Retracing Mies' Modernism: the anti-romantic city

Andrea Valentini – Architect M.Sc. USI-AAM
andreavalentini@bluewin.ch

1. Introduction

In 1981, American author Tom Wolfe's critique of New York as the central post-war Modernist city is summed up in his dismissal of Manhattan's Sixth Avenue as: "[r]ow after Mies van der row of glass boxes."[1] Certainly, hordes of Miesian imitators have cemented some of the most divisive features of American urban development around the world. However, when compared to other protagonists of the Modern Movement, Mies van der Rohe stands out for his sober approach toward the built environment. Never embracing the *tabula rasa* of Le Corbusier, Mies always looked for a constructive dialogue with history.

It has been widely explored how the Miesian modernist language draws inspiration from the archetypal buildings of Western antiquity, to the point of translating the tectonics of classical orders into the language of steel construction. However, we will argue that the classicism in Mies' work is not limited to architectural detail and composition, but extends to the urban presence of the building. In this regard, it comes as no surprise that art historian Giulio Carlo Argan subscribes the Seagram Building to the noblest breed of classical art, "a Greek original in the middle of a crowd of Roman statues."[2] Classicism is, indeed, a recurring word in decades of literature on Mies' work, proving that the well-known literary quarrel between Romantics and Classicists was not settled in the nineteenth century but rather is an ongoing dialogue in history of human creativity. While shapes and materials had fatally changed with the Modernist revolution, the protagonists of the heroic upheaval against Beaux Arts' "international style" operated in different, and often incompatible, aesthetic frameworks.

It is the author's view that Mies van der Rohe's most precious lesson stands in his ability to distinguish between the premises of Beaux Arts architecture and the build up of centuries of architectural language. His modernist revolution succeeded where most failed - he subverted the romantic premises of academia while standing in a meaningful – and arguably classical – connection with context. This essay will outline the main features of the Miesian "classic" approach to nature and urban design, comparing it to the "romantic" attitude still predominant in Modernist icons, most notably in the work by Le Corbusier.

2. Countryside development

2.1 - A classical approach to Nature – the case of the villa

From a formal standpoint, we can trace the genesis of the Modernist villa back to Palladio and from there to Vitruvius. Nevertheless, attitudes toward space has, since then, evolved significantly. The Palladian villa was often a farm, the attic used as a barn, and the owners only seasonally occupied it. Later, baroque and romantic sensibilities expressed a different approach to land. Indeed, the aristocratic country house of the nineteenth century is more likely to be a place of leisure, passive toward the surrounding land. Notably, it lacks the productive limbs, the *barchesse*, once actively engaging with landscape. Thus, as the fields turned into the idealised Nature of the English garden, the relationship between architecture and landscape shifted from a *continuum*, as in Palladio's Veneto, toward the sheer opposition at the base of the experience of the "picturesque" and eventually, of the "sublime."

At the turn of the twentieth century, mainstream European architects were still choosing to root their practice in the Academic iterations of the previous Century.[3] And even the Corbusian white villas of the 1920's feature the same approach to land of the previous generation: a simple volume, standing (or floating) on a tailored piece of Nature. Yet, during the same decade, Mies van der Rohe was conducting a very different kind of research. Instead of operating a re-invention of the Romantic country house, he concentrated on the spatial quality of the classical prototypes.

Let us consider the Lange house (1927).[4] The villa features a polygonal movement in its back façade, that allows one to see into the living room from the next piece, through the outside space of the garden. This playful

1 Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981): "Introduction," p. 4.
2 Quoted in: AA. VV., *Mies Van Der Rohe: Sa Carrière, Son Héritage Et Ses Disciples* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1987): p. 7.
3 See: Werner Blaser and Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, *Mies Van Der Rohe: Die Kunst Der Struktur* (Zürich: Verlag Für Architektur, 1965).

overture weakens the boundary between interior and exterior, while the rigorous orthogonal brickwork of paths and retaining walls corroborates the idea of a rational continuum of house and garden, thus extending the dwelling to the size of the entire lot. The ingenious window of the Tugendhat house (1930) and the large, almost disproportioned terrace of the Farsworth (1945), are examples of design solutions instrumental to the same spatial posture.

From this standpoint, Mies' appropriation of Doesburg's grammar is no choice of "stjil". This is obvious in his typological research. With the "brick house" (1923), the archetype of the villa as a box is exploded in a series of spaces that seem to grow from a centre, engaging dynamically with a garden that has no pretension of looking more natural than the living room of the house itself. The walls exceeding the limit of the paper toward the cardinal directions suggest a design intention that is reminiscent of the Roman *centuria*. The court house studies[5] of the 1930's and 1940's feature a similar intertwining of interiors and exteriors, architecture and landscape, and lend themselves to multiply in a fractal-like fashion into suburbs and extended cities. This incremental, almost biological, yet still rational approach to space appropriation, can only be compared to the contemporary Broadacre City and is rooted in Western antiquity more than in the forms of urban development of the Modern era.

2.2 - The building as a cell

Mies' research on the country house typology is telling of the architect's attitude toward sub-urban development. Even though the garden of the Lange house is not Palladio's agricultural estate, the building appears to dwell the site in a dialectic that recalls the prototype. Mies succeeded in establishing a link between interior and exterior spaces, bringing "Nature, man, and architecture into a higher unity"[6] – his life-long motto. A commitment evocative of Heidegger's "fourfold".[7] From this standpoint, the building is no longer conceived as a shelter against the natural elements, it's rather a medium between culture and Nature. It's worth remembering that "culture" comes from Latin "colere" meaning both "cultivating" and "inhabiting" a place. While Palladio's villa had a causal link to the agricultural practice, the Lange house's back garden is cultivated through the cultural gesture of imposing on Nature the measure of human mind.

The in-between quality of Miesian villa entails that it blends human and natural characteristics. On one hand, Lange house belongs to nature for its individuality and existential imperfection, on the other, their rigorous geometry is quintessentially human and tends toward abstraction. As the highest architecture of Pericles' Acropolis, now stripped of its original colourful regalia, the German master's creations impose themselves as instant-classics even without the lush effort of shapes, plaster and colours then being deployed by Le Corbusier and the Neoplasticists.

The eloquent austerity of Miesian spaces were certainly influenced by the work of his contemporaries, such as Rudolf Schwartz[8]. Still, the core of his grammar is enlightened by the seminal pamphlet "Space as a Membrane," by Bauhaus student Siegfried Ebeling.[9] The essay introduces a biological analogy to architecture design. As the outer membrane of a cell mediates between its inner chemistry and the environment, similarly, the skin of a Miesian building fulfils the function of regulating the exchange between inner and outer forces, these latter being Nature and Society. Indeed, transparent, reflective or massive skins regulates the degree of permeability of space, according to their quality and texture. We have seen how a concave façade developed along a broken line is a weak boundary, fostering osmosis. Conversely, the convex of the "office skyscraper" study (1921) suggests a more defensive approach. As much as the "brick house" is earthy and looks like an organism taking over a favourable environment; the skyscraper is reflective and shrinks defensively at ground level in favour of its third dimension.

4 Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, item: MR6.151, 1927-1930, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

5 Notably: Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, item: 733.1963, 1945-1946, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

6 See: Wolf Tegethoff and Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, *Mies Van Der Rohe: The Villas and Country Houses,* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1985).

7 Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking", 1951 reprinted in Neil Leach, *Thinking Architecture: A Reader in cultural Theory,* (London: Routledge, 1997), 100-109 pp.

8 Werner Blaser, Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, and Johannes Malms, *West Meets East - Mies Van Der Rohe,* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001) p. 27.

9 Siegfried Ebeling and Spyros Papapetros, *Space as Membrane,* (London: Architectural Association, 2010).

The architecture of the villa is a cultural layer added to the land. The building itself has no boundaries, but those dictated by land ownership. Differently, the city building insists on a limited and potentially harmful context. Not unlike a Greek theatre or temple, it develops multiple layers of well-defined skins, meant to regulate the transition between inclusive and exclusive spaces.

3. Urban manifestations

3.1 - One-point vs. two-point perspective

As with the country house, Miesian research on urban typologies appears to be in contrast with the sensibility of the previous generation and, interestingly, with the spirit of contemporary urban utopias. In a famous sketch, Le Corbusier outlines a *café* facing the lush vegetation of an English garden and, further away, the majestic skyline of a "City for three million" (1922). Aerial acrobatics complete the scene[10]. Needless to say, lifestyle and transportation had changed dramatically with the turn of the Century. Still, the Corbusian vision draws for meaning from recognizable Baroque and Hausmanian devices: the one point perspective, the boulevard, the picturesque park, the landmark. The experience of the "sublime" is revived in the urban setting as architecture transitions from the human to the natural scale, forcing the individual into a position of powerlessness. In this regard, the Algeri plan (1931) is the ultimate expression of a city that becomes landscape. As such, the city transform into a unified form, antagonistic to culture and citizenship. The sheer size of Palace Square in St. Petersburg, Paris' Champs-Élysées or Berlin's Friedrichstadt are just a few examples of a city planning practice that challenges Nature in scale, in a Romantic quest for the experience of the "division by zero."

A different approach is found in Western classicism. Accessing Athen's *acropolis* from the Propileiis, the Parthenon first appears on the right side of the field of view, imposing itself as a stand-alone organism, not aligned with any other building, nor with the axis of the Propileiis. Similarly, the "office skyscraper" breaks the eighteenth century enfilade of Friedrichstrasse, as its triangular plan forces a two-point perspective. The prismatic[11] building's attitude is foreign to the continuous façade's and its plan underlines the project's self-sufficiency, recalling both the bastions of a Renaissance fortress and the geometric pattern of unicellular organisms, as brought to popular imaginary by Haeckel's pioneering engravings[12]. Similar is the posture of the curved "glass skyscraper" (1922), mistakenly assumed as an example of openness and transparency, due to the photos of a lost model.[13] Actually, the architect's sketches[14] show the façade as a thick velvet curtain, concealing the building's structure, to the point of hiding the horizontal rhythm of the slabs. The tower rises in a prominent position at the conjunction of two streets.[15] Still, its irregular main façade deforms the geometry of the lot and denies an obvious reading of the volume. Once again, the city is not assumed as a landscape *per se*, nor as unity in which to operate with either continuity or monumental vanishing points.

3.2 - From the Agora to Park Avenue

The approach emerging from the tower sketches finds subtler expression in the built opus of Mies' maturity. Where the perspective imposed by the continuous façade was not a deliberate choice of the planner, it often happened to be a consequence of profit-oriented building practice. As in the case of Manhattan's grid.[16] The Seagram building (1958), does not try to align with the surrounding blocks and enters the field of view abruptly, offering itself to an oblique perspective. The layered space of *crepidoma,* colonnade, and *naos* is closely revived in as a sequence of increasingly private spaces. The raised square, the lobby, the lift-shafts. The tower typology favours this three-stepped spatial experience. A persistent idea in every tower design from the earlier Lake Shore Drive Apartments until the posthumous IBM Plaza. Nonetheless, this approach finds its ultimate implementation in the public buildings.

10 Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, item: 29711, 1922, Fondation Le Corbusier collection, Paris.
11 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, item: MR20.2, 1921, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
12 Notably: Ernst Haeckel, *Kunstformen Der Natur,* (Leipzig and Wien: Verlag Des Bibliographischen Instituts, 1899), plate 4.
13 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, item: 2377.2001, 1922, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
14 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, item: 474.1974, 1922, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
15 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, item: MR21.5, 1922, Mies Van Der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
16 Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations and Its Prospects,* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1961), pp. 426-431.

The Neue Nationalgalerie (1968) in Berlin lends itself to an obvious comparison with the Altes Museum, by nineteenth century master Karl Friedrich Schinkel. While the latter can be praised for its philological Greek revival, the way the building sits on the site is not classical and rather belongs to post-Renaissance urban schemes. Conversely, the Miesian museum forces visitors to access the *stylobate* from a stair tangent to the façade, thus denying a bi-dimensional, axial experience of the pavilion. Like Athen's a*gora,* the IIT master plan proves the effectiveness of this strategy on a larger scale, as the campus is made up of a group of structures that dialogue with each other without evoking a narrative of power. The pavilions don't challenge each other for landmark status and their positioning compresses or dilate public space according to their function, still they don't suggest a strict hierarchy of paths.

4. Conclusions: Kolbe's dawn and the Modulor

The width of the boulevards of the *ville Radieuse* was certainly multiples of the measure of a man's elbow or leg. And as we appreciate the intention of bridging the gap between geometry and human body, Modulor's masculine silhouette has proved to be insufficient to ensure the human scale of Le Corbusier's bold urban vision. Indeed, Modulor's embodiment of Modernity entails a romantic aberration of the "classical" approach to proportional design as the Corbusian city doesn't question the horizontal hierarchy of spaces engrained in the mainstream urban culture of the time. Indeed, the *ville Radieuse* is the extreme iteration of in ideal that was born in Giulio II's Rome and had, since then, spread through all the capitals of the western hemisphere, in an increasingly grotesque imitation of the classical prototypes.

Miesian schemes are not rooted in such a strict framework, yet they appear to be intrinsically human. While the android-like Modulor is a perfect fit for a 226 centimetres-wide bedroom in a city of cruciform hives, Georg Kolbe's "Dawn" makes sense of the unique spatial quality achieved by Mies van der Rohe in the late 1920s. In contrast to the Corbusian dummy, "Dawn" looks androgynous and self-absorbed. The statue is anatomically disproportionate and it is not representative of human physicality. Nonetheless, its pose suggests a feeling of both concern and delight that belongs to the existential. Not unlike a caryatid, she embodies Semper's vertical axis with gracefulness. We can see this latter posture reflected in Mies van der Rohe's architecture, whose formal outcome is modern yet thoroughly subscribes to classicality. This is evidence that the Miesian approach to history was humanistic rather than merely sympathetic and it's no surprise that such a sensibility came from a country, Germany, that was cradle to ancient Greek philology.

On a larger scale, this vision translates into towns of individuals, with no place for ornament, celebration, and monumentality. Still, the Miesian city is imbued in a sense of diffuse sacredness. Private space is built around the ideals of land cultivation and independent vertical communities, while the public sphere does not intimidate but rather empower the individual, evoking the drive for transcendence that is intrinsic in every human being.

Naturally, this approach appealed to the underlining narratives of post-war "American dream" and the typologies pioneered by the German master became controversial paradigms in America's urban culture.

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