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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society
PO Box 18337 • Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

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Philip Johnson: On and Off the Overlook

Philip Johnson in 1933. (Photo by Carl Van Vechten)
Inset photo: Philip Johnson’s childhood home on Overlook Road.
The Euclid Heights residential development now primarily in Cleveland Heights was designed in the 1890s as a suburban oasis for émigré’s from Cleveland’s posh “Millionaires’ Row.” These Heights pioneers were escaping mushrooming business and pollution near their Euclid Avenue mansions. The original block of Overlook Road in Euclid Heights was a most desirable address, as it sat along the scenic ridge after which the street is named. To this day this part of the street furnishes spectacular views of Cleveland, particularly from the eighty-foot-high Waldorf Towers. In 1961, this apartment building replaced one of the Overlook’s earliest and grandest mansions, the home of William Lowe Rice, a lawyer and investor in distressed companies. The Rice home, designed by architect and neighbor Alfred Hoyt Granger, featured large, symmetrical Greek-style porticos. The demolition of such sumptuous properties on the Overlook has been the historical norm. Today only three — or possibly four — of the original mansions stand. “Demolished over 60 years ago, the house at 2171 Overlook Road — like many of the Overlook’s erstwhile mansions — have faded from public memory, and one of its past residents may someday suffer the same fate in his own hometown.

One of the most prominent men to emerge from Euclid Heights was architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005). In 1952, at age 26, the Harvard-educated Johnson was already making his mark on the art world, becoming the first Director of the new Department of Architecture at New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). That same year, he co-wrote an important book on a branch of Bauhaus architecture, by then called the International Style, and co-curated “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition,” a 1932 MoMA show that is often credited with introducing modern architecture to American audiences. After World War II, Johnson would go on to design such world-famous modernist structures as the Seagram Building — a skyscraper in New York City — and the Glass House, a completely translucent cube that was Johnson’s own residence and remains one of the most famous houses in the world. But it would be Johnson’s political career between 1934, when he abruptly quit his post at MoMA, and 1940, when he returned to Harvard and entered its Graduate School of Design, that would to many forever taint the legacy of the most famous artist from Cleveland Heights.

While growing up in Cleveland Heights, Johnson’s world largely consisted of his home
From the President:

The Board of Trustees of the Cleveland Heights Historical Society would like to announce the resignation of our Founding President, Charles (“Chuck”) Owen, and state our profound appreciation for all the years he had given us. Chuck initiated our legal status as an historical organization, and faithfully maintained our legal records for many years. Although the CHHS went through periods of inactivity several times in its first decade, Chuck steadfastly kept the idea alive such that we can thank him for pursuing our very existence. Also, Chuck was always able to supply Board members with a ready array of Cleveland Heights historical information – facts, but also anecdotes. His persistence enabled the CHHS to obtain important materials pertaining to the history of Coventry Village, such that they would be readily accessible to anyone interested.

The Board is also announcing the recent resignations of Christopher Roy and Sue Godfrey, and is most grateful for their years of service put into our organization. Chris was on our Board since the early days and was eventually CHHS’ President until several years ago. He could discuss local history interestingly – always with keen interest and respect – and many of our accomplishments can be attributed to Chris’ enthusiastic imagination. Sue has been a steady supporter of our programs and, as a very long-term Cleveland Heights resident, she could contribute from a perspective of broad community involvement few could match.

Those of us remaining on the Board are delighted to announce the appointment of five new Cleveland Heights Historical Society Trustees, bringing the total number to nine – the largest ever and the maximum allowed in our newly rewritten By-laws. The individuals are: William Hopkins, Christopher Hubbert, Michael Madorsky, Laura Peskin, and Stephen Titchenal. These folks bring an abundance of diverse yet appropriate backgrounds and shall surely contribute a great deal to whatever directions the Historical Society takes from this juncture.

— Ken Goldberg

Among other designs, Johnson’s 1932 show at MoMa depicted a futuristic gas station contributed by Philip’s friend Alfred Claus, a German associate of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Johnson’s Harvard mentor. Johnson and his father Homer, who did legal work for Standard Oil of Ohio (Sohio), helped Claus obtain a prestigious Sohio commission for the gas station, and the design soon became a familiar sight around Northeast Ohio. Cleveland Heights was home to one of these Sohio stations for a time at the intersection of Mayfield and Noble Roads. (Photo courtesy of the BP Archives)

This void was intensified by Johnson’s college-age diagnosis with bipolar disorder.

Johnson — who much later in life lived openly as a homosexual — had emerged from toddlerhood with a distinctly effeminate air that troubled his father. Since an older son, Alfred, had died at age five, Johnson was the sole male heir. A few years later Johnson was taken with temper tantrums, something that the future architect recalled his father dealt with swiftly and harshly: by sending missiles of cold water his way.

Johnson’s mother, Louise, was an unorthodox parent as well. The Wellesley-trained math teacher and spare-time artist laid out the home
in the day’s highest style, an undertaking that may have influenced her son’s penchant for modernism. More influential, as described by daughter Jeanette, were Louise’s “slide-illustrated ‘seminars’ on art ... including the ‘modern’ stuff for Theodate, Philip and me in the living room. Philip just soaked it up.” On the other hand the intellectual, emotionally distant Louise provided little of the needed maternal warmth. Later in life Johnson called Louise a “cold fish,” although they kept up a copious letter correspondence emanating from the mother-and-son intellectual bond.

Johnson’s letters from his young adulthood document continued estrangement with his father. Rare correspondence with Homer mainly concerned money. Homer implored his son to wisely use the family financial investment in him. While a June 1930 missive to Louise clarified Johnson’s new-found interest in architecture, the same letter concluded with reassurance to Homer that he would not build anything soon and therefore not burn through his inheritance. On at least two other occasions between 1926 and 1930 Johnson had, through letters, likewise resolved “misunderstandings” with Homer about finances. Some observers have viewed Johnson’s life as a series of infatuations with strong, male leaders; these figures ran the gamut from politicians to his mentor and frequent collaborator (most notably with the Seagram Building), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Schulze and others have described his hero worship as seeking substitute father figures for the distant and disapproving Homer. Indeed, via letters to Louise, Johnson exhibited intense enthusiasm about each admirable male to enter his life. “Mies is the greatest man ... I have ever met. [Architect JP] Oud I like better. I almost love Oud such a dear man he is besides being a genius, but Mies is a great man.”

Johnson eventually decided to seriously pursue a career in politics, though this got off to a shaky start in 1935. First he acted on fascination with the flamboyant, populist demagogue Huey Long, one of the few real challenges to perceived FDR ineptitude. In the vacuum created by Long’s death, Johnson was finding other charismatic leaders to which to attach. There was Gerald LK Smith, father of the organiza-
State Representative. By August Johnson stunned his supporters by withdrawing his nomination. He was as ever in the orbit of his idol, Coughlin, and the radio priest was making a third-party Presidential bid. The priesthood frowned on political dual-careers, but Coughlin had his proxy in lackluster North Dakota Representative William Lemke. Gerald LR Smith stepped on the Lemke bandwagon as well. They called their organization the Union Party. It included personable and less controversial Dr. Francis Townsend, author of a senior pension program that in part inspired Social Security. The party trailed dismally in the election, though Ohio gave it 152,512 votes, the most of any state.

For one of the Union Party's largest rallies, in September in Chicago, Johnson designed a stage after the one he had seen Hitler use in Potsdam. The Chicago Tribune described it as "bordering on the moderne… it provided a glaring white background 50 feet wide and 20 feet high for the solitary figure of the priest." Coughlin thought the Union Party would disturb electoral votes so much as to throw the election to the House of Representatives. Through Congress breaking the predicted electoral impasse, Union ticket supporters reasoned that Roosevelt's enemies had a better chance of throwing him off than by electors and the voting public alone. The Union Party's crushing defeat was another anti-climax in Johnson's political career.

Johnson was not in Cleveland much until the end of 1937. Prior to that point he divided his time between forming his own political party, the sluggish Young Nationalists, observing Ohio architecture, and translating a Rightist German essay. On an extended winter 1937/38 holiday on Overlook, Johnson had the family home to himself. Homer and Louise were at their winter vacation home in the Carolinas — a resort at which they had wintered for years. Few periods saw as much festivity at 2171 Overlook as the 37/38 winter when Johnson was taking a break from politics and entertaining Cleveland's elite. Johnson dated a Play House actor that winter, vaguely setting the stage for his future Cleveland involvement. From that time on Johnson's connection to Cleveland would manifest itself most greatly in the Play House, an object of sister Jeanette's philanthropy and an institution that furnished work to singer-sister Theodate. 1938 on Overlook rekindled Johnson's aesthetic impulses. After a little-understood, Nazi-oriented 1939 European trip, in 1940 Johnson entered the Harvard graduate design program. In short order he reunited with Mies and modernist functionalism, and definitely turned his back on politics to become the pioneering architect that he is remembered as today.

Most commentators on Johnson's legacy seem to concur on two things about the quirky architect: a) that he was generous to associates and b) that he had an uncanny talent for emerging atop of fashion trends. Most of Johnson's buildings are not mere curiosities but key pieces in their respective genres. Johnson's mark on Cleveland, however, is growing ever tenuous. Alarmingly, his sole architectural Cleveland creation, a 1983 addition to the Cleveland Play House, is now little used — in the control of the ever-expanding Cleveland Clinic and outside of any historic district. "Turning Point," Johnson's five-piece, Stonehenge-like sculpture installed on the CWRU campus in 1997 currently remains in storage after being removed during the recent construction of a new student center. In addition, Homer Johnson's house on Overlook Road was torn down in the 1950s and is now the site of a senior living facility. Only the home's carriage house remains standing today.

While Johnson's 1930s activities represent Cleveland at its darkest, Johnson is a complex

Philip Johnson’s 1983 addition to the Cleveland Play House, the only architectural work Johnson designed for his hometown. (Photo by Laura Peskin)
product of the Overlook of Cleveland and Cleveland Heights, who may deserve a lasting in-town architectural monument to his disturbed genius.

Laura Peskin, an almost lifelong greater Clevelander, has contributed to Ohio Archaeologist and the Ohio Cardinal. Her writings have been linked to the Shaker Heights Library’s website and to BluestoneHeights.org, an east side research website. Most recently Peskin has authored the book series Deep Cover Cleveland. As the title implies, the books bring to light aspects of regional history that are not as well known as they should be. Around the book series Peskin has given several PowerPoint presentations at area libraries and museums.

Left: All that remains from Philip Johnson’s childhood home is its detached carriage house, now a private residence situated among four other former stables from the same era along an alleyway known today as Herrick Mews. (Photo by Laura Peskin)

In the foreground is the section of the senior facility that sits on the former site of the Johnson home. Two of the remaining Overlook mansions are to the east, as is the looming Waldorf Towers apartment building, constructed on the site of a razed mansion in the 1960s. (Photo by Michael Rotman)

The view looking north from what was once the front lawn of Philip Johnson’s childhood home on Overlook Road. (Photo by Michael Rotman)

Bibliography


Philip C. Johnson-Papers. Western Reserve Historical Society. Cleveland, OH.

