

MIES'S LIFE



Mies in the garden of the Riehl House. c. 1915.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mies van der
Rohe Archive. Gift of the architect

Profound thinker, inspired artist, and one of the greatest architects of the twentieth century, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed buildings that changed our idea of space—and reshaped our cities—during the decades following World War II.

Mies was born in Aachen, Germany, in 1886. As a youth, he trained with his father—a master stonemason—and at a trade school. He apprenticed on several building projects before leaving for Berlin in 1905. After briefly serving in the German army, the young architect went to work for the Art Nouveau designer Bruno Paul. In 1906, at age twenty, he received his first independent commission, a house for Alois Riehl, a professor of philosophy, and his wife Sofie. After completing the Riehl House, Mies sought to enrich his design skills under Germany's leading architect, Peter Behrens, who hired him in 1908.

Behrens encouraged Mies to study the early-nineteenth-century buildings in Berlin designed by the Prussian architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel that had inspired his own stripped-down architecture. Mies also became familiar with the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose designs were published in Germany. In 1912, he left Behrens's employ to establish his own office, where he designed a series of houses influenced by Schinkel's simplified Neoclassical style. The following year, he married Ada Bruhn, who had been introduced to him by the Riehls.

After World War I, Mies began studying the skyscraper and drew up two innovative proposals for steel-framed towers sheathed entirely in glass. One of them was the boldly crystalline Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper, drawn in 1921 for a design competition. Though never built, this revolutionary high-rise drew critical praise and foreshadowed his towers of the late 1940s and 1950s.

At the same time Mies was radically transforming his architecture, he was making drastic changes in his private life. In 1921, he permanently separated from his wife and their three daughters, and changed his name to symbolize his new personal and professional status. Adding the Dutch “van der” and his mother's maiden name, “Rohe,” Ludwig Mies became Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

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Portrait of Mies. c. 1930. Photographer unknown.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mies van der
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During this decade Mies was active in a number of avant-garde circles in Berlin, organizations such as the Novembergruppe, Zehner Ring, and Arbeitsrät für Kunst that championed modern art and architecture. He also contributed to the journal *G*, along with artists Hans Richter, El Lissitzky, and Theo van Doesburg, among others. Mies continued his spatial experiments during the mid-1920s in projects such as the Wolf House. With its fluid floor plan and strong connection between indoors and outdoors, the asymmetrical brick and glass building expressed many of the ideas that Mies would explore throughout his career.

In 1925, the architect was appointed a vice president of the Deutscher Werkbund, a powerful association aimed at elevating the quality of German design. Mies was put in charge of planning the Weissenhof exhibition, a model housing colony in Stuttgart. The modern apartments and houses were designed by leading European architects, including a prominent block by Mies, and opened to the public in 1927. In another project in Stuttgart, a bank and office building for a 1928 competition, Mies extended his earlier experiments with glass-covered structures and proposed an exterior of translucent and transparent panels with letters spelling out the names of the commercial tenants.

The same year, Mies designed one of his most famous buildings, the German Pavilion at the International Exposition held in Barcelona, Spain, in 1929. The small ceremonial hall, now known as the Barcelona Pavilion, had a flat roof supported on chrome columns. The pavilion's walls, made of glass and marble, could be freely positioned, since they did not have to support the structure. This innovative arrangement allowed Mies to realize dynamic interior spaces that achieved a seamless flow between indoors and outdoors. Though it was eventually dismantled, the pavilion became highly influential in the development of modern architecture, and it has recently been re-created on its original site.

Mies further developed his concept of fluid space in a large home built in Brno, Czechoslovakia, for Fritz and Grete Tugendhat. The living room had the same type of freestanding partitions as at Barcelona, as well as fabric hung from ceiling

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Mies and unidentified colleagues in Brussels. 1934. Photographer unknown. Gelatin silver print, 5 1/4 x 7 in. (13 x 18 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mies van der Rohe Archive. Gift of the architect

tracks and retractable glass walls to change the degree of privacy and openness in the space.

In the mid-1920s, Mies began working with the talented designer Lilly Reich, who remained his collaborator and companion for more than a decade. One of their most striking collaborations, the German Building Exhibition in Berlin, demonstrated new types of living arrangements. Each designed a model home, and Reich also created an innovative display of building products.

In 1930, Mies met New York architect Philip Johnson, who was in Europe researching what would become MoMA's first architecture exhibition, "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition." Through this 1932 exhibition, which featured several of Mies's projects, and through architecture publications, the work of the German architect began to be appreciated in the United States.

Though Mies continued to undertake many projects, such as the Gericke House, during the 1930s, none of his designs were built due to the sweeping economic and political changes overtaking Germany. In 1933, Mies permanently shut down the Bauhaus, where he was director and a teacher, under pressure from the new Nazi government.

By the mid-1930s, the architect realized that he had few prospects under the increasingly oppressive Nazi regime. He decided to accept an offer from advertising executive and MoMA trustee Helen Resor and her husband Stanley to travel to the United States. The Resors were eager to have Mies design their vacation home near Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and Mies was now looking for opportunities outside Germany.

After sailing to New York, Mies traveled to the West via Chicago to visit the site. He then returned to New York to spend the next seven months designing the Resor House. While Mies was on his way back to Germany to settle his affairs, the couple decided to cancel the project. Mies, however, had already decided to move to the United States and accepted an offer to head the architecture department at the Armour Institute of Technology in Chicago.

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Mies and office colleagues at the Farnsworth House site, Plano, Illinois. 1949-50. Photographer: Edward Duckett. Gelatin silver print, 3 x 3 in. (7.6 x 7.6 cm). Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal. Myron Goldsmith Archive. © Edward Duckett

After settling in Chicago, Mies was asked by the Armour Institute's president to design a new campus for the school, which was soon renamed the Illinois Institute of Technology. His master plan for IIT on Chicago's South Side marked a huge leap from his small European projects to a vast urban scale. In designing most of the buildings, Mies used off-the-shelf steel beams and columns to create an industrial image expressive of the institute's technological mission.

By 1944, Mies had become an American citizen and was well established in his professional life. He had also formed a new relationship with Chicago artist Lora Marx that would last for the rest of his life.

In the late 1940s, the architect continued to develop his steel-and-glass vocabulary. During this era he designed one of his most famous buildings—a small weekend retreat outside Chicago that was designed for a doctor, Edith Farnsworth. A transparent box framed by eight exterior steel columns, the Farnsworth House is one of the most radically minimalist houses ever designed. Its interior—a single room—is subdivided by partitions and completely enclosed in glass.

Over the next decade, Mies continued to develop this concept of open, flexible space, though on a much larger scale. In 1953, he was invited by Chicago's South Side Planning Commission to develop a building that could serve as both a sports arena and a meeting hall. Working with several IIT students, Mies developed an innovative structural system for the Convention Hall that spanned large distances. Its deep steel roof trusses allowed the seating and exhibit areas to remain unobstructed by elements such as walls and columns.

During this period Mies also realized his dream of erecting a glass skyscraper. The twin towers of the 860-880 Lake Shore Drive apartments, completed in 1949, were followed by other high-rises in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Montreal, Toronto, and elsewhere. These structures were unique not only in their glass and metal detailing, but also in their siting. Placed on plinths—a kind of urban podium—they created ordered precincts distinct from surrounding urban activity.

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Mies in the dining room of his Chicago apartment. 1964. Photographer: Werner Blaser. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm). © Werner Blaser

Even amid the bustle of midtown Manhattan, Mies separated his architecture from the city. In 1954, he was chosen to design a new headquarters for distiller Joseph E. Seagram and Sons on Park Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets. Responsible for his selection was Phyllis Lambert, the daughter of Seagram's president Samuel Bronfman, who urged her father to build a significant design.

Mies separated his tower from the avenue by a plaza, which created an unprecedented gap in the city's fabric. For the building's exteriors, Mies used unusually luxurious materials—dark bronze-tinted glass panels held in place by exposed bronze supports. This urban sophistication and material refinement established the Seagram Building as a masterpiece of skyscraper design. Though the high-rise was widely copied in the postwar decades, very few architects succeeded in achieving the elegance of Mies's seemingly simple architecture.

Though crippled with arthritis during the last decade of his life, Mies and his staff—many of them IIT graduates—remained busy designing buildings in the United States and abroad. The rationalist brilliance of the architect's work was recognized around the world and earned him scores of honors from professional societies and universities. In 1963, Mies was awarded the nation's highest accolade, the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Lyndon Johnson.

In 1962, Mies's career came full-circle when he was invited to design the New National Gallery in Berlin, a museum that was to accommodate changing displays of contemporary art. Mies developed a glass-enclosed hall framed by a dramatically cantilevered roof resting on eight tapered columns. The design achieved his long-held vision of an exposed steel structure that directly connects interior space to the landscape. Though he returned to Berlin several times to see the gallery under construction, Mies was too sick to attend the opening in 1968. He died the next summer in Chicago.

—Deborah K. Dietsch