

The Evolution of Wright, Mies & Le Corbusier

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HENRY-RUSSELL HITCHCOCK

The Evolution of **WRIGHT,** **MIES &** **LE CORBUSIER**

Henry-Russell Hitchcock was this year visiting professor of history of architecture at Yale. He is author of In the Nature of Materials the authoritative work on Wright and co-author of the first book on the International Style. He is presently head of the Smith College Museum.

In order to make more graphic various parallels and contrasts between the early stages of the careers of Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies, I have organized a few dates in tabular form (see opposite page). Some of these dates are matters of recorded fact; others, however, necessarily represent subjective judgments as to when an architect's work first becomes mature or as to which in the roster of all his buildings should be considered the "masterpiece," in the old literal sense of representing his earliest attainment of masterhood in his art. The date when a man leaves off his formal schooling is not a matter about which there are likely to be two opinions; but with regard to the ranking as a masterpiece of any of his productions there may well be long-continued, if not eternal, disputes. Among those interested in modern architecture—and particularly among architectural students in America—Wright, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe are now generally accepted as masters at least—sometimes only too literally so.

You will note one embarrassing feature of all three careers; namely that the education these men had was not on a par with that you are getting. The formal education of Mies, which ended at age 15, was in a trade school; that of Le Corbusier, ending at 17, was in an arts and crafts school; Wright's education lasted a little longer, but it ended abruptly by his own decision at 20, after only two years of engineering school.

Architectural students need not take these facts too much to heart. Formal school education in architecture may have come relatively late into the world, and particularly late in this coun-

try. In the region where Wright grew up there were no architectural schools at all in the 1880's. Even in Europe the conventional training of architects, as we know it today, is a relatively modern development.

In George Howe's address which opened this series of talks there is a fascinating quotation expressed in such superb jargon that I must read it to you: "The phenomenon of the great style is an emanation from the essence of the Macrocosm, from the prime-symbol of a great culture. . . . Only the art of great cultures, the art that has ceased to be only art and has begun to be an effective unit of expression and significance, possesses style." I think I know what Oswald Spengler, who wrote this, meant; at least I am sure that Mr. Howe does. For he went on to paraphrase it very effectively, something I shall not attempt to do either in his words or in my own. But the quotation struck a deep chord in my memory. When I was about your age, back in 1927, and was publishing my first article on the subject of architecture, I was much influenced by Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* was then newly published and much discussed. I therefore called the article (and I am afraid I then meant it) "The Decline of Architecture."

In the succeeding quarter century I have had both hopes and fears for architecture. But I can only tell you that at this present moment I have far more hopes than fears. I do really feel that the phenomenon of a great style has *already* emanated from the essence of a Macrocosm, something Mr. Howe implied will rather be the responsibility of *your* generation to bring about. For last summer I saw in the Middle West, rising out of that uninspiring terrain which has proved so conducive to the production of great architecture, two buildings in particular which suggest to me that the mid-20th century will represent to posterity a truly great architectural moment.

For nearly fifteen years Wright's Johnson Wax Building in Racine has been famous. Two years ago an addition was made to it, an addition which is, in my considered estimation, even finer than the original edifice. The two apartment towers at 845-860 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago by Mies van der Rohe, although not even finished yet, are already among the most prominent objects in the distinguished shore line view of the city. Surprisingly enough, Mies seems to have picked up again here after fifty years the line of Sullivan's great buildings. These two new buildings in Racine and Chicago are, of course, by two of the greatest architects practicing in the world today. It is sobering to my generation, though

	WRIGHT	MIES	LE CORBUSIER
BIRTH	1867	1886	1888
END OF FORMAL EDUCATION	20	15	17
END OF APPRENTICESHIP	26	25	22 <i>travel, business, writing, editing & painting from 1911 to 1921</i>
INDEPENDENT PRACTISE	26	25	34
MATURITY BEGINS	31-33	34-36	35
FIRST MASTERPIECE	35	43	39



WRIGHT *The Hillside Home School, Spring Green, Wisconsin*



WAYNE ANDREWS

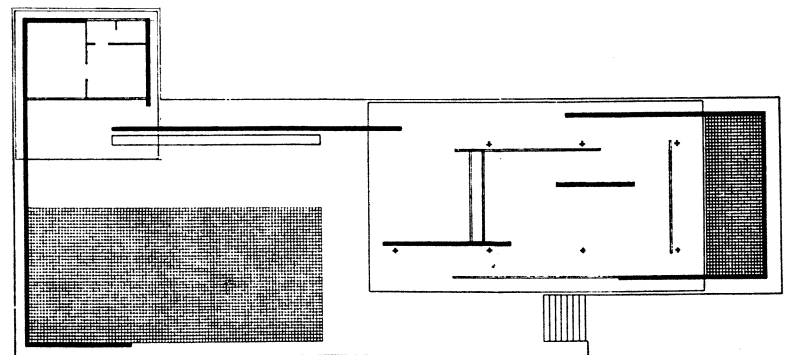
Ward Willitts House, Highland Park, Illinois

LE CORBUSIER *Stein House at Garches*



MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

the first masterpieces



MIES *The Barcelona Pavilion Plan*

not necessarily to yours, that Mr. Wright is in his 80's and Mies in his 60's. But these works represent, I think, a sort of culmination of a "great style" which has been in existence now for a half century and more. If they come late in their designer's careers, they also come late in the history of that style. It should be of interest to examine now the beginnings of these two architects, turning later to a parallel discussion of the beginnings of Le Corbusier, the one great architect of the mid-20th century who has not yet built in America.

As is evident from the table, the education of these three men ended in all cases considerably earlier than your formal education will end. But

it was many years before it was possible to recognize, not just promise—but actual achievement in executed work. It would seem that ten or even twenty years lie ahead of most modern architects after the end of their formal education and before they can hope to arrive at maturity, or as applying to architects of earlier periods their mature production has rarely begun before they reached their mid-30's.

In 1893 Frank Lloyd Wright, having just left Sullivan's office, entered a Louvre-like project in a competition for a new Public Library and Museum in Milwaukee (Fig. 1). In that very year, you may recall, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago had swept America off its feet

with its classic colonnades. Wright evidently judged—incorrectly as it proved—that nothing was more likely to win a competition at that time than a design which echoed the colonnades of the White City. I recall no project by any of the architects who were then beginning to make this academic mode their stock in trade which is more refined or more distinguished, except perhaps Henry Bacon's Lincoln Memorial. This project well illustrates Wright's surprising capacity, at this particular point, for working in a vein that he must have considered as remote as possible from that of his Lieber Meister Sullivan, with whom he had just broken rather sharply.

We cannot tell to what extent Wright may have had his tongue in his cheek in preparing this Milwaukee design. There was no stylistic restriction in the terms of the competition; but Wright may have felt, just the same, that it was canny to offer what would most probably be liked by the jury, rather than a design more expressive of his own personal aspirations for architecture.

In the case of Urbig house (Fig. 2), which was built in a suburb of Berlin by Mies van der Rohe in 1914, I am told that the clients had stated a definite preference for a generically late-18th-century manner of design. Within that manner, Mies certainly worked with refinement and distinction and also achieved a very great dignity and simplicity in the detailing. Like Wright, he succeeded in producing a work which is quite comparable in quality to the best things being done by other men who were devoting their lives to this sort of derivative design.

There is, I think, a lesson for students here. That lesson is: don't take too hard the requests from your teachers—or later from your clients—that you should design now and again in manners that are alien to your present tastes and even more alien, presumably, to your ultimate creative aspirations. It can be a good educational exercise for visual artists such as architects, as it certainly is for writers, to parody some other artist during their period of training. You will not arrive any later at your own personal style. Do not be afraid that the power of your own personality will not ultimately unfold itself just because, for a year or so, you allow yourself to design in some fashionable manner of the moment.

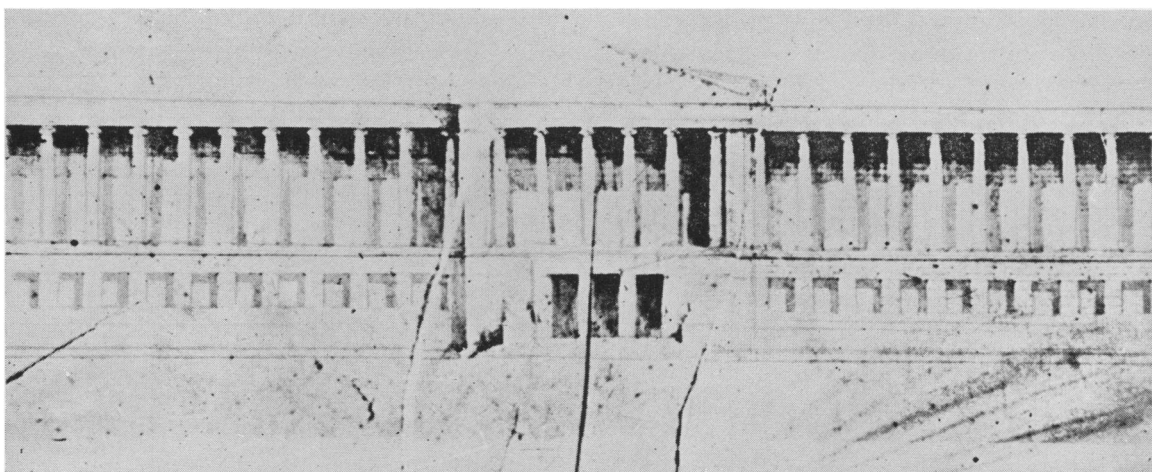
Le Corbusier came on the scene somewhat later than Mies and hence a great deal later than Wright. Try as I will, I cannot find out what the house was like which Le Corbusier assisted his teacher L'Epplatemnier to build when he was only 17 years old. Nor can I find out what the other house looked like which he built for his own

father six years later when he was 23 years old. I must suspect that, unlike Wright, Le Corbusier has consciously expurgated his early record. Even in the case of Mies, I have only a generic image of his work before the Urbig house; and I know that all the drawings for his early work which would help us to understand better the character of the Urbig and other houses of the teens have been destroyed.

The earliest Le Corbusier house of which published illustrations are available is one he built in 1916, still at La Chaux de Fonds (Fig. 3). It is in a rather personal variant of that international academic manner which was rising in popularity, at the end of the first decade of the 20th century and through the years of the first World War, against the freer currents that were associated with the Art Nouveau of the 1890's and the *Jugendstil* of the 00's. The main interest of this villa—for our present purpose at least—lies less in the careful organization of the exterior façade (which is illustrated by the proportional control lines Le Corbusier drew over the elevation) than in the plan. Yet, of course, such fixed schemes of ideal proportion were to provide a most important aspect of his mature architectural doctrine. It is when we study the plan, however, that we really recognize the presence of a markedly original talent. For the use of schemes of proportion to organize façades had long been a part of the post-Renaissance tradition.

The flowing together of the three rooms across the front of this house is quite in the manner of Wright's Prairie houses of the previous 15 years. But peculiar to Le Corbusier certainly are the curved shapes of the interior screens; it almost seems as if the articulated interior space was bending the membranes which confine and shape it. Also the fashion in which the formal space of the living room here is carried up behind a great window-wall, to give monumental scale both to the exterior and to the interior, seems to me specifically Corbusian. Thus one sees far more readily in this house, which is "later" biographically as well as actually than Wright's projects or Mies's Urbig house, something that we now know was going to be an important part of the designer's mature contribution as an architect.

It is, I think, of some interest historically—although I certainly don't want to stress the matter too much—that these three great innovators, perhaps the three greatest innovators in architecture of the 20th century, all accepted in the early years of their careers an exacting sort of discipline such as we in our American schools have largely thrown over in the last ten or fifteen



1 *Wright's drawing for Milwaukee Library and Museum Competition*

years. None of these men had had an academic architectural education; yet they all took it upon themselves, for one reason or another, to absorb a great deal of the academic tradition of architecture during their early years. The reason this academic discipline was not unhealthy for them, while it seems to have been fatal to others, may well have been because it was a medicine personally prescribed; and also because—and most notably in Wright's case—they got through what may be called their early academic period with very great speed.

I would not say, therefore, that students today in good architectural schools are losing much because they are no longer indoctrinated during their training period with that academic classic tradition which so long dominated architectural education here and abroad. But you are as free as were Wright, Mies, or Le Corbusier to explore for yourselves, if you wish, whatever may be of value to you in that tradition. For you it will not be something imposed but rather something to be rediscovered. At least it should probably be investigated in order to find out why, over a long period of 500 years or more, it has appealed (at least in their youth) to generations of brilliant architects, of whom the latest are the men with whom we are now dealing and a few of their juniors whose work is also familiar to you. Wright and Le Corbusier and Mies were certainly not stymied by academicism. But they evidently found in it some needed corrective to a rebellious romanticism. That romanticism is evidently a continuing force in both Wright's and Le Corbusier's natures, if hardly Mies's; with them at times it even gets out of hand.

Wright did not necessarily have a better professional preparation than Mies or Le Corbusier. His training on the structural side at Wisconsin was certainly of a more formal nature. Moreover, he went on immediately to practical employment

in busy Chicago offices, moving up from the position of draftsman to that of chief designer for the Adler & Sullivan office within three or four years. It may have been largely due to the conditions of the happy period and place in which he grew up, Chicago in the late 80's and 90's, but he was certainly able to produce from an early age far more prolifically than were the two Europeans of the next generation. Their careers were inhibited by the 1914–18 war, as the rather late dates of their first masterpieces so significantly indicates.

Mr. Wright is not ashamed of his rather eclectic beginnings in the 90's. He knows why he tried out the various types of design that he did, nor is it too difficult for others to understand his reasons. He certainly explored many more different lines than did the two other men we are discussing who came along so much later. It was, moreover, a good ten years between his first executed building, his own house of 1889 in Oak Park, and the moment when his various experiments ceased shooting off in various contradictory directions and began instead to converge. This is well illustrated in the River Forest Golf Club of 1898; for in that we can already find most of the basic elements of what is usually considered the earliest phase of his mature style combined in a really integrated way.

The study of Wright's early work still continues to reveal new sources of influence. Vincent Scully's investigations make it very evident that at the beginning, in the years 1889–92, Bruce Price was the architect with whom Wright felt the closest sympathy. Price's Chandler house, built in Tuxedo Park in 1888, obviously provided the basic pattern for the elevation of Wright's own house, something of which I was not aware when I published my book on Wright ten years ago. He was willing moreover to follow Price quite closely for a few years at least. Some of these Pricean elements are actually among those that seem es-

pecially premonitory of his own mature style.

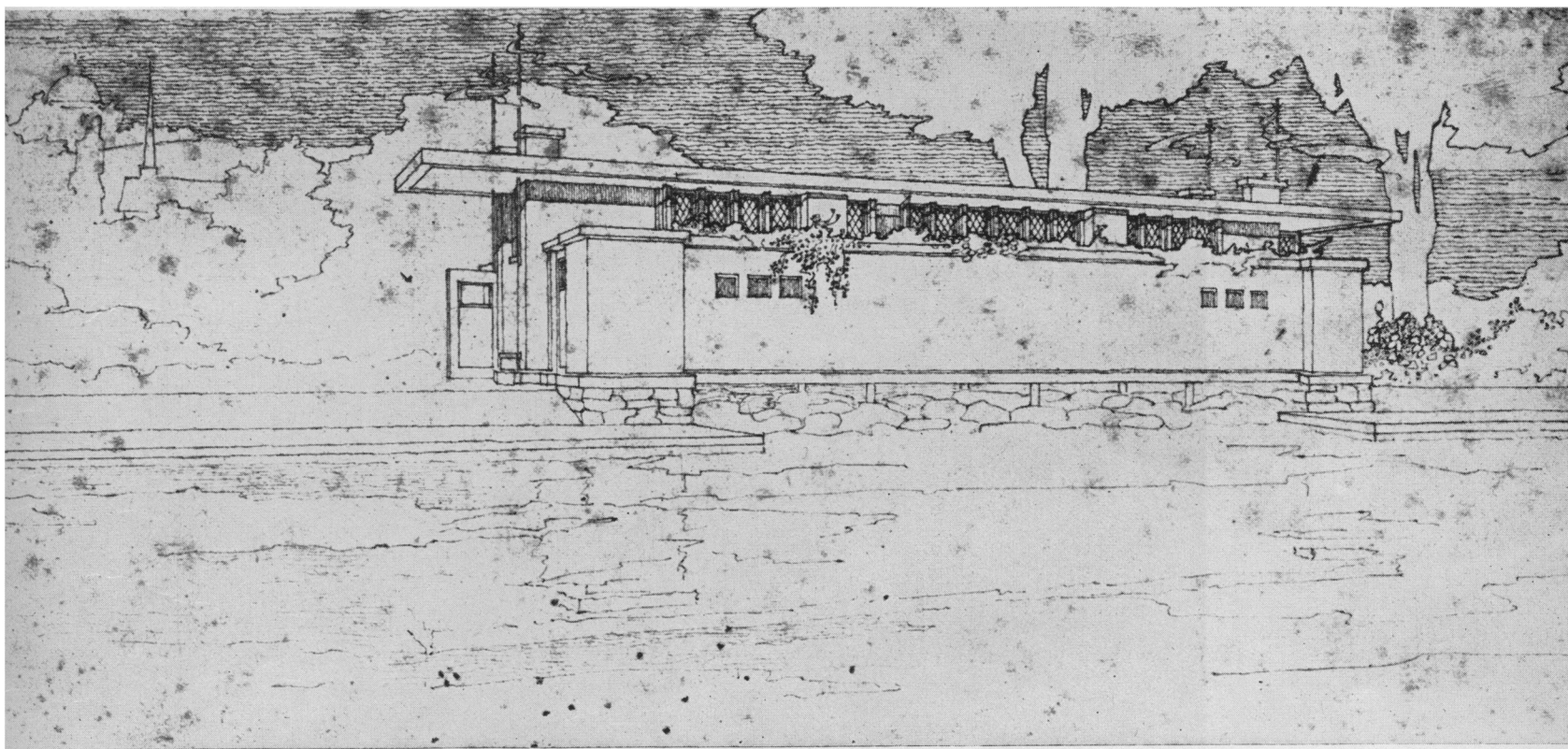
In Wright's estimation his "first" house was not his own Oak Park house but the Winslow house in River Forest, the initial commission which he undertook just after leaving Sullivan. It was a very considerable one, moreover, costing a good \$20,000. The Winslow house leads us from the period of Wright's actual apprenticeship to a particular master into those rough waters where he had to steer his stylistic ship without any outside guidance. (The master was of course his actual employer Sullivan, not Price whose work he could only know from illustrations in books and magazines.) There was still a good seven or eight years before he really reached full maturity with the first Prairie houses of 1900. But there is no need here to detail the vagaries of those years. I should note, however, that Japanese art was apparently the particular catalytic that finally caused his style to fuse into a wholly personal and coherent formal vehicle.

At this point it is desirable to consider Mies and Le Corbusier at comparable stages in their

careers, Le Corbusier, during a long period of his youth, was not directly concerned with architecture at all. His travel sketches, of which a great many are published in the monographs on his work, give you some idea of the sort of education which Le Corbusier was picking up for himself around the Mediterranean at this time.

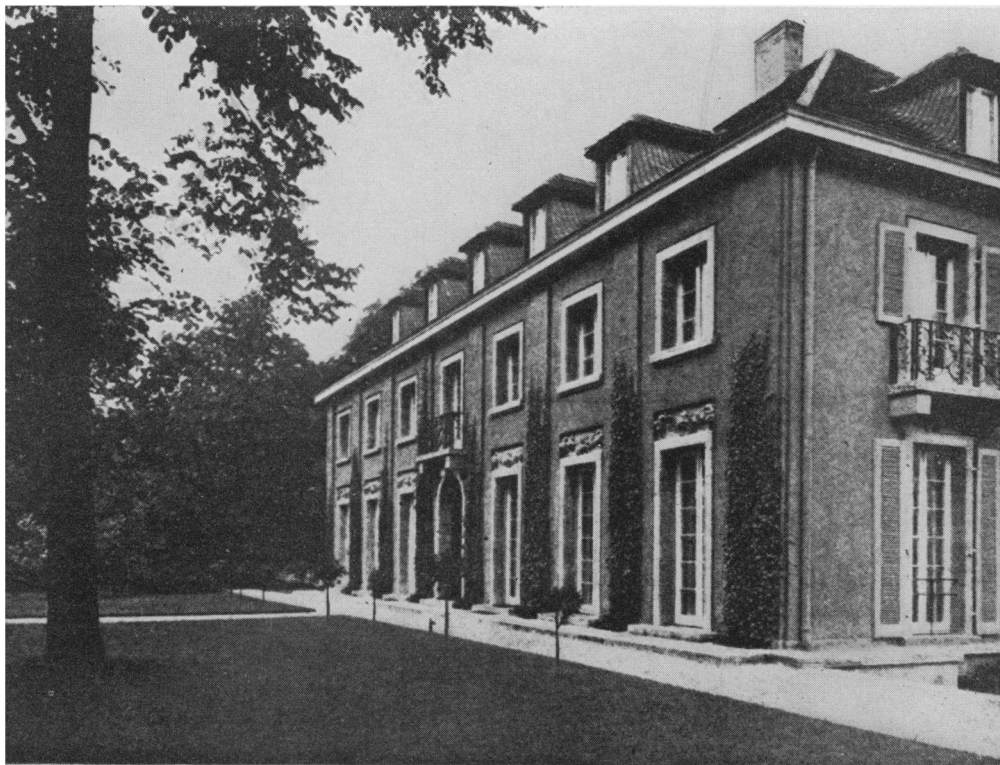
Despite the fact that Le Corbusier's formal education in the arts and crafts school ended at 17, he certainly had one of those "broadening experiences," in his case continuing for quite a few years. At least a year of travel without professional worries is a desirable part of any architect's education and always has been.

I have never seen Mies's first house of 1907 nor even a picture of it. His Perls house of 1911 I did know (Fig. 4). It particularly illustrates the strong influence of Mies's then master, Peter Behrens. Behrens, indeed, *may* have been almost as important in Mies's career (though not, I think, in Le Corbusier's, who also worked for him but only very briefly) as Sullivan was in Wright's. Through Behrens Mies was drawn, however, to



THE YAHARA BOAT CLUB

*This drawing, owned by H. R. Hitchcock, was presumably made by Marion Mahoney (later Mrs. Walter Burley Griffin) in 1909 for one of the plates in *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright, Berlin, Wasmuth, 1910, the first important publication concerning Wright's work. Wright describes Marion Mahony as "a capable assistant for eleven years."**



2 *Urbig House, Berlin-Neubabelsberg*

Perls House, Berlin-Zehlendorf **4**

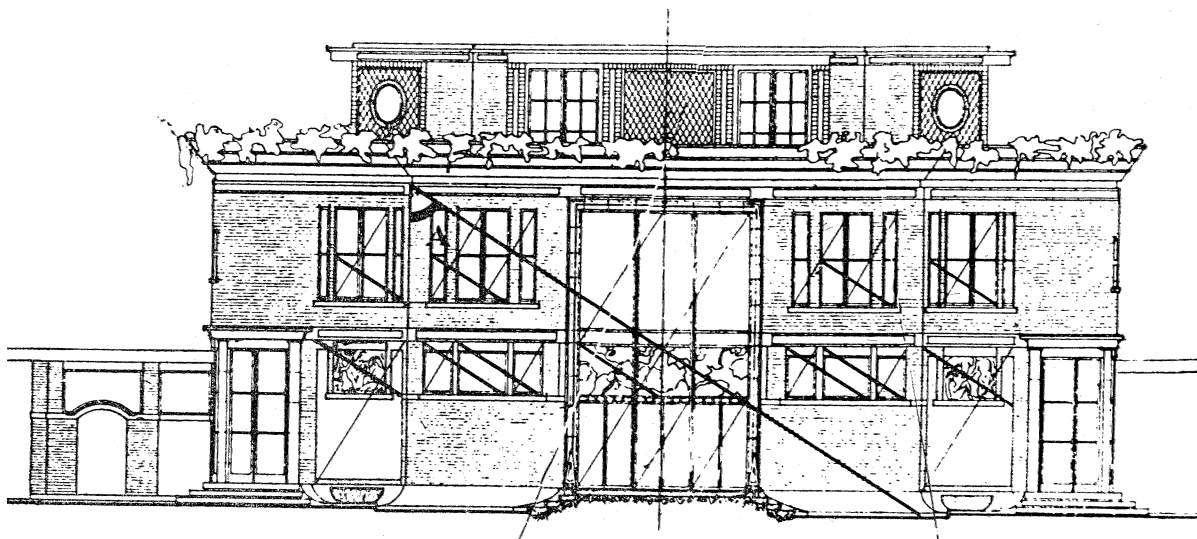


study the works of a far greater German architect of a hundred years earlier, Karl Friedrich Schinkel. In the Perls house Mies even provided a sort of reflection of Schinkel's romantic classicism.

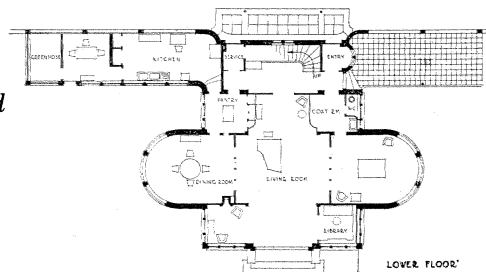
This influence of Schinkel, whose work Mies could study in the actual buildings which surrounded him in Berlin, was on the whole healthier, I think, than that of the American "academic tradition" of the 90's with which Wright was briefly but deeply involved in his early youth. For Wright and his Middle Western contemporaries had never seen a single sound example of academic work of the past, except of course in books! To Wright, academic design could only be literally academic, that is, mere "book learning." If an architect of modern times can have any profitable relationship with the building of the past—and I certainly believe he can—it should certainly be based upon direct knowledge. Mies's relationship to Schinkel was in the end more significant, I think, than his relationship to Behrens. It has continued, moreover, not in a very overt form but as a matter of basic respect and admiration, down to this day. Those who admire Mies do well to make for themselves some study of the work of Schinkel also.

More Schinckelesque even than the Perls house is a large project designed for the Kröllers outside the Hague in Holland. This was never executed. In this project Mies attempted to go on—as many men have attempted to go on from whatever past models they have especially admired—from where Schinkel had left off. As Mies was eventually able to go on so very far, it would appear that Schinkel was—for him at least—a very sound jumping-off place. Schinkel's work took the place for Mies of that more generic study of academic design which we find occupying the years 1892 and 1893 in Wright's career.

It is fortunate that Mies did have this contact with a greater man than Behrens, even if he were long dead. Behrens is a somewhat enigmatic, or at least ambiguous, figure. He was one of the first architects to build industrial buildings without stylistic reminiscence and yet with a full consciousness of their architectural potentialities. Thus he had a great influence on the beginnings of Gropius. But this industrial work seems to have had little or no influence on Mies at this early date. Let us look for contrast at a Schinkel project for a city house, dating from the 1830's. It well represents, I think, that greater restraint, that greater refinement, that extraordinary precision of proportion, which are so characteristic of Mies in our own day and which in the early 19th cen-



3 *House in La Chaux-de-Fonds, Switzerland*



tury were peculiarly characteristic of Schinkel.

I should perhaps point out, because it is a curious paradox, that these modern architects we are discussing, who owed so much in one way or another to academic or classic traditions in their designing, in their thinking were most influenced by the writings of the neo-mediaevalists. It was Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc and similar 19th-century writers—most particularly perhaps William Morris—who influenced their *thought*. Their design was never mediaeval at all, perhaps because the vitality of neo-mediaevalism in practice, if not in theory, had drained away by the early 80's, well before they came on the scene.

I have mentioned that it was after almost precisely ten years of practice that Wright, reacting at times wildly from extremes of academic classicism to extremes of romanticism, or from a conscious continuation of the line of Sullivan to a thorough absorption of Japanese influence, was finally able to pull all the divergent tendencies of his work together. Then he entered that brilliant period of his early maturity, running from 1900 to 1909, which is called the Prairie period. That of course was destined to have a major influence on the world at large. In America we are now well

aware, however, how small a part the production of the Prairie period plays in the total story of Wright's architecture and how exceptional for him moreover the relative homogeneity of his production in those early 20th-century years was to be.

To wind up my explanation of the dates given in the table at the head of this article, I must say which are the works by the three architects I have been considering that I believe to represent their first masterpieces. For Wright I have picked the Willitts house in Highland Park and the Hillside Home School, built for his aunts in Wisconsin. Both of 1902, they come precisely in his 35th year. Le Corbusier's Stein house at Garches and his great project for the Palace for the League of Nations, both of 1927, occupy the same position in Le Corbusier's career. By that time he was, however, 39. Mies did not produce his masterpiece, the Barcelona Pavilion, until he was 43! In the estimation of some, however, that is preëminent among all the masterpieces of the 20th century. I hope these figures are not too depressing to you at your present age! Their message is only too obvious; so all I will say to you in conclusion is: "Don't be in too much of a hurry."