

The Void of Mies: Unfolding Unbuilt Projects of Mies van der Rohe

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Abstract

The core of Mies van der Rohe still remains as a vast void. Since the Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project in 1921, Mies's manifestos have always been mediated to the world through the unbuilt projects. In Mies's planes, there is a dialectic between the manifesto and the realized works in the unbuilt projects, which complement each other's dimensions, and only in this way can Mies the architect be historicized. However, upon examining the unbuilt projects in detail, hidden qualities have been uncovered that have not yet been recognized by historians and critics. Thus far, more than 35 unbuilt projects have been analyzed academically, both known and unknown, creating hypothetical spaces in the form of drawings, 3D modeling, and physical models. The unexplored qualities that have emerged in this process are, in short, the phenomenological manifestation of space and Mies's particular view of nature, as well as the spiritual boundaries that lie behind these planes of perception.

Keywords: Mies van der Rohe, unbuilt projects, manifest, Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project, Brick Country House Project, Barcelona Pavilion, Farnsworth House, void, emptiness, Francesco dal Co, Beatriz Colomina, Romano Guardini, universal space, less is more

1. Introduction: A Void

The core of Mies still remains as empty as a vast void. Discourses on Mies have been written from diverse perspectives, including writings by Peter Eisenman, Francesco Dal Co, and Rosalind Krauss. Even today, the traces of Mies can be seen behind the work of contemporary architects such as SANAA and Christian Kerez. However, the question of where Mies truly belongs remains unresolved, still unknown. This might be why the specter of Mies continues to hover within the realm of contemporary architectural discourse.

2. Media / Reality

How did Mies make himself present in history and leave his traces behind? Most probably this was made possible by traversing the realms of physical space and media space. Drawing on the zeitgeist of media distribution, which became prominent in the early 1920s, Mies achieved this in a highly deliberate and political manner.

Since presenting five projects, including Glass Skyscraper Project (1922) and Concrete Office Building Project (1923), through media outlets, Mies's manifestos were almost always mediated to the world via unbuilt architecture, continuing into his American period after 1938. These projects were introduced on publicity platforms such as publications and exhibitions, including G (1922), Frühlicht (1922), Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung (1922), and Merz (1924). Notably, much of the historical discourse written about Mies has been developed through his unbuilt projects, solidifying his place in architectural history. It is evident that Mies held a conscious and almost subversive awareness of the power of media that emerged in the 1920s.

Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, raised questions about the transformative power of media distribution in his era. In a near-prophetic manner, Mies had been employing the political potential of media with striking intentionality since his Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project (1921). Human perception evolves with time, and as Benjamin pointed out, perception – mediated by reproducible media – tends to depersonalize the environment. While the materiality of architecture and its representation in media often appear contradictory, Mies's approach demonstrates a dialectical relationship between the manifestos expressed through his unbuilt projects and his realized works, where each dimension seems to complement the other. This complementary relationship preserves the aura of the works within the realm of the unbuilt, avoiding any sense of loss.

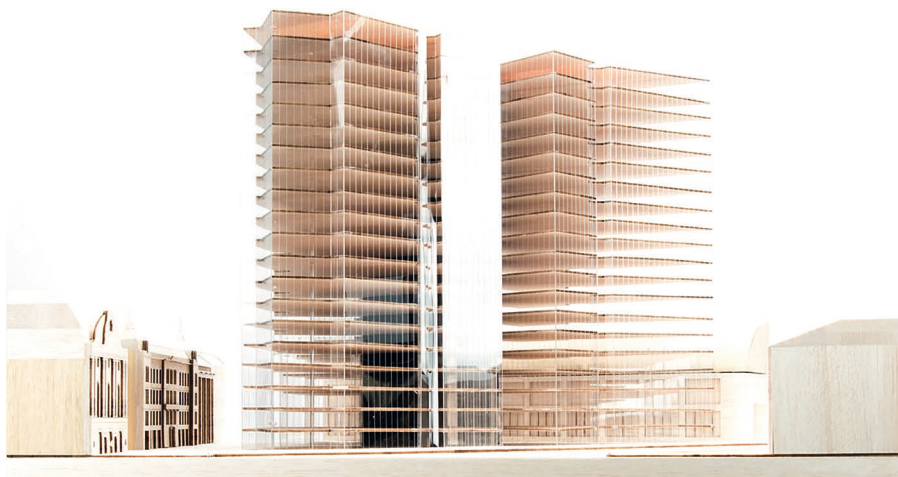


Fig. 1. Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project (1921). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

However, it should be noted that in Mies's activities from the 1920s to the 1930s, a tension – or even frustration – becomes apparent between his media representations and the physical forms of his realized works. For instance, after presenting the fluid, open spaces integrating with nature in the Brick Country House (1924), one can sense a degree of compromise in the realized Lange House and Esters House (1930). This reflects a transformation in the locus of architectural production – from the site of construction to the realm of media distribution – or a traversal of these two domains. Architecture as media, more ephemeral than physical architecture yet more enduring, secured historical space. Architecture begins when it enters the discursive space of architecture itself.

3. Hypothetical Representations

Through the process of tracing the historicization of Mies van der Rohe by countless historians and critics, I have long felt a certain incomprehensibility, or perhaps the absence of a fundamental essence. Simply put, it is the phenomenological or physical dimension of experience inherent in Mies's unbuilt projects, which often serve as the main subject in his historicization.

Nearly all of Mies's sketches are housed in the Mies van der Rohe Archive at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. When examining these sketches, many perspectives emerge alongside his floor plan studies. Notably, the majority of these sketches – drawn with pencil or charcoal on tracing paper – seem to focus on confirming the phenomenological experience of space from Mies's own viewpoint. For instance, in the 1930s sketches of the unbuilt projects, the glass in these sketches is transparent without openings and without materiality, so that the interior space, the walled courtyard space, and the landscape outside of it are represented in a strangely articulated and flowing manner. The aspect of space that emerges in my mind while piecing together fragments of such incomplete sketches is a strange manifestation of nature that is different from the way nature usually appears, and I feel a boundary that could be called an inner nature hidden behind this phenomenon. This may, perhaps, touch upon the core of Mies, a quality that historians have yet to fully uncover.

Against this backdrop, over 35 historically significant but lesser-known unbuilt projects by Mies are hypothetically reconstructed through academic research, spanning from the 1910s to the 1960s. Mies's unbuilt works often trace them only imperfectly. Architectural drawings lack much information and remain fragmentary, making it impossible to accurately depict a comprehensive picture. Mies was known for rigorously selecting his sketches, discarding many traces that did not contribute to his concept or failed to satisfy him. This approach unintentionally presented an incomplete yet meticulously curated vision for each project. It seems plausible that Mies deliberately intended to historicize the unbuilt in this manner.

The research involves reconstructing a hypothetical image from these incomplete traces. This includes rough sketches, inconsistently drafted drawings, and loosely rendered perspective studies made with soft pencils. It is an almost impossible process of hypothetically reconstructing the essence of Mies's core through the many possibilities of interpretation. This process not only encompasses selected projects but also traces the evolution of Mies's shifting thoughts over his lifetime, capturing these transformations temporarily through drawings, perspectives, and physical models.

4. Phenomenological Perspective

Through such a process, hypothetical spaces gradually emerge, either digitally in three dimensions or as physical models. We consistently examined the launch of unbuilt in this process from a phenomenological standpoint. Mies's plans left behind charcoal perspectives on tracing paper, many of which are phenomenological studies from a human perspective. What was Mies thinking when he drew these perceptual perspectives, so to speak, and then put them into the plans? We have virtually moved through the digital space that emerged from the limited floor plans and sections left behind, arranging walls, glass, and columns, and confirming the quality of the phenomena that emerged there for the first time.

One of Mies van der Rohe's most notable unbuilt projects, the Brick Country House (1924), serves as a manifesto from the 1920s. Wandering through the space of its geometrical plan, one becomes aware of subtle shifts at boundaries where layered spaces dramatically transition. At certain scattered points, multiple wall edges intersect obliquely, momentarily dissolving the gestalt of figure and ground. However, with just a step forward, the space reorganizes itself into a reconfigured, differential composition, taking us into a newly assembled spatial realm. Floating architectural elements rigorously define various spatial domains, which sometimes appear to flow with the movement of the body, and at other times give way to enclosed spaces. The sense of perception is continually shifting, and the spatial domains are not limited to the interior, but also extend to the exterior courtyards and exterior landscapes through the walls and glass that connect to the outside. At certain moments, the interior space appears as if it is flowing and takes on a landscape-like aspect while incorporating the courtyards, or conversely, the courtyards enclosed by the exterior walls that extend outside appear like interior spaces, a reversal of perception.

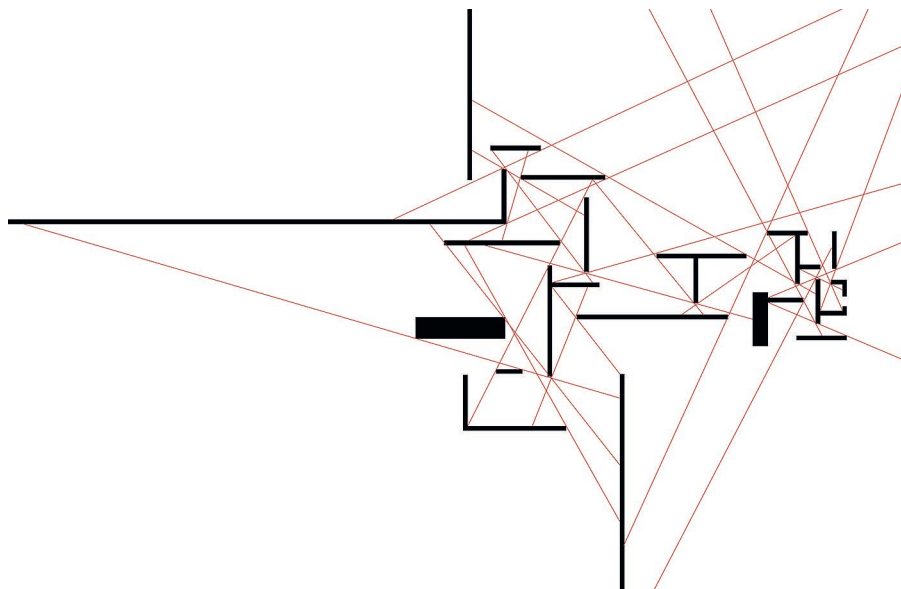


Fig. 2. Hidden Geometry. Brick Country House Project (1924). © Münster School of Architecture and the author

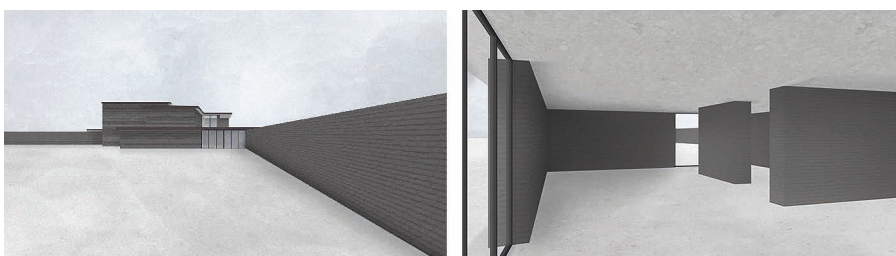


Fig. 3a, b. Brick Country House Project (1924). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

Returning to the plane, we see that this alienated phenomenon has been caused by the countless diagonal lines drawn there. These oblique lines, which touch the edges of the wall in at least three and often as many as seven places, cannot be coincidental. This geometric order, which had already appeared suddenly in the floor plan of Haus Lessing (1922) and was fully sublimated by the Brick Country House (1924), defines the arrangement of walls, glass, and openings. Yet, these virtual lines should not be seen as mere aesthetic compositions or forms. Only by immersing oneself in the phenomenology of the architectural body derived from this geometric order does its intrinsic nature begin to illuminate. The method that emerged from the unbuilt projects was later adopted in realized projects such as Wolf House (1925), Barcelona Pavillon (1929), Lange / Esters House (1930), Tugendhat House (1930), and almost all of the projects until 1938 when he moved to the United States.



Fig. 4. German Pavilion, International Exposition, Brussels (1934). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author



Fig. 5. Court House Project (1938). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author



Fig. 6. Court House with Garage (1939). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

These invisible lines represent a physical threshold. As we navigate through walls as linear boundaries, countless absent lines are continuously crossed, where at subtle thresholds, the chain of differential domains transforms completely. This was precisely the place where the potential of space is stripped

away. Through such virtual reconstructions, we reach moments where we faintly sense the traces of thought behind the perceptual images Mies studied through his physical senses.

Our attempt may be an act contrary to Mies's intention to rigorously present the incomplete, yet intentionally focused, representations he left behind as a meticulous artifice. Beatriz Colomina once mentioned the thesis that "architecture is not only something represented but also a means of representation". In the process of this work, we have come to ask whether a phenomenological sense of the body was certainly assumed to be behind the creation of these representations. We believe that this is a perceptual dimension that critics have not yet experienced from the remaining drawings, and that the risk we have taken will barely be avoided if such an attempt provides an opportunity to infuse a discourse that has not yet been discovered. As one walks through the flowing, unknown space that emerges in the unbuilt projects, a moment arises when the physical phenomena and views of nature that unfold seem to ultimately touch upon the thoughts of the unknown Mies.

5. Enclosed Nature

A prominent characteristic of the unbuilt projects that have emerged is the thought of the conflicting materials of wall and glass. Put simply, many of Mies's projects from his Berlin period ideally enclosed the external environment with solid walls, while within these walls, fragmented spaces defined by additional walls, glass, and columns flowed seamlessly into interconnected, enclosed courtyards. This tendency evolved through projects such as Nolde House (1929), Golfclub Krefeld (1929), Courtyard Studie (1934–35), Ulrich Lange House (1935), and Hubble House (1935). In these works, the intricately segmented interior spaces and the exterior spaces defined by outer walls appear in an almost parallel relationship. The courtyard as an exterior space is either paved with a grid or, ideally, covered with a lawn. In exceptional cases, a limited number of trees and sculptures are placed, but in any case, the exterior space is treated as an extremely abstract quality, as if it has been stripped of any sense of life. These courtyards can be described as a form of internalized nature. These courtyards can be described as a form of internalized nature. Moving through the interior of the reconstructed perspective, it becomes evident that the glass dividing exterior and interior space is not invisible;



Fig. 7. Golf Club Project, Krefeld. Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

rather, its solidity appears to correlate with the exterior wall as an absolute substance, devoid of any sense of reflection. Behind this enclosed aspect, one might question whether it conceals the hidden political reactions of its time or opens up a deeper, spiritual dimension through its very act of enclosure. These questions compel a pause for reflection. In these perceptual forms, an intrinsic spiritual dimension is sensed, transcending the vague plane of physical nature. This leads to the question: where is this heading?



Fig. 8. Hubble House (1935). Reconstruction.
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The dialectical quality of walls and glass, enclosure and fluidity, underwent a transformation after Mies emigrated to the United States in 1938, eventually reversing in his later works. In the Museum for a Small City (1942), planned four years after his move to America, Mies continued to use compositional elements such as walls, columns, a thin roof, and courtyard settings from his Berlin period. However, the crucial difference here lies in the complete enclosure of the flowing, segmented interior space by glass walls. While partially placed external walls frame the surrounding environment, visually drawing the landscape into the interior space, the glass-enclosed interior simultaneously blocks external

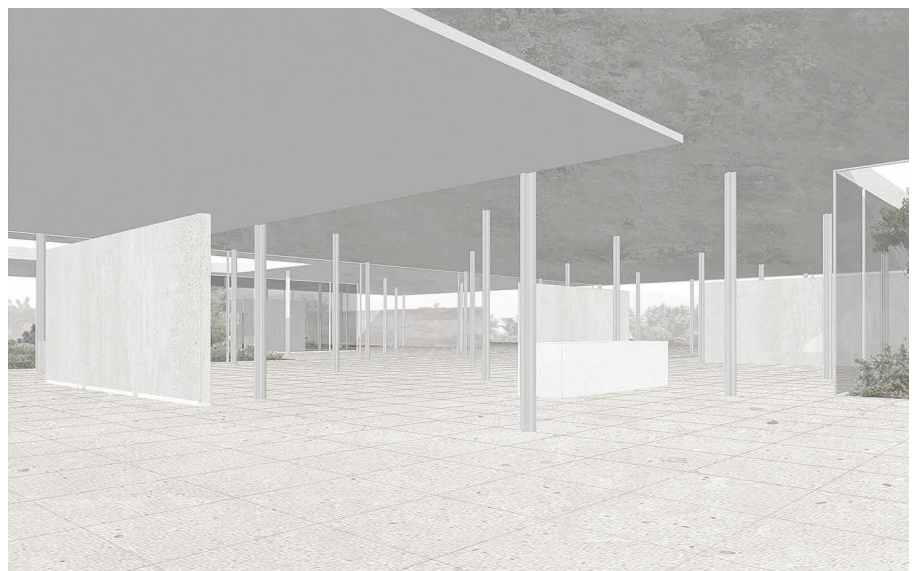


Fig. 9. Museum for a Small City (1942).
Reconstruction. © Münster School
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sounds and air. This results in a suspended sensation, seemingly disconnected from the world, despite the panoramic visual effect of the glass. The treatment of glass and the internalized nature of the scene here will be refined nine years later at Farnsworth House (1951). Mies once remarked: “Nature, as seen through the glass walls of the Farnsworth House, presents a more profound meaning than when observed outdoors. More questions are asked about nature because it becomes part of a greater whole”. In such fragments of phenomena, we may glimpse Mies’s core potential, his transcendent dimension.



Fig. 10. 50 × 50 House (1951). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

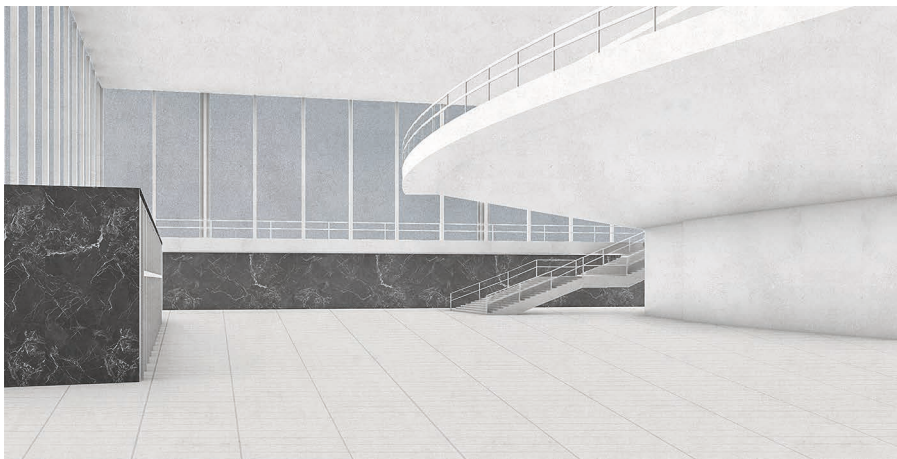


Fig. 11. National Theatre, Mannheim (1953). Reconstruction. © Münster School of Architecture and the author

6. On the Spiritual Dimension

There is nothing more sinful than the simple yet seductive statement that “what is functional is beautiful”. The Barcelona Pavilion, with its specific function of manifesting space within a temporary exhibition, embodies surfaces that reflect and multiply through glass, chrome columns, polished onyx, and water basins. Paradoxically, beyond its purpose, it reveals an “uninhabited” place that alienates humanity. Later in his American Period, through iconic works of 20th century architecture, such as the Farnsworth House and the New National Gallery in Berlin, Mies would redefine the capitalist space of the 20th century, universal space, as a spatial typology, and philosophically redefine the social phenomena of the time, while intensifying a tendency to escape the so-called functions of living and exhibiting. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes

clear that this inclination was already prominently present in the unbuilt projects Mies had been presenting to the world since the 1920s. Furthermore, Mies's later hidden endeavor in America seems to have been to sublimate capitalist rationality into a transcendent universality.

Thus, the unbuilt projects phenomenologically reconstructed transition into an intrinsic dimension through virtual and bodily exploration. Our ongoing inquiry into the core of Mies has led to the hypothesis that it is, in some sense, rooted in the intangible nature of his unbuilt projects.

The visible is the handmaiden to the invisible. Mies's relentless focus on the visible details undoubtedly aligns with this philosophy. The I-beam columns in the Farnsworth House were driven completely outward by welding flanges from the side to the webbing of the channel beams that run around the four perimeters, and glass was installed in the process, symbolically presenting a homogeneous space that ideally extends infinitely without any obstruction to the floor and ceiling surfaces. In this abstract setting, panoramic views of the Fox River and trees flow into the interior through the glass walls. Yet, as all the glass except the entrance door is fixed, one feels paradoxically cut off from the world, like an insect trapped in a transparent glass cup. This place ultimately expresses what Jacques Herzog termed a *Nicht-Raum*, a non-space, that seems to exclude the body itself.

The invisible horizon of the psyche, which was always an absolute question for Mies, could not escape the awareness that he was delicately redefining his relationship with God in a transforming age through the medium of architecture. However, it must have been an almost impossible task for Mies, who was closely reading Nietzsche's "Beyond Good and Evil" at a time when the closer one tried to get to God, the further away from God's place one might be. The world of the psyche with which Mies struggled is still a dark text, like a dark hole hidden in the distance.

As Francesco Dal Co points out, many notes are left in the margins of the pages of the many philosophical or theological books in Mies's study. In the course of such a reading trail, Mies comes to recognize *Baukunst* as a spiritual art form. Thus, through the writings of Romano Guardini, he encounters "a world that has lost its center". "Mies's personal sentiment is that to define the architectural form of modern abstraction and spiritualization is to show the gradual impoverishment of life, the rapid decay of the spirit, and the foolishness of matter overwhelmed by usefulness".

7. Conclusions

Over a century after the Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project, as the search for a new post-capitalist perspective continues, how should the spiritual place – the place of the void followed by Mies – be inherited and evolved?

Mies's words from a 1947 interview with House and Garden resonate deeply: "What I strongly desire is the absence of architecture, and what I practice is the art of building". Evolving these words into new dimensions within our transforming society might represent the possible way for us to carry history forward.

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