

HOUSE FIVE: The Glass House—Farnsworth House, Plano, Illinois. 1946–51

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (American, born Germany. 1886–1969)



IMAGE 20: Exterior view. October 1985. Photo: Jon Miller. © Hedrich Blessing



IMAGE 21: Interior view. October 1985. Photo: Jon Miller. © Hedrich Blessing

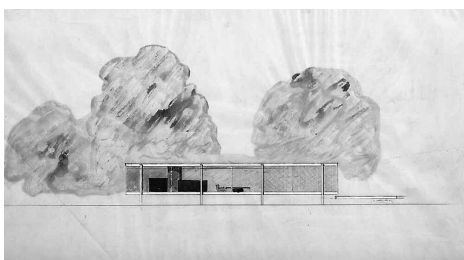


IMAGE 22: Elevation. 1945. Watercolor and graphite on tracing paper, 13 x 25" (33 x 63.5 cm). Drawing attributed to Edward Duckett. Later addition of watercolor: Mies van der Rohe. Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the architect, 1966. © 2004 The Museum of Modern Art, New York

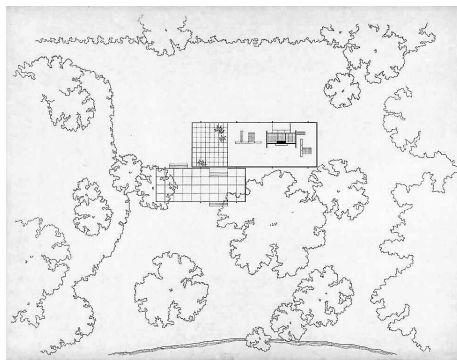


IMAGE 23: Plan. 1946. Ink on paper, 30 x 40" (76.2 x 101.6 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of the architect, 1966. © 2004 The Museum of Modern Art, New York



IMAGE 24: Model. 1985. Synthetic polymer paint, wood, metal, plastic, plexiglass, sand, paper, 30¼ x 60¾ x 42¼" (76.8 x 153.4 x 107.3 cm). Modelmakers: Paul Bonfilio, with Edith Randel and Lenon Kaplan. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchase



IMAGE 25: Barcelona Chair. 1929. Stainless steel bars and leather, 31 x 29¾ x 30" (78.7 x 74.6 x 76.2 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Knoll International, Inc.

ABOUT THE FARNSWORTH HOUSE

The Farnsworth House was built between 1946 and 1951 on twenty acres of land adjacent to the Fox River in the Chicago suburb of Plano, Illinois. Named after Dr. Edith Farnsworth, the client and first owner, this house was unusual at the time because the exterior was made primarily of large sheets of glass and white *enameled* steel. Designed by the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, the Farnsworth House was conceived as a one-story weekend home. Dr. Farnsworth commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design the Farnsworth House, her second home, after they were introduced by mutual friends. She left all of the decisions to the architect, allowing him to design the house as if it were intended for himself. Mies envisioned the interior as consisting mainly of a large living area and other smaller areas, with the kitchen, two bathrooms, and a fireplace positioned close to the center of the main living space. Since the house did not have an opaque exterior, the only way to create any privacy was to draw the curtains.

When construction was completed, Dr. Farnsworth and Mies became involved in a bitter public feud over the interior. Although Dr. Farnsworth was interested in using her existing furniture for the house, Mies insisted on decorating it with his own designs. When Dr. Farnsworth sold the house, the second owner furnished it exclusively with Mies furniture (see Image 21). One of the pieces was Mies's Barcelona Chair (see Image 25), originally designed for the German Pavilion at the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona. At the time the chair was first introduced, it could not be mass-produced due to its elaborate parts and complex steel base.

The dispute between Mies and Dr. Farnsworth received much press coverage, in part because of the unusual appearance of the house, which attracted both positive and negative reactions. For example, a 1953 article in *House Beautiful* magazine presented the following view:

Does it work? The much touted all-glass cube of International Style architecture is perhaps the most unlivable type of home for man since he descended from the tree and entered a cave. You burn up in the summer and freeze in the winter, because nothing must interfere with the “pure” form of their rectangles—no overhanging roofs to shade you from the sun; the bare minimum of gadgets and possessions so as not to spoil the “clean” look; three or four pieces of furniture placed along arbitrary pre-ordained lines; room for only a few books and one painting at precise and permanent points; no children, no dogs, extremely meager kitchen facilities—nothing human that might disturb the architect's composition.⁹

Mies provided this explanation for the house's unusual design:

Nature, too, shall have its own life. We must beware not to disrupt it with the color of our house, and interior fittings. Yet we should attempt to bring nature, houses, and human beings together into a higher unity. If you view nature through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from the outside.¹⁰

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe the house that you see in these pictures. What did you think when you first looked at it? How would you compare it to other houses you have seen in your neighborhood?
- Describe the rooms in these pictures. Now that you have seen photographs of the Farnsworth House, what do you think of it? What do you suppose it would be like to live here?

9. Elizabeth Gordon, “The Threat to the Next America.” *House Beautiful* (April 1953); repr. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (1998), 141.

10. Christian Norberg-Schulz, “A Talk with Mies van der Rohe.” *Baukunst und Werkform*, no. 11 (1958); repr. Fritz Neumeier, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, trans. Mark Jarzombek (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 235.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITY

Have your students write a short essay in response to the excerpt from *House Beautiful*. Ask them to consider the following questions:

- **In the context of Mies's statement about the Farnsworth House, do you think his design was successful? Why or why not?**
- **How do you think people would react to the Farnsworth House today if it had just been built? Do you suppose they would react as people did in 1951? Explain.**

ABOUT LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE

Mies van der Rohe was born Ludwig Mies, in Aachen, Germany, in 1886. Aachen, located in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Nordrhein-Westfalen), close to the borders of Belgium, The Netherlands, and Luxembourg, is also known as Aix-la-Chapelle.

The youngest of five children, Mies worked in his father's stone-cutting shop until he was thirteen years old, gaining valuable experience that would later emerge in his work as an architect. He subsequently went to trade school for two years, and when he was fifteen he worked in an interior decorator's workshop. Three years later, Mies found a job working for a local architect. When he was nineteen, he moved to Berlin to work in the office of Peter Behrens, an architect who was well-known at the time for his designs of factories and houses. (Other promising architects, such as Le Corbusier, also came to work in Behrens's office around that time.) Mies earned his first commission designing a house for Alois Riehl, a philosophy professor at Friedrich-Wilhelm University, in Berlin.

From 1930–33, Mies was the director of the Bauhaus, an art, architecture, industrial design, and crafts school founded by Walter Gropius in 1917, and originally located in Weimar, Germany. The focus of the Bauhaus was to mass-produce artistic designs for household items, such as teapots, furniture, lighting fixtures, fabrics for wallcoverings, and jewelry. Mies's leadership of the Bauhaus coincided with Hitler's rise to power in the 1930s. Hitler assumed control of individual liberties as well as artistic, political, and cultural thought. Although Mies had relocated the Bauhaus to Berlin in an attempt to escape the increasingly unstable political atmosphere in Weimar, he was forced to close it down in 1933 due to pressure from the Nazis, who opposed modernist art and architecture. In the following years, Mies struggled to retain commissions for his design work. In 1938, as a refugee of Nazi Germany, he immigrated to the United States. Mies became director of the architecture department at the Armour Institute of Technology (now known as the Illinois Institute of Technology).

Mies was a prolific architect, designing homes, office buildings, banks, museums, and school buildings in the United States, Canada, Germany, the Czech Republic, and Spain. One of his best-known designs is the Seagram Building, a skyscraper built in the 1950s in midtown Manhattan. Scholars have attributed Mies's primary influences to the De Stijl movement and Frank Lloyd Wright. Mies's work was featured in a 1932 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art called *Modern Architecture: International Exhibition*, which consequently increased the public's interest in modern architecture.

Mies van der Rohe died in Chicago, Illinois, in 1969.

RESEARCH PROJECTS

1. The Bauhaus

Conduct research on the Bauhaus movement. How would you define the movement, and what is its history? Who were some of the artists active in the movement, and what are some examples of their work? How did some of the main Bauhaus concepts surface in Mies's own designs? The political climate in Germany had a major impact on the fate of the

Bauhaus movement. How did the closing of the Bauhaus affect both Mies's career and the reception of modern European architecture in the United States?

2. Politics and the Impact on Artists

During the 1930s, Hitler rose to power in Germany. As a result, many artists and intellectuals, like Mies, sought asylum in other countries to escape censorship and the suppression of individual and political rights. Find out who some of these artists were, and how their lives and work were affected by political events in Germany at that time. Write a report that presents your research.

GLOSSARY

Bauhaus: The Bauhaus was a school created by Walter Gropius in 1917, which first opened in Weimar, Germany, and then relocated to Dessau and Berlin before the Nazis finally closed it down in 1933. The name Bauhaus makes reference to the German word *Bauhütten*, the homes for stonemasons during the High Middle Ages. The Bauhaus conducted its training through artists' workshops, where students gained practical and hands-on skills in art, craft, and architectural and industrial design.

Enamel: To treat a material in order to create a smooth and glossy surface. Enamel can also refer to a type of paint made from very fine pigments and resin that form a glossy surface.