

View from The Overlook

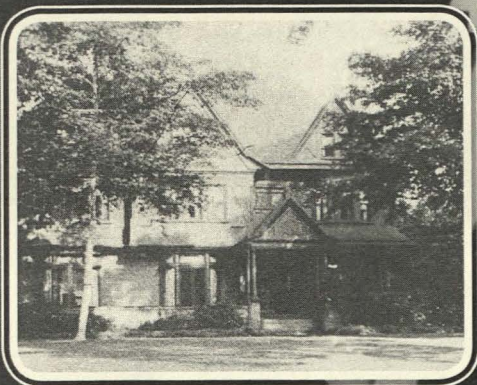
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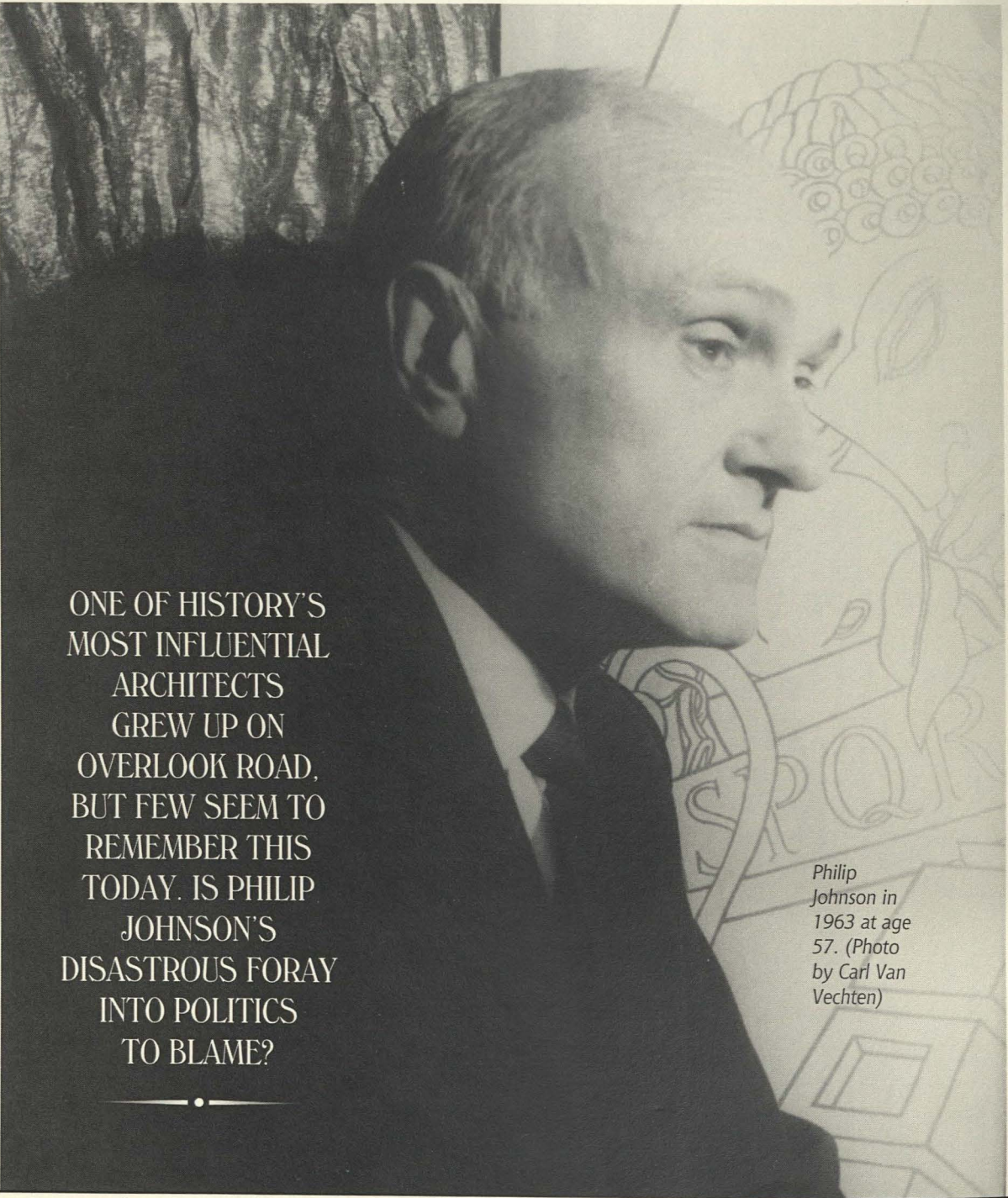
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Philip Johnson: On and Off the Overlook



*Philip Johnson in
1933. (Photo by
Carl Van Vechten)
Inset photo: Philip
Johnson's child-
hood home on
Overlook Road.*



ONE OF HISTORY'S
MOST INFLUENTIAL
ARCHITECTS
GREW UP ON
OVERLOOK ROAD,
BUT FEW SEEM TO
REMEMBER THIS
TODAY. IS PHILIP
JOHNSON'S
DISASTROUS FORAY
INTO POLITICS
TO BLAME?

*Philip
Johnson in
1963 at age
57. (Photo
by Carl Van
Vechten)*

Philip Johnson: ON AND OFF THE OVERLOOK

By Laura Peskin

The Euclid Heights residential development now primarily in Cleveland Heights was designed in the 1890s as a suburban oasis for émigré's from Cleveland's posh "Millionaires' Row." These Heights pioneers were escaping mushrooming business and pollution near their Euclid Avenue mansions. The original block of Overlook Road in Euclid Heights was a most desirable address, as it sat along the scenic ridge after which the street is named. To this day this part of the street furnishes spectacular views of Cleveland, particularly from the eighty-foot-high Waldorf Towers. In 1961, this apartment building replaced one of the Overlook's earliest and grandest mansions, the home of William Lowe Rice, a lawyer and investor in distressed companies. The Rice home, designed by architect and neighbor Alfred Hoyt Granger, featured large, symmetrical Greek-style porticos. The demolition of such sumptuous properties on the Overlook has been the historical norm. Today only three or possibly four of the original mansions stand. Demolished more than 60 years ago, the house at 2171 Overlook Road — like many of the Overlook's erstwhile mansions — has faded from public memory, and one of its past residents may someday suffer the same fate in his own hometown.

One of the most prominent men to emerge from Euclid Heights was architect Philip Johnson (1906-2005). In 1932, at age 26, the Harvard-educated Johnson was already making his mark on the art world, becoming the first Director of the new Department of Architecture at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). That same year, he co-wrote an important book on a branch of Bauhaus architecture, by then called the International Style, and co-curated "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition," a 1932 MoMA show that is often credited with introducing modern architecture to American audiences. After World War II, Johnson would go on to design such world-famous modernist structures as the Seagram Building — a skyscraper in New York City — and the Glass House, a completely translucent cube that was Johnson's own residence and remains one of the most famous houses in the world. But it would be Johnson's political career between 1934, when he abruptly quit his post at MoMA, and 1940, when he returned to Harvard and entered its Graduate School of Design, that would to many forever taint the legacy of the most famous artist from Cleveland Heights.

While growing up in Cleveland Heights, Johnson's world largely consisted of his home

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The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

Our Mission
The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights. As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.

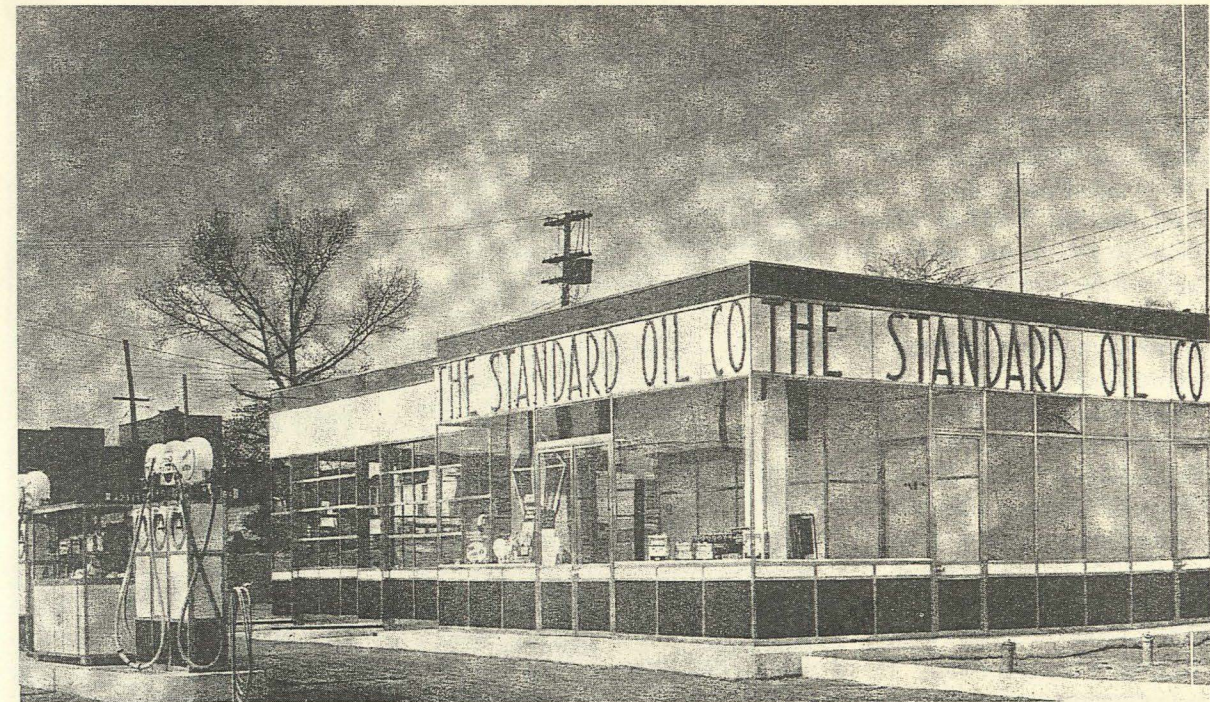
From the President:

The Board of Trustees of the Cleveland Heights Historical Society would like to announce the resignation of our Founding President, Charles ("Chuck") Owen, and state our profound appreciation for all the years he had given us. Chuck initiated our legal status as an historical organization, and faithfully maintained our legal records for many years. Although the CHHS went through periods of inactivity several times in its first decade, Chuck steadfastly kept the idea alive such that we can thank him for pursuing our very existence. Also, Chuck was always able to supply Board members with a ready array of Cleveland Heights historical information – facts, but also anecdotes. His persistence enabled the CHHS to obtain important materials pertaining to the history of Coventry Village, such that they would be readily accessible to anyone interested.

The Board is also announcing the recent resignations of Christopher Roy and Sue Godfrey, and is most grateful for their years of service put in our organization. Chris was on our Board since the early days and was eventually CHHS' President until several years ago. He could discuss local history infectiously – always with keen interest and respect – and many of our accomplishments can be attributed to Chris' enthusiastic imagination. Sue has been a steady supporter of our programs and, as a very long-term Cleveland Heights resident, she could contribute from a perspective of broad community involvement few could match.

Those of us remaining on the Board are delighted to announce the appointment of five new Cleveland Heights Historical Society Trustees, bringing the total number to nine – the largest ever and the maximum allowed in our newly rewritten By-laws. The individuals are: William Hopkins, Christopher Hubbert, Michael Madorsky, Laura Peskin, and Stephen Titchenal. These folks bring an abundance of diverse yet appropriate backgrounds and shall surely contribute a great deal to whatever directions the Historical Society takes from this juncture.

— Ken Goldberg



Among other designs, Johnson's 1932 show at MoMA depicted a futuristic gas station contributed by Philip's friend Alfred Clauss, a German associate of Ludwig Mies van der Röhe, Johnson's Harvard mentor. Johnson and his father Homer, who did legal work for Standard Oil of Ohio (Sohio), helped Clauss obtain a prestigious Sohio commission for the gas station, and the design soon became a familiar sight around Northeast Ohio. Cleveland Heights was home to one of these Sohio stations for a time at the intersection of Mayfield and Noble Roads. (Photo courtesy of the BP Archives)

at 2171 Overlook (on the Cleveland-Cleveland Heights border), the nearby Cleveland Play House, and the elite University School. As a child Johnson very rarely explored everyday Cleveland, not even the adjacent Little Italy neighborhood. Philip's mother, Louise, disdained the Italian immigrants from "down the hill," who were rumored to steal salad greens from the lush Overlook lawns. Franz Schulze, who wrote the definitive biography of Johnson's life, characterizes Philip's childhood as a time of loneliness. As soon as Johnson's life began in the roomy house on Overlook, it was filled with material comforts but few of the emotional sort.

This void was intensified by Johnson's college-age diagnosis with bipolar disorder.

Johnson — who much later in life lived openly as a homosexual — had emerged from toddlerhood with a distinctly effeminate air that troubled his father. Since an older son, Alfred, had died at age five, Johnson was the sole male heir. A few years later Johnson was taken with temper tantrums, something that the future architect recalled his father dealt with swiftly and harshly: by sending missiles of cold water his way.

Louise was an unorthodox parent as well. The Wellesley-trained math teacher and spare-time artist laid out the home in the

day's highest style, an undertaking that may have influenced her son's penchant for modernism. More influential, as described by daughter Jeanette, were Louise's "slide-illustrated 'seminars' on art ... including the 'modern' stuff for Theodate, Philip and me in the living room. Philip just soaked it up." On the other hand the intellectual, emotionally distant Louise provided little of the needed maternal warmth. Later in life Johnson called Louise a "cold fish," although they kept up a copious letter correspondence emanating from the mother-and-son intellectual bond.

Johnson's letters from his young adulthood document continued estrangement with his father. Rare correspondence with Homer mainly concerned money. Homer implored his son to wisely use the family financial investment in him. While a June 1930 missive to Louise clarified Johnson's new-found interest in architecture, the same letter concluded with reassurance to Homer that he would not build anything soon and therefore not burn through his inheritance. On at least two other occasions between 1926 and 1930 Johnson had, through letters, likewise resolved "misunderstandings" with Homer about finances.

Some observers have viewed Johnson's life as a series of infatuations with strong, male leaders; these figures ran the gamut



United States Senator Huey Long of Louisiana delivers a speech, circa 1933.

from politicians to his mentor and frequent collaborator (most notably with the Seagram Building), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Schulze and others have described his hero worship as seeking substitute father figures for the distant and disapproving Homer. Indeed, via letters to Louise, Johnson exhibited intense enthusiasm about each admirable male to enter his life. "Mies is the greatest man ... I have ever met. [Architect JP] Oud I like better. I almost love Oud such a dear man he is besides being a genius, but Mies is a great man," gushed one September 1930 letter from Philip to Louise. In the mid-1930s, Johnson would become deeply

inspired by a series of politicians — Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Adolf Hitler — who would influence his own foray into politics, which began when he made the shocking decision to abandon his promising art career and resign his post at MoMA in 1934.

By 1934, Johnson was getting discouraged at the radical MoMA. He feared he would never gain recognition there. After all, early MoMA's pivotal role has only been cemented by history. Meanwhile another Harvard alumnus, finance expert Lawrence Dennis, impressed many including Johnson with his early '30s tome "Is Capitalism Doomed?" Here Dennis called for a particular American fascism. On top of Johnson's fear of obscurity lurked the post-Dennis fear that the fall of capitalism would doom MoMA financially. Now the budding architect was in full flight mode, a state of mind enhanced by his longtime friend, MoMA underling and political animal Alan Blackburn. In short order both deserted the museum. What to do next loomed murky, but for Blackburn less problematic because he lived in Ohio off the Johnson largesse for the next few years.

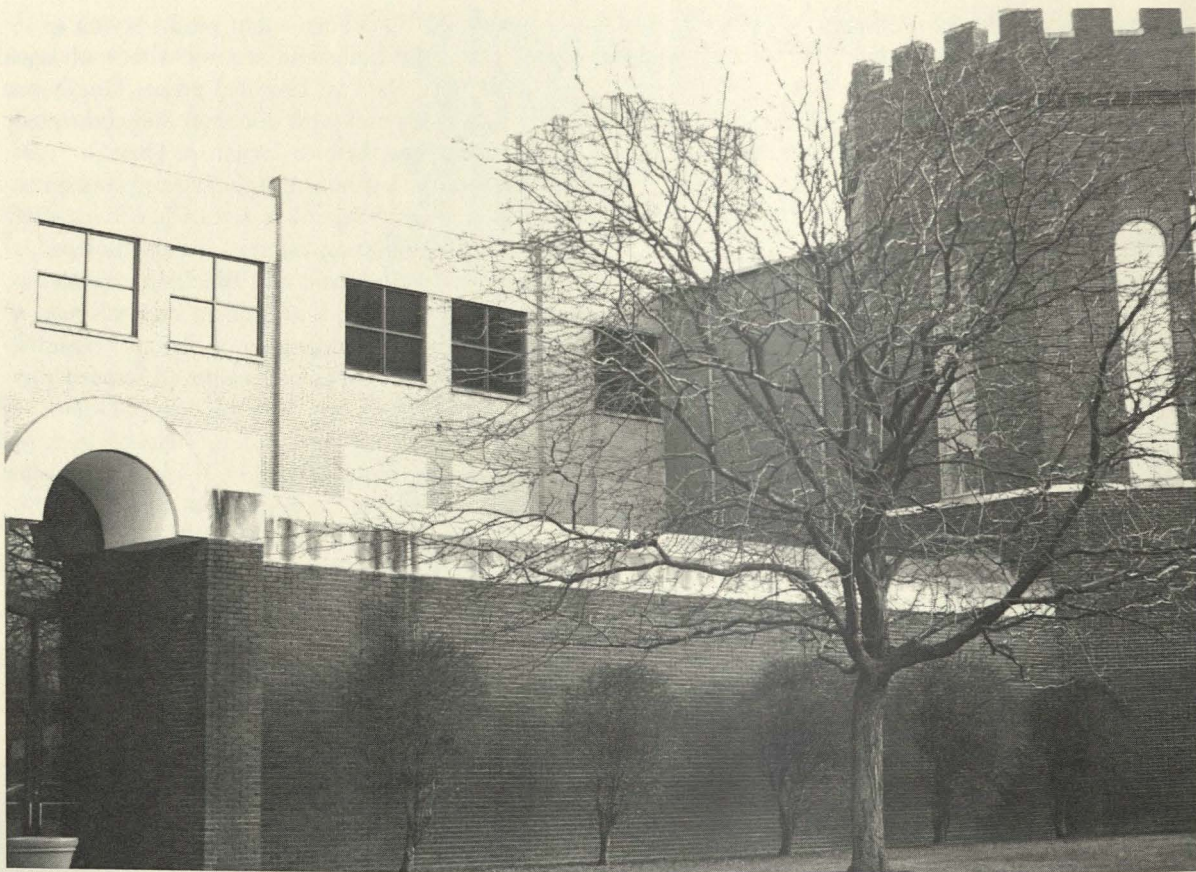
Johnson eventually decided to seriously pursue a career in politics, though this got off to a shaky start in 1935. First he acted on fascination with the flamboyant, populist demagogue Huey Long, one of the few real challenges to perceived FDR ineptitude.

Father Coughlin addresses a rally for his National Union for Social Justice at Cleveland Municipal Stadium in May 1936. (Photo courtesy of the Special Collections Department, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University)

Johnson and Blackburn spent weeks trying to track down the Louisiana senator who, with equal vigor, avoided the two Harvard preps. Finally one of Long's aides met with Johnson and counseled the political neophyte to "organize Ohio." Johnson took that advice to heart and was on Overlook Road September 10th when Long died from an assassination attempt the day before. Straight away, Johnson and Blackburn headed out to the funeral, but arrived in Baton Rouge a day late. Homer disapproved of his son's populist turn. Thus Johnson largely removed himself to the family farm in New London, Ohio. Homer did not object and, in New London, Johnson launched his bid for the Ohio Assembly. If Cleveland's elite little felt the Great Depression, it was in full swing in New London where the largely agrarian populace was receiving a pittance for commodities such as milk. Johnson closed the year with a call on Cleveland radio for a dairy farmer strike.

In the vacuum created by Long's death, Johnson was finding other charismatic leaders to which to attach. There was Gerald LK Smith,





Philip Johnson's 1983 addition to the Cleveland Play House, the only architectural work Johnson designed for his hometown. (Photo by Laura Peskin)

Long's successor, and like the deceased senator, an arresting speaker. Closer to home Johnson found his new idol in the dynamic Father Coughlin, widely followed in Ohio. Coughlin, an Irish-Canadian advocate for the common man, devoted his time to successfully countering perceived New Deal excess. The political priest mobilized millions of people through his popular radio program. The egotistical cleric ran his movement dictatorially and called for idealistic but

far-reaching changes that invited authoritarian enforcement: the outlawing of private banking coupled with fiat currency to guarantee a living wage. Already in January 1936, Johnson and Blackburn shared the stage with the radio priest at a meeting of the local Cleveland Coughlinite organization. The following month the two MoMA veterans organized a similar Coughlinite group in New London. In a primary election, Johnson received the Democratic nomination for

State Representative. By August Johnson stunned his supporters by withdrawing his nomination. He was as ever in the orbit of his idol, Coughlin, and the radio priest was making a third-party Presidential bid. The priesthood frowned on political dual-careers, but Coughlin had his proxy in lackluster North Dakota Representative William Lemke. Gerald LK Smith stepped on the Lemke bandwagon as well. They called their organization the Union Party. It included personable and less controversial Dr. Francis Townsend, author of a senior pension program that in part inspired Social Security. The party trailed dismally in the election, though Ohio gave it 132,312 votes, the most of any state.

For one of the Union Party's largest rallies, in September in Chicago, Johnson designed a stage after the one he had seen Hitler use in Potsdam. The Chicago Tribune described it as "bordering on the moderne...it provided a glaring white background 50 feet wide and 20 feet high for the solitary figure of the priest." Coughlin thought the Union Party would disturb electoral votes so much as to throw the election to the House of Representatives. Through Congress' breaking the predicted electoral impasse, Union ticket supporters reasoned that Roosevelt's enemies had a better chance of throwing him off than by electors and the voting public alone. The Union Party's crushing defeat was another anticlimax in Johnson's political career.

Johnson was not in Cleveland much until the end of 1937. Prior to that point he divided his time between forming his own political party, the sluggish Young Nationalists, observing Ohio architecture, and translating a Rightist German essay. On an extended winter 1937/'38 holiday on Overlook, Johnson had the family home to himself. Homer and Louise were at their winter vacation home in the Carolinas — a resort at which they had wintered for years. Few periods saw as much festivity at 2171 Overlook as the

37/'38 winter when Johnson was taking a break from politics and entertaining Cleveland's elite. Johnson dated a Play House actor that winter, vaguely setting the stage for his future Cleveland involvement. From that time on Johnson's connection to Cleveland would manifest itself most greatly in the Play House, an object of sister Jeanette's philanthropy and an institution that furnished work to singer-sister Theodate. 1938 on Overlook rekindled Johnson's aesthetic impulses. After a little-understood, Nazi-oriented 1939 European trip, in 1940 Johnson entered the Harvard graduate design program. In short order he reunited with Mies and modernist functionalism, and definitively turned his back on politics to become the pioneering architect that he is remembered as today.

Most commentators on Johnson's legacy seem to concur on two things about the quirky architect: a) that he was generous to associates and b) that he had an uncanny talent for emerging atop of fashion trends. Most of Johnson's buildings are not mere curiosities but key pieces in their respective genres. Johnson's mark on Cleveland, however, is growing ever tenuous. Alarming, his sole architectural Cleveland creation, a 1983 addition to the Cleveland Play House, is now little used — in the control of the ever-expanding Cleveland Clinic and outside of any historic district. "Turning Point," Johnson's five-piece, Stonehenge-like sculpture installed on the CWRU campus in 1997 currently remains in storage after being removed during the recent construction of a new student center. In addition, Homer Johnson's house on Overlook Road was torn down in the 1950s and is now the site of a senior living facility. Only the home's carriage house remains standing today.

While Johnson's 1930s activities represent Cleveland at its darkest, Johnson is a complex

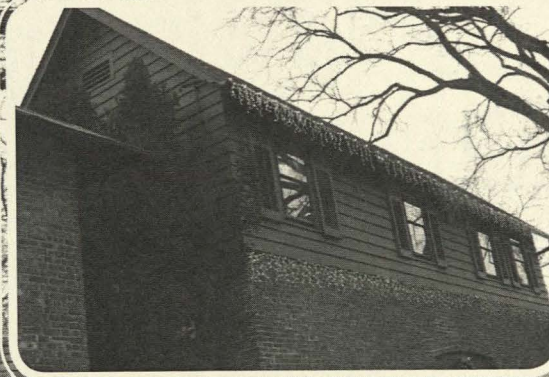


In the foreground is the section of the senior facility that sits on the former site of the Johnson home. Two of the remaining Overlook mansions are to the east, as is the looming Waldorf Towers apartment building, constructed on the site of a razed mansion in the 1960s. (Photo by Michael Rotman)

product of the Overlook of Cleveland and Cleveland Heights, who may deserve a lasting in-town architectural monument to his disturbed genius.

Laura Peskin, an almost lifelong greater Clevelander, has contributed to Ohio Archaeologist and the Ohio Cardinal. Her writings have been linked

to the Shaker Heights Library's website and to BluestoneHeights.org, an east side research website. Most recently Peskin has authored the book series Deep Cover Cleveland. As the title implies, the books bring to light aspects of regional history that are not as well known as they should be. Around the book series, Peskin has given several Powerpoint presentations at area libraries and museums.



Left: All that remains from Philip Johnson's childhood home is its detached carriage house, now a private residence situated among four other former stables from the same era along an alleyway known today as Herrick Mews. (Photo by Laura Peskin)



The view looking north from what was once the front lawn of Philip Johnson's childhood home on Overlook Road. (Photo by Michael Rotman)

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