

Tim Foldy-Porto

14 November 2017

Professor Purves

### **The Temple of the Parking Garage**

As cars driving along the ridgeline of I-95 approach the junction with I-91, with the derelict waterfront of New Haven on one side and the industrial zone of the city on the other, they might see in the distance a modest four-story concrete structure, standing quietly in solidarity with the gritty rush of traffic that flows beneath it. Temple Street Garage, designed by Paul Rudolph in 1958, is one of New Haven's many significant architectural works. Its arches and bridges are reminiscent of an ancient Roman aqueduct; instead of flowing water however it contains moving cars.

Also like ancient architecture, Temple St. Garage is often considered to be a monumental work. Indeed, it is monumental in size and shape: massively monolithic, so clearly a study in the emotional power of raw concrete that it is nearly impossible for the observer not to feel in awe. But the concept of monumentality contains multiple dimensions, aesthetic appearance being just one of them. In his essay on the subject, *Monumentality*, Louis Kahn describes a monumentality rooted in a mastery of construction whose goal is to "convey the feeling of eternity." (Kahn 21) Kahn argues that the greatness of a monumental building lies in an enduring spiritual quality—a rich encoding of historical and cultural information into the forms of the structure. By examining Temple St. Garage through the lens of Kahn's "Monumentality," we gain insight into the interplay between human emotion and the spaces that we sculpt, and in placing Kahn's seemingly superficial musings on construction in historical context, we are able to see how it is the scope of a building—its attempt to preserve for eternity a moment in time—that allows it to achieve Kahn's notion of the spiritual.

Kahn introduces one of the central themes in *Monumentality* in the first few pages: "Neither the finest material nor the most advanced technology need enter a work of monumental character

for the same reason that the finest ink was not required to draw up the Magna Carta.” (Kahn 22) In this one line, Kahn draws one of the most consequential comparisons of the essay—that similar to how it is the concepts behind the Magna Carta make it truly great, the merit of a building as a monumental work lies predominantly in its ideological and ethical statement. While beautiful surfaces and rich façades may make for good architecture, the aesthetic appearance of a building does little to immortalize it in time. To do that, argues Kahn, a building must express monumental ideas. For ancient monuments, claims Kahn, their “impressiveness, clarity of form, and logical scale” expressed the timeless theme of the human quest for “structural perfection.” (Kahn 22) For Rudolph, this meant instilling a sculptural and rhythmically poetic quality into the forms of Temple St. Garage. The uniform bareness of the raw concrete draws the eye to the unusual designs of the building’s repeated patterns: the rolling arches, the staunch plasticity of the columns, the ominous but alluring stairwells on the roof. Even the lamp posts are concrete.

It is primarily the character of concrete that allows the observer to engage more with the form of the material than the exterior appearance. Compared to materials like marble and wood, concrete is less visually exciting: it is drab and unassuming, plain and, perhaps most significantly, visually heavy. But this perceived heft allows observers to feel the full weight of its geometric shape, to feel its total interruption of space. The uninterrupted mass of the Temple St. Garage rests as an emotional burden on any viewer who chooses to engage with it, and although it is difficult to elucidate the precise ideas that Rudolph included in this work, it is clear to any who observe his organic, lively, and deeply evocative forms that a strong message exists. It is this idea of emotional weight that touches upon Kahn’s conception of the spiritual—this extra-physical and enduring quality of a monumental work.

Implicit in an analysis of Temple St. Garage is the notion that the forms Rudolph employs, particularly the ones he keeps returning to, are in fact deeply significant beyond face value.

Embedded in the sweeping floors and ceilings of Temple St. Garage is information on architectural and cultural ideas belonging to the time. Kahn writes, “No architect can rebuild a cathedral of another epoch embodying the desires, the aspirations, the love and hate of the people whose heritage it became.” (Kahn 22) What he touches upon in this quotation is fundamental to his argument on monumentality: a monumental work belongs to and is representative of its time. The careful lines and clean geometric forms of ancient Greek and Roman buildings are representative of a societal admiration for technical expertise, precision, and order. The Roman vault, argues Kahn, carries with it the technical and scientific achievements of the Roman population, saying that “Through Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and today, its basic forms and structural ideas have been felt.” (Kahn 23) In a lengthy discourse on the failures of modern architects to understand modern construction, Kahn highlights what he sees as a major factor in the making of a monumental building: the ability of the architect to utilize contemporary construction methods to their fullest potential. (Kahn 25)

For Temple St. Garage, Kahn need not have worried. Rudolph was so concerned with the construction of the garage that he personally supervised the process, something he rarely did. (Rohan 56) To emphasize the significance of the construction process, Rudolph chose to leave the striations on the concrete that were formed when the wooden molding boards were removed from the cast-in-place concrete. Keeping the striations served to recall both the colossal mechanical forces and the skilled human craftsmanship it took to shape the concrete to Rudolph’s will. To further extend his technical prowess, Rudolph pushed the boundaries of cast-in-place to give a sense of plasticity to the swooping gates and arches that adorn the garage. The building is solid in footing, and as long as it remains it will stand as a sturdy monument to the technical skill of Rudolph’s generation. It is through this encoding of historical information that buildings—the Temple St. Garage included—have

been able to attain Kahn's monumentally spiritual quality and to preserve for future generations a moment in time.

In the final pages of the essay, Kahn writes about what he imagines to be a modern monument: "The giant major skeleton of the structure can assert its right to be seen...sculpture graces its interior...[outstanding architects] have restated the meaning of a wall, a post, a beam, a roof and a window and their interrelation in space." (Kahn 27) He goes on to discuss the structural issues facing the building and its confrontation with modern science. Kahn takes a step into the cerebral, describing the abstract nature of this monument:

The plan does not begin nor end with the space he has enveloped, but from the adjoining delicate ground sculpture it stretches beyond to the rolling contours and vegetation of the surrounding land and continues farther out to the distant hills. (Kahn 28)

I will not begin to unpack this excerpt in its entirety, but I should draw attention to the ethereal geometric forms of the imagined structure and its infiniteness evoked in the "rolling contours" and "distant hills." To Kahn, this model monument existed only in dream, but the ideas it set forth, of memorializing and preserving a culture in its physical form, were tractable.

To Rudolph, these ideas were more than tractable; they were attainable. He took Kahn's idea of an exposed major skeleton one step further: instead of revealing the garage's true framework of steel beams, utilized the concrete arches to form "symbols of structure," which he used to place an emphasis on the idea of structure rather than on the structure itself. (Rohan 58) Rudolph's choice to construct the garage out of uniform repeated shapes, or modules, is again consistent with Kahn's theoretical framework for monumentality. On page 29, Kahn describes how the model architect chooses to create a large work using small consistent parts, which "he used to construct block over block the overall form." The rhythmic continuity of shapes and the long sight lines serve to elongate the perception of the building, allowing it to seem as if it is extending to infinity in either direction, conveying a sense of its own eternity.

Must a monumental building have a monumental purpose? Buildings such as the Parthenon and the Taj Mahal—buildings that serve as temples and palaces—cross our minds when thinking of monumentality in architecture. Yet Kahn's principal definition of monumentality makes no reference to function, saying only that for a work to be considered monumental, it must be bold enough to address the topics of eternity, cultural history, and spirituality. It would be a mistake, then, to assume that a building must address these topics functionally. While perhaps it is easiest to create a monumental building by making its purpose and usage relate to the practice of spirituality or cultural preservation, such as a religious center or a museum, there are in fact a multitude of ways an architect can interact with these deep concepts.

Rudolph, for example, set in contradiction the quotidian nature of the parking garage with its imposing outward appearance to elicit the monumental. He used evocative forms and allusions to the titanic forces of construction to encode what he felt to be the characteristic themes his era: an increasing mobility due to the automobile and a new urbanism that focused on the merits of cities for future habitation. Temple St. Garage came about in the midst of the urban renewal movement in the United States, in which a large amount of federal funding was invested in the redevelopment of urban spaces. The ideas of monumentality and preservation are inextricably linked with that of explicating a society's cultural values. Rudolph envisioned his garage as a centerpiece for post-war New Haven, functioning both to define a new urbanism as a primary focus of the 1960s, and to commemorate it. The contradiction of the everyday use of the parking garage with its compelling and enduring ethical statement stirs strong emotions in those who engage with the building. In this way, Rudolph's ordinary yet powerful Temple St. Garage actively confronts observers' preconceived notions of monumentality, hinting at the idea that it was time for the post-war society to reevaluate the artifacts, the knowledge, and the aspirations that it wanted to leave behind.

### Works Cited

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