BUILDING IN WRIGHT’S PENUMBRA: KAHN’S UNITARIAN CHURCH

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The paper offers a critique of Louis Kahn’s First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York, informed by evidence contained in an archive held at that church. Prior to a recent trip by the author, this rich archive had not been accessed for the purposes of architectural scholarship.

The archive reveals a previously unknown connection between the clients and each of the architects Wright and Kahn, and suggests that Kahn may have been under some pressure to imitate Wright’s Unity Temple in Oak Park Illinois. The paper argues that Kahn’s reluctance to copy Wright’s church caused him to become fixated on an antithetical but fundamentally flawed planning strategy, which was concentric rather than binuclear.

Kahn designed this building while he was actively pursuing fame. Kahn’s recollection of this project’s conception can be seen in this context, as a demonstration that he is a fountainhead in his own right. It is especially telling that shortly after this project, Kahn articulated a theoretical position that reacts specifically against Wright’s theory of organic architecture.

Evidence in the Rochester archive suggests that Kahn and the committee of clients, may also have conspired to fabricate what has become an orthodox but misleading history. Other members of the congregation strongly opposed Kahn’s concentric design and they objected to the fact that the client committee had not represented their interests but acted as apologists for Kahn. An analysis of the building as it used today gives credence to these dissenters’ concerns and calls for a new history, according to which Kahn ignored functional concerns for the sake of asserting his autonomy from Wright. While Kahn’s Unitarian Church is praised for its manipulation of light and shadow, in a metaphorical sense, it is built entirely in Wright’s penumbra.
INTRODUCTION

Since its construction in 1961, Louis Kahn's First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester has been the focus of significant scholarly attention. As Kahn tells it, the story of this building's design challenges the tenets of Functionalism, since he claims to have started with a preconception which transcends the details of his clients' program.

A preemptive sketch that Kahn made early in 1959, before his first meeting with the congregation in Rochester, suggests an octagonal sanctuary encircled by ancillary spaces. However, Kahn's accounts of this building's design process make no mention of this sketch. Rather, he gives the impression that he conceived an esquisse-like drawing during his first visit to Rochester. In his 1961 article "Form and Design," Kahn recalls presenting what he refers to as a "form" diagram to the building committee in Rochester:

I made a square center in which I placed a question mark. Let us say I meant it to be the sanctuary. This I encircled with an ambulatory for those who did not want to go into the sanctuary. Around the ambulatory I drew a corridor which belonged to an outer circle enclosing a space, the school. It was clear that School which gives rise to Question became the wall which surrounds Question. This was the form expression of the church, not the design.

According to Bob Jonas, who sat on the building committee:

[From the very first time he came and presented this idea about the question surrounded by the other things, that was the central theme of the building he was going to build, regardless of what the building committee might have in mind.

The finished church loosely resembles this diagram, which Kahn would later refer to as a representation of the building's underlying "form".

Analysis of Kahn's church in Rochester has often focused on those historical precedents that may have influenced Kahn's choice of a centralised planning strategy. For example, Robin Williams links Kahn's preconception to the centralised churches in Wittkower's book, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism, a copy of which Kahn had received as a gift from Colin Rowe in February of 1956. Kenneth Frampton argues that Kahn's "form" diagram may have been informed by Ledoux's De Witt house (c.1780). Kahn's speech at the dedication of the church in December 1962, points to another precedent, the Pantheon in Rome, which he describes as a circular space with a non-directional nature. He states "I had those things in mind when I built this building. Though I had frugal means [...]." He goes on to state "[his building is also a non-directional building. It's practically a square]."

Supported by evidence contained in an archive held at the First Unitarian Church in Rochester (which has not been accessed previously for the purposes of architectural scholarship), the present paper chronicles the development of Kahn's Unitarian church with reference to an unlikely precedent, Frank Lloyd Wright's Unity Temple in Oak Park Illinois, of 1906. Being the antithesis of the church in Rochester, Wright's church wouldn't normally be thought of as a source of Kahn's planning strategy, where Kahn's building is concentric, Wright's is binuclear. Yet each building responds to a very similar brief, featuring a school and an associated sanctuary. Each building was designed for a Unitarian congregation. And, significantly, each building was designed by an American architect in the process of becoming exceptionally famous.

THE COMMISSION: THE FIRST PHASE

In 1954, Kahn was chosen from a number of eminent architects to design the First Unitarian Church and School in Rochester. The other architects included Wright, Paul Rudolph, Carl Koch, Eero Saarinen and Walter Gropius. To some extent Kahn may have been chosen by default, since Wright and Saarinen declined the commission.

As stated, Kahn first met the congregation in 1959, with a firm idea about the church's "form" already in mind. During his first visit to Rochester, Kahn also assisted the building committee with the selection of a site. He recommended a green-field site, on South Winton Road outside central Rochester. This was a site without urban constraints that might otherwise have hindered Kahn's realisation of a radically symmetrical edifice.

From May 1959 until March 1960, Kahn produced various iterations of his preconception, ignoring his clients' repeated calls for a more modest, asymmetrical solution. His radically symmetrical schemes of his first design phase feature a double height square sanctuary, encircled by an ambulatory, which in turn is encircled by a corridor, enclosed by three levels of classrooms. The outer walls of these classrooms give the whole building a square profile.

During the early months of the commission, there was relatively little communication between Kahn and the church building committee, hence records of preliminary designs and their dates are largely incomplete. Meanwhile, many members of the congregation wrote to Kahn directly with particular requests, until Kahn was asked to return such correspondence to the church building committee. From an undated report from the building committee to the congregation, it can be deduced that a radically symmetrical scheme was presented on 12 December 1959 and that this would have cost $860,000 to build. Whereas, the report states, "we certainly could not anticipate spending more than 450 thousand." Later in December of 1959, Kahn responded with an almost identical scheme, with an estimated budget of $650,000. When the building committee reconvened on 4 January 1960, after the Christmas-New Year break, their former complacency had turned to anxiety. Shocked by Kahn's apparent disregard for their financial circumstances, they began to keep accurate minutes of this and all subsequent meetings. Dr. Maurice Van Horn was replaced by a more assertive chairperson, Mrs. Helen Williams, who was asked at that meeting to write to Mr. Kahn immediately, telling him that members of the building committee are enthusiastic about the general style of the building but that it is too expensive for our congregation and does not meet our needs - to point out that he did not come near our original figure and did not give us what we specified.

A few days later, on 8 January 1960, Kahn received Helen Williams' letter, stating that his proposal was over budget, inflexible, deficient of classroom space and unsuited to the site. She writes:

[Under the circumstances, we feel that further revision would be futile and that a brand new approach to the problem would be preferable [...]. It is disappointing to realise that some eight months have elapsed already and we have nothing to show.]
Kahn responded with two sketches, which, according to Williams' next unfavourable letter dated 1 March 1960, "represent a modification of your original idea [merely] pared down to meet our conflicting space and budget requirements".6

Kahn's apparent obstinacy during this period may reflect his reluctance to design anything which vaguely resembled Wright's prototypical Unity Temple, and a desire instead to assert his own authority as a leading architect. At meetings and through direct petitions, Kahn would have heard calls from many in the congregation for a Gothic style church, to replace the one they were leaving in downtown Rochester, but, as a Modernist, he would have found such requests easy to ignore. He would have found it much harder to ignore the pressure he would have felt, as an architect, to follow the example of Wright's Unity Temple. Like any architect, Kahn cannot have come to such a commission without realising that other architects and critics would invariably compare his response to such a brief with Wright's famous solution to an almost identical brief.

While the archive in Rochester, like the Kahn Collection in Philadelphia, contains no written requests for an imitation of Wright's church, circumstantial evidence suggests that many in the congregation may have been partial to a binuclear scheme. In 1961, Kahn recalled a meeting during which the committee had asked him to investigate a binuclear arrangement reminiscent of Wright's, but Kahn explains that he could only bring himself to draw a rough diagram to appease them.7 Kahn is soadamant that such a response to the problem of a Unitarian Church would have been wrong, that he claims to have resisted "making any sort of plan. I wouldn't have done it", he insists.8 He claims to have presented a series of diagrams with a categorical "No!" written beneath a diagram representative of Wright's binuclear scheme. He also claims in 1961 that he cannot imitate how others, namely Wright, have made their churches.9

It is also significant that the Unitarian congregation in Rochester have a direct connection to Wright dating from the early 1900s. Their connection to Wright is through Dr. William Gannett, who had been their minister at the turn of the century. Gannett had been an early mentor to Wright, and Wright had produced the layout and graphic design for Gannett's 1895 book, The House Beautiful.10 At the Unitarian church in Rochester, it had become tradition to present all newly married couples with a copy of Gannett's book, thus giving many in the congregation a personal interest in Wright's work. It will also be recalled that Wright had been invited to design the First Unitarian Church in Rochester but had declined. In the light of this connection, the committee's request for a Wrightian parti can be viewed as an affront to Kahn's autonomy and ability as an architect.

**RAMIFICATIONS FOR KAHN'S THEORY**

Kahn's difficulties with his clients in Rochester are reflected in his theoretical statements of the time, most significantly, the sudden emergence of a new theory of "form". According to that theory, particular buildings of the same type share an archetypal counterpart, or "form", which is seen in the mind's-eye, or "psyche," as a vague idea which can only be represented diagrammatically. Although it is undated, Kahn's earliest documentation of this precise thesis is most likely a hand written draft in his personal notebook, circa 1959,11 in which he writes about his typological preconceptions as though they are divine revelations.

Form is belief in beginnings. Design [illegible] inspired [illegible] fits in the laws of order... that binds thought and feeling and links them to [the] realm of philosophy and religion and aspirations, reading as [sic] one experiences renewal of form as immanent, immaterial, undefinable yet characteristic reality, that is ever beginning, and we celebrate a work which achieves the kind of sacred realization... in man's worshipful labors... perpetuates the transcendence of form by that of himself.

The beginning is belief in form, feeling as dogma, thought as philosophy is the milieu of form.

Beyond the personal limits of feeling and thought it is hard to... write about a work.

I find it hard to write about my work after it is built. I recall the beginning as belief. It is the time of realization of form. It is feeling as religion and thought as philosophy. Though there is no material, no shape, no dimension... and the recall... the [illegible] of design when dream inspired form must answer to the laws of order so as to be. One feels the work of another in accordance in an aura of transcendence and in the Belief.12

The first recorded public expression of this thesis is contained in a public address delivered at the Cooper Union titled "The Scope of Architecture" on 20 January 1960,13 just twelve days after Williams' damning letter. In that address, Kahn states that an architect "must never think in terms of what did they do before. It's pure death architecturally to think that way."14 This statement may be pointed at the congregation and their suggestion that he follow Wright's example.

Kahn's assertions regarding the transcendence of his "forms" imply a dismissive attitude towards Wright's Unity Temple, which clearly does not conform to Kahn's philosophical and religious vision of the ideal Unitarian church and school. Stanford Anderson explores this ramification of Kahn's theory of "form" concluding, diplomatically, that Kahn's "form" diagram for Rochester is an "hypothesised appeal".15 However, Anderson's analysis ignores the many dogmatic assertions by Kahn that have been quoted in this paper.

A desire to be seen as a great architect in his own right, could also explain a number of anomalous statements by Kahn that appear to react against Wright's famous proclamations regarding organic architecture. Kenneth Frampton argues that Kahn's "feeling for the organic surely derives in large measure from Frank Lloyd Wright", who, according to Frampton, is "an insufficiently acknowledged influence on Kahn".16 This analysis is true of Kahn's theory generally, but it does not account for various statements made by Kahn during the early 1960s. Kahn writes in 1966 that the "inspiration to express is that which sets up man's urge to seek shapes and forms which are not in nature. Nature cannot build locomotives", he maintains, "nor build houses".17 Reacting against what De Zurko describes as the organic analogy of functionalist theory18 (epitomised by Wright's organic design approach whereby architects see themselves and their buildings as products of nature), Kahn refers to a uniquely human impulse. Where Kahn would often describe "form" as an "unmeasurable" concept, he writes that "nature, physical nature, is [merely] measurable".19 In 1964, after lamenting that an architect, unlike a painter, "must use round wheels, and he must make his doorways bigger than people", Kahn further states that architects must learn that they have other rights [...] their own rights. To learn this, to understand this, is giving the man the tools for making the incredible, that which nature cannot make. The tools make a psychological validity, not just a physical validity, because man, unlike nature, has choice.20

In 1967 Kahn writes that "[w]hat man makes, nature cannot make, though man uses all the laws of nature to make it".21 In his 1982 text titled 'A Statement', Kahn writes that

[n]ature is unconscious, but the psyche is conscious, demands life, and gives life. Nature makes the instruments which makes [sic] life possible. It will not make the instruments unless the desire for life is there.22

In each of these quotations, Kahn privileges the human mind over nature.
THE COMMISSION: THE SECOND PHASE

After March 1960, Kahn's proposals resembled the radically planned, yet asymmetrical profile of the church as it was built. Due to their close similarity, these can be called his second phase schemes. Adopting the planning strategy, but not the symmetry of his first phase schemes, Kahn was at least able to appease his client's budgetary concerns. Kahn's final design features an off-square double height sanctuary, surrounded by corridors on two levels and two levels of class rooms. The outer walls of these classrooms give the building a rectilinear, though asymmetrical shape in plan.

While progress resumed on the project, Kahn still had to contend with an unusually diligent client. Fehmi Dogan and Craig Zimring argue that the congregation played a valuable role in shaping the final design. They state that the client's contribution belies the [c]onventional story, told by Kahn, [which] narrates triumph of a genius designer endowed with a 'concept' before his first meeting with the client that guided the design process in an almost linear fashion.6

The congregation's internal correspondence, held in their own archive in Rochester, provides further evidence of their sustained effect on Kahn's progress. The building committee was inundated with letters from the congregation making requests or suggestions and was expected to pass these on to Kahn for consideration. One member of the congregation went so far as to personally build and was expected to cover the cost of the design. The building committee was inundated with an unusually diligent client, Fehmi Dogan and Craig Zimring while progress resumed on the project, Kahn still had to contend with an unusually diligent client. Fehmi Dogan and Craig Zimring argue that the congregation played a valuable role in shaping the final design. They state that the client's contribution belies the

This weakness in Kahn's final scheme attracted severe criticism from sections of the Unitarian congregation in Rochester, who leveled their criticism at the church building committee. One member of the congregation, the attorney Judson Parsons, sums up the discontent of many in a letter to the building committee, dated 24 February, 1961.

Had they [the congregation] been told: "Yes, this building has just about twice the usual percentage of halls. Half of them are unnecessary and they are expensive, and to surround the auditorium with them will shut out all natural light and make it necessary to build expensive, large, cumbersome towers on the roof to filter the light and channel some of it back into the auditorium", some people who voted for the plan might have done otherwise [...].

You who were then on the committee were our representatives to obtain a plan from Mr. Kahn and to report its advantages and disadvantages to us so that we might make an intelligent decision. You were not Mr. Kahn's representatives [...].

As it is, if this were a purely business affair, people could almost ask for their money back. 6

If the resultant surplus of darkened corridor space calls Kahn's early assumption into question, later adaptations to the building confirm that his planning strategy bore no relation to the congregation's long-term needs. In 1964, just two years after the completion of his centralised scheme, Kahn was commissioned to design an extension to the church. According to Richard Forbes of the church building committee, this was the extension that was never meant to happen, and Kahn had been explicitly briefed during the design of the first section that the church would require no additional space in the future. However, the physical presence of their new church led to a dramatic rise in attendance in the years immediately following its construction. Where Kahn had originally insisted that the sanctuary must occupy the physical centre of a concentric plan, today the church plan resembles a dumbbell. The original entrance space, which Kahn had intended to be peripheral, now occupies the physical centre of a much larger complex, having the sanctuary to its west and Kahn's later extension to its east. Where they have been able to, members of the church have also relocated facilities associated with the school, such as the children's chapel and administration facilities, into the eastern extension, away from the sanctuary.

CONCLUSION

The irony is obvious. In its final configuration and pattern of use, Kahn's Unitarian church and school bears an uncanny resemblance to Wright's Unity Temple. It has been argued - Kahn went to great lengths to defy. As in Unity Temple, today users enter Kahn's building via what has become a link-way joining the school and the Church. It can be argued that Kahn's reluctance to copy Wright's church caused him to become fixated on an antithetical but fundamentally flawed planning strategy.

Despite its programmatic inconsistencies, the lasting appeal of Kahn's Unitarian church is its fortress-like exterior and the serene quality of daylight entering the sanctuary. As with later master works such as the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth Texas and The National Assembly in Dacca, daylight enters the space in such a way as to illuminate internal surfaces without allowing viewers to see the sky. Since the clerestory windows are concealed, viewers are presented with a subdued play of natural light across the textured concrete and blockwork surfaces of the sanctuary.

It can be said therefore that Kahn's Unitarian Church employs a masterful manipulation of light and shadow. It can also be said that the church is built entirely in the shadow of another master.


6 Letter, Colin Rowe to Louis I. Kahn, 7 February 1956, file labelled, "Correspondence from Universities and Colleges." L.K. Box 65, Kahn Collection.


8 Dedication of First Unitarian Church, Rochester, NY (Dec 2 1952), Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.

9 Dedication of First Unitarian Church, Rochester, NY (Dec 2 1962), Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.


11 Building Committee Meeting, November 4, 1959, file labelled, "Building Committee Minutes 59-60," Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.

12 Report from the Building Committee Meeting, file labelled, "Building Committee Reports 59-60," Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.

13 Report from the Building Committee Meeting, file labelled, "Building Committee Reports 59-60," Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.

14 Building Committee Meeting, January 4, 1960, file labelled, "Building Committee Minutes 59-60," Historical Records of The First Unitarian Church, Rochester.

15 Letter, Helen Williams to Louis I. Kahn, 8 January 1960, file labelled, "Building Committee Correspondence - Rochester, April 1959 through December 1960," L.I.K. Box 15, Kahn Collection.


21 Interview, Steven Fleming with Colleen Hurst (historian for the First Unitarian Church in Rochester), 25 June 2002, Rochester.

22 Louis I. Kahn, "Louis I. Kahn notebook," [undated, circa 1959], Box K12.22, Kahn Collection. Transcribed from Kahn’s original notebook with the assistance of William Whitaker, archivist of the Architectural archives at the University of Pennsylvania.


24 Cassette recording, "The Scope of Architecture at The Cooper Union Hall, 1-20-60," Kahn Collection.


