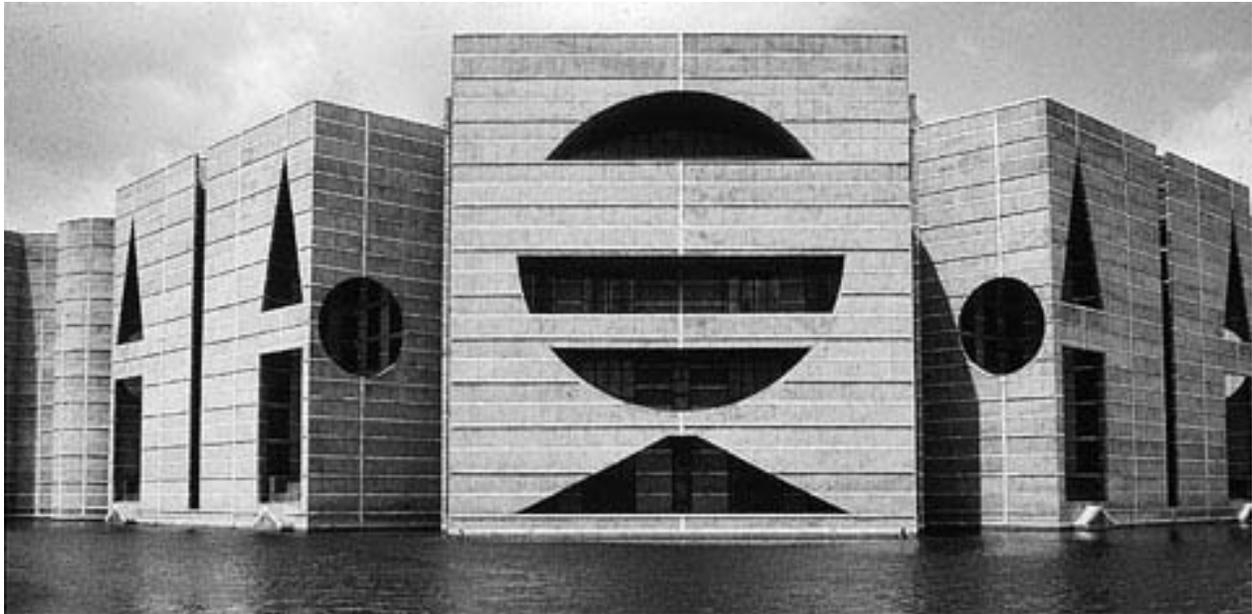


An Archaic Approach to Modernism

Louis Kahn – National Assembly Building, Bangladesh



The National Assembly Building of Bangladesh marked a shift in Modernist architecture. It was a departure from the previous dogmatism of the avant-garde to a new epoch, where classicism and modernity would coalesce. Louis Kahn maintained that classical architecture must remain an essential consideration in the conceptualization of architecture. This was due, in part, to Kahn's strong foundation in Neoclassical Architecture – learned at the Beaux-Arts. While context and site were of little importance to modern architecture, the National Assembly Building was extraordinarily invested in the Bengali vernacular. In 1971, construction of the National Assembly Building halted due to the Bangladesh Liberation War. Once the country was independent of Pakistan, construction resumed. The cultural implications of this building grew even deeper, as a unified sense of nationalism began to emerge. To this day, it stands as a symbolic monument to the government of Bangladesh.

Looking beyond the building's obvious cultural and national significance, this architectural monument takes on a compelling ontological perspective with respect to Archaism. Louis Kahn strived to create a transcendental place of spirituality and gathering, manifested through the archaic use of geometry, material and light.

A major problem with modernism is the gap it creates between thought and feeling. Archaism strives to reconcile this gap. Highly formal, monumental, and spiritual in character; the overall master plan for the 200-acre project is a geometric study in symmetrical composition. Ole Bouman, a director of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, describes Archaism as a materialist pursuit that relies on tangible objects and spaces for

authenticity. The National Assembly Building enlists geometric shapes, inspired and abstracted from traditional Bengali culture; reminiscent of fortification towers and that of the sultanate mosques. This iconography is not merely expressed through architectonics. It becomes a representation of the Bangladesh locus; an articulation of the sacred and the religious.

“I changed the buildings from their original design in concrete to that of brick, honoring thereby the advice that brick would prove to be more economical. Though I first resisted this change, I have now discovered, in the development of the design, some beautiful shapes that are true to the order of brickwork.” –Louis Kahn

All structures, with the exception of the Assembly Building, were constructed from brick. White marble is reserved for the place of assembly – a material reminiscent of the Taj Mahal or the Lakshmi-Narayan Temple in Jaipur. The entire complex is fabricated out of poured in place concrete with inlaid white marble. The material selection transforms the scale, elevating the space to a monolithic fortress of lasting ideals. This material palette is an archaic expression of permanence. It serves as a counter-point to the typical masonry technique - called upon for housing and other, similar buildings in the master plan’s program.

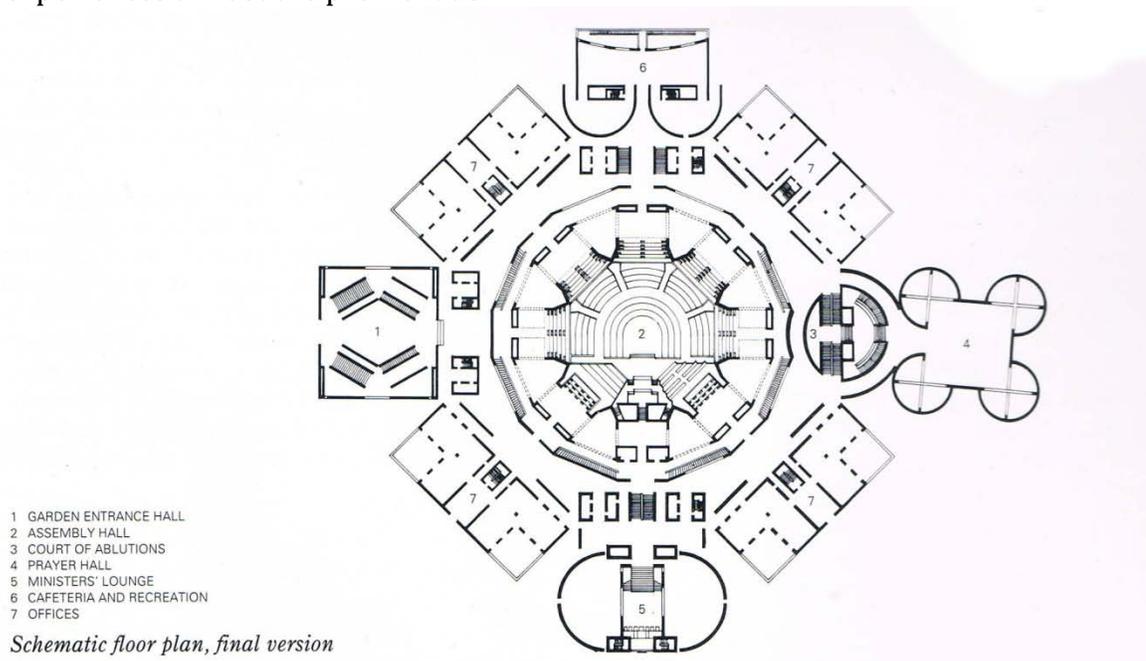


Upon closer analysis of the building, an important consideration is *durée*. Through *durée*, an experience of dialectics emerges - one that oscillates between temporality and permanence. *Durée*: an intensity of experience which makes the concept of time more fluid compared to the Cartesian linear concept of time. In archaism time is reduced to a practically timeless essence.¹ This becomes an interesting discourse when dealing with the passage of natural light; a process intrinsically reliant on the continual flow of time. For Kahn, light is an important aspect. He did not see it as merely a way to illuminate space, but he rather conceptualized light as a creator of space.

The movement of sunlight is undeniably temporal. Its cyclical flow is matched with the linear decay of matter, resulting in a sublime uniqueness of every passing second. This experience of time is an experience of the present. For the present is a temporal event – continually changing and evolving – that begins on the shoulders of the past.

1. Bouman O. & Van Toorn, Selected Extracts: *The Invisible in Architecture* (Academy Editions 1994), 15

Durée is expressed, in the National Assembly building, not only through the passage of light, but also in the sequential experience of space. There is a pre-determined promenade one must follow in order to navigate through the Assembly Building. Upon entering, one walks through an interstitial void of space that has been created by superimposing geometric shapes. This path permeates inward to the main assembly room. The path also continues to an off-axis place of worship at the South end of the building. The experience of this building cannot easily be understood without considering the compiled multiplicity of spatial experiences amidst the promenade.



“If you reduce sculpture to the flat plane of the photograph....you’re denying the temporal experience of the work” –Richard Serra

This reduction not only changes the scale of space, but denies the viewer from experiencing the true content of the work. Similar to Kahn, Serra’s projects unfold with time by walking and looking. Like film, they operate in durational space; with the integration of time. Serra’s work is not about sculpture alone, but rather a dialectic between art and its physical environment. Kahn remarks, *“A stair isn’t something you get out of a catalogue, but a very important event in a building”*. This distinction marks the significance of understanding space through movement and through time.

One observation, noted in an essay by Hilde Heynen, is that a temporal shift occurred in the development of Modernism. This shift repositions humanity in relation to the architectural timeline. It speaks to the emerging temporality of architecture; people are beginning to last longer than their buildings. *“Each generation will have to build its own city”*, Heynen remarks. Louis Kahn’s work continually resists this temporal shift. It reaches for a sense of permanence through the use of durable materials and chases after experiences that are

both emotional and spiritual. In the design of the Assembly Building, his visions of eternal, timeless principles assume tangible form. The promise of a new architecture, so fervently sought by his fellow architects, was fulfilled.

Architecture has a peculiar relationship to Modernism, in regards to idealistic clarity. The architectural avant-garde dismisses any resemblance to previous styles and pretentious ornament. It seeks purity and authenticity. However, this ambition was less prevalent in architecture than it was in art and literature. Architecture could not conform to the avant-garde style because buildings ultimately have to be constructed. They cannot completely dismiss every lesson learned from the past. With this in mind, Louis Kahn designed his Assembly Building with an emphasis on context. This manifested through a diversity of contextual streams: Political, Historical, Geographical, and Societal.

While Kahn did not hold control over political motivations, he did acknowledge that his building carried with it a national significance. It would be the physical and symbolic point, at which a nation would come together.

In the Assembly Building – a heterogeneous mixture of Roman, Renaissance, Mughal and Modern – architectural styles seemed to have converged. Not in a synthesis but as a palimpsest, still bearing visible traces of its earlier forms. Inspired by Piranesi, Kahn discovered late in life how to transform the ruins of ancient Rome into modern buildings. His final architectural product was an accumulation of cultural history. He spent the remaining years of his life developing the Assembly Building. The master plan was a new locus – a structural proposal for urban life. Interestingly, Kahn achieved his greatest vision for a city located in one of the poorest countries in the world.



Through the vernacular use of material and the permeability of landscape, Kahn put great emphasis on geographical context. In the United States, the climate forced Kahn to create a more succinct separation between the interior and exterior. With the environmental conditions of Bangladesh, it became possible to blur the edges of building and landscape. In terms of archaism, this allowed natural light to stream into the space, uninterrupted. This direct connection between the individual, material and light, made for a more authentic experience of the space. Kahn also became highly invested in composing layers of geometric shape to form great Piranesian arcades and transcendental sequences of entry.

Perhaps, what made the National Assembly Building most unique was its relationship in the greater context of 20th century modernism. A great criticism of modernism is the inevitable sense of insignificance that emerges from being a part of such a highly calculated and machine-like society. Under the lens of the Modernist movement, the metropolis is a physical manifestation of co-dependence and a steady rhythm of uninterrupted habituations. This opens up the potential for the devaluing of individuality and promotion of a mental state of worthlessness. The tension begins when combining the notion that the metropolis is an efficient machine with the realization that humanity is quintessentially not a machine.

Walter Benjamin argued that in an age of mechanical reproduction, uniqueness and authenticity is lost. He refers to this emerging process as the "atrophy of experience". Kahn is aware that the monolithic nature and monumental scale of the National Assembly Building dwarfs the individual. While this sounds like another example of the inhumanity of modernism, Kahn maintains that the sense of scale becomes resolved when there are enough people. For a space of assembly, it is necessary for the spatial experience to become complete only after the coming together of a large group. In this way, Kahn converts any trepidation into a positive philosophical point; one that ultimately strengthens the building's desire for existence.

Despite Louis Kahn being a major advocate for Modernist thinking, his foundation in classical architecture, as well as his work on the international scale, helped him remain immune to the relentless pursuit of efficiency. The National Assembly building expressed Modernity as a summation of the collective past, not as an expression of the architectural avant-garde. This distinction elevates his work from the monotonous drone of everyday necessity, to a more meaningful encounter with the built world.

"I don't believe in need as a force at all. Need is a current, everyday affair. But desire – that is something else again. Desire is the forerunner of a new need. It is the not stated, the yet not made which motivates." –Louis Kahn

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