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ARCHITECTURE

John Lautner's Dazzlers Designed for Daily Living

By DAVID LITTLEJOHN
September 4, 2008; Page D7

Los Angeles

Numerous movies and TV shows have used the houses designed by architect John Lautner (1911-1994) as their futuristic sets. Wealthy bachelors and Hollywood sybarites bought or rented them as party houses, then abandoned them to decay. They were featured in Architectural Digest, among other houses of the rich and famous, but ignored by the serious professional magazines. Respected critics of Los Angeles architecture dismissed Lautner as flamboyant and vulgar. David Gebhard called Silvertop (1963/74), a grand, curving house overlooking Silver Lake, "A Flash Gordon City on the moon." Now the Hammer Museum is trying very hard to elevate Lautner into a poet of space, a visionary, a major American architect. And it is pulling out all the stops in its tribute: exhibition, catalog, film, symposia, talks, gallery walks, house tours, etc.



Lautner was best known for a one-of-a-kind house in the Hollywood hills called the Chemosphere (1960), named for the building so that it could use its striking image in ads. The structure is always compared to a flying saucer that crashed into a steep hillside. But this giant octagonal glazed Frisbee is actually supported

on a five-foot thick concrete pole and eight steel struts, and entered by way of a tramway from the street below.

The architect's second best-known building is the Elrod house, a vast free-form pad in Palm Springs, Calif. (1968). Its circular living room is decorated by immense boulders and curved brown sofas seating 20, and roofed by a shallow concrete cone sliced open for pie-shaped wedges of glass. It was here, in "Diamonds Are Forever," that James Bond did battle with two acrobatic female bodyguards in bikinis, before being thrown by them off the balcony into the semicircular swimming pool below.

The soul of the Hammer exhibition is a collection of sketches and architectural drawings by Lautner and his associates, drawn from the Getty Center's immense horde of Lautneriana and awkwardly displayed under glass on blond wood podiums with tilted fronts and tops. But most people don't know how to read architectural drawings, however displayed. At the opening, Julius Schulman, the legendary L.A. architectural photographer (now 97) whose impeccable images helped make these buildings famous, growled that "it's all blueprints!" And Lautner was never a master draftsman like his mentor Frank Lloyd Wright.

Nonprofessional visitors to the exhibit will turn to the six big balsa-wood models, meticulously crafted by Design Models of California on a generous 1:12

scale. Most of these are sliced in half, so one can both admire the exterior shapes and imagine moving about the interiors. On the walls behind them play constant loops of short color videos by Murray Grigor, lyrical, floating tours of the same six houses, plus one other -- the Wright-like Schaffer house of 1949. The basic six are the two famous houses I mentioned above; a cylindrical cabin (1957) on a steep mountain slope whose round roof and folded glass walls are held up by rough logs;

BETWEEN EARTH AND HEAVEN

Hammer Museum
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an astonishing little wood-and-glass house (1969) that climbs up a densely wooded hill; a big white segment of a sphere in Aspen, Colo., (1982) that becomes one more mound of snow in the winter; and -- Lautner's most photogenic achievement -- a Mexican billionaire's villa (1973) made of free-flowing concrete and water that commands all of Acapulco Bay.

But there is no way to experience and assess the work of an architect as unique as Lautner without seeing and moving around inside his buildings. Ideally, one would either live in them or talk to the people who do. I was able to visit seven important Lautner houses in and near Los Angeles, dating from 1949 to 1969, and to learn what they were like to restore, maintain and live in from the current owners of six. The seventh, the ingenious wood-and-glass Schaffer house, a tree-sheltered jewel in Glendale, is up for sale for a bargain \$1.8 million.

Though they may look like hyperdramatic pieces of expressionist sculpture in carefully composed photographs of their exteriors, the most successful Lautner houses tend to be humane and welcoming inside, where the architect thoughtfully attended to a thousand problems of daily living in carefully choreographed spaces that seem to grow more light-filled and life-enhancing at every turn. Lautner was an unequalled master of curving concrete -- but no less a master of warm, often exotic, precisely bent and fitted wood, and a virtuoso of sunlight.

Lautner houses tend to be high-maintenance challenges, and have to be commissioned or adopted by the right owners. The current owners of the Chemosphere and the Harvey, Garcia and Harpel houses have spent fortunes trying to undo the unsympathetic alterations of their predecessors. Strangely configured roofs and walls leak. Curved and fitted woods come apart. Faceted glass walls crack. Few workers know how to repair Lautner's complex mechanical contrivances when they fail. But owners who take seriously their responsibilities as trustees of the Lautner legend will put up with all manner of minor griefs in return for the daily joy of dwelling in houses of constant surprise and sensual delight, often with broad, spectacular valley or ocean views and pools whose curves match those of the house.

I'd like to have seen a few more, but I no longer do steps, which ruled out three dazzlers in Malibu that descend from Highway 1 to the beach. No stranger is likely to get into the 25,000-square-foot Bob and Dolores Hope house in Palm Springs, shaped like a four-headed tortoise shell. (Lautner ended up disowning it, because of Mrs. Hope's reactionary improvements). Its near neighbor on gated Southridge Drive, the "Diamonds Are Forever" house, is available for rent -- \$3,600 a night with a three-night minimum. The grandest of them all, the curvaceous, sprawling, sea-banded 1973 Jerónimo Arango mansion in Acapulco (now identified as Marbrisa), is likely to remain off limits to all but the occasional film crew or friends of the supermarket king who commissioned it.

Lautner designed only about 60 completed houses -- almost all in and around Los Angeles -- over an independent professional career of 53 years. He also designed a zingy steel-and-glass café on the Sunset Strip that gave its name to "Googie-style" architecture, a chain of classic L.A. drive-ins, a desert motel, a few stores, a Lincoln Zephyr showroom, some offices and remodels, and a winning garden-apartment complex near UCLA composed of wood and glass cylinders held aloft on floating horizontal trays.

The authors of the Hammer Museum catalog try too hard to resurrect Lautner as the supreme modern master, justifying his every whim or excess in poetic, pantheistic, transcendental terms. In the end, the old image was partly right. Like Wright, he created some foolish and self-indulgent places -- particularly in his later years, when his commissions became grander and his loopy, flyaway roofs led to sprawling, lavish interior spaces it is hard to imagine anyone using except for a Hollywood set or party. But at his best he gave us some of the most freewheeling, most captivating houses in the land.

Mr. Littlejohn writes about West Coast cultural events for the Journal.

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