

Title Glass house reflections  
Date 2016  
Publication FARIAS, Agnaldo. *Glass House Reflections*. Jacaranda n.2

Author Agnaldo Farias  
Artist Mauro Restiffe

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*By working with  
 actual glass models,  
 I discovered that the important  
 thing is the play of reflections,  
 and not the effect of light and  
 shadow as in ordinary buildings.*  
 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Built in 1949 at the Rippowan River Valley, in New Canaan, Connecticut, the Glass House, by Philip Johnson, still amazes by its detachment from the notion of a house: two rectangular horizontal planes of the same size, floor and ceiling, both having dark steel edges, separated by the open grid steel structure of window frames and columns, and by the glass plates used as walls. A small transparent house, a crystal in the landscape, a landscape in itself, proudly standing in front of a lawn, at the edge of a valley, backed by a row of trees where an oak tree stands out, gradually sloping down following the hillside until it meets the shimmering waters of the lake further below.

The Glass House ensured fame to Philip Johnson and to this day it is considered, other than an architectural icon, the piece of work that contributed decisively for the American people to start recognizing, getting used to and even coveting modern architecture. Johnson, architecture curator of the Museum of Modern Art of New York, after taking three to four years between its project and construction, was the sole resident of his Glass House until his death, in 2005, at the age of 98. Declared a monument by the National Historic Preservation Landmark, it was finally open to the public, professionals and architecture students as well as those interested in modern architecture, who were not allowed inside before due to a harsh warning sign that Johnson had placed down the road, saying that people were living there and the visitors should obey "specific days".

In spite of its high attributes, the Glass House cannot be considered an "*opera prima*" but "*seconda*." The reason is its direct descent from the extraordinary house that the German architect Mies van der Rohe built for his friend Edith Farnsworth between 1945 and 1950, whose glass model Johnson himself presented in a MoMA exposition in 1947. The legend says that the German master, former Bauhaus director but based in the United States since 1933, reacted very negatively to this "tribute." On top of that, the fact that Johnson's house was completed before Rohe's might suggest that the idea wasn't his. Regardless of the similarity, the formal qualities and materials in the Farnsworth House, – as, for example, the high quality of the finishes, very characteristic of Mies van der Rohe – by

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far exceed the work of his North-American colleague.

But it doesn't matter; with his Glass House, Johnson, a genius in both architecture and publicity, was the one who best advocated for the equation that a construction open to light, to nature, and to the view of whoever passes by, would be more democratic. He planted, in the heart of the North American WASP aristocracy, at the moment when the Cold War policy began, the very same year that NATO was established, the idea that "the people capable to adopt this architecture would be a people of clear horizons". (A.Marsá, L.Marcillach, *La montaña iluminada*, 1929)

That's why it is easy to understand the fascination that Mauro Restiffe feels for the house. For a long time, the photographer has been fascinated by architecture in general and by modern architecture in particular. One of the highlights of his work is the special set of images about the inauguration of president Lula in Brasilia, in 2003; the day when, according to the artist, the postcard capital, the photogenic futuristic city that the Brazilian state accomplished in 1960 in the Central Plateau of the country as a proof that utopia had indeed arrived, was finally invaded, occupied, celebrated, with a lot of noise and mess, by

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the people, without the usual police intervention.

Showing that his resourcefulness in dealing with space is present in both the open plan and in the private one, Restiffe arrived at the Glass House on a late sunny afternoon, equipped with his analog camera – the artist uses always exclusively this piece of equipment for the production of black and white images –, inspecting the peculiarities of the glass skin and the concise geometry of its metallic exoskeleton. Going from one corner to the other, making an inventory of the indoor places barely defined by the disposition of the furniture and few sparse objects, investigating the particularities

of that architecture which unravels through the light beams, the artist discovered, perhaps in the first place, and as well as Mies van der Rohe working with glass models that, in the house, the “important thing is the play of reflections.” But that’s not all, or else, Restiffe catches and takes advantage of not just the reflections produced by the glass transparency that he will explore, as it will be seen later, in both ways explained by Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, in the seminal text of 1963, “Phenomenal and Literal Transparency.” In his photos, his sharpness in analyzing the relation between language and time adds up to the exploring

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of the reflections produced by light and glass, more precisely, the historical relation of painting, architecture and landscaping, a relation intentionally activated by Johnson and that until the present time had not deserved a translation up to its value.

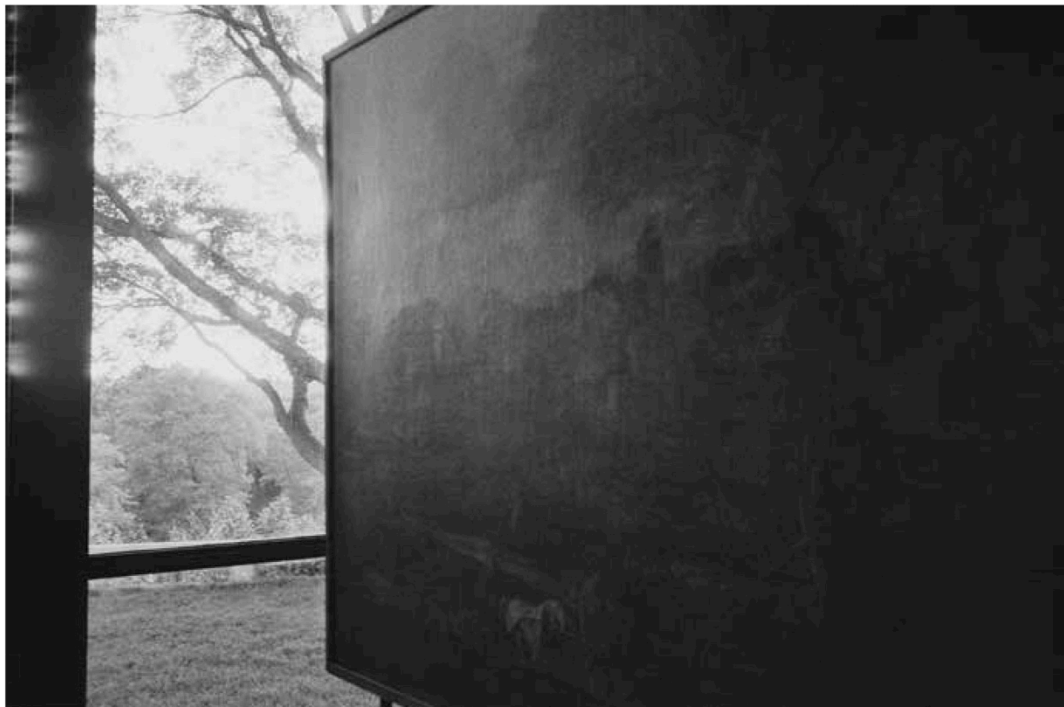
Besides the reflections indoors and outdoors, the unexpected combinations between architecture and landscaping, the loss of substances of both and their transformation in images, all the photos that form the Glass House series have one painting as protagonist, the only one of the house, a masterpiece of the French painter Nicolas Poussin, more specifically

one of the three existing versions of “The Funeral of Phocion”, made in 1648. Although extraordinary, the presence of this masterpiece, at least at first sight, is a startling event. What would it do there, at the house of an active member of the first and most important institution dedicated to modern art, a 17<sup>th</sup> century masterpiece? Johnson himself explains the reasons for the presence of this masterpiece, that was chosen and suggested by Alfred H. Barr Jr., the first MoMA director, which along with Elie Nudelman’s sculpture, was part of the house since its opening:

*Stylistically, the Glass House is a mixture of Mies*

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*van der Rohe, Malevich, Parthenon, English Garden, the Romanticism as a whole, the asymmetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century [...] it is more a landscaping design than an architectural work. It is more related to the memory of the English gardens of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and they are called English gardens for a reason. There is no garden anywhere, I mean, there are no flowers, as the Americans usually associate when they think about a garden. It's only a kind of landscape in which I focused on the hill where it is located and on the oak tree.*

The Poussin painting appears in the center of all the eight photos that form the series, including

the eighth, a horizontal diptych, two views against the light, made outdoors, when, as it happens with the superb and ambiguous painting of René Magritte "The Light Empire", the brightness of the day sky seen above and through the house contrasts with the dim indoor lighting in which it is wrapped, with the furniture being transformed in silhouettes, with the spectral trees overlapping it, stealing the light.

Poussin's painting is presented on a front view, back view, on the side, at open and closed angles, almost always a background that when added to the glass, generally amplifies the outstanding effect,

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except when it becomes the side of a dark blade, dull in its inferior part, slightly bright in its superior half. Every time, Restiffe adjusts the landscape described by the painter with the landscape that surrounds the house. Reacting to the French master's tendency to use the trees to frame a given scene, in this case the funeral of a man, the Athenian statesman Phocion, theme of a Plutarch text, Restiffe makes the surrounding trees, other than framing Johnson's house, mismatch with both, house and painting, in a game of overlapping, in a fusion of reflections.

The sequence of images, starting with the first one in which the painting is shot in a front view,

with its rectangular shape keeping the same distance from the ceiling and of the metal column that is to our left hand side, already presents the irradiation of the classical landscape made by the French painter through the texture of the real vegetation, that can be seen through the narrow glass strip. On the left hand side, besides the mentioned column, it is the house itself that is launched beyond its limits. There are already the two transparency qualities identified by Rowe and Slutzky, the *literal transparency*, due to the glass material nature that allows to see through or brings inside what is outside, and the *fenomenal transparency*, taking the house to where it is not,

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paintings, mainly Nicolas Poussin and Claude Lorrain's pastoral landscapes. It is not the case here to detail this interesting passage of the relations among the artistic languages, one more topic to illustrate Oscar Wilde's thinking, who stated that life imitates art much more than art imitates life. But it will be convenient to remember Alexander Pope's verses, written in 1731, in his tribute to Earl Richard of Burlington for his job in the development of the Stowe gardens, in Buckinghamshire, England, based on a view of nature completely opposed to that of French origin, as it can be seen in Versailles, which were geometrically made,

organized, rationalized. Pope enhances the power of nature of the gardens that had been made since the beginning of the century he lived, an understanding originated in the French painting. Let's listen to him:

*To build, to plant, whatever you intend,  
 To rear the Column, or the Arch to bend,  
 To swell the Terras, or to sink the Grot;  
 In all, let Nature never be forgot.*



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But which Nature? – Restiffe's images make us think. Being indoors or outdoors in the Glass House that Johnson made appear on an elevated plateau, what we have is the confirmation of the van der Rohe's poetic which dragged the idea of housing from its correlation with the ideas of protection and enclosure, shelter and opacity, private space as the inscrutable space, to, on the other hand, present it as evanescent matter, dissolved in the world. The spaces interpenetrate, and as shown by these images, both lose the substance which defined them thus far. They are not tangible, palpable, and safe, but

an imaginable maze made of planes and straight lines with the complex planes and lines of nature.

Poussin's painting inside Philip Johnson's house was the generating source of a landscape, renewing a reverberation that comes from afar, a phenomenon of crisscrossed relations, intense and constant in the world of arts. Mauro Restiffe makes images showing that this exchange is what we call reality.