

# SILVERTOP

## REBOOT

JOHN LAUTNER'S ICONIC 1958 "HOUSE OF THE FUTURE"  
IS RESTORED FOR A NEW GENERATION

A soaring concrete shell forms a column-free roof over Silvertop's main living area. The glass wall retracts at the push of a button, opening the house to the terrace. Mass Beverly's Nido dining chairs complement a Mecox dining table. Landscape design by Studio MLA.





*Text by Michael Webb / Photography by Tim Street-Porter*









Silvertop is a habitable sculpture: a dynamic composition of concave and convex curves that seems to levitate from a hilltop overlooking the Silver Lake reservoir. A billowing concrete vault, supported on four columns, arches over the expansive living room. Bowed brick walls at either end conceal the compact kitchen and bedroom wing. An elliptical infinity pool echoes the ellipse of the roof vault. A steep drive, cantilevered from the hillside, wraps around the house, and steps lead down to a guest house and a tennis court that juts into space.

This house of the future was conceived in 1958 by John Lautner, who—like his mentor, Frank Lloyd Wright—dreamed of things that never were. Technology has caught up with his vision, and that allowed a new owner—music-industry executive Luke Wood—to restore the house and subtly enhance its hidden mechanisms. Working from Lautner’s plans, which are now in the Getty’s archives, architect Barbara Bestor and a team of creatives spent three years completing bits of the house that had been left unfinished and seamlessly integrating new climate controls, sound systems and lighting. As Bestor

explains: “Luke was game to make it all it could be and become a demonstration of the future of design, as Lautner had intended.” Interior designer Jamie Bush designed new furniture that takes its cues from the architecture, while providing a comfortable living environment for Wood, his wife—writer Sophia Nardin—and their two teenage daughters.

Wood started out as a guitarist in an alt-rock band and progressed, through a stint at Dreamworks, to become president of Beats Electronics. Music and design are his twin passions, and Bestor knew he would be the ideal custodian when Silvertop came up for sale in 2014. “It was more fantastic than anything I could have imagined,” Wood says, recalling his first visit. “Nobody realized how long it would take to restore, but we weren’t intimidated. In the world of music, things can come quickly or take time. There was no pressure—we were living one block away in a house we loved.”

It made sense to pause and get everything right, for the house had waited 50 years for its final polish. Lautner always took the long view. In a book published just before his death in 1994, he declared: “The purpose of architecture is to improve human

*Opposite top: Bestor Architecture restored every aspect of Silvertop. At the entry, tile was replaced and cedar siding refurbished.*

*Opposite, bottom left: The cast-bronze front door is original; the terrarium was replanted and is open to the sky.*

*Opposite, bottom right: A glass, metal and wood doorway provides access to the west courtyard.*

*Above: Designer Jamie Bush furnished the interiors. The two 1965 lounge chairs are by Arne Norell; Jens Risom chair and ottoman at right from Ralph Pucci. Travertine-and-brass table by Ten10; Heather Rosenman vase on the custom coffee table. Newly added custom cedar cabinetry conceals the television and audio equipment.*









life. Create timeless, free, joyous spaces... [These] can be as varied as life itself and they must be as sensible as nature in deriving from a main idea and flowering into a beautiful entity."

In his six-decade career, Lautner built about 50 houses, though as many more went unrealized. A few exceptional clients shared his quest for sculptured forms and fluid volumes allied to structural rigor. Kenneth Reiner, an inventor turned entrepreneur, commissioned Silvertop. "Mr. Reiner and I worked on this project for almost ten years, researching and developing different things," Lautner recalled. "We were constantly breaking new ground, inventing and testing new designs.... Nothing stock was used and there wasn't any hurry to finish; we wanted to get it perfect." Sadly, Reiner's business folded before he could move in, and the house sat empty for a decade until it was bought in a bankruptcy sale by Phillip and Jacqueline Burchill, who lived there happily for 40 years.

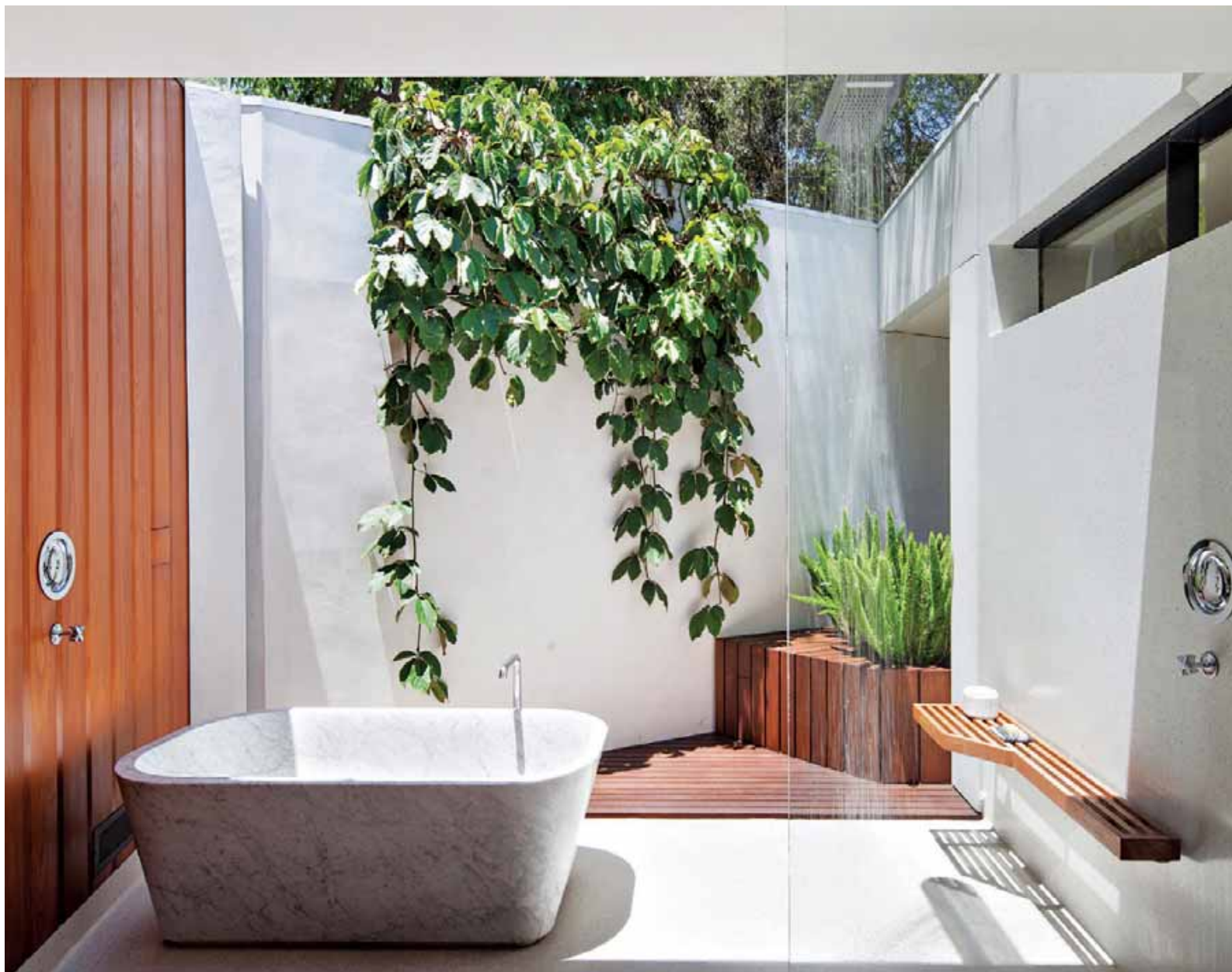
For the past century Los Angeles has been a crucible of innovation in residential design, and Silvertop looks across the reservoir to Richard Neutra's VDL house, which was begun in 1933 as an experiment in living and rebuilt after a fire in 1963, just as Lautner's house was nearing completion. It's hard to imagine a greater contrast. The Austrian-born architect used the VDL as a model for nearly 300 buildings that play variations on a few simple, orthogonal themes, perfect proportions and elegant restraint. Lautner grew up in the woods of Wisconsin, absorbed Wright's love of organic architecture and—though he found

*Opposite top:* The Egg Collective custom dining table has a built-in bench designed by Barbara Bestor and Jamie Bush and made by ROWLA. Gubi Beetle dining chairs; custom industrial floor lamp by Jamie Bush.

*Opposite bottom:* Bush designed a two-sided sofa covered in Donghia fabric; custom jute-and-cotton rug from Marc Phillips. The Axon table lamp is by Apparatus. On the far wall, a brick panel slides up automatically to provide access to the kitchen.

*Top left and above:* Bestor Architecture designed a new breakfast nook and banquette in the remodeled kitchen. Custom table by Jamie Bush; Muuto Visu chairs. Artwork by Glen E. Friedman. Cork ceiling panels were refurbished throughout. Satellite Pendant from Gubi.

*Opposite:* A new kitchen island was designed by Ilan Dei Studio. Fixtures by Fantini; Gaggenau oven and cooktop.



L.A. painfully ugly—spent the rest of his life here, exploiting the freedom it offered a maverick. But he had to fight for every advance: The L.A. Building Department refused to approve the cantilevered driveway of Silvertop and insisted he build a full-scale mock-up for testing. Lautner and his engineer had the last laugh—it has survived two major earthquakes without a crack.

Drama is the hallmark of Silvertop. Projecting planes shade the carport at the top of the hill and a recessed entry. A low-ceilinged passage, lit from a terrarium, builds anticipation for the lofty sweep of the living room. There, floor-to-ceiling glazing—still suspended from the clips Reiner invent-

ed—frames a panorama of the city to the east, while the westerly view to the Hollywood Hills is shaded by two tall trees. An aged sycamore serves as a site-specific sculpture, and another tree penetrates a hole in the projecting roof plane. Mia Lehrer redesigned the garden, which extends to the edge of the site. From here the graceful arch of the roof vault plays off the angled walls of dark brick that enclose the master suite and the daughters' bedrooms. To the south, pool changing rooms are enclosed by railroad ties, with fiberglass panels to pull in light.

Within, the kitchen has been upgraded, and new cork ceiling panels from Portugal have replaced the old, there and in the bedrooms. In the living

A retractable glass ceiling and wall opens the master bathroom to the outdoors. Custom tub by Modul Marble; Waterworks fixtures; Gessi showerhead.



The master bedroom features automated wood louvers and glass panels; the cork ceiling and skylight also open electronically. Poliform Bolton bed; Restoration Hardware faux-fur throw. Area rug from Marc Phillips; chaise with brass-wire base by Phase Design. Teak daybed with Raf Simons cushion fabric by Lawson Fenning.

“John Lautner believed that architecture should be progressive, that it should evolve with technology and be a living thing,” says Luke Wood.











*Left:* A living-room corner offers views of downtown Los Angeles. Scalloped concrete ceiling elements conceal cove lighting. The swivel chair, covered in Maharam mohair, is by Michael Berman; pillow fabric by Kelly Wearstler.

*Above:* Bestor Architecture designed the crow's nest above the carport based on early Lautner drawings that were never realized.

room a section of the glass wall glides silently aside. ("Before, it was operated by a motorcycle chain and sounded like an Austrian cog railway," says Wood.) The master bathroom is small by contemporary standards, but it becomes infinite when the glass wall descends into a newly excavated slot and the glass ceiling recedes, leaving nothing but a slender shower head between you and the sky. In the master bedroom, an array of tiny bronze buttons operates the shutters, folds a concertina of cork ceiling panels, and opens the windows and skylights. Overhead speakers are concealed behind a thin layer of cork, and the sound is digitally processed and equalized. Concealed LEDs turn the house into an ethereal theater. Mechanical services line a tunnel that runs under the house, and these have all been updated.

"Lautner believed that architecture should be progressive, that it should evolve with technology and be a living thing," says Wood. "That guided Barba-

ra and the team in the choices we made, and we all shared a respect for the historical significance of the house. It was a collective effort—like a great band playing together." After completing the guest house, a circular space that had been left unfinished and used for storage, he asked them to add a tiny recording studio and console in one corner, painting the walls a similar shade of blue that Bestor had used for his office in Culver City. The concrete column rising through this sunken space ended in rebar; now that has been crowned with a glass-railed crow's nest (which Lautner designed but was unable to realize) commanding a 360-degree panorama of the city.

"We wanted to preserve the consistency of materials that Lautner used but distinguish our additions from what was there," explains Bestor. "The sliding cabinet that hides the television screen uses the same Louisiana cypress as the existing paneling, but we ran it vertically rather than horizontally. We





cleaned the end-grain fir flooring and matched the terrazzo, which was extended out from the kitchen. Jamie's decision to employ a circular rug and a double-sided curved sofa in the living room created a much better balance with the monumental fireplace."

"The design and placement of furniture in the living room was determined by the scale and character of the architecture," says Bush. "We wanted there to be a dialogue between the two, allowing the family to use every part of the room. We custom designed almost everything, repeating shapes in the double sofa—which were inspired by those of Vladimir Kagan—floor lamps and brass drum tables. For contrast we added pieces like the two green-leather armchairs with buckled straps that look Brazilian but are, surprisingly, the work of Swedish designer Arne Norell. They echo the greenery beyond."

Public appreciation for classic modern houses in Los Angeles has never been greater. Escher GuneWardena Architecture, who are working with the Getty on the conservation of the Eames house, restored Lautner's Chemosphere house for publisher Benedikt Taschen. Jim Goldstein has continued to enhance the former Sheats house in Beverly Hills, in collaboration with the master's office, bequeathing it to LACMA as the first Lautner house to be publicly accessible. In his lifetime this creative genius was widely disparaged, and Silvertop was dismissed as a costly folly. Moviemakers still use modern houses as shorthand for villainy, but that has become a tired cliché. Though Hollywood may not know it, the legacy of modernism has now been embraced by the good guys. ●

*Above:* Bestor restored Lautner's infinity-edge pool, which was the first ever built. Case Study #22 chaise lounges from Modernica; teak dining table, Gloster.

*Right:* Silvertop's transparent, ethereal quality is revealed from the west courtyard; Lautner created an opening in the cement canopy for the large fir tree. The brick-clad bedroom wing is at left.





