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John Lautner's spirit of invention

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The Elrod house in Palm Springs also is among Lautner's most famed commissions, partly because of its appearance in the James Bond film "Diamonds Are Forever."

His L.A.-area homes showcase his genius for fluid forms and a spatial sense of freedom.

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Paul Young

THIS may be John Lautner's year.

Long overshadowed by modernist contemporaries Rudolph Schindler and Richard Neutra, Lautner (1911-94) and the homes he built here in Southern California are set to receive unprecedented attention, starting with the publication this month of "Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner," written and edited by historian Nicholas Olsberg, with additional chapters by New York University professor Jean-Louis Cohen and L.A. architect Frank Escher, who worked on Lautner's first monograph. The book, which will hit stores April 22, is published by Rizzoli in conjunction with the Hammer Museum, whose related exhibition will open July 13.

PHOTO GALLERY

The architecture of John Lautner

http://www.latimes.com/features/home/la-hm-lautner0410-pg,1,1684503.photogallery

The book and show detail how Lautner built his legacy in a city he despised, once calling Los Angeles "so ugly it made me physically sick." He stayed here only because the technologies of the aerospace and military industries had established a culture of innovation. Wealthy residents were willing to take risks and experiment, even when it came to something as elemental as their homes.

The architect wasn't -- and still isn't -- held in high regard among certain critics, who see his homes as symbols of L.A. excess. "If you're going to run the risks he did and build what Frank Lloyd Wright called exuberance and others called vulgarities, you're going to build some mistakes," Olsberg said by phone from his home in Patagonia, Ariz. But even those mistakes are part of Lautner's biggest legacy in Southern California, a spirit of invention. "That's what is amazing," Olsberg said. "There are clients and architects willing to run risks like nowhere else. That's why Lautner stayed."

In the forthcoming book, Olsberg details the architect's childhood influences, his cantankerous and sometimes self-destructive personality, and the genius of his work: a sense of freedom that one feels upon entering Lautner's best houses -- "a form and spatial experience so ravishing," Olsberg said, "it brings you to tears -- to walk in and have the world open up."

An excerpt adapted from Olsberg's work in "Between Earth and Heaven":

IN 1973 a major Lautner exhibition traveled across Europe. Uneasy over the purported exclusiveness of his work, the organizers suddenly adapted this retrospective and presented him alongside perfectly forgettable Los Angeles work, none of it bearing the slightest relationship to Lautner's ideas. As a result, the critical essays in the catalogue focused on precisely what Lautner was not: avatar of a casual, disorderly, sprawling city of gaudy neon and cheap symbolism.

Historian David Gebhard, echoing the received opinion of Lautner's Silvertop residence in Silver Lake ("a Flash Gordon city on the moon") and Chemosphere off Mulholland Drive ("a flying saucer from outer space"), dismissed the work as outdated, merely a "union of current technology with nineteenth-century Romanticism." Critic Reyner Banham, who had once admired the logic of the Chemosphere, now called Lautner nothing but a fabricator of "one-off dream houses."

But recognition of the expressive force of Lautner's explorations of structure and plastic forms had been growing. In 1971, Architectural Record named the Stevens House in Malibu the house of the year. Others were starting to acknowledge that Lautner had dramatically expanded the language of architecture with the fluid volumetric geometries. Raymond Kappe suggested that Lautner's curved forms in concrete opened architecture to "a new dimension."

The idea that a building can suggest temporal flux within its permanence, and stillness under its

physical fluidity, dominated Lautner's work. He called this "freedom," meaning not a looseness of form, but a formal originality that could liberate perception.

This notion places Lautner close to artists like Clyfford Still or Jackson Pollock, whose work he knew and followed. He also equated his architectural procedures with those of composers he loved. He talked about the "open forms" of Duke Ellington; he spoke of music where silent "spaces" between the notes became as important as the sounds, similar to how the voids and distances made his architecture; and he talked of jazz forms that the listener could not predict, but which, like the slowly unfolding unfamiliarity of his architectural spaces, seemed inevitable once uncovered.

By now Lautner could say that the palette with which the architect must work was nothing but "light and air and sun and freedom and space" -- so that revealing the ineffable became the primary task. The building, he argued, exists only as we perceive it, and this we do differently as light and memory play upon its surfaces and into its voids. Hence it moves, grows, changes, and becomes "alive."

Lautner might fuse different elements -- concrete, wood, glass, solids, voids, furniture, building, hardscape -- into a single interlocking and encompassing set of geometries, eschewing any articulation of the composition. As in a cave, there are only two worlds at play: the fixed shape of the shelter around you, and the shifting shape of what is in the view beyond. Internal movement was choreographed around a set of controlled, almost cinematic, changing vistas.

In all of these late works, Lautner strove to intensify the exchange between the sheltering space and the fluidity of the elements outside. He saw the Segel House in Malibu as a breakthrough, creating a space that felt secure like a cave, but that oriented the view up and down the shore -- a duality between safety and observation. Lautner said that Joann Segel, the dance therapist who commissioned the house, had precisely understood the idea when she told him that one could stay on the ground and fly at the same time.

Lautner's later years were plagued with pain and distress as illness attacked his mobility. By May 1990, he was in such discomfort that he could not work and even writing had become "next to impossible." As his mobility became ever more troubling, Lautner's isolation intensified. He conceded little; admired less; railed against Los Angeles; ploughed through the massive published set of Le Corbusier sketches and found them "worthless"; assailed Robert Venturi, Michael Graves, and Frank Gehry as slaves to "superficial effect"; accused Richard Neutra of simply reproducing the same idea for every setting.

Paradoxically, as his ability to work dwindled, the recognition of his originality grew apace in countless interviews, critical writing on his ideas, and a second international traveling exhibition, organized in 1991 and still moving around the galleries of architecture schools at the time of his

death. Even his "unfashionably unsavvy" protests against the vanity of architectural culture and its unreadiness to honor man's stewardship of the earth, said Progressive Architecture, now bore "the grim ring of truth."

During what he knew might be his last visit to Midgaard, the log cabin his parents built on Lake Superior, Lautner sat on the terrace, and there, perched on his billion-year-old rock, looking at the evanescent horizon, he gave his nephew some parting advice. Be faithful, he said, to first beliefs. For in spite of the things he could not change, he felt he had opened up as much of the world as he could to its inherent truths and beauty.

Nicholas Olsberg was formerly director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal.