

Fritz Neumeyer

In June 2017, Ana Tostões interviewed Fritz Neumeyer, reference expert on Mies van der Rohe, in order to discuss the importance of Mies's legacy. Neumeyer conducted a deep research on Mies's writings and intellectual activity that has resulted in the worldwide renowned publication *Mies van der Rohe. Das kunstlose Wort. Gedanken zur Baukunst* [*The Artless Word: Mies Van der Rohe on the Building Art*] (Berlin, 1986; Cambridge/London, 1991; Madrid/Paris/Milan, 1996; Seoul 2007 – see p. 93) offering a precursor critical anthology of Mies theoretical corpus.

This issue of *docomomo Journal* intends to discuss how the buildings of Mies van der Rohe survived the time and the challenges encountered on the restoration works conducted so far. I may say that the balance between construction and tectonics – evident in the works of Mies – has been resilient. How do you explain this relationship within his architecture?

Construction refers to the empirical act, how something is done, put together. Tectonics is the expression, using construction as a means of architectural expression. A column has a curve, a head, a flute, etc.; it's not just a constructional form. It explains to our senses the act of carrying load, how the building and its members are carrying. Mies was interested in tectonics from the very beginning, leading to its higher explicitly in his last work, the *Neue Nationalgalerie*, in Berlin. In the construction plans, we find the word "column". Mies not only used the term, as he actually designed a column, which so far was a taboo for the modern architect. 4 industrial profiles diminishing to the top were welded together to implement a kind of entails and even capital had been designed. He knew that this would be much more expressive than the mere technical form. This abstract use of a classical element was part of the Friedrich Schinkel-lesson that Mies learned in his early years in the Peter Behrens office.

An engineer would hardly suggest this huge roof to be supported by 8 columns, placed apart from the corners and moved to the outer edge of the roof plate, to the last centimetre possible, as Mies did in the *Neue Nationalgalerie*. This formal decision was about architectural expression *by* construction and not the result of constructive rational reasoning. This peculiar position of the 8 columns is essential for the tectonic impression of a majestically floating roof over a wide-span space.

By highlighting the character of materials, Mies was able to bring the great qualities of special woods, marbles, stones, into the creation of masterpieces.

Materiality for Mies became an important issue in relation with the process of abstraction of architectural form. He never wanted to have abstraction end with the white box as the ultimate ideal of the modernist abandoning of traditional architectural values. For Mies the process of abstraction never ended with abstract geometry but with the presence of architectural values in their elementary expression. As an equivalent to abstraction, the richness of materials secures the perception qualities of architectural space. This is what

makes Mies so unique as a modern architect. He used modern and classical materials next to another, without any ideological constraints. Maintaining opulence and richness under the condition of abstraction was the issue, and this prevented him from making the mistake of simplifying things to a dead end. I think one of the great virtues of his architecture is that it cultivates in a classical manner the sensitive relation between the haptic and the optic.

Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat once told me that, when her mother Greta returned to the house, in 1969, she was so relieved when she found the onyx wall, caressing it while muttering – "oh, thanks god you still here!" – like it was an animal.

This quality of a seemingly "bodily" physical presence is exactly what makes architecture open to acquaint life and allow specific experiences. The surfaces and materials and their careful embodiment define the atmospheric quality of a space and its peculiar aesthetic life.

I was very surprised while visiting the Dom in Aachen, when I immediately realised "Mies was here!".

I've always had a rather similar impression, with regards to the marriage of opposites which determines the philosophy of Mies — and the *Neue Nationalgalerie* is a brilliant demonstration of it; the marriage of the monumental and heavy with transparency and openness. I don't know any other architect who was able to produce a kind of light monumentality or vice versa a monumental transparency. In the Aachener Dom, you have exactly these two different architectural worlds attached to another: the massive Octagon Romanic building and the filigree construction of the gothic chapel with walls consisting almost only of pure colour attached to another as if they were Siamese twins; two opposite worlds come together, if you wish, the classical and the modern, and form a whole. To unite these two worlds has been Mies's ultimate goal, according to his own words. Maybe, Aachen was already preparing the grounds for what Mies called "bound dualism" as he described his concept for architecture in the late 1920s. But one can also think of Schinkel's concept of morphology, which also relates to opposites and their gradual transformation from one condition into the other. It is possible to create a tangent between two poles, the monumental and the transparent, the classic and the modern. In the typical modernist perspective, if one is a classicist, one can't be modern. Mies proves that these are stupid dichotomies and that it is artistically much more interesting to

have opposites starting a dialogue and being used for expressing architectural ideas. When I first stood inside the Dome of Aachen I also thought: "Here you have it, Mies!". On the outside the magnificent bronze door from the 11th century shows a grid with proportions that make one think of the Seagram's façade!

Your work from the 1980s, *Das kunstlose Wort*, was fundamental to further understand Mies. In his text "*Baukunst und Zeitwille*" (1924), Mies makes clear that he was not looking for being or not being modern, but the ability of translating the time into space.

Yes. Mies was not so much interested in modernity as such, but in what could be regarded as essential for his own time and how to translate it into architectural properties. First modern construction work as such seemed for him to be the expression of it; but rather soon he realized that not the technical as such was valuable but what you are able to make out of it. For Mies the modern achievement of a new kind of freedom of movement in space challenged the architectural understanding of space and the relation between inside and outside. As modern transportation techniques like cars, airplanes etc. allowed man to freely move in space, modern construction in architecture would allow a new type of architectural space open for movement and bringing closer together the opposites of inside and outside. The ground floor plans of Mies tell a fascinating story about this idea.

It's very interesting to find that idea in a family house too, as it is the case of the Tugendhat House. I always explain the students that it's not a house of a *marchand d'art* or from an exotic couple; it's a normal house, with children, parents, cakes, birthdays, bicycles; with a family who lived there appreciating everything and creating this notion of freedom in space.

In his explanations for the House Hubbe of 1935, Mies speaks about an architectural space sheltering and protecting us, but at once making the horizon to become part of the interior. This space is at once both confining and defining. In the Tugendhat House, you can experience this double orientation towards two poles in an exemplary fashion: you have the openness of the glass walls providing a great view into the landscape in front of you and a monumental slab of onyx marble in your back which holds you in your place like a magnet and protects you from being pulled away through the lowerable glass walls into the open space, to the horizon.

Looking at so many unique, almost epic and transcendental, characteristics of Mies architecture, it is inevitable to conclude how difficult must be to rehabilitate his works.

It's not easy. Within the refurbishment works of the *Neue Nationalgalerie*, I was hired as an independent person to evaluate things from my point of view of Mies's architecture; My job is to explain Mies's idea of architecture exem-

plified in this amazing building and to act as the protector of both. We started our work in 2011/2012. We made a visit to the USA to learn about the restoration problems with Mies buildings in Chicago, Toronto, Houston and New York. In the meantime, all participants in some way have become Mies experts or lovers, and this makes the collaboration between the different participants a real pleasure; I believe, we are really a good team.

You have been teaching how to read Mies.

Yes. And there have been a couple of things where my point of view has had some impact, for example on the use of the sculpture on the podium of the *Neue Nationalgalerie*. Exactly in the main axis of the entrance, the Barnett Newman sculpture, *The Broken Obelisk*, has been placed some years ago, which I think was terribly wrong. First, because as an object, it is an obstacle occupying the position that the visitors should obtain, blocking the view through the upper hall; plus, it miniaturizes the architectural dimensions; and second, Mies never, ever, in any of his buildings and drawings, employed abstract geometrical sculpture for his spaces. His choice of sculpture always referred to anthropomorphic or abstract organic forms, but never abstract geometrical forms. Why? Because sculpture in Mies's understanding has to produce a kind of complimentary element to architecture. While architecture necessarily tends towards geometrical abstraction, sculpture should represent the anthropomorphic or organic which in the process of modern abstraction has been banished from the formal language of architectural expression. For Mies, abstract geometrical sculpture was redundant. It equals modern abstract architectural form, but it adds no complementary formal quality to it in terms of a tension between the opposites of expression. Following my argument, the museum removed the *Broken Obelisk* from its frontal and central position to the back of the pavilion.

I'm also insisting on the sculpture garden being reconnected to the museum-path because it is an essential part of the tremendous spatial sequence and experience Mies provided for this museum. This space-journey begins when entering the podium with the experience of an outside-inside dualism in the moment you step under the floating roof. Being inside the glass hall this dualism becomes much more intense as due to the surrounding glass walls the interior space is almost like an exterior. Leaving the main hall, you get down into the lobby, connected to the exhibition spaces of the ground floor with the main axis leading into the courtyard of the sculpture garden - which like a *hortus conclusus* open only to the sky - completes the morphological span of architectural spaces this building can provide.

This travel offers a unique sequence of opposite spatial experiences in connection to the experiencing of exhibited artwork. This makes the building being a unique kind of

museum. It merges the experiencing of art and architectural space and provides a wide range of opportunities of viewing artwork, from the almost intimate encounter in an enclosed space in the ground level to the almost public and urban condition of the upper hall where one can see works of art against the backdrop of the city: the bustles of modern life to be seen in the background but inside a space of silence. Mies's artwork of architectural space creates a moment of a halt, of stepping aside, although being in the middle. This experience of both distance and centrality at once can reorganize and re-sensitizes our attention and make a dialogue between you and the art object happen. There is no better preparation for viewing art that architecture can provide than here, and to preserve this quality is a must.

Museums today tend to turn into event machines for art mediation. However, this type of museum might be outdated in 10 or 20 years, when people may be fed up with media excitement and the experience of unmediated encounter with art in space and the intimate dialogue between the viewer and the work of art will be recognized and estimated even more. The Mies museum is a singular place for the perceiving of art. It is more a place of meditation than mediation. As such it has to be estimated and preserved.

And after this journey we are different.

In some way, yes! Here we can experience spatial perceptions only architecture can provide. Nothing else. Here we also can experience what architecture finally is about: it is the art of space, which is more than art of producing built objects. And we can think about the relevance of Mies's architectural understanding that time expresses itself at first hand by space and not by the object.

With regards to the issue of conservation, there are a lot of problems with the Mies building. All the original glass sheets broke due to constructive tension and friction. Today, no one in the world anymore produces 16-millimeter thin glass sheets of that enormous size. Plus, the thermic shortcomings of such a thin glass sheet are no longer acceptable to us today. The new glass sheets will be of 25 mm and this has consequences for the frame construction. You can't just make the steel profiles grow in size accordingly. On the contrary, they have to be made thinner on one side in order to keep the proportions of the façade-system. Instead of one 16 mm single glass sheet, we will now have two of 12mm, glued together with a very thin insulation in between; as a consequence of this change the optical reflections are slightly different. This affects the view from outside to inside and thus the visual continuity of the roof structure. Also, the preservation of steel provides some difficulties once rust has taken over.

Today we have all the normative regarding energy, comfort and safety, to address.

Yes, there is a number of things we have to adapt to today, just in terms of climate and se-

curity and building rules. But also the current loan conditions of artwork are much more restrictive as at the time of Mies. Collectors and museums today lend their artefacts only if a certain level of humidity, temperature, light can be guaranteed. Improving the climate therefore is a serious issue for the restoration of the building in order to maintain its function as a museum.

But in the end, when the restoration will be finished and the building looks like it looked before, people will ask themselves what for 100 million Euro have been spent, because you won't see it. And if it is like this, then we have done our job well, because this means we preserved its identity and likeness. I am rather confident that the restoration work will be done as good as one can do it. Every one of us gives his best.

I know this building since its erection and I've also experienced the changing of the cityscape around it; the wall coming down, the *Potsdamer Platz* going up, with the building maintaining its corner-stone capacity and autonomy as an urban monument.

Resisting.

And getting even stronger in its presence in space. The turmoil around it even more underlines the tremendous quality of this building as an island of order. Its podium is a balcony onto the city overlooking the chaotic landscape of the so called *Kulturforum* which is nothing else than a collection of individual buildings unable to create any kind of acceptable urban space. Mies related his building to the only historical remnant which survived the war, a small classicist brick church. Mies visually connects with this building so that both together can establish a minimum of urban coherence and create a refuge of order and calmness.

Like an acropolis. Like a victory.

Yes, even more, because this modern acropolis provides the only inviting urban space within this urban desert; the only space which provides a place like an urban square that justifies the term "forum" to be used here at all.

Fritz Neumeyer

(b. 1946, Germany). Architect, PhD in engineering, Professor Emeritus of the *Technische Universität Berlin*, where he held the chair of architectural theory (1992-2012).

He also taught at the *Universität Dortmund*, the Princeton University, the Southern California Institute of Architecture in Santa Monica, the Graduate School of Design at the Harvard University, the *Université de Louvain*, the *Institut d'Humanitats de Barcelona* and the *Universidad de Navarra*.

Among his most important publications are *Das Haus Wiegand von Peter Behrens in Berlin-Dablem* (1979); *Mies van der Rohe. Das kunstlose Wort: Gedanken zur Baukunst* (1986); *Oswald Mathias Ungers Architektur 1951-1990* (1991); *Friedrich Gilly 1772-1800. Essays on Architecture* (1994); *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Hochhaus am Bahnhof Friedrichstraße* (1992); *Der Klang der Steine. Nietzsches Architekturen* (2001) and *Quellentexte zur Architekturtheorie* (2002).

The pioneering restoration of the Peter Behrens's *Haus Wiegand* (1912, Berlin), in 1979, and the *Planwerk Innenstadt Berlin*, in 1997, must be highlighted among his architectural works.