

PROFESSIONAL ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF REGINALD DAVIS JOHNSON, FAIA

Reginald Davis Johnson (1882–1952) stands as a pivotal figure among the master architects who defined the "Golden Age" of Southern California architecture in the early 20th century. While internationally recognized for his lavish residential commissions in affluent communities like Pasadena and Santa Barbara, his career exhibited a profound trajectory toward socially responsible design, culminating in his influential work in public housing.

Architectural Philosophy and Early Career

Born in Westchester, New York, in 1882, Johnson was the son of Joseph Horsfall Johnson, the first Episcopal Bishop of Los Angeles. This connection later proved significant in his ecclesiastical commissions. Johnson's architectural education was foundational, including studies in Paris and a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1910.

Upon returning to Pasadena, he established his practice around 1912, quickly becoming one of Los Angeles' leading architects by 1920. His work is characterized by a distinctive integration of Mediterranean, Spanish Colonial Revival, and Anglo-Colonial styles, harmonizing them with the California climate and landscape. This approach was instrumental in shaping the regional aesthetic known as "A California Architecture," rooted in local history and tradition.

A major early accolade was the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medal in 1920 for his design of "Miraflores," the John Percival Jefferson estate in Montecito, marking the first time the award was given for residential architecture in Southern California.

Partnership and Significant Commissions (1920s)

Between 1921 and 1924, Johnson was a principal in the highly influential firm of Johnson, Kaufmann and Coate, alongside Gordon Bernie Kaufmann and Roland Eli Coate Sr. The firm produced several significant non-residential works:

- St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral (Los Angeles, 1924–1925): A major commission, Romanesque and Gothic-influenced, consecrated by Johnson's father.
- Caltech Hale Solar Laboratory (Pasadena, 1924)

Following the dissolution of the partnership, Johnson's independent practice thrived, particularly with large-scale commissions in the Santa Barbara area:

- The Santa Barbara Biltmore Hotel (Now the Four Seasons Biltmore, Santa Barbara, 1926): This seaside hotel is one of his most famous designs, earning him a gold medal from the Architectural League of New York.
- UCLA Chancellor's House (1930)

Shift to Public Housing and Urban Planning

The Great Depression marked a fundamental shift in Johnson's focus. Although his 1931 award for the "Best Small House Built in America" (a gardener's cottage) demonstrated his mastery of modest scale, his growing concern for social equity led him to concentrate his expertise on affordable housing.

Driven by a commitment to improving living conditions, Johnson made the pivotal decision to retire from his lucrative private practice around 1934 to dedicate his remaining years to public service. He became a co-founder of the Los Angeles Citizen Housing Council and worked at local, state, and national levels to champion low-rent housing.

His significant later works in urban planning and public housing include:

- Santa Barbara Post Office (1937): This New Deal-era building is often cited as his final major architectural commission.
- Baldwin Hills Village (Los Angeles, 1930s-1941, in collaboration with Clarence Stein): Conceived as an up-to-date, inexpensive community utilizing Garden City planning principles, this development was recognized by the AIA as one of the 100 most important architectural achievements in American history.

Johnson's enduring legacy rests not only on the elegance of his Golden Age estates but also on his progressive vision for inclusive, well-designed urban communities.



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