

Doing a house is so much harder than  
doing a skyscraper. **PHILIP JOHNSON**



# Blueprints

ISSUE 10

*Occasional Musings of a New Jersey based architect*

## WHEN TO RENOVATE, WHEN TO BUILD NEW

Recently I have been finding many new clients with the same dilemma: “should we renovate/reconstitute an existing house, or should we build from scratch?” Without knowledge of costs, options and building restrictions, it’s impossible for them to know exactly where the tipping point lies when deciding between renovating an existing house, or tearing it down to build something new. These are some of the issues they need to consider:

**COST.** New construction costs are easier to estimate than renovations as there are so many variables and unknowns in renovation, particularly when removing parts of the existing structure. Also, significantly changing the footprint can be expensive, whereas building upward within the existing footprint is often more cost-effective.

**EXISTING HOUSE STYLE.** Modern houses are few and far between in this part of the world. While I’ve done some modern interior renovations in colonial style homes, they are not ideally suited to creating a modern look on the outside.

And while ranches and split-levels tend to have better transforming potential given their typical mid-century origin, their existing designs are often hap-hazard and quirky.

**REUSE POTENTIAL.** In deciding between a renovation and a tear-down, the first thing you want to examine is the layout and condition of the house, and its potential for transformation. The simple rearrange-

ment of elements within the house (moving or opening up walls, replacing windows and doors, etc) is often the most cost-effective way to transform a house.

Another major factor in deciding on whether to remodel or tear down and rebuild lies in the materials and systems in the existing structure. When it is clear that very little of existing structure and mechanical systems can be reused, it may be a sign that the home is not a good candidate for renovation.

**SITE RESTRICTIONS.** State and municipal site restrictions can be a significant factor. In some neighborhoods, there may be zoning laws that limit the scope of construction of a new structure on the lot or an addition to the exiting house.

In some cases, even while an existing house may not conform to zoning codes, it might still be “grandfathered-in”, even with a total renovation. At the same time, the new zoning might severely limit the potential of building a new house of similar size.

In other instances, the existing house may be situated in a way that adding on still can’t achieve the owner’s goals.

If the property and location are nonetheless ideal for the client, it would make sense to tear-down and build from scratch.

As you see, the process can be daunting, and decisions that are made have lasting consequence. The expertise I offer clients will help them see where that tipping point is, and then they can make good, educated decisions on how to proceed.





Philip Johnson's iconic "Glass House" in New Canaan, CT. Inset picture to the right shows the lesser known "Brick House" in the distance.

#### ICONIC MODERNISM

# The Rock-star Architect, And the Poet Architect

It's probably not well known that Philip Johnson is not particularly admired by architects; he was regarded as something of an opportunist, an architect of modest talent, but who found himself in the right place at the right time. That place was New York City, and the time was mid 20th century when the art world's focus moved to the US, and Johnson was instrumental in promoting International Style modernism. Some would say that his interest in architecture was in "form" with-

out any anchoring philosophy. He did however create a building that is widely regarded as an enduring icon; The Glass House.

Built in 1949 in New Canaan, CT, the Glass House was described by New York Times architecture critic Nicolai Ouroussoff as "once one of the most famous houses in the United States. Its celebrity may have done more to make Modernism palatable to the country's social elites than any other structure of the 20th century."

Hard to believe I hadn't been there before, but recently I finally made it to the Glass House. Although I'd



seen many photos over the years, you can only appreciate in person the sense of serenity that is achieved by being within this transparent house surrounded by the carefully curated landscape outside. In fact, the Glass House is less of a practical home than it is a pavilion for entertaining and “camping out”. The companion Brick House across the yard provided guest accommodations with more private facilities and was conceived as an essential mate to the glass house. Johnson ended up mostly sleeping in the Brick House as well.

The concept for the glass house was inspired by Mies

Van Der Rohe’s Farnsworth house in Plano, IL. Johnson saw Mies’ design drawings and then completed his own house first. Although architecturally it’s not up to par with Mies’ creation, it doesn’t compromise the modernist architect’s goal of making buildings light, transparent, expressed in steel and glass.

At roughly the same time another architect was quietly blazing a different trail. That was Louis Kahn. Unlike most of the International Style architects, who sought lightness and transparency in their designs, Kahn built structures that are massive (often monolithic) and yet lyrical. He is

regarded by architects with as much affection as respect. His legacy is small but powerful, having built enduring structures that were inspired by ancient buildings and the sense of place and permanence they conveyed. His buildings are solid and heavy, using concrete and brick to create his forms, with a mastery of bringing in natural light

On the other end of the modernism spectrum from the Glass House, Kahn’s Esherick house, was built in Philadelphia in 1961. The monolithic structure was carved out to provide windows and insets of warming materials. The street facing facade more solid than

**Louis Kahn’s Esherick House**

the open face to the privacy of the back garden.

I was lucky to catch the extensive retrospective exhibit of Kahn’s work at the Fabric Workshop and Museum in Philadelphia before it closed. Models, sketches and photographs trace this modern master’s journey to greatness. Having spent a high school summer working in his office, I have a special fondness for Kahn’s legacy, beyond the power of his architecture.



JPM



I'm happy to report that we have recently expanded our office and have more than doubled our space. With a growing desire for modern design in the suburbs, we are fortunate to be seen as the "go to" architectural firm in NJ for modern home design. I want to thank all of our clients who have contributed to our growth and reputation-building. We will showcase some of our new projects in future newsletters.

## FAQs

### Custom home Design Projects

#### DO I NEED BOTH AN ARCHITECT AND INTERIOR DESIGNER FOR MY PROJECT?

THAT DEPENDS ON YOUR CHOICE of architect and your preferences. Typically, architects are responsible for the space planning, structure and exterior of the building, while interior designers are called upon to do kitchens, bathrooms, and select interior finishes. However, some architects (including us) also excel in interior planning and finish work, so you will have a **single source of both creative vision and responsibility**. If you use a separate designer, make sure they collaborate with the architect so all decisions are coordinated to achieve an harmonious design throughout.

#### HOW CAN I GET A GOOD UNDERSTANDING OF DIFFERENT DESIGN STYLES AND FIGURE OUT WHAT I LIKE BEST?

UNTIL RECENTLY, PEOPLE WOULD buy design magazines and cut out pictures they liked. Today's online resources provide a much easier process and more comprehensive range of images to search and select from.

A great website for residential design is [houzz.com](http://houzz.com). They have an enormous library of images submitted by architects, designers and suppliers that are easily sorted by room type, style, and budget. You can create "Ideabooks" on their website, where you save images you like. Use them like file folders to separate different aspects of the project. After a while you will notice patterns develop that illuminate exactly what "your style" is. This is also a great tool to share with your architect, who can then help you synthesize this into a cohesive design aesthetic that you helped to create.

Pinterest is another source for searching for images with keywords. Like houzz, you create "Boards", which are collections of images with links back to the original source. You can "pin" photos from almost any source to your Pinterest boards, so you're not restricted to their own web site for reference material.

#### HOW LONG WILL MY PROJECT TAKE?

THINK ABOUT AND SHARE WITH your architect key target dates that are important to you. When do you want to start and finish the project? Bear in mind, as a rule of thumb, depending on the scope of the project, it takes at least 4-8 months to finalize the design, prepare construction drawings, hire a contractor, and obtain building permits before construction work can begin. If you need a zoning variance to build your project, this process can add several months. You are less likely to be disappointed if you allow at least 6-9 months for work on existing homes and about 12-18 months for new homes. Times may vary depending on the scope and complexity of your project.

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Find answers to frequently asked questions about custom home renovations at our website:

**[GARYROSARD.COM/RESOURCES](http://GARYROSARD.COM/RESOURCES)**