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On: 25 October 2014, At: 23:14

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office:  
Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## The Journal of Architecture

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjar20>

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Published online: 08 Dec 2010.

To cite this article: Victoria Watson (2002) Mies van der Rohe: a drawing and a letter to a client, *The Journal of Architecture*, 7:4, 355-360, DOI: [10.1080/1360236032000040875](https://doi.org/10.1080/1360236032000040875)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1360236032000040875>

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# Mies van der Rohe: a drawing and a letter to a client

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During the RIBA Professional Practice course it is taught that the legal relationship between the architect and the client is not the same as the relationship between an employer and an employee. Unlike the relationship of employment, which, being based upon the master and servant relationship, has a clear and distinct hierarchy, the relationship between an architect and their client is of two equal parties – at least it is in the early stages of a project, prior to agency, when the architect is trading in design.

It is easy to understand why architects need to produce drawings, for it is the drawing that stands as the sign of a design, that is as the sign of the commodity with which the architect trades. Standing as a sign of the architect's commodity it becomes obvious why architects feel most secure if they produce lots of drawings, with lots of shapes and lots of lines and lots of rotations and lots of dimensions.

One of the things which has always seemed curious about Mies van der Rohe is that his drawings, although they are often very big, are always so empty: it is as if he isn't trying hard enough to attract trade (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 is a drawing I have made. It is, amongst other things, a reflection upon the drawing which Mies made in order to illustrate his design for the Adam Department Store. Mies produced his design for the Adam Department Store in 1928. The store was to sit between Friedrichstrasse and Liepziger

Strasse, in Berlin. The drawing can be associated with the draft of a letter written by Mies to his client. It may be interesting to look a little more closely at this drawing and Mies van der Rohe's letter to his client.

## **Prejudice**

But first it is necessary to attempt to dislodge a number of prejudices that tend to cling to Mies' work.

Of all the twentieth century architects whose names have been associated with modernism it is Mies van der Rohe whose name is most readily associated with 'high modernism'. Of the architectures of modernism, his, it might be said, has come to be seen as the highest of the high, the most impersonal of the impersonal, the most abstract of the abstract, the most indifferent of the indifferent.

Within the set of critical concepts which define high modernism, Mies van der Rohe's project for the Adam Department Store could be said to stand for the idea of an architecture which deals only with those elements that are unique to the discipline of architecture. The architecture may be deemed to be a three-dimensional construction formed with a particular purpose in mind. But to look at this architecture through notions of construction and of purpose is impossible to do. The concepts simply do not adhere to the work.

Looking at Mies' drawing of the Adam Department Store it is hard to see any evidence of an

Figure 1. Victoria Watson, The Cotton Grids Have Flown. Mies van der Rohe's design for the Adam Department Store below.



interest in exposing the elementary principles of construction; on the contrary, at the level of construction here is a building that appears to deny the primary principles of structure and shape. Here is a large diaphanous volume floating in the air, perhaps it is tethered to the ground by a number of small shiny vertical members, but it is hard to say as the reflections of light tend to dissolve the reading of the verticals into the blurry flux of electromagnetic radiation, reflected and transmitted in glass.

And there is little evidence of an interest in purpose here either. If this is a department store then Mies is keeping quiet about it. The articulation of programme is mute to the point of dumbness. This could as well be a block of flats or a block of studios, a block of swimming pools even, as much as a block of retail.

### Letter

Unlike his earlier projects for structures of glass, the Adam Department Store is not a theoretical project but a tangible proposal – Mies had a client for this one; a client to whom he wrote a letter.

The draft of Mies' letter to his client is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in folder no. 1 of a set entitled: *The Later German Projects*. But since 1991 the letter has been available to read, reproduced in the appendix of the English translation of Fritz Neumeier's book on Mies: *The Artless Word*. The letter is divided into four paragraphs.

In the first paragraph Mies introduces his text as an opportunity to: 'present briefly the thoughts that determined the project'. He then gives a schematic account of the project, justifying the basic moves he has made in terms of the professed needs of the

client: 'The variability you want is best served by an undivided expanse of the individual floor levels; for that reason I have placed the supports in the exterior walls.'

Here Mies justifies a clear and undivided interior for each of the different floor levels on the grounds that it satisfies his client's need for variability.

In the case of a department store it may be assumed that the variability the client has in mind arises from the need to change constantly the displays of goods for sale. As a consequence of this need for variability Mies is suggesting that each floor of the building, far from expressing possible differences between, say, female clothing and toys, should represent an undivided expanse – rather like the sky or the sea on a clear day, an expanse of space, untroubled by incident.

Paradoxically, having established that the basic strategy for the interior space is that it be undivided, Mies' letter then goes on to reveal that the client has actually requested the space be divisible. This request Mies proposes to accommodate in the placement of the stairs:

Your request that the building be divisible both horizontally and vertically to accommodate the workshops you need makes three staircases necessary. The secondary staircase for the workshops I have arranged so that it is accessible from the Friedrichstrasse as well as from the Leipziger strasse.

Of course Mies is right, the placement of staircases can drastically alter the calm sky and seas of the undivided expanse, introducing eddies and ripples – pathways of social utility these might be called. Each of the three staircases is to have a lift, but the secondary staircase – and this one has to

belong at the centre of the building – is to have two goods lifts, while the two main staircases are to have lifts for the customers. Mies concludes his discussion of the schematic logic of the project by explaining where the lavatories are to be. As with the stairs, so with the lavatories, there is to be a distinct hierarchy. Those for the employees are to be placed: 'In the stairwells . . . accessible from the landings', while those for the customers and managers are to be located not inside, but next to the stairwells.

So the calm sky and seas of Mies' undivided space are to be marked by the eddies and currents of social differentiation.

In the second paragraph of the letter to his client Mies turns to admonishing the client for having expressed a preference of taste:

You have indicated in your requirements that in general a building with vertical articulation would conform to your tastes. May I say in all frankness that in my opinion a building has nothing to do with taste but must be the logical result of all requirements that result from its purpose. Only if these are established can one speak of the intrinsic forming of a building.

Here it might be thought that Mies is making a functionalist argument; but if this were so then it might be reasonable to expect to see an indication of the functional schematic in the drawing Mies made of the department store. It might even give rise to the expectation that Mies will oblige his client's taste for vertical emphasis and will articulate, in the composition of the block, something of the hierarchy and verticality of the staircases and lavatories, and of the social differences signified in

the detachment of employees from customers and of managers from both. But Mies does nothing of the sort. No vertical emphasis, no volumetric differentiation, just a mute, shimmering volume is what is to be seen in the drawing.

What you need, writes Mies to his client, is: 'layered floor levels with clear, uncluttered spaces. Furthermore you need much light. You need publicity and more publicity.' So it seems that although Mies can clearly see that his client requires staircases, lavatories and lifts and that it is necessary to place these in such a way as to differentiate space in a manner that reflects social purpose, nevertheless, from the letter and from the drawing, it can be seen that, for Mies, these practical considerations do not constitute what is essential to his client's needs.

An architect of ability should be able to tell a client what he wants. Most of the time a client never knows what he wants.

What is essential to his client's needs are vast empty rooms filled with light and with publicity.

### Writing

With his plea for uncluttered space and for light, for much light, Mies is still in the realm of clear skies and seas; but with the sudden introduction of 'publicity' and 'more publicity' it is possible to feel the peaceful calm of the uninterrupted expanse beginning to attract 'noise', to fluctuate, to flicker and to vibrate.

In the third paragraph of his letter Mies begins to write about the effects that would arise through the deployment of glass. Glass, it seems, is to be everywhere and in many different guises. It is glass that will ensure the 'lightness' of the department store:

I therefore suggest that you make the skin of your building of glass and stainless steel, with the bottom floor of transparent glass, the others of opaque glass. Walls of opaque glass give the rooms a wonderfully mild but bright and even illumination. In the evening it represents a powerful body of light.

It is amidst the mild but bright and even illumination of the daytime and amidst the powerful body of light of the night that the client's publicity is to materialise.

Mies does not seem to have any views on what the advertising should be like: 'You can do as you like,' he writes: 'regardless whether you write on it "for the summer vacation", "for winter sports" or "four bargain days" such brightly lit advertising on an evenly illuminated background will have a fairy-tale effect.'

This is the most critical sentence in Mies' letter and, according to the canonic representation of Mies, it is the most uncharacteristic, for here Mies is offering his design as something for the client to write upon. Here is an architect – a modern architect – an architect who, criticism leads us to suppose, is interested in purity, in order and control – suggesting to the client that they should write upon their building. This seems rather strange.

If Mies really is so concerned with the total image then surely the last thing he will want is to relinquish his control. And yet what he seems to be suggesting is that he, the designer, should have no say in the living image of the building. Can this be true, can Mies really be prepared to relinquish his control over the image?

Just as Mies' apparent interest in the pragmatics

of the social provision of staircases, lavatories and lifts is belied by the drawing which he made of the project, so – even more so – does his enthusiasm for brightly-lit advertising appear to be repudiated in the drawing. There is no advertising shown here, no bright lights, no words, no window displays, no goods for sale. No fairy-tale effect.

It may be tempting to believe that Mies is saying one thing while meaning quite another, that his apparent enthusiasm for the client-led invasion of the calm, evenly lit illumination is disingenuous and that what he is really interested in is the precision and elegance of his design. Well, of course, he must be interested in the precision and elegance of the design – quite rightly, he is a designer and that is what is expected of designers.

But surely that is the whole point and it is precisely the design, the unmarked, evenly illuminated background, that Mies is showing in his drawing.

And just because Mies has drawn a design – rather than a picture with lots of shapes and lots of lines and lots of rotations and lots of dimensions – that is no reason to assume that he is telling lies when he says of the design that it is for writing on. But the idea that architects would design, not so much programmed space as volumes of illumination, upon which their clients could write, would have been quite unfamiliar back in 1928 – why even today it is still quite a difficult concept.

It is apparent from his letter that Mies was a little anxious that his client would not understand and would therefore fail to enact a whole-hearted appropriation of his architectural illumination: 'All this' writes Mies, as if urging his client to a responsive engagement with the project 'requires not only

from the architect but also from the client a good dose of boldness.'

### Alteration

The word for what Mies is doing here, or rather for what he is suggesting his client should do, is alteration. Mies is advising his client to see the design as being like a clean piece of paper, an unspoiled surface, which the client is to write upon and thereby to alter. The idea that designers would advise their clients to alter their designs is not one with which we are at all familiar; and yet the inevitable trajectory of any design is that it will get altered, altered by the client, by the user, altered by another designer.

The obvious reason why designers do not advise their clients that their designs are alterable is because to do so is to run contrary to the logic of the market place in which designs, like any other commodity, are for buying and for selling; and as such must adhere to the fiction of all commodities and that is that they are born into the 'real world' – the world of the commodity – in a fixed state of perfection.

Since it is the client who is paying the designer's fees, it would be foolish of the designer to risk the suggestion that the goods they are selling the client are anything other than perfect – that they may need alteration. Unfortunately architects are chained – as are all designers – by the ideology of the commodity and this ideology fastens all designers to the fiction that the things they design must originate in a state of perfection. It would not be at all surprising to find that the reason Mies did not succeed in building the Adam Department

Store is that his client did not want a design that needed altering but one that only needed to be maintained – within the ideology of the commodity, maintenance, unlike alteration, is a benign, perfectly acceptable concept.

The difference between alteration and maintenance, of course, is that while the former runs the risk that things might, in the process of alteration, become spoiled, with the latter there is a risk of stagnation; the risk of stagnation does not seem to attract the caution it deserves; perhaps this is because, while with the former there is a chance that things will become dangerously unstable, with the latter there is the hope that things will remain always the same.

What is fascinating about the work of Mies van der Rohe is that it is precisely because he does not want to encourage the dull architecture of stagnation that he produces empty designs of remarkable simplicity and beauty. And the reason Mies van der Rohe never spoke to his clients about architecture? It was because Mies believed that architecture arose at the point of intersection between design and alteration.

So far as Mies was concerned, until his clients began to alter their designs, rather than merely to maintain them, there was, quite simply, no architecture about which to talk. And hopefully, to see Mies as holding the transgressive thought of alteration is not so much to be removing him from his high modernist pedestal, as altering the substance from which that base is made.

### Reference

1. Neumeier, F, *The Artless Word*, (MIT, 1991), p. 305.