

A Museum Takes Steps to Collect Houses

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LOS ANGELES, March 14 — Shortly after moving here last year to take over as director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Michael Govan started looking at houses — not as a place for him to live but as potential museum pieces.



The 850-square-foot office that John Lautner designed in Century City.

His idea — one that has rarely, if ever, been tried on a large scale by a major museum — is to collect significant pieces of midcentury residential architecture, including houses by Rudolf M. Schindler, Richard Neutra, Frank Lloyd Wright and his son Lloyd Wright, and to treat them as both museum objects and as residences for curators.

While he has yet to acquire any properties, Mr. Govan said this week that he certainly had his eye on some, including Frank Gehry's landmark residence in Santa Monica, a collage of tilting forms. In an interview Mr. Gehry confirmed that Mr. Govan had discussed the idea with him but said that no agreements about the house's future had been reached.

Mr. Govan, who moved here in March 2006 from New York, where he directed the Dia Art Foundation, said his project had been driven by the immediate impression that in Los Angeles, a city defined by outdoor spaces, architecture is inseparable from art.

“It started with an effort to rethink the museum, looking at the resources that are both locally powerful and internationally relevant,” he said. “It's clear that the most important architecture in Los Angeles is largely its domestic architecture. I've talked certainly to a number of people who have interesting architecture, and I'm beginning to talk to other people about raising funds to preserve these works.”

The potential cost of the houses varies widely. Many of the most distinctive properties, in Beverly Hills or the Hollywood Hills, have most recently sold for millions of dollars. Others, like Schindler's Buck House, on Eighth Street, barely two blocks from the museum, sold for less than half a million dollars in 1995, although it clearly would be worth more than double that today.

Mr. Govan was reluctant to discuss his plans in detail, partly because he has taken only “baby steps,” he said, but also because he does not want to set off bidding wars for houses in which he is interested. He said he hoped the museum could either buy houses or have them donated, the same ways that a museum would go about acquiring paintings or sculptures.

“This whole initiative will depend on generosity,” he said. “In the same way that someone would donate a Picasso, we want people to think of ways to see these houses as works of art and to think about ways to preserve them.”

Although he said he had received an “enthusiastic response” when he presented the idea to the museum’s trustees, “we have no funds at the moment” dedicated to the effort, he added.

But the idea has already started to generate chatter in the architecture community here. Richard Koshalek, president of the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and a former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, said Mr. Govan’s effort was “not only crucial for the city of Los Angeles but for the history of modern architecture.”

“Architects learn from other architects,” Mr. Koshalek said. “This history will be lost if people like Michael do not take this kind of initiative.”

While owning an architecturally significant house in Los Angeles has long carried a certain cachet, many potentially valuable works have fallen into disrepair or been greatly altered by renovations undertaken by a succession of owners.

“A number of them haven’t been touched,” Mr. Govan said. “But many have been badly renovated and fundamentally changed. So I think it’s kind of the last chance to try to preserve a group of these as a collection.”

Mr. Govan’s idea is perhaps all the more remarkable because the Los Angeles County Museum does not have a department of architecture or design, unlike some older institutions, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

But one of the museum’s first acquisitions after Mr. Govan moved to Los Angeles, after 12 years as director of Dia, was a high-rise office interior by the Modernist architect John Lautner.

The Lautner office was formerly owned by James F. Goldstein, a real-estate investor who had Lautner design the space in 1987 for the 20th floor in a building in Century City, the commercial development on Santa Monica Boulevard in west Los Angeles.

In 2005 Mr. Goldstein was informed that his lease for the space would not be renewed, and a foundation devoted to saving Lautner works began seeking a patron who would preserve the space.

The Los Angeles County Museum initially turned down the proposal because museum officials felt it did not have the room to display the 800-square-foot office. But once Mr. Govan arrived, he seized the opportunity to acquire the work for an undisclosed amount and use it not as an exhibit but as an office — specifically, his.

The museum now plans to install the office, which includes copper walls, a wood ceiling and a floor of black slate, as part of the renovation of the May Company building, a former department store that is on the western edge of the museum’s 20-acre campus on Wilshire Boulevard. That renovation is planned for 2008 or 2009, and Mr. Govan said he hoped to use the space as his regular office, allowing visitors access to it as an exhibit on weekends.

Similarly, he said he hoped to use the houses that he collects not strictly as museum pieces but as housing for museum staff members, a perk that he said he believed would help the museum attract new curatorial talent.

“A lot of curators here have sought out interesting houses,” he said. “I thought, ‘You could just have house tours on a regular basis to allow the public to have access to them.’”

Although it does not have a design collection as such, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art has hardly ignored the city’s architectural history. In 1987 it organized a tour in the Silver Lake community of houses by Schindler, Neutra and other architects of the 1920s, ’30s, ’40s and ’50s. In 1965 the museum published “A Guide to Southern California Architecture,” a book that, although out of print, is prized by real-estate agents here who specialize in architectural gems.

Various Los Angeles organizations have also sponsored tours of houses that were built as part of the Case Study program: two dozen prototypes of modern architecture, by Charles and Ray Eames, Neutra and Pierre Koenig, among others, that were commissioned by Art & Architecture magazine and built from 1945 to 1964.

Silver Lake, an area around a man-made reservoir in the hills east of Hollywood, is the site of dozens of houses that

would be potential acquisitions for the museum. The 2200 block of Silver Lake Boulevard, for example, has no fewer than five houses by Neutra, who was encouraged to migrate from Vienna to Los Angeles by Schindler, who was himself born in Austria and had worked in Chicago and Los Angeles as a construction supervisor for Frank Lloyd Wright.

Schindler's work is also ubiquitous around Los Angeles. In 2001 the magazine ArtForum listed 32 significant works by Schindler, several in the parts of Los Angeles that visitors to the city rarely get to, including Torrance, Glendale, South Central and Woodland Hills.

Mr. Govan said that because the institution was a county museum, he did not intend to limit his collection to the area immediately around the museum's west Los Angeles location.

With Mr. Govan's plans already being discussed in architecture and real estate circles, the museum is certain to face some competition to acquire properties, including that of Mr. Gehry. His Santa Monica house, built in 1978 and remodeled in 1993, is known for its distinctive exteriors, which include corrugated metal, plywood and chain-link fencing.

It is also in the sights of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Mr. Gehry said, which has talked to him about its registering the house or acquiring it once he completes a new residence in nearby Venice, Calif.

"In the meantime," Mr. Gehry said, "I'm living in it."