

Nineteen Eighty-Four is a great romantic novel, science-fiction tale, horror story, boys' adventure story, and Kafkaesque novel of the absurd, all rolled into one. Neither work has richly elaborated characters, colorful prose, or complex social situations, but that is just to say that they are not of the same genre as the fiction of Charles Dickens, Fyodor Dostoevsky, or Henry James. Neither are the

works of Franz Kafka or Edgar Allan Poe—and they were geniuses too.

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Tainted Glass

THE ARCHITECTURE OF PHILIP JOHNSON.

By Hilary Lewis; photos by Richard Payne. Bulfinch Press. 330 pp. \$85

Reviewed by Tom Lewis

“Philip, am I inside or out?” Frank Lloyd Wright asked when visiting Philip Johnson’s Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. “Do I take my hat off or leave it on?” Imagine this meeting of the young and old turks that took place sometime in the 1950s: the young, cosmopolitan Johnson, tall, well dressed, well heeled, gay, promoter of himself and especially of the International Style; the octogenarian Wright, short, dressed in his signature shoulder cape and broad-brimmed hat, often financially strapped, decidedly heterosexual, promoter of his Prairie Style and especially of himself. The two men had been sparring ever since an architecture exhibition in 1932 at the new Museum of Modern Art, where Johnson had depicted Wright as a shadowy forerunner of the brilliant architects of the International School, especially Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. More than once, Johnson had declared Wright the greatest architect of the 19th century.

Mies at the time served as Johnson’s muse. Studying architecture at Harvard University, Johnson even designed his first house in Cambridge along Miesean lines. The Glass House of 1949, echoing Mies’s Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, marked the summa of his appreciation, yet it was a very different structure. Mies was so unhappy with the result that he refused Johnson’s offer to spend a night there. And no wonder. Farnsworth’s

girders, columns, and dead-white color appear heavy, sterile, and charmless in comparison with the warmth of Johnson’s glass gem. Johnson had out-Miesed Mies.

Johnson designed like a honeybee, culling virtuous sweets from many flowers. With the Glass House, the nectar didn’t all come from Mies. The structure owes as much to classical ideas of balance as it does to the International Style. True, it has the glass walls and the steel frame that the Internationalists so loved, as well as Mies’s chrome-and-leather Barcelona chairs and day bed. But it also has features that no doubt made Mies uncomfortable, particularly a brick floor, and a brick cylinder that encloses a fireplace and a bathroom. Johnson stresses the totality of a design, too. He pays as much attention to landscapes and interiors as to buildings. Wright’s critical question about the Glass House was on the money; Johnson himself has said that “trees are the basic building block of the place.”

Not all Johnson buildings are as successful as the Glass House. No pretty picture can make the brown wood and glass of the Paine House in Wellsboro, New York, anything other than a mediocre postwar residence. One could easily mistake Johnson’s dormitory at Seton Hill College in Pennsylvania for a Holiday Inn. The John F. Kennedy memorial in Dallas seems less the sacred place he intended than a pair of huge, cold, graffiti-



Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut. "Comfort is not a function of beauty," said Johnson. "Sooner or later we will fit our buildings so that they can be used."

attracting concrete horseshoes. The façade at 1001 Fifth Avenue, with its tongue-in-cheek, slanting mansard roof, reduces postmodernism to a silly joke.

But those are exceptions. Most of Johnson's designs are remarkable. The best of his buildings—say, the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute in Utica, New York, the Pennzoil and Transco towers in Houston, the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California, the interior of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, and even the AT&T Building in New York, with its Chippendale highboy top—are like finely constructed stage sets. All the elements, interior and exterior, come together in graceful harmony.

It has been 60 years since Johnson executed his first design, his own one-story house in Cambridge. Like orchestra conductors and Supreme Court justices, architects tend to live a long time. Mies died at 83; Wright at 91; Johnson is now a vigorous 96. It is only fitting to celebrate his rich career with a handsome coffee-table book. *The Architecture of Philip Johnson* provides a brief foreword by Johnson, an intelligent but light essay by Hilary Lewis, and close to 400 splendid photographs

by Richard Payne, with captions by Stephen Fox. It makes a wonderful companion to Franz Schulze's biography *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (1994), which was burdened with disappointing illustrations.

Hilary Lewis paints a sunny picture of Johnson's connection to Mies, the influence of historical precedents, and his interest in emerging architectural movements. As she remarks, Johnson "often embraces forms developed by others but then transforms these in various ways." She might have said that he appropriates others' designs and improves on them. The industrious bee alights on many flowers. But Lewis might also have spent a few words on some *fleurs du mal* whose nectar Johnson sucked up and later secreted. They constitute a part of his architecture in general and of his Glass House in particular. This darker past has been documented by Schulze and a number of critics and is important in any assessment of Johnson's work.

After the Museum of Modern Art's International Show that so annoyed Wright, Johnson left for Europe to see the emerging Third Reich. He attended a Hitler rally held outside Potsdam and was taken with the drama of Hitler's harangue as well as "all

those blond boys in black leather.” Returning to the United States, he sought out some of this nation’s fledgling fascists and dictators—first Huey Long, who rebuffed him, and then Father Charles Coughlin, whose magazine *Social Justice* soon featured Johnson’s anti-Semitic diatribes. For a Coughlin rally in Chicago, Johnson designed a platform modeled on one he had seen Hitler use in Potsdam. No doubt he improved on the original.

Johnson’s interest in Hitler led him back to Germany as a guest of the Propaganda Ministry to witness the invasion of Poland. “We saw Warsaw burn and Modlin being bombed. It was a stirring spectacle,” he wrote to a friend, Viola Bodenschatz. Back in the United States, he churned out articles and speeches dismissing Nazi atrocities as fabrications of American and British propagandists. By 1940, after being investigated by the FBI and linked with the “American Fascists” in magazines, Johnson left the public sphere for architecture school at Harvard. He had been an architecture curator and critic; now he would be an architect. The Glass House marked his reentry into public life.

And from what flowers did Johnson suck for his Glass House? The blossoms, it seems, of a burning Poland. As Johnson said in *Architectural Review* in 1950, the main motif of the house, the brick platform and the brick cylinder, came not from Mies “but rather from a burnt wooden village I saw once where nothing was left but foundations and chimneys of brick. Over the chimney I slipped a steel cage with a glass skin. The chimney forms the anchor.” Based on the evidence, biographer Schulze and other critics conclude that the architect had admired this “burnt wooden village” during his Nazi-sponsored junket to Poland. Ruins fascinate Johnson. In his preface to this book, he directs readers to the ruins of the New York State pavilion he designed for the 1964–65 World’s Fair. “In a way, the ruin is even more haunting than the original structure. There ought to be a university course in the pleasure of ruins.” Stirring spectacle indeed.

Whatever its sources, the architecture of Philip Johnson’s career has often been superb. His New Canaan prop-

erty, now about 43 acres, serves as a hive for his many gatherings. In the five decades since he built the Glass House and adjacent guest house there, he has added a pavilion, painting and sculpture galleries, a library/study, a “ghost house” (made of chainlink fencing on the ruined foundation of a farm building), a tower in tribute to Lincoln Kirstein, and a gatehouse. In these structures we glimpse inspiration from, among others, the Mycenaean treasury of Atreus, Pop art, Michael Graves, deconstruction, Giorgio De Chirico, postmodernism, and the Platonic solids. It is not so much a house, Johnson has said, as “a clearinghouse of ideas.”

However talented and clever Philip Johnson is, I suspect that his transmutations will not influence and inspire future architects in the way that the work of Wright, Mies, Le Corbusier, or Louis Kahn has done. Indeed, this already seems to be the case. Rather than having been influenced by Johnson, important younger architects such as Robert Venturi, Frank Gehry, and the late Charles Moore have influenced him.

Johnson’s life and work remind me of Ezra Pound’s. A scurrilous anti-Semite and Fascist, Pound was also an extraordinary poet. I find the political stance of both men repugnant, yet I’m moved by their art. (Fate wasn’t as kind to Pound. While Johnson was executing lucrative commissions for the Rockefeller and Schlumberger oil barons and designing the sculpture garden in the Museum of Modern Art, the poet, who was arrested in Italy for broadcasting fascist propaganda, was languishing in St. Elizabeth’s mental hospital in Washington.) However contemptible Philip Johnson’s politics were (or are), we must recognize him as a Nietzschean to whom art matters above all. And as Nietzsche reminds us, “Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature winged insects and honey gatherers of the mind.”

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