

# ARTnews

## MoMA's Philip Johnson Problem: How to Address the Architect's Legacy?

BY ALEX GREENBERGER March 25, 2021 11:02am



Philip Johnson.

In 1984, the **Museum of Modern Art** in New York dedicated a set of galleries to **Philip Johnson**, who had served as the institution's founding architecture department head during the '30s. He staged some of the museum's most memorable architecture shows, among them 1932's influential "International Style" show, which helped pinpoint a mode of modernist design that was cropping up around Europe. He also transformed the institution that housed such pioneering exhibitions, designing its famed sculpture garden in 1953. He even gifted MoMA several masterpieces, including Jasper Johns's *Flag* (1954–55). "His genius helped define the Museum in its formative years," William S. Paley, chair of MoMA's board, said upon the gallery's dedication.

For more than 30 years, a sign bearing Johnson's name has been visible on a wall on the museum's second floor. All that changed, however, earlier this month, when the Black

Reconstruction Collective, a group of 10 architects, temporarily covered it. They were participating in the museum's current "Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America" exhibition, and they were responding to recent protests over Johnson's name at the museum. For the run of "Reconstructions," the Philip Johnson Galleries's sign will be hidden beneath a denim textile bearing out the group's manifesto, which reads, in part, "We take up the question of what architecture can be—not a tool for imperialism and subjugation, not a means for aggrandizing the self, but a vehicle for liberation and joy."

Protests over Johnson's name have been brewing since November, when a group of Black architects and artists signed a letter demanding that MoMA remove it from its walls. The **letter**, circulated by the Johnson Study Group, claimed that Johnson relied on his MoMA connections "as a pretense to collaborate with the German Nazi party" and that he "effectively segregated the architectural collection at MoMA" by not hiring Black curators and by not acquiring work by Black architects. While it is unclear when MoMA acquired its first work by a Black architect, scholar and "Reconstructions" curator Mabel O. Wilson has argued that the museum was "maintaining the logics of racism" during its early decades by focusing on white European and American designers, even when their work related to affordable housing for Black communities. For some, Johnson can be considered an architect whose output, while variable in quality, helped define a sensibility, with his Glass House ranking as one of the most celebrated modernist structures in the U.S. For others, his legacy can't be separated from his explicitly fascist and anti-Semitic views. Protests over Johnson's politics are not new—his fascist leanings are well-documented, most recently in a 2018 biography by Mark Lamster, and even during his lifetime, various individuals, both within MoMA and outside it, attempted to bring attention to them.

But with the Johnson Study Group letter, new questions are arising: How can MoMA effectively right Johnson's wrongs? What would a MoMA without recognition of Johnson look like? Those who oppose the removal of Johnson's name counter with another question: Should MoMA have to contend with the political views of a figure who has been dead for almost two decades? V. Mitch McEwen, an architect included in "Reconstructions," said that she signed the Johnson Study Group's letter partly in an effort to address "concerns that the architecture department at MoMA was vested in fascism and white supremacy," she told *ARTnews*. "As far as we could tell, no one had investigated that beside concerns about anti-Semitism. ... To be exhibiting work in a gallery with the name of a white supremacist doesn't sit well with me."

According to McEwen, she and others met with MoMA director Glenn Lowry in January to discuss how the museum could begin to reconcile with Johnson's history. His response, McEwen **told *Hyperallergic***, was that "MoMA didn't create the problem."

Lamster, the Johnson biographer, said that, because of Johnson's outsized influence at the museum, it would be nearly impossible for MoMA to scrub him from its history. "To cancel Philip Johnson is to cancel MoMA," Lamster said. That does not mean that the moment isn't ripe for reflection, Lamster continued. "There is no canceling Philip Johnson. He's already dead—that's as canceled as you can get. The question is how you understand his legacy. If

canceling means we don't grapple with that history, that's a big mistake. If canceling means removing his name, that's a different story."

A MoMA spokesperson did not respond to a list of fact-checking queries about Johnson's time at the museum and the institution's response to the signatories of the Johnson Study Group letter. In a prior statement made when the Black Reconstruction Collective covered Johnson's name, a spokesperson said that "the Museum currently has underway a rigorous research initiative to explore in full the allegations against Johnson and gather all available information. This work is ongoing."



Installation view of the Black Reconstruction Collective's "Manifesting Statement," which will cover Philip Johnson's name for the run of MoMA's "Reconstructions" exhibition.

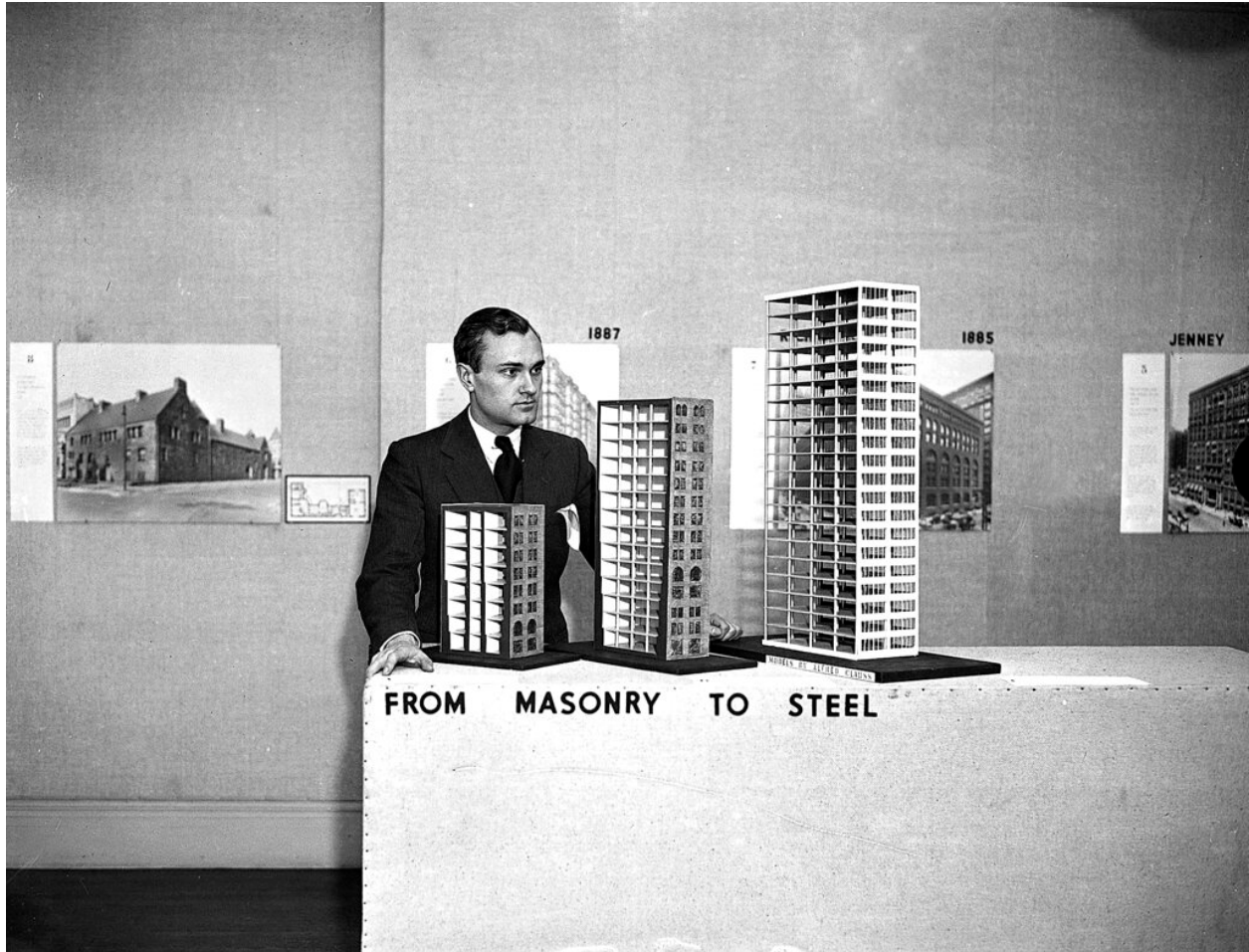
Johnson began working in MoMA's architecture department in 1930, when the museum, founded a year earlier, was still in its infancy. His first stint at the museum ended in 1934, and there were extended periods where he was not formally employed by the museum. During the late 1930s, in a period while he was disconnected from the department, Johnson began to push anti-Semitic and fascist political views in a series of essays. In one written for the fascist journal the *Examiner*, he claimed that the U.S. was committing "race suicide" and advocated for a restoration of national values. In another, written for *Social Practice*, for which he served as a European correspondent, he addressed the "Jewish question" in France, writing, "Lack of leadership and direction in the State has let the one group get control who always gain power in a nation's time of weakness—the Jews."

During the late '30s, Johnson spent extended periods in Germany, where he found himself "carried away" by Adolf Hitler's politics, as he once wrote, and he started consorting with Nazi leaders. Prior to this, Johnson had briefly been involved with the U.S.'s Young Nationalist movement, which Lamster characterized in his 2018 Johnson biography as an "alt-right *avant la lettre*," with "pro-Nazi German-American Bundists, Klansmen, and members of the Black Legion, an Ohio-based secret society that took the Klan as its model," among its supporters. As

the Young Nationalist campaign began to fizzle out, and as the spotlight turned to his collaborator, Alan Blackburn, Johnson departed the movement. Meanwhile, the Nazi party continued to rise in Europe.

As the war raged abroad the FBI investigated Johnson's activities in 1940 on the suspicion that he was acting as a Nazi spy. The architect admitted to the Bureau that he attended Nazi party rallies in New York, including the most infamous one in 1939 at Madison Square Garden. (He later denied this.) Although it found evidence that Johnson could be linked to members of the Nazi party, the FBI never charged him with espionage. After the war, in 1947, Johnson rejoined the architecture department at MoMA. For the rest of his career, he was still intimately connected to the museum, even when he was not formally on staff.

Johnson's activities during the 1930s would continue to haunt him throughout his career, and he was later forced to address them during the '90s, after the BBC produced a documentary that focused largely on his foregone fascist politics. Johnson, who at one point called himself a "philo-Semite," defended himself, citing his friendships with Jewish architects like Louis Kahn and Frank Gehry, as well as with Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, as proof that he had changed. He told the TV host Charlie Rose, "If you'd indulged every one of your whims that you had when you were a kid, you wouldn't be here with a job either. It was the stupidest thing I ever did, and I can never forgive myself and I never can atone for it. There's nothing I can do."



Philip Johnson in 1933.

Johnson died in 2003, but for some, institutions with connections to him should redress his legacy. Two have already responded to Johnson's unsavory history. In 2020, amid Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd, the Glass House—a boxy glassed-in structure in Connecticut that ranks as one of Johnson's most famous buildings—updated its website with a statement referencing “Johnson's own history” and a need to confront the “difficult histories of places where art, architecture, and racial justice intersect—as part of our dedicated effort to tell the full American story.” And in November, after the Johnson Study Group's letter, the Harvard Graduate School of Design renamed a structure Johnson designed while he was a graduate student there in recognition of the “entrenched, paradigmatic racism and white supremacy of architecture,” its dean, Sarah M. Whiting, wrote. (That structure was informally called the Philip Johnson Thesis House, and will now be referred to as 9 Ash Street.)

Over the past several months, multiple essays have taken Johnson's legacy to task—with people on both sides. In an **essay** called “Why We Should Cancel Philip Johnson,” Aaron Betsky, director of Virginia Tech's architecture school, wrote, “Philip Johnson wasn't just a racist and fascist: He was a cultured, rich cad who made us forget our own failings as a country and as a

profession.” Others have pushed back against that logic. In a *Guardian* **op-ed**, Michael Henry Adams, an architecture historian with connections to Johnson’s family, wrote, “None of us only amounts to our worst mistake. Today, we all need what Philip Johnson died imagining he’d found: the opportunity to evolve—a chance to become better people.”

Xaviera Simmons, an artist who signed the Johnson Study Group letter, said her intention was not to cancel Johnson, but rather to force MoMA to contend with its history. While some may consider removing Johnson’s name a symbolic gesture, its resonance could be far-reaching.

“You can be subtractive in some ways and additive in others,” Simmons said in an interview.

“MoMA has to absorb the knowledge that has already been provided and work in concert with the Johnson letter signatories,” she continued. “They’ve already done the labor. The museum doesn’t have to do the labor, actually, and the museum should step back. You’ve got to make way for the new, and you have to make way for Black thinkers, Jewish thinkers, queer thinkers, and all the other thinkers.”