‘A Photographer’s Journey: The Work of Pedro E. Guerrero’

SAH/SCC Film Screening & Talk
Sunday, December 6, 2015, 2-4PM

The PBS documentary film “American Masters—Pedro E. Guerrero: A Photographer’s Journey” (60 minutes) explores the remarkable life and work of Pedro E. Guerrero (1917-2012). He left behind thousands of photographs and hours of interviews. This film tells, in his own words, the remarkable story of a Mexican American boy raised in segregated Mesa, Arizona, who goes on to a remarkable international career. The documentary is a special co-presentation between THIRTEEN’s American Masters series and Latino Public Broadcasting’s VOCES series.

With his outsider’s eye he produced insightful and iconic portraits of three of the most important artists of the 20th century: Frank Lloyd Wright, Alexander Calder, and Louise Nevelson. Through his lens and voice the film reveals Guerrero’s unique perspective on life, art, architecture, and the artists he collaborated with. After high school, Guerrero followed his older brother to Art Center School in Los Angeles (now in Pasadena), intending to study painting. To his dismay all the painting classes were filled. Instead he took photography and fell in love with the camera.

Watch the film trailer on the American Masters website. More of Guerrero’s images are viewable here.

In addition to the screening, the event will feature the curator of Guerrero’s last exhibition, architectural historian and SAH/SCC member Emily Bills, who will provide personal insights about the artist’s work. Bills will introduce the film and participate in a Q&A after the screening.

“A Photographer’s Journey” — Sunday, December 6, 2015; 2-4PM; Martin Luther King, Jr., Auditorium at the Santa Monica Central Library, 601 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica; free; seating is available on a first-come, first-served basis; 310.458.8600.

Pedro E. Guerrero self-portrait in his New York City studio, circa 1950s. Credit: ©2015 Pedro E. Guerrero Archives

Frank Lloyd Wright stands at the drafting table in his studio at Taliesin, Wisconsin, 1947, photographed by Pedro E. Guerrero. Credit: ©2015 Pedro E. Guerrero Archives
SAH/SCC President’s Letter

With the end of the year upon us, I’d like to reflect on one of my favorite SAH/SCC programs of 2015: August’s Jascha Heifetz Studio Tour and Panel Discussion.

For those of you who were unable to attend, it combined all the elements that make SAH/SCC so special: big ideas, personal connections, spectacular architecture, and an element of discovery.

Panelist Dana Hutt started us off by talking about the nexus of music and architecture, and the studio (Lloyd Wright, 1946) being “architecture as musical instrument.” Explained Hutt: “Lloyd Wright used to play Bach day and night. His passion for music was embedded in the Heifetz Studio.” Those ideas became palpable in the hands of the next panelist, the architect Eric Lloyd Wright, who traced the passion for architecture and music back through his father to his grandfather, master architect Frank Lloyd Wright. Tears came to his eyes as he recalled family occasions when they would all play music together. Heifetz and Lloyd Wright, along with another of the architect’s clients, Gregor Pitagorsky, found common ground in their passion for art and life. Our third panelist, Sel Kardan, President and CEO of the Colburn School, brought it all together from the musician’s perspective.

The Colburn School (Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer Associates, 1998) literally rescued the studio from the wrecking ball—not knowing what to do with it. Today, it serves as a practice room for the Heifetz scholar and inspiration to all the students at the Colburn.

Proving how exceptional our membership is, one of the event attendees was Anita Weaver, a Library Assistant at The Huntington Library. After the event she was inspired to uncover more information about the preservation and relocation of the studio in the Library’s Martin E. Weil Collection (Weil was a well-known Los Angeles preservation architect). According to Weaver, “Weil was consulting to the Los Angeles Conservancy on the project and working with [architect] Fred Hartman in the preparation of a relocation and preservation plan. The files include notes and correspondence (1989-1990) addressed to Weil c/o the Conservancy as well as to his private restoration practice address. The correspondence file includes proposals for relocation from various parties (individuals and organizations) and Weil’s draft of a letter to the Conservancy regarding the relocation proposal submissions review and the process of winnowing out the ‘finalists’.”

The Heifetz program revealed one of Los Angeles’ best-kept architecture secrets and inspired more questions. That’s what I know SAH/SCC will continue to do in 2016. Thanks to everyone for making 2015 a banner year.

—Sian Winship
Presburger Reborn
SAH/SCC Tour & Talk
Sunday, November 15, 2015, 2-4PM
SAH/SCC Life Members and Patrons are invited to a very special afternoon at the Presburger Residence (R. M. Schindler, 1945) in Studio City. An Historic Cultural Monument for the City of Los Angeles, the Presburger Residence is undergoing restoration after years of alterations by previous owners.

Walter S. White: Inventions in Mid-Century Architecture

Authors on Architecture: Ostroff on Eames

On Saturday, September 19th, author Daniel Ostroff spoke about his new book An Eames Anthology (Yale University Press) in front of around 90 people—all seated in Eames-designed chairs. Hosted by Herman Miller in its Culver City headquarters (Lynch/Eisinger/Design, 2009), the event included plenty of time to socialize, enjoy refreshments, and experience the architecture and furniture. “This was a thought-provoking new take on Eames, set in a remarkable architectural space I didn’t even know existed,” noted a member attendee.
Frank Gehry’s Urban Renewal

With a huge exhibition opening in his adopted hometown of Los Angeles and recently introduced plans for the LA River and Watts, AIA National Gold Medalist Frank O. Gehry, FAIA, is more ubiquitous than ever. The “Frank Gehry” exhibition at Los Angeles County Museum of Art (through March 20, 2016) would also have you believe he embodies another U-word—urbanist.

When viewing an exhibition, I’m compelled to regard the work, the installation, and the curatorial conceit equally to judge its successes. The work at LACMA is incredible, the installation is okay, and the conceit is misguided.

I really like most of Gehry’s work. And for the ones I don’t like (see: Experience Music Project), I’m not alone. The exhibition (adapted from Centre Pompidou’s) reads as a “greatest hits,” starting with his own revolutionary house, through Bilbao, and onto Facebook. Consisting of presentation models, scribble drawings, and still photos looped on monitors, the show presents work from Point A to Point Z with little in between. This way of showing architecture to a general audience that is awed by dollhouse models, amused by scribbles, and comforted by photographs does not educate the public on what architects really go through to get to that end point. Without a hint of process, the show actually diminishes the accomplishment of getting such revolutionary work built.

As a budding art historian, I became disenchanted when I continued to see curatorial texts and labels presented with reckless disregard of what was actually on the walls next to them. Throughout “Frank Gehry,” the message is that his work “distinguished him as an urbanist.” This moniker is used repeatedly and insistently in exhibition texts (which differ somewhat from those presented in Paris) and press materials, as if trying so hard to convince us that it’s true. The curator doth protest too much.

I would not be this judgmental if I weren’t forced to review Gehry’s work in all scales as progenitors of “revolutionary” urbanism. The evidence of urbanism isn’t supported, particularly when, of the six urban planning projects shown, only two are built. The curators insist this has been an issue for Gehry since the 1960s. Only one built project (my favorite, the Nationale-Nederlanden Building, or “Fred and Ginger,” in Prague) is shown in a site model that includes its urban context. Because a building is in a city doesn’t mean it contributes to the urbanism of the place. “Frank Gehry” is retro-revisionism for the guy who’s responsible for the Bilbao effect, even if unwittingly.

This statement in the exhibition text is true: “Gehry questions a building’s very means of expression, a process that has generated new design methods, technologies, and approaches to materials as he has sought to free architecture from its conventions.” But this statement smacks of backpedaled justification: “His pursuit of an architecture in which the negative space to materials as he has sought to free architecture from its conventions.” But this statement of presentation models, scribble drawings, and still photos looped on monitors, the show presents work from Point A to Point Z with little in between. This way of showing architecture to a general audience that is awed by dollhouse models, amused by scribbles, and comforted by photographs does not educate the public on what architects really go through to get to that end point. Without a hint of process, the show actually diminishes the accomplishment of getting such revolutionary work built.

So, ultimately, what’s behind this Gehry re-branding? Is it to bolster the LA River project? Atone for too much “plopitecture”? Inject gritty realism to the man who has both Don Quixote and Alice in Wonderland on his bedside table? Burnish the reputation of the octogenarian architect? Atone for too much “plopitecture”? Inject gritty realism to the man who has both Don Quixote and Alice in Wonderland on his bedside table? Burnish the reputation of the octogenarian architect?

What’s wrong with merely beholding beautiful structures that have obviously captured the hearts and spirit of people throughout the globe? Why not present the work of someone whose wonderful drawings and evocative models are as enchanting as the resulting buildings? Text from the excellent 2001 Guggenheim Museum’s Gehry exhibition noted his projects “involved a complete rethinking of the architectural box.” Why is Los Angeles, which Gehry acknowledges has more architectural freedom than other cities, readily cramming his work into an urbanist box? At the media preview, he said: “To transmit feeling through inert materials, that is the architect’s mandate.” And that, he does. And very well. And that should be enough for history.

—Julie D. Taylor, Hon. AIA/LA

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BOOKMARKS

Improvations on the Land: Houses of Fernau + Hartman
By Richard Fernau, FAIA

Although working in a number of project typologies, San Francisco-based firm Fernau + Hartman present residential work in their first monograph. Introductory essays by Richard Fernau, FAIA, and Laura Hartman, AIA, establish their history, outlook, and intentions for the reader, prior to investigating 18 stellar examples of homes in mostly chilly locales of Montana, Colorado, Massachusetts, and New York State, in addition to both coastal and mountain areas of California. Prolific architectural journalists Beth Dunlop, Thomas Fisher, Assoc. AIA, and Daniel Gregory also contribute commentaries.

The connection to nature is key through text and images, yet the book is generous in showing additional important influences of art, architecture, and music. Axonometric diagrams are helpful in understanding how Fernau + Hartman’s Cubist-like volumes fit together. Some photos are taken from dizzying angles, emphasizing the staccato quality of the architecture, which is akin to the improvisational jazz that Fernau admires. Gregory aptly describes the architects’ process as “lifting each major room out of its ‘packing crate’ and setting it apart.”

The firm was an early adopter of sustainable architecture, but Fernau was dismayed by how it was becoming a style, which he sees as a “contradiction for architecture that was supposed to be site- and climate-specific.” The houses, most set within beautiful sylvan sites, nevertheless emerge in an industrial aesthetic that is tempered by natural materials and playful color. Though tied to the land, the homes also exude light and air. This array of projects exhibits how the architects synthesize nature, while combining creative elements into three-dimensional collages for living.

The Monacelli Press; 192 pages; hardcover; $45.