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# The Outsider as insider: Louis I. Kahn and Chloethiel Woodard Smith

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## Palavras-chave:

Arquitetura moderna,  
Gênero,  
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Renovação urbana.

## Abstract

The architects Louis Kahn (1901-1974) and Chloethiel Woodard Smith (1910-1992) were near contemporaries whose networks overlapped in multiple ways. Kahn's best buildings offer transcendent experiences of community; Smith's remain cherished, if far more ordinary, places to live and work. Although the level of fame the profession bestowed upon him eluded her, in the 1960s and early 1970s her singularity as a female architect working on a national scale led her to be frequently profiled in the popular press. Kahn began as an outsider because of his working-class Jewish background; Smith remained one because she was a woman, although she was highly ambivalent about, and -- when well enough established -- outrightly dismissive of being labeled a woman or -- worse yet -- lady architect. Each also benefited from their status as relatively privileged white Americans, while building for African Americans and in the Global South. Tracing the arc of their careers captures the opportunities for upward mobility that the postwar boom created in the United States, as well as ones that the Cold War bestowed upon its best-connected architects, even as it illuminates the obstacles that continued to hinder the progression of women in the profession.

## Resumo

Os arquitetos Louis Kahn (1901-1974) e Chloethiel Woodard Smith (1910-1992) eram quase contemporâneos cujas redes se sobrepunham de múltiplas formas. Os melhores edifícios de Kahn oferecem experiências transcendentais de comunidade; os de Smith continuam a ser apreciados, se bem que muito mais comuns, como locais para se viver e trabalhar. Embora o nível de fama que a profissão lhe conferiu lhe tenha escapado, nos anos 60 e início dos anos 70, a sua singularidade como arquiteta que trabalha em escala nacional a levou a ser frequentemente divulgada na imprensa popular. Kahn começou como um forasteiro devido à sua origem judaica, da classe trabalhadora; Smith permaneceu como tal porque era uma mulher, embora fosse altamente ambivalente, e - quando bem estabelecida - completamente desdenhosa de ser rotulada de mulher ou - pior ainda - de arquiteta mulher. Cada um também beneficiou do seu status de americano branco relativamente privilegiado, enquanto construía para afro-americanos e no Sul Global. Traçar o arco das suas carreiras capta as oportunidades de mobilidade ascendente que o boom do pós-guerra criou nos Estados Unidos, bem como as que a Guerra Fria concedeu aos seus arquitetos mais bem relacionados, ao mesmo tempo em que ilumina os obstáculos que continuarão a impedir a progressão das mulheres na profissão.

## Palabras clave:

Arquitectura moderna,  
Género,  
Sociedad,  
Renovación urbana.

## Resumen

Los arquitectos Louis Kahn (1901-1974) y Chloethiel Woodard Smith (1910-1992) fueron casi contemporáneos cuyas redes se superpusieron de múltiples maneras. Los mejores edificios de Kahn ofrecen experiencias comunitarias trascendentes; Smith sigue siendo apreciado, aunque mucho más común, como lugares para vivir y trabajar. Aunque el nivel de fama que le confería la profesión la eludía, en la década de 1960 y principios de la de 1970 su singularidad como arquitecta trabajando a escala nacional la llevó a aparecer con frecuencia en la prensa popular. Kahn comenzó como un extraño debido a su origen judío de clase trabajadora; Smith siguió siéndolo porque era mujer, aunque era muy ambivalente y, cuando estaba bien establecida, desdenaba completamente ser etiquetada como mujer o, peor aún, como arquitecta. Cada uno también se benefició de su condición de estadounidense blanco relativamente privilegiado mientras construía para los afroamericanos y en el Sur Global. Trazar el arco de sus carreras captura las oportunidades de movilidad ascendente que el auge de la posguerra creó en los Estados Unidos, así como las que la Guerra Fría brindó a sus arquitectos mejor conectados, al tiempo que ilumina los obstáculos que seguirán enfrentando. Progresión de la mujer en la profesión.

## Introduction

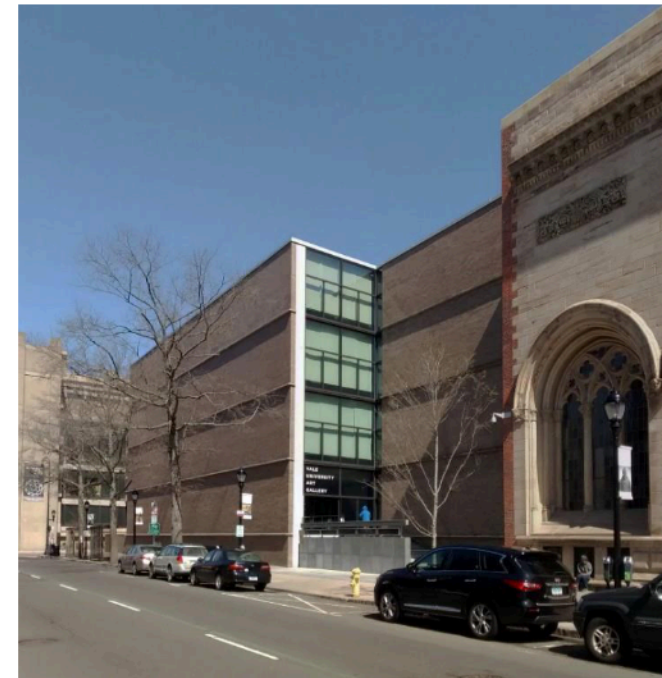
How do we decide which architects matter? And what path do men, and far more rarely women, take to become such architects? Louis Kahn (1901-1974) was one of the most celebrated architects of the twentieth century, while for two decades Chloethiel Woodard Smith (1910-1992) ran what was at the time the largest women-led postwar practice in the United States. Kahn's best buildings offer transcendent experiences of community; Smith's remain cherished, if far more ordinary, places to live and work. Although the level of fame the profession bestowed upon him eluded her, in the 1960s and early 1970s her singularity as a female architect working on a national scale led her to be frequently profiled in the popular press. Kahn began as an outsider because of his working-class Jewish background; Smith remained one because she was a woman, although she was highly ambivalent about, and -- when well enough established -- outrightly dismissive of being labeled a woman or -- worse yet -- lady architect. Each also benefited from their status as relatively privileged white Americans, while building for African Americans and in the Global South.<sup>1</sup>

The two near contemporaries practiced for nearly forty years within 250 kilometers of each other, with Smith based in Washington and Kahn in Philadelphia. The buildings Kahn designed beginning with the Yale University Art Gallery, completed in 1953, through his death in 1974, remain among the most celebrated civic and

<sup>1</sup> This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101019419). With thanks as well to my research assistant Weronika Kocurkiewicz for help with the illustrations and the citations.

The literature on Kahn is vast, but the basic outlines of his life are best traced in MCCARTER, Robert. **Louis I. Kahn**. London: Phaidon, 2022; WISEMAN, Carter. **Louis Kahn: A Life in Architecture**. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020; LESSER, Wendy. *You Say to Brick: The Life of Louis Kahn*. New York: Farrer, Straus, and Giroux, 2017; and BROWNLEE, David; DELONG, David. **Louis I. Kahn, In the Realm of Architecture**. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991. For Smith see SIMON, Madlen. *Chloethiel Woodard Smith. Pioneering Women in Architecture*. <https://pioneeringwomen.bwaf.org/chloethiel-woodard-smith/>; and ZIPF, Catherine W. **A Female Modernist in the Classical Capital: Chloethiel Woodard Smith and the Architecture of Southwest Washington, D.C.** Newport: Salve Regina University, 2006. Because Kahn's story is so well known I will offer detailed citations only when absolutely necessary. For Smith, however, I will document my own findings about her career as well as what I have learned from the relatively scant literature that references her.

institutional structures of their day. He was feted internationally for the way in which he was able to combine abstract geometry, an attention to structure, and an elastic definition of function to create spaces and places that are clearly extraordinary (Figure 1). Smith's career was bookended by Capitol Park, of which the first block was finished in 1959, and Washington Square, completed in 1984, a housing development and an office building. Both are located in Washington, where her notable work also includes Harbour Square, although she worked elsewhere, including most notably, Boston, New Haven, and St. Louis (Figure 2). She was best known for being able to design understated structures that equally pleased developers and those who inhabited them. If Kahn made modernist monumentality inspiring, Smith had a flair for rendering urban renewal's most destructive edges more palatable. Tracing the arc of their careers captures the opportunities for upward mobility that the postwar boom created in the United States, as well as ones that the Cold War bestowed upon its best-connected architects.



**Figure 1.** Louis Kahn, Yale University Art Gallery, main building, 1950-1953, New Haven, Connecticut. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



**Figure 2.** Chloethiel Woodard Smith with a model of Harbour Square, Washington, D.C., circa 1965. Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs division, digital ID ppmsca.31775.

Kahn and Smith were not friends, although the circles in which they moved overlapped so often between 1933, when Smith moved to the East Coast, and Kahn's death in 1974, that it is difficult to believe that they never met. The extensiveness of these convergences demonstrates that they were not, as an assessment of their relative reputations today might suggest, operating in entirely different worlds, even as it casts light on what each did best. While Kahn's appeal was largely to fellow

architects, and especially architecture students, and his economic success continually undercut in the last dozen years of his life by his inability to settle quickly upon a final design, Smith excelled at gaining the support of developers, policymakers and politicians, as well as in producing to a deadline, although her firm also

struggled financially (JAMES-CHAKRABORTY, 2013).<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly not by choice, she often worked behind the scenes, while he occupied center stage. Charting these differences highlights the gap then and now about what buildings have and continue to captivate architects, architectural critics, and architectural historians, and what stories about architects entice the general public and give the greatest insights into the past.

## Beginnings

Kahn's ascent continued across the 1950s, a decade that ended with the dedication in 1960 of his Richards Medical Research Laboratories. The first building to receive its own exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, Richards stood on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, where he began teaching in 1958. Smith also gained ground, albeit more slowly. While Kahn was elected a fellow of the American Institute of Architecture in 1953; she had to wait until 1960. This was still a considerable achievement, however, at a time when only a handful of women had received this honor, especially because she had still built relatively little in the United States at that time (her buildings in Bolivia remain largely untraced). The parallels continued as both designed psychiatric hospitals that, while little remembered today, were key in enabling them to build their practices. They also busied themselves with the redesign of the cities in which they lived and worked, a task in which Smith was eventually more successful than Kahn, although the consequences for the impoverished African Americans displaced from Southwest Washington have long cast a dark shadow over this achievement. Both mixed apartment towers with town houses in complexes landscaped by Kiley. And both received commissions from the State Department to work in the Global South, although Kahn's consulate in Luanda, Angola, remained unbuilt, while Smith's embassy in Asunción, Paraguay, was realized. A key difference was that Kahn drew heavily across the decade upon the talents of Tyng, while Smith was unable to command the respect of the younger men with whom she had strictly professional partners-

<sup>2</sup> Much of Kahn's financial difficulties dated to his commission for the National Assembly in Dhaka, for which he was paid irregularly at best. Smith's financial insecurity is a frequent theme of the letters she wrote to Lewis Mumford, which are preserved in the Lewis Mumford Collection (LMC), Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania. See, for instance, those dated 22 Dec. 1976 and 17 Jan. 1978.

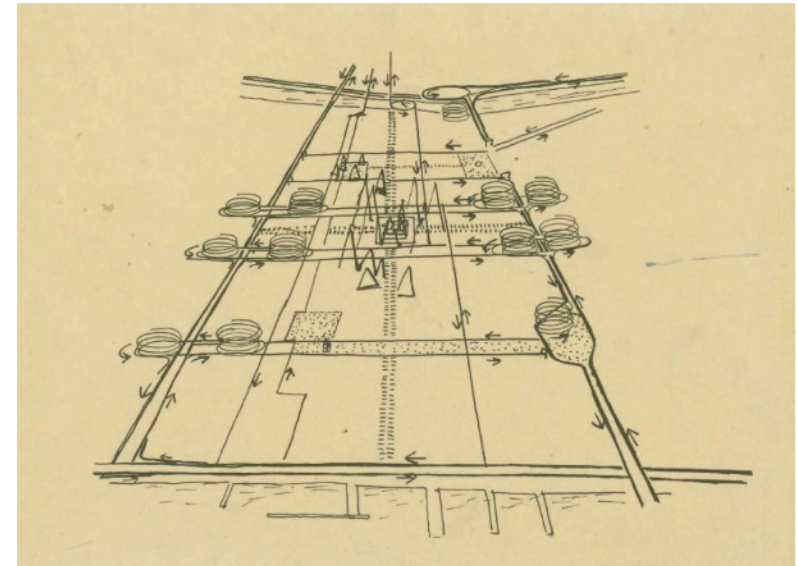
hips, or to compel them to work as hard as she did.<sup>3</sup>

Kahn and Stonorov parted ways in 1947, after Kahn became dissatisfied that he had not received adequate credit for his work on the Better Philadelphia Exhibition. In 1950, the same year he secured the commission for the Art Gallery, his firm began work on the Samuel Radbill Building of the Philadelphia Psychiatric Hospital. Following the formation of Keyes, Smith, Satterlee, and Lethbridge, Smith in 1955 began work on the Chestnut Lodge Mental Hospital and Research Institute in the Washington suburb of Rockville, a commission that would continue to engage her sporadically until 1975. Although neither of these complexes remains well remembered, they helped launch both practices. Radbill was recently demolished; and much of Smith's work has also been replaced after the facility was closed and the site redeveloped (KORNBLATT, 2022; ROBINSON, 2016).

The Housing Act passed by Congress in 1949 created new opportunities for both Kahn and Smith. It enabled city governments to access federal funding to substantially rebuild neighborhoods, often inhabited predominately by African Americans, that were understood to be "blighted." These efforts were embedded in strategies intended to modernize cities by better facilitating automobile traffic to the rapidly expanding suburbs at the same time that cities sought to retain middle and high-income taxpayers by expanding housing opportunities close to downtowns. Both architects focused their attention across the 1950s on ambitious redevelopment plans. These involved addressing both how the automobile entered the city and how those who could not or did not want to move to suburbs might be housed (MUMFORD, 2009, p.64-79; AMMON, 2009, p.175-200).

Smith had less of a commitment to the historic city than Kahn. Portland was officially established a century and a half after Philadelphia; when Smith moved there as a child few of its oldest white inhabitants had been born in the area. Unlike Kahn, she had not visited Europe before the 1960s, much less traveled to the eastern Mediterranean, as he did during his fellowship at the American Academy. Although she appreciated many aspects of the oldest cities she did know reasonably well, all of them located in South America, she displayed no nostalgia for their co-

lonial pasts. And yet it was Kahn, ably assisted by Tyng, who in his traffic studies for Philadelphia proposed the boldest interventions (Figure 3). Perhaps because they were never built, as well as because their daunting scale continues to mesh with the ambitions of architects who dream of being unconstrained by clients or finances, they remain much more admired than the plan Smith developed in 1952 for Southwest in collaboration with Louis Justement, although the later was a more nuanced and partially realized approach to similar issues (WIGLEY, 2001, p. 82-122).<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 3.** Louis Kahn, Traffic Studies for Philadelphia, Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Kahn and Smith shared an aversion to the automobile and to the suburbs and a strong commitment to the city as the place where people of all classes, and it was implied religions and races, came together to construct democratic communities (SMITH, 1975). Although Smith, unlike Kahn, could actually drive, she frequently recounted getting lost when she ventured into suburban Maryland or Virginia, which she described with a mock terror that never infected her discussions of ur-

<sup>3</sup> This is a theme of some of her letters of Mumford. See, in particular, those dated 21 Aug. 1952, 29 Apr. 1953, 7 Feb. 1956, and 18 Feb. [1956], LMC.

ban neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup> While Kahn proposed quasi-fortified rings of parking to protect the center city from the scourge of cars, Smith in 1962 designed Washington's E Street Expressway to minimize its impact on the street grid (Figure 4). Moreover, while most of Kahn's plans for Philadelphia ran afoul of Edmund Bacon, the executive director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, but Smith eventually saw much of her vision for Southwest implemented in Washington, although she did not receive full credit when the developer William Zeckendorf and his architect W. M. Pei appropriated many aspects of the Justement-Smith plan (HASKELL, 1945). These included, for instance, the boulevard running from the Mall to the waterfront that became L'Enfant Plaza.



**Figure 4.** Chloethiel Woodard Smith, E street Expressway, View east along the E Expressway from the overpass for the 23rd Street Northwest in Washington D.C. Source: Famartin, Wikimedia Commons. Available in: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=82249255>. Accessed: 12 Oct. 2022.

<sup>4</sup> She describes one such incident in "Creeping Cities," an address she delivered on 3 October 1969 to the Garden Club of Virginia, CWSC.

Smith and Kahn's approach to housing in these years largely dovetailed, however, although the fate of the results diverged. Kahn's firm began work on Mill Creek in 1953 (Figure 5). Here impoverished African Americans, denied access to the suburbs on both economic and racial grounds, were housed in three high-rise apartment towers as well as tight terraces of modest rowhouses, some of which fronted small courtyards. Like so many such projects, the lack of adequate social support for residents in tandem with a lack of maintenance by the city resulted in the eventual demolition in 2003 of the towers, by which time many of the houses had also been boarded up (WHISTON SPIRN, 2005).<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 5.** Louis Kahn, Mill Creek buildings, Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Smith was determined that the clearance of Southwest's historic fabric not generate similar results, which she predicted would occur if all of the most impoverished of the displaced African American inhabitants were rehoused on the same site. She advocated that Southwest be redeveloped for a largely middle-class clientele, with higher end housing positioned on the waterfront. This was a strategy that carefully meshed with city official's desire to grow the area's tax base. It did not work out, however, as she had hoped. Despite her and the city's efforts to secure better

quarters than they had previously inhabited, many of the dislocated suffered long afterwards from the destruction of the community ties that had helped sustain them emotionally (AMMON, 2009). They often moved into previously largely white neighborhoods, above all Anacostia, where city and national officials once again ignored their needs, while their presence encouraged white residents to leave for the suburbs, undercutting the benefits the redevelopment of Southwest had provided.

Smith's strategy in part foreshadows the gentrification that is currently resulting in increasing densification of housing across Southwest and the commercialization of much of its waterfront. She, however, was careful to preserve a mix of dwelling sizes in even Harbour Square, her most upscale housing in the area, in order to encourage a mix of incomes. The construction of Capitol Park, her first venture in the area, on a site previously occupied by Dixon's Court, a notorious example of the neighborhood's slum alleys, stalled for years because of city authority's demands that whatever was built on the site be available to tenants regardless of race at a time when it was almost impossible to secure financing for such a situation (GILLETTE, 2006) (Figure 6).<sup>5</sup> Its eventual occupants included the legendary civil rights lawyer Thurgood Marshall, who became the first African American justice of the Supreme Court; Robert Weaver, the first secretary of Housing and Urban Development and the first African American member of the Cabinet; and Clifford Alexander, the first African American Secretary of the Army, his wife the historian Adele Logan Alexander, and their daughter the poet Elizabeth Alexander (RAVITCH, 2014, p. 22; RUHE, 1966, p. 15).<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 6.** Chloethiel Woodard Smith in front of Capitol Park building, 1959, Washington DC. Source: Philip Harrington, Alamy Stock Photo.

The final appearance of Capitol Park, whose apartment blocks and townhouses, landscaped like Mill Creek by Kiley, reached completion between 1959 and 1968, were influenced by Smith's experience building the United States embassy in Asunción (Figure 7). This was part of a campaign by the Department of State to use modern architecture designed by some of the country's most prominent up-and-coming architects to demonstrate the country's commitment to individual expression. This was at a time when the Soviet Union still embraced Socialist Realism. Most of the new embassies were in the Global South, where the United States did not yet own major properties, and where the relatively adventurous designs were intended to impress left-leaning local intellectuals enthusiastic about modernism. Smith, the only woman to participate in the program, was awarded one of the most obscure. Paraguay was the only independent nation in South American she had not visited during her Guggenheim fellowship; most of the materials for the building had to be brought up the river from Argentina (THAYER, 1958).

<sup>5</sup> For Smith's frustrations, see her letters to Mumford of 28 January [1952?], 21 August 1952, and 20 November 1952, LMC.

<sup>16</sup> The marker of THURGOOD MARSHALL in Capitol Park, according to which he was living at 64 G Street when he was named to the Supreme Court. The Historical Marker Database. <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=147019>, Accessed: 5 October 2022.



**Figure 7.** Chloethiel Woodard Smith, United States Embassy, Asunción, Paraguay, 1959. Source: sfgamchick, Flickr, 2011, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The brickwork in Capitol Park, which won Smith industry attention, was clearly inflected by the use she made of this material in Asunción, where she used it as infill in the concrete-framed chancellery and residence as well as in walls that offered definition to the landscaping.<sup>7</sup> Kahn famously asked the brick what it wanted to be and claimed that it responded that it wanted to be an arch, but in the balconies of her first Capitol Park apartment block, Smith used the material in ways that were more decorative than structural (WURMAN, 1986, p. 252).<sup>8</sup> While Kahn's celebrated approach to the material was inspired by his experience in the 1960s at the Indian Institute of Management, where relatively unskilled labor was trained to make and lay bricks, Smith took care to employ local materials and lessons, perhaps absorbing lessons from South American architects like Uruguay's Eladio

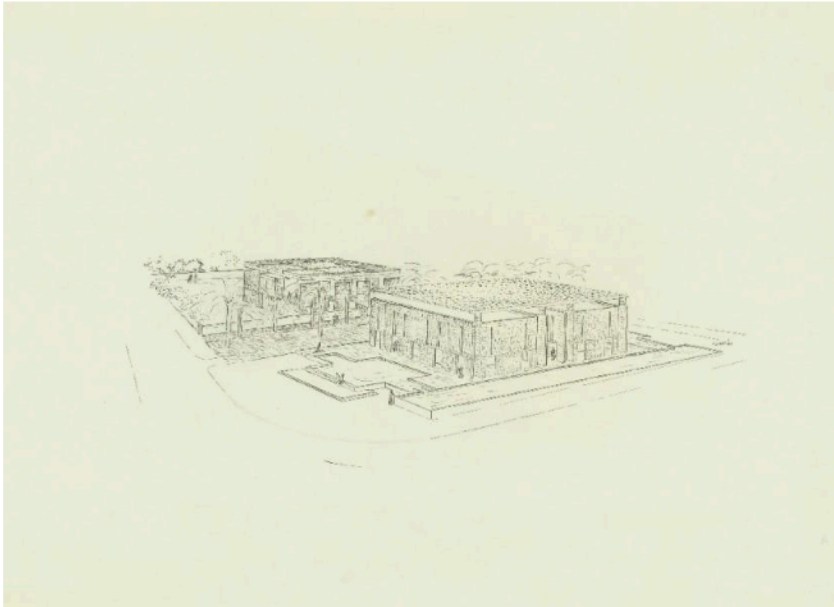
Dieste.<sup>9</sup> Climate as well as materials played a role in her design of the embassy complex. Like Edward Durrell Stone in his embassy in New Delhi, she adopted a lattice work approach to the walls, which she built of brick where his perforated screens were concrete blocks (LOEFFLER, 1998, p. 144-45). She also placed vaults over the flat rooves to offer further sun protection, something the State Department found entirely acceptable from her. It balked, however, when Kahn proposed a double roof system for his one State Department commission.

In little more than a crumb of the expansive program, he was asked in 1959 to design a consulate in Luanda, then the capital of the Portuguese colony of Angola (Figure 8). On a trip to Africa that also took him to Brazzaville and Léopoldville (now Kinshasa), he was struck, even more than he had been when traveling around the eastern Mediterranean in 1950, by the intensity of the tropical light (KAHN, 1961, p. 9-28). The approaches he developed to moderate both it and the heat that accompanied it reverberated throughout the rest of his career. Where Smith and Stone had favored porous screen walls, Kahn preferred a double wall system that he would later describe as "ruins wrapped around buildings." (KAHN, 1961, p.9). Kahn's proposed design was never built, however, as State Department officials found it too unusual, and the political situation deteriorated as the Angolans increasingly campaigned for independence. While Kahn's design has been viewed as strikingly innovative, Smith's has been almost completely forgotten (LARSON, 2000, p. 21-47). Both were relatively modest efforts to strike an appropriately civic note without adopting the overt references to classical antiquity seen in more celebrated examples from the same program, such as Stone's building in New Delhi or The Architectural Collaborative's effort in Athens.

<sup>7</sup> CAPITOL PARK PLAZA. *Brick & Tile*, 23 (1966): 2-4, offprint in CWSC.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in an interview of 31 May 1974 with Balkrishna Doshi reprinted in (WURMAN, 1986, p. 252).

<sup>9</sup> "Building Embassy is a Delicate Task," *The [Washington] Evening Star*, 26 May 1958, clipping, Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, CWSC.



**Figure 8.** Louis Kahn, Drawing of unbuilt consulate in Luanda, Angola. Source: Louis I. Kahn Collection, University of Pennsylvania and Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Smith, who had executed her commission with aplomb under difficult circumstances, never built abroad again nor, for that matter, was she entrusted with another major civic commission. By contrast, in the final dozen years of Kahn's life he received two South Asian projects that dwarfed anything he realized in the United States; both were awarded to him with the assistance of local architects. Balkrishna Doshi and Muzharul Islam, like their clients, knew what prestige hiring a famous first world architect would bring to the institutions his buildings housed as well as that his presence in their communities would help launch the careers of their students. These were advantages that Smith was unable to bestow. It was at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad that Kahn discovered that the brick wanted to become an arch. His double wall strategy reached its apex there and at the National Assembly (Sher-e-Bangla-Nagar) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The latter was, like Smith's embassy, crowned with a vaulted double roof.

## New Haven

Kahn and Smith's careers peaked in the sixties and early seventies. Kahn's was cut short by his death in 1974; Smith's paradoxically sputtered in part because the rise of a different paradigm of female engagement – feminism – replaced the approach she, like many of the most successful professional women of her generation, had taken, in which they traded on their newsworthiness while not rocking the boat by openly voicing claims of discrimination, much less harassment. She ended her career a decade later than Kahn on a high note with Washington Square, a mixed-use building on a corner of Washington's Connecticut Avenue where she had already realized two previous office blocks (the fourth at "Chloethiel's corner" was designed by her former staff member, Arthur Cotton Moore) (FORGEY, 1993). Kahn's authority in these years came from the power of his rhetoric and the apparent assurance – although in most cases he struggled long and hard and achieved it only with the help of others – of his best designs. Smith's increasingly stemmed from her participation in planning bodies in Washington, especially after she was appointed to the Fine Arts Commission in 1967. After stepping down from the Commission in 1976, she played a key role in the establishment of the National Building Museum. The divergence between the way that their designs a block apart in New Haven were received locally demonstrates the limits of Smith's ability to win the widespread professional respect more easily accorded Kahn. At a time when profiles of her were largely authored by sympathetic female journalists confined to writing for the society pages of newspapers in the cities in which she built, Kahn commanded the respect of the city's – and also the country's – most prominent historian and critic of modern architecture, Vincent Scully. Scully's damning indictment of urban renewal, the field in which Smith had scored her most important triumphs, rendered these successes largely invisible.

Teaching positions like the ones Kahn held at Yale and subsequently at the University of Pennsylvania remained well outside Smith's reach until the 1970s, when she turned down an invitation to run a studio at Harvard because she could not take so much time away from her practice (SMITH, 1972). In the late 1940s the much shorter commute from Philadelphia was achievable for Kahn because he had so much less work than Smith did more than a quarter century later. A teaching position at Yale, unusual for a Jew like Kahn before the war, remained

unthinkable for almost any woman even afterwards; when Yale hired Josef Albers away from Black Mountain College in 1950 with Kahn's encouragement, there was no thought of an appointment for his equally talented wife Anni (OREN, 1986). Besides, Smith was stuck in Washington, where her husband eschewed diplomatic posts abroad so that she could practice, but where she was still expected to entertain his colleagues as well as tend to their two children.

Of all the colleges and universities in the United States, Yale excelled in the post-war period at commissioning major works of American architecture. In addition to Kahn's masterpieces, Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, and Eero Saarinen realized some of their best work on a campus that also included work by Marcel Breuer. Scully, working closely with Whitney Griswold, president of the university from 1951 to 1963, helped spearhead the creation of this showcase (SCULLY et al. 2004). Meanwhile Griswold also encouraged the ambitious urban renewal schemes unleashed by Richard Lee, the city's mayor from 1954 to 1970 in collaboration with Edward Logue, the head of the city's redevelopment commission from 1954 to 1960 (COHEN, 2019). While Scully initially backed an effort that garnered the city an outsize share of national funding, he eventually became, alongside Jane Jacobs, one of urban renewal's most eloquent opponents, directing his ire in particular at the Oak Street Connector (SCULLY, 1969). This road linked the intersection of two interstate highways to the city's downtown. Displacing some of the city's poorest residents, many of them African Americans, it provided land for new apartment blocks just to the south of Chapel Street, historically the edge of the Yale campus and the site of both of Kahn's museums.

Smith designed Crown Towers, the tallest and best of these complexes. Begun in 1962, it was completed in 1966 (Figure 9). It consisted of a twenty-two-story apartment tower that also contained professional offices (the complex is a short walk from Yale New Haven Hospital and the university's medical school), a mid-rise apartment block, and a raised parking garage, the whole landscaped once again by Kiley. Changes by the developer to lower costs resulted in the elimination of the original town house units, the placement of the parking above ground, and the reduction in the quality of the landscaping. This further eroded the reception of what has nonetheless remained an attractive and desirable place to live (AMMON,

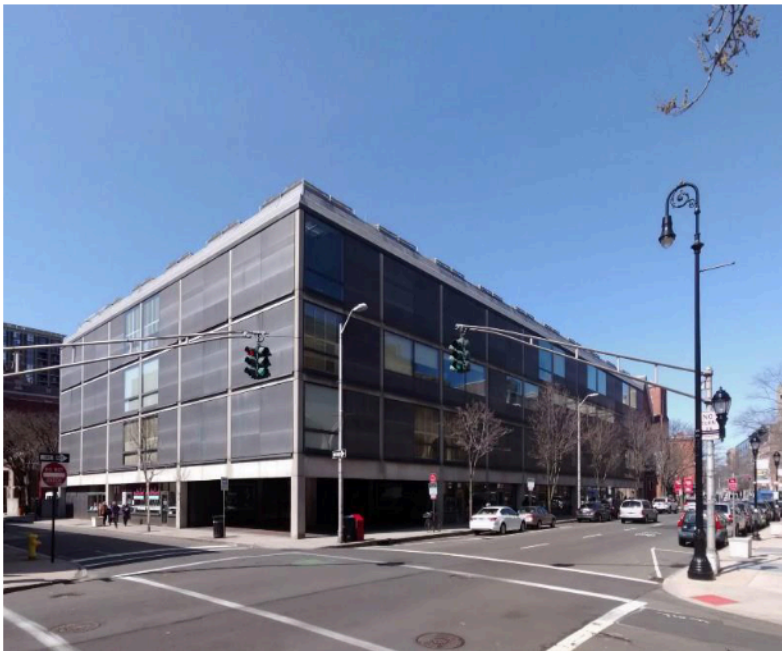
2020). Shortly after its completion, Elizabeth Curren, the paper's society columnist, profiled Smith in the *New Haven Register*, in an article entitled "Mrs. Architect Designs with Human Values in Mind." (CURREN, 1967, p. 6).<sup>10</sup> Smith's willingness to build subsidized rental housing on sites from which lower income residents had been cleared pushed her to the fringes of the country's architectural culture. This was centered on the discourse forged at the country's top architecture schools and disseminated by the national and international journals that contributed so greatly to Kahn's renown, and from which Smith was by now almost entirely absent. But there was little personal about this critique; Scully did not even deign to name those whose contributions he condemned. That a woman had contributed to the shaping of the city went unmentioned.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 9.** Chloethiel Woodard Smith, Crown Towers, New Haven, 1966. Source: Source: Courtesy of New Haven Towers.

<sup>10</sup> For Curren's obituary see "New Haven Register society columnist Betty Curren dies," *New Haven Register*, 22 May 2011.

Kahn must have known Crown Towers well, as he was invited back to Yale in 1969 to design what became the Yale Center for British Art, on a site just one block to the north (Figure 10). In the interim, Scully had written the first book on him, published in 1962, and the university had awarded him an honorary degree in 1965. In New Haven, Kahn, like Smith, had to trim his sails. Even Paul Mellon, who funded the building and whose collection of British art it was built to house, refused to pay for the original ambitious scheme after inflation raised its cost. The budget made available to him remained, however, far beyond anything for which Smith's developer clients would shell out. In Kahn's case, moreover, the resulting refining of the scheme has been widely understood to have improved the clarity of its plan and of the articulation of its facades and its interior spaces, while avoiding the standardized solutions to building components that Smith had limited opportunities to pass up. When the museum opened posthumously in 1977, it was widely judged to be one of his finest works (PROWN, 2021, 2009; LOUD, 1989).



**Figure 10.** Louis Kahn, The Yale Center for British Art at Yale University, 1974, New Haven, Connecticut. Source: Gunnar Klack, 2014, Wikimedia Commons.

Smith's contribution to this New Haven neighborhood bears comparison as well with another building in the neighborhood, its exact contemporary Crawford Manor, situated just a block to its southwest. Designed by Paul Rudolph when he was dean of the Yale School of Architecture, this Brutalist tower contains public housing for the elderly. Fifteen stories tall, it was clearly intended to make an architectural statement, with the ribbed concrete wall surfaces of its distinctive exterior carried over as well into the parts of the interior, whose minimal details were constrained by a budget far tighter than the one on which Smith was forced to work. Rudolph was allowed to develop a far more dynamic site plan, but whether the one-bedroom units, with their tiny kitchens and living room balconies that block part of the bedroom windows, into which they look, are preferable places to live is an open question. Certainly, the chain link fencing that surrounds the building in recent photographs suggests a less hospitable relationship to the street than the more effectively sited but less sculptural Crown Tower.

Six years after its completion, Crawford Manor was the subject of a devastating critique. In *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*, a manifesto based on a studio taught at Yale in Rudolph's Art and Architecture Building, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, argued for the "ugly and ordinary" over the "heroic and original," as represented by Crawford Manor (VENTURI, SCOTT BROWN et al. 1972; STIERLI, 2013). For the authors Venturi's Guild House in Philadelphia rather than Crown Towers, which was even closer to Yale's Art and Architecture building, where their studio had been housed, stood for the "ugly and ordinary" because of the degree to which it served as a decorated shed, onto which Venturi had applied what they described as symbolic form. The same could certainly not be said of Smith's intentions at Crown Towers, and she never got on the postmodernist band wagon, although her work in Washington was grounded in the sensitive attention to context that foreshadowed many aspects of its approach to urbanism (MUMFORD, 2009).<sup>11</sup> It is tempting, however, to think that Scott Brown was already aware of Smith and appreciated her talent at making "ordinary" habitable spaces.

<sup>11</sup> For the roots of this position in the practice and teaching of Louis Kahn and Josep Lluís Sert, more than Smith.

## Conclusion

Kahn was undoubtedly from the beginning a more visually sophisticated and imaginative architect than Smith. Smith, however, had important skills that Kahn notoriously lacked. She was by far the more effective in meeting deadlines and budgets, and at addressing the everyday needs of those who used her buildings. While she never produced anything that compares with the courtyard of the Salk Laboratories or the atrium of the library at the Phillips Exeter Academy, she also assiduously avoided the over confidence in her own genius that at times encouraged Kahn, like many other male architects of the post-war period, to trust in his and his office's own forms at the expense of almost everything else. Whether or not Smith's preference for "applied" over theoretical architecture was a product of her gender, it accounted for much of what was and remains most attractive about her work.<sup>12</sup>

Smith was far from unknown in the period when Kahn was designing his most celebrated work. Her sex made her a newsworthy novelty, as did her success in building marketable housing. Across the 1960s she was profiled in such general interest publications as *Business Week*, *Look*, and the *New Yorker*, as well as style and society pages.<sup>13</sup> She was never, however, an insider in the upper echelons of the profession. In 1956, for example, she was not included in the important urban design conference held at Harvard and attended by both Catherine Bauer and Jane Jacobs, women whom she knew; instead she traveled that year to the conference on working problems in urban renewal held at Michigan State University in Lansing.<sup>14</sup> When in the 1970s and eighties she refused to be lionized simply on account of her sex, or to admit that as a woman she had suffered considerable discrimination and harassment, although this was indeed the case, she shut the door on another possible path towards recognition.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Scott Brown increasingly eclipsed her.<sup>16</sup>

If we are to meet the challenges of our own time, which include how to build vibrant, sustainable cities, there is, however, much to learn from Smith, whose concern for the environment moreover can be traced back to the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup> At Capitol Park, Crown Towers, Harbour Court, and elsewhere, she balanced density and community to create an urbanity supported by judicious planting, that continu-

es to house racially and economically diverse tenants. While not aesthetic triumphs, they are nonetheless highly livable. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that, although Kahn came from a far more economically disadvantaged background and belonged to a religious group all but exterminated from his birthplace and still discriminated against in his adopted homeland, he was eventually awarded opportunities denied to Smith for reasons that involved more than his talent, especially when one considers the effectiveness with which she fought across three decades for the transformation of Washington. What heights she might have reached had anyone in the postwar United States been willing to entrust major civic commissions with ample budgets to any female architect remains unknown and unknowable.

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<sup>12</sup> For this preference see SMITH, **Chloethiel Woodard**. Talk delivered at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on 25 April 1975, CWSC.

<sup>13</sup> SIMON, Madlen. "Chloethiel Woodard Smith," lists many of these, as well as the less frequent times when her work was published in architecture journals.

<sup>14</sup> For the importance of the Harvard conferences see MUMFORD, 2009; the brochure for the Michigan State conference is in the CWSC.

<sup>15</sup> Although largely ghostwritten by its editor, Smith's essay "Architects Without Labels: The Case Against All Special Categories," in Ellen Perry Berkeley, ed., **Architecture: A Place for Women. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press**, 1983, p. 221-27, represents an accurate statement of Smith's views. For Berkeley's role in writing the essay see SMITH Chloethiel Woodard. **Letter to Ellen Perry Berkeley**, 4 November 1986, CWSC. Her letter to Mumford of 29 October [1941?], LMC, makes clear the discrimination she had indeed faced.

<sup>16</sup> The two were profiled together in MCGROATY and TORRE, 1977, p. 115-32.

<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, her memo, "Notes on the design of city buses for discussion with Volvo representatives, September 6, 1973 – Washington, D.C.," CWSC.

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