A Portrait and a Dream

The visual representation of non-visual psychic content in design
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Abstract

*Philip Johnson’s Glass House is interpreted as containing visual representations of non-visual psychic content, specifically, aspects of object relationships with the architect’s mother and Mies van der Rohe, his idealized mentor. It is argued that these latent meanings—notably, Johnson’s sense of internal fragmentation, need for binding containment, and conflicted wish for dependent attachment or fusion—achieve dynamic, stylistic, and functional signification in the manifest design of the Glass House, supporting and extending the author’s previous conceptualization of design as dream. The dynamics represented in Johnson’s work are considered in juxtaposition with Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of enclosed space.*
Began the treatment by assuring him that if he shut his eyes he would see pictures or have ideas, which he was then to communicate to me. He replied in pictures. —SIGMUND FREUD

If we have retained an element of dream in our memories, if we have gone beyond merely assembling exact recollections, bit by bit the house that was lost in the mists of time will appear from out the shadow...—GASTON BACHELARD

Introduction: A Portrait and a Dream

The present study extends the previous conceptualization of the design of Philip Johnson’s “Glass House” in New Canaan, Connecticut (Fig. 1) as being structured and interpretable as a dream. This conjecture was arrived at through evidence, derived from dream-interpretative methodology, that Johnson’s unconscious visual recollection of components of the Mycenaean Citadel had undergone distorting processes of condensation, displacement, and secondary revision during its translation into diverse manifest elements of the Glass House complex (xxx). In another study, the single painting within the Glass House, Poussin’s Burial of Phocion, is argued to represent additional, interlacing aspects of Johnson’s identity, including the narratives of disgrace, exile and redemption (xxx). Organized around the classical legends of Atreus and Phocion, these analyses focused on dialectics of power, destruction, and mortality. Here, these efforts are elaborated by the demonstration of the visual representation of non-visual, abstract psychic ideation, focusing on conflicts around separation and other facets of Johnson’s object relationships, echoing and adding to the library of latent meanings contained and represented by the Glass House. Since its design

1 Freud 1900, p. 618.
2 Bachelard 1958, p. 57.
reflects diverse and crucial aspects of its designer, it is therefore, like a dream, a representation of the self—a self-portrait, of sorts.

Like many of his era, Johnson embraced the idea that his work was a product of his unconscious mind, and, by extension, inexplicable during its achievement.

The artist is traditionally inarticulate... His reason for doing this, not that, is mere rationalization after the fact of blind artistic choice (Johnson 1979, p. 73).

It’s impossible to know what influences from your early life or from study are up in your consciousness (Johnson, quoted in Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 59).

Jackson Pollock also ascribed to the belief that creativity is a direct expression of the unconscious. In *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, Michael Leja’s (1997) examination of the role of the unconscious as subject and inspiration for Abstract Expressionist painters, Leja postulates that Pollack’s experience with Jungian psychoanalysis stimulated his interest in articulating his unconscious in graphic form. Leja maintains that Jungian constructs—in particular, archetypal symbolism—proved a superior vehicle than Freudian psychology for achieving this end.

the graphic orientation and the rich, visual vocabulary constituted in Jungian discourse... was, in a sense, the version of the unconscious best suited to visual representation—to the project of ‘visualizing the unconscious’—and it seemed, in particular, a marked improvement over Freudian dream illustration (Leja 1997, p. 195).

In this passage, “Freudian dream illustration” is divested of Freud’s stress on visual representation, and likewise, throughout Leja’s exposition, Freud’s “version of the unconscious” is divested of its stress on dreams. As applied to the unconscious, the Freud–Jung divide is thus framed around an inaccurate dichotomy of visual vs. non–visual.

Pollock’s 1953 painting, *Portrait and a Dream*, is a diptych on a sold white ground, the left-hand side a abstract black and white drip painting, and the right-hand side carefully drawn,
colored and abstractedly figurative (Fig. 2). Leja understands Pollock’s painting as a literal 
*depiction*—a “visualization of the unconscious”—of a portrait and of a dream, rather than as 
a representation, discussion, or other sort of vehicle of these or other meanings. In 
addition, I argue that the common, reflexive assignment of the “dream” to the left hand 
portion of the painting and the “portrait” to the right—despite its opposition to the left-to-
right listing in Pollock’s title, *Portrait and a Dream*—is not a presumption that can be safely 
made. Indeed, the variable level of abstraction of the diptych obscures the fact that *both* 
aspects are abstracted. If this proposition—that there *is* no assignment—is allowed, the 
painting is liberated to comment on the ambiguous equivalence, or interchangeability, of a 
portrait and a dream: which is more revealing? which is more veritable? which has more 
color, which has more depth?³

Although this discussion scarcely qualifies as an exegesis, it serves to illustrate that 
although *Portrait and a Dream* is referred to here and elsewhere as an exemplar of the 
primacy of the unconscious in twentieth-century art, when it, and other works of art, are 
interpreted *within a psychoanalytic context*, they tend to be addressed as hieroglyphics, a 
literal configuration of legible symbols, as opposed to as containing latent, concealed 
meanings—that is, as a dream. Freud precisely cautioned against this, anticipating Jung’s 
formulations.

³ The reader is referred to Gedo (1999) for an exemplary discussion of covert meanings contained in 
the self-portraits exchanged between Van Gogh and Gaugin.
restricting the work of translating dreams merely to translating symbols and against abandoning the technique of making use of the dreamer's associations (Freud 1900, pp. 353–360).

The application of Freud's dream-interpretative methodology to graphic works of art—having long been understood as deriving from the unconscious, but only rarely more rigorously compared to dreams—may have been discouraged by the traditional association of Freudian psychology with conceptual ideas and dynamics (castration anxiety, the Oedipal complex) as opposed to visual imagery and symbols (as in Jungian thematics), exampled by Leja's analysis. This dichotomy is perverse as it neglects Freud's interest in the dreamer's creative subjectivity, and obstructs the appreciation of his theory of dreams as indeed preoccupied with that most conspicuous element of dreams—the visual representation of underlying meanings, including unconscious, non-visual psychic content.

what are truly characteristic of dreams are only those elements of their content which behave like images, which are more like perceptions (Freud 1900, pp. 49–50).

Of the various subsidiary thoughts attached to the essential dream-thoughts, those will be preferred which admit of visual representation (pp. 343–344)

Donald Kuspit (1991) offers another concern regarding the limitations of psychoanalytic approaches to visual art.

[Freud's] psychoanalysis of art undermines its sublimity, deconstructing that sublimity in a way that makes it seem impossible to reconstruct... Applying psychoanalysis to art, then, amounts to demystifying and unmasking it... For Freud, the work of art is a kind of dream—if a social one—and the poet and the artist daydreamers. Art cannot sustain its sublimity in the face of the psychoanalytic stare that turns it into a symptom (p. 4).

Kuspit, with others, offers a deserved criticism of the narrowly focused analyses that deform and undermine the “sublimity” of art, those that assert with certainty to provide exclusively correct or conclusive interpretations, and those that would impose a ready-made theoretical
framework in lieu of addressing the artist’s subjectivity. Yet in the following, he appears to undermine an aspect of his argument.

psychoanalytic interpretation is more adequate to and constitutive of the literary than the visual work of art, for it cannot come to terms... with the power of visuality in the best works of visual art... It is inseparable from the special erotic character of seeing... One should also recall, in this context, Freud’s assertion... that ‘thinking in pictures is... only a very incomplete form of being conscious. ...it stands nearer to unconscious processes than does thinking in words...’ Psychoanalytic interpretation may constitute literary art by interpretive act... [but not] visual art because of visual art’s almost unmanageable power of sensuous/erotic excitation (pp. 6–7).

Following Freud, Kuspit suggests that psychoanalysis can “constitute literary art,” but not visual art—not because the latter is more sublime, but because it is more erotic, more primal, “nearer to unconscious processes.” In other words, more like a dream. Assuming for the moment that Kuspit is correct (which I do not believe is the case), why, then, avoid the very apt, and very depth—psychological approach to art as dream? Kuspit may be speaking for himself when he suggests that there a

fear of [psychoanalysis’s] seemingly overwhelming reductive power—its power to reduce the object of its investigation so completely to the terms of its theory of material subjectivity that the object seems nothing but an epiphenomenon of that theory, insubstantial and meaningless apart from it—remains among art lovers. One must heed their objections, especially when made in intellectually cogent from—however much such form may mask narcissistic distress at the sight of a precious object being “slandered” by psychoanalytic reduction (pp. 2–3).

Heeding his own objections, Kuspit’s characterization of psychoanalytic approaches to art as reflecting overly simplistic, pathologizing and necessarily disrespectful stance, is, I argue, itself a reductive generalization and neither a conclusive nor necessary view. Rather—and more importantly—as Kuspit allows, it reflects a fearful fantasy that analysis reduces and ultimately destroys the object of its attention, rather than adding to its appreciation and
understanding. This fear is the same fear that clinical psychoanalysts and therapists face every day: our patients’ fear that by being understood, or analyzed, one will be being taken apart—diminished, defeated, and destroyed.

How, then, to approach a visual design as a dream, and not a hieroglyphic, and avoid the unsubtle reductionism that disassembles a work of art into rudimentary iconography, robbing it of its power, its “sublimity,” its ability to arouse—much the way Freud’s own theories have in some realms been reduced to an assortment of misapplied ideas and dusty clichés? First, one must choose a design that lends itself to the methodology of dream interpretation, a suitability conferred by the presence of accessible signs in the manifest content, and the availability of meaningful associative data. In the approach I have outlined elsewhere (xxx), in the absence of the designer these “associations” may be expanded to include his comments, writings, life history and experiences, and body of work, from which interpretative lines can be traced to underlying meanings. Second, one needs to appreciate the inherent limitations of the dream–interpretative approach, which specifies from the start that there is no single all-encompassing understanding; instead, we expect many layers of meanings to co-exist, and to uncover and infer only those meanings made accessible by the associative material at hand.

In this study, I will endeavor to show how Johnson’s sense of internal fragmentation and related conflicts over individuation, autonomy, and dependent attachment are visually represented in the manifest design of the Glass House. Like many of our patients, Johnson also feared coming apart; I will argue that his architecture represents this fear, and also reflects an attempt to keep himself together as he navigated the dangers of autonomy. Throughout, it is understood that these are but a few facets of a far more complex body of
meaning, and are explicated with every effort to handle with care Johnson’s portrait and
dream—to maintain an empathic holding, rather than a dismantling stare.

A Child is Falling

Louise Pope Johnson, Philip Johnson’s mother, was

a very strange woman. She didn’t like children and so we were brought up by nannies...
outside the family. As soon as any of us children were born, Mother would go off to Europe
with our father and leave us with a nurse (Stern 2008, p. 20).

This is Johnson’s characterization of his mother: a mother who abandons her disliked
children at birth. In the following, he links her, and significantly, her educative role, to early
manifestations of life-long feelings of aloneness.

[My parents] didn’t like each other very much... [Father] used to complain that [Mother] would
never let people in the house. He loved to see people... So I was brought up as a loner
because of my mother’s antisocial attitude, which stayed with me my whole life... [During
summers on their farm] we weren’t allowed to mix with the locals... so we were alone again.
Mother would teach us (Stern 2008, pp. 18–19).

Johnson was further set apart by his privilege, driven to school in the proverbial chauffeured
limousine, dressed in Brooks Brothers suits and carrying elaborate lunches, which he ate
alone. His fierce intellectuality became a means to rationalize his loneliness, transforming it
into something desirable; at Harvard, he decided that

maybe it’s better to be a lonely person because you do then start looking and being
intellectually curious, inquisitive (Stern 2008 p. 23).

Ironically, Johnson’s mental prowess and power of articulation encouraged some to
perceive him as a dilettante—a reputation enhanced by Johnson’s insistence on presenting
himself as a second-rate designer, epigone and copyist. One interpretation of Johnson’s
tendency to put some off, while gaining the admiration of others, it is to suggest that it
reflected an identification with his scholastically demanding mother, whose alternately engaged, praised, intimidated, and rejected him. If a mother can be compared to a house—an enveloping, holding environment—then there was something about Louise that recalls Le Corbusier’s conception of a house as a “machine a habiter”—a machine for living.

Although Louise was experienced as aloof and cold, she also appeared to have difficulty letting her children individuate, resisting the tendency of Johnson’s strongly felt aesthetic and intellectual preferences to diverge from her own. Johnson relates that

I did notice that I loved architecture and that was the only part where I seemed to depart from my mother, much to my surprise. Because I was a pure mama’s boy, I had no inkling that there was any knowledge in the world worth having except what she could tell me. So when I first liked a building—I guess it was the Parthenon, naturally [age 22—his first such response was more likely at the Chartres cathedral at age 13]—I burst into tears and she didn’t know why. That she didn’t see what I saw there was as annoying to me as it was to her when I didn’t appreciate a Simone Martini that she liked in the Siena museum... I couldn’t partake of her particular passion. Although later I did—my rooms at Harvard had nothing but Martini (Stern 2008, p. 20).

Note the idealization of his mother, perceived as omnipotent and containing all the “knowledge in the world worth having.” It can be imagined that a longing to remain fused with this powerful, all-knowing woman may have further complicated Johnson’s separation from her, and deepened his despair over not being able to combine his jouissance with a feeling of oneness with her. Johnson’s notion that his love of architecture was a point of departure from his mother seems a bit of a conundrum, as he was well aware of her keen interest in modern architecture; at her instigation, the interior of their home in Cleveland had been redesigned by forward-looking designers during Johnson’s childhood. One way of understanding this puzzle is to postulate that Johnson was describing her failure to appreciate and share his emotional response to specific works of architecture. Another
would be to hypothesize that he needed to minimize his mother’s penchant for architecture in order to claim it for himself, something uniquely belonging to this “pure mama’s boy” in the service of individuating from her—despite (and perhaps, because of) her discouraging this process.

As a young adult, Johnson’s loyalty to Louise was reflected by a constant correspondence, which faded until he had little contact with either parent. Johnson’s curt statement that “she was my invention; I invented her to write my letters to” (Schulze 1994, p. 51) suggests another identification with Louise, perhaps stemming from Johnson’s feeling that he had been invented by her to fulfill her vicarious, narcissistic wishes for an exceptional child, a prince (xxx). But there is something here that hints at Johnson’s own ambivalence around differentiating from his mother: the confession that he was “as annoyed” with her differences from him, and his dutiful decoration of his rooms with reproductions of Martini, her favorite painter—a vain attempt, perhaps, to keep her close and attached.

And so attention must be paid to Simone Martini (c. 1284–c. 1344). The works of this Sienese painter involve reverently drawn classical and Gothic architectural motifs. Touring

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4 The dynamics suggested here are closely aligned with Mahler’s (1968) description of those who seek “symbiotic omnipotent fusion with the mother” (p. 74), whose “central problem was their incessant search for their place in life—their search for identity... I could reconstruct a very long symbiotic–parasitic phase with a narcissistic mother, who was highly seductive yet could accept [her son] only... as a continuation of her own narcissistic self... After the symbiotic–parasitic relationship, the mother suddenly abandoned [him] to his own devices... he was forever searching for the ‘good’ need–satisfying mother... Yet, at the same time, he dreaded engulfment in symbiosis... [and] thus ‘lose himself” (pp. 27–29).
Siena and its environs with Louise on one of their many European tours, one of his paintings
Johnson would have encountered as a child is Martini’s masterwork, *The Miracle of the Child
Falling From the Balcony*, which offers a group of buildings notable for their disoriented,
cubist geometry, uncannily similar to certain of Johnson’s aesthetic conjectures, exemplified
by the Beck House (Fig. 3). And what boy would not be arrested by this image of a child
plunging head-first, his mother standing helplessly by? Her arms can only reach upward, in
a reflexive gesture of terror, while those of another—an angel—fortuitously reach out to
catch the child. Also in Siena, Martini’s *St. Louis of Toulouse Appearing at the Bedside of a
Sick Child* has a classical setting of austere, classical simplicity, which could easily pass for a
prototype of Johnsonian design (Fig. 4). It, too, is concerned with a vulnerable dyad: a child
in bed, and his similarly beseeching mother—*a child in danger, in danger of forever
separating from his mother*.

Johnson’s ambivalent relationship with his mother was complicated by that with his
father, Homer Johnson (xxx), to whom he was even less attached. His father’s disparaging
rejection of him as an effete, non-income producing “mama’s boy,” enforced by Johnson’s
homosexuality, would never be mitigated by his achievements—“My father always hated [the
Seagram] building”\(^5\) (Stern 2008, p. 148, Riley 2009, p. 66). The sociable Homer was also
something of a disappointment to his son, an aspect Johnson identified with.

I have got some of my father’s superficial get-along—with people–ism that makes me an easy
speaker like Father was. He… never made much sense… they told me in [his father’s law]
firm… that he was just a talker and the real work was done by someone in the back room
(Stern 2008, pp. 16–17).

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\(^5\) Johnson assisted Mies van der Rohe on the landmark Seagram Building in New York, and designed
its interiors and restaurant, The Four Seasons.
I connect myself with able, straight people... Somehow I need that to complement my personality, to make sense of the world... I seem to have a sort of charisma that I don’t understand at all. It isn’t due to ability... I’m not a strong—I’m a weak person (p. 64).

In marked contrast to his confident erudition, Johnson in fact considered himself wanting in many areas, especially those involving talent, creativity or skill. It seems he felt that he could *know* things, but could not *do* things—that he could share in his mother’s knowledge, perhaps, but lacked a sense of independent ability or action-oriented autonomy—bringing to mind Mahler’s descriptions of children for whom adventurous independent exploration during the practicing and rapprochement sub-phases of separation-individuation was compromised (Mahler and La Perriere 1965).

[Before entering architecture school] I realized that I wasn’t cut out as a writer and theorist, and that infuriated me. One doesn’t like to be not good... I had to give up piano playing. I had to give up philosophy... I just felt lost (Stern 2008, pp. 69–71).

Johnson was ever grateful to those who showed confidence in him (xxx). On the other hand, he returned his father’s rejecting attitude, judging him as he had felt judged—useless.

When he died, Johnson told his biographer—pitilessly—

I was spared any problem. And I am a very selfish, very egotistical man. I didn’t give a damn what my father wanted [to not die alone]. [He was] expendable. He wasn’t any use in the world (Schulze 1994, p. 272).

**An Aesthetic Dictator**

As early as 1931, a curator at the newly established Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) at the age of twenty-five, and seven years before he entered architecture school, the perpetually hesitant Johnson expressed anxiety over the idea of having an individual style, averring that “submission to an artistic dictator is better than an anarchy of selfish personal opinion”
(Johnson 1979, p. 49). “Lost,” and not knowing what to do, the radical Modernist Zeitgeist in architecture and design (and the outsize personalities that dominated it) was an organizing scaffold, providing Johnson with a culture, a discipline, and a home. Safer than setting out on his own, his first task at MoMA—the promotion of Modernism—gave Johnson a consuming purpose, and moreover, a secure sense of direction and containment. At the heart of this endeavor was his determined attachment to his architectural *Lieber Meister*: Mies van der Rohe, the pre-eminent spokesman of Modernism, to whom Johnson apprenticed himself with a vengeance. Johnson’s letters from Europe, on assignment from MoMA, reveal his enthrallment with Mies’s Tugendhat House in Brno, and with Mies the man.

[The Tugendhat House] is like the Parthenon... It is without question the best looking house in the world (letter to H.-R. Hitchcock, Schulze 1994, p. 68).

Mies is the greatest man we or I have ever met... He keeps his distance... only letting down graciously once in a while, thus honoring you as the nod of a god would... He is a pure architect (letter to Johnson’s family, p. 69).

Stern rightly notes Johnson’s frank idolatry of Mies, and the absolute quality of his devotion.

Johnson’s early advocacy of Mies’s architecture and his subsequent emulation of it in his own work are virtually without parallel in recent architectural history (Stern 1979, p. 206).

Mies was clearly more than a mentor to Johnson, and more than a contemporary master to follow and identify with: he was, as Johnson lets on, a “God.” Or better, an angel who saved Johnson from falling into the abyss of anarchic artistic isolation. Johnson was drawn to Mies’s impeccable craftsmanship; his use of fine, even opulent finishes, so unlike the utilitarian materials espoused by the contemporaneous Bauhaus designers; and the paradoxical romanticism inherent in the austere, formal purity of his designs. It was an
aesthetic seduction—if not a surrender. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard (1958) notes that when

two images that are the work of two poets pursuing separate dreams [meet], they apparently strengthen each other... The image loses its gratuitousness; the free play of the imagination ceases to be a form of anarchy (p. 59).

Central to Johnson’s feelings of inadequacy as an architect was his lamented (real or imagined) lack of originality or novelty, Johnson’s prevailing definition of genius in design, as personified, for example, by Frank Lloyd Wright. This limiting equivalency prevented Johnson from considering himself to be a true artist or innovative “form–giver,” rather than a derivative “copyist”—or as Wright would say, a “stencillist”. For Johnson, the prospect of “free play”—creating his own work in his own style—was “anarchic,” invoking disorganization and failure; better to be faithful to an idealized “artistic dictator.” While his professional estimation of Mies was a fair and accurate one, Johnson’s absolute deference to him was contributed to by other factors. Johnson’s Germanophilia was one, traceable to his German nanny, and to his parents’ personal passion for all things German (xxx). But surely there was also something about Mies’s discerning, aloof hauteur that was reminiscent of Johnson’s mother, and something about his doctrinaire, rejecting criticality toward Johnson that recapitulated his relationship with both his parents.

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6 Despite their collegial relationship, Wright hurt Johnson often and easily with such mockery, which Johnson occasionally returned, famously calling Wright “the most famous architect of the nineteenth century” (Johnson 1979, p. 189).

7 Johnson’s wisdom in choosing Mies as a mentor was borne out: “events have proved him right to have done so, since Mies still remains the classic shaper of most of our contemporary architectural types” (Scully 1979, pp. 6–7).
I suggest that Johnson’s lack of a sense of internal integration and fear of anarchic isolation stemmed from problems individuating from his mother, for whom, later in life, he substituted dominating others: from the lack of room to develop into his own individual self, with confidence in his own tastes and talent, and without the fear of chaotic annihilation that autonomy evidently entailed for him. His frequent invocations of the need for containment and protection from fragmentation—which, as it will be argued here, is represented in his architecture—may be related to a lack of a fully-formed sense of self, and a “fear of re-engulfment,” which Mahler (1968) formulated as a “dread of dissolution of the self... into an aggressively invested dual unity” (p. 81), only reinforced by a lasting longing for symbiotic fusion. Such a “dual unity” was in fact achieved: by the mid 1950’s, Johnson had earned the epithet “Mies van der Johnson.” Johnson quoted Mies defiantly in support of his slavish discipleship.

Mies has always said it is better to build good buildings than interesting ones... who on the Acropolis would complain of the lack of originality around him? (Johnson 1979, p. 79)

I have been called Mies van der Johnson—it doesn’t bother me in the slightest, and it does seem to me that if our generation is going to stand on somebody’s shoulders, we had better pick the best man to start with (p. 89).

Observe the idealization, rationalization, and negation that belie Johnson’s despair over not being able, in his mind, to build “interesting” buildings—that is, his own, bearing his own name. In the following, the conflict between the chains of safe stylistic enslavement—and the seemingly impossible expectation of constant originality, and its attendant “wilds” of dangerous non-alignment—is guarded against by a joyous subjugation.

I am extremely grateful [for the modern style]. I do not want to wander alone among the arbitrary wilds of ‘taste’... Now I rejoice, I can lean on my elders, then hope to stand on their shoulders... the onus of designing a new style any time one designs a new building is hardly
freedom; it is too heavy a load except for the greatest of Michelangelos or [Frank Lloyd] Wrights (in 1955, Johnson 1979, p. 76).

Some of us rejoice in [our architectural] crutches and pretend that we’re walking and that poor people with two feet are slightly handicapped... The act of creation, like birth and death, you have to face by yourself. There aren’t any rules... architecture is the sum of inescapable artistic decisions that you have to make. If you’re strong you can make them... I’m a traditionalist. I believe in history... I do not believe in perpetual revolution in architecture. I do not strive for originality. As Mies once told me, ‘It is much better to be good than to be original.’ I believe that. We have very fortunately the work of our spiritual fathers to build on. We hate them, of course, as all spiritual sons hate all spiritual fathers... Can you imagine being alive at a more wonderful time? Never in history... were the great men so great, never could we learn so much from them (in 1954, Johnson 1979, pp. 137–140)

The metaphor of *handicap* implies that Johnson believed that making his own “artistic decisions”—standing on his own two feet—required not only the “onus” of iconoclasm, but also the *strength* to carry this “heavy load,” qualities he felt he lacked, but perhaps could borrow from a “great man.” And according to the prevailing cliché, “only a weaker artist is influenced by what is outside himself” (Carrier 1993, p. 96). But note the despair, the iterative negation, and the hatred toward the withholding lender. Johnson’s use of the locomotoric metaphor in this context is significant, once more evoking Mahler (1968) and her stress on how the achievement of standing and walking “motivates the infant to separate in space from his mother” (p. 18).

By 1959, having largely moved away from Miesian thematics, Johnson maintained a confused admixture of identification and dis-identification with Mies.

I am just as Miesian as I ever was... Mies stands out so far today that one must stand for him, against him, underneath him, on top of him, on his shoulders if you can get there. My stand today is *anti*-Miesian. I think that is the most natural thing in the world, just as I am not really fond of my father... in these days of change, you have to thumb your nose in order to exert your poor little ego... I suppose the rest of us aren’t quite that great; and we all have
our little egos, and we are damn well going to express them... It has always seemed proper in
the history of architecture for a young man to understand, even imitate, the great genius of an
older generation... I have gone back to my own little way of looking at things, which is purely

The passages above are remarkable for their facile conceptualization of Mies as an Oedipal
father to rebel against. Recruited to mock (and thus mitigate) Johnson’s expression of his
own “poor little ego,” this formulation also rationalizes other painful feelings and dynamics,
including a shameful sense of weakness; an envious wish to inherit the strength of an
idealized “spiritual father”; and a hatred of that father for not granting that wish, traceable
to his father’s rejection and to both his parent’s humiliating criticality. Johnson’s hostility
and spite—“thumbing his nose”—appears to act as a wedge between his “poor little ego”
and Mies’s Teutonic one, a differentiation defended against by an effacing self-mockery and
an agitated, if detached, adulation. At the same time, and paradoxically, Johnson’s hatred
may have served as a vestigial binding tie.

By 1960, the dictates of Modernism, exemplified by the “International Style” that
Johnson helped formulate and promulgate (Hitchcock and Johnson 1932), were no longer in
ascendance, displaced by the primacy of individualism and an emphasis on novelty in
design. Johnson met these developments with an anxious disillusionment.

I am a historian first and an architect only by accident, and it seems to me that there are no
forms to cling to, but there is history. There is nothing today like the wonderful faith of
Cezanne and Picasso in primary colors... Primary little colors were things one could defend.
One could defend the straight line... we should splinter up in any way we please. [My
approach involves] being able to choose from history whatever forms, shapes, or directions
you want to, and using them as you please... if we are going to have chaos I feel that we
might as well have nice, juicy chaos (in 1960, Johnson 1979, pp. 108–110).

I can no longer build glass boxes... I cannot find any shapes to copy, and forms like good old
Malevitch and Mondrian to fit in. Nor do my contemporaries give me a clear lead. The very
best of my own generation do one building in one day and the very opposite the next...

Indeed, the whole concept of originality is getting new emphasis... A few years ago I was
proud to be tagged with the sobriquet ‘Mies van der Johnson’... Great works of architecture, I
thought, could only be created in a period with a strong style sense, and that I could feel in
the International Style... No academy can exist in these times of violent atomization... There
are no hidden valleys where an artistic ‘school’ can develop (in 1962, pp. 243–247, all
emphasis added).

Johnson left the safe confines of high Modernism without a “clear lead,” with “no forms to
cling to” or “shapes to copy,” no “straight lines” to defend, and no “academy” or “hidden
valleys” to reside in. Lacking anchor or ballast, and about to “splinter up,” Johnson—an
“architect by accident”—desperately sought refuge from a “violent atomization” by resorting
to the reassuring security of historical form.

In the following dialogue with British architects, Johnson skillfully neutralizes
negative judgment by preempting it and deflecting it outwards. But beneath his
condescension, he seems to have concluded that his attempt to shed the formulaic dictates
of Modernism only generated “scattered” work with a “lack in direction”.

there is only one exponent [of International Style] left, Mies, and he will not change. I think it
is wonderful that forty years afterward he will no do so... Today I am ashamed of the terribly
scattered work that I do, and its lack of direction. I am perfectly willing to admit that your
work lacks it also...

Do you feel that your art changes from one building to another?

English people know so very much more about how to use all these words than we do.

Some of us may feel that some of your buildings are facile?

That is because I am a bad architect (in 1960, Johnson 1979, pp. 107–113).
Mutinous Representations

For all his allegiance to Mies, there is evidence that Johnson, even while emulating him, had attempted to differentiate from him from the start. While admittedly inspired by Mies’s contemporaneous plans for his Farnsworth House, the Glass House (1949) contains several important deviations from this Miesian exemplar, the most prominent of which is the imposing interior brick cylinder, a blatant “anti-Miesian heresy” (Dal Co, 1993, p. 118) containing the hearth and the bath (Fig. 1). Puncturing the roof-line and melding seamlessly with the brick floor, it compromises the independence and integrity of these planes while anchoring the entire structure to the ground (Frampton 1993): effects antithetical to the Miesian ideal of weightless, autonomous planes intersecting in space.8 The non-structural circumferential steel chair rail (Fig. 1), painting to mimic the structural system of the Glass House, is another, albeit less overt defiance, as in Mies’s eyes, not only should structure provide sufficient “decoration,” it should also be “honest,” that is, only “those parts of a building resembling supports should actually support” (Johnson 1947/1978, p. 16). Given their anomalous betrayal of Miesian thematics, the chair rail and the cylinder merit attention.

To better understand the cylinder, a highly condensed manifest element partially elucidated in previous work (xxx), we must turn to Johnson’s mother’s first cousin, Theodate Pope Riddle (1867–1946). Far wealthier than Louise, she was one of the first female American architects, a serious collector of significant Impressionist paintings and a member of the artistic intelligentsia (Katz 2005). Yet Johnson’s family maintained a

8 Johnson allowed that the cylinder was anathema to Mies, and that the prominence he grated it owed much to the significance of the hearth in his upbringing (Johnson 1979, p. 89).
contemptuous distance from Theodate; Schulze, Johnson’s biographer, points out that Louise was envious of her exotic, independent, and eminently well-connected cousin, who likely stimulated Louise’s own emerging (and competitive) interest in art and architecture. Louise had wanted—but did not get—a house by Frank Lloyd Wright, settling instead for contemporary interior additions to her conventional home, including a lavish Art-Nouveau bedroom, wildly avant-garde for the time, installed while Johnson was a child (Stern 2008, p. 18). Theodate’s almost certain homosexuality (or, at least, bisexuality) complicates the family’s attitude toward her, as not only was Johnson homosexual, he and his sisters believed their mother had had at least one lesbian relationship (Schulze 1994, p. 21).

Theodate’s chef d’oeuvre and lifelong passion was Avon Old Farms, a boy’s school in Avon, Connecticut. When Johnson, aged nineteen, visited the construction site in 1925, he wrote home that

It is the purest mess you ever saw. It is built out of red stone and in no particular architecture that I could discover... I had a good talk with [Theodate] and... pronounced her thoroughly cracked (Schulze 1994, p. 38).

Aside from Johnson’s ridicule for Theodate’s rusticated idiom, Schulze notes that this is his first known mention of architecture, postulating that he was “accommodating himself to his mother’s feelings toward her cousin” (p. 38). After all, when Theodate built her first school, Louise, not to be outdone, opened her own. Johnson’s scorn may have guarded against his own envy, as well as his mother’s—for although it was viewed as an exercise in self-indulgence, Avon Old Farms is an exceptionally ambitious and stunning achievement. None other than Johnson’s protégé, Robert A. M. Stern, had critical praise for Avon Old Farms; in *Pride of Place: Building the American Dream* (1986), he compares its “reverent” organicity of form to the best of Johnson’s rival, Wright (p. 28). Johnson’s contempt for Theodate was
reciprocated. In 1932, Theodate was one of eighty architects invited to a forum promoting the MoMA exhibition that established Johnson’s reputation as a curator, “The International Style”.

After listening to the praise that her male colleagues were heaping on modern architecture, Theo suddenly stood up... She announced that, in reality, modern architecture was a failure... ‘Because it was purely intellectual without regard for the emotions.’ Cold, sterile, modern houses ignored a basic human need. People want to lie in ‘nests,’ she explained... ‘Men who work with machinery during the day might rather not sleep in a machine at night’ (Katz 2005, p. 226).

But for Johnson, at least for a time, aesthetic purism trumped comfort, and other emotional needs.

The road to Avon Old Farms winds through dense trees before reaching the school, which appears in a clearing, an forested example of “the hide and the reveal,” a device Johnson used at the Glass House—referencing the Muskau estate as inspiration, not his cousin’s school. In Pride of Place, Stern relates that the school confronts the arriving visitor with the high cylinder of a brick water tower, a hulking mass that looks like a medieval castle keep. At its base... [are] superbly crafted, ancient-looking buildings (p. 25).

One turns the page, and Stern confronts the reader with a two-page spread of Johnson’s Glass House and its own “hulking mass” of a brick cylinder (Fig. 5). Mentioning only the familial relationship between Johnson and Theodate, Stern fails to acknowledge the stylistic

\[9\] A reference to the afore-mentioned quote from Le Corbusier.
\[10\] Muskau’s park in Poland and many others throughout Europe were in turn influenced, as was Theodate, by Lancelot “Capability” Brown who designed many of Great Britain’s famous estates, furnishing them with dramatic, winding entrances.
relationship between the two structures, despite their virtually identical material and form. One assumes Stern was as blind (or at least mute) to the explicit correspondence as Johnson appears to have been, for neither (and no one, as far as I can tell) has ever mentioned the Avon tower with reference to the Glass House. And—unlike Stern’s other monographs—*Pride of Place* has no place at all in Johnson’s architectural library.

Given the burden of jealousy inherited from his mother, and given Theodate’s talent, earning comparisons to no other than Wright, might it have been too painful for Johnson to admit of his admiration or envy via her influence? The surgical excision of Theodate from Johnson’s library and roster of references—symbolically killing off his competitor—may have also served to inure himself against the hostility towards his mother implicit in (and perhaps represented by) the eidetic appropriation of the signifier of Avon Old Farms.  

While the cylinder represents an explicit rejection of Mies, and can be interpreted as a commandeering of his cousin’s phallic strength, by taking the form of her envied cousin’s tower, it may also be represent an implicit rejection of Louise. Johnson’s redesignation of the water tower as a chimney is an illustration of *displacement* (Freud 1900, p. 308), in this instance, achieved through changes of function (holding fire, in addition to water), context (inside, rather than outside), and emphasis (less a declamatory statement, more a quietly assertive one). It may be safely inferred that Johnson’s wish to be a form-giver is represented in this manifest dream element: to stand on his own two feet, apart from and independent of Mies, and more like his outré, iconoclastic cousin. I suggest that underlying this wish is a related, earlier one: *the wish to differentiate and be autonomous from his* 

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11 An iconic feature in school photos, the water tower, now a gallery, is located adjacent to the entrance sign of the school.
mother. Johnson’s cylinder may also represent an exquisitely tuned, vengeful rebuke of these idealized others: an act of mutiny.

The other anti–Miesian element of the Glass House, the seemingly innocuous chair rail that skirts its perimeter (Fig. 1), seems to serve no function at all (other than the one sacrilegious to Modernism, decoration), as no furniture abuts the glass. Eisenman (1979) observes that it turns a void into a boundaried container:

It is only the steel wainscot line on the Glass House that violates [the] principle of a–spatiality... it turns the glass into a membrane—a container of interior space and not a void. But in none of Johnson’s writings on his house can one find a discussion of this very crucial and untypical architectonic gesture, which differentiates him from [Mies] (p. 22).

Eisenman does not infer that containment is the intended function of the chair rail, which Johnson (who did comment on it) implies.

there are many anomalies in [The Glass House] as built that Mies would never have tolerated: the round brick element that ‘anchors’ the design, and especially the chair rail that ties the house into an enclosed composition (Johnson 1979, p. 269).

The chair rail’s enclosing and containing function, deemphasized and obscured by its mimicking of the supporting structure, establishes a tension between it and the indeterminate border specified by the glass walls. Also in contrast to the Farnsworth House is Johnson’s deliberate omission of an external overhang, enhancing its reflectivity and therefore its opticality and function as barrier and boundary, further protecting against the “endless spatiality” of glass (Lavin 2004, p. 43).

Echoing the chair rail, a granite railing delimits the shelf upon which the Glass House stands, separating it from the hill beyond. At various viewing points, the two railings
coincide, reinforcing the sense of limiting boundary (Fig. 6). Hitchcock notes that the granite railing’s interruption of the approach encourages an additional layer of spatial intimacy.

Advancing [to]... the house... one sees first the distant landscape of the next wooded ridge. As one approaches the [granite] rail, however, one can look down on a more intimate landscape surrounding a pond (Hitchcock 1966, p. 15).

The granite rail’s reassuring restraint provided the safe, limiting enclosure that Johnson clearly sought.

The terrace [of the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Sculpture Garden at MoMA] was a containment... Same as in the Glass House. Without the little granite edge, you’re not contained from the view (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 65).

And thus, although Johnson’s alliance and identification with Mies had served as a protecting and organizing scaffold, his departures from Miesian thematics describe some of their limitations for him: the cylinder, a unifying, gravitational anchor and the welcoming, centering warmth of the hearth; and the chair rail, a calming ballast of centripetal enclosure—stabilizing, holding functions, needs not met by Mies.

A Boudoir and a Porch

Johnson’s first addition to the Glass House, four years after its completion, was the 1953 interior redesign of the adjacent Brick House, the opaque dyadic counterpoint to the Glass House (Fig. 7). The manner in which Johnson collapsed its two original bedrooms into a one long one signaled his dramatic parting from his early adherence to the International Style.
Consciously remembering the circular breakfast room in Sir John Soane’s house, which features a vaulted dome suspended from the ceiling, and Robert Adam’s library at Syon House, in which irregularly spaced pilasters interrupt the horizontal line (Johnson 1979, p. 114), Johnson created internal domes of thin plaster, supported by delicate columns set away from the walls, extending into flattened, elliptical arches, emphasized with backlighting (Fig. 8). This was decorative architecture with no structural function, and curvilinear to boot, sheer blasphemy against the modern. Johnson had come to understand that what modernism determined was “useless” could serve an emotional function, as well as an aesthetic one, reflecting a growing acceptance of his very human longing for comfort as conferred by formed space: its enclosure, and its embrace. Freud drew attention to “this useless thing”:

[among] the first acts of civilization were the construction of dwellings... we welcome it as a sign of civilization as well if we see people directing their care too to what has no practical value whatever, to what is useless—if, for instance, the green spaces necessary in a town as playgrounds and as reservoirs of fresh air are also laid out with flower-beds... We soon observe that this useless thing which we expect civilization to value is beauty (emphasis added, 1930, pp. 90–92).

In a speech given at Yale in 1959, Johnson specifies his dissatisfactions with “puritanical” Miesian theocracy.

[Mies’s Illinois Institute of Technology chapel and plan] is a magnificent plan. But it doesn't satisfy. It does not do us emotionally enough good anymore just to see buildings well related in blocks (Johnson 1979, p. 239).

There are four areas in architecture in which the puritanical religious background of the International Style has failed me. This failure has driven me to a renewed study of history. The first is the theatre; the second is the façade; the third is religious building; and lastly, the plaza (p. 232).
Johnson felt that the Miesian façade failed to draw one in, to beckon and entice. The other three spheres he mentions are public ones. Johnson’s wish for communal space that fosters human connection is exampled by the balconies of his New York State Theatre (1964), designed expressly to promote social interaction.¹³

The only thing that will give you help [with designing a theatre] is the memory, the history of how you feel in enclosed theatres, and there is absolutely no substitute for that. The [tiered and rounded] court theatre makes it possible to make the theatre small enough, appearing to give you a sense of intimacy... You get a sense of participation; the curve around the back doesn’t have any corners (as in the fan [theatre]) where you could get the feeling you were not in the theatre at all (Johnson 1979, p. 234).

Thus, Mies’s rectilinear program had given way to secure embrace of the curve. Here, and in the following, I rely on Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958), which the Brick House anticipated.

The poet...goes to live in the loop of a scroll to seek warmth and the quiet life in the arms of a curve... The grace of a curve is an invitation to remain. We cannot break away from it without hoping to return. For the beloved curve has nest–like powers; ...it is a curved “corner,” inhabited geometry. Here we have achieved a minimum of refuge (p. 146).

The indifferent, blank façade of the Brick House, fenestrated by only three round windows to the rear elevation, gives no hint of its surprising contents—a voluptuous bedroom, covered with lustrous pink Fortuny silk, that gives the effect of an erotic, yet ineffably elegant boudoir. In later years, Johnson preferred to sleep there, narrowly cradled

¹³ Johnson had in fact proposed to enclose all of Lincoln Center with an arched colonnade to create coherence within and without. More so than any other, Phyllis Lambert (2009) appreciates Johnson’s stress on enclosure; the daughter of Samuel Bronfman, she had advocated, on Johnson’s recommendation, that Mies van der Rohe (with Johnson’s assistance) design Bronfman’s Seagram Building.
within its feminine, intimate canopy that protects one from the magnitude of “the great outdoors”:

my Brick Guest House does five or six things besides providing for sleeping. It does something to cradle the spirit to be in a curved surface... the colonnettes go to the ground...to keep you from the walls, to keep the light and the lighted walls away from the room that you are in. The room is small up to the columns, and then the great outdoors takes over with the light on the pink walls (in 1959, Johnson 1979, p. 237).

The domes in my guest room...have a calming, quieting effect (in 1962, p. 252).

Bachelard (1958) commented on the peculiar “consolation” of narrow space.

Often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside draws its strength. One feels this elasticity in the following passage from Rilke: ‘And there is almost no space here; and you feel almost calm at the thought that it is impossible for anything very large to hold in this narrowness.’ There is consolation in knowing that one is in an atmosphere of calm, in a narrow space... Then, in the next sentence... ‘But outside, everything is immeasurable...’ (p. 229).

Might the stern Miesian exterior of the Brick House conceal a reimagining and recreation of Johnson’s mother’s lavish Art Nouveau bedroom, a memory formerly forbidden to be recalled in architectural form? Both were radical for their time. If so, the Brick House redesign can be understood as signifying a forbidden wish to return to (and identify with) a woman’s secret world of beauty and soothing femininity. His father had reacted poorly to his son’s homosexuality, and had made it clear that in his eyes, art belonged to the province of women (xxx). For Johnson, art and beauty appear irrevocably linked to the feminine: witness his description of his first piece of “decorative” architecture, the Lake Pavilion at the Glass House,
My pavilion I should wish to be compared to high-style, high-heel evening slippers, preferably satin—a pleasure-giving object, designed for beauty and the enhancement of human, preferably blonde, beauty (in 1962, Johnson 1979, p. 251).

The voluptuous Brick House redesign was Johnson’s first sculptural proposition; its “useless” beauty—disparaged and rejected by the modernist program—may be a self-representation of those aspects of Johnson that felt of “no practical value whatever,” “useless” and feminized. It most certainly signifies a revolt against puritanical modernist aesthetics, whose frustrating interdiction of beauty for beauty’s sake, of comfort, and of warmth Johnson appears to have identified with his parents (Johnson 1993, p. vii). In defiance—perhaps of his own internalized prohibitions, projected onto and identified with modernism—he had made a silken nest.

That the various wishes and revolts contained by the Brick House were formulated through interior redesign may indicate that in 1953 they could not yet be visualized in exterior form, rather than behind closed doors. Still other latent meanings remain concealed by those doors. Let us look more closely at the motif prominent in the interior redesign, the curvaceous elliptical arch, which Johnson usually attributed to Soane. Later, he offered a more haphazard explanation of his design process.

I flattened that particular arch... because there wasn’t any room. I remember that. So I used the elliptical arch. And then I sort of stuck with that elliptical arch, which I used in the pavilion in the lake (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 37).

14 Johnson was not the only one to revolt; see Lavin for a discussion of the increasing appreciation for the psychological and environmental effects of architecture in the mid–twentieth century (Lavin 2004).
Neither is likely the whole story, for one of the Johnson family houses has a porch containing the identical form (Fig. 9). That the structure involving this element is a porch further complicates the matter, as Johnson’s parents were so terrified of tuberculosis that they had their children sleep year-round on a sleeping porch, a common Midwestern practice in the pre-streptomycin era.\(^{15}\) Johnson recalled that he would at times waken to find himself covered with snow (Schulze 1994, p. 24).

What did sleeping outdoors mean to a man who later needed an opaque, sealed-off vault to sleep in? If this experience of “the great outdoors”—the immensity of the night sky, snow for a blanket—was recapitulated in the Glass House, Johnson describes it, at least at times, as transcendent.

[in the Glass House] the snow comes down at night, and the building floats. You’re being levitated, and that impressed me—really fantastic (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 34).

In other places, Johnson’s bitter words convey a rather different feeling than the previous ecstatic ones.

I’d never do it again—I’m numb when I think about the Glass House... I feel now it’s a vacuum... I was brought up on a sleeping porch, so I’m used to this... In a house like this, you live in the weather (quoted in Giovannini 1987, p. 161).

[the Glass House] is very unsatisfactory to work in... Reflections don’t bother me, but the lack of containment does... (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 43).

Again, Bachelard is prescient.

Without [the house], man would be a dispersed being... Before he is “cast into the world”... man is laid in the cradle of the house... Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house... To illustrate the metaphysics of consciousness we should

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\(^{15}\) Homer Johnson had lost not one, but two wives to tuberculosis before he married Louise.
have to wait for the experiences during which being is cast out, that is to say thrown out, outside the being of the house, a circumstance in which the hostility of men and of the universe accumulates... When we dream of the house we were born in... we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise. This is the environment in which the protective beings live (Bachelard 1958, p. 7).

If the Glass House is a dream of the sleeping porch, with the barest of membranes separating one from dispersal and the “hostility of the universe,” might the Brick House be an alternative, wishful dream, in which the sleeping porch is brought safe inside, returning Johnson to the warmth and protection of an idealized mother’s bosom? And if Johnson experienced sleeping outdoors as a banishment, a “casting out” (and, I would imagine, metaphor and screen for other, older hurts, given the family narrative of infants abandoned at birth), might the condensation of the porch and the boudoir represent an attempt at reversal and repair?

As might be expected, Mies did not react very well to the Glass House. Johnson told different versions of the story of how he stormed out, refusing to sleep in the Brick House.

I know [Mies’s] students in Chicago always considered [the Glass House] a poor imitation of his Farnsworth House, so that’s probably what [Mies] thought... one night we got into a philosophical argument about something, and Mies got so angry that he insisted on spending the night under another roof (Tompkins 1977, p. 66)

What had caused it was I said, Mies, I see what you see in Behrens. But I don’t understand what it was in Berlage that interested you so much. And that just set him off. I never knew what layers of meaning there were.

(Stern) It had nothing to do... with [the Brick House] he was [staying] in?

I think it did, but I don’t know... No, I just think he felt my bad copy of his work was extremely unpleasant (Stern 2008, p. 149–150).

Schulze (1994) extracted a more complete story from Johnson:
Mies... could not keep from complaining about the design of the house... The corner, he complained... was badly understood and miserably detailed. Obviously, Mies concluded, the designer did not know how to turn a corner... no longer the breathless acolyte... [Johnson] came back at Mies, indirectly rather than head-on: 'I've been meaning to ask you about Berlage and the Stock Exchange he put up in Amsterdam. All that decoration mixed up with masonry and metal... in view of your love of pure structure, I am at a loss to comprehend what you see in him or in it'... [Mies announced] he was finished with the evening and [had no] intention of staying on the premises (p. 245).

Castigated by his master, Johnson retaliated by attacking Mies's own Lieber Meister, Berlage—on quite the same grounds (the use of decoration) that Mies would have used to criticize the Brick House bedroom. Yet in the previous versions of his story he deemphasized this detail of the encounter, preferring to understand Mies’s anger as a protest, a negative response to Johnson’s stylistic disloyalty and his supposed “bad copy” of the Farnsworth House.

The building Johnson singled out for criticism—Berlage’s Stock Exchange in Amsterdam—is a refined brick edifice, the massive solidity of its exterior offset by a huge, buoyant inner space lit by a vast steel-and-glass skylight, reminiscent of the contrast between the exterior and interior of the Brick House. The interior is lined by brick arcades featuring elliptical arches below a series of round windows—the very material and motifs iterated in the Brick House (Fig. 10). The figures, text, and art-historical references “Residence in New Canaan,” the 1950 essay with which Johnson unveiled the Glass House (1979, p. 212), are largely reserved for the Glass House, while the Brick House is all but attributed to Mies—with no mention of Berlage. Why did Johnson not reference Berlage—a name architects particularly associate with brick—and disparage him to Mies, his disciple, and then minimize doing so?
The most parsimonious reconstruction is that Johnson attacked the work of a man Mies held sacred in retaliation for Mies’s criticism—and Mies’s failure to appreciate the homage Johnson had repeatedly paid him—for not only was the Glass House an emulative study, just two years previously Johnson had conceived of and curated Mies’s first major retrospective and authored its handsome accompanying monograph, which, according to Johnson, Mies claimed to not have read (Johnson 1947/1977, p. 208). There was more precedent for Johnson’s fury. In the following, he defends against hurt and repudiation by binding himself to Mies with a rationalized, mocking self-reproach that identifies with Mies’s criticality; preserves his lionization of Mies; and disavows any thought of creative autonomy from Mies.

Ash Street [a court house in Cambridge, Johnson’s first residential design] was a Miesian labor of love, of course. I was very hurt when Mies... didn’t come to see it. Of course, now I’m glad, because it didn’t always follow his basic principles... There were too many columns, overhangs. It’s ridiculous. Why didn’t I, damn fool, just stop the roof at the wall plane? It sticks over in the most ridiculous way... I’ll never get over that... the Mies influence was so strong, and his court-houses were so attractive... So I wasn’t claiming any originality. It was a Mies idea (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, pp. 23–24).

Schulze’s (1994) following Johnson’s lead, believes that Mies criticized Johnson “not for having copied him but for trying to and failing” (p. 245). Seen somewhat differently, the authoritarian Mies may have been intolerant of Johnson’s deviations from his own aesthetic preferences, just as Johnson’s mother had. In this case, considering the Glass House a “bad copy”—rather than an inroad toward autonomy—would have protected against mutinous or rivalrous propositions (such as Johnson’s potential competitiveness with Mies for the better emulation of Berlage, a forbidden idea, warded off by the omission of this attribution). And, while we can imagine (as Johnson could not) that Mies might have felt challenged by his
tentative protégé (after all, the Glass House was finished before Mies’s Farnsworth, stealing its thunder), Johnson’s self-effacing tarnishing of the Glass House, the target of envy, would have in fantasy protected him from the threat of retaliation or alienation from Mies: better to be retained as the dictator’s chastised disciple.

And so, Johnson obediently hung his Simone Martini on his dormitory walls, and assumed the role of the inadequate apprentice, perhaps the only way he knew to sustain connections to disapproving others.

Mies’s [house] was a floating thing, a beautiful rhythm. Mine was the clunk that sits on the ground. But I wanted it to sit on the ground… I wasn’t aiming at lovely finishes, but I should have… Mies is far, far better—better quality finishes and much better steel… I didn’t pay that much attention… my corners are not as proper… the furnishings are all Mies. It relieved me of the responsibility of thinking and designing… Take the masterworks. Why reinvent the spoon? (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, pp. 28–36).

Implicit in this relentless self-reproach is the imagined failure to honor Mies’s dictum, “God is in the details.” Johnson’s need for worshipful deference came at the expense of trusting his independent “thinking and designing,” and resulted in painful shame and envy. What motivated this hobbling subjugation? Based on what he tells us, I suggest that for Johnson, the prospect of becoming a fully autonomous artist involved the loss of dependent attachment to idealized, critical others—that were nevertheless sources of crucial self-esteem and connectedness—bringing with it the threat of being unmoored, isolated, and alienated, as well as the threat of his competitive strivings eliciting retaliatory hostility. Apparently, allowing for a degree of autonomy or competency (let alone genius) would have

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16 The theme of the apprentice, copyist and lesser artist in Johnson’s personal myth is elaborated on elsewhere (xxx).
rendered Johnson more vulnerable to Oedipal guilt (involving his mother as competitor, in addition to or in place of his father). On the other hand, self-recremimation, in identification with reproachful others, provided a means to keep them close, and a means of punishment that may have felt deserved. For in addition to Oedipal conflicts, Johnson may have felt guilt over his brother’s death from mastoiditis when Johnson was a child (xxx), revisiting Martini’s theme of the vulnerable child.

The Brick House can thus be understood as a result of condensation: a crystallized, over-determined design containing inferred, latent derivations associated with conflictual, interlacing meanings, including, among others, the dynastic genealogy of Berlage and Mies, and Johnson’s uneasy allegiance to it (referenced by aspects of the Berlage Exchange); his ambivalent relationship with his mother (the reincarnation of her radical boudoir); and the internalized sleeping porch, and its narrative of banishment (the elliptical arches). In that it a motif is shared by some of these tributaries—the arch—the Brick House is also a composite. If there is an underlying, unifying wish to this dream, it may be the longing for enveloping embrace, a wish to be brought back inside and safely returned in a loving, admiring mother’s arms.

A Splintered Self

Of all his works at the Glass House, the Sculpture Gallery (1970) was Johnson’s favorite, not only because it is so utterly arresting, but because he felt it to be the most inventive (Fig. 11). It has been characterized as “a sort of angular Guggenheim” (Goldberger 1975, p. 61). In a revealing comment, Johnson describes
the experience of entering, the shock of big space, or dark space, as it encloses... Much better [than the Seagram Building] in that regard is the Guggenheim... The visitor comes through a tiny door... and is sprayed into the room. Breathtaking it is (Johnson 1979, p. 151).

More notable than Johnson’s typical deference to Wright\(^{17}\) is his articulated sensitivity to form, the vulnerability to feeling dispersed—literally aerosolized—by the “shock of big space”. But rather than being “sprayed into the room,” in the “big space” of the Sculpture Gallery one is pulled inward and down by the central descending staircase, an experience Johnson likened to that of a dog that “settles circularly into his place” (1979, p. 264): it is thus radically opposed to Wright’s museum in that its effect is centripetal, not centrifugal.\(^{18}\)

Here, the sense of expanding space is countered by a kinetic evocation of settled containment, within the surround of art.

Holding enclosure is physically signified and achieved throughout most of structures of the Glass House by their consistent paucity of windows: the Painting and Sculpture Galleries lack windows altogether, the Brick House portholes can be sealed off with sliding panels, and the cloistered Study has a single, tiny window. Walled off to the outside, skylights are the major source of natural illumination.

the human being... knows instinctively that... space identified with his solitude is creative... the recollection of moments of confined, simple, shut-in space are experiences of heartwarming space, of a space that does not seek to be extended, but would like above all still to be possessed (Bachelard 1958, p. 10).

In contrast, and despite its attempts at stabilization and enclosure, the isomorphic Glass House—one continuous window—is a study in fragmentation and disintegration: the

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\(^{17}\) Johnson said of Wright, “He has developed one thing which will defy any of us to equal: the arrangements of secrets of space” (Johnson 1979, p. 197).

\(^{18}\) The skylight of the Sculpture Gallery also quotes from that of the Beurs de Berlage (Fig. 9).
“dissolution of the interior... through the further elimination of even interior walls” achieves a “de–differentiation of internal parts” (Lavin 2004, p. 99, p. 135). There is a de–differentiation of the exterior as well, as the Glass House’s surface typology is undermined by the collapsed significations of window and wall, wall and door, door and window. Thus, unlike conventional doors, the doors are floor–to–ceiling, and can be taken for wall or window; all the walls are windows; and since none of the windows open, the doors function more like windows than do the actual windows.

Over the years, Johnson steadily split off and distributed the functions of living between new constructions (Kipnis 1993): the Brick House became, in essence, the bedroom; the Sculpture and Painting Galleries, places for housing and viewing art; the Study, library and studio; and the Lake Pavilion, dedicated play space. Set against the ambiguously boundaried, de–differentiated Glass House, a strain exists between the centrifugal spinning–off of disparate parts of life, and the centripetal, fortified environments that receive and contain those parts they serve. Johnson’s constitutive additions to his estate have been conceptualized as a laboratory for architectural experimentation: compare the 1962 Pavilion (Fig. 12) with the 1964 Beck House (Fig. 3). While I believe this is true, it may also be hypothesized that Johnson’s continual partitioning of life’s activities between isolated buildings was also an ongoing, symbolic elaboration of a splintered self, opposed by the seeking, in each building, of enclosing, binding cohesion. The visual representation of this tension—between coming apart and holding together—was, I suggest, an attempt at mastery.

Adherence to doctrine was one way for Johnson to escape a “violent atomization.” Although Johnson, breaking with Mies in discrete but crucial ways, initiated his autonomy as
an architect with the Glass House, the progressive elaboration of the Glass House from a dyadic structure to a collective reflects the teachings of another figurehead. Johnson had helped to support and promote the architectural historian Emil Kaufman when he came to America as an exiled European Jew in the early 1940’s, and credited his scholarship as a major influence on the Glass House (Johnson 1979, p. 212). In Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier, Kaufman traced the roots of architectural modernism to the French neo-classicist architect, Ledoux, whose principle of architectural “autonomy” involved the separation of buildings according to a quasi–functional identification, rather than their unified and hierarchical massing to include all functions... As opposed to the classical and baroque system... where ‘to detach a part is to destroy the whole’ [Ledoux’s] pavilion rejects parts and becomes ‘an association of independent elements... one could define baroque association in these terms: one part dominates all the others and nevertheless all the parts form a whole; the deep sense of the pavilion system can be translated thus: the part is independent within the frame of the totality’ (Vidler 2008, quoting Kaufman; pp. 50–51).

Moreover, Vidler continues, Kaufman attempted to join what he called Ledoux’s principle of architectural ‘autonomy’—the derivation of an architectural aesthetic from internal requirements of construction and use rather than from any external, imposed artistic conception—to a similar characteristic of emerging bourgeois society ‘which thinks of itself as composed of isolated, equally free individuals’ (p. 62).

Vidler recognizes that “The paradox, of course, is that Johnson, often criticized for ‘betraying Mies,’ [was in the Glass House] following Kaufmann’s principles of autonomy almost to the letter” (p. 75). The various, free–standing structures of the Glass House may thus be interpreted as a physical representation of Johnson’s conflicted wish for independence, safely liberated from an undifferentiated symbiosis in which “one part dominates all the others and nevertheless all the parts form a whole.” The principle of
architectural “autonomy,” linked as it was by Kaufman to individual personal freedom, may have authorized and encouraged Johnson’s individuation as a person and as an architect; at the same time, it ironically provided Johnson an different theoretical credo to be faithful to, an alternative structure within which to organize himself—with an architectural provenance (Ledoux, Le Corbusier) as distinguished as Mies’s. Yet, although the various buildings at the Glass House are “independent elements,” distinguished by appearance and function, it also remains true that “one part dominates all the others” (i.e., the Glass House proper), and that “all the parts form a whole.” Collectively, their design is a symbolic compromise struck between precarious, incomplete autonomy and dominating, fused attachment.\textsuperscript{19}

Johnson gained another source of precious refuge in the swells and folds of the hilly landscape of the Glass House, itself a former farm.

Southern Connecticut... rolls at exactly the right degree of humanistic pleasure... A landscape has to have the right folds at the right scale. Big folds don’t do you any good, because then you’re lost in the heights. Little folds are no good, because they’re too small to give you a sense of containment. Ohio, where I come from, has folds, but it doesn’t have folds in hills. Southern Connecticut has exactly the right change in grades... (in 1986, Johnson 1993, pp. 147–148).

Adding to the atlas of interpretations of the Glass House ensemble, one may imagine it as reprising the prosperous family farm where Johnson summered as a child. An example of Ledoux’s “quasi–functional identification,” the working architecture of the typical American farm has its own colloquial vernacular, the functions of its numerous outbuildings designated via their structure: the hen–house is raised on its stilts, the smoke–house is

\textsuperscript{19} The single sculpture displayed inside the Glass House, \textit{Two Circus Women} by Elie Nadelman, is of a fused female couple, which, among other things may represent the wish for symbiotic fusion, as well as a feminine identification with the mother (xxx).
legible by its chimney, the pig barn by its own peculiar geometry (Larkin 1998). So, too, the distinctive design of each Glass House building is identified with its unique purpose, from the great swinging circular axes of the Painting Gallery displays, to the conical oculus over the desk in the Study. Like the Glass House, barns also lack internal differentiation; the five-year old Johnson may have witnessed a barn raising in 1911, its stark frame recalling the exposed piers of the Glass House (Fig. 13), while the brick cylinder invokes the brick silos that once dotted the corn country of the Midwest. Johnson frequently and fondly noted the rustic provenance of his estate, conserving it rather than erasing it. When he discovered the crumbling foundations of long–disappeared farm outbuildings, he was compelled to build on them—a folly, in the form of an archetypal house (or barn), and called it the Ghost House.\footnote{Of note, Johnson’s first built design was a small, cubic barn on his family’s Townsend Farm (Stern 2008, p. 98).}

I loved those ruins and kept them and built on top of them... I built [the Ghost House] the way a child designs a house... I still get a sense of the old cow barn... [In the Study] there is one window [situated to overlook the Ghost House] where I can watch the rain or nature or leaves falling off, but be totally enclosed (emphasis added; Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 43).

Johnson uncovered and restored the rambling stone walls that marked the ancestral farm’s division into pastures. He described their orderly boundaries of the walls as lending an “organizing” quality to nature.

my house is a house in the field. That comes from my upbringing in Ohio. I love fields, pastures... I think it’s because of the lines, or the walls in this case—provide an organizing grid that I’ve preserved in this landscape... The idea was to be connected with nature... Then
you step into the house, and you stomp off the snow, and you put your backside to the fireplace (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, p. 31–34).

Johnson cleared much of the secondary growth forest that had overgrown the meadows. In Bachelard’s (1958) eyes, the comforting familiarity of the field derives from its history of human cultivation.

there are no young forests. In the vast world of the non–I, the non–I of fields is not the same as the non–I of forests. The forest is a before me, before us, whereas for fields and meadows, my dreams and recollections accompany all the different phases of tilling and harvesting... I feel that fields and meadows are with me, in the with–me, with–us. But forests reign in the past (pp. 187–188).

Given that internal cohesiveness is gained by feeling connected to one’s past, the organizing function of the walls and meadows was gained from their evocation of Johnson’s childhood farm, as well as from their aesthetic formality. The pond, where Johnson built his Lake Pavilion (Fig. 12), also speaks to a specific, wishful recreation of summers spent on the farm.

Back home in Ohio, my mother carved a pond out of a lazy old creek. So I said I’d make a pond, too, right here. Doesn’t everyone?... I designed the little pavilion down there that I wanted to put in water (in 1986, Johnson 1979, p. 149).

In one of Johnson’s family albums is a photographic collage of a summer meadow, dotted with trees, sloping to what may have been his mother’s pond—just as the Glass House overlooks its pond (Fig. 14).

*I say Mother. And my thoughts are of you, oh House.*

*House of the lovely dark summers of my childhood*

If the functions of life are distributed among the buildings at the Glass House, so are the memories represented in them. The Galleries function as a repository of Johnson’s memories of looking at art with his mother, among the most intimate times spent with her; the remote, monastic Study revives the isolation of Johnson’s closeted student years, away from home; and the Pavilion on the pond is a distilled, idyllic recreation of childhood longings.

The space we love is unwilling to remain permanently enclosed. It deploys and appears to move elsewhere without difficulty; into other times, and on different planes of dream and memory (Bachelard 1958, p. 53).

A Childhood Dream

The Lake Pavilion (1962), a folly of classical appearance but distinctly modern geometry, was the first structure Johnson added to the original Glass House/Brick House dyad (Fig. 12). One of its intriguing aspects is its undersized scale, its ceiling barely six feet tall, giving the illusion of greater distance when viewed from afar. Paradoxically, up close, it can make one feel greater in size. Johnson reveled in this magical effect of looking small, being big: the Pavilion could make a grown man feel little again.

It is pleasant to be in a false scale—to fell big or feel small... in my Pavilion you feel big and important. When you sit for tea, you reduce yourself to child size (Johnson 1979, p. 251)

One has to wonder if Johnson had read Poetics of Space, published four years before he built the Pavilion, in which Bachelard describes another function of the small scale, strikingly parallel to Johnson’s concerns.

I feel more at home in miniature worlds, which for me, are dominated worlds... To have experienced miniature sincerely detaches me from the surrounding world, and helps me to resist dissolution of the surrounding atmosphere. (Bachelard 1958, p. 161)
One takes not a little step over the water to reach the island Pavilion, an example of the programmed “safe danger” Johnson prized, and eroticized.


This, too, harkens back to Johnson’s past, as shown by photographs of a plank bridge on his farm (Figs. 15, 16). In the following passage, Johnson associates “safe danger” with the negotiation of the developmental process of separation. Note the erotization of the anxiety and excitement involved in the emblematic act of leaving shore, and the transcendental, imaginative nature of Johnson’s enjoyment of it—feeling small, feeling big.

In getting to an island, you feel separated from the mainland, and therefore on your own. That, incidentally, has sexual overtones that I don’t understand... it is a feeling of excitement, like being on a ship when you first cast off from land... I reduced the scale of the pavilion for several reasons. If you come into a room that’s the wrong scale... that gives you a wonderful feeling of power... That feeling of being powerful and big is a marvelous feeling. ...when I am in the pavilion... I can make myself small by imagining... If you sit down and think hard, you can think of the right scale. To me it becomes full scale then... that’s the whole point, the whole experience, of a playhouse... It’s exactly the same as a kid building, or having his father build, a tree house. You pull in the rope after you and it’s yours. Or a dollhouse for a girl. She thinks right away back to the scale of the little dolls that are in that little house. I do... I think that architecture is so much more than thinking about shape... The architect is expressing his whole cultural background and experience in a building... I had more than my usual share [in the Pavilion] because I didn’t have a function for it... The pavilion is... the clearest expression of what architecture is for [at the Glass House] (Lewis & O’Connor 1994, pp. 40–41).

If the Pavilion was “the clearest expression of what architecture is for,” then this passage is the clearest expression of what it was, for Johnson: an expression of “his whole cultural background and experience.” I suggest it expresses what he so sensitively identifies as
among a child’s basic wishes and needs: the wish for play, and for a special place to play, and to leave one’s parents for that place, and one day, to be on one’s own; and, to navigate that dangerous journey more safely—with no need of miraculous rescue—than Martini’s fated children, and Johnson’s own brother. Being in that precarious, special place feels powerful (the exhilarating feeling of being big enough!); being on one’s own is being one’s own person: “you pull in the rope after you and it’s yours”. As Bachelard (1958) observes, “One can undoubtedly become aware of existing by escaping from space” (p. 139). Leaving that space for another also requires a parent’s permission to separate, and to be separate—different—from them.

Only when freed from Modernist functionalism could Johnson create the Pavilion—a contemporary rendering of classical, “function–less,” pleasure–giving architecture.\footnote{One influential example may have been the Maritime theater of Hadrian’s Villa outside of Rome.}

the last generation... preached the moral nature of [the architect’s] art... I would, within the confining limitations of our era, create some tiny oases of marble and gold... as grandiose as the confining mores of our century will allow (Johnson 1979, p. 248).

In its physical context (an island separated by the mainland), its flamboyant decadence (its ceiling was, yes, gold leafed, and a jet fountain once soared above it), and its “functionlessness” and “useless” beauty, this “tiny oasis” specifies dynamic, stylistic, and functional aspects of separation and individuation. Surely this luxuriant “self–portrait” was authorized by a gathering architectural Zeitgeist that newly sanctioned the emotional function of formed space (Lavin 2004). Still, the Pavilion represents more than a passive drift along ideological trends: it is a voracious, determinedly hedonistic self–representation, an
insurgence against an authoritarian, puritanical parent, as personified by Mies and by an aesthetic of deprivation.

Within the dream of the Glass House, the Pavilion is an encapsulated, fully formed dream, a child’s island of undiluted pleasure, a memory of a childhood spent gazing at classical antiquity. It is an evocation of journey and adventure, of reverie and play, of growing up and growing away. Late in his life, Johnson had another dream: he often said that he wanted to observe his centenary by moving to Rome. He did not get the chance. Johnson died, at the age of ninety-eight, in his dream house.
References


Figures

Figure 1: The Glass House, P. Johnson, 1949. New Canaan, CT. Note the internal brick cylinder and the circumferential chair rail.

Figure 2: Portrait and a Dream, J. Pollock, 1953. The Dallas Museum of Art.
Figure 3:  *The Miracle of the Child Falling from the Balcony*, S. Martini, 1324. Chiesa di Sant'Agostino, Siena, Italy; compare with Beck House, P. Johnson, 1964, Dallas.
Figure 4: *St. Louis Appearing at the Bedside of a Sick Child*, S. Martini, 1317. Detail, *St. Louis of Toulouse Crowning Robert of Anjou*, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy.

Figure 5: Tower of Avon Old Farms School, T. P. Riddle, 1920–1929. Avon, Connecticut. View from entrance drive, with the brick water tower.
Figure 6: Overlapping enclosures. The Glass House, highlighting the overlapping of the chair rail and the granite railing.

Figure 7: The Brick House, P. Johnson, 1949.
Figure 8: The Brick House interior, redesign, P. Johnson, 1953.

Figure 9: Johnson family home, New London, Ohio, 1935. Note the porch with elliptical arches. From Schulze 1994, p. 118.
Figure 10: Beurs van Berlage (Berlage Stock Exchange), H. P. Berlage, 1930. Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Figure 11: The Sculpture Gallery, P. Johnson, 1970.
Figure 12: The Lake Pavilion, P. Johnson, 1962.
The Glass House on the hill in the background, the Sculpture Gallery to the upper left.

Figure 13: Barn raising, Johnson Family Farm, 1911.
From Johnson family albums. Might the little boy (bottom, right) be the five year old Johnson?
Figure 14: The Johnson family farm, 1915.
Photographic collage from a Johnson family album.

Figure 15: Safe danger: the Glass House footbridge.
The original narrow footbridge leading to the Galleries. The National Trust has replaced this bridge with a sturdier one.
Figure 16: Safe danger: on the Johnson farm, 1912.
From a Johnson family album. Philip Johnson would have been 5 and 6 years old.