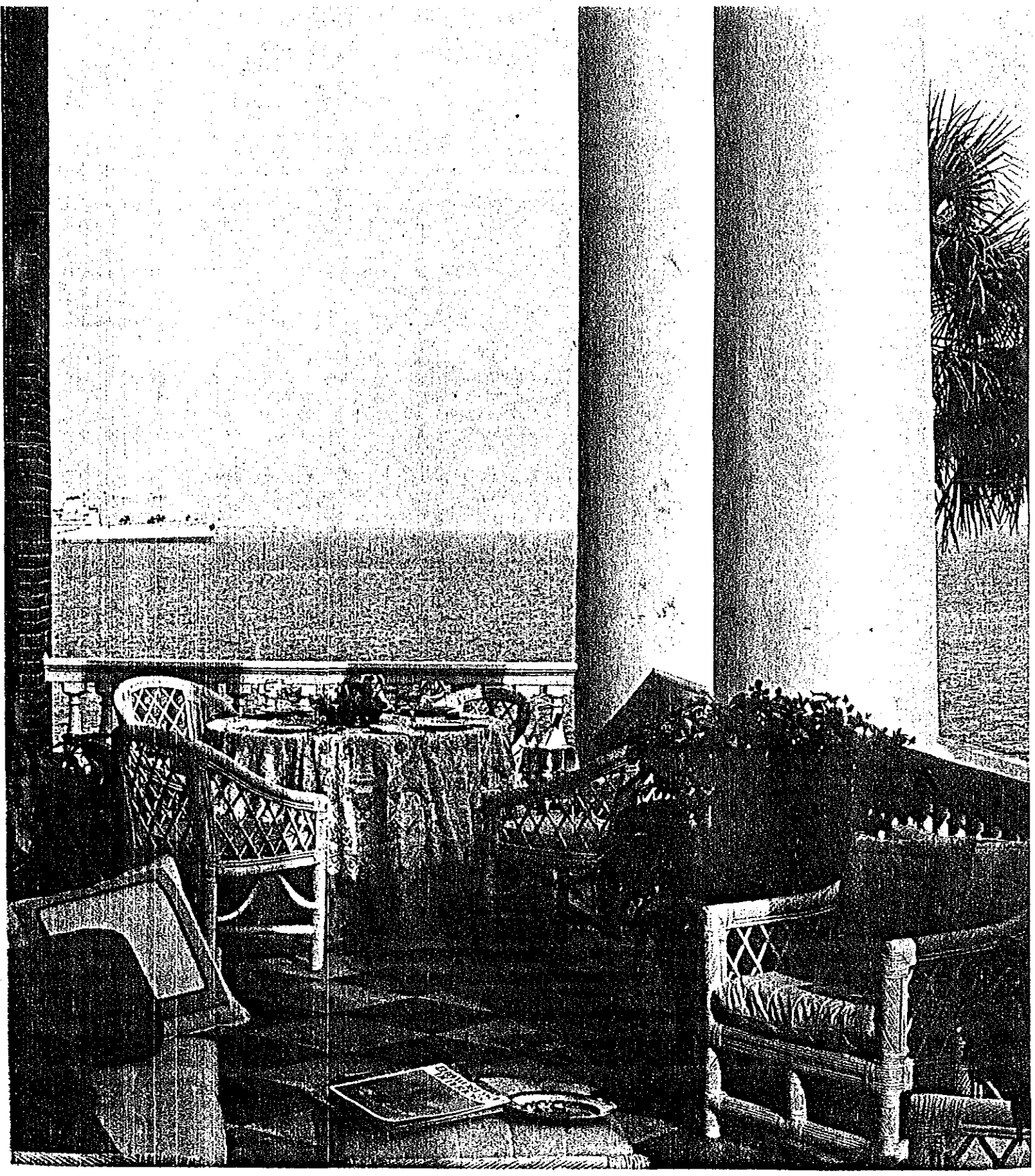


# HOUSE & GARDEN

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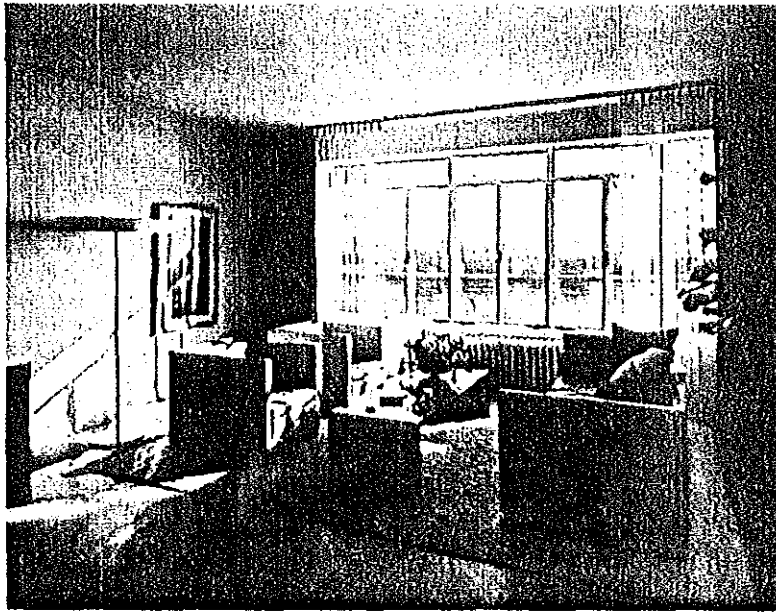
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# REVOLUTION ON BEEKMAN PLACE

Philip Johnson's timelessly modern Warburg apartment of 1934 was an early shock of the new from the iconoclastic architect who turns eighty this summer

By Nicholas Fox Weber



*Above:* The living room of Edward M.M. Warburg's apartment at 37 Beekman Place in New York City, published in the January 1935 issue of *House & Garden*. *Left:* The designer, photographed by Carl Van Vechten. *Right:* The client, photographed by George Platt Lynes.

When Edward M.M. Warburg brought Picasso's 1905 *Garçon Bleu* home to the French Gothic mansion where he was living with his parents on Fifth Avenue and 92nd Street he was told "it was much too radical for downstairs," where there were Rembrandt etchings and Italian and Dutch paintings, and would have to go up to the squash court on the fifth floor. In little time the squash court became a gallery of recent art. At age 24, on a visit to the Dessau Bauhaus, Eddie acquired two major oils after waiting politely on Paul Klee's doorstep until he heard the painter finish playing a Bach violin sonata. He sat (68 times) for a portrait bust by Gaston Lachaise, who made a radiator cap out of a dolphin for his Packard. He bought Lachaise's *Knees* and a head by Jacob

Epstein. Clearly Eddie needed his own digs.

In 1934 he asked Philip Johnson, his friend and co-worker at the recently founded Museum of Modern Art, for advice. Philip had never before had a commission and was not yet a licensed architect, but he had a keen eye for design. They found a fourth-floor walk-up in an old brownstone on the river side of Beekman Place, and decided to wreck it completely and start all over again. Where there were two small windows overlooking the East River there should be a wall of glass. Every last drop of ornament had to go. Whereas Eddie was used to his parents' enormous stairwell with its Gothic oak balustrade, to marble amphoras and Gothic sculpture in a sea of cut velvet, ornate bronze, and fancy lace, now

he would walk on off-white linoleum, and the draperies would be fishnet or monk's cloth.

It was becoming routine for Edward Mortimer Morris Warburg to venture forth. The year 1934 was also when Lincoln Kirstein asked him to help fund George Balanchine's trip from Paris to the United States to start a ballet company. The troupe had its first public performance on Eddie's 26th birthday that June in front of some two hundred guests in the garden of the senior Warburgs' country house in White Plains, and so began the American Ballet. As usual his family was shocked but tolerant; they were getting used to him. When Eddie's brother Paul had met his boat after the summer holiday from Harvard when he bought the Blue Period Picasso, Paul had ex-

CENTER: EMILIE DANIELSON

plained to a customs officer shocked by its value that at least it was cheaper than a stay in a mental hospital. When Eddie did his apartment with Philip Johnson, however, his brothers thought that they had not been able to keep him out of a hospital after all. One of them thought it resembled such a facility; another brother said that the whole place was so antiseptic "that you have the feeling you're in a dairy. When you go into the bathroom, you don't expect to find the usual fixtures—you expect to find a separator."

Eddie's independence had first surfaced at Harvard. He often voiced his view that art-history courses focused on facts and identification more than on judgments of quality in art, and he ridiculed the required memorization of monuments by pointing out that Cefalu Cathedral could only be identified because all the university photographs of it had a dog in the foreground. Eddie and his classmates Lincoln Kirstein and John Walker (the future director of the National Gallery in Washing-

ton) started the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art, which inspired the founders of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Between 1929 and 1931 they mounted 21 pioneering art exhibitions in two rooms above the Harvard Coop. There was a show of Alexander Calder wire figures for which Calder as a bonus did a portrait of Eddie's father with a test tube in his lapel to hold a carnation; exhibitions with Braque, Picasso, Matisse, and Derain; and architecture shows, including one on Buckminster Fuller's Dymaxion House. Philip Johnson, who had been graduated from Harvard in 1927, frequented the Society, which is how he and Eddie first met.

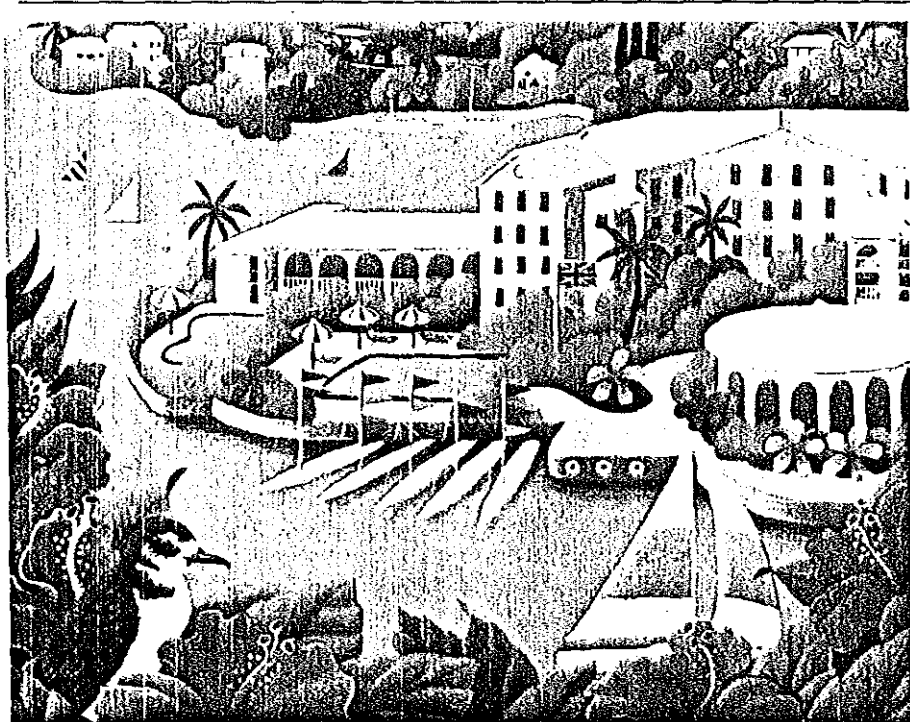
After Harvard Eddie taught art history for two years at Bryn Mawr. He then moved back to New York and joined the staff of The Museum of Modern Art. He was on the Junior Council, and at age 24 became a trustee. He helped start the Film Library and was active on the Exhibitions Committee. Philip Johnson was the cu-

lator of the Department of Architecture.

Johnson selected everything for the apartment on Beekman Place. "He was violent on the subject of ornament. Anything with decoration on it was nonsense," according to the client. Johnson championed the International Style, about which he had recently written a book with Henry-Russell Hitchcock. His own first apartment, at 424 East 52nd Street, had been designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (and executed by Mies's lady friend and business associate, Lilly Reich). The lines were spare and elegant, the atmosphere assertively modern. There were Barcelona chairs, solid raw-silk curtains, Chinese floor matting, and a lighting fixture that Johnson says today was "as bad as any lighting fixture you could imagine. It threw a miserable cold light, but Mies only cared about it as an object." Early in 1934 Johnson had designed a duplex for himself and his sister with similarities to the spaces he would soon make for Warburg. He tore out many of the interior walls of the existing apartment, put down a pale ecru linoleum, and focused on the beauty of severe, solid planes at right angles to one another. Rooms had more than one function—a dining area in the living room, a bedroom/sitting room—and everything was physically and visually very light.

The only visual records that remain of the Johnson duplex and the Warburg flat—illustrations in 1934 and 1935 copies of *House & Garden*—show the same rigorous aesthetic. But, in addition to the art collection, Eddie's apartment had more furniture actually designed by Philip. Along with pieces by Mies there were Johnson's pigskin-covered bucket chairs and sofa (no longer extant), his tubular wastebasket, his two different standing lamps (of which there was one in his duplex), and his fishnet curtains.

Warburg was "a great, great client" for Johnson. "He never made one demand. The budget was elastic. He'd say, 'You know better about that than I do. Why should I interfere?' It cost what it cost, and it took as much time as was necessary." Fifty years later, Johnson still admires Warburg's courage in choosing the unknown, as he had with Balanchine, and in giving someone a start. "How did he know what I would



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Johnson, says Warburg, "was violent on the subject of ornament . . ."

do? I had never had a commission before. But he trusted me, just as his father trusted him. Eddie has a great sense of style and of patronage. He took a big chance."

For both men the exposed radiator, unframed mirror with clips, and frankly industrial furniture were as much personal statements as aesthetic decisions. Warburg says, "This was my assertion—non-antagonistic—of being different. As the fifth child, I had one ambition, the approval of my brothers and the rest of my family and, as I grew, of my friends." In this case, he was playing to his friends. He knew he would get the usual "Oh my God!" from his brothers, but he did the apartment "to be part of the gang." The gang were his fellow staff members at MOMA and the other supporters of contemporary art with whom he visited galleries.

Eddie's family was astonished by the interior at 37 Beekman Place, but they remained gracious about it. The one time that Eddie's father, at risk to his health, climbed the three steep flights, he tried his best to like the austerity of the two rooms. After a few minutes, he leaned forward to use the phone, and as the metal strap runners of the desk chair slid out from underneath him, his jaw crashed onto the desk. When Eddie rushed over to help, Mr. Warburg simply said, "That's what I like about modern art: it's so functional."

Eddie himself had mixed reactions to the place. The Makassar ebony screen walls were beautiful, as was the birch dining-room table and the black lacquer coffee table. The neutral colors and overall simplicity made a striking setting for the art. The view was wonderful. For five years he lived well with the combined living and dining room; central core with kitchen, bathroom, and closets; and the bedroom/study. But the pigskin chairs often gave their occupants a mat burn. And "it was a bit monastic for me. I was uncomfortable with the coldness of it. . . I always felt that when I came into the room I spoiled the composition. The discipline was so violent. If you moved an object an inch, it threw everything off kilter. If a magazine was not at right angles with the coffee table, you felt the room hadn't been cleaned up. Acoustically it was awful. You dropped a spoon on the table and thought a pistol shot had gone off." Johnson acknowledges the practical deficiencies, and simply calls Warburg "an angel" for never having blamed him for them at the time. At least the apartment succeeded as an art object, in its visual grace and fine proportions and textural play.

Philip Johnson became a licensed architect nine years later. Today he puts Chippendale on the outside of buildings, and Edward Warburg uses it within. The latter married in 1939, and Mary Warburg would have nothing to do with the austerity of 37 Beekman Place. They have had various residences in which ornament and decoration have figured proudly. The first was a town house in the East 60s. George Stacey was the decorator. Eddie said to George Stacey, "Look, I don't want to interfere with your décor—you and Mary are working that out—but tell me something: where do you visualize that you're going to put the various paintings?" Stacey turned to Warburg and said, "Eddie, on the wall." At least it was better than the squash court. □

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