Mr. Brown Keeps His Dreamhouse



No one ever accused Lou Kahn of encouraging his clients to think small. His project for Rice University (1969) yielded an arts and architecture building nearly 1,000 feet long, its awesomeness overshadowed only by his proposal to invest the adjoining acreage with a performing arts center that would have sufficed for a small city.1 As Marshall Meyers, his project architect for both the Yale Center for British Art (1969-77) and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (1966-72), recalled: "Many times he designed a building that was too big. Yale was too big. He didn't think about size. His very first design for the Kimbell was six hundred feet on a side, and the director, Richard Brown, started comparing it to the scale of the Grand Canyon. It occupied almost three-quarters of the site."2 So it is not without a touch of irony that many of Kahn's admirers were moved to protest the recently proposed but since abandoned project for the expansion of the Kimbell prepared by Mitchell Giurgola Associates, acting on the instructions of Edmund Pillsbury. As director of the Kimbell since 1980 and a previous tenant of Kahn's while director of the Yale Center for British Art (1976-80), and before that curator at the Yale University Art Gallery (1972-76), Pillsbury, no less than Romaldo Giurgola, realized the delicacy of the situation and sought to preserve the integrity of Kahn's landmark.

No one can know what Kahn himself would have wished, though this scarcely inhibited speculation. Giurgola asserted that his proposed wings followed Kahn's all-but-expressed intentions for just such a contingency.3 But Giurgola's set-back enfilade of Kahn-like vaults, held apart from the flanks of the original by "unseamly" circulation notches, dispelled the three-bay tautness of the original, producing a five-bay-plus front that Paul Goldberger characterized as "stretch limousine architecture."4 The more prudent and conservative course, that of leaving well enough alone, was reached only after a winter of vocal discontent. As it so happened, the public laundering of the Kimbell's new clothes also mirrored the attitude of the Kimbell's first director and client of record, Richard Brown, conveyed in a letter of July 1967 reacting to the size and scale of Kahn's initial designs. It is reproduced here along with a diagram Brown prepared in November 1968 that compared the 450-foot-long front of Kahn's scheme of the moment with the 600-foot length of Eero Saarinen's Dulles Airport.5 The diagram was signed "Richard the Chicken Hearted." Ultimately, Kahn was persuaded to take less for an answer. The front of the Kimbell as built measures 318 feet, which Giurgola's expansion would have increased to a Dulles-like 558 feet.

Brown's fear of flying at the Kimbell was by most accounts influenced by his appreciation of the congenial surroundings of the Frick Collection, where he began his professional career as a researcher. According to Meyers: "He wanted the building to be like a large house, like a villa he would say, not like the Louvre, not a palace. He had worked many years earlier at the Frick in New York and that was his model: neither

residential in scale nor palatial, but somewhere in between. You should feel the presence of the building but not be overwhelmed by it. He reiterated this many times and made it sink in."6 As director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1961-65), Brown had been frustrated in his attempt to secure Mies van der Rohe as architect of its new building on Wilshire Boulevard. But for the Kimbell, he felt that Mies was unlikely to alter his own canonically determined procedure to accommodate "a totally new situation with a different climate and light."7 Brown had also come to view Louis Kahn as "the architect whose style is germinal to the second half of the twentieth century, just as Mies was the best architect of the first half."8 Although other architects were considered, he succeeded in awarding the commission to Kahn, who he believed "would approach the problem like Adam"9 and whose neo-Roman tendencies were not inconsistent with Velma Kimbell's expressed hope that the building would be 'of classical design."10

Kahn's "noble palazzo," as Brown later called it,11 was intended to conform to the director's requirement that it be "a building of such an organic integrity [that it] cannot be built in stages, with allowances and adjustments being made for future wings, extensions or added floor levels. The form of the building should be so complete in its beauty that additions would spoil that form; and all of the requisite functional facilities should be articulated as components of that form so that, from the outset, the museum will be able to operate as a complete and vital institution."12 Brown's active and intelligent collaboration in the actual design of the Kimbell is again confirmed in Meyers's recollections, though Brown, speaking for the record, was always solicitous of Kahn's authorship. The definitive, almost hermetic, ideal Brown prescribed is not above question, and indeed Kahn would have been entitled and perhaps even disposed to reconsider the finality of their mutual arrangement some 20 years later. But in his absence, Brown remains a persuasive and cautionary critic. As Kahn himself reflected in private conversation several months before he died: "Much must be given to Rick Brown."13 And so it has.

Drexel Turner

Notes

- Stephen Fox, The General Plan of the William M. Rice Institute and Its Architectural Development, Architecture at Rice no. 28 (1980), pp. 80-82.
- 2 "Louis I. Kahn: Yale Center for British Art," in Processes in Architecture: A Documentation of Six Examples (Cambridge, Mass.: Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1979), p. 37.
- 3 Kimbell Art Museum, news release, 25 July 1989, p. 4: "'it was almost as if Kahn had left "design intent" instructions for how the Museum could be expanded at some later date."
- 4 Paul Goldberger, New York Times, 24 December 1989, 2:33.
- 5 Brown to Kahn, 12 July 1967 and 5 November 1968, Correspondence, Dr. R. Brown, March 1966 through December 1970, Box LIK 37, Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. These were brought to my attention by Patrick Peters, assistant professor at the University of Houston College of Architecture. Brown's correspondence is also noted in Patricia C. Loud, The Art Museums of Louis I. Kahn (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 111-13, 131, 162, 164.
- 6 "Louis I. Kahn: Conception and Meaning," Architecture and Urbanism, extra ed., November 1983, p. 225.
- 7 "Interview with Richard F. Brown," Art in America, September/October 1972, p. 44.
- 8 Peter Plagens, "Louis Kahn's New Museum in Fort Worth," Artforum, February 1968, p. 19.
- 9 "Interview with Richard F. Brown," p. 44.
- 10 Leonard Sanders, Fort Worth Star-Telegram,

(see note 5 above).

- November 1964.
 Brown to Kahn, 15 March 1971, Kahn Collection
- 12 Richard F. Brown, "Kimbell Art Museum: Pre-Architectural Program, 1 June 1966," in Richard Saul Wurman, ed., In Pursuit of Quality: The Kimbell Art Museum (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 319.
- 13 Louis I. Kahn in conversation with Richard Saul Wurman, October 1973, in What Will Be Has Always Been: The Words of Louis Kahn (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 236.

The Kimbell Art Foundation. Fort Worth Texas

Suite 400, Fort Worth Club Building

NORM & KANN ARCHITECT

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IOM TRADITY ST

Ar. Louis I. Kohn 1501 Walnut Street Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Dear Lou

After perhaps too much simmering on the museum plans, and after innumerable discussions from time to time with Board members, singly or in groups, and after dieliberate. "estings" of my simmerings with other staff members, and ofter tryle to find some concise way of setting down in brief outline farm the results of my simmerings, I find that I can only simply sit down and write a letter and hope the thoughts make sense and come out in some kind of order.

First, nobody wants to push or rush anything, but I have noted an increasing uneasiness on the part of important Board members obout not seeing any progress. I have convinced them that things will be infinitely better in the long run if, at this stage, we keep everything an flexible and as wide open a possible so that more thought can be applied to basics before we are committed to crystalizations which might not be ideal. This they bury, so far, but I don't want to reach a poin where we might lose their full confidence. Knowing how all responsible so appropried when they must be responsible as a group, I want to avoid a point where everyone and his grandmather begins to suggest solutions themselves when they don't have the resolution to the markless confronted.

Second, I think it is still perfectly true to say that the basic principle of design and conception of the building, as presented so far, is wholly and completely liked. More than that, it is found exclining and in absolute harmony with what we envisioning, and how we expect to function in it. In other words, we are

The only aspect of the conception to which the word "apprehensive" might be applied is the <u>SIZE</u>1 Four-hundred feet square is a hell of a big square, and it might seem, in the setting, the city, and in relation to neighboring institution.

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The Kimbell Arr Foundation.

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Far left: Richard

model of penulti-

mate design for

the Kimbell Art

Left: Richard F.

Brown to Louis

I. Kahn, 12 July

1967.

Museum, October-

November 1968.

F. Brown with

lot of cubic space that must be heated, air-conditioned, illuminated, etc.; and acres of floor and wall surface that must be cleaned, waxed, mapped, resurfaced upon occasion, etc.; etc.; all of which costs money and labor to do, and I want as much money as possible saved from maintenance so I can buy more and more art as the years roll by, not just keep up the house. And I want the labor primarily applied to putting the museum's program on.

Related to the size question is the trickier one of SCALE. (I don't know whether other people separote size and scale, or whether anyone will know what I mean by doing so; but I will! try to elucidate.) The Grand Canyon is vast and its scale is exactly right because its most effective nature is to be avestomely hoge; size and scale are in balance, or hamony, for desined effect. The Roccoc church at Wiss is try because it sits in a little valley where nature is "manicured" down to the point where it is the small clipped and cultivated details that count; because the social and religious feeling when it was built was one in which the subtle small refinements were what communicated; and because everything on it and in it was carved, pointed or molded so that delicacy of detail is a primary means of achieving cesthetic integrity — a completeness and a unity of a feeling. (I can see now that I should have used triffy Renaissance and Baroque St. Peter's instead of the Grand Canyon. Oh, well!) The Grand Canyon or St. Peter's are meant to be averful, whereas the sensitive saints and pink-tailed cherubin in Miss were supposed to make that polite and courtly oil Bevarian, while snoozing through Sunday service, feel as secure and intimate with God and the universe as does a warm bath behind a door bothed against any possible intrusion. The overage size picture on the walls of the KAM will be about 2 1/2 feet in one direction and 3 or 4 feet in the other. Some of them (e.g.: 14th or 15th century Italian panel) are all of 12 inches in the largest dimension. In addition, most of the best pictures out of the original private collection made by the Kimbells are very "genteel", "politie" representations of fair ladies, tender little children and singularly pure young men. And people today (i.e., the museum visitor) are generally only about 5 1/2 feet high, and they have a tropism for intimacy of space rather than expansiveness.

All that to say that I'm worried about how a little old lady from Abilene is going to feel looking at our 15 inch Glovanni di Paolo on a wall 15 feet vertical, with a vault above that which goes up to 30 feet.

To really get us between the bull's horns, I now must say that we need every inch of quate footage of floor space presently allocatable to galleries, auditorium,offices, eh Dilemmal

But, how about this? If the vertical gallery walls are reduced to 12 feet, proportion and scale of the other dimensions must shrink soo, no? This could make scale more artuned to the lody from Abilitiene and Giovanni di Poolo. Then, to reduce size and cubic space, without reducing square footage of those spaces where we need it must for our functions. 1: reduce sizes of inner enclosed courtyrds a bit, 2: shove a lot more into the ground level west of the parking space, putting offices, library, etc., except the lower courtered at lower level. 3: reduces the width of the control

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circulation artery, the "galleria", considerably. This latter feature has been worrying me considerably; it were it "imperial" or it stands now: 60 x 400 feet! Whee III If would give a first impression, to anyone entering the museum from either direction, the feeling of a pretty empty museum. Finding the kinds of art objects that could go into a space like that is pretty night impossible these days, since Pergaman Altans or bithar Cartes are not coming out anymore. The idea of this space, its location, the way it would function, etc. I still love; but I'm scared by the size and the scale

All of the above has to do also with style. We want the direct, simple, spare shell of structural validity and integrity, which is inherently there already. But somehow we also must achieve the warmth and chain I spake of in the program. We can't do it with period boiserie, Vitrovian plaster and paint, Byzantine tile or Gothic topestries. The size-scale question, if adjusted successfully, will help. Then materials and their treatment: color and textures. Most of the objects on exhibit in the building will be of the kind that look just great in an 18th century French choteou of subth sophisticated elegance and richness; we can't do that! But, within the integrity of this building the same feeling should prevail.

Further thought about the "one floor level" mania of mines: Shifts in level would be just fine if they occur between gollery floor and a courtyard or light well or exteriol loggia. But I still hold to the principle that the floor of the main level, inside, an where the gallery circulation is, must be without a single step, rise, drop, slope, threshold, bump or pimple.

Re. the narrow strip skylight and the long utility core beneath: this is still a brillion solution if we can find the right shape for the core and the right relationship to the vault to that it helps the effects I've been talking about above. Do you really thinks we should do a scale mack-up? Ugh! But maybe we would have to in order to know

I have lots of other ideas, but the above questions, I think, should get solved first. Then maybe things which, if brought up now, would muddy the waters, afterward mi easily fall into place.

All best regards, and let me know when we can get together for a real big pow-way and start really rolling.

Richard F. Brown

F. Brown to Louis I. Kahn, 5 November 1968.

