

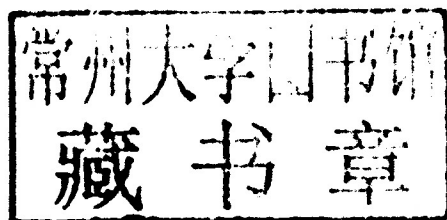
E2A

ARCHITECTURE | PIET ECKERT & WIM ECKERT

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With texts by Piet Eckert, Wim Eckert,
Michèle Bianchi, Tibor Joanelly,
Via Lewandowsky, Niklas Maak,
Martino Stierli, and Frank Weiner



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Introduction

Architecture is a longing for the ideal while simultaneously a trace, or a record of reality. Seeking a form that expresses both of these conditions and that resolves the latent contradictions of ambition, program, and site, has been our quest from the beginning. The irreconcilable has become the program of the architectural discipline. Desire and reality form an increasingly conflicted relationship which can be described as a systematic incoherence. Thus, we pursue systems that do not adhere to a single vision of cohesion but rather integrate discrepancies and extremes with a unique organizational logic and clarity. One must rid oneself of the old dogma of the minimum, often developed with maximum means, and allow a turn toward systems with diverse perspectives capable of achieving unique outcomes. A series of projects, travel notes, ideas, built works, and observations developed that depict their own sense of geography and a bizarre network of ongoing reflections. In this way, idealism does not lack context; it refers to the current political, economic, and ecological situation in a profound way that cannot be perceived as ideal without a sense of irony. This publication began with the documentation of such “ideal cases,” which provided the motivation to shape it into its current form over the course of several years.

Many places have influenced this book and are incorporated in the form of stories and projects. Zurich has asserted itself as the pivot point for new investigations. The present form is the result of an intensive examination of our work, with a concentration on that which is most significant to us. As for Richard Wagner, whose work gained new life

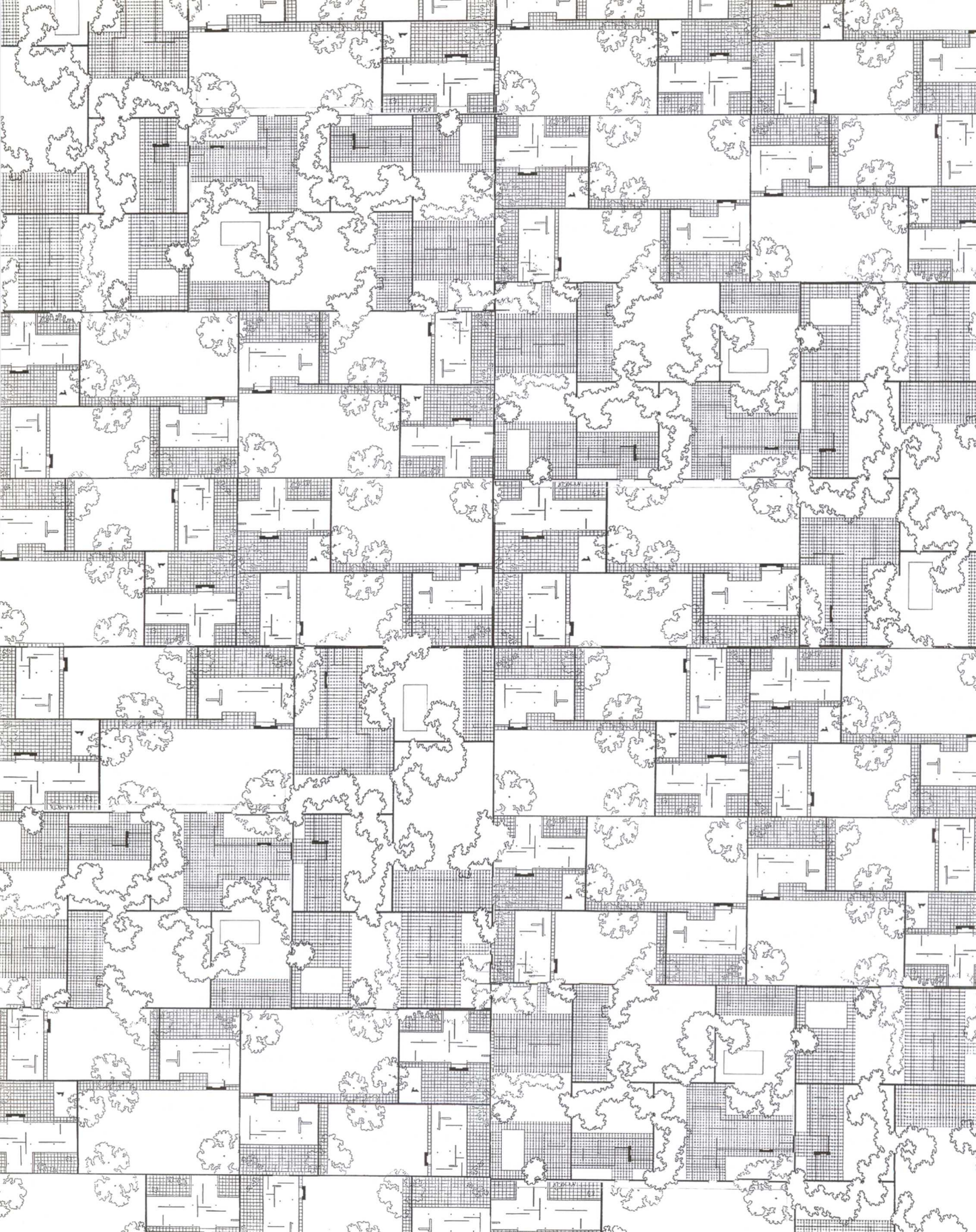
while he was exiled in Zurich, the importance lay in the willingness to be unfaithful to the purpose; in other words, to systemize that which appears unrelated to anything else.

This book could not have been created without the contributions of many different people from many different professional backgrounds who have worked with E2A over the past ten years. It would not have been possible without the restless spirit and the continuous involvement of our collaborators. Many of them left their marks in the office and others remain intensively active with us.

In creating this book, the involvement of Hans-Peter Kistler was indispensable; his independent and critical perspective continues to add an important dimension to our processes. Ellen Leuenberger gave the book form and a resilient force of continuity. Monika Annen organized all of the documents and sources from the beginning. Jon Naiman gave hundreds of working models a photographic and artistic presence and became a critical partner. Via Lewandowsky remained an inspiring friend from afar through all these years. A special thanks goes out to those who contributed their words in texts, specifically, Martino Stierli, Michèle Bianchi, Frank Weiner, Tibor Joanelly, Via Lewandowsky, and Niklas Maak. Their words are thought-provoking and exciting—always welcome in the process toward developing and understanding our work.

Finally, we would like to thank Hatje Cantz for their support and expertise, specifically Cristina Steingraber, who cordially welcomed us in Berlin and generously offered a breadth of experience and skills to editing our book.

Piet Eckert and Wim Eckert



Mies Replication

Martino Stierli, Notes on *Miesology*, Study, 2005–11

Mies van der Rohe and Architecture in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility

Perhaps nothing epitomizes modern architecture's transformation from an avant-garde utopian project into built reality more clearly than the career of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The German architect's output in the first decades of the twentieth century remained, for the most part, limited to a few relatively humble houses as well as to a number of bold visions on paper that would haunt the profession's imagination for decades to come—and apparently continue to do so. His emigration to the United States at the end of the 1930s marked the beginning of Modern Architecture's fast embrace by the capitalist establishment. Far from its iconoclastic and radical beginnings, by the 1960s Modern Architecture, and in particular its manifestation in the works by figures such as Walter Gropius or Mies van der Rohe, had become the architectural lingua franca in the western hemisphere, and the "normative" model of architectural production.¹ Meanwhile in Cold War politics, features such as abstract reductionism or transparency were hailed as the architectural insignia of democratic and egalitarian societies. Although its predominance was soon challenged by a younger generation of architects who would become the protagonists of postmodernism, Mies's proposal of a seemingly timeless architectural grammar consisting of a limited number of formal elements has remained a reference—and a challenge—for practitioners to the present day. The ongoing fascination with Mies's architectural language is not surprising, for it seems reduced to the point

of indeterminacy, leaving ample space for projection and speculation, while simultaneously manifesting a superior understanding of tectonics and the inherent qualities of materials. What renders his model compelling from a contemporary perspective is the reduction of architecture to a limited number of discrete modules or elements that can be reassembled and reproduced seemingly at will. In this regard, Mies's conception represents not only a pertinent architectural answer for the "age of technical reproducibility" (Walter Benjamin), but—arguably—also a historical precursor to the digital age. Seen in this way, as E2A has suggested in their theoretical *Miesology* project, the architectural and spatial configurations developed by Mies van der Rohe in the mid-twentieth century may be seen as a formal source from which in an almost digital manner an infinite number of architectural variations can be assembled based on a finite number of elements. *Miesology* is a series of a dozen or so photomontages created by E2A with the help of their photocopier (the everyday representative of the age of reproducibility *par excellence*) and based on reassembly of fragments of Mies's projects into new configurations. By using photomontage as a tool for spatial and architectural inquiry in such a way, E2A confronts and underlines an important point made by the German architect when he, inspired by Berlin Dadaist circles, started to make regular use of this technique from the early 1920s onwards: (visual) representation is much more than simply a *post facto* illustration, but rather a significant tool for conceptual and theoretical architectural research. A rereading of Mies van der Rohe's oeuvre may help to

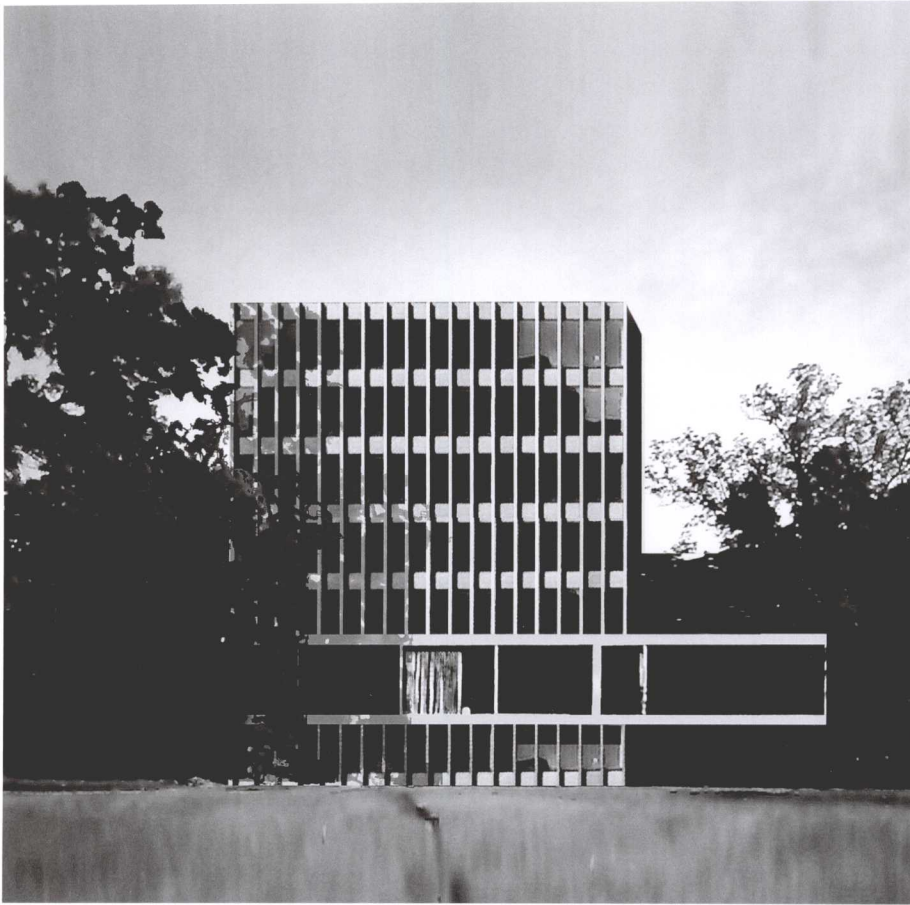
reveal its significance for contemporary architectural discourse. The historiography of modern architecture has tended to associate Mies with two main issues. On the one hand, he is considered to be the architect who pushed the idea of a flowing interior to its limit and thus paved the way for a modern conceptualization of space. On the other hand, given his background as the son of a stonemason and his non-academic training in a vocational school, he is seen as the ultimate representative of the tradition of the master builder, a craftsman whose own architectural language emanated from his intuitive sense for materials. By contrast, the role of visual media as a key element of his architectural discourse and production has been given scant attention.² However, these judgments should be reconsidered, for neither truth to materials nor mastery of space seem to be the real issues with Mies. Rather, the significance of his contribution to Modernity lies in two intertwined issues: 1) his command of (visual) media and 2) his appreciation of the fact that architecture is primarily about representation rather than space. Indeed, Mies's fame is based to a considerable extent on the production and presentation of image architectures and architectural images—on what was often pejoratively labeled, not least by Mies himself, “paper architecture.”

Within this context, the many photomontages and photocollages produced by Mies van der Rohe throughout his long career on both sides of the Atlantic deserve a closer look. His use and perfection of these media gave him the means both graphic and epistemological to revolutionize architectural representation and to elaborate his own conceptualization of space.³ Photomontage is based on the assembly and (dialectical) combination of reproduced photo-

graphic elements, hence epitomizing the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility. Thus, by preferring the principle of montage over other means of representation, Mies confirmed his will to contribute toward a genuinely contemporary architecture of his age. If the computer and the digital revolution have dramatically altered the working methods as well as the self-perception of contemporary architects, this paradigm shift may very well have been anticipated by Mies's embrace and systematic research with and in the medium of photomontage.

Retouched or cut photographs were widely used in architectural representations as early as the 1890s, very often with a manipulated or deleted background. So-called “machine retouch” (*Maschinenretouche*) was frequently employed to isolate photographed objects from distracting backgrounds or nearby buildings.⁴ Graphically manipulated photographs were also used to illustrate the impact of a projected building on the existing cityscape or landscape. The aim is to induce in the observer a kind of “reality effect,” to borrow Barthes's term. But appearances can be deceptive: with photomontage, the idea of re-presentation seems to have come to an end, for what it offers is truly virtual. Despite this attempt to achieve maximum visual integration of the project into its scenic or urban context, the Aristotelian unities of place and time, normally a given in photography, are transgressed as a number of different vantage points and levels of reality are integrated into a single depiction.⁵

The earliest instance of the use of photomontage in Mies's oeuvre dates back to one of his first known projects: his entry, with his brother Ewald, in the 1910 competition for a national monument honoring Bismarck at Bingen. In



contrast to earlier instances of architectural photomontage, Mies's depictions of the Bismarck monument are photomontages in the proper sense. His early use of this technique appears to be unparalleled at the time, and becomes all the more striking when one considers that the "invention" of photomontage is usually attributed to post-war Berlin Dada circles. In any case, this official genealogy of photomontage is somewhat imprecise, as the manipulation and montage of photographs dates back to the inception of the new medium in the mid-nineteenth century. By the end of the nineteenth century there was a popular tradition of vernacular photomontages in the form of comic postcards, private albums, and military mementos.⁶ The Dadaists deliberately referred to such artifacts from popular culture in order to unsettle and challenge generally accepted conceptions of art. Avant-garde montage, it seems, has more in common with eclectic image practices than is generally presumed—a fact clearly demonstrated by Mies's Bismarck monument montages. His use of photomontage emerged from his awareness not just of earlier developments in architectural representation, but of certain vernacular traditions, particularly in late-nineteenth-century German military and popular culture. Mies was, in other words, not the great classicist he is often thought to be, but deeply rooted within vernacular culture. Paradoxically, his utopian architectural visions are the most revealing of the subconscious links to anonymous tradition. Even if Mies experimented with photomontage at an early stage, a clear shift of intention in his use of the medium can be discerned from the early 1920s, starting with his famous designs for the Friedrichstrasse skyscraper competition and the Glass Skyscraper. In contrast to his montages

for the Bismarck monument, in the Friedrichstrasse photomontage the dialectic principle is applied purposefully in order to produce a strong pictorial assertion. Rather than integration, these visualizations seek an overt display of difference between project and (urban) context.⁷ Through this device, Mies led the way to understanding aesthetic tension as a quality that could be made productive for architectural and urban design. This shift, one could argue, is directly linked to his association with the Berlin Dadaists and his adoption of their image politics. It is striking how Mies, at that time an inconspicuous and little-known architect, all of a sudden developed an interest in avant-garde art practices. The architect retrospectively emphasized the importance of his exchange with the Dadaist artists.⁸ Their prime field for artistic experimentation and expression was photomontage, which they structured as a direct reflection of their aesthetic and political goals. Rejecting traditional aesthetics, and the idea of the work of art as an organic whole, they committed themselves to an aesthetic of selection and assemblage. Another constitutive aspect of montage was its valorization of the sometimes violent contrasts affected by the assemblage of disparate materials, media, and fragments. For the Dadaists, photomontage was not merely a means of representing the industrialized metropolis and its fragmented perception, but also a heuristic model for the production of visual meaning. The profound transformation in Mies's architectural language that took place at precisely this moment is clearly a result of his confrontation with Dadaist pictorial grammar. Only through Dada did he learn to understand photomontage as an epistemological tool—an understanding that had direct consequences on his

architectural thinking. What he shared with the Dadaists was a fundamental investigation of the modern metropolis as the symbolic form of a new cultural paradigm. In this investigation, photomontage served him as both a frame for study and as a means of representing an architectural idea. It is in attributing an epistemological dimension to photomontage that E2A seems to reference Mies's model. Their *Miesology* montages served as a tool for investigation during the design of projects such as the headquarters building of the Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin-Mitte (2008). Both the executed building and the underlying photomontage are characterized by a collision of two contradictory elements: the vertically oriented office tower in glass and aluminum is dialectically counterbalanced by the horizontal glass slab of the so-called *bel étage*, or *piano nobile*. Whereas the office spaces are furnished only minimally, in an almost Spartan spirit in order to save costs, the publicly accessible *bel étage* reserved for receptions and exhibitions does not refrain from representative gestures of spatial splendor. For E2A, referencing Miesian architectural grammar and aesthetics is not an end in itself, but rather a strategy to “free architecture from itself.” For them, using Mies's grammar as an architectural system that is almost universally applicable means to gain new freedom to select and arrange, to think and build an architecture grounded on the principle of montage. Where the details have already been thought through and have proven to meet the requirements again and again, attention in the design process can be shifted elsewhere.

Whereas Mies's earlier montages had primarily shown his projects within an urban or scenic context, the 1930s were marked by a decisive shift to interiority that manifested

itself in his architectural representations as well. The most visible sign of this recalibration is Mies's preoccupation with an altogether new building type, the courtyard house. This new perspective is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Mies's first American commission, his designs for the Resor House in Jackson Hole, Wyoming of 1937–38. Rather than extending his exploration toward the refracted spatiality of the avant-garde, Mies decisively returned to linear perspective. His perspectival photocollages clearly comment on and affirm the notion of architecture as a stage.⁹ His insistence on conical perspective and his refusal to visualise his architecture through other techniques such as the axonometric underscores his understanding of architecture as primarily a visual medium perceived by the eye. Against the all-encompassing panorama of a sublime landscape, architectural design is reduced to an almost invisible perceptual device, or an optical apparatus, with a few lines forming the simplest indication of spatial confinement and rendering architecture a mere frame. The minimalist tropes and the rhetoric of abstraction should not distract from the fact that Mies's photomontages of interiors are transformations of the gaze afforded to the observer in nineteenth-century panoramas and dioramas—popular devices of forgetting and deception that similarly combine an illusionist representation of a scene with the reassurance of being placed in the calm eye of the storm, beyond time and history. Only two conclusions seem possible: we either find ourselves masters of the totalizing gaze in the center of the panopticon, or unconscious victims of an escapist dream.

While the champions of criticality have seen in the “silent theater of the world” staged in Mies's architecture a fundamental critique of capitalist consumer culture and its