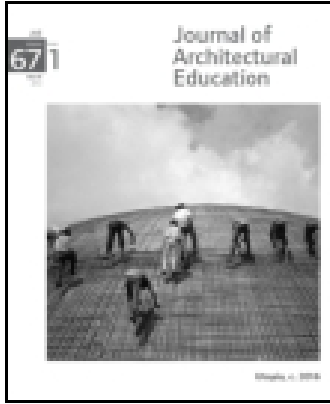


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# Mies van der Rohe: The Genealogy of Column and Wall

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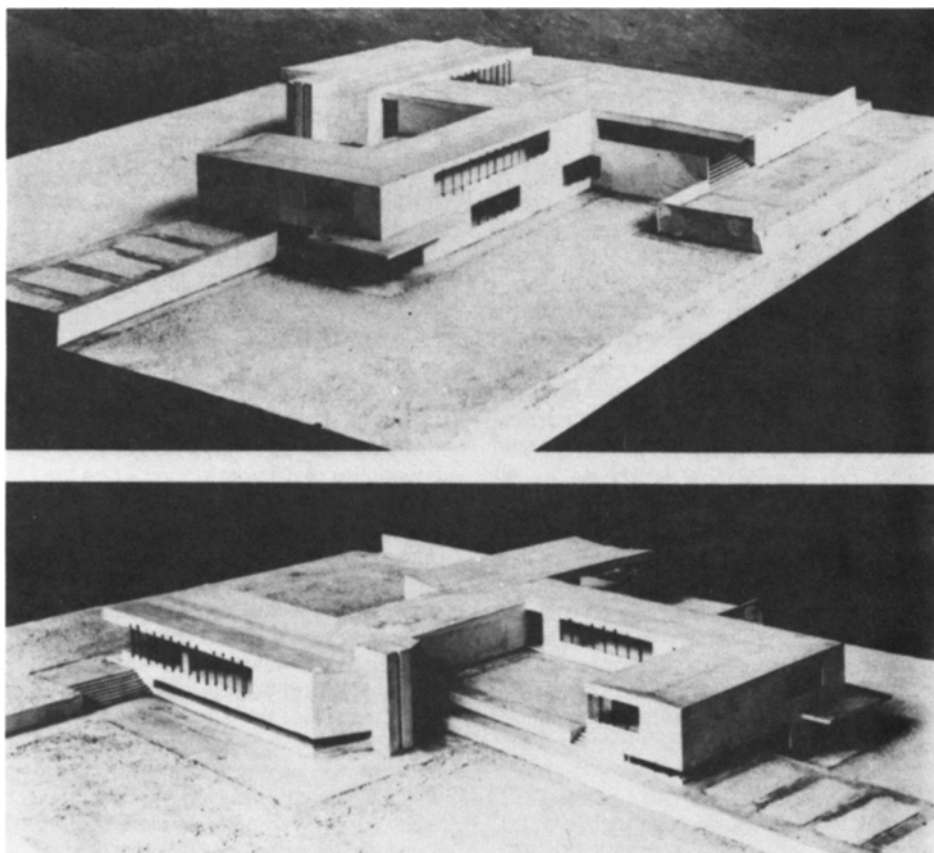
*In this paper Mies van der Rohe's discourse on the column and wall is considered with respect to the question concerning technology and its impact on his work. Mies' plans are analyzed and the criticality of the column and wall for the idea of open-plan is disclosed. This leads to two developments: First, the dissolution of the wall and realization of the column as a formative theme in Mies' planimetric organization. Second, the debasement of the classical discourse on column and wall promulgated by L. Battista Alberti. Following Martin Heidegger's thought on technology and dwelling, this paper concludes that Mies' later architecture came short of presenting a critical reading of the idea of dwelling.*

"Just as Napoleon failed to recognize the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, neither did the master builders of his time perceive the functional nature of iron, through which the constructive principle began its domination of architecture."

Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

This essay explores the place of the wall and column in Mies van der Rohe's houses. My contention is that Mies debased the metaphoric relation of column and wall promulgated by L. Battista Alberti. By analyzing the syntactical dimensions of Mies' design economy, this study at one level addresses the process of the dematerialization of architectural elements. At another level, my inquiry discloses the criticality of the notion of the open-plan in Mies' discourse on column and wall. One might locate Mies in "the chain of simplification and obedience to structure" which, according to Colin Rowe, started in the 1870's.<sup>2</sup> Yet, this esteem for formal simplicity acquired a new nature and magnitude by the first decades of the 20th century. One might also search beyond the scope that views Mies' architecture as a reflection of a particular brand of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Without disregarding these previous assessments, my reading focuses on the themes and concepts by which Mies particularized the project of the historical avant-garde in his architecture. As Manfredo Tafuri has succinctly suggested, the most important aspect of avant-garde thought was the attempt to desecrate existing values in order to open the path to a critical understanding of art and society.<sup>4</sup>

In touch with the Berlin avant-garde of his time,<sup>5</sup> Mies set himself the task of decomposing the conventional values of architecture in order to arrive at a new order. Indeed, one might characterize the whole professional life of Mies as two interrelated poles of disintegration and formation. In his early designs, Mies attempted to deconstruct the architectural elements of traditional architecture. He believed that in "contrast to the extraordinary order apparent in technical and economic realms, the cultural sphere, moved by no necessity and possessed of no genuine tradition

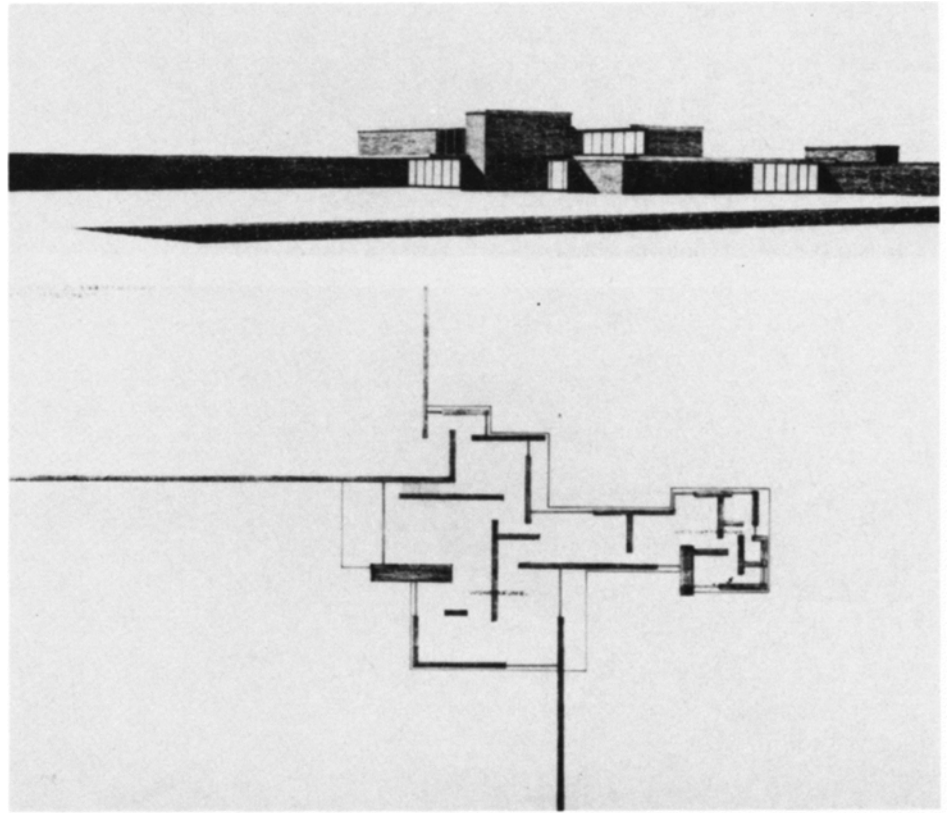


<sup>1</sup> Mies van der Rohe, Concrete Country House project, 1923, model.

is a chaos of directions, opinions...<sup>6</sup> Thus, to work toward order as a "definition of meaning and measure of being," Mies integrated the universal precision of technology into the domain of culture, and architecture in particular. In so doing, Mies confined the sources of his architectural metaphors to the factual world of material and technique.

In a Hegelian sense, Mies conceived of the "Zeitgeist" as a driving force in history infused in and identified with technology. He claimed that "Technology is rooted in the past. It dominates the present and tends into the future."<sup>7</sup> Mies believed that the linear progression of technology would surpass its practical dimension to become "something that has a meaning and powerful form."<sup>8</sup> This monism initiates an architectural discourse which rejects "all aesthetic, all doctrine and all formalism," and restores architecture "to what it should exclusively be: building."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, we might argue that through his peculiar understanding of technology, Mies arrived at an architectural language in which the notion of construction is critical. The genealogy of this architecture can be traced to the radical act of the dissolution of the traditional language of architecture. This breakthrough is carried out by a systematic use of modern technology. Nevertheless, from the standpoint of the present, Mies' architecture represents the most eloquent architectural language of steel and glass. Yet Mies is more. One might claim that his architecture anticipated the silence of the "culture industry."

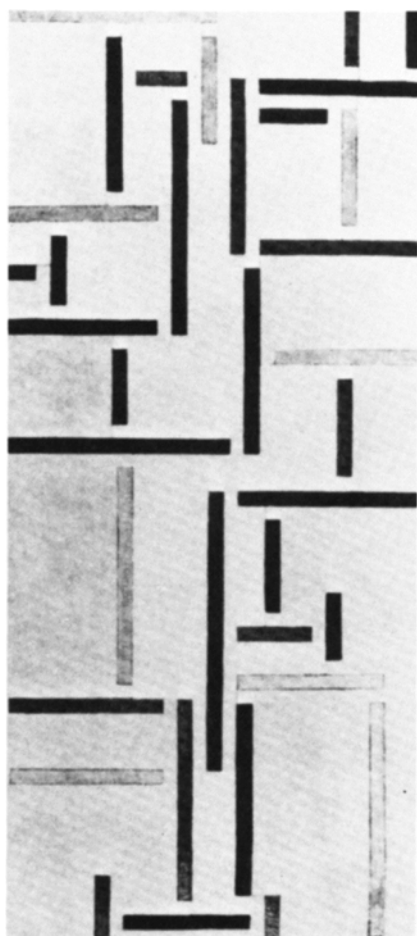
From 1919 to 1925, in just a few projects, Mies was already accomplishing certain aspects of his architectural vision. In the Concrete House (Fig. 1), the arbitrary appearance of window cuts revealed Mies' plastic sensibility. Besides its dynamic form, which can be associated with some constructivist compositions, the excessive fenestration is instrumental in breaking down the traditional cubic house. The continuous ribbon of basement windows separates the building from its site and simulates the cut that a sculptor would make in a bulk of material. Indeed, the entrance to this house displays the act of incision rather than the "gesture" of invitation.



2 Mies van der Rohe, Brick Country House project, 1923-24.

However, by changing the material, Mies would find the proper design device to achieve his objectives. The Brick Country House (Fig. 2), designed in 1923, illustrates Mies' treatment of the brick wall. In this design, space is defined and plan is organized by independent walls. The elementarist character of the wall is so compelling that as early as 1934 Alfred Barr did not hesitate to compare its plan with Theo Van Doesburg's painting (Fig. 3), the "Russian Dance."<sup>10</sup> Beyond their dynamic configuration, both works are exemplary in abstracting their theme. Just as Van Doesburg's painting has representationally nothing to do with the reality of dance, so Mies' design hardly relates to any conventional plan of a house. The room as a plan organizer is dissolved and the center is abolished.<sup>11</sup> At one level, the Brick Country House recalls Frank Lloyd

Wright's early attempts to break down the boundaries of different rooms. At the level of planimetric organization, the expressive nature of the wall displays a thrust towards one dimensionality; even the structural *raison d'être* of the wall is undermined. The extension of the wall reaches the perceptual domain where a load-bearing mass could be seen as a free standing plane. One might read these radiating walls as an act of integrating the building with its site, or "emulsification of interior and exterior."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is the edges of the drawing sheet which bring an end to the prolongation of walls. Here, Mies' perception of the wall recalls the excessive expansion of decoration in Rococo architecture; decorative motives are infused in the frame, undermining its purpose.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, we might assert that Mies' major intention was to dissociate the



3 Theo van Doesburg, "Rhythm of Russian Dance," 1918.

wall from all its figurative and connotative dimensions until the wall would signify just a wall.

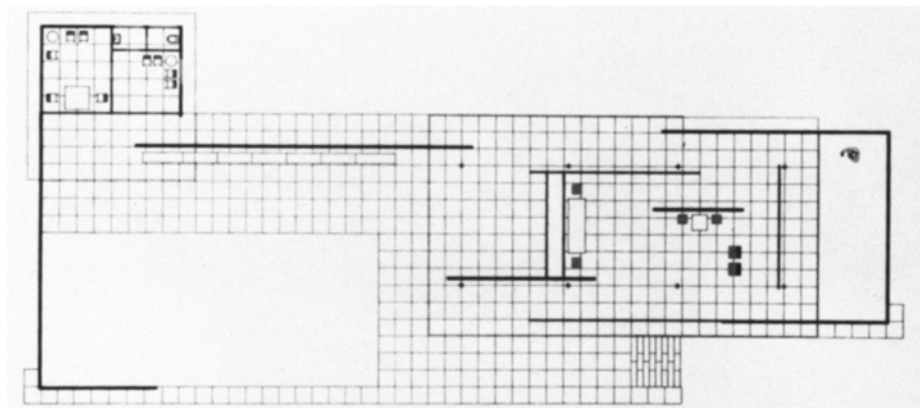
Any advance for Mies beyond this stage of abstraction of the wall and nullification of architectural object would entail a new economy of design. The implementation of the column as a formative structural element is strongly stated in the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House. In these two houses, walls are reduced to a state of partition, and the plan is stripped of any excessive element. From this point on, Mies unfolds an architectural discourse, the formative concepts of which are embedded in the dialogical relationships between column and wall. As will be discussed, the interplay of column and wall eventually ended with the total dissolution of the wall and the crystallization of the architecture of the open-plan.

Analyzing the plan of the Pavilion (Fig. 4), one will notice the compositional motif of a pair of columns standing in front of a wall. It is my belief that this architectonic syntax is the key to unfolding Mies' particular discourse on column and wall. Yet, in order to map the genealogy of column and wall in Miesian architecture, it is necessary to examine Alberti's discourse on the column.

The wall is the main structural system of the Renaissance building; however, the column has a major place in Alberti's aesthetic theory. His definition of beauty<sup>14</sup> and his characterization of the column as "...the principal

ornament in all architecture..."<sup>15</sup> might sound contradictory. But in a cultural milieu where resemblance and similitude are two major forms of knowledge, it would be logical to perceive the column in the light of ornament. Michel Foucault asserts that during the Renaissance the "search for the law governing signs is to discover the signs that are alike."<sup>16</sup> This observation is convincing when we read in Alberti that "a row of columns... (is) indeed nothing else but a wall open and discontinued in several places...." He adds that "... a column is a certain strong continued part of the wall ..."<sup>17</sup> Alberti's notion of column and wall are discrete and yet identical: One is recognized through the existence of the other. This dialectical relation is not rooted in the load-bearing function of column and wall, but stems from their analogical resemblance to a higher order; that is, building understood as body.<sup>18</sup> This semantic context differentiates Alberti's characterization of beam and arch as bones and ribs as "fillers"<sup>19</sup> from the Miesian metaphor of "skin and bones." For Alberti, an arch is nothing more than a bent beam while a transom is only a column laid crosswise. This optimization of architectonic elements is rooted in his perception of the corporeal nature of structure. Mies' vision, on the other hand, is more in line with 19th-century functional rationalists. The latter, as noted by Herbert Damish, would see the structure in the discontinuity of its elements, aggregated and based on the efficiency of a load-bearing economy.<sup>20</sup> An architecture structured around the notion of "less is more" attempts to dissociate itself from classical semantic language and identify itself with the factual world of technology.

In Mies' architecture, the relation between column and wall is sustained only in the recognition of their difference. In the Pavilion, the House for a Bachelor and the Tugendhat House, Mies has reversed Alberti's syntax of column and wall. In these projects, the column stands as a load-bearing element while the wall displays its liberation, so to speak, from the ordering logic in which column and wall are identical. In Mies' later architecture, walls are no longer subject to the rationality of gravity; rather they partition the space. Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of column and wall achieved its ultimate complexity in the House for a Bachelor and the

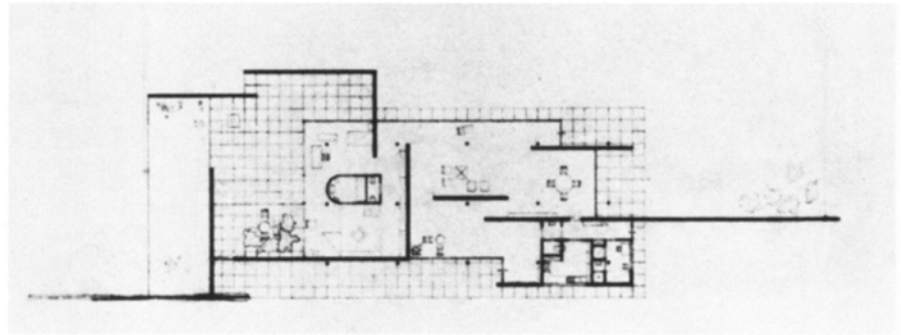


4 Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion, plan, 1928-29.

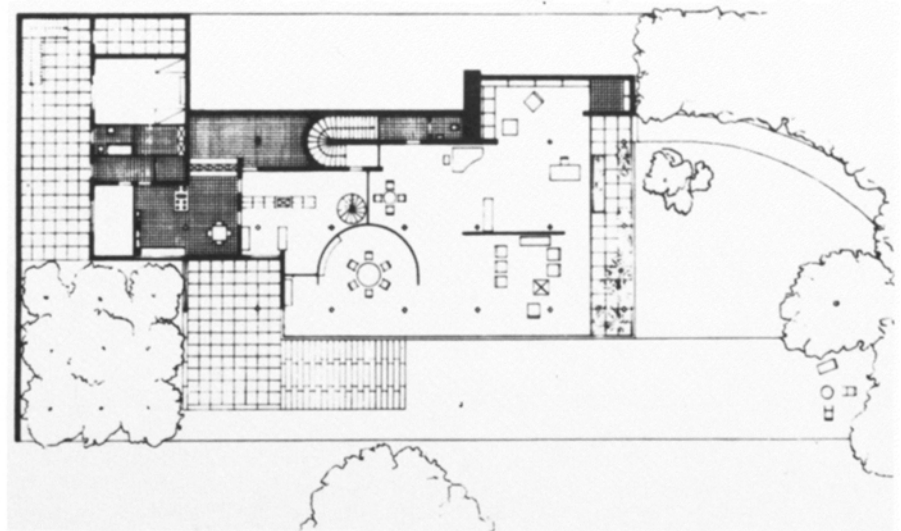
Tugendhat House (Fig. 5, 6). The semantic depth of this interplay has less to do with the artistic creativity of Mies than with the tectonic bond between these two elements. Therefore, I do not agree with interpretations which attribute the design economy of these projects either to Mies' desire to achieve a higher unity between man and nature or to the creation of a new structural order.<sup>21</sup>

The interplay of column and wall is also the major theme of the planimetric organization of the above-mentioned houses. Here, plans are not organized by the taxonomy of functions, but represent one instance among many possible compositions of Miesian motif of wall and column. In fact, the function of this motif is similar to that of a room in conventional plan organization. In the Tugendhat House (Fig. 7), the wall encloses the dining area, yet it defines the sitting area or the bedroom from other parts. In all these permutations, one thing is consistent and worthy of attention: that is, the wall which gives character and defines the place of the column. Although separated from the wall, the column is still bound to the form and direction initiated by the wall. Mies reveals in this arrangement a complex picture of play between opposites. Its ambiguity is presented in the dining area of the Tugendhat House. The position of the two columns next to the window is determined, on the one hand, by the necessity of structural order and, on the other, by the trace of the wall. The columns stand on the perimeter of a hypothetical circle realized by the extension of the curved wall.

Moreover, the House for a Bachelor reveals the ultimate rift between the load-bearing function of the wall and its abstract representation. The free expressive character of the wall in conjunction with the presence of the column is a successful simulation of the Brick Country House. Yet the exchange of the partition for the wall disrupts the conventional image of a structural order. The dining area of the Bachelor House serves as a difficult vantage point from which to read the structural system: on one side, we have the two chromium columns standing in front of a wall; on the opposite, a partition's solid extension rises up to the ceiling and obstructs the columns behind it, stimulating a false reading of the wall as a structural element.



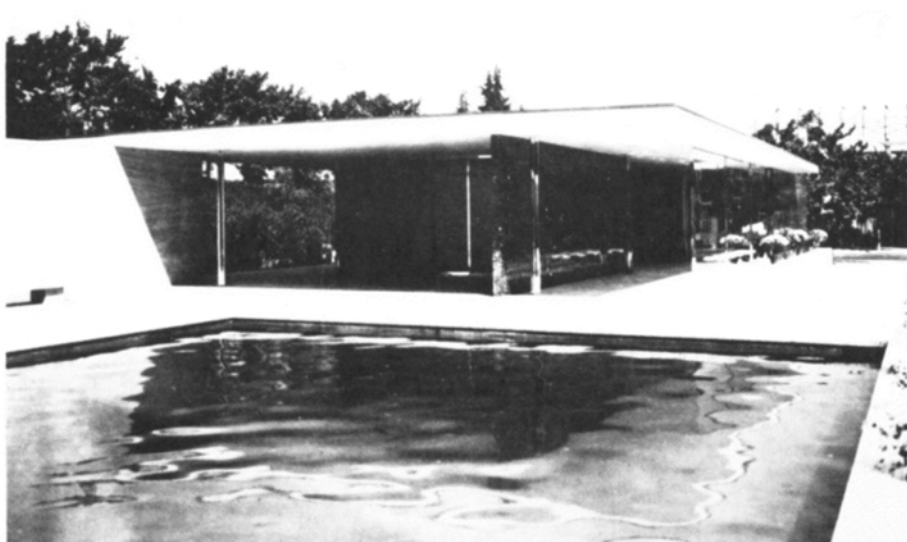
5 Mies van der Rohe, Bachelor house, Berlin, plan, 1931.



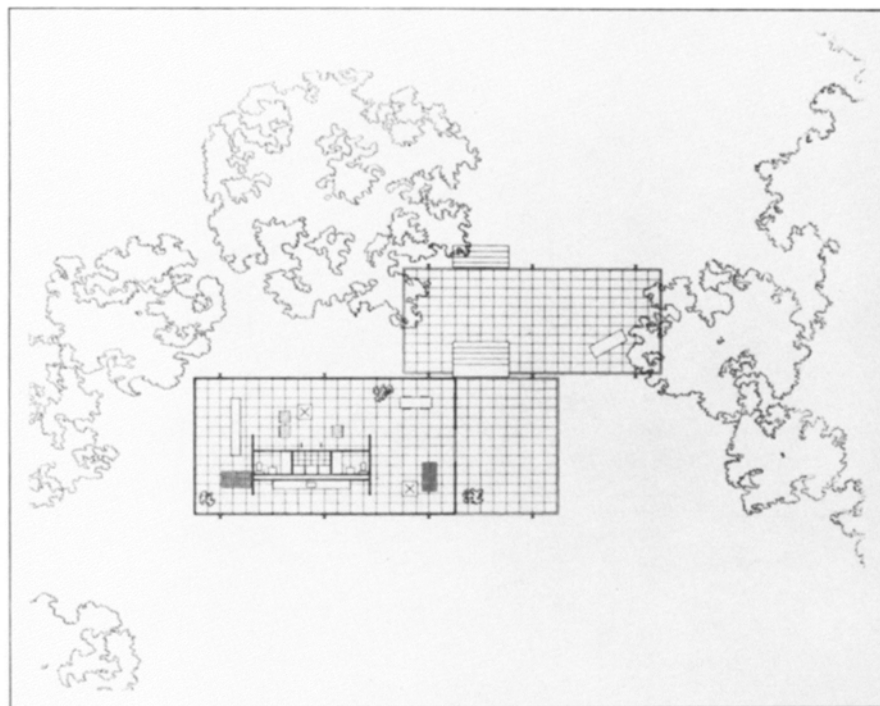
6 Mies van der Rohe, Tugendhat House, Brno, plan of ground floor, 1928-30.



7 Mies van der Rohe, Tugendhat House, library and living room.



8 Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona Pavilion.



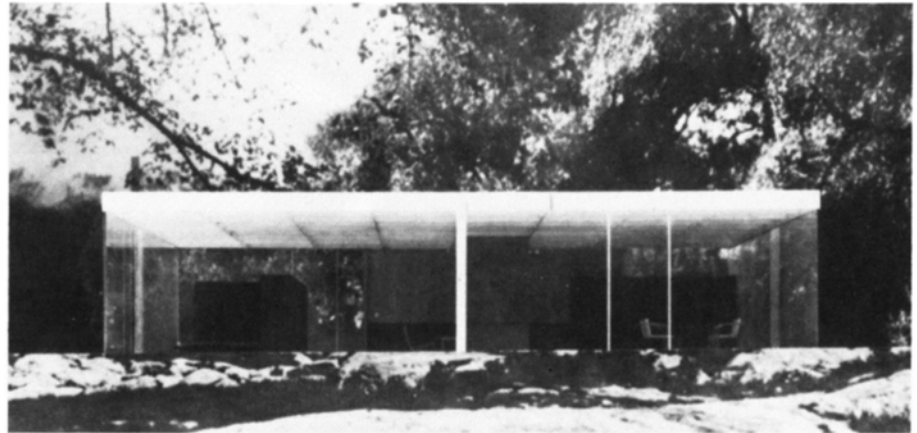
9 Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois, plan, 1951.

Nevertheless, these projects share the following two interrelated points. First, the elementarist juxtaposition of their architectural elements recalls the De Stijl compositions. The elementarist composition of the wall, column, slab and podium is evident in every photograph published from the Pavilion (Fig. 8). Second, the continuous distillation of symbolic and representational content from the architectural object legitimates the very process of abstraction. As a result of the design strategies, the wall and column acquire a new meaning. In Miesian language, the wall is reduced to the facticity of its material. For instance, Mies' treatment of marble does not correspond to any denotative meaning which the material might have obtained in the history of modern architecture.<sup>22</sup> Losing its ontological connection with earth, the wall in Mies' architecture represents "the empty wall, ... the pure wall," or "the silent wall," citing Wassily Kandinsky as the last word in a chain of attributions.<sup>23</sup> Column, on the other hand, beyond its verticality, neither refers to nature and the human body, nor recalls any stylistic metaphor. Instead, it has been pulled into a self-indulgent process of abstraction. In Mies' design, the cross-shape and the other formal configurations of the column represent one choice among many compositional possibilities initiated by the shapes of steel products.<sup>24</sup> However, this set of design policies ends up displacing the symbolic dimension of column and wall. The resultant void houses an architectural discourse in which Mies designated construction the ultimate criterion of "truth."

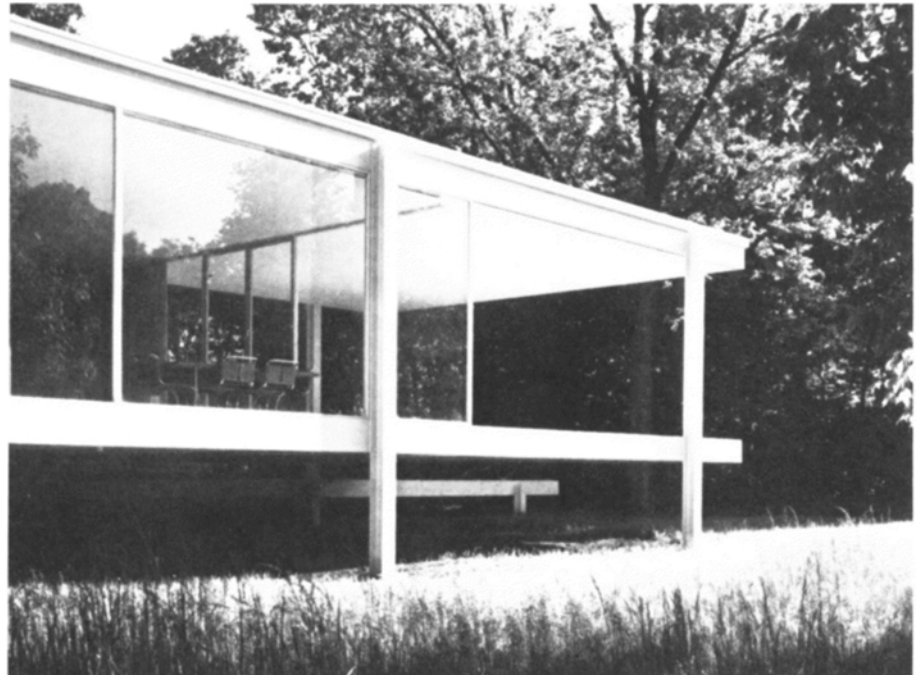
Truth and construction return us to the opening theme of this presentation; that is, the question concerning technology and culture. By narrowing the domain of cultural signification to that of technology, Mies formalized the architectural language of steel and glass. In this regard, the Farnsworth House (Fig. 9) and the 50 by 50 House are exemplary; they unfold the beginning of an end. These two designs convince us that the realization of the open-plan demands the elimination of the wall and the presence of the column as governing compositional and structural elements. The architecture of steel and glass symbolically presents the rift between technology and culture.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, the 50 by 50 House (Fig. 10) is Mies' homage to the avant-garde desire to transform our perceptual experiences through technology. To this end, the dislocation of the column from the corner to the middle of the enclosing planes challenges the expected correspondence between form and structure. This disjunction provides a successful statement of shock. Meanwhile, the plan exploits the notion of open-plan to the extent that its void represents the loss of memory and intimacy.<sup>26</sup> Finally, the transparent silence of its skin recalls Malevich's "White on White" painting. Here, parallel to the avant-garde, Mies closes the circle of negation, abstraction and construction using certain design techniques. What would have been the next design stage beyond such an abstract geometrical composition? Is there any devaluation of tradition left to accomplish? Or is there any formal territory yet to be emancipated from its representational burden? The answer to these questions is reflected in the idea of "object-type"; a model or a structural prototype whose repeatability is a dimension of mass production and whose peculiarity is a function of building types.

It is my belief that Mies's later architecture is one symptom of a broader socio-cultural crisis, anticipated by Martin Heidegger. According to Heidegger, this crisis is not a reflection of the "Zeitgeist" or technology per se. Rather it is a state of revealing which sets architecture in the purview of instrumental reason and, thus, does not open up the possibility of dwelling. In a dichotomous sense, Heidegger conceives of crisis as the essence of modern technology; yet he states that this essence "is by no means anything technological."<sup>27</sup> In this paradigm, Heidegger's notion of dwelling is discerned from Miesian "building." Dwelling is building which conserves the fourfold interplay of earth, sky, divinities and mortals.<sup>28</sup> The interplay determines a location's existence and man's relation to space. The prevailing openness and boundless space of the 50 by 50 House do not acknowledge dwelling. Rather they represent "building"; a mode of construction which challenges the metaphoric language of architecture and looks for "truth" in objectifying reason. One might make the claim that the problematic of contempo-



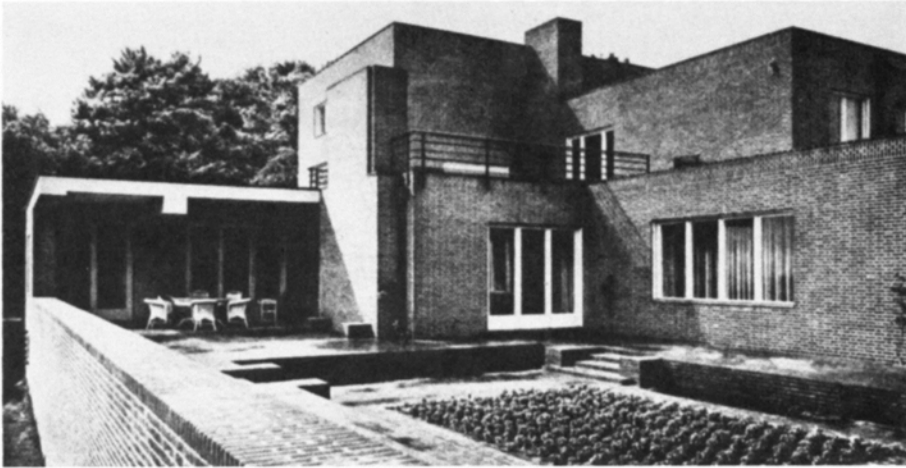
10 Mies van der Rohe, 50x50 House project, 1950-51, model.



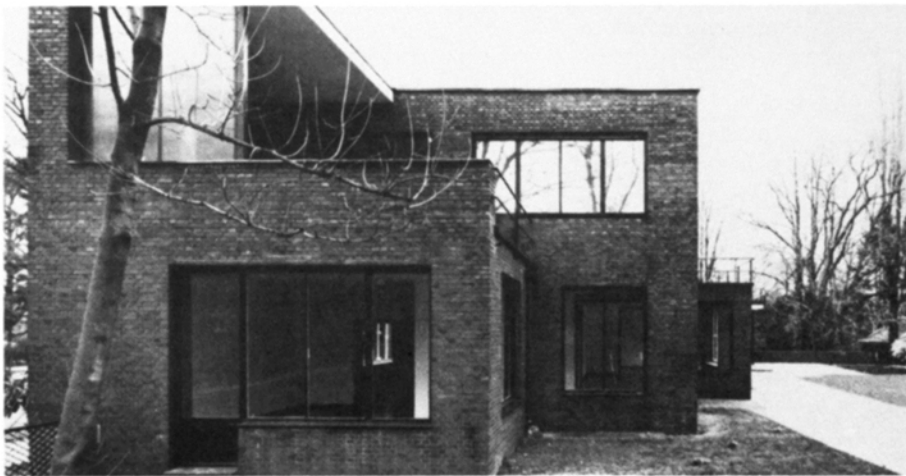
11 Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House.

rary architecture lies in the fact that the project of the historical avant-garde has come to resonate with the consumptive and degenerative aspects of our technological world.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the disappearance of the interplay of column and wall reflects Mies' desire to illuminate architecture by reason and technology. The illuminated space faces man in silence. The muteness speaks to us through the gentle and contingent setting of the house

on its site (Fig. 11). The same indifferent touch connects its columns to the roof and the earth. The glass architecture negates the dialectics of enclosure and openness. Indifferent to place as well as man's presence on the earth and under the sky, Mies implicitly discloses the separation of thinking and building which is well-established in western architecture.



12 Mies van der Rohe, Wolf House, Guben, 1925-27.



13 Mies van der Rohe, Ester House, Krefeld, 1927-30.



14 Mies van der Rohe, Lange House, Krefeld, 1927-30.

14 Mies van der Rohe, Lange House, Krefeld, 1927-30.

Paradoxically, we can trace the history of the separation of thinking and building or design and construction back to Alberti. By borrowing the motif of the triumphal arch for the facade of S. Francesco, Alberti coined the schism between theory and practice.<sup>30</sup> In the preface of his book, Alberti states that a building is a kind of body which consists of design and matter. "The first is produced by the thought, the other by nature; so that the one is to be provided by the application and contrivance of the mind, and the other by due preparation and choice."<sup>31</sup> A new perception of the world became possible through projection of objects into the picture plane. Thus the mythical distance between gaze and objects was obscured by the truth of representation. "What is to be is for the first time defined as the objectiveness of representing..."<sup>32</sup> Of course, Heidegger's conception of the world as a "picture" is the essence of modern technology.

Finally, we can claim that Mies' architecture is a supplement to modern representation. However, from today's standpoint, we can claim that his discourse initiates the possibilities of a rupture. As the course of our current architectural experience indicates, we are left with the choice of either embracing the so-called post-modern scenographic esteem for history, or opening a critical reading of modernity which pays attention to dwelling. Now, do we dwell poetically? In the current theater of architecture we do not have any positive response to Heidegger's question. Yet, the prospect for place and tectonic figuration is promising.<sup>33</sup> Not to mention the current works, a drive for poetics of place can be traced in early modern architecture; this includes Mies' illuminating work on the Wolf (Fig. 12), Esters (Fig. 13) and Lange (Fig. 14) houses. In regard to his later work in steel and glass, I recall Walter Benjamin's statement and conclude that what was delusion for nineteenth-century builders turned out to be the "truth" of Miesian architecture.

Figure Credits:

Figure 5 is from John Zukowsky, *Mies Reconsidered*, Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., New York, 1986. All other figures are from Wolf Tegethoff, *Mies van der Rohe*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985.

## Notes

- 1 Benjamin, Walter, *Reflections* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1978), p. 147
- 2 Rowe, Colin, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and other Essays* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1982), p. 35
- 3 For an interpretation of Mies' work in the guise of philosophical discourse see, Serenyi, P., "Spinoza Hegel and Mies: the Meaning of the New National Gallery in Berlin," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. XXX, Oct. 1971. See also, Schulze, Franz, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), pp. 90-94.
- 4 Tafuri, Manfredo, *Architecture and Utopia*, trans. B.L. Penta (New York: The MIT Press, 1977), p. 56. On the influence of the Suprematist painters on Mies, see, Frampton, Kenneth, "Mies van der Rohe and the Significance of Fact 1921-23," *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 161-166. Also see, K. Michael Hays, "Critical Architecture," *Perspecta* 21, 1984, pp. 14-24, which was brought to my attention by Professor David Bell.
- 5 For the scope of Mies' relation with different intellectual circles of his time, see F. Schulze, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-130.
- 6 Schulze, Franz, *op. cit.*, p. 35
- 7 Conrads, Ulrich, *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th Century Architecture* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1975), p. 154
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 Mies van der Rohe, "Aphorisms on Architecture and Form," quoted by Johnson, Philip C., *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1947), p. 184
- 10 Barr, Alfred, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1964), p. 156
- 11 There is enough historical evidence to associate Mies' design concepts with the De Stijl aesthetic sensibility. On the renewal of the method of composition, Theo van Doesburg declared that by the gradual abolition of all passive emptiness, "the composition develops in the opposite direction, instead of towards the center towards the extreme periphery of the canvas, it even appears as if were to continue beyond it..." Quoted by Rowe, C., *op. cit.*, p. 127.
- 12 Schulze, *op. cit.*, p. 116
- 13 Harries, Karsten, *The Bavarian Rococo Church* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983)
- 14 On the interrelationship between ornament and beauty, L. Alberti concludes that: "...beauty is somewhat lovely which is proper and innate, and diffused over the whole body, and ornament somewhat added or fastened on, rather than proper and innate." Alberti, Leone Battista, *Ten Books on Architecture*, ed. by Rykwert, Joseph (London: Alec Tiranti, 1955), p. 113.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 48
- 16 Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 29
- 17 Alberti, *op. cit.*, p. 14
- 18 On this subject, see Rykwert, Joseph, "Inheritance or Tradition, in *Architectural Design Profiles*, vol. 49, no. 5-6, pp. 2-6.
- 19 Alberti, *op. cit.*, p. 48
- 20 Damish, Herbert, "The Column and the Wall," in *Architectural Design Profile*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-25
- 21 For the first view, see Tegelhof Wolf, *Mies: The Villas and Country Houses* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), and for the second, see Schulze, *op. cit.*
- 22 I refer the reader to Alvar Aalto's treatment of this material in Alajarvi Town Hall or Ekenos Savings Bank in Tammsaari where according to Demetri Porphyrios the metaphoric operation is not based on marble's material facticity, but marble in its "stylistic density," that is, in "the encoded meanings that classicism had already assigned to it." See *Sources of Modern Eclecticism* (London: Academy Edition, 1982), p. 50.
- 23 Quoted by Hilberseimer, L., *Contemporary Architecture: Its Roots and Trends* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1964), p. 200
- 24 On the nature of the formal configuration of the column in Mies' architecture, see Rowe, C., *op. cit.*, p. 145.
- 25 In 1914, Paul Scheerbarth claimed that "In order to raise our culture to a higher level, we are forced, whether we like it or not, to change our architecture.... This, however, we can only do by introducing a glass architecture...." Quoted by Frampton, K., *op. cit.*, p. 116. Notable is Scheerbarth's farewell to the "brick culture"; "Glass brings us the new Age. Brick-culture does us nothing but harm." Quoted by Reyner, Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Praeger Pub., 1978), p. 266.
- 26 Batchelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 9
- 27 Heidegger, Martin, *The Question Concerning Technology and other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 4. For Heidegger, the essence of technology in its inception consisted of the occurrence of *eletheia* as creative concealing and clearing, while "the unconcealment that now prevails shows itself as an openness which unveils the current prevailing sense of Being of being as disposable stock." See Warner Marx, *Heidegger and the Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 173-179.
- 28 Heidegger, Martin, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Hofstadler, A. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), p. 145-161
- 29 For the impact of technology on the current architecture, see Gevork Hartoonian, "Post-modernism: the Discrete Charm of the Other," *Art Criticism*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1987, pp. 1-8.
- 30 This observation was first made by R. Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism* (New York: The Norton Library, 1971), p. 37. Also see Peter Eisenman, "The End of Classical," *Perspecta* 21, 1984, pp. 154-173.
- 31 Alberti, *op. cit.*
- 32 Heidegger, Martin, "The Age of the World Picture," *op. cit.*, 1977, p. 127
- 33 In particular, Kenneth Frampton's "Toward a Critical Regionalism" is suggestive. See *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (Washington: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 16-30.