

Mies as gardener

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MIES AS GARDENER

Christophe Girot

The title may sound like a joke for the purist; but there is reason to believe that Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's understanding of landscape and nature shifted significantly throughout his career, and came to play a distinct role in his later American works. Although as a hypothetical gardener he probably couldn't tell the difference between two species of trees, what mattered to him most was actually the manner in which his buildings engaged with the surroundings. There is no doubt that his flight from Germany in the late 1930's was instrumental in this shift of perspective, not so much in a lyrical sense following in Frank Lloyd Wright's footsteps, but in a more humble and subtle Miesian way.

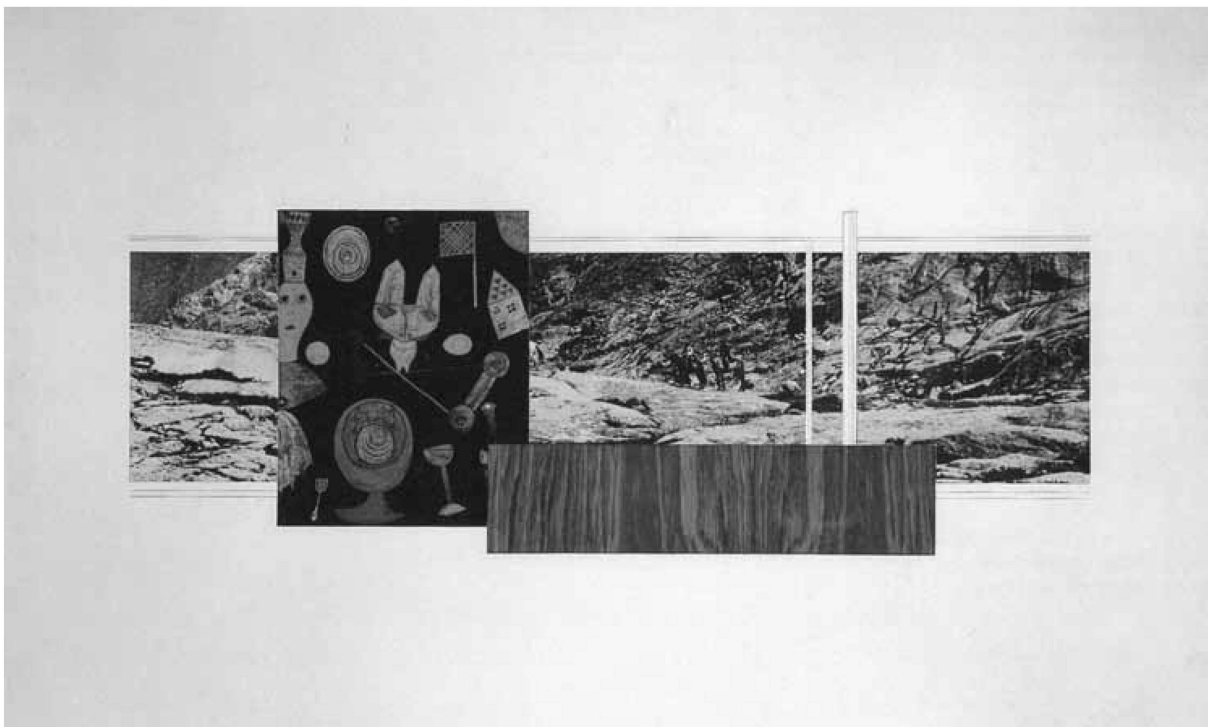
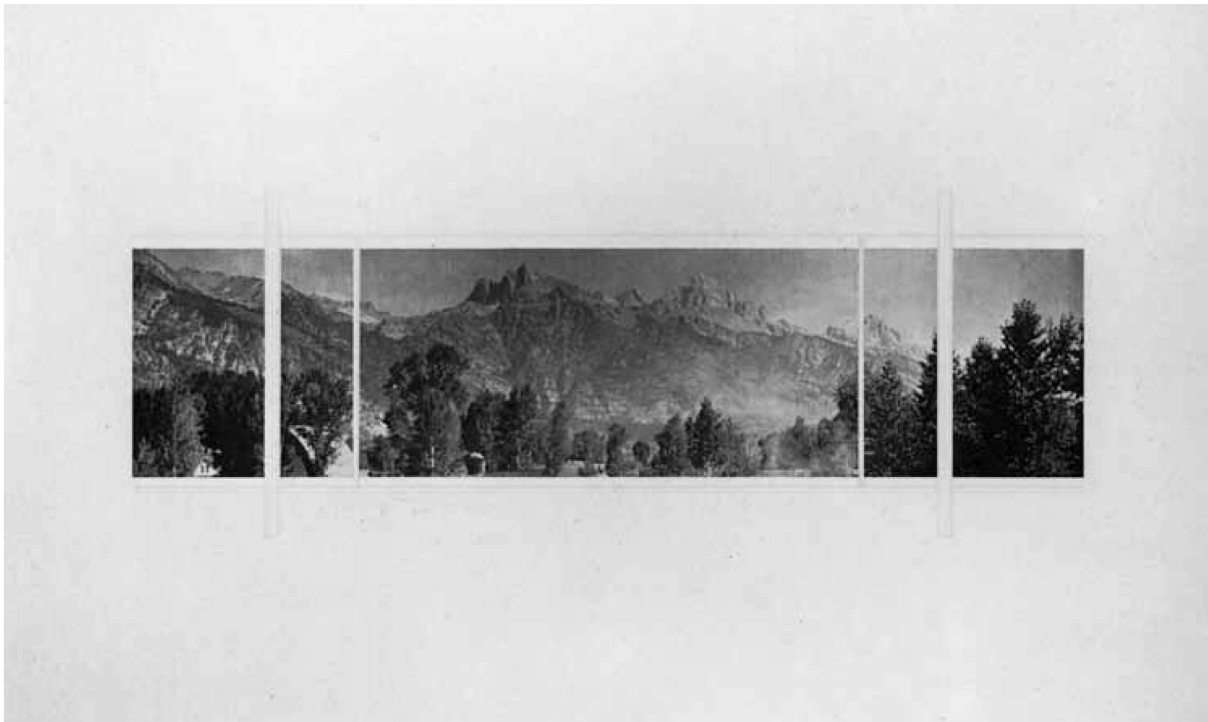
One of the most vivid examples of his early American period, the first project he actually designed when he arrived in 1937, is the Resor House, a summer home project located in Jackson Hole Wyoming at the foot of the Grand Tetons. How Mies must have reacted to the natural power of the site when he first got there with his client can only be speculated upon. He found a site where some architect had recently set some foundations for a building, directly in the bed of a wild river facing north towards the mountains. Mies worked for several years on a house plan that incorporated these foundations; he even developed an entire set of working drawings for the house as late as 1942. The following year, a flood of cataclysmic proportions on the Snake River washed all the existing foundations away; the project was called-off and never built.

The etymology of the name Grand Tetons is rather colloquial, not to say bawdy, and was probably coined by early French trappers wandering-up the Missouri wilderness back at the time of the Great Louisiana. They designated the sensuous mountains lasciviously as a set of big breasts. Although Mies spoke no English on his first visit to Wyoming, he probably knew enough French to understand precisely what Grand Tetons meant. Whether this affected his unabashed reception and empathy for the site leaves little doubt. But all of these anecdotes would matter little to us if it weren't for the extraordinary amount of time that Mies devoted to this single project. It developed into an incredibly reduced, simple and empty box to view nature. The celebrated photo collage drawing that Mies made representing the view of the Resor House towards the Grand Tetons is a masterpiece of architectural understatement and effacement in the face of an almighty nature. It is almost as if he had

wanted his architecture to consist simply of two columns and a couple of window frames to be able to merge entirely with the surroundings.

The Resor House is undeniably a conceptual masterpiece of minimal architecture and, although it was never realized, it contains the essential ingredients and beliefs that will become most pertinent in Mies van der Rohe's subsequent work. The project is capable of reducing built space to a form of sublime emptiness, which crystallizes around a relentless contemplation of nature in all its beauty and brute force. The plan is nothing but a banal rectangle, open on all sides and empty in the middle. The Resor House straddles the Snake River like a living bridge skimming above the wilderness and embracing the environment emphatically. In the Resor House, no trees were planted and no axis was traced, the landscape was left to the hands of the almighty inscribing its very own form of design. Mies's two celebrated photo collages looking north, towards the mountain and south towards the river valley, play overtly with a perspectival reference to Piero della Francesca's ideal city portico where a pair of columns with entasis frame an elegant urban view. But in the Resor House, all the historic substance of this reference is entirely washed away, effaced and replaced by two slender pipe columns framing an open view to the wilderness, with the Grand Tetons postured as an idealized and motherly nature.

This return to the primary not to say the primitive in nature, set within an almost invisible architectural frame, is far from neutral for its age. During his last years in Germany, Mies certainly had had enough time to reflect on the sheer weight of Nazi ideology in art, architecture, and urban design, where modernism was coined as a degenerate trend. Hitler's neoclassical favour of Albert Speer's axial plan of Berlin or Heinrich Tessenow's Neue Wache at Unter den Linden, was probably more than Mies could bear. It is said that Mies spent long days drawing the Resor House plan while he was staying in New York, reflecting day-in and day-out on how and why things back home had become so contrary to his architectural beliefs. This probably explains why, after much time and thought, this project reached a point of almost complete stylistic dissolution. Neither an axis nor a pinwheel remained in the Resor House – just a box of light set in the wilderness. Behind the unabashed praise of the Grand Tetons, there was also a determined quest for complete archi-



Mies van der Rohe, Collage Resor House Project, Interior perspective of living room looking north and south (with Paul Klee's "Bunte Mahlzeit"), 1937/1938

tectural rupture and change from Old World values. In his landscape and architecture alike, one senses the intimate conviction of this architect, where the least manifest and most minimal can triumph and bring back some sanity and wonder to the world.

The Resor House was to have been built in 1942 in a time of great uncertainty at the heart of World War II. The message of hope that emanates from this first Miesian project in America is one of a return to nature with deep and loving trust, combined with an even deeper distrust in man, hence the quest for absolute rigour and transparency in his building. It will therefore be of no surprise to note that the Snake River still flows freely and beautifully through the Resor Estate in Wyoming, whilst the tenuous foundations of the house have long since been swept away.

The allegory of Mies as a Gardener is a fascinating key to better understanding the fundamental questioning and shift that this architect operated with great rigour throughout his life. The various contributions in this pamphlet will certainly help shed light on one of the most fundamental aspects of his work, which is the vital consideration of nature with respect to sighting, building, and composition. It would, therefore, be quite wrong to consider landscape as something secondary to Mies van der Rohe's architectural approach and work. I believe on the contrary that it was absolutely primordial and necessary to his art of cultural effacement.