

# ROCHESTER HISTORY



## Rochester's Modern Maverick: The Innovative Career of Architect James H. Johnson

By Katie Eggers Comeau and Christopher Brandt

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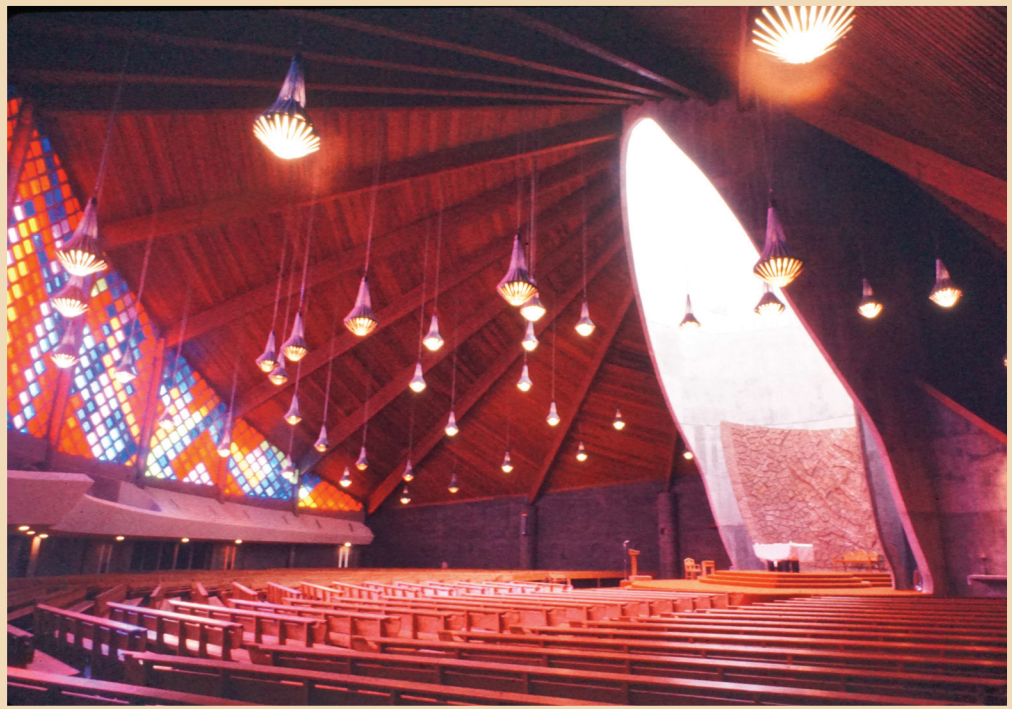
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*The interior of St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece. Completed in 1964, the house of worship was one of architect James H. Johnson's first breakthrough projects. The fan-shaped interior with a central altar reflected a shift in Roman Catholic Church design, which sought to unite clergy and congregation in body and spirit. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Front Cover: Architect James H. Johnson in front of one of his best known and most creative works, the "Mushroom House" in Perinton. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

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Dear *Rochester History* Reader,

Just when I think there's nothing new to learn about Rochester, I come across some interesting person, place, or thing that renews my interest and pride in this city. Right now, that person is architect James H. Johnson, who is best known as the mind behind the Mushroom House in Perinton. I'd read articles about Johnson's concept and creation of the Mushroom House and knew that he designed the Phillis Wheatley Community Library on Dr. Samuel McCree Way, but I was fascinated to read about all the other buildings he created in Rochester during his career. This issue of *Rochester History* provides insight to Johnson's creative process, reminding me of the current "maker movement" which encourages people to think about form and function in new ways. I invite you to learn more about this multi-dimensional architect who married form and function in ways that defied tradition and created architecture that is also art.

Patricia Uttaro, Library Director

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# **Rochester's Modern Maverick: The Innovative Career of Architect James H. Johnson**

By Katie Eggers Comeau and Christopher Brandt

Architect James H. Johnson is perhaps best known for designing the local curiosity known as the “Mushroom House,” but he was responsible for many of the most memorable buildings in Monroe County. Throughout his career, Johnson stood apart from his colleagues in his determination to test the limits of structural feasibility, experiment with new materials, collaborate with artists in other fields, and design buildings that radically merged sculpture and architecture. While a few of his projects—like the “Mushroom House” and the Liberty Pole—garnered attention at the time they were built, Johnson mainly stayed out of the spotlight, quietly designing buildings of startling originality in the Rochester region and occasionally farther afield. He was confident in his own artistic vision even in the face of controversy but was not given to self-promotion, preferring to focus on his work and his family. Many of his works were constructed on secluded sites hidden from public view, which further reinforced Johnson’s proclivity towards anonymity. As the buildings from his most prolific and inventive period—from the early 1960s to the mid-1970s—reach the half-century mark, Johnson’s exceptional creativity merits broader recognition in his adopted hometown of Rochester and beyond.

## **Johnson’s Path to Rochester**

James H. Johnson was born in 1932 in Springfield, Missouri, to a family prominent in the local development and construction fields. During summer vacations, he gained an appreciation for hands-on construction work while helping his uncles on job sites. Although Johnson was initially inclined to follow his relatives into the family trade, his uncle Eugene encouraged him to get a degree in architecture, which would allow him to pursue either that field or contracting.<sup>1</sup>

Johnson took his uncle's advice and, after briefly attending Drury College (now Drury University) in Springfield, studied architecture at Oklahoma Agricultural & Mechanical College (now Oklahoma State University), graduating in January 1956. At the time, the prevailing style of modernist architecture emphasized basic box-like structures with straight lines and 90-degree corners. Johnson was not particularly impressed with this style or with his experience with formal education, saying it "wasn't anything to shout about."<sup>2</sup> However, later in life he noted that he felt "he was fortunate to be in school during the 1950s, when architects were breaking from standards and making their own rules. . . . They had the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do."<sup>3</sup> As he watched many of his classmates producing what he saw as interchangeable modernist designs devoid of individuality, Johnson resolved to take his career in a different direction, one that would allow him to merge his interests in design and hands-on construction while producing one-of-a-kind buildings that tested the limits of structural feasibility.

Johnson found greater inspiration *after* graduation in his interactions with architect A. Blaine Imel (1921–2005), a former student of renowned architect Bruce Goff (1904–1982), who, in turn, was a protégé of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959). Both Imel and Goff were practitioners of organic architecture. First developed by Wright, the style embraced carefully thought-out designs in which each part connected together to create a well-integrated whole, much like a living organism. It also emphasized fostering harmony between human-built structures and natural spaces. While working with Imel in the spring of 1956, Johnson met Goff on several occasions. Johnson described the experiences of working with Imel and getting to know Goff:

I was just like a sponge; I knew what I wanted to learn, so I learned what I would have learned in two or three years just in a short time, then, working with [Goff's] best student. I was, as I said, primed to really suck up what they were going to offer.<sup>4</sup>

Goff's influence would later manifest itself in Johnson's designs, most notably in his repeated use of spiral rooflines and, more generally, in his tendency to draw inspiration from a building's site and forms found in nature. Johnson also cited famous Swiss architect Le Corbusier as an inspiration, particularly his Notre-Dame du Haut, whose sculptural form and sweeping profile would have clear echoes in a number of Johnson's works.<sup>5</sup>

While working for Imel in the spring of 1956, a few months after finishing his architectural degree, James Johnson married Sarah Genung, a fellow Springfield native a year his junior whom he had been dating since she was in high school. They lived in the

Washington, D.C., area for the first year and a half of their marriage while Johnson completed his military commitment under the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) and worked briefly in an architectural office. In the fall of 1957, the Johnsons moved to Rochester so that Sarah, a cellist, could pursue her graduate degree at the Eastman School of Music.<sup>6</sup>

## Establishing a Solo Practice

Johnson's first job in Rochester was with the architectural firm Bohacket and Flynn. The practice undertook a significant amount of work for local Catholic churches. In 1961, Johnson served as project captain for the firm's design of a school for Our Lady of Mercy in the town of Greece, during which he worked closely with the parish priest, the Rev. John S. Whalen. Whalen's appreciation for Johnson proved critical to the course of the architect's career. The firm drew up several proposed designs for the church, but John Flynn and Whalen disagreed over which direction to take. As Johnson recalled:

So we designed a couple of [proposals] for them, and there were some delays. In the meantime I had left Flynn and Bohacket and went to Waasdorp's [another architectural firm] for a while. . . . Father Whalen went back to Flynn's office and wanted to finish the [design], but Flynn didn't appreciate my work at that time and said, "We'll design you a building, but it won't be that one." [Whalen] said "No, I like this one." Then he said, "Well then you just go down the street, and get him!" That's what Father did, he called me up and said "I've got your release." And I said, "Okay, I'm gone." So that launched me.<sup>7</sup>

With a project in hand, Johnson was able to start his own architectural practice, initially working from the second bedroom of his apartment on Bobrich Drive in Rochester.

During the early years of his solo career, Johnson's work was typical of a young architect establishing his own practice. His projects included suburban tract houses, multipurpose buildings for growing suburban congregations, commercial remodeling, and modest industrial structures. In his free time, he produced



*Our Lady of Mercy School (1961) in Greece. Johnson served as project captain. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*The Glasow house (1963), featuring a low-pitched roof and clean lines, is an example of Johnson's early work, 2020. Photograph courtesy of Christopher Brandt.*

drawings exploring his more unusual ideas, some of which can be seen as precursors to his later works. Two Johnson houses from this period stand out: his and Sarah's personal residence on Browncroft Boulevard, which he designed in 1961, and a house for Ann and James Glasow in the town of Chili, built in 1963. Both featured square

footprints, low-pitched rooflines with skylights, and clean lines, contrasting with the more flowing, curvilinear designs for which he would later be known.

The Glasow House also incorporated an indoor garden, in the form of a ground-floor planter beneath the stairs, coordinated with projecting concrete wall niches designed to hold trailing plants. The Johnsons' personal home featured a more elaborate incorporation of interior greenery, with a central atrium similar to that of a Japanese courtyard house at the center of its unusual square floor plan. The Johnsons cultivated an indoor garden and, later, a children's play area for their four daughters in the atrium. Johnson designed an office with its own entrance in one corner of the house, with a Dutch door opening onto the atrium that allowed him to keep an eye on his children. Johnson kept his office in his house until late 1969, by which time both his growing practice and growing family needed more space.

## **Breakthrough Projects**

Following these notable domestic designs, Johnson reached a major turning point in his career as he worked on two projects that brought him to unexpected prominence and firmly established his reputation as the region's most daring architect.

### St. John the Evangelist, Greece, New York

The first of these two projects was a new church for St. John the Evangelist Church in the town of Greece. The town's population had skyrocketed after World War II, jumping

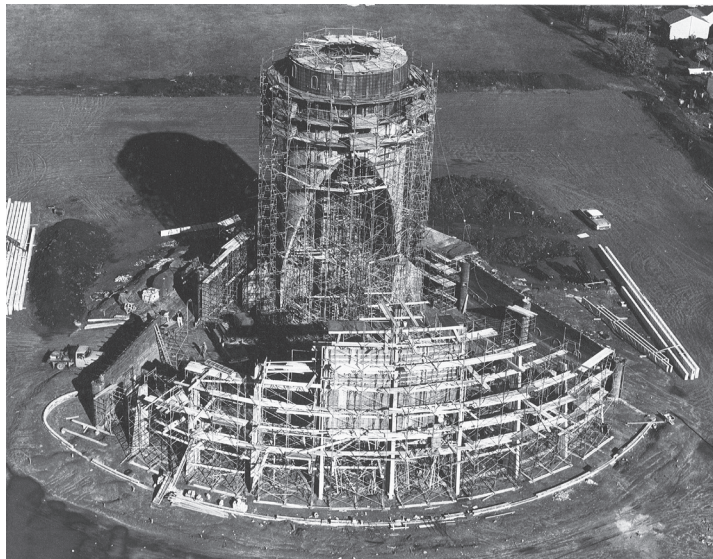


from almost 15,000 residents in 1940 to more than 48,000 by 1960. Consequently, the parish outgrew its existing building. In early 1963, the Rev. Donald Lux announced that Johnson had been selected as the architect of the new house of worship, which was to embody the latest in modern Catholic church design. As Lux explained:

The basic idea followed in planning the church is to stress the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as the central action of divine worship. Since the Mass is not a spectacle to be merely watched, each one must be able to do his part in the united assembly of priest and people. . . . The church will be fan-shaped with the altar, the central object of the church, in full view of each person taking part in the Mass action. Every person will be close to the altar in body as well as in spirit.<sup>8</sup>

Lux's description of the design intent was consistent with changes then gaining popularity in the Roman Catholic Church as a whole, which would become formal Church policy upon completion of the Second Vatican Council's work in 1965.<sup>9</sup> Most notably, the Church promoted fan-shaped designs from the mid-1960s onward because they brought the congregation closer to the altar where the liturgy was performed, in contrast to the long, narrow nave of a traditional Catholic church in which the congregation sat at a distance from the altar.

As a major work of sacred architecture, St. John the Evangelist presented Johnson with an excellent opportunity to assemble a stellar team of artistic collaborators. He had partnered with artists on previous projects. At the parish hall for Our Lady of Mercy and a similar building for the St. John of Rochester parish in Perinton, New York, Johnson had commissioned ceramic



*Construction on St. John the Evangelist in Greece began in 1963 and was completed in 1964. The house of worship's impressive integration of art and architecture led to Johnson's wider recognition in Rochester. From Johnson Ephemera Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*Top: Ceramic figures sculpted by educator Kurt Feuerherm were embedded in frames designed by James and Philip Secrest to create St. John the Evangelist's iconic mural. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Middle: Installation of the symbol-laden mural at the church site. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Bottom: The curved concrete wall of St. John the Evangelist Church, 2011. Photograph courtesy of Christopher Brandt.*

artists James and Philip Secrest and art professor Kurt Feuerherm to create altar screens. He had also worked with metal sculptor Carl Zollo on a number of interior designs for Altiers shoe stores in malls and plazas in the Rochester and Syracuse areas. Johnson enlisted all four men to work on St. John the Evangelist. Zollo designed an abstract wall-mounted baptismal scene as well as metal gates defining the entrance to the baptistry, while the Secrests created steel light fixtures. Johnson also partnered with a new collaborator, sculptor Wendell Castle, who was then in the nascent stages of what would become an internationally renowned career. Castle provided several pieces, including a baptismal font, chairs, a lectern, and Prie-dieus for the chancel.

In addition to incorporating traditional sculptural pieces, St. John the Evangelist featured a deeper artistic collaboration between Johnson, Feuerherm, and the Secrests that fundamentally merged architecture and sculpture. Johnson asked the three artists to design a mural for the exterior concrete walls. To create them, Feuerherm sculpted a series of ceramic figures representing symbols traditionally associated with Catholicism, including an eagle signifying St. John the Evangelist. These were then embedded face down in sand within wood frames designed by the Secrests. After

preparing the ceramics and frames in the studio, the team moved them to the construction site where the concrete was poured, to minimize the distance the heavy panels needed to be transported. After the concrete had set for about a week, masons put them in place around the exterior walls where they formed the curved, 130-foot-long front facade. This technique was the precursor to the even more ambitious creative work Johnson and the Secrests would soon pursue in their earth-formed concrete projects, which went further still in merging sculpture and architecture.

The three artists also produced a large ceramic and concrete altar screen in the form of an abstracted tree of life. This piece was coordinated with a massive concrete cutaway silo that acted as the architectural and structural anchor of the sanctuary space; together these elements formed the visual and spiritual focal point of the interior. In these, as in their other joint projects, Johnson provided general guidance on overall design intent, Feuerherm supplied the artistic vision, and the Secrests provided their technical expertise in ceramic firing and concrete casting, developing the process by which the large pieces would be fabricated and assembled in order to fit together perfectly.

Wendell Castle saw Johnson’s approach to the integration of art and architecture, exemplified at St. John the Evangelist, as unique, at least in Rochester:

[Johnson] was perhaps about the only architect in town that incorporated artists’ work into his work. That didn’t seem to happen other places. Well, it would happen but in a different way. Other modern houses that got built, they may have a modern painting, but as far as something that [was] really incorporated into the house, I think he’s probably about the only one around there that did that. There’s a long history of that, but not here, I don’t think.<sup>10</sup>

St. John the Evangelist also marked the first collaboration between Johnson and structural engineer Ray DiPasquale. Johnson later called him “the genius behind all these structures,” and credited DiPasquale with turning his



*The completed St. John the Evangelist Church, built to serve the expanding population of Greece opened to parishioners in November 1964. Photograph courtesy of William Sauers.*

imaginative concepts into reality. Johnson described their collaboration:

[Ray] was just a dear friend and a great engineer. We just followed him and he told us what to do and that's what we did. . . . You felt that when you designed things, you never worried about how to get it built, in a way . . . none of this could have been possible without him; he just gave us a confidence to just go out and do it.<sup>11</sup>

DiPasquale's assistance would prove instrumental in Johnson's next major project.

#### The Liberty Pole, Rochester, New York

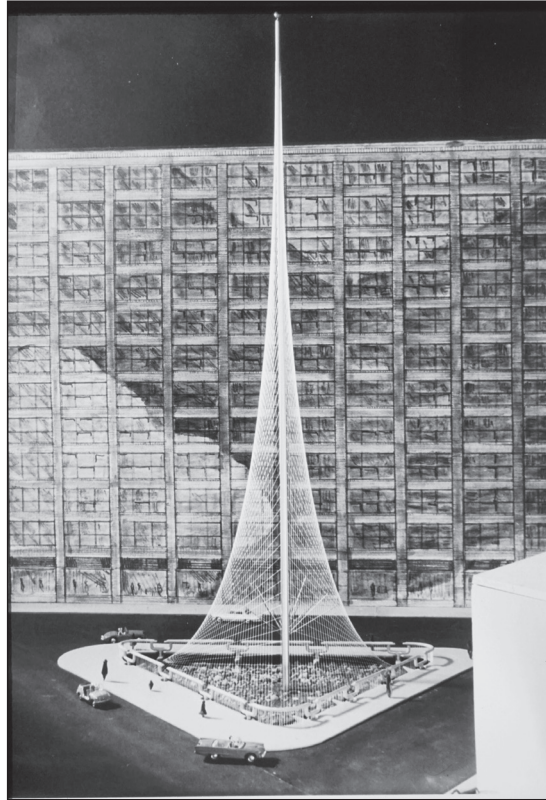
Just as the congregation of St. John the Evangelist was preparing for the first mass in its newly completed building in November 1964, Johnson found himself at the center of the most high-profile architectural project in Rochester. In June 1964, the City of Rochester launched a design competition—the first local contest of its kind—inviting architects to redesign a small parcel at a key downtown intersection where buildings had been slated for demolition. The project, which had been planned and funded by the cooperative efforts of surrounding businesses as well as the local, state, and federal governments, was the smallest federal urban renewal project in the country at just one-fifth of an acre.<sup>12</sup>

According to the brochure announcing the competition, its goals were “to remove a serious pocket of blight,” “to redevelop the project area in a manner appropriate to its unique location,” and “to obtain the best possible design for the construction of a permanent, inspiring, appropriate and attractive embellishment for the Project Area, the Liberty Pole Triangle.”<sup>13</sup> The guidelines further indicated that the resulting project should be attractive at all times of the year and should be designed to be admired from a distance rather than up close, since the lot was surrounded by busy streets and not easily or safely reached on foot.

On October 31, 1964, a five-member jury announced its unanimous selection of Johnson's proposal. His symbolic flagpole design drew inspiration from the history of the location, where two previous liberty poles had stood in the nineteenth century. The first flagstaff was installed in 1846 at the start of the Mexican-American War; the second was erected during the Civil War. Patriotic gatherings took place at the site during both conflicts.<sup>14</sup> Johnson's design featured a 190-foot stainless steel pole, supported by cables at different lengths and angles that resembled a spiraling sail. At the base of the pole lay a sunken rock garden with an abstracted metal tree that would serve as a fountain in warm months, with gas jets emitting flames in the winter.

Johnson explained that after contemplating the competition all summer, he drew the

Liberty Pole very quickly one night, shortly before the deadline. Once he had the initial idea, he said, “It just came to me and I said, ‘That’s it. That’s what I want to do.’ . . . I made the first sketch of it which was pretty accurate.”<sup>15</sup> The team that helped Johnson refine his idea included the Secrests and Feuerherm, who shared suggestions early in the process; George Richardson, a sculptor and product designer who assisted him with the model; and Ray DiPasquale, who evaluated the plan’s structural feasibility and later used a computer to calculate the exact stress, length, and angle of the cables that would provide both structural support and aesthetic appeal.<sup>16</sup>



*Johnson’s design of the Liberty Pole won the unanimous praise of a five-member jury of architecture experts but was not universally embraced by Rochester residents when it was revealed to the public in 1964. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

Despite the jury’s high praise for Johnson’s work, which they called “a transparent and yet a subtle statement of space,” the design was not universally popular.<sup>17</sup> Several letters to the editor panning the plan appeared in both the *Democrat and Chronicle* and *Times-Union* newspapers. Some Rochesterians believed the parcel would be better repurposed as a green space, while others thought the pole belonged in a more open location where it would be more visible. Johnson shrugged off the criticism, confident that his idea was both structurally feasible and aesthetically appropriate to the site:

We tried to develop a design that would carry the meaning of freedom . . . liberty . . . flight. I feel the design expresses the sentiments of an era in which the American flag meant something. It is designed as a monument, and I think people should treat it as such, and not push it off into a corner where it won’t be seen. It was designed for this specific triangle with its particular design problems.<sup>18</sup>



*Johnson's original Liberty Pole design, completed in 1965, included a metal tree that served as a fountain in warm months and emitted flames in the winter. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*The Liberty Pole plaza, seen here in 2018, was reconfigured in the 1980s following the removal of the section of North Street (now Liberty Pole Way) between Main Street and Franklin Street. Photograph courtesy of Katie Eggers Comeau.*

The initial controversy eventually subsided, and the lot was cleared and prepared for installation. On October 29, 1965, almost exactly a year after the competition had closed, workers began anchoring the pole's four sections into place. The design was implemented as conceived, with one notable exception: Johnson originally designed a circular pole, but it had to be changed to a square shape due to cost.<sup>19</sup>

The Liberty Pole has become a familiar and admired fixture in downtown Rochester, particularly in the winter months when an annual ceremony—began in 1972—celebrates the illumination of more than 10,000 lights on the structure, evoking an abstract Christmas tree.<sup>20</sup> The sunken garden proved less successful, as its nooks and crannies collected garbage and the fountain/flame tree failed to work as expected. Johnson participated in a redesign process for the plaza in the late 1980s, when the closure of the section of North Street (now Liberty Pole Way) running along the northwest side of the triangular plaza offered the opportunity to reconfigure the space as a gathering area rather than, as in the original design, a traffic island surrounded on all three sides by busy streets.<sup>21</sup>

During the Liberty Pole's construction, Johnson hired and formed a short-lived partnership with his friend and former coworker at Bohacket and Flynn, Peter Romeo. Romeo joined Johnson's office around November 1964, and the two worked together until the fall of 1967. Before Johnson and Romeo parted ways, they hired their first employee, Thomas Hamilton, filling the office in the Johnsons' home to

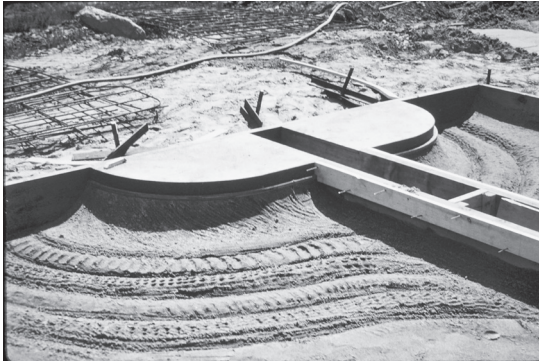
capacity. Over the years, Johnson maintained a small practice, usually employing a handful of associates. Romeo, Hamilton, and others who worked with them during this era noted that Johnson was the singular design visionary for the firm's projects, while they facilitated his vision by developing the construction details and writing specifications under Johnson's guidance.

Johnson and his associates were remarkably productive during this mid-to-late-1960s period, with several major projects in the works each year. His office kept busy with a steady stream of conventional residential, commercial, and industrial work. These inconspicuous Johnson projects that now dot the Monroe County landscape do not bear the hallmarks of his more imaginative work, but they helped keep the practice afloat. As Johnson immersed himself in these conventional projects, he explored more creative ideas via a series of designs that never came to fruition. Archives from the period reveal houses shaped like donuts, onions, and spirals; an arts center in the form of a violin; and a field of wind turbines lining a path to a concert hall composed of billowing sail-like forms. His most ambitious conceptual venture, a project he called "Atlantis" or "Bubble City," plotted an entire city enclosed by a two-mile-high dome.<sup>22</sup> Though these highly original plans never saw the light of day, Johnson soon found a medium which would allow him to unleash his creative potential and build upon his reputation as a boundary-pushing architect.

## **Earth-Formed Concrete**

Some of Johnson's most imaginative work came to fruition in the late 1960s as he worked with an interdisciplinary team on a series of remarkable buildings that showcased a new construction technique called earth-formed concrete casting. Johnson had long been fascinated by the possibilities inherent in concrete, thanks to his family's involvement in real estate development and his uncle's ownership of a concrete plant. When asked what attracted him to concrete as a building material, Johnson replied:

It flows through my veins . . . that's the easy [answer]. I don't know, I just love concrete. I was thinking about, if someone said to me, "I want a magical material that will bend, curve, and do all these various things, and if I could just shoot it with a hardener, and it would all just harden as I moved it along, and I just built [the building] with a crane or something . . . wouldn't that be the best material in the world?" And I thought and I said "Yeah, that's concrete, I've got it." . . . It's plastic, it will go any place you want it to go, it will do anything you want it to do.<sup>23</sup>



*Top: Constructing the concrete wall panels of the Our Lady of Mercy rectory. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Middle: Lifting the rectory's hefty wall panels. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Bottom: The completed exterior of Our Lady of Mercy's rectory (1965) in Greece. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

In the early 1960s, a colleague told Johnson about an earth-formed concrete building in Provo, Utah, known as the “Turtle Shell,” which was designed by Lee Knell and Associates (built in 1961; demolished in 2006). The “Turtle Shell” was constructed by building a large mound of compacted earth; reinforcing steel was laid atop the mound, over which concrete was then poured. After the earth was removed, the remaining reinforced concrete dome formed the building’s roof, supported at the perimeter where it came into contact with the ground.<sup>24</sup>

The idea of pouring concrete over or into earth-formed molds captivated Johnson. He relished the opportunity to push the aesthetic and structural boundaries of architecture, work hands-on with concrete, and use a sculptural process to create a one-of-a-kind building. Earth-formed concrete casting was (and is) a rarely used technique; the few architects who employed it generally followed a similar method to that used at the “Turtle Shell” to create symmetrical, dome-like structures. Johnson took the idea in a different direction, creating irregular, sculptural shapes out of concrete molds formed in the ground at the construction site.<sup>25</sup>

Using their own variation on the earth-



formed concrete process, Johnson and his team produced six buildings of startling originality: four houses of worship and two private residences, all built between 1965 and 1970. Of the six, five are still standing, although one (Penfield Presbyterian Church) was never completed as designed. The other four remain some of the most unusual and eye-catching buildings in the Rochester area.

Our Lady of Mercy Rectory, Greece, New York

The first of Johnson's six concrete structures was a rectory for Our Lady of Mercy Parish (1965), again arranged by the Rev. Whalen, who asked Johnson to create a building similar to the architect's own house on Browncroft Boulevard. Johnson agreed with Whalen that the inward-focused courtyard plan was ideal for this purpose, as it would "[send] a message that this place was a refuge, serving the priests as an oasis."<sup>26</sup>

The project gave Johnson his first opportunity to try the earth-formed concrete technique. To create the rectory's exterior walls, Johnson and the Secrest brothers dug molds directly in the ground on the rectory site, creating an inverse of the shape and texture of the



*The rectory's interior took inspiration from Japanese architecture and Johnson's personal residence. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

wall panels. The crew laid reinforcing steel mesh or bars into the mold and poured concrete into it. After the panels had cured, the crew tipped them up vertically onto footings to form the exterior walls.

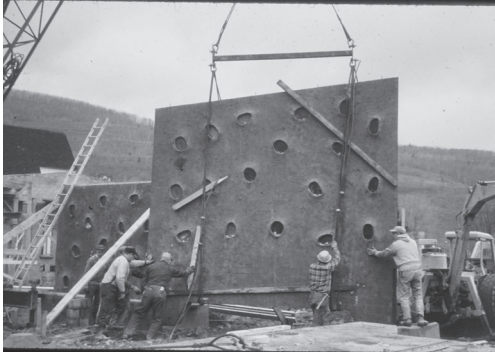
The panels were designed and formed to create a repeating pattern of window openings later infilled with two glass panels—a thin, vertically oriented floor-to-ceiling rectangle topped by a wide, shallow bowl shape emphasized by rough-ridged texturing in the concrete panels. The interior, inspired by the Johnson house, featured mahogany- and glass-fronted rooms looking into, and cantilevering out over, a lushly planted central courtyard with a man-made stream running through it. The spare, Japanese-inspired geometry of the interior contrasted with the dramatically sculpted structural concrete exterior walls.

Although the rectory bore architectural significance as Johnson's first earth-formed concrete building, it was demolished in 2012 when the Our Lady of Mercy campus was transformed into a senior housing complex. The school, which Johnson had designed while at Bohacket and Flynn, and the parish hall, Johnson's first solo project, were also dramatically transformed during the repurposing process, marking an unfortunate loss of three milestone buildings from Johnson's early career.

Having demonstrated the feasibility of the earth-casting process in a conventional building with a relatively traditional geometric shape, Johnson and his collaborators went on to refine and push the limits of this technique in a series of career-defining projects, creating increasingly unusual, expressive, and structurally audacious forms.

#### St. Januarius Catholic Church, Naples, New York

Johnson's second earth-formed concrete building was St. Januarius Catholic Church (1966) in the village of Naples, New York. He again worked with the Secrests to fabricate the concrete panels, which were cast on-site and lifted into place by cranes in a fashion similar to that used for Our Lady of Mercy Rectory. Johnson's inspirations for the edifice were said to be the region's hilly terrain and grape vines and leaves (reflected in the building's windows and footprint), honoring the signature crop of the Naples area.<sup>27</sup> The most notable aspect of the design from the exterior was the scattering of irregularly shaped, roughly oval window openings, which were filled with colored glass in a range of brilliant hues. Inside the church, the texture of the walls changed to feature deep, irregularly shaped indentations framing each piece of colored glass, creating a mottled honeycomb-like texture that amplified the dramatic, ever-shifting lighting effect. Alternately dubbed by locals as "the Swiss cheese church, the jelly bean church, or the grape church," St. Januarius, like some of Johnson's other forward-



*Left: Installation of the concrete panels at St. Januarius Church in Naples. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Right: Johnson's unique design for St. Januarius Church (1966), which drew inspiration from the hills and vineyards of the Naples area, featured an array of multicolored oval windows. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*Left: The pied lighting effect provided by the windows of St. Januarius Church. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

*Right: The honeycomb-like interior walls of St. Januarius Church. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

thinking designs, initially drew criticism, but its congregants later came to appreciate the unique house of worship.<sup>28</sup>

### Temple Sinai, Brighton, New York

The third in this remarkable series of earth-formed concrete buildings was Temple Sinai (1967) in the town of Brighton, New York, built for a congregation formed in 1959 by about two dozen families. Johnson said his design for Temple Sinai was based on his understanding of Jewish theology as constituting a never-ending ring, which he saw as a contrast to Protestant Christianity's emphasis on "a straight line from here to there with

something beyond.” He showcased Jewish symbolism in the design: the sanctuary evoked the image of a tent in homage to the nomadic history of Judaism, the ten rib-like concrete panels making up the sanctuary’s side walls symbolized the ten tribes of Israel, and the two concrete pylons outside the sanctuary’s glass wall represented the two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.<sup>29</sup>

Peter Romeo worked closely with Johnson on the project, planning the education wing that surrounds the sanctuary. While modernist synagogues often featured extensive decorative detail that incorporated Jewish symbolism, Johnson left the concrete and glass, and views of the surrounding trees, unadorned by ornamentation. There were, however, two notable design elements that were coordinated with the architecture: the Ark and the Rabbi’s lectern, both created by Wendell Castle.



*The tent-like sanctuary of Temple Sinai (1967) in Brighton. Photograph courtesy of Bero Architecture.*

On all his earth-cast concrete projects (and some of his other projects as well), Johnson seized the opportunity to take a hands-on role in construction. At Temple Sinai, he even took part in assembling the building, helping to guide the massive 20-ton panels into place. He injured his hand in the process when it was clipped by one of the panels as he inserted it into its foundation. Fortunately, the injury did not involve any broken bones or more serious damage. After getting stitches, Johnson insisted on returning to the site to continue supervising the project.

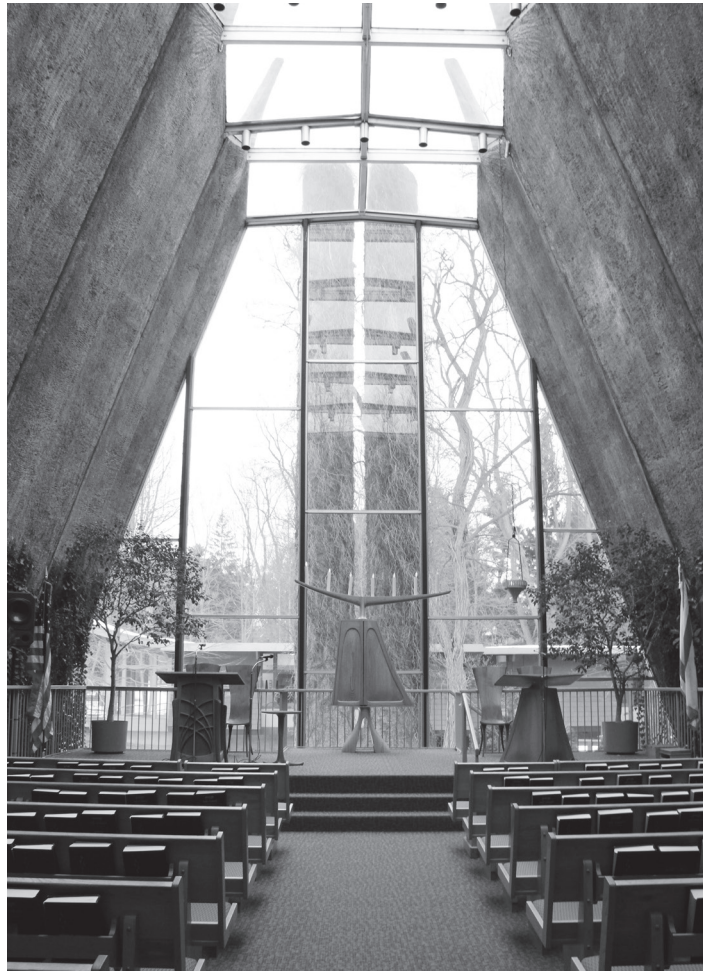
Temple Sinai continues to serve its congregation well. The sanctuary is virtually unchanged, and any additions made to accommodate the congregation's changing needs have been done sensitively, allowing the spectacular sanctuary to remain the focal point of the composition.

Penfield Presbyterian Church, Penfield, New York

Johnson's fourth earth-formed concrete building, Penfield Presbyterian Church, proved unusually problematic. The design, unveiled in late 1965, was Johnson's boldest form to date: an inverted flower

shape formed by six massive concrete "petals" fanning outward, the stem of each petal rising 90 feet tall in the center and meeting to form a central tower. The petals formed the roof of the structure's offices, chapel, lounge, and classrooms, which ringed a central courtyard intended to be capped by a dome sheltering a 700-seat sanctuary. The congregation's plan was to complete the earth-formed petals first to a height of 30 feet and have the central sanctuary and tower added later.

Johnson and his team employed a variation of the process they had developed at Our Lady of Mercy Rectory and Temple Sinai. The crew formed and poured a series of columns



*Noted sculptor Wendell Castle designed the Ark and lectern that form the centerpiece of Temple Sinai, 2013. Photograph courtesy of Bero Architecture.*

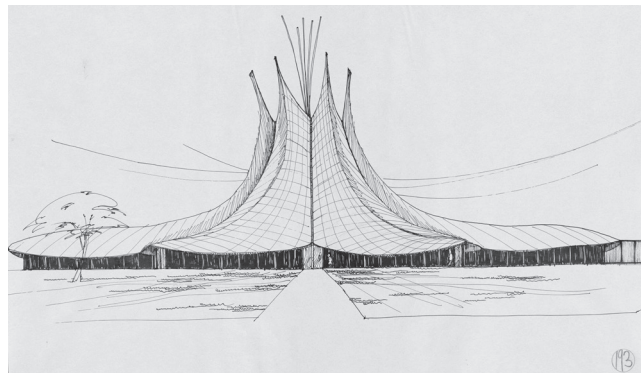


*These two images reveal the remnants of Johnson's original design in the church's interior, 2018.  
Courtesy of Christopher Brandt.*

first, around which they mounded dirt. They fashioned the dirt into molds for the giant petal-like forms, placed the reinforcing steel, then poured the concrete, which the Secrests then sculpted from above to create distinctive abstracted ribbing on the top. After the concrete had cured, the dirt mold was dug out and the excess was used to grade the site. Johnson described a series of difficulties that began after the concrete had hardened and the crew began removing the earth mound beneath the petals:

[The dirt supporting the concrete petals] had been there for some time because we poured each panel, and a few even in the wintertime, and so the dirt had frozen to the concrete. When we dug it out, there was this foot or two of dirt stuck to the bottom side of the building, and of course [the dirt] would start dropping when it got warm, vroom!, kavoom! So at one point we had one “petal” asymmetrically loaded, because one side had fallen off and one side had all of the dirt on it. I got worried, if we twisted the building, we’d bring it down. The whole building was sitting on columns, so we burned tires and stuff like that inside the building to get the other half to fall off. . . . When they removed some of the dirt they found this big ol’ boulder, about as big as this table [six feet in diameter], just hanging there off the roof. So I said to the bulldozer, come on in and see if we can’t push it away and it’ll break and go. So he put his blade up against it and started to move it, but the tracks were slipping, so he started pressing again. I was over near a column and I guess I had my hand on [it], and [I felt it], he was moving the whole building, with that damn bulldozer. . . . I said “Stop! Stop!” So those things we had as problems. But really for what we were doing, we were not too sane, we shouldn’t have been doing it, honestly.<sup>30</sup>

Johnson had temporary roofing installed over the truncated ends of the “petals” to tide the building over until the central sanctuary and tower could be added. The congregation took longer than expected to raise the funds to finish the building, however, and in the meantime the temporary roof developed leaks, which



*Johnson’s bold, unrealized design for Penfield Presbyterian Church took the form of an inverted flower. From the Department of Rare Books, Special Collections, and Preservation, University of Rochester.*

Johnson attempted to diagnose and repair. In the end, Johnson was not invited to complete his design after all; instead, another architect essentially encased the original incomplete building beneath new roofing and siding, concealing the concrete “petals.” The courtyard was never enclosed. As Johnson described it:

All they did was cover it up with another building[,] . . . so I’ve got an entombed building. I don’t think many architects have an entombed building, but there it’s sitting. Someday maybe they’ll rip it all off and finish it. . . . Obviously if I had to do it all over, I don’t think I would do it that way.<sup>31</sup>

Although almost entirely concealed from the exterior, Johnson’s original concrete structure remains visible at the building’s eaves and interior.

### **The “Airplane House” and the “Mushroom House”**

Johnson’s last two earth-formed concrete buildings were both private residences, one in Victor, New York, and the other in Perinton, New York. The house in Victor (1968) was designed for a couple who wanted a fireproof structure. Their home, which their children’s friends dubbed the “airplane house” for its low-slung, gently curving profile, was sculpted and cast in a way similar to Penfield Presbyterian Church. The design was so successful that 50 years later, not only do the original owners still live there, never having changed even the paint colors, but two of their children hired Johnson to create houses for them on adjacent properties in the early 2000s. These three private homes make up a unique assemblage of Johnson projects spanning half a century.

Johnson’s best-known project is the so-called “Mushroom House” (1969–70), which he designed for Marguerite and Robert Antell. The house is justifiably recognized for its audaciously strange form: a series of connected pods, each standing on a tall “stem.” Marguerite Antell later noted that she and her husband chose Johnson because of his imaginative approach to architecture. When Johnson asked the couple what they wanted the house to be, they explained:

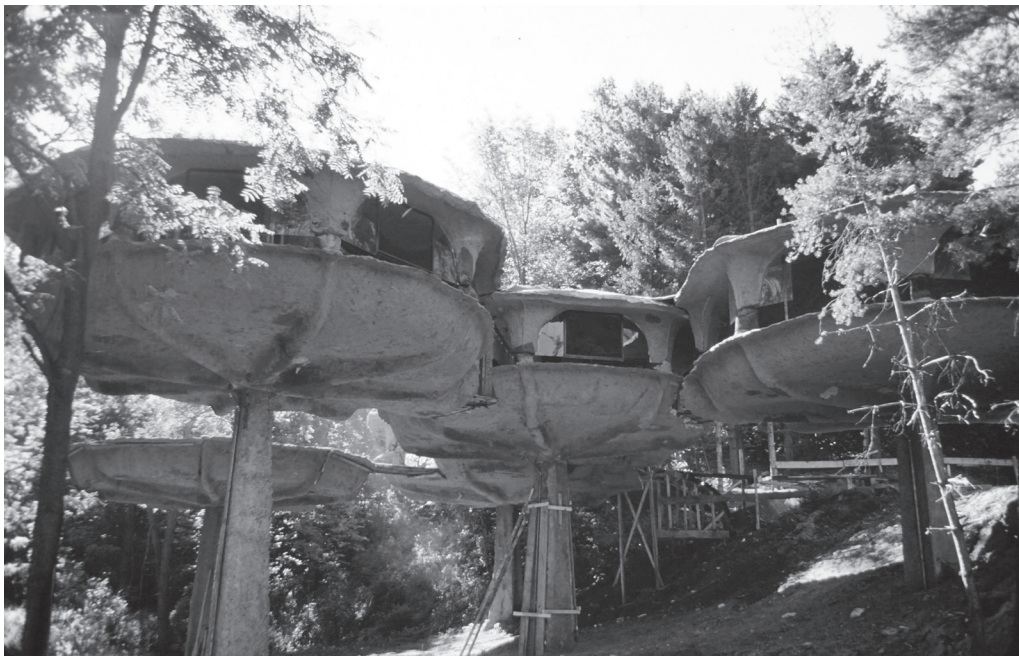
We chose you, Jim because we know you can design a house that is far beyond our imagination. We want our house to require growing on our part to “catch up” with its design and concept. We want our house to give us an exciting adventure in living in the years to come. We want our house to belong to its site and to have a natural, honest feeling. We want the house to be its own decoration. We want it built of



permanent natural materials. Here are some adjectives to describe how we'd like to feel about the interior of our house: free, sculptural, 3 dimensional, organic, fun, groovy, informal, dramatic, happy, unusual, open, sophisticated, comfortable.<sup>32</sup>

According to Marguerite Antell, the next time the couple met with Johnson, “he said, ‘I have your design—just a minute’ and he ran out the door to a field next to him and brought in 3 Queen Anne’s lace flowers. He gave us each one and held the 3<sup>rd</sup> one himself. He had us touch the edges together. ‘There,’ he said, ‘is your house.’ And so it was!”<sup>33</sup>

Although Queen Anne’s Lace was the design inspiration, the Antell residence acquired the “Mushroom House” moniker early on and has been known by that nickname ever since. The Antell House was the most ambitious in Johnson’s series of earth-formed concrete buildings. To create the four enclosed pods and one open (bottom only) pod for the patio, the crew made two molds in the earth on site, one for the top half of the pods and one for the bottom half, each about 35 feet in diameter. Sid Burton, who was working in Johnson’s office at the time, recalled that the entire staff helped form the molds by hand. As at Penfield Presbyterian Church, the team encountered dangerous mishaps and accidents during construction, prompting Johnson to observe, “I may be the only living architect who has



*The iconic “Mushroom House” (1969–70) in Perinton was custom designed for Marguerite and Robert Antell and remains one of Johnson’s best-known works. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*Left: The concrete pods that formed the “Mushroom House” were cast onsite using earth-dug molds. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.  
Right: Airlifting a pod into place. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*The cavernous interior of Johnson's Mushroom House. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*

watched one of his projects fall into a ravine.”<sup>34</sup> Through a series of on-the-fly adjustments, they managed to complete the project, which has become Johnson’s most renowned building, thanks to its otherworldly appearance.

Marguerite Antell was a ceramic artist, and a key part of her vision for the house was the merging of her art with Johnson’s to make the residence not just a home, but a unique creative expression as well. She made over 9,000 floor tiles, as well as lamps and various other decorative items for the house. In the first two years, she converted parts of the home into two studios and added a kiln in a separate outdoor structure. She occasionally worked with Johnson on other projects after her own house was completed; the Johnsons’ second home in Penfield, for example, featured a sculptural fireplace surround she designed.

The Antells were delighted with their unusual house, which they owned until 1995. In 1999, a cousin of Marguerite Antell, Steve Whitman, and his wife Christine, purchased it, and the pair soon began working with Johnson on a significant addition containing a family room and an art studio built in a separate man-made cavern set into the hillside and connected to the original pods by a tunnel. Johnson again assembled a multidisciplinary team, including Marguerite Antell, who created and installed handmade tiles; Wendell Castle, who designed two doorways for the original house and the addition; Adam Chesis, who produced a tree-like room divider made out of wood; sculptor Pepsy Kettavong, who worked closely with Johnson on a roof sculpture; and artist Annie Dunsky, who created murals. Johnson formed the dirt mold for the exterior shell by hand, incorporating an abstracted network of vines along the concrete ceiling similar to the ceilings of the original pods. Johnson relished returning to his most famous building and the free, collaborative design approach that characterized his early work: “There’s no grand plan for shaping the (family-room) dome. . . . It’s like jazz, improvised as we go along. . . . Sometimes I feel like a movie producer with my crew of construction people, engineers and artists.”<sup>35</sup>

## **A Long and Varied Career**

Johnson’s earth-formed concrete projects were surely the most unusual and dramatic buildings of his career, but they were just six out of hundreds of projects he completed, more than 50 of which are architecturally or historically significant based on the criteria established by the National Register of Historic Places. Among his other accomplishments, Johnson co-founded a company called Housing Systems that sought to build modular concrete multifamily apartment buildings using a portable factory system he patented. His expertise

with large-scale concrete construction led to him being hired as a consultant for a pedestrian bridge project in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Working for a local food processing company, Johnson designed housing for migrant farm workers that was hailed as a statewide model for addressing a persistent social problem. He designed the Phillis Wheatley Library in the Corn Hill neighborhood of Rochester, whose massive concrete curved walls incorporated a technique that was new to Rochester in which styrofoam-lined forms were “burned” with hot pickaxes and tubes to create a unique texture of randomly scattered rings and ripples. Exploring the possibilities of angles rather than curves, he created an angular house perched on stilts high above Irondequoit Creek, Memorial A.M.E. Zion Church in Corn Hill with a soaring, eight-sided pyramidal ceiling, and a new sanctuary for the bomb-damaged Temple Beth Am in Henrietta, New York, with a multifaceted, complex surface and triple-pyramidal massing. The last new building he designed, in 2009, was a house for one of his daughters representing the purest expression of the perfect spiral form that had fascinated him throughout his career.

Although James H. Johnson’s daring, expressive designs, spanning nearly 60



*The uniquely designed Phillis Wheatley Community Library has been serving patrons since 1971. From Johnson Ephemera Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*The former Temple Beth Am building in Henrietta, 2017. The building is presently occupied by the Ukrainian Christian House of Prayer. Photograph courtesy of Christopher Brandt.*

years, remain some of the boldest and most creative contributions to the Rochester area’s architectural heritage, he garnered surprisingly little recognition in or beyond the area over the course of his career. Unlike some of his more famous predecessors and colleagues, he did not have students or inspire a style or a group of imitators. And aside from the flurry of attention he received during the controversy over the Liberty Pole, the sporadic local news story, and the occasional blog or television spot about unusual architecture featuring the Antell-Whitman House, Johnson was rarely the subject of media coverage regionally, much less at a state or national level.

Johnson did, however, receive several local awards for his artistic achievements during and after his lifetime. On the strength of his design for St. John the Evangelist Church in Greece, Johnson in 1965 received the prestigious Lillian Fairchild Award, bestowed annually by the University of Rochester in recognition of “the resident of Rochester or the immediate vicinity who has produced within the year the most meritorious creation of art, poetry, or literature of the imagination.”<sup>36</sup> In 1981, his work was the subject of a small local art exhibit at The Harley School. Late in his life, he received a Special Achievement Award from the Landmark Society of Western New York, and in 2017 he was selected posthumously as the

inaugural winner of the Lifetime of Design Award presented by the Rochester chapter of the American Institute of Architects.

## **Conclusion**

While attending architecture school in the 1950s, James H. Johnson had observed his classmates churning out what he saw as interchangeable modernist boxes devoid of character and decided to take his career in an entirely different, unconventional direction. His vision of architecture as a hands-on, gravity-defying activity melding structure and sculpture found its most dramatic expression in his buildings of the 1960s, when he and his unique team pushed the boundaries of their disciplines to create structures that continue to inspire wonder. He went on to explore complex geometry and unusual spatial relationships in the 1970s and 1980s. Occasionally, he returned to the organic architecture ideas that had inspired his earlier work, basing his designs on natural forms like a bird's wing or a favorite geometric shape like a spiral. While the late 1960s were his most prolific and innovative period, he continued to create unusual buildings into the twenty-first century.

Johnson was willing and eager to work well outside the architectural mainstream, championing collaborative, interdisciplinary projects that took aesthetic and structural risks that none of his peers locally, and few at a national level, were willing to take. His surviving buildings are the legacy of his unorthodox artistic vision, and are among the Rochester area's most significant works of twentieth-century art.

## Acknowledgements

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## About the Authors



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## End Notes

1. Early biographical information is mainly from James Johnson, interview by Lori Sandler, June 1976, transcript, John Wenrich Memorial Library, Landmark Society of Western New York, Rochester, NY; and Sarah Johnson, discussion with the authors, June 30, 2017.
2. James Johnson, interview.
3. Steve Orr and Meghan M. McDermott, “Noted Local Architect Johnson Dies,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, February 7, 2016.
4. James Johnson, interview.
5. Christopher Brandt, “James H. Johnson: Rochester’s Modern Master,” (Independent Study project, SUNY Buffalo, 2011), 9.
6. Sarah Johnson, discussion.
7. Brandt, 6.
8. “New St. John’s Church in Greece,” *The Catholic Courier Journal*, February 15, 1963.
9. Catherine R. Osborne, *American Catholics and the Church of Tomorrow: Building Churches for the Future, 1925–1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Kindle edition, introduction.
10. Wendell Castle, in discussion with the authors, June 2, 2017.
11. Brandt, 9.
12. “Smugtown Sculpture—Big, Bad, or Ugly,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, March 22, 1981.
13. Flossie Zartman, “The New ‘Liberty Pole’—Inspired Design or Towering Oddity?,” *Brighton-Pittsford Post*, May 13, 1965.
14. The latter pole was destroyed during a winter storm on December 25, 1889, and a collection of small storefronts took its place. “Five Men Win Liberty Pole Prize,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, October 31, 1964.
15. James Johnson, interview.
16. Kurt Feuerherm recalled that although he provided some ideas, he did not end up being



involved with the eventual design, but Johnson paid him for his time. The Secretsts were involved in designing metal elements in the sunken garden. Kurt Feuerherm, in discussion with the authors, January 25, 2018.

17. “Four Crafts United in Shaft’s Design,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, October 31, 1964.
18. Bert Gustavson, “Tree vs. Flagpole on Liberty Green,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, January 10, 1965.
19. Peter B. Taub, “Windy setback for Old Glory,” *Rochester Times-Union*, June 22, 1966.
20. “Fancy Liberty Pole—Will It Pass Test?,” *Democrat and Chronicle*, August 20, 1972. The ceremony is still held in the winter, although the pole now remains lit in the evenings year-round.
21. James McCommons, “The Liberty Pole Stays,” *Rochester Times-Union*, June 18, 1986.
22. Most of these designs reside in the Johnson family private collection.
23. Brandt, 7.
24. Brandt, 79. Osborne, introduction; and Freda Parker, “Dr. Arnold Wilson and the Ream’s Turtle,” accessed June 13 2020, <https://www.monolithic.org/benefits/benefits-strength/dr-arnold-wilson-and-the-ream-s-turtle>.
25. The best example the authors could find of another architect using concrete in a manner and scale similar to Johnson was Paolo Soleri (1919–2013), who worked in Arizona.
26. James Johnson, fax message to Christopher Brandt, September 17, 2012, quoted in, *Our Lady of Mercy Rectory: Documentation of the James Johnson-Designed Rectory Prior to Demolition*, (The Landmark Society of Western New York, 2012).
27. “Naples has New Church Emphasizing the Grape,” *Geneva Times*, October 8, 1966.
28. Jack Jones, “Church an inspiration to worship,” *Democrat & Chronicle*, January 18, 1986.
29. James Johnson, in discussion with the author (KEC), March 6, 2013; see also Brandt, “James H. Johnson: Rochester’s Modern Master,” and James Johnson, “Cast in Dirt: The Architecture of James Johnson” (presentation, Greece (NY) Historical Society, May 8, 2012).
30. Brandt, 11.

31. Brandt, 10.

32. Notes by Marguerite Antell, vertical files, James Johnson papers, Landmark Society of Western New York, Rochester, New York.

33. Ibid.

34. Leslie Harmer, "Would They Do It Again?," *Upstate*, May 23, 1976.

35. Stuart Low, "Bold Enterprise," *Democrat & Chronicle*, November 17, 2001.

36. George H. Ford to James Johnson, November 5, 1965, Johnson family private collection.



*Johnson's Housing Systems company employed his patented portable factory system to build concrete apartment buildings. From Johnson Slide Collection, Johnson family private collection.*



*Johnson once again at work on the iconic Mushroom House in 2002.  
Photograph Courtesy of Betsy Johnson.*