My Architect, Myself

Q&A

The mystery of Louis Kahn's life was as compelling as his buildings. Thirty years after his death, his filmmaker son goes in search of the true Lou with the documentary *My Architect*.



Louis Kahn created some of the most important buildings of the twentieth century: the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth; the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California; the National Assembly Building of Bangladesh, in Dhaka. His buildings were monumental, deeply rooted in materials, and full of mystery. And yet the deepest mystery surrounding Kahn remained secret throughout his life. When he died of a heart attack, in a men's room in Penn Station in 1974, obituaries said he was survived by his wife, Esther, and a daughter, Sue Ann. But it turned out that Kahn had lived a life split four ways: work, his traditional family, and two women and the children they bore him.

Nathaniel Kahn—son of Harriet Pattison, a landscape architect who worked in the Kahn office—was eleven when his father died. Now 39, the writer and director has recently completed a documentary entitled *My Architect*, a deeply affecting look at a complicated man. For the film Nathaniel interviewed dozens of architectural luminaries—Vincent Scully, I. M. Pei, Frank Gehry, Robert A. M. Stern—and others, including his half-siblings. *Metropolis* executive editor Martin C. Pedersen talked to Kahn about the film prior to its screening at the New Directors/New Films Festival in New York. The film will be released in theaters this fall. (For information see www.myarchitectfilm.com.)

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Above: Nathaniel Kahn and his father, the architect Louis Kahn. Left: Louis Kahn's National Assembly Building, in Dhaka.

Obviously the search for your father has been a lifelong quest. But what happened in your immediate past that made you want to make this film now?

I think you get to a point where your curiosity gets the better of you. As a little boy, I didn't see much of my father's world—I just had a key hole–size glimpse of it. But what I saw of it was fascinating. You also want to know about the man who came before you. I'd made other films, but this is something that I had avoided for a long time, because it's scary to go back. You don't know what you're going to find. There's always the risk of embarrassing yourself: here comes what appears to be a nearly middle-aged man asking questions that a child asks. That was difficult.

Was it the sort of film you always knew you were going to make but kept putting off?

No, I kept trying to do it in other ways. I wrote a screenplay about a son who discovers that the father he thought was dead isn't—which of course was always a dream of mine. It sort of reverberates throughout the film. As a little boy, I never quite believed that Lou was gone. I would always look for him in crowds. I'd see a white-haired man turning the corner and think maybe it was him.

Did you always know that you were going to be the main protagonist in the film?

No. One of my biggest struggles was: what would the character of the son—me—be like in the documentary? For a long time I tried to ask interview questions that were more objective. But when I got that footage back, I'd look at it and think, "You know what? This is a movie anybody could make."

The search for your dad is what propels the story, but if someone goes into the theater not knowing about Louis Kahn, they come out knowing a lot more about his architecture.

There was a very fine line to tread there, because the narrative drive of the film is a son looking for his father. But along the way the father happens to be a well-known architect. I felt that it was important for people to experience what his architecture was like. One of the traps that people who write about architecture often fall into is that they merely describe the buildings as objects. When you experience Lou's architecture, it always gives you a feeling.

You have a lot of amazing footage of your father. Where did you find it?

The most important source was the Museum of Modern Art. They have a collection of films shot by Hans Namuth and Paul Falkenberg, who did a film about Lou while he was alive. Peter Namuth, Hans's son, and MoMA generously allowed us to use the outtakes.

Did you know what was in those films?

No. One morning fifty boxes of tape arrived. My producers and I went through the film and put it up on reels. And it was like Christmas morning! Now another kind of filmmaker might look for Lou speaking cogently about architecture. But I was interested in the way he moved, the way he walked, the way he talked, the way he looked confused, things that revealed his personality. I couldn't resist using those shots. We use Lou a lot like a ghost. He's someone who appears and then is gone. So for quite a while you see little glimpses of him, which was always the way I saw him. In a way, the film was like conjuring him, bringing him back from the dead for two hours.

There's a scene toward the end of the film that's my favorite piece of footage. The camera pulls through the window. Lou is sitting at the table, drawing. When he folds his hands, we see charcoal all over his fingers. Then the camera pans up to his

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Philip Johnson and Nathaniel Kahn outside the Glass House.

face. To me that is my father. It is absolutely the salient image for me of Lou. He came from this little island off of Estonia—where his face was badly burned as a small child, where he himself was touched by fire—and his preferred drawing material was charcoal. He never got far away from that visceral feeling of "This is color; I am applying color to a piece of paper."

One of the things I liked about the film was that its narrative wasn't literal or strictly chronological.
Documentaries that are more subject-based often use people as recurring voices. They interview eight or ten people and then sort of manipulate them. It's a pretty tried and true documentary style—the talking-head film—and it's highly effective intellectually. But I think it's highly ineffective emotionally because on a journey you don't suddenly have someone who you met a year ago pop up and tell you something. There is a unity of time and place. I met Philip Johnson once. All of the scenes with him, all of the moments I could use, were in one place, the Glass House. I met Moshe Safdie in the desert and instead of saying, "Let's find a nice place to hang out, because I want to use you in a lot of different places in the film," he and I took a little walk in the desert. It's one of my favorite scenes because it was literally one take. We had this conversation. It happened one afternoon—and it was gone. That's the way so much of life is. And always the way I thought encounters with my father were.

How did your view of your dad's work evolve during the making of the film?
I always felt like his buildings were monumental and beautiful, but in a way they seemed rather distant when I first saw them. But as I moved through them—and later filmed them—I felt the tremendous acts of imagination that had gone into making them. I think that he walked through them in his mind. Here was an architect who asked questions, like: what's my building going to be like when it's raining? What's this room going to feel like if I'm sitting in **continued on page 74** the corner? You can start to think of his buildings as endless acts of imagination. I felt very connected to him by imagining him imagining these places.

How did you approach his buildings as a filmmaker?
One of the biggest no-nos in filming architecture is panning, because that's just moving the camera. People don't pan when they look at something. They move through space. So the filming that I did early on? I threw all of that out. Honestly, I probably filmed those Yale buildings fifteen times, and I still don't think I've done it right. The moment we got away from the feeling of "we need to show what this building looks like" and instead used the buildings as a stage set, letting people use them as a way to jog their thinking, that was when they became interesting and easier to deal with. For instance, the scene at the capital in Dhaka, when the architect comes up to me at the end of the film. We didn't set that up. He kind of accosted me, wanting to know what I was doing. Yes, I knew the top level of the building would be a great vantage point, but it wasn't, "OK, I want you to stand here; this is a good background." Somehow he was speaking from the building. It was a meeting that the building made happen.

That seems to be one of your favorite Kahn buildings. Do you remember seeing it for the first time?
Absolutely. We had a number of friends over there who acted as guides for our crew. When we arrived I told one of them, "I want you to take me to the capital, but I don't want to see the building until I can *really* see it." So the guide said, "Well, why don't we blindfold you?" As we got near the building, I could actually hear the open space around it. The city of Dhaka is insane. There were rickshaws, crazy baby taxis driving all over the place, a sort of constant chaotic bedlam, and then suddenly off to the right there was this silence. They took me out of the car. The ground got soft. We walked over some grass. Then I could hear birds. The traffic was behind us now. Our guide—whose name was also Kahn, spelled K-H-A-N—asked, "Are you ready?" I said, "Not yet. Give me a minute." I prepared myself, realizing, *This is the last building of my father's that I'm going to see for the first time.* So in a way I was coming to the end of something too. "Ready?" Khan asked again. "Yes," I said. "Am I facing it?" Khan took off the blindfold and I burst into tears. It was the only time that happened. I've been moved by places before, but seeing that building was so astonishing. It's such an incredible structure. Very pure. Usually it's hard to end a film. But I knew that when I was in Dhaka the film was over. I knew that we were done, there was nowhere else that I could go. And there's something wonderful about that because it's how stories—mythological stories—end. You journey to the end of the earth and find the answer. ◻