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CITYSPACE

The Path of Kahn



Kahn Artist: Architect Louis Kahn (pictured) built many things -- but not a life with son Nathaniel.

On fathers, sons and buildings.

by Harris Steinberg

There is a scene of particular poignancy in *My Architect* (currently showing at the Ritz Five in Philadelphia), Nathaniel Kahn's elegiac cinematic ode to his father, the late Philadelphia architect Louis I. Kahn, that puts into stark relief the vastness of the divide between father and son, the present and the past and the yearning, hungry ache of a son to find his father.

At Union Station in Los Angeles, Nathaniel anxiously awaits the man who found his father on the floor of the men's room in Penn Station -- a continent and a generation away. Expectantly, he scans the crowd for a sign of the last person to see his father alive, as if this man will be able to fill in the blanks in a text that the years have rendered nearly illegible.

This angel that Nathaniel seeks is, in reality, a sad, middle-aged man who hasn't seen his own son in 10 years -- one who can barely remember the layout of the men's room that fuzzy day in 1974 when he unwittingly stumbled upon a world-famous architect lying in cardiac pain on the bathroom floor. Searching for shards of

hope, Nathaniel tries valiantly to hide the disappointment that is enormously evident in his eyes, which momentarily lose their optimistic sparkle.

And it is in this instant that the emotional divide, the sense of longing, the breach of time, place and space is cracked open and we glimpse the emptiness of Nathaniel's unimaginable void.

Such is the searing undertone of *My Architect*, a film at once searching, sad and yet ultimately hopeful as longing, hope, desire, and love all skid, hover and glide just above and below the surface of a story that is both painfully personal and universal. For Nathaniel, in sharing his search with us, taps into our own need to place ourselves in the great generational sweep of time and place as his quest is our quest to locate ourselves within the world of our ancestors.

Crisscrossing the globe to learn about a father he barely knew, Nathaniel searches for traces of a man who lived a fractured and multifaceted triple existence, with Nathaniel a small boy at the edge of his father's vast universe -- the illegitimate third child in a splintered, nontraditional family of three women and as many children.

Buildings loom large in the life of Lou Kahn -- a man who spent a lifetime searching for universal truths about place and place-making. An architect who drew people into his ever-widening sphere of mystical and universal revelation, he was at the same time a man unable to build a home life for himself -- keeping three families who remained invisible to each other within a 10-mile radius in Philadelphia.

Trying to find and make peace with this man who left him and his mother over and over before Kahn died when he was an 11-year-old boy, Nathaniel doggedly visits his father's masterworks in Philadelphia, New Haven, Fort Worth, La Jolla and Bangladesh -- searching out the people and places touched by this peripatetic architectural prophet who owned nothing and left few physical traces of himself save the reams of drawings, sketches and a handful of architectural masterpieces scattered across the globe.

It is in the people whom Kahn touched and in the buildings in which Kahn began to realize his full flowering as an artist in the last 10 years of his life that Nathaniel begins to piece together an understanding and a love for this physically scarred (his face bore the results a childhood accident with burning coals) and emotionally flawed human being. It is in the tears of those touched by Kahn -- lovers, clients and colleagues -- and in the enigmatic realization of ideal and timeless space -- that Nathaniel finally finds his father.



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Assembly Hall of the capitol complex at Bangladesh, staring up and into the
d that was Kahn's great gift to this struggling country, Nathaniel
Jew -- Kahn is slowly revealed as a complex layering of influences, the
th.

Ultimately Kahn is exposed as a man -- a flawed, competitive, driven professional seeking the great commissions of the
day while all the while deeply touching people from Bangladesh to California in his quest to render in physical form the
places of human relationships that eluded him in his private life.

Nathaniel Kahn has created a film of honest beauty and transcendent depth -- not surprisingly the same qualities that
his father strove mightily to achieve in his buildings. While at times painfully skirting the edge of cloying sentimentality
(Was it really necessary to film Nathaniel rollerblading in the great court of Kahn's Salk Institute in La Jolla?), the film
ultimately escapes the nostalgia trap and stands on its own as a testament to a universal search for roots, and the
timelessness of human qualities of love, hope and desire.

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