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# 20th Century Avant-garde and Architecture: Mies van der Rohe's unbuilt design for the City of London

by

VICTORIA WATSON

*This essay takes its cue from the exhibition Mies van der Rohe + James Stirling: Circling the Square, held at the RIBA, London in 2017, to look at the architectural and political context of the memorable Mansion House Square controversy.*

A recent exhibition at the RIBA Architecture Gallery staged a comparison between two design proposals, one by Mies van der Rohe the other by James Stirling, for a historic site in London's financial district known as 'The City'.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition looked back in time to events of the mid-1980s, revealing how Mies' unbuilt modernist design for an office tower and open plaza had actually paved the way toward realising a design by James Stirling: the building sits on the site today, known as No.1 Poultry and has recently been listed by Historic England as an exemplary postmodern monument. The exhibition was interesting for its curatorial bias because, although it appeared to be about a historical subject, it resisted setting that subject in a meaningful narrative, its stated intention being solely to compare the formal propositions of the subject architects (Fig. 1). As an accompaniment to the exhibition a book was published, *One Poultry Speaks*,<sup>2</sup> imagining Stirling's building as like a child, curious to know about its origins and identity and innocently asking questions of its progenitors. The answers constructed a myth around the building, one that included Mies' design but omitted to say anything about the avant-garde attitudes that underpinned it.

Leaving to one side the somewhat doubtful premise that buildings can speak for themselves, in what follows it is tentatively assumed that the founding principles of the Ancient Monuments Society extend to the consideration of unbuilt designs as a species of ancient monument and it is supposed that, had it been built, the Mies would by now be valued for its historic significance and fine old craftsmanship. One reason for pursuing this line of inquiry is because the aspirations of modernist avant-garde architects, like Mies, are a proper subject for study and conservation and the fact London **almost** had a building by Mies a tantalising feature of recent architectural history.

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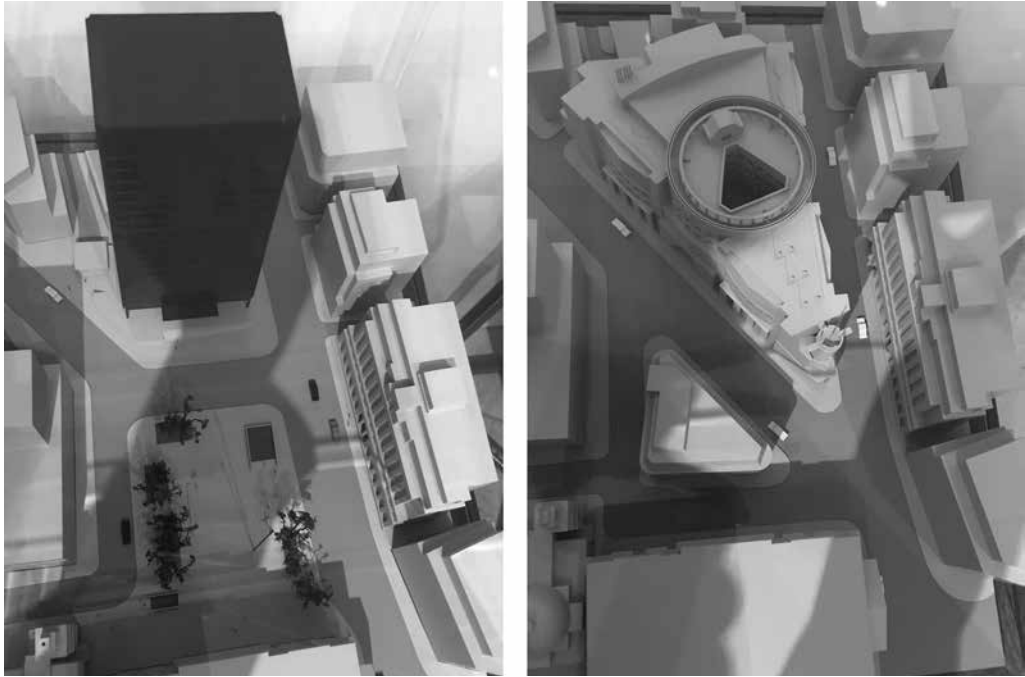


Fig. 1

Two formal statements for the same site in the City: left, Mies van der Rohe, Office Tower and City Square (1967), unbuilt; right, James Stirling, No.1 Poultry (1985-88), built (1994-98).

## ARCHITECTURE AND AVANT-GARDE

The architecture of the twentieth century avant-garde is too complex to deal with in a single history, but for those of us who are curious about architecture and avant-garde, the case of the Mies in London can serve as a case-study to examine the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup> In order to make use of the Mies in this way it is first necessary to revise all those things about technology and progress that are so often associated with his work. So far as these were concerned, Mies shared the same attitudes as all the other avant-garde artists and architects of his generation. Avant-garde individuals and groups looked to technology and progress as negative, destructive forces that ought to be resisted.<sup>4</sup> With Mies, resistance was enacted through a strategy of neutralisation, not through defence and attack, as was the case with so many other protagonists of avant-garde. Mies approached neutralisation from two directions, looking at architectural ornamentation and at the building programme.

Mies' tactics for neutralising ornamentation are well recorded in histories of the Modern Movement in Architecture, which examine the way that Mies reduced the appearance of his buildings to mute, unadorned parallelepiped structures with gridded façades woven out of optically scintillating tapestries of steel and glass.<sup>5</sup> The tactic of weaving façades as Mies did guaranteed a distinct similarity between his buildings, to the extent that to some people the buildings all look the same. Be that as it may, it is nevertheless possible, with a modicum of attention, to see how, by varying the proportional relations of the weave, Mies was able to make his buildings quite different.<sup>6</sup> What is more, the reflective

and refractive properties of the glass façades meant that a Mies, wherever it is located, maintains a certain distance from its surroundings while at the same time mirroring the local environment in scintillating imagery. This is because light bounces around between the surfaces of the glass and is picked-up and interpreted by the perceptual apparatuses of the viewing subject - people like you and me as we move around and about the building.<sup>7</sup>

As for Mies' tactics for programmatic neutralisation, these continue to generate confusion and for that reason are given considerable attention in this study. In an interview with Christian Norbert-Schulz, published in the journal *Baukunst und Werkform* in 1958, Mies was attempting to clarify his approach when he stated:

The purposes for which a building is used are constantly changing and we cannot afford to tear down the building each time. That is why we have revised Sullivan's formula 'form follows function' and construct a practical and economical space into which we fit the functions.<sup>8</sup>

Mies was referring to Louis Sullivan's essay from 1896 about office buildings, in which Sullivan set out his parameters for the 'true normal type' of the tall office building.<sup>9</sup> Based on the observation of natural forms, Sullivan postulated a direct relationship between 'life' and 'form.' He thought man-made, artificial forms, when they were not overly constrained by scholarly determinations, also conformed to the natural model and hence produced a sure fit between form and function. In the case of tall office buildings, Sullivan thought the horizontal and vertical divisions of the bulk of the structure should be based on what he called the 'office unit,' that being 'a room of comfortable area and height...' This basic cell, explained Sullivan, drawing an analogy with nature, is 'similar to a cell in a honey-comb, merely a compartment, nothing more.' If we look at an office building designed by Sullivan, for example the Wainwright Building,<sup>10</sup> we can see his cellular theory reflected in the look and organisation of the building. The 'cells' are repeated and lined up, side by side, to form a single, typical floor arrangement, with corridor connections, and this is in turn repeated and stacked up, tier upon tier, so as to 'form ... the true basis of the external development of the exterior.'<sup>11</sup> In his designs for tall office buildings we can see how Mies revised Sullivan's principles by eliminating the cell, and hence the corridors, to leave the typical floor plan as a clear and uncluttered expanse, marked only by the grid of the supporting structural frame and the service cores with their clusters of stairs, lifts, restrooms and rising ductwork (Fig. 2).

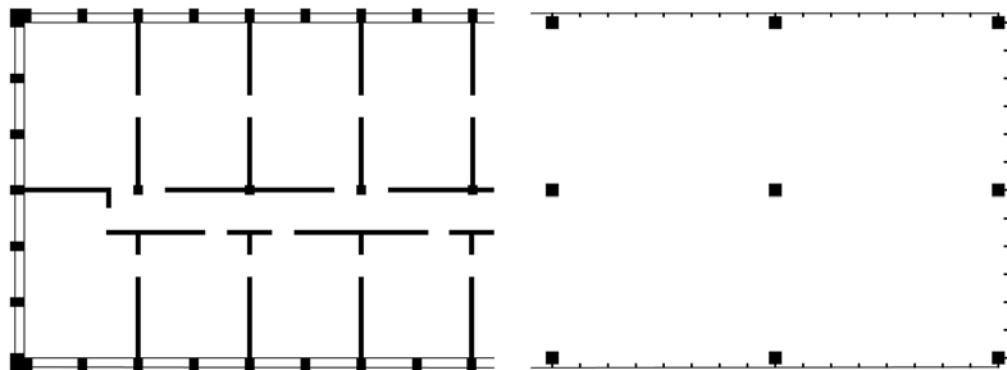


Fig. 2

Plan diagram showing the principles of Mies' revision of Sullivan's formula: Sullivan on the left, Mies on the right.

Mies' neutralising approach to the building programme was not simply a pragmatic consideration but a rational critique of the obvious fact of life's subjection to temporal change, which, as he once remarked, 'even Plato recognised.'<sup>12</sup> For Mies, adopting a reasonable attitude to time meant facing up to the fact that everything present in life can be only transitory, including plans for the future. Plans are doomed to fail because they run out of time, the people who devise them pass away and those who follow on have no grasp of the immediacy that made those plans once seem so urgent. For this reason Mies thought it a mistake for architects to propose forms for buildings based on preconceived notions about how they would be used, which, even with swift procurement, could be no more than projections into the future. For Mies the real challenge for the aspiring architect was to build without programme.

It can help to understand Mies' avant-garde attitudes through a metaphor invented by Walter Benjamin in his famous evocation of Paul Klee's painting, *Angelus Novus* (a painting which Benjamin owned, having bought it in 1921). In his writings Benjamin often referred to the angel, likening it to his avant-garde friends and acquaintances, one of whom was Mies.<sup>13</sup> In his posthumously published essay, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' Benjamin reflected on the significance of the angel and on what it told him about human history. Looking at the painting today (or at least at its online image), the angel looks as if it is suspended in a space without gravity, hovering with open eyes and mouth and with outstretched wings and dangling legs and toes. The posture is reminiscent of the description of Mies' tall buildings, given in Robin Evans' important essay 'Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries.' In his essay Evans commented on the way tall Miesian structures:

...do not rise against the pull of gravity; gravity does not enter into it. They make you believe, against reason, that they do not partake of that most pervasive and relentless of all natural forces. So the result is not the exhilarating levitation of an object, (a familiar effect), but a gentle, dreamy disorientation in the observer.<sup>14</sup>

Benjamin read the angel of history as facing toward the past yet moving backwards into the future, its gaze resting upon the traces of the past that are piling up behind, like wreckage in a storm. The angel sees the pile of history as a single catastrophe, rather than a chain of events as we humans might do. To the angel the detritus of the past is a disorganised heap that just keeps on getting bigger!

In Mies' well known text of 1924, 'Baukunst und Zeitwille' (Building Art and the Will of the Epoch), he made a statement, plausibly referring to Benjamin's angel:

We find again and again that excellent building masters fail because their work does not serve the will of the epoch ... it is the essential that matters. One cannot walk forward while looking backward, and one cannot be the instrument of the will of the epoch if one lives in the past. (my underlining)<sup>15</sup>

The text was published in the avant-garde Journal *Der Querschnitt* (The Cross Section), known at the time for its unorthodox literary and graphic style.<sup>16</sup> Mies' sometime colleague, the Dada artist and film maker, Hans Richter referred to *Der Querschnitt* as 'a very successful operation performed on the corpse of a present-day life.'<sup>17</sup> At a first reading Mies seems to have been admonishing his fellow architects for facing the wrong way, as if he did not want architects to be angels. However, an equally legitimate and

perhaps more accurate reading suggests it was not the direction Mies was criticising but the mode of perambulation: Mies objected to walking backward, facing backwards was fine. Furthermore, given his aversion to living in the past, what better assurance could there be than to turn to face it in opposition, keeping it firmly in your sight as your own backward image. Thought about in this way, Mies' preferred architectural posture might be described as that of a suspended, backward-facing, immobility, as if it were possible to maintain a mobile equilibrium, held in a state of relative stability, by pushing against the flow of time.

## ALMOST

Mies' London design conforms to his avant-garde outlook, but the histories that tell of it are told from one of three perspectives, each of which tends to overlook his avant-garde approach.

Sometimes, as in *Circling the Square*, it is told as a battle of architectural styles. In these accounts Mies' design is described as futuristic, reductive and unadorned and the idea of the large open space as combining a solution to problems of congestion with a potential place of festival and assembly. Stirling's, on the other hand, is presented as bumptious, quasi-historicist and jokey, with the idea of an open interiorised rotunda at the heart of a dense urban block as a place of transition for people crossing the site. A further point of comparison is Mies' use of rectangular geometries and the organising principle of the grid, as opposed to Stirling's more baroque geometries and his use of collage as a strategy of composition.<sup>18</sup>

Or the history may be told as a battle between progressive and conservative mentalities wherein the property developer, Peter Palumbo and his allies, are pitted against amenity societies, activist groups and members of the royal family, such as the Victorian Society, SAVE Britain's Heritage and HRH the Prince of Wales.<sup>19</sup> In these developer versus conservationist antagonisms special attention is given to the two sensational planning inquiries, both of which ended up before the secretary of state for the environment. Each inquiry served as a platform for the conservationists to argue for the rights of the listed Victorian buildings that would be demolished to make way for the new development. The threatened buildings were represented as massively popular and exemplary of the architectural preferences of ordinary people, while the proposed new buildings stood for the power and greed of wealthy elites. A further point of contention was the Victorian buildings' sympathetic relationship to the patchwork urbanism of the City's built fabric, as opposed to the unsympathetic and assertive autonomy of developer-led interventions.<sup>20</sup>

The third kind of history associated with the Mies belongs to the tradition of the architectural monograph, where the design is framed within an evolutionary history of Mies' intellectual life and practice. Until recently these histories have had little to say about Mies' London design, although in her essay of 2004, 'Mies Immersion,' Phyllis Lambert categorised the London design as a carefully worked out but unbuilt 'stand-alone high-rise.'<sup>21</sup> More recently, in 2014, a monographic treatment by Detlef Mertins traced the formal lineage of Mies' unrealised design for the Mansion House Square back to the Seagram Building in New York, completed in 1958.<sup>22</sup> Mertins explains how Mies' design

of the Seagram Building set the precedent for the architectural type of the combined office tower and open plaza development, which after its construction ‘triggered a change in the zoning bylaw’ of New York City and indirectly ‘encouraged the construction of more public plazas.’ Mertins reads Mies’ London design as having failed because the urban typology of the office tower and open plaza was ‘too controversial in its modernity to be realised in that city.’<sup>23</sup> His assessment was correct in that the modernity of Mies’ design contributed to its eventual rejection, but that was not the reason the project failed. The reason was the quite considerable delay in the procurement process, during which, to draw on Benjamin’s angelic metaphor, the flow of time managed to creep-up on the Mies and engulf it!

In June 1962 Mies, then in the last phase of his career, was commissioned by property developer and art collector 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. 3). Mies’ Mansion House design proposal was granted outline planning permission in May 1969. In those days it was not necessary actually to own the property rights in order to apply for planning permission and it was understood that full permission would be granted at a later date, when Palumbo had acquired all the properties on the site. It took him about twenty years and it cost him £10 million to acquire the twelve freeholds and 245 leaseholds necessary to be in a position to realise Mies’ design. So it was not until January 1982, by which time Mies was dead (he passed away in August 1969) that Palumbo could apply for full planning permission. After doing so, permission was refused on the grounds that:

The proposed development ... would not accord with the special architectural and visual qualities of the Bank Conservation Area, and would be seriously detrimental to its character and appearance ... to the setting of nationally known historic buildings and other listed buildings in the locality...<sup>24</sup>

The refusal was based on conservationist principles. Between 1969 and 1982, as Palumbo was acquiring the property rights and time was creeping-up on the Mies, the site had become incorporated into the Bank Conservation Area, including the listing of some of the incumbent buildings. The slow listing process began as early as 1971, but the incorporation of Palumbo’s plot into the conservation area was not until December 1981, just a month before he applied for planning permission (Fig. 4). Perhaps it was the fear of increasing conservation pressures that prompted Palumbo to apply when he did; be that as it may, he appealed against the refusal on the grounds he already had outline permission and had acquired the necessary property holdings in good faith. The appeal led to a public inquiry, launched by the Department of the Environment (DOE) on behalf of the government in May 1984, the proceedings of which were long and protracted but the outcome was no different and again permission was refused. The grounds for refusal were again essentially conservationist, the inspector’s report noticed, quite correctly, how obtrusive the proposed tower would be and how it would ‘affect significant local views ... draw attention away from the present central area and its civic buildings and dominate the whole of the space between it and the Royal Exchange.’ The report also noted how the proposed square would ‘eliminate the central focus served by the radiating roads signalling the heart of the City’ and, contrary to the claims of the applicants, would ‘not enhance the setting of the principal listed buildings facing the square.’<sup>25</sup> There is

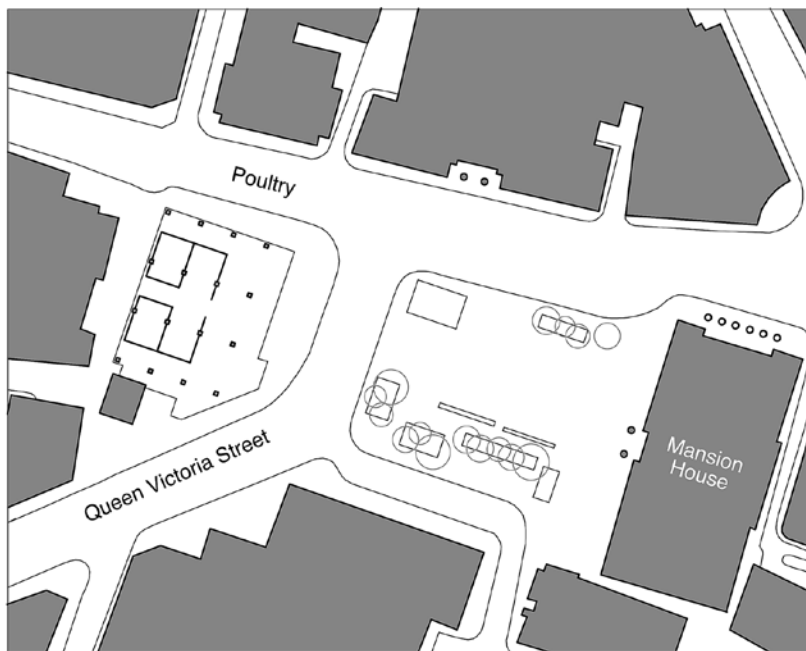


Fig. 3

Plan diagram showing Mies' proposal for the development of a large plot of land to the west of the Mansion House in the City of London.

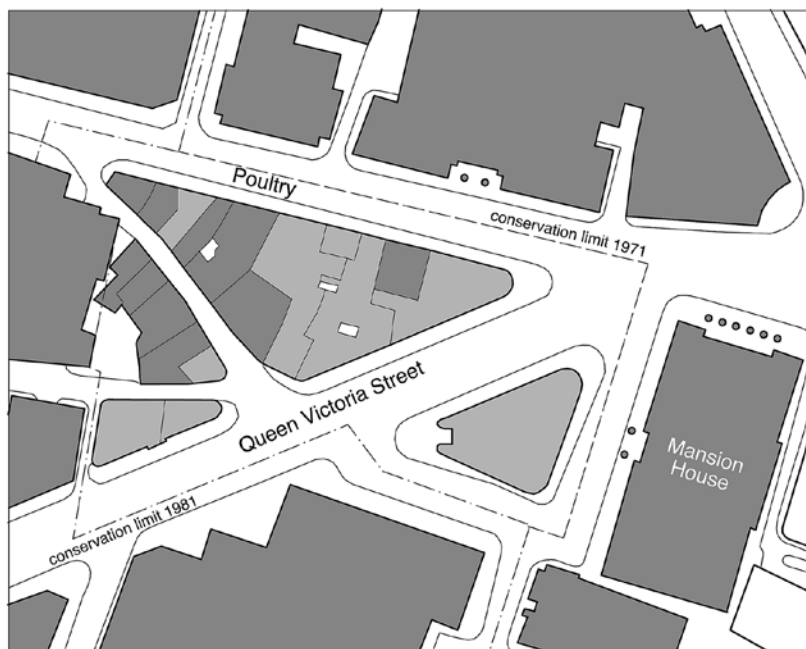


Fig. 4

Plan diagram showing the conservation area boundary changes between 1971 (dashed line) and 1981 (dot-dashed line), and listed buildings on Palumbo's site during that time (pale grey fill).



no counter argument to rebuff the inspector's objections; the Mies was indeed intended in true avant-garde spirit as nothing less than a radical alteration of the extant urban form. It was not that Mies was intending to shock the City by eradicating its historically evolved forms, rather it was because he could see little point in preserving them since all such forms were destined to perish in the future.

By 1982 there was little if any sympathy, or indeed awareness, of Mies' radical urbanism, not even his most avid supporters seemed to be able to follow his logic in this regard. As a result of the inquiry it became obvious to everyone, including those who supported the Mies, that his approach to urban design and architecture had completely lost its appeal. Palumbo must have been disappointed: he seems to have been quite genuine in his admiration for the Mies and judging by his publicity statements, looked upon it as a kind of gift from himself, as patron, to the City, rather in the way private collectors give artworks to public museums, as something to remember them by.<sup>26</sup> And maybe it was because the secretary of state realised that the economics of gift-giving had become entangled in those of property development that the DOE letter, sent to Palumbo's solicitors, included the following conciliatory passage:

The fact that a building is listed or is within a Conservation Area does not necessarily mean that it will be preserved. The secretary of state does not rule out redevelopment of this site if there are acceptable proposals for replacing the existing buildings. He does not consider that the buildings are of such overriding importance that their preservation should outweigh all other considerations.<sup>27</sup>

The passage was qualified and reinforced with the following, distinctly anti-conservationist, statement:

The secretary of state takes the view that, for the City to continue to function efficiently as a world financial centre, it needs to adapt to the requirements of the modern commercial world. It needs to attract high quality, efficient, modern buildings ... It would be wrong to attempt to freeze the character of the City of London.<sup>28</sup>

Quite soon after the decision, Palumbo announced his intention to go ahead with a new proposal for the site, one that would take into consideration the comments and recommendations of the DOE letter and of the new patterns in international finance that were transforming the way in which the City imagined itself.

## BIG BANG

When Palumbo first approached Mies back in the early 1960s the City still saw itself as the international clearing-house of what was known as the 'sterling area' (a group of countries, mainly part of the Commonwealth, pegging their currencies to the pound sterling or actually using the pound as their currency), but by the 1980s sterling's reserve currency status was no longer credible and the clearing function was pretty well over. By the time of the Mansion House Square public inquiry the City had completely changed its character. It was now a key hub in the vast new global capital marketplace and the key driver for its success was no longer the old Commonwealth connections but the ability to capture a huge share of the business associated with the rapid growth of the Eurobond market.<sup>29</sup> At a more local level and perhaps of greater consequence for the imagination of the City, the British government was in the process of instituting the legislation necessary

to trigger what came to be known as the ‘Big Bang’. By abolishing the minimum fixed fee on trades, Big Bang legislation aimed to encourage greater competition in financial trading. By putting an end to the separation between dealers in stocks and shares and investment advisors it aimed to encourage mergers and take-overs and by allowing foreign firms to own UK brokers it aimed to open up London’s market to international banks. All this was to be accompanied by a switch from traditional, face-to-face share dealing, to electronic trading. These immanent changes generated an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement in the City, one with architectural consequences. One consequence of Big Bang excitement was an attack on the kind of conservationist attitudes that had led to the listing of so many buildings on Palumbo’s plot. Under the mood of Big Bang, conservationist attitudes were heavily criticised as an attempt to turn the City into a museum and for the same reasons Palumbo’s gifting approach to development also seemed inappropriate. Increasingly the City Corporation came under pressure to respond to a perceived future need for:

Vast, open-plan, high-tech trading floors where all the different arms of the new securities conglomerates could be housed under one roof. Such trading floors were not compatible with narrow Victorian frontages. As early as January 1985 a poll by Savills of 251 City occupiers revealed that more than two-thirds of respondents expected to be looking for large, open-plan areas, with nearly half feeling the floor sizes of over 10,000 square feet were ‘most suited to their needs’.<sup>30</sup>

The Mies, it should be noted, had been designed with a single occupancy user in mind, that being Lloyds Bank who, initially with a ‘sterling area’ outlook, were planning to use the tower as their Overseas Head Office. Mies even went so far as to prepare layouts for each floor of the tower, corresponding to Lloyds’ specified requirements. According to Palumbo, Lloyds waited for twelve years but eventually pulled out of the deal.<sup>31</sup> Assuming that the twelve-year period began at the time of outline planning permission, which, again according to Palumbo, coincided with Mies’ completion of the detail design process, then Lloyds would have dropped out around 1980, just two years before full planning permission was applied for and refused. But thanks to Mies’ neutralising attitude to the building programme, the bias of the Mies in favour of a single, specified occupant had only a negligible impact on the tower design. It was only the location of partition walls and furniture that qualified the design of some specific floor layout and these could be removed without making any difference to the structured organisation of the building. As we have already seen, it was an inherent principle of Mies’ approach that the interior layout of a building was merely contingent, not an essential, formative principle and could always be changed, or even removed, without detriment to the design.

The notion of changeability as an essential principle can be traced back to a time long before Mies’ comments on Louis Sullivan; it had been a key tactic of his avant-garde approach since the 1920s. Changeability was already present as a principle in Mies’ design for the Weissenhof apartment block, part of the German Werkbund exhibition, ‘Die Wohnung,’ that opened in Stuttgart in July 1927 (for which Mies served as artistic director). The sketches Mies made of the interior layout of his Weissenhof block are evidence of his fascination with the different spatial possibilities inherent in the same basic structural system (Fig. 5).<sup>32</sup> In a short text written at the time, Mies justified the

principle of changeability by balancing the notion of ‘rational construction’ against that of ‘programmatically freedom’:

Economic reasons today necessitate rationalisation and typification in the construction of apartment buildings. The increasing differentiation of our housing needs, however, demands on the other side an ever greater freedom of usage...

And he went on to identify what he called ‘skeleton structure’ as the key device for achieving just such a balance:

For this purpose the skeleton structure is the most suitable system of construction. It makes a rational production possible and yet permits total freedom of disposition of the interior. If one limits oneself to the predetermination of kitchen and bath locations on account of the required installations and if one divides the other space by movable walls, I feel that all legitimate living purposes can be accommodated.<sup>33</sup>

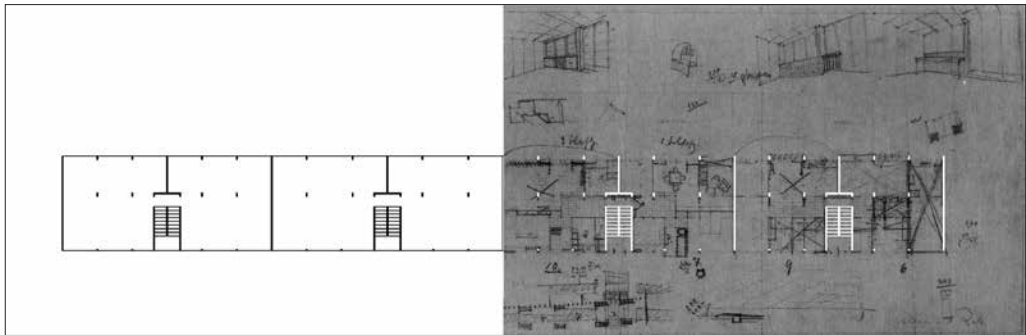


Fig. 5

Plan diagram and part Miesian sketch exploring the different spatial possibilities inherent in the basic structural system of the Weissenhof apartment block.

It is important to keep in mind the importance, signalled here, which Mies attached to the idea of skeletal structure and to note that the Weissenhof apartment block was the first opportunity he had for working with a rational building frame in an actual, realised project. When the trajectory of Mies’ career moved from Europe to North America, there were greater opportunities to test his permanent-change/skeleton-structure approach. In America Mies was invited to design high-rise apartment and office blocks, many of which were realised (although by no means as many as Mies’ critics might lead us to suppose - according to the records Mies built only seven high rise office developments and sixteen high rise residential developments, although some of both involved groups of towers).<sup>34</sup> All of Mies’ American high rise structures demonstrate the permanent-change/skeleton-structure idea. In each case the skeleton structure is a three-dimensional lattice of horizontal and vertical members that punctuate the entire built volume with the regular rhythm of their order. The London Mies was no different; it too had a skeleton structure, a frame of horizontal and vertical members, organised as a regular lattice with a measure of 26 x 36 feet between the vertical members and 13 feet between the horizontals.

So far as the floor layouts of the London Mies were concerned, the design could easily have been adapted to suit the new kinds of open-plan space desirable to City

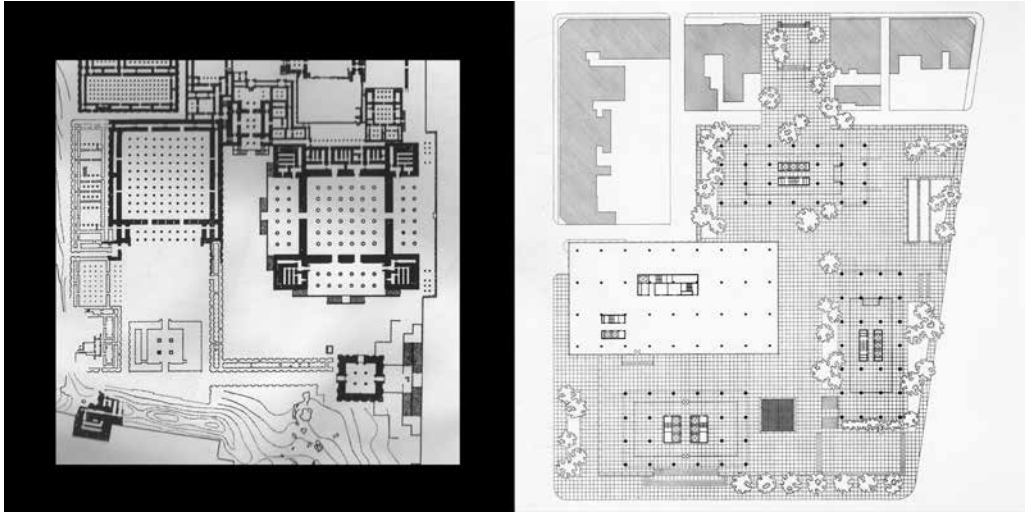


Fig. 6

Plan diagrams, on the right, Mies' Westmount Square development (Montreal, 1965-68), on the left, the Achaemenid City of Persepolis (from 515 BC). Note the four hypostyle spaces of Mies' design: three are high-rise buildings, one a low-level structure. The two dominant hypostyle spaces shown on the Persepolis plan are the Hall of 100 columns, on the left, and the Great Palace of Xerxes, on the right.

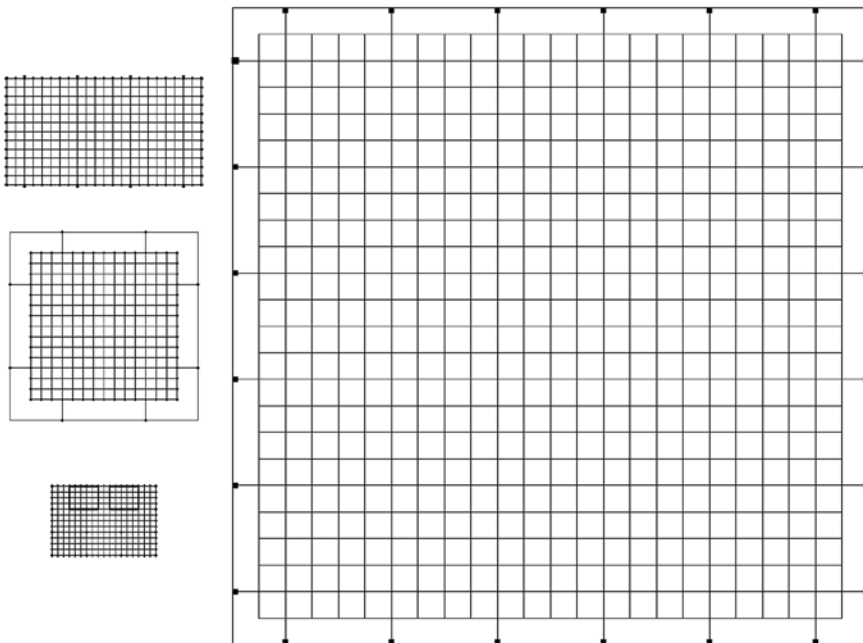


Fig. 7

Comparison of the relative plan footprint of three clear-span structures and the Mansion House skeleton-structure: right, Chicago Convention Hall (project); top left, Crown Hall, IIT; middle left, New National Gallery, Berlin; bottom left, Office Tower, Mansion House Square, London (unbuilt).

Big-Bangers of the 1980s. But it was not the principle of permanent change that stood in the way of the Mies, it was the medium of expression that was the problem, that is, the skeletal structure, which sounded the death knell for the design. One of the arguments put forward in favour of the Mies was the way the architect had adjusted the dimensions of the skeleton structure so that the proportions of the new tower would harmonise with those of the Lutyens building flanking it to the north. As we have noted, Mies spaced the vertical members 13 feet apart, which corresponded to a floor-to-floor height of the same dimension. Unfortunately, the new Big Bang craze for minimum open-plan spaces of 10,000 square feet was coupled with a desired minimum floor-to-floor height of 15 feet. The new, increased floor-height stipulation meant the Mies was out by 2 feet. It would have been possible to readjust the design to accommodate the new height, but that would have negated the argument about harmonising with the Lutyens and, perhaps more to the point, it would no longer have been possible to claim that the Mies was authored by Mies!

A second problem relating to the skeleton structure concerned the notion of open-plan. Although the floors of the Mies would be spacious and clear they would not, strictly speaking, have been open-plan. The vertical members of the skeleton structure would have formed a grid of columns on each floor, interrupting the spatial field and making each floor more like a hypostyle hall than an uninterrupted flow of space (Fig. 6).

In fact Mies had already begun to experiment with what he called clear-span structures long before he began work on the London design. Perhaps his most extraordinary clear-span proposition was the Chicago Convention Hall of 1953-54, a remarkable 720 square feet of covered enclosure, sheltered under an enormous canopy and supported on perimeter columns but with no interior supports to interrupt the flow of space. Sadly it was never built. Mies' first realised clear-span structure of considerable size was the Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Work on this project began in 1950, although the building was not completed until 1960, a remarkable 262 x 524 feet. In the same year that he first met Palumbo, 1962, Mies began work on the New National Gallery for the city of Berlin, an amazing 214 square feet of uninterrupted space. The building opened to the public in 1968 (Fig. 7). Yet all Mies' clear-span structures were conceived as single-storey buildings; it never seems to have occurred to him to stack the clear-span spaces up on top of one other. The habits of the building industry in the 1950s and 1960s were perhaps not yet ready to realise the idea of the stacked clear-span; and perhaps Mies' avant-garde spirit prevented him from proposing anything whose technical feasibility would depend on future progress. Recollect, for Mies, avant-garde and progress were incompatible.

The decision to reject the Mies eventually led Palumbo to develop the site on the basis of a low-level urban infill block design by the British architect James Stirling, then at the height of his career (Fig. 8). Stirling's Poultry design in striped shades of pink and buff stonework, with an embedded circular atrium, open to the sky, was reminiscent of his Neue Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, which he had completed in 1984 and was thought to be exemplary of the new, postmodern attitudes to form and space in architecture and urbanism that had been emerging in the international architecture culture of the 1970s.<sup>35</sup> Postmodern architects had a different, if no less idiosyncratic, view of temporality than

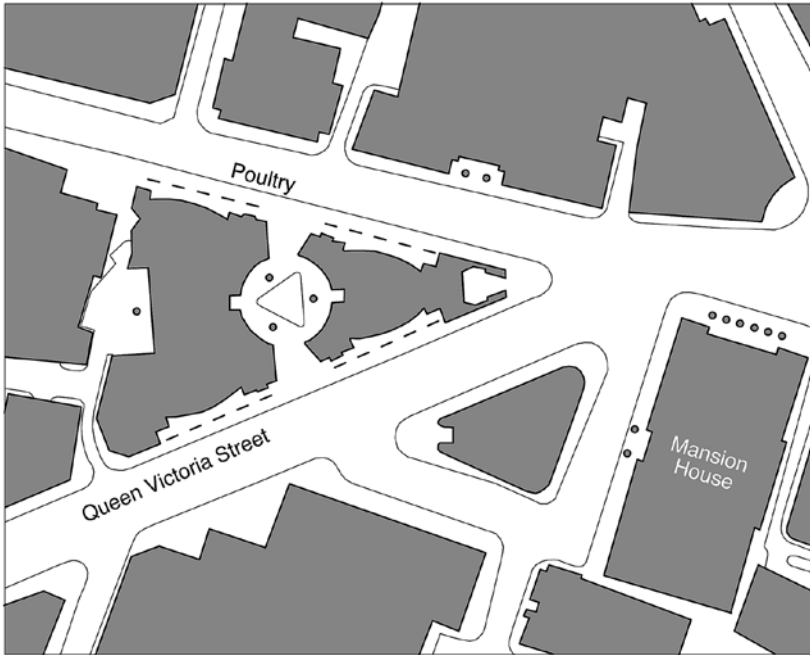


Fig. 8

Plan diagram showing the site layout of James Stirling's No.1 Poultry.

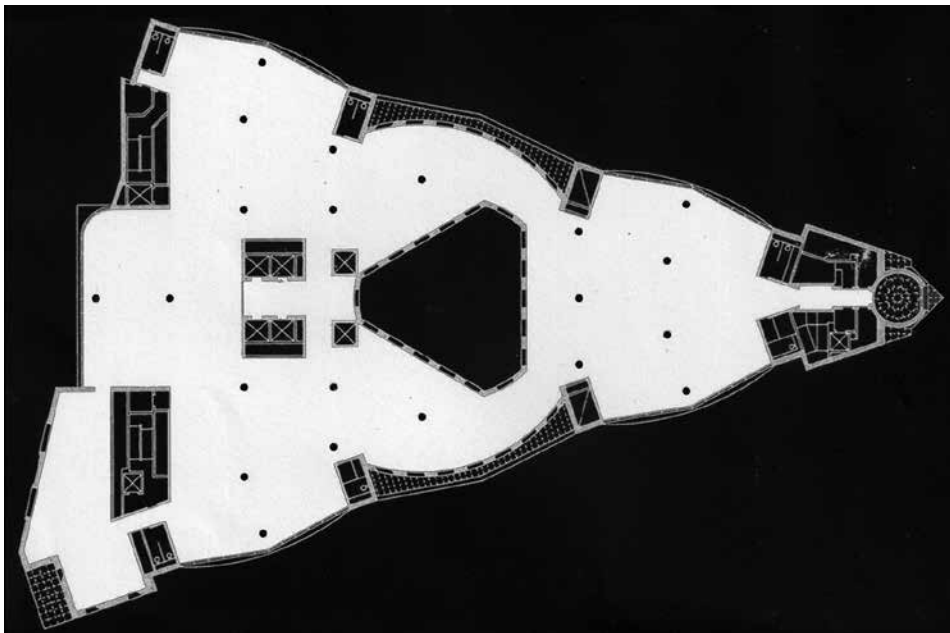


Fig. 9

No.1 Poultry, plan diagram showing the open field of columns of a typical office floor.

did their modernist predecessors. To the postmodernist the architectural past was a repository of formal possibilities, rather than a testament to impermanence and change. For these architects past forms could be adapted and utilised in the present to make new combinations. Stirling's buildings, with their profusion of obsessively repeated forms and motifs are symptomatic of this postmodern outlook. His obsession with the device of the embedded circular atrium for example, references a number of historic buildings: the Maritime Theatre of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, the house of Mantegna in Mantua and Vignola's circular courtyard at the Farnese Villa at Caprarola. Just like at Stuttgart, Stirling's Poultry building too had an interiorised yet open rotunda, with an architectural promenade cutting through a substantial building mass. Reciprocally, just like No.1 Poultry, the Stuttgart building displayed amusing architectural motifs, including fake cyclopean walls in stripy stonework with garishly coloured handrails. In the mid 1980s Palumbo could rely on the success of Stirling's Stuttgart project to persuade the City authorities and arbiters of taste that his design for No.1 Poultry was of sufficiently high quality, modern in outlook and acceptable as a replacement for the existing buildings on the site. But perhaps the most important thing to note about the design is the 15 foot floor-to-floor dimension. For all that the massing of the Stirling looks like it is composed out of several different spatial volumes, on the inside we see it is nothing of the kind. It is a block, striated with evenly spaced floor plates 15 feet apart. Each floor is a single volume of space with minimal interruptions, first in the middle of the block, where the atrium penetrates the interior, bringing light into the deep space inside and, second, in the distribution of columns, not on a regular grid like the Mies' but still, an orderly interruption of the spatial flow (Fig. 9).

At first glance Stirling's design does not look anything like the Mies, which might have stood in its place and yet, on closer inspection we see a spirit of continuity between the two, first, because of the way Stirling knowingly reversed the urban figure/ground relations of Mies' design and second, perhaps more tellingly, the related ways in which each architect mused on the past and kept it at arms length. Mies' musings led him to position his architecture as conspicuously uninvolved in the past, where Stirling's led him to use the past almost like a huge toy-box, to rummage about inside looking for forms he could use in the present (Figs 10 and 11). It is perhaps ironic then, that one outcome of the Mansion House saga is that the collection of artefacts that actually were from the past, the listed Victorian buildings, were all demolished and soon forgotten, with one tiny but interesting exception. The best known building on Palumbo's site was the Mappin and Webb building by J. & J. Belcher, completed in 1870. It was located on the apex of the triangle, facing the Bank of England and presenting a 'prow' form to the radiating pattern of roads that for many people signal the heart of the City (Fig. 12). In classic Victorian manner, the Belchers dealt with the pointed corner by means of a circular tower-form rising up through five floors from the ground to the parapet, with an inverted cone-shaped roof topped by a pinnacle. After demolition, Palumbo had the pinnacle shipped to America, where he placed it as a garden feature in the grounds of his other Mies design, an actual building that he owned, the Farnsworth House at Plano Illinois, 1945-50. At Farnsworth the Mappin and Webb pinnacle became a kind of trophy, celebrating Palumbo's eventual victory over conservationist attitudes back in London.<sup>36</sup>



Fig. 10  
Model of the Mies Mansion House  
Square proposal in the RIBA  
exhibition, *Circling the Square* (2017).



Fig. 11  
No.1 Poultry (at the junction of Queen Victoria  
Street, to the left, and Poultry, to the right).



Fig. 12  
Mappin & Webb, 2-10 Queen Victoria  
Street, London EC4.



There is a further twist to the tale of the Mies in London because in 2003 Palumbo sold the Farnsworth House to the American Trust for Historic Preservation. The significance for London of his having done so is because the Farnsworth House was a near perfect expression of the same Miesian avant-garde outlook that would have been embodied in his City tower. The Farnsworth House is an open space, like a tiny portion of office floor, including a grid of columns and a small service core, into which differing contingent functions can be fitted.<sup>37</sup> By renting it out for ‘events’ the current owners’ Farnsworth House business plan buys-into the Miesian capacity to shrug-off contingency. A brief visit to their web-site shows an indifferent range of contemporary contingencies, including wedding-receptions, Tai Chi and Yoga classes.<sup>38</sup> The relationship to London is only an indirect one, nevertheless one cannot help wonder, had it been built, what kind of contingencies would the Mies in London currently be hosting? Of course Mies would not be interested, he would be facing the other way, but for others - users, designers and sometimes thinkers about buildings - these kinds of contingent matters are often of interest.

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Note: All images are by the author with the exception of Figs 10 and 11 (J. Bold) and Fig. 12 (T. Hinchcliffe).

## NOTES

- 1 *Mies van der Rohe + James Stirling: Circling the Square*, The Architecture Gallery, RIBA, 8 March to 25 June 2017. For images of the gallery and exhibition visit [https://www.carmodygroarke.com/RIBA\\_Gallery/](https://www.carmodygroarke.com/RIBA_Gallery/)
- 2 M. Iuliano (ed.), *One Poultry Speaks*, (Liverpool, 2017).
- 3 In order to stress avant-garde as a motivation rather than a group with members, the customary definite article is omitted.
- 4 There was a very strong anti-constructivist/anti-productivist outlook among the avant-garde. Mies’ complaint about architects who indulged in a confused ‘playing with forms’ was directed at constructivism. The same attitude is shown in the following observation by Mies: ‘I think there is no more difference in the arrival of nuclear fission than there was in the arrival of the aeroplane. People do not, I think, change basically. We can easily become too influenced by what we read in the newspapers. I think the so-called Space Age is just a technological problem of the universe’ (Mies van der Rohe, ‘No Dogma’, *Interbuild*, 6/6 (1959), 11.
- 5 For a recent account see the chapters ‘860-880 Lake Shore Drive: High Rise,’ and ‘Seagram Building: Dark Building,’ in D. Mertins, *Mies*, (London & New York, 2014), 314-37, 338-63.
- 6 For a good, analytical account of this aspect of Miesian architecture see the article by J. Winter, *Architectural Review*, 151, (February 1972).
- 7 For more about this aspect of Miesian architecture, see K. Michael Hays, ‘Critical Architecture: Between Culture and Form,’ *Perspecta*, 21, (1984); for more about the reflective and refractive properties of glass see R. Feynman, *QED, The Strange Theory of Light and Matter*, (Harmondsworth, 1985).
- 8 See ‘Christian Norberg-Schulz: A Talk with Mies van der Rohe,’ in F. Neumeyer, *The Artless Word, Mies van der Rohe on the Building Art*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1991), 338-39.
- 9 Louis Sullivan, ‘The tall office building artistically considered’, *Lippcott’s Magazine*, (March 1896), (no longer under copyright), [https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/architecture/4-205-analysis-of-contemporary-architecture-fall-2009/readings/MIT4\\_205F09\\_Sullivan.pdf](https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/architecture/4-205-analysis-of-contemporary-architecture-fall-2009/readings/MIT4_205F09_Sullivan.pdf)
- 10 There are many images online of the Wainwright Building, St Louis, Missouri (built 1890-91); see also H.R. Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Harmondsworth, 1971), 343.

- 11 Sullivan, op.cit.
- 12 Mies van der Rohe, 'Lecture', (place, date and occasion unknown), in Neumeyer, op.cit., 252.
- 13 For evidence of Mies and Benjamin's overlapping interests see D. Mertins & M.W. Jennings (eds), *G An Avant-Garde Journal of Art, Architecture, Design and Film, 1923-1926*, (London and Los Angeles, 2010).
- 14 R. Evans, 'Mies van der Rohe's Paradoxical Symmetries', *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, Architectural Association, (London, 1997), 246.
- 15 Mies van der Rohe, 'Building Art and the Will of the Epoch', Neumeyer, op.cit., 245.
- 16 E. Esau, 'The Magazine of Enduring Value, Der Querschnitt (1921-36) and the World of Illustrated Magazines,' P. Brooker et al (eds), *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, Volume III, *Europe 1880-1940*, Part II, (Oxford 2013), 868-87.
- 17 This is taken from a commentary written in Richter's own journal G - to which Mies also contributed, sometimes in the role of editor, sometimes as content provider and sometimes by providing funds: Mertins & Jennings, op.cit., 173.
- 18 See for example, Designing Buildings Wiki, 'The Inquiry - Mansion House Square v. Number 1 Poultry', ([https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/The\\_Inquiry\\_-\\_Mansion\\_House\\_Square\\_v.\\_Number\\_1\\_Poultry](https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/The_Inquiry_-_Mansion_House_Square_v._Number_1_Poultry)).
- 19 For a history of the rise of these groups within the planning system see M. Hunter, *Preserving the Past, The Rise of Heritage in Modern Britain*, (Stroud, 1996). The book includes an account of the Mansion House and Poultry affair, see chapters 5 & 8.
- 20 See for example, G. Stamp, 'The Battle of No.1 Poultry', *Apollo*, (April 2017), <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/the-battle-of-no-1-poultry/>
- 21 P. Lambert, 'Mies Immersion,' in P. Lambert (ed), *Mies in America*, (New York, 2001), 512 (note 89).
- 22 Mertins, *Mies*, op.cit.
- 23 Ibid, 423.
- 24 'City rejects Mies,' *Architects' Journal*, (29 September, 1982), 29.
- 25 'Highlights from the inspector's report,' *Architects' Journal*, (29 May 1985), 25.
- 26 See the AA School of Architecture public lecture series: Peter Palumbo-Mansion House Square, (8.3.1982), (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAA1VoiSfg8>).
- 27 Quoted in *Architects' Journal* (29 May, 1985), 24.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 An international bond denominated in a currency not native to the country where it is issued. The first eurobonds were issued in 1963 by Autostrade, an Italian motorway network. The deal was arranged by the London bankers S.G. Warburg.
- 30 D. Kynaston, *The City of London*, Volume IV, *A Club No More, 1945-2000*, (London, 2001), 700-01.
- 31 See 032c, 'The Spectre of Mies Over London: Jack Self Interviews Lord Peter Palumbo,' *Manual for Freedom, Research & Creativity*, (January 9, 2017), (<https://032c.com/lord-peter-palumbo>).
- 32 See the entry in T. Riley & B. Bergdoll (eds), *Mies in Berlin*, (New York, 2001), 214-17.
- 33 Mies, 'Concerning My Block', Neumeyer op.cit., 259.
- 34 P. Carter, 'Mies van der Rohe 1886-1969, Complete List of Works', *Mies van der Rohe at work*, (London, 1999), 186-89.
- 35 See the chapter 'After Stuttgart' in M. Girouard, *Big Jim: The life and work of James Stirling*, (London, 1998).
- 36 I am indebted to Tanis Hinchcliffe for information on the turret and its movements. She visited the Farnsworth House in 1996 and recounts how 'Palumbo had set out the grounds as a sculpture park, but just to the left of the drive mid-way as you came in from the road there was the top pinnacle of the Mappin and Webb building, set on the ground'. When Palumbo left the Farnsworth House he took the turret with him to his house by Frank Lloyd Wright at Kentuck Knob, Pennsylvania.
- 37 For more about the design of the Farnsworth House, see my essay 'Twentieth Century Modern Architecture and the Countryside: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's design for a country golf clubhouse for the Krefeld Golf Club Association, *TAMS*, 60, (2016), 91-93.
- 38 <https://farnsworthhouse.org/history-farnsworth-house/> (accessed 25 August 2018)