The Miesian Lesson
By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLECHICAGO.
New York Times (1923-Current file); Apr 28, 1968; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times
pg. D34

Architecture

The Miesian Lesson

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE
CHICAGO.

THE exhibition of the work of Mies van der Rohe that opened in Chicago this week has the singular advantage of being held in two places: at the Art Institute and on the city's skyline.

Mies has lived and worked in Chicago since 1938. Except for a brief stopover at Harvard after leaving Germany, Chicago is the city that he has made his own. He has built here: a significant handful of handsome apartment houses, the start of a campus for the Illinois Institute of Technology, an impressive Federal court and office building that is one of the city's show pieces.

Two more buildings are in construction in the Federal Center now, the first structure for the huge Illinois Central air rights tract is on his boards, and what may well be the most important skyscraper in the country is about to go ahead—an immense 50-story I.B.M. building on the river, adjacent to those other show-stopping structures, Bertrand Goldberg's circular Marina City towers.

*

There are at least half a dozen very large, new, excellent buildings in Chicago influenced and executed by a second generation trained by Mies until the late 50's, during the period when he headed the I.I.T. School of Architecture. The outstanding example is the monumentally successful Civic Center with its Picasso-adorned plaza, its dramatic 87-foot spans faced with rusting steel designed by a combination of talents from three local offices: C.F. Murphy, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and Loebl, Schlossman and Bennett.

The most radical designs of the Chicago branch of the top big business firm of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, long firmly rooted in the Miesian esthetic, are here. The 100-story, tapered, diagonally trussed John Hancock Building, still in construction, is already a distinctive, looming obelisk against Chicago's windy skies. Architecturally, this is not the Second City anymore.

In the 30 years since Mies's arrival in Chicago the world has caught up with him, but it still does not understand his work. His art is subtle, structural, professional. His remarkable refinements escape the casual observer. His buildings do not provide the cheap, easy effects of fake elegance with which the public gulls itself as a substitute for the real thing.

*

The world knows now, as the profession knew even 40 years ago, that this quiet man of serenity and strength whose art distills the deceptively simple essense of complete sensuous sophistication, is one of the great men and great artists of our age.

Even without real understanding, it brings to him in his 80's the major commissions that were denied to his talents when he was younger: the almost completed Berlin Museum (called by James Speyer, the Art Institute's Curator of 20th Century Art and director of the exhibition and author of its catalogue, "The most beautiful building of our time"), the I.B.M. Building, a Lloyd's Bank Building in London, the multi-structure Dominion Center in Toronto. It is now possible to live in Mies apartment houses in Chicago, Detroit, Newark, Montreal and Baltimore. It is not possible to do so in New York. (It remains a mystery how New York's status symbol-conscious rich can continue to accept, at the nation's highest prices, residential architectural trash.)

Today, Frank Lloyd Wright and LeCorbusier are gone; Mies is the last of the triumvirate that has given the modern world its fantastic physical form.

What may well rank Mies as the most important of the three, in the final analysis, is the fact that he did so much more than bring the highest art to architecture. He took the basic tools of the structural revolution that changed the world irrevocably and magnificently in the 20th century — steel and glass — and turned them into a system of structural esthetics with subtle variations that belie any literal interpretation of his methods. He handles this system with such logic and beauty that he has transformed both the building and the vision of our time.

Can anyone stand, unmoved, at the top of a steel-framed skyscraper today, looking out across a city's glittering 20th-century towers, glass walls reflecting clouds, sky and structures in a massed, changing pattern of light and color? This architecture is not static, any more than life is static. Can anyone fail to recognize and react to this miracle of our time? Mies is basic to the miracle.

What is displayed, extremely handsomely, in the 160 photographic blow-ups, original drawings, models and furnishings in the Art Institute Exhibition is the refinement, over a lifetime, of a revolution.

*

These are not the sketches made on the backs of envelopes on high-flying jet planes between international construction sites that have become part of popular 20th-century hard-sell architectural mythology. The 36 pivotal skyscrapers, houses, museums, schools and office buildings shown in the exhibition in sketch, model, or completed photograph form cover a half century in one of the most important periods of the building art. They are the end product of painstaking study and restudy of a theme that was explosively radical after the first World War and has been fully realized in 1968. If city streets are lined with ordinary offspring, this is common to every creative age. They are preferable to the petty, picturesque vanities that pass for innovation today.

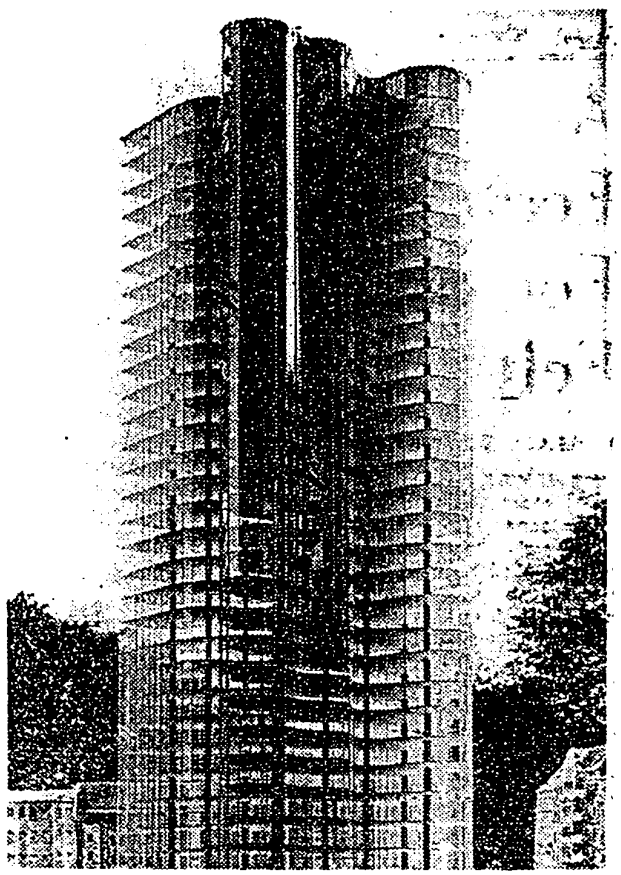
The Art Institute exhibition, which will run through June 30, has been assisted by a grant from the Chicago-based Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts. It is a curiously, even tragically, timely show. Since the last Mies retrospective was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1947, a whole generation, except for professionals and historians, has not seen this work. A whole generation does not really know or comprehend the legacy that it will leave behind.

*

In the natural pendulum swing of revolution and reaction, of stimulus and rejection—and 20 years is just par time for the course—an entire generation of architects has turned its back on Mies. Twenty years have inevitably revealed the deficiences of the First International Style; the limitations of a rigid functional esthetic applied to the complexity of later 20th-century architectural needs, from planning to urban sociology, are clear. As always, the pendulum swings too far.

Only in Chicago has the Miesian lesson been properly learned. This city is proving that while Mies's personal brand of consummate elegance cannot be copied—the massive, subtle rhythms of the facade of the Federal Building are breathtaking—his basic philosophy can and does lead to significant further developments of structure and style.

At the entrance to the Art Institute's exhibition are room-high enlargements of two of the most important buildings in architectural history: the prismatic and curved glass skyscraper projects (unbuilt) of 1919 and 1920-21. Outside, on the Chicago horizon, there is a new curved glass building, Lake Point Tower, by second generation architects' Schipporeit and Heinrich, close to completion. It is, almost, the dream realized. It is still considerably less than the dream. And that is probably just as it should be, since perfection, the quality for which Mies stands above all, is the incentive of art and life.



Mies van der Rohe's glass skyscraper
A dream unrealized