

1. 2.. 3... Who were Louis Kahn?

The film *My Architect* as a Monumental Identity Crisis

by Johnny Rodger

one: can or can't

(The original intention was to preface this piece with that famous quip of Groucho Marx 'I don't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member'. A quick browse through the Internet to trace use of the quotation revealed thousands of entries employing it as an opener. Not only has this quip itself become institutionalised, but it has opened up its own institutional space: most of the entries involve misquotation – including such as 'I wouldn't join any club' and 'Any club that was willing to accept me'; none of the hundreds checked could cite a correct source; and many of them, despite this deracination, went on to make assumptions about the quotation's original role as a reaction to institutional anti-Semitism.)

It is not inconceivable that when Philadelphia architect Louis Kahn declared in the late sixties that 'all our institutions are on trial' he wasn't referring merely to those that wouldn't admit Jews as members, nor those that were the butt of race riots, nor even those institutions that had brought the once almighty USA tumbling into the disasters of the Vietnam war. Understandably, in that given social background, and with the petro-crisis just around the corner, his words would have carried a certain resonance there. But on consideration of the long uncomfortable gestation of his architectural ideas (he didn't build a masterpiece until he was into his late fifties) and then, finally, of the awe-inspiring monumentality, order and massing of his built work might we not suspect that with this utterance, and others similar, he was aiming at a more fundamental interrogation of man's institutional life, namely his conception and occupation of space.

If, that is to say, 'all' institutions are on trial, then what about the institution of geometry? It's one that lies at the heart of Kahn's architecture of platonic forms, and it's the institution that underwent perhaps the most serious questioning and most fundamental changes in the 20th century. Since Einstein's theories were published we evidently have to conceive of space as curved, and the famous parallel lines of Euclid's Elements will no longer be allowed as carrying on rigidly out to infinity, but will bend, come together, move apart, curve round the universe, and eventually return to hit you on the back of the head. All this disrespectful, apparently nonsensical, and violent shaking up of a cosmology with a fine and classical pedigree can only be carried out through very difficult mathematics of course, and it only applies at macro-levels of the universe. Just so, in his 1935 essay *The Invention of Space* F.M. Cornford wonders if human behaviour will have to adapt to this new theoretical conception of space by developing a correspondingly new spatial 'common sense'. Cornford points out that the parameters of Euclidean space, which we conceive of now not so much as just a common sense as almost a natural logic, are in fact a cultural construct gradually developed and put together in



Greece through the 3-500 years of such thinkers as Thales and Pythagoras, and ultimately synthesised and systematised by Euclid. Indeed egg-shaped pre-Euclidean space itself was, says Cornford, closer to Einstein's egg-headed conception of curved space, than to the infinite blank field of Euclidean space.

'So tenacious was the resistance of pre-Euclidean common sense. The Greek mind recoiled in horror from the boundless vacancy its own reasonings had conjured into existence.'

It might be contended that architecture is uniquely capable of testing man's relationship to 'vacancy', of putting the institution of space on trial, and perhaps thus even working towards that new 'common sense'. But if that is for similar reasons to those that led Schopenhauer to classify architecture as the meanest art (ie. that art concerned only with the 'lowest grades of the will's objectivity', with the conflict of gravity and rigidity, and the 'nature of light') then one has to wonder if film can be an appropriate medium for carrying out a study of this architecture.

'Colours ain't architecture' said Kahn once about some work by his disciple Robert Venturi – and it's a criticism which would seem to hold for architectural films too. In its failure to give a real sense of mass or scale – especially when dealing with the massive platonic forms of an architecture like Kahn's – film surely leaves something architecturally to

be desired. In essence, might we not propose this weightless, insubstantial and illusory medium of coloured light projected onto a flat screen as anti-architecture itself?

Schopenhauer, of course, didn't hang around long enough to be able to place film in his aesthetic championship of the Arts. But perhaps anti-architecture is going a bit far – is film indeed *necessarily* so different? In an early issue of *The Drouth* (no.1), Mitchell Miller argued that in its constitution of a 'meeting of nature and art of the simplest kind, light reflected onto film', film would lie somewhere at about the same lowly level as architecture in Schopenhauer's Arts league table because it is similarly 'limited by the brutalities of physics'.

Again, despite, or perhaps because of their concern with these 'brutalities' and 'lowest grades of objectivity', it seems that a precocious 20th century partnership of these two arts – an early as yet relatively uninstitutionalised film procedure, and expressionist architecture – was fitted for the highest grade experimentation and exploration into that most



fundamental of man's existentia – a new sense of space. 'Space' as Scheffauer said at the time, 'hitherto considered and treated as something dead and static ... has been smitten into life, into movement and conscious expression. A fourth dimension has begun to evolve out of this photographic cosmos.' Thus did the so-called German Expressionist film movement of the late tens and early twenties act almost as a laboratory for this experimentation through involvement of prominent architects like Poelzig, who designed the moulded clay sets of *The Golem*, and architecturally-trained directors like Fritz Lang, who made *M* and *Metropolis*. So much was this the case that that writer of eminent common sense, Virginia Woolf, was moved, after seeing Robert Wiene's 1919 classic *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, to write 'For a moment it seemed as if thought could be conveyed by shape more effectively than by words.'

two: kahn or cant

(There exists a theorem that if at any stage false logic is allowed in a logical system, then that system could be used to prove that 1=2. Really this is nothing other than an arithmetical formalisation of a fairly basic question of identity. Bertrand Russell had once been speaking about this theorem, when a supersceptical member of the audience attacked him, calling out, 'If 1 accept that one equals two, then prove to me that you are the pope!' Russell thought for a moment and then replied, 'The pope and I are two, therefore we are one.')

The question – whether the documentary *My Architect* conveys its message more effectively through shape or by words – may well be moot. Is it a film about architecture at all? Can it be considered as a film about an architect? Or do we see it as a film just about a man who happened to be an architect?

Nathaniel Kahn, the director and producer of the documentary is Louis Kahn's illegitimate son. The father only knew his son through once-weekly evening visits to the mother's house, and he died (in 1974) when Nathaniel was 11 years old. The awkward, odd and slightly archaic sounding conjunction of words in the title may thus be understood as a representation of the institutional facades behind which the boy – not allowed to appear as family at his father's funeral – was hidden away from the full public acknowledgement of private intimacy, and thus prevented in effect from openly declaring Kahn as 'my father'.



In Nathaniel's quest to make sense of the fading memories of his childhood, and to discover what sort of man was his father, we are not permitted ever to forget that this man was one of the greatest and most influential architects of the 20th century. Ultimately Louis Kahn's massive monumental buildings – such as the Kimbell Museum in Texas, the Dhaka Parliament in Bangladesh, and the Salk Institute in California – built with such robust formal order that they have been described as in 'the Romantic Classicist style of Le Doux and

Boullée', form the dramatic backdrop to an emotional and poetic journey around the globe in search of Kahn's 'true' character.

We are treated to interviews with all sorts of people who had any sort of dealing with him; colleagues, lovers, taxi drivers, building workers, secretaries, and even the man who found him dead in Penn Station in New York in 1974. Many pointed anecdotes are retailed, and all interviewees seemed to have been profoundly affected by the visionary that was Louis Kahn. But meanwhile these buildings stand brooding, sphinx-like and remote all around us, and we don't feel we have come any closer to understanding the man Kahn himself. Perhaps it would have been better to make a general advice out of Virginia Woolf's particular crit, and to simply study and show the relational aspects of mass, spatial division, openings and closures, interiors and exteriors of these buildings, and to say nothing.

Kahn himself however, was famously prone to a spot of verbalising, albeit usually couched in the form of the gnomic aphorism. We see a delightful piece of footage of the maestro with his students, giving out his famous saying that 'the brick wants to be an arch'. In a recklessly generous moment we might even be inclined to hear that saying, along with the above quoted 'institutions on trial' piece, as a type of Derridean deconstruction *avant la lettre*: as fragments that is, evidencing a Derrida-like vision of the materiality of space as but a product of complex and suppressed (and repressed) desires and interactions: similarly we might take Kahn's dictum 'I see light as the giver of all presences, and material as spent light' for a retroactive, architectural common sense making of Einstein's $e=mc^2$.

But some people, including Kahn's friends and clients, are not so sure about the value of this verbalising. Jules Prown, his client at Yale, spoke of one Kahn as a 'very factual, very direct' man at work on the job, and yet another who spoke 'more abstractly, more poetically' in public when nervous and trying to impress. And Kahn's friend Vincent Scully, the architectural critic, has said:

'Sometimes even I and the people who loved him most found it hard to let him do it, to listen to him talking this terribly vague stuff – and even slightly sort of false stuff. Then, to hear so many people pick it up as gospel, the sort of

philosophical gospel of Lou, was distasteful because in his later years it had become more of a smoke screen around his actual methods than anything else.'

three: kahn or kant

(A recently released album of the late pianist Glenn Gould's recordings of J S Bach's Goldberg Variations includes three separate discs in the package. The first disc contains a recording of the 1955 performance from the 22-year-old Gould, described as 'one of the most celebrated keyboard discs of all times'. The second contains a

recording of the same piece by the same artist done in 1981; in this disc we hear the odd hummings and singing along of the artist, who has been living almost as a hermit for 17 years. In the third disc is an interview with the artist given in 1982: in it he speaks of himself as a performer in the other two discs – 'I prefer the later version' he says, and of the earlier 'I could not identify with the spirit of the person who made that'. Gould died some six weeks after making the interview.)

So who was Louis Kahn? Many handy tropes come immediately to mind, and might appear, for a while, useful in covering the vague, groundless, if continually striving pattern of that *life* – The Wandering Jew being not the least obvious. A resonant picture emerges from this documentary of a lone, desperate prophet, incapable of a proper bourgeois domestic life, who often slept the night on a rolled up carpet in his office. Indeed we are told that the reason he lay for several days unrecognised and unidentified in a NY morgue after taking a fatal heart-attack in a railway station toilet while returning home from work-related trips to Bangladesh and Iran via London, is because he had taken a pen to his passport and scored off his home address.

But what can such figurative language do apart from kill Kahn more dead than he already is? Besides, everywhere in this film we are shown evidence of those unquantifiable, uncategorisable, squalid compromises which make up a life and leak out all over our deathly pale conceptualisations. Nathaniel not only introduces us to his mother Harriet Pattison, who was a landscape architect colleague of his father (elsewhere L Kahn interestingly compares their relationship to that of Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll); but also to another very influential colleague and lover, Anne Tyng, who had a daughter by L Kahn; as well as giving us descriptions and stills of L Kahn's late wife with whom he also had a daughter and from whom he never actually separated. Again, it appears here as though Kahn might be drawn as some sort of latter-day Abraham, wandering in a spiritual desert between the tents of his many wives and offspring, while pondering on eternal laws and relationships. *What is tradition?* was after all, one of Kahn's favourite questions.

The truths are, alas, as ever, more confused and confusing. Harriet Pattison had always maintained to her son over the years – and we see her doing so again in this film – that the reason L Kahn had scored out his legitimate family address from his passport just before he died was because he had finally decided to leave his wife for good and come to live with them. We then see her consoling belief contradicted by Kahn's other lover Tyng, who with equal conviction, and perhaps more convincingly, denies that Kahn would ever have left his wife for one of his other two families.

It might be hoped that the simple biographical facts and career path of the great architect ought to provide a more straightforward picture, but again we find drama and tension here. Born in 1901 to an Estonian Jewish family which emigrated to



the USA in 1906, as an infant Kahn had scarred his face for life by picking coals out of the fire, and was left with an odd high-pitched voice after an attack of scarlet fever. His father had evidently believed that after the damage inflicted by these attacks that the child would have been better off dead, but his mother had said it would make a great man of him. Ultimately the problem with these details must be to know what is relevant: the length and format of the film dictates that there be certain restrictions; and then, as viewers, we all have our own particular interests which we would like to see developed. It seems to some of us, for instance, that there is not enough discussion of the form of his work in this film: of the importance of his travels on his sense of classical cohesion; the influence of the decorum of his Beaux Arts training; Rome, Greece, brickwork itself; and the knowledge of the work of near contemporaries such as Le Corbusier. Again, many viewers at the Edinburgh International Film Festival showing ought to have been specifically intrigued to hear the throwaway mention in the film, by the architect I M Pei, of the fact that Kahn had said his Rochester church was a 'Scottish castle'. The truth is that Kahn had an enormous interest in the type of the Scottish castle, whose great living halls and auxiliary spaces nestled in thick walls presented a model which was useful for his studies in monumentality and in planning for 'servant and served spaces'; and that interest whatsmore, is documented elsewhere to go as far as including a flying visit to Scotland in 1961 to visit castles; readings from *Country Life* publications; and Kahn's acquisition in 1962 of Stewart Cruden's book *The Scottish Castle* (Edinburgh 1912). It is also of note (but not mentioned in the film either) that Harriet Pattison, who met and was heavily involved with Kahn at this period (Nathaniel was born in 1963), had previously studied at Edinburgh University.

It is thus, with the ever-increasing complexity of the picture of L Kahn's personal life, and of its relationship to his work, that it would seem – despite Scully's scepticism and Prown's ambivalence – imprudent and neglectful of us to deny ourselves the resource of his own pithily charged words. Yet is not the monument that which compels us to be silent and still before eternity? In contemplating the monumentality of his works, Kahn lays on some heavy irony, by defining it as a 'spiritual quality inherent in a structure which conveys the feeling of its eternity, that it cannot be added to or changed.'

But architecture can never be simply monumental, it must always open itself up on a practical level to occupation or dwelling, otherwise a structure will belong to the realm of sculpture. It is that particularising element of the useful, or the purposeful that has been disparaged in architecture or even used to deny it the status of an Art in the eyes of such philosophers as Schopenhauer and Kant – the latter who defined Art as having 'purposiveness without purpose'. But Kahn himself sums the compositional forces at play in the discipline masterfully, when he says 'Architecture is where the Silent Ideal encounters the illumination of the real.'



It is the same tussle between the ideal and the particular that lies at the heart of the documentary *My Architect*. In the face of his lifetime's real achievement, this inspiring film is caught between the discursive movement necessary to creating a *memorial* for Louis Kahn, and the standing in awe before the *monumental* architecture created by Louis Kahn. Perhaps the most successful mediation between these two poles is to be found in the silent black and white footage shown of Kahn in his wonted black jacket and bow tie walking jauntily along the Philadelphia city streets and entering his office block. There is, of course, movement there, but it is abstracted into monochromatic forms, which admittedly bring their own nostalgic baggage, but also seem pure and simple in their everyday meaninglessness; constitute a refuge from endless competing details; and for a moment, the emotional turmoil he left in his wake is silenced.

My Architect/Nathaniel Kahn/USA/116 mins.

Some selected writings of Louis Kahn, *Essential Texts*, Robert Twombly (ed), ISBN 0393731138, was published in October 2003 by WW Norton & Co.