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**Three Greek Lessons on
Louis I. Kahn's Late Work**

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Abstract

Louis I. Kahn's Architecture changed radically in the 1950s. Such was the transformation that it is difficult to find his unmistakable mark in works so different like the *miesian* Parasol House (1944) or the *palladian* Fleisher House (1959). All these differences have been widely recognized by architectural critics and some of them even venture to place that process of changing while he was at the American Academy in Rome between 1950 and 1951. They are absolutely right in the terms of time and place. But the real question arises when they have to establish the reasons for such a radical change in a short stay in Rome. The answer, however, is more difficult.

The three months that Kahn spent in Rome were really intense. His position was a Resident Architect (RAAR). Contrary to what anyone might think he was more a kind of a college friend than a Professor. His job encouraged him to travel and allowed him to do it often. Some of those trips were nearby but he also made a far journey that got him to Egypt and Greece. This Mediterranean journey is well-known by everyone because of its great drawings. Even some architectural critics point a possible influence of this travel on his late work. But no one has dwelt upon it so far.

In this paper, as a part of my Ph.D. about the influence of this European travel on his work, I will try to find out the traces of Greece in Louis I. Kahn's late work.

Keywords: Louis I. Kahn, Contemporary Architecture, Greek Architecture, Reinterpretation

Why Greece?

Fortunately, after many failed attempts, Louis I. Kahn arrived at the American Academy in Rome (AAR) on December, 1st 1950¹. He worked there as an Architect in Residence; as far as I am concerned his duties were “to act as advisor” and “to accompany” the Fellows in Architecture “on occasional trips”². They made together several trips to nearby cities.

Figure 1. *Louis Kahn Travels through Greece*



During December, Kahn and the Fellows travelled to Ostia, Tivoli, Tarquinia and Naples. But they also made many tours around the Ancient Roman Architecture, especially the Architecture of the Roman Empire, guided by the famous American archaeologist Frank Brown. Nevertheless the most important trip for Kahn was made at the beginning of 1951 with other five Fellows³.

Their first stop was Egypt where they arrived on January 6th, 1951. In this country, as it can be imagine, the group visited the most important places of its

¹To study more about the previous relationship between the AAR and Louis Kahn, see: GARCIA RUBIO, Rubén, 2014. *Densidad Aparente. Las lecciones de Roma en Louis I. Kahn*. Doctoral Thesis, University of Valladolid and University degli Studi Rome Tre.

²Letter from Laurence P. Roberts to Louis I. Kahn, February 17th, 1950. American Academy in Rome 1947 to 1961, LIK 030.II.A.61.1, Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Hitorial Museum Commission, hereafter cited as “LIK Collection, AAUP”.

³They were the architects Spero Daltas, Joseph Amisano and William Sippel (Paris Prize) and the landscaper George Patton. We have to add Amisano’s wife, Dorothy, to this group.

ancient civilization (Upper and Lower Egypt) and twelve days later they took a plane to the place long desired by Kahn: “after all these years of dreaming about seeing Greece I am finally in the [?] of it”¹.

The Lessons of Greece

In early January, the Director of the AAR, Laurance P. Roberts, sent a letter to his homonym at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens (ASCSA). This letter said that a few of his Fellows were going to visit Athens so they needed a place to stay. Eugene Vanderpool, Professor of Archaeology on behalf of the absent director John Caskey, answered affirmatively to this request². This exchange of favors between the two American institutions in Europe was quite common due to a "tacit agreement" they both had. Thus Kahn and the other Fellows could rest in the facilities of the ASCSA so it became their “headquarters” until January 30th³

Figure 2. *Loring Hall, ASCSA*



¹Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to Anne Tyng, January 21st, 1951. 074.II.A.81, LIK Collection, AAUP.

²Mail from the ACSA to the author, May 22nd, 2012.

³I would like to thank the ASCSA, and especially Natalia Vogeikoff-Brogan, for all their help to find the Greek traces of Louis Kahn.

Once installed at the Loring Hall, the American travelers could spend all their time visiting the Greek treasures. Unfortunately there are no evidences of their stay in the ASCSA neither what they saw in Athens nor when they saw it. However, there are three postcards that apparently Louis Kahn wrote and sent the same day, January 21st. He wrote down in all of them that they have visited several places outside Athens so they must visited them on these first days in Greece.

The Light

One more time there are no many traces of this first journey, just three postcards, seven drawings and six photos. But a close look at these traces can allow us to rebuild an approximate trip. It is possible that they could set off on a journey from Athens to Corinth. There the group could spend all the morning visiting the ancient city as the shadows of the drawings and the photographs show. Then they might have visited the Theatre of Epidaurus later on they could have stopped in Nafplio to spend the night². The second day could start with a tour in this small city and then they might have gone to see the ruins of Mycenae late in the morning. And finally, Kahn and the Fellows should have returned to Athens with a last stop in Corinth where Patton took a photo of the sunset³.

We can be sure on these places and of the time due to the tracks but the order is entirely hypothetical⁴. In the same way, we can not be sure if they visited other places but we know for sure that Kahn did not visit Olympia or any island. The reason is because he wanted “to visit each place well instead of getting snatches” and especially because he felt that he had “not seen enough of the Acropolis yet”

Regardless of the places or the order, we know for certain that they spent at least one morning in the Ancient Corinth. Among all the ruins, Kahn was impressed by the Temple of Apollo because he made five drawings of it (we have to remember that he made only seven drawings on this Peloponnese tour)⁵. And besides, all these drawings are focused on the mass-void relation that

¹Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to Anne Tyng, January 21st? 1951, 074.II.A.81, LIK Collection, AAUP. Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to his “office and Friends”, January, 1951, LIK 030.II.A.60.37, LIK Collection, AAUP. And Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to Esther Kahn, January, 1951, property of Sue Ann Kahn and showed at the “*Louis I. Kahn. The Power of Architecture*” Exhibition.

²There is a photo in George Patton Archive named as Nafaulis [Nafplio]. Greece 033.III.C.1, George E. Patton Collection, University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Hitorial Museum Commission, hereafter cited as “George E. Patton Collection, AAUP”.

³Greece 033.III.C.1, George E. Patton Collection, AAUP.

⁴For instance, Laurance P. Roberts with his wife and some friends made the same tour three months later. But they made it in his friend’s car. Isabel P. Roberts, April 6th and 7th, 1951, Series III: Correspondence, Subseries 2: Family, Laurence P. and Isabel Roberts Papers, 1910-2005, Biblioteca Berenson, Villa I Tatti – The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies.

⁵The most Kahn’s drawings are collected in Jan Hochstim, *The Paintings and Sketches of Louis I. Kahn*, Ed. Rizzoli (New York, 1991). So this paper will identify Kahn’s drawings by JH

show the seven columns and the architrave corner which still stand. An idea that is well illustrated in the drawing made back to the light (JH381 but also JH384)¹. This drawing abstracts the main elements of the Temple in just a plan where the unbuilt spaces (intercolumniation) let pass the light through them. It is as if several holes had been opened in a wall in order that the light crosses freely or, like Kahn used to say; “the great event in architecture when the walls parted and columns became”².

Figure 3. “*Temple of Apollo no. 2*”, JH 381



However the most interesting thing on these drawings (and others like JH373-380-381-382-383³) is that they show clearly a rhythm between something that let see through it and something that do not let see through it. Or, that let pass the light through it and something that do not let pass the light. This idea is underlined by the fact that they all show a monochromatic

added the number in Hochstim' book. “Temple of Apollo no.1 y no. 2”, JH 381; “Temple of Apollo no.3”, JH382; “Temple of Apollo no.4”, JH 383; and Temple of Apollo no.5, JH384.

¹Patton took a photo with a similar point of view where we can see to Louis Kahn near the Temple. Greece 033.III.C.1, George E. Patton Collection, AAUP

²The first time Louis Kahn wrote these words was in: Kahn, L.I. 1957. *Architecture is the thoughtful making of spaces*. Perspecta 4: The Yale Architectural Journal (New Haven, 1957), 56

³“Interior Parthenon, Acropolis”, JH380 Y PAFA 63; and “Propylea, Acropolis”, JH 373.

background whose only duty is to serve as an opposition to the foreground (to the built) instead of trying to connect it with the environment¹.

Structure is the maker of light [...] One in class [...] in explaining that structure is the maker of light I introduced the idea of the beauty of the greek columns in relation to each other and I said the column was no light- the space was light.²

And finally this Greek idea about how “the structure let pass the light through it” became one of the most important concepts in Louis Kahn’s late work. We can identify it in the gap between the wall and the roof in the Trenton Bath House (1954-59), in the lateral holes of the First Unitarian Church (1959-69) in the skylights of the Kimbell Museum (1966-72) or in the Yale Center for British Art (1969-74).

The Mass

Unlike the Peloponnese trip, the stay of Kahn and the Fellows in Athens and its surroundings is unknown. We can state that they were touring the city center because of some photographs taken by Patton³. Those photos show that the group went to visit the “Changing of the Guard” in Syntagma Square and the ruins of the Temple of Olympian Zeus and also the Temple of Apollo Patroos in the Ancient Agora. Although Kahn made only two drawings in these visits, both of them were drawn in the Temple of Olympian Zeus, and their main subject was the Acropolis of the city.

Without a doubt, the “incomparable Acropolis”⁴ of Athens was the place that attracted Louis Kahn's attention more. A proof of this attraction is fact that he made twelve drawings about it. Contrary to what might be thought he was not interested in the proportion, composition or details of the different buildings. None of the five drawings that were made inside the Acropolis were focused on the Parthenon, the Erektion or any of the other jewels of the sacred hill. Furthermore, two of them (JH380 y 383) continued with the relation mass-void that he had already observed in Ancient Corinth. For Louis Kahn the powerful mass of its platform was the most important form.

Over again his drawings speak for themselves. From the two drawings made in the Temple of Zeus that show the contrast between tectonic-stereotomic (as Kenneth Frampton has defined)⁵; to the powerful (even aggressive) accumulation of forms near the Acropolis⁶; or the drawing made

¹Only one drawing of them (JH384) tries to connect the Temple of Apollo with the environment. This also happens with the drawing made in Mycenae: “Lyon Gate”, JH 369

²Kahn, L. I. 1967. *Statements on Architecture from a talk gives at the Politenico di Milano in January 1967*. Zodiac 17 (Rome, 1967), 57

³Greece 033.III.C.1, George E. Patton Collection, AAUP

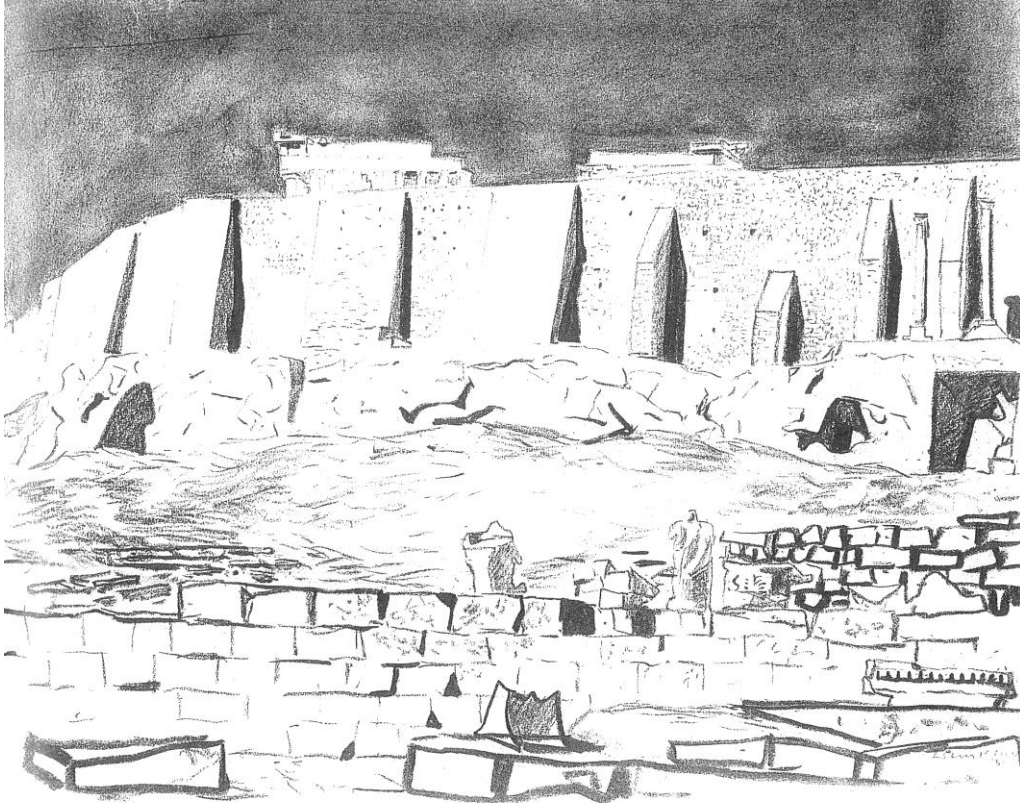
⁴Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to his “office and Friends”, January, 1951, LIK 030.II.A.60.37, LIK Collection, AAUP

⁵“Acropolis from the Olympieion”, JH37; and “Acropolis from southeast”, JH376

⁶“Acropolis, approach from the west, no.1”, JH371; “Acropolis, approach from the west”, JH372; “Acropolis”, JH374; “Mycenae-Acropolis”, JH369

from the Theater of Dionysus¹. All of these drawings have as main subject the telluric form of the platform on which is based the sacred “upper city”.

Figure 4. “Acropolis from Theater Dionysos”, JH378



These forms will have a translation in many buildings of Kahn’s work. For instance in the vertical rhythms created by the shadows in the first sketches of the Trenton Bath House (1954-59) but also in the façade of the First Unitarian Church (1959-69) or the Richards Medial Research Building (1957-60) and the Morris House (1958). As well as we can also find the powerful Greek platform on the ground where the Synagogy Hurva (1967-74) and Mikveh Israel (1961-72) arise or the well-known square at the Salk Institute of Biological Studies (1959-65).

The Place

After a few days in Athens, the group made their last trip, to the mythological area formed by the Delphi Sanctuary and its environment. This initiative was entirely driven by Kahn.

Louis was all cranked up to go on to Delphi and Parnassus, sites of the human struggle where democracy and tyranny once stared each other down. So we took off, via Corinth, by bus.

¹“Acropolis from Theater Dionysos”, JH378.

Louis' outwardly robust appearance belied a fragile body that on that trip, nearly came apart because of the antics of a Kamikaze driver who took the turns through those war ravaged roads, missing oncoming vehicles over Bailey bridges by the thickness of this paint. As one S curve followed another, Louis vowed that when we got to Delphi, he would demand of the Oracle to see to it that the driver spend eternity riding his bus around Purgatory. By the time we got there, whatever stamina he started out with has gone and we damn near had to carry him to his room!

My wife offered Louis aspirin and her seal coat, because the hotel was without heat or hot water, but he gallantly refused, preferring to die in silence between the frozen dampness of bed sheets.¹

Amisano's words suggest that the group did not see anything on their way to Delphi. So we have to assume that all Kahn's drawings were made in Delphi or during their return way. Nevertheless, the following day, after Patton took two photographs of the group², Kahn and the other Fellows went to the archeological site in Delphi.

The goats awakened us, their bleating and the bells echoing in the foothills of Parnassus. Louis was already in the terrace, sheltered from the wind; the sun was shining and he was reborn. After a tea and hard toast, we were off to see the sights. My wife and I headed for the temple, Deltas in another direction, and – as often happened- Louis wandered off on his own. We could see him in the distance with his thoughts, paper and Conte, musing the immediate scene. By mid-morning the un had warned us. Louis returned and picked a dramatic spot for lunch overlooking the valley. Throughout this part of the trip, these lunches were happy picnics, always winding up with us stretched out, letting the sun and the Retsina wine do their job.

The rest of the day was spent sketching and looking. By late afternoon, the sun disappeared and it was time to get back. After a brief rest, we were on the terrace ready for a dinner that consisted of half of an anemic chicken divided among the four of us (the other half was reserved for the next day). On the third day, Louis discovered two small children battling each other with a dried cod, and he brought us the possibility of having cod as an alternative, but the proprietor didn't consider dried cod a fair fare for Americans. Louis convinced him that he should make an exception in this case. It was prepared by the gods and Louis could not resist the Retsina in spite of his delicate stomach. It put him in a gay mood. He and the proprietor, with a good deal of toasting and hand shaking- a

¹AMISANO, J. 1986. Interview by Richard Saul Wurman. In *What will be has always been. The words of Louis I. Kahn*, R. S. Wurman, Ed. Access and Rizzoli, New York, 1986, 266.

²Greece 033.III.C.1, George E. Patton Collection, AAUP

bewildering scene since neither spoke the other's language. Daltas, the Greek emissary, was supposed to see us through these briers. Instead, Louis carried the day eyeball to eyeball expounding the theme of Greek stoicism, Greek women, Greek songs and even the disastrous wine.¹

The entire group should have loved the trip, especially Louis Kahn. Since, he made five drawings there besides all of them (just like his drawings of Deir-el-Bahari, Acropolis or Corinth²) were focused on the relationship between the man-made landscape (building) and the natural environment (context). This link became quickly very important for Kahn and he tried to think over it on his drawings. What is more, Kahn tried to explain this idea himself several years later taking one of these drawings as an example (JH364)³:

Figure 5. “The Oracle no.2”, JH364



It's really a line of a hill, which to me is the line of the ending, the ending line, which constituted a serious meaning. That line couldn't be any other line because nature makes whatever it does by the interplay of circumstances – by a succession of equilibriums- and that line is an

¹AMISANO, J. 1986, 266.

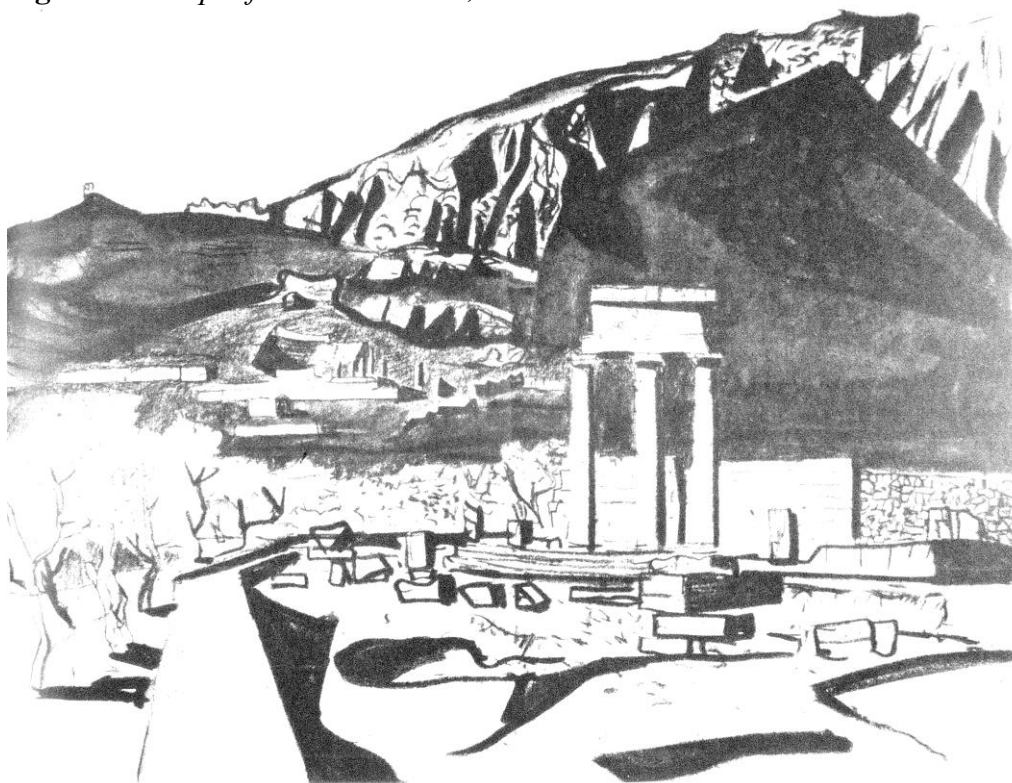
²“Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut”, JH404; “View from the Parthenon, Acropolis”, JH377; “Erechtheion and Parthenon, Acropolis”, JH379; and “Nike Temple and south wing of Propylaea Acropolis, Athens”, Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University. But also JH384

³Those drawings are usually known as “The Oracle” but they are part of the swimming pool of the ancient gymnasium. “The Oracle no.1”, JH363; “The Oracle no.2”, JH364; and “The Oracle no.3”, JH 365.

absolute end line of conscious being, an absolutely different form of the laws that govern nature. And it does it without a purpose, and that's why that line is absolutely the manifestation of evidence of being. So in drawing this line you draw your reverence for that which is also devised as the maker of all things. If you have something you wanted to do and call on nature, nature will make that particular line... So when I was drawing Delphi and the hills surrounding it, I couldn't draw them verbally, like any drawing. I could only draw them as though they were endings, a manifestation of natural ending. I was trying to make the whole picture to see the mountains and the line. It was a great privilege to draw this line.¹

Maybe these words are too rhetorical but they explain perfectly how the architect believed that he has understood the principles of how the nature operates and how insignificant is the human work in comparison with nature. In that sense, the man-made can only participate opposing its pure geometric forms (in this case the circle of the pool) against the irregular power of the Nature. This was also the main idea of his drawing "Sanctuary of Apollo" but especially it can be seen in the drawing "Delphi from Marmaria" with a powerful contrast².

Figure 6. "Delphi from Marmaria", JH368.



¹Kahn, L.I. cited in *The Paintings and Sketches of Louis I. Kahn*, J. Hochstim, Ed. Access and Rizzoli (New York, 1991), 27.

²"Sanctuary of Apollo", JH 367; "Delphi from Marmaria", JH368.

This relation between man-made and nature has its origin on Kahn's formative years while William Gray was his teacher. Kahn kept this theory in mind during his training years at the University of Pennsylvania and it would culminate when he attended the classes of Vincent Scully just a few months earlier¹. It needs to be remembered that he was one of the first historians who analyzed the seemingly casual relationship between the Greek Temples and their environment. So Scully showed that each architect must understand the natural environment before doing anything to achieve an ideal adaptation between construction and the context. In other words, or following Kahn's words, the architect must be conscious of the natural order before he can establish any relation with it.

This sensibility with the environment is evident in many of Kahn's late works such as the Memorials Levy Playground (1961-66) and Roosevelt (1973-74 y 2013), or in the Monasteries of Saint Andrew (1966-67) and Dominican Motherhouse (1965-68). But the best example that shows the perfect relation between human construction and Nature is in the *Salk Institute of Biological Studies* (1959-65) even if the whole complex was never built.

Last Days

The group might have been in Delphi three days before they returned directly to Athens. In the meantime Kahn made several drawings of the stunning and mythological landscape of this area². Then they might have spent some days more in the city because in those years "there was not a plane to Rome everyday"³. But finally the group could have taken a plane a few days later directly to Rome on January 30th.

Unfortunately, or luckily, this trip became the beginning of the end of Kahn's stage in the AAR. The reason is that Kahn discovered a letter from the Yale University in which he was hired to design the extension of its Art Gallery. So he immediately bought a ticket to return to the USA.

¹In those years Vincent Scully was starting his book about Greek Architecture. Scully, V. 1962. *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods: Greel Sacred Architecture*. Ed. Yale University (New Haven, 1962)

²Hochstim has situated several drawings in the Arakhova Mountains in his book but he is not able to place them accurately (JH355-56-58-59 y 60). We can only be sure about the drawing titled "Panorama" because Patton took a photo very similar in Delphi. "Panorama", JH 357

³Postcard from Louis I. Kahn to his "office and friends", January, 1951, LIK 030.II.A.60.37, LIK Collection, AAUP