He Adds Elegance To Modern Architecture

Philip Johnson strikes a new note in homes and buildings by his special use of the past.

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THIS is the year of Philip Johnson, a modern architect with a difference—instead of throwing away the past, he makes use of it in new and startling ways. At 57, he has emerged as a top tastemaker, a powerful influence in the market place where all cultural styles wind up, despite the fact that he has been an architect for only 11 years, coming to the practice after a long and successful career as director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Architecture, architectural critic, iconoclast and rebel against "the Establishment."

Just how important a pace-setter Johnson is has become evident this spring with the unveiling of three of his newest buildings in New York City. At the World's Fair, the New York State Pavilion was immediately hailed as the architectural delight of Flushing Meadow. His design of the State Theater at Lincoln Center caused as much comment as the works performed inside it. And tomorrow the nation's First Lady, Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson, will dedicate his rebuilt and remodeled Museum of Modern Art.

What Johnson is bringing to New York, and to a good many cities across the country, is a kind of architectural elegance that has not been seen since the turn-of-the-century days of McKim, Mead and White and the splendid "Renaissance" palaces built for the business aristocracy. But his is a new kind of elegance in completely contemporary terms—a modern architecture with the timeless values of beauty and luxury that have a universal appeal, whereas the more startling contemporary styles do not.

"I call myself a traditionalist, although I have fought against tradition all my life," he explains. "I like to be buttoned onto tradition. The thing is to improve it, twist it and mold it; to make something new of it; not to deny it. The riches of history can be plucked at any point."

IN practice, the result is a frankly romantic and sensuous group of buildings which look toward the past knowledgeably, although they never copy it and can be mistaken for nothing but of the present. There are suggestions of the work of the 19th-century Englishman, John Soane, for example, in the dome of Johnson's Kneses Tifereth Israel Synagogue in Port Chester, N. Y., and of the German classicist, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, in the stylized colonnades of Johnson's museums in Nebraska and Texas. But the echoes are faint; Johnson plays on new instruments, in new keys.

It is a controversial style, praised as a "breakthrough" by some, damned as "decorative" or "reactionary" by others, who feel that plucking the past is not a genuinely creative act and may even be something of a betrayal of modern architecture's search for completely new solutions for our time. All agree, however, that the plucking and molding are done with finesse and taste, and often result in effects of exquisite sensibility. His design of Washington's Dumbarton Oaks Museum, for example, is a cluster of round pavilions, like glass-walled jewel cases, fitted with precious teak, marble and bronze. This is an architecture of painstaking refinement, at a time when most building is grossly and flashily vulgar.

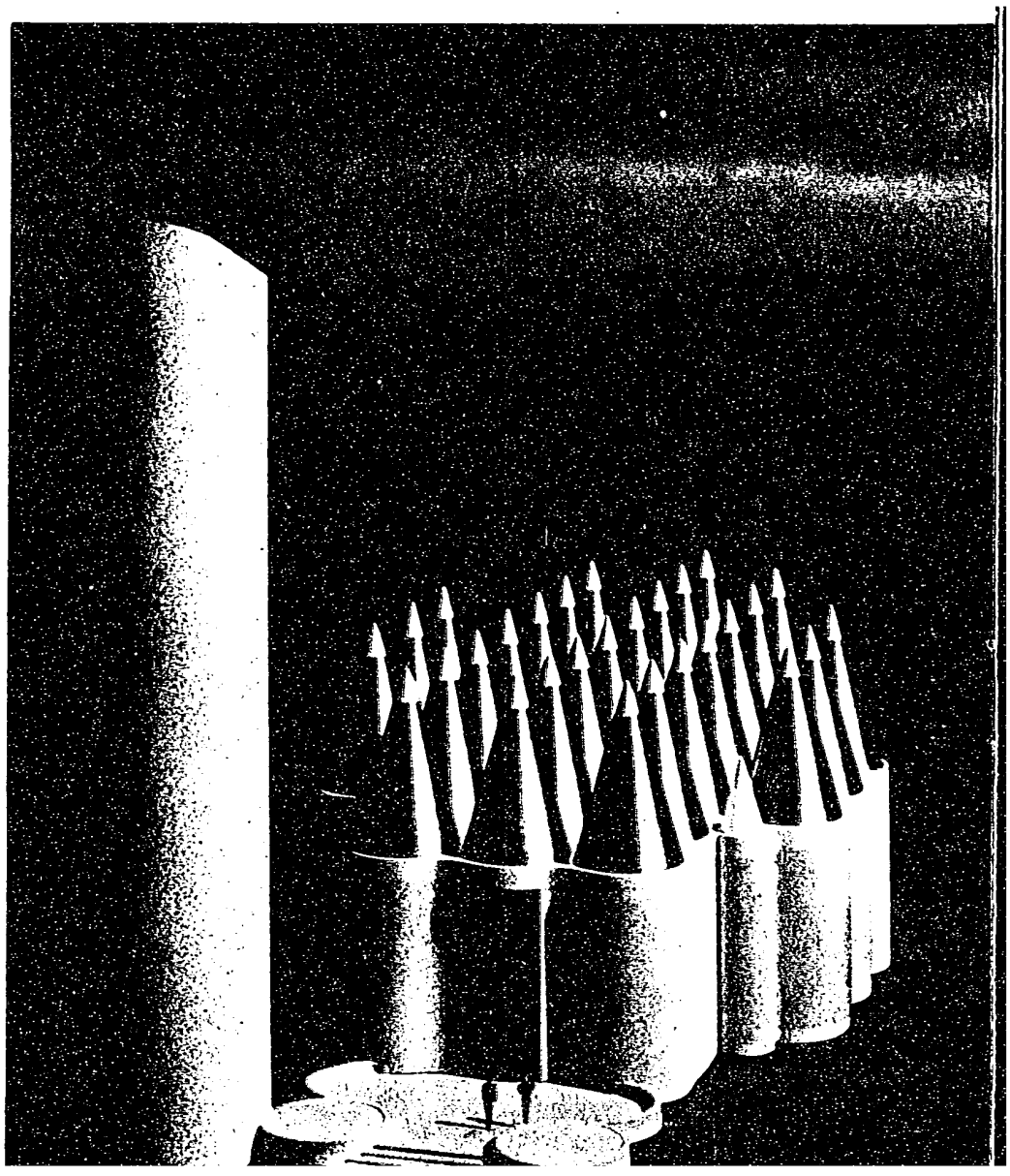
It is not surprising, therefore, that Johnson specializes in prestige construction—museums, churches and theaters—the great "one-room buildings" that are the architect's most coveted commissions because they give him the best opportunity for creative expression. The Johnson museums are multiplying across the country, from Utica, N. Y., to Fort Worth, Tex., and to Lincoln, Neb. Churches in New Harmony, Ind., and an abbey in Washington show similar concern for exquisite form, as do a nuclear reactor in Rehovot, Israel, and new science buildings at Yale.

HIS houses are extravagant pleasure-palaces of carefully unostentatious richness for a Who's Who of art patrons and wealthy collectors. A Johnson house is something like the legendary Morgan yacht—if you have to ask how much it costs, you can't afford it. He is not looking for budget jobs, but he is a bit rueful that his reputation as a rich man's architect has kept away some commercial or corporate clients who consider him too expensive.

Nevertheless, he has produced at least one commercial landmark of unassailable magnificence, the Seagram Building in New York, on which he collaborated with Mies van der Rohe in 1956-58. But the building that brought him instant fame was his own glass house, which shocked his neighbors and the world when he built it in New Canaan, Conn., in 1949. It is strongly influenced by Mies, whom he has always admired. In his role as critic and proselytizer at the Museum of Modern Art, Johnson wrote the authoritative biography of Mies van der Rohe in 1947, and when he turned from critical observation to practice, Mies was his mentor and his first buildings were all in Mies's severe, spare style.

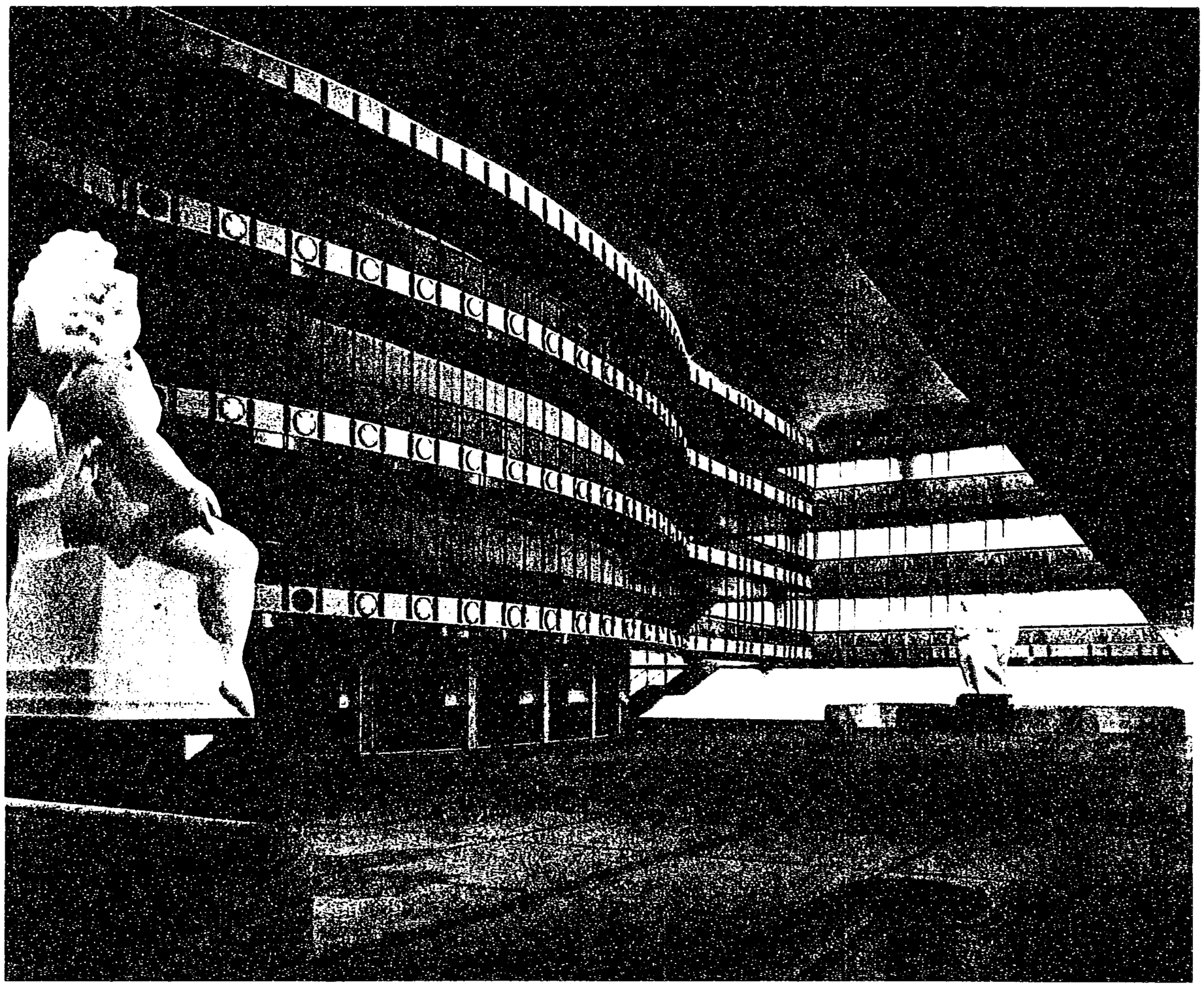
THE glass house, once attacked so violently, is now preferred by some critics to his more recent historic-romantic work. (The tales of shock generated by the house are legion, but the best has become an oft-told classic. To the lady visitor who professed that she could never live there, Johnson, a bachelor, replied, "I haven't asked you to, madam.")

PAVILION—The festive forms of the New York State Pavilion at the World's Fair show Philip Johnson's interest in new structural techniques for unusual effects. The giant roof, covered with

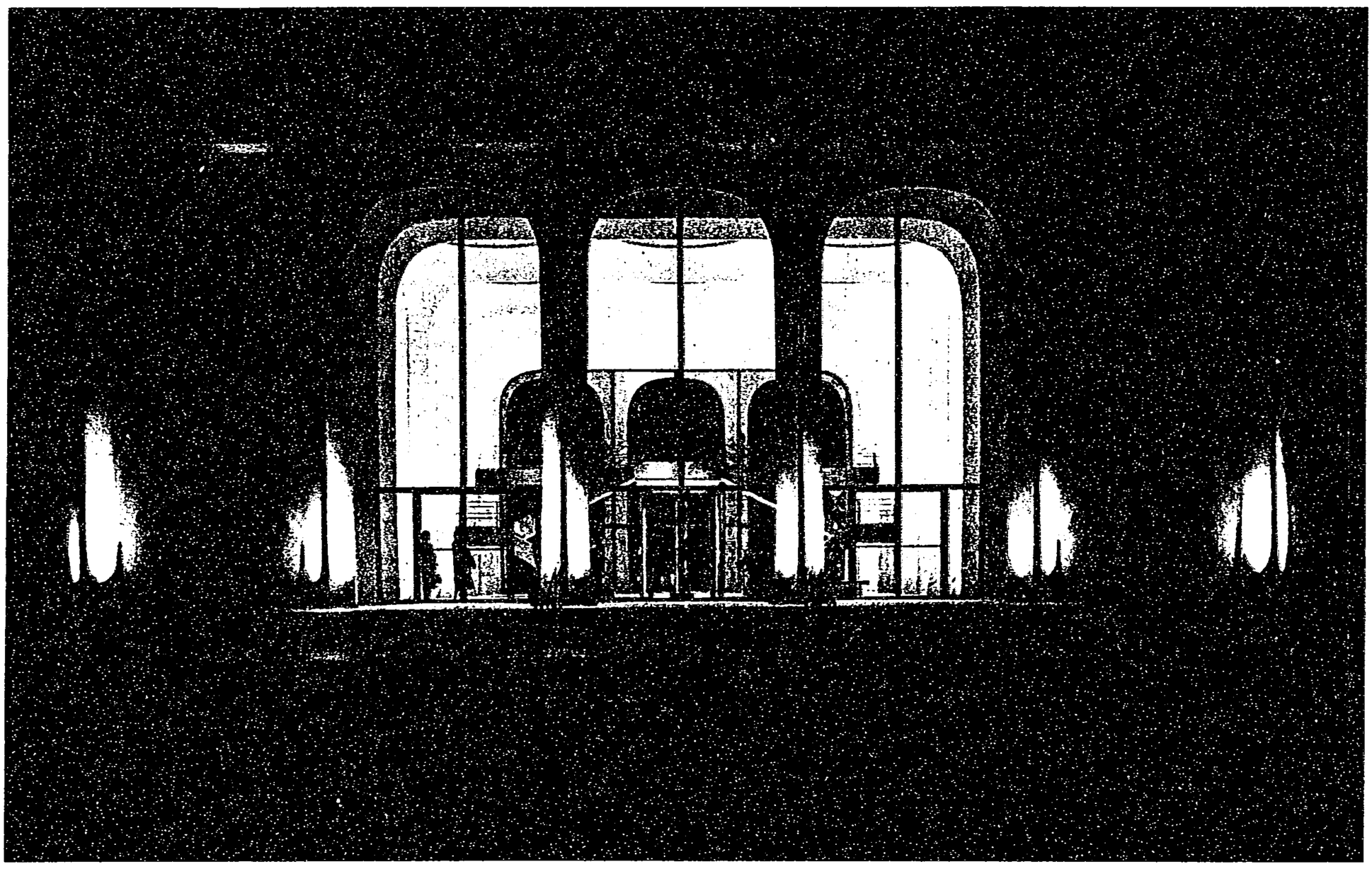


ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE has been archi-

colored plastic, is an elliptical steel ring on concrete columns.



THEATER—Travertine and marble floors, gold-leaf ceiling and tiers of gold-screened balconies with diamondlike lights impart Johnsonian elegance to the lobby of the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center. The architect himself selected the marble statues by Elie Nadelman.



MUSEUM—A formal colonnade fronts a two-story, glass-enclosed hall at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, completed for the University of Nebraska last year. The grand stairway is visible through the glass wall. At night, illumination emphasizes the sculptural play of light and shadow on the flat arcades. Materials are sumptuous — travertine, bronze, teak and walls covered with thick carpeting.

Left—
CHURCH—One of the newest of Johnson's works is Saint Stephen's Episcopal Church, to be built in New Harmony, Ind. This model shows a forest of conical steeples with pointed skylights at the top, which will light the open-plan interior. A bell tower is at left. Outside walls will be brick.

GLASS HOUSE—The view from his home in New Canaan, Conn., says architect Johnson (above), "makes beautiful wallpaper."

Elegance in Architecture

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Philip Johnson's work stands somewhere between the rigid boxes of the diehard functionalists and the free-form flights of fancy of the neobaroque experimenters. He has given rich, traditional materials, like marble and travertine, equal status in the modern vocabulary with contemporary steel and glass, and he has restored the backward look at history to respectability for a generation of architects that had renounced the past with an almost religious fervor.

IN Johnson's work, everything — whether unusual construction, like the tension-compression ring design of the great bicycle roof of the World's Fair pavilion, or just a preoccupation with the play of light and shadow of classically inspired colonnades—is a means to a single end. It is beauty that he is really after, and history and structure are his convenient tools. This sometimes turns an artful device into "art for art's sake," and even makes structure look a little thin. But beauty is seductive, and so are his buildings.

His least successful work borders on the decorative (a pejorative adjective) with subtle overtones of decadence. While his devices work — the giant truss from which his museum in Utica, N.Y., is suspended, for example, serves the useful purpose of making a column-free, open interior space—the impression is that these devices are picked primarily because he likes the way they look. This suggests preoccupation with petty effects rather than design breakthroughs.

As a man, Philip Johnson is as soigné as his architecture, with the kind of knowing discernment that eschews the too silken necktie, the too obvious gold cuff links, the too smooth, overtly rich effect. With the correct credentials of money, family and looks, he has been an elegant maverick all his life, a confirmed, conscientious nonconformist and privileged insider whose pleasure is in shaking up the Establishment.

The Johnson skill in shockmanship and one-upmanship is matched by a sincere, sensitive erudition. He excels in historical name-dropping and watches its devastating effects with sly delight. But the scholarly references are serious. His work and attitudes are motivated by studied convictions about the importance of modern art and architecture and a consciously and unapologetically aristocratic and esthetic approach to life.

His one disappointment is that he has ceased to shock the Establishment. He *is* the Establishment now, a completely accepted architectural leader of unimpeachable authority. But he still has the pleasure of outraging the bourgeoisie, as he did with the Pop art embellishments that he commissioned for the state pavilion at the fair.

Johnson's success story is something other than the battle of the conventional struggler against conventional odds. Born in Cleveland in 1906, the son of a wealthy, land-owning lawyer, he followed the privileged path of good schools, like Harvard, and travel. In the soul-searching nineteen-thirties when other young intellectuals were facing left, he turned to the political far right, supporting Huey Long, among others.

In 1932, he went to the newly formed Museum of Modern Art, where he founded the Department of Architecture and proceeded to bring the word about the modern movement, then booming among the European intelligentsia, to a reluctant and rather uninterested New World. He defined the new architecture in a landmark book, "The International Style," in collaboration with the historian, Henry-Russell Hitchcock.

In the early nineteen-forties, he went back to Harvard for his degree in architecture. He had the advantage of maturity, and the even greater advantage of being able to build his master's thesis rather than draw it — he built a walled

modern house that created in Cambridge the kind of stunned reaction that was to greet his later glass house in Connecticut. His talent for design has always exceeded his ability to draw, being more verbal than visual and consisting of descriptive airy gestures amplified by quick rough strokes of a soft pencil on paper. Ironically, when he took the New York State registration examinations he failed—and had to repeat—the design section.

Returning to the museum, he continued to function as critic, trend-setter and close friend and associate of the élite group that controls the country's cultural conscience and purse strings through its major institutions. He finally opened his own office in 1953. This all led inevitably, if not exactly in Horatio Alger fashion, to an international reputation for buildings of fastidious taste and elegant detail for a top-drawer clientele.

For the client who might come complacently to his discreetly luxurious offices in the Seagram Building for some discreetly luxurious job, the first confrontation is with an old automobile tire, a blue light and some carefully arranged debris in a startling collage facing the entrance, a work by the Pop artist, Robert Rauschenberg. For Johnson, a collector who has always promoted the avant-garde, this is as right as the fresh flowers carefully arranged according to the season and the properly accented receptionist. The message is offbeat, but far from beatnik. The suggestion is of breeding and daring, a combination that reassures and challenges. He leads, so it is safe, and profitable, to follow.

HIS opinions are outspoken; he treads on toes gracefully and firmly. Washington is "dull, mediocre monotony"; the Pan Am Building, "ruinous, a building nobody wanted"; Kennedy Airport, "a congeries of cheapies"; low-cost housing, "monstrous brick prisons rising from the streets like untidy asparagus." The war between the old and young generations in art and architecture is "rational and healthy"; his advice to students, "leave school."

His thoughts on the present condition of architecture: "There are many directions—all welcome and good. We don't have a single style. We run the gamut from British brutalism — you know, things that look like blown-up water tanks in a semi-crude state—to the lacework of Yamasaki. It's enriching; it's more like the 19th century. Architecture is in an extraordinarily fluid state.

"IN my own work, I'd say I'm a classicist, but I look everywhere for my solutions. I don't study the toilet-living habits of my clients, although that's a popular approach. First, I think of every building in history that has been similar in purpose. Then I think of the functional program — that's a major part of the study. At the same time, forms and processionalism are floating around in my head. Processionalism is primary—how you get from one place to another, the relationships and effects of spaces as you move about in them. That's worked out awfully well in the State Theater. I'm a 'straight-in' man myself; I'm too nervous, I like to know where I am.

"I also like to know where I'm going. I think the future, the important future of architecture, is in public building. We have a great private architecture now, and I believe we're moving toward a great public architecture. There are signs of government sponsorship.

"My ambition? I'd like to be *l'architecte du roi*." There is a quick smile, a sidelong glance, to see if the dropped phrase has been understood, and if it has had the proper shock value. "The king's architect," he goes on. "We have no phrase for it today, but I mean the country's official architect for its great public buildings. I'm not thinking just of myself, but of all our top talent." He offers another calculated heresy: "I want to take the dirty connotations out of the words 'official' and 'academic.'"

From the glass house and the glass-walled office in the Seagram Building, Johnson continues to throw well-selected, beautifully polished stones; the royal rebel is growing gracefully into the next generation's grand old man.