

## **John Lautner: A Southern California Visionary with Northern Michigan Sensibilities**

By Melissa Matuscak

Anyone who has lived in the Upper Peninsula tends to develop a deeper awareness of nature, if only to anticipate the constantly changing weather. The natural landscapes, and especially Lake Superior, are integral to the way of life in the region in both work and leisure. John Lautner's idyllic childhood in Marquette stirred what would become an ongoing quest to create unity between nature and architecture.

The story of what made John Lautner a visionary architect begins with his parents. His father, John Lautner Sr., was born in 1865 near Traverse City, the son of German immigrants. Though he began school late—at age 15—by age 32 John Sr. had received bachelor's and master's degrees in German literature from the University of Michigan. His studies took him to the East Coast and to Europe, but he eventually returned to Michigan to accept a position at Northern State Normal School (now Northern Michigan University) in Marquette in 1903.

At the time, Northern was a fledgling institution offering preparatory study for teachers in a sparsely populated area. John Sr. was one of eight instructors at the time and taught a variety of subjects including French, German, philosophy, economics, sociology, ethics, and education. Northern is also where John Sr. met his future wife, Vida Cathleen Gallagher. Vida had moved to Marquette from Cheboygan as a teenager to attend school and help care for her sister's children. Vida graduated from Northern with a teaching certificate in 1906 and a B.A. in 1924. The couple was married in Houghton in 1907. Their first child, John Jr., was born in 1911 and their second child, Cathleen, was born in 1915.

The Lautners' pursuit of a life that included a well-rounded education influenced young John from an early age. The same year their son was born, they contacted New Jersey architect Joy Wheeler Dow to design a family home near Northern's campus. Vida was intensely involved in the process and, after much correspondence, a Jacobean Colonial design was agreed upon. The Lautners filled the space with books, music, and art, including woodcarvings and paintings made by Vida and furniture built by John Sr.

In 1924, the family began building a summer home just north of Marquette along a rocky stretch of Lake Superior known as Middle Island Point. The cabin would be situated on top of a mass of towering boulders across from Partridge Island, with endless views of Lake Superior and the Huron Mountains. Vida's extensive research led the way for the design: a log cabin based on Norwegian folk architecture. John Jr., then 12 years old, had his first exposure to architecture with the construction of this residence, named Midgaard: a word from Norse mythology that described the home of mankind, situated between the land of ice and the land of fire.

The Lautner family took on the construction of the cabin themselves, with the help of friends and students from the normal school. Each day, the crew would board a small motorboat for a 15-minute ride across the bay to the base of the rocks. This was also the landing site for the timber for the cabin, which then had to be hoisted up to the building site. Here's how John Jr. remembered the process: "We had no machinery, we had absolutely nothing. And my father knew how to do everything. So, we rafted logs across the lake, and we built a skidway up to the mountainside, and he built a windlass, a vertical windlass, that [had] a long arm out like you see pictures of in the Egyptian days. And I ran that windlass pulling material up the mountainside to build. So with just two people and hand labor; you could build the whole thing."

While John Sr. led the building and carpentry, Vida painted cupboard doors, constructed wooden chandeliers, and made woodblocks to print folk designs onto fabric for curtains. The entire process of designing, building, and furnishing the camp took three years to complete, with the teenaged John laying the hardwood floors.

Even with a seemingly daunting and difficult building process, the family took time to hike the shores and explore the islands nearby. Lunchtime was spent on the rocks near the water, cooking over an open fire. The days were filled with conversations on a range of topics including philosophy, economics, literature, religion, and art.

Through these experiences, overarching themes of common sense, universal truth, and the human relationship to nature were instilled in John Lautner, and these same ideas would become fundamental to his thinking as a designer and architect. He would return to his beloved Midgaard as much as possible throughout his life.

## **Apprenticeship to Wright**

In 1933, Lautner graduated from Northern with a degree in liberal arts. With his mother's encouragement, he applied for and was granted admission to Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin Fellowship program that same year. Accompanying Lautner on the move to Taliesin East—located in Spring Green, Wisconsin—was another new student: his soon-to-be wife, Mary Faustina "MaryBud" Roberts.

The Lautners worked under Wright for six years at both Taliesin East and West (in Arizona), following the architect's integrative pedagogy to "learn by doing." Lautner described his time at Taliesin: "He did create a real apprentice training for architects, which is not just drafting, it's building. On Sunday nights we had 30-40 guests from Chicago, string quartets, and apprentices would be in charge of the whole dinner. We cooked and served and cleaned up for fifty people. So when I design a kitchen, I know what goes on [in it]."

This holistic approach to learning was appropriate for Lautner, given his exposure to a variety of visual arts, literature, and music as a child. It also allowed him to gain invaluable, firsthand experience with stonework, steam fitting, and carpentry.

Understanding the mechanics and materials of architecture would prove crucial in his development as an architect.

## **Developing His Own Style**

In the late 1930s, Lautner left Taliesin for Los Angeles to work on Frank Lloyd Wright's Sturges House. He also continued working on a variety of other Wright projects, including Wingspread—the Johnson residence near Racine, Wisconsin—and the drafting room at Taliesin West. Soon after these projects, Lautner felt ready to strike out on his own and establish a practice in Los Angeles. He knew how to balance what he had learned from Wright without duplicating the work of his mentor:

“The main thing Wright stressed was to have a total idea. If you didn't have a total idea, you didn't have anything. All you had was an assembly of clichés. I never used any of his forms, never copied anything. He was against that. But it was difficult not to, he was such a great genius and did such beautiful work that, as a young man, it looks impossible to do anything in relation to him because he is so great and you feel so dumb. But I was philosophically minded so I never took a photograph or a plan or anything else.”

It is strange yet fitting that Lautner would end up in Los Angeles. During the pre-World War II period, the bustling city was rapidly growing, creating an environment that couldn't be further removed from the forests and freshwater expanses of the architect's childhood. Lautner saw Los Angeles being shaped by the very characteristics he decried: superficiality, fashion, and gimmicks. He was especially concerned to see design and architecture following this trend.

However, by staying in Los Angeles, Lautner was motivated to work against what he liked least in architecture. He quietly laid the groundwork for an evolving approach to the field, one that recognized the humanity of those who inhabited his buildings. The city's temperate climate also allowed him to develop designs that blended natural and built environments—easily the most important aspect of his work. Los Angeles, with its eclectic mix of research, business, and entertainment industries, was also where he could find forward-thinking clients who appreciated his experimental designs.

## **Lautner's Legacy**

More than 100 of Lautner's designs were realized, including commercial buildings, offices, schools, apartments, places of worship, theaters, and motels. Some recognize him only for his contribution to the space-age “Googie architecture” of coffee shops and restaurants from the 1950s and 1960s. However, it is his residential designs that made him one of the most influential architects of the 20th century. Each design is a distinctive solution for an individual client and, most importantly, for a particular location. Lautner's solutions are often suitable only for these specific factors involved with the project. However, each design is intentional, complete, and resolved.

The vast majority of Lautner's work is located in southern California, though he also completed projects in Mexico, Alaska, Colorado, and Florida. Three of his most recognized commissions are the Malin residence/ "Chemosphere" (Hollywood, 1960); the Garcia residence (Los Angeles, 1962); and the Sheats-Goldstein residence (Beverly Hills, 1963/1989). These buildings, among others, have been featured in major Hollywood films and continue to challenge commonly held notions of residential design.

The Chemosphere—whose name is tied to a corporate sponsorship that helped fund its construction—is an icon of Mid-Century Modern residential architecture. It was featured in the film "Body Double" (1984) and inspired the home of the villain in the film remake of "Charlie's Angels" (2000). The residence was originally built for Leonard Malin, an aerospace engineer. As with many of Lautner's buildings, the landscape of the site inspired the final design, particularly the steep, nearly 45-degree slope that was considered unbuildable. Instead of building retaining walls out from the slope to support the structure, Lautner's design hovers over the untouched landscape, supported by a 30-foot-tall reinforced concrete column. An octagon-shaped building sits on top of the column, with a roof constructed as if it were the keel and ribs of a ship. These elements create an interior that is open and free from obstructed views of the landscape and beyond.

The Chemosphere became famous because of its spaceship-like appearance, something that Lautner did not intend. His goal, as with all of his designs, was to create the best solution for the site. The Encyclopedia Britannica once declared it to be the most modern home built in the world. After ownership changed hands multiple times, the home fell into disrepair and many feared it would be lost. However, the house was purchased in 2000 by art book publishers Benedikt and Angelika Taschen and underwent extensive restoration. The latter work on the Chemosphere was recognized by the Los Angeles Conservancy and featured in multiple magazines and newspapers.

Almost as iconic as the Chemosphere, and one of several Lautner-designed homes on Mulholland Drive in Los Angeles, the Garcia residence was originally built for jazz composer Russ Garcia in 1962. Sometimes referred to as the "Rainbow House," it was recreated in full scale and demolished in the film "Lethal Weapon 2" (1989).

Architecturally, the Garcia residence is a testament to another feature distinctive to Lautner's designs: the ability to manipulate concrete into organic forms. The large, arched roof is made of concrete, a material that can feel heavy and brooding. However, the house looks almost weightless as it nestles into the hillside, echoing the curve of the terrain. The roof connects at both ends of the structure by steel I-beams that rise up to meet the edges. Two rugged, V-shaped beams anchor the structure in the front while concrete supports provide stability in the flatter ground in the rear. What is left inside is an open and airy shell divided in half by a winding staircase that provides views of the canyon as one descends from the parking area into the living spaces. Colored-glass panes were included by Lautner to add warmth to a terrain that was originally devoid of vegetation.

Perhaps the most-seen Lautner house is the Sheats- Goldstein residence. The films “The Big Lebowski” (1998), “Bandits” (2001), and “Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle” (2003) are just a few of the many films that have featured the house—also a favorite of photographers. The centerpiece of the design is another concrete roof, which contains three folded, triangular surfaces. Two points touch the ground at different elevations, essentially creating a concrete sail. The interior coffered ceiling rises 18 feet overhead at the tallest point and dives down to almost six feet to allow for shade from the sun. More than 700 small drinking glasses were incorporated into the roof’s design to create tiny skylights. (Lautner considered this a way to recreate the light of a northern Michigan forest.) The natural light also allows the concrete to once again appear weightless—similar to the Garcia residence, but this time trading organic forms for purely geometric ones.

The original clients, Paul and Helen Sheats, sold the house soon after it was completed in 1963. Businessman James Goldstein purchased it in 1972 and worked closely with Lautner on a series of projects to bring the design to perfection. Lautner was free to incorporate new technologies into the ongoing renovations, including concrete-and-steel furniture and a transparent sink that looks like a waterfall when in use and gives the user an uninterrupted view of the landscape. (Lautner’s design for the Sheats-Goldstein residence continues to evolve. Goldstein is working with associates from the architect’s firm to update and enhance the home.)

Later in the 1970s, Lautner secured high-profile commissions to design homes for Dolores and Bob Hope as well as the Mexican supermarket magnate Jerónimo Arango. The latter residence, called Marbrisa, is perched on a hilltop overlooking Acapulco Bay and features a large (25,000 square feet) living space topped with a terrace encircled by a “sky moat.” Marbrisa is often cited as the pinnacle of the architect’s 55-year career.

When visiting a Lautner residence, one can’t help but be reminded of his early influences. Marquette and Midgaard are never obvious in the actual forms of his work; he was constantly experimenting with materials, design, and engineering based on the needs of the client and the challenges of the site. But it can be felt, nonetheless, when you catch your first glimpse of the unimpeded horizon. It is this ability to blur the line between home and habitat that make John Lautner’s designs so incredible.

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