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Thesis Abstract

*Philip Johnson’s Glass House: Framing Interpretation*

Architect Philip Johnson’s Glass House, in New Canaan, Connecticut, has been cited as a “canonical” work of 20th century architecture, as well as a biographical and metaphorical reflection of its creator; a work which has continuously framed, and been framed by, Philip Johnson for over 50 years. Johnson has promoted the house as a “diary” of his career, and in 1986 he ensured that the house would live on by bequeathing it to the National Trust for Historic Preservation; an agreement in which the Trust will assume control of the property at the time of Johnson’s death. However, in the forthcoming attempt to interpret the house for a new audience, the conflicting interests of architectural history, preservation ethics, and personal intentions are destined to clash. The aim of this thesis is to clarify these potential points of conflict, and to address the implications of an autobiographical framework for its interpretation. By examining Johnson’s ongoing narrative of the site, a unique mixture of historical, mythical, and personal elements, his influence on past critical discourse is illustrated, and its implications are discussed. The thesis then traces the trajectory of the house’s interpretive context from intentional monument to historic house-museum, suggesting that Johnson’s longstanding pursuit of self-preservation is deeply embedded in the history of the Glass House. Finally, the thesis contends that the transition of the house from private home to historic site represents a crucial contextual shift, necessitating the re-evaluation of previous assumptions, along with the de-centering of Johnson as author of the house’s narrative. In conclusion, the thesis offers possible alternative interpretive frameworks including narrative strategies that seek to expand, rather than restrict, the potential of the site.