

A portrait and a dream—

The visual representation of non-visual psychic content in design

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I 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

Philip Johnson's "Glass House," his home in New Canaan, Connecticut, is an icon of modernist design, stewarded since Johnson's death in 2005 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. A collective that grew to eight structures over five decades, Vincent Scully considers the Glass House "the most conceptually important house of the century."

The present study represents part of an effort to conceptualize the design of the Glass House as structured and interpretable as a dream. As such, latent, covert meanings are proposed to have undergone distorting processes resembling dream-work during their translation into manifest design elements of the Glass House. In January at the winter meetings I will discuss hidden representations of the Mycenaean Citadel, which I argue reflect Johnson's identification with Atreus, mythological ruler of Mycenae. Like dreams, architecture can contain visual and spatial representations of wishes, conflicts, and other non-visual psychic ideation.

Tonight, I will discuss such hidden meanings embedded in the Glass House—specifically, conflictual aspects of Johnson’s object relationships. The disguised and covert form of these and other meanings underlies the proposition that the design of the Glass House can be understood as a dream. And since a dream is about its dreamer, the Glass House is as much a self-representation—or self-portrait—as it is a dream. I will juxtapose this psychoanalytic approach with the very different, but very complementary phenomenology of space formulated by Gaston Bachelard.

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

Like many of his era, Johnson embraced the idea that creative work springs from the unconscious mind, and is, 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** (1955)
It’s **impossible to know** what influences from your early life or from study are up in your consciousness (1994)

Jackson Pollock, Johnson’s contemporary, felt his art to be a direct expression of his unconscious. In *Reframing Abstract Expressionism*, Michael Leja maintains that Jungian constructs—in particular, archetypal symbolism—proved a means

superior to Freudian metapsychology for achieving this end, framing the Freud–Jung divide around the dichotomy of visual vs. non-visual.

Pollock's 1953 painting, *Portrait and a Dream*, is a diptych on a solid white ground. The left-hand side is an abstract black and white drip painting; the right-hand is figural, colored, and carefully drawn. This painting is often taken to be an attempt to literally depict a "self-portrait" and a "dream," the "dream" traditionally assigned to the left hand, and the "portrait" to the right. I suggest that this is not a presumption that can be safely made. If the alternative is assumed—that in reality, no such assignment can be made—then the painting is allowed to comment on the ambiguous equivalency of a self-portrait and a dream. Which is a more veritable representation of the self? The portrait, intended to reveal? Or the dream, which conceals what it aims to reveal? Is a dream not a portrait? Is a portrait not a dream?

This is to illustrate that when works of art are interpreted within a psychoanalytic context, they tend to be "read" as hieroglyphics—as a configuration of legible symbols—and not assumed to contain concealed, disguised, or otherwise inaccessible meanings. In other words, the "portrait" is usually not understood as a "dream." This may relate to the historical association of symbolic visual imagery with Jungian thematics, in contrast to the conceptual and dynamic formulas (e.g., the Oedipal complex) of Freudian metapsychology. Yet this dichotomy is perverse as it neglects Freud's preoccupation with that most conspicuous element of *dreams*—the visual and spatial representation of underlying dream thoughts.

what are truly **characteristic** of dreams are only those elements of their content which behave like **images**

Of the various subsidiary thoughts attached to the essential dream-thoughts, those will be preferred which admit of **visual representation** (Freud)

Kuspit also discourages the psychoanalytic approach to *visual*—as opposed to *literary*—art, an approach which, in his words, can “reduce the [art] object... completely to the terms of its theory... that the object seems nothing but an epiphenomenon of that theory.” Apparently speaking for himself, Kuspit suggests that the art-lover’s aversion to “the psychoanalytic stare” reflects a fear that it will rob the cherished art object of its sublimity and power, a sort of annihilation by analysis. This fear is the same that we face every day in clinical practice: the fear that by being understood, one will be taken *apart*: diminished, and destroyed.

Like our patients, Johnson also feared coming apart. I will argue that his sense of internal fragmentation and need for containment are symbolically elaborated in the Glass House, and that the *act* of creating his own home—a work-in-progress spanning five decades—was an attempt to navigate the dangers of autonomy. How can we appreciate his design as a dream, and not a hieroglyphic, without disassembling it into a rudimentary iconography?

The approach I take is adapted from Freud’s dream-interpretative methodology. Beginning with Johnson’s comments on specific design elements, associative pathways are traced by making formal, contextual and narrative links to

Johnson words; his life history; and the designs and forms he saw and knew. Latent content is inferred at the convergence of these interpretative lines. Recognizing the inherent limitations of this technique, we expect to glean only those meanings *rendered accessible by the associative material at hand*; we also assume that these will be but a fraction of a body of co-existing latent meanings. We will thus make an effort to handle with care Johnson's portrait and dream—to effect a holding and an integration, rather than a dismantling stare.

Louise Pope Johnson, 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**

This is Johnson's conception of his mother: a mother who abandons her unwanted children at birth. Johnson—who repeatedly describes being left alone as a child—links his mother, and her strenuously educative role, to life-long feelings of aloneness.

I was brought up as a loner because of my mother's antisocial attitude, which stayed with me... [During summers on the farm] we weren't allowed to mix with the locals... **so we were alone again**. **Mother would teach us** (1984)

Johnson's emerging intellectuality was a means to identify with Louise, and also to rationalize his painful feelings of separateness and transform it into something desirable. His connoisseurship and considerable power of articulation encouraged

the perception of him as an elitist dandy and dilettante—a reputation enhanced by Johnson’s constant presentation of himself as a something other than a true artist: a second-rate designer, or *copyist*. His tendency to attract admiration, while putting others off, may reflect an identification with his scholastically exacting mother, who alternately enthralled and intimidated him via her compulsive tutoring, at home and in the museums and cathedrals of the Continent. But although Louise was experienced by her son as a “cold fish,” “more schoolmistress than mother,” she apparently had difficulty letting him individuate, resisting the divergence of his own strongly felt aesthetic and intellectual preferences from her own.

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—I burst into tears and she didn’t know why...** [This] 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

The idea that Johnson’s love of architecture was a point of departure from his mother flies in the face of her keen interest in it, of which Johnson was well aware. Failing to get the Frank Lloyd Wright house she lusted after, she settled for remodeling the interior of their Cleveland home during Johnson’s childhood, installing—importantly—a lavish Art-Nouveau bedroom for herself, wildly avant-

garde for the time. Rationalizing Louise's empathic failures as an aesthetic difference, Johnson may have minimized his mother's penchant for architecture in order to claim it for himself, something uniquely belonging to this "pure mama's boy," despite—and maybe because of—Louise's discouragement of his differentiation from her. And yet there is ample evidence for Johnson's ambivalence over separating from such an omnipotent woman, possessive of all the "knowledge in the world worth having"—a dynamic recalling patients Mahler describes as searching for "symbiotic omnipotent fusion with the mother" yet "dreading engulfment in symbiosis." Witness Johnson's confession that he was "as annoyed" with their aesthetic differences as Louise was, and his dutiful decoration of his rooms with works by Martini, her favorite painter—a vain attempt, perhaps, to keep her close.

And so attention should be paid to Simone Martini, a trecento Sienese painter whose works involve reverently drawn architectural motifs. Accompanying his mother in Siena, on one of the many art-looking pilgrimage he took as a child, Johnson would most likely have encountered Martini's masterwork, *The Miracle of the Child Falling From the Balcony*. This painting is notable for its disoriented cubist geometry, startlingly reminiscent of certain of Johnson's aesthetic conjectures, exemplified by the Beck House. What boy would not have been arrested by the image of a child plunging head-first to the ground? His mother looks on helplessly, her arms

straining upward—not downward—in a reflexive gesture of terror, while the arms of an angel reach out to catch him.

Martini's *St. Louis of Toulouse Appearing at the Bedside of a Sick Child* offers a setting of austere, formal simplicity that could easily pass for a prototype of classic Johnsonian design. It, too, concerns a savior come to rescue a child in danger—*another child about to be forever separated from his mother*.

Johnson was far less attached to his father. Homer Johnson's disparaging rejection of his son as an effete, non-income producing "mama's boy" went unmitigated even by Johnson's greatest achievements. But Homer was also somewhat of a disappointment to his son.

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

Johnson in fact considered himself wanting in many areas, especially those involving talent, creativity, and technical skill. He seemed to believe that while he could passively receive his mother's knowledge and his father's "charisma," he was *weak*, like his father, and could not *do things* or *make sense*.

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

This inadequate sense of independent, action-oriented capability recalls Mahler's descriptions of children whose adventurous exploration during separation-individuation was unsupported or interfered with.

[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

Nevertheless, even before graduating from Harvard, Johnson was invited to become the founding director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the newly established Museum of Modern Art—an extraordinary opportunity that would shape the course of his life, and provide Johnson with a much-needed culture, discipline, and *home*. In particular, the radical Modernist Zeitgeist espoused by MoMA offered the stabilizing scaffold of *style*. For as early as 1931—fully seven years prior to entering architecture school—the hesitant Johnson expressed anxiety over the notion of individual style, averring that

submission to an **artistic dictator** is better than an **anarchy** of selfish personal opinion

Underlying this idea was Johnson's fear that he lacked sufficient talent or vision to become a "form-giver" or "artistic dictator" himself. For Johnson, originality and novelty was the definition of *genius in design*, personified by Mies and by Frank Lloyd Wright. (Ernst Kris traced the path of this prevailing mythic formulation, from the *artista divina* to the modern-day "cultural hero.") And, for Johnson, the prospect

of creating original work invoked isolation, disorganization and chaos; far safer, then, to “submit” to an “artistic dictator”.

The promotion of European Modernism in architecture became Johnson’s organizing and consuming purpose. Conceived at the heart of this endeavor was Johnson’s determined attachment to his *Lieber Meister*, the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who Johnson identified and promoted as the pre-eminent spokesman for “The International Style”. Johnson was captivated by Mies’s impeccable craftsmanship; the formal purity and paradoxical romanticism of his designs; and his fine, opulent finishes. Letters home from the early 1930’s, when Johnson traveled in 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

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)

After becoming an architect himself, Johnson modeled his early work after Mies, and collaborated with him on the famed Seagram Building.

The architect Robert Stern underscores the extremism of Johnson’s frank idolatry.

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)

Clearly, Mies was more than a mentor to follow and identify with: he was, in Johnson's words, "a god." Or better, an angel who saved Johnson from falling into the abyss of creative isolation. But while Johnson's estimation and choice of Mies as a master was by all accounts a prescient one, other factors contributed to Johnson's absolute deference. Johnson's Germanophilia was one, traceable to his adored German nannies and to his parents' general passion for all things German. And surely there was something reminiscent of Johnson's mother in Mies's famously taciturn, aloof hauteur, and something in his rejecting criticality that recalled Johnson's father.

Johnson quoted Mies repeatedly, and defiantly, in defense of his radical 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? (1955)

I have been called **Mies van der Johnson**—it doesn't bother me in the slightest (1958)

But he was bothered. Observe the idealization, rationalization, and negation that betray his despair over being unable, in his mind, to build "interesting" buildings.

Listen to how he guards against the chains of safe stylistic enslavement and the impossible demand of constant originality with a joyous, almost manic 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... **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 (1955)

Some of us rejoice in [our architectural] **crutches** and pretend that we're walking and that poor people with two feet are slightly **handicapped**... architecture is the sum of inescapable artistic decisions that you have to make. **If you're strong** you can make them... **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.** Never in history... were the great men so great, never could we learn so much from them (1954)

Johnson associates his sense of artistic inadequacy with feelings of *weakness*: he felt he lacked the *strength* to bear the “heavy load” of creativity—strength he might *borrow*, however, from a “great man.” Again, witness the struggle to convince himself—“I believe that”—and the hardly convincing negation—“I do not strive for originality”.

Ultimately, Johnson's underlying drive for artistic autonomy made itself known. Moving away from Miesian thematics, in 1959 Johnson still expresses a confused admixture of obedience and defiance toward his “artistic dictator”.

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 (1959)

Even if correct, this facile conceptualization of Mies as hated Oedipal father rationalizes and masks other painful feelings and dynamics, including a shameful sense of weakness; the envious wish for the potency of an idolized “spiritual father”; and a hatred of him for not granting it. Johnson’s spite may have served to drive a wedge between his “little ego” and Mies’s Teutonic one, a tentative differentiation opposed by a lingering, agitated adulation, and punished by merciless self-satire.

By the 1960s, the very aesthetic Johnson helped formulate and promulgate—the “International Style”—was no longer in ascendance, displaced, by an increasing emphasis on individuality in design. Johnson met this transition 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... We should **splinter up** in any way we please... [and] choose from history whatever forms, shapes, or directions you want to ... if we are going to have chaos I feel that we might as well have **nice, juicy chaos** (1960)

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... A few years ago I was proud to be tagged with the sobriquet 'Mies van der Johnson'... no academy can exist in these times of violent atomization... There are no hidden valleys where an artistic 'school' can develop (1962)

Johnson left the security of the International Style with “no forms to cling to,” no “shapes to copy,” and no “academy” to belong to. Threatened by a “violent atomization,” Johnson—an “architect by accident”—sought refuge in the reassuring familiarity of *enduring historical form*.

Johnson’s experience of architecture also manifests a sensitivity to fragmentation. He described the “shock of big space” as feeling like being “sprayed into a room”—literally aerosolized—and, as we shall see, constantly sought a physical sense of enclosure and containment. I suggest that these responses reflect Johnson’s deficient sense of secure, integrated and autonomous self, which spurred his lifelong search for a dominating school or muse. According to Mahler, feelings of chaos and atomization can be related to a “dread of dissolution of the self... into an aggressively invested dual unity.” Ironically, in his flight from fragmenting autonomy, Johnson literally achieved such a “dual unity”: “Mies van der Johnson”.

Johnson candidly volunteers that his Glass House was purposefully inspired by Mies’s plans for the Farnsworth House. Yet Johnson had in fact made attempts to

diverge from Mies from the start, as the Glass House contains several important differences from this Miesian exemplar. First, the Glass House was originally conceived as another “*dual unity*”—the Glass House, and the adjacent Brick (or Guest) House, as opaque as the Glass House is transparent. The most prominent deviation in the Glass House itself is the imposing internal brick cylinder that contains the hearth and the bath. By puncturing the roof-line and melding seamlessly with the brick floor, the cylinder compromises the integrity of these enclosing planes, creatinh a unifying, anchoring effect, antithetical to the Miesian ideal of weightless, autonomous planes intersecting in space.

The innocuous circumferential chair rail is another, less overt defiance that violates Mies’s stance that *structure alone* should suffice for “decoration.” Moreover, it mimics the structural framework of the Glass House, disobeying Mies’s rule that “only structure should look like structure.” Apparently, these departures from Miesian thematics were not formulated consciously.

as different as [the Glass House] is from the Farnsworth... at the time I was completely devoted to making it identical, showing you’re never conscious of your own motives (1963)

Given their discrete and unconscious defiance of Mies, the cylinder and the chair rail merit our attention. To better understand the cylinder, we must introduce Theodate Pope Riddle, Johnson’s mother Louise’s first cousin.

Theodate was one of the first female American architects, a serious collector of Impressionist paintings, and a member of the elite artistic and political intelligentsia. Yet Johnson kept a dismissive distance from Theodate, following his mother's lead. Louise's contempt for Theodate barely concealed her envy of her iconoclastic, fiercely independent, eminently well-connected, and far wealthier cousin. Louise's interests in art, architecture and education were uniformly modeled after Theodate's; shortly after Theodate designed her first school, Louise opened her own.

Theodate's chef d'oeuvre and passion was Avon Old Farms, a boy's school in Avon, Connecticut. After visiting the construction site, Johnson reported 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 (1925)

Note Johnson's ridicule of Theodate's rusticated, sentimental idiom. If Johnson's scorn was meant to placate his mother's envy, it may have also guarded against his *own*, for Avon Old Farms was an exceptionally ambitious and stunning achievement. None other than Johnson's protégé, Robert Stern, compared its unique organicity to the best of Johnson's greatest rival—Frank Lloyd Wright. Johnson's less favorable attitude toward Theodate was reciprocated. In 1932, she took part in an architectural forum in conjunction with Johnson's famous MoMA exhibition, "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 (Katz)

But for Mies—and thus, at least for a while, for Johnson—aesthetic Puritanism trumped comfort, familiarity and other emotional needs. Those needs—and architecture attentive to those needs, like Theodate's—were dismissed by contempt.

The road to Avon twists through a forest before reaching the school in its clearing. In Robert Stern's book *Pride of Place*, an appreciation of Theodate Pope Riddle's architecture is closely followed by a discussion of the very different architecture of her cousin, Philip Johnson—connected only, Stern implies, by their familiar relationship. Here, he describes the signifier of Avon Old Farms.

Avon Old Farms confronts the arriving visitor with the high cylinder of a brick water tower, a hulking mass that looks like a medieval castle keep (Stern)

When one turns the page of Stern's book, the reader is confronted with a two-page spread of Johnson's Glass House and its own "hulking mass" of a brick cylinder. Despite their plainly identical material and form, and despite their proximity in the *text*, Stern fails to acknowledge the stylistic relationship between these two structures, appearing as blind (or mute) to this explicit correspondence as Johnson was. And of all Stern's monographs, *Pride of Place* has no place at all in the shelves of Johnson's architectural library. The surgical excision of Theodate from his shelves

and from his habitual roster of references appears multiply determined. Given his inherited burden of envy, Johnson might have found it intolerable to admit of Theodate's influence. And while we can interpret the cylinder as commandeering Theodate's phallic strength, it may also represent an encrypted, forbidden rejection of Louise by its assumption—and admiration—of her envied cousin's form. The disavowal of his competitor's influence could have also effected a symbolic killing-off of her, simultaneously inuring Johnson to the various meanings—and the very reality—of his eidetic appropriation of her form.

If we accept the proposition that Theodate's *water tower* is part of the latent content of the Glass House, then its redesignation as a *chimney* during its translation into the manifest brick cylinder is an example of *displacement*. Its transformation was achieved through changes of function—it now holds fire, in addition to water, and changes in context—inside, rather than outside, which also results in a change in emphasis, Johnson's form being more quietly assertive than Theodate's. We can infer that the cylinder represents an *incorporative identification* with Theodate, an identification that contains a wish: the *wish to create his own forms*, like the outré Theodate. I suggest that this wish screens an earlier wish: *the wish to differentiate and be autonomous from his mother*. In its exquisitely tuned rebuke of idealized others—Mies and Louise—Johnson's cylinder may be ultimately understood as an act of mutiny.

Yet this stand takes the form of Theodate's tower, countering its stab at autonomy. And by imitating Theodate, Johnson was imitating his mother's imitation of Theodate. This doubly mimetic act may be interpreted as reflecting a pull opposing differentiation: *the wish for symbiotic attachment or fusion to an omnipotent other*. The conflict between the pull toward individuation and the pull toward dependent attachment is perfectly encapsulated by the way that Johnson *differentiated* himself from Mies by emphasizing the *connectedness and anchorage* of the component parts of the Glass House, vs. Mies's stress on their *independence* from each other and from the earth. The cylinder thus provides a unifying, holding function.

Mies's [Farnsworth 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** (1994)

The other anti-Miesian element of the Glass House, the steel chair rail, also has a holding function: it defines a circumferential enclosure, a boundary that the inherently indeterminate glass curtain cannot provide. This boundary is subtly reinforced by the granite railing. Because the chair rail blends in with the adjacent structural framework, its containing function is obscured and *disguised*.

Thirty years after the Glass House was completed, Johnson recognized the importance of its anti-Miesian "anomalies":

there are anomalies... that Mies would never have tolerated: the round brick [cylinder] that 'anchors' the design, and especially the chair rail that ties the house into an enclosed composition (1979)

In 1949, Johnson had *consciously* scorned these stabilizing, holding functions while *unconsciously* realizing them. While Miesian doctrine had provided an organizing scaffold for Johnson, *the Glass House anticipates and mitigates its limitations for him*: the chair rail, a reassuring ballast of centripetal enclosure; and the cylinder, a unifying, gravitational anchor and its all-important hearth.

I'm talking about something that fills the room with its energy and flicker... The fire is not only a warmth, it touches so many senses, the fire and the flicker... to me, if neither the fountain nor the fireplace is going, I have a sense of loss (1963)

Four years after the resounding success of the Glass House, Johnson redesigned the interior of the Brick House, signaling a dramatic parting from the International Style. Collapsing its two bedrooms into one long, narrow one, Johnson furnished it with delicate colonettes and domes of thin plaster, set away from backlit walls covered in lustrous pink Fortuny silk. This was purely “decorative” design, and curvilinear to boot: sheer blasphemy against the modern. Johnson could now allow that *decoration*—which modernism dismissed as “useless”—had emotional value. He could allow himself to create, rather than imitate; he could allow himself to *play*.

In 1959, Johnson spelled out his dissatisfactions with “puritanical” Miesian theocracy. He complained that the Miesian façade failed to draw one in, to beckon

or entice; rather, the Miesian façade *rejects*. Johnson also criticized the Miesian program for its handling of public domains—the plaza, religious buildings, and the theatre—specifically, for their failure to foster a sense of *gathering* and *intimacy*, and indeed, for their capacity to invoke a feeling of *banishment*.

The only thing that will give you help [with designing a theatre] is the memory of... **how you feel in enclosed theatres**, and there is absolutely no substitute for that. The [tiered and rounded] court theatre... give[s] you a sense of **intimacy** [and] **participation**; the curve around the back doesn't have any corners... where you could get the feeling you were **not in the theatre at all** (1959)

Similarly, Johnson was preoccupied with ways to prevent a column situated in a corner from being “lost” in the receding right angle. As he grew to acknowledge his very human longing for the comfort conferred by formed space—its enclosure, and its embrace—Mies’s rectilinear program gave way to the *secure surround of the curve*.

Johnson preferred to sleep in the Brick House, cradled under its narrow, feminine canopy that protected him from the vastness of “the great outdoors”.

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 (1959)

The Brick House redesign presciently anticipates Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological study, *The Poetics of Space*, published five years after.

*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... For the beloved curve has nest-like powers... Here we have achieved a minimum of **refuge**...*

*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... There is **consolation** in knowing that one is in an atmosphere of calm, in a **narrow space** (Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958)*

Johnson's father reacted poorly to his son's homosexuality, and dismissed his proclivity for "art" as belonging to the province of women. And for Johnson, art and beauty do appear irrevocably linked to the feminine. The stern, rejecting façade of the opaque Brick House—Miesian, but also rather like Louise—gives no indication of its surprising contents: an erotic, ineffably elegant boudoir diametrically opposed to puritanical Miesian principles, an aesthetic that Johnson appears to have identified with his parents. In defiance, he made a silken nest. And might this nest conceal a reimagining of Johnson's mother's sumptuous Art Nouveau bedroom, recalled in architectural form? Both interiors were redesigned; both were incongruous with their exterior; both were radical for their time. The Brick House interior can also be interpreted as signifying a forbidden, hidden—*interior*—longing for (and identification with) a woman's secret world of beauty and soothing femininity. In

addition, the “useless” beauty of the Brick House interior can be construed as a self-representation of those rejected, feminine, “useless” aspects of its architect.

Let us look more closely at the prominent motif of the interior redesign, the curvaceous elliptical arch. Johnson originally referenced Sir John Soane’s famous Neo-classical breakfast room in London as inspiration for his elliptical forms, but later he offered a more haphazard description 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 (1994)

Neither explanation is likely the whole story, Johnson’s insistence aside (“I remember that”), for a Johnson family home has a porch with identical arches.

That this element belongs to a *porch* further complicates things, as Johnson and his siblings sleep year-round on a sleeping porch. At times Johnson wakened to find himself covered with snow. What did sleeping outdoors mean to a man who needed an opaque, sealed-off vault to sleep in? As recapitulated in the Glass House, it was, at least at times, transcendent.

the snow comes down at night, and the building floats. You’re being levitated, and that impressed me—really fantastic (1994)

In other places, Johnson conveys a rather different feeling.

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... Reflections [on glass] don't bother me, but the lack of **containment** does
(1987)

Bachelard offers a perspective on what Johnson sought to master in the Brick House.

*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... When we dream of the house we were born in... we participate in this original warmth... This is the environment in which the protective beings live (Bachelard)*

I suggest that the “sleeping porch” is a symbolic leitmotif that contains a narrative of being “cast into the world”—of *banishment* from his mother’s boudoir. If Johnson experienced spending dark nights outside “the cradle of his house” as a banishment—a screen, I imagine, for earlier abandonments; and, if the Glass House is a dream of the sleeping porch, with only the most fragile membrane keeping one from being “dispersed into the world”—then might the Brick House be an alternative, reparative dream in which the sleeping porch is brought back safe inside? Note that the Glass House and Brick Houses are linked underground by an underground connection referred to as the “umbilical cord,” through which the Brick House supplies heat, power, and water to the Glass House. Cast out into a vacuum—the sleeping porch, signified by the Glass House—Johnson thereby remained connected to a source of comfort, protection and warmth: the idealized mother he hoped to find behind her forbidding exterior, signified by the Brick House.

As might be expected, Mies did not react very well to the Glass House. From Schulze's biography of Johnson,

Mies... could not keep from complaining about the design of the house... [Johnson] came back at Mies... '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 (Franz Schulze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*, 1994)

Castigated by his master, Johnson retaliated by attacking Mies's own *Lieber Meister*—Berlage—on quite the same grounds he would have expected Mies to criticize the Brick House: the use of decoration. When Johnson told this story, he omits his attack on Berlage, describing Mies's storming out as a natural and justifiable response to the Glass House's supposed "bad copy" of Mies's Farnsworth House.

The building Johnson ridiculed—the Stock Exchange, or the Beurs van Berlage—is a refined edifice, its massive solidity offset by a vast, buoyant interior lit by a steel-and-glass skylight. We can see that the Brick House iterates the exact material and motifs of the Beurs: it is brick, it is skylit, it has repeated round apertures—and it has elliptical arches.

In Johnson's rather provocative essay introducing his "Residence at New Canaan," he references more than twenty diverse art-historical sources for the *Glass House*, but

practically attributes the Brick House to *Mies*—with no mention of Berlage whatsoever. Why did Johnson disparage Berlage, and disavow his influence in the Brick House—Berlage being a name historians associate, more than anything, with *brick*?

The most parsimonious hypothesis is that Johnson attacked Mies's master in retaliation for Mies's failure to appreciate not only Johnson's work, but also the steady homage Johnson had paid him. Two years before completing the Glass House, Johnson organized Mies's first major retrospective, and authored its handsome accompanying monograph—which Mies claimed to have had no interest in reading. Earlier, in the 1930s, after Johnson had helped him to leave Germany and find employment in the United States, Mies snubbed him by not visiting his thesis project—a Miesian court house in Cambridge—when in town. Johnson rationalized these hurts by construing his own work as a “bad copy” of Miesian design. Why didn't he see his aesthetic differences from Mies as a venture toward originality and autonomy?

I suggest that Johnson might have feared that Mies would not tolerate such disobedience—as Johnson's mother had not. Imagining his work to be a “bad copy” would have protected against anxiety over such conflict, let alone the anxiety around being or becoming a rival. Similarly, Johnson could have disavowed the competitive challenge of own emulation of Berlage by neglecting Berlage's influence in the Brick House.

The Glass House was planned after, but brought to completion two years before Mies's Farnsworth House, effectively stealing Mies's thunder. While we can easily imagine Mies being threatened by his protégé, Johnson's painful effacement of the potential target of envy might have prevented him from even picturing that scenario.

Mies's {Farnsworth House} is far, far better—better quality finishes and much better steel... I didn't pay that much attention... my corners are not as proper... [my] furnishings are all Mies. It relieved me of the responsibility of thinking and designing... Take the masterworks. Why reinvent the spoon?
(1994)

Endorsing the myth of the failed, incompetent copyist may have been a way to maintain connections to idealized, omnipotent others, but came at the painful cost of shameful, hobbling subjugation and loss of autonomous *self*. What made these binding attachments so crucial for Johnson? I suggest that they were invaluable sources of self-esteem that also protected Johnson against isolation and ensuing feelings of fragmentation, *containing* him even while *consuming* him within a fused dual-identity. Self-criticism—in identification with reproachful others—could have also been a means of self-punishment. For in addition to Oedipal conflicts, Johnson may have felt guilt over his elder brother Alfred's illness and death when Johnson was 2 years old—a loss that lends dynamic weight to Martini's vulnerable children.

We can now conceptualize Brick House as a result of *condensation*: an over-determined design containing a multiplicity of interrelated, conflict-laden meanings,

including aspects of Johnson's relationship and identification with his mother—the recapitulation of her radical boudoir; the narrative of banishment and mastery—the architectural recollection of the sleeping porch and its repair through internalization; and, the uneasy dialectics of binding allegiance vs. autonomy, symbolized by Johnson's ambivalent place in the dynastic genealogy of Berlage and Mies, and visualized by the veiled representation of Berlage's *Beurs*. That the porch and the *Beurs* share the elliptical arch also renders the Brick House a *composite*. If there is an underlying, organizing wish to the Brick House dream, it may be the conflictual longing for enveloping embrace—a wish to be brought back inside and safely returned to a protective, loving mother's arms.

In fact, holding enclosure is signified and achieved in most of the different buildings of the Glass House campus by their paucity of windows. Literally walled off, their skylights are the major source of illumination. Over the years, Johnson steadily isolated and split off various functions of living of life, distributed them between new constructions: the Brick House became the bedroom; the Sculpture and Painting Galleries, places for housing and viewing art; the Study, workspace and library; and the Lake Pavilion, dedicated play space. Johnson thus created a strain between ambiguously boundaried Glass House and the spinning-off of parts of life, and the fortified environments that received and housed those parts. I propose that this tension represents a symbolic elaboration of *a splintered self*, and the related search for refuge in *binding cohesion*. The various components of the Glass House

can also be construed as representing a compromise struck between the pull of permeable, uncertain autonomy and the pull of dominating, containing attachment. The architectural transformation of these tensions—between coming apart and coming together—was, I suggest, an attempt at mastery.

Johnson also found precious refuge in the hilly landscape of the Glass House.

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 too small to give you a sense of **containment**... (1986)

Johnson was fond of the rustic origins of his estate, a former farm. Clearing the secondary growth forest, he restored some of the ancestral pastures, and the rambling stone walls that marked their division.

my house is a house in the field. That comes from my upbringing in Ohio. I love fields, pastures... I think it's because... the walls provide an **organizing grid** that I've preserved... The idea was to be **connected with nature** (1993)

The idea was to be connected to nature—Mother earth, *Terra madre*. For Johnson, this was at least as important as being enclosed by an “organized grid”. For Bachelard, the comforting familiarity of the field comes from its evocation of cultivation. If internal cohesiveness is gained by a connection to one’s past, then part of the organizing quality of Johnson’s walls and meadows derived from their recollection of his beloved summers on his farm. The pond, where Johnson built the Pavilion, speaks specifically to wishful recreation.

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 (1986)

In a Johnson family album is a photographic collage of a meadow, sloping towards his mother's pond, just as the Glass House overlooks its own pond.

The Lake Pavilion of 1962, the first structure added to the Glass House House dyad, is a folly, a contemporary rendering of classical pleasure-giving architecture—anathema to the Modern. One of its intriguing aspects is its undersized scale, the ceiling barely six feet high. When viewed from afar, its smallness gives the illusion of great distance; up close, it makes one feel greater in size. Johnson reveled in this magical effect: the elegant, yet playful Pavilion could make a grown man feel little again. Bachelard proposes a function of the miniature, strikingly parallel to Johnson's longing for subjugated, protected connection.

*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** into the surrounding atmosphere (Bachelard)*

One takes not a little step over the water to the island Pavilion, epitomizing the programmed “safe danger” Johnson prized. Precarious, exciting crossings such as the island and the narrow footbridge invoke the allure and danger of separation. At the same time, the elliptical arcades of the Pavilion evoke that other symbol of the anxiety of separation—the sleeping porch.

Now external and open to the elements, these arches are more closely allusive to the sleeping porch than those sequestered within the Brick House. I argue that this is an example of *the progressive approximation of latent content in successive works of manifest design*, a phenomenon I describe elsewhere in the Glass House; I propose this reflects a process of *working through*.

The “safe danger” of precarious crossings may have helped to mitigate and transform the anxiety of separation, as may the erotic feelings Johnson links with the physical process of leaving shore in this crucial passage.

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...

Note how infinitely more appealing “cast off” is than “cast out”. And note here, the playful, transcendent nature of Johnson's enjoyment of being small, being big.

I reduced the scale of the pavilion for several reasons... That feeling of being powerful and big is a marvelous feeling... I can make myself small by imagining... that's the whole point, the whole experience, of a playhouse... It's exactly the same as a kid... 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... [it] is... **the clearest expression of what architecture is for** [at the Glass House] (1994)

If the Pavilion was “*the clearest expression of what architecture is for,*” then this passage is Johnson’s clearest expression of what architecture was for him: his “*whole cultural background and experience in a building*”. The Pavilion is a visualization of what Johnson so sensitively identifies as among a child’s most basic wishes and needs: to have a special place to play; to leave one’s parents for that place, and one day, to be on one’s own; and, to be able to navigate that dangerous journey safely, without need for rescue—like Johnson’s elder brother and Martini’s fated children. To be on your own in that precarious, special place is to feel powerful: the exhilarating feeling of being big enough! As Bachelard observes, “One can undoubtedly become aware of existing by escaping from space”. For that escape to be safe, it requires a parent’s permission, and encouragement, to *be* separate—and different—from them.

Only after liberation from Modernist constraints could Johnson create the Pavilion.

the last generation... preached the **moral** nature of [architecture]... 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 (1962)

This playhouse, this luxuriant self-portrait, was surely authorized by the gathering design Zeitgeist which sanctioned the emotional function of formed environments.

Yet the Pavilion is more than a passive drift along ideological trends. It is a defiant expression of the self, an insurgence against an authoritarian, puritanical parent, embodied for Johnson by Mies and his *aesthetic of deprivation*, and epitomized by Mies's principle and price: "*beinahe nicht*" (*byenye*), almost nothing.

In summary, this "tiny oasis" represents separation in several aspects: *physical*, in its context as an island, separated from the mainland; *symbolic*, in its evocation of the latent sleeping porch, and its narrative of banishment; *dynamic*, in its repudiation of Miesian thematics identified with Mies and with Johnson's parents; and *defensive*, in its erotized and exciting "safe danger". Within the greater dream of the Glass House, the Pavilion is an encapsulated, fully formed dream, of a child's island of undiluted pleasure, 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 liked to say that he wanted to observe his centenary by moving to Rome—*Roma madre*. He did not get the chance. Johnson died, at the age of ninety-eight, in his dream house.