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Kahn in Dhaka: The Capitol and the City

Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, the capitol complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh (1962–83), designed by Louis Kahn, resists a neat positioning in architectural history. An iconic example of American modernism in a non-Western, newly independent context, it straddles binary categories: East-West, Pakistan-Bangladesh, modern-postmodern. If Kahn represents a transitional figure within twentieth-century architectural discourse, then at Dhaka this liminal status is uniquely amplified. Embedded in this work is, therefore, a distinctive narrative concerning Kahn's effort to rethink modern architecture in the post-war years. This paper reflects on Kahn's disciplinary priorities as transferred to, and particularly translated in Dhaka. It does so with a focus on the proposed relationship between the capitol and the city. Informed by recent trends in critical historiography, in which non-western modern is identified as a key agent in the internal critique and ongoing evolution of mid-century modernism, the significance of the capitol complex is emphasised as a site where Kahnian tropes were not only extended, but transformed.

The paper is developed via a close study of the project's evolution over a three-year period (1963–66). Kahn's effort to distinguish and yet balance an abstract and memorable architectural image with the building's civic purpose is underlined. It is however argued that the realised capitol presents an ambivalent relationship to its civic function. This ambiguity, although alluded to in Kahn's parallel works, is here amplified and rendered more extreme. The paper speculates that value and meaning of civic monumentality in this project partly lie in its expression as a monument that is liberated from, or is in critical relationship with, its contemporary situation.

“A thousand acres of flat land subject to flood.”¹ So Kahn described the site for the capitol commission in the opening passage to his early account of the project’s conception and development, first published in the North Carolina student publication in 1964. As the only explicit reference to the capitol’s physical context, the depiction appeared somewhat terse and elusive. Indeed the sparse level of detail about the existing city of Dhaka was a striking aspect of this document. When viewed in relation to the project’s sequential development, however, the two measures of the site underlined in Kahn’s concise categorisation – the extensive scale of the allocated site relative to the scale of the existing city, and the topographical nexus between land and water – emerge as fundamental to the relationship between the capitol complex as realised and the city of Dhaka. This paper considers this relationship as imagined by Kahn and as ultimately manifested in the design.

The Diamond Projects

Kahn first travelled to Dhaka in late January 1963, at which time he was presented with a building programme, inspected the capitol site and the city.² Oriented north-south, the designated land for the second capitol was on the city outskirts, close to the industrial suburb of Tejgaon and mediated between the airport and Mirpur Road, the main roadway extending north from the western edges of ‘old Dhaka’.

Scheduled for immediate development were the National Assembly Building, housing and offices for assembly members, ministers and secretaries during their periodic stay in Dhaka and individual residences for the president and high officials, all to be accommodated on a two-hundred-and-thirty-five-acre zone. These were to be considered as part of a larger plan, incorporating the contiguous land to the north. Initially six hundred acres, the capitol precinct was subsequently extended at several stages and ultimately approximated one thousand acres.³ Planned for future construction were the Supreme Court, a diplomatic enclave, offices, schools, a library, a museum, a hospital and additional housing.

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- 1 Louis Kahn, in “The Development by Louis Kahn of the Design for the Second Capital of Pakistan at Dacca,” *Student Publication of the School of Design, North Carolina State College, Raleigh 14 (May 1964):* np.
 - 2 For a biography of the project and its sequential development see Peter Reed, “Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Capital of Bangladesh,” in David B. Brownlee and David De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture (New York: Rizzoli, 1991)*, 374–83.
 - 3 Early drawings indicate a two-staged site allocation: 250 acres for the first construction phase and 640 acres as the full available extent including land for future development. Kenneth Yeang suggests that after two years of negotiations 840 acres were allotted for the site (out of which 600 acres were government farmlands and 240 acres were privately owned), and another 90 acres were made available after two more years. After 1971, the site was further extended to near 1000 acres, see Kenneth Yeang, “1986 Technical Review Summary,” in Aga Khan Award for Architecture, “Project Report,” (1989), www.akdn.org/architecture/project.asp?id=75 (accessed March 5, 2013). 2. David Wisdom similarly notes that, “The initial commitment of land was 235 acres. Kahn pleaded for more site area and in conferences about various master plan studies he obtained an increase in area increments of a few hundred acres to the present 1,000 acres,” see, David Wisdom, “Kahn’s Building at Dacca,” in “Louis I. Kahn 1901/1974,” *Rassegna 7*, no. 21 (March 1985): np.

Invited to design institutions for governance; for health, recreation, education, religion and culture; places for commerce as well as housing, Kahn's brief presented the ingredients for a self-supportive urban enclave. Up until this date, the architect's reflections on the city, in particular the "city/civic centre", had been most evocatively registered in a sequence of proposals conceived in relation to his hometown city of Philadelphia. Manifest in these studies, particularly those schemes developed between 1959 and 1962 was a radical critique of the decentralized city (1947-62, unbuilt).⁴ Beyond these explicitly urban propositions, the diverse requirements for the Salk Institute for Biological Studies, La Jolla, California (1959-65) were considered in terms of discrete yet mutually supportive, formally individuated, programmatic elements; encompassing accommodation for individual as well as collective association. Resolved as a tripartite ensemble of laboratories, meeting houses and residences, the Salk campus would however remain incomplete. An amendment to the Salk contract, only seven months after Kahn's first trip to Dhaka, terminated his work on the "meeting" and "living" components of the master plan.⁵ The project for the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (IIM, 1962-74) similarly combined residential, educational and public facilities and allowed for further exploration of the relationship between discreet yet interdependent campus programs. Surpassing the IIM in scale, programmatic diversity and symbolic significance, the commission for Pakistan's second capitol at Dhaka thus presented Kahn with an extraordinary opportunity to extend his thought on the ideal order for the city.

The dominant focus of Kahn's early description of the capitol project was the programmatic order of his proposed master plan. Beginning with the principal function of the capitol, namely the house for assembly and legislation, he posited an interdependent relationship between the National Assembly Building and a mosque. In a country unified by religious association, he implied, the alignment would render the National Assembly Building's elevated function explicit. In Kahn's thinking, the mosque's architectural affect and legibility as an elevated institution not only prepared the elected representatives for ethical service to their country but also assigned the National Assembly Building with a culturally sanctified, and therefore readily understood, symbolism.⁶

Kahn further nominated two additional programmatic components as essential: the Supreme Court and the residential hostels, the latter interpreted as "studies".⁷ He concluded that the necessary elements to the assembly ensemble were formed by the National Assembly Building interwoven with

4 For Kahn's critique of the decentralised city, see, Peter Reed, "Toward Form, Louis I. Kahn's Urban Designs for Philadelphia, 1939-62" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1989).

5 Daniel S. Friedman "The Salk Institute for Biological Study," in David Brownlee and David De Long, *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 336. Friedman offers a detailed account of the Salk Institute's biography and characterises the project as incomplete. For the evolution of the Indian Institute of Management see, Stephen Bernard James, "Louis I. Kahn: Toward an Iconography of Memory," (PhD. diss. University of Virginia, 2010), 136-217.

6 Kahn, "The Development of Dacca," np. The proposed association was a radical departure from the client's brief. Peter Reed highlights the discrepancy. See note 8 in Reed, "Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Capital of Bangladesh," 382. The misalignment forms a core theme in Lawrence Vale's criticism of the project, see: Lawrence Vale, *Architecture, Power and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 261-64.

7 Kahn, "The Development of Dacca," np.

a mosque, the Supreme Court and places for individual reflection and study, situated upon a lake within a garden environment. This building group was termed the “Citadel of Assembly”.

With the programmatic ingredients for the Citadel of Assembly first established, Kahn suggested that this legislative cluster would be complemented and balanced by a second group of buildings consisting of public and commercial institutions as well as housing, with the latter as an anchor for a new residential sector to the northern periphery of the capitol. Citing the bathing complexes of ancient and imperial Rome as the architectural model for this second cluster, he termed the collective the “Citadel of Institutions”.⁸

Capitol and the City

In his biographical record of the capitol project, Peter Reed identified an early and previously unpublished architectural sketch, which, he speculated, dated from Kahn's first visit to Dhaka.⁹ The drawing reads as the precursor to the binuclear scheme first submitted to the client, dated 12 March 1963.

An undated model, identified as the “first version”, is anomalous in relation to this consistent drawn sequence.¹⁰ A striking aspect of the early model was the capitol's proposed landscape. Rendered as an intertwined sequence of irregular mounds and water basins, it alluded to the sculpted topography of the region's rural settlements. Indeed the ground figurations portrayed in this early model closely resembled Kahn's later drawn representations of the existing alluvial terrain to the north of the capitol site; the area he later described as an “old village with its mounds and depressions already established.” The proposed architectural platform for the assembly precinct, treated as a series of embankments and sunken lakes, appeared as an abstracted representation of this vernacular setting. In this early scheme Kahn appealed to regional traditions in support of his siting strategy.¹¹ Although the proposal was immediately and radically revised, the sculpting of the ground based on the interplay of land and water would remain fundamental to the subsequent designs and their respective projection of the relationship between the monument and the city.

8 Kahn, “The Development of Dacca,” np.

9 Reed, “Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Capital of Bangladesh,” 375.

10 Heinz Ronner, Sharad Jhaveri, and Alessandro Vassella, *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Works, 1935-74*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1975), 234.

11 Within East Pakistan, a particularly “local” built tradition was emphasised. Looking to the rural vernacular rather than the urban built fabric, the timber pavilion - a single-roomed, rectangular structure with bamboo wooden posts, woven screen walls and thatched roofs - was depicted as the most authentic response to the deltaic landscape. A particular point of emphasis was the manner in which these dwellings were sited. This highlighted an approach colloquially described as a “dig-and-mound” strategy, whereby earthen mounds formed by the excavation of nearby land allowed for the elevation of individual pavilions above the flood plain. This is for example highlighted by August Komendant in his account of the March 1963 visit to Dhaka. See, Komendant, *18 Years with Architect Louis I. Kahn, 77-78*. For a description of rural huts see, Attilio Petruccioli, “A note on Louis Kahn's mosque at Banglanagar,” in Catherine B. Asher, “Dhaka: Inventory of Key Monuments,” in George Mitchell, ed., *The Islamic Heritage of Bengal*, (Paris: Unesco, 1984), 231-36. This emphasis on the rural vernacular takes on a particularly amplified, and more theoretical character in the post independence architectural discourse and the associated search for national identity via the lens of architecture and urbanism.

Kahn returned to Dhaka in mid-March, 1963. In just over one month his team had prepared their first submission to the client. The bipartite conception of the capitol underscored the essential order of the proposed site plan. Two distinct urban “centres” were shown aligned on the north-south axis and mediated by an open field. The Citadel of Assembly was located within the southern portion of the site.

In accord with Kahn’s account of the project’s initial conception, the most prominent buildings in the assembly group were the National Assembly Building, the mosque and the Supreme Court - sequentially aligned from south to north on a common central axis. The fourth necessary program, the residential hostels, was defined as two monolithic linear elements. They diagonally flanked the assembly group along the lake’s eastern and western boundaries and framed this body of water.

Situated across the park, the architect’s proposed tripartite civic cluster was articulated as a sequence of individuated cubic volumes with centralised courts. To their north a low-rise market place and ancillary services mediated the Citadel of Institutions and the surrounding housing, and also served as an arrival point within the precinct. Further to these building components and their immediate landscape, circulatory pathways formed dominant figures. Two modes of circulation shaped the patterns of movement within the site. A sequence of entrance roads directed access from Mirpur Road and the new eastern boundary road (labelled as Inner Road) to each of the citadels and also determined the extent of vehicular traffic within the capitol. A network of internal courtyards and diagonally oriented avenues accommodated the pedestrian movement within the precinct.

A resonance with Kahn’s urban design proposals for the city of Philadelphia was evident here, in particular his more theoretical proposals generated between 1956 and 1962. Recalled were the core principle of the Philadelphia proposals: a formally defined city centre - garrisoned against the erosive impacts of the modern vehicular traffic and charged with a multifarious and culturally elevated sequence of public buildings - was framed as fundamental to the civilising agency and social vitality of the contemporary city.¹²

The Binuclear City

In its binuclear conception, Kahn’s composition of the capitol was however more distinct and the equivalence with the Philadelphia proposals is more tenuous in this regard. A functional and symbolic hierarchy was fundamental to Kahn’s conception of architectural and urban order; however, the implied distinction between the sacred and profane institutions via a binuclear civic organisation was anomalous in terms of his working method. In his statement for the North Carolina student publication, Kahn noted the particularity of the composition, depicting the strategy as novel. Referring to his discussion with the Danish architect and urban planner Steen Eiler

12 Peter Reed draws a parallel between Kahn’s design for the capitol of Dhaka and his design proposals for the city of Philadelphia, see Reed, “Toward From,” 280-81.

Rasmussen, and to Rasmussen's critical response to the scheme, Kahn admitted to some uncertainty as to the essential merit of the proposal. The passage indicates his grapple with the dilemma - contending with the criticism that, as composed, the association between the two citadels overtly relied on formal or visual criteria. The capitol's social efficacy, Rasmussen's critique had inferred, was compromised. Kahn however maintained that the individuation of the citadels was pertinent. He ultimately implied that the visual perception of the capitol as an integrated entity was a key priority in the site configuration. What he sought was a legible and absolute formal expression in productive tension with its immediate urban context - a distinctive and internally coherent idea of the city rather than one that conforms to or appears in continuum with the existing urban fabric.

An early sketch dated 8 February 1963 provides an evocative register of the assembly group's proposed setting. To the south of the National Assembly Building a grand, two-level, monumental "promenade" traversed the site and reconfigured the body of water, which was cut as two individuated elements: the triangular head and crescent shaped base. The upper platform was dedicated to pedestrian movement and the road below to vehicular traffic. At its centre, considered lengthwise, the promenade abutted the National Assembly Building tangentially; that is on a single point at the building's southern apex. The junction was in turn framed as a gateway, a charged entry point with the building otherwise distanced from the pedestrian concourse by way of enclosing perimeter walls and the mediating body of water. In the March site plan, the promenade reads as a major east-west thoroughfare between the suburbs of Tejgaon and Mohammadpur, effectively integrating the capitol within the existing transport network. Whether on approach to the National Assembly Building, or traversing the capitol site, the proposed pedestrian experience was unambiguously novel and ceremonial. With the crescent-shaped lake placed between the capitol and the city, the assembly group from the south was to be perceived from a distance. Thus composed, the promenade read as an extended platform, an accentuated horizontal landscape upon which the National Assembly Building was centrally poised.

Kahn had typically explained the artificial lakes via a regionalist logic, variously referencing Moghul built tradition or the Bengali dig-and-mound strategy.¹³ Moving beyond regionalist references, however, he extended his explanation toward formal or compositional motives: "I employed the shape of the lake too as a discipline of location and boundary. The triangular lake was meant to encompass the hostels and the assembly and to act as a dimensional control."¹⁴ When revising the North Carolina transcript Kahn made additional notes, which, although unpublished, further elaborate his thought:

13 For example in an early letter to the client the influence of Moghul gardens was underlined. See typed document, undated, "Pak Correspondence Miscellaneous," Box LK 120, Louis I. Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, hereafter cited as the Kahn Collection. In Kahn's introduction for the North Carolina Student publication the dig and mound strategy was rather privileged.

14 Kahn, "The Development of Dacca," n.p.

"I try to make each building shape distinguish from its surroundings by the introduction of the lake as a firm boundary to which it is tied. Because this is delta country, buildings are placed on mounds to protect them from flood. The ground for the mounds comes from the digging of lakes and ponds. Therefore, the lake is nature (natural?) planning discipline, and its shape becomes part of all dimensions. I employed the shape of the lake as a discipline of location and boundary."¹⁵

Formal priorities interlaced with vernacular references were here framed as a novel, "natural", planning principle. The lake gave sharp definition to the "shape" of the building and like the expansive lawn that separated the two citadels, this body of water was employed as a device for calibrating the distance between the buildings and their audience.

In the March site plan the lake and the promenade served as the capitol's public forecourt, facing the existing city. In contrast, the northern plaza and associated circulatory elements appeared to cater more particularly to the precinct's principal occupants, namely the administrative and legal representatives, office bearers and personnel. The National Assembly Building was therefore rendered with two distinct prospects, paths of approach and points of entry.

This articulation of the buildings with two "fronts" suggested that Kahn's urban proposal was not a bipartite composition, but instead was conceived as related to both the Citadel of Institutions and the existing city. The National Assembly Building was, in effect, situated between the two. Read in this light, the early master plan shows a deliberate effort to calibrate the capitol's prospect both to and from two distinct vantage points: the Citadel of Institutions, on the one hand, and the surrounding city (to the south, east and west) on the other. This strategy allowed the separation of civic activity from the monumental and abstract image of the National Assembly Building.

As Kahn had anticipated the arrangement was scrutinised and the association between the two citadels and their respective relationships with the existing city was subsequently tested and reworked.

Monument and the City

The March 1963 site plan was revised within two-months. New drawings and model photographs, dated May 3, were sent to Dhaka accompanied by a letter of explanation, dated May 16.¹⁶ Emphasized was Kahn's compliance with the client's priorities and feedback. For example, it highlighted the design's broad alignment with the stipulated maximum site limit, with the distance between the Citadel of Assembly and the Citadel of Institutions accordingly reduced. The scale and appointment of the mosque was also revised, as the designation of a single denominational and deliberately monumental religious institution as the point of entry to the National Assembly Building had been

¹⁵ Revised Transcript, "North Carolina," Box LIK 56, Kahn Collection.

¹⁶ Letter, Kahn to Ahmad, 16 May 1963, "Pakistan Correspondence-Miscellaneous," Box LIK 120, Kahn Collection.

perceived as controversial.¹⁷ In the new proposal the mosque was reconceived as a more generic “spiritual” institution and was described as the Prayer Hall. The structure was further reduced in scale and absorbed within the body of the National Assembly Building.¹⁸

The most profound change in the May site plan, however, was the reorientation of the constitutive elements of the Citadel of Assembly. The composition was, in effect, mirrored along the north-south axis. In this new arrangement the crescent-shaped lake (later named as Crescent Lake) was positioned to the north of the National Assembly Building, with the Supreme Court and the mosque relocated to the south. The diagonal lines of the residential hostels now fanned open toward the Citadel of Institutions, and the housing for high officials was sited further south towards the capitol’s lower boundary. This reversed the National Assembly Building’s two discrete points of entry and associated prospects - to the north a ceremonial public boulevard, to the south a forecourt. The former was conceived with particular regard to its distant prospect, while the latter was defined as a “working” forecourt for governmental and judicial institutions.

This reorientation of the site plan appeared motivated, at least in part, by a desire to clarify the internal order of the design. The Citadel of Assembly and Citadel of Institutions now faced each other, unobstructed, across the open extent of the parkland. Less direct, however, was the proposed relationship between the National Assembly Building and the existing city. Here the southern platform was treated as a bounded court, with houses for high officials mediating the assembly precinct and the city. The connection between the capitol and its immediate urban context to the south thus seemed neglected, if not deliberately severed. This disjuncture was, however, reconsidered in the next sequence of design iterations.

By late 1963 the design of the north and south plaza had acquired distinctive characteristics. The site plan dated December 1963 is illustrative. This drawing registered an important change to the location of the National Assembly Building. Pulled away from Crescent Lake and the adjacent ceremonial thoroughfare, the northern entrance court to the building was resolved as a ceremonial platform set within a formal “garden”, and accordingly labelled as the “Garden Entrance Plaza”. The southern point of entry to the building was, by contrast, architecturally delimited. Fronting the mosque and framed by the “Central Government Secretariat”, “Central Library” and the Supreme Court building, this entrance court was labelled “Forecourt”.¹⁹ In this proposal two discrete entrance environments defined in terms of “garden” and “court” were explicitly juxtaposed.

From Kahn’s earliest site diagrams, the doubling of the entries had allowed for the delineation of two patterns of use: one associated with the parliamentarians, legal officers, public servants and their personnel; and the other with the public and public ceremonies. However, a key question remained

17 For the re-conception of the mosque as a prayer hall, see August Komendant’s account, *August Komendant, 18 Years with Architect Louis I. Kahn*, (Englewood: Aloray, 1975), 78.

18 Letter, Kahn to Ahmad, 16 May 1963.

19 Reed notes that a central Secretariat building and a meteorological observatory were late additions to the program introduced in the late summer of 1963. Reed, “Sher-e-Bangla Nagar, Capital of Bangladesh,” 377.

obscure in this dialectical proposition: that is, what constitutes the primary “public” approach to the building?

The Dilemma of the Entrance

This ambiguity was partly due to the location of the existing city of Dhaka. Orientated towards the city, the south plaza intuitively read as the primary forecourt to the building. The northern podium and garden, in turn, looked toward the Citadel of Institutions, which, according to the logic of the site plan, served as the locus of public life within the precinct. Although in Kahn’s early drawings the latter frontage was more definitively presented as the “public” entrance to the National Assembly Building, this was in tension with the location of the existing city.

Kahn’s sketches and office drawings dating from 1964 indicate the on-going explorations of both environments. The design of the ceremonial plaza to the north of the National Assembly Building, later named Presidential Square, was first resolved and this grand masonry under-croft is where the construction of the capitol complex began in late 1964. The southern forecourt however remained less developed at this time. Sketches and office drawings evidence the on-going evolution of this precinct during the second half of 1964. In these studies the court-like character of the National Assembly Building’s immediate setting was gradually dissolved. Consistent in these explorations was the articulation of the southern podium as a two-level structure, which vertically delineated vehicular and pedestrian movements. In addition, the lower concourse provided a second entry to the building at ground level, via a covered path. The National Assembly Building was therefore assigned with distinct points of entry in both plan and section. What remained ambivalent, however, was the building’s “main entrance” and approach. Notation to an undated office drawing suggests that the dilemma was addressed in early 1965. Here, under the heading “Notes about changes brought by LIK about PAC on 12 Apr. 65” it was inscribed: “The main entrance at the capital will be at Road A [boulevard bordering the southern boundary of the site]. The Supreme Court Bldg. should be considered with its environment as an entrance bldg.”²⁰ By mid-1965 the south plaza was categorically framed as the principle entry to the building.

A concurrent “Progress Brochure” – written with the perspective of the client in mind – outlines a suggestive account of the imagined public approach to the building along the southern boundary.²¹ This description was closely aligned with the site plan of January 1965. Here a pedestrian approach aligned with the north-south axis was proposed – this composition distinct from the earlier plans in which the primary approach and ascent to the southern podium had been at cross-axis to the National Assembly Building. The southern landscape to the building was conceived as a grand

²⁰ Holding 650.MP:151, Kahn Collection.

²¹ Typed document, Philadelphia office to Roy Gvus, sent 9 July 1965, “Second Capital of Pakistan in Dacca, Citadel of Assembly, Progress Booklet” LIK 122, Kahn Collection.

and ceremonial pedestrian Entrance Square and garden, situated between the National Assembly Building and the city.

By 1966 the project had reached an advanced level of resolution and construction documents were issued. The design of the southern precinct, however, remained in flux. In late 1966 the podium was recomposed. Square-shaped in plan and approximately 200 metres wide, its scale was amplified. The undercroft to this structure was to partly serve as accommodation for cars and mechanical services, and particular attention was paid to the circulatory connection between the lower concourse and the podium above. The passage of movement from the hostel's covered walkways to the upper platform was also closely studied and a number of connecting stairways were developed and tested. A subtle yet significant design revision, in late 1966, involved repositioning of the south plaza relative to the lake. Previously the podium projected into the water body, now it was aligned with the lake's southern boundary. The result was a more pronounced separation between the podium and the mosque. The modest bridge, which had earlier mediated the two elements, was now elongated. Here, arched masonry walls bracketed a passageway at ground level, while also supporting the bridge above. In this arrangement the two paths of entry to the National Assembly Building were expressed and the threshold between the podium and the mosque/entrance chamber was amplified.

By the late 1960s the National Assembly Building, when viewed from the city of Dhaka, was resolved as a monumental and distinctive architectural node set upon a lake, fronted by a grand podium and surrounded by an expansive landscape, it was arrived at by way of a ceremonial bridge hovering in the air, suspended over water.

From East Pakistan to Bangladesh

Between March and April of 1971 Louis Kahn's office in Dhaka was closed and their contract terminated. Kahn's return was however not prolonged. Only months after the close of the yearlong brutal civil conflict, and the resulting emergence of Bangladesh as an independent nation-state, negotiations with Kahn's office were resumed. Within a period of only two years, the capitol of Dhaka had undergone a remarkable symbolic translation: from the Pakistani second capital to the capitol for the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

The most significant programmatic change to the project introduced at this time was the extensive requirement for a new secretariat. The 1973 site plan registers the development of this program in terms of a colossal and monolithic office building situated to the north, across the park from the Citadel of Assembly. The Citadel of Institutions was thus replaced with housing for the new governmental bureaucracy. The Secretariat was not realised. Nevertheless, the associated siting for the Secretariat building consolidated the southern precinct as a public plaza facing the existing city.

Realized Capitol

With the Citadel of Institutions eliminated and the Bangladeshi Secretariat never built, the National Assembly Building and hostels assumed a formal singularity unintended by the architect. By the time of the project's completion in 1983, nearly a decade after Kahn's death, Dhaka's densely knit and populated city fabric had surrounded the capitol. The juxtaposition between the capitol reserve and its immediate urban situation was stark. The near 1000-acre site that Kahn had persistently claimed as vital to the order of his proposed plan now served as a vast urban void within the city. The National Assembly Building now presented itself as a monumental figure with sculptural force set within an expansive green field.

The view from the north, and at a distance, is of a compositionally integrated and hierarchically ordered architectural complex: the centralized, monumental National Assembly Building set above a lake and flanked to the east and west by low-rising, supporting hostels. Through precise geometric control and the masterful layering and superimposition of fenestration patterns, the scale of the National Assembly Building and the residential hostels is mediated from this perspective. The overall affect is of a unified and aesthetically powerful pictorial composition consisting of sharply defined elemental forms and geometric figurations. Seen from the south, the National Assembly Building rests upon a vast, gently rising masonry podium. The form of the mosque/entrance block dominates, with the body of the National Assembly Building receding behind. Particularly striking, once the top of the podium is reached, is the distance that separates the podium and the National Assembly Building. The two architectural elements appear pulled apart, with air and water in between.

Evidenced in the early site proposals for this project was the architect's effort to balance an image of an abstract, temporally ambiguous architectural form with the expression of the building as a forum for civic action and interaction. This was in part achieved by the delineation of patterns of use - by the members of the government and aligned staff, on the one hand, and the civilians on the other. These priorities were made manifest through the two-pronged entrance to the building.

In the project as realised this desired delineation remains in play. Such distinct patterns of occupation are not accommodated by the order of the plan, however, but by the architectural section. When in use, the parliamentarians, high officials and their associated staff enter the building via the southern and ground level concourse. This entrance more readily allows for a "secure" point of entry and also facilitates direct access to and from the vehicular point of arrival. With the everyday passage of officials and associated personnel accommodated within the lower concourse, both the south and north platform appear clear of the building's day-to-day operation. The civic operation of the building is thus not merely delineated from public and ceremonial events but also in effect obscured from view. This sectional hierarchy, coupled with the building's highly internalised configuration, gives the complex a curiously vacant expression.

When not closed to the public by security blockades, and despite the National Assembly Building's at times occupation by undemocratically elected officials, the capitol precinct, and the southern

podium and gardens in particular, serves as a vibrant place of gathering within the city. The popular reception of this project, it appears, readily distinguishes this landscape from its contemporary political symbolism and function. The architectural cut that separates the southern podium from the National Assembly Building, works less as an amplified entrance threshold, as it was perhaps intended, and more as an architectural void that distinguishes a vital public stage from a visually spectacular edifice. Rather than a destination point, the National Assembly Building serves as enigmatic background to a vast recreational ground within the city. The presence of Dhaka and its populace are not here denied, neither does the project serve as an active civic precinct in continuum with the existing city. The meaning of this monument appears less indebted to its civic purpose than the capacity to aesthetically stir the collective imagination.