Two new books by Michael Merrill are nothing less than a revelation for our understanding of Louis Kahn. The volumes investigate one of Kahn’s most famous unbuilt projects, the Dominican Motherhouse, a monastery near Media, Pennsylvania, and provide a great deal of insight into the architect’s strikingly sensitive design process and his ability to think through all aspects of a project with hard and soft-line sketching. While this motor response to the unworldly program of communal living and religious study in the solitude of nature seems like an obvious place to begin for an architect on any project in its planning stages, it is the expressive manner in which Kahn’s drawing analysis unfolds which makes this very special collection worth delving into. Kahn’s drawings across four schemes between June 1966 and March 1969 develop in a way that suggests that they have a spiritual struggle of their own to contend with that runs parallel to the life of the congregation and the rules of the Dominican order, which the architect perceives through an unquestionably romantic sensibility.

The endless succession of site plans, floor plans, sections, elevations, construction details and perspectives in Louis Kahn: Drawing To Find Out illuminate not only Kahn’s spatial agenda during various stages of the design process, but also indicate an intimate understanding of the predominantly religious program, its general and specific circulatory requirements, logical adjacencies, and its appropriate materiality. As the Dominican Motherhouse was unrealized, this collection of sketches also challenges the relevance of a completed or built work of architecture’s ultimate value when weighed against an unfinished project of this conceptual magnitude made consubstantial by yellow trace alone. In this case, it seems there may be more to learn from that which does not exist than from a definitive statement in built form, which remains static and to a degree limited in terms of its ability to inspire further provocation.
To comprehend the significance of Kahn’s fundamental approach to the Motherhouse, one must begin with a clear understanding of the nuns’ reciprocal program and its complex relationship with the rural landscape. Merrill suggests that it is the tension between what could be thought of as the inner world of the congregation and the exterior world of its visitors that drives Kahn’s focus and the focus of his project architect, David Polk. Parallel to this (and more intrinsic to the design problem) is the internal organization of communal and ancillary spaces with the organization of cells that serve as living quarters for the hierarchy of nuns: newly arrived postulates, novices who had begun their vows, younger professed sisters, and older professed sisters. Kahn’s desire to establish a sense of arrival or the notion of a “gateway” between worlds would ultimately help to define the final solution’s entry edge or “front door.” This concept of both a physical and metaphorical gateway manifested itself in a clear program-form-function diagram for those spaces that collectively served as a soft barrier between the nuns’ religious subjectivity, symbolized by the cells and their perimeter serialism, and those outward or public facing programs, such as the entry hall, administrative offices, and the project’s massing hinge pin, the “ziggurat” tower.

As the first two schemes progressed in a straightforward manner in terms of planning decisions based on client response, there was a point, perhaps inspired by a necessity to lower construction costs (by simplifying the program and reducing the building footprint), when Kahn allowed the “pre-established shapes and sizes of the various spaces” to discover their own final resting places through a process of collage. This unlikely, seemingly irrational move on Kahn’s part ultimately gets his team to a final scheme. The collaged plan enables the irregular geometries of the spaces in previous schemes to have their own independence, while at the same time, inspires an automated sense of connectivity that makes the pieces inseparable from one another. In this way, the third scheme of October-December 1966 precipitated the fourth and final scheme. What Kahn’s sketches and their visual tangents tell us ultimately is that he found a way to resolve the complex program, not by a strategy of segregation (public-private or inside-outside), but by one of integration, holism, and balance or equality even among the program’s most disparate parts.

In Louis Kahn: On The Thoughtful Making of Spaces, Merrill elaborates: “Drawings have a life of their own and an observer may find it difficult to judge to what degree the drawing tool has been led and to what degree it has done the leading.” Kahn’s automatism, represented by the collaged plan of the third scheme, could be construed as a mode of belief or faith in itself, where the architect allows something like fate, destiny, or the unconscious to enter into the design solution. This operation injects a certain
transcendental attitude into the internal organization of the monastery, which is consistent with the end users’ spiritual investment and the building’s formal relationship to the surrounding wooded landscape.

Michael Merrill’s two books complement one another in spite of some obvious redundancies. While Louis Kahn: Drawing To Find Out is more curatorial in its arrangement of sketches, correspondence, estimates, and quotations, Louis Kahn: On The Thoughtful Making of Spaces, like the companion guides to James Joyce’s Ulysses or Thomas Pynchon’s Gravity’s Rainbow, helps to further shape the theory behind Kahn’s thinking-through-drawing process in terms of “the room,” circulation, programmatic reciprocity, and the establishment of iconic space.

Aside from the philosophy embedded across the two books, what the reader is ultimately left to admire is both Kahn’s determination and his overarching humanity. It is a true gift to be able to inhabit his imagination, to be able to struggle with him, and to be with him when he reaches epiphany. Although the project’s materialization was mitigated by a lack of resources, what Kahn has left with us, and what Merrill has broken down, is a slice of the architect’s own spiritual biography and the nature of the heartstrings that tied him to his vocation.

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Horton, T.A. “With Hand and Heart.” The Architect’s Newspaper” (September 27, 2011) [online].