

Louis Kahn and the Little Book of Tea: Echoes of the Tao Te Ching in Louis Kahn's Thought

Peter Schneider

Professor of Architecture and Chancellor's Scholar
College of Architecture and Planning
University of Colorado Denver
USA

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the impact that passages in Kakuzo Okakura's Book of Tea had on the transformation occurring in Louis Kahn's thought and work after his encounter with Okakura's book in early 1954. I suggest that it was his encounter with the sensibilities that the seven excerpts he cites in a January 8, 1954 letter embody that allowed Kahn to quickly transform his personal approach to architecture. Using Kahn's own words, I show how those new ideas rapidly begin to manifest themselves in his words and thought as clear departures from the prescriptions of canonical modernism that had shaped his work prior to his encounter with Okakura's book. I finally suggest that the foundations of Kahn's novel approach to his work find their origins in the attitudes and sensibilities of the East rather than in the normative philosophies of the West as has been suggested by some Kahn scholars.

Keywords: Kahn, Okakura, Tyng, Architecture, Thought, Theory, Influences, Tao

1. The Letter

There is a long series of letters written by Louis Kahn to Anne Griswold Tyng between mid-November of 1953 and early December of 1954. Anne Tyng lived in Rome for most of that time. She had gone there to wait out her pregnancy and give birth to their daughter Alexandra. On January 8 of 1954 Louis Kahn, in one of those letters, wrote these words: "I have been reading The Book of Tea and here are some gems out of it." (Tyng 1997. 88-90) Kahn then cites six short passages from Kakuzo Okakura's book. (Okakura, 1956. 6, 36-37, 44, 45, 46 and 90). They appear below in the order in which they are cited. The sections appearing in parentheses in two of the excerpts are significant parts of the text that I have included to situate the sections Kahn chose to cite in an appropriate context.

- 1.1. "Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in others."
- 1.2. "Translation is always treason, and as a Ming author observes, can at its best be only the reverse side of brocade, all the threads are there, but not the subtlety of color and design. But after all, what great doctrine [the Tao] is there which is easy to expound! The ancient [sages] never put their teachings in systematic form. They spoke in paradoxes, for they were afraid of uttering half-truths. They began by talking like fools and ended by making their hearers wise."
- 1.3. "(It is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow. The present is the moving Infinity, the legitimate sphere of the Relative.) Relativity seeks adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings."
- 1.4. "Lao Tse claimed that only in vacuum lay the truly essential. The reality of a room, for instance, was to be found in the vacant space enclosed by the roof and walls, not in the roof and walls themselves. The usefulness of a water pitcher dwelt in the emptiness where water might be put, not in the pitcher or the material of which it was made. Vacuum is all potent because all containing. In Vacuum alone motion becomes possible."
- 1.5. "In Art the importance of the same principle (absence) is illustrated by the value of suggestion. In leaving something unsaid the beholder is given a chance to complete the idea and thus a great masterpiece irresistibly rivets your attention until you seem to become actually a part of it. A vacuum is there for you to enter and fill up to the full measure of your aesthetic emotion."

Kahn ends the first five excerpts by writing: “Anny I was very taken by the little Book of Tea, which really deals with the art of contemplation and living. Some day we will read it – I mean you will read it to me aloud. It puts into words the feeling of beginnings. Speaking of flowers what is referred to as the poetry of love.” Kahn’s use of the term ‘beginnings’ in this excerpt letter is mentioned in Solomon (2000, 174, n21). Solomon notes that this is Kahn’s first written use of the term ‘beginnings.’ That term and especially the idea of the archaic was to become central to Kahn’s understanding of architecture as he developed his own voice as a theorist and teacher. Kahn ends the letter by including a seventh excerpt:

- 1.6. “(Surely with mankind the appreciation of flowers must have been coeval with the poetry of love. Where better than in a flower, sweet in its unconsciousness, fragrant because of its silence, can we image the unfolding of a virgin soul). The primeval man in offering the first garland to his maiden thereby transcended the brute. He became human in thus rising above the crude necessities of nature. He entered the realm of art when he perceived the subtle use of the useless. I don’t like these last words but the thought is beautiful - Anyway it’s [the book] delightful.”

2. *The significance of the Excerpts*

Louis Kahn’s inclusion of these seven excerpts in his letter is important in terms of documenting the history of the formation of his ideas about architecture and its manifestations. They exist as the most extensive and sustained use of quotation in the corpus of his writings, talks and teachings. That alone marks them as significant. Kahn had this to say about the lack of citation in his writings and lectures: “I don’t have any historical knowledge, nor any research tendencies. I can’t look up and find other literature: I just can’t do it. And so its [my writing] left, in a way, in a very undeveloped state . . . I really say too little to make it completely understandable.” (Latour, 1991, 309).

Kahn’s gleanings from the Book of Tea are shared with Anne Tyng at the precise moment that Kahn was – with her encouragement - remaking himself as an architect, a theorist and a teacher. His encounter with the ‘little book’ came at a particularly fertile but very difficult time in his life in architecture. The letters Kahn wrote to Tyng reveal a man struggling earnestly to find a new voice. He was looking for a new way of expressing those nascent but emerging realizations that would mark him as singular: as an artist rather than a professional, as a teacher rather than an instructor, and as an important figure in the landscape of contemporary rather than modern American architecture.

The Rome letters, closely read, exist as a persuasive history of Kahn’s architectural, intellectual and imaginative transformation during a year in which he wrestled with ways to share his new insights and emerging understandings with Anne and others. Kahn’s mention of Okakura’s book and his careful choice of these seven selections to send to Tyng marks the beginning of that period of intense speculation in and through which Kahn re/formed himself as an architect.

The Okakura excerpts are part of an ongoing discussion that Kahn was having with Tyng: he in Philadelphia, she in Rome. That discussion started in his letter to her on Friday, December 18, 1953. It is a long letter – five pages. It was written a week after Kahn had been part of a discussion at Princeton on ‘Architecture and the University.’ Kahn writes, earnestly and with passion: “I advanced my “order-design” thesis but added another area of design influence – “the nature of the space.” He continues: “external shapes must wait until the ‘nature of the space’ unfolds, and before ‘order’ can be evolved or created. Now that is the reason why I had difficulty explaining order before. The basis from which order could be derived was absent. . . nature of the space → order < design.” (Tyng 1997, 76-77). Kahn’s letters to Tyng on December 24 and 26, 1953 and January 7, 1954 mention that Kahn had “talked to many people by now about this [thesis]. . . ‘and for once they seem themselves to understand.” (Tyng, 1997, 81, 83)

Kahn’s use and application of the terms ‘order’ and ‘design’ is rooted in the canon of the classical tradition he was exposed to in his Beaux Arts education at Penn. That canon finds its origin in the Vitruvian prescription that “architecture depends on order (*taxis*) and design (*diathesis*).” VI.2.1. The meanings Kahn attached to the terms ‘order’ and design’ as he understood them are directly equivalent to those evoked by the Vitruvian terms *taxis* and *diathesis*.

Kahn’s letter citing these gems of ideas from The Book of Tea was written just three weeks after the ‘nature of the space’ letter to Anne Tyng quoted in the previous paragraph.

While there is no direct evidence to point to the fact that Kahn had started to read Okakura's book prior to the Princeton meeting, the connection between Lao Tse's understanding of the locus of the reality of the room and Kahn's subsequent understanding of the fact that the reality of a space lay in its 'nature' rather than in its order or design suggests that he probably had. There is another passage that appears in the Book of Tea a few pages after the LaoTse excerpt that seems to confirm this: 'the followers of Zen aimed at a direct communion with the inner nature of things.' [My underline] The Book of Tea letter on January 8, 1954 consequently establishes the underpinnings for Kahn's transformative orientation toward his work, and toward his evolving realizations about architecture, buildings and the reality behind the making of a room.

I use the term new orientation with some reluctance, as it misstates the case. Kahn, in an essay published in 1931 and titled 'The Value and Aim in Sketching' talks about the importance of sensing the "intrinsic character" in things. (Latour, 1991, 10,11) His use of that term is evidence of the lasting influence that the teachings of J. Liberty Tadd had on Kahn when he studied at Philadelphia's Public Industrial Art School. The term Intrinsic Character turns into Nature of the Space in 1953, into What the Thing Wants To Be in 1954, and ultimately to the term Form in the renamed Form → Order < Design thesis that became so important to Kahn later in his career.

The connection between the ideas of 'intrinsic character' and 'the nature of the space' is made in Kahn's 1953 comment to the effect that: "We are trying to put all of the responsibility for discovering what may be the [intrinsic] character of today's buildings on someone else. . . We should arrive at these discoveries through our internal contemplation on the nature of the space." (Tyng, 1997, 75). The addition of the nature of the space to his earlier order-design thesis marks the beginning of the intellectual and imaginative journey that transformed Kahn from an accomplished architect into a truly great contemporary American architect and arguably the greatest teacher of architecture in the 20th century. His encounter with the Book of Tea provided him with the important conceptual tools he needed to help him to find his way.

3. Words, Images and Fugitive Sensibilities

Susan Sontag, in her essay 'Notes on Camp,' observes that, in writing about fugitive sensibilities that are 'very alive and very powerful,' the "form of jottings, rather than the essay (with its claim to a linear, consecutive argument) seems more appropriate for getting something down." (Sontag, 1966, 25, 27). Kahn, at this point in his life, was clearly confronting architecture's fugitive sensibilities. He had been introduced to those through the Book of Tea, and had been exposed to a way of using language that was poetic and expressive rather than prescriptive and informative.

Lao Tse's and Okakura's idiosyncratic ways of using language is present in the phrases that Kahn read and absorbed in the Book of Tea in late 1953 and early 1954. Those served as a very real model for the radical changes Kahn began to make in his vocabulary and syntax. Okakura's mention of LaoTse's enigmatic use of language exemplified in the following statement "There is a thing which is all containing. How silent! How solitary. It stands alone and changes not. I do not know its name and so call it the Path. With reluctance I call it the Infinite. Infinity is the Fleeting, the Fleeting is the Vanishing, the Vanishing is the Reverting" gave impetus to Kahn's invention of a new, cryptic vocabulary. It allowed him to begin to use the paired terms that characterize his mature thought: Lightless and Darkless, Silence and Light, the Unmeasurable and the Measurable, the Ideal and the Circumstantial, Existence and Presence, Servant and Served, and of course Beginnings.

The way Kahn intentionally began working with words and images, as well as his exploration of the poetic potential of the enigmatic phrase, was a shift that was clearly provoked and encouraged by his encounter with the nature of the language used in the Book of Tea. His shift to the use of the techniques of jotting and commenting as he wrote and spoke was also a reflection of the demands placed on him by the fugitive sensibility he was encountering in his discovery of an architecture that had "existence, but no presence." He had begun dealing with an emerging sensibility in architecture that was 'very alive, and very powerful.'

It is after his encounter with the Book of Tea that we consequently begin to see Kahn's way of expressing his ideas change markedly. His modes of writing and his style of talking – of using words – was changing. Instead of the didactic and even pedantic style that marked his earlier writings and lectures, he began to dissemble. Like Okakura's ancient sages, Kahn appeared to 'never to put his teachings in systematic form.' He began to speak in paradoxes, and 'began talking like a fool.' He notes, in a letter to Tyng in January of 1954, that he was fast becoming known as "an architect with his head in the clouds." (Tyng, 1997, 93).

It was almost as if the things she was encountering in and around architecture were incapable of precise definition. The fugitive architectural sensibilities he was working on were elusive, and all-but-inexpressible. They were, in the invented words that were to become favorites of his, shadowed in the lightless and darkless realm of an unmeasurable silence.

Kahn's work on finding the words he needed to express his emerging ideas and understandings was described by both his wife Esther, and by Anne Tyng. Esther Kahn, in an interview with Alessandra Latour in May of 1982, makes the following comment: ". . . words and how to put them were very important to him, and they became more and more important. . . The importance of the meaning of a word for him was such that he could spend hours on just getting exactly what he wanted to convey, what he wanted to say." (Latour, 1986, 25, 27). Anne Griswold Tyng in an interview on May of 1982, again with Latour, recalls that "Lou had a rare feeling for words. . . Since he had always been drawing, images were more important than words: words were, for Lou, images. . . He didn't take words for granted. Each word was a discovery for him. He was always looking for a better way to articulate things. The way he worked with images and words was one of the keys to his greatness." (Latour, 1986, 41)

The seven excerpts from the Book of Tea that Kahn chose to share with his 'Anny' in the form of these highly personal jottings, exist as the record of a grouping of sensibilities that clearly struck imaginative chords in Kahn's mind as he struggled with re/forming and in/forming his new orientation toward his work in architecture. Kahn, as he himself notes, may not have liked the words in those borrowings, but did find the thoughts they held and expressed to be beautiful. And so Kahn continued his search to find the words and phrases that he could use to express those very alive and very powerful sensibilities in his work and through his thought in a way that did them justice. In 1955, in his poem Order Is, Kahn realizes that "The nature of space reflects what it wants to be." (Latour, 1991, 58). That realization led inexorably to his framing of that unique, pregnant question that characterizes his new approach to his work: "What does this thing want to be?" Kahn suddenly began asking that singular question of all sorts of things: bricks and windows and walls, programs and precedents and preconceptions.

In 1954 a synagogue's space told him that it wanted to be a place to assemble under a tree. In that same year a kitchen told him that it wanted to be the living room, and a bedroom whispered that it wanted to be a little house by itself. And a railroad station that wanted to be a street. In 1956 the library told him it wanted to be a place where a man takes a book to the light and reads. In 1959 a sanctuary told him that it wanted to be a place for asking a question. A school told him to think of a man under a tree, talking to a few people about a realization he had - wanting to be a teacher. And in 1974, in a notebook found with Kahn after he died in New York, the brick had another conversation with him - long and intimate and final - and again whispered to him that it wanted to be an arch.

4. Echoes of the TAO

The changes that began to occur in Kahn's use of language during 1954 and especially 1955 began the process that eventually defined his greatness. Kahn 'didn't take these new words for granted.' Each new word was a discovery for him as he looked for better ways to express his new realizations. The new way he learned to work with images and words, and his ability to treat the phrase as poetic, brings me back to the little Book of Tea and its role in in/forming and re/forming Kahn's changed approach to his work after he read it in late 1953 and early 1954.

To describe the pivotal role the little book played in this process of transformation, I will use the seven excerpts previously cited and will connect them to the words and images that Kahn's began to use after he had read Okakura's book to show his borrowings and gleanings from that 'little' Book of Tea. I can, in this paper, merely give one or two illustrations of Kahn's incorporation of these Eastern ideas into his own idiosyncratic vocabulary. Each of the ideas he appropriates appears in his notebooks, lectures, letters and other writings in many different ways and at many different times. The persistence of these borrowings in his published writings, lectures and interviews is so extensive that to describe those fully would require an essay or chapter for each. The need to 'feel the greatness of little things' in others, as Kahn transformed it, became the singular question "what do you want to be" brick and stone and column, sanctuary and synagogue, library and school. By posing that simple question, Kahn brought the otherness of the thing he was working with - its intrinsic character; the nature of its space; its Form - into the conversation, meaningfully and mindfully.

By asking the joint what it wanted to be, Kahn discovered that it “was the beginning of ornament: that ornament begins in the adoration of the joint.” The adoration of the joint occurs in three ways in Kahn’s work: the physical joint is adored, as are the conceptual joint and the phenomenal/experiential joint. The image of ‘translation as always being treason,’ of needing to turn the brocade over to see the ‘real’ pattern, ultimately led Kahn to his realization of the power of the real as it appeared at the time an idea or thing first manifested itself. In the moment of its origin, it’s ‘beginning.’ To avoid treason, one needed to return to a thing’s moment of origin, its beginning, so that one might sense its ‘intrinsic character,’ the archaic ‘nature of the thing or the space.’ One had to, quite simply, sense ‘what it had - always and forever - wanted to be,’ like the “momentous event in architecture when the wall parted and the column became” or Kahn’s sense that “the beauty of architecture lies in those recessions of the mind from which come all that is not yet said and all that is not yet made.”

The image of those ancient sages never putting their teachings in systematic form, of their speaking in paradoxes, as they were afraid of uttering half-truths clearly freed Kahn to assume a persona and voice that, while he began talking like a fool, ended up making others wise. It is an interesting if anecdotal fact that Kahn was often called ‘loony Lou’ by his colleagues and especially his detractors. The change in the way he chooses to describe things as he writes the rest of his letters to Tyng in 1954, and as he begins to publicly discuss his ideas over the rest of that year and after her return in December of 1955, is marked, and consistent. While there is evidence of awkwardness in his letters to ‘Anny,’ his new voice is not an outcome of that old awkwardness that, as Tyng comments in her interview with Alessandra Latour, was the result of his shyness and his late start in school at the age of seven. (Latour, 1986, 26)

The value of suggestion, the art of leaving something unsaid so that the beholder [and even the designer] is given a chance to ‘listen’ and complete the work so that you seem to become actually a part of it became central to Kahn’s method is conveyed in the words he used to talk about the Kimbell: He says “when you make a building you make a life - and it talks to you.” And “this building feels – and it’s a good feeling – as if I had nothing to do with it: as if some hand other than my own did it.” And “when you know everything about a building before you start building it your answers are not true. The building gives you answers as it grows and becomes itself.” The immanence of things that these words entail, their own sense of becoming, reverberates in Kahn’s enigmatic but famous saying: “what was has always been, what is has always been, what will be has always been.” That orientation towards time clearly – and almost unequivocally - echoes the sensibility that one finds in the teaching ‘it is in us that God meets with nature, and yesterday parts from tomorrow. The present is the moving Infinity, the legitimate sphere of the Relative,’ that Okakura cites in his book. It is this particular sensibility, I suggest, that led Kahn to his images of silence and light, the unmeasurable, and to his images of the lightless, darkless realm of the threshold of the shadow.

Okakura continues the passage with these words: “Relativity seeks adjustment; adjustment is art: the art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings.” Kahn’s renewed focus on the circumstantial as the locus of design, and the particular as the force that gives rise to art, reiterates these words from the Book of Tea and gives them a new orientation when he suggests that the space of adjustment, the space of all art, is at the threshold of the shadow. The threshold where silence, the all containing, meets light, the giver of all presences. The threshold one crosses to enter ‘the realm of art where we perceive the subtle use of the useless.’

5. Consequences

I have left to last my discussion of the impact of the little book on Kahn’s thought and process the singular excerpt that deals with LaoTse’s image of the vacuum with its ineffable sense of ‘silence’ and its insistence that “the reality of the room is to be found in the emptiness enclosed by the roof and walls and not in the roof and walls themselves.” Ursula LeGuin’s translation of this passage put these words in another context: one, which relates quite directly to Kahn’s own interpretation of the passage. She writes “Cut doors and windows to make a room. Where the room isn’t there’s room for you. So the profit in what is is in the use of what isn’t.” (Le Guin, 1997, 14). This particular sensibility - and the ideas it embodied - clearly had the most significant impact on Kahn, as it reappears again and again and again in a number of ways as Kahn rediscovered the essential nature – the intrinsic character – of the room in his design for the Trenton Bath House and in all of his later work. It inevitably led to his many statements that held that “the most inspirational point from which architecture can be understood is to regard the room as the beginning of architecture,” or “it is the room that’s important when you’re in it. The whole building means nothing compared to the room you’re in. . . the room is the beginning of architecture.” (Wurman, 1965. 154, 237).

In mid-1955 Kahn writes these words in one of his personal notebooks: “I have discovered what everyone else has found that a bay system is a room system. A room is a defined space defined by the way it is made. By the way it gets a roof. . and has its walls to separate itself from the rest of the spaces. In a system of bays not intended as rooms the rooms however do still exist though it[sic] may not have the walls to define it.[sic]”(Solomon, 2000, 169 n25). Kahn began to explore this rediscovered ‘order of the room’ and the ‘bay system’ and ‘the use of what isn’t’ in his 1954 designs for the Adler and DeVore houses. He also explored it in his 1954/1955 proposals for the Adeth Jeshurun synagogue. And, of course, he used it with impeccable refinement in his design for the pivotal project that marked the formal point of his intellectual and architectural conversion: The Trenton Bath House.

Kahn writes this about the great importance of the Trenton Bath House in his oeuvre, and of its continuing presence as his most singular architectural epiphany. “If the world discovered me after I designed the Richards towers building, I discovered myself after designing that little concrete block bathhouse in Trenton.” And: “from this [little bathhouse] came a generative force which is recognizable in every building which I’ve done since.”(Solomon, 2000, 174 n4 and 175 n6).

The Trenton Bath House exists as the first project in which Kahn translated the words he did not like but which contained a beautiful thought - ‘the subtle use of the useless’ - into his founding conception of servant (useless) and served (useful) space. That founding conception was to become the seminal force in Kahn’s work from that point forward, and established his new architectural position in a way that allowed him to realize that he could now say goodbye to the precepts of canonical modernism that had shaped and informed his work before 1953. Kahn writes this of his discovery of the servant and the served:

“Now when I did the bath house, the Trenton Bath House, I discovered a very simple thing. I discovered that certain spaces are very unimportant and some spaces are the *raison d’être* for doing what you’re doing. But the small [useless] spaces were contributing to the strength of the larger [useful] spaces. They were serving them. And when I realized there were servant areas and there were [and canonical modernism] anymore. I realized I don’t have to work for him at all.” (Solomon, 2000, 174 n2). And: “The Trenton Bath House gave me the opportunity to work out the separation between the serving and the served spaces. It was a very clear and simple problem. It was solved with absolute purity. Every space was accounted for, there is no redundancy. . . And I found, during the expression of this very simple building, the concept of the serving and the served spaces.” (Solomon, 2000, 175, n5). Or, as Lao Tse would have put it, of ‘the useful and the useless.’ And Le Guin, of ‘what is and what isn’t.’

The connections between the words and ‘beautiful and delightful’ ideas Kahn so carefully noted in Okakura’s *Book of Tea* and the images, ideas and language that Kahn began to use after he ‘discovered himself’ in and through his process of designing the Trenton Bath House are clearly neither an accident nor a coincidence. The echoes are too clear, the resonances too pure. The argument that the foundations of Kahn’s highly personal approach toward his work after 1954 finds their origins in the ideas and practices of the orient – of Taoism and Zen as they are embodied in the Way of Tea - rather than those of the occident as they appear in Plato’s works as some scholars have suggested, is consequently compelling.

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