

Philadelphia

# HOME

FROM THE EDITORS OF PHILADELPHIA MAGAZINE

## King Kahn

For just \$10 million,  
the Great Louis'  
last house can be yours

### Stellar Cellar

Tim McCarver's fine wine

### Harmony at Home

Better living through feng shui

*The vast and airy  
dining room of  
the Korman house in  
Montgomery County,  
designed by the  
late Louis I. Kahn.*

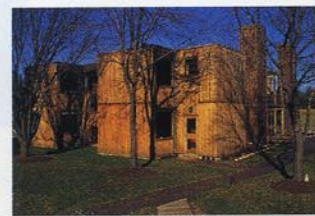


*In the living/dining room, two tiers of huge windows open up the northern facade. "At night, from the outside, that wall looks like a cross section of a dollhouse," notes Steven Korman, owner.*

Shortly before his death, Louis Kahn, Philadelphia's best-  
Now, his clients are ready to hand over the keys—

loved architect, built a residential showplace in Montgomery County.  
provided they find a buyer to appreciate it

# Master Classic



By Barbara  
Flanagan

**C**onsidering what they went through to build it and how well the landmark building has served them over the years as a home for their three sons (now grown), Toby and Steven Korman believe \$10 million is a fair asking price for the house they've put on the market.

Featured in the glossy real-estate wish book *Christie's Great Estates*, this flat-topped, cypress-and-glass box designed by the late Louis I. Kahn—arguably the finest architect in America's lifetime—can barely compete with the frilly manses and sprawling ranches elsewhere in the magazine, spectacular at half the price. Although *Christie's* vows that Kahn's modernist masterpiece is

"unabashedly open in its articulation of space and attitude," fantasy shoppers can't help but assess 100 competing pages of much ritzier amenities. When a person can buy 2,000 acres of Tuscan hill town or three whole islands in Maine for the price of a single Kahn in Montgomery County, the value of homegrown genius can't help but lose some cachet by comparison.

In fact, the Kormans might be surprised to sell this, the last house built by one of the nation's least-known international legends, to an American, for Kahn's following is far stronger in Japan and Europe than in his homeland. Foreign connoisseurs, it seems, have a better understanding of his lifetime dedication to upholding man's deepest beliefs through enduring architecture.

"Outside this country, Kahn is worshiped," says Toby Korman, who's hosted more than 100 busloads of visitors, welcoming as many as 200 breathless foreign architects at a time. Closer to home, however, Kahn is just a former University of Pennsylvania professor who designed a few museums and inspired a generation or two of architects with impossibly



*Above: The Kormans asked for a house that would not intimidate them. Kahn responded by eliminating dark corridors, instead creating hallways that overlook an atrium.*

*Kahn brought in a firm of church builders to handcraft custom parts, like these stairs assembled with interlocking pieces of solid oak, right.*

lofty ideals, unbillable in this era of downsizing.

In terms of art history, the selling of the Korman residence is nearly as important as its actual undertaking by the couple, shortly before Kahn's death in 1974 at the peak of his career. Because few of the architect's carefully designed houses advanced to the construction stage, and few of his buildings are houses at all—most are institutional—his greatness is rarely measured in resales. Whatever price this home commands, it will update

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the architect's position in artistic posterity and, by extension, comment on the dwindling state of American architecture. A good sale, in other words, would be good news not just for the Kormans, but for anyone who ever dreamed of building a masterpiece from the ground up.

**S**equestered on a 69-acre family compound with two other estates, the house is dwarfed by the sheer expanse of its private land, and shows a modest facade to the road. True to Kahn's diagrammatic method, three brick chimneys buttress the house, as if to support its more fragile structure of cypress and glass.

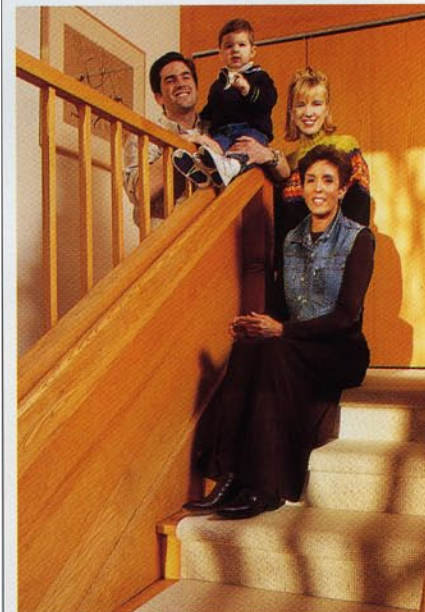
Inside, the house is not at all the off-putting oeuvre of a modern master. It's just so ... "Comfortable," offers Toby Korman. "Happy," says her husband. Somehow, the architect used each part of the house to domesticate the looming landscape. The living room, modestly scaled, feels like a cozy balcony overlooking a ballroom of green grass. The

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kitchen blends with the wilderness beyond its windows; snug bedrooms float in the treetops. For all his asphyxiatingly poetic talk about "human scale," Kahn actually delivered the goods.

But comfort was not the Kormans' only mission; they had every intention of causing a work of art. Steven Korman firmly believed Louis Kahn to be the world's greatest living architect and, conveniently, as a land developer steeped in the family business of making and distributing building products (bricks, lumber, trusses, etc.), he understood many of Kahn's mystical obsessions: "We both loved materials," he explains.

The process of courting the architect began with refusals. Preoccupied by grand and cerebral work worldwide and lionized for his designs of the Salk Institute in California, the Yale Center for British Art and a government complex in Bangladesh, the renowned Kahn told



*Toby Korman with her son Brad, his wife Toby, and grandson Jackson on the steps Kahn foresaw as a teen hangout.*

Steven Korman he couldn't possibly design the suburban home.

"I begged him," Korman recalls. "And he turned me down two or three times."

He thinks he prevailed by proving his willingness to learn from the master, and to fulfill his side of a father-son relationship. (Kahn was then 71, Korman 34.) He made a sort of deal with himself. "I decided that I owed Lou two things: keeping the house in mint condition, and allowing everyone who wanted to see it, to see it," he says.

Starting with their own property—a sensuous African savanna in Kahn's

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eyes—the architect transformed the Kormans' perceptions of the world through weekends of long discussions about the meaning of daylight, politics, caulking and metaphysics. "He was a genius," Toby Korman maintains. "But he was the kind of genius who actually cared about people."

Not that Kahn was easy to work with, however. Haunted by a deep conviction that architects must express the essence of a building's true purpose, Kahn did a lot of thinking. While thinking, he tended to change his mind, revise his drawings and, occasionally, ask workmen to demolish and rebuild a wall or two—once or twice—when the finished product fell short of his imagined ideal.

Although the Kormans respected the intensity of dedication behind Kahn's famously indecisive work habits, they resolved to take the house all the way to completion. To that end, Steven Korman played taskmaster to Kahn's genius, disciplining both the builders and the architect. He imposed a weekly work schedule and reminded the architect of the growing family waiting to move in. "We could have spent 12 years redoing the house, but we were determined to finish it before our three sons grew up," Korman says. "Eventually, Lou promised to redo drawings over the weekend, present them on Sunday night, and change nothing during the workweek."

Meanwhile, the craftsmen, weary of rebuilding their work to Kahn's shifting whims, were ready to walk off the job. Korman asked them to put their labor into a larger perspective: "I sat down with everyone and said, 'Look, you're dealing with an artist here.'" Later, when Kahn ordered masons to tear out the brick fireplace arch and remortar its joints correctly—a second time—his clients simply demurred.

Among Kahn's first proposals for the Korman house was an angular, irregular, multifaceted floor plan too big (at 8,200 square feet) and too complex for the family's needs and budget. At their behest, he simplified the plan into its final form: 6,000 square feet, wrapped into a more rectangular envelope. Occasionally, when Korman declined a construction detail important to Kahn's concept, the architect balked. "Lou would get mad, or say, 'I thought we were friends,'" his client recalls. "We did most of the things he wanted, but we had to talk him out of others."

Capping Kahn's aspirations gave Korman pangs of regret and sleepless nights. How much purity, he wondered,

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could one house handle? "Those were the two most difficult years of my life," he admits now.

To learn the functional minutiae of their domestic lives, the architect asked the Kormans how the house could help them raise their family. Toby Korman told Kahn she wanted her small sons nearby, not quarantined in the kind of distant "children's wing" that designers tended to favor. She also advised him that mothers spend half their lives processing clothes in utility rooms; Kahn responded with a sunlit laundry/storage room right off the foyer, which Korman displays as proof of his devout attention to real life. In answer to the parents' request for interiors comfortable enough for three boys and their friends, yet elegant enough for entertaining adults, Kahn designed oak cabinetry into every room's walls. "When company came, we could whip the family clutter right off the floors and into the drawers," Korman says.

Steven Korman came to realize he was still haunted by the architecture of his childhood, having grown up in a big house with dark corridors and a menacing basement. "I told Lou I didn't want to be scared," he recalls. In response, Kahn eliminated corridors by attaching rooms to other rooms and linking upstairs and downstairs together with stairways: a private flight on the parents' side of the house, and more public stairs on the children's side. By day, both staircases and all 22 rooms glow with the golden color of daylight reflected by oak-framed walls. In the 26-foot-high living/dining space, two tiers of large windows open up the north facade to sunlit views framed by stately piers. "At night, from the outside, that wall looks like a cross section of a dollhouse," notes Korman. The house intimidates no one.

Kahn, it turned out, had a great understanding of how buildings could actually organize people's lives. In choreographic detail, he managed to describe the patterns of the family's daily existence ten years into the future. As time passed, they gradually found themselves fulfilling his predictions. "Everything Lou said would happen really *did* happen," says Steven Korman.

The architect, a master of staircases, clustered four children's bedrooms around a wide flight of steps and made the hallways work like balconies overlooking a bright atrium that doubled as a playroom. "Kahn told us that when our sons grew to be teenagers, they'd start hanging out around the stairs," says Korman. "And of course, they did."

**M**any of the circumstances that went into the creation of the Korman house could never happen again. Twenty-five years have rendered some of the construction methods and materials used virtually extinct. Already tenuous in Kahn's day, the role of heroic architect—a fountainhead of inspiration and leader of craftsmen—has virtually disappeared.

For all his apparent modernism, the architect's building techniques were so classical, they required unpredictable amounts of planning and tinkering, a prospect that rightened off some local contractors. Kahn specially loathed American wood construction and the way it concealed popple-stick frames—and human error—with overlapping layers of flimsy materials: siding, drywall, baseboards, molding. Instead, he wanted people to live inside the real shape and texture of a building's expressive structure. Because Kahn detailed the Korman house like a piece of durable furniture fitted together with intricate joinery, a firm of upstate church builders was recruited to handcraft its custom parts with natural materials like cypress, oak, fir and slate.

And customized they are. All doors, windows and stairs are assembled with interlocking puzzle pieces of solid oak. Arrayed in the living/dining room, ten huge Thermopane windows are inch-thick sandwiches of tempered glass sealed in rabbeted oak frames. Above them, the six-inch-deep ceiling is made of double planks of tongue-and-grooved oak. And one 20-foot-high wall of oak paneling was doweled with inch-thick boards—no nails at all.

But more than anything, structural integrity and its clear expression were key to Kahn's notion of timeless building. Throughout the interior, a solid framework of fir posts and beams reads against the plaster walls like the half-timbered facade of a medieval house. Sometimes, his logic required expensive structural gymnastics. Supporting the main staircase, for example, he architect used inordinately tall fir columns—six-by-sixes that are three stories high—rooted in the foundation and rising toward the roof like a grove of living rees. The idea is sublime, but its costly execution is imperceptible to all but those busloads of worshipful young architects. And, of course, to the Kormans, who show off the columns as if they were tribal totems, hand-hewn in an ancient ritual lost to time.

"There are no more trees around anymore to cut lumber like this," Toby Korman explains with a reverence that's grown over the years.

And, alas, there are no more Kahns around to create immutable houses for a family of daring clients. ■