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Hurvat haMidrash—the Ruin of the Oracle

The Hurvah Synagogue of Louis Kahn and the Semantics of Nationalism

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Fig. 1 Hurvah Synagogue, first proposal. Louis I. Kahn, 1968. (Model reconstruction by Kent Larson).

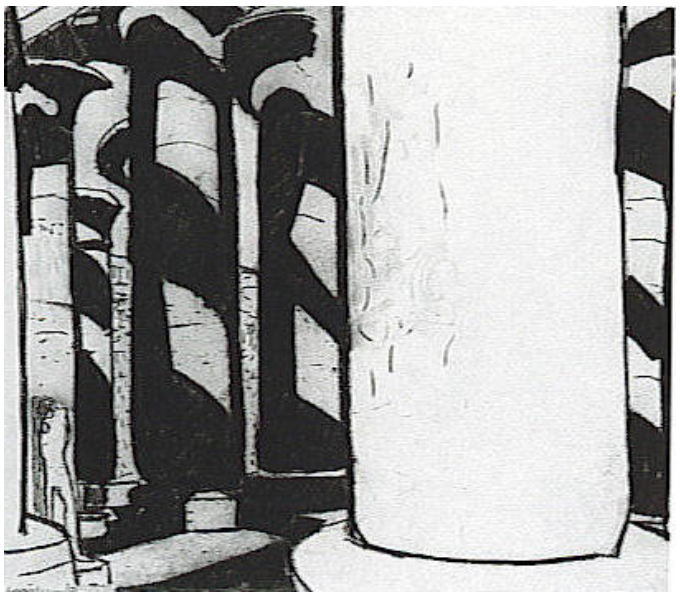

Fig. 2 Temple of Amon, Karnak, Egypt. Louis I. Kahn, 1951.

Hurvat haMidrash—the Ruin of the Oracle
The Hurvah Synagogue of Louis Kahn and the Semantics of Nationalism

In the Pantheon of 20th century architects, Louis Kahn occupies a singular place. Although Kahn was not exactly the "mystic" seer that some claim he is, his personal mythical quest for the "origins" of architecture gives him the status of something like a divine personage or Biblical prophet among architects, says Alexander Gorlin. We often lump Mies, Corbu and Gropius in one breath, and may trace out in a good day their family trees through their Team X and Situationist scions and their prattling post-modern grandchildren. But somewhere standing alone in the margins is the Ezekiel figure of Kahn, straddling simultaneously the Beaux-Arts universe of the early 20th century, CIAM modernism, and Neolithic and Bronze Age architecture. When Kahn was a toddler, the legend goes, he was drawn to inspect the light of glowing coal, which flared up suddenly in his face and permanently scarred the features around his mouth. Devotees of Kahn love to recount that story. As Gorlin observes, "The incident recalls the passage from the Book of Isaiah (XI, 66) where 'one of the angels, with a glowing stone in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from off the altar, touched my mouth with it to cleanse me of sin.'"[1] Actually, a closer precedent occurs in a Jewish Agaddic tale that recounts a similar event in the life of Moses, who purportedly placed a glowing coal in his mouth as a babe so that it scorched his tongue and made him "halting in speech". Nothing, of course, could be more prophetic about Kahn's architectural career, enraptured as it was with the unspeakable, form-giving, radiating force of light. To him light was everything; he would describe the material universe (architecture) as "spent light"

[1] Gorlin, p. 85

and “the shadows of God”. In his discussions about his work, light was truly the most tectonic element of his buildings. He not only designed like a mystic of light, he spoke and wrote like one, with a language all at once syntactically stilted, direct and elegant. To Kahn, “everything man does is design”. Leafing through his correspondence in the Louis I. Kahn Collection at the Architectural Archives of U. Penn., the most surprising articles I came across were the poems. Fellow architects and academic colleagues would compose him letters and notes as poetry, so moved were they by their encounters with his work. The hardest thing about reflecting on the life of Louis Kahn is to bring him down to earth a little.

Louis Kahn’s persona was of such a kind that the Israeli architect Ram Karmi refused what could have possibly become the greatest architectural commission of the 20th century (and certainly was the greatest commission in the Jewish world at that time) in order to hand the project over to Kahn. It was not expected to be the greatest commission of the century, but Kahn nearly turned it into that. Kahn was awarded with the task of reconstructing the Hurvah Synagogue[2] in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem, the central monument of the Quarter before it had been destroyed during the 1948 war. Kahn, however, proposed to preserve the ruins of the Old Hurvah and designed an entirely new structure nearly four times its size. He also took upon himself the task of planning a schematic for the entire Quarter itself. The schematic shows that the New Hurvah Synagogue was not only to serve as the heart of the Jewish Quarter but would become a monumental symbol of world Jewry almost on par with the Western Wall. Indeed, Kahn seemed to have regarded his synagogue as an extension of the Wall, once writing that the screen of stone pylons surrounding the New Hurvah represented the stones Western Wall.[3] In plan, he seems to have offered the synagogue as a harmonious indoor complement to the plaza before the Wall,

[2] The full name of the Synagogue is “Hurvat Rabbi Yehuda haHasid”. One will encounter several alternate transliterations of the Hebrew word חרבה, typically Khurvah and sometimes Hurvah or Churvah, with the final “h” optional (the “KH” sound at the beginning is a guttural “H” sound in Modern Hebrew). Kahn used “Hurva” normally, although once (imitating excitedly the language of the Jerusalem Ministerial Committee’s resolution which approved the project) he endearingly called it “Churvat”, not understanding that this is the construct form of the word in the full name (letter to Yehuda Tamir, 28 March 1969, Box LIK 39, Louis I Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania).

[3] However, it seems that the material quality, not the symbolic meaning, of the Western Wall appealed directly to Kahn. Explaining the deployment of light and shadows in the Dacca Assembly complex, he says: “The outside is one building that belongs to the sun. The interior belongs to the shadows, or the place where people live. Now these were not done with blinds and other accoutrements. They were simply made architectural by expressing fully the powers of architecture. Again expressive of the same idea is the Hurva Synagogue in Jerusalem, where I’m using the stone of the Western Wall and inside of it is a concrete structure. These stones are cool compared to any other structure. The concrete is warm because the reinforcing rods get heated up—it’s a warm construction” (Kahn, “Architecture and Human Agreement”, p. 30).

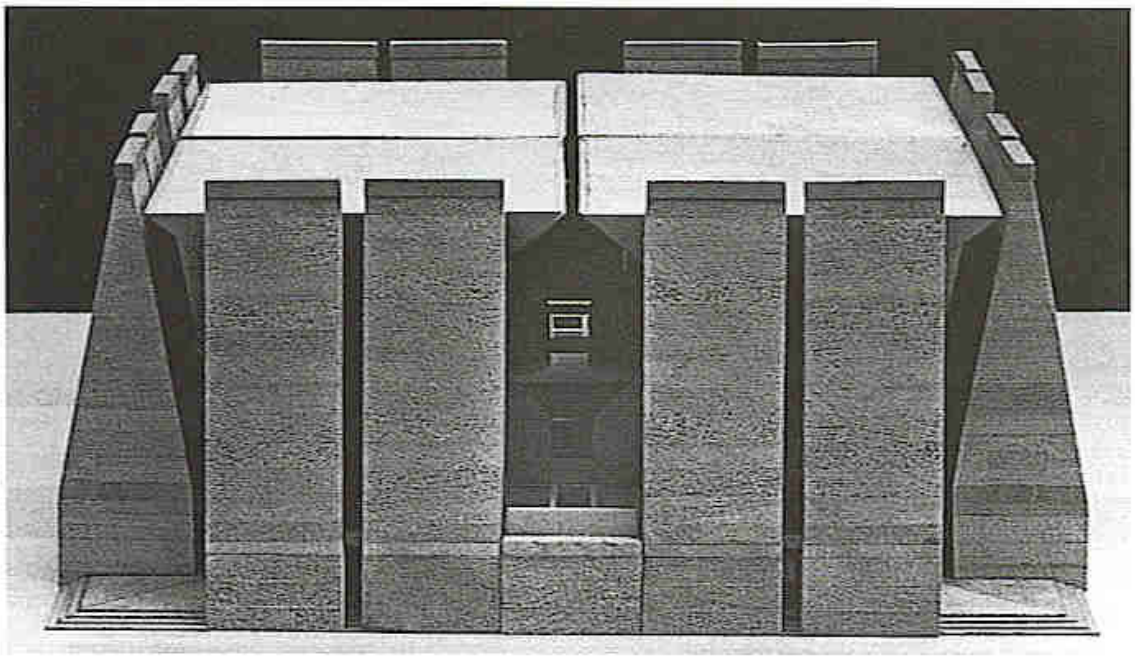

Fig. 3 Hurvah Synagogue, model of the first proposal. Louis I. Kahn, 1968.

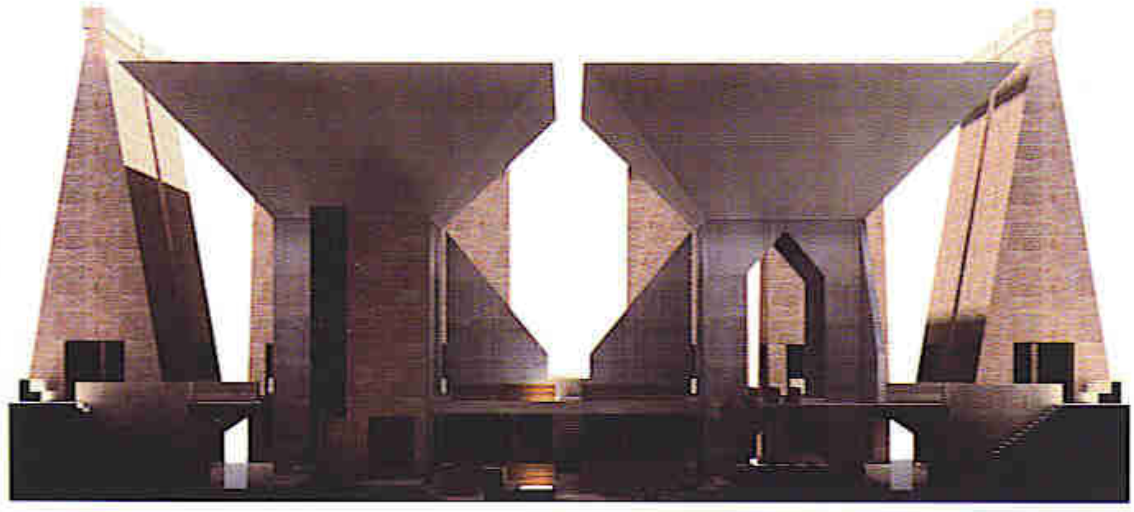

Fig. 4 Hurvah Synagogue, section model of the first proposal (as reconstructed by Kent Larson). Louis I. Kahn, 1968.

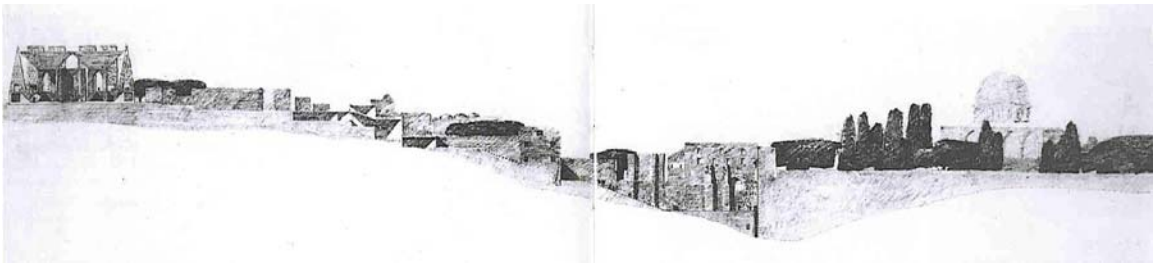

Fig. 5 Hurvah Synagogue proposal, section of the first proposal in relation to the Western Wall. Louis I. Kahn, 1968.

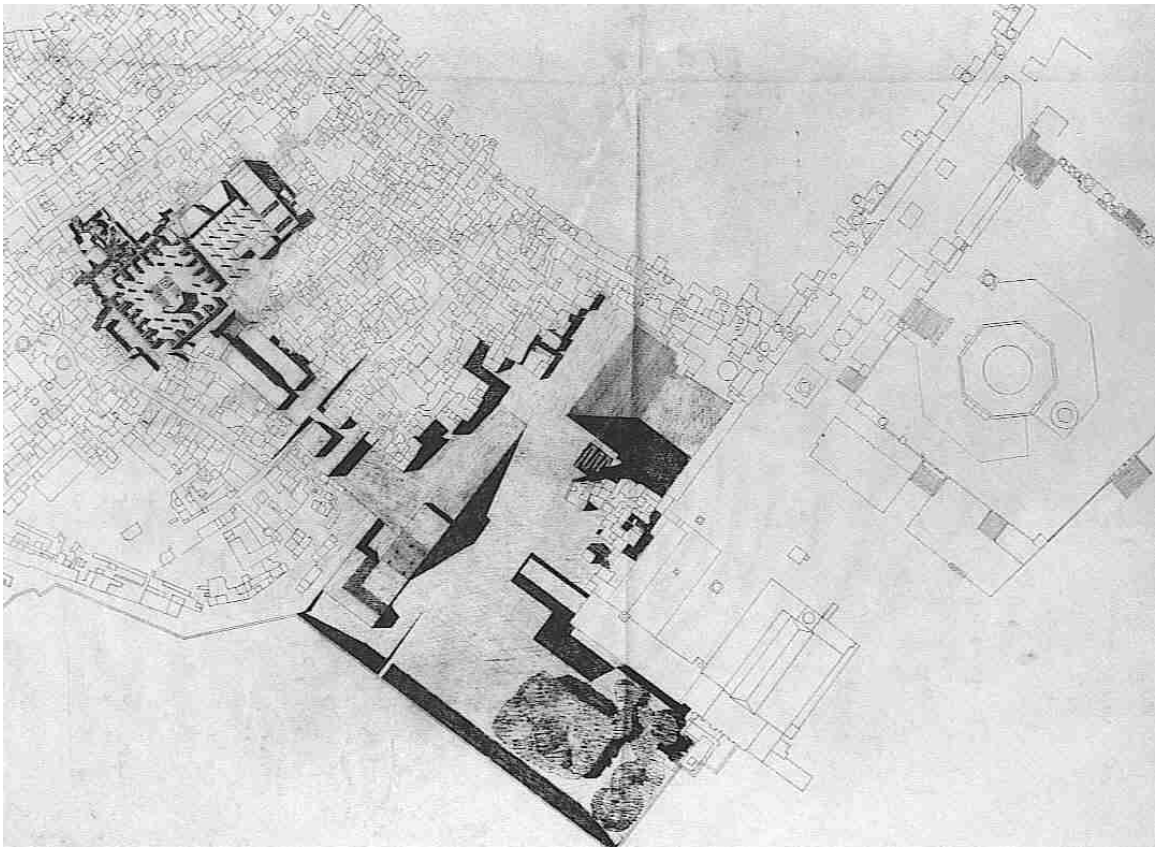

Fig. 6 Hurvah Synagogue proposal and the schematic plan of the Jewish Quarter. Exhibited in the Israel Museum. Louis I. Kahn, 1968.

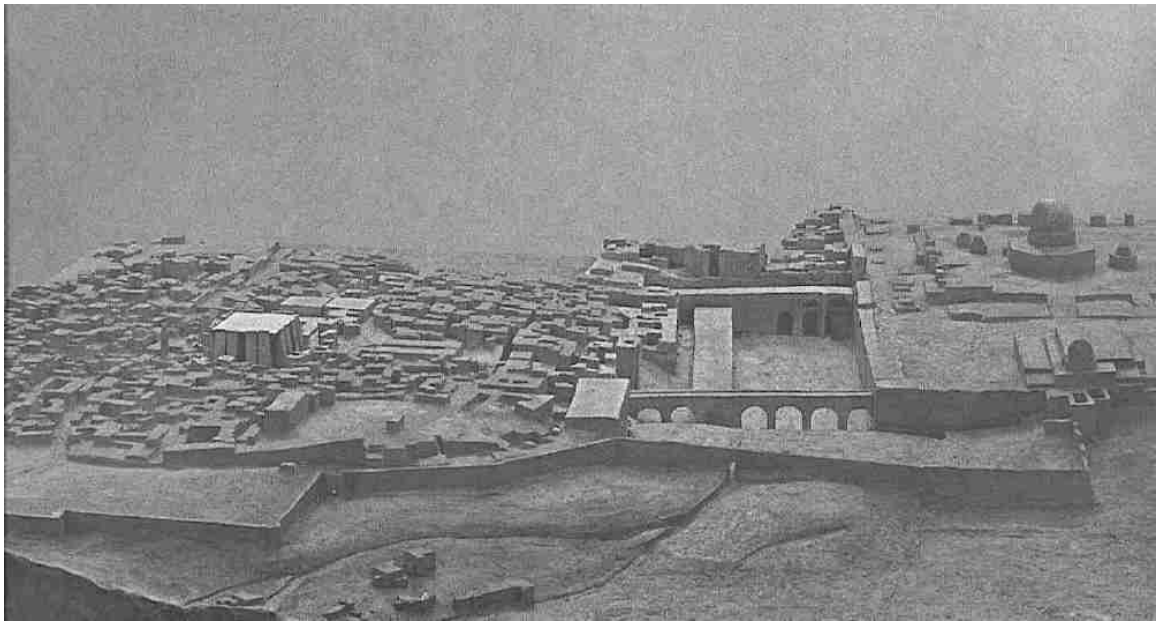

Fig. 7 Site model of the Hurvah Synagogue proposal.

which according to his vision would have shared the same width as the Hurvah (see Figure 6). A processional pilgrimage route was to lead from the Hurvah downhill towards the Western Wall's plaza. The plaza would have been excavated down to its original grade (where the Herodian street running adjacent to the wall still exists below intact), making the height of the synagogue's stone pylons, as Yasir Sakr points out, equal to the height of the Western Wall from the street (see Figure 5).

All except for the processional route and the preservation of the Old Hurvah's ruins as a memorial garden, not much of this plan was realized as Kahn had specified, for Kahn unfortunately died before the plans could be carried out to completion. Yet his design for the Hurvah helped establish Israeli Brutalism as a new paradigm for Israeli national architecture, a stylized modernist architecture that adopted a primitivistic archaeological sensibility, recalling the muscular, fortress-like forms of ancient Mediterranean structures. Israel, following the exploits of the preeminent archaeologist Yigal Yadin, was experiencing in 1968 an unprecedented enthusiasm for excavating, understanding and culturally referencing its Herodian and Solomonic past. The Quarter's planners were handed Kahn's schematic design for the Quarter and given the charge to musemise were appropriate and stylize the Quarter with vernacularly sensitive architecture.[4] Yet despite the apparent primitivism of his Hurvah design and its

[4] In April of 1969, over a year and a half after the annexation of East Jerusalem, the Israeli government commissioned the Association for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, headed by Yehuda Tamir, to rebuild the area as a residential district, cultural center and museum of Jewish heritage. The association answered directly to the Prime Minister's office and the

devotion to the ruin, Kahn's writings hint that he did not imagine a musemised environment. Instead, he seems to have described an essentially modernist utopian project to create a thriving urban environment for the city, a national centre, in fact, for cultural "institutions" that would make Israel "a place of the example".[5]

The Old Hurvah

Throughout most of its history, the Old Hurvah Synagogue had been a relatively insignificant edifice in the Jewish Quarter, used sporadically by a few Jewish sects in the late Ottoman period. Built in 1701 by an immigrant group of Ashkenazi Hasidim, the building was destroyed when the group failed to pay back their Arab lenders. For over a century, the building remained in a state of ruins, receiving thus the name "Hurvah", Hebrew for "ruin". In the early nineteenth century a fundamentalist Ashkenazi Orthodox group immigrated to the Holy Land in anticipation of the Messiah. They were treated as heretics by some of the locals, but through the aegis of the Rothschilds, the Austrian Emperor and some engagement by the British authorities, the group was able to secure a permit from the Ottoman Sultan to rebuild the Synagogue – in what could be seen as one diplomatic gesture of thanks to the British for their intervention in the Crimean War. The Ottoman Emperor graciously offered the services of his own royal court architect Assad Efindi (then working on the restoration of the Dome of the Rock), who built the Synagogue in the domed "Sinan"-style of Ottoman mosques of the same (relatively small) size. It was completed in 1864 with the funds the Rothschilds provided and soon assumed its role as the central cultural monument of the Jewish Quarter. Thus, the history of this poignantly named Synagogue represents the travails of newly arrived Jewish immigrants as well as the devotion of the Diaspora towards the memory of Jerusalem's Jewish heritage. In addition, this history makes readily apparent the idiosyncratic and often burdened relationships in Jerusalem between national powers and its

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charter stated its goals as following: "To bring the Quarter back to life again, and to dignify and develop it as a national, religious, historical and cultural milieu; To plan works of restoration and development to that end, making the Quarter a lodestone for tourists and, at the same time, a residential area of study and scholarship, ensuring public services and safeguarding the unique aspects and atmosphere of the Quarter" ("The Jewish Quarter," Booklet by the Association for the Reconstruction and Development of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City of Jerusalem, (nd) p. 11; cited in Yasir Sakr, p. 84).

[5] Letter, Louis Kahn to Teddy Kollek, 4 July 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.

religious/cultural institutions (who, in scope, are as much of a local as they are of a supra-national significance—apparently, the Crimean War itself was triggered by an altercation between Greek Orthodox and Catholic worshippers in the Holy Sepulchre).

The Old Hurvah was reduced to ruins once again during the 1948 War, and the fledgling state of Israel for a time relinquished the Old City both geographically and as a symbolic cultural monument. Architecturally, this new state of affairs found its expression in the adoption of a "Zionist Statist style" or "*Mamlakhtiut*" which selectively appropriated cultural symbols for strictly nationalistic representation, implicitly secularizing their historic and religious associations. The Israeli Knesset Building, whose stone walls purposely appropriate the image of the Western Wall in order to recreate the religious precedent as a secular symbol, is the most noteworthy example of *Mamlakhtiut*—an act of willful displacement that stirred up some controversy in its time.[6] *Mamlakhtiut*, however, rose in part as a mitigating response against the International Style adopted by secular Zionism in the 1930's, which became regarded as too neutral or aloof for nationalistic representation. The Zionists of the 30's had claimed Modernism as the only appropriate form for national representation, since it shirked any association with the "debilitating" vernaculars of traditional Diaspora architecture.[7] Needless to say, with the foundation of the state, the stage was cleared for the adoption of a more nationalistic vocabulary of self-representation.

"*Mamlakhtiut*" in Israeli culture is expressed generally as the elevation of the state above the individual and all traditionalist culture. In 1950's urbanism, *Mamlakhtiut* was simply a willful continuation of the secular building project of Zionism, which had always ignored the Old City and devoted its energy to establishing and building the Jewish center of the city in West Jerusalem. The loss of the Old City in 1948, as reflected in the attitude of Ben-Gurion, was considered to have even conveniently advanced the Statist cause. However, the need to commemorate the state's conception of itself as the beacon and protectorate of world Jewry, shortly gave rise to the "New Zionist Style", which began to replace *Mamlakhtiut* after 1956 by openly reclaiming traditional Diaspora vernacular forms, Mediterranean town planning and preservationist attitudes (examples include the restoration of Old Jaffa, the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Israel Museum). The state accepted Diaspora religious symbolism (e.g. the menorah) to memorialize thus the Holocaust and to represent itself as the new Jewish homeland to promote immigration. Zionism in the early 60's, however, began looking back with Yigal Yadin towards an even more ancient heritage that it could legitimately claim its own, an attitude reinforced by the miraculous victory of the Six Day War and the emotional, heroic recapture of the Old City. The focus of Zionism, it can thus be

[6] But as Teddy Kollek recollects, apparently not with the kind of controversy Kahn's Hurvah proposal elicited (Letter, Teddy Kollek to Louis Kahn, 29 August 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection).

[7] But, as Sakr is sharp to point out, most modernism in Israel was the "Bauhaus style" and not avant-garde modernism, and as such represented the nostalgia of the wave of secular immigrants from Germany (including renowned architect Eric Mendelsohn) that had arrived there in the 30's.

said, shifted from the Statist project (*Mamlakhtiut*) to the Nation, expressed by the need to root the developing narrative of the state in ancient history, giving the Nation underpinnings that transcended the state. The temple mount built by Herod represented the greatest and most lasting achievement of Jewish construction in history. Thus, the Western Wall was no longer simply a religious symbol but became a symbol for Zionist Nationalism as well.

There was therefore a stir in the first week of July 1968 when a stone ossuary was discovered accidentally by a bulldozer in the clearing of an Israeli settlement site, which bore the name of one of the Herodian temple's builders, "Shimon the builder of the temple". Louis Kahn had cut out the New York Times article describing the discovery at the very time he was just over one week into the site planning and design of his Hurvah proposal, and he preserved it in his Hurvah project files.[8] The article must have seemed prophetic to him, but we do not know how the archaeological finding inspired his vision. We may safely posit that it had some influence on the boldness of his conception. The opportunity to spark the national imagination was something he must have sensed. At the end of that July, he flew to Israel to present the New Hurvah proposal.

The New Hurvah of Louis Kahn and the Nationalist Metaphor

We may wonder what lessons Louis Kahn might have drawn from the history of the Old Hurvah in his studies of Jerusalem and synagogues. He showed an uncanny ability to infect the national authorities and the public imagination with his essentially nationalistic vision, arguing for the preservation of the Old Hurvah's ruins in order to commemorate the city's recapture and offering a New Hurvah design physically on par with Jerusalem's other buildings of primary importance, the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulchre. Yasir Sakr argues, however, that, despite the grandiosity of the New Hurvah, Kahn had exhibited in his proposal subtle strategies to mitigate the potent Nationalism that the scale of the building implied. He contends that Kahn's Hurvah proposal ingeniously provides semantic readings that transcend the Nation and subversively check its potentially detrimental nationalistic attributes, especially in his mediation of national memory in what Sakr terms "negations" of social metaphors.

The primary way Sakr claims Kahn's design scheme works to subvert the religious and nationalistic meanings is the clear way it seems to posit the Hurvah as a symbol challenging the status of the other religious symbols of the city. In scale and prominence in the skyline, it sets itself up in a "negational" opposition to the Dome of the Rock and the Holy Sepulchre. Within the Jewish Quarter, it challenges the important place of the Western Wall by co-opting its elements: the stone pylon-screen is compositionally equivalent to the Wall, and since it completely surrounds the cubic form of the Hurvah, it represents a recreated

[8] Terence Smith, "Traces of Second Temple Found", *New York Times*, July 12, 1968, C 18 (in Box LIK 39, Kahn Collection).

"Temple Mount". Sakr even posits that the pylons imitate the buttresses of similar plinths of the ancient world (such as those of the Acropolis of Athens, which Kahn lovingly illustrated in his travel sketches). All this is supposedly Kahn's attempt to dislocate the Temple Mount's symbolic potency. Since the interior void of the New Hurvah has the same dimensions of the Old Hurvah, Sakr claims this shows that Kahn also wanted to "void" this symbol of Diaspora-era Judaism (not to mention his move to preserve it as a ruin). Because Kahn's Hurvah posits itself as a reconstructed temple by incorporating the dimensions of the Dome of the Rock, the stone bema at the center, according to Sakr, represents the rock outcropping which the Dome houses, upon which once had stood the Holy of Holies, the most sacred place in Judaism. The bi-axial symmetry of the Hurvah, centered around the bema, reinforces this most heretical dislocation of all.

While some of these observations sound defendable, Sakr's second line of argumentation seems to stray into strange territory. Once the Hurvah succeeds in negating these traditional symbols, re-centering the spiritual locus of Judaism away from its traditional moorings, lo and behold, he claims, it somehow decomposes itself from a metaphorical presentation of a temple to a re-presentation of a metonymic, archeological "ruin", both by recalling the images of ancient ruins (such as Stonehenge) and by its fragmentation of forms—creating asymmetrical, shifting elements, which break apart the periphery, violate the corners of the implied Platonic forms and so on. Like a self-annihilating semantic black hole, it thereby reduces the entire city to a valueless, "open archeological field, in effect a museum intermittently constructed upon an imaginary grid whose modules emanate from those of the pylons framing the new Khurvah."[9] According to Sakr, then, the cubic, symmetrical form of the Hurvah so stands out in opposition to the city's vernacular architecture and irregular fabric that it becomes more of an artificially staked-out archeological plot than a building.

Several points to Sakr's argument do seem to bear out historically from the critical reaction in Israel to the project, namely that the project immediately raised questions about its potentially greatly disturbing effects on the sacred landscape of the Old City. The scale of Kahn's proposal drew a collective gasp at the moment of its public unveiling in the Israel Museum in July 28, 1968, and despite its highly acclaimed, positive public reception, the authorities were only slow to entertain its feasibility. The Prime Minister, Levi Eshkol, at least thrice postponed meeting (purportedly for health-reasons) with Yaacov Salomon, the Hurvah Foundation's leader and Louis Kahn's patron and chief advocate in Israel. Salomon had immediately understood upon seeing Kahn's design that the project's realization would require the decision and financing of the state and as such was no longer a project for the Hurvah Foundation to execute. A ministerial committee was appointed to study the project, but, as the Israeli settlements in East Jerusalem (especially those of Ramot Eshkol and the Mt. Scopus area) increasingly drew international attention, the Prime Minister's office intuitively sensed the international provocation the project might stir. The Prime Minister wrote to Salomon, "…the plans are indeed tremendous and beautiful and to my

[9] Sakr, p. 54.

liking. However, it seems to me that the carrying out of such a great project in the Old City should be put off for several years as we have to worry first about the settlement of the Jews in East Jerusalem. After all," he added emphatically, "there is a limit, even to money." He then brought up the reservations being voiced in the ministerial planning committee: "Several of its members have expressed their view that we should not put up such a tremendous undertaking in the Old City, and that there we should find a way to put up a more modest building."[10] Jerusalem's mayor, Teddy Kollek, wrote directly to Kahn about the impasse: "The decision concerning your plans is essentially a political one. Should we in the Jewish Quarter have a building of major importance which 'competes' with the Mosque and the Holy Sepulchre, and should we in general have any building which would compete in importance with the Western Wall of the Temple?"[11]

It was not until almost half a year after the unveiling, on New Year's Day of 1969, that Salomon finally met with the Prime Minister and the ministerial committee overseeing the planning of the Jewish Quarter, which was headed by Yehuda Tamir. It is fairly evident that the central topic of the meeting had been to discuss with the Prime Minister the negative drawbacks of the project's nationalistic aspirations.[12] The meeting had probably convened to sort through the arguments brought up by a recent symposium that had assembled the month previous to discuss Kahn's proposal on the national stage, which had been attended by various religious leaders, politicians, noted academics, heads of industry and other important personalities. Sakr is probably right in declaring that the symposium had offered the nation its first critical, soul-searching occasion to discuss its national and religious identity. Predictably, the symposium had divided quickly into two opposing camps—as Sakr labels them: "the religious and largely Jerusalemite-Diaspora culture" and another that "expressed a modernist, secular, and largely Tel-Aviv cosmopolitan outlook."[13] The former contingent, represented best by Rabbi Shar-Yeshuv Cohen (a war-hero who had defended the Jewish Quarter during the 1948 war), was bitterly critical of the unorthodox qualities of Kahn's design. Some of the critics attacked Kahn's blatant disregard to observe the traditional formal requirements for synagogues established in Halakhic literature and the Zohar, such as the need to provide twelve "beautiful windows". But the most pointed criticisms, which appear to unmask a conspiratorial negation of religious symbols in Kahn's design, were reserved against the proposal's perceived pretensions to not only supplant the Old Hurvah but the image of the Dome of the Rock and indeed all Jerusalem. The Dome of the Rock, explained Rabbi Cohen, looked back to Solomon's Temple in the minds of the Diaspora, and it stood over Judaism's holiest place. No one in the

[10] Letter, Levi Eshkol to Yaacov Salomon, 19 September 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[11] Letter, Teddy Kollek to Louis Kahn, 29 August 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[12] Salomon informed Kahn about the meeting: "The principal question was whether your conception, which as you know I wholeheartedly endorse and consider as the only way of restoring the Hurva with its religious and national significance, should be adopted. I referred to the history of the Hurva, its significance, what it stands for and what it is intended to stand for when reconstructed" (Letter, Yaacov Salomon to Louis Kahn, 3 January 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection).
[13] Sakr, p. 72.

orthodox communities was fooled, he claimed, that the New Hurvah was not conspiring to supplant the Dome of the Rock through its imposing size and its equal (if not higher) height on the adjacent hill, heretically striving thus to supplant the historical importance of the Temple by inference. Worse, he said, "I am not willing to see that the proposed new Khurvah becomes with the passing of time a tradition and the final word; the alternative to the Temple."[14] It was clear from these reactions whose national identity at the symposium Kahn's Synagogue was truly representing.

That the once religion-averse "Tel-Aviv" nationalists had made a convincing defense of the New Hurvah and that they represented the Yadin-inspired, Nationalist *zeitgeist* of the greater nation[15] is indicated by the fact that the once strongly reserved Prime Minister had "wholeheartedly" endorsed the design on the New Year's Day meeting.[16] By mid-January, the Ministerial Committee gave the project the green light. In February 25, 1969, Kahn received a formal letter from Yehuda Tamir informing him of the resolution to invite him to become the architect of the "Churvat Rabbi Yehuda Hachasid".[17]

Positioning Louis Kahn within Zionism

Although the project's critics seemed to have been aware of the "negational" aspects of Kahn's design, it is clear that Yasir Sakr is reading Kahn's motives with the philosophical lens of Kenneth Frampton's theory of Critical Regionalism[18], and I question whether the use of conscious "negations" is truly part of Kahn's conception of his social responsibility in the project. Kahn's concern to represent the "institution" of the Synagogue by calling to mind its primitive origins, rather, seems to be the overarching precept guiding Kahn's intentions for his proposal's "historicist" attributes, a precept not necessarily eschewing a nationalistic program. Kahn's Jewish nationalism, of course, was a humanist sort, typical of the kind of Zionism embraced by secular Jews of his day, which invited a vital coexistence with the Arab nations (as will be discussed below).

Sakr fails to acknowledge, first of all, Kahn's long and marked involvement with the Israeli national cause. Almost from the inception of the

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[14] *Ibid*., p. 75.

[15] Besides the rich trove of archeological findings of that year, 1968 also saw the publication Yigal Yadin's best known work, *Masada*, describing his research and findings on the Masada excavations, a place whose story of (secularist) "transcendent solidarity"—Yadin basically confirmed the Josephus story describing the mass-suicide that took place there during the Roman siege of 72-73 CE—played an important inspirational role in the continuing transformation of Israeli Nationalism (especially in the national perception of its underdog status) during the Egyptian war of attrition years and the Yom Kippur War; see Anthony D. Smith "Gastronomy or Geology? The Role of Nationalism in the Reconstruction of Nations." *Nations and Nationalism* 1, no. 1 (1994) 3-23.

[16] Letter, Yaacov Salomon to Louis Kahn, 3 January 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.

[17] Letter, Yehuda Tamir to Louis Kahn, 25 February 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.

[18] Sakr credits Prof. Kenneth Frampton in the acknowledgments to his dissertation. He also credits Paul Ricoeur as his "spiritual mentor".

state of Israel, Kahn had seen in the dynamic young nation the ripe testing ground and best hope for the utopian urbanist aspirations of the modernist movement, ideals he had tenaciously held on to throughout the extent of his career. In January of 1949, Kahn was approached by his associate in the Federal Public Housing Agency, Philip Klutznick, a well-known activist for nationwide and non-profit Jewish organizations, with the tantalizing project of tackling Israel's housing shortage crisis. Kahn not only immediately accepted the offer to participate, he aggressively engaged himself in Klutznick's study team in the Israeli Housing Survey Committee with unrelenting drive and visionary foresight, to the surprise of some of his colleagues (Kahn, always a singular personality,[19] was not noted for exhibiting a stellar attendance record with other such engagements). According to Susan G. Solomon, "Kahn's willingness to participate in the IHSC was typical of many nonobservant Jews who began to play a part in the Zionist world after the creation of Israel. At a time of increased interest in religion, when any religious affiliation was becoming a fundamental way in which to express American identity, Zionism offered a means to identify with Judaism without having to engage in ritual participation."[20]

The project, however, deeply appealed to Kahn's humanistic sensibilities and professional interests in modernist housing projects at the time, besides providing him with his first opportunity to travel to Israel, an experience that richly impacted his intellectual, if not his spiritual, life. Solomon observes that Kahn's experiences in Israel proved formative in redefining his personal soul-searching journey in architecture, receiving there the foundation for ideas that would mark his later career and assure his unique place in the history of architecture. In Israel, he not only gained a deeper appreciation for the use and possibilities of concrete, but the sight of young modernist buildings sprouting in Mediterranean neighborhoods and adopting elements of regionalist building practices had left upon him a deep impression. In correspondence with Yaacov Salomon, Kahn describes exactly this eclectic, dialectically dynamic sensibility in reference to the Hurvah's site. He writes, "The clearing of the site has uncovered interesting spaces and structures revealing a bygone way of life which besides being of human interest offers a richer field of departure in the shaping of the new structures intended to express attitudes of to-day woven together with old

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[19] "If you get direction from a committee", Kahn once advised corporate leaders about design, "I am positive the product will be less, the expression will be less. If it can be in an individual, it will have such resources that a committee meeting many, many times would never have. The individual has the ability to see it all as a unit. From sketchy first realization mixed with faith in what is realized, can there be exchange of a designer and the man who wants the design made. There can be a fruitful exchange which can make the executive a better executive and the designer a better designer." In his signature mytho-poetic style, Kahn then sums up the corporate client/executive/designer relationship: "It's humans, human, and a human" (Kahn, "Architecture and Human Agreement", p. 19). Solomon shows that Kahn's participation in the IHSC was self-guided almost to the ambition of tackling Israel's housing crisis single-handedly. For him, the crisis offered Israel the chance to introduce in the Middle East the pre-fab housing and vacuum-formed concrete industries, and jump start thus the industrialization of the region, turning a "Building Emergency into a Major Industry" (sic); unfortunately, the Israeli government rejected the ideas as too ambitious in favor of temporary housing solutions. One should note that his outlook is regional and not simply nationalist (Solomon, p. 15).

[20] Solomon, p. 13.

structures."[21] Kahn is describing here his inspirations for the New Hurvah design to Salomon, and by implication what he desires for the Quarter itself. This is curious, for although the design seems to be conceived as a ruinous temple from the hoary past, in Kahn's mind it expressed "the attitudes of today". He conceived in the "historicist" form not only the essentialist expression of the Synagogue's cosmogonic "desire to be"[22], but also, doubly romantically, the expression of the Nation's fundamentally new "attitudes" in modernity. We may categorically label Kahn a romantic from both vantage points. Yet this dual inspiration emblematically describes to a "T" the shift in the Zionism of his day

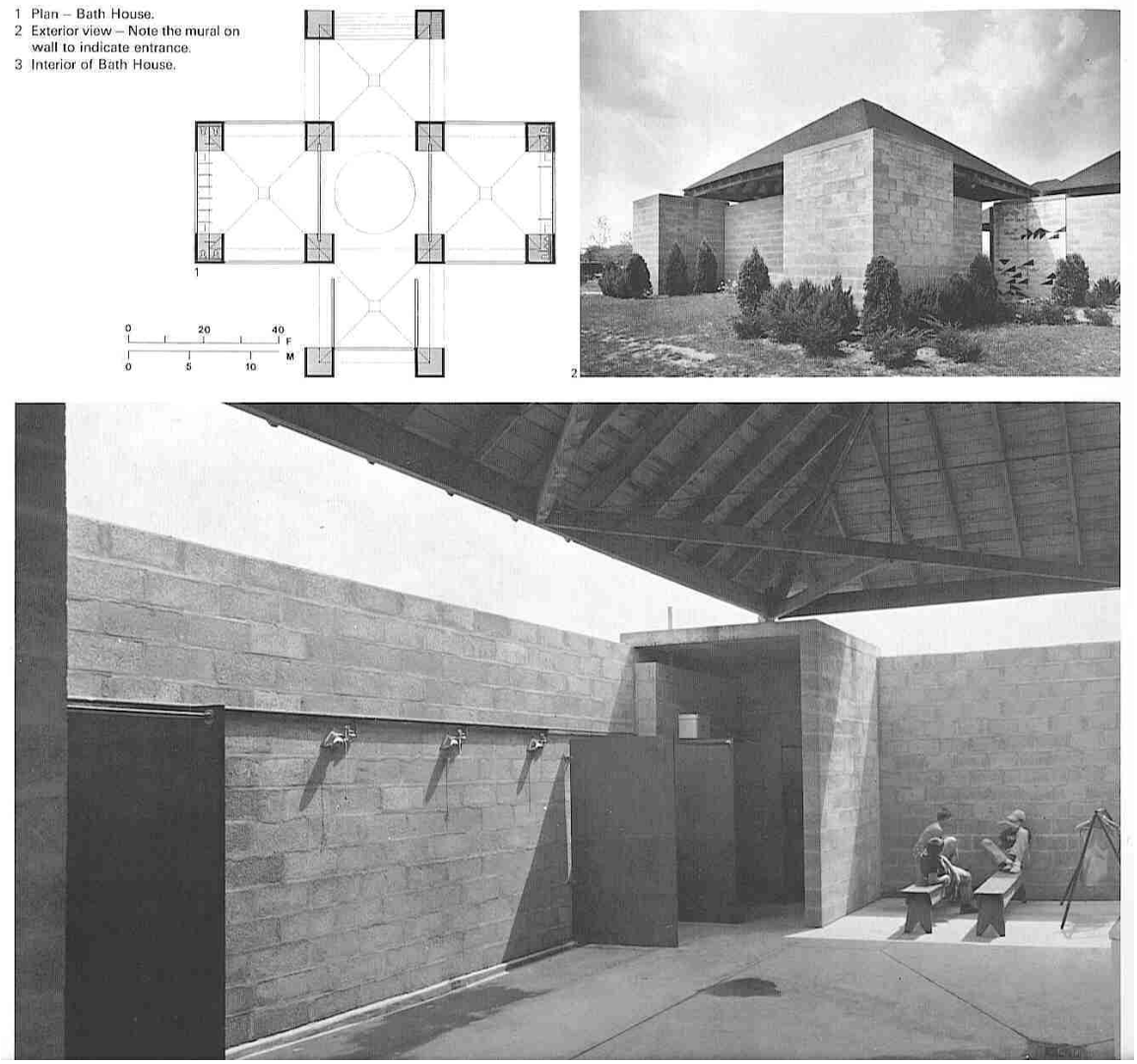


Fig. 8 Trenton Bath House for the Jewish Community Centre, Trenton, New Jersey. Louis I. Kahn, 1955.

[21] Letter, Louis Kahn to Yaacov Salomon, 19 August 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[22] *Ibid*., as expressed in the same letter; see below.

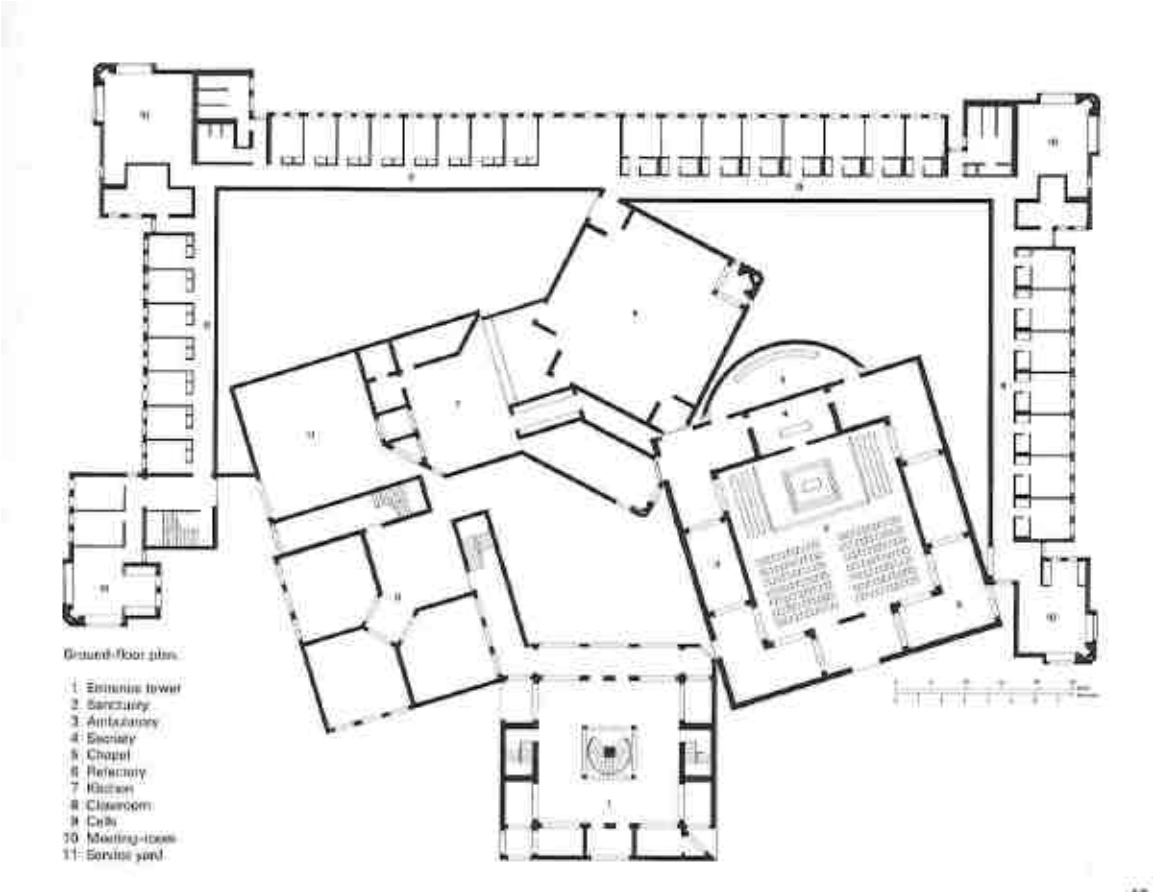


Fig. 9 Convent for the Dominican Sisters, Media, Pennsylvania. Louis I. Kahn, 1965-68.

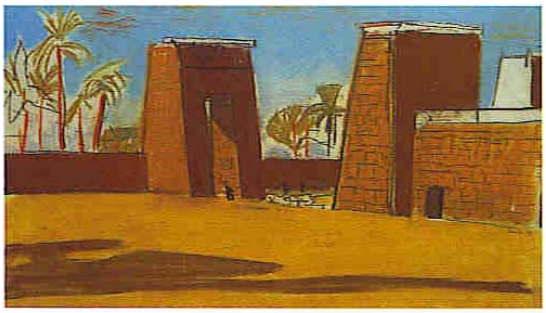
to depart from *Mamlakhtiut* and recuperate Nationalism.[23]

Is Kahn, however, casting a pall on the Synagogue by reconstituting it as a "modern institution"? Does he read the source (the cosmogonic synagogue) as a "pre-national" and universalistic institution? We can only attempt to answer this from the vantage of his theoretical disposition and possible influences.

In his 1949 trip to Israel, Solomon also observes that Kahn began crystallizing the underpinnings for a second important notion in his later thought. The problem to find the most economical means of providing housing had provoked Kahn to think of the most elemental notions of shelter: the need for privacy, safety and function expressed in their most essential form. His discussions at that time with his colleague and lover Anne Tyng and the Israeli architect Arieh Sharon, a former beekeeper, regarding the elegant geometries and self-sustaining efficiencies of the natural world also permeated his thought. Pursuing the "Form" (of the semi-private communal building this time) and its architectural "Order" with Tyng in this fashion, Kahn perceived a breakthrough

[23] However, Kahn himself was not a true Nationalist (a nationalist, perhaps, with lowercase "n"). Susan Solomon agrees that he would not have worn the label "Zionist" comfortably. As will be seen below, he included Arabs in the Zionist project and he envisioned for Jerusalem an urbanism of global consequence.

with their design for the Trenton Bath House in 1955 (Figure 8), which he forever credited as a personal milestone since it revealed to him the formal notions of "served" and "servant" space—an enormous, liberating discovery that allowed him to depart from the modernist notion of the "free plan". As he put it, "I didn't have to work for Corbusier anymore".[24] The revelation allowed him to unreservedly combine aspects of his Beaux-Arts training (especially his personal devotion to Boullee, Ledoux, and Piranesi) with his developing sensibility of modernism (ala Brutalism). Throughout the rest of his life, Kahn would use this signature austere architectural style of "served" and "servant" spaces: typically, singular buildings with centralized plans of Platonic shapes and/or biaxial symmetries ("served" spaces), which are modulated by smaller, enveloping "servant" spaces and often deployed in field-complexes with other such buildings with a Piranesian-like planning (see Figure 9). He claimed that he observed no method, however, since the inspirational Form that best expresses a building's social purpose is not readably knowable. Yet his starting point was often the question: "What does the ____ want to be?", e.g. A brick wants to be an arch.



In his letter to Yaacov Salomon, Kahn wrote of the Hurvah's conceptual development in exactly these abstract terms, "The conception was a development of what I realized from the very beginning to be the Form and its main elements. From the enthusiasm in my office I sensed, before its presentation, that the design had the essence of Hurva's spirit and the desire

[24]"Now when I did the bath house…I discovered a very simple thing. I discovered that certain spaces are very unimportant and some spaces are the real raison d'etre for doing what you're doing. But the small spaces were contributing to the strength of the larger spaces. They were serving them. And when I realized there were servant areas and there were areas served, that difference, I realized I didn't have to work for Corbusier anymore. At that moment I realized I don't have to work for him at all" (Louis Kahn, interview with John Peter, Philadelphia, 1961, in John Peter, ed., *The Oral History of Modern Architecture: Interviews with the Greates Architects of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) 214, cited in Solomon, p. 136).

to be."[25] Noting the capitalization of "Form" and his aspiration to capture the essence of the ruinous Synagogue's "desire to be", it is difficult to imagine with Sakr that Kahn was somehow conceptually driven to semantically mitigate the nationalistic message of the Hurvah through formalist methods, since nothing in the project really betrays a departure from Kahn's already signature mystic-essentialist approach to form-making. If anything, it would appear that he was on the opposite quest.

Kahn's fascination with the Old Hurvah's ruins and the ruin-like character of his overall design are also nothing out of step; this fascination had captivated him since his experiences visiting the ruinous temples of Greece and Egypt during his epiphanic tour of the ancient world in 1951 (see Figure 2) and is expressed most notably in such projects as the Luanda U.S. Consulate and the Dacca Assembly Hall, for which Kahn has often been noted for his desire (which he related directly about his design for Luanda U.S. Consulate) to use a ruin-like, shadow-casting exterior screen, "wrapping the ruins around the buildings".[26] If the Hurvah is decomposing the symbol of the Temple or the Dome of the Rock, as Sakr claims, by deconstructing its Platonic form, then is the split-cornered,

Fig. 10 Library, Philip Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire. Louis I. Kahn, 1967-72.

[25] Letter, Louis Kahn to Yaacov Salomon, 19 August 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[26] Louis Kahn, interview, *Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal* 7 (1961) 9-18.

fragmented facade of the Exeter Library attempting to decompose the meaning or purpose of a library? Kahn instead always expressed his conscious desire to understand the spirit of an institution's "desire" and "quest", an important element of his situated modernism. As Sarah Williams Goldhagen puts it, Kahn would combine historicist references and cultural allusions with "his existing repertoire of abstract, modernist aesthetic devices"—an approach that she convincingly argues defines a key aspect of the urbanistic prerogatives that gradually matured in his work throughout his career.[27]

Kahn did design from the vantage point of his idiosyncratic, self-professed "religion of light"[28], in which he regarded the architectural impulse as the almost religious quest to reveal the hypostatic entities of "pre-form": Silence and Light; nevertheless, he did not regard his sensibilities incompatible (naively perhaps) with needs and spiritual desires of his buildings' intended occupants. Although he seemingly expressed his devotion to light spiritually, he was not attempting to compete with or universalize religious meaning. For Kahn, light was every bit of an expressive tool as structure. Indeed, light was kind of tectonic element for him—a metonymic component of the building (see Figure 12), which reveals the "Room in its infinite moods":

> The structure of a room must be evident in the room itself. Structure I believe is the giver of light. A square room asks for its own light to read the square. It would expect the light either from above or from its four sides as windows or entrances.[29]

This expression of the self-conscious "room" and its light entity-sources is certainly realized in the square-shaped Hurvah's discontinuous walls and canopy roof, which allows light to spill in from the top and the sides into the deepest interior spaces in strong shafts, enabling the square space to "read" itself. The "deconstructive act" with Kahn (if you can call it that) is part of the building's quest to realize what it "desires to be". In Kahn's mind, the elements of the material world interacted anthropomorphically with one another in cosmogonic dramas—everything was always a searching analysis of the Origin. "In the beginning" is where the "desire to be" is expressed. Moreover:

> A building being built is not yet in servitude. It is so anxious to be that no grass can grow under its feet, so high is the spirit of wanting to be. When it is in service and finished, the building wants to say, "Look, I want to tell you about the way I was made." Nobody listens. Everybody is busy going from room to room. But when the building is a ruin and free of servitude, the spirit emerges telling of the marvel that a building was made. [30]

Thus, stagnation, regression and ruination also return the consciousness to the cosmogonic act.

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[27] Goldhagen, p. 204.
[28] Kahn, "Architecture and Human Agreement", p. 23.
[29] Kahn, "The Room, the Street and Human Agreement", p. 9.
[30] *Ibid*., p. 20.

At the beginning of July 1968, Louis Kahn finally received the topographic drawings of the Hurvah site, which he had been waiting expectantly from Ram Karmi. Karmi had had tremendous difficulty executing them due to the excavations going on in the Quarter and general ruinous condition it was still in. Although Kahn seems to have had a conception of the Hurvah's structure in his head and in sketches, he had not yet begun the site planning of the design and the schematic of the Jewish Quarter until he finally received the drawings. I do not know when the notion first entered his head to preserve the ruins of the Old Hurvah and build a separate structure altogether adjacent to it, but Sakr seems to agree that he executed the entire conception of the design in the space of just three weeks. Evidence confirms that at the beginning of that July, Kahn was still researching the history of Jerusalem and the Quarter, for on July the 2nd he had sent a letter to the librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York requesting a copy of Louis Finkelstein's 1928 article "The Origins of the Synagogue".[31] Kahn, having probably seen the title in a list of sources, had been dying to read it, due to what was certainly to him its most provocative title. Indeed, not wanting to wait for its arrival by mail, he sent two (yes, not one but two) of his assistants to retrieve it from New York.

Kahn was so interested in the Origin, that he professed he rarely ever read a volume of history beyond the first or second chapter (he once remarked that he would simply continue to linger in the first chapter, hankering to view "Volume Zero"). If indeed he had read Finkelstein's article in its entirety, I will grant you that it was really not necessary for him to get beyond the first two sentences to receive his inspiration (or confirmation) to preserve the ruins of the Old Hurvah:

> The beginnings of the synagogue are hidden from us by the mists that gather about the horizon of Jewish history, no matter in which direction we look. When the synagogue rises into view during the Second Commonwealth it is already a well-established institution, and strangely the first mention of it is in a record of persecution, burning and destruction *(fn. Psalm 74:8*).[32]

Finkelstein attributes the origin of the synagogue in the article to a time of persecution during the reign of the evil king Manasheh, who raised an image of Astarte in the temple and persecuted the prophetic party. Since Manasheh killed freely those who opposed him, the prophetic party developed a practice of gathering together for prayer in secret places. The place were they convened was called a *Midrash*, theorizes Finkelstein, which in its primitive meaning had a locative sense and meant literally "the place of Divine communion". It was a place were one could "inquire" or "seek out" (*lidrosh* "to seek out") an oracle from God. When the persecution ended, however, the practice still continued, Finkelstein argues, just as…

[31] Letter, Louis Kahn to Mrs. Serata, 2 July 1968, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[32] Finkelstein, p. 49.

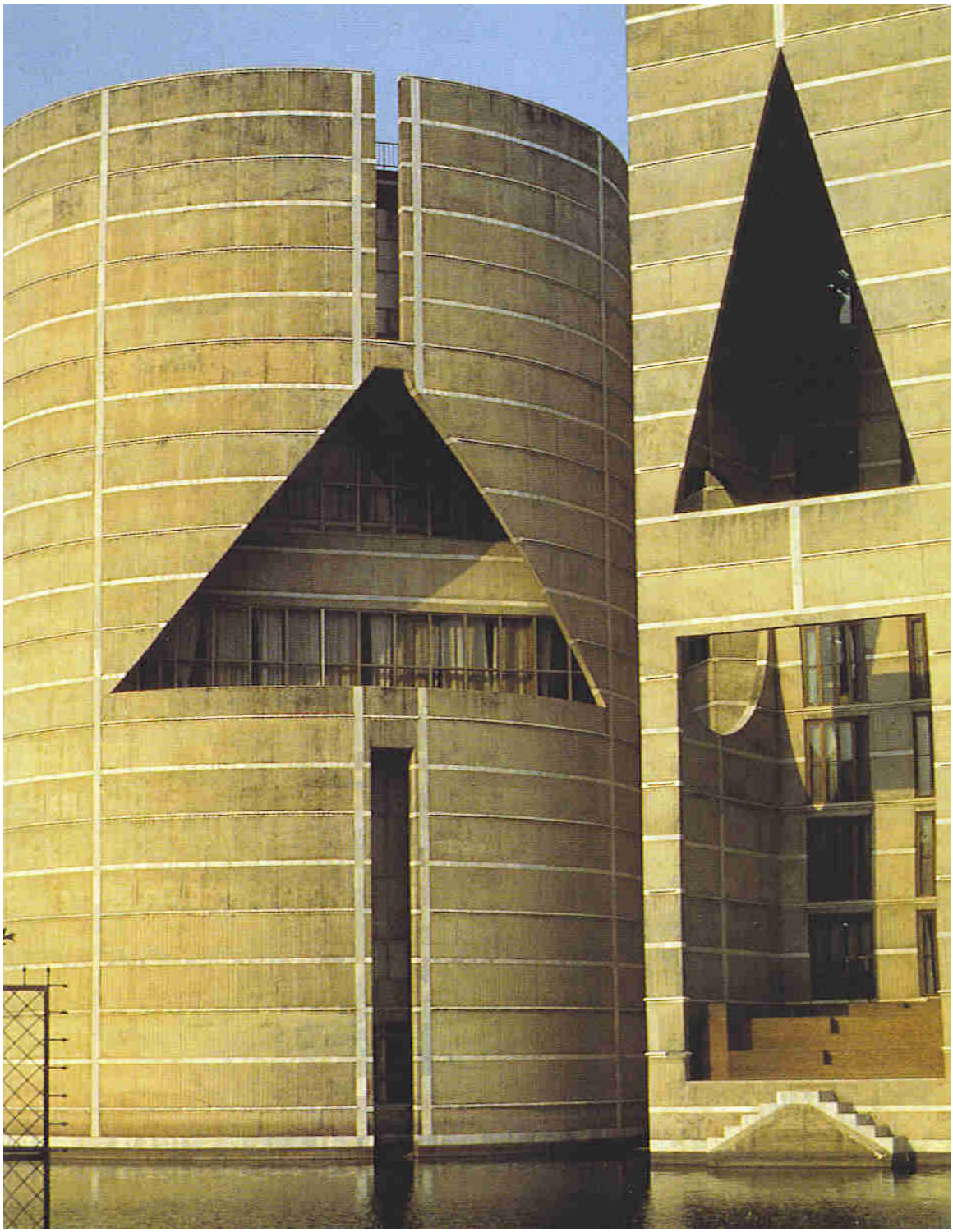

Fig. 11 "Wrapping the building in ruins", Dacca Assembly Hall.
Louis I. Kahn, 1962-74.

> …Maranos in Portugal are said to believe that true prayer can be offered only in secret synagogues. Having never worshipped in a synagogue openly and publicly recognized, they have come to regard what was forced by cruel circumstance on their fathers as normal religious life.[33]

So thus the pious continued gathering together in intimate places. Later, in the second temple period the word "*midrash*" lost its locative meaning, if Finkelstein is right, probably because the institution naturally evolved to assume a different role. Indeed, it seems to have bifurcated into places of communal prayer, the synagogue of today, and places devoted to learning, the institution of the *beit hamidrash* (house of study), first mentioned by Ben Sirah in the early second century BCE. "*Midrash*" today simply means "the expounding of Scripture", which has replaced the place of the prophetic oracle.

Most say that Kahn would have regarded the details in Finkelstein's article as more or less arcane, especially the linguistic areas of it, but the example of the Portuguese Maranos makes Finkelstein's greater discussion sufficiently concrete: the Synagogue is an institutionalized continuity of piety born in travail. Since Kahn already regarded the ruin as expressing the consciousness of its creation, how appealing must the thought have been to him that the "Hurvah" was named for this very consciousness? How appealing that its two destructions in history so made it forcefully continue as a symbol and celebration of its "desire to be"? And how doubly appealing that this very desire can be a potent metaphor for the Synagogue's (the "institution's") cosmogonic desire for the community to grasp the Divine message in cruel times, the place—as Finkelstein actually states in the article—God "agrees" to dispense counsel (commune) with humans? Needless to say, one can certainly begin grasping what Kahn might have meant when he declared to Yehuda Tamir that the conception of the Hurvah "came from inspiration never before felt".[34] That the inspiration must have all come together suddenly with such impact, perhaps as he read Finkelstein's article, is hinted at in his next statement: "This design came spontaneously though it took many days and many hands to develop".[35]

Hence, the evidence of Finkelstein's article suggests that the ruin-like character of the Hurvah has no "negational" desire to undermine nationalistic meaning, but instead seems to shore it up. The Synagogue, in Finkelstein's vision, is rooted in the humanist prophetic tradition of Israel's past; it is an institution which seeks to preserve the faith of the prophetic community through its greatest travails. The ruin represents the travail in structure that brings to mind the original inspiration, now a metaphor for the desire of the Nation to "seek out" transcendent intervention during its trials.

After being awarded the greatest commission of the century, Teddy Kollek quickly involved Kahn in the greater planning of the city. Not only was Kahn's schematic for the Quarter to be carried out, but in June 6, 1969 Kollek thought it befitting to give him also the chance to direct the planning of the important

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[33] *Ibid*., p. 54.
[34] Letter, Louis Kahn to Yehuda Tamir, 28 March 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[35] *Ibid*.

overlooking ridges to the south of the Old City.[36] Kollek seems to have acted a bit prematurely, for he and the planners of Jerusalem would shortly find out what a strongly opinionated personality Kahn was. Nevertheless, Kahn openly offered him his fearless vision for the city. He described for him an environment composed of "a composite order of concrete and stone which would respect each material for its own power and beauty without disguise".[37] Kahn's Hurvah boldly demonstrated this very composite order—it was to be an example for which, we can safely guess, Kahn intended for the Jewish Quarter as a whole. He then goes on to describe his social vision for the city:

> One of the more important ideas, however, is to give thought to the creation of new institutions which should be offered to Jerusalem and should appear in South Jerusalem. Places of well being, glorifying body beauty as well as the beauty of the mind. I see the places for children, for boys, for young and those older, and old as having their own clubs, their own rooms of meeting and places of happening, places of cross invitation, places associated with their gardens, for privacy their courts of entrances, play fields, etc.
>
> I have been proposing for other developments, the establishment of schools of the talents, schools designed to draw out the natural talent of a person in contrast with present ways of examining people on an equal basis. A person does not learn anything that is not already part of him from the start.
>
> A man is born knowing what to do but is not born knowing how to do it or how to express it. This he or she must learn. How timely is now the need for schools which examine only within the talent of the person. The would be good for Arabs and Jews. Israel could be a place of the example.
>
> I know the idea does not apply only to S. Jerusalem but as well, I believe, to Jerusalem S. N. W. or E. as a whole even if only S. J. is being thought of.[38]

Kahn's vision is clearly intended for the entire city outside the Old City, but we can guess the Jewish Quarter (then mostly unbuilt) is also included. Several things about this vision stand out. First, the vision is not a strict Nationalism, for he describes schools that would draw out the "talent of the person", "the would be good" inside them, of both Arabs and Jews as individuals, without the constraint of a nation's traditionalist narratives. Nor is the vision describing Israeli *Mamlakhtiut*, for it very much glorifies the heroic capacity of the individual and describes the utopian project in terms of the city, an urbanism in which the state appears in only an off-hand manner. What we have clearly here is a utopian urbanist project that will make Israel "a place of the example". Kahn's Hurvah, however, shows that the urbanism he imagines makes room for nationalism, but it is nationalism (with lowercase "n") in a multi-national urban context. The size of the Hurvah and its impact on the skyline to me is not a

[36] Letter, Teddy Kollek to Louis Kahn, 6 June 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[37] Letter, Louis Kahn to Teddy Kollek, 4 July 1969, LIK 39, Kahn Collection.
[38] *Ibid*.

provocation against the other national groups of the city; rather, it makes visible the city's "desire for a new agreement" through its institutions[39], the desire to find common ground and mutual respect.

In one of the most revelatory pieces of writing he ever wrote on his views regarding the social responsibilities of an architect, Kahn describes that his inspiration for the Dacca Assembly Hall had arrived to him as he was observing the worship taking place at a mosque in Dacca. He writes,

> …I saw the devotion of the Moslems to their prayers five times a day, and I was inspired very much by their anonymity—that's probably the wrong word—but that the mosque need not be visited. It was there for those who wanted to go. There was no preaching there. You simply said your prayers. It was just a community building which was your community building, nobody conducting it. And I thought that it should be part of the Assembly—that the Assembly should look to the mosque, and the mosque should look to the Assembly.[40]

After this, Kahn describes the greater complex surrounding the lake of the Assembly Hall as a "citadel of the institutions", and he declares that his desire was to reveal formally in the buildings a way of life conductive to the legislative enterprise of creating the "institutions of man" for the greater nation. Romantically, the Capital complex represented to Kahn the institutions that begot the institutions; in the legislative act was the "origin" of institutions. He then utters a very surprising thought, which reveals a kind of psychological perspicuity for the relation of a human to his or her institutions, one we may not immediately associate with such an abstract formalist architect such as Kahn:

> One feature which was very important to me was to make the distinction between the place of legislation and the supreme court.
>
> Legislation is circumstantial law and the supreme court is law in relation to humans.
>
> When I presented this idea to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he said that he didn't want to be near the Assembly. And when I sketched for him the mosque which was there, he took back his words and said, "The Mosque is sufficient insulation for me." So that was the basis of the plan.[41]

This personal anecdote certainly is revealing that Kahn understood well the importance of creating mitigating constructs in power relations. But startling is his romantic appreciation for the religious entity, the Mosque (Figure 12, below), to play a balancing role in these power relations. Therefore, rather than reading a conflictive relationship between Nationalism and resistant architecture, as Yasir Sakr sees in the Hurvah, I will contend that Kahn viewed the Hurvah's religious function as a conducive "irritant" to encourage the positive Zionist ideals

[39] Lobell, p. 45.
[40] Kahn, "Architecture and Human Agreement", p. 26.
[41] *Ibid*., p. 28-29.

that the nation should strive to maintain. From his comments on the Assembly Hall at Dacca, it is not a far stretch to suggest that Kahn intended the ruins of the Old Hurvah to remain as they were as a national memorial to signify the constant need for the nation to return to the origin, to rekindle its self-determinative faith ("desire to be") and remember its original, humanistic values, much as the role the Mosque plays in Kahn's mind at the Dacca Assembly Hall. The New Hurvah, however, rises triumphantly, validating and celebrating the spirit and new "attitudes" of the Jewish people in the modern world. The new and old stand together, in a mitigating posture perhaps, but returning arm in arm to the source—the Synagogue's oracular beginnings among the humanist prophets of ancient Israel.

Fig. 12 "Hollow columns" or "columns of light", Prayer Hall of the Dacca Assembly Hall. Louis I. Kahn, 1962-74.

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