

Autonomy and Heteronomy in Architecture Theory: Part I

***The Potential Conflict Between the Art of Building
and the Act of Dwelling
(2000)***

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Again and again, architecture theorists like to quote Adolf Loos's parable about "the poor rich man." But, do they really understand the lesson?

As the story goes, a newly enriched man wanted to celebrate his change of status by asking the best architect in town to build him a new house. Everybody worked hard, and after a couple of months, the rich man could move in into his new residence. The architect had thought of everything, for instance, the color of the bedroom's wallpaper was harmonized with that of the man's and his wife's nightgowns, and even with the special slippers that they were supposed to wear in that part of the house.

The rich man was really happy, and, like Emperor Nero in his Golden House, he could have exclaimed: "At last, I feel fully human." Architectural journals widely publicized the mansion and described its owner as a man who had made a work of art out of his life. In fact, there was not a single act of his daily existence that was not art.

This euphoria lasted until the man's birthday. At this occasion, his house was invaded by his new adulators who filled the living room with their gifts, all meant to be contributions to the man's art of living. After they had left, passed midnight, the rich man inspected the gifts and tried to figure out where each of them would fit in his artwork.

Suddenly, the architect emerged from behind a curtain and ordered: “Remove immediately all that trash. You hired me because I am a renowned artist and you wanted me to provide you with a perfect life. Your house with you inside is my major work and I will not let you defile it. Besides, look at your feet: those pink slippers belong to the bedroom, not here in the living room.” The rich man realized at once that what his architect called a perfect life was a life to which he had nothing to add. “I am perfect: I am a finished man,” the poor rich man moaned.¹

When he wrote that joke in 1908, Loos wanted to deride the pretensions of the architects who thought of themselves as “general artists of life” (“Gesamtkünstler”) while allowing their clients almost no vital decisions over their own vital space.

Yet, in spite of that early warning, more than one modern architect played god with their clients. See for instance what happened to poor Mrs Edith Farnsworth, one of Mies van der Rohe’s first American clients. Middle-aged, single and professionally successful (she was a nephrologist at a Chicago hospital), Dr Farnsworth met her future architect at a party in 1945. When she ushered her desire to create a retreat in which to escape the loneliness of weekends in the city, Mies immediately offered her to design it. He would not charge any architect’s fees. Mrs Farnsworth had already bought a piece of land in a place called Plano, 60 miles west of Chicago, near the Fox River. A visit to the site with her architect elated both.

She (in her Memoirs): “...the effect was tremendous, like a storm, a flood or other act of God.”

He: “I would think that here where everything is so beautiful, and privacy is no issue, it would be a pity to erect an opaque wall between the outside and the inside. So I think we should build the house of steel and glass; in that way, we’ll let the outside in.”

A project was soon done. It was displayed at the exhibition of Mies’s work at the Museum of Modern Art organized by Philip Johnson in 1947. Edith Farnsworth felt proud of the project and

¹ Alice T. Friedman, “Domestic Differences: Edith Farnsworth, Mies van der Rohe, and the Gendered Body,” in Christopher Reed, *Not at Home. The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, pp. 179-192.

of her role in it. From that point on and for all the three subsequent years, she felt more a patron than a client.

Construction was started in the summer of 1949 and lasted about one year and a half. When Farnsworth finally moved in, in December 1950, nothing really worked: the roof leaked, the heating reeked, and building costs amounted to twice the original estimates. The patron became an ordinary client again, and she complained. The architect answered by claiming owed fees for architect's and supervisory services, amounting to 20% + 15% of actual building costs. Counterclaims followed claims until the matter was finally settled in 1956. Meanwhile, Farnsworth tried to make a home out of the glass house that one of the world's leading modern architects had built for her. She confessed to a journalist:

The truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass I feel like a prowling animal, always on the alert. I am always restless. Even in the evening. I feel like a sentinel on guard day and night. I can rarely stretch out and relax....What else? I don't keep a garbage can under my sink. Do you know why? Because you can see the whole "kitchen" from the road on the way in here and the can would spoil the appearance of the whole house. So I hide it in the closet farther down from the sink. Mies talks about "free space": but his space is very fixed. I can't put on a cloth hanger in my house without considering how it affects everything from the outside. Any arrangement of furniture becomes a major problem, because the house is transparent, like an X-ray².

The Farnsworth House was to become an emotional *cause célèbre* invested with meanings that went far beyond matters of architectural design³. Architectural journals, like *House Beautiful*, *Architectural Forum*, *House and Garden*, successively publicized the case until it became the object of a national debate on "Good and Bad Modern Houses." While this publicity eventually contributed to the architect's fame (he could discuss his ideas with famous architectural critics) it was no benefit to his client. Once the case was brought to the attention of the public, crowds of people came on weekends to look at the house "reputed to be the only one of its kind," but in reality

“a one-room, one story structure with flat roof and glass and steel outer walls.”⁴ In her memoirs, Farnsworth wrote that she found it,

hard to bear the insolence and boorishness of those who invaded the solitude of my shore and my home... flowers brought in to heal the scars of the building were crushed by those booths beneath the noses pressed against the glass⁵.

In spite of all, Edith Farnsworth managed to stay nearly twenty years in the glass house, working to make it a home. But she finally gave up: in the early 1970s, she sold the house and moved to Italy. She had been for too long the object of other people’s curiosity, too long a non-conformist. Now, she wanted nothing more than to become invisible: “Now I would prefer to move as the women do in the Old Quarter of Tripoli, muffled in unbleached homespun so that only a hole is left for them to look out of.” Best of all, she said, the world outside would not even know where the hole was⁶.

Last spring, I visited Mies van der Rohe’s Museum of Modern Art at Berlin’s Kulturzentrum. Few works of architecture affect me so powerfully. The architectural promenade through the museum lets you with the sensation that every particular space opens to a half mysterious beyond, that you are on transit to the place where the gods play with numbers and proportions (and, as Mies said, reside in the beautifully crafted details). The Cistercian simplicity of the forms, the clever clarity of the composition, the naturalness of the light, the presence of the garden “in the inside” before it becomes physically accessible, all contributes to a feeling of great complexity, a word that here almost means the contrary of complication. A splendid “leçon d’architecture.”

² Quoted in Alice T. Friedman, “Domestic Differences...,” *op. cit.*, p. 188.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 181.

⁴ *Op. cit.* p. 187.

⁵ Quoted in *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁶ *Op. cit.* p. 192.

True, the architecture is so interesting that you almost forget to see the paintings on the walls. As to the sculptures, they seem to engender their own “Eigenspace” and to modify the “metrics” of space perception. Every time I visit a work by Mies van der Rohe, I discover new aspects of it, am elated by the manifestation of always new intentions. His spaces are literally extraordinary. They are for very special moments. They put you out of yourself.

Would I like to spend my ordinary life (with its apparent disorder, its need for changing arrangements) in them? No. Yet Mies found patron-clients who have been said to appreciate just that: being put out of themselves, estranged from ordinary circumstances, “defamiliarized.” So confirmed Grete Tugendhat, one of Mies first European clients, over the effect her house had on its inhabitants: “A person appears, both to himself and to others, to be more clearly set off from his surrounding.” As to Mrs Farnsworth (obviously not a he-person), she experienced this being set off as a repression of her being a woman⁷. Her house was no real home to her.

What are the lessons of Mies van der Rohe’s “leçons d’architecture”? Let me try suggest these: A home is what you make of the house that has been made for you. A house is “homeable” when it lets you touch it. A house of untouchable perfection is hardly homeable.

How do contemporary architecture theorists understand this lesson of a lesson?

⁷ Op. cit. p. 190.