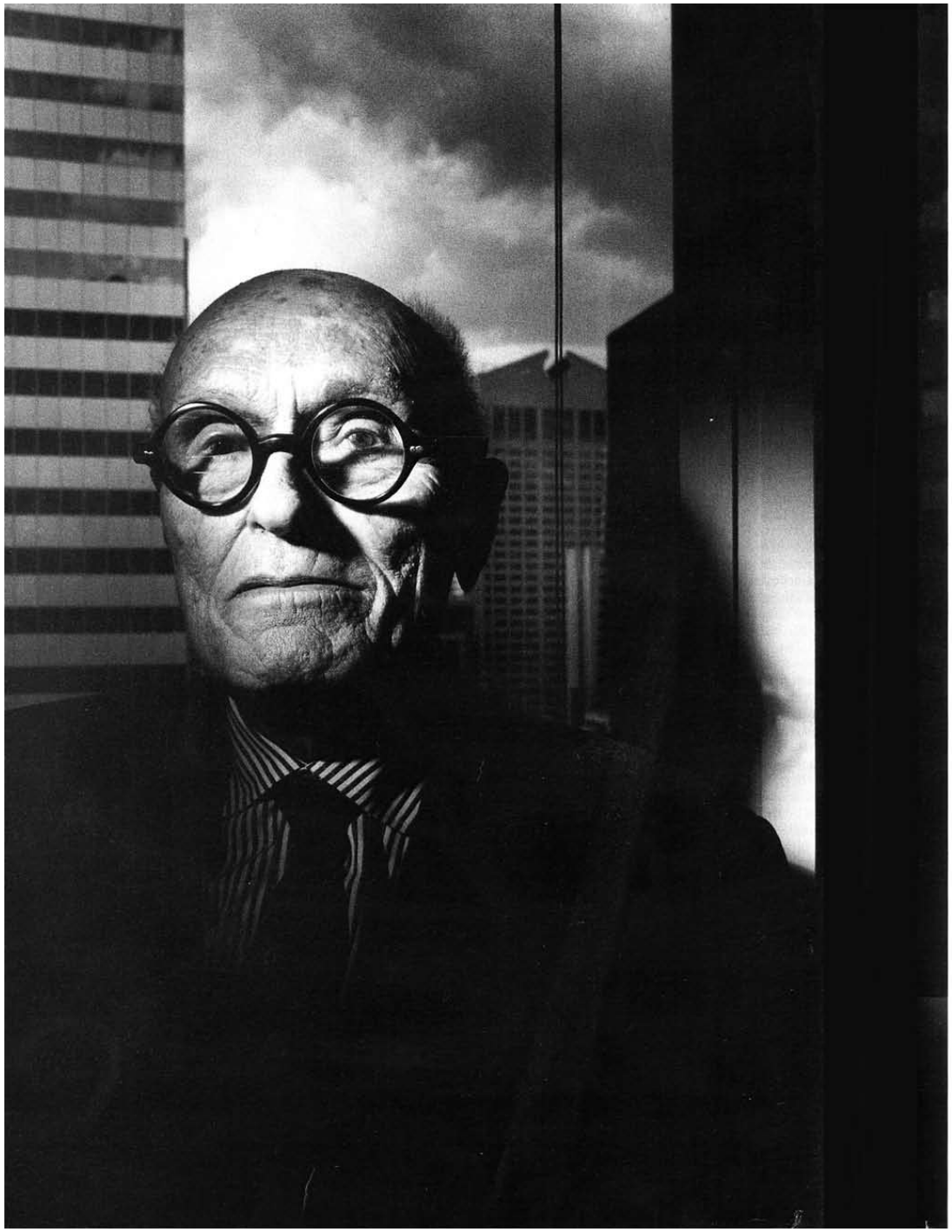

[THE *NEW YORK* INTERVIEW]

Magic Johnson

Preparing to turn 90, **Philip Johnson,** wily and protean and busy as ever, chats with a longtime colleague about Mies, Disney, and urban messiness BY PETER BLAKE

PHILIP JOHNSON IS THE MOST FAMOUS, the most outrageous, the most notorious, and probably the oldest architect actively practicing in the U.S. today. He will be 90 on July 8, and he is busy designing and constructing buildings in Singapore, Houston, Rotterdam, Dallas, Cleveland, and New York. He has also just completed a pair of skyscrapers in Madrid and a town hall for Disney in the new community of Celebration, Florida. He is turning the former Gulf + Western Building on Columbus Circle into the new Trump International Hotel & Tower by dressing it up in golden mirror glass, to flash Trump's message across the New York skyline and beyond (to the growing irritation of many Upper East Side flashees). What's more, a dozen or so magazines in the U.S. and beyond are currently featuring Johnson to help him celebrate his tenth decade.

In short, Philip Johnson has never been more visible.

Last week, in his office in the Lipstick Building at Third Avenue and 53rd Street—which he designed—Philip Johnson had a chat with Peter Blake, a fellow architect and critic (he was *New York*'s original architecture and design columnist) who has known him for close to 50 years, and who will next month publish the monograph *Philip Johnson: Built Work*.

Peter Blake: What is all this I keep hearing about you having been a Nazi, or a whore, or gay, or a modernist, or a very naughty boy? Why do people keep saying these things about you? Why do you keep saying these things about yourself?

Philip Johnson: Search me. Doesn't have anything to do with architecture, does it?

Blake: What I really want to know is: How many birthday parties are they throwing for you?

Johnson: Hah! Which one do you want to come to?

Blake: Let's get serious: Until about 1955, or thereabouts, you were considered to be the principal supporter and advocate of Mies van der Rohe. You thought he could do no wrong.

Johnson: That is right.

Blake: And then everything changed, and quite dramatically. And now you are building that town hall for Mickey Mouse. What happened?

Johnson: Boredom. I was bored by Mies's world—the rigidity of it all, the lack of modulation . . .

Blake: And so you became a "postmodernist"?

Johnson: It was the obvious thing to do, to join the postmodern movement. *Postmodern* was a ridiculous name—but all those names are ridiculous, like the one we invented in 1932, "International Style." Or that latest one, "Deconstructivism." Do you know what any of them mean?

PHOTOGRAPHED BY KEN SHUNG
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Blake: I haven't got the slightest idea.

Johnson: Well, none of those terms mean anything. This time it was *postmodernism*! That wasn't started by me. It was started by the kids, by people like Bob Stern. They just wanted to change, and they wanted a new label.

Blake: And you?

Johnson: The basic reason I wanted to change was that I was bored. And there was that knowledge I had of history. I wanted to connect more.

Blake: With what?

Johnson: With New York. New York, to me, was McKim, Mead & White. I wanted to connect with the history of New York, and that to me was Stanford White. And so I thought—what would Stanford White do today?

Blake: Don't you think it's peculiar though, when you look back to your Miesian days? Here we are in your Lipstick Building, and outside the window is your AT&T Building, and just around the corner is Mies's Seagram Building, on which you worked with utter devotion . . .

Johnson: Yes, quite true.

Blake: And yet, here we are, in a Johnson building that looks like a Mendelsohn building of 1925, and surrounded by Johnson buildings that could have been built by half a dozen different people at half a dozen different times.

Johnson: That's because people think that architects should always do the same thing. Follow their trademark, or something.

Blake: Isn't that reasonable?

Johnson: Well, a good many of my contemporaries got stuck in one idiom, as it were. I can't name names . . .

Blake: Why not?

Johnson: Well, let's say there are some who can never get away from early Corbusier, for example, and using the same geometry.

Blake: . . . And painting it all white?

Johnson: Right. All white. As there are others who keep using one kind of composition—early Mondrian, asymmetrical—the De Stijl distortion of Cubism. That would bore anyone out of his mind! So I tried all sorts of different things, some of them more successful than others. I tried to enlarge my grammar.

Blake: I am not sure I understand why this would necessarily lead you backwards . . .

Johnson: Well, I said to myself: "Johnson, if you feel like exploring history again, why don't you just do that." I had always had a fascination with classical compositions. As a matter of fact, you were the first one to notice it, in my Glass House . . .

Blake: But since that time, you tried to do any number of things, often quite far removed from where you started out. Sometimes you would go back to something, sometimes you would go forward . . .

Johnson: Quite right.

Blake: For example, right now you've just finished doing a Constructivist pair of skyscrapers in Madrid, and you did the Pennzoil Place in Houston. These are very "modern," and so are others you have done and keep doing. You are doing biomorphic buildings in the manner of Frank Gehry, and you did that Gate House in New Canaan in the neo-Expressionist manner of Hermann Finsterlin.

Johnson: Is it just superficiality, or is it facility? History will have to judge. Am I really that good?

Blake: I must confess, the Pennzoil Place is pretty spectacular.

Johnson: Well, it is spectacular, and there is nothing wrong with Madrid . . . well, it's actually two buildings forming a gate, in the great tradition of Spanish buildings. A new entrance to a part of Madrid.

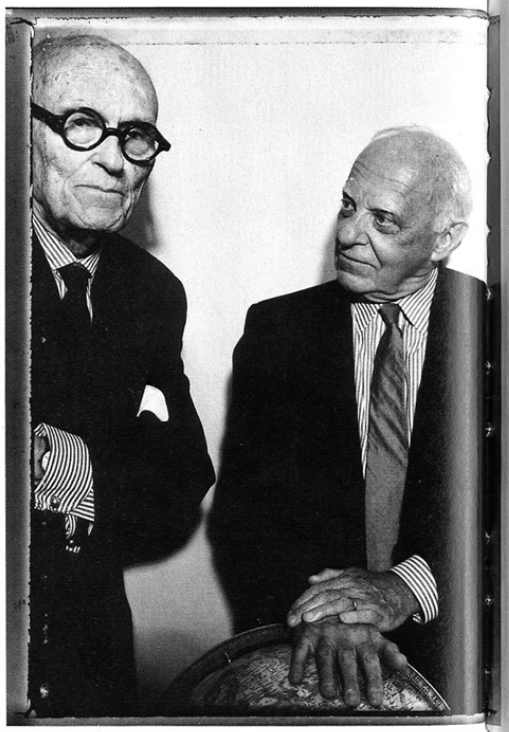
Blake: And in the tradition of radical, Russian Constructivist work. And only a few years earlier you were doing a neo-Gothic complex in Pittsburgh for PPG. Why neo-Gothic?

Johnson: I did it because I was dying to do what I am doing at Columbus Circle too—to use glass in a fragmented way, in a mosaic of reflections. And the only style that would let you do that was the Gothic. The Prince of Wales likes my neo-Gothic buildings in Pittsburgh. He thinks they are meant to look like the Houses of Parliament, but of course they weren't.

Blake: What are they meant to look like?

Johnson: Early Gothic country churches. Thirteenth or fourteenth century. I think that within the purview of architecture, you pick what you want. There doesn't seem to be a name for the sort of thing that I reach back to now, in the sort of work I do now. I am afraid there soon will be . . .

Blake: So now we've got all these styles zipping around our cities, and flashing on our skylines . . . the overwhelming mess



THE WORLD AT THEIR FEET: JOHNSON AND HIS BOSWELL DECONSTRUCT A CAREER.

of *x* number of styles, *x* number of shapes and forms and colors and materials. Don't you think it's getting to be a bit much? Did you have anything to do with it?

Johnson: Well, haven't you been reading our favorite text right now? *S, M, L, XL*? By Mr. Koolhaas?

Blake: I don't have time to read 1,500 pages—not this week, anyway.

Johnson: Well, it *is* rather longer than what any of us can handle. But it's really rather fascinating—his approach to the mess. He really says, leave the mess as it is, and add all sorts of detail—start with Corbusier windows, add some corrugated iron, and paint it all the wrong colors.

Blake: It sounds awful.

Johnson: I said to myself: "What's wrong with it?" I don't really know. Koolhaas is so charming, such a wonderful salesman.

Blake: It still sounds awful. But you are the expert on charm. . . .

Johnson: Well, glibness, anyway. Glibness will get you anywhere. As Henry Hobson Richardson liked to say—the No. 1 principle in architecture is to get the job!

Blake: And I guess Rem Koolhaas is getting the job, and our cities are turning into an overwhelming mess. Philip, I have always meant to ask you something: Everything I know about you—your clothes, your ties, the art you collect, the quality of your Glass House, your knowledge of history—all this suggests a very high degree of exceptionally good taste. And yet many of the buildings you have built in the past twenty years or so suggest that, deep down, secretly, you seem to hold many of your business clients in contempt. Some of the buildings you have done for them almost seem like a joke on the quality of your clients. You seem to think of them as people of spectacularly bad taste. Is that correct?

Johnson: No.

Blake: Well, I guess that settles that. Let me try something else: A lot of people say that you have been quite an operator over the past five or six decades in New York—that you have been a leading power broker in architecture and the arts . . .

Johnson: You mean like the late Robert Moses?

Blake: Roughly.

Johnson: Well, I have helped a number of talented people now and then, and I am not going to mention names, because they'll deny it. I have had quite a few friends among the younger architects, like Peter Eisenman and Jim Polshek. But I absolutely deny . . .

Blake: All right—a *long* time ago, in the early 1950s, the magazine *House Beautiful* launched an attack on all of us who were in some way identified with the International Style. That campaign was directed in particular against you and MOMA, and we were all lumped together as being "un-American," or "Communist," I think.

Johnson: Oh yes, I remember all right.

Blake: And we wrote letters and made speeches defending Mies and Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and so on, and talked about virtually nothing else for several months.

Johnson: Yes, I remember.

Blake: And yet, shortly after that business erupted, your own "style" in architecture took a dramatic turn.

Johnson: I just got bored, I guess. It was as simple as that.

Blake: Actually, I think you have a better excuse than that: [The great nineteenth-century German architect] Karl Friedrich Schinkel, whose work both you and Mies always admired, never stuck to a single style. So you're in good company.

Johnson: True. His best work was neoclassical, or neo-Gothic, or whatever interested him at the time.

Blake: And he was a great landscape architect as well. Which brings me to another question: You once said that you thought you were really better as a landscape architect . . .

Johnson: Somebody said that about me. I wish I knew who.

Blake: I don't think it's derogatory at all. Some of your best work is really landscape architecture—the MOMA Sculpture Garden, the gardens around your Glass House, the fantastic four-and-a-half-acre Water Garden in the middle of Fort Worth—those are some of your best works.

Johnson: I always think of buildings in their settings, but so do other architects. Perhaps I carry this even farther than most—like my Glass House, which is really a 50-year experiment in landscaping. I had to cut down most of the trees on the site when I moved out to Connecticut—the place was like a jungle until I did. I cut down so many trees that it destroyed my reputation in certain areas. That was quite all right with me. I had to cut it down to create a landscape. As a student at Harvard, I always turned in my "solutions"—they called them "solutions," not designs—in the form of trees on a site. Of course, I couldn't draw worth a damn, and so my teachers couldn't figure out what I was trying to do. But it was always a landscape.

Blake: Who was your favorite teacher at Harvard?

Johnson: Oh, Marcel Breuer. He was an artist. He was the best teacher I ever had. All the others were Bauhaus ideologues.

Blake: How come you went to Harvard instead of Mies's school in Illinois?

Johnson: I was really ill at ease working with a pencil in my hand. And to make drawings where Mies could see them—well, I wasn't going to make a fool of myself. I have never said that before, but it's true.

Blake: And you've often said you didn't have such fun with Walter Gropius.

Johnson: Poor Gropius. He was an intellectual, and everybody else was what Germans call *Gasse*—gutter. That was the worst thing you could say about Hitler: That he was just *Gasse*. And Gropius was an intellectual, and he had all the proper trimmings. He never thought of architecture as an art; he never thought that art was a goal. He thought that architecture should lead to . . . "Social Betterment"—that was his aim. And since he

Blake: What do you want for your birthday?

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was not a first-class artist himself, "Social Betterment" was as good a way to describe architecture as any.

Blake: You wouldn't know how to design a building for "Social Betterment"?

Johnson: I don't think I'd know how to start. And the other kind of building I would refuse to do—with the same degree of vigor, as a matter of fact—is a profit-making, capitalist project, if that's the correct term. Because those projects are just as mean, just as anti-art, as any Marxist effort.

Blake: You mean corporate headquarters—that sort of thing?

Johnson: Corporate headquarters—well, some of them, anyway. There are exceptions, of course, like that Cummins Engine outfit in Indiana. And the Rockefellers, who liked money just as much as everybody else but used a lot of it to support the arts.

Blake: But I still get the impression that when you do a building for some of those capitalist clients, you are making fun of them. Some of those buildings don't seem to have anything to do with your own taste, or style.

Johnson: How do I know? How do I know how my own processes work? I guess I want to make money just like other people, perhaps more than most people . . .

Blake: I almost forgot—what do you want for your birthday?

Johnson: I wish someone would ask me to design a cathedral.

Blake: That's what Mies used to say! Where would you build it?

Johnson: In New York, of course. Probably on the Lower East Side, or someplace like that, where you can clear out a slum and make a large landscape. It would be free-form, in shaped concrete, in several colors—rather like my Gate House in New Canaan. It would be a little like the Goetheanum by Rudolf Steiner, or something designed by Finsterlin, or by Bruno Taut. There would be no right angles, of course. And it could be any denomination—a synagogue, or a mosque, or a church. Anyway, that's what I'd like for any birthday: a commission to design a cathedral.

Blake: Happy birthday! Consider it done ▬