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Murray Grigor on John Lautner

'Infinite Space: The Architecture of John Lautner' is a new documentary feature film by renowned Scottish film-maker Murray Grigor. The film traces the lifelong quest of visionary architect Lautner to create "architecture that has no beginning and no end" and features archive recordings of Lautner talking about his life and work alongside interviews with previous and current owners of Lautner houses; architects and builders he worked with and whom he inspired, notably Frank Gehry, and Lautner's two daughters Judith and Karol. In conjunction with the exhibition 'Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner', which receives its only European showing at The Lighthouse, 'Infinite Space' is due to be screened at the GFT at the end of this month (see details below).

Murray Grigor took time out to talk to Web Editor, Caroline Ednie about Lautner's architectural journey from "Taliesin on steroids" to one of the most "inimitable" architects of the 20th Century.

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Architecture in Detail



MiLoft Housing Concept
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Exhibitions



Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner
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Blogs

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Above images of the Elrod House, Palm Springs by Joshua White. Sean Connery features in the introduction to Grigor's film 'Infinite Space' recounting memories of the Elrod House, which provided a memorable backdrop to a scene from the James Bond film Diamonds are Forever (1971).

CE: So, how did the John Lautner film project come about?

MG: Arriving at the Lautner film has been a long journey and I suppose its genesis goes right back to 1963 when I first got involved with the work of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Back then nobody in Glasgow knew who Mackintosh was, but I became something of a fanatic and I helped to form a group, the 'Friends of Toshie'. I worked together with Andrew McLaren-Young (then Professor of Fine Art at Glasgow University) on a Mackintosh exhibition and eventually we put together enough to make a film to accompany the exhibition.

This changed my life, because after that I got all kinds of invitations from all over the world, and the opportunity to make more films. Many films later, as part of Glasgow's 'European City of Culture' celebrations in 1990, we held a Symposium at Glasgow School of Art on 'Regionalism and Internationalism in Architecture' - because of course Mackintosh took a lot of inspiration from outside Scotland, particularly from Japan, Vienna and England. We filmed this Symposium and this became the third Mackintosh related film that I had made. At the same time we worked with the fifth year GSA students and I, together with Isi Metzstein and Richard Murphy, put together installations all around the school and filmed this too.

Richard Murphy then convinced me to make a film on 'The Architecture of Carlo Scarpa' and when we were in Italy making the film (which was made in association with the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal - as well as Channel 4 and the Arts Council) I met Nicholas Olsberg, who was running the Canadian Centre for Architecture at the time. And when Nicholas was asked by Frank Escher to take part in the Lautner exhibition, he invited me to make

a film on the architect. Everyone felt that it was time for Lautner to be re-appraised.



"Concrete was Lautner's Muse". Above images of the Beyer House, LA by Joshua White.

On this question of re-appraisal, I was surprised to discover, when I dug out my architectural reference book 'Modern Architecture since 1900' by William Curtis, that Lautner isn't even mentioned. Do you believe that his reputation has suffered since his death or even in his lifetime?

Definitely. We didn't go into it too much in the film but most of Lautner's Googie* architecture has been knocked down. Only the Beachwood Market in Hollywood remains. Those buildings were very interesting as they were so different from the New York diners that were like rail cars. Lautner really explored the idea of opening the whole building up to the landscape. There was all this space inside where you could cool down after coming off the highway. These buildings were real spatial adventures and were dismissed as 'junk-itecture' which of course they're not.

**The origin of the term Googie goes back to 1949 when Lautner designed Googie's coffee shop in Hollywood. Since then the term has been used to describe the popular novelty 'space age' architecture - mainly roadside cafes and diners - that emerged in 1950's and 60's California.*

Do you think that Lautner was the victim of architectural snobbery?

Yes I do. I did an eight-part film series in the mid 1980's on American architecture, 'Pride of Place: Building the American Dream' for PBS (Public Broadcasting System) America and architect Robert Stern presented it. He was of the Post-Modern persuasion so didn't care much for Lautner. Stern was critical of Lautner in the same way that Frank Lloyd Wright was criticised because every building he designed was different, and that was hard for many critics to grasp - unlike say Richard Neutra where every building used the same proportional system throughout all his work.

This line can be viewed in parallel with what was happening in painting at the time, where influential critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg only considered abstract artists such as Mark Rothko to be important. Minimalist Modernism was revered and Mies van der Rohe was the architectural hero. Architects like Frank Lloyd Wright and Lautner were seen as a bit over the top and even kitsch to these people.

On a personal level architectural critic and writer Peter Blake hurt Lautner when he described his work as roadside junk that was poisoning the landscape. The fun and joyous elements were missed and the interesting spaces were disregarded. That's why for 'Infinite Space' we interviewed David Wasco, the production designer who worked with Tarantino on recreating the Lautner spaces in films such as Pulp Fiction. Wasco celebrates the fun and joyous elements of Lautner's Googie architecture.**

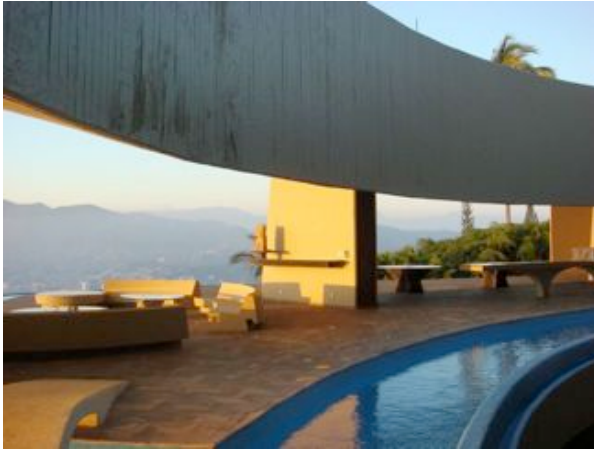
***The scene in Pulp Fiction where John Travolta and Uma Thurman do the twist in Jack Rabbit Slim's takes place in a recreation of one of Lautner's 'Googie' diners.*

Do you think that Lautner was a true original or was he simply carrying on the tradition or even taking on the mantle of Frank Lloyd Wright, being, as he was, a Taliesin acolyte?

At the beginning of his career that's exactly what he was doing - carrying on the Taliesin tradition. Lautner's early Googie coffee shops are like Taliesin on steroids. Diagonal, thrusting steel shafts are very much in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright's late Taliesin period. Frank Gehry says in the film that Lautner's Shaffer House shows that he's still very much under the influence of Wright but that he's "trying to box his way out of it." From this point on Lautner continues on his own way. I don't think that Frank Lloyd Wright would have ever done the concrete domed or façade-less buildings that Lautner created.

Wright always claimed that he broke the box and dissolved the corners but Lautner goes beyond this and dissolves an entire façade, it's incredible, particularly in Marbrisa, the house he designed in Acapulco. I see Lautner as the one who got away from Frank Lloyd Wright. In fact Wright did make the comment that Lautner was the second greatest architect in the world - and guess who was the first?! I believe that Lautner, like Wright, Mackintosh or Gaudi are inimitable. You can't copy them - they are so unique and special. Although I suppose you do have rip-off Mackintosh (Mockintosh) and fake Frank Lloyd Wright, which could be described as Frank Lloyd Wrong!





Above images of Marbrisa, Acapulco by Sara Sackner.

What would you consider to be Lautner's most important achievements?

I think that he is an important figure in 20th Century architecture in the way that he achieved a façade-less architecture. That's his ultimate ambition. He's concerned with space – infinite space –where you are embedded into the landscape.

Lautner actually hated LA because it's full of 'junk-itecture' but it also has a wonderful topography, where he could perch his houses on poles or cantilever them off hills. Yet at the same time he could also create something out of nothing as in the case of the Pearlman Cabin. It's such a beautiful simple concept achieved essentially with logs and bits of glass.

Lautner's research into every project - into the site and client's requirements - was also second to none. He'd spend hours thinking about things. In the case of Marbrisa, he had everything worked out including the climate, and the way that the wind shifted during the day due to the sea currents. All the soft ventilating spaces he created as a result make Lautner one of the first modern eco-architects. Wright was also a pioneer of eco design, but Lautner is very special because he is always directing your eyes to extraordinary views.

He stands alone, he is inimitable and I think that his time has come. I think he is the missing link between humanist, organic architecture and the work of contemporary architects such as Frank Gehry and Zaha Hadid.

In one scene in Infinite Space you revisit Lautner's studio, and one of the architect's mottos written on his office wall is: 'It's so simple, I wish I had thought of that.' Isn't it complexity rather than simplicity that perhaps more readily springs to mind when considering Lautner's work, particularly in projects such as the Malin House or Chemosphere, which appear to be more aeronautic than architecture?

The Chemosphere was an impossible site so this was really the only solution that Lautner could come up with. I think the building became like science fiction because sci-fi embraced it. The Jetsons (an animated tv sitcom made from 1962-63 where the Jetson family live in a space age utopia, and live in

homes raised off the ground on adjustable columns) was created in a studio close to where the Chemosphere was built and they used its design concept. A building like the Chemosphere is a generator of sci-fi rather than a reflector of sci-fi.



Above image of the Malin House or Chemosphere, LA by Joshua White.

In the film Frank Gehry describes Lautner as a "loner" as well as a "maverick". Do you think this was deliberate choice on Lautner's part?

Lautner was quite a secretive guy, and got very bitter about the horrible attacks on him by journalists. He wouldn't speak to other architects either. He wanted to do large scale and public buildings and although he entered competitions, he never really received a big commission. He hated LA but realised that it was the only place that he could find clients that would be brave enough to commission his designs. A lot of his clients, such as the Walstroms and Len Malin were in the aerospace industry - they were pioneering types.





Above images of the Walstrom House, LA, courtesy of the Hammer Museum.

For such a major undertaking Infinite Space took relatively little time to complete - only two years?

Yes, because we had a fabulous team, a wonderful producer in Sara Sackner who persuaded a lot of reluctant people to be on film, and Hamid Shams, a wonderful cameraman. It was well organised and we were blessed with great weather.

I think it's one of the best films that I've ever done and one of the greatest pleasures to make. It was shot in high definition. It's incredible to work with this new technology and to see in my lifetime how I started off with scratchy 16mm and have ended up using this amazing technology.

What projects are you working on at the moment?

I'm currently collaborating with my son-in-law Seamus McGarvey (Oscar nominated cinematographer) on a re-make of the film 'Space and Light' that I made over 35 years ago about St Peter's Seminary in Cardross. We have shot exactly the same film as the building is today and we're putting together a two-screen presentation. (Screening venues for the two versions of Murray Grigor's 'Space and Light' to be announced).

Right now I'm also planning a trip to Sarasota. There's a great Scottish presence there, mainly due to the fact that Sarasota, as we know it today, was founded mainly by people from Dunfermline. Did you know that my late wife Barbara and I were part of the campaign to save the Dunfermline Opera House when it was being destroyed to make way for a shopping centre? They tried to burn it down, but all the plasterwork and fittings survived. We then got all the bits and pieces that didn't burn down, put them in packing cases and it was shipped off to Sarasota, where they were used to complete the auditorium when it was re-instated in Sarasota and is now the State Theater of Florida. So, when I arrive I'm going to be met by lots of guys in kilts waiting to show me around Sarasota!"

For more information visit: www.infinitespacethemovie.com

Infinite Space: The Architecture of John Lautner will be screened on 29 March 2009 at 5.15pm at the Glasgow Film Theatre, 2 Rose Street, Glasgow G3 6RB. Box Office: +44 (0)141 332 8128



Above images of the Sheats-Goldstein Residence, LA courtesy of the Hammer Museum.

Main image of Murray Grigor with Sean Connery, provided courtesy of Murray Grigor.

Click on the following [link](#) to view full details of the exhibition 'Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner', which receives its only European showing at The Lighthouse.

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