

John Lautner's visionary design recognized in 'overdue' exhibit

by Carl Larsen

It's months away, but already the first major exhibition of modernist American architect John Lautner's work is stirring a buzz among architects and those with a passion about the discipline.

A VISIONARY DESIGNER - 'Too much of what goes on today are 'facilities' ... they are seldom architecture,' wrote the late John Lautner, a legendary architect. CNS Photo courtesy of Lautner Foundation. The Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, part of UCLA, announced in November that it would present "Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner" from July 13 to Oct. 12, and then the show will travel abroad.

"I am on the edge of my seat with excitement about Lautner," wrote Keith York by e-mail. York operates the modernsandiego.com Web site, devoted to modernist architecture.

San Diego designer Wallace Cunningham said Lautner, who died in 1994 at the age of 83, was one of two great apprentices to Frank Lloyd Wright, along with E. Fay Jones.

"Jones received a Gold Medal (from the American Institute of Architects). John should have gotten one. His work is better," said Cunningham, who recalled annual treks to Lautner's Los Angeles studio.

"He captures the spirit of the age, what it's like to live in Los Angeles - great cars, garages and swimming pools ... great spans and columns. He's got it down. All of us looked up to him. He did what we all wanted to do - build great buildings," said Cunningham.

"A show on Lautner's work is long overdue," agreed architect Ken Kellogg, who was a friend of Lautner's and helped him build his only San Diego-area house along the waterways of Coronado Cays.

Lautner is considered a visionary by many who celebrate his work, which unfolded across Southern California. His homes achieve an unusual dichotomy, offering a sense of internal shelter and refuge while becoming vistas to, and part of, the world outside.

But his stature wasn't always so great. For years, before the term "starchitect" became synonymous for the likes of Frank Gehry, Santiago Calatrava and Daniel Libeskind of today, Lautner searched for recognition.

A cantankerous reputation perhaps didn't help.

"After six years studying with Frank Lloyd Wright and two decades of building extraordinary structures - he was still known as 'John Lautner, Designer,'" wrote Lautner fan Betsy Speicher on her Web site.

"Since he had never graduated from a school of architecture, the AIA (American Institute of Architects) would not grant him the title of 'Architect,'" Speicher's essay goes on.

"Lautner had only his own courage and dedication to see him through the 1950s and 1960s. There were years when the only work he had was a kitchen remodel and years when he didn't even have that," Speicher wrote.

"His lean years did not end until the late 1970s when Lautner built Bob Hope's spectacular home in Palm Springs. At last, he finally began to receive the honor and recognition he had so long deserved."

But in 1970, his peers did recognize him after more than 30 years of work by naming Lautner as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects. And in 1993, he received a lifetime achievement Gold Medal from the Los Angeles AIA chapter.

The general public would know Lautner's work best by its intersection with popular culture. Over the years, the architect's designs have been joined with the need of Hollywood directors to portray "Space Age" or futuristic homes.

And, car-loving Californians would be familiar with another genre from the '50s credited to Lautner: Googie Architecture.

That concept took off from his 1949 design of a Los Angeles-area coffee shop, called Googie's, that emphasized glass walls and extreme signage directed at the growing car culture.

The roadside architecture received scorn from many in the profession and critics, although the popular appeal of this type of commercial design quickly was seen and adopted by other developing fast-food enterprises.

Among moviegoers, perhaps best remembered is Lautner's Elrod House, built in 1968, which was featured in "Diamonds are Forever." There, a not-so-sure-footed Sean Connery, in his last film as James Bond, is seriously pummeled by two acrobatic women, Bambi and Thumper, amid the expanse of the Lautner-designed hillside home in Palm Springs. Other movies using Lautner homes include "Lethal Weapon 2" and "The Big Lebowski."

Also well-known is a house labeled as Lautner's most futuristic work: the Malin Residence, or Chemosphere, in Los Angeles. Built in 1960, the house is supported by a single central pier, with beams radiating out to support the underside, that makes it appear to spring from a hillside, much like a flying saucer, into the sky.

But his work is not to be viewed as some futuristic Hollywood set, with commanding views of the mundane world below. Instead, his admirers say, it follows on the "organic architecture" pioneered by Wright that considers the possibilities of tying design into the surrounding landscape.

He is important, summed up Kellogg, "because Lautner innovated without copying Frank Lloyd Wright."

Indeed, Lautner was a protege of Wright, and worked with the man considered America's greatest architect as one of the first fellows at Wright's Taliesin partnership. Over his career, Lautner venerated his mentor, but developed his own typology.

A native of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Lautner set up a practice in Los Angeles in 1939 after apprenticing with Wright, and embarked first upon a house for his own family. That project was called by a contemporary critic as "the best house by an architect under 30 in the United States."

"Lautner's dwellings took on dramatically new and varied shapes as he moved toward the central themes of his career - how to use architecture to sublimate the domestic, and to domesticate the sublime," said historian Nicholas Olsberg, a co-curator of the upcoming exhibition along with architect Frank Escher, author of a book on Lautner's work and a founder of the John Lautner Foundation in Los Angeles.

Seldom venturing outside the region, Lautner's homes today extend in an arc from Palm Springs, through Los Angeles and Malibu and down to San Diego. One exception is among his most famous designs - the expansive Mar Brisas house in Mexico, overlooking Acapulco Bay.

The Coronado Cays house was one of Lautner's last designs. The home, known as the Shearing Residence, was built in the early '90s and recently was for sale for \$4.1 million. The owners decided to remove it from the market because of the housing downturn, said agent Aileen Oya.

The 3,675-square-foot house has four bedrooms, 2 1/2 baths and is on one of the Cays' waterways. Trademark Lautner features include walls of glass, concrete walls, Douglas fir paneling and flagstone flooring.

Lautner also worked on two other San Diego-area designs, both unbuilt. One was a ballet school and theater (1963); the other a residence (1971).

It's a bit of an irony that the first exhibition of Lautner's work will take place at the Hammer Museum, on Wilshire Boulevard, which will make it the third institution in Los Angeles to hold a claim to the architect's work.

Down Wilshire Boulevard, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art plans to install an office designed by Lautner in one of its exhibition spaces.

And, a bit north of the Hammer Museum, the Getty Research Institute at the nearby Getty Center is cataloging a collection of Lautner's papers, photographs and architectural models, which was obtained by the institute earlier this year from the John Lautner Foundation.

Hammer spokeswoman Sarah L. Stifler said more information on the upcoming exhibition, including house tours, scheduled lectures, film screenings and a hardcover catalog to be published by Rizzoli International will be posted on the museum's Web site: hammer.ucla.edu.