

Architecture: A Few Good Buildings: Reading the obituaries of Philip Johnson

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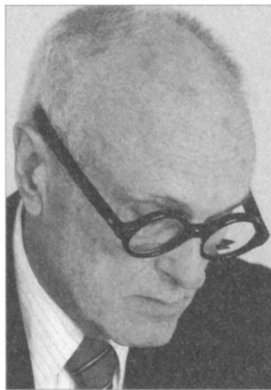
A Few Good Buildings

Reading the obituaries of Philip Johnson

By Stanley Abercrombie

When a prominent but controversial figure lives to the age of 98, we can be sure that members of the press have spent at least a decade considering their characterizations. And when that figure is notoriously opinionated and a powerful opinion shaper, writers will be eager to freely express their own opinions of him at last. Philip Johnson, who died January 25 at his famous Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, was such a figure.

He was much more than an architect; he was also an influential museum curator, an amateur historian, an art collector, a wit, a gadfly, a patron, a maker of careers and reputations and trends. It is interesting to see, therefore, how he was identified in the postmortems. The headline of Paul Goldberger's 4,000-word obituary in *The New York Times* identified him as "Architecture's Restless Intellect," and the lead sentence said he was "at once the elder statesman and the enfant terrible of American architecture." Nicholas Oouroussoff's shorter piece on the facing page was titled "A Tastemaker Propelled by Curiosity." Maria Puente, in *USA Today*, called him a "diminutive agent provocateur" and quoted Goldberger as having said that he was architecture's "greatest presence" without being its greatest practitioner. Blair Kamin, architecture critic of the *Chicago Tribune*, called him "the aristocratic, often outrageous dean of American architecture." Ada Louise



Huxtable, whose first job was working for Johnson as an assistant curator at the Museum of Modern Art, said bluntly in *The Wall Street Journal* that "Whatever Philip Johnson's legacy turns out to be, it will not rest on his buildings."

But an architect he was, nevertheless, and an honored one, having won both the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects in 1978 and the first Pritzker Prize the following year. Which of his many buildings and which of his many styles fared best—and which worst—with the postmortem critics? Those writing in cities where Johnson built important buildings naturally scored his local successes and failures. Benjamin Forgey in *The Washington Post*, for example, said that Johnson had given Washington "two of the best he ever designed," the "magical" 1963 museum for pre-Columbian art at Dumbarton Oaks and "the elegant Kreeger Museum," a multi-domed 1968 design, while the 1985 Tycon Tower in suburban Virginia was "a disappointing conceit." Other appraisals of Johnson's local (as well as international) impact appeared in *The Miami Herald*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.

Among his buildings, the clear favorite proved to be his own 1949 Glass House, modeled on, but built earlier than, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's design for the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois. Huxtable called it "iconic." Andrew Saint in *The Guardian* of London called it "by far his best work." Mark Stevens in an Op-Ed piece in *The New York Times* called it "his signature work." It was named a National Historic Landmark in 1996, and Johnson willed it, along

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with its many later outbuildings, each in a different style, to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which will open the complex to the public. Other works universally well received were his 1953 Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden for the Museum of Modern Art, demolished but faithfully reconstructed in MoMA's recent rebuilding, and the Dumbarton Oaks museum (Huxtable admired the "jewel-like pavilions of the exquisite museum in the gardens").

Second only to the Glass House in public awareness, but far below it in acclaim, was the 1984 AT&T building in New York, now renamed Sony Plaza, by Johnson and his partner of the time, John Burgee. When it was new, Huxtable called it "a pastiche of historical references," and Michael Sorkin in *The Village Voice* called it "the Seagram building with ears." But the building's shocking (at the time) rejection of modernism, culminating in its "Chippendale" roofline, was deemed newsworthy enough to earn Johnson the cover of *Time*. Finished the same year and even less loved than AT&T was the tower of stacked ovals at Manhattan's 53rd Street and Third Avenue, popularly known as the "Lipstick" building. Recent judges thought it "shallow" and a work of "garish cheapness."

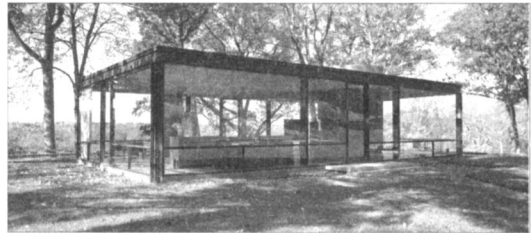
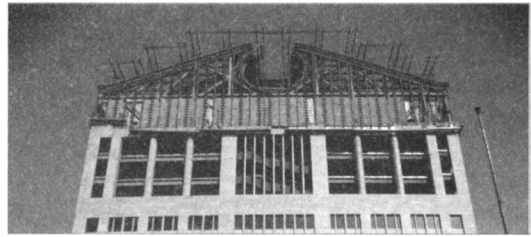
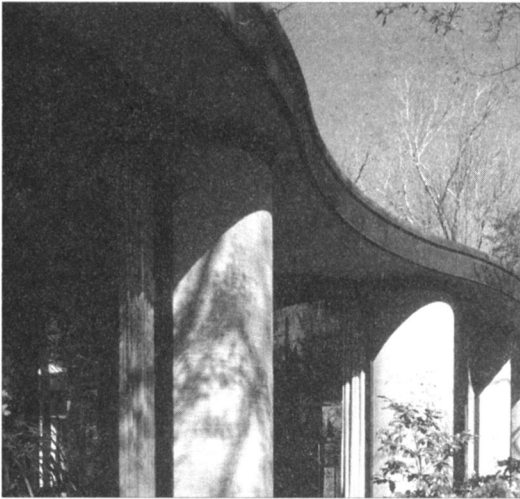
In general, Johnson's exceptional number of office towers for corporate America was largely dismissed. Anne Applebaum of *The Washington Post* described them as "chilly skyscrapers." Mark Stevens wrote of "corporate schmaltz." Ben Forgey spoke of "kitschy shtick." Richard Lacayo in *Time* magazine spoke of some "very good buildings, like Pennzoil Place in Houston, and mere concoctions, like so many of his later-life office buildings." And Andrew Saint called Johnson's influence on recent business architecture "baleful."

An important exception to this rejection of his largest works was Johnson's association with Mies in the design of New York's 1959 Seagram Building, the bronze-sheathed beauty that Herbert Muschamp in a 1999 *New York Times Magazine* article called "the millennium's most important building." What was Johnson's role? In addition to his having suggested Mies as a possible architect, it is generally known that he was a chief designer of the building's Four Sea-

sons restaurant and, on the floor below, the Brasserie. In addition, a surprising number of tributes credited Johnson with the building's interior design, but that is at best an oversimplification. Franz Schulze, in his 1994 biography, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*, wrote that, beyond the restaurants, "Philip's completed assignments consisted of the design of the elevators, the lighting, and a pair of glass canopies" leading to the tower's side entrances.

Comments about the Four Seasons were uniformly enthusiastic, Ouroussoff in *The New York Times* calling it "one of the sexiest rooms in the city 45 years after its completion." Strangely, I could find no mention anywhere of William Pahlmann, who, as the in-house designer for Restaurant Associates, operators of both the Four Seasons and the Brasserie, collaborated with Johnson on their design. This is consistent with Pahlmann's near-invisibility today, though in 1959 he was the best known decorator in the world. In 1955 he had written *The Pahlmann Book of Interior Design*, he was the author of a widely syndicated newspaper column, "A Matter of Taste," and in 1957 he had designed another New York venue for Restaurant Associates, the Forum of the Twelve Caesars. We know little of the Johnson/Pahlmann collaboration except that it is thought that Pahlmann suggested the central pool for what became known as the Pool Room, and that Johnson was responsible for the large pendant Lippold sculpture in the Grill Room and the Picasso stage curtain in the vestibule. The magically rippling draperies of aluminum chains were by Marie Nichols, the lighting was by Richard Kelly, and the tabletop design was by Garth and Ada Louise Huxtable. The chairs, of course, were by Mies himself.

Beyond individual buildings, obituarists paid attention to Johnson's notorious changes of stylistic affiliation after having established himself as a staunch Miesian in his MoMA exhibitions (including the "International Style" in 1932, "Machine Art" in 1934, and the museum's first Mies show in 1936) and in his own work. As he wrote about himself in 1994, "I was a devoted disciple of Mies . . . but then I got bored with it." He first moved on—in a museum in Texas, another in Nebraska, his own pond pavilion,



Clockwise from left: Dumbarton Oaks (1963); AT&T Building (1984) in construction; Glass House (1949)

and a large house in Ohio—to a curvaceous sort of neoclassicism that Andrew Saint in *The Guardian* called “the camp arches of his . . . ballet-school style.” Then it was on to post-modernism, beginning with AT&T, then to deconstructionism, the subject of a 1988 exhibition he co-curated with Mark Wigley. Thomas Hine and Inga Saffron in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* called these “chameleonlike shifts,” and David Dillon in *The Dallas Morning News* referred to Johnson as the “quintessential flip-flopper” with a knack for the “new new thing.”

My own suspicion is that Johnson, even in his earliest work, was never a true believer in modernist philosophy. Certainly he showed little interest in modernism’s social concerns, the notion of better living through design; the London *Telegraph’s* unsigned obituary noted his “hedonistic values.” Nor was he interested in the principle of “form follows function,” a glass house being one of architecture’s least functional inventions. Nor in the Miesian principle of form determined by structure; the Glass House does have an evident and elegant structure (though not as elegant as that of Mies’s Farnsworth House, which lifts the whole building off the ground), but structural frankness was almost never a feature of Johnson’s later work. Like many of us, in short, Johnson was enthusiastic about modernism simply because he liked the look of it. No wonder that in later years he could change styles as easily as neckties.

Johnson’s awareness of the newest styles undoubtedly came from socializing with the most talented and articulate of a younger generation of architects. In what Huxtable called his “notorious and exclusionary Century Club dinners” and in more private tête-à-têtes at his usual Grill Room table, Johnson offered powerful support and prestige (and sometimes valuable contacts and leads to commissions) in return for fresh ideas. Benjamin Forgey recalled the Four Seasons’s “who’s-in, who’s-out conversations,” and Robert Ivy, editor-in-chief of *Architectural Record*, was quoted as saying that “You weren’t anyone until you had lunch with him.” Among his guests and mentees, the one mentioned by the largest number of reporters was Frank Gehry, followed at some distance by Rem Koolhaas, Daniel Libeskind, and Peter Eisenman, and less frequently by Robert A. M. Stern, Zaha Hadid (although the black-tie Century Club dinners were all male), and Robert Venturi. Two others, not mentioned in any article I saw but generally thought to have profited from Johnson’s support, were critic Paul Goldberg and Terence Riley, aptly titled the Philip Johnson Chief Curator of Architecture and Design at MoMA. Johnson’s help to all these and many others was not wholly altruistic, but neither was it wholly self-serving, and it seems that he did more for them than they did for him.

Johnson was unwed, good-looking, “aesthetic,” and a fastidious dandy, and his sexual

orientation must have been questioned most of his life. Even decades ago, as architecture students, we rudely presumed to dub him "Miss van der Rohe." An encouraging sign of progress is that such backroom sarcasm has given way to public candor, and if any hint of criticism can be found in these writings, it attaches not to Johnson's orientation but to his long secrecy about it. *The Times* of London hinted at early liaisons with Noel Coward and John Cage, but his long-term relationship was with art dealer David Whitney. The pairing lasted more than 40 years, but for most of that time it was a private matter. In a 1977 *New Yorker* profile of Johnson, posted on the magazine's Web site the day after Johnson's death, Calvin Tomkins (reportedly at his subject's request) had said merely that "his friend David Whitney, who is a museum consultant" had advised Johnson about which painters' work to buy. (The advice included Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, and Frank Stella.) Goldberger, who knew the couple, said in *The New York Times* that they "lived well" in various houses and apartments but that only "in the last decade, as he felt greater ease in making his relationship with Mr. Whitney public," had Johnson begun taking him to social events. Steven Litt in Johnson's hometown paper, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, took a positive view, saying "Johnson was openly gay, coming out in the early 1990s at a time when it was unusual for public figures to take such a stance." John King in the *San Francisco Chronicle* said more specifically that "in 1993, Johnson disclosed to *Vanity Fair* that he was gay." Johnson was then 87.

Many of us now find it relatively easy to accept homosexuality in ourselves or others. Fascism is another matter. From a number of accounts we can piece together that Johnson at one point worked for Nazi sympathizer and radio propagandist Father Charles E. Coughlin and that at another he offered his services to Louisiana's demagogic governor, Huey P. Long. Johnson attended one of Hitler's Nuremberg rallies in 1938. In 1939 he visited the front at the invitation of the Nazis and reported that "the German green uniforms made the place look gay and happy. There

were not many Jews to be seen. We saw Warsaw burn and Modlin being bombed. It was a stirring spectacle." He later recanted, of course. The Associated Press obituary, picked up wholly or in part by many papers, quoted Johnson as saying he had "no excuse" for his "utter, unbelievable stupidity." Robert Campbell in *The Boston Globe* reported Johnson's making light of the matter to a biographer years later by saying he had been taken by "all those blond boys in black leather."

Applebaum in *The Washington Post* complained that "in his lifetime . . . nobody was very interested" in Johnson's political leanings, but upon his death many sources seemed both interested and unforgiving. Lacayo in *Time* called that period of Johnson's life "a nasty episode." Saint's *Guardian* piece said his "career was marred by a flirtation with nazism." The PBS NewsHour noted that the day after Johnson's death was the 60th anniversary of the evacuation of Auschwitz and said that Johnson "more than flirted with right-wing politics." And Mark Stevens's *New York Times* Op-Ed piece almost a week after his death was headed "Form Follows Fascism" and concluded with the observation, "Philip Johnson lived in a glass house. He threw stones, too."

Finally, we can be sure that these judgments are not final. We cannot yet determine to what degree, for which accomplishments, and in what light Philip Johnson will find a place in architecture history, a field he knew well, respected highly, and changed. His idiosyncrasies, his friendships, and even his distasteful politics may be gradually forgotten. Some of his professional enthusiasms, like postmodernism and deconstructionism, are fancies already passed. His mediocre towers have blended into the general banality that houses American business; they have probably been mentioned for the last time in these obituaries. What will endure, I would guess, is his early and perceptive passion for the genius of Mies, his own buildings in the Miesian vein (not just the Glass House, but half a dozen other houses as well), and his skillful forging of Mies's opportunity for a brilliant second career after leaving Germany for the United States. For that, if for nothing else, Johnson deserves a permanent place of honor. ♦