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contours of the architect’s project will come to light, that a common language will be detected. Goff’s work, however, resists such conclusions in its very heterogeneity, a fact that Prina clearly comprehends: Rather than trying to understand his subject by offering the “complete Goff,” he seeks to rekindle a subjectivity through a scrupulous and meticulous attention to detail, by lingering over the house’s bits and pieces affectively. Just as Goff attended to the particular subjectivity of each of his clients in designing projects for them—a practice that had the effect of liberating him from a signature style—so does Prina attend to Goff’s. It is this affective and deeply personal dimension of Prina’s film that is its most notable dimension and which distinguishes it from so many other contemporary artistic representations of modern architecture, from Dan Graham’s to Thomas Ruff’s.

Though the entirety of Prina’s film takes place within the Ford House, other works by Goff appear in it as well. There is a passage when the camera passes over two of Goff’s models, including his unbuilt design for the Joe Price Studio in Bartlesville, Oklahoma (1954). Suddenly the viewer is made aware of scale, and of the deeply hermetic situation in which the film is taking place. There is a sense that we are inhabiting a world within a world here. It is not so much that the models appear to be real spaces but rather that the house itself is a type of model, a respite or reserve, perhaps a model world for us to take refuge in. The story about Prina finding the Ford House after the Farnsworth House makes perfect sense in this regard. After encountering the long glass walls of Mies’s transparent rectangle in the woods, exposed to vision on all sides, Prina comes across a round hut stuck in the ground, bordered by dark coal walls. (Although the house has a large glass wall, it is never seen here.) There is a deep sense of interiority, of protectiveness, and also perhaps of an opacity before the world captured in the Ford House. But it is only a temporary reprieve from the world outside. In the film’s penultimate sequence, we are given a long shot of the house’s door, a threshold space, a wooden plane hovering between two thin panes of glass. In the film’s last shot, the camera is suddenly transferred to someone’s shoulders and moved outside, wobbling now, into the snow-covered ground of the Illinois winter. The camera stands there for what feels like a long moment, staring out at a trio of leafless trees. We hear the last notes of music. A couple of cars whiz by on the road. It is an eerie scene, but also sentimental. We have to leave the house at some point, it seems. But once we do, exposed and unmoored from cultural reference, it is not necessarily clear where we should go.

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Note
1. I refer the reader to Tom Holert’s incisive essay “Flaming Feature,” Artforum 38, no. 9 (May 2000), pp. 148–53, for a reading of the earlier film.

Murray Grigor, director
Vignette films for Between Earth and Heaven: The Architecture of John Lautner

Murray Grigor, director
Infinite Space: The Architecture of John Lautner

“What goes on in the windshield is cinema in the strict sense.”—Paul Virilio (1988)

Murray Grigor, director of over a dozen architectural documentaries, premiered his new film on the architecture of John Lautner (1911–1994) at the Palm Springs International Film Festival in January 2009. Its cinematography of Lautner’s spaces opens up key questions concerning the expected relationships between architecture and cinema.² Of course, buildings and cities are frequently depicted on screen. And elaborate environments are often built for films; sets designed for the films of Fritz Lang, Alfred Hitchcock, and Jacques Tati are some “architectural” favorites. However, it seems less common for buildings themselves to operate overtly as vision apparatuses. This is precisely the impulse of Lautner’s architecture; his buildings are more about framing than posing, more like cameras than photographs. But they are also eminently photogenic, having appeared as primary backdrops in numerous blockbuster Hollywood movies.

Grigor’s film is not the first on Lautner’s architecture; Bette Jane Cohen directed a feature-length documentary with Lautner’s cooperation in 1991.³ Film also played a prominent role in the recent John Lautner retrospective at the Hammer Museum, but photographs were practically absent from the exhibition. This is partly because curator Frank Escher blames the spectacular quality of published photography for damaging Lautner’s reputation. The “glossiness” of these images, he argues, focused attention on the superficial and sensationalist aspects of Lautner’s projects and drew it away from his guiding spatial ideas. The only major photographic component of the exhibition was located in a darkened room at the gallery entrance, where fourteen of his own travel slides were projected in a continuous, luminous loop. These images were intended to offer glimpses of what inspired him: cumulous clouds, desert terrain, ocean surf, and so forth. Indeed, Lautner obviously loved these natural environments, but their implied role in his design process is problematic. One might assume that an admitted “organicist,” who apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin for six years (1933–39), might attempt to isolate certain geological and meteorological patterns for experiments in bio-mimicry. Lautner did sometimes describe his projects using natural metaphors—comparing the Elrod house (1968) in Palm Springs to a desert flower, the Stevens house (1968) in Malibu to ocean waves, and the Sheats/Goldstein house (1963/89) in Los Angeles to a primeval forest. But this rhetoric clouded—and continues to cloud—one of Lautner's
Lautner, Banham concerned himself temporary automobile design. But unlike architecture has much to learn from Detroit car-body stylists, insisting that celebrated the “streamlined shells” of 1955 essay “Vehicles of Desire,” Banham turi and Denise Scott Brown’s analysis of Vers une architecture airplanes, ocean liners, and automobiles in architecture: Le Corbusier’s celebration of automotive obsessions pervade modern architecture. But Banham the bicyclist was not entirely oblivious to this ecstatic motive universe. But Banham the bicyclist was not entirely oblivious to this ecstatic position at the helm. He even quoted a 1950s Buick advertisement locating the subject behind the wheel: “The driver sits in the dead calm at the center of all this motion—hers is a lush situation.”

This “lush situation” in Lautner’s buildings is achieved through ocular expansion and automation instead of motorized acceleration, but his spaces still have a recognizably vehicular sensibility. Many Lautner projects employ curvilinear forms, it was not the streamlined shells of car body stylists that motivated his work. It was, instead, the experience of sitting at the controls in the center of one’s own automotive universe. But Banham the bicyclist was not entirely oblivious to this ecstatic position at the helm. He even quoted a 1950s Buick advertisement locating the subject behind the wheel: “The driver sits in the dead calm at the center of all this motion—hers is a lush situation.”

This relationship with De la Vaux paralleled architect Richard Neutra’s collaboration with photographer Julius Shulman. Shulman’s perspectival framing techniques reinforced the linear steel and rectilinear planes of Neutra’s projects the way De la Vaux’s boat building techniques realized the curving glueams and difficult geometries of Lautner’s structures. De la Vaux describes the Chemosphere, for example, as having a structure composed of eight ship’s keels. The encircling glazing of this octagonal project tilts inward at the top, producing an aerodynamic image that suggests movement. The project has been frequently compared to a UFO, and the glass slopes at approximately the same angle as an automobile windshield. In actuality, however, the glazing’s oblique orientation has nothing to do with wind resistance, and everything to do with visual resistance. Lautner inclined the glass to eliminate the middle ground for the viewer. As he explained, “I wanted it to work like a penthouse overlooking the Valley. I purposely sloped the glass in so when you stand up against it you can’t look straight down. You are forced to look at the magnificent view.”

Many other Lautner buildings—not only those built by De la Vaux—deploy forms of vehicular fenestration. The Turner house (1982) in Aspen uses tropes associated with submersibles: portholes look directly into snowdrifts and a cylindrical glass shower conjures images of vacuum tubes, decompression chambers, and even futuristic teleportation. Although it is well known for its mechanical automation, the Sheats/Goldstein house also crosses into the automotive. During his renovation of this project in the 1980s, Lautner designed a transparent glass sink that includes a “rearview mirror” for shaving. He also instructed Duncan Nicholson—an architect in his office from 1989 until Lautner’s death in 1994—to search for wrecked high-end cars with push-button reclining seats that could be used in the new media room. Lautner designed numerous media rooms and home theaters throughout his career, but that was not his closest relationship with cinema.
Cinematic Space

Architectural historian Sigfried Giedion’s conception of modern space-time still haunts architectural discourse: “Still photography does not capture [modern buildings] clearly,” Giedion famously insisted. “One would have to accompany the eye as it moves: only film can make the new architecture intelligible.” A similar desire to make Lautner’s architecture intelligible led the Hammer Museum to commission seven vignette films from Murray Grigor to be projected on the gallery walls throughout the exhibition. The decision to include moving images in the exhibition was made early in the curatorial process. But what is most striking about these films is actually their lack of movement—or at least their commutation of movement. Only a few Steadicam shots in the films follow a pedestrian’s movement through space, and these are notable mainly for the surprising tunnel vision they produce. When moving straight ahead in depth, the filmic frame’s cropping of the periphery becomes particularly evident. Even the Walstrom house—one of Lautner’s rare vertical projects—suffers from the elimination of peripheral views by the camera lens.

The lack of periphery in these moving shots is disconcerting, especially since most of the camerawork in these short films is achieved from relatively stationary vantage points. Cinematographer Hamid Shams frequently focuses on subtle movements within the frame: water rippling, birds gliding, fires flickering. Here we are no longer dealing with the mobile viewer of Le Corbusier’s promenade, but with movement within the frame. Film scholar Anne Friedberg sees this as a crucial vision in the postmodern subject’s relationship with media. She notes that as the mobility of the gaze becomes virtual, the observer becomes “immobile, passive, ready to receive the constructions of a virtual reality placed in front of his or her unmoving body.” Although the presumed passivity of Lautner’s viewers is questionable, the moving images they conspire to construct certainly have more to do with eye movement than pedestrian movement. Lautner’s viewers are closer to moviegoers relaxing in their seats than to Steadicam operators straining to support the weight of their equipment.

Shams also uses panning close-ups to great effect in these films. This type of shot works particularly well with high-definition video, which allows the camera to caress the rough textures of boulders and board-formed concrete, the saturated colors of redwood and moonlit snow, and the reflective surfaces of glass and polished stone. For these shots the camera usually pans and tilts, mimicking the sweep of the eye and rotation of the head. The preference for these shots is at least partly product of budget concerns; laying tracks for extended dolly shots and paying Steadicam operators can be expensive. But the predominant panning and tilting camerawork also discloses something important about Lautner’s viewing subject. His projects do not so much reveal themselves to the pedestrian flâneur as they envelop the viewer at rest. Lautner’s buildings immerse this relaxed viewer in a single continuous vista of the surrounding landscape, activating peripheral vision and encouraging the sweep of the eye from side to side. As Lautner explained toward the end of his career: “When standing on a site I search for its particular and unique expression with all my senses. The sweep of my eye and what it embraces merge through years of work and experience with all I have learned and come to know.” It is telling that he did not mention the focus of his eye, the penetration of his eye, or the wandering of his eye, but rather the sweep of his eye. Lautner’s designs sweep to delineate the frame, like Shams’s camera movements. And unlike Wright’s spaces, which often reveal themselves only gradually to build suspense, Lautner’s spaces frequently expose themselves all at once to stimulate climax.

This partially explains the continual claim that Lautner was the one Taliesin Fellow to “go beyond” Wright. While this problematic cliché lacks specificity, it does apply to the focal length of the two architects. Although Wright’s broad roof overhangs sometimes lead the eye beyond the wall when looking from inside, his projects frequently arrest the eye at the building envelope. Witness the stained glass in his Prairie houses, dark atmospheric interiors of his textile block houses, and translucent glass tubing at his Johnson Wax Headquarters (1936). Lautner’s projects, however, almost always take the eye beyond these boundaries into the distant landscape. Interior (architectural) edges and exterior (landscape) edges become part of the same expansive composition, each boundary successively propelling the eye farther. The Elrod house is a prime example. Before it was removed, glass separated the lower terrace from the raised living space and stood as the first visual boundary. The eye moved through it to the concrete ceiling ring at the perimeter, then to the edge of the swimming pool that bulged out beyond this ceiling, to the valley floor below, to the mountain ridge beyond, and finally to the distant sky—a game of ocular leapfrog that takes the eyes where the legs cannot follow.

This house places the viewer at the center by eliminating horizontal obstruc-
tions wherever possible. The perimeter beam of its massive concrete roof appears to rest directly on the continuous vista of Palm Springs that it frames. The open terrace of Lautner’s Arango house (1973) in Acapulco pushes the viewer even farther into the image. The geometric center of its radiused concrete canopy is actually located within the hillside and therefore cannot be occupied; the viewer must inhabit the image. Lautner designed its irregular floor plan—which bulges beyond the canopy above—to obscure the lights of a resort hotel sited on the hillside below. A sinuous lap pool at this perimeter obviates the need for an obtrusive railing. Both of these projects construe the distant panoramic view as an architectonic component of the design while immersing the viewer in the horizontality of his or her own sphere of vision. Surprisingly, even the grain of high-definition video in Grigor’s films sometimes seems inadequate to convey the deep, clear vision enabled by the sun-drenched climates of Palm Springs and Acapulco. But this is no photographic mistake. Rather, it reveals the problem of a motion-picture lens trying to focus through Lautner’s architectural lens, or a camera trying to focus on the distant landscape through a dusty windshield.

**Cineramic Space**

In his classic work *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, art historian Erwin Panofsky emphasized the artificiality of one-point perspective, noting, “[Perspective] forgets that we see not with a single fixed eye but with two constantly moving eyes, resulting in a spheroidal field of vision.”¹⁰ This spheroidal field is the assumed shape of vision for Lautner’s subjects. It is also the basic shape of several widescreen film formats that were introduced in the postwar period. The first of these was Cinerama, which inventor Fred Waller developed in response to his finding that peripheral vision was as important as stereoscopic vision for achieving the impression of depth. Cinerama debuted in 1952 with a three-projector system and a gigantic, curving screen that filled the peripheral vision of the audience. The filling of the periphery, of course, was a technique that had been used for over 150 years in mass entertainment apparatuses such as panoramas and dioramas.

Cinerama resembled more than the broad curving shape of those earlier vision apparatuses. As film scholar John Belton has noted, Cinerama productions often took the form of travelogues, whose content recalled the exotic painted journeys of panoramas and dioramas.¹¹ Cinerama’s promotional materials exploited the travel ambition of viewers with advertisements depicting individual audience members floating above or swept up in the action on screen. As one advertisement read, “You won’t be gazing at a movie screen—you’ll find yourself swept right into the picture, surrounded by sight and sound.” Media theorist Erkki Huhtamo sees this recurring taste for travel (and escape) as part of a broad, cyclical desire for immersion. He writes, “the quest for immersive experience is a cultural topos, which has been activated—and even fabricated—now and again in culturally and ideologically specific circumstances.”¹² This immersive topos reached an expressive apogee in the 1950s with television and widescreen cinema, and in the 1960s with Lautner’s in-the-round ocular-centric architecture.

Because many of his later projects explored the plastic potentials of concrete as a building material, it makes sense that Lautner's work might be associated with the postwar Expressionist projects of Eero Saarinen and Oscar Niemeyer. They are, after all, two of the architects whose buildings he respected and photographed. But Lautner also photographed the popular futuristic apparatuses of the Seattle and New York world’s fairs of 1962 and 1964–65. The space-age towers and pavilions at those expositions celebrated elevated rotational observation (literally) above all else. This future-oriented conception of buildings as apparatuses for viewing distinguishes Lautner’s work from the projects of other organic and structural Expressionists. His main ambition was not sculptural or tectonic expression. As Lautner straightforwardly explained, “Usually in the hills you have a panoramic view that people are interested in right away, and so most of my things are curved.”¹³ His carefully framed landscapes are the images, and his buildings are the apparatuses that produce them.

This production process relates Lautner’s machines for viewing to Le Corbusier’s “machines for living,” which also exploit the potentials of the panorama. Le Corbusier’s horizontal windows, in challenging the perspective of traditional Western art, have become emblematic of modernism’s attempt to displace the humanist subject. Architectural historian Beatriz Colomina locates the Villa Savoye (1929) at the center of this discussion, and describes the villa as the result of Le Corbusier positioning himself behind the motion-picture camera.¹⁴ There, media technologies occupied the generative center of architecture. For R. Buckminster Fuller, mechanical systems were at the center. His Dymaxion House (1927–46) mobilized panoramic viewing while achieving numerous mechanical efficiencies within a compact in-the-round plan. Lautner borrowed this central plan and central utility column concept for the Chemosphere. But unlike Fuller’s prefabricated house, whose center houses the utility core, the Chemosphere’s center houses the viewer.¹⁵ Although their priorities diverged, both Fuller and Lautner took design cues from the aircraft industry. Lautner was disappointed that aircraft companies never mass-produced the Dymaxion house, and the Chemosphere was partially his attempt to fulfill the promise of Fuller’s design.

Other projects of the Second Machine Age shared the Chemosphere’s cineramic aspirations. Among them were Matti Suuronen’s Futuro House (1968), which resembled a UFO and could be airlifted to remote locations, and Richard T. Foster’s “Carrousel House” (1969), which rotated 360 degrees on its central tower at the touch of a button. Welton Becket also produced several cineramic projects in Los Angeles: the Capitol Records Tower (1956), the LAX Theme Building (with Pereira & Luckman and Paul Williams, 1959), and the Cinerama Dome (1963). Often considered kitsch by the architectural academy and press, these *space*-ships reconfigured buildings as circular vehicles for viewing. They took Le Corbusier’s flat,
horizontal windows and curved them into the third dimension. One wonders how the impact of Grigor's films might change if they were allowed to escape the rectilinear planes of the gallery wall to embrace the viewers of Lautner's enveloping forms with curvaceous widescreen frames.

Outer Space

In the 1960s antigravity was hip, and aerospace imagery rapidly infiltrated domestic space in Los Angeles. It is no accident that Lautner's architectural practice started to take off in the early part of the decade; his success relied partly on the aircraft industry. The Chemosphere's client, Leonard Malin, was an aircraft mechanical engineer who designed and installed the project's “hill-a-vator” funicular. And Kenneth Reiner was an inventor and manufacturer of airplane clips when he met Lautner in 1956. Together, they experimented with numerous innovative systems and products during the design of three projects: a Kaynar Factory (1958) in Pico Rivera and the Midtown School (1960) and Reiner house (“Silvertop” 1963) in Los Angeles. At Silvertop, Lautner used a prestressed concrete shell roof, automatic sliding glass doors, and automated plumbing, electrical, and mechanical systems. Switches in the master bedroom retract a portion of ceiling to reveal a skylight above the bed and pivot panels to open an entire wall to a view. The bed's headboard slides down to reveal a switchboard that operates intercom, lighting, and security systems. Lautner specified similar bedside command consoles for several other projects, notably the Elrod house and the Sheats/Goldstein house.

Although publicity often focused on the mechanical gadgets in his designs, Lautner was proud of his ability to subordinate them. The fact that he located most technology behind the scenes is crucial to understanding his sensibilities. Instead of fetishizing machine parts as the early modernists did, Lautner valued the framing effects they produced. He kept technology out of sight so that sight itself could become the driving experience. In an article from 1905, Lautner's father—a philosophy and social sciences professor at Lautner's alma mater, Northern Michigan University (then Northern State Normal School)—described the quintessentially American, pragmatic desire to achieve maximum effect with minimum effort: “The first and chief aim of inventions is to secure the necessaries of life at a less expenditure of human energy. A second aim is to free man from the narrow bonds of his physical environment and to secure for him a larger sphere of action.”

In his ocular-centric residences, which substitute mechanical energy for human energy wherever possible, Lautner took the challenge of designing a “larger sphere of action” seriously. He used push-button automation in conjunction with expansive viewing to increase the realm of action for his clients.

Although Lautner's houses do not actually levitate, they still transport vision by stretching views into the periphery and toward the distant horizon. For this reason, his spaces are often described as inducing a hovering or floating sensation. For critic Henry Whiting, the feeling of being in the open living space of Lautner's Arango house was like “floating, not quite sure if you are on earth or in heaven.” Lautner himself called this house a “sheltered island floating above the sea.” Joanne Segel, the client for the Segel house (1979) in Malibu, chose Lautner as her architect because she thought he knew how to “stay on the ground and fly.” And in a 1964 article for Playboy magazine, writer Bernard Wolfe labeled Lautner “a wingless aeronaut... engaged in a struggle to the death with the force of gravity.” Playboy also published an article on the Elrod house in 1971. In fact, Playboy and other popular magazines published Lautner's projects when professional architecture journals did not. This is hardly surprising given the similarly circular and automated experience of the Playboy Bed of 1965: “for the contemporary morphous-in-the-round, a wondrously electronic, indolently sybaritic, ingeniously equipped sleep center.” At the touch of a button, the vibrating bed rotated to face a TV, video tapeing unit, Italian marble fireplace, conver-
tation couch, work desk, refrigerator, hi-fi, telephone, intercom, and lighting controls. According to Playboy, the bed "seems almost to float like an enticing island of indolent delight—truly a place for the sweetest of dreams." Like the Playboy Bed, Lautner's floating spaces often have a rotational rather than a progression rationale—less picturesque, more automated.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Lautner purchased a converted Setra German touring bus, which, not surprisingly, contained unconventional fenestration. Because it had been designed to provide ample views for tourists, it was far more transparent than a typical RV. The windows of most campers are completely contained within the vehicle's side walls. But in this case, the glass of the upper encircling windows curved where the side walls joined the ceiling. This radiused design extended views from inside the vehicle the way Lautner extended views from his buildings. Numerous photographs of and from this bus are located in Lautner's personal collection. One photograph showing this camper parked next to the Elrod house elucidates Lautner's vehicular ambitions for the project (Figure 2). In this image, both vehicles for viewing—house and camper—are parked at the edge of a cliff overlooking Palm Springs. The implication is clear: both vehicles can take us there.

These projects transport viewers into the immersive images they construct. Lautner's ocular logic, which emphasizes operation over representation, produced buildings that frame as cameras rather than pose for cameras. But this does not mean Lautner's buildings are not photogenic. Celebrity photographers including Mario Casilli, Douglas Kirkland, and Guy Webster created provocative images of his work using unconventional camera equipment, producing the kind of "distorted" images that were purposely omitted from the Hammer Museum exhibition. Kirkland in particular produced extraordinary depth in photographing the Chemosphere, Elrod house, and Silvertop with fisheye lenses. He also snapped a poignant shot of Lautner in a helicopter flying over his Stevens house in Malibu (Figure 3). Here Lautner is clearly at home—hovering above the earth, surrounded by glass, with the controls at his fingertips. This is the viewer of the Second Machine Age of the 1960s—someone who neither concentrates on the static (photographic) frames of perspective, nor wanders distractedly (cinematically) through the city. Instead, Lautner's viewer reclines in comfort: channel surfing in a La-Z-Boy, pausing the widescreens of Cinerama, and scanning the horizon from the cockpit. Architectural historian Bruno Zevi appreciated these bold voyages into the unknown: "John Lautner did not defend himself," he declared. "He navigated into the organic sea with no compromise, no afterthought, no pretense of an harmonious result." Indeed, Lautner invited viewers to navigate with him. And theirs is a lush situation.

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Notes
2. Parts of this essay are based on research conducted for the author's doctoral dissertation, "Widescreen Architecture: The Immersive Visuality of John Lautner," which is currently being completed in the Critical Studies in Architectural Culture program in the UCLA Department of Architecture + Urban Design.
4. The author would like to thank Lautner's daughters Judith and Karol for access to these personal slide collections. See The John Lautner Foundation: http://www.johnlautner.org/ (accessed 2 Jan. 2009).
7. Sigfried Giedion, Bauern in Frankreich—Bauern in Eisen—Bauern in Eisenbeton (Leipzig and Berlin: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1928), 92.
15. For a recent discussion of panoramic viewing in the work of Fuller, Lautner, and Le Corbusier see Federico Neder, "Tour de contrôle: Scènes domestiques et spectacle extérieur," in Facet 55 (Summer 2004), 28–31. The author would like to thank Jean-Francois Bédard for his translation from the French.

Illustration Credits
Figure 1. Photo by author
Figure 2. Photo by John Lautner (Lautner personal collection)
Figure 3. Photo by Douglas Kirkland, 1979