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Photos by Peden + Munk

Project: Concept 2  
Architect: J. Lamont Langworthy  
Location: Los Angeles, California

# The Shape of JAZZ to Come

Jazz pianist Greg Reitan surveys Los Angeles from a 1968 J. Lamont Langworthy-designed prefab house where he has lived since 1997. The chrome chairs are by Rima-Linea and the turntable (opposite) is by Technics.



A redwood interior and cozy dimensions make jazz pianist Greg Reitan's Los Angeles prefab by architect J. Lamont Langworthy an ideal place to work and play.







“Our idea was to create better design for at least the same cost as a tract home.” —Architect J. Lamont Langworthy

**Los Angeles composer and pianist** Greg Reitan is a skilled musician, but his neighbors haven't always appreciated his talent. “Being a piano player was somewhat hard,” says Reitan of living and working in an apartment complex in close proximity to neighbors: “They'd complain.” In 1997, he spotted an ad for a house high in the hills of Highland Park, and as Reitan and his wife, Meredith Drake Reitan, rolled up a winding driveway to the low-slung box perched on a ridge, they knew it was the right place for them. “It would be a good place not to bug people.”

The house was more than an out-of-earshot hideaway, though; it was an architectural time capsule—one of a handful of modular houses designed



and built in the 1960s by J. Lamont Langworthy, a well-known Laguna Beach architect and prefab pioneer. Langworthy wanted to create a low-cost, low-impact housing solution that would make a modern home accessible to a broad market. “Our idea was to create better design for at least the same cost as a tract home,” says Langworthy, now 82 and still working from his office in Graton, California.

The heart of Langworthy's design wasn't so much an aesthetic agenda but a feat of engineering. A partner in his firm had worked in a truss company, and they hit upon the idea of using a single truss module as a kind of building block, providing both structural strength and a strong visual impact. It also allowed for ultimate ▶▶



Perhaps the most prominent piece in the 960-square-foot house is Reitan's grand piano by Steinway & Sons. The rest of the house is dominated by rich redwood panels and mid-century design, like the metal pendant by Lightolier (opposite bottom). The sliding glass doors, original to the house, are by Arcadia Architectural Products.





Meredith Drake Reitan changes the record next to a 1950s dining set by Russel Wright for the Conant Ball Company (this page and opposite right). The Manchester Pierce fireplace in the living room is by Majestic and the redwood for the refurbished deck (opposite left) is from Ganahl Lumber.





flexibility: The units could be brought to difficult locations, stacked, and even cantilevered atop one another.

This scheme was especially effective for the hilly lots of Southern California, many of which afforded incredible views but had been declared unbuildable. In fact, the site of Reitan's house (one of three nearby) was specifically chosen for its challenging topography. "He wanted to demonstrate that it was good for hillsides," says the pianist—that "the truss was stable for a tough site." The structure was finished in an Orange County factory in 1968, but, before it was installed, it made a 1,200-mile road trip to Sacramento to be featured as part of the *California Design Ten* exhibition.

Reitan's house, dubbed Concept 2 because it's a smaller variation on the

original Concept 1, has a total living space of 960 square feet. Materials, like the half-inch, rough-sawn redwood plywood that covers the walls inside and out, were picked for both affordability and durability. (The Concept 2 retailed in 1968 for \$12,397, including appliances.) Massive, sliding glass doors open on either end of the house onto redwood decks, and, inside, the exposed Douglas fir trusses become a design element, gracefully zigzagging their way through the space where the two modules meet.

As it turns out, Langworthy's vision was resonant beyond the architecture world: In 1969, the Ford Motor Company invested \$1 million in the business, enough to open a small factory. But houses didn't have the same profit margins as cars. "It didn't take them long to

see that, although they could do mass production, the money wasn't there in modular housing," says Langworthy. After building about 100 homes, production ceased, and Langworthy moved his practice to Northern California—where he works out of a former apple-drying factory that he's converted into a live-work complex.

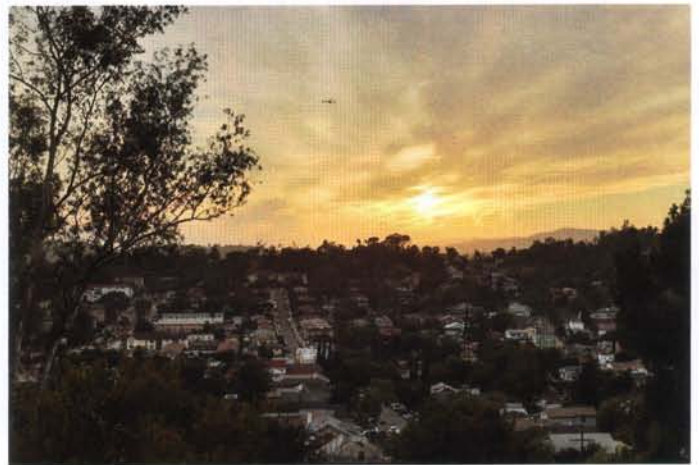
Yet Concept 2 remains intact, almost pristine. Aside from a few updated appliances (the old brown fridge had to go) and a new HVAC system, the house has its original fixtures, including the distinctive windows: long, slender bubbles, made from vacuum-formed plastic by Langworthy's friend, Bruce Meyers, a progenitor of the dune buggy. Reitan, who rents the house, recently refurbished one of the decks, but, other ▶





Canted Douglas fir beams, like the A-framed pair in the bedroom (left) define the interior and divide the living space. Greg and Meredith stand on the porch next to one of the home's vacuum-formed

bubble windows (below); their view of Los Angeles (bottom) is one of the home's best features. The credenza in the living room is by Founders Furniture and the painting opposite it is by Donald Ohlen.



than that, he and his landlord have chosen to leave the house as is. In fact, the original furniture, designed by Maurice Martine, is in a storage unit, which Reitan hopes to begin excavating soon. "That's my next adventure."

Another reason to leave the house relatively untouched is that Langworthy's design happens to be ideal for Reitan's livelihood. He noticed the potential right away: Redwood walls are often used in recording studios, says Reitan, and low ceilings and carpeted floors create ideal acoustic conditions. There's even a storied history of home-recorded jazz—the masterful engineer Rudy Van Gelder recorded the likes of Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk

in a studio in his parents' New Jersey living room in the 1950s.

With only a slight rearranging of furniture, Reitan and his trio have managed to tease the most organic sound possible out of the house. The piano holds court in the living room, with the bass in the dining area, tucked behind a blanket. The drums go in the bedroom. "The best performance is when the whole thing comes together at once." When Reitan took tracks to his engineer for mastering, "he was blown away," Reitan remembers. "He didn't have to meddle with it at all."

Langworthy, who met Reitan at a 2006 retrospective honoring his work at the Laguna Art Museum, isn't surprised at the way the house has

adapted to its new use. Concept 2 was originally commissioned by a woman named Laura Delacy, who had hired Langworthy to design several houses for the property. She'd envisioned an inspiring artists' compound for her talented friends, high above Los Angeles.

Listening to the three albums Reitan recorded in the house, the songs have a certain quality to them that might best be described as warmth. You can almost feel the redwood panels, curing for nearly half a century in the California sunshine, creeping into Reitan's lyrical runs up and down the keyboard. Reitan's band may be a trio, but listening to the rich timbre of the Langworthy house, you might just call it a quartet. ■■■



