

# Seeing design in a see-through house

Philip Johnson's Glass House has been described as 'the most sustained cultural salon that the United States has ever seen'



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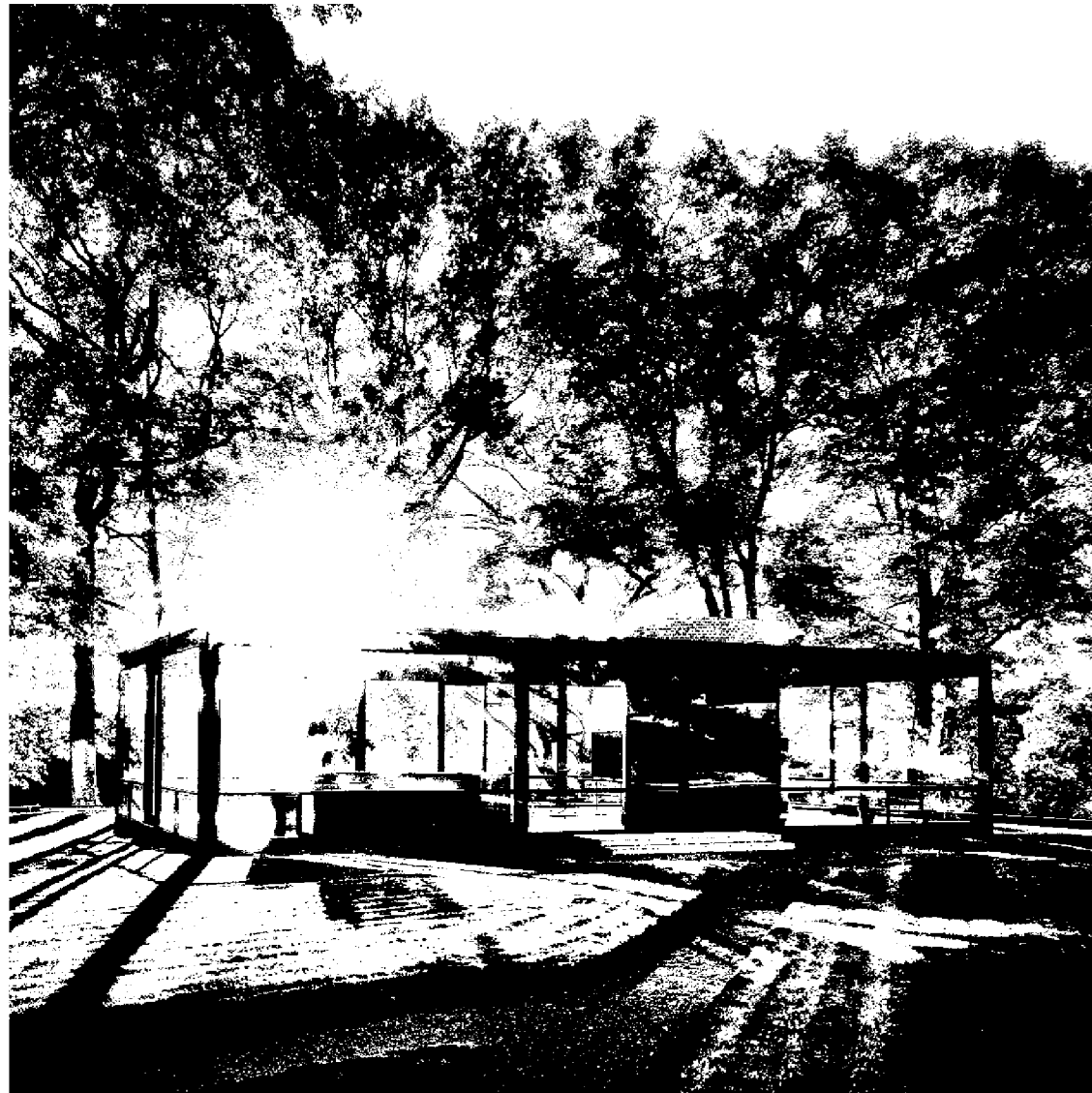
It's the little things that hit you when visiting a house you've seen a thousand times in photographs – a scuff on the counter top, a piece of missing grout, a cigarette burn in the upholstery – because the big things are already fused in your mind.

I think, also, it's because there is so much that's perfect about Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Conn., the eye is desperate to catch a flaw. In other words, we need to see that Mr. Johnson's masterwork is as human as he.

I had the privilege of spending a sunny, late afternoon last week touring the almost 50 bucolic acres Mr. Johnson assembled during his long life as part of a television crew (I'm hosting a new series, *Where Cool Came From*, so look for it in the spring of 2014) with docent Kathy Karlik, who then left us to our own devices for a short period of time.

As a matter of fact, the first time I opened the door to the house I was alone while the rest of our group chatted a few hundred metres away.

Surprisingly, this icon of Modernism – created using sheets and sheets of glass, sleek steel, and brick for the 1,728 square feet of floor and large round chimney – smelled a little like the cottage does when you open it after a few weeks of sitting empty: Musty and stale. Call me crazy, but I think that's what will stay with me; similarly, my most cherished memory of a two-night stay at Frank Lloyd Wright's Louis Penfield House outside of Cleveland (which anyone can do) is the moment I noticed a few warps in the exterior Masonite panels were allowing sunlight to penetrate into the bedroom as I unpacked my luggage! Moments that demystify architecture turn demigods back into people who were just trying to make a living but became famous along the way; more importantly, they give us regular folk a few minutes of that lottery-ticket-feeling when we think "Maybe I could have been invited to a cocktail party here."



The Glass House. The home and grounds can now be rented for dinner parties or other functions.

Mr. Johnson and his partner of 45 years, David Whitney, certainly used the Glass House for entertaining. Wonderful photographs show Andy Warhol, Frank Stella, Robert A. M. Stern, Jasper Johns and Frank Gehry (to name but a few) gathered around the Mies furniture and at the compound's other structures, such as the partially submerged and curvaceous Painting Gallery (1965), the angular and light-filled Sculpture Gallery (1970) and the whacked-out Da Monsta (1995). In fact, the website, philipjohnsonglasshouse.org, quotes architectural historian Vincent Scully as describing the compound as "the most sustained cultural salon that the United States has ever seen."

That continues to this day, as the National Trust Historic Site now hosts a series of author's readings, has sponsored digital "conversations" in past years



Dave LeBlanc in the house with guide Kathy Karlik.

(glasshouseconversations.org) and continues to rent the home, other buildings, and grounds to dinner party groups or for larger functions since opening to the public in 2007.

Conversations at these gatherings, no doubt, will turn to the topic of Modernist preservation, since even attendees who know little about the era will understand that they are in a very special place. And, as more of these homes are opened up for tours, whether the famous 1949 Charles and Ray Eames home in Pacific Palisades, Calif., the unconventional 1922 Rudolph Schindler House in West Hollywood (run by the MAK Center for Art and Architecture), or lesser-knowns such as the 1953 J. Irwin Miller House by Eero Saarinen in Columbus, Ind. (run by the Indianapolis Museum of Art) or the 1959 Wilsonart House in Temple, Tex. (also on the National Register), similar experiences, from the sublime to the mundane (like that musty smell I experienced) will embolden others to reassess our endangered stock of Modernist gems across North America.

Maybe some will rally together to save a few more.

And speaking of the sublime, I did experience that as well. Standing in the living room, bathed in golden sunlight, my eyes tracking the shadowy bars moving slowly across the floor – created by both the trees and the home's metal frame – a sense of calmness and peace washed over me so quickly it sent a chill up my spine. When I walked over to the fireplace and ran my hand along the brick, I thought about long winter nights here, and how snow pressing against the glass walls must have seemed both threatening and magical at once; outspoken urban critic James Howard Kunstler (whom I interviewed during this trip for a different episode), told me Mr. Johnson and the other Modernists of his generation forgot about what human beings need to feel sheltered.

With all respect to Mr. Kunstler (since I agree with a great deal of what he writes about), I felt as sheltered in Mr. Johnson's home as I did when I wandered the dark, cozy rooms of Frank Lloyd Wright's Darwin Martin House in Buffalo, NY.

Plaster and lath or steel and glass: In the hands of a great architect, it matters not what makes up the wall.