

LESSON SIX: Designs for Urban Life

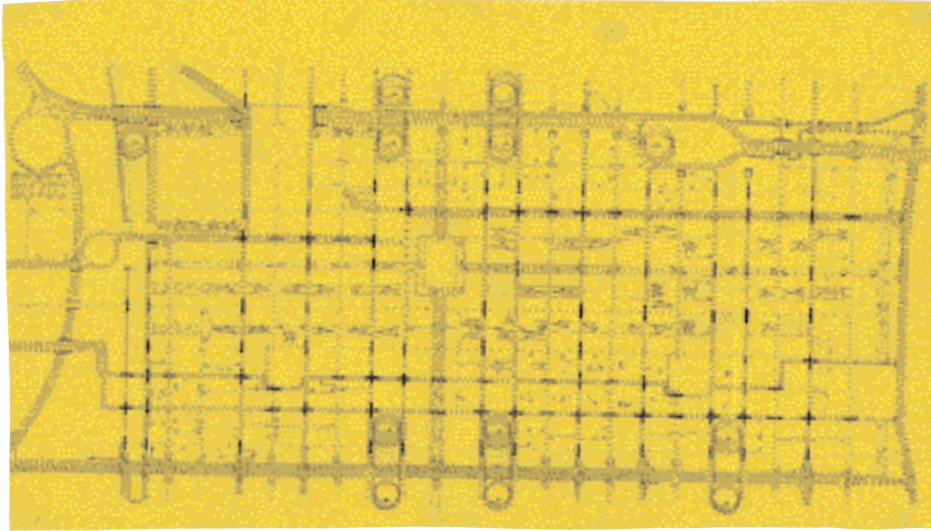


IMAGE THIRTY-FOUR: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. Traffic Study, project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Plan of proposed traffic-movement pattern. 1952. Ink, graphite, and cut-and-pasted papers on paper, 24 ½ x 42 ¾" (62.2 x 108.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the architect

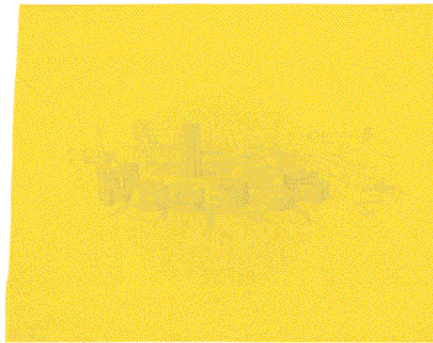


IMAGE THIRTY-FIVE: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. Civic Center, project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Aerial perspective. 1957. Ink on tracing paper, 11 x 14" (27.9 x 35.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York

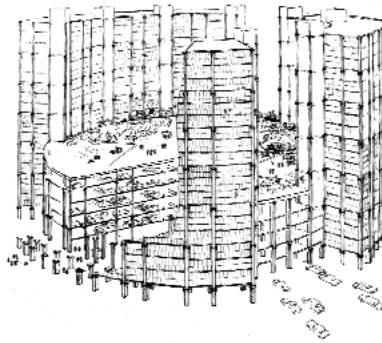


IMAGE THIRTY-SIX: Louis I. Kahn. American, born Estonia. 1901–1974. Civic Center, project, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Cut-away perspective of parking tower. c. 1957. The Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania, by the gift of Richard Saul Wurman

INTRODUCTION

“What spaces, what activities, what buildings formed the creative center of human communication?”¹⁹ This is the question Kahn was asking in the 1950s. He felt that in order to preserve the quality of life in urban environments, people, buildings, and services should be brought to the city center and cars and roadways should be placed on the periphery, or outer edges. This would, he theorized, allow people to walk safely and easily from place to place within a city. This lesson explores Kahn’s conceptual plans for the redevelopment of Philadelphia in the 1950s.

19. Louis I. Kahn, quoted in Reed, “Louis I. Kahn,” 112.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn that in addition to buildings, architects are involved with the design of cities and systems of flow for pedestrians and vehicular traffic.
- Students will be introduced to the discipline of urban planning and will consider how it relates to other architectural processes or concepts.
- Students will compare and contrast conceptual drawings and plans.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

In the 1950s, Philadelphia was undergoing a period of redevelopment, and Kahn, a long-time Philadelphia resident, was very interested in the idea of improving modern urban life. Based on his principle of “served” and “servant” spaces, Kahn created conceptual plans for the Center City district of Philadelphia that included traffic-flow redesign and structures that were sensitive to the issues of an ever-growing urban center. Have your students brainstorm a list of possible improvements to the design of their neighborhood. Have them consider what might have to occur in order to have these ideas come to fruition.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students the plan drawing of Kahn’s proposed traffic-movement pattern for Philadelphia (Image Thirty-four). Ask your students to describe what they see in this drawing.

Inform them that this is a plan of the Center City region of Philadelphia. In this drawing, Kahn started his exploration of the modern city with a look at how traffic flows, specifically addressing what he saw as a need to reorganize streets to alleviate congestion. He created a system of symbols to represent the different types of traffic flow. The dotted line represents stop-and-go movement of trucks and buses. Arrows represent fast-moving traffic, and the spirals represent cars in parking lots. In his plan, Kahn said, he intended “to redefine the use of streets and separate one type of movement from another so that cars, buses, trolleys, trucks, and pedestrians will move and stop more freely, and not get in each other’s way. . . . This system of movement is not designed for speed but for order and convenience. The present mixture of staccato, through, stop and go makes all the streets equally ineffectual.”²⁰

- Have your students look at the drawing again, using the notation system as a guide for reading it. What conclusions can they draw based on the notations? Draw their attention to the bands of arrows running around the periphery of the drawing. Ask your students what kind of roadway this might represent.

In Kahn’s drawing, the bands of arrows around the periphery of Philadelphia’s downtown area are expressways. The circular arrows represent parking towers, while in the center are smaller streets. He likened this plan to the walled cities of ancient times, specifically Carcassonne, a walled town in southern France. Just as Carcassonne had to defend itself against its enemies, Kahn felt the modern city must defend itself against the automobile, which he saw as a threat to human interaction. Kahn himself did not own a car. He never learned to drive, and he felt that cars should be kept to the periphery of the city, which would allow the downtown to be reserved for pedestrians.

- Next, show your students the panoramic aerial (bird’s-eye) view of Kahn’s proposed city structures (Image Thirty-five). With this drawing, Kahn was further developing his idea for a city surrounded by cylindrical parking towers. Have your students look at the panorama

20. Louis I. Kahn, “Toward a Plan for Midtown Philadelphia,” in Latour, *Louis I. Kahn*, 29.

view to locate the cylindrical structures. Ask your students what other forms they see in the foreground, middle ground, and background. Ask them if these structures recall other structures they are familiar with.

A panorama is a form of pictorial representation that allows for a wide, unobstructed view. The cylindrical structures in the foreground are parking towers that would sit on the periphery of the city, leaving the downtown open for institutions.

- **Next, show your students the detail cut-away view of the parking tower (Image Thirty-six).**
- **Ask your students to compare this detail to the panorama view. Ask them to describe how it is different. What information can they see here that is not available to them in the panorama view? Ask your students to debate the merits of this design for Philadelphia. Ask them to express their feelings about the validity of this design **concept** and whether or not it would better the lives of the people who live there.**

Ultimately, Kahn's plans were not considered as part of the redevelopment of Philadelphia due to conflicting opinions within the city planning administration. Although they were not realized, architects and scholars continue to research and reference Kahn's ideas about the modern city.

ACTIVITIES

1. Have your students take part in a study of their environment based on some of the concepts included in Kahn's design for Philadelphia. Have your students include movement studies that reflect the pattern of traffic on streets and sidewalks. Consult with your local library to obtain maps of your city or town to use as the basis for the projects. Once your students have gathered their data, have them work in teams to analyze their findings and make recommendations for ways to improve their community. Have the teams create two- and three-dimensional presentations of all phases, from research to design. Set up your classroom as a gallery space, and invite members of the school and the local community to see the completed work.
2. Kahn's conceptual drawings for Philadelphia's Center City were inspired in part by eighteenth-century views of Rome. Have your students search online for images of Rome. They can go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Web site (www.metmuseum.org) to use the museum's Timeline of Art History feature. Have your students compare the images of Rome to Kahn's designs.