

Patricia Gatlin

May 2, 2014

John Lautner: Organic Style in Los Angeles

John Launter's modernist residential architecture helped Los Angeles homeowners of the elite class encompass the city as a Utopia in which paradise could be created within their homes and an Arcadia where a paradise could be found naturally in their own backyards. This way of thinking is constituted by the mythologies of place and space presented in William McClung *Landscapes and Desire* and Reyner Banham's writing *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. The design of Lautner's residential spaces evoke Los Angeles' need for urban sprawl through three architectural techniques including modernism, organic style, and infinite space. Each techniques encompassing its own aesthetic appeal within the context of architecture. Residential owners of Lautner's work use these techniques to help obtain their own idealized paradise by turning urban public space into designed private space.

John Lautner was a contemporary American architect. His work was centered around the relationship of human beings to space and the space's connection to nature. He did not believe in the separation of human beings and nature. He states, "Shelter is the most basic human need." (johnlautner.org). Launter was born in 1911 and died in 1994. He was raised in Marquette Michigan in the rich woods by Lake Superior. Presumptions have been made eluding to the location of Lake Superior being the center of Lautner's philosophy of man and space. He would return to Lake Superior many times and considered it a heaven on Earth. Lautner received his bachelors in English from Northern Michigan University before working as an apprentice at Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's fellowship, in 1933. Lautner worked with Wright for six years, supervising the construction of two major projects, before moving to Los Angeles to establish his own practice in 1937. He continued to work on projects for Wright up until 1939 and Wright even called Lautner "The world's second-best architect," (Baer, 106). Many of Lautner's buildings have been featured in Hollywood films, commercials, publications such as Curbed L.A. and Playboy, and even in documentaries on Lautner himself. It is from Lautner's childhood, beliefs, and teachings of Wright's organic style that I find techniques to re-enforce my theory of

how home owners of his residents obtained their own Utopian and expressed Arcadian perception of the city.

To better understand the techniques used and the disciplines of architecture one must look at the way in which architecture exist. According to Philip Bishop's *A Beginner's Guide to the Humanities*, "Architecture is the art of building – an act of constructing a shelter for human activity or a stage for human action," (p. 30). The fundamental use of architecture is building a stable shelter and therefore functions means more than the aesthetics of ornamentation. When one ornaments or decorates that is considered an artistic expression of style. Bishop suggests that art, design, and function come before the beauty of a building. He also asserts that ornamentation gives meaning to the space in which dwellers inhabit. Modernist architecture was Lautner's style and his designs were, "typically a pure glass, and steel box unspoiled by decoration. Many also use concrete, exteriors, either smoothed or roughened," (Bishop, 42). Another technique used to obtain infinite space was building up mountaintops. Infinite space creates more space out side of the structure of the home. Most of Lautner's homes were built in the hills around Los Angeles County. Bishop states, "They traversed that vertical axis between the ordinary human and the cosmic," (p. 31). Bishop is stating that mountains have always been used as a way to get closer to the heavens. The placement of Lautner's home utilized these techniques to obtain infinite space and to appeal to their mystification of Los Angeles as a paradise or Eden.

The history of Los Angeles' landscape and architecture appear to be a myth created by the Anglo American who migrated to the desert landscape in the hopes of create their own paradise. McClung argues that the novel "*Ramona*" written in 1884 helped shape the area into a material equivalent of new settlers' desire.¹ *Ramona* helped create nostalgia for a cultural invention of Mexican heritage. The vision of Los Angeles therefore, became one of literary fiction because this heritage was non-existent. Travelers came to Los Angeles in search of a place that would satisfy their need for urban expansion. McClung states, "Los Angeles is expected to give immediate gratification – to justify the long trip – to be the beginning of a new

¹ McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*, University of California Press, 2000, pg. 44.

life whose rewards will materialize later," (p. 47). Even today, people move to Los Angeles in search of a place to satisfy their need for a paradise.

The novel, *Ramona*, made Southern California in the late 19th century more of a quasi-colonial area and smothered the old Mexican heritage. *Ramona* offered readers a Mexican colonial nostalgia because of the landscape but this did not match its iconic presentation. Instead, McClug states that settlers, "remake the landscape and the city according to the mentality of their desired; from another, we might deplore their bad faith in appropriating only those parts, of the past they found convenient," (p. 48). It was the use of landscape and architecture that helped take control of the image of Los Angeles by using neo-Hispanic architecture and changing the landscape. Yet, it is architecture that sets the stage for the mystification of the representation of Los Angeles as an Arcadia. During the time the novel was written it appealed to Anglos and it was their interpretation of Hispanic heritage that created Los Angeles' culture. From this created cultural Los Angeles architecture had the Mission Revival style from about 1880-1915 and before 1880 was the Mexican revival style.

An example of how the effects that the novel had on the general public is asserted by McClung depiction of the citrus label from Comulos rancho, the supposed home of *Ramona* in the novel, and it was that image of her home's architecture that spread through Southern California and helped refashion the area as province of Spain. "Due to this the influx began the Spanish Colonial Revival of 1915," (McClung, 98). The Comulos advertisement for oranges and the use of *Ramona* as a backdrop solidified the mystification and brought sightseers from across the states. Although, many believed Los Angeles was a paradise, others argued that it was nothing more than a dried up dessert. It was not until the city commerce decided to refashion the landscape with aqueducts, parks, and palm trees while the promoting the sunny weather, miles of beaches, and orchards that city started to resembled a paradise. The homes were in the style of ranchos, huts, mediterranean villas, cottages, and other style that encompassed the canyons and foothills creating an even great illusion of a romanticized past that never existed outside of the novel.

As the population increased over the years, due the marketing of the city commerce, Los Angeles began to assimilate the land to the uses of the city and the suburbs. Los Angeles was perceived as a future that could be built based on the landscape and weather. Settlers were able to

plant orchards and create what they believed to be a real paradise. McClung state that settlers had an unsuppressed need to create their own artificial paradise. “Vast orchards and seemingly infinite neighborhoods of modest houses in substantial gardens are the two most successful displaces of the wilderness model,” (McClung, 125). The artificial paradise of the Arcadia not only included gardens, orchards, but also the notable plant in the region, the palm tree.

Although, the palm tree is not a native to the entire area it is native to Palm Springs, and it has became a symbol of the natural paradise. McClung discusses how the palm tree became distributed vastly across the area, “Some twenty-five thousand of them were planted in honor of the 1932 Olympic games, and the palm has became virtually synonymous with the city,” (p. 125). Palm trees have become nothing more than a way to contribute to the mystification of Los Angeles as an Arcadia. McClung makes claims against the way in which Los Angeles was created. Through out McClung’s writing he points out the many semiotic clichés of Southern California that have built its misrepresentation such as the “palm trees” which according to McClung were strategically placed for effect. He argues that the wilderness is being taken away and replaced with an idealistic concept of what it should look like and not what is actually was. Palm trees were not naturally conceived by the land but instead placed for a more tropical look. He states, “Admiration as well as frustration and violence characterize Los Angeles’s treatment of its natural envelope, paralleling the citizens’ characteristics will both dwell in the common Arcadia and to build private Utopias,” (p. 117). The importance of McClung’s argument establishes how Los Angeles came to view its own landscape and how that image affected the architecture.

This type of organic style or “natural” environment is used an architectural feature for Lautner in which he obtain from Frank Lloyd Wright. Many of the Lautner homes use some form of palm tree, garden, and orchard for their landscape or vista. Although, artificial landscape is not natural it is an element of the principal of organic style and use in a way that promotes nostalgia for the Arcadia in Los Angeles. This type of organic style or “natural” environment is used an architectural feature for Lautner in which he obtain from Frank Lloyd Wright. Many of the Lautner homes use some form of palm tree, garden, and orchard for their landscape or vista. Although, artificial landscape is not natural it is an element of the principal of organic style and use in a way that promotes nostalgia for the Arcadia in Los Angeles.

McClung also addressed that residential establishments started to be leisure places for those who the wealthier class and they found ways to make their homes look more integrated with the new aesthetics of “wilderness.” McClung uses Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural style as away to assimilate a home’s construction to that of the landscape. Suggesting maybe Los Angeles could have built into the landscape and not paved over the landscape. He quotes Wright’s view on the landscape and how he uses architecture to promote it by stating, “beautiful in California in the way that California herself is beautiful,” (p. 132) asserting that the organic nature of California could develop its own special kind of architecture. The Fallingwater residence was built in 1930 by Frank Lloyd Wright as a residential dwelling in Pennsylvania. The home was constructed based on the owners need for a mountain retreat and the stream that flowed next to the land called Bear Run. Wright was giving a difficult task to build the home without obstructing natural elements.

Wright is praised because he was able to suspend almost half of the home over the stream with use of steel beams. Wright’s visual illusion of the home floating over Bear Run was what he considered a submission to nature. Bishop states, “steel-reinforced concrete trays that anchored at one end and hung unsupported at the other (cantilevering),” (p 33). This description alone asserts that Wright was able to build around nature. Not only did he build around nature but he also left the interior and exterior of the wall undecorated and brought in elements from the outside. The home became an extension of what was already in place. The importance of Fallingwater is to show that buildings at even given place can be interwoven with the nature landscape and still be artfully beautiful. This relates to the creation of the Arcadia by settlers, in

the city of Los Angeles, became focused on expanding their land with a wilderness appeal.

According to the Taliesin website organic architecture is defined as, “Architecture designed to harmonize with its environment and the needs of the people living in it.”² This means that buildings designed by particular architects such as Wright, who designed residential spaces in Los Angeles to appeal to the desert landscape, and Lautner who appealed more to the artificial paradise landscape could both vary in design. The main principals of Wright’s organic style include the site, materials used, and the structure of the building. The building must be built to complement the natural terrain, real or artificial, in the case of Los Angeles. Natural materials from regional sources could be used in combination with modernist materials of concrete, steel, and glass. Lastly, the construction of the structure could include the opening up of spaces by expanding windows that allow for skylight, eliminating walls that would break away from the box architecture and thus allowing for interior freedom or infinite space.

With a population increase in the 1900s due to urban sprawl the small area of Los Angeles had a need for expansion occurred heavily after the installation of railroads and then later the creation of cars and freeways. Suburbs that were located further from the city center, downtown Los Angeles, could be found backing up into the foothills. The area of the foothills was dense with homes scattered across the mountains with the little lot space for yards. Also, the price of land in Los Angeles increased over the years and may have also influenced the size of residential lots. The issue with building upon the foothills to obtain the vista was that it was difficult to build on a slope. Banham describes the two solutions to this problem:

The common solution for a long time has been to create a formed substructure of some sort with supporting post and tiles and dead-men to fix it back to the slope behind,” and the Smith house solution consisted of “the flat floored single-storeyed house integrated with the supporting frame below, a common steel structure continuing the bay-system leaving the space underneath wide open. (p. 85).

The environment of landscape Lautner’s homes were constructed upon were based on the refashioning of Los Angeles by settlers who believed in mythology of the novel *Ramona* and

² Gouwens, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Dawsari, and Victor Sidy. "Organic Architecture Selected Bibliography." *Taliesin, Building Architects Since 1932*. Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.taliesin.edu/organic.html>>.

wanted the area to be viewed as an Arcadia. The foothills have a heavily significant roles in the residential spaces created by Lautner who used organic architecture to develop many homes. Although, not all of his residences are built upon hills, the duration of this paper focuses on the four popular homes located in Los Angeles County, and how they utilized the organic style to establish a Utopian atmosphere inside the residence. Lautner's homeowners did not create cities but personal paradises that were perfect to their refashioned environments in Los Angeles due to the use of Wright's organic architecture's three main principals of site, building material, and construction.

The construction of the Chemopshere home, located in the Hollywood hills, was for Leonard Malin, a young aerospace engineer, who had an issue with building upon a steep slope above Mullhond Drive. Banham states, "It sit perched upon a single concrete column. It doesn't tear away or pave completely over the hillside. This takes the standard tract house and places it in mid air," (p. 86). The home used modern materials and engineering that were appropriate to the time, place, and residents. Chem Seal sponsored the coating of the building and thus concluding it its name. The house is shaped like an octagon that has glass windows on all sides giving views of both the San Fernando Valley and the hillside. There are eight metal beams that support the base of the home to the concrete column. The house has sense of motion when inhabitants move from one room to the next. Lautner's use of modern architecture allowed the homeowners to obtain even more views of the hillside and agriculture because there was not any mountain cropping. Banham define mountain cropping as, "scrapping away the mountain until you have enough horizontal surface," (p. 88). Lautner's approach to the Chemosphere and its landscape was different than the majority of architects because mountain cropping is still viewed as the most economically efficient way of building around the foothills.

The Schaffer house began to construction in 1949 and in the woods of Glendale located the Los Angeles Forest. The location of the home is in the wooded hillside residential community called Whiting. The area consists of single-family homes and it is located in the Verdugo Mountains with activities like hiking trails, nature walks, and mountain biking. Due to the wooded area there are animals like rabbits, dear, coyotes, snakes, bobcats, and many more animals. When Lautner began construction he looked at the elements of site that included natural materials like live oak and sycamore trees. Although, Lautner did not use these trees to build the

home he also did not remove these trees instead he built the home in the natural environment. Even though, he did not build the home local materials he did use redwood from northern California.

Over eighty percent of the construction of the home is constructed out of redwood and blends into the natural terrain of the wooded and mountainous environment. Within the construction of the Schaffer home Lautner uses glass material to open up sky space, which, allows natural light to pierce through the openings of the red wood. The home is not built on a hill overlooking Los Angeles foothills but the home's appeal to organic style is in the use of materials in which it was constructed. The home uses a modernist approach by supporting redwood with brick and concrete. The Schaffer home appeals to the homeowners need for the great doors. At first glance one would think the home was like a pitched tent in the woods or even a modernist cabin. Inside the home there is an interaction of the rooms by the glass doors, which are center on central pivots. The glass doors in the home allow for a seamless divide between the home and the woods and appear to invite the outdoors in. At any given moment residents have an unhindered view of the terrain around them.

The Sheats-Goldstein residence is located in Beverly Crest, Los Angeles and began construction in 1963. The original owners were artist and doctor, Helen and Paul Sheats, and their five children. Since then, the house has passed through numerous owners until acquired by James Goldstein in 1972. Goldstein purchased the home and started a series of remolding projects that are still currently being completed. The home is built on three acres and into a sandstone ledge. Lautner was not able to finish all the remolding of the home as he died in 1994. What Lautner was able to do for Goldstein was create a home with stunning views of the century city skyline and create all the furniture within in the home. These two aesthetics of the home play a huge role in how Goldstein is able to create his own modern Utopia that invites in Los Angeles' valley.

Lautner built the home to overlook the valley below and has skyline of Century City. To keep from hindering the focal point of infinite space that invites the city into the living space by creating built-in furniture in the living room. A sink in the home's kitchen is clear so that it also does not hinder the vista. The living room is also covered by a coffered roof, a triangle, which links the open space to the city in the foreground. All of the triangles in the home's construction point toward the city skyline as if to building up the focal point even more. Majority of the home's

materials are rosewood floors, glazed walls, glass, concrete, are all an extension of the landscape and they seek to seamlessly integrate the home with the lush surroundings. There is blurring between the interior and exterior of the home. Goldstien also added a rich garden with Koi ponds in the back of the home. The vegetation expends all around the residence and appears to be pressing up against the glass windows and concrete walk ways that have no railings.

The importance of this is home is that in function simultaneous with its environment to capture the ideal aesthetic of the paradise. Lautner made sure not to hinder the view of the city by using glass windows that pointed out to the landscape. He also created furniture that could not be moved around so that no matter who owned the home it would have to stay the way it was. This type of organic architecture was also done by Wright in his construction of Falling Waters. The Sheats-Goldstein home is constructed for the sole purpose of taking in the infinite space that the Hollywood hillside has to offer. It was not constructed for privacy that could have been the reason why Goldstein added the lush vegetation to block out unwarranted views but also promote nostalgia for the paradise that never actually existed.

The most important feature of Lautner's residential homes in Los Angeles have is the way in which they assert the Utopian ideal of being perfect to the place in which they exist. Each residence discussed embodies different elements of the landscape of Los Angeles and residential ideals of an established Arcadia whether imaginary or real. Many of these homes have become landmarks of Los Angeles and are recognized as monumental pieces that express the ideals of Angelos that can be traced back to the novel of *Ramona*. Although, mission style homes and stucco boxes of Irving Gill still are fixtures in the California architecture, it is homes of modernist ideals that still encompass the city's need for urban and infinites space that tell the story of how Los Angeles came become one of the most recognized and traveled cities.

Work Cited

Bishop, *A Beginner's Guide to the Humanities*, 2nd Ed Pearson, 2007.

Banham, *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, 1971.

Chan Imperial, Anna Loraine. "Chemosphere Residence." Docomomo US. Getty Research Institute, 17 Aug. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2014. <http://www.docomomo-us.org/register/fiche/chemosphere_residence>.

Gouwens, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Dawsari, and Victor Sidy. "Oranic Architecture Selected Bibliography." Taliesin, Building Architects Since 1932. Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation, n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.taliesin.edu/organic.html>>.

Hise, Greg, and William Francis. Deverell. *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted-Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region*. Berkeley: University of California, 2000. Print.

Kudler, Adrian G. "Inside John Lautner's Dangerous Sheats-Goldstein House." Curbed LA. Curbed Network, 25 July 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.
http://la.curbed.com/archives/2011/07/inside_john_lautners_dangerous_sheatsgoldstein_house.php

Kudler, Adrian G. "John Lautner's Stevens House Hits Market in Malibu For \$22MM." Curbed LA. Curbed Network, 19 Aug. 2011. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.
http://la.curbed.com/archives/2013/08/john_lautners_stevens_house_hits_market_in_malibu_for_22mm.php

Kudler, Adrian G. "Touring John Lautner's Incredible Schaffer House and Talking About Why It Isn't Selling." *Curbed LA*. Curbed Network, 5 Nov. 2012. Web. 15 Apr. 2014.
http://la.curbed.com/archives/2012/11/touring_john_lautners_incredible_schaffer_house_and_talking_about_why_it_isnt_selling.php

McClung, *Landscapes of Desire: Anglo Mythologies of Los Angeles*, University of California Press, 2000.

Matuscak, Melissa. "The Biography of John Lautner." The John Lautner Foundation. Michigan Historical Society, July-Aug. 2012. Web. 02 May 2014.
<<http://www.johnlautner.org/wp/?p=1272>>.

Unknown. "Los Angeles Conservancy." Schaffer House. Los Angeles Conservancy, n.d. Web. 19 Apr. 2014. <<https://www.laconservancy.org/locations/schaffer-house>>.

Unknown. "Whiting Woods History." History. Whiting Woods Property Owners Association, n.d. Web. 27 Apr. 2014. <<http://www.whitingwoods.org/History.htm>>.