

The Space Between

Author(s): PETER SMITHSON

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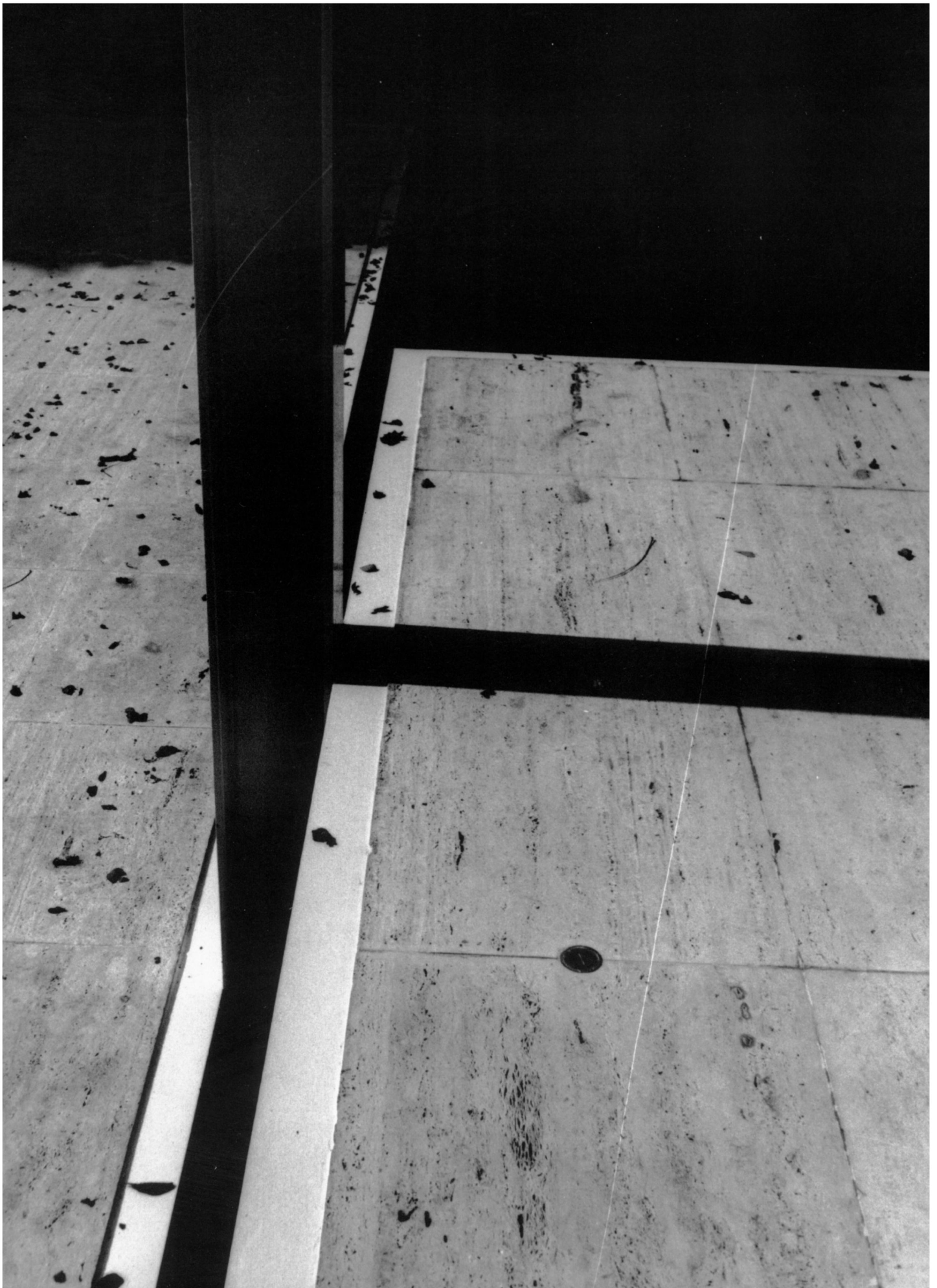
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The Space Between

PETER SMITHSON

I gave an interview to a student from Bath who had made an interpretation of the work in Urbino. Towards the end of her dissertation, she said, 'In the time of massive developments there is no consideration of the in-betweens.' And, of course, it instantly flashes into one's mind that the palace of Duke Federico Montefelto is an absolutely massive megastructure, and the size of the Palazzo Ducale in relation to Urbino at that time is very similar to the size of the shopping-hypermarket against the pygmy dwellings which frequently surround them. The quality of such a structure and its in-betweens is completely dependent on the quality of the architect.

The Sixties for us personally was the beginning of the discovery and investigation of the space between. In 1959 I designed a wallpaper in which the base image is ambiguous – is it a centaur or a man on a horse? But with it being a wallpaper in strips the relationship between the images which occur is random. Therefore the quality of the image is the space between and not the object.

In the Fifties also we did the basic work (in 1955–1956) on *The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture*.¹ The introduction states:

The documents have been photographed and the collection reviewed as a whole and edited during 1965 with the help of Christopher Woodward.² A few pieces of text have been inserted at this stage which, it is hoped, will



Figure 1. The Farnsworth House, Plainfield, Illinois; Mies van der Rohe, 1945–50. Column between the upper (house) and lower (landing) platforms. (P.S., September 1984)



Figure 2. Two wallpapers by Peter Smithson from the Palladio Magnus range, no. 44440, 'Digitus', 1959. (Walter Hoyle, 1959; *Interior Design*)

1. Alison and Peter Smithson, 'The Heroic Period of Modern Architecture', in *Architectural Design*, vol. 35, no. 12, December 1965, reprinted Thames and Hudson 1981.

2. Christopher Woodward was at that time working in our office.

3. Note from 2002: This has turned out to be, for the normality of building, completely wrong. The new buildings along the M4 to the airport, for example, are 'object buildings', much worse than can be imagined.

Figure 3. The Economist Building, St James's Street, London; Alison and Peter Smithson, 1959–64. 'Three men on the Plaza', looking towards Brook's Club in St James's Street. (Michael Carapetian, 1964)

illuminate the pattern of the choice of the material. 'Then comes the critical bit. *We have had one afterthought, and that is that this is probably the last collection of its kind. The next collection in forty years' time of the architecture of our own period will be quite different for it will not record buildings, but built-places, and the documents will be mostly air views, sequential photographs, and system explanations. Our documents [– the documents of the Heroic Period –] are still very much like those of Bannister Fletcher on the Italian Renaissance [they are documents of objects, buildings as objects].*

Now, that was December 1965. It placed the beginning and end of the Heroic Period as 1922–29, so that the centre of that period was, say, 1925. That was forty years forward and one felt justified that enough time had elapsed to select the images that showed the flow of the ideas. Forty years from 1965 brings you to 2005, when in my view the new collection of the critical documents of our period will be quite different and they will be documents concerning the space between.³

The Economist Building was designed in 1959 and completed in 1964. The first edition of the paper from the new address came out on 6 June 1964. I remember it because 6 June was D-Day. So the Economist also, like the publication of this Heroic Period document, comes in the middle of the period that the Twentieth Century Society is interested in. Some photographs of the buildings there seem to me to catch the nature of the space between. The most asked-for photograph of The Economist is this one taken by Michael Carapetian, and because of the nature of the empooling of the space, those people walking through it are particularly vivid. You can't photograph space, so anything that I have as slides or as black and white photographs is a simulacrum for experience. The buildings are making the space, but the palpability of the space is separate from the palpability of the building.





Figure 4. Demonstrators resting on The Economist Building steps up from St James's Street. (P.S., 23 October 1983)

Why the Economist works with space is because it was perceived that buildings are surrounded by a spatial energy field. When you have a long rectangular building you have a long rectangular energy field. Squarish-in-plan buildings have an ability to mesh in with the existing energy fields. Therefore, the space is a combination of the energy of what is existing and what you're putting in it. It is not that the buildings look good together, but that the spaces built in aggregate have a joint spatial energy.

That is difficult to think about and difficult to accept, so that when you say that the building's first duty is to the fabric of which it forms part, is not that duty to re-energise the existing spatial energy? We are coming into a slightly metaphysical notion of architecture, when we embark on this idea.

I must continue with the difficult bit.

In 1963 I first became dimly aware of a metaphysical notion of space in a building by Mies van der Rohe when on a visit to the Afrikanischestrass in Berlin which was built in 1926–27. Again, I have to say that you can't photograph what I experienced. I felt then that the distance between the road and the buildings was critical to the Afrikanischestrass. It just looks like a terribly tedious block of pre-war modern housing in photographs: it is not like that in real life to me!

And you could say that it is customary to talk about Mies van der Rohe in



Figure 5. Municipal Housing in the Afrikanischestrass, Berlin; Mies van der Rohe, 1926–27. View from the street. (P.S., March 1963)

the sense of his mastery over proportion. But proportion is the wrong word: proportion implies geometric relationships, whereas I believe what is magical in Mies van der Rohe is the consonance of things in their actuality not in their geometries. That quality in this building is striking. It is just plain cement render. The cement render looks wonderful. The very cementness of it is what is in the proportion. When we talk about Mies's proportion, we are not talking about as they were made in a drawing, but as they hit you in their actual presence.

This was a glimmering of what I later perceived as something that Mies van der Rohe can do which you can barely talk about, and that is that the space



Figure 6. The Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Mies van der Rohe, 1962–68. It has been said that in certain works of Mies van der Rohe that 'the space without is within'; here in Berlin, in the late 1990s, in spite of later buildings coming close the sense of the control of the 'space without' is held. (P.S., 1967)

without is contained within. The building lays down its spaces around it, whether or not there is actual physical space, the sense of the exterior space is there in the building. And this is a thing so difficult to struggle for. Eighteen aspects of the play between existing circumstance and the new building on the Economist were worked for. But why it works is not because of those eighteen things; there are additional factors that come into it, which were not imagined into it.

To continue to focus on the space-without-within of Mies van der Rohe. The Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin has been surrounded by further new buildings and yet one becomes increasingly conscious of its spatial control. The spatial control can be corrupted by subsequent buildings but it still remains. At that point, you realise that you are dealing with a concept which you can't really handle. Therefore, all I can do is be like the traditional art historian who says the function of the art historian is to make a map, that is, to get you to the building. That is also my function.

However, with Mies this space-without-within is not always present. At the Farnsworth House there is first the landing platform, then the house platform: a kind of Mississippi levée – one step and then another step above a potentially floodable ground. The space here is entirely literal, not of this metaphysical sort I am talking about. The Farnsworth House was designed in 1945–9 which is quite astonishing, and the Eames House is 1949, and Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall is 1949; that is, all the critical things in my lifetime happened in 1949, like all the critical things in the first Heroic Period happened in 1925.

For the historian, this space-between notion produces two problems of assessment. If the insertion of the new thing with these spatial characteristics



improves the circumstance by the interlock of the spaces with the existing spaces, it produces a wholly new criteria of assessment: you are not saying this is a beautiful object, you are saying in what way does it enhance the circumstance. And from that is an even more shattering notion and that is, if you are considering the conservation of a building with these spatial characteristics, it is no good saying put a conservation order on the building because it is not in the building, it is in the space. We have to be conscious of spaces. To give a crude example: Enric Miralles telephoned me one evening and said 'what is the width of the Campo in Siena?' And I said, it could be between 300m and 500m, and I then rushed about trying to find a plan with a scale on it, so that I could scale it and ring him back. And I had misjudged the dimension by a factor of one hundred percent.

If it is true that a book of our period, 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, in forty years time will be one of recording spaces, there will be a combination of existing spaces and old spaces, and that feeds on to the problem of conservation. We have become

Figure 7. The Eames' House, Santa Monica, California; Charles and Ray Eames, 1949. The house and the studio beyond, seen from the 'meadow' through the line of the eucalyptus trees. The space – between trees and house is critical. (P.S., November 1978)



Figure 8. Lever House, New York; Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1952. To the left is the Racquet Club, McKim, Mead and White; right, an office building by Emery Roth. (P.S., 1957)

accustomed to saying that it is no good keeping that one building, because unless the street is there the building loses meaning. One of the critical inputs into The Economist Building was seeing the Lever House 1948–51 which, by ignoring the energy of Fifth Avenue, was very destructive. Therefore, that was a kind of negative signpost, that is not a way forward. Fifth Avenue is the thing with the rich spatial energy, and the new thing has got to give to that richness something. Or, if it is terrible, the reverse, if you see what I mean. If it is a terrible street, the building has to have a destructive energy to the terribleness or the re-organisation of the space, so that it works. Following that line of thought, you end up with problems you haven't really properly thought about, but know intuitively you have to act on.

So I think I have to leave you with the problems I haven't properly thought about, and thank you for giving me the chance of putting the notes together of what realisations happened to us in the Sixties.