



## PEOPLE WHO LIVE IN GLASS HOUSES...

WITH NOTHING TO HIDE, PHILIP JOHNSON'S GLASS HOUSE SHOWS THERE IS MORE TO A HOUSE THAN A ROOF AND FOUR WALLS

BY MELISSA SILVA

When I was a child, I loved to go for car rides with my father. During such rides, I was always full of questions: What does this button do? Can I press this one?

During one of our evening rides, I vividly remember turning on the light inside the car; rendering our vehicle somewhat of a motorized firefly, flying down the night's path. In one such instance, my father told me, "Don't turn on the light! It makes the car a fishbowl; everyone can see inside."

It seems as though the average person has these same reservations about being revealed or exposed — emotionally, physically, or both. There exists a level of privacy most wish to uphold, which perhaps explains my father's resistance to having the car illuminated while driving at night.

The same can be said about the home. Walls, a roof, shrubbery, a fence — in addition to protection, such attributes are also used for privacy to prevent others from looking in.

With that said, why would anyone want to live in a glass house?

For Philip Johnson, creator and owner of the renowned Glass House, the answer to such question is really quite transparent.

"[When] it first crossed my mind to build a glass house [it] was about 1946 when I saw that Mies [van der Rohe, Johnson's associate] was going to build a glass house and I had never thought of building a glass house," said Johnson in an interview by Franz Schulze for the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1991, the organization to which Johnson





Living room in the Philip Johnson Glass House

donated the house in 1986.

Johnson, a graduate of Harvard Graduate School of Design, founding director of the department of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and designer of some of America's most renowned modern architectural landmarks — the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at MoMA and Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York — borrowed the idea from van der Rohe, who at the time was designing the famed glass-and-steel Farnsworth House. It's been said that both the Glass House and Farnsworth House were "the result of shared ideas and collective desire."

"So I finally bought the land by walking down a hill in the middle of the snow," said Johnson, "But when I got there I realized



there was no place in the world like this, so I decided to build a house there [...] So I said Mies was right, let's build a glass house. And I pushed the solid element of necessities further and further and further away until it almost disappeared into the hill."

A stewardship site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Philip Johnson Glass House is comprised of 47 acres of land upon which sit 14 structures — some of which he built over a period of 50 years — known as "a diary of Johnson's architectural ideas," including Johnson's iconic personal residence, the Glass House.

"Completed in 1949, the Glass House is an icon of modern architecture," says Irene Allen, curator and collections manager at the Philip Johnson Glass House. "Although Johnson was directly influenced by the design esthetic of Mies van der Rohe's 'skin and bones' architecture, it was a style that Johnson reinterpreted and made uniquely his own."

Located in New Canaan, Ct., the Glass

*"A legacy of focus upon details and surface — inside and out"*

House sits on a promontory, providing a view of a pond and woods, thus largely obscured from public view. Made primarily of glass and black steel pillars, each of the four quarter-inch thick exterior glass walls include a central door that opens directly onto the property, seamlessly eliminating the divide between indoor and outdoor space.

Essentially one large room, the 54-foot long, 32-foot wide house includes a kitchen, dining room, living room, bedroom, hearth area and a bathroom, contained by a brick cylinder that along with a series of built-in, walnut storage cabinets, are the only markers of separation between the "rooms."

Regarded as the structure that brought International Style to residential America, the Glass House was only considered complete to Johnson with the inclusion of the Brick House, which was completed a few months prior.

Meant to serve as a "lesson in contrasts" alongside the Glass House, the Brick House — linked to the Glass House by a grass court — contains "all the support systems necessary for the function of both buildings and is made almost entirely of brick, as its name suggests, with only skylights and large circular forms at the back of the structure."

Also on the property are the Painting Gallery and Sculpture Gallery. Completed in 1965, the Painting Gallery was built to "house the collection of large-scale modern paintings that he and [partner] David Whitney collected throughout their lifetimes," including works by Andy Warhol, Julian Schnabel and Cindy Sherman. Appearing outside as a grass-covered mound, accessible only by a monumental stone entrance, the underground bermed structure is said to be a result of Johnson's inspiration — the ancient Greek tomb, the Treasury of Atreus.

Built after the Painting Gallery in 1970, the Sculpture Gallery also has a Grecian influence. Rather than a tomb, its





Photo of Philip Johnson by Annie Leibovitz



Painting Gallery



Sculpture Gallery

inspiration is garnered from Greek islands and villages. With a glass ceiling supported by tubular steel rafters containing cold cathode lamps, the gallery is comprised of a series of 45-degree angle squares and spiralling staircases, which are used to showcase an array of art, including that of Bruce Nauman and Frank Stella. It's been said that Johnson adored the gallery so much, he contemplated leaving the Glass House to make it his home.

The remainder of the property includes additional structures built by Johnson, existing buildings and architectural follies.

*Points on a Line*, a film by artist Sarah Morris, which was commissioned by the Glass House in 2010, was created with the intention of documenting the “shared desire to build structures that might change the way we think about a house, a form and a context.”

You could say that this change in

thinking was something that was discussed years prior within the Glass House itself, which for decades served as the meeting place for the great minds in the realms of architecture, design and art. Figures such as Andy Warhol and Robert A.M. Stern sat within the glass walls and engaged in conversations, many of which are believed to have influenced the culture of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For Morris, the Glass House demonstrates “a legacy of focus upon details and surface — inside and out,” and remains “elusive despite [its] openness.” Perhaps it is its perpetual elusiveness that renders it significant today, 63 years after its completion.

“The historical significance of the Glass House is multilayered... which makes it a place of interest to a broad range of the public: Architects and designers, artists, art historians and art lovers, as well as the general public,” explains Allen.

Such historical significance is something new director Henry Urbach — appointed earlier this year — wishes to uphold, with his plans to reanimate the property as a centre of contemporary culture, a place where once again, exhibitions, performances, events and of course, engaging conversations will be held.

If anything, these conversations will hopefully allow visitors to move past the question of living and onto the question of creating. Akin to Morris, the purpose of the Glass House is really not about living at all, or questions of privacy, but more about changing — or challenging — the way we approach and appropriate conventional forms, such as the house, and reappropriate such forms as both art and historical landmarks.

It's been said that Johnson was once approached by a visitor who said of the property, “It's all very beautiful, but I wouldn't live here.” Based on the discussion herein, it makes complete sense that Johnson blatantly responded, “I haven't asked you to.”

“When people come into my house,” Johnson once said, “I say, ‘Just shut up and look around.’” He couldn't have made himself any clearer. **U**

» [philipjohnsonglasshouse.org](http://philipjohnsonglasshouse.org)

» [preservationnation.org](http://preservationnation.org)

**&** To see more photos of the Glass House and learn about architectural structures reminiscent of the famous residence, go to [lifestylemag.com](http://lifestylemag.com)