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February 6 - February 12, 2016
LOS ANGELES, SANTA BARBARA & VENTURA COUNTIES

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FINDING NEUTRA

ARCHITECT JOHN BERTRAM BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO L.A.'S MOST ICONIC MIDCENTURY HOMES.

BY ALYSON PITARRE

Los Angeles may be living in the era of the mega mansion — but ask any of the architects of these spectacular spec homes, and they'll tell you that the designs of Richard Neutra, John Lautner and Rudolph Schindler continue to influence their work. John Bertram has not just been influenced by them — he's spent the last two decades restoring many of their homes from the midcentury period, including those designed by Richard Neutra (1892–1970), whom many consider to be one of the founding fathers of California modernism.

To date, Bertram has applied his hand to five historic Neutra residences in Los Angeles, including the Brown and Hammerman houses in Bel-Air, as well as his own — the 1939 McIntosh house in Silver Lake. The clean lines, smooth surfaces and indoor-outdoor connection were all hallmarks of Neutra, and have since been adapted by Bertram and a newer generation of architects. The draw to the midcentury is natural, says Bertram, because “these homes are very livable, flexible and less fussy.”

We asked Bertram about the modernist legends who have gone before him and how he finds beauty in the everyday — in the tiny yet meaningful connections built between the house and the humans living in it.

YOU'VE RESTORED FIVE NEUTRA HOMES IN YOUR LIFETIME. WHAT WAS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT THING YOU LEARNED FROM THOSE EXPERIENCES?

Neutra was a great architect, and he was also remarkably consistent. He had a trove of details and an almost standardized kit of parts to which he turned again and again.

Yet, instead of remaining static, these details evolved and improved over time and, as a result, it's been interesting to see firsthand how certain details were executed on different projects. Likewise, I also find myself using some of the same details from project to project, refining them a bit each time to make them look and function better.

Neutra was also an undisputed master of siting his houses, and he is celebrated for his almost magical ability to work with problematic lots. A case in point: a few years ago, I spent several months exploring ways to expand one of his houses, which proved incredibly difficult because, although it appeared effortlessly and casually situated, it was very cleverly shoehorned into the lot.

IF NEUTRA WAS ALIVE, WHAT DO YOU THINK HE WOULD SAY ABOUT THE HAMMERMAN TODAY?

On the one hand, I think he would find it gratifying that his houses from a half-century ago are being restored and cared for so lovingly, but at the same time, he would probably be perplexed by the almost slavish devotion to a specific architectural era. Certainly his own work was still evolving at the time of his death, and, had he lived a decade or two longer, I am sure his work would have continued to change, perhaps even considerably. Of course, we'll never know for sure, but he was a forward-thinking and progressive figure who could have easily remained in the architectural vanguard. In any event, I think it's clear that he would not be populating his new houses with midcentury modern furniture!

YOU LIVE IN A NEUTRA HOUSE — WHAT'S IT LIKE?

The size and layout of the McIntosh house actively encourages us to embrace austerity, since there just isn't enough room to have too much of anything. It definitely discourages collecting. The happy result of this is twofold: we focus on the exterior, our backyard garden and the surrounding view, and we focus on the house itself, which, when properly appreciated, has all of the serenity and jewel-like quality of a Japanese tea house. It is supremely functional in the sense that we are able to focus with gratitude on the abundance elsewhere in our lives: health, friends, each other. Of course, I've always been attracted to smaller, more intimate spaces, and two favorite projects of mine are very small: a writer's studio nestled up against Griffith Park and a hillside studio for a fashion photographer (unfortunately unbuilt).

IF YOU WERE LOOKING TO PURCHASE ANOTHER LANDMARK ARCHITECTURAL HOME, WHAT ELEMENTS WOULD YOU LOOK FOR?

Several years ago, I had the opportunity (that I passed up) to purchase a lovely house on Wonderland Park Avenue that I had remodeled and restored for a wonderful client. On a full acre, it was designed by Leland Evison in 1950 for Oscar and Audrey Fuss and retained all of the original landscaping by Garrett Eckbo. The entire house was constructed of redwood, cedar and glass, with absolutely no drywall and only a single plaster wall dividing the carport from the living spaces. I created an interior constructed entirely of vertical-grain Douglas fir, including all of the walls, doors and cabinetry. All of that wood gave the house a warmth and intimacy that was incredibly special. A house like that is a dream of mine.

IN WHAT WAYS HAVE NEUTRA AND OTHER ARCHITECTS OF HIS ERA INSPIRED YOUR WORK?

Outwardly, most of my work clearly owes a great debt to Neutra, among others, but let me provide a less obvious example. Neutra was certainly not alone in his use of wood elements such as built-in seating, casework and walls to unify his interiors. In most of my projects, these tend to be functional and integral to the overall design. I find they help to activate the space and act as mediators between the architecture and the furnishings, not to mention the fact that I love wood and I absolutely adore designing and detailing cabinetry and built-ins.

WHY DO YOU THINK NEUTRA HAS REMAINED SO REVERED IN THE DESIGN WORLD?

On a purely pragmatic level, Neutra had all the hallmarks of what we'd now consider a very successful brand. Supremely talented, charismatic, ambitious and a relentless champion of his own work, perhaps most importantly he was also extremely prolific and had a clearly identifiable aesthetic throughout his entire 40-year career. The designer Paul Laszlo, a near contemporary, said that Neutra's style was his personal religion. To be sure, there is as much of the evangelist and proselytizer in him as there was in his former employer Frank Lloyd Wright. But it's the planarity and the slenderness of structure in Neutra's work (which Wright derided as looking "thin and cheap") that still seems radical today.



LOOKING BEYOND L.A., WHY DO YOU THINK MODERNISM TOOK OFF IN PALM SPRINGS?

A number of locations within a 100-mile radius of Los Angeles were retreats and recreational outlets for the entertainment community seeking to escape from Hollywood, including Santa Barbara, Ojai, Rancho Santa Fe and even Apple Valley, but Palm Springs was a clean slate, architecturally speaking, and afforded opportunities of invention and reinvention not present in other locations. Ample credit must be given to the qualities of the place itself: the extreme summer heat, the near-constant sunshine, and the relentless flatness of the area beneath the mountains. These factors influenced, to a great degree, the low-slung horizontality of the architecture that flourished where there was no view and nothing to look at and therefore no reason to build upward, as well as the predominance of reflective and low-maintenance white plaster that suited a relatively transient community in a climate that was utterly hostile to wood.

WHY DO YOU THINK CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTS RETURN TO MIDCENTURY ARCHITECTURE REPEATEDLY?

To those willing to devote time to careful study, midcentury modern architecture offers a multitude of practical lessons and interesting choices that are pertinent to life today. But I think what is most often lost in the translation is that, with many notable exceptions of course (like, for instance, Sunnyslands), the work of the period was smaller, simpler, cheaper and humbler than it appears to us now. The unfortunate irony is that to emulate it today can be very expensive, which is another reason why slavish devotion to modernism can be a bit absurd. Also, at a remove of 50 years, nostalgia is undoubtedly a factor. Ultimately, however, the best modernism is arguably architecture's high-water mark, and it represents a time of great promise and opportunity.

WHAT ARE YOU WORKING ON CURRENTLY?

Among other things, I recently completed extensive renovations of the 1962 Cornet Residence by Smith & Williams in Pasadena and the 1964 Rowan Residence by Robert Skinner in Beverly Hills. Also, for the past year, I have been working on remodeling and restoring a wonderful Paul Laszlo house from 1956 in Pacific Palisades as well as continuing work on a Craig Ellwood house in Sherman Oaks, which has been an ongoing project for some time.

