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## **Philip Johnson**

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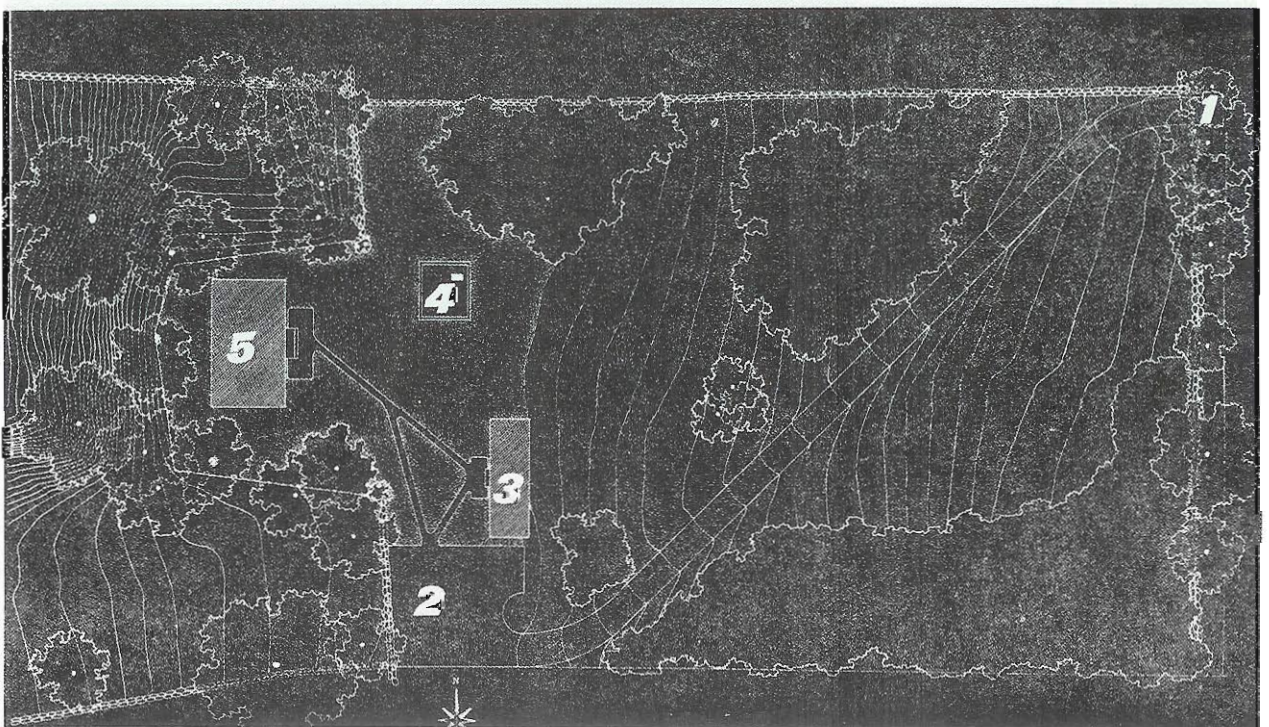
# House at New Canaan, Connecticut

## HOUSE AT NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

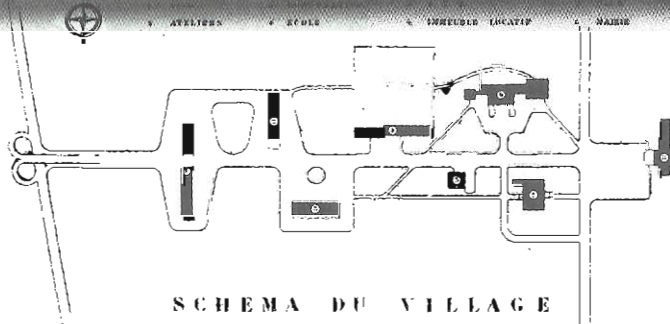
PHILIP JOHNSON: ARCHITECT

The latest development in 'skin and bones' architecture\* is Philip Johnson's glass house, which he has designed for his own occupation. Since the work is proclaimed by the architect as frankly derivative, in this publication of it and the adjacent guest building, Mr. Johnson has followed the unusual and, it should be granted, praiseworthy expedient of revealing the sources of his inspiration. These are presented in consecutive order, and precede the illustrations of the two houses. The commentary is Philip Johnson's own.

\* A. Johnson states that by "skin and bones" he means the structural system of which he is the leading exponent.



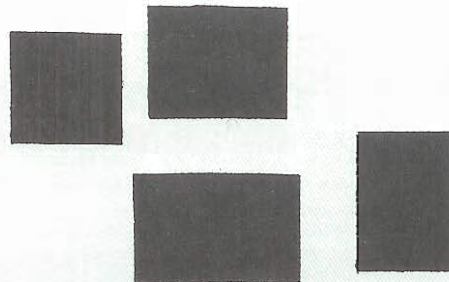




1 Le Corbusier: Farm Village Plan—1933.

The approach to the house through meadow and copse is derived from English Eighteenth Century precedent. The actual model is Count Pückler's estate at Muskau in Silesia. The driveway is straight, however, like the pathways in the plan above. The footpath pattern between the two houses I copied from the spiderweb-like forms of Le Corbusier, who delicately runs his communications without regard for the axis of his buildings or seemingly for any kind of pattern.

THEO VAN DOESBURG  
GENERALBASS DER MALEREI

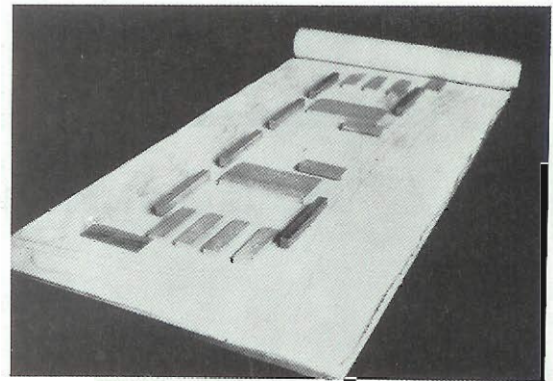


3 Theo Van Doesburg: The Basso Continuo of Painting. (Published in "G" an avant garde magazine by Mies van der Rohe in 1922).

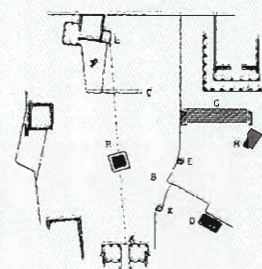
The idea of asymmetric sliding rectangles was furthest developed in the De Stijl aesthetics of war-time Holland. These shapes, best known to posterity through the painting of the late Piet Mondrian, still have an enormous influence on many other architects besides myself.

Mies van der Rohe: Ideal arrangement of Illinois Institute of Technology Buildings, 1939.

The arrangement of the two buildings and the statue group is influenced by Mies' theory of organizing buildings in a group. The arrangement is rectilinear but the shapes tend to overlap and slide by each other in an asymmetric manner.



4 Plan and Perspective of the Acropolis at Athens from Choisy: L'Histoire de l'Art Grecque.



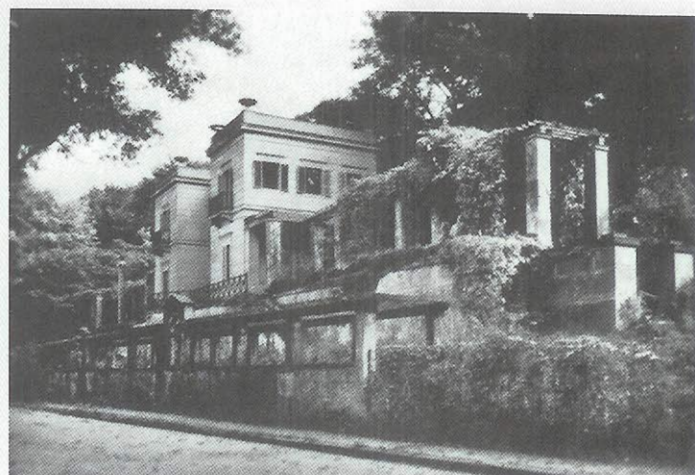
Choisy proved that the Greeks restricted the angle of approach to their buildings to the oblique; also that they placed their monuments so that only one major building dominated the field of vision from any given point. The grouping of my buildings follows Choisy: from the focal point at the beginning of the footpath near the parking lot, the brick house (Propylaea) is passed and forms a wall on the right hand. The statue group (Athene Promachos) is in full view slightly to the right. The glass house comes into view (from an oblique angle) only after the pine tree at the angle of the promontory is circumnavigated.





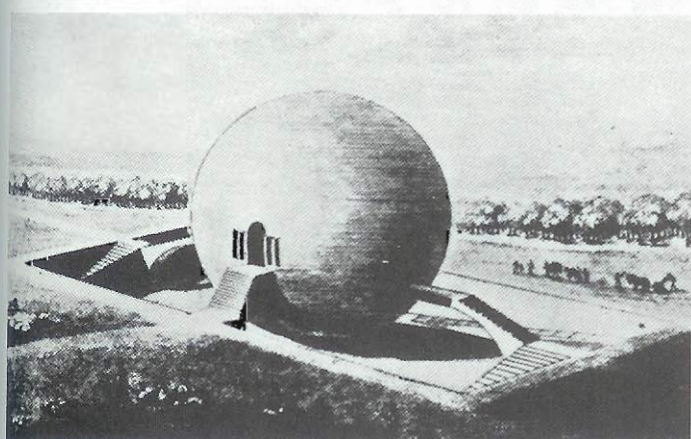
5 Karl Friedrich Schinkel: Casino in Glienicke Park near Potsdam c. 1830.  
Entrance façade.

*The site relation of my house is pure Neo-Classic Romantic—more specifically, Schinkesque. Like his Casino my house is approached on dead-level and, like his, faces its principal (rear) façade toward a sharp bluff.*



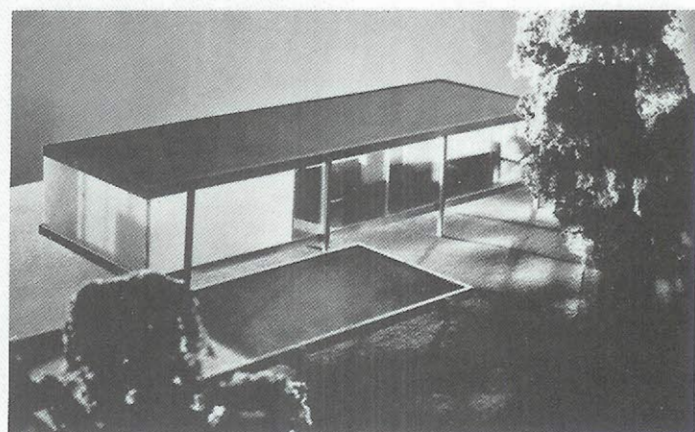
6 Karl Friedrich Schinkel: Casino in Glienicke Park near Potsdam c. 1830.  
Terrace overlooking the Havel.

*The Eighteenth Century preferred more regular sites than this and the Post-Romantic Revivalists preferred hill tops to the cliff edges or shelves of the Romantics (Frank Lloyd Wright, that great Romantic, prefers shelves or hillsides).*



7 Claude Nicholas Ledoux: Maison des Gardes Agricoles, at Maupertuis c. 1780.

*The cubic, "absolute" form of my glass house, and the separation of functional units into two absolute shapes rather than a major and minor massing of parts comes directly from Ledoux, the Eighteenth Century father of modern architecture. (See Emil Kaufmann's excellent study Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier.) The cube and the sphere, the pure mathematical shapes, were dear to the hearts of those intellectual revolutionaries from the Baroque, and we are their descendants.*



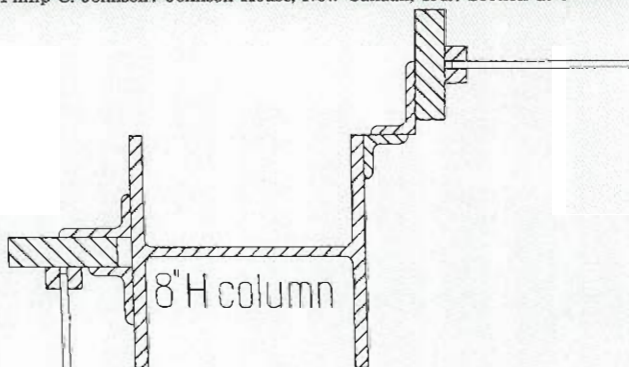
8 Mies van der Rohe: Farnsworth House, 1947. (Now under construction near Chicago).

*The idea of a glass house comes from Mies van der Rohe. Mies had mentioned to me as early as 1945 how easy it would be to build a house entirely of large sheets of glass. I was sceptical at the time, and it was not until I had seen the sketches of the Farnsworth House that I started the three-year work of designing my glass house. My debt is therefore clear, in spite of obvious difference in composition and relation to the ground.*

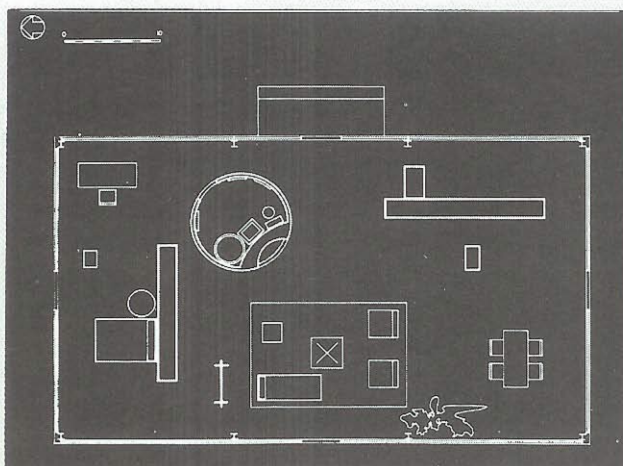


## Philip Johnson

9 Philip C. Johnson: Johnson House, New Canaan, 1949. Section at corner



Many details of the house are adapted from Mies' work, especially the corner treatment and the relation of the column to the window frames. This use of standard steel sections to make a strong and at the same time decorative finish to the facade design is typical of Mies' Chicago work. Perhaps if there is ever to be "decoration" in our architecture it may come from manipulation of stock structural elements such as this (may not Mannerism be next?).

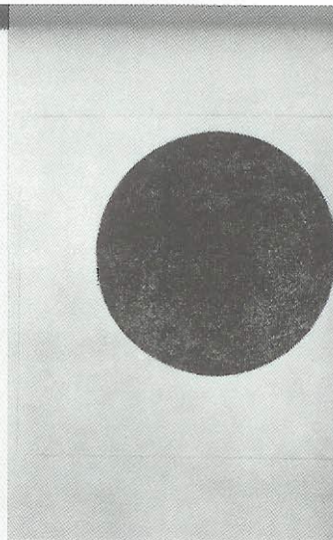


10 Johnson House: Plan of Glass Unit.

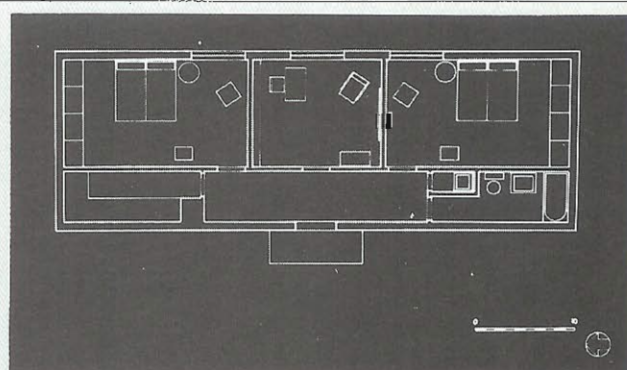
North end, sleeping and writing; brick cylinder - bathroom and toilet; south end, cooking, lunch room, dining; rear, sitting.

Except for the cylinder, the plan of the house is Miesian. The use of 6 foot closets to divide yet unite space is his. The grouping of the furniture asymmetrically around a coffee table is his. The relation of cabinets to the cylinder, however, is more "painterly" than Mies would sanction.

11 Kasimir Malevich: Suprematist Element: Circle—1913.



Although I had forgotten the Malevich picture, it is obviously the inspiration for the plan of the glass house. Malevich proved what interesting "unit-rounding" areas could be created by correctly placing a circle in a rectangle. Abstract painting of forty years ago remains even today the strongest single aesthetic influence on the grammar of architecture.



12 Johnson House: Plan of Brick Unit.

Two double guest bedrooms with study between; combined entrance hall-picture gallery with storage room at one end; bathroom and shower at the other.

The guest house with Baroque plan central corridor and three symmetrically placed rooms, was derived from Mies' designs. The three round windows in the rear of the facade are a Renaissance approach to a Miesian motif. Mies uses the round window as a method of admitting light in a long brick wall in a manner least to disturb the continuity of the wall. A rectangular hole would compete in direction with the shape of the wall itself. I used the round windows for the same reason, with a totally different compositional effect.



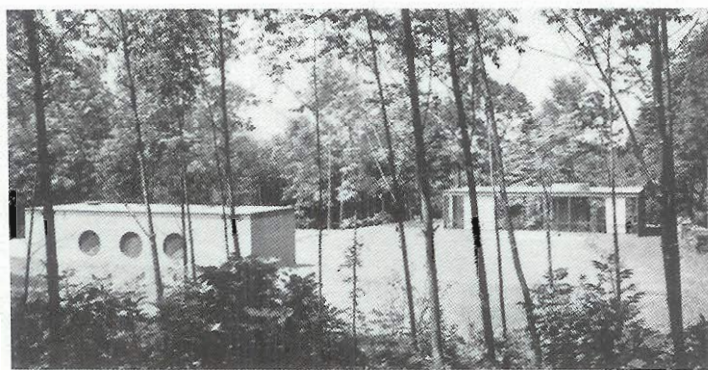


13. Johnson House: North End of West Wall.

*The multiple reflections on the 18' pieces of plate glass, which seem superimposed on the view through the house, help give the glass a type of solidity; a direct Miesian aim which he expressed twenty-five years ago: "I discovered by working with actual glass models that the important thing is the play of reflections and not the effect of light and shadow as in ordinary buildings."*

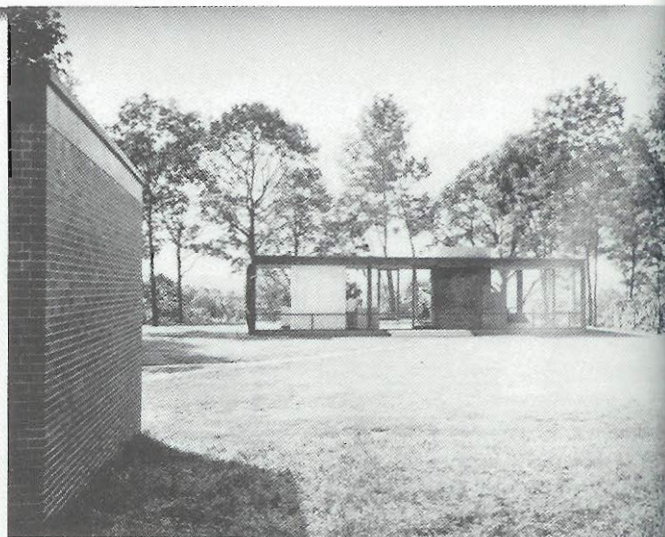


## Philip Johnson

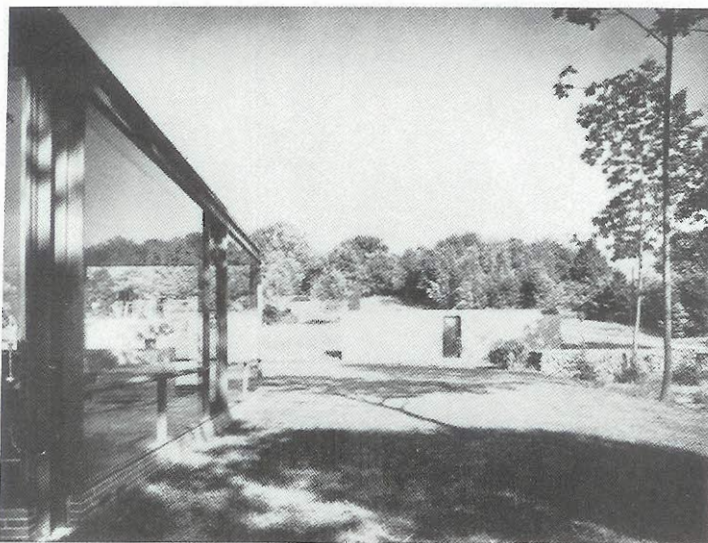


**14** Johnson House: General View of Brick and Glass Units.

*The bi-axial symmetry of each façade of the glass house is as absolute as Ledoux and much purer than any Baroque example. Opposite sides of my house are identical and the "minor" axis is almost as developed as the "major". (Is there a slight left-over of Baroque in the fact that the front door is in the long elevation?)*



**15** Johnson House: Entrance Façade of Glass Unit.

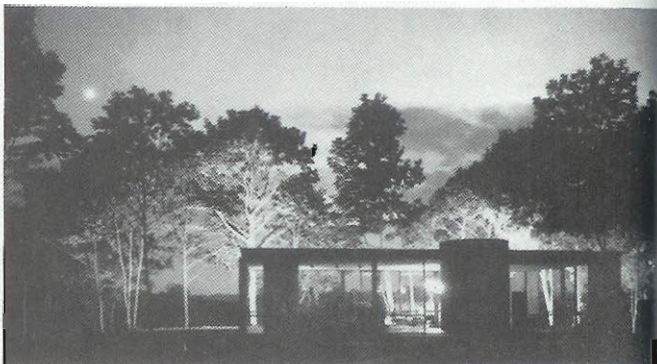


**16** Johnson House: Entrance Façade of Brick Unit.

*The guest house with central door and severely axial plan is jointly descended from the Baroque and from designs by Mies. (See 12.)*

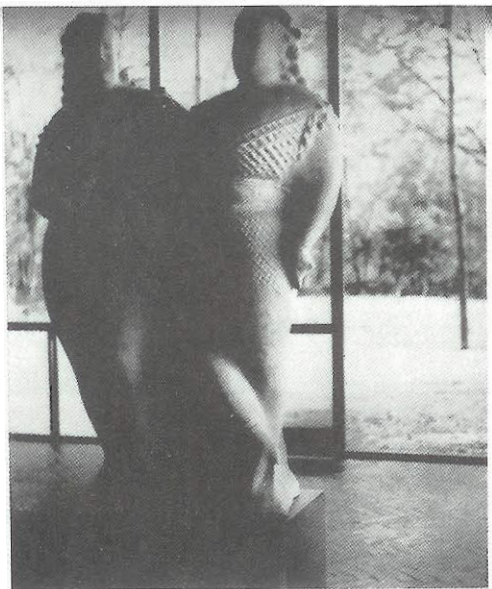
**17** Johnson House: Glass Unit at Night.

*The cylinder, made of the same brick as the platform from which it springs, forming the main motif of the house, was not derived from Mies, but rather from a burnt wooden village I saw once where nothing was left but foundations and chimneys of brick. Over the chimney I slipped a steel cage with a glass skin. The chimney forms the anchor.*



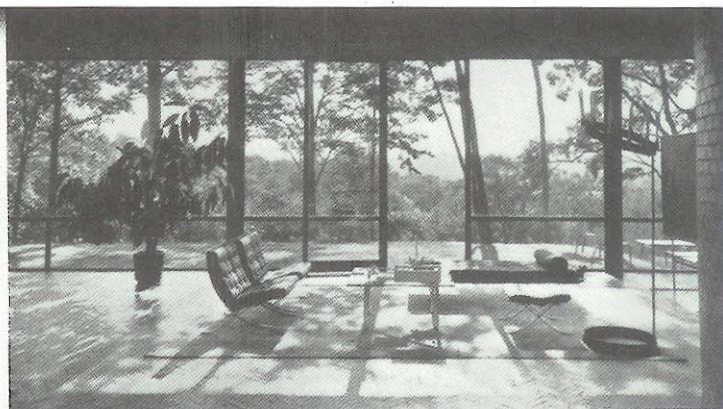


18 Johnson House: Interior looking south.



19 Johnson House: Sculpture Group.

The papier-mâché sculpture by Nadelman provides the type of foil which this kind of building needs (Mies again established the precedent in his Barcelona Pavilion).



20 Johnson House: Interior looking west.

The view of the valley, with its repoussoir of giant trees, is contrived with the aid of many Baroque landscapes. A view without a frame seems impossible after the Seventeenth Century.



21 Johnson House: Cooking Unit.

The kitchen I reduced to a simple bar so that it would not close off any space. I have no idea what precedent I followed on that.



22 Johnson House: Interior, north-east corner.

Bed and writing desk, with strips of pandanus cloth hanging from the ceiling—the only screening I felt to be necessary.

\*(See photograph on page 38.) Mies van der Rohe has not only influenced the concept of the house. He has designed all of the furniture—some of it a quarter century ago, none of it later than 1930.