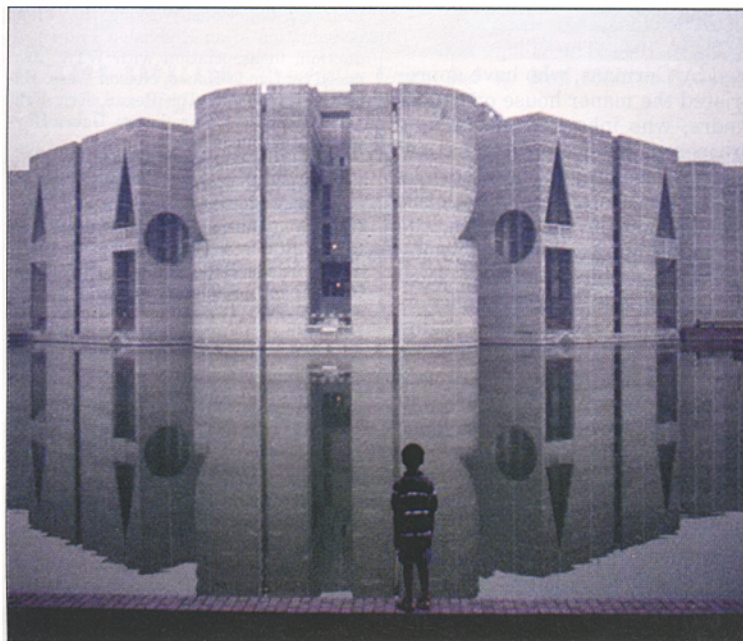


REVIEWS **VARIETY**

MARCH 31 - APRIL 6, 2003



REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER: *Bangladesh capital, designed by Louis Kahn, is shown in son Nathaniel Kahn's "My Architect."*

DOCU DESIGNED WITH LOVE

By DAVID ROONEY

A quietly moving documentary that superbly balances personal reflection with career assessment, Nathaniel Kahn's "My Architect" represents the filmmaker's quest to understand and appreciate the work of his late father, Louis Kahn, to explore the thinking behind his stark yet spiritual designs, and to reclaim a filial connection with the complex, contradictory man. This fascinating portrait of an eccentric visionary and his chaotic triple family life is an accomplished, enormously satisfying nonfiction work that should secure specialty theatrical distribution in sophisticated markets in addition to wide festival and television slots.

Despite the fact that many of his ideas caught on only in the last 10 years of his life, Louis Kahn is considered among the most influential postwar 20th-century American ar-

FILM

chitects. His death in 1974 — alone, unidentified and deeply in debt in a Penn Station restroom — was in some way typical of a bizarre personal life threaded through with mystery, divided between his legitimate family and committed relationships with two other women, each of whom bore him a child. Nathaniel Kahn is the child of one of those relationships.

Younger Kahn starts his journey with the New York Times obituary, which listed only the architect's wife and daughter as survivors, omitting any mention of his illegitimate son and daughter or their mothers. The three families lived within several miles of each other but crossed paths for the first time at Louis Kahn's funeral.

A Jew who came to the U.S. from Estonia in 1906 with his family and grew up in the tenements of North Philadelphia, Kahn was not a handsome man — short and scarred from a childhood burning accident — but was charismatic. He also was

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MY ARCHITECT

outspoken and unable or unwilling to speak the language of the business world, which often proved unreceptive to his impractical, utopian design concepts.

This is especially apparent in Kahn Jr.'s outlining of his father's involvement in the 1950s and '60s with a project to rebuild downtown Philly with circular parking stations outside the inner city to reduce downtown traffic. The still-anxious response from Kahn's belligerent nemesis, urban planner Edmund Bacon, suggests Kahn was a man who ruffled feathers. Other interviewees hint that anti-Semitic feelings may have contributed to keeping Kahn outside the Philadelphia establishment.

The filmmaker deftly traces Kahn's artistic development from his breakthrough with the Exeter Library in New Hampshire through the Salk Institute in La Jolla, Calif., to the sprawling Bangladesh capital in Dacca, which took 23 years to build and was completed after Kahn's death. Local architecture professor Shamsul Wares pays eloquent tribute to this last, ambitiously complex structure and what it represented to a poverty-stricken infant democracy like Bangladesh.

Also moving is the acknowledgement of Kahn's failure to leave a legacy as a Jewish architect, with a detailed account of his daring plans for a Jerusalem synagogue that never made it to the construction stage.

Having clearly inherited an architect's eye from his father, Nathaniel Kahn humanizes the imposingly tough yet simple prismatic forms

create modern buildings with the majesty and timelessness of ancient monuments.

But what makes the impeccably assembled film so distinctive is the organic integration of its artistic analysis with Kahn Jr.'s often frustrated odyssey to find a fuller sense of this man to whom he was granted only partial access as a child including fleeting visits during which he bewitched the boy with stories of exotic places. The exploration is characterized not by justifiable bitterness but by a spirit of generosity and understanding.

Broken down into chapters and graced by a subtle piano score, Nathaniel Kahn's journey from Philadelphia to far-flung parts of the U.S., Israel and finally India and Bangladesh evolves fluidly, establishing personal connections with professional associates, friends and family members that gradually coalesce into something resembling a full-bodied character study.

Kahn's interviews with his own mother, landscape architect Harriet Pattison, and with Anne Tyng, his father's other long-term extramarital partner, who collaborated with him on a turning-point project, are especially insightful, undertaken with remarkable objectivity. The docu gently draws emotional resonance from the pragmatism tinged with melancholy of these two strong women, in particular Pattison, who acknowledges her romantic fatalism, having made the choice to live her life alone, believing in Kahn but aware at the same time he would never leave his wife.

NEW DIRECTORS/NEW FILMS

MY ARCHITECT

(DOCU)

A Louis Kahn Project production. Produced by Susan Rose Behr, Nathaniel Kahn. Executive producers, Behr, Andrew Clayman, Darrell Friedman. Co-executive producers, Robert Guzzardi, Lynne and Harold Honickman.

Directed, written, narrated by Nathaniel Kahn. Camera (color), Bob Richman; editor, Sabine Krayenbuehl; music, Joseph Vitarelli; sound (Dolby), Eddie O'Connor; line producer, Simon Egleton; associate producers, John Hochroth, Phyllis Kaufman, Judy Moon. Reviewed at New Directors/New Films Festival, New York, March 17, 2003. Running time: 116 MIN.