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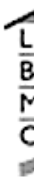
Architecture tours were invented for people like me – the voyeurs who spend too much time crowding the bougainvillea looking for a glimpse of the staircase or roofline of a well-hidden gem. No matter how dog-eared your guidebook, or how familiar you are with the recent restorations of mid-century relics or the cutting edge buildings by local architects, too much of the city's great architecture hides behind fences and walls or is tucked along hillsides, invisible to even the intrepid observer. Tours give us the opportunity to legitimately walk through the front door of a Lautner house, an original case study design, or a cluster of Neutra houses – with no guilt – and soak up the expanses of glass, steel case frames and original wood details.

These days, architecture tours in and around Los Angeles have become their own version of a hot little art show with many tours highlighting the homes the way museum exhibits showcase premiere paintings. After all, Los Angeles is considered the jewel box of mid-century modernism, with premiere examples throughout. And these days that architecture is being collected, restored, and sold like art, piquing the interest in these homes that are often hidden in the hillsides. From the Valley to Palm Springs, from Silverlake to the Westside, fabulous houses are being showcased on tours by well-established organizations like The MAK Center and The Los Angeles Conservancy, new groups like CA Boom Design Shows, and small neighborhood groups like the Committee to Save Silverlake's Reservoirs.

Though I've been taking tours for quite some time, it was a recent MAK Center tour that set a new standard. The MAK Center, which opened in 1994, is located on King's Road in West Hollywood in architect's R.M. Schindler's house and studio, which was built in 1922. Schindler, the well-known modern architect and Viennese émigré, along with his wife Pauline hosted artists, musicians, poets and actors in their home, creating an environment for creative exchange. Today, the center hosts a year-round schedule of exhibitions, lectures, symposia and concerts. The programming they present challenges conventional notions of where architecture leaves off and other creative arts begin. The architectural tours that the center hosts are considered to be some of the cities finest.

As I waited patiently in the lot for a friend, I watched a shuttle bus load up other voyeurs clutching bag lunches and guidebooks. Others carried maps for the self-driven. This particular tour included designs by Pierre Koenig, Irving Gill, Frank Lloyd Wright, and one of my favorites, John Lautner. The guiding principle of the tour was to highlight the ways in which Schindler fit into the architectural landscape of the time. A side benefit to the trip was discovering how these other architectural gems fit into the geographic landscape of the present.

A John Lautner house was on the tour, and before going on it, I wanted to find out if one of our stops, the Harpel House, which was built in 1956, ever made it into films or videos. Unlike the John Lautner houses immortalized on the big screen – the Elrod House in "Diamonds are Forever" or the Malin House (popularly known as the Chemosphere) in "Body Double," the Harpel house hadn't had a theatrical run. Still it was well worth the peek inside. Lautner had a career spanning 55 years. He became legendary for his architectural essays on the relationships between human beings and their space, and space as it related to nature. He often bucked more conventional and practical approaches for more experimental, geometric designs. His houses are coveted by architecture buffs to this day. The Harpel house, though not one of the more famous designs, was just as interesting in many ways. The house was constructed as a triangulated system of glued laminated timber beams on concrete columns. Inside, Lautner created a giant trellis spanning almost the entire property. A section of the space was



closed off for living and entertaining. It was beautiful.

Other highlights of the MAK Center tour include the recently restored Morgan House. Designed by Irving Gill, one of the early Californian modernists, and built in 1917, the house is a wonderful example of site-cast, tilt-slab construction. A magazine article written in 1913 entitled “Outdoor Life in California Houses, as expressed in the new architecture of Irving J. Gill” highlighted the early interest in the relationship between indoors and outdoors, one of the most significant ideas in modernist spaces. Eloise Roorbach writes, “But they must have the opportunity for outdoor life, a sequestered place in the open air where they can serve their meals, receive their guests, sleep within sight of the stars or take a midday siesta.” It was an early inspiration for many other modernist architects.

But among all the wonderful homes on display, above all, there was one reason this tour was a stunner: Case Study House #22 designed by the architect Pierre Koenig. Koenig was noted for his exposed steel and glass houses and was invited by John Entenza, editor of *Arts & Architecture* magazine, to design Case Study House #21. When he completed that project successfully, he designed Case Study House #22, which to date is his most famous. The hillside house built in 1959 on Woods Drive above Sunset and Laurel Canyons has become an iconic image – featured in the photographs of Julius Shulman. The photos showcasing the glass and steel design show the house all lit up like a light box – the two women inside chatting visibly in one dazzlingly exposed glass corner of the living room. Interestingly, Case Study #22 was once a neighborhood secret. Nearly impossible to see from the street, the house was designed in an L shape around a swimming pool. The glass box built into the steep terrain could only be seen from other hillside homes. Walking through the front door it was immediately clear that I was not the only person familiar with the Shulman photograph. Two women posed as a friend snapped a picture in the living room, overlooking the vast grid of the city below. The house is in great condition, with original details throughout. And as I wandered, I thought about how wonderful it would be to chat in that living room with a friend overlooking the twinkling grid.

When CA Boom Design Shows got ready to host its fourth design exposition this spring, they decided to create an architectural tour in order to feature some of L.A.’s best non-traditional architects and designers. In an effort to reinvent the home architecture tour the architects and designers were the guides, offering insight into the design process. For end users or potential clients contemplating a new design project or a major renovation, either residential or commercial, the tours were an innovative opportunity to meet a variety of L.A.’s best contemporary architects and designers. “Where else,” asks Charles Trotter, CA Boom’s founder and executive producer, “can a consumer or developer be able to meet and speak with five contemporary architects in the span of three to four hours, while experiencing the finished product?”

With the advent of tours like this one, the tours are not just about enjoying the architecture but about providing an opportunity to meet and network with the architecture and design community. They have also become a way to raise dollars that many organizations sorely needed for preservation projects and general education. “LA’s New Independents Fall 2006 Design and Architecture” series ended up featuring Richard and Dion Neutra Associates’ stunning VDL Research House II on its Silverlake tour, which is another personal favorite. In 1960, after the original home burned down, Richard Neutra, arguably L.A.’s most famous modernist architect, rebuilt the house with his son. A solarium overlooks the reservoir for tanning with giant louvers for controlling the sunlight. The most striking feature is the entry hall, where the house seems to disassemble before your eyes. Mirror walls and glass create the impression that you are looking through a glass wall into a garden with a suspended steel staircase. At one point you stand outside while a mirrors reflect the indoors, and a huge glass window above you slides right off of the building to create a spatial enclosure in midair. Neutra was rigid in some ways, but wildly experimental in his efforts to visually and physically expand the space of his houses into nature.

Curious about who might live in such a phantasmagoria, I was told on the tour that there are three types of original Neutra home owners: the rich and fashionable Hollywood set, the starving artists, and the progressive academic liberals. This particular Neutra home was built as an experimental project and

was funded by Cornelius H. van de Leeuw, a Dutch industrialist who met Neutra in Europe. Fully rebuilt after the fire, it became Neutra's primary residence.

Moving along on the tour, it was the large ash tree that was preserved and integrated into the design of the house that put Silver Lake House by Standard, LLP, at the top of my "must see" list, along with the VDL house. The house uses passive solar design and other methods of climate control, and the open south elevation allows for amazing views. A post and beam structure defines the space, and horizontal layering of the roof and floors adds depth to the interior spaces and engages the space under the tree. The strong horizontal projection provides a visual balance to the gigantic trunk and limbs.

A neighborhood fundraiser highlighted a great collection of architectural gems from the past and present. "Silver Lake Modernism: Then and Now House Tour" featured homes by Gregory Ain, Ed Fickett, Harwell Hamilton Harris, Richard Neutra, Rudolph Schindler, and Raphael Soriano. The tour also featured contemporary architects, Barbara Bestor, Ana Henton, and John Southern. The Meyer's residence, built in 1939 by Raphael Soriano, was a surprise and turned out to be my favorite. It was built for a family of musicians, and it is neighborhood lore that every New Year's Eve the family would host a concert and they would play all night. Built-ins were created for instruments and metal cabinets were designed to hold sheet music.

I tend to prefer the self-driving tours because it allows you to go at your own pace, although it can be tough to get a good parking spot. The Los Angeles Conservancy has been hosting architecture tours for ages, and they have been a really successful way to pique interest in preservation as well as make money for the organization. A recent tour hosted by the Modern Committee of The Los Angeles Conservancy called "Spectacular/Vernacular" explored the high-style roots of everyday modernism. The tour was self-driven, with docent-led tours at each of the six mid-century homes in the San Fernando Valley. The tour included the Adams House designed by Lloyd Wright in 1939. It is a small brick and redwood design with ideas from his father, Frank Lloyd Wright. An Edward H. Fickett-designed home in Meadowland Park, designed and built between 1950 and 1953, was loosely based on the idea of a ranch house. The home Fickett designed had a major influence on innovative, mass-produced post-war housing. There were also two homes in Corbin Palms designed by Dan Palmer and William Krisel between 1954 and 1955, showing distinct approaches to vernacular modernism by the firm that designed nearly 4000 residences in the San Fernando Valley alone. Amazingly, William Krisel was in attendance to answer questions about his design and the influences he has seen over the years.

The Modern Committee is known for snappy, unconventional architectural tours that focus on drive-ins and coffee shops from the '50s and '60s. They have even offered celebrity bus tours to visit the first McDonald's ever built, which still stands only because the group persuaded the McDonald's Corporation to save it and restore it. But at the same time, they also offer more traditional tours that focus on a particular architect or style of architecture. According to Trudi Sandmeier, director of education for the Los Angeles Conservancy, these tours have been in existence since 1981 and have introduced tens of thousands of people to L.A.'s rich architectural heritage. "We do them more to raise awareness than money – they're a great way to open people's eyes to the beautiful historic architecture of Los Angeles. The best way to understand and appreciate L.A.'s historic architecture is to see it firsthand, in a small group," she said.

Unlike cities like New York or Chicago, which parade their architectural masterworks along the strands of their grand public boulevards, Los Angeles is a more private city. Many of its finest architectural gems are in fact private residences, which are often tucked away out of view. As more and more people become aware of the architectural treasures that hide behind neighborhood fences, canyons and hillsides, it only stresses the importance and the value of the buildings themselves. Almost inevitably, one leaves these tours with a greater appreciation of these hidden masterworks, a greater knowledge of the city's architectural heritage, and a final souvenir from the days explorations – sore feet.

For more information:

MAK Center

www.makcenter.org
(213) 651-1510

The Los Angeles Conservancy
www.laconservancy.org
(213) 623-2989

CA Boom Design Tours
www.caboomshow.com
(310) 394-8600

Committee to Save Silverlakes Reservoirs
www.csslr.org
(323) 259-3919

Dec 2006 by kim stevens

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