

# For the Love of Lautner

One of architect John Lautner's L.A. masterworks was left unfinished. Then the president of Beats and his wife decided to realize his plan—and update it for the 21st century.

BY CHRISTINA BINKLEY  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAGNUS MÅRDING

**I**N 1956, the Los Angeles industrialist Kenneth Reiner, who made his fortune by inventing a self-locking aircraft nut and spring-loaded hair clips, decided to build himself a home that would double as a laboratory for modern living. After purchasing a one-and-a-half-acre hilltop parcel overlooking the Silver Lake Reservoir a block from his home at the time, he enlisted a 45-year-old architect named John Lautner to design a structure that would turn his space-age dreams into domestic realities. The modernist landmark, considered one of Lautner's masterpieces, boasts a cantilevered driveway and a glass wall suspended from a track that, when it slides open, transforms the vast domed living room into a plain air terrazzo terrace.

Reiner and his architect spent the next eight years working on the house, devising contraptions to control its environs (the master-bed headboard, for instance, operated every light on the property). But Reiner never occupied Silvertop, as he christened the house. Derailed and financially drained by numerous side projects—including contributions for the preservation of L.A.'s Watts Towers—he abandoned his Atomic Age masterwork. In 1974, it was sold in bankruptcy to a neighboring couple, the Burchills, who made it habitable, moved in and stayed for 40 years.

And it might have stayed unfinished if Apple hadn't bought Beats Electronics. Shortly after that \$3 billion deal closed, in August 2014, the president of Beats, Luke Wood, and his wife, Sophia Nardin, a writer, put in a bid for Silvertop. Having lived nearby for 20 years, the couple—who met as undergraduates at Wesleyan—knew about the house but had been searching for a site to build their own dream dwelling from the ground up. Wood,

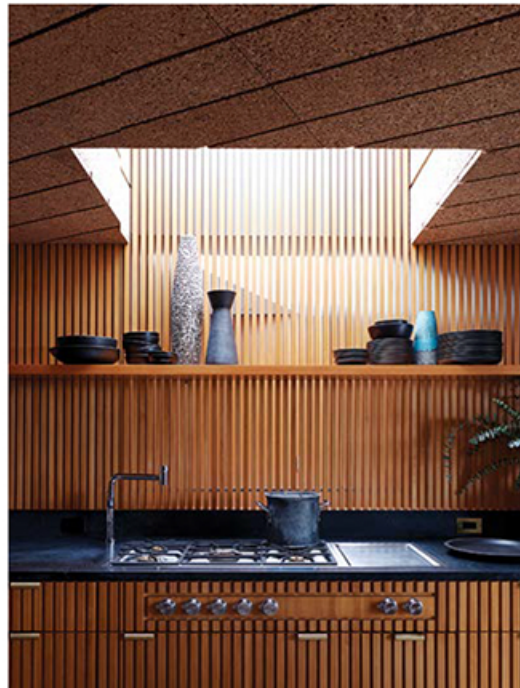


**SPACE ODDITY**  
Silvertop, as the Lautner house is known, was commissioned in 1957 but never occupied by its first owner. The bedrooms (at left) are divided from the house's public spaces by a brick wall.





**THE WOOD LIFE**  
Left: In the master bedroom, the walls, as in much of the house, are Louisiana cypress. Right: New woodwork in the kitchen.



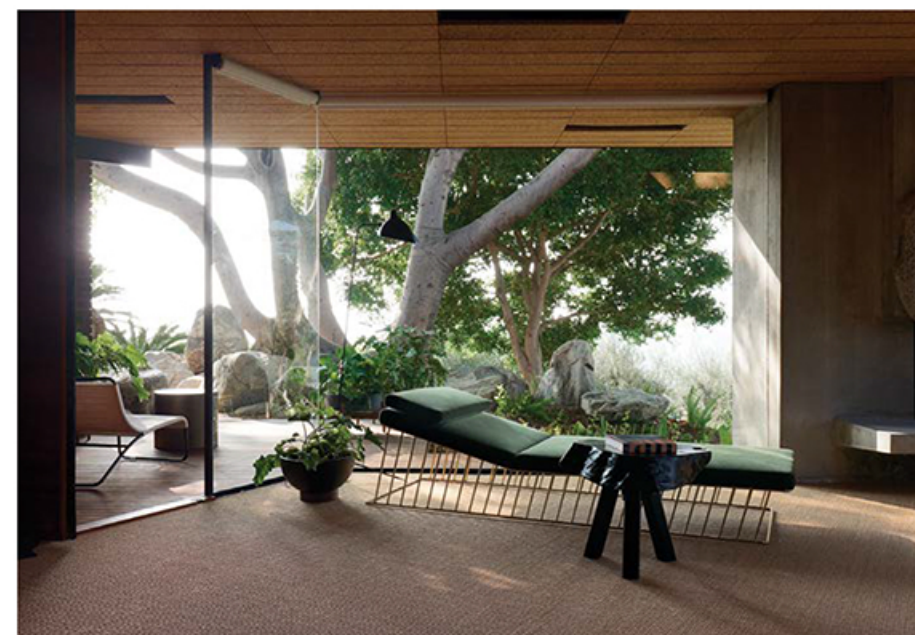
“I CONSIDER LAUTNER THE MISSING LINK BETWEEN FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT AND FRANK GEHRY.”  
—FRANK ESCHER



**NIGHT COURT**  
Left: Silvertop's cantilevered tennis court features lighting that can be raised during play—or lowered to clear the house's view of Silver Lake Reservoir beyond. Right: The ceiling in the guesthouse is cedar with Douglas fir beams and was restored from Lautner's original design.



**CREATURE COMFORTS**  
Clockwise from top right: Wood and Nardin in the living room; the guesthouse boasts a recording studio; the chaise in the master bedroom is from Phase Design.



a former guitarist and music industry veteran who joined Beats in 2011 to work, in part, on product development with founders Dr. Dre and Jimmy Iovine, found himself drawn to the idea of completing what Reiner had started, bringing Silvertop and its James Bond atmosphere into the 21st century—by applying a Steve Jobs overlay.

Silvertop's \$7.5 million listing created a minor frenzy among midcentury architecture aficionados. Rivals for the property included Hedi Slimane, at the time the creative director of Yves Saint Laurent, and Benedikt Taschen, founder of Germany's Taschen publishing house. Slimane says he hoped to use the 4,700-square-foot home and its 960-square-foot guesthouse as a studio. “I went to see it a few times. It was completely untouched, a true masterpiece,” Slimane said via email. As the bidding escalated, Taschen, who owns another Lautner in Los Angeles known as the Chemosphere, promised to best any offer. Wood and Nardin “had their kids with them; we just really liked them,” says Susan Burchill, whose mother, Jacklyn Burchill, died several months after selling Silvertop to the couple for \$8.55 million.

Wood bought every book he could find on Lautner, who had been largely overlooked by the East Coast architectural establishment until after his death in 1994, at age 83. Known for his futuristic approach and deft use of space with complex building sites, the onetime Frank Lloyd Wright protégé was hailed by

his mentor as the “second best” architect in the world (after Wright). “I consider John Lautner to be the missing link between Frank Lloyd Wright and Frank Gehry,” says architect Frank Escher, who oversaw Lautner's archives and placed them at L.A.'s Getty Center.

Southern California is dotted with Lautners, many owned by fashion or entertainment luminaries. Designer Jeremy Scott owns two Lautners, in Los Angeles and Palm Springs. The actress Kelly Lynch and her husband, producer Mitch Glazer, own a Lautner in L.A.'s Los Feliz hills. Bob Hope's former Palm Springs Lautner home, with its spaceship curvilinear roof, hosted Louis Vuitton's 2016 cruise collection show. One Lautner-designed residence, perched above L.A.'s Sunset Strip, has even been bequeathed to LACMA by its owner, James Goldstein.

When Wood and Nardin bought Silvertop, it had a leaky roof, a cramped kitchen added by the Burchills and a host of midcentury technological headaches. The couple enlisted architect Barbara Bestor, who had designed Beats' corporate offices in L.A. and who had tipped them off to Silvertop's impending sale. The choice was closely monitored by Lautnerphiles, as well as members of the Los Angeles Conservancy, some of whom doubted that Bestor, known for her bohemian aesthetic and marine-grade plywood finishes, was the right person to tackle a landmark renovation. “I was

skeptical. She wasn't the obvious choice as an architect to do a renovation like this,” says interior designer Jamie Bush, who created Silvertop's new furnishings.

Bestor hunkered down with Lautner's original ideas, recorded in hundreds of sketches housed at the Lautner archives at the Getty. “I don't want to be the Hun,” she says. Her work on Silvertop is now receiving plaudits (Bush calls it “ballsy”) for its insertion of modern amenities that feel in tune with the home's original intent. To gain insight into Lautner, she brought in a general contractor, Lynn Call, who had worked with the architect decades earlier. As the team investigated how to realize the original plans—such as Lautner's idea for a crow's-nest viewing platform set atop a tall pole, accessed via ladder—Wood expanded the budget and became obsessed with the house's details. He researched ice makers for the kitchen that would deliver perfect pebble ice (he went with Scotsman). While staying at Le Royal Monceau in Paris, he fell for the hotel's bronze wall knobs and asked Beats' renowned designer, Robert Brunner, to customize their installation, adding white LED lights; artist Geoff McPetridge was commissioned to create tiny engraved hieroglyphics indicating their functions.

During a trip to Tokyo, while listening to Yo La

Tengo's “Green Arrow” in his Chiyoda district hotel, Wood spied a sea of vermilion construction cranes and towers nearby. The color, with the music, felt comforting, he says, so he asked Bestor to match the pigment and apply it throughout Silvertop in details such as the crow's-nest ladder. “It was really a question of how do you make everything bespoke and interesting. Because Reiner was the same way—he was an inventor. So it was about honoring that spirit,” Wood says. “We lived a block away, so it was easy to become overinvolved,” he concedes.

Bush commissioned custom oversize couches and rugs for the cavernous living room, building cardboard prototypes to test in the space. “Luke is not the sort of client who gives you carte blanche,” says Bush. “It's not that big of a house, but everything was labored over in an almost maniacal way. I'm pretty sure everyone has spilled blood in that house somewhere.”

The midcentury technology of the original house, which looks nearly as futuristic today as it did then, has been replaced with cutting-edge 21st-century engineering, requiring a 600-amp electrical panel (about four or five times more than a typical house). A circadian lighting system now automatically adjusts according to the time of day and the season, while music emanates from speakers hidden behind cork-panel ceilings throughout the house. The original

glass living room wall, which formerly chugged like a locomotive, opens with a slight hum as it erases the boundary between indoors and out. Louvered wood panels in the master bedroom pivot to provide either light or privacy. And in the ultimate 007 touch, a counterweighted glass shower wall in the master bath descends into a 14-by-14-foot concrete vault carved beneath the house, creating an outdoor shower when the ceiling also retracts.

Renovation costs amounted to roughly the equivalent of the purchase price, according to several estimates, including about \$1 million for the house's lighting, which now causes Silvertop to glow like a spaceship above the reservoir at night. A recording studio, with a 1973 recording console by the audio pioneer Rupert Neve and a compressor that once belonged to Bob Dylan, has been added to the guesthouse.

Reiner—who died in 2011, at 95—used an industrial strengthening technique (“pre-stressed, post-tensioned” concrete) in Silvertop's dome and cantilevered driveway—a concept so novel that L.A.'s building department refused to approve the driveway until Lautner and Reiner sued, then used sandbags to prove its load-bearing capacity. Happily for Wood, Lautner designed catacombs beneath the

home to enclose plumbing, electrical and other technology—a design that enabled Wood six decades later to fully wire the house for the 21st century. “He was with the angels,” says Wood.

Neighborhood kids explored Silvertop freely when it was unoccupied in the '60s and early '70s. Michael Rotondi, a local architect, recalls jimmying a window and peering into some empty cabinets. Susan Burchill remembers her parents spending hours pondering its eccentricities, such as the plumbing for hot, cold and ice water in some rooms. In the '80s, Silvertop was used as a key location in *Less Than Zero*, a cinematic paean to the decade's excess, adapted from the Bret Easton Ellis novel.

Wood and Nardin, who have two daughters, are keen to share their new home and have become hosts to a steady stream of musicians, visual artists, athletes, scholars and “a lot of teenagers,” Wood says. In October, the couple hosted the Los Angeles Conservancy's annual gala at Silvertop, with dining tables set on the cantilevered tennis court, which has lighting that can be raised or lowered to clear the view of the Silver Lake Reservoir below. As a harvest moon rose, framed by the hills, guests reached for their phones to snap a photo. “The house is just perfectly positioned to see the moon rise,” said Linda Dishman, the conservancy's CEO. “And that says so much about how John Lautner worked.” ●