Motherhouse for the Dominican Sisters

Louis Kahn
Pennsylvania

General Information

Motherhouse for the Dominican Sisters is also called Dominican Sisters' Convent. Louis Kahn designed this building for the Sisters of St. Catherine de Ricci as a Place of Worship. He worked on it from 1965-1968, but it was never built.

The size of this project is approximately 64400 square feet. It includes programs of sanctuary, sacristy, chapel, kitchen, classrooms, cells, meeting-room, refectory, service yard and entrance tower. Like Kahn's many other projects, he used concrete to make the structure out of load bearing wall system.

Louis Kahn's driving concept comes from the idea of spirit and soul in a religious space. He then translated his thoughts into a communal project by forming interrelated clustered of buildings. His design intention of this project can be understood from the following direct quotes.

"The inspirations of man are the beginning of my work."
"The mind is really the center of the unmeasurable, the brain is the center of the measurable."
"It is for the reason my interest in this nucleus, in form realisation, form meaning, the realisation of inseparable parts of something."

Early Sketches of Site Study

Site Plan

Early Site Model
Sections-Elevations/ Synopsis Analysis

The elevations and sections of Dominican Sisters' Convent show the distinction between the wall, which is the cells that form the boundary, and the center or the nucleus. Elevation, in particular, tells another story about hierarchy due to the scale and mass. The dramatic design of the entrance tower and sanctuary, for instance, indicates the hierarchy of those components. Even though the final elevation has less geometry, the scale still keep the level of hierarchy in this building.
Building Plans/ Synopsis Analysis

The building plan of Dominican Sisters' Convent reveals different levels of thought that Louis Kahn had gone through when he was designing this project. Since he believed the plan is a society of rooms, he looked for communal quality. The highly articulated public space, for example, allows different functions to connect that conceive each program as a path to the next. The outdoor space caused by the rotating forms leads to an opportunity for gathering space - another feature of unity.

Louis Kahn also expresses the concept of a self-supportive city. The geometric form has a gesture of wrapping around the religious components, showing independence and security. This is similar to a castle, where the cells form a wall-city, and separating itself from the urban fabric.

From a religious point of view, Louis Kahn considered every cell as an individual chapel because he believed in the importance of spirit in a religious institution. Therefore, "the program that you get and the translation you make architecturally must come from the spirit of man, not from the program."
Relationship of Building to Daylight

Exeter Library

Motherhouse for Dominican Sisters

Inner Layer - Less need for sunlight exposure

Outside Layer - More need for sunlight exposure

Public, Private, and Transitional Space

Public Space

Transitional Space

Private Space
Spatial Organization of Singular vs. Repetitive Elements

Motherhouse for the Dominican Sisters

Exeter Library

Salk Institute Meeting House

- Blue: Singular Elements
- Red: Singular Elements
- Light gray: Repetitive Elements
Sequence of Spaces - Path

- Start of Sequence
- End of Sequence

Circulation within the Building

- Horizontal Circulation
- Vertical Circulation
- Junction between Private and Public part of building

Levels of Hierarchy

- No Hierarchy
- Most Hierarchical of the living quarters
- Less Hierarchical in the building
- Most Hierarchical of the whole building