

An Architect's Journey

Philip Johnson & Texas by Frank Welch.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000.
298 pp., illus., \$39.95.

Reviewed by William F. Stern

Philip Johnson's career is as much identified with Texas as any place he has worked in the United States. Over the course of five decades, the Ohio-born, New York-based architect has become a Texas phenomenon, a legendary figure producing major buildings in Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and Corpus Christi. Twice — first with the Menil House in 1950 and then with downtown Houston's Pennzoil Place in 1976 — Johnson set precedents so strong that he influenced the direction of modern architecture in Texas. Amazingly, in his ninth decade of life and the beginning of his sixth decade of work in Texas he is completing the design of Dallas' gigantic Cathedral of Hope. Indeed, Texas and its patrons can lay rightful claim to ensuring the success of Johnson's architectural career. Without Texas patronage, that career could have been quite different. Moreover, the buildings of Philip Johnson in Texas exemplify the extremes of his work, from the rigor and refined elegance of Houston's University of St. Thomas of the 1950s to the kitsch and parody evoked by the Crescent, a Dallas office and hotel complex of 1985. Looking at Johnson in Texas is one way to understand his overall career, while at the same time providing a window into the power and patronage that built the state during the second half of the 20th century.

This is exactly what Frank Welch set out to do in *Philip Johnson & Texas*. What is most appealing about Welch's fascinating

study is that it can be read both as a condensed biography of Johnson and as a book about the Texas clients who supported his work. While most of the book focuses on Johnson in Texas, Welch also includes substantial biographical information, giving the reader an overview of the architect's life and times. Welch begins and ends his book with a visit to the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, Johnson's New England residence and the building considered to be his architectural masterpiece. Over his professional life, the New Canaan estate has served as a laboratory for changes in Johnson's approach to architecture. After completion of the steel frame Glass House, which was heavily indebted to the work of Johnson's first great influence, Mies van der Rohe, Johnson expanded the estate, adding a number of structures — among them the underground Painting Gallery, 1965, and the Sculpture Gallery, 1970, both to house his extensive collection of modern art; the Library Study, 1980; and the recently completed Gate House, 1995, which will serve as a visitor's pavilion when the New Canaan estate is bequeathed to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. These buildings, along with several open-air pavilions, document the stylistic shifts in Johnson's work, revealing an architect who has changed unpredictably, as if fashion, rather than a clear evolving idea, has determined his development.

Welch's prologue outlines Johnson's life from the time of his 1906 birth in Cleveland to that moment in the late 1940s when he was introduced to his first Texas patrons, Dominique and John de Menil. The biography of Johnson's early years examines his undergraduate education at Harvard, his time as the first director of the Department of Architecture at New York's then-new Museum of Modern Art, his decision at age 34 to pursue a career in architecture at Harvard's Graduate School of Design, and the beginning of that career. Welch touches on a dark side of Johnson's early years, describing his leanings towards Hitler and his attraction to right wing populist politics during the Depression. But the most important event of those years was non-political. With art historian Henry Russell Hitchcock, Johnson organized "The International Style," a seminal exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art that brought to an American audience the work of the great European modernists Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier, J.J.P. Oud, and Walter Gropius,

putting them side by side with leaders of America's progressive architecture such as Howe and Lescaze and Richard Neutra.

By the time Johnson reached Harvard's Graduate School of Design in 1940, Walter Gropius was its director, and the school was at the forefront of the modern movement in the United States. For his thesis project, Johnson designed and built a house for himself in Cambridge modeled after Mies van der Rohe's courtyard houses. Following a stint in the army, Johnson moved to New York, where he divided his time between a small architectural practice and his old position at MoMA. The gregarious Johnson made friends easily; one was modern sculptor Mary Callery, who introduced him to an array of artists, architects, and socially connected art patrons. His association with Callery proved to be the link that first brought Johnson to Texas. In 1948, on a visit to New York, John de Menil, who knew Callery, asked her to recommend an architect for his new house in Houston. Callery introduced the young executive and collector to Johnson, who by that time was building his Glass House. Soon plans were being made for Johnson to visit Houston and meet Menil's wife, Dominique. Recalling his anticipation about that trip many years later, Johnson told Welch, "You bet I was excited — my first important house and in *Texas* to boot."

What follows is the story of Philip Johnson and Texas organized chronologically, beginning with the Menil House and ending with the Cathedral of Hope. Each building project is treated in detail, from how the commission came to be to a thorough description of the completed work. What makes this book so enticing is the telling of the story, much of which was garnered from interviews with clients, friends, critics, and associates of Johnson. Lengthy quotes from these interviews give the story a sense of immediacy, clarifying how buildings are commissioned, built, and critically evaluated. The projects are illustrated with drawings, vintage photographs, and beautifully composed contemporary photographs taken by Paul Hester. The black and white format is particularly appealing, and a reminder of just how sharp and clear architectural photography can be when it eschews full color.

Johnson's early association with Dominique and John de Menil provided the catalyst for further commissions in Texas. Not only did he design the Menils'

Houston home, but it was through the Menils' connection with the University of St. Thomas that Johnson was asked to prepare a master plan for the school, as well as to design three of the campus' new buildings, establishing the direction for future construction. The Menil House and the University of St. Thomas buildings, all of which are indebted to Johnson's mentor Mies van der Rohe, set an example that encouraged the young post-war generation of Houston architects in the direction of modern design. One of these architects, Howard Barnstone with Preston Bolton, became the associate architect with Johnson on the St. Thomas buildings; later, with his partner Eugene Aubry, Barnstone would take over the building of the Rothko Chapel, the last Johnson building commissioned by the Menils. Johnson's work for the Menils also caught the eye of Jane Owen, daughter of Humble Oil co-founder R. Lee Blaffer, leading to the commission for the Roofless Church in New Harmony, Indiana, a clear stylistic departure from Johnson's Mies-influenced work in Houston.

Through their patronage of art and architecture in the 1950s, the Menils became increasingly prominent in Texas cultural circles. One of their friends, Ruth Carter Johnson, daughter of Forth Worth publisher Amon Carter, was invited to a weekend celebration for the dedication of two University of St. Thomas buildings, where she met Johnson. As she recalled later, "There was a warm immediate rapport, and we just got along famously. We talked about everything from gardening to art collecting. Before the weekend was over, I asked him if he would come to Fort Worth and talk to us about designing Dad's memorial. He said indeed he would and was soon back in Texas."

The building Ruth Johnson referred to became the Amon Carter Museum, completed in 1961. By then, Johnson had broken with his International Style roots, favoring instead an eclectic modernism described by one disapproving critic as "ballet-school classicism." The opening of the Amon Carter Museum was a significant event for a city with the nickname "cowtown," and from that day forward, Fort Worth would increasingly be viewed as a place of art and culture. As Welch perceptively points out, the hiring of nationally recognized architects to build in Texas became increasingly popular. "Wealthy Texans began to regularly hire East Coast architects to design their important buildings," he writes. "It

seemed to be culturally safe to stick with a well-known big-city Ivy League architect with design credentials. Later the range for esteemed-architect selection would broaden and become international." Just down the hill from the Amon Carter Museum is Louis Kahn's Texas masterpiece, the Kimbell Art Museum, dedicated in 1972. Now under construction across the street from the Kimbell is a tour-de-force work of architecture by Japanese architect Tadao Ando that will soon house the Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art. In 1970, at the behest of Ruth Carter Johnson, Philip Johnson returned to Fort Worth to design the Fort Worth Water Garden.

Following his successes in Houston and Fort Worth, it was inevitable that Johnson would receive a commission in Dallas. In the early 1960s, on the advice of Houston patron Jane Blaffer Owen, Dallas contractor Henry C. Beck and his wife Patty hired Johnson to design their house. Johnson had recently completed an open-air structure on an artificial pond at his New Canaan estate. The arch motif that defined the portico of the Amon Carter Museum was expanded upon in this colonnaded six-foot-high "folly," which was not tall enough to stand in without bending over. At the Beck House, Johnson exploded the folly motif to full scale, creating an odd, grandiose house that was the opposite of the refined, elegant dwelling that he had designed for the Menils. Indeed, none of Johnson's work in Dallas ever achieved the stature of his work in Houston and Fort Worth. Referring to later Dallas buildings, the Crescent and the high-rise office building Momentum Place of 1987, Houston architectural critic Stephen Fox observed that "Philip Johnson saved his worst Texas buildings for Dallas."

Indeed, by the mid-'80s, Johnson had immersed himself in the paper-thin, post-modern historicism that had invaded architectural practice throughout the United States, showing a lack of a consistent point of view that led critics to dismiss him as a mere stylist, and no longer a leader in design. Among the Johnson buildings in Texas that suffered the fate of gratuitous historicism are the University of Houston's College of Architecture, 1985, and buildings for an office park in Sugar Land. The Crescent in Dallas, the College of Architecture, and the Sugar Land buildings, while clear and logical in siting and plan, fail as works of architecture and mark the low point in Johnson's Texas work.

But before being bitten by the post-

modern bug, Johnson produced some of his most significant Texas work, returning to the clarity and imagination of his earliest Texas buildings. Beginning with the artfully abstract Art Museum of South Texas in Corpus Christi of 1972, this period culminated in a series of Houston office buildings that would not only revive Johnson's career, but would also help to put Houston on the nation's architectural map. This time Johnson's patron was Gerald D. Hines, a man quite different from the architect's cultural patrons of the 1950s and 1960s. A former mechanical engineer from Indiana, Hines began his career as a Houston developer with a series of modestly designed two-story office buildings on Richmond Avenue. Working with architect Harwood Taylor of Houston's Neuhaus & Taylor, Hines was persuaded that good design need not lead to costly buildings, and might even result in higher rents. Soon Hines would retain Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum of St. Louis to design the Galleria, which became a trend-setting mix of retail, hotel, and office space.

At that time Hines became acquainted with I.S. Brochstein, who owned land that he hoped to develop near the Galleria. Hines persuaded Brochstein to let the Hines organization lease the property, on which they would build a complex of high-rise office buildings. Brochstein agreed, but wanted a say in the selection of the architect. Hines came up with an initial list of nationally prominent architects, to which Brochstein added the name of Philip Johnson. Brochstein, who owned a business specializing in custom mill work installations, had come to know and admire Johnson when his company supplied the paneling and cabinets for the Amon Carter Museum. Once again the linked chain of Johnson patrons would lead to new commissions. The first was for what would become known as the Post Oak Central buildings. The second was for Pennzoil Place.

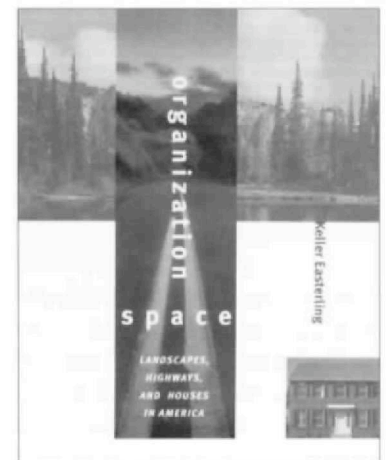
These buildings came at a crucial time in Johnson's career. In the early 1970s Johnson had formed a partnership with John Burgee, and together they had embarked on the design of the IDS Center in Minneapolis, an office tower and enclosed retail center connected to adjoining blocks with pedestrian bridges. Then in his mid-sixties, Johnson was beginning a seemingly new career, this time as a favored architect for high-rise office buildings. Johnson's association with Gerald D. Hines was fortuitous for

both men. The Post Oak Central complex, 1975-1982, and the twin towers of Pennzoil Place, 1976, were noted for their imaginative rethinking of the standardized rectilinear speculative office tower, transformed into objects of pure geometric sculpture best appreciated from the nearby freeways while traveling at 60 miles per hour. While he was not alone in this, Johnson helped set a new direction for America's high-rise office buildings. Hines, as impresario, benefited his company and Houston with impressive architecture that attracted tenants willing to pay premium rents. The Hines/Johnson collaboration continued with the beacon of the Galleria, Transco Tower, 1983, the tallest building in America outside a downtown core, and the RepublicBank building, 1984, which sits opposite Pennzoil Place. Johnson/Burgee's practice expanded to include buildings in major American cities including New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, and San Francisco. Much of the credit for the architects' success belongs to their Houston patron, the engineer turned developer Gerald D. Hines.

Johnson's career in Texas came full circle in the 1990s, when he was called back to the University of St. Thomas to design a chapel. Always enamored of the latest trends in architecture, Johnson abandoned the grace and modest scale of his 1950s St. Thomas buildings for a structure that bowed in part to the then-fashionable trend in architecture called "deconstructivism." As a result, the Chapel of St. Basil, 1997, feels out of place, overpowering the spare, modern buildings that form the campus' academic mall. By the late '90s, Johnson appeared more in control of this stylistic shift with his bold design for the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, a building clearly influenced by the work of Frank Gehry, architect of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. And there may be more to come — in 1998, at the age of 92, Johnson, with his new partner Alan Ritchie, was asked by Texas A&M regent John Lindsey, a successful Houston businessman, to design an expansion for the A&M College of Architecture.

Frank Welch's *Philip Johnson & Texas* is a book that should find a wide audience. It tells the coming of age story of Texas cities from the post-war years to their dynamic rise in the '60's, '70s, and '80s. Most interestingly, the book brings to life the people and patrons behind the story. Through the shifts and meanderings of Johnson's work, Welch captures trends, both high and low, in the evolution of

American architecture over the last half century. While not a critical biography, *Philip Johnson & Texas* does raise appropriate questions about the qualitative disparities in Johnson's work. Frank Welch has produced a book that captures the spirit and mystique of Texas since the 1950s, a book about the individuals whose determined conviction challenged the status quo to advance the state's cultural boundaries, and, finally, a book about Philip Johnson, an Easterner who practically got his start as an architect in Texas, where his work still flourishes 50 years later.



Infrastructure Lost

Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways, and Houses in America by Keller Easterling. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999. 209 pp., illus., \$35.

Reviewed by Keith Krumwiede

Keller Easterling's *Organization Space* is not a book about architecture. That is not to say, however, that it is not relevant to architectural discourse. It is, precisely because it eschews an object-focused perspective and instead examines the processes and organizational paradigms that determine our physical environment.

In the domain of *Organization Space* architecture is symptomatic of the intelligence, or lack thereof, of larger, often invisible, infrastructures. The book is an attempt to reveal those infrastructures, to expose the underlying procedural history of the American landscape. While other observers of our suburban nation may bemoan the aesthetic degradation of the environment, Easterling is not so much worried that the environment is ugly as that it is stupid. She is, therefore, less