

MIES VAN DER ROHE AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF WORK

SEAN PICKERSGILL

University of South Australia

This paper will investigate the work of Mies van der Rohe concerned with the representation of the modern office and the manner in which work and work practices have come to dominate modes of expression at a number of levels in modern society. By examining Mies' mediations of the idea of "work," I will show how its disciplinary practices have been transposed into a number of architectural environments that traditionally have been thought to be external to the work place. Mies' own work, I believe, is peculiarly apposite for this question. His post-war work carried out principally in the United States is often characterized as the promulgation of an approach already determined in the pre-War period.

While Mies was certainly clear that he aimed at singular consistency in design, I wish to argue that the changed circumstances of not only a New World culture but also a more global revision of the optimism of Modernism places his language in a different semantic context. Modernity itself will be investigated to show that the principals of surveillance at play in the workplace, principles that can be mapped in quite orthodox fashion when it is a question of sociological analysis, become interesting for architectural criticism when they are expressed as fundamental questions of an approach to design. Again, I believe this is expressed in exemplary fashion in the work of Mies. Ultimately, I wish to visit the work of Walter Benjamin and examine the "negative" aspects of Mies' aesthetic, the simultaneous destruction and preservation of form in which the discarded results of Mies's refinements, the empty matter left after the process of *aufheben*, ultimately may be recovered by a reexamination of the melancholic ruins Mies' ascetic expression wrought. And as a matter of history, this paper was born out of a stay in Chicago where the everyday view from my apartment window was of the residents in one of Mies' apartment blocks going about their daily lives.

Mies and the Bauhaus

In the talk given at the Staatliche Kunstbibliothek in Berlin, in February 1928, Mies said the following:

Man develops a corresponding attitude in which will and capability undertake rational work. Carried along by this will, the powers of nature, heretofore isolated, come into play. Will freely sets

its aims, places them in the service of use, and wrests performance from conquered nature. Nothing seems impossible anymore.

... Technology offers a thousand means to increase awareness. Nothing occurs anymore that is not observed. We survey ourselves and the world in which we stand. Consciousness is our very attitude.

... It must be possible to heighten consciousness and yet keep it separate from the purely intellectual. It must be possible to let go of illusions, see our existence sharply defined, and yet gain a new infinity, an infinity that springs from the spirit.¹

Mies offers here a reconciliation between the imperative of rationality in the world of human affairs and the exploration of will as an agent and manifestation of consciousness. The tension between form and will, between *Bildung* and *Unbildung* as Mies expressed it, is necessarily constrained within an aesthetic of efficiency and order. For Mies, expression and, particularly, architectural expression, is not merely the epiphenomena of experience it is the very form itself of society. It is the architect's responsibility to society its proper form. In clearly Hegelian terms, Mies believed that there was a unifying tendency in culture towards the reconciliation of physical method with spiritual unfolding. The sensuousness of manifold experience is made coherent by its appearance in the recognisable forms of technology. Architectural work then is the uncovering of the form of society's institutions to its members. And since progress is an effective element of the active world, to participate in the world one must assume the responsibility for materially changing it.

Behind the Hegelian agenda, and the influence on Mies of Romano Guardini, Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann, Mies' world view is a mixture of Keynesian economic determinism and Neo-Kantian ethics transposed onto the consideration of the role of architecture in society. By acting as if every (aesthetic) decision should be judged by its communality with a general principle Mies is attempting to discover the moment when architecture can disappear from the stage of mere aestheticism and reappear unmediated as a law of structure and construction. When one works, one is not only participating in an economic process that is providing a viable and necessary service, one is also affirming the

categorical nature of this process. Further, architectural work is the discovery and affirmation of the general principles of design that invoke this higher order.

But of course work is a far more problematic area than Mies' summary would suggest. And as I will show, the limitations Mies placed upon his idea of architectural work tacitly acknowledged this quandary. The immediate area of concern is the political nature of work, for it involves the engagement of the labor and life aspirations of classes of people for the accomplishment of ends that rarely serve the ultimate interests of those employed. Rather than people working to affirm their capability of dealing with the world in any intellectual complexity, people generally work because they have only modest economic choice. Indeed the workplace seeks to limit choice in order to better manage the processes involved. This is nothing new, but what is significant in modernity, and for the discussion of Mies, is the degree to which this submission is masked by a variety of propagandistic pressures. Many critics, especially those engaged in the Marxist tradition, have been active in uncovering the coercive elements in culture that seek to cloak inequity in spurious freedoms. If a definitive element of material culture is the production of commodities, there is a simple and self-evident argument to be made regarding the commodification of labor and of the labor force. Capitalism necessitates an alienated labor force. This is vulgar Marxism and misses the complexity of his vision; but it does tell us of the relationship between capitalist society and the architecture of capital? How does Mies determine work as a responsibility of the architect, and for whom are workplaces created?

Mies' visionary projects for *Friedrichstrasse* in the early 1920s give us an early indication of the straightened terms of reference he employs in determining the scope of architectural work. Publicized as exercises in the reflective properties of the medium of glass it is undoubted, given also the obsession with glass promoted by the Taut brothers in the journal *Frühlicht*, that they share some of the utopian zeal of Expressionism. The "materialized immateriality" of glass demanded its consideration as a medium of transcendent expression and although Mies' later pronouncements are determinedly *sachliche* in their terseness the original choice of glass is hardly coincidental. Neumeyer has shown the influence of August Endell in this regard. Endell's rhapsodic description of the curtain wall of the *Friedrichstrasse* Railway Station in *Die Schönheit der grossen Stadt* could easily substituted as a description of Mies' work.²

Beyond the visual effect of glass however, Mies shows his principle concern is with the reconciliation of design with the order of construction, the minimum degree of subjective agency fused with the maximum uncovering of the immanence of the constructive order. Following the *Friedrichstrasse* projects, when the perspective for the *Bürohaus* was published in 'G' the accompanying polemic against aesthetic speculation went further in signalling the frail ground on which architectural design, that is design as individual and idiosyncratic act, stood. In this building Mies attempts to recover the last remaining ground for design by reverting to the raw language of capital. The economics of construction

confront the political economy of employment in the workplace. As Mies describes it:

*The office building is a building of work, of organisation, of clarity, of economy. Bright, wide workrooms, uncluttered, undivided, only articulated according to the organism of the firm. The greatest effect with the least expenditure of means.*³

He goes on to describe some of the physical properties including the revelation that the windows are in fact skylights that commence two meters above floor level on each floor, thus preventing any of the inhabitants from directly viewing out of the building. The overall dimensions of the building are a multiple of the individual dimensions of a workstation, echoing the elemental importance of the dimensions of the primary constructional element, the brick, in the *Wolf House* of 1925-26. At all levels design is given form by the disciplinary nature of office management. The most important aspect of this description by Mies is the arbitrary nature of the organism of the firm. There is no sense of *what* sort of work may be accommodated in the *Bauhaus*. Infinitely fluid in its application the *Bauhaus* shows capitalism *in esse* as formless.

The Place of Work

This principle is repeated in the criticisms of work practice that occurred in the 1940s and '50s when Mies' Chicago office was beginning to produce a series of typological models for the modern office building. Acutely aware of the relations between work and self-identity in the American psyche C. Wright Mills, Marshall McLuhan and other contemporary commentators were persistent in their criticism of the humbuggery of the advertising professions and the obfuscations and romanticisms of Hollywood in promoting and normalizing relations in the office place. Mills, in *White Collar*, a seminal text of the period is consistently critical of the manner in which the liberating potential of work is engineered to mean submission and obedience. He says, speaking of social relations in the office:

*Mechanized and standardized work, the decline of any chance for the employee to see and understand the whole operation, the loss of any chance, save for a very few, for private contact with those in authority — these form the model of the future.*⁴

It is no coincidence that Mies' buildings of that period hypostatise this relation. His "philosophy" of architecture had reached a point of immaculate self-similarity with the values of capital. Just as the economy of means of business demanded the erasure of competitive difference so too Mies' work continually sought to disappear into the apparatus of abstract economics. All of this was explained as a elevation towards purer, more platonic principles of architecture and construction. To this effect the platonic principle of order infused by a will to form that is heralded in the text of "The Preconditions

of Architectural Work” are directly borrowed from the work of the Catholic theologian Romano Guardini. As Fritz Neumeyer has shown, in the excellent *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art* Guardini was a seminal influence in the development and consolidation of Mies’ thought. The immanence of order in the work of Mies is an elaboration of a greater faith in the objective sense of the world. The binary of subject and object ultimately affirms the external reality of order, in the Kantian sense, and the potential for its application in all forms of human endeavour, again following Kant.

Neumeyer perceptively approaches the final, American phase of Mies’ work through the essay by Georg Simmel, “Philosophie der Kultur.” In this discussion he suggests visually by displaying the varying ‘I’ beam sections of a series of buildings completed between 1951 and 1969 that they represent Simmel’s argument that culture was the only means of reordering a world continually in entropy and disarray. To quote Neumeyer, “Simmel ... saw the ‘objectivation of the subject and the subjectivation of the object’ as that specific quality that constitutes the cultural process: It is peculiar to the concept of culture that the spirit stipulates an independent object through which the development of the subject from itself to itself takes its passage.”⁵ Neumeyer is saying, in effect, that Mies’ concentration on the technique of the detail was the vehicle for the recovery of the self through design.

Neumeyer goes on to describe the spatial developments of Mies’ work as a logic of the skin. Universal space, first heralded in the collage of the concert hall project of 1942, is occupied by a collection of archetypal elements. This is a pattern followed by Mies in a number of subsequent projects, including ultimately the New National Gallery in Berlin. In this, as in a number of earlier projects, including the Farnsworth House, but involving all of his work domestic and commercial the same principle of order is invoked. It is a progressive emptying of space as Neumeyer puts it. A trajectory of abstraction that is ultimately described as progressing ad absurdum towards, presumably, nothingness.

I would like to take these two ideas, the concentration on the object and the inclination towards relentless spatial abstraction, a little further. The workplace that is proposed in the glass and concrete office buildings of 1923 are the first acknowledgment of the incipient dominance of capital in the organisation of social relations. The form of absolute space implied by these projects proposes a correspondence, as discussed at length by Henri Lefebvre, between the potential violence of the state towards non-conformism, the disciplinary structures of modern law and the need for aesthetic practice to be “useful.”⁶ The iconoclastic revision of the Beaux-Arts that modernism engaged in, its rejection of aestheticism in the face of the new order of the technologically adept nation state are in essence the attempts to rescue architecture from non-conformism. Freedom then, as a political and spatial property, is of great importance.

The spatial freedoms Mies alludes to when the subjectivity of the individual is allowed infinite scope for self-determination is questionable. Just how free are the occupants of Mies’ buildings? And, more importantly,

how rich is the range of self-determination offered. By representing a totalizing order as ubiquitously immanent, is this less the reassurance of an ordered, supra-material culture as it is the actual dominance of the *Raison d’Etat*, the potentialized violence of the State against its own people? Again, C. Wright Mills writes:

Current management attempts to create job enthusiasm, to paraphrase Marx’s comment on Proudhon, are attempts to conquer work alienation within the bounds of work alienation. ... The amusement of hollow people rests on their own hollowness and does not fill it up; it does not calm and relax them as old middle-class frolics and jollifications may have done; it does not recreate their spontaneity in work, as in the craftsman model. Their leisure diverts them from the restless grind of their work by the absorbing grind of passive enjoyment of glamour and thrills. To modern man leisure is the way to spend money, work is the way to make it. When the two compete leisure wins hands down.⁷

Mills’ comments are unremarkable in our contemporary society, so fully has his analysis been borne out by the growth of the culture industry, but it is not for this reason that they are worth attending. I suggest that a proper re-examination of the work of Mies’ post-war work needs to actually commence from this point. Following this, how do we provide an account of the role of Mies’ architecture in transferring the dominance of order in the workplace to other places of existence? It is not enough to solely understand the austere and now repetitive philosophical formula Mies adhered to in teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology and in the discussions of his built work. It is evident that some study of the excluded portion of Mies’ work needs attention, at the public and domestic level. The nihilism of Mies’ process of refinement, he termed it “fulfil the law to gain freedom,” suppressed beneath a dominant Order a quotidian world of possibilities. How might this demonstrative Order be animated by the inconsistent and seemingly inconsequential marginalized fragments of *Erlebnis*, life as it is lived?

Paulette Singley, in her article “Living in a Glass Prism: The female figure in Mies van der Rohe’s domestic architecture” broaches similar issues to those I have described.⁸ Rightly, in my view, she argues that a split exists in the later work of Mies between the haptic and optic modes of perception, an analysis she has derived from Alois Riegl via Walter Benjamin. For Singley, the principle revelation regarding Mies is the chauvinism implicit in the “apprehension” of the female body in his architecture. Historically, Mies had placed female statuary in his buildings as part of an ossified order of architecture and inhabitation. The statue, be it full figure or torso, stands proxy for the liberated subjectivity alluded to by Neumeyer at the end of his work. But of course, as a statue, the possibility for infinite, unmediated experience is impossible. The statue, and Singley extends her argument to include any aspect of inhabitation, is trapped within a “cryptic prism” brought about by Mies’ insistence

on complete openness. Literally there is nowhere to hide, nowhere where the gaze of (masculine) onlookers may be escaped. This is a peculiarly disturbing aspect of the economy of vision and surveillance that is part of modern social management. While the experience of Edith Farnsworth is far from ideal, and sadly one of great distress to her, there is a lesson to be learnt regarding the immanence of modernity in everyday life.

An important aspect of Dr. Farnsworth's criticisms of the house Mies designed and built was the lack of storage space for household items, a disadvantage that seems more irritating than significant. Similarly and equally importantly, the relentless persistence with which the design prohibits the casually thrown jacket or the dirty plate or the crumpled newspaper seems to be solely an admonition towards good housekeeping. More obviously difficult, and disturbing, is the question of artworks. Where, in the Farnsworth House, is one to hang a painting or paintings, or even the photograph of a loved one? Of course the answer is that the house was intended as a weekender and would not necessarily contain significant amounts of art, and indeed the very building itself acts as a conduit for the representation of the nature. Each of the glass walls is the representation of the outside world mediated through the order of architecture. But the irritations of this design portend far stronger dislocations between Mies' transcendent order and the accumulations of phenomena, immaterial and material, that are part of the human condition. While Singely is correct in recognizing the transference of Mies' concerns to increasingly optic forms of control she neglects the increased importance of this optic regime in modern experience. Similarly, I suggest, this condition is not limited to Dr. Farnsworth, but is a condition of all of Mies interiors and even of the modern interior in general.

Originally, and almost exclusively Walter Benjamin has been the prophet of this elided experience. For our purposes his "Angel of History" spoken of in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* has seen not only the melancholic wreckage caused by the storm of progress, but specifically the carnage caused by Mies' elision of the interior.⁹ With an uncanny sense of his world-historical role, Mies' continual act of compressing architecture into the material of the skin, from the earliest office buildings to the final projects in Berlin and Chicago, has made an intellectual space for the "our-history of the modern" traced by Benjamin. In the interiors put together by Mies and his students there seems to be something *more* present than the simple presentation of a refined aesthetic of abstraction. The collections of images and objects present in the collages, as well as the murals of the external world, present the objects as isolated entities within the order of architecture. Simmel's "subjectivization of the object" becomes particularly important for the attention each object singularly commands. In other words, while collectively they seem to allude to overall categories of "Art" and "Nature" the specificity of their placement in relation to each other subsumes these categories under the Idea of architecture.

But how specific is this relationship? If we look closely at the scale of Mies interiors, I would suggest that the generosity of space in fact makes the location of

objects almost arbitrary. Their interdependence is less assured than the rhetoric of the collages might suggest. Should the objects be moved, or should the discarded jacket or even the dirty nappy [diaper] appear, the spell is broken and the objects appear as inconsequential accumulations. In a more surreal or phantasmagoric fashion if we were to create a collage of visually incommensurate objects, perhaps like a painting by Magritte or a collage by Ernst, Mies interior would now display a world of almost infinite heterogeneity, a "something more" specific to the allegorical possibilities of the image. Here lies the possibility that this population of objects, and their residence in a Miesian interior, may demonstrate something significantly more eloquent than an assertion of aesthetic order. Most importantly we can extrapolate this condition from the domestic to the public sphere. What are the interiors of the Miesian office like? What is the urban "interior" of Miesian public space like?

In Mies' architecture the place of work and the place of domesticity have become fused, or at least locked in a struggle involving definitions of public and private life. From this it follows that if leisure is mediated by the disciplines of work, and if work is redeemed by the fantasies of individual will, then any disruption to this interdependence will be welcome. The place of work and the place of leisure may be disciplined in the same manner, this much is evident in Mies' indifference to the idea that architecture be mediated by social practice. We can achieve this by considering the truth content of the modern interior and the truth content of modern urbanity.

Benjamin saw the practice of history as necessarily philosophical. The task of his specific history of Paris in the nineteenth century was to uncover the immanent revolutionary and redemptive potential of modernity. To this end his eclectic collection of categories (or rather *Konvoluts*) of enterprise and identity, from shopping arcades to Baudelaire to the detective to the flaneur, spoke of the fragments of truth available to the historian. His history emerges from the magical properties of the commodity, its mythic role in society. For Mies, and for the school of modern architecture he fostered, the redemptive potential of commodities refers to the objects catered for in his interiors and for the formal tensions inscribed on users of urban space.

Mies' interiors are the modern equivalent of the *wunderkammern*, the room of wondrous objects whose interrelationship can only be imagined. This is their function par excellence. Instead of enforcing a nostalgia for pre-modern forms of feudal community onto modern society they give space to the fluid potential for the re-inscription of value. It is only in the utterly abstract space of a Miesian urban space that the homeless person pushing a trolley can exerting an irritating effect on the seamlessness of capital. So work, and the inscription of order demanded by it, may be eluded by recognizing the significance of the marginalia of urban existence.

NOTES

¹ Quoted from Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe and the Building Art* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press: 1991), p. 300.

² Neumeyer, pp.181-183.

³ Quoted from Neumeyer, p. 241.

⁴ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar, The American Middle Classes* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 225.

⁵ Neumeyer, p. 224.

⁶ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-

Smith, trans. (Oxford UK & Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1991).

⁷ Mills, p. 235.

⁸ Paulette Singley, "Living in a Glass Prism, The female figure in Mies van der Rohe's domestic Architecture", *Transitions*, 44/45 (1994), pp. 20-35.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn, trans. (London: Fontana Press, 1973).