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Uncrating Kahn’s Fisher House

Abstract
Dr. Fisher tells an amusing story about the house that Louis Kahn designed for him and his wife in Hatboro, just outside Philadelphia. Soon after its completion, two of Fisher’s new neighbors walked past, pausing for a moment to consider this unusual double-cube structure. One condemned the flat-roofed house made of vertically hung natural wood siding, thinking it out of place in a neighborhood of traditional dwellings of white-painted clapboard and stone. The other reserved judgment. “I’ll wait and offer my opinion,” he declared, “when the thing is uncrated.”

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Dr. Fisher tells an amusing story about the house that Louis Kahn designed for him and his wife in Hatboro, just outside Philadelphia. Soon after its completion, two of Fisher’s new neighbors walked past, pausing for a moment to consider this unusual double-cube structure. One condemned the flat-roofed house made of vertically hung natural wood siding, thinking it out of place in a neighborhood of traditional dwellings of white-painted clapboard and stone. The other reserved judgment. “I’ll wait and offer my opinion,” he declared, “when the thing is uncrated.”

The comment is not without insight for boxes and machines were certainly among the most prevalent paradigms of Modern architecture, and one might well imagine the vertical boards of the Fisher house stripped away only to reveal a porcelain-enamedled, (Richard) Meier-esque ‘washing machine for living in’. Kahn’s buildings often assumed a ‘box with contents’ parti and it was Kahn himself who likened his Fort Wayne auditorium to a violin in a violin case. Indeed, preliminary sketches indicate that this is exactly how Kahn initially conceived the Fisher house. Next to a wood-framed cube, he placed a cube of stone, hollowing from its interior a cylindrical void. At their narrowest, stonewalls were to be two feet thick. Preliminary cost estimates rendered this scheme absurd, and Kahn was compelled to build in a manner conventional to American residential construction: concealed wood-stud framing— a manner at odds with Modern movement dicta that seemed to insist on honest expression of structure and material. It was Kahn’s religious adherence to such dicta that had brought to his work a gravity, a weight, an order, an authenticity that few Twentieth Century structures had achieved. And if at Hatboro he were to reluctantly give up his thick walls, he would not so easily give up their effects.

Now it seems to me that one of the essential aspects of a ‘box within a box’ parti such as that which Kahn devised for Fort Wayne is that one might inhabit the walls. I mean by this that there is the principal ‘room’— in the case of Fort Wayne, the auditorium — and there is surrounding this room a space that is not a room. This space that is not a room is the space between the exterior walls of the inner box and the interior walls of the exterior box. To inhabit this in-between space, is to dwell within the building’s wall. At Fort Wayne, the ostensible function of the building perfectly accommodates the ‘box within a box’ parti, for an auditorium demands to be surrounded by circulation space, the space of movement. The clarity of the scheme in this large volume one-story structure is readily evident. The same parti, though somewhat more complex and therefore less apparent, is employed at Rochester and at Dacca (clearly a variation on Rochester) at Bryn M awr and most ingeniously at Exeter. At Rochester [L & R], Kahn surrounded the sacred, principal room with a corridor and then with another very thick wall, a wall that houses all the other functions of a Unitarian church. When inside the building, the thickened wall is hardly perceived as such. One understands this wall as a series of rooms off a common corridor. From the outside, however, the thick surrounding wall is made visible by Kahn’s cutting and removing of each of its corners. The resulting end walls Kahn rendered as impenetrable masonry, a motif he extended to the open front walls in the form of deep, closely spaced sunscreens. All conspire to give an overall impression from the outside of massive brick walls, surrounding— perhaps, buttressing— a big box, a big box in the latter stages of decay. And something of the same might be said of Kahn’s dormitories at Bryn M awr [L & R], though here the big box is multiplied by three and is far more submerged in the surrounding walls, walls which again are inhabited. The inhabited ‘walls’ are the dormitory.
rooms themselves; the inner boxes are the three atria that they surround. This *parti*, however, lacks clear articulation. As at Rochester, the rooms are severed from the inner boxes by a corridor, but multiple levels complicate and confuse the order. In addition, the inner boxes lack definition. In their attempt to accommodate diverse functions and movements, their form is eroded.

At Exeter, Kahn perfected the ‘box within a box’ *parti*. Here the inner box is a void, a cube of light, absence itself made manifest. This inner box is not an object, and yet it has four facades. Unlike Fort Wayne or Bryn Mawr, the place it offers us is not habitable. It is ideal space made manifest, a space traversed by light alone. Surrounding this light is the dense, dark core of books. And surrounding this solid core are the inhabited walls, now made very visible as such. All of this is obvious from the outside, where Kahn has again clipped the corners to render the walls massive, thick brick piers; yet here he has welded the walls together with balconies and in so doing maintained the integrity of the cube. The building can thus be perceived both as four hollowed walls— the pergola at the top and arcade at the bottom delineating this hollowness— strapped together at the corners with balconies, and as a solid cube with chamfered corners. The reading depends largely on the way in which the building is lighted as the sun moves through the sky. But the inhabited wall motif is now made visible on the inside too, for here the space of the wall is a vertical channel— a channel that echoes the verticality of the wall as we know it from the outside. That the wall presents itself as a wall, that it contains space is absolutely imperative. That it illuminates the space it defines is equally important. The two would seem to be in conflict, and it is the real genius of Kahn at Exeter that both are accomplished together, that the opening of the wall makes visible the wall itself.

So at Exeter Kahn perfected a *parti* that he had deployed in many of his most renowned institutional buildings. He turns Fort Wayne inside out, surrounding space with solid, solid hollowed out to allow for inhabitation. Readers in this library dwell in the fabric of its construction and by contrast, the cube of absence that is its center, its reason for being, is rendered visible. The building is never diagrammatic, each of its elements— whether solid or void— is inextricably woven into a whole far greater than the sum of its parts. In this, and in the clarity of its insistence on the (philosophical?) centrality of emptiness— that is, of the unknowable and inexplicable— it stands in marked contrast to a building that assumes a very similar *parti*, Gordon Bunshaft’s Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale. If Kahn, as Robert Venturi once remarked, is neither a modernist nor a post-modernist, certainly this Bunshaft building, can only be considered American Modern Movement par excellence [L & R]. I introduce it here only because I believe it persuasively indicates how radical Kahn’s vision was when compared to that of his contemporaries. Within an elevated box of translucent marble, Bunshaft placed at its center another box, a hermetically sealed glass box that he filled with the renowned rare book collection. This glass box is luminous; it glows in the orange light of the library. The display is fetishistic; the books are there to be worshiped as objects. An extensive comparison might be made between Bunshaft’s manifestation and that by Kahn at Exeter, and from such a comparison, I suppose, we would begin to understand how terribly different Kahn’s work was from that of his contemporaries, and how truly revolutionary was the building that he built in New Hampshire.

But I recall that my declared subject was the Fisher house, and I began by suggesting that in his preliminary design for that house— a stone cube containing a cylindrical interior— Kahn simultaneously incorporated the two notions so essential to his institutional work: a ‘box within a box’ and ‘the inhabited wall’. Clearly the two notions work as one and, as we have seen, Kahn’s direct and uncompromising use of materials helps to articulate both. But, no matter how tight the weave of this ‘box within a box’ might be, there is a redundancy in this multiple layering that can be sustained in a large institutional building, but that necessarily must seem superfluous and less than ‘economical’ in the case of a
relatively small, modest dwelling. With this in mind, I will examine the more curious features of the Fisher house. These features, as I see it, are two: First, there are two cubes (or near cubes) and these cubes are ‘joined at the hip’. Second, there are the ‘windows’—if I dare call them that—and unlike most Philadelphia bay windows, these windows project into the house, not out of the house, as can be seen on the plan.

Now ‘two cubes joined at the hip’ is a variation on a theme that Kahn adopted in the early fifties when he abandoned his Breuer-esque approach to residential design; and the inverted window, I would argue, grows directly from Kahn’s rigorous subscription to that theme. At that time he chose the square as a basic datum, and from this square—almost always 26 feet on a side—each of his residential designs is generated. Thus there is the three-square Fruchter house project of 1952, and the six-square Devore house plan of 1954-55, looking a bit like a poorer, ‘servantless’ version of Richards Medical Laboratories. Next there is the 5-square Adler house plan and here the columns, too, have become squares,—grown to the size of walls, firmly articulating the corners as mass, while eliminating the corner as space. Chimneys find their place as Kahn’s first servants, poised outside glazed openings and therefore visible from the inside, a place they will occupy in successive residences right up until Kahn’s last work, the Korman house. The width of the column-piers in the Adler scheme affects the ‘field’ generated by the articulation of structure. No longer is that field a simple Cartesian line grid, but now becomes a Scottish plaid Tartan grid, defining a swath of space wide enough to accommodate staircases and toilet rooms. If this mention of piers, corners and tartan grids all sounds a bit Wrightian, the similarities are indeed there and well worth pursuing, though certainly not at the present time. At the present time we push on to Trenton where the corner piers of the Adler scheme become inhabitable, which is to say that it is here that the idea of poché space emerges in Kahn’s work in a fully modern sense. It emerges, and though it may later be clarified by a study of historic structure, and though, too, it may well have lurked in Kahn’s Beaux Arts consciousness, here it is grown from within, a direct result of his disciplined pursuit. And after all, how else to enter the walled-off dressing courts; and where else to put the plumbing? So servant and served, poché space, inhabitation of the wall: all emerge complete at Trenton.

And together with them— the yang that makes the ying visible— at Trenton, perhaps purely by chance, Kahn discovered the inner courtyard, the synergetic appearance of a fifth square (which is a void) from four squares (which are solids) has something to do with the need to eliminate redundancy and thus to allow each solid, pyramided roof to share two piers with its neighbors. But the real inner courtyard, the true Kahn court, is not the roofless, fifth square, but the roofed dressing rooms. Here the pyramidal roof does not meet the wall, and light spills in from above. (Here again we might remember Wright, for certainly this is what Kahn recognized in Wright’s great workroom at Johnson Wax.) The space is entirely enclosed and we are made keenly aware of the wall, of the apparent heaviness of the roof suspended above, and of ‘light’. As the sun traverses the sky, successive walls are highlighted. The order of the building registers celestial movements. This is a registration Kahn will conjure up again and again in all of his great space: in the Rochester church, in the Salk plaza, in the vaults of the Kimball, at Exeter and in the courts of the British Art Center.

One could continue this review and move on to the weather-proofed version of Trenton, the Clever house, where an obviously Palladian plan is married (perhaps more by the Rev. Anne Tyng than by Rabbi Lou Kahn?) to Bruce Goffian elevations and details. From here we would go to the Escherick and Shapiro houses (the immediate predecessors to the Fisher house) and to the preliminary sketch for a ‘box within a box’ that gave rise to the present inquiry. Earlier along the road we would have run into the Escherick studio where a skewed geometry resulted in a ‘joined at the hip’ motif, not unlike that at the Fisher house—or that exhibited more famously in early American building, most notably at the Ephrata
with Kahn architecture this idea is crystallized not at Hatboro but the notion of inhabiting the wall. In his residential the next work that Kahn conceives. From box to box. But just as with the Bath House in Trenton, it is exactly such need that drives Kahn on. With each new solution, comes a new discovery. You see, Kahn could not have placed the cubes side by side allowing them to share a common wall as at the Esherick house; and, having long ago dismissed the corridor as coercive, he certainly could not have introduced a third element, a connector between the two buildings. Connectors and corridors belonged to his Breuer-esque phase before Kahn became Kahn with his acceptance of the elementary square as generator of architectural form. What else then could he have done? He joined the buildings at the hip, and, within the solid cube— for certainly the bedroom box is this— he cored a space of entry, a place that might approach a corridor in its configuration were it not emptied entirely of its coerciveness by its opening completely both onto the landscape and into the living cube beyond. This joined-at-the-hip motif, having successfully percolated through this persistent investigation, is subsequently offered to the next work that Kahn conceives.

Briefly I return to the inverted bay windows and to the notion of inhabiting the wall. In his residential architecture this idea is crystallized not at Hatboro but with Kahn’s last work, the Korman house. Here he builds a masonry fireplace that one can sit in and a masonry kitchen as extension of the dining room hearth. The effect is so very early American, as is the all-wood staircase hidden within the fabric of the house and the deep window recesses that show up in many Kahn works, including the bedrooms at the Fisher house. It is this depth that is essential to Kahn, this feeling for a surrounding massiveness not easily attained in three-and-half-inch thick concealed wood stud framing. So at Hatboro Kahn introduces the inverted bay window to remedy this. It runs the full height of the cube and suggests that, despite the exterior horizontal banding that divides the box into upper and lower layers, the interior volume is a single cell. Too, this slit gives the impression of very thick walls, exactly as at Rochester, Bryn Mawr, and Exeter; yet here, on the street side at least, Kahn leaves the corners intact. Indeed the corners are reinforced and the building seems as though it might be made up of solid pieces, as here the thick pier-columns of the Adler house re-appear if only fleetingly. On the inside, the inverted bays serve to thicken the wall too. Like the piers of the Adler house they bring to the project a tartan field. A zone is created exactly as if the cube had been built of heavy timbers. And it is this sensation of a truly heavy frame—a suggestion both reinforced by the massive stone foundation, for instance, and occasionally denied by the larger taut glass openings in which a phenomenal world is found in reflections — that Kahn again offers to his later creations.

And this then takes me back to the box and machine paradigms with which I opened. For certainly these devices can be found in play in Modern works contemporary with the Fisher house, as well as in buildings that belong to the local landscape of Philadelphia. And certainly exactly these paradigms were portrayed as early as the first two decades of this century (and here I remind the reader of Walter Gropius’ renowned 1913 *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbund* article in which he offers for our consideration two American building types, the silo and the factory, in other words, the machine and the box, or in more cuddly local jargon, the duck and the decorated shed). And certainly these paradigms have many Philadelphia connections, buildings that seem to have anticipated much of what Kahn accomplished late in his life. But if one accepts the analysis here offered, if one understands Kahn’s astounding accomplishment as coming from within, as a result of a firm adherence to a program intended to legitimize the production of architectural form, then one might begin to understand that Kahn’s buildings are always more than machines or boxes, ducks or decorated sheds, and one might begin to more fully appreciate the truly vast qualitative differences that separated Kahn’s work from that of his contemporaries.

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