

History, Autobiography, and Interpretation: The Challenge of Philip Johnson's Glass House

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1. The Glass House, New Canaan, CT. This image would later appear on the cover of *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*. (Courtesy of Norman McGrath. All rights reserved. Used with permission.)

# History, Autobiography, and Interpretation: The Challenge of Philip Johnson's Glass House

Philip Johnson's 1986 bequest of his Glass House in New Canaan, CT (Figure 1), to the National Trust for Historic Preservation would seem to represent an unqualified preservation success story, one in which an enlightened benefactor effectively assured the survival of an iconic work of 20th century Modern architecture for future generations. Yet while a fight to preserve the material artifact may have been avoided, the struggle over its meaning, and the interpretive narrative that will convey it, has yet to begin. Serving as Johnson's personal residence for more than 50 years, the estate has grown to include almost a dozen structures, each new addition reflecting Johnson's appropriation of the latest architectural "style." Thus the estate constitutes not only a distinctively personal collection of objects, but a more general narrative of the evolving formal and theoretical preoccupations of American architectural production, a narrative in which Johnson himself as played a significant role.<sup>1</sup>

However significant either the Glass House or its architect may be, Johnson's bequest raises problematic issues regarding the preservation of the estate as a national historic site, not the least of which concerns the nature and content of the interpretive narrative for a future public audience, an essential part of the National Trust's mission.<sup>2</sup> Given the impending transformation of the Glass House from a private dwelling to a public monument, this alteration will correspondingly necessitate the creation of a new interpretation of the site. In *The Birth of the Museum*, Australian sociologist Tony Bennett's 1996 work, the author notes the crucial distinction that takes place at this moment of transition:

For the simple act of extracting a site from a continuing history of use and development means that a frame is put around it, separating that site from what it was prior to the moment of its preservation. Dedicated to a new use as, precisely, a historic site, it becomes a facsimile of what it once was by virtue of the frame—which may be as simple as a notice or as elaborate as a piece of legislation—which encloses it and separates it off from the present...They announce a distance between what they are and what they were through their very function, once placed in a

museum, of representing their own past-ness and, thereby, a set of past social relations.<sup>3</sup>

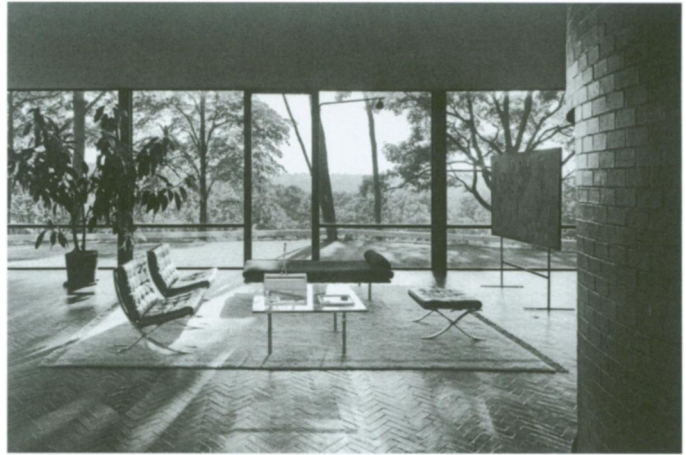
This shift in context is a critical one, for it will require a corresponding re-evaluation of the history and significance of both the Glass House and Philip Johnson, and it is precisely at this moment of transition that the conflicting interests of architectural history, preservation ethics, and personal intentions are destined to clash.

In order to construct a new narrative, the Trust will first have to consider the existing interpretive framework, a narrative established at the very beginning of the Glass House's history, and which has served as the basis for much of the critical discourse that followed. The principal source of this narrative is Johnson's own critical interpretation, an unprecedented essay he first published as "House at New Canaan" in the British journal *Architectural Review* in September of 1950, less than a year after the house's completion. Here, Johnson cites a diverse assemblage of historical and contemporary sources for the design, offering both his formal and theoretical inspirations, thereby creating a critical framework that would inform later interpretations by such notable architects and historians as Kenneth Frampton, Peter Eisenman, Robert Stern, Francesco Dal Co, and Vincent Scully. In fact, over time the discourse came to constitute another "artifact" of the site, later to be "preserved" by Johnson in the form of a book entitled, appropriately, *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*.<sup>4</sup>

By reprising his previous roles as historian and critic, Johnson skillfully promoted the Glass House and, through association, himself. Johnson's merging of his own identity with that of the house allowed both subject and object to be intimately linked in the minds of his audience. This, combined with Johnson's repeated efforts to keep the house alive in the critical and popular imagination, served to situate the house within a framework that simultaneously "framed" Johnson as well. Through this close association of subject and object Johnson ultimately pursued his own immortality, conflating the concept of the domestic house with that of the historic monument.<sup>5</sup>

Although a thorough account of Johnson's efforts in this regard lies beyond the scope of this article, one consequence of these efforts was the development of a narrative that relied as much on myth as it did on fact.<sup>6</sup> In his later interviews, for example, Johnson described his inspiration for the cylindrical, brick fireplace as arising from Frank Lloyd Wright's notion of the central hearth and the distinctly American image of the traditional New England brick fireplace (Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> These sources emphasize Johnson's American roots and link him, through

2. Glass House Interior. (Ezra Stoller, Courtesy of Esto. All rights reserved)



association, with Frank Lloyd Wright, arguably America's greatest architect, yet not one usually associated with Johnson's work.<sup>8</sup> However, Johnson initially cited very different inspirations for this element, two of which appear in his 1950 essay for *Architectural Review*: a painting by the Russian avant-garde artist Kasimir Malevitch entitled "Suprematist Element Circle—1913," and Johnson's own memories of burnt-out houses in which all that remained standing was the brick chimney. The validity of even these two references can be called into question,<sup>9</sup> for it is more than likely that Johnson appropriated this form from two of Mies van der Rohe's earlier projects, both of which Johnson was intimately familiar with at the time he was designing the Glass House.<sup>10</sup> Nowhere, however, does Johnson acknowledge these works as having influenced his design despite his repeated acknowledgement that Mies served as a prime, and literally unmistakable, source for the Glass House.

Similar efforts by Johnson to frame his own history can be seen in his film *Diary of an Eccentric Architect*, first broadcast on television in 1986, and later intended to serve as an introduction to the site for future visitors.<sup>11</sup> By casting the narrative as a "diary" Johnson reinforces the autobiographical nature of the project, while the format of a personally guided tour led by the artist allows Johnson to act as the mediator of the site's history and significance. Johnson's chatty and informal guided tour, however, is certainly not innocent, due to the inherently high level of control involved in the interpretation of a site, including the paths, destinations and duration of a visitors' stay.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, narratives can restrict the visitor's access to direct and uncensored knowledge of the subject. By situating the Glass House within an autobiographical framework, Johnson suggests that he alone has access to the "truth" of his own sources of inspiration and intentions, and that he alone can accurately relate his own history.

In fact, Johnson makes a similar claim in an exchange with

the Museum of Modern Art's Terence Riley, in which Riley's attempt to correct the historical record concerning the genesis of Johnson's and Henry-Russell Hitchcock's canonical "International Style" MoMA exhibition of 1932. In his article Riley wrote:

Previously unexamined correspondence shows that Hitchcock and Johnson conceived the International Style project first as a book and some time later as an exhibition, despite their respective recollections to the contrary. These and other issues surrounding the chronology of the exhibition's inception and planning...seem to have slipped, not surprisingly, from the memories of those involved.<sup>13</sup>

To which Johnson, in a foreword to Riley's piece, nevertheless maintained that:

Since I am the only living member of the triumvirate [of Barr, Hitchcock and Johnson], my memory should be the determining factor in any discussion of the revival of the show ... Terence Riley, almost 50 years my junior has supplanted in this document my memories as the 'true' story of the early days at the Museum.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, Johnson's continual re-framing of history is evident in the numerous forewords, afterwords, introductions, and post-scripts he has authored, underscoring his desire to cast the historical record in accordance with his own perceptions, as well as for his own ends. In what might constitute a partial explanation, Johnson has noted that history is the product of the "victors."<sup>15</sup>

Despite his attention to the propagandistic aspects of his efforts, Johnson never ignored the importance of the actual physical artifact; for Johnson painstakingly maintained his Glass House, including all its contents, according to its original appearance. In fact, it can be argued that the house has already been "preserved," essentially functioning as a permanent exhibition since its completion in 1949, when its carefully designed interior was situated within its transparent glass display case and thereafter meticulously maintained in situ. Thus Johnson, as "curator" of this permanent "exhibition," has created a work that seamlessly incorporates both the house and its occupant within the context of a single visual display, one that serves to frame both the subject and object simultaneously. The house thus showcases Johnson's mastery of the art of display even as it functions as a vehicle for the production of a carefully manufactured, and tightly controlled, personal and public identity.<sup>16</sup>

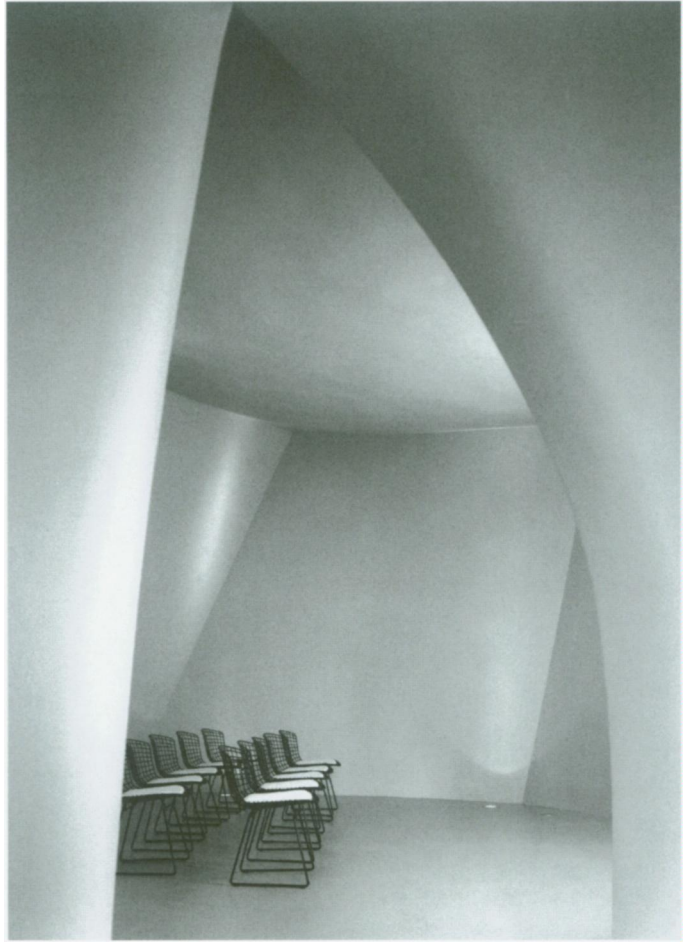
The imposition of an autobiographical frame of reference has another problematic consequence, specifically in Johnson's claim of authority based on his personal memory. Indeed, historian Eric Hobsbawm has cited the general unreliability of personal memory, particularly the general bias towards selective and constantly shifting memories inherent to oral histories.<sup>17</sup> While outside sources might be able to verify historical information, "The crucial problem," Hobsbawm argues, "is to know what we can believe when there is nothing to check it against."<sup>18</sup> In other words, in cases where no corroborating evidence exists, how do we determine when memory has, in fact, become supplanted by myth?

Similarly, even when we detect that myth has overtaken fact we are unable, in most cases, to determine its origins, for this information remains inaccessible to the outside historian, its sources located within the human mind rather than in archival documents. Thus Johnson's "gift" raises critical questions regarding the extent to which Johnson, as author/donor, should be the one providing the interpretive framework for the future narrative. The situation also raises the question of autobiographical narratives as interpretive strategies, and compels us to consider how the Trust might attempt a re-interpretation in which the autobiographical subject is not the only, or even the primary, source for the construction of a new critical framework.<sup>19</sup>

The Trust can, of course, consult other sources in gathering their material, and almost certainly will assemble a panel of experts to guide them in their construction of any future narrative. Again, however, the Glass House poses a particular dilemma, for the group of individuals generally regarded as among the most knowledgeable about Johnson and his career are the same individuals who are themselves most personally and professionally connected, and even indebted, to him; a group Johnson has come to refer to as his "kids," including such luminaries as Peter Eisenman, Robert Stern, and Frank Gehry. Thus, while these individuals possess an undeniable wealth of information and insight that would be invaluable to any interpretive effort, objectivity would be difficult since they themselves are inextricably bound up with Johnson's legacy. In addition, since both Eisenman and Stern have already published their own interpretations of the house it is unlikely that they would significantly alter their earlier contributions, or re-interpret the site in a radically different way. In fact, asking them to do so would in essence be asking them to re-interpret their own critical history.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps most troubling, however, is what Johnson's existing framework would omit were it to be adopted as the scaffolding for future interpretations. It needs to be recognized

3. Interior view of the Visitor's Center designed by Philip Johnson for the Glass House site, New Canaan, CT. (Copyright Norman McGrath. All rights reserved. Used with permission.)



that Johnson has constructed his narrative from the materials on visual display, thus creating an “autobiography” that officially begins in 1949 with the construction of the Glass House and ends in 1986 with the completion of the Visitor’s Center (Figure 3), the two structures providing bookends for Johnson’s narrative. Yet by doing so, Johnson has managed to exclude important portions of his life, initiating his narrative at the age of 43, and thereby conveniently editing out some of the most controversial and, for Johnson, undoubtedly the most uncomfortable aspects of his personal history. For instance, while the Glass House might be said to recall Johnson’s early promotion of the International Style and the designs of Mies, and thus predate his career as an architect, nowhere does Johnson’s current interpretation of the Glass House make reference to the period between 1934 and 1940, when Johnson left his influential position as Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at MoMA in order to pursue a disastrous career in right-wing politics while publicly supporting the Fascists in Germany.<sup>21</sup>

The consequences of these actions, however, contributed

to Johnson's decision in 1940 to enter Harvard's Graduate School of Design in an attempt to resurrect his career and his image through architecture.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Johnson's emphasis on a formalist reading of the site consequently allowed him to evade references that might extend beyond the realm of the aesthetic. Given the controversial yet important aspects of Johnson's life prior to 1949 it is therefore essential that any future interpretation of the Glass House include references to Johnson's *entire* personal history, and not merely re-present the subject's own self-edited version of that history.

Should the Trust maintain Johnson's current narrative as the operative framework for its future interpretation, the Glass House would merely continue to operate within its present context, thereby providing a vehicle for Johnson's own project of self-preservation. It would enable Johnson to set the ground rules for his own historicization through the creation of a self-authored memorial site that satisfies a personal desire for immortality. The mandate of the National Trust, however, charges it with serving the *public* interest, rather than that of any individual. It will therefore be the responsibility of the National Trust to re-frame Johnson's narrative within a larger interpretive structure that critically engages both the history of the Glass House and Philip Johnson, an effort that would ideally open the site up to multiple narratives and a more complex reading than the narrow one Johnson's framework currently offers. The final result of such a re-framing would be a more challenging presentation of the site, one in which its significance is expanded even while its meaning might be problematized, where questions are posed as well as answered, and where the Glass House might serve the memory of its creator while enabling the Trust to honor its commitment to a public audience.

#### Author biography

Leslie Klein holds an undergraduate degree in Architecture from the University of Virginia and a Master's Degree in Historic Preservation from Columbia University. This article is an excerpt from her Master's thesis, which was supervised by Prof. Jorge Otero-Pailos, and which won the the Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation's History/Theory Honor Award. Ms. Klein has recently presented papers at Columbia and at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She also co-curated the exhibition "Negotiating Domesticity" at the Bendheim Gallery in Greenwich, CT, where she serves on the Architectural Review Committee, and has worked as a practicing architect in New York City.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Johnson is generally credited with helping define the canon of early Modern architecture with his exhibition "The International Style" of 1932, co-curated, and also published, with the historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock for the Museum of Modern Art. Later, Johnson would be instrumental in popularizing a historicizing Postmodernism during the 1970s and 1980s, then introducing Deconstructivist architectural theories to a wider audience with another major exhibition for the Museum of Modern Art curated with Mark Wigley.

<sup>2</sup> The congressional charter of the National Trust for Historic Preservation states that in order to "provide for the preservation of historic American sites, buildings, objects, and antiquities of national significance...there is hereby created a charita-

ble, educational, and nonprofit corporation, to be known as the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the United States...The purpose of the National Trust shall be to receive donations of sites, buildings, and objects significant in American history and culture, to *preserve and administer them for the public benefit.*" (italics added)

<sup>3</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 129.

<sup>4</sup> Whitney, David, and Jeffrey Kipnis, ed., *Philip Johnson: The Glass House* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Johnson was extremely candid about this desire, offering a number of statements similar to this one given during an interview from 1973: "The desire for immortality is the only proper aim. How are you going to be immortal without a monument?" Philip Johnson to John W. Cook and Heinrich Klotz, published in *Conversations With Architects* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973) 43; while in the year following Johnson's official bequest of the Glass House to the Trust he stated that: "All architects want to live beyond their death." As quoted in Joseph Giovannini, "Johnson and His Glass House: Reflections," *The New York Times*, July 16, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed examination of Johnson's actions see Leslie Klein, *Philip Johnson's Glass House: Framing Interpretation* (Thesis, Columbia University, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Hilary Lewis and John O'Connor, *Philip Johnson: The Architect in his Own Words* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> In fact, Wright and Johnson were antagonists throughout much of Johnson's early career, Wright blaming Johnson for importing, and later adopting, the 'foreign' "International Style" box that ultimately hindered Wright's career and represented the antithesis of his architectural ideas. In fact, the author Seldon Rodman would refer to Wright and Johnson as representing the two opposing poles of American post-war architecture. See Seldon Rodman, *Conversations with Artists* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Johnson himself casts doubts as to the veracity of this claim, implying that the Malevitch reference was an unconscious one and came to him only in retrospect. According to Johnson: "Although I had forgotten the Malevitch picture, it is obviously the inspiration for the plan of the glass house." See Philip Johnson, 'House at New Canaan, Connecticut', *Architectural Review* 108, no. 645 (September 1950), 152–159.

<sup>10</sup> Mies, whom Johnson had adopted as his mentor during the early part of his career, had employed similar forms in his Berlin Exhibition House of 1931 and some early design sketches for the Farnsworth House.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson even designed a "Visitor's Center" on the site, a structure he claimed to be his last addition and which would provide a setting for the screening of the introductory film. Unfortunately, due to technical and functional problems with the design a new Visitor's Center will be constructed by the Trust at an off-site location.

<sup>12</sup> Neil Cossons, "What is Interpretation?" *Historic House* (Summer 1997), 17.

<sup>13</sup> Terence Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, (New York: Rizzoli, 1992) p.10.

<sup>14</sup> Philip Johnson, "Foreward," in Riley, *The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>16</sup> Fred Myers, ed., *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press), 38.

<sup>17</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (New York: The New Press, 1997), 206.

<sup>18</sup> Hobsbawm, 207.

<sup>19</sup> Such a proposition has been explored in the writings of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, particularly in Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (*Image, Music, Text*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) and Foucault, "What is an Author" (*The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

<sup>20</sup> Stern's essay originally appeared in *Oppositions* (Fall 1977) while Eisenman provided the introductory essay to *Philip Johnson: Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed examination of this period in Johnson's life see Franz Schulze's biography, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1994). Other writers to examine this material include Michael Sorkin and Kazys Varnelis.

<sup>22</sup> Prior to this time, Johnson had only engaged architecture as a historian and critic, done without the benefit of any formal training in the field.