

Mies van der Rohe's Compromise with the Nazis

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Leaders of the Modern Movement in architecture typically have been portrayed as standing above politics and in opposition to reactionary social movements such as Fascism. But over the last thirty years it has become apparent that this picture of moral probity is far from clear. The Modernists, perhaps because of a pragmatic outlook, and a philosophical view that stresses success, functionalism and power, have more often than is thought, collaborated with repressive regimes. Their record is not as pure as their defenders would like. As the complicated case of the Quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg has recently revealed, collaboration of a top professional with the Nazi hierarchy has many benign motives as well as negative consequences.

This paper will explore the moral ambiguities of one Modernist leader, Mies van der Rohe, to become a, perhaps the, architect of Germany (Fig. 1). My intention is not to censure, but to elucidate the moral ambiguities of his position; it is more typical of architects' relations to the power structure than most apologists of the Modern Movement would like to admit.

Mies van der Rohe was one of the most central figures of the Modern Movement. In 1924, he became chairman and director of the architectural exhibitions for the *Novembergruppe*, the main outlet of the avant-garde in Berlin. This was in addition to being one of the founding members of the *Ring*, the elite cell of Berlin architects that helped to establish the postwar Modern Movement. In the 1930's, members of the Modern Movement were traditionally opposed to Fascism, and a majority fled from Germany and Italy to England, America and elsewhere. This self-imposed exile is called the „diaspora“ of the Modern Movement, and has generated a myth associating modernism with organized political resistance. However, the individual behavior of those considered to be „archetypal modernists“ often complied with the power structure: Walter Gropius wrote letters to Goebbels justifying modern architecture as German and entered the Reichsbank competition, Le Corbusier worked under the Vichy government, Giuseppe Terragni worked under the Italian Fascists, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe accommodated the Nazis and sought their approval. Contrary to usual opinion, this paper will contend that Mies' behavior was typical of other grand modern architects.

The premise of most buildings of the Modern Movement was, as described by Mary McLeod, „to serve as an agent of social redemption by implementing the measures of economy, efficiency, and technical innovation as well as being able to produce buildings cheaply, make them available to all, and thus improve social conditions.“¹ Although Mies was interested in projects with a social agenda, as seen in his participation in the housing development at the *Weissenhof Exhibition*, his primary intent was to define cultural reform in terms of aesthetic and spiritual ideals rather than material and social matters. As opposed to what most critics have written, Mies dismissed the implications of social reform built into the old doctrine of the pre-war *Werkbund* expectations.

Given these goals and knowing Mies' uncompromising character, it seems surprising that Mies was asked to become director of the Bauhaus in Dessau, in 1930. The Bauhaus was founded as an alternative institution under the strong influence of Russian socialist ideals - ideals that didn't necessarily coincide with Mies' more

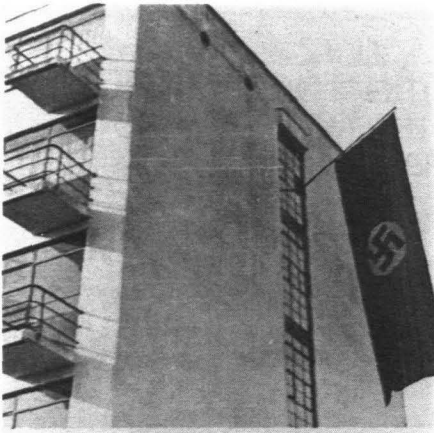


1 Caricature of Mies

liberal and capitalist beliefs. In fact, Mies' career at the Bauhaus was short-lived. When Mies was asked by Walter Gropius to assume the directorship in Dessau, the Bauhaus' existence was already on shaky grounds due to political and financial problems. By 1930, the ideological differences between the emerging National-Socialist Party and the Bauhaus' implicitly socialist ideals were firmly established. On October 1, 1932, the Bauhaus in Dessau was shut down due to funding cuts by the city council - cuts which were motivated by the council's fear of the Social Democrats.

In order to fulfill Mies' goal of re-opening the Bauhaus as a private institution in Berlin, the city of Dessau turned the rights on all patents, the equipment and trademark (the right to use the name „Bauhaus“) over to Mies. He became the official „owner“ of the Bauhaus and was able to treat any dispute as his private affair. In late October, the Bauhaus in Berlin opened, but it lasted less than a year. Increasing political pressure from the Nazis gradually made the Bauhaus untenable, and it was closed in August of 1933 (Fig. 2). Mies attempted to negotiate a re-opening of the Bauhaus with Alfred Rosenberg, head of the Office for the Supervision of the Ideological Training and Education of the National-Socialist Party and with the Gestapo.

The Nazis agreed to re-open the Bauhaus under certain conditions, notably the dismissal of two faculty members and close friends of Mies, Wassily Kandinsky and Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer. Surprisingly,



Bauhaus Dessau, Prellerhaus mit Hakenkreuz
ohne
Weihnachten 1933

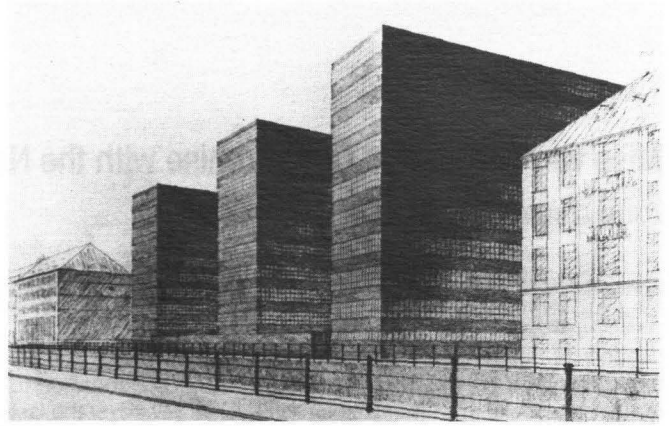
- 2 Bauhaus Dessau, Prellerhaus with swastika flag
After the closure of the Bauhaus, the swastika flag signified the victory of the National-Socialists over the architecture of the Modern Movement

records show that one day after the Nazis agreed to permit Bauhaus to continue operating, Mies ordered the dissolution of the school. It is possible that Mies' letter and the letter from the Nazis' crossed in the mail.²

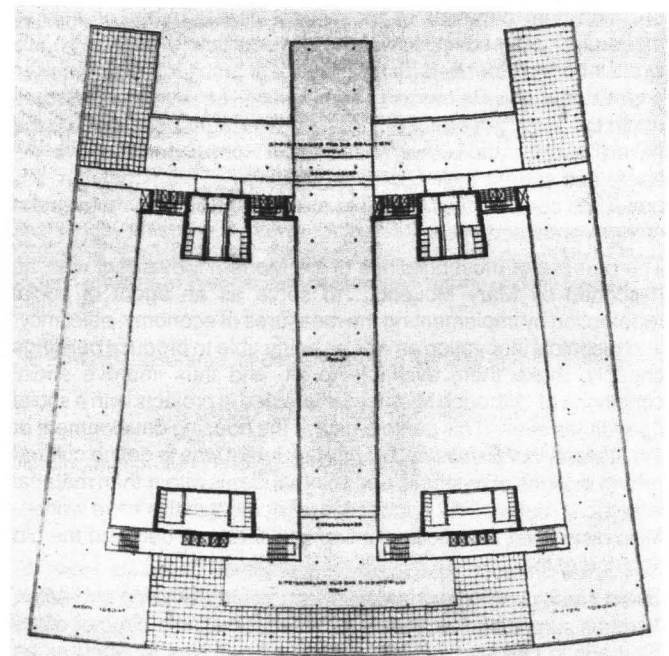
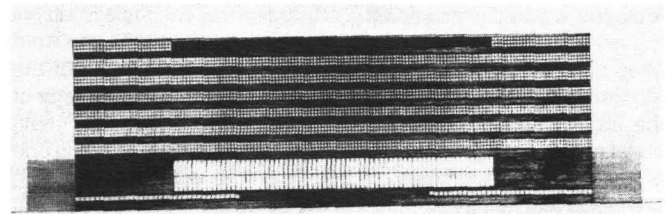
On the 10th of August, in a note to his students, Mies declared that if the Bauhaus had been financially viable, he would have agreed to the requirements set by the Nazis, (e.g. the dismissal of Kandinsky and Hilberseimer). Mies' effort to communicate with the Nazis must be interpreted as an effort to compromise with them. In retrospect, it appears that Mies had a policy in making overtures to the Nazis, demonstrating his willingness to toe the line and close the Bauhaus. To our knowledge, this was the first time that Mies compromised his ideals, and did so in order to get commissions. It seems as if the fate of the Bauhaus was an indicator of the fate of the Modern Movement within the framework of the Third Reich. If the Bauhaus had endured the political pressure by the Nazis, Mies would have been able to demonstrate the appropriateness of defining modern architecture as „German“, and he would have succeeded in becoming a modern architect in Nazi Germany.

Even though Mies was willing to compromise, in 1933, he lost the first major public competition of the newly founded Nazi Germany, the design of the *Reichsbank*, Imperial Bank, in Berlin. Mies was invited by the board of the *Reichsbank*, along with Walther Gropius and others, to participate. Mies was selected as one of the winning finalists. His ten-story block with a massive, unornamented convex facade stood out not only because of its symmetrical layout and simple profile, but also because of its inherent monumentality (Fig.3-5). Mies' grandiose project recalled the architecture of the *Kaiserreich* and has to be considered as un-modern in its compositional formality, although the materials and severity of expression were both modern and reduced classical.

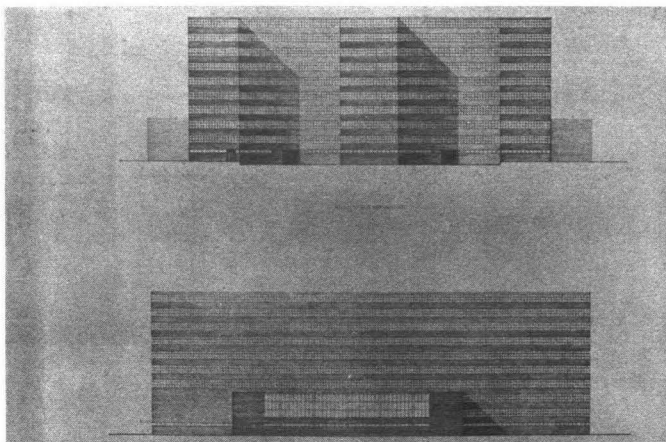
During this period, Adolf Hitler's architectural intentions were beginning to show more clearly. Hitler was personally involved in the judgment of the *Reichsbank* competition entries. He rejected all designs because the buildings lacked, as the chancellor stated, the „grandiosity and impressiveness Hitler deemed essential for the buildings of the state, and complained they looked like normal office buildings.“ Mies' design was the only entry that satisfied what Philip



- 3 Perspective sketch of Mies' *Reichsbank* Competition Proposal, Canal Elevation, 1933
The symmetrical, monumental wings of the facade are an expression of an architecture of power, which became the architectural expression of Mies' work in the U.S.



4 Plan of *Reichsbank*, top floor

5 Elevations of the *Reichsbank*

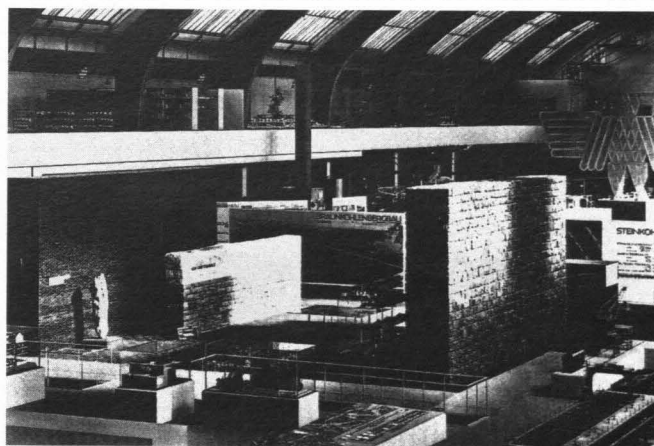
Johnson called at the time Hitler's 'craving for monumentality'. According to Elaine Hochman, Mies was disappointed that the German leader decided to return one of the most heroic architectural competitions to the bank's own technical design division.³

In 1934, Mies was desperate for work and took the opportunity given by the Nazis to design the exhibition hall for the German People/German Labor exhibition to be held in Berlin from April to June of that year. (Fig. 6). The stated purpose of the exhibition, described by Richard Pommer was ... "to display the Nationalist Socialist doctrines of race and labor in Germany. As a whole, the main goal of the exhibition was to warn the Germans of the dangers of racial degeneracy, a display of the countermeasures of the regime."⁴ The architectural expression of the exhibition hall was reminiscent of Mies' earlier buildings such as the Brick Country House of 1924. Compared to Mies' previous works, the only visible difference was the more symmetrical layout of the plan. Throughout the 1930's, Mies' architecture became increasingly more stern and reduced. This monumentality continued in his American works.

In 1935, Mies rejected the execution of a house commission for Ulrich Lange and his family because the *Baupolizei* (police in charge of supervising design and building construction) wanted the construction of an earthen wall to hide the house from the street (Fig. 7). Otherwise, the house would have been built exactly as designed by Mies. The Langes saw the restriction as a mere face-saving device by the council. Not so in the eyes of Mies, who was unwilling to compromise his design - the pure platonic aesthetic would not be sullied by an earthen wall. Surprisingly, in this case, his commitment to pure form took precedence over his will to succeed. Formal integrity gave him a moment of moral integrity.

After, in effect, refusing the compromise on the Lange house, Mies focused on the design for the new German Exposition Building for the 1935 Brussels World Fair - a highly politicized project. Mies was invited by the president of the *Reichskammer der Bildenden Kuenste* (an organization under Heinrich Goebbel's Ministry of Propaganda) to participate. Mies' expectations were high. He hoped to continue the earlier success of his Barcelona Pavilion on a more monumental scale, and even more importantly to represent the new German Reich in Brussels.

Very little artistic freedom was given in the guidelines for the 1935 Brussels World Fair which was written by the Reich's Commissioner on the 14th of May, 1934. As was stated in the first sentence of the document, the German Pavilion was to „proceed from the principle of totality inherent in the Third Reich.“⁵ The notion of totality was new to German politics, but eventually became the essence of the Third Reich politically as well as architecturally.



6 Mining Exhibit, Deutsches Volk/Deutsche Arbeit Exhibition

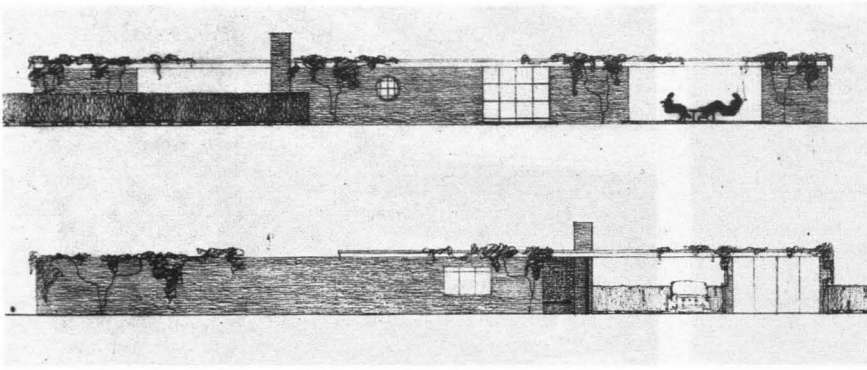
The document gave the architect an in-depth understanding of the program, „an explanation of the ideological reasoning, and the implementation of materials appropriate for representing the Nazi ideology (for example: colored glass for the representation of the German tribes).“⁶ The plan for the exhibition called for a hall of honor for Goebbel's Propaganda Ministry and four major exhibits in addition to the industrial exhibits. The exhibit titled *Weltanschauung*, or „world view“, Hitler's phrase for fundamental Nazi principles, was to include the functions and goals of the Reichskulturkammer, Goebbel's bureau for the control of the arts. The exhibition about people was to range from the Nazi Party, the storm troopers, and the *Deutsche Arbeitsfront* and its *Kraft durch Freude* („strength through pleasure“) organization to youth and the school, crafts and the middle class, and the landscape. Another section was to be called „Peasant and Soil“ (*Bauer und Boden*), a variant of the slogan of Nazi racism and expansionism „Blood and Soil“ (*Blut und Boden*), because the latter was deemed „not feasible in Brussels.“ A fourth exhibition was to deal with new transportation proposals.⁷ The major goal of the exhibition, as described in the program, was to express the will of National-Socialist Germany through an imposing form: the building was to symbolize the fighting strength and heroic will of National-Socialism.

Mies' competition entry (drawings and a model) was accompanied by a letter to the Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment for the People, dated July 3, 1934, which explained his design ideology and strategy. In a very general first sentence, Mies described his basic design ideas as follows:

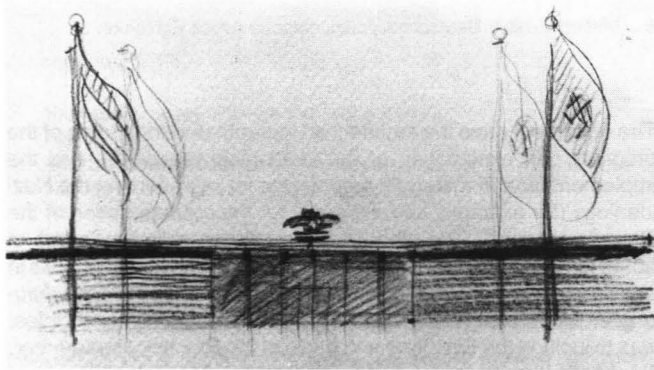
„During the last years, Germany has developed a form (Form) for its expositions that more and more shuns away from large expanses and progresses from exterior embellishment to the essential, to what an exposition should be, to a factual (sachlich) but effective visual display of things, to a real picture of German achievements“.⁸

In general, Mies' design followed his earlier guidelines: „less is more“ and „form follows function.“ His aesthetic approach closely followed his personal design philosophy. Yet, Mies continued in the letter to call his ideology „superior to any other“ and stated that the „clear and striking language“ would have corresponded to the „essence of German work.“ He insisted that the „effects of this (his) language, including those (effects) it has upon foreign countries, have been demonstrated (in his designs) in the course of the last years.“ Mies was probably referring to the Barcelona Pavilion.

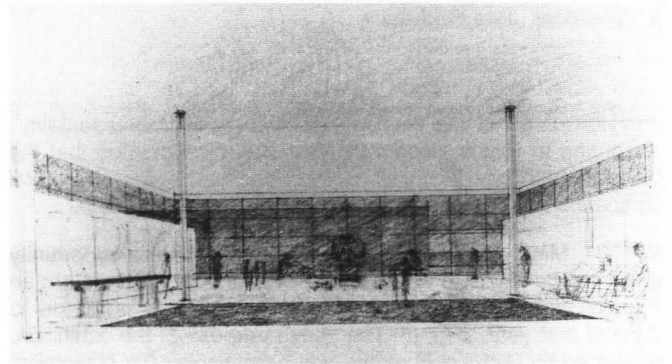
Clearly, the programmatic requirements dictated the display of swastikas and the German Eagle as an integral part of the design, and Mies adhered to them (Fig. 8). In Mies' design, two marble walls



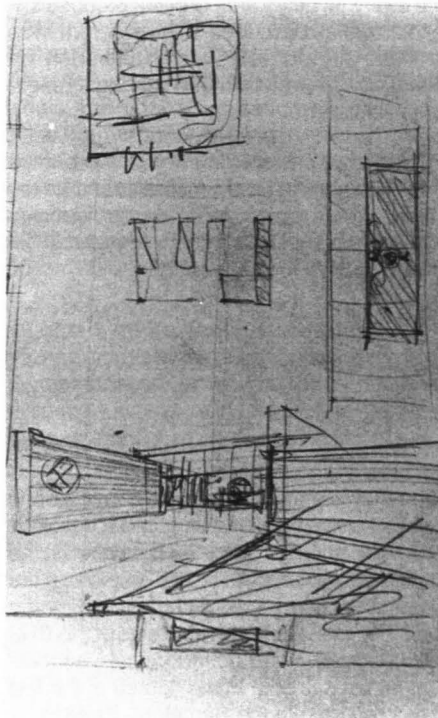
7 Elevation of the Ulrich Lange House Project, Krefeld, 1935



8 German Pavilion Project, Sketch of the central portion of the facade, 1934, with a German Eagle marking the main entrance and two Nazi flags framing the front elevation.



9 Interior perspective of Hall of Honor, German Pavilion, with the inscription „Deutsches Reich“ on a partition wall



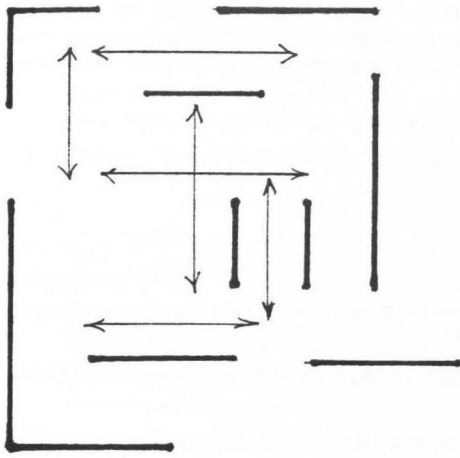
10 Sheet of sketches for the German Pavilion (swastika rendered on perspective)

became a billboard for Nazi ideology: a large swastika was carved into one, *Deutsches Reich* was inscribed in another (Fig.9). A bronze eagle of the Reich stood at the far end of the court.

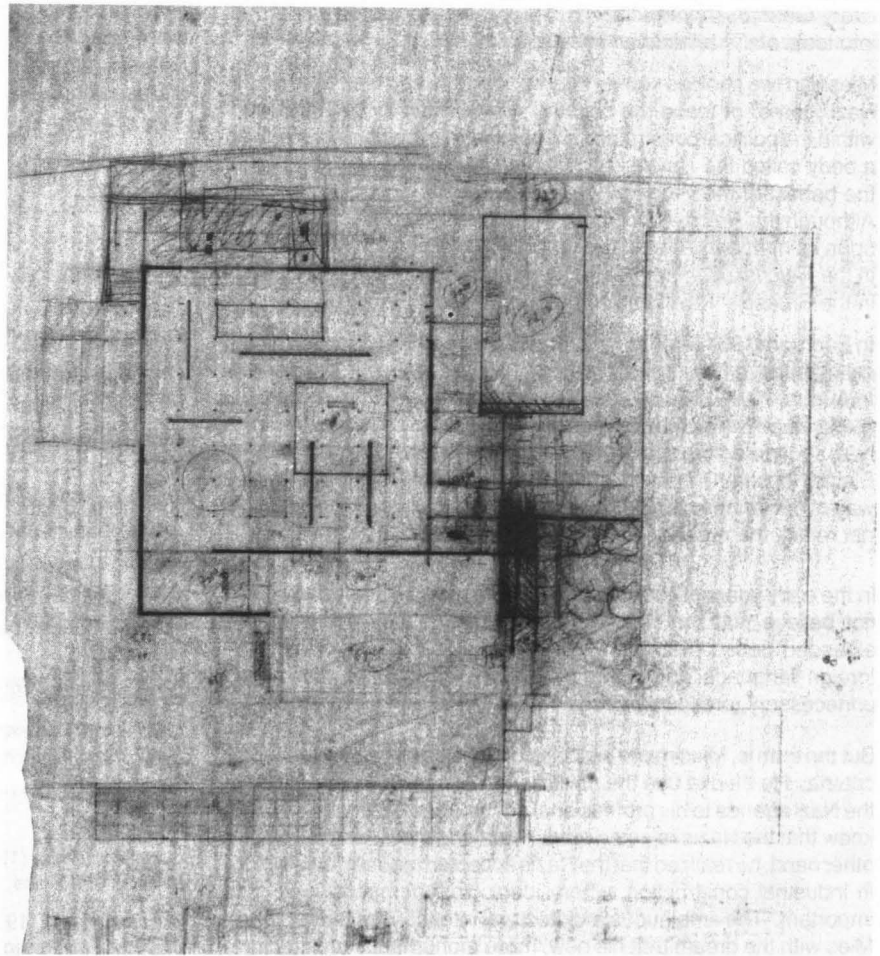
Mies sketched a variety of swastikas, from the very literal to the very abstract. A literal swastika sketched onto one elevation expressed Mies' willingness to utilize, in the most direct and blunt manner, Nazi symbols within his own language of architecture (Fig.10). One can assume that to Mies, the symbols became ornamental details. This contradicted Mies' „less is more“ philosophy. A quote by Elaine Hochman further illustrated Mies' opinion on the use of Nazi symbols (from a discussion on a Textile Exhibition sponsored by the Nazis):

„There is nothing...absolutely nothing...in the show to which the Nazis could possibly object. At the very worst, they might forbid the use of my name, as they did in thirty-four. And that bothers me now as much as it did then! Perhaps we might put in a few swastikas or other party emblems. But that's not the real problem. So forget about it!“⁶

Mies had become very cavalier about the use of Nazi symbols. The deconstruction of a swastika in the plan of the Brussels Pavilion can be interpreted as Mies' attempt to work with the geometry of the swastika on a purely aesthetic level (Fig.11 and 12). Mies transformed the swastika according to the rules of his own architectural principles. At the same time, Mies was trying to accommodate the taste of the Nazis. The very subtle use of the abstracted form could be interpreted as a hidden message to Hitler, a message that was to seal a silent „treaty“ - from „architect to architect“ - between the *Führer* and Mies. It is questionable whether Hitler (or anybody else) understood this message due to the fact that it is hidden in abstraction.



12 German Pavilion Project, Analytical sketch of the floor plan, illustrating a deconstructed swastika



11 German Pavilion Project, Plan

Hitler judged the competition entries himself because of the political importance of the project. Elaine Hochman describes that Hitler reacted violently when he saw the projects. Sergius Ruegenberg, Mies' young assistant recalled that Hitler „sealed his decision with his foot“¹⁰ - he stepped on Mies' model. As a result, Hitler decided not to participate in the Brussels's Exposition because none of the designs satisfied his craving for the new monumental expression of German power in architecture. It must have been a great satisfaction for Hitler, an unsuccessful artist/architect himself, to be able to coopt one of the main figures of the Modern Movement to his symbolic and political agenda and then deliberately reject him.

Likewise, Hitler's decision must have been a great disappointment to Mies. The fact that Mies compromised his beliefs for the taste and rules of the establishment made the disillusionment even more painful. Since 1925, when Mies was considered for the position of the chief municipal architect of Magdeburg, his willingness to compromise had overcome his strong architectural beliefs. This can be seen in the following paragraph, a letter by Mies to M.G. Fahrenholtz in 1925, rejecting the position offered to him:

„I myself would never have considered accepting such a position if I were not anxious to prepare the grounds somewhere for a new attitude to building (Baugesinnung), since I can't imagine for what other reason I should give up my artistically free and materially far better position. Since I pursue very specific spiritual-political goals in my work, I don't find it difficult to decide whether or not I can assume such a post. If the possibility of achieving the goal of my work does not exist in such a position, then I must forego it; therefore...“¹¹

Mies was deeply humiliated. His dream of convincing the Nazis that his style was the appropriate architectural expression of the new

Germany had been destroyed with the failure of the Brussels Pavilion.

Standard historical accounts of Mies' work fall into two categories. The „white washers“ ignore Mies' political compromise and the way it shaped the monumental and stern direction taken by his later works in the U.S.¹² In contrast, the „political realists“ acknowledge a not-so-heroic period in Mies' life, accept his political compromise, and choose to deal with it.¹³

Kenneth Frampton exemplifies the „white-wash“ approach in his book *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. The book demonstrates an in-depth understanding of the relevant historical events, but Frampton avoided the question of whether it is important to evaluate architecture within a political setting (to look beyond an aesthetic level and to move beyond platonic purism) and thereby missed the crucial issue of the relation between a modern master and brute power. On the other hand, „political realists“ discuss architecture as a profession, made up of a complex fabric that includes site, climate, place, insulation, function, any internal activity, as well as platonic ideals and conceptual ideas. In 1964, at the Modern Architecture Symposium, Sibyl Maholy-Nagy's attacked Mies by calling him „a traitor to all of us.“ She despised the fact that Mies tried to play up to the National Socialists.

Only by using a „political realist“ lens can one perceive how Mies became a victim of the ruling power structure. Until 1930, it was acceptable for Mies to stay „apolitical“ - during the Weimar Republic no political commitment was expected by the government. Therefore, Mies never felt the need to join any political party. But, Mies could only stay „apolitical“ until the Nazis came to power. The National Socialist Party required - step by step - the political commitment of

every German (Aryan) citizen. Slowly, people were transformed into tools of the totalitarian system.

Mies had two choices - either stay in Germany and play a part in the Nazi „game“ or leave the country. He decided to stay and work within the political constraints, not passively, but actively: he joined a body called the *Reichskulturkammer*, which was established at the behest of the Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels, in 1933. Although the *Reichskulturkammer* imposed no stylistic restrictions upon its members, it required proof of „racial purity“. Membership in the *Reichskulturkammer* was a prerequisite for the participation in the Brussels' Pavilion Competition.¹⁴

In February 1934 Mies was granted membership in the Reichsluftschutzbund, a Nazi-sponsored organization for home air defence. In August 1934, Mies applied for another membership, namely the *National-Sozialistische Volkswohlfahrt (NSV)*. The *NSV* was a Nazi sponsored organization dedicated to the needs of the poor. In Elaine Hochman's opinion, it offered Mies an attractive and harmless way of declaring to the authorities that he supported, or at least did not reject, the regime.¹⁵

In the early years of Nazi rule, many architects, including Mies, did not believe that the Nazis could hold on to their power for an extended period of time. Furthermore, Mies did not speak any foreign language and leaving Germany seemed to him as an unnecessary, presumptuous move.

But the truth is, Mies made his plans on the basis of altogether other criteria. He tried to use the political and architectural ambiguity of the Nazi agenda to his professional advantage. On one hand, Mies knew that the Nazis rejected modernism and the Bauhaus. On the other hand, he realized that the Nazis accepted modern architecture in industrial construction, where ideological demands were less important. The ambiguous architectural intentions of the Nazis left Mies with the dream that his new, more monumental architecture, which was competing with classical revivalism, would become the appropriate style for the German Reich. As a result, Mies declined the offer by the Mills College to become head of the architecture school in 1936, and one year later, he declined a similar offer by the Armour Institute of Chicago (now, Illinois Institute of Architecture). It was not until 1938, when Mies realized that his dreams were futile, that he accepted the offer by the Armour Institute and left for the United States.

Whether or not Mies was a traitor, as Sibyl Maholy-Nagy called him, remains to be seen. We can only argue that Mies worked under the Nazis in order to remain in his homeland as long as possible without jeopardizing his life. In my opinion, an important but unremarked motive for Mies' continual compromise in a situation he obviously did not relish was his hope that he might become a major architect in the Massive Berlin Renewal Program (begun in 1936). Circumstantial evidence seems to back up this opinion because when Mies realized that the Nazis had no place for him in their future architectural plans (perhaps the summer of 1936), he left his native country with shattered hopes and dreams.

Years after his arrival in the U.S., Mies was asked to take part in a Bauhaus exhibition (shown in the U.S.). He denied participation by saying that he „owed nothing to the Bauhaus.“ I believe that Mies must have felt uneasy about his German past. What other reason is there to not share his Bauhaus experience, an affiliation he seemed to have fought for so strenuously?

As the architectural community comes to terms with Mies' past, so must historians come to terms with architectures „real history“, a history that includes politics, — in the same way that Germans need to come to terms with their „real“ history, a history that must include their Nazi past. In facing these truths perhaps more will be understood about the Modernist belief in pragmatism, power and the efficacy of moral trade-offs. Perhaps all ideologies would have

succumbed to Nazi power and the regime of fear, but some are more open to compromise than others, and the difference often concern general motives of fatalism, moral relativity and the duties of opposition.

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Illustrations

1. *Caricature of Mies van der Rohe* published in „Montag Morgen“, October 1932. (from Peter Hahn's (1985), *Bauhaus Berlin*, p.94)
2. *Bauhaus Dessau, Prellerhaus with Swastika Flag*, Christmas 1933 (from Peter Hahn's (1985), *Bauhaus Berlin*, p.125)
3. *Reichsbank, Berlin, Competition Project, Canal Elevation, 1933* (from Franz Schulze's (1987), *Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays*, p.120)
4. *Reichsbank Berlin, Plan View* (from Arthur Drexler's (1986), *Mies van der Rohe Archive*, p.483)
5. *Reichsbank Berlin, Two elevations* (from Arthur Drexler's (1986), *Mies van der Rohe Archive*, p.448)
6. *Mining Exhibit, Deutsches Volk/Deutsche Arbeit Exhibition* (from Franz Schulze's (1989), *Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays*, p.124)
7. *Elevation of the Ulrich Lange House Project, Krefeld, 1935*. (from Franz Schulze's (1985), *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, p.194)
8. *German Pavilion Project, Sketch of central portion of facade* (from Franz Schulze's (1989), *Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays*, p.99)
9. *German Pavilion Project, Interior perspective of Hall of Honor* (from Franz Schulze's (1989), *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, p.201)

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| <p>10. <i>German Pavilion Project, Sheet of sketches for the German Pavilion</i> (from Franz Schulze's (1989), <i>Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays</i>, p.99)</p> <p>11. <i>German Pavilion Project, Plan</i> (from Arthur Drexler's (1986), <i>Mies van der Rohe Archive</i>, p.93)</p> <p>12. <i>German Pavilion Project, Analysis of Plan</i></p> | <p>8 From a statement by Mies van der Rohe that (may have) accompanied the drawings and model submitted to the Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment of the people; Berlin, 3rd of July, 1934).</p> <p>9 Elaine Hochman, p.283</p> <p>10 Elaine Hochman, p.228</p> <p>11 Richard Pommer, p.108</p> <p>12 For example: Siegfried Gidion, in his book <i>Space, Time and Architecture</i> (1941), Kenneth Frampton, in his book <i>Modern Architecture: A Critical History</i> (1980), and Fritz Neumeyer, in his book <i>The Artless Word</i> (1991).</p> <p>13 For example: Elaine Hochman, in her book <i>Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich</i> (1989), Charles Jencks, in his book <i>Modern Movements in Architecture</i> (1973), and Sibyl Maholy-Nagy in a speech at the Architecture Symposium (1965).</p> <p>14 Franz Schulze, p.199</p> <p>15 Elaine Hochman, p.225</p> |
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- 1 Joan Ockman, *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology*; Princeton Architectural Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 1985, p.7
- 2 Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1985, p.186
- 3 Elaine Hochman, *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*. Weidenfels and Nicolson: New York, 1989, p.202
- 4 Richard Pommer, *Mies van der Rohe and the Political Ideology of the Modern Movement in Architecture*, p.122
- 5 Translation of the guidelines drafted by Baehrens, deputy of the Reich commissioner to the 1935 Brussels World Fair; Berlin, 14th of May, 1934.
- 6 Translation of the guidelines drafted by Baehrens.
- 7 Richard Pommer, p.122

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