

The Lincoln Kirstein Tower

NEW LIFE FOR AN ARTFUL EXPRESSION OF FRIENDSHIP

by Lauren Weber

Looking at it, you might be tempted to climb the Lincoln Kirstein Tower at the Philip Johnson Glass House. Johnson certainly enjoyed scaling the 30-foot concrete block structure, as did many of his visitors, though few made it farther than halfway to the top.

Today, of course, climbing is no longer permitted. But the sculpture, located just beyond the pond at the sprawling 47-acre campus in New Canaan, Conn., continues to evoke a sense of playfulness, with a composition inspired by the choreography of George Balanchine and Johnson's own fascination with building blocks.

Constructed in 1985, a year before Johnson celebrated his 80th birthday, the sculpture was a touching tribute to the architect's friend Lincoln Kirstein, a noted poet and cofounder of the School of American Ballet.

In a 1991 interview for the National Trust with Johnson biographer Franz Schwalz, Johnson said, "I admire Lincoln Kirstein more than any of my friends. ... He became 80 about the same time that I did, and nobody was giving him enough honors. So, I said [to myself], 'I will name the tower after Lincoln,' and I did."



Repairing the 30-foot Lincoln Kirstein Tower is one of several conservation projects happening this summer at the Philip Johnson Glass House.

Johnson asked Kirstein to find a meaningful quotation, which Johnson engraved at the very top to ensure few would ever see it. The Glass House staff continues to honor his intent, never disclosing the inscription to visitors.

"I will, however, share that it is a verse from Psalms," says Irene Shum Allen, curator and collections manager at the National Trust Historic Site.

This summer, the sculpture will be scaled once again, as the Glass House staff begins major conservation work on the piece. Before the Glass House opened to the public in 2007, the sculpture was cleaned, but in

the 1990s, it had been repainted with an acrylic latex paint, an impermeable coating that traps moisture and mold underneath, causing significant deterioration. Once the harmful substance is removed, the sculpture's surface will be thoroughly cleaned and coated with the ecofriendly KEIM silicate paint, which Allen says will protect it from environmental factors like pollution and mold, without flaking or peeling.

The project is expected to take anywhere from a few weeks to several months, weather depending. But by the time the final layer of paint dries, Johnson's "staircase to nowhere" will be ready to endure for decades more. ■