

Luxury and Fate: Social Housing in Mies Van Der Rohe's Lafayette Towers

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INTRODUCTION

Lafayette Park sits immediately to the east of Detroit's Central Business District, severed from it by an expressway that runs northward toward the distant suburbs. Icon of the urban renewal movement, it is the fruit of a collaboration between urban planner Ludwig Hilberseimer and architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Mies' largest realized residential project. The reasons that motivated its inception were not unusual. Like many American cities, Detroit faced the problem of exodus to the suburbs and the deterioration of inner city residential neighborhoods. Because of its origins in urban renewal, it has perennially echoed the economic and social transformations taking place in the city at large.¹ Specifically, Lafayette Park has been involved in a complex relationship with the city's poor, both causing them to lose their homes in the 1950's and beckoning them back in the early nineteen nineties after the worst years of Detroit's urban crisis.² In sharp contrast to his residential towers for Chicago, Mies van der Rohe's architecture was confronted in Detroit with a set of circumstances under which it would be forced to display its own contradictions.

DESCRIPTION AND HISTORY

The twenty-one low-rise townhouse buildings designed by Mies van der Rohe still shimmer against the backdrop of Alfred Caldwell's flowing landscapes of footpaths. His three high-rise towers, with their precise clear aluminum curtain walled facades, stand in sharp contrast to the ruination of the surrounding areas.³ If from a distance this place appears to be unmarked by time, it is nonetheless woven into the very complex social and human fabric of Detroit's post-industrial history. Initially known as The **Gratiot Redevelopment Project** Lafayette Park replaced the poorest neighborhood of the city, a densely populated predominantly African American neighborhood known as **Black Bottom**.⁴ The site had been identified and announced as early as 1946, and demolitions began in October of 1950. Before Mies van der Rohe and Hilberseimer became involved in the redevelopment project the site had been cleared and sitting idle for six years.⁵ An inherent conflict in the project's mandate, to halt the flight of the middle class to the suburbs and to provide housing for low income groups, was at the core of numerous disagreements in the early days of the project. The proximity of the Lafayette Park site to the Central Business District was likely a strong factor in the decision to designate it as the first site of urban renewal in Detroit when the Federal Housing Act was launched in 1949. Lafayette Park would be marred by its association with the raising of this "unsightly eastern flank" of the downtown.⁶ Naturally, the introduction middle and high income housing seemed out of place, and generated a climate of suspicion and resentment at the time.



Fig. 1. Lafayette Park viewed from downtown Detroit, figuring the now demolished Hudson Building in foreground.



Fig. 2. The Lafayette Towers.

LAFAYETTE PARK IN CONTEXT

The downtown's fall and its abandonment by the wealthy left it open to be claimed by the dispossessed.⁷ Lafayette Park would face certain difficulties in maintaining a stable middle class population. In the low-rise townhouses, there was the recurring trend for families who had settled in Lafayette Park to move to the suburbs once their children attained schooling age.⁸ In the high-rise towers, departures

related to perceptions about the buildings themselves. For some, Mies' "ultra modern" glass clad structures lost their appeal as they aged, when compared to newer riverfront apartment structures built in the area. More generally Lafayette Park would struggle to keep its population simply because jobs were leaving the city.⁹ Of Mies' three high-rise structures in Lafayette Park, the twin Lafayette Towers experienced the most severe vacancy rates, leading their owners to take measures in the late nineteen eighties to fill vacant units. These would include campaigns aimed at attracting the city's university students and advertisements in local newspapers, among others.¹⁰ The most aggressive measure was taken in the early nineteen nineties by the Towers' owners when they enlisted the tenantry of tenants receiving social assistance.

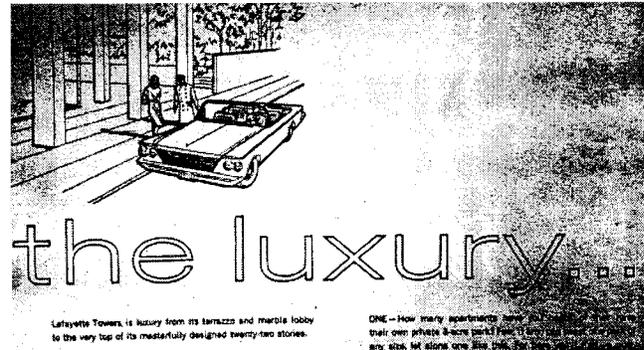
The contract into which the Lafayette Towers entered in July of 1991 with the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development would allow the owners to receive HUD funds in exchange for providing "safe, decent and sanitary housing" to families enrolled in the *Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments Program*.¹¹ The Section 8 contract would be renewed a single time in November of 1994. A subsequent wave of economic vitality in Detroit would lead the owners to opt out of the contract when it terminated on October 31 1998. Lafayette Park's rental apartments are once again filled with ease at market rate, and the Towers no longer figure on the list of properties participating in the Section 8 program. At the present time, the majority of tenants receiving Section 8 subsidies have left the Lafayette Towers.¹² These departures have been quiet, signaled only by piles of carpeting and forlorn furniture evacuated from the north-end service doors at the foot of each of the Towers at an increased rate over the past year. In addition to tenants receiving assistance, the population at Lafayette Park includes large numbers of law enforcement agents, Detroit School teachers, professionals, students and city functionaries.¹³ One can observe the Lafayette Towers' unusual relationship to prestige and entitlement in the buildings' public areas. Indeed over the past nine years it was been possible to discover strikingly unusual mixes of people inside the elevators, depending on the time of day.¹⁴

ORAL HISTORY

A forty three-year-old black woman recalls her move to the West Tower:

I moved here in April of 1989... It was swell and it was nice. The people that I met since I moved down here were friendly. When I moved in here, and since I have been here for nine years, I feel my freedom began here... what I felt when I first came here at the Lafayette Towers is that it's where my freedom was just beginning. And I'm very happy, and it's going to get better. I don't have any complaints, and hey, thank God for the Lafayette Towers, because really, after my divorce was finalized, you know, and I was wondering: now — how am I going to live? I didn't know where I was going to live, and didn't know where I was going to go, you know I was like — "Oh God! I don't want to go home and live with my parents all over again."

And so then there, as I'm sitting down looking at the television, on Channel 7 comes: Lafayette Towers will now be accepting applications for Section 8 applicants. And I thought: "Hey, wow! Will they accept me?" You know, and so finally, I came down here, I put in an application, the next thing I know, the next day rather, my mother's phone rings. It was Lafayette Towers calling to say that I could come and look at the apartment and move on in. "Oh wow! No! Hey - this must be some kind of joke!" I was too... Hoo... I can't think of a word at this particular time. But I'm here...



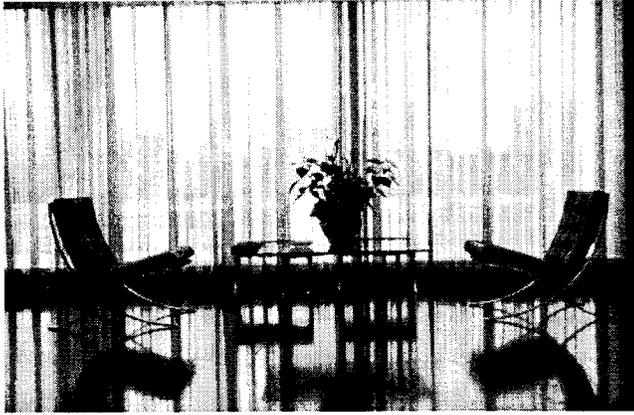


Fig. 4. West Tower lobby, circa 1960.



Fig. 5. West Tower lobby today.

overhangs of any kind. The interest of this already tantalizing spatial arrangement is heightened further by its relationship to the urban landscape of Detroit and by the social diversity that exists behind the "perfect skin."

A single mother who moved into the East Tower in 1991 before the birth of her daughter, is among the pioneer group of socially assisted single mothers who were given one bedroom apartments in the first days of the Section 8 openings in the Lafayette Towers. She tells of how, over the years, all of her daughters' clothes have come from a family living nine floors above her. Other practices of exchange have cropped up during the decade of mixed income occupancy of the Towers, including child sitting, furniture transfers, and social encounter. A single male who entered the building as a subsidized participant explains that he decided to keep renting his apartment even after exiting the Section 8 program because he was single and had no children. He describes the absence of loneliness afforded by the tower structure: "You just have to go to the lobby, there's always someone coming and going, there's always someone you know." Tenants with cable television can tune into the closed circuit video footage of the lobby - weatherlock and intercom station, broadcast on cable 1. "If someone owes you money, you can see them, and you can go get them," states a tenant whose television, placed on the perimeter vent box on the west wall of her seventeenth floor apartment, is often stationed on the first channel. The bluish image on the screen, a bird's eye view of the lobby, looks eery against the panoramic view of the city and the lustrous green park below. Another participant has decorated her apartment with plants recuperated from the incinerator room in the basement. A historian

who has lived in the Towers for twenty years comments on the Section 8 arrival into the Lafayette Towers: "Some people were angry, they had meetings in the lobby, some people left... When the Section 8 people first moved in, some of them had attitude. After a while, when they felt accepted, they got better. Everyone is so polite now; they stopped wearing bathrobes in the corridors and in the lobby and got dressed up." There are obvious discomforts, on both sides. On his moving day in October, a male in his forties states: "we have a bit of a complex, us Section 8 people, with all them lawyers and doctors living up there, but God can knock them down just as fast as they got up there, that's what I say."

Although the once state-of-the-art amenities are now obsolete, and although the building controls have now become the objects of frequent complaints, the elegance of the Towers' public spaces has endured. A green marble clad lobby, a mail-room with stainless boxes, glazed party room, are elevated on a podium of green terrazzo. The latter extends outside under the colonnade of the structural grid from which the glass ground floor enclosure steps back.¹⁹ The swimming pool that surmounts the parking deck between the two towers provides the only structured outdoor space of the architecture, and is as such an important social condenser. The celebration of public areas is a recurring theme of Miesian architecture; it is as if the basis of the construction of a social fabric requires such a support.

PRIVATE AREAS AND CIVIC SPACE

A retired navy officer who now works as a court clerk, describes the thought that went into organizing the material supports to his daily life in the smallest of the Tower's studios: answering machine, telephone, exerciser, books, bed, entertainment system, are organized spatially to follow his routine as smoothly as possible. "It took me a while to get things so it all flowed. I moved things around about four times before I settled on this." Indeed, a social domain is further constructed by the dwellings themselves, and more specifically, by the inhabitants relationship to the architecture. The highly unusual (un-domestic) architectural language of their apartments demands that tenants adjust their lives and face the rigors of the Miesian box. A kind of bond results from this common activity of adjustment, from the overlaps in the manner individuals practice their space.²⁰ All are involved in similar battles with: privacy, the heat of the sun, the need for more storage. All must reconcile themselves with the contradictions of the purity of the spaces and the realities and disruptions of their own domestic life. Possessions, exercise machines, televisions, sofa beds, children's toys, all must find their place inside the grid, within spaces "as perfect, meticulous, and well-arranged as ours is disordered, ill conceived, and in a sketchy state."²¹

The final social modulator of the building is of course it's skin: as in a human body, it can remain permeable or impermeable to outside invasions. This is interesting when understood through the architectural detailing of the curtain wall; the latter effectively sets up a stage for social interactions from behind. Significantly, in the Towers windows are non-operable. Window vents along the perimeter walls contain horizontal panels that are flapped upward from inside with the same gesture that would open a chest.²² This allows fresh air to flow in without disrupting the transparent membrane of the faÁade. The "window" is thus an inward projection into the apartment, an inverted balcony or sorts, which is used to sit on or to place objects upon. As such, the curtain wall is more screen-like, scintillant, and transparent, as a result of its immotility. The sense of curtain wall as screen is intensified on the inward facing flanks of the towers. There, the towers are placed in geometrical correspondence to each other, allowing the inhabitant to read their coordinates in space as if looking in a mirror. It is along those faÁades that the heterogeneity of the worlds concealed behind the curtain wall can be apprehended. This is especially true at night. It is then that the



Fig. 6. Tenant Man in efficiency apartment.

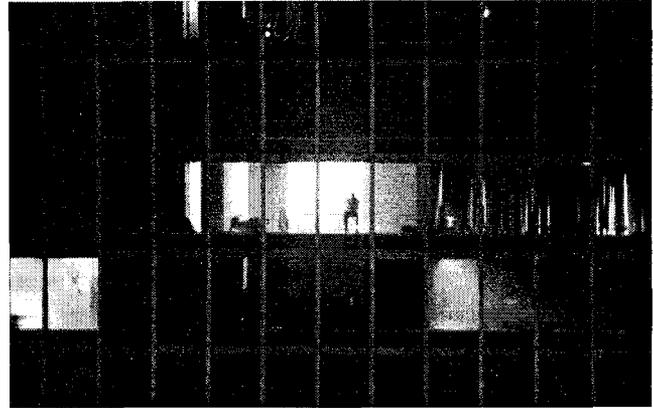


Fig. 8. Curtain wall at night viewed from opposite tower.

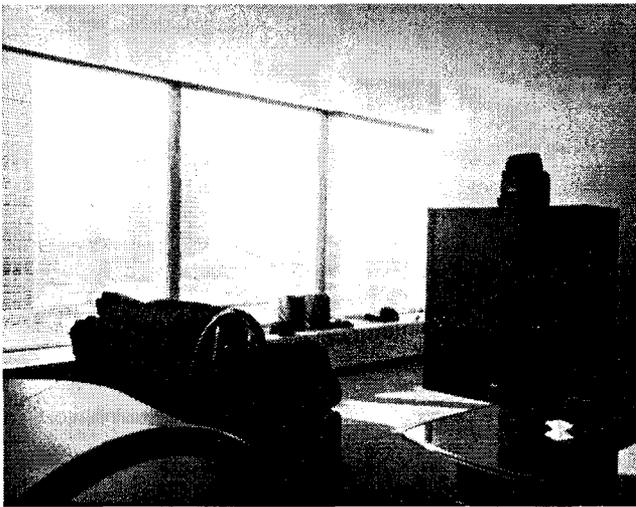


Fig. 7. An upscale one-bedroom unit with large TV.

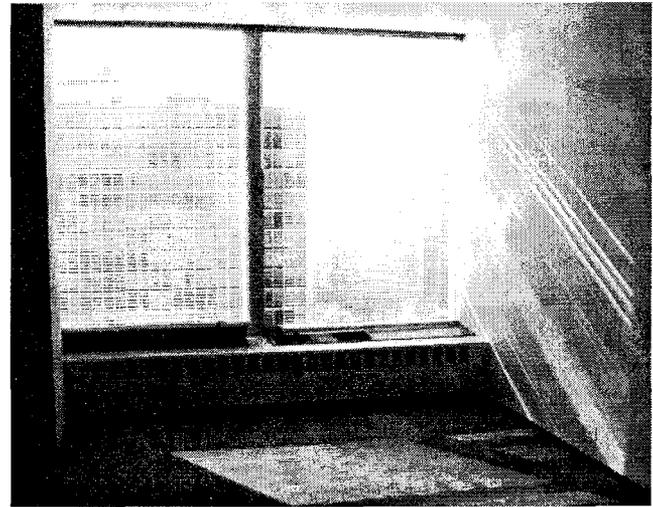


Fig. 9. Lafayette Towers, vacant apartment.

buildings emerge as *heterotopia* of dwelling.²³ Indeed, at night, the glass towers become large gridded boxes forced to expose their luminous contents to the outside. The architecture in a sense here turns back on itself, forever escaping the entrapment as purely aesthetic object.²⁴ Furthermore, interior privacy is quickly eroded by the outsider's gaze inward: when lights are turned on inside, the weakness of the demarcation between neighbors' apartments is revealed, turning external space into inner space and charging it with the same fragile qualities. The veiled light and transparency infiltrates both sides of a glass wall, and as soon as the light is turned off, space disappears, once again, on both sides. The added layers of meaning of Mies' equalizing façades in the context of Lafayette Park are here recognized.

CONCLUSION

As a "garden city," Lafayette Park both inaugurated the spatial restructuring taking place in the city at a that time marked the termination of the urban core as center, while putting forth strong concepts of civic presence in the downtown. It is both *anti* and *proto*-suburb, standing on the threshold of the rust-belt and the green suburbs of America — and because of the very complex tenor of this threshold — it is significantly populated by rich and poor. The Detroit site constituted a loaded context, and it is there that Mies' conflicting love of luxury and social ideals would be resolved, inadvertently, for a brief moment in time. In all of its humanity, Mies

van der Rohe's residential district is a surprising presence in Detroit. Its controversial origins in the urban renewal movement with the hopefulness of the diversity that has managed to characterize its social fabric over that past forty years contribute to the significance of Lafayette Park in the history of urban development in America. At present, the gentrification that began in most American cities twenty years ago has begun in Detroit, as Federal and State mega-projects are being initiated.²⁵ Within the context of the city's trajectory of economic revitalization, the state of social balance at Lafayette Park has become vulnerable. "We kept the building going and now they're getting rid of us," were the honest and recent words of a Section 8 tenant, worried about her future after a decade in the East Tower and unsure about her housing prospects as the downtown is reclaimed both from outside and from within the city limits. At the very point that errors of the past seemed to have healed in this historically charged part of the city, displacements of the less privileged have once again begun.

Interestingly, Mies' other design for Detroit was a housing project for homeless men entitled "Skid Row," designed in 1958 but never built. Much like the Towers' efficiency apartments, its rooms are square boxes whose considered dimensions seem to anticipate the human life that will move into them. Perhaps in the end, it is in the dimensions of rooms that one can reconcile the work of an architect who designed both luxury homes and social housing in Germany and America. A room, after all, does not know for whom it was built.

NOTES

- ¹ Lafayette Park initially known as the "Gratiot Redevelopment Project" as it was initially referred to was indeed already in the works at the time of the passing of the Housing Act of 1949.
- ² For an account of Detroit's social and economic history of the last fifty years, Thomas Sugrue's recent work is unsurpassed. See *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- ³ Lafayette Park includes two other high-rise towers and several other townhouse complexes not designed by Mies. The Mies-Hilberseimer plan was abandoned mid-project, upon the death of the developer, Mies' patron, Herbert Greenwald. A detailed chronology is provided by the work of Sarah Evans who prepared the documents for the National Register of Historic Places. See *Mies van der Rohe Residential District, Lafayette Park* (Washington: National Register, 1997).
- ⁴ Very little recorded history about this neighborhood exists. A recent exhibit at Detroit's Museum of African American History, *Detroit's Black Bottom and Paradise Valley: Help Us Collect Your Past*, attempted to reconstruct a body of knowledge about these neighborhoods demolished during urban renewal, through public participation, collecting of photographs and oral histories (Sept.-Oct. 22, 1998).
- ⁵ It had taken time to find a developer who believed this project of renewal was feasible. Herbert Greenwald and Samuel Katzin would take on the site in 1956 and would hire Mies van der Rohe and Hilberseimer to design the project. On the history of Lafayette Park see R. W. Mowitz and Del S. Wright, *Profile of a Metropolis* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1962).
- ⁶ For an account of the controversy surrounding Lafayette Park and other urban renewal projects in Detroit see: June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). This work also recounts the carelessness of the Gratiot Project renewal process as it pertained to relocation and rehousing. Sugrue also documents this event.: "About one-third of the Gratiot area's families eventually moved to public housing, but 35% could not be traced. The best-informed city officials believed that a majority of families moved to neighborhoods within a mile of the Gratiot site, crowding into an already decaying part of the city, and finding housing scarcely better and often more overcrowded than that which they had left." *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, p. 51.
- ⁷ In particular, the uprising of the summer of 1967 in which predominantly young black participants denounced police brutality and the severe crisis in housing and employment in Detroit, was followed by increased polarization of city and suburbs.
- ⁸ In the beginning, it was the cooperatively owned townhouses that faced vacancies, while the rental towers filled as noted for example in the article "Lafayette Park Tastes Success," *Detroit News* (1968), pp. 6-24.
- ⁹ On the early social history of Lafayette Park, see Eleanor Papper Wolf and Charles Lebeaux, *Change and Renewal in an Urban Community: Five Case Studies in Detroit*, chapter 5, pp. 107-71, (New York: Praeger Press, 1969). On the racial component of urban exodus in Detroit, see June Manning Thomas, "Racial Crisis and the Fall of the Detroit City Plan Commission," *Journal of the American Planning Association* 54 (1988), pp. 150-61.
- ¹⁰ Rent discounts are offered to Wayne State University medical students and to the University of Detroit Mercy Dental School students to this day. The "Tell A Friend" rent rebate offered to existing tenants who managed draw in new customers, has recently ceased.
- ¹¹ The Section 8 Housing Assistance Payments Program was launched in 1974 and provides rent subsidy for low-income families in privately owned, existing market rate rental housing units. The Lafayette Towers fulfilled the requirements for the "Low Management Set-Aside" division of the Section 8 program, a reserve of HUD funds for market-rate properties "experiencing vacancies." *Certificate Holders Briefing Packet, City of Detroit Housing Commission Section 8* (Detroit: City of Detroit Publications, 1998). Additional information was obtained from HUD.
- ¹² Section 8 tenants were given one year's notice that the HUD contract would not be renewed a second time in October of 1998. Although many have already moved to other locations, some have renewed leases using Detroit Housing Department vouchers to continue renting. (Anonymous, *Department of HUD, Detroit*)
- ¹³ Lafayette Park has been a neighborhood of choice for City of Detroit employees who must reside in Detroit according to the *Home Rule* legislation.
- ¹⁴ This paper was written at a time of transition, when the population was still significantly diversified from an economic standpoint. I have been able to observe an increased wave of departures between October and the present.
- ¹⁵ Oral interview, October, 1998.
- ¹⁶ The bathrooms are in reality quite modest in size. Their finishes and fixtures, modernist and utilitarian, did not attempt to be luxurious.
- ¹⁷ Alison and Peter Smithson, *Changing the Art of Inhabitation*, (London: Artemis, 1994).
- ¹⁸ The windows in fact extend beyond the ceiling plane, into a recess from which blinds or curtains hang.
- ¹⁹ Parts of exterior and non-polished terrazzo has recently been replaced by concrete pavers.
- ²⁰ A reference to Michel de Certeau is here implied. See *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- ²¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias," in Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Columbia Press, 1993).
- ²² In the Pavilion, the curtain wall articulates a hopper window along the floor. The latter opens inward.
- ²³ Term refers again to Foucault's essay, *ibid.*
- ²⁴ There is no perfection once inhabitation occurs, as evidenced by the failure of rules regarding obligatory white curtain linings for example. The Towers' management began installing blinds in all apartments in 1994, to ensure uniformity from the outside.
- ²⁵ Two new stadia are now being built on the former site of the YM and YWCA buildings and casino projects on the riverfront due-south of Lafayette Park are responsible for land value's soaring in the past two years.