

Poetic-Architectonic Realizations: Louis Kahn and Fumihiko Maki

R. B. SCHWARTZ

Abstract: This study of how poetic content, which both underlies and is revealed by the architectural design process, explores the work of two late twentieth-century modernist architects, Louis Kahn and Fumihiko Maki. Linguistic/poetic elements are revealed in an examination of each architect's built environments. The process and product of creating poetry and designing architecture share essential similarities. Various modernist precepts demonstrate an organic construct of poetic and architectonic experience, when developed within vital design programs. This subtle intermediality is defined through examining Kahn's and Maki's success in developing meaning, as opposed to the typical thrust of architectural critique, which usually concerns itself with form and function.

Keywords: Intermediality, poetic, architecture, Louis Kahn, Fumihiko Maki

Introduction

At the outset of this exploration into the nature of poetic realization in modern architecture, it is worth asking: Must a work of architecture, to be meaningful, speak poetically, or for that matter, develop any semblance of preconceived aesthetic content, other than from its intrinsic character? Or should we conclude that architecture must, by definition, somehow enhance itself by consciously developing poetic content? I suspect the answer lies in what building types we examine, recognizing that there do exist truly inspiring buildings that had no architect or design approach; (see Mesa Verde, Stavkirke of Urnes, Ise Shrine Complex, and so on).¹ To be fair, this exploration of poetic intermediality, addresses only one, often subtle aspect of the architectural design process. However, it is clear that poetry offers us an appropriate aesthetic correlative for architecture, consistent with the euphemism that when buildings inspire, we say that its architect "speaks to us" through his or her building.

From a metaphysical perspective, I believe it would not be inaccurate to define modern societies – and their citizens, who are the 'users' of modern buildings – as a concurrence of both *what we want to do* and *what we are told we must do*. Consider then, that an architect has little-to-no influence on either of these societal imperatives. So not withstanding some remarkable building program, and seen from that metaphysical perspective, an architect's aesthetic sphere of influence is essentially defined by *meaning*, not *purpose*. This liminary parameter, inherent in all building design, constitutes both the impulse and the license toward achieving poetic content in a work of architecture.

Every great architect is – necessarily – a great poet. He must be a great original interpreter of his time, his day, his age.²

Frank Lloyd Wright's epithet could not be more relevant, as it recognizes that architects are interpreters, not masters of their time. However, the following exploration of poetic-architectonic intermediality will focus not on Wright, but instead on two other successful, twentieth century

designers, Louis Kahn and Fumihiko Maki, whose buildings relate clear, although quite different, poetic content. This will take us along a somewhat traditional comparative journey; from understanding the aesthetic principles at work in each discipline, to an appreciation of how those principles were applied in different design processes, and finally to a better understanding of twentieth century culture itself.

In that regard, a brief primer on the language of architecture,³ and some of its poetic counterparts, will be useful. Some of the closely related principles these two distinct arts share are: structure (grammar); abstraction; referential imagery; conceptual integrity (syntax); style (metaphor and simile); spacial organization (mood); and form (prosody). Interestingly, another shared principle – rhythm, relates to movement in architecture, and similarly to “[t]he accommodation of the poet’s individual voice in...the accentual symbolic line,” creating poetic flow.⁴

Just as the rhythm of a poem transports us as we follow the poet’s thoughts, the rhythms of a building – in its columns, windows, floor patterns, lighting scheme – provoke us to move, within or around it. And when the rhythm of a building ‘turns’ or changes in unexpected ways, we experience the same moments of reflection about where we are as we do with the progression of trope in a poem. When we are asked to grasp a linear, or nonlinear, flow of time and space, we instinctively draw closer to a realization of that particular moment and place. As perceptive reality, some people are quite consciously aware of this sense of poetic intermediality in sophisticated works of architecture, although many others will sense it only vaguely or unconsciously; it is simply that some people are more attuned to the subtle qualities of their environment than others.

In addition, there are the direct influences of natural conditions: climate, terrain, tree forms, as well as sounds, acoustics, light and shadow, texture, color and so on, which become poetic elements in the hands of a talented designer; keeping in mind that some of these conditions are more cognitively immediate than others. Architecture always possesses the potential to use these figures to form an underlying poetic sense, because these are some of the same sensations that originally instigated primitive language itself: the aesthetic quality of natural environments as experienced and expressed by our language-forming ancestors. Woven together into an architectonic experience, complimentary natural elements and built environments amplify and enhance each other. Naturally, patterns of light and shadow, earthy colors and textures, as well as the sound of water, when integrated into built environments, are imbued with a special poetic quality of their own. It follows that various poetic and architectonic principles, experienced simultaneously as related aspects of meaning and cognition, have been understood as intermediality throughout civilization.

Lastly, regarding structural composition, (formal building elements, now expanded upon by modern engineering), it also has vital poetic potential, through an emotive identification with security and the ordering of our lives.

Taking all this into account, one realizes that architectonic-poetic achievements have qualities that propel a work of architecture *beyond mere considerations of style*, defining a dimension of architecture that has the potential to illuminate cultural significance in unexpected, transformative ways.

Louis I. Kahn, 1901–1974

Poetry and architecture are one and the same for Kahn because “when you think [in terms] of a building, you can’t but think almost immediately of a poem, because a poem to one mind is the same as the building is to another mind. They are both incredible.” And Kahn thinks of developing architectural elements to such an extent they become “a poetic entity”.⁵

This observation, from Ms Pedret’s masters thesis sums up, as no other statement available to me, the intermedial synergy of Kahn’s design process. Louis Kahn was both a professor and a practicing architect. He truly grasped the ‘presence’ inherent in language, an unusual personal achievement in a profession not ordinarily known for skillful elucidation. For many of my peers, he represented an authentic artistic spirit, who somehow found success despite his unorthodox design approach. As a

student, I never had an opportunity to attend one of Kahn's design studios, where he discoursed on these concepts; but in the nineteen-sixties he was well-known for his inspirational style:

He had...built a cult-like following among his graduate students, drawn to his enigmatic philosophy that was often framed in memorable aphorisms ("what a building wants to be"), unexpected juxtapositions ("silence and light"), and thought-provoking syllogisms ("science finds what is already there, but the artist makes that which is not there").⁶

Drawn to classical music, and the ruins of Classical architecture, the arc of his imagination seemed to bend of itself toward poetry. And so it seems possible that with his last design, the capital of Bangladesh, which speaks of a communal sacredness, Louis Kahn had finally found himself, on planet Earth, interwoven symbiotically with his work. Shelley commented on a similar quality found in elemental verse, a quality that also seems to emanate from Kahn's buildings:

In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry....Every original language, near to its source is itself the chaos of a cyclic poem.⁷

The thrust of Kahn's design process closely resembled this elemental writing of poetry. Kahn sought a minimal, almost primitive architectonic vocabulary that he perceived as necessary for creating an essential building mood, and rightly so. As his career and his commissions progressed, away from utilitarian building types toward monumental public spaces, the logic of that spirituality becomes clearer, and Kahn's capability to communicate it improves. One might say his buildings speak in a sort of holy verse; more evident perhaps, when experienced alone. If heightened awareness of our immediate environment provides us glimpses of four-dimensional, time-space reality, it explains why Kahn's buildings are imbued with a minimalist, existential character, not unlike Rothko's color field paintings, which have been described as 'environmental art'.

Whether Kahn was truly aware of his highly personal creative journey toward self-realization, and how it actually manifested his career, is not known. But the need to connect with an other-worldly spirituality was consistent with his life style: his isolation from intimacy; his Platonic/rabbinic teaching method; his disdain for the pragmatic; and his obsessive work habits all coincided with this type of psychic orientation. In fact, he encouraged the impression he made, as that of a guru, a cult leader, a nomad, an iconoclast.

Exactly how Kahn transmitted these inspiring poetic impressions and apprehensions is far more complex than his built environments suggest, because they emanate from his design process, more so than from any specific building components. My impression is that the architectural techniques he turned to most often were juxtaposition, (what appears to me to be his poetic syntax) and sensuality, in the literal sense of the word, (his prosody). That juxtaposition was crucial to his poetic content makes a great deal of sense, given that syntax is a modern correlate for its simpler ancestor, grammar, which was a significant defining feature of Western classical religious verse.

Any number of clearly contrasting elements can easily be recognized in Kahn's buildings, but at what level do they successfully become a unified syntactical device? Some of his highly expressive contrasts are: setting a massive masonry building in, what appears to be, the middle of a lake, (Sher-e-Bangla Nagar); a deceptively plain facade enclosing a sumptuous, complex interior environment, (Phillips-Exeter Library); and the double-juxtaposition, of dense forms (closure) contrasted with emptiness (vista), which at the same time contrasts the complexity of human activity with pure inspiration, (Salk Institute; below). And in fact, the cloister imagery at the center of the Salk Institute, with its ever-present Pacific horizon, demonstrates the efforts Kahn made in his design process to align these juxtapositions as syntax, in their rhythmic simplicity and sense of other-worldliness. His Erdman Hall dormitories, warehouse-like in form, also contain chapel-like spaces within; here Kahn invokes a severely vertical facade set against the horizontality of Bryn Mawr's pastoral campus landscape. These multifarious elements of his designs may appear dissimilar in a strictly visual context, but not necessarily as elements of a coherent poetic syntax.

The arrangement and rearrangement of...univocal terms in a series of propositions is the function of logic....The poetic has nothing to do with this. It can only manifest itself as fresh meaning...for it creates and recreates by the magic of new combinations. Horace chose his iunctura, and Maupassant his contact, well: for in the pure heat of poetic expression juxtaposition is far more important than either logic or grammar.⁸



Salk Institute, La Jolla, California

All material in nature, the mountains and the streams and the air and we, are made of Light which has been spent, and this crumpled mass called material casts a shadow, and the shadow belongs to Light.⁹

Kahn's is an architectonic language of contrasts, insistent repetition and clear structural integrity, semantics that extend Classical aesthetics into modern cultural sensibilities. His use of tactile, lucid, auditory and other sensory-specific components are extremely complex; and like a first-rate poet, the prosody they create is transformed by one's personal sensibilities. Notably, his design process always emphasized the creative impulse, what architects call the conceptual design phase; however his conceptual solutions maintain their realism, always containing very logical ground for the development of each specific building program. Kahn consistently used concrete structure, which he exposed, highlighting its imposing presence; this was his central ordering device, a substantiation that complimented his elusive design orientation; similar to the ordering produced by end-of-sentence rhyming. This structural integrity found both resonance in, and developed from, using monumentality to effect, an insistence of scale Kahn incorporated in all his designs. (Regarding monumentality I should note that architectonic scale is generally underutilized, and underappreciated in modern buildings, however it has wide-ranging effect on many of the design considerations discussed here. Yet, for the purposes of these speculations, I find no poetic device that corresponds to Scale in architecture.)

Finally, in the context of poetic mood, there is a noticeable feeling surrounding Kahn's work of coming to an unexpected place. Perhaps it was, for him, an allusion to the mysterious inspiration of an ancient age. And although Kahn's work does not quite embrace an all-encompassing connection between environment and human psyche, his achievements are remarkable, all the more so for their unique contribution to modern architecture. His modern re-imagining of a thoroughly Classical poetic vision, through the contrast between cognitive immediacy and other-worldly mood, was skillfully devised using palpably authentic, yet innovative formal content. His work speaks with an aesthetic semantics of meaning, perhaps even wisdom with all its implied potential to reorient us. Owen Barfield, whose thoughts contributed so significantly to this study, wrote eloquently about a aspect of archaism resembling Kahn's work:

For properly understood, archaism chooses, not old words, but young ones. If it is objected that the meaning of archaism is here stretched too far, the reply, of course, is that it is only by such deliberate extensions that hitherto unapprehended, or unemphasized, relationships can become incarnate in meaning.¹⁰

Fumihiko Maki, 1928–Present

Fumihiko Maki was the only influential Japanese architect of his generation to study abroad, (Cranbrook and Harvard, 1952–1954). Remaining in the US, he then accepted a position as an assistant professor at Washington University, (1956). Not long afterward he returned to Tokyo and participated in the avant-garde Metabolism Group, which fused ideas about mixed-use buildings with biological principles of growth. He later returned to the US, and worked at two international style offices in New York and Boston, before forming Maki and Associates, in Tokyo, (1965), which remains active until today. From an architectural perspective his designs do reflect obvious Western aesthetic influences, however seen from the more subtle vantage of poetic-architectonic semantics, I believe Maki's designs are inherently Japanese in aesthetic origin, particularly in their development of meaning. With the exceptions of a few commissions, (that perhaps were heavily influenced by client preferences), his design process seems to consistently emphasize what I understand to be the poetic fluidity of Japanese aesthetic experience, in both intent and execution.

Maki's perceived design process also reflects another of the liminary demands of large scale modern architecture, being the necessity of employing an array of consultants, co-designers, and managers acting together in close coordination, for there to be any chance of achieving sophisticated results. The complexity of these types of large, mixed-use environments are simply beyond the capacity of one "great" individual to accomplish by himself or herself. Perceptually, Maki's architecture creates a type of poetic content that Owen Barfield also alludes to in his *Poetic Diction*. Here, I allow myself a literary inversion of Barfield's observation, one that relates directly to Maki's poetic framework. The first paragraph is Barfield's; the second, inverted one, is mine:

For example, there is a certain half-spurious element in the appreciation of poetry, with which everyone will be familiar, when one takes delight, not only in what is said, and in the way it is said, but in a sense of difficulties overcome – of an obstreperous medium having been masterfully subdued. It is a kind of architectural pleasure. One feels that the poet is working in solid masses, not in something fluid. One is reminded by one's very admiration that 'words are stubborn things'.¹¹

For example, there is a certain half-acknowledged element in the appreciation of architecture...when one takes delight, not only in form and usefulness, and in the refined manner of their execution, but in a sense of enlightening, unexpected meaning conferred. It is a kind of poetic pleasure. One feels that the architect is working in fluid aesthetic experience, not in mere 'materiality'. One appreciates, in one's evolving perceptions, 'architecture's complexity', and apprehends its potential.

How does Maki connect us directly through *cognitive experience* to that elevated sense of mastering a complex building; how does he achieve something we are also *likely* to understand innately as pleasant and poetic? First, it seems Maki infuses a general sense of fluidity, through the use of connected, referential components, which align themselves as organic flow, a qualitative effect he himself alludes to in his writings. And while Maki's buildings display excellent functionality, it is this aesthetic fluidity that draws our attention away from their pragmatic usefulness, toward the possibility of poetic dialogue with Environment. And it is a sort of dialogue: Environment speaking poetically to us, and we in turn responding in our own way. All of which is consistent with a uniquely Japanese form of poetry called Renga, a poetic comparison that, on close inspection develops considerable relatedness to Maki's work.

As I did with my exploration of Kahn's poetic-architectonic intermediality, let's look at some examples of how purposefully Maki uses building components and space to achieve these synergistic, harmonizing, and inward flowing effects. To begin with, his design process does not emphasize the conceptual design phase above all else, as in Kahn's design process. Instead, having totally embraced

the multi-disciplinary team concept of the modern architectural office, Maki's conceptual designs intentionally delegate much of their creative potential to subsequent design phases; concepts that remain open for team solutions, while establishing key referential *foci*, which guide design development. This sense of ease in Maki's buildings, reminds me of a poem by Lin Yuan:

On the road I met an old man
both our heads white as snow,
we walked one mile, then two
taking four rests, then five.¹²

And it seems likely that many of these referential elements were created by his teams in the same way that the masters of Renga poetry came together in the spirit of spontaneity and fellowship. In his firm's catalog of projects,¹³ Maki describes some of these aesthetic references: he mentions that the facade of the Spiral building references cubist art; and the exterior of the Tepia museum likewise, takes its inspiration from the de Stijl movement, while Tepia's interior perforated metal panels reference traditional Japanese shoji screens, and so on. Does the spiral ramp in the building of the same name reference the Guggenheim Museum? Most likely, while also suggesting a lovely unexpected lightness floating beyond the gravity of a lobby that could easily be mistaken for Rockefeller Center. Does the envelope layering of glass and wood panels at Penn's Annenberg Center allude to the layering of *shoji* screens and *amado* shutters in Japanese buildings? Perhaps, but whatever their interpretation, they clearly carry the intentionality and imagery that we associate with being drawn inward. At the MIT Media Lab Complex, accents of red, yellow and blue primary colors are a captivating reference to Bauhaus design, one of many. His referential relationships are so extensive that I could imagine discovering something new, something I had missed previously, with every visit. One could elaborate forever, because his method of creating allusive flow, using it as a primary design statement, gives us a discovery, one after another, of these enticing references; they catch the eye they pull you in, they make you interested in 'knowing' more, moving you through large, open spaces, until the complex character of where you find yourself comes together aesthetically, and shifts your consciousness to create new meaning.

As mentioned above, defining Maki's semantics in this way does seem a valid comparison to Renga's poetic process and format. Paraphrasing some of the notes in the poetry anthology, *From the Country of Eight Islands*: Renga is known as 'linked verse'. It is fashioned from the spontaneous interaction of two or more poets who together write alternating, short lines, which allude obliquely only to the line preceding them. This gives each series of linked verse a wide range, allowing it to flow without preconceptions. Each line follows specific syllabic rules, but with no fixed syntax, and may evolve to as many as one hundred linked lines; themes of nature are common, as are pointed references to other poetry. Here is an example from the above-mentioned anthology, written by three poets in 1491; these are lines 1 through 6:

Thinly covered with snow, the leaves look brighter along this mountain pass
the pampas grass by the boulders will be more enjoyable in winter
lured by tree crickets I left my home early
must be late at night – on my sleeves an autumn wind
dew so cold the moon seems to change its light
as you walk through unfamiliar fields.¹⁴

Of the referential mode that Maki's buildings speak with, one example stands out for me – the roof at the Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium; (below). Seen as a series of overlapping plates, which obscure what lies beneath their sweeping overhangs, it seems to reference the *kobuto* helmets worn by samurai fighters, who shared that same hard-core, yet vulnerable spirit found in both sports competitions and warfare. Not coincidentally, the roof's visual impact creates an apprehension of a monumental structural problem mastered skillfully. I venture to add that initially, as one approaches a

building like this, which is typical of Maki's work, one has a visceral impression of formidable design mastery; and then as one experiences its flow, spontaneity and referential fluidity – its poetic meaning – one comes away with a more considered understanding of that initial impression. Although subtle, and requiring some sense of architecture, this mode of poetic intermediality has potential for significant perceptual insight.



Tokyo Metropolitan Gymnasium

Maki himself readily acknowledges his reliance on referential imagery and the importance of ‘flow’, which I take to mean perceptual flow – flow experienced as discovery, as well as pedestrian movement. This is what I alluded to, above, as fluid aesthetic experience. Maki also clearly acknowledges his ubiquitous use of organic imagery as an integral part of the design process, and it is through this alignment between organic flow, allusive imagery and complexity that his buildings speak in subtle, yet expansive poetic modes, which when followed carefully, have the potential to expand one’s consciousness further, into an even deeper, detailed layer of architectonics. Whether this approach simply emerged from Maki’s own, personal sensibilities, or from skillful aesthetic deliberation, Maki fully embraces it. His chosen design semantics speak poetically of seamless relatedness, rather than of metaphor or abstraction. Perhaps most importantly, Maki’s Modernist architecture benefits, in both its context and its human usefulness, from this quintessentially Japanese approach to imbuing a work of art with meaning.

Maki was, of course, largely journeying along pathways of cultural influence much like many other Japanese artists of the twentieth century, which was a period of opening up to and fusing with internationalism. Yet Maki found himself in a pivotal role, as Japan became the most successful example of modern architectural integration. This might be due in part, to Japan’s ancient, abiding appreciation for building as an artform. Nonetheless, these flourishing, cross-cultural influences, borne on the wings of every modern artform during the late twentieth century, played a prominent role worldwide, as well in Maki’s work. Inevitably, many of these experiments were shallow appropriations of foreign styles into other cultures, essentially the exotic fascinations of popular culture. But where these cross-cultural influences resonated deeply, a potential for new life-meanings emerged. And Maki’s poetic-architectonics arguably does represent a new way of perceiving Japanese culture, as well as combining the use of fluid imagery with complexity to enhance the poetic content of modern architecture.

Reflections and Thoughts

Considering Kahn’s and Maki’s poetics as reflections of a broader cultural orientation, do they typify a pervasive aesthetic impulse to maintain something of a recognizably *personal* cultural semblance; of an art form still nourished by the creative roots of modernism? Not coincidentally, from

an aesthetic perspective, the twentieth century was a time of *ever-increasing pace and scale* of institutional imperatives: mass electronic media, entertainment industries, fossil-fueled travel, corporate conglomerates, all represent institutional forces with ever-increasing effects on every culture, effects which have devolved to such an extent that our sensibilities have become widely institutionalized and seriously transformed. Have some jazz musicians, architects, film makers, and modern figurative painters continued to embrace an underlying necessity of poetic expression as a sort of antidote for the proliferation of institutionalized culture? It may be that the *personal, intimate* quality of modern art, and the necessity of meaningful content, is now surviving largely through this kind of poetic intermediality.

I recall a sepia watercolor of a nineteen-twenties flapper, given to me by my grandmother, that speaks strongly of a unique “her”; of the artistic spirit who made it; and of an identifiable time and place; a small poetic image, not a portrait of what we might refer to now as a generic “twenty-something”; but rather, a uniquely personal poetic image, impressionistic, and so unlike portraiture today.

These realizations suggest the presence of a poetic continuum in modern art forms, and the importance of embracing authentic aesthetic content as an acknowledgment of the creative impulse itself. Whatever future poet-artists create, our times also beg us to consider: How disconnected have we already become from an appreciation of meaningful aesthetic content itself? Are we even aware of how impersonal most cultural artifacts are now? If poetic content imbues meaning in a work of art, and that meaningfulness connects us to our sense of self, it will continue to signify some vital part of who we are.

North Carolina, USA

Notes

- ¹ Indigenous architecture lies beyond the scope of this essay. However, two books I am familiar with that shed light on these types of built environments are: Sybil Moholy-Nagy. *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*. Horizon Press NY. 1957. Bernard Rudofsky. *Architecture Without Architects*. University of New Mexico Press NM. 1987.
- ² Frank Lloyd Wright. *The Future of Architecture*. Horizon Press NY. 1953.
- ³ Another modern perspective on the language of architecture, available online, is: Olena Remizova. *The Structure of Architectural Language*. Architectural Studies. 2015. Volume 1 Number 2. p. 81–86. ISSN: 2411–801X.
- ⁴ Mary Kinzie. *A Poet’s Guide to Poetry*. University of Chicago Press IL. 1999. p. 457.
- ⁵ Annie Pedret. *Within the Text of Kahn*. Master of Science in Architecture Thesis at MIT. 1993. p. 14–15. Ms Pedret’s thesis defines Kahn’s poetic orientation in great depth.
- ⁶ Stuart W. Leslie. *A Different Kind of Beauty: Scientific and Architectural Style in I.M. Pei’s Mesa Laboratory and Louis Kahn’s Salk Institute*. Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences 38/2. 2008. p. 201.
- ⁷ P.B. Shelley. *A Defense of Poetry*. Atlantic Press. 1840/2015.
- ⁸ Owen Barfield. *Poetic Diction*. Wesleyan University Press CT. 1937/1973. p. 131
- ⁹ Louis Kahn quoted by John Lobell. *Between Silence and Light: Spirit in the Architecture of Louis Kahn*. Shambhala Publications MA. 1979. p. 5.
- ¹⁰ Owen Barfield. p. 165.
- ¹¹ *ibid.* p. 96. Here Barfield provides us with a prescient description of Maki’s poetic context. As an architect myself, having designed large-scale, multi-use facilities similar to Maki’s, I have to admit that an accurate statement of this particular aesthetic principle, and its equally insightful inverted meaning, is inspiring.
- ¹² Jerome P. Seaton and Dennis Mahoney. *A Drifting Boat: Chinese Zen Poetry*. White Pine Press NY. 1994. p. 83. Translated from a poem by Lin Yuan.
- ¹³ *Fumihiko Maki: Buildings and Projects*. Princeton Architectural Press NY. 1997.
- ¹⁴ Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson. *From the Country of Eight Islands*. Anchor Press NY. From Three Poets at Yuyama: Botange Shohaku; Saiokuken Socho; and Iio Sogi. 1981. p. 254.