
The Gregarious Loner

Louis I. Kahn:
Beyond Time and Style:
A Life in Architecture

by Carter Wiseman
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Reviewed by
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ONE DOES not expect a film about an architect to have broad appeal, and so there was little surprise when *Sketches of Frank Gehry*, Sydney Pollack's fawning 2005 documentary, quickly dropped from sight. Yet, only two years earlier, *My Architect*, Nathaniel Kahn's award-winning documentary about his father, was warmly embraced by public and critics alike.

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The cause is not hard to find. While only a few of us must deal with architects, we all must deal with families. And the family of Louis I. Kahn, in its intense and ramified complexity, was worthy of a 19th-century Russian novel.

Kahn's reputation is higher today than at any point since his death in 1974. In an age of celebrity architects, each carefully cultivating his idiosyncratic signature style, there is something inspiring in an architect who suppressed the personal and willful in favor of universal and collective expression. Kahn's finest buildings, such as the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, and the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, achieved a fine tragic dignity, a quality so rare in American modernism as to be almost non-existent.

But Kahn also led a disordered personal life, fathering three children by three women, only one of whom was his wife. The three families were dimly aware of one another, but not until the death of his long-suffering wife were they able to meet. This is what gave *My Architect* its bittersweet poignancy, as Nathaniel Kahn found in the company of this ad-hoc family and of his father's friends a surrogate for the attention he never received as a child. Were its subject not so famous (or its maker so forgiving), it might have been titled *Lou Kahn, Deadbeat Dad*.

Personal though it was, the film also had a liberating effect on Kahn scholarship. Early researchers had concentrated on interpreting Kahn's work either in terms of his own cryptic theoretical pronouncements or else in terms of its relationship to the broad professional and cultural currents of the day. Over his unruly personal life they left a veil of gentility. After all, he was hardly the first architect to play the rogue; Frank Lloyd Wright and Stanford White come readily to mind. Unlike them, however, Kahn had found his mistresses among his professional assistants and treated them as intel-

lectual peers, thus merging his creative and romantic life to a degree that stands out even in the cheerfully wanton history of art. Because of this, and despite all the books devoted to him, his story had not yet been told in full.

SUCH IS the gap that Carter Wiseman aspires to fill in this attractive and handsomely illustrated biography. He moves briskly: Kahn's family background and architectural training are treated in two preliminary chapters while each of the next seven is devoted to one of his major works. Wiseman presents much new material, mostly drawn from copious interviews with Kahn's associates. He performs an especially great service in revising the somewhat mythical account that Kahn himself promulgated of his early childhood.

He was indeed born in 1901, the son of a Jewish paymaster in the czarist army—but not on the Baltic island of Saaremaa as he claimed but in the somewhat less romantic venue of the Latvian mainland. Nor was he born Louis Kahn but rather Leiser-Itze Schmuilowsky, an evidently embarrassing name, unknown until recently, that was changed in 1915, a decade after the family's emigration to Philadelphia.

Kahn studied at the University of Pennsylvania under the tutelage of Paul Cret, a dynamic French instructor who advocated a kind of contemporary classicism, based on the French École des Beaux Arts but receptive to new materials and boldly abstract. Cret's works include the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., on which Kahn assisted, in the process absorbing Cret's classical system. But his faith was shaken in 1929 when, during an extended European study trip, he encountered the works of the echt-modernist LeCorbusier.

For the next two decades, Kahn would founder between Beaux-Arts classicism and Bauhaus modernism. Because of the Depression and then

World War II, he built little but thought much, which gave his subsequent work a high cerebral content (and which may account for the characteristic indecision of his later work). During these hardscrabble years, Kahn was largely supported by his wife Esther, whom he married in 1930. Although they had planned to travel together to Europe, he to study with Walter Gropius at the Bauhaus and she to study experimental psychology with Anna Freud, as the Depression worsened they moved in with Esther's parents and she became the principal breadwinner as well as caregiver to their daughter Sue Ann.

This long period in the wilderness is given rather perfunctory treatment here. Wiseman is also lamentably incurious about the politics of his subject in that highly politicized decade of the Popular Front. Noting that in 1933 Kahn designed a monument for Vladimir Lenin, which would have loomed over the harbor in Leningrad, he does not observe how assiduously the architect later effaced that item from his résumé. (It was unknown to scholars until discussed by me in 1992.)* During the 1950's, when Kahn was negotiating with the U.S. State Department to design the consulate in Angola, such a credential would have been a liability. One wonders what other credentials he suppressed; Wiseman, however, does not.

KAHN DID not hit his stride until 1953, with the building of the Yale Art Gallery. Open in plan, and ostentatiously capped by a geometric space frame, it was decidedly modern. Yet in other aspects, as Wiseman shows, it recalled the great buildings of the ancient world that Kahn had encountered during his travels. In its insistence on flowing space and volumetric transparency, modernism had effectively banished the discrete room and the massive wall—those traditional components

of architecture. At Yale they returned triumphantly. The character of the building was neither contemporary nor archaic but rather timeless, and this indeed became Kahn's preferred mode of expression.

The triangular space frame above the Yale gallery was the particular contribution of Kahn's longtime collaborator Anne Tyng, a Harvard graduate who joined his firm in 1945. Shortly afterward they began an office romance, which in 1953 resulted in the birth of their daughter Alexandra. When the romance faltered in the early 1960's, Kahn commenced an affair with Harriet Pattison, a landscape architect. Their son Nathaniel, the filmmaker, was born in 1962. It was to untangle these relationships with his half-sisters and with his absentee father that Nathaniel would eventually set out to make his film.

By the start of the 1960's, Kahn's architectural language was fully realized, at which point *Beyond Time and Style* loses its dramatic momentum. As the works of Kahn's late maturity follow in train, Wiseman does justice to the convoluted design his-

tory of each but the story is much the same: a laborious gestation period as Kahn subjects his designs to revision after revision—a process that continues even after construction has begun, with dire financial consequences. Invariably, and often after the project has already grown disastrously over budget, Kahn's exasperated clients would assign a manager to rein him in.

Not that Kahn himself made money. To the contrary, he perpetually teetered on the brink of insolvency, and when he died in 1974—in a men's room at New York's Pennsylvania Station—his office was for all intents and purposes bankrupt.

APART FROM a certain stinginess with dates, Wiseman tells the individual building histories well. There is the Salk Institute, where Jonas Salk, Kahn's most confident and self-assured client, pushed him to make a building he could "invite Picasso to." And there is the capitol in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a concrete

* "What Louis Kahn Built," COMMENTARY, March 1992.

building erected with the most primitive means: a massive bamboo scaffold was lashed together with rope, some 2,000 workmen balancing on their heads the metal pans with their load of viscous concrete. Since each successive pour varied considerably in texture and color, Kahn hid the seams behind slender marble strips—a felicitous improvisation that imparted a human scale to what would otherwise have been a hulking concrete leviathan.

These capsule accounts are engaging, but their repetitive nature makes it impossible for Wiseman to achieve any narrative momentum. Instead of tracing the larger arc of Kahn's life, his seven detached vignettes follow the dispiriting rhythm of lather-rinse-repeat. While doing justice to the buildings, they lose sight of their creator.

We do not see, for example, the great effect of celebrity on Kahn, especially after the appearance of a 1962 monograph on his work by the architectural historian Vincent Scully. Prior to its appearance, he had been careless with his drawings; afterward, he lovingly and self-consciously signed and dated even the most hurried sketch. His prose, already famously tortuous, now reached heights of metaphysical pretence, as when he pronounced to a 1967 audience in Boston that "I sense Light as the giver of all presences, and material as spent Light."

In all these respects, *Beyond Time and Style* is less a true biography than a monograph. Even the welcome details of Kahn's private life scattered throughout remain at the level of anecdote. Although Wiseman has interviewed widely and filled his book with amusing incidents—he shows us Kahn desperately trying to erase the doodles on the wall of his squalid office before the arrival of Jacqueline Kennedy to interview him about designing the Kennedy Library—Kahn himself remains at a distance, remote and

elusive to the end; if this were the life of an English aristocrat, it would be all downstairs, no upstairs.

How was it that this unprepossessing, rather unattractive figure—with his scarred face and tatty clothes—should have exercised such a hypnotic attraction over others? How is it that he emerged so successful a seducer so late in life (Wiseman refers in passing to other romances)? These are not questions of mere prurient interest, but essential to who Kahn was and, moreover, how he worked.

Kahn was that paradox, the rigorously solitary artist who needed to work out his ideas in dialogue with others. He stubbornly insisted that his was a one-man firm. "There aren't going to be any partners," he told one of his assistants. "When I die, it's over; there will be no crumbs."

And yet throughout his career he worked in tandem. He designed his Lenin Memorial in collaboration with the Architectural Research Group, a collective of jobless architects who gathered around his charismatic leadership. Later he had a series of partnerships, most importantly with George Howe and Oscar Stonorov. When he began to practice alone, he looked elsewhere for foils against whom to try out his ideas. Teaching at Yale and later at the University of Pennsylvania, he gave his students the same projects he himself was working on. He also came to lean on the criticism of talented employees like Robert Venturi. The interchange was intensely close; if the interlocutor was a woman, all the closer.

KAHN'S DESIGN process seemed to demand the presence of such interlocutors. His drawings invariably began indecisively, circling through vague ideograms in a roundabout way. For his plans to take on definite and finite form—more defini-

tive than a platitude like "Light is the giver of all presences"—a respondent was evidently required, someone with whom he could test his ideas out loud. That these respondents, who felt the full brunt of Kahn's hypnotic personality, were in some sense interchangeable became clear enough in time, causing varying degrees of personal distress.

Wiseman makes little of the letters Kahn sent to Tyng when she was in Rome in 1953-54, secretly giving birth to their daughter. But he wrote incessantly, sending money in dribs and drabs and reporting self-absorbedly on the minutiae of his life and family. Published as *Louis Kahn to Anne Tyng* (1997), these letters are the only sustained writing in which he spoke of personal and professional matters with frankness or real intimacy. (Not that this is the sort of intimacy most of us would regard as normal: "Dearest Anny: Am just returning from Washington where I consulted on a shopping building of 30,000 sq. ft. for which I recommended the use of a 3D Truss[,] a natural for the problem.") It is a pity that Wiseman is so incurious about them.

It is precisely because Kahn's buildings are so monumentally impersonal that one is drawn to speculate about the personality that made them. In his work there was none of the histrionic presentation of self that is the hallmark of today's signature architects. To the contrary: throughout his design process he worked to refine and clarify form, and to purge every last vestige of personal caprice. The resulting structures splendidly suited collective functions, such as civic buildings or monuments. One can see how the will to monumentality is rooted in his classical training, but whence the strand of self-effacement? We must await another biography to plumb the depths of this gregarious and garrulous figure, and the fundamental remoteness at his core.