

## Architecture

# Mies: Lessons From the Master

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

A SMALL, impeccable show of drawings of delicate precision and quiet power by Mies van der Rohe opened at the Museum of Modern Art this week to honor the architect's 80th birthday. It will run through March 20. The exhibition says a great deal about the artist's remarkable half-century of consistency as one of the supreme innovators of our time, but it leaves a great many things unsaid that could be discussed profitably at this moment.

The first are truisms that bear repeating, such as that Mies is one of the greatest architects of the 20th century, and, without really stretching the point, of all time. To the historian with a critical sense, he has obviously taken his place among the men of genius whose talents and contributions are such that the world is never quite the same again. Flesh and blood genius is seldom acknowledged by its own generation; we wait for the authentication of Charlton Heston playing Michelangelo as superman in supercolor.

## Popinjays

But we have had our supermen: Frank Lloyd Wright playing himself, and Le Corbusier playing Scrooge while producing timeless spatial and sculptural delights. Both are gone. Only Mies remains, the last of the triumvirate that so decisively affected the course of architecture in the revolutionary years of the 20th century, evolving the look, structure and function of a new kind of man-made world in natural and inevitable synthesis with society's other radical changes. And he remains, at 80, at the peak of his creative powers, although crippled with arthritis, collecting the prime commissions that never came in his youth, now that his years to execute them are limited.

He is a massive, craggy man, given to few public pronouncements, whose person and work share a tacit monumentality. Measured against his stature, most of today's architects look like popinjays and pygmies. Measured against his work, most of today's architecture has a spurious creativity: an overanxi-

ous originality for its own or publicity's sake, that only incidentally may solve problems.

The world has mislearned the lesson of Miesian architecture, and then lost the ground he had gained for modern architecture, in the span of his own lifetime, and it is sadly instructive to see how and why.

The Miesian esthetic—strict, strong and subtle—is a correct, ordered and logical architectural solution for our day. That it is not the only solution goes without saying; but each artist must have his personal vision which he carries as close as possible to its ultimate perfection. Mies's vision rests on the acceptance of modern technology as it appeared, stunningly, in his youth.

## Purity and Power

Trained as a stonemason, bricklayer and delineator of plaster ornament, he saw steel and glass as the fabric of a new world of shimmering skyscrapers and floating pavilions of stringently rational and elegant simplicity. He has produced work of a purity and power as great as anything the art of building has ever known.

But technology is not art, and form only follows function as a starting point, or life and art would be much simpler than they are. The key to the art of architecture is the conviction and sensitivity with which technology and function are interpreted esthetically, in solutions of practical social purpose.

Mies's structure, often the hard, straight-lined strength of the steel frame, is reflected in exterior metal detailing of painstaking refinement that speaks directly and logically of the way he builds. His use of these details is as expressive as Sullivan's foliate ornament was of its underlying structure, and it is the quality and effectiveness of this expressive balance that marks the good, or great building.

The proportions of a Mies design are so sensitively adjusted, his understanding of the richness of marble, the brilliance of glass and the substantiality of bronze so sensuously sure, his feelings for the materials of our time

so overwhelmingly rich and yet so far from vulgar, that no one has matched the precise and timeless beauty of his buildings. The Seagram building, for example, is dignified, sumptuous, severe, sophisticated, cool, consummately elegant architecture; architecture for the 20th century and for the ages.

The Miesian example is a lesson of principle. But in too many cases the Miesian principle has been ignored and the Miesian example simply "knocked off" in the cheapest Seventh Avenue terms.

Without fine materials and meticulous details, Mies's diamond-sharp doctrine of "less is more" becomes a most ordinary formula. Raised above the shoddy and speculative, however, it is a competent and appropriate formula, and

it is here that Mies's signal importance, as the source of a genuine popular style, has been much misunderstood.

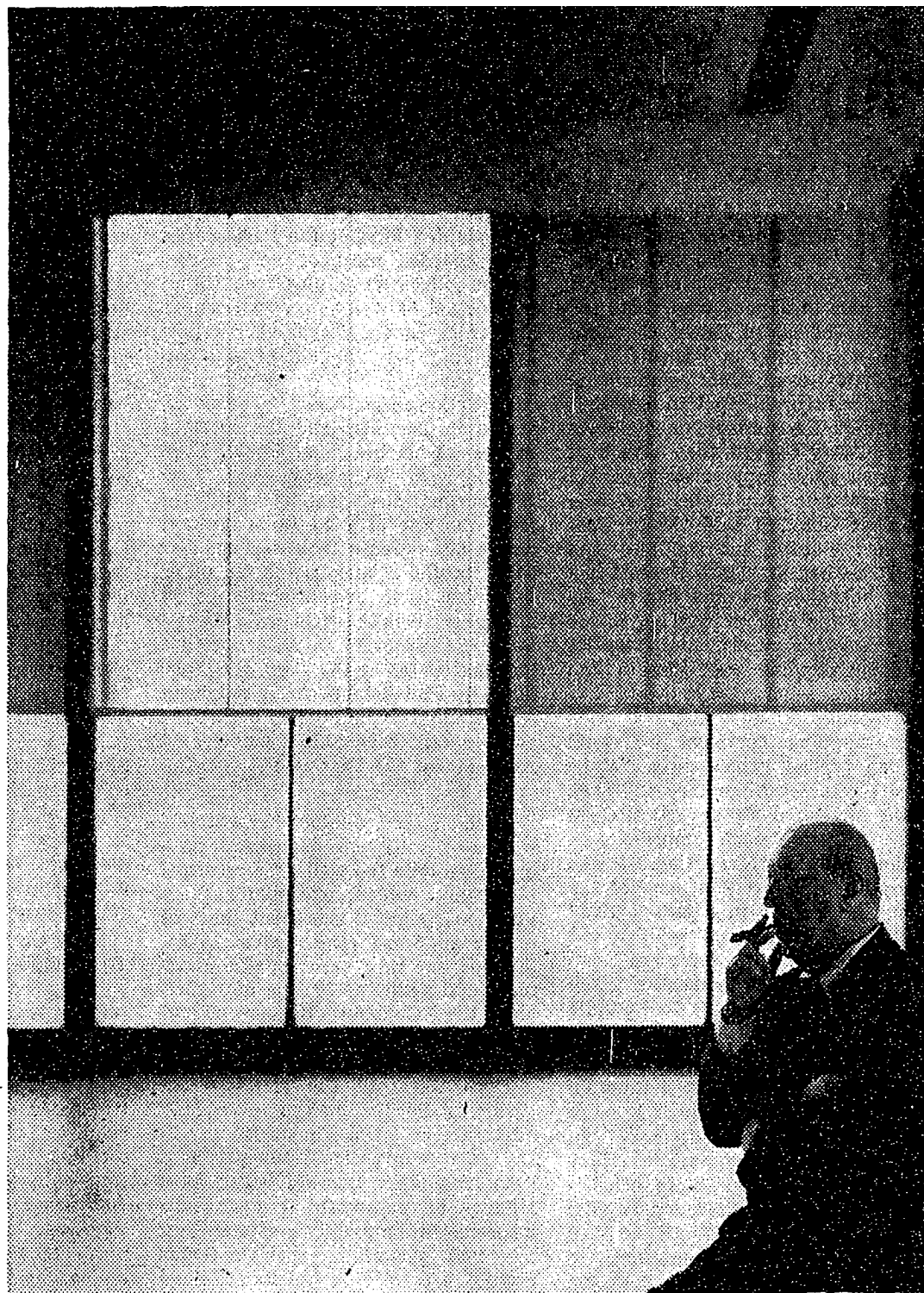
## A Genuine Vernacular

The "glass box" is the most maligned building idea of our time. It is also one of the best. Whatever its deficiencies, and there are many, due to the complex factors of architects who are less than perfectionists and businessmen who are less than philanthropists or sociologists, it is the genuine vernacular of the mid-20th century. It derives, legitimately, from Mies's masterful and meaningful innovations, and it serves, legitimately, the needs of a commercial society that builds on an industrial scale. It does this with sheer and brilliant modern magic, and with as

much validity and suitability as the last great vernacular style, the Georgian.

The two are not dissimilar, except in their obvious disparity of scale. The Georgian expanse of plain brick, window-pierced wall with standard moldings and cornices made the kind of uniform, understated 18th-century background that set off a good Wren church; the glass-walled streets today are a contemporary version of the same thing, background building for a Seagram tower or a handsome Beaux Arts survival.

The Miesian lesson has been equally misunderstood in the higher spheres of creativity. Today's architect is rushing lickety-split backwards into



Hedrich-Blessing (Bill Engdahl)

Mies van der Rohe in Crown Hall, Illinois Institute of Technology

*"Architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space"*

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