

# california

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# UPHOLDING THE LAUTNER

DESIGNER KRISTIN KILMER  
RECASTS LAUTNER'S WOLFF HOUSE  
FOR A REAL ESTATE INVESTOR WHO  
FLIPS ONLY THE FINEST.  
BY SUSAN MORGAN PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN ELLIS





**I**n 1999, when Michael LaFetra decided to leave New York and a 10-year career as an off-Broadway actor, he was given a simple piece of advice by his psychologist: “Follow your curiosity.” LaFetra, a third-generation Angeleno, returned to Los Angeles and began producing films. While renting a 1950s post-and-beam house in Laurel Canyon, he also began to see L.A. through the lens of modernist architecture. “I grew up in a post-and-beam house and went to a preschool designed by Richard Neutra,” says LaFetra. “Modern design was always familiar, but I only rediscovered it about five years ago.”

So when a real estate agent friend telephoned to say that Pierre Koenig’s Case Study House #21 was for sale, LaFetra pursued his curiosity. He bought the ultimate icon of Southern California mid-century architecture—an elegant steel-and-glass house surrounded by five reflecting pools—and thus began his new fascination. Over the past seven years, LaFetra—

LEFT: Michael LaFetra, inside the glass-and-stone Wolff house with girlfriend Alison Letson, has become renowned as a collector of mid-century architecture. ABOVE: The coffee table and cork BBC 2 armchairs are by Phase Design.



ABOVE: The front door looks out onto a steep projection. Lautner designed the triangular skylight with mirrors for a prism effect. LEFT: Los Angeles designer Kristin Kilmer has designed the interiors of four homes for LaFetra.

now a member of the Los Angeles Conservancy—has bought and restored homes by such leading Southern California modernists as R.M. Schindler, Thornton Abell, and John Lautner, the peerless master of space-age bachelor-pad design.

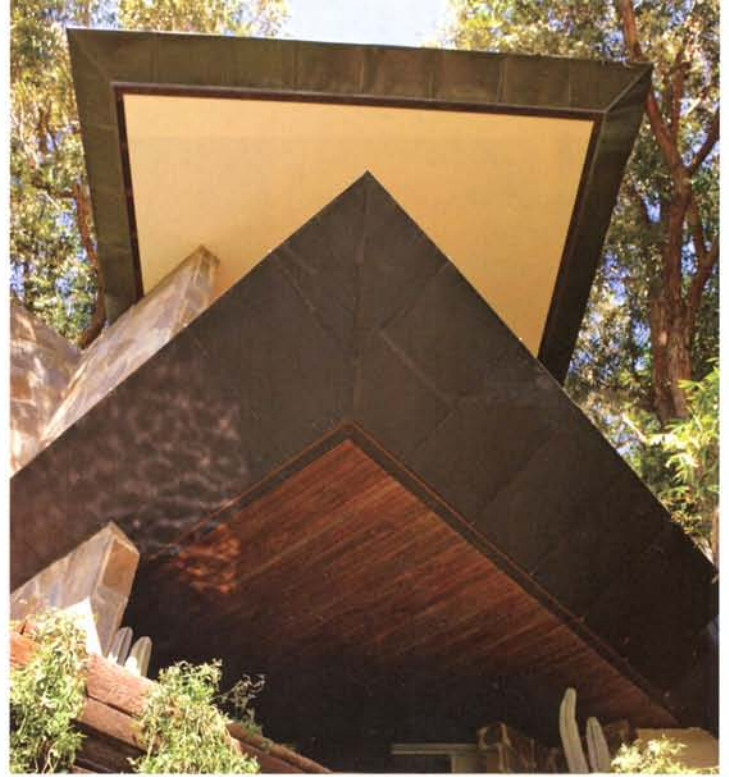
LaFetra registers the houses as Los Angeles cultural and historical monuments, and works closely with each property's original architectural plans. Last year, LaFetra purchased Lautner's 1961 Wolff House. According to local architectural legend, when producer Marco Wolff was ready to build his dream house, he envisioned a riff on Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. Lautner, who grew up in Michigan and worked as Wright's apprentice at Taliesin during the 1930s, was the perfect architect for Wolff.

From the street, the home looks like an unassuming ranch, but the back of the house cantilevers dramatically from a hillside overlooking the Sunset Strip. From various vantage points, the house looks quite different: When viewed from the street below,

the structure appears as a startling arrangement of interlocking blocks thrust outward like the prow of a ship, while the entrance is an imposing wall of stone gracefully framing a eucalyptus tree. The flow between indoors and out is exuberantly theatrical. A triangular skylight sharply outlines a glimpse of blue, and the mighty trees that bracket the outside of the building also grow up through the house as part of the rugged architecture. The third-floor entrance juts out to a rocky, angled precipice, and leads into a soaring great room, where 22-foot-high glass doors open onto an adjoining deck. Lautner's original design for a swimming pool failed its initial building inspection—one corner extended too far off the property and threatened the neighbors below—so he adapted his plan, folding the offending corner back like a piece of concrete origami.

An acre of stone, quarried in the San Gabriel Mountains, was used in the construction of the house, which was designed as a

RIGHT: When viewed from below, the cantilevered overhangs look like the prow of a ship ready to set sail. BELOW: Kilmer reupholstered a vintage Vladimir Kagan Hahn sofa and Lucite barrel dining chairs in pale neutrals.





In the great room, a Bertoia Bird chair—unexpectedly covered in yellow terry cloth—is paired with oversize beanbag chairs. Emmerson Troop's cantilevered wooden bookshelf is as strong as it is sleek.



ABOVE: Lautner first designed a pool that would extend out to a point, but he complied with the truncated version suggested by the local building commission.  
BELOW: Kilmer found the vintage sectional sofa at X21 Modern in San Francisco.



A twisting cantilevered wooden staircase leads down to the master bedroom. As part of the minor repairs required for preservation, Kilmer shored up the loose steps.

*“It’s amazing to think that this was built as a simple, one-bedroom house.”*

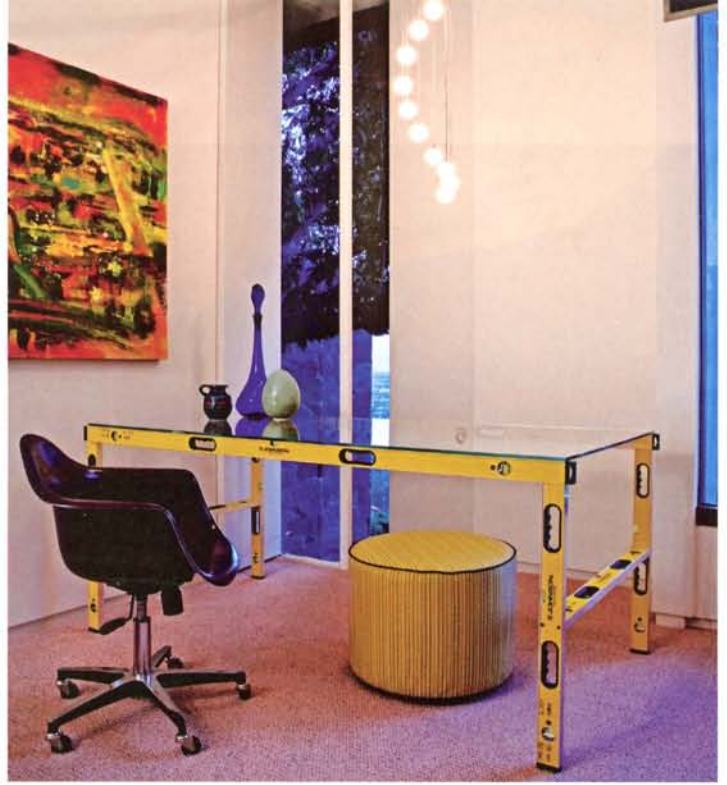


one-bedroom (Lautner returned in 1970 to build a guesthouse). The foundation is secured by piles that reach 45 feet down into the bedrock—a geologist recently determined that the house hasn't shifted in the 46 years since it was built, so all of Lautner's original angles have remained intact. With only five different owners—most notably actor Vincent Gallo—the house had retained most of its original architecture, with the exception of a new kitchen.

Enter designer Kristin Kilmer, who first began working with LaFetra on a Ray Kappe house and has collaborated on several similar projects in the past few years. "It's amazing to think that this was built as a simple, one-bedroom house. There is so much movement—all the angles and lines," Kilmer says. "Once you walk inside, you are entirely blown away."

Throughout the house, Kilmer's design plays with light and scale by contrasting textures and repeating shapes. In the living room, she placed an area rug on the diagonal, reiterating the house's spectacular

RIGHT: The office's droll Straight desk, designed by Sundayland, is made from builder's levels. BELOW: With a cartoon-like sense of whimsy, a classic yellow Panton chair expresses the essence of cantilever design.





"When I first saw the house, it was all Nelson lamps and Barcelona chairs—been there, done that," says Kilmer, who kept only the Nelson lamps in the master bedroom.



orientation on its site. She then looked for furnishings that were sympathetic to the architecture, deftly integrating a range of design periods for an overall harmonious effect. The curvaceous silhouette of Vladimir Kagan's Hahn sofa is an inviting juxtaposition to the heft of stone walls and floors. For the dining room, Kilmer reupholstered a set of four vintage Lucite barrel chairs with pale gray cowhide cushions, creating an artful mix of natural and man-made that mirrors the architecture. "I usually introduce a lot of color into a room," admits Kilmer. "But here it was clear that we should stick to a natural palette and organic forms as a tribute to Lautner's initial concept."

For Kilmer, who studied interior design in Spain, working on this house and other LaFetra projects has been an extraordinary education in California modernism. "I've been very blessed," she says. "In one year, I've been able to work on a Schindler house, a Ray Kappe, a Thornton Abell and a Lautner. Not even some of the biggest designers can say that!" ■

ABOVE: With an appreciation of the environment, Lautner designed the Wolff House around an existing eucalyptus tree, which grows alongside the central axis from the bedroom all the way up to the main patio.