

LIVING IN A GLASS HOUSE

*In a Mies building, the architect
begins to seem like The Man Who Came
to Dinner, an honored guest
who ends up moving in with you*

by COLIN WESTERBECK

LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE WAS A lover of paradoxes, as his most famous pronouncement on architecture—"Less is more"—suggests. The central paradox is that in order to appreciate his work, you have to stand outside of it. The building at 860 North Lake Shore Drive, for instance, is seen to greatest advantage when viewed from a boat on the lake. Mies's biographer Franz Schulze has said of this 1951 apartment house and its twin tower at 880, completed the same year, that they are "among the ... most influential designs for high-rise structures of the 20th century." Why this is so becomes apparent the first time you lay eyes on them. Never before had Mies refuted as concisely as he did here the traditional idea of architecture, the belief that in order to be grand a building must have the solidity of stone and the luxury of ornament. If less is more, then sheer nothingness ought to be everything. This was the ideal for which Mies strove. He wanted a building by him to be, in one of his favorite phrases, "*beinahe nichts*"—almost nothing.

That's the quality that 860 has. Measured by bulk alone, it and 880 together are far from monumental. The former has only four apartments per floor and a lobby that couldn't hold more than the two glass-topped X tables flanked by Barcelona chairs—both Miesian designs—that are its only furnishings. Yet it is this modesty of scale

photography by WAYNE CABLE





It is the modesty of scale that makes the building at 860 North Lake Shore Drive impressive. All 26 stories seem to be balanced on the small lobby (above). At night the imposing glass-and-steel structure appears to be a simple cube of light.



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that makes the building impressive. All 26 stories seem to be balanced on the small transparent lobby. Seen from the Drive or the lake at night, the glass-and-steel structure appears to be a mere cube of light. It creates an optical illusion. It is imposing precisely because it looks as if it's hardly there. Even today, backed by taller, more massive buildings, the two towers assert their own significance. The rightness of their proportions gives them an airiness and dignity, a spiritual presence, that other buildings lack.

Problems begin to arise only when you move inside such Miesian landmarks, as I did several years ago. Actually living in 860, I was at first struck less by its eternal truths than by a few day-to-day irritations it seemed to entail. An architect who is trying to make "less" into nothing, or at least into as little as is humanly possible, believes in pushing all his ideas to their ultimate logical conclusions. This is what gives a Mies building its drama. Yet living in intimacy with such ultimacy can be a bit trying. Mies's personality was such a powerful one that it almost seems to linger, like a whiff of one of those strong cigars he smoked, in every room he designed. He begins to seem faintly like The Man Who Came to Dinner, an honored guest who, having been invited to the housewarming, ends up moving in with you. You sometimes feel that you are getting to know the great man better than you really wanted to.

He was not the urbane, well-educated sort of person that his chief rival back in Germany, Walter Gropius, was. He was the son of a family of stonemasons, and he first learned how to con-



struct a building by being a bricklayer. In old age he could still remember the foreman who taught him an object lesson by not pointing out his mistakes until many rows after he had made them, whereupon he would have to start over from the place where the mistake had occurred. It's an anecdote with a distinctly Germanic flavor that can also be tasted here and there in 860. In some respects the building is overengineered, like a BMW. This is particularly true of the heating system. However avant-garde the design for the building may have been, the assumption that fuel oil would always be cheap was rather unfuturistic.

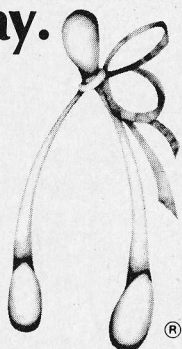
The heating plant may have reflected a certain anxiety on the part of the developers about whether Mies's plans would actually work, for never before had he been allowed to do a high-rise as he wanted, with exterior walls that were glass all the way to the floor. Another aspect of his work that caused nervousness was the "open plan," interior space that, having no load-bearing walls, could be arranged at will, or left entirely empty. Schulze claims that the developers compelled Mies to enclose the back of the 860-880 apartments much more than he would have liked. I have no reason to doubt this. Still, it's hard not

to see in all the different features of my apartment different aspects of Mies's own character, as if whatever restrictions were placed upon him secretly appealed to his venal side, to some provincial narrow-mindedness that his personality continued to harbor.

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Even today, backed by taller buildings, Mies's twin towers (left) assert their own significance. The variegated view from the living room (above) has a dramatic sweep to it, and yet you remain a part of the city even as you contemplate it.

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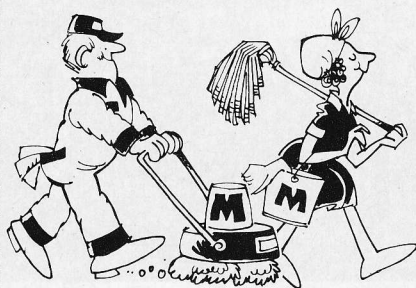
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My apartment suggests the open plan most freely in the living room, where two long walls of glass meet at a corner. Yet, even as you stand before them, you feel that you can hear the poltergeists of another, more inhibited era conspiring behind your back. On a warm summer day, if you unlatch one of those windows to let a breeze pass through the apartment, a door will slam somewhere behind you, a protest against too much openness. As you move from the front toward the bedrooms, the nature of the space changes. In the apartment's innermost recess is a tiny hall on which five doors close. Even in the most conventional American house of the period when this building was constructed, between the front rooms and the hall to the bedrooms there would have been an open arch, not a narrow, hinged door. The habit of never leaving one room or entering another without closing a door behind you is European, as is, even today, the sort of interior architecture that encourages such fastidiousness. As you withdraw into the private quarters of my apartment, you get the impression that within the public personality Mies projected—the internationalist, the visionary creator of liberated spaces—there still lurked a petty German burgher of the 19th century.

These peculiarities of the design are only details, of course. They don't ruin the pleasures of living in the apartment, the generosity with light and space characteristic of Mies's work. But you can't just overlook such details in a Miesian design the way you might in one by a less original and profound architect. Another pronouncement attributed to Mies is "God is in the details." It's a remark that once again calls attention to the paradoxicality of his ideas, for in a sense there ought not to be any details in his designs. His architecture goes to the very heart of what is modern because it is based on an extreme reductionism, on the desire to strip away all but the most fundamental elements in a building. The object of his work is to be streamlined, not just in the superficial way of Art Deco design, but in a deeply philosophical sense. There can be no details in his work because it is all essence. The results should be seamless, indivisible. A detail is by nature something that stands out. It protrudes, like a steel burr on the cable along which a tightrope walker glides in his soft, soleless slippers. Merely the fact that a detail is noticeable makes it obnoxious to the Miesian concept.

Two details that literally stick out in

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my apartment are the walls leading from the front hall into the living and dining area. Neither ends at the corner; both extend more than a foot into the room in order to create a partition whose insubstantiality—it's only two inches thick—is its point. The extension is there to demonstrate the freedom that the walls have from structural responsibilities. This is actually a very elegant gesture, and yet a little disturbing as well because a gesture is all it is. It's a purely symbolic, ornamental addition to the apartment, a little flourish made for its own sake. Should Mies have permitted himself this display of self-satisfaction? I would forgive any other architect a bit of vanity like this, especially if the result were as visually pleasing as it is here. But Mies's self-indulgence seems to compromise his design. The practical problems that the awkwardness of the back hall creates, particularly when you move furniture around, occur in every apartment. But concern over aesthetic detail is for me an experience unique to living in this apartment. It is, I guess, part of the luxury of being here.

Mies himself recognized that details such as this extension of the hall walls required some kind of rationale, or rationalization. Their function was, he said, to "express" structure that would otherwise be hidden. He relied on the same line of reasoning to justify his use of I-beams placed vertically on the building's exterior between the windows. This was the first time he employed this device, which was to become, through more famous projects such as the Seagram Building in New York, a Miesian trademark. These I-beams are only a metaphor for the real superstructure, which Chicago fire laws require to be enclosed. Where the beams have been attached to the frames of the windows, they do reinforce the mullions (though to use structural steel beams for this purpose is overengineering with a vengeance); but where they are attached to the outside of the columns that actually bear the building's weight, they have no function whatsoever. With militant advocates of Mies's own philosophy, this was the sticking point, the crucial detail over which he was accused of having betrayed his principles. His only justification was to say that without the I-beams, the building "did not look right."

It was because Mies put so much of himself into 860-880, I suspect, that he didn't want to live there. He was offered an apartment but turned it down. It's hard enough

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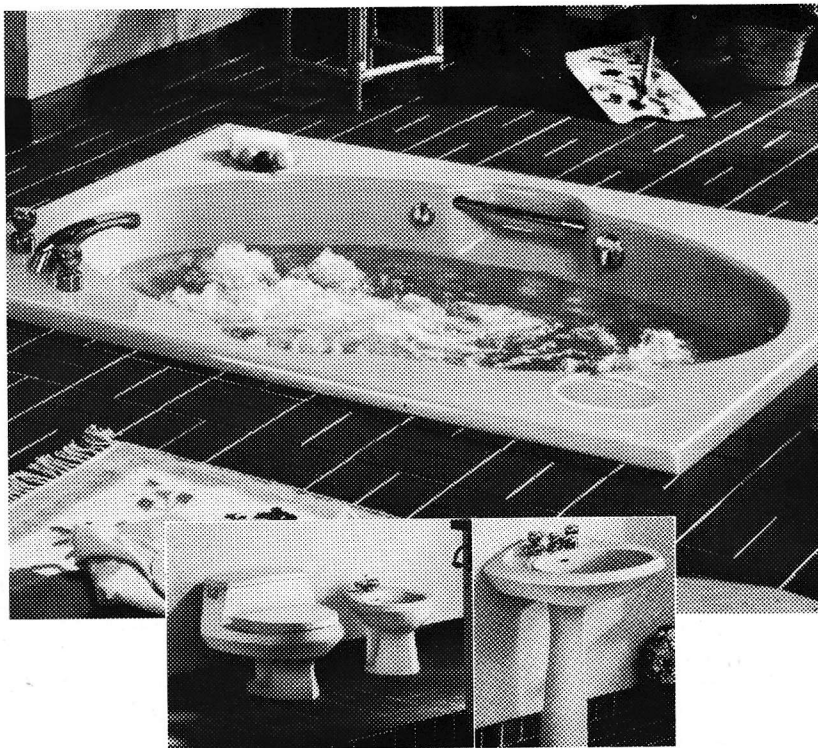
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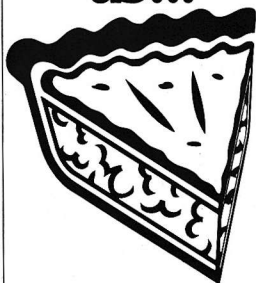
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GLASS HOUSE

for most of us to live with ourselves psychologically; to be physically surrounded by our own foibles and principles would be unbearable. Instead, he moved into an unremarkable apartment built in 1910 a few blocks away. (It's curious how rarely modern architects live in their own buildings. While urging everyone else to be ahead of the time, they themselves prefer to lag a generation behind. Postmodernist Stanley Tigerman lives in one of Mies's apartments, to which he has managed to give—judging from photographs I've seen—a nicely rumpled and homey feel.) Among the reasons Mies wanted a more conventional apartment may have been that had he lived in 860, where at least one wall of every room (except the kitchen and bathrooms) is glass, he wouldn't have had enough space for the art collection he owned, which included Klee, Picasso, and other modern masters. The problem was not only finding enough room for such paintings, but also the fact that a Mies apartment is itself a work of art. The presence of another powerful imagery can seem intrusive. The walls reject it the way the human body might reject a transplant.

To retain your perspective on Mies, it's not finally necessary to move out. All you need do is look out, to see the city around you in the way that Mies wanted you to. This is the most significant paradox that his architecture creates. The vantage point that you have indoors makes you more intensely aware of what is outdoors than ever before. The ultimate nothingness his design achieves is that the building itself seems to fall away when you step up to the windows; you become totally absorbed in what lies beyond.

Although I do a lot of traveling, I rarely see sights more remarkable than those outside my own study. Once a huge military transport plane, the sort that can airlift an entire division to Europe, flew down Lake Shore Drive with its wings perpendicular to the ground at about the same altitude as my apartment. (This was, I realized a few days later, a rehearsal for the Air and Water Show.) On another occasion, when a welder was dismantling an old steel smokestack across the street, the rigging on which he was standing suddenly caught on fire. I leaped out of my chair! Luckily for him, he was calmer and just pinched off the oxy-acetylene lines to his torch with one hand while patting out the flames with the other. The laconic way in which he went about repairing the damage suggested that this

happened all the time, which worried me more than ever.

What really makes the view engaging, though, is not some momentary excitement it might contain. It is just the setting itself. Most of my windows are on the south side of the building, so that if I look to my left I see the lake. But my apartment doesn't face the lake, nor would I really want to be in one that did. Lake views have two, basically contrary moods—the Zen emptiness of winter (gray sky, black horizon line, gray water) and the sugary calendar cliché of sailboats and sunshine in summer. You might as well be living on Martha's Vineyard. Like the essayist Charles Lamb, I prefer to be in the city and to know that's where I am. My view goes from Water Tower Place and the Neiman-Marcus building past the Tribune and Sears towers, the Northwestern Medical School, the Stone Pavillion, and the Amoco Building, all the way to the old Furniture Mart at 666 North Lake Shore Drive. There is even an arrow slit between two buildings through which I can see the lake opposite Grant Park and beyond—all the way to the high-rises in Hyde Park.

This prospect is particularly marvelous to me because I'm not very high up, only slightly above the middle of the building. In New York, where I lived for many years before moving to Chicago, almost the only way to have a view like this is to live in a penthouse. You have to be able to rise above a real-estate market in which most building is done right to the property line and straight up as far as the financing will reach. There a panorama of the city represents money and power. In Chicago, even downtown where I am, low-rise commercial and residential buildings are mixed in with skyscrapers, and the latter often have setbacks, lawns, or gardens as well. The consequence is a kind of variegated view that moves in and out, combines near and far, has a dramatic sweep to it, and yet (most important of all) can be seen from down inside the city itself. You remain a part of the city even as you contemplate it. Looking out the window becomes an act not of condescension, as it is from a penthouse, but of introspection.

Especially on clear nights in the fall or the spring, my view has a lucidity and a nearness that make it almost too real. It takes on a kind of movie-set perspective, as if the buildings were a tabletop model that had been constructed to look far away when photographed close up. What I see be-

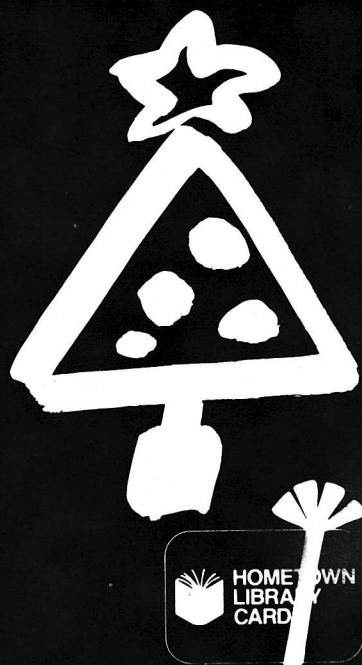
comes an idealization of the modern city. At moments like these, the immediacy of the view is everything. The kind of smoked windows put in later high-rise buildings, including the ones by Mies a block north of where I live, may save an occupant the trouble of having to remember to put down the blinds. But they also force him to look at the world as through a glass darkly, like some gangster squinting out of his limousine.

Before I had actually lived in a Mies apartment, I had never grasped the completeness of his vision. I had understood him only as the type of Modernist who thinks of a house as what his contemporary Le Corbusier called "a machine for living," an architect whose exposed I-beams and barren interiors showed that he was, like others associated with the Bauhaus, focused on high technology. I considered Mies a classic anti-Romantic who left nature out of his calculations. What I did not appreciate when I saw his buildings only from outside was the way in which the view was supposed to complement the machine-made inside. In his work technology is only a form of access to nature. He replaces exterior walls with day, night, light, and weather. He makes the city a part of nature itself. Because of its unpredictable climate and superb urban views, Chicago was the perfect place for his peculiar kind of site art.

"Wasn't it splendid of Mies to invent the lightning?" the composer John Cage once asked as he watched from 860-880 while a storm gathered over the city. But of course all Mies really invented was the view—the sight of fog scudding and rolling in from the lake in layers like an undertow beneath the breakers, the prairie light blasting through the cross streets at sunset, the top of the Amoco Building engulfed in a huge nimbus cloud, the wind trying to drag it away, the static charge of the water vapor as it rubs against stone and steel holding it there. I suppose it could be argued that what I see from my window might be enjoyed from several other buildings in my neighborhood, later models that, at least in terms of conveniences, improve on the Ur design that I live in. But to look out at a city dotted with later, lesser imitations of Mies's work, and to do so from one of the first high-rise apartment buildings actually done by Mies, is something special. It is to be present at the creation of the view itself. ~

Colin Westerbeck is a curator at the Art Institute of Chicago.

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