



Growing Up Inside Greatness – and Parting with It

By Jesa Damora



Imagine some taken-for-granted artifact that has been collecting dust in your home for as long you can remember. You eventually banished it to attic or cellar, vowing that one of these days you would sort through decades of accumulated detritus.

That day arrives, not out of choice, but necessity. Perhaps you are moving, perhaps a renovation is at hand and “everything must go.”

As it happens, “Antiques Road Show” is filming an episode in your town. You bring your discarded artifact on a whim. When the appraiser describes its historical context and current value, your jaw drops and you forget to breathe.

Now imagine that “artifact” is your home itself. That’s the case with the house in which I grew up. And the “necessity” is the recent death of my father who, over the course of his ninety-seven years, created innovative architecture, photographed the work of the world’s great architects to much acclaim, and raised a family in Bedford, New York.

Our house was Philip Johnson’s first commissioned residential design. Over his long life and career, Johnson was without a doubt the most visible and versatile architect of the 20th century. Rarely off center stage, Johnson promoted, explained, taught, and designed architecture that became known, throughout its various permutations, as Modern. Engaging, urbane, and never at a loss for words, he produced



well over 100 projects throughout his career and eased blithely into many styles.

Some buildings were controversial, some legendary, but all were exciting: They included New York’s landmark Seagram Building in collaboration with Mies van der Rohe; Lincoln Center’s New York State Theater; the AT&T building in Manhattan; Pittsburgh’s PPG Place; the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California; the daring Puerta de Europa in Madrid, Spain; and the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art.

Fond of the innovative use of glass, his masterpiece was the iconic Glass House which he built for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut in 1949. Our house, built in 1945-46, was its direct ancestor.

To my brother and me, it was just home. We would sit before its huge glass windows at dawn and peer into the woods that still surround it. We would watch the grazing deer’s ears twitch and breath condense, the grass white with frost or pink with clover blossoms. One winter the snow drifted up to the eaves in the backyard, and the Aurora Borealis



swept as far south as Pittsburgh. Our parents shooed us out of bed so that we could sit under that pink splendor and watch it pulse across the sky.

On Halloweens, we painted images on the windows with something called glass-wax. Huge dragons and firebirds erupted beyond the narrow confines of the mundane stencils we were provided. Or crude copies of Peanuts characters. Our proud parents kept them there until Christmas.

When we visited the homes of friends, we felt closed in and unaccountably claustrophobic. Our home’s Breuer tables, Eames chairs, and the open plan made everything feel light and airy. The layout and floor-height sills seemed to



form a continuum with the surrounding landscape. Their homes felt smaller without the immediacy of sun and sky throughout the seasons.

In the weeks before my father’s death last year, our family sat before the huge crackling fireplace and listened to John Coltrane as the panorama of the misty woods began to bud, smells of coffee and pancakes emanating from the kitchen. We didn’t need to think or talk. It was more than sufficient to just sit together, our house another companion.

But now we need to think. And to act.

Our mother is eighty-six. She has projects that need an urban location: the publication of my father’s book, the



disposition of his archive, the production of a film about him. She needs our help, and we live in Boston.

We are obligated to dispose of the house. And this obligation has taken us into its history anew, and almost shockingly made us aware of the significance and value it enjoys beyond its taken-for-granted identity as our cherished home. Owning a Philip Johnson house is indeed special, but owning his first commissioned work means also owning the progenitor of its kind.

Modern houses flourished after World War II, spurred on by the housing shortage and newly available technologies. More importantly, there was a wide reassessment of how families actually live in a house. People wanted to live less cut off by the divisions of rooms and functions, the mom alone in a kitchen somewhere -- one of the reasons Johnson and others included an open kitchen in the flow of house plans. Many architects were engaged with the Usonian ideal originated by Frank Lloyd Wright. He advocated a "democratic" architecture, affordable to an average family, with no attics, basements, or garages, and little ornamentation.

The Case Study House program in California and Wright's own Usonia project in Pleasantville were examples of such efforts. New Canaan hosted a larger Mid-Century Modern community, a more loosely organized, but widely publicized effort. Most of these homes were designed by a group known as "The Harvard Five": Marcel Breuer, Eliot Noyes, Landis Gores, John Johansen, and Philip Johnson.

This group produced one brilliant project after another inspired by the philosophy of its mentor, Walter Gropius, founder of Bauhaus and at the time, the first comprehensive American program of modern architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. The group also used economic, unconventional construction methods and materials, such as the steel beams and raw concrete block that appear in our house. New Canaan became an enclave for this kind of innovative home building.

The first of these projects, however, was built not in New Canaan, but in neighboring Bedford for a couple named the Booths. The construction



drawings for the house are dated January 30, 1946, only a few months after Japan's surrender in World War II. The house also predates the start of Wright's Usonia, Pleasantville community and was constructed concurrently with the first West Coast "Case Study House." J.R. Davidson built that project in the spring/summer of 1946, but it is no longer standing. It is the first post-war house on record by an American architect trained in Bauhaus principles, as well as the first commission built on either side of the war. My father moved us into it in 1955.

Dad, whom Gropius described as "the best photographer of architecture in this country," traveled in these circles. His life was wrapped up in the house. He built a studio near it for his darkroom, his architecture firm, his office. He nurtured the house, replacing the heating system, adding air conditioning, and modernizing baths. He found a way to finally, really waterproof the obstinately flat roof. In the Modernist tradition of materials innovation, he coated it with Mathys, laid up much like the deck of a boat. Johnson saw it, thought it was a good idea, and used it himself to sculpt the famous free-form red gatehouse at the entrance to the Glass House preserve.

With a keen sensitivity to Johnson's sense of design, Dad carved the basement into a habitable space, setting it on hollow concrete planks that conducted forced hot air for radiant heat -- a Usonian simplicity. A sunken garden terrace was excavated to admit light. He installed extra baths, and reconstructed the exterior doors. Designed as huge glass panels with mere 2½" wooden

frames, these doors always shuddered when opened. "I didn't know any better," Johnson commented about this. Dad rebuilt them, embedding steel frames in the wood.

My parents went to great lengths to preserve the wilderness around the house: they sold a parcel to the north with a codicil to never build on it. Sun pours through mature woodland to the west. To the east, across the brook, are thirty-six acres of rolling preservation land, something they helped engineer. An undeveloped parcel is available and could be annexed. Tantalizingly, the property in back of the house, the only near exposure to neighbors, is also for sale, making it possible to sew up this gem in the country in total privacy.

Mid century style is hot. There are people out there who actually collect houses built then, and organizations like DoCoMoMo (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement) that exist to protect and preserve them. "Modern" has multiplied in meaning, representing everything from the International Style to Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, from retro dinnerware to dresses. But it all started with our house.

To whom can we pass it on? Who will love and care of it?

The author is holding an event on Sunday, May 23, from 1-5 P.M. to say goodbye to the house, launch its sale, and exhibit photographs from Robert Damora's archive. Many of her friends from the mid-century modern community will be there, and celebrated visionary, John Johansen, will speak. To attend, please write to anthony.ardino@raveis.com.