

RUINS, RUB-OUTS AND TRASH

In my own experiences with it, curiosity is about patterns.

It's one of our most powerful tools for noticing difference in the environment. When human beings detect difference—when we notice that the way things show up for us is different than the pattern we expected—what happens next is patterned, too.

One of the patterns is Fight: to push back on the changes we've taken note of, and use whatever power we have to force the patterns to re-align with expectation.

The opposite pattern is Flight. To turn away from the things that don't make sense, and recenter our energies in the places where the patterns are more reliable.

I'm interested in a third way; in a response to what curiosity finds out that isn't yet directional, like fight/flight. Instead, it's a loop. A loop from curiosity into wonder and then back again into a heightened state of curiosity.

And when the process of curiosity-into-wonder-into-more curiosity is really clicking, it forms a cobweb. Like a doily: stronger and more resilient because of the different threads and loops and overlaps and redundancies, not in spite of.

If you allow this loop to keep looping, it forms a center: like a nest. Thatched in new patterns. Circumscribed by questions. Ideal conditions, I believe, for developing an appreciation for the texture of the real situation one finds oneself in, and to discern individual threads in its fabric.

To figure out what connects this difference we've noticed in the environment into the sameness we're more familiar with.

Because everything connects.

The loop of curiosity and wonder that I've been wound up in for decades now, that I'm in no hurry to be disentangled from, has to do with "the architecture part" of information architecture.

My desire to understand it has been warmed by friction in the overlaps of this one particular thread with threads that connect into the fabric of fields I have no training in: cartography, environmental graphics, exhibitions, visual design, industrial design, and the making of the built environment.

The texture of the situation I find myself in here today, on the architecture side of the information architecture equation, doesn't so much match the patterns I learned in library school.

But there are some threads.

What a gift: to have been able to follow some threads—from the work of **Christina Wodtke** and **Nathan Shedroff**—back to a source they both were personally connected to in different ways. This source was and is **Richard Saul Wurman**.

In 1976 he wrote a fable about a city where old people and old buildings were cherished through a department called Waiting To Be Wanted.

In March, Richard will be 86. But he's not yet old, and doesn't like waiting. Since designing and publishing his first book 60 years ago — *The Notebooks And Drawings* of his beloved teacher and mentor Louis I. Kahn — he went and created 99 more.

Living five lives in the space of one.

Working on his biography has become a daily riot of new discoveries, and new stories, as the network effects of a decade of threading loop-de-loops in the curiosity and wonder pattern suddenly starts to speed up.

My inbox is now a constant celebration of magazine articles, book scans, and personal photos. Like this picture of Richard that Lance Wyman shot in a sun-drenched mountain glade in Aspen, in June of 1972.

Perhaps I am too comfortable, dwelling amid these wonders!

After all, it's been 10 years since my first telephone interview with RSW. 10 years since I decided to begin work on his biography. And often times, to an outside observer, my work on this project must look like doing nothing at all. But looks can be deceiving.

In that first interview, Richard told me that if I wanted to understand what he understood, and see as he sees, that there were four things I'd need to know:

Lou Kahn, Lou Kahn, Lou Kahn, and Lou Kahn.

Here's what Lou Kahn has to say about wonder.

Form comes from wonder. Wonder stems from our 'in touchness' with how we were made. One senses that nature records the process of what it makes, so that in what it makes there is also the records of how it was made. In touch with this record we are in wonder. This wonder gives rise to knowledge. But knowledge is related to other knowledge and this relation gives a sense of order, a sense of how they inter-relate in a harmony that makes all things exist. From knowledge to sense of order we then wink at wonder and say how am I doing, wonder?

The biographers have varied in the truths they've tried to tell about Lou Kahn since his death in 1974, but the smudges on his hands, and on his sleeves: those are factual. Kahn's preferred medium was charcoal. He liked to use the side of his hand to rub out the thing he was drawing in order to draw it over, and over again.

Turning the tracing paper into a palimpsest; where a trace of each previous marking is still there, only blurred out and faded back by Kahn's rubbings-out and re-renderings, so that in what he made there is also the record of how it was made.

Richard told me that Kahn insisted on using charcoal made from grapevines. Perhaps as part of a Francophile, or even Bacchanal fantasy of connecting all the way back to the ancient ruins he was most stirred by. In Carcassonne. Paestum. Luxor. The Pantheon.

A bit of something plucked from the ashes of his ancestors. A means, perhaps, of reigniting primordial fire in the spaces and places he explained to himself with the charcoal.

And that decision he made to do his drawings on the so-called "trash" of the yellow tracing paper: not only was each sheet its own potential palimpsest of rub-outs and re-renderings, the sheets themselves could be onion-skinned to permit the darker markings on each layer to be faintly discernible and literally traceable from the layers above or below. Charcoal on trash collected over time acting as ersatz animated film recording how Kahn's ideas developed.

Lou Kahn sometimes talked like how the Bible sounds.

Like when he said **what will be has always been**.

Here was an architect who made models of the footings of a building—of the deep structure you can only see that way when the building is coming down—to better understand what the building wanted to be and how it would change over time.

Did he choose to draw in ashes and in layers of trash because he knew that all of the works of his hands were already, in some sense, ruins? Predestined to be scraped off from their foundations, like a palimpsest of stone and steel, and overwritten by the next architect?

Some of the finest examples of ancient parchment palimpsests can be found in Egypt, in a monastery on Mt. Sinai. Yes: that Mt. Sinai. From the Bible.

Holy ground.

It's part of an ancient complex that's been in continual use by monks and rabbis and imams and pilgrims since before the 3rd century BCE, with library collections including works in Arabic, Syriac, Aramaic, Georgian, and Slavonic.

I first learned of this monastery while following a thread about Richard into the DVD extras from Nathaniel Kahn's film *My Architect*. It was a place that Nathaniel's father had visited in the 1960s. Architects more typically make their pilgrimages to St. Catherine's to see its buildings, not its books — to see the oldest known surviving roof truss in the world — its oaken timbers somehow defying centuries worth of the termites' gnawing.

144 of the 3300 manuscripts in the library at St. Catherine's show the signs of previous writings having been made on and then scraped off from the parchment that the current text then was written over-top of. I was not surprised to read that in many instances, it is the original text that is of greater interest to scholars today.

The people I've interviewed who worked in Lou's office when Richard did tell stories about the extraordinary power and clarity of Kahn's original drawings for a new project.

Beginnings beginnings beginnings beginnings I love beginnings he said.

Which must be understood as a paradox, coming from the guy who said what will be has always been.

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Why am I telling you all of this stuff about Lou Kahn?

For two reasons.

First and most obviously: to highlight the crucial role that archives and records-keeping plays in fueling the loop from curiosity into wonder and then back in to heightened curiosity. Thanks to their preservation in the archives at the University of Pennsylvania, and to their publication in books and exhibitions, people still wonder about those black smears across sheets of yellow trash. Perhaps at this very moment. Following traces. Uncovering connections. Discovering patterns.

The 2nd “because why” is because I worry that unlike Kahn’s process and tools, the processes and tools we use are aimed at helping us satisfy the demand for moving fast and breaking things, not to be good, or to better ensure the doing of good work.

How will the interaction designers and information architects that show up after we go away trace their interests back through the layers of what we made, when the tools we use and processes we’re following today are so insufficiently palimpsestic.

And/or proprietary.

And/or locked up behind licenses that virtually ensure their inscrutability and unavailability to people forward in time from us, in ways that the people who came before us didn’t have to think about all that much.

My son Gerrit told me about a YouTube video from a conference where the presenter asked for a show of hands from video game developers in the audience who could produce or successfully compile their own code from the previous quarter. Or from the previous year. Or from two years ago. And by that time the point had been made: nobody had their hand in the air.

I’m curious to see what the equivalent show of hands might look like in our communities of information architecture practice.

Lou Kahn said that **a house is only good if it’s good for the next man.**

He knew that the likelihood of its spaces and places continuing to be loved after “the first man” has come and gone requires the kinds of attention to detail you’d have to be paying if the next man and the next-next man were embraced as stakeholders from the onset.

Kahn’s body of work was, in the archaic English way of saying, builded to the ages. Executed in materials and utilizing techniques that were explicitly designed to outlast the next man. Some of them may yet outlast the last man.

As contrasted with the stuff we make: executed in materials and utilizing techniques that have been explicitly designed to make the human context of a particular place, and a particular time, irrelevant.

In June of 1972, I was born. And Richard Saul Wurman chaired the International Design Conference in Aspen. He called the conference **The Invisible City**. In a time of accelerating urban decay and so-called urban renewal, the program for the conference was focused on making cities observable, and making the built environment understandable.

The Invisible City was a Rocky Mountain high: about as utopian as Richard ever got in the development of his thinking about cities. Attendees recollect it as having been among Richard’s best conferences; a kind of proto-**TED**. Lou Kahn gave a talk there, flying into Aspen after having been in London to receive the gold medal from the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Coincidentally, **Italo Calvino** published his faux-historical masterpiece **Invisible Cities** later that same year, wherein a languid and despondent character called Kublai Kahn is being regaled with fantastical descriptions of and stories about his empire by a Venitian explorer named Marco Polo.

This other Kahn is said to have said that “in the lives of emperors there is a moment which follows pride... The desperate moment, when we discover that this empire, which had seemed to us the sum of all wonders, is an endless formless ruin.”

Calvino’s narrator goes on to say that none of the stories and explanations of his courtiers, nor the adulations of his concubines, could soothe The Great Kahn’s ennui.

“Only in Marco Polo’s accounts was Kublai Kahn able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, **the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing.**”

You and I will not escape the termites’ gnawing.
But we can do good work.

Like Marco Polo, and Richard Saul Wurman, we can explain things to each other in ways that help people trace patterns that are worth noticing, and remembering, and repeating. And like Kublai Kahn, we can demand to hear better stories about how everything connects.

I think I’ve said enough for now.

Clearly, I don’t have any answers. My favorite saying of Lou’s is that **a good question is worth more than a brilliant answer.**

I don’t think I’ve yet heard a question as good as the one we heard him ask a few minutes ago.

It’s the question I dare you to ask, too, as you consider the opportunities you might have, to encode and preserve and celebrate the record of how the things you make were made, in the very process of their making.

How am I doing, wonder?

CREATED FOR WORLD IA DAY EGYPT

THANK YOU GHADA KANDIL

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