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by the British architectural historian Gavin Stamp about the
German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
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Architecture and Faux-nationalism: Reflections on a remark made by the British architectural historian Gavin Stamp about the German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

In 2017, while visiting the RIBA exhibition *Mies van der Rohe & James Stirling: Circling the Square*, I came across a copy of a letter from the architectural historian Gavin Stamp addressed to Margaret Thatcher, it was dated April 1985 - at the time the 'tory' party under Thatcher had been in power since 1979.ⁱ In the letter, Stamp referred to the German-American architect, Mies van der Rohe, as a '99-year-old German from another age who is dead' and to Mies' proposal for an office block and urban plaza for a prime site in the City, opposite the Mansion House, as an example of the '*inhuman megalomania of architects.*' The letter concluded by suggesting the site be developed instead '*by younger, talented and British architects*' (Stamp's underlining). If we try to understand Stamp's comments in terms of current identity politics then we might suppose him to have been a British nationalist with strong anti-European inclinations; but to do that would be a mistake, because Stamp was not anti-European, quite to the contrary. His pro-European sentiments are well-evidenced in his last wishes - he passed away in December 2017 - where he specified his corpse be laid to rest wearing the lapel badge of his last great cause: Bugger Brexit!

So, if it is impossible to make sense of Stamp's ageist, anti-Germanic sentiments in nationalist terms then how are we to understand them? I would suggest the best way is to travel back through the historical archives to the 1980s, where we can look more closely at the context in which they were made. At that time, the Neoliberal outlook, which would eventually lead to the political dilemmas of today, was only just beginning to take effect in the UK. The story of Mies' Mansion House proposal belongs to that period, but its position there is something of an anomaly. Mies originally formulated his proposal back in the 1960s, when he was commissioned by the property developer, Peter Palumbo, to propose a design for the development of a large plot of land to the west of the Mansion House in the City of London (Fig 1). At the time, the cool, reductive modernist idiom in which Mies worked was highly fashionable and Palumbo had no difficulty obtaining outline planning permission, it was granted in 1969. But the proposal did not appear before the City planners for full permission until 1982, by which time it looked out of date (and Mies was dead, he passed away in 1969). The reason for the delay was because it took that long for Palumbo to acquire the necessary property rights to develop the site. Palumbo's application for full planning permission was refused, he appealed against the refusal on the basis he had already been given outline permission and had acquired the necessary property holdings in good faith.

The appeal led to a public inquiry, launched by the British Government in May 1984, the results of which were announced a year later, in May 1985.ⁱⁱ There was some concern amongst opponents of Mies' proposal that Thatcher, who was well-settled and fully confident in the role of Prime Minister, would overturn the decision - if her secretary for the environment rejected the proposal. Stamp was one of the concerned, oppositional groups and that is why he wrote his letter to Thatcher. There is no record of Thatcher's response, nor is it known if she even read the letter, however, the apparent nationalism it expresses could be understood as an attempt to appeal to the changes in her feelings about what was then called the European Economic Community (EEC).ⁱⁱⁱ

To gauge the trajectory of Thatchers emerging sentiments towards Europe we can turn to her notorious *Speech to the College of Europe*, which she gave in Bruges in 1988, the subject of the speech was the future of Europe and the role of Great Britain in that future.^{iv} In her speech, Thatcher made it clear: although she appreciated the shared history and cultural values of Great Britain and Europe, nevertheless she understood the EEC as a means of facilitating willing and active cooperation between sovereign states and not a pretext for utopian dreaming about a future European confederation. For Thatcher, the EEC was essentially a practical device whose purpose was to '*ensure the future prosperity and security of its people in a world in which there are many other powerful nations and groups of nations,*' she warned:

We Europeans cannot afford to waste our energies on internal disputes or arcane institutional debates. They are no substitute for effective action. Europe has to be ready both to contribute in full measure to its own security and to compete commercially and industrially in a world in which success goes to the countries which encourage individual initiative and enterprise, rather than those which attempt to diminish them.^v

The background to Thatcher's speech was her growing fear, 'becoming European' would undo all the work of deregulation that she had effected in the UK since rising to power, as she explained:

...it is ironic that just when those countries such as the Soviet Union, which have tried to run everything from the centre, are learning that success depends on dispersing power and decisions away from the centre, there are some in the Community who seem to want to move in the opposite direction.^{vi}

At the time, Thatcher regarded the then German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl (he looked a tiny bit like Mies, see Fig 2) as the prime champion of movement in the contrary direction. She continued:

We have not successfully rolled back the frontiers of the state in Britain, only to see them re-imposed at a European level with a European super-state exercising a new dominance from Brussels. Certainly we want to see Europe more united and with a greater sense of common purpose. But it must be in a way which preserves the different traditions, parliamentary powers and sense of national pride in one's own country; for these have been the source of Europe's vitality through the centuries.^{vii}

The Brussel's speech was not directly concerned with the matter of the Mansion House public inquiry, but I would suggest it was Stamp's feeling for Thatcher's fears of a German-led, European superstate that prompted him to compose his letter in the way that he did. In fact, for the sake of the letter, Stamp quite knowingly distorted the truth about Mies' national identity, because Mies was not German, he was American, having emigrated to the states in 1938, Mies became an American citizen in 1944. Stamp was well aware of this, but to effect the persuasive power of his letter he was careful which parts of Mies' history he chose to reveal. Taking the year of Mies' birth - 1886 - and subtracting the then current year - 1985 - produces the figure of 99 years. That figure hovers ambiguously within the letter, it implies both the age of the architect and the age of the proposal, while at the same time alluding to Germany's history of military aggression and imperialist ambition that ran from the late nineteenth century to the close of the second world war and included the period of Nazi dictatorship (1933-1945).

Stamp failed to mention, the reason Mies had left Germany was because he found it increasingly difficult to work under the Nazi regime. The root of the problem was not so much the mute, reductive forms of Mies' designs but his refusal to compromise over the matter of representation. Mies did not agree with the Nazi's that architecture should serve as a means of expressing national pride, regional building traditions or political power. His approach to architectural design explored all forms of spatial production, including building and planning but also communication and distribution networks, civil engineering and mass media. Mies was interested in the question of how architecture might express these new socio-technological forms that actually were shaping the times in which he lived, as he put it:

I did not want to change the time; I wanted to express the time. That was my whole project. I didn't want to change anything. I really believe that all these ideas, the sociological ideas and even the technological ideas, would have an influence on architecture.^{viii}

Even if Stamp believed the conservationist cause justified his duplicitous representation of Mies' architectural aspirations, that does not annul the underhand intent of his letter to Thatcher. Stamp's preferred option for the site was a scheme by the architect Terry Farrell, which proposed to keep all the old Victorian buildings, but to repurpose them for contemporary use (Fig 3). I would suggest the twin aspirations for conservation and repurposing can cast a light on Stamp's later Bugger Brexit attitude. To begin to unpack why this is so I would like to turn to a parallel event in Mies' posthumous history: the reconstruction of the Barcelona Pavilion.

At more or less the same time as Mies' design was being scrutinised by hostile conservationists and City planners in London, in Barcelona the City Hall was setting up the Fundacio Mies van der Rohe (Mies van der Rohe Foundation). The Foundation's first project was the reconstruction of the Pavilion, designed by Mies and his partner Lilly Reich as a temporary structure to represent the Weimar Republic at the Barcelona International Exhibition of 1929. The project was entirely successful and the reconstructed Pavilion was opened to the public in 1986, since then it has served as an attractive destination for architectural tourism and events. But, of equal importance, the Barcelona Pavilion has also become the Foundation's symbolic home-base for its long term mission, which is to foster debate on modern and contemporary architecture and urban planning in Europe. As well as the pavilion building itself, the most potent instrument at the disposal of the Foundation is the joint organisation, along with the European Commission, of the European Union Prize for Contemporary Architecture, otherwise known as the EU Mies Award (Fig 4).

The fact the EU's official architecture prize carries the name of Mies, would, given the hostility expressed in his letter, lead one to suppose Stamp would be antipathetic to contemporary European architecture and yet, his antibrexit stance would seem to imply otherwise. To resolve this apparent paradox we need only visit the EU Mies Award website and take a look at the stated objectives of the 2019 prize. Here we find two items of particular relevance to our inquiry. The first states, an important aim of the Award is to '*highlight the European City as a model for the sustainably smart city, contributing to a sustainable*

European economy.' The second states, the Award aims to draw attention to *'the involvement of the European Union in supporting architecture as an important element that reflects both the diversity of European architectural expression and its role as a unifying element to define a common European culture.'*^{ix} By linking it to notions of economy and sustainability, the first of these objectives makes the idea of something traditional - the European City - appear to be progressive and forward-facing. The second objective reflects the more general aspiration of the European Union to represent unification through diversity. Both objectives are not only inline with Stamp's preferences for architecture and urbanism, they also resonate, quite positively, with Thatcher's views about the practical basis of the European Union, as indicated in her Bruges speech.

Where the statements do seem to be somewhat incongruous however, is in relation to the Barcelona Pavilion that is symbolically their home. Because it is evident, both from the things Mies said about architecture and from the buildings he designed, that he would not have been sympathetic to the kind of architectural and urbanist rhetoric the EU Mies Award currently promotes in his name. And, insofar as he was sympathetic to EU rhetoric, Stamp was absolutely right to be suspicious of Mies' design for London. Because Mies' designs never were intended to sympathise with the context in which they were placed (be it the European City or otherwise), nor to add scenographically to the formal diversity of some particular portion of the built environment. Rather, Mies' designs aimed to create a new kind of space, one that turned away from the traditional forms of architecture that had shaped the cities of Europe and looked instead to the truthful expression of prevalent structural conditions, which, for him, meant the worldwide influence of science and technology, as he expressed it:

I think there will be certain influences, climatic influences, but that will only colour what is done. I think a much greater influence is the influence of science and technology that is worldwide and that will take all these old cultures away and everybody will do the same. Just this light coloration.^x

Mies' proposal for London was designed in the spirit of *'taking away,'* referred to in this quotation. Had it been built, it would now be operating in the City, accentuating luminosity, reflectiveness and the absorption of light, as a means of producing lightly coloured perceptions for contemporary citizens and visitors in real time and space. I would suggest that in so doing it would now serve as a critical counter-form to the forced diversity and

phoney traditionalism that has been dominating architectural production for the past thirty years.

Figure Captions

Figure 1

Model of Mies' Mansion House Square proposal in the RIBA exhibition, Circling the Square (2017).

Figure 2

Photo images: Left, Helmut Kohl. Right, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Figure 3

Stamp's preferred proposal for the site, by Terry Farrell architects, cut-away view, based on an illustration appearing the Architects Journal, 21 March, 1984, p28

Figure 4

The reconstructed Barcelona Pavilion with visitors paying entry fees and European Union flag, photographed by the author in April 2017

ⁱ Letter from Gavin Stamp to The Rt Hon. Margaret Thatcher, dated 21 April 1985, exhibit 14, Mies van der Rohe & James Stirling: *Circling the Square*, The Architecture Gallery, RIBA, 8 March to 25 June 2017

ⁱⁱ For more about Mies' proposal see my article: 20th Century Avant-garde and Architecture: Mies and der Rohe's unbuilt design for the City of London, *Transactions of the Ancient Monuments Society* 63, 2019, pp 90-106

ⁱⁱⁱ The European Economic Community (EEC) was a regional organisation aiming to bring about economic integration among its member states. It was created by the Treaty of Rome of 1957 with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland joining in 1973. Upon the formation of the European Union (EU) in 1993, the EEC was incorporated and renamed as the European Community (EC). In 2009 the EC's institutions were absorbed into the EU's wider framework and the community ceased to exist.

^{iv} Margaret Thatcher, *Speech to the College of Europe* (The Bruges Speech), 20 September, 1988, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/113688>

^v Ibid

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Mies van der Rohe, quoted in, Moisés Puente (ed), *Conversations with Mies van der Rohe*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 2006, 47

^{ix} EUMiesaward, about the prize, <https://www.miesarch.com>, accessed 23 June 2019, 18:13

^x Quoted in, Puente, *Conversations*, 2006, 57