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THE SECRET LIFE OF ARCHITECTURAL GENIUS LOUIS KAHN WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY NATHANIEL KAHN

MY ARCHITECT

A SON'S JOURNEY

The Academy Award nominated and critically acclaimed documentary *My Architect* is one of the year's most memorable films. This unforgettable exploration of the secret triple life and genius of Louis Kahn brings a fascinating and mysterious man to life, and shows us the awesome majesty and beauty of his buildings which so profoundly influenced the course of 20th century architecture.

UNITED STATES • 2003 • 116 mins • Color • In English

When the Ultimate Monument Isn't a Building

HERBERT MUSCHAMP

Louis Kahn, the subject of a brilliant film portrait by his son, Nathaniel Kahn, is the ghost at the banquet that architecture has become since his death in 1974. As the movie makes clear, Louis would have made a bad banquetmaster. He was too dedicated to mastering architecture. That left little room for the aesthetic jollies in which today's designers take such splashy delight.

Titled "My Architect," this wonder of a movie should put a stop to the notion that architecture is a less creative form of practice than music, painting, literature or dance. I have never seen or read a more penetrating account of the inner life of an architect — or of architecture itself — than that presented in this movie.

The depth it achieves owes much to the filmmaker's search for his own psyche. Nathaniel was 11 years old when Louis died. His father's buildings become the medium through which the son discovers his own identity. The result is a personal reflection on the continuity buildings offer society at large.

The film starts off bleakly, with Nathaniel recounting the circumstances of his father's death, by heart attack, at the age of 73. He collapsed in the men's room at Penn Station in New York. Lacking proper identification, his body was sent to the city morgue, where it lay unclaimed for three days. Kahn was bankrupt but by no means forgotten: no American architect of that period was more highly esteemed. The discrepancy between Kahn's professional achievements and his disordered personal life is one of the movie's central themes.

It emerges that Kahn's life was nearly as complicated as Frank Lloyd Wright's. Married to one woman, he sustained three families. Members of the trio didn't meet until Kahn's funeral. It is hard to imagine that such a menagerie could exist in the Philadelphia of those years, or even today. There are limits to brotherly love. Born out of wedlock, the grown-up Nathaniel must retroactively create the family in which he finds a legitimate place. That is this picture's story.

In the mid-1960's, I was acquainted with one of Louis Kahn's children. I never knew what all the grown-up whispering was about; just that there were whispers, and that they weren't about architecture. In any case, I didn't discover Kahn's work until 1965, when I moved into quarters that looked right onto the Richards Medical Research Building at the University of Pennsylvania (1960), the first building that brought Kahn international renown. It was like living next door to somebody famous. Of course, in the Philadelphia of those years, fame was more scandalous than sex.

"My Architect" is very much a Philadelphia story, in terms of urban as well as moral climate. Kahn's work matured in the postwar decades of "white flight," the suburban middle class exodus that hit cities nationwide. The erosion of downtown Philadelphia was particularly painful, however, because the city had long prided itself on its relative stability. Also, Philadelphia had two giants in the fields of architecture and city planning: Kahn and the legendary Ed Bacon, the Daniel Burnham of postwar American planning.

Feisty as ever at 92, the lovably cantankerous Mr. Bacon puts in an appearance here, one of several cameos by the senior statesmen of American urbanism. In his scene, Mr. Bacon is challenged to defend Kahn's exclusion from the planning of postwar Philadelphia. Mr. Bacon accuses Kahn of myopia: his focus on the individual work of

genius blinds him to regional needs.

The point is well taken. Still, many in the Philadelphia region may now regret the local scarcity of Kahn's architecture. In the age of "archi-tourism," substantial buildings are among the cultural draws that cities increasingly rely on to shore up their shrinking economic bases.

While the film remains tightly focused on the father, Nathaniel is a constant presence on its margins. Art imitates life. The irony of this is surely deliberate. Legally, Nathaniel was a bastard. Psychologically, his father was worse than that. Yet the movie does not adopt a judgmental attitude, except perhaps toward the mores of the times.

There may be great male architects who have managed to successfully organize conventional private lives. In my observation, talented people are drawn to this highly social art precisely because they are truly comfortable only with inanimate objects and abstract ideas. This doesn't excuse Kahn's behavior. It does suggest, however, that those who are drawn into the orbit of such figures are not necessarily victims, or victims solely.

Women got many raw deals within the monogamous conventions of the 1950's and 60's. How do you compare the development of an inner life to the socially sanctioned denial that such a thing exists? "My Architect" lets the ambiguities speak for themselves.

There is a lovely scene near the beginning of the film. Nathaniel is shown rollerblading in the great courtyard of the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, Calif. Completed in 1965, the institute is a masterpiece of 20th-century architecture, usually approached on bended knee. The cinematography gives us that sense of reverence, then partly undermines it as Nathaniel traces serpentine paths within the courtyard's immaculate void. The moment comes across as a desire for freedom, from the void of an absent father, a memory that must have been crushing at times.

It's a Post-Modernist we see skating down there, a surrogate for all the architects, like Philip Johnson, who had to break out of Kahn's solemnity in order to breathe. Robert A. M. Stern, in his cameo performance, warns against putting Kahn on a pedestal. But isn't it the architects of Mr. Stern's generation and temperament, with their desire for commercial success, who ended up keeping Kahn up there?

In addition to the Salk Institute, the movie's grand tour of Kahn's buildings includes the library at Phillips Exeter Academy (1972) in Exeter, N.H., the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (1972) and the Yale Center for British Art (1974) in New Haven. Finally, Nathaniel visits the great complex of government buildings his father designed for the capital of Bangladesh (1983). Here, far from the context of technological civilization, Nathaniel gains the feeling that he has rejoined his father at last.

The release of this film is perfectly timed. Today, many architects are seeking to convey the emotional qualities Kahn captured. Frank Gehry, in his star turn, speaks for them. It's become customary to trace this emphasis back to Aldo Rossi and the explicitly sentimental dimension he explored in his writings and designs. "My Architect" makes a good case that Kahn was the primary pivot away from the cool rationality of modern thought toward the contemporary search for subjective truth.

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