

THE ARCHITECTS

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When Louis Kahn was three years old, he stood at the open hearth before a coal fire in his home in Estonia, watching the firelight. Ordinarily, the coal burned with an intense blue flame, but that night, as Kahn later recalled, some of the coals burned with an unusual, bright green flame. Hoping to capture the rare light, Kahn reached into the fire and plucked out the burning green coals and put them in his pocket. His clothes caught fire and went up in flames. He put his hands up to cover his eyes, but his face was badly burned, and healed in grotesque folds of scar tissue.

In 1906, soon after this traumatic accident, Kahn's father moved the family to Philadelphia. The father went to work in the construction business, was injured on the job, and never worked again. Kahn's mother struggled to support the family; in the course of two years, they moved seventeen times.

Kahn spent his childhood in hand-me-down clothes, and when he entered school at the age of seven, he would make his way to class each morning slinking along the sides of the houses, ashamed to show his scarred face. When he got to school, he would wait across the street until, at the last minute, he would make a run for the classroom just before the bell rang.

His teacher, noticing he had a talent for drawing, asked him to sketch one subject after another and to enlarge the drawings so they might be put on the wall for others to see and learn from. Even at a young age, Kahn drew effortlessly - his lines were bold and his colors vibrant: Viewers would say that his trees were so real they could get up and walk off the page. In recognition of his drawings, his teacher pasted gold stars to his skin.

Kahn's mother played the harp and claimed she was a descendant of composer Felix Mendelssohn. Kahn himself displayed a talent for music and played the piano well enough that, as a teenager, he played for money at a silent-movie house. (In later years, he would entertain friends by sitting down at the piano and improvising. He would take a copy of *The Saturday Evening Post*, open it to one advertisement or another, and, at the guests' bidding, "play it like Bach," or "play it like Beethoven," or Vivaldi or Mozart.)

His father, crippled by his building accident, was a tyrant who

occasionally beat his son. Nevertheless, he was a talented man: He spoke five languages fluently and was a skilled craftsman in stained glass. Traveling with his father once aboard a train, Kahn remembered vividly how his father had pointed out to him the patterns of frost on the window pane, and how the two traced the crystalline patterns with their fingers.

Kahn thought he would be a painter until, in the latter half of his senior year at Central High School in Philadelphia, he enrolled in an architecture course taught by a man named William Gray, who had inspired a number of students to pursue careers in architecture. Within three days, Kahn declared that he wanted to be an architect.

At the University of Pennsylvania, where he received a scholarship, he was trained in the tradition of the French *École des Beaux-Arts*, an architectural style characterized by massive masonry structures and clearly defined blocks of space, with an emphasis on the neo-classical designs of Roman antiquity. Kahn did not adopt the exaggeratedly ornate embellishments of *Beaux-Arts* building, but he did incorporate the sense of solid structure to develop his own modern, idiosyncratic style.

Kahn was an intercollegiate wrestler, a muscular young man with powerful arms and hands and broad, strong shoulders, and from the beginning, the buildings he designed looked just like him. He had a natural affinity for *Beaux-Arts* building - a sense of how to shape and place mass and weight - but none at all for the new International school. Aside from his instinctive feel for solid construction, Kahn had difficulty with the glossy finish the International school of the 1920s and 30s gave their steel and glass buildings - what architects commonly call the skin of the building.

Kahn graduated from architecture school in 1924 and spent two decades completely unfit by training or inclination to design anything that a world enamored with the International style would want. Because he could draw better than anyone, however, he got a job immediately in a Philadelphia architect's office, where he worked on plans for the Philadelphia Sesqui-centennial Exhibition of 1926.

By 1928, he was able to scrape enough money together to take

a trip to Europe and make a grand tour of architectural masterpieces. Although he could have seen something of the new architecture if he had wanted to - Le Corbusier was at work at the time, and one of Kahn's Philadelphia associates was even working for the urban planner - Kahn headed straight for the ancient Greek and Roman buildings.

On his way through Italy, he stopped off to do some sketches of the turreted town of San Gimignano, south of Florence. Drawn in bold strokes with the side of a carpenter's pencil, the sketches capture perfectly the intensity of the afternoon Tuscan sunlight, the dark shadows of the narrow streets, the weight of the hefty blocks of stone and the texture of their rough surfaces, pierced here and there by a small window. In Assisi, he sketched the cathedral, its doorway set beneath a flawless semicircular stone arch. Cube, circle, rough surface, sunlight: Kahn made them all his own.

Of all the sights, nothing impressed him more than the Baths of Caracalla. "Consider the beauty of the Baths of Caracalla," Kahn later said. "Why a one-hundred-and-fifty-foot ceiling when an eight-foot ceiling would do? What has this evoked? Certainly not only a bath!" Feeling, said Kahn, must come before functionalism. An eight-foot ceiling would do if all one wanted was a bath; but to have the feeling of luxuriating in a bath, to be overcome by the sensation of water and stone and sunlight, required a vast space. Feeling must come before functionalism, before design, even before an understanding of materials. Kahn never stopped talking about the Baths of Caracalla.

When building anything, he said, the work should begin not at "volume one" but at "volume zero." "I think of a school as an environment of spaces where it is good to learn. Schools began with a man under a tree who did not know he was a teacher, discussing his realizations with a few others who did not know they were students. The students reflected on the exchanges between them and how good it was to be in the presence of this man. Soon the needed spaces were erected and the first schools came into existence. . . . Schools must reflect the spirit of the man under the tree."