

## Variations on Mies' Work

Grou Serra

### Introduction

Variation through repetition. It seems this is the way Mies understood his project and in a broader sense, the discipline of architecture itself. This can be seen through several viewpoints—which can, and has, also lead it to be over-simplified and misunderstood over time.

He understood well the futility of some aspects of architecture; form, reinventions, breakthroughs, uniqueness, fashion. The elements he saw as being temporary, fleeting. And so, he focused on fundamentals for all of his life as an architect and educator. These being construction, clarity of structure, proportions. He understood them, studied them, and evolved them. Slowly but deeply, firmly. Variation through repetition.

It is born from great discipline and humility—and it can be traced back and explained through history on some very fundamental, and in truth rather simple, level.

### Precisions

Mies rarely expressed himself, and seldom wrote, to the opposite of many of his contemporaries. But when he did, he did so in a precise and concise manner. Excerpts from his "Miscellaneous notes to lectures"<sup>1</sup> will be used throughout this essay as support material. These notes express several distinct ideas, therefore a selection will be made to better understand his way of thinking and strengthen this thesis.

### How wealth fosters trends

Wealth in and of itself is nothing to condemn. We are, thankfully, living in one of the most – if not the most, wealthy periods in history. Poverty is at an all-time low; there hasn't been a major war in over seventy years. People are getting healthier across the globe; they are living better, longer. These are all by-products of the extreme wealth we are experiencing today.

But as we now observe, there are ramifications when it comes to the creative fields and their position in a prosperous situation.

What wealth offers to the creative, more

than anything, is possibilities. The wealthy have choices, a lot of choices – and in some cases, maybe too many. Not only does it offer plenty of choices, it also offers enough freedom that one is free to follow them; regardless of reason, philosophy or knowledge.

The creative fields, within wealthy circles, follow people's whims. They tend to shift around much more often, follow trends and fashions – simply because they can afford to do so. All the different choices become enticing, we feel the need to try them all; the present and established condition is boring, and we are quick to dismiss one for another – whether it be a philosophy, a method, or an idea.

This is a simple result of the wealth of possibilities we have at our disposal – they are made very easy to access, and we are given no reason not to.

*"And yet we have at our disposal a surprising wealth of technological possibilities.*

*But perhaps it is this wealth that prevents us from doing what is right.*

[...]

*Today the building represents more an appliance than a monument."*

### **How need fosters permanence**

To the contrary of that, it is to be noted that scarcity fosters by default a strong sense of permanence.

Scarcity - again, whether financial or social, by its very nature limits these same possibilities. What happens is an introverted approach in the creative fields, on a more limited scope. But this lack of choice is also accompanied by another very important factor - that of need. Scarcity by defaults limits our choices, but it also limits them to what we could see as essentials - or fundamentals. And the lack of choice forces one to focus on these essentials, inhabit them. There isn't a temptation to follow trends or fashions simply because the opportunity isn't there. Cynics would say that less fortunate people know more about what they would call the real world, or the reality of things - real problems, and therefore don't spend time with trivialities. And while this might be true, it is also true

that they simply can't afford any other way.

This leads to an in-depth knowledge of fundamentals and in turn to a much more direct approach to any encountered problem. Pierre Bourdieu in his *Distinction*<sup>2</sup> explains this very well with his concept of *Habitus*. A social and financial environment that moulds those who inhabit it - he also posits that trends tend to move upwards in social classes - from the lower to the higher. And while the higher classes focus more on fleeting movements, the lower classes are more rooted in permanent and static movements.

What also applies to materialism is true in the arts - scarcity gathers the right conditions for what could be seen as an inward reflection and fundamental understanding - a direct product of the use and re-use of the same elements. The same way a family of lower means passes down clothes from the elder son to the youngest, patching its way down - in the arts, something similar happens with ideas and philosophies. And in the same way our frugal family will not bother with following the current clothing trends - not because

it doesn't want it but simply because it can't, an artist living in scarcity will equally not follow current trends and instead focus on more fundamental aspects of its art.

*"Not the interesting and unique, but the self-understood and valid is the real theme of the building art.*

[...]

*Perhaps building is the outcome of a simple deed.*

*Of a simple work process and of a clear building structure."*

### **The consequences in the arts**

Such an understanding of creativity and production could potentially better explain and share some hindsight on the contemporary situation of the arts.

When artistic endeavours pertain to express a message through a certain skill,<sup>3</sup> wealth - whether economic or social - seems to hinder both the message to be carried, but also the skill needed for it. A particular skill needs work, and time to be honed and even more so to be expressed clearly.

Wealth doesn't need these and the plethora of possibilities it offers are in the end detrimental to the proper expression of an idea through a skill. It is easier, quicker and from an economical and social point of view, more profitable, to have several approaches and a much broader sense of knowledge, rather than a specific focus. Artists now change, adapt, create - or at least believe so, different trends at an astonishing rate, in order to remain relevant, stay in the eye of the public and make money. They can afford to do this only through their wealth. There is no need to develop skills to remain in the spotlight - the message simply needs to be loud enough.

But the nature of the message itself also suffers; messages are seldom as poignant or understanding of life when they come from wealth; without struggle they come as hypocritical, or at best merely a temporary entertainment. Wealth simply makes looking for things and understanding them on a fundamental level completely unnecessary. It is the enemy of simplicity and clarity.

### **The consequences in academia**

The lack of simplicity and clarity are also felt in the academic world today. Especially in architecture. But the presence of wealth and this lack of necessity of understanding have tainted the education of the creative fields on a broader scale - and it is to note that on the contrary, the scientific fields adhere to a much stricter base of clear fundamental knowledge, and as such have flourished in the academic field in the recent past.

More and more, knowledge has become abstracted to a degree very separated from reality. We allowed it to diverge and stray so far of the path - simply because we could. This is a direct consequence of the wealth and plurality of the approaches we have had in the creative disciplines. Professors now teach in such an abstracted manner - and yet with such confidence, they have no trouble gathering a following. Yet more and more it becomes difficult to imagine any of what is taught to be of any use in the real world - outside of the academic cocoon. In a recent interview<sup>4</sup>, Lebanese

architect Bernard Khoury formulated these concerns very well, about his concerns regarding teachers in architectural education:

*"[...] Yet, they're still very comfortable, and you sit with these professors and you listen to them speak and you would be for a second, tempted to think that they know what they're talking about. There is such a comfort around our knowledge, and the deeper it is and the more complex it is, and the more disconnected it is, and the more it makes sense to them, the more comfortable they are in their ignorance."*

These words might seem very blunt, but more and more they are becoming extremely apparent in our profession - as well as other creative fields. Everywhere, the disconnection is becoming greater and greater to the outside world.

*"Building is giving form to reality."*

### **Discipline as a guide**

To provide and create knowledge of substance, it needs therefore to be rooted.

But in order not to be tempted by the wealth of possibilities, and focus on what is important, and in a way obvious, discipline is required. And this discipline does not come easy - it must be actively sought. Discipline guides one to a certain path, consistently and without deviations.

This might seem almost undesirable to some; but without discipline, we are bound to repeat the same mistakes of the past. We are bound to focus on trivial undertakings that in the end, will contribute nothing to the discipline.

*"For this reason we do not ask what this or that master has expounded on but what he has contributed to the growth of history."*

Mies had clearly understood that revolutions through form weren't revolutions, merely cycling trivialities. And yet, we seem to be witnessing that exact same thing again today - with, in reality, very little differences from the movements he himself saw the limitations of and wanted to move past, almost a century ago.

Wealth made us lose

track of what is important; it gave us too many possibilities, and our lack of discipline led us to follow and attempt all of them. Resulting in another superficial attempt to renew architecture through form.

### **Humility as a necessity**

This requires humility. For in order to follow a guided path, one has to renounce all other possibilities. If we understand how futile most of these other possibilities really are, the choice is not as difficult to make. But when we are blinded by them, and their loudness, this choice becomes virtually impossible.

One has to put himself in the position of a servant of the discipline in order to do so adequately. We have to choose, and we have to choose wisely. We have to acknowledge that building is merely - so to speak, that: building. There is no need for superfluous polishing, conceptual coating to try and give it a semblance of intellectual credibility. We have to merely build. Nothing more but also nothing less.

This, however, seems to draw much resistance in the field - as if building itself wasn't good enough, nor interesting enough. An intellectual greed that ends up being completely counterproductive in the long term - although it might seem more satisfying to the individual in the short term.

*"He who wants a building art [Baukunst] must decide. He must subordinated himself to the great objective demands of the epoch. Give constructive form to them. (Nothing more and nothing less.) Building was always linked to a simple deed, but this deed has to hit the nail on the head. Only in this sense can one understand Berlage's saying BUILDING IS SERVING."*

Yet quite the opposite is true today. Most architects see themselves as leaders - they believe they have to innovate, create, and invent. All day, and every day. They lack the discipline and humility not to do so. It is a remarkable feat of arrogance to believe not only that things need to be changed at

such a frequent rate, but also that one could possibly have the ability to do so!

### **Temporality of architecture**

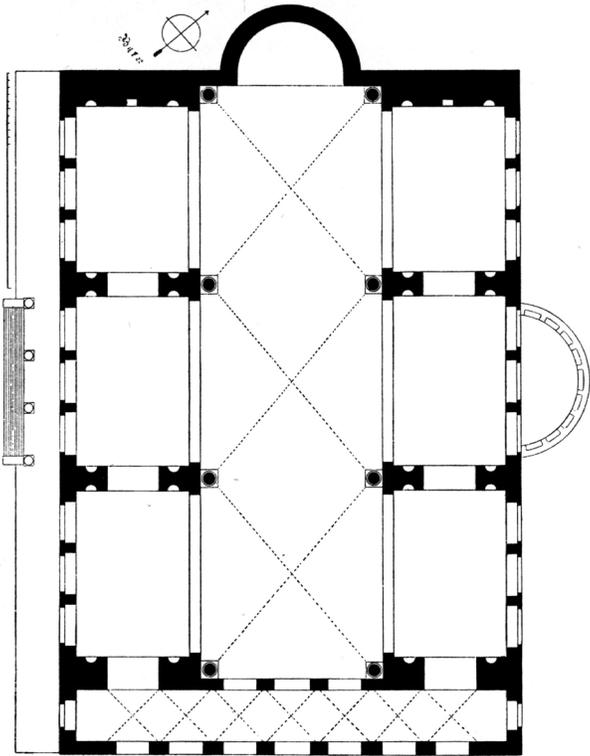
As Mies made clear on several occasions, architecture is bound to the epoch. It acts on a timeframe much greater than that of the life of any man. The Doric order took more than a thousand years to develop, from the Mycenaean megaron<sup>A</sup> [~2000 BC] to the Parthenon<sup>B</sup> [~432 BC]. And the same is true for the Gothic, which begins with the Roman basilica<sup>C</sup> [~200 BC] and will find its culmination in the Amiens cathedral<sup>D</sup> [~1266 AD].<sup>5</sup>

We are, and always will - in so far as human beings are concerned, part of a much greater whole. How many masons built the knowledge needed in order for us - today, to be able to practice the way we do? How many architects, engineers, stonemasons, blacksmiths, carpenters, plumbers, gardeners, etc. ? Each of them, hundreds, thousands, even millions of people, each contributing the knowledge they had gathered, that we use today, that make

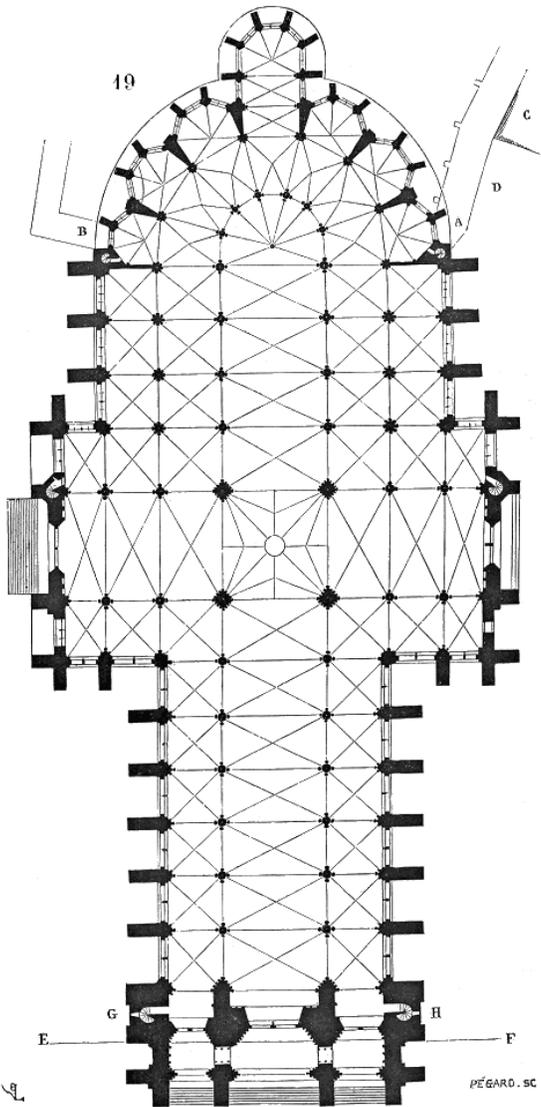
the discipline what it is. The rib vault was developed by a nameless Lombard mason at an unknown date,<sup>6</sup> and it only found its masterful expression some five hundred years later in Amiens. What an incredible example of a discipline greater than its individuals !

It is with such a set of mind that we should approach our work - or art; and through humility and discipline, we can again contribute to the field in a meaningful and fundamental manner.

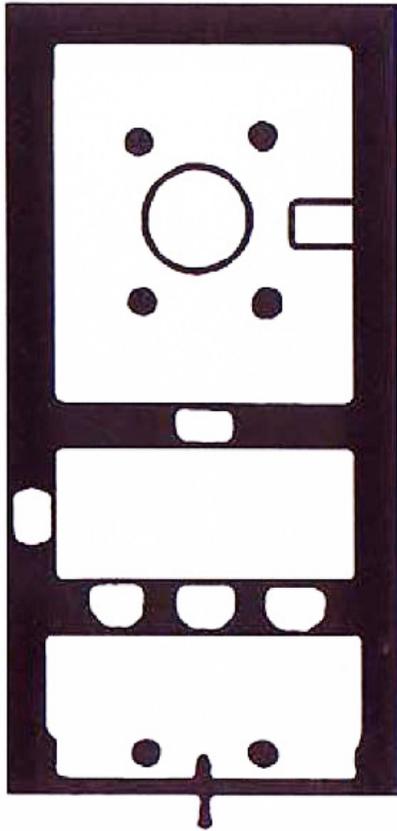
*"Do what is expected: apply what is self-evident, and realize what is about to reveal itself."*



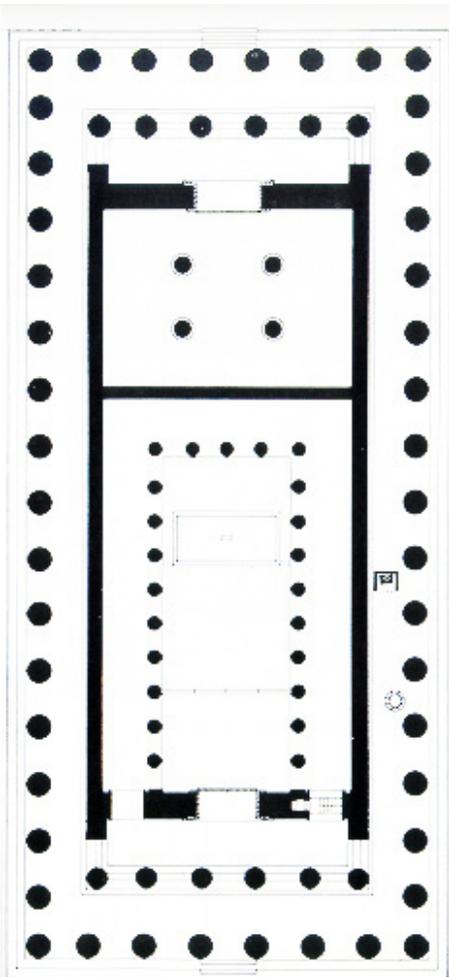
^ Plan of the Roman Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine ~312 AD, the largest building in the Roman Forum, and the predecessor to what would become the Gothic style in later buildings.



^ Plan of the Amiens cathedral, ~1266 AD Erwin Panofsky posits this to be one the finest example of Gothic cathedral and perhaps its culmination.



° Plan of a Mycenaean megaron, dating around ~2000 BC showing the hearth and its surrounding four columns.



° Plan of the Parthenon, around ~432 BC, representing the culmination of the doric order that was started with the Mycenaean megarons; the hearth and its four columns are still present more than a thousand years later.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Neumeyer, Fritz. The Artless Word: Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art. 1994, p326-328

<sup>2</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre. La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement. 1979

<sup>3</sup> Oxford Dictionary, definition of Art:

"The expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power."

<sup>4</sup> IIT Interview, April 22, 2015. With Skylar Moran, John Pasowicz, and Jenna Staff. Transcribed and edited by Jorge Serra.

Full quote from the transcription, on the usefulness of school:

"I think if we spend too much time in school it becomes difficult to get out of that very comfortable cocoon. I spent seven years in that academic cocoon, back to back. And I think that was enough, because more than that, it becomes a bit dangerous. Because the comfort of the academic cocoon can be dangerous, in the sense that you can't get out of that after a while, because you're completely disconnected. You've spent too much time with a very comfortable stomach, where you don't have to do much to feed yourself.

And more important, you start to think that you're too intelligent to get out of that comfortable situation, and I think that is a problem, I think we - particularly in our practice, there's a huge gap between the difficult realities of the world we're supposed to navigate in, and what we're prepared to face, when we're in that academic cocoon. There's a big gap there. So, I think it's about time the academy and the schools really reconsider where we stand.

And it amuses me to see what is published in the published pictures of architecture magazine, that I can no longer look at, not even sit with them, because I think it's become completely irrelevant, completely self-centred, and things that nobody cares about. Even our superstars are fabricated by others and no longer by us. It's a really, really, really sad fate. I wouldn't let my son or my daughter be an architect. I'd love to see them in finance. What a sad, catastrophic end.

So that's what I have to say to GSD Harvard, and all the other schools.

Yet, they're still very comfortable, and you sit with these professors and you listen to them speak and you would be for a second, tempted to think that they know what they're talking about. There's such a comfort around our knowledge, and the deeper it is and the more complex it is, and the more disconnected it is, and the more it makes sense to them, the more comfortable they are, in their ignorance."

<sup>5</sup> Panofsky, Erwin. Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism. 1951

<sup>6</sup> Choisy, Auguste. Histoire de l'architecture. 1899