

(This text is bowdlerized from a proposal by Wendy Lesser of Threepenny Press, successfully submitted to NEH's Public Scholar Program in 2017. Edits are the responsibility of the presenters and should not be attributed to Ms. Lesser.)

Significance and contribution – worse version

Architecture is a pertinent subject for all of us—we live amidst it, whether we wish to or not—and Louis Kahn, perhaps above all other twentieth-century American architects, was a “public” architect who did not design shopping centers or fancy hotels or expensive condominium towers or corporate skyscrapers but instead focused on medical and educational research complexes, government centers, art museums, libraries, memorial parks, religious buildings, and other structures that would in some way serve the public good. I feel he is an exemplary subject for a general-interest biography. There is as yet no book that encompasses his complicated life and his powerful work in a way that makes its importance clear. My book, I hope, will do that.

The fact that I myself am neither an architect nor an architectural historian is of great assistance in this project. Coming at the subject from the outside, as my readers will, I need to fully understand the complexities in layman's language before I can transmit them to the page. I am now grappling with the writing phase. A schedule of fulltime writing, from October 2015 through July 2016, is what I hope will be funded with the NEH Public Scholars grant. I have already written the opening sections of the book and have worked out the entire structure. The problems of writing a biography are very interesting ones, and I have already begun to immerse myself in them. Not only must I go back and forth between the life and the work, as all biographers of artists must—a complicated task, if one wants to avoid being either reductively causal or completely disjunctive but I will also have to explain the complex procedures of modern architecture including, for instance, how concrete is poured, and what holds buildings up, and how a client and an architect interact, and how various people work together on a single commission, and many other subjects of this kind) in language that ordinary readers can comprehend.

My project will be the first full-length biography of the architect Louis Kahn, and the only book about him to be aimed at a wide general audience. There are dozens if not hundreds of works about his architecture, plus one book that calls itself “a life” (but which speaks in the language of professional architecture and leaves out a great deal of the personal information) and a few rather one-sided memoirs written by people who knew him. There is also one great documentary film, *My Architect*, made by his son Nathaniel Kahn. This is not an authorized biography in any way, and I am free to come to whatever conclusions I wish. I hope my project will present the life of a pre-eminent architect to the general public.

By all accounts, Louis Kahn was a warm, captivating man, beloved by students and friends, admired by colleagues from all walks of the architectural profession, enduringly attractive to strangers and intimates alike. Born into a Jewish family in Estonia in 1901, Kahn was brought to America in 1906, grew up in poverty in Philadelphia, and by the end of the century was widely recognized as one of the greatest architects of his time. Jewishness, for Kahn, may have been as kind of mask, defining him in the eyes of WASP Philadelphia (not to mention the *echt*-Protestant architecture world), but less fully defining him to himself. If he received more commissions to build synagogues than churches or mosques, it is nonetheless the case that among his built masterpieces only a mosque and a church emerged triumphant; the synagogues, for the most part, foundered in the design phase. “I'm too religious to be religious,” he once told a friend, after a major Philadelphia synagogue commission had disappointingly died on the drafting-board. Perhaps he partly meant that his religion was architecture and everyone who knew him sensed this about him, that he was, even by his own admission, a terrible businessman, but he was a great, public-spirited artist, and his architecture reflected that.

(NEH book proposal – better version)

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Significance and contribution

Architecture is perhaps the most public of arts, and Louis Kahn was a “public” architect, perhaps above all other twentieth-century American architects. His best buildings have a kind of inevitability to them, displaying a perfection of form that is almost mythic in its rightness. The arched line of vaults that make up the Kimball Art Museum in Ft. Worth Texas, and the concentric interior spaces of the library at Philips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire showcase the rhythms in his forms. He designed not commercial buildings but structures that would in some way serve the public good. Yet this man also had a personal life that was so complex and obscure (and sometimes so unconventional) that it has remained largely unexplored in any of the works written about him. There are dozens if not hundreds of works about his architecture, and the one book referred to as “a life” speaks only in the language of professional architecture and leaves out a great deal of the personal information. What we do know about his life story possesses the allure, the pathos, and the shapeliness of a work of fiction. A few rather one-sided memoirs have been written by people who knew him and there is a documentary film made by his son Nathaniel Kahn. But there is as yet no book that encompasses both his complicated life and his revolutionary, powerful work in a way that makes its importance clear to the non-architect.

My goal is both to place the work of Louis Kahn in context both of the times and of his own remarkable life story. For this work, I have been given complete access not only to the Kahn papers at the Architectural Archives at Penn, but also to a vast number of private papers in the hands of Kahn's three children. I have also had extensive conversations with dozens of people who knew him, ranging from established architects and designers (Moshe Safdie, Richard Saul Wurman, Balkrishna Doshi) to the Kahn relatives in Philadelphia and California, the members of Kahn's office who are still alive. The research phase has been largely completed and the shape of the work has emerged (see chapter headings, below). I am the author of ten published books, and my expertise as a writer lies in bridging the distance between the academic or specialized cultural world and the world of general readers. The book is also under contract at Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.

In writing a biography, one must go back and forth between the life and the work—a complicated task, if one wants to avoid being either reductively causal, on the one hand, or completely disjunctive, on the other. In Kahn's case, I will also have to explain the complex procedures of modern architecture (including, for instance, how concrete is poured, and what holds buildings up, and how a client and an architect interact, and how various people work together on a single commission, and many other subjects of this kind) in language that ordinary readers can comprehend. In this I am assisted by the fact that I myself am neither an architect nor an architectural historian. Coming at the subject from the outside, as my readers will, I need to fully understand the complexities in layman's language before I can transmit them to the page.

I expect this book will find an audience interested in the fascinating personality and life behind many medical and educational research complexes, government centers, art museums, libraries, memorial parks, religious buildings in the Philadelphia area and around the country.