

INTERIOR DESIGN

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LOUIS KAHN'S LAST RESIDENTIAL PROJECT
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI
ORIENTAL RUGS
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Focus On Kahn

*Suzanne Binswanger
designs interiors
of Louis Kahn's
last completed residence*

THE TWO-STORY HOUSE honors not only the late, renowned architect Louis I. Kahn, and his tenaciously held beliefs in honest design and use of natural materials, but also interior designer Suzanne Binswanger and the clients themselves, all of whom actively participated in the project. Located on a 70-acre site in Fort Washington, Pa., it is Kahn's ultimate completed residence.

The clients (he is a prominent Philadelphia builder whom the designer credits with greatly expediting the house's completion) had been long-time admirers of Kahn's work. When they decided to build a new house, they sent the architect a detailed letter asking him to undertake the project. In it they described their personal tastes; lifestyle; and, most importantly, how they wanted an informal house where they and their three young boys "could really live." Thus, the clients worked closely with Kahn from the start.

The house is an austere structure, with only three 30-foot high chimneys breaking the horizontal plane on which the architectural design is based. The exterior is of cypress, which as it greys with increased exposure to the elements, will lessen the starkness. Other primary materials are oak, brick, and huge expanses of undraped glass, showing how Kahn used sunlight as an integral design component.

In designing the interiors, Mrs. Binswanger was faced with stipulations from both Kahn and the clients. In no way could the furnishings infringe upon the interiors' architectural purity. Any hint of clutter was to be strictly avoided. Thus, although there is ample space for overscaled pieces, furniture tends to be light, graceful, and sparsely concentrated. "The scale was kept small because nothing could possibly live up to the tremendous volumes of space," comments the designer. This feeling of spaciousness is accentuated by 20-foot ceilings and a living room wall of floor-to-ceiling glass. Both Kahn and the clients were adamant in their insistence that natural materials and hues (navy blue is the only departure from the beige, rust, brown, and gray colors used throughout) be specified to harmonize with the construction materials. Furthermore, the clients prohibited the use of patterned fabrics or wall coverings. They also requested that the boys' bedrooms be identical except for the bedspread fabrics. (Each of the small rooms is simply furnished with a trundle bed and built-in furniture.) "It was a great challenge. Never before had I worked with such definite restrictions," comments the designer, whose specialty is office design in primarily traditional/eclectic idioms.

On entering the house, one is greeted by a large graphic painting, one of the few color accents to be found. To the right rises a sculpture-like stairway. On this main level are: the living and dining rooms, each with a fireplace, separated not by a wall, but by an oak divider that itself resembles an art object; kitchen; small study; children's playroom; laundry facilities; maid's quarters; and powder room. The second floor stairway landing with built-in cabinets and bookshelves provides storage space for items shared by the three children. On this level are four small bedrooms with adjoining baths; the master suite, where one expanse of wall provides custom wardrobe facilities; and two master baths. □

Located on a 70 acre site, the two-story house has one entire side of undraped glass, testimony to the importance Kahn placed on natural light. The outdoor sculpture is by Paul Cisco. Interior view shows living room seating area and oak divider separating living and dining areas.

*Sofa, lounge chair: Atelier International
Piano stool: Eklektrix
Cocktail table (custom): Trimark Designs
Chairs: Thonet
Rug (custom): Edward Fields
Piano: Steinway
Piano bench: Dunbar; fabric: Knoll
Plants: National Plantscaping*

Photographer: Jaime Ardiles-Arce

Focus On Kahn

1 Kitchen features a complete built-in grille and central work station. All cabinetry was designed by the architect. As in the rest of the house, glass walls remain uncovered for an unobstructed view.

*Table (custom): Trimark Designs
Chairs: Knoll
Fabric: Naugahyde by Uniroyal*

2 Dining room furniture consists only of glass-top table and chairs.

*Table (custom): Trimark Designs
Chairs, fabric: Pace*

3 Sculpture-like oak divider and window frames were designed by the architect. The extensive use of glass heightened the feeling of spaciousness.

4 Stairway view shows Kahn's attention to details. At the base of stairs is the entrance foyer with painting by Elaine Kurtz. The second floor landing has built-in storage facilities for items shared by the three children.



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Focus On Kahn



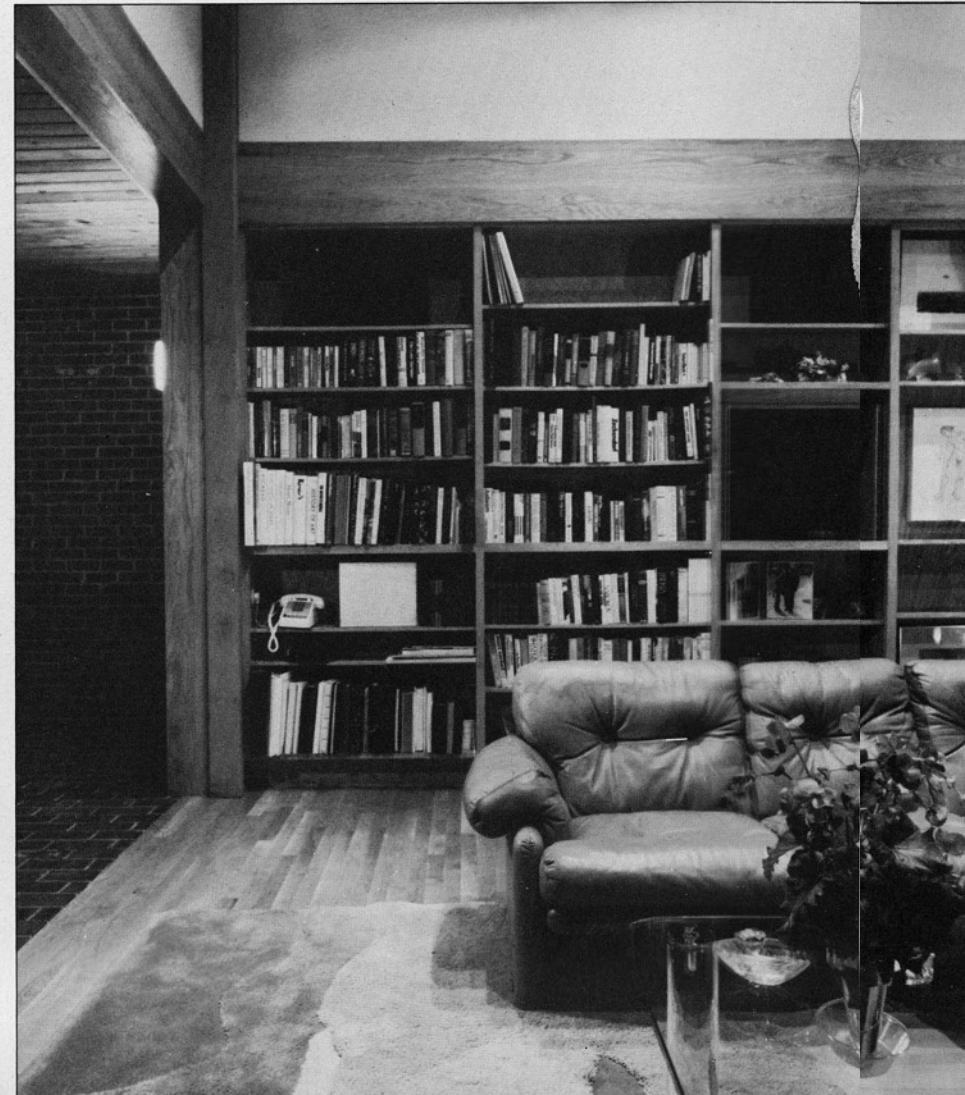
Suzanne Binswanger received a basic art background at Sarah Lawrence College. In 1961, she formed the design firm Executive Interiors, Inc. of which she is president. Although she has designed residential projects, her forte is office design in both traditional and contemporary idioms. To her credit are: the office and reception room of the vice president and general manager of the Philadelphia Inquirer; the offices of the editor of the Philadelphia Daily News; corporate headquarters of the Delaware River Terminal Inc.; offices of the Franklin Mint; offices for the Binswanger/Herman commercial and industrial real estate firm; and corporate headquarters of the Ridge Homes Division of Evans Products Company. For the past ten years Executive Interiors has provided complete design services for the executive offices of the accounting firm Price Waterhouse. She has also donated her services to design the medical library for The Institute for Cancer Research; the Marriage Counsel of Philadelphia; and the Philadelphia Oncologic Hospital.



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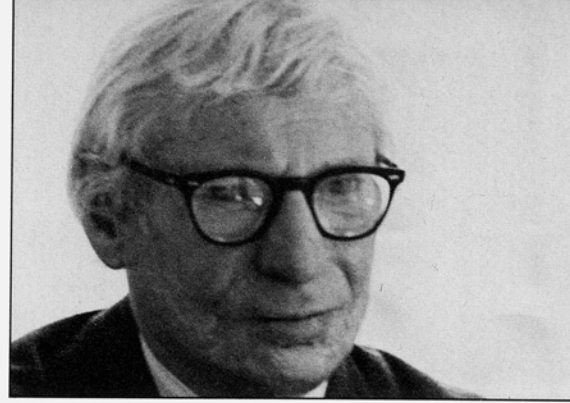
1 Custom designed desk is built into one corner of the master bedroom. Chair is the same as model specified for the dining room.

2 One of the two master bathrooms.

3 & 4 Details of living room and oak wall divider. Built-in bookshelves and dining room buffet were designed by the architect.

5 Master bedroom has two complete built-in wardrobe facilities. Custom rug accentuates the length of the room.

In His Own Words



FOR LOUIS I. KAHN (1901-1974), buildings acquired an almost animate quality. "When you make a building, you make a life. It talks to you," he is quoted in an April 1, 1974 *Newsweek* article by Douglas Davis. And according to the clients of his last completed residence, Kahn created a home in absolute harmony with their personal tastes. Following are comments by Kahn taken from a taped conversation between him, the interior designer and the clients.

General Comments

"It's shaping up very nicely. We were hit by extraordinary costs recently and the house had to go through some transformations, which I don't think will hurt it. It just had to be done. I like the idea that just because money is available that you don't have to be ostentatious . . . I agree with that totally. If I were a millionaire, I would build a house very modestly . . ."

"The house will be gray and the color of brick which is a very rich brown-red. I didn't want the red-red brick. There will be no preservatives added to the wood no matter how much people cry about it. It's silly to think that you want to preserve the wood—except for termites. Natural wood as it grays is so marvelous. . . . I think a yellow house and green leaves looks awful, but a gray house and green leaves looks absolutely marvelous. We have to ask nature to help us out."

Construction details

"I think the house is modern only in its attitude toward space . . . The details of construction are somewhat refined over what you would find in ordinary construction, though it was infinitely more so before we started to realize labor costs. It leads us not into millwork, but cabinetwork . . . We cut back on that: it isn't as articulate as before. The only thing that's articulate is the difference between boards which are fairly close together because we don't want the boards to bulge. So we use these small boards on the outside. Also, the joints won't open up as much if the small boards are there. In large boards, the opening at the joints becomes very marked."

Large expanses of undraped glass

"I don't divide the exterior from the interior in any way. I'm glad you're concerned about this [the large expanses of glass]. It's a problem. I said that you would see yourself in the window in the black of the night, and that's the worst part of it."

"I don't like lighting the outside—lighting trees and things of that nature. I think it's very artificial, I think it's very wrong; I think there should be actual shutters on the upper level so that you can adjust the light and the glare, especially in the winter. These would project into the room, giving the room a lot of interest. Below, I thought there should be a curtain so you don't see yourself at all. At night you close the curtain and you actually feel encased in the room. It would look very good. It would feel cozier inside . . . The shutters would not be louvred but just panels of wood. It would be a wood window instead of glass. Glass is very imposing."

Furnishings

"We can make [the interiors] a combination of heritages . . . not necessarily starkly antique or anything. You say that you don't mind a piece of sculpture in your house and that could be contemporary. Because you like good sculpture, you could probably love old stuff too. A fine refectory table, which would look very nice, is like a piece of sculpture only it modifies the architecture. I don't know where it would be, but it would be very excellent to have. You see, here you can have a modern table if you wish. Here would also be a great place for an old table. If you had one piece of furniture here and an old piece where you walked in, you wouldn't need any more old pieces."

"Built-in furniture will be done not like cabinetwork. Everything will be fine . . ."



Left: Exterior of the house is of cypress which will grey with increasing exposure to the elements. Extensive use of glass exemplifies Kahn's fascination with natural sunlight as an art form.

Below: Navy blue bedspread is the only departure from the natural color palette used throughout. The master bedroom opens onto a terrace that overlooks the property.

*Bed (custom), bedspread fabric (Ultrasuede): Trimark Designs
Bedspread fabrication: Sansom Quilting
Round table, chairs: Pace
Night tables: Harvey Probbler
Rug (custom): Edward Fields
Bed table lamps: Galleria Mobili*

