

THE KIT-CAT REVIEW

Volume 4, Number 4

Winter 2007/2008

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LIZA LENTINI—As a playwright, she has won numerous awards and recognitions, notably the Lillian Hellman Prize and the Pinter Prize in Drama. The following is an account of her experience working with architect Philip Johnson during the last years of his career.

PHILIP JOHNSON

Remembering the Late, Great Icon

Everyone who knows anything about architecture knows of Philip Johnson, though before I worked for him I admittedly wasn't sure if he was dead or alive. You can imagine my surprise when in the fall of 2002 I was hired for a non-architectural position at Philip Johnson/Alan Ritchie Architects, conditional on whether or not the old man like me. He was a sprightly ninety-six at the time, and the interviewer had explained to me that he'd "slowed down" a bit since falling through an entire exterior pane of his iconic Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut only one year before. I gasped, horrified at the thought of a ninety-something, no matter how young at heart, fending off spearing shards from his own design. "I know," the interviewer replied rather casually, "he's had twelve blood transfusions since then. But you don't know Philip Johnson yet. That guy will never die."

It was during my tenure there that our beloved PJ (as his staff called him, though never actually to his face) passed away in his sleep just six months shy of his ninety-ninth birthday. At the time, he was spending most of his days in the quietude of the Glass House (the one that put him architecturally on the map, and was ironically, nearly the death of him), but by that point I had been working at his firm regularly for two and a half years. I can honestly say that I was amazed by Philip Johnson on a daily basis. His brilliance was impenetrable; his spirit the undeniable source of his legacy. What you saw was not the least of what you got with him—the famed round, black rimmed glasses a symbol that would transcend time, and simultaneously, once deemed iconic, stifle the depth of his humanity.

My advantage when starting at the firm was that I knew next to nothing about architecture, much less Philip Johnson himself. I had studied him, if you could call it that, in a fleeting slide show in Art History 101, and to this day I can recall the marveling at a man who, back in 1945, would be so insane as to conceive of a modernist, all-glass solarium and then actually live

in it until his dying day. Never could I have imagined that I would actually be working for the man and discussing cantilevering with him a decade later.

When I took the position, I couldn't have cared less if Philip Johnson liked me, but I found myself faced with a tyrannical reputation that would have made Pinochet look like a wayward kitten. Once I had settled in at the office and had been invited into the inner circle, the staffs stories abounded—the architect who was fired because PJ didn't like the way he clicked his pen; PJ ripping pencils out of architects' hands that didn't meet his aesthetic and then breaking them over his knee in protest; hysterical fits, tirades and screaming matches; the ongoing and open combustion between PJ and Donald Trump, which some said was over PJ's hatred for The Donald's gold-toned interior insistence.

The first day I met PJ we bonded instantly over my lavender leather skirt, which he insisted on fingering lavishly, only to look up at me like an awed schoolboy conjuring magic on an ordinary afternoon. I came in the following week with some high-heeled sneakers, to which he clasped his chest in campy dramatics and gasped, "If only I could wear shoes like that!" Philip Johnson, the Godfather of Modern Architecture, and I, a lowly layperson, had bonded in our devotion to fashion.

He was a dapper man his entire life, though his flare in those later years came out via his sock collection. They were extraordinary—orange with fuchsia stripes, turquoise with gold threading, bolts of color that only rivaled a circus tent and its clowns. But on him they worked. There was nothing garish about them. I loved the socks and he loved showing them to me. When he'd come in at his usual 10:00 a.m. from his chauffeured drive from New Canaan, he'd stop in front of me and pull up his pant leg and make that famous open-mouthed mug to show off his newest sensation. On feistier days, he would do a spirited jig, then a hop, then a smile. It had become our morning ritual.

It occurred to me, as the years went on, that this icon—the word itself indicative of a symbol, not a human being—would never be allowed to be elderly. PJ was not the Pope, though in his last years in the New York office the two operated with distinct similarities and tragic differences. PJ would take appointments throughout the day of those who only wanted to proverbially kiss his ring, show them their plans, or talk shop. PJ had his small group of friends who really cared about him—famed architects Frank Gehry, and David Childs come to mind—

but there were others who only cared about being able to brag later that they had spent an hour with a legend. I was close enough to his office to hear the talking (or shouting, as PJ was hard of hearing) and if I was positioned well, I could also see PJ nodding his head obligatorily, sometimes staring out the window as the guests blathered, and occasionally tried to sell him something. All seemed aggressive and strangely uninterested in PJ, only in themselves, never realizing that he might not be in the mood for company or might, at moments, need a moment of silence.

I can honestly say that I never saw PJ's brilliance wane; in fact, in some ways, it was more pronounced in his growing silences. Right before I arrived, an Asian architect with the firm had proudly presented a new, full scale model to PJ for his approval. As the story goes, PJ looked at the miniature, with silhouetted pedestrians on the street, and told the architect, "This man is not six feet tall. You shouldn't use Asian height, use American height." He was right. The architect had scaled the two inch mini-men to be five foot six, his own height. PJ's eye for scale was superhuman, but his eye and love for color illuminated his softer side. He insisted on fresh, bright flowers at his desk, jonquils in particular, and loved to admire anything bright—scarves, glassware—and, if they had a luxuriant texture he would visibly seem to melt in ecstasy.

I learned a lesson from PJ about humility and fame, and that some clichés really prove themselves true. An icon is the title they give to someone when they are about to be dehumanized. Philip Johnson didn't just have talent; he had a gift and a presence. He was a superstar in his own right, and as with rock stars and Hollywood icons, nobody was comfortable with him getting old. Not just old, but feeble, needful, and perhaps no longer living up to everyone else's ideal.

The day PJ finally decided not to come to the office anymore, his assistant came to me with a box full of his things. "These need to go to the Getty Museum for his archives," she told me. They included his favorite ruler of thirty years, his name embossed in simple block letters. His remaining personal effects were to go to his unused New York apartment, including an extra pair of those famed black-rimmed now bifocal glasses. The glasses, heavy in my hands, were a final sign that he would not be coming back.

My favorite memory of PJ is, ironically, from one of his

worst days. He was looking over some recent renderings for a high-rise in Shanghai. It was routine for him to have his hand in the design of projects, but I could tell on this day he just wasn't right. There were some days when he would reminisce slightly about the past, others when he would declare somewhat morbidly that he hoped to make it to one hundred years. On this day, I think he was simply melancholy. Unfortunately, he had had an unusually busy day, barraged by architects wanting his approval of their various designs. At some point, everyone was ushered out and he was left alone with the sketches, staring off out his window of the Seagram Building, the project that had put him on the map under his mentor, Meis Van De Roh—the view just high enough to see the distinctive shape of his own so-called Lipstick Building, I'd been observing all the barrage of questions being thrown his way that day, the effect the chaos had had on him. He seemed unusually tired. He stared out the window, the proffered designs in disarray on his desk.

