

13 From the ground

Stan Field, Master's Class of 1969

I am now the same age that Louis Kahn was when I began studying with him in 1968. The world has changed dramatically, yet I still marvel at Kahn's core belief that order exists and that our uncovering of its latent potential is what we see as new.

At the same time that I was studying with Kahn, and only a few yards away, Ian McHarg was uncovering his visionary ideas with his new book, *Design with Nature*. He revealed how everything was connected and that we, too, were a vital part of this whole.

Inspired by these two views of time and place, I would be drawn back to my native South Africa by my deep connection to nature. I had begun to see Lou Kahn's powerful philosophical constructs in a new light that embraced ecological dynamics as the shaper of form.

While I could still ask brick what it wanted to be, I could also calibrate brick's answer according to a host of environmental inputs. Kahn would have said that form is governed by laws, while shape is governed by rules – the Unmeasurable and the measurable.

There is no question that Kahn awakened in me a yearning to connect the tangible with the intangible. To me, his work is a narrative on the making of architecture formed by typology. I too am striving to create a narrative – a narrative formed by typology *and shaped by contextual forces*.

The United States was in turmoil during the years 1968–69. Enmeshed in an unwinnable conflict in Vietnam, the youth in America were galvanized into a coherent anti-war coalition. Schools of Architecture were burnt and protest was in the air. This dynamic and ever-changing environment was in stark contrast to Kahn's teachings. Kahn talked about the architect's role in uncovering and expressing "the order of things." With our very society being challenged, I was determined to find an architectural language that captured and spoke to the times.

On graduating with my Master's degree, two close colleagues and I from the Master's class managed to acquire an unused old library space on campus and set about writing a book, "Morphogenesis," continuing to work in the wake of energy we still felt. We lined up and tilted the desks into lengthy rows along the walls and proceeded to draw on rolls of paper extending for

what seemed like miles. After several months when we felt we were ready, we invited Lou Kahn to view our work. This was truly an amazing encounter. As Lou walked up and down, viewing the vast extent of drawings laid before him, he looked at us with a twinkle in his eye that left us with a feeling that it was now up to us, and then he disappeared. Was this to be taken as acknowledgment that we had grasped his teachings? Or was this a silent challenge for us to create "new" thinking?

On reflection of that significant and dramatic encounter, this was the point at which the platform Lou had provided me with became the springboard for my own architectural development. The vision of the arc of my career became the driving force that allowed me to take that leap. I felt the forces of the times and dreamed of creating new structures.

Around this time, Edmond Bacon had completed his book, *Design of Cities*, and he invited my two colleagues and me to join the team to work on the American Bicentennial in Philadelphia. I had to politely turn down his great offer, telling him that I had a burning urge to go back to South Africa to design my first work.

Upon returning to South Africa in 1970, I opened my architectural practice in Johannesburg in a grand old Victorian house, within walking distance from the University of the Witwatersrand. I also began teaching design at the School of Architecture there. Those were exciting times, and the flow of students and professors in and out felt like a kind of alternative "academy of architecture" that I still dream of recreating today. I would also realize that the context in which I designed was becoming the defining force of my work.

Two works of architecture stand out for me during this period. The first was the Miller House at Khyber Rock, north of Johannesburg, set in a vast Transvaal Highveld landscape. The confluence of a unique outcrop of huge boulders that formed the site and a client who loved the African bush created the dynamic context for this project. The design began with the carving of a model for each boulder in African Imbuia wood to gain a formal understanding of the identity of each of these massive rocks. It was clear at the onset that the architecture would become a dialogue between natural and man-made formation. No boulder would be moved and no built structure would touch them, as both shared and vied for the common support of the ground. The intent of the architectural formation would be expressed through a distinctly man-made geometry in juxtaposition to nature's organic shapes. The deep spaces between the two became the counter form giving shape to the shadows. Like my first born, this raw concrete building is rooted in that place and every so often it beckons me back. In retrospect, this first built work might well have been a homage to Lou and in the process, liberated me from his formal language.

The second work was my competition entry for the Germiston Civic Center in 1972. In an urban setting and at a crossroads in South Africa's sociopolitical environment, I was deeply intent on creating a civic architecture

that could be transformative. The winning scheme, designed by an ex-Kahn Master's graduate, was Kahnian in its formal resolution of the brief. Although my entry did not win, it was broadly recognized and published. *Plan*, the South African Institute of Architects' official magazine, commented:

There are usually one or two projects in every architectural competition of note which stand out as particularly provoking, reflecting architectural solutions which may have far reaching influence on architecture and architectural thinking. One such project, we believe, is submission entry no. 26, Stan Field, which has taken full advantage of the absence of constraints (other than those built into the brief) under normal competition circumstances.

The project explores, in an extraordinary and competent way, the complex requirements of the brief, and the conflicting nature of functional requirements and aspirational or symbolic needs required by a public building of this type in an urban context. The interior arrangement of the various functional areas and spaces has the introspective complexity of a medieval city, scaled to the needs and movement of the occupants and users. The symbolic and speed scales dictate the sculptural simplicity of circular shell, rather like the fortifications of the medieval city, and the generosity of architectonic gesture, bestows focal and reference values on the structure in the visual urban chaos. Only at the major point of entry is the surrounding urban open space allowed to pry the protective shell open and to become part of the intestinal functioning. Viewed against this inherent conflict of scale obligations, the construction, with its differing orders of structural requirements, assumes greater clarity and meaning.

In its exploitation of site and setting, in its functional welding of spaces of differing usage and form and in its architectural resolution of the conflict between symbolism and functionalism, we believe that this project has been unequalled.

The sociopolitical environment was so starkly etched on even the urban and city form that it would have been reckless for an architect not to bring these powerful forces into the narrative of the work.

These were times of impending change in apartheid South Africa and the 1970s brought the freedom struggle to fever pitch. As an outcast nation, South Africa was isolated from the international discourse in architecture and was condemned to the sidelines.

By the late 1970s, the political situation in South Africa had made it virtually impossible for any meaningful work to happen. The white Afrikaner government favored like-minded supporters of the regime while black people were totally disempowered and, in any event, did not want white patronage. So I found myself in a situation of stagnation.

At this time, I came upon a book written by Arthur Kutcher called *The New Jerusalem – Planning and Politics*. "For three thousand years," Kutcher observed, "history and faith have shaped Jerusalem. Now its fate hangs on the decision of its planners." Kutcher explained the dilemma facing the city, how its spiritual significance is bound up with its form and setting, and how these were now in danger of being destroyed by massive new developments but for which alternative solutions were available and which posed a question of world concern.

I was drawn by this powerful sense of connection and wanting to be a part of this significant moment in time. And so my family and I emigrated to Israel in 1978 and began our new life in Jerusalem.

I began working with a wonderful landscape architect where I literally learnt from the ground up and dialogued extensively with Art Kutcher in the same office. In 1980, I was appointed Chief Architect of the City of Jerusalem. My brief from Mayor Teddy Kollek was to connect East and West Jerusalem. The singular concept of heavenly Jerusalem proved more easily attainable than its earthly counterpart. After two years of heading a team that worked on unraveling this human dichotomy, our planning scheme was finally approved. After completing this public work, I moved on and opened my private practice in a historic building that overlooked the great ramparts of the Old City of Jerusalem.

I remember that in one of our studio classes in 1968, Kahn had spoken about the Hurva Synagogue project, which he had just begun. I'd always admired his Hurva project in Jerusalem, which masterfully elevated a sacred structure slightly above the fabric and texture of the Old City. I believed I could build a sacred structure of equal importance. My big opportunity came when I met a remarkable rabbi on Mount Zion. He proclaimed, "You are the architect who will rebuild Mount Zion," and for ten years we dreamed and planned. Three religions vied for attention on this complex site on the southern slope of the Old City walls – the Tomb of King David, the room of the Last Supper, and a mosque, all intertwined and within a stone's throw of each other. I developed extensive plans which were ultimately approved by the city and mayor of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is a horizontally layered city where one civilization built atop the ruins of the previous one. My plan was to build a wall on the foundations of an excavated early Israelite wall that surrounded Mount Zion, a penetrable wall to bring people in rather than to keep people out – a living habitable wall. This porous structure would maintain the physical and contextual continuity but provide openness and access that could potentially redefine entrenched patterns of interaction. I slowly began to understand, however, that to build anew in this historic and ancient place required either a new civilization or a new mindset, neither of which was within my grasp.

During this time, I did build two synagogues outside of the walls of the Old City. A newly established community of diverse cultural backgrounds decided to build a synagogue together on the eastern slopes of Jerusalem

overlooking desert landscape that stretches all the way down to the Dead Sea. So I designed a sanctuary made of 1-meter thick stone walls that unraveled to create a communal courtyard. From a distance, the recognizable form of its barrel-vaulted silhouette also provided a welcoming sense of arrival coming up the long, windy road to Jerusalem. In contrast with the huge stones of Khyber Rock, South Africa, which wanted to remain untouched, these Jerusalem stones wanted to be touched by chisels, and hands and hearts, and so I too grasped the courage to add my pieces that must surely have been configured and shaped by the same forces that were shaping me.

In 1990, with a heavy heart, my family and I left Jerusalem, but with the sense that I had played my part in helping shepherd the planning and design of the new Jerusalem at that critical time in its history. The twelve years that I lived and worked in Jerusalem further reinforced my belief that the contextual forces of the cultural sociopolitical environment were major determinants of architectural form. This twelve-year experience gave me an enormous new depth of understanding on which to build the next phase of my architectural career.

Landing in America in 1990, twenty years after leaving Penn, and faced with the challenge of starting again was both exciting and daunting. We headed for California where I had a teaching position at the graduate school of architecture at the University of California at Berkeley. I became deeply involved in discovering my new American context. Everything seemed so much bigger, more complex yet efficient. Berkeley and I entered into a kind of honeymoon, where the students and I seemed to have bonded, and which generated a high level of creativity. I remember the first studio I taught was about equipping ourselves so that we were "fit" to design, as if we were Olympic athletes. It was amazing how they signed up for this course and we set about discovering the mental space that allowed a beginning.

I believe Kahn was first and foremost a teacher. I can still clearly remember those jaw-dropping statements he would make where everyone in the class would mutter, "Did he really just say that?" To me, his architectural works themselves were designed to teach. With a limited body of built work at the time, I needed to invent a medium with which to teach. Here at Berkeley, with its less formal and freer structure, I created a studio style where each and every student was a vital part of the learning experience. It grew to be extremely popular and I became invested in each student.

Through the work itself, I coaxed and drew the emerging Form out of them and the wonder of architecture was instantly recognized. To the extent that Kahn would have concurred with the idea of an emergent Form, this sense of wonder resembled the spirit of the Master's Class.

I enjoyed hearing this description of my classes from one of my students: "Thank you, as always, for giving us confidence to expand to what is not known before the tendency, in a studio like this, to contract into what is known."

My teaching contract was for two years and on the day that it ended, I arrived in the courtyard to find an incredible sight. The previous night, the entire student body had dropped strings from all the windows of the five-story architecture school that were then gathered to create a kind of shrine in the courtyard. They afterwards told me that this was an expression of how I had touched them all and that it was a petition for me to stay on.

While teaching and learning are intertwined, I began to realize the significance of my relationship with the students of architecture and how instrumental this was in my own development. It defined the very ethos of my work.

At this point, a handful of graduates from my class and I were highly motivated to continue the work we had begun at Berkeley. Our goal was to create an academy of architecture that I had always dreamed of. We found a vacant hangar in the Presidio adjacent to a highly public promenade alongside the Bay. I wanted to draw the public in through the studios and workshops and lecture spaces thereby creating a bridge between academia and the real world.

Around this time, the Loma Prieta earthquake had hit San Francisco. The elevated freeway that cut San Francisco off from its waterfront was deemed seismically unsafe and had to be demolished, and an international competition was launched to reconnect San Francisco with its waterfront. My solution was to remove the barrier by designing a huge arc that circled out into the Bay becoming a scenic bypass, while at the same time creating a new marine environment. The streets of the city's grid would descend into the water, becoming canals and the city blocks islands, thus dissolving the edge. The physical wood model was set on a sea level base made of brushed aluminum. With the grid of streets draped over the natural topography of San Francisco, it vividly expressed the essence and magic of the city.

This project, urban in scale, revealed to me that it was the ground that was and had always been, the generator. I began to trace all my works, beginning with the Miller House, which revealed that the common thread throughout was the construct I had established – the ground is our base and that architecture could be pulled out of it.

In 2006 my son, Jess, graduated with his Master's in Architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, and joined me to form Field Architecture. With this new multigenerational practice, a rigorous and challenging dialogue developed between us. These were heady times and I was situated in the eye of the Silicon Valley revolution. A spate of new and exciting projects was commissioned that allowed new explorations.

Our office in Palo Alto, California, with its workshop-like setting, comprises around eight dedicated architects and technicians. Our goal is to remain a tight-knit team where our best work is realized through a deep resonance and the art of listening to the client as well as the land until the tune that reverberates can be captured on tracing paper.

A kind of geologic catalog has become my handbook which I dip into for inspiration. I feel in the prime of my career – together with my son as partner, a rare opportunity and sense of extended time and generational breadth are propelling us even beyond my imagined goal.