

Neighboring and Boundaries in Mies Van Der Rohe's Lafayette Park¹, Detroit

JANINE DEBANNE
University of Detroit Mercy

Introduction

The modernist residential district of Lafayette Park designed by Mies van der Rohe in Detroit is a strikingly harmonious district in a city known for its severe urban and social crises. Detroit's first and innermost urban renewal project was built between 1958 and 1963. It was the result of the collaboration of the urban planner and architect team, Ludwig Hilmerseimer and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and the landscape architect Alfred Caldwell.² Lafayette Park holds the traditional position of an inner-city neighborhood, located within walking distance from the Central Business District. An expressway corridor that links the downtown to the distant suburbs, built during and just after Lafayette Park's construction, severs the district from the downtown.³ The cohesion of Mies's neighborhood is all the more notable due to such divisive gestures.

Lafayette Park aimed from its inception to be an alternative to the suburbs, to deter urban exodus, and to halt suburban expansion; and though it did not become the model for any further urban development, it succeeded in its self. Lafayette Park has maintained a healthy population density in a de-urbanizing city. Its population is atypically heterogenous, and blurs racial, ethnic and economic divisions. The district is also cohesive, even though its physical boundaries are only loosely defined, and its buildings—all glass-clad—only discretely asserted in the landscape. For these reasons Lafayette Park raises substantive questions concerning urban dwelling and community of our time. In sharp contrast to the nearby freeway and the suburbs it serves, Mies's aim at Lafayette Park was to establish the appropriate dimensions with which to organize social and private life, and to achieve a kind of order that would afford privacy within a collective landscape. Through an examination of its territorial

structures and its architecture, especially the dwelling units' party-walls, this essay asks: can cohesion be achieved without divisive barriers? What is the status now of the modernist ideal of openness? Does Mies's Detroit work have the ember's potential to be fanned into new life; can it become a model for the present? These are pressing questions in an era that is witnessing the consolidation of the gated community.

Description

The residential district of Lafayette Park consists, in essence, of various manifestations of glass boxes in a landscape. Twenty-one linear buildings containing one and two-story row-houses and three highrise apartment towers—the single *Pavilion* tower and the twin *Lafayette Towers*—share the site with a thirteen acre oblong park. The buildings are arranged on their seventy-eight acre lot on an orderly grid, creating a fascinating series of implicit territorial overlaps at both the macro and micro scales. On the exterior, the buildings negotiate adjacencies between cars, footpaths, park-land, and the surrounding city. Internally, they balance the needed private spaces of dwelling with openness and transparency. It was undoubtedly in response to this balanced condition that Alison and Peter Smithson wrote: "this is why we will return so often to Lafayette Park in Detroit, to feel again its decent calm, its openness; to study its methods of putting the car in its place...".⁴ Lafayette Park's boundary conditions, from the site plan's invisible hierarchies to the party-walls of the low-rise row-houses, are delicately drawn. They convey Mies's ideas concerning sociality and the individual, while informing the broader question of the relationship of home and

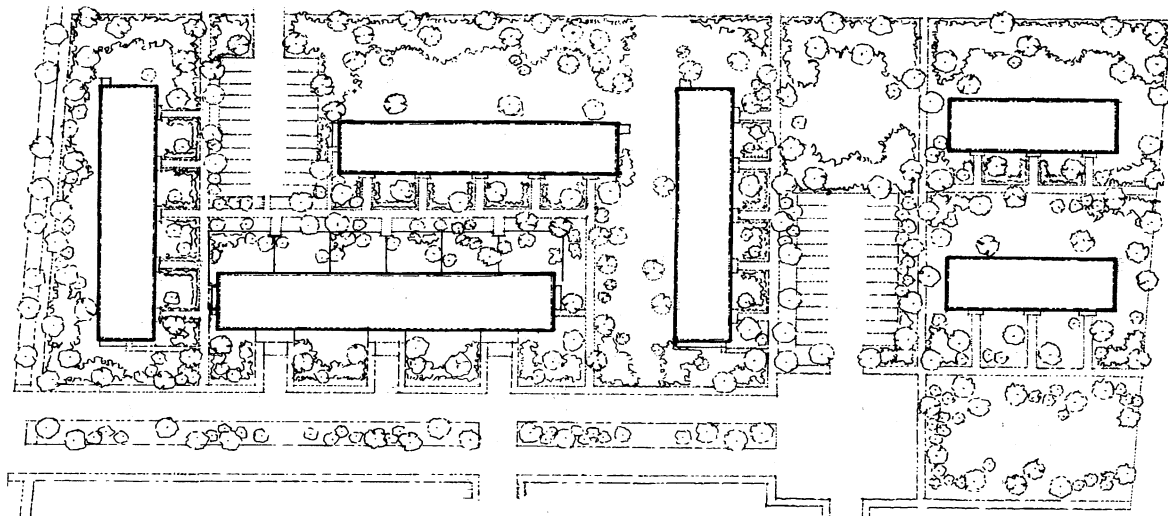


Fig.1. Lafayette Park Site Plan (detail)

city. In the context of a city where the act of neighboring is complicated by economic and social tensions, Mies's glass boxes gain in meaning.⁵ The neighborhood has always had an experimental character due to the townhouses' un-domestic language of architecture and their cooperative ownership structure. Its resident base was partly shaped by *Home Rule*, a law that required all city of Detroit employees to live inside the city limits.⁶ In the end however, the architecture's ability to support diversity will be best illustrated in the rental Towers.

Figure-Ground Relationships of the Townhouses

Lafayette Park reconfigured traditional spatial relationships between domestic and civic life for the technological age, according to socializing tenets of high modernism. Conceptually, the 186 low-rise homes share one lawn. In turn, the high-rise apartments—devoid of balconies—avail themselves of a city park for their portion of outdoor space. Since the boundary between the park and the green spaces of the townhouses is unmarked, the two domains inter-mix.⁷ This fluidity is accentuated by the manner in which the houses meet the ground. Their line of contact is thin; blades of grass advance into the flashings of the aluminum curtain wall façades. Except for a concrete platform that extends from the entrance recesses assigned to paired units, the townhouses possess no base of any kind. The structures' connection to the earth is only delicately revealed by area-ways along the curtain walls and staircases emerging from the basement on one end-wall of each building.

The boundary between public and private domains is quite clear on the front elevations, where a series of landscaping gestures organize the process of arrival and entrance. A footpath leads from each entrance platform to a sidewalk, which in turn links the homes to the nearest parking area and to cul-de-sac streets. Along the sidewalk, Hawthorne hedges wrap a patch of



Fig.2. View of two-story townhouses

lawn that corresponds to a single dwelling unit and anchor the building to the site. As has often been pointed out by the district's residents, the sense of enclosure comes only from bushes and trees. From behind, lacking sidewalks or hedges for added demarcation, the buildings have an air of uncanny fragility and temporariness. Loosely positioned Webber bar-b-q's are the only indications of the beginning of a private zone. The traditionally intimate bond between home and car is also challenged by the clustered parking arrangement employed in the master plan to limit the area devoted to the automobile. The car is further subdued by a three foot grading drop to the parking plane from the plane of the houses. This enables a person seated in the dining space to have a clear line of vision over the cars.

Cooperative Ownership and Public Lands

The cooperative structure that governs ownership of the row-houses further erodes the distinction between neighboring dwellings. Inhabitants do not actually own the land surrounding their house, or even the house itself, but rather, equal shares of the

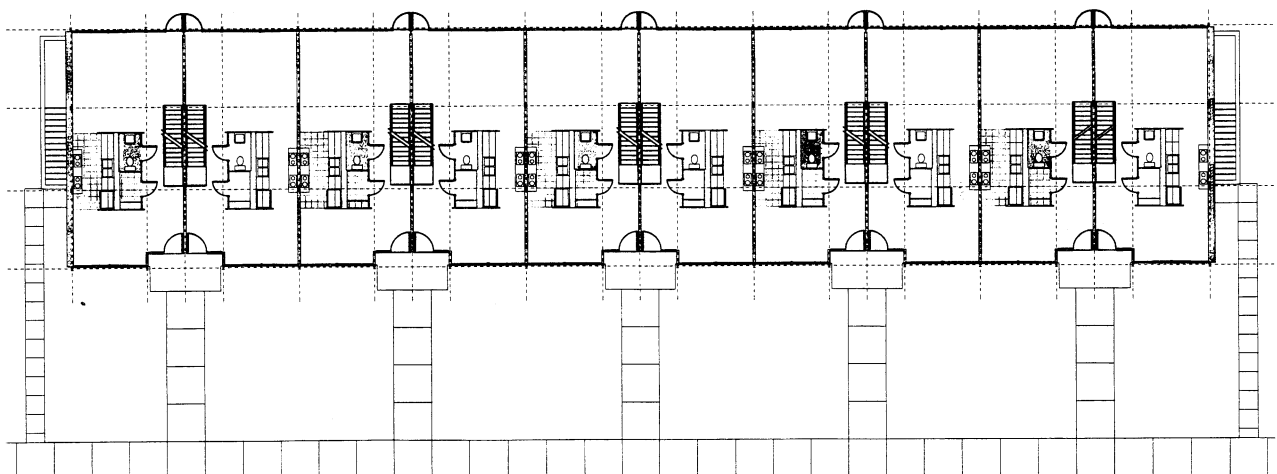


Fig.3. Townhouse Building: Ground Floor (Ten Units)

cooperative building and associated lands. Ownership is merely premised on the right to exclusive use. The outdoor areas of Lafayette Park are subsequently “practiced” according to a unique mixture of conventions and rules, both written and unwritten.⁸ Except in the courthouses where a wall encloses an expanse of outdoor space beyond the living room, there are no yards in the traditional sense. A three foot strip along both elevations, ungoverned by the cooperative’s grounds committee, is the only area individually tended by the inhabitants of the corresponding dwelling unit: “If you want to plant sunflowers or tomatoes or pumpkins, that’s where you would do it,” explained one resident.⁹ The lawns that extend beyond these narrow swaths, although dedicated to the exclusive use of the adjacent home, belong to the collective domain.¹⁰ The instances of over-reaching decks or the presence of encroaching plantings in these areas are to be understood as the result of either an exception granted by the grounds committee or of a small transgression.

City streets bound the low-rise neighborhood on three sides but along the Eastern edge, by contrast, lawns run into Lafayette Park proper, and this, with disarming fluidity. The city-owned park, centrally positioned on Hilberseimer’s master plan, thus acts as a point of confluence for the rental and ownership communities of Lafayette Park and its adjacent neighborhoods. A college student who grew up in the district recalls the boundless playing field of her childhood— “we had free run of the neighborhood because all the adults knew us and they let us run wherever we wanted.” Similarly, she describes the role played by the school located on the Park’s southern flank as condenser for the nearby social housing district and the wealthier families of Lafayette Park.¹¹

Privacy and Sociality - A Reading of the Townhouse Plans

It is almost certain that Mies did not understand Lafayette Park in the same way as did its promoters, that is to say, in terms of a response to a city-suburb rivalry.¹² As was all of Mies’s housing— in Germany or in America, intended as social housing, or designed for a wealthy client— the buildings of Lafayette Park could be said to be preoccupied with existential questions of dwelling. Its row-houses and apartments comprise reflections on the dialectical relationship of public and private life and the yearning for self-actualization for all individuals, indeed for any individual, in modern times.¹³ Containment and expansiveness, adjacencies and remoteness, all are carefully negotiated in these restrained dwelling plans. His effort is evidenced in the pencil work of all of his plan drawings; dark lines become tangled around the core functions, while loose lines defining large public areas expand into the landscape. To be sure, it is in apartment buildings and row-houses that questions of privacy and social intercourse were posed by Mies most poignantly.

The single-story courtyard houses are the most private of Lafayette Park’s three housing types due to their walled gar-

dens. Through a dexterous manipulation of the interior walls, Mies fashioned units containing as many as four bedrooms on a single floor; he jogged the party-wall of a four bedroom unit over the grid-line in order to absorb space for an extra bedroom, leaving the neighboring unit with only two. Where this jog does not occur, adjacent units both possess three bedrooms. These tightly planned units rely on a rigorous assessment of the program and reflect the privileging of some spaces over others; there is a generous foyer, while the kitchen occupies only a narrow slot of space. To compensate for its reduced size, the slot runs parallel to the party-wall, allowing light and air to flow through it. Openness and privacy must be tightly entwined; the bedrooms are small— “there is not much room around the bed, but just enough, like in a boat”¹⁴— while the living rooms are broad and large and have beautiful views. Mies achieves what can be called the appropriate human distance by inter-penetrations of condensed private functions and expansive public spaces



Fig. 4. Courtyard House and Sidewalk

at various scales; all the dwellings, for example, have generous arrival spaces inside, although expressions of the private lot are abbreviated (there are no porches or patios for example).

Division between units is further blurred in the basements through an internal connection between all the units. At that lower level, back doors open into a common service tunnel punctuated at one end by an outdoor stair leading back to Caldwell’s garden. Residents describe the convenience of this alley, not only for the evacuation of refuse, but also as a path to neighbors’ homes during inclement weather.¹⁵ Like the *jogging* party-walls that challenged the implied limits of a box, the basement corridors subvert the separateness of units from the inside, and in this, contradict the conventional idea of the townhouse.

Another instance of implied overflow between units is observed in the two-story town-houses. These organize complete openness on their ground floors due to the combination of an open ground floor plan and glass curtain wall cladding on both elevations. The upper levels are much less transparent. In es-

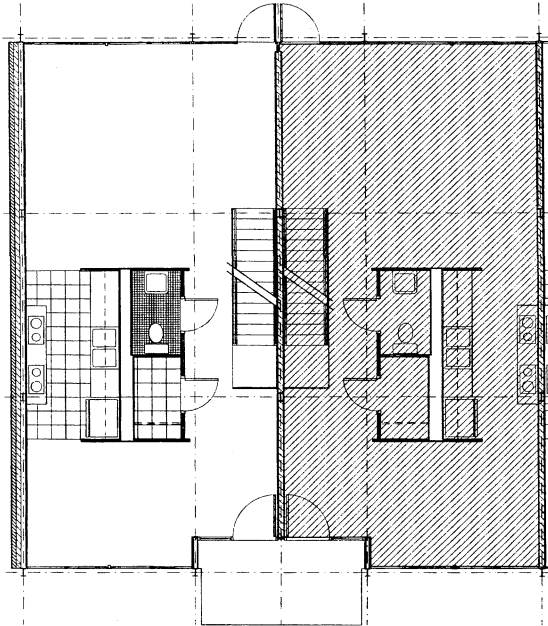


Fig. 5a. Two adjacent units: Ground Floor

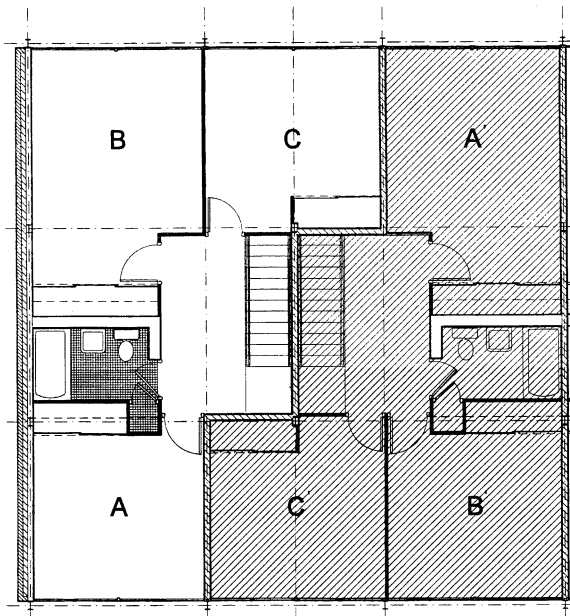


Fig. 5b. Two adjacent units: Second Floor

sence, the units are paired; on the ground floor, the plan of the pair is divided equally along the column line. In contrast, the upstairs floor plans are L-shaped and interlock with each other. The units of each pair exchange one window bay—one taken from the front, the other from the back, about the party-wall—in order to accommodate a third bedroom more comfortably in both units.

Thus on the second floor, a stranger's bedroom encroaches into the space directly above the ground floor. The single larger bedroom, A-A', is most often designated as the "master bedroom," while the smaller pair of rooms on the opposite side of the house, B-B' and C-C,' are usually children's rooms or offices and dens.

Mental Maps: Perceived Space and the Neighbor

The perceived space of the overlap is best understood through depictions by residents of their own homes. Mental maps, or drawings produced by memory that convey personal and perceptual knowledge about a place, provide a valuable supplement to measured drawings.¹⁶ These aptly reveal the mysterious character of the overlap. While depictions of the ground floor seem to flow from pens quite easily, representations of the second floor pose greater difficulty. Even an architect who had resided in a town-house for many years concedes about his drawing: "It's the upstairs I'm having a little trouble with. I keep making the same mistake." Several described the vague and mystifying quality of the second floor spaces owing to the meandering of the party-wall. The depiction of bedroom A-A' in

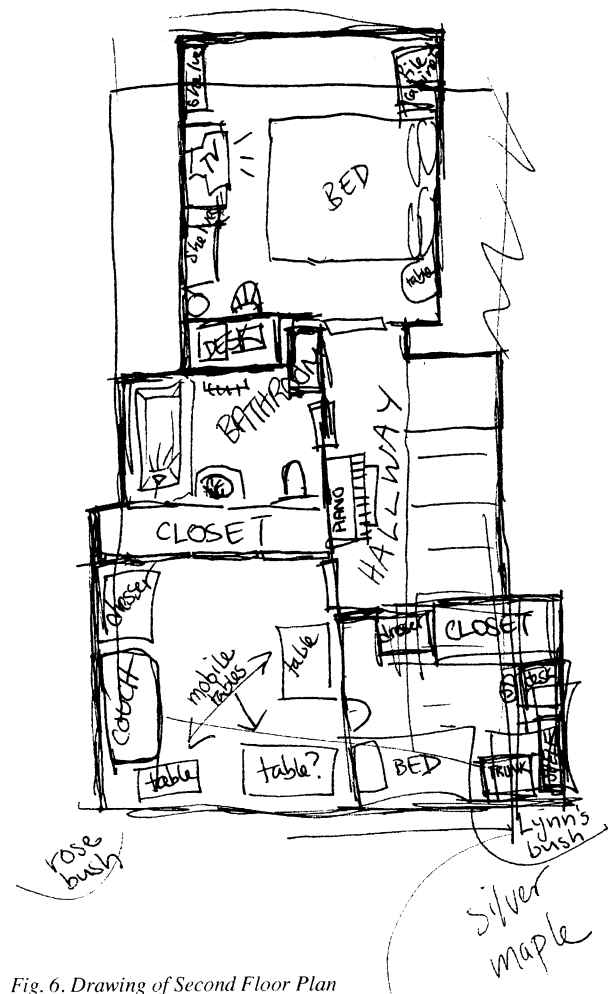


Fig. 6. Drawing of Second Floor Plan

the mental map of a music student bears the markings a struggle. She began the drawing by delineating a box with light lines that was to contain all the rooms on the floor. During the process of creating the map, she enlarged one room beyond the confines of the initial box, and then crossed out the light-lined box in order to make room, if unknowingly, for the neighbor's C-C' bedroom, the encroaching bedroom.

Mental Map: Second Floor

Frequently, bedroom A was misaligned from the dividing wall between B and C, even where the proportions of the rooms themselves were otherwise drawn very accurately. This misalignment would have as a consequence the elision of room C' in the neighbor's unit. One resident explains: "that wall rightfully belongs to the bedroom," pointing to the wall behind which looms a stranger's room. She explains that because she does not sleep on that side of the house, her knowledge of the other side (her parents' room) is not as clear, as she realized for the first time that the wall she had faced as she walked up the stairs every day since childhood was not an internal dividing wall but rather, a party-wall.

Just after visualizing the implications of the overlap for the first time, another admitted "I know her studio is there because we see it from outside, but I never really thought of it that way." It had not before occurred to her that her neighbor's studio was inside the spatial realm of her own house. Finally, a child's drawing leaves much of the second floor altogether unaccounted for and strikingly annotates the void between two bedrooms with the sentence "Note: the bedrooms are not this much apart." It is an interesting mistake. Although this note pertains to rooms internal to a dwelling unit, it evokes a perennial question to do with dwelling and neighboring: residents of the Lafayette townhouses describe the sense they have of their neighbor more as a general presence reminding them that they are not alone, rather than an obtrusive or disturbing force. In one case, the only sound ever heard from the "encroaching bedroom" was the clanging of hangers from their neighbor's closet.¹⁷ The overlaps observed in the town-houses raised interesting questions about privacy and shared space in urban living. Whether because residents prefer not to think that a stranger dwells within the felt-geometry of their own box, or because the overlap is too difficult for most to visualize, the space beyond the party-wall evades complete understanding. One cannot really envision it in plan and the specifics of its operation remain unfathomable.

The Curtain Wall as Porous Boundary

In addition to the dimensional encroachments caused by interlocking plans, another type of overlap occurs in Lafayette Park that is more inescapable, and that has to do with the buildings' sections. It is that generated by the transparency of the exterior walls. By day, the dwelling interiors enjoy the upper hand in the play of transparency. This situation reverses at night when the

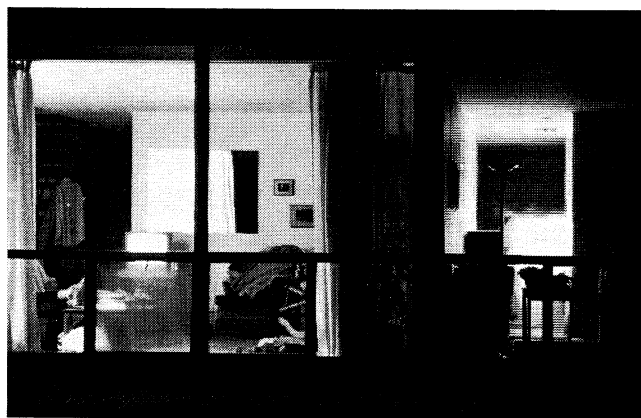


Fig.7. Townhouses at Night: Neighbors.



Fig.8. View from East Tower to West Tower

façades become luminous screens viewable from without. Scenes of domestic life are progressively revealed as the internal light level surpasses that on the outside.

This phenomenon is all the more poignant in the vertical buildings of Lafayette Park where the screen-effect is multiplied along the twenty-two story curtain walls. The presence or absence of a tenant, degrees of openness of the blinds, types of light sources on the interior, draperies and fabrics, all are registered on the towers' façades.

The condition of tower-as-screen is heightened even more in the twin *Lafayette Towers*, where the symmetrical placement of one tower in relation to the other creates a condition of perfect mirroring. Between them, a swimming pool surmounting a parking deck completes this realm of light and reflections; its third plane. (This parking-pool deck arrangement is also a further reiteration of the lessening of the car seen in the townhouse grading scheme). In addition, the façades' stillness—their windows are not visibly operable—increases their screen-like appearance.¹⁸ Within this configuration, visual invasions modulated by light levels and blinds enable the dissolution of boundaries between personal and public space. It was possible, for example, for a tenant residing in a pool-facing unit of one of the *Lafayette Towers* to seize the suggestive geometry of the architecture and project herself visually into the outside space between the two towers. She described the building as a theater,

and how she would raise her blinds and put a green light in the window and dance for the *West Tower* at night: "The people over there, they watch and follow my routine. The next day, people see me and they say - oh, you're the dancer. I saw you."¹⁹ The potential to defy the inherent isolation of buildings through actions of projection like those of the dancer is heightened in the architecture of the *Lafayette Towers*, if not always embraced with such vigor.²⁰ Mies's long-held affection for glass walls is here recalled. Glass walls, he felt, were the only ones that allowed the virtues of modern construction to remain legible; a steel or concrete armature did not exist as "an empty promise" behind them.²¹ One wonders if he had considered their potential to provide the means for the individual to penetrate social space, or even, to create it.

Conclusion

To be sure, there are wounds at Lafayette Park due to its origins in the urban renewal program. A long-standing tradition of integrated living has nonetheless persisted there. Lafayette Park is now old enough that successive generations of the same family have occupied it. One resident describes the passing of a generation as a cycle through the various dwelling types of Lafayette Park. Now in his late thirties, he tells of his childhood spent in a townhouse bought by his mother, his adult life in an apartment shared with his brother in the *Pavilion* and then in an efficiency apartment in the *Lafayette Towers*, before returning to the familial townhouse after his mother's death. He describes the integrated character of Lafayette Park and alludes to the equalizing tendencies of the district and its intellectual climate of openness. "Lafayette Park is for thinking minds" — he states — "my white friends in the neighborhood are the blackest white people I know, and I'm the whitest black person they know."²² The modernist district has also proven able to sustain a broad social mixture harmoniously. Indeed, throughout the better part of the last decade, the "luxury" *Lafayette Towers* were home to socially assisted tenants.²³ Even though this phenomenon was economically driven, it illuminates the social potential of Mies's open landscape in an age marked by profound disparities of entitlement and wealth.

Lafayette Park's lack of hard edges and ensuing territorial overlaps, in combination with the unfettered use of glass as building skin, speak loudly of the optimism of the era in which it was conceived. What would likely be seen today as a menacing urban configuration is in fact strangely comforting in context. If we say with the geographer Yi Fu Tuan that our very humanity hinges upon the possibility of "being for others," Lafayette Park must be looked at more closely at this time.²⁴ The many challenges to civic presence posed in Detroit, from the human vacancy of its downtown, the gaping voids in its urban fabric, the far-reaching geographical dispersion of its suburbs and the severing action of its expressway infrastructure, are all decidedly countered in Mies's Detroit work. Strikingly, this happens without gates. Instead, separation is premised on interlocking plans, territory defined by encroachment, rooms placed only "this much

apart," private life shielded with transparent screens. It is a hopeful place. We must take the Smithsons' advice, and return often to Lafayette Park.

NOTES

- ¹ This article emerges from an ongoing research project about the lived aspect of Mies van der Rohe's Detroit work. I am indebted to the residents of Lafayette Park who have shared their knowledge of the place with me on many occasions.
- ² The work completed by Sarah Evans for the *National Register of Historic Places* (Washington, 1996) provides a comprehensive account of Lafayette Park's early history. On Lafayette Park's position within the urban renewal movement in Detroit, see also June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race - Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1997, and Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis - Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
- ³ The expressway connects the distant suburbs to the downtown, while dividing the neighborhoods from it.
- ⁴ Alison and Peter Smithson, "Mies's Pieces," *Changing the Art of Inhabitation* (London: Artemis, 1994) 8 - 69.
- ⁵ Detroit is a vivid model of the "doughnut city" phenomenon, in terms of human settlement, employment, wealth, and racial distribution. See especially "Patterns of Diversity and Change," (Detroit: Southeast Michigan Council of Governments (SEMCOG), 1994).
- ⁶ *Home Rule* explains the large number of teachers, law enforcement agents, fire fighters and city functionaries at Lafayette Park. It was recently lifted.
- ⁷ Although there are a few occasions where fences have been added in recent years, Mies' and Hilbersheimer's original intention remains legible.
- ⁸ I refer here to Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*) and Michel de Certeau (*The Practice of Everyday Life*) who use the term "practice" to speak of the socially encoded meaning of the word "use."
- ⁹ Resident interview with author, April 1999.
- ¹⁰ Perpetuation of Caldwell's landscape plan rests in the hands of each of the four cooperatives' respective grounds committees.
- ¹¹ The Chrysler school is located on the site. Although it appears on Hilberseimer's master plan it was only built in 1961. During the years before its construction, the school operated from one of the townhouses. See "Here's a One-Room School In the Heart of Detroit," *Detroit Free Press*, Sept. 17, 1959. The nearby social housing district, the Martin Luther King Homes, was built in 1968.
- ¹² A campaign undertaken by the Lafayette Park Development Association (created in 1963) and disseminated in local newspapers and through tasteful brochures, promoted the newly built "suburb in the city" throughout the 1960's.
- ¹³ "The phenomenon of new housing is basically a spiritual problem." Mies van der Rohe, 1927. Cited in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word - Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* (London: MIT Press, 1991), 157.
- ¹⁴ Transcript: interview by author. This statement reiterates Mies' own quest for space that was "defining but not confining." On this topic, see again Neumeyer, *ibid.* xiii.

- ¹⁵ One person also spoke of this realm's illicit character, recalling "a lot went on there in the sixties." Interview with author, April 1998.
- ¹⁶ On mental maps, see P. Gould and R. White, *Mental Maps* (London: Routledge, 1992). These drawings were created in the context of a series of interviews conducted by the author in Lafayette Park in 1999. Insights were also gained from student-conducted case-studies of townhouse households in a class taught by the author at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture, in conjunction with Dr. Jean François Staszak, a Geographer from the *Institut Universitaire de France*.
- ¹⁷ Most interviewees talked of hearing specific noises only in the event of an argument of a television being played loudly. Other sounds mentioned were the water of a shower, the "occasional toilet flush," the vacuum, people walking on the stairs, children crying, answering machines, and musical instruments.
- ¹⁸ The windows are not visibly operable. Fresh air is allowed in by lifting a horizontal panel on the ventilation units *inside* the apartments. In the Pavilion, the curtain wall has a row of lower hopper windows that open toward the interior.
- ¹⁹ The dancer's nine-year residency lasted from 1990 to 1999.
- ²⁰ This spectacle is all the more striking in context: the Towers rise next to a vacant downtown. The writings of Camilo José Vergara describe this condition. See *The New American Ghetto* (Rutgers University Press, 1995). It is noted that at present, the city's downtown is experiencing a wave of economic "renaissance" with the recent completion of a stadium and three casinos.
- ²¹ Mies van der Rohe, "What Would Concrete, What Would Steel Be without Mirror Glass?" in Neumeyer, 314.
- ²² Interview with the author, April 1997.
- ²³ This is the topic of "Luxury and Fate: the Section 8 Presence in Lafayette Park," *La Città Nuova - Proceedings of the 1999 ACSA International Conference* (Washington: ACSA Press, 1999).
- ²⁴ The writings of Richard Sennet, Hannah Arendt, and the geographer Yi Fu Tuan, are all alluded to here.