Biography : Philip Johnson

, Monday 02 October 2006 - 18:00:00

Philip Johnson was the first architect who won the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1979. Here is his short biography (text courtacy Pritzker Architecture Prize authority , the Hyatt Foundation and wiki pedia): Philip Johnson was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1906, He attended the Hackley School, in Tarrytown, New York, and then studied at Harvard as an undergraduate, where he focused on history and philosophy, particularly the work of the Pre-Socratic philosophers. Johnson interrupted his education with several extended trips to Europe. These trips became the pivotal moment of his education; he visited Chartres, the Parthenon, and many other ancient monuments, becoming increasingly fascinated with architecture. With his thick, round-framed glasses, Johnson was the most recognizable figure in American architecture for decades. Part icon, part oracle, part stand-up comic, Johnson was a reliable source of wit and provocation. Johnson was openly gay, although he struggled with his sexuality when he was younger. When Johnson died in January 2005, he was survived by his long time partner, David Whitney. Whitney subsequently died a few months later, on Sunday, June 12, 2005 at the age of 66. According to Whitney's obituary, he was "an art collector, curator, and the long-time companion of architect Philip Johnson" In the years since has become one of architecture's most potent forces. Before designing his first building at the age of 36, Johnson had been client, critic, author, historian, museum director, but not an architect. His greatest influence as an architect was his use of glass. Johnson was among the first to experiment with all-glass facades, and by the 1980s such buildings had become commonplace the world over. He eventually rejected much of the metallic appearance of earlier International Style buildings, and began designing spectacular, crystalline structures uniformly sheathed in glass. Many of these became instant icons, such as PPG Place in Pittsburgh and the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California. In the 1990's Johnson designed the Comerica Tower in Detroit, Michigan In 1949, after a number of years as the Museum of Modern Art's first director of the Architecture Department, Johnson designed a residence for himself in New Canaan, Connecticut for his master degree thesis, the now famous Glass House. He literally coined the term "International School of Architecture" for an exhibition at MOMA. Johnson organized Mies van der Rohe's first visit to the USA as well as Le Corbusier's. He even commissioned Mies to design his New York apartment. Later, he would collaborate with Mies on what has been described as this continent's finest high-rise building, the Seagram Building in New York. By the fifties, Johnson was revising his earlier views, culminating with a building that proved to be one of the most controversial of his career the AT&T headquarters in New York with its so-called "Chippendale" top. Joining forces with partner John Burgee from 1967 through 1987, their twenty year output has been nothing short of phenomenal. Johnson's most famous work is the Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, a transparent open-plan frame structure which was his own residence. The Glass House is heavily influenced by Mies' Farnsworth House, among other buildings -- Johnson often discussed the influences of the building from many historical models, even the Acropolis. The New Canaan estate continued to grow and now boasts a number of unique designs, including a building made out of chain-link

fencing, a sculpture gallery with a glass ceiling, a house of brick mirroring his glass house, and a building with no conventionally shaped walls (having only two corners). Johnson's architectural work is a balancing act between two dominant trends in post-war American art: the more "serious" movement of Minimalism, and the more populist movement of Pop art. His best work has aspects of both movements. Johnson's personal collections reflected this dichotomy, as he introduced artists such as Rothko to the Museum of Modern Art as well as Warhol. Straddling between these two camps, his work was seen by purists of either side as always too contaminated or influenced by the other. From 1967 to 1991 Johnson collaborated with John Burgee, his most productive period certainly by the measure of scale -- he became known at this time as builder of iconic office towers. The AT&T Building in Manhattan, now the Sony Building, was completed in 1984 and was immediately controversial for its neo-Georgian pediment (Chippendale top). At the time, it was seen as provocation on a grand scale: crowning a Manhattan skyscraper with a shape echoing a historical wardobe top defied every precept of the modernist aesthetic: historical pattern had been effectively outlawed among architects for years. In retrospect other critics have seen the AT&T Building as the first Postmodernist statement, necessary in the context of modernism's aesthetic cul-de-sac. The list of projects fills a volume, but suffice it to say, ranges from numerous high-rise projects such as International Place in Boston; Tycon Towers in Vienna, Virginia; Momentum Place in Dallas; 53rd at Third in New York; NCNB Center in Houston; PPG in Pittsburgh; 101 California in San Francisco; United Bank Center Tower in Denver; to the far flung National Center for Performing Arts in Bombay, India; Century Center in South Bend, Indiana; a Water Garden in Fort Worth, Texas; a Civic Center in Peoria, Illinois; the Crystal Cathedral in California; and a Dade County Cultural Center in Miami. There are many, many more. Since 1989, Johnson, semi-retired, has devoted his time mainly to projects of his own, but still is a consultant to John Burgee Architects. His most recent design is for a new School of Fine Arts for Seton Hill College in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Comeria Tower

At 500 Woodward Avenue, Detroit, USA Built dring 1991-1993.

Glass house model at MOMA