





RESPONSIBILITY, INFINITY, NATURE

John Lautner

Interviewed by Marlene L. Laskey

Completed under the auspices
of the
Oral History Program
University of California
Los Angeles

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BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY

PERSONAL HISTORY:

Born: July 16, 1911, in Marquette, Michigan.

Education: Public schools in Marquette, Boston, Massachusetts, and New York City; Northern Michigan University; worked under Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin (Wisconsin and Arizona), 1933-39.

Spouse: Married Mary Faustina Roberts Lautner, 1934; married Elizabeth Lautner, 1950.

MAJOR PROJECTS:

- 1940 Lautner House, Los Angeles, California
 - Bell House, Los Angeles, California
- 1946 Maurer Residence, Los Angeles, California
- 1947 Desert Hot Springs Motel, Desert Hot Springs, California
 - Grantvoort House, Flintridge, California
 - Henry's Restaurant, Glendale, California
 - Polin House, Los Angeles, California
- 1948 Sheats Apartments, "L'Horizon," Westwood, California
 - Shaeffer House, Montrose, California
- 1949 UPA Studios, Burbank, California
 - Dahlstrom House, South Pasadena, California
- 1950 Shusett House, Beverly Hills, California
 - Harvey House, Los Angeles, California
 - Foster House, Sherman Oaks, California
- 1953 Bergren House, Los Angeles, California

- Beachwood Market (remodeling), Los Angeles, California
- 1955 Baldwin House, Los Angeles, California
- 1956 Speer Contractors Office Building, Los Angeles, California
- Harpel House, Los Angeles, California
- 1957 Zahn House, Los Angeles, California
- Pearlman Mountain Cabin, Idyllwild, California
- Henry's Restaurant, Pomona, California
- 1958 Kaynar Factory, Rivera, California
- 1960 Midtown School, Los Angeles, California
- Malin House, "Chemosphere," Los Angeles, California
- Concannon House, Los Angeles, California
- 1961 Wolff House, Los Angeles, California
- 1963 Reiner House, "Silvertop," Los Angeles, California
- Sheats House, Los Angeles, California
- 1965 Zimmerman House, Studio City, California
- 1966 Harpel House, Anchorage, Alaska
- Alto Capistrano Headquarters Building, San Juan Capistrano, California
- 1968 Stevens House, Malibu, California
- Elrod House, Palm Springs, California
- 1969 Walstrom House, Los Angeles, California
- 1970 Natural Sciences Building, University of Hawaii, Hilo Campus
- 1971 Familian House, Beverly Hills, California

- 1973 Arango House, Acapulco, Mexico
- 1975 Nature Center, Griffith Park, Los Angeles, California
- 1978 Jordan House, Laguna Beach, California
- 1979 Segel House, Malibu, California
- Rancho del Valle, Crippled Children's Society Rehabilitation Center, Woodland Hills, California
- Rawlins House, Balboa Island, Newport Beach, California
- 1980 Bob Hope House, Palm Springs, California
- 1981 Schwimmer House, Beverly Hills, California
- 1982 Turner House, Aspen, Colorado
- 1983 Krause House, Malibu, California
- Beyer House, Malibu, California

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC AFFILIATIONS:

Associate in the office of Douglas Honnold, Los Angeles, 1944-46.

Private practice in Los Angeles since 1946.

Lecturer, Chouinard Art Institute, 1960-62.

PUBLICATIONS:

John Lautner: architettura organicosperimentale. Bari [Italia]: Dedalo libri, 1981.

HONORS:

Fellow, American Institute of Architects, 1970.

Architectural Record Award for Excellence, 1971.

Distinguished Alumni Award, Northern Michigan University, 1975.

Architectural Record Award for Excellence,
1977.

Cody Award, 1980.

Los Angeles chapter, American Institute of
Architects, Man of the Year, 1980.

Olympic Architect, 1984.

EXHIBITIONS:

Exhibition of work at Mt. San Antonio College,
1963.

Exhibition of work at the University of
Kentucky, 1966.

Exhibition of work at California State College
at Los Angeles, 1967.

"The Three Worlds of Los Angeles," United
States Information Service traveling show,
1974.

"12 Los Angeles Architects," California State
Polytechnic University, Pomona, 1976.

"A View of California Architecture, 1960-76,"
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1977.

One Man Exhibition, Schindler House, Los
Angeles, 1985.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

INTERVIEWER:

Marlene L. Laskey, interviewer, UCLA Oral History Program. B.A., Political Science, UCLA; has researched, organized, and conducted architectural tours of Los Angeles.

TIME AND SETTING OF INTERVIEW:

Place: Lautner's office, Los Angeles, California.

Dates: April 23, May 5, 19, June 2, 16, 30, July 14, 1982.

Time of day, length of sessions, and total number of recording hours: Interview sessions were conducted in the afternoon and were generally one and one-half hours in length. A total of approximately six and one-quarter hours of conversation was recorded.

Persons present during interview: Lautner and Laskey.

CONDUCT OF INTERVIEW:

In preparing for the interview Laskey reviewed several articles on Lautner's work. She was unable to view any of the local houses since most of them are secluded and inaccessible.

No important problems were encountered during the interview taping which began with a discussion of Lautner's family background and apprenticeship to Frank Lloyd Wright. After Tape III the interview is organized around a discussion of topics.

EDITING:

Carey Southall edited the interview. He checked the verbatim transcript against the original tape recordings and edited for punctuation, paragraphing, spelling, and verified proper nouns. Words and phrases inserted by the editor have been bracketed. The final manuscript remains in the same order as the taped material.

In September 1985, the edited transcript was submitted to Lautner along with a list of queries and names requiring identification. He returned the approved transcript in

December of the same year. Lautner made only a few corrections for clarity and spelling.

Jacqueline Wester, editorial assistant, compiled the index, table of contents, biographical summary, and interview history.

SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS:

The original tapes of the interview are in the university archives and are available under the regulations governing the use of the permanent, noncurrent records of the university. Interview records and research materials are on file in the office of the Oral History Program.



To All My Children

and

Family

J.L.

TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE

APRIL 23, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. Lautner we generally start our interviews with some questions or insights into your family background. So, if it's OK with you, we'll start this interview in the same way.

LAUTNER: That's fine. I think it's of interest, what went in with the family-- The inheritance does have an influence, but I also believe, as an architect, that environment has an influence, too. But anyway, specifically, my mother was Irish, and my father was German or Austrian, and both of their parents came directly from Europe. Fortunately or unfortunately I am just about fifty-fifty, so I haven't been able to be a completely free, wild Irishman or a completely mechanical German. But I've had these controls.

LASKEY: That gives you the best of both worlds.

LAUTNER: Yes, I guess it is a-- It can be a pretty good combination. Also my mother was a painter, and she painted all her life. And my father was a professor. My father was really an exceptional student. He was brought up on a farm in northern Michigan by his family who came from Austria. They came by the Erie Canal, by boat, which is interesting. I didn't know how they got there till just a

few years ago. So, instead of a wagon train, they came all the way by boat to northern Michigan.

LASKEY: From New York?

LAUTNER: From Austria.

LASKEY: From Austria. Oh, that is impressive.

LAUTNER: Isn't it.

LASKEY: Really.

LAUTNER: That was a sensible, normal way, when you had some goods and so forth to carry, you know. Anyway, on the farm he didn't get to high school, or he didn't get to school until he was about fifteen or something like that. Didn't get to school at all. He did eight grades and high school in one or two years, then he went to the University of Michigan. Before that, he was a rail splitter, like Abe Lincoln. So, he's an unbelievable man. Then he went to the University of Michigan and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1893; was a champion hammer thrower and other things. Then he went to Europe, and he spent eleven years in different European universities. The University of Paris, Göttingen, Leipzig, [Heidelberg, Geneva], all the famous universities of Europe, so he was a real scholar.

Then he came back, and he taught at the Washington University in St. Louis for a little while. And I think maybe a little at the University of Michigan. Then he found out about the normal school in Marquette, Michigan,

and he went there because he loved the country which was more like his native country, and the lakes and the beauty of it. So he decided to teach up there in that-- So, he taught there the rest of his life; it is now Northern Michigan University.

And we had a house which he built right across from the university, so I could get up at ten minutes to eight for an eight o'clock class, so I was a real spoiled student. But nevertheless, I had the background of a real professor. I mean, he taught anthropology, philosophy, ethics, French, German, [economics, sociology], you know. I got everything under the sun from my parents. So, I got off to a very civilized start.

So you know, when I arrived in Los Angeles I was so shocked that-- I was physically sick, it was so ugly after that kind of life, you know. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, it's extreme. The extreme from northern Michigan. I'm really curious about your father. Where did his impetus come from? Do you have any idea?

LAUTNER: I don't know. He [was] just a complete natural. You know, like many families, one of the boys will be a something-or-other, and nobody knows why or how, but he was just a fantastic man. And so much so that in teaching in northern Michigan-- If you ever go to northern Michigan-- most of the people are probably dead by now, but you used to go up there, everybody in northern Michigan knew him as

the professor. And in fact, so much so that they would come to him rather than to a priest for advice if they had problems of some sort.

LASKEY: He sounds like a renaissance man.

LAUTNER: Yeah, and he almost did become a minister rather than a professor at one time, I understand.

LASKEY: What was his name?

LAUTNER: Same as mine. John E. Lautner, and I'm John E. Lautner, Jr. And my mother's name was Gallagher and nobody knows much about her family. I've only seen a few pictures of her father, who was a handsome, very handsome, dashing man of some sort. But he-- I don't know anything about him. My mother didn't, never said much about her family, so that's a kind of mysterious side. She was twenty years younger than my father. My father was married once to, I think it was a student at the university, when he was at the university. She died, I think, and then when he came to northern Michigan to teach, my mother was one of his students, so he was about forty or something as a professor, and she was twenty as a student. So, she was a beautiful Irish girl. She looked like [a] "Gibson girl." Have you seen those pictures of the Gibson--? She was a real Gibson girl. So he had a real doll for a wife.

LASKEY: What was her first name?

LAUTNER: Vida. Vida Cathleen Gallagher.

LASKEY: That's Irish.

LAUTNER: Yeah, completely.

LASKEY: Red-haired was she?

LAUTNER: No, black; black hair. I have pictures of her with a hat and the Gibson clothes, and, my god, it's unbelievable to see.

LASKEY: Now, she was living in Marquette?

LAUTNER: Yes. She was Irish-Catholic, and she, I think she was living-- She went to a Catholic school in-- I don't know who was taking care of her. Her family wasn't there. Maybe some relative, but all I know about that is that when she was in this Catholic school, she was a kind of a daring one too. And she--in the auditorium she told me--several of the girls would go in the back of the auditorium, and they had a chafing dish. And they'd be cooking while they were supposed to be doing school work, you know. So she was kind of independent, too. [laughter]

LASKEY: They sound like quite a combination.

LAUTNER: Yeah, and they both read all their lives. When I was in high school, I used to go back and forth to the library with ten or fifteen books every week. My mother would read ten or fifteen books every week, and my father would read ten or fifteen books every week, and so that was the life. So, I think that does-- I mean, I know it does contribute to the total knowledge and feeling in

civilization that you need to become a total architect. I've seen people who know practically nothing compared to what I know. I mean, they have no background of any sort, and so there's no subtlety or civilized concern; they're unconscious. So anyway, I guess that's enough about the mother and father; you think so?

LASKEY: Just whatever--

LAUTNER: Well, let's see, no. I guess we should continue further with that. When I was-- This is really the start of my architecture. My father liked doing carpentry work, construction work, in the summer vacation. And, so my mother designed a cabin, a log cabin, like a, it was like a Swiss chalet. I was twelve years old, and my father and I built it on a rocky point peninsula out into Lake Superior. And this was a fantastic family project, with mother designing it, and my father and I executing it.

And, I tell architectural students this, because it's even--it's more important now than it ever was. This was built the same way that the Egyptians built, because we had nothing. We had no machinery, we had absolutely nothing. And my father knew how to do everything. So, he rafted logs across the lake, and he built a skidway up the mountainside, and he built a windlass, a vertical windlass, that has a long arm out like you see pictures of in the Egyptian days. And I ran that windlass, pulling material

up the mountainside to build. So with two people and just hand labor, you could build the whole thing. But, you see nowadays, nobody can do anything.

I mean, like around here, if you want to build a house-- The first thing, if they got one beam, they have to hire a crane which costs \$500 an hour, and they don't know how to rig up anything; they don't know how to do anything, and they of course refuse to do any work. So to do the simplest thing it costs \$10,000 a day, and you can't get anything, you know. And it's because there's no basic understanding, or any basic care or nothing, just the almighty buck, you know.

So I tell students that if they really want to build something, they can build right from scratch, but they have to **do** it, you know.

LASKEY: It's interesting, because the log cabin you're talking about sounds very much like a germinal part of what you're going to do in many of your projects later.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. Well, I've been working that way-- real basics, and I've had a-- I always had a horror of any kind of routine, and that's one of the reasons that I ultimately chose architecture. Because I felt when I was a student that many professions became ruts and routines--and like there's old banker so-and-so, and old doctor so-and-so, and they're all "walking dead" as Frank Lloyd Wright

would say. [laughter] But I've, since then, I found that it's not necessary that other professions are ruts, but a creative individual could do something with any kind of work. But inherent in architecture, it involves everything in life, so that there is absolutely no end to it. By the time you're seventy or eighty, you're still beginning. So, that's the kind of life I've preferred to being the expert at forty and dead, you know.

LASKEY: Yes.

LAUTNER: So, I understood those things.

LASKEY: It sounds a lot like your father might be talking--

LAUTNER: Yeah, right.

LASKEY: His example-- You were very lucky.

LAUTNER: Yeah, well I-- Let's see--

LASKEY: Now, you were born in Marquette, right? In 1911--

LAUTNER: Yes. The life was beautiful because I loved the woods and the lake. I mean everything was beautiful, and we didn't need any money, I mean, for anything, because just going-- Well, I played hockey. And playing hockey, and skiing in the wintertime and walking in the woods, and swimming and boating in the summertime, you need absolutely no money. It's the most beautiful life in the world, and it's so different from the city, you know.

Now, my god, I find that if I take \$200 for the weekend, I get \$150 for groceries and something else. I get no pleasure at all, I just spend the money--for nothing. So it's a very strange life, nowadays.

LASKEY: Do you ever get back to Michigan to refresh yourself?

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. I go every chance I get, because it's the most refreshing place I can go. Also because my oldest daughter [Karoll] is there, and she owns her grandmother's house, who was my first wife's mother, who engaged Frank Lloyd Wright to do a house which was the first house that I worked on. So, now my daughter lives in the Frank Lloyd Wright house in one hundred fifty acres of woods and lakes, and it's the first place that I worked on. And so I go to see her, and just take a walk in the woods, in her woods. There just couldn't be anything better.

LASKEY: Now, is this in Marquette?

LAUTNER: Yeah. In Marquette County. And, my daughter who has been head of the zoning for a while, she stopped a nuclear power plant from being built on Lake Superior, so she's a fantastic gal. So that's exciting too, you know. So that, she--

LASKEY: In growing up in Marquette obviously you weren't deprived in anyway of cultural or physical activities.

LAUTNER: Oh, no. Another interesting thing to me about it was that the college at that time had all of the people on a lyceum course that you'd have in a big city. Like I heard, oh, [Roald] Amundsen when he came from the North Pole, you know, and-- Everybody you ever heard of, I heard at the college, and if I'd been in the big city I probably never would've seen them. So, I heard all of the nationally famous people in string quartets and everything, because of the college. So, being in a small town in the woods was more cultural than being in the big town, really. For me, I think it was.

Like here, you have to search out something. More and more things are becoming available, but I can't stand driving across town. And when I do see something that I think's going to be interesting, usually it's a farce, it's a phoney, or an act, or something. [tape recorder off]

LASKEY: Well, the people of Marquette, at this time, what were they like?

LAUTNER: Well, it was-- I was interested in the whole cross-section. I knew people from the south-- Like any town, or more or less like lots of towns, the north side or the south side is really the bad side, or something like that, you know. So, I knew people who were not considered the right people to associate with, and I also knew the cream of the town, because of being a son of a professor.

My father and I would have social access to any strata of the society. And that made it interesting, because I could go to a party at the biggest, richest house, or I could go to a party at the poorest house, and I enjoyed both, and I'm still the same way. I like the real thing wherever it is. I mean, I like the absolute, bottom basic, and I like the most super-sophisticated, so I get the whole range. And, I think that the average-- I don't think Marquette is really an average small town, because there were more sophisticated, wealthy people who were world travelers. In fact, my ex-mother-in-law, now deceased of course, entertained President Taft at her house, for instance. Everybody doesn't entertain a president, you know. And, so there was-- I don't know, did we get that on there before about the lyceum of the college? I guess we did, OK.

LASKEY: Yeah.

LAUTNER: Well, anyway.

LASKEY: I'm curious-- Marquette is in the northern part of Michigan in the upper peninsula. Why would that have developed into this sort of nucleus of culture and learning-- There are two colleges there, right? There's Marquette and--

LAUTNER: No, just one. The college that's known as Marquette is Marquette University in Milwaukee, but the college that's in Marquette, Michigan, was originally a

northern state teacher's college and it became Northern [Michigan] University later on.

LASKEY: I see.

LAUTNER: But I think part of what happened there is the pioneers like my ex-mother-in-law's father was a Longyear. His name was John M. Longyear, and he was a pioneer of northern Michigan and Minnesota, [landlooker and timber cruiser]. And so he acquired timber and mines to such an extent that he finally bought the island of Spitsbergen [a northern arctic possession of Norway--ed.]. He owned the island of Spitsbergen, and right now the main city on the island of Spitsbergen is named Longyear [Longyear City, or **Longyearbyen**, founded 1906--ed.]. That's from him, so he got around the world, you know.

Then there were other people there in timber and mining who built the libraries, and were very interested in nature and animal photography, and all kinds of beautiful things. They had the money, and they were so solid that they didn't, that there was no need for any kind of "keep up with the Joneses" or any rat race or anything. It was just follow some endeavor that you chose. So one of them would have his own sailboat, and his own building for making sailboats, another one was photographing--flash photographing--deer out in the woods, and doing different things like that, and for their own entertainment. So it

was a completely different kind of situation; a solid thing. Like one of my friends there: his father owned the newspaper. And he had five thousand acres of woods for his own private duck hunting, and they still do. I mean, they don't want population there. They just want to keep it the way it is.

LASKEY: That was my next question. Has Marquette changed much?

LAUTNER: No, no. Well, it has just in the last few years. The army has a big base there. It involves maybe fifteen, twenty thousand people near there. And then some of these big shopping center people have gotten in there and destroyed the little, old, original downtown, which is unfortunate. Because it doesn't have that-- I mean, they just about killed off the local, the little local merchants. So, but for--oh, from 1890 to 1970 it stayed about fifteen, eighteen thousand population; never changed. Because people had to leave. There was nothing to do; there's enough to do for the people who own the town, but not enough for anybody else. There are developers trying to do things, but there's still old landowners who don't want to do anything, they really believe in the beauty of nature. It's not to hoard it for their own money, but really to maintain the beauty of the original country-- [taping interrupted] --pretty unusual.

My childhood, I had a hundred miles of beaches, private beaches, you know; no people, no nothing. I mean, just go swimming anywhere you want, and no problem. The coast here to me is just ugly, you know, it's crazy. Malibu is nothing to me, it's just crazy.

LASKEY: But this was Lake Superior, that you had the coast--

LAUTNER: Yeah, that fresh, beautiful water too.

LASKEY: Cold!

LAUTNER: Yeah, cold. Let's see, what else should we get in here?

Oh, my high school, giving you a clue here. That was interesting, too. Because my father was a professor, he had sabbatical years, and so when I was in the-- I think it was about the sixth, seventh grade, I was a year in Boston school, public schools. And so I saw all the things in Boston. My mother and father were great for seeing everything. We saw the old Salem House, and everything around there. And, the Boston Museum-- We lived in an apartment right across the Fenway [Park] from the Boston Museum. So I used to go to the Boston Museum when I was in the seventh grade. And I remember it vividly, because I had a fancy book from the school, and I dropped it in the park, in the pond near the museum. And I was frantic and I didn't know what to do, because it was-- The leaves were getting all

curled up. Anyway, I brought it home, and we finally got it ironed, and I don't know how we really solved it, but it got saved. Then, it's interesting, when I got my fellow[ship] in the AIA [American Institute of Architects] for design--about, I don't know, six or eight, ten years ago [1970]--the convention was in Boston, and the ceremony was in the Boston Museum. The very same place that I had been when I was in the sixth grade.

LASKEY: How appropriate.

LAUTNER: Yeah, which was nice.

Then, later on, my father had a sabbatical, and we went to New York. So I was a freshman in high school in New York City while my father was studying at Columbia with a-- Well, he had studied with Dewey, [Santayana], and various others. But the latest philosophers, he was working with. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School which was a real fantastic change for me, because I was in a school in Marquette-- The total school would be maybe one hundred fifty or two hundred kids. So there were five thousand in the DeWitt Clinton High School in a five-story building. And I had to come from an apartment on Eighty-seventh Street and Riverside Drive--on the Hudson River, which was nice--over to Broadway and take a subway down to Columbus Circle, and then run to the top floor of this building to be on time, [laughter] when I was a freshman.

LASKEY: This is from being across the street in school!

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah, so that was some change. And then it was interesting because it was international. You know, there would be like five hundred kids in the class.

There'd be Italians and Poles and Chinese, and I mean all, everything, people that I'd never seen before. And, I got a top grade in algebra in the five hundred[-person] class in New York City. So, I was pretty proud of that. Also, a thing that I like to tell people which is, again, an intelligent application of rules: they were very strict about being late. If you **were** late, instead of some silly kind of, I don't know, punishment, they-- First of all you had to stand in line to get a card stamped stating that you were late. And, in a school of five thousand, there were usually two or three hundred [late students]. So, you're in a line of a hundred, two or three hundred people **after** school to get your card stamped. And, anything I hate is standing in line. So, just the fact of having to stand in line was enough to cure me from being late. It was an ideal cure without any other kind of punishment, a very interesting thing.

LASKEY: But did you find it difficult making that change from Marquette to New York from a small school to a large school?

LAUTNER: No, no, I just found it exciting. I mean, anything new, it was surprising of course, because-- Like we went to the Woolworth Building which was one of the biggest at that time. And the Woolworth Building houses 15,000 people which is the total population of Marquette, Michigan--can go in that one building in New York. So, I was seeing things like that which were fantastic, but I loved it. I mean, it was fun.

LASKEY: Do you think your parents were responsible for making it an adventure for you, their attitudes?

LAUTNER: No, I don't think so; I was on my own. They brought me up that way. They say it's more or less the John Dewey method: I was to make my own decisions from the time I was eight or ten or even younger, I guess. So I don't know whether that's good or bad, but I felt responsible, and I did make my own decisions, and I did my own thinking and everything, all the way.

LASKEY: But, of course, you can only do that successfully if you have the background and the support--

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: --to do it.

LAUTNER: So, when I rode down in the subway to get to school on time, I walked about forty blocks back on Broadway to get home. And that was exciting every afternoon, because I looked in all these jewelry stores.

There'd be all this fancy stuff, you know. And then there's a--at that time--there's a Loew's theater on every block, every block: like Loew's Forty-second, Loew's Forty-fifth; a theater every single block. And then, all these different kinds of stores and restaurants. Restaurants with glass sculpture and all kinds of stuff that I'd never seen before, so it was just a picnic going home.

LASKEY: What year was this?

LAUTNER: That was--1926. Let's see, I graduated from high school in 1929; eight, seven, six, four, maybe 1924. And I remember seeing Earl Carroll's follies right across the street [in] the theater. The signs and the whole thing, but I was too young to go in there. I wish I'd been a little bit older. [laughter]

LASKEY: Just stand outside and drool. [laughter] What was New York like then, the architecture?

LAUTNER: Oh, god, it was fantastic to me, because I loved-- Of course, I loved suspension bridges, and I loved going up to the top of these big buildings. I liked the Hudson [River], and I liked Broadway. I liked the whole thing. But, I've been there only for a moment, since then, once or twice, and it is getting, superficially, very dirty and old, and the subways are dirty and old. At that time I had no feeling of dirty and old subways. They were clean, and they were fantastic, because they had, I remember, they

had express trains every sixty seconds, and local trains every thirty seconds: the best transportation in the world. I mean, you never had to wait for anything. It was just boom, like that. So, the whole thing to me was just the best in the world, the best and the biggest, and it is, it still is.

LASKEY: Well, you had access to the museums in New York at that time.

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. We went to all the museums, and the public library, and the aquarium, and-- Oh, there were so many things. I'd love to go there right now and just spend a year. I mean, I've never had that chance, and when I read there's something like five thousand museums in New York, I think, holy god, the things I'm missing.

[laughter]

LASKEY: The things we're all missing.

LAUTNER: So, I don't believe in putting down New York.

LASKEY: Oh, no. Did you travel much else with your parents?

LAUTNER: No, no. Well, those were the major things, and as a professor, [my father] couldn't afford anything else. We had a few boat trips on the Great Lakes which were great at that time. They still had passenger steamers with-- Like we went to Detroit, and they had a jazz band and dancing on the back of the boat, you know. That was beautiful. All that stuff to me is so much more fun than

anything that goes on now. We don't have anything that's fun. It's all grim, and so I did get a taste of all that.

LASKEY: What about Chicago?

LAUTNER: Oh, Chicago. Oh, I loved that. I got there quite often when I was in college. And we went to all the nightclubs, and so I danced to all the big bands in Chicago. I just had a fantastic time in Chicago. That was going maybe once or twice a year, and that was probably the most exciting thing that I did when I was in college. So that was beautiful.

LASKEY: Well, you were there, too, in sort of its architectural heyday.

LAUTNER: Yeah, everything was just great. Well, I heard-- Well, there was still prohibition, and we went to the suburbs into those night clubs, like where Duke Ellington would be, and people like that. It was very exciting.

LASKEY: It was still the era of the mobs, wasn't it?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. They were still functioning there. I could sense that when we went to some place downtown. They looked at me; they knew I was [an] innocent from the country, you know. [laughter] You could tell, you could feel it. But it was fun for the innocent to see this sophisticated crowd, you know. It was very exciting, and a lot of fun.

LASKEY: So what else would you have had access to from Marquette? [interruption in taping]

LAUTNER: One other thing that I did that was beautiful was I took a canoe trip up in Canada, north of Minnesota, Lake of the Woods, one summer. And, that was a beautiful experience because all the roads, everything ends at International Falls, Minnesota. From there on, it's absolute wilderness, and you're just in a canoe, and it's completely silent. And, no people, nothing. And you just go in the lakes, in the woods. So that's a fantastic experience. That's the first time I really heard the coyotes. I mean, they cry like-- They sound like babies, but they don't hurt you. I mean, you just hear them at night. Otherwise, the absolute quiet is just unbelievable. To be really away like that--I'll never forget that.

LASKEY: And to see stars or see skies, which is something we can't do here anymore.

LAUTNER: Then, as I mentioned before, I enjoyed playing hockey, that was my sport. I played hockey and tennis and so I really enjoyed those things. And so I am kind of the opposite of a lot of people where they had a bad childhood, you know, and they had to do this and that to make up for the bad childhood. I had a beautiful childhood, so my adulthood has been really frustrating, because its-- Half

the time it hasn't been as good as my childhood. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, we'll pursue that further next time.

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MAY 5, 1982

LASKEY: You had a rather idyllic childhood, and we've gotten you through high school, and now it's time for you to go to college. How was the choice made that you should go to the college of Marquette [Northern Michigan University]?

LAUTNER: Well, it was practically automatic because, my father being a professor there, I felt it was sensible and reasonable. I didn't question it particularly, except that I had friends in the summertime, and some in the wintertime, some that lived in Marquette, who went to Princeton, and Harvard, and Yale, and all of the rest of them. And, I sometimes thought, well, I don't know, it would be interesting to see one of those universities, but I was really happy with the college that I was going to right there in Marquette.

I just took subjects that I was interested in, and so I really enjoyed it. I took astronomy and physics and chemistry and-- Then I took subjects from my father: philosophy and ethics and anthropology, and-- You're wondering how I got to English. An English major was just the fact of the curriculum requiring you to have a major in order to graduate. And I had automatically acquired more

English courses than any other kind and so it wasn't that I chose English, it's just that in my last year I took mostly English in order to graduate.

One thing that I did accomplish there, academically, was that I took history of architecture, which was the only thing related to architecture that this school had, and that only applied to a major in art or a B.S. degree so they weren't going to count it for an A.B. degree. After a big hassle with the administration, I got an asterisk in the catalogue that history of architecture can be applied to the A.B. degree. So that was a major triumph over the academy. [laughter] Which is just nonsense most of the time, you know. So I graduated.

LASKEY: Was there any problem in taking classes from your father?

LAUTNER: Oh, no. It was really interesting, because he was such a scholar that-- This is a good example that I tell people: one year, the term before I had a course from my father, I took an ancient history course. And in the course that I was taking from my father, people would ask him a question, and when he was asked a question, he would answer it from tracing it from 5000 B.C. up to the present; so it would take him an hour to answer one question. But, that's from a scholar, so-- And, he answered, within that question, stuff that I had already forgotten from the term

before in ancient history. So he was really way beyond me as a scholar. So that was interesting.

LASKEY: Well, was your interest more in the sciences?

LAUTNER: Well, mainly, I would say, mainly philosophy, really. And so, in trying to arrive at my work or my real major, my profession, while I was in college, I did kind of--I did naturally think about it, and I tried to analyze it very rationally, as well as emotionally. And through the years, sometimes I've found that by trying to be too rational I really made a mistake. I would've been better to let--to be more emotional, but that's part of my Irish-German, fifty-fifty thing.

LASKEY: The German aspect of it.

LAUTNER: Yeah. And so, I looked at law and medicine, and all the rest of the professions. At that time, I felt that they were pretty fixed, and, they were in a kind of a rut, and that most of them were very sort of dead-end things. They knew their profession by the time they were forty-five, or fifty, they were a complete success, and they were more or less dead human beings. But later on I realized that a creative person initially--or inherently a creative person can bring a new thing to any kind of work, but as a student I didn't realize that. So I had a horror of any kind of routine or any kind of the same thing over and over again, and that certainly happens in the other professions.

I mean, the doctor does the same damn thing with every patient, and so does the attorney and--more or less, you know. So I didn't want any duplication or routine or dead-end or-- I wanted the most free, most interesting, durable kind of life. And, I discovered that architecture-- I didn't fully realize it at the time, but I could see-- I rationalized it, again, in the simplest way.

In my father's basic sociology, or what-have-you, there's food, clothing, and shelter, you know, is basic life. And so I thought, well, that's great. I can be an architect, and I'm working on one of the basic human needs and contributing to society as well as doing a special kind of work, so that it is completely legitimate from every standpoint. And it had to be, for my decision.

But, of course, after I had got to Los Angeles, I discovered that shelter doesn't mean a damn thing. Food's the only thing that matters. And so architecture was just the first thing to save money on, or the first thing to omit, because it was a luxury instead of a basic thing. And, unfortunately it's still that way. If they considered architecture or understood the importance of its possible contribution to human welfare, it would be [as] important as food, clothing, and shelter; but now it's not. Shelter is just a business. Like in the papers, they have "New Facility Being Erected"--and that's what I call it.

They're facilities, they're not architecture: so many square feet of space for office, warehouse, office, factory, theater--whatever it is, it's just so many square feet for so many bucks, but it's not architecture.

LASKEY: Do you think that--is that just Los Angeles or do you think--

LAUTNER: No, I think it's pretty much all over, but I think it's **more** in Los Angeles, because other cities I've been in, like Chicago, and San Francisco, and New York, there is more respect and more consciousness of architecture than there is here, by far. I mean, like taxi drivers and people in the street are interested in architecture, and know something about it. But here: **nothing**, absolutely nothing.

LASKEY: And you think that comes out of the fact that we don't need it as much, it's not one of our basic needs.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. And it's just built on advertising, and it has been affected by the movie industry: the stage set. And they're used to the facade and it's perfectly all right. And, the climate permits it and so on, so there's nothing real, nothing solid, and nobody cares. [tape recorder off]

I'm too far off my education now, but it's in line there. So, in college, I enjoyed it, and it was pretty easy for me. I mean I could get a B without any effort at

all. So, I could always go to the parties and the dances-- and I really enjoyed the dances, and the parties--and playing tennis, and playing hockey and all of that. So I had a very easy time going through college. And I was elected president of the senior class, and I was in the junior class play. So I had the whole thing.

LASKEY: Did you ever consider theater as a possible alternative?

LAUTNER: No, no, but that was a great experience. It was very exciting for me, and the play was **Dear Brutus**. And it was really something to make it come off on the stage, and I almost-- I had the last punch line and I almost forgot it. J. M. [Sir James Matthew] Barrie, **Dear Brutus**. A beautiful little play, very romantic. So that was a great experience.

LASKEY: Did you ever do any more plays, or just that?

LAUTNER: No, no.

LASKEY: Did you ever consider becoming an artist? Your mother was a painter; you were looking for an area in which you had total freedom.

LAUTNER: No. I liked the construction-- Well, I did work for my father building our cabin and so forth, and I liked the reality of building. And I didn't feel that I had any talent as a painter. I mean, I never really seriously tried it, but I didn't feel-- I wasn't a natural artist, I

mean as a painter. But I can visualize as an architect, which is a different thing.

LASKEY: Well, did you ever do any other construction after the cabin you made with your father before you went to Taliesin?

LAUTNER: Well-- No, that's all. What had happened, how I got to Taliesin was I graduated in 1933 and Frank Lloyd Wright's autobiography had come out, I think in 1932--just the year before--and my mother, being an avid reader who read it-- So that's how it happened. She read it, and I knew-- In fact, in high school I had a drafting course, and it was so damn boring I couldn't stand it: the picayune little man, and keeping your pencils sharp, and getting the lettering right-- It had absolutely **nothing** to do with architecture. So I knew that if I went to a typical architectural school, I'd just be absolutely dead. Because I couldn't deal with that picayune stuff. But, when I read about Frank Lloyd Wright, I mean it was just unbelievable. And so the only thing that I regret about that is [that] before my mother found the autobiography and Frank Lloyd Wright, and the fact that he started the Taliesin Fellowship that same year for apprentice training of architects, I had been playing with the idea of hitchhiking or bumming around the world. I had hitchhiked around the United

States when I was in college, so I-- In fact, I came to Los Angeles; hitchhiked to the 1932 Olympic games.

LASKEY: Did you really? What was that like?

LAUTNER: Well, that was interesting. But the most interesting thing was going around the country. Like, I saw the Dakotas and Montana, and went, you know, all the way around and back through the Southwest on foot and, you know, bumming rides. That's the way you really see the country.

LASKEY: Were there many rides to bum in 1932?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. It was easy, very easy, yeah. Because nobody, nobody was suspicious. There [was] practically nobody hitching rides. And we--a friend, there were two of us, one of my best friends--and we wore white pants; we looked good, you know. And we had no problem at all. I mean, we got the most interesting kinds of rides. From everything from trucks to college professors to whatnot, you know.

LASKEY: How long were you gone?

LAUTNER: Three months hitchhiking and that's interesting too. My father gave me ninety dollars. That's a dollar a day. That's all it took. When I came, when we came to Los Angeles, [in] 1932, it was twenty-five cents for a chicken dinner. That's the difference between then and now. That's the truth, so a dollar a day was OK for eating, you know, or almost more than OK for eating.

LASKEY: Did you camp out?

LAUTNER: Oh yeah, we just had-- It was before people had sleeping bags, we just had blankets. We each had a blanket, and we slept anywhere, absolutely anywhere.

LASKEY: That's fascinating.

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. It was really, really interesting.

LASKEY: Do you think that experience had anything to do to push you over toward architecture as a field?

LAUTNER: Well, no, I don't think it had anything to do with architecture. It's just that I've always been interested in seeing the world as well, you know. I'm still interested in seeing the world, and I finally made a trip around the world just a couple of years ago. So that was the exciting part, was just seeing the world. Of course, lots of basic things happen on a thing like that, so it's a good part of your education. And also to know that you could get along more or less by yourself with practically no money anywhere, you know. So, I had experience which gave me the feeling that I could go around the world if I chose.

And I probably could have, but-- So the unfortunate thing about running into Frank Lloyd Wright right after graduating was that I didn't get a chance to bum around the world which I've always felt probably would've been better for my basic welfare and my total life had I done that, it

would've contributed more. I would have understood more about the world and I wouldn't have come to the city so naive, you know. But anyway--

LASKEY: Well, you hadn't-- You weren't familiar with Wright's work prior to the autobiography. You hadn't seen it, so that it--

LAUTNER: No, no.

LASKEY: --wasn't the impetus. How did you-- What was involved in you getting to Taliesin?

LAUTNER: Oh, well that was very simple. You just went for an interview, and he said, "Well, you're exposed to this environment; either it takes or it doesn't take. We're not teaching and you're working as an apprentice and that's it." So he just said, "Come," you know, "and if it works, it works. If it doesn't, it doesn't." And that worked beautifully, because while I was there, the first year I was there, there were a couple of boys from Harvard, Harvard Graduate School [of Design], and they couldn't understand what was going on at all. Because there were no courses, there were no rules, there were no regulations, and nobody was teaching anything. So those two, they'd sit in their room and play cards. And they just automatically left, because they didn't know what was going on. It didn't mean anything to them. So Mr. Wright used to say he preferred kids out of high school to [those] out of

college, because, he'd say, "They don't have as much to unlearn." So he could get them straight the first time.
[laughter]

LASKEY: So you had to have no particular background in architecture to go?

LAUTNER: No, you just did it, or you didn't do it. And that was it. And that's perfect. Also, it's interesting that, about regulations and stuff, he only had one rule, and that was if you didn't get up at seven o'clock for breakfast, you didn't get any breakfast. And so if you were working like on the farm or doing stone work or carpentry work and you started doing heavy labor at eight or nine o'clock, if you were late and you had no breakfast, the next day you got up in time for breakfast because you couldn't make it without eating and do that hard work.

LASKEY: Well, was this part of what you did, was the work? Were you assigned projects?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. Physical labor, yeah. That was part of-- Everything was part of learning **for** architecture and that's the way he felt about it, and I think it's absolutely the best, because everything in life is-- Architecture **should** be concerned with everything in life, so when you know how to build physically, and then you know what stone is good for, you know what wood's good for, you know what to plan for, you know what to design. The typical

architectural school, they don't even know what the materials are. They're making sketches or plans, and they have absolutely no meaning. They don't know what they mean. So, he [Wright] considers all the architectural schools insane.

The apprentice system is what they use in Europe, you know, in Switzerland, in Germany; all over the world in fact. The architectural students in Germany--well, they start when they're ten or twelve years old, and they work as a clean-up boy in an office, and then they do stone work, and electrical, and cabinet work; they do everything. When they graduate they know what building is.

And, aside from that, [at] Taliesin, he included in the life there-- Apprentices would take turns cooking-- For instance, he had big Sunday night dinners where people were invited from Madison or Chicago or something. So he would have a conversation with some famous--usually famous-- person in that area, and always have a string quartet and music and-- So the apprentices would rotate for doing this dinner. You'd have to figure out what to cook for, say, fifty or sixty people: cook it, serve it, and clean it up. And do the whole thing.

Well, I was married. I got married right about the same time. So, my wife and I did that. So when we left Taliesin it was absolutely nothing to have anybody for

dinner. I mean, if you had four or five people for dinner, that's nothing when you know how to do it for fifty or sixty. Why, it's fantastic. It changes your whole attitude, you know. And then it's also part of your training as an architect. Because you know what goes on in the kitchen, you know what goes on in the living room, you know socially, you know everything, so it's-- Complete living was the training. And, most architects don't know anything about that either. I mean, they just read what some expert says about a kitchen, but they never worked in a kitchen, so they don't know what the hell it is, you know.

LASKEY: Well, it sounds like from your background, Taliesin may not have been as much of a shock to you as it would have been to a lot of other people.

LAUTNER: No, no, that's true. It wasn't any shock to me, it was just a pleasure. Something more academic would have been a big bore. [laughter] So, that's the difference.

LASKEY: But how, out of this, did you evolve your architecture? I'm not finished with Taliesin yet, but I'm curious about how you learned actually in this kind of an environment to be an architect. Not to understand it, but to actually function?

LAUTNER: Well, I was-- Mr. Wright was around all the time pointing out things that contributed to the beauty of the space, or the building, or the function of the kitchen, or

the dining room, or what-have-you. And also the details of construction: how a certain way of detailing, which he would call grammar, contributed to the whole idea, the whole, the total expression. And then he kept accenting the idea that there wasn't any real architecture unless you had a whole idea, so I-- He accented that all the time. So, I really learned that you have to have a major total idea or it's nothing, you know; it's just an assembly. What most people do is an assembly of cliches or facades or what-have-you; there's no real idea. And, so I kept constant-- He was usually talking very philosophically, too, about human life, and the whole world, and the democracy. And architecture is all part of that. So, I gradually-- Well, I was naturally sympathetic with those ideas anyway from my father and mother and I kept working on them and concentrating on them.

And I purposely didn't copy any of Mr. Wright's drawings or even take any photographs, because I was a purist. I was [an] idealist. I was going to work from my own philosophy, and that's what he wanted apprentices to do, too: that wherever they went, they would contribute to the infinite variety of nature by being individual, creating for individuals a growing, changing thing. Well, practically none of them were able to do it. I mean, I am one of two or three that may have done it, you know, but--

So I knew that that was my plan for being an architect: to work from scratch and from philosophical ideas. So then I got looking at nature the same as Mr. Wright did, and observing absolutely everything. So when six, seven years after, when I came here after Taliesin, I had in my head, oh, a million things that I'd like to build. So whenever I got-- I'd say for twenty years maybe whenever I got a job--I didn't have the full control or the full confidence by any means, but I had plenty of ideas from previous observations. So I could always contribute something new and fundamental and real to whatever the problem was, and so I enjoyed that.

LASKEY: What was Taliesin like, physically, to live in or work in?

LAUTNER: Oh, it was beautiful, because-- It was a beautiful place in the hills of Wisconsin to begin with. A beautiful building, and each apprentice had their own room. My wife and I had a big room with a fireplace and you were pretty much on your own. I mean, you just helped the whole--whatever's going on. And in my time there, I did a lot of steam fitting.

LASKEY: Steam fitting?

LAUTNER: Yeah, I enjoyed that, because I found that-- In fact, I was probably happier doing that than I ever have been about anything, because it takes some real thinking

and real planning with your head and it takes some real physical work at the same time. So, you're completely involved, and, usually you're just in an office doing mental work, or you're outside doing physical labor, but you don't get the two together. And when you get the two together you're-- That's the happiest condition for living, really, because you're absolutely involved. And like, when you finally get through doing a steam system, then you have to measure all these pipes, then you get to these big ones. They have to be within a sixteenth of an inch, you know, to fit; you can't stretch them, you have to be right. And you finally get this all together and you fire up the boiler and there's the steam in the-- And the whole place is heated, you know. You really accomplish something. I mean, it's just sensational, and so I never had a better time in my life than doing that.

LASKEY: Now, you mentioned getting married. Who and when?

LAUTNER: Well, I married Abby Roberts's daughter [Mary Faustina Roberts] in the first year that-- We went to Taliesin at the same time.

LASKEY: Now, was she a student also?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: An apprentice? You met her at Taliesin?

LAUTNER: No, no. She came from Marquette. So we came at the same time and Mary's mother, Abby, actually paid for

our-- He [Wright] had the eleven-hundred dollar tuition [including room and board] per year.

LASKEY: In 1933?

LAUTNER: But that was room and board and everything. And it just stayed that way. So she actually paid for that. Then, later on, like after you're there three or four years and Mr. Wright decides you're of some value in the work-- helping with the drafting or superintending construction or something--then he cancels the tuition and maybe you get a little money besides. But it was-- Of course, at that time it was extremely tight and--[the] Depression and all of that. But that's the way it worked.

LASKEY: For the fact that it was really at the peak of the Depression, in the thirties, did that affect what was going on at Taliesin or your view of architecture?

LAUTNER: No, that's the amazing part: how Mr. Wright could cope with the Depression, and practically no work, and still enthusiastically describe and do what architecture should be. He gradually got just enough work to help maintain, but he was in debt most of the time. And the people around there--the grocery stores and whatnot--they loved him so much that they'd say, you know, after he'd owed them money for a couple of years, they'd say, "Well, we're not going to let him have any more." He'd come into the store and he'd say, "Well, Joe, how are you? I'll take

ten bushels of potatoes." And they'd haul it right out. Just absolutely irresistible.

LASKEY: Was he really?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. There's just nothing you could do [to resist him]. I mean, he'd just wipe out anything. [laughter] Unbelievable.

LASKEY: Well, your background wasn't terribly dissimilar to his. Did you feel a lot of just natural sympathy with him?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah, yeah, you know-- And I was very excited about everything he said. I mean, he could say-- He could analyze something and say it in three words so potently that other people would take a whole book and still not really understand what it was. So he was just unbelievable. I mean, every time he said anything it was just sensational. You know, it was so exciting that thirty young boys in their teens and twenties-- We very seldom went to Madison, Milwaukee or Chicago because--we all liked to go to dances, parties, and theater, and so forth--but it was so exciting being with Mr. Wright that we practically never went. It was more exciting being there with Frank Lloyd Wright out in the country than going to Chicago. Now that's, that's something! [laughter]

LASKEY: That was the question I was going to ask, is-- What was the feeling of the school at that time--of the,

you know, your fellow schoolmates, your fellow apprentices?

LAUTNER: We were all--felt that way, pretty much all. I mean, there're naturally odd ones. I mean, there were some who were kind of peculiar this way or that way. But the consensus just was all for him, you know. There was just nothing--nothing better.

LASKEY: Did you have the feeling that you were the start of something monumental when you were there?

LAUTNER: No, the-- When I was first there, he was so brilliant that I was too shy to even say anything or even ask a question. Because I felt I wouldn't want to bother such a brilliant man with anything that I might say, you know. So I was just listening, that's all. And that's the way-- Later on you couldn't-- I got up nerve enough to talk to him once in a while, but not very much. Mainly, listening.

LASKEY: He must have been very supportive, at least in theory, of your desire to follow your own philosophy.

LAUTNER: Well, that's what he--that's what he intended the apprentice training to be, that you should be your own way as an individual and your own architecture, and practice it to suit the geography and climate of wherever you ended up. And everything was basic and nothing to be repeated or nothing routine, nothing-- So that was ideal for me, and-- Let's see--

LASKEY: Were you part of the trek to Taliesin West? Was that started when you were there?

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. We went two or three years to Chandler, Arizona, where we built the Broadacre City model and other models; and I worked on those models in the-- [There] was a hacienda belonging to [Dr. Alexander] Chandler, who was an old client of Mr. Wright's who [Wright] designed a San Marcos Hotel, [San Marcos-in-the-Desert, 1927], which wasn't built. But this Chandler owned--more or less--owned the town of Chandler. So, there's a hotel there where Herbert Hoover and all those people spent the winter. So we lived in a hacienda that was part of that hotel, and we built the architectural models. And then we did that for two or three winters before Mr. Wright bought property outside of Phoenix to build Taliesin West. And I was there when he first went out there. I was there the first year and did a lot of the stonework on the drafting room and the vault: the beginning of Taliesin West. I placed most of the stones.

LASKEY: Really?

LAUTNER: Yeah, so I know what that is.

LASKEY: What was the trip out like?

LAUTNER: Oh, it was fantastic. We-- Everybody drove, so it was a train of maybe fifteen, fifteen cars with a truck, a truck or two full of stuff. Then we'd take a different

route back and forth from Wisconsin to Arizona every time. So Mr. Wright was like that. The only-- Well, he said, you know, the only absolute is change. And so if anything got to be a routine, he'd change it. We never had any routine in any way whatsoever. We never went the same way twice. So it was just fantastic.

LASKEY: And, you didn't find it disrupting to pack up twice a year and move across the country--?

LAUTNER: Oh, no--just exciting. I mean, it was just perfect, because we got the full three, the full seasons in Wisconsin, and then--at that time we went in, like, January after Christmas, so we had the Christmas in the snow, and then we went only for about two months there to Arizona. Now, they go much longer to Arizona. But, that was perfect, because you just--you just got this change, complete change, from the middle of winter to the desert, and then back for spring, summer, and fall. So you got everything. It was ideal.

LASKEY: Did you live there, live at Taliesin year-round? Or was it fully--

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. Year-round. That was another thing; he, once you were an apprentice, he never wanted you to leave, for any reason. In fact, he didn't even like apprentices going home to their families. I think that was mainly so that the architecture--the philosophy--was

absolutely the whole life. And it's not diluted in any way at all--on purpose.

LASKEY: Sounds ideal.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Oh, it was fantastic. So, of course, that made it difficult later on, because having really known a genius of five hundred years, there aren't that many people that are very interesting after that. [laughter]

LASKEY: Where do you go after you've been there? Well, you mentioned Broadacre City [c. 1934]. Frank Lloyd Wright, or his office, did some interesting things during the period that you were there. Like Fallingwater [Edgar J. Kaufmann House, Bear Run, Pennsylvania, 1935-1936], and the Johnson's Wax Company [S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Administration Building, Racine, Wisconsin, 1936-1939], Broadacre City. Were you involved in any of those?

LAUTNER: Oh, yes. I did most of the plans for [Herbert F.] Johnson's residence ["Wingspread," Wind Point, Wisconsin, 1937], and, I superintended the residence and I had a real great time doing that. I also went with Mr. Wright and [Edgar] Tafel and Wes [William Wesley] Peters [fellow Taliesin apprentices--ed.], who, when he went down to superintend the Johnson Wax office building-- So I saw that from beginning to end while I was working on the house, mainly. And so I had the whole experience of all that. It was just unbelievable.

LASKEY: It must have been. Now, Mrs. Beecher's house, you said that that was the first house that you supervised? Is that right?

LAUTNER: Abby Roberts.

LASKEY: Roberts, I'm sorry.

LAUTNER: Abby Beecher Roberts. One of my daughters [is] named Mary Beecher Roberts. And they're from the Beecher family in the east. I mean, that's part of that family. The writer--

LASKEY: Harriet Beecher Stowe? Oh, really?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: So how did she end up in Marquette?

LAUTNER: Well, she married-- I mean, she was the daughter of Longyear, but (remember, I told you, the pioneer)-- So, I guess, [the woman] who Longyear married was partly Beecher: my wife's grandmother.

LASKEY: So, the house that you built [for Wright] in Marquette [Abby Beecher Roberts House, "Deertrack," Marquette, Michigan, 1936], then the Roberts House, what was it like?

LAUTNER: Oh, it was beautiful. On a hundred and fifty acres of woods. In the living room, the ceiling went up to the sky, so that you incorporated the woods, and a distant view of Lake Superior. So, there was nothing like that up there because, you know, most houses have a square or

rectangular room with a window on each wall, you know. Particularly in the wintertime, when you'd go in that living room, you're in a woods full of snow, and you're just right in the middle of it. And, it's just [an] unbelievable place to live. Of course, all spring, summer, and autumn, it's just magnificent, because you're just part of the woods.

LASKEY: And this was built in, what, 1937? '36?

LAUTNER: Yeah, about then [1936].

LASKEY: Finding materials to build a house like that, was it unusual?

LAUTNER: Well, we got the brick, we got a tan brick, I think, from Green Bay, which wasn't too far. Green Bay, Wisconsin. And then Mr. Wright preferred cypress when he used wood. He always used cypress, because that really is the best wood. And that comes from Louisiana.

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LAUTNER: Well, the wood for this house was cypress, and had to be imported from Louisiana. But, outside of that, they [were] normal materials, so it wasn't any problem to build. In fact, in those days it was much easier to build than now. My experience with building the Johnson residence, superintending it, was just a dream compared with now. Because they had these, I think it was, a Polish contractor from, I'm not sure if he was from Milwaukee or Racine. But he had a crew of carpenters who were all cabinetmakers that were better than the average cabinetmaker we have right now. So I remember authorizing one wing of this job to be built. It was all approved and everything, and so I told the foreman to go ahead with that wing. In one week, it was all framed like a cabinet. It was so perfect that you just couldn't believe it, and in **no** time. I mean, nowadays it's just **impossible** to get anything like that done.

And aside from that, the luxury of what was the cabinetwork and all of the woodwork was done in a shop in Milwaukee: a big cabinet shop where they made full-sized shop drawings. You can't get shop drawings in Los Angeles at all. I mean, you have to go **east** if you want to get

quality, you know. And this was the same shop that did the Supreme Court building in Washington and the Waldorf-Astoria [Hotel, New York]. So that was an adequate cabinet shop. So I got a real kick out of that because they'd have tables thirty, forty, fifty feet long. And the drawings for the woodwork: full-sized, detailed, fifty feet long-- absolutely perfect. So when they came out and installed it, it was perfect. So it was just pure luxury to be superintending that job because the people, the workmen were just fantastic. I've never seen anything like that before or since. [laughter] So that, that was a dream.

LASKEY: Well, as superintendent, what did you do or be responsible for?

LAUTNER: Well, you have to watch all the details and be sure they have all of the right plans. And I did a lot of the drawing, with Mr. Wright's approval, of course, and a lot-- I detailed windows and doors and jambs and all that kind of thing. I really enjoyed it. I detailed a lot of that full-sized. So that's part of the learning. And aside from that-- I mean, you handle all the communication between the contractor and the owner and the architect.

LASKEY: That could get pretty sticky, can't it?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. That gets complicated. And then also, you deal with the client. Like, Johnson, Hib [Herbert F.] Johnson, didn't really understand-- He loved the house

because he saw the model before he approved building it. But he still didn't really know what it was. I mean, he knew partially. And that's generally true, most people really don't understand what it is. And so, when he'd come on the job, he'd say, "Well, what's this for," you know, "this room here, what's it for?" And so I'd have to explain it to him. So that's part of the superintendent job too. I was able to do that and I enjoyed it. It was working with the client, the contractor, with the whole thing.

LASKEY: And Mr. Wright allowed a lot of his apprentices to do this?

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. [It was] part of the training. And it was good for the jobs too, because a more or less continuous superintendence by the architect--it really had to have that, even more now than at that time. I mean, I have a hard time here because I have to go or have somebody in my office go all the time, because you can't depend on the contractor for anything; they just don't care. The building business now is just awful.

They talk about progress. There's no progress whatsoever. I mean, I used to have a contractor who built several of my houses. He built the Town House [Hotel] which is now the Sheraton down on Wilshire, in the twenties. It's a concrete structure, and he told me about it.

He built one floor per week, in the twenties. Now, with fifty million cranes and all of the computers and all of the monkey business that they've got, they can't even do it. So there's no progress at all. It's just talk. It's all talk and all overhead. Excessive overhead and talk, that's what it is. But that's our image of progress.

[tape recorder off]

LASKEY: So how many of the houses would you say you supervised?

LAUTNER: Well, I supervised [the] Roberts House and Johnson [House]. Those were the main ones for me [until I came to L.A. to supervise the Sturgis and Oboler residences]. But while I was there--you mentioned Falling-water--I was standing right alongside of Mr. Wright when he designed the Bear Run House. It was a perfect example of what he-- You know, a lot of people say he didn't do what he preached, or they like to think he didn't, but he did. He's one of the few men in the world who really did practice what he preached, and there's no two ways about it. He said, "You have to"--he never made any sketches--"you have to have it all in your head." That's when you can see what a real, total, entity or a real piece of architecture [is]. Like, that one in Acapulco that I did [Arango House], or in various ones here, I have conceived [it] as a whole, one-piece thing, and so with Mr. Wright when he--

When he got back from Pittsburgh (he came on the train; that was before airplanes--I mean, there was no air transportation) he had a survey, and he had the idea in his head. And he just took the survey and drew the plan and section (which, he also pointed out, are the essence of a building; that tells the whole story: the plan and section), in twenty minutes, and it never changed. That was it. He just put it down like that.

LASKEY: What was your reaction to it when you saw him do it?

LAUTNER: Oh, well, we saw him do it many times.

LASKEY: But I mean Fallingwater, specifically.

LAUTNER: Well, it was exciting in the end because you saw this initial plan. And then when it was finally built and photographed, the photographs were **exactly** like the drawings, just exactly. There was not a variation. It's really something.

He was so capable that I felt he could probably do ten or fifteen jobs a day. He never had the work, you know, but he only worked in the office for maybe an hour or two in the morning. And then he'd write some letters, and the rest of the day he'd go out on the farm because it never took him eight hours to do anything. I mean, he was just so fast, he could handle ten jobs in two hours and talk to

five different people at the same time. [laughter] So he was really brilliant.

LASKEY: Did this intimidate you at all?

LAUTNER: Well, yeah. I mean, it intimidated some people. Like, the man--the boy [Albert McArthur, a former apprentice] that he was connected with on the [Phoenix] Arizona Biltmore [Hotel, 1926-28; designed by McArthur with advice from Wright--Ed.]-- I think he and maybe several others actually committed suicide because Mr. Wright was so much, and they were so little, that they might as well commit suicide, you know. [laughter] But I, no, I never got to anything like that. It was just a-- I had just a tremendous delight in listening and seeing his brilliance, that's all. Of course I did feel, I felt very modest when I finally took off to start on my own. I mean, I didn't know whether I'd get to really doing anything or not. I mean, there's no way you could tell. You just had to--try.

So as I went along, after I practiced for about twenty years, I began to feel that I **was** doing something, you know. But that's all part of it: that it goes on forever. And you're always just starting, if you have the right attitude about it.

SECOND PART

MAY 19, 1982

LASKEY: What I'm curious about is, at Taliesin--I want to rephrase a question that I'd asked you earlier in the interview--how did you learn the mechanics of architecture?

LAUTNER: Well, we learned in the best possible way: by actual construction. First of all, we had remodeling and additions, physical work with concrete and wood, and plumbing, and stone masonry, and everything. So we learned first as apprentices how to handle these materials in an architectural way, which is natural to the material. So that in handling the materials, Mr. Wright pointed out-- If somebody tried to make something out of wood that was inappropriate to the material, he pointed out why and what. So that you really got the essence or the nature of the material. And so you learned to use the material in its natural way, so that when you did become an architect and were designing something, you wouldn't use wood where you should have used stone or vice versa or, you know, things like that. And things like that do happen. I mean, they stretch things, and they force things, and they do all kinds of crazy things. So that's the first basic part of the techniques.

Then you were encouraged to do little projects of your own or make or build whatever you liked to build, small or large. And then on top of that, after you'd been there a while, you got to doing drafting on certain jobs. And you'd learn from Mr. Wright, and from all the other work that was going on, how to detail and how to draw these things, in a [way] not only suitable to the nature of the materials but suitable to the essence of an idea. Like, he stressed most of all that anything that was architecture had to have a real idea. So whatever the building was, [it] had a major idea. And once you understood the idea, all the other parts fell in place, if you understand the whole thing. And just being there--that's why he said you'd have to be there four or five years, six years minimum, before you really could absorb or really understand.

There's no picking this up superficially like a three-months course in college and learning it, you know. It doesn't have any meaning. So then you find how--and he points out all the time--how in finishing the drawings or plans for the building, how every detail and every element is sympathetic with the whole idea and accentuates the whole idea, or extends the whole idea but never conflicts with the idea. So the way he would put it was the details were like the grammar. The main story or the main idea is

the whole building, and then the techniques and the final details of construction are the grammar. So that grammar is different for every different idea.

His whole architecture is so much more than any other style because every one's a new one. Nobody believes that, you know. They think, oh, he copied from the Japanese and he copied from the Mexicans, and-- They can't give him credit for anything, you know. They still pick at him when he really was a genius.

LASKEY: They sometimes pick on him through you, too, which we'll come to later.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: While you were in Taliesin, in fact, just about the time you started, the [Henry-Russell] Hitchcock [and] [Philip] Johnson book on the International style [**The International Style**, Museum of Modern Art, 1932] came out. Did that have any particular effect on you, or on Taliesin?

LAUTNER: No, none at all. Because we knew that [Ludwig Mies] van der Rohe was like a--almost like an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright in 1910. When Mr. Wright had his exhibit in Holland and Germany, and he got those books out, van der Rohe wrote to him as "My Dear Master." So he was just another pupil. And most people don't understand that either.

LASKEY: Well, it's very ironic, the irony of it. So weren't there any other influences at Taliesin? Did other architects come and talk to you, for example?

LAUTNER: Well, van der Rohe came for a visit once.

LASKEY: He did?

LAUTNER: Yeah, from Chicago. And oh, yeah, several others. I don't remember who--quite a few who were sympathetic, and I guess some who were just curious, but I don't remember who they were. None of them had anything like Frank Lloyd Wright.

I mean, like, when students ask me-- I actually heard in person [Walter] Gropius, [Le] Corbusier, van der Rohe, and all of the big ones. And they're all **nothing** compared to Frank Lloyd Wright. They're just **nothing**. So when people want to discuss it with me, it's crazy, that's all. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, you did find that you particularly had to fight against the International style then as a student?

LAUTNER: No, no. We were entirely concerned with what Mr. Wright calls organic architecture. And any style that became a style or became a fad, became a superficial kind of nothing. We wouldn't even consider it architecture, but they still do consider-- I mean, most of them took me years to figure it out. I mean, I could see that a lot of styles were just styles, and anybody could learn a bunch of styles

and do a modern or a colonial or what-have-you, but that's an empty nothing as far as creating architecture. So we learned that, you know, from Mr. Wright.

So what we did find out was that (not so much right when I was there, as later on, when van der Rohe was running the Illinois Tech [Illinois Institute of Technology] and all) that they were avidly trying to put down Frank Lloyd Wright in dirty ways. My mother was there and my sister too. Sometimes they'd take a course once in a while, and they knew some of the people personally. And they did and said a lot of absolutely untrue, dirty stuff to put down Frank Lloyd Wright.

LASKEY: At Illinois Tech?

LAUTNER: Yeah. Just disgusting. And they still do, I guess. It's a crazy thing.

LASKEY: [This is] sort of a what-if question, but what if Frank Lloyd Wright hadn't opened Taliesin at that time? Have you speculated what you might have done?

LAUTNER: No. As I mentioned before, I was ideally analyzing everything, and if Taliesin hadn't occurred, or Mr. Wright's autobiography and this apprenticeship school-- I had in mind to bum around the world. And that's the thing that I miss. I wish I **had** been able to do that, because I feel that I missed freedom and some experiences outside of architecture that I would like to have had. And so I think

that's what I would have tried to do. And if I hadn't succeeded in that, there's no telling where I would have ended up, you know.

I think I still would have been interested in something definitely creative, definitely no repetition, no rut, and constructive and for human welfare, you know. Idealistic, whatever it was. It would have to fulfill all of those things--which, I guess, many things could but not as obviously as architecture.

LASKEY: But architecture schools at that time were pretty pro forma, weren't they?

LAUTNER: Oh yes. There would be no alternate there because, as I also said, after taking a drafting course and not being a neat draftsman, I knew that the typical academic approach would be so deadly that I just wouldn't want to do it. And in fact, at that time, I don't know whether you know it or we should say it, Mr. Wright's books were not allowed in the universities. I mean, that's how bad, how narrow minded the so-called "free" U.S.--the country of U.S.A., which is supposed to be a free country--how narrow-minded the academic world is, as well as the business world and the whole thing. His books were not allowed in the universities.

LASKEY: For what reason?

LAUTNER: Too radical. And it's still like that. I mean, the academic boys still go for old styles or tricks or something, and they leave him out, you know.

LASKEY: That's astonishing. I didn't know that.

LAUTNER: Oh god, it's unbelievable. So, like, it was funny. The students practically had strikes. I mean, they reacted to this. They knew about Frank Lloyd Wright. Like, at the University of Michigan, the students would get together and invite him and come and talk some place, but he would be outlawed by the university. But the **students** would get him.

LASKEY: That's astonishing.

LAUTNER: Isn't that something?

LASKEY: It really is.

LAUTNER: It's unbelievable. But it's understandable, too, because it's just like any genius in the history of the world. I mean, it just proves it all the more. They were run down, kicked out of town, or had to struggle, or never get published because they were too new, too radical, one way or another. And any genius has had that problem. So, like, later on when Mr. Wright got a job in, well, I think he said it when he first--no, they wanted him to do the civic center in Madison, which they didn't build--but he said, "I must be slipping because I'm winning my own precinct." See, that's the way it is. I mean, he was

treated as an outlaw almost all his life. And the fact that he got recognized before he was dead is unusual for geniuses.

LASKEY: Of course, he lived a long time. That may have had something to do with it.

LAUTNER: Yeah. But he had to live that long before he really-- Well, he was recognized in Europe when he was a young man but not in this country until he was eighty or ninety. And this is supposed to be a free country, and it's not. It's very reactionary.

LASKEY: Did you have any difficulty because you were a student of his?

LAUTNER: Oh sure. When I came here if I told somebody I had studied with Frank Lloyd Wright, they'd kick me out. I couldn't get a job. I couldn't get a job in any office, because that's too radical.

LASKEY: Amazing.

LAUTNER: That's right.

LASKEY: Now, you came out here in 1939, right? And you had been here before for the Olympics. What did you feel about Los Angeles when you came out?

LAUTNER: Oh, it was depressing. I mean, when I first drove down Santa Monica Boulevard, it was so ugly I was physically sick for the first year I was here. Because after living in Arizona and Michigan and Wisconsin, mostly

out in the country, and mostly with good architecture, and string quartets and things of beauty, this was the ugliest thing I'd ever seen. And so I was just sick, that's all.

LASKEY: Even in 1939? Before the smog and--

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. The buildings, you know. If you tried to figure out how to make a row of buildings ugly, you couldn't do it any better than it's been done [here]. I mean, they're just ugly, naturally ugly all the way. There isn't a single legitimate, good-looking thing anywhere, you know. [laughter]

LASKEY: How did you happen to come out?

LAUTNER: Well, I came initially as a superintendent for Mr. Wright on the [George D.] Sturgis House in Brentwood [1939]. And then I also had my first child [Karol, May 29, 1938], and I decided I had to separate and get started on my own. And that all happened at the same time.

LASKEY: How did you feel about that, separating from Mr. Wright?

LAUTNER: Well, it was very difficult because it was such an exciting and beautiful and happy life, you know; everything was great. And so trying to get started here, during the Depression, on your own, was terrible. I mean, I had things like-- Well, I attracted a few people who wanted to do something, after I built my own house, and some of them-- Like, I remember one-- Well, at that time, of

course, [the] Depression, and no architect had any-- I mean they all had problems, but starting was even worse. And what people did as far as houses were concerned, they normally wouldn't use an architect at all. But they would say, "Well, if you want to submit a plan, we've got seven other architects who've submitted free plans, and if we like it we might pay for it." That's the way it was. And so it's hard for me to understand now kids getting out of architectural school. You know, they want fifteen dollars an hour, and they don't know what they're doing.

LASKEY: That hasn't changed any.

LAUTNER: No. So I had one client--they had a steep hillside lot, and they wanted a house with an apartment to rent and a badminton court, for twenty-five hundred dollars. I built my own house for four thousand at that time, but I worked with them for a whole year. I got the plans--in fact, I got a price that was something like two hundred dollars more than they wanted to spend, and nothing happened. I got absolutely no money and no building. So talk about tough--I mean, the kids now don't know what tough is. They haven't got the vaguest idea.

LASKEY: It must have been somewhat frightening.

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah, it was. I mean, the only reason that I was able to keep on was that I had this in the back of my mind when I first started--since I did all this plumbing

and steam fitting, particularly at Taliesin, I said to myself, "Well, if for some reason I could never make it, or get through, with architecture, at least I can become a plumber or something like that for a living." So I had a kind of, a sort of a backup feeling that I could do something regardless. But it was a horrible, long stretch, and really, my first wife's mother had to help us every so often financially, or I could never have made it at all.

LASKEY: Before we get too far away from it, I'd like you to talk a little bit about the Sturgis House because I think it's a remarkable house.

LAUTNER: Well, I had complete charge of getting it built, so I took the plans through the building department. And at that time the head of the building department was a real individual with guts enough to use his authority and not, you know, [was] not the picayune letter-of-the-law administrator. He was the kind that Mr. Wright had when he was doing his concrete block houses here. He wrote about it and said that he finally persuaded the head of the building department to be his building inspector, but all of the stuff was illegal.

LASKEY: Really?

LAUTNER: Yeah. I mean, everything was against the code, and the same way with the Sturgis House. And the same way with almost every job I've done--there've been twenty,

thirty, forty, fifty things that are against the code, the letter of the code, which doesn't necessarily mean there's anything wrong. It's just that those things are in the code to try and protect the people from crooked contractors, you know. It's just a pain in the neck for architects. But anyway, that was what happened with the Sturgis House. I had forty or fifty points against the code that had to have special approval. I got to the head of the department, and he just checked them all off, signed them all off.

LASKEY: Good grief.

LAUTNER: [laughter] But you couldn't do that now. Now it's worse. But you can still fight the code, which I've had to do all my life, with special appeals to the different appeal boards, you know. So if you're doing something reasonable, you can finally persuade them, but it takes a lot of work.

LASKEY: Is the code basically to protect people from the shenanigans of [contractors], or is it just to keep things in a sort of a status quo?

LAUTNER: Well, the way I see it is that they've been trying for years to make it an airtight legal document that protects people from bad building. The contractors, you know, they'll cheat on everything. They'll put in lousy plaster, lousy concrete. They'll omit the reinforcing

steel. They'll do anything for a buck, so that's what the code's for now. But then it gets down to so many crazy things that they don't really make any sense.

Like, a little thing: [in] my first house I decided the shower--I didn't like that big ugly curbing across the shower. If you have a good drain--I decided I'd have a stainless steel pan and it would be down about an inch, just enough to drain. And that's a good shower, but it's against the code. The code requires a four-inch curb across there, see. Well, that's because of crooked contractors or poor construction or something, you know. But you have to fight. Anything I thought of was against the code for one reason or another, you know.

LASKEY: Well, your own first house was rather unique in a lot of ways wasn't it [John Lautner House, Silver Lake, 1939]?

LAUTNER: Yes. What I've always recommended-- I mean, theoretically, what it's supposed to be for is to protect the public health and safety, but it's so far beyond that, that it's crazy. At that time, when I was just starting, I had a visiting architect from Rio de Janiero. (I had a lot of friends stop in from all over the world, and had a lot of fun.) He did the--I can't remember his name now, but he was a famous architect down there--he did the ministry of foreign affairs building, a great big building in Rio. And

he said that, at that time, they were concerned about the building [code] because it had become something like--oh, something like one hundred pages, which is, like nothing compared to our code. But that was too much for them, so they cut it back to the original [strictly] public health and safety [needs].

First of all, the architect down there, and in other countries, is responsible, and there the architect's also the builder. That makes all the difference in the world. So what the code is-- They had a list, he told me, of seventy-five things, like: you're not allowed to dump sewage in the middle of the street, and you're not allowed to do this, and you're not allowed to do that, in relation to the public health and safety. Otherwise, you could do absolutely anything you wanted to do. And if you did something wrong, you never got hired again. You were dead, that's all. But the code was absolutely no interference, just like-- And that's the way it should be.

My client for Silvertop--we worked on that to try and revise this code to allow architects to work like doctors. You know, a doctor doesn't have to have some checker decide whether he can remove an appendix. I mean, some clerk would say, "Well, you can't remove it," or something.
[laughter]

LASKEY: Well, I remember reading of an architect just about the time we're talking about, in the late thirties, early forties, who couldn't build a house with a flat roof. He had to have a peaked roof. What's the point?

LAUTNER: Yeah, oh yeah. All kinds of crazy stuff. It was really worse when Mr. Wright built here, because the code was more commercial. It had built in to it a required certain proportion of different materials--like: so much cement, so much wood, so much plaster--so that the people in the building business could figure out how much profit they're going to make because they had a certain percentage allocated by the code. Now, isn't that disgusting?

LASKEY: It's amazing!

LAUTNER: Well, that's, you know, our country, as far as I'm concerned: nothing but the buck, you know. They say, "Why don't we have architecture?" Well, I say we're not civilized, that's all. So we won't have any until we're more civilized.

LASKEY: That's amazing.

About your own house, Esther McCoy once called it--and I love this quote--"It was a marriage between Walden Pond and Douglas Aircraft," the first house that you built.

LAUTNER: Well, that is nice, a nice description. It has the kind of a natural, warm, interior feeling--in space.

The roof is free and sort of soaring, you know, like an airplane, so that description is pretty good.

LASKEY: And it had only two doors?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: How did you do that?

LAUTNER: Well, one door was the entrance door, then the living-dining-kitchen was one room, and what normally would be doors, a door out of the kitchen, were actually windows. And then there was one door to a balcony where there were bedrooms with windows. Well, actually there were two more. There were two doors on the bathroom and two doors for the whole house. So in a small house you get all the space and all the freedom.

LASKEY: Did your building that house help you any to gain credibility in Los Angeles?

LAUTNER: Oh yes. That was the best thing that I could have done. I recommend it to students. If they really want to get started, they have to build something, because just drawings--they don't mean a thing. I mean, you've got to show them something real, unless you're in some political, crackpot scene, you know. Like, some of the guys now, I don't know why they have any reputation because they haven't built anything, but they do. Anyway, I found that, like, oh, ten, fifteen years later, somebody would come to me, and they'd say, well, they saw this little house that I

built for myself ten years ago, and they remembered it, and they wanted me to do something. And that's what did it. So I started right from scratch the way Mr. Wright did and built up my practice from my own work, without any PR or promotion or sales or anything.

LASKEY: Your house was in Silver Lake, and there was a lot of building that went on in Silver Lake, again in the thirties and forties. Why Silver Lake?

LAUTNER: Oh, I think the easy answer to that is that Silver Lake, I think it's still true, is one of the few areas in the whole of Southern California where people own their house and stay there. Because it's a beautiful place to be, and it's extremely convenient. I mean, it's easy to downtown, easy to Hollywood, easy to anywhere. They used to say there were a lot of doctors there, and I guess there still are, because it's easy to all the hospitals and it just got to be that kind of a solid community. So the houses were not for speculation. They were to live in. So Harwell [Hamilton] Harris and Gregory Ain and [Richard] Neutra and all of them had houses there--[Rudolf M.] Schindler. Because that was a place where people built houses to live in, not to sell. You know, [in] the rest of the town, a house is just a piece of merchandise, a thing to trade up, so that next year you can get to Beverly

Hills. I mean, that's the way all the rest of the town is.

[laughter]

LASKEY: All the architects you just mentioned were more or less of the same style. I think that they were, most of them, in fact, students of Neutra or Schindler. You were very different than they were. Did that cause you problems?

LAUTNER: No. I was sort of recognized early as a good contemporary architect, but I had my own work and my own name, so that I just kept building that up. It took me a long time to understand why Neutra was a big name at all, because, as far as I was concerned, all he did was one thing, and he kept repeating that same thing.

Years later, after I'd been practicing for maybe fifteen or twenty years, I suddenly realized that (I should have realized it sooner, but the simple things are hard to really understand) there are a lot of people-- I thought that to be an architect you should contribute and create a whole new thing for each client, and that was the ultimate service and the ultimate pleasure for everybody. But then I suddenly realized that there are these people, they look for what they want, they see it, and they want a copy of that. So that's what they did with Neutra. When they went to him they wanted another one of those, and so it was really easy. All Neutra had to do was make a different

plot plan and use all the same details, all the same stuff, so he had the same house over and over again. It was OK because the people got what they asked for. They got just what they saw. Those people would be afraid to do anything with me because they didn't know what they were going to get. So it's another world completely.

LASKEY: Why Neutra rather than Schindler just--

LAUTNER: Well, I think that's the same reason. Schindler was more experimental and created more interesting spaces and tried different materials. Neutra just did the same thing over and over and over.

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LAUTNER: I talked to Schindler one time in his later years. He did all of his own building, and I don't blame him because you couldn't find a contractor, then or now, who wants to do anything different or at a reasonable price. And so Schindler really tried to provide an interesting space at a reasonable price. So even though he was interested in concrete and so forth, and did his own pre-cast concrete, most of the later things were just regular studs and plaster: the cheapest, fastest way you could do it. I couldn't blame him either, because he did give the client a space that didn't cost too much, and he did some experimenting with the space as well. He liked what I did, what little he knew before he died.

LASKEY: Did you ever consider doing your own contracting?

LAUTNER: Well, I more or less did for years because in working with the clients with a contractor, they would come in, and they'd say, "Well, do you realize you've got ten thousand dollars worth of brickwork here," you know. And I'd have to take off everything myself and price it, know all the unit costs, and I knew I had something like two thousand dollars worth of brick business for [a masonry subcontractor]. So, I'd just have to tell the contractor

to go to hell and hunt for another one. So, I had to get all the subbids and hand it to the contractor in order to get a decent price. [Steel bids still vary 500 percent; contracting is like horse racing.] So, I've more or less done that all my life, but I haven't been paid for it. What I should do is-- But I didn't go into that way because the architects had this so-called or theoretical ethic that if you're a contractor, you can never be engaged as an architect for a public building or big building or anything else. So I naively hoped that I might get some kind of a building sometime, and I didn't want to jeopardize that. But since then I've found that, you know, they do all kinds of unethical things, and they still get hired, and it's all bunk and so on.

LASKEY: Well, when you first came out here, you were associated with Douglas Honnold for a time?

LAUTNER: Not when I first-- I started on my own first.

LASKEY: Oh, you did?

LAUTNER: And I did several jobs. I did my own, and I did the Bell House [Hollywood Hills, 1940], and I did the Springer House [Echo Park, Los Angeles, 1941; cost: \$2,500], and I did-- Then I had about twelve or fifteen clients built up over the first two or three years, and then the war stopped everything.

Then rather than work for an architect during the war, I worked for a contractor as a contractor superintendent because I wanted to know more about the contracting so that in the future I could do more architecture. And that's what's enabled me to, because the typical architect doesn't know enough about contracting or building. They're scared to death. They all succumb to the contractors. So anything that a contractor says, goes, and it's still that way. I mean, that's why we don't have any new office buildings. It's just "get the contractor who does this kind of a thing, at this kind of a price." You don't do anything else.

So then it was almost the end of the war when I went to work with Doug Honnold, and we did some black market work in Beverly Hills, because you weren't allowed to build anything, and you couldn't get any materials unless you had the priorities and, you know, all that kind of stuff. And that was all baloney too. If you were rich in Beverly Hills you could build anyway, so that's the way it was.

So I worked with him for, I guess, two or three years. And I designed about one hundred and fifty jobs while I was with him. And, I don't know, maybe ten or fifteen were built. But he knew how to--he had all the contacts, you know. He knew how to get jobs.

LASKEY: Well, during the war were there jobs to be had? Was there material available?

LAUTNER: No, no. During the war there were no jobs except army or navy. The big architects were drawing army barracks. And this was the most insane thing I've ever seen in my life. I tried it for one week. I couldn't do it all. I mean, they had big, big army contracts and they'd have three or four hundred draftsmen, and literally they'd be drawing--you've seen the army barracks like this.

[gestures] It's a rectangular building like that? And it has crossbarred windows? Two hundred draftsmen drawing these crossbarred windows. [No new ideas allowed.] So, you know, the whole architect profession, to me, was just stupid, absolutely stupid, but anything for a buck, you know. And it's still like that; that's a total farce. So working as a contractor was much better because I was learning something and I was outside and it was healthy work and real. What the architects were doing was just a farce. I mean, completely unnecessary but a trick way of making money, because it was traditional. They were making traditional plans of army barracks. [laughter] Crazy!

LASKEY: Well, what would the independent architect have done during this period?

LAUTNER: That's what they did. They either did that or they starved to death.

LASKEY: I see. I was thinking of, well, people like Harwell Hamilton Harris, whom you mentioned, people who did residences.

LAUTNER: I don't know what they did. They just didn't do anything, I guess.

LASKEY: But you had the training, at least, from Taliesin that you could survive as a contractor.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: So, then after the war, when things loosened up a bit, you were with Honnold?

LAUTNER: Yeah. Well, then I went completely on my own again. I mean, we just, well, we decided to separate. So I've been on my own all the time, really.

LASKEY: The late forties--you've seemed to have done a lot of things, like Henry's Drive-In [Pomona, California, 1948] and the Desert Hot Springs Motel [Hot Springs, California, 1947] as well as your residences.

LAUTNER: I don't know why. They were just people who came and found out about me. They came, and I did the work. And it's been that way. I still get jobs the same way. Somebody has seen something in a magazine or actually seen something and they'd come and see me. But how many come, at what time, there's no predicting, you know.

And it has nothing to do with the economy. I mean, if the building business is down I might have more work than I

ever had or if the building business is up, I might not have any work. It just depends on the fluke of some individual looking for architecture. And there aren't very many people looking for architecture. They're looking for deals, but there are very few who really want to get into something new.

LASKEY: On the other hand, doesn't Los Angeles historically sort of offer this opportunity for people to be different?

LAUTNER: Yeah--well, that's a misnomer too. I was very disappointed in that. What I found there was that it's true, you might be able to do almost anything, and you might have almost any kind of a client. And I have had a few--they wanted to do something just to be different, with no understanding of the architecture. So that's completely unsatisfactory because here you've got a guy who just wants to show off, and he does it to show off, which is part of the movie industry or the whole thing, you know, of non-reality or advertising or whatever it is. So that made me very mad when I discovered that I had several clients like that, which theoretically were giving me the opportunity to do a new job, but they didn't understand it.

Then I used to tell people I wished to hell I had started out in Boston because I would have built up a reputation that would grow. Well, here nothing grows,

you're just in or out. You can be in for this week and out next week. There's no continuity, and nobody gives a damn. Well, in the east there's some continuity, and they care. So, actually, I think I could have done more if I'd started in Boston than here. Also, here the bankers and the contractors are very conservative. You couldn't get a loan on anything, you know, that wasn't just stock. So it doesn't have the freedom that it's supposed to have [just advertising media P.R., et cetera].

LASKEY: Speaking of clients, I would think that your nature, your type of architecture being so particularly personal and so unique that your clients would have got to be rather unique for the most part, too--that your relationship with them is, perhaps, different than most architects with their clients.

LAUTNER: Well, they are. They're individuals, so I think it means that there aren't too many real individuals. Most people want something the same, you know. And that's hard for me to understand, when there is this infinite variety possible, why you should want to duplicate something. Of course, I've never been able to understand the conservative point of view anyway. I mean, that's beyond me; I just can't understand it at all. But that seems to be the dominant thing, is all the same. So I am dependent on individuals.

Well, like a good example right here [is] that [Gil and Joanne Segel] house [1978] down there in Malibu, that "wood cave." Well, that woman--we had absolutely no problem. She is a dance therapist. So she had seen some of my work, she came in, and she said, "You know how to stay on the ground and fly." And that's what she wanted to do. So aesthetically, architecturally, and humanly and every other way, that's solid and free, which are elements that I love in architecture: enduring spaces. She said, "Well, we're dancing together." Well, that's an individual, see. I mean, you can't imagine a banker understanding that. They don't give a goddamn; it's just so many square feet for so many bucks, and architecture means nothing.

So that's the kind I like. I mean, I had another client, for instance, who had a big abstract painting, and he said, "I want to have a house that gives me that kind of environment."

And I said, "That's beautiful. I love the tougher the challenge, the better." You know, I create a whole new environment that makes him feel as though he's living in that painting. I mean, that's really doing something with architecture, you know. This other stuff is nothing, that you see, you know. [Merely fads and facades.]

And so when you have individuals who have some idea of how they want to live or wish to live, why, that gives me the clues to-- That's why they're all different, individual things.

LASKEY: Then you experiment with materials and with the different forms as you're doing things?

LAUTNER: Oh, everything. Everything, yeah.

LASKEY: As the client requests you to--

LAUTNER: Sure. Whatever I get from the client as a kind--whatever I feel--as a sort of space or environment that they want, I try to achieve. That's the interesting part of it.

LASKEY: Well, your Desert Hot Springs Motel [1947], which I've only seen in pictures, but it looks like a great place to stay, like a little garden in the desert. How would you come to design something like that?

LAUTNER: Well, that was a very nice man, Lucian Hubbard, who was sort of a retired movie producer, director, and he had these hot springs. He was primarily interested in the hot springs down there that were on this property. I went down there with him, and he didn't get into the architecture that much. But he wanted something so people could stay there while he developed these hot springs--something that could be expanded. So he only built, like, four or five units to start with, which could have been added to.

But in staying down there, I stayed in a typical motel. And it's very windy, and the buildings just rattle and scream--it's terrible. So I got the clue right away that for that environment I use steel and concrete. So first of all it wasn't rattling in the wind. And then, as a motel, I loved that challenge too. Because a typical motel is just partitioned off like that, and you have a window in the rear and a door in the front, and they're just horrible things. And so by opening it up to the sky, each one has its own private patio, garden, and top of the mountains and sky and everything--even in row housing.

So I loved to achieve those things, but the strange part is that the, you know, big business developers, they never see anything like that. I mean, these are real contributions to every kind of project but they're unnoticed, don't make any difference.

LASKEY: Or perhaps they're frightened.

LAUTNER: I don't know. I guess so. I suppose that's true too.

LASKEY: You have done some commercial work.

LAUTNER: Yes. Well, that was one. Then I did a whole chain of restaurants [Henry's, c. 1949-52, and 1960], and a [Kaynar] factory [Pico Rivera, 1950], and a school, an elementary school [Midtown, Los Angeles, 1960]. I did also a laboratory building for [the] University of Hawaii

[Hilo]. And just a couple years ago, a rehabilitation center ["Rancho del Valle," Main Building, Canoga Park, California, 1979] for the Crippled Children's Society out in the [San Fernando] Valley, and some offices--but not too many, because they really don't want any architecture. I discovered when I built an office center for a subdivision in [San Juan] Capistrano [Alto Capistrano Headquarters, 1966], and also worked on developing the whole subdivision--with a shopping center and the whole thing, which was premature. But we built the office building. And I did that with brick and natural light and ventilation, and it's so nice the people working there didn't want to go home. And I found that that building didn't cost any more than the typical concrete block building with air conditioning and fluorescent lights. And here was a luxury office that cost the same as the stock concrete block with air conditioning.

So they [office developers] don't think about anything at all. I mean, first of all, they don't give a damn about human welfare. It's just enclose the space fast and cheap and rent it; that's all. So the business people don't look for anything. I mean, I have had a few, like some of the jobs I did when I was with Honnold in Beverly Hills.

I had a call from somebody in San Diego, and they said they liked the front of the store that I did. It was a

liquor store, and he said, "Do you want to do it or shall I have somebody copy it?" They don't give a damn.

LASKEY: He said that to you?

LAUTNER: Sure. I mean, they have no respect at all.

None. I mean, an architect is just the bottom of the world to a developer or a business man. They don't give a damn.

That's all. It's just them and their money, that's all.

LASKEY: It's something I've always wanted to know--this is a little bit aside from what we're talking about--but as an architect, how do you feel when you turn the building over to someone else--a house, building, whatever? Do you maintain the proprietary feeling that it's yours?

LAUTNER: You mean when the owner moves in?

LASKEY: Yeah. When it becomes his. Or do you get upset about the color they paint it or the furniture they put in it or--

LAUTNER: Oh no. No. Oh, I do, I do. Sure, I get upset if they wreck it, but usually-- I've only had one or two initial owners that did things I didn't like. Most of them were very sympathetic, and whatever they did-- They wouldn't do anything without asking me. I mean, they wouldn't even put in a certain kind of tile or drape without asking me, you know, if it was going to ruin something. And so the first clients, I've had no problem at all.

But when they're sold, and somebody decides to paint it, you know, then it's just death, that's all. And they've done that quite often. Like, all concrete--paint it, you know, paint it black and white and stuff like that. I mean, just the crudest, ugliest kind of things in the world happen after they're sold. Then somebody else gets it back and tries to bring it back to my original building. So, fortunately that's happened most of the time, where there've been intermediate owners who have just completely ruined the thing, there's a present owner who's put it in its original condition.

LASKEY: Do they contact you?

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. They want my advice about how to get it back to the original condition, and they love it. So, as far as I know, practically every job I ever did has somebody living or using it that loves it. So it looks like it was done yesterday.

LASKEY: Well, you mentioned a little earlier in the conversation about space and your feelings about space, which I think is probably the main feeling one has when they look at one of your buildings, is the use of space--the kind of soaring arches that show up.

LAUTNER: Well, to me that's one of the biggest contributions to joy in life, to human welfare. So, when you contribute this kind of space, you're giving life, you

know, to the environment. You can't ask for any more than a life-giving environment: [freedom].

LASKEY: Well, some of your buildings look as if they have life, as if they're life forms.

LAUTNER: Yeah. And I think that has to--that's one of the essence[s] of architecture. They like to discuss architecture: whether is it an art, you know, or is it architecture, or should they have some art applied to the architecture and all that kind of baloney. Well, to me, architecture **is** an art, naturally, and it isn't architecture unless it's alive. Alive is what art is. If it's not alive, it's dead, and it's not art. It's not quite that simple but it's like that.

LASKEY: Do you have to battle much with your clients? Have you had to get them to see that point of view?

LAUTNER: No, no. They've come to me looking for that. That's the advantage of building up from scratch. But unfortunately, it takes so long-- It would have been better if I had become known sooner, you know; I could have done more. But the other way--I've had friends who've wanted to help me, because I've never had too much work, and they would say, "Well, what you need is a salesman," you know.

I'd say, "Well, it's no good."

And they'd go out, and they'd make a contact, and they'd get somebody who's going to build something and send

them in, [but] they don't want any architecture. I can't even talk to them, you know. All they want is so much a square foot for two cents, and they want it right now. So, it doesn't do me any good to have a salesman contacting people who want to build, because those people don't want to build any architecture. They just want to build, that's all. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, when I think of your houses--and I know you've been accused of this but--I think of houses like Silvertop, or the [Bob] Hope House [Palm Springs, California, 1973], and Chemosphere house [Malin House, Hollywood Hills, Los Angeles, 1960], which really are beyond the means of most people who are planning to build a house. Is that valid criticism?

LAUTNER: Oh, well, I guess--I know I do have a reputation of being too expensive, but it isn't really so when it's completely analyzed. The size doesn't matter, and I've explained it to many clients, and they understand that in a certain size, even if it's a little bit more than a stock tract house, to make it fairly comparable they have to have the equivalent electrical, plumbing, heating, cabinets, and so forth, which a tract house price doesn't have. And when they end up with the architect's house complete, they really don't need an interior decorator either. If they look at the total picture, they're getting a bargain. But

there are very few people who understand that, you know. All they look at is the first picture. Like, if you get an empty tract house for fifty dollars a square foot. Well, my house costs a hundred dollars a square foot, you know. But if they fix that tract house so that they can live in it, they get up to the same price.

LASKEY: Well, I'm looking at a quote here in the **Los Angeles** magazine article from Mr. [Daniel] Stevens for whom you did that wonderful house [Stevens House, Malibu, California, 1969]. And now, when he says you don't charge enough-- And I think his last quote is, "All he really cares about is seeing his homes built." That's you, the "his" that he's talking about.

LAUTNER: Well, I think that's right too. I charge 15 percent, and I probably **should** charge more. But they can get architects for 10 percent, you know. I don't know-- I try to do something reasonable with whatever it is.

LASKEY: But you haven't done tract housing or small scale housing--that sort of thing.

LAUTNER: No. No. I've had people, like, I had one fellow in here who said--old-timer--he said he built most of the apartment buildings in Hollywood. He said he never paid over fifteen hundred dollars for a set of plans in his life, and he's never going to. So I get no apartment buildings. But there are architects who'll do apartment

buildings for two thousand dollars. Now, if I had it, I'd want a 15 percent fee or a 10 percent fee, and they wouldn't pay it. So, that's the way it is.

LASKEY: You did do the [L']Horizon Apartments [1949] in Westwood, which are still beautiful.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Yeah. Well, that was not for a developer but for an individual. [Helen (Mrs. Paul H.) Sheats]

LASKEY: Oh I know. I'm just saying that you've done it, and it works.

LAUTNER: Oh sure. I would love to do every kind of project, and I'm sure I could contribute to it and have it within, you know, reasonable economics and everything else. But I just haven't seen anybody--the clients aren't here. I was thinking about that--well, I naturally have thought about it **lots** of times. For instance, right now, when they talk about the architects in the United States, the best buildings are still all in the east and the Middle West. There are no good architect buildings here. I mean there're not any really good ones, you know, like I. M. Pei and Gunnar Birkerts and various guys that are doing--and [Eero] Saarinen and so on--you know, real quality stuff. They're all in the east. There isn't anything here of that caliber. The clients are in the east, and the money's in the east. I mean, really, the big money's in the east, so

if they have a big project here the money comes from the east.

LASKEY: But there is money here, and there is room for architecture.

LAUTNER: But they don't-- The kind of people who have the money don't have the taste or the interest in architects. It's obvious, they just don't. They take-- I don't know. The best example is that man [J. Irwin Miller, chairman of] Cummins Diesel [Engine Co.] in Indiana, you know, where that town-- Have you heard about that town, where he wanted to make the whole town good architecturally?

LASKEY: Oh, was that Columbia?

LAUTNER: Yes. Missouri wasn't it? Missouri or Indiana.

LASKEY: Indiana, I think it's Columbia [Columbus], Indiana.

LAUTNER: Well, he's the Cummins Diesel-- And I notice lately he was on some jury or something. But he paid the architectural fees, so that whoever was going to build something, he paid for an architect, a good architect; otherwise it would have been another piece of junk, see. But he's the only guy I know in business who really tried to do anything good for architecture. So he really helped build up [Eero] Saarinen and a whole bunch of them because he hired them initially. But here there's nobody that

would hire anybody initially to do a new building, you know. They're not that kind of people.

LASKEY: I think that just happened with the downtown, the Bunker Hill development that went up. The powers that be opted for the established firms.

LAUTNER: Oh, sure, sure. It's like that all the time. A lot of the eastern architects have done jobs out here but they're the worst jobs they've ever done. Like, I remember one fellow, I knew somebody who was a friend of his, and he said he'd been using some architect here for fifteen or twenty years, and he finally made enough money to build his own big one on Wilshire [Boulevard]. So he got Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and he got the worst Skidmore building that was ever done. Well, I mean, he's probably--I'm sure he's a disgusting man, you know. You can't do anything with a disgusting, rich businessman. He has to be semi-civilized you know. There aren't that kind of client[s] here as far as I can tell. Then I hear about the, you know, big executives on the airplane. They come in and they see that somebody's loan company on Wilshire is taller than theirs, so they've got to build a new one that's taller than theirs. They're juvenile, you know. But it has nothing to do with architecture. It has to do with status, price, rent, location, everything except

architecture. That's all it is here. Architecture doesn't mean anything here, nothing.

LASKEY: Well, the downtown skyline certainly doesn't reflect any concern with keeping an identity of the city.

LAUTNER: Oh well, there's nothing interesting about it. The same way with Century City: the whole thing's new, and there's not an idea there, not a single idea for people. You know, originally it's not for people. All it is, is for rent. It's not for people, it's just for rent. Absolutely disgusting.

While there are places in the world where they have done some interesting-- They've done better things in Minneapolis and Chicago and Boston, Baltimore. [In] all kinds of places they've done some interesting things, but there isn't anything here that I know of, I mean, that I call interesting. Like, downtown, one of the most insane, really obvious commercial, gyp thing, like the Richfield [ARCO] towers with the five stories of basement and the shops. I mean, you come to California for California living, and you go shopping in a parking garage. But they promote anything, it's all on location, sales, and promotion, advertising. There's nothing real or valid at all. It's just disgusting. That's why I don't get any commercial work. I mean, hell, they don't care.

LASKEY: Do you sort of feel the challenge--well, you must when you do a building or you do a house, particularly out here--a challenge of the landscape?

LAUTNER: Oh sure. It's very difficult. I mean, at first people think, oh, it's a cinch because it's always warm. But when you really get into the subtleties of this-- Like, in most of the things I've done, they're in the hills. And if you're over on this side of that hill, and you have a southeast exposure and not too much wind--you're protected a little bit from the wind--you can have good outdoor living, and you can have this and that and the other thing. And if you're over here a little bit, you've got a lousy thing, you know. Just two blocks away, you've got a lousy spot. And the subtleties of adapting to this ideally are fantastic. I mean, while in a country with four seasons, that's obvious what you have to take care of. But to really make this work takes some real doing.

LASKEY: Well, we're sitting here, looking out at the hills, the Hollywood hills, it's so pretty--and it is a challenge to make what you put in there not destroy that landscape, I would think.

LAUTNER: Oh sure. I've always been concerned with that. Usually in the hills you have a panoramic view that people are interested in right away, and so most of my things are curved. The curved things just naturally go with the

hills, you know. While the boxes are just stuck there. The only thing you can do with the boxes is plant more trees. It's just fortunate that there are a lot of trees right there. If there weren't all those trees that whole scene would be pretty ugly.

LASKEY: You have never come to terms with Los Angeles.

LAUTNER: No, no. Well, I'm just one of many who are here because there is work. One way or another, there's work. I've never liked it, but I know that I couldn't exist in San Francisco. They just do one kind of cute, little thing. They're tighter and more narrow-minded and more status and more everything. And at seven hundred thousand people while there's seven million here-- So I know I have to be where there're millions of people to get a few individuals per year. And that's why I say I work for .001 percent of the population, so I get about ten or fifteen out of seven million each year. That's all the individuals I can find. There just aren't very many, I guess.

[laughter]

LASKEY: But you have done work as far away as Alaska: a beautiful house.

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. Well, I had hoped to get recognized earlier and attract, you know, be able to do anything all over the country. But I have attracted interest all over the country, but I've found that they get-- Like, I had one

fellow in here. He had a beautiful property on the Potomac. And he was really excited about the kind of architecture I was doing, but he finally backed down. He had to have his architect right there in town, you know. He's a businessman. It's not necessary, but in order to keep his finger on it he decided he's got to have the architect right there; couldn't do it remotely because he's "a practical man," you know. So I have a hell of a time with that kind of mentality, you know. What the hell can you do? [laughter] And there's too much of that.

LASKEY: Well, it's a little bit further on but your Arango House in Mexico--

LAUTNER: Oh, well, that was different because they have a natural love for architecture, you know. They do. They're kind of-- And they're not afraid of anything new. I mean, all kinds of things happen in Mexico, and it's OK. I mean, they're not restricted to build colonial houses or colonial buildings or anything else. Whatever any artist or architect wants to do, they'll do it, and they're not afraid. And then the builders are architects too, you know, so that makes all the difference. So, like, when that client [Jeronimo Arango, Jr.] saw the model--I made a model--he said, "It's beautiful, just go ahead and do it," that's all.

LASKEY: How did you conceive of it? It's the most extraordinary looking building.

LAUTNER: Well, it's right from scratch. It's a good example of how I've been working and how I really learned from Mr. Wright the importance of getting a real total idea. I sat on that property. And I had a survey--

LASKEY: It's in the mountains, right?

LAUTNER: Yeah. And I just decided-- Pretty soon I got this idea that the best thing I could do was have a living space where there was no interference with the beauty of the bay and the mountains and the sky. So I thought of this terrace, and then-- I know I've spent more time trying to get rid of railings, ugly railings that are always in the view. So I had this idea of the pool which blends into the bay and also removes the ugly railing. And then I got the idea of the ceiling going up into the sky, so it's not interfering either. So when you walk in there you're just out in space with the bay and the sky. I got that whole idea when I was on the site, and I also got the plan because the Las Brisas hotel is down here. I made the floor go out like this [gestures] to sort of blank out some of the lights from that hotel in the foreground. Then the floor dishes in like this, so you get a deep view of the bay over here, you see. So everything there means something. You know, the average architect doesn't understand

that at all. They think that's just baloney, you know, they say, "That's arbitrary." They don't know what goes on. They don't know what I'm doing at all. They have no idea. They just think I got a new effect or something, you know. And I have a million reasons for every job. But it's no use explaining it to those guys because they're just so tight that it's unbelievable.

LASKEY: I guess we should be glad that there are the seven to ten people a year--

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: --who can--



TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE

JUNE 2, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. Lautner, it's sort of a common acceptance that World War II brought about a lot of technological improvements in a number of areas including architecture. Did you find that particularly true in your work?

LAUTNER: Oh, no. Unfortunately, I don't think it hit the building business at all. In fact, I was pretty disgusted during the war in working for a contractor, sometimes building army barracks, and various things like that. But no new techniques were even considered. They just did the same old thing, and repeat, repeat. And I think that's part of the status quo, and the conservatism of army, and money, and everything else. They weren't willing to experiment with anything. As I say, in the building business they didn't do anything. I know they did with aircraft, and tanks and things--they made technological progress. But no progress with the building business whatsoever.

LASKEY: Yeah?

LAUTNER: Then after the war, there was this big cry that-- Well, I don't believe that it was big, but some people said, "Now we may be able to make more progress using something that has developed--" Well, I guess this would be

mostly in the aircraft industry because anything developed in munitions doesn't help, is hard to apply to the building industry. So, as you know, Bucky [Richard Buckminster] Fuller was one of the best ones then as now. He made this Dymaxion house which folded up in a tube, and you could ship it anywhere in the world, and it was a good house. And his intention was that the new technology developed in the aircraft industry could manufacture this house, and it would help solve the housing problem. Well, not one single aircraft company converted to do anything; they did absolutely nothing. They could have manufactured that house.

They could've made some progress, but they're all too reactionary. And, of course in the war business, they're backed by the government, so they're-- Theoretically there's speculation in American business to make money, but actually I don't think there is any. It's just guaranteed money by the government. And when it gets into housing, it's not guaranteed like warfare, so they do nothing. And, so there still isn't any progress--as far as I can see.

I mean, they have manufactured parts that can be assembled like steel trusses, and so on and so forth; they still cost too much. Manufactured products still cost too much. You can still take a stick or a two-by-four, or brick, or what-have-you--the same as for the past hundreds of years--and it's cheaper, easier and faster; so there is

no progress in the building industry. And, there's none definitely in the hardware business or they're all-- I mean, they did better hardware in 1890 than they do now. Because they made a big variety and they made it for specific purposes, and they made it for use, and they made it to endure. Now, they just make merchandise that has a mass market, and nothing for special purposes, nothing of any durable value; because they want to have a resale market. And it's just disgusting, that's all. The whole thing is disgusting.

So, being an architect has been very annoying because the real business of building is against any kind of new [thing] or progress. They just want to keep it the way it is, and figure out how to make more money easier, or quicker. And nothing else matters.

LASKEY: Well, do you think that's the reason, then, why the flurry right after the war for prefabricated houses, and houses that could be assembled easily, never came to anything?

LAUTNER: Yeah. Also, that's a combination of a lot of things. No big companies got into it. Then you have the usual problem of financing. The banker at that time, you say, "prefab," (it's the same now [when you say] "trailer") and [the banker would say] "We're not going to have that on our property, and we're not going to finance it." Also,

the ones who did prefab anything didn't hire architects, and didn't have the imagination to do anything beautiful, or suitable, or anything anyway. They just did copies of old things, but prefabricated old things. So that's not new; I mean, that's still what they're doing. And they say, "We have to, because that's the market, we appeal to the market."

So, I've tried analyzing all these things, you know, for years: what can an architect do. [He] can't do anything. [He] has no effect whatsoever. It's just a crime.

One of the specific ones that I think of is Le Tourneau [who] was a fantastic man who invented all this earth machinery. He got interested in the housing and he designed and built a huge metal form to pour a concrete house all in one form, just pour the whole house in one pour. Then he had the big machinery to haul the form and to take it away. And he had the mechanical genius to figure all this, but he had an ugly house. He didn't have an architect. But just any architect wouldn't have done him any good, because they would've applied some facade or style or superficial thing that didn't jibe with his operation.

And so he probably didn't know that there was anybody that could contribute to it. But I felt that I could work

with a new process and design for it, and get something out of it. But I've never been hired to do it, and I never had a big company to work with or anything. So, I think it's a crime that something like that had to go down the drain because concrete's the best material. And with some variety of that mobile form which he and his kind of machinery--a tremendous thing could've been done, just in that one area, but nothing's ever been done.

And then, the federal government had this program, I don't know, five or six years ago--HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development]--and they were supposed to be looking for new methods and economical housing and all that. So, they gave the money to the same big contractors and the same big architects, and they created absolutely nothing. It just meant that the same old people got the same old contracts, and they got the money. Anybody with any new ideas didn't get any money.

I submitted stuff to HUD and I got absolutely nothing. No response whatsoever, because you can't wade through all this paperwork. You can't wade through all the clerical and legal monkey business. And nobody wants you to, because the real money-power doesn't want anything to happen; they want to keep it just the way it is. So it's very sad prospects as far as I can see. The only answer I've been able to figure out in my forty years, is one that

I figured out in the first few years that I started working: I could see that the architect--

I mean, the financing was the biggest cost in building. And then the other costs were just whatever a contractor wanted to do or could get away with. And it didn't make any difference if you made a cheaper design; they'd just charge more and make more profit. So, there was no way you could win or help, as an architect, unless you did it yourself. So then I figured I couldn't do it myself because I wanted to be a professional architect. And if I did it myself, I ethically would not be allowed to have a government job or any other kind of building, because I was out of my profession.

Outside from that, I figured when somebody asked me how--what's the solution? All I've been able to figure out is you have to do it yourself. To do it yourself, you'd have to do it like Henry Ford. You just own everything. You own the land, you own the timber, you own the steel, you own every kind of tool there is. And people say, well, what would I like to have? That's what I'd like to have. I'd like to have every material, every tool, and a piece of land. And I'd build dozens of things right there, and I'd bring the bankers out and I'd say OK, take a look, take it or leave it, there it is. But the only way you could do it, is to do it yourself, because nobody else'll do it.

LASKEY: What would the chances be of somebody doing that today, even if they wanted to?

LAUTNER: It's so rare that anybody is interested in anything like that. You know, like this one man in Indiana, I think we mentioned him [J. Irwin Miller] before: Cummins Diesel. Well, he's interested in architecture and he's a businessman, and he finances architects. But I don't know anybody else in the country that gives a damn about architects, architecture, or housing. They really, all they want is war business, or oil business, or some other kind of business.

LASKEY: It's kind of surprising, because right now, there's a demand for housing in the country, and you'd think that one of the large architectural firms would find it to their advantage to do something like make the concrete forms you're talking about. Finding a way of, number one, solving the housing problem, which is an admirable thing to do, and therefore, you probably would get federal funds. And doing something to their benefit. Not even just creative, but to benefit them.

LAUTNER: Well, it's the-- I don't think any of the architectural firms would do it, they're dependent on the big contracting firms. And the contracting firms, the best ones, really stay in the big building business. I mean, the ideal thing for the contractor is roads and bridges,

you know, because you can get miles of concrete and you get the same amount of money. Or like the Dallas airport: they poured more concrete there than anyplace else in the world. So the contractor who got that job really made money. But, if he's just doing a house, why, what the hell, it's not worth bothering. So then, the worse contractors do speculative houses, and they don't give a damn about doing anything good.

So there it is, you know. I don't know what the hell to do-- Except as I said, do it yourself, like Henry Ford. Nobody's ever backed me to that extent. If somebody wanted to give me about fifty million dollars or something, I'd get going on it. But who the hell is going to do that?

LASKEY: That's sort of what Wright did, isn't it? To some degree, when he started Taliesin, I mean, and the Broadacre City models.

LAUTNER: Oh, he did everything himself, sure. In the models with the Broadacre City, and others, he did have various ideas that would be applicable to prefabrication or what-have-you, you know. But nobody ever did anything about that either. I mean, he thought of the prefabricated kitchen and bath which you put in the center of the house. And they occasionally try that once in a while. But I don't know what happens; it never gets off the ground.

Right now, I have a friend in Mexico who used to work for me, who's now head of city planning for the city of Guadalajara. And he has his own company, and his own concrete company, and he does anything he wants. He's building like five thousand houses out of concrete and [there is] no problem at all in Mexico; but here it's impossible. So it's really different.

LASKEY: You like concrete.

LAUTNER: Yeah. But I mean, they're open to it. He's got the financing and he's got the people doing it. And even the city is doing just what he recommends. And here, planning is just a farce. Always has been; it's just whoever owns the property decides what to do, and the planning department has no effect whatsoever. Well, in Guadalajara he's building a whole new city and part of the town-- [tape recorder malfunctions]

LASKEY: We were talking about what you would do with Los Angeles, downtown.

LAUTNER: Well, I guess I got to the point where-- I mean, first of all, I wouldn't build it down there. There's no need for it, but, except as-- Some people feel there's a need for a government center. But on the other hand the government center is already decentralized: like, we have building department offices in Malibu, and in West Los Angeles, and so forth, rather than all in one place

downtown. Certainly, the business doesn't have to be concentrated because they can do everything by telephone or by video cassette or whatever. I mean, there are a million ways of communicating that don't require everybody to be concentrated in one downtown.

But then, on top of all that, if they wanted to make one that was just for [the] interest of the population, some kind of concentration, they could have done something in the mountains, or it could have been a really fantastic New World place, but nothing-- There are really no ideas involved, except building on a certain block where they figure the value is such-and-such, and they can build so high and make money. That kind of thinking I don't think has anything to do with human welfare whatsoever, and I don't think it's necessary.

LASKEY: If you were designing Los Angeles, would you have high-rise[s]?

LAUTNER: I think I would in certain [places], but scattered. I think that's the way Mr. Wright looked at it too when I was working on Broadacre City. We had occasional buildings up in the air someplace, just for the fun of it, or for the view, or something like that. But no concentration, because [with] the concentration they start to eliminate-- Well, they're just discovering it here now on Wilshire Boulevard with the big condo rage. They've

discovered that now that they have such a concentration of them built there, that all they are is sitting there looking at each other. So they have no view, they have no California living, they have nothing but location which is what the bankers finance on, is location, and the status address. Well, those things to me are very superficial, but-- And they are superficial to the good life or to architecture or to human welfare--but they seem to be paramount to business, so there it is. It's just crazy.

In fact, I have a good friend who lives in one of those, and he doesn't understand it. He bought a condo on the backside of one that has a view of the mountains, but everybody else thought he was crazy, because "he should really be on Wilshire," you know. [laughter] So, what are you going to do with that kind of mentality? You can't do anything. Fortunately they can't sell them now, that's one-- I'm glad to hear that, that the economy has knifed the speculators to some degree. [laughter]

LASKEY: With the architecture on Wilshire that you're talking about, [it] never seems to take advantage of the climate of Southern California.

LAUTNER: No, nothing.

LASKEY: Why is that?

LAUTNER: It's the business. I mean, they-- A balcony costs money, and they're not going to have any of those

things. They have what they call certain amenities, and those amenities are usually a jacuzzi or a washing machine or something; but nothing in the architecture, you know.

LASKEY: Or an outdoor place to sit.

LAUTNER: Nothing to do with this climate whatsoever. I worked for a client of mine who used to own a hotel there, and he was considering a new hotel for a while. And so he asked me to make a few preliminaries, and I did. I made, oh, half a dozen designs of interesting kind[s] of hotels with open spaces and views of the mountains and the ocean and everything. So I know it could be done, but nobody ever does it, because all they do is the cheapest and the fastest. And the architects come to the contractor-- I mean, the developer, first of all, usually **is** a contractor. Or if he isn't a contractor he has a contractor. And then the architect is number three in the program, so he does just whatever the contractor says it is going to cost, such-and-such, to suit the owner, you know. So there is nothing you can do that way. It's just maximum rent for the cheapest kind of space we can get. So, that's where the location is good business, because they can still build a cheap building with nothing to do with the climate, and as long as they're in a status location they can get double the rent that they need, so that's ideal for profit. After all, that's the only motive there is, is profit. And I was

brought up with the idea that you should have a motive to human decency and contribute to human life and human welfare, and have some value to your work, you know. Today there's no such thinking. The thinking is just to make a buck any way you can. So, that's awfully hard to fight.

LASKEY: Has that always been the case out here?

LAUTNER: Seems to me, ever since I've been here. People say, well, why don't you move? But I don't know where to go, because it seems to be affecting the whole world. This kind of smart merchandising is sort of originating here, and it's beginning to penetrate the rest of the world.

Where they might have done something more decent, they get on to a faster, cheaper kind of merchandise to make money. And so I guess Los Angeles is a leader in that respect.

LASKEY: But at least in the thirties, forties, and to some degree the fifties, Los Angeles had a reputation for doing, for being at least innovative in housing activity, housing architecture. That's seems to have quieted down too.

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. I think there were some new things here in housing. I mean, there were quite a few architects doing original kinds of things; where in Kentucky or someplace like that, they're still building colonial houses, and they don't want to build anything else. But I think it's also been exaggerated, but at the same time, there were some new things being built here that were quite well

publicized. There were new things in Chicago, and there were new things in Boston, and there were new things in various parts of the country as well.

And so, now, I feel that a legitimate new architecture can really be better achieved in the east than it can be here, because they still have some-- They're still willing to pay for some legitimate values that they don't need to pay for here, because of the status, or the tradition that we have here.

LASKEY: I think it was in a book called **Form Follows**

Fiasco: [Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked, 1977] that Peter Blake took on architects for jumping on the bandwagon of new materials that come along or, you know, buying what the distributor has to offer without testing it. Is that a valid criticism? How do you deal with new materials, and new ideas, in your designs?

LAUTNER: Well, if there are any new materials that have a suitable purpose, I'm naturally interested. But I don't know any that apply really. The plastics industry has made some. I mean, there are quite a few things I guess-- I mean they have their plastic hardware, and plastic various windows, and things like that--that you have to be careful of because it's well known that almost any kind of plastic is susceptible to deterioration by the sun. So the sun

ultimately destroys plastics. And so what other new materials are there? There aren't any.

So the best materials are still concrete and wood and stone. They're still the best. In fact, they are better than steel because steel is only incombustible, it's not fireproof. Steel is dangerous, and concrete is much safer. So, to me, the only way of doing it is with concrete.

LASKEY: But your earlier houses, right after the war--

LAUTNER: Well, we couldn't-- They were such small houses generally. And you couldn't even think of concrete, because they were so small, and it was considered so expensive to do it. In fact, if you had a retaining wall, that was enough to destroy a whole project because the retaining wall would cost more than the whole house, you know. But since then in larger projects, and also in the changing economy, the concrete hasn't gone up as much as other things; like wood and carpentry have gone up maybe four or five times as much as concrete has. So, right now, concrete, poured-in-place concrete, is still more expensive, but not that much more for what you get out of it as compared to wood and carpentry work--or steel, in fact.

It's strange what happens: like, they used to build entirely out of concrete in Italy and they still do, mostly in Europe and in South America they--and Mexico--everything's concrete. But I understand that in Italy, I forget

the reason now, somebody set up a steel plant and they're promoting steel, which isn't as good as concrete. But anyway, it's a crazy scene.

LASKEY: I think right after-- Again, going back to the late forties, there was a lot of experimenting with steel-structure houses in Los Angeles wasn't there?

LAUTNER: Well, there was **talk**. I mean, like Neutra talked about using prefabricated steel parts and all that. And I talked to the steel contractors because I almost always had steel, a fair amount of structural steel, in my designs-- mainly to get clear spans and also to get rigid structures for earthquake [resistance] without having walls. So I was always interested in steel for those structural purposes. And I was also interested in the most economical thing and I kept checking steel trusses and steel decking and all that prefabricated kind of material. And everytime I checked it, it cost much more than anything else I could think of; so it was just talk. It really never happened. I mean, it was never cheaper--it was always more money--and you were taking a stock thing in the guise of something being simple and regular and economical when it wasn't. So it was a phoney.

LASKEY: Was this because that's the nature of steel--

LAUTNER: And so I thought-- I mean, my god, why not do the most interesting kind of thing you want to do rather than

be confined to whatever is manufactured on a modular system, particularly when that system costs more than what you could do otherwise. So that's all selling and publicity and misnomers and misinformation or no information, and et cetera.

LASKEY: Well, the Case Study houses, I think, were usually steel--

LAUTNER: They were mostly that, yeah. Well, that was very popular, it-- They all went along with the [Mies] van der Rohe kind of thing that was supposed to be neat and clean. And you could have all glass, because the steel can be rigid, see, and that was it.

LASKEY: How did you fit into that?

LAUTNER: I didn't fit into it at all, except that when [John] Entenza was running the **California Arts and Architecture** magazine, he published my work as well as [Richard] Neutra, and [Gregory] Ain, and [Harwell] Harris, and the rest of them. But mine was always an original of my own, but seemed to be most suitable for what I was doing. And I wasn't paying any attention to the style or the fad while the rest of them were. And I found out much later that--

In fact, I lost a job that really hurt me about, oh, ten or fifteen years ago. There was a glass company considering me to do a building for them, for their offices

and their business. And I thought, boy, that's great, because I've done all kinds of things with glass--more than anybody, really. I had glass mullions, in a house in Montrose, thirty years ago [Shaeffer House, c. 1950]. So, I've done more neat glass details than anybody ever thought of, but I've never advertised all this stuff. And I found out later that the job went to Craig Ellwood because he was the one who made glass boxes, and they thought, just like the public thought, that a glass box **is** modern; nothing else is modern. And that I wouldn't be modern enough for their glass place, when actually what I could have done with glass would have been ten times as interesting for their glass business. But they just took the facade or the fad of the moment.

LASKEY: Well, and as you say, the Mies van der Rohe influence-- That's what Ellwood did, so that you had to--

LAUTNER: Yeah, that was considered the-- Well, and I suppose there is no way for them to know, you know, "this is modern," "this is colonial," "this is something," you know. What I do, nobody knows what it is, you know, and I never-- I'm glad, because I never wanted to be put in a pigeonhole, and I don't believe in being in a pigeonhole, and I'm **not** in a pigeonhole. [laughter]

LASKEY: That's caused you some problems over the years.

LAUTNER: Oh, sure. Lots of frustration, and annoyance. But I've stuck to what I felt was the best thing that I could do, in spite of everything. So I never, never succumbed to the fad or the pitch of the moment.

LASKEY: Well, when you were mentioning glass, it made me think of the Pearlman House [Idyllwild, California, 1957]: the use of glass and wood in that structure is so lovely.

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. There's all kinds of things, and-- Well, actually, Silvertop, which was done over twenty years ago now, has **hanging** glass. It's probably the only job in town with hanging glass, and that's the way that glass should be handled, physically and structurally.

LASKEY: What do you mean by hanging glass?

LAUTNER: Well, it's clipped. It's held by clips at the top, see. The way you describe the benefit is structurally: you could take a thin piece of glass that's like a piece of paper, see. [demonstrating] If you put it down and sit it on the floor like they usually do, or on the sill, it just buckles of its own weight, see, unless it's extremely thick. So if you hang it from the top, the gravity helps keep it straight, so structurally the best thing to do with glass is to hang it. And, then also, we didn't have any mullions, no mullions--so [there's] no interference with the view whatsoever. And so it's absolutely ideal. Well, they do it in Germany, but they

still don't do it here. I mean, here it's got to be the same as it was fifty years ago, you know. We work for the insurance companies. [Laughter]

LASKEY: You've done some teaching at that time, too.

LAUTNER: Well, I used to go-- I taught once a week at Chouinard Art Institute for, I guess it was, two or three years I did that. And it was kind of a laboratory where, for the senior students-- One day they'd have an industrial designer, and another day they'd have a painter, and another day an architect, and another day somebody--maybe a sculptor. So they had a kind of cross section of people in a kind of studio workshop, and I was the architect. So that was interesting except it surprised me that senior art students were supposed to be able to see. They couldn't see. There weren't very many good students, I mean; so it was very difficult for me. I'd be lucky if I had one person who could do anything. [It was] a strange thing.

LASKEY: That's what I was wondering, because if you were teaching, and I was curious about what students--how receptive they were to your ideas and if they understood them, and--

LAUTNER: Very few. I guess it's still the same way. I have a few-- I get letters or applications from certain ones. From almost any school in the country, I'll get one occasionally, but no, you know, no majority. There are

just certain individuals that dig into this stuff, and they get interested and they come to see me. But there are not very many.



TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE

JUNE 16, 1982

LASKEY: We were talking about dream situations or perfect situations--what you would do given a certain set of situations--and I thought perhaps you might talk about Silvertop [Los Angeles, 1957-64, 1976-77] because that comes close to being the dream situation.

LAUTNER: Yes. Well, it is an exceptional client [Kenneth Reiner] and consequently an exceptional job. I think I should describe it right from the beginning to show what happens as much as possible. It could take a whole book in itself, just that one job, really. I mean, if you related everything that happened over a period of about ten years.

LASKEY: How long did the actual construction of it take?

LAUTNER: Well, we were working on it almost ten years. But not going fast, you know, just researching, developing different things. There wasn't really any hurry to finish it, just to get it perfect.

But anyway, one of the interesting things that makes it really interesting is that most people-- I think I have a reputation **now** of "you've got to be rich to do it," you know, and it's expensive and all that, which is bunk. I mean, I'd just [as] soon do the low cost as any other kind as long as it's real architecture. But this fellow started

out that way: like, being a businessman as well as an inventor, he said, "I'm not going to spend more than seventy-five thousand on this--

LASKEY: When was this?

LAUTNER: That was about twenty-five years ago, which was a fair amount of money then, of course. But he wanted a lot. I mean, he had lots of requirements, very specific requirements.

The site was-- He had collected six lots on a hilltop overlooking Silver Lake because he wanted to be able to see water, and that's one of the few places around that you could see water in the Los Angeles area except for the ocean, of course. And also he wanted to be not too far from his factory and work, which was South and East Los Angeles. So he had easy commuting and desirable living and he ignored the status business of building in Bel-Air or Beverly Hills or wherever you're supposed to build if you got a few dollars.

And so [he was a] completely independent man. Most people, they wouldn't even think of doing that because they're afraid their investment wouldn't be just right. They'd be more afraid of that and they'd cancel the architecture and everything else.

The first design I made-- He liked the hilltop, and I made the design that I figured maintained the hilltop as

much as possible. The basic scheme was two curved brick walls that sort of blank out the bedrooms and kitchen and other functional facilities of the house and also the neighbors. So that those walls open to the view east and west, and just keep the whole hilltop almost the way it was without building. And then by putting an arched roof over those curved walls, that created a free space that did not destroy the original hilltop, and created privacy from the neighbors and everything else.

Well, he liked that idea right away, which I was lucky enough to conceive of the very next day after I saw him. The scheme didn't change from then on. I mean, he understood that this was a real idea, and the only thing that took time was he, as an inventor, was interested in ultimately and then possibly manufacturing various kinds of hardware and so forth for luxury conditions, like sliding doors and-- Well, he had operating boards to hide the electrical plugs and telephone and all that; and pivoting, disappearing lights, and hundreds of things that could be manufactured and sold. So it took a long time to develop those things.

So he got very much interested in the architecture and forgot entirely about his initial budget, so much so that you can't attribute all the cost to the [design of the] house because half of it you could say was research and

development for his possible future manufacture. And in doing that (of course it was luxury for me) he set up a machine shop. He had machinists in his factory anyway, because his invention was stainless steel hair-clips, spring-clips, and hollow, self-locking nuts for aircraft, which he invented; not only invented but invented the methods of manufacturing. He had these men to mock up anything we wanted that would be operable in the house. That machine shop ran forty thousand [dollars] a month just for research.

We also-- One of the premises was that we searched the whole world and decided that if there was anything available that is manufactured that is suitable, but if not we'd decide what the most suitable thing is and we'd make it ourselves. So there's not a single stock thing in the whole job. Everything is right from scratch, one-of-a-kind, just for this purpose, for beauty, for maintenance; it had to fulfill every conceivable requirement. So it is an ideal job.

Like, the flooring--this is something that everybody could understand. It took quite a while to decide: what's the best final finished flooring? Well, we ended up with end-grained wood block, about three inches thick. So we figured that you could sand it every once in a while if you wanted to, or if you felt it was necessary, and it would be

good at least a thousand years. Of course, the brick walls are good for a thousand years. The concrete roof is good for a thousand years. And none of these require any maintenance, except the floor. Then the walls are cypress siding, which is the best wood you can get, also good for a thousand years. So getting that all together--I mean, we used to have meetings up there just to check and double-check.

He would have whoever was involved, whatever it was: the experts from the field. So we might have six or eight experts all giving their opinions and all being paid. I mean, one of these research meetings cost Reiner, the client, maybe a thousand dollars an hour. You know, most people would never think of doing anything like that either. [laughter]

LASKEY: How did he grow into this? I mean, obviously he didn't start out with the idea that you and he were going to make this gem. Was it just the idea, when he saw the idea, that he decided that he wanted to make it perfect? Was it something that developed slowly?

LAUTNER: Yeah, I think it developed just as we talked and as we worked on it. The nice part was that he was still in his forties, and he was a millionaire. He hadn't gotten to the point-- He just wasn't that kind of a guy. The typical millionaire knows everything and you just do what they say

and shut up, you know. But he knew that he wasn't himself an architect; he was a mechanical engineer. So when we had these meetings I had the absolute last word. He refused to destroy the architecture with mechanical--or anything else--business that couldn't be properly designed and absorbed in the architecture.

Well, the typical guy wouldn't give a damn. He'd stick a TV someplace and a rotating bar or god knows what, you know, and the whole place would be like Disneyland. But this fellow, even though he was interested in these things, they were all practical things and maintenance-free and sensible things. When the publicity, when the magazines or anybody gets ahold of things like that then they start talking about "gadgets" and making it sensational, so that they would get a more sensational story. Then it becomes a completely untrue story, you know. That's the hell of publicity; it's practically never the truth.

LASKEY: It's interesting that you say that, because that is basically what is in the writing and the reading about Silvertop: that it was a house of gadgets, which makes you think that you go through pressing buttons--

LAUTNER: Actually, you don't know [that] there's anything mechanical there at all. They're completely subordinated. There are electrically operating skylights and doors and

light controls and various things. But they're also manually operable because he said everything has to be foolproof. Well, one of his ways of saying it (which is very good in developing any of these things) was, "Now you have it foolproof, let's make it idiot-proof." So then you have a perfect product, see. So that's what took time. It was interesting to do.

I could get material or information from any place in the world and he paid for all my office expenses. I mean, it was real common sense working with ideas, just working. Typical working is all so phoney. I mean, it's a trick of trying to get the architect to do a lot of work for nothing, and vice versa. It has nothing to do with trying to get a really beautiful job, you know. [interruption in taping]

LASKEY: I'm curious-- You used brick walls. Why did you use brick as opposed to concrete?

LAUTNER: Oh, well, we wanted some color. And also I wanted the roof to just be completely by itself, completely free. We couldn't use wood walls going from inside to outside because the wood weathers differently. So it had to be concrete or masonry or something that the weather wouldn't affect, so it still looks the same inside as outside, which it does. We didn't want red brick, so I recommended a brown brick to go with the wood and all the

rest. We had to get the brick from Texas, which was a beautiful brown brick but very expensive. So he agreed to that, too. I mean, just one thing like that where a lot of people wouldn't, you know, if it's so many hundred dollars more for the brick, why, they'd say, "Oh no!" you know, just like that. But he fully cooperated with the aesthetics and the architecture. So that's all part of it being an ideal job. I don't know--it's hard to recount all of the things that were involved.

There's one detail: the swimming pool overflows, one entire edge overflows. I had this idea-- Because it's above Silver Lake, and when you sit on the terrace and look over this pool, you just have one sheet of water above another sheet of water. It's really one of the most beautiful pool situations in the world. That whole edge also, it had to be-- Well, he argued [against] that for a while because he knew that that would have to be ground to a perfect level in order for it to function, overflow evenly, and it would be very expensive to do it.

Then I told him that it would also act as a giant skimmer. Business people like that. I mean, I've worked with all kinds of clients that way, where I have six or eight reasons for doing things. I start listing; when I get up to about six reasons they cave in, you know. [laughter] And with that, he did. I mean, he was

delighted with the giant skimmer, and I was delighted with the two surfaces of water. So all the things really worked out beautifully.

LASKEY: But when it overflowed--you say it overflowed--where did it overflow to?

LAUTNER: Well, we had a gutter and a reservoir. It was interesting to work that out too. It had to be automatically maintained full to be continuously overflowing. And we found that the only way we could really determine that was by testing. We did a lot [of] things by testing. That pool is a big one: like, fifty feet long. And in the summertime we discovered that it evaporated as much as seven hundred gallons a day, and you'd never guess that. So we had a seven hundred gallon reservoir at the end of the recirculating gutter for automatic make-up water. So that's just one little example of things that we did there.

But all through the house there were things like, that were tested and looked at from every possible standpoint. So it really was an interesting job, and it was a pleasure to work because when we finally resolved what we felt was the ideal solution, we just went ahead and did it. It seems like the simplest, most straightforward way of working, but it's the rarest. I mean, there's always some tricky little thing going on. In a typical job they're trying to cut costs, or they're suspicious of anything new,

or they're suspicious of this-or-that, or they're too conservative, or-- Oh my god, there're just millions of things to stop anything from being done right from scratch in a beautiful way. There's always something interfering.

LASKEY: Now, you're talking even about clients that have the money and could afford to do what Mr. Reiner did.

LAUTNER: Yeah, that's right.

LASKEY: How did Mr. Reiner find you in the first place?

LAUTNER: Well, that was interesting too. He had seen some of my work and liked it. But outside of that, he is a very smart man, and he didn't want [to] just make an emotional judgment. Being a scientific man as well--I forget to tell this to people--he interviewed something like forty-five architects, and I was the only one-- All the rest of them were typical; I was the only one that didn't fit the typical pattern, so he took me. So I was not like the other forty-five architects, so that did it. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, you mentioned earlier in the interview about the hung glass that you used in Silvertop. Did you do any other [of] that sort of thing, with glass? Because there's an enormous amount of glass in Silvertop, right?

LAUTNER: Did we do it any place else?

LASKEY: No, I mean any other particularly creative things with glass, because you must have had to have shaped it, formed it, done--

LAUTNER: Well, the hanging glass was the ideal solution for the main living room view. And also because it was an independent arch concrete roof that didn't require any posts, or mullions to be structural, in the view. So there's absolutely nothing in the view, so the hanging glass without mullions was ideal. Other parts of the house, like, in the bedroom, we used laminated glass, pivoting, frameless, laminated glass. We designed special pivots which he had manufactured, stainless steel pivots and things like that. Any place there were frames for doors or anything else, that was all special design and special detail that made thin lines that didn't destroy the architecture. So everything we did was special.

LASKEY: Well, the roof was how large?

LAUTNER: Oh, the living room roof is three thousand [square] feet. When we used to have tours up there, I'd tell people you could put three tract houses in the living room, which you could. I mean, a typical small house out in the Valley is only about a thousand square feet, and so that three thousand feet-- Also we had some architectural meetings up there and with folding chairs we got three hundred people in the living room. But at the same time, it's really pleasant for **two** people. So that's an achievement, and it's an architectural thing.

Another interesting thing--I mean, there're so many things about Silvertop, we could go for a week talking about it. That just reminded me that Europeans coming to visit--off and on somebody would come, and I'd show them, and I remember one-- They all love it immediately, they felt it and understood it. One of them said, "What's the owner like? He's got to be a good man in order to live up to this house." But the average Los Angeles person seeing it, they didn't know what it was. They didn't know whether it was a house or a restaurant. I mean they have absolutely no feeling, no understanding whatsoever, because they're not civilized, you know, as I've mentioned before. They just follow each other, whatever the fad or their experience is. But the Europeans got it right away.

LASKEY: I was going to ask you, what **was** the reaction of the Los Angeles architectural community, essentially?

LAUTNER: Well, the architectural community, I don't know. I think they all sort of secretly think it's very good but don't want to say so, you know. I really don't know, you know.

LASKEY: What was the printed reaction to it?

LAUTNER: Well, it's never really been published properly.

LASKEY: It hasn't?

LAUTNER: No, because-- It went all this time while he had lawsuits, when he got divorced, and separated from his

business partner, so it wasn't completely finished until about five or six years ago, when these new owners bought it. Since then, the **Architectural Digest** wanted to publish it, but they didn't like the way it was furnished. And nobody else has published it, so I'm going to have it in my book for the first time, really.

LASKEY: That's amazing; a house that's so famous.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Yeah, it is strange. I mean, everybody in town knows the house, and it's never been published.

[laughter]

LASKEY: Amazing. I'm amazed; I thought it was. I asked you about the roof because I was curious about the construction problems involved in forming the roof.

LAUTNER: Oh. Well, it was regular formed--I'm glad you asked, though--it was formed-in-place [concrete]; it wasn't suitable to precast. The arch was a very low arch, which I felt was most desirable for the human being. So it's also an example of sort of overriding ideal engineering in favor of ideal architecture. I believe in that, and a lot of people don't understand that either. I mean, they think that they get an ideal engineering structure and they got to go with that. But that doesn't necessarily make architecture at all, for people, because mathematics and engineering are an artificial invention that don't

necessarily jibe with human welfare at all. So a lot of people don't understand that.

So, the concrete was formed in place, and it was post-tensioned. The client was interested in every detail, and he was willing to spend extra money to make it better. So it only needed to be post-tensioned in one direction, but he decided to have it post-tensioned in two directions, so it couldn't crack, and it would be waterproof just from this extra reinforcing. I suppose it's the only house in town with [a] prestressed, post-tensioned, two-way concrete roof. I mean, you just couldn't get any better than that.

Then the same thing applied to the ramp driveway, which we had to maintain at a 20 percent grade to suit the building code. We wrapped it around the guest house in order to make it long enough to maintain that grade. And we had the choice there of typical big retaining walls or cantilevering the driveway. And we found that it was really more reasonable to cantilever the driveway from this round guest house than to put in a typical retaining wall, which is the way it would typically have been done. In doing that it was also post-tensioned, reinforced concrete, supported on prestressed, post-tensioned, concrete block walls.

This construction was ideal from an engineering standpoint, but it wasn't in the building code so [it was]

not allowed. So Reiner sued the city to be able to build better than the code allows. So it was a perfect lawsuit because you've got the whole building department in court for about a week, and they gave up. And they had to pay, the city had to pay.

He was so interested in architecture at that time that he developed a committee of architects and engineers, and we met several times to try and revise the building code so that architects could practice like doctors. You see, an architect now has no authority whatsoever. I mean, with this building code, he just goes according to the code, and there are a lot of things that [are] unnecessary nuisances. We almost got that into the code when Reiner got into all the problems with separating from his partner and his wife and everything else, so that stopped all of that.

But he's the only one I've known in my whole lifetime here [in Los Angeles] who was willing to spend some time and money to improve the building business. Nobody else has spent a dime or a minute to improve it. They just succumb to it. So it's absolutely disgusting. I mean, this is supposed to be a progressive area, but it's not. It's nothing, it's absolutely nothing.

LASKEY: You or Mr. Reiner, apparently, had to have a number of run-ins with the building code.

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. We ended up with something like forty-five permits for that job. It got so involved that the inspector couldn't keep track of it, he didn't know what was happening; so the building department just gave up completely. So that was the best way to do it. But, you see, most people wouldn't do that either. I mean, they'd say, "Well, if it's against the code, we can't do that," you know. They're crazy, that's all. They're afraid to have any basic thinking. They just go all with it, and that's why it gets worse and worse all the time. They're unwilling to fight it. The architects don't do anything either because they might lose money, so they don't do a damn thing. So that's a crazy scene.

LASKEY: But as a result of all that the codes didn't-- The wound just sort of healed and the codes went right back to where they were before?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. But we almost got it. It was a clever way of doing it. We finally figured out that just by adding a paragraph in the front of the code that legally it could be written in such a manner that architects had an authority of their own, and it almost made it.

They work that way in Brazil and in lots of Latin countries. The architect is also the builder, and he's totally responsible. He can do anything he wants. They have an absolute minimum code which is like ours was

originally, to protect the public health and safety. But theirs is, like, fifty pages or less--or, no--fifty items, I think it is, that say you cannot dump sewage out in the street, you know, and you can't do this, and you can't do that for health and safety. Otherwise, you can do anything you want, and its your responsibility. Well, that's what this country is supposed to be but it isn't. I mean, it's all controlled, and you can't do anything. I understand it works beautifully [elsewhere].

Well, that's just the way it's worked for two or three thousand years, because I understand two or three thousand years ago that if the architect did something wrong, they just chopped his head off, you know: the pharaohs or something, you know. Well now, like, in Brazil, if he does a poor job, he's through. He never gets another job. It's just automatic. So you pay for the freedom of doing what you want to do. But here you're not allowed to do anything. It used to make me very mad because I couldn't get the responsibility; I would take the responsibility. I had my neck out all my life, but I couldn't **get** the responsibility because either the code or the bank or the client or somebody would stop it. So, when I first started working people would say, "Did **you** do that job?"

And I'd say, "Yeah, I did what I could between the client, the building department, and the banker. That's

all I could do. I could have done ten times more, but I had all those to fight." [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, what about the AIA [American Institute of Architects]?

LAUTNER: They don't do anything; nothing, absolutely nothing. It's funny--just this year, for the first time, the new president announced they're going to have their national convention in Hawaii. (They have it right now, I think, in June.) And he announced they're going to study or promote working for architecture rather than for architects. Up until now they have only worked for architects. Like, the state, when you're licensed in the state, the architects try to fix it so nobody else can get licensed so they get more work. So, it's never really been concerned with architecture at all. It's just been business, insurance, all kinds of junk that's sort of meaningless but never anything about architecture. And they've never tried to educate the public or anything. It's just a crazy thing.

LASKEY: They've never felt it to their advantage to take on the building codes, to adjust them?

LAUTNER: No. Oh no. Of course, they can't afford to do anything. I mean, it's a big group but they've never had enough money to do anything. They've never really-- I mean, they're wishy-washy. They play it safe. It's

basically conservative, right down the middle, do nothing, you know. I couldn't understand that for a long time, but my friend Ingo Preminger told me--he put it very well--he said, "The reason for all this is that no matter what's going on"--he was a director's agent and decided about movies and things like that--"all that anybody wants is to be held blameless. They don't want to do a damn thing. Nobody wants to do anything or have any responsibility. They just want to be blameless." And that's the way the AIA is too. They write this double-talk, so they can't be blamed. They don't say anything, they don't do anything. It's just zero.

LASKEY: Well, I've read that Mr. Reiner was never able to live in Silvertop--

LAUTNER: Yeah, that's right.

LASKEY: --after it was all completed. Is that true?

LAUTNER: That's true. He bought a big house across Silver Lake from this one, so he had a very comfortable place to live while this was under construction. But he never actually lived in this house, which is too bad; but he's adapted to it. He bought a house down on the ocean, in Long Beach, and he lives down there. He's rented another factory, and he's started up again. Twelve years of litigation--the attorneys cleaned him out. That's what did

it. Twelve years of paying attorneys just wiped him out. That legal business is just terrible.

LASKEY: Has he ever seen Silvertop since it's been finished?

LAUTNER: No, I don't think so; no.

LASKEY: It's curious--usually, when a house like that is built it's named after the person who built it: "the Reiner House, for example.

LAUTNER: Well, he liked this name because it was overlooking Silver Lake, and it's on the top of the hill--very obvious name, but it stayed with it.

LASKEY: Well, if Silvertop was never published, the [Arthur] Elrod House [Palm Springs, California, 1968-69] certainly has been.

LAUTNER: Oh yes. Yeah, that was published all over the world in all kinds of magazines.

LASKEY: Well, that looked like it came fairly close to being another ideal work situation.

LAUTNER: Well, that's true too. Not as completely, though. Elrod wouldn't wait for experimenting or researching something to get an ideal solution. We had a good solution that didn't require too much of that anyway. His initial request, after he took me to see the property was-- He just said, "Give me what you think I should have on this property."

And at that time it was a flat bulldozed hillside lot, like they make in the typical subdivisions. Nothing interesting about it except that it was a flat pad. So I got looking over the edge, and I saw these big, beautiful rock outcrops. And so I decided if he excavated about eight feet off of this pad, which had already been built, then these natural outcrops would be exposed in the house and more or less on the perimeter of [the] house. We could design something that's really built into the desert.

So he understood that right away and said, "You mean, those are going to be sculpture in the house?"

I said, "Yes."

And so he was willing to spend, I don't know, fifteen or twenty thousand more to excavate the lot. Now that's something that most people wouldn't do either. I mean, they already paid for the lot, they're not going to pay any more, you know, blah, blah, blah. Anyway, that's what enabled us.

The way I looked at it, there isn't a single really integrated building designed **for** the desert in Palm Springs. They're all colonial or Spanish or I don't know what. They're just stuck there. They don't really have anything to do with the desert. So I decided we'd do something that really suited the desert. So this circular concrete roof with triangular openings in it and triangular

clerestories in it sort of fanned around, so that from the outside **and** the inside it's sort of like a desert flower. And then, of course, being concrete it would be right down on the boulders and rocks and become part of the whole scene. So once we had the concept, or the preliminary design, for this one, Elrod just went straight ahead and built it, without any changes whatsoever. Just everything --no hitches at all.

LASKEY: How long did it take you to come up with the design for the roof?

LAUTNER: Well, that one wasn't too long either. I suppose it was maybe a month before I really was satisfied with that design. But I got the idea somehow very soon. And I had a clay model made. One of my draftsmen at the time made pretty good models with the whole part of the mountain. Elrod came in and looked at it, and he [was] just delighted, you know. So we just went right ahead, no problem at all.

LASKEY: Well, did you run into construction problems? The house is actually built into the rock, isn't it? How would you form the wall after that?

LAUTNER: Well, some of the rock becomes the wall. The main problem we had with that was that [there were] a lot of cracks in the rocks. We had a geologist check their structural value. He recommended bolting them together.

So quite a few of them have long, steel rods drilled right through the big outcrops and they're bolted together.

That's for earthquake [resistance], you know.

LASKEY: How do you bolt, or drill, through a rock without cracking the rock through?

LAUTNER: Well, they can. They have all kinds of drills, you know. They used to drill for dynamite. They [can] drill a hole in the rocks (and they have long drills like twenty, thirty foot drills) right through the whole pile. And it's bolted together. So we did all that. It's designed to resist earthquake and everything else, so it's fine.

And then, of course, what really made it possible-- I wouldn't have designed it that way if I didn't know who was going to build it. I told Elrod then, and I tell most of my clients, that you can't really design anything exceptional unless you know who's going to build it. Because if it's just a typical contractor it's-- First of all they'll quote five times what it's worth, and second, they'll bitch it up because they don't know how to build it, and it'll have to be rebuilt three times, and [it's] just plain murder.

So I had this contractor that I originally got out from Chicago to do Silvertop, Wally Niewiadomski, and he's one of the best men I've ever seen in the building

business. So I introduced him to Elrod, so we knew right from the beginning who was going to build it. It was on a cost basis; it wouldn't have to be some kind of contract or anything, just go ahead and build it. So with Wally building it, it's a perfect job all the way through. But good client, good architect, and good builder, that's all you need. But that very seldom happens.

LASKEY: Well, the glass--the pictures that I've seen of that house--that glass living room, living room walls, absolutely beautiful. Wasn't that a little tricky?

LAUTNER: Oh yes. Originally, it was faceted so that the glass would just butt glass, again without posts or mullions, so that it didn't interfere with the view. By having it on angles, and faceted, pieces would support each other, reinforce each other against [the] wind. We had certain corners where we should have had extra glass mullions, and Elrod knew this, but he didn't want to spend the money on it and he was willing to take the chance. So we tried it that way, and it **was** beautiful. But they had an exceptional windstorm, like, 120 mile [per hour] winds, and something was open, and it blew out. But he knew that that **could** happen.

But it was interesting to see [it] that way because we had a party down there just after it was first finished--for the Palm Springs architects, actually [laughs]--and one

of the older, big firms there came up to me, and he said, "god, it's like being inside of a diamond." And it was; it was absolutely perfect. Then later on they used it for that movie **Diamonds Are Forever**.

Then Elrod, since that happened, wanted to be able to have it open in the wintertime, when it's not too hot; in the summer it has to be air conditioned. So we made two twenty-five-foot wide hanging glass doors, which are motorized and slide around the side of the building, so that it has a fifty-foot opening now.



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LASKEY: So you were talking about the changes in the glass that you had made in the [Arthur] Elrod House.

LAUTNER: Well, Elrod decided he'd like to have it openable in the wintertime, so we made two twenty-five-foot wide, curved--well, faceted, actually--glass doors and hung them on the perimeter of the roof, which, fortunately, had a big enough reinforced concrete beam and was strong enough--we checked the engineering--to hang these doors. So we had an aircraft door company make them. The operation is motorized, electric, and counterbalanced, so you can push a button and get a fifty-foot opening to the view, to the desert and the whole situation, which is really beautiful and desirable.

LASKEY: Now, the pool goes under part of the door.

LAUTNER: Yes. Well, with the glass on the perimeter, now the pool comes inside when the glass is closed, and the glass doors just have a neoprene flap on the bottom that comes down to the water, so it's pretty well sealed for air conditioning in the summer.

LASKEY: The pool looks like it was quite an engineering or a structural feat anyway.

LAUTNER: Yeah. The whole thing [is] on a mountainside, but it's a rock mountainside, so the foundations are all very good. The whole building is concrete, so there's nothing to go wrong with it. In fact, a lot of people--

Well, I guess most people don't realize at all that concrete is the best in every possible way, including earthquakes. It's better than steel. I was in a twenty-five story apartment building in Anchorage, Alaska (where I also did a job), just after the big earthquake up there. And that reinforced concrete building swayed sixteen feet in each direction at the top, in this strong earthquake. Nobody was hurt, nobody was killed, and nothing fell down because the reinforced concrete cracked, but nothing caved in, because it's like there's a mesh throughout the whole thing that's sort of flexible. Well, in a steel structure or almost any other kind of a structure, it would fall apart and cave in, and it's much more dangerous.

LASKEY: What is the stairway that goes down in the Elrod House? There's a stairway alongside the pool that goes down to another level.

LAUTNER: Oh. Well, it goes down to guest rooms down below.

LASKEY: So the house is built on two levels then?

LAUTNER: Yeah. Yeah. There's a lower level of guest rooms and an upper terrace. Well, I guess the main problem with this history [is] it's all in print.

LASKEY: And we can't show--

LAUTNER: We don't have pictures.

LASKEY: We're looking at a picture of the house right now which I wish we could put into the tape machine.

[laughter]

LAUTNER: It is going to be interesting as a record. I mean, just in print or in writing, but the complete architecture thing takes pictures or, better yet, [seen] in person.

SECOND PART

JUNE 30, 1982

LASKEY: Backtracking a little bit in time, Mr. Lautner, once you left Taliesin, what was your relationship with Mr. Wright? Did you see him after that?

LAUTNER: Well, I naturally liked to see him any time I could. But when I came here originally, to superintend a couple of his houses, I couldn't afford to travel back and forth to Arizona. And he couldn't either, as far as that goes. [laughter] Because every dime he got, he put into his buildings. So I didn't see him very often. But when he came to Los Angeles, he usually called me to pick him up

at the Union Station and drive him around town or drive him to see his son Lloyd, who he always visited. So we had visits like that as well as some discussion of projects that he-- Well, the ones I superintended were mainly finished by that time. I mean, they were just over a period of a couple of years--like '39 to '41, I guess would be the time.

One of the really interesting trips that I had with Frank Lloyd Wright driving him around-- He had his own theater in Wisconsin and also in Arizona, and while I was there as an apprentice, we had all European films, which were fantastic. Mr. Wright loved the Russian cartoons and the René Clair French movies, and we saw all of the best of everything. But we couldn't get the best of any American films because of their booking systems. They required you to take a dud along with a good one and all this kind of dirty-dealing stuff. So he just said the hell with them, you know, for years.

But finally, he made a trip over here, and I drove him around with the express purpose of breaking the movie booking system; which nobody else would even attempt, you know. So this was really fun. Without any appointments at all, we walked into all of the top offices of the big movie studios. The first thing that would happen--Mr. Wright would say, "Well, I don't think you know who I am, but I'm

Frank Lloyd Wright, and I have a place in Arizona and a little theater." Before he got going at all almost every one of them knew him, of course, and they'd say, "Oh yes. Of course we know you because you've been a celebrity for fifty years, while an average movie star is only good for five or ten years, you know." So they look at it from the business standpoint. [laughter] So he had lots of interesting conversations with different people about breaking the booking system. But even though they were heads of certain studios or certain functions, the first four or five that we went to see couldn't do anything. They were tied because of that system.

But what happened was we finally went to one man who was head of--I forget whether it was MGM or what studio--this man was the real control of booking the film to theaters and could do whatever. He was the head man. So Mr. Wright started talking to him about the problem, and he stopped him, and he [the studio man] said, "I know all about you because I've kept track of your whole life. I was on a boat to Yokohama with you"--when he was building the Imperial Hotel. And this man had made a hobby of keeping track of all the passengers on this boat to Yokohama. Frank Lloyd Wright was one, Franz Werfel and various other people were on that boat. This man had everything that ever happened to all of these people, their

complete history. So we got a real reception there, naturally.

So then after that happened he said, "Well, what do you want?" And Mr. Wright said he wants the good movies without having to take the bad ones or any of the monkey business involved. So [the man said], "Anything you want; no charge, any time." So he broke the booking system, and he could get good American movies.

LASKEY: He was lucky, because I think it's a problem that theater owners are still struggling with.

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. It's a hell of a problem, but Mr. Wright broke it. [laughter] So that was something.

LASKEY: At this time, in the late forties and going into the early fifties, prior to Silvertop, most of the things that you did were on a smaller scale than those pieces that you were to become known for. How did you make the leap into the larger--

LAUTNER: Oh, I didn't make any leap. I considered architecture-- As Mr. Wright used to point out, it's the quality, not the quantity. So I just did what I could with whoever my client was. For, I guess, the first ten years or so, I didn't have any clients that had any money. They were all aiming at rock bottom costs on little tiny lots and so forth. So I finally got some who had more land and

more money, and so they became, you know, bigger projects. But there wasn't anything special that happened.

LASKEY: But your style changed somewhat, too, as the houses got bigger. The early ones, I think, had more wood; they were almost more Wrightian, if that's a fair term, than Californian.

LAUTNER: Well, I think-- I don't like to use the word "style" at all. It's just that every one was an individual job, and when it got to be-- When there was more opportunity than just the absolute minimum, rock bottom, little tiny thing, why, I could do something else. So I've been continually interested and experimenting with different kinds of spaces and structures and all of the values of architecture. So in these later projects that are just-- They just represent further control and further experimentation in livable kinds of spaces and in durable values. That's a continuous, non-ending search, so I'm still doing it.

LASKEY: Is this something that you have to educate your clients to understand for the most part?

LAUTNER: No. What's happened was that the clients came to me looking for something which comes from my work. For instance, Reiner, who did Silvertop, had seen, I guess, a half dozen smaller houses that I had done and he had interviewed forty architects before he interviewed me. He

decided that I had the imagination and the ability that he was looking for. And I had quite a few clients like that. They were actually looking for architecture, looking for imagination, rather than [the] latest style, or stock, or this-or-that, or facade, or what-have-you. They wanted something real. I'm fortunate to have turned up a few clients like that, but there aren't very many.

I've always complained about Los Angeles being bad architecturally and various other ways, and people say, "Well, why don't you move?" I've tried to figure out how I could move, and there's no way I could be in a place with less population because here's a population of seven or eight million in the county. And I get maybe ten a year out of seven or eight million. The individuals who are looking for something real in architecture are very few.

LASKEY: You also came to Los Angeles just about the time the floodgates broke as far as the population growth of the area, too. Has that helped you or hurt you?

LAUTNER: No. I don't think any of those things has any effect on my work. I mean, when there's a building boom I might not have any work at all, and if there's no building, I might have the best job I ever had, because it just depends on a particular individual showing up who wants to do a real piece of architecture. And they show up any time, regardless of the world situation, or [a] boom-or-

bust economy or anything else. It has nothing to do with it.

LASKEY: Well, in fact, when you were building Silvertop and the Malin ["Chemosphere"] House [Hollywood Hills, 1960], I think, was during the Korean War [1950-53], wasn't it?

LAUTNER: Yes. Yes.

LASKEY: And the McCarthy era.

LAUTNER: Well, I was so involved with the architecture that I hardly knew the Korean War was going on. [laughter] It had no effect whatsoever on my work.

LASKEY: So it wasn't a major problem with architects or architecture that World War II had been as far as being able to get things or do things.

LAUTNER: No. No, it wasn't like World War II. I mean it did actually stop things, World War II. I mean, it was against the law to get materials. You had to do it with [the] black market, [which] was what they did in Beverly Hills. I guess I mentioned that before.

LASKEY: You were talking about, in your earlier times, that you had to build small houses on obscure lots and in difficult situations, but [in] one of your newer houses, the Stevens House, you've had to do that same thing, and it's just beautiful. Did you find-- That certainly had to

be an entirely different kind of a challenge than the earlier challenge that you were talking about it.

LAUTNER: Well, I naturally like any kind of a challenge in architecture. In fact, the more challenge, the more interesting, and I think the more likely some total new, legitimate solution can come out. So when Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Stevens came as clients with this thirty-foot lot and they wanted five bedrooms, five baths, and so forth-- and a swimming pool. They had had an architect before, and he'd told them that they couldn't get a swimming pool on that lot and they couldn't do this and they couldn't do that, like most-- That's usually what you get when you want to do anything, is the expert tells you you can't do anything. So I told them right away, don't tell me what you can't do or what anybody said, just tell me what you **want** to do. So then it makes it a beautiful challenge. So I got everything they wanted on the little lot.

And every bit of it is desirable, so much so that-- this is interesting, and I think it's perfectly all right to say--Mr. Stevens loves the house more than ever right now. And he's been divorced a couple of times, and the wives have gone away but he still has the house. So it's a real part of his life. He wrote me a letter one time. He said he just enjoys sitting in there, you know. It has a

permanent, lasting feeling, and interest, and so it's a real place to **be**.

LASKEY: Well, describe the lot and what he wanted on it.

LAUTNER: Well, it was actually thirty-something [feet] wide, and with setbacks it was really less than that that you could build on. And then we could build on something like eighty or ninety feet in depth. Then with the county building department regulations, you could go to forty feet high. So I had that volume of space to work in. By going down levels--I went into the sand within a foot of high tide, so there's a floor buried below, which became a children's playroom--I mean, sort of half-buried but it still has windows--maid's room and bath, and a painting studio. They're down on the level more or less with the bottom of the swimming pool. And then there are other, four or five other levels.

And then by doing this catenary curve concrete shell and reversing it in the middle, I not only created a maintenance-free, desirable building for Malibu, but it went with the mountains and the waves, and it opened up in the middle to give views of the ocean and the mountains, rather than being trapped like you normally would be in a rectangular box [in which] you'd just have a hole in each end and/or some side windows that would be looking into somebody else's house. So this one has complete privacy

with all desirable rooms. Five bedrooms and five baths, living, dining, kitchen, and swimming pool, and every bit of it is desirable. So I'm very proud of that solution.

In fact, it's probably more of an achievement than if I had something on a big lot. But what's happened to me is strange. Even when I've had larger properties with wealthy clients, there's never enough room. No matter how big the property, we still don't have enough room to do what we really want to do.

LASKEY: Really?

LAUTNER: That's true, yeah. Like, Silvertop is on six lots, and we were out to within an eighth of an inch of every setback line. We didn't have enough room to do really what we wanted to do. [Bob] Hope's [house] is on eight lots and no room at all, down in Palm Springs. No room at all when he should have had acreage, you know. And then none of the lots on the coast have any room. Even if they're a hundred feet or a hundred and fifty feet, there's still not much room.

LASKEY: Well, I was thinking about the Stevens House, the idea of not having the windows on the side makes such good sense in Malibu because it is wall-to-wall houses over in that area.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. And that one also-- It is hard when people reading this don't see any pictures, but the

catenary curve, I guess you could visualize [it] as a high point on one side and it curves down to the ground on the other side. And then, as the elements are reversed, there's a high side on one side, and then there's a high side on the other side in the length of the property. This not only gives the opening in the middle of the house from within, but it's an improved condition for the neighbors. Because you're getting more space, you're up against a curved disappearing wall instead of a flat vertical right in your face.

So I've mentioned it to quite a few people [that] it's really an ideal solution for townhouses or row houses. Row houses have been a problem for centuries, and they're still done more or less the same way. I guess some of them now have lightwells or, you know, skylights over the stairway and things like that. But it's just been in the last few years that they've done anything even that good. This kind of a thing could improve everybody's condition in row housing.

LASKEY: But since it makes such good sense, why don't they do it?

LAUTNER: I don't know. As far as I can see, the builders and developers, they really don't go on good sense. They just go on merchandising statistics that they [have]. As far as I can tell--I worked on one subdivision--they get

certain things that are considered saleable by the loan company, certain facades or certain looks, and that's what's financed, and that's what's built. So it has nothing to do with architecture at all. It's merchandise to be merchandized, and that's it.

LASKEY: And whatever the particular trend happens to be, that's what they're going to merchandize.

LAUTNER: Yeah. I had a hell of a time with that kind of thing in the beginning because-- Everybody had needed to borrow money and the loan companies, you know, would say, "Why, it's unfortunate that you have this clerestory window"--which makes the most beautiful light and space inside. But outside they're not used to seeing a clerestory window in the kind of houses they finance, so they penalize it. So anything good that I did was just a penalty by the loan company. The money business has always been disturbing to me.

People say, how can you do anything with all these building codes? Well, they're bad enough, but my answer to them is that the building code is still a democratic action, and you can go to an appeal board, and there's something you can do even though it takes a lot of work. But to a banker, there's nothing you can do. It's an independent institution, and their idea of merchandise has nothing to do with your idea of what you want to do, and

there's no appeal. So that's what stops anything new, is the financing.

LASKEY: Just offhand, can you think of any project that you had, or design that you had come up with, that you really thought was extraordinarily good that got defeated, ultimately, by the banks, that you were simply not able to build?

LAUTNER: Well, where people had to borrow money, I had that problem every time. And some of them managed to get private loans or some kind of financing to get built, and then after it was built, they were able to get more normal financing. So it's always been a problem.

LASKEY: What about your clients going through a period like that? It must be equally hard on them, if it's something that they want, and want built. Would they generally stick with you and try to fight it through?

LAUTNER: Well, yeah, that's the unusual thing, is that I did have clients who really wanted it, and they were willing to go through all this pain; while the typical client just wouldn't be willing to go through all the trouble. That's why most of the--when I try to analyze it--most of the so-called smart people, they never build anything. They just buy and sell. That's the safest way. But they spend a lot of money on interior decorators, and

they're satisfied; that satisfies their whims, but they never have anything that is real architecture.

LASKEY: Speaking of interior decorators, do you ever work personally with decorators when you're doing a building?

LAUTNER: Oh, sure. Sure. It's different with different clients. Certain clients **with** certain decorators-- If they're involved in the planning stage, why, it's fine because we all work together and get the best total product we can get.

LASKEY: What about landscaping? Are you involved in the landscaping?

LAUTNER: Well, yes. I'm involved in everything, really. But I've never been able to find anybody that was much help in landscaping. There are landscape architects, but when I've tried to improve the whole site with landscaping-- I mean, you can create more or less space with landscaping as well as with building. And I think some of them understand that a little bit, but I've never found one who really contributed with real thinking to the whole project, or even could understand what I was asking him to do.

So that's always been disappointing to me, especially in this area [where] almost everything is barren. So I say you have to build the site, you have to build the environment, and you have to build the people, and build the landscape, and build everything. And they say--the typical

idea is this is the easiest place in the world, and it's not. I mean, if you had a beautiful piece of woods in Oregon with a view of Mt. Hood, you don't have to do a damn thing. But here you have to do everything. [laughter]

LASKEY: So do you end up doing the landscaping?

LAUTNER: Well, I usually end up designating what, without knowing the plant names, areas and heights and things that seem suitable for the situation.

LASKEY: Well, you have designed a couple of apartment houses that--when you were talking about the Stevens House and it being an answer to row housing, it made me think of it. That's going back again, too, but the Sheats apartment house [L'Horizon] and then-- At least your designs for the [Alto] Capistrano apartments [San Juan Capistrano, 1963-64] which did the same thing that you were talking about, gave privacy as well as mass--

LAUTNER: Right.

LASKEY: --which seem not, again, to have been taken up generally; I'm surprised.

LAUTNER: No, no. The apartment business is just the fastest and the cheapest you can get away with. The only time they spend any money is on a chandelier in the lobby or a little marble around the front door; otherwise they're just boxes as usual.

LASKEY: You mentioned the Hope House. I read somewhere where it was--it's been compared to the [Eero] Saarinen TWA terminal, and you didn't agree with that.

LAUTNER: No. It has no relation to it whatsoever, except that it's curved, but that's typical of publicity. They have to latch on to some comparison or something to make it build up a story. And half the stories are just completely meaningless. There's all kinds of writing about architecture, not only by just writers as such, but by so-called architectural critics and writers, who don't really understand either.

LASKEY: Have you found that the architectural critics from the east have been harder on you than the critics in the West?

LAUTNER: Well, I don't know. When I first began, I had a criticism from Henry-Russell Hitchcock, who was the best one, the biggest one. He saw the first house that I did here, on Micheltorena Street [John Lautner house, Silver Lake, 1939], and it was published in **House Beautiful**. He said it was the best house in the United States by an architect under thirty. So I thought I got off to a fantastic start.

LASKEY: Yes.

LAUTNER: But it didn't happen. I mean, it still took me thirty years to get established. [laughter]

LASKEY: Yes, but you were fighting trends during that time, too.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Well, it's still the same way, I think. I mean, I sort of get [an] underground sense around here that everybody thinks-- I mean the architects or whoever, seem mostly, I think, [to] think I've done some good if not great work; but it's all kept quiet, you know. It's not supposed to be publicized or something. I don't know.

[laughter]

LASKEY: Well, somebody referred to you as quote, the **bête noir** of the architectural establishment, and that may be why they want to keep you hidden and don't want to deal with you.

LAUTNER: Yeah, I think it's true because I've seen lots of, well, not so much, but-- I didn't like to think it at first, but I think there's a lot of small thinking and a lot of petty thinking. And there's jealousy in the publicity area, lots of picayune stuff that goes on that I've avoided. But I've had to just exist by myself with no cooperation or inspiration from anywhere else.

LASKEY: Well, the quote, "the **bête noir**," comes from the Brendan Gill [book] **The Dream Come True: [Great Houses of Los Angeles, 1980]**, in which he was very hard on you, in the book. But I think what's interesting is that the final

picture in the book is a photograph of the Segel House [1975], I believe it is, looking out to the ocean.

LAUTNER: Yeah, but not a very good picture.

LASKEY: I don't know if it's-- It's beautiful. I mean, the scene is sort of-- The book was called **The Dream Come True**, I think it was.

LAUTNER: He completely missed everything, you know. If he really was concerned with the "dream come true," I've done more of that than anybody in the whole country, almost. What I did made him mad because all he could understand were interior design stuff and facade stuff and traditional recognized status values and things like that. He had no idea whatsoever of a "dream house coming true," and yet he had a book with that title. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, he was also part of the eastern establishment and they all go back to the Henry-Russell Hitchcock era, and that's why I ask you if easterners have more difficulty dealing with your designs.

LAUTNER: Well, I haven't had much comment from them because I haven't had that much publicity there. I mean, I've had things, you know, in the **Architectural Record**. But since **House Beautiful** and **House and Garden** have gone downhill-- I mean, they don't seem to have any architectural value now--why, I have no publicity in the east at all.

LASKEY: Does criticism of the nature of Brendan Gill's upset you, or have you gotten used to it over a period of years?

LAUTNER: Well, it's annoying, naturally. I thought he was, well, that he would be more open or more free about it or something. But I finally realized that he's in his rut or in his nook or whatever, and he couldn't see what I was doing at all. So it's just too bad that the book gets out to the public. In fact, the Segels wanted to sue him for what he was saying, you know. But I am used to that, the same as Mr. Wright was used to it. I mean, every time he did anything he got the craziest kind of stories about what it was or wasn't--because it was nonconformist. So, that's part of doing anything: if you do anything, and you're nonconformist, you're going to get all kinds of crazy stories.

LASKEY: As time has gone by--let's see, [it was] 1939 that you left Taliesin--has your relationship with Taliesin and with Wright changed: that is, people's perception of you? Because at the time, when we talked about this before, you said that it really made it hard for you to get established, that you had been associated with Wright. But Wright has at last become an acceptable, you know, person.

LAUTNER: Well, still not really.

LASKEY: Really?

LAUTNER: No. They still fight him. They still try to put him down. I see the established--they still make wise-cracks. The academic, established architects and architectural critics, who are going with the latest phoney rationalization or style, they still love to refer to Frank Lloyd Wright as a joker, or he did this or did that, you know. I mean, they try to put him out--keep him out. It's still the same way.

LASKEY: It's still the same?

LAUTNER: So I'm still dependent on individual people who are not affected by the status quo or the conservative point of view. It seems, when they're controlled by the safe, conservative point of view, we just don't have anything in the way of architecture in that area. So I really hate the conservative point of view; I mean, I can't understand it all, really. Maintaining the status quo and playing it safe is absolutely doing nothing. I mean, why did we establish a free country, why are we trying to live, or why are we trying to do anything, if we're just going to be not doing anything?

LASKEY: Tom Wolfe recently wrote his book **From Bauhaus to Our House**. Have you had a chance to look at that?

LAUTNER: Yes, yes.

LASKEY: Because I have a feeling you might have felt a great deal of sympathy to what he was saying.

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah. I liked the book. I was glad that he blew up a lot of the phoney, latest-rationale, and things like that. I mean, some of these latest ones, you know, with all these white pipe railings and things like that, I just say the same thing as the book. I mean, first of all, they look like 1929 "Moderne," another old cliché. And then I say, "Well, what if they painted them black, you know, where would they be with this kind of stuff? To have it dependent on white pipe railings or three shades of pink like [Charles W.] Moore, you know, the whole thing is crazy. I'm glad that Wolfe got into it.

LASKEY: Well, I liked his idea of the compound and the idea of the worshipping at the compound--that everybody had to do the same thing, and that if you didn't worship in the particular compound you were really alienated or out of it to the point where people were terrified not to have a box or whatever. Now, that's what you were fighting.

LAUTNER: Yes. That's right. I've been fighting that all my life. That's true. I mean, I have really had my neck out, and I don't blame a lot of architects for not sticking their neck out because when you do, you're out of it, absolutely, you know. You get no cooperation. I mean, that's probably why I never got an interesting commercial job or an interesting public job, because I'm not part of

the thing, you know. I'm not in there, I'm not on the inside.

LASKEY: You're not in the compound.

LAUTNER: No. [laughter]



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE

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LASKEY: Of course, one of the interesting things about the particular modern architecture that we're talking about and Henry-Russell Hitchcock, whom we were talking about, [is that] he wrote the book on the International Style with Philip Johnson, which really set the pace for so long. And now Philip Johnson has set about sort of totally going against what it was he had written about for so long.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Well, that was interesting to me. I've heard Johnson talk a couple times, and he's a very, very sophisticated, very, very smart man. And I thought that he was really beyond just an International Style, but what I gather from all of these things that have happened just in the past couple years, [is] that he was really totally involved in the International Style, and that was the beginning and end of architecture.

As smart as he is, he didn't realize that--which I've always realized--a whole, legitimate piece of architecture is a whole idea and a valid idea and a new idea for every situation. It's not just following a style or a fad that has this clean glass look, you know. So I was delighted that they finally discovered that modern was dead because I thought that they were going to go on forever with the

[Ludwig Mies] van der Rohe stuff, and you might as well forget doing anything at all. But the public reacted against it, and actually, a lot of the van der Rohe stuff in Chicago is lousy. I mean, it's poor living conditions, and it doesn't even have the proportion which originally made him famous. Even now, his most famous Tugendot House and Barcelona Pavilion had certain very subtle proportions and spaces that were real architecture. But from then on it had some of that look without those subtle proportions or anything else, just clean detail. So, that's a crazy scene.

I think that Johnson knows that Frank Lloyd Wright created real architecture, but I don't think he still understands it as a potential or as anything to do with the whole history of architecture. The way I see it, what Frank Lloyd Wright did is-- Like, the first building--for whatever it was, 5000 B.C. in China--was an original building and it had some meaning and some purpose and some architectural value. There've been buildings like that throughout history, and when they become copied as styles, they lose their meaning. So I feel that Frank Lloyd Wright['s] understanding and my understanding is the most valid and fits in with the whole history of the world. It's not just today or yesterday, or this-or-that; it's one of a kind real value.

LASKEY: Do you find that it's been easier for you now to get to do what you want to do design wise with the client? You've been able to convince them?

LAUTNER: Well, I haven't had any problems with the clients for years because they've come to me **wanting** architecture, that's the clue to it. I've had people who wanted to help me as a business. They'd say, "Oh, so-and-so's going to build, and I'm going to recommend him." And whenever that's happened, it's been absolutely impossible because they just want so many square feet for so many dollars, and they're not looking for architecture, and I couldn't work with them.

But people who voluntarily come because they've seen something or read something and **do** have an interest in a space to be created for them, then it's entirely up to me. I mean, my worst problem then, and now, is to satisfy myself. I have no problem satisfying a client. I could satisfy them with **half** of the work that I'm doing. But to make it good enough for them **and** good enough for **me** is really difficult. [laughter]

LASKEY: I think that's what I'm really trying to say; and I'm not saying it right, but early on in the interview, you talked about, when you left Taliesin that you had all these ideas and all these plans and all these things you wanted to create and to design, and it took you thirty to forty

years to finally refine and develop those projects. I'm wondering if that's what you're doing now. Are you finally getting to do the things that are in your head?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Now, with most of my new clients, the design is entirely up to me. And that's very difficult because I like more limitations; as Mr. Wright used to say, "The artist's limitations are his best friends." That gives you some legitimate control; it demands some kind of control. If some client comes to me and says, "Just do whatever you like," that's the toughest thing in the world. I mean, Elrod more or less did that to me, but I was fortunate enough to conceive of that design and have it a good solution regardless. But generally, I prefer more requests as to feeling or atmosphere or way of life or something. Like, one client wanted daylight throughout the whole house. Well, that's nice; I liked it-- And the one in Alaska wanted me to create an environment that would keep his wife there through the winter. Another one wanted me to create an environment that was like a big abstract painting that he had on the wall. Now, that's a real architectural challenge. I like those.

LASKEY: That's when you have parameters--

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. But if somebody says, just whatever, that's very difficult.

LASKEY: When they say that, do they really mean it?

LAUTNER: Well, I think they do. I mean, they're looking for something. I don't know how far--I mean, I've never really stretched it.

LASKEY: You should try that.

LAUTNER: There probably is a point where they would stop. But I do have one right now who just said he wants a whole new world, and that's his request. It's under construction. I talked to him the other day about some of the finishing and furnishing we're trying to figure out. I said I was studying what to do and still keep complying with a whole new world. You know, that's a difficult assignment.

LASKEY: What is a "whole new world"? How do you create a "whole new world"?

LAUTNER: Well, I don't know--I'd have to show you that model; it's in the other room. Basically, it's a property on a cliff on the ocean. And he wanted it completely private, soundproofed from the highway, and then block out the neighbor--got an ugly, big, colonial house next door. So with those requirements I conceived of an idea of a thirty foot high concrete wall that's sort of serpentine, and it also slopes back and forth. Then it turns and becomes the roof of the house, so the wall becomes the house. It is a whole new concept of developing a whole property for living for this one man. He's delighted with

it. It's a three million dollar house for one man.
["Contemporary Castle," 1986, client does not want name
used]

LASKEY: Oh my. Where is it?

LAUTNER: It's west of Trancas [Canyon Road], on the coast.

LASKEY: Oh, out in Malibu.

LAUTNER: Yeah. As I was saying, I'm finishing and furnishing-- We're trying to keep complying with the request for the whole new world--it's a new planet. So, your question--this guy will go as far as you can possibly go. He's probably the first and only one I ever had that would go like that. Just unbelievable.

LASKEY: Where do you start?

LAUTNER: Fortunately, with that one, which practically had no restrictions, I did have that start. The start was to, first of all, completely blank out the neighbor, which required a huge wall down the whole property line. Also it automatically soundproofed the interior garden from the highway. And then there's the panorama of the ocean. So those things determined the physical thing, and I don't know exactly how I arrived at this wall working that way. But it is a whole new world, because nobody's ever seen a curved sloping wall, I don't think, anyplace. I don't think there is one anywhere in the world. It's just a fantastic thing. I mean, some of that wall is built right

now. I was out there with Helena [Arahuete] (who's working on it, been working on it for a couple of years) with the doctor client, and I said, "My god, I'd like just to have that wall, just a piece of that wall on a lot." It would be one of the greatest things you could have architecturally.

LASKEY: A sculpture.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah; it is. It looks real. It looks like in some of the things-- It's all concrete, and it looks like something maybe from Egypt or-- It's just completely out of this world. I mean, it's not a stucco, plaster Los Angeles box, you know. [laughs]

LASKEY: It sounds fabulous. But I have two questions about the wall. Did you have trouble finding a contractor who could build it for you?

LAUTNER: Oh, sure, sure. Well, we decided that right away, too. Wally Niewiadomski, who I got originally from Chicago to build Silvertop, he's building this house.

LASKEY: Oh, he's still here then?

LAUTNER: He built Elrod's too. If I didn't have him, why, I couldn't even design anything like that; nobody would touch it, no typical general contractor. The only way they'd touch it would be, say, [for] triple the money, and then they'd look at it, you know.

LASKEY: And then they'd straighten out the curve--

LAUTNER: And then there's still be problems, you know. So it's really an unusual thing. It's about half, almost half-built now.

LASKEY: Well, a thirty foot wall, and I assume it's on the lot line, is very imposing. Did you run into any problems from the neighbors or from the--

LAUTNER: Well, it's set back. It has to be set back, so it's back to the building setback. So there's still a ten or twelve or fifteen foot side yard, so it's legal.

LASKEY: Well, what is the inside of it like? Is it a large space?

LAUTNER: Yeah, well there are some [photographs], you can tell-- That's a portion of [the] main upstairs living room. It has this concrete shell roof ceiling and [a] stone floor and a continuous pool around the edge, like the one [Arango House] in Acapulco. Then the ocean out here. And this is a sloping curved stone wall that divides the living area from the master bedroom area. So it's mostly just a big open space on several levels, with a few screen walls. [It's] hard to see from that.

LASKEY: But over here on the right, no, on the left, where the wall slopes up to the ceiling, is the ceiling actually--I mean, is the wall actually--is it a curved wall?

LAUTNER: Yeah, that's a pier; it's a column.

LASKEY: Oh, I see. It's like the other one across the way, then.

LAUTNER: This continues on over here someplace. I was experimenting with cutting out a big rock and setting upholstery in there, so essentially, when you go in, you really don't see any furniture, as such, but you might see a couple of boulders, and you go around the other side, and there's an upholstered seat, you know. So we have to do some pretty subtle things to keep it "a whole new world."
[laughs]

LASKEY: It looks like a new world. It looks like a spaceship.

LAUTNER: Yeah, it's a nice space.

LASKEY: Now, that's the glass--is the same kind of glass--

LAUTNER: The glass is going to slide open, so he can have it wide-open to the ocean. So that'll really be something.

LASKEY: How large is that space?

LAUTNER: Oh, that's about forty by forty--this area. And past the column is another twenty or thirty feet.

LASKEY: How long does it take to build something like that?

LAUTNER: Well, I think it'll be done in about two to four years.

LASKEY: That long? But I can see there wouldn't be too many people coming in off the street who--

LAUTNER: No, no. [laughter]

LASKEY: Not with this kind of a design. But doesn't it make you terribly excited when you get a commission like this?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, I have three or four that are all interesting like that, I mean, under construction. So that's my reward. I do have some exciting buildings under construction, and it's fun to see those accomplished.

LASKEY: Plus, don't you think that now, when your clients come, that's what they expect from you?

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. I'm glad you mentioned that. When I think about it, I find that people come, the last two or three years anyway, maybe more, they expect a museum piece. So every job I have has to be a museum piece. And so that really **is** a challenge. [laughs]

LASKEY: That's what you worked your forty years for.

LAUTNER: That's right. I asked for the responsibility, which I couldn't get when I was younger, and that used to make me madder than hell, because nobody'd allow you to do anything. And now every one has to be a masterpiece. So I asked for it, and I got it. [laughter]

LASKEY: That's great.

SECOND PART

JULY 14, 1982

LASKEY: Mr. Lautner, getting back to a subject we were on earlier, which is criticism by architectural writers, I have a quote from the program notes of an architectural exhibit from 1974, [by] a Hans Hollein, in which he is quoted as saying that, "He," meaning you, "are the most 'losangelian' [sic] of all the known, the conscious architects. . . . Lautner seems to accept Los Angeles . . . for what it is rather than having a message for how Los Angeles could be transformed, changed, improved." What's your reaction to that?

LAUTNER: Well, just about the opposite is true. I have never accepted Los Angeles. And when I first came I thought it was really an ugly place because it's mostly all commercial. You seldom go on a beautiful street, even though there **are** hideaways and oases in the mountains and so forth. But that's a long, long story. [laughter]

But anyway, in my architecture, what I've done is try, in spite of Los Angeles, to create the most beautiful oasis within--in the city, in spite of it being in Los Angeles. And suiting it to the particular situation for the people and the kind of terrain and orientation and so on--and blocking out ugly views and it all comes, it develops from

basic, hard-thinking reasons for the building. So it has nothing to do with style or fad or Los Angeles or anything else.

LASKEY: But your critics don't seem to analyze it like that.

LAUTNER: No, they have to tie it in with a style or with a fad or with the city. I know some of them have said-- I don't know--just in passing, for instance, "Lautner has not yet developed a style." Well, I never wanted to develop a style. I just wanted to do good architecture, and they don't understand **that**, either. So the written stuff, to me, is a great problem because it's so superficial and doesn't really get into the guts or the meaning or reason for being, of real architecture. And of course, that's kind of understandable because most of the architecture is superficial or a fad or a facade or something and doesn't contribute what I'm contributing. So I don't like to be treated that way.

LASKEY: Has it been a problem from the beginning, since you've been an architect, having problems with critics misinterpreting your work?

LAUTNER: Oh sure. Also, magazine editors, when you have something published, they have to write some kind of story that they think is great for the public and they're apt to pick the wrong pictures and tell some crazy story that

really isn't true at all. Or it's halfway this way or that way, and you can't control it. It's hard to get just the straight story about what you're doing.

LASKEY: Well, also, when you came to Los Angeles in 1939, and we talked about this before, you started in-- There was a certain period, a certain style of architecture that was then taking hold in Los Angeles, and I assume that it was assumed that you would adopt that style. So everything that you did after that, I imagine, was appraised in the light of that style, whether you did it or not and whether you departed from what was acceptable or not.

LAUTNER: I guess so. I can't really put myself in the critics' point of view because I can't understand how they can write so much that doesn't mean anything and not really get into it.

So I think when I started I was lucky in a way just to be recognized as a modern architect. But aside from that, I had nothing to do with the kind of architecture the other so-called modern architects were doing at the time. I was doing right from scratch my own idea of the best solution. I started that way, and I've been that way all my life. I know, like, **Arts and Architecture**, they published a lot of my initial work. But then, when they did their Case Study houses they just did one glass box after another. So whoever did a glass box was doing a modern house. And I

never did a glass box, so I guess that's why I never did a Case Study house, because that's all they knew about modern.

LASKEY: Well, that was [John] Entenza's particular love, wasn't it?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: I'm looking at a review, or critique, of some of your houses from **House and Home**, when you were doing the [L']Horizon apartments. And it talks about your free-wheeling treatment of forms, and it says: "**House and Home**'s editors would prefer not to go out nearly so far. They believe that serious designer Lautner, however, should no longer be officially ignored."

LAUTNER: Yeah. I think that's Peter Blake. He really did the worst kind of story on me. He made everything out to be a careless or wild or crazy thing. He just didn't understand any of it and didn't want to.

And now the funny thing is that he's finally discovered that the glass box is not the beginning and end of the world, and maybe, right now, he might understand what I'm doing if he chose to. But at that time he certainly didn't.

LASKEY: Well, words like "freewheeling" and "fantastic" and "futuristic" and "Buck Rogers" are terms frequently critics use when they talk about your work.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Well, they're at a loss. I mean, they don't know the real inside meaning, and I guess, they don't understand that they're not just superficial effects [done] to look different from something else. I think some of them think that that's what it is. In fact, I think some other architects think that I just arbitrarily make something that looks different than something else without any reason. I have millions of reasons for every job. And that's what's **really** misunderstood: that they develop from real hard work, and they put together the kind of required space and structure and everything into one whole architecture. And that's a real struggle to achieve. To have it superficially tossed off as "fantastic" or "Buck Rogers" is insane.

LASKEY: But does it bother you that, perhaps, they didn't come and talk to you about your work first, before they simply made these analyses?

LAUTNER: Well, sure it bothers me, because I hate superficiality, and I hate phoniness. Even if I ignored my own life or my own feelings about it, I hate to see it going on, on that account.

LASKEY: That first quote I read, as I say, it was from some program notes from an exhibit in 1974; maybe you'd like to talk about "The Three Worlds of Los Angeles."

LAUTNER: Well, that was kind of an interesting exhibit. Beata Inaya put it together and worked with the United States Information Service [USIS] and got their approval of doing this exhibit. She was really, has all her life been really interested in architecture, and she was really wanting to get more exhibits of my work in view. But in order to have it sponsored by the Information Service, they just said, they can't just do one person; they have to do something more social.

So that's the reason for this [being] called "Three Worlds of Los Angeles." I'm in there as an individual architect, and Daniel, Mann, Johnson [and Mendenhall] are in there as big office-building architects. And then there are black architects in there to make a cross section of--what they would say would be a cross section of--Los Angeles. And then they felt it was a legitimate exhibit to sponsor, because it had the social and the economic and every sort of angle. But it did go around the world. I don't know whether it did any good or not. [laughter]

LASKEY: Did you go with it?

LAUTNER: No, no.

LASKEY: Oh, you didn't?

LAUTNER: But I saw a few responses. Like, when it was in Paris and various other places there were some good things written. I mean, [for example] that my work was beautiful

and fresh. But I didn't see all of the responses, I just saw a few.

LASKEY: Well, how far did it go?

LAUTNER: Well, I don't know the exact route. It went to several of the main cities in Europe, and then it went to-- Well, it went to India and Indonesia, and I'm not sure if it went to Japan; I don't think it did. But it was in storage, I guess, most of the time. [laughs]

LASKEY: Where is it now?

LAUTNER: It just came back.

LASKEY: Did it really? Did it really?

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah. [laughter]

LASKEY: Oh, that's marvelous.

LAUTNER: In fact, Beata tried to get it in Australia. And I wrote to my friend over there in Sydney, who used to work for me. He wanted to do it and try to get the AIA [Australian Institute of Architects] to sponsor it--and this was just last year--and they couldn't afford it. I mean, in Sydney, last year, the architects were working as waiters in restaurants. They're completely out of business. So they couldn't afford \$150 freight from Bangkok to Sydney to have this exhibit. The USIS didn't pay the freight, you know; that made it complicated. They sponsored it, but whoever really wanted to put it on had to pay the freight, so that made it very complicated and long.

LASKEY: It didn't show here, did it?

LAUTNER: No.

LASKEY: Is there any chance that it will? Can it be done?

LAUTNER: Well, it could be done. Beata wanted to do it when it came back, but a lot of the stuff is in bad condition. If I were going to do another one I could improve it quite a bit, too, in my photographs and also new jobs and so on. So I sort of told her no, I didn't want to repeat that, you know.

LASKEY: Has there been a major show of your work in the area?

LAUTNER: No, I don't think so, in Los Angeles. Quite a few years ago, must be twenty-five to thirty years ago, I had one at USC [University of Southern California]. And I had one at-- Let's see, there's a college out there past Claremont-- I can't think of the name of the school.

[California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, produced an exhibit in 1976 entitled "12 Los Angeles Architects."

--Ed.]

LASKEY: Scripps?

LAUTNER: No. It's a-- I think they're famous for their track. I don't know what it is. Anyway, no, I don't think much of anything around here. I had it at the University of Oklahoma, the University of--I mean, at Berkeley, and I think the University of Washington, the University of

Kentucky and quite a few places; that's about fifteen, twenty years ago. I had it in quite a few universities, but nothing here. I mean, when I went to USC they didn't understand what I was doing **at all**.

LASKEY: Really?

LAUTNER: No. And they never have. So it seems like both USC and UCLA have nothing really to do with my work because it's not in the typical scene, you know. It's not stock of the moment.

LASKEY: Well, that brings up the point--when you decided to go into architecture you went to Taliesin because you needed an alternative to standard architecture schools. What is there today? Have architecture schools changed particularly that you notice?

LAUTNER: Well, I don't know too many details of the schools except they've changed. It seems to me what happens is whoever the dean is, he's quite a major influence on the school. The school doesn't really know, they don't know what to do. I mean, like, when they first started UCLA [School of Architecture and Urban Planning], a couple of them interviewed me to find out what I would suggest they do as a school, but then after that they ignore me, you know. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, you probably told them--

LAUTNER: Yeah. So then they follow each other, see. One

dean gets a name for something or other. It's very curious. I mean, it was funny to me because I know personally two examples, which are not many, but I know more, really. The dean--I probably shouldn't mention any names; I don't remember the other name anyway--but I went to the dean of USC['s] house, some cocktail party or something. (They did quite a bit at one time, trying to get the local architects with the students and things like that.)

He had an old house that he remodeled and put a wood deck out in back, and he had the latest recognized kind of furniture and the whole thing. The dean at the University of Kentucky had an old remodeled house and a wood deck outside--identical. They were not only identical in what they promoted with the school, but they were identical with what they did with their own house. So, it's absolutely crazy. [laughter]

LASKEY: That's wonderful. I think the idea that Charles Moore came from the east to become [head of the architecture program] of UCLA, or Cesar Pelli goes from here to go back to Yale--you've got to end up with a uniformity of ideas.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Well, you're asking about the schools, well, that's one thing. The other thing is it seems as though years ago they did do pretty matter-of-fact drafting and engineering and stuff like that, which theoretically

prepared them to do the actual work in an office. Now they're all off on some design tangent, and they don't know what the design is or what it's for; plus they don't know how to do the work either. So, I don't know what it is now. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, what about a school like SCI-ARC [Southern California Institute of Architecture], which is, I think, somewhat more--

LAUTNER: Well, they are completely open. And they're trying to, by being open, be a service to the students, I think. They have everybody come there. I mean, they're not restricted to just the few who are the latest fad to come talk or show their work. They've had, for instance, Mexican architects, which USC and UCLA, as far as I know, they ignore Mexico completely, which has much better architecture than we have here.

But in their doing that, I mean, that's a good idea in itself. But what I gather is that it's just a wild thing for the students. They don't know where they are or maybe it's too much for them, I don't know. I really don't know whether it's achieving-- I know [Raymond] Kappe's a good guy, and his wife, [Shelly Kappe, is] very good. They're both doing their damndest, but I don't know what it really, how it's really functioning for the students.

LASKEY: Well, is that different from what Taliesin was like?

LAUTNER: Well, yes. Well, yes and no. I think it's similar in that you're exposed to something as a student, which is basically true. You can't be taught anything; you have to learn whatever you're going to learn. But the exposure to Frank Lloyd Wright was an exposure to strong philosophy and principles of materials and principles of life and beauty and all kinds of realities of the universe, which you can ponder forever; while being exposed to fifty different latest styles by fifty different architects leaves a student-- I mean, he doesn't know where he is. He doesn't know anything, I guess.

LASKEY: Confused.

LAUTNER: Yeah.

LASKEY: But the state of architecture today is rather confused.

LAUTNER: Yes, it is. I mean, the architects themselves and the critics-- It's all kind of understandable because, I guess, I mentioned it before, it's sort of partly in line with my friend Ingo [Preminger] saying everybody wants to be held blameless. So the architects, in order to be held blameless, they generally always play it pretty safe. So that's not only satisfactory because they can't be blamed for anything, but also, anybody can do it. So they're kind of happy in that situation, but to me it's not creating architecture.

LASKEY: Do you think the change that's happening, at least the breakdown of the hold of modernism--will it be good? Will it be good for **you**? For recognition of what you've done in the past?

LAUTNER: Oh, I don't know. I don't think it helps me at all. I was glad to see that they recognized that the specific so-called modern style of van der Rohe and the glass box were finally sort of destroyed. But in what's happened since then they're almost destroying architecture, the whole of architecture, by just doing anything crazy that they can think of, and anything goes. So they're all happy with that too because that's easy. I mean, any kid-- Like, I had a student in here yesterday who used to work for me, he's out at Cal Poly. He said the student presents some models like Charles Moore with a couple of boxes turned on angles and painted pink and green with holes. Well, I mean, they're such silly things that anybody can do them. I don't know--

LASKEY: Well, that thing out along the San Diego Freeway, the replica of Liberty House, or whatever it is, one of the historic buildings--it's an office building--

LAUTNER: Where is that?

LASKEY: It's out on the San Diego Freeway, and I'm trying to remember the name of the building, Liberty Hall, I think it is, or Independence Hall--a replica of Independence Hall

serving as an office building down in Redondo Beach, and it's perfectly absurd.

LAUTNER: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Well, then there's all this throwing in some history and throwing in a little this and that, and it's really like set designs, and it's hard on architecture.



TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE TWO

JULY 14, 1982

LASKEY: In the catalog for this 1974 show ["The Three Worlds of Los Angeles"] we've been talking about, there's a reference to you and your wife giving a garden party to raise money for the Watts Towers in 1970. What was your involvement with the Watts Towers?

LAUTNER: Well, it was quite a bit, actually. I was, naturally, interested myself because I liked the idea of it, I liked the look of it, I like the construction, the putting together just reinforcing rods with little dabs of mortar was a very interesting structure in itself. In fact, I'd been thinking about things like that--not exactly like that, but minimum structure with reinforcing and concrete is just an interesting thing in itself.

But aside from that, I was working with [Kenneth] Reiner on Silvertop at the same time and we were working to try and get a preamble to the building code that would allow architects to practice like doctors, that the architect would have some responsibility and some choice rather than just the code. And in our interest we had committee meetings with engineers and artists and what-not concerning that. And at the same time they were threatening to tear down the Watts Towers. So Reiner, I

think, he helped pay engineers to prove that the structure was OK.

LASKEY: Reiner did?

LAUTNER: He helped too, yes.

LASKEY: Great.

LAUTNER: So, we were all involved in helping save it, and so it was just a kind of a natural to have a garden party, and it was very successful. I mean, we got, I don't know, maybe eighty people or something, and it was a big one. It ultimately was saved in a great part due to Reiner's backing, because nobody wants to donate any money. So it was lucky to save it. Since then, they've finally realized that it means something, but it could have been too late very easily.

LASKEY: Well, in Los Angeles, especially, since there's a history of it being too late very frequently.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: Have you been involved with any other architectural projects like that, the saving of--

LAUTNER: No. I've often thought it would be nice, you know. If I were in Boston, I could be interested in something. But "old" here--just because it's old, the oldest it can get is about fifty or sixty years, I guess. And it's not very interesting just because it's old.

LASKEY: What about the Frank Lloyd Wright houses? Are they being well maintained?

LAUTNER: Yes, mostly. I've helped on several, two or three of them. [I] help maintain--it depends on the particular owner at the time. I think practically all of them now are well maintained. I know the [John] Storer House [Los Angeles, 1923], I had Johnny de la Vaux--a carpenter-builder who's done quite a few of my houses, who['s] a fantastic builder, can do absolutely anything--he just about completely redid that one. [He] took it apart and put it together again, so it's in good shape.

LASKEY: Well, and Hollyhock House, of course, is maintained.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: What about the Lloyd Wright houses? Do you think they would be maintained?

LAUTNER: Lloyd? I don't know.

LASKEY: Yeah. [The] two or three that are probably very interesting.

LAUTNER: I don't know. I know that his [Wayfarer's] Chapel is being maintained. But I really don't know about the houses. I just don't know, really.

LASKEY: Well, it makes me think. I saw it around April--sometime ago--that his house on Doheny [Drive, Beverly Hills]--Lloyd Wright's house--was at that time an art

gallery. And it makes me think that some of your houses would make great art galleries.

LAUTNER: Um-huh. [Concurs]

LASKEY: Has it ever been considered?

LAUTNER: I don't know. I don't think so. Because they've mainly been bought where the original client died or was divorced, is the only reason they got rid of them. Somebody gets ahold of them who really loves them, and they keep them. So, I don't think any of them have come up empty that long.

LASKEY: Have you ever designed an art gallery specifically?

LAUTNER: No, no. But I'd love to. I've thought of it--millions of things that could be done. I've been very disappointed in the so-called Museum of Modern Art [Museum of Contemporary Art] planned for Bunker Hill. I'm disappointed in the whole procedure. I mean, one of my clients was on the [design selection] committee, and they had [Frank O.] Gehry and [Charles W.] Moore and everybody on there. I asked him why (and he's too politically sharp to put anything in print) so he said, "Come and have lunch, and I'll explain it to you." So I haven't got around to that yet, but he can give me the whole dirty inside works of the committee and the whole damn thing.

But it's really unfortunate, because I told him that I could have done a better museum with one eye and one hand, you know, than anything they're getting. But they don't even consider me for it, and I'm a local architect. So it's too bad.

LASKEY: But I don't think they seriously really considered any of the local architects, although they sort of gave lip service. But I think it was always intended that another out-of-state, out-of-country in this case, architect--

LAUTNER: It was kind of interesting. I didn't know that the Japanese, [Arata] Isozaki, or whatever his name is--has written that he's an admirer of Frank Lloyd Wright. But they hired him because he knew how to do geometrics. Well, all the students know how to do geometrics, you know. And that was something that the committee said, so the whole thing to me is-- That's all insane, also.

LASKEY: Of course, when you get into an area like that, you're getting into--strictly into politics, I would think.

LAUTNER: Yeah. I do realize that-- I mean, somebody told me that a long time ago, that if I'd gotten that job or anything like that, I'd be so sick in the end of the compromises and the committee work that I would wish to hell that I hadn't got the job, which is probably true.

LASKEY: But you did--going back to Frank Lloyd Wright and family and extended family--you did some work for Anne Baxter at one point.

LAUTNER: Yes. Yes. That was early, just a few years after I first came here. It was a big remodeling of an existing house, like, tearing out practically three-quarters of it and making it a nice big new living-dining-entertaining kind of house. Mr. Wright, naturally, saw it and approved of it, so that was very nice. [laughter]

LASKEY: Well, one of your projects that we haven't talked about, [we] keep speaking of Mr. Wright, is the [Marco] Wolff House [West Hollywood, 1963]. And I think, of your major works, it's the one that's most frequently referred to, by your friends the critics [laughter], as "Wrightian-influenced."

LAUTNER: Yeah, that's what they have to grab on [to]. And that's a pain in the neck too, because the reason it is [Wrightian], is because the client, Wolff, asked for that. He **wanted** a Frank Lloyd Wright kind of house, and so I had to respect his request as a client. And that's the first and only time that I did anything similar [to Wright]. And immediately everybody recognized it, and they think that's my best work, when it's the easiest. I could do those any time of the day or night. I could do a Frank Lloyd Wright house, but doing my own are more original. I mean, they

involve all kinds of other things, not just a "look," et cetera.

But what they see or what they think they understand-- I guess, when they see something similar to something then, I don't know, that's part of that critic scene too. That's "acceptable" architecture because it's similar to something else. Well, my other work is not similar to anything, so nobody knows whether it's acceptable or not. [laughter]

LASKEY: That's true. That's really true.

LAUTNER: It's crazy, and nobody knows except the people who live in them and love them as functioning architecture.

LASKEY: But we don't ask **them**.

LAUTNER: No, that's the last person involved. In fact, the student--that reminds me--he was saying, he was really thinking about it. He was thinking about the critics too, they criticized the big office buildings. They take a picture from far away--they have to--and they see how it fits in the urban scene, you know. There's nothing about down on the sidewalk where the people go in or in the offices. There's nothing about that at all: how it's used. So that's another crazy scene. [laughs] [There's] never anything been done with offices that's good for people, you know. They're still cubicles, boxes: [square feet for lease.]

LASKEY: I think it was Charles Moore, who once--I thought it was a valid criticism--[said] that we design plazas for all our large buildings, but we're not from a country that knows what a plaza is for, so we end up with a lot of wasted space because that's not our orientation, is to use-- So we have these large empty expanses around all of our major buildings.

LAUTNER: Well, it's an attempt, I think, to humanize. But I think that's true, that this society, I guess mainly because it's an automobile society, just doesn't have anything to do with plazas. But I think they still do in New York and Boston. I mean, where people are walking they enjoy it, and they use it.

LASKEY: Because we do have some here that are-- The Security Pacific plaza downtown is a--

LAUTNER: Yeah, but who wants to go downtown? I mean, this is really a crazy place for that, because you're in a car. They should have an automobile plaza. I mean, a parking [lot] with trees, you know. They don't even do that, and something could work out that way. It's just lately that they're making parking things even human at all. I mean, there are few that I've seen or read about where they're letting some daylight down and making it a decent place to go. But they're just beginning to do that. I mean, normally they don't do anything. The economics says it's

not necessary, you know, so long as they get the location and the rent, so amenities--which is anything for people-- is just extra cost, and they don't do that. [laughter]

LASKEY: Usually, in a parking structure I feel like I'm caught in some sort of a Kafkaesque nightmare, trying to figure out, once I'm in there, am I ever going to get out?

LAUTNER: Oh, yeah--no orientation whatsoever. They could be designed so you could tell where you were, and they could have daylight, but, you know, they'd lose ten or fifteen parking spaces or something. They're so damned picayune that nothing happens, that's all.

LASKEY: Of course, we could have rapid transportation, but that's a whole other subject that we won't get into.

[laughter]

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah.

LASKEY: I'm curious about, too-- We have talked about your commercial things, some of the commercial buildings that you've done before. And one that--I don't think we talked about--but that was the UPA [United Productions of America] Studios that you worked on [Burbank, California, 1949]. I'm curious about how you got involved with them.

LAUTNER: Well, that was an interesting-- Steve Bosustow, who was the president for years and really the running force of the UPA Studios, saw my house, the first house I did in 1939. And it was about ten years later he came to

me because he remembered that house. He loved the house, and he knew there was something there. So that's how I got the job, which is the way I've been getting work ever since, is from the work that I've done. So he came, and they had no money. So he said, "Can you," you know, "get us, like, forty artists' rooms" and all this kind of stuff that they need, "for thirty thousand dollars?" or something like that.

I said, "Well, I don't know, but I'll try." So my challenge there was to get a decent artist's working space for absolutely minimum money, and I did. I did a rigid steel frame, which was minimum structure, and then the whole roof was corrugated aluminum, which was the ceiling as well. So there was no duplication of anything. And because of the way it was detailed-- I detailed it [with] a curving, overhanging fascia, that made a very good looking building. And it was absolutely rock-bottom--like a garage, almost--construction. Then, a radiant-heated concrete floor, and so it was a very successful thing. It's still operating, but it's been added [to] and re-modeled and all that.

LASKEY: Well, the UPA did primarily animation. Did you have to study animation techniques in order to complete the assignment?

LAUTNER: No, not really; although they told how they worked and what kind of spaces they needed. So I knew they had to have certain kinds of equipment for doing different things. So we had the different areas to function for their production. And then since then, Steve, just a couple years ago, came to me. He wanted to do a mountain house [at] Lake Almanor, up in northern California near Mount Shasta. So I helped him with that. So, like, forty years later I got the same client.

LASKEY: Speaking of mountain houses and lake houses, how did you happen to design the [Mr. and Mrs. Willis Harpel] House in [Anchorage] Alaska [1965]?

LAUTNER: Oh, that's a very good story. (Well, almost all of them are good stories; we could keep this going for a long, long time.) Harpel was a CBS radio announcer here, and I did a house for him here up in the Hollywood Hills on the other side here, overlooking the [San Fernando] Valley. He built it himself, I mean, he did all the work he could himself with Johnny de la Vaux, this foreman, this fantastic builder, really running things. But Harpel was so energetic that he worked eight hours a day in the radio station and eight hours a day on his house. He had a step ladder--we had concrete columns--he'd run up and down the stepladder with a bucket of concrete and poured his own concrete columns. So he was a fantastic guy. And when he

got through, he said he never did anything so exciting or so great in his whole life as building his own house. And that's absolutely true. That's the way it should be, you know. But usually it's a big pain in the neck because everybody's trying to cheat everybody, and it's a just one goddamned pain in the neck after another on account of the contractors. Well, anyway, the great thing about this was that consequently he got a big house for very little money.

And he wanted to have his own radio station. He couldn't stand being a pigeon in a CBS pigeonhole, and so he combed the whole country. He couldn't find a single radio station that wasn't completely tied up with one of the big chains or something; he couldn't do anything independent at all. I mean, you know, theoretically, this is the independent free enterprise, but not in radio or not in lots of things. So he had to go to Alaska in order to do this.

So he went to Alaska to build and operate his own radio station, and he got that started. And then he called me to do a house because his wife-- Well, because he liked the architecture anyway, but the big request was that I do something that would make his wife enjoy it through the winter in Alaska, so that was the reason. So it's designed to pick up the horizontal Alaskan winter sun, and it reflects a glow right in the center of the house. So it's

the only house really designed for Alaska; the rest of them look just like North Hollywood, the same as everywhere else. So that was a great pleasure and a real achievement. The other part of it was he financed his radio station by selling the house that he built here. So his whole success was, in large part, due to the architecture.

LASKEY: Did you go to Alaska to supervise the building?

LAUTNER: Oh yeah. Well, I went to design it, to see the situation. I spent about ten days. We went snowmobiling and everything. [It's] really some country.

LASKEY: You liked it.

LAUTNER: Yeah.

LASKEY: Well, you have mentioned earlier on, quite early in the interview, that your one regret in going to Taliesin was that you didn't get to travel at that point, that you were planning--but you did get to do it much later.

LAUTNER: Well, yes. I, fortunately, managed quite a few trips by now. The first major trip Reiner paid for.

Theoretically it was investigating hardware and things like that all over Europe; but actually we saw all or a lot of the major sights and went to all of the major cities, but we were only there in each city maybe a day and a half, two days, three days. But we had a tour and all kinds of facilities, so as fast as it was, I got a good look at all the main cities in Europe on that trip, including Leningrad

and Moscow. Then I saw all the great museums, like, the Louvre in Paris, the Prado in Madrid, and the Hermitage in Leningrad. So I saw all kinds of things, and it was just a fantastic trip, going like that.

Since then, I had a couple of trips financed by my now publisher, who's interested in doing--wanting me to do some progressive Waldorf schools sometime; I don't know if she'll ever really get to it. But they are in Switzerland and Germany, mainly, and also in Scotland and Sweden, and so I went to all of those places looking at the Waldorf schools, and that was all interesting.

Then, let's see, I had another trip--several trips to Europe. Then I, after my wife died, I had a client in Bahrain, in the Persian Gulf. He came here, and he loved the architecture. So he sent me a retainer to do a house for him there. I decided that was my chance to go around the world. The retainer was enough for an around the world, first-class ticket, so I went to see him. He finally didn't build because he wouldn't pay the full fee. He said he could build for one third the price that they can build here, which is probably true. And I told him I had to have it based on what it would cost here because that's what it cost me to do the work. And he wouldn't do it.

But I was glad--that initiated the trip, anyway. So in doing that, I went-- I mean, Bahrain is halfway around the world, that's how I got started on the round-the-world [trip] because I might as well come back the other way. So in doing that I got to Cairo and Egypt and Luxor. I'd always wanted to see those things. And Bangkok, Hong Kong, Kyoto, Tokyo, and so I covered all of that. So that was exciting and fun too. Two weeks around the world.

[laughter]

LASKEY: It sounds marvelous. Did it change your perceptions of architecture at all?

LAUTNER: Oh no. It was just fun to see these things. In fact, like, Kyoto--I'd seen so many pictures that I couldn't believe I was there. It was just like I knew what it was and there I was, you know, that's all.

LASKEY: When you're here, obviously you don't have a great love affair with Los Angeles going--

LAUTNER: No.

LASKEY: --and you do have a cabin in Sequoia, a property in Sequoia to escape from us.

LAUTNER: Well, I try to get there, but it's two hundred and twenty miles, which isn't bad--it's about a four-hour drive. But it seems as though to enjoy it you have to go on Friday and come back on Monday, and I don't like to-- I haven't generally been able to take that many long

weekends. So I've used it mostly for holidays with an occasional weekend. But I think the interesting thing about that historically, or to somebody concerned with this area and what I've been doing here, is how I got to that.

First we had some lots in Wrightwood, which are eight thousand feet [elevation] and have the four seasons. I was determined to get out of the smog somehow and get a change. But the San Bernardino Freeway is such an ugly, horrible trip that even though we had those lots up there, I couldn't stand making that trip. Then after looking at them, going up there, oh, dozens of times, you're still in a subdivision even though you're in the woods. And I hate being in a subdivision, so I had to sell the lots, then, because that was no solution. I mean, to drive an ugly trip and then arrive in a subdivision, what the hell good is that? I mean, the first time I went to Lake Arrowhead I said, "My god, it's like Coney Island." I never went back there again.

I mean, to me almost everything in Southern California is a farce. I mean, it's not good enough for anything really, but it's sold all the time. It's continually being sold. But I guess it's to people who don't know any better. I mean, the way I figure, it's got to be, and it is, a lot of people from Iowa and Nebraska, who never saw anything at all. Anyway, the next phase in my trying to

find a living thing that I could enjoy-- We got a motor home, a German bus, a German tour bus. So it was beautiful, with skylights. We went every place you could go from Los Angeles with that. And I still didn't find any place that I'd want to stay or even go back to. It was so-- [laughter]

LASKEY: Oh dear.

LAUTNER: So finally we went up-- The best thing I could find was Sequoia [National] Park, where it was really beautiful woods and fresh and cool. So then, coming down from Sequoia Park, we found this property on the river and bought it because it was so close to Sequoia Park. I mean, it's like half an hour into the park. And the property [extends] to the middle of the river-- And it's also the closest year-round river. So it's like having a fresh, private swimming pool with these big boulders and everything. So that's how it finally ended up with some kind of living condition. [laughter]

LASKEY: So, between that and occasional trips back to Marquette, it keeps you sane.

LAUTNER: Yeah, just barely--I guess, I don't know.

LASKEY: Well, we seem to be very close to the end. I'm curious-- In one of the interviews that I read you had once said that it's possible, that you wanted to, that you could change a house with the four seasons or design a house for

changing with the four seasons. It sounded like a marvelous idea. Have you ever actually pursued that?

LAUTNER: No. I've never actually done it. That's where I would like to have, you know, a client have a specific job. I don't really, even if I had time, I don't really like to do theoretical things; I like to do real things.

But I think one of the clues, or one of the things, that initiated that idea was just what happens in the east, and northern Michigan, as far as that goes. They change with the two seasons. They generally have a big screen porch, which is a beautiful thing in the summertime, with white slipcovers. Then it's glassed in, and you have a sun porch in the wintertime, and the slipcovers are removed and you have colorful furniture. Well, that in itself is a nice change with the seasons, so your home isn't continually the same goddamned thing all the time. It has a pretty major change right there. That could be, you know, expanded or what have you depending on the situation.

LASKEY: It's a great idea.

LAUTNER: Yeah. There are so many things. That's what hurts me, and the reason I kick about all this stuff that's going on, is that when you're really thinking about it, there's so much that could be done for the human welfare, and that would be in the line of the infinity of nature (which is really the ideal) that we haven't even started.

What we're doing is just the same damn thing all the time, nothing. So it's really disgusting. [laughter]

LASKEY: It's discouraging.

LAUTNER: Yeah. [interruption in taping]

LASKEY: I guess then, Mr. Lautner, that this will end the interview and I just want to thank you very much. I found it to be a completely pleasant experience.

LAUTNER: Well, you're welcome, and I hope it does the kind of job for the-- It's for a library, a permanent thing; I hope it portrays something that means something. We intend it to anyway. [laughter]

LASKEY: I hope so too, and I hope that, eventually, you'll get to do your museum because I think that's the one thing left to do.

LAUTNER: Yeah, yeah--right. Unfortunately, you cannot even get into a competition without having done several of the same before. So it's impossible here, but OK in Germany.

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