The Making of a Master

MIES VAN DER ROHE
A Critical Biography.
By Franz Schulze, in association with the Mies van der Rohe Archive of the Museum of Modern Art.
Illustrated. 355 pp. Illinois: University of Chicago Press. $39.95.

MIES VAN DER ROHE
By David Spaeth.
Preface by Kenneth Frampton.
Illustrated. 205 pp. New York: Rizzoli. Paper, $25.

MIES VAN DER ROHE
The Villas and Country Houses.
By Wolf Tegethoff.
Translated by Russell M. Stockman.
Illustrated. 223 pp. Cambridge, Mass.: The Museum of Modern Art / The MIT Press. $55.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

Even if the centennial of the birth of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were not coming up next year (how quickly new worlds become old), there could be no better time for the critical and scholarly reappraisal of this seminal and influential modernist architect than right now. How tiresome and meaningless the once-revered phrase "form-giver" has become to a new generation, how steady the stampede away from the master in the 16 years since his death. The reaction was inevitable; Mies was the giant who epitomized the strongest beliefs and the most distilled practice and had the most widespread impact of the modern movement. Perhaps because the 20th-century world continues to be so conspicuously shaped in his image, the once-Olympian and oracular Mies has become the lightning rod for postmodernist rejection — the architect who must be exorcised.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because the span of a century evokes a Pavlovian reflex in those who record and interpret such events, this centennial is about to be celebrated in no uncertain fashion. A major Mies retrospective will open at the Museum of Modern Art in February, and a number of important Mies publications are beginning to appear. "Mies van der Rohe," by David Spaeth,

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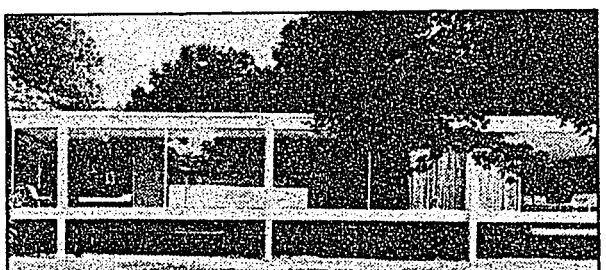
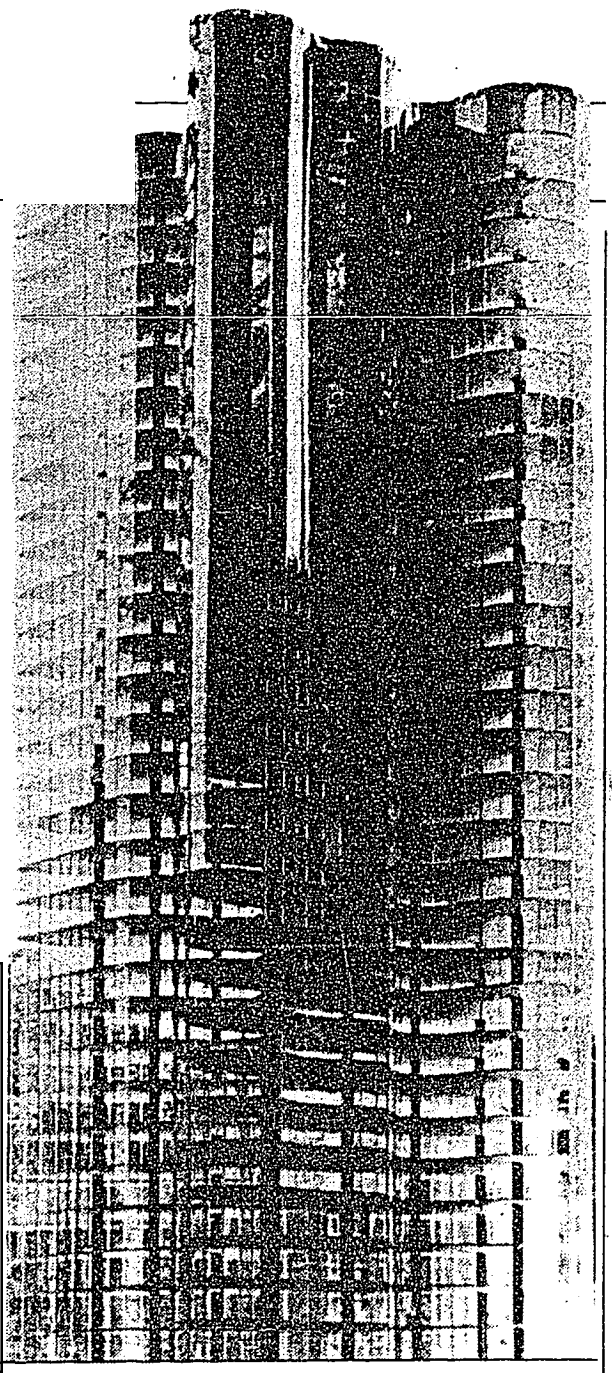
Ada Louise Huxtable, a former member of the editorial board and architecture critic of The New York Times is the author of "The Tall Building Artistically Reconsidered: The Search for a Skyscraper Style."





At center, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969); above, his glass-and-steel Farnsworth House, completed in 1951 in Plano, Ill.; far right, model of his 1921 glass skyscraper project in Berlin that was never built.

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with a preface by Kenneth Frampton, was issued this spring; "Mies van der Rohe: The Villas and Country Houses," by Wolf Tegethoff is now available and so is "Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography," the long-awaited study by Franz Schulze. To coincide with the exhibition, Garland Press will bring out the first four volumes of the Mies Archive (with three more volumes to come). Two additional Museum books will follow later in the centennial year — a definitive Mies monograph by Arthur Drexler, director of the department of architecture and design at MOMA, and a volume of essays meant to further illuminate the Mies legacy.

FOR Mies enthusiasts, this is all heady stuff. Mies detractors, busy setting the record wrong (but no more so than his followers), will have to deal with significant new scholarship meant to set the record right. Each of these books adds something to the clarification of Mies's art. A fuller understanding of this enigmatic architect is emerging, and that understanding includes the obvious and sometimes disturbing connections between the man and his work. Unfortunately, not one of these books is written with the witty glitter and provocative irreverence we have come to expect from the best postmodernist literature. There is none of the smoking evangelical fervor of Vincent Scully's pronouncements from Yale and the inner circles of postmodernist Gnosticism, or of the dazzling intellectual footwork of Charles Jencks, the movement's "official" historian, who concluded a passionate put-down of Mies in his "Modern Movements in Architecture" by dismissing the architect's philosophy as "farce" and his buildings as "half baked." These three early reappraisals are as solemn as Mies.

The re-examination of Mies's place in art and history can only be salutary and sobering at this transitional moment in our culture. Standards of judgment have never been shakier. Not since the height of the muzziest Victorian eclecticism has there been more widely acclaimed bad building with more foolishness written and spoken about it, foolishness directed at a confused public and an insecure profession. With a new style or personality celebrated weekly, one of the cogent infrequent Mies quotes has a particular pertinence, his answer to the accusation that he repeated his themes was that one does not invent a new architecture every Monday morning. Today, Monday-morning styles play as well in Paris as Peoria, particularly if the architect can talk and will travel. Mies did little of either, especially in later years. In this age of promo-architecture, silence and solitude are no longer the artist's lot, or choice.

Franz Schulze's biography is a herculean, generally successful effort to present Mies's work in terms of both character and context. The writing style has a curious gait, from lively to plodding, but the substance is impressive and much of the material is fresh and revealing. The author is a professor of art at Lake Forest College in Lake Forest, Ill.; this book has obviously been a long labor of love and respect for which no source has been left untouched. In addition to the Mies Archive at the Modern and the letters and documents willed by Mies to the Library of Congress, his sources include publications and records here and abroad, as well as unedited tapes and transcripts and countless conversations with family, friends and colleagues of Mies. He has carefully retraced locales and relationships. While this effort may not yield absolute truth, it is enormously helpful.

The man who emerges from Mr. Schulze's book is much as he is remembered by those who knew him: solid, slow, taciturn, devoted to the long and careful development of his ideas over many years and projects, unswerving in his standards, authoritarian and unyielding in matters of principle and design. Here is the not unfamiliar portrait of the artist as loner — a talented ambitious young man, who was born in Aachen, Germany, in 1886, rose from humble, provincial beginnings as a stonemason's son and advanced through marriage, social contacts and a trail of broken personal and professional relationships to a position of prominence in the sophisticated art circles of post-World War I Berlin, and to world eminence in his later years in the United States.

Solitary and self-absorbed, he was unable to adjust to marriage and a family. He left his wife, Ada Bruhn, the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, a few years after their wedding in 1913; there was never a divorce, and their three daughters remained loyal to both parents. Mies's close personal relationship with the talented designer, Lilly Reich, whose collaboration considerably enriched his work, ended when he came to the United States in 1938; he made no attempt to continue it, while she, for her part, attended to his affairs in Berlin and kept his papers intact. Mies's single-minded devotion to the practice of architecture always took precedence over friendship, love and loyalty; he simply accepted attention and affection from those who could tolerate the unequal priorities on his side.

A handsome, stocky young man, Mies became heavyset and crippled with arthritis as he grew older. His tastes in his advancing years were simple and sybaritic — a few expensive dark suits of excellent cut, preferably tailored by Knize, and an endless supply of martinis and Havana cigars. He died of the complications of arthritis and alcohol at the age of 83 in 1969.

Mies came to the United States in response to an invitation to be the director of architecture at the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago, later the Illinois Institute of Technology, when it became clear that his life and work in Nazi Germany had reached a dead end. He lived, practiced and taught in Chicago for the next 30 years. Critics have accused him of being slow to oppose the policies of the Nazis. The record suggests that he was as unconcerned with politics as he was with personal relationships. He was quite capable of producing sincerely conceived designs for the Imperial German state (the Bismarck monument project of 1910), the Communists (the Liebknecht and Luxemburg memorial, 1926) and the National Socialists (the Reichsbank competition of 1933). Shortly after Mies succeeded Walter Gropius as head of the Bauhaus in 1930, he moved the school from Dessau to Berlin, where the Nazis closed it. After working assiduously for permission to reopen, he realized that the school would not be able to function in its original spirit, so he and the staff closed it themselves in 1933. Mies did not ever really subscribe to the social utopianism of modernist ideology, although he headed the famous Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, the 1927 complex that remains a landmark demonstration of modernist housing design. When he could no longer work and teach according to the beliefs that shaped his style, he went. Clearly, they were the only beliefs he had.

MIES, the man, is a shadowy presence in Wolf Tegethoff's book, which restricts itself to a careful analysis of documents in the Mies Archive, supplemented by dogged detective work to fill in the missing pieces. A slender volume, of which more than half is taken up by splendid illustrations, this translation of the 1981 German edition is the most important contribution to Mies scholarship to date. It is a product of that well-known scholarly attribute, *Sitzfleisch*, as opposed to the more popular practice of winging it or speaking-in-architectural-tongues that is currently producing so much of what could be called, in fashionable parlance, faux history.

Mr. Tegethoff deals only with the house designs from 1923 to 1951, but he does so in the broadest terms of their spatial and structural development — explorations that had everything to do with the extension of architectural frontiers and little to do with domesticity. His research corrects longstanding errors and disposes of lingering Miesian myths. It redates the concrete and brick country house projects — two of the most revolutionary designs of

the 1920's and part of the group of five Mies projects on which much modern architecture admittedly rests. The implications revise our understanding of Mies's early work and have an inescapable impact on the writing of architectural history.

He also gives us a fascinating insight into Mies's working methods. The image that has prevailed — encouraged by Mies himself — is of the solitary genius cogitating silently until the perfect design springs fully developed from his hand and brow (it was quite a Jovian brow). The Mies Archive material proves that he was a constant, compulsive sketcher, forever changing and reformulating both concepts and details. Divine creative inspiration never struck; he studied and restudied every nuance of plan and facade. No architect ever drew more beautifully — from deft, lyrical sketches to precise collages with the power of much larger works of art. A perfectionist, he sought the ultimate refinement of idea and form. The buildings that seem all serene, effortless simplicity were the result of intense and endless work.

DAVID SPAETH is an architect and associate professor at the University of Kentucky, who published an annotated Mies bibliography and chronology in 1979. Unfortunately, his new book perpetuates dating errors, such as 1919 for the 1921 glass skyscraper project and the wrong sequence for the country houses. His bibliography lists the 1981 edition of Mr. Tegethoff's study, but the contents evidently went unnoticed. (The Schulze book incorporates the new material.) As a Mies loyalist, however, Mr. Spaeth makes his case, buttressed by extended personal research.

Increasingly we see that Mies's roots were less in revolution than in tradition and the discernible past. He virtually reinvented classicism in terms of 20th-century technology; the connection between "Berlin modernism" and "Prussian classicism" was made by the critic and historian Colin Rowe as early as 1947 in the brilliant essays of "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa." The precedents were close at hand — the monumental and domestic architecture of Karl Friedrich Schinkel and the open-plan villas of Schinkel and his students around Berlin. Mies admired Peter Behrens, the early advocate of the totally designed environment, and participated in the neo-classical manner of much of the proto-modernist work early in the century. It was the transformation of this tradition into something new and the level of art on which he made change, rather than the advertised rejection of the past, that guarantee his place in history. For Mies, the physical and perceptual relationship between structure and space was the fulcrum of all architectural art. The respect and reverence for material learned in the stonemason's yards of Aachen never left him. He knew how the strength and measure of the brick established the module and mystique of the finished building, and the expressive and esthetic possibilities of glass, steel and concrete were central to his art.

His entire life's work was devoted to the search for the most magnificent and compellingly beautiful clear-span space enclosed by the most elegant structural systems made possible by modern technology — in two forms, the pavilion and the tower. The search ended with his last work, the Berlin National Gallery of 1962-65. In pursuit of this ideal, his designs became increasingly reductive, refined and abstract. But his "skin-and-bones" buildings were never the product of a rigid, narrow functionalism. His minimalism was as lyrical as it was precise, and the result was not restriction but an extraordinary new freedom.

This was a kind of freedom never posited or made possible before: the free plan, in which spaces no longer had to be determined by bearing walls; free walls, which could be placed anywhere within an efficient and flexible support system; the dematerialization and redefinition of walls through the use of glass and translucent or transparent planes; the breakdown of barriers between interior and exterior; the ultimate romantic extension of the building into the natural landscape. There is nothing "simple" about these deceptively simple buildings. They offer unprecedented experiences,

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without the associations of ornament or history, and they are intended to engage the spirit in the fullest sense.

The spare, basic, Miesian vocabulary also gave the modernist architect a new freedom to succeed or fall short. The limitations of smaller talents were brutally revealed; there was no longer any way to dress up the banal and mundane. Mies's reductive theories, carried to their conceptual extreme, contained the stuff of both sublimity and failure, to which even he was not immune. His "universal" space proved elusive and troublesome; his Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology was noisy and resisted subdivision. No museum director has yet come to terms with the inescapable demands of a Mies building. The Farnsworth House (1945-51), a glass temple that celebrated the seasons, leaked and was hot; the owner sued when costs reached $70,000.

In the end, Mies's work is a paradox. In one of history's giant creative leaps, it uses exceptional forms and solutions to enlarge the ideas and boundaries of art; it distills building to its most artful essentials. Yet by their radical and uncompromising nature, these forms are flawed for the more conventional and complex purposes that architecture must satisfy. Obviously, he sought beauty over utility. As Kenneth Frampton reminds us in his introduction to Mr. Spaeth's book, Mies attached enormous importance to the act of building as a poetic gesture. Poetry is the most difficult, demanding and disciplined of the arts; it searches for essences and invests them with universal meanings in a way that can delight, move, or shatter us. Great architecture does all of these things. The essence of architecture is structure; Mies made poetry of it.

The postmodernist counterrevolution must continue to attack Mies; he is too central to the modern movement. To do this it is necessary to deny the knowledge that has been carried through centuries of building — at the same time that the past is being plundered for trim. We are therefore told that the presumption of structural relevance to the art of architecture is no longer valid or necessary, that there is no intrinsic integrity to the building act, that no expressive challenge is involved. Suave stylemongering, from cryptoclassicism and flashcard historicism to stage-set sophistries, is passed off as an architectural rebirth. After so many vanities, the simple logic of the despised Miesian vernacular is beginning to look good. This anonymous product may not be poetry, but it beats nonsense rhymes. Less even looks like more. □