

VANITY FAIR



Nicky Haslam on His First Trip to Philip Johnson's Glass House in 50 Years

The interior designer recently returned to the late architect's masterpiece, and reminisced with Reinaldo Herrera afterwards.

By Isabel Ashton | May 20, 2016



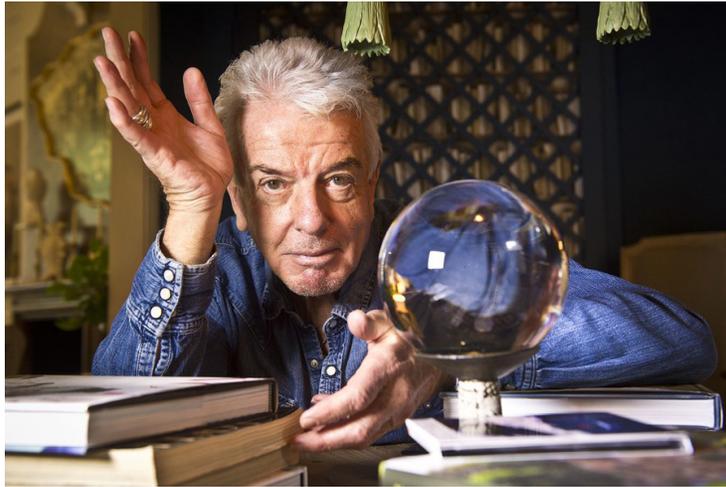
Yayoi Kusama's Narcissus Garden at The Glass House. Courtesy of The Glass House.

Philip Johnson's Glass House, that subject of many an architectural pilgrimage in New Canaan, Connecticut, is having something of a moment with its spring programming this year. It's currently hosting a landscape installation, Narcissus Garden by the revered Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama, and also recently served as the stage for a much Snapchatted piece by the performance duo **Gerard & Kelly**. Last month, the British car manufacturer Bentley introduced its new Bentayga model to editors and journalists at the property. Nicky Haslam, British interior designer and contributing editor at British Vogue and Tatler, and a friend of Johnson's until his 2005 death, returned to the grounds for the occasion. V.F. contributing editor Reinaldo Herrera, who has known Halsam for more than 40 years, sat down with him to reminisce about the house and classic cars.

Nicky Haslam: It was fun to go back to the Glass House after, must be 50, years. I used to stay with Philip in New York and we'd go up there at weekends.

Reinaldo Herrera: Has it changed?

NH: It was very early on when I went. 1962 or '63. Philip hadn't built most of the other buildings so it was just the Brick House, and the Glass House, and he'd just finished the Pavilion in the Pond. So that's all there was.



Nicky Haslam at his apartment on Cromwell Road, 2013. By Francesco Guidicini/The Sunday Times/News Syndication/Redux.

RH: I find the Glass House—as I’ve seen it photographed—so modern, and so perfect for the day. It is a small work of art.

NH: Funny you say that, I’d forgotten how small it was. When I was there I remembered it being about twice the size. But funnily enough the space sort of grows on one while one’s in it.

RH: It has no space; it’s all air. It’s all floating—it’s wonderful. For me, it really is one of the most beautiful architectural toys—because that’s what it is, it’s a toy.

NH: It’s also perfectly situated on that rocky outcrop looking down. It’s very moving in its purity.

RH: When was it built?

NH: 1949.

RH: And that was otherwise a very bad period for architecture.

NH: I also think the Monument to Lincoln Kirstein is rather wonderful, the sort of mad twisted staircase. That I’d never seen before. And there’s a really wonderful chapel constructed with planes of concrete—not one straight line—that was one of the last things Philip built.

RH: Whose house was the Glass House?

NH: Philip’s, he built it for himself and lived there all the time. He died there. Now it’s a National Trust Historic Site.

RH: He died a very old man, didn’t he?

NH: Yes, 98. There is a painting gallery and a sculpture gallery in the grounds but in the actual Glass House there’s only one painting, *The Burial of Phocion*, attributed to Poussin. Philip was very conscious of death and longevity, and of art and design being involved in the cycle of life. There’s a kind of melancholy about the Glass House, which is very much in Philip’s nature.

RH: And Bentley has designed a new model?

NH: Yes, it's the tough boy's Bentley. It's called the Bentayga—it's rather wonderful. The new long Bentleys are also beautiful. They almost look like a Zaha Hadid.

RH: Wonderful, like the drawings, I know exactly what you mean. What did the new one look like?

NH: It looks like an SUV.

RH: But it must be finished beautifully.

NH: It's an extraordinary design, yes. The lights are incredibly beautiful and the detail is astonishing. Bentley also concentrates very hard on the radiator of each model to ensure they're all different.

RH: Did they tell you about the design process?

NH: Yes, the head of design, Stefan Sielaff was there. One always talks about the body of a car, but when he was giving the briefing on the new design he spoke about the haunch of the car, and the eyes, and the elbows for the spaces over the wheels. They think of it as a human—it was rather touching. Just as a caterpillar has a face like a human being, so do cars.

RH: What was the affiliation between the Glass House and Bentley?

NH: I think the connection was their perfect pared-down designs and their lightness off the ground—nothing too concrete.