



Safe Houses

STACIE STUKIN
MEETS THE DEFENDER
OF L.A. MODERNISM.

Michael LaFetra cringed every time he heard about another iconic Los Angeles house crumbling under the wrecking ball. Two by R.M. Schindler — gone. A Richard Neutra — dust. Just as bad were the ones left standing. They had to suffer the indignities of master-suite additions, reconfigured floor plans, buffed-out kitchens with granite countertops and industrial-size appliances. The trend was disturbing enough to spur the 40-year-old film producer into action. The only way to save these houses, LaFetra reasoned, was to buy them.

Now LaFetra collects houses the way some people collect art. It started innocently enough in 1999, with the acquisition of Pierre Koenig's Case Study House #21. At that point his passion for modern architecture was still nascent. He had grown up in Claremont — a college town about 30 miles east of downtown Los Angeles — in a 1960s modern post-and-beam house and had gone to a preschool that had been designed, coincidentally, by Neutra.

But LaFetra had never even heard of Koenig (or, for that matter, Neutra) until his real-estate broker showed him an issue of *Architectural Digest* that featured the Case Study houses. All he knew was that he liked what he saw. When the Koenig house came on the market shortly thereafter, he walked in and, as he recalls, "it just felt right."

So began his education in architectural preservation — and a fantastic buying spree. From the Koenig, he moved on to the Hollywood Hills, restoring a midcentury house with a Garrett Eckbo-designed garden and a Neutra addition. Next came a 1938 Schindler in Sherman Oaks, where instead



Curve appeal Michael LaFetra and his girlfriend, Alison Letson, in front of his latest purchase, the Stevens House by John Lautner in Malibu, Calif.

of giving it a whitewash, he went with the architect's original choice — a burned shade of yellow-orange. There is the house he now lives in, an essentially glass-walled Ray Kappe from 1967 in Brentwood, as well as a John Lautner above Sunset Plaza with a cantilevered pool. For another Schindler in Silverlake, he rebuilt the architect's original furniture and light fixtures from plans. Two more houses in Brentwood — by the Case Study architects A. Quincy Jones and Thornton Abell, respectively — were added to his haul. Next spring, LaFetra plans to break ground in Malibu on a Koenig house that the architect designed for him before he died in 2004.

Since he began collecting, LaFetra has sold four of these houses but still has seven in his portfolio. Gloria Koenig, Pierre's widow, an architecture writer and now a good friend, says LaFetra is not just a house flipper: "For Michael, it's a passion, not a business. He wants to honor and preserve these homes for generations to come." While there are certainly others who restore and sell significant

modern homes in Los Angeles, as LaFetra puts it, "No one is as cracked as I am." And no one is doing it on such a large scale while earning the respect of the city's preservation community.

"Michael's sense of purism is kind of insane and intense," says Kimberli Meyer, the director of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, Los Angeles, where LaFetra has made donations and sits on the advisory board. "Since there's no public entity in Los Angeles that can handle our incredible collection of important homes, we need people like Michael. Private restoration is becoming more and more important."

In many ways he is doing what nonprofit preservation organizations can't. He has the funds they don't, and he's learned not to let go of a house until he registers it as a Los Angeles historic cultural monument and enrolls it in the Mills Act (a tax abatement program that gives future owners incentives to maintain the house under historic preservation guidelines). While Los Angeles preservation laws aren't

perfect, these protections entice a certain type of buyer and deters developers who may want to bulldoze and rebuild a faux Mediterranean McMansion. It also eliminates the need for LaFetra to accompany his broker when a particular house is shown — an experience that LaFetra likens to having his “skin flayed.” Instead, he can “let it go,” knowing he’s done all he can to protect the integrity of the house.

LaFetra has been known to go to extremes to match the present with the past. He used archaeological techniques to determine what shade of yellow to paint a Schindler house and had the window hardware for the Lautner house custom-welded. When he moved into his Kappe house, he contemplated removing the granite countertops that had been installed during a 1990s kitchen renovation and bringing back the original Formica. But then Kappe himself weighed in, assuring LaFetra that houses have lives of their own and it’s O.K. if they change a bit over time. The granite stayed. For LaFetra, the architect is the last word. “I think the architect is God,” he says.

But because many of the architects in his house collection are no longer alive to advise him, he ultimately takes a very academic approach: he analyzes the original plans, cross-references them with old photographs and enlists the aid of architectural scholars.

“Unlike a lot of these homeowners, Michael consults the experts,” says Judith Sheine, herself a Schindler expert who chairs the architecture department at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. “He doesn’t renovate these homes just to live in them, he’s doing it to get them right. It’s amazing what I’ve seen some owners do to their houses,” she adds. “When they proudly show me, I want to burst into tears.”

The fear of losing such legacies — and making people like Sheine cry — keeps LaFetra’s checkbook out. While he buys houses based on aesthetics and location rather than pedigree or square footage, he has a soft spot for homes from the 1960s. Schindler is one of his favorite architects, as is Harwell Harris, another Modernist. He calls David Gebhard and Robert Winter’s “An Architectural Guidebook to Los Angeles” his bible and regularly visits Internet hot spots like Realestalker.blogspot.com and Modcom.org to get the latest real-estate and preservation gossip. He is not above stalking a house.

One longtime object of his affection is the Stevens House by Lautner in Malibu. The six-bedroom property, which looks like an avant-garde boat that’s been hauled onto the beach, was put on the market by the original



Good as new
Over the years, LaFetra has bought and restored 11 houses, including the one below by the Case Study architect Thornton Abell. He currently lives in the house at left, which was designed by the architect Ray Kappe.

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owners about four years ago. LaFetra couldn’t finance it then, but he continued to keep a close watch. At one point he had his broker inquire whether the owners would entertain an offer, and they agreed to let him see it. What he saw was alarming. Gone was the original teak and mahogany master bath; in its place was a big white porcelain tub. They had painted the poured concrete white and removed the Lautner-designed furniture; the cast-in-place concrete light fixture in the dining room had been replaced with a French chandelier lit with fake flame bulbs.

“It was painful to see,” LaFetra says, describing it as a bit Stevie Nicks: “If you want to buy a shabby-chic house in the colony, there are plenty available. Why buy a Lautner?” It is precisely when people start to tinker with the architecture, taking away essential details, that homes like these no longer make sense and get bulldozed, he insists. So he made an offer. The house became his this past June.

“I know Michael’s been out there when he comes home looking like he’s been out on a fabulous date with a beautiful girl,” says his longtime girlfriend, Alison Letson, about the Stevens house. She has stuck with him through the scaffolding, the constant renovations, the feeling of “living inside a Saks Fifth Avenue window.” She has tolerated impracticalities like

the pristine white floors that their Great Dane, Tarmac, would inevitably dirty with muddy paws. And ultimately, she has come to love some of these houses as much as he does. “In some ways, Michael looks at these homes like paintings,” she says. “You can’t really rework a Kandinsky because it was so beautifully conceived in the first place. It’s sad when that happens, then it just becomes a Kandinsky paint-by-numbers.”

The comparison to painting is apt; many of these houses are no longer considered just real estate but are being handled like works of art. Last year, Koenig’s Case Study #21 sold at auction for \$3.1 million. (The seller purchased the house from LaFetra, who completed the restoration with Koenig’s help.) “A responsible preservation job, without a heavy hand, increases market value and can be a very strong selling point,” says Crosby Doe, a real-estate agent who specializes in the sale of architecturally significant houses. “If you buy one of Michael’s houses, you know it will be in turnkey condition.”

While LaFetra has certainly made money on these ventures, the margins are still very small because the time and investment is so large. But you get the feeling profit is not the real motive: “When I start cursing myself that I’m not making a lot of money on these homes, I have to remind myself, I’m not doing this to make money. I’m doing this to save a house.” ■