

Farnsworth House

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The **Farnsworth House** was designed and constructed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe between 1945-51. It is a one-room weekend retreat in a once-rural setting, located 55 miles (89 km) southwest of Chicago's downtown on a 60-acre (24 ha) estate site, adjoining the Fox River, south of the city of Plano, Illinois. The steel and glass house was commissioned by Dr. Edith Farnsworth, a prominent Chicago nephrologist, as a place where she could engage in her hobbies: playing the violin, translating poetry, and enjoying nature. Mies created a 1,500-square-foot (140 m²) house that is widely recognized as an iconic masterpiece of International Style of architecture. The home was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2006, after joining the National Register of Historic Places in 2004.^[4] The house is currently owned and operated as a house museum by the historic preservation group, National Trust for Historic Preservation.

In September 2008, the house was flooded by rains from the remnants of Hurricane Ike.^[5] Water levels reached about 18 inches (46 cm) above the floor and the 5 foot (1.5 m) stilts upon which the house rests.^[6] Much of the furniture was saved by elevating it above the flood waters. The house was closed to the public for the remainder of 2008 for repairs and reopened for public visitation in spring 2009.

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History

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was retained by Dr. Edith Farnsworth to design a weekend retreat during a dinner party in 1945. The wealthy client was highly intelligent, articulate, and intent on building a very special work of modern architecture. The program was to design the house as if it were for himself. Farnsworth had

Farnsworth House

U.S. National Register of Historic Places
U.S. National Historic Landmark



Coordinates:	41°38′5.96″N 88°32′8.6″W﻿ / ﻿
Built:	1951 ^[2]
Architect:	Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
Architectural style:	International Style, Modernist ^[3]
Governing body:	National Trust for Historic Preservation
NRHP Reference#:	04000867 ^[1]

Significant dates

Added to NRHP:	October 7, 2004 ^[1]
Designated NHL:	February 17, 2006 ^[4]

purchased the riverfront property from the publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*, Colonel Robert R. McCormick. Mies developed the design in time for it to be included in an exhibit on his work at MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1947.

After completion of design, the project was placed on hold awaiting an inheritance from an ailing aunt. Mies was to act as the general contractor as well as architect. Work began in 1950 and was substantially completed in 1951. The commission was an ideal one for any architect, but was marred by a very publicized dispute between Farnsworth and Mies that began near the end of construction. The total cost of the house was \$74,000 in 1951 (\$648,000 in 2012 dollars). A cost overrun of \$15,600 over the approved pre-construction budget of \$58,400, was due to escalating post-war material prices resulting from inflationary shortages arising from the mobilization for the Korean War. Near the completion of construction, Mies filed a lawsuit for non-payment of \$28,173 in construction costs. The owner then filed a counter suit for damages due to alleged malpractice. Mies' attorneys proved that Farnsworth had approved the plans and budget increases, and the court ordered the owner to pay her bills. Farnsworth's malpractice accusations were dismissed as unsubstantiated. It was a bitter and hollow victory for Mies, considering the painful publicity that followed. The conflict resulted in an unfinished site and an unfurnished interior. The construction of a teak wardrobe closet and the system of bronze-framed screens to enclose the deck porch were completed to Mies' designs by his former employee and architect William Dunlap and a local millworker who mediated between them. Mies never communicated with Edith, nor spoke about their rumored relationship again.

Edith continued to use the house as her weekend retreat for the next 21 years, often hosting architectural notables visiting to see the work of the world-famous architect. In 1968, the local highway department condemned a 2-acre (8,100 m²) portion of the property adjoining the house for a new raised highway bridge over the Fox River. Farnsworth sued to stop the project but lost the court case. She sold the house in 1972, retiring to her villa in Italy.

In 1972, Farnsworth House was purchased by British property magnate, art collector, and architectural aficionado Lord Peter Palumbo.^[7] He removed the bronze screen enclosure of the porch, added air conditioning, extensive landscaping and his art collections to the grounds, including sculptures by Andy Goldsworthy, Anthony Caro, and Richard Serra. After owning the property for 31 years, Palumbo removed the art and put the property up for sale at auction, raising serious concerns about the future of the building.^[8] Preservationists and contributors from around the world, including the Friends of the Farnsworth House, began a concerted preservation and fund-raising effort to keep the house on its original site. With this financial support, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Landmarks Illinois were able to purchase the house in December 2003 for a reported \$7.5 million. Now operated as a house museum, the Farnsworth House is open to the public, with tours conducted by the National Trust.^[9] The house is listed in the National Register and is designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior.^[4]

Configuration

The essential characteristics of the house are immediately apparent. The extensive use of clear floor-to-ceiling glass opens the interior to its natural surroundings to an extreme degree. Two distinctly expressed horizontal slabs, which form the roof and the floor, sandwich an open space for living. The slab edges are defined by exposed steel structural members painted pure white. The house is elevated 5 feet 3 inches (1.60 m) above a flood plain by eight wide flange steel columns which are attached to the sides of the floor and ceiling slabs. The slabs' ends extend beyond the column supports, creating cantilevers. The house seems to float weightlessly above the ground it occupies. A third floating slab, an attached terrace, acts as a transition between the living area and the ground. The house is accessed by two sets of wide steps connecting ground to terrace and then to porch.

Mies found the large open exhibit halls of the turn of the century to be very much in character with his sense of the industrial era. Here he applied the concept of an unobstructed space that is flexible for use by people. The interior appears to be a single open room, its space ebbing and flowing around two wood blocks; one a wardrobe cabinet and the other a kitchen, toilet, and fireplace block (the "core"). The larger fireplace-kitchen core seems like a separate house nesting within the larger glass house. The building is essentially one large room filled with freestanding elements that provide subtle differentiations within an open space, implied but not dictated, zones for sleeping, cooking, dressing, eating, and sitting. Very private areas such as toilets, and mechanical rooms are enclosed within the core. Drawings recently made public by MOMA indicate that the architect provided ceiling details that allows for the addition of curtain tracks that would allow privacy separations of the open spaces into three "rooms". The drapery was never installed.

Mies applied this space concept, with variations, to his later buildings, most notably at Crown Hall, his IIT campus masterpiece. The notion of a single room that can be freely used or zoned in any way, with flexibility to accommodate changing uses, free of interior supports, enclosed in glass and supported by a minimum of structural framing located at the exterior, is the architectural ideal that defines Mies' American career. The Farnsworth House is significant as his first complete realization of this ideal, a prototype for his vision of what modern architecture in an era of technology should be.

Architecture as an expression of the times

The Farnsworth House addresses basic issues about the relationship between the individual and his society. Mies viewed the technology-driven modern era in which an ordinary individual exists as largely beyond his control. But he believed the individual can and should exist in harmony with the culture of his time to successfully fulfill himself. His career was a long and patient search for an architecture that would be a true expression of the essential soul of his epoch, the Holy Grail of German Modernism. He perceived our epoch as the era of industrial mass production, a civilization shaped by the forces of rapid technological development. Mies wanted to use architecture as a tool to help reconcile the individual spirit with the new mass society in which he exists.

His answer to the issue is to accept the need for an orderly framework as necessary for existence, while making space for the freedom needed by the individual human spirit to flourish. He created buildings with free and open space within a minimal framework, using expressed structural columns. He did not believe in the use of architecture for social engineering of human behavior as many other modernists did, but his architecture does represent ideals and aspirations. His mature design work is a physical expression of his understanding of the modern epoch. He provides the occupants of his buildings flexible and unobstructed space in which to fulfill themselves as individuals, despite their anonymous condition in the modern industrial culture. The materials of his buildings, industrial manufactured products like mill-formed steel and plate glass, certainly represent the character of the modern era, but he counterbalances these with traditional luxuries such as Roman travertine and exotic wood veneers as valid parts of modern life. Mies accepted the problems of industrial society as facts to be dealt with, and offered his idealized vision of how technology can be made beautiful and can support the individual. He suggests that the downsides of technology decried by late 19th century critics such as John Ruskin, can be solved with human creativity, and shows us how in the architecture of this house.



A winter view of the house in 1971, showing the original insect screening of the porch, and the roller shades added by the owner after the curtains were damaged by flood waters.



The house in 2006

Reconnecting the individual with nature is one of the great challenges of an urbanized society. The 60-acre (240,000 m²) rural site offered Mies an opportunity to bring man's relationship to nature into the forefront. Here he highlights the individual's connection to nature through the medium of a man-made shelter. Mies said: "We should attempt to bring nature, houses, and the human being to a higher unity". Glass walls and open interior space are the features that create an intense connection with the outdoor environment, while providing a framework reduces opaque exterior walls to a minimum. The careful site design and integration of the exterior environment represents a concerted effort to achieve an architecture wedded to its natural context.

Mies conceived the building as an indoor-outdoor architectural shelter simultaneously independent of and intertwined with the domain of nature. Mies did not build on the flood-free upland portions of the site, choosing instead to tempt the dangerous forces nature by building directly on the flood plain near the rivers edge. Philip Johnson referred to this type of experience of nature as "safe danger". The enclosed space and a screened porch are elevated five feet on a raised floor platform, just slightly above the 100 year flood level, with a large intermediate terrace level.^[7] The house has flooded substantially above the living level floor level twice, in 1956 and 1996 (both in excess of FEMA 500 year flood levels), causing significant damage to utilities, wood veneers, glass and to furnishings.^[7] The site experienced heavy rains and floodwaters rising to within two feet of the main floor in August 2007 threatened again in 2007, setting curators scrambling to protect the house and its contents from any further rise in the flood level.^[10]

The house has a distinctly independent personality, yet also evokes strong feelings of a connection to the land. The levels of the platforms restate the multiple levels of the site, in a kind of poetic architectural rhyme, not unlike the horizontal balconies and rocks do at Wright's Fallingwater. The house is anchored to the site in the cooling shadow of a large and majestic black maple tree. As Mies often did, the entrance is located on the sunny side, facing the river instead of the street, moving visitors around corners and revealing views of the house and site from various angles as they approach the front door. The simple elongated cubic form of the house is parallel to the flow of the river, and the terrace platform is slipped downstream in relation to the elevated porch and living platform. Outdoor living spaces are extensions of the indoor space, with a screened porch (screens now gone) and open terrace. Yet the man made always remains clearly distinct from the natural by its geometric forms, highlighted by the choice of white as its primary color.

Integration with nature

Mies stated, "Nature, too, shall live its own life. We must beware not to disrupt it with the color of our houses and interior fittings. Yet we should attempt to bring nature, houses, and human beings together into a higher unity."^[11] With the concept of the weekend house, Mies van der Rohe has deeply marked the architectural culture, not to mention the art of material selection, construction and aesthetic perception. Beyond the functionality of a building, Mies van der Rohe also highlighted the building's most distinguishing aesthetic features. By using proportion and scale, Rohe was able to perceive its innermost order and distinguishing features and to express them in space and form.

The Farnsworth House, built on a vast meadow with a variety of trees along the Fox River, is not a structure that lives up to common societal ideals of inhabitable architecture. What is missing are the "non-essentials". As Mies quotes, "the essentials for living are floor and roof. Everything else is proportion and nature. Whether the house pleases or not is inconsequential." The house was created in order to enable its inhabitants to experience the rural silence and the passing of the seasons. It begins unfolding and communicating itself to the outside only with the change of the seasons. Thus, this house, and living in it, involves trust in the environment. The man-made geometric form creates a relationship the extraneous landscape surrounding it to exemplify "dwelling" in its simplest state. Open views from all sides of the building help enlarge the area and aid flow between the living space and its natural surroundings. The views achieved from the architecture reaches through the masses of the

trees to other bank of Fox River – the cell of urbanism as a meditative, almost monastic production, The ever-changing play of nature guides the inner life of the inhabitants through sensual space towards self-realization. The basic idea was thus realized.

The house stands independently as a masterpiece. The continuous change in nature is a work of art in and of itself, leaving no need for interior decor or landscaping. Where the interior blends into the exterior, the gentleness of nature flows into the softness of the space, and light creates a subtle modulation within. Both aspects create an aura that solidifies sensibly where the inner and outer worlds meet. The house is in perfect harmony with nature – there is no garden architecture, no pathways, beds or flowers. A large maple tree protects the raised travertine marble terrace. The discrete white of the steel construction and the transparent glass panes make the house almost invisible; it offers its respect to nature.

The development of new technical and aesthetic possibilities helped Mies van der Rohe to create a solid foundation for his architecture. Despite all of the changes that have occurred over the years, these principles still have tremendous influence on modern architectural form. Reflecting upon the weekend house also led Mies to a form of expression that approached the building style of the Far East. However, it is devoid of any imitation, as is demonstrated by the wall as a non-supporting spatial termination, which allows for ground plans that are as open as possible for the extension of the living space into the garden. In the context of the idea of "skin and bones", the uniform treatment of materials and the concept of "adaptation to nature", catch the attention of architects who look to the past for inspiration for contemporary architecture.

As Mies stated on his achievement, "If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from the outside. That way more is said about nature—it becomes part of a larger whole." Farnsworth House is the essence of simplicity in the purest form, displaying the ever-changing play of nature.^[12] ^[13]

One of the many features of the immediate site was a large Black Maple tree, which was integral for the placement and orientation of the house on the site. Incidentally, the same kind of tree, which also is quite abundant in the State Park to the south, was part of the reason for the land in the immediate vicinity of the house to become a State Park in the 1960s. Sadly, due to disease and old age, the tree died in the early 2000s, and the (now deceased) tree was removed, as most of the trunk of the tree remained, and it was being held in place through cables and bracing. The house's close proximity to the tree, some ten feet, led to a feeling of oneness with nature, which was integral to the design aesthetic that Mies was going for in designing the house.

Criticism

The building design received accolades in the architectural press, resulting in swarms of uninvited visitors trespassing on the property to glimpse this latest Mies building. But as a result of the accusations contained in Edith Farnsworth's lawsuit, the house became a prop in the larger national social conflicts of the McCarthy era. The weekend house became a lightning rod for anti-modernist publications, exemplified in the April 1953 issue of *House Beautiful*, which attacked it as a communist-inspired effort to supplant traditional American styles. Even Frank Lloyd Wright denounced the Bauhaus and International Style as un-American.

Large areas of glass wall, flat roofs, purging of ornament, and a perceived lack of traditional warmth and coziness were International Style features that were particular talking points of attack. Still, the Farnsworth House has continued to receive wide critical acclaim as a masterpiece of the modernist style, and Mies went on to receive the presidential Medal of Freedom for his contribution to American architecture and culture. Prominent architect and critic Philip Johnson was inspired by the design to build his own Glass House in 1947. In the 21st century, Pulitzer Prize-winning architectural critics Paul Goldberger and Blair Kamin have both declared the house a masterpiece of modern architecture. Its timeless quality is reflected by the reverent fascination in the minimalist house shown by a new generation of design professionals and enthusiasts.

Recent development

It was announced in 2011 that the Illinois Institute of Technology (which Mies restructured and designed the Master Plan for) was going to build a permanent exhibition space for the massive wardrobe, which formerly resided in the house. The wardrobe had been extensively damaged in the 1996, 1998, and 2008 floods, with its massive size rendering any possible evacuation attempt costly and difficult. In an attempt to protect the wardrobe, Farnsworth House curators decided to have the wardrobe be on permanent display near the Visitor Center, which is well above the 500-year flood plain. Illinois Institute of Technology students under the direction of Professor Frank Flury have been involved in the design and construction of the structure, and the wardrobe will be better protected for future visitors.^[14] The students have nicknamed the building "Barnsworth".^[15] It is scheduled to be completed in September 2012.^[15]

See also

- National Register of Historic Places listings in Kendall County, Illinois
- Glass House

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Notes

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External links

- Farnsworth House (<http://www.farnsworthhouse.org/>): Official site
- Farnsworth House Today (<http://www.columbia.edu/cu/gsap/BT/GATEWAY/FARNSWTH/farnswth.html>): An in depth page from Columbia University, many diagrams and drawings.
- Het Glazen Huis te Geldrop (<http://www.glazenhuis-geldrop.nl/>): 1971 Dutch home based on the Farnsworth House, designed by H.G. Smelt.
- Photos of the Farnsworth House (<http://www.photoree.com/collections/gallery/175660/1>)
- Edith Farnsworth Papers (<http://www.newberry.org/collections/FindingAids/farnsworth/Farnsworth.html>) at the Newberry Library

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