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Sundaram Tagore's film promotes the idea that great architecture belongs to humanity

Written by [Shiny Varghese](#) | Updated: January 16, 2018 9:37 am



New York-based art historian and gallerist Sundaram Tagore (Right) When American architect Louis Kahn was commissioned a parliamentary complex for East Pakistan in 1962, Dhaka was meant to be Pakistan's second capital. With the 1971 war, Bangladesh won its independence. While his friends suggested that Kahn return home during the war, the architect continued to build; his only argument was that one day the war would be over, and then they

would need the building.

The National Assembly Building in Dhaka stands testimony to that unflinching spirit of its maker and its people. The building became functional in 1984, nearly 10 years after Kahn passed away.

New York-based art historian and gallerist Sundaram Tagore's film Louis Kahn's Tiger City takes its name from the 'mini city' in which the complex sits — Sher-e-Bangla Nagar. If one can spot a tiger by its stripes, the world-renowned capital complex is considered to be one of Kahn's most significant work.

The interiors of Dhaka's National Assembly Building Tagore took six years to make the film, with a diverse international crew, spread across 13 countries. Fabricated out of concrete with inlaid white marble, the monumental assembly building has a man-made lake around it, while its geometric façade patterns make for interesting spatial and lighting experiences. Louis Kahn's Tiger City will be screened in Delhi next month at the India Arc Dialogue at gallery 1AQ.

Excerpts from an email interview with Tagore

What drew you to Dhaka's Assembly Building?

My research began in the mid-1980s when I was given a travel grant in college to study the buildings of Louis Kahn in Bangladesh

and India. I was awestruck by these incredible forms. It felt like modern and ancient worlds colliding.

At the parliamentary complex in Dhaka, flights of stairs crisscross the space in a manner you could only imagine in a painting. Kahn not only had great admiration for Roman and Greek architecture but his association with architect Balkrishna Doshi allowed him to understand the importance of ancient Indian architecture. Doshi brought Kahn to India and gave him architectural tours. He also toured Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.

This enabled him to deconstruct some ancient Indian forms that can be seen later in his sub-continental designs. His use of water inspired by Gujarat's step-well forms, along with forms from Jaipur's Jantar Mantar are perfect examples.

Did you not want to interview the next generation of Dhaka architects, who are hugely influenced by Kahn?

The film is concerned with one question: How was Louis Kahn able to build a 20th-century masterpiece in one of the poorest countries in the world? I interviewed few architects in Bangladesh, but in the end, I felt that it would take me into a completely different direction.

While the architects from the sub-continent speak of Kahn's spirituality, architects from the west speak of his poetry. Do you think the two ideas intersect or converge?

Louis Kahn was interested in creating poetry in forms. In addition, he was highly spiritual. He called his architecture 'an offering', architecture was never just architecture for him. He inspired an entire generation of architects, including Moshe Safdie, Renzo Piano and Robert Venturi, all worked for him.

He produced such inspiring structures, including the Kimbell Art Museum in Texas, the British Art Museum at Yale, the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California, and in the sub-continent, the Ahmedabad Institute of Management and the Parliamentary complex. He was able to create these inspiring buildings because he had a higher purpose. He wanted to leave behind a better world.

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