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Son travels the world to learn more about his father

In his film, "My Architect," Nathaniel Kahn traveled from Philadelphia to California to Bangladesh to learn about the work and life of his father, renowned architect Louis Kahn.

By MARYCLAIRE DALE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

PHILADELPHIA — When the renowned Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn died in 1974, The New York Times named just one of his three children — or families — in his obituary.

Kahn, an unconventional force in architecture as in life, remained married to his wife while he fathered two children by different colleagues. The other women endured career and social setbacks from their mid-century status as professional women and Kahn's paramours.

Yet, decades later, neither regrets the choices she made for the chance to work and create with Kahn.



Nathaniel Kahn

"That was the price that I paid. It was worth it," landscape architect Harriet Pattison tells her son, Nathaniel Kahn, in his film, "My Architect."

In 1997, Nathaniel Kahn, now 40, and a film crew set off on a five-year odyssey to learn more about his father. "This film came out of my desire to just spend some time with the man," Kahn says in an interview.

He trekked around the world, from the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia to the Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., to the capitol in Dhaka, Bangladesh, to see his father's work and to meet his father's contemporaries.

"All my buildings don't add up to his three or four," architect great Philip Johnson confides.

Still, Johnson and fellow admirers I.M. Pei and Frank Gehry won many more commissions, such as the coveted design of the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, which went to Pei. Most of Louis Kahn's architectural achievements exist only on paper — in rejected designs for office buildings, temples, homes and cityscapes.

Those he completed include the Yale Center for British Art at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., Richards Medical Research Laboratories at Penn State University in Philadelphia and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas.

Kahn, who immigrated from Estonia as a child and taught at Penn and Yale, favored hulking concrete structures that honored classical forms and changing natural light. He lost money on all but the Salk project and died a half-million dollars in debt.

In heartfelt letters, he regrets being unable to scrape together a few dollars to send pregnant lover Ann Tyng, who had gone to Rome in 1953 to have his child, or, later, to Nathaniel.

"Someday I hope to teach you to be a better man than I am," Kahn wrote Nathaniel on a postcard from one of his distant travels.

Nathaniel Kahn's memories are of a mysterious man who made late-night visits to his mother's home in the city's Chestnut Hill section.

"I didn't spend a great deal of time with him, but my memories are so strong and cinematic," Nathaniel Kahn says.

However infrequent, the visits were vivid, such as the time the sixtysomething architect and young boy doodled pictures of "crazy boats," shaped like a spoon or biscuit. Pattison, who continued their relationship until Kahn's death, would prepare a lavish meal, no matter the hour.

"He was this special, almost semi-mythical character, perhaps even from another time and place, who came into our life for these incredibly interesting, exciting evenings, and then he would be gone again," Nathaniel Kahn says.

All three of Kahn's children grew up to be artists. Alexandra Tyng, who wrote an architecture book about her father's work, is a painter, while Esther Kahn's daughter, Sue Ann, is a flutist.

Nathaniel Kahn studied philosophy and theater at Yale — in the shadow of two of his father's buildings — before moving to New York to work in film and theater.

In one of the film's most private scenes, the three children gather in a tranquil home Kahn designed in Hatboro, a Philadelphia suburb. They note the dichotomy of a man who could create an intimate domestic space but never live in one.

Kahn's 1960s-era plan for Center City included fortresslike garages at the edge of the city, from which commuters would walk to a variety of eye-popping, geometric-shaped office buildings. Instead, his son laments, Philadelphia's boxy skyline emerged much like those of most other U.S. cities.

"He was his own artist. He was free compared to me," Philip Johnson said.

Kahn's poignant, often funny 110-minute film, accompanied by a moving original score, does not yet have a distributor. It has shown at local film festivals.