



December 5, 2020

Subject: Letter to MoMA and the GSD

Dear Mitch and other members of the Johnson Study Group:

Thank you for this note, which I take very seriously—both as dean of the GSD and as a designer. Philip Johnson’s global influence in architecture in the 20th century and his grip on the field even now, 15 years after his death, cannot be overstated. And the power he wielded and continues to wield make it critical that not only his own work as an architect and curator continues to be reappraised, but also that the consequences and persistent legacy of his influence in shaping the field and canon of architecture continue to be scrutinized. His racism, his fascism, and his strenuous support of white supremacy have absolutely no place in design.

At Harvard, the GSD owns a private residence in Cambridge that Johnson designed and built for his thesis project at the GSD, when he attended the school in the 1940s. At the university, the house doesn’t have an official name on record, although it is usually referred to as the Thesis House, or the Philip Johnson Thesis House, or some variation. But I fully agree with your strong point about the power of institutional naming, and the integrity and legitimacy it confers. And so we are taking steps to officially recognize the house within the university as simply “9 Ash Street”—the house’s physical address.

As you put it, this is a minor but clarifying step in making room for other legacies to come. I agree about this, too. We do not pretend to think our work, as a school, ends here. At the GSD, we are committed to doing our part to bring much-needed, long-overdue change to the field, to a fundamental reorientation toward inclusion. Johnson’s influence runs deep and wide, and across generations, and yet he is also just one figure among the entrenched, paradigmatic racism and white supremacy of architecture. Undoing that legacy—of the field, not only of Johnson—is arduous and necessary, and as a school and community we are committed to seeing it through.

Regards,  
Sarah

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