



Louis I Kahn, the US-American designer of our Parliament building, is considered one of the most transformative examples of 20th-century global architecture.

COLLAGE: TEENI AND TUNI

## The Louis Kahn mystique: 20 years after 'My Architect'



### THE GRUDGING URBANIST

Dr Adnan Zillur Morshed is an architect, architectural historian, urbanist, and professor. He teaches at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, and serves as executive director of the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism at Brac University. His most recent book is 'Dhaka Delirium.'

ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

It has been two decades since Nathaniel Kahn's acclaimed documentary, *My Architect: A Son's Journey* (2003), renewed interest in architect Louis I Kahn, the American designer of our National Parliament building, who is considered one of the most transformative examples of 20th century global architecture. I keep wondering what enabled *My Architect* to strike such a popular chord around the world and become a classic. Is it Kahn's monumental architecture, his mystical style of teaching, his complicated personal life, or something else? Conceived as a self-reflective journey – albeit through architecture – in search of a father long gone, the film was the brainchild of Nathaniel Kahn (hereafter Nathaniel), Kahn's son born out of wedlock. Nathaniel was 11 years old when his father died of a heart attack in 1974 in the men's room of New York's Pennsylvania Station, after a 24-hour flight from India and Bangladesh. Nathaniel met his father only a few times during his life.

The tragic set of events decidedly contributed to Kahn's legend. Through a probing, at times emotional, study of his celebrated father's buildings, Nathaniel seeks to understand the enigmatic father he rarely saw and barely knew. The result is a personal reflection on the mysterious intersection of private life, public identity, and their roles in the creation of architecture.

Along the journey, Nathaniel interviews renowned architects and planners who were either influenced or repelled by his father, the various people who met him, and, most of all, the two colleagues-turned-lovers – Anne Tyng and Harriet Pattison – each of whom bore a child with Kahn (while Kahn remained married to his wife, Esther Kahn). Nathaniel, Pattison's son, is one of them. The archaeology of personal secrets interwoven with an epic narrative of architecture, built and unbuilt, spread across the US, Jerusalem, Iran, India, and Bangladesh, unleashes a philosophical energy that compels the audience to ask questions concerning human nature, creativity, and the enigma of their inter-relationship. The film also examines the nature of the father-son relationship, further compounded when architecture plays the abstract role of surrogate father.

Nathaniel's journey resonates with classic filial quests – Homer's Telemachus looking for his father Odysseus, or Parsifal finding a father figure in a hermit uncle. The fatherless son's narrative is a timeless narrative, an archetype:

losing his father at a tender age, and thereafter setting out to find him, the son initiates an existential journey of self-discovery. Telemachus' search for his father who would come back to restore his mother Penelope's honour, for instance, takes on redemptive meanings deeper than merely yearning for a lost father.

"As a little boy, I never quite believed that Lou was gone," Nathaniel reminisces, "I would always look for him in crowds. I'd see a white-haired man turning the corner and think maybe it was him." Nathaniel's Telemachian desire is neither to rescue his mother Pattison (a landscape architect who collaborated with Kahn in the design

**I keep wondering what enabled 'My Architect' to strike such a popular chord around the world and become a classic. Is it Kahn's monumental architecture, his mystical style of teaching, his complicated personal life, or something else? Conceived as a self-reflective journey – albeit through architecture – in search of a father long gone, the film was the brainchild of Nathaniel Kahn, Kahn's son born out of wedlock. Nathaniel was 11 years old when his father died of a heart attack in 1974 in the men's room of New York's Pennsylvania Station, after a 24-hour flight from India and Bangladesh. Nathaniel met his father only a few times during his life.**

of the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas) from surrendering to banal fatalism nor to simply reconstruct a father from stratified memories. Nathaniel starts off the documentary with the burden of his own scandalous origin, yet in his search he remains resolutely philosophical about the nature of conflicts between his father's personal life and creative endeavours.

The audience is left wondering to what extent does one privilege personal narratives in the rather amorphous process of aesthetic appreciation. Nathaniel's pilgrimage inadvertently criticises formalistic

architectural pedagogy that isolates the analysis of architectural forms from the personal sagas of form-givers. By imagining the father in the realm of architecture, *My Architect* reaffirms, if subconsciously, the educational importance of aesthetic criticism that, among other things, includes what could be called the interior stories, anxieties, and desires of the designer.

The amazing footage of Kahn – walking around absentmindedly, talking to students like a yogi, and drawing with charcoal – shed new light on the ways in which architectural historians discern the kind of impulses and tensions that sustain the sublimity of Kahn's architecture. *My Architect's* dramatic finale – expressed through the exquisitely filmed parliament building of Bangladesh – exudes a son's reflective delight in at last being able to reconcile with his dead father. Nathaniel chooses to see the building through the bedazzled eyes of a solitary, prepubescent Bengali boy, a reference to Nathaniel's own age when his father died. This is the frozen moment that serves as the film's official image.

Inside the parliament building, Nathaniel interviews architect Shamsul Wares, who delivers a startling, if not the ultimate, message: that personal failings should not blind us to the genius of a great artist and that a son must seek his father not always in the father's fulfilment of familial duties, but sometimes in the humanity of his aesthetics.

Father-seeking was an integral theme of modernist architectural history. If the archetypal fatherless son's search bears redemptive spirit or the hope of performing spectacular things – to form a utopian society, to remind humanity of a golden bygone era, or to return civilisation to a pristine condition – early historians of modern architecture articulated the image of the architect with similar filial devotion. In their formulation, the architect became a "fatherly" figure, a saviour, a master, under whose tutelage the phoenix of modern utopia would rise from the ashes of dysfunctional cities. The historian often played the role of the fatherless son, imagining the advent of a visionary father: upon reconciliation they would resituate the state of architecture in the Garden of Eden to begin civilisation anew.

Despite the film's inherent melancholy, people discover *My Architect* as a populist case study, so to speak, to inquire into the historical and sometimes fateful alliance between the modern architect and the historian, an alliance that often transpired within the mould of the archetypal filial quest.

The legend of Louis Kahn remains strong. I wonder if it is the enigma and magic appeal of a father figure that inspire people to feel the way they do toward Kahn.

## Can we look beyond the seasonal activism against animal cruelty?



Abida Rahman Chowdhury is a member of the editorial team at The Daily Star with interests in wildlife and biodiversity conservation.

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

Over the centuries, our fellow sentient beings have played many roles: as muse for the very first human art, as spiritual deities, as captive entertainment, as aides for humans in carrying and lugging about heavy loads, as beloved companions, and as a source of livelihood. But as the relationship evolved (or devolved), so did its exploitative tendencies.

Human beings steadily climbed to the top of the food chain, and animals – even apex predators – slowly started to be relegated to the back. We have plundered, exploited, and built entire businesses on the backs of animals, domestic or wild. Even as pet parents, many are guilty of being neglectful or preferring more expensive breeds. The breadth and range of animal abuse is wide-ranging – from damaging their habitats (hence driving them towards extinction), selective breeding to make profits and keeping them captive, to

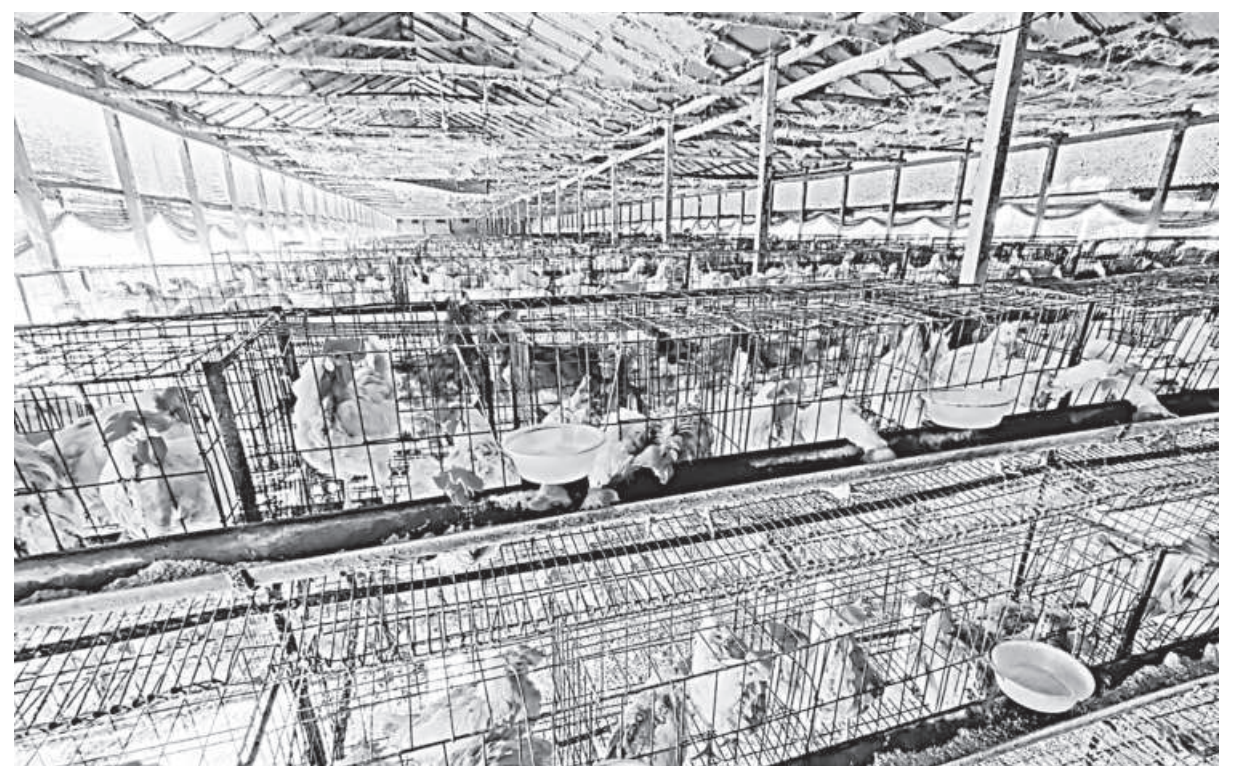
with/rear/raise/consume livestock/pets/wildlife?

Farmed animals make up the bulk of the protein we consume on a day-to-day basis. And yet, many of us never stop for a moment to think about the conditions these poor animals were raised in. All that broiler chicken that we consume, almost every single day for our protein needs, are subjected to some of the cruelest conditions known to an animal – from confinement right after their birth to being packed into coops without any space to roam around, and almost never getting to see or feel the sun in their lifetime, all make for an extremely cruel existence. In fact, a study by the University of Guelph that looked at more than 7,500 broiler chickens from 16 genetic strains found that the fast growing chicken varieties that are commonly found in factory farms suffer a host of health problems that are different from the ailments caused by their horrifying

the fate of poultry farms, cattle growing up and living their whole lives inside cattle farms are not faring much better. They don't get to graze fallow land or forage looking for the best tasting grass out there. They get mass produced feed to make sure they fatten up nice and quick for consumption.

After introducing these horrid farming practices themselves, now the West is trying to move towards more free-range, grass-fed happy, healthy animals for consumption. But, Bangladesh always had free-range chickens that roamed around our grandparents' backyard until some important guest arrived and one of them was sacrificed. But, at least, at the very least, the poor animal didn't live all their life in abject misery.

Even for selfish reasons, we need to start looking at how our animals are being farmed and also take note of our increasing consumption. And if you concern yourself with matters of the environment, then that is all the more reason to be aware. According to a 2021 report by the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep), livestock accounts for roughly 32 percent of human-caused methane emissions. Unep recommends cutting down on dairy and meat consumption, and bringing an overall change to our farming methods.



In Bangladesh, studies or articles on the overall well-being of our poultry is negligible, and most scientific articles tend to focus on the business aspect of poultry farms, or their environmental impact.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

trafficking them for valuable parts, to subjecting them to casual torture and intensely cruel farming conditions.

These conversations are mostly ignored until this particular time of the year, when we engage in (or have engaged in) mass celebrations of animal sacrifice. We dissect the practice of animal sacrifice, the cruelty of the celebrations, the disconnect from the beings we are sacrificing for the greater good, and all manner of other issues. Was the sacrifice simply a show of big bucks or was it from the heart? Was the animal treated with love, and did it hurt us to say goodbye?

But is animal cruelty something we only condemn during this particular time of year? What are the subtle and not-so-subtle acts of cruelty we exhibit as we interact

living conditions alone. This means that the fast-growing variety, which is what most farms are opting for, now experience a lot of suffering even if they were provided with the ideal living conditions.

In Bangladesh, studies or articles on the overall well-being of our poultry is negligible, and most scientific articles tend to focus on the business aspect of poultry farms, or their environmental impact. No one, it seems, is really concerned whether the chicken they consumed for lunch today had access to a healthy, happy, or full life before they were butchered for consumption. While livestock in Bangladesh is still somewhat out of the clutches of large-scale factory farming, cattle farms are slowly being established across the country. While not as dark as

Bangladesh doesn't have to look to the West to import good sense. We have been doing grass-fed beef and free-range chicken for decades now. The key is to scale up these good practices, and not confine and subject an animal to a host of terrible experiences before their life comes to an abrupt end, all so that some rich business person can feed his family with imported grass-fed beef in the city.

The country has the necessary legal framework to make sure animals have a good life as well. As per Section 6 (d) of Animal Welfare Act, 2019, "cruelty" amounts to restricting an animal to such an extent and in such a manner that makes the animal unable to stand, sit or function in its natural ways.

But when exactly will the country learn to translate laws into action?

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 Diverts
- 7 House topper
- 11 Small restaurant
- 12 Writer Ferber
- 13 Sensible
- 15 Hired thugs
- 16 Docking spot
- 18 Kid
- 21 Prohibits
- 22 Swindled
- 24 Fitting
- 25 Road to take
- 26 25-Down, in France
- 27 Hamburg talk
- 29 Make lots
- 30 Decisive defeat
- 31 Long-snouted fish
- 32 Amber,

- essentially
- 34 Pioneered, as a movement
- 40 Pharmacy unit
- 41 Vocal range
- 42 Line of symmetry
- 43 Make numb

#### DOWN

- 1 Jackson 5 hit
- 2 A thou thou
- 3 Employ
- 4 Play places
- 5 Goolf
- 6 Manhattan area
- 7 Logic
- 8 Strange
- 9 Lowest die roll
- 10 Passing craze
- 14 Take pleasure

- in
- 16 Copier need
- 17 Prologue
- 19 Be furtive
- 20 Throw with effort
- 21 Chips buy
- 22 Paint buy
- 23 Word on a bill
- 25 Bottled buy
- 28 Diego Rivera works
- 29 Target at a party
- 31 Component
- 33 Not barefoot
- 34 Hotel amenity
- 35 Films, slangily
- 36 Actor Wallach
- 37 Pop
- 38 Eden resident
- 39 Bear's lair



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.