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Modernist Icon: Myths & Realities-Philip Johnson, The Glass House 1949

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PHILIP JOHNSON’S RESIDENCE, three-dimensional sketchbook, and aesthetic oasis sprawl across a 47-acre canvas/campus along Ponus Ridge Road in New Canaan. Ensnared into the sculpted landscape, the site encompasses 14 separate structures. Like Zeus wielding his thunderbolt, Johnson playfully sprinkled onto his personal Parnassus a veritable encyclopedia of architectural styles.

Often inspiring, sometimes infuriating, an escorted walking tour is always reflective of the master’s pixie-like sensibilities. A team of talented guides, well versed in the anecdotal lore of this magical refuge, opened our eyes to Johnson’s hide-and-reveal—now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t manipulation of his guests. Do schedule a visit with high expectations, but don’t come if you’re checking off “complete a great house tour with preconceived ideas” from your bucket list. Instead of national historic sites akin to Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello or Frank Lloyd Wright’s Falling Water, the Johnson estate is like a chessboard with discrete satellite pieces and moveable parts. You can never grasp all of it at once—only fragmentary splinters are within view. And Johnson’s chuckling ghost permeates every corner and breathtaking vista.

Johnson is ever the brilliant illusionist, chameleon, and merry prankster. His experimental curiosity reminds me of Winston Churchill’s quip about Russia’s deceptive role before WWII as a “riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.” When I walked the property along with the editorial staff of VENÜ on a perfectly cloudy late fall afternoon, we were able to appreciate the con-
In the Post WWII era architects were responding to the shift from a war-based economy to the new single-family homes of middle class families in the USA. To answer this question, I would defer to my fellow lead guide and writer, Gwen Philip Eliasoph: We know that Philip Johnson was a giant among the masters of 20th century architecture such as Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright. What in your estimation is the most distinguishing characteristic of The Glass House as an example of International Style design and what would be its most distinguishing characteristic?

Christine Wolf Nichols: The International Style in this country was defined by Philip Johnson and Henry Russell Hitchcock by their 1932 exhibition at MoMA: “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition.” Here, with their accompanying book, the two men put forward the tenants for this style 1) an expression of volume agossed to mass, which often resulted in a radical simplification of form; 2) balance instead of symmetry, and 3) the rejection of ornamentation based of the adoption of glass, steel and concrete as the main materials used in expressing post World War II technological developments. I would say that the most unique aspect of the Glass House, then, would be its purity. It is simply a box with glass walls between thin columns of steel, a plaster ceiling and a brick floor in a herringbone pattern. There is one door in the center of each façade which acts as the only operable “windows” for the entire building; thereby creating a very straightforward plan and design scheme. Once you move inside the building, however, it is masterfully organized asymmetrically within the one room volume with a brick cylinder (which houses the bathroom inside a fireplace facing the living room area outside), anchoring the entire floor plan. There are 18 full floor-to-ceiling partitions in the bedroom with one bank of five foot high cabinets that allows you to see through the glass walls beyond, and the kitchen is designed by low, counter-height cabinets so that the overall feeling is one of release to the varying landscapes outside the entire building. I have never been in a building which so completely satisfies the needs of shelter while allowing the spirit to soar.

To me, the most distinguishing characteristic is that while it is so obviously a “modern” home even by today’s standards, it is also like a Greek temple. Vincent Scully pointed this out in his teachings and essays. Unlike its predecessor the Farnsworth House by Mies Van Der Rohe in Plano, Illinois, Philip Johnson’s Glass House sits on the ground on a brick platform and it is irregularly spaced, black steel columns and reflective glass panels melt into the landscape. The roof system is framed into smaller-than-needed steel joists to create a heavier “cornice” detailing that allows us to feel its weight so that it solidly sits on its dramatic promontory site.

INTERVIEW: CHRIS WOLFE NICHOLS, architect and guide at The Glass House and VENÜ senior arts editor Philip Eliasoph reflect on Philip Johnson’s Connecticut residence, its place in architectural history, and conservation needs for this mid-century modernist masterpiece.

Philip Eliasoph: We know that Philip Johnson was a giant among the masters of 20th century architecture such as Le Corbusier, Mies Van Der Rohe, and even Frank Lloyd Wright. What in your estimation is the most distinguishing characteristic of The Glass House as an example of International Style design and what would be its most distinguishing characteristic?

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In the Post WWII era architects were responding to the shift from a war-based economy to the new single-family homes of America’s suburbs. But the “Show” Houses created by Johnson, Brown, or Gropius were far too sophisticated, intellectual and expensive. They were really not meant to reflect contemporary “good living” standards of the time as they meant “practical.” Not many folks out there in the current suburbs could afford their families into an aesthetically pure glass box. But Johnson, ever forthright about buildings practical and unalike the Glass Temple with the VENÜ. To answer this question, I would defer to my fellow lead guide and writer, Gwen North Ross. Here’s how she fielded your question:

“None of the modern houses in New Canaan were built purely as show houses. The architects all built homes for themselves and their families and hoped that they would win other commissions once people saw these designs. Johnson always said he designed the Glass House for himself – it was the perfect weekend house for him. Many of the other New Canaan Houses are quite comfortable and practical. Some were expensive, some were not. Many of John Johnson and John Black Poe’s houses were done inexpensively and with experimental materials and modular designs. The large expanses of glass of course made the houses harder to heat, but most modern houses aren’t made completely of glass and steel.”

That’s very useful, do you have a personal note on this experimental house?

While Philip Johnson had an interest in designing “for the masses,” most of his clients were wealthy and had a certain level of sophistication and a wish to be considered hiring him. Their properties were increasingly spectacular (especially after the Glass House in 1949) and his designs always incorporated the site for viewing and “nature/anthropocentric” appreciation. Even though the square footage for his homes was often modest, they often borrowed space from the outside or used the expansive views as a canvas. If anyone ever asked him to design a glass house for them, his first response was, “paraphrased,” “tell me about your land.” He often stated, “I’m really a landscape architect,” and also said, “I’m a better landscape architect than I am an architect…” To me, it’s nice art.

Let’s discuss The Glass House specifically. How much time did Mr. Johnson actually spend in the house? He designed and built the Brick or Guest House at the same time; both buildings are considered one complete composition.
During the three-year period of time from 1946 when he purchased the original five acres of the site until 1949 when he completed the constructions, he came up with many different design ideas. Through the conceptual design of these schemes, he split his ideas into the more open, "public" space of the Glass House and the more closed, "private" space of the Brick or Guest House. The Brick House (after some changes made in 1953) has a personal library, a large bathroom with marble, a storage room and sub-grade mechanical room, and a guest bedroom that acts almost as a sen- sory-deprivation chamber with its movable panels that could block out all exterior light. So, when Mr. Johnson needed to get a good night’s sleep, take a nap, have privacy, take a long shower or store away his things, he would use the Brick House in addition to the Glass House. The Brick House also houses all of the mechanical systems for the Glass House which run through an under- ground conduit to the Glass House, thereby allowing the Glass House to be as open and unobstructed as it is. The two buildings are mutually supportive, and make living in the "Glass House composition" very livable.

Philip Johnson spent weekends there throughout the year, and he always had a nice apartment in New York City during the week. The whole point of the Glass House was to immerse himself in nature during the weekends, which he did for over 56 years. He had a caretaker on site at all times (which helped with the trespassing issues!) and over time, he purchased contiguous properties to create the 41 acres property that the Glass House site is today. On these additional lots, he built the Library Study (1963) for architectural work and reading, the Painting Gallery (1965) and Sculpture Gallery (1970) for his art collection that he created with his partner, David Whitney, as well as other structures, follies and renovated vernacular buildings to assist with various personal and entertaining functions. When he was working lots and lots in New York City, he spent more time at the Glass House site, and it eventually became his primary residence. He called the whole site his "labor of an eccentric architect" because this was his place to experiment with design and building, to have fun and enjoy himself.

How do you imagine Mr. Johnson living in the space or entertaining his guests with these "comfort level issues"? Considering the nearby heated water in the Glass House, how do you feel about it as you slide the house on the coldest days of winter and on the hottest days of summer? Knowing that the Glass House site incorporates 47 acres with 14 structures (some of which are air-conditioned) to assist with Philip Johnson’s various needs, the "comfort level" demands on the Glass House building itself and the Brick House were alleviated over time. But before the additional properties were added, even though he preferred to have smaller, intimate groups of friends over to often use his promenade and outdoor spaces for entertaining. On cold winter days, his friends often described that he would crank up the radiant floor heating (so high, that you would have to keep your shoes on or wear two pairs of socks) and have a fire roaring in the fireplace. One of my favorite images that he described (paraphrased) was being at the Glass House during a snow storm with the wind blowing, because you felt like you were in a "celestial elevator" moving up into the direction of the falling snowflakes. During the summer months with no air conditioning, he would have all of the doors open to get the refreshing cross-ventilation (a design consideration older than Venturi) and bugs would fly in and out against the glass panels, and leaves and the odd creature would come inside as well. In some cases, he would pick up the phone and call his caretaker for assistance with the scurrying critters and birds.

How do you think this structure would be viewed in the context of contemporary eco-friendly design? Are there any parallel situations for LEED certified homes that are more sustainable as a necessity?

Again, in order to answer this question, you must consider the Brick House as part of the original "Glass House" composition. I will try to answer this in two parts: the Glass and Brick House as they were built in 1948, and the composition as it works today after Mr. Johnson passed away in 2005 and various upkeep improvements were made (in parentheses).

In terms of positive, eco-friendly design:
1) the original Glass (1,728 square feet = living area) and Brick House (988 square feet) buildings were relatively modest in size not building an overly large house is the best place to start for resource stewardship.
2) the sitting of the Glass House under seven or eight large specimen deciduous trees shielded it from the hot sun during the summer, but allowed the sun to come through in the winter.
3) the heating system for the Glass House is radiant floor heating (supplemented with a working fireplace, which is excellent in that radiant heat is efficient in heating the occupants directly instead of using energy to control the larger environment.
4) for the glass walls, there are tracks on the eastern, southern and western elevations on which to hang panels to block the sun from direct solar heat gain, and abundant daylight means less use of artificial lighting.
5) the door placements at the center of each elevation allow for maximum cross-ventilation, bringing in fresh, cooler air during the summer months.
6) the bathroom(s) and kitchen are small in size and use mostly natural materials.
7) all of the stone walls on the property are built from local stone from the site.
8) if the Glass House were built today most of the materials would be either abundant (sand for the glass and crushed material for the brick) or mostly highly recycled (steel)
9) even though this is not about LEED-certification specifically but definitely eco-friendly issues, having a direct connection to nature and the landscape would promote well-being, and in general, a happier, healthier existence. (Please note the Brick House renovation is being designed and considered for LEED certification.)

The negatives of the original Glass House composition:
1) the large sheets of single-pane (1/4” plate) glass have no treatments (which were not available in 1949) to make them energy efficient. (Those have been replaced more recently with 3/8” tempered glass which has a small-molded insulation value, and probably a Glass House built today would incorporate insulated, double-pane glass (7) with heat-saving, clear coatings.
2) there is no overhang for the roof system (save-detail) to block the sun during the summer but allow for the lower winter sun to hit the glass.
3) the radiant floor heating system and all mechanical systems come from the subgrade Brick House mechanical room, which is about 120’ feet away. Originally there was a tunnel of about 24’ with conduct running through it, but having to travel a distance (even though it remains about 55 degrees) is less efficient than using a more local source.
4) the brick color of the detail is not efficiently designed (but Philip Johnson added a glass heat screen in 1949).
5) the steel framing of the I-columns and the window frames have no thermal break and so directly transmit the cold inside the house, and the heat outside the house. (Today, this would be a tricky design issue, because today’s simulation designs with insulations and glass stops are large and unobtrusively)
6) as Philip Johnson said himself (paraphrase), it’s not a very practical building.

Yale, architectural historian Vincent Scully noted that the Glass House was for many decades a gathering place for many of the greatest thinking minds of the modern world; he even called it “the most sustained outpouring of the new thinking that the United States has ever seen.” Why do you think this was such a magnet for these great thinkers and how does this tradition continue in the work of the Glass House Foundation today?

The Glass House, of course, became a very famous place because Philip Johnson and David Whitney were such interesting, intelligent, amusingly generous and powerful people. Not only did they create a setting for experiencing architecture, art, conversation and taking physical and intellectual risk by testing one’s boundaries between safety and danger (thereby encouraging people to think out side of their comfort zones and actually learn and grow), they had a lot of fun and enjoyed themselves. Philip Johnson in particular loved being in the spotlight (and it didn’t hurt that he could in the meantime elevate his social prestige) and was extremely generous with his intellect, time and money. But most of all, they created a place that was safe for their friends and fellow creators to relax and enjoy themselves, even if the stakes were sometimes pretty high. When Frank Stella visited the site last year, he said that (paraphrase) “no one ever came to the Glass House to talk business, that they came out there to drink and enjoy themselves. That is not an easy task when you consider bringing together some of the most creative and competitive thinkers of our time.”

In terms of the programs that the Glass House sponsors, they are outlined on our Philip Johnson Glass House website under “Programs” at the top of the page. These include Glass House Conversations; Design Literacy Retreat; Glass House Oral History Project; Modern Home Project and Survey; and Modern Views. This NTHP site is very vital, indeed.

Thanks for your time and valuable insights into a living work of art that will continue to grow in its significance and historical importance over the decades.

Background: CHRISTINE WOURE NICHOLS
1) I graduated from Yale College (1984) and majored in architecture. In 1982 before declaring my major I had the luck to hear Philip Johnson give a lecture and was invited for drinks with him and some graduate students afterwards. There we sat in the Old Hesslerbergh bar, watching Mr. Johnson down three martinis in a non-wasted skipping a beat—while he kept asking the then Dean of Yale School of Architecture, Caesar Pelli, if the students had understood the lecture. A graduate student named me over to me and said, “How do I feel to be sitting across the table from God?” and I remember thinking that I didn’t think that God would drink like that, nor need to be so startled about his lecture. What impressed me the most was how sincerely Mr. Johnson needed to know if his lecture resonated with the students.

After college I worked for James Wines, Architects in Boston, and then for J. M. Pel and Partners on the Louvre project in Paris. Then, I went back to Yale for my Master’s in Architecture (1989) under Tom Wuehrer. I worked for Shus, Ricci, Wharton and Associates in Greenwich, CT, and then CB+I Ruff Architects in Bedford, New York before starting a family and running my own residential architecture firm. This is my third year as a guide at the Philip Johnson Glass House.”

Philip Eliasof, Ph.D. is Professor of Art History at Fairfield University and a Commissioner on the Connecticut Commission for Culture & Tourism. His interest in modern architecture began in graduate school when he did some of the first published research in the United States on the Bauhaus avant-garde architect, Konstantin Melikoff. Despite the bleakness of the financial situation at the Bauhaus, Melikoff was a leader who contributed his talents to projects in Dessau, Berlin and Rudy, Malickov, entry for the Park Exhibition of Art 1890-1925, and the show with his students’ designs in the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, WA. He is currently working on a book about Melikoff’s work.