

JULY 2009 • MAGAZINE

Fifty Years of the Four Seasons

On the anniversary of one of New York's great modern spaces, the interior designer Kitty Hawks and Four Seasons co-owner Julian Niccolini lunch in the famous Grill Room and talk about what makes that restaurant the ultimate dining experience.

By Belinda Lanks & Paul Makovsky
Posted July 22, 2009

Be the first to comment on this article

After the Seagram Building—Mies van der Rohe's bronze masterpiece on 52nd Street and Park Avenue—was completed in 1958, one vital question remained: What could possibly be installed in the lobby that would befit a paragon of the International Style? Various schemes were entertained, but the winning pitch came from Jerry Brody and Joe Baum. But this restaurant had to be different. Just as Mies changed architecture, the Four Seasons would redefine the American eatery. For starters, Philip Johnson, who had collaborated with Mies on the building, was commissioned to design the interior, a massive space with 20-foot-high ceilings. In the end, the budget came to \$4.5 million—more than had been spent on any other restaurant. And it showed. Every detail was calibrated to create the ultimate dining experience.

When the Four Seasons opened in July 1959, it was an immediate hit. With its clubby atmosphere, the understatedly spectacular Grill Room, became the gentlemen's lunch spot; the more feminine Pool Room, named for the 20-foot-square Carrara-marble pool at its center, was the place for an intimate dinner. Fifty years later, the restaurant (landmarked in 1989) remains one of the most enduring modern spaces in the world. But the key to its success lies not in stasis but in its ability to adapt. When the restaurant was floundering in the 1970s, George Lois, the irreverent adman recruited to promote it, established the Grill Room as the home of the power lunch. Presiding over the industry titans and media magnates was Johnson himself, who lunched at his regular corner table every day until his death in 2005.

One afternoon in June, *Metropolis* magazine editorial director Paul Makovsky (PM) and managing editor Belinda Lanks (BL) met with famed interior designer Kitty Hawks (KH) for lunch at the Four Seasons. They were joined (intermittently) by the restaurant's peripatetic, table-hopping managing partner Julian Niccolini (JN).

PM: When was the first time you came to the Four Seasons?

KH: Probably the late sixties. It's always been the place to go for a special event like an anniversary or birthday. Last night I said to my husband: "You don't ever not get dressed up for this restaurant."

BL: When you come here, do you still feel that special feeling?

KH: Every time. Arriving in off the street is very inauspicious. I love that you walk in downstairs into a low-ceilinged room, and you're not met by anyone. It's staid and dignified. There's something about the proportion of the stairs, and the way you ascend them, and of course when you turn that corner and enter the space, it's like nothing you've ever seen: the classic contrast between low and small, high and open. It's the best move you can make architecturally. And whether it's the Grill Room for lunch—I've never been in a restaurant where you're facing away from the center—or the Pool Room for dinner, where the pool in the middle of the room forces a kind of privacy. Both rooms are comfortable but different socially.

Niccolini arrives at the table, warmly greets his guests, then promptly leaves.

PM: What are some elements of the spaces that really work?

KH: The fundamental proportion and the generosity of the spaces are extraordinary. The acoustics are wonderful, because of the high ceilings, and the carpeting and upholstery. Philip Johnson partnered with the great decorator Bill Pahlmann on the interiors. So what was at work was taste, which is the hardest thing to define, and isn't even a necessary component, especially for architects, even really good ones in restaurant design today.

PM: Today it's more theme-park.

KH: It's "design" design. Very self-conscious. Here there's nothing kitschy. It's so elegant and tasteful, and yet nothing draws undue attention to itself. You sit back and experience the highest quality of everything, but not to the point where you're thinking, Oh, my god, I just spilled a drop of red wine on a \$4,000 napkin!

PM: And there's something almost bold about not having anything on the wall except for this veneer.

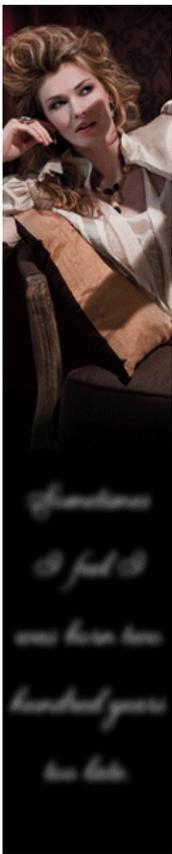
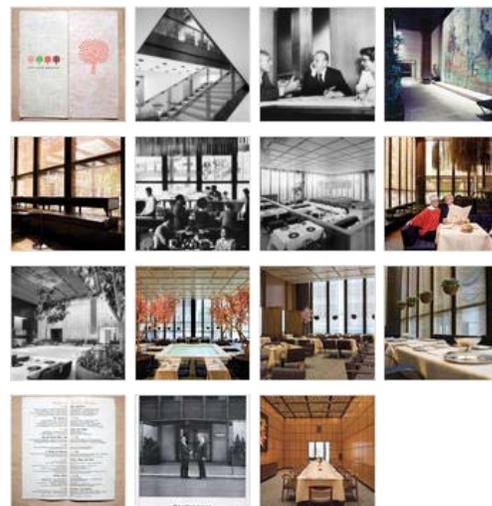
PRINT

E-MAIL

TALK2US



Kitty Hawks and Four Seasons co-owner Julian Niccolini pore over an original menu in the Grill Room. The glass partitions behind them were a later addition by Johnson to replace the trees that kept dying. Portraits by Chris Mueller for *Metropolis*





More than
200 patterns
and colors
are waiting
for you.

KH: It's lit so simply, and when you put it all together—the service and how dignified it is, how it's formal but not intimidating—the space is still the essence of great modern design. As an interior designer, you're always thinking of what the inhabitation of a space will be like, what the experience will be like, and this delivers on all of those accounts. There's also an uncommon graciousness, which they've never pulled back from. I'm sure there have been times when they thought of putting in twice as many tables.

PM: Or changing the menu to flip tables.

BL: I had a conversation with one of the owners of Momofuko—a trendy restaurant in the East Village—and he was so proud that it received the first James Beard award given to a restaurant where there aren't even backs

to the seats. You come in, eat, and leave. No desserts either. I couldn't believe that it was such a point of pride for him.

KH: It's so perverse. I don't know what point people are making. How good does the food have to be if I make you incredibly uncomfortable?

Niccolini returns to the table and sits down.

PM: So, Julian, you've been working here over thirty years?

JN: Yes, since 1977. I was work-ing for a couple of years at the Palace Restaurant. All of the restaurants then were run by French people. This was the only one that wasn't. It was run by Tom Margittai, a true Hungarian,

and was the first restaurant in America that started cooking American food. So I came here for dinner, and it was fine, but I found a few things that were not working, like the people working here. The next day I called up Paul Kovi, one of the owners, and that's how I started, working six days a week, basically running the Grill Room.

BL: What changes did you institute when you got here?

JN: At that time, the Grill was not as popular as the Pool Room. All of the Madison Avenue advertising executives used to eat in the Pool Room, so we started by catering to the publishing and fashion people, and then the Grill Room became more popular than the Pool Room.

PM: What about architects and designers?

JN: Every day Philip Johnson was here with a different architect—Frank Gehry, Richard Meier, Bob Stern, and that Iranian lady, Zaha Hadid, who had lunch with him many, many times.

PM: What's the story with the famous chain drapes?

JN: They were not supposed to move, but they kept moving because of the air conditioning and the difference in temperature between the outside and inside. It's a beautiful effect, especially during the evening.

KH: How do you clean them?

JN: We take them down in pieces and put them through the dishwashing machine.

Niccolini gets up and leaves as the table finishes up.

KH: Oh, look, Henry Kissinger. [under her breath] Fascist beast.

PM: Maybe you should invite him to sit down.

BL: You're not going to accuse him of being a war criminal?

KH: I don't have to. I think enough people have done it for me [looks around the room]. It's really the volume of the room that is so extraordinary. And each time I come here, it's the same magical experience. You know it's going to happen, but it feels new every time.

**

We asked a number of people who know the Four Seasons intimately—both past and present—to share their memories of this singular space.

Norman Diekman Designer

In 1960 I started working as a draftsman in Johnson's office, which was located on the 36th and 37th floors of the Seagram Building. One time, a group of us from the office went down to the restaurant to look at the fountain. There was a proposal to put a glass floor over the pool, but there was something disconcerting about dancing on that, whether the light wasn't very nice for the ladies, or the sound of it, or people dancing on glass, maybe in high heels, could have been a little slippery. I think the idea got shelved.

Noreen Morioka Graphic Designer

The primary feature is the food, because it is a restaurant. The architectural space is secondary. I'm a foodie, and what's really amazing about the Four Seasons is that it has impeccable service and impeccable food. It's one of the few places around that has a head waiter, a second waiter, a server, a bread guy. This kind of service is not a standard in America anymore. The architecture is a stage for their service and from that it all just comes together. That's what makes that place so amazingly beautiful.

Robert A.M. Stern Architect

I lunched with Philip any number of times over more than 30 years. He would always try to get me to order dessert so that he could have some of it. And he tended to have a pattern—he'd have a certain kind of food or drink, and he'd have it all the time. He drank his Americano for years and years and years.

The two rooms are marvelous. They're both virtually identical in cubic volume, but



60 YEARS
OF DESIGNING FOR SCHOOLS
HAS SCHOOLED
US ON DESIGN
FOR PEOPLE

through the differences of decor and spatial manipulations, they seem very different, which is an incredibly interesting phenomenon. The Grill Room is, of course, the place to be seen having lunch. The Pool Room is maybe more interesting. (I think Philip always thought the Pool Room was where the bridge-and-tunnel crowd ate.) In certain seasons of the year, the natural light coming through is very beautiful. Of course, the buildings have gotten so big all around, but when it was relatively new, there were fewer skyscrapers and a little more sunlight came in.

Gerald D. Hines

Real Estate Developer

Philip and I had many luncheons there. We talked about the restaurant's interior in relation to some of the buildings we were doing together, like Pennzoil Place, where we had a very high entry lobby, 100-and-some-feet tall. So that was how that was going to look in scale, and we compared it many times with how the restaurant was built. Although the Four Seasons doesn't have 100-foot-high ceilings, it does have some nice height. That's what gives it that kind of majesty. You just don't find that kind of space available very often, especially in New York. After the Pennzoil opened, Ada Louise Huxtable named it the building of the year, which was a pretty significant award for us because we were a young developer and Huxtable was a big deal then, and is today.

You know, Rothko was doing a whole series of paintings, but he withdrew them because he said, "I don't want my paintings hung there with a bunch of rich bastards eating there." Boy, would they have been valuable. The owner of that restaurant would have a couple hundred million dollars of paintings there he could've sold off. He missed out on that one.

Phyllis Lambert

Architect; founder of the Canadian Centre for Architecture; and daughter of the original building owner, Samuel Bronfman

As director of planning for the Seagram Building, I was the connection to all of the consultants, the real estate people, and the architect. There were vague discussions of how that space was to be used—such as a car showroom or as a museum space—but finally the real estate people came up with the idea of doing a restaurant. We had to decide on that, so Philip and I went with Jerry Brody out to New Jersey and had a meal at his restaurant, where they gave us soup in profiterole bowls. Then we went to the completely over-the-top Forum of the Twelve Caesars, designed by Bill Pahlmann. Anyway, there was this ridiculous little twist in the AIA rules that, because Mies was in Chicago, he couldn't get his license in New York, so Mies told Philip, "Why don't you do it?" And he did a brilliant job.

Ada Louise Huxtable

Critic

Philip recommended my husband, Garth, for the job to design all the "accoutrements." We did designs for all of the tabletop stuff—the glass and the china, the wagons that they serve from, everything in the restaurant that was used to serve food, from serving pieces to bread baskets. We had nine hysterical, crazy, wonderful months to work on it.

I was working with Garth when he needed me, and we did collaborate on that job. But I was never a designer. I was more or less the hand holder, and critic, and sometimes public advocate.

Hilary Lewis

Architectural Historian and Philip Johnson's official biographer

I used to go about once a month with Philip to lunch at the Four Seasons—always at 12:30 p.m. and always at table 32. It was certainly a highlight, to say the least. He liked to sit with his back to the wall, looking into the room, so he could see everybody coming in and going out. It was entertainment for him. Obviously, he loved that space, and he felt that it had held up well and was one of the great rooms in New York, if he did say so himself. Once I was admiring the French walnut on the wall, and I asked him if he had used walnut at the Glass House, and he said, "Oh, yes, but not like this walnut"—this was obviously a much finer selection. My understanding is that this was selected with Mies's approval. There's a quality to that wood that really sets it apart—something that naturally delighted him in terms of the space.

Terence Riley

Architect and Director of the Miami Art Museum

For somebody who was not born in New York and came there as a young man, it's certainly one of the more sophisticated places. The first time I went there was not with Philip or anyone else. It was probably with some friends, and we went to the bar for a drink. From the bleacher seats, or the equivalent of the bleacher seats, for the cost of a cocktail, you could enjoy the same service, sophistication, and the incredible design that Philip had produced. I do remember one day when I was sitting with Philip, and there was Tina Brown and Henry Kissinger, and in the middle of all of it everybody's heads turned, which was sort of unusual, as Ronald Reagan walked through to one of the private rooms. That was the moment I realized that in a place like the Four Seasons even Henry Kissinger might be turning his head. It was incredibly fun like that. How can you not feel like you had some sort of entrée into a kind of magical world?

One of the funnier things that ever happened was when I was sitting there with Philip in the corner, and Linda Wells, who's the editor in chief of *Allure* magazine and who had been

a client—we designed her house in Jersey—was sitting across the room. She was discreetly making a face at me that said, “I want to meet Philip Johnson.” So I was discreetly kind of winking, suggesting she stop by. So she walks by the table and says, “Oh, hi, Terry,” and I said, “Oh, hi, Linda. You know Philip Johnson, don’t you?” and she said, “No, I’d love to shake your hand,” which she did. And then she said, “Terry designed my house for my husband and my kids, and we just love it.” He asked, “Do you have any pictures?” and she replied, “Of my children?” and he said, “No, of the house. I actually don’t care much for children.” I think that story could have happened anywhere, quite frankly, but I do think there was something special about the Four Seasons that made people want to be wittier than they normally were, made them want to say things that were more memorable.

George Lois

Adman and Art Director

There were a lot of bumps along the way. Over the years, businesspeople stopped going there. It didn’t have the life of New York. It had become a kind of a tourist thing—if you came to New York, you had to go to the Four Seasons. It became a white elephant, because, two floors high, if you look at the space, it’s gigantic. People were saying to the owners of the building: “Gee, you know, you should throw the Four Seasons out and build two floors there and make much more money.” To the rescue came two Hungarian refugees by the name of Tom Margittai and Paul Kovi—terrific, wonderful men who came to me and said that they were buying it. But they weren’t going to buy it unless I stuck with them and did the advertising. So I gave up this couple-million-dollar Restaurant Associates account, where I did all the restaurants, to work on one restaurant, a great restaurant, where I’m not sure they had money to spend to do advertising.

The first thing I did was run a full-page ad in the *New York Times* with a photograph of Tom and Paul outside the entrance on 52nd Street shaking hands—sort of this warm, traditional shot. It announced to the world that the two of them were going to take over and run the store, instead of this Restaurant Associates, this corporate thing. Every ad from then on was signed: “From the two of us.” It was such an immediate change in the imagery of the place that within two days they were booked for months.

**

Next Season

For decades, Philip Johnson was responsible for fine-tuning the Four Seasons, but it has now been 50 years since the restaurant opened, and it’s time this landmarked interior got some gentle refreshing. Last fall, Lambert and the owners of the restaurant began a search for a new house architect, settling on Belmont Freeman—a Modernist with historic-preservation credibility—who is now overseeing the rehabilitation, restoration, and upkeep of the space.

Freeman’s top priority will be the restoration of areas of the restaurant that have aged, like the ancillary spaces on the ground floor and the ladies’ powder room. His firm is collaborating with several of the companies that supplied the original interiors back in 1959, such as Knoll, to replace Saarinen Tulip chairs; Speakman, to echo the Johnson-designed faucets; Fortuny, to restore the original feather-pattern fabrics in the bathroom; and Edison Price, to refurbish custom-built lighting fixtures in the lobby. (Freeman and William Armstrong, a lighting designer, tracked down the original Richard Kelly drawings for the fixtures and are working with a longtime employee from Edison Price familiar with the project to rebuild them, putting in more efficient lamps within the original housing.)

The iconic shimmering chain curtains, by the textile designer Marie Nichols, pose a particular challenge. The manufacturer of the aluminum chain went out of business in the 1970s, and Freeman has had little success in locating an alternative. The chains break easily, but replacing them with a stronger metal would destroy their gentle flutter. Freeman is in talks with metal artists about repairing them as you might jewelry. The drapes would be mended strand by strand and bathed in a solution to remove tarnish. “There’s still a little bit of research to be done here,” he says. “The project will be an ongoing enterprise.”

SHARE 

Read Related Stories:



Rooms of Their Own

A new book of residential photographs celebrates a highly personal approach to interiors.



Breaking Theme

Neil Denari delivers a refined space for a Los Angeles restaurant that takes its inspiration from street culture.



Style & Substance

Anachronistic tastes land Roman & Williams two of New York’s hottest