

A SCALE BY WHICH WE WILL BE MEASURED
THE MASTER WORK OF LELAND Y. LEE

BY APRIL WOLFE

Frank S. Wyle House near North Fork, Madera County, designed
by John Rex of Honnold & Rex, 1987-88.



© Leland Y. Lee

Elrod House, Palm Springs Modernism by John Lautner. 1969

LELAND LEE DRINKS HIS CUP OF BLACK COFFEE, wipes a crumb from the table, and says, “I was just there for scale.” He is, of course, referencing his numerous appearances in Julius Shulman’s work from his eight years as his assistant, but something more can be found in this statement.

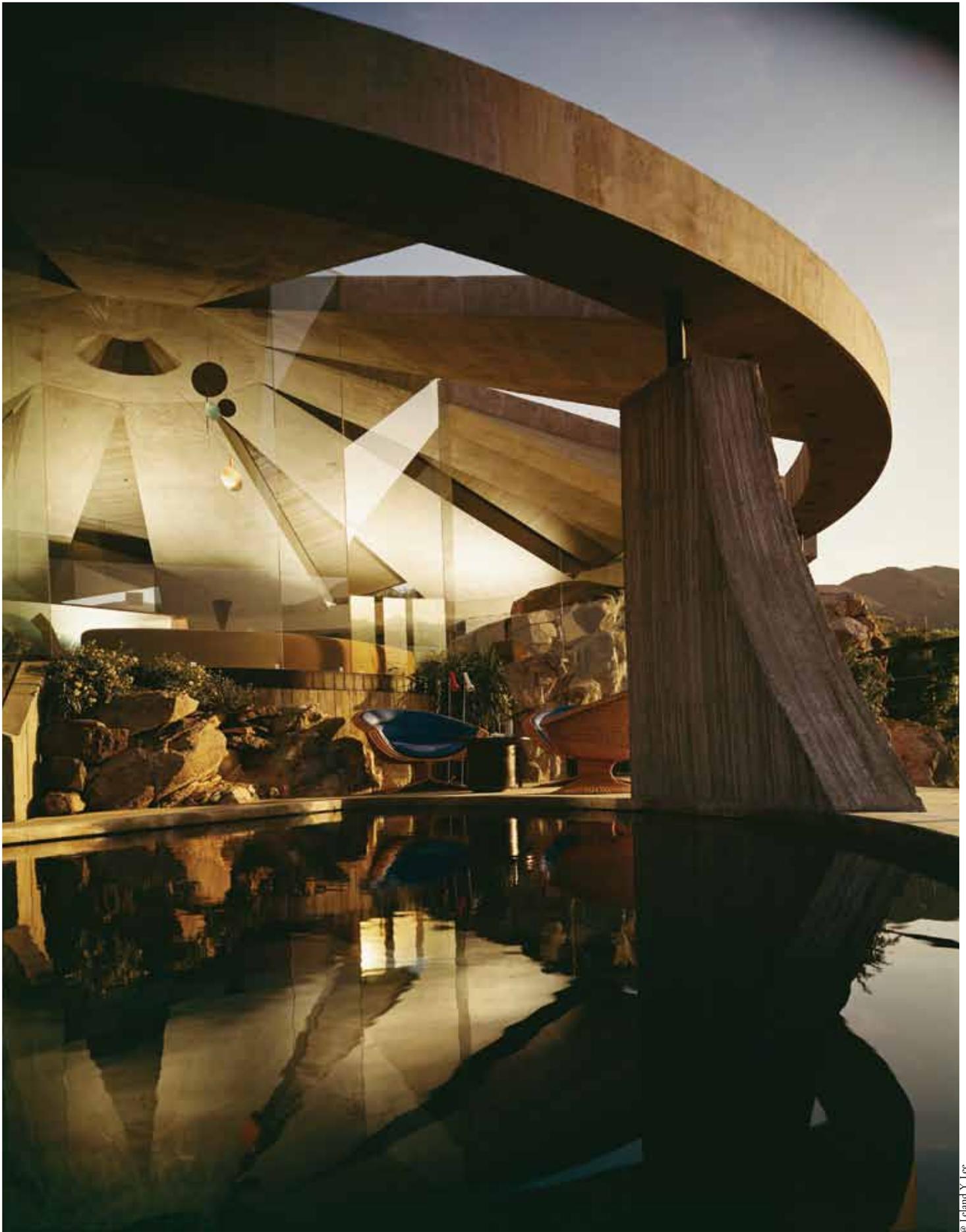
Lee, now a healthy and vibrant ninety-three, has outlived and outworked the majority of his peers. Finding his niche first in a chance meeting at a portrait studio in Hawaii, he transitioned into architectural photography after assisting Shulman, and eventually went on to become one of the most published and recognized photographers you’ve never heard of. Even as recently as 2009, works of his have been used on the covers of widely-circulated magazines with absolutely no acknowledgement or credit given, and while this type of image stealing is definitely a growing epidemic with tendrils reaching into all disciplines, it’s especially detrimental to Lee, who has almost no archive left from his sprawling career.

Years ago, most of his physical archive was washed away in the flooding of his Hollywood home, and what wasn’t lost in the flood was lost in a strange fire that broke out in his garage the next year. All that’s left can fit neatly into a small yellow bag, which is watched over by his trust lawyer.

If Lee were religious, he may have seen all this as a sign, but Leland continued to make work with his meticulous attention to minute details, something he considered to be first-nature. He sees himself as a surrogate to the homeowners whose interiors and homes he photographed, styling plateware and magazines on tables and acting as florist for imaginary dinner parties. Included in his long history of work are iconic images of the Wylie house, the very first images of the completed Elrod house, and the interiors of Sam Maloof, among countless others, but the extensivity of Lee’s career also poses several problems in recovering his archives.

Lee’s images have been circulating for decades, and, over time, have become so iconic that they seem to stand alone, while Leland as the photographer is rarely considered. In addition, many of Lee’s peers who have access to his photographs have already passed, and those who are still alive may not be as savvy to the internet, and so won’t be easily found or contacted. In a short preliminary search for interior designers who may have some of his photographs, three out of three leads went nowhere, with business and personal numbers disconnected.

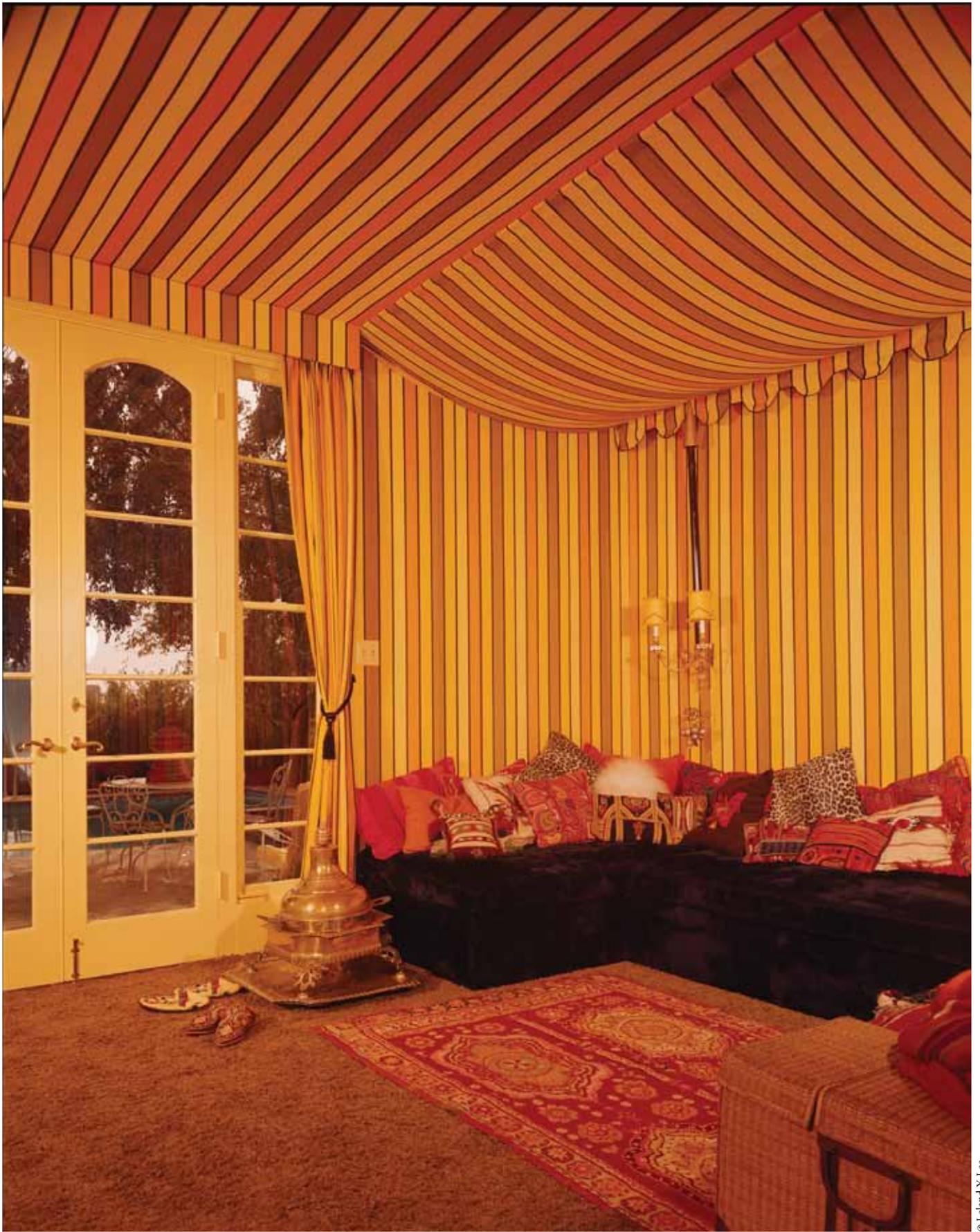
Also, though seemingly less tragic than the loss of his photographs, Lee lost his journals in the fire. Decades of notes



Elrod House, Palm Springs Modernism by John Lautner. 1969



The Herculaneum at the Getty Villa, designed by Daniel, Mann & Mendenhall. Landscape design by Emmett Wemple.



© Leland Y. Lee



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and personal accounts of his work that could have led to archive connections today have disappeared. But more disappointing is that the story of decades of growth, achievement, hard work, successes, and learning experiences will never be known to the young photographers in generations to come. Lee recounts the hours of labor put into the incandescent lighting and staging of exterior night shots of the Wylie House, crouching in the marshes in almost pitch-black dark, only to have all of the circuit breakers bust right before the photos were taken. He talks of scouting out a home location for months and the labor and networking to find such a home, only to find that the *Los Angeles Times* sent Ezra Stoller instead. But Lee also remembers fond surreal moments like his photo shoot at Cher’s house, with his son’s assistance, both of them noting how innocent Cher looked with Chastity asleep there in a cradle. What stories he has must be told orally or recorded here, or they will be lost.

Still Leland persists. With a pair of fitted leather pants and black boots, he could pass for much younger. On our afternoon with Leland, he even persuaded us to accompany him to the grocery store, where he purchased some much-needed ice cream rations, but even with some sugary treats, Leland swears

by a healthy diet coupled with the life motto, “I just pretend I’m young.” Through the many innovations in photography and photographic equipment over the years, Lee embraced all of it, welcoming his digital camera, which he now uses to take snapshots of his family and trips, and which we’ll assume are as precisely crafted as any of his work. 

His is the story of longevity, perseverance, and high art, which you’ll see in the few photographs included here, all of which have come from that small, yellow bag. But our hope with the publishing of these images is that someone somewhere may know of or have seen Leland Lee’s characteristic images. With the help of some kind Art Center students, we’ll be digitizing his collection and tagging each image with the necessary metadata to continue tracking down his legacy. You can help by spreading the word and contacting us at editor@aspp.com.

While he may be greatly remembered for his appearance for physical scale in Shulman’s photographs, Leland Lee is also an historical measure for all photographers, a representative of a body of work by which many will be judged for decades to come, and his “scale” makes much very pale and small in comparison. 