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Letters from Johnson to J.J.Oud

Philip C. Johnson Archive

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(5 photocopies: 17 September "an bord der Bremen" 3p.  
April 16, 1932 2p.  
1-1-46 1 p.  
27 April 1946 2p.  
20 May 1946 1p.

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106 East 56

New York 22

27 April '46

Dear friend Oud,

Yes, you must have thought that everything had gone wrong over here that I have not written for so long. It is not that I have not thought of you but that I have not written anyone, not even my mother. I am very ashamed. Life goes along here much as before the war except that everyone has more money than then and there are more people everywhere, more cars etc.

First the car. It seems it is impossible to ship things as big as cars at this time and even if we could, where would I get it? You can buy very bad second hand ones for \$1200 or so, but that is a lot of money for something *not* much good and would cost that much again to send over to you even if we could. The English only have cars for export as we understand. I don't see why you could not get one of these. Would it help you if I sent you my bicycle? I think I have one in Cambridge, but I lent it out for the war and don't know where it is. If I can find it I should be glad to give it to you. (I say, give it, rather than sell it because I do not believe that you will ever be able to export money to this country without government permission nor will you have enough even then to buy what you need) Let me know on this!

No I am not working on the Memorials. There was no interest in this country on anything so monumental. Everyone here is working on the Existenz-Minimum which you remember was a great favorite of the Bauhaus. Gropius is the great leader here and no one that designs anything except a Harvard type building can win prizes. It is very discouraging. And Harvard thinks that Memorials are sentimental and useless as I wrote in the article that I think I sent to you. So I could not get the show together and dropped it. What is keeping me busy is building three buildings, two houses and a little hospital wing. I shall send you photos when they are done though you will say that they are too international too lacking in real architectural value, too simple. You may be right, but I can only do what seems good to me at the time and when I shall change I do not foresee. The houses are less "Mies" than my first, but still very formal and flat roofed. I wonder what you will say. I shall come and visit

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you some time and then we can go over the whole field to see what has happened since we last met.

About the books you ask for: I do not consider any of them particularly interesting for you. Perhaps the Mumford however, which I have not read. I shall send that to you. The Swedish stuff you have seen, the Churchill book is a Marxian argument, the new Wright books are no where near as good as the autobiography and whereas there is some new stuff in the new edition, I feel that if you have the old, you will not need it. However, I shall be glad to send you what you need..

Mies has been in town for a week and we have had long discussions about Berlage and you and modern architecture. He has put up two more buildings since the one you saw illustrated in Built in USA which are still more "negative" than that one, if negative is the right word. Most architects and critics think that his slogan of "beinahe nichts" has now gone so far that there is really nichts. I don't know. I very much enjoy the rationale of it all, the lack of indeterminate dimensions and shapes, the clean, brushed-hair effect of the cornice, the symmetry of the facade. The windows were meant to be different, but you are right, Mies allowed them to go through and thinks them beautiful. After all, he says, it is a foundry and why should it look like anything else. It seems right to me. The detailing of the steel with the brick is clean and pleasing. History will tell us and tell us no doubt very soon.

For the Museum I am commissioned to do a book on Mies' work which will be a pleasure and also a small exhibition of large photos for schools on what is modern architecture. Since I no longer know as much about "what is modern architecture" as I did ten years ago that will be very difficult.

So you see I am busy and why I do not write oftener. Please however, you write me. Congratulations to your son on his wedding. I am very pleased.

Also tell me what parcel to send next. What is the greatest need? Cigarettes, coffee and what else? Perhaps you have enough of the staples in food now and would rather have clothes. Please tell me.

Love to you and yours,

*Philip*

*What wedding present for the newly weds?*

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106 East 56

New York 22

20 May 1946

Dear Oud,

I was pained to think that I had caused you pain about the "beggar people". No, I consider you a proud people with a future as well as a past. My reference was to exchange difficulties, a function which I believe governments will more and more take over to the detriment of us private people who wish to trade internationally. No reference to Holland!

I have continued to ask about cars. But everyone thinks I am ~~not~~ joking and all say that it is quite out of the possible. We are importing cars from England; that is why I thought maybe you could do that and cheaper than we could too.

Did I mention the Existenz Minimum in my last letter? If I did I assure you I agree one hundred percent with your analysis. We in this country, being materialists, Puritans, meliorists, utilitarians, give no room to values of the spirit. Who will pay for Architecture? They pay only for planning for the existenz Minimum. That is the tragedy of Gropius and the Bauhaus idea in this country. It took root alas only too well. Now too late, Mr. Gropius complains that architecture should also be of the spirit. The fact that he must put that word "also" in proves that his main interest as also that of his School, is just the opposite of spirit. Mies of course agrees with you and me as does Frank Lloyd Wright. Mies now goes so far as to ask for a 3000 dollar fee before he begins work, as an Honorar just like a painter's.

Mies, by the way, has not yet seen the pictures of the Shell Building. He is as you know a great admirer of Berlage, as great as you; I wonder what he will say. He has been in New York a good deal recently and we have had long talks. He is a friend of yours. Frank Lloyd Wright also is here now and is doing wonderful things. He has 13 million dollars of business in his office now. His greatest success at the age of 75. A wonderful man and very encouraging to me.

Le Corbusier is also in New York and is quoted as saying that the trouble with France is that it was not destroyed enough, that people preferred to rebuild their bad buildings rather than begin again. Especially he was referring to St. Die. Do you have the same trouble, or are you able to design with some sort of free hand?

I am saving your letters to type up and show some chosen colleagues. Hope you don't mind. As ever,

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106 East 56  
 New York 22  
 New Year's Day  
 1 - 1 - '46

Dear friend Oud,

Your two good letters arrived about the same time. I am so glad you could use everything that I sent you. Tomorrow I shall send you some food that can be shipped directly from Denmark. I imagine you can use it all and give it to friends if you do not need it yourself.

Your remarks on architecture are very interesting. I don't think I am quite in Giedion's class and I must say I am very impressed by your analysis of national and international. I suppose being in America now where we have had so little Berlage and where Wright has been such an individualist, we have taken too hard to the International Style. But there seems little attraction for me an amore traditional approach. I agree with you the accent on domestic architecture is unfortunate. We all long to build larger more monumental building of the size of your SEELL. But I still cling to the love that the home can be a little monumental, like a Blondel or Gabriel Chasteau or pavillion. As for Mies, his school is less interesting than that Barcelona Favillion and the windows were changed in their proportions at the last minute by the builders to make them cheaper. But I like the purity, the careful brick work (which you have in Holland without question!) and I like the proportion, except for the changed windows. Wright I admit is the greatest architect in this country or maybe in the world, though I find him difficult to adopt as an example. He is so romantic and so little interested in the monumental as such.

And now I am working on a new house for myself which will be high ceiling and very monumental (like LeDoux whom I like very much) But I know not how it will come out. I shall send you prints.

You are so right that architecture needs rules. But are you right that rules are by nature traditional?

Since you have requested it I shall <sup>not</sup> tell my colleagues of your remarks, but I wish I could so they would be stimulated to talk and think. Perhaps some day you will write me a short paper which I can read to them (not to Giedion, who is back in Schweiz.)

My best to Mrs. and to Hans. Tell me what you need most now? Still soap?  
 Happy New Year!

*Philip*

*P.S. Jagas with you a great glass - lights in monuments. Only big stones, granite, marble etc.*

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PHILIP JOHNSON - 124 EAST 52 STREET - NEW YORK - TELEPHONE PLAZA 3 9568

April 16th, 1932.

Dear Mr. Oud:

I would so dearly like to have a long talk with you about the house and architecture in general. I feel that I must somehow come to Europe this summer, and it is barely possible that my sister may get married in England and in that case I shall have to come over. If I do, I shall make a flying trip to see you.

America becomes more and more difficult a place to find satisfaction in. The architecture gets worse and worse and the appreciation of real values seems to get less and less, and then "die H/itze" of New York life is depressing instead of exhilarating. I think of you living quietly in Holland and wish there was some way of attaining such a peace for myself. I must however do it vicariously by visiting you often.

You are right. A quick success would not in the end have been a permanent one, and a slow infiltration may be better.

I am sending you a copy of a magazine of which I am an associate editor. You can see by the attacks which we have published what the general attitude is.

I am horrified that you did not receive your catalogue and have sent you the three for which you cabled. You must not consider reimbursing me as I am only too glad to do anything I can for you, especially since my failure to obtain the \$100.00 from my committee. I am also sorry that I did not send the photographs of the model, but I had realized you would want them. I am sending some at once under separate cover. The Burgomaster of Rotterdam must have received his copy of the catalogue unless all our calculation in sending them out went astray.

There are some chances in America that I may be able to procure for you a more or less permanent teaching position if you want it. Do write and tell me under what conditions you would be willing to come to America; how much salary you would need; whether a teaching position would be what you want; and for how long you would wish a guaranteed salary due to your giving up your job in Rotterdam.

It is very interesting that you and Miës van der Rohe should be the European architects to have received the most acclaim in our Exhibition. You very largely on the grounds of your work as a housing architect in the Hook of Holland, and Miës van der Rohe largely on the luxury of his Tugendhat mansion. I invariably recommend you to any interested people as I am sure that Mies would not fit in with our American way of doing things. Le Corbusier is rather disliked as he is considered too outré, and people instinctively dislike houses on stilts. If only your model had been as graphic as that of Mies van der Rohe's with furniture, original color, and glass, I think your house would be as much admired as his, but as it is, the Tugendhat house attracts most of the rich people, as might be expected.

The Americans, as you can see by the catalogue, show up very badly. Frank Lloyd Wright was included only from courtesy and in recognition of his past contributions; Raymond Hood because some day he may be

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JOHNSON, 424 EAST 52 STREET, NEW YORK, TELEPHONE PLAZA 3 9563

Mr. J.J.P. Oud

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April 16th, 1932.

attracted into the fold by his opportunism; the Bowman Brothers because they are primarily steel engineers and might some day standardize a half-way decent steel house; Neutra and Howe & Lescaze because they are the only successful modern architects in America.

Please give my kindest regards to Mrs. Oud and your charming, shy but temperamental son, Hans, and believe me

Yours,

*Philip*

PJ/f

Mr. J.J.P. Oud  
Villeneuvesingel 29  
Hillegersberg  
Rotterdam, Holland.

*Russell Hitchcock sends his best,*

*Philip*

Philip S. Johnson Archive 123 B

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PHILIP JOHNSON, 424 E. 52nd St. NEW YORK CITY

Anberler "Bremen"

17 September

Dear Oud,

I have been putting off writing to you because I knew it would take a lot of time and energy to tell you everything that I ought to tell you about our travels. And now I have put it off so long that I am afraid the letter will have to go to America and back with this ship. I wish I could have stopped off on my way home to see you in Rotterdam but I am in too much of a hurry. I have so much to talk over with you that a mere letter will have to seem somewhat like a catalogue of events since I last wrote you from Berlin way back two months ago.

I must begin backwards because that is what is freshest in my mind. It is perhaps also the most exciting part of the trip since Holland. That is my meeting with Mies van der Rohe. Incidentally it is most interesting to see how the different architects with whom you are acquainted react to the mention of your name. Your dear friend Mendelsohn for instance, admitted to knowing you but was most unenthusiastic. And that leads me to another point. Mendelsohn somehow got the idea that he was to build a house for me in Berlin, a thing which I never thought of, and then when nothing came of that he was angry with me. Another theory of why he was so unpleasant to me is that he suspects that I want to say something bad about his architecture in the book, which is nearer the truth, but how he knew that I don't know. I tried all the ways and means in my power to get pictures from him and finally succeeded only through relatives of his wife. I should like to meet him sometime under an assumed name or something, because then he might be more pleasant to me. But to get back to Mies. He speaks of you with such enthusiasm as one of his most honored acquaintances. And Mies is very seldom enthusiastic about other architects. In fact you and Corbusier are the only ones that receive praise from him. It was curious how I got to know him so well. You know how impersonal and impassive he is. After seeing some of the rooms that he had decorated here in Berlin, I got the idea of getting him to do my room in New York for me. I went to call on him with my best friend, a German, Jan Huhtenberg who is beginning to study architecture. Mies was most polite and distant, but we were lucky to be going to Dessau the same day that he was going, so we took him with us in the car, and then he opened up and talked all the way, always impersonally, but very openly, about his plans for the Bauhaus and the other architects. By the time we were back in Berlin he had agreed to take my friend Jan as the first voluntary assistant that he has ever had. We had talked of the best way to study architecture and he advised my friend against going to the Technische Hochschule, and told him that he ought to work with various architects for the same amount of time and thus learn more. The first architect he suggested was you, and I hope sometime that I can bring Jan to see you in Rotterdam. He has always wanted to know you and now that I do know you he is more wild about it than ever. Finally Mies agreed to let him work in his office and since it is the first time that Mies has ever taken anyone to work this way, we felt quite honored. It was so refreshing for me to meet a German architect who has no illusions about Sachlichkeit or Technik, or Material. He uses all these things only as steppingstones and not as ends in themselves as Gropius and his school do. He tells amusing stories about Gropius' Acht vor der Technik. He worships it because he knows so little about it. Especially Mies hates this Zweckmassigkeit carried to extremes as it was in the Bauhaus before he came. He says Zweckmassigkeit is more subjective than rein Asthetik. He has closed the Bauhaus for a month because the students were so politically minded after the regime of Hannes Meyer that they thought they would continue to run the school along their programmatic lines. Mies says he has no interest whatsoever in politics or programs but only in beautiful buildings, so he closed the school. I have great hopes for the Bauhaus if Mies can once get his start there.

Frankfurt was interesting. Sten is the best example of this German tendency of working from a nonaesthetic program. The Altersheim is good, but it could be much better. It was built parcel from the plan, according to Zweckmassig

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principles, but the effect is not happy. Where he had a free chance in the great central hall (and in a central hall of such a kind it is hard to be bound by Zweck) he made a masterpiece. In his Siedlungs buildings he is much too communistic and harsh to get any beautiful results. But he is at least a Geist, which is more than can be said for May. Frankfurt is now erledigt. Stam is gone and May too, Frankfurt is overbuilt, and has no money. There is one very interesting city building the Volkstempel by Lehr. By the way, his wife and assistant is a former assistant of yours, a tall blond girl. I forgot her name. She speaks of you with love and veneration. You probably have seen the building in the cahiers d'art by this time, written up by our friend Giedion.

Giedion made Zürich very interesting. It was very kind of you to write him that we were coming, for he went out of his way to be hospitable. His wife is charming. Naturally Hitchcock and he disagreed on every point that came up, and every time Hitchcock won, though really they could hardly be said to have argued since each sees from his special point of view. Giedion is the incarnation of the point of view that Russell and I, and you as well I think, especially disagree with. It is interesting that the great architects all disagree with him in this fundamental view point. You and Mies and Corbusier, and of course the Swedes all disagree. But the Swiss architects except perhaps Schmidt of Basel all belong to the group, which Giedion and Stam head. They sacrifice their ideas of beauty which they regard as wrong, in order to have windows that God knows only the Swiss would find practical. They sacrifice the beauty of the Fläche of their houses by putting a heavy Gesimse on to protect the plaster. That may be good construction but it looks like the devil, and I notice other architects in other places can get along very well without it. These people study too much technical things. They can't really understand it as well as an engineer, but if they know a little they think they know it all, and then instead of consulting an engineer they do their own work along that line and the result is anything but happy. No Switzerland hat uns geerget. Boesiger, the one who wrote the book on Corbusier, has built a house in the Corbusier style which is not bad there and a few other buildings have by accident got good proportions but these are the buildings that the architects themselves are least proud of. And then we got into a mess with Peter Meyer. We went to him first when we got there, and he was very nice to us, but of course he is horribly Swiss and old-fashioned. He and Giedion are enemies. Giedion was gekraenkt that we went first to Meyer, and Meyer was gekraenkt that we spent more time later with Giedion. These people are so small.

Brünn was interesting. You have there an unknown worshipper. He knows you but says you do not know him. Otto Eisler, a very gifted young architect. He asked me to give you his respects when I write and I do so. He has built till now only a house and parts of a factory, but they show quite a good deal of originality and charm of proportion. In the matter of imitation which goes on in Czechoslovakia it is refreshing to meet an original man. There is a good deal of imitation of you there strange to say. The L.C. imitations are easy to spot since there are the outward signs, such as pilotis, and ribbon windows, but I have never seen anyone trying to imitate you a thing which is quite impossible I assure you. The result is terrible. Most of the stuff in Czechoslovakia is terrible. But there happens to be in Bruenn also that accident of good architecture, Fuchs' Pavillion in the Ausstellung, and Mies' latest and most modern house, and a café which though it has your work for inspiration is refreshing in its clarity, and purity. The Fuchs pavillion is quite evidently by an assistant for the man himself is quite obviously incapable of good architecture, but it is very good. Mies' house is quite for me the best house in the world. It has cost so far nearly a million marks so it ought to be good. The main room which serves as dining room living room and library is twenty seven meters long and the wall is entirely of glass as is one of the side walls at least ten meters long. The steel posts are clad in chrome, an onyx wall separates the library from the

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PHILIP JOHNSON, 424 E. 52nd St. NEW YORK CITY

the main living room, and a curving wall of some exotic wood makes the dining niche. The room is very low. The proportions are exquisite. It is Mies first house in plaster and he is not satisfied with that as a material. He would build entirely of glass. In Prague I had an unfortunate experience. All the Stavba people were out of town and then when I had been there a day and seen nothing worth looking at, I got in touch with Lyl who was just leaving town again. His own work is pretty bad and he didn't seem to know much about others, but said he would send material. As far as I can judge from looking through Stavba there is nothing much in Prague anyhow. The Czechs lack discipline and direction. They have taken over modern architecture as a national thing, and have really no idea of architecture at all not to mention modern.

I can understand your not wanting to publish the Katwijk house, but we wanted it to show two things: the birth and development of the modern aesthetic, and the best Umbau. The difference for instance, between the east porch and the west porch, is the difference between the fully completed idea of no-weight as against the uncompleted attempt to reach this feeling. I know that what I say is not clear, but if we could talk together I would explain, and when Russell writes it down you would understand it too. The posts on the west porch are thick and obviously support the roof. The posts on the east give only definition to the surface, and the porch is a volume and not a weight. Then also Katwijk is of such early date. It is the only building before 1925 that we intend to show. We would give the dates of the various parts if possible. Then again Katwijk is an Umbau. What can be done simply with an old house to make it absolutely modern. I would show the house only from the sea side, where the beautiful ~~xxxxx~~ window spacing gives elegance to the simple form. We have showed the picture that Russell took to several laymen and they have all seen the beauty of it. If after reading this you don't want us to publish it, we of course will not, but it is the only historical building in the book and would be shown mainly for its historical importance. If you agree to let us publish it with these explanations, have you got a picture of it from the north? And please give us the dates of the various parts as they appear on the photograph so we may be exact. In schlimmsten Falle we could use the snapshot that Russell made when we were there.

The other pictures that you sent are very good. You sent everything that one could wish for of the Hoek and Kiefhoek. I only wondered if we could publish a second picture of the church. The one I have is from across the water showing mainly the facade but some of the north side. I could use this but I think it is the same that is in the Cahiers d'art. You say you have no other pictures and this one is very good and we shall use it. It does not make much difference if the same view is shown twice.

I wish I could come soon and visit you, but I really cannot say when I shall be in Europe again. I am hoping to get the book published without returning to see it through the press, but there may be complications and I had better be there. If I come over I shall certainly come to see you. If not then perhaps next summer. I am sorry to bore you with such a long epistle, but really it is only a small part of what I could say if we could really talk. I hope you have Russell's book by now. I am terribly ashamed I did not cable at once in June. Please forgive me. Give my very best regards to Mrs. Oud and Hans.

If you get time drop me a line. My address is in New York for the winter.

Very sincerely yours,

*Philip Johnson*

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