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Objective Architecture

by *Lucius Burckhardt and Werner Blaser*

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In the first part of this Issue an attempt is made to establish a historical thesis: a family tree is posited for the achievement of Mies van der Rohe, consisting not of his actual teachers and models but of a number of architects who have prepared the way for the development of an "objective architecture". There is first the invention of skeletal construction, its differential application in the U.S.A. and in Europe, then the discovery of "cubic volumes" and their inter-articulation, especially by the Dutch, and finally the combination of these two components, of skeletal construction and new spatial conception, to issue "objective architecture".

The series begins with Louis H. Sullivan and his Carson, Pirie, Scott department store on Madison Avenue in Chicago in 1899. It is still a remarkable fact that the name of Sullivan stands at the beginning of this purest of all architectural methods and at the same time at the beginning of the liveliest phase of Early Modern decoration.

An entirely different conception of the relationship of the skeleton to decoration is exemplified by Baron Victor Horta, Brussels. The illustrations show his two residences, Hotel Solvay, 1895 to 1900, and Hotel Tassel, 1892/93 in Brussels, as well as the large, support-free covered over interior of the Maison du Peuple in Brussels, 1896.

Gerrit Rietveld stands as an exponent of the "de Stijl" movement, which works with voluminous cubes and spaces and their articulation. His chair constructions and his Schröder house in Utrecht, 1924, show a "subjective" element, which, however, lays claim to a mathematical ideal.

J. Duiker is the first to succeed in effecting a synthesis between the two components. The two most outstanding buildings are the Openlucht School in Amsterdam, 1929, and the Zonnestraal Sanatorium in Hilversum, 1926 to 1928.

Mies van der Rohe

General planning and building of the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, 1938-1958 398
Chapel on the site of the IIT, 1952 400

The general planning as well as the execution of the individual buildings follow a simple principle, which has not changed in over 20 years.

The High-rise Buildings of 860 Lake Shore Drive Apartments, 1951, Esplanade Apartments, 900 Lake Shore Drive, 1959, and Lake View Apartments, 1956, in Chicago 402, 406

In 1951 Mies van der Rohe was able for the first time to apply his entire range of ideas on the steel-skeleton high-rise building. The structure becomes legible from the steel T-beams in the elevation.

Five years after the completion of these two high-rise apartment houses there follow other examples with projecting elevations of aluminium. Mies van der Rohe employs the same type of light-metal high-rise constructions in other places in the United States.

Seagram Building, Park Avenue, New York, 1956-1958 408

One of the highly costly novel features of the Seagram Building falls under the head of town-planning: the projecting plaza interrupts the monotony of the canyon-like street and permits a free view of the facade. The other novel feature is the ornamentation of the facade effected by the bronzing of the metal parts. The building employs, moreover, the same system as the Esplanade Apartments.

High-rise Apartment Houses in Lafayette Park in Detroit 412
(Town-planning by Ludwig Hilberseimer)

A combination of high-rise apartment houses, rowhouses and patio houses. All motor traffic is on a lower level than pedestrians and gardens.

The Hall Plans

Theatre plan for Mannheim, 1952 414
Crown Hall of the IIT in Chicago, 1952/53 415
Plan of the Convention Hall for Chicago, 1953 418

The quest for a clearly conceived structure leads Mies van der Rohe on the one hand to the perfection of the skeleton, on the other hand to ever larger free spaces. Crown Hall, the Architecture and Townplanning Department of the IIT, has been executed. Crown Hall is a large hall, articulated only by low partitions and with all rooms in harmonious connection with one another. A suspended ceiling resolves the problems of acoustics and lighting. The hall is a flexible, multi-purpose building.

German Pavilion at the International Exhibition of Barcelona 1929 420

In a purely prestige building Mies van der Rohe displays his ideas on free spatial configuration and on the integration of the arts in such spaces. The non-supporting wall of onyx represents a select work of art.

Museum for a small city, preliminary plan, 1945 421
Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, 1945-1950
50 x 50 foot house, plan, 1951 422

There grow out of the ideas of the Barcelona Pavilion a number of plans and completed buildings on the basis of the principle of the free plan. A new theme is now the inclusion of unspoiled nature in the overall spatial configuration of the architecture. For this reason the external supports have to be reduced to a minimum to the point even where they disappear at the corners. Like a crystal such a house stands, an isolated artefact, in the midst of the open landscape.