

Plumbing in[to] the Labyrinth: "The dwelling of our time does not exist" Mies van der Rohe's Ground Floor House

STEVEN THOMPSON and PAUL CLARK
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

More uprightly and purely speaketh the healthy body,
perfect and square-built; and it speaketh of the mean-
ing of the earth.

- *Thus Spake Zarathustra*
Friedrich Nietzsche

There existed for a brief time a built example of a utopian vision of dwelling. A dwelling that was built on a deceptively simple thesis: *"The dwelling of our time does not exist. But changed living conditions demand its realization."* It is the meditation upon this utopian vision, that we invite you to participate. The Ground Floor House, designed by Mies van der Rohe, was presented as a world set apart. This Ground Floor House exhibits the characteristics of a house built on hallowed ground. A significant space that attempted to break the homogeneity of Enlightenment space, Mies' vision for the *"dwelling of our time,"* sought to establish a space that was *Real* and as such a *Real-ly* existing space, a sanctified space, set apart from the formless expanse surrounding it. As Mircea Eliade demonstrates, *"When the sacred manifests itself. . . there is not only a break in homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality."* It was in the pursuit of the absolutely *Real*, that Mies van der Rohe invested his entire life. Digging out of the Old World ruins of a declining Enlightenment culture and the *"Cubist War,"*² the period between 1918 and 1932 is marked by a struggle to reform a lost unity. For Mies van der Rohe as for Alberti, when attempting to seek out and establish a new identity, art, with its iconic anagogical power and theological philosophy with its analogical reasoning were the highest forms of human truth seeking methods. Mies turned to Augustine in the early twenties and later to the writings of Thomas Aquinas. Mies was attracted to Aquinas' rationality. As Mark Taylor points out, "According to theoesthetics, rational truth is spiritual and spiritual truth is rational. Thus the *"kernel of truth"* that reveals the *"essence of things"* can be cracked only by reason, which is made in the image of God."³ Taylor adds that in Mies' reading, Thomistic theology approaches philosophical idealism. Even though appearances often seem to be irrational, nothing is insignificant. The

"significance of fact" is captured in *"the philosophical idea."* This idea, in turn, is the *structure* that constitutes the foundation of the world. . . The task of architecture is to lay bare the foundation of the *Real* by building this ideal *structure.*"⁴ For Mies, even to the end of his life search, it was the *intrinsic* nature of things that lay at the bottom of all meaningful thinking and making. To *"fathom the kernel of truth"* was absolutely necessary to properly build the emerging life world. *"If one wants to understand the epoch in which one lives, writes Mies, "one must come to understand its nature and not everything that one sees. . . But, the essential is not easy to find, for the overall form unfolds itself very slowly."*⁵

The clues left behind in *"The answers a generation [found] to these questions [as] its contribution to architecture"* also require a similar undertaking for the next generation to seek its identity. The bits of what remains of Mies van der Rohe's Ground Floor House, in the form of photographs, drawings, and writings, require iconographic and interpretive reading. As Aby Warburg, the founder of the Warburg Institute, stated in summing up his interpretive methodology, *"God lies in the detail."* In taking to heart, this figure of speech, we seek to discover a larger presence by delving into the particular nature of a work. For Mies and others of like mind in his generation, building of a new life world required acts of purification to achieve unity or wholeness. Purification as an act leaves its vestiges and traces. Many of the signs of purification are also the signs of hygiene. The etymological analogy between these two terms can be found in the word health, signifying the state of being whole and hygiene signifying the establishing, the preservation and promotion of health. And in course, acts that purge foreign matter, in an attempt to purify, assure the state of wholeness. Yet this subject, the subject of hygiene, also requires a plumb line to sound its depth, for purity in its unspeakable perfection, its infinite distance, and absolute luminosity has as its antithesis the guttural and unspeakable, the untouchable, and absolute darkness. In this polarity of infinite and absolute, both directly unapproachable, we attempt to purge objectionable, and offensive material and at the same time

capture some of this in a defensive action, in an attempt to understand and order it. The order is linguistic, a kind of veil or limen (threshold) that allows us to approach the unapproachable. This transparency allows for reflection and screening so that the darkness of matter can be illuminated. This process requires the art of the plumber to insure that foreign matter stays confined to the proper channels and that couples stay coupled.

Taking on the task of interpreting this e-elimination process we also undertake a custodial role. Just as the janitor takes care of double-borders, we can only point out and clean up the edges of the subject so that hopefully you will allow your imagination to complete the picture. The second order is to give purity's antithesis a speakable name, a kind of orderly face or cosmetic. Instead of using profanities, we will employ a simple devise, as common as the word *dirt*, because even the clinical names for this foreign, and sometimes utterly monstrous Other, offer a polished shield for it's Medusan appearance, such as septic, viral, semen, menstrual blood, saliva and excrement, not to mention illicit and monstrous sexual unions. Dirt obscures boundaries between things and in the process browns out acute distinctions between ordered systems. Containing and eliminating this polluting, contaminating, and offensive brown, yellow-green, and sometimes gray stuff is the driving habitual force of putting things into a hygienic, healthy, and wholly unified system. The priesthood of these hygienic sciences of the body is medicine and of the mind, psychology. Lower sciences include home economics and sanitation engineering.⁽¹⁾

Joseph Rykwert describes the traditional cosmological connection of urban design to the body and hygiene in "Uranopolis or somapolis?" Referencing both Western, Eastern and Primitive civilizations, he notes,

As far as I can tell, the cosmos of the creation legends was made up of bodies, of parts and processes that were always described by reference to the human body. The remotest unknown can only be mastered by assimilating it to what is known most intimacy: and the ultimate an innermost intimacy is that of each one of us with his own body. Hence the microcosm: it is the archetype of cosmogony, since it seems to recur in all of them. The body is a world, the whole world a vast body.

For Rykwert, the body and its processes form the archetypal model for universal world order. In pointing out that cosmology is directly related to the body's grooming, he argues,

(T)he very word we use for universal world order, cosmos, carries within it...[a] bodily reference. Cosmos from kosmeo, I put in order, or tidy. As at the opening of the third book of the Iliad, when the two years were drawn up, kosmithen, against each other. By a curious analogy the Roman grammarians derived the word mundus, which was regarded an exact trans-

lation of kosmos by some Latin writers, from mundo, I clean; mundus was also the name of a basket with a dome-like lid which Roman ladies used a cosmetic box, and whose shaped was said to recall the vault of heaven....⁷

In this matter of order and tidiness, even decoration, the very word cosmos insistently points to the body. ..."(E)ven if the word microcosms was by Aristotle, the conception is immemorially archaic and near-universal, as I have suggested. In tightly hieratic societies obviously, in more gently structured ones less so, the city and the state could be clearly seen and understood as being modeled on universal order, and because of that uniquely suited to mediating between the individual's body and a threateningly vast world." Rykwert links body grooming (including cleansing and decoration) to the construction of the artifactual world ranging in scale from the cosmetic box to the city and state. The artifactual world acts in mediating between the individual's body and the threatening world.

Sarah Morris further illuminates this ordering principle. In her investigations into the "*Origins of Greek Art*," Daidalos emerges in the Greek consciousness as the exemplar figure of the intelligent and cunning maker of cosmic devices, and in particular skillfully wrought devices called *daidala*. The most frequent occurrences in Homeric poetry referred to their manifestation in the form of armor, a protective barrier between the naked body and invading foreign bodies and projectiles. The most common qualities of these devices were, its glowing and shining radiance, its highly reflective characteristics, its ability to strike wonder in the hearts and eyes of mankind in its god-like appearance, its trueness, and its life-like characteristic of auto-kinetic movement. So life-like in fact, that many of these wondrous devices would run away unless bound or fastened by other well crafted devices such as chains, lines, or points. These fastening points, their tectonic joints, were many times fastened in the back of the body, like the greaves that guarded the shins of Achilles, which were fastened with silver ankle-points. The god double of Daidalos was Hephaestus, the smith, who lived in a house that was "*indestructible, bright as the stars, shining among the gods, [and] built of bronze.*"⁹ Homer lyrically describes the making of Achilles' armor and shield in similar terms. When detailing the shield in particular, he sings, "across its vast expanse with all his craft and cunning, the god creates a world of gorgeous immortal work."¹⁰ The Greek poet sings the details of this world order as the smith forges the emblematic icons onto the shielding devise attempting to ensure the remaking of this order in the future. This world ordering device, iconographically spelled out two scenarios, the first of an unbounded outside other, "*Strife and Havoc plunged into fight, and violent Death, the second with a healthful bounded and bountiful order, where innocent youth danced and courted, where girls wearing robes of linen light and flowing, [and] the boys wore fine spun tunics with a gloss of oil.*"

Mies' attempted to re-signify the mantle of the architect, by taking the model of engineering, especially ship engineering. Alberti in breaking with the medieval master-builder re-signified the title of architect in part by linking the Renaissance architect with the democratic Greek personification of the making of cunning and wonderful devices of the highest order. Daidalos is most commonly associated with the Homeric songs linking King Minos, Theseus, and Ariadne in a plot that required Daidalos to devise a Labyrinth in Knossos to house the Minotaur, (a progeny of an illicit union). The story ends in a flight from Crete having in one version devised wings for himself and his son Icarus who plummeted into disaster after steering an improper course, finally ending in his exodus with another plumbing feat where he cleverly rigged "pipes in order to boil a royal host in his bathtub." The name of Daidalos as the chief maker of ingenious works [arke-tekton] carries with it the idea of technology. Daidalos was most importantly known for his cunning and shining devices, that clad and shielded heroes in battle or acted as kinetic prosthesis enabling Icarus to fly or sailed allowing for escape.

An eternal poetic matrix carries forward the signification of Daidalos technology into the modern "Machine Age." Engineers devised auto-kinetic devices such as the airplane, steamship and the motor car that would be produced by the New World (American) production-line method of Henry Ford, promised "The Big Today and the Bigger Tomorrow."* "A hygienic, practical apartment was in the early twenties for many a luxury article that could be given, like the automobile, a new social dimension by revolutionizing the production processes." In his lecture notes of 1924, Mies praised Ford's book and the response it received in Germany, but distanced himself with this caveat:

We agree with the direction Ford has taken, but we reject the plane on which he moves. Mechanization can never be a goal, it must remain means. Mean toward a spiritual purpose. While we want to stand with both feet firmly on the ground, we want to reach with our head to the clouds."

Mies' mechanization is the re-signification of a *mechana ex deus* toward a *deus ex mechana*. This eversion requires great intellectual cunning, while steering an even, middle course, a means, like that of the figure Daidalos, who in the end resorted to the e-liquidation of his tyrannical monarch by devising an absolute cure for his persecutor, everting a hygienic sauna, "where a cloud of vapour emanated so warm and gentle that it induced a most agreeable sweat, and cured the body in an extremely pleasant manner" into its absolute cleansing state, the rigging of "pipes to boil a royal host in his bathtub."

In the midst of these floating signifiers, where the making and re-making of corporeality is linked through the means of the artifactual to the building of a new cosmos a.k.a. universal order that we propose that the Ground Floor House be examined. This house was designed for part of an exhibition

intended to display to the world, Germany's industrial brilliance and cultural excellence through its ingenious devices and cunning works. The 1931 German Building Exposition in Berlin was an amazing spectacle of colossal proportion taking place in eight exhibition halls, covering an area of seventeen acres. One aspect of this utopian exposition housed in Hall II and titled "*The Dwelling of Our Time*" was in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's charge. Included were various residential structures (designed either by Mies or by architects he selected); within the surrounding galleries were displays of individual suppliers of the building trade (marble, wood, wallpaper, hardware and room after room of plumbing fixtures).¹⁴

In a pamphlet describing to visitors the idea that the Mies intended the exhibition to project, the architect wrote:

The dwelling of our time does not exist. But altered circumstances in our lives demand that it be created. Before it can be created it is essential that we have a clear idea of what our living requirements really are. Overcoming today's discrepancy in living conditions between actual needs and false pretensions, between genuine demand and inadequate supply, is a burning economic challenge, and a precondition to the advancement of "Culture."

As Mies makes clear "*the dwelling of our time does not exist*" and cannot exist unless we have a clear idea of its "*between*" character, the between "*actual and false*" and between "*genuine and inadequate.*" As a "*precondition to the advancement of culture*" the dwelling exists as an artifice between the intensive construction of the self occurring in the sanctified and hygienic house and the extensive universe. The Ground Floor House, the exhibition's principle work of plumbing, existed as a mid-way, or as a means to embody, and to substantiate a spiritual / corporeal way of life. A year earlier Mies spoke of this in-betweenness. In asking, "*What finally is beauty?*" he offers a "*kernel of truth*" instead of a definitive answer, "*Certainly nothing that can be calculated or measured. It is always something imponderable, something that lies in between things.*" ~

Mies' utopian projection required the positive negation of Renaissance humanism and Romantic historicism to clear the way for the re-signification of facts and artifacts. This mission was an attempt to un-cloak the disguise of the unhealthy, unclean past that was associated with disease, deterioration, and ruin. This entropic carnal past also had as its double, a foul, unclean spirit, a Nietzschean "*Spirit of Gravity.*" The purification of this dirt also required a "*guiding light.*" The gospel according to Mark is exemplar (a common parable referred to in Augustine's writings, which Mies was an avid reader). The gospel situates itself between the beginning, (first word in this book is *arche*), and the eminent ending. There are approximately nine cases of carnal and spiritual pathologies that are cured. The media of healing and sanitation are silence, ritualized cleansing of bodily fluids, and "*restoration by an exercise of power which*

is, in antithetical contrast, explicit and willed." Characteristic of uncleanness include public nakedness, guttural speech, menstrual flow, improper sexual practices, queer behavior. Water and a clean cloth or garment was typically instrumental in the casting off of the invading and impure foreign matter. But it was silence that cleansed the spiritual field. This purifying and sanctification process demonstrates a re-signification of a *dirty* world into a healthy, hygienic, and sanctified world. With the spiritual purification process and Daidalon protective devices in mind, let's take a new look at the Ground Floor House.

During the period between wars, the tone of Mies' work and words begin to subtly shift from the brightness of the primary and the economical to darker and contrasting matters. Mies focused on the nature of beauty and the sublime on one hand and inner tension and spirituality on the other. Like the German National Pavilion in Barcelona, the Ground Floor House was a temporary exhibition structure consisting of the partitions slipping under the rectilinear roof plane supported in tension and compression by a fragile columnar grid. Also similar was the temporary presence of the standing nude female figure and dark shallow pools. The similarity between these two projects is so great that one contemporary critic lamented that the model dwelling's formal contribution was limited to the addition of plumbing. Although observant, this critic was mistaken as the Barcelona project had a lavatory and water closet in the cubic, out-building that anchors one corner of the also no longer existent Pavilion. The formal advancement that the Ground Floor House presented was Mies' transference of the volumetric out-housing to an internalized and in-hibiting cloaking device and rendering it one of the project's most formally active de-limiting elements.

In looking for *signs* that indicate sanctified places, "*evocations of sacred forms or figures for the immediate purpose of establishing an orientation in the homogeneity of space*" are necessary. These "*signs reveal an absolute point of support.*"¹⁸ At the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies linked Kolbe's Morning to the place of hygiene by virtue of what Jose Quetglas aptly refers to as the "*corridor*": an architectural and landscape device framing views and controlling movement. This orientation device aligns the horizontal axis with a grounding figure, not unlike absolute grounding device that Mies employed at the temple-like 1910 Bismarck Monument, where in the drawings, a solitary dark sculptural figure of Bismarck is seated in the exedra, facing the forecourt. Mies in each case fixed the sculptural figure relative to a garden wall, another *sign* of a sanctified precinct. In the court yard houses of the 1930's, the grounding figures of sculpture, anchor the garden and house together, relying on the slender columnar grid to lock in its orientation. The Ground Floor House relies on a 2:1 proportioned grid of three rows of five polished cylindrical vertical beams to *fix* a horizontal orientation relative to the ground plan. Along the "top" of centerline of this grid, functions associated with service and grounded production are located. With the signs

of grounded production are subtle details that signals the cubic form's hygienic connotation: the project's only punched opening of the size and location that Mies reserved to provide light and ventilation while maintaining privacy and to signify hygienic areas.

The innermost sanctum of the house is the master bath. It is the axial center of gravity at the head of the house. The master bedroom pivots, unfolds, and expands from the center of a 180° radius bow. This bright, shining shielding and cleansing device projects outward toward the garden, the pool and the waiting pure white feminine figure. The bedroom for a couple who sleep in separate beds is cleaved in two by the this upstanding white figure over-shadowing the white double conjugal bed, clamped and held in stasis by a 90" angled skirting plane, slipped and folded in a nestling alignment with its opposite, reflective angle on the other side of the space, where two folded planes form a garden armature. The white polished figural device illuminates the background of a black single bed, stretched out in horizontal alignment with the dark pool of water that grounds and reflects the captive white figure. Sun light illuminates both bed and female sculpture proportional to it's distance of perfect form. Both tableau figures reside in the garden. The bridal bed lies in wait encased in a crystal framework, kept in an in-between state, while her double stands frozen out side. The white interior pilot house sheath pushes backward toward the wardrobes standing back against the flanking limits of the wing walls. The back, re-addresses the clothes cabinets with a second interior partitioned water closet exerting a compressing force on the 90" clamping arm of the vestibule for robing and dis-robing. This curvilinear figure rises vertically in a plumb line, breaking through the resisting horizontal ceiling diaphragm, exhibiting itself, while shedding light into the dark interior and letting off vapors of the hot and sometimes steamy interior. The breaking of the ceiling plane is significant in two ways. First, it is a sign of interior hygienic space that Mies employed in his 1930's houses. Second, the breaking of the roof plane signifies a vertical "link" to the sky, further signifying the pre-eminently *real*.

In the Barcelona Pavilion, the feminine figure in horizontal axial alignment emerges from a pool of water, fixing its origin that reminds one of "*paradigmatic images of creation as an island that suddenly manifests itself in the midst of waves.*"¹⁹ Water signifies both infinite rebirth and absolute darkness. This reminder of glowing health and fertility, has its counter-balance of absolute darkness. In the Ground Floor House the innermost sanctum of the bath has as its double the reflecting pool in the garden. According to Eliade, "*In whatever religious complex we find them, the waters invariably retain their function; they disintegrate, abolish forms, . . . they are at once purifying and regenerating. . . Everything that is form manifests itself above waters, by detaching itself from the waters.*"²⁰ In alignment with the master bedroom and the garden pool, the absolutely white "Traveler" stands out in perfect form against

the formless water, while its precise outline is visible against the white garden walls, appearing to have been freshly washed and emerging from the water. On the interior sanctum, a white fountain and basin lie in wait for a purifying action. The plumb line and the plumbing²¹ of this house attempt to balance the scale of infinite purity and absolute darkness.

As Adolf Loos freely pointed out in his 1898 critique of Viennese hygiene, "the plumber is the pioneer of cleanliness. . . He is the state's chief craftsman, the quartermaster of culture."²²

NOTES

¹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & Profane, The Nature of Religion*, (HBJ, NY, 1957), p. 20-21

² A term attributed to Gertrude Stein and used as a chapter heading by Stephen Kern in *The Culture of Time and Space - 1880-1918*, referring to the view from an airplane over America where an Cubist landscape appeared with "the mingling lines of Picasso coming and going, developing and destroying themselves" and using this as a metaphor, projects it upon World War I:

Really the composition of this war, 1914-1918, was not the composition of all previous wars, the composition was not a composition in which there was one man in the center surrounded by a lot of other men but a composition that had neither a beginning nor an end, a composition of which one corner was as important as another corner, in fact the composition of cubism.

³ Mark C. Taylor, *DISFIGURING, Art, Architecture, Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1994)

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 134

⁵ Mies van der Rohe, "ich mache niemals ein Bild," *Bauwelt*, 53 (1962), p. 884, trans. in Fritz Neumeyer, trans. by Mark Jarzombek, *The Artless Word*, (MIT, 1991)

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Boston, 1978) p.115. Douglas' position that the body and its hygiene serve as a model for socio-cultural behaviors is followed in spirit in the analyses of Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983) and Michael Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁷ Buck, Carl Darling, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages*, (Chicago, 1988), p. 12-14. For the idea that the notion of hygiene relates to architectural order I am grateful to Joseph Rykwert's article "Uranopolis or somapolis?" in *Res* 1711 8 Spring/Autumn, 1989, pp. 15-21.

⁸ Sarah P. Morris, *Daidalos and the Origins of Greek Art*, (Princeton, NJ, 1992)

⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, Book 18: 432, trans. Robert Fagles, (1990)

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 18: 560-564

¹¹ *Ibid*, 18: 640 - 710

¹² the subtitle of Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (NY, 1922) which appeared in Germany in 1923

¹³ Mies van der Rohe, "Solved Tasks: A Challenge for Our Building Industry", (*Die Bauwelt*, 14 no. 52, 1923) p. 719

¹⁴ Photographs of the display---many of which were designed by Lilly Reich---are in the Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York

¹⁵ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Die Wohnung unserer Zeit," *Der Deutsche Tischlermeister*, Vol. 37, No. 30, July 23, 1931, p.1038. Translated in Tegethoff (note 8), p.110.

¹⁶ Mies van der Rohe, "Building Beautifully and Practically! Stop This Cold Functionality," *Duisburger Generalanzeiger*, 49, 1930, published in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word*, trans. Mark Jarzombek., (MIT, 1991)

¹⁷ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1979) p.125-145

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & Profane, The Nature of Religion*, (HBJ, NY, 1957), p. 28-29

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 130

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 131

²¹ plummet as well as plumb are derived from Latin plumbum signifying lead.

²² Adolf Loos, "Plumbers", (Neue Freie Presse, 1898)