

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

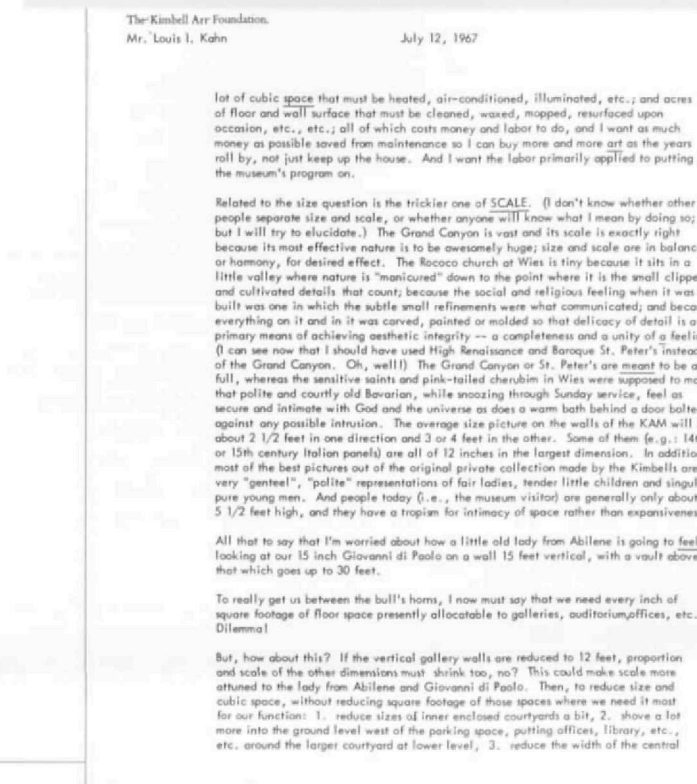
Notes

- 1 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 LK 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*, 9 November 1964.
- 11 Brown to Kahn, 15 March 1971, Kahn Collection (see note 5 above).
- 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.

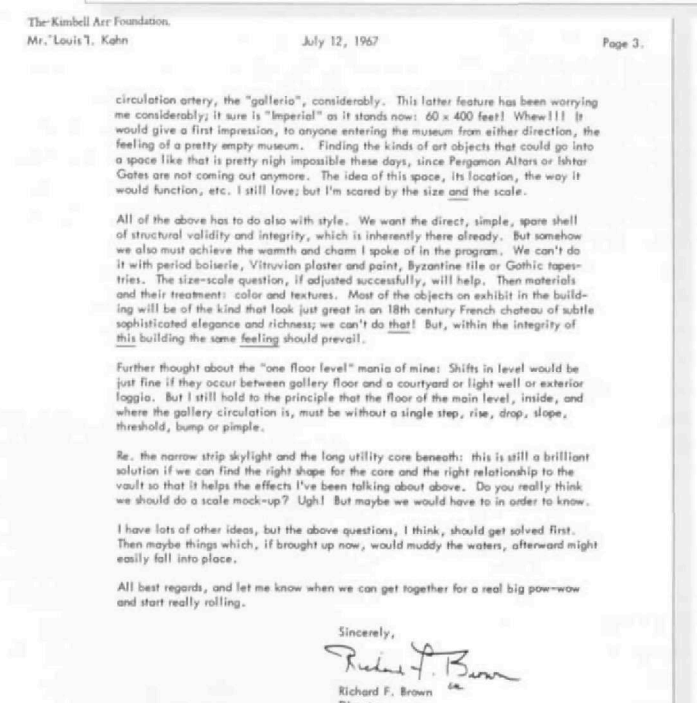


Far left: Richard F. Brown with model of penultimate design for the Kimbell Art Museum, October-November 1968.

Left: Richard F. Brown to Louis I. Kahn, 12 July 1967.



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Below: Richard F. Brown to Louis I. Kahn, 5 November 1968.

