



LAUTNER VS. LAUTNER

Thirty-five years later, a modern interior revisits a project from his past and finds there's room for improvement.

Story by Marc Kristal
Photographs by Julius Shulman and David Glomb

Anne Friedberg gazes through the redesigned and extended front entry way towards the carport and outdoor fireplace. The faint line extending from the rear right corner of the glass to the left stair pole delineates the path Lautner's original glass entryway once took. Lautner encouraged Friedberg and Rodman to redo the entire entry in frameless glass, replacing the original tunnel-shaped entry and thus enclosing the exterior door to the utility room.



Upper Level



Lower Level

(left) From the street, the house seems to sit on an exceptionally large hedge. In fact, the landscaping conceals the curving drive that leads up to the entrance. The beige areas in the above plans illustrate the changes and additions Lautner made in 1992.

(opposite page) The skylight is supported by a cross of steel beams and allows for a maximum dose of Los Angeles sunlight. Of the Douglas fir ceiling, Lautner told the new owners with pride, "We had that wood there specially milled; if the house caught on fire, it would take three hours to burn through that."



Restoring a classic—which requires little more than original plans, a brilliant contractor, and a king's ransom—is easy. *Renovating* one is another matter entirely. Faced with reconciling personal need with the responsibilities of preservation, every homeowner cursed /blessed with a masterpiece has, during one crisis or another, wondered, "What would [insert name of genius here] have done?"

Anne Friedberg and Howard Rodman actually got an answer—and from one of the icons of Los Angeles architecture, John Lautner. In a city renowned for the quality of its residences, Lautner's achievement is singular: More than any of his contemporaries—including his teacher, Frank Lloyd Wright—he found the essence of the city he claimed to loathe and converted it into architecture. Lautner's 60-odd residences, which include the world-famous flying saucer-shaped Chemosphere, seem to have coalesced out of L.A.'s sexuality and corruption, friendliness and inscrutability, its capacity for fantasy and its hard, dark power. Often described as "observatories," equally are Lautner's works observations—of an actual, cultural, and imaginative topography of the L.A. state of mind.

Given the force of his vision, it's surprising

to learn—as Friedberg and Rodman did—that Lautner cared less about how his creations looked than about how they felt to those who lived in them. In 1992, the couple purchased the Zahn house, a two-bedroom structure designed by Lautner in 1957 for an elderly homeopathic doctor. Much as they appreciated its singularity, Friedberg and Rodman, writers who work at home—she authored *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, he wrote the screenplay for *Joe Gould's Secret*—knew the residence needed significant remodeling to accommodate their needs, and ultimately approached Lautner himself. The results proved transforming—not only to the structure but to the clients as well.

Ironically, given the outcome, Friedberg and Rodman weren't looking for a house at all. "We were reading the Sunday real-estate ads, which we did as entertainment," Friedberg recalls. "And Howard said, 'Hey! First time on the market. John Lautner.' We'd never gone to look at a house before." They contacted the agent, the splendidly monickered Crosby Doe, of Mossler, Deasy, and Doe, an L.A. real-estate firm specializing in classic architectural properties. Doe proved to be a bit of a classic himself. "He is an extremely dapper man with a

little moustache who often wears ascots," Rodman says. "And he drives either a vintage Facel Vega, Jaguar, or a 1966 International Harvester Travel-All restored to a fare-thee-well." Doe's flair for presentation extended to his work. "Crosby was showing the house in December, January, one of those months where the air is very clear and the view really pops out at you," Rodman recalls. "He chose the hour," Friedberg adds. "Twilight. You walked up the driveway and you could see the ocean. The siting was just incredible."

And the house, in Beachwood Canyon, above Hollywood, is a minor gem. Trapezoidal in shape, the exterior is distinguished by twin rows of adjustable, perforated-steel screens, which provide shade, privacy, and ventilation. Within, a light-filled central atrium begins at the glass-enclosed entry, from which a staircase winds up to the main floor, and climaxes in a generous skylight supported by a cross of steel beams.

Rodman "was very taken with it as a kind of fantasy," which combined the villain's lair in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* with an embrace of futuristic (for 1957) gadgetry. Lautner had fitted the house with an intercom that connects the kitchen with the master ▶



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bedroom, entrance, and carport (and featured a police band), and what Rodman describes as "one of these future-that-never-came-to-pass low-voltage relay systems. The virtue is, you can turn certain lights on and off from any of five places. The downsides are—we now know—there are only a couple of electricians who still understand this. Parts are really hard to get. And if one of the relays jams, then every light in the house that's on stays on, and every light that's off stays off."

Having arrived as tire-kickers, Friedberg and Rodman departed as potential buyers—and, embracing their role, decided they couldn't take the first place they saw. "We went around with Crosby and looked at about 35 other houses," Rodman says. "And we got the best architectural education you could possibly get." Doe's knowledge of the development of the city and its styles—dispensed from the Jaguar's driver's seat over three months of Saturdays—increased Friedberg and Rodman's appreciation, not only of L.A.'s superlative residential architecture, but the uniqueness of Lautner's creation. "We came back to it three times," Rodman recalls. "There was a day that we realized that the driveway spirals a certain

way, the stair spirals in the same direction, and in fact it's a chambered nautilus. Or you'd see details, like the way the walls float." With a nudge from Doe, who invoked Beachwood's literary past, the couple took the plunge.

As structured, however, the 1,800-square-foot second-floor living quarters (with an additional 500-square-foot utility room on the ground floor) couldn't accommodate the couple's need for office space and bookshelves. When all the architects they approached, including such heavyweights as Eric Owen Moss, and Henry Smith-Miller and Laurie Hawkinson, proved unwilling to tamper with a classic, the Rodmans turned to the maestro himself.

The architect, who was 81, arrived in a silver BMW with a LAUTNER vanity plate; a large man, imposing as his creations, he strode directly to the deck and surveyed the city. After more than 30 years, Lautner was clearly pleased to be back. "He pointed out all kinds of features," says Rodman. "He said, about the Douglas fir ceiling in the kitchen, 'We had that wood there specially milled; if the house caught on fire, it would take three hours to burn through that.'"

Lautner, however, was no softie. "You like the house?" Rodman recalls him saying. "Or maybe you're the kind of people who like that trendy façade crap in Santa Monica." By which I think he meant Frank Gehry." Rodman ascribes this prickliness to underappreciation, a neglect Lautner abetted out of principle (by refusing to promote himself) and personality (he thought most architecture critics were uninformed, and said so). Adds Crosby Doe, "I think he may also have suffered from depression about what L.A. became, and what he envisioned he could have done."

Yet disappointment didn't equal rigidity. "John was very specific," Rodman remembers. "He said, 'Houses are built for the people who live in them.'" It was agreed that the funnel-shaped glass chamber that formed the ground-floor entry would be expanded to enclose the exterior door to the utility room, and the room itself restyled to hold the couple's voluminous library and serve as their joint office.

Lautner's working methods proved as unique as the house itself. "He joked about not being a good draftsman because, to him, there was no value in it," says Helena Arahuete, who worked for him for 23 years and today runs ▶

Julius Shulman is perhaps the best-known photographer of the mid-century-modern residential architecture that came to define the California landscape. He worked closely with John Lautner, documenting many of his projects, including the Friedberg and Rodman house (originally known as the Zahns house) in 1957 (left). Styles have clearly changed since then (note the fabric choices on the Lautner-designed sofa and the wall hanging), but the architecture has remained remarkably timeless. In Shulman and Glomb's recent photo of the project (above), they took advantage of the ample light encouraged by the stark white walls and exposed materials. Friedberg, Rodman,

and Lautner were all pleased with the original main room, leaving it much as it was, aside from fabric color choices, art, and the addition of the vintage 1930s black lacquer rectangular dining table and the surrounding Emeco chairs. The Bauer pitchers on the table were given to Friedberg and Rodman by the Zahns, the original owners of the house.

(opposite page) in the original house (left), Lautner chose to paint the exposed steel beams. Thirty-five years later (right), the steel was stripped to reveal its natural color.





Lautner Associates. "Often he would just do a very rough sketch, then give it to someone else to develop," Lautner, she explains, was "an ideas man" who focused on the site and the clients. "He wanted to know, 'When you're working, do you like light and openness? Do you like enclosed space?'" Rodman says. "At one point, he walked around the living room, and he asked me to point out where I'd feel most comfortable working, and I went right for a corner. That, I think, informed where my office was." The finished room includes a pair of custom-designed desks, Lautner's signature bookshelf design featuring recessed standards that disappear behind the books once they're in place, and cork-finished sliders that hide shelves and allow the couple to work together or separately.

Expanding the entry also enabled Lautner to replace the aluminum-frame doors with the frameless glass he'd wanted to use 35 years earlier. Friedberg and Rodman agreed, but balked at the expense of the single glass sheet he specified. "I suggested two sheets, because it's a lot less," Rodman says. "And he said, 'If you're going to do that, do three. Two looks like a compromise. Three looks deliberate.'"

In the end, they hit the bullet and followed Lautner's original suggestion.

When the couple had a child, the architect was again recruited to baby proof the stairwell. By then, Lautner, ill with emphysema, couldn't climb the stairs to consider the problem directly. "But he didn't need to," Rodman says, "because it was in his head." The elegant solution was a minimally invasive Plexiglas gate, which, open or closed, was barely visible. After Lautner's death, in 1994, his office added what Rodman calls a "sneeze guard"—long sheets of Plexiglas, inserted behind the banquette that wraps around two sides of the stairwell—to prevent children from swan diving over the edge (now removed).

In the ensuing years, Friedberg and Rodman have made changes that preserve the original spirit while maximizing livability, most notably in the master bedroom, where architect Dale B. Cohen added a bookshelf below the windows and constructed a headboard that conceals the alarm and intercom controls. But apart from wishing for more land, they are surprisingly regret-free—a function, in Rodman's view, not so much of alterations made to the house, but the opposite. "I had



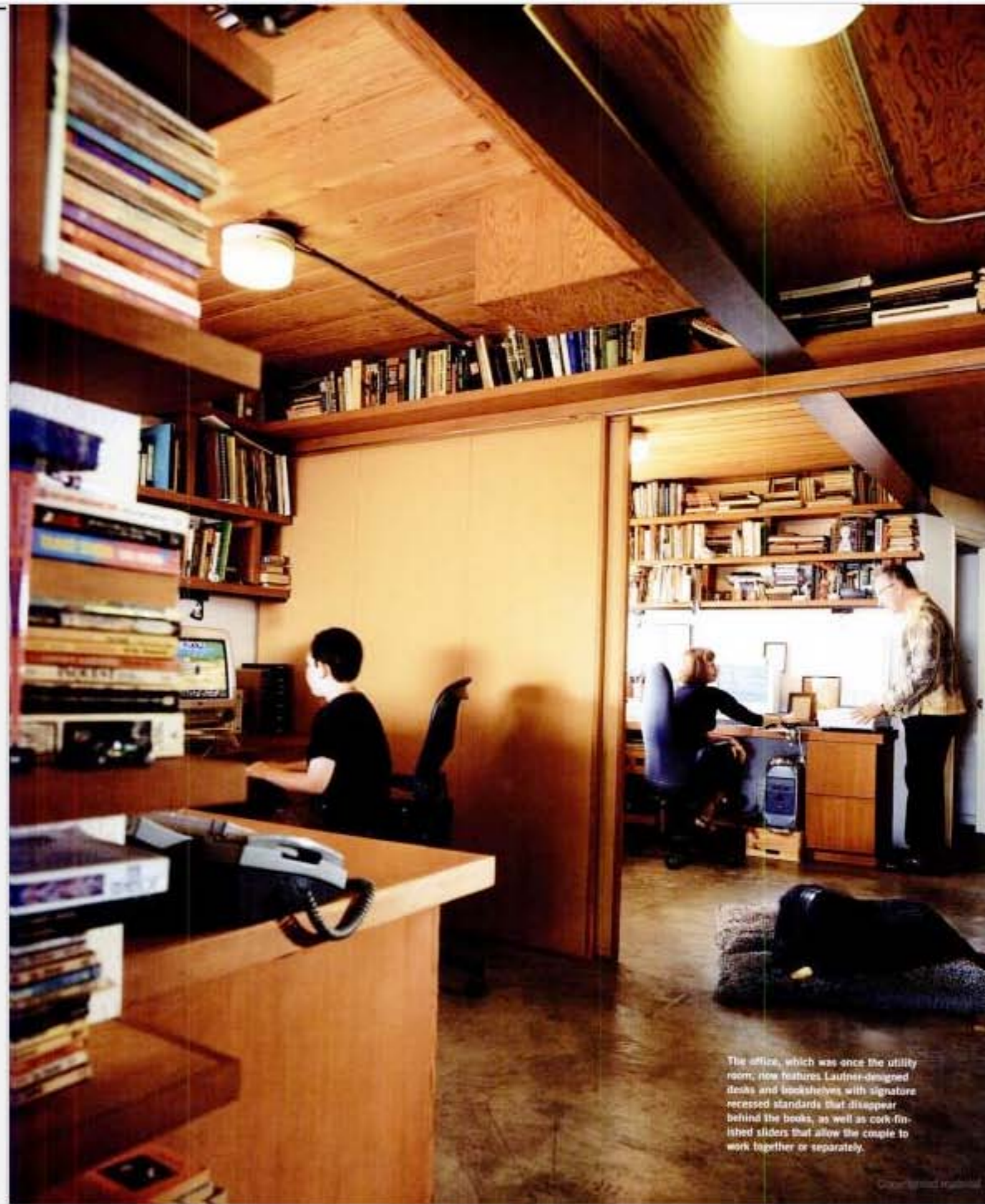
(left) Perforated steel louvers were installed to provide protection from the east and west sun without interrupting the views. During the renovation, Lautner determined that these were still the best way to provide shade from the harsh rays, since the lot did not have room for additional trees. The lack of acreage on the lot is perhaps Rodman and Friedberg's one regret about the house. (above) Lautner's original Douglas fir kitchen countertops still remain—as sturdy as the day they were installed.

to do a lot of growing up in order to live here," he observes. "I was an adolescent for the first 30, 35 years of my life, and I think the house taught me that I could be a grown-up without having to give up my sense of whimsy or playfulness."

Friedberg marvels at the architecture's influence on her work, which deals with film theory. "There's something unique about living in a house that's all about light, shadow, and constructing views," she says. "It's like a material paradigm of something very theoretical that I live with all the time. And there's something deeply aligned and pleasurable about that."

Both agree that the foremost beneficiary of Lautner's enduring alchemy is their eight-year-old son, Tristan. "Growing up in this house, where it was light and spacious, I mean, you can't have seasonal affective disorder here," says Friedberg. "I think it just produced a happy child." She laughs. "I don't think we did."

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The office, which was once the utility room, now features Lautner-designed desks and bookshelves with signature recessed standards that disappear behind the books, as well as cork-finished sliders that allow the couple to work together or separately.