



Johnson, Philip (1906-2005)

by Ira Tattelman

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Controversial and provocative, Philip C. Johnson was a towering force in American architecture for many years. Known both for promoting the International Style in the United States and for helping to define Post-Modern architecture, he had an uncanny ability to sense new trends and to adapt his style to those trends.

Philip Cortelyou Johnson was born into a wealthy family in Cleveland on July 8, 1906. After graduating from Harvard with a B.A. in Architectural History, he became the founding director of the Department of Architecture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

At the age of 26, he co-curated, with Henry-Russell Hitchcock, the influential 1932 exhibit entitled "International Style: Architecture since 1922." With this exhibit Hitchcock and Johnson effectively brought modern European architecture to America. Johnson also used his own personal wealth to introduce Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier to the United States.

After a brief period of residence in Europe, during which he spoke admiringly of the Nazi movement (beliefs he later recanted), Johnson returned to the United States to attend Harvard's Graduate School of Design. At the age of 37, after having been an author, historian, museum director, curator, and critic, Johnson became an architect.

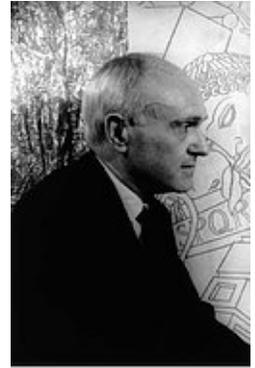
In 1949, he designed his own residence in New Canaan, Connecticut. It has since become one of the most famous houses in the world. Made with steel frame and glass, the see-through "Glass House" has an open plan with a bath and fireplace in a brick cylinder.

In the 1950s, Johnson worked on a number of glass towers, as well as the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (completed in 1980), and, as an associate of van der Rohe, the Seagram Building in New York.

By the 1960s, however, he began to criticize the modernist aesthetic he had championed. With the State Theater at Lincoln Center and New York State Pavilion at the New York World's Fair, Johnson's style became more eclectic.

When he became partners with John Burgee in 1967, he fully embraced Post-Modernism. Johnson and Burgee, whose partnership lasted until 1987, designed some of the nation's most visible high-rise projects in Boston, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, and San Francisco. In 1984, his New York City AT&T Building with its Chippendale top became the most talked about building of the year.

Johnson's later projects were smaller and more personal. He curated a show on Deconstruction in 1988 and,



Top: A portrait of Philip Johnson created by Carl Van Vechten in 1963.

Above: The Seagram Building in New York City, a building Johnson worked on as an associate of Mies van der Rohe. Photograph by Steve Cadman. The portrait by Carl van Vechten courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. The image of the Seagram Building appears under the Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike License.

later, added a visitor's pavilion to his New Canaan estate. This latest addition, built in 1995, is an abstract and disorienting structure painted red and black. Made by spraying concrete onto a metal framework, this new entry hall with gift shop will introduce visitors to Johnson's long and controversial career when the estate (donated to the National Trust for Historic Preservation) opens to the public.

While never completely hiding his long term relationship with curator David Whitney, which began in 1960, Johnson did not officially "come out" publicly until 1994, when his biography by Franz Schulze was released.

Not long afterwards, he was asked to design a new sanctuary for Dallas's Cathedral of Hope, then a member of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC), the nation's largest predominantly gay and lesbian religious denomination. Johnson's Cathedral of Hope, still unbuilt because of a lack of funds, is a 2,000-seat sanctuary with an altar under a ceiling that rises more than 100 feet. The design has no parallel lines; the walls twist, tilt, and bend into ceilings and floors.

Monumental, unconventional, and ever-changing, the proposed building will be a symbol of strength, hope, and unity. As Herbert Muschamp observed in reaction to the design, "It ministers not only, or even primarily, to the needs of gay people for self-acceptance. It ministers to society's need for self-acceptance; for the wisdom to perceive that gay men and lesbians are integral to society, not alien from it."

Even in semi-retirement during his last years, Johnson remained a dominating force in American architecture and a helpful influence and mentor to many younger architects.

Provocative and unpredictable, Johnson had a chameleon-like career, often reinventing himself, changing architectural allegiances, and not following any particular style. "Whoever commissions buildings buys me. I'm for sale," he once quipped. Although he was accused of being more interested in style than substance, Johnson always showed intelligence and enthusiasm.

He received the American Institute of Architects (AIA) 25 Year Award (1975), the AIA Gold Medal (1978), and the first Pritzker Architecture Prize (1979).

Johnson died on January 25, 2005 at his home in New Canaan, Connecticut. He is survived by his life-partner, David Whitney.

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About the Author

Ira Tattelman is an architect, artist, and independent scholar living in Washington, D.C. He has published in such books and journals as *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies*, *Genders and Generations*, *Public Sex*, *Gay Space*, *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*, *The Best of The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Lambda Book Report* and *Journal of Homosexuality*.