

Philip Johnson: Not Just a Copycat

December 17, 2004

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Philip Johnson is one of the most well known practitioners of architecture today. In 1979, at age 73, he was awarded the prestigious Pritzker Prize for "50 years of imagination and vitality" in the words of the Citation from the Pritzker Jury (Philip). Twenty-five years later, he is still designing. His current work shows both a difference from his earlier work and a consistent uniformity of vision over the years.

Despite Johnson's prominence and acclaim, there are people who criticize his work. "Chameleon" and "whore" are labels thrown at him (Pearson 59, Lewis 15). "Johnson admitted to copying" is proclaimed triumphantly (Antoniades 166). Some critics would dismiss Philip Johnson as uncreative, merely a copier of other, somehow more legitimate, architects' works. Such criticism is incorrect.

To dismiss Johnson as no more than a copier requires ignoring the creative differences he brings to his work regardless of inspiration, the innovations he has introduced, and finally that "copying" is exactly what he is supposed to do.

Philip Johnson did once blatantly copy another architect's work and is up front in acknowledging that. He writes, "The Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at the University of Houston was the only building in my career that I unashamedly copied from another architect... I changed a few little things along the way." (Fox 1) What then of his other 700 buildings designed over the course of the past fifty years?

Before studying architecture, Johnson was the first Director of the Department of Architecture for the Museum of Modern Art (Gössel 403). He had toured Europe and become familiar with the new architecture being created there. In particular he became friends with Mies van der Rohe, one of the visionaries behind the new architecture. In 1940, Johnson went to

Harvard to study architecture. By this time, many of the big names from Europe were in the United States. Walter Gropius was in charge of architecture at Harvard; Mies had moved to Chicago. Even though he was studying under Gropius at Harvard, Johnson stayed a pupil of Mies's ideas. In Cambridge he designed and built his own house, a variation on Mies's "courtyard house" theory on Ash Street (Jenkins). His first built work, the Ash Street house was eventually accepted as his master's thesis. It seems difficult to believe that the house would have been accepted as a design thesis if Johnson had merely copied it from Mies's ideas without any actual design of his own put in to it. Indeed, Hilary Lewis writes:

However, for all it apparently owes to the work of his mentor Mies, this building also represented the way in which Johnson would at once absorb the designs of others and yet make the work his own. For example, the overhang at the wall comes from neither Mies nor Gropius. Ash Street marks the beginning of Johnson's blending of pure International Style tenets with his own sense of taste. The Glass House would take this much further, but Ash Street was the point of departure. (Fox 4)

The man is barely out of the gate and he has already started departing from the teaching of his mentor. He learns from his teachers but has ideas of his own to add. As Lewis notes, the differences become more apparent in Johnson's house for himself from 1949, the Glass House.

While Johnson completed his house before Mies finished Farnsworth, it is accepted that Farnsworth was the first design and that Johnson would not have made his own Glass House were it not for Mies's work. This case is probably the most famous of Johnson's supposed copycat efforts. Of the inspiration for his home, Johnson writes:

It was not until I had seen the sketches of [Mies's] the Farnsworth House that I started the three-year work of designing my glass house. My debt is therefore clear, in spite of the obvious difference in composition and relation to the ground." (Jenkins 63)

The Glass House is small. The form is a plain box with a single off center brick cylinder providing a fireplace and private bathroom. A tall cabinet separates off one end for use as a sleeping area. Despite this simplicity, it took Johnson three years, 27 numbered schemes and as many as 79 different variations to perfect the Glass House. (Jenkins 64) That seems like a large amount of work for a mere copy.

Of course, Johnson did not expend that effort on simply ripping off Mies's work. There are significant differences between the two houses. The difficulty lies in seeing and understanding them given the stripped down nature of the work. Both houses are rectangular, build of light steel frame with floor to ceiling glass for all exterior walls. They each sit in a grassy lot with nearby forest. Farnsworth floats above the ground. Attention is drawn to the requirement of extra elevation for protection from flood by the river running alongside the property (Safran 81). But this only explains the house being open under the floor. The elevated floor is typical of Mies's work at the time, particularly at Illinois Institute of Technology (Safran). On the other hand, Johnson's Glass House is raised above the ground only the minimal amount required for practical reasons. The Glass House sits on the ground. The difference in effect is dramatic. Farnsworth is a temple or bandstand and the Glass House is the landscape hinting at shelter. (Jenkins 64, Safran 81)

Mies painted Farnsworth white and paved the floor with Italian travertine. This is typical of Mies whose famous Barcelona Pavilion from 1929 used marble and rare onyx and glass as interior partitions. Farnsworth stands out as a self-important jewel in the landscape. Johnson, on

the other hand, painted his steel black and paved the floor with brick. The brick is more comfortable, familiar than the cold polished travertine. It also relates the house to its larger Connecticut setting. The Glass House almost disappears into the trees of its site. (Jenkins 64, Safran 81)

Farnsworth is chopped into six different spaces, not counting the bathrooms and closets. The Glass House makes do with two, not counting the 40 acres of surrounding countryside. Farnsworth contains only straight lines with even the chair placement adhering to a rigid grid. The Glass House is anchored to a large off-center brick cylinder. Johnson likes the play of light on curved surface (Lewis 26). (Jenkins 64, Safran 81)

"Philip Johnson has said that you can not not know history." (LeBlank 171) Thirty-five years before Farnsworth was built, Swiss architect Le Corbusier developed a system for modern house construction that he called *Maison Dom-Ino*. Dom-Ino consisted of a simple framework of concrete columns and slabs. The simple, open concrete framework allowed for flexible configuration of interior and exterior walls. Le Corbusier's drawings of Dom-Ino show no walls. The effect is one of complete transparency (Khan 28). What architect could look at Dom-Ino and not see giant sheets of glass completing the shelter yet maintaining the transparency?

Yet Dom-Ino, in 1914, was not the first in its class. The search for a structural system that opens up exterior walls to light and expands interior spaces begins in earnest in 1140 at the abbey of Saint-Denis near Paris (Nuttgens 157). Here was the beginning of the Gothic cathedral. The Gothic style combined a new philosophy of the meaning of the building with new engineering techniques to create bold new interiors of space and light. Michael Doordan said "the modern world made new demands of the architect, offered new material and tectonic possibilities and, therefore, required a new architectural aesthetic" with the early Twentieth Century in mind but he could just as well have said it of the middle Twelfth (Doordan 13).

An exquisite example of the success of Gothic can be found at the small church of Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. The walls are brilliant stained glass gems filling the space between slender stone columns and the whole expanse of the floor is open (Nuttgens 158). In light of this history, it would seem a little hypocritical to dismiss Johnson for copying Mies while not dismissing Mies in turn for copying seven hundred years of architectural precedent.

It has been claimed that "Farnsworth House... is famed for its functional living spaces" (Cowan 146). Interestingly, though, Dr. Farnsworth hated the building and the next owner "bought an 1850s house nearby for his family, and [visited] his prize acquisition as though it were a garden pavilion, to smoke a cigar and soak up the atmosphere." (Webb 106, 113) Johnson's Glass House has been continuously occupied for the past fifty years by a single occupant. Since architecture is ultimately about designing buildings to be used by people in specified ways, Johnson clearly had to apply design skill beyond his original inspiration in order to create an architecturally successful house when the source of his inspiration was a failure.

That Johnson should succeed in making a house that functions and Mies fail is ironic in light of the following observation by architecture writer Hilary Lewis:

Johnson is an unabashed formalist. The appearance of the building, not its function, is what gets Johnson going. This places him well within historic precedent, but far outside the mainstream of his contemporaries. The prevalent attitude in architecture schools at the time Johnson trained stemmed from Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus. Form was to follow function. But Johnson disagreed and has remained true to this attitude." (Fox 8)

Indeed, not four years after completing the Glass House and attendant Guest House, Johnson returned to the Guest House to reconfigure some of the interior rooms. In the new

master bedroom he added a freestanding canopy almost as large as the room. Inside a brick box which functioned perfectly well, he erected slender columns grouped by arches and supporting shallow domes (Jenkins 240). Lighting, hidden above the domes, spills down the walls and creates a gentle glow. Smooth and white the columns are clearly Modern with respect to their own lack of decoration. Yet they decorate the slightly larger room and are a reference to historic structures.

Twenty years later sees Johnson creating a giant sculpture with Pennzoil Place in Houston. Rather than build another rectangular box office building as dictated by the tenets of the Modern movement, and as he did with Mies at the Seagram Building, Johnson placed two triangular towers on the site. In the center of the composition the towers almost meet at corners of the triangles. Each tower has a steeply sloped top and the site is filled in with a similarly sloped low rise lobby between the towers. The narrow corners, a waste of floor space, were expected to cause renting difficulties. Instead, the power of the composition as a whole filled the building with tenants well before construction was complete (Fox 174). The power of the buildings comes not from their utility but rather their dynamic form. From the nearby roads and highways, the movement through space presents a changing aspect of the two towers. From one angle they are massive and blocky, from another they become spindles separated by a great empty volume and from certain privileged angles, the view between them becomes a slice of sky and buildings beyond (Fox 174). This breaking of traditional forms and attention to procession was not copied from his peers, it is pure Johnson.

In recent years, Johnson has designed a gate house for his property, Da Monsta, to be used as an orientation center and gift shop when the National Trust takes over his estate. The form of this building and also of the individual units in a recent project for a home in the Israeli desert immediately call to mind the forms of the currently popular architect Frank O. Gehry

(Jenkins (230). When quizzed on these forms, Johnson freely admits that they were inspired by the wax sculptures of artist Frank Stella. There is a Gehry inspired work on Johnson's estate, his "Ghost House" made of chain link (Jenkins 258). The overall form is that of an old barn, traced in simplified planes, resting on the foundation of a previous barn. Gehry's work with chain link is commonly lifted in the air and arranged at oblique angles (Dal Co 169). Johnson clearly did not just copy the work of Gehry, but was inspired by his use of material and the existing foundation of the barn. He brought these two ideas together in a new idea which is uniquely Philip Johnson's.

Just as the history of Gothic questions Mies's originality, the history of Classicism validates Johnson's use of precedent as an influence in his own work. Thousands of years ago in Greece architects devised certain looks for columns and associated decorative panels. They formalized the best proportions for each of the different column styles. These systems are called the Orders. Rome took the use of the Orders from Greece and refined them to Roman tastes, adding a few innovations and even whole new Orders. An ancient Roman, Vitruvius, wrote the first architecture text known - De Architectura. In Renaissance Italy, architects developed a preoccupation with reproducing the perceived perfection of their ancient forebears. Vitruvius's work was very influential. In 1570, Venetian architect Palladio published I Quattro Libri d'Architettura, which refined Vitruvius to the tastes and new building types of the day (Flon 2645). Today in England, Quinlan Terry is designing in the Classical style. His new works are rooted in a design tradition that is over two thousand years old and five hundred years ago was considered to be the correct way to design (Flon 265). Regarding his Howard Building of 1985 he writes "Palladio's moldings and proportions were followed carefully" (Economakis 108). Terry carefully follows the example of Palladio. In Palladio's time "The correct handling of the Orders [was] indeed the foundation of the architectural language" (Flon 265). Do some criticize Terry as a copyist? Probably, they do. But also, he is recognized for the value of his work.

Some of the texts cited herein are general histories of architecture. Kostof emphasizes one aspect of building, Nuttgens another, and Neal yet another. Even though these authors are interested in different approaches to the telling of the history of architecture, each book is ordered chronologically and grouped by the styles predominant at different times in different places. These texts all emphasize the commonalities between buildings from different designers (Kostof, Nuttgens, Neal). Architects are expected to work in a common idiom.

The tenacity of the Classical Orders through thousands of years, the early Modernists' search for "an architecture for the twentieth century," and the focus on style of architectural history texts all point to one conclusion. The accepted practice among architects, it must be concluded, is to share design vocabularies and present new solutions for use by all. That Johnson follows in this tradition can not be held against him.

While it may be technically feasible to say that Philip Johnson copies other architects the accusation can not be taken as legitimate criticism. In order for such to be seriously considered, it must show that Johnson is excessive; that he reaches beyond the standards of the industry.

Instead, with his body of work, Johnson has shown that he possesses a rare talent for creatively extending and transforming architecture within established approaches. Philip Johnson is, indeed, not just a copycat.

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Illustrations added 6-17-2009



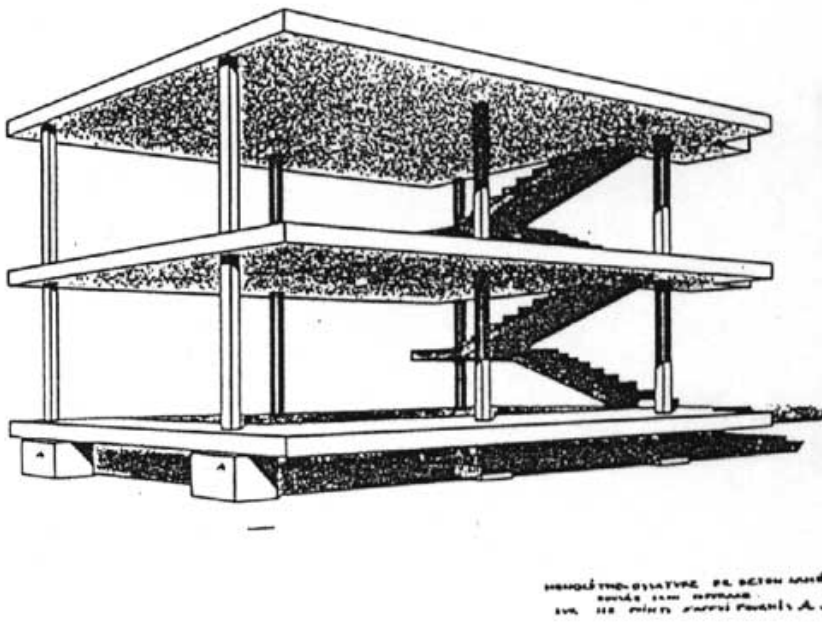
Ash Street – Philip Johnson



Glass House – Philip Johnson



Farnsworth House – Mies van der Rohe



Maison Dom-ino – Le Corbusier



St. Denis – Abbot Suger



St. Chapelle



Penzoil Place – Johnson Burgee Architects



Da Monsta – Philip Johnson



Disney Concert Hall – Frank O. Gehry



Ghost House – Philip Johnson



Gehry House – Frank O. Gehry (modernization/addition)



Parthenon - Athens



Villa Rotonda - Palladio



Something by Quinlan Terry - Quinlan Terry