

HABITATS | NEW CANAAN, CONN.

# Treading Gently on Hallowed Ground



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

**MODERN MASTERY** As director of preservation, Marty Skrelunas is helping prepare Philip Johnson's Glass House for the beginning of public tours in April.

By **FRED A. BERNSTEIN**  
Published: August 13, 2006

BEFORE [Philip Johnson](#) died, in January 2005, he left his iconic Glass House and its 45 acres in New Canaan to the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#).



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**OUT OF SIGHT** Marty and Leigh Skrelunas and their son, Benjamin, live on the Philip Johnson estate in New Canaan, Conn., in a farmhouse called Popestead.



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Mr. Skrelunas has furnished Popestead with pieces by Marcel Breuer, Le Corbusier, Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto.



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The Glass House, shielded from view by evergreens, is about 250 yards away from the farmhouse.

she said.

In fact, from the couple's living room, the Glass House is nearly invisible — large evergreens guard its privacy. But the two houses, about 250 yards apart, share views of the bucolic estate, which contains about a dozen other buildings designed by Johnson over half a century, including a deep red curved-walled entry pavilion he called "the Monsta."

The trust plans to begin admitting visitors to the Glass House, and to several other buildings on the property, next April.

Until then, the most frequent visitor to the house is Marty Skrelunas, the site's jovial 39-year-old director of preservation, who is in charge of preparing the building for its debut.

On a recent afternoon, Mr. Skrelunas unlocked the door to the Glass House and James, a keeshond, scampered in. The dog belonged to Johnson and his partner, David Whitney (who also died last year). Mr. Skrelunas and James arrived at the Glass House around the same time — in 1997.

Mr. Skrelunas lives uphill from the Glass House in a modest farmhouse that was built before Johnson arrived in New Canaan. Johnson named the building Popestead, in honor of his mother's cousin Theodate Pope Riddle, one of the first women to practice architecture in [Connecticut](#). Popestead is also home to Mr. Skrelunas's wife, Leigh, a resident in internal and preventive medicine, and their son, Benjamin, who was born in May. Most nights, James joins them in their second-floor bedroom, choosing companionship over his Johnson-designed doghouse.

For Dr. Skrelunas, the hardest part of living on the famous estate is describing it to friends in her native California. "When I say we live next to a house that's entirely glass, people imagine us peering into Mr. Johnson's windows,"

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Popestead also overlooks Johnson's 1951 Hodgson House, across the street. That house, which is now on the market, is the subject of a preservation easement that ensures it will remain as Johnson and his clients intended. "We have the best views anyone could ever hope for," said Mr. Skrelunas, who is much like a ranger living on the edge of a gorgeous national park — only this is a park of architectural wonders.

Mr. Skrelunas was hired nearly a decade ago by the trust to help Johnson maintain the Glass House in accordance with the organization's standards. The idea was to have someone work with Johnson, to "become aware of his processes and preferences and build familiarity with the buildings and the grounds," said Christy MacLear, who was recently appointed executive director of the Glass House site.

Mr. Skrelunas had the right credentials. A graduate of the [University of Michigan](#), in architecture, and Columbia, in preservation, he had been working at Lyndhurst, the Gothic revival mansion on the Hudson River in Tarrytown, N.Y. He knew about the Glass House, built in 1949, but when he visited for a job interview with Johnson and Whitney, he said he was so excited he "couldn't breathe."

The Glass House is one of only two postwar buildings owned by the trust. (The other is the Farnsworth House near Plano, Ill., by Johnson's sometime collaborator, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.)

Over the years, Mr. Skrelunas became accustomed to carrying out major repairs while Johnson and Whitney were vacationing, often at their house in Big Sur, Calif. These days, he is planning a long list of improvements, including replacing the roof, which is "nearing the end of its life cycle," Mr. Skrelunas said.

But not everything happens according to schedule. Recently, a wild turkey crashed through one six-foot-wide glass panel, necessitating an emergency repair job.

Mr. Skrelunas is accustomed to seeing nature take its toll. "After a storm, you throw on the wellies and your oil jacket and go investigate the property," he said.

Mr. Skrelunas's house, while less an icon than the Glass House, is known in New Canaan for an odd detail: a window in the second-floor guest room looks out through the chimney (an arrangement that required a split flue). It is one of several charming aspects of the house, which Johnson gently modified over the years.

"He was interested in all types of architecture, not just his own," Mr. Skrelunas said. Johnson's biggest changes involved removing accretions, including greenhouses and a porch enclosure, to bring the house back to basics — a kind of minimalism akin to the minimalism of the Glass House.

Because patching the walls meant mixing old and new shingles, Johnson brought in Donald Kaufman and Taffy Dahl, color consultants in [Manhattan](#), to choose a uniform exterior hue, a gentle beige that Mr. Kaufman describes as the color of weathered cedar. The color is not available commercially; when Mr. Skrelunas needs a gallon of paint, he orders it through the Kaufman-Dahl office.

On the inside, Johnson kept Popestead's wide-board floors and white plaster walls, creating a neutral backdrop for furnishings, which now include Mr. Skrelunas's collection of pieces by great modernist architects. There are chairs by Marcel Breuer, a chaise by Le Corbusier and tables by the Finnish masters Eero Saarinen and Alvar Aalto.

Dr. Skrelunas said that she had not added much — "Marty is the designer in the family." Benjamin's arrival this spring brought many items chosen for function, not form.

Popestead has a lot of history. In the 1960's and 70's, Johnson's sister Theodate Johnson Severns and her husband, Dr. Scott Severns, a Manhattan dentist, used it as a summer residence. Then, in the 1980's, Johnson and Whitney lived in Popestead for about a year while a new under-floor heating system was installed in the Glass House.

Although it is considered part of the National Trust site, Ms. MacLear said, Popestead

won't be part of the official tour, which will be offered on Tuesday through Sunday to groups of as many as 10 people. (Reservations will be available online at [www.philipjohnsonglasshouse.org](http://www.philipjohnsonglasshouse.org).)

Ms. MacLear and Mr. Skrelunas are working with consultants to make the buildings more accessible to people with disabilities. At the Glass House, a portable ramp will be placed over the two steps when necessary.

For the Skrelunas family, things will be different when tourists begin arriving next spring. But both Mr. Skrelunas and his wife said they won't mind the visitors. "It's not ours," Dr. Skrelunas said of the Glass House and its surroundings. "We have always thought of it as Mr. Johnson's space."

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