

# UC Berkeley

## Places

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The Cave and the Ruin [Forming Place, Informing Practice]

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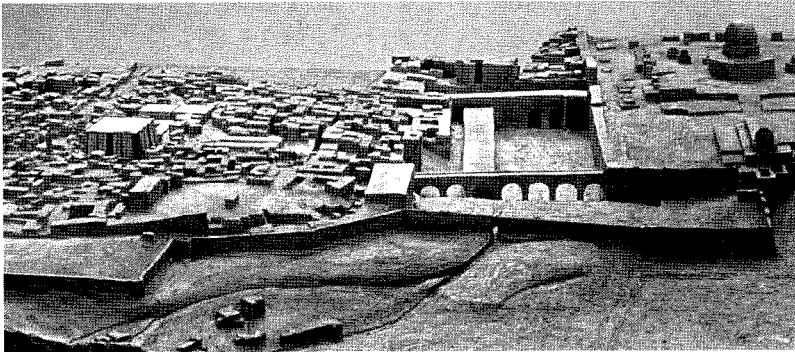
Fjeld, Per Olaf

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Architecture is moving in many directions. Common concerns based upon social consciousness are no longer clearly articulated through the built environment. The expressions and content that lead up to an architectural decision focus more on visual aspects (how to view architecture through an established code) than on spatial awareness and understanding.



Above: Model demonstrating relationship of Hurva synagogue to the Wailing Wall

Below: Early sections of Hurva synagogue  
Photos: Per Olaf Fjeld

Today, a two-dimensional approach is used to achieve spatial goals, and this in turn effects the treatment and perception of architecture. The elements and tools that form an architectural decision are evaluated and understood through a two-dimensional concept of physical space. Short-term commercial interests and immediate physical needs are easily incorporated into this concept, but these are not necessarily forces that direct architecture to inventiveness and long-term spatial transformation. In distancing physical reality we also distance architectural presence.

The following story describes the transformation of architectural energy that emerges from the reading and intuitive understanding of a place.

More than thirty years ago the city of Jerusalem asked Louis Kahn to design a new synagogue located on the site of an old synagogue, the Alzimmer, destroyed during the war of independence. At first he thought of building the new synagogue on top of the old ruin, but in the end he chose to build beside it. The new walls would be built from stones of the West Wall. From the very beginning, the site was loaded with energy.

The site is a very strong force in itself; one can really talk about the potential of place. The old synagogue as a ruin had a presence, an awareness that was equal in strength to any future building. It had a latent energy present within the minds of people, as part of a social consciousness, a tradition based on memory and future hopes.

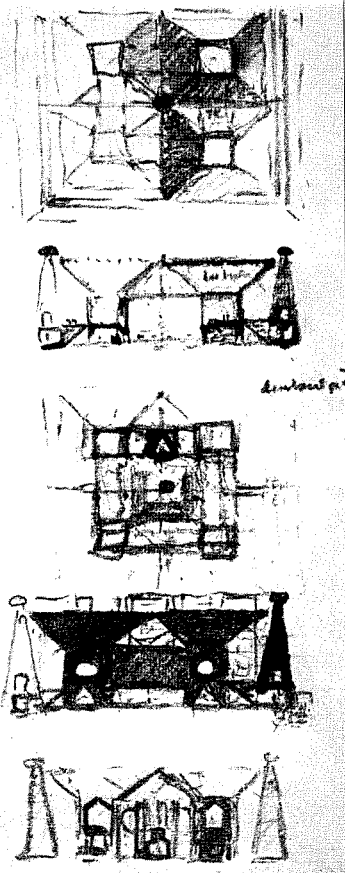
Kahn thought of the new synagogue as part of an architectural sequence that would revive important human activities and events. In a way, Kahn's goal was to link the synagogue to the Wailing Wall by a series of places and institutions that would reflect the history of the city. The idea was not to make a new synagogue as a separate building, an object, but to offer a strong link between the ruin, the new synagogue and the Wailing Wall.

Kahn immediately gave the new synagogue a history in the same way that the ruin carried a distinct memory. He inserted his new synagogue into an already existing energy pattern. The project has an architectural identity and power of its own, but once linked to other objects of equal energy, all together they would together initiate a very strong transformation — not as a single gesture or idea in the mind of people, but, rather, as a renewed focus.

The synagogue was called Hurva, Hebrew for “ruin,” and Kahn regarded the building as a ruin with an inner and outer structural shell that functioned as a sign or token of what was left behind. The inner sanctuary, made of concrete, was a place of worship. The outer areas were places of contemplation, and the synagogue's materials were chosen to acknowledge the history of the surroundings. The transformation was a ruin linked to the history of another ruin.

Daylight was the proper beginning, not something that was added or thought of at the end of the working process. The different sections in the project were a continuous discussion of light as a material.

Kahn also said: “the significance of the ruin is not the age, but the silence between the walls.” It was the first time in his work he linked the idea of ruin with the word “silence.” The key point is that Kahn made a very beautiful building with a spatial identity of its own, independent of the site, yet at the same time completely part of it. The “Hurva” project was never built, but it still exists as a memory or part of a dream.





Kahn's synagogue has never really been out of my thoughts. As a continuation of these concerns, something happened recently that affected me very much. Circumstances brought me to Jerusalem and later to Bethlehem. There, I visited the old basilica built over a ruin, the cave that many believe to be the stable where Jesus was born. To be honest, I was in no way prepared.

It was early in the morning, about 8:00 a.m., and during the previous days I had attended some tough meetings. Extremely tired and not very concentrated, I entered the church through a hole in a very thick wall dimensioned to the height of a kneeling camel. There, once again, an architectural space struck me full force. To enter a space is always very personal. It was very beautiful and powerful room with a double set of columns touched by thousands of people through hundreds of years; smooth, tactile, an extension of my skin. The morning light entering from high above gave silence to the space. At that moment I was not separate from architecture. I did not view architecture, nor was I part of a reading; I was part of a spatial event.

The two stories begin with a ruin, a place with a history and memory. In both cases, architecture is adding



a quality to an existing situation, but at the same time the new space has a life of its own. Both places are located in troubled areas politically and socially, but architecture can transcend these problems through space. In this sense, architectural content, by way of being specific, is a spatial translation of a continuous human dialogue open to all.

Above left: Entrance to the basilica in Bethlehem  
Above: Inside the basilica