

JULIUS OF THE JUNGLE

A visit with Julius Shulman, the master of architectural photography

BY JC GABEL

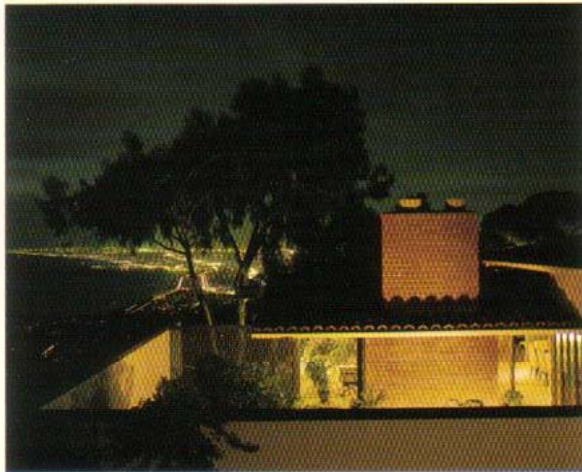
Without the work of Julius Shulman as a guide, architectural photography might never have become the art form it is today. Throughout his long, prosperous career — he turns 97 on October 10th — Shulman has single-handedly defined what modern architectural photography looks like. He attributes his form and style to his “built-in facility for composition” and the fact that he had no idea what he was doing when, through a chance encounter with a friend, he photographed Richard Neutra’s Kun Residence in 1936 with a Kodak Vest Pocket 127-format camera, more or less for fun. Neutra saw the images, bought them from the young amateur photographer and the rest is history.

Almost overnight, what had once been a hobby for the Brooklyn native (Shulman moved to Los Angeles in 1920 at age 10) became his calling, and he never looked back. Through his long-standing friendship with Neutra, he would go on to work with almost every modernist architect working in Southern California and around the world (from Gregory Ain to R.M. Schindler, Frank Lloyd Wright to Mies Van der Rohe) and his photographs would come to define the image of modern Los Angeles in the postwar years. LA was a new kind of urban jungle, surrounded by mountain valleys and the sea, and built upon land that was once a combination of dry desert and

orange groves. His shot of Pierre Koenig’s Case Study House #22, taken in 1960, is arguably one of the most famous architectural photographs of the 20th century.

This past summer, I visited Shulman’s home and studio off Laurel Canyon Boulevard, high in the Hollywood Hills, to discuss *Modernism Rediscovered*, a new collection of his life’s work. Shulman’s friend and neighbor, Benedikt Taschen, who lives in John Lautner’s “Chemosphere” and famously calls him “One Shot Shulman” because of his ability to capture his intended frame in one take — will publish the hardbound, three-volume set in October. This definitive collection took them two years to complete, after sifting through over 260,000 images taken between 1939 and 1997, many of which had been on display at the “Modernity and the Metropolis” exhibit at the Getty Museum a couple years back.

When I arrived, Shulman was working at his desk, surrounded by stacks of magazines and newspaper clippings that featured his work. A boisterous and talkative man, he immediately began flipping through the clippings with a childlike vigor. In the process he discarded a few articles, handing them to me. “Are you sure I can have these?” I asked. “Sure,” he replied. “As of yesterday, I realized

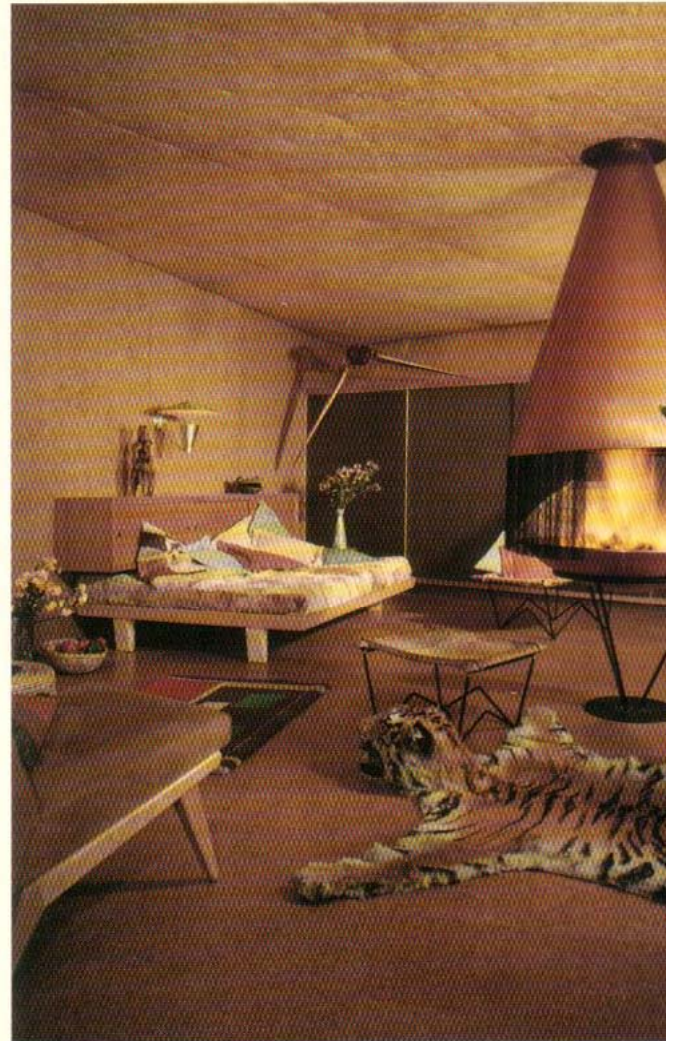


that I've had over 3,000 articles using my photography in some form or another over the years. I've got plenty."

Shulman's home and studio is the last standing residence in LA designed by his friend, architect Raphael Soriano, who built the house for him in 1950. "When I got out of the Army in 1948," he says, "I bought two acres of land to build a house for myself." The structure itself is made up of mostly sliding doors of glass and steel and the original interiors are still intact. Soriano's modern kitchen and bedroom designs look as futuristic as they must have over half a century ago.

After a couple hours of storytelling, Shulman stood up from his desk, grabbed his walker and led me through a tour of the botanical gardens that engulf his sprawling mountaintop home. Sharp as a tack, he could recall the name of every plant and flower on his property. "I planted a lot of these flowers and trees myself," he said. "I have my own jungle." I shook his hand and thanked him for his time. Shulman smelled one of the flowers alongside his doorway, opened the sliding glass door to his studio and went back to work.

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TL Buff & Hensman, Greenberg Residence
Palos Verdes, CA 1966

BL Clark & Frey, Frey Residence 1
Palm Springs, CA Addition 1954

R William Alexander Residence
Los Angeles, CA 1952