

# ARTIST OF PASSION

Quintessential modernist Matt Kahn embraces innovation—from Eichler design guru to maverick shunning popular style

Story: Jack Levitan

MATT KAHN'S LIFE may be all about design. But fortune played its part as well—getting him into a top art school, leading him to Stanford University, where he has taught for six decades, and introducing him to Eichler Homes, where he served as a design consultant for a decade.

The only son of hard-working parents in the clothing business who had little time for him, young Matt learned to grab their attention by showing off his artworks.

Kahn's talent got him through the New York's High School of Music and Art, and convinced a jury—Kahn has no idea who served on it—to offer a scholarship to the Cranbrook Academy of Art, in Michigan, one of the bastions of modernism in the United States, where Kahn fell under the spell of architect Eliel Saarinen. Along with the scholarship came a \$500 stipend, "so my parents [who wanted Matt to get a job] wouldn't block my acceptance."

"They gave me my life," he says of the jurors. "And I don't even know who they are."

Kahn's life has been focused on art—as a working artist and craftsman in many media, as a beloved professor, and at Eichler Homes, designing model home interiors and serving as design guru for a decade. Like most people associated with Eichler Homes, artist Kahn had a career that went well beyond tract homes. Joe Eichler, after all, sought out individualists, people with talent and imagination.

Fortune also smiled on Kahn in 1949, when Stanford University contacted Cranbrook seeking a recommendation for a design instructor. "I got it," Kahn says, even though he hadn't graduated.

"I had an idea that I was never going to teach. When I came [to Stanford], it was a freak," Kahn says. "But I liked it and it took. I hung in a little while and it got better and better and more and more entrenching, and my kids were born."

Today, Kahn is a legend on the

Stanford campus, where he has taught for 59 years—a university record. But it's not longevity alone that has given Kahn his reputation.

It was also happenstance that brought Kahn to another endeavor that brought him fame—designing model home interiors and serving as design consultant to Eichler Homes.

At Stanford, Kahn is known for his innovative approach to teaching design, for his passionate teaching style, and for inspiring thousands of students, many of whom have gone on to important careers.

Kahn developed a curriculum he calls 'the Bridge,' which teaches design not by the standard categories—graphic design, product design, etc.—but according to topics including context, utility, ceremony, propaganda, and vanity. He pioneered graduate level courses that integrated students from the engineering and art departments.

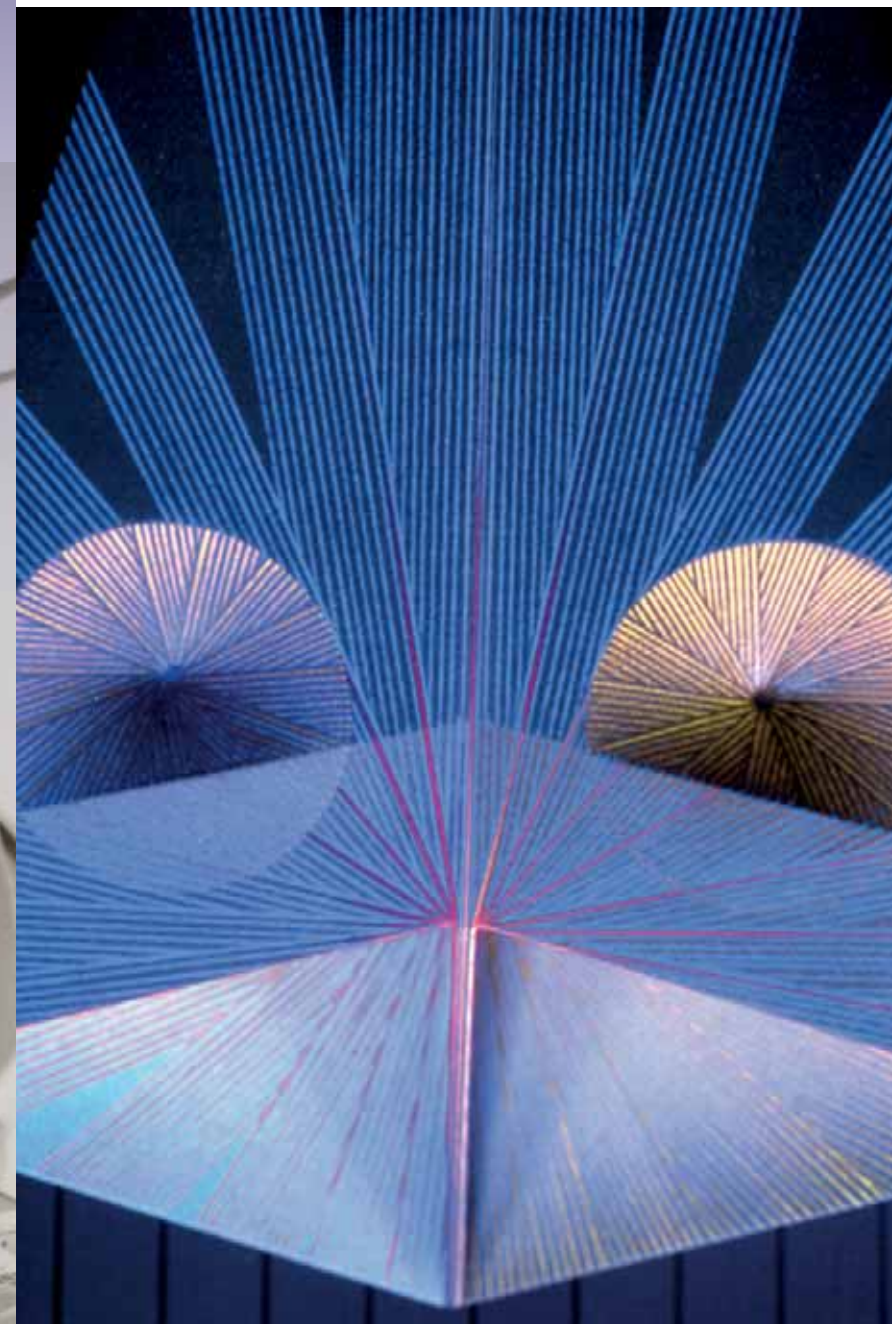
The interdisciplinary program is unique in the United States, giving engineering students with no design background a good grounding, says John Edmark, a Kahn student who teaches in the program today. "Kahn's very much a mentor to his students," Edmark says.

"He's incredibly visually oriented, a natural visual genius," Edmark says. "Kahn also has the ability to articulate what he sees and how he sees it. He's warm and very engaged with the students. He cares about you as a person and as a designer."

Mark Fuller, founder and CEO of Wet Design, a Los Angeles company that designs fountains for such projects as the Bellagio in Las Vegas, says Kahn was a mentor

## NEW THIS ISSUE

OUR PROFILE of Matt Kahn inaugurates 'Art About the House,' a new *CA-Modern* series that focuses on artists and designers whose work is closely tied to modern homes. Not surprisingly, most of them live in modern homes themselves.



when he was a student 30 years ago and remains so today, still offering advice on company projects. Without Kahn, he says, "There wouldn't be anything like Wet Design."

"You can never imagine what he'll come up with—but it's exactly the right thing," Fuller says. "It's so right!"

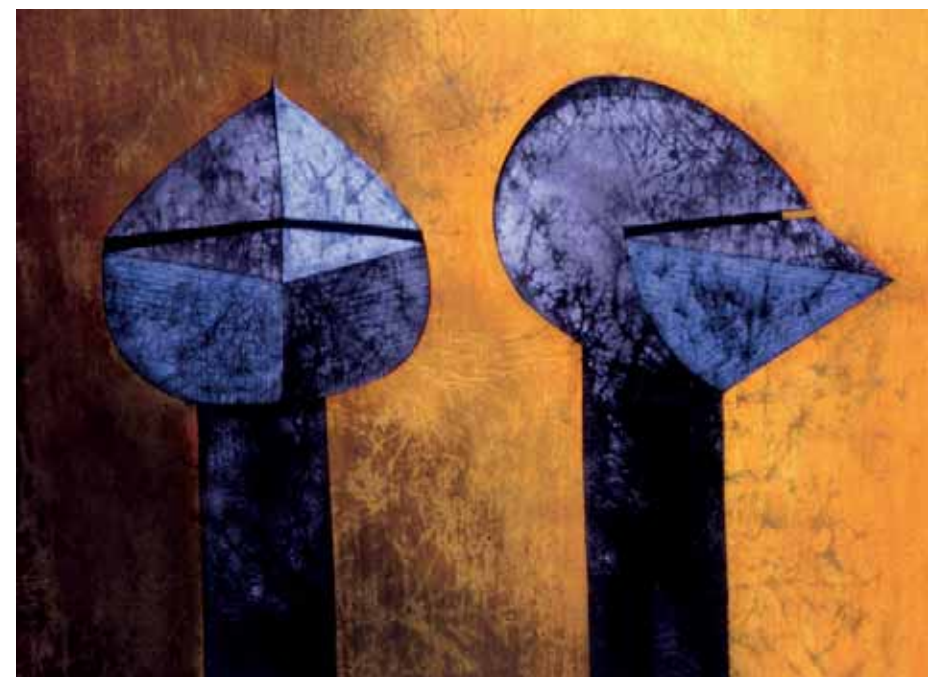
"Your head almost hurts because he's got you thinking in different ways."

Students appreciate Kahn's enthusiasm, interest in innovation, and high expectations. Trudy Myrrh, who later founded the art-and-technology organization Ylem, recalls a class where Kahn announced that everyone would build furniture. "You could hear the

this from a guy who never graduated from college.

And all the while, Kahn was creating paintings, jewelry, lighting, furniture, and textiles. Kahn considers himself a fine artist and a designer as well. He's often been told, "You've got to be one or the other, or we can't figure you out." "Well, great," Kahn says, "don't figure me out."

For a decade, starting in 1954, Kahn and his wife, weaver Lyda Kahn, designed interiors for most of Joe Eichler's models. Kahn also helped Eichler Homes choose colors, worked on the company's graphics, and ran seminars on design for sales and other employees.



THE KAHN CANVAS. Three choice pieces of Matt Kahn's own art. Left: 'Artifact,' one of several by this title; above: 'Dead and Alive,' an anti-war image from the 1960s, inspired by the Vietnam War; below: 'Blue Grotto,' a selection from Kahn's eclectic art collection. Opposite page: Kahn works on 'Sidewinder' in his studio; bottom: Kahn and wife Lyda and their two children prepare their luggage for travel abroad, early 1960s.

girls go 'Ahhh!' Because they hadn't had shop in high school." But what she learned was, "Yes, I can do this."

Students also find Kahn's criticism harsh. He aims it at art he calls "infantile," "trivial," "self-indulgent," or "trite." "I found myself crying a couple of times," Myrrh says.

Fuller also found himself in tears after a rough critique or two. "Then I would go to his office and he would give me a big hug. He could be withering in his critiques, then turn around and be warm and loving."

Kahn became a full professor in 1965 and won the Dean's Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1992. All

The Kahns helped set the tone for what an Eichler was—a home that Kahn says is "insistently permissive," that is all about freedom. "You must, in an Eichler home, expand and express yourself," he says. "That was very much the draw for me and my wife."

"I'm a romantic and a sentimentalist," says Kahn, who speaks in well-formed paragraphs, complete with italics, capital letters, and exclamation points. "Joe was not. To me it was a little bit, 'Let us show you how a house can love you.' Not just 'how you can love a house,' but 'how a house can love you.' It's an emotional thing."

It's not surprising that Kahn hooked up with Eichler Homes. Joe Eichler was enamored with modern architecture. Eichler Homes employed top-flight architects, and brought in employees who were creative and "more than yes-men." Kahn says.

The firm was devoted to good design and integrity, Kahn says. "And it's not easy for a designer to find a place that supports those qualities as completely as Eichler Homes did. I refer to it as a kind of designer Camelot," Kahn says.

As Kahn recalls, his Eichler venture began after he and Lyda got to know Jim San Jule, one of Eichler Homes' founding partners and its first marketing director, while visiting models in the early 1950s. Eichler, unsatisfied with their current model interiors, asked the Kahns to spiff one up.

Kahn filled large glass flasks from Stanford's chemistry department with colored water and arranged them on cabinets, "doing little things that would give a younger spirit or original spirit to the interiors," he says. Soon, instead of farming out his model interiors to local furniture stores, Eichler was buying furnishings at Kahn's direction, and

speaks to integrity."

The Kahns frequently used antiques. "We were very anxious to prove to people that the things that they've held dear can work with this new interior landscape," he says.

Looking to wear a dunce cap? Then ask Kahn what sort of furnishings and art 'go' with an Eichler. "It's coercive," he says of the question. "Go with?! It means 'resemble,' it means 'be the same as,' 'cut from the same cloth,' 'wearing the same uniform,' 'marching the same march,' 'having the same car in the carport!'"

"This is a permissive situation," he says of an Eichler home. "In fact, it's more than that. It instigates a riot. It instigates invention."

The most special model home of all was the Palo Alto Eichler that became the setting for 'Art About the House,' a collaborative art exhibition orchestrated by Kahn and landscape



is Kahn's own house, a Jones & Emmons-designed Eichler on Stanford campus that has been his home since 1960. Inside, Kahn's paintings share wall space with art by his son and daughter, and weavings by Lyda, who

On shelves and tabletops sit bowls of sea stones, hundreds of painted eggs, fat-lipped pre-Columbian figures, and a remarkable grouping of long-beaked creatures from West Africa. From the ceiling hang a Venetian glass chandelier



HOME & STUDIO. Top: Kahn in his home studio with 'Asp.' Above right: In his Eichler living room, masks, other tribal artworks, and Kahn's 'Circus Maximus' share space with a Bechstein piano. Above left: a Kahn tapestry, and an 'eaves dropper' of tinted glass, look down at a table filled with what Kahn calls "these crazy mixtures of things." Top left: Kahn's collection of eggs "from everywhere" includes many that were painted by his daughter.

died in 1990. Also on the walls are sections of a hand-painted Sicilian horse cart, masks (from Africa, Oceania, Alaska, and the American Southwest), antique quilts, and an engraving by Piranesi.

and Japanese glass lighting pendants of Kahn's design. A Zulu 'prestige staff' is near the antique Bechstein grand piano, along with a Maori club, a Huron paddle, Calabrese and Greek staffs, and a Chinese water bucket that contains



Kahn's main regret about his career is that he never adequately promoted his work. "I don't sell vigorously, and I don't try to."

"I should have had more shows," he admits. "I think I could have made that happen. But in my independent way, I never climbed on the bandwagon. I never joined the styles. Abstract expressionism, post-modern, whatever it was, I wasn't interested. So the galleries weren't interested, or the museums, or the critics. Now that I've lived past all that stuff, they're sort of discovering what I do."



HIDDEN PLANES. Above left: 'Hope,' named for the diamond. Above right: two more 'Artifacts.' Left: 'Palio I.' Top: A living room of art and a promotional poster from the Kahn-Eichler collaboration, 'Art About the House,' from 1954.

a Chippewa ice-fishing decoy shaped like an ermine. "Another of these crazy mixtures of things," he says.

In the morning, Kahn's house fills with shifting colors as sunlight pours through 'eaves droppers' of his own design, a series of tinted glass panels suspended in front of the glass walls.

Kahn's art is attentive to light. Some of his three-dimensionally shaped canvases contain hidden planes painted yellow that reflect light onto other parts

of the painting.

His paintings can be abstract or figurative. Many suggest masks. Recent canvases picture Luna Park, the Coney Island attraction Kahn remembers from his boyhood, the face of an otter, and 'Praying Mantis Preying,' created after 9-11. "It's about bin-Laden. It condemns anyone who takes human life in the name of God," Kahn says.

"Much modern design comes across to some people as sterile," Mark Fuller says. "Matt is the quintessential modernist, but it's fun, wild, enjoyable. But it's still true to all the fundamentals of modernism."

Despite health problems, including arthritis in his hands, Kahn works in his studio religiously. The doctors put part of the blame on his work, "putting pressure on my hands."

"So what did I do when I heard that?" Kahn says. "I ordered another canvas." ■

Photography: Ira Kahn, Dave Weinstein, Ernie Braun; and courtesy Matt Kahn

• In 2009, 'Matt Kahn: Designer/Educator, 1949-2009,' an exhibit of work in many media, will run at the Museum of Craft + Design in San Francisco. 550 Sutter St. Oct. 16-Dec. 31. 415-773-0303. www.sfmcd.org



Kahn and Lyda—whom he met at Cranbrook—were engaged in what Kahn calls "propaganda"—using design to persuade.

"Our whole approach to doing an Eichler home was to live it up—to bring stuff to an Eichler home that was remarkably diverse," he says. "We had some rules. We never did anything fake, because an Eichler home

designer Kathryn Imlay Stedman that featured art by the Kahns and fellow artists Anne Knorr, Bryan Wilson, Ernie Kim, Virginia Davidson, and others. Profiled in *Life* magazine in November 1954, Art About the House was Eichler Homes' most ambitious attempt to show how art can integrate with life.

Proving that it wasn't just talk