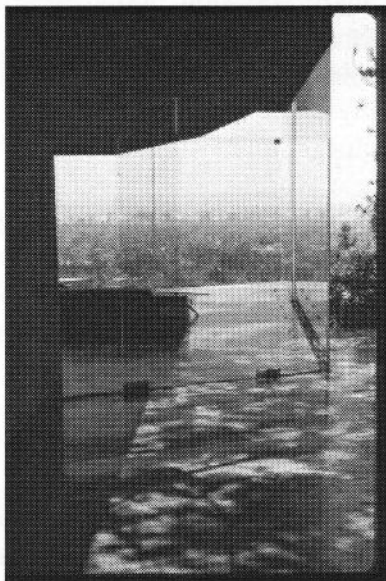


The making of The Spirit of Architecture

BY BETTE JANE COHEN



Interior, Sheats/Goldstein house
Photo by Bette Cohen

There are so many stories about the making of the documentary film, "The Spirit in Architecture: John Lautner"... One of the best things was that I was able to make the film in John Lautner's lifetime! I think it meant a lot to him. I remember after the Museum of Contemporary Art premiere someone in his family came up to me and said, "... Now I understand what my father does." That meant a lot to me!

I made the film over ten years ago and a lot has changed technically. One of the biggest changes is digital technology. I shot the Lautner film in 16 mm, interviews were 1/4 inch tape and cassette which were transferred to 16 mm magnetic stock and I edited on a 16mm steenbeck. Today I edit on a computer and I shoot digitally. It is all pretty amazing.

Another thing I remember is a conversation I had in 1988 with the late architect Anthony Greenberg. I told him I was in architecture school at Southern California Institute of Architecture and about what I was really interested in in architecture. He asked me if I had seen the work of John Lautner. I started to research Lautner's work and I stumbled on the Garcia House (The Rainbow House). The owner invited me in and said there was going to be a Los Angeles Conservancy Tour on Lautner and he invited me to be his guest.

*At the time I made the film
no books had been written
on Lautner.*

I went inside the Carling House for the first time. The living room was on a hinge and the pool was inside and outside the living room. The Silvertop House, Lautner's own house and a few others were on the tour. The owner of the Garcia House said to me, "... you seem so interested in Lautner's work. You should go to Lautner's office; it's right on Hollywood Boulevard".

At the time I made the film no books had been written on Lautner. There were several magazine articles but there had not been a book published on his work. I went to John Lautner's office and I collected a bibliography of his work.

Lautner was not there at the time but Julia Strickland was.

(Continued on page 2)

Screening:

The Spirit in Architecture:

John Lautner

Saturday October 20, 2001

8:00 P.M.

MAK Center for Art and
Architecture L.A.

at the Schindler House

835 North Kings Road

L.A., CA

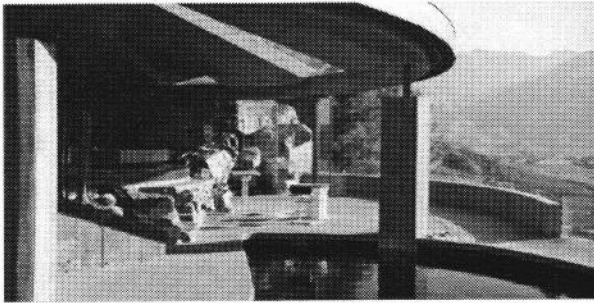
(323) 651-1510

(Continued from page 1)

Marlene Laskey had interviewed Lautner for UCLA's Oral History Program. She edited "Responsibility, Infinity and Nature" from the tapes of those interviews, which was on the bibliography. I went to the University of California Los Angeles and listened to the tapes and it was during that time I was able to visualize the film. It became clear that there were many ideas that he was talking about and that he wished he could show visually. I thought film would be a wonderful format to portray these ideas and complex flowing spaces and describe the creative forces behind them.

I started to write a National Endowment for the Arts grant. I told a friend of mine about the project and he asked, "You are making a film on a man who you have never met and has not given you his permission? What—are you crazy?" I called Lautner's office the next day to make an appointment with John Lautner. I went into Lautner's office with my proposal and introduced myself. I had never made a film before but I had been a film editor on many films.

He said, "Well it seems like a worthwhile project and you seem tall enough to do it!" That is how we started working together.



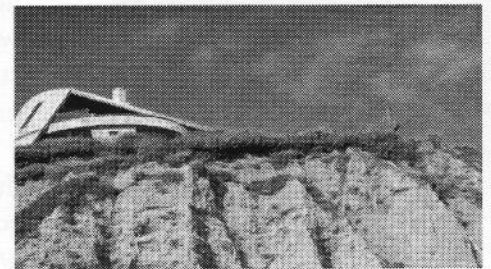
Elrod residence overlooking Palm Springs
Photo by Bette Cohen

Several months later I went back to see Tony Greenberg and I told him I had not only seen the work of John Lautner but that I was making a film on his work.

I started to make the film way before I had any funding. It was an idea in my head but I could visualize it and I knew nothing like it had been done before. Co-producer and co-writer Evelyn Wendel and I began collaborating while she was employed in the Motion Picture Group at Paramount Pictures. Isabel Coulet, Jeanice Deeb and Ann Gray became involved. I had never intended to direct the film. I was looking for a director.

Funding was so difficult for the project we decided to start shooting anyway. We had planned our first 16mm shoot with John Lautner at the Chemosphere House. Bernard Salzman was the first cinematographer. He said to me, "You direct it!" So I did. We rented a camera, got a sound man, and started to shoot. After that first shoot Ann Gray and Evelyn Wendel helped to get support from Paramount Studios. We would shoot and edit and shoot and edit... I remember the hours and hours of interviews with John. Sometimes I could afford to run film and sometimes I could only use a tape recorder. It was always a challenge interviewing him.

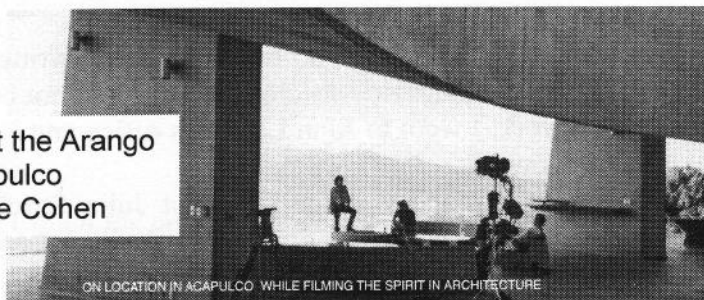
Alan Blaisell and I shot in John's office and shot models on the roof. He was also with me when we shot the exterior of Lautner's own first home. Throughout the project I worked with about fourteen different cinematographers. They all contributed something amazing to the film. They were all challenged and inspired



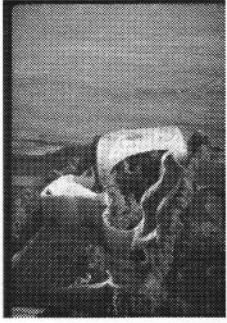
Private residence, Malibu
Photo by Bette Cohen

by Lautner and the project. I got Directors of Photography from agents, directors and producers I had worked with in the past. My friend Carl Bressler was an agent representing cinematographers and editors. He knew of a woman editor from Canada, Michel Jones, and gave her my number. She

On location at the Arango house in Acapulco
photo by Bette Cohen



ON LOCATION IN ACAPULCO WHILE FILMING THE SPIRIT IN ARCHITECTURE



Private residence from the air

became a dear friend, co editor, and co writer. Carl also helped me find different 3 cinematographers to work with. One of Carl's Directors of Photography was an aerial DP named Stan McClain.

One day Stan called me, "I have a 35 mm camera and a helicopter . All you have to pay for is gas and film and processing. Do you want to shoot?" Well, gas from Burbank to Malibu cost a lot and 35 mm film and a 16mm film reduction cost a lot but the shot really does help communicate the extraordinary space. It was quite an experience.

Early on in the film I knew I needed to go to Taliesin West in Phoenix where John Lautner apprenticed with Frank Lloyd Wright. I drove to Phoenix and called Taliesin. I made an appointment with the person in charge who happened to be the late architect William Wesley Peters, who had been an apprentice with John at Taliesin. They opened their archives to me and allowed me to shoot whatever I needed for the film.

I had been corresponding with Bruno Zevi, the late architectural critic in Rome, where I was able to film him. It was quite a challenge to organize a 16mm film shoot in Rome but

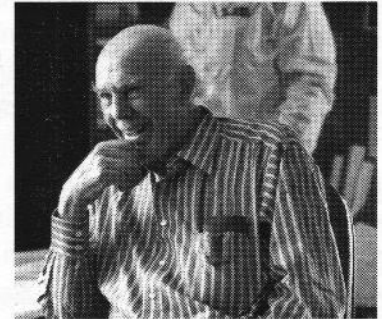
The cinematographer asked, "Where is John?"

somehow I found a crew and I did it. I was also able to interview the late architectural historian Esther McCoy and the late architectural historian David Gebhard. Architectural historians Alan Hess and Ken Breisch were also very helpful.

When I went back to Taliesin to shoot with a great crew we had just landed in Phoenix and rented a truck for us and all our gear. The cinematographer, Toni Palmeri, asked, "Where is John?"

I had not planned for John to be there with us. I called him from the truck while driving on the highway and I said it might be a good idea if he came to Taliesin with us. He jumped on a plane with his wife Francesca. He took us to the spot out in the desert where he had built his first structure. He showed us where he would work and eat. It made it so special that he could be there with us.

John Lautner needed to go to the Elrod House in Palm Springs. I was able to arrange to film there at the time and stay in the house overnight with my crew. We also went to the Desert Hot Springs Motel with John.



John Lautner
photo by Bette Cohen

I get the same feeling today as I got the first time I was in one of Lautner's spaces...it adds something very special to your life.

He had not been out there since he had built it. Steven Finestone was the cinematographer for that sequence. He was very inventive and was able to do a lot with a small budget.

We shot at the Elrod House until the sun went down and shot the sun coming up. It was spectacular to be documenting that space. I will never forget it.

Darin Okada shot with me at the Sheats Goldstein House. Another really special thing happened one day while I was in the editing room. I got a call from Carter Manny from the Graham Foundation. He had worked with John at Taliesin and knew his work. He said they wanted to help us with our project. We not only got support from Paramount but we had gotten our first grant. Later I got a Grant from the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Department and the Architectural Foundation.

We were able to film in Acapulco at the Arango House. Steven Finestone, Jack Walner and Dan Kneece joined us for that sequence. We were able shoot the time-lapse sequence in the bedroom. A few years later, after I had finished the film, we had gone together for the screenings at Taliesin West in Phoenix, in

4 Vancouver BC, Vienna, the University of Michigan in Marquette, his home town, and Harvard University in Cambridge where there was an exhibition of his work and he was invited to lecture. I screened the film at the Pompidou Center in Paris, the House of Architecture in Moscow, an architecture film festival in Bordeaux, France, and Viterbo Italy, the Exploratorium in San Francisco, the Northwest Film Center in Portland Oregon, the University of Washington in Seattle and the Pratt Institute in New York City.

I get the same feeling today as I got the first time I was ever in one of Lautner's spaces: no matter how large or grand it always makes you think about where you are (the light, nature) and adds something very special to your life. It is a feeling of timeless enduring space; it just keeps going. It is really wonderful to see all his structures being restored so beautifully. I know it would have made him very happy!

Bette is distributing the film through her website (see below). She has received emails from all over the world asking for copies. Companies in The Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, and Germany are interested in television distribution. She has heard also from the American University in the United Arab Emirates, Spain, and South Africa. Bette is excited that people from around the world are interested in John Lautner's work and ideas.

*For more information on **The Spirit in Architecture** contact :*
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John Lautner on location
photo by Bette Cohen

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