

A Journal for Ideas and
Criticism in Architecture

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Fall 1977: 10

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Peter Eisenman



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1 *Philip Johnson in the Glass House, 1960.*

2 **In architectural works, man's pride, man's triumph over gravitation, man's will to power assume visible form. Architecture is a veritable oratory of power made by form.**

Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted by Philip Johnson, "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture," 1954.

Philip Johnson may be the last architect of the Enlightenment.

Words tend to become tools of knowledge . . . tend to increase interest in the values of the description of things and not in things themselves . . . words are for the mind, not the eye.

Johnson, "Why We Want Our Cities Ugly," 1967.

Philip Johnson is an essayist, an anti-*philosophe*. After reading all that he has written, one has a sense of having been inundated with an erudition rather than confronted with a body of theory. His writings are a monument, perhaps more so than his buildings, to an education and culture that are no longer with us. His essays, while admittedly not of the belles-lettres tradition, nevertheless possess wit, charm, and devilish insight. What on first glance appears to be somewhat casual writing, tending in fact toward the facile, conceals a rapier-like fineness which, without drawing blood, slices the world into slabs of his measured content. For Johnson, words are thought, and art is feeling. His writing is a constant struggle to have beauty triumph over idea.

Ideas keep us from the agony of art.

Johnson, "Beyond Monuments," 1973.

This essay is not intended to be a discussion of the complete writings of Philip Johnson. It attempts to place his widely dispersed written *oeuvre* into some understandable framework, and thus for the first time tries not only to see the range of ideas inherent in Johnson's writings but also to give them their intellectual due; to demonstrate that they are not, as he himself would have us believe, merely the exotic banter of an elite connoisseur.

And, although Johnson would profess to the contrary, would disclaim all manner of knowing, it will be my contention that in his tremendous outpouring of words there is a highly selective attitude which subtly suggests another Johnson: the ideologue.

Words mean what you want them to mean.

Johnson, paraphrasing Through the Looking Glass in an informal talk at the Architectural Association, London, 1960.

The writings discussed here are intended to isolate and position his ideology. In doing so, the usual classification of writings according to chronology or according to the building types of individual architects discussed in them is eschewed for a litmus of another kind. Thus, the subject matter here is not necessarily all of Johnson's best or even most important writing; some is not "vintage" Johnson. But insofar as any text contributes to our understanding of the ideological mind, it is worth considering.

What follows therefore is not simply an apologia for his activity in architecture. Nor is it merely a gesture to one of the few architects who from the 1930's to the present has stood against the philistinism of conventional practice, who created a climate for serious discussion of architecture, and who fostered a generation of young architects as few others in his position have. It is rather an attempt to make Johnson stand up and be counted, to be seen, despite himself, for the impact he has had on our architecture (not that we necessarily believe him, nor does he want us to), and to bring the force of his consciousness to the public domain. That consciousness must be seen for the seriousness of its discourse.

On the other hand, it is perhaps a little ironic to expose what turns out to be Johnson's self-made myth of himself as a counter-intellectual gadfly. Yet it is necessary to do so in order to allow history to write its own myths. Moreover, in a time of diffusion, a time of what many people would call post-modernism, the sensibility that is Johnson's needs to be identified.

The word kills art.

Johnson,
 “*Style and the International Style.*” *Barnard College, 1955.*

On Functionalism

All architecture is more interested in design than in plumbing.

Johnson, “*Where Are We At?*”, 1960.

You can embellish architecture by putting toilets in.

Johnson,
 “*The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture,*” 1954.

There can be little doubt that by the late 1920’s Johnson, the young philosophy student out of Harvard traveling in Germany, understood and distinguished two intersecting currents in modern architecture: one, the moral sanction given to the forms of the machine aesthetic; the other, the political sanction given to the polemics of the machine society. These intersected and had a common root in the doctrine that was known generally as functionalism.

It is clear from his first published essay on architecture that Johnson recognized the potential for such a dual practice to have a certain paralyzing effect on any form of aesthetic idealism,² and it is this idealism that must be seen as the underpinning of his conception of architecture. Thus, in the brief period from 1931 to 1933, Johnson used his writings to construct a very intricate counterposition to functionalism. Careful, clever, moving among people and ideas in the half-light of the euphoria of the late twenties and early thirties, he cut quietly and subtly at the moral and political roots of the dual doctrine of modern architecture. He did so not with theory or polemic, but by infiltration—by developing a fifth column that paraded as the standard-bearer of that dual doctrine, seemingly marching alongside the cadre of architectural modernists who carried the enthusiasm of those early years.

It is only when one examines, with almost forty years of hindsight, the disintegration of that movement that one can see mirrored in the American context the cunning and efficacy of his activity. The substance of this activity and the

tactics he employed can be pieced together from many of his texts. Johnson’s reasons for writing them, however, are more elusive; yet it will be argued that it is precisely these reasons that remain the key to understanding the essential Johnson. In short, why should anyone seek to erode the basis of his own activity? That is, why should someone who is overtly propagandizing modern architecture at the same time be covertly eroding its basic tenets? This essay can only begin to probe the surface of such a phenomenon. It will remain for scholars and historians to elaborate the full implications of the paradox: the narrow distinction between ideologue and anti-ideologue, between artist and connoisseur.

To see Johnson’s position in relationship to functionalism is the first step in unraveling this riddle.

For Johnson, architecture in 1931 had three attributes: first, it was progressive; second, it stood for originality and individual genius; and finally, it represented the practical expression of solutions to American building problems.³ Now while we can read “progressive” and “practical expression” as two aspects of functionalism, the second attribute, concerning originality and individual genius, seems to contradict the other two. Moreover, when the architect said, “Can I make this building serve its purpose?” Johnson meant, “Can I make it look as if it is serving its purpose?” This *sotto voce* contradiction of functionalism belies a real desire for a return to some *Gesamtkunstwerk* conception of architecture.

Beautiful workmanship of the machine; . . . rather than imitation by the machine.

Johnson, *Introduction to Machine Art, 1936.*

Beyond the practical advantages, modern architecture is beautiful. For while the modern architect accepts the machine age, he also transcends it.

Johnson, *Built to Live In, 1931.*

Time and again, Johnson’s technique is to drive a wedge into an apparently monolithic phenomenon. This technique is articulated for the first time in the two different versions