Introduction (Morality)

Mies, formally unschooled and entirely self-taught, seems to have possessed an innate morality as well as an intrinsic generosity that imbued his work with meaning. Mies' buildings were both expressive of a morality peculiar to postwar America and basic to his own beliefs. American architects copied Mies with great boldness; New York's Lexington, Madison, and Sixth Avenues furnish many examples of this simulation. Sometimes reasonable, never contextual, and mostly Godawful, these neo-Mies boxes have come to populate most American cities. As Mies' work developed and his language broadened, his vision established a new American norm or truth. To see SOM (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill) imitating Mies' coping of a clipped steel angle (made symmetrical by Skidmore about the vertical axis) is to understand that one architect was engaged in contending with such essentials as gravity while the other was engaged in formalism alone (figs. 1, 2). To see an English cross-bond masonry wall by Mies (fig. 3) and then to look at apparently the same wall by SOM, only to discover that the headers have been clipped in the latter (fig. 4), is to understand that Mies was authentically resisting natural forces, while Skidmore is engaged in a kind of usury, a simulation of sorts.

Clearly Mies unlocked the door behind which lay the solution to the building needs following the Second World War, just as his imitators unlocked the door to endless and sterile repetition of Mies' signature.

Optimism is never more apparent than when it appears in support of a particular culture. Such a mood existed in 1946, after the Second World War, when America attempted to sustain the frantic zeal of virtue through the peace that followed. It was crucial to find a variety of vehicles to serve as reminders of the correctness of the political – indeed, ideological – condition that had prevailed against fascism. One of these was architecture – the overwhelming, visible cultural form that could represent not only the opti-

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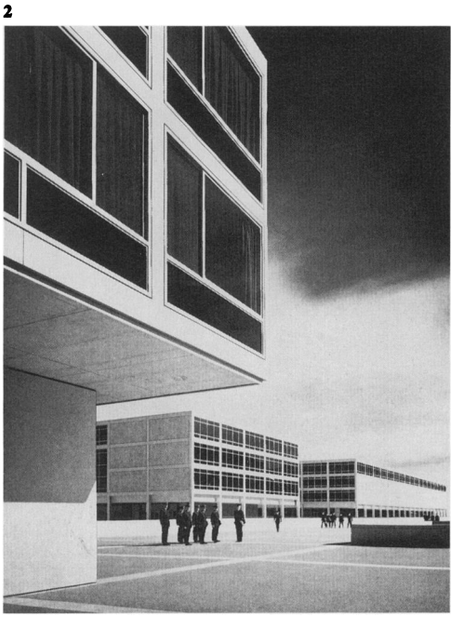

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1
Alumni Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1945–1946, detail, Mies van der Rohe

2
Air Force Academy, Colorado Springs, Colorado, detail, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

3
English cross-bond wall, Chapel, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1952, detail, Mies van der Rohe

4
Simulated English cross-bond wall, University of Illinois Medical Research Building, 1967, detail, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

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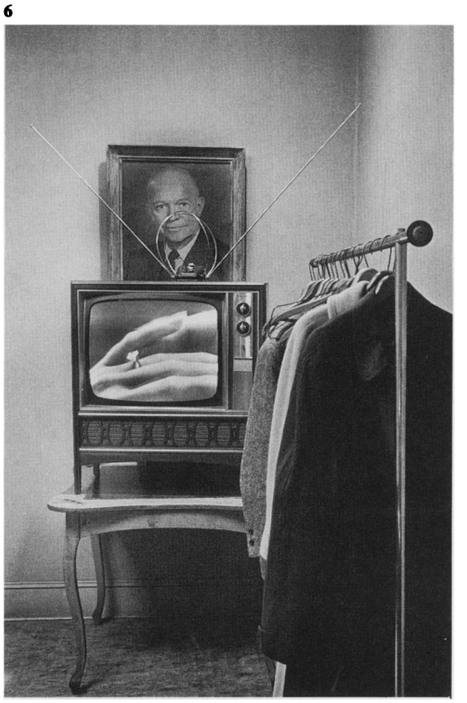

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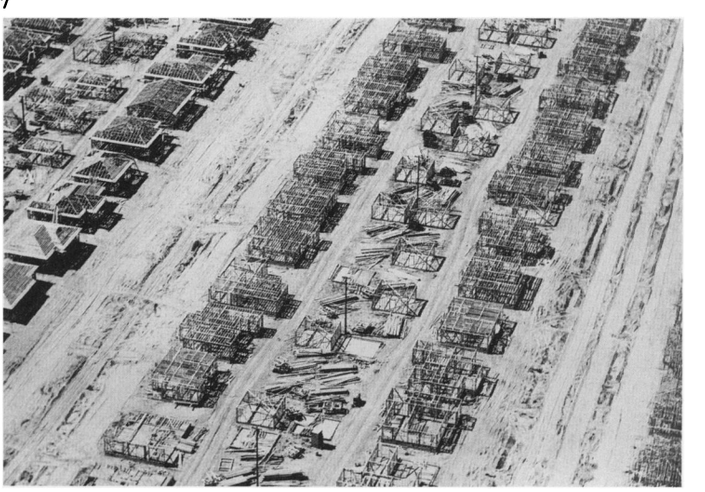

5
1959 Cadillac Fleetwood

6
Television rabbit ears

7
Levittown, Long Island, New York

mism of the moment, but also the desire to revel in, as well as perpetuate, the legitimacy of patriotism.

Architecture has always been an optimistic pursuit, grounded in the Platonism of beauty, perfection, the ideal. Architecture, however, also shares a benign anti-intellectualism with the middle-American ethic that holds work (much like patriotism) in and of itself to be sufficient.

Another concept that significantly influenced postwar attitudes was the view of America as a nation of emigrés fleeing religious persecution, national famine, and in some cases, legal authority, with all the attendant insecurities. This disparity of immigrant groups was now considered healed by victory. It was as if a modern crusade had forged a new culture of "the poor and the downtrodden."

Victory in the Second World War confirmed America's moral certitude, which seemed both ethically and religiously correct. After all, *our* way of life had prevailed, proving that democracy was both correct and credible. Immediately following the war's conclusion, signs began to confirm the fitness of the American way. The industrial giant of war could (and resoundingly did) direct its attention to peace—ultimately a more demanding taskmaster. Overnight an immense military force turned into an equally immense work force requiring production for its own consumption. Symbols of a new American attitude appeared. Automobile tailfins (fig. 5) begat television rabbit ears (fig. 6), which in turn begat wingwalls on subdivision houses (fig. 7). There was a surfeit of evidence that war made a poor teacher—at least with respect to good taste. What was clearly needed, particularly as new concepts of urban America were becoming apparent, was a paradigm of good taste—of correctness and authenticity—proving that the victorious Americans of the Second World War were not too immature to responsibly reap the benefits of world dominance and peace. Strangely, and almost without precedent, American society came to look to architecture as a means of establishing cultural credibility.

Adaptation of European Modernism as Appropriate Architectural Style

But where, within architecture's compound, could society look, given the many ebullient new modernist styles? Which, if any, of modern architecture's methods contained language to convey victoriousness combined with the solidity of good taste? Surely not that of FLW (Frank Lloyd Wright) (fig. 8); he was too patently individualistic, what with his embarrassing taste in clothes, his unfortunate matrimonial record, and worst of all, an architecture that simply could not be copied. Idiosyncratic at its most normative, FLW's work contained too many elements of unpredictability; it was not something one either could count on or, worse, would want to represent stability (fig. 9). Surely, if America was to elect a style by which to be remembered, it could not be the work of one arrogant architect alone—certainly not a self-announced eccentric genius such as FLW. Even if he could be copied (unlikely), it would be too demeaning for others to commit themselves to such an idiosyncratic original.

What, then, about Le Corbusier? He, in turn, seemed too European, too intellectual; ultimately his architecture, while admittedly artful, seemed too esoteric. His persona was too haughty, too grand, and too self-consciously inaccessible (fig. 10). Le Corbusier's apparent dialectical approach, in which ideal repetitious structure played against idiosyncratic partitioning of space, was too conceptual (fig. 11) and simply inappropriate as a role model for a nation gorged on victory (fig. 12). Socratic debate was undesirable; a Platonic synthesis was needed.

Because both Le Corbusier and Wright suffered from unpredictable stylistic shifts within their careers, they did not seem capable of authentically representing a culture desiring a zeitgeist mentality in architecture, one that would not necessarily change its appearance simply on the basis of aesthetics. Le Corbusier's early (and seminal)

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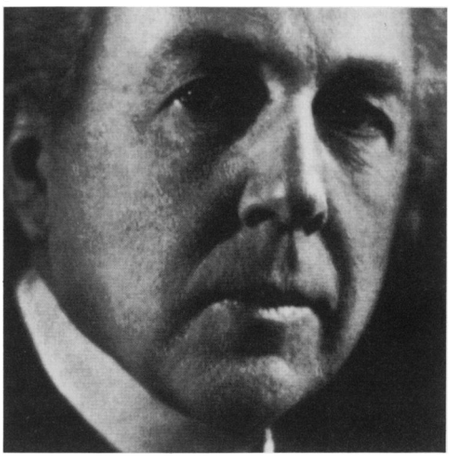

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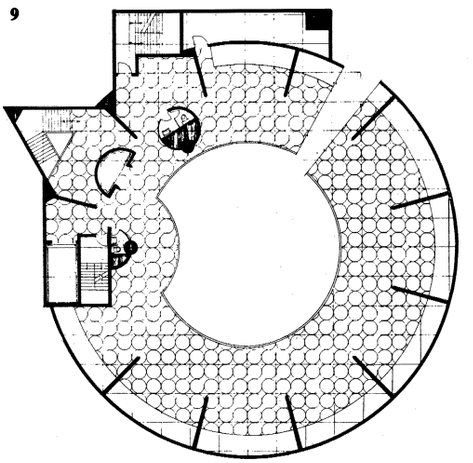

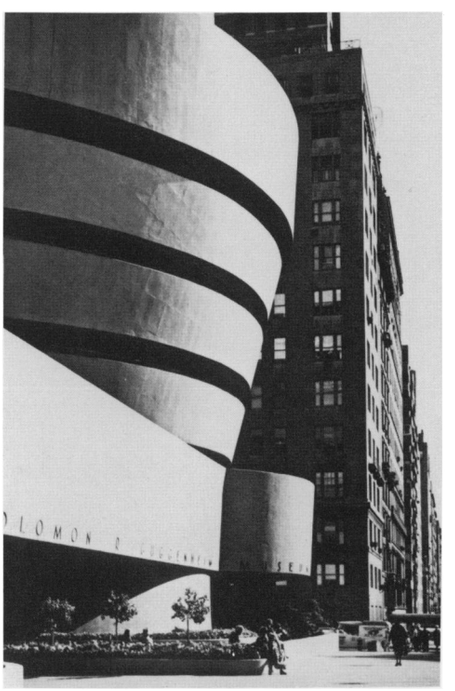

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Frank Lloyd Wright, c1930

9
Guggenheim Museum, New York City, 1959, Frank Lloyd Wright, exterior view and plan

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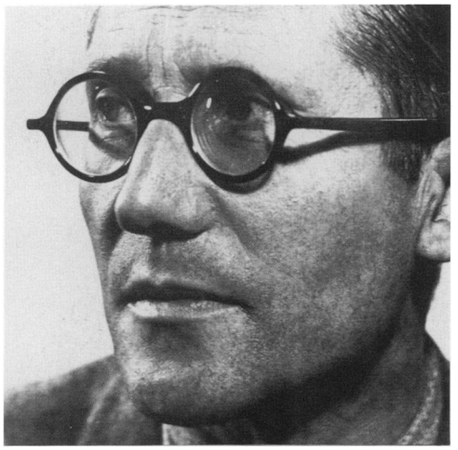

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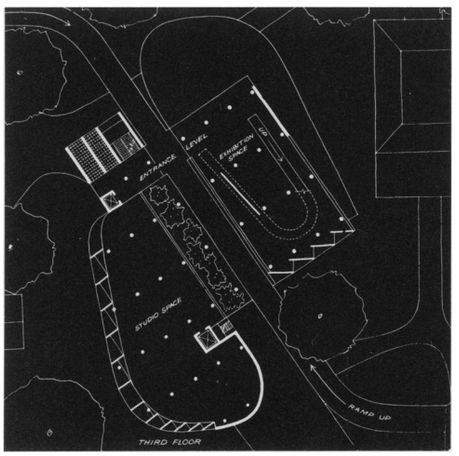

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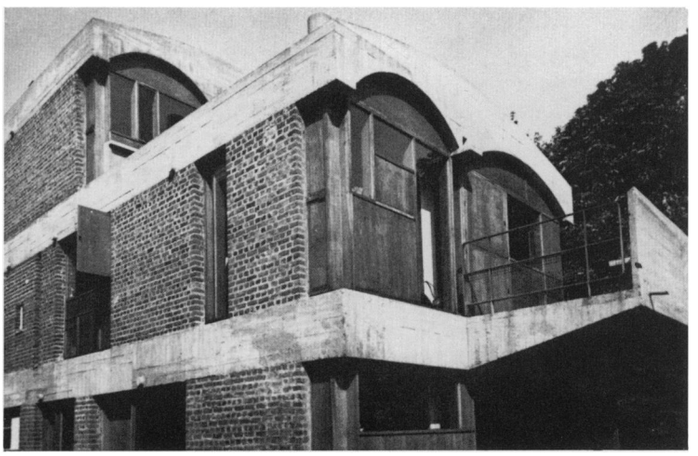

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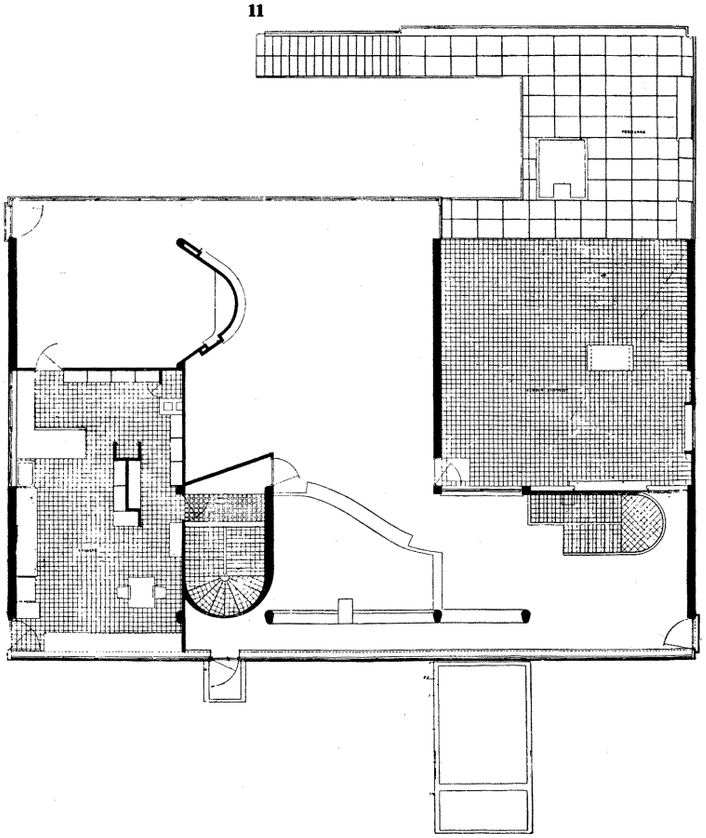

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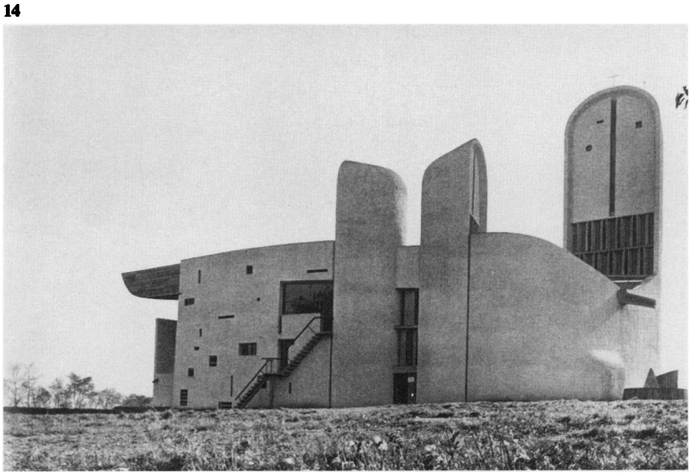

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Le Corbusier, c1930

11
Villa Stein, Garches near St. Cloud, 1927, first-floor plan, Le Corbusier

12
Harvard Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1961–1963, ground-floor plan, Le Corbusier

13
Maison Jaoul, Paris, 1955, Le Corbusier

14
Notre Dame du Haut, Ronchamp near Belfort, France, 1950–1955, Le Corbusier

15

16

17

modernism gave way, somewhat too easily, to the New Brutalism – a style incorporating rough concrete (*beton brut*) and unevenly fired brick, not exactly consonant with the pretensions of good taste (fig. 13). Yet, even that experiment was soon replaced with expressionist eccentricities, such as the Chapel at Ronchamp (fig. 14). Because Corbu was stylistically so inexplicable, some came to think of him as a Swiss – or worse, French – FLW. It was bad enough to have a nineteenth-century native American architect jump stylistically from one thing to another (Prairie School, Usonian, and so on), but when in Corbu's hands the new modernism showed pluralist tendencies in a culture that was virtually uninterested in such multiplicitous quirky concepts, that architect could simply not be thought of as a paradigm.

Then there was Walter Gropius. Very early on – in the 1920s, or the Bauhaus period – he could easily have become the mid-twentieth century's role model (fig. 15). Certainly he looked the part, urbane and cultured; he was the leader of this century's prime-mover technoaesthetic institution (fig. 16) – the first to sense that production had a romantic egalitarian potential. He seemed the right person at the right time, even to the extent of having emigrated to the United States and having accepted the leading position at Harvard's Graduate School of Design. Indeed, until the end of the Second World War and through the early 1950s his graduate students became the most powerful architects in the United States. Philip Johnson, Paul Rudolph, Edward Barnes, I M Pei, Ulrich Franzen, Victor Lundy, John Warnecke, and Joseph Passonneau are among the many who helped to spread the word of Gropius' pedagogically broad methods. The architectural educator, it seemed, never benefited so greatly from the kind words of so many diverse students. The reason why Gropius nevertheless did not fill the role of paradigm is a simple one. His work (inexplicably) lacked the overriding clarity or continuity necessary to convey the image favored at

15
Walter Gropius, c1940

16
The Bauhaus, Dessau, East Germany, 1925–1926, Walter Gropius

17
The Architects' Collaborative (TAC) at the Harvard Graduate Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts, c1950

the time. Worse, his newly formed TAC (The Architects Collaborative), composed mainly of ex-Harvard students, seemed excessively (and regionalistically) permissive (fig. 17). No one knew what to make of him, and no particular interest (or reason) gave the impetus to emulate him or to imitate work that seemed anything but memorable. Even his pedagogical methods appeared intellectually permissive insofar as they produced wildly diverse students. There was apparently nothing to grasp that might express America's postwar mood.

Finally, there was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, a late (1937) emigré from Nazi Germany. On the surface, he would seem anything but a potential paradigm. Son of a stonemason from Aachen, never formally educated beyond the eighth grade, caretaker of the German Bauhaus long after its initiator (Gropius) had fled and the school's reputation had been assured, and responsible for its closing in 1934, there was nothing particularly exemplary in either the man (fig. 18), or his work to presage the great power he would wield in another country within just over one decade.[1] Even when Mies did emigrate, he came to Chicago, a city not renowned as a cultural or media capital.

At a reception for Mies van der Rohe in 1954, he told of the day he closed the Bauhaus. He was called to the Berlin headquarters of the SS, where he was advised that if he did not expel Bauhaus students of Jewish extraction as well as those of Bolshevist persuasion, the SS would close the school. Mies listened, saying nothing. At the end of the interview he went across the street to a wine shop, where he purchased several cases of champagne. He then proceeded to a nearby crystal shop and bought several dozen glasses. He had both the wine and the stemware delivered directly to the school. Walking back slowly, he arrived to find both students and faculty wondering about the many cases of champagne and glasses. He saw to their unpacking and pouring champagne for all. Then he toasted, "Gentlemen, I give you the last day of the Bauhaus." He then ordered the school closed permanently.

Mies never admitted that being in Chicago had any impact on his architecture. In an interview Katherine Kuh asked him if Chicago had influenced him in any way. He tersely replied, "No."

When I was an apprentice architect just setting out in architecture, some believed in Christ and others in Moses; I believed in Mies.

Within the decade spanning the Great Depression and the conclusion of the Second World War, American attitudes greatly changed from feelings of cultural and economic insecurity to self-esteem bordering on arrogance. When Mies' persona and his architecture surfaced near the end of the first half of the twentieth century, he and his work seemed just right for America's new directions and tastes (fig. 19). He was not ostentatious, and he conformed to America's need to encourage groups rather than personality cults. His work was elegant and in good taste (fig. 20), and most importantly, his architecture was not unnecessarily demanding on the functional or intellectual levels (figs. 21, 22). His architecture could be altered internally without vitiating the power of its external appearance. Mies' subtle artfulness did nothing to diminish his architecture's obvious functionality. Justifications of his work did not seem necessary, since the up-to-date technological basis of his buildings spoke to a future that was democratic, if not egalitarian.

Mies' essentially withdrawn yet gentlemanly personality was ideally suited to project the mystique of inexplicability. Unlike others of his time, it was not in his nature to give lectures, participate in architectural juries, engage in symposia, and in general "be seen." Mies wrote precious few papers. Almost without exception, none of his lectures lasted for more than ten minutes; and even these were few and far between. Feigning a lack of sophistication in the English language suited him well, though it is known that he was fluent in both German and English. With the exception of a few hours each week at the architecture school at IIT, and incomplete days at his office, he was not to be seen at all.

When he did speak or write, his statements were epigrammatic and stunningly to the point; Mies was not a man to use fifty words when five would do. What little he said smacked of moral certitude: "Build, don't talk," "God is in the details," "Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space."[2]

Mies had a simple, direct way of putting things. In 1955, at a party held in his honor in an IIT student's apartment, Mies responded to an inane question about how to become a "designer," a word Mies abhorred—he felt it to be intrinsic to and a trivialization of architecture. "First, you learn how to draw, then you learn how to build, then you are an architect."

When he was photographed, his pose generally reinforced his reductivism. Reflective and contemplative by nature, he genuinely projected an image of a man deep in thought (fig. 23). Corporate Americans were enchanted with Mies' European accent, his modest good graces, his nine-hundred-dollar black silk suits, and his artistry—perhaps in that order. That he was philosophically rigorous about his work was insignificant. His architectural production and his genuine humility were an unbeatable

18
Mies van der Rohe at the Bauhaus, c1930

19
Mies van der Rohe in Chicago, after the Second World War, c1947

20
Collage Project: Museum for a Small City, 1942, Mies van der Rohe

21
860-880 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, 1951, early scheme, typical floor plan, Mies van der Rohe

22
860-880 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, 1951, typical floor plan as built, Mies van der Rohe

23
Mies van der Rohe, c1950

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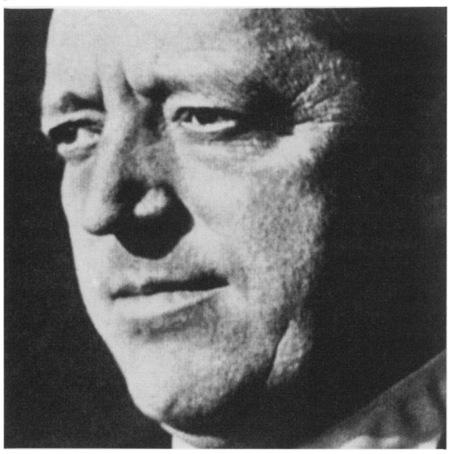

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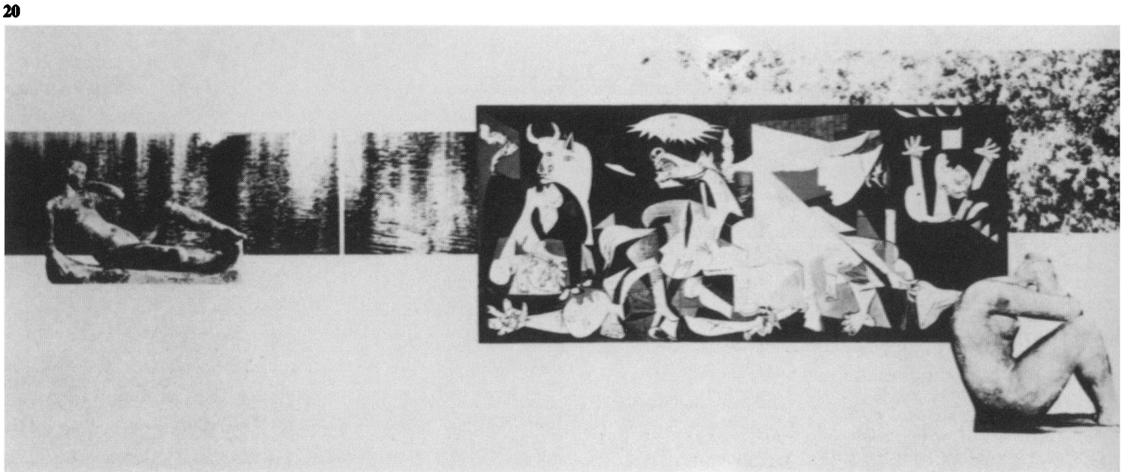

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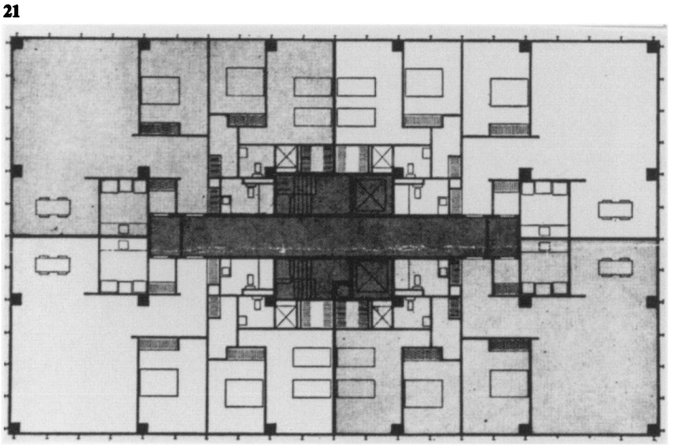

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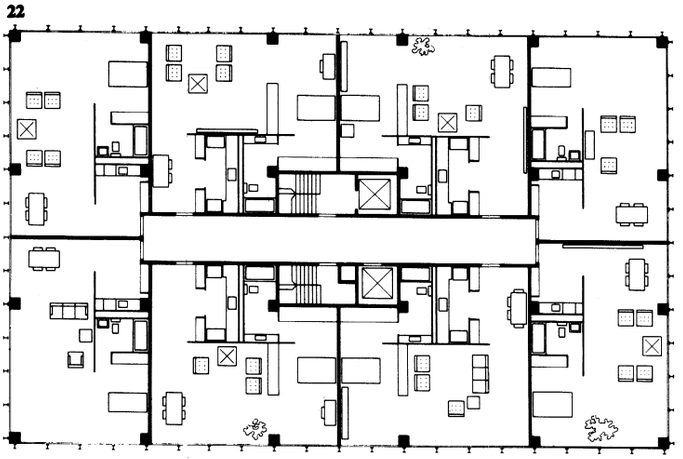

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24
Seagram Building, New York City, 1957, Mies van der Rohe

25
Diagram of golden section with Vitruvian man and mullionization

26
Fair Store [under construction], Chicago, 1890–1891, William Le Baron Jenney

27
Chicago Stockyards, Chicago, c1905

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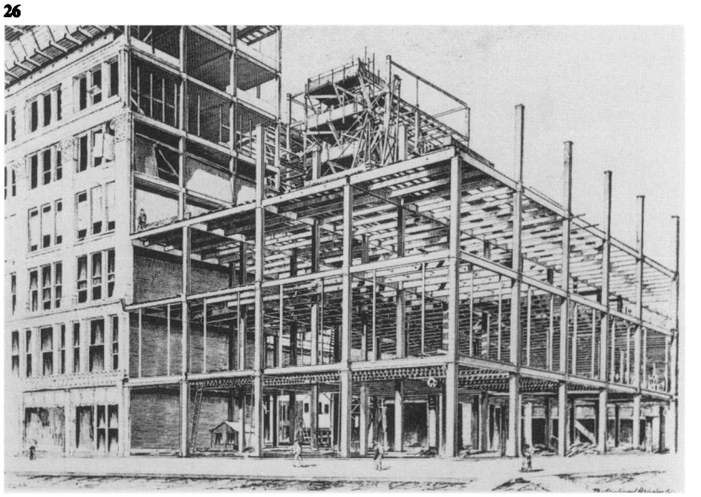

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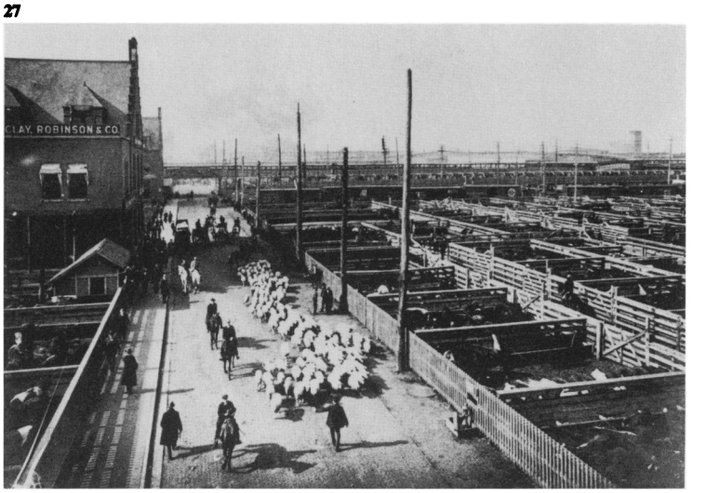

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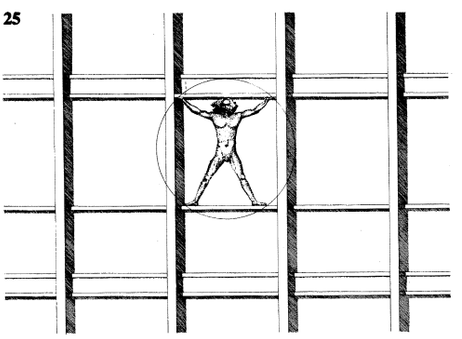

combination, particularly since they were drummed home by a spate of books of humorless accolades: Ludwig Halbersheimer, Philip Johnson, Arthur Drexler, Peter Blake, Werner Blaser, Peter Carter put out "the word." If Mies' own buildings as well as those by his followers conveyed verification through repetition, books about him conveyed precisely the same form of legitimation. Ultimately overwhelming, the effort was bound, sooner or later, to fail.[3]

The Hype of Corporate Correctness

America, Americans, and most of all, the image makers of Madison Avenue were thoroughly ready to embrace Mies van der Rohe and his monuments as symbols of the "spirit of the age." The look-alike "new wave" celebrated by C Wright Mills was at once destined and ready to inhabit reductive black and bronze-tinted glass boxes.[4] Like Ivy League collegians and Brooks Brothers clothing, Mies' glass buildings appeared to be well-bred and neatly tailored, and as such, they were much admired. The appropriateness of Mies' black-box architecture to corporate America was undeniable. On occasion, as in the case of New York City's Seagram Building, it could also suggest majesty (fig. 24). Even as Madison Avenue manipulated trends and tailored taste, Mies buildings continued to demonstrate not only intrinsically good taste, but also permanence—a commodity longingly sought but sparingly achieved.

All at once buildings followed proportions that were beyond question; all Mies buildings are studies in the "golden section": 5′0″ modules and 8′0″ floor-to-ceiling dimensions, the 5:8 ratio accordingly subdivided; 5:5; 3:5; 1.75:3; and so on (fig. 25). The materials used in these buildings were clearly meant for the long term: stainless steel, bronze, hard-coated and anodized aluminum, verde antique marble, travertine, and terrazzo. Even as it became fashionable to damn the tastemakers, the paradigm was more often than not a Mies-like building, offering a mentality dedicated to expressing the spirit of the times, with a belief in the possibility of "correctness."

I recall that on one occasion a developer tried to justify to Mies the use of hard-coat aluminum cladding on an office building Mies was designing. Scolding the developer, Mies said, "You know, when we did the Seagram Building we studied the possible use of stainless steel, aluminum, and bronze. Bronze was a million dollars more expensive. You know, Dorfman, Seagram's owner, really got something for nothing."

The Power of Mies' Chicago

That this process unfolded in the heartland of America and that it was proffered by a middle-European immigrant is, in retrospect, not particularly surprising. After all, Chicago's population has always been rooted in European vernaculars. The city has effectively been a bastion of middle-class and lower-middle-class emigrés engaged in industrial pursuits; the professions and the arts historically played a comparatively insignificant part in the city's early development: Chicago's first native son trained as an architect, for example, Howard van Doren Shaw, died as recently as 1927. Chicago (and the rest of middle-America) is solidly grounded in several types of production—agricultural, industrial, and in the case of Chicago, architectural. The "Chicago School" met with welcome acceptance after the 1871 fire destroyed the heart of the city.

It was established by such late-nineteenth-century architects as William Le Baron Jenney, John Wellborn Root, Daniel Burnham, and Dankmar Adler, all practical men first and foremost whose commitment was toward getting the job done. The city's desire to match New York in commercial prowess needed a no-nonsense architecture (fig. 26) to symbolize the directness for which Chicago was already known. Traditional forms in the classical language of architecture seemed not only unnecessary, but even willful and vainly elegant when used for the "hog butchers of the world."

The quality of pragmatic plainness, faithfully represented by Carl Sandburg and by later generations of writers, including Nelson Algren and Saul Bellow, depicted the classically unsubtle attitudes connected with Chicago.[5] Upton Sinclair's description of the venality intrinsic to the meat-packing

industry in *The Jungle* suggests an environment (fig. 27) at odds with the style and grace implicit in the classical language of architecture. Chicago's impatience with intellectual quibbling is in keeping with its strong belief in the rewards emanating from the process of production.

Mies van der Rohe's coming to Chicago rather than to either of this country's coastal (and intellectual) regions may be seen as almost an act of predestination. From his arrival in Chicago in 1937 it took but one short decade for his power as a paradigmatic architect to take root. Using Chicago as a base of operations and the versatility of American steel as a tool of production, Mies was able to establish a so-called legitimate architecture that was indeed "the will of an epoch translated into space." The reductive elegance of his architecture was destined to represent America's cultural maturity and civility. It seemed possible, after all, to win a world conflict and come out looking like the winner.

How Mies First Established, Then Manifested His Power

Architects can polemicize their positions in three ways: through pedagogic methods; through an emulatable work product; and through an enviable and mysterious persona—particularly when amply documented by others. Mies van der Rohe was capable of and capitalized on all three.

I remember meeting Herbert Greenwald (a developer) in 1950, when I was twenty years old, and I recall how impressed I was at hearing this ex-rabbinical student tell me that he was more interested in excellence than in profit, thus explaining his commitment to Mies van der Rohe.

When Mies was named Director of Architecture at IIT in 1938 by its then President and one of the two most avid patrons Mies ever had, Henry Heald (the other patron was the developer, Herbert Greenwald), Mies brought with him two other ex-Bauhaus professors—Ludwig Hilbersheimer (planning) and Walter Peterhans (basic design).[6] Thus, in one swoop, architecture, planning, and visual fundamentals fell under Mies' control. In his first year as director of the school he took over the education of incoming students, apparently giving up on the education of students already indoctrinated with the school's earlier attitudes. In 1939 he once again taught the first year, and so on until 1941, by which time everyone at the school was effectively under his tutelage. All courses of study (including the history of architecture) were presented from a particularized rational point of view. Students mastered construction methods, detailing, and the dictates of structure, as well as extraordinary drafting skills (fig. 28). It was as if an American Bauhaus had been melded with a modernist canonical version of the École des Beaux Arts.

In a way Mies and his professional colleagues had uniquely created an American work force peculiarly trained in building-construction methods. Peripherally he and his associates were inevitably training architectural educators prepared to "spread the word." Such men as George Danforth, formerly of Case Western Reserve; Anderson Todd of the University of Houston; John Sugden of the University of Utah; and Reginald Malcolmson of the University of Michigan were among those sent "abroad" from IIT and Chicago to teach the principles of Mies modernism in other classrooms at other times. Finally, and inescapably, practicing architects trained by Mies and his followers at IIT were to build in the spirit of their architectural education. Such figures as Myron Goldsmith, Jacques Brownson, Gene Summers, James Speyer, James Ingo Freed, David Haid, Arthur Takeuchi, and even Helmut Jahn, are in varying degrees products of this education. Each in his particular application of structural and constructional rationalism brings luster to the training received under Mies at IIT.

Of greatest importance, pedagogically speaking, was the method of recycling former students into faculty positions. Goldsmith, Brownson, Freed, Speyer, Takeuchi, Danforth, Malcolmson, Brenner joined the school; in fact, virtually the entire IIT architecture faculty was composed of IIT graduates. As the years rolled by, an ever increasing percentage of IIT's graduate students came either from IIT's undergraduate program or from overseas. With the possible exception of the École des Beaux Arts, architectural inbreeding has never been more prevalent than at Mies' IIT.

It may be that not since Andrea Palladio has any architect had such a massive influence on successive architects. Throughout the world more buildings carry Mies' stamp than do those by any of his contemporaries. In Chicago alone there are forty-seven buildings by Mies himself, to say nothing of

the additional two score by his descendant firm. The early reputation of the young, maturing firm of SOM was almost solely based on interpretations (and vulgarizations) of Mies' structural clarity. Such architects and firms as Welton Beckett, Emery Roth, SOM, Howard Barnstone, Craig Ellwood, Edward Killingsworth, Schmidt, Garden and Erickson, and C F Murphy (now Murphy-Jahn) carry a large debt to Mies, without whom their work would not be what it is. Was his pervasive influence the result of form following function, as both residential and office building programs became abstracted? Since there was no semiological imperative to carry the sign of the building as Mies' methods were best suited to carry out such abstractions, it would certainly seem so. Was Mies able to produce elegant, paradigmatic solutions far beyond their intrinsic costs because he understood both the possibilities as well as the limitations of American industrial production in general, and the steel industry in particular? It certainly appears that way. Was he embraced because his buildings bore traces of civility through production that led to an understandable urban fabric, an American urban typology? It definitely seems so. Finally, in an enchantingly simple way, was this not an undemanding anonymous architecture, which all architects might interpret and, depending upon their sensibilities (or commercializing venality), make their own without obvious homage to Mies? One can only infer the truth of this point.

For all of Mies' architecture and its essential capability for apparent emulation, what was really occurring was simulation. Other architects were satisfied with simulating the authenticity present in Mies' work without resorting to the required philosophical rigor that would only make them appear to be too closely connected with Mies and thus subject to increasing accusations of sycophancy. While many architects of the 1950s and 1960s simulated Mies buildings, precious few appeared capable of authentically replicating the essential qualities present in Mies' work. Such elements as proportion, which seemed so exquisite in the Seagram building (fig. 29), seem to show up the lack of authenticity in the earlier fenestration of Lever House directly across Park Avenue (fig. 30). Even the attempt by Schmidt, Gar-

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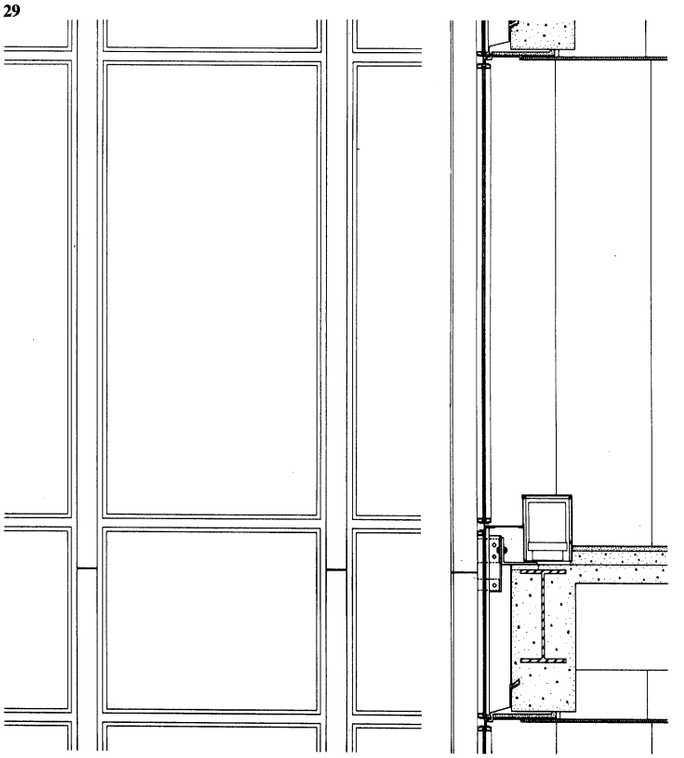

28
Student drawing of two-story row houses with load bearing party walls.

29
Seagram Building, New York City, 1957, Mies van der Rohe

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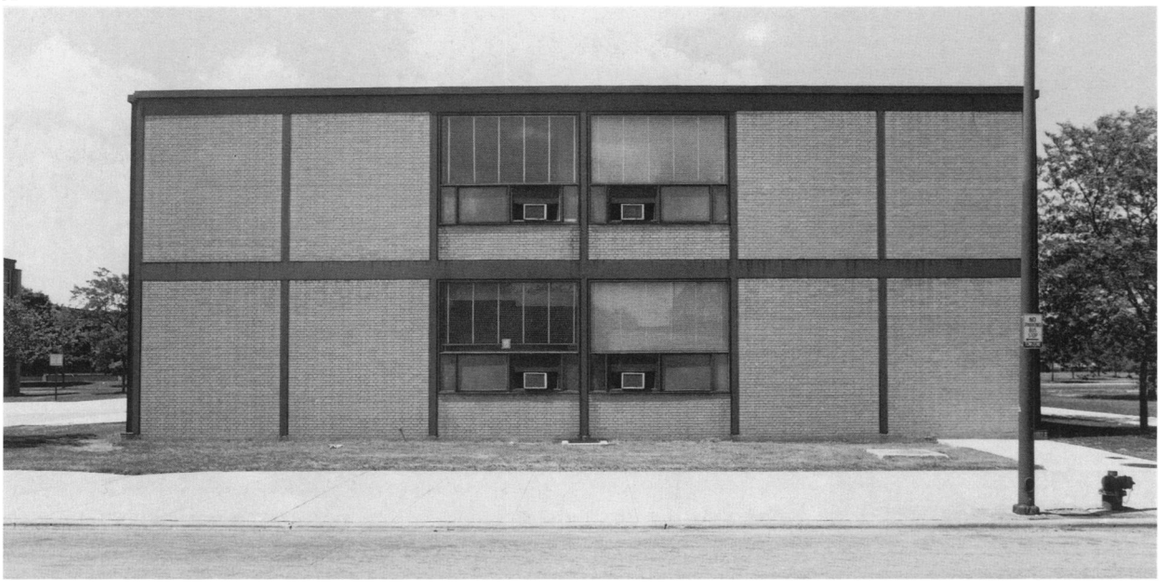

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30
Lever House, New York City, 1952, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

31
Alumni Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1945–1946, Mies van der Rohe

32
Research Tower, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, 1957, Schmidt, Garden & Erikson

den and Erikson to replicate the beautiful proportion of mullions to spandrels in Alumni Hall (fig. 31) in the research building at IIT seems pedestrian by comparison (fig. 32). No matter how hard others tried, there seemed no way they could match the impeccable sense of ideal proportion with which Mies imbued his buildings. It was as if architects were more interested in interpreting Mies and transforming Mies buildings than in expanding on his language.

And yet in the many transformations that occurred in the quarter-century between the end of the Second World War and Mies' death in 1969, the only buildings that genuinely transformed Mies' ideas about architecture were those few that remained faithful to an aesthetic sensibility derived from structural logic. The most seminal example is Chicago's Civic Center, designed by Jacques Brownson working with C F Murphy. This brilliant structural tour de force seems to transcend Mies only because it is stridently faithful to him (fig. 33). The building's staggering structural clarity (87′-0″ spans in one direction!), its proportion, its lucid detailing, and its potent presence in a structurally expressive city make it the preeminent exception to the massive simulation of Mies' work for more than two decades after the war.

There are, of course, many other neo-Miesian examples, but none so comprehensively transcended or transformed. Each in its own way is flawed. For example, while Philip Johnson's glass house of 1950, in New Canaan, CT (fig. 34), is beautiful in its abstraction, it is precisely because of this (and its lack of clear structural rigor) that it seems to fall far short of Mies' Farnsworth House of 1950 in Plano, IL (fig. 35). David Haid's clunkily proportioned bank of 1977 in Evanston, IL (fig. 36), can be compared to Mies' Social Service building at the University of Chicago in 1965, in Chicago (fig. 37). The Haid bank is unbelievably awkward, whereas Mies' Social Service building is serene in its setting adjacent to Chicago's Midway Plaisance. Similarly, SOM's Chase Manhattan Bank of 1960 in New York, designed by Gordon Bunshaft

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Civic Center, Chicago, 1965, C F Murphy

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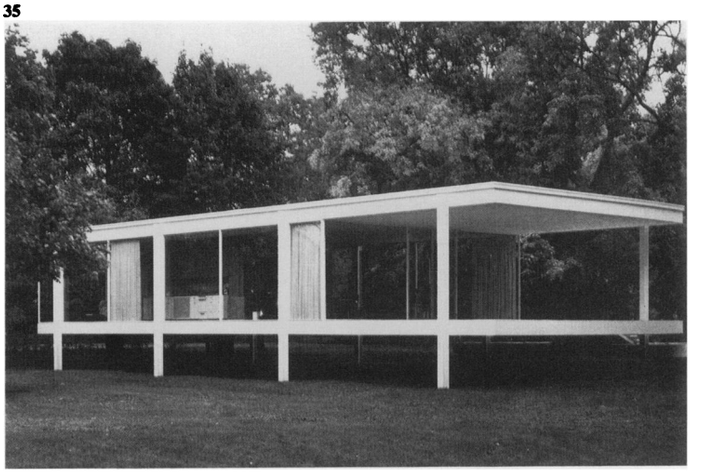

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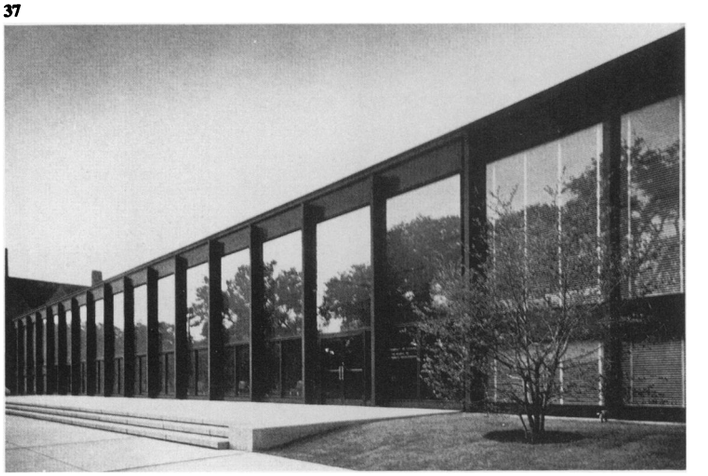

34
Glass House, New Canaan, Connecticut, 1949, Philip Johnson

35
Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, 1945–1950, Mies van der Rohe

36
Bank, Evanston, Illinois, 1977, David Haid

37
Social Services Building, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1965, Mies van der Rohe

38
Chase Manhattan Bank Building, New York City 1960, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

(fig. 38), is slick without elegance, while Mies's Federal Center Tower of 1964 in Chicago (fig. 39) is majestically elegant.

There is no limit to parallels between what in Mies' hands always seems correct and what in the hands of others generally comes away wanting. This disparity is curious, considering the clarity both of Mies' buildings and his principles. Surely the golden section is as accessible to others as it was to Mies. Surely idealized structures with odd bays, Hellenically derived, are just as available to other architects as they were to Mies. Certainly contemplation and study as methods of design were not exclusive to Mies; presumably they are at the core of all architects' thinking. Practical detailing in an up-to-date technological framework was clearly the spirit of the age. But did Mies alone somehow know what others did not? Did this knowledge give him access to a kind of truth and authenticity denied to others?

How Acolytes Trivialized Mies' (and America's) Optimism

Much of the power of Mies' architecture lies in the essential optimism buried deeply within the Platonic tradition. There is a theory according to which, at the closing of the Bauhaus (and concurrent with Mies' presumed reading of Oswald Spengler's apocalyptic and visionary book, *The Decline of the West*), Mies, in despair, gave up modernism and returned to Schinkelesque classicism. Nevertheless, his work always embodied optimism as its essential condition of being. It was as if his optimistic search for beauty lay at the root of the renowned contemplative method he employed as he studied his own works in progress. It is said that he would spend hours pondering a full-size model of a structural bay broken into modules of glass divided by steel (or aluminum) mullions; occasionally he might instruct assistants to move something this way or that by as little as a quarter of an inch. It was precisely this kind of reflection that gave his buildings great presence (fig. 40). And it is precisely this personal struggle with architecture that others neglected.

The moral certitude so evident in Mies' epigrammatic statements reflects his search for

39
Federal Center, Chicago, 1964, Mies van der Rohe

40
Federal Center, Chicago, 1964, detail, Mies van der Rohe

40

I have seen Mies examining a coping detail which a draftsman had asked him about. Predictably, Mies responded, "Yah, I will think about it." Six weeks later I was also there to see Mies finally answer the question. Clearly he had thought about the detail all that time.

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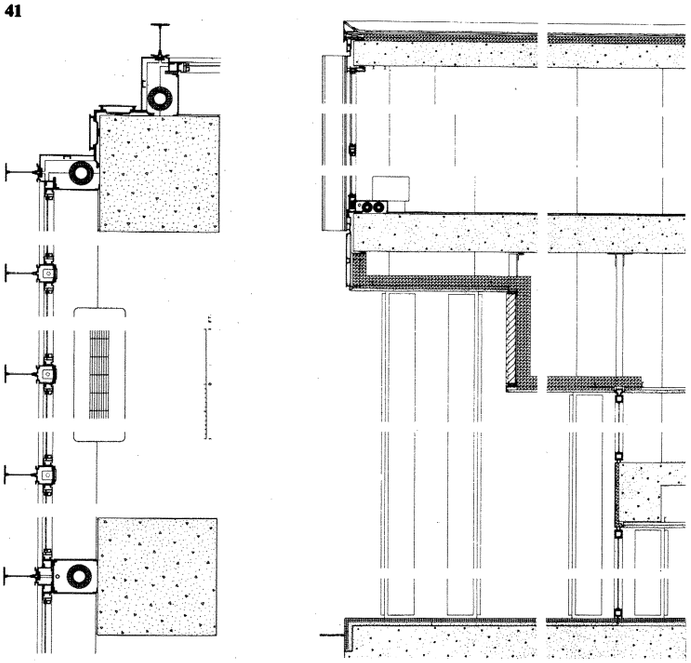

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Aluminum-clad corner columns of Commonwealth Promenade, Chicago, 1955, detail, Mies van der Rohe

42
Housing Towers, Chicago, 1950, Pace Associates

excellence in his work. Each material that composes each building becomes an element for study. Hellenic in origin, Mies' buildings are both intrinsically and symbolically isolated from their surroundings. That each material is, in turn, detached from every other material suggests that the building details are thought of in microcosm; that is, the building's essence is forcefully and consciously composed of those elements that make it. Therefore "God is in the details."

The struggle is intrinsic to the mythic quality of Mies' architecture. The architects who standardized Mies' architecture, never inspired or deterred by myth as they engaged in acts of simulation, were responsible for some of the trivialization that occurred in American architecture during the 1950s and the 1960s. Others believed that Mies' isolation of each material from every other material of a building, dividing it into its essential subsections, was inconvenient and unnecessary. His aluminum-clad corner columns of the twin Chicago apartment towers, "Commonwealth Promenade," of 1955 isolate sections of the three-dimensional column into two-dimensional planes of metal plates separated by an absent center (fig. 41), while Pace Associates' housing towers in Chicago of 1950 simplistically (with economically derived "practicality" in mind) express the three-dimensional column literally—unclad (fig. 42). While the former deconstructs the column into its component two-dimensional parts, based on Mies' interpretation of "the breakup of the box" so evident in his early European work (for example, his brick villa project of 1923 and his projected house for a bachelor of 1924), the latter, unencumbered by either aesthetic concerns or philosophical rigor, simple-mindedly "uses" the column's expression while suggesting an interest in structural clarity.

On a larger scale the suggestion that in a city such as Chicago Mies structures imply both a building typology and an urban typology is based on Mies' understanding of the demands of the Cartesian grid that orders the Chicago street system. His siting of the apartment towers 860 and 880 Lake Shore Drive of 1951, as well as the adjacent towers at 900 and 910 Lake Shore Drive of 1955, disregard Lake Michigan's diagonal edge (fig. 43), being related in parallel and perpendicular juxtapositions to the insistent grid of Chicago's post-1871 plan. Further, each pair of buildings implies a missing element in the corner of each site (fig. 44), resulting from their perpendicular juxtaposition. This site planning stems from a kind of Wrightian antecedent Mies (and other European architects of either De Stijl or Bauhaus persuasion) found so compelling

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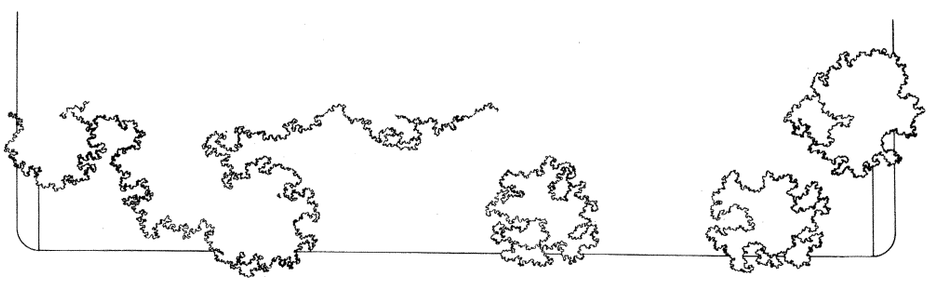

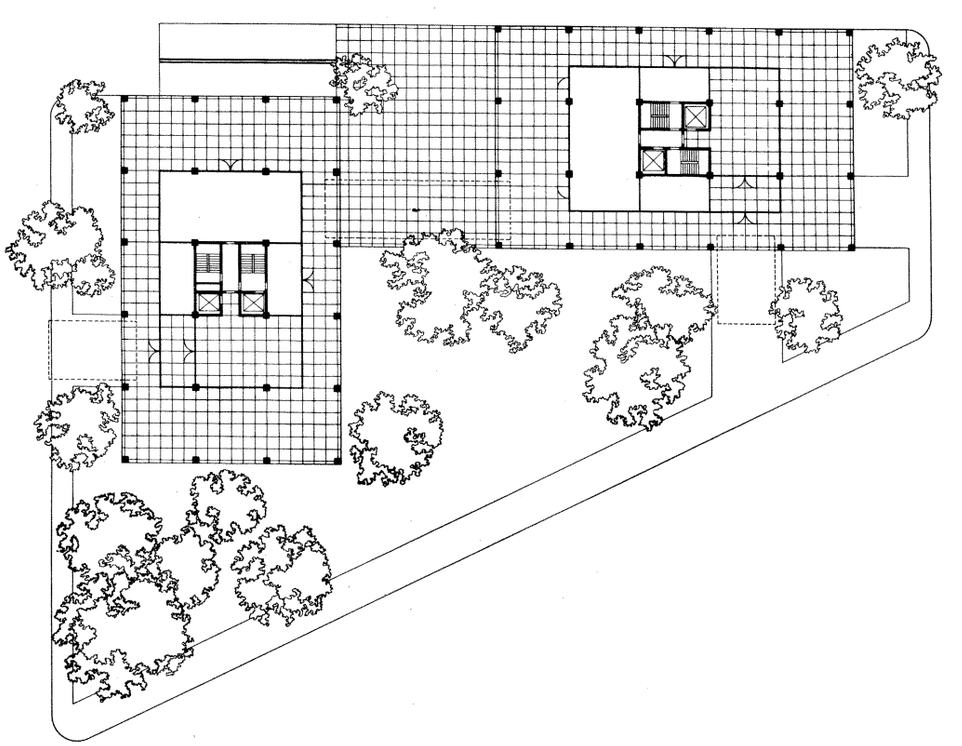

43
860-880 and 900-910 Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, 1951–1955, Mies van der Rohe

44
Site diagram showing incomplete corner of 860–880 Lake Shore Drive

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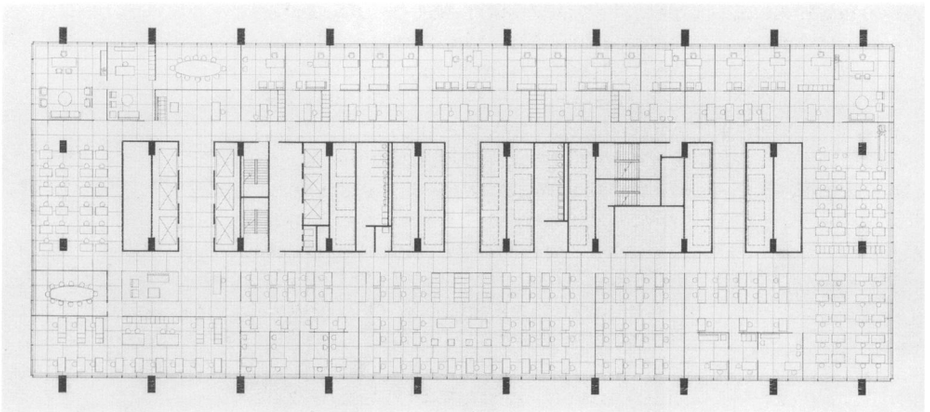
Pepsico building, New York City, 1960, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

46
230 West Monroe, Chicago, 1963, Perkins and Will



47
Chase Manhattan Bank building, New York City, 1960, typical floor plan, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

in Wright's 1910 Wasmuth Exhibition in Berlin. Much of Mies' most interesting work, curiously, is in pairs.[7] The free-standing characteristic of each pair of buildings suggests a new, strangely intriguing four-sided urban typology absent in the buildings of sycophantic followers. SOM's and Gordon Bunshaft's Pepsico tower of 1960 in New York City has a four-sided equivalency perceived on only two of its sides (fig. 45). Perkins and Will's 230 West Monroe tower of 1963 in Chicago suffers from much the same problem, less brilliantly conceived (fig. 46).

While Mies interpreted a city grid into the three-dimensional matrix of the skeleton frame, others who followed understood the grid more simplistically as capable of absorbing diverse conditions. Thus, while Mies' original intention of dialectically opposing the free-plan apartment subdivision of 860 Lake Shore Drive to its ideal odd-bay structural framework, SOM saw the subdivision of an arbitrary odd-bay structural framework as a "modularization" (fig. 47). Paradigmatic thinking by capitalistically driven acolytes leads, it seems, to trivialization. The worst of American capitalism—the short-term gain of limited flexibility through modularization—removed what possibilities existed for "the spirit of the age" to develop a permanence comparable to Hellenic architecture. That Mies was to be "used" (for profit) as a role model by American architects is one of the unfortunate results of a population too eager to find a paradigm to manifest its conceits. The lack of morality evident in the situation is a reflection of the shallowness of those belief systems that supported victorious America's righteous attitudes after the Second World War. American involvement in Korea, and later in Vietnam, signaled a growing cynicism concomitant with the erosion of both America's and Mies' essential optimism; his work was increasingly standardized, trivialized, and ultimately degraded.

The ultimate misuse of Mies came from the misunderstanding of his intellectualism. His interpreters were far more concerned with the chance to manipulate orthogonal grids to incorporate functional idiosyncrasies than in Mies' essential historical and cultural continuity, which established his authenticity. Interested in expediency, such architects found solace in popular acceptance as technical virtuosity allowed them to superimpose grid upon grid. The philosophical antecedents that guided Mies' concerns appeared insignificant to architects who only saw Mies as a means to greater and greater production. His imitators—or simulators—saw no importance in the moral essence central to the process that inspired his architectural production. Mies' struggle toward achievement through synthesis represented an intrinsically American hybrid sensibility that was lost upon a generation of followers apparently more deeply committed to a capitalistic use of production than to the essential development of the language implicit in Mies' architecture.

How Vietnam Changed All That

Tragically, as the 1960s came to a close with America's participation in an unwanted struggle in Vietnam, Mies' usefulness as an architectural paradigm came to an end. It was 1923 when he uttered his optimistic phrase heralding a constructive polemic: "Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space." Now it came back to haunt him as he neared the end of his life. In the late 1940s Miesian ideas reflected the will of the epoch, as an expression of a desire for cultural coalescence that would lead to a Platonic permanence essential to American intentions. Conversely, the late 1960s provoked a Socratic distancing from a repugnant reality requiring debate and dialogue rather than the perfection implied by the Platonist view of Mies' architecture. It is intellectually unimaginable that Mies' struggle with an unresolved dialectic was overlooked by those now seemingly more interested in architecturally interpreted populist concerns. To equate America's defeat and its fall from grace with a failure of Mies' vocabulary and to substitute new, more pluralistic paradigms useful to the "new revisionism," was to throw out the baby with the bathwater. As American architects returned to the comfort of the classical language of architecture, they failed to see that Mies' language had every bit as much poignancy.

As the 1960s came to a close and American values came into question, there seemed no need for a zeitgeist mentality in architecture. If Mies was correct that "architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space," then the late 1960s—a time neither of peace nor of American unity—did not need, or indeed want, a singular architectural expression of the age. It was no longer appropriate to synthesize a culture that now thrived on its fragmentation: its unmanageable war, its debates on the virtues of high art versus low art, and its replacement of permanent value systems with fashions and trends—a situation so clearly illustrated by Robert Venturi in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.[8]

Mies' death in August 1969 coincided with the end of a decade that witnessed the demise of modernist power. His ultimate failure as an architectural paradigm parallels America's failure to recognize its own culture in other than one-dimensional terms. Architects could view Mies as paradigmatic only when American culture was simplistically interpreted to be appropriate in the most simplistic Miesian terms. This situation is an admission of the lack of cultural comprehension by such disciplines as architecture, whose members were ill-equipped by their modernist, Bauhaus-like, technologically based, culturally impoverished education; they therefore missed the point entirely about Mies and his architectural production. It took fifteen years after Mies' death to perceive a larger, more comprehensive picture of what he and his work really meant. The dismissal of both his architectural and cultural significance, now that America is more realistically viewed, is an unnecessary lapse of faith in moral values that were nevertheless continuously, albeit quietly, present in both American architecture as well as American culture.

I, for one, miss Mies. Chicago was a better place, architecturally speaking, when he was alive.