

# Engaging Kahn



## A Yale Master Pays a Visit

At the Center for British Art, from January 23–24, 2004, a conference, “Engaging Louis I. Kahn,” was sponsored jointly by the Yale Center for British Art, the Yale Art Gallery, and the School of Architecture and organized by Sandy Isenstadt of the art history department and Carter Wiseman of the School of Architecture.

At the Center for British Art, Louis Kahn’s legacy at Yale was celebrated in the bringing together of a variety of Kahn scholars, along with clients and colleagues, friends and lovers. It was held amid a popular revival of Kahn due to the film *My Architect*, a biographical documentary made by his son Nathaniel, which would be nominated for an Oscar a few weeks later. The timing of the film and the presence of many of its stars gave the conference a serendipitous buzz, energizing what was otherwise a thoughtful and intellectually varied look at Kahn.

Given the success of *My Architect*, one might have presumed that the conference was held to capitalize on Kahn’s recent notoriety. In fact, it was planned before the film was released, to commemorate the anniversaries of Kahn’s great Yale buildings: the silver anniversary of the Yale Center for British Art (1977) and the golden anniversary of the Yale Art Gallery (1953). Thus it was appropriate that the conference opened with a panel entitled “Kahn Conserved,” a discussion of the current restorations of these two buildings. The session was chaired by David De Long, who, along with David Brownlee, had curated *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*, the comprehensive exhibition of Kahn’s work that traveled to several museums in the early 1990s. De Long brought an intelligent and straight forward character to the session, which included the architects responsible for the restorations: James Stewart Polshek and curtain-wall specialist Gordon H. Smith in the case of the art gallery, which is currently under construction, and Peter Inskip of the British firm Inskip/Jenkins, which has the commission for the Center for British Art. The session was refreshingly literal for an academic symposium—details of the new curtain wall for the Art Gallery were shown, for example—giving the conference a real-world immediacy and reminding us, lest we forget, that Kahn was an architect, not just an unusual personality.

The conference took off its construction hat and donned a mortar board with the keynote address, delivered by Robert Bruegmann, of the University of Illinois at Chicago, who introduced what would be the dominant subject of the conference: how Kahn is represented in popular and academic discourse. Bruegmann reviewed the history of publications dedicated to Kahn, from Vincent Scully’s mythmaking 1961 monograph to *My Architect*. In Kahn Scully found a subject worthy of his full dramatic powers: an outsider who rose to the top, a wildly talented artist interested in reconnecting modern architecture with its past, and, fortuitously, an architect on the brink of stardom. Scully’s inspiration is evi-

dent in this Whitman-esque description of Kahn quoted by Bruegmann: “deep warmth and force, compact physical strength, a printless, cat-like walk, glistening Tartar’s eyes, only bright blue, a disordered aureole of whitening hair once red, black suit, loose tie, a pencil-sized cigar ... It was at this time that he began to unfold into the rather unearthly beauty and command of a phoenix risen from the fire.” As Bruegmann remarked, until recently most writing about Kahn was done by people who knew him personally, Scully included, and the result “makes for great writing, [but] it also makes for difficult history.” Bruegmann meant this remark in a general sense, but given Scully’s expressive language and his empathetic approach to criticism, as Bruegmann said, “Scully is there in the text, standing side by side with Kahn.” It was Scully’s version of the story that flourished, no doubt embraced by Kahn himself, and for many years it was accepted with little criticism.

Scully was not present at the conference; he typically spends the spring semester away from New Haven. But his intellectual, spiritual presence was palpable, both in his canonical portrait of Kahn and in the conference attendees, so many of whom undoubtedly had been his students. Kahn, too, was spiritually present, even more so given the setting, and this gave the conference its unique character. Sitting in the Center for British Art, one had the disorienting experience of time warping, of Kahn and his milieu coming back to life, not just as history, but as real presences. Peter Eisenman unintentionally captured this phenomenon when he quoted the literary critic Maurice Blanchot on the representation of time in the writing of Marcel Proust: “Some insignificant instant, which took place at a certain moment, now long ago, forgotten ... the course of time brings it back, and not as a memory, but as an actual event, which occurs anew, at a new moment in time” (“The Experience of Proust” in *The Book To Come*, p.12, Stanford, 2003).

Perhaps this would be true of any conference with a subject as charismatic as Louis Kahn, with so many people in attendance who were so affected by him, but credit really must go to *My Architect* for making the feeling so powerful. The film sentimentalizes Kahn and makes many of the people in his life—many people who were present at the symposium—dramatic figures, even celebrities. They were on display in a session entitled “Clients and Colleagues,” which included Kahn’s two mistresses, Anne Griswold Tyng and Harriet Pattison, who each had a child with Kahn (Pattison is Nathaniel’s mother). Each woman spoke only about her professional experiences in Kahn’s office—Tyng rather stridently taking credit for Kahn’s interest in complex geometries, and Pattison sensitively reminiscing about the landscape design of the Kimbell—but it was their personal histories, laid bare by the film, that had the greatest impact on the conference. The academic proceedings were infused with a slightly naughty, voyeuristic quality, and watching felt a little like spending Thanksgiving dinner with someone else’s dysfunctional family. That said, the session added a spark to the event. Other clients and colleagues on the panel included Professor Emeritus Jules

Prown, who served as the client representative for the British Art Center; Duncan Buell, who worked in Kahn’s office; Rodney Armstrong, who gave a hilarious account of building the Exeter Library, and Moshe Safdie, who interned with Kahn and whose eloquent remarks were unfortunately cut short by Tyng’s extended talk.

Not only were past and present getting mixed up in discussions of Kahn the man, but also more substantively in discussions of Kahn’s work. As the speakers in “Kahn Conserved” noted, the processes of restoration and preservation are not simply aimed at recreating the past. Rather, there’s a slippery goal of updating the architecture, of bringing it into the present and future, while maintaining the intent of the original design. The designers must speculate about what Kahn would do if he were alive today: How would he deploy new technologies? How would he accommodate new programmatic demands? This project has been taken to an extreme by Kent Larson of MIT, author of *Louis I. Kahn: Unbuilt Masterworks* (The Monacelli Press, New York, 2000).

Larson’s finely rendered digital models of Kahn’s major unbuilt projects, including the Hurva Synagogue, the American Consulate in Luanda, and portions of the Salk Institute, built from digital photographs of existing Kahn projects (including the concrete wall Professor Larson was speaking in front of), have the shimmering sheen characteristic of computer renderings. They are unpopulated, and Kahn’s concrete “ruins” are bathed in the light of a bright, clear sun, making them look a bit like a Hollywood version of the afterlife. One half expects Kahn to stroll by in a toga, followed by Vitruvius and Palladio.

Methodologically, these talks and others, such as Alec Purves’s elegant discussion of being a student in the Yale Art Gallery, demonstrated the depth of Kahn’s built work, along with Robert McCarter on Kahn and Aldo Van Eyck; David Van Zanten on the Beaux Arts roots of Kahn’s composition, and Alan Plattus on Kahn’s urban planning, not to mention the “Kahn Conserved” and “Clients” and “Colleagues” panels. All were striking, in the context of other recent symposia at Yale, for their direct approach to history and architectural discourse. There is a divide in architecture, as there is in culture more generally, between avant garde and arriere garde, between liberal and conservative, between the critical theorist and the historian, between those dressed in black Prada and those wearing tweed. These labels, however simplistic and imprecise, refer to an ideological duality that is on display at these events, sometimes in direct, self-conscious opposition (“Eisenman/Krier,” fall 2002), or more typically through the effective absence of one side, save for a token representative (“Architecture and Psychoanalysis,” fall 2003). “Engaging Kahn” was a decidedly tweed conference. Nonetheless, Kahn is starting to get attention from the black-clad crowd, and the most stimulating moments of the weekend came from scholars—Robert Bruegmann and Sarah Williams Goldhagen especially—who straddle the ideological divide.

The Scully Kahn is a tweed Kahn, and, as Bruegmann pointed out, until recently it had gone largely unchallenged. Younger scholars, unencumbered by direct acquaint-

ance with Kahn, have started to revise and expand the standard version of his story. Chief among these writers is Sarah Williams Goldhagen of Harvard, whose book *Louis Kahn’s Situated Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2001) dedicates its introduction to debunking, one by one, the myths about Kahn that have become accepted history: that Kahn was the founding father of historicist Post-Modernism, that he lost the social consciousness that drove his early work, that he was a heroic genius, and so on. Goldhagen discussed Kahn’s time at Yale and the fruitful connections with other professors, including Josef Albers and Willem de Kooning. She showed how Kahn absorbed their work and made parts of it his own, undermining the myth that he was a lonely, creative genius. Similarly critical, expansive approaches were taken by other young speakers, including Kathleen James-Chakraborty, who spoke about Kahn’s belief in American exceptionalism in his project for the American Embassy in Luanda, and Kazi Ashraf, who examined Kahn’s ideas about landscape.

Although these speakers were critical in the contemporary, discursive sense of the word, the token member of the opposition at “Engaging Kahn,” the representative of the black-clad ideology, was Peter Eisenman. After acknowledging that he was asked to “rattle the cages a bit,” his talk opened with the Blanchot quotation cited above. It was intended to introduce a “post-’68” sensibility into the discussion, via Proust, an assertion that truth is relational and that disjunction and nonlinearity are central to Post-Modern thought. These are not ideas traditionally associated with historicist, grounded Louis Kahn. Even so, Eisenman persuasively “re-read” the Adler and DeVore houses in light of contemporary theory, and in so doing reminded the audience that great architecture avoids being fixed in history and can be seen in new ways by new generations.

—Ted Whitten (’02)  
Whitten works for Gray Organschi in New Haven

1. Gordon H. Smith, James Stewart Polshek, Peter Inskip
2. Moshe Safdie and Jules Prown
3. Gordon H. Smith and Robert A.M. Stern
4. Anne Griswold Tyng, Duncan Buell
5. Moshe Safdie, Jules Prown, Rodney Armstrong, Harriet Pattison, Duncan Buell and Anne Griswold Tyng
6. David De Long
7. Robert Bruegmann
8. Amy Meyers
9. Alan Plattus
10. Peter Eisenman
11. Alexander Purves
12. Kent Larson
13. Anne Griswold Tyng
14. Harriet Pattison
15. Rodney Armstrong
16. Moshe Safdie
17. Carter Wiseman
18. Sandy Isenstadt
19. David Van Zanten
20. Sarah Williams Goldhagen
21. Robert McCarter
22. Kathleen James-Chakraborty
23. Kazi Ashraf
24. David Brownlee