

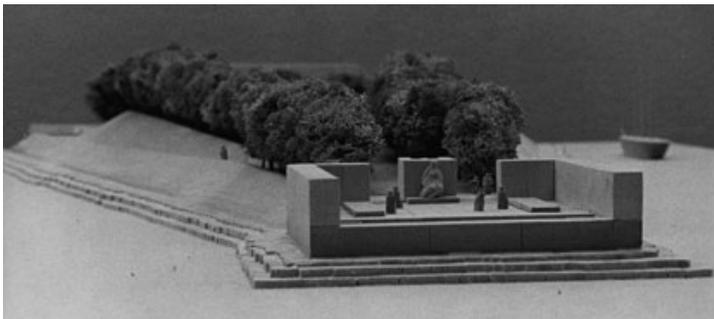
Kahn and the Civic Realm

Robert Geddes, FAIA, Dean Emeritus
Princeton University

My intention is to analyze the design of the Roosevelt Memorial, its place in the New York landscape, and its place in the architecture of Louis Kahn. My viewpoint – that of a working architect – is necessarily different from that of a critic or a historian, such as Brendan Gill or Vincent Scully, coming as it does from within the discipline and practice of architecture today.

But first, some personal history. I first met Louis Kahn in 1947, in Philadelphia. I was 24, studying architecture with Walter Gropius at Harvard. He was 46, just starting to practice on his own, in a town-house office on Spruce Street, and starting to teach at Yale. 1947 was also the year of the «Greater Philadelphia» exhibition, designed by Edmund Bacon, Oskar Stonorov, and Louis Kahn, which dramatically showed architectural possibilities for the city's future.

I saw Lou on many visits to Philadelphia; he was very generous and eager to talk with me, or anyone, I suppose. At Harvard, I organized a collaborative thesis on a downtown plan for Providence, Rhode Island. It was about ideas being generated in Philadelphia. In the 1950s, on the faculty of Penn, a group of architects – later to be called «The Philadelphia School» – came together. Lou was a great teacher, and his works remain to teach us today. What are the lessons?



View of Roosevelt Memorial model looking north, showing the Room and promenade of trees. Basswood and canvas on unpainted wood base, 1974. George Pohl, photographer. George Pohl Collection, University of Pennsylvania Architectural Archives.

First, the importance of origins as the source of understanding and imagination. Lou believed, as it was believed in the Enlightenment, that the quintessential character of a thing, an institution, a landscape, or a building, is not in its sophisticated development but in its beginnings. He preferred the early to the late, the essential to the superficial, the authentic to the faddish and fashionable. In the Roosevelt Memorial, the garden and the room are «points of departure.» Each one's origin is made clear: for the garden, a meadow and a forest edge; for the room, «when the walls parted and the columns became,» architecture begins.

Second, the meaning of form. Underlying Lou's work is the classical conception of form, that is, a composition that has clarity and coherence, an ordered relationship of parts and wholes. It has origins in geometry: the concept of the center; the circle and the square; symmetries and

asymmetries around a point or an axis, along a line. The goal is clarity and coherence, a community of parts.

Where do the parts of the composition come from? For Lou, they come from classifications, that is, from classifying the nature of a social institution, the nature of a building's spaces, the nature of a city's streets. Lou believed that the process of creating goes through three phases: the unmeasurable, the measurable, the unmeasurable. The mid-stream phase is measurable, functional, rational. It is similar to Francis Bacon's three-part library classification system: memory, reason, and imagination.

Third, form is created by structure. Structure is a key concept in modern thought, and it is central to Lou's work. Structure means organization. It has two meanings in architecture: composition (that is, the organization of parts to create visual wholes) and construction (that is, the organization of parts to create stable buildings). The two meanings need not be in opposition, and each can be carried forward somewhat autonomously from each other. In Lou's work, the two types of structures – as composition and as construction – are brought together. The integration of structure is clear in the Roosevelt Memorial's form: the garden, a structure of trees; and the room, a structure of columns and walls.

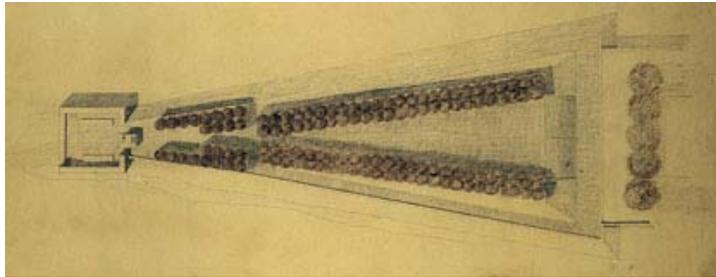
Lou challenged modern architecture profoundly by his explorations of structure. The key to structure – both as composition and as construction – is the counterpoint of column and wall. Here are some key examples in Lou's work: the Richards Medical Research Building's columnar frames; the Kimbell Art Museum's walls and vaults; the Salk Institute's embedded wall columns; the wall structures of the capital of Bangladesh. Lou was a devoted modernist, who was simultaneously an anti-modernist.

Just as Kahn was interested in origins, we can learn about his architecture by looking at its origins. His work can be divided in three parts. First, his Beaux-Arts education, at the time of the City Beautiful movement, which was creating civic monumentality in American architecture. It had clear principles of composition for buildings and cities. Philadelphia was a fine place to experience this civic monumentality. Philadelphia became his drawing board.

Second, in the 1930s, the emergence of European modernism in the United States was first expressed dramatically by the tower of the PSFS building designed by George Howe and William Lescaze in Philadelphia. For Lou, it was a manifestation of a new architecture. During the Depression years, architects in Philadelphia responded with social housing and neighborhood design, expressing a sense of the importance of social institutions in community life. Lou's work during the New Deal period was exemplary. He was involved in the design of the Jersey Homesteads, later called Roosevelt, New Jersey, and in some of the most satisfying social housing and community design in Philadelphia. He joined with his colleagues in forming professional organizations of architects and planners concerned with social responsibility.

The third phase of Lou Kahn's career is remarkable for us to contemplate. It is a modern architecture of Platonic idealism, of social forms and spatial forms that are created with classical principles. A question often raised by critics is, what caused this transformation, this transcendence? I believe it came about because the third phase of Lou's career closely combined

teaching and work as an architect. His teaching was a laboratory of architecture. He worked with students in the studio and in reviews of student work as if they were exploring the frontiers, as well as the origins, of architecture. The influences of others were absorbed. The conceptual structures of Buckminster Fuller and the compositional principles of Joseph Albers are evident. Lou led the search for order, for coherence of form. He separated form from design. Form is order. Design is choice, circumstantial. In that sense, Lou was concerned with form as the essence of architecture. The search for form brought him back to his origins, his concern for monumentality, social institutions, and the civic realm.



Site plan, Roosevelt Memorial. Colored pencil and charcoal on yellow trace. December 11, 1973. Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Where does the design of the Roosevelt Memorial fit in this chronology? The memorial is a late work, one of the last. It embodies the essence of Lou's thought. First, a geometrical order, a composition of clarity and coherence. Second, a structure that is both compositional and constructional, in which the relationship of column and wall, structure and space is integrated. Third, the materials – the granite, the paving, the trees – are organized to create both mass and space. The materials themselves speak without decoration. And finally, light is created. The light of the sky over the garden and the room, the light of the vista looking past the United Nations, overlooking the harbor, framed by the shadows of the granite walls.

Now, let us consider the Roosevelt Memorial design in its setting in New York. The memorial is addressed to both nature and the culture of the city. New York – beyond the conventional sense of the city, its buildings and streets, its neighborhoods and districts – is a landscape of rivers and islands bordered by landmarks. The Statue of Liberty is such a landmark, and so are the bridges across the rivers and the United Nations building on the river's edge. The tip of Roosevelt Island lies asleep, but full of possibilities. Lou's design for the Roosevelt Memorial would give it a remarkable life, and we would gain a new landmark in the city of rivers, islands, and landmarks.

Let us consider the memorials in New York. We have a large collection of memorial sculptures. (The recent announcement of a figure of Eleanor Roosevelt adds to this fine list.) We have some green spaces that are dedicated as memorials, such as Washington Square. We have private monuments, such as the Towers of Trump, Chrysler, and Woolworth, but few truly public memorials. An exception is the mausoleum of Ulysses S. Grant on a hill overlooking the Hudson River. Most of our major memorials are traffic places: airports named for John F. Kennedy and Fiorello La Guardia; a bridge named for George Washington, and a tunnel named for Abraham Lincoln.

But we do not have dramatic public memorials comparable to those in the nation's capital. Why not? The power of the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial comes from their place in the city, in the architectural landscape. They do not have anything to say directly about Washington or Lincoln; indeed their meaning comes from their spatial settings and from the public realm that they evoke. They are spatial monuments. They demonstrate Immanuel Kant's philosophical definition of space, which is the «possibility of being together.» The Roosevelt Memorial has this spatial possibility: to evoke the public realm, «the possibility of being together.»

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