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# What is life? Exploring Mies van der Rohe's concept of architecture as a life process

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From his popular motto 'less is more' to his concept of architecture as 'the spatially apprehended will of the epoch', the aphorisms of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) remain one of his most memorable legacies. Despite being less well known, other such statements promoted by Mies are also important to clarify the philosophy that sustained his works. This paper investigates one of these less known yet highly revealing statements: 'Building-art is only understandable as a life process'. Considering the broader context of Mies's discourse, philosophical readings and architectural projects, this paper argues that Mies used the term 'life process' to refer to a larger changing reality that united the material and the spiritual realms of life. According to Mies, the recognition of this material-spiritual unity was necessary to recover architecture's status as 'building-art' [*Baukunst*] amid an overly technological and individualistic modern age. This view of life and modernity is consistent with the writings of Rudolf Schwarz, Max Scheler and Alfred North Whitehead, which, as this paper shows, were highlighted by Mies not as sources of his thought, but as key references that could especially illuminate the significance of his work and architectural philosophy.

## Architecture as a life process

Mies van der Rohe introduced his concept of architecture as 'the spatially apprehended will of the epoch' [*raumgefaßter Zeitwille*] in the manifesto *Bürohaus* of July, 1923, alongside the drawing of the Concrete Office Building project (1923), which he had especially produced for the effervescent *avant-garde* exhibitions and publications of the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> Mies continued to promote both this project and this concept of architecture in later years, such as in the seminal monograph that accompanied his solo exhibition in 1947 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.<sup>2</sup> He also reaffirmed this concept in about 1960 during a talk at the Architectural League of New York. Towards the end of this talk,

a member of the audience commented: 'I'm not sure what we've been talking about all evening ... I'd like to know what your definition of architecture might be ... I'm sure your definition would be better than almost anyone's here'. Mies replied: 'I'll say it in German. It is too difficult for me ... *Baukunst ist raumgefaßter Zeitwille* ... Why don't you write it down and then try to translate it?'.<sup>3</sup>

At first, the continuous reaffirmation of this concept of architecture seems to contradict Mies's claim that 'To find out what architecture really is took me fifty years—half a century'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this apparent contradiction can be resolved by considering that, whilst keeping key principles and ideas, Mies continued to develop, refine and clarify his architec-

tural philosophy throughout his career. As he explained, 'I could not read in a book and it wasn't dessert served on a lunch plate. Little by little one thought is put to another. One is doubtful of a thousand things in this process, but by experience and logic you may build upon these thoughts until you achieve a real conviction'.<sup>5</sup>

As part of this process of developing his architectural philosophy, in 1928—around the time that he started to realise his progressive ideas in built form, such as in the *Weissenhofsiedlung* (1925–1927), the German Pavilion in Barcelona (1928–1929) and the Tugendhat House (1928–1930)—Mies promoted another statement aimed at epitomising his concept of architecture: 'The building-art can only be unlocked from a spiritual centre and can only be understood as a life process' [*Baukunst ist nur von einem geistigen Zentrum aus aufzuschliessen und nur als Lebensvorgang zu begreifen*].<sup>6</sup> This statement highlighted the link between architecture and life that occupied Mies's mind as early as August, 1923, when he wrote: 'The modern building art has, for a long time, refused to play a mere decorative role in our life ... Their [the building artists'] work shall serve life. Life alone shall be their teacher'.<sup>7</sup> In December of that same year, he stressed that life's needs included 'inner needs', such as the demand for 'absolute truthfulness'.<sup>8</sup> In the following year, Mies related these 'inner needs' to a spiritual realm, which, like 'life', became a recurrent theme in his discourse.<sup>9</sup> In March, 1926, Mies also introduced the term 'life process' to argue that architects continuously had to impart 'new expression to the changed life content' to prevent architecture's deterioration into a 'senseless banality'.<sup>10</sup>

Mies presented his concept of architecture as a 'life process' at the beginning of the lecture 'The Pre-conditions of Architectural Work' (1928), whose purpose was to identify the challenges that the modern age had been posing to architecture, and to indicate ways in which to respond to these challenges.<sup>11</sup> In this lecture, Mies explained that modernity had succumbed to the reign of technology, which, though impressive, was 'only the raw material compared to life'.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, every endeavour, including architecture, had been reduced to purely technical-scientific work. Mies traced this cultural decay to the rise of Nominalism under the influence of William of Occam (1285–1347), whose disbelief in a metaphysical reality transcending the individual human mind had fostered relativism, arbitrariness, fragmentation and *Unbildung* (lack of formation, education and culture). While illustrating his lecture with a picture of Strasbourg, Mies presented the 'objectively correct order of spiritual life values'<sup>13</sup> that had sustained the health of the society of the Middle Ages under the influence of Augustine of Hippo (354–430) as the way to relate technology to humankind, to recover architecture's status as 'building-art' and to build 'an order that permits free play for the unfolding of life' (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> Mies reinforced this argument in a journal article, also published in 1928, by affirming that the central problem of modern times was the 'intensification of life'.<sup>15</sup>

### **Life as a source of success in architecture**

This discourse contributed to a larger effort by various progressive architects to re-establish architecture's intrinsic connection with life. For example,



Figure 1. Strasbourg in the 1890s (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC, via PPOC). Showing a picture of Strasbourg, a city on the border of France and Germany that is known for its mediaeval cityscape, Mies stated: 'The life of medieval man was determined through and through by a totally secured understanding of the meaning of life. Everything points to a spiritual aim. Insight stands before deed. Belief and knowledge have not yet stepped apart. This idea of order is the point of departure for the change we want to demonstrate.':

L. Mies van der Rohe 'The Preconditions of Architectural Work', (1928), in, F. Neumeyer, *The artless word: Mies van der Rohe on the building art* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1991), p. 299.

the Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856–1934), whose ideas Mies greatly admired, had stated in 1886: 'All attempts to undo architecture's dependence on life and its needs will be in vain, for one would have to abolish the essence of architecture: its relationship to life'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in 1902, the influential German architect Hermann Muthesius (1861–1927) defined architecture as 'the art of daily life',<sup>17</sup> adding that 'there can be only one standard for art, namely that which expresses the life and

culture of the time'.<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on the link between architecture and life can be traced back even earlier. The English art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900), whose books influenced both Berlage and Muthesius,<sup>19</sup> identified 'life' as one of the seven 'lamps' or 'sources of every measure of success' in architecture.<sup>20</sup>

Besides 'life', the term 'life process' was also usual amongst Mies's colleagues, such as Walter Gropius (1883–1969) and Hannes Meyer (1889–1954), who

preceded him as director of the Bauhaus school.<sup>21</sup> In Gropius's front-page contribution to the Bauhaus journal of April, 1927, the following statement was underlined: 'Building means design of life processes' [*Bauen bedeutet Gestaltung von Lebensvorgängen*].<sup>22</sup> A few months later, Gropius reaffirmed this statement in the preface to the second edition of the book *Internationale Architektur* (1927 [1925]), in which he argued that modern design [*Gestaltung*] was rooted in the totality of social life and embraced all areas of human organisation.<sup>23</sup> In subsequent writings, his idea of life as 'a whole, a single cosmic entity'<sup>24</sup> became more emphatic and clear. For example, in *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935), Gropius stated that 'the aesthetic satisfaction of the human soul' was just as important as the material, practical satisfaction: 'Both find their counterpoint in that unity which is life itself'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, this fundamental unity included art, which was not something 'apart and curious' but rather 'vital and essential to the fullest life'.<sup>26</sup>

In his manifesto 'Building' [*Bauen*] published in the Bauhaus journal of October, 1928, Meyer also highlighted the importance of 'life' in architecture when he stated that 'Building is the deliberate organisation of life processes' [*Bauen heißt die überlegte Organisation von Lebensvorgängen*].<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, Meyer relied on a contrasting conception of 'life' as he argued that 'all life is function and therefore unartistic'.<sup>28</sup> In later writings, he continued to emphasise 'physical, psychological, material, social and economic concerns' to the detriment of artistic ones by affirming that 'all life is an urge towards harmony ... the harmonious enjoyment of oxygen + carbon + sugar + starch + protein'.<sup>29</sup> From this premise, he concluded

that 'architecture [*Architektur*] is no longer the art of building [*Baukunst*]. Building has become a science. Architecture is the science of building [*Bauwissenschaft*]'.<sup>30</sup>

Mies's manifestos 'Building' [*Bauen*] (1923) and 'Industrial Building' [*Industrielles Bauen*] (1924) had also emphasised a straightforward, practical approach to architecture.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Mies soon resumed the use of the term 'Building-art' [*Baukunst*] to refer to buildings that transcended mere utilitarian structures, and later on this became his preferred term with reference to architecture.<sup>32</sup> Accordingly, Mies argued that architecture was a complex problem, which could 'only be solved by creative forces rather than by calculation and organization'.<sup>33</sup> He also became critical of the unartistic approach to life and architecture that Meyer had been championing. This position was subtly manifested in the lecture 'The Preconditions of Architectural Work' (1928) when Mies included Meyer's project for the Palace of the League of Nations (1927) amongst examples of 'technical-scientific' works (Fig. 2).<sup>34</sup> Mies was more outspoken about this position in personal conversations. As Walter Gropius recalled: 'His [Meyer's] philosophy culminates in the assertion that "life is oxygen plus sugar plus starch plus protein", to which Mies promptly retorted: "Try stirring all that together; it stinks"'.<sup>35</sup>

Whilst Mies considered Meyer's views too materialistic and unartistic, Meyer, as an avowed Marxist, probably considered Mies's views to be too removed from social and political realities. Indeed, Mies believed that broader sociological and political issues were beyond the control of architects.<sup>36</sup> Yet

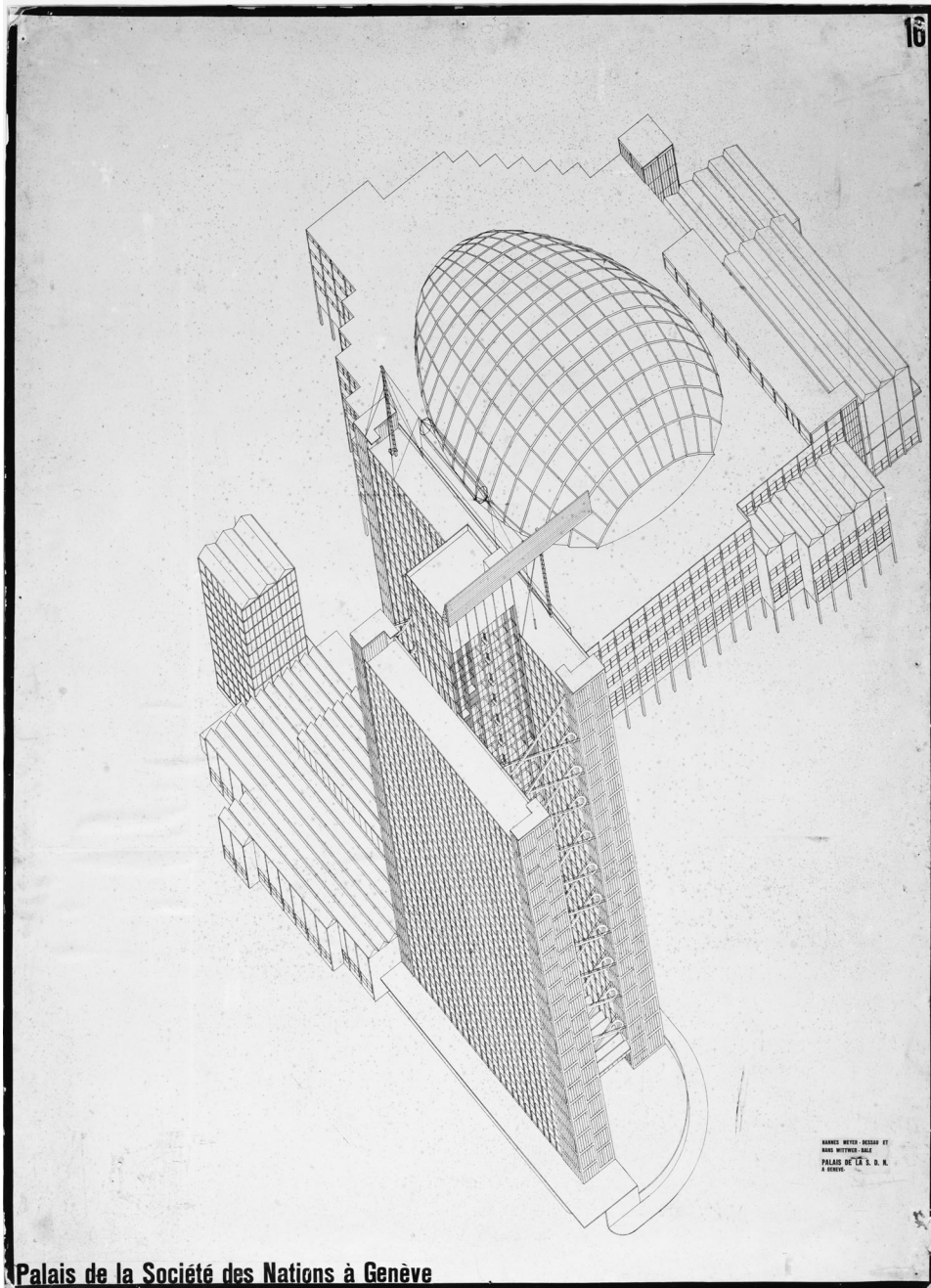


Figure 2. Palace of the League of Nations, Geneva, 1927, Hannes Meyer and Hans Wittwer (DR1984:0705, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal). After presenting examples of technical-scientific works, which included Meyer's Palace of the League of Nations, Mies stated: 'These are amazing achievements; all these are results of will, of rigorous discipline ... But they assume a threatening predominance. Unchecked, they thunder along. Man is swept along as if in a whirlwind.': L. Mies van der Rohe, 'The Preconditions of Architectural Work', (1928), in, F. Neumeyer, *The artless word: Mies van der Rohe on the building art* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1991), p. 300.

he still strove to achieve a comprehensive and balanced view of life and architecture. For example, in 1927, he wrote: 'We want to open ourselves to life and seize it. Life is what matters in all the fullness of its spiritual and concrete relations'.<sup>37</sup>

### Life as spiritual-material unity

The existence of a spiritual realm entailed that life could not be understood solely through measurable, scientific, physical and quantifiable facts. For example, Mies was reported to have made the following comment on the book *What is Life?* (1944), in which the eminent Austrian-Irish physicist Erwin Schrödinger (1887–1961) reduced life to observable crystals: 'It is unspiritual. What about man and his hopes for immortality? Does Schrödinger think that I can sit staring at snowflakes on the window or the salt crystals on the dinner table and be satisfied? I want to know what I have to expect after death'.<sup>38</sup> Schrödinger's book admittedly focussed on the purely scientific aspects of the problem.<sup>39</sup> Using a mechanical analogy—clockwork—he defined 'life' as the 'orderly and lawful behaviour of matter', which continued 'moving, exchanging material with its environment, and so forth ... for a much longer period than we would expect an inanimate piece of matter to "keep going" under similar circumstances'.<sup>40</sup>

Despite this initial clash of views, Mies came to admire Schrödinger's later thought, particularly his book *Nature and the Greeks* (1954), which Mies quoted on several occasions.<sup>41</sup> In this book, Schrödinger recognised the deficiency of the scientific picture of reality: 'It gives a lot of factual information, puts all our experience in a magnificently consistent

order, but it is ghastly silent about all ... that really matters to us ... it knows nothing of beautiful and ugly, good or bad, God and eternity. Science sometimes pretends to answer questions in these domains, but the answers are very often so silly that we are not inclined to take them seriously'.<sup>42</sup>

Schrödinger's concern with 'the grotesque phenomenon of scientifically trained, highly competent minds with an unbelievably childlike ... philosophical outlook'<sup>43</sup> echoes a long-standing worry expressed by a pioneer of modern scientific thought. As Mies explained in 'The Preconditions of Architectural Work' (1928): 'The English statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon spoke out against pure science, against science for the sake of science, recognizing its practical potential and demanding that it serve life'.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Bacon had written in *Novum Organum Scientiarum* (1620), 'Mere power and mere knowledge exalt human nature, but do not bless it. We must therefore gather from the whole store of things such as make most for the uses of life'.<sup>45</sup>

In his lecture of 1928, Mies mentioned other famous historical figures, whilst omitting the names of contemporary authors whose statements he was repeating almost verbatim. As Fritz Neumeier showed through meticulous study of Mies's discourse, personal library and notebooks, Mies's high regard for the order of the Middle Ages and his argument for a more spiritually oriented modernity also relied on the book *Die Welt des Mittelalters und wir* ['The world of the Middle Ages and us'] (1922) by Paul-Ludwig Landsberg (1901–1944); as well as on the books *Briefe vom Comer See* ['Letters from Lake Como'] (1927) and *Der Gegen-*

satz: *Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* [‘Contrasts: essay on a philosophy of the living-concrete’] (1925) by Romano Guardini (1885–1968).<sup>46</sup>

In fact, the copies of these books in Mies’s library contain unusually enthusiastic markings. Moreover, Mies had been in personal contact with Guardini, whose writings promoted a conception of life and of the modern situation to which Mies was profoundly sympathetic. For example, Guardini argued that modern thinking had been marked by excessive use of abstractions—the universal signs that did not fit any individual concrete case fully—and by the lack of the measure in which ‘the earlier time found supreme fulfilment, wisdom, beauty, a well-rounded fullness of life’.<sup>47</sup> Oscillating between one-sided scientific view and unrestrained individualism, modern mentality had been promoting decay in various spheres, including architecture and urban planning.<sup>48</sup> To unlock the fullness of reality and recover the lost harmony with the absolute order of the world, modern science and technology had to be mastered and reoriented through a holistic mode of thinking. Life had to be reconsidered as objective totality, where opposites, such as reason and intuition, rest and change, universal and particular, body and spirit, were balanced and united in a relationship of ‘contrast’ [*Gegensatz*] rather than ‘contradiction’ [*Widerspruch*].<sup>49</sup>

### Three key references

Numerous other books from Mies’s personal library can help enrich the understanding of his concept of life and architecture.<sup>50</sup> However, space limitations hamper the study of all these books simultaneously;

moreover, some of them have already been investigated in detail elsewhere and need not be rehearsed here.<sup>51</sup> Instead, this paper concentrates on the books by authors whom Mies explicitly associated with the philosophical ideas that he had developed during the seminal decade of the 1920s. Thus, this paper avoids a biased selection and an overemphasis on books that were less significant to him.

On several occasions, Mies affirmed that he had three thousand books in Germany, from which he selected three hundred to bring with him to the United States when he immigrated in 1938. In the 1950s, he was even more selective, whilst still acknowledging the importance of his extensive reading: ‘I can now send two hundred and seventy books back and I would lose nothing. But I would not have these thirty left if I would not have read these three thousand’.<sup>52</sup> From amongst the books most significant to him, Mies selected three—Rudolf Schwarz’s *Wegweisung der Technik* (1928), Max Scheler’s *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft* (1926) and Alfred North Whitehead’s *Science and the Modern World* (1925)—as the most representative of the views that he had formulated in the mid-1920s.

This selection stems from Mies’s notes for his speech on receiving the Royal Gold Medal through the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1959. One of these notes simply reads: ‘In this peculiar year—1926: Schwarz—Max Scheler—Whitehead’ (Fig. 3).<sup>53</sup> The first of these, Rudolf Schwarz (1897–1961), was a fellow architect with whom Mies developed a lifelong friendship based on mutual admiration for each other’s work as well as for the work of Guardini.<sup>54</sup> In fact, between 1923

Figure 3. Note card 5, Speech on receiving the Royal Gold Medal through the Royal Institute of British Architects, 1959, L. Mies van der Rohe (Papers of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, courtesy of the heirs of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe).

⑤  
 IN THIS PECULIAR YEAR - 1926  
 - Schwarz -  
 • MAX SCHELER.  
 - WHITEHEAD.

and 1927, Guardini and Schwarz published several journal articles on the relationship between technology and humanity that were soon compiled into Guardini's *Briefe vom Comer See* and Schwarz's *Wegweisung der Technik*.<sup>55</sup> The second author listed in Mies's speech notes, the philosopher and social thinker Max Scheler (1874–1928), was important not only to Mies, but also to Schwarz, Guardini and Paul-Ludwig Landsberg.<sup>56</sup> Mies read books by Scheler as early as the 1920s and continued to reread them until his later years.<sup>57</sup> Of these books, *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*, published in 1926, was the one that Mies's family and friends included in their list of the books most important to him.<sup>58</sup> This selection also included *Science and the Modern World*, a book originally published in 1925 and written by the English mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947), the last author listed in the notes for Mies's speech.

Mies could not have read this book by Whitehead in the 1920s because he learned English only after his immigration, and a German translation of the book appeared much later. These circumstances have discouraged investigation into the link between Mies and Whitehead, even in studies

focussed on Mies's discourse and philosophical background, such as *The artless word: Mies van der Rohe on the building art* (1991) by Fritz Neumeier.<sup>59</sup> More than two decades after the publication of Neumeier's seminal book, the comprehensive book *Mies* (2014) by Detlef Mertins addressed this research gap, without, however, exhausting the subject or considering the aforementioned circumstances.<sup>60</sup> Yet, these circumstances have to be taken into consideration to clarify that Mies highlighted the writings of Whitehead—together with the writings of Scheler and Schwarz—not as sources that elucidated the formation of his thought, but as key references that could especially illuminate the significance of his ideas.

Mies explained that 1926 was the year in which some thinkers had written and produced books that expressed with great clarity the views he had been developing independently around the same time. He stated: 'I would say that 1926 was the most significant year. Looking back ... it was a year of great realisation or awareness ... it seems that a particular situation will be ripe at a certain time and will be understood. That is why great people who may never know each other can talk, simultaneously, about the same things'.<sup>61</sup> He added: 'At the beginning, it was more of an instinctive drive. Later on, it became more and more a conscious awareness ... all this was from within me. In my interview with the BBC, I talked of the three other people in Europe who, although I didn't know them, were thinking in 1926 what I was thinking. Their business was to get this thing clear in their minds and to write their books about it. In the same way, I had to build and I was very happy

with the results'.<sup>62</sup> Thus, instead of writing a book himself and agonising over every word, Mies recommended books by like-minded authors that could clarify and support his ideas in written form. Mies did not elaborate on how these books related to his thought, apparently trusting that this relationship was evident. He simply concentrated all his energies on his own area of expertise: the architectural manifestation of his ideas.<sup>63</sup>

### Life in a technological age

Indeed, in their writings of the period between the two World Wars, Whitehead, Scheler and Schwarz elaborated the argument that the scientific mentality disseminated through strict professional training had been conducive not only to technological progress, but also to the disintegration of communities, the reduction of workers to mere hands, the destruction of the natural environment and the defacement of the cityscape. These problematic consequences indicated that the perspective of science was insufficient to deal with the problems of modernity. Ultimately, other perspectives, such as the artistic, religious and philosophical, which had been highly valued in ancient civilisations and disregarded as frivolous in modern times, had to be reconsidered.

In 1959, Mies indicated the way in which Whitehead had reinforced his long-standing view of modernity. While pondering the question of 'the sustaining and driving forces of our epoch', Mies stated, 'Everyone who is interested in this question will know by now—particularly since Whitehead—that they are science, technology and even industri-

alization ... We are soaked in economy as the medieval peoples were soaked in religion'.<sup>64</sup>

Mies's understanding of architecture as a 'life process' also strongly relates to Whitehead's 'process philosophy', even though Mies seems to have never mentioned this relationship. For example, Mies highlighted the importance of process when he asked in 1927, 'Is it not the process that is essential? Does not a small change in preconditions bring about another result?'<sup>65</sup> Processes, together with relationships, principles, values, meanings and ideas, formed the invisible essence of reality, in which, according to Mies, rested the kernel of truth and the key to understand the continuous flux of life.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Whitehead argued that reality exhibited itself as process or becomingness.<sup>67</sup> Consequently, no generation could merely reproduce its ancestors: 'You may preserve the life in a flux of form, or preserve the form amid an ebb of life. But you cannot permanently enclose the same life in the same mould'.<sup>68</sup>

Like Whitehead's process philosophy, Scheler's phenomenological philosophy relates to Mies's thought in important ways. Throughout his career, Mies persistently searched for the 'essence' or 'innermost structure' of things, such as architecture and the modern epoch, and for ways to express this essence in his works.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, Scheler sought to advance his philosophical pursuit of rigorous insight into essences—the absolute knowledge devoid of pragmatic interest that was accessible through concrete examples.<sup>70</sup>

In addition, Mies consistently indicated the importance of grasping reality, working with and against

the world, and realising the ideal, thus pointing to a process that Scheler regarded as the essential human task of spiritualisation.<sup>71</sup> For example, Mies's statement of 1928 that 'A knowledge of the times, its tasks, and its means is the necessary precondition of work in the building art'<sup>72</sup> accords with Scheler's argument that, without considering broader independent laws and historical tendencies, the human mind 'bites on granite and its "utopia" fades away into nothing'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Mies's statement of 1930 that 'The changed economic and social conditions ... go their fateful, value-blind way. What is decisive is only how we assert ourselves toward these givens. It is here that the spiritual [*geistigen*] problems begin'<sup>74</sup> relates to the following passage that Mies underlined in his copy of *Die Wissensformen und die Gesellschaft*: 'Realities follow ... a course that is "blind" from the viewpoint of the notions of value and meaning belonging to the subjective human mind [*Geistes*] ... Only one sovereign, changeless privilege remains for man: to be able through his mind [*Geist*] "to reckon", and not, however, to calculate, the future with a sort of *expectation* [*Erwartungsbildung*] that remains hypothetical and probable'.<sup>75</sup>

The phenomenon of value is another prominent theme in both Scheler's and Mies's discourses. Like Mies in his lecture of 1928, Scheler confronted modern relativism, individualism and scepticism with an objective order of values in line with Augustinian philosophy. Scheler argued that this order, ranging from pleasure, utility and vitality to culture, spirituality and holiness, could be grasped by way of a direct intuitive and thoughtful experience.

Being independent of subjective opinion, this order provided a common basis for the revitalisation of the sense of responsibility, ethics and solidarity.<sup>76</sup> Mies frequently referred to such an order as an absolute 'hierarchy of values',<sup>77</sup> which indicated the existence of different forms of architecture: 'In its simplest form, architecture is entirely rooted in practical considerations, but it can reach up through all degrees of value to the highest realm of spiritual existence'.<sup>78</sup>

Reinforcing this concern with how architecture could reach the highest spiritual realm in modern times, the writings of Rudolf Schwarz also had a lasting impact on Mies.<sup>79</sup> Most noticeably, Mies paraphrased Schwarz's introduction to *Wegweisung der Technik* when he stated in a lecture of the 1950s: 'Technology promises both power and grandeur, a dangerous promise for man who has been created for neither one nor the other. Those who are truly responsible feel depressed and respond to this promise by searching for the dignity and value of technology.' Still closely following Schwarz's text, Mies asked: 'Is the world as it presents itself bearable for man? More: is it worthy of man or too lowly? Does it offer room for the highest form of human dignity? Can it be shaped so as to be worthwhile to live in?'<sup>80</sup>

### **Architecture as a framework for living**

As Mies searched for architectural answers to these enduring questions, he developed a spatial concept that he later named 'framework for living'.<sup>81</sup> Mies's 'framework for living' is a thin and elegant skeleton construction enclosed with glass that contains large bright, fluid and uncluttered



Figure 4. New National Gallery, Berlin, 1962–1968, L. Mies van der Rohe, interior view (courtesy of Adam Nelson, 2007, via Flickr). During the ground breaking ceremony of the New National Gallery in Berlin in 1965, Mies made the following statement, which evokes his concept of ‘framework for living’: ‘My sincere wishes accompany this building that it will become a dignified framework for a great collection, for the enjoyment of all people, for serving art and the spirit.’: L. Mies van der Rohe, ‘Mies in Berlin, interview by Ulrich Conrads’, (1966), p. 12 (Papers of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Library of Congress, Washington DC).

spaces adaptable through lightweight movable partitions (Fig. 4).

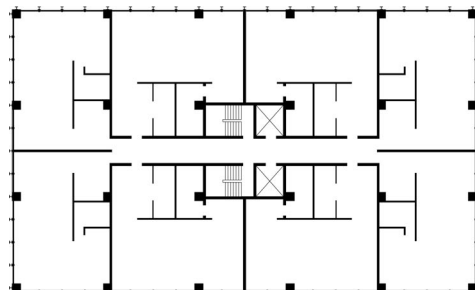
The greater freedom of spatial configuration and movement allowed by this perceptive use of modern technology still had to be balanced with broader laws. Mies explained, ‘People think [that] with the open plan we can do everything ... [but] the problem of space will limit your solutions. Chaos is not space ... though you can take the free-standing wall out of your pocket and throw it anywhere ... that would not be space’.<sup>82</sup> Mies also noted that, as impressive as the large open spaces

could be, they were still not the most essential feature of his works. He included more conventionally partitioned spaces wherever necessary, such as in the service annex of the Barcelona Pavilion (Fig. 5), in the private quarters of the Tugendhat House and on the lower floor of the New National Gallery in Berlin (1962–1968). He also decided to continue the 860–880 Lake Shore Drive Apartments project (1948–1951) despite the elimination of the open plan, which investors considered unsuitable for American tastes.<sup>83</sup> Indeed, the plan, as well as the mechanical systems, could change over the

Figure 5. German Pavilion, Barcelona, 1928–1929, reconstruction 1983–1986, L. Mies van der Rohe, view of the service annex in the background (courtesy of Christian Gänshirt, 2012, via Wikimedia Commons).



Figure 6. 860-880 Lake Shore Drive Apartments, Chicago, 1948–1951, L. Mies van der Rohe, schematic apartment floor plans showing the open and the standard layout options (adapted from W. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe: the art of structure* (Basel, Birkhäuser, 1993 [1965]), p. 133; '860–880 Lake Shore Drive sales brochure', (c. 1950), p. 8, via 860 Lake Shore Drive Trust).



dicted such fundamental principles could be made 'only over his dead body'.<sup>86</sup> For example, Mies was not willing to accept the idea of placing a bank on the plaza of the Seagram Building (1954–1958) because this idea undermined the dignified public space that was central to the project.<sup>87</sup>

The structure became even more crucial as it inevitably determined the character of the building. According to Mies, 'For economic and practical reasons, in this age, it is not possible to do anything else'.<sup>88</sup> Mies turned this architecture of austere structural character into an unobtrusive background from which people, nature, furniture and artworks stood out (Fig. 7), as well as into a discreet outer edge that framed the views of the surroundings as if they were vivid pictures (Fig. 8).<sup>89</sup> Whilst highlighting the underlying essence, significance and beauty of everyday objects and actions, Mies's serene, contemplation-inducing architecture could also stand out and be perceived as a figure when one focussed on its refined rhythm, proportions, details and finishes; on its unusually strong integration of interior and exterior space; and on its artistic manifestation of modern technology and civilisation (Fig. 9).

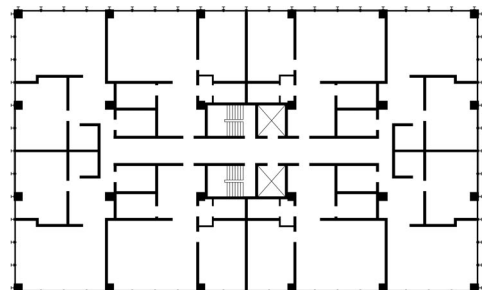




Figure 7. Lafayette Park, Detroit, 1955–1958, L. Mies van der Rohe (courtesy of Raimund Koch, 2008).

Ultimately, whilst recognising the changed historical circumstances and embracing technological progress, Mies counteracted modernity's materialism

and individualism by developing an artistic and disciplined architecture that encouraged active creation and contemplative beholding, and that promoted

Figure 8. Golf Club, Krefeld, 1930, reconstruction 2013, L. Mies van der Rohe (courtesy of Chris Schroeer-Heiermann, 2013, via Flickr).



awareness of oneness with other people and with the natural world. Striving to create favourable conditions for a renewed, profounder and nobler life in modern times, his architecture transcended mere physical necessities, such as eating and sleeping, to address higher spiritual needs, such as freedom, order, unity, truth and beauty. Therefore, Mies's work considerably coheres with his view of architecture as part of a broader dynamic spiritual-material reality, and thus indicates a mutually enriching dialogue between architecture and philosophy.

Figure 9. Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, 1946–1951, L. Mies van der Rohe (courtesy of Ariel Mieling, 2011, via Flickr).



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