

## PHILIP REVEALS ALL: IT'S NOT ENOUGH

*Philip Johnson: Life and Work* by Franz Schulze. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994. 496 pp., illus., \$30

Reviewed by Stephen Fox

In his new biography of Philip Johnson, Franz Schulze appears torn between a sense of his obligation to chronicle the life and work of his subject and a barely concealed disdain for Johnson. His designation of Johnson throughout the book as "Philip" is telling. The convention of English-language biography is to use a male subject's given name when writing about his childhood and adolescence, then switch to his surname when the subject attains maturity. Schulze's implicit judgment on "Philip" is obvious. At 88, Johnson has yet to attain maturity.

Schulze dutifully details Johnson's privileged childhood in Cleveland, where his wealthy, gregarious father and intellectually inclined mother lived when not wintering in North Carolina or traveling in Europe. They are depicted as well-intentioned and indulgent but emotionally remote. Predictably, little "Philip" was winning, precocious, and a perennial misfit.

Schulze fills in the blanks on the two facets of Johnson's life that were expunged from his architectural record between the late 1940s and the early 1970s: his homosexuality and his involvement in the 1930s with right-wing U.S. and German Nazi politics. Readers' prurient curiosity about Johnson's liaisons and domestic life will be richly rewarded by this book. Schulze's account of Johnson's Nazi enthusiasm elicits a close analysis of the architect's character as Schulze tries to understand the logic motivating Johnson to forsake the Museum of Modern Art (where he had firmly established himself as a cultural force by the time he was 25) for political misadventures that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Johnson's impetuosity, the invincible naïveté that privilege instilled, an enthrallment with authority born of emotional neediness, and his bravado are deduced as a fatal combination of factors. Terms like "snob," "spoiled," "trifler," and "dilettante" indicate Schulze's opinion of the maddening, irretrievable foolishness of Johnson's excursion into politics. What especially troubles Schulze, though, is the way that images from this part of Johnson's life infiltrate his later observa-

tions. Johnson's likening his Glass House to "a burnt wooden village I once saw" is, as Schulze documents, a veiled reference to the Nazi destruction of Polish towns that Johnson witnessed in 1939, when he accompanied the German army as a reporter for the right-wing American journal *Social Justice*. Johnson, in his favorite meta-lecture (a version of which he presented when he and John Burgee spoke to the Rice Design Alliance in 1981), calls for a demonstration project of comprehensive, coordinated urban planning and monumental urban architecture, usually restricted to a designated precinct (Johnson thought that 15 acres downtown would be sufficient for Houston), that clearly would require concentrated, centralized authority for its realization. The dark side of Johnson's engaging and irrepressible personality emerges in his childish, contrary evasion of responsibility for the implications of his actions and pronouncements, whether these involve past political decisions or silly, offhand, but extremely durable buildings. Schulze concludes that disillusion with the politics of philosophical commitment propelled Johnson back into the milieu of architecture and art, because these exist in a realm where meaning is contingent and can be construed rather than patiently deduced and rigorously constructed, as in science and philosophy.

For those who know Johnson's architectural career, the balance of the book covers familiar territory: Johnson's return to Harvard in 1940 to study architecture at the Graduate School of Design, a humiliating plunge into the real world as an army conscript in 1943–44, then the beginning of his professional career as an architect in 1945, cushioned by a second term as director of the department of architecture at the Museum of Modern Art between 1945 and 1953. Schulze identifies the significant periods in Johnson's career, describing significant buildings and identifying significant clients. He references the multiple, overlapping contexts with which Johnson is identified: the arts-and-letters end of New York society, the Museum of Modern Art, the intellectual-academic-media circles of New York architecture, the New York art scene, and New York's homosexual subculture. What fascinates Schulze is the nimbleness with which Johnson maneuvers among these worlds.

Schulze acknowledges the important role that Texan patrons and buildings have played in Johnson's career. Yet here a weakness of the book becomes quite apparent, one that casts a pall of uncertainty over the rest of the text. Schulze clearly relies on Johnson's own recollections as a primary source of information about buildings and clients. However, one need only review Johnson's published writings and remarks to see how his account of the same event can change over time. This should have alerted Schulze to Johnson's unreliability as sole witness and interpreter. Thus – unbelievably – John de Menil is never mentioned. Schulze states that the Schlumberger-Menil family connection was important for Johnson's career, but he gives little evidence of it. Schulze discusses the first Boissonnas House and the University of St. Thomas back to back without noting the Menil connection. He seems rather confused about who I. S. Brochstein is (Brochstein secured Johnson's first commission from Gerald D. Hines) and is not clear why Brochstein insisted that Johnson be retained to design Post Oak Central. These imprecisions all have the earmark of Johnson's "impatient" memory (Vincent Scully's inspired characterization), which Schulze does not always clarify, expand on, and readjust with further research and interviews. This does not so much compromise the accuracy of Schulze's account as it does foreclose a more comprehensive understanding of how Johnson has affected the course of 20th-century American architecture.

Again, a local example will suffice. Schulze does not address, and perhaps was not aware of, the extraordinary impact that Johnson had on Houston's modern architecture scene in the 1950s. Schulze does not acknowledge the Houston architects affected by Johnson's Miesian proselytizing, nor the role some of them played in securing for Mies van der Rohe the commission to expand the Museum of Fine Arts. Johnson's associations with John de Menil (who became a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art in 1959), Ruth Carter Stevenson of Fort Worth (who not only had Johnson design the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, but got him to serve several terms on its board of trustees), and Patsy Dunn Singer of Corpus Christi (she and her husband, at John de Menil's recommendation, hired Johnson as architect of the Art Museum of South Texas, then got

Johnson's companion, David Whitney, to organize the museum's opening exhibition) suggest the breadth of his influence as an architectural and artistic impresario in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>1</sup> These wider dimensions of Johnson's career are ignored because Schulze adheres so closely to Johnson's own point of view.

What is missing from this account of Johnson's "life and work" is the "critical biography" appended as subtitle to Schulze's justly praised book on Mies van der Rohe. Historical interpretations of the political significance of modern culture and taste criticism in the United States in the 1950s, such as Jackson Lears's,<sup>2</sup> or R. E. Somol's provocative linking of formalism to an end-of-ideology program in considering the intellectual development of Colin Rowe,<sup>3</sup> suggest that Johnson's roles as architect, wit, cultural arbiter, and gay blade have a historical dimension and historical significance that transcend the limitations of his sometimes odious twit personality ("harlequin" is Schulze's elegant and insightful term). What is required, as Scully prescribed for Johnson in 1969, is a "less impatient analysis" of the historical "problem"<sup>4</sup> that Philip Johnson represents for historians and critics of 20th-century American culture. ■

1 Frank Welch is preparing a book on Johnson's career in Texas, to be published by the University of Texas Press, that will document much more fully the social history of his influence on the state's modern art and architectural scene from the 1950s to the present.

2 Jackson Lears, "A Matter of Taste: Corporate Cultural Hegemony in a Mass-Consumption Society," in Lary May, ed., *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cold War* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 38–57.

3 R. E. Somol, "Oublier Rowe," *ANY* 7/8 (1994), p. 11.

4 Vincent Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988), p. 196.