

# À la recherche du Dad perdu

The category Directed by Child of the Architect dominated this year's Architecture and Design Film Festival.  
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A still from *My Architect*, directed by Nathaniel Kahn.

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## #38/39

- *My Architect* (2004), directed by Nathaniel Kahn.
- *Radical Landscapes* (2022), directed by Elettra Fiumi
- *Skin of Glass* (2023), directed by Denise Zmekhol

Nobody has daddy issues like the children of famous men. Their fathers, like anyone else's, only exist as a mystery. They may be pursued or ignored, but they will never be fully deciphered. Such fullness—Alex Colston showed in a piece titled “Father” published in *Parapraxis*—is itself a delusion. For the children of stars, their fathers' unknowability is only further proved by the world's delusions of familiarity and confident assertions of proximity.

At this year's Architecture and Design Film Festival, the category Directed by Child of the Architect was a specific incarnation of the larger efflorescent genre of film Looking for Dad. If daddy issues aren't always in fashion, they are at least ripe, raw material. The films featured under the category were Nathaniel Kahn's Oscar-nominated *My Architect*, Elettra Fiumi's *Radical Landscapes*, and Denise Zmekhol's *Skin of Glass*. Starring in each: Estonian American giant Louis Kahn, Italian avant-garde artist–architect–nightclub owner Fabrizio Fiumi, and Syrian Brazilian architect Roger Zmekhol.

Against the father's unavoidable abstraction, the architect's child finds his degraded (or elevated?) reincarnation in buildings that become clues in the great puzzle of paternal identity. "Who was my father?," the question that premises all three films, covers for the more obvious inquiry: "Who am I?" The search for the Father parlays into an exploration of the self—bereft and mourning in Fiumi's case, rightly hurt in Kahn's—or of the historical and present circumstances in which the Father lived and acted or failed to act.

The idiosyncratic talent that made Louis Kahn perhaps the most eminent US architect of the 1970s might have also been what made him, as *My Architect* demonstrates, an asshole. Kahn married a woman named Esther and had a daughter with her, and then he also started relationships with two other women, with whom he fathered two other children, neither of whom he ever acknowledged, one of them Nathaniel Kahn. Nathaniel speaks to countless collaborators and admirers, all of whom are in awe of his father's work but deeply ashamed of his personal life. In a recurring gimmick, Nathaniel unveils his identity to stunned and often moved interlocutors. One even admits, "I saw you at the wake with your mother" while sobbing. In another scene, Louis Kahn's first cousin refuses to acknowledge Nathaniel. Later in the film, Nathaniel's mother—landscape architect Harriet Pattison, who passed away in October—affirms that Louis, who died of a heart attack in a Penn Station bathroom, was that very day headed to her house with confirmation of the divorce he had spent fifteen years promising.

Colleagues' guilty handwringing only counterbalances the discussion of Louis's scintillating work, and Nathaniel admirably avoids veering into what would be an understandable resentment. A Yale professor not inaccurately ascribes messianic qualities to Louis Kahn's monumental yet restrained buildings, while a Bangladeshi architect suggests that he aspired to "be Moses here," "here" being the site of Kahn's magnum opus, the National Assembly of Bangladesh. Juxtaposing the Great Artist and the Asshole, the film's narrative alternates brilliant shots of sublime edifice—the Salk Institute, the Kimbell Art Museum—with interviews that explore both the work and the man. Nathaniel grants precedence to the work, which has the imposing visual physicality that moral failings lack. In heroic shots, Kahn's buildings become an ironic material index of the immaterial and absent: the dead and deadbeat Father's monuments to himself. If Nathaniel understood his father completely, would we not think so poorly of him?

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Nathaniel's experience of being fathered (or rather, not fathered) stands in contrast to Elettra Fiumi's, whose father was caring and attentive and as such imparted only the habitual complexes plus the sense of incurable weirdness that '60s bohemians bequeathed upon their children. Fabrizio Fiumi was a central element of the Radical Design movement, which transformed Florentine art and architecture in that decade. His group, first called 1999 and then 9999, was one of a handful that sprang up at the city's school of architecture to follow the innovative (if not radical) ideas of Andy Warhol and Marshall McLuhan about media and space. Elettra's film

prefers intellectual history to biography and reconstructs, with abundant nostalgia, the adventures and beliefs of the 9999, culminating with the prize for “young artists” at MoMA’s landmark 1972 show *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*.

The members of 9999, architects by training, dedicated themselves to collage and other forms of media art, from clandestine projections onto an ancient Florentine bridge to their greatest project: the Space Electronic dance club in downtown Florence, which served as a template for the ideas Fiumi and the rest had about transforming subjectivity through aesthetic experience and a beacon of Florence’s nightlife. Though Fabrizio Fiumi studied architecture, he led the life of an artist and, unlike Kahn, produced few material objects.

Elettra’s loving relationship with her father, who died in LA and the scattering of whose ashes opens the film, morphs *Radical Landscapes* into a standard—though beautifully shot—piece of ’60s nostalgia. The film concludes at the still-existing Space Electronic, in which the surviving members of 9999 and their descendants re-create their iconic project of planting a garden as a family. Closure through reenactment of both art and family proves a fitting analogy for the misadventures of vintage radicalism, which Elettra sidesteps to the benefit of her fascinating father’s biography.

*Skin of Glass* also attests to a decayed ’60s utopia. Roger Zmekhol was a leading architect in midcentury São Paulo, when developmentalist politics led to the construction of a slate of modernist projects, including the entire city of Brasilia, and turned Brazilian architecture into a globally recognized phenomenon. His most famous building—the Wilton Paes de Almeida, whose pioneering *pele de vidro* facade provided it a nickname and the film its title—was built between 1961 and 1968 for a glass manufacturing company and became a symbol of openness and modernity in the city and the history of Brazilian architecture.

The crystalline outer layer soon darkened, as did much of Brazil. A right-wing military dictatorship did away with democratic government in 1964 and ruled the country for the following twenty years. Its most brutal period, from 1968 to 1974, came to be known as the “years of lead.” Because Roger Zmekhol was, by all accounts, apolitical, he did not suffer direct consequences beyond the general climate of repression. But many architects were banned from working for years, and the most politically active were persecuted and tortured, killed, or forced into exile. After the glass company went bankrupt, the Federal Police of São Paulo made the Pele de vidro its headquarters and tarnished its structure of openness and transparency, turning it into the center of its operations.

The police vacated the building in 2003, leaving it to decay and become reduced to a sardonic token of a ’60s utopianism cut down at the knees by state-sponsored brutality. Yet Denise Zmekhol continues the story: after the 2008 financial crisis, squatters seized the many empty buildings in downtown São Paulo. Faced with a desperate need for housing and no government response, they made the Pele de vidro their home, and it became a landmark part of the squatters’ movement in the city. *Skin of Glass* proves most compelling in narrating Denise’s attempts—repeatedly rebuffed by the occupants, who were (probably rightly) suspicious—to enter the building. This rejection becomes a major obstacle but also takes the film in a radical direction: in its second half, *Skin of Glass* deals with the plight of São Paulo’s ballooning unhoused population. She eventually finds footage of the building’s initial takeover and interviews organizers from other similar occupations, as well as the pichação artist who tagged the building’s windows. Throughout the film, Denise insists that the building is unfit for habitation and poses a severe risk to the people living in it.

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Like a vile prophecy, the Pele de vidro caught fire in 2018 in the middle of Denise's filming. The makeshift wooden additions of its inhabitants turned an electrical short-circuit into a blaze that collapsed the building within ninety minutes, killing at least seven people. After the collapse, Denise can finally speak with the inhabitants, now living in makeshift shelters in a public square, of the building her father built. The story is tragic and predictable: the occupation's leaders, who should have invested the residents' monthly payments into safety improvements suggested by fire departments and electricians, had pocketed the cash. When the building fell, they vanished.

The São Paulo police soon cleared, with no shortage of violence, the square where the residents were living, unhousing them once more. Denise Zmekhol's repeated, unanswerable entreaties to her dead father regarding his opinion—on the occupation of his building, for instance—open ethical and political questions foreclosed by the escapist fantasy of the search for an evanescent father. Once the Pele de vidro is longer available as a physical metaphor of her father, Denise and other lovers of the building understand that its memory—and the gap it leaves in the São Paulo skyline—must be mobilized against the tragedy of a housing crisis that will not abate. Her father's lack of politics becomes, through Denise's work, a lens through which to understand a radical movement that he, most likely, would not have supported.

In titling the film after the building, Denise makes evident her positioning as daughter; that is to say, her inheritance of and ability to reinterpret her father's work.

The shadows of Great Men can deceive even their children, promising depths nowhere verified and the impossible resolution of the infinite problem of identity. Their edifices, which to the world confirm the father's Greatness, weather into reminders of paternity's hollow promise: to return, for Kahn; to change the world, for Fiumi; to bring about a modern future, for Zmekhol. Our fathers will—indeed, must—always betray or disappoint us; we become ourselves in what we make of the world they leave behind.

Federico Perelmuter has daddy issues and writes sometimes.