In a new essay on landscape architect Garrett Eckbo’s communal landscapes done with architect Gregory Ain, Constant again explores social and political agendas, here democratic ideals as realized in the spatial experience of the place (building on the scholarship of Imbert and Treib). The reader is by this time aware of Constant’s interests and it is easy to follow her argument, although a question that begs elaboration is why so few of the projects were ever built. While such discussions throughout are well positioned, what is noticeably missing is any acknowledgment of issues of gender, a flaw both because the landscape architect for Sunnyside, Marjorie Sewell Cautley, was a woman (and a single mother), and because each of these housing projects forms domestic family space (i.e., for mothers and children).

Constant’s attention to the collaborative nature of the projects is as equally significant a contribution as the context. It is remarkable to read how, through collaboration, landscape comes so often to dominate over architecture. In essence it bears repeating that in such projects the landscape is the “means by which the structure of the ground is made intelligible” (1). Landscape does not do this alone, however; it is in conjunction with architecture that the shared experiences are created. That architecture and landscape comfortably play these integrated roles, Constant maintains, is the result of a productive collaborative process.

Such collaborative attitudes are also at the core of two essays on the work of the Swedish architect Erik Gunnar Asplund, reflecting Constant’s larger project on Stockholm’s Woodland Cemetery and the salient role of landscape in his work. In these essays Constant’s attention to the complex relationships shaped by collaboration, in conjunction with Asplund’s inherent cross-disciplinary curiosity, reveals a deeply thoughtful and reflective design process for which professional boundaries are of no consequence either to the designers or to Constant as critic. Her description of the role of ritual experience mutually engaged by architecture and landscape offers compelling prose and a proposition that again underscores the power of the two spatial experiences treated as one whole.

There are also essays that are not about collaboration so much as about the overlapping approaches of one architect. This is true in the essays in which Constant considers Mies’s Barcelona Pavilion and Le Corbusier’s Chandigarh. In each she offers a close analysis of the design process, shifting the focus from architecture as object to project as spatial experience. For the Barcelona Pavilion, Constant draws on the landscape term picturesque, grounding her analysis in Mies’s manipulation of the visual sequence through the landscape and its pavilion by means of an internal promenade. In the latter essay, she describes how Le Corbusier “ultimately achieved a reconciliation of architecture and landscape through his designs rather than through his polemical writings” (150). The essay ends with a persuasive description of the significance of the Governor’s Palace garden as “both universal and particular: the garden unfolding as a microcosm of the Indian landscape” (168). In both essays, Constant’s ability to move between the vocabularies of architecture and landscape is critical to her analysis and reinterpretation. In this way, as she describes the architects’ process of production, she initiates exploration and meaning rather than imposing it (60).

In a similar focus on the architect using landscape to realize a specific spatial experience, Constant considers Jože Plečnik’s designs for Prague Castle. While her notion that Plečnik was creating thresholds out of sync and does not have the quality picturesque, grounding her analysis in Mies’s manipulation of the visual sequence through the landscape and its pavilion by means of an internal promenade. In the latter essay, she describes how Le Corbusier “ultimately achieved a reconciliation of architecture and landscape through his designs rather than through his polemical writings” (150). The essay ends with a persuasive description of the significance of the Governor’s Palace garden as “both universal and particular: the garden unfolding as a microcosm of the Indian landscape” (168). In both essays, Constant’s ability to move between the vocabularies of architecture and landscape is critical to her analysis and reinterpretation. In this way, as she describes the architects’ process of production, she initiates exploration and meaning rather than imposing it (60).

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In the final essay Constant takes on a relatively recent project, the competition for Parc de la Villette, but rather than Bernard Tschumi’s winning proposal, her focus is on Rem Koolhaas’s second-place entry completed with Claire and Michel Corajoud, French landscape architects. The submission proposed programming socialized space in malleable and indeterminate terms, an alternative to the idea of static design. Here again Constant raises the concept of democratic space, this time in describing the proposal’s engagement with conflict and the unpredictable. Although it is interesting, this essay reads as out of sync and does not have the quality of reassessment of the previous essays.

Given their breadth and depth, these collected essays should be a primary source for seminars on potential convergences among the disciplines of landscape architecture, architecture, and urban design. The essays are also convincing models of how we might learn to write legibly about the process and the experience of design. Most significant, however, is Constant’s call for new approaches to design grounded in rediscoveries of our historic narratives in order to reevaluate the breadth and depth of thick practices that we have not yet acknowledged.

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Notes

Phyllis Lambert
Building Seagram
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2013, 320 pp., 140 b&w and 56 color illus. $65.00, ISBN 9780300167672

“Can there be a need for yet another book on Mies van der Rohe, who has been more exhaustively written about than any other of the hero figures of modern architecture?”

J. M. Richards, the British critic and editor of Architectural Review, asked this question in 1975—thirty-eight years ago. Since then,
the literature on Mies has grown substantially, and the most recent addition to it, Phyllis Lambert's summptuous monograph, *Building Seagram*, demonstrates once more that there is still plenty about Mies, his work, and its context to be uncovered. No one could tell the history of the most seminal office building of the twentieth century as well as Lambert, who selected the architect in 1954 and then worked closely with all participants as director of planning and representative of the client, her father, Samuel Bronfman, the president of Seagram. The experience changed her life. She went on to study architecture under Mies at IIT and immediately afterward designed the Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts (known today as the Segal Centre for Performing Arts) in Montreal. She became an architectural historian, an active preservationist, and the founding director and main supporter of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, the premier research center for architectural history and theory in the world.

The story of how the young Parisian art student rose up against her father, whose “fierce temper” had terrified her as a child, and interfered in his selection of an architect for the new company headquarters in New York, is so well known that it long ago assumed the quality of an architectural myth, equal to, perhaps, the account of Frank L. Wright sketching his famous perspective of Fallingwater between a phone call from the client, Edgar Kaufmann, and his arrival at Wright’s home half an hour later. One would ordinarily assume these stories to be too good to be true, having been embellished as they are told and retold over time. But here, in appendix I, we find the letter that Lambert sent on 26 June 1954 to “Dearest Daddy”—eight pages in facsimile, written over two long days, with all the writer’s misspellings and handwritten additions. “NO NO NO NO NO,” she cries out about the Pereira and Luckman that sparked Lambert’s letter, we learn, had been intended to inspire 700 sales representatives assembled in the ballroom of the Waldorf Astoria for their annual meeting on 12 July 1954. The design had been requested only a few weeks earlier, and Pereira and Luckman had not been given an official commission. Charles Luckman later recalled that Samuel Bronfman wanted “old world charm in a modern setting,” and even dreamed of placing an English castle atop the Park Avenue office building—which might explain the tower-like extrusions at the corners of Luckman’s design. In addition to the model, he produced a series of drawings of interiors. Following his presentation, he received a “heartwarming” response from the audience, and Samuel Bronfman promised him the commission.

Phyllis Lambert, meanwhile, found an important ally in the pragmatic and far-sighted Lou R. Crandall, president of the Fuller Construction Company, the designated builder and a friend of her father’s. Crandall seems to have been one of the key players—“like an *eminence grise* or a dept puppeteer,” as Lambert put it. He convinced Bronfman that his daughter should select a new architect, and later he suggested the association of Johnson with Mies, orchestrated the collaboration with the firm of Ely Jacques Kahn and Robert Allan Jacobs, and oversaw the financial aspects of the building. Most importantly, he had already been at work for two years on finding the best solution for the Park Avenue site. In 1952 he had commissioned the “Skytop” study from Kahn and Jacobs, who had plenty of experience building high-rises up and down Park Avenue. The firm produced a series of sketches to illustrate “various schemes showing allowable building size and comparable financial set up.” Among them was a scheme with great similarity to Lever House and “Scheme 4A” (shown in Lambert’s book for the first time), a slab tower set back from Park Avenue with a plaza and fountain in front and “very close to Mies’ solution,” as Lambert notes. Crandall had also assembled a list of competent potential architects, among them Voorhees, Walker, Foley and Smith, Eggers and Higgins, William Lescaze, and Pereira and Luckman.

While Luckman’s hasty design might not have been the last word (it came nowhere near any of Kahn and Jacobs’ feasibility studies), and someone else on Crandall’s list might have been given the commission eventually, the outcome probably would have been an acceptable but unremarkable (and certainly much cheaper) modern office building. What Lambert’s forceful intervention achieved was to move the discussion to a different realm, making architectural quality the most important asset of the building and ultimately transforming architectural culture in New York. In fact, the choice of Mies, his design’s extraordinary quality, its generous plaza, and the associated costs became the central part of the public relations campaign that accompanied the construction and opening of the building.

In the end, at a construction cost of $36 million (30–40 percent above the average office building), the Seagram Building became the most expensive office tower ever built, “in Manhattan or anywhere else,” according to *Architectural Forum*. The capitalized building value from rental income (usually applied for tax purposes) was only $17 million, but, in a novel approach, the city decided to tax it at $21 million, applying something like a tax on “prestige.” While this approach was unsuccessfully appealed, the architectural community protested it as a tax on architectural quality and the
freedom of experimentation, one which would prevent the construction of good architecture in New York City in the future (a suggestion that seemed to assume that additional costs automatically spell better architecture). If this unusual approach to taxation did indeed, as Lambeth suspects, result from puritanical prejudice against the Seagram Company’s business practices during Prohibition, it certainly backfired. The Seagram Building emerged in general opinion as a gleaming landmark of an altruistic, high-minded engagement with architectural culture, or, as Lambeth sums it up in her chapter “Regulations and the Modern Metropolis,” “what the company paid in real estate taxes it gained in reputation.”

The chapters on the structure’s genesis are followed by a contextual study of Mies’s oeuvre, suggesting an ongoing fascination with the notion of the podium as the intermediary between the building and its surrounding land- or cityscape. There is also a portfolio of fifteen color photographs of “plaza studies” taken by Richard Pare during 2000 and 2010 (though alas, no night views). The lighting design, a crucial issue for the appearance and perception of the building and for the charm of the Four Seasons restaurant, lay mostly in the hands of Philip Johnson and lighting designer Richard Kelly. (Johnson liked to claim that Mies was “lousy at lighting.”) Kelly was responsible for the perimeter lighting on every ceiling with two dedicated circuits for day and night lighting, and for the recessed downlights and wall washers in the lobby. Kelly, by the way, convincingly claimed that he talked Mies into covering the lobby’s elevator shafts in rough white travertine rather than his customary polished green marble, in order for the grazing light from above to reflect out evenly from the rough surface of the stone, producing the intensely bright glow visible from Park Avenue.

Thankfully, the story of the building, as Lambeth tells it, does not end with its completion, as it often does in conventional monographs. She devotes a substantial chapter to the commissioning and selection of artwork for the building, in which she played a central role. There are, of course, Richard Lippold’s mesmerizing metal sculptures in the Grill Room, Picasso’s stage curtain, and Mark Rothko’s famously failed commission for a series of paintings for the mezzanine of the poolroom of the Four Seasons. Works by Joan Miró, Fernand Léger, and others were commissioned or bought for the upper floors. In another lengthy, but important, chapter we hear about the struggles to simply maintain the building in a state close to its original conception, especially after it was sold in 1980 to the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America, and to promote its landmark designation in 1989.

The bronze cover of this beautifully produced book is a reminder of one of the building’s unresolved problems: it was designed and widely celebrated as a “bronze building,” and the architects and engineers went to great lengths to work out the color and form of the bronze spandrels and extruded mullions, trying to anticipate the way they would change over time. It was the first skyscraper, as William Jordy once pointed out, that was “consciously designed to age …—an architectural property as appropriate for Seagram’s whisky as sheen for Lever’s soap.” A coating of ferric nitrate and lemon oil was applied to achieve the desired patina. While inside the lobby the bronze surfaces have aged to the rich golden brown of an “old penny” that Mies had cheerfully imagined, most of the building’s outside surface has turned an uneven charcoal gray or black—a far cry from Mies’s vision for this building (and much closer to the black he intended for the Lake Shore Drive apartments in Chicago or the New National Gallery in Berlin). Understandably, the impact of New York City’s future air pollution proved hard for the engineers of General Bronze to predict. The idea of somehow returning the entire tower to its intended brighter and warmer color is apparently floated by every new property manager, but prohibitive costs and a somewhat uncertain outcome have, so far, prevented it.

Lambeth’s book about the “birth and life” of the Seagram Building is richly illustrated (though architects among the readers might miss a complete set of floor plans and sections), engagingly written, and full of previously unavailable information, thanks to her personal recollections and an enormous amount of archival research. It is an exemplary architectural monograph. Neither Mies nor Johnson (nor Lambert herself, for that matter) plays an oversized role as the author’s emphasis lies firmly on the complex processes and many players involved in getting the building done. The chapters on the building’s later fate and efforts toward its conservation make a convincing case for a strong and responsible stewardship for our best buildings.

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Notes
2. Two recent scholarly contributions to the history of the Seagram Building perfectly complement Phyllis Lambert’s book, as they deal with areas not covered here: Benjamin Flowers, Sky scraper: The Politics and Power of Building New York City in the Twentieth Century (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), which explores in detail the advertising strategies that made the Seagram Building a public relations asset for a firm still struggling with its negative reputation from the Prohibition era; and Felicity D. Scott’s excellent review of the critical reception of the building, including the previously unavailable court documents regarding the Seagram tax case: “An Army of Soldiers or a Meadow: The Seagram Building and the ‘Art of Modern Architecture,’” in JSAH 70, no. 3 (2011), 330–33.


6. While the role of the Bronfman’s liquor business during Prohibition (and the resulting desire for an improved public image) is not a topic addressed in this book, it is part of Michael R. Marrus’s brilliant biography of Samuel Bronfman, for which Phyllis Lambert was extensively interviewed. Michael R. Marrus, *Mr. Sam: The Life and Times of Samuel Bronfman* (Toronto: Penguin Books Canada, 1991).


