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If you eliminate the fairy tale from reality,
I'm against you.
It's the most sparkling reality there is.
Louis Kahn¹

**“Magic Internationalism” or the Paradox of Globalization:
Louis Kahn’s National Assembly Complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh**

by

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When it was commissioned, Louis Kahn’s monumental National Assembly Complex in Dhaka (today capital of Bangladesh) was supposed to be a Pakistani response to Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh complex in Delhi. Its construction took a long time: begun in 1962, the complex remained unfinished at the time of Kahn’s death in 1974 to be completed only in 1983. Most recently, the world has been reminded of the existence of this unusual building through Nathaniel Kahn’s award winning documentary film on his father’s life and work.^{#2}

When I visited the building in 2004, I was not blindfolded as was Kahn’s son Nathaniel Kahn who wanted to experience a sort of empathic shock effect on his arrival. Keeping my eyes open I could see masses of people, many of them underfed or misshapen and begging children. The Assembly towers on an artificial mount and the first impression it yields is rather Nordic. The brick boxes with their pop-up circles and triangles look like oversized climbing constructions for a playground. The wooden windows that lurk through the cut out triangles of the concrete boxes – an effect that is not clearly visible on photos – evoke the homeliness of Black Forest log cabins or Russian dachas while the brick part is vaguely reminiscent of Pietilä’s Hervanta housing complex in Finland. This is no regionalism, not even a very critical one but the building definitely looks entirely extraterrestrial in the Bangladeshi context. At the same time it is undeniable that this building is a success even though so many details fail to work in the service of straightforward intercultural communication. The building’s main concept functions well within the locality. Very different from what happened to Pietilä’s Ministry in Kuwait, Bangladeshi people are proud of their National Assembly and accept it as the embodiment of their nationhood and pay dearly for its maintenance: every minute of parliamentary session costs the state 15,000 Taka, about the monthly salary of a university professor.

The building complex is not situated in the proverbial Bangladeshi ocean of poverty but

enjoys its own sub-environment. When Kahn visited the site in 1962, he saw 1000 acres of farmland (an additional 2000 acres were accredited in 1973) bordering the city limits and touching upon a corner of the airport. Meanwhile the city has developed. The airport is no longer used – a new international airport has been built further away from the city – and the site now appears as integrated into the urban tissue of Dhaka. The complex is situated in the middle of a large park which I visited on a public holiday. Masses of young middle-class people hang out here with radios or skateboards, similar to what young people do in Tokyo or other Asian cities. Those people are rich compared to most of their countrymen, but still poor enough to escape stigmatization as a privileged minority. The National Assembly is visible from almost any point of the park and it can be approached by walking through labyrinthine brick corridors of the Capital complex linking offices, hostels, a hospital and other facilities. In certain areas of this “brick part” the civil population can circulate relatively freely. Part of the “hostels” are used by the staff (drivers, cleaners, etc.) who have hung out their clothes on drying stacks on the little verandas in front of the round shaped windows.

This “brick part” of the complex is much less documented and written about than the actual Assembly. This might be justifiable from the point of view of architectural aesthetics. With regard to the anatomy of the environment and its daily use by people, however, the “brick part” is, in my opinion, the more interesting part of the complex since it provides people much more space and many more opportunities for concrete associations. Originally Kahn projected to build also this part in concrete but reverted to bricks for financial reasons, using not only the locally produced bricks but also the simple Bangladeshi building techniques. The result is vaguely reminiscent of local Mughal architecture or of the hybrid colonial architecture that can be seen all around in which red brick served as a substitute for sandstone. Some historians have been searching for concrete parallels with Mughal or vernacular South Asian architecture, trying to prove that Kahn has picked up the one or the other architectural element while traveling through the region.^{#3} At the same time it can be interpreted as an homage to Roman brick construction.

Walking through these hybrid brick constructions of the Capital Complex, people seem to communicate with the Assembly Building. The language they use remains obscure: it must be assumed that the vocabulary of the main building remains relatively strange to them. The language is more familiar to the Western observer who recognizes the round concrete towers, especially as they border on the artificial lake, as evocations of medieval water castles. The Bangladeshi observer might have seen pictures of European medieval castles but these associations remain poor on a cognitive and emotional level. It has been suggested that for Bangladeshi observers the lake evokes the flooding by which Dhaka is regularly haunted rather than graceful water castles of Germany or France. The same problem arises with regard to Kahn’s idea of buildings as “constructed ruins.” Strictly speaking, “constructed ruins” are out of place in a city where hundreds of new buildings are literally “in ruins” as a result of financial miscalculations; it is even more absurd in a city whose old colonial sector is definitely “in ruins” and above that, partly flooded.^{#4}

All these things must have led the Indian architect Charles Correa to claiming that Kahn failed in Dhaka “on the level of poetic invention.”^{#5} Correa is right if poets are supposed to invent *only* verses, symbols and metaphors. It is perfectly true that Kahn’s poetic vocabulary is misleading and perhaps even entirely senseless in the context in which it is embedded.

However, a model of poetics that sees poetry as nothing but a web of symbols is too simple to be valid. No poet invents only metaphors and images but he also creates a certain *style*. And this style is able to transcend the creation of suitable, “correct,” and “understandable”

metaphors. Deep down, Correa seems to wish for something like an Aalto-like identification of architecture with its native environment, sporting the palpable poetry of Indian bazaars that sprawl and wiggle, waiting to be caught up by the empathy of their daily users. First, it is doubtful if an American architect could ever do this without becoming hypocritical, mannerist and artificial. Second and more importantly, certain arguments derived from poetics show that Kahn's solution appears "reasonable" in spite of his illogical use of architectural signs.

In general, Kahn was insensitive to Aaltonian regionalist hermeneutics (that is, to the dialectical relationship between the building and its environment) but much more given to Corbusian structuralism. By the latter I mean the most powerful idea *underlying* the principle of "form follows function" which is that of a form *flowing out of itself*, regardless of the context within which it is imbedded. The Dhaka building looks much more "Nordic"^{#6} in the sense of "wild," "natural," and "anti-progressive" than anything built by Le Corbusier. In a way, Kahn could afford Aalto's anti-modernism without passing through its intrinsic environmentalist hermeneutics of Critical Regionalism. How did this happen?

Kahn's most famous sentence is that "A house should be in the first place not 'a house' but simply 'House'." Kahn's sources of inspiration when saying this sentence are unknown, but the idea itself can very well appear as an architectural blueprint of Cocteau's sentence that one "should not try to have *a* style but *style*." What is produced here, in Cocteau as much as in Kahn, is a strange kind of hermeneutics that willfully pushes common-sensical dialectics (usually operating with ideas of the 'general' and the 'individual' and their relationships) towards a shortcut. Individual expression and general environment are no longer explained as mutual derivations: in "House" they are simply declared to be identical: a house should not be *a* house but House.

In Dhaka, the simultaneous overcoming of "Form Follows Function" *and* the Aaltonian identification of form with the surrounding environment led to the simultaneous transgression of Le Corbusier's functionalist grammar *and* the poetic language of bazaars. As a result, the creations settled within the *non-linguistic* domain produced by the stylistic tension between several elements. Within this tension, "style" is no longer a linguistic phenomenon, meaning that it cannot be defined as the dialectical fusion of different linguistic elements. Style itself represents the domain where architectural forms begin to manifest themselves not through poetic metaphors or images but simply "as such," that is, by evoking the style they "want to have." "The brick was always talking to me, saying you're missing an opportunity," is one of Kahn's ways of describing this procedure. Or: "Brick was saying: I want an arch."

This is exactly the reason why the Dhaka buildings manage, in a paradoxical way, to transcend cultural differences just by making them obvious. Kahn sees no reason to cancel them and to give in, for example, to globalized universalism, nor does he attempt to fuse, in a post-modern manner, different cultural (linguistic) elements. This represents a parallel with Pietilä's Kuwait project. However, instead of emulating local culture through surrealist juxtapositions, Kahn simply insist on cultural paradoxes as if is hoping that out of these paradoxes will flow a particular style.

What can be called Kahn's "magic internationalism" is meant to overcome both universalism and regionalism. It goes without saying that there is no place for Critical Regionalism here either. Kahn himself offered rather mystical explanations for this procedure, but in fact, it be explained. Kahn suggests that we should "listen to the house" and that the house will "say what it wants to be" (that is, it will "communicate" the entity that it has always been by nature). The essential point of Kahn's para-theoretical elaborations is that the house speaks no

particular language, neither the international nor the regional one. Of course, later, once the house is built, everything “the house has said” can be translated into *real* languages. Then, Western visitors, for example, will find the National Assembly “classical” while visitors from the Indian cultural sphere might find it “indigenous.” In any case, it is wrong to expect a *concrete* poetry from this building, in the sense of the “Bangla-spirit,” or that of “universalism,” or perhaps in the form of the one or the other idea of what National Assemblies are usually expected to express: democracy, freedom, modernity...

At the end of Nathaniel Kahn’s film, *Shamsul Wares*, the Bangladeshi architect who had been working with Kahn claims, with tears in his eyes, that “Kahn gave us democracy.” If he gave it to them, it must be permitted to ask where it is now. I am not talking about parliamentary democracy (which officially exists) but about a possible democratic attitude that could be manifest, for example, in how people behave in the heavy traffic of Dhaka City. Nothing is democratic here: the strongest simply paves his way through the traffic, putting at risk the lives of others. In the same way, Kahn’s building was not supposed to yield anything concrete: all Kahn suggested was the vague possibility of intercultural communication.

Walking through vaults and over bridges past threatening towers and heavy walls, I arrive in the canteen of the housekeepers who offer me Pepsi-Cola. Outside is Bangladesh with its never-ending rhythm of mudslides, strikes, floods, and trade deficits. The inside of the building is dark and looks like in a medieval cloister. Curiously, the walls have no windows but large holes yielding a view on lush greenery, the shallow, swanless lake as well as the main building. Many a visitor must have felt something “medieval” but they should be aware that this are neither the *European* Middle Ages nor the *Bangladeshi* Middle Ages but simply – “Middle Ages.” This architecture is based on the principle of superposition. The undeniable dizziness created through the confluence of several realities joining a single super-reality called the Dhaka National Assembly makes me think that this architecture is best experienced like a film in which images can overlap or like a dream in which elements or cultures cannot “clash.” I am waiting for “brick” to talk to me in the language of Freudian dream speech. Nothing is here resolved in a “critical” fashion and regionalism is neither defended nor offended. Everything coexists, mocking what Enlightenment philosophers like to call “logic.”

Aalto needed pre-industrial Finland in order to let the rationalist laws of architectural ecology work in the service of regionalist internationalism. Pietilä needed surrealist collages to overcome the trite expressions of regionalist imitations. Kahn needed the underdeveloped Bangladesh to make his architecture “speak” a unique stylistic language purified of all logic of fusion or subordination.

Notes

- 1 In: John Wesley Cook, *Conversations with architects* (New York: Praeger, 1973), p. 192.
- 2 *My architect: A Son’s Journey*. Film by Nathaniel Kahn.(USA, 2003).
- 3 See William Curtis’ “Presence of Absence: Louis I. Kahn and Modern Monumentality” where he writes: “He surely realized that the pre-Moghul mosque type of Bengal (...) was a centralized building type. More than that, it was a fusion of two great universal traditions: the Islamic from the West, and the Buddhist from the East. May it not be that the Dhaka Assembly rests upon local substructures and continuities of great antiquity, making its way back through the strata of time?” (In: *Ptha* 2002:2, p. 31). See also D. Hossain’s Thesis *Architecture and Identity: Bangladesh and the Spirit of Louis Kahn*, London, University College,1992; as well as Curtis’

“Authenticity and Abstraction and the Ancient Sense: Le Corbusier and Kahn’s ideas of Parliament” in *Perspecta* 20 (1986), 191-93.

- 4 Those of Kahn’s buildings that look as if they have no windows, like the Exeter Library for example, are indeed reminiscent of high rise buildings from Dhaka in which windows had never been installed.
- 5 Charles Correa: “Chandigarh: The View from Benares” reprinted in: *Chandigarh: Planning and Architecture* <http://chandigarh.nic.in/architec.htm#arch>.
- 6 I insist on the “Nordic character” of Kahn’s architecture. Contrary to what Vincent Scully states, Kahn was not “Russian after all” (Introduction to *Louis Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*) but born in Estonia. Anybody who has visited Estonia will have recognized that this country is as different from Russia as is, for example, Germany. Estonians and Finns belong to the same ethnic group and share similar psychological dispositions, which in many respects makes Estonia just as much a part of Northern Europe as Finland.