

The question "What comes after Seagram?" is being answered in Philip Johnson's latest designs. In view of his earlier work, the answers will be surprising

The Mies-less Johnson

BY WILLIAM H. JORDY

Philip Johnson—Mies van der Rohe's disciple, biographer, and erstwhile collaborator—is venturing out with designs very different from the classically simple work for which Mies is well-known. Johnson's declaration of independence from Miesian discipline is most interesting because he pursued this discipline longer and more profoundly than did most others. He produced many a work which, suffused with his own creative individuality, was also exactly Miesian, demonstrating a genuine kinship. Under the circumstances, it is natural that the break be ambivalent. But ambivalent or not, the Mies-less Johnson is more interesting and more varied than the Miesian one.

At first glance the neoclassic forms remain, simple and serenely ordered, in his latest work. The elemental shapes and dominating ceremonial space of his typical country houses persist in most of his current production. Compared to his earlier work, most of his recent designs are more compact in composition. Plans are rigidly axial and more commandingly dominated by central spaces, which have generally become more tightly contained. But on second glance there is a tension between the intensive discipline of the early Johnson and the extensive exploration of the present one (photo, left). Johnson's neoclassicism, still deeply embedded, is being modified by three interrelated quests, central to his work from the beginning, but now revealing new possibilities. First, there is the quest for a continuity of human experience through the recall of historic forms. Then, there is the quest for movement of various sorts to enliven the rigidity of the neoclassical order. Finally, there is the quest for a powerful image evoked by the building, both through its visual form and by associations which it calls from memory.

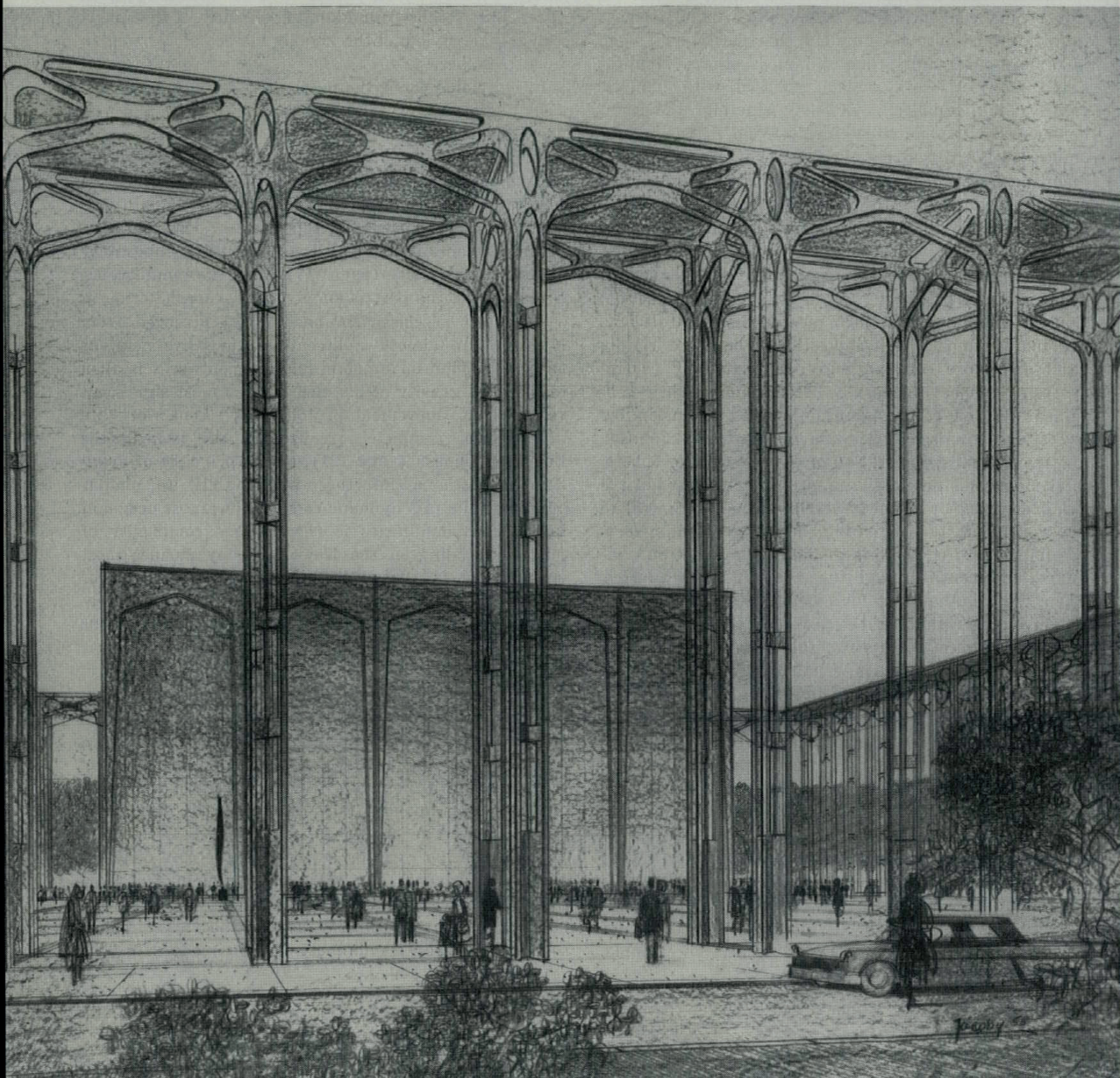
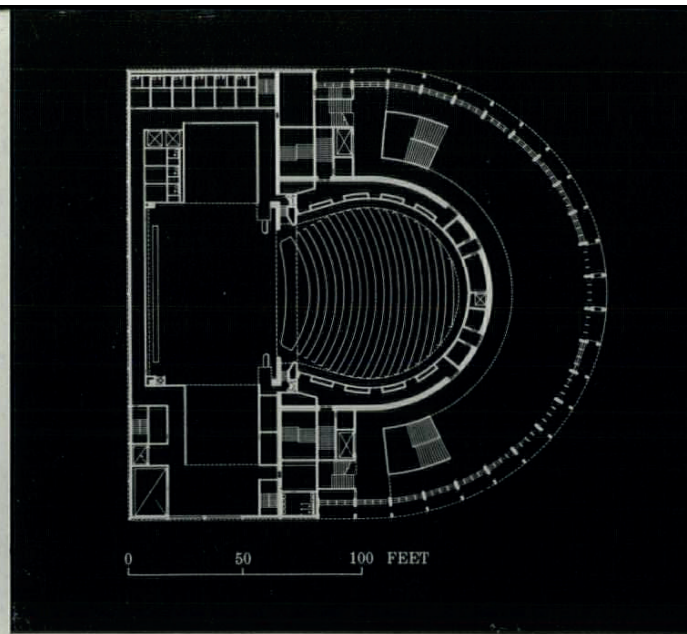
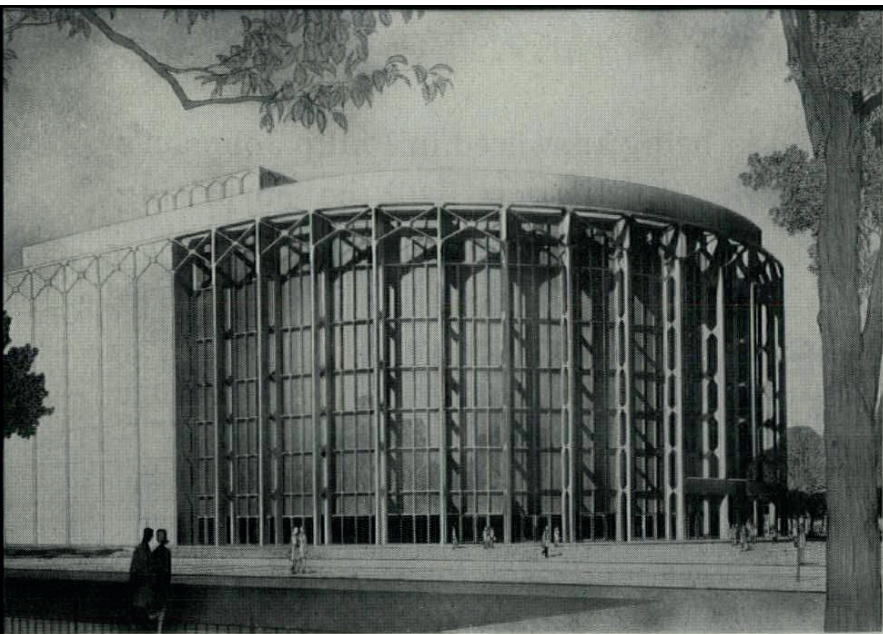
Johnson's orientation has always been profoundly historical, but subtly so. His present historical allusions, however, are both wider in range and, occasionally, more literal in their reference. His exploration of the Western tradition, for example, ranges from the portico and cella of the classic temple (photos, page 117) to complex plans and undulating roofs of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli or of work by such late baroque architects as Borromini and Guarini (photos, pages 121, 122). Occasionally he goes further to attempt a synthesis of Western and non-Western traditions as, for example,

in juxtaposing ideas garnered from the Japanese pavilion house and the Indian stupa. Even vernacular and folk architecture do not escape attention. Johnson's shingled dome for a shrine at New Harmony, Ind. (page 122) recalls the undulating surfaces of the American shingle style and the knobby masses of Norwegian wood churches.

In individual cases, the puzzle is how much Johnson's design grew *out* of historical reminiscence in the first place, and how much it grew *toward* historical reminiscence during its development. But for all the transmutation of old into new, the hazard in such historicism is a withdrawal from life to form, from actuality to abstraction. This hazard is especially evident, perhaps, in the Carter Museum and the Computing Laboratory at Brown University (page 117). Here the reminiscence is too literal; the past is simply "modernized."

Johnson's neoclassicism has always diverged from Mies's in an almost eighteenth-century liveliness, as natural to Johnson's mobile temperament as it is alien to the fixed gravity of his mentor. The most significant ventures into movement in Johnson's recent work are three: most completely realized is the use, in the Boissonnas house (page 121), of the principle of Japanese domestic architecture which adds up similar building units in a dynamic composition; most pregnant for future possibilities is the baroque complexity of plan and ceiling in the New Harmony shrine; most questionable is the often literally moving detail of the newly opened Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building (page 123), albeit festive and vivacious in the setting.

Finally there is Johnson's quest for an architectural image as memorable and unforgettable as an unusual human face. In the new shapes they take, these images break with the Miesian past. In their self-containment, however, they remain essentially Miesian. Although one may question the remote and chilly abstraction in some of Johnson's images, they are assured memorable abstractions. The power to envelop a forceful plan with a haunting exterior image is at the core of Johnson's achievement. This power is more evident now than before. If architecture is measured by the intensity of its image on the consciousness of the viewer, Johnson's current work is his most challenging to date.



THE TEMPLE

The largest and most impressive of Johnson's porticoed schemes is the original design for the Theater for the Dance in New York's Lincoln Center.

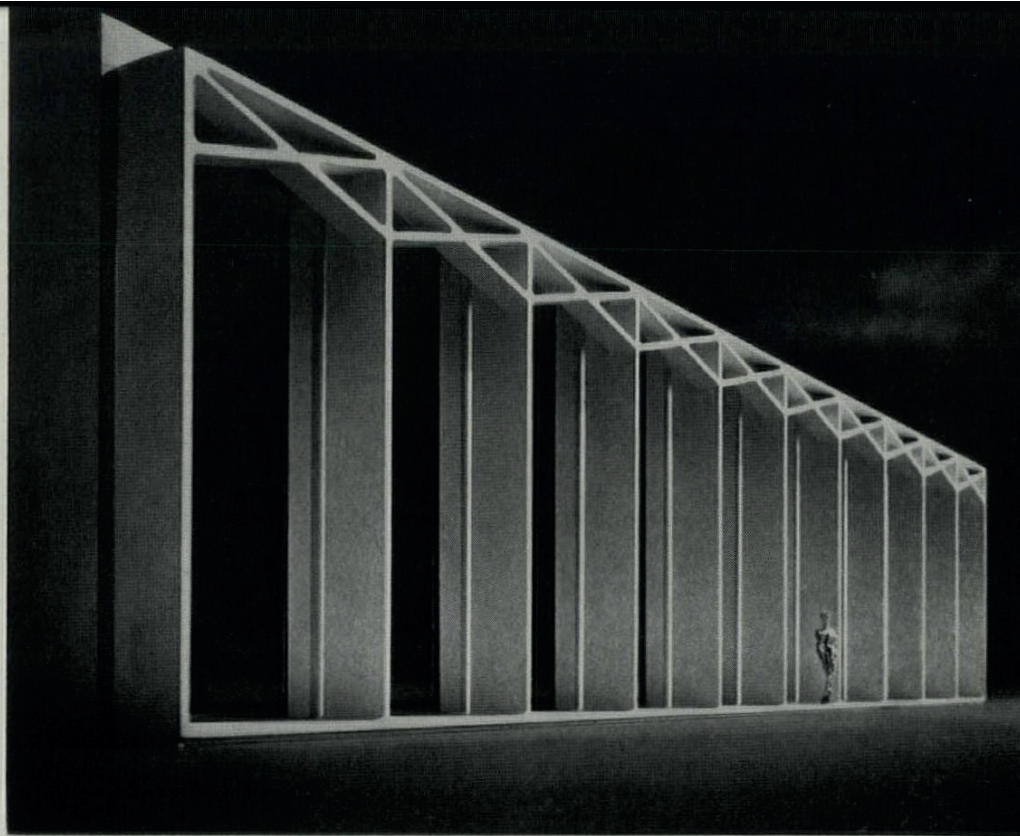
The girderlike colonnade surrounding the exterior (model photo, left) seems simultaneously decorative and severe. Actually, only the inner column of the paired group is structural. The outer columns only symbolize the structure acting like Mies's H-section exterior pilasters. The extension of the colonnade around the back walls of the stage binds the compact mass together the way pilasters bind a classic or renaissance wall.

Despite Johnson's preference for this design, it will not be built because recent alterations in the general plan require a rectangular rather than a semicircular building. With the abandonment of the first scheme, Johnson proposed another design (sketch, left), which was abandoned in turn for a third scheme now in the formative stage and not yet divulged. The second scheme extended a tall and elegant portico across the front of the central plaza and across the façades of the flanking theaters for the dance and the philharmonic. The theaters would have been visually subordinated to the outdoor room formed by the all-embracing portico.

PORTICOES

The Thomas J. Watson Memorial Computer Laboratory at Brown University in Providence, R.I. (model photo, above right) and the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art for Fort Worth, Tex. (below, right) are Greek Revival of modest pretention. Both are simply masonry boxes fronted with porticoes, one in red concrete, the other in hand-carved pink granite. In each example the portico is more tenuously related to the building than the portico for the Theater of the Dance.

Of course, neither portico is as arbitrary as may appear at first glance. Both go nicely with enclosed interiors. Both can be justified as sunshades and entrance shelters. And the buildings are both so sited as to make a frontal composition logical. But defenses aside, the porticoes are so two-dimensional as to recall stage backdrops for some ballet dream sequence.

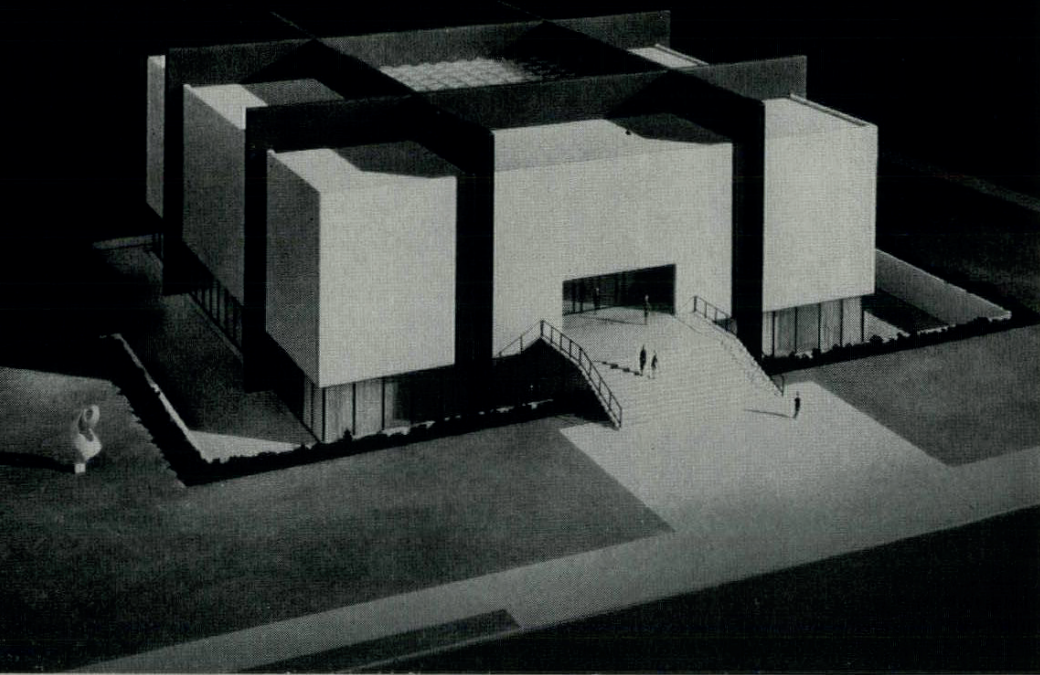


PHOTOS: LOUIS CHECKMAN

A CENTRAL PLAN

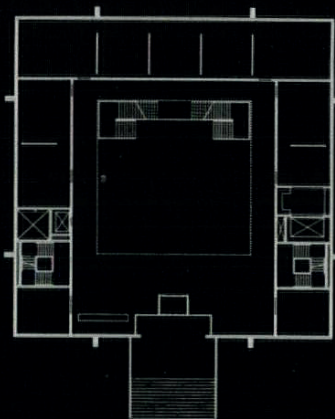
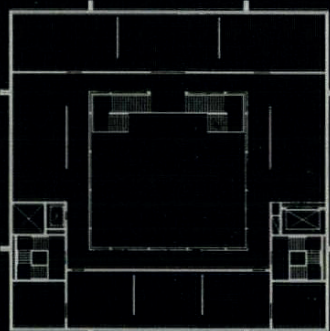
Among Johnson's more adventurous structures is the Proctor, Williams, Munson Museum in Utica, N. Y. (model photos, left), now nearing completion. Here, the walls hang as deep reinforced concrete beams from trusses exposed atop the roof. Obviously, the Utica Museum harks back to Mies's Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology. But, as those inclined historically may note, it looks back even more directly to Mies's forgotten building for the German electrical industries at the 1929 Barcelona Exposition and to a third source (to which Johnson confesses): Frank Lloyd Wright's 1908 Unity Temple.

As seen in a model, the building is sited on a gentle slope. Offices and an auditorium will be placed below grade. A separate entrance to these facilities is located at the rear of the building and will be used when the Museum is closed. The Museum itself will



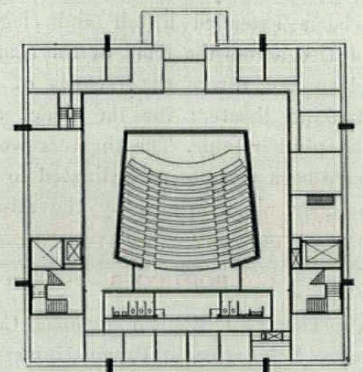
SECOND FLOOR

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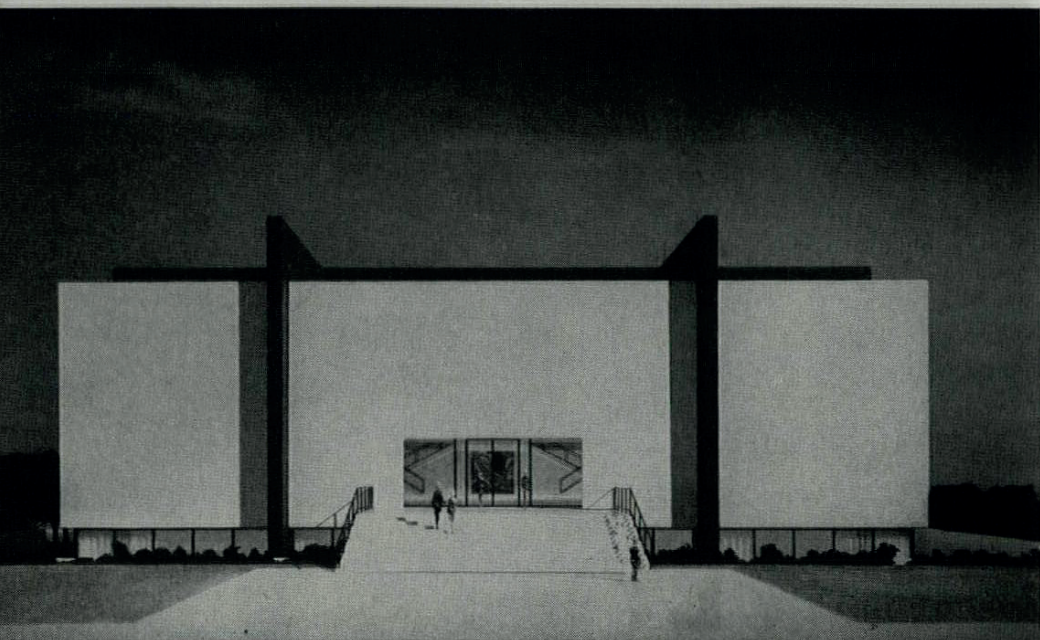
BASEMENT



be entered in front across a bridge of stairs over the sunken moat.

On the exterior, the box form suggests the unified central space within, while the tic-tac-toe division of the trusses records the second-story mezzanine that surrounds the central room.

Although the plan is logically delineated on the exterior of the Museum, the question is whether or not the resulting image will be a happy one. The brutal scale of the bronze frame and hammered black-granite wall is deliberately contrasted with the delicate scale of railings, glazed entrance, and basement windows. There is a remote quality to the austere closed shape which, coupled with the monumental scale, is, perhaps, initially disconcerting. But there is no denying the haunting quality of the image.



PHOTOS: LOUIS CHECKMAN

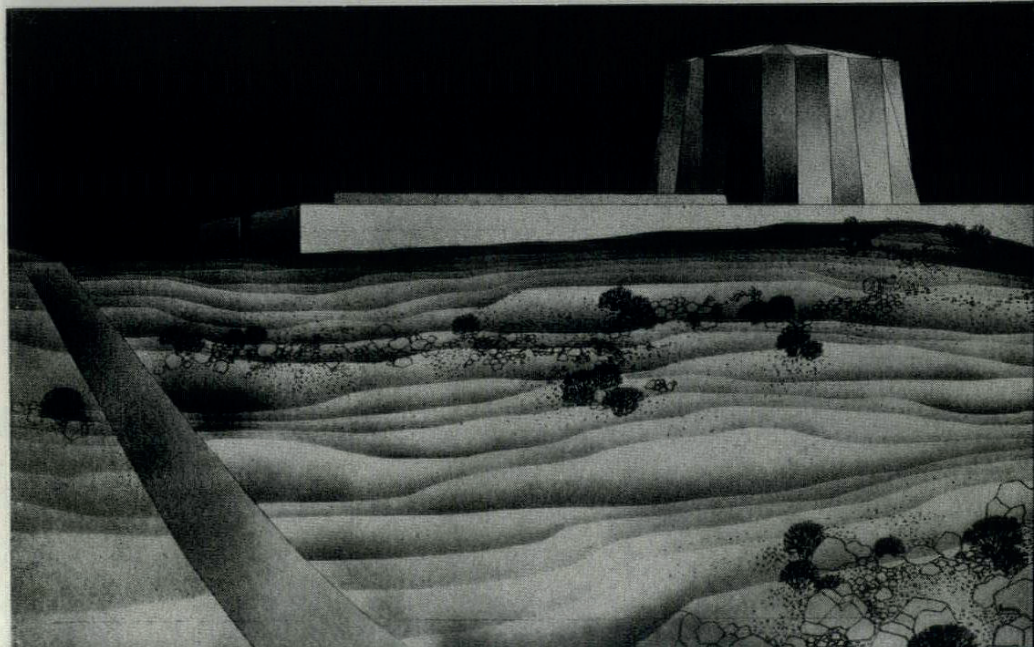
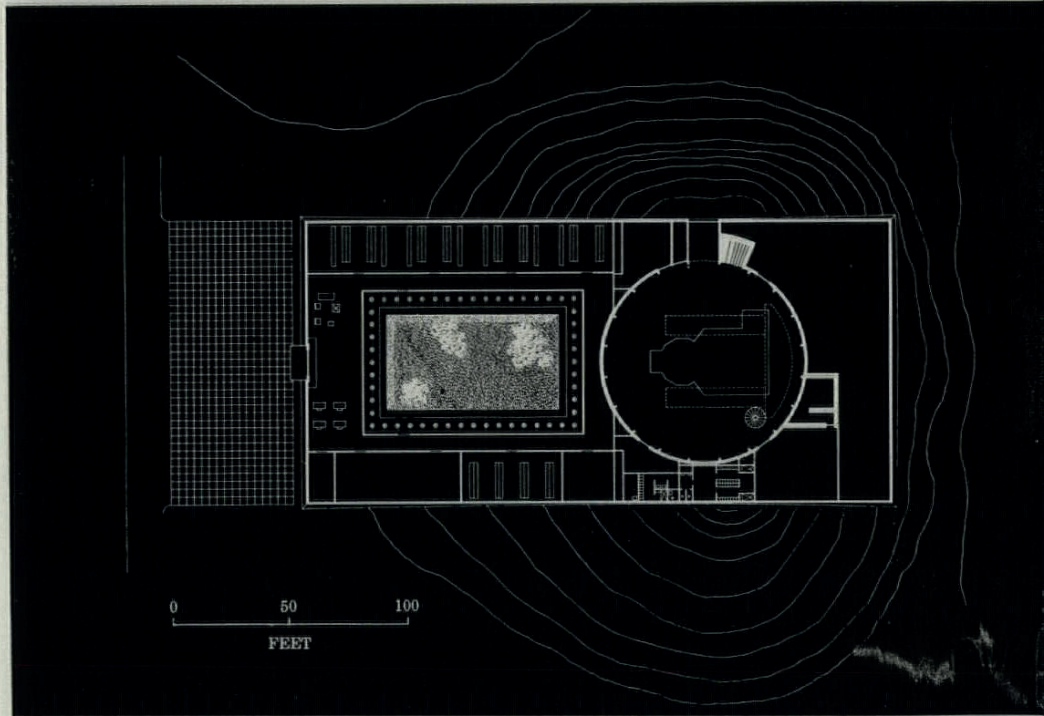
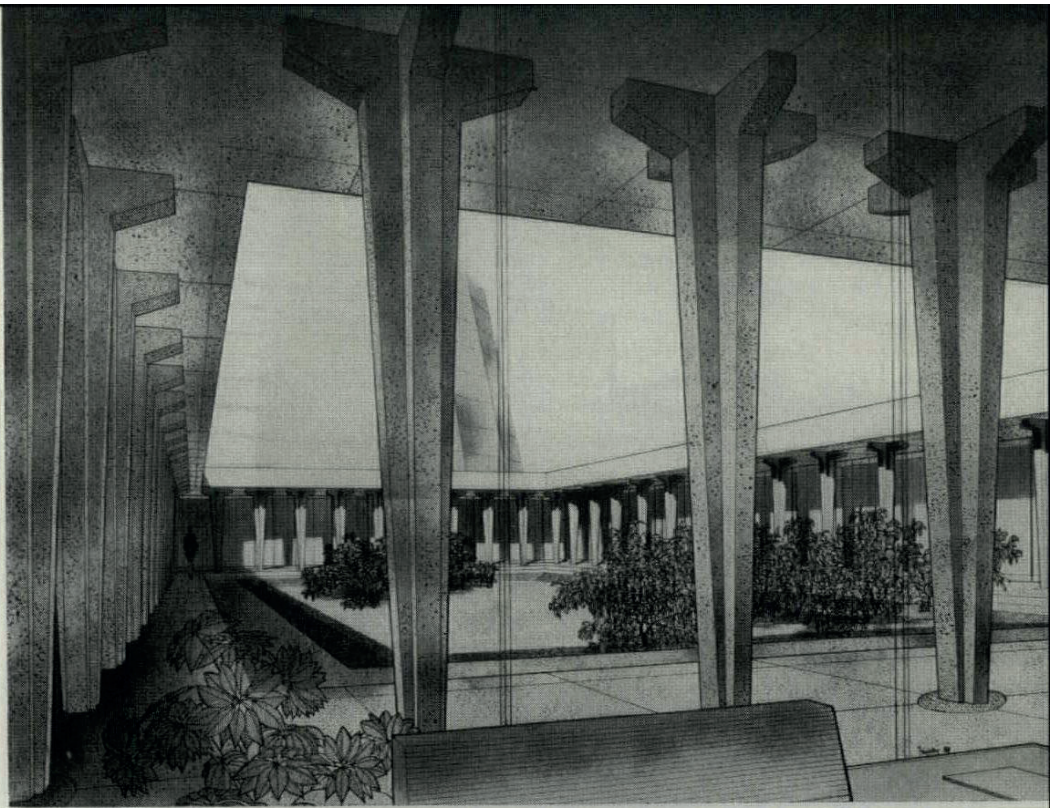
AXIS AND CLIMAX

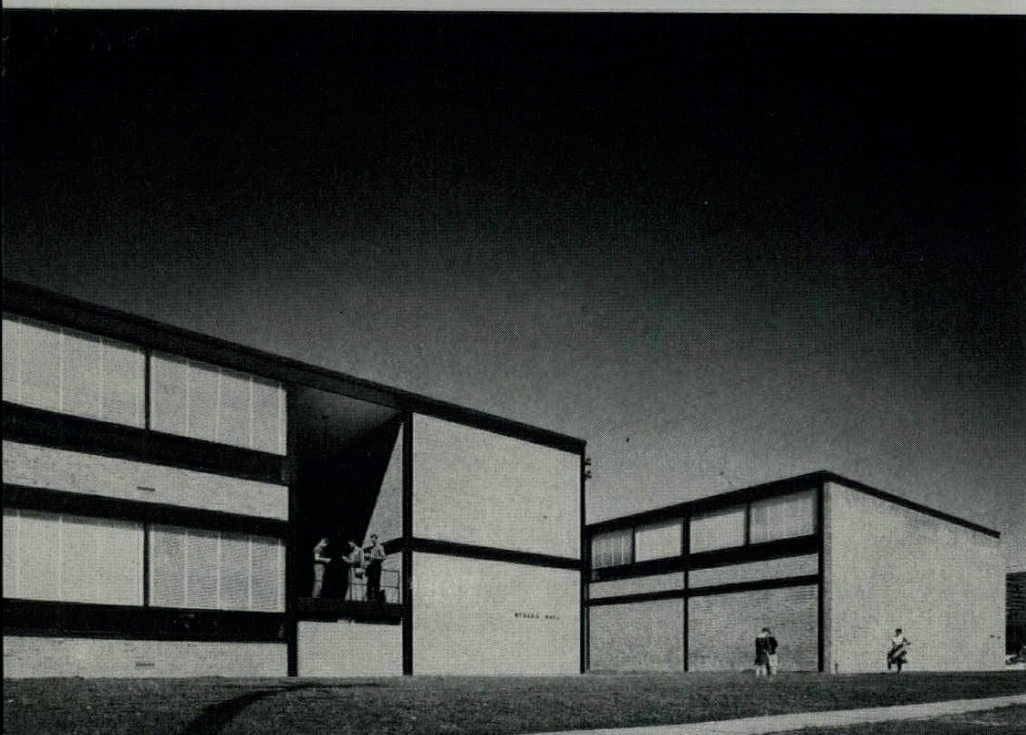
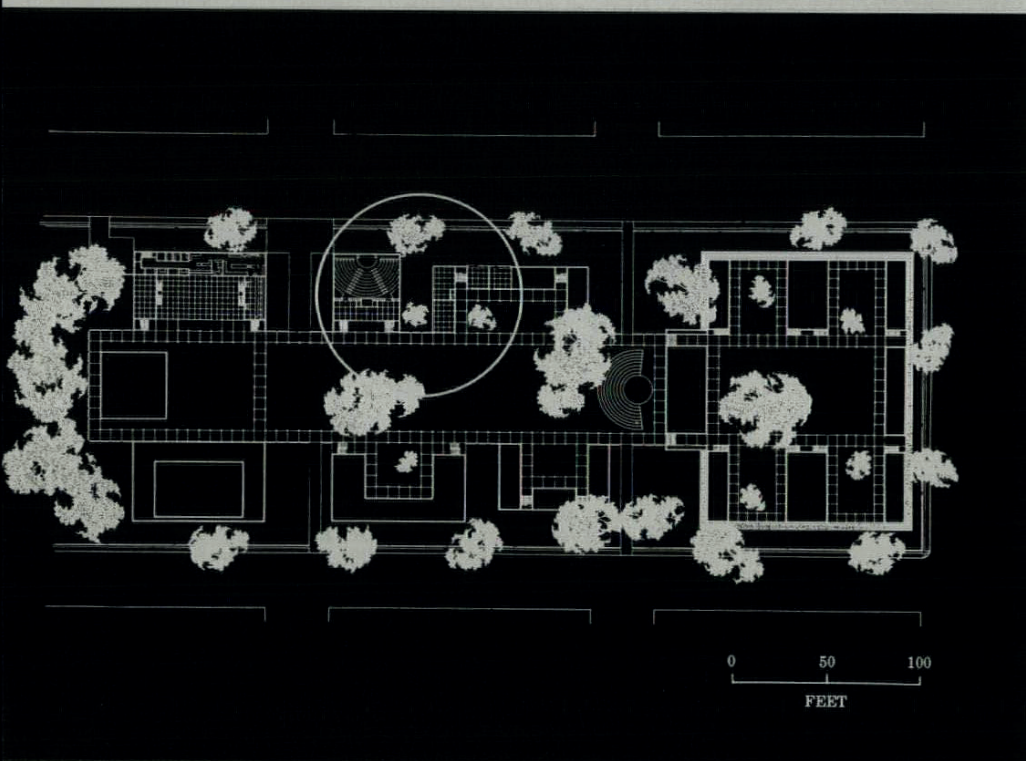
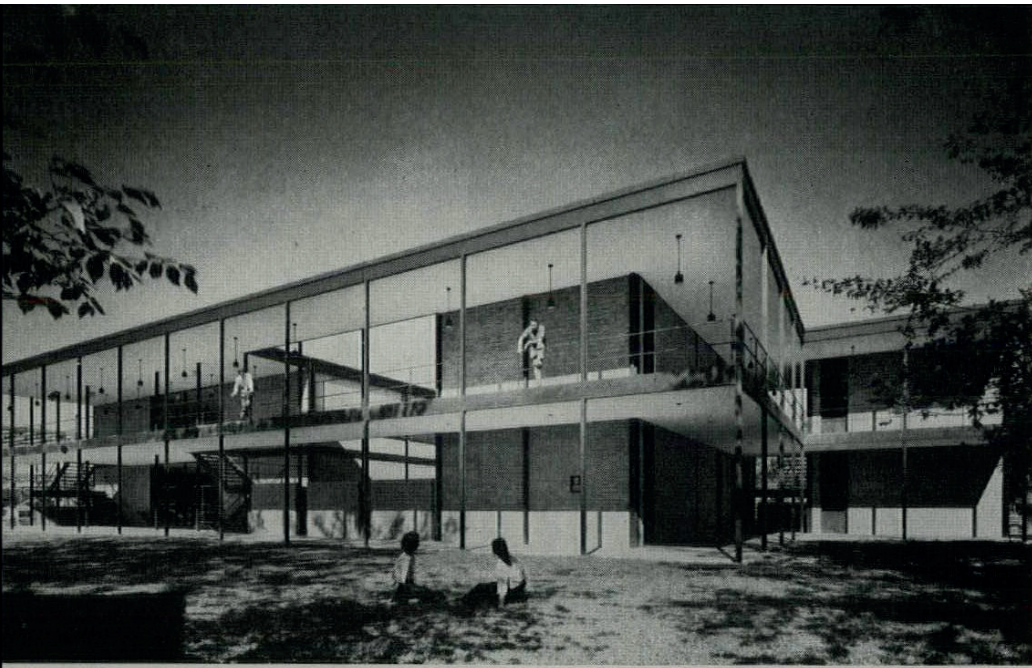
Structurally more radical than the Utica Museum are Johnson's Nuclear Reactor Building (outside U.S.—model photos, right) now nearly complete, and his shrine in New Harmony, Ind. (page 122), now in construction. Both buildings are gored circular structures, the reactor built of reinforced concrete, the shrine of wood frame covered with shingles. Both are on axis in rectangular enclosures, with the most important form topping other forms in a hierarchical fashion. Both are reminiscent of the undulating baroque shapes of Borromini and the complex geometric plans of Roman architecture.

The reactor dome rises above the battered walls of a rectangular podium containing offices and laboratories. The entire complex is formidably sealed against desert sun. Only a single entrance at the front and a truck entrance for the reactor at the side break into the walls of the podium.

Inside, the complex is a shaded garden oasis. Daylight is filtered from the open garden court through the glazed interior walls to the laboratories. The cross-shaped columns of reinforced concrete in the court may distantly recall Mies, but the elegant flared shapes are more reminiscent of the inverted columns of nearby Crete.

The concrete-surfaced reactor casing is shaped at its base like a drum, takes on a many-pointed star plan as it clears adjoining roofs, and is the same star at the top—but slightly smaller and with the points reversed (see rendering). The reversal gives the wall facets a subtle hyperbolic-paraboloid twist. The roof, also faceted, rises gently to a central bronze disk.





A COLONNADE

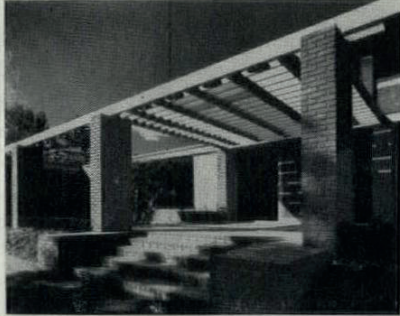
At the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Tex. (photos and plan, left) Johnson used a portico as a running colonnade, much as Jefferson did in imposing a large unity on many small buildings at the University of Virginia. The buildings at St. Thomas, unlike Jefferson's, vary in size, shape, and placement, and are simply hooked onto the back of the continuous galleries. And, unlike Jefferson's colonnade with its one- and two-story alternation, Johnson's all-two-story version holds a uniform cornice height. This cornice line is held across the classroom and dormitory buildings by simply raising the lower-ceilinged dormitory buildings on a 4 ft. artificial earth mound. This change of level, plus the closure of the dormitory quadrangle by a building across the main axis of the campus, nicely distinguishes the two separate functions.

The lightly framed colonnade marches across the front of the buildings in marked contrast to the buildings themselves, Miesian in weight and gravity. Occasionally, smaller courts are opened between the U-fronted classroom buildings and the colonnade, which ties the whole main quadrangle into a neat rectangle.

Johnson's several portico buildings demonstrate one of his architectural ambitions: "In addition to creating beautiful individual structures, I would like to be an architectural vulgarizer like Palladio. I would like to create designs which could be applied to cheap as well as to expensive buildings."

A PAVILION

The vitality of the Eric Boissonnas house in New Canaan, Conn. (photos and plan, right) derives from the rigid components of checkerboard, square bay, and pier out of which grows a free plan. The checkerboard, eight units across by five units deep, was marked off on an artificial earth

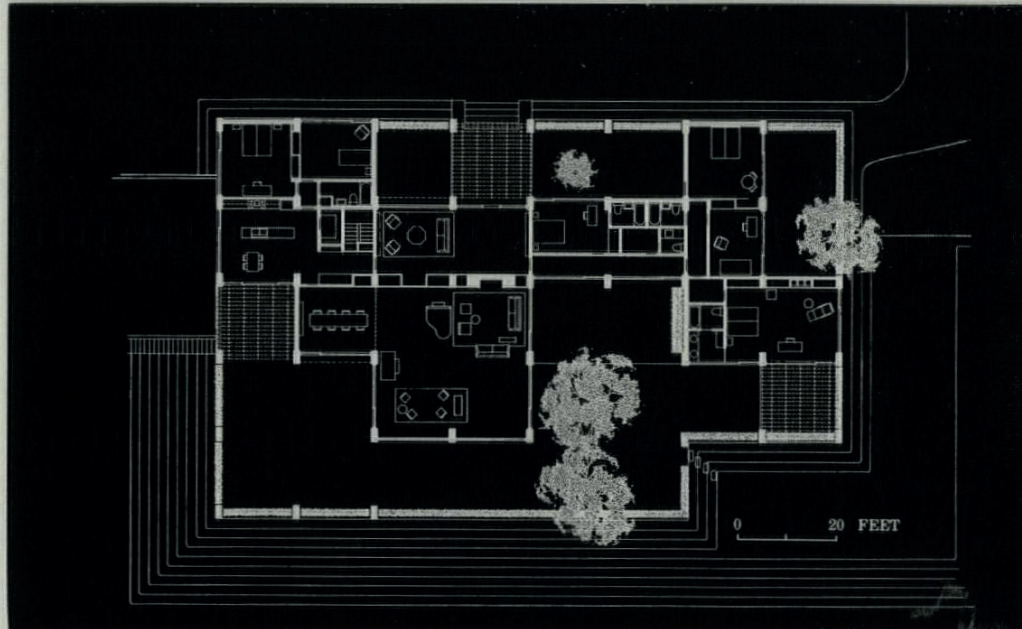


terrace overlooking a landscape of woods and water. Once the 16 ft. squares were established, the composition grew into three dimensions by enclosing some of the rectangular building bays as rooms and leaving others open as outdoor space. The rooms, indoors or out, retain a sense of the original "bays."

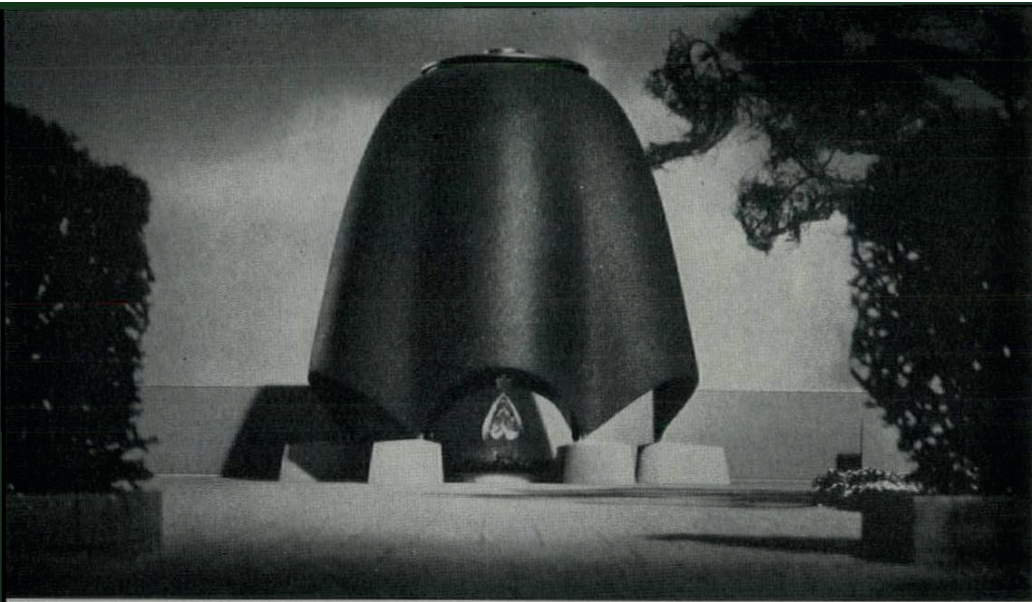
The rectangular piers, two bricks wide and four bricks long, assume a double role; they are columns when seen head-on and slabs when viewed from the side. As columns they mark points in space; as slabs they direct the eye from the entrance to the rear terraces in accordance with the plan.

The dignity and liveliness of the Boissenas house are most evident at its climax in the grand salon, appropriately furnished in Louis Quinze style. Here the contrast of high spaces and low, of sunlight and shadow, of formality and informality, provides a space exceptional in modern architecture and unique in Johnson's work.

While the prototype of the house is certainly the add-a-unit plan of the Japanese house, the thin wooden roof on heavy piers derives from recollections of pergolas in Italy. Johnson also admits to having been influenced by Le Corbusier's week-end house at Vaucresson and, possibly, by Louis Kahn's strongly bounded building bays.



PHOTOS: © ERNA STOLLER

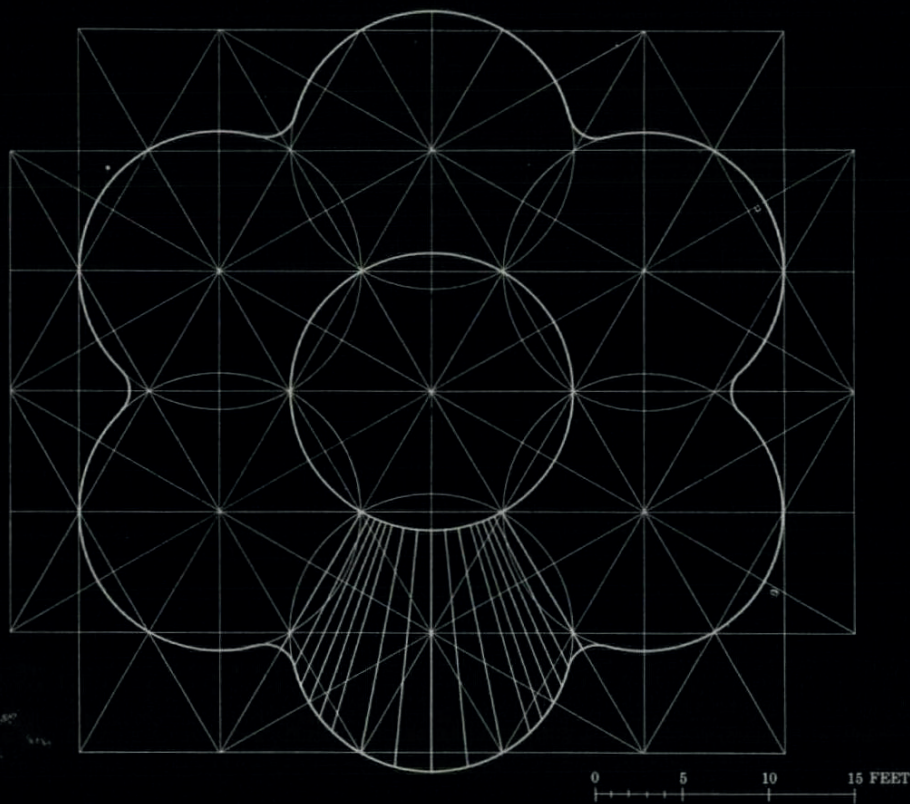


THE DOME

As architecture, the shrine in New Harmony, Ind. (model photos, left) is an unusual commission. Johnson, in simply sheltering a Lipsehitz sculpture under a hood, took liberties he might hardly have hazarded in a more complicated building. The structure is now being built in the unspoiled country where Rappites and Owenites plotted their utopias.

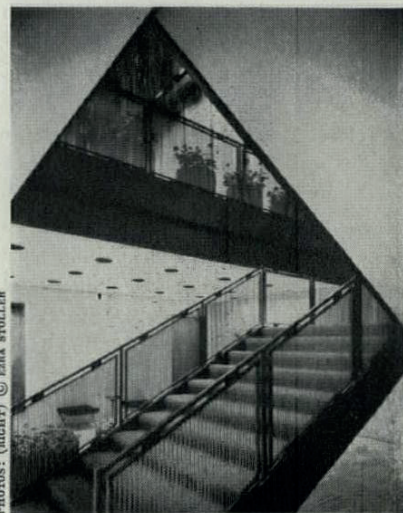
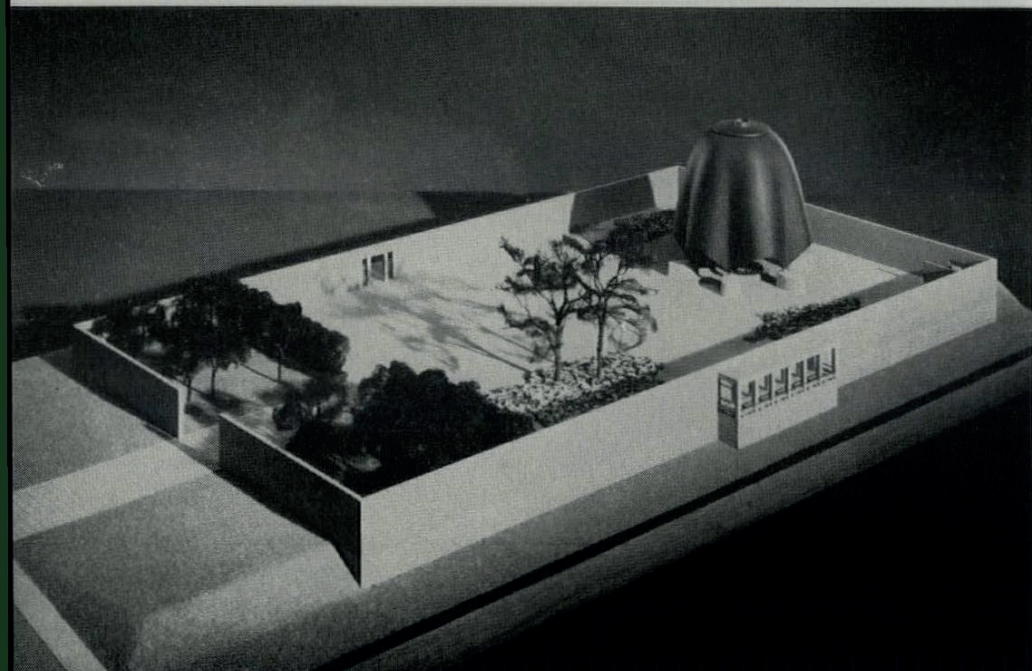
The ground plan for the 50 ft. high hood of lapped wood shingles is formed of six interlocking circles surrounding an inner circle. The outside contour of the circles is one track and the inner circle the other track for the parabolic curves of the hood. Wood bents rise in the valleys as "columns" and curved horizontal "ribs" arch outward from column to column to provide a base for the plywood sheathing.

The large axial portal, which Johnson added at the request of Sculptor Lipschitz, serves only on ceremonial occasions. For everyday use there remains the small side entrance. Across the court is an open balcony overlooking the Wabash River.



MOVEMENT

In the sumptuous Four Seasons Restaurant in the Seagram Building (below and right), thin chains of colored aluminum looped across the windows undulate with currents from the air-conditioning system. In the cocktail lounge, suspended clusters of brass rods by Sculptor Richard Lippold create an animated aurora borealis. Stair rails are supported on two staggered rows of thin rods which seem to flicker as the steps are mounted.



PHOTOS: (RIGHT) © EZRA STOLLER

