

. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.8275>

## Cultural Institutions as Formative Elements in the Work of Behrens, Utzon, and Kahn

Mark E. T. Horn, CSIRO, AU, [mark.e.t.horn@bigpond.com](mailto:mark.e.t.horn@bigpond.com)

Peter Proudfoot, UNSW, AU, [peterproudfoot27@gmail.com](mailto:peterproudfoot27@gmail.com)

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This paper is concerned with the role of human institutions as generators of architectural form, with reference to the writings and works of Peter Behrens, Jørn Utzon, and Louis Kahn. In contrast with the narrow functionalist approach promoted by some of their contemporaries, these architects regarded human institutions as living entities that ought to have a determinative influence on the design of the buildings constructed to house them. The paper considers these architects' assumptions regarding the concept of 'institution' within a broad social and political context and offers some suggestions for a more systematic investigation in that respect.

The paper begins with a brief outline of functionalist theory, then turns to the theatre as a primary cultural activity and the prominent place it held in Behrens's thinking during the opening years of the 20th century. Affinities are explored between Behrens's concept of the theatre and Utzon's subsequent treatment of the theatre as a central civic institution in his design for the Sydney Opera House. A parallel is seen in Louis Kahn's insistence that an architectural project should begin with a vision of the human institution which the project is to serve, a principle that was implicit in utopian and radical schemes from the 19th century onwards. The concluding sections of the paper raise some questions about the doctrines of Behrens, Utzon, and (especially) Kahn, by considering how institutions are adapted to their socio-political settings and how they affect architectural outcomes in practice.

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## Introduction

Naïve interpretations of Louis Sullivan's dictum 'form follows function', which implies that form *can* reasonably follow function in a strictly deterministic way,<sup>1</sup> have been rightly deprecated, notably by Banham (1960: 320–330). Other, more coherent versions of functionalism emphasise two disparate ideas of 'function', referring either to the utilitarian elements of a building (e.g., its structural, weatherproofing, and environmental-management systems) or else to the human activities that the building is to accommodate.<sup>2</sup>

That second form of functionalism was observed among many progressive architects of the early 20th century, in the rule that there should be 'a separate volume for each separate and defined function, and composed in such a way that that this separation and definition was made plain' (Banham 1960: 20). This rule subsequently became almost a commonplace in the teaching of architectural design, at least as a stage in the composition of spaces and structural forms.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper we consider a more positive functionalist impulse, expressed in the work of a few architects who saw in a building's societal *raison d'être* a starting point for the development of organising principles in its design. In each case there was a cultural or communal emphasis, derived from a view of buildings as part of a larger urban or social matrix. In particular, we use the term 'institution' to mean a collaborative enterprise that is devoted to an important social activity or cluster of activities. Our immediate focus is on certain institutions of high culture, notably the theatre, but we shall have some suggestions concerning a broader view.

In the first section we suggest how the theatre can be understood as the venue for an exposition of a community's religious and cultural values, and we suggest that this is linked with Peter Behrens's promotion of the theatre as a high point of civic life. We then highlight parallels between Behrens's ideas and Jørn Utzon's vision of the Sydney Opera House, in effect a secular temple devoted to the shared culture of the community. We relate that vision to Louis Kahn's exposition of the role of the 'institutions of man' as *cynosures* of urban culture. After summarising the contributions of our three chief protagonists, we raise some questions about the doctrines of Kahn, Behrens, and Utzon by considering how institutions are adapted to their socio-political settings and, in turn, affect architectural outcomes in practice.

## Behrens: The Theatre-Temple Revived

Religious ceremony has a close affinity with what is now recognised as dramatic performance. This follows from the inevitably self-conscious element in the rituals of every religious tradition, subject as they are to surveillance by a deity, by the colleagues of the celebrants, and by other members of the community. Ancient Greek tragedy and the passion plays of medieval Europe illustrate how religious and dramatic elements can be combined in a single performance.

The concept of the theatre-temple was reinvented by Behrens (1868–1940) in his work at the Künstler-Kolonie (Artists' Colony) in Darmstadt at the beginning of the 20th century (**Fig. 1**). The members of the colony saw themselves as standard-bearers in a mission to lead the rejuvenation of German art. In particular, Behrens and several



**Figure 1:** Opening of the Künstler-Kolonie, Darmstadt, 1901. The ceremony took place in front of the main atelier, which was designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich. From Koch and Fuchs (1901: 64). Original photo by W. Pöllot. Image courtesy of Heidelberg University Library. Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

of his colleagues saw the theatre as a site of quasi-religious ceremonies in which the highest spiritual values of a community might be expressed, a view heavily influenced by Nietzsche and his followers (Anderson 1990). This vision was realised initially in Behrens's production of the Künstler-Kolonie's solemn opening ceremony in May 1901, involving a procession up the main staircase of the main hall, where robed figures witnessed a prophet's unveiling of a crystal endowed with transfigurative powers. Behrens subsequently elaborated proposals for theatre design involving radical departures from naturalistic theatrical convention in order to achieve a closer relationship between audience and performers (Anderson 1990: 121–124). Behrens himself, however, was able to put these ideas in practice only to a very limited extent in the staging of a Symbolist play at Hagen in 1909 (Anderson 1990: 127–130).

In a larger sense Behrens saw communal ceremony as filling the gap left by the decline of the dominant religions, which were no longer shaping the life of the community. He explained the solemn liturgical quality that he had in mind as follows: 'If drama has derived from religious cults, then I can see a great sign for the evolving theatre style in that again poets live who can give us and our times the forms of a Cult of Life' (quoted in Anderson 1990: 124).

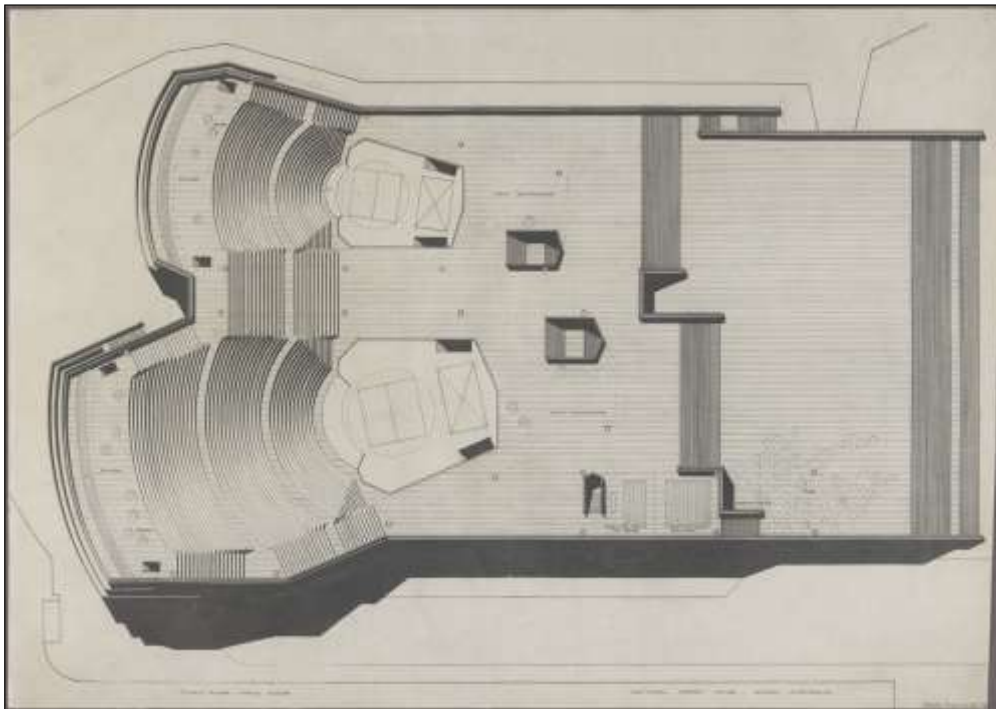
That view of culture as a transmitter of spiritual values soon entered the mainstream of modern architectural thought, presumably partly through Behrens's work as a teacher, and also through the influence

of Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, and Walter Gropius, who all served in his architectural practice during the period from 1905 to 1915. The elitist and Nietzschean elements were, however, modified, at least in the case of Gropius, by an acceptance of more democratic political ideals and a correspondingly more egalitarian view of the role of public institutions within the community.

### Utzon: Archaic Ends, Modern Means

Utzon (1918–2008) inherited this respect for civic culture by way of distinctively humanistic Nordic channels: contact with exponents such as Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Gunnar Asplund, and Arne Jacobsen. There is no sign that Utzon had any direct awareness of Behrens’s teachings or writings, yet it is a striking fact that by the time he undertook the design of the Sydney Opera House in 1956 (**Fig. 2**), he had become an expositor of ideas tantamount to those that Behrens had espoused. In particular, he saw the cultural activities housed in the Opera House as elevated above the day-to-day life of the city, expressing the highest ideals of the citizenry.

The Opera House, in his view, was to be a spiritual centre of the city, a modern embodiment of the medieval cathedral, realised with an eye to ancient Mayan and Greek



**Figure 2:** Sydney Opera House: plan of podium, from competition drawings with partition walls omitted. The building is approached from the south (righthand side of drawing). The incoming audience passes around the stage towers, entering each hall from the sides. From Utzon (1957: 5). Licence: CC NY 4.0. © State of New South Wales through the State Archives and Records Authority of NSW 2016.

prototypes. In the podium and shells of the Opera House he sought to evoke spiritual and aesthetic values akin to those which he attributed to the platform-temples of Mexico (Utzon 1962).

Utzon repeatedly invoked religious buildings in relation to the Opera House: ‘If you think of a Gothic church, you are closer to what I have been aiming at’ (quoted in Kerr 2003; Utzon 2002: 24). The main halls of the building are elevated on a podium and the great stairs that give access to it are crucial markers of separation (**Fig. 3**). Utzon’s competition report envisages these formal elements as the setting for a dramatic marshalling of the audience in preparation for their role as spectators of the performance within the building:

The approach of the audience is easy and is distinctly pronounced as in Grecian theatres by uncomplicated staircase-constructions ... The audience is assembled from cars, trains and ferries and led like a festive procession into the respective halls thanks to the pure staircase solution. (Utzon 1957)



**Figure 3:** Sydney Opera House: view from southwest. The main halls are reached from the podium stairs, also by way of internal stairs from a porte-cochère directly underneath. Photo by Dietmar Rabich, 1962. Wikimedia Commons, Licence: CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

### **Kahn: The Institutions of Man**

Kahn (1901–1974), like Utzon, evinced a seriousness of intention and a devotion to the development of a formal composition that would match the inner purpose of a building (**Figs. 4 and 5**). In these respects he and Utzon may be regarded as peers, although the commonalities considered here refer to their underlying aims rather than the means they used; as to the latter, Kahn in fact regarded Utzon’s work with some misgiving.<sup>4</sup>

Kahn’s exposition of ‘the institutions of man’ and his insistence that in any given project the institution should be the generator of architectural form are consistent with Utzon’s view of the Opera House as a vital institution enshrining communal values. For Kahn, a city could be understood as a collection of activities, organised as institutions:

Inspiration stems from the inspiration to live ... The three great inspirations are the inspiration to learn, the inspiration to meet, and the inspiration for well-being. They all serve, really, the *will to be, to express*. ... The city is the place of availabilities ... The city, from a simple settlement, became the place of assembled institutions. (Kahn, quoted in Lobell 1979: 44–46; emphasis in original).



**Figure 4:** Louis Kahn, Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban (National Parliament House), Dhaka. Interior view. The building accommodates a complex inner community, with a scale and grandeur larger than its individual members. Photo by Rossi101, 2018. Wikimedia, License: CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>.



**Figure 5:** Louis Kahn, Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban (National Parliament House), Dhaka. Exterior view, with lakeside parliamentarians' facilities in brick buildings at left. Photo by Nahid Sultan and Saiful Aopu, 2014. Wikimedia, License: CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/deed.en>.

This way of thinking entailed a willed forgetting of precedents, so that the architect might penetrate to the fundamentals:

In a recent problem I gave at the university [of Pennsylvania], of a monastery, I assumed the role of the hermit.

There was as yet no name *monastery*.

For two weeks the students tried to extricate themselves from the knowledge they had of monasteries ...

One young Indian girl ventured, 'I believe the cell is the nucleus of the monastery. The chapel earns its

right to exist because of the cell. The refectory has a right to exist because of the cell. The retreat is the same, the place of work is the same'. (Kahn, quoted in Merrill 2007: 158)

An emphasis on fundamentals could sometimes run into conflict with programmatic requirements. This happened, for example, in a project to rebuild the twice-ruined Hurvah Synagogue in Jerusalem, as described by Eric Orozco (2011). Kahn envisaged — before even meeting the client — a very large, heavily buttressed building, which would have been as high as the Western Wall and would have visually dominated the traditional Jewish district of Jerusalem to a much greater extent than its predecessors. Rabbinical commentators strongly criticised the scheme for Kahn's inattention to requirements laid out in ancient Hebrew literature (e.g., the 'seven beautiful windows' called for by the Midrash Halakha). There was also widespread concern that the project would supplant the Temple Mount as the pre-eminent holy place for Jews.

Like Utzon, Kahn drew inspiration from historical precedents — in his case especially the tower-houses of medieval Italian towns and early Greek temples. In this successful assimilation of diverse influences, what is notable is these architects' evident lack of interest in local traditions. Similarly, Behrens drew much inspiration from medieval Tuscan architecture, despite his part in the promotion of German culture (Behne 1912). As we shall see, this universalising impulse, which was characteristic of the modern movement in architecture, ran parallel with a corresponding belief in an underlying set of archetypal institutional forms.

Kahn was responsible for one performing arts centre, the Arts United Centre in Fort Wayne, Indiana, 'a cluster of related institutions ... with archetypal overtones in Kahn's mind: school, theater, museum, music hall' (Brown 1989). By contrast with the Sydney Opera House, the Arts United Centre makes no gestures towards linkage with its urban environment, but Kahn's sense of its usage is similar: 'I thought further of the meaning of a place of assembly ... The music is only partly important ... [I]t's all part, is it not, of the nature of going to a concert?' (Kahn, quoted in Brown 1989).

### **Institutions as Elements of Architectural Thought**

We have shown how the Sydney Opera House was conceived as virtually a sacred place, elevated above the mundane concerns of the city, we have drawn attention to a close parallel between Utzon's ideas and those of Behrens some 50 years earlier, and we have noted affinities between Utzon and Kahn with respect to their treatment of human institutions. Although we know of no direct line of influence connecting Behrens with Utzon, we suggest that a secularised reinterpretation of the theatre-temple as central to civic life was pervasive within the evolving complex of Western architectural thought.

Kahn's enunciation of the concept of institutions surely is the most comprehensive of the approaches considered here. Behrens is of interest in this context as advocate for the primacy of a particular type of institution, namely the theatre. Utzon in a sense is the most pragmatic of the three, focussed — like a stage designer — on the experiences of an audience.

Although these design approaches are somewhat removed from the sphere of everyday practice, in our view they are relevant to the formation and orientation of a responsible architectural mentality. Much of the power of Kahn's teaching, for example, arises from its essentialist character: What does a building want to be? What is its justification in human and social terms? Leaving aside their metaphysical ramifications, such questions can yield a leitmotif for a project, a central theme around which the aspirations of architects and those of an institution's representatives may be aligned.

### **Institutions as Socio-Historical Entities**

We acknowledge that there is a considerable distance between the doctrines considered above and the real life of human institutions. To illustrate this we need look no farther than the Sydney Opera House: under

the original design brief the larger of the two main halls was to have housed both opera and orchestral performances, but in March 1967, a year after Utzon's ouster from the project, the New South Wales government decided to transfer opera to the smaller hall (Drew 2000: 114–121). That decision, which followed negotiations between the government, the architectural firm that had succeeded Utzon, and the leading performing arts bodies, has left a legacy of operational and acoustic difficulties for opera productions in their eponymous Sydney home.

In an historical context, the concept of human institutions propounded by Kahn embodies a universalism that was characteristic of its century in its quest for archetypal forms of human association, in contrast with a view of institutions as historical artefacts located within particular socio-political settings. An anthropological or meta-sociological analysis may be required for a full exploration of the links between these approaches. More immediately, the questions raised in this article have highlighted the historical co-evolution of institutions and the building programs they have fostered. In particular, the literature on architectural history and urban geography has often used building function as a basis for classification and analysis and has emphasised the emergence of new building types during and after the Industrial Revolution: factories, hospitals, large-scale public housing, railway stations, airports, and more. Our argument here is for a stronger emphasis on institutional intentions. A factory, for example, is never merely a functional solution to the needs of the industrial processes which it houses, but must respond to an *interpretation* of those needs in the light of the client's broader expectations and assumptions within a given regulatory and commercial setting.

In addition, progressive architects and political activists have often seen building programs as offering opportunities to propound radical ideas and even to release new energies of social transformation. This is seen in the Phalansteries and similar projects undertaken during the 19th century (Benevolo 1967: 39–104) and in subsequent utopian schemes, such as the design for an industrial city developed by Tony Garnier during the period from 1904 to 1917 (Frampton 2007: 100–104). Of particular interest is the concept of the 'Social Condenser', enunciated by the constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg in 1928 as a vehicle for the intensification of the new life promised by Socialism. Embodied in buildings of various kinds, the Social Condenser seeks a dissolution of social hierarchies, typically through the use of communal spaces and a reduction in privacy. The concept and its history are explored at length in a recent issue of *Architectural Histories* (Murawski and Rendell 2017).

## Conclusion

Actual human institutions are more diverse and contingent on their historical context than is recognised by the archetypal definitions considered earlier. We see the political and economic environment as a matrix for the development of institutions, which in turn provide settings within which individuals may find and realise their own aspirations. And yet with the increasing emphasis in liberal democracies on the efficient deployment of capital, the weight given to buildings as manifestations of institutional purpose has been greatly attenuated. This is evident in Australia and other countries, especially in the treatment of real estate primarily as a quasi-fungible embodiment of capital. We see this, for example, in the offloading of grand public buildings to the private sector and in the outsourcing of building ownership on the part of many companies and public agencies. The institutions concerned are consequently reduced to the status of tenants, by contrast with the autonomy which Kahn had presumed.

In the longer term we may hope for some amelioration of these trends and for a renewed acceptance of institutions as potent elements in civic and social life. To express these hopes is to assert a view of architecture as an activity pursued primarily through an engagement with real institutions and their purposes.





## Notes

- 1 Determinism in design implies a quasi-mathematical formulation of the task at hand and requires that the objectives, requirements, and means of the task are defined so narrowly as to allow a unique solution. Leaving aside the difficulty of solving the problem thus stated, the solution chosen will be highly sensitive to the terms in which the conditions of the problem are formulated.
- 2 This distinction seems to have been glossed over in previous scholarship, even by Banham (1960).
- 3 Articulation on the basis of program elements was ignored in many notable European buildings of the 20th century, especially where encompassing sculptural form was adopted (as in German expressionism), or where compelling constraints were imposed by the site (as in Ralph Erskine's Byker Wall). This kind of articulation stands in opposition to the principle that a building ought not to be so narrowly tailored to its immediate use as to preclude its future adaptation for other purposes.
- 4 Conversation between Peter Proudfoot and Louis Kahn in 1967 at Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## Author's Note

Mark Horn wishes to acknowledge the contributions and support of his co-author, friend and onetime teacher, Peter Proudfoot, who died a few weeks before publication of this article. He was a gifted historian and a brilliant teacher, with an intuitive sense of human and architectural possibility.

This article originated in an earlier, more discursive account of the 'theatre-temple' as embodied in the Sydney Opera House. That account was published in *Quadrant*, an Australian magazine of literature and current affairs (Horn and Proudfoot 2021). We thank the editor of *Quadrant* for permission to reproduce parts of that earlier piece. The present article was motivated by a desire to draw out more rigorously and within a broader context the ideas of cultural institutions enunciated by Utzon, Behrens, and (especially) Kahn. We are grateful to the editor-in-chief of *Architectural Histories* and her colleagues for their encouragement and their useful reviews of an earlier version of this article.

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