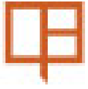

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Philip Johnson (1906–2005)

Philip Johnson was thirty-six years old when he saw to completion his first architectural design—a house he intended for himself. By that time, 1942, he had been a published writer for more than a decade. Architectural practice, in fact, was the last of the fields to which he addressed himself. As an undergraduate at Harvard University, he majored first in the classics and later in philosophy. Even before he graduated, he was offered a teaching assignment in beginning Greek at Oberlin College. For a time he considered law school. When he finally made his entry into the architectural world, it was not as a designer but as a curator, at the Museum of Modern Art. In that capacity, he played a major role in the organization of the epochal *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* of 1932, which drew the attention of the American public for the first time to the work of Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier, J. J. P. Oud, Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. He also contributed a well-researched essay to the accompanying catalogue. During the same year, collaborating with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, he published *The International Style*, a book largely based on the show and still remembered three-quarters of a century later as among the definitive documents in the history of modern architecture.

The obituaries taking note of his death in January 2005 were virtually unanimous in identifying Johnson first and foremost as an architect. At the public level, the label was justified; the buildings he designed in a career of more than sixty years include dozens that received prominent mention in scholarly publications and the principal organs of the professional press. Moreover, many of them possessed a special gloss that critics and historians alike find hard to resist: they were in one way or another controversial. The arguments they aroused were enough by themselves to make and keep Johnson famous. Alive and dead, he earned the place he occupies among the most publicized designers of the twentieth century.

Shortly after the realization of the 1932 exhibition and book, and largely because he enjoyed the friendship and full confidence of the museum's director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., he was named head of the museum's department of architecture. The *New York American* called him "the brilliant young authority on the history of architecture." Johnson followed his appointment with several innovative exhibitions devoted to modern design and the decorative arts. Of major consequence among these was *Machine Art*, which opened in the spring of 1934. It consisted of manufactured objects of anonymous authorship, mostly standardized and all produced by a device fully impressed on modern culture: the machine. Items as modest as paper cups and wood screws shared gallery space with a motorboat propeller, a circular saw, and a porcelain insulator, each exhibit selected for beauty of design and precision of form. No American art museum had ever put on anything like it. The catalogue was written by Johnson, who in less than four years and mostly by himself had established modern architecture and design as fields worthy of serious museological study.

Within a matter of months, as has been well recorded, Johnson quit the museum in pursuit of a goal almost totally unrelated to any of his previous activities. He turned away from the arts and took up politics, of a right-wing slant. Seeking to learn about his new cause at the source, he looked for leadership both at home and abroad. The two Americans he found most appropriate to his ends had gained substantial fame by promoting their shared hostility toward the policies of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: the ambitious populist governor of Louisiana, Huey Long, and the "radio priest," Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, whose Sunday afternoon broadcasts were heard by audiences in the tens of millions. Johnson also returned several times to Germany, where his dedication to modern architecture had first been developed. Even before he staged *Machine Art*, he had attended a rally of the National Socialists in Potsdam, where Adolf Hitler had spoken. Johnson later recalled the atmosphere as "totally febrile. You simply could not fail to be caught up in the excitement of it, by the marching songs, by the crescendo and climax of the whole thing, as Hitler came on at last to harangue the crowd." Early in 1933, the Nazis took dictatorial control of the government, and Johnson, recognizing that the party was more enthusiastic about "monumentality" than about the modernism he had stood for earlier, composed an article identifying Mies as the designer most capable of uniting the modern and the monumental in Germany. If the endorsement was heard by party officials, it was never followed, but Johnson continued to find much to admire about the Nazis' dash and color and even Hitler's political theory. With writing still his favored medium of communication, he contributed articles tinged with anti-Semitism to Rev. Coughlin's periodical *Social*

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Justice and even published a laudatory review of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in the *Examiner.* For a time, he considered buying the conservative journal *American Mercury*, in hopes of making it a forum for his own ideas and those of like-minded people.

Johnson retreated from his Fascist sympathies when it became apparent that they were unshared by his countrymen. In 1939, World War II had broken out and the decided majority of Americans favored England and France with as much will as they abhorred Nazi Germany. Johnson returned to Harvard and enrolled in the Graduate School of Design. His writing and the sentiments he expressed had driven him at last and for good into architecture's arms. Nevertheless, the weight of his previous literary record could be measured by the adoption of *The International Style* as a text in a Harvard history of architecture course.

Nor did he give up writing even while taking courses in architecture. His 1942 article "Architecture of Harvard Revival and Modern: The New Houghton Library," though published in a student journal rather than a professional periodical, was evidence that he had retained a sound and wide-ranging knowledge of architectural history. Relatedly, with the completion of his aforementioned house, which served as the equivalent of a senior thesis, thus assuring him of graduation, he invited the newly formed American Society of Architectural Historians to convene there to hear critic-historian Emil Kaufmann talk on his book *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier. Ursprung und Entwicklung der Autonomen-Architektur*, a study of architectural form that spoke to Johnson's unfailing interest in history.

With the entry of the United States into the war, he was drafted into the army. Only following his discharge in 1944 was he able to begin his practice. Yet, with the economy still oriented toward wartime production rather than to consumer needs, commissions were hard to come by. Once again, MoMA was effectively waiting in the wings. The house design that Johnson and his newly appointed partner Landis Gores submitted to a competition sponsored by the *Ladies' Home Journal* was published by the magazine in July 1945, and a model of the house was shown at the same time in the museum. These events brought Johnson back in close touch with Barr, who had special cause to welcome him. Barr was no longer director of the museum, having been dismissed in 1943 on account of a longstanding conflict with board chairman Stephen C. Clark. In reaction to that misadventure, which threatened his life's work, Barr settled himself in a carrel of the museum library and remained there resolutely until the trustees found another official name for him: advisory director. Thus a significant measure of authority was returned to him, but as he evaluated the museum's personnel, it was clear to him that the architecture department was lacking the leadership Johnson had provided earlier. Johnson's return from the army offered the promising likelihood that Barr could restore him to a major place in the department.

Johnson took advantage of the opportunity. Largely by virtue of his commanding presence and the memory of his previous accomplishments at the museum, he slowly but surely regained command of the chair of the architecture department.

Two years following his appointment, he organized an exhibition of scholarly consequence equal to anything in his earlier record. The 1947 Mies van der Rohe retrospective was the first full-scale review anywhere of the work of an architect of prime importance to the modern movement. Since Mies had emigrated from Nazi Germany in 1938, while Johnson was on his political escapade, the show amounted to a professional resurrection of both men. True to form, Johnson also saw to the publication of an accompanying monograph, which revealed more about the subject than anything previously written. The exhaustiveness of his research is all the more impressive in view of the fact that the cold war was well under way and many of Mies's papers were still in East Germany, a state whose hostility to the West prevented access to those records. Even today Johnson's study occupies a vital place in the Mies bibliography.

By the time the exhibition closed, Johnson was a practicing architect more in name than in fact. And even before he resigned as department chair in 1951, to focus on practice, his curatorship was notable for its inventiveness as well as its breadth of coverage. Subjects following the Mies show were remarkably varied and included Louis Sullivan, Matthew Nowicki, textiles by Anni Albers, new posters from various countries, and the architecture of the city plan. Three houses were specially constructed and mounted in the garden space behind the museum, and Johnson organized several panel discussions in which distinguished critics, designers, and historians debated issues of the day. No curator had ever shown an actual building in a museum exhibition, or made public dialogues regular features of his departmental activity.

With the 1950s, Johnson's career as a designer began in earnest. It lasted all of four decades. Since his fame almost always assured him of commissions, he completed an uncommonly large number of buildings, notable for their wide range in quality and lack of originality. If as a curator he had a highly innovative record, as an architect he was inclined to depend on others' examples. He made that distinction clear in an essay he wrote shortly after the completion in 1949 of the Glass House and guest house, a two-part residence he designed for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut. There he acknowledged that he got the idea of a house with walls of glass after having examined the plans Mies had made for a somewhat similar structure, the Farnsworth House. But the point of Johnson's article was that the influences he felt were more numerous than a single source and hardly confined to the modern period. He claimed that the plan was inspired by the Russian Suprematist Kasimir Malevich, and the sliding units of his two houses by the Dutchman

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Theo van Doesburg. "The approach to the house through meadow and copse," he added, "is derived from English Eighteenth Century precedent. The actual model is Count Pückler's estate at Muskau in Silesia. . . . The separation of functional units into two absolute shapes rather than a major and minor massing of parts comes directly from [Nicolas] Ledoux, the Eighteenth Century father of modern architecture. The cube and the sphere, the pure mathematical shapes, were dear to the hearts of those intellectual revolutionaries from the Baroque, and we are their descendants." Johnson traced the placement of the Glass House on a bluff to Karl Friedrich Schinkel's related treatment of the Casino in Glienicke Park near Potsdam. From the Beaux-Arts theorist and historian Auguste Choisy he learned "that the Greeks restricted the angle of approach to their buildings to the oblique," hence the grouping of the buildings in New Canaan.

Some readers of the essay accused Johnson of historical exhibitionism, and the charge may be warranted. But it takes nothing away from the opinion expressed in many quarters that his most memorable achievements were made of ideas and words rather than built form.

Now for the qualification.

Johnson was responsible for the design of a number of buildings that the world justifiably honors. The Glass House is one of his best, an admirable union of structure and space, further worthy of note for the sensitivity with which it is related to the surrounding landscape. A similarly keen awareness of the connection of structure to plantings marks the sculpture garden at MoMA, which since 1953 has been one of the pleasantest places in midtown Manhattan to sit, to promenade, to take in the museum's sculpture collection. The Museum for Pre-Columbian Art at Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D. C. (1963), features an ingenious plan of nine interlocked domed chambers resting on marble pillars, with plants set in the interstices. The use of materials, chiefly Illinois marble for the columns and teak for floors, surrounded by Vermont marble, is exquisite, and the light penetrating the building is one of the museum's most memorable assets. On a vaster scale, but treated appropriately, is the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (1980), a decidedly unusual sanctuary, so constructed on a space frame that the California sun floods the interior through ten thousand windows. The column-free space with a span of 200 feet measures 207 x 415 feet and rises to a height of 128 feet at its apex. The building is less a house of worship than an entertainment spectacle, but it performs that function brilliantly.

Johnson was himself a master showman, a quality that did not always serve him well at the level of his architecture. Once he joined the ranks of the postmodernists, thus determined to return to the look of history, he produced several buildings that were caricatures of their models rather than acts of homage. Pertinent examples were the College of Architecture at the University of Houston (1986), which apes Ledoux's House of Education, and the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Corporate Headquarters (1984), which turns the Houses of Parliament in London into an act of architectural vaudeville. Still worse, at the very opposite pole of his best efforts, is the Crescent (1985) in Dallas, a stylistically graceless smorgasbord of office towers, shopping mall, hotel, and garage.

Vital to these remarks is the affirmation that Johnson's professional carriage continually ran on the two rails of design and writing. Since his buildings are material and his writings not, it is the former that earned him the greater share of his renown. But any serious consideration of his career must lead to the conclusion that his most enduring contribution was made in the verbal medium. He forged a separate but noteworthy career as a teacher, with adjunct appointments at Pratt Institute in the late 1940s and Cornell University early in 1950, while he was still at MoMA. In early 1950, the newly appointed dean of the Yale University architecture department, George Howe, invited him to serve as visiting critic, and he spent more than a decade at Yale, promoting his lifelong conviction that the grandeur of architecture rests in its formal qualities, hardly at all in its social significance ("Form follows form"). In that regard he faced opposition, more than a little of it from a fellow faculty member, Vincent Scully. Finding such a variety of views favorable to the ends of education, Howe established—with Johnson's encouragement and assistance—*Perspecta: The Yale Architectural Journal.* There statements both about and by Johnson were published.

He found other avenues for the dissemination, in writing, of his views. In the late 1960s, he became a major player in the affairs of New York's Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies, an organization meant to advance intellectual exchange among professionals and laymen alike. The IAUS served as a research center and a non-accredited school with a faculty of top designers, critics, and historians. It was a forum of ideas, and Johnson played his own special role as speaker and informal publicist. He also supported and contributed articles to the institute's publications, one of which, *Oppositions*, developed into one of loftiest, most recondite periodicals in the country's architectural history.

In 1977, the journal devoted an entire issue to Johnson. Two years earlier, at Columbia University, he delivered a lecture, "What Makes Me Tick," in which he summarized his views of his profession and the manner in which he pursued his own designs. Sure enough, he did this—almost involuntarily, one suspects—by building a mise-en-scène of history and parading people and places across it, from Mesopotamia and Stonehenge to Kevin Roche in Indianapolis and himself in New Canaan.

Roughly a decade later, the old curatorial appetite kicked in again, and to be sure, MoMA satisfied it. *Deconstructivist Architecture* ran there in the summer of 1988, with the eighty-two-year-old Johnson in the capacity of curator. He had achieved that position by simply asking for it, and his career was,

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of course, both long and distinguished enough to assure him of an affirmative answer. "The most obvious formal theme repeated by every one of the artists"—Peter Eisenman, Frank Gehry, Zaha Hadid, Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, Wolfgang Prix and Helmut Swiczinsky of Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi—was identified by Johnson in his catalogue introduction as "the diagonal overlapping of rectangular or trapezoidal bars." Here Johnson saw similarities with early Russian Constructivism, hence the name of the show.

The exhibition fell far short of success. Deconstructivist architecture was in large part a theoretical construct, and criticism was directed at the dense and dubious verbiage on which the show and the catalogue essay (written by Mark Wigley, at Johnson's invitation) rested. Nevertheless, *Deconstructivist Architecture* is remembered as yet another effort by Johnson to think and work in the role of an architectural historian. That accomplishment assures him a place of honor in the annals of the discipline.

FRANZ SCHULZE
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Selected Writings by Philip Johnson

With Alfred H. Barr, Jr., Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr., and Lewis Mumford, *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition* (New York, 1932). This text is identical with that of *Modern Architects* (New York, 1932).

Machine Art, foreword by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (New York, 1934)

Mies van der Rohe (New York, 1947; 2nd rev. ed. with add. ch., 1953)

Philip Johnson: Architecture 1949–65, introduction by Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Jr. (New York, 1966)

Selected Writings by Philip Johnson, ed. David Whitney, trans. into Japanese by Tadashi Yokayama (Tokyo, 1975)

Writings, foreword by Vincent Scully, introduction by Peter Eisenman, and commentary by Robert A. M. Stern (New York, 1979)

With Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (New York, 1988)

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