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The social poetics of urban design: rethinking urban design through Louis Kahn's vision for Central Philadelphia (1939–1962)

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ABSTRACT
The architect Louis Kahn is known for the simple yet poetic composition of his words. Through some of the unique features of his unbuilt master plan for the urban centre in Central Philadelphia, this paper argues that we can understand the true quality of Kahn's design only when we look at his proposals through the lens of linguistics and semiotics. The appeal of Kahn's design lies in what semioticians and linguists would call 'poetic quality', or the production of inventive understandings of both the conventions and new inventions of the shared social milieu. It is precisely because the poetic function in language is humanistic, that Kahn's use of social poetics has brought the abstract ideas of urban planners down to earth in a way that everyone can appreciate.

The sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building. (Louis Kahn, cited in Hawkes 1996, 112)

Introduction
Known for the simple yet poetic composition of his words, the American architect Louis Kahn (1901–74) is not only one of America’s most celebrated modernists, but also arguably one of the most renowned architects of the modern era (Frampton 1980; Anderson 1995; Goldhagen 2001). Standing out from a series of plans he developed for Center City Philadelphia over more than two decades from the late 1930s to the early 1960s, his vision for the centre of the city (1939–62) set in motion what architectural designers and urban planners in the generations following his would call ‘urban design’. This was due to his architectural principle that encompasses not only meticulously detailed building designs, but also the urban system that brings them together to exist coherently with the sum of the built as well as natural environments. In fact, as the prominent Kahn scholar Peter Reed (1989) suggests, Kahn did not see any distinction between architecture and urban planning. To Kahn, these two disciplines shared similar forms and principles. This ‘trans-disciplinary approach’ to design is in essence the ambiguity that paved the way for the development of several new, including some very radical, ideas in urban studies.
The goal of this paper is to explore multiple aspects of Kahn’s master plan for Central Philadelphia (which Kahn himself preferred to call ‘midtown Philadelphia’; Kahn 1953) but was never built. Building on the previous work on Kahn’s urban design by this author (also published in this journal, see Arkaraprasertkul 2008), the evidence presented here will argue that urban design not only could but also should be understood through linguistic and semiotic approaches, especially those of linguist Roman Jakobson and social anthropologist Michael Herzfeld. The aim of this paper is to show how through both the lens of linguistics and anthropology – especially what Herzfeld (2005) calls ‘social poetics’ – it is possible to analyze and understand the true quality of Kahn’s design, which lies in the poetic qualities displayed in both his works and his words. Although this paper will begin with the notion of language, ultimately the goal of this paper is to take the analysis beyond language. The appeal of Kahn’s designs lies in the deformation of conventions, leading to the production of inventive understandings of both such conventions and the new inventions, and of the shared social milieu – what linguists would call, ‘poetic quality’. This covert and therefore unquantifiable poetic quality of design is precisely what the previous work by this author touched upon, especially in explaining why Kahn’s design was poorly received primarily by a handful of mainstream urban planners in the 1950s to 1960s (also see Kahn, Vitrarelli, and New Yorker Films 2005). The evidence presented in this paper will suggest that such failure was due to the fact that Kahn chose to operate in a ‘poetic’ idiom. The more ‘prosaic’ planners argued that his imaginative design, as a result of his poetic derivation, overshadowed too many other aspects of the design, such as its practicality and feasibility that were central to the planners’ concerns. Some of them also criticized Kahn for being ‘overly idealistic’ about the reality of a city. These planners emphatically dismissed Kahn’s ideas of an automobile-free environment, monumental square and forum for citizens, and elevated highways around the central city area containing multiple layers of public transportation, for being not only economically unfeasible but also socially naïve (see Ksiazek 1996; Garvin 2002; Arkaraprasertkul 2008; Knowles 2009; Kativa 2010) (see Figure 1).

Background: Kahn’s design for Central Philadelphia

Kahn, who was known for his ‘poetic language’, found he was not taken seriously by professional (and often number-crunching) planners who often talked in and designed by numbers (for examples of some of his most famous quotes, see Tyng 1984; Kahn and Ngo 1998; Goldhagen 2001; Kahn 2003). He was famous for asking the most simple, yet profound questions, such as:

At one time, I thought the idea of towers with big open spaces around them [referring to Le Corbusier’s radiant city idea] was a wonderful thing, until I realized, Where is the bakery shop? And the park was not good enough. (Brillembourg and Kahn 1992)

The bakery shop, to Kahn, symbolizes the sense of humanism in the monotonous landscape of a typical modernist city spearheaded by the modernist architect Le Corbusier (1887‒1965). However, according to Edmund Bacon (1910‒2005), the famous planner and the Executive Director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission from 1956 to 1962, the mention of the bakery shop undermines Kahn’s ability to see the ‘big picture’ of planning. Bacon’s critique was probably reasonable given that he himself was a different type of professional (see Cody 2001; Garvin 2002; Knowles 2009). In his famous illustrated book that became a classic in urban planning and design studies, Design of Cities (Bacon 1967), he focused primarily on displaying and commenting on macro-planning ideas from various cities, and the relationships between large-scale systemic elements such as built forms and nature, nature and human interaction, and so on. This critique brings to the surface points supporting both sides.

On the one hand, Kahn’s ideas showed that his plan for Philadelphia could have been environmentally sound within the framework of a much-needed gradual, rather than swift, process of revitalizing the city for the future had it been properly executed. This is particularly the case given how often discussions on the subject of urban decay as a result of the planning that allowed cars to dominate the city have been brought to the table in the past few decades. On the other hand, Kahn could be overly simplistic in his thinking about the city, especially when considering one of his most famous comments and diagrams illustrating his urban planning idea ‘the plan of the city is like a plan of a house’ (Figure 2). Surely most trained planners would immediately point out, if not first being totally offended and appalled by what they would have perceived as Kahn’s downright childish understanding of the city, that the nature of city design is much more complex.

It should be precisely this point where any keen readers of Kahn’s unbuilt master plan for Central Philadelphia see it from a different perspective, namely how his idea was communicated. As mentioned above, the background of this paper is the classic debate about the future of Philadelphia in the mid-twentieth century between Edmund Bacon and Louis Kahn. After having been rather successful in delivering acclaimed designs for a number of projects, mainly neighbourhood and medium-sized urban developments, in Philadelphia, Louis Kahn was asked to produce a master plan for the development of the entire central area of the city (extensively documented in Reed 1989). In the 1950s, he understood that the city had suffered from half a century of inactive planning. The historic city of Philadelphia dealt with community collapse, owing to the departure of industries and original occupants. The essay ‘Toward modernist urban design: Louis Kahn’s plan for Central Philadelphia’ (2008) provided a detailed study of the trajectory of Kahn’s ideas and practices, arguing that he was aware of both the problems of urban decay as well as his ambiguous position as an architect/
planner. This essay, however, only lightly touches upon the issue of communication by concluding that his design should not be read literally but read as a metaphor of a total urban system. In other words, a quick perusal of the documentation shows that Kahn ‘poeticized’ his urban vision by bringing the metaphor of romantic Venetian water transportation to provide a foundation for the re-organization of the entire traffic system of the city. In addition, he proposed large-scale structures whose forms bring to mind ancient monuments with blatant platonic forms, to make a statement about the need for a new civic centre. Unfortunately, both his metaphor and nostalgic proposition not only failed to gain traction, but were also dismissed by the planners who were, at that time, obsessed with developments in vertical building and construction technology, motor vehicles and expansive highway networks.

The notion of poetics

Scholars have written about the poetics ‘in and of’ architecture rather broadly, looking mainly at the coherence of the design in the context surrounding the architect’s ingenious use of natural lighting as well as the surrounding environment (e.g., Tzonis, Lefaivre, and van de klassicistiese architektuur Tzonis 1986; Antoniades 1990; Frampton and Cava 1995; Van Schaik and Lyssiotis 2002; Weingarden 2009). In other words, Kahn’s architecture is poetic in a
dictionary definition, which is the ‘imaginative and/or sensitively emotional style of expression.’ Most of us would probably agree that this was an impressionistic approach, akin to the fashion of what the French phenomenologists Bachelard and Jolas (1994) refer to as perception ‘through natural phenomena.’ This impressionistic approach, however, only reduces architecture to spatial aesthetics and, consequentially, pure subjectivity. For example, as quoted at the beginning of the paper, Kahn is quoted as saying, ‘the sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building.’ Through this statement, it is possible to begin to feel Kahn’s take on the importance of light as it allows us to perceive the materiality of a particular element of architecture, but how many of us could actually understand this? Two-dimensional photographs capturing the beauty of shadow cast on a wall of a famous building are often used as cover photos of books about the notion of poetics in and of architecture, but what do these photographs really tell us about the way in which we could analytically understand how these poetic forms are interpreted, let alone created? Does it mean that as long as there is light, the building is an example of good architecture? How much light is needed to make a space feel poetic? In fact, architecture has long been using jargon from other fields to enhance its own credibility. For example, well-known architectural concepts such as ‘urban morphology,’ ‘space syntax’ or ‘shape grammar’ owe their origin to the field of linguistics. Rather than dwelling on the second-hand (and sometimes misleading) usage of a meaningful term, it is better to resort to the original definition of poetic which could help us understand the social context of Kahn’s urban vision – the linguistic definition.

We will begin by unpacking the linguistic definition of poetics. This definition will serve as a conceptual springboard to analyze Kahn’s design incorporating both the semiotic analysis of inert signs and the action and acting in the world. In his classic study How To Do Things With Words (1975), the linguist J.L. Austin (1911–60) argues that a person communicates through uttering sounds, and the utterances that work – meaning those that are effective in communication – do not necessarily need to have what he also calls ‘truth-value’. In fact, it is the context in which the utterances are made, and the conscious performance associated with the words themselves that makes a combination of words operative. From this basis, it is possible to understand what the structural linguist Roman Jakobson (1896–1982) means when he writes ‘the notion of poetics deals primarily with the question of what makes a verbal message a work of art’ (Jakobson 1960, 351). That is, according to both Austin and Jakobson, the notion of poetics deals with the overall structure that makes a verbal message appreciable in a similar way to art, which is not usually directly associated with its content but other factors such as the composition, form, colour, light, volume and so on, especially in abstract art forms loaded with indirect referential symbols (Jakobson 1960, 350). In other words, the poetic function of language focuses on the message for its own sake: the form over the content. This same logic also applies to the reasons why linguistic jargon such as morphology, syntax and grammar, mentioned above, are chosen by the architectural theorists who may or may not know the etymological origins of these terms. It is precisely because of their poetic qualities, not because of their content. A classic example that Jakobson (1960) used is the political slogan ‘I like Ike’. Owing to the embedded poetic quality, sometimes the rhyming of the phonetics, the use of parallelisms or sometimes both of these techniques combined, the listeners perceive the message not through the content but the form of the slogan. For example, if someone tries to understand the slogan starting with what it means, then the first and most obvious question would be the one that concerns the slogan’s
semantic inadequacy: why should I like Ike? Who is Ike? Even if I have heard of Ike, do I know him enough to like him? Set in the political context in which Irvin Berlin, the creator of what Time Magazine ranks the eighth all-time most influential campaign advertisement, knew exactly that anyone who heard the slogan would not be able to think of any other Ike except the presidential candidate Dwight Eisenhower. The brevity of the slogan also plays a role in emphasizing the point as to why this slogan caught on so quickly from when it was first used in Eisenhower’s 1952 presidential campaign. In other words, as Jakobson points out, it was the ‘impressiveness and efficacy’ of the slogan in which the power of public persuasion lay, not the content. In fact, to look through all of the best political slogans, it is possible to also find many similar ambiguous yet straight-to-the-point slogans such as ‘Kenney for Me’ in 1960, or Barack Obama’s highly ambiguous slogans ‘Hope,’ ‘Change’ and ‘Be That Change,’ for example.

Therefore, any poetic messages should only be analyzed by what Jakobson calls their ‘operative effect’ rather than their meanings. In this paper, the argument presented shows that Kahn’s proposal must be read – visually and textually – in the same way we understand the poetic function of language. In addition, the fact that Kahn’s designs have never left the pages of his published works reinforces their semiotic qualities, because all interpretations of his designs, whether good or bad, were based solely on the interpretation of what they represented and how well he verbally represented them.

Central to this paper’s argument about the poetic quality of Kahn’s designs is the underlying idea that urban design is also a system of communicative signs and symbols – a semiotic system – that could be analyzed through the lens of semiotics. This is not only verbally, where something can be perceived as poetic, but also in other systems involving the use of signs and symbols aimed at communicating a particular message to the receiver/audience, such as music, film, art, architecture, graphic design and so on. By looking at Kahn’s vision this way, it is possible to better understand both the true philological basis from which he derived his urban vision, as well as how and why some (i.e., the planners) might not take such a vision seriously. This is precisely why it is worthwhile to look at both the poetic expression of his verbal message as well as the poetic aspect expressed in the semiotics of his urban design. Kahn’s poetic way of expressing his ideas had always been his trademark, which was instrumental to his success in persuading many high-profile clients to take the risk of investing in Kahn’s modernist dream. During the two decades between his first and last projects, he completed many important projects that later became permanent emblematic monuments. Many scholars of Kahn have pointed out that owing to Kahn’s perfectionism, he was ultimately known as an architect whose projects were not only expensive, but usually, if not always, over budget as construction progressed. His idealism also rendered many of his designs, especially in the eyes of the planning commissions, impractical and not worth the disruption they would have created. His poetic way of expressing his ideas, however, could also be a double-edged sword. Kahn’s failure to convey his design to the Planning Commission of Central Philadelphia might have been due to the misinterpretation of the message that he sent, and perhaps the breakdown in the system of semiotics that underlies the mental structure of the design.

Toward social poetics

The social anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005) coined the term ‘social poetics,’ or the process of identity reproduction through the system of social interactions where, like the
notion of poetics in language, the focus is placed on the form rather than the content. For example, in his anthropological study of a small rural community in Greece the relationship among its members might appear to outside observers as rather discourteous, vulgar and insolent, if not downright uncultured. To outside observers, the ways in which his informants conducted themselves made the existence of this particular community appear rather anachronistic and backward. That said, Herzfeld discovered that the members of this particular community communicated through what he calls ‘poetic acts’. Such acts included the often exaggerated expression of masculinity, the use of seemingly vulgar words to denote intimate social relationships, and the act of stealing as a proof of brotherhood. In the fashion of what we might call ‘cultural relativism’, Herzfeld urges us to look beyond the superficial understanding of a social group and look at the use of symbols, which we may interpret differently in our own society, as a way the community bonded, united and sustained itself. As the social interactions that he observed and reported are not just speeches, Herzfeld’s use of the term ‘social poetics’ explicitly rejects the idea that this is about language. Social poetics analyzes how people use conventions, many of which are not at all about language, in social interaction.

Herzfeld argues that in a society there are elements of what he terms ‘cultural intimacy’, or aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of criticism both by outside observers and the state, but are nonetheless used to provide members of the community with a sense of comfort, understanding and unity (see Herzfeld 2005; Subotic and Zarakol 2013). In this way, social poetics could be thought of as an expressive form of cultural intimacy. Herzfeld’s concept is considered one of the most influential concepts in contemporary social sciences precisely because it sheds light on how we might be able to ‘see through’ the façade of social interaction, in order to decode and comprehensively understand the role of actions in a studied community. Therefore, most social actions should be understood not by the literal reading of the form that they take but by the deep cultural intimacy of their contents. This is how social researchers navigate the total social system and make sense of an otherwise impenetrable community.

The obvious question, however, is what constitutes an act of social poetics? First and foremost, Herzfeld explains that what makes something socially poetic is the fact that, like poetic messages, these acts have the potential to divert our attention to their social forms which are expressive. Second, what makes a social act poetic is the dynamic between the invention and the convention. In other words, what makes something poetic is the result of the creative attempt to break the rules (invention), without actually breaking it (convention). Embedded in this creative play is also ambiguity, which blurs the boundary between perceptual and interpretative receptions. For example, Kahn could have said that light is crucial to architecture, but instead he said, ‘the sun never knew how great it was until it struck the side of a building’, which, needless to say, is a highly ambiguous yet playful and original quote. In the practice of everyday life, Herzfeld’s concept of social poetics shows that the furthest one can go in taking risks in breaking the rules without actually breaking them, the more poetic the system of social interaction becomes.

Rivers, canals and docks: social poetics in Kahn’s visions for Philadelphia

Kahn envisioned the movement in his famous Traffic Study Project for Central Philadelphia by moving elevated high-speed roadways – rivers – out from the center of the city, consolidating
‘Go streets’ — canals — in the center city, and connecting them with parking facilities — harbors — along the perimeter of the area he defined as the city center. (Frampton and Cava 1995, 224)

Kahn clearly played with existing conventions, and did so inventively. But how did his designs play with the conventions that had not worked and produce something that might be arrestingly different, interesting and perhaps even successful? This section discusses the main elements of his creative play on conventions and how he did so in the actual designs, not just in the language he used.

Metaphors are another form of creative play. In the example above, Kahn uses the metaphors of water transportation to denote his vision for restricting the traffic system. This seemingly mundane metaphor used to express an urban planning ideal remains one of the most memorable visions for urban design to date (Rudofsky 1964). Why is Kahn’s use of metaphors so powerful? The short answer is that we always live ‘by them’. Metaphors are usually thought of as a measure of the poetic quality of prose, but contemporary linguists have discovered that metaphors are much more pervasive than that. They underpin the foundations of how we think and act. To elaborate this point, look at some of the following pieces of prose (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 4): ‘Your claims are indefensible. He attacked every weak point in my argument. His criticisms were right on target. I demolished his argument. I’ve never won an argument with him’. These examples of argumentation as war are the cognitive linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s most well-known set of metaphors through which they make their most groundbreaking point regarding metaphors as fundamental to the way we think — and that we are not usually conscious of their extensiveness. In their most famous work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), they argue that metaphors are omnipresent in everyday life, not just in language but also in the way we think and the way we act as well as how we perceive action. Contrary to what many may consider to be mere devices of the poetic imagination and rhetoric, metaphors are a prevalent fundamental mechanism in our minds, allowing us to use our physical and social experiences to make sense of the world in which we are living. In other words, we all think in metaphors. For a city with a limited traffic system and decaying urban environment that was not conducive to pedestrians such as Philadelphia in the 1950s, it was Kahn’s use of metaphors of waterways that conveyed to the public his radical idea so well, reflecting the core quality that was most desired in the projects that he proposed, as the art educator Lisa Mazzola (2007, 19) writes:

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.

The design convention of the time facilitated the influx of private automobiles. Bacon had a vision of a city that not only welcomed cars but also placed their importance at the centre (Bacon 1967; Garvin 2002; Knowles 2009; Kativa 2010). Although Kahn disagreed with this idea, instead of proposing a design that did not recognize such conventions, he proposed a reorganization of traffic that still accommodated the convention but pushed its boundaries. Reflecting his design philosophy of spaces of the served and servant, his proposed design not only separated the movement of cars from that of pedestrians, but also provided both of them with ample space to attain complete mobility without crossing the paths of each other. Such mobility was to be controlled by their hierarchy of speed. Although Kahn’s metaphors evoked the image of a romantic canal city, he obviously did not literally mean that he would like to create a system of urban mobility by digging waterways. The ‘river, canal,
dock’ metaphors were meant to conjure up the image of a total system of organized urban social place. Resonating with the philosopher and urban theorist Donald Schön's (1993) idea of ‘generative metaphors’, Kahn's ‘river, canal, dock’ metaphors both generate a clear picture of the problems persisting in the current urban condition of the city and set the direction for solving the problem. As Kahn saw the city as fragmented, the logical step he took was to create some sense of structure for it. In that sense, he felt that the system of water transportation provided a much stronger sense of organizational hierarchy, which was, to him, part and parcel of the civic sense of the city. In other words, it was not the case that Kahn was over-romanticizing small canal towns, as Bacon accused him of being completely ignorant of a much larger system of urban organization. On the contrary, Kahn's own upbringing and lifelong residency of Philadelphia, alongside his extensive travels as an architect and educator, must have given him enough experience to understand the limits of such an idea vis-à-vis the needs of a city. In this sense, it is possible to see Kahn's poetic expression through the lens of social poetics — that it could be understood in his indelible push towards the invention of a new idea of an urban-social place, with graphic references to a highly conventional system of mobility such as waterways.

In terms of practicality, Kahn argues that, first, lying in the quality of all great architecture is the apt and robust arrangement of the served and servant spaces (probably most obvious in his design of the Richards Medical Research Center at the University of Pennsylvania, see McQuaid 2002, 116–117). Second, what he was proposing was in essence a ‘walking city’ — the served space for the city's real clients, with no private vehicles and their owners, but the majority of the residents whose movement in the city would be primarily be on foot. In his design, motor vehicles would enter the served space (what he calls ‘the architecture of stopping’ see Reed 1989, 206) from a high speed roadway (that he later calls the ‘viaduct’ — also another creative play with the metaphor of the long bridge-like structure in Roman architecture), and park at a ramped parking garage — the servant space — then the vehicle owners would take public transportation provided along the low-vehicular congestion block system to the inner part of the city. This idea, although many saw it as controversial (especially Bacon) and being ahead of its time, was not unheard of during the era. In the 1960s, Victor Gruen, the Austrian-born architect who was best known as a pioneer in the design of shopping malls in the US, had proposed the idea of creating parking structures around the perimeter of a downtown area, which in turn would eliminate the disruptive traffic from the main streets (Robertson 1995). Recognizing the city’s historic roots and envisioning its urban future (Kahn 1957; Reed 1989, 206–210), Kahn's design for the city sought to replace the inefficient traffic system obstructing Philadelphia with not only a more lucrative, but more humanistic future (see Figure 3).

At this point, it is worth remembering that the aim of this paper is not to suggest in a simple-minded fashion that his design could have been realized if he had rephrased his words and design differently. That said, this could well be the case, but there were too many other factors involved in the politics of urban design and development and such counterfactual arguments often have no meaningful scholarly findings. Through the lens of social poetics, however, his critics may have believed that Kahn had gone too far in his visions, and therefore actually had broken the conventions, which, according to theorists such as Jakobson and Herzfeld, would have turned poetics into simply mindless fragments. Rather, the goal of this paper is to make a point that the design not becoming a realization is what makes it even more poetic in the minds of subsequent generations of urban designers who
have tried to replicate his poetic expression. The ‘poetics’ of Kahn's proposal lies in his visionary idea of ecological urbanity, encompassing not only the sustainability of the city's physical design through the reorganization of movement, but also socially viable spatiality that places emphasis on the building of social capital through innovative forms of interaction.

**Timeless forum: monumental civic centre**

Like Kahn's formal vocabulary, that embodied eternal archetypes, the activities associated with the forum embodied what was essential to man. (Reed 1989, 218)

Kahn's civic centre was the central element of his plan that urban planners, especially Bacon, most abhorred. Not only did his civic centre look as though it was an anachronistic medieval town (indeed, Kahn's sketches conveyed such an impression), but it also seemed to lack the element of capitalist commercialization, namely skyscrapers, which were craved by both the planners and developers alike. It was no surprise to discover how he derived his basic design principles. His key guidance to how he designed was a simple quote, 'what does it want to be?' The full quote (said by Kahn in his master class at the University of Pennsylvania in 1971) appears in the documentary *My Architect* (2003) by his son Nathaniel Kahn as follows:

> If you think of Brick, you say to Brick, ‘What do you want, Brick?’ And Brick says to you, ‘I like an Arch.’ And if you say to Brick, ‘Look, arches are expensive, and I can use a concrete lintel over you. What do you think of that, Brick?’ Brick says, ‘I like an Arch.’ And it’s important, you see, that you honor the material that you use. ... You can only do it if you honor the brick and glorify the brick instead of shortchanging it.’ (Nathaniel Kahn 2005).

This way of thinking is applied to just about everything that Kahn has designed, from a construction element such as a brick (when he was choosing whether to design an arch or
use a column with it, see Kahn and Ngo 1998) to, in this case, an entire civic centre. In a personal letter to his colleague when he was perplexed by the question of how to deliver the design for Philadelphia, he wrote, “CIVIC CENTER – CORE’ [capitalized as in the original text]. What does it want to be? Is it the creative center of human communication? Is it the Cathedral of the city?” (cited in Reed 1989, 219)

At the end, Kahn concluded that this civic centre must be both monumental and cultural – therefore he used the term ‘forum’, which invokes an image of a large and open public meeting place in Ancient Rome. That is, at the heart of this civic centre is the forum – the principal served space accommodated by the ‘architecture of the streets’ and of the buildings. As Reed (1989, 202—235) writes, Kahn placed great emphasis on what he vaguely defined as ‘communication’ (which, as Reed also observes, probably meant ‘interaction,’ in both cathartic and spiritual ways; see Reed 1989, 221). By ‘communication,’ not only did Kahn hope to restructure the ways in which urban environments are experienced, but he also wanted to recreate social spaces that would provide citizens with a sense of dignity. By not allowing cars to enter the city, he envisioned that citizens would experience the city differently – through a slow walking pace rather than the speedy movement of automobiles, and there would be more meaningful ‘communication’ between citizens. As romantic as several of his ideas may sound, Kahn also envisioned that the forum would have different heights, resonating with the diversity of heights the buildings surrounding it with the interplay of the horizontal and vertical planes, both visually (via different building heights) and physically (via the multiple levels of planes of the plazas). He hoped that this ‘labyrinth of pedestrian ways threading in the environment of great buildings and varied activities’ (Reed 1989, 227) would foster communication between the architecture and the citizens for whom they were created.

It could be argued that the quintessential quality of Kahn’s architecture is its timelessness, yet not in a clichéd sense that his architecture would need to be everlasting, or simply stand the test of time. Kahn’s timelessness is about the way his architecture ages. Deeply rooted in their context, the users and vernacular, his buildings are designed to age in such a way that chronological change would assimilate to the circle of life, therefore giving them a nuanced sense of socio-temporal change that engages profoundly with the people and environment. His architecture became timeless because the buildings are not affected by time. The initial design may already express some references to the ancient past, and they would then become part and parcel of the temporal perception of the people who used them as they grew older together. In addition, Kahn’s design also provides robust opportunities for extensions. Nevertheless, unlike laissez-faire expansion or bulldozing and rebuilding – both of which were conventions of the time – Kahn’s plan for expansion provides both a systematic and coherent formal quality, as well as structure to the new additions. As the architectural historian Sigfried Giedion (1949, 691—692) observed, Kahn’s provision of both the scheme and scope for expansion could take place without disrupting the original concept. This was precisely how time was dealt with ‘poetically’ – by fostering space to communicate, age and expand. The way in which Kahn engages with the notion of space and time is not only humanistic but also anthropological. What else should architecture resonate with if not these two dimensions of the phenomenal world in which we all live? This is vivid evidence of his creative play on existing social conventions; in other words, the social poetics.
Conclusion

If I were not an architect, I would be a writer. (Louis Kahn 1967)

Kahn’s architectural and urban projects are, like his words, also poetic in the sense that they make people think about architecture in ways they would not have otherwise thought of. In his plan for Central Philadelphia, he completely removed our natural inclination to think about road systems as grand corridors for high-speed cars, and replaced it with the idea of a space for the flow of environmentally-friendly water vehicles. His vision emphasized the city as an organism, with the conscious goal of minimizing the environmental effects of automobile traffic. Frequently, he put extremely loaded inquiries into the nature of built environments in the most fundamental forms. In his famous quote about the ‘bakery shop’, he was basically confronting the question of whether the idea of a modernist city (Le Corbusier 1976) full of symmetrical and replicable sets of high-rise buildings, which was once conceived as the most efficient way of living, really works. Ironically, Kahn had never proposed an actual bakery shop anywhere in his design. The absence of an actual bakery shop renders the use of the term rhetorical and metaphorical rather than literal. In his interview with the architect Carlos Brillembourg (Brillembourg and Kahn 1992), Kahn made use of the term ‘bakery shop’ to refer to what he thought was missing in the design which, in his own words, was a ‘revelation to me’ of the architect who he thought of as ‘an inspiring teacher: Le Corbusier’. He did not answer the question yet only posed it as a rhetorical engagement with Le Corbusier’s design, as opposed to a practical comment on the missing urban element in the ‘revelation design by his inspiring teacher’ (Kahn and Brillembourg 1992). Nevertheless, the answer to the question in its own rhetoric could not be found; it is not in human nature to live in a sterile city full of high-rise buildings. What is more interesting, however, is that in his response was not just the answer itself but what Jakobson would call ‘the poetic function’ of his response.

Another aspect of the design of Central Philadelphia that is often overlooked because it was not built is the notion of material specificity. Kahn paid remarkable attention to particular material details of urban space, such as, again, the bakery shop, where humans process matter (in this case flour, water and yeast to make bread) that help to build a complex community unit, not just with architecture but also with food and tradition. For Kahn, the city was not just a soulless abstraction, since he knew that it needed to accommodate not just one but many bakery shops. The modernist architect Le Corbusier (1976) once argued that the goal of modern architecture is to create ‘a machine for living’, a metaphor urging us to think about the function of architecture, but can we always do that? Moreover, is a ‘machine’ really an apt metaphor with which we would like to relate our human experience? What lies in the quality of a place where bread and cakes are made or sold is a communal place where a person who bakes them does so for the customers who come in not just to buy food made of flour, water and yeast, but also to engage in friendly conversations with the baker and other customers, as well as the aroma of the place. It was precisely this understanding of urbanism that has since paved the way for much more humanistic approaches to urban design. The renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs (1916‒2006), for example, was a lifelong and ardent advocate of small-scale planning that places the emphasis on elements that human beings actually use such as streets, coffee shops, grocery stores and bars, as opposed to gargantuan structures such as massive elevated highways and high-rise structures that could often be appreciated only in aerial views (see Jacobs 1961, 1970, 1985) (see Figure 3).
In this way, it is possible to see a series of almost uncanny similarities between Kahn and Jacobs, Edmund Bacon and Robert Moses (whose idea of building highways was opposed by Jacobs), and, perhaps more simply, between the ‘urbanists and urban planners’ as a whole. Even though neither Kahn or Jacobs had formal training in urban planning, they were able to see urbanism just as a person wanting to live in a city would see it, rather than as a master builder or the state which usually has authority over urban planning (see Scott 1998).

In other words, Kahn’s attention to bakeries could suggest a sense of humanity, as well as groundedness that seems strikingly different from an environmental perspective, even though professional urban planners at the time found it too ‘poetic’ and felt that he was ‘too caught up in details’. Indeed, because the focus is on form and how form induces reactions that often remain difficult to describe, poetics is arguably a better way of describing an architectural aesthetic than many of the other approaches that have been tried to date.

It is also hoped that this paper has brought to the attention of those of us who care about urbanism the idea of reclaiming the value of such poetics by looking at the profoundness of Kahn’s design. Despite being criticized for his poetic idealism, Kahn evidently had a very concrete understanding of who and what inhabited cities. Rather than communicating in the language of the economists, Kahn communicated his design through poetics in the language of the public — the true clients of the city — and that made his ideas powerful and publicly engaging. It is precisely because the poetic function in language is humanistic that Kahn’s uses of social poetics has brought the ideas of urban planners down to earth from lofty, abstract sterile plans. The true function of poetics was evident in the way that the Kahn communicated his work. Kahn also shows that what makes something a work of art does not have to be highly complex, but can be very simple yet humanely meaningful. Looking at the development of architecture in the twenty-first century, in which everyone tries to compete to be unique through creating the wildest possible architectural forms, using and exploiting various means endowed upon us by Mother Nature, one cannot help but think that perhaps we have not thought through and understood the most fundamental aspect of architecture. Perhaps, Kahn’s poetic teaching should be revisited: ‘architecture is, simply, a thoughtful making of space’ (Kahn 2003) — which is barely present in today’s architectural practice.

Notes

1. Famous examples include the pronouncement of marriage at a church where the combination of words ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ has an operative effect compared to if it was being uttered elsewhere, such as at a bar. When Kahn uttered the combination of words that form a sentence ‘architecture is the thoughtful making of space’, he was conscious both of his audience and the context in which he made the speech, therefore making this particular sentence one of the most profound architectural tenets of his time and beyond.

2. It should be noted here that, considering the impact of the Jakobsonian school of linguistics, it is certain that any trained linguists will be well versed in Jakobson’s complex four-directional schematic diagrams of verbal communication as well as the corresponding fundamental factors. This paper, however, will not use too much specialized terminology or go into too much depth and detail about linguistics. Concepts will only be provided insofar as they will help to understand Kahn’s work from such perspectives.

3. The writings of enlightenment philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham, for example, are full of idiomatic proses that are not necessarily grammatical in the strictest sense. His most famous (far from being a complete) sentence is ‘mankind governed by pain and pleasure’ and then a
period denoting that this is a full sentence consisting of just these six words despite the lack of the crucial model verb 'is' between the subject and the passive verb form. Yet, it was precisely an example of what Herzfeld (2005) would call a 'creative play' that makes his writings on utilitarianism widely influential and accessible. According to Jakobson et al. (1985, 38) 'Bentham is perhaps the first to disclose the manifold “linguistic fictions” which underlie grammatical structure and which are used throughout the whole field of language as a necessary resource.'

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