

# K R U H L YARCHITECTS

## Contextual Monumentality of Louis I. Kahn

James Kruhly is founder and principal of KRUHLYARCHITECTS. A Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, and a Gold Medalist of the Philadelphia Chapter, Kruhly has been a Distinguished Visiting Professor of Architecture at a number of schools in the US, as well as in Europe. He has written and lectured on the work of Louis I. Kahn frequently. Currently, he is a Galletly/Dickson Visiting Scholar in Architecture at the University of Bath, England and is working on a book entitled *Crafting the Architecture of Place*, which has a critical chapter on Kahn.

The lecture is held in English.

Registration is not required.

Host: MOME Institute of Architecture

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Louis I. Kahn began a lasting connection between Modern architecture and the great works of the past, a connection which has changed the course of today's architecture. Unlike most of his contemporaries in the early fifties, who practiced a modernism devoid of the passion and the mission of the first generation Modern, Kahn elected to question the basic tenets established by Hitchcock and Johnson in their pivotal show "The International Style."

While Kahn agreed with the first two principles that advocated for a lack of applied decoration and a search for balance not symmetry, he rejected the preference for emphasizing volume over mass. It was his re-introduction of mass into architecture and his unique way of relating it to its context which enabled Kahn to break away from the modern architecture movement of his time.

Consistent with his desire for buildings which had the "heaviness of being" or "gravitas", he chose materials appropriate to this end. Kahn loved brick, concrete block, poured and pre-cast concrete. He used these materials with a freshness and inventiveness which gave his building a poetry which was un-paralleled. His life-long search to express the ultimate truth about his materials produced architectural works containing the greatness of past epochs in Europe.

From his first major work, the addition to the Yale University Art Gallery, with its bold use of brick and concrete block, to his last project, the more elegant British Arts Center, Kahn designed modern buildings with substance and mass, yet deeply deferential to the context, the history and culture of place. His poetic response to the context is often overlooked and misunderstood. For a public looking for a more literal, more decorative response to his buildings' neighbors, Kahn's work seems a bit brutal and abstract. Kahn never wanted to copy or imitate or seek obvious analogies. His goal was to create contextual buildings, yet buildings which expressed the

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monumentality of their mission, a monumentality based on their importance in our society. Few architects have been able to do this so successfully.

Historian and critic Vincent Scully very accurately described Kahn's work as "never gesturing". This is absolutely true, especially when it comes to his efforts to acknowledge the specialness of place and culture. The Richards Medical Laboratories recall the brick and tower-like structures of the Gothic Collegiate university campus. The Bryn Mawr Dormitories are a modern "castle" designed for a medieval castle setting. Exeter Library has a separate skin to reprise the prevalent brick New England mills.

Kahn's commitment to a contextual architecture was an essential part of his efforts to acknowledge the past, while going forward with a new language based on advances in structural systems and an honest expression of materials. In so doing, Kahn created an architecture which was respectful, formidable and deeply moving.

