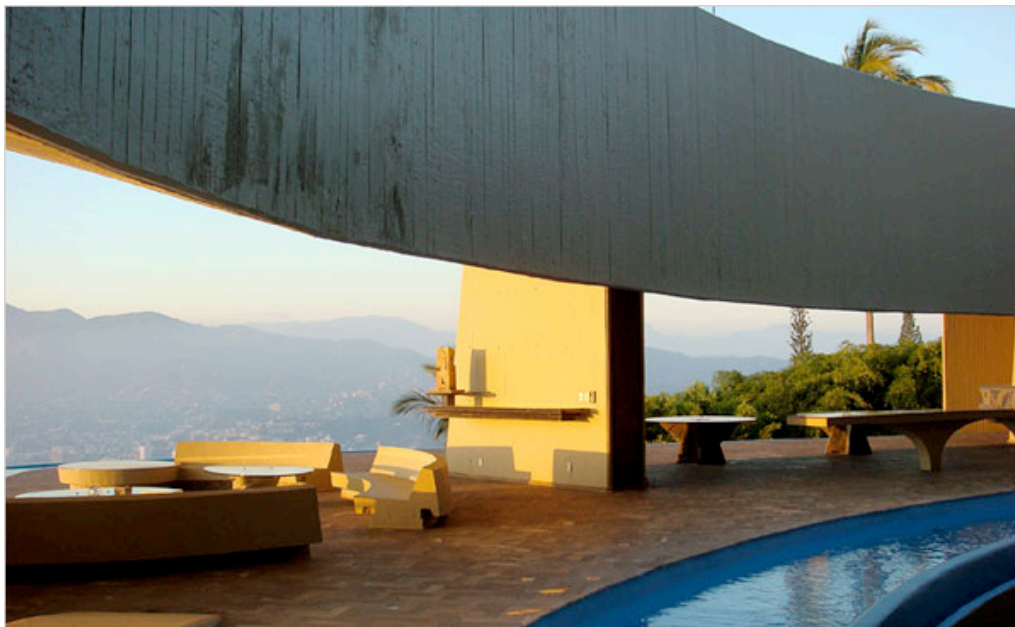


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DESIGN REVIEW

# Bonding Humanity and Landscape in a Perfect Circle



Sara Sackner

John Lautner's Mar Brisas House (1973), in Acapulco, Mexico, has a pool that echoes the shape of the beach below it, as if they were created by the same hand. [More Photos >](#)

By NICOLAI OUROUSSOFF  
Published: July 31, 2008

LOS ANGELES — For those who find consolation in visionary architecture, this city has always been a powerful antidepressant. Its wealth of 20th-century treasures, mostly private homes, reminds us that it is possible to find quiet corners of enlightenment in dystopian times.

## Multimedia



Slide Show

“Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner,” an exhibition at the Hammer Museum here, makes a strong case that Lautner’s role in forging that architectural legacy has been curiously underestimated. Organized by Frank Escher and Nicholas Olsberg, it presents about 120 plans, sections and renderings that counter his longstanding image as an architect who succumbed to Hollywood gaudiness and glamour. What we

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Joshua White/Hammer Museum

The 1960 Chemosphere House, perched in the Hollywood Hills, designed by the architect John Lautner. [More Photos »](#)

glean instead is a keen structural knowledge wedded to an environmental sensitivity — a seamless bond of nature, space and humankind.

Sadly, in their earnest effort to rehabilitate Lautner's reputation, the curators have toned down the fantasy and sensuality that make his houses so intoxicating. The play of light, air, water and materials that is intrinsic to his best work is often lost amid an abundance of coolly abstract technical drawings. An impressive work of scholarship, this is nonetheless an oddly dry show that may bore the average viewer.

Like other great Los Angeles architects before him, Lautner, who died in 1994, was a dreamer in a land that inspired outlandish fantasies. The Michigan-born son of an artist and a professor, he worked as an apprentice to [Frank Lloyd Wright](#) in the 1930s, when Wright was entering his most radical Modernist phase.

Attached to the woodlands and lakes of his birthplace, Lautner hated Los Angeles, which he viewed as a cultural wasteland obsessed with money and devoid of beauty. Yet few serious architects are as closely associated with the city's blend of pop culture and nature, rugged individuality and lush hedonism. Like the work of the great Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer, his buildings take their cues from their natural settings to such an extent that they are unimaginable elsewhere.

The show opens with a series of renderings of his earliest houses, mounted on the wall or on drab beige fiberboard stands. These look a bit like conventional real estate ads and lack the otherworldliness of, say, Wright's drawings. Yet all of Lautner's major themes are already here.

A drawing in graphite on paper depicts his low-slung Carling House (1947), embedded in the side of a hill. A triangular pattern of trusses supports the living-room roof from above, attesting to his early fascination with complex structural systems. In a precursor to the elaborate machinery incorporated into his later works, a mechanical wall swivels to open the interior to a stunning view of the city.

The show picks up steam with a design for the 1948 Sheats Apartments, Lautner's first built foray into what would become an obsession with circular structures. A tentative early sketch shows three cylindrical forms on a steep hillside site, the relation between them still crude and unresolved. In a later version the forms have gained in complexity, and the social relationships have become more nuanced. A narrow entry path leads to a small irregular courtyard that binds the structures into a coherent assembly; the upper-level residence has become a partial hexagon.

Viewed one after another, the drawings are a powerful expression of a creative mind at work, and of Lautner's struggle to strike a balance between individual and community, privacy and companionship.

That tension crystallizes in the 1960 Chemosphere, one of his most celebrated works. An

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octagon perched on a steep site in the Hollywood Hills, it is supported by a single wood mast, like the trunk of a tree; its low, round roof provides shade and a bit of privacy.

The design harks back to the mushroomlike columns of Wright's 1939 Johnson Wax headquarters in Wisconsin or Buckminster Fuller's 1927 design for the Dymaxion House. Lautner imagined dozens of his octagonal houses scattered across the Santa Monica Mountains, each in its own self-contained world enveloped in glass. The dislike form, hovering above the landscape, conjures both an oversize birdhouse and a flying saucer, embodying the technological bravura of the space age.

1 | 2 [NEXT PAGE »](#)

*"Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner" runs through Oct. 12 at the Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles; hammer.ucla.edu; (310) 443-7000.*

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