

A Philadelphia architect in Dhaka

The following are excerpts from a conversation between Nathaniel Kahn and Kazi K. Ashraf. Nathaniel Kahn, an upcoming film-maker from New York, has just completed and released a film, "My Architect: A Son's Journey," on his father, the illustrious architect Louis I. Kahn. The film is a genre-bending masterwork, a spell-binding story that weaves architecture, the life of a creative personality, and the emotional landscape that connects people around him.

Kazi K. Ashraf (KA): The Parliament Complex takes a very special place in your film. It is in fact the climax to your film... What made you realise the importance of this group of buildings in Dhaka?

Nathaniel Kahn (NK): There are a few things that come to mind. One is the importance of Lou (Kahn) and his work to the world of architecture, and also the importance of this project in the process of his work, and thirdly, my perception of what Lou did with the government of Bangladesh. My first access to it is because of my travel around the world seeing the places where my father built.

cerned with are the timeless things. He wasn't concerned with money, he wasn't concerned with fame. He was concerned with making something that would last forever. Now you have in the middle of Dhaka city the single most important creation that Louis Kahn ever made. You have it, it's in your country. It is of international value, it's of value for all time and it's the most important thing with a building like that is you've got to preserve the space that's around it so that it can be seen and be understood.

KA: This project is an offering to the city of Dhaka, to the people of the city, it's not just a parliamentary complex. This is something that people in Dhaka should really value, should realise as an infinite gift. I think they do... but you have this story, this beautiful story about your first experience of the Complex.

NK: You know I had traveled around the world to see my father's buildings for this film. And I saved the Parliament Complex in Dhaka for last because I knew it was his greatest and also it was the one that had the most emotional impact for me... and also it was from here, not exactly from Dhaka but from India, that he never returned really. He died on the way home. So when I went to Dhaka I was almost afraid because I knew it would be the last building I would ever see for the first time of my father's and that has great significance for a son. In a way this is the last piece of him on the earth that I can see. I wanted to see it in the right way. I didn't want to just arrive and suddenly have it be there. I wanted to really be in the right place. I wanted to be on that south lawn... looking at it. So I was with a friend an architect from Dhaka, Nurur Rahman Khan, and I said look I want to see this thing the right way, I don't want to see it in an accidental way, I want to see it in a really emotional way. So he suggested why don't we blindfold you and I'll drive you there. And so Nurur blindfolded me, and we drove through the streets and as you know Dhaka is very noisy. The sound of the baby taxis, the sound of the trucks, the constant honking and yelling and shouting and rickshaws and everything, it's very exciting but it's also very, very loud. And we drove through the streets...

So we pulled up front and I got out from the taxi and suddenly there was soft ground under my feet. And we started walking up, I was being led blindfolded into this area. I didn't know what it was yet. And it was soft ground under my feet and sounds of the city started to recede and Nurur said, "Are you ready to see this building?" And I said "I'm not ready yet, not ready I just want to stand here for a moment and feel this place." I have

KA: Let me ask you this way, because other people will raise it, so why should we now be concerned about this man coming to Dhaka from Philadelphia with his dream project?

NK: Well I think that's a good question. There are several answers. One, I found in the people of Bangladesh tremendous respect for what someone has given, more respect there than we have here. This is about a man who really gave his life for this project. And I think that so many times people have given their lives for something and maybe it hasn't turned out that well. What amazed me is how wonderfully this project turned out not only as a national treasure but an international treasure. This isn't just my father's dream project, it's also an example for the world... It is considered by architects around the world to be an absolute masterpiece of modern architecture. It is now going to be the subject of several books. I didn't know how wonderful it was until I went there.

KA: Is it too premature to mention the Hollywood film here?

NK: No, not at all. Hollywood is what Americans look to for what's important and who's important. A number of famous producers in Hollywood have seen my film and they were totally blown away by this story of this man from Philadelphia, who came from poor beginnings, who found his greatest achievement in this far away land called Bangladesh. And the buildings that he created there absolutely knocked them out, and they said, look, we want to make a feature film about this, about this man. It will be a huge Hollywood production because they were so impressed by the passion this person had to reach across the boundaries that separate east and west, different languages, different cultures and yet somehow a universal language was found between this architect from Philadelphia and the people of Dhaka, Bangladesh. And the building that was built is nothing short of the great pyramids of Egypt. I think Hollywood realises that this is the kind of story that dreams are made of and that people go to see movies about. I think people will fly to Dhaka once they see this building, there will be tourists coming to Dhaka just to see this building. They will realise that it is a timeless piece of architecture and as time goes by the perception of his importance as an architect will continue to rise. He is one of the greatest architects of the 20th century along with Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Mies van der Rohe.

KA: People seem to return to Louis Kahn, his philosophy, his work, recurrently no matter what kind of fashionable things that are going on, and what rises and what falls.

NK: It's interesting, you're reminding me of a great friend of Lou's, the Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi who thought of Louis Kahn as a guru or yogi because he said he felt he was from here, he was from this part of the world. I asked why, and he said because the things he was con-

cerned with are the timeless things. He wasn't concerned with money, he wasn't concerned with fame. He was concerned with making something that would last forever. Now you have in the middle of Dhaka city the single most important creation that Louis Kahn ever made. You have it, it's in your country. It is of international value, it's of value for all time and it's the most important thing with a building like that is you've got to preserve the space that's around it so that it can be seen and be understood.



Louis Kahn

ate impression was, I didn't see anything else around it but this building, this form. There was nothing encroaching upon it. It was a pure, very pure view, and that view also talks about how a government has to act with great clarity and definition and be a symbol for its people. That's something that deserves space around it. You can't just shove that in the middle of buildings in a city...

KA: Yes, one has to realize that architecture is not just buildings, the material physical objects. The space around it, that's architecture too. We should realise that we need those spaces. A city is a matrix of buildings and spaces.

NK: Absolutely, and the Parliament building is the centerpiece of that matrix, no matter what happens in the rest of Dhaka City. Let them build elsewhere if there are needs... progress is good but it is not progress if you squeeze the Parliament by building all around it.

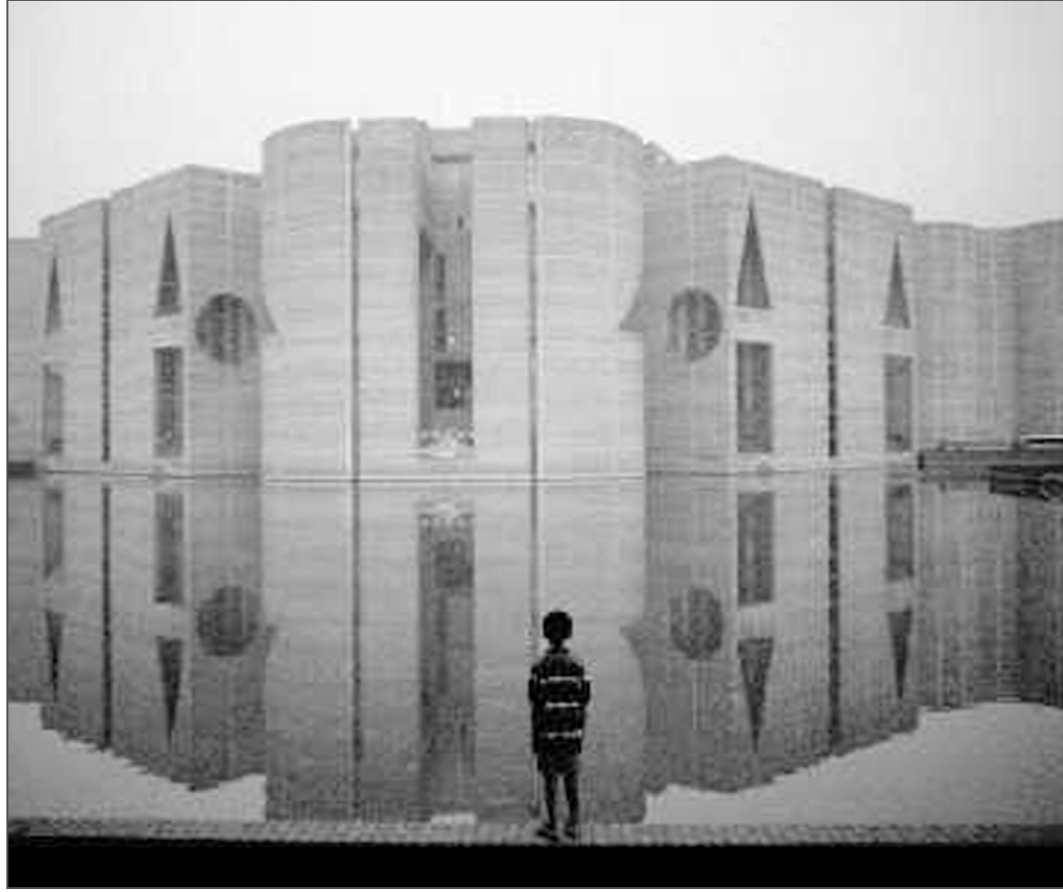
KA: I like that. NK: That is not progress, this is actually going backwards. Think of what New York City would be without Central Park. The city would not exist. I live in New York, the city would be utterly unlivable if we didn't have Central Park. It is the only place where the city breathes, and the city can stop and collect itself and remember who it is. You take a run through that park and you remember this is a wonderful city. I live in the middle of this din but I can get away from it. I was also deeply impressed by the fact that everybody I've met in far flung places of the world, Bangladeshis, everybody has a

him for a while even on this project. I would think, and people would say too, that Lou Kahn brought his own American, western ideas, and what have you, but at the same time he engaged very poetically and in very imaginative ways with what's already there, with the landscape of Bangladesh. The result is a very new creation in Dhaka, especially the matrix not just the buildings.

NK: Beautifully said. A couple of things come to mind. When the Aga Khan Award was given, they said that the Parliament building is a universal kind of architecture but

thinking about how buildings emerged from the landscape in a profound relationship between the two. His buildings look very crisp and crystalline, but they arise from the ground in a sort of mythical manner. I think that especially in Bangladesh Kahn was really amazed by the aquatic landscape and talked about how he should do "an architecture of the land" here. I know that your mother is a landscape architect and she worked with

When people watch the movie they say, you really found him there, didn't you? You found him in Dhaka. You looked for him all over the world and you got pieces of him but you found him there. And I say in the movie if my father was going to be anywhere, he was here (in Dhaka). My father has a grave outside Philadelphia. It's in a cemetery with a lot of other people. I know that his body may be there but his heart was in Dhaka.



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suffering the consequences... Any way I think his response was very strong: I want to create not just a building that serves a parliamentary purpose but a building in a landscape, a building in a landscape that responds to and expresses the actual landscape that is native.

KA: And at the same time it's a city, so there is a twin thing, to live with the landscape and being in a city. It's not an anti-city, that landscape and city are not antithetical. That I think was a challenge.

this which is interesting that his dream more than anything else than designing individual buildings was to design the basis on which buildings would be built.

So you're worried about matrix. That's a plan, that's a master plan. It's something he couldn't do anywhere else in the world. He tried in Philadelphia, he was denied. And Philadelphia now is

world. They go there and they think, God, where is this from? It belongs here yet it has this resonance of something enormously ancient. Was it built ten years ago, was it built 10,000 years ago? You don't know. And that is something, that wonderful ambiguity and that reach for something very ancient and very fundamental.

KA: You know this idea of a Ben-



Nathaniel Kahn

same, yet you get what you already have... KA: Which you are getting in the rest of the city.

NK: The other thing is that there is an issue of national pride and identity. The people that I talked to when I was filming, they said this is our national symbol, we are very proud of this. But I am thinking when those people said to me this is a symbol of our country, we're proud of it, what exactly are they saying? Is it just the building? No, it's also the whole space around it... it is a little city in a park. It is a calm space which brings people together and from which you make policy about everything else but you don't let the petty concerns of the day, needing a house here and a house there, encroach upon the big vision.

KA: Let me come back to his urban visions for Philadelphia. Lou Kahn was not just an architect he was an urban visionary of sorts. He had some very significant ideas for the city.

NK: He started in public housing.

KA: That too, plus his idea for a civic downtown but then some of the ideas trickled down and... NK: ...became Dhaka.

KA: And sure became Dhaka. This is the interesting twist that despite his great plans for Philadelphia the drawings of which are studied even now by architects and urban planners all over the world, some of that got built in Dhaka.

NK: This is interesting because it reminds me of a story that he was very fond of telling about his city Philadelphia. People asked him why do you love Philadelphia? And he'd say a city is a place where a small boy when he walks through it can find what he wants to do for the rest of his life, and for him that city was Philadelphia, and I also think for him that city could be Dhaka, but in Philadelphia I think at the time when he was growing up there were great institutions of learning, great schools that were free to people no matter where you came from. There were beautiful art museums, there were fantastic government buildings, and a child could wander through the parks and think about things, and as time went by other things happened... people were going to the suburbs and soon there was a need to reju-

than just a building, actually a plan for a small city, the two places in India and the greatest one absolutely in Dhaka. And I think it's significant that this is not a complex of art galleries, it is not a school, it is the centre of government which is the central symbol of the entire country. So I think he brought many of the best ideas that he had that should have been implemented in Philadelphia and that now people here are wishing that they had done but it's too late. He brought to Dhaka those visions and those experiences of how a city can be screwed up. Let's learn from the mistakes we made in America. Don't make the same mistakes we made here.

KA: We don't want to be Philadelphia.

NK: Believe me you don't want to be Philadelphia, you don't want to be New York, you don't want to be those things. And I can tell you right now that in the Complex there is a place where a small boy wandering through it can find what he wants to do for the rest of his life. Don't lose that. That's it. You've got it there. And it's not an American city, it's a Bengali City but it comes with tremendous knowledge of what went wrong in America.

KA: So, Lou had a vision of what will happen in the next forty, fifty years. I'm sure he was looking at cities and he didn't want cities to be like that. So in a sense he has given a vision for any city.

NK: You raise an interesting point here what you were talking about a city being buildings and spaces. Now basically what we have in our cities is buildings and then a park. We have very poor integration of landscape and buildings. We don't put them together very well. We have to designate areas. This is a park, you can't build here. But what you've got in Dhaka is this perfect combination of buildings and space and the way they interact with each other is the best of both worlds. It's kind of what you were talking about, this matrix.

KA: One last thing... about the film. We are already seeing that your film is going to be a major event all over the US. The Parliament Complex is so important in your film. You end the film with it. But really what I am interested in finding out is how do you think people are perceiving the Complex as you show the film?

NK: Well, I can tell you what they've already seen. There's no question that everybody loves the part of the film that takes place at Dhaka. It has been mentioned in reviews, in the New York Times, in Variety magazine. Many people have never seen the building before which means there's a PR problem. People need to know more about these buildings. But they cannot get over the building and the people who we encountered in Dhaka. Their vision of Bangladesh is floods literally and then they see this and they say, oh, my god, that's the capital of Bangladesh and Kahn built that? And that's what it looks like? I want to go. Their response really is what a spiritual building, what an incredible place, what beautiful people. We want to go, how do we go? And their response also is how my father was thwarted in his dreams in America. They say we missed out and Bangladeshis got the cream of the crop. I wish we'd done it.

And I think they also are completely knocked out by another aspect which is very touching for me and that is my mission to try to find out who my father was. Many people in America treated me as "here comes this nearly middle-aged man... get over it" and their response is in the film. Not all of them were that way. There was more openness with people in Dhaka. It's almost as if for a Bengali it's completely normal that you should try to find out who your father was and you should honour the quest... When people watch the movie they say, you really found him there, didn't you? You found him in Dhaka. You looked for him all over the world and you got pieces of him but you found him there. And I say in the movie if my father was going to be anywhere, he was here (in Dhaka). My father has a grave outside Philadelphia. It's in a cemetery with a lot of other people. I know that his body may be there but his heart was in Dhaka.

The interesting thing is that in Philadelphia he was basically given mostly projects to design individual buildings. In two places he was given the chance to design more



It is a model of a Bengali city. One doesn't have to be a Bengali to do that... and this raises something wonderful which is that what Lou was after... an architecture that came from before the beginning of history.

to say that standing on that lawn you could feel the building, you could feel the space around the building. It was as if something was breathing there, it was air around it, it was space. It's really being in the presence of something spiritual. It's like being in the presence of a great temple. You feel it. You can feel a great monument by the silence around it and my father talked about the silence...

KA: You need a silence like that in the city.

NK: Absolutely, a city must have silence. And of course you can call it a park, you can call it whatever you want to call it but a city must have silence somewhere in the core because that is a place of calm from which action comes. You can't have action if it's all just nervousness and energy. You have to have a calm space. So there I stood in the calm space, breath deeply, and I said, okay, I'm ready and he took off the blindfold and there was the south lawn in front of me, the south plaza and the building rising above it with the flag, the Bangladesh flag, and I burst into tears. I actually

story not just about the parliament building but the space around it. Everybody has a story about meeting a friend on the plaza, playing a game on the lawn, being a child on the lawn, walking around the Crescent Lake, exploring the area that the streets go past the hostels. Everybody has a story about it, and they're wonderful stories. Some of them are romantic. "I met my wife there." Some of them are dramatic. "I had a political confrontation, an important political discussion there." Some of them are artistic. "I had an idea for a book while walking around that lake every morning." A very famous American architect, I.M. Pei, told me before I went there, "Look, I've seen pictures of this building but I've never seen how it's used by people..." I was there for two weeks, and every time I went I saw the building being used in different ways and that is a sign of a great space.

KA: There is something else I would like to bring up, Kahn's interest in landscape. I don't know when he really became involved with that idea, although he was

it could only exist here, it could only be in Dhaka. It is a timeless building but it is also very specific to this place. My father's first response when he came to Dhaka was to go on the river because he realised flying in that this is delta country. It is a land that is floating on water. And he took a boat on the river and the first thing he drew was -- there's a beautiful little series of drawings -- little boats... When we were figuring out how to get to the building in the film, we decided it has to rise out of the water. It is like an impossible, wonderful castle that lives in the middle of the water. The fact that Lou put it in water is very significant for several reasons. There's a practical reason, the water rises and falls. Yes, it's on dry land but really this whole place is floating on the water. And so I think his specific response to the place, to the landscape was very, very strong, and that building was not something he just kind of stuck there. It was something that grew out of his experience of the land of Bangladesh. And I think that it was very clear to him, he actually said



NK: I'm sure. And he didn't impose the western grid. It is a much freer, more like the delta country. It is not rigid, it's canalled, it's meandering. The river goes this way and it goes that way.

KA: Despite the geometry.

NK: Sure. It has porosity to it. Water passes through, air passes through and this is space. So it's taking a chunk of space and defining it.

KA: I've also been saying that if there is a model or a paradigm of a so-called Bengali city, it is perhaps this. Even though it has been proposed by a Jewish architect from Philadelphia, it is a model of a Bengali city. One doesn't have to be a Bengali to do that.

here and what we really need to appreciate.

NK: I think this raises the question of what is the edge of this creation...

KA: He was really getting into something quite exciting. He was commissioned to look at the low lying area in the north which used to get flooded during the monsoon and he was thinking of buildings on bridges where you could cultivate at the lower level and you could have houses on the upper level. A new kind of building typology.

NK: You know there have been many assaults on Central Park. People have tried to say we need more housing. We need to build something in the bottom of the park and many times things have gotten close to being built and they've been stopped and every time people have breathed a sigh of relief, and five or ten years later they say, boy, with this temporary gain what we would have lost. So, if you start encroaching upon what exists there in the Complex your dream of the Bengali City which is really a city on the water is totally lost. And you just get more of the