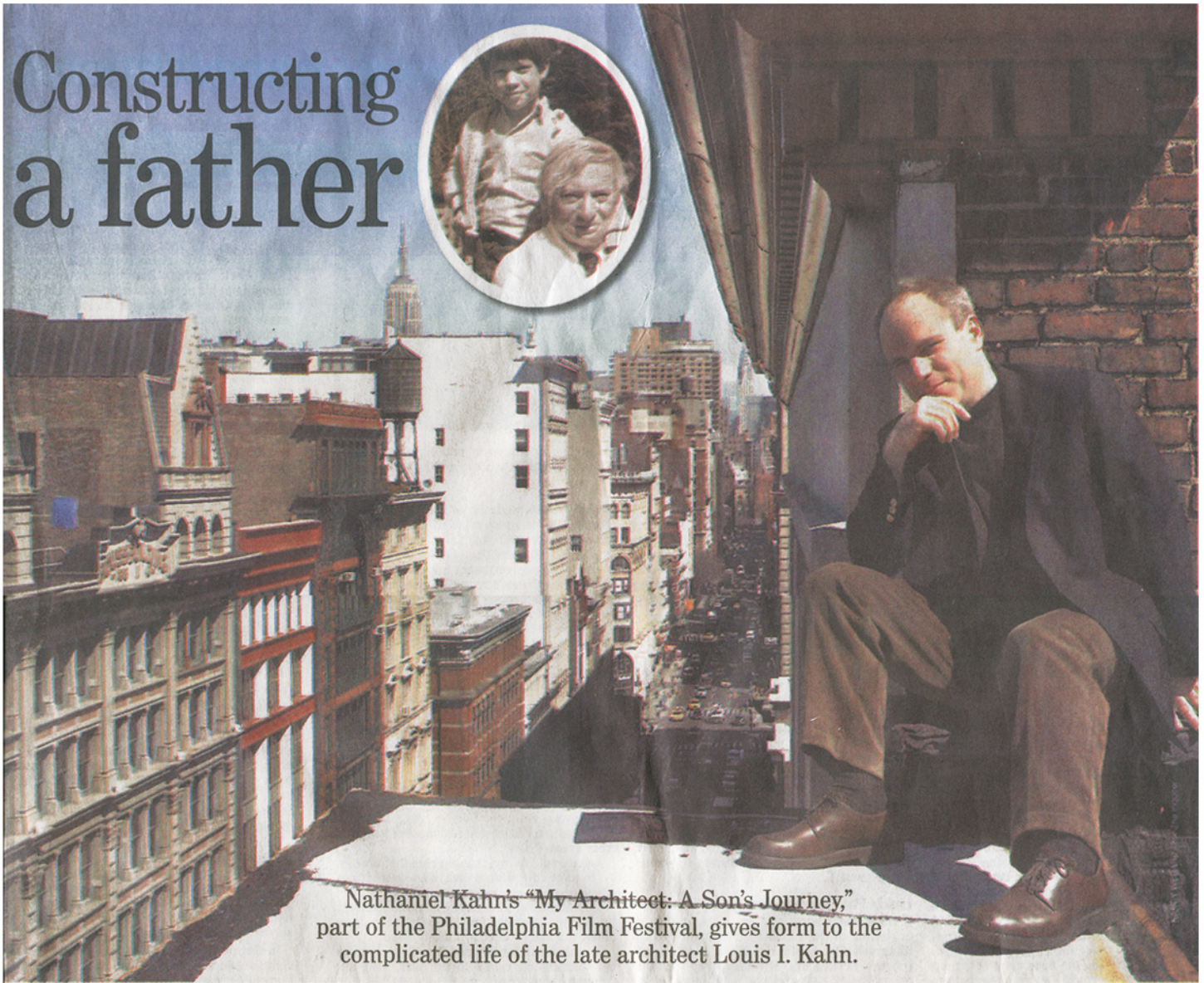
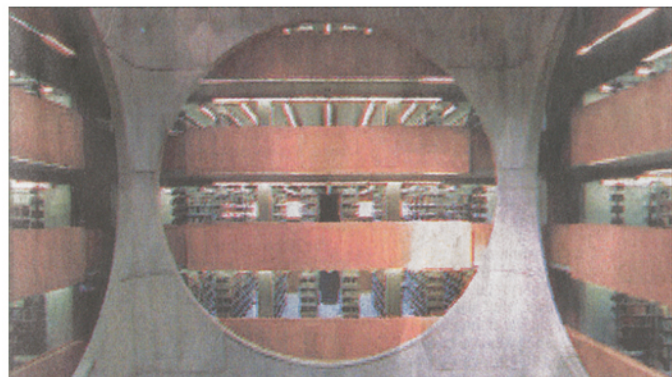


## Constructing a father



Nathaniel Kahn's "My Architect: A Son's Journey," part of the Philadelphia Film Festival, gives form to the complicated life of the late architect Louis I. Kahn.



Louis I. Kahn's work includes the Phillips Exeter Academy library in Exeter, N.H. "My Architect: A Son's Journey" touches less on Kahn's architecture than on his family life. Above right, filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn atop his New York office. At top, father and son, circa 1970.

**By Inga Saffron**  
INQUIRER ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

**N**EW YORK — Bearing a child takes a mere nine months. Giving birth to a film usually takes a bit longer. When the film is the story of your struggle to get to know your dead father, the process requires the better part of a lifetime.

Filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn, 40, began shooting interviews for a documentary about the great Philadelphia architect Louis I. Kahn nearly four years ago. But the images and ideas for *My Architect: A Son's Journey*, shown tomorrow and April

13 at the Philadelphia Film Festival, which opens tonight, had been percolating in his brain since he was able to wonder about his unusual family circumstances.

Not only was Louis Kahn a groundbreaking figure in the glory days of Philadelphia architecture and the man who lifted American architecture out of its modernist rut, he also challenged conventional notions of family life. He had three of them, to be exact: one official, two unofficial. Yet he was so secretive about his personal life that some colleagues did not

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# Son discovers a famous father in documentary

know that he was married at all, to Esther Kahn, never mind that he managed long-term liaisons with architect Anne Tyng and then with landscape architect Harriet Pattison, or produced three offspring.

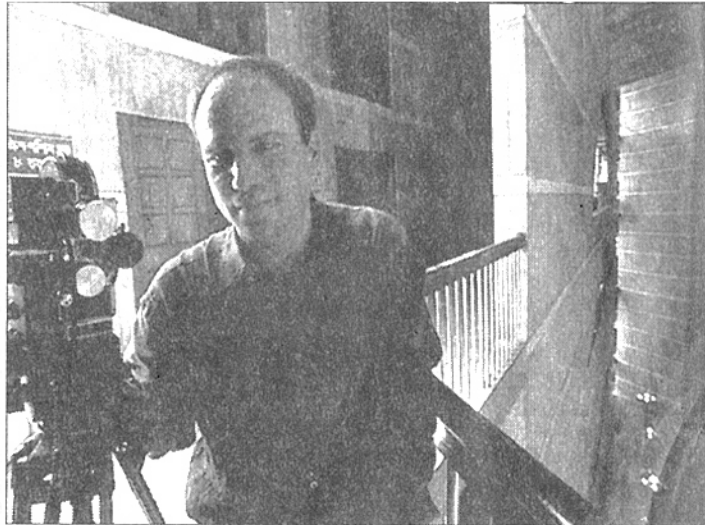
Nathaniel is the child of Kahn's last relationship, with Pattison. He has the same eyes as Kahn: intensely blue in color, yet evoking those eastern places where horsemen once trundled across the steppe. Nathaniel grew up in Chestnut Hill, attended the Germantown Friends School and left for Yale University and New York as soon as he could, becoming a scriptwriter and director.

Because his documentary is meant as a personal journey to discover his place in Kahn's complex universe, Nathaniel said he didn't want it to be a mere lineup of talking heads. The film has a strong narrative quality. "The audience becomes the son" and is buoyed along on the journey, Nathaniel explained last week, sitting in his Soho office.

That makes the film sound rather heavy. It is, by turns, hilarious, touching, sad, cruel, angry, sweet and maudlin. The documentary seems deliberately calibrated to follow each emotion with its opposite, which makes for good pacing. Screenings in New York were sold out last week, and Nathaniel is hoping for commercial distribution.

The 110-minute film isn't really about architecture, not in the way the Ken Burns documentary about Frank Lloyd Wright is. It's more of a family saga than a saga about the struggle to build.

The film brings together all of Kahn's children for an emotional reunion and asks some difficult questions of Tyng and Pattison. Yet the documentary doesn't fully resolve the mystery of why Kahn's women put up with his philandering, why Tyng and Pattison never married and remained devoted to the architect their entire lives. The association with genius is clearly a powerful force, but is that the only reason?



**Nathaniel Kahn's documentary** took him to Dhaka, Bangladesh, where his father, Louis I. Kahn, designed the capital building.

For all its emphasis on exploring such human emotions, Kahn's buildings aren't ignored. They loom as characters in the film — monumental ones, too.

As Nathaniel makes his way from his father's Richards Medical Laboratories in Philadelphia to the Salk Institute on the Pacific Ocean in La Jolla, Calif., to the capital building of Bangladesh in Dhaka, he gradually builds a scaffolding to reach his father.

Nathaniel was just 11 in 1974 when Kahn was found dead of a heart attack in New York's Pennsylvania Station after a grueling journey from Bangladesh. The abrupt loss extinguished the boy's cherished dream of converting the architect into a full-time dad.

Although Nathaniel attended Kahn's funeral, along with his mother, Tyng and Kahn's daughter Alexandra Tyng — all ignoring a message from Ester Kahn asking that they stay away — he said the event failed to give him a sense of finality. To make the point, Nathaniel opens the film by focusing his camera on Kahn's front-page obituary in the New York Times, which omitted any mention of him, his mother, or the Tyngs.

Nathaniel found it distressing

that his father "left so little evidence that he had really been there. And perhaps because Kahn's presence was so fleeting and immaterial, Nathaniel said, "I always had the feeling in Chestnut Hill that I might run into him, that he wasn't really dead. I used to get a start when I would see a white-haired man in a suit."

Rather than use the film to put his emotions about Kahn to rest, Nathaniel tries to bring his father back to life. He tracked down virtually everyone who knew Kahn, from the architect I.M. Pei to a Philadelphia cab driver.

He uncovered a fascinating collection of archival material, including footage showing Kahn strolling across the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, where he was a celebrated architecture professor. Just looking at his squat, pugilistic gait, it is possible to understand how a boy who grew up in poverty in Northern Liberties fought his way to becoming a great 20th-century architect.

The film makes several important observations about the origins of Kahn's work, which is marked by a spiritual, timeless quality. When the camera lingers on the abandoned factory

buildings of Northern Liberties and the Estonian castle near Kahn's birthplace, it reveals that the architect's inspiration was deeply personal and subconscious.

Similarly, we come to understand that Kahn's love of rough concrete could be a comment on the condition of his own face, badly scarred in childhood when he picked up a burning coal. "He wanted to play with the light," observed Nathaniel — as a boy and an architect.

One of the more disturbing bits of archival footage is a 1960s interview with former Philadelphia city planner Edmund Bacon. Explaining why he refused to hire Kahn as an architect for the Penn Center development during that period, Bacon exudes a malevolence that is both comic and revealing. The documentary also implies that Kahn's Jewishness had something to do with his lack of Philadelphia commissions.

Kahn may have built few structures in his home city, but his presence is still felt here. His office at 1501 Walnut St. remains home to an architectural firm, and his legions of students and followers ply the trade.

As revealing as the documentary is, Nathaniel remains guarded about how his journey of discovery changed him. He is reluctant to talk about the ways he resembles his father. But he no longer calls him "Daddy," as he did in interviews several years ago. Now it's "Lou."