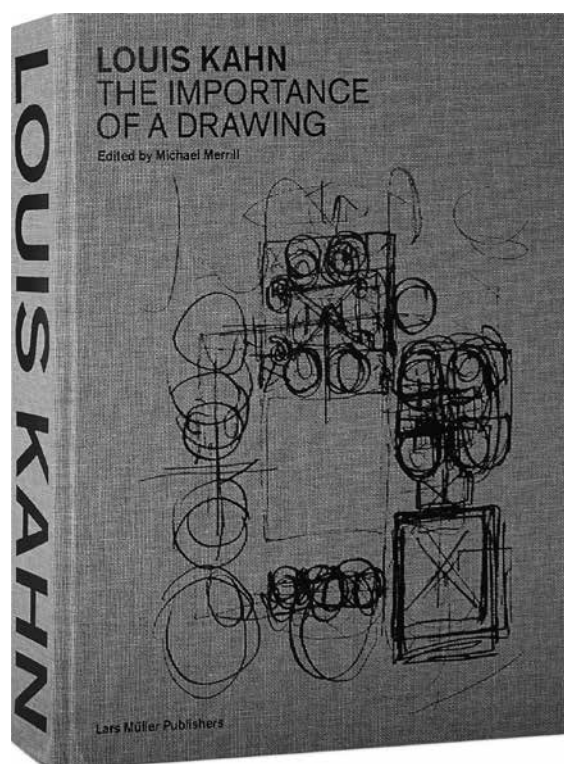


‘... drawing embedded in a culture of considered representation ...’

‘... the exacting working out of “parts to whole” in details, compositional [...] studies, and construction drawings ...’

## Stephen Kite on Louis I. Kahn’s tangled, deliberating, and fraught design procedures inviting numerous paths of self-exploration and quiet contemplation



**Louis Kahn**  
**The Importance of a Drawing**  
Edited by Michael Merrill  
Zurich, Lars Müller, 2021  
512 pp.  
Price 90 Euro (hb)

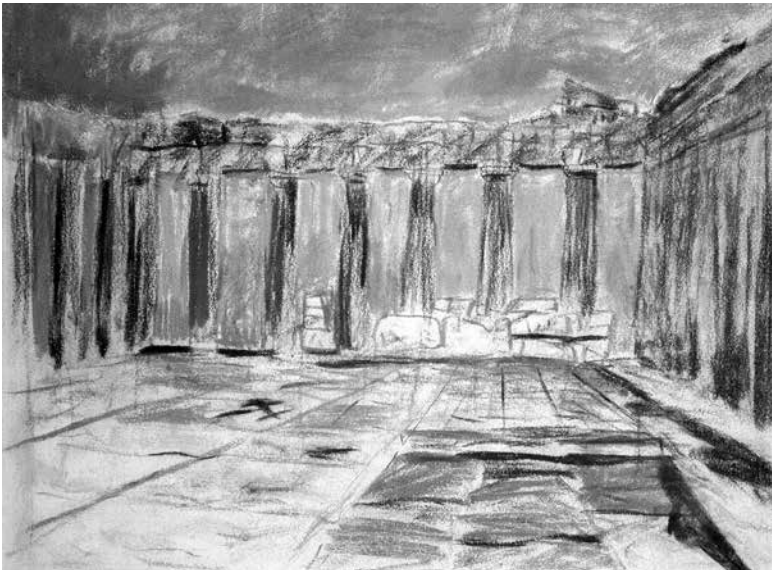
*Reviewed by Stephen Kite*

The Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania – which holds the bulk of the several thousand surviving drawings by Louis Kahn and his associates – fittingly occupies the lower levels of Frank Furness’s muscularly magnificent Fisher Fine Arts Library. For Kahn’s former studio lies high above, and Furness’s expressively functional language – and

sense of the monumental – was one inspiration for the later Philadelphia School, centred around Kahn. The drawings are brought in large folders to researchers at the generous tables. At times the marks are tentative and vine charcoal barely adheres to the diaphanous sheets of yellow trace, or it can be deeply worked, fixed and worked again, so that the superimposed ideas become as opaquely transparent as a Rothko. Precious sheets now, but of course they were once working documents, reflecting Kahn’s intense belief – as in his 1967 guidance to his masterclass in the studio loft – that ‘the importance of a drawing is immense, because it is the architect’s language.’ These words make the epigraph to this superlative book, and form the core of its title.

There is also Kahn’s other celebrated injunction that, as architects, we should ‘train ourselves to draw as we build, from the bottom up, when we do, stopping our pencil to make a mark at the joints of pouring or erecting.’ One project, whose drawings show this process well, is the less-regarded Tribune Review Building (1958–62). It is the subject of one of the many chapters – some twenty-two in number – written by the editor Michael Merrill himself: ‘Drawing Between Part and Whole: The Tribune Review Building’, and it is the last essay in Part V on ‘Drawing Connections’. As Merrill explains, one of the appeals to the researcher of this project is that – because the plan was quite quickly resolved – the five archive portfolios of this project show Kahn working in the vertical dimension to meticulously work out each ‘mark at the joint’ of material change, invariably a shadow-gap. The typically generous page-spreads, in colour or black-and-white, demonstrate the exacting working out of ‘parts to whole’ in details, compositional elevation studies, and construction drawings. Here, as at a number of points throughout the book, Merrill and his fellow authors stress the importance of the *Beaux-Arts* methodology to Kahn, and the idea of architecture as an art of *composition* not *design* – imagining architects as composers of discrete elements.

From his two earlier books on Kahn’s unbuilt *Dominican Motherhouse* project – *On the Thoughtful Making of Spaces* and *Drawing to Find Out* – Merrill is already well known as a penetrating reader of Kahn’s drawings, and an *habitué* of his archives. This is a book with a presence equal to the monumentality that Kahn rediscovered for Modernism. At over 500 pages, 4.5 cm thick, and weighing 3 kg, it is the most generous corpus of the drawings available. The oblong *Louis I Kahn: Complete Work 1935–1974* (Heinz Ronner and Sharad Jhaveri, 1987) included a wide-ranging selection, but was only in black-and-white, and if found



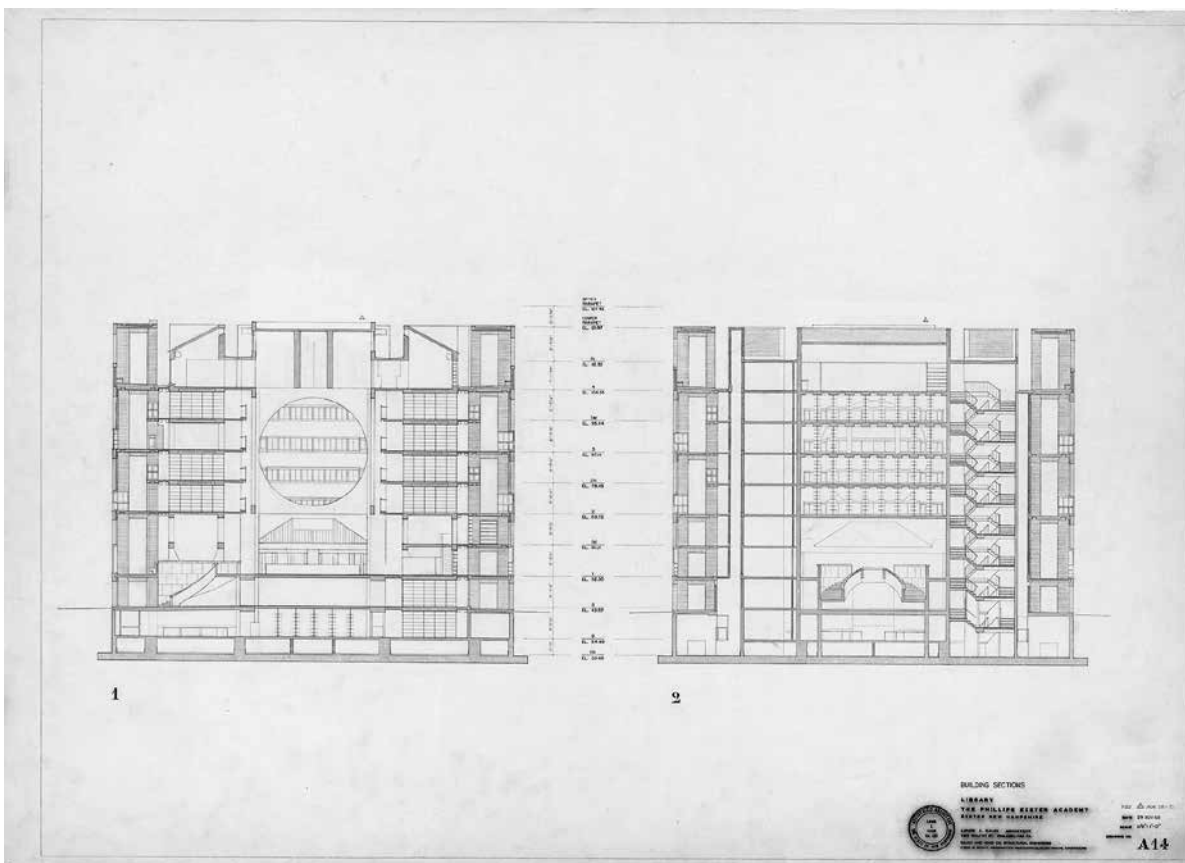
1 Interior of the Parthenon, Athens, Louis Kahn (1951). From the collection of Sue Ann Kahn.

nowadays is very expensive. The question then arises as to how, and within what narrative, to gather the work together: by project?; and/or by chronology?; by building-type?; or by theme? Merrill, with his co-authors, has opted for the last thematic approach, organising the material into eight sections: First, Kahn's use of drawings as a way of seeing, here some of his dramatic pastels of the temples of Greece and Egypt are illustrated [1]; then

two sections on drawings as investigative tools, the 'orthographic drawing set' of the plan and the section, followed by perspective and axonometric drawings. A section on 'Drawing Together' explores Kahn's culture of collaboration; next his composition is examined through his drawings; there is then a section on special themes in drawing, a playbook for his son, the water fountain at the Kimbell Art Museum, his 'Drawing (on) Walls' or

murals, and so on; then a section on 'Redrawing', and finally the lessons his drawings hold for future practice and teaching.

As Merrill himself admits, one drawback of this thematic approach is that drawings of a single project can become split across themes, placing for example the floor plans of the Exeter Library in the 'Composition' section, and its vertical sections, elevations, and perspectives in the relevant parts on the drawing as an investigative tool [2]. An advantage is that the appearance and reappearance of drawn aspects of the same project – under the various interpretative lenses of the themes – creates an assonance within and between projects, and across the spectrum of Kahn's *oeuvre*. Accordingly, the book invites a ruminative approach. It can be read sequentially or entered into at many points, while its generous format and quality of reproduction allows the sheer quality of many of the drawings to speak for themselves, to be for a time autonomous objects of contemplation. This magisterial volume might also inspire – not so much nostalgia – but a *rappel* to the best, and still valid, aspects of that analogue order whereby drawing was embedded in a culture of considered *representation* as compared to the swiftly tempting *simulations* proffered by the digital world.



2 Construction sections for the Library of Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, New Hampshire (November 1968). From the Louis I. Kahn Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.



3 Louis Kahn in his office, photographed by George Pohl (October 1960). From the George Pohl Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.

For the same reason, since the book is dedicated to *The Importance of a Drawing*, there are very few *project* photographs, so readers may wish to have another monograph to hand for some of those – such as Brownlee and De Long’s *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (1991). There is also little on the models, an important part of the archive, and Kahn’s creative process – Merrill promises a further book on those which, given the quality of this one, we can eagerly anticipate. One important exception to the few-photographs-rule is a revealing sequence of thirty-four in the ‘Drawing Together’ section showing the collaborative *milieu* of Kahn’s office [3]. These were taken serendipitously by photographers George Alikakos and his partner George Pohl over two days while in the office on other assignments. As William Whitaker explains in his piece on ‘The Arsenal of the Tools’, they candidly capture the everyday life of an office where Kahn is immersed in a collective creative endeavour, standing or seated at the boards with his staff, focused on the all-important drawings.

Mention of William Whitaker attests to the authority of the contributors. Whitaker is the Curator and Collections Manager of the University of Pennsylvania’s Architectural Archives and the author – with George H. Markus – of a perceptive book on *The Houses of Louis Kahn* (2013), which uses much

archive material under the rubric of Kahn’s domestic work – yet another way of approaching the resources of the collection. Other co-authors include David Leatherbarrow on Kahn’s site sketches at the Salk Institute; Michael Benedikt on Kahn’s counting; and Nathaniel Kahn on ‘The Book of Crazy Boats’. This was an intimate memoir by Kahn’s son of father and son imagining together a series of fantastic boats, the pages taken and folded to make the little book, from one of the red notebooks Kahn often carried. As his son points out, Kahn never owned or needed a camera – because he could draw.

Returning, in conclusion, to Kahn’s Beaux-Arts training; if Kahn had simply been reprising Beaux-Arts stratagems in a kind of naked Modernist monumentality, that would fail to explain the resonance of his work. In ‘Kahn and Composition’ – analysing Kahn’s Phillips Exeter Academy Library, as compared to the design of his teacher Paul Philippe Cret’s Indianapolis Public Library (1914–20) – David Van Zanten delves into Kahn’s compositional strategies, finding – as yellow trace piles on yellow trace – a procedure that is tangled, deliberating, and fraught, very different from the swift definition of the *parti, en loge*, that lay at the core of Beaux-Arts training. For Zanten, at Exeter, Kahn offers much more than a lucid Indianapolis-like *parti* to please efficiency-minded bureaucrats,

but a wonderful narrative, that invites readers to ferret among the book stacks and squirrel their findings to the building’s edge, to the timber reading carrels wedged into the masonry of the built ruins of this square Colosseum. Within its thematic *parti*, and the guidance of its knowledgeable *cicerones*, the structure of this handsomely monumental volume invites numerous paths of self-exploration, and quiet contemplation.

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