

# Little Room for Improvement in Philadelphia Memorial to Louis Kahn

By Thomas Hine  
Knight-Ridder

PHILADELPHIA—"The room," said the architect Louis Kahn, "is the beginning of architecture. It is the place of the mind."

Siah Armajani, an Iranian-born, Minneapolis-based artist, has built a room to honor Kahn, a Philadelphia who was one of the great architects of this century. It was dedicated last week at the Fleisher Art Memorial, the free art school in Philadelphia that Kahn attended as a child.

The Louis Kahn lecture room is the second work of art to be completed in the Fairmount Park Art Association's public art project, which was undertaken in observance of the 300th anniversary of Philadelphia's founding.

It is not a large room, 24 by 17 feet with 10-foot ceilings. Yet, when it is filled with the approximately 35 people it is designed to accommodate, most of it will be empty.

Speakers will stand at a triangular podium and will almost be forced to lean out over the audience, which will be seated on fixed wooden benches that are neither comfortable

nor intolerable. The room has quotations from Kahn along its blue cornice and a quotation from Walt Whitman inlaid in its floor. It is a demanding place, not just another room.

"There is open space because you must not be cramped, there must be a meditative quality," Armajani said as the final coats of paint were being applied. "There are benches for one person, two, three or four. It doesn't establish any pattern of behavior."

The room is of painted hardwoods, designed to be durable. The carpentry is straightforward and visible, with little adornment. The colors are a grayish rose, bright yellow and a Pennsylvania Dutch blue.

Blue display cases lean outward from the wall and appear to be pushing into the space. Changing displays of reproductions of Kahn's drawings and other works will be placed in them.

Most of the seating is on the pew-like benches, which are placed at an angle to the wall. Everywhere, the shoebox shape of the room is denied. All the diagonal lines created by the placement of the seats and the lectern recall Kahn's discussion of what

happens in a small room where there are many people: "The singularity of each is so sensitive that the vectors do not resolve."

Armajani has recently specialized in making rooms and gardens for meeting. He shares Kahn's concern for making places where people can meet and be comfortable, but there is nothing about his design for the room that tries to evoke Kahn's own work or appear to be something Kahn might have done.

---

## It is not a large room... Yet, when it is filled... most of it will be empty.

---

Armajani said that he considered it more important to be neighborly than to be shocking, and that the object is much more important than the artist who makes it. "I hope that people will come and use it and be comfortable, and recognize that we did everything to respect them, and as Whitman says [in the inlaid quotation], to glorify them."

Armajani was one of 15 artists invited by the Fairmount Park Art Association to propose projects that would be useful as well as beautiful.

Penny Bach, who directed this program, brought him to the Fleisher the first time he visited Philadelphia. The Fleisher had planned to install a community meeting room as part of a \$200,000 rehabilitation and expansion program.

When Armajani heard this and found out that Kahn had not only attended Fleisher but was inspired by it, the idea of a Louis Kahn lecture room was born. The artist went home to Minneapolis and made a

design and a model for a room that would be in a basement space.

But meanwhile, the school, which is administered by the Philadelphia Museum of Art, decided that the room would be too important for the basement so Armajani was asked to redesign it and move it to a space at street level.

Armajani was not particularly bothered by the changes he had to make in his design. Indeed, he said he thinks the changes are an important part of his responsibility as an

artist to accommodate the public's needs.

"It is most important that in such a process there be people in the middle who understand art, but even more important, understand what people need and what has to be done to make what you are doing useful," Armajani said. "Here we have reached the best possible compromises. I am pleased with everything that has happened."

As the project developed, the school discovered that the room would meet some needs that it did not at first know it had. Thora Jacobson, the school's director, said she expected that the room would be used often for critiques of student work and that its existence would prompt additional lectures and other events.

Along the way, Armajani was able

to make some changes that added to the design. A glass transom with one of Kahn's drawings incised in it has been placed at the entrance. Another addition was the cornice with Kahn's thoughts on schools. "Schools began with a man under a tree who did not know he was a teacher discussing his realizations with a few others who did not know they were students," says one of the quotations.

"The quotations are corny but beautiful," said Armajani. "It is not a negative thing for something to be corny. It means that it is understood."

The room is in a renovated rowhouse. There are windows at the front, with red and yellow shutters. The showcases are a bit like windows, and they will help provide the distractions that Kahn said every schoolroom needs.