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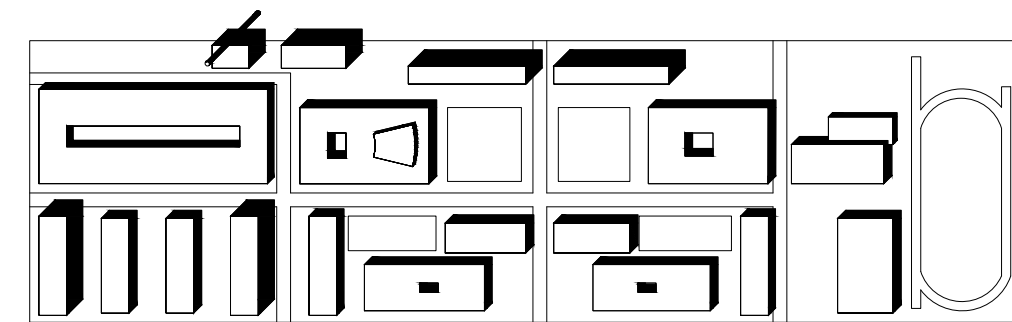
MIES VAN DER ROHE THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY

Theory and Architecture

edited by

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

scientific supervision Adalberto Del Bo



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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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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THE PURSUIT OF AN IDEA: MIES' LEGACY IN FELTRINELLI PORTA VOLTA, MILAN

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The duty of a vanguard or a rear-guard is neither to advance nor to withdraw, but rather to manoeuvre.

Entry "Avant-garde" according to Napoleon I; Larousse, 1865

1.

The latest interpretations or understandings of the premises of modern architecture, that clearly move away from an absolute or dogmatic reading, have opened paths of thought and an unique understanding of the main principles that have governed the lines of experimentation and thought in architecture set in different social and cultural settings. This not only allows us to introduce and above all to study new or concealed authors by the linear narrative of the history of architecture but also to look deeper to the main protagonists/masters of the modern movement opening a (re) reading on their legacy.

This broader and open reading will permit the review of texts and statements of the modern masters, most of the times inscribed and studied as absolute and hermetic truths, leading to epidermal and simplistic readings, placing on opposite sides experimentation that share the same concerns or themes simply because they occur through different paths or crossroads. In this sense, it will always be important for us to understand the modern movement, as an ideological adventure, set on a new idea of architecture within a cultured position towards society with the acknowledgement of its time and not as a closed and hermetic style with its technical devices and formal mannerisms.

We can evoke William Curtis's text entitled *Conclusion: modernity, tradition, authenticity* that reinforces our idea of an open and still incomplete endeavor worth striving for:

If one refers to modernism as a historical abstraction [...], it is because it now plays several roles: an activating ideal almost outside time; a renewable charter of intentions; an incomplete cultural project; an evolving tradition of ideas, forms and actual buildings. The epic adventure of modernism is clearly not over, especially in a world grappling with the implications of global economy, the universalization of technology, the redefinition of identities and territories, and the question of how the future should be planned.¹

¹ W. Curtis, *Modern Architecture since 1900*. New York: Phaidon, 2003.

2.

Mies will be at the center of this debate because he evokes the newness of his themes associated with structure, material and notion of space where shape will be a secondary matter. However, his body of work, after 1938, translates a precise plastic expression and a formal clearness based on two dominant typologies: the pavilion and the skyscraper (steel, glass and brick/concrete) promoting a formal repetition and compositional clarity that could pose a problem of style or even mannerism.

In contrast, his writings, equally straightforward, concise and precise, are, however, less visual and more conceptual, always searching for the essential nature of matters. His aphorisms and speeches as director of the department of architecture at Armour Institute, later Illinois Institute of Technology, allows subtle interpretation levels that can be comprehended as a fine filigree/tracery. Where each thread is as important as the final texture of the fabric, allowing us to look at the meaning of each expression in its truest intellectual insight and responsibility. This opens different interpretative levels, as emphasized by the IIT Curriculum and suggested, many times, by Mies himself, namely in his Inaugural Address, in 1938, when he says:

If teaching has any purpose, it is to implant true insight and responsibility. Education must lead us from irresponsible opinion to true responsible judgement. It must lead us from chance and arbitrariness to rational clarity and intellectual order.²

It is from this point of view that we are interested in evoking and deepening Mies' legacy. Where his path to rational clarity and intellectual order may open doors and perhaps allow for a more uncompromising and essential reading within today's architectural concerns and issues.

3.

Although, Mies has fundamental publications that depict his life and works, we have a particular sympathy for the authors that shared Mies' routine or crossed roads with him, even if, in a broad spectrum. They give a particular insight of how he was perceived in his time.

As such, the 1947 monograph by Philip Johnson, published on the occasion of a Mies van der Rohe exhibition, held at the Museum of Modern Art, considered by Johnson as the first complete reading of Mies works, is a fundamental reference, placing the European and American phases in continuum. The book is published in close collaboration with Mies, as expressed in the acknowledgements, «I wish to thank above all Professor Mies van der Rohe for his close collaboration in every part of the work: assembling material, making special drawings, selecting illustrations and designing the jacket of the book»³. Mies' projects/buildings are organized in four periods with his writings individualized in an autonomous chapter, with 14 diverse entries, ranging

² W. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. Continuing the Chicago School of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhauser, 1981.

³ P. Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*. New York: MoMA, 1947.



1. Proportion as a means
of architectural expression.
Feltrinelli Porta Volta, Milan
(photo by the Author)

2. Structure as an architectural factor.
Feltrinelli Porta Volta, Milan
(photo by the Author)

from 1922 to 1943. These selected texts gain particular significance because they were chosen with Mies or by Mies himself.

In the 50s, different magazines portrayed Mies' path. Two, culturally diverse, stand out: the swiss (Zurich), *Bauen+Wohnen*, July issue, 1956, celebrates *Mies van der Rohe, 70 years old*, and September issue, 1958, French *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, dedicates the whole magazine to "l'oeuvre de Mies van der Rohe".

Bauen+Wohnen's editorial refers to "70 years of a productive life" and affirms «we will present in this number some of his finest and most perfect buildings from the years 1938-1953». The selected works are Lake Shore Drive Apartments, McCormick House, Illinois Institute of Technology and Farnsworth House framed by three texts, "Mies van der Rohe. Chicago school 1938-1956" by Werner Blaser, "The moral influence of the Architecture of Mies van der Rohe" by Siegfried Giedion and Mies' Inaugural Address, as director in 1938. The works illustrated by small plans, with little detail, relied mainly on expressive photographs to convey Mies' Baukunst, focusing on specific viewpoints valuing the formal texture/pattern of the buildings and their details. With a cover in shining gold and black, reproducing a partial view of Common Wealth Promenade Apartments, in Chicago, *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* presents a more complete scope on Mies' activity with works from 1912, Kroeller Residence, to 1958, Seagram Building, handling in total 44 entries accompanied by three texts, "The difficult art of simplicity" by Peter Blake (former student and collaborator), "Architecture in steel" by Reginald Malcolmson (Mies' chief administrative at IIT), "Talks with Mies van der Rohe" by Christian Norberg-Schulz, and a section dedicated to Mies' writings, with five texts published in Johnson's monography and "1950: Address to IIT". With these two publications, it is clear the need, at the time, to express his educational premises and architectural insights hand to hand with impressive visual representations of his buildings or proposals – photos/montages/models.

In the 80s, the readings on Mies had a significant change with archival access, be it MoMA, Library of Congress in Washington or the Chicago Archive, with two main publications: Franz Schulze's, *Mies van der Rohe; A Critical Biography*, 1985 (extended in 2012) and Fritz Neumeier's, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, 1991 (published in German in 1986). Nevertheless, it will be Werner Blaser's insistent contributions that will enlighten Mies' educational path, based on acknowledging transferrable design insights and methods that could be open to different contemporary interpretations.

In the opening of his Inaugural Address as Director, in 1938, Mies expresses clearly his search: «In its simplest form architecture is rooted in entirely functional considerations, but it can reach up through all degrees of value to the highest sphere of spiritual existence, into the realm of pure art»⁴.

The Five principles of architecture formulated by Mies, which appeared in IIT Bulletin for the Graduation Courses 1944-45, although already formulated in 1939, are:

⁴ W. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. Continuing the Chicago School of Architecture*. Basel: Birkhauser, 1981.

1. The structure as an architectural factor: its possibilities and limitations.
2. Space as an architectural problem.
3. Proportion as a means of architectural expression.
4. The expressive value of materials.
5. Painting and sculpture in their relationship to architecture.⁵

These five fundamentals of architecture, «structure, space, proportion, material and the fine arts in building», evoking permanent values of architecture, would be complemented by the notion, according to Blaser: «The application of these principles by means of free creative work»⁶. These principles introduce reading variables which the characteristic elements of Mies' built work, set on «rectangularity and the visualization of the skeleton as a means of order and as a basis for architectural design»⁷, expresses with grand eloquence.

The search for the meaning behind a pursued design theme is as important as the drafted result and fundamental for its success. As expressed by Blaser, the «nature of space is not determined by the mere presence of limiting surfaces, but by the intellectual principle behind this limitation. The formal disposition of space proceeding from structure itself is the essential task of architecture. The achieved work is not the building, but the ordered space»⁸. As such the program embodies «the solution of all architectural problems in line with basic principles. In the primary conception is included the general lines of all possibilities and all limitations»⁹.

4.

This open reading permits us to pursue Mies' legacy stepping into contemporary built landscape with clean, untainted eyes, searching through his main design principles leaving behind formal depiction of material, structure or shape. It is through this light we are able to look at Milan's recent built landscape and find an example where structure, space and material form, through proportion, a harmonic triad in means of architectural expression and character, i.e. one of the most miesian enterprises: Feltrinelli Porta Volta, by Herzog & de Meuron. Here we can evoke Mies' structure as an architectural factor, space as an architectural problem, proportion as a means of architectural expression and the expressive value of materials as a symphonic unity (figs. 1-4).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ W. Blaser, «Mies van der Rohe, Chicago School 1938-1958». *Bauen+Wohnen*, 7, 1956.

⁹ *Ibid.*



3. Space as an architectural problem.
Feltrinelli Porta Volta, Milan
(photo by the Author)

4. Expressive value of materials.
Feltrinelli Porta Volta, Milan
(photo by the Author)

5.

Although, seen by many as one of the most Milanese buildings in Milan, condition which is reinforced by the authors themselves, relating their design themes and urban options to traditional Milanese culture be it Ospedale Maggiore, Rotonda della Besana and Castello Forzesco or Aldo Rossi's preferences, the linear Cascina buildings from Lombardia, which are embodied in his Gallaratese ensemble. This relation with diverse architectural references relies on abstract readings, which depict individual notions or design themes in a selective and operative way. This abstract reading subtracts the core issues into a conceptual plane leaving behind all physical likeness or visual/tectonic expression. It is about the approach and selection of keywords that represent permanent values and open the door to other shapes, structures and materials.

This *modus operandi* is not exclusive to Herzog & de Meuron but imbedded in contemporary Swiss heritage which, as a culture, has always been an avid, but selective, collector. Collects and then cleanses through an aseptic and impersonal approach detaching all that is superficial, epidermis, valuing exclusively its essence, i.e. conceptual mainframe. It is for this reason that Aldo Rossi's writings have served swiss culture in an illuminating way, clearly detached from Rossi's formal syntax, contrary to Latin culture, namely Italian architecture.

More than a language or a syntax we are confronted with the notion of a handwriting, open to diverse influences and references which are moulded, compiled within a specific coherent narrative, set on an architectural ethics/pathos, which even St. Augustine's «Beauty is the splendor of truth» would agree and sponsor.

One of Feltrinelli's main/structural themes is the clear structural enterprise of the whole system set in a free plan setting guided by an intense use of geometry. Norberg-Schulz will ask Mies about his notions on free plan and clear construction, which Mies answers with precision:

The free plan and a clear construction cannot be kept apart. Clear structure is the bases for a free plan. Structure is the backbone of the whole and makes the free plan possible. Without that backbone the plan would not be free, but chaotic and therefore constipated.¹⁰

Here structure could also be interpreted as the search for a needed order, where structure is not only a constructive element but a system that regulates space. In the Feltrinelli ensemble this quest for a clear construction, a visual and expressive order, is absolute in its interwoven design themes – structure, space, material – with the glass and concrete grid façade embodying the structure, moulding the space and formulating the shape of the building all in one gesture. The free plan formulae emphasizes the thematic concentration on the outer surface of the building where skeleton and skin are one.

Wouldn't Mies at this moment in time, with all the advances on concrete structures, be it cast in situ or prefabricated, consider the spatial unity through the natural fusion of the skin and its skeleton?

¹⁰ C. Norberg-Schulz, "Talks with Mies van der Rohe". *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 79, 1958.

Another significant miesian notion is underlined in the Feltrinelli building: the meaning of program. Not only is the Milanese ensemble set on a program, characteristic of Mies' high-rise commissions, but also applies the suppression of "form follows function" dictum, as Mies often liked to remind us, by using the Manheim Opera:

As you see the whole building is one large room. We believe that this is the most economical and practical way of construction today. The purposes the building serves are always changing, but we cannot afford to pull the building down. Therefore we put Sullivan's slogan "form follows function" upside down, and construct a practical and economical space into which we fit the functions.¹¹

To this issue Blaser adds, «To the dictum Form follows function ascribed to Louis Sullivan, Mies opposed the concept of structural design. The functions in a building may change but its form remains»¹².

Thus, it is all about form, its significance and urban intent.

Mies' structures are unique, not only in their glass and in metal expression, but also in their siting establishing landscape relationships. Placed in a natural landscape or on an urban podium they created an order distinct from surrounding morphology, nevertheless complementing the existing urban character.

The Feltrinelli ensemble, in reading Porta Volta, valued the two Caselli Daziari, and placed an autonomous form in visual tension with pre-existing urban structure, establishing continuities and occasional breaks through alignments and a sense of rhythm/repetition. In urban terms, there is a sense of belonging but without imitating the surrounding buildings. The urban integration relies on another given miesian theme: proportion and in this case interpreted in a physical and symbolic meaning (fig. 1). The neutral frame is a complementary key notion, underlining a clear structure/order, set on a repetitive pattern, in constant transparency, revealing nothing but its truth nature.

«I try to make the buildings a neutral frame where human beings and works of art may live their own life», replied Mies to Norberg-Schulz¹³. Feltrinelli is a unique building set in such a way that it seems to comply with every detail, a clear harmonic idea of structure, space and material within the interpretation of place and purpose; built with the intent to engage with the community, representing entrepreneurship.

6.

It is through these viewpoints that we come back to Mies' legacy, as an exceptional beacon of conceptual notions, which their oeuvre is just one possible interpretation leaving us with unimaginable paths to explore. The notions of material, space, structure and, above all, the notion of order go beyond steel frame, glazed surfaces and marble walls. A sense of order, an atmosphere set in a cohesive and coherent narrative

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² W. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. Continuing the Chicago School of Architecture.*

¹³ C. Norberg-Schulz, "Talks with Mies van der Rohe".

of clear, crystalline space is implied. The ensemble presents a tranquillity, as if all is in the right place, be it, architectural details, rhythmic precision or geometric spatial sequences.

As Mies stressed in his 1938 Inaugural Address as Director at AIT:

Every decision leads to a special kind of order. Therefore, we must make clear what principles of order are possible and clarify them. [...] So we shall emphasize the organic principal of order as a means of achieving the successful relationship of the parts to each other and to the whole.

And there we shall take our stand.

The long path from material through function to creative work has only a single goal: to create order out of the desperate confusion of our time. We must order, allocating to each thing its proper place giving to each thing its due according to its nature.¹⁴

For the ones that are still doubtful about the singularities stressed we evoke one of Mies' best-known aphorism: «Architecture has nothing to do with self-expression. All great buildings have said something about the age, not the man»¹⁵.

But, in his 1950 address to IIT, he will go further, almost as if he can foresee Porta Volta's intervention:

Architecture depends on its time.

It is the crystallization of its inner structure, the slow unfolding of its form.

That is the reason why technology and architecture are so closely related.

Our real hope is that they grow together, that someday the one be the expression of the other.

Only then will we have an architecture worthy of its name:

Architecture as a true symbol of our time.¹⁶

Hence, we quest for an Architecture interpreted as a built idea, underlining its time through material expression, where structure is not only a constructive element but also a metric system that regulates and proportions space as an architectural tool. These premises, linked to the permanent values of architecture, are seen as open frames, lessons that go beyond frozen expressions or historical catalogues, empowered by means of free creative work, i.e. fertile ground endowing manoeuvre.

¹⁴ W. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. Continuing the Chicago School of Architecture*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ L. Mies van der Rohe, "1950: Address to IIT". *l'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, 79, 1958.

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