

Organic or functional?¹

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ABSTRACT

In 1952 the MoMa organized the exhibition *Built in the USA. Post-war Architecture: a strong affirmation that the battle for the modern architecture had been won*. In 1960, less than ten years later, Philip Johnson declared it “terribly boring”, welcoming the “juicy caos” that he observed in the contemporary American architecture. The paper focuses on what was happened during the fifties, looking through the time-old debate between “organic” and “functional”, analyzing in particular the trajectory of Eero Saarinen. Against the myth of the *recherche patiente* and the extreme coherence of the Mies buildings, the “style for the job” proposed by Saarinen posed a new question to the critics, along the outbreaking buildings of the ‘new’ Louis I. Kahn, or the *folies* of Morris Lapidus along the east coast.

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The 50s are believed to have placidly got under way with the third architecture exhibition at MoMA – *Built in USA. Post-War Architecture* – for which Arthur Drexler summoned again Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock for an updated remake of their famous 1932 event – *The International Style* – which had also been held at MoMA. Johnson, however, kept his distance and just wrote the catalogue preface, leaving to Hitchcock the choice of the forty-three buildings.

The exhibition featured modern architecture which had «come of age» (Philip Johnson), i.e., architecture that, having nursed on a rigorous education, was then grown-up, free to do anything it wanted. Frank Lloyd Wright [Figs. 1-2] became rehabilitated, in other words, recognized as «modern» in his own right, while «four interpretations of the curtain wall» were identified, including that of the Harrison and Abramovitz' Alcoa Building (1952), with its stamped aluminum facade that appears to have been superimposed over «several thousand television sets» (Drexler).

The battle cries were: openness, difference, plurality, the integration of disparate trends. Even Soleri and Mills were present, if only for the laughs: «the amusing glass and aluminum dome». Western practices were also showcased: the Bay Area Style represented by Mario Corbett; the Wrightian trend: H. H. Harris, Lloyd Wright [Fig. 3]; the Miesian one: Gregory Ain, Charles Eames [Fig. 4], Rafael Soriano; and Richard Neutra for the Tremaine House.

That openness was rooted in the belief that «the battle of modern architecture» had been won. Irrefutable evidence of it could be found in the post-war government buildings that America had finally started raising in the «modern style»: «Whether consciously or not, the government has now made US architecture a vehicle of our cultural leadership».²

Architectural Design, which reported the survey carried out by the American magazine, interpreted the belated adoption, which also applied to England, as a suspension of mistrust: «Until now, no doubt, we seemed to consider that modern architecture was not serious enough for the gravity of an embassy or a consulate». Half-way through the century that had witnessed the birth of modern architecture, MoMA was thus celebrating its victory in the United States, lauding its benefits and its inalienable heritage: «Every building in this book would look different if it had not been for the International Style».³ Plurality was in fact being considered only against the background of the great opposition – even if this one was deemed simplistic (by Hitchcock) – between the «organic»

1. First published in *Les Années 50*, Paris, éd. Centre G. Pompidou, 1988, pp. 494-501. English translation : Marina Gaillard.



FIG. 1 Frank Lloyd Wright, Laboratory for Johnson Wax Company, Racine, 1949. Détail of the brick wall ©Ph. D. Rouillard

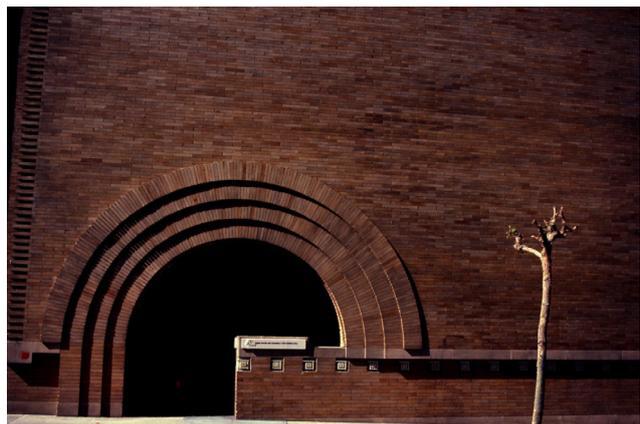


FIG. 2 Frank Lloyd Wright, Morris Store, San Francisco, 1949. Détail of the entrance ©Ph. D. Rouillard

2. "Architectural Forum", March 1953.

3. H. Russell Hitchcock, A. Drexler, *Built in USA: Post-war Architecture*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1952.

Wrightian party, and the «functionalist» party of Mies and Le Corbusier. Exhibitors had no idea of what awaited them.

Saarinen

The celebrity at the origin of the scandal – but also the hero who built a monument to America shortly before his death – was Eero Saarinen. First acclaimed by the modernists who saw him as one of the leaders of the Mies-follower generation (with the Centre for General Motors in Detroit), he was then hailed by the specialized press because of his sustained formal research (MIT buildings, skating rink [Fig. 5], airports), and, by the end of a decade, by America as a whole when the monumental Gateway Arch spurted over Saint-Louis in the early 60s. His production was compared with that of the world's largest architecture studio, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill.⁴ Like most stars, Saarinen was being solicited and his projects were announced several years in advance; he made the front page of "Time Magazine" as well as "Architectural Forum", expectation around his latest works matched that of the premier of a successful film, and he was, of course, unpredictable, surprising and confusing (something that only architects found annoying), as no one could foresee what his next feat would be. «Saarinen does a different building every time he puts pen to paper».⁵ Unlike the masters (Mies van der Rohe, F. Lloyd Wright), he built a lot and received huge and prestigious orders. He was recognized by the specialized press, while Wright's «bad pupils» who had strayed to the west or into the deserts (John Lautner, Bruce Goff [Fig. 6], Paolo Soleri), or who were too busy satisfying the aspirations of the middle class (Morris Lapidus), remained marginal. His work would not be suspected of commercialism like SOM's (the Lever Building in New York in 1952 owed its success to its meticulous Miesian interpretation which went almost too far for a building designed to house a detergent company, whose completely smooth glass walls became an advertising icon).

Widely published, Saarinen took part in the doctrinal debate, without being blacklisted because of his excessively outrageous remarks (like Johnson's at Yale from 1949 onwards). He distinguished himself also from Buckminster Fuller who, like Johnson, but with totally different slogans and diametrically opposed attendance rates, was jumping from campus to campus, showing the road to salvation to mesmerized students who would listen for hours on end to proposals that could not be generalized to all types of programs (the geodesic dome was, despite its designer's ambitions, always presented as a partial solution).

The consumption of architecture

What critics immediately perceived as «American» in Saarinen – «his work is American always; his father's to the last remained somewhat Finnish»⁶ – or even what



FIG. 3 Lloyd Wright, Wayfarers' Chapel, Palos Verdes, 1951. Interior ©Ph. D. Rouillard

4. L. Mumford, *Frozen-Faced Embassy*, in L. Mumford, *The Highway and the City*, New York, Hartcourt, 1963.

5. P. Johnson, *Informal Talks*, 1960.



FIG. 4 Charles and Ray Eames, Case Study House, Santa Monica, 1949. Détail of the facade ©Ph. D. Rouillard

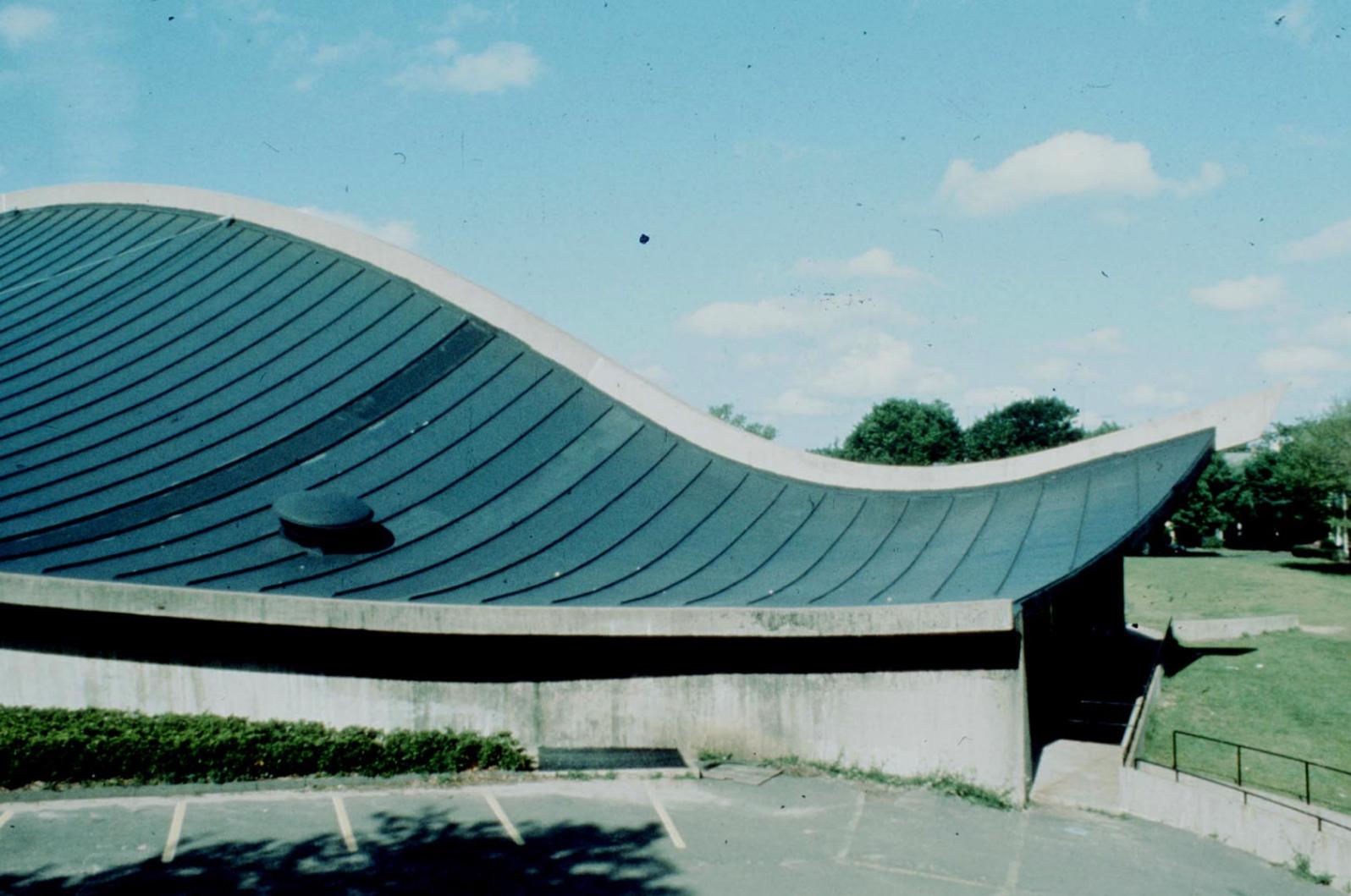


FIG. 5 Eero Saarinen, Skating rink, New Haven, 1958, Detail of the "tail". ©Ph. D. Rouillard

one could call his «americanicity», owed in part to the rare notoriety, both public and professional, that he amassed in his time (unlike Edward Durell Stone, whose playing field remained restricted to the media scene). His popularity was comparable to that of Alvar Aalto in Finland, but Saarinen had more advertising presence and was more demonstrative, provocative without excess, humor or cynicism.

Saarinen approached his projects as deliverables for consumption, which were expected to work (to function, to please), and he perfectly achieved his goal. «Few architects have been so popular with their customers», notes Vincent Scully.⁷ Same as Lapidus, yet not entirely relinquishing the discipline of architecture, Saarinen's mind worked like that of a professional in the image and communication fields. Both accomplished commercial success, and that's precisely what was reproached of Lapidus, as well as of Saarinen from the 60s onwards: he would then be accused of «styling»,⁸ while until then he had been at worst considered a «form giver».⁹

But Saarinen did not indulge in cinematographic imagery and stage gimmicks to better sell his product, like Lapidus so lavishly did in order to imbue an out-of-this-world atmosphere to his gigantic Florida hotels. Lapidus enriched his entertainment program in the manner of Walt Disney, whose fabulous estate was inaugurated in Los Angeles in 1955, by the use of artifice and the staging of the fake – an attitude which, much to his chagrin, met with no recognition from the architects.

7. V. Scully, *American Architecture and Urbanism*, New York, Praeger, 1969.

8. "Progressive Architecture", March 1961.

9. "Architectural Forum", July 1953.

Saarinen's projects, increasingly turbulent, peculiar and expressionistic, embodied what the architectural doctrine of the 50s was disposed to embrace and accept as architectural work. Neither Minoru Yamasaki nor Durrell Stone, and much less Lapidus or Johnson, all of whom, each in his own way, were doing too much, ever managed to cross that threshold into the «publishable».

Lapidus recognized his own approach in Saarinen's work, where space is organized along emotional sequences, especially in the TWA airport terminal (New York, 1956-1962) [Fig. 7], while Scully believed, from the General Motors building onwards, that «Saarinen was already showing his remarkable instinct for appealing to American taste»; «General Motors stretches out across the landscape and glitters and snaps like something designed for the moon».

This first work done away from the paternal studio was far from being a faithful Miesian rendition. First, Saarinen seized on the model of the IIT buildings, made the mullions thinner, stretched the curtain wall, lightened what had already been lightened, composed in a more symmetrical manner; then, he substituted the original colors of the bricks for «tones of burnt orange and blue, very bright, and not unlike Persian faience ware».¹⁰ [Fig. 8] All of Drexler's descriptive vocabulary suggests a bright, shimmering, eye-catching building, with greenish blue membranes and sparkling brick panels over the evenly flat site, and those amazing dark blue aeration columns, emerging from the ground without connection to the building dynamos that they aerate, symmetrically aligned on both sides, such as column shafts rising from the ruins of a forum. For Saarinen, «if a large building today must be impersonal, let it at least have an exciting impersonality».¹¹ Saarinen carried out austere or official programs without betraying himself, nor abandoning the use of materials and techniques in vogue, that is to say «modern» (steel, glass, reinforced concrete, brick). He flaunted a constructive structuralism made of great spans, cantilevers and technical prowess, while entertaining a dialogue with the bosses – Mies and the engineers Nervi and Candela, who enjoyed a wide audience in the United States.



FIG. 6 Bruce Goff, House, Aurora, 1947, Détail of the entrance ©Ph. D. Rouillard



FIG. 7 Eero Saarinen, TWA airport Terminal, NY, 1956. Detail of a «leg» and Interior ©Ph. D. Rouillard

10. H. Russell Hitchcock, A. Drexler, *Built in USA...*, cit.

11. "Architectural Forum", November 1951.

The lack of repetition in his projects was almost a guarantee of success (departure from it would turn into failure: the American Embassy in London, «a copy» of the Oslo one, according to Mumford). This constant change, always highlighted, can be easily interpreted as a reaction to Mies's commitment to deliver an envelope capable of accommodating any activity. Whereas Mies claimed time and again that «it is not necessary or possible to invent a new kind of architecture every Monday morning», Saarinen advocated a form that expresses the function, brings it alive and makes it felt («the style for the job»). Mumford interpreted that drive to imprint a different «trademark» to each project, as a strictly commercial attitude typical of many buildings of the time, some of which could have been put on the market supported by slogans such as: «And now: a new taste!» or «You, too, can be years ahead with the latest model».¹²

Outrage broke out following the publication of Saarinen's two projects for the MIT Campus [Fig. 9] in 1955 (the circular brick chapel surrounded by water and the auditorium covered by a dome fastened by three stakes) and some threw up their hands in horror. For Eugenio Montuori: «The mess is complete»; for Nervi «extravagance» (a dome resting on the ground!); for Bruno Zevi: «the figurative dead-end», «perhaps even the moral crisis of today». Yet, Zevi recognized Saarinen as «one of the most remarkable architects of his generation»: «the flaws of a great architect are always significant».¹³

Saarinen dominated and disrupted the decade, which was the last one when America still basked in the certitude of its immense power: «Saarinen's buildings are the most popular packages of their time and a revealing image of it. Through them runs the insistent American instinct for simplistic and, in this case, spectacular solutions» (Scully).

The Roadtowns

Recognizing Saarinen as a major figure in American architecture is not in step with the history of architecture, which is far keener to track the beginnings of Louis Kahn (Art Gallery of Yale University, 1952, although the magazines rather focused on the tetrahedral sections of the ceilings) and the premises of postmodernism with Philip Johnson, who nevertheless remained unknown to American publications throughout the decade. Magazines did not only show the monthly degree of affection towards individual architects. They also revealed the extent to which the buildings that had started to cluster along the freeways and the

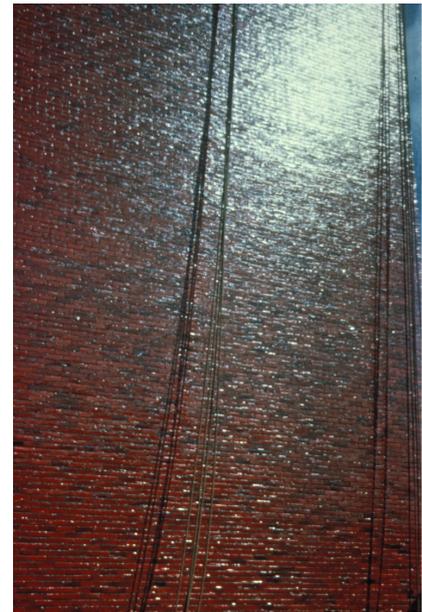


FIG. 8

Eero Saarinen, General Motors, technical Center, Detroit, 1951, Detail of the « persian faience » wall ©Ph. D. Rouillard

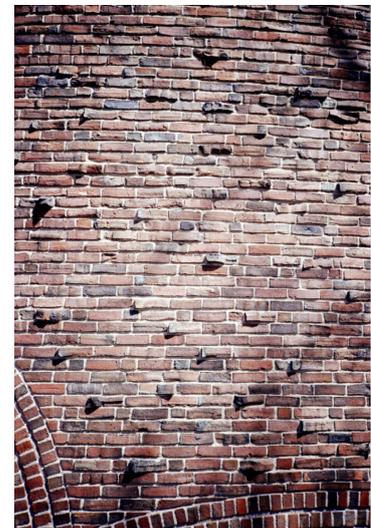
13. "Architectural Forum", October 1955.

12. L. Mumford, *The case against "Modern Architecture"*, in "Architectural Record", April 1962.



FIG. 9

Eero Saarinen, Auditorium and Chapel MIT Campus, 1955. Interior of the Auditorium and detail of the brick wall of the Chapel ©Ph. D. Rouillard



main street, forming roadtowns, were becoming a very pressing issue, not ignored by architects in the way that Lapidus' production, for one, could have been. Admittedly, it was the English magazine "Architectural Review" who twice (in 1949 and in 1955) cried its «outrage» at the shameful proliferation that America's characteristic «hands-off» approach was engendering. Magazines first tried to understand the phenomenon («a country with fifty million cars lives and must live along the roads») and acknowledged the vitality, good sense and smartness of building alongside heavily travelled routes, a practice soon imitated by banking companies who started moving their headquarters to such areas.¹⁴ When Robert Venturi took his Yale students on a study tour of the Las Vegas strip in 1968, he operated a reversal in value of an already identified urban event. He pushed further the «understanding» of that American production – already engaged 15 years earlier – to the point of making it into an aesthetic object, at a time when everyone else just wished to put an end to it or to replace it by IM Pei's or Victor Gruen's shopping malls.¹⁵

The magazines switched from a history of vanguards and changes to a history in which change itself was continuous, permanent, and worked as the ongoing drive of both the press and architecture itself, Saarinen being their true turbo engine. The plight of Wright or Mies was being heard – too often wrongly – and architecture magazines were finding in Saarinen the architect in whom the time-old debate between «organic» and «functional» had found new life in the absence of a serious alternative.

This does not mean that Wright – who saw orders pouring in until his death in 1959, when the construction of the Guggenheim Museum in New York started – and Mies van der Rohe were absent from the architectural scene and not influential on mass production. Mies's prototype works, in particular, were all being immediately published (the Farnsworth House [Fig. 10] and the Crown Hall at IIT with their structure thrown out to the outside or the twin towers of the Lake Shore Drive Apartments) and widely emulated. Those impoverished versions («glass boxes») standardized the urban landscape ad nauseam; few were as successful as some in California, especially after the Case Studio House program



FIG. 10 Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, Plano, 1950. Detail of the structure ©Ph. D. Rouillard

14. *Ibid.*

15. W. Gropius, *Unity in Diversity*, in VV. AA., *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture*, New York, Columbia University, 1961.



FIG. 11 Craig Ellwood, Case Study House, CSH 16, LA, 1960 ©Ph. D. Rouillard

launched in 1949 by John Entenza. Mies's followers in California were creating from standardized components and applying to any terrain the theme of industrialization and its corollaries (low cost and speed of construction), even if such projects remained at the prototype stage. Twenty houses would be built, including some by Charles Eames (who also worked with Saarinen in the development of a CSH for



FIG. 12 Craig Ellwood, Kubly House, Pasadena, 1965 ©Ph. D. Rouillard

Entenza in 1949), Craig Ellwood, who developed metal [Fig. 11] and then wooden versions [Fig. 12], and Pierre Koenig, whose 1959 CSH overlooking the illuminated grid of Los Angeles would make the cover of magazines.

Reversals

Saarinen disappointed the modernists when he switched from the Miesian stance – «architecture has nothing to do with the creation of forms» (1950) – to the «search for form», even when it was just functional. Durell Stone joining the ranks also came as a shock, especially with regard to official buildings: the US Embassy in Delhi in 1957, profusely ornamental, while Le Corbusier was building Chandigarh, or the United States pavilion for the Brussels World Fair in 1958, a kind of lit up flying saucer posed on a pond. Johnson's doctrinal reversal was, in turn, strictly unmentionable, even unthinkable, and it would not be released nationwide until the early 60s. While Saarinen kept navigating the decade with unprecedented media coverage, Johnson roamed through it in an underground but nevertheless destabilizing way: «the only principle that I can conceive of believing in, is the Principle of Uncertainty. It is a brave architect who can possess convictions and beliefs». ¹⁶ In 1969, Mies's most famous students – Skidmore, Owings and Merrill – would also catch the bug, signaling the return of the «decorative» with the Hancock Building, today certainly the most eloquent building in Chicago, which exposes the diagonal bracing over its truncated cone shape. They would hit back in San Francisco the same year with the Crown Zellerbach Building, and from then on never stopped copying Johnson...

A juicy chaos

In 1950, Johnson enumerated the references and the aesthetic reasons that led him to the realization of his Glass House (1949) [Fig. 13]. Cultivated eclecticism sets the tone: on one side, the «modern» influences - Le Corbusier for the curved tracks, Mies for the building's setting, the bricks and the glass (the Farnsworth house was finished at the same moment), De Stijl for asymmetry, Malevitch for yet something else, and Johnson does not know to whom he owes the kitchen; on the other side, ancient sources, whether neo-classical or romantic: the Greeks

16. "Progressive Architecture", March 1961.

through Choisy, the Schinkel casino, and Ledoux's pavilions. Treating the history of architecture as a reservoir from which to draw, and borrowing from others, were, at the time, new attitudes. «Creation» was no longer inscribed in the being of the architect from scratch. In Johnson, the voice of the devil himself could be heard (V. Scully). In 1954, in Harvard – Gropius's adopted homeland –, he delivered a speech which was published the following year by Yale students, under the ironic title of *The Seven Crutches of Modern Architecture*, clearly plagiarizing John Ruskin's seven lamps. The seven crutches advocated the abandonment of the rules of functionalism that he had significantly contributed to implement in the United States. In 1960, when he was barely being listened to, he declared modern architecture «terribly boring». The fate of modern architecture would be sealed and its defeat recognized as such by Johnson:

It is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about architecture. Twenty or thirty years ago [...] it was relatively simple. We had a battle to fight [...] Modern architecture is going to pot [...].

[...] Today I am ashamed of the terribly scattered work that I do. I have no faith whatever in anything [...] Briefly, functional eclecticism amounts to being able to choose from history whatever form, shape or direction you want to, using them as you please [...]. I have no really expressible attitude on architecture, and if we are going to have chaos, I feel that we might as well have a nice, juicy chaos.¹⁷

In March 1961, the movement spread; the magazine *Progressive Architecture* took stock of the state of architecture: it was confusion, «chaotism». Ten years after the MoMA exhibit, there was no longer any hope to see the ideals of modern architecture lead future works. The same words, coming from the mouths of the fifty interviewed architects, conveyed as much regret as pleasure: variation, diversity, freedom, rebellion, revolution. Condemned pell-mell were the «Curtain Wall Style», the hotdog-stands, the constructions of Saarinen (the fallen angel), Miami's beaches, the exhaustion of modes, the excessive variety in the choice of materials and techniques and the disappearance of all



FIG. 13 Philip Johnson, Philip Johnson's house («Glass House»), New Canaan, 1949, Interior and Guest Pavilion ©Ph. D. Rouillard

17. P. Johnson, *Informal...*, cit.

typologies (hyperbolic structures had been placed on all buildings, from churches to supermarkets). Identifying the culprits sufficed. A regressive trend seeking to stop the bleeding came together, along the lines of Mies and Khan, who knew «which way to go». If Louis Kahn was not yet fully recognized, his imminent success would owe in part to his ability to return to stable forms based on a logic of materials and the quest of order in the face of chaos. But most architects still felt that architecture was entering a new era, where everything remained to be done within the modern framework established by Wright, Mies and Le Corbusier. Much like Siegfried Giedion who, at the time, finally found in Jorn Utzon the true successor of the pioneers, few were grasping the nature of change, which was still being viewed as some sort of liberation, a rehabilitation of expression as independent from the structure or the insertion in a context. Architecture – the real one – was still alive; styling was only a rough spot on the way.

It seems unnecessary to say that what followed – up to our own day in France – proved Johnson right: «We are going to a foggy chaos. Let us enjoy the multiplicity of it all. Let the students have a different hero every year. Maybe it is good for them».