

Order for Unfolding:

**The metropolis and mental life of the individual through analysis of
Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's domestic and work environments.**

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The working individual in the metropolis has a constant life of engagement with the world around him and has to process and filter a myriad of stimuli. “The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of existence” and the metropolitan context provides an arena for this struggle to play out.¹ What does it mean to be an individual in a city space? How does the constructed environment both intensify and mollify the tensions on an individual? This paper will examine the constructed environment of the individual in the metropolis by observing three realms: the urban environment - focusing on plazas, the corporate workspace, and the domestic environment, all through the lens of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s architectural language and the framework of Simmel’s essay.

Simmel discusses the chaos of the metropolis and the challenge of finding individuality. Because of specialization in work, each is “more directly dependent upon the supplementary activities of all others.”² There is an interrelatedness of the individual to the larger metropolis for “to be an individual in an inescapably social world – it’s not only that we are always embedded in a larger social environment, but, even more profoundly, we can only become who we are by virtue of our connections to a larger collective.”³ The domestic interior space provides a reprieve from the complex exterior world and allows the individual to refocus and contemplate their place in the world, yet the “individual doesn’t know who they are without the larger context of the community” finding their identity through interaction with the people and places of their environments.⁴

Just as the individual finds their dependence on and necessity to the larger collective society in the role they play, we will see in Mies’s work “an order which permeates the whole building fabric, illuminating each part as necessary and inevitable.”⁵

On the surface, Mies van der Rohe’s architecture can be easily misconstrued as repetitive and overly simplified, but once the layers are peeled back and his philosophy of architecture is understood,

1. 33. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *Social Theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 440.

2. Ibid.

3. Section V. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester, “The Rise of the Avatar: Connecting Self and Society,” in *Social Theory Re-Wired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 415.

4. Ibid.

5. Peter Carter, *Mies van der Rohe At Work*. (New York: Praeger, 1974), 9.

the richness of meaning in these spaces and the careful consideration of the human scale displays the relevance of his work.

Mies arrived in Chicago from Germany in 1937 and began to engage the American landscape in this second phase of his career, bringing with him an architectural theory which had developed over the course of his practice and was presented with a clarity of architectural language. This epoch of post-war corporate modernity is where we will observe his design for the public and private realms. His 1938 IIT Inaugural address sets the framework for this approach where, “The long road from material through function to creative work has but one goal: to create order from the desperate confusion of the present time.”⁶ Referencing Werkbund ideals, he communicated that he wasn’t looking to make forms, but an expression of the time in saying, “Form as a goal always ends in formalism... the art of building has little or nothing to do with the invention of interesting forms or with personal inclinations. True architecture is always objective and an expression of the inner structure of the epoch in which it is rooted.”⁷

He described his architecture as *Baukunst* (the art of building), “the spatially apprehended will of the epoch. Alive. Changing. New.”⁸ This clearly presents Mies’ philosophy of architecture: “the ‘bau’ being the construction and ‘kunst’ just a refinement of that and nothing more.”⁹ Mies referred to this refinement as “Almost Nothing”, meaning “that sound architecture emerges so intimately from its structure as to seem its inevitable consequence.”¹⁰ Mies considered architecture and technology to be intertwined, for “wherever technology reaches its fulfillment, it transcends into architecture.”¹¹ “He believed that technology would not allow any other forms than the structural ones.”¹² It is this structural logic that becomes the manifestation of his ideas of order. The substrate of construction technology

6. Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe a Critical Biography*, New and Revised Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 189.

7. Immo Boyken and Hans J. Oestmann, “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Egon Eiermann: The Dictate of Order.” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 49, no. 2 (1990): 136.

8. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Working theses,” in *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 74.

9. Peter Carter, “Mies van der Rohe: An Appreciation on the Occasion, This Month, of His 75th Birthday,” *Architectural Design* 31, no.3 (Mar. 1961): 96.

10. William H. Jordy, *Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 225.

11. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Technology and Architecture,” in *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 154.

12. Immo Boyken and Hans J. Oestmann, “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Egon Eiermann: The Dictate of Order,” 146.

allowed for this order in “clear forms” which transcended materiality and provided a framework for creating places that facilitated the functions of life.¹³

Mies’s philosophy was developed out of an inquisitive approach to understanding architecture. His desire to gain understanding is seen in the scope of his book collection which displayed an interest in the “potential intersection of philosophy, theology, natural science, and technology” which began to develop a language for his sense of order in the world.¹⁴ The scientist Francé was of special interest, since he moved between disciplines “in order to delineate a theory of life and a theory of sensory cognition that seemed especially relevant to architecture.”¹⁵

Another influential author on his theory was St. Augustine whose “sociology of order provided a theological framework within which Mies considered the problems of modernity and the desire to express the structure of the world in architecture and the city.”¹⁶ Mies often paraphrased St. Augustine’s City of God in saying that to give order is to ““give to each thing what intrinsically belongs to it” so that ‘all things would easily fall into their proper place.’”¹⁷ This philosophy of order provided a “framework for... life, in dialogue with the world of nature in its infinite variety and richness of forms.”¹⁸ His built works engage in a dialogue with their surroundings and modernity.

Knowing this background provides more understanding to his thoughts on the building art which he considered to be “man’s spatial dialogue with his environment” that “demonstrates how he asserts himself therein and how he masters it. For this reason, the building art is not merely a technical problem nor a problem of organization or economy. The building art is in reality always the spatial execution of spiritual decisions.”¹⁹

The following excerpt affords us better insight into the spiritual side of Mies’s approach to architecture:

Architecture is the real battleground of the spirit. Architecture wrote the history of the epochs

13. Immo Boyken and Hans J. Oestmann, “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Egon Eiermann: The Dictate of Order,” 146.

14. S. Detlef Mertins, “Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture, and the Art of City Building,” in *Mies in America*, ed. Phyllis Lambert (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 607.

15. *Ibid.*, 606.

16. *Ibid.*, 607.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Fritz Neumeier, *The artless word: Mies van der Rohe on the building art*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 299.

and gave them their names. Architecture depends on its time. It is the crystallization of its inner structure, the slow unfolding of its form. That is the reason why technology and architecture are so closely related. Our real hope is that they will grow together, that some day the one will be the expression of the other. Only then will we have an architecture worthy of its name: architecture as true symbol of our time.²⁰

His work in post-war America was the manifestation of these ideals, where the character of structure and the spiritual aspects of architecture came together to create spaces that were an expression of the time. Mies applied this theory of creating order not only to the design of the buildings themselves, but also in their connection to the landscape around them. We will see this intentionality in the domestic works of the Lake Shore Drive Apartments and Lafayette Park, along with the corporate architecture of the Seagram Building.

In 1933 Mies said, “[Concrete, steel, and glass] are genuine building elements... of a new building art. They permit a measure of freedom... now can we articulate space freely, open it up and connect it to the landscape.” This desire to “bind building to site” becomes visible as we look at the threshold of engagement of the buildings with their environment and the phenomenal transparency that occurs there.²¹

Much of the metropolitan environment is a continuous wall of buildings and the density can feel dominating with little respite. Plazas serve to ease the cacophony and tension of the built environment and act as a place for individuals to come together in community or find solace in the midst of the crowd. As “individuals and groups use buildings on a daily basis, they are affected by the built-in physical aspects of the building and site” and the plaza at Mies’s Seagram Building in New York is an excellent example of how he created a zone of personal engagement on the level of the individual within the urban space that had the potential “to open up a clearing of implacable silence in the chaos of the nervous metropolis.”²²

The individual benefits provided by this urban space continues on the interior. The experience for those working within is much different than those in other buildings. The posture of the building

20. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Technology and Architecture,” in *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 154.

21. Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 115.

22. Craig Zimring, PhD, et al., “Influences of Building Design and Site Design on Physical Activity Research and Intervention Opportunities,” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 28, no. 2S2 (2005): 187; K. Michael Hays. “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,” *Perspecta*, vol. 21 (1984): 22.)

being set back from the street allows for more light to enter the plaza and rest on the facade and views to the city are not as obstructed by an adjacent neighbor as others (fig. 1).

The result of his consideration for the individual has made the Seagram plaza a “primary model” for the creation of public space in the city.²³ The use of plaza “has made evident its qualities as a public space” and “the ebb and flow of people across the plaza intensifies the awareness of how crucial movement is to Mies’s oeuvre” (fig. 2).²⁴ This movement and engagement starts with the plaza’s “relationship to the street” allowing it to become a transitional zone between the street and the building where the individual encounters community or finds a moment of solace in the outdoors amid the crowd of the metropolis.²⁵ It acts as a threshold while becoming a place of its own. This particular plaza has become the site for many cultural events and art installations, contributing further richness to the city and serving the community well. It also has lasting importance as a study by William Whyte resulted in an ordinance requiring public spaces to be created in New York City; policy change that directly impacts the lives of the individual.²⁶

Mies took great care to consider the individual experience in connection to his built work:

“In testing the design of a building in relation to its site and context, Mies investigated two kinds of movement. From his earliest built work, he considered the visitor’s flow of movement... through individual elements... which were composed as part of an unfolding progression through space. But Mies also explored the visual effect of parallax — that is, the perception of change in the appearance of an object or building, relative to other objects, owing to a change in the observer’s position.”²⁷

His consideration of the pedestrian viewpoint for the IIT Campus “ultimately brought parallax to bear on the design of the curtain wall of the tall building, so that it would be perceived to be open or closed, transparent or solid, depending on the position of the observer.”²⁸ His regard for the individual perspective is shown as he “insists that an order is immanent in the surface itself and that the order is continuous with and dependent upon the world in which the viewer actually moves” (fig. 3 & 4).²⁹

23. Lambert, *Building Seagram*, 191.

24. *Ibid.*, 118.

25. *Ibid.*, 191.

26. *Ibid.*, 195.

27. *Ibid.*, 118.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Hays, “Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,” *Perspecta*, 20.

Through the devices of movement and visual parallax, Mies engages the individual in a dialogue with the curtain wall and begins the conversation of eroding the boundary between inside and outside which continues from within the spaces. Here we see reference to his visionary glass skyscraper projects, where glass was “used as a substance as much as absence, an ever thinner membrane between interior and exterior space” (fig. 5).³⁰ These “varying degrees of opacity and transparency” create an interaction between the individual and the urban environment as the enclosure becomes animated in response to the viewer’s position (fig. 6 & 7).³¹ This consideration adds a subtle humanity to the curtain walls of the projects being observed. His ordered architectural language allows for adaptation to many applications. He wasn’t looking for a specific type for the domestic environment and another for the corporate world. His approach was to find “anonymous vernacular” that would have broad application.³² The real mastery of his architecture, as observed in these buildings, is that he made nuanced and intentional adjustments to fit the different building types all while using a consistent gridded structural language with I-beam mullions on the exterior to create a bas relief effect of articulation on the facades (fig. 8-10).

The continuity created by the continuous I-beams mullions allows the buildings to “be comprehensible as a whole” much as an individual in the metropolis comes to understand himself as part of a larger collective body.³³ The interplay of the ground plane and facades “celebrates the smooth coupling of inside and out” (fig. 11-13).³⁴ On the interior spaces, this phenomenal transparency is increased by the dissolution of the wall with floor to ceiling windows, removing obstructions to views regardless of the floor level. Mies believed that “only a living inside has a living outside” and he created a boundary for the interior life through the construction system he employed (fig. 14-16).³⁵

The ordered skin and bones construction system allows for internal spaces to be configured by the owners and adapted for future uses; in essence the ‘complete building [is] a single big room’ with

30. Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, *Mies in Berlin* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 84.

31. Lambert, *Building Seagram*, 120.

32. Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 243.

33. Jordy, *Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 254.

34. Jordy, *Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, 261.

35. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “On form in architecture,” in *Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970), 102.

the function fitted into the form (fig. 17-19).³⁶ Originating from the landscape of industrial technology, “the structural cage has been dimensioned specifically” for domestic and corporate applications.³⁷ This flexible frame engendered “a new way of living that was itself to be more open, visible and connected with nature.”³⁸ The spaces are proposed in a way that allows for a connection to nature and the outside world. Each of the plans presents a clear order and simplicity of space in keeping with Mies’s work (fig 20-23). The planes and open plans are reminiscent of the Barcelona Pavilion yet the interior materials on the domestic works are much more austere. Simple white walls provide a minimal canvas for residents to create their own interior spaces. The floors of the Seagram building share the same adaptable qualities as the residential projects. Ample access to light through complete or almost complete floor to ceiling windows in each project brings the outside into each space. The domestic spaces range from small ~ 400 square foot studio apartment spaces at Lafayette Park to over ~1800 square foot for combined units at Lake Shore Drive Apartments, yet each of the living spaces, either spacious or compact, are made to feel larger by their expansive windows.

This access to natural light through plan freedom of configuration provides a level of comfort to the individual by bringing in the benefits of natural light. This connection to the outdoors is especially important in workspace since the white collar worker spends much of their day in an office setting. The psychological aspects are evident, the individual – even in his interior space – is still connected visually to the outside world and larger community.

Even though they were built in a different era of American culture, these spaces have a timeless essence to them. “The clear, empty structure and modular plan remains open to diverse inhabitants and change over time... It is the “gentlest of styles, which... leaves itself open to – even suggests – interpretation, without itself being changed.”³⁹

These spaces supply a framework for the experience of the individual in the metropolis. In the discovery of their interconnection to society, the milieu of the metropolis provides an ongoing experience of conflict for the individual, and Simmel posits that “it is the function of the metropolis to

36. Immo Boyken and Hans J. Oestmann, “Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Egon Eiermann: The Dictate of Order,” 146.

37. Mertins, “Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture, and the Art of City Building,” 609.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

provide the area for this struggle and its reconciliation.”⁴⁰ We have seen room for this interconnection and consideration of the needs of the individual in the metropolis facilitated in Mies’s spaces as they contain the capacity for respite and exposure to the larger community.

Mies’s theory of order manifested itself in vibrant plazas and animated articulated glass and steel enclosures in which he was “optimizing the space for life to unfold and spirit to play wherever the opportunity presented itself.”⁴¹ Both his domestic and corporate spaces share a similar architectural expression, blurring the lines between these environments for the individual and through their being made of a unity of constituent parts, serving as a constant reminder that the individual is an integral part of the whole of society. These works are, at their best, a realization of Mies’s intent when he put forward his ideal that, “We have to become the master of the unbridled forces of our time and build them into a new order, an order that gives life free room to move for its unfolding.”⁴²

40. Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 447.

41. Lambert, *Building Seagram*, 116.

42. Mertins, “Living in a Jungle: Mies, Organic Architecture, and the Art of City Building,” 609.

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Figure 1. Seagram Building in New York set back from street edge.

Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 87.



Figure 2. Seagram building and plaza being used by the public.

Source: Alex Schwab, "Seagram building and plaza.," photograph, DesignObserver.com <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/seagram-union-of-building-and-landscape/37758/> (accessed December 1, 2013).



Figure 3. Parallax effect on the Lake Shore Drive Apartments facade which changes based on viewers position.

Source: William H. Jordy, *Impact of European Modernism in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 240.



Figure 4. Parallax effect on the Seagram Building facade.

Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 114.

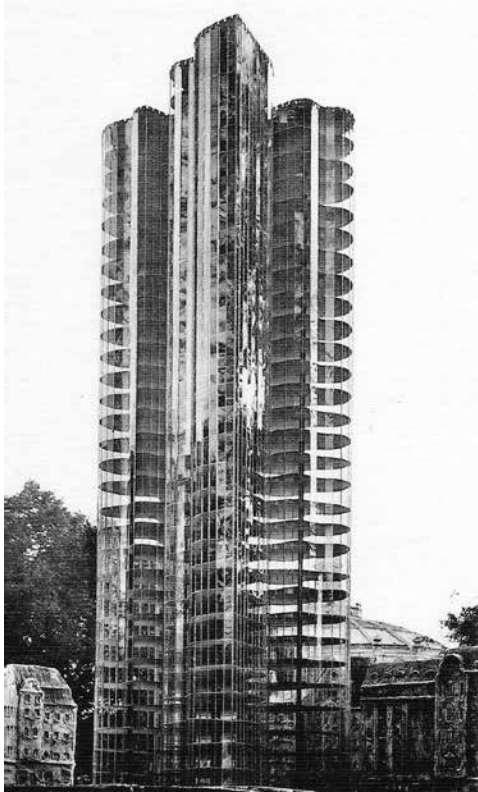


Figure 5. Mies's Glass Skyscraper project showing idea of floor plates and a thin exterior membrane.

Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 114.



Figure 6. Seagram Building facade showing opacity and transparency based on vantage point.

Source: Jules Antonio, "Seagram Building," photograph, DesignObserver.com <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/seagram-union-of-building-and-landscape/37758/> (accessed December 1, 2013).



Figure 7. Lake Shore Drive Apartments facade showing opacity and transparency based on vantage point.

Source: Werner Blaser, Lake Shore Drive Apartments, High-Rise Building (Basel: Birkhaus-



Figure 8. Lafayette Park Detroit facade showing variation on the ordered structural curtain wall.
Source: Charles Waldheim, ed.. CASE--Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 117.

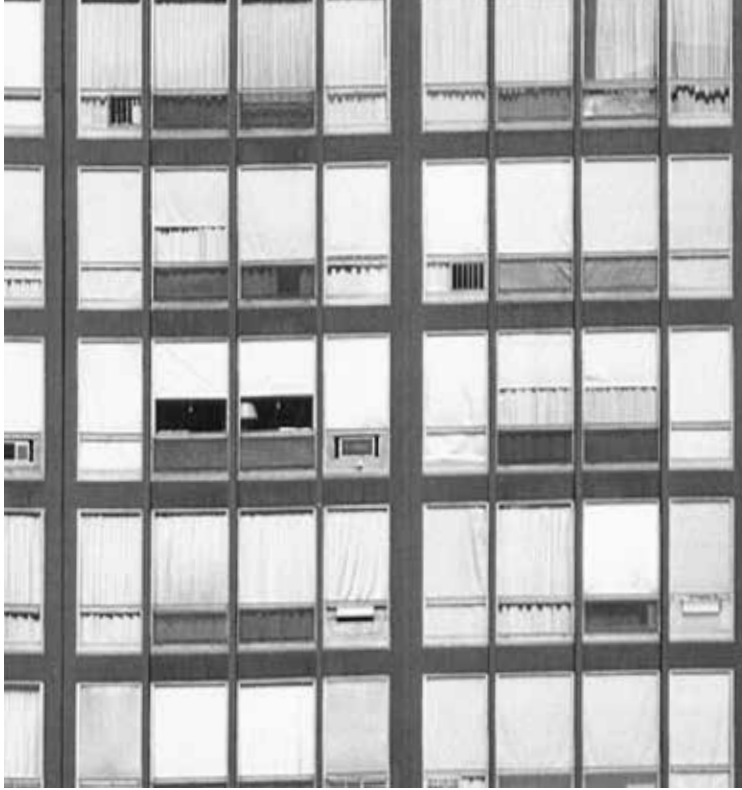


Figure 9. Lake Shore Drive facade showing variation on the ordered structural curtain wall.
Source: Werner Blaser, *Lake Shore Drive Apartments, High-Rise Building* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 59.

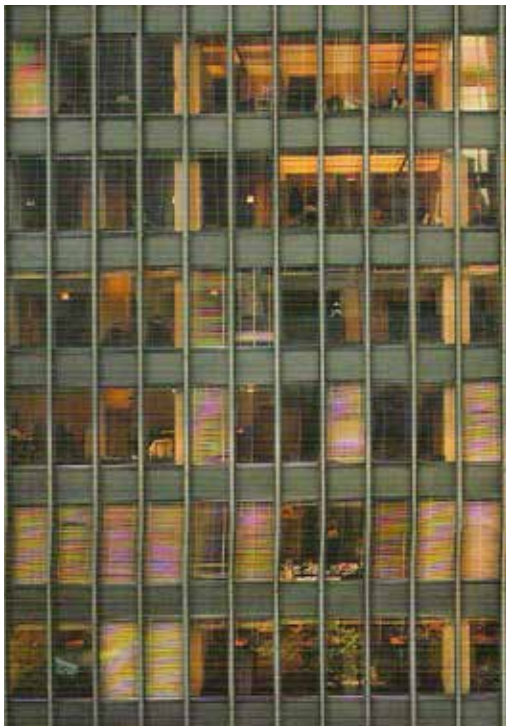


Figure10. Seagram Building facade showing variation on the ordered structural curtain wall.
Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 88.



Figure 11. Lafayette Park Detroit interplay of ground plane and building (phenomenal transparency).

Charles Waldheim, ed.. CASE--Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 40-41.



Figure 12. Lake Shore Drive Apartments interplay of ground plane and building (phenomenal transparency).

Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 117.



Figure 13. Seagram Building interplay of ground plane and building (phenomenal transparency).
Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 92.



Figure 14. Lake Shore Drive Apartments view form interior showing connection to the exterior.
Source: Werner Blaser, *Lake Shore Drive Apartments, High-Rise Building* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 72-73.



Figure 15. Seagram Building view form interior showing connection to the exterior.
Source: Ezra Stoller, *The Seagram Building* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 68-69.



Figure 16. Lafayette Park Detroit view from interior showing connection to the exterior.
Source: Raimund Koch, "Lafayette Park Pavilion Living Room," photograph, Dwell.com <http://www.dwell.com/house-tours/slideshow/mies-van-der-rohe-lafayette-park> (accessed December 6, 2013).



Figure 17. Seagram Building construction showing adaptable floor plates.
Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 76.

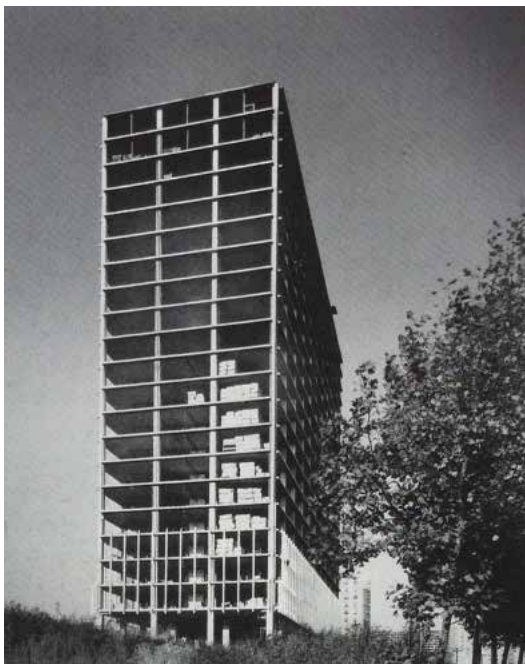


Figure 18. Lafayette Park Detroit construction showing adaptable floor plates.
Source: Charles Waldheim, ed.. CASE--Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, *Lafayette Park Detroit* (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 120.



Figure 19. Lake Shore Drive Apartments construction showing adaptable floor plates.
Source: Phyllis Lambert, *Building Seagram*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 54.

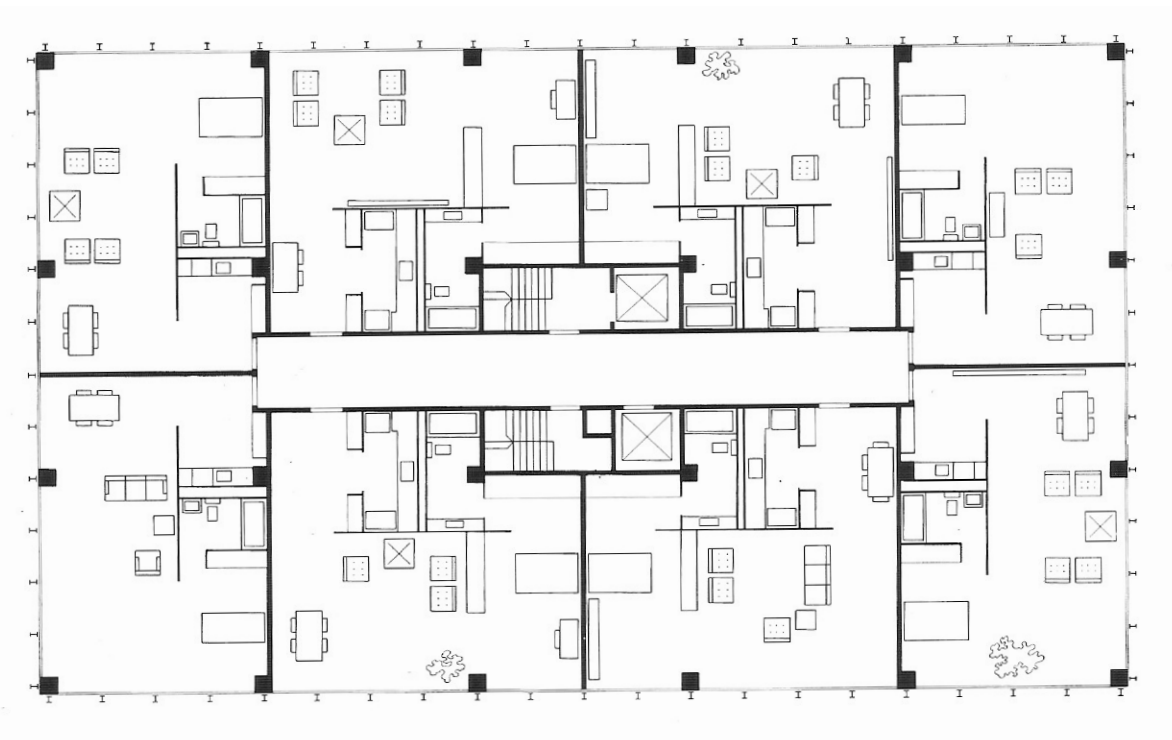


Figure 20. Lake Shore Drive Apartments proposed floor plans.
Source: Werner Blaser, *Lake Shore Drive Apartments, High-Rise Building* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1999), 33.

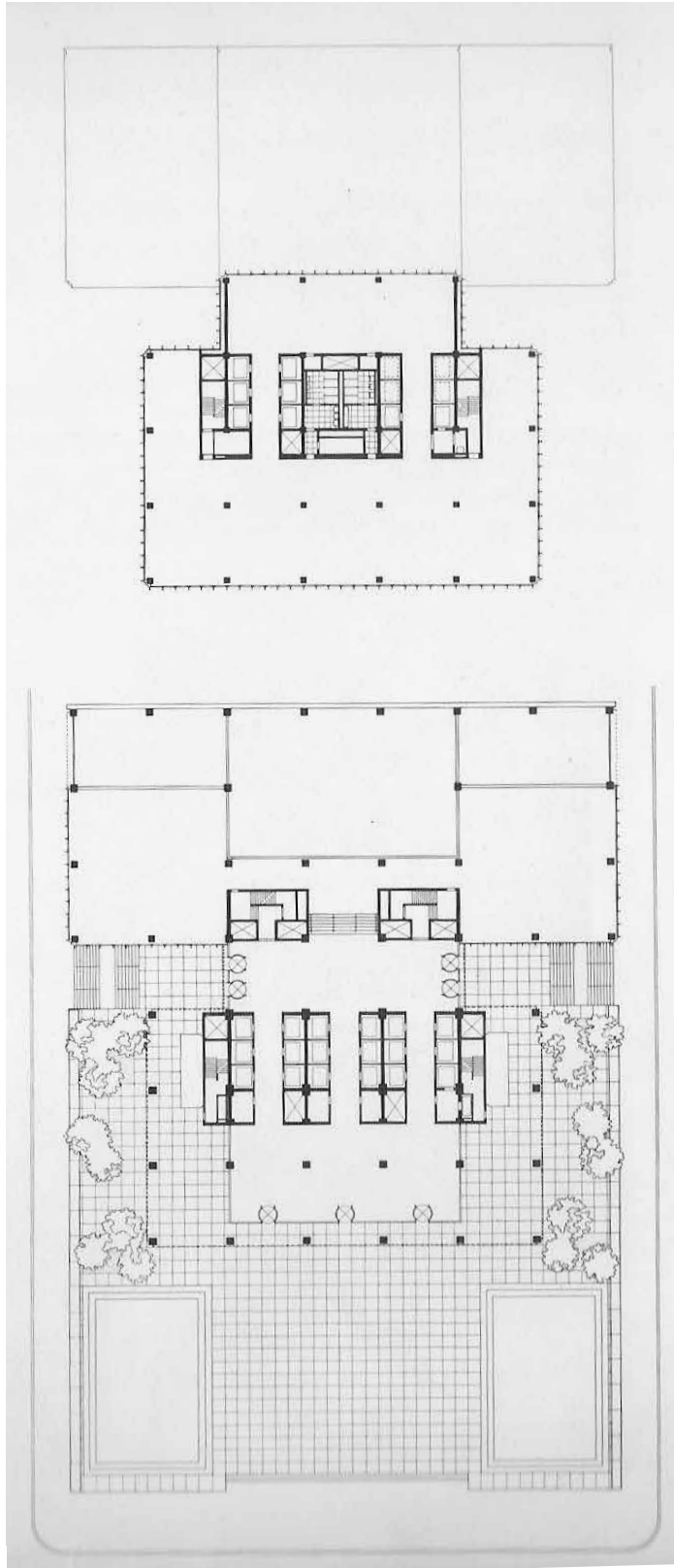


Figure 21. Seagram Building, site plan showing plaza and typical upper level floor plan. Peter Carter, *Mies van der Rohe At Work*. (New York: Praeger, 1974), 62.

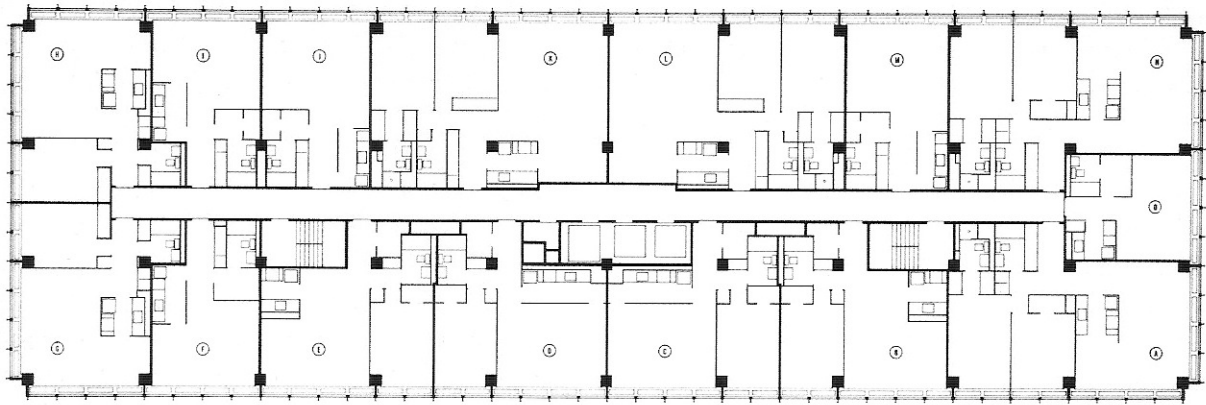


Figure 22. Lafayette Park Detroit Towers typical floor plan.
Charles Waldheim, ed.. CASE--Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 117.



Figure 23. Lafayette Park Detroit Pavilion Apartments floor plans.
Source: Charles Waldheim, ed.. CASE--Hilberseimer/Mies van der Rohe, Lafayette Park Detroit (Munich: Prestel, 2004), 102.