

LESSONS

LESSON ONE: What is Architecture?

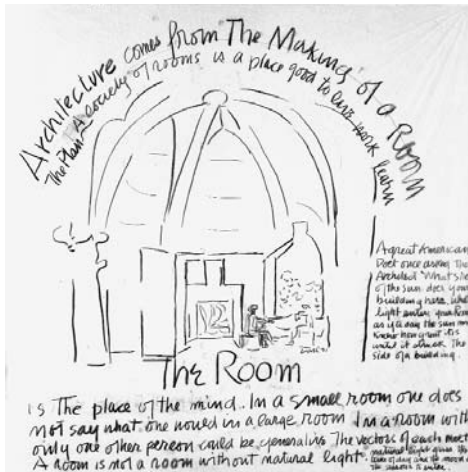


IMAGE THREE: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. *Drawings for City/2 Exhibition: Architecture Comes from the Making of a Room.* 1971. Charcoal, 34 x 34" (86.4 x 86.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Louis Kahn



IMAGE FOUR: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. *Drawings for City/2 Exhibition: The Street is a Room.* 1971. Charcoal, 34 x 34" (86.4 x 86.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Louis Kahn



IMAGE FIVE: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. *Drawings for City/2 Exhibition: The City From a Simple Settlement.* 1971. Charcoal, 34 x 34" (86.4 x 86.4 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art. Gift of Louis Kahn

INTRODUCTION

During a lecture at Princeton University in 1967, Kahn said, “If I were not an architect, I would be a writer.”⁴ This lesson explores how Kahn used writing and sketches as tools for articulating his thoughts about architecture and its place in the world.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will be introduced to Kahn’s architectural philosophy through writing and drawing.
- Students will examine primary source imagery composed of text and drawing.
- Students will discuss their interpretations of architecture and the built environment.
- Students will observe and record buildings in their neighborhood.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Experts on Kahn’s work often describe the architect’s connection to written language: “Words, for Louis I. Kahn, projected the same powerful imagery as his sketches, drawings, and the work itself”⁵; “He toiled over the making of words with the same indefatigable energy that he devoted to architecture, crossing out and rubbing out and remaking a phrase or a plan.”⁶ In many cases, Kahn combined text and drawing to clarify his ideas and to elaborate on them. His words often read like poems, reflective of an inner journey. Ask your students to consider in what situation or environment they encounter words and images used together to communicate ideas. In these instances, do the images and words communicate similar ideas? Ask them to consider when images would be a better format than words. When is it more effective to have words?

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Print Kahn’s three *Drawings for City/2 Exhibition* (Images Three, Four, and Five) from the CD-ROM or download them from the Web site. If possible, copy the drawings for each student, cropping out the text. Break your class into pairs and distribute the copies. Ask your students to brainstorm a list of adjectives that describe the drawings, and, in addition, have them write down three questions they have about the works. Have one pair present their findings to another pair. Next, moderate a class discussion based on everyone’s experiences. Make a list on chart paper or on the board of all your students’ descriptive words. Next, ask your students what questions they have, and try to answer them based on the descriptive words generated in the brainstorm. Make a list of any new questions that arise as a result of this discussion.

Inform your students that these three drawings were made by the architect Louis I. Kahn. With these drawings, Kahn was attempting to illustrate his architectural philosophy.

- Pass out copies of the same three drawings, this time with the text included. Next, read aloud the excerpts transcribed below from each of the drawings. Work with your students as a group to understand what Kahn might have been trying to say about architecture.

Architecture comes from the making of a room
The room is the place of the mind

4. Louis I. Kahn, “The Institutions of Man” (lecture, Princeton University, Princeton, N.J.: March 13, 1967). The Museum of Modern Art Archives

5. Alessandra Latour, ed., *Louis I. Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 8.

6. David D. Brownlee and David G. De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 129.

- Ask your students to make lists of the different kinds of rooms they are familiar with. Have them include descriptive words that convey a sense of the activities that take place in those spaces. Are any of the spaces they mentioned places where they use their minds? Have them cite specific examples.

In a small room one does not say what one would in a large room
A room is not a room without natural light

- Ask your students to consider the important elements of a room. What does a room need to be functional? What role does natural light play in the experience of a place?

The street is a room by agreement
A community room the walls of which belong to the donors
The ceiling is the sky

- How is a street like a room? Have your students make lists of words that describe the design elements and activities that exist on a street in their neighborhood. Have them compare their descriptive lists about the street to those about the room. Are there any similarities?
- Ask your students to consider who the “donors” are in a community.

The city from a simple settlement became the place of assembled institutions
The measure of the greatness of a place to live must come from the character of its institutions sanctioned through how sensitive they are to renewed desire for new agreement

- Ask your students to consider the different elements that make up a city. What are the different activities that take place in a city?

Inform your students that, for Kahn, the room was the basic building block of architecture. For him, a building was composed of organized groups of rooms that share a common purpose. Institutions were the places and spaces where civic life takes place. These places—sites of inspiration and wonder—could be a church, a museum, or a school. In his view, cities were made up of different kinds of institutions, including places for shopping, learning, worship, and play, among others. The donors are the people who inhabit these places and spaces in a community.

- Ask your students to work in partners and discuss the texts as they relate to the imagery. Do these images and words tell us about Kahn’s approach to architecture? If so, what do they tell us? Do these statements answer any of their questions about the work? Bring your students back together as a group to share their experiences, revisiting earlier questions.

ACTIVITY

Ask your students to choose a neighborhood “institution” that they are very familiar with. Have your students make a list of the activities that take place in that space. Then, have your students make a list of words that describe the mood or feeling of that place. Is it bright and loud or dark and quiet? Based on these descriptions, have your students make a sketch of this place.