

Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner

REVIEWED BY SUSAN H. STAFFORD

Edited by Nicholas Olsberg; texts by Jean-Louis Cohen, Nicholas Olsberg and Frank Escher. Published by Rizzoli International Publications in association with Hammer Museum, 2008. \$60.00, 234 pages.

For nearly 60 years, architect John Lautner (1911-1994) dissolved and transcended the boundary between earth and heaven with bold and daring designs, many of whose shapes and vistas take your breath away. As his works changed the architectural conversation about the interrelationship of space, structure, environment and materials, Lautner was often cast into personal and professional limbo, suspended between the scathing criticism of his detractors and the near cult status afforded him by his admirers.

Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner persuasively stakes out a permanent claim for the often misunderstood Lautner as one of the 20th century's great architectural visionaries through four essays that draw extensively on writing, papers, construction drawings, spectacular photographs, and other materials from The John Lautner Foundation Archive. The book is a companion piece to the retrospective exhibition of the same name held last year at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

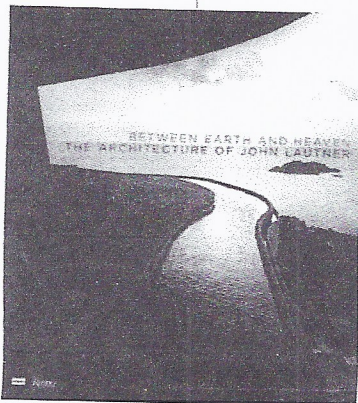
The opening essay, "John Lautner's Luxuriant Tectonics," by Jean-Louis Cohen, Sheldon H. Solow Professor in the History of Architecture at New York University, discusses how the major architectural themes in Lautner's designs reflect his contemporaries' works and concepts, as well as those from other eras. Although Cohen often speculates on the origin of Lautner's ideas, drawing the connections helps anchor him and shows his impact on architectural history and thought.

An extended biographical essay, "Grounding: The Idea of the Real," by cultural historian and exhibition co-curator Nicholas Olsberg, traces the influence of Lautner's cultured and intellectual parents, the expansive wilderness of Michigan, his home state; and his Taliesin apprenticeship and ongoing association with Frank Lloyd Wright on Lautner's creative trajectory as an architect. Within the context of historical events, Olsberg explains the subsequent "pattern of boom and bust" that marked Lautner's independent career as an architect and his roller coaster ride through alternating admiration and derision at the hands of his critics, many of whom found his creations to be simply outlandish or "too Hollywood." (Several of Lautner's most dramatic homes, such as the Elrod House, Sheats-Goldstein House and the Chemosphere or Malin House, retain stardom as unforgettable movie settings.)

In "Building: Shaping Awareness," Olsberg examines Lautner's evolution as an architect from his earliest inventive designs for small residences (Polin and Jacobsen houses) to the highway constructions designed to catch motorists' attention and lure them in (Lincoln Zephyr Showroom; the much-mocked Googie's Restaurant) to striking homes that are sculpted into or seem to hover above their settings (Pearlman Mountain Cabin and the Chemosphere or Malin House). It is clear why the geographical expansiveness and aura of endless possibilities of Los Angeles and the surrounding area provided a perfect backdrop for many of Lautner's boldest and most visually stunning creations.

In the final essay "Continuity: Structuring Space," Frank Escher, an architect who helped produce Lautner's first monograph, *John Lautner, Architect*, and who served as co-curator for the exhibition, explores Lautner's unique relationship with his builders and engineers and the way in which technological developments fueled his vision, and vice versa. Lautner had the ability not only to wrap his architectural vision around new industrial products and technologies, but also to almost hone them to his will by pushing them well beyond conventional form and use.

Overall, this book serves as a scholarly examination of Lautner and his work, aimed at an academic and professional audience, rather than providing a readily accessible introduction to Lautner for the general public. Architects, architectural historians and other scholars will appreciate the great detail with which Lautner's buildings and his concepts of space, environment, and materials are explored within the context of architectural history, as well as within the culture and times in which he worked. Non-scholars might find the amount of information presented to be overwhelming, requiring bite-size readings of the text.



Frank Lloyd Wright Mid-Century Modern

REVIEWED BY NORMAN SILK AND DALE MORGAN

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Text by Alan Hess; photographs by Alan Weintraub, with contributions by John Zukowsky and Monica Ramirez-Montagut. Published by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, 2007. \$55.00, 335 pages.

The publication of Alan Hess's book *Frank Lloyd Wright Mid-Century Modern* is well timed, appearing on the bookshelves when interest in mid-century design is exploding. For those of us who grew up with Wright's mid-century influence – from carports to cantilevers – the book showcases designs from the final and most prolific chapter of Wright's life.

Wright introduced several pioneering design movements during his career. His mid-century style reflects many of his earlier ideas, reinvented and recast in new ways, using new materials, simplifying designs and awakening dreams long tucked away in his brilliant mind. As Hess writes, "Part of the fascination of Wright in this period is that his work existed in two entirely separate dimensions: One utterly in tune with the real world advancing around him and the other in a visionary world (or city) which was his alone."

Mid-Century Modern is a systematic and admirable explanation of the works from an era that many regard as Wright's most prolific and creative period. As neophyte Wright admirers, we found the book a well organized, informative presentation of this under-explored period in the architect's career. Although it might seem mundane to a veteran Wright disciple, we were able to gain knowledge from Wright's perspective, which helped us better understand his work. The book makes it easier to see there was a rhythm in his work and a subtle repetition in each building and that materials were refined, adapted and used in surprising new ways. In photo after photo, Wright's philosophy of anchoring a house to the land is apparent. His creative designs appear to grow from the land in concrete, brick, wood and stone.

The photographs by Alan Weintraub are beautiful and show great artistry. Stunning as they are, however, no two-dimensional photograph can fully capture the spirit of three-dimensional spaces and the movement of light and shadows. Nor can it draw the viewer through private, intimate spaces or replace the experience of visiting these indescribable homes.

The new photographs left us hungry for more. It would have been interesting to include more historic photos of the houses, showing rarely photographed spaces, like bathrooms or workspaces, all of which often contain interesting details. The absence of people and automobiles in the photographs tends to make the houses appear like museums instead of the family-oriented structures that Wright intended.

That said, *Frank Lloyd Wright Mid-Century Modern* should win Wright new fans and contribute to sustained interest in his work. As owners of the Wright-designed Turkel House (1955) in Detroit, Michigan, our personal experience with a constant stream of Wright admirers suggests this book will have a large audience.



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This work is handsomely produced with color and black-and-white photographs of Lautner's creations that draw one into the buildings they depict. It captures "the originality of [Lautner's] ideas regarding sites, shaping spaces, and experiments with structure," as Ann Philbin, director, Hammer Museum, observes in the book's foreword. After decades of short shrift from the architectural community and argument about his appropriate place in the pantheon of architectural giants, one suspects, however, that Lautner himself gave the best and simplest summation of his work in a rare 1991 interview shown on the CBS *Morning News*, September 7, 2008: "...if you can't see it when you're looking at it, you never will."

Following its 2008 run at the Hammer Museum the exhibition is scheduled to tour in the following cities: The Lighthouse, Centre for Architecture, Design and the City in Glasgow, Scotland, March 19 to July 26, 2009; the Wolfsonian at Florida International University in Miami Beach, Florida, October 15, 2009, to January 17, 2010; and the Palm Springs Art Museum in Palm Springs, California, February 20 to May 23, 2010. The John Lautner Foundation also maintains an excellent website: www.johnlautner.org.

Susan H. Stafford is a writer and anthropologist who lives in Alexandria, Virginia.