

LOS ANGELES

Julius Shulman—The 97-year old living legend of modern photography shares his passion for architecture—and gardening—with a young Los Angeles architect. Text by Fritz Haeg, Photo-graphy by Todd Cole.



1. A large poster with Shulman's name hangs by the entry door in the driveway to Shulman's main house.



2. A view along the glass wall into the garden outside of Shulman's living room. The house was designed in 1949 by Raphael Soriano.

3. (Right) Perched high on the hills above hectic Los Angeles, Shulman's house is a sleepy refuge of green serenity.



On a sunny Los Angeles Sunday afternoon, I arrived at the appointed time at Julius Shulman's Raphael Soriano-designed hilltop residence. The house is reached by a long steep driveway off Mullholland Drive. At the top is a quiet wooded retreat. I rang the bell, but there was no answer. I called and left a message. I waited another half hour, then decided to leave. That evening I got a call from Julius: he apologized and recounted how Benedikt Taschen had suddenly arrived in town just before we were to meet, and whisked him off to his John Lautner house, the Che-mosphere, to show Julius the new three volume monograph of his work for the first time.

When Julius and I finally met a few days later, he cheerfully welcomed me into his studio from behind his desk. He was sporting a bright red pair of Marilyn Monroe-printed suspenders. He obviously enjoyed the frequent ritual of greeting young admirers into his modern den. I was impressed by how in-the-moment he was. I was also surprised by how keen he was to talk about his land, trees, garden, and animals, even more than about his own house or architecture in general.

Fritz Haeg: Being on this property and in this house for so long, how have your feelings about it changed? In a lot of your early photos we often see the buildings just built—they're brand new—and the landscape is restrained and bare, then you go back 50 years later and the landscape grows in and the house mellows...

Julius Shulman: When I first saw the property I knew that was it, there was nothing on it, just a little brush up on the hill. As a child growing up on a farm in Connecticut, we were surrounded by forests and a lot of land. When I came out here in 1920, I thought, this is great! I want to live in the hills and simulate that sort of landscape. I was only 10 years old when we arrived in California. I bought this property in 1947, we moved in in 1950, a year later I began the landscaping. All of the trees, shrubbery, and vines were planted by me. I landscaped it and built the retaining walls with broken concrete from my neighbor's property. I created a jungle way up on this hill. We have animals here. Every day people come here and take a walk into the back and they see a couple of bucks.

FH: We just saw one this weekend when we stopped by!

JS: Yes, everyone does. They have those big antlers; there are two of them. They're brothers. Actually my gardener, Mike, who lives out in Santa Clarita, was saying that they like hay. So this weekend he brought bales of hay to spread around the property, to entice the deer. I like having them around. When people come to visit I tell them to go behind the house but don't talk too loud, so as not to scare them away.

FH: Some people might think when looking at a photo of a modern building from the '40s or '50s that this is the perfect moment of the house, when it's photographed right after it has been built. But then you visit it 50 years later and landscape grows in and the deer come...

JS: Look at what I've accomplished here in 50 years. All of the trees were planted from seedlings. There is a little pond that attracts animals. It's like a paradise on top of the hill.

FH: So you would say the house is better now than it was when first built?

JS: Oh definitely!

FH: What is it like for you to visit buildings that

you photographed decades ago, to see how they've changed with time?

JS: There was the house on Mullholland Drive that I first photographed for Neutra after it was first built. They couldn't afford to finish the landscaping right away after construction had finished, so he had me come back a few years later after the landscaping had been planted to take some more pictures. I went back every year to photograph it. Like my house: when I first photographed it in 1956 for *Progressive Architecture*, it was bare all around and the landscaping I had planted hadn't grown in. Now it's difficult to photograph this house because it's hidden. I planted a jungle! When I was a child I lived in a forested area like this and I had that in the back of my mind when I created this place.

FH: That's really interesting to think about this life that exists outside of the building, and how that affects the building over time.

JS: Yes, especially since nobody lives in a house that long anymore. I've been in this house for over 50 years. People come here to visit me from all over the world and they can't believe that we're in the middle of a big city. This is Los Angeles, four or five million people—who knows how many there are. It's so peaceful up here on these two acres. It's such a big city, but up here it's like being in the country.

FH: How has L.A. changed since you've been here?

JS: Well, don't forget that in 1927, when I arrived, there were 576,000 people here. By the next census, there were nearly one million. Double in 10 years! Then you count all of those people from Santa Barbara to San Diego, north to south.

FH: It doesn't feel like we're in the middle of all of that up here.

JS: Occasionally a helicopter comes by, and that's about it—the only sign of the vast city beyond.

FH: Do you look at very much contemporary architecture? Do you look at all the current magazines?

JS: Look at the pile of magazines surrounding us here! Look at the books all over the place!

FH: So you keep on top of what is going on now?

JS: Well of course I do! It's my job.

FH: Do you have any thoughts about how architecture has evolved in Los Angeles from when you first arrived, to where it is now?

JS: I'm glad you used the term "evolved". It happens gradually. In the new monograph you can see the whole progression: Modernism is very much alive, you can see it through the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, '80s, and through today. It's been 70 years now and it still looks good.

FH: I've had the pleasure to meet a few people, maybe in their 80s or 90s now, who were, like yourself, original clients for these modern architects in Los Angeles. Like you, they still live in the original houses. There is something about them that I think is so unique. They took this early risk to hire young architects, to build these radical houses for them...

JS: Well, wait a minute; I'm not so sure it was such a risk. In my case, in 1949 I had hired Raphael Soriano to design this house. The blessing in my life has been to cherish the concept of Soriano's steel and glass house that he designed for me. There are two acres up here that you can spread out on. You can actually have a glass house. There are no neighbors up against you. In recent years, the city acquired 53 acres of land on top of the hill behind me that will be managed by the conservancy and

will never be built on. There are possums and skunks and raccoons, foxes, deer, bobcats...

FH: Do you think most of the early modernists here shared the same sensitivity to the landscape?

JS: No! Neutra thought it got in the way of the architecture. Schindler was one of the few that was interested in the trees and the landscaping. Today, people don't stay put, they move around so much, they don't make the investment. They sell their house before things have a chance to grow, and then buy another house.

FH: Maybe for that reason they don't make the early investment in the landscape that you did here.

JS: I planted every tree on the property from a little sapling, redwoods that are now over 50-feet tall. It's a blessing. On Mullholland I can point out the name of every tree. I love nature!

FH: Were there architects that you shared that with? That had a similar affinity...

JS: ...No, no! They were too busy making a living, making buildings.

FH: In some ways it's similar: dealing with the landscape as you're photographing from the outside, and then from the inside, how you photograph the people and how they live...the life inside and out.

JS: Being inside looking out, you're still in nature. Look at where we are sitting now. Look at the garden through those windows. Nothing's changed in 50 years. But what does change are the wonderful shadows of the trees on that wall. And it's so wonderful in the morning when you come in here with the light striking that wall from the east, and the sun moves behind me, and it will go over your shoulder, into the south and west. It's an amazing visual experience that changes continuously. The shadows shape the morning light...

FH: A lot of people say that Neutra and Schindler were opposites, and that one has to choose one or the other, because they represented two opposite ways of thinking.

JS: When I selected an architect for my house, I chose Soriano. I knew it couldn't be Neutra, he was too rigid a person. He designed according to what he wanted. Soriano was rigid, too, that's why he died a pauper—he drove people away from him. If someone said, "Mr. Soriano, there's a great view up there, can we just angle the roof up a bit to see that?" he'd just grumble. He could get very angry. If they persisted, he'd say, "there's the door, good-bye!" He was very focused; he had rigid ideas about the grid, steel framing, and glass, which I accepted, because it was appropriate for the site. I had plenty of land, so I didn't have a problem with all of the glass. Modern architects didn't think of privacy in those days.

FH: Why is that do you think?

JS: Because they were so wedded to the concept of what "modern" was. This was a problem on small lots, where the architects used all this glass facing their neighbors, and the owners would have to put up blinds or plant trees to shield the views in.

FH: Who would you have hired if you had a 50-foot lot instead of this two-acre lot?

JS: Well, I must say, you mentioned Schindler before? I knew all of the architects in that period and Schindler was high on my list. I respected him greatly.

FH: Did you know his wife Pauline? I'm curious about the events that she had at their house on Kings Road.

JS: By the time I met her those had passed; but I knew about them.

FH: That would have been in the 1920s?

JS: Yes, exactly. They lived a very open, bohemian life—much more informal than Neutra.

FH: Did you also know the Eames very well?

JS: Yes, his own house is very special. He was very creative with available materials, prefabricated industrial steel and glass. You know, in those days you couldn't just go to Home Depot and get everything you need to build a house.

As we walk down the garden path towards the house, Julius shows me a sunken area near the house.

JS: Every ounce of water that comes from the sky on to the roof pours down into here. It is a dead level roof, but fortunately it all drains to this one spot and runs down this chain. So no water is lost in the downpours we have here, it all stays on the property, goes back into the ground here.

FH: We need to learn those lessons again don't we? We finally got some rain last week, too...

JS: Yes, we really needed that.

Back in the house we sit in the living room and he proudly shows me his copy of the massive new three-volume monograph of his work. As I page through the book I make the mistake of asking him a question.

FH: Is there anything you feel that young architects need to know today?

JS: You can't look at the pictures and talk at the same time. You can't thumb through the book like you're doing now; you're flipping the pages without looking! To answer your question, it's right here in your hands! You don't realize what you're seeing. There are thousands of books available for young architects today that have important stories from the past for them. Benedikt Taschen said in the essay he did for this monograph, he made a statement...here, open that book, look at the index...

FH: Here it is, page 30: "The Living Memory of Modernism."

JS: Yes, exactly, that is what he says in the preface, that through these books, young architects can learn what was done before them, what they can gain by understanding what happened before they were born...

At the end of our conversation, he showed me photos he had taken throughout the years. We lingered on one in particular, a photo taken from a neighboring roof looking into the large windows of a modern high-ceilinged living room below, with fireplace aglow. He realized that this was the "Santa Claus" view of the house—this really got him excited. He said that he had looked at this photo hundreds of times and never thought of this before. He got out a pen and paper and made a note of the page number to have an assistant make a slide of this image for his next lecture. He wanted to say to any children that might be in the audience: "Hey kids, this is Santa Claus's view when he parks his deer on the roof, and gets ready to go down the chimney to deliver the presents." Throughout my three-hour visit, this was probably the most animated I had seen him.

—Fritz Haeg is an architect, educator, saloniste, and the principal of his namesake architecture studio. His first book, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, will be published in February 2008. He lives in a geodesic dome in Los Angeles.