

MIES WITHOUT COLUMNS?

About the Glass Skyscraper by Mies Van der Rohe

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In that suffocating summer of Berlin 1922, Mies Van der Rohe was sitting at his desk on which there were three pieces: a lovely glass, half full of white wine, an open bottle of Riesling and a transparent Savoy vase.

The lovely glass half full of wine was a design by Adolf Loos. Mies, after reading an incisive text by Quetglas in Circo, decided to buy a dozen and was delighted with them. And each time he took the glass between his hands, he felt the tingle of the stria in the crystal that the Catalan architect described so well in his text.

The open bottle was a Weingut Barzen Riesling Aulselese Halbtrocken from 1920. The best blond Riesling produced by Barzen. Mies's favorite wine. Sublime.

The Savoy Vase was considered by some to be Alvar Aalto's best piece. The Finnish master confessed that he had been inspired by "the turn of the leather breeches Eskimo women wear". I have an example before me as I write this, and I must confess it still fascinates me.

Mies had just lost the contest for the Friedrichstrasse tower. There he had made a marvelous design in crystal (I still prefer the term crystal over glass), entitled Beehive, that he would never repeat.

Resolving the triangular lot between Friedrichstrasse, the train station of the same name, and the Spree River, he invented a foliform floor plan with triangular geometry, so that the light would enter the interstices and could translate with its play of reflections on the vertices of the desired verticality. And the sharp angles of the corners, less than 90 degrees, revealed from the street in perspective through foreshortening the much sought-after transparency on the highest floors. In the center, the resistant nucleus with stairs and elevators and services.

And Mies, instead of getting angry about having lost, decided to continue his investigation into what a tall building with crystal transparency is and means. The crystal tower, the glass skyscraper. And, as he sat in front of the Loos full of Riesling and looked at the empty crystalline Aalto, his reflection bore fruit when, after downing the third glass of wine, he saw it all clearly. "In vino veritas" or in the words of Karen Blixen, "wine is the best path to truth".

He took a blank piece of paper and put the Aalto vase upside down on it and with his thick pencil outlined its form. And he saw clearly that the crystalline continuity so evident in the vase could be translated almost literally to the much sought-after floor plan. Try it for yourselves and you'll be surprised. It's not that the outline of Aalto's vase and that of Mies's skyscrapers are similar: they are identical. I tried it and scared myself when I saw it.

And Mies himself was so moved that he made this first drawing without drawing the pillars which would hold up the horizontal planes. Though he had them clearly in his head.

In a brief text that he wrote in 1994 for the Circo of M. Mansilla, Rojo and Tuñón, Antón Capitel commented on this absence of columns. And later, in 2004, in his lovely text “The Columns of Mies” that I always recommend, he wrote, “the abstract floors of these buildings seem thus to be as voluntary as they are clearly defined, obstructed only by the system of vertical circulations, and giving free reign in the drawing to an impossible desire, such as leaving out the columns as elements of composition.”

On the occasion of the exhibition “Mies in Berlin”, which Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll organized at MoMA in New York in 2001, I was able to see a drawing by Mies that I didn’t already know and that accompanied the mentioned and always reproduced “pillar-less” floor plan of the Glass Skyscraper. The drawing on a large sheet measuring about 1 meter by 70 cm. was made with pencil and charcoal and appeared “with pillars”, had the pillars firmly in their place. There with Miesian precision, the master traced the impeccable geometry of the structure with such clarity that the floor plan of columns appears twice. “In situ” with lines of connection and above, to the left, so clearly that at first glance one could confuse them with a group of trees. Mies! How could Mies not think of structure? The exhibition then went to Berlin and later to Barcelona. In the catalogue it appears, very small, on page 188 and I encourage you to study it.

The result of all that was an incomparable design that was translated into a wonderful model, with columns, that Mies had photographed several times. The stubborn Mies, as he didn’t want to lose the theme of the sharp, transparent angle over which he’d thought so long and so hard in the earlier design, still left a corner in angle. To show that transparency in foreshortening. And thus, as a *pièce de resistance*, the master chooses the photo in which the tower appears more svelte and transparent than it is; why not! That which to the left has the sharp angle and therefore the maximum transparency. And with the pillars, Mies’s columns, very well placed.

Once again, as couldn’t be otherwise in Mies, the structure, establishing the arrangement of the space and the light so as to summon the obvious transparency there, constructs time. And it happens that, as I insistently repeat to my students, in Architecture, “gravity constructs space and light constructs time”.

And a final question, why did Mies never have that wonderful crystal tower built that still remains (no one has ever built it) far ahead of its time?

N.B.

This story is partly invented. The Friedrichstrasse competition is from 1921 and the Glass Skyscraper design from 1922. The Adolf Loos glass is from 1931 and the Alvar Aalto vase from 1937, and I don't know whether Barzen then produced the fabulous Riesling that we enjoy today. Regarding the matter of Mies's columns in the Glass Skyscraper, that is in the clarifying drawing that I speak of and is reproduced here. But the story is believable and the coincidences true. And the central issue, Mies's incredible glass skyscraper continues to be an unresolved matter. Mies's columns, included.