

### 3 Architects:

The following is a study conducted to get at what sorts of ideas may underlie architectural pursuits. The architects, John Hejduk, Louis I. Kahn and Michelangelo, were selected for their extraordinary ability, and the richness of the ideas with which they create/created architecture. The text is based upon interviews, in a sense.

By asking questions I hope to get at a more critical understanding of the architects' works as well as a better understanding of the architecture of our times. I questioned in order to find out what questions they asked of themselves and what questions they did not ask.

Our place in the World is established in questioning. For Maurice Merleau-Ponty,

“Every question, even that of a simple cognition, is part of the central question that is ourselves, of that appeal for totality to which no objective being answers.”<sup>1</sup>

“Philosophy does not take the context as given; it turns back upon it in order to seek the origin and the meaning of the questions and of responses and the identity of him who questions...”<sup>2</sup>

We each make and remake the world before us, questioning , answering, and finding out who and what we are.

1. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 104

2. Merleau-Ponty, *Ibid*, 105

#### 1. *Time and place?*

Michelangelo Buonarati. Born March 6, 1475, Florence, Italy  
Died February 18, 1564.

Louis I. Kahn. Born February 20, 1901, Osel, Estonia Russia;  
age 5 family immigrated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Died  
March 17, 1974.

John Hejduk. Born 1929, New York City, New York. Rus-  
sian, Catholic.

Each of these men stayed in one place most of their lives, and identified themselves very strongly with that place. Moves were based on work. Michelangelo spent some time in Rome (a matter of working on the Sistine Chapel). Kahn lived in Philadelphia from the time his family immigrated, turning down jobs that would have taken him from there. Hejduk spent brief periods studying and teaching away from his native New York City.

## 2. *What are the ideological influences in the work?*

This question immediately attempts to get to the heart of the matter of the thinking of each of these individuals, as men of their times and architects.

Michelangelo read Platonic philosophy, at the time the writings had been recently rediscovered. These readings spurred a pursuit of ideal beauty a Platonic Form. A sculptor first, his interest in the inner forces of human form contributed to his architectural expression of forces in material, a rather honest understanding of the nature of materials is experienced in his departures from more Vitruvian forms of classicism. Such departures align him with the Mannerists. His training as a stone-cutter/mason inform his understanding of material and also plays a role in the ideological expression of proportions found in his work. His architecture may imply the ideologically rooted proportions of the music of his time as well.<sup>3</sup> His poetry suggests a less rational understanding of the world around him. Michelangelo, a pessimist, was interested more in the transcendental than in the phenomenal.

3. For further investigation on the possible implications of musical proportions in Michelangelo's work see "Michelangelo and the Music and Mathematics of His Time" by Caterina Pirina, *The Art Bulletin* Sept. 1985 Vol. LXVII Num.3 P.368-382

**Teaching** is the backbone of the two Americans pursuits, it makes them more in tune with Architecture. It opens avenues of research unavailable to the average practitioner. It keeps one honest and, generally, more **critical**.

Kahn is interested in presenting the nature of things. Kahn's reading of "volume zero" of history is his imagination of origins; a spiritual quest for the foundations or eternal truths of architecture. Kahn was schooled in the Beaux Arts tradition at Penn, his gravitation toward the modern movement was closely tied to its social agenda. Kahn's work is essentialist to its very core. He sought to find monumental expression in the modern movement

Each is looking to the past for aid in the pursuit of architecture. However, Kahn was looking back to an imagination of origins in order to present an architecture of origins; an original architecture, perhaps. Kahn's work attempts the transcendent, where Hejduk and Michelangelo are culturally bound.

Hejduk and Michelangelo bring forward the elements of the past in order to frame an architecture that is hauntingly referential; we have seen these things before, they are familiar. In this way they re-present architecture to us. Their way is that of David Michael Levin's "recollection", or Mark Wigley's Deconstruction, where elements of the past are rediscovered in different ways from the way we are used to seeing them. **This forces us to reevaluate the hegemonies of architecture and culture.** This parallel between the Mannerism of Michelangelo's times and the Deconstruction of our times reinforce similarities between these two architects.

Hejduk works with the methodical investigation and representation of architectural ideas (questions). He is interested in the "poetics of architecture that only an architect can give."<sup>4</sup> American pragmatic concerns are coupled with more European intellectual pursuits. The mundane forms of vernacular architecture meet literature and the mythological dimension of architecture drawing his work into a private world of poetry, prose, drawing, and painting. The influence of critical thought reaches deeply into the architecture. K. Michael Hays describes Hejduk's work as a "chronotope", meaning "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history."<sup>5</sup>

4. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 63

5. K Michael Hays. *Hejduk's Chronotope*. 10.

### 3. What is the framework: givens/backdrop?

This question is one of the times in which the man lived. I found it instructive in how the specific philosophical leanings of each was framed, as well as their attitudes with regard to architecture and culture in general.

Late fifteenth and early sixteenth century Florence saw the destruction of the Florentine Republic and the decline of Florence as a world power and primary center of trade. Political upheaval prompted the occupation of the city by French and Spanish armies and German mercenaries at the close of the Renaissance. Mannerism was finding strength in Florentine Humanism as the artists and architects rebelled against the Rationalism of Leonardo Da-Vinci. Renaissance classicism was being questioned in Mannerist works. It was a volatile time for the city, Michelangelo was forced to hide for his life in a basement after aligning himself with the Florentine Republicans, against the Medici.

A certain amount of **upheaval** is always evident in any society. Michelangelo and John Hejduk live in more **tumultuous and questioning** times. Kahn, despite his questioning of Modernism and technology, built in a time where people were concerned with establishing new institutions, rather than tearing down old ones. Each architect was, simultaneously, out-of-phase with and a product of their times. I mean to say their course of development does not strictly adhere to the immediate currents of society at large. Their work is ground breaking, which puts them slightly ahead, or at least somewhat out of tune, with their contemporaries.

Kahn was born into America's G.I. Generation, a generation that overcame major crisis time and again. America's arrival as a world power and World War I came early in his life. A young architect entering the profession just prior to the Great Depression and World War II, he became a housing expert, drawn to the social agenda of the modern movement. His maturity as an architect came during the Cold War, a time of technological breakthroughs, the space race, and the establishment of scientific institutions. He forged his thinking on architecture and institutions during this time. The culmination of the rational/technological age was the lunar landing, at the same time a spiritual revolt against the institutions that he helped build was raging among the youth of the day. This was difficult to understand for the man. Structuralism was his philosophical contemporary, which is to some degree evident in his buildings. Today, his architecture is viewed as having a Post Modern legacy, as Robert Venturi was his most immediate descendant at the University of Pennsylvania.

**Between the rationality of Kahn's plans and the spiritual slant of his writings there is tension. His buildings, despite their order, offer a spiritual sensitivity not often seen among the technologists of the modern movement. This reveals the departure of his work from the rhetoric of the modern movement. This departure, though oddly reactionary, reveals the edginess of Kahn's work. The work was not wholly of the times in which it was built, yet still is bound to a time that really does not fit into the larger currents of American culture. Post World War II America was an oddly reactionary time.**

Hejduk was born into the Great Depression, a teen during World War II, and came of age at a rationally dominated time in the U.S. It was a time of building institutions, which is reflected in the types of projects that he was given in school, chapels, schools and other structures with civic merit. The late modernist schools of thought are legible in his Texas Houses of the early sixties. The Vietnam War and the late sixties seem to have an impact upon his work, it becomes more ominous and disconcerting than before. Throughout the Cold War, and after its demise, the work questions the methodology of architecture with a depth that is both revolutionary and reactionary. Also evident in Hejduk's work is the Post Modern/Deconstructive debate which has had major effect on contemporary architecture.

Hejduk's reading of culture is a troubling criticism of our times.

## **“We are no longer in an age of optimism.**

We went through a period where there were only programs of optimism. Schools. Hospitals. Sunlight everywhere. Boundaries open up. Privacy was at a minimum. No bedrooms. No kitchens. Open space. No need to have privacy, because this was very utopian, light-filled, optimistic view of the future. There wasn't a counterforce culturally in the same way as we had in the Middle Ages where the programs of pessimism existed to off-balance programs of optimism. Now we are entering into an architecture of pessimism. I don't take this as a negative condition at all. It's simply a necessary psychic state. There has to be an equilibrium, a balancing order for both lines to be running in a parallel and productive way again, like the Middle Ages, where a simultaneity of conditions will provoke certain arguments not presently possible.”<sup>6</sup>

Finally, his place, New York City, plays a role in how he views culture. The city dominates Hejduk's current work, the city is a living organism made up of a million stories (of alienation?). The Silent Witnesses fill worlds of conflicts and contradictions. “They both feel the silence”<sup>7</sup>

6. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa* 63

7. John Hejduk. *Pewter Wings Golden Horns Stone Veils*. 12

#### 4. *What is the framework: rules?*

This question reveals an acute and critical understanding of architectural history on the part of each architect. It also points toward the connection between ideas and architecture in the understanding of each man.

The architecture of Michelangelo is one where the elements of Vitruvius' classical architecture are put into question. He was “not interested in erecting monuments, but in intervening with force in existing ones and changing their meaning, often with only a few energizing features.”<sup>8</sup> The purity of geometry and proportion create spaces of simplicity, contradicted by an irrational architecture of expression (for its day). The clear and honest expression of forces in the elements of building combine in visually active and dynamic space, becoming organic, anatomical, and highly sculptural. It is an architecture that is critically oppositional, where the polemic is resolved in coincidence. The architecture is mimetic, tested in its tracing of its own concept.

8. Rudolf Wittkower. *Idea and Image*.

Kahn's architecture is that of agreement; it is feeling and intuitive architecture. This agreement is reached in dialogue with material and form. **Form**, as he means the word, became the primary resistance that a work was tested against.

**“Form is that which deals with inseparable parts. If you take one thing away, you can't have the whole thing.”**

**“Realization is the realization of form, it is realization of the laws of nature, it is realization of the validity of your relationship with the laws of nature.**

**The first thing that comes from realization is form.**

**Form is not shape.**

**Form is the realization of the inseparable parts of something.**

**When you consider the form of school you consider a realm of spaces, not spaces spelled out, but a place where you sense it is good to learn.”**<sup>10</sup>

**“...form, the inherent essence that an architect had to discern in an architectural program before it was contaminated by practical considerations,...”**<sup>11</sup>

9. Louis Kahn. *What Will Be Has Always Been*. 13

10. *ibid.* 95

11. Brownlee, De Long. *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture*. 22

Hejduk's work is an architecture of simple, at times, even child-like reasoning and method. Decisions are sometimes made in reference to the most obvious connections that humans make, for example in the "Element House":

red = hot = fireplace.

What appears, somehow, before us is an architecture of oppositions, left open to be reassembled by the reader/viewer.

13. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 53

"Wall: '...It (your work) attempts to resolve the issues in the head of the observer...'

Hejduk: 'You're leading not just to my work, but to an American phenomenon, which I agree with substantially.'"<sup>13</sup>

The conflict is rich. The abstractions Hejduk uses relate time, history, place, site, material, shape, program, construction, structure, the fundamental elements of architecture. Titles reveal a great deal about the work: **Silent Witnesses, Victims, Cemetery for the Ashes of Thought, Still Life, Valley of Remote Whispers, Chapel of the Fallen, Sacraments**. Each of these make a statement about the human condition. Taken together we find the general conditions for Hejduk's work. A framework relating the pessimism that he perceives as our current predicament.

Kahn's idea is incredibly close to the Platonic Ideas that were for Renaissance architects ideal geometric arrangements from which specific designs would grow (see Palladio's villas). For Kahn, "Form is *what*. Design is *how*."<sup>12</sup> Hierarchy is revealed in dialogue between "servant" and "served" spaces in "form". The nature of things is foremost in the truth of a work, therefore, in Kahn's famous discussions with bricks, the material is asked what it desires to be.

12. Louis Kahn. *What Will Be Has Always Been*.  
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## 5. *Where does the architect begin?*

Michelangelo began with a sculptural conceptualization of material, space and the forces of bearing within the architectural element. Michelangelo was a professional, an artist and a practitioner. As an architect he did not abandon projects once designed instead, he often personally supervised his building projects.<sup>14</sup> He dealt with the resistances of patrons and the power structure of Florence.

14. For further discussion of Michelangelo's role in the building process see *Michelangelo at San Lorenzo: The Genius as Entrepreneur*. William E. Wallace

**In running his own projects Michelangelo was master mason, site architect, construction manager. This, we know, is a mammoth job, requiring a resolve that most of us are incapable of. It is a testament to Michelangelo's extraordinary abilities.**

Kahn begins with an original abstraction, Form. The Form is based in the ideal formulation of programmatic "desires" of the building's users/owners. The primary theme of the Unitarian Church and school (Rochester), for example, created a centralized Form sketch which was then translated in design.<sup>14</sup> The Form is realized through the architect's ability to discern the institution's principles symbolically.

14. Louis I. Kahn. *Writings, Lectures, Interviews*. "The Sixties A P/A Symposium on the State of Architecture: Part 1." 132-140

For Hejduk, the good architect “starts with the abstract moves towards the real world, at the finish is as close to the original abstraction as possible.”<sup>15</sup>

This idea is related by Barbaro in his commentary on Vitruvius’ *Ten Books on Architecture*: “The artist works first in the intellect and conceives in the mind and symbolizes then the exterior matter after the interior image, particularly in architecture.”<sup>16</sup> It is doubtful, however, that Hejduk is relating the proximity of architecture to Platonic Form as Barbaro was. This idea is remarkably similar to Kahn’s “Form” and the Michelangelo notion of an architecture tracing its own concept. They stand together on this idea.

Hejduk is at one level attempting to fill in **voids in the history**,

“I am like a fly that comes in and says, ‘Ok, here is one aspect that has been left out, yet which has great potentiality, it should be wrapped up’.”<sup>17</sup>

Hejduk also attempts “To go deep and try to understand the American.”<sup>18</sup> The America of Poe, Melville, and Hopper; the uneasiness, the tension, the grey, the void, the harsh and essential aspects of American culture<sup>18</sup>.

15. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 128

16. Wittkower. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. 65

17. John Hejduk. *The Mask of Medusa*. 129

18. John Hejduk. *The Mask of Medusa*. 53

6. *What are the questions? What are not the questions?*

Michelangelo questioned the hegemonies of Renaissance readings of Vitruvius' *The Ten Books on Architecture*. He questioned the power of his patrons the Medici. He questioned the rational currents of his age and Leonardo DaVinci. He was a Mannerist. He questioned space and the forces held within the wall, and how it was manifest in detail, he questioned the approach of the architect by being a sculptor first. Michelangelo questioned in his work, was he iconoclastic, only concerned with tearing down the architecture of his day, or was he, simultaneously, attempting to establish a new architecture that was to consistently reverse or rather decenter the hegemonies of architecture?

Hejduk questions culture, as well as the architects encultured methodology. He questions the way we see our environment and translate that into architecture.

“...that they could get the tactile condition of this house through the drawings.”

Hejduk questions the modernist optimism and finds culture moving away from that inclination, toward a new pessimism. He seems not to question whether there are any problems in being a sounding board for the pessimism or even cynicism that pervades our culture. For Hejduk, the architect represents cultural currents, questioning some pieces, filling in voids, yet not really violating the overriding motion. Again, he is a man of his times.

19. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 136

“That also is a failing of my work. Ambiguity gives an excuse for dismissal.”

20. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 52

The following statement is Kahn's mature philosophy of Architecture, written in 1955, it reveals his questions things he failed, refused or had matured out of questioning.



Order is, and, therefore, is not a question. In the same way one ought not ask "why?". The Platonic "Form" is not in question. The questions are engaged in modernity and, at that time, its lack of monumental quality. Why do we seek harmony or beauty? is not a question, we simply do as we pursue "form-making in order". The terms original, essential, transcendent are not questioned.

**Order is**  
*Design is form-making in order*  
*Form emerges out of a system of construction*  
*Growth is a construction*  
*In order is creative force*  
*In design is the means--where with what on when with how much*  
*The nature of space reflects what it wants to be*  
*Is the auditorium a Stradavarius*  
*or is it an ear*  
*Is the auditorium a creative instrument*  
*keyed to Bach or Bartok*  
*played by the conductor*  
*or is it a convention hall*  
*In the nature of space is the spirit and the will to exist a certain way*  
**Design** must closely follow that will  
*Therefore a stripe painted horse is not a zebra.*  
*Before a railroad station is a building*  
*it wants to be a street*  
*it grows out of the needs of street*  
*out of the order of movement*  
*A meeting of contours englazed.*  
*Thru the nature---why*  
*Thru the order---what*  
*Thru the design---how*  
*A Form emerges from the structural elements inherent in the form.*  
*A dome is not conceived when questions arise how to build it.*  
*Nervi grows an arch*  
*Fuller grows a dome*  
*Mozart's compositions are designs*  
*They are exercises of order---intuitive*  
**Design** encourages more designs  
*Designs derive their imagery from order*  
*Imagery is the memory---the Form*  
*Style is an adopted order*  
*The same order created the elephant and created man*  
*They are different designs*  
*Begun from different aspirations*  
*Shaped from different circumstances*  
**Order does not imply Beauty**  
*The same order created the dwarf and Adonis*  
*Design is not making Beauty*  
*Beauty emerges from selection*  
*affinities*  
*integration*  
*love*  
*Art is a form making life in order---psychic*  
**Order is intangible**  
*It is a level of consciousness*  
*forever becoming higher in level*  
*The higher the order the more diversity in design*  
**Order supports integration**  
*From what the space wants to be the unfamiliar may be revealed to the architect.*  
*From order he will derive creative force and power of self criticism*  
*to give form to the unfamiliar.*  
*Beauty will evolve*