

Brick Whisperer: Architect Louis Kahn's magnum opus now in cinemas near you

BV Doshi also stars in Tiger City, a new film on one of the finest modern architects of our times, Louis Kahn, the man who designed the IIM-A campus

Uma Nair

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Tiger City is a feature length film, directed by Sundaram Tagore, exploring the work of American architect Louis I. Kahn and the creation of what is considered his magnum opus, the National Assembly Complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh amidst that nation's liberation war. The film animates the story of Bangladesh's independence movement, offers unprecedented footage of an architectural feat and conveys the deep humanism that founds both the Bangladeshi spirit as well as Louis I. Kahn's artistic vision.



Actress Debra Winger, on set in Dhaka, along with Sundaram Tagore

for the filming of Tiger City, a film on architect Louis Kahn

Sundaram Tagore is a Calcutta-born Oxford-educated art historian, gallerist, and an award-winning filmmaker. A descendant of the poet and Nobel Prize-winner Rabindranath Tagore, he promotes East-West dialogue through his contributions to numerous exhibitions as well as his four art galleries and their multicultural and multidisciplinary events.

Uma Nair (UN): What inspired you to create a film on Louis Kahn?

Sundaram Tagore (ST): My life is about cross-cultural dialogue. I come from a family deeply involved in this idea, though I left India and moved to the West in the late 1970s. Since then I've lived in so many countries that the idea of cross-cultural dialogue has become even more meaningful and real.

My first film, *The Poetics of Color* (2010), was a documentary on Natavar Bhavsar, an Indian artist living in America. I was refining the craft of filmmaking and how to tackle narrative. My current film, on the other hand, is about an American working on the Subcontinent, so it's a reverse journey. That, to me, was very appealing.

I was introduced to Louis Kahn by an art history professor during my college days and shortly after, I received a grant to travel to Bangladesh to see his magnum opus, the parliamentary complex in Dhaka, and to India to see the Indian Institute of Management.



National Parliament House located at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh was designed by architect Louis Kahn

UN: India is the land of Laurie Baker and Charles Correa? Where does Louis Kahn fit into the scheme of city building?

ST: The first generation of master builders were Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier; the latter built his only city in the Punjab.

The second generation of modern builders has only one figure who became a global star architect and that happens to be Louis Kahn. His impact was enormous. People look at him as a guru architect—in India they called him stapathi. To many, he is considered more than an architect—he was a philosopher and a poet and those are the qualities that shine through in his buildings. When experiencing one of Kahn's structures one is truly transported to the realm of silence and light.

Generations of architects learned under his tutelage, at the University of Pennsylvania and Yale. He turned out a great number of star architects and scholars in the field. He was an engaging and benevolent figure.



National Parliament House located at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh was designed by architect Louis Kahn

UN: On the beauty of cross-cultural dialogues and influences.

ST: Louis Kahn was invited by Balkrishna Doshi in 1962 to build a university campus for the Ahmedabad, the Indian Institute of Management. As you know, Ahmedabad has some of the greatest buildings in the country because of enlightened patrons such as the Sarabhai family. Gira Sarabhai spent time with Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and the Polish architect Matthew Nowiki at Black Mountain Collage, the original architect of Chandigarh. She was exposed to many avant-garde ideas in the US and was able to invite figures such as Frank Lloyd

Wright, Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn to India.

Louis Kahn single-handedly designed the entire campus while drawing inspiration from the Mughal and Jain architecture of the region. What he created in the process is magnificent and powerful. The buildings he created on the Subcontinent happen to be his masterpieces and worth a trip no matter where you live.



Interior of the National Parliament House located at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh designed by architect Louis Kahn

UN: What went into the research of your film on architect Louis Kahn?

ST: Generally, when I want to tackle a subject matter, I need to know all its confines. I researched the film for many years, and spent an additional two years writing the script. Although documentary in form, I had a complete and very detailed script

to work from during filming.

I traveled quite a bit for filming—across Europe, including to Kahn’s birth country, Estonia, although he only lived there until the age of three, then relocated to Philadelphia. I filmed in 13 countries.



Interior of the National Parliament House located at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh designed by architect Louis Kahn

UN: Design is a difficult subject to film. How did you strategize your shooting modalities?

ST: You’re right. Architecture happens to be a difficult topic to handle, so from the very start I wanted the look for the film to be more poetic and visual. The emphasis was to create a sense of fictional narration as opposed to a documentary-like quality. This was a deliberate choice made to transport the viewer to another world, which was accomplished, in part, through the

architectural walk-throughs of many of his buildings. We were perhaps the first to use drones to film in South Asia. I flew in a team of German drone operators to film in Dhaka. This was a few years ago before drones were common.



Interior of the National Parliament House located at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in Dhaka, Bangladesh designed by architect Louis Kahn

UN: How did you experience the ethos of being between silence and light?

ST: To bring the concept of silence and light to the screen, we had to revisit the parliamentary complex during different periods of the day to capture the variations of daylight and sound. The completely empty building could feel like haunted Mughal ruins. When accompanied by the right kind of music, the film brings out what you actually experience within these spaces. Tiger City will be shown at the IIC Delhi in February 2018.

UN: What is it about architect Louis Kahn that made his work nonpareil?

ST: Louis Kahn loved architecture of great mass, gravity, weight—and silence, the kind of buildings that lift you up and make you feel bigger than life. Architecture has a profound impact on us, like when you walk through the inner city and sometimes feel emotionally squeezed or when you experience great classical spaces like the Taj Mahal or the Pantheon. You know that you're in the presence of great art and that's the kind of architecture that Louis Kahn wanted to create.



Sundaram Tagore with Debra Winger inside the Parliament Chamber of the National Parliament House designed by architect Louis Kahn

Louis Kahn traveled in the early 1960s to the subcontinent and was asked to design major projects. His influence is felt from the Subcontinent to Africa and to Europe, to places such as the

Venice Biennale in Italy, and across the US as well. What he has produced, in cases such as the Kimbell Art Museum, the [Salk Institute](#), the Indian Institute of Management (IIM-A), and the parliamentary complex in Bangladesh, are all great architectural legacies. And in some sense, by reverting to the architecture of masonry as opposed to the more efficient steel and glass, he had a hand in establishing the foundation for postmodernism.

Tiger City will be shown at the IIC Delhi in February 2018. It stars Debra Winger, Balkrishna Doshi, Nathaniel Kahn.
