

Outdoor Living With Underground Art: Architecture Living With Art

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE Ezra Stoller

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By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

THE glass house that Philip Johnson built for himself in New Canaan, Conn., in 1949 is now 17 years old. Secure in its ambivalent position of representing standard chic to the world of the Beautiful People and standard shock to middle-class suburbia, the glass house, with its less celebrated companion brick house, has been joined in the intervening years by a half-scale arcaded pavilion and a 120-foot *jet d'eau* in a lake below, a round swimming pool, and, most recently, an underground art gallery.

Each addition has produced another *frisson* of horror or delight,

depending on how one looks at houses. Mr. Johnson has never lacked a flair for publicity, and high among his talents has been the knack to *épater les bourgeois*. His pleasure dome has been called everything, in the full range of glossy to scholarly international publications, from one of the most impressive domestic architectural statements of the century to an exercise in decadence. There can be no argument that it is an exercise in intensely personal esthetics and nonfamily living that few could duplicate.

To this viewer, however, within extremely specialized limits, this was, and is, one of the most beau-

tiful houses of our time. It is certainly one of the century's most sophisticated statements on how to live with nature. The woods and sky are its walls; every nuance of the light and seasons illuminates and changes it. The suave, steel-framed glass structure, sparsely and formally furnished with the classic Mies furniture of the 1920's and '30's, is a definitive refutation of rusticity, and yet nowhere is nature caught, held and celebrated with such total finesse.

On a recent October Saturday maples spilled gold and dogwood flamed red through the glass walls, fall crocuses carpeted the grass, and the jet in the lake leaped and

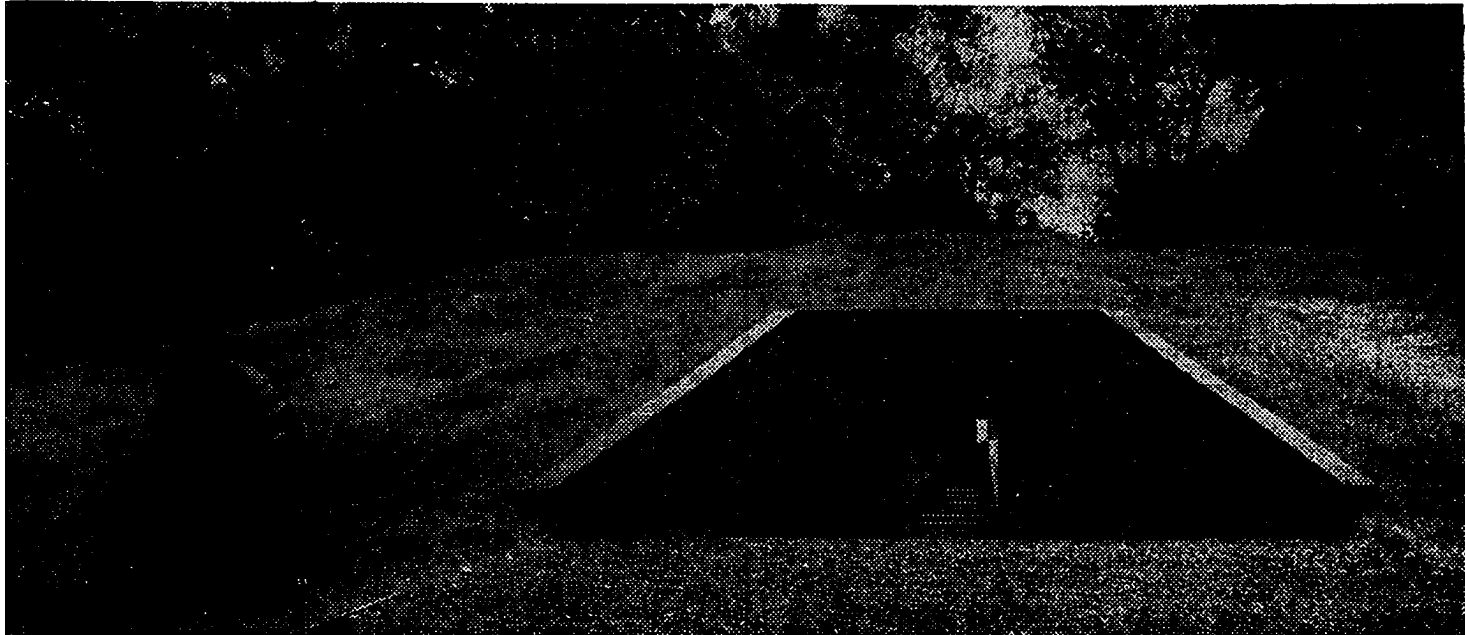
spilled a luminous mist. This is not nature enjoyed with earthy, peasant simplicity; it is the deceptive simplicity of absolute art. Whatever else Mr. Johnson may be faulted for, he is a sure esthetician, and at home on a glorious day, he is a happy man.

And speaking of art, which I have been given permission to do by my colleagues on this page, the art works in this house have never been changed. There is a Poussin landscape of classic pastoral elegance equal to its setting that adds a subtle note of the continuity of time, style and the complex relationships of nature and art. Two decorously voluptuous lady visitors

by Elie Nadelman complete the catalogue.

Yet Mr. Johnson is a collector of art and patron of the *avant-garde*. What he has done, therefore, is to build an art gallery, and he has managed to shock everyone once again by putting it underground. Actually, the building is burrowed into a grassy hill.

What he has also done, with the sure touch that he habitually demonstrates, is to prove unequivocally that much of today's art has no place in today's home, that the collector of genuine sensitivity would not dream of putting it there, (Continued on Page 29)



Esra Stoller

Underground art gallery for collection of the architect, Philip Johnson, behind his glass house at New Canaan, Conn. Entrance, above, interior, below, with works by Jasper Johns, Don Judd and John Chamberlain.

"Quite a bit to say, none of it comforting"

Architecture

Living With Art

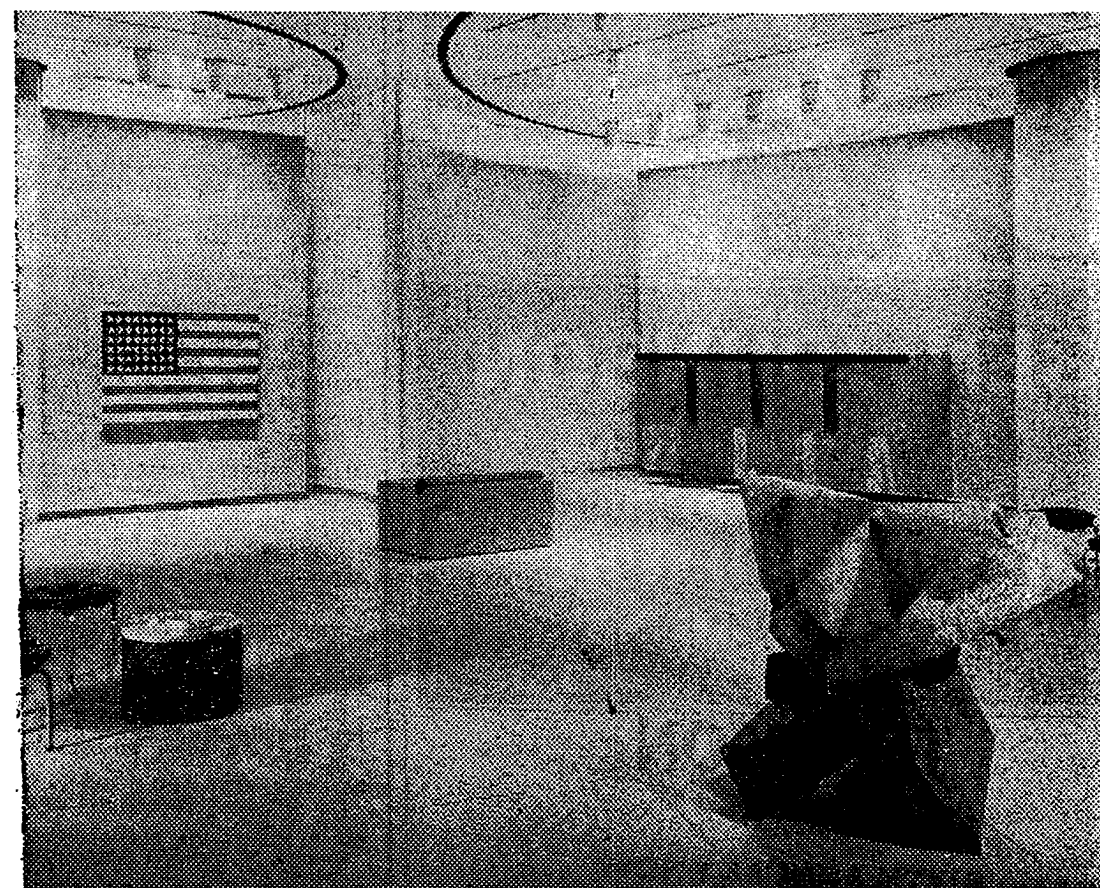
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and that art has never been more divorced from life as it is ordinarily lived. He has made his points with sure, cruel clarity. His solution makes collecting seem, unless one has the means and sensibility to create one's own museum, a rather vulgar game.

It also makes a great deal clear about the art of the present moment. Mr. Johnson's gallery, windowless, without views, cleverly designed as three circles of varied sizes within which wing walls for paintings pivot on supporting columns, is a perfectly lit, concentrated ambience for art, with no distractions of any kind.

Outdoor views are pointless here, since Mr. Johnson lives with them. Art is not treated as a dubious accessory or a decorative object. If it has any statement to make, it makes it with undivided impact. Any art of serious intent deserves this respect.

The "old Masters" of the Johnson collection are Rothko, de Kooning and Bacon; it proceeds through the pioneering pop work of Rauschenberg, Johns and Indiana, and is open-ended, with emphasis on the latest experi-



ments. The place of honor right now is held by three massive boxes of assertive esthetic nihilism by Don Judd, a kind of pseudo-credenza strung along one wall.

Mr. Johnson's collection, in this setting, has quite a bit to say, none of it comforting and a great deal of it a deliberate denial of art. It is clever, hard, bitter, violent and vacuous by turns; often ostentatiously ugly and sometimes deliberately empty; adroit, willful and warped. It spills over into cynicism and social protest, its most damaging blows dealt with

the flattest hand. To keep shocking, it moves farther and farther from accepted esthetic criteria, seeking greater insults and greater obscenities. Some of it is perversely skillful. Much of it leaves a bad taste in the mind of the viewer, which is exactly what it is intended to do. None of it is housebroken and it is not meant to be.

The collector who takes it into his home must willfully suspend customary sensitivities, or lacks them completely. He is unwittingly providing the negative last switch that surely completes the

artist's objective in the most satisfying way. His receptivity has supplied the final commentary on the sick absurdity of contemporary society that it is this art form's elusive and often questionable purpose to reveal.

In this gallery, architecture has served art with the same skill that it serves nature in the glass house. The logic, and the esthetics, are impeccable. Mr. Johnson, to whom it matters, is one up again. And again, he has given the art world a lesson in the values it purports to live by.