## 1. NAME OF PROPERTY

**Historic Name: PHILIP JOHNSON'S GLASS HOUSE**

**Other Name/Site Number:** N/A

## 2. LOCATION

**Street & Number:** 798-856 Ponus Ridge Road **Not for publication:** N/A

**City/Town:** New Canaan **Vicinity:** N/A

**State:** CT **County:** Fairfield **Code:** 001 **Zip Code:** 06840

## 3. CLASSIFICATION

| Ownership of Property | | Category of Property | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Private:** | X | **Building(s):** | __ |
| **Public-Local:** | __ | **District:** | X |
| **Public-State:** | __ | **Site:** | __ |
| **Public-Federal:** | __ | **Structure:** | __ |
| | | **Object:** | __ |

**Number of Resources within Property**

| Contributing | Noncontributing | |
|---|---|---|
| 8 | __ | **buildings** |
| __ | __ | **sites** |
| 4 | __ | **structures** |
| 3 | __ | **objects** |
| 16 | 0 | **Total** |

**Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register:** 0

**Name of Related Multiple Property Listing:** N/A

## 4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

**As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this _X_ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.**

_____ _____
**Signature of Certifying Official** **Date**

_____
**State or Federal Agency and Bureau**

**In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.**

_____ _____
**Signature of Commenting or Other Official** **Date**

_____
**State or Federal Agency and Bureau**

## 5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

**I hereby certify that this property is:**

**____ Entered in the National Register**
**____ Determined eligible for the National Register**
**____ Determined not eligible for the National Register**
**____ Removed from the National Register**
**____ Other (explain): _____**

_____ _____
**Signature of Keeper** **Date of Action**

## 6. FUNCTION OR USE

**Historic:** DOMESTIC **Sub:** single dwelling

**Current:** DOMESTIC **Sub:** single dwelling

## 7. DESCRIPTION

**ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION:** MODERN MOVEMENT

**MATERIALS:**
**Foundation:** CONCRETE
**Walls:** GLASS
BRICK
EARTH
STUCCO
CONCRETE

**Roof:** CONCRETE
GLASS

**Other:** BRICK

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Philip Johnson's Glass House is an estate[1] of 16 buildings, structures, and objects situated on 40 acres of land in New Canaan, Connecticut. Located on the western side of Ponus Ridge Road and screened from view by a high stone wall and trees, the property consists mostly of open fields, stone walls, and scattered clusters of trees; from the road along the ridge, the land gently slopes downward toward a bluff, where it then descends much more steeply to a small pond and wooded area on the western edge on the property.

The centerpiece of the estate is the Glass House and its associated brick Guest House, both built in 1949 to serve as Johnson's weekend residence. Sited on the edge of the bluff, the Glass House is a simple rectangular prism, 32 feet by 56 feet in plan, with a height of 10 ½ feet. The house's walls consist entirely of 18-feet-wide floor-to-ceiling plate-glass sheets secured between black-painted steel piers. Stock H-beams anchored the glass with angle brackets. An off-center cylindrical mass of brick, which has a fireplace on one side and the entrance to the bathroom inside the cylinder on the other, protrudes through the top of the flat roof. The foundation is a brick platform with a slab for frost footing.

Like the floor of the house, which is laid in a herringbone pattern, the cylinder is constructed of glazed brick in various shades of deep reds and browns with lighter-colored flecks. Otherwise, the interior is completely open, with low cabinets and bookshelves serving as area dividers. The other major division in the living area, aside from the brick cylinder, is the long line of 42" high cabinets which contains the kitchen. Two panels on top of this unit, when opened and folded back, provide a black linoleum work surface. The sink, two refrigerators, a stove, and storage are all included in the one unit, besides a liquor closet which opens into the living area.

With ventilation from all four sides--the whole house is one room--cooking odors disappear almost immediately. Six spotlights above provide light, and a rubber mat on the floor behind the counter simplifies the mopping-up activities. The furnishings have been largely unaltered from the house's original construction and include chairs and tables made from designs by Mies van der Rohe.[2]

The area immediately surrounding the Glass House is treated as lawn, with crushed stone paths connecting the Glass House with its brick companion, the guest house, and a low light-gray granite curb demarcating the outer edge of the lawn. Similar granite forms the low steps to the Glass House's entrance, which is a full-height single-pane glass door centered on the east elevation.

The Guest House, located about 80 feet to the southeast of the Glass House, is also a low rectangular prism but measures 18 by 52 feet in plan. Its walls are built of the same brick, laid in Flemish bond, and are broken only by a single black-painted entrance on the west elevation and three large circular windows on the east or the rear elevation. A plain sheet-metal frieze serves as the only cornice below the Guest House's flat roof. The interior is partitioned into a corridor, utility room, and bathroom on the west side and two guest rooms on the east side. In 1953, the larger of the two guest rooms was refitted with a rich, shimmery, Fortuny fabric interior vaulting that remains in place.

A circular swimming pool 32 feet in diameter was installed in 1955. It lies to the north of the Glass House and Guest House. Placed beside the swimming pool is a rectangular deck of light-gray granite.

---

[1] Following Johnson's own practice and that of most commentators, the term "Glass House" is used herein to refer both to the primary residence and to the entire property.

[2] Whitney, David and Jeffrey Kipnis, *The Glass House*. New York: Pantheon, 1993. p. 6.

In 1962, Johnson built his Pavilion, a precast concrete construction of open colonnades that seems to float in the small pond near the western edge of the property. It was assembled in one day. Measuring about 32 feet square overall, the Pavilion's symmetrical four-armed plan is placed over a system of water channels and a pool that originally contained small water jets. Spouts in the curbing around the roof empty into the pool, creating waterfalls when it rains. Although from a distance the Pavilion appears to be a full-size building, its scale, said to have been based on the dwarf's quarters in the Ducal Palace at Mantua, is about two-thirds of what would be comfortable for a person of normal stature.

To the west of the pond is a tower erected by Johnson in 1985 in honor of Lincoln Kirstein, a friend, poet and founder of the New York City Ballet. The structure is built of concrete blocks assembled in informal step variations and rises to a height of 36 feet. Although irregular in form, the tower provides a continuous set of winding steps leading to the top.

In 1965, Johnson designed a gallery to contain his painting collection, choosing for its site a grassy hill northeast of the Glass House. From the outside, the earth-bermed building appears to be a large mound of grass, with the entrance set on the east side between battered wing walls of vermiculated concrete. The overall dimensions of the gallery are 60 feet by 72 feet, not including the entranceway. The interior galleries are 24 feet by 40 feet in diameter. Though the plan of the building cannot be easily perceived from the outside, it is in the shape of an asymmetrical three-leafed clover with a rectangular vestibule behind the entrance door. Architecture critics and academics followed developments at the New Canaan property. Jeffrey Kipnis comments:

> The painting gallery was announced as a paraphrase of the ancient Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae, but such architectural allusions had lost coin for many critics, who found other aspects of the gallery more to their liking. The exception to the rule was Vincent Scully, a critic whose greatest joy derives from his unparalleled ability to see something ancient in almost everything. Not content with the relatively recent vintage of the Treasury, purportedly built in the fourteenth century, B.C., Scully preferred to detect in the Gallery shades of the...neolithic temples of Malta.
>
> Of greater interest to writers at the time were the gallery's display system and its siting. Johnson mounted the paintings on screens hung from circular tracks in the ceiling of the round bays that served as storage wells. This system enabled the architect to rehang the gallery space at liberty by rotating desired paintings to the front. Such hanging techniques were well-known, but Johnson integrated them into the overall design concept with notable precision. Each circular bay is of a different diameter, accommodating paintings of different sizes, and the radial screens can be aligned to crate a rectangular gallery within the orbital plan.
>
> Though it is often described as such, the Painting Gallery, nicknamed the *Kunstbunker*, is not underground. It sits above ground, though covered in sod so as to appear a chthinic mound emerging from the landscape. For Johnson, who loves artifacts, the design of the *Kunstbunker* was a concession to his developing conception of the Glass House as a garden estate, He amplified the impression with two devices borrowed from landscape architecture: a footbridge to take one out of the formalist space of the original complex and into nature, and a moon-viewing platform, which was sited opposite the entry corridor to the gallery.[3]

North of the Painting Gallery lies the Sculpture Gallery, built in 1970 to house Johnson's three-dimensional art. The plan of the building is a complex star-like pattern of intersecting rectangles and triangles. Its glass-door entrance faces southeast. The walls of the Sculpture Gallery are of white-painted brick; the pitched roofs are made of semi-mirrored glass panes, some of which can be opened for ventilation, set in metal channels. The interior features several descending levels of exhibition space connected by open stairs. Outside the gallery is a sculpture in the form of a large horizontal log;

[3] Whitney and Kipnis, pp. xxiii-iv.

entitled "Ozymandias." It was created by Julian Schnabel in 1989. Critics have been generous with their praise of the sculpture gallery. Paul Goldberger writes, "the sculpture gallery is a sharply defined, irregular white structure, a sort of angular Guggenheim Museum, with levels stepping downward around a central space, the whole room marvelously tense, all covered with a greenhouse-like glass roof."[4] It is often cited as Johnson's best non-high-rise building, wholly original without any historic references.

The houses, pond, and galleries are connected by a series of informal paths. The path to the galleries has two notable features: a narrow arched steel-plate footbridge, decked with thick wooden planking, crossing a drainage ditch; and a timber observation platform, cantilevered out from the path over the sloping meadow below, that provides an exceptional view of the Glass House and Guest House, with the pond and Pavilion visible in the distance. There is a system of exterior lighting, but it functions less to light the paths than to illuminate particular trees at night.

The main driveway, leading to the Glass House and Guest House, was reconfigured in 1964, and in 1977 Johnson installed a set of monumental concrete gateposts at its entrance on Ponus Ridge Road. The gateposts, which have a white stucco finish, are each a pair of tall back-to-back slabs that taper in width as they rise, terminating in a shouldered round arch reminiscent of old-fashioned tombstones. The gate itself is a large steel tube raised and lowered by an electrical mechanism.

In 1980, Johnson built a Studio (also called the Study) in the meadow south of the Glass House, on the other side of the driveway. The Studio takes the form of a box, 15 feet by 20 feet in plan and 10 feet high, with an intersecting cylinder, 12 feet in diameter, at the southeast corner. Above the roofline, the cylinder changes to a 8-foot-high truncated cone that tapers to a skylight 3 feet in diameter. A square fireplace chimney rises at the Studio's northwest corner. The flat walls of the Studio are made of concrete blocks with a white stucco finish. The walls of the building are 10-inch thick concrete block, finished outside with a cement-based waterproof coating and inside with 2 inches of rigid insulation and plaster over metal lath. The cone is laid up with 8-inch concrete bricks similarly insulated and finished; the floor is wood-framed. The roof slab is more complicated--it is 8 inches thick, rather elegantly reinforced and poured with a 3-foot-deep concrete ring stiffener to support the load of the oculus.[5] An entrance with an oversized door is cut into the east elevation of the building. A single large window, fitted with smoked glass, appears on the west elevation and provides a view of fields, marshland, and woods.

To the west of the Studio lies an old cow barn's stone and concrete foundation, to which Johnson added a chain-link construction in 1984 in honor of the California architect, Frank Gehry. Commonly called the "Ghost House," the work consists of welded square-section steel that outlines what appears to be a small gable-roofed building, with the walls filled in with white vinyl-coated chain-link fencing. Johnson chose to split the structure down the middle along the ridge line, leaving a gap of about a foot between the two halves. In addition to its artistic intent, the "Ghost House" serves to protect a garden of lilies within from the browsing of deer.

The latest building to be added to the estate, completed in 1995, is the Visitors' Center that Johnson designed for the property's eventual role as a museum. It measures about 30 feet by 40 feet overall. Built of concrete sprayed onto a heavy mesh form, the building has a highly irregular curving plan, corners that form acute angles, and walls that rise at angles other than the vertical and curve in both dimensions. The exterior is painted bright red and black. The entrance is set in a small section of glass wall in the north elevation, behind a low granite step. Inside, the building provides a viewing area for

---

[4] Whitney and Kipnis, p. 61.

[5] Whitney and Kipnis, p. 124.

orientation films and another small room. Only a single window in the west wall provides a view of the outside.

The Glass House property also includes two plainly detailed houses that predate Johnson's arrival. At the extreme southeast corner is a shingled house (804 Ponus Ridge Road), built c.1905 and remodeled in 1968; it has a large open porch facing north and an attached garage. The other one is a c.1910 shingled house that serves as the estate's caretaker's residence; Johnson purchased it in 1956.

In enumerating the resources that make up the property, the Glass House, Guest House, Painting and Sculpture galleries, Studio, Visitors' Center, Pavilion, and the two shingled houses were considered contributing buildings; the swimming pool, steel footbridge, platform and entrance gate were counted as contributing structures; and the Kirstein Tower, "Ghost House," and the Schnabel sculpture were counted as contributing objects.

Other than Johnson's deliberate additions and alterations to the property, little has occurred to detract from its integrity. Both the fountain that at one time provided a tall spray of water adjacent to the Pavilion and the Pavilion's pool jets are no longer operative, and some of the timbers that make up the observation platform and the steps along the pathways have become deteriorated. Otherwise, the various components seem to be in good condition and retain the appearance they had when first constructed.

## 8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

**Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: Nationally:** X **Statewide:**___ **Locally:**___

**Applicable National Register Criteria:** **A**___ **B**X **C**X **D**___

**Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):** **A**___ **B**___ **C**___ **D**___ **E**___ **F**___ **G**X

**NHL Criteria:** Criterion 2 and 4, Exception 8

**NHL Theme(s):** III. Expressing Cultural Values:
5. architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design

**National Register Areas of Significance:** Architecture
Landscape Architecture

**Period(s) of Significance:** 1949 - 1995

**Significant Dates:** 1949

**Significant Person(s):** Johnson, Philip

**Cultural Affiliation:** N/A

**Architect/Builder:** Johnson, Philip

**NHL Comparative Categories:** XVI. Architecture

**State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**

## Summary

As one of the masterworks of modern American architecture, Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, is a key monument in postwar construction. Taken strictly on its own terms, the Glass House is significant because it epitomizes the International Style and has long been regarded as one of the premier representatives of modernism. The Glass House also has national significance because of its associations with Johnson, whose work as an architect and critic has had a profound effect on the course of 20th-century architecture. Finally, the Glass House estate--including both the original 1949 elements and the subsequent additions made by Johnson--is significant because it provides an understanding of the architect that no other single property can equal. In his writings and lectures, Johnson constantly made use of the buildings in New Canaan to illustrate his ideas about architecture, and features of many of his major works are foreshadowed by elements first introduced on his estate. Spanning almost 50 years, the buildings provide a compact critical catalog of Johnson's work, yielding insight into both his changing styles and his enduring principles.

## Criteria Exceptions

Although the oldest of Johnson's buildings on his estate is less than 50 years old, the property nevertheless qualifies because it is of extraordinary national importance. The longstanding reputation of the Glass House itself as the pinnacle of modernism, the exceptionally significant role of Johnson in the history of American architecture, and the potential of the estate to further an understanding of Johnson's ideas all justify its designation despite being three years short of the threshold.

## Significance of Philip Johnson

Philip Johnson is one of the pivotal figures in the history of modern American architecture. As both a critic and a practitioner, he has continually been in the forefront in introducing new styles of building and new ways of understanding architecture as an art. His writings and works have influenced many and outraged more than a few, but both have endured and are now commonly regarded as part of the core of the nation's architectural heritage.

Philip Cortelyou Johnson was born in 1906 into a well-to-do Midwestern family. As a young man he studied classics and philosophy at Harvard University, graduating in 1930, and traveled widely in Europe, where he first encountered the then-radical architecture of Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Oud, and Le Corbusier. Returning to the United States, Johnson was appointed director of the architectural department of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Along with his colleague, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, he created for the museum a review of European architecture of the previous decade, his first exhibit, and was published *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922* (1932). In addition to giving one school of modern architecture the name by which it has been known ever since, the International Style, Johnson and Hitchcock identified the common elements that defined the type: a complete absence of ornament; simple geometric forms, especially flat-roofed horizontal ones; and the espousal of rationalism and functionalism, usually expressed through the frank articulation of structure as one of architecture's highest values. The exhibit was highly influential, and the book soon became a standard text in the education of American architects.

After a brief foray into right-wing politics in the 1930s, Johnson returned to Harvard's School of Design in 1939 to undertake a degree in architecture, studying under the emigrés Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer. As a student, he designed and built a modern house for himself in Cambridge that prefigured

in some ways the Glass House: it was a long, low rectangular prism with a glass wall facing a courtyard in front. Following completion of his studies at Harvard in 1943, Johnson immediately began work on another house for himself, this time carrying out the precepts of the International Style to an even higher degree of purity. Completed in 1949, the Glass House was immediately recognized by both professional journals and popular writers as the ultimate example of the modern movement, and won for Johnson wide recognition and acclaim.[6]

During the 1950s and 1960s, Johnson sustained his reputation as a modernist by designing variations on the Glass House for several private residences and a number of International Style institutional buildings, including an annex for the Museum of Modern Art (1950), the University of St. Thomas in Houston (1957), and another addition to the Museum of Modern Art in 1964. Johnson's first major commercial design was a collaboration with Mies van der Rohe in the design of the Seagram Building in New York. Completed in 1958, the Seagram Building became an instant icon, its utterly simple lines, smooth glass exterior, and street-level plaza providing the prototype for hundreds of "glass-box" high-rise office buildings in cities throughout the nation.

Increasingly in the late 1950s and 1960s, the sense of order and restraint inherent in modernism was expressed in Johnson's designs as something approaching neoclassicism, or as some have termed it, the New Formalism. Once again, Johnson produced some of what are now regarded as the key expressions of the style, such as the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in Fort Worth (1961) and the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center (1964, with Richard Foster).

Eventually, Johnson departed from both the modern and the neoclassical with designs that were more experimental and ornamental. Two buildings at Yale, the Epidemiology and Public Health Building (1965, with Douglas Orr) and the Kline Science Tower (1965, with Richard Foster), demonstrated the use of geometric forms to give the high-rise a more three-dimensional surface, and in his work with John Burgee, Johnson approached an almost abstract use of shapes, such as the pyramidal entry and sharply angled roofs on Pennzoil Place, a pair of glass towers in Houston (1976), and the star-shaped high-vaulted Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California (1980).

Also in partnership with Burgee, Johnson began the seminal design for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company Building in New York, a tall office shaft terminated with what appeared to be a huge broken pediment, earning it the name "Chippendale Building."[7] Completed in 1984 and now recognized as one of the opening salvos of Post-Modernism, the AT & T Building represented for many a re-validation of ornamentation and historicism and the kind of complexity and contradiction valued by architectural theorists such as Charles Jencks and Robert Venturi. It also earned Johnson an unprecedented (for an architect) appearance on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Over the next decade Johnson went on to produce a number of highly influential Post-Modern office-building designs incorporating Gothic spires, huge pillars, and endless repetitions of Palladian windows. While serving as a lightning rod for the critics of Post Modernism, however, Johnson also continued to produce designs that were abstract, geometric, and expressionistic, such as the "Lipstick Building" at Fifty-Third Street and Third Avenue in New York (1985, with John Burgee).

Although he will always be most closely associated with the Glass House and his high-visibility office-building and institutional projects, Johnson also has national significance in landscape architecture

---

[6] To cite but one example, Katherine Morrow Ford and Thomas Creighton included the Glass House as the first example in their popular book on modern architecture, *The American House of Today* (New York, 1951).

[7] A nickname with some irony, in that the Chippendale use of the broken pediment represented the grafting of an architectural element onto furniture. In this sense, Johnson restored the feature to its rightful place in architecture, though at a scale that horrified many.

because of his gardens and other environmental designs. Many of his earliest International Style dwellings have important landscape components, either gardens or special spaces separating component buildings. His sculpture garden for the Museum of Modern Art (1953) has been called "a serene and urbane oasis, perhaps the greatest urban garden ever built".[8] Johnson's use of water is especially notable, with the low stone bridge over a pool appearing in numerous designs. His Fort Worth Water Garden, consisting of various plantings, waterfalls, channels, and pools in a large concrete stepped structure (1975) has won both critical acclaim and immense popularity with the public.

In addition to the buildings he designed, Johnson influenced the architectural profession through his lectures, writings, and teaching activities. He was a visiting critic at the Yale School of Architecture throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and his Glass House served as the location for an ongoing informal seminar for young architects. Among his influential lectures and writings were "The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture," published in *Perspecta* in 1955; "The International Style--Death or Metamorphosis?," delivered in 1961 at the Museum of Modern Art and excerpted in *Architectural Forum*; and "Whence or Whither: The Processional Element in Architecture," published in *Perspecta* in 1965.

Johnson's peers recognized his accomplishments with many prizes and awards, including the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal in 1978 and Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1979.

## Significance of the Glass House

Although it has great significance because of its associations with Johnson, the Glass House itself would be considered a building of national significance regardless of its designer. In addition to its many other levels of meaning, the Glass House remains the epitome of modernism, its simplicity and purity of form unparalleled in domestic architecture. Following its completion in 1949, every major architectural critic felt obliged to visit it and comment on it, and there were reportedly traffic jams on Ponus Ridge Road as people tried to park. The house was featured in both the major professional journals and popular magazines such as *Life*. In the years since its completion, the Glass House has maintained its hold on critics, architectural historians, and other architects, who continue to re-assess its influence and significance, and all texts on modern American architecture include it as an indisputably pivotal design.

The search for the larger meaning of the Glass House inevitably leads back to the architect himself. Understood to encompass not only the original buildings of 1949 but everything he added afterward, the Glass House is, to use Johnson's own metaphor, "the diary of an eccentric architect." Like a diary, it reflects his stylistic changes over time, from modernism to formalism to Post-Modernism and beyond. No single other property can make the claim of representing Johnson over nearly five decades of practice. At the same time, the Glass House reveals the constancy of Johnson's vision. Taken separately, Johnson's works appear as products of a mind quick to embrace new ideas and just as quickly discard them. Considered as a whole, however, as only the Glass House property can present it, Johnson's architecture has a strong consistent element. Throughout his career and what have been perceived as separate "phases" or even enthusiastic eclecticism, Johnson has remained an architect of ideas, a designer in constant dialog with both history and his contemporaries. From first to last, his buildings have been layered with historical allusion, experimentalism, paradox, irony, and wit, qualities evident in great abundance throughout the Glass House garden estate.

Johnson's own explanation of the Glass House acknowledged his intention to fulfill Mies' goals by creating a building pure in its form and materials, seeing it as a sort of variation on Mies' 1947 design

[8] Norval White and Elliot Wilensky, *AIA Guide to New York City* (rev. ed., New York, 1978), 166.

for the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (not completed until 1950). With a whirlwind display of historical erudition, however, he cited as additional inspiration (or at least a connection to) such far-flung architectural sources as Ledoux, Schinkel, Choisy, Malevitch, and Le Corbusier. Moreover, Johnson is known to have made alternative sketches for the project with such decidedly non-modern elements as Syrian arches. Kenneth Frampton has summed up the heated discussion about the place the Glass House occupies in contemporary architecture and especially its relationship to Mies' Farnsworth House in Illinois:

> Where Mies is always techtonic, Johnson is invariably scenographic...Frampton argued that the phenomenological impact of the Glass House--that is, its finite, domestic space--derived from its suppression of the structural system. Johnson terminated the roof plane at the corner column, turning the house into a beautifully detailed, but closed, box. The effect was amplified when Johnson painted the structural system black and set it flush with the glass walls. To the contrary, Mies cantilevered the roof beyond the columns and expressed the structural system by painting it white and detaching it from the glass walls. Thus Mies' space, sandwiched between the roof and the floor, flows past the glass, through the structure, and beyond. Moreover, in the Farnsworth House one sees the shadow of the structure on the glass, a confirmation of its distinct presence.[9]

It can be said that Philip Johnson in his Glass House was a modernist, in that he acknowledged the power of modernist ideas that would result in a structure of beauty. At the same time, we now realize that even in 1949 Johnson went well beyond modernism. In citing Ledoux and Schinkel, Johnson espoused a modernism that not only broke with the past, but embraced much of the past as well. One could say that he appreciated modernism as a powerful set of ideas, but not as the *only* powerful ideas. He valued both the classical sense of order and control in the Glass House, as well as a Romantic love of nature in the fields and woods that surround the house. In short, with the Glass House Philip Johnson designed a building that is at once both the apogee of modernism, "the Ideal realized"[10] and its Post-Modern antithesis.

In addition to its dialog with the past, immediate and distant, the Glass House takes up a number of other ideas, such as the interplay of opposites, in which the transparency of the Glass House is balanced by the opaqueness of the brick Guest House. On another level, the Glass House questions the distinction between outside and inside. Like many of his later works, the Glass House was also an experiment in extremism, taking an idea and carrying it to its consequences. Thus Mies may have been partly right in regarding the Glass House not as homage, but as a caricature, even a cruel joke, just as later critics bemoaned the AT & T pediment or Johnson's use of hundreds of identical Palladian windows. Finally, the Glass House addresses the issue of privacy within glass walls by providing a highly ironic solution: confining guests to separate, nearly windowless quarters in the guest house.

Although sometimes misunderstood and even appreciated for the wrong reasons, Johnson was never cryptic about his sources and intentions. He always acknowledged Mies's significance in allowing him and many others to break with the past, openly embracing the name "Mies van der Johnson" in reference to his early work. At the same time, in replacing the formula "Form follows function" with his own dictum, "Forms follow ideas," Johnson provided the key to moving beyond modernism. For Johnson, history was a major source of ideas that could be adopted, modified, or contradicted but in some way had to be acknowledged. "One cannot *not* know history," he proclaimed in 1975 in "What Makes Me Tick."

At his New Canaan home, Johnson saw history everywhere he looked. In addition to the numerous historical sources said to have influenced the Glass House itself, he cited Sir John Soane in his 1953

---

[9] Whitney and Kipnis, p. xxviii.

[10] Vincent Scully, *Architecture: The Natural and Manmade* (New York, 1991), 349.

decision to install interior vaulting in the Guest House; his 1980 Studio reminded him of an ancient whitewashed mosque; the Sculpture Gallery, apparently so abstract, was to him classical in its arrangement of rooms off a main court; the Painting Gallery recalled the Treasury of Atreus at Mycenae; and the Pavilion was seen as at once classical, Gothic, and a Romantic folly. Johnson at various times explained his home's interplay of buildings and landscaping in terms of his Midwestern upbringing, his respect for the New England countryside, traditional Japanese practice in house-siting, and the gardens of 18th-century England.

Johnson's claim that he intended to capture a faint sense of danger in his work is also apparent in many of the Glass House compound components. The footbridge on the way to the galleries has no railing, like most of Johnson's slab bridges over pools in his gardens, nor does the observation platform, which has no visible support as it juts out over the meadow. The bridge is slightly springy, adding to the pedestrian's discomfort, and the Kirstein Tower's steps are too steep (as are the larger steps in the Fort Worth Water Garden).

On the level of specific details, the Glass House property can in some ways be seen as a log of his experiments. Johnson's installation of the fabric vaulting in the Guest House in 1953 preceded his vaulted ceiling in the Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue in Port Chester, New York (1956); the waterfalls, channels, and fountains of the Pavilion prefigured by more than a decade many of the effects of the Fort Worth Water Garden of 1975; the Sculpture Gallery's roofs anticipated the mirrored glass and sharp angles of Pennzoil Place; and the entrance gates of 1977 heralded Johnson's Post-Modern period.

At the same time, the property also acted as a sketch book recording his accomplishments. The arches and convex columns of the Amon Carter Museum are similar to those Johnson used the following year in the Pavilion, the Water Garden's steep steps and spiraling stairs reappeared ten years later in the Kirstein Tower, and the complex geometry of the Visitors' Center reproduced at a completely different scale the swirling forms of his 1993 "Berlin Fantasy," a half-serious proposal for the Friedrichstadt district in that city.

Johnson identified procession, the process of experiencing the temporal as well as the spatial character of a building, as an important component of architecture. The concept of procession is embodied throughout the Glass House property. With the driveway revision of 1964, the house is obscured from view as one travels down the driveway, screened by trees, until one suddenly comes upon it at an oblique angle, an experience that emphasizes the contrast between the two buildings as well as the floating, transparent quality of the Glass House. The Sculpture Gallery imposes a particular procession, as its stairways take one spiraling down to its lowest level. Kipnis admires the sculpture gallery as Johnson's best non-high rise building:

> Informed but unfettered by direct reference to either historical or contemporary sources, the Gallery is a wholly original work. In this etude of acute angles and sectional circulation, Johnson created a space so vast that it appears unable to be filled, whether occupied by one person or by a hundred people. Though not public, neither is the gallery entirely private.
>
> As one descends through the Sculpture Gallery's five levels staged over two floors, one's sense of existential isolation in the space causes each *ad hoc* encounter with the sculpture to be at once both intimate and empty. The effect is intensified by a collection that consists largely of pop and minimalism, that is, works exploring anonymity, mass production, and the banal. No collaboration between architecture and art could more thoroughly erase both the humanist and the modernist subject to such dazzling effect. In those terms, Johnson's Sculpture Gallery achieves results that deconstructivist architecture would pursue a decade later--though, unlike the

deconstructivists, Johnson achieves his ends through a detailed study of the architectures of humanism and modernism.[11]

The Painting Gallery, reached through a ramp between wing walls, almost conjures up a liturgical procession in which one passes through a portal to sacred wonders within. The buildings and other components of the Glass House property embody another aspect of Johnson's work that should not be overlooked, their fundamental suitability for their purposes. Although he himself identified an overconcern with utility as one of the "seven crutches of architecture," Johnson's designs would today be regarded merely as curious eccentricities if it were not for the fact that they fulfill their purpose well. Since with few modifications the Glass House has served as his primary residence for nearly five decades (along with an office and an apartment in New York), it must be assumed that it met his expectations as a place to live, work, and entertain. The Studio likewise seems admirably suited to its function, admitting light principally through the cone and another skylight; by including but one wall window, the design ensured that diffuse light would predominate, and also freed up wall space for bookshelves. The design of the Painting Gallery excludes harmful natural light altogether, allows for upright storage, and minimizes handling while making every work of art accessible; its asymmetrical cloverleaf plan allows for carousels accommodating three different sizes of paintings. The Sculpture Gallery provides an open, three-dimensional, almost outdoor-like (though softly lit) space for the works within, complementing though not competing with them in its abstract geometry. The components of the Glass House estate demonstrate the attention to detail and to workability without which the deeply layered intellectual qualities of the buildings would appear as so much self-indulgence.

Irony, discordance, and contradiction, qualities that are important parts of Post-Modernism, are embodied not only in the dueling Glass House/Brick House units but in many of the estate's other components as well. Johnson's chain-link construction, built on the footprint of an old barn, alludes both to Robert Venturi's Benjamin Franklin's ghost house in Philadelphia and Frank Gehry's use of chain link as a design element, stands in honor of the younger architects. Yet one wonders if there is also a strong element of parody in the structure. Gehry used chain-link fencing as an unexpected, discordant element, yet Johnson uses it as--a fence! And what of the fact that the manure trench left over from the old cow barn empties into the structure? Coincidence? With Johnson, it is difficult to distinguish among his intentions, the meanings he himself read back into his work, and meanings that the observer is simply imagining.

Johnson's ironic wit is also apparent in his entrance gate of 1977. Like the Pavilion, the gateposts upset the rules of scale and perspective, their exaggerated taper making them seem larger than they are and creating the illusion that they tilt back. The irony comes from the suggestion that the gates are monuments, or perhaps the entrance to a memorial, an idea that is introduced by the shape of the slabs and at the same time made light of by their stylization. Johnson again took up this theme when he installed the 1989 sculpture "Ozymandias" by Julian Schnabel outside the sculpture gallery. Shelley's poem "Ozymandias" tells the story of a vain king whose monuments are covered up by the sands of time, which Schnabel's sculpture interprets with a once-mighty tree now laid on its side. By having the piece outside his sculpture collection, Johnson conjured up both the king's boast ("Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair") and the futility of building monuments.

The irony, of course, is that in 1986 Johnson had arranged for the preservation of his monument, his Glass House estate, by providing for its transfer to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In this connection, Johnson designed the latest building to be constructed on the property, an orientation center for visitors. In what may well be a unique undertaking, a building explicitly intended to serve as an introduction to the architect's own life and work. The Visitors' Center is unlike anything else on the property and hardly could be taken as a representative work. The building's vivid colors and its total

[11] Whitney and Kipnis, p. xxiv.

departure from the Euclidian restraints of right angles and straight lines (which led Herbert Muschamp in the *New York Times* to call it an "orientation center whose chief function is disorientation") make it seem out of place. Yet in this building can be seen the essence of Johnson as an architect in love with ideas. In addition to referring back to early Expressionist works in other media, the Visitors' Center explicitly acknowledges Johnson's previous buildings on the site with its granite slab step, short wall of glass, and its duplication (in a non-Euclidian way) of the Studio's west-facing window. The window, which contains the Studio within its field of view, may well be an allusion to 18th and early 19th-century portraiture, in which a building of importance to the sitter was commonly included in a distant landscape visible through a window. By its very break with Johnson's past, the Center demonstrates the architect's lifelong engagement with new ideas. Finally, by being a commentary on Johnson by Johnson, the Visitors' Center continues the architect's practice of serving as his own interpreter, just as he himself published a thorough dissection of the Glass House in 1950, and reviewed one of his own books for *Architectural Forum in 1966*. By challenging the viewer to look for the Center's meaning beyond simply its unusual appearance, Johnson in fact does provide a fitting introduction to his architecture and life, one that looks back all the way to his first "self-portrait", his Glass House of 1949.

New York Times Critic Paul Goldberger writes:

> Taken together, the buildings on [Johnson's] estate at New Canaan are a remarkable group; far more than the ultimate expression of one man's personal taste, they represent an attempt to come to grips, over time, with a variety of notions of what architecture is. They are the result of an agile mind probing, refining, rethinking, from the glass house's explorations within the Miesian vocabulary and the ironic interplay of inside and outside...From inside, the carefully manicured landscape visible through the glass functions as an enclosure, and the ironic illusion is superb: The vistas tell the occupant he is open to the whole world, while in truth there is no world outside at all--just an elegantly arranged landscape that is as much a part of the house as the furniture. The 'real world' toward which the walls of glass beckon is far away and invisible.[12]

[12] Whitney and Kipnis, p. 60.

## 9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Dean, Andrea Oppenheimer. "Reflections from a Glass House." *Historic Preservation* 48 (July/August 1996): 70-81.

Ford, Katherine Morrow, and Thomas H. Creighton. *The American House Today*. New York: Reinhold Publishing Corporation, 1951.

Hitchcock, Henry-Russell, and Philip Johnson. *The International Style: Architecture Since 1922*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1932.

Jacobus, John M. *Philip Johnson*. New York: G. Braziller, 1962.

Johnson, Philip. "House in New Canaan, Connecticut." *Architectural Review* 108 (September 1950), 152-59.

_____. *Philip Johnson: The Architect in His Own Words*. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1994.

_____. *Writings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

_____. *Architecture 1949-1965*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966.

Muschamp, Herbert. "A 'Monster' of a Masterpiece in Connecticut." *New York Times*, September 17, 1995, 2:36.

Schulze, Franz. *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994.

Scully, Vincent. "Architecture: Philip Johnson--The Glass House Revisited." *Architectural Digest* 43, no. 11 (November 1986): 116-25.

Whitney, David, and Jeffrey Kipnis, eds. *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

___ **Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.**
___ **Previously Listed in the National Register.**
___ **Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.**
___ **Designated a National Historic Landmark.**
___ **Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #_____**
___ **Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #_____**

**Primary Location of Additional Data:**

X **State Historic Preservation Office** Connecticut Historical Commission
___ **Other State Agency** 59 South Prospect Street
___ **Federal Agency** Hartford, Connecticut 06106
___ **Local Government**
___ **University**
___ **Other (Specify Repository):**

## 10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

**Acreage of Property:** 40 acres

**UTM References:**

| | Zone | Easting | Northing |
|---|---|---|---|
| **A** | 18 | 623180 | 4555550 |
| **B** | 18 | 623530 | 4555570 |
| **C** | 18 | 623560 | 4555110 |
| **D** | 18 | 623330 | 4555070 |

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

The boundary includes the parcels known as 798, 806, 842 and 856 Ponus Ridge Road, New Canaan, shown as Lots 27, 67, 68, 81 and C7, Block 13, New Canaan Assessor Map 26, and described in the New Canaan Land Records in Volume 327, pages 774-777 and Volume 333, pages 338-340.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundary includes the entire Glass House property as owned and developed by Philip Johnson during his years of residence. The surrounding fields and woods were added to the parcel by Johnson and were considered by him as part of the house's natural setting.

## 11. FORM PREPARED BY

**Name/Title:** Bruce Clouette and Hoang Tinh
Historic Resource Consultants, Inc.
**Telephone:** (860) 547-2068
**Date:** June 28, 1996

**Edited By:** Carolyn Pitts
National Historic Landmarks Survey,
National Park Service
(202) 343-8166

## SITE MAP

## PHOTOGRAPHS

**All photographs:**

1. Philip Johnson's Glass House
2. New Canaan, Fairfield County, CT
3. Photo Credit: Historic Resources Consultants, Inc., Hartford, CT
4. July, 1996
5. Negative filed with Connecticut Historical Commission
Hartford, CT

**Captions:**

Glass House, east and south elevations, camera facing northwest
Photograph 1 of 18

Glass House, east and north elevations, camera facing southwest
Photograph 2 of 18

Brick Guest House, west elevation, with studio in distance, camera facing southeast
Photograph 3 of 18

Rear (east) elevation of Guest House, with Glass House in background, camera facing west
Photograph 4 of 18

Pavilion and pond, with Sculpture Gallery and Glass House visible through trees in distance, camera facing northeast
Photograph 5 of 18

Lincoln Kirstein Tower, camera facing west
Photograph 6 of 18

Swimming pool north of Glass House, with Painting Gallery and steel bridge visible in background, camera facing northeast
Photograph 7 of 18

Observation platform on pathway to galleries, camera facing northwest
Photograph 8 of 18

View from observation platform, showing Guest House and Glass House, with pond and Kirstein Tower visible in distance beyond trees, camera facing southwest
Photograph 9 of 18

Painting Gallery, camera facing northeast
Photograph 10 of 18

Sculpture Gallery, with "Ozymandias" by Julian Schnabel at left, camera facing northwest
Photograph 11 of 18

## PHOTOGRAPHS (continued)

**Captions:**

Studio, east elevation, with Chain-Link House ("Ghost House") in background, camera facing southwest
Photograph 12 of 18

Chain-Link House ("Ghost House"), camera facing southwest
Photograph 13 of 18

Gates at driveway to Glass House, camera facing west
Photograph 14 of 18

Visitors' Center, north elevation, camera facing south
Photograph 15 of 18

Visitors' Center, west elevation, camera facing east
Photograph 16 of 18

Caretaker's house, c.1910, west and south elevations as visible from grounds, camera facing northwest
Photograph 17 of 18

House, c.1905, at 804 Ponus Ridge Road, south end of property, camera facing south
Photograph 18 of 18