

O P E N B O O K

# Desire and Design

**Wendy Lesser** '73, the founding editor of *The Threepenny Review* and a critic of unusual scope (witness recent books on reading and on Shostakovich), has now written *You Say to Brick: The Life of Louis Kahn* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27), about the zenith of architectural creativity. The title (from Kahn's elemental teaching about the essence of materials, "You say to a brick, 'What do you want, brick?'...") weaves together a biography; Lesser's visits and reactions to some of Kahn's most significant works; and an intriguing speculation about the inner drives that propelled him both to brilliant design and to numerous affairs, illegitimate children, and chaotic business practices. He was a modernist who looked *backward*, in a colleague's assessment—to the essential forces of building and of life. In Lesser's telling:

...**"Desire is irresponsible,"** Lou himself commented. "You can't say that desire is a sense of purity. It has its own purity, but in the making of things great impurities can happen."

He saw the danger, but he did not disown it. And this respect, if that is the right word, for desire, for the original impulse that motivates all making and taking, was essential to Kahn's views, governing his sense not only of how life might be lived but also of how architecture might be practiced. "I do not believe that beauty can be deliberately created," he wrote in his notebooks. "Beauty evolves out of a will that may have its first expression in the archaic. Compare Paestum with the Parthenon. Archaic Paestum is the beginning. It is the time when walls parted and the columns became and Music entered architecture.... The Parthenon is considered more beautiful, but Paestum is still

more beautiful to me. It presents a beginning within which is contained all the wonder that may follow in its wake."

To insist on a perpetual sense of wonder—or to argue, as Kahn did, that a great building "must begin with the unmeasurable, must go through measurable means when it is being designed and in the end must be unmeasurable"—is to resort continually to the same impulses that fuel desire. One must be constantly acting on one's own feelings, one's own responses: Is this what I really wanted to do? Does this or that element need to be altered to accomplish what I envisioned? How about this unexpected factor—can I use it to get back to my original idea, but in a new way? The process is all about beginnings, for Kahn. And it is in the beginning, of course, that every desire burns with its most searing intensity. Kahn's wish to return there, repeatedly,

was perhaps his most salient characteristic as both an architect and a man.

The two were, in any case, probably not separable.

**Louis Kahn, and archaic Paestum—the "beginning" of beauty**



crash course in basic film production, became an important training ground for producers and technicians.

The show had a contentious start. An early segment on the clothing brand that popularized the dashiki almost fell through when the proprietor objected to the story's having only white producers, reports media scholar Devorah Heitner in her book, *Black Power TV*; and at a party celebrating the release of the first episode, in June 1968, a well-meaning white assistant served fried chicken and wa-

termelon. Black staff members objected to the gap between the program's promise—to be a national production by, for, and about African Americans—and its reality under white management. Garrett and his colleagues eventually went on strike, leading the network to name William Greaves, then in front of the camera as co-host, as the new executive producer. Under black editorial control, "The feel of the pieces changed. We didn't have go through a white filter," says Garrett. "There's kind of a directness. And I think that was reflected in the pieces."

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They also reflected Greaves's background in underground cinema. Despite the staid norms of public television, *Black Journal* aired documentaries with expressive cinematography and emphasized man-on-the-street interviews over editorializing narration. Garrett's 1969 documentary *Black Cop*, a nuanced portrait of policemen in New York City and Los Angeles, intercuts interviews with police officers and members of the communities they patrolled. Its mood shifting between jittery and oddly placid, the film follows its subjects down busy streets, into dim stations: a typical day on the job, set to the music of John Coltrane. One scene, especially striking in the age of body cameras and Facebook Live, records an altercation between an officer and an angry driver



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