Municipal House, was a building that Kotěra openly criticized. Designed by Antonín Balšánek, this late Art Nouveau palace was official architecture at its least demanding. Built as a cultural center for Prague’s Czech community, it overflows with syrupy allegorical murals and sculpture, the direct opposite of Kotěra’s realism of materials and function. The implications of this distinction could have been more explicitly examined, for it is here that a closer appreciation of Kotěra’s Modernism really emerges. Kotěra understood modern architecture as a search for reasonable solutions to spatial and functional problems, and a deliberate thwarting of expectations, which demanded as much of the user of a modern building as from its creator. That his early detractors in Prague accused him of internationalism seems fitting. He did not crib from the work of foreign architects, as early critics would suggest, but simply turned his back on many of the social and political demands that conditioned the work of his predecessors, to produce new and challenging solutions to everyday architectural problems. By allowing a rare glimpse at this enterprise, the recent exhibition has situated Kotěra among the leading architects of his generation, and provided a context for his reappraisal. The publication of an extensively illustrated English version of the catalogue, the first comprehensive monograph of his work, lends it historical teeth, and provides a substantial footing for further study.

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Publications related to the exhibition:

Mies in Berlin
Museum of Modern Art, New York
21 June–11 September 2001

Altes Museum, Berlin
14 December 2001–10 March 2002

Fundación La Caixa, Barcelona
30 July–29 September 2002

Has the time come when a reconsideration of the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe no longer has to be a reconsideration of architectural Modernism itself? That this is indeed the case seems to have been one subtext of Mies in Berlin (and its sister exhibition, Mies in America, not reviewed here). The ascetic attention to structure and space and the arrogant distance from life of Miesian Modernism—Modernism in perhaps its most emblematic and influential form—were clearly not at issue in the show. The avant-garde as a project and Mies’s ambivalent relation to it were not put in the dock; nor was the complicity between this idiom and the look of the late-capitalist city. Even if these matters have not lost their relevance, perhaps the logical short circuit that connects them to a single oeuvre has been severed; perhaps the time has come when it is possible to look at Mies without falling into polemical or defensive postures. One could, of course, question whether the purpose of the exhibition might have been to serve the institutions that stood behind it—an embattled and regrouping MoMA and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin-Preußischer Kulturbesitz in the capital of the new State of Berlin. But it is to the credit of the organizers, Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, that these complex pressures do not seem to have led to an agenda beyond their own valid and self-consciously pursued scholarly one. If the adaptation and installation of the exhibition in Berlin’s Altes Museum by Andres Lepik raised the specter of Prussian classicism, this was perhaps inevitable given the context; more on this later.

The purpose of Mies in Berlin was to look at the early work of the architect “on its own terms,” not as the mere prelude to the mature work of the American period, and with resistance to Mies’s own efforts to excise the seemingly conservative early projects from his oeuvre. Mies’s career was not presented as a modernist parable, one that only begins in earnest with the so-called “five projects”—the unbuilt skyscrapers, the office building, and the country houses of 1922–1924 that announce the architect’s avant-garde ambitions—and achieves fulfillment in the flowing space of the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion and in the classicist perfection of the American work. Instead, Mies’s European work was framed between the numerous pre–World War I country houses at the beginning of his professional life and the residences (from the Tugendhat House to the Resor House project) of the 1930s. By shifting the coordinates between which a narrative could be constructed, the organizers presented a novel picture of Mies. Even if its contours were occasionally drawn by selective and unexplained exclusions, this picture was plausible and convincing. It is certainly one that we will have to get used to.

Roughly the first quarter of the exhibition was devoted to the houses Mies built for a wealthy clientele in the southwestern suburbs of Berlin before World War I. These commissions are usually considered competent but derivative journeyman work, well crafted but uninspired examples of the prevailing neo-Biedermeier identified with Paul Mebes’s contemporary book-manifesto Um 1800. Despite evidence of later Miesian motifs and classical gestures, the work is usually downplayed in favor of attention to Mies’s mentors Peter Behrens and Hendrik Petrus Berlage. This approach was notoriously ratified by Mies’s destruction of the majority of his early sketches and plans in 1926, precisely when the architect had taken on the organization of the Werkbund Weissenhof settlement and the image of a far more avant-garde persona had already come into focus.

Yet the organizers were able to
make good sense of the earlier works in the context of Potsdam and Neubabelsberg around 1910. The show deployed a variety of media—plans, vintage and new photographs, maps, models, and computer simulations—to give a strong contextual reading. What emerged without great clarity was that Mies was working in a landscape that had already been interpreted and framed for the Prussian royalty by Karl Friedrich Schinkel. Schinkel’s Schloss Charlottenhof in Potsdam and his collaborations with the landscape designer Peter Joseph Lenné at Schloss Glienicke and Schloss Babelsberg along the Griebnitzsee had articulated the area as one of complex optical relationships and vistas through a vast site that was, by the turn of the twentieth century, being settled by the bourgeoisie. The Riehl House, Mies’s first commission, was situated right in the middle of this architectural and social dynamic, and its temple-front porch rising from the podium overlooking the Kaiserallee clearly represented a self-confident but respectful response to the challenge of such a sensitive site. The example of Schinkel’s intervention in the romantic landscape, the exhibition implied, was one model for the complexity of Mies’s handling of the relation of building to site in his early projects. They are characterized by an extraordinary attention to detail in the garden and landscape design, down to the position of specific plants and the positioning of exedra benches. The show made clear how actively the houses engaged with their sites, encompassing them by porches and long walls, framing paths and views through a complex of balanced but asymmetrical interior and exterior spaces, walled and open gardens, lawns and paths. The gentle overlay of classical form on the landscape, and the houses’ interlocking relationship to it, ends up looking more picturesquely romantic than classical. And as Bergdoll traces in his catalogue essay, it has much to do with the contemporary Wohnreform movement and, in particular, with a set of discussions around the “architectonic garden” as championed by Alfred Lich- wark and Hermann Muthesius, among others.

The show’s attention to the early work effectively suggests several revisions to the received view of Mies. First, it resituates the dialogue between Mies and Schinkel from Berlin to Potsdam. In other words, the axis connecting Schinkel’s urban work such as the Neue Wache and the Altes Museum to Mies’s Neue Nationalgalerie looks less interesting than the one connecting Charlottenhof to the Riehl House, and then to the flowing spaces of the Barcelona Pavilion and the Tugendhat House. Second, it anchors Mies’s manipulation of Freiraum less in the context of de Stijl and Cubism than in the architectonic garden of the bourgeois reform movement. Even the early American houses and the courthouse projects look less like an assertion of classical separation from the site than a complex and romantic relation to it. And, finally, the exhibition serves as a sort of vindication of the embattled interpretation Fritz Neumeyer sketched out in The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art of 1986. Overstated as that position of a sort of “philosophical Mies” may be, it now appears as fundamentally correct in the importance attributed to the early intellectual contacts of the architect.

Having established a continuity between the early works and the classic Mies of flowing spaces framed by floating, interlocking elements, the exhibition made the key moment of the emergence of Mies as avant-garde architect look quite different. The published but unbuilt (and unbuildable) projects of 1921 to 1924, it seems, not a beginning but a rupture in Mies’s career; they show not the first “independent” work but instead the emergence of an avant-garde persona. Here the multimedia aspect of the exhibition was entirely in the spirit of Mies. Next to the country houses that he was designing in the prewar mode at the same time, the skyscraper and office building projects looked less like essays in the constructional possibilities of steel, glass, and concrete than experiments in photomontage. True, the Friedrichstrasse skyscraper project shows a more sensible relation to the context than hitherto assumed, but the manipulation of media (stretching back to the presentation material for the Bismarck monument of 1910) combined with the radical antihumanist rhetoric of his statements in the journal G—Material zur elementaren Gestaltung make as much a Dadaist as a clear-thinking structural logician out of Mies. By displaying stressing the variety of experiments in film and print and downplaying the Constructivism of de Stijl, the exhibition raised the possibility of viewing the “five projects” largely as an exercise in publicity (but no less important for that).

Yet perhaps this view of these crucial years is at once too strong and too weak. Do we really want to ignore the importance of the tendencies of thinking about architectural space stretching from Schwarsow to Lissitzky and van Doesburg, the usual reference points for understanding Mies’s work of the 1920s? The exhibition gave little ground for understanding the centripetal space of the country house projects beyond that of the architectonic garden of the reform movement. And, second, despite the rich material presented by Detlef Mertins in the catalogue, the exhibition itself could have gone further in exploring the problem of Mies as manipulator of the media. His role as exhibition designer was foregrounded effectively in a video presentation (and a fine essay by Wallis Miller in the catalogue), but the challenge laid down by Beatriz Cololina’s work on the inseparability of modern architecture from modern forms of publicity was not really met. How was a career such as Mies’s defined by the possibility of images to circulate in the twentieth century? What were the publics addressed by this string of publications (the journals, be they avant-garde, professional, or bourgeois) and exhibitions (from Stuttgart to Barcelona to Berlin)? This otherwise ambitious exhibition kept such questions at arm’s length.

Of course, these are matters of emphasis, and no exhibition can address
every issue it would seem to raise. The result was still a strong reading of Mies, a bold set of interpretations that goes beyond a mere fleshing-out of our view of a canonical figure. I did not see the crisp and colorful MoMA installation, but there it seems the use of parallel walls with views across the oeuvre of 1907 to 1937 facilitated the establishment of a new set of concepts and parameters by which to understand the work. The installation in Berlin, however, seemed to express discomfort with the interpretations raised by the material on view. It was certainly a coup that Mies in Berlin could be staged in the Altes Museum instead of the more obvious choice, the late Neue Nationalgalerie by Mies himself, but the powerful presence of the Schinkel building reasserted traditional conceptions that the local organizers seemed unconcerned to counter. The exhibition unfolded chronologically, with a restricted temporal horizon as one passed through the muted blue rooms. While the Berlin installation contained important additional material rooting the early work in the Potsdam of Schinkel, the exhibition ended with two rooms devoted to the Neue Nationalgalerie. The inevitable comparison of the Mies and Schinkel museums is, of course, a trope of a modernist view of twentieth-century architecture, and studying the one before stepping into the vestibule of the other brings this view, as it were, right home. If the teleology implied by the site, installation, and chronology was the message given the visitor, then he or she was left with the very view of Mies as classicist that the exhibition otherwise so brilliantly problematized.

Yet Mies in Berlin was an intelligent and probing exhibition, even in the heart of Schinkel’s Prussia. And good use was made of Thomas Ruff’s digitally manipulated images of Mies’s buildings; distributed throughout the exhibition, they were strangely comfortable among the documents and reconstructions out of which a complex and contrapuntal view of the architect emerged. Ruff’s large color photographs showed the Perls House at night, with the lights turned on; the Afrikanische Strasse settlement threatened by Allied bombers; the Esters House on a frosty morning; the Urbig residence blurred through the viewfinder of an unfocused camera; the Barcelona Pavilion passed at high speed. Such manipulation is fully consonant with Mies’s own mobilization of the various media at his disposal to publicize his work. Like the exhibition, it showed Mies in motion again, and that is quite an achievement.

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Publications related to the exhibition: