Mies van der Rohe and the conservation of the American landscape

MIES VAN DER ROHE AND THE CONSERVATION OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

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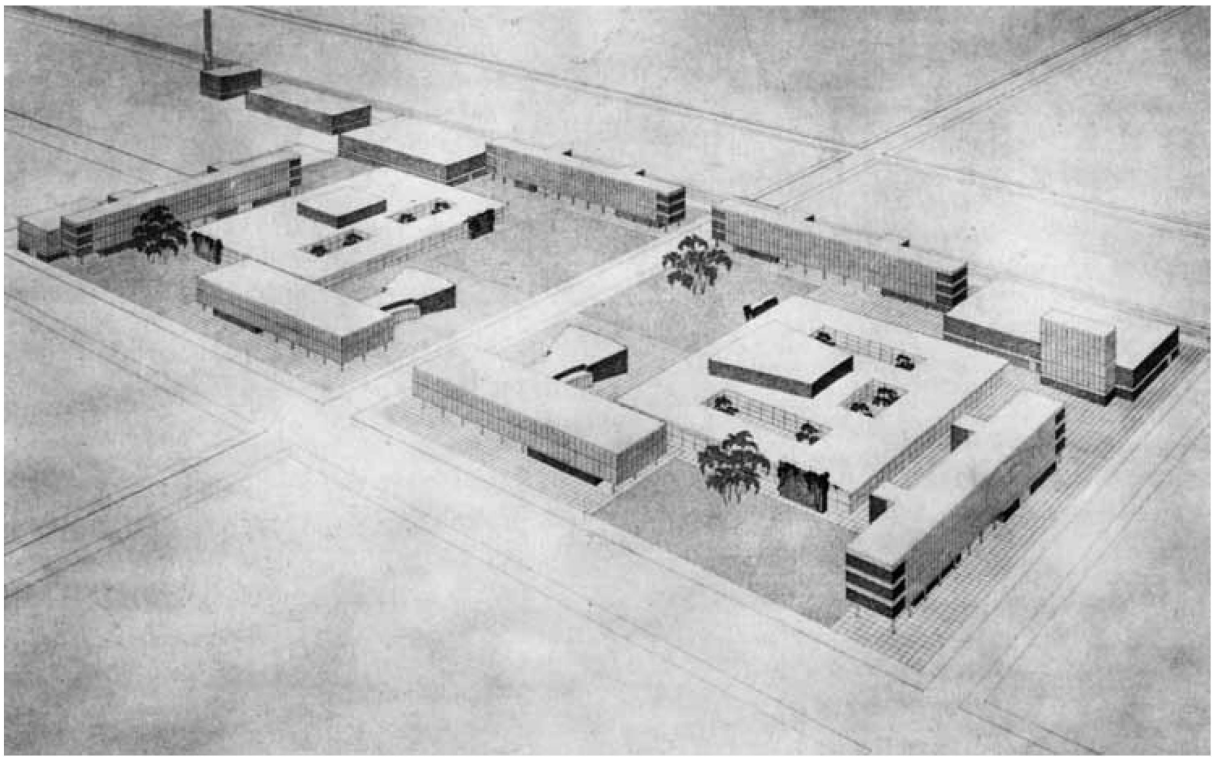
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe remained characteristically aloof on the subject of landscape. In an interview with *Artnews* in 1947 he made a rare allegorical reference to plants: "There are good roses, but all plants cannot be roses; there are also good vegetables." In a recent compendium of his writings and interviews, the words 'landscape', 'trees', 'bushes', and 'soil' do not appear at all. He addressed his few theoretical statements exclusively to the art of building rather than to the conditions of building sites. Yet observing the drawings and built works of his American projects, one recognizes a compelling landscape attitude, best seen in the Farnsworth House, where the architect attempted to disturb the site as little as possible, raising the transparent house to head height on eight slender steel columns. Mies's architectural works stood resolutely apart from nature as pure objects in space that could serve as a viewing platform and frame for the surrounding environment.

During the thirty years of his career in America, Mies often relied on the professional assistance of landscape architects, yet the natural elements in his works usually go unnoticed. The triads of ginko trees set in beds of ivy on the short sides of the Seagram Building in New York City do not stick in one's memory of the place. Yet Mies relied on the landscape to provide the honest contrast with his compositional strategies for an architecture of geometric perfection. While one usually thinks of Mies as a master of inert steel and glass boxes, it could just as well be said that his true mission was to create grand vistas using natural elements of water and plants. The perception of his architecture as the product of pure reason was grounded in its coexistence with uncontrived natural settings. Thus Mies promoted an undeclared project for the conservation of the American landscape as the passive backdrop for his architecture. Like the designers of ancient Greek temples to whom he occasionally deferred, he proposed the uncompromised rigor of prismatic structures in dialogue with the irregularities of nature.

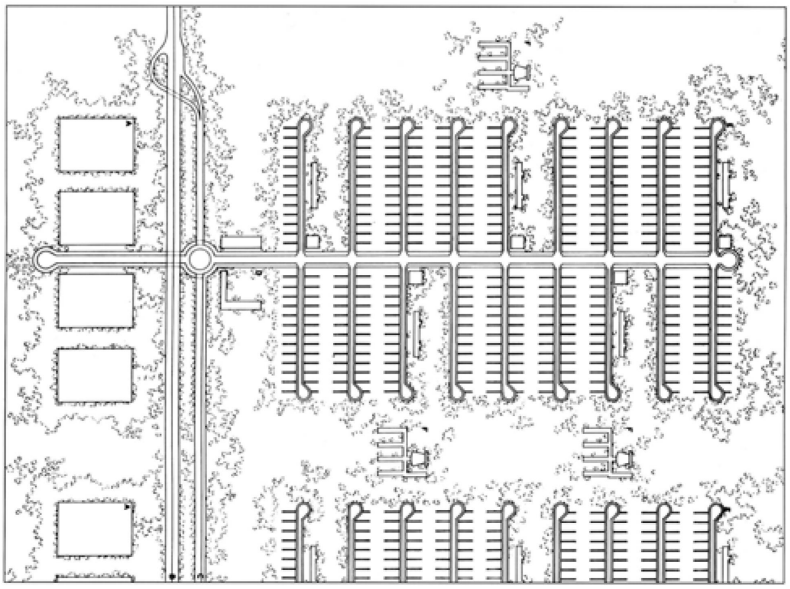
Would Mies have resorted to the same landscape solutions if he had remained in Europe? Although he undoubtedly would have answered "Yes", one must suspect that the vastness of America, its openness and its emptiness, inspired a new direction in his work. When Mies settled in Chicago in 1938, he had yet to realize any large buildings, nor had his few built projects, mostly private residences, demonstrated a consistent approach toward the landscape. His most famous work in retrospect,

the German Pavilion in Barcelona (1928/1929), had been witnessed by few and was known primarily through a few black and white photographs. As lovingly reconstructed in 1983 by Ignasi Solà-Morales Rubiò (1942-2001), one can experience its composition of intersecting planes as a denial of nature, with reflecting pools of water serving as abstract geometric elements. In his rough drawing for the plan, Mies excluded planted materials, leaving rough squiggles for generic hedges along the outer northern prospect. Like several of his early house plans, the architectural composition of the German Pavilion reveals itself to be a labyrinth, offering protected enclosure. For his major work of urban design, the Weissenhof Siedlung in Stuttgart (1926/1927), Mies pursued the staggered massing of a Mediterranean hill town. He gathered the collection of white boxes by different international architects into a dense fusion with the slope, trees, and shrubs. Once in the USA, Mies abandoned his nested compositions and enclosed courts and, when building in cities, succeeded in dramatically de-densifying urban situations.

After the conclusion of World War II, the scale of Mies's work increased dramatically, in parallel with the American economic boom. The Miesian approach to the landscape reached maturity during his first decade in Chicago and anticipated the effects of the much-maligned American program for Urban Renewal, which took hold in the late 1950s. Both Mies's campus plan for Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chicago (1939-1956) and the Lafayette Park housing project in Detroit, begun in 1955, originated as slum-clearance efforts. In each case he blocked out street connections to create a sizable superblock, in which a few buildings were served by broad grassy landscapes. Such interruptions in the urban fabric attracted the wrath of the critic Jane Jacobs, who in her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961) launched a community backlash against replacing the variety and intimate scale of neighborhoods with wind-swept, monofunctional high-rise projects. Mies, however, was not overtly responsible for the urban renewal models that converted cities into a collection of superblocks, a theory strongly connected to Le Corbusier's widely published proposals for urbanism. All of Mies's important urban projects, such as the Federal Center in Chicago (1959-1973), the Dominion Center in Toronto (1963-1969), and the Westmount Square in Montréal (1965-1968) attempt to relieve the crowding of inner cities by setting the



Mies van der Rohe, Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), early campus project, 1939



Ludwig Hilberseimer, "Hochhausstadt", 1924 and
plan of an ideal suburban settlement, 1940

buildings in staggered relationships and opening plazas between them. Instead of adding to the confusion of the surrounding streets, these projects offer picturesque sequences for pedestrian routes, past fountains, sculptures, and planters with seating. The two Canadian projects primarily serve tertiary functions but also include significant underground shopping areas that connect to the subterranean pedestrian systems of their respective cities. While Mies's projects will never be associated with the folksy charm of Greenwich Village, they add surprising human scale and openness to congested downtown business districts.

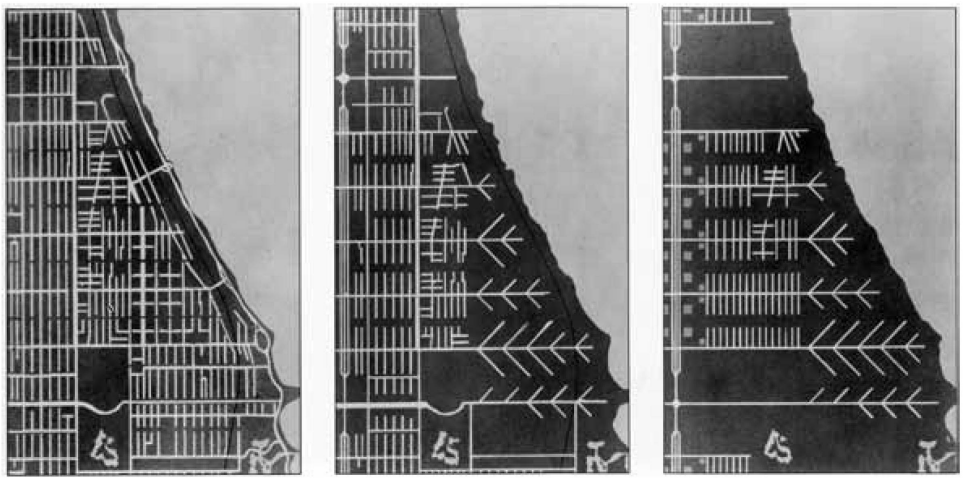
There were numerous American sources for Mies's embrace of the pastoral landscape, beginning with the dean of American landscape practitioners, Fredrick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), who left two major parks in Chicago and the residential suburb of Riverside. Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) exerted a noticeable effect on the younger Mies during the second decade of the century in Berlin. Mies pursued the American master's pinwheel plans, however, more than his commitment to an 'Organic Architecture' that actively integrated structure with natural elements, such as the cliffs and waterfall at Fallingwater (1936). Still, Mies's respect for Wright endured, and one can assume some influence at least at the level of knowledge of the American landscape. Wright's disenchantment with the IIT plan was not with the landscape but with the rigid box-like buildings and their symmetrical placement, which he rejected as academic classicism.

A stronger influence came from Ludwig Hilberseimer (1885-1967), Mies's old friend from the Bauhaus, who joined him to teach planning at IIT in 1938. In 1924, inspired by Le Corbusier's futurist visions of the contemporary city, he designed an extremely desolate urban model, the Hochhausstadt, which he proposed mid-rise slabs overlooking 200-meter wide boulevards and at the 6th-floor level a pedestrian network of paths connected by aerial bridges. He later disowned this early work complaining, "Every natural thing was excluded: no tree or grassy area broke the monotony (...) the result was more a necropolis than a metropolis, a sterile landscape of asphalt and cement, inhuman in every aspect." Hilberseimer assimilated more quickly than Mies into American culture and seemed eager to make amends for his unnatural project of the 1920s. By 1944 he had produced a treatise on planning,

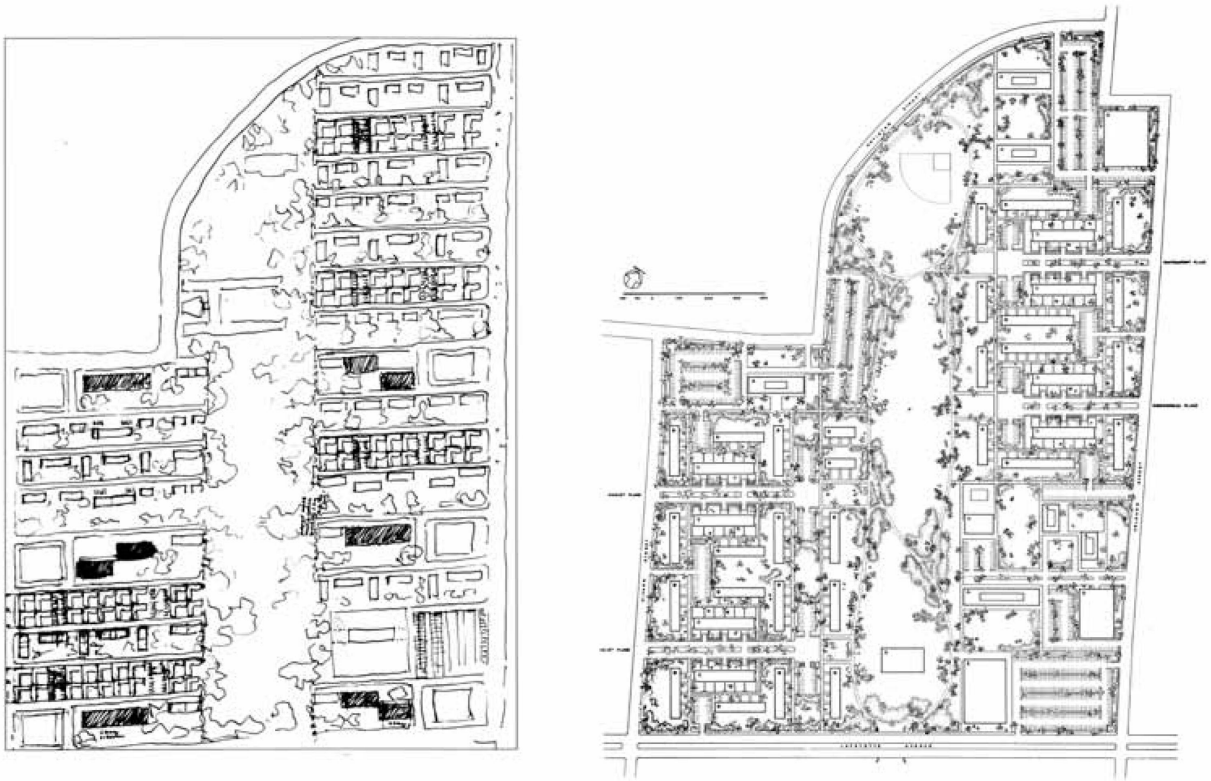
The New City: Principles of Planning, that demonstrated a new "American" approach to the landscape based on the cul-de-sac and greensward concept of Radburn, New Jersey (1929). In 1951 Hilberseimer proposed to de-densify Chicago's South Side by interrupting the grid with cul-de-sacs and covering the displaced streets with connective parkland that would extend from the Lakeshore Park system into the grid. Hilberseimer's concept of subtracting area from the automobile infrastructure for use as green space finally came to fruition at the Lafayette Park housing project in Detroit (1955-1963), where five through streets were turned into cul-de-sacs on either side of the superblock, leaving a significant 19-acre park as the central cross-axis. Unlike most other urban renewal projects of the times, the voided areas of Lafayette Park proved to work well as a park, carefully planted and maintained from the start. The plan discretely pushed traffic and parking functions to planted pockets along the edge of the superblock. The mixture of unit sizes, ranging from single-storey row houses, to two-storey townhouses, to mid-rise apartments permitted a unique blend of incomes and age groups, one of the reasons that Lafayette Park did not degenerate into a battleground of civil unrest during the 1960s.

Alfred Caldwell (1903-1998), also a faculty member at IIT, collaborated with Mies and Hilberseimer in Detroit, bringing the theory of 'natural planting' from his mentor the Danish-American Jens Jensen (1860-1951). Jensen advocated planting indigenous species as the correct ecological response to a given site. A comparison of a working sketch drawn by Hilberseimer with the final plan of Lafayette Park illustrates how much the landscape designer influenced the project. While his plan shows no attention to the edges of the superblock, Caldwell planted a protective barrier of trees and hedges wherever the site came into contact with the street system. He also introduced a hierarchy of vegetation, intensifying the size and density of trees on the rim of the central park. He laced the open meadow with winding paths reminiscent of Olmsted's parks, connecting them to playing fields, a community house, and a swimming pool.

Another important difference from the Hilberseimer plan with the final design for Lafayette Park involved the elimination of L-shaped houses, a type that he had perfected while teaching at the Bauhaus and proposed in his plans for the "New City" of the 1940s. L-shaped units



Ludwig Hilberseimer, Proposal to dedensify Southside Chicago, 1951

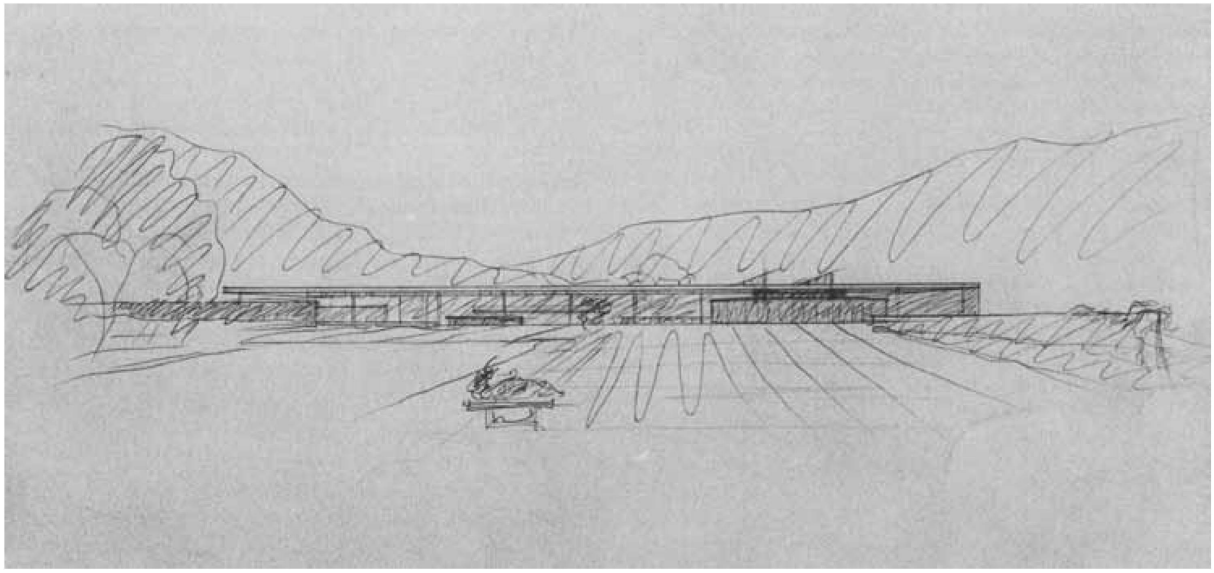


Comparison of Hilberseimer's sketch with the finished master plan, Lafayette Park, Detroit, 1955
(with contributions by Alfred Caldwell)

allowed dwellers to have private garden courts, but such enclosure had by this time become anathema to Mies's desire for an open American landscape. The final project sets rectangular boxes in staggered rows, allowing them to be seen more distinctly against the asymmetrical planting of trees and hedges. While the Lafayette Park project was completed and partly modified by other architects, the central park area essentially followed Mies's original proposal, offering a rare vision of openness in an area a stone's throw from the downtown. No one knew at that time how much Detroit would undergo a natural process of de-densification due to the post-industrial crisis of the automobile industry of the last forty years. Since the 1960s the city has lost more than half of its population and many neighborhoods have become deserted prairies.

Before meeting Mies, Caldwell was heavily influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, attempting to integrate structure and landscape. At the Lily Pool in Chicago's Lincoln Park, designed in the 1930s before Mies's arrival in the USA, he brought together a romantic assembly of stone terraces and steps around a pond sheltered by cantilevered pergolas. His architectural projects of the 1940s show a transition toward the simpler geometries of Mies's brick courtyard projects. He designed his own house in Bristol, Wisconsin (1948) on a Miesian pinwheel plan, while using fieldstone walls instead of bricks. A large vegetable garden serving the kitchen, protected by the two major walls that extended from the core of the house, remained a non-Miesian aspect of the project, closer to Wright's Usonian concept of the autarky of the modern American house. From 1944 until 1959 Caldwell taught landscape at IIT and designed the landscapes for Mies's ongoing campus projects. Today the campus covers the equivalent of forty Chicago blocks, and many of the initial landscapes have been altered. Working with Mies, Caldwell abandoned complicated compositions to create stark grassy fields punctuated by slender, asymmetrically placed deciduous trees. The IIT campus became for Mies and his followers not just a place to realize uncompromised Modernist structures in brick, steel and glass, but a chance to restore the open prairie of the Midwest.

Alfred Caldwell, Lily Pool, Lincoln Park, Chicago, 1937



Mies van der Rohe, Museum for a Small City, 1942

While Mies drew his sketches sparingly, he usually included gestures of landscape as elements against which to read the geometry of his compositions. In the sketch of the Museum for a Small City (1942) he placed a reclining sculpture to one side of a grand esplanade foreground, while to the left he dashed off the rough outline of a tree to contrast with the strict horizontal structure in the distance, built with regularly placed steel columns and free-standing planes on a terrace. One notes two exoskeletal columns on the right, implying a free-span hall on that part of the interior. Beyond the building he sketched a mountain range, implying the American wilderness. When Mies finally got the opportunity to build a museum, the two-phase addition to Houston's Museum of Fine Arts, he was faced with the flattest terrain in Texas. For the first phase of Cullinan Hall (1955-1958) he produced a grand esplanade entry to a full glass façade articulated with four exoskeletal steel columns painted white. The interior offered an uncompromised open space, in which six paintings were suspended in mid space and a few planters were added for relief. Mies hoped to achieve the same feeling of openness in the landscape. Both sides of the new volume remained framed by the sizeable profiles of the existing local live oaks planted when the area was subdivided in the 1920s. The uniquely curved façade of the second phase of the Houston Museum, the Brown Pavilion (completed posthumously in 1974), extended on a slightly cantilevered glazed second storey held by six black exoskeletal columns over a limestone base. Pushed almost to the edge of the site where more oaks were planted at the corners to protect it from the traffic. The curved facade of the museum in Houston, so contrary to the otherwise orthogonal solutions of Mies's American opus, responds to the special wedge site addressing two major thoroughfares that connect to downtown Like Crown Hall (1956), Mies's final contribution to the IIT campus, it commands the site like an urban temple.

What can one make of the mystery that the presentation drawing of the Farnsworth House excludes the position of a large tree on the site that was purposely conserved? All the photographs, from the 1950s until today, show a tree standing directly behind the lower terrace, but in the drawing the tree appears on the side. Observing some of the other drawings, for such projects as the unbuilt '50 x 50 house' (1951), one recognizes a similar pattern of trees. Mies repeated the arrangement in

the drawings for the Lakeshore Drive Apartments, allowing for protective zones of trees that would not compromise the experience of openness. Bound to a wheel chair during the last decade of his life, Mies did not frequently visit building sites, nor did he experience nature directly. He designed his projects with generic vegetation, trees that he did not know the names of but that Caldwell and others would make sure were appropriate, perhaps in the way that he meant there were "good roses and good vegetables." Like so much of his universe, the landscape remained an ideal. His view to the lake and his preconceptions of American mountains and prairies conditioned Mies's pursuit of an ideal openness, where trees grew casually without interrupting the sweeping conception of the land.[1]

1 Sources: Friedman, Alice T.: *Women and the Making of the Modern House. A Social and Architectural History*, New York 1998; Neumeyer, Fritz: *The Artless Word. Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, Cambridge MA1991; Pommer, Richard et al.: *In the Shadow of Mies. Ludwig Hilberseimer, Architect, Educator, and Urban Planner*, Chicago 1988; Schulze, Franz: *Mies van der Rohe. A Critical Biography*, Chicago 1985; Spaeth, David: *Mies van der Rohe*, New York 1985.