



What buildings want

Description

Architect Louis Kahn (1901-1974) used to ask **“What does the building want to be?”** In talking about light, shadow and silence he’s also reported as saying, “Everything you make is already too thick.

I would even think that a thought is also too thick.”

I assume the kind of *thick thinking* to which Kahn refers is where we cogitate too much and too hard along overly rationalistic, analytic, causal and technological lines, always asking “why,” without



Kahn’s paradoxical and terse sayings about architecture point to the

pursuit of authentic buildings and places, where materials are not tortured into contrived forms, nor where concrete is made to look like stone; it suggests a more significant, important, situated, genuine and symbolically rich architecture.

Considering his fascination with light and shade, Kahn’s inquiry into what buildings want does however suggest that buildings want to be seen. What if our buildings don’t have any desires or thoughts at all?

Kahn's architecture would have difficulty subscribing to the proposition advanced by theologian and hymn writer Angelus Silesius (c. 1624-1677) that the finer (and most ordinary) things of this world don't have to announce themselves. Nor do they have to have a reason for being there. Consider the rose.

The rose is without a why; it blooms, because it blooms;
It pays no attention to itself and doesn't ask if anyone sees it.

(Die Rose ist ohne Warum; sie blühet, weil sie blühet; Sie achtet nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht, ob man sie siehet.)

Martin Heidegger contrasts Silesius's proposition that a rose is *without reason* with the assertion of the Enlightenment philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716) that everything must have a cause. Leibniz famously advanced the so-called **Principle of Sufficient Reason**:

The great foundation of mathematics is the principle of contradiction, or identity, that is, that a proposition cannot be true and false at the same time; and that therefore A is A, and cannot be not A. This single principle is sufficient to demonstrate every part of arithmetic and geometry, that is, all mathematical principles.

But in order to proceed from mathematics to natural philosophy, another principle is requisite, as I have observed in my *Theodicy*: I mean, **the principle of a sufficient reason**, viz. that nothing happens without a reason why it should be so, rather than otherwise.



([Condence](#))

This is thick thinking: technological thinking, a productionist

metaphysic that demands that we always expect explanations and meanings. Why can't we just let things be? It is impractical in a professional context to ignore the need to explain things. Professionalism demands reasons and causes. (As a professional philosopher Heidegger was not immune from this requirement.)

The rose to which Silesius refers is presumably in the wild, untouched by cultivation and cross-breeding. The modern rose is already a contrivance. I find Heidegger's account of *things* as outlined in his essay 'The thing' particularly helpful. The exemplar is not a rose but a jug.

“The jug presences as a thing. The jug is the jug as a thing. But how does the thing presence? The thing things. Thinging gathers.” (p.174)

Jugs are manufactured. They are also everyday artefacts that don't announce themselves. They blend into ordinary practices, not least at meals and in the provision of hospitality. What does a jug gather and how is it helpful to think of ordinary artefacts in that way? It sounds almost as if *gathering* is about community, tradition, domesticity, and might even relate to some of the social functioning of the Internet. Could architecture ever be so [ordinary](#)?

- [Find out more](#) about what Heidegger thinks of technology.
- [More](#) about things.
- Some further rhymes of Silesius are [online](#).

Bibliography

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Notes

- The quotations from Louis Kahn are to be found in a lecture transcript in Jencks, Charles, and Karl Kropf (eds). 1997. *Theories and Manifestoes of Contemporary Architecture*. Chichester: Wiley-Academic, p.236. The transcript also appears in full in Kahn, Louis I., and Heinz Ronner. 1994. *Louis I. Kahn: Complete Work 1935-1974*. Basel: CIP.
- In a thesis available on line, Frederick Esenwein shows the influence on Louis Kahn of teachings from the Kabbalah, a tradition that plays with paradox as a way of accessing truths. See Esenwein, Frederick W. 2011. *The Organic Imagination and Louis Kahn (Master of Science in Architecture Dissertation)*. Blacksburg, Virginia: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, [PDF](#).

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Date Created

March 3, 2012

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