

FARNSWORTH COLLECTION

Chapter 13

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4
5
6 By the summer of 1950 the Fox River house had a roof, and the slabs of
7 travertine waited in rows outside the brooding house. Students of all callings
8 arrived in busloads to mill around open-mouthed and to drop a line into the river
9 in the hope of carp. Architects came from various European countries and we
10 brought one or two of them out from town with us about every weekend. Most of
11 them were fulsome in their words of praise and wonderment at the miracle which
12 was taking form in that rural spot; one or two of the German ones exclaimed,
13 "Master!" and crawled across the terrace to the latter's feet where he sat on a
14 low aluminum deck chair, impassively awaiting the throaty plaudits of the visitors,
15 "Grossartig!", "Unglaublich!".
16

17 The blue canvas deck chair became the pivotal point in the travertine
18 drama which drove the first nails of incredulity into my hither to well to order
19 guarded tolerance. The slabs cut specially, and had been selected before they
20 left the yards of the marble firm, delivered at the farmhouse, they had been made
21 visible to Mies who had assigned them to one of three categories; first quality,
22 second quality, or reject. This seemed appropriate and I took it for evidence of
23 the architect's meticulous concern for the best use of his buildings materials
24 when, however, the travertine ceremony was once again enacted, this time with
25 Mies in the blue deck chair while a crew of men filed by, each man carrying a
26 slab of stone like a precious painting before the eyes of a divine appraiser, until
27 every slab had once more been viewed. I turned a corner in my regard for Mies.
28 The absurdity became dramatic when it was discovered that there had been a
29 misunderstanding about which pile belonged to which category and that there
30 was no agreement between First Viewing and Second Viewing.
31
32

33 There were also irritations that summer of 1950 for the workmen who
34 complained that the young man from Mies' office who had been delegated as
35 supervisor, interrupted their work with foolish questions. "He don't know anything
36 about building and he expects us to teach him but that keeps us from getting
37 anything done."
38

39 On this point I expostulated to Mies: "The workmen are complaining, and I
40 get the impression that he is really raising our building costs through his
41 inexperience."
42

43 Mies hesitated for a moment. "You go back to your nephritis where you
44 belong and leave me to build your house without interference." It as a tough
45 moment, and Mies and I were not far from a rift; but a house cannot very well be

46 abandoned half finished and a vertrautes Gesichtbe cancelled out for a squabble.
47 So we softened our voices and parted friends.

48

49 Finally the travertine floors were complete, the furnace room was loaded
50 with the boiler for the floor heating coils and two hot air furnaces as well as the
51 overhead wter tank, and the "core" was surrounded by a light wall in paneled
52 wood veneer. It was at this point that I found that the utilities had been jammed
53 together so ruthlessly that only the most emaciated of heating and plumbing men
54 could ope to service the equipment lying to the east of the middle. As for the
55 chimneys and dampers for the oil furnaces, they could only be reached by the
56 plumber's oldest boy, a thin wiry child who could be poked back among the pipes
57 and was just old enough to carry out orders. After one such session, the plumber
58 dusted off his child and stood him on his feet. "You haven't chosen a name for
59 this house yet, have you? My suggestion would be 'My Miesconception'".

60

61 At last the glass panes could be bolted in place, the fireplace could be
62 tried out and a can of soup could be heated on a hot plate in the bathroom. The
63 lighting of the fireplace on the hearth revealed a curious fact, namely, that the
64 house was sealed so hermetically that the attempt of a flame to go up the
65 chimney caused an interior negative pressure. This was surprisingly hard to
66 correct.

67

68 One evening I went to a party in Hugo's studio, where I found a number of
69 people from the Institute of Design most of whom I knew. The aura of the
70 Bauhaus and Moholy-Nagy still surrounded the Institute in those days and the
71 atmosphere was alight with trends from the old world and the new. Salvation
72 was to be found in the enchanting titles and the linear reiterations of Paul Klee, in
73 the cut-outs of the last Kandinsky, the two-dimensional mechanisms of Mondrian
74 and, a little later, the large-scale product, the squirt gun where the brush was to
75 fussy. The arty folk got plastered with cheap wine, and the paint was sprayed,
76 dribbled, or applied with the heel, the elbow or the knee.

77

78 The sensitive and intellectual Hugo had a different problem and his hopes
79 lay in automatic expression. Speed, not surface area, seemed to him the
80 essential, and his tables were covered with ejaculations in India ink on paper
81 napkins with which he hoped to elude the brain with all its paralyzing forms and
82 tap a deeper source of animal force.

83

84 Mies came with me that evening of Hugo's studio party. Established in an
85 equivalent of the blue canvas deck chair, with a drink in hand, he offered no
86 comment whatever and his gelid silence discouraged even the drunkest from
87 approaching him. In the other room, a stranger grasped my elbow. "How did you
88 ever happen to involve yourself with Mies? You surely know that this is nothing
89 but a very queer man with a queer name"----.

90

91 I was shocked and hurt on Mies' behalf, but before I had recovered enough to
92 think of a reply he had moved past me and disappeared among the other guests.
93 When Hugo dropped by one evening a week or two later I told him about the
94 incident and asked him who the stranger was.

95
96 "He's a fellow I used to know when I worked around Arp's studio. He's an
97 art historian, quite a smart fellow. He's visiting in Chicago and giving a few
98 lectures at ID."
99

100 He hung his coat in the closet and, putting his immense and bulging
101 briefcase on the floor he sat down on the sofa and pulled out a Photostat page
102 from Mallarme and one from Apollinaire. The little silver poodle welcomed Hugo
103 fondly and buried her head in his briefcase. "I have some cookies for her in
104 there," he explained. Hugo was charming and I loved his occasional evenings
105 calls: he always telephoned first and arrived smelling of soap and Swiss snows,
106 his odd little black fedora set straight on the top of his head and his long funereal
107 overcoat was tattered and he never came empty-handed, and from the tattered
108 briefcase came sparkling enthusiasms, perplexities, clippings from foreign
109 reviews, disputed points of scholarship and, of course, hopes. The poodle curled
110 up on the sofa beside him where he could pat her without disturbing our
111 conversation, and we went on talking for hours. Once I wrote a sketch about
112 Hugo which I presented to him on one of these occasions. In it I put the soap,
113 the sandpaper, the shy motions of his long limbs, the dueling Ego and Id and
114 everything else that affectionate insight could know or divine. While he read it I
115 went out in the kitchen to make him a drink. When I came back he got to his
116 feet. "I protest" he said, a little embarrassed. "You left something out".

117
118 "Is that possible? Tell me, so that I can make amends!"

119
120 "You didn't say what I had in my pickets!"

121
122 Such was the Hugo of those still charmed days. That evening soon after
123 the party and the cutting words of the stranger, I brought up the incident.

124
125 "I'm so accustomed to the premise that Mies is great that I was really
126 shaken by the curt finality of those words. Of course I have been aware of his
127 brutality for quite a while now, but I never seriously questioned his place and
128 value in architecture. And yet I wonder if what I'm saying now is strictly true.
129 Perhaps, in addition to a real and growing dislike for his arrogance and his
130 monumental selfishness, I have been having some shadowy doubts concerning
131 the sanctity of the rectangle. I mean as an absolute and not only one but the
132 only one - ."

133
134 "That's bad," interposed Hugo lightly. Doesn't Mies himself say that
135 culture spreads by proclamation? Well, you've heard the rectangle proclaimed
136 emphatically enough, haven't you"

137
138 “And how! Of course it isn’t Mies who vocalizes the rectangle – he is the
139 rectangle. Perhaps it’s the vocalizing by the supporting cast which is getting hard
140 to bear.

141
142 “Well, if one undertakes to proclaim one has to develop the means of
143 emphasizing the proclamation. Emphasis is the main thing and the ordinary way
144 to get it is through repetition and here the supporting case becomes important.
145 And of course modern advertising has a lot of resources.

146
147 “Hugo, did you ever hear anybody else express a similar viewpoint about
148 Mies?”

149
150 “A queer man with a queer name? Not precisely. But it wouldn’t surprise
151 me to hear that he has adverse critics in Europe. Anybody who achieves
152 prominence has adverse, even hostile, critics, and I don’t quite see why you
153 should feel so upset about it. De-bunking has been a popular exercise for quite a
154 time now.”

155
156 “But your friend’s message goes a good bit further than that.”

157
158 “True. But don’t forget that Germany of the Inflationzeit must have been
159 pretty nasty.”

160
161 “It must have been a hot-house for all spies of opportunism.”

162
163 “At any rate, so far as Mies and his rectangle are concerned, they have to
164 be taken or left – the Emperor wears the most superb cloak in the world or else
165 he is naked. And it seems that neither the Trustees of IIT nor the architects of
166 Chicago thought he was naked.”

167
168 Not all the foreign architects who came to visit the glass house were
169 German and not all the Germans prostrated themselves before the designer.
170 Among others there were three particularly nice English ones who, though
171 appreciative and cordial, managed to retain their calm. Chronologically the first
172 of these was Mr. Malcolm Dark, who took the back seat as we drove out to Plano
173 and from his slightly aloof position there, addressed Mies as “Mr. Mice.” I was
174 trying to accomplish a bit of economy in connection with the hardware that day.
175 “I can’t believe that that single door handle has to be made to order and to come
176 from some far place. Sometimes I wonder whether the boys know how to shop
177 for such details.

178
179 “Mr. Mies!” called the jolly Mr. Dark from the back seat, “Mr. Mice! She’s
180 begging for mercy!”

181

182 Mies offered no comment and we pulled in the gate in a mood of
183 uncomfortable constraint. The glass panes were not in place yet and we had to
184 watch carefully as we trailed around upon the lower of our two horizontal planes.
185 This circumstance gave an opportunity to observe the manner of joining of the
186 potential glass box to its columns. "My goodness, Mr. Mice" explained or
187 irrepressible guest, "Are the channels welded to the columns?"

188
189 "Exactly!" replied Mies. "The house is a glass box hanging from its
190 supports."

191
192 "May I make so bold as to ask what the advantages are to that system?
193 I'm afraid I never heard of welding such large surfaces together. It certainly looks
194 very solid but I would think that the heat required might easily have warped either
195 of the two, or both, joining members."

196
197 "I employ only expert welders."

198
199 "But Mr. Mice – please excuse me if I persist, what are the advantages to
200 be expected from this technique? I see, too, that it leaves the sawed-off ends, so
201 to speak, of the columns exposed outside the glass circumference. And the
202 same goes for the terrace? How original!"

203
204 "That was my concept." Said Mies, evidently unsure of his position vis a
205 vis our English visitor. It should be a glass box hanging from its supports."

206
207 At this moment the afternoon took on a different, a supernatural tint. The
208 trees and meadows, as we saw them from our stone shelf, faded into a vision
209 which we all saw and in the sky there floated a blush-pink celestial body like a
210 pale pink moon, supremely large.

211
212 "Why Mr. Mice!" shouted Mr. Dark. "What in the world is going on?"

213
214 "For God's sake, how should I know? Eigenartig!"

215
216 We stared at one another and at the big pink heavenly body and at our
217 altered world. "You don't imagine that we might have slipped out of orbit, do you,
218 after so many years in the same one?" suggested Mr. Dark, now quite subdued.

219
220 We agreed that we had never seen anything like it and that the two
221 horizontal planes of the unfinished building, floating over the meadows, were
222 unearthly beautiful under a sun which glowed like a wild rose.

223
224 The explanation of the phenomenon, as it appeared in the paper the
225 following morning had to do with forest fires raging in Canada. But the mystery
226 was unsolved as we got back into the automobile that Sunday afternoon.

227

228 The second of the three Englishmen was Fello Atkinson an architect from
229 London. The first snow had fallen during the night when I stopped for him at the
230 Chicago Avenue YMCA and when we reached the river bank the rustlings and
231 cracklings of autumn were muted by a light covering of crystalline white. Fello
232 gathered up some dry wood and we lighted a fire and began to talk about the
233 furnishing of the house.
234

235 “If you build a house with glass walls, not only to put a roof over year head
236 but to procure certain aesthetic satisfactions, I think you should be careful not to
237 lose those values through the furnishings and here where we looked into the
238 hearts of these great trees and across the meadows and the river, it would be a
239 great mistake to set up the usual massive pieces of overstuffed furniture. And
240 yet, if you want to use reed, wicker or something of that sort, the effect would not
241 be humanly inviting and you would feel as if you were camping on travertine.
242 Color, as well, turns out to present problems. It seems to be wanted, to take the
243 chill off and yet, however it is introduced, it turns out to be disastrously.”
244

245 “I suspect that the difficulties have to do with an abstract quality which is
246 perhaps the dominant ones. It will be interesting to see what means you will find
247 to live happily in your weekend house. For it would be dreadful if you were not to
248 be happy here,” Fello poked up our brushwood fire and then went out to look for
249 more wood.
250

251 On our way home we arranged that Fello was to come over that evening
252 for a nightcap and that I would invite Mies to join us. “You would enjoy meeting
253 him, wouldn’t you?”
254

255 “I’d love to come over. As for meeting Mies, I can’t honestly say that I
256 care particularly.”
257

258 Invited to come over for a nightcap – and the expression was never varied
259 – Mies always agreed, put the receiver down, took his hat and walked out the
260 door. In five minutes he was at his destination. And so it was, the evening when
261 I got back from the country with Fello Atkinson.
262

263 Conversation moved heavily in spite of anything I could think of to get it off
264 the ground, and by eleven Atkinson took his leave and offered to drop Mies at
265 home on his way back to the Lawson Y. The next evening, however, he rang the
266 doorbell unannounced and, taking the stairs two at a time, he threw himself down
267 on the sofa.
268

269 “Look,” he said, “I’ve been thinking a lot about the furnishing for the house
270 and some of the other problems that we were talking about yesterday afternoon
271 and I wanted to see you again before I leave Chicago. Am I disturbing you?”
272

273 “No, of course not. I’m terribly glad to see you.”

274 "The thing I have on my mind is this; the history of architecture is badly
275 served with quarrels between architects and their clients. I won't stop even to
276 cite the best known of these rows between great architects and great clients
277 which usually ended in the illustrious architect being forbidden to set foot on the
278 grounds. These stories do no credit to architects and have done a great deal of
279 damage to architecture. The situation seems even worse in recent years
280 because we architects have broadened our pretensions and come to feel that we
281 should not only design and execute the house itself, but furnish it as well."

282
283 "That presupposes, however, that the clients have no feelings of their own,
284 no traditions, no taste and no personal requirements - ."

285
286 "That's about what it amounts to. Of course you realize that all of us do
287 not see it that way, but still it is a trend, one which is fortified, I'm afraid, by some
288 of the innovations in architecture which combine so poorly with traditional
289 furniture. And here we come back to your problems and your situation with
290 respect to Mies which is the reason for my visit this evening. It should be
291 possible for you to go ahead together until the project is complete, but I'm afraid
292 you're not going to be able to. I kept thinking of it last night as you and he were
293 sitting here on the sofa. He is a very stubborn man and you are far removed
294 from the masochistic German woman he's accustomed to dealing with – I'm
295 terribly afraid that it's going to turn out to be impossible for you keep on with him."

296
297 "That is certainly possible. I am sure that he would like to put several
298 examples of the Barcelona chair, done in pink suede, beside that enormous
299 glass coffee table, although the subject of furniture has never come up between
300 us. I think the Barcelona chair is very handsome but it is fearfully heavy and
301 utterly unsuitable for a small country house - the place would look like a Helena
302 Rubinstein salon. There is already the local rumor that it's a tuberculosis
303 sanitarium. The fact is that Mies has no taste and if you stop to think about it,
304 that is not surprising. I would hate to be forced to break with him, but I would
305 never consent to his ideas on furnishing. One's house is almost as personal as
306 one's skin. I don't see how he could seriously think that I would go with him
307 beyond the erection of the house itself."

308
309 "But I have no doubt that he does think just that. It shouldn't be this way,
310 but I'm afraid that this story is going to end badly."

311
312
313 "I suppose you have good reasons for your predictions, Fello, and I listen
314 with a very heavy heart. It may well be that I have been mistaken in my
315 impressions of Mies. Perhaps, as a man, he is not the clairvoyant primitive that I
316 thought he was, but simply colder and more cruel individual than anybody I have
317 ever known. Perhaps it was never a friend and a collaborator, so to speak, that
318 he wanted but a dupe and a victim. There are also the possibilities of a ruinous

319 financial mess, in case our gloomy prognostications should really turn out to be
320 well-founded.” We finished our drinks and parted with a promise to write.

321
322 “I can be reached in New York at this address, and if I can be of any help,
323 don’t hesitate to let me know.”

324
325 Not long after this I wrote to Mies that I was unable to underwrite any
326 further expenses in connection with the Fox River project. As I remember he did
327 not acknowledge my communication either in writing or by word of mouth, and I
328 felt that a refusal to authorize further expenses should not involve a rupture of
329 friendship between us and therefore made efforts to continue all of our cordial
330 customs unchanged.

331
332 One evening a truly bizarre incident occurred. Mies was to have dinner
333 with me at home, and when I opened the door I found the table set in the bay
334 window and Mies already established in his preferred corner of the lounge. I had
335 hardly washed up and given him his martini before the doorbell rang. Supposing
336 that it was a telegram or something of the sort I released the front door without
337 using the house phone and waited to see who or what it was. I was presently
338 joined on the landing outside my door by a strikingly handsome young man in an
339 immaculate white linen suit who gave his name as Snyder and preceded me in
340 the door. Whether he told me that he was a friend of someone I knew in New
341 York or whether I thought the friend in New York had mentioned a lover of hers
342 by that name and was ready to accept any handy explanation for the fortuitous
343 presence in my living room of the young man in the white suit – I do not recall; in
344 any case I could think of nothing more plausible to do than to present him to Mies
345 and offer him a drink, which he accepted pleasantly as he made himself
346 comfortable on the chaise lounge.

347
348 My tentative researches into the identity and background of Mr. Snyder
349 had made no progress whatever when Laura appeared in the doorway and said
350 decisively, “I’m sorry to interrupt you, Dr. Farnsworth, but dinner is ready.”

351
352 We waited for the unidentified young man to spring to his feet, bid us
353 good-night and leave, but he simply continued to sit.

354
355 “I’m awfully sorry that I can’t urge you to join us for dinner, Mr. Snyder.
356 Unfortunately, the meal was planned for one guest and doesn’t lend itself to a
357 third portion.”

358
359 “That’s quite all right – I understand perfectly,” responded the unsought
360 guest, still making not the slightest motion to get off the green chaise.

361
362 Laura appeared again in the door and Mies and I took our places at the
363 table. By this time I was uncomfortably aware that Mies had acknowledged by
364 no word or sign the presence of a third person in the room.

365 “Perhaps you will excuse us if we proceed with dinner,” I said, feeling
366 definitely exasperated. “You can take the other chair, if you like.”

367
368 He complied and, putting his elbows on the table and his chin in his
369 hands, he surveyed us placidly and, it seemed insolently. Mies disposed of his
370 tenderloin rapidly. Presently the stranger spoke:

371
372 “I know all about you, Mr. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe” – were his
373 astonishing words, pronounced with a kind of a feline sneer.

374
375 Without replying, Mies finished off his plate while I released my artillery:
376 “I’d like to remind you, Mr. Snyder that you have surged into my house uninvited
377 and insulted a guest of mine. This has gone far enough and I’m now asking you
378 to leave.”

379
380 But it was Mies who got up from the table, took his hat from the shelf in
381 the coat closet and walked out, closing the door. Mr. Snyder went back to the
382 end of the chaise and burst into tears. Laura appeared once again at the door,
383 this time with an upraised hatchet in her right hand. “I’m not leaving until that
384 young man’s out of here,” she announced.

385
386 “Snyder, I don’t care whose friend you are, for God’s sake, stop that idiotic
387 bawling and go away!”

388
389 “I will, I’m terribly sorry.”

390
391 Laura lowered the hatchet and bolted the door behind him. After a
392 discrete interval I went to Mies with the idea of apologizing for the treatment he
393 had received in my house. There too the doorbell rang, but Mies did not admit
394 the caller, who was presumably Snyder. By that time it occurred to me that it
395 was I who had been mistreated and that Mies should have shown some regard
396 for me since the incident evidently regarded him and not me.

397
398 By the end of 1950 it seemed possible to spend a night in the house, and
399 on New Year’s Eve I brought out a couple of foam rubber mattresses and a
400 number of other indispensable articles and prepared to inhabit the glass house
401 for the first time. With the light of a bare 60 watt bulb on an extension cord I
402 made up the foam rubber mattress on the floor, turned up the air furnaces and
403 got something to eat. Spots and strokes of white paint remained here and there
404 on the expanses of the glass walls and the sills were covered with ice. The silent
405 meadows outside white with old and hardened snow reflected the bleak bulb
406 within, as if the glass house itself were an unshaded bulb of uncalculated watts
407 lighting the winter plains. The telephone rang, shattering the solitary scene.

408
409 “Are you there alone in those cold meadows? I’m your neighbor from over
410 the approach to the bridge. Won’t you come and celebrate New Year’s Eve with

411 us? I'll send one of the boys to bring you over – I can't bear to think of you there
412 all alone!"

413
414 At that time unknown to me, the voice was Leola's, the wife of Gar, the
415 tavern keeper. It would have been easier to face the situation for which I was
416 prepared: the new house, the seamy flood – meadows and the young moon over
417 the black river. But I could hardly decline so warm an invitation; so it was not
418 long before two dark forms could be made out walking down from the farmhouse.

419
420 "We didn't know whether we could get down here in a car. Do you mind
421 walking up?"

422
423 "Not a bit. You can make it in a car but it's a little hard to turn around.
424 You did well not to try it."

425
426 Leola's cottage house still wore its Christmas trim and all the lights were
427 on when we knocked and entered. Leola herself was an immensely obese
428 woman who played the organ and adored music. Gar had to work that evening, I
429 was told, but there were five or six couples gathered around a long table, and I
430 took one of several empty chairs. I remember nothing attractive about that
431 evening except the haunting melancholy in the eyes of that tremendous woman
432 who was married to Gar and loved music.

433
434 "I could have cried when I saw you was going to build down by the shore,"
435 she said. "You don't know how quick the river can rise. Often I can't sleep at
436 night for fear it's going to drown us all. Once it came up and flooded your barn
437 so that the farmers could catch fish with a pitchfork."

438
439 "Really, Leola? What year was that?"

440
441 "Oh, it was a good many years ago, but still you never can tell when it'll
442 rise again and we'll all be drowned."

443
444 Finally the New Year came in, burdened with its future floods. I went
445 home to my electric bulb escorted by one of the couples at the long table who
446 lived just down the road.

447
448 It was an uneasy night, partly from the novel exposure provided by the
449 uncurtained glass walls and partly from the fear of Mies' implacable intentions.
450 Expenses in connection with the house had risen far beyond what I had expected
451 or could well afford and the glacial bleakness of that winter night showed very
452 clearly how much more would have to be spent before the place could be made
453 even remotely habitable.

454
455 Perhaps it was not precisely the following morning – it might have been a
456 few weeks later – that I went back to town to begin the week's work, deprived of

457 any further doubt that my economic security had been seriously jeopardized by
458 my architect and that my trust in Mies had been misplaced.

459

460 On hospital rounds I visited Room 35 which was occupied by a 59-year-
461 old lawyer who had been hospitalized for treatment of a kidney disorder. As I
462 entered the room, he stared at me from the bed. "You don't look very good
463 yourself, this morning," he said. "Can't you sit down for a few minutes?"

464

465 After hearing the principle reasons for my debilitated health he sat up
466 decisively. "Well! Now will you let me try to get you out of this mess?"

467

468 There being no other value left to save except my economic solvency, I
469 agreed and in the ensuing weeks I learned in considerable detail the facts of my
470 situation. "Do you realize that he hasn't obtained waivers of lien from the firms
471 who supplied labor or materials and that any or all of them could claim that they
472 weren't paid and take you to court? And from the records kept in that incredible
473 office it's anybody's guess whether they were paid or not."

474

475 "Don't tell me any more awful things, Randy. I already have so much on
476 my mind that I can't take any more. Put a period to the sentence – one that will
477 stick – and then we'll see where we stand."

478

479 What passed between the two men I never knew as Randy, unkindly
480 turned the "leather-hinged" a journalist who covered the suite later brought
481 against me by Mies, considered that the house was an incompetent botch and
482 that I had been the gullible victim of exploitation by an opportunist in whose
483 megalomania and pompousness had replaced the ordinary prerequisites, training
484 and experience which I had had the right to expect of an architect. It is unlikely
485 that he would have displayed, or wanted to display, much tact in his dealings with
486 Mies, on the other hand, the latter had learned certain sordid lessons from the
487 New World as well as from the German inflation of 1922-23, among which the
488 percept that bad publicity was better than none. Probably contributing to the
489 storm, one of the boys from Mies' office telephoned one day to tell me that the
490 furniture for the house was to be delivered, namely, two Barcelona chairs, the
491 glass coffee table and two of the chrome spring chairs. I answered that I had not
492 ordered them and did not intend to use them. "You're not going to use them!" he
493 repeated, stunned. You can't mean it. They were ordered for you." Evidently.
494 But not with my knowledge, let alone, my agreement. I'm sorry to have to clear
495 up that point, Jerry. A pause followed before he said darkly. "You'll be sorry!"

496

497 A few weeks later I was served with a summons to appear in the Yorkville
498 courthouse in connection with a suit for \$30,000 brought against me by Ludwig
499 Mies van der Rohe. "It doesn't seem possible," I said to the bailiff who served
500 me with the document, "It certainly is a pity," he responded. "As long as I'm here,
501 doctor, do you mind if I have a look around? I've heard so much about this
502 house – it sure is unusual."

503 Mies had been poorly advised on the technique of his punitive action and
504 the formula which began "as architect, contractor and agent," had to be revised
505 several times in accordance with the regulations of the American Institute of
506 Architects, before the final document, a Mechanic's Lien, was filed, claiming
507 \$30,000 in architect's fees for a house which, when first accepted as a material
508 project, was not to cost more than \$40,000, which I had, in the absence of any
509 contract between us made the facts difficult to unravel, but after a time Randy
510 filed counter suit. Strangely enough it was not Mies' attack, but my defense suit
511 which detonated the publicity and made it appear that I had suddenly and
512 capriciously turned against him, and I soon found myself in a position to
513 understudy Mr. Eric Hoffer as observer and analyst of mass movements. In my
514 case the masses moved chiefly on Sundays, by busloads or by private car, on
515 horseback or on bicycles, their motivations must have been as described by
516 Hoffer in that famous little book, *The True Believer*, and they thumbed their way
517 tirelessly aboard my distress and my exposure behind glass walls, to whatever
518 satisfactions they were seeking. Shirts fluttered from behind trees, cameras
519 clicked, and heads encircled my "sleeping space" as I woke up in the morning.
520 Qualified persons continued to ask permission to come and see the house, and
521 for a year or so after the rupture with Mies, I thought that our personal relations
522 should not affect my attitude toward those professionals who had a legitimate
523 interest in the project. Into that rather restricted group fell the third nice
524 Englishman, Mr. Michael Jaffe, and Mr. and Mrs. Richard Neutra.

525
526 The Neutras came when the forsythias were blooming. These were
527 among the first gardening experiments to be tried indoors and half-a-dozen tubs
528 of forsythias bushes were in luxuriant bloom when the Neutras came up the path
529 to the terrace and saw them from the bare ground outside. The California
530 architect had just recovered from a coronary occlusion and he moved slowly as
531 he came up the travertine steps, giving me the impression of a frail man. His
532 wife was charming and we fell to talking about the broken friendship between
533 Mies and myself.

534
535 "I have built a good many residences," said Mr. Neutra, "but I cannot
536 remember an instance in which I have left a client in the position in which you
537 find yourself. This is a very sad story, to which the house stands as a
538 monument. I do hope that finally you will find some degree of happiness here."

539
540 Their friendly and civilized presence was consoling and this evening as I
541 come across the name of Richard Neutra in the little *Guzanti Dictionary of Art* I
542 am glad to see that in spite of the coronary occlusion of 1950, he lived until 1970.

543
544 Mr. Michael Jaffe came late one Sunday afternoon and I liked him well
545 enough to share a chicken with him for supper. By that time I had a proper
546 woodpile, and the firelight brought out the shadows of swelling buds on the black
547 maple at this end of the terrace. We talked about Cyril Connolly and his "Unquiet
548 Grave" and the collapse of the review, *Horizon*. "Do you remember the terrible

549 story of the oil slick – in the Baltic, wasn't it that that trapped the seagulls so that
550 they couldn't get off the surface, and the boys who stoned them from the shore?
551 I think it was in the last issue of Horizon.”

552

553 “That became the most famous story of post-war writing. The oil-slick was
554 of such dimensions that it could only have come from a torpedoed sunken tanker,
555 so the anecdote was full of tragic overtones. No one of my generation will ever
556 forget it.”

557

558 As of that evening, passed in the company of a stranger who shared not
559 only the chicken, but Connolly with his pervading angst and his fascinating
560 anecdote, the swelling buds and the stoned and dying birds – the glass house
561 took on life and became by own home. Michael found his way back to town
562 rather late that evening and went back to England a few days later, leaving
563 flowers and a note.

564

565 A year or two ago I found an article in one of the Italian dailies which
566 reported the tracking down and authenticating of a Titian painting long
567 disappeared and located at last in Scotland by Prof. Michael Jaffe of Cambridge
568 University. So he is still at his work and perhaps some day I shall be trying to tell
569 him how it was that the Fox River house was converted from a propaganda issue
570 into a home.

571

572 The court hearings went on forever, futile, nasty and infinitely tedious, in
573 the old courthouse in Yorkville. “Remember that a lawsuit is only a method of
574 settling a quarrel, by no means to be confused with a way of finding out the
575 truth.” This was Randy's instruction as the session opened and I took the
576 witness stand.

577

578 As a witness I was disappointing to my defense. The reduction of my
579 relationship with Mies to a legal brief looked completely hopeless to me, and I
580 was unable to furnish dates for the few points which could have had some
581 validity in a court of law. Moreover, a sense of profound isolation brought to my
582 mind those multitudes who have tried to defend themselves, their values, their
583 honor and freedom, their lives, in some court, regular or irregular, - and plunged
584 me into depression. The only light note was introduced by a whopping bumble
585 bee which drifted into the court room from the lilacs outside and caused the
586 attorneys on both sides of the table to erase their professional smiles and spring
587 to their feet batting the air violently. The presiding judge displayed notable
588 resourcefulness with respect to the bee and after chasing it around the room for
589 a; while, cornered it and put it outside with a heavy-duty broom, so that the legal
590 squad could take their places again and mop their brows, while I took up the
591 tread of my useless reminiscences and one of the opposing attorneys announced
592 his intention to register an objection to any statement I would make. At the end
593 of the session I took the East-West freeway back to town and work, half-sick with
594 distress.

595 One Saturday in early June I packed a few groceries in the usual thermos
596 can and embarked for the weekend in the country. Hugo's little friend, the silver
597 poodle, had had puppies and they too were packed in a little basket and but on
598 the floor of the car, out of the sun. A violent thunderstorm overtook us on the
599 way, and the river shore glimmered with spectral drops as I counted the
600 travertine terrace carrying the three puppies and the rest of the paraphernalia.
601 Shall I make a bed for Lucy out here where there is a bit of a breeze, or inside, I
602 wondered as I fitted the key in the lock and opened the door.
603

604 Inside, however, I found the floor covered with water. The wood veneer of
605 the core showed a high water mark an inch or two above the floor, and the
606 shantung folds which enclosed the entire house hung, stained and soaked, from
607 their aluminum tracks overhead. Thunderstruck, I took off my shoes and waded
608 around to check the possibility of a leak in the plumbing, but there was none, and
609 it soon became clear that the water came from above, not below, and not from
610 one point but from the entire periphery of the roof. When the heating and
611 plumbing man arrived we set up the ladder and went up on to the roof which I
612 examined then for the first time. It was a flat tarpaper and gravel covering with a
613 slight pitch directed not toward peripheral gutters but to a pipe downspout leading
614 down through the core to the ground below the house. Around the outer edge
615 the tarpaper had been cut off where it reached the border or ornamental steel
616 and in the absences of flashing, had responded to a half-year of weathering by
617 bubbling and retracting. We found a defect broad enough to admit a finger,
618 which extended all around the structure and had provided for the destruction of
619 the hundreds of yards of shantung which curtained off the interior.
620

621 Coached by Harry Callahan, I was a discrete photographer at that time
622 and I spent a roll of film on flounces of tarpaper, on the border of ornamental
623 steel which had supplanted the normal flashing, on the plumber's forefinger
624 inserted in the crack and the ruler which showed the breadth and depth of the
625 defect. All the negatives were masterly and, helped by one of the teachers of
626 photography, from the Institute of Design, one evening was enough to provide
627 me with a small album of photographs to present to the court at the next of its
628 interminable sessions. This contribution excited general admiration, I was told by
629 Randy, but it seemed nobody could believe his eyes, and a court session was
630 called to meet on the roof, in the course of which it was made clear that the
631 roofing company accepted no responsibility for damages contingent upon its
632 mode of construction, since they had refused to guarantee a roof so constructed
633 and had acted under order of the architect. All hands, made it up the ladder and
634 down again, I was told, including even Mies who had been present at all or most
635 of the hearings.
636

637 The fate of a witness, let alone a litigant, in a court of law depends largely
638 upon the identification which he is able to set up in the minds of the personnel
639 therein, not only of the judge and the attorneys, but the bailiffs, the court
640 secretary, even the janitors. In this connection by all odds the most convincing

641 witness was Georgia in whose apartment in the old Irving Mies and I had met for
642 the first time. Georgia was one of the fine old book women in the Chicago of the
643 pre-Master period and the friendship between us was deep and affectionate. As
644 my misadventure took on even more weight and threatened greater danger, she
645 evidently suffered from regret, and remorse that she had ever brought us
646 together, for she volunteered to testify to the extremely modest character of the
647 Fox River project as it was originally conceived. I was not in the room to hear the
648 testimony, but it was described to me as amazingly effective for its clarity, its
649 simplicity and sincerity.

650
651 It was Mies himself who took the hardest punishment on the witness
652 stand, not only because of his language limitations but because of his total
653 ignorance of everything that everybody present thought any architect should
654 know. "You can't imagine what an exhibition of ignorance he put on! He didn't
655 know anything about steel, its properties or its standard dimensions, nor about
656 construction, or high school physics or just plain common sense. All he knows is
657 that guff about his concept and in the Kendall County Courthouse that doesn't go
658 down. I tell you, we had him sweating blood – he was heard to say afterwards
659 that he would never start another law suit.

660
661 For six mortal weeks those grotesque hearings continued and until at last
662 the records had grown to such proportions that there would be no further doubt
663 that nobody would ever read them.

664
665 The actions were finally settled out of court many months later, for a
666 division of court costs. I never heard the particulars of the agreement; with
667 infinite thanks to Randy I made out a check for two thousand dollars, well
668 knowing that that amount would hardly have paid for the court secretary, let
669 alone the rest of the costs.

670
671 Some time following the litigation the American Institute of Architects
672 murmured some kind of official admonition which was immediately sweetened,
673 presumably by other elements in the organization, by a medal in recognition of
674 valor as a designer.

675
676 The Museum of Modern Art intimated that it was a pity that an architect
677 should have to crush his friend and client but that in the creation of so great a
678 work of art, the crushee could not hope to prevail against the generations to
679 come.

680
681 The big glossy reviews polished up their terms and phrases with such
682 patience that the simpler of the minds that came to have a look, expected to find
683 the glass box light enough to stay afloat on air or water moored to its columns
684 and enclosing its mystic space. So "culture spreads by proclamation," and one
685 got the impression that if the house had had the form of a banana rampant

686 instead of a rectangle couchant, the proclamation would have been just as
687 imperative.

688

689 So, also, a mass movement begins to coalesce, and all those standing by
690 who bear rancor because they are not other human beings or perhaps even bear
691 nothing else than rancor, sign up for the ride, and whether the destination is
692 positive in the sense that the desired feelings of prestige and snob support are
693 attained by innocuous means or negative insofar as attained through damage to
694 those who are not booking the same ride, still it is the ride that counts. All
695 aboard!

696

697 It was hard to bear the insolence, the boorishness, of the hundreds of
698 persons who invaded the solitude of my shore and my home, and I never could
699 see why it should have to be born. It was maddening and heart-breaking to find
700 the wild flowers and ground covers so laboriously brought in to hide the scars of
701 building, battered and crushed by the boots beneath the noses pressed against
702 the glass. The only possible victory seemed to be the surviving in some degree
703 of my original idea. But the alienation, which seems today must have had its
704 beginning on that shady river bank all too soon abandoned by the herons who flew
705 away to seek seclusion farther upstream.

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