

Freiraum

Ideas of nature and freedom in the work of Mies van der Rohe

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Reference

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Abstract

Human action is shaping the earth on a geological scale. How can architects respond to the present-day imperative of maintaining liberty for the individual within a "landscape" understood as a global entity? The work of Mies van der Rohe offers an architectural concept that is characterised by a great sense of freedom, both spatially and intellectually. In providing openness and an unprecedented degree of spatial expanse, modernity's ambivalent condition of supreme freedom and inherent uncertainty is expressed. By asserting creative liberty on contested territory, architecture has an urgent part to play in humankind's perpetual effort to actively establish its freedom.

*Eröffn' ich Räume vielen Millionen,
Nicht sicher zwar doch thätig-frei zu wohnen.*

[For I will open up space for many millions
To live, not securely, but free for action.]

Goethe, *Faust II*

(Goethe 1832, trans. 1962: verse 11563f)

To be in this world is to exercise liberty. Architecture is the place, practice and product of humankind's perpetual effort to creatively establish its freedom. This is not to discuss the nature of freedom. Nevertheless, *Natur und Freiheit* can be identified as the constituents in the architectural work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. In the defining image of the *Landhaus in Backstein* of 1924 Mies famously delineates space in a most liberating way. While the perspective remains a composition of distinct volumes, the plan forsakes the usual distinctions between exterior and interior: three brick walls extend towards infinity and in reaching beyond the limitations of the page anchor the building in an implied, universal landscape. Since the 1920s, the understanding of "nature" has expanded, not only to denote natural landscape, but also to include cities and infrastructural landscapes, and recently even more broadly as "territory." The focus of design attention has shifted from propagating the ideal as central to architectural design to a more differentiated appreciation of the contingent

and the contextual, acknowledging boundaries not as limitations but as the actual instigators of meaning. By accepting this change of paradigm from early modernism to the present, working within a landscape or territory cannot be avoided. Mies's work provides a model response to the present-day imperative of establishing individual freedom within a landscape understood as a universal entity. Like no other architect, he expressed modernity's sense of space, characterised both by openness and an unprecedented degree of spatial expanse. It is a fundamental constant in his work. While the world has changed dramatically over the past three generations, Mies was already attending to the enlarged frame of the territory that was beginning to be theorised then.

In his concept of the *Noösphere*, Vladimir Vernadsky (1863–1945) vastly increased the understanding of the humankind's global influence. The Russian geochemist asserted the *totality* of the impact of life and the advent of a new epoch, being the first to recognise the geological scale of human activity on planet Earth. His work expanded the idea of the biosphere (a term first coined by Eduard Suess in 1885) to the understanding largely shared by the scientific community today and laid the foundations for the environmental sciences that have gained recent import.

Vernadsky argued that the development of the earth proceeded in three distinct stages: from geosphere, then biosphere to noösphere. And just as the geological world of inanimate matter was fundamentally transformed by the advent of life on earth, the emergence of human cognition changed the realm of biological life in a similar way. Not only has life in all its forms shaped our planet and established its totality in the biosphere, but the

impact of humankind's conscious actions match nature itself in scale and consequence. Decisions on industry and infrastructure, on development and exploration, discoveries in science and technology are as powerful as earthquakes, continental drift and the natural selection of species. Humanity's actions have become equally if not more powerful than the forces of nature (Vernadsky 1945).

Vernadsky's seminal *Geochemistry* was published in 1924, the same year in which Mies exhibited the *Landhaus* drawings. *The Biosphere* followed two years later. There is no evidence to suggest that Mies took note of the Russian scientist, twenty years his senior (a German translation of *Geochemistry* was first available in 1930). It is interesting to note, however, what Mies perceived to be of importance that year. He would later identify three names (those of a young Catholic architect and two philosophers) that connect him to a field of philosophical inquiry interrogating religious positions, rationality and the impact of technological innovation, and *values* in human activity: "In this peculiar year - 1926: Schwarz, Max Scheler, Whitehead" - Rudolf Schwarz appeals to religious spirituality, and Scheler links Mies to the phenomenological realm of Husserl and Heidegger (who published *Sein und Zeit* in 1927) whereas the influence of Alfred North Whitehead remains obscure (Neumeyer 1986: 210). The importance of this moment was not lost on Mies: "[...] 1926 was the most significant year. Looking back it seems that it was not just a year in the sense of time. It was a year of great realisation or awareness. It seems to me that at certain times of the history of man the understanding of certain situations ripens" (Mies van der Rohe 1959).

In developing his concept of the *Noösphere*, Vernadsky posited the dawning of a new epoch, that of the mind. Mies insisted on architecture being the spatial expression of an epoch, no less: “*Baukunst ist raumgefasster Zeitwille*” (Mies van der Rohe 1923). Responding with seismographic sensitivity to imminent changes in the understanding of the world and acknowledging the new times as fact – “*Die neue Zeit ist eine Tatsache*” (Mies van der Rohe 1930) – Mies committed himself to modernity. The question of how architecture might be conceived under these circumstances remains vital to this day. Mies resented romantic sentimentality and glorified pathos, emphasising rationality and *Sachlichkeit* instead. He reacted to the expressive tendencies in the architecture of his day with abstraction and with a spatial concept of his own. In adjusting the interdependence of interior and exterior anew, he focused his attention to the structuring of space. In a public lecture on *The Preconditions of Architectural Work* in 1928, he proclaimed: “It must be possible to solve the task of controlling nature and yet simultaneously create a new freedom” (Neumeyer 1986: 365, author’s translation). Architects are challenged to ascertain the freedom of human action in the face of an environment, natural or man-made, that resists the very efforts to control it.

The ambitious quest to balance a controlled relationship with nature and the provision of freedom coincided with the design and subsequent realisation of two of Mies van der Rohe’s key buildings, the German Pavilion in Barcelona of 1928/29 and the Tugendhat House in Brno of 1928–30. While his earlier buildings had a specific relation to their actual landscape setting and stayed within the bounds of established architectural form, these two

designs revealed a new quality in their spatial concept. As Fritz Neumeyer has so carefully established: “In around 1928, the synthesis of classical form and modern technology in the creation of *a new sense of space* became Mies’s guiding principle, one that would remain valid up to his last building, the New National Gallery in Berlin” (Neumeyer 2001b: 317, emphasis added). The same is true for their relation to landscape: intellectual abstraction, personal detachment and political withdrawal prompted Mies to devise an increasingly artificial territory. With progressive distancing from the surroundings’ actual features, landscape became internalised. Elevated on a podium, like a temple, the pavilion is embraced by perimeter walls, its vistas are contained. At the moment when the architectural creation detaches from its setting, Mies provides a line of reference – the horizon – that establishes a virtual landscape within. Simultaneously, other systems of reference are removed and no longer support the viewer’s perception and, as Robin Evans so eloquently suggested, the Barcelona Pavilion seemed to resist the stern forces of gravity almost effortlessly, a space credited with an apparent weightlessness which it was to share with subsequent designs from his hand (Evans 1997).

In foregrounding an individual’s *perception* of space Mies infused an architectural humanity that remained his most potent achievement. Speaking about the German Pavilion in a way that also holds true for the Tugendhat House, Neumeyer re-emphasises the new spatial quality, this time not as a result of new means employed by the architect, but as the expression of an underlying philosophical idea: “It is the cardinal demonstration of a modern humanism – built on a Platonic-Apollonian podium as its foundation, it

celebrates the modern sensation of freedom in a new dynamic spatial arrangement” (Neumeyer 2001a: 317, author’s translation).

The liberation of interior space – seen as a void between two horizontal planes whose resolution can be imagined only in the distance – was fully realised in the Tugendhat House, fortunate in its setting atop a hill. Earlier projects manipulated their respective sites in order to create the perfect setting. For the unrealised Kröller-Müller House of 1912/13, a life-size mock-up of Mies’s design was constructed from timber and canvas so that it could be moved along tracks in order to identify the most harmonious position within the landscaped grounds. The Barcelona Pavilion confidently asserted itself *on the site*, or, as Caroline Constant argues, established itself *as a landscape* in its own right (Constant 1990). And the steep-sloping Tugendhat plot eventually *became* the building. The residence for the Tugendhat household resolved a far more complex programme compared to the ambitious yet modestly scaled exhibition pavilion; both, however, were recognisably conceptual twins. The two main floors in the Tugendhat House (one consisting of the private accommodations, the other providing for the reception spaces) were treated independently of each other. This autonomy in section suggests that rather than being developed as an internal *promenade architectural*, the Tugendhat House was indeed conceived as a landscape proposition. Like Claire Zimmerman’s comprehensive interpretation of the photographic material, a detailed analysis of sketches, drawings and built designs can demonstrate that the spatial experience, as realised, was indeed intentionally created (Zimmerman 2001, 2002, 2004).

The carefully choreographed approach to both buildings (owing much to Schinkel's precedents at Potsdam) and the fluid movement through them replaced a static perception that favours pleasurable beholding, a purely visual appreciation. Yet, Mies's seminal works were not so much characterised by a progression from place to place, a sequential succession of spaces, but by a sense of "rhythm" that emphasised the integration of the architectural space inside and nature's space outside, and more strongly even, the integration of the house and its inhabitants. The initial relation, predicated on visual perception, had transformed into a phenomenal one, engaging the beholder fully in an interaction with architectural space. Grete Tugendhat commented on her experience living there, "For just as one sees in this room every flower in a different light and every work of art gives a stronger impression [...], individuals too and others stand out more clearly against such a background" (Hammer-Tugendhat and Tegethoff 2000: 35). The pulsing sensation of space expanding and presence affirmed are some of the most powerful experiences Mies's buildings provide. The beholder is endowed with a manifest personality. The spiritual sensation of *being* in the presence of architectural space, not as representation but as projection into the world, bears parallels to the ideas of Martin Heidegger, as Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat suggests (Hammer-Tugendhat and Tegethoff 2000). In this, "the task of controlling nature" is fulfilled while affirming the individual's presence in a most liberating sense. And describing his experience, Fritz Tugendhat emphasises that the inhabitants "[...] can feel free to an extent never experienced before" (Hammer-Tugendhat and Tegethoff 2000: 37).

Mies van der Rohe's efforts to integrate his architectural vision with landscape, understood as both physical as well as intellectual construct, may be traced back to his very first commission, the Riehl House of 1906/07. His client, philosopher Alois Riehl, became Mies' mentor and fatherly friend. His influence on the young architect's convictions is not to be underestimated, although their discussions can only be abbreviated here (Neumeyer 2001b). And later in life, Mies still understood his work on architectonic form as a labouring with philosophical problems (Neumeyer 1991).

The design for the house underlies a concept of a "silent partaking in a greater whole" (Neumeyer 2001a: 313, author's translation). In its spatial as well as philosophical interpretation it is informed by Riehl's humanist background. A "critical realist," open to Positivism and the natural sciences, Riehl was the first academic to publish a monograph on Friedrich Nietzsche, with whom he shared many interests including aesthetics, cultural philosophy and human cognition. Nietzsche's dictum on God's ultimate demise established a "horizontal" worldview, dispelling notions of an infernal underworld and heavens above. Worldly relations were no longer vertical, caught in the hierarchies of religion or doctrine, but depended on particular perspectives: man had to recognise himself. The degree in which the encounter with Nietzsche's views prompted Mies to take recourse to Romano Guardini's work shortly afterwards can, at this point, but be speculated about.

Riehl also introduced Mies to Adolf von Hildebrand's proposition that any entity can only be recognised within a spatially imagined and structured context, an *architectural* context. This cognitive condition depends on

differentiating micro-spection (recognising detail) and integrating macro-spection (beholding totality). All ideas about the world are constructed spatially, by constantly relating close-up vision with distant views (Neumeyer 2001b: 313). The house for Alois and Sofie Riehl can be read as a perfect illustration of this concept.

Of modest size and elegant proportions, the house sits on a terrace above a retaining wall cutting across the slope of the plot. Separated from the street by a low wall and fence, the formally arranged and strictly architectonic front garden sets up the house's approach. On its elevated site, the Riehl House could hardly avoid vistas over the nearby lake and valley. Garden walls were employed to control this relationship, withholding the realisation of the dramatic slope and the full landscape panorama. By maintaining a degree of separation, nature was kept at arm's length, thus turning it into an object for self-conscious appreciation rather than a seamless continuum. Instead of connecting the house to nature by means of a broad terrace, the great retaining wall drew a line, composing a visual panorama that sharply juxtaposes the foreground of human inhabitation with views of the open landscape beyond. The young architect created a disposition of spaces finely attuned to the continuous oscillation between close-up views and distant vistas. He thereby conceived a measure of spatial expanse that both integrated and absorbed the defined spaces of the house and gardens into the wider context of a "landscape."

The absence of a middle distance had become a leitmotif in early nineteenth century Romantic landscaping and painting alike. Most notably, the many perspective renderings by Karl Friedrich Schinkel illustrate a union

of (urban) landscape and architecture. The 1829 engraving of the prospect from the gallery of the main stairs of the museum in Berlin (Mies credited this project as highly influential) most clearly shares similarities in their conception of spatial expanse; the spaciousness of the gallery is screened from its surroundings by the colonnade, and the views across the *Lustgarten* relegate all other buildings to a distant urban backdrop (Schinkel 1982: pl. 43). Similarly, many paintings by Caspar David Friedrich (*Gartenterrasse* 1811/12 and *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* 1817/18, for example) present the eerie scene of individuals set against vast landscapes. In each instance, a figure arrested in conversation or contemplation defines the foreground space through its presence. A tight juxtaposition of foreground elements and background scene creates the tension that induces the beholder to constantly reconsider the individual's position within the world.

The argument could be expanded to Mies's later work, especially the Farnsworth House of 1945-51 in its precarious relationship to its Fox River setting. As much a temple as the Barcelona Pavilion is a dwelling, the Farnsworth House asks the same profound question about our relationship with nature. Mies summarised the phenomenal experience he attributed to his creation: "When one looks at Nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it takes on a deeper significance than when one stands outside. More of Nature is thus expressed - it becomes part of a greater whole" (Mies van der Rohe 1958). Finally, the *Neue Nationalgalerie* as Mies van der Rohe's last major work establishes an architectural landscape vis-à-vis its Berlin context, now extending the question of man's relationship with

nature to include the urban territories that today are home for the majority of humankind.

Determined to attain clarity, Mies pursued throughout many projects his idea of *space expanding*. It was his pursuit of clarity which paradoxically resulted in a state of indeterminacy that reached beyond a purely visual understanding and emancipated itself as an ultimately spatial phenomenon. What accounts for the *uncertainty blur* that is so characteristic of Mies's buildings is the ever-alternating perception of things close-by and far away, and the resulting shift in focus between their respective frames of reference. Provoking perpetual oscillation between both modes of visual perception implied the presence of an *in-between*, a quality that has received much attention in current architectural discourse. The architect's work on the clarity of structure and space does not provide definite answers but allows for a new quality in approaching questions about the relationship of humans, architecture and nature. Furthermore, inherent uncertainty in spatial creation brings with it a promise of freedom, the liberty to inhabit. Uncertainty and ambiguity combine to create a spatial potential that lifts architecture from responding to functional needs. The opening up of spatial expanse entails more than an avoidance of material restrictions. Space is not only freed from the contingent conditions of its use, but by the staggering of boundaries and the resulting tendency of their successive transgression, the beholder experiences a dynamic shift of formerly fixed relations: a horizon expanding. The work of Mies van der Rohe exemplifies the phenomenon of architectural space freely expanding in unison with a sensation of uncertainty and

suspense. In doing so, it expresses Modernity's ambivalent condition of supreme freedom and inherent indeterminacy.

In stating the *totality* of the biosphere, Vernadsky raised the problem of freedom: "In everyday life one used to speak of man as an individual, living and moving freely about our planet," yet "[...] he is geologically connected with its material and energetic structure. Actually no living organism exists on earth in a state of freedom." And further: "There arises the problem of the *reconstruction of the biosphere in the interest of the freely thinking humanity as a single totality*" (Vernadsky 1945: 4, 9, emphasis in original). A shared understanding of the profound integration of humans with their place on earth should yield an ultimately positive outlook on the creative potential of the human mind. The totality is balanced by a sense of the individual's presence. The transition into the noösphere is marked by individuals exercising their freedom to act, while *conscious* of their embeddedness in the biosphere.

For those caught in the maelstrom of modern life, Mies's work provides an example of how to be radically modern and unyieldingly conservative, resistant to the very forces that command one's actions. Those forces, at work in a bourgeois society driven by modernisation, are in their effect equally apocalyptic and liberating. The presence granted to the individual comes at the price of his or her estrangement from others, a social distancing. In his study on the experience of modernity, *All that is solid melts into air*, Marshall Berman links Karl Marx's analysis of modernisation as a sobering experience to Goethe's vision of a civil society united as it seeks to transform *land* (Berman 1982). Here, Faust is portrayed as the prototype of

the modern developer who acts out the experience of asserting his creative liberty on contested territory. This is a fundamentally *architectural* experience, and a practice that resonates with the idea of “cultivation,” both of the land and of the mind. Faust’s vision echoes the words and sentiment of yet another architect: “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Through Faust’s concluding monologue, Goethe delivers his summation of the intertwined nature of life’s liberty and humanity’s perpetual struggle:

*Das ist der Weisheit letzter Schluß:
Nur der verdient sich Freiheit wie das Leben,
Der täglich sie erobern muß.*

[The best that mankind ever knew;
Freedom and life are earned by those alone
Who conquer them each day anew.]

(Goethe 1832, trans. 1962: verse 11574f.)

The optimism expressed in Faust’s poetic vision resembles Vernadsky’s outlook. Both link the creative impact of active human intellects to a civil society that assures our freedom for action:

“Now we live in the period of a new geological evolutionary change in the biosphere. We are entering the noösphere. This new elemental geological process is taking place at a stormy time [...]. But the

important fact is that our democratic ideals are in tune with the elemental geological processes, with the law of nature, and with the noösphere. Therefore we may face the future with confidence. It is in our hands. We will not let it go” (Vernadsky 1945: 10).

The intrinsic link and interdependence between civil society and a spatial sensation of freedom merits further discussion.

It is in the defence of this unique sense of freedom, “free for action” (*thätig-frei*) that architecture, the work of an architect, has its most significant part to play. In linking the work of Mies van der Rohe to aspirations expressed by Vernadsky, Goethe and others, I want to promote an architectural concept characterised by a great sense of freedom, both spatially and intellectually. By creating a realm of openness without exposure, the architect endows every individual with a presence of their own, and thus heightens one’s sense of liberty in the world. This humanistic ideal is infused in all of Mies’s designs and remains relevant today. Structures graced by clarity and openness, in Mies’s own words, “permit a measure of freedom in spatial composition that we will not relinquish any more. Only now can we articulate space, open it up and connect it to the landscape, thereby fulfilling the spatial needs of modern man” (Mies van der Rohe 1933).

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