



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE

Humanities

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

## **Narrative Section of a Successful Application**

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model or to indicate particular areas that are of interest to the Endowment, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects his or her unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/public-scholar-program> for instructions. Formatting requirements, including page limits, may have changed since this application was submitted. Applicants are also strongly encouraged to consult with the NEH Division of Research Programs staff well before a grant deadline.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: American Architect Louis Kahn (1901-1974): A Portrait in Light and Shadow

Institution: Threepenny Review

Project Director: Wendy Lesser

Grant Program: Public Scholar Program

## Narrative

### *Significance and contribution*

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. But there is as yet no book that encompasses his complicated life and his revolutionary, powerful work in a way that makes its importance clear to the non-architect. My book, I hope, will do that.

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. He did not design shopping centers or fancy hotels or expensive condominium towers or corporate skyscrapers. Instead, he 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. 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. I feel he is an exemplary subject for a general-interest biography—not just because his best buildings have a kind of inevitability to them, displaying a perfection of form that is almost mythic in its rightness, but also because his own life story, as a narrative about human possibilities and fallibilities, possesses the allure, the pathos, and the shapeliness of a work of fiction.

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. Yet this enormous reputation was based on only a handful of masterpieces: the Bangladesh government center in Dhaka, the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad, the Phillips Exeter Library, the Yale Center for British Art, the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, the Salk Institute in La Jolla, and perhaps the First Unitarian Church in Rochester. (To these we can now add the recently opened FDR Four Freedoms Park on Roosevelt Island, which was finally completed thirty-eight years after the architect’s death.) All of these great works were designed in the last fifteen years of Kahn’s life. During his first three decades as an architect he was barely able to earn a living, and it was not until he began teaching steadily—first at Yale, starting in the late 1940s, and then at the University of Pennsylvania, from 1955 onward—that he became the primary breadwinner for his family. Even in the midst of his growing fame, financial success continued to elude him. He died bankrupt, with his firm owing nearly half a million dollars to various creditors.

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. But he was also a secretive man hiding under a series of masks. There was the literal mask he wore permanently on his face, a layer of heavy scars produced by a childhood accident. Then there was the mask of conventionality he wore in his private life—the forty-four-year marriage to Esther, mother of his oldest daughter and partner in his Philadelphia social life—which covered over his intense romantic liaisons with two other women, Anne Tyng and Harriet Pattison, each of whom bore him a child outside of wedlock. There was also his name, which was not really his name at all, but a convenient invention devised by Kahn's father and subsequently imposed on his whole family when they immigrated to America. The boy who had been born Leiser Itze Schmuilowsky in Estonia became Louis Isadore Kahn in America: not an escape from Jewish identity itself, but a purposeful elevation from the lowly Eastern European category to the more respectable and established ranks of German Jews. And even Jewishness, for Kahn, may have been another 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 sole religion was architecture. This was what everyone who knew him sensed about him. His wife, his lovers, and his three children—Sue Ann, Alexandra, and Nathaniel—came to understand sooner or later that his work was his one great love. His fellow architects often voiced their respect for his tremendous integrity, repeatedly noting (perhaps with a combination of Schadenfreude and chagrin) the way he emphasized the artistic side of the profession over the business side. Even his clients, who sometimes wanted to tear their hair out at his refusal to let a project out of his hands, perceived that his constant revisions resulted from a deepseated perfectionism, not just orneriness or bad judgment. Kahn was, even by his own admission, a terrible businessman, but he was a great, public-spirited artist, and his architecture reflected that.

The problems of writing such 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, 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.

## *Work plan*

I started working on my biography of Louis Kahn in 2012. To begin with, I read as many books and articles about him as I could (see bibliography for a partial list); I also read his own writings about architecture, many of which have been published. I began talking, early on, to his living relatives and colleagues, who referred me to other relatives and colleagues, so that by now I have interviewed dozens of people, some of them multiple times. I have spent a substantial amount of time at the Architectural Archives at the University of Pennsylvania, where the Kahn papers are housed, and there I have been able to watch videotapes of Kahn himself as well as interviews with his now-dead companions. The Archives also enabled me to look at Kahn's own architectural sketches, see his tax records, explore his correspondence, investigate his travel history, and uncover many of details of his life and death. In all of this research I have had the invaluable assistance of the director of Penn's Architectural Archives, William Whitaker, and also the very active help of all three of Kahn's children, Sue Ann Kahn, Nathaniel Kahn, and Alexandra Tyng. This is not, however, an authorized biography in any way, and I am free to come to whatever conclusions I wish.

Most important of all have been my visits to Kahn's major architectural sites, both in this country and abroad. In the past two years I have been to Ahmedabad, India; Dhaka, Bangladesh; Rochester, New York; New Haven, Connecticut; Roosevelt Island, New York; Trenton, New Jersey, Fort Worth, Texas; and La Jolla, California (as well as the environs of Philadelphia, where all the houses Kahn designed are located). I also visited the island of Saaremaa in Estonia, where Kahn was born and spent the first five years of his childhood, as well as the city of Riga, Latvia, where most of his relatives came from and returned to. All of this gave me a tremendous sense of the actual places in the Kahn biography—both the places that shaped him as an individual and an artist, and the places he gave rise to as a practicing architect. In each location, I spoke not only to architects and planners, but also to the people who actually use his buildings, whether they be students, researchers, government officials, art-museum curators, maintenance workers, or regular visitors of all kinds.

I have practically finished the research phase of the book and 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, as follows:

1. Prologue: an overview of Kahn, his importance to architecture, and the effect on our lives of architecture in general.
2. The End. Partly because of Kahn's own ideas about time ("I believe that what was has always been, and what is has always been, and what will be has always been," he famously said), and partly because his own ending was so dramatic, I have chosen to start the book with his death and funeral. This will also enable me to give an overview of the people who knew him in his lifetime.

3. Interlude: Salk Institute for Biological Research. This will be the first of five such interludes that occur throughout the manuscript. In each, I will directly address the experience of moving through one of his buildings (or complexes, or parks) as if from the point of view of a current visitor. This will allow me to produce a kind of architectural criticism that is understandable to the layman and also true to Kahn's intentions, for it is only by moving through his built works, experiencing them from the inside, that we can truly see what he was doing in them.

4. Early. This chapter will cover Kahn's life from 1906, when he arrived in America, to 1940, when his first child was born, and will include childhood and family, education from elementary school through college, first architectural jobs, his Grand Tour of Europe, marriage to Esther Israeli, his unemployment during the Depression, the paintings and drawings he made, and his first efforts at private practice.

5. Interlude: Kimbell Art Museum

6. Middle. This chapter will take Kahn from 1941, when he was forty years old, to 1961, when the Museum of Modern Art celebrated his Richards Medical Building in its first exhibit ever devoted to a single work of architecture. During this period he essentially became Kahn the architect, though none of the works that are hugely admired today were completed during that time. In this period he also met both Anne Tyng (with whom he had a daughter in 1954) and Harriet Pattison (with whom he eventually had a son, in 1962).

7. Interlude: Phillips Exeter Library

8. Late. This chapter covers the period of Kahn's greatest achievements, from 1962 (when he began working seriously on the Salk Institute, completed the Rochester Unitarian Church, and got the commission for the Indian Institute of Management) to his death in 1974. The focus here will be on his architecture practice and his key collaborators, though there will also be a great deal about family life, his teaching, his writing and speech-making, and other aspects of his architecture-focused life.

9. Interlude: Indian Institute of Management.

10. The Beginning. This chapter takes us back to Kahn's earliest years in Estonia, and to the burning incident at age three which caused his lifelong scars.

11. Epilogue. This summary-and-conclusions chapter investigates the heritage of Louis Kahn—not only his impact on the world of architecture, but his effect on his children and other survivors, the fates of his built and unbuilt buildings, and the possible connections between his life and his work.

12. Coda: Bangladesh Government Center, Dhaka. This concluding "interlude" explores Kahn's masterpiece, completed by his former employees nine years after his death.

### *Competencies, skills and access*

While I am neither an architect nor an architectural historian, I have long been interested in design and city planning. As an undergraduate at Harvard I wrote my dissertation on the Scottish city planner Patrick Geddes (this was subsequently published as “Patrick Geddes: Practical Visionary” in *Town Planning Review*) and worked during the summers at the MIT Urban Systems Lab. In my twenties I did consulting work for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, even as I was earning my PhD in English. 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. Among my books are *Pictures at an Execution*, which translates complex legal issues into accessible language; *A Director Calls*, which explains to the public what a theater director does; and *Music for Silenced Voices*, a biography of the composer Dmitri Shostakovich that renders into non-musical terminology the achievements of his string quartets. I was drawn to Louis Kahn for the same reason I was drawn to Shostakovich—my admiration for the work, and my desire to create a larger audience for it.

As noted in the previous section, 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, as well as to 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 site directors and maintenance people who have conserved his buildings, and the curators, politicians, librarians, congregants, scientific researchers, and regular visitors who use his buildings today.

### *Final product and dissemination*

The book is under contract to Farrar, Straus & Giroux, a highly regarded trade publisher. They plan to bring the biography out sometime in 2017 (roughly a year after its delivery) and will devote their excellent publicity and distribution skills to it. I have published one previous book, *Why I Read*, with FS&G, and I was enormously satisfied with their active dissemination, including their ability to go back to press as editions sold out, their use of digital format as well as print, and their willingness to bring the work out in both hardcover and paperback. I expect their efforts on behalf of this biography will be even greater, because it has even more market potential with general audiences. Having published general-interest nonfiction books with a variety of trade and university presses, including Pantheon Books, Faber & Faber, Yale University Press, and Harvard University Press, I am convinced that Farrar, Straus & Giroux is the best possible publisher for a book like this. They know how to reach a literate yet not specialized audience; they are able to produce beautiful books (including, in this case, up to 35 illustrations); and they excel at getting their books reviewed in a variety of print, online, and broadcast venues. Attached to this proposal is a Letter of Commitment from my editor at FS&G, Ileene Smith.

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