The Presence of Art in Mies van der Rohe’s Houses

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Abstract

Is Mies van der Rohe’s architecture hostile to art? Set within the context of a lifelong engagement with artworks and their collectors, a closer consideration of the Lange and Tugendhat houses reveals a moment of transition. The anticipatory incompleteness of the Lange House yields to the Tugendhat House’s integrated approach in which the house itself becomes a work of art. Not at all hostile to art, Mies’ architecture is seen as accommodating, assimilating and elevating art.

Keywords

Mies van der Rohe | Modern architecture | Art collection | Spatial integration.

Reference

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Modern architecture, especially in residential projects, is hostile to art. Such was the contention of art critic Walter Cohen in 1931. As his example for what he called «Bilderfeindlichkeit der neueren Wohnarchitektur» Cohen cited the programmatic apartments at the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart, designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969).¹ Thus Mies can be placed at the center of a debate on art and architecture’s reciprocal relationship and their impact on domestic life. Art had a constant presence in Mies’ work, and artists or art collectors were often friends or patrons. Artworks played an important role in the creation of spatial experiences in Mies’ architecture. The interaction between artists or art collectors and architects at the scale of domestic settings and through the individualized responses to private life offers valuable insight into the relation between art and architecture at large.² Rather than arguing for or against the assertion of modern architecture’s adversity to art, I promote a more balanced appraisal of Mies’ work in particular.

Mies’ responses to art in domestic situations evolved gradually and slowly: from art settings to art spaces to spatial presence. This, however, is not a simply linear progression. Mies explored a variety of approaches, each care-fully adjusted to client briefs and architectural
problems. His buildings were «drawing the activity of inhabitation back to its unformed origins each time.»³ It is precisely this readiness to experiment and to respond to changing conditions in ways more and more appreciated for their complex and often paradoxical nature that made Mies’ work a valid paradigm and inspiration for relating art to architecture even today. This interpretation aligns with arguments «favoring Mies’ modernity as an instructive and durable model across a range of architectural circumstances.»⁴

Early projects like the private houses for Alois and Sofie Riehl (1906/07) and Hugo Perls (1911) introduced the young architect to the realm of art – as theory and practice as well as personal interest. In his unrealized design for the Dutch Kröller-Müller family and their extensive art collection (1912), Mies merged reception, living and exhibition spaces within a most elaborate «museum-house.» Art historian Julius Meier-Graefe complimented the successful blend of residential qualities and exhibition purposes, thus summarizing Mies’ pre-modernist position as «unity of liveableness with the rational display of art works.»⁵

Ada Bruhn, who was engaged to Heinrich Wölfflin before she married Mies in 1913, brought a progressive interest in art as well as a family fortune that allowed her to support Mies’ emerging career. Profits from her father’s business paid for ventures into publishing G design magazine, which in turn expanded Mies’ contacts with the art world. In 1923, G published Proun Space by Russian avant-garde artist El Lissitzky. Termed an «interchange station between painting and architecture,» this installation blurred the boundary between artwork and exhibition space.⁶ In the years following World War I, with the help of G and through a number of conceptual projects, Mies van der Rohe re-invented himself as a distinctly Modern architect. His innovative projects were concerned with new materials, urban form and open-plan living. Another of Mies’ influential clients, graphic artist and curator Walter Dexel, understood that the focus of attention no longer rested on the picture on the wall and promoted the comprehensive design of the environment. His book The Dwelling of Today (1928) featured the Wolf House (1925–27), Mies’ first modern residence, designed for a textile merchant and art collector.⁷ Yet the realized design made few allowances for the display of art, and a proposed gallery addition was never built.⁸ The idea of merging artwork and domestic space was yet to manifest itself in Mies’ oeuvre.

In his most productive period (1927–30), Mies re-engaged in earnest with the issue of exhibition through numerous and diverse designs. Seminal projects like the Weissenhof apartment block, the Lange and Esters houses, the Barcelona Pavilion, and the Tugendhat House were all designed around the same time and evidently tested a variety of approaches in parallel. Even the design for the Adam department store was concerned with problems of display. Mies’ engagement with exhibition projects and his close collaboration with Lilly Reich on the Glass Room, the Velvet and Silk Café, and numerous exhibits for the 1929 International Exposition, amongst others, shifted the design focus from architecture of display to architecture as display. Among the realized commissions of this period, the Weissenhof apartment block, through its experimental plan layout, demonstrated the flexibility of inhabitation provided by its modern construction system, while the Lange and Esters houses and the Tugendhat House in turn balanced architectural elements and spatial
presence of both artworks and inhabitants. Thus they captured the moment of transition towards the maturity of Mies’ iconic modern designs.

The Lange and Esters houses and the Tugendhat House have been described as either standing within a line of succession, the first being forerunners to the latter, or as irreconcilably distinct. In many aspects, however, they were very similar indeed. Paid for by fortunes made in the textile industry, all three houses were designed for a markedly bourgeois lifestyle. In addition to their need for prestigious grandeur, the clients brought an interest in contemporary issues in art, philosophy and technology. In each house, a suite of generous interconnected reception spaces for living, dining, and for study downstairs were separated in section from the private bedrooms upstairs. These households depended on servants, who occupied extensive quarters. Each house featured high-end contraptions for the conveniences of modern life (from wine cellar and art store to retractable windows and air conditioning), and accommodated automobiles. In their suburban settings, the houses commanded large, park-like gardens at their rear, and engaged intensely with their respective exterior spaces by simultaneously being opened to and distant from the surroundings. Due to the free organization of the plans and the pronouncedly large areas of glazing, all three buildings depended heavily on the extensive, and in part excessive, use of steel for their structural integrity, thus pushing the boundaries of construction technology at the time.

The main difference between the Lange House (and, to a certain degree, the Esters House) and the Tugendhat House lay in their relationship with art. They accommodated artworks differently, and the idea of inhabitation changed as a consequence.

In 1927, following the successful silk exhibit, Mies was commissioned to design two family residences for Hermann Lange and Josef Esters, both directors of Verseidag, the leading consortium of silk mills and textile companies in Krefeld. The related two-story houses on adjacent plots present themselves as stark geometric volumes, with a front of dark brick. In keeping with the clients’ temperaments, the Esters House was the more measured and livable one, while the subtly different Lange House was more experimental. Hermann Lange, a member of the Werkbund and close friend of Alfred Flechtheim, was a major patron of avant-garde art in Germany. He exhibited as well as lived with his extensive collection. The Lange House was designed with the display of artworks in mind (ill. 1). Cantilevered travertine shelves presented a torso by Wilhelm Lehmbruck and other pieces, and made sculpture an integral part of the architectural composition. The original picture rails provided for frequent changes. In contrast to salon-style hangings still popular at the time, photographs of the Lange House show a strikingly modern hanging, with plenty of white wall on which to float the large paintings and drawings. The same article that criticized Mies’ Weissenhof apartments as adverse to art «praised the tranquil spaces of Haus Lange, the extensive white walls and occasional wood paneling, and the simple wall-mounted pedestals as an ideal, non-distracting, harmonious setting.» Architecture served quietly. And when not providing the setting for art, it accommodated domestic life just as well (ill. 2). Neither groundbreaking nor truly radical, the Lange House (and, partially, the Esters House as well) nevertheless enabled a new way of living with art. In retrospect, the architecture of the Lange House was seen to assume «a background character and also a quality of incompleteness, as if the art – or more
generally, inhabitation – was anticipated by the architecture and made whole by it.»\textsuperscript{14} What started with the design for the Kröller-Müller Residence was completed in the houses Lange and Esters. Mies had made the display and appreciation of art very much an integral part of his architecture. Spaces designed for living – calm, bright and generous – made these houses also perfect for appreciating art, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{15} Mies thus achieved what El Lissitzky had pioneered in his installations and Dexel understood as Modernity’s emerging quality: the comprehensive integration of artwork and architectural space. And Mies was to take this integration one step further.

At midnight on New Years Eve, 1928, preoccupied with the dawn of a new era, Fritz and Grete Tugendhat and their architect pored over sketches for their new home. Set on a sloping site overlooking Brno, the design was discrete and spectacular at once. The house was spatially generous and technologically advanced. Exquisite materials and custom furnishings defined the interior (ill. 3). Uncompromisingly modern and unconventional in every respect, the habitable qualities of the Tugendhat House became subject of public debate. With maturity, Mies relied on an ever more limited range of architectural elements to frame and enhance an individual’s presence in space. It was in projects that did not center on the display of artworks that Mies was able to make his most original contribution to architecture. Reaching beyond functionalist servitude and no longer content with providing a backdrop for art that represented life, architecture now engaged life itself. Both the German Pavilion for the World Exposition in Barcelona and its conceptual twin, the Tugendhat House, realized inhabitable space as works of art. These spaces no longer lent themselves to the display of art. «It is true that it is not possible to hang paintings in the main room,» Fritz Tugendhat wrote. «The incomparable grain of the marble and the wood have not taken the place of art,» he insisted, «they are part of the room which in this case is the work of art proper.»\textsuperscript{16} Still, select pieces of sculpture were purposefully placed. \textit{Morning} (1925) by Georg Kolbe was chosen for the Barcelona Pavilion, and Lehmbuck’s \textit{Female Torso} (1913) was the sole sculpture in the Tugendhat House.\textsuperscript{17} Arguably, they served a new purpose. No longer objects of ostentatious display, these sculptures interacted with the space and inhabited it much like a person did (ill. 4). The intended effect was not lost on Fritz Tugendhat, who thought the Torso «is highlighted in this space in an unusual way, as is the case with the personal lives of the inhabitants, who can feel free to an extent never experienced before.»\textsuperscript{18} The attention, and achievement, had shifted from integrating works of art with the life of the houses’ inhabitants to emphasizing life itself and elevating it to a level of spiritual fulfillment.

Grete Tugendhat, in her appreciation of their home, recognized Mies’ ambition to create architecture as art (ill. 5). Yet she was cautious regarding the general relevance of the architectural position realized by Mies. She thought «that the project of a private house is not the best and most adequate occasion for realizing Mies van der Rohe’s ideas of space design, if only because, as opposed to arts and crafts, true art – which is the goal of architecture – never was and never could be created just for individuals.»\textsuperscript{19} As it turned out, her reservations were unwarranted. Mies has used his private commissions to develop and test spatial expressions of modernity that held true in his public projects alike.
The fruitful and at times problematic relationship between curatorial interest and architectural practice changed over the course of Mies’ career. The process was gradual and slow, never abrupt but radical at times. Mies’ early projects accommodated art. From the Perls/Fuchs House to the Lange and Esters houses, architecture was subordinate to painting and sculpture. Houses were filled with art. Mies’ iconic projects in Barcelona and Brno achieved a balanced integration of art and architecture. No longer art cabinets and exhibition rooms, spaces were full of art. Artworks now defined the inhabitable realm as art spaces, and architecture accommodated life. Through intense engagement with art, Mies established architecture’s independence from the artworks that had originally informed it. In a dialectical process, through appreciation, architecture eclipsed art. (I think it is no coincidence that Mies only started to collect art himself once his architecture had emancipated itself from art’s leading influence.20)

The process of integrating art into the spatial experience and then dispensing with it altogether had its echo in Mies’ unrealized project for the Resor House (1938). Initial collages made to represent the concept included a freestanding art wall as the centerpiece of the living space.21 The presence of a large painting suspended in space took inspiration from the onyx walls that featured prominently in both the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House, and was likely meant to play a similar role as the fulcrum of domestic life. Subsequently, the view of the surrounding landscape was given an independent presence in its stead, while architectural elements were reduced to a barely perceptible minimum, «almost nothing.» Nature had forcefully entered into the picture. By way of reprise, the conceptual project Museum for a Small City (1943) presented art as an integral part of the spatial experience, balanced against the backdrop of nature. The Farnsworth House (1946–51) dwelled exclusively on architecture’s relation with nature. In his mature projects, Mies emancipated his architecture from art’s expectations. Thus, architecture became pure art. The supremacy of space in the Farnsworth House and, finally, in the New National Gallery no longer relied on works of art. A legacy project in many respects, the New National Gallery concluded Mies’ longstanding engagement with art. Infinitely flexible, its vast glass pavilion was more concerned with the city around it than with the art within. When criticized for creating such problematic conditions, an unapologetic Mies replied, «It is such a huge hall that of course it means great difficulties for the exhibiting of art. I am fully aware of that. But it has such potential that I simply cannot take those difficulties into account.»22

Drawing to a close the long process that had the Kröller-Müller project, the Lange and Tugendhat houses as its milestones, Mies’ last project affirms Beatriz Colomina’s speculation about domestic designs as a proving ground for modern architecture: «What if the most public buildings of the last century were first incubated in the most private commissions?»23 Not hostile to art, but accommodating, assimilating and elevating, Mies’ architecture formed a new relationship with art. In a transformative process, the architectural experience liberated itself from its initial closeness to works of art. In turn, paradoxically, art was free to claim architectural space in ways the architect would have never anticipated, thus reviving the creative interaction that art and architecture share.
Notes


2. An earlier version of this text was presented at the research symposium «The Modernist House for the Art Collector or the Artist» at the University of Oslo, on 5 June 2014, and is related to early-stage PhD research under the supervision of Kathleen James-Chakraborty, Professor of Art History at University College Dublin.


11. Both houses still exist and, as a museum for contemporary art, they are open to the public. Originally conceived as a series of discrete rooms, not unlike chambers for art (Kunstkabinette), today the houses present a more fluid sequence of spaces, thus adapting to expectations of what a Mies house should «feel» like and accommodating larger thematic exhibitions at the same time. For an expert discussion of the dialogue between the two houses and site-specific artworks, see Kleinman and Van Duzer, The Krefeld Villas.


14. Mies was to repeat this formula in later designs. For instance, see Wita Noack, Konzentrat der Moderne: Das Landhaus Lemke von Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Wohnhaus, Baudenkmal und Kunsthaus (München: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2008).


20. The idea of an art wall first appeared in sketches for another unrealized project, the house for Ulrich Lange, son of Hermann Lange (1935).


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