Mark Jarzombek
Mies van der Rohe's New National Gallery and the Problem of Context

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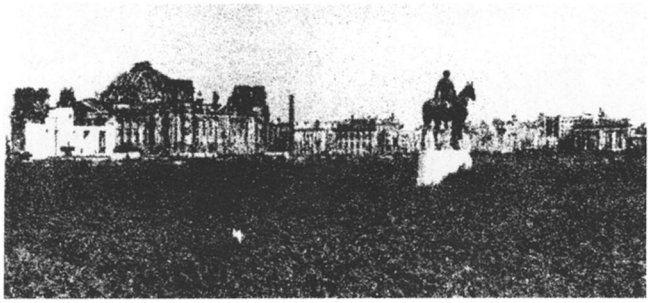
When, in 1964, Mies van der Rohe returned to Berlin, to the city where his career had begun, he must certainly have felt profound sorrow; he had been entrusted with a mission far more complex and demanding than merely building an art museum. The Berlin that he had known as a young man no longer existed. The city had been so violently disfigured that Mies must have been haunted by thoughts on the fragility of architecture and the impermanence of its meaning.

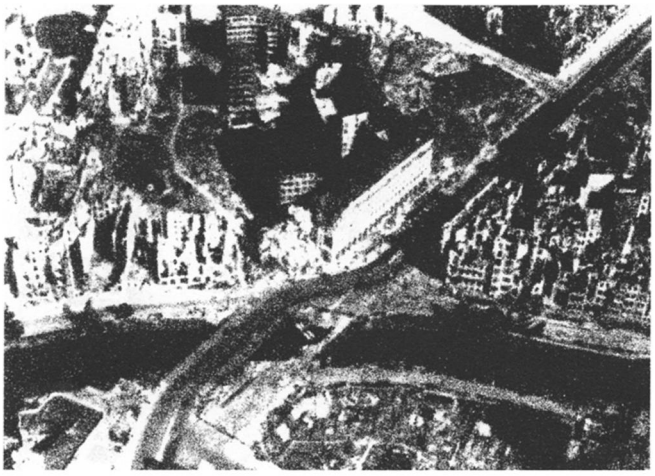
From the site of the New National Gallery, on the Potsdamer Strasse, a Berliner can hold forth on the history of terror and destruction that has overtaken this once effervescent and lively metropolis. Only a stone's throw to the east stood Hitler's chancellery erected by Albert Speer in 1938. When it, along with Hitler's legendary Bunker and other connected government buildings of the so-called Citadel, was razed by the allies, all that remained in what had been the heart of Berlin was a vast, amorphous wasteland. To the south of the National Gallery, across the Potsdamer Bridge, stood a synagogue, a victim of the infamous Kristallnacht. Adjacent to the museum site, on the west, still loom the fire-blackened ruins of a court building, preserved as a memorial to the war. Half a mile to the north is the Reichstag, destroyed in 1933 when Hitler's cohorts set it afire in their putsch and again in 1945 during the infamous Battle of Berlin.

Had Germany's history run a different course, the location of the National Gallery, in the southeastern corner of the

1 (frontispiece). Mies van der Rohe, The New National Gallery, 1962–68, to the left of view looking east



2. The destroyed Reichstag and the denuded Tiergarten, view just to the north of the site of the National Gallery, 1945



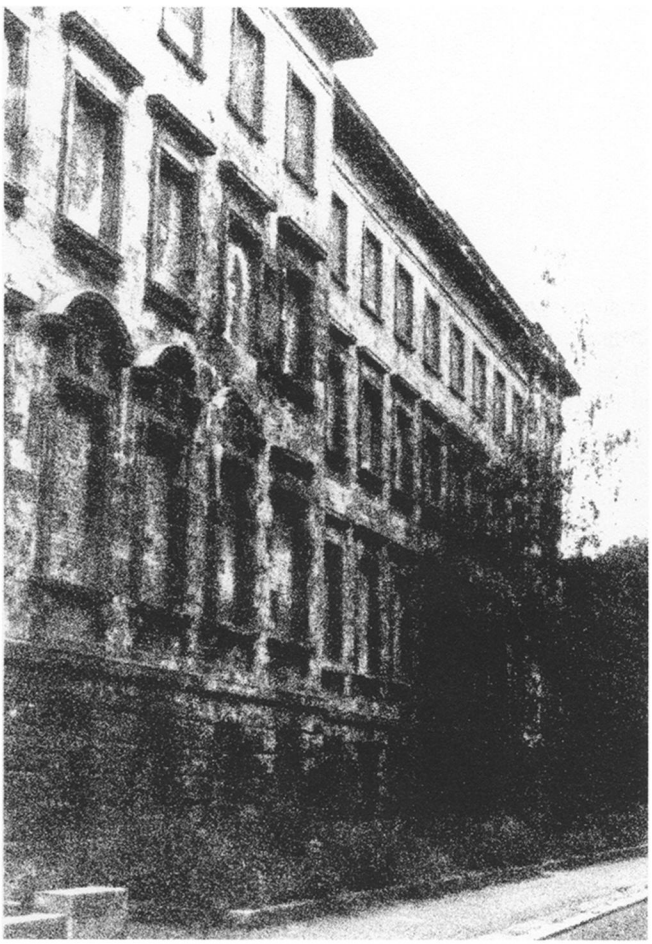
3. The Potsdamer Bridge area, 1945, aerial view. The site for the National Gallery is in the center left.

Tiergarten Quarter, would have been one of the city's most prestigious sites. Developed in the nineteenth century, this quarter was, before the war, studded with embassies, villas, and the abodes of the well-to-do inhabitants of Berlin, who enjoyed its proximity to the park and the government district. The Potsdamer Platz, which defined the Tiergarten Quarter's eastern border, was famous for its many fashionable stores, among them the Columbushaus, erected by Erich Mendelsohn in 1931. But for Mies the area held a special meaning, close as it was to his former abode (Am Karlsbad 24).

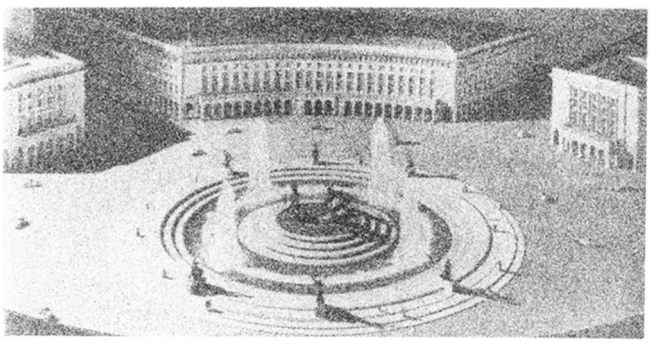
In the closing days of the war, Hitler turned this privileged quarter into his last line of defense. The Potsdamer Bridge, immediately next to the site of the Gallery, was itself the scene of a fierce battle; to bring an end to Hitler's insanity, the Russians focused their cannons on these few square miles, totally devastating the area. Though most of the ruins have now been cleared away, leaving a grid of deserted streets and empty lots, the derelict shells of several embassies remain, their respective governments unmotivated to undertake the expense of removing them as the German capital was moved to Bonn. The former embassies rise from among ferns and bullet-ridden stones with surreal unexpectedness only a few blocks from Mies's building.

The site underwent profound changes even before the war. As part of Speer's redesign of central Berlin, the Potsdamer Platz area was to be razed and rebuilt as the Runder Platz. Though most of Speer's plan never left the drawing board, this part was begun. Only one segment of the Runder Platz was completed, however; and it was the ruins of this structure that had to be removed in 1966 to make way for Mies's building. A final transformation of the site was undertaken in 1961 when the by then denuded Potsdamer Platz area was crossed by the Berlin Wall. The former center of town was pushed to the periphery of a city itself on the edge of the "known" world.

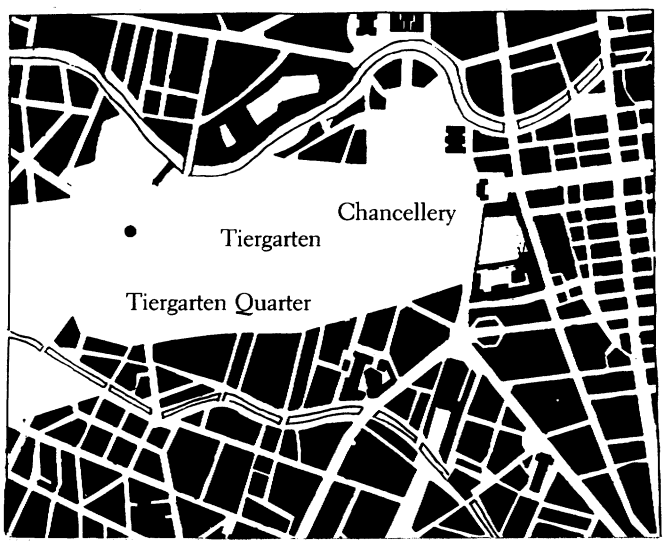
The destroyed Tiergarten Quarter as a whole has been rezoned as a cultural quarter of West Berlin: The park has been painstakingly replanted and the Reichstag, now a museum, laboriously rebuilt. Hans Scharoun's Philharmonic Hall (1956–63) was the first new building in the area, and



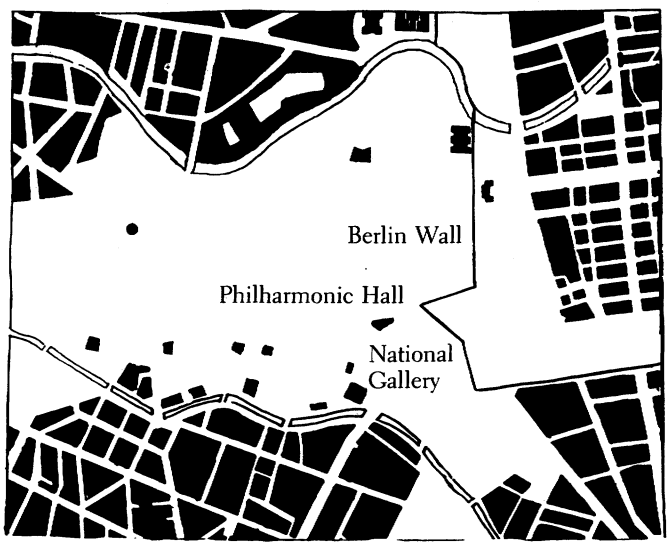
4. A destroyed and abandoned embassy building in the Tiergarten Quarter



5. Albert Speer, Runder Platz, perspective. Only one of the four segments were ever built, the ruins of which can be seen in fig. 2.

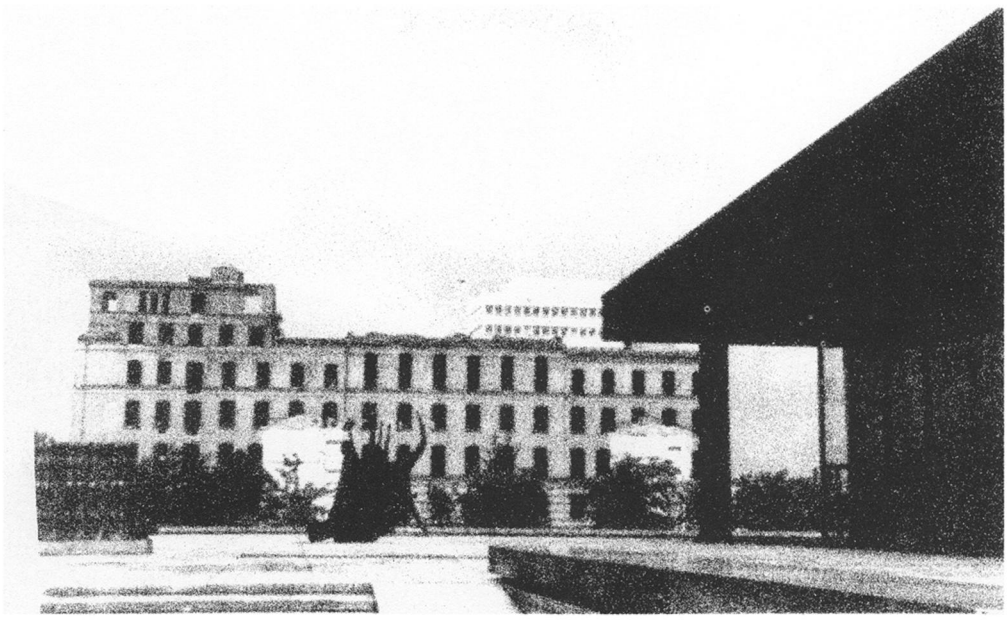


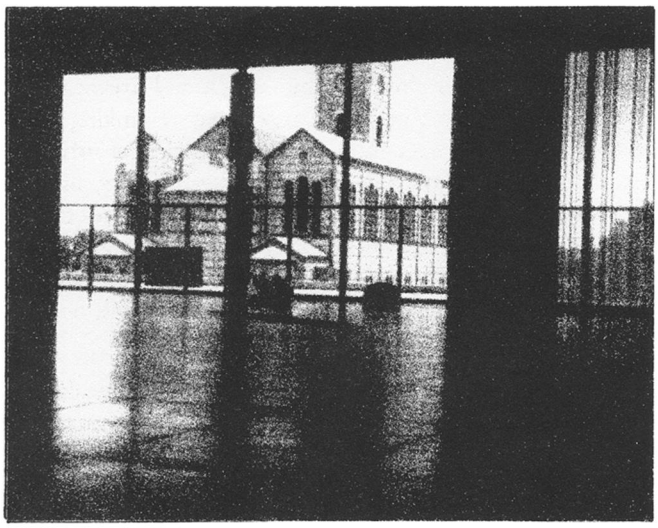
6. The Tiergarten Quarter, plan of area in 1940



7. The Tiergarten Quarter, plan of area in 1965

8. The National Gallery, view looking west





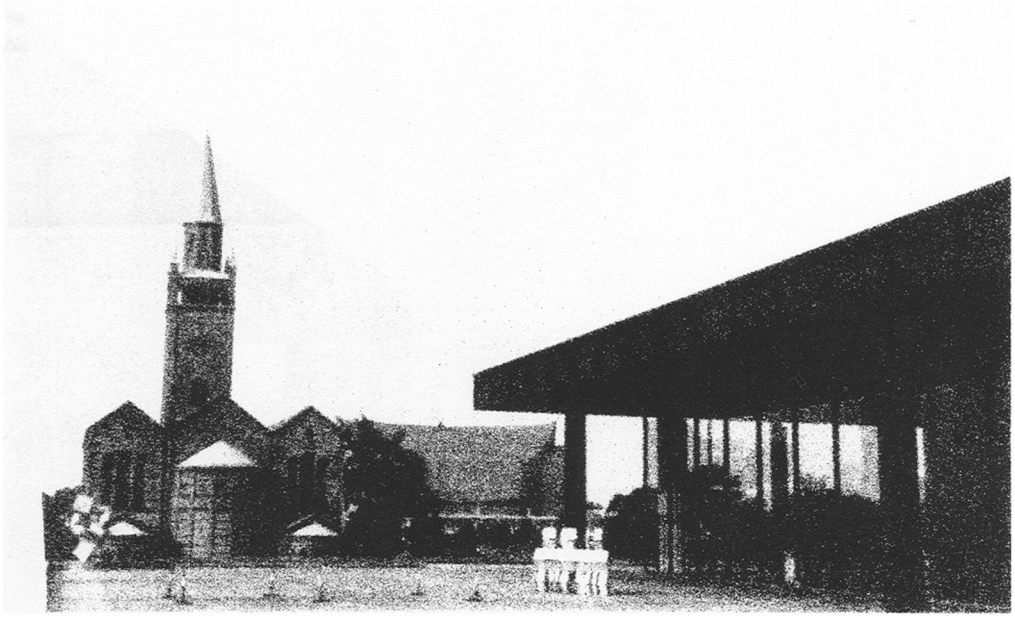
9. The National Gallery reflecting the rebuilt Matthäus Church

had just been completed when Mies was called to Berlin. These, in short, were the problematic givens confronting Mies.

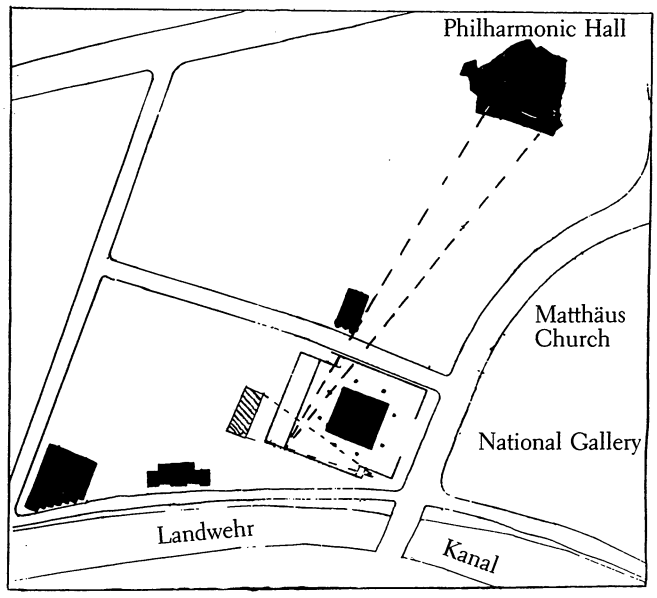
The National Gallery consists of a large elevated platform, roughly three hundred feet square, a clearing in the rubble, metaphorically and literally. On this platform rests a roof structure, two hundred thirteen feet square, supported by eight tapered columns. It covers an open exhibition space totally enclosed in glass. The gallery proper is below in the platform itself.

When construction began only three structures stood in the vast emptiness around the site: the Matthäus Church (built in the 1850s and restored after the war), Scharoun's Philharmonic, and a ruin left over from the bombing. The Gallery is so positioned that the three buildings close off peripheral spatial zones on three sides of the platform. These buildings turn Mies's platform into an urban stage, with the buildings and their reflections in the glass as proscenium, like a modern cinematic panorama offering a view of the surrounding urban destruction. Unfortunately, Mies's statement has been considerably weakened by the recent removal of the ruin. It was after all an embarrassment. If the Gallery appears today, seventeen years after its construction, out of context, it is largely because part of the context has been altered.

Mies, however, saw an even more powerful order latent in the site's chaos, and with simple and inventive brilliance he brought it to articulation. Standing exactly on the southeastern corner of the platform, we see that the build-



10. The National Gallery, view looking north



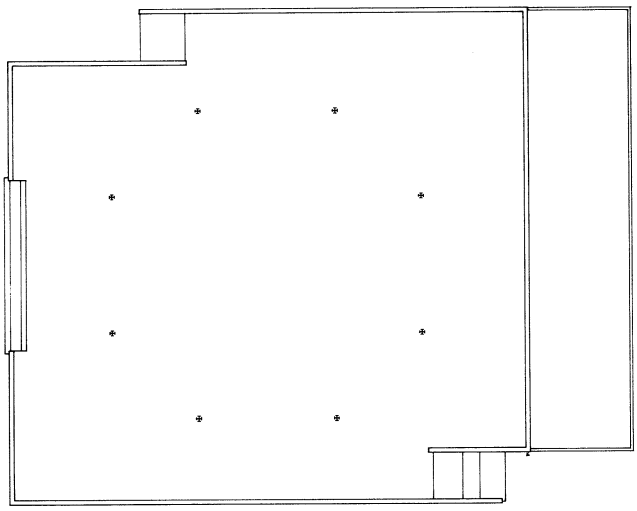
11. The National Gallery, plan of site after completion in 1965

ing is fitted precisely into the landscape, as the columns of the gallery, the edge of the Matthäus Church, and the distant Philharmonic are brought into a tight and irrevocable bond. Mies strove to create an acropolis effect, linking art, music, and religion over the vast empty expanse of urban destruction. The dimension of the National Gallery, uniting landscape and architecture, and bringing together the voices of art, music, and religion, points to the fragility of cultural continuity. If the city proceeds with plans to erect structures between these buildings, this message will be lost.

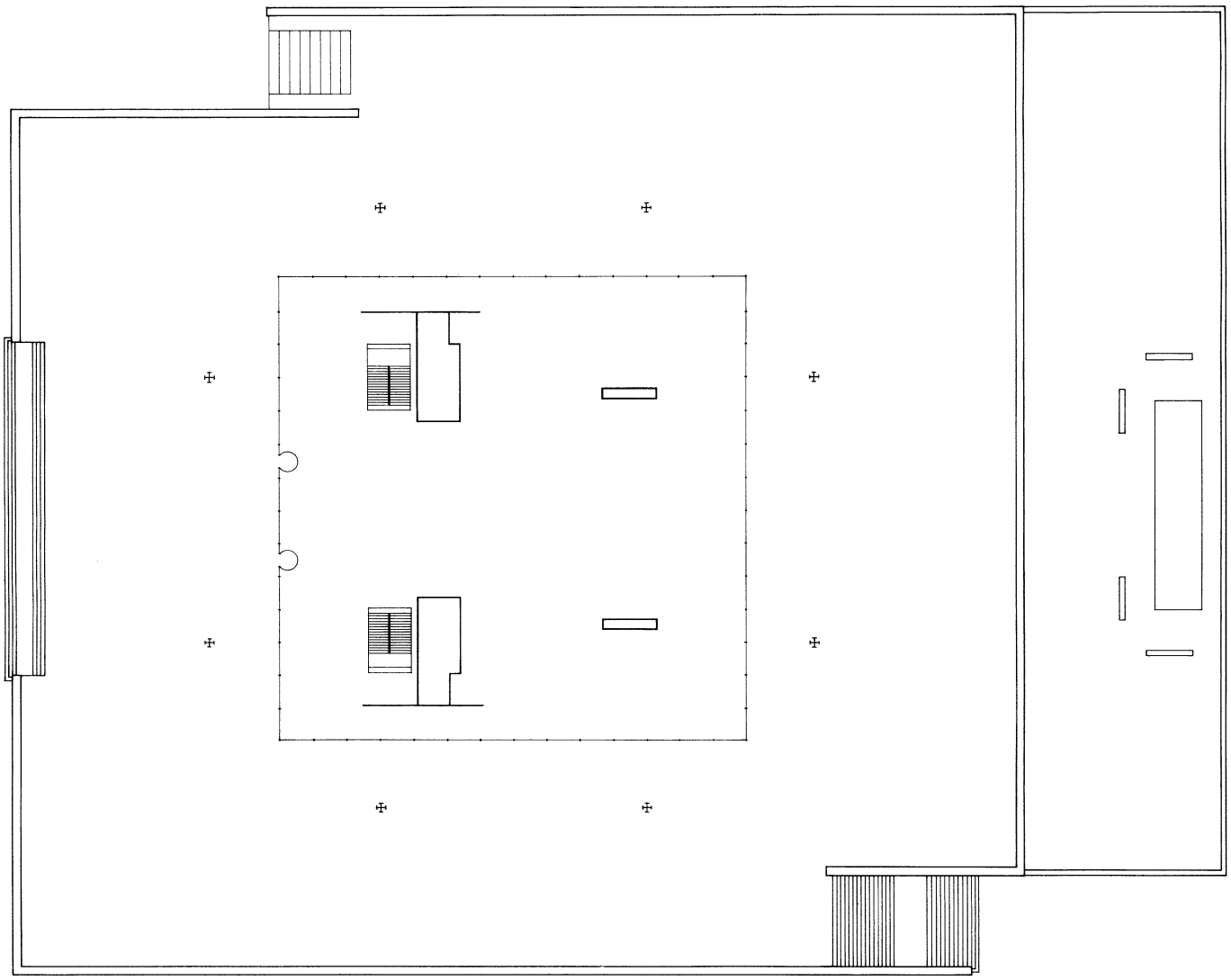
Let us now turn to the building itself. A plan of the platform area that is drawn to scale with an on-site sensitivity to the space would show so few marks on paper as to leave almost a blank sheet. Published plans, with thickly drawn sections and an overemphasized grid overlay, give a misleading impression. The great columns are only a few inches thick, not much thicker than the glass itself. Indeed it appears miraculous that over five thousand tons of steel can rest so effortlessly on eight thin columns.

Whereas in other buildings by Mies the apparent purposelessness of the main space seems to counter the fundamentals of functionalism and borders on ostentatiousness, here, at the National Gallery, the expanse of space rings true. The absence of any gesture whatsoever pointing to the building's purpose seems to address directly the problem of the site. Indeed, any banal allusion to function could hardly survive the dramatic intent of a building that pulls together a site that has suffered so much from a painful coming and going of symbols.

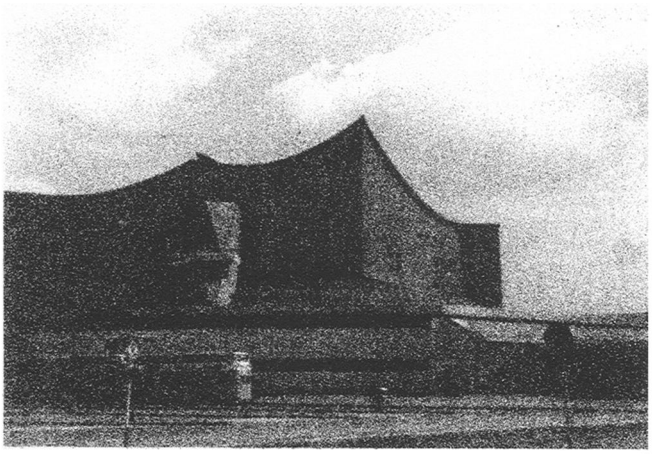
12. The National Gallery, plan of platform



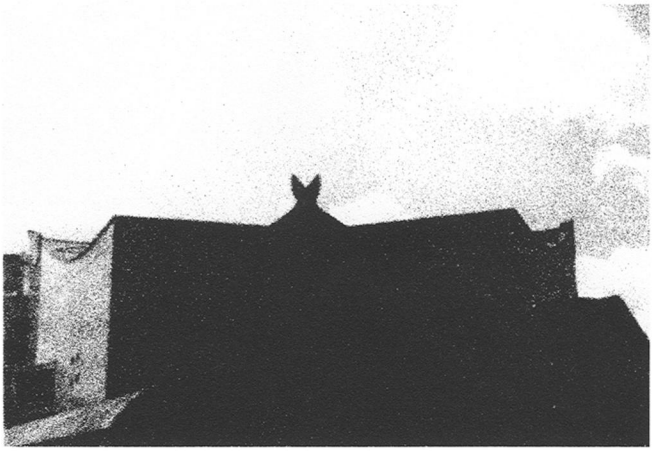
13. The National Gallery, plan of main level

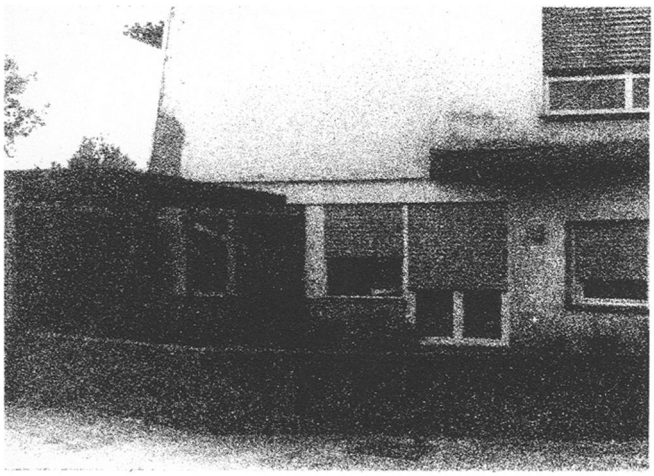


14. Hans Scharoun, The Berlin Philharmonic Concert Hall, 1956–63, view looking north



15. Scharoun, Philharmonic Hall, view looking west



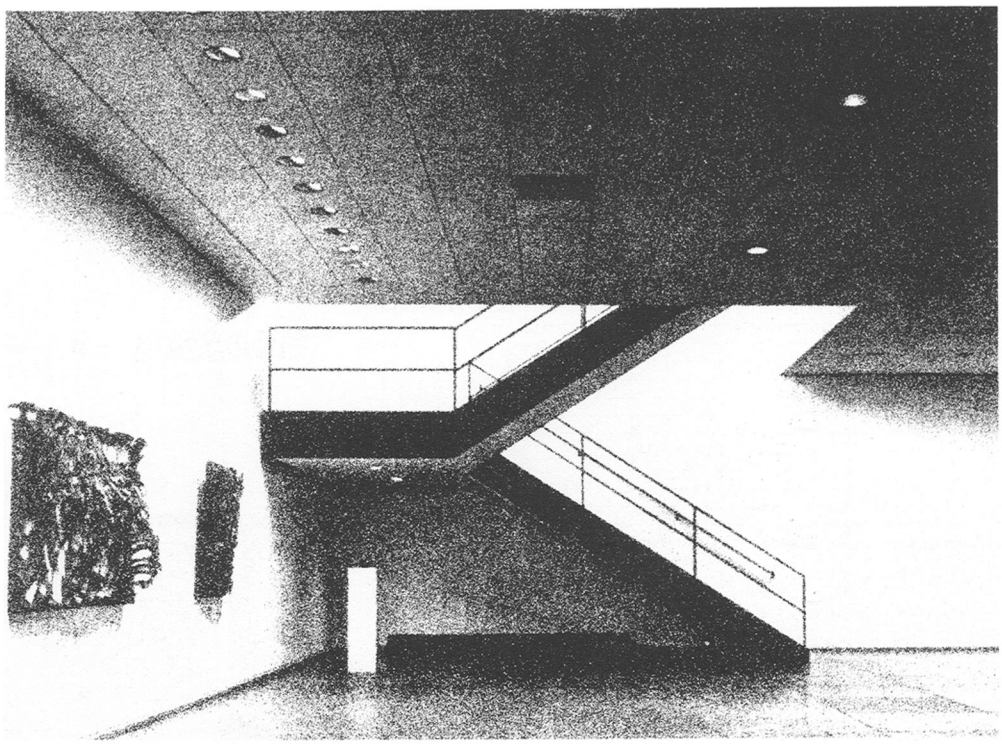


16. Scharoun, Philharmonic Hall, building supervisor's residence, southeastern corner of the complex

In contrast to Mies's reticence, Scharoun, in his Philharmonic Hall, continued undeterredly the same old dialogue of symbols as if nothing had happened. We find revived the old expressionist motives, the old euphoria of space, movement, and rhetoric. The building is replete with that Berliner dash of the prewar days. Scharoun, attempting to return architecture to the "authenticity" of experience and to the revelry of three-dimensional "aliveness," created a complex spatial interior that makes reference to the new pluralistic society. In reality, it speaks only to the returned purchasing power of the wealthy middle class. The "ship" metaphors have also lost their former allure; and the eagle, perched on the roof of the Philharmonic, gazing provocatively eastward, is merely a mask of former glory. The building supervisor's residence, incorporated in the southeastern corner of the building, is marked by an incongruous suburbanist backyard, complete with a rose bush and garden hose — semiotic devices meant to reassure the visitor, rather than the inhabitant, that a new democratic life is taking root.

Mies denies the relevance of the supposedly essential tools of architectural expression: on this site architectural language cannot continue its rhetorical flourishes — aimed at the anticipated tastes of urban sophisticates — as if nothing had taken place. Mies, abnegating the architect's right to create pathos, offers instead an architectural experience of

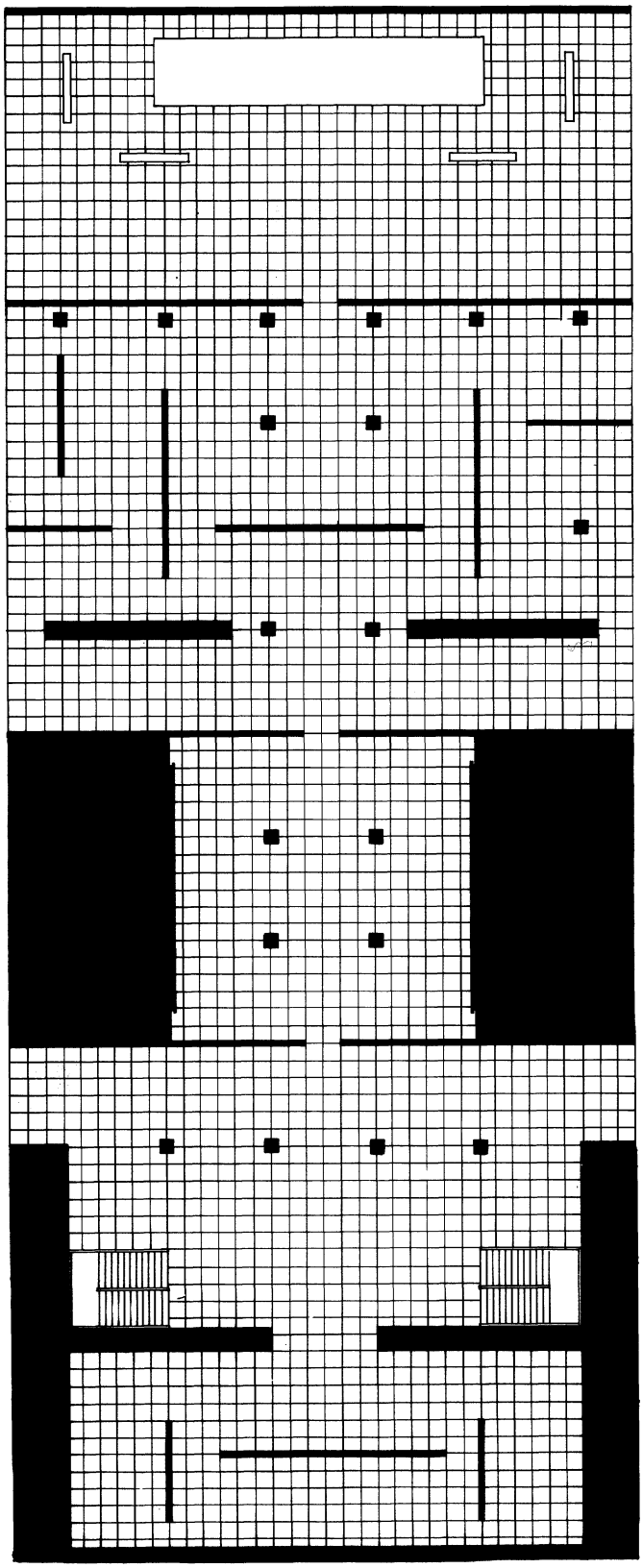
17. The National Gallery, stairs



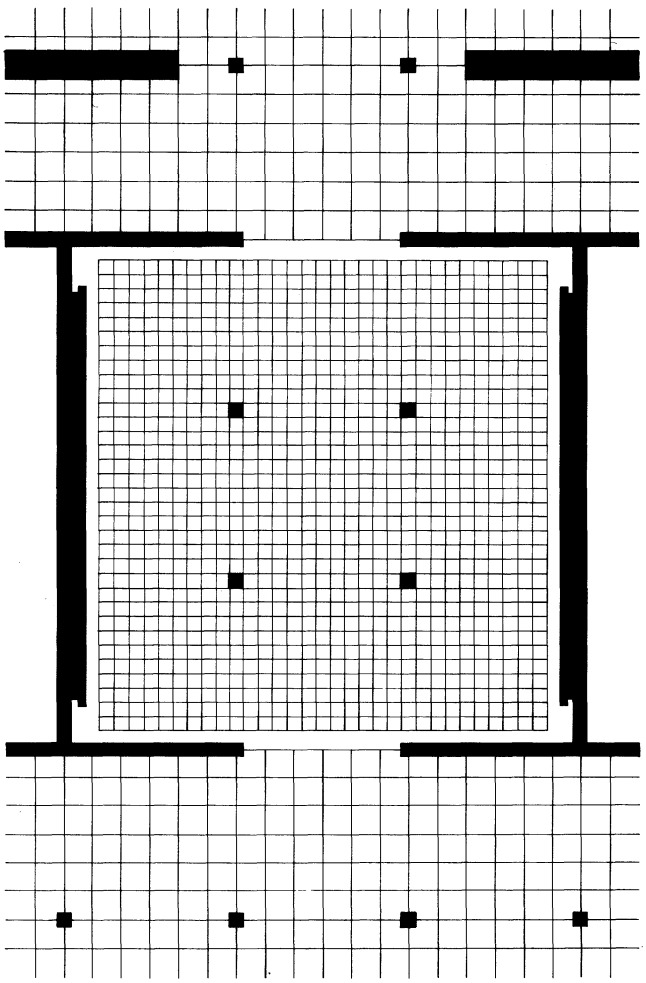
a more phenomenological nature. The empty expanse of the platform, preserving the emptiness of the site itself, forces museumgoers to muse on Berlin's history. The descent into the gallery is equally sobering: The visitor is cautioned by the very simplicity of the steps. There are no architectural adornments here, no designer signatures, no hedonism.

Leaving behind the charged freedom of space of the great hall above, museumgoers encounter a spatial grid that regulates the gallery and brings a fragile order of history into the chaos of the present. The gallery is constructed along a central processional axis, replete with pylonlike wall segments, unexpectedly and enterprisingly atavistic. The archetypal qualities of the layout are especially evident in the dominant square room, the inner sanctum. Four columns emphasize this space with a minimalist expressiveness that shames the minimalist sculpture exhibited in it. In this room, a well-needed refuge, the two lateral walls are disjointed from the grid and appear as planes — the only architectural elements to deviate from the grid. By this simple and ingenious device, Mies affirms, on the one hand, the processional axis and, and on the other hand, the sense of the wall not only as a surface that exhibits the art, but as a form of protection as well.

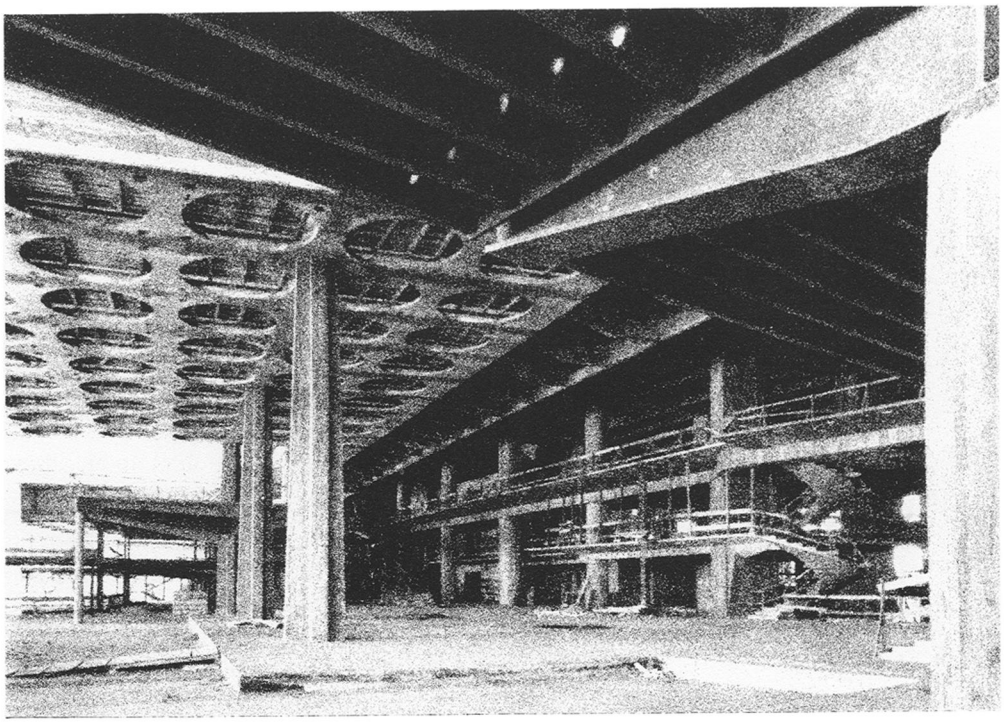
The parti culminates in the sculpture garden, a rectangular space terminated by a fifteen-foot-high concrete wall. As is



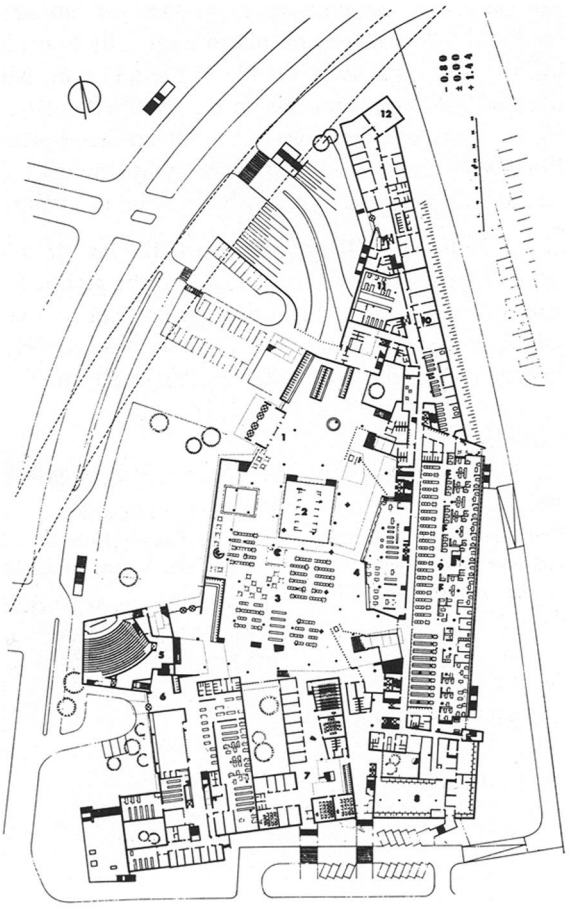
18. The National Gallery, plan of gallery space



19. The National Gallery, plan of the central room in the gallery space



20. Hans Scharoun, State Library, 1975, main reading room during construction

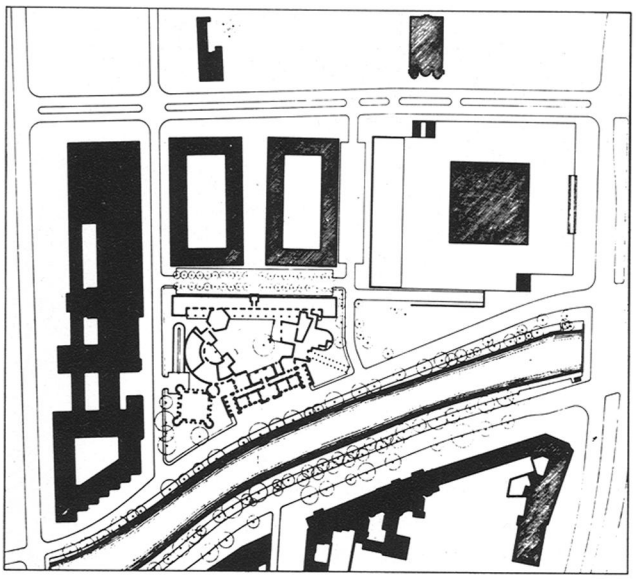


21. Scharoun, State Library, plan of ground level. Crosses indicate Scharoun's pumped-up columns.

well known, the wall for Mies has always had great significance as an iconic projection of man's vision of his artistic and nature-bound essence. Here, the wall brings the experience of the building full circle, for it is a foil not only for the sculpture placed before it, but also for the *ruine trouvée* of a shattered building (removed in 1983) that looms surreally behind. More important, the wall echoes the Berlin Wall, once visible from the steps of the exhibition space above. Movement through the museum, away from one wall toward another, traps the museumgoer in a realm of art with uncertain destiny.

The powerful statement of the National Gallery has been considerably weakened by the erection of Scharoun's State Library (1975), which blocks off the essential view of the Berlin Wall. Like the Philharmonic, the library is a turbulent essay in space and light, a swirl of passageways, stairs, and columns. Particularly questionable is Scharoun's quotation of the Gallery's columns: Mies's elegant and powerful cruciform supports are pumped up into plump, sensual monoliths. Certainly it was a clever pun to twist one of the columns ever so slightly out of axis.

The most recent structure, now under construction, is James Stirling's Science Centre, which is to include the shell of the court building just to the west of the Gallery. Despite the charm of the design, it trivializes the site. It is a Disneyland version of the ninth-century Carolingian juxtaposition of castle and church, an allusion taken, no



22. James Stirling and Michael Wilford, Science Centre, 1979, plan. The National Gallery is in the upper right corner.

23. The Berlin Wall at the Potsdamer Platz

doubt, from some medieval history book. This unfortunate misapplication of historical forms exposes Stirling's brand of elitism and its pseudocontextualism at its vainglorious best. The powerful fire-scorched ruin behind Mies's sculpture garden wall will be replaced, in Stirling's design, by the backdrop of an elegantly scaled fake church apse.

But worse is to follow. The greatest threat to Mies's vision lies in the planned extension of the National Gallery itself. The winning design of a competition held in 1980 destroys once and for all the unity of Mies's design, drowning out the building in a sea of architectural bric-a-brac. The sculpture wall will be removed entirely and replaced by flower beds, a dainty canal, and a cute Japanesque bridge. While such playfulness, and even flippancy, may have its time and place, it is certainly not here. Man's innate tendency to build a "place" means all too frequently to eradicate, to fill up an unpleasant vacuity of site and soul. Mies has withstood this temptation. With masterly deftness he has had the courage to preserve in the site an incompleteness, throwing himself open to the dangers inherent in such a choice: by capturing the context, he became its victim.

Leaving the National Gallery and walking the few steps to the Berlin Wall, one may perhaps still find the graffiti I saw there on my last visit. It is a fitting comment on the cataclysmic history still being played out on this site: "Here ends the first part of the only urban puzzle of all time!"

Figure Credits

1, 4, 6–11, 14–16, 23. Courtesy of the author.

2. D. Rentschler and W. Schirmer, *Berlin und seine Bauten*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm und Sohn, 1972), p. 25.

3. *Architectural Design* 52, nos. 11–12 (1982), p. 4.

5. *Architectural Design* 49, nos. 8–9 (1979), p. 35.

12, 13, 18, 19. Plans drawn by Paul Hanley.

17. G.A. 14 (1972), p. 26.

20, 21. Peter Pfankuch, ed., *Hans Scharoun: Bauten, Entwürfe, Texte* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1974).

22. *James Stirling*, Architectural Design Profile (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 65.