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Revival of the Swinginest

Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner at the Hammer Museum will delight aficionados and broaden understanding of an architect who was, in his lifetime, ignored and even denigrated by many of his peers.



LAUTNER'S BEYER RESIDENCE, LOS ANGELES (1969).
JOSHUA WHITE

Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner
Hammer Museum
10999 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles
Through October 12

The great limitation of architecture exhibitions is that they generally display only representations of buildings through two-dimensional images and models—pale shadows of the original work. This diminishes the impact of any building, especially work that is dynamic and multifaceted. *Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner*, a landmark exhibition at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, boldly challenges that constraint by recreating the experience of walking through the architect's studio and the visionary spaces he created, juxtaposing video projections, large cutaway models, and drawings of six houses, all selected to illustrate themes the architect explored. These are the highlights of an engrossing exhibition that chronicles Lautner's six decades of practice, from an apprenticeship at Taliesin in the 1930s to his death as a proudly independent though embittered master in 1994.

Historian Nicholas Olsberg curated the exhibition jointly with Frank Escher, a principal in the LA firm of Escher GuneWardena Architecture and a former Lautner associate. Escher also designed the installation, placing the drawings under sheets of Plexiglas, taped onto tilted MDF boxes at the height and angle at which they were originally created in Lautner's studio. "Lautner considered himself a terrible draftsman," said Olsberg. "He would hold a thick pencil in his fist, but what results is magical because it's three dimensional. The line is bold and decisive, the plans and perspectives match exactly. The drawing is effectively a model." The six cutaway models were fabricated by a company known for creating sophisticated maquettes for the aerospace industry. These are displayed at eye-level to draw you into their volumes, and the videos are projected high on the walls so that they can be viewed from across the room.



Murray Grigor, who won acclaim for films on Mackintosh, Wright, and other masters, made the six video loops in parallel to his documentary feature on Lautner, *Infinite Space*, premiering at the Hammer's Billy Wilder Theater on September 18. Using a 27-foot crane, Grigor takes the viewer up and over these houses with the lazy grace of the hawks that sail over the Marbrisa house in Acapulco. He is equally adept at capturing the view of a first-time visitor walking through the interior. Unlike many documentarians, he uses no zooms or jump cuts, and his compositions have the same spatial balance in two dimensions that one's eyes can appreciate in three. He's an invisible presence, analyzing the shifting perspectives and the play of

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light and reflections without drawing attention to his camera. In the glass-walled mountain cabin of Idyllwild, the Rubik's Cube of the Schaffer house in the Hollywood Hills, and the soaring aerie of the Chemosphere, he is able to compress an hour of experience into two or three minutes of imagery. The grand sweep of Marbrisa, the Elrod House in Palm Springs, and the Turner House in Aspen are caught with the same fidelity as the intimate spaces of earlier work.

The Hammer exhibition shows how drawings, models, and images can be woven together as seamlessly as Lautner combined wooden slats, expanses of glass, and soaring concrete vaults. It will delight aficionados and broaden understanding of an architect who was, in his lifetime, ignored and even denigrated by many of his peers. If Lautner, an expressionist and apostle of organic architecture who swam against the mainstream of cool rectilinear modernism, had been as widely published and sympathetically reviewed as Richard Neutra, he would probably have realized some of the 50 daring projects that remained on his boards. As with Rudolph Schindler, his genius was appreciated by a discerning few, gaining wider currency after his death. Neither was invited to build a Case Study house, for John Entenza was unable to see beyond the flat roof and the right angle, and his program embraced only the mainstream of postwar modernism.

"What if?" is a question that hovers over this exhibition as one encounters Lautner's proposal for the Midtown School, a cluster of tent-like structures, or the stacked hillside apartments of the Alto Capistrano project. Suppose Bob Hope had approved the first version of his house, which Lautner designed with Felix Candela as an undulating concrete shell. But for all the regrets, we should be thankful that 50 extraordinary houses were realized, mostly in LA. Nearly all are cherished by their owners.

Michael Webb

Michael Webb is an architecture critic and frequent contributor to AN.

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