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MIES VAN DER ROHE. THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY

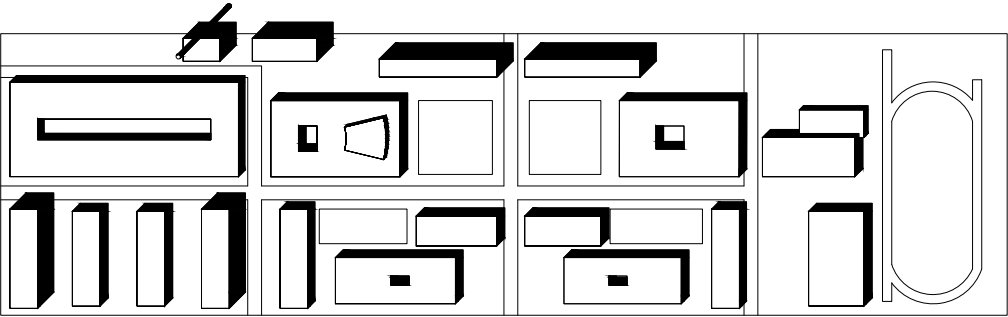
ILPOLIGRAFO

# MIES VAN DER ROHE THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY

## Theory and Architecture

edited by  
Michele Caja, Massimo Ferrari, Martina Landsberger  
Angelo Lorenzi, Tomaso Monestiroli, Raffaella Neri

scientific supervision Adalberto Del Bo



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Much has been written about the work and thought of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, but perhaps less attention has been paid to one of the most important aspects of his way of thinking and designing, namely the relationship between architecture and the city. The volume *Mies Van Der Rohe. The Architecture of the City Theory and Architecture* aims to fill this gap, gathering the contributions of many international scholars and researchers who, fifty years after the death of the master from Aachen (1886-1969), have tried to confront his extraordinary capacity to think and build the places of the contemporary city.

In fact, Mies' projects can all be read and interpreted as a meditated and clear reflection on the relationships to be established with urban features, with the specific conditions of the context, and with the elements of nature, always considered as a significant part of the project. In relation to the diversity of scales with which Mies confronts the city – from the compact structure typical of the historic European city to the open structure of the American experience – his projects can be understood both as architectures capable of weaving close relationships with the consolidated context, and as prefigurations of a different idea of the city realised in the American experience in close collaboration with Ludwig Hilberseimer.

Starting from the central architectural and urban theoretical themes, the book articulates the contributions through various topics (the idea of the city, construction, teaching, public buildings, the house, representation) from which emerges the complexity and richness of a design-thinking that finds in the historical experience and in the adherence to reality its extraordinary actuality.

*in copertina*

Mies van der Rohe, Chicago, IIT project, 1942,  
(drawing by Gianluca Zavatarelli)





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## **MIES VAN DER ROHE. THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY**

Politecnico di Milano, October 2019

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*This book is dedicated to the memory  
of Antonio Monestiroli*



**POLITECNICO**  
**MILANO 1863**

SCUOLA DI ARCHITETTURA URBANISTICA  
INGEGNERIA DELLE COSTRUZIONI

DIPARTIMENTO DI ARCHITETTURA  
E STUDI URBANI

DIPARTIMENTO DI ARCHITETTURA,  
INGEGNERIA DELLE COSTRUZIONI  
E AMBIENTE COSTRUITO

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## CONTENTS

- 15 The Urban Space in Miesian Architecture  
*Adalberto Del Bo*

### LECTURES

- 29 Villa Wolf in Guben - Gubin.  
A Modern Suburban Country House by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe  
*Annegret Burg*
- 39 The Legacy of Mies van der Rohe through the Restoration of the Neue Nationalgalerie  
*Andrea Canziani, Sara Di Resta*
- 49 Restoration of the *Verseidag* silk factory in Krefeld.  
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's only Industrial Building in Transformation  
*Norbert Hanenberg, Daniel Lohmann*
- 63 Mies van der Rohe's Neue Wache Memorial Project of 1930  
*Dietrich Neumann*

### PART ONE: THEORY

*An Idea of the City*  
edited by Tomaso Monestiroli

- 79 An Idea of the City  
*Tomaso Monestiroli*
- 83 The Construction of the Threshold Between Architecture and Nature  
*Luigi Cimmino*
- 89 Depths of Autonomy.  
Heteronomy and the Construction of Urban Space starting from Mies  
*Francesco Costanzo*
- 98 The Order of Grid in Mies van der Rohe. Three projects in Chicago  
*Roberta Esposito*



- 107 A Modern Interpretation of *Genius Loci*:  
Mies as a Designer of the New Urban Landscapes  
*Deborah C. Lefosse*
- 116 Mies van der Rohe: Art Architecture City  
*Concetta Montella*
- 126 The Hilberseimer's Replanning. The Role of the Infrastructure  
in construction of discontinuous Order within and against the Metropolis  
*Gaspare Oliva*
- 136 Core house. The Grain of Alternative Urbanization  
*Yushi Uehara*
- 146 Retracing Mies' Modernism: The Anti-romantic City  
*Andrea Valentini*
- Construction**  
edited by Raffaella Neri
- 155 Construction for Mies  
*Raffaella Neri*
- 159 The Work of Mies van der Rohe. Image of Technology  
and Semantics of Transparency  
*Antonella Contin*
- 166 Mies and the Primacy of the Relations between Space, Structure and Closure  
*Mara Oliveira Eskinazi*
- 176 Master of every scale: an opinion  
*Serena Ferretti*
- 179 The relationship with the history:  
Classical Architecture as a Methodological Paradigm  
*Simone Leoni*
- 187 Tectonics towards the Outside  
*Luigi Mandraccio*
- 195 Textiles and Oppositions in Mies van der Rohe's Public Spaces  
*Edoardo Marchese*
- 203 The German Pavilion: shape and meaning. From town to detail  
*Anna Lisa Pecora*
- 211 Mies van der Rohe and the Progressive Aspect of Architecture  
*Sotirios Zaroulas*

### ***Teaching and Legacy***

edited by Angelo Lorenzi

- 217 Mies van der Rohe, Teaching and Legacy  
*Angelo Lorenzi*
- 221 A few words to build a Myth  
*Alessandro Canevari*
- 229 Mies's Representations as Zeitwille:  
Großstadt between Impersonality and Autonomous Individual  
*Marianna Charitonidou*
- 240 Still Mies. The Legacy of Public in the Portuguese Building Typologies  
*Sérgio Padrão Fernandes, João Silva Leite*
- 248 The evolution of the structure from the Perspective  
of the Teaching Work of Mies van der Rohe, 1938-1953  
*Laura Lizondo-Sevilla, Zaida Garcia-Requejo, José Santatecla-Fayos*
- 257 The Mies "speech" in Colombia  
*Serena Orlandi*
- 266 Absolute Space vs Daily Space.  
Domestic Dimension and Role of Superfluous in the Work of Mies van der Rohe  
*Stefano Passamonti*
- 274 Cultural Transplants: The Legacy of Mies's Urban Strategies in India  
*Alisia Tognon, Catherine Outram Desai*

### **INTERLUDE**

- 285 Learning and Working with Mies  
*Peter Forbes*

### **PART TWO: ARCHITECTURE**

#### ***Living the City: Public Buildings***

edited by Massimo Ferrari

- 291 The hall space according to Mies. A feasible critical comparison  
*Massimo Ferrari*
- 297 The Architecture as Eponymous of the City.  
The Case of the Mannheim Theater by Mies van der Rohe  
*Bruna Di Palma*
- 305 Modernity in liturgical Spaces.  
Mies' Chapel and Schwarz' Aula: a comparison  
*Davide Franco*

- 314 The Myth of the Origin. Three Projects  
*Lorenzo Giordano*
- 322 The Enigma of Zarathustra's Square:  
Conception, Reception and Life of Seagram Plaza  
*Jacopo Leveratto*
- 331 What is the City made of?  
*Federico Perugini, Carlo Berizzi*
- 344 Playing against Type:  
The Chicago Federal Center Courthouse and the Architecture of Jurisprudence  
*David R. Shanks*
- 353 Designing beside Mies. The Architecture of the City  
in the *Berliner Kulturforum*: an ongoing challenge  
*Ilaria Maria Zedda*
- 364 Mapping Mies. An Open Typological Comparison from the (in)complete Library  
*Leonardo Zuccaro Marchi*

***Living the city: Houses***  
edited by Martina Landsberger

- 375 «Building is a thing of the mind». Building the house, building the city  
*Martina Landsberger*
- 381 Training Architecture through Mies' Houses: The Lemke House in Berlin  
*Vincenzo P. Bagnato, Spartaco Paris*
- 389 Tradition and Renewal: Mies van der Rohe's Early Houses  
between Berlin and Potsdam  
*Ivan Brambilla*
- 398 How lengthy are these brick walls? The Brick Country House (1923-1924)  
*Stefano Guidarini*
- 407 View with a House. The Resor Paradox  
*Luca Lanini*
- 414 Transparency and Layering.  
A Non-Literal Analysis from the Resor to the Farnsworth House  
*Irene Romano*
- 422 Lost in Atlantis. The city Mies missed  
*Bertrand Terlinden*
- 430 Villa Tugendhat: the house, the garden, the city  
*Jana Tichá*
- 437 The Courtyard House: Type and Urban Form  
*Camilla Lebboroni, Giovanni Longobardi, Giovanna Spadafora*

## ***Representation***

edited by Michele Caja

- 445 Mies, the City and its Representation  
*Michele Caja*
- 451 Rhetoric in the Architectural Image.  
Mies van der Rohe: Collage and Montages for the Construction  
of the Architectural Image  
*Michele Bagnato*
- 459 The City inside: Mies's Photomontages of Interior Spaces  
*Jan Frohburg*
- 469 Pictures are Condition, Space is Existence.  
A Walk along Mies van der Rohe's 1921 Friedrichstrasse:  
Architecture, Photography and Cinema  
*Pablo Gallego Picard*
- 481 Transparencies: The Dialectic Relationship  
in the City of Mies, Permeability and Rooting  
*João Silva Leite, Sérgio Padrão Fernandes*
- 491 The aesthetics of representation  
*Claudia Sansò*
- 500 Ongoing Authenticity or Fake Heritage?  
*José Miguel Silva*

## **CONTRIBUTES**

- 513 Mies, me, my uncle and the Führer  
*Emilio Battisti*
- 522 Mies "master builder" of monuments: the Seagram Building, 375 Park Avenue, NYC  
*Renato Capozzi*
- 532 The pursuit of an idea: Mies' legacy in Feltrinelli Porta Volta, Milan  
*Helder Casal Ribeiro*
- 542 Mies and the Idea of a Universal Space  
*Marco Mannino*
- 549 Space Investigations. Continuous space and topological order  
*Pisana Posocco*
- 555 Mies and *The Architecture of the City*  
*Federica Visconti*

***Construction***

edited by Raffaella Neri

## CONSTRUCTION FOR MIES

Raffaella Neri

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Mies was trained at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period when German culture was imbued with pragmatism and positivist certainties, but also, on the artistic side, with idealism and *zeitgeist* research, “the spirit of the age”. These were the two noble souls of German thinking, an aspiration for precision and a desire for expression, the two poles which over time saw their manifestations vacillate between romanticism and objectivity, between expressionism and rationalism.

Mies was firmly anchored to the rational shore, to the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in which the search for objectivity and precision definitively passed via technical construction, without a doubt the most clear-cut element of architecture. An element of modernity too, consonant with the times, new knowledge and therefore fresh possibilities offered to architecture and the city, in addition to being the essential element of any work of architecture.

But Mies was also a humanist architect, well-read, and aware of diversity in the role of art, instinctively associated with expression, rather than technology and science. Quite distinct roles, in the end. Moreover, in the German word for architecture lingers a Vitruvian echo of the “art of building”: *Baukunst*, as is widely known, is made up of *construction* and *art*, inseparable both in the word and in the very sense of this practice.

In this light, a place can be found for his most explicit declaration, the one which has been interpreted as a fulminating definition of architecture<sup>1</sup>: «Constructive clarity brought to its exact expression». Perhaps we might start from the meaning of this declaration to address the issue, even if much has already been said, since the question is extremely complex and of immense importance, and above all, is not unambiguous in its interpretation. Mies knew this well, and played with terms and concepts to challenge us.

In the first place, it seems that he want to delude us, comforting us with the affirmation of a coveted *exactness* of architecture, but then immediately implying a subtle doubt, which overturned the statement and transformed it into a thorny issue needing resolving. Easier and more obvious would have been to propose a «constructive clarity brought to its exactness», virtually a tautology, a definition entirely internal to science

<sup>1</sup> A. Monestiroli, “Otto definizioni di architettura”. In Id., *La metopa e il triglifo*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2002.

and technology, at this point of no interest. Instead, Mies speak of an exact *expression*, where the idea of 'expression' is manifestly in antithesis with that of exactness, ergo, impossible to reconcile. The two concepts conflict, pulling from two opposite sides, expressionism on the one, rationalism on the other. However, they are both equally necessary for architecture, says Mies, and, indeed, with this somewhat destabilizing definition it seems that he wishes to encourage us to seek an elusive exactness of expression: with what meaning?

At this point, all that remains is to explore the possibilities of their relationship, assuming that this can be resolved in forms where expression and exactness converge, while accepting answers which cannot be absolute. The solution is not given once and for all, a fixed solution does not exist: the relationship is variable and can only be addressed by establishing a way forward, priorities and principles to be followed and on the basis of which to make necessary choices, from time to time.

What, then, is the way for Mies to reconcile these opposites? What are the thoughts on which to found a profitable relationship for both components?

The first statement concerns the need for *constructive clarity*, an essential objective to be met by each work of architecture. This means that it is unthinkable to falsify, disguise, or mask a construction, or, as Lodoli said through the words of Memmo, «to represent anything that is not also functioning»<sup>2</sup>. What is seen must correspond, clearly and obviously, to what *is*. The principle of truth, so dear to the positivists, is an indispensable starting point, the structure, always present, must be clear and explicit, never distorted. Denying it would be analogous to saying that a building is unable to perform the functions it has been designed for: it would be inadmissible, this too is an essential task of architecture. But is this the sole truth?

Like Le Corbusier, Mies takes the point of view of construction and its logic to bring order to the parts of a project, to give a form to the elements of which it is composed: that decisive form in architecture, down to the smallest detail, only if a conquest, an achievement, the final result of the project. On the contrary, starting from the form would mean denying the role of construction as a determining factor of architecture, being indifferent both to its importance and its appeal to rationality and clarity.

Construction, a technical and scientific act, is therefore a central and indispensable fact of architecture. The problem is the next stage, its transformation or, at the same time, its leaning towards accuracy and expression.

It seems clear that, somewhat misleadingly in the concise definition, the problem of reconciling these two presumed opposites cannot be tackled as an act subsequent to the construction choice, that is, when the choice and logic of the construction have already been established. We need to take a step back and resolve the relationship upstream. The *choice* of construction methods is the decisive and discriminating act: that is to say, it is not a question of *leading* the construction to an exact expression, the exactness lies in the initial choice. For a construction to be expressive, for it not to be reduced to a merely technical act but to become artistic thought, great attention must

<sup>2</sup> A. Memmo, *Elementi di architettura lodoliana*. Zara, 1833.

be paid to the *choice* of the construction method. Only this choice makes it possible to lead the act of construction towards expression, to transform it into an intentional act, removing it only from its scientific reasons, its absoluteness and presumed neutrality.

So we might well ask at this point, “Which expression?”. Certainly, this expression cannot be that of the construction itself – unless it results in useless technical complacency or tautology. Architecture, for Mies as for us, can only be the expression of a value outwith technology, a civil, human value. The value which each building and each institution assumes for the world for which it has been built, in “the spirit of the age”. Art as well as architecture must strive towards these values.

It remains to be clarified what the *exactness* of an expression consists of. Reread in this sense, exactness is certainly not that of science, but it still turns out to be an ancient principle, that of the correspondence of a form to a meaning. Accuracy concerns the adherence between values and forms, and the forms of architecture, as Perret also said, can only be the forms of its construction. Consequently, accuracy is achieved when meanings and forms coincide, as when the plates of different colours overlap in a print: the sharpness of the image, the expressive force of a work of architecture is manifested solely in that magical moment when expressive intentionality and construction choice perfectly coincide, when the way of construction succeeds in interpreting and giving form to an idea, when it finds an exact consonance with the expressive purpose. It is then that the construction unfolds its potential in giving evidence to a thought, in letting «the point of support sing»<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> A. Perret, *Contribution a une théorie de l'architecture*. Paris: Cercle d'Études Architecturales, 1952. Italian transl. in E.N. Rogers, *Auguste Perret*. Milano: Il Balcone, 1955.





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