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A Reconsideration of the Use of Collages in Mies van der Rohe's Architectural Plans

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I. Introduction

It is well known that the modernist architect Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) investigated unique methods for “construct” and “space,” the two fundamental dimensions of architecture, leaving behind many superb examples of works fusing these two elements. Mies’ buildings are clearly formed from columns, beams and roofs, and made primarily from steel in a classic structure of load and support arranged in a “construct” based on vertical and horizontal elements. (fig. 1) The “space” formed by this construct is a space that essentially lacks a sense of reality given its glass walls that imbue it with the characteristics of transparency, opacity and reflection. In other words, he constructed spaces without material frameworks. Mies himself said that it was technology that allowed him to connect the steel “construct” with its material form, with the “space” made up of glass with its unique transparency to create superb structures.¹

While these features of Mies’ architecture are accepted, at the same time it would not be an exaggeration to say that various aspects can be discerned as the basis of his architecture. One such important aspect is collage. It goes

¹. Mies van der Rohe, *Industrielles Bauen*, in: *G. Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, hrsg. v. Hans Richter, Nr. 3, Juni 1924, S. 18–21.



Figure 1. Mies van der Rohe,
Farnsworth House, 1945–51

without saying that the fundamental understanding of the concept of collage as it occurs in art history, as first defined by Harold Osborne, can be found in the works of Picasso and the Cubists in 1912 who used elements from newspapers, advertisements and other mass-produced found objects within a single work to give their works a dual nature.

The first part of this duality is the emphasis on an actual living world in the art work realm based on imagination. The other part is giving a type of critical reflective appearance to his autonomous art works realm based on imagination, thus bringing forth a meta-artwork construct.² At first glance collage as a type of method does not appear to be connected to technology. And yet, Mies used several of these collages in his architectural planning process, placing a number of color reproduction prints of modern paintings by such artists as Paul Klee (1879–1940), Picasso (1881–1973) and Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) in his architectural spaces, along with photographs and abstract color plane prints by lesser known artists. These works were not used solely as decorative elements, but rather were made as freestanding, non-load bearing walls to actually divide interior spaces, and thus can be called collages.

Earlier scholars have already commented on Mies' use of collage tech-

² Harold Osborne (ed.), *Collage*, in: *The Oxford companion to twentieth-century art*, Oxford/New York/Toronto/Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1981, p.118.

niques. Neil Levine's 1998 article found in his collage method a political strategy during Mies' years of exile in America. In 2001 Detlef Mertins commented that there was a connection to the avant-garde artistic methods that came about thanks to the important opportunity Mies had to interact with the Berlin Dadaists beginning around 1920.³ However, while these scholars focused on the collage method, they overlook the question of why Mies specifically used the paintings of Klee, Picasso and Kandinsky as collage elements in the form of freestanding walls. Thus we must consider the formative characteristics of modernist painting itself in our examination of this issue. In other words, these earlier scholars do not consider that the collage technique held a theoretical meaning towards the construction of his works, but rather interpreted the method as related to the social reception of architecture or its functionality.

This article focuses on the reality of the use of collages by Mies who welcomed the advent of technology in his architectural creative process. We then focus on Mies' interest in the functional morphology in organic theory that was especially espoused from the end of the 19th century onwards. And thus we reconsider the seemingly unrelated concepts of collage and technology from their connection to the concept of biological organisms.

II. Mies' Collection of Modern Art and Avant-Garde Collage

First, let us reconfirm our understanding of the term collage as used here. Collage, to restate earlier definitions of the term, is a technique whereby another object exerts some extraneous effect upon an art work's internal fusion or self-completion. As a result fundamentally it can be considered a contradiction to the creative process of art which is traditionally considered as being oriented towards an organic or living segmentation. However, as we

³ Neil Levine, The Significance of Facts: Mies's Collages up Close and Personal, in: *Assemblages. A critical journal of architecture and design culture*, vol. 37, 1998, pp. 70–101. ; Detlef Mertins, Architektonik des Werdens. Mises van der Rohe und die Avantgarde, in: *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Die Berliner Jahre 1907–1938*, hrsg. v. Terence Riley und Barry Bergdoll, München/Berlin/London/New York: Prestel, 2001, S. 106–133.



Figure 2. Wassily Kandinsky, Winter II, 1911
Private collection



Figure 3. Max Beckmann, Alfi with Mask, 1934, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

will see below, the collages used in Mies' work do not introduce disparate elements as the antithesis of the work's organic, living quality, but rather multiply and layer the form through the expansion of the various spatial construct elements. Thus it can be seen as having a special quality that can be interpreted as a layering method. In other words, here collage means the multilayering and mutual layering of various elements that make up the space, whether interior or exterior, of the architecture itself, the natural scenery outside the architecture, the transparent glass, images as free-standing walls, and sculptural works placed in the space.

Mies' use of this creative method was based in the fact that he was actively both involved with and a collector of contemporary art. Mies began collecting contemporary art in 1937, about the same time that he began to use collage in his architectural plans, often utilizing reproductions of modern paintings. Over the course of the succeeding 20 years or so he collected more than 40 contemporary paintings. Vivian Endicott Barnett's materials survey clarified the details of that collection.⁴ According to Barnett, there were at least 22 works by Klee along with 14 collages by Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948). There were also collages by Georges Braque (1882–1963) as well as large-scale works by Kandinsky and Max Beckmann (1884–1950) (figs. 2,

⁴ Vivian Endicott Barnett, *The Architect as Art Collector*, In: *Mies in America*, ed. Phillis Lambert, exh. cat., New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 2001, pp.91–131.

3). Of these works, Mies' collecting activities focused particularly on Schwitters's collages made in the early 1920s. These were largely collected during the latter half of the 1950s, and thus his own involvement with collages in general preceded his collection of Schwitters's collage works. In any event, Mies was interested in the formal characteristics of the works created by his contemporaries, and undoubtedly this was an important fundamental aspect of his collecting activities. Thus his painting collection was not simply a hobby, but rather was clearly related to his architectural work. Earlier scholars working on the subject did not focus on this aspect of the works.

As a young architect in the 1910s and 1920s, prior to starting his collecting activities in 1937, Mies is thought to have focused on the collage method as a new form of 20th century artistic expression. Around 1919, he began to interact with Hannah Höch (1889–1978), and had close personal relationships with many of the avant-garde artists who participated in the first international Dada Fair, Berlin 1920, a fact that has rich potential in terms of understanding his creative processes.⁵ In other words, given Picasso's first creation of a collage in 1912, Mies as a contemporary was fully aware of the meaning of the collage as a powerful creative tool that through its layering of numerous different elements within the context of the art work's construct gave birth to a new context in terms of the work's meaning. Therefore I would posit that Mies' use of the painting planes of Klee, Picasso and others in his own architectural formative process was engaging with an extremely meaningful construct, and through this method he planned a form of change in the spatial character of the work.

III. A Collage Architectural Plan: Focusing on the Snake River Resor House Project (1937–1939)

An important example of this idea can be seen in the collage created for the plans for the proposed living room of the Resor House created for Stanley Resor, president of a leading American advertising firm, and his wife Helen, both renowned as collectors affiliated with the Museum of Modern Art, New

⁵. Detlef Mertins, *op. cit.*, S. 112–113.

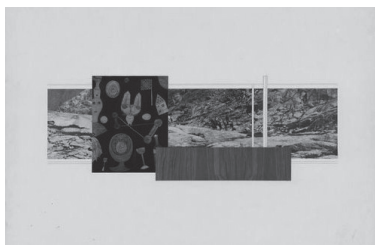


Figure 4. Mies van der Rohe, Collage for Resor House, 1939

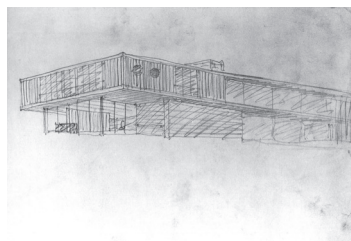


Figure 5. Mies van der Rohe, Sketch for Resor House, 1937/38, MoMA, New York

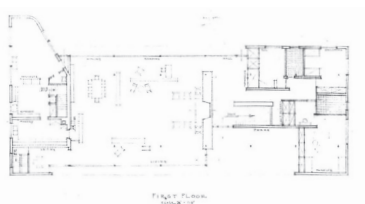


Figure 6. Mies van der Rohe, Sketch for Resor House, 1937/38, MoMA, New York

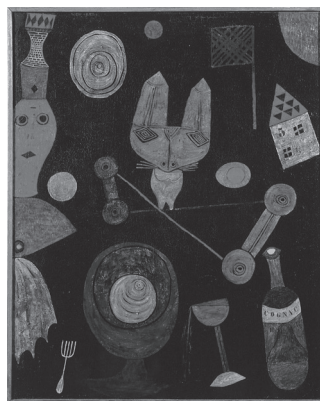


Figure 7. Paul Klee, Colorful Meal, 1928, Private collection

York. (Fig. 4). Plans were drawn up for this project during 1937 to 1939 for a house which was to be built in a section of land owned by the Resors along the Snake River in Wyoming's Grand Teton Mountains. (Figs. 5-6)⁶ The clients sent Mies photographs of the splendid natural scenery of the Teton Mountains and the Snake River site when he was planning the house's living room, and he used these images in his plans in a collage manner, inserting them where the view would be from the large windows in the living room. Inside the room he proposed an enlarged reproduction of Klee's oil painting

⁶ Neil Levine, *op. cit.*, pp. 77–82.

Colorful Meal (1928) as a freestanding wall within the room along with a freestanding plywood counter. (Fig. 7) The plans called for cross-shaped pillars to support the flat roof, sashes to divide up the windowpanes and freestanding walls that would extend from the floor to the ceiling. These verticals would be combined in a geometric composition with the clearly contrasting horizontality of the freestanding counter and the windows that were open largely to the side. In this composition these three different materials, namely plywood, color print and photograph, were layered, compressing the sense of spatial depth that continues from the interior to outside the window, and thus stop the natural connection of perspectively rendered space. This brings a sense of flickering, which carries within it the potential for visual reversal, severing the connection between foreground and background.

However, how was the intellectually dynamic effect achieved that seems to flicker between spatial front and back created by the three layers of differing elements, plywood, color print and photography, that stood were stable materials as compositional elements within an architectural space? When we ask this question, we realize the different color characteristics of these three planar elements. In this setting Mies juxtaposed Klee's eponymous *Colorful Meal* with its color planes and two uncolored planes, namely the foreground brownish plywood and the background black and white landscape photography. This spatial arrangement can be considered to have been based on Mies's basic understanding of the characteristics of the colors in Klee's painting that he placed right in the middle of his composition. *Colorful Meal*, an oil painting that Mrs. Resor had in her own collection, was contemporary with the Resor House Project planning,⁷ and is one of the works that Klee repeatedly created from 1919 onwards. The creative focus of these works was on the use of black or dark colors as ground color and the evocation of that ground color by layering colored pigments on top of it.⁸ This is a striking example of Klee's creative interest in "overlapping," the multi-layered expression of darkness and light, light and darkness, bright and dark and

⁷ Vivian Endicott Barnett, op. cit., p.109.

⁸ Osamu Okuda, Still life (pots, fruit, easter egg, curtains, etc.), 1927. 18, *Colorful meal*, 1928. 29, in: *Klee and America*, ed. by Josef Helfenstein and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, exh.cat., New York: Neue Galerie New York, 2006, p.114.



Figure 8. Paul Klee, *Quarell Duet*, 1938, Private Collection. Courtesy Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf

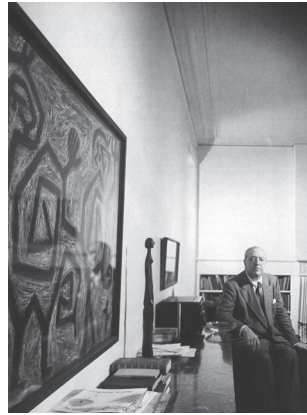


Figure 9. Mies in the living room of his Chicago apartment, 1956, Photo: Frank Scherschel

black and white that are all part of the fundamental creation of colored pigments⁹.

Mies' close affinity for these light and dark paintings by Klee can be further seen by his purchase, almost immediately after its creation, of the large *Quarell Duet* (1938, fig. 8) by Klee, painted the year after Mies began planning the *Snake River Resor House Project*. Mies acquired the work from the New York art dealer Karl Nierendorf,¹⁰ and is said to have loved it and kept it close by throughout his life¹¹ (fig. 9). Specifically, the *Quarell Duet's* composition is characterized by its dynamic, signal-like black drawn lines and its white areas daubed with movement-filled brushstrokes, all layered on the colorless brownish-purple ground. The layered expression of dark and light is such that the brownish-purple overall ground color seems to permeate the entire work.

Mies layered together a collage in the *Resor House Project* plans made

⁹. About Klee's fundamental interest in "overlapping", see: Maeda Fujio, *Überlagerung bei Paul Klee. Alternative Poetik und Glasmalerei*, in: *Paul Klee. Erzählung und Schöpfung*, exh.cat., Tokyo: The Tokyo Shimbun, 2006, pp.233–245.

¹⁰. Vivian Endicott Barnett, op. cit., p.99.

¹¹. Ibid., p. 124.

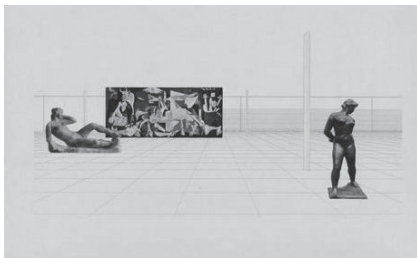


Figure 10. Mies van der Rohe, Collage for Museum for a Small City, The Mies van der Rohe Archiv, MoMA, New York

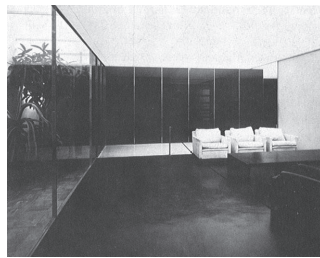


Figure 11. Mies van der Rohe, Glass Room, Photo from *Die Form*, 3. Jg. 4. H, April 1928

up of plywood, a color reproduction of Klee's light and dark painting and a monochrome photograph. He went on to heighten the lighting by sunlight streaming in through the large, open windows, and this created yet more layering of nuances. This creative process of nuanced overlapping was nothing other than an emphasis on the issue of color quality in architecture, as found in the questions raised by Klee's painting and the freestanding walls.

Now, turning our attention to another collage architectural plan as seen from the same viewpoint, for example, the *Museum for a Small City Project* (1942–1943, fig. 10), we are drawn to the color palette effects of that project's freestanding walls. This is like the *Resor House Project* plans, except that here there is more emphasis on horizontals in the geometric composition. In this case the freestanding wall used to divide the space is made up of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), which instead of being a color plane, is a tonal monochrome work of black, white and gray. This panel is set up as a freestanding unit in front of the large, open window. Behind *Guernica* can be seen a collage element photograph standing in for the view outside the window. Through the subtle color shifts and changes that occur in natural elements, such as verdant foliage and watery surfaces, here Mies presents an extremely tactile monochrome image. Are these color changes introduced into the structure through the large open window interrupted by the freestanding wall, or does it link to and continue the dark/light tonal changes of the *Guernica* image that makes up that freestanding wall?

From these examples we can see a shared formal characteristic within these primary spatial constructs in Mies' collage architectural plan. In other

words, for the fundamental elements of a building's space and construct, collage stands as both a layering of material layers made up of different material elements, as well as a layering of immaterial layers of light and dark. This clearly reveals that in these architectural plans the photograph, which is an inimitable optical method, is collaged into the background of a painting reproduction. This is because photography is an expressive medium which fundamentally internalizes the true nature of the sensation of light and shadow, and by layering such images with the light/dark paintings of Klee and Picasso, Mies was able to read into the space the attitude which gives special credence to the dynamic layering of subtle differences in the positioning of light rays within a spatial construct.

IV. Conclusion

This multilayered effect created within a spatial construct by the layering of disparate elements is nothing other than the issue that Mies was already aware of in the 1920s as he experimented with the use of glass elements, the material that symbolizes modern architecture. In this regard, an important example can be found in the *Glass Room* (fig. 11), an experimental temporary space built by Mies out of Spiegelglas, or mirror glass, for the exhibit *Die Wohnung* (The Dwelling) featured at *Der Deutsche Werkbund* (German Work Federation Exhibition), Stuttgart 1927. In the *Glass Room* Mies explored the issue of the layering of special and different elements through modern technology in a spatial construct characterized by glass with its unique material quality of transparency.

While space here does not allow for a more detailed discussion of this issue, to indicate one important aspect of the background of this research, we can mention the interest from the late 19th century onwards in functional morphology as seen in Mies, and the artists and critics around Mies, such as Hans Richter (1888–1976) and Raoul Hausmann (1886–1971). The Austrian Raoul Heinrich Francé (1874–1943) was the ideological center of this group and through his *Kosmos* series of articles on natural sciences published in the monthly periodicals published by the Stuttgart-based nature organization *Gesellschaft der Naturfreunde*. Francé was a natural scientist, well-read and received throughout Europe in the early 20th century. As noted

by Fritz Neumeyer's studies, Mies began a systematic collection of Francé's principle texts around the end of 1924 that resulted in a collection of more than 40 volumes of works by Francé.¹² Clearly, Mies closely studied and was particularly fond of Francé's writings with their organic metaphors about the shift from industrial civilization to natural sciences philosophy, particularly his theoretical writings from the early 1900s to the middle of the 1920s on plants, animals and other living things such as *Das Sinnesleben der Pflanzen* (1905), to his *Die technischen Leistungen der Pflanzen* (1919), *Die Pflanze als Erfinder* (1920), *Die Seele der Pflanzen* (1924) and *Das Gesetz des Lebens* (1921).

Mies' study of Francé's philosophy stretched from when he began buying Francé's books, around the mid 1920s, through the early 1930s Bauhaus era and even after he moved to America in 1938. Mies taught at the Armour Institute of Technology (predecessor of the Illinois Institute of Technology) in America, and he is known to have discussed Francé's theories in his lectures at the Institute. In other words, we know, given the timeframes, that both during his work for *Der Deutsche Werkbund's Die Wohnung* exhibition and the collage architectural plans discussed here, Mies was involved with Francé's ideas.

The spatial organization of Mies's architecture was not a case of architectural interior and exterior clearly divided by opaque walls, but rather, as emphatically demonstrated by the collage architectural plan, Mies constructed a layering of multiple layers of diverse elements, such as the natural scenery outside of the structure and the transparency, shading, reflection and other light interaction involved in glass, freestanding chiaroscuro paintings, and sculptural works. He then brought about functionality through the medium of the modern technology of mirror glass, transforming the functional nature of the building. This is nothing other than a tendency towards a dynamic interaction between the structure and its surrounding environment and life forces. Thus the reconsideration of Mies' collages as seen in this article should lead to a further examination of this issue in modern architecture and art and its relationship to the late 19th to early 20th century functional morphology in organic theory. (English translation by Martha McClintock)

¹² Fritz Neumeyer, *Der Erstling von Mies. Ein Wiedereintritt in die Atmosphäre vom <Klösterli>*, in: Terence Riley und Barry Bergdoll, *op. cit.*, S. 309–317.