

Home & Garden
PRESERVATION

Restored: John Lautner's Harpel house



Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times

Midcentury architect John Lautner's Harpel house in the Hollywood Hills was written off by some preservationists after previous owners added a second story and installed stucco walls, track lighting, aluminum window frames and other features ill-suited for the 1956 design. After two years of renovation, however, current owner Mark Haddawy has revived Lautner's original vision, peeling away misguided additions and studiously re-creating the architect's light fixtures, doorknobs and other details.

The 1956 home near the Chemosphere had been remodeled beyond recognition. It took current owner Mark Haddawy two years to get it back to the architect's original design.

By Paul Young, Special to The Times
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ASK the most ardent John Lautner fan about the architect's Harpel house, and you may get a shrug. After all, the house sits in the shadow -- if not quite literally, then figuratively -- of Lautner's landmark Chemosphere, one of Los Angeles' most famous residences. What's more, Harpel was significantly altered by previous owners, one of whom added a second story and another who installed stucco walls, track lighting and aluminum window frames, all ill-suited for Lautner's 1956 design. To some architecture aficionados, the house was a Lautner no more.

"The place was just weird," says Mark Haddawy, who bought the house in 2006. "It looked like the owners had taken every opportunity imaginable to turn it into something completely conventional. But Lautner was about as unconventional as you can get. So why would you do that?"



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It's a puzzling question indeed, especially when you see what Haddawy has done. After two years of renovation, the house has been brought back close to its original design, he says, the second story peeled off and interior details studiously re-created, right down to custom light fixtures and doorknobs.

Set on about an acre off Mulholland Drive, Harpel appears to be a simple 2,600-square-foot home laid out in an L-shape, with a pool and entry courtyard. But once you step across the threshold and descend into a skylight-topped living room, that simplicity gives way to a complex design full of Lautner trademarks.

The living room is almost cave-like, made of earthy materials and opened to jaw-dropping views of the distant San Gabriel Mountains. Go farther -- through the dining room, kitchen, den and two bedrooms in back -- and you understand how Lautner blended inside and out with uncommon precision.

A bookshelf in the living room carries the eye into the dining area, through floor-to-ceiling glass and beyond the pool deck -- a perfect line toward the horizon. Stone walls at the back of the house emulate the nearby hillside, merging homescape with landscape. The entire affair has the eloquent yet forceful poetics that define Lautner's best homes.

"He's a very significant architect, especially at this moment in time," says Wim de Wit, head of the architecture collection at the [Getty Research Institute](#). "We're seeing a lot of contemporary architects who are very interested in creating highly sculptural buildings that are also highly functional. And of course, Lautner was doing that a long time ago."

Nicholas Olsberg, editor of a Lautner monograph to be released this month by Rizzoli, argues that the architect aspired to transform lives like no other home designer since.

"Today, design is very much about the house as an object in a landscape," Olsberg says. "They can be phenomenal objects, but the design doesn't begin with the spatial experience. Lautner thought from the inside out -- not just from the inside of the house, but from the inside of your head, to the world beyond."

HADDAWY'S house was built for Willis Harpel, a radio announcer in the 1950s whose land sat below the site where Lautner and aerospace engineer Leonard Malin would in 1960 build the

flying-saucer house known as Chemosphere.

Although a fan of Lautner's architecture, Haddawy says he didn't know the full potential of the house, which he purchased for \$2.99 million. His first order of business was to pore over old photographs and blueprints and spend time at the property.

"My initial thought was to keep the second story because I thought it might be nice to have that extra space," he says. "But after spending a little time here, I quickly realized that it was just wrong for the house -- completely wrong."

He took the house back to how Lautner first imagined it, he says, at a cost of about \$500,000. "I was running crews up every day," he says. "And I'm the kind of guy who'll just jump in, even if I'm wearing flip-flops or a nice shirt, and start ripping things apart."

That's typical, says Katy Rodriguez, his partner in the Resurrection vintage clothing boutiques. Haddawy comes from a family of collectors, she says. When she met him 20 years ago, he was obsessed with cars and motorcycles. "He's an all or nothing kind of guy," Rodriguez says. "He's definitely a risk taker."

That includes buying and selling vintage furniture and, later, vintage houses, which he calls "L.A.'s greatest treasure."

Haddawy made news in 2006 when he sold Pierre Koenig's 1958 Case Study House No. 21 at auction for about \$3.2 million; everything inside -- paintings, furniture, plus a '58 Porsche Speedster for the carport -- were sold to the same buyer separately. Says Haddawy: "I just couldn't imagine any of it anywhere else."

THE Harpel house, however, proved to be a far more complex project, one that taught Haddawy some of Lautner's subtler touches: 1920s push-button light controls used for their retro-futuristic aesthetic; rain gutters concealed within the architecture; gas burners at the end of a kitchen island so the cook could better enjoy the view.

"I could point to so many examples of his genius," Haddawy says. "But the roof is really interesting, because it does far more than just provide shelter. Here, the roof is the house."

Indeed, the roof is defined by a series of roughly hewn wood beams that connect via concrete columns throughout the property. The effect is a kind of crisscrossing trellis, an open canopy for the entryway that continues through the house and out the back, where it becomes cover for the pool deck. The design allowed Lautner to spread living spaces and literally hang the rooms off beams like a Christmas tree holding ornaments.

"So you have these absolutely incredible views from every room in the house," Haddawy says. "And they just drop off like an infinity pool, which really gives you this sensation of floating."

Previous owners tried to make the house feel more spacious by removing built-ins in the living room and adding a deck, Haddawy says, but they ended up hemorrhaging sight lines and killing that drop-off effect. One owner unwittingly took out two kitchen islands that Lautner had carefully set at a 45-degree angle; Haddawy meticulously re-created the original layout, which frames the view outside through the kitchen's glass walls.

"Unfortunately we see that fairly often in Lautner houses," explains architect Frank Escher, former director of the John Lautner Foundation. "People might have the best intentions, but they think that Lautner's architecture has so much power that it can withstand anything. Yet in fact, all it takes is a few minor changes to the house and it no longer works."

For Haddawy, bad interior design also can ruin classic architecture, so he went to great lengths to find era-appropriate tables, chairs and lamps, including pieces by Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand and George Nakashima. He mixed vintage accessories such as a McIntosh stereo with contemporary artworks by Raymond Pettibon, Ed Ruscha and others. He even found another perfect car: a silver 1964 Ferrari Lusso like the one actor Steve McQueen made famous.

"I think it's important to save these houses," says Haddawy, who says he's helping a friend to restore a 1949 Richard Neutra house in Los Feliz. "These are major works of art by major architects, and yet they're not protected. So we need people to be a little more appreciative and committed. Otherwise we could lose some of the very treasures that L.A. is known for throughout the world."

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