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Sarah M. Dreller

Curtained Walls: Architectural Photography, the Farnsworth House, and the Opaque Discourse of Transparency

Abstract

This paper studies the creation, circulation, and reception of two groups of photographs of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's iconic Farnsworth House, both taken by Hedrich Blessing. The first set, produced for a 1951 *Architectural Forum* magazine cover story, features curtains carefully arranged according to the architect's preferences; the Museum of Modern Art commissioned the second set in 1985 for a major Mies retrospective exhibition specifically because the show's influential curator, Arthur Drexler, believed the curtains obscured Mies' so-called "glass box" design. Through comparative object-based analysis and in-depth exploration of the images' discursive context, "Curtained Walls" finds both groups of photographs to be quasi-fictional portraits that are valuable today for how they engaged various modernist concerns rather than as reliable architectural representations. Ultimately, this paper complicates the history of a building famous for being minimal—and questions whether these photographs helped direct critical opinion of the Farnsworth House toward a transparency-focused narrative and away from other potential interpretations.

Curtained Walls: Architectural Photography, the Farnsworth House, and the Opaque Discourse of Transparency

In 1985, Arthur Drexler, then Director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), approached the architectural photography firm of Hedrich Blessing to commission new photographs of the Farnsworth House for an upcoming retrospective exhibition about the building's architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Drexler explained that the original photographs, created by

Hedrich Blessing as the Farnsworth House neared completion in 1951, featured the curtains too prominently—especially because in some instances they prevented views through the corners of the residence (Figures 1-2). Even after it was revealed that Mies had actually attended the 1951 shoot and had therefore presumably given his approval for portraying the building in this manner, Drexler insisted. According to Jon Miller, the

Figure 1. Bill Hedrich (photographer) for Hedrich Blessing, entrance (south) façade view of the Farnsworth House, 1951. (Hedrich Blessing Photograph Collection, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Series, negative # HBt14490t, Chicago History Museum.)

Figure 2. Bill Hedrich (photographer) for Hedrich Blessing, living room view of the Farnsworth House, 1951. (Hedrich Blessing Photograph Collection, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Series, negative # HBt14490L, Chicago History Museum.)

Hedrich Blessing photographer who eventually produced the new pictures, Drexler was “not as concerned with the history of the matter as he was with capturing on film that transparent effect that is so much about Modernist architecture” (Figures 3 and 4).¹ Indeed, in a letter to Dirk Lohan, Mies’ grandson and a respected Chicago-based architect in his own right, Drexler described the stakes of photographing the Farnsworth House anew in the strongest possible terms:

Since the house now has curtains they must be positioned to leave the glass as clear as possible. Pictures which have solid curtains at the entrance corner misrepresent both Mies’ intentions and the reality of the house. For the Museum’s purposes they are worse than useless . . . I have to explain—although I think you already understand—that getting the right photographs has become something of a crusade. I don’t know how to explain to the world the misleading photos we would be forced to use.²

The following paper concerns itself with “the history of the matter.” The study considers themes of enclosure and openness in the Farnsworth House’s photographic history by exploring the inclusion of curtains in pictures of the building over time as well as the exclusion of the screened porch in those same images. Why is it important that the Farnsworth House was photographed in a specific way in 1951, and why were images created with Mies’ blessing considered too opaque for expressing his vision in 1985? What happened in the intervening 34 years to encourage a discourse on this building that privileged “that transparent effect?” And did the 1985 re-photography project clarify the significance of Mies’ architecture or make other potential themes less visible? This study ultimately suggests that disentangling the connected histories of the 1951 and 1985 Farnsworth House pictures complicates our appreciation of

Figure 3. Jon Miller (photographer) for Hedrich Blessing, entrance (south) façade view of the Farnsworth House, 1985. (Jon Miller © Hedrich Blessing.)

Figure 4. Jon Miller (photographer) for Hedrich Blessing, living room view of the Farnsworth House, 1985. (Jon Miller © Hedrich Blessing.)

a building famous for its minimalism and exposes the role architectural imagery can play in the development of narrative resilience.

“That’s What Sparked the Whole Feud”

Given Mies’ reputation as the type of architect who always liked to be in control, the fact that he was involved in shaping the Farnsworth House publicity might at first seem unremarkable. But he apparently paid relatively little attention to the commercial photography of his own architecture before moving to the United States. Mies did not, for instance, attend the shoots for either of his most celebrated early built works in Europe, the Tugendhat House and the Barcelona Pavilion.³ Moreover, while it is routine in American practice today for architects to personally oversee the photography of their designs, until the mid-1960s most commercial architectural photography was handled directly by magazine editors and their preferred photographers; architects could suggest views or furniture choices if they managed to attend the shoots.⁴ Indeed, like Mies, Frank Lloyd Wright was elsewhere when *Architectural Forum* magazine had Fallingwater photographed in 1937.⁵ And, as late as 1962, photographer Julius Shulman felt he needed to devote two entire chapters in his book *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* to urging architects to care about the photography of their buildings.⁶ In other words, Mies’ presence when Hedrich Blessing was photographing the Farnsworth House in 1951 is actually quite noteworthy within the context of his transatlantic move, in particular, and in comparison to the

apathy felt by many of his mid-century architect peers in this country more generally. For an architect who did not comment very much on his own work, the way in which the Farnsworth House was constructed photographically in 1951 offers Mies-inflected insights into one of his most commented-on designs.

Of course, when Drexler claimed not to care about “the history of the matter” in 1985, he was not just referring to the fact that Mies attended that first photography session. To reveal the Farnsworth House’s “transparent effect,” Drexler needed the curtains literally and figuratively pushed outside the frame of our visual experience in order to hide their materiality, their function, and especially any meaning that might be associated with their presence and soft opacity. In 1951, though, the curtains occupied a much higher position in the hierarchy of significant design details than they did in later decades. In fact, Mies and Edith Farnsworth—his client and originally also his friend—argued bitterly over Mies’ preference for natural-colored raw shantung silk. Farnsworth wanted something darker and more substantial, and was reportedly so adamant that she consulted another architect.⁷ The mutual resentment that arose from their disagreement laid the groundwork for the infamous legal battle to come. Referring to the curtain debate, an architect in Mies’ office once reflected, “That’s what sparked the whole feud.”⁸

An important and oft-repeated element of the Farnsworth House’s narrative is that Mies picked out the actual pieces of travertine and primavera wood installed there. It is therefore not at all surprising that he was also quite passionate about a correspondingly sumptuous curtain fabric. Still, Mies must have had especially strong reasons for remaining committed to shantung silk, in particular, after his choice obviously started damaging his relationship with Farnsworth. Some portion of his resolve may have connected to the important role textiles had played in the careers of two of the nineteenth century architects he admired most, Karl Friedrich Schinkel and Gottfried Semper. Schinkel regularly specified wall coverings and other textiles as part of his design process and also actively promoted Prussia’s trade industry by helping publish catalogs, while Semper considered textiles to be *Urkunst* (original art) since he believed patterns created through weaving had informed the development of structure.⁹ A second factor was probably Mies’ own record of engagement with silk in Europe, a record that would range into the American phase of his career if he could persuade Farnsworth to accept his curtain choice. Notable among his previous projects was the Silk and Velvet Café (1927), in which he and Lilly Reich used richly colored silk and velvet to cordon off space for a small café within the

much larger Exposition de la Mode in Berlin, and the Tugendhat House (1928-30), where photographs show soft floor-to-ceiling curtains.¹⁰ Additionally, we can speculate that Mies' Farnsworth House curtain choice was also in some way associated with the prominent use of textiles in two other projects in his office at precisely the same time, as if the point were perhaps to create a kind of "curtain moment" within the larger expanse of his career. The first to be completed after the Farnsworth House were the 860-880 Lakeshore Drive apartment buildings (1948-51), where individual unit owners could determine their own curtain fabric as long as they lined the exterior-facing side with Mies' material.¹¹ Completed shortly thereafter, the Carr Memorial Chapel at the Illinois Institute of Technology (1949-52) featured luminous full-height curtains extended as a backdrop to the altar.

At the Farnsworth House many yards of the expensive silk were fit into place just before Hedrich Blessing arrived in early September 1951, providing Mies the opportunity to highlight that part of the design specifically.¹² The curtains' conspicuous existence in the resulting photographs, then, announced a hard-won triumph over his client and helped situate the Farnsworth House within his evolving oeuvre.

Importantly, the photographs' entry into general circulation occurred in an equally conspicuous manner: as the key images for the cover story of *Architectural Forum* magazine's October 1951 issue, a highly-publicized double-length overview of contemporary American house design.¹³ That special edition was delivered to 72,500 subscribers, thousands more than the combined total number of subscribers for *Architectural Forum's* two closest rivals, *Architectural Record* and *Progressive Architecture*.¹⁴ Even if only half its subscribers shared their copy of the October 1951 issue with only one colleague or friend, the overall exposure that Mies and his photographic version of the Farnsworth House gained from this single publication encompassed well over one hundred thousand individual architectural professionals throughout the United States and abroad.

Farnsworth replaced the silk curtains with rigid blinds some time later, but no additional official pictures were taken.¹⁵ And since admirers could not visit the physical building itself, the silk curtains survived for decades in the only form that the Farnsworth House could actually be experienced: photographically. Earlier in Mies' career, the Barcelona Pavilion and Tugendhat House projects had demonstrated the discursive importance of images of his inaccessible work; with the Farnsworth House in 1951, Mies made sure he prevailed in the curtain debate when it really mattered.¹⁶ For both Mies and Farnsworth, the battle over how to cover the glass walls ended

up uncovering the fundamental ways in which their concepts of ownership and good taste differed. When Drexler, in 1985, commissioned photographs with less prominent curtains as a way to reveal the transparency of the architecture, he actually concealed an important physical embodiment of one of the modern movement's most enlightening architect-client struggles.

"The Constructive Thought"

In *Architectural Forum's* October 1951 cover story, the magazine's editors emphasized the white steel frame as the Farnsworth House's most important design element. In particular they noted that Mies had over-engineered the columns for expressive effect—that although the weight of the building combined with the number and placement of the columns had not required the use of such thick I-beams, Mies had specified them anyway because they functioned aesthetically as contributors to what he called "a special kind of order."¹⁷ The columns' massiveness read clearly in Hedrich Blessing's considerable number of obliquely angled shots since the I-beams appear in almost perfect profile in that type of photograph.¹⁸ For instance, in the

Figure 5. Bill Hedrich (photographer) for Hedrich Blessing, angled stair and entrance view of the Farnsworth House, 1951. (Hedrich Blessing Photograph Collection, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Series, negative # HBt14490h, Chicago History Museum.)

image *Architectural Forum's* editors chose for the cover, the photographer had placed the camera on the terrace at the edge of the porch, providing a raking view down the front façade's full expanse (Figure 5). In the immediate foreground the viewer is presented with an I-beam right away. Sunlight hits the outer flange in such a way as to create a self-descriptive shadow against the side of the column itself. Just beyond, another shadowed I-beam is clearly visible. The remainder of the façade is shaded by a nearby tree; the other two columns are substantial enough to maintain their visual integrity while the glass, viewed at such an extreme angle, seems to morph into a mirror of the surrounding foliage.

The curtains in the middle of the cover photograph, obviously hung along the inside face of the glass, do nothing to impede the columns' aesthetic functioning on the exterior. If anything, the curtains in this and the other Hedrich Blessing's photographs passively help illustrate the article's argument about the columns' significance by, in part, blocking potentially distracting interior views. Moreover, the magazine's editors included an additional image of the Farnsworth House, created by a different photographer, that actively engaged the curtains in emphasizing the I-beams' size. Wrapped entirely in silk, the interior as portrayed in that image provided a soft white

background against which dramatically long shadows of the deep columns could materialize (Figure 6). Of course the curtains arranged in this manner rendered the Farnsworth House entirely opaque, but that would only have been problematic if the building's transparency had been the *Architectural Forum* article's key theme.

Architectural Forum's editors broke no new discursive ground with their focus on the Farnsworth House's columns. By 1951, in fact, Mies himself had spent decades encouraging an interpretation of his work that assigned structure primacy. He had also stated repeatedly that glass functioned in contemporary architecture at the service of structure, that its role was to make structure more visible. In 1922, for example, he published a proposal for a skyscraper in *Frühlicht* magazine with an accompanying essay that began:

Only skyscrapers under construction reveal the bold constructive thoughts, and then the impression of high-reaching steel skeletons is overpowering. With the raising of the walls, this impression is completely destroyed; the constructive thought, the necessary basis for artistic form-giving, is annihilated and frequently smothered by a meaningless and trivial jumble of forms . . . The novel construction

Figure 6. George Steuer (photographer), rear (north) façade view of the Farnsworth House, 1951. ("Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth house in Fox River, Ill.," *Architectural Forum* 95:4 [October 1951]: 159.)

principle of these buildings comes clearly into view if one employs glass for the no longer load-bearing exterior walls.¹⁹

Mies' proposal featured a steel inner structure and a glass exterior through which the steel would be seen. In this case, the transparent quality of the glass was crucial, not in and of itself but because it enabled the building to communicate something more important: "the constructive thought."²⁰

Mies made a similar argument about the essential supporting role of glass eleven years later, declaring: "The glass skin, the glass walls alone permit the skeleton structure its unambiguous constructive appearance and secure its architectonic possibilities."²¹ Importantly, Mies wrote this passage in a speech for an association of glass manufacturers. That is, given the opportunity to address the inherent qualities of glass, Mies chose instead to expound on the way in which glass could help other materials achieve their maximum expressive potential. And he singled out concrete and steel, the two materials most associated with modern structural technology, noting dramatically that without glass, the "space-toppling power" of concrete and steel "would be undermined, yes, even canceled; would remain empty promise."²²

Mies' 1922 and 1933 statements have in common the skeleton metaphor, the assumption that structural "bones" would be located inside a building and that as a result the exterior would need a special transparent "skin." For the Farnsworth House, though, Mies reversed the relative locations of the steel and glass. In this case, he extended the steel frame outward from the façade and pushed the façade's walls backward toward the interior. The building's glass, in its capacity as a servant to the expression of "bold constructive thoughts," now only needed to be understood visually as a non-load-bearing material. Transparency contributed as a sign of the absence of structure but, unlike the skyscraper proposal of 1922, always being able to see through the Farnsworth House's walls was not obligatory. Mies took a similarly exoskeletal approach to the design of Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology (1950-56) and, famously, used opaque glass along the lower portion of the walls to help create a distraction-free interior for students. At the Farnsworth House, curtains installed into the custom track lining the interior ceiling edge of every wall fulfilled the basic privacy and flexibility requirements of a residential project. Viewed from the outside, the silk's loose folds added no visual mass to distract from the steel. And, as a sign of interior domesticity that could only be telegraphed to viewers as a result of transparent walls, the curtains actually rendered the materiality of the glass more visible whenever views through

the building were blocked. In this way the walls continued to serve their function as the recessive, non-structural foil against which Mies' forward-pushing, hard-working steel frame could be best appreciated—even, or perhaps especially, when the curtains were entirely drawn.

Contextualized, the combination of prominent curtains and obliquely angled views in Hedrich Blessing's first set of photographs seems to be a logical photographic manifestation of Mies' structure-oriented inclination. This combination also helps explain the aspect of the 1951 pictures that Drexler found especially problematic in 1985: The fact that the curtains tended to be pushed into the corners. The geometry inherent to the oblique architectural photograph tends to foreground or otherwise emphasize corners and, given the Farnsworth House's glass corners in particular, that translated into ample opportunities to display the prized shantung silk. Moreover, the building's non-structural corners were, in themselves, meaningful architectural gestures because they unmistakably differentiated Mies' technologically modern design from the traditional way of building that had relied on corner structure. Visually filling the Farnsworth House's corners with fabric, perhaps the only space-defining material more obviously non-load-bearing than glass, drew extra attention to the building's structural design as whole.

"Transparency"

Thinking of the Farnsworth House curtains as one-half of a glass-and-silk wall system instead of a decorative afterthought helps us further understand Mies' tenacity in his argument with Farnsworth. And thinking of the Hedrich Blessing's 1951 images as a chance for Mies' architecture to exist in a controlled imagined space separate from the building's physical reality helps us appreciate the manner in which the curtains were treated photographically. Yet, in 1985 Drexler was not wrong when he insisted the Farnsworth House had exercised tremendous influence over modernism's evolution as a key example of transparency. And it is also certainly true that the curtains marred this particular quality in both the actual Farnsworth House and its 1951 photographic counterpart.

Since the Farnsworth House was re-photographed in 1985 specifically to emphasize the walls' transparency, a crucial component of the interconnected narratives of Hedrich Blessing's two image sets is the way in which the view-permitting aspect of the glass acquired more discursive significance over time. The 1951 images themselves provide an entry point. That part of the story begins most obviously with the Farnsworth House's initial introduction to the public, which occurred with Mies'

Figure 7. William Leftwich (photographer), Mies inspecting a model of the Farnsworth House, 1947. ("Mies van der Rohe" exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, 1947, William Leftwich, photographer, Edward H. Duckett Collection, 1931-1978, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, The Art Institute of Chicago, Digital File # 198602.081216-03.jpg.)

first solo exhibition at MOMA, September 17 through November 23, 1947. Titled simply "The Architecture of Mies van der Rohe," the show was curated largely by Mies himself and coordinated at the museum by fellow modernist Philip Johnson.²³ At the time the Farnsworth House was a recent commission, and as a result it was represented at MOMA in the form of a large model Mies had purpose-built for the exhibition.²⁴

A photograph of Mies inspecting the model during the exhibition reveals something curious: Under the entry canopy, unapologetically visible, sits a dull gray volume that does not appear in any form in Hedrich Blessing's 1951 photographs (Figure 7). This element, it turns out, was supposed to read as the screened porch Mies envisioned from the outset to protect Farnsworth from the mosquitoes that inhabited the building's river-side site much of the year.²⁵ Like the curtains, the screened porch got caught in the infamous fight between Mies and Farnsworth. Unlike the curtains, though, the porch had not yet taken shape when *Architectural Forum's* editors needed pictures for their cover story in mid-1951.

Farnsworth had the porch built during the spring of 1952, well after her association with Mies had ended.²⁶ Two elegant center-pivot bronze-framed doors stood at the top of the building's travertine steps, a fine-weave corrosion-resistant wire mesh cloth stretched between the building's white steel supports and mullions similar to the type Mies specified for the glass connected everything together (Figures 8-10).²⁷ The screened porch remained intact the entire twenty years that Farnsworth owned the house.

Just as with Farnsworth's post-1951 installation of rigid

blinds in place of the silk curtains, no new official photographs of the building were made for publication after the porch was enclosed. The screened porch, which would have photographed as a conspicuously ambiguous light-absorbing void, therefore never took its rightful place in the American architectural imaginary next to the rest of the Farnsworth House's more straightforward view-permitting glass. *Architectural Forum's* editors helped set a precedent for disregarding the missing porch by only briefly mentioning it in their October 1951 article as an element of the design that had yet to be constructed.²⁸ Not included were the porch's complicating materiality, its status as an essentially functional design element, and its dynamic quasi-opacity in lived four-dimensional experience.

During the decisive first years when the prevailing consensus about the Farnsworth House's significance was crystallizing, the limited photographic "evidence" showing an unscreened porch adjoining clear glass walls encouraged interpretations focused on transparency, both in a literal sense but also in terms of Mies' full commitment to a conceptual lack of obstruction. Anyone with general knowledge of Mies' career will be acquainted with the famous aphorisms that were supposed to have encapsulated this latter idea—"less is more," "almost nothing," "universal space," "Platonic ideal," and so on—while those familiar with the Farnsworth House discourse in particular will know that this building is often held up as the banner American example. If nothing else, the screen-less porch in the 1951 photographs did not actively discourage or complicate this line of thinking in the way images of the house with a dark screened porch and bronze-framed doors undoubtedly would

Figure 8 (Left). Jack E. Boucher (photographer), rear porch corner (northwest) view of the Farnsworth House, 1971. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, reproduction # HABS ILL,47-PLAN.V,1--8.)

Figure 9 (Lower Left). Jack E. Boucher (photographer), porch entrance (south) view of the Farnsworth House, 1971. (Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, HABS, reproduction # HABS ILL,47-PLAN.V,1--2.)

Figure 10 (Lower Right). Photographer unknown, possibly Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House screened porch doors view from interior looking toward the Fox River, c.1952. (Ludwig Mies van der Rohe© 2015 Artists Rights Society [ARS], New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.)

have. Within this milieu, moreover, it is not hard to imagine how the curtains could have been overlooked; pushed as they were to the edges of the building and associated with the perceived pedestrianism of interior decor, the nuance of their serious architectural purpose was essentially made invisible.

For instance, in a 1961 lecture James Marston Fitch tried to use the Farnsworth House's functional deficiencies to demonstrate how Mies' artistic commitment to "an absolute purity of form" forced him to do "what Plato did" in disregard-

ing everything else, including his clients' concerns.²⁹ But Fitch's comments actually testified as much—or perhaps even more so—to the suggestive power that the open porch in Hedrich Blessing's images could exercise:

This house achieved world-wide acclaim for its beauty, and, in purely visual terms (especially in terms of the photographs on which most critical judgment seems to have been based) it is indeed a little building of ravishing grace and

elegance . . . To escape [the] hot weather dilemma one could move out onto that beautiful porch and famous floating terrace, except that, without insect screens, they too were uninhabitable at this time of year . . . The owner has made certain modifications which presumably make it more comfortable to live in. But it cannot be held that they make it more pleasant to look at. In fact, in screening the porch, even with the care that was obviously exercised, Mies's beautiful creation has been not merely maimed, but destroyed. Where once pure space flowed between and around those hovering planes there is now a solid black cube, heavy and inert.³⁰

Here, Fitch openly acknowledged the limiting effect photographs had already had on the reception of the Farnsworth House, and then moved toward solidifying this paradigm when he unapologetically judged architectural elements according to what was "more pleasant to look at" and, especially, described the "solid black" porch based on how it would appear in photographs rather than in lived experience. Importantly, the cumulative analytic momentum of the screen-less porch photographic illusion led him to dramatically misrepresent the building's physical evolution, erroneously attacking Farnsworth for selfishly ruining a masterpiece of modern architecture when the screened porch had actually been Mies' idea from the beginning.³¹ By this point in his career Fitch was not only a distinguished Columbia University professor but also well known as a critic specializing in climate-based architectural design. Moreover, the text of this lecture was published in a compilation of his essays in 1961, and again in 1970 as part of the verbatim record of Columbia University's "Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture" event to which it had originally been contributed.³² So, although Fitch may have made a genuinely honest mistake in this analysis it is also entirely likely that his opinion, thus expressed, influenced countless others.

Henry-Russell Hitchcock's observations in his respected survey text *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, first published in 1958, in which he acknowledged the porch's existence but continued unimpeded by its implications, were more representative of early Farnsworth House reception.³³ He began with a telling description: "This is a cage of white-painted welded steel raised above the river valley in which it is set and walled partly with great sheets of plate glass, partly with metal screening." Here the modifiers "white-painted" for the structure and "great" for the glazing assisted readers as they began to form a mental picture of the building's general aspect, yet Hitchcock immediately placed the porch in a secondary

position by not also helping readers imagine the screened porch. He then states:

The floor is a continuous plane of travertine from which broad travertine steps descend to an open travertine terrace. Planned about a central core in which are placed the fireplace, the bathrooms, and the heater, the interior space is completely unified, the different functional areas being separated only by cupboards that do not rise to the ceiling . . . this house represents the purest and most extreme statement of aesthetic purpose in one particular direction that the new architecture has yet produced . . .³⁴

To be able to observe that the main platform's travertine floor was "continuous," he included the zone just specified as "walled" by "metal screening." To label the interior as "completely unified," though, he had to subtly shift to a more restricted definition of "functional" living space in which only those areas enclosed by glass were valid. His conclusion, that the Farnsworth House design was so refined as to justify the superlatives "pure" and "extreme" was already common in Mies scholarship but, again, it required the architecture to be perceived conceptually as Hedrich Blessing's 1951 photographs present it literally: unpolluted and un-moderated by the kinds of discontinuities the porch could have introduced.

In this passage Hitchcock never actually promoted the building's visual transparency as a specific virtue, and in fact in order to make his case he had to place the "great sheets of plate glass" in their role as partitions between interior and exterior. However, here as in other similar analyses, the underlying message's emphasis on the clarity of Mies' aesthetic sensibility corresponded metaphorically to what was seen—and, more importantly, not seen—in the photographs as a physical reality. On the one hand, to describe the design as "the purest and most extreme statement of aesthetic purpose that the new architecture has yet produced" was to reference Mies' reputation as one of the mid-twentieth century's few quintessentially decisive architects, someone who possessed not only an unwavering commitment to a particular approach but also the skill to maneuver away from whatever compromising obstacles clients placed in his path. On the other hand, what really made the Farnsworth House so potent as an embodiment of Mies' artistic identity, and what gave Drexler a sense of urgency as he organized his exhibition in 1985, was the design's supposed immediate intelligibility, its conceptual lucidity derived from the building's physical clarity. Indeed, it was one thing for historians to shed light on an architect's

single-mindedness but it was another thing entirely for that way of working to translate successfully into a physical form so obviously lacking barriers to its own expression. Writing in 1964, literary theorist Susan Sontag described this phenomenon of clarity as the viewer “experiencing the luminousness of the thing itself, of things being what they are” and pronounced it to be “the highest, most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today.” The word she used to encapsulate this quality: “transparency.”³⁵

This is not to say that critics and historians entirely disregarded the important role the structure played at the Farnsworth House. In fact, this theme continued throughout the discourse, typically in its position as that aspect of Mies’ design that noticeably enables the lack of obstruction—literally and otherwise. It was Drexler, actually, who labeled the building a “perfect expression of structure” in the short Mies monograph he wrote in 1960, while Charles Jencks, whose attacks on Mies’ architecture were vehement and frequent, conceded the building to be “a coherent statement of transcendental technology” as late as 1985.³⁶ When Drexler objected emphatically to the inclusion of silk curtains in the original photographs, though, he assigned importance to a relatively subtle kind of enclosure, the curtains, which seem to have had relatively little impact on the perception of Farnsworth House’s transparency. While, at the same time, the absence of what would have been a much more obvious kind of enclosure in those same images, the porch, encouraged Drexler and many others to conceive of the building as transparent in more ways than it probably deserved.

“At First We Thought This Was Crazy . . . ”

Ironically, it was Mies’ colleague and collaborator, Philip Johnson, who helped popularize the transparency narrative. Johnson had initially adopted a structure-focused interpretation of the Farnsworth House in the monograph he wrote to accompany the 1947 MOMA show. He praised Mies for having “carried Berlage’s theory of structural honesty to a logical extreme” and for practicing *Baukunst* (the art of building) in place of self-conscious architecture.³⁷ Commenting specifically on the Farnsworth House project, Johnson eagerly emphasized the use of glass walls as a way to ensure that the “purity” of the building’s structural design would remain “undisturbed.”³⁸ During the design, construction, and especially promotion of his own home in New Canaan, Connecticut, in 1950, however, Johnson replaced this way of understanding the Farnsworth House with references more akin to the “glass box” phrasing so common today (Figure 11).

Unlike the residence Mies was creating for Farnsworth,

Johnson’s so-called “Glass House” project proceeded quickly without client debates or budget concerns. This meant that although the building was initially conceived after the Farnsworth House was already under construction, Johnson was able to introduce his finished Glass House to the world more than a year before *Architectural Forum* was free to announce the completion of Mies’ first American house. With the timing in his favor, Johnson wrote an article about his new home for the September 1950 issue of *Architectural Review* in which he specifically credited the Farnsworth House as the direct source of his inspiration for the feature that lends the building its name:

The idea of a glass house comes from Mies van der Rohe. Mies had mentioned to me as early as 1945 how easy it would be to build a house entirely of large sheets of glass. I was skeptical at the time, and it was not until I had seen the sketches of the Farnsworth House that I started the three-year work of designing my glass house. My debt is therefore clear, in spite of obvious differences in composition and relation to the ground.³⁹

This text captions a picture of the same Farnsworth House model Mies was photographed admiring during the 1947 MOMA retrospective (Figure 7). If we assume this image is supposed to illustrate the sort of building constructed “entirely of large sheets of glass” which Johnson and Mies had discussed years earlier, what Johnson wrote for *Architectural Review* qualified as yet another example of an influential author strategically overlooking the screened porch. However, since Johnson’s

Figure 11. Sarah M. Dreier (photographer), main entrance (east) façade view of the Glass House, 2009. (Photo by the author.)

previous observations about what made the Farnsworth House significant emphasized the building's structural design, what is perhaps even more conspicuous about his *Architectural Review* piece is the absence of any obvious reminder that the glass walls actually play a recessive role in Mies' design. After all, given Mies' consistent focus on opportunities made available by the era's engineering innovations, his comment to Johnson about "how easy it would be to build a house entirely of large sheets of glass" likely emphasized the technological ease of the matter as much, or perhaps even more, than the crystalline spectacle of the result. In any case, the point here is that Johnson had two chances to shape perception of the Farnsworth House before the building was even finished: the first as part of the monograph associated with the 1947 MOMA show and the second his 1950 *Architectural Review* article. Readers of the former would have clearly understood the Farnsworth House as made primarily of steel, while readers of the latter would have no reason to value anything other than the glass walls.

Even though Johnson and Mies were friends and sometime collaborators, this striking reversal was perfectly logical when the *Architectural Review* article is understood as Johnson's way to publicly highlight first and foremost what he wanted others to think was important about his own house design. His claim of having been directly inspired by Mies was truthful; the Glass House, in fact, started out with a structural arrangement quite similar to the Farnsworth House in plan and prominence. However, after various iterations Johnson eventually pulled his walls forward to meet the columns' outer flanges, drawing attention away from the structure and toward the special qualities of the glass itself. This was fundamentally opposed in nearly every way to the function and purpose of Mies' glass walls, which acted as a neutral foil against which the building's "tectonics" contrasted so advantageously, but the Glass House's particular wall-column relationship played just as crucial a role in defining the architecture's character overall. Indeed, in an essay once labeled "the most rigorous and learned consideration of the Glass House ever written," architectural critic and professor Kenneth Frampton went so far as to declare the very source of the Glass House's "strong phenomenological impact" to be the "*suppression* of its structural system" (Frampton's emphasis).⁴⁰ In the end analysis, while Johnson was not necessarily wrong when he associated Mies, the Farnsworth House, and glass walls with his design, the implied one-to-one connection was certainly misleading. Significantly, Johnson signaled his continuing commitment to a glass-oriented interpretation of the Farnsworth House when, in a later revision of his Mies monograph, he went on to describe the building in

no uncertain terms as "the first all glass house in the world."⁴¹

At its core, the *Architectural Review* article may have been a clever piece of self-publicity, but we can find something much more profound than mere rhetorical convenience in the subtle shift of focus from those architectural elements holding the Farnsworth House up, to those elements that were being held up. Whether purposeful or not, Johnson essentially replaced a set of ideas recognizable only with the specialized knowledge of architects, critics, and historians—the structural design—with an architectural component instantly understandable by anyone—the glass walls. Moreover, by couching the source of his inspiration for a glass house within the context of a building that had only been experienced as sketches and models in a public museum, Johnson called upon his authority as a curator and taste leader to suggest a fusing of glass and art into a single, highly accessible concept.

Johnson's Glass House was an instant public event. More than a year before his *Architectural Review* article formally signaled the project's completion, in fact, the construction site was considered a bona fide tourist attraction. "Week-end crowds," the *New York Times* reported in December 1948,

have been blocking traffic on Ponus Ridge in this conservative old community of early colonial homes, with hundreds of residents turning out in holiday mood to inspect Philip C. Johnson's all-glass house. While workmen put the finishing touches on the 'private' residence and the adjoining guest house, startled, uninvited visitors tramp about to view the results with mingled expressions of awe, wonder and indignation.⁴²

The fact that some visitors were portrayed as feeling a sense of "indignation" certainly highlighted the provocative nature of the architectural statement but did not, importantly, communicate a lack of understanding. Furthermore, the fact that Johnson, described in the article as "architectural designer and acting director of the department of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York," allowed regular people to wander around his otherwise exclusive property during active construction was itself a kind of "making transparent" act. When the author concluded by quoting a workman admitting "at first we thought this was crazy . . . but every day we are here we have come to like it more," she underscored the positive persuasive power accessible art could exercise.⁴³

Later, after the Farnsworth House was completed and news of the rancorous architect-client relationship surfaced, Edith Farnsworth repeatedly accused Mies of having put aesthetic

concerns above everything else. This is not to say that she necessarily spread her version of events as a way to increase her own building's perceived artistic value; however, coverage in Chicago newspapers and elsewhere sensationalized that part of the story especially, which in turn encouraged a general perception of the Farnsworth House as a definitive image of modern art in the form of glass architecture. When the influential editor of *House Beautiful*, Elizabeth Gordon, took up Farnsworth's cause in the pages of her popular magazine, Gordon had to first accept the building as modern glass art-architecture in order to then build an argument for how Farnsworth had been forced into a physically and financially uncomfortable existence in the name of beauty.

In one of Gordon's most famous articles, "The Threat to the Next America," she presented a version of modern architectural history that directly aligned Mies with respected fixtures of modern art and architecture such as Cubism and the Bauhaus as well as with the so-called "International Style," a term formulated for MOMA by Johnson and others to reference a specific kind of 1920s and early-1930s design.⁴⁴ Some of her conclusions, including "form became separated from function and purpose, and became an end in itself" and "these International Style designers are much more concerned about appearance than they are about performance," were clearly and intentionally derogatory.⁴⁵ However, whether or not her readers accepted the parts of her article that were obviously opinion, Gordon's endorsement of a connection between Farnsworth's "glass cage on silts" and art remained.⁴⁶

Johnson's self-promoting activities helped bring modern glass architecture to the public's attention and make the Farnsworth House seem to be an important example of this kind of new residential design. At the Glass House, though, Johnson accentuated the reflective and refractive aspects of glass by specifically siting the house so as to activate different angles of sunlight across the building's walls. The effect, under the right conditions, is a layered, almost hallucinogenic semi-opacity that has been photographed and commented upon nearly as much as any other single design feature. By comparison, when Farnsworth and Gordon attacked the Farnsworth House's clear glass walls for overly exposing a private life to potential public gaze, they stressed physical transparency as a character-defining quality of this kind of design. The concerns Farnsworth and Gordon voiced were not at all unfounded, of course. Trees surrounding the house blocked some of the sunlight that might have produced the same kind of partial obscurities experienced regularly at the Glass House. And, moreover, the problems transparency created for the building's female occupant probably became

more acute as the landscape matured and more visitors trespassed on Farnsworth's property to steal a glimpse of Mies' increasingly famous building.

The Farnsworth House did not need to be perceived as perpetually transparent to be aesthetically successful; the glass only needed to be understood as an insubstantial material operating in expressive service of the building's more substantial steel. As a general rule, though, the non-architectural public could not be expected to appreciate the subtlety of what Werner Blaser has observed as Mies' "lucid and uncompromising statements" about the "clear distinction . . . between structural and non-structural elements."⁴⁷ Even well-educated lay people would not necessarily be familiar with the constellation of influences that informed Mies' design decisions at the Farnsworth House, nor could they be counted on to interpret glass walls as special because they were not holding the building up.

Within this context, the negative press around the Farnsworth House's transparent walls and rancorous architect-client relationship reached a ready audience through mass-market magazines and newspapers like *House Beautiful* and the *Chicago Tribune*. The readers of those publications appreciated glass as primarily a view-enabling material, like the "picture windows" that plentiful ads promoted to homemakers as a way to watch from the kitchen while their children played in the yard. The silk curtains that so bothered Drexler in Hedrich Blessing's 1951 photographs would have further connected the idea of "glass" specifically with that of "window" in the public imaginary. And, although Farnsworth and Gordon emphasized views into the house for their own purposes, the fact that Farnsworth got to look out toward an idyllic tree-and-river scene would have seemed like a perfectly logical basis for understanding the glass walls' importance as offering an ever-present visual connection with the natural world.⁴⁸

The non-architectural public, or at least the erudite strata of it, could probably be expected to recognize that a house with see-through walls had been designed with a very different idea in mind than their own more opaquely private utilitarian residences. In that case, the positive press around the ideals of glass architecture, which some magazines had begun to circulate by the early 1950s as a particularly up-to-date design concept, presented them with a reasonable framework for believing they understood what someone like Mies was trying to do with a building like the Farnsworth House—even if they themselves had no desire to live there.

Thus, one way of interpreting what Drexler did when he commissioned new photographs to more obviously demonstrate "that transparent effect that is so much about Modernist

architecture” was to offer his museum-going public images directly corresponding to a particularly understandable formulation of American modern design: transparent glass architecture. And, taken at face value, the 1985 photographs achieved that goal with considerable success. This is particularly evident when the overall façade images from 1951 and 1985 are compared. The 1951 overall façade image positions the camera at an oblique angle toward the house, the way visitors see it before they arrive at the stairs around the front (Figure 1). The featured corner, toward the right edge of the frame, corresponds to the bedroom zone, its status as a private space signaled by curtains that fully block the ability to see anything inside the house until the living room space begins. Part of a large tree can be seen at the extreme left edge of the frame while the outline of its main branch system reflects off the walls, obscuring part of the view into the living room and reminding us of the walls’ materiality. The primavera wood service core appears taller and longer than it actually is when looked at on the diagonal, making much of the interior seem rather dark. And, as Drexler noted to his chagrin, curtains gathered in both of the entrance-flanking corners further impede the view directly through the house to the trees beyond.

The 1985 overall façade image, on the other hand, is a straight-on “elevation” view that precisely maps the building’s minor axis along the stairs (Figure 3). As instructed by Drexler, the curtains were moved away from the corners; in this case they were bundled behind the trunk of the same large tree glimpsed in the 1951 photograph. Looking at the building from this frontal direction, the beginning edge of the glass-enclosed living area is essentially indistinguishable from the end of the adjacent open porch. Because of the late-autumn or early-winter time of year, the surrounding trees insert no dense foliage screen, while trees in the distance are clearly visible as a continuous line of brown vertical elements, the view toward them virtually unmarred by the house’s placement directly between them and the camera.⁴⁹

“ . . . The Effect of All of This Will Certainly Be to Restore Mies . . . ”

While the discursive importance of the Farnsworth House’s transparency evolved out of the building’s specific architectural and photographic history, it was informed by decades of accumulated architectural praxis that connected the special view-permitting materiality of glass with the changing nature of the modern condition. In fact, Nigel Whiteley has noted that transparency was already considered “a sign of modernity and progress that was not just technical, but also aesthetic and

ethical” as early as World War I.⁵⁰ This widespread faith in transparency as a quintessentially twentieth-century mode proved an obvious and effective target during the 1960s and ’70s, when modern art of all types was questioned and found lacking. One of the earliest and most direct attacks on transparency came in the form of an essay, the first of a pair entitled “Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal” by architectural theorists Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky.⁵¹ Published in 1963, the main point was to challenge modernism’s hegemony on its own terms by fracturing the definition of transparency into dualities such as “literal and phenomenal,” “unambiguous and equivocal,” “singular and multiple,” and so on. Throughout much of the essay, Rowe and Slutzky dwell on the issue of transparency in painting or on critical architectural texts characterized by a strong connection between painting and architecture, neither of which is entirely relevant to the ways in which transparency was assumed to have been important to Mies and the Farnsworth House, specifically. However, the potential these authors demonstrated to destabilize what was supposed to have been one of the most straightforward modern virtues functioned as a harbinger of things to come.

One of the loudest and most influential early voices was Robert Venturi. In his 1966 book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, he admitted “Mies’ exquisite pavilions have had valuable implications for architecture” but went on to note “their selectiveness of content and language is their limitation as well as their strength.”⁵² The accusation of exclusivity he leveled against Mies was not a particularly difficult argument to make since this was one of the qualities that Mies adherents unapologetically admired most; the very fact that Mies strove so single-mindedly to find and express “the thing itself” seemed to justify other idiosyncrasies. In a book specifically promoting inclusiveness, though, going to great lengths to emphasize this served the important rhetorical purpose of helping delineate postmodernism as distinct from what came before it; Mies’ doctrine, “less is more,” may have been as widely circulated when it served as the foil for Venturi’s twist, “less is a bore.”

Venturi’s attitude toward Mies was generous in comparison to the comments of another well-known postmodern architectural critic, Charles Jencks. In his seminal 1977 book, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, he vehemently attacked Mies and Mies-inspired glass-and-steel architecture as “impoverished,” “fetishised,” “inarticulate,” and most especially “univalent.”⁵³ These were strong words, again meant to undermine modern architecture according to precisely the sorts of values Modernists themselves had previously promoted. But

also like Venturi, Jencks was careful to formulate as extreme a vision of modern architecture as possible so as to juxtapose postmodernism to greatest effect.

It was within the context of this rhetorical push-and-pull that Drexler's Mies retrospective materialized in 1985. Called "the Centennial Exhibition" because it claimed a central position among various high-profile celebrations marking the 100-year anniversary of Mies' birth, the show understandably garnered attention among devotees on both sides of the modern-postmodern contest. Even before it opened in early 1986, *New York Times* architecture critic Paul Goldberger expressed high expectations in an article decidedly entitled "Modernism Reaffirms Its Power":

The impulse toward a resurgence of modernist sentiment will coalesce, surely, around the exhibition the Museum of Modern Art has planned for this February to mark the centennial of the birth of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It will be a major event, promised as the most complete retrospective of this modernist master's work ever mounted, and it has already stimulated several books on the great International Style architect; the effect of all of this will certainly be to restore Mies, whose significance has been obscured not a little in recent years, to the forefront of the architectural consciousness.⁵⁴

Here, clearly, the show's value was imagined to extend beyond merely educating the public about glass architecture, even as "the most complete retrospective" in history. Goldberger, in fact, was putting Drexler and MOMA on the front lines against the most passionate anti-Mies postmodernist forces. For Drexler, no detail was too small, especially because he also had to protect his museum's reputation for promoting the best qualities of contemporary architecture. Any potential for alternate, layered, or ambiguous interpretations of Hedrich Blessing's 1951 photographs, in other words, would have been inappropriate for the fight ahead. Instead, what Drexler needed were images that were absolutely clear—literally and metaphorically—in order to help his audience re-connect with what modernists considered the elemental beauty of Mies' true masterworks. In this sense, Drexler's passion for having the Farnsworth House re-photographed for the 1985 Mies retrospective seems not only perfectly logical but also solidly located within the broader developments of twentieth-century architectural history.

Fortunately for transparency-minded Drexler, when Hedrich Blessing arrived at the Farnsworth House in 1985 to re-photograph the building, they had to be careful to hide the curtains behind a large tree but did not have to work around the porch's

dark void (Figure 3). This was because Peter Palumbo, the wealthy modern architecture connoisseur who purchased the Farnsworth House in the early 1970s, had had the porch removed a decade earlier. Guided by Hedrich Blessing's original images and their reception, in fact, Palumbo had set about restoring the house back to what he believed to be Mies' original design. On the one hand, this meant he had replaced Farnsworth's rigid blinds with diaphanous silk-like material but, on the other hand, it also meant any trace of the screened porch and its bronze-framed doors had been eliminated.⁵⁵ Palumbo's changes essentially altered the Farnsworth House reality into alignment with its two-dimensional illusion. As a result, all that was left for Drexler—in a quasi-Platonic twist—was to make sure the building's photographic self aligned with its idea.

Not surprisingly, the Farnsworth House of Hedrich Blessing's 1985 photographs is a kind of strategic abstraction of itself. The frontal view, especially, causes the flanges of the columns and fascias of roof and floor planes to read like two-dimensional lines, as if a diagrammatic elevation of the building's structural design had been drawn into the scene with a thick white marker (Figure 3). This is a static and insubstantial Farnsworth House, existing outside of the normal limitations of space and time. Although formed of the same raw materials, it bears only passing resemblance to the layered, dynamic, weighty, and contingent building portrayed in the oblique 1951 façade photograph. More tellingly, the 1951 image tantalizes viewers with openly obscured details, inviting engagement and promising more to learn; the 1985 image seems to expose all, but in fact gives viewers no more than what they already expect, assuring them there is nothing more to know. Transparency presented in this way encourages a particularly insidious form of intellectual opacity: It suggests there is no question the modernism this building embodies cannot answer—while also discouraging the asking.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno warned us something like this might happen. In their famous essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," they outlined the ways in which prefabricated opportunities for enlightenment could lead to a sort of pacifying self-satisfaction.⁵⁶ Of course, their concern was directed toward capitalist manipulation of the "mass-media consumer's powers of imagination and spontaneity" for their own gain; this overt Marxism does not directly apply here.⁵⁷ But the question remains: Did Drexler do too much of (in Horkheimer and Adorno's words) the visitor's "schematizing for him" in zealously causing new photographs of the Farnsworth House to be created that purposefully shed

the original images' more challenging aspects?⁵⁸ And was Drexler especially successful in this case precisely because the notion at issue was transparency—that quality which, by definition both literally and figuratively, promises elucidation rather than obfuscation?

Part of the urgency informing Drexler's self-styled "crusade" may have stemmed from the fact that the original Hedrich Blessing images, which he considered so problematic, actually enjoyed a wide currency. Did he perhaps harbor some hope that his new photographs might become similarly separated from the context of their own production and eventually challenge the 1951 set as the authoritative visual record of the Farnsworth House? If he had not died only two years later at the relatively young age of 61, Drexler would have lived to see that very scenario evolve into actual reality; today Hedrich Blessing's 1985 photos circulate freely, often undated and used in place of the original 1951 photographs, potentially influencing a new generation of architectural publics. One of many notable examples can be found in Alice Friedman's book, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History*, in which Hedrich Blessing's 1985 frontal façade view appears as the opening image for the chapter entitled "People Who Live in Glass Houses: Edith Farnsworth, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Philip Johnson."⁵⁹ In other words, a photograph explicitly created to accentuate the Farnsworth House's transparency occupies the most prominent illustrative position within a piece of scholarship that extends modern architecture's transparency-themed discourse in an important new direction. Friedman could be viewed as having helped this

image achieve its destiny, on the one hand, but on the other, Drexler's desire to re-photograph the building in 1985 originated with his interest in reviving Mies' modernist legacy whereas Friedman's work challenges and complicates it. Knowing the 1985 façade view in particular portrays the Farnsworth House as more transparent than Mies himself envisioned—photographically at least—does not necessarily hurt Friedman's argument. Indeed, if the Mies-inflected curtained walls of 1951 could be interpreted as suggesting Farnsworth's sequestration almost as much as Drexler's view-permitting walls of 1985 suggest her exhibition, both sets of photographs could be interrogated against what Friedman and others have uncovered about the nature of women's spatial experience.

"Modern Architecture's Core of Truth"

Friedman is not the only historian to have taken up Mies' use of glass in general and transparency in particular as a theme in her own scholarship since Drexler commissioned Hedrich Blessing in 1985.⁶⁰ Moreover, in recent years, several works of art exploring the meanings and implications of the Farnsworth House and its clear glass walls have also been presented for more broadly public consumption akin to Johnson's strategic Glass House promotion. Perhaps best known among them is Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle's short film *Le Baiser* ("The Kiss"), produced in 1999 and showing the artist as a window washer meticulously cleaning the exterior glass of the Farnsworth House as a young woman listens to music inside.⁶¹

In 2007, a photographic analog to the continued evolution of scholarly and public transparency discourse was created.

Figure 12.
Jon Miller (photographer)
for Hedrich Blessing,
entrance (south) façade
view of the Farnsworth
House, 2007. (Jon Miller
© Hedrich Blessing.)

The building's new operator, a historic preservation advocacy group called Landmarks Illinois, commissioned Hedrich Blessing to once again photograph the house (Figure 12).⁶² In the façade image from this shoot, just like the photographer's overall façade shot from 1985, the camera is positioned frontally relative to the building, tracing its minor axis up the stairs. Taken at the same time of year as before, the trees read correctly as evidence of the building's setting directly amidst nature but no foliage impedes the view. And, despite some tree reflections, the edge of the glass-enclosed interior living area is virtually indistinguishable from the end of the adjacent open porch, as was also the case previously. In fact, the only really obvious difference

between the two photographs is that whereas the curtains are pushed rather awkwardly behind a big tree in 1985, in 2007 the curtains have been removed altogether. Here, finally, is photographic proof of a fully transparent Farnsworth House that only really exists in the timeless and undifferentiated space of the American architectural imaginary. The "glass pavilion," which Drexler once labeled "modern architecture's core of truth," has been made manifest—he, we speculate, would have been pleased.⁶³

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ENDNOTES

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1. Tony Hiss and Chicago Historical Society, *Building Images: Seventy Years of Photography at Hedrich Blessing* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2000), 39.

2. Arthur Drexler to Dirk Lohan, 25 September 1985. "Mies van der Rohe Centennial Exhibition February 10–April 15, 1986. Misc. Correspondence" Folder, Curatorial File #1415, The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York City, NY.

3. Claire Zimmerman, "Modernism, Media, Abstraction: Mies van der Rohe's Photographic Architecture in Barcelona and Brno (1927–31)," PhD diss. (The City University of New York, 2005), 44.

4. Robert Elwall and Royal Institute of British Architects, *Building with Light: The International History of Architectural Photography* (London; New York: Merrell; RIBA, 2004), 162.

5. Franklin Toker, *Fallingwater Rising: Frank Lloyd Wright, E.J. Kaufmann, and America's Most Extraordinary House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 257.

6. Julius Shulman, *Photographing Architecture and Interiors* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1962).

7. Leaving the shantung silk in its natural off-white state was of specific concern to Mies in this case. According to Werner Blaser, Mies noted: "I was in this house myself from morning till evening. I had never known till then what splendid colors

nature can display. The interior must, therefore, be kept neutral in tone because there are all the colours outside." Meanwhile, Farnsworth reportedly consulted with Harry Weese, who advised her to opt for brown instead of the natural color that Mies wanted to complement the beige travertine floor and to blend with the golds and reds of the surrounding landscape in autumn. Werner Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe* 6th rev. ed. (Basel, Switzerland: Birkhäuser Verlag, 1997): 121. Published originally in 1965 as *Mies van der Rohe: The Art of Structure*; Myron Goldsmith, interview by Betty J. Blum, pages 67–68, 25–26 July 1986, 7 September 1986, and 5 October 1986, compiled 2001 under the auspices of the Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Department of Architecture, the Art Institute of Chicago.

8. Gene Summers, interview by Pauline A. Saliga, 7–8 October 1987, page 37, compiled c.1993 under the auspices of the Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Department of Architecture, the Art Institute of Chicago.

9. For more information and an example of Schinkel's textile designs, see Martin Steffens, *K.F. Schinkel 1781–1841: An Architect in the Service of Beauty* (Cologne and Los Angeles: Taschen, 2003): 43–44. For more information on Semper's relationship to textiles, see Rebecca Houze, *Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary Before the First World War* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 47–48. Semper assigns central importance to textiles especially in the book that is often considered to be his most influential text: *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder praktische Ästhetik* (*Style in the Technical and Structural Arts, or Practical Aesthetics*), published 1861–63.

10. For *The International Style*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson included a Mies-design apartment study that featured a "blue raw silk curtain" as part of the space's textural and chromatic richness. Also, during his

disagreement with Farnsworth, Mies apparently claimed to have used the same natural-colored shantung silk material for curtains in his own home that he was specifying for the Plano house. Additionally, an important component of Mies' history of engagement with textiles in Europe was the fact that he counted several textile manufacturers as clients. Regarding the Tugendhat house, for instance, Marianne Eggler has noted: "... textiles were in a sense at the heart of the Tugendhat commission, since both Fritz and Grete Tugendhat's families had made their fortunes in the textile industry." Mies also designed two houses on adjacent lots for managing directors of silk weaving mills in Krefeld, the Esters and Lange Houses (both 1927–30), as well as a factory for them (1931–35) and a house for Hermann Lange's son, Ulrich (mid-1930s). Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson, *The International Style* (1932; repr., New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 195; Myron Goldsmith, interview, 67; Marianne Eggler, "Divide and Conquer: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich's Fabric Partitions at the Tugendhat House," *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 16, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 2009): 89 n17; Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 108–112.

11. In *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream*, Thomas Dyja notes a direct connection between Mies' negative experience with Edith Farnsworth and his more permissive attitude toward the curtains at 860–880 Lakeshore Drive. Dyja writes: "The truth was, Mies didn't really care how anyone lived. Controlling the look of a house in Plano intended as a work of art mattered to him; he couldn't care less about a spec apartment. His only requirement for 860–880 was uniform curtains, but he'd learned his lesson; the owner could use any material facing inward, as long as they were backed with his." Thomas Dyja, *The Third Coast: When Chicago Built the American Dream* (London: Penguin Press, 2013), 218–219.

12. Douglas Haskell to Edith Farnsworth, 9 August 1951, and Douglas Haskell to Mies van der Rohe, 20 August 1951, "Architectural Forum 1940-55" folder, container 15, "General Office File, 1923-1969, n.d." file, Papers of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereafter MvdR Collection, LoC].

13. [Peter Blake], "Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth house in Fox River, Ill.," *Architectural Forum* 95, no. 4 (October 1951): 156-161. The article is unsigned, as was the standard policy for all Time Inc. magazines, however a letter from Forum's editor to Mies indicates Peter Blake as the author. Douglas Haskell to Mies van der Rohe, 24 October 1951, "Architectural Forum 1940-55" folder, container 15, "General Office File, 1923-1969, n.d." File, MvdR Collection, LoC.

14. The publishers of these three magazines reported their circulations in 1951 as the following: *Architectural Forum* 72,528; *Architectural Record* 33,293; and *Progressive Architecture* 32,462. Roll #P-10, Publisher's Statements, Historical Circulation Data File, Audit Bureau of Circulations/Alliance for Audited Media, Arlington Heights, IL.

15. In 1971 the federal government sent a photographer to the Farnsworth House to document it for the Historic American Building Survey. These images were not meant for publication, however; filed at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C., the Internet has only recently made these images easily accessible to the general public.

16. Claire Zimmerman has done excellent work investigating the history and importance of photographs of the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House. See *Photographic Architecture in the Twentieth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), especially chapters two and three.

17. [Blake], "Ludwig Mies van der Rohe," 159.

18. I am indebted to Peter Bacon Hales for pointing out the photographer's frequent use of oblique camera angles to highlight the steel columns' depth in this particular set of images.

19. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Fruhlicht* 4 (1922): 120, in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building-Art*, trans. Mark Jarzombek (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 240.

20. While this proposal's original publication in *Fruhlicht* labeled it simply as "Highrise" (*Hochhaus*), historians today routinely refer to it as the "Glass Skyscraper." The difference is subtle, but it suggests a discursive shift from identifying this design as a building made possible by new structural technologies to a building with a specific type of non-structural cladding material.

21. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Address to the Association of Mirror Glass Manufacturers, (1933),"

quoted in Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, trans. Mark Jarzombek (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 314.

22. Ibid.

23. "Museum of Modern Art Presents Retrospective Exhibition of the Architecture of Mies van der Rohe," 17 September 1947, Museum of Modern Art Press Release Archives, 1940-49, accessed online: https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/1117/releases/MOMA_1946-1947_0100_1947-09-15_47915-37.pdf?2010.

24. Goldsmith, interview, 66.

25. The famous watercolor Mies created early in the design process to communicate the building's underlying idea to Farnsworth includes some cross-hatching in the area of the terrace, which is the typical graphic language in professional architecture for screening of some sort. Additionally, when Peter Blake asked specifically about the screen porch, Joe Fujikawa, an architect in Mies' office, confirmed in writing that screening the porch was part of the Farnsworth House project. Joe Fujikawa to Peter Blake, 11 October 1951, "Architectural Forum 1940-55" folder, container 15, "General Office File, 1923-1969, n.d." file, MvdR Collection, LoC.

26. In 1999, a journalist published an essay in the *New York Times* attributing the construction of the porch in April 1952 to his father, William Dunlap, then a young architect associated with Mies through the Illinois Institute of Technology who happened to be friends with Edith Farnsworth. The article also indicates that Dunlap designed the porch with input from Mies, although the exact parameters of Dunlap's contribution to the actual design are unclear. On the one hand, Myron Goldsmith, the architect in Mies' office assigned specifically to the Farnsworth House project, has attributed the building's "moveable windows on the end" to Dunlap. In that case, perhaps Dunlap also designed the porch's pivot doors. On the other hand, in a letter to Blake from October 1951, Fujikawa was quite specific about the type of screening that was to be used for the porch (see footnote 27) but did not mention Dunlap as the person who had made the screening decision or could provide more information. It should be noted that the *New York Times* article perpetuates the myth that the idea of a screen porch originated with Farnsworth as a way to make the building more comfortable. David Dunlap, "Glass-Box Secrets Are Hard to Keep," *New York Times* (24 June 1999), F1; Goldsmith, interview, 64; Fujikawa to Blake, MvdR Collection, LoC.

27. Fujikawa indicated the use of "18 mesh monel wire screen" in his letter to Blake. In addition to the carefully designed doors and mullions, this mesh specification also implies that considerable attention was given to the porch

detailing. Monel was a white architectural metal that, according to historian Derek Trelstad, was popular in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. It was corrosion-resistant, which was important given the Farnsworth House's proximity to the Fox River, and it expanded at roughly the same rate as concrete and steel, which made Monel an obvious option for use with the building's steel frame. Furthermore, an early twentieth-century specifications manual indicates that this type of material was produced by a Chicago-based manufacturer, American Wire Fabrics Company. The manual notes: "Monel should be specified for use along sea coast or in other localities where atmospheric conditions are destructive to other grades of wire cloth." The "18" in Fujikawa's letter refers to the density of the weave; this was the finest American Wire Fabrics Company made in the Monel type. Fujikawa to Blake, MvdR Collection, LoC; Derek H. Trelstad, "Monel," in *Twentieth-Century Building Materials: History and Conservation*, ed. Thomas C. Jester, 52-57 ([New York]: McGraw-Hill, 1995); *The American Architect Specification Manual: A Compilation of Specifications of Advertised Materials and Accessories as Prepared by Representative Manufacturers for Use by Architects and Architectural Engineers* (New York: The Architectural and Building Press, Inc., 1921), 91.

28. [Blake], "Ludwig Mies van der Rohe," *Architectural Forum*.

29. James Marston Fitch, "Mies van der Rohe and the Platonic Verities," in *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture: Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Wright; The Verbatim Record of a Symposium Held at the School of Architecture, Columbia University, March-May, 1961* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 163.

30. Ibid., 162-3.

31. This misunderstanding is quite common, in scholarly literature as well as in writings created for more public consumption. For additional examples, see footnotes 26 and 55.

32. James Marston Fitch, "Mies and the Climate of Plato," in *Architecture and the Esthetics of Plenty*, 156-170 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961); *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture: Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Wright; The Verbatim Record of a Symposium Held at the School of Architecture, Columbia University, March-May, 1961* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970).

33. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 389.

34. Ibid., 389.

35. Susan Sontag, "Against interpretation," in

'Against Interpretation' and Other Essays (New York: Octagon Books, 1978), 13. Essay originally published in 1964.

36. Arthur Drexler, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960), 28; Charles Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 104.

37. Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1947), 138 and 140.

38. *Ibid.*, 162.

39. Philip Johnson, "House at New Canaan, Connecticut," *Architectural Review* 108, no. 645 (September 1950): 153.

40. Jeffrey Kipnis, "Introduction: Throwing Stones—The Incidental Effects of a Glass House," in *Philip Johnson: The Glass House*, ed. David Whitney and Jeffrey Kipnis (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), xxvi; Kenneth Frampton, "The Glass House Revisited," *Catalog 9* (September/October 1978): 50.

41. Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1978), 167.

42. Mabel Haerberly, "All-Glass Home on Ponus Ridge Startles New Canaan Residents; Visitors Create Traffic Jams at Philip Johnson's Ultra-Modern Residence and Guest House in Old Connecticut Village," *New York Times* (12 December 1948), R1.

43. *Ibid.*, R4.

44. Elizabeth Gordon, "The Threat to the Next America," *House Beautiful* 95 (April 1951): 126-131 & 250-251.

45. *Ibid.*, 130.

46. *Ibid.*, 129.

47. Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe*, 10.

48. The historically American relationship with nature is a story too complicated to be completely included within the scope of this study. However, it should be noted that Mies, though a very recent German émigré, was attuned to this phenomenon. Historians often point to the famous Resor House photograph-drawing collage showing his clients their future view toward the surrounding mountainous landscape.

49. From the beginning, the Glass House has been frequently portrayed via a diagonal corner shot to stress the painterly play of light and shape across the building's glass walls. One of the most typical views, in fact, places the camera along the main gravel walkway, which leads to the house's entrance at a particularly picturesque angle.

50. Nigel Whiteley, "Intensity of Scrutiny and a

Good Eye: Architecture and Transparency," *Journal of Architectural Education* 56, no. 4 (May 2003): 8. Whiteley's article does excellent work mapping the evolution of the perception of transparency throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century. His analysis of Gianni Vattimo's *The Transparent Society* (published originally in Italian 1989; Oxford: Polity Press: 1992) is especially thorough and relevant to contemporary concerns about the ways in which trust in transparency's revelatory nature can be manipulated.

51. Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 45-54.

52. Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 17.

53. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, revised enlarged edition (New York: Rizzoli, 1977), 15.

54. Paul Goldberger, "Modernism Reaffirms Its Power," *New York Times*, 24 November 1985, H1 & H35.

55. Shulze and Windhorst refer to Palumbo as "an ideal owner," and cite the fact that Palumbo removed the screened porch as evidence of his good stewardship. The phrasing of their passage about Palumbo and the porch perpetuates the common misconception that it had been Farnsworth's idea to enclose the otherwise open terrace, and then further implies her poor stewardship by noting that the porch was in disrepair: "Farnsworth had insisted on screening the deck. When Palumbo took over, the screening was loose and full of debris, and he removed it." Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, 284; "History," from National Trust for Historic Preservation, "Farnsworth House," accessed online: <http://www.farnsworthhouse.org/history-farnsworth-house/>; I am indebted to Whitney French, former Farnsworth House Historic Site Director, for providing additional details related to Palumbo's early ownership period.

56. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming, 120-167 (New York: Continuum, 1988). Originally published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (New York: Social Studies Association, Inc., 1944). English translation by Heder and Herder, Inc., 1972.

57. *Ibid.*, 126.

58. *Ibid.*, 124.

59. Alice Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House: A Social and Architectural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1998), 126. The cover image for this book consists of an oblique view of the Farnsworth House from Hedrich Blessing's 1985 set without curtains at all, in the

corners or otherwise. Interestingly, the cover image for Friedman's second edition of *Women and the Making of the Modern House* (Yale University Press, 2007) features a different photograph of the Farnsworth House, this time looking frontally into the kitchen side of the building with the curtains completely drawn around the entire remainder of the interior space.

60. I would like to especially thank the anonymous reviewers who reminded me of two important post-1985 essays on glass and transparency. One is Josep Quetglas' "Fear of Glass: The Barcelona Pavilion," in *Architectureproduction*, ed. Joan Ockman and Beatriz Colomina, 122-151 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988). In the same volume, see also K. Michael Hays, "Reply to Jose Quetglas," 240-244. The second is Detlef Mertins, "The Enticing and Threatening Face of Prehistory: Walter Benjamin and the Utopia of Glass," *Assemblage* 29 (April 1996): 6-23. For an additional example of feminist writing on the topic, see Paulette Singley, "Living in a Glass Prism: The Female Figure in Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Domestic Architecture," *Critical Matrix* 6, no. 2 (1992): 47-77.

61. An excerpt of "The Kiss" can be accessed online: <https://vimeo.com/45767217>. It should be noted that the location of the camera during some of this film's exterior shots was only possible because the wire mesh screening on the porch had been removed. This film would have had a different feel without the option of placing the camera at the far side of an empty and open terrace. A second well-known example of a Farnsworth House-themed work of art is June Finfer's "The Glass House" play from 2010. Finfer explores the popular version of the Farnsworth House architect-client story, which by default involves the walls' transparency.

62. I am indebted to Whitney French for bringing this photograph to my attention initially and to Clark Christensen, preservation architect, for providing the details of its origin. Whitney French, conversation with the author, 22 August 2010; Clark Christensen, conversation with the author, 24 August 2010.

63. Arthur Drexler, "Architecture in the Millennium," *Unfinished Modern* series lecture 2, presented at the Architectural League of New York, 18 April 1984. Audio recording accessible online: www.archleague.org.