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GLASS HOUSES SOFTEN THE EDGE BETWEEN THE ORGANIC AND MAN-MADE, TURNING US INTO NATURE-LOVING MYSTICS. **BY KARRIE JACOBS**

I once spent a week in a glass house. It was an eccentric, bow-tie-shaped modernist thingamajig mounted on stilts in an isolated patch of Marin County. Through the house's transparent walls I could watch the birds go about their business at treetop level and gaze out over coastal meadows and pastures. My closest neighbors were dairy cows. On my first night in the house, I woke up at 4 A.M. wondering why the sun was out. Gradually, I came to realize that the brilliant white glow flooding the house was moonlight. Still, I was a little spooked, because the moon's unusual intensity made me feel as though I were sleeping snugly not indoors but somewhere out in the wild.

For all the obvious reasons, true glass houses, transparent all the way around, are relatively rare. But now that glass has been reengineered into a high-

performance green building material, we'll surely be seeing more of them. Just take a look at Werner Sobek's R128 House (page 72) in Stuttgart, Germany. It's a gleaming, ultra-efficient, sustainable, recyclable, triple-glazed ice cube of a house. Today, as architects who design skyscrapers well know, stunningly clear glass can filter out the sun's heat, and glass sandwiches with air or argon in the middle can effectively insulate. And with the addition of photovoltaic technology, glass curtain walls can generate electricity, too. It makes perfect sense. But then, the appeal of the glass house has never exactly been rational. In fact, I'd prefer to think glass houses are pretty specifically designed to facilitate those 4 A.M. encounters with the cosmos.

I don't think I fully grasped this until a recent visit to Philip Johnson's 1949 Glass House in New

MORE LOUIS XIV THAN HENRY DAVID THOREAU, PHILIP JOHNSON UNDERMINED THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN INDOORS AND OUTDOORS.

Philip Johnson's famous Glass House, built in 1949 in New Canaan, Connecticut, measures just 1,728 square feet. Only the bathroom is enclosed.



Canaan, Connecticut. The architect died in 2005 at age 98, and his 47-acre estate, dotted with architectural experiments, is now administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. I've never been much of a Johnson fan; his office towers and public buildings have always left me cold. But when I stepped into his Glass House for the first time, I fell in love. It is all the things I never thought of Johnson as being: simple, modest, understated. It is just 1,728 square feet of open space (only the bathroom is enclosed)—epic sheets of glass mounted in steel frames. What I found fascinating was the way Johnson carefully groomed the surrounding woods and fields and installed floodlights so that the landscape would be illuminated at night. And in this elaborate way—more Louis XIV than Henry David Thoreau—he undermined the boundary between indoors and outdoors.

Actually, my own fascination with the idea of the glass house has less to do with Johnson than with an architect named Michael Bell. Back in the 1990s, Bell, who then taught at Rice and is now an associate professor at Columbia and director of the Columbia Project on Housing, designed the Glass House @ 2 Degrees. The house was one of a collection of sixteen by innovative architects that were supposed to be built in Houston's Fifth Ward, an impoverished and long-troubled neighborhood. What Bell called for was a 900-square-foot, two-bedroom, two-bath house clad entirely in glass. I saw it at a 1999 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art,

A transparent house by architect Michael Bell, sited on 12 acres in New York's Hudson River Valley, evokes Philip Johnson's famous Glass House.

"WHEN I WAS 10 YEARS OLD AND I SAW PHILIP JOHNSON'S GLASS HOUSE FOR THE FIRST TIME, I THOUGHT, THAT'S WHAT I WANT."

"The Un-Private House," and it was the one plan I found hanging on the museum's walls that I desperately wanted to see realized. For one thing, I admired the audacity of planting a house so open and so vulnerable in a tough urban setting. And I especially appreciated Bell's intention to knit a glass house together

from store-bought components, like Fleetwood sliding glass doors, and erect the whole thing for \$113,000. Maybe the most alluring aspect of the house was that it was the only one in MoMA's galleries that I could dream of owning. Certainly I wasn't the only person to think so.

"When I was 10 and I saw Philip Johnson's Glass House for the first time in *Janson's History of Art*, it was a true aesthetic moment," recalls Philip Gelter. "I thought, That's what I want." Later in life, Gelter, who grew up to be the culture pictures editor at the



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"TO FIND THE EDGES OF THE WINDOWS, YOUR PERIPHERAL VISION HAS TO BE WIDE. YOU END UP FEELING LIKE YOU'RE NOT INSIDE AT ALL."

New York Times, and his partner, Richard Press, a filmmaker, encountered Bell's version on display at MoMA. "And in 2002, when it occurred to us that we could actually buy land and build a house, he is the first architect we called," says Gefter. "It didn't occur to us that he'd never built it."

Gefter and Press hired Bell believing that they were about to build a simple prefab glass house on the 12 acres they'd purchased in the Hudson

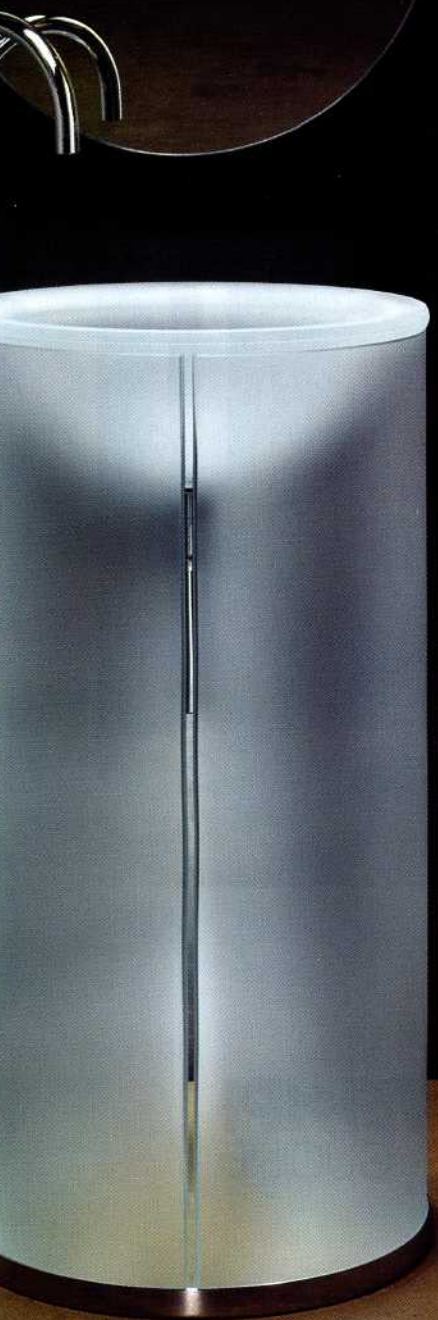
River Valley, north of New York City. However, both clients and architect expected so much from this particular house that simplicity was never truly an option. For one thing, not only had Bell never built the Glass House @ 2 Degrees, he'd never before built anything on his own. And Gefter and Press were very particular. Coincidentally, as the couple embarked on their home-building plans, Press was doing research for a screenplay, one that traces the troubled history of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Edith Farnsworth, who arguably was his greatest client and was also rumored to be his lover. Naturally, Gefter and Press made a pilgrimage to the Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, which inspired Johnson's house but wasn't completed until two years later, in 1951. "I studied architecture at UC Berkeley, and I always worshiped the Farnsworth House," Press explains. "But nothing really prepared me for seeing it in person. Tears came to my eyes—it was just so beautiful—and I looked at Philip and he had tears in his eyes. It sounds like a corny thing, but I thought I was seeing something that was perfect."

Not only did Gefter and Press want a fully transparent house that would embody the aesthetic power of Mies and Johnson, but they were also after more esoteric qualities. For instance, they wanted the house to be like one of artist James Turrell's sculptures, where space is defined only by a diaphanous rectangle of light. "I wanted the enigma of perception," Gefter tells me. So it is no surprise that the 2,280-square-foot J-shaped house wound up costing far more than Bell's Houston budget. For one thing, it was all custom-crafted. Absolutely nothing was off the shelf. But what they wound up with was a house that exceeds even the extraordinarily high expectations of all concerned. And when any of the three talks about it, he quickly goes metaphysical. For instance, because the glass walls are suspended beyond the structural frame of the house, and because each sheet of glass is so immense, Bell observes, "to find the edges of the windows, your peripheral vision has to be quite wide. You end up feeling like you're not inside at all." And Gefter has noticed that, given the way the pieces of the house reflect one another and the surrounding landscape, "there are times when it's so ambiguous that you're not really sure where you are."

With his first commission, Bell wound up leaving his dream of the populist glass house behind. But other architects have lately been pursuing the notion that the glass house is not just a temple for the worship of high modernism but something that might actually be practical. For example, Linda Taalman



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Werner Sobek's R128 House in Stuttgart, Germany, is a gleaming, ultra-efficient, sustainable, recyclable, triple-glazed ice cube of a house.

and Alan Koch, an L.A.-based husband-and-wife architecture team, built themselves a prototype in the desert near Joshua Tree National Park, using a kit of parts that includes an easily assembled Rexroth aluminum frame, glass walls fabricated by the Metal Window Corporation and a roof made from a type of steel decking customarily used as the structural floor in skyscrapers. They plan to sell an affordable kit version of their house and are also working with a developer on a high-end model. What the Taalman-Koch approach adds to the formula is bold graphics. Koch says they have artists create “outfits” for the glass walls to make them less “sterile.” The colorful patterns are decorative, of course, but they also contribute shade and a bit of privacy.

And, predictably, when Koch relates the experience of living in his high-desert house, he tells me that the glass walls offer a “new relationship” with nature that transforms even routine chores. Koch tells me about “sweeping the house in my towel after taking a shower with the doors all open, feeling the rhythm of the breeze.” In this respect, he doesn’t sound so very different from Bell, who got to spend one night alone in the Gefter-Press house. He woke up in the middle of

the night and wandered the 135-foot route from Press’s studio, located at one end of the J-shape, to Gefter’s, at the opposite end. “To be honest, I was naked and I was just walking around looking at the house. You feel like you’re outside, but your feet are on a warm floor because it’s radiant heat, and you’re looking into this forest.”

And this is the intriguing thing about glass houses: On one hand, they are the ultimate expression of the modernist aesthetic, buildings distilled to pure structure, but on the other, they can be a surprisingly powerful means to reconnect tenderfoot urbanites to nature. For all of the technological mastery implied by these cool glass-and-metal boxes, for all the high-minded theory they inspire, people who live in glass houses tend to go a little primitive, developing an almost mystical connection to the landscape on the other side of their see-through walls.

“Oh, yeah, we do that all the time,” Press replies when I inform him of Bell’s late-night stroll. “I’ll just wake up to get a drink of water or something. And there’s an animal outside. Or wild turkeys walking across the field. Or the moon’s coming in the room. Or the stars. The glass is so tall that when you’re lying in bed, you see the sky. So it’s like camping out.” ☼

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