

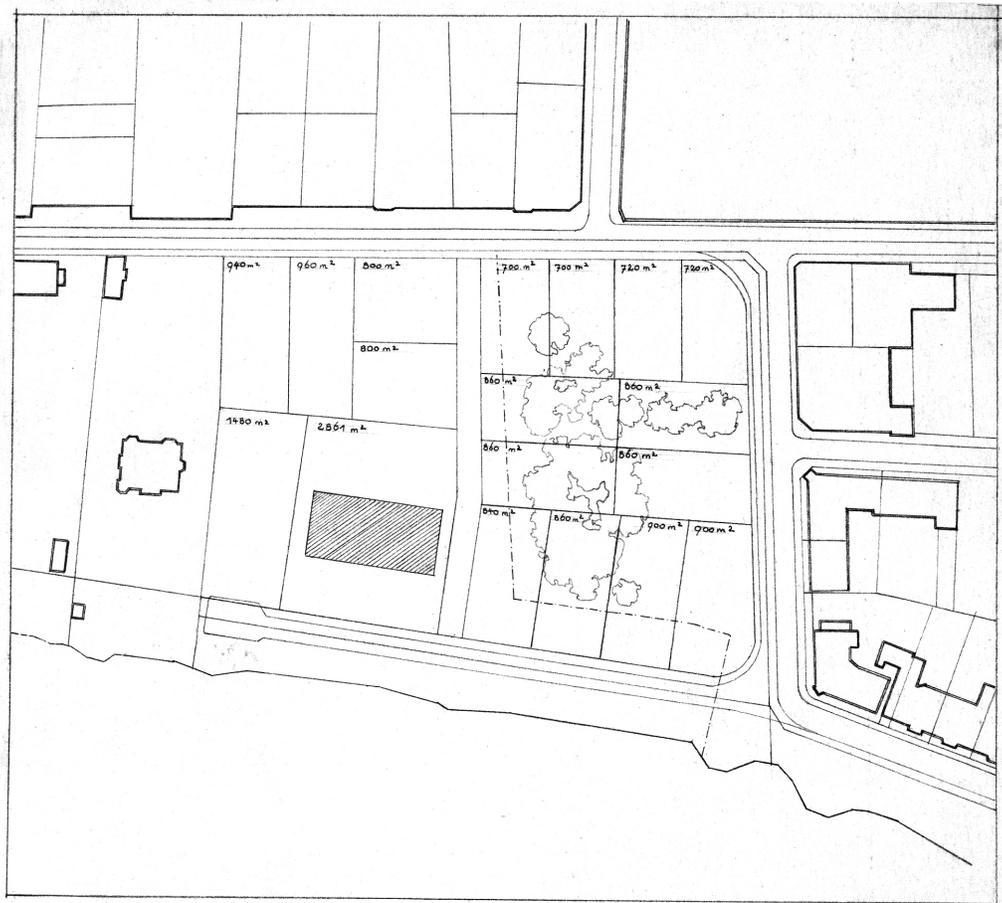
The Hubbe House as Learning Process

Grou Serra

Mies van der Rohe's Hubbe house - an unbuilt courtyard home done between 1934 and 1935 for a client in Magdeburg, might not be a very well known project of his - it is nevertheless an important stepping stone in the advancement of the open plan language he developed throughout his career; a language that was crystallized in the Brick House project of 1923 and the Barcelona Pavilion in 1929, but hadn't been transposed to a commissioned residence until the Hubbe house.^[1] This paper will first analyze thoroughly the architecture of the Margaret Hubbe house, and in a second

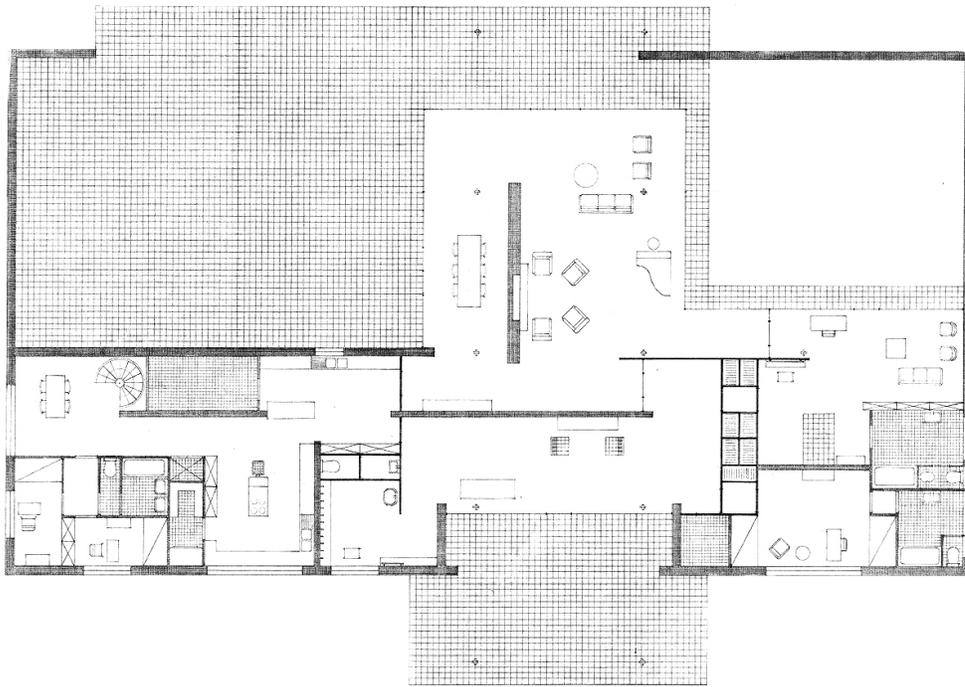
time place it in the context of Mies Van der Rohe's body of work relating to the court house typology and expose the importance of the Magdeburg project.

The Hubbe house was to be built on the Werder Island in Madgeburg - between the Old Elbe and Elbe rivers. Longitudinally placed alongside the river bank, the house's enclosure nicely answers the surrounding context - with the south side open to the river and the north side enclosed to the neighboring streets and buildings. The enclosure of the house is more open than the prototypical court house -



1 The intended site for the project. A suburban neighborhood surrounds the lot, with the Old Elbe river to the south and a road to the north.
MoMA Collection.

2 Hubbe House,
main floor plan.
MoMA Collection.



the site being in a suburban lot and not directly attached to another house allowed the masonry enclosing wall to have bigger openings.

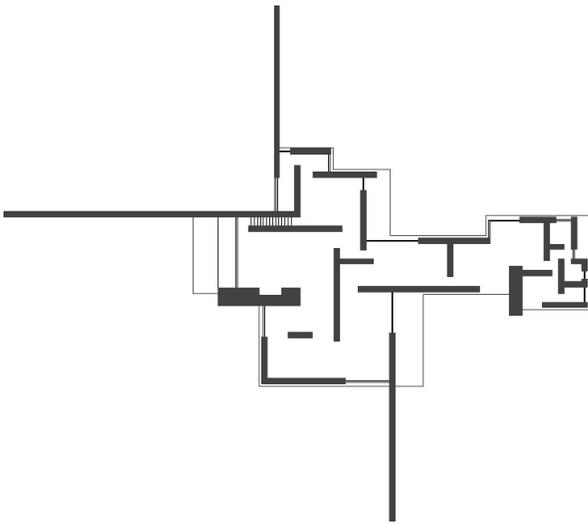
The entrance is on one of the long sides and the main living spaces of the house follow this south-north transversal axis. These are the spaces that have been executed in an open plan - the client's need for privacy in certain areas forced the architect to follow a more conventional closed system.

The articulation between these two operating systems is remarkable. The two systems are in fact very strongly differentiated. The east-west band of private, closed-off spaces, continues the masonry structure found on the periphery wall; whereas the north-south open living areas make use of the cruciform column to operate more freely. The distinction is quite strong - if not for the extension of

the cruciform structure westwards of a single column to encompass the master bedroom. The T-shaped space creates three courtyards. The vestibule, the more private spaces and the more formal spaces face the small, medium and large courts respectively; with the south facing spaces also responding to the large opening in the enclosing wall and facing the Old Elbe river.

Two main partitions divide the open space into three distinct spaces: vestibule, private and formal; with the bedroom and its related study being a continuation of the private space into an intimate one.

The clear articulation between the two modes of operation - the open and the closed plan, makes a clear distinction between two ways of defining space; but in order to make better sense of it we need to put the Hubbe project in context of the courtyard house and open



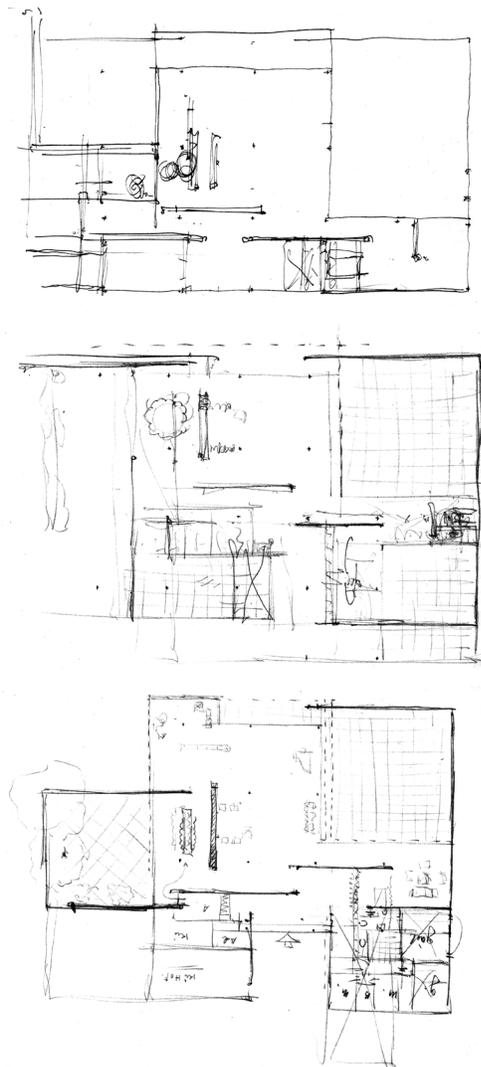
3 Brick Country House
main floor plan, 1923.

plan research Mies had been conducting up unto that point and where he took it.

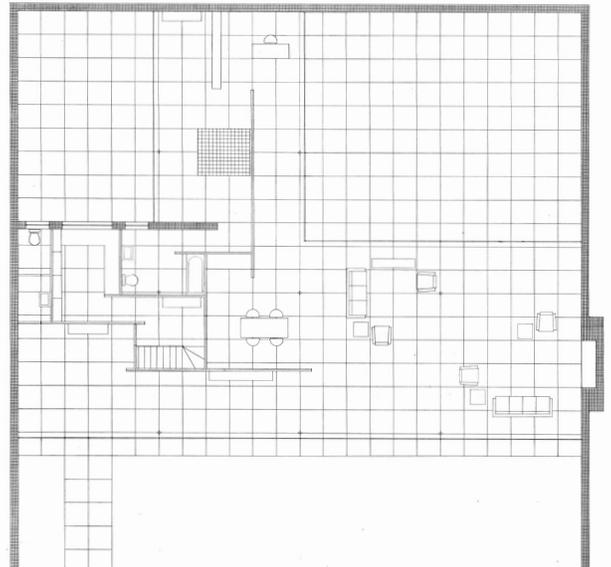
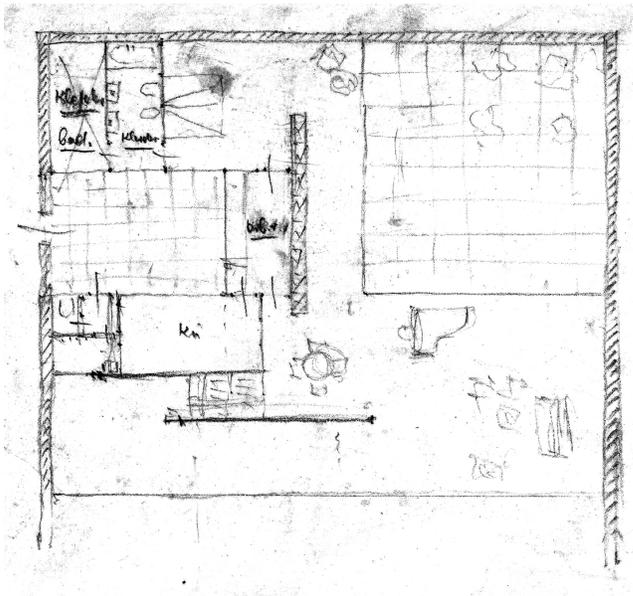
Besides his 1923 project for a Brick Country House, which foreshadows the courtyard house - the contrast in execution - infinite vs. enclosed, simply disguises an effectively similar relational spatial logic - Mies was also very successful in articulating the open plan in his pavilions. Whether in the Glass Room at the Stuttgart Werkbund exhibition of 1927, the German Pavilion for the International Exposition of 1929 in Barcelona, or the Model House for the Berlin Building Exposition of 1931. Starting in 1931 he taught the courtyard exercise at the Bauhaus school and in a few years, produced with the help of his students and colleagues remarkable examples of courtyard houses.^[2]

Unfortunately, none of these early schemes were built. The Hubbe house was effectively the first time the open plan scheme was applied to a commissioned courtyard house.^[3] The different studies done related to the Hubbe

project clearly show a progression in the house's spatial qualities (fig. 4). As the project progresses; its becomes increasingly closed, increasingly private. And while it begins in a scheme fairly similar to the House with Three Courtyards project (fig. 5), the final proposal is possibly more enclosed than any of the studies. Several other changes from the academic model - the breaking of the enclosing masonry wall, the two coexisting structural and spatial systems, the high number of redundant programmatic elements: powder rooms, closets, studies - are all



4 Preliminary schemes for the Hubbe House, 1934. MoMA Collection.



a

b

5 Early scheme for the Hubbe House (a) compared against the House with Three Courtyards of 1934. (b)

responding to the surrounding existing condition and an actual client's requests; not an academic brief. The simplicity of the early schemes could be said to have been lost - or at least heavily transformed when confronted to the realities of the project.

Although this doesn't mean the Hubbe house was a failure, far from it. And while it could be argued that the several changes that had to be made show the limitations of such a spatial system, it could also be said instead that it does in fact show its possibilities and adaptability to different conditions.

The importance of the Hubbe project can not be overstated. Not only was it a necessary confrontation, it was a stepping stone - to challenge such a spatial system with a client's demands only carried the research further.

This is how Mies saw his practice - and architecture as a discipline, as a continuous research. By not necessarily having each building completely tailored for the clients, but instead developing the method itself; and there was no need to be commissioned for that.^[4] By doing the Hubbe house, it allowed him for the first time perhaps to confront the open plan to the very personal way people experience and inhabit space.

Pablo Picasso said in a very provocative statement that it had taken him only four years to learn how to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.^[5]

With the Brick Country House, Mies was in fact a child. And it took him almost a lifetime to achieve the same level of spatial quality in built construction

with such projects as Crown Hall or the Neue Nationalgalerie, both happening much later in his career.

The first step of that learning process could be said to have been the project for Margaret Hubbe ■

Notes

[1] Mies did use the open plan method for the main living space of the Tugendhat villa in 1931. However, the open plan is confined to a single space and the house itself doesn't follow a court typology - it could therefore be argued that the space problem does not apply to the Tugendhat villa. Whereas the Barcelona pavilion does in fact follow a courtyard typology, as well as the Hubbe House. Equally, it is important to note that Mies van der Rohe started developing the court house exercises between 1931 and 1938 at the Bauhaus school - an exercise he kept throughout his teaching career; unfortunately none of them were built at that time.

[2] Starting in 1931 with his L-shaped Row House, and until 1934 with the

Courtyard House with Round Skylight, House with Three Courtyards and Courtyard House with Garage. All done in an academic setting and unbuilt.

[3] The Lemke House built in 1933 in Berlin is a courtyard house - but it doesn't follow an open plan scheme.

[4] In a 1959 interview, Mies said "This is interesting because most of our designs are developed long before there is a practical possibility of carrying them out. I do that on purpose and have done it all my life. I do it when I am interested in something. I do it just to hope that one day the building will be lived in and liked." From, Mies van der Rohe 1959; in Mies van der Rohe, Moisés Puente; Iñaki Abalos. Conversations with

Mies van der Rohe. English. ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008.

[5] Peter Erskine, Rick Mattingly (1998), Drum Perspective, p. 73.