

URBAN FORM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY. ON PHILADELPHIA, 1950-2000

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To the visitors who arrive in Philadelphia by train, at 30th Street Station, and then take the subway to City Hall (provided they find the wretched entrance to the metro station, situated in a nearby parking lot) Philadelphia's Core with its bombastic City Hall still displays a hilarious panache. Seen from the roof terrace of the PSFS Tower, located only a few blocks east along Market Street, the bronze statue of William Penn crowning City Hall Tower can even now be experienced in its dual role as icon of the city founder, inviting the world to make Philadelphia a capital of trade, and as a merciless height limit to the hybrids of those who agreed to come. (The spell was only broken during the Reagan years)¹.

The driver who approaches Philadelphia from Route 95, however, finds downtown signalled laconically as "Independence Hall". The street map singles out the entire eastern section of the downtown area as "Independence National Historic Park", identifying the city in such a way as a prime locus of American patriotism - with Independence Hall marking both the focus of the baroque tapis verts of Independence Mall and the transition to the scattered historic buildings of Society Hill. Here, in this "National Historic Park", and in the residential enclave of Society Hill, developed in the late 1950s, "the first step in a comprehensive policy to revamp the center city of Philadelphia"², the visitor may stroll around exemplary buildings, evocative both of historic romance and of architectural character. At the center is Independence Hall



1. On Philadelphia urbanism in the first part of the 20th century cf. HEGEMANN, Werner, *Amerikanische Architektur und Stadtbaukunst*, Berlin (Wasmuth), 1925; REPS, John W., *The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1965; and more recently BROWNLEE, David B., *Building the City Beautiful*. The Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia (Philadelphia Museum of Art), 1989.

On the post-1945 development of Philadelphia's urban form and on the "Philadelphia School" see Peter S. REED, "Philadelphia Urban Design", in BROWNLEE, D., and LONG, D. de, (eds.), *Louis I. Kahn. In the Realm of Architecture*, New York (Rizzoli), 1991, pp. 304-311.; HOLMES PERKINS, G., "Philadelphia Phoenix: Postwar Civic Renaissance and the Philadelphia School", in J. F. O'gorman, Jeffrey A. Cohen, George E. Thomas and G. Holmes Perkins (eds.), *Drawing Toward Building*. Philadelphia Architectural Graphics 1737-1986, Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press/Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, 1986, pp. 203-207; HASSEBROEK, D., "Philadelphia's Postwar Movement", in PERSPECTA, 30 (1999), Cambridge, MA, pp.84-91. An earlier version of this paper appeared as "Penn's Shadow", in Harvard Design Magazine, (1999), Cambridge, MA, pp. 45-51; but see also S.von Moos, "Contextual Oscillations" (Introduction), Venturi, Scott Brown Et Associates, 1986-1998, New York (The Monacelli Press), 1999 for more references.

2. BOYER, M. Christine, *The City of Collective Memory. Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments*, Cambridge MA/London, MIT Press, 1994, p. 396.

Philadelphia. Benjamin Franklin Parkway (illustrated Postcards).

William Strickland, view of Chestnut Street with the Second Bank of the United States on the right, Philadelphia, watercolor, early nineteenth century.



itself, arch-icon of the Red (brick) City of the revolutionary era, built 1732 to 1756 and visible from a distance thanks only to its awkwardly proportioned steeple, "widely out of scale on the garden side and in any distant view but falling into perspective from the street"³. Next to Independence Hall, Independence National Historic Park begins, with William Strickland's Second Bank of the United States of 1817-24 (one of the nation's first public buildings in the Greek Revival style) as well as, further to the east, the Philadelphia Exchange of 1834, again by Strickland.

Not every visitor realizes that the park is the result of a planning operation that dates back only a few decades⁴. In the 1930s, Roy F. Larsen had proposed to create an open space around Independence Hall, "America's Most Historic Area", but the idea was carried out only in the 1950s and 60s, as a sequel, in part, of the "Better Philadelphia" exhibition of 1947, and clearly in an intent to rival the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, the City's "Champs Elysées", built during and after World War I as a bold diagonal cut into the 17th century grid. It was then, in the 1950s, that Independence National Historic Park became a display of carefully reconstructed historic buildings and gardens surrounded by open space and served by cobbled walkways, and that Society Hill, the portion of the inner city closest to the Delaware River, was redeveloped as an exemplary case of historic preservation at the service of urban gentrification. Edmund N. Bacon, the long time head of Philadelphia's Planning Commission, later described this operation as the "Rebirth of Philadelphia"⁵.

KAHN, PATRIOTISM AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The architecture of what once was called the "Philadelphia School", including George Howe, Louis Kahn, Romaldo Giurgola, as well as Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and others, is profoundly attached to this historic area and its ethos. Louis Kahn's work towards the redevelopment of blighted neighbourhoods, as well as his urbanistic proposals for Philadelphia, "grandiose and cataclysmic, like Le Corbusier's schemes"⁶, are all in a complicated way related to Philadelphia's mythic "rebirth" after World War II. Starting with a first tabula rasa-plan of 1941, then culminating in a series of grand projects of around 1956-1957 (and then again in 1962), Kahn's heroic visions focussed on, among other things, disentangling circulation by car and on foot. Between 1946 and 1954 he had himself been a consulting architect to the City Planning Commission. Kahn's projects, of course, all remained on paper⁷. The best known among them was published in *Perspecta* in 1957. It proposed a chain of

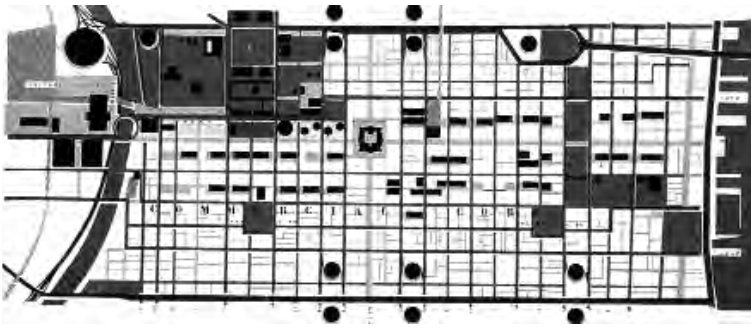
3. SCULLY, Vincent, *American Architecture and Urbanism*, New York/Washington, Praeger, 1996, p. 44. - At the time of its origin, the State House was among the largest buildings in the American colonies. Since, it has become a symbol of American independence.

4. Cf. BACON, Edmund N., *From Athens to Brasilia*, New York, The Viking Press, 1967, pp. 243-271; GREIF, Constance M., *Independence. The Creation of a National Park*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987, and BOYER, *The City of Collective Memory*, op. cit., pp. 392-396.

5. From Athens to Brasilia, op.cit., pp.243-271; see also id., "Urban Design of Today: Philadelphia", in *Progressive Architecture*, xxxvii, no.8, August (1956), pp. 108-109.

6. SCULLY, Vincent, *American Architecture and Urbanism*, op. cit., p. 224

7. Cf. SCULLY jr. Vincent, Louis I. Kahn, New York, Braziller, 1962. On Kahn's work for Philadelphia see REED, Peter S., "Philadelphia Urban Design", in David Brownlee and David De Long (eds.), Louis I. Kahn. In the Realm of Architecture, New York (Rizzoli), 1991, pp. 304-311, as well as, more recently the comprehensive study by See WILLIAMS KSIAZEK, Sarah, "Critiques of Liberal Individualism: Louis Kahn's Civic Projects, 1947-57", in *Assemblage*, 31 (1997), pp. 57-79.



Louis I. Kahn, Philadelphia traffic study, 1952-1953.

giant cylindrical bodies, conceived as parking structures, encircling the city and capable both of organizing access to and departure from it⁸. In terms of scale, the towers resembled the Colosseum in Rome, but the overall image was more reminiscent of the medieval enceinte of Carcassonne, suggesting in such a way a somewhat ominous separation of the core, seen as a historic relic, from the rapidly decaying sectors to the north and south. What strikes most, from a contemporary viewpoint, is how much these projects, in their capitoline monumentality, respond to the particular ethos of the city that has come to think of itself not only as a national shrine, but also as the emblematic home of parliamentary democracy in an age of rampant anti-communism. Clearly, with Kahn, the issue of patriotism was inseparable from the idea of the public sphere, profoundly threatened, as he saw it, by the apocalypse of suburbanization and mass culture⁹.

This became even clearer when later, in 1962, Kahn took Piranesi's map of the Campo Marzio, put a sheet of paper over it and drew another, updated version of his earlier plan: no longer with towers, but with a heightened sense for the city's existing circulation pattern, and in particular with the system of freeways around the center redefined in terms of a viaduct. The elevation shows City Hall, which Kahn (like, incidentally Paul Cret) had at one time proposed to eliminate, emphasized again in its emblematic outline and height-defining function.

VENTURI, COMPLEXITY, THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, AND THE "SYSTEMS APPROACH"

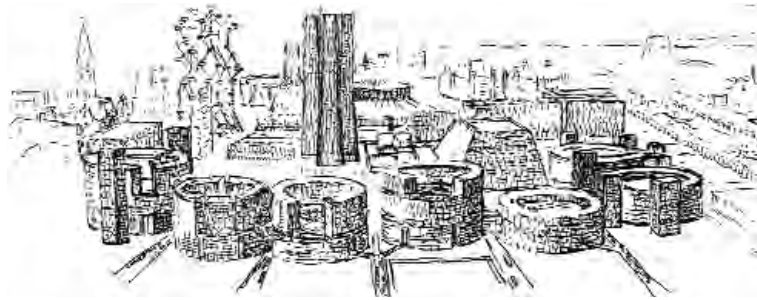
Venturi's view of Philadelphia, and certainly Denise Scott Brown's, appears to be linked in a contradictory way to Kahn's. While in his earlier schemes, Kahn defines the monumental in terms of archaic reminiscences and elemental technological space-grids, unshakeable in his belief that architecture is the medium by which the great societal ideas and ideals will have to be delivered to eternity, his late projects have come to interpret the real workings of the city at its lower levels of representation and on a small scale. Following this thread and others, Venturi and Scott Brown, the most verbal among the younger architects of the 1960s, came to tenaciously redefine the focus and the meaning of an architectural search of "identity".

In a pluralist society, the fragile realm of collective emotion cannot, they argued, continue to be defined in terms of idealist artistic abstractions. Nor in terms of subjective aesthetic equations between timelessly archaic pasts and

8. KAHN, Louis I., "Order and Form", in *Perspecta* 3, 1955, pp. 47-59. Cf. Venturi's evocative comments on this project: "If Kahn's urban planning acknowledged existing fabric - as opposed to that of Frank Lloyd Wright (...) - Kahn's intrusions within the urban fabric could be nevertheless heroic and utopian, as in monumental public parking garages resembling the turrets of medieval fortresses." Cf. "Thoughts about Evolving Teachers and Students", in Robert VENTURI, *Iconography and Electronics upon a Generic Architecture. A View from the Drafting Room*, Cambridge, MA (MIT Press), 1996, p.86; cf. also p. 89.

9. See WILLIAMS KSIAZEK, Sarah, "Architectural Culture in the Fifties: Louis Kahn and the National Assembly Complex in Dhaka", in *JSAH* (LII/4), 1993, pp. 416-435.

Louis I. Kahn. Philadelphia Center Study (1956). With existing City Hall (left), proposed new City Hall Building, as well as Independence Mall (to the right).



heroic monumentalizations of democracy. Rather, it has to be anchored in the existing sign languages that serve elementary social needs and organize a sense of belonging in terms of established cultural and (how could it be otherwise) commercial rites. And since aesthetic subjectivity is the inevitable premise of any art today, they think it needs to be softened and made plural through irony and deliberate semantic ambivalence.

Venturi had worked at Kahn's office for nine months in 1956-57¹⁰, - i.e. at the time of Kahn's proposals for the Civic Center. Kahn's increasing frustration with Philadelphia and its unwillingness to have any of his projects built must be the background of a note sent to him by Venturi, including a quotation from a book by Albert J. Nock about patriotism: "Burke touches this matter of patriotism with a searching phrase. 'For us to love our country,' (Burke) said, 'our country must be lovely'... Economism can build a society which is rich, prosperous, powerful, even one which has a reasonably wide diffusion of material well being. It cannot build one which is lovely..."¹¹

Venturi's Guild House, a home for the elderly sponsored by a Quaker community, can perhaps be seen as an artfully awkward demonstration of that striving toward the lovely. The Guild House shares with Kahn a commitment to the Red City of the fathers. And it is also an anticipated comment on Kahn's obsession with the square box with a circular hole in it. But more importantly, the part of modernity that Kahn viscerally rejected is here embraced. With the "commercial" sign above the entrance and with the antenna above the main façade, "mass culture" is addressed as the prime semantic referent of social identity and architectural meaning today. Charged with visual references to the city—this city—and to the brick housing project and some older houses that were already there, Guild House is also deeply about the "Old Philadelphia", long gone¹². And to that extent Guild House can also be seen as an act of symbolic resistance against policies of urban beautification that manure Independence Hall while wrecking the entire neighbourhood around it.

Unlike Kahn's, the Venturis' way of celebrating the Philadelphian heritage involves Pop: Thanks to the lesson of Pop Art, the nostalgia involved in the design of Guild House is not so much of the "Pride of Place" kind - i.e. focusing on the classical and the pretty; instead, it also involves the "ugly". Cooked up during the great years of the Civil Rights Movement, the extravagant aesthetic complexities that characterize Guild House—it's enough to refer to the symbolic television antenna that originally crowned the façade—have often been seen as excessively "camp". Yet beyond that, they also interpret a political project. They relate to the Civil Rights movement. After Lyndon B. Johnson's

10. Denise Scott Brown, in turn, arrived at Penn in 1958, coming straight from London. She had been advised by A. and P. Smithson, that Penn was the place to study planning; at the same time, she also hoped to study with Kahn. Cf. Denise SCOTT BROWN, "Between Three Stools. A Personal View of Urban Design Pedagogy", in id., *Urban Concepts*, London (Academy Editions), 1990, pp. 9-20.

11. NOCK, Albert J., *Memoirs of a Superfluous Man*, New York, 1943; quotation from an undated letter by Venturi to Kahn referred to by WILLIAMS KSIAZEK, "Architectural Culture in the Fifties(...)", op.cit., p. 424.

12. Not by coincidence, one of the corridors of the Guild House is decorated by a ceramic mural that celebrates the city through its architectural landmarks, including, predictably, Independence Hall. - While my earlier discussion of the Guild House (in Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown. *Buildings and Projects*, Fribourg/New York (Office du Livre/Rizzoli), 1987, pp. 22-31) has emphasized the connections with Kahn, it's significance in terms of urban design still awaits an in depth analysis. On VSBA's strategy of urban design and its sources see S. von MOOS, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown, op. cit., pp. 77-85.

victory over Barry Goldwater, in 1964, and inspired by John F. Kennedy's New Frontier, coping with urban poverty and slums had quickly moved to the top of the political agenda. With Johnson's 'Great Society', dealing imaginatively with the socio-economic complexities of urban life became the new public rhetoric. The architecture of the Guild House as well as the Venturi's subsequent interest in advocacy planning as a means of dealing responsively with issues of urban renewal must be seen against the background of such new political imperatives. Venturi's very concept of "complexity" (*Complexity and Contradiction*, 1966), although distilled from aesthetic and literary theories, appears to relate to the "systems approach" then increasingly en vogue in the American bureaucracy:

Everywhere, except in architecture, complexity and contradiction have been ecknowledged, from Gödel's proof of ultimate inconsistency in mathematics to T.S.Eliot's analysis of 'difficult' poetry and Joseph Albers' definition of the paradoxical quality of painting¹³.

TOWARDS THE ELECTRONIC EIFFEL TOWER

In the late 1960s, the Venturi's approach in more than one instance coincided with the activism of neighbourhood groups that opposed freeways in the name of urban preservation. Later, their practice evolved more in the direction of a critical preservationism that involved the dialectics of modernity and history while also acknowledging the fact that what cities now want is tourism. The most important among VSBA's preservation projects involved also new building - Franklin Court. The site is part of the Historic Park that extends from Independence Hall to the Delaware River.

It is no coincidence that this project was commissioned by the National Park Service at about the time when the idea to celebrate the Bicentennial with a World's Fair was definitively abandoned¹⁴. Franklin Court, ultimately, brings the Fair to the City: it plays with the evocative mystery of the ephemeral architectural "sign" and sets it off against a context of urban permanence. What distinguishes Franklin Court from the other "shrines" in the nearby historic precinct is that it combines preservation and reconstruction with the magic of a fair-like installation, re-casting baroque scenography in terms of surrealism. It needs to be recalled that the Philadelphia tradition of celebrating itself in fairs and exhibitions began long before World War II. The 1876 World's Fair marked the peak of Philadelphia's industrial power; it not only brought hundreds of thousands of visitors to the city, but it had also a major impact upon its architectural culture.

In 1964, when Venturi handed in his Fairmount Park Fountain project, a bold attempt to re-interpret the City Beautiful in terms of the moving automobile, Philadelphia was already knee-deep in preparation for the World's Fair of 1976¹⁵. Various sites had been envisioned. Kahn had played an important role in the process, and the series of proposals by him, dating mainly from 1971-1972, were among his last projects altogether¹⁶.

Like Kahn, and many other architects, the Venturis had made proposals for the 1976 Philadelphia Bicentennial Exposition which were at first no more successful. Yet predictably, and unlike Kahn, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown



Robert Venturi in association with Cope and Lippincot, Guild House, Philadelphia, 190-1963; view from Spring garden Street.



Venturi and Rauch, Franklin Court, Philadelphia, 1972-1976.

13. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, op.cit., p. 16. - That there is a correspondence between Venturi's notion of "complexity" and the "systems approach" has been pointed out to me by Prof. Thomas P.HUGHES.

14. von MOOS, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown, op.cit., pp. 104-109.

15. On the Fairmount Park Fountain project cf. VENTURI, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, op. cit., pp. 122-123; STERN, Robert, *New Directions in American Architecture*, New York (Braziller), 1969, pp. 51ff.; von MOOS, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown. *Buildings and Projects*, op. cit., pp. 86f.

16. KAHN, Louis, "I Love Beginnings", in Louis I Kahn (commemorative issue of a+u), Tokyo, n.d.(1975), pp. 278-286; on "The Forum of Availabilities", see GIURGOLA, Louis I.Kahn, op.cit., p. 241 and BROWNLEE, De LONG (eds.), *Louis I Kahn. In the Realm of Architecture*, op. cit., pp. 112-125 and passim. Later, once the International Exhibition idea and the selected site to the south of the city had been abandoned in favour of a more local event - owing to the lack of Federal funds - Kahn made a proposal of a large, T-shaped hall to be built at Independence Mall. None of these projects had come through by 1974. On the latter project see Marc Philippe Vincent, in Louis I Kahn: *In the Realm of Architecture*, op. cit., pp. 414-417. Even the Mikveh Israel Synagogue which according to one of Bacon's concepts was to conclude the perspective of Independence Mall, finally remained unbuilt (cf. Giurgola, Louis I. Kahn, op.cit., pp. 44-47).



Venturi and Rauch. Fairmont Park Fountain Project (1964). Photomontage showing the proposed fountain at the foot of City Hall, with Penn Center Office towers right and left.



Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Welcom Park, Philadelphia.

always visualized the event as a fair; the great "thing", in their eyes, that deserved to be celebrated was "people-to-people communications". Since theirs, in short, was a vision of modernity inspired more by the views of Marshall McLuhan than by "modern architecture", their official project involved colossal signs and electronic message boards for information and entertainment.

We use large and small spaces, large entrance ways, water areas, occasional piazzas, and especially important signs (that) function both emblematically as an identity image and traditionally as the symbolic value of an existing technology, our Crystal Palace or Eiffel Tower.

And furthermore:

In McLuhan terms, the messages on the signs will provide interest and will take on importance as the message-media will, we believe, become a main forum for people-to-people communications¹⁷.

While being a deliberate tribute to Las Vegas, the project, perhaps unintentionally harked back to earlier, constructivist fascinations with the light spectacles of Berlin, Paris or New York. Its underlying theme, "Electronics and Iconography" as part of the urban environment, has been revived with vigor in the firm's more recent projects for public buildings, where monumentality meets with the ephemeral drama of the electronic sign. Rather than locating the American ethos in some realm of Jeffersonian political metaphysics, or in an idealist belief in the public realm as the locus of communal regeneration, these architects bluntly addressed it in terms of America's claim of industrial leadership: The United States as the home no longer (as in the World's Fair of 1876) of steam engines and advanced electrical power equipment, but of electronic communication¹⁸. In the end, the World's Fair project was not further pursued.

BETWEEN THE DISNEY SYNDROME AND QUAKER PRAGMATISM

In the meantime, the references to "Old Philadelphia" have vacillate between ironic variations on baroque scenography on the one hand and explicit evocations of Holme's pragmatic 17th century city plan on the other.

In fact, when it comes to Philadelphia's "egalitarian" grid plan, irony for the Venturis is out of place - or almost. Venturi is rhapsodic as he writes about the "egalitarian" American gridiron plan that he sees exemplified by Philadelphia's layout:

One glory of our city as an urban whole is its gridiron plan (...). The city designed by William Penn represents the prototypical American city where urban quality and architectural hierarchy derive not from the special location of, but from the inherent nature of, individual buildings - as they sit in the grid and on the streets¹⁹.

And he continues:

The American gridiron city accommodates both unity and diversity by juxtaposing diverse architecture on a unified plan (...). Theoretically our mayor's house could sit across the street from a

17. von MOOS, Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown. Buildings and Projects, op. cit., p. 303.

18. The model of this approach was the Pavilion of the Czechoslovak Republic at the Montreal World's Fair of 1967: "an architectural and structural nonentity, but tattooed with symbols and moving pictures. (...) The show, not the building drew the crowd. The Czech pavilion was almost a decorated shed." Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, ed. 1977, p. 151.

19. VENTURI, Robert and SCOTT BROWN, Denise, "The Hall and the Avenue. Thoughts concerning the Architectural and Urban Design of the Philadelphia Orchestra Hall (etc.)", unpublished ms., 1993; revised 1995.

It is interesting, in this context, that Venturi explicitly associates Kahn to this American tradition of the gridiron plan - in his "Protest concerning the Extension of the Salk Center", reprinted in Iconography and Electronics, (op.cit.), pp. 81.

deli. Our buildings derive their hierarchical standing not from their ordained position but from their inherent character: our urbanism is egalitarian as well as diverse.

In Welcome Park, a vestibule of sorts for those entering National Historic Park from the nearby parking garage, Venturi built a moving tribute to the "city of brothers": in the shape of a garden, orchestrated as a historic theme park. Its paving depicts Penn's original plan; a miniature bronze replica of Slate Roof House, one of Penn's temporary homes in the city, is mounted on a pedestal, at eye level, and in the middle, on a cylindrical base, there stands Penn again, in bronze.