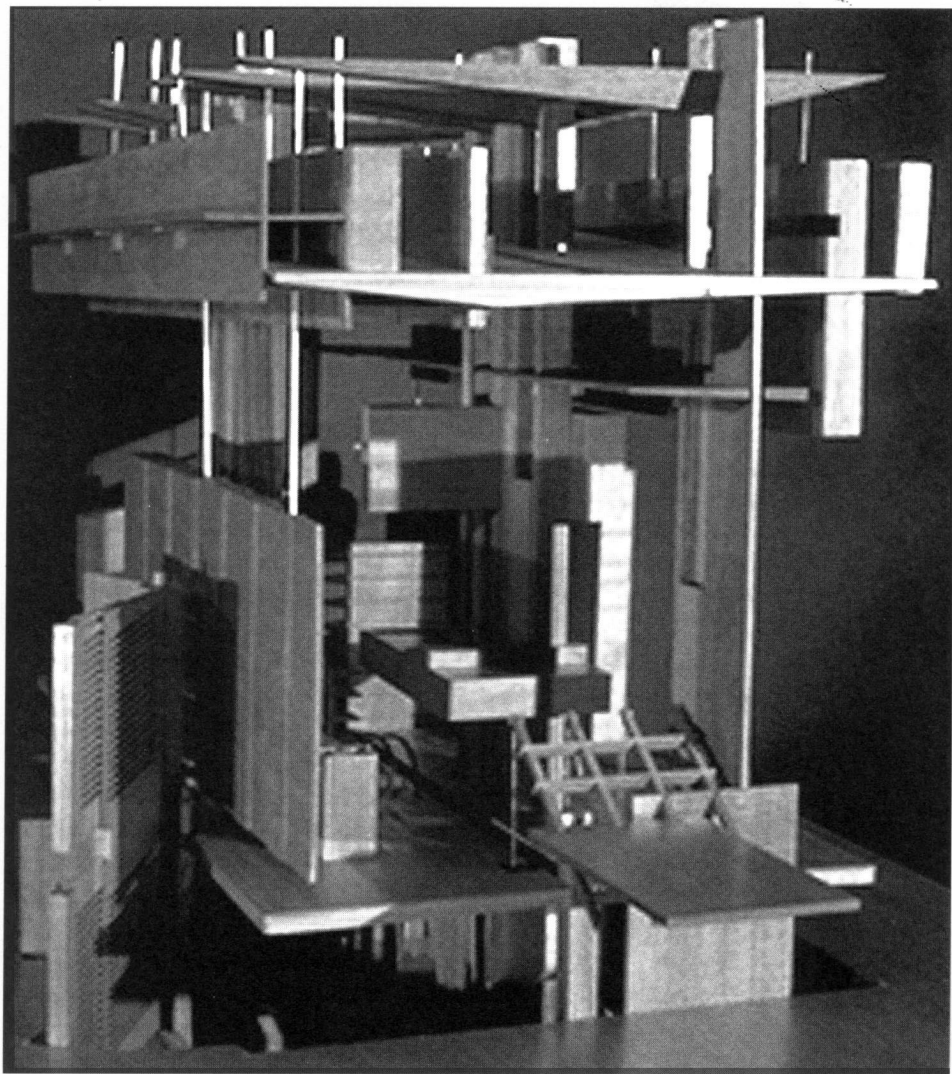




The Presence of Mies

Edited by
Detlef Mertins

Princeton Architectural Press



1. Loaf House,
Model, constructed by Amy Berka,
Tim Burke, Fritz Head, Jason Kerwin, and
Veronica Pazaran.

RENOUNCING AUTISTIC WORDS

Ben Nicholson

AN AUDIT OF THE AMERICAN PEDAGOGY

In 1989 IIT decided to take on the task of repacing the 40 year old pedagogy of the College of Architecture. Invited by the current Dean, Gene Summers - who collaborated on Mies' late projects - my participation in the reworking of the 40 year old curriculum began with its commencement in 1990. I add I am implant to the College, having never passed through the official rites of initiation of Mies' pedagogy.

On reading Mies' texts and seeing the student work, there are apparently no difficulties in aligning the existing curriculum to the tradition of architectural education, past or future. The form of his words and artifacts is little changed from the traditional model: it is based on a philosophy, imbued with fine craft, and its process becomes the constituted artifact.

Makers and architects have frequently taken on the task of describing how they think about architecture and art: Alberti, Durer, Serlio and Palladio left documents that would lead the architect or painter right up to the brink of creation. A similar reflective process exists in our century and Mies' strategy for thinking about architecture is part of the lineage. The IIT curriculum, formed in 1938, was a gritty total work forged by Mies and then hammered and polished by Peterhans and Hilberseimer to run smoothly for a projected decade, however it slipped into sequential perpetuity. Once the vim and vigor of creating this system had reached a plateau, only the slightest trimming was needed for its maintenance.

The instigators of the pedagogy left in their wake little more than cryptic aphorisms and a legacy of impeccable drawings. The evidence that remains of the original working pedagogy comes to us in these forms:

- 1) The text of the inaugural address and The Program for Architectural Education.
- 2) Student drawings and models, for the most part now dispersed.

3) The legacy of Word of Mouth.

4) The buildings of Mies.

Practically speaking, the pedagogy became an artifact of sworn silence, unavailable to the uninitiated, for there is only one way to it - to do it. A legacy of word of mouth accompanied participation in the curriculum yet this is a paradox, for it is nonsensical to articulate the contemplative silence surrounding the critical vehicle of thinking - characterized by a gaze and punctured by Mies' famous remark "Try it again!"

A legacy of silence has its difficulties: for once the artifacts are gone and the story tellers leave, there is nothing to grasp, no written word to set the imagination afire. The physique of Mies' buildings is too big to put into one's lap and mull over: without a key, the buildings are going into a slow feint, and residents are more frequently leaving articles propped up against the glass walls. They are admonished for doing this by those who know - yet without understanding exactly why.

REWORKING THE INAUGURAL ADDRESS

The text of the 1938 inaugural address is a compaction of succinct aphorisms that collect around four topics: The binding of practicality and values, Order emerging from chaos, Working in the Spirit of the Age and, Formal and organic order. The remarks are qualified by the activity of building.

Chaos and Order

The second wave of remarks in the Address settle on chaos and order. He states:

- Education must lead us from irresponsible opinion to true responsible judgement.

- It must lead us from chance and arbitrariness to rational clarity and intellectual order.

- Therefore let us guide our students over the road of discipline from materials, through function to creative work.

Let us lead them into the healthy world of primitive building materials.

The value of his thoughts, on chaos and order, is in the promotion of a journey from one state of being to another. The specific examples used in his remarks are not so useful to us: being led from chance and arbitrariness to rationality and intellectual order is a proposition that sticks in the craw, for it deposes the potential value of chance and arbitrariness before it has had an opportunity to establish its self worth.

The texts that he refers to, that guide his pedagogy, are by St Augustine and St Thomas Aquinas, we can see how the logic of their thought fits the logic of his thought. However his chosen books are not our chosen books. Since his writing, architects have imbued chance and the arbitrary with a furious logic, even mathematicians have formed a Theory of Chaos. It is curious that Mies preferred

not to speak of the rationality and order present in the work of people such as Kurt Schwitters, whose collages he owned.

Today's cultural interests and accompanying models gleaned from the past, are radically different from those stated in the Address. Since 1938 interests have focused on other texts. The careful logic of Marcel Duchamp has become a contender for an available and appropriate model for logic in our age. Duchamp's Large Glass and accompanying manual, The Green Box, is as well reasoned and well crafted as anything offered by the party line of order. We are also reminded of the crisis in thinking in the sixteenth century in which paradox and incommensurability were viewed as a more fitting model of life than the rational systems that preceded them. For example the introduction of irrational dimensions and irregular geometry, present in the 1540's pavement in Michelangelo's Laurentian Library, might be a more apt model of intellectual order today than anything based upon the Hesiodian flight of Chaos making a beeline for Order. Mies' Address gives us the structure to think about philosophical models, even though they are different from his.

In the opening sequence of his address he sets practicality and virtue apart and then reinvents them back into each others company, as mutual counterparts. It is our task to complete this structure of thinking and bring together those ideas in the address that he identifies but was unable to commingle. Having located our own philosophical models, we have found a way to invite issues, such as chance and the arbitrary, to consider clarity and intellectual order. A wistful retention of St's Augustine and Aquinas, as contemporary models, is nothing more than a sheepish longing for the good old days: Mies asks us to engage in philosophy - not sentimentality.

The Shake out of Ordered Chaos

We are no longer willing to engage the pedagogical sequence leading from materials, through function, to creative work. That sequence echoed Mies' personal journey from the stone yard, to the making of programmed houses to the symphonic works.

Between his time and our time, a generation of architects, such as Sterling, Hejduk, Eisenmann, and then Libeskind, had to unlearn modernist dogma and rediscover architecture through a long and silent search, characterized by the abstract discipline of drawing, to arrive back at a point from which they could consider themselves ready for big building.

In practical terms, the avant-garde of architecture have forged a course of action diametric to that suggested by Mies. Their first activity was to pose questions that lead to creation, their second action was to look for function, and finally to grapple with materials in the building site. It must be added that Hejduk and Libeskind have paid enormous and visible tribute to Mies, by rediscovering his spirit, strategy and method.

The Spirit of the Age

The third sequence in the Address centers on the necessity to remain in step with the Spirit of the Age. He states:

- Just as we acquaint ourselves with materials and just as we must understand functions, we must become familiar with the psychological and spiritual factors of the day.
 - No cultural activity is possible otherwise: for we are dependent on the spirit of our time.
 - Therefore we must understand the motives and forces of our time and analyze their structure from three points of view: the material, the functional, and the spiritual.
- We must make clear in what respects our epoch differs from others and in what respects it is similar".

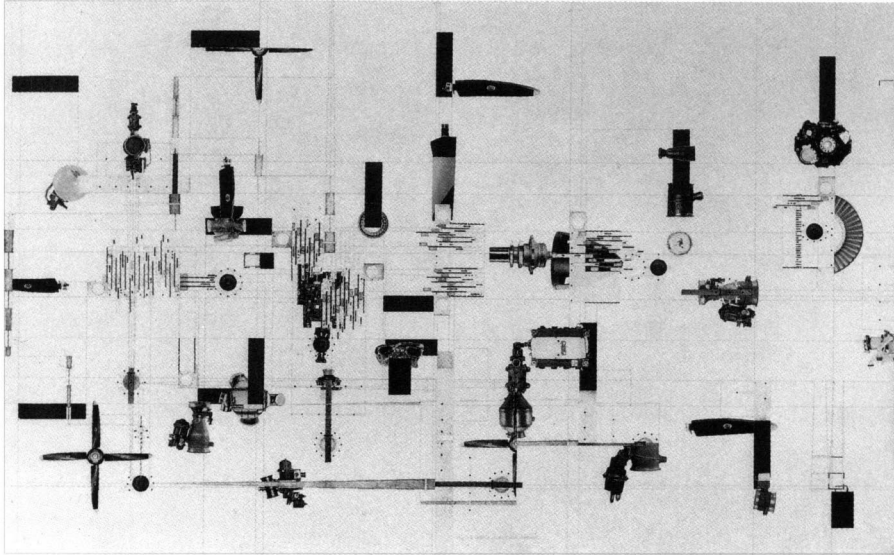
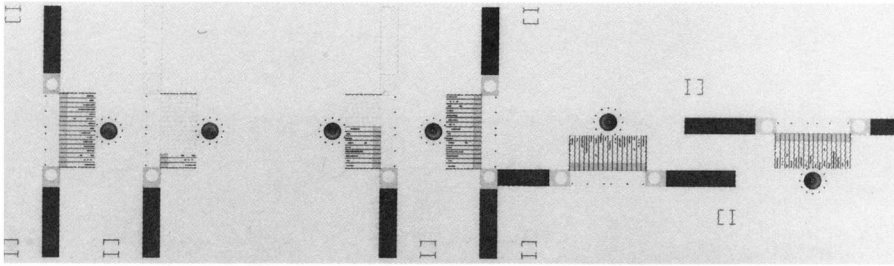
Our times are not his times. His epoch was begun by end game belligerence, followed by the fresh face of being on a winning team which went on to pursue a vision of life characterized by optimism and prosperity. Furthermore IIT, his laboratory of Architectural thought, was set down in a city eager to practice the ideas of Urbanism formulated by him and his collaborators.

In 1992 it is no longer appropriate to found a curriculum based upon that kind of cultural optimism, particularly when the age is uncertain whether it is coming or going. Yet architecture is not a fair weather activity: its responsibility is to decode whatever conditions we find ourselves in and we are charged to find the appropriate manner of practicing - building or otherwise.

WAYS OF THINKING IN THE SPIRIT OF THE AGE

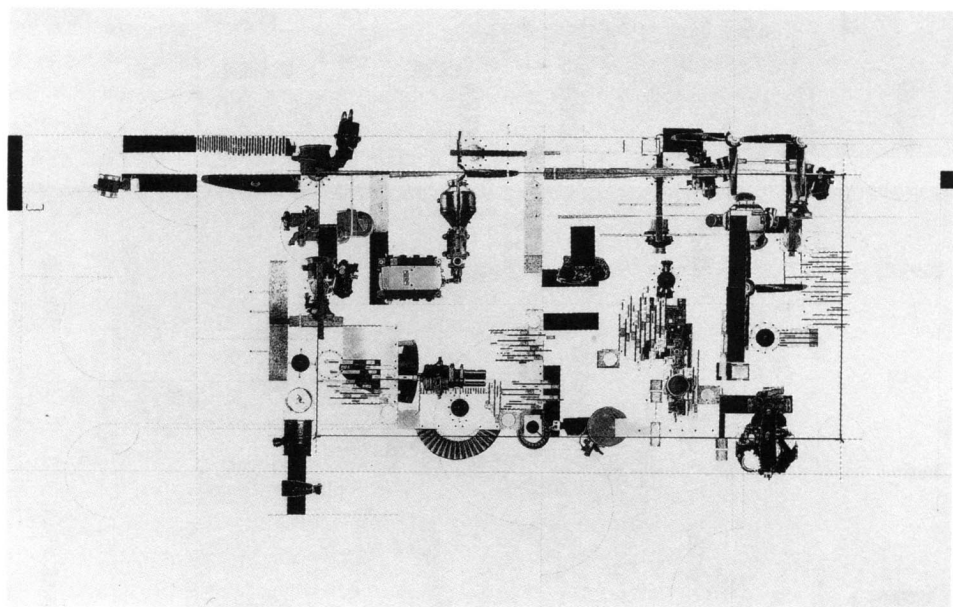
The intellectual activities that we practice in the Studio are guided by considering incidents and past structures of thinking that are pertinent to our age. For example, Robert Graves notes that the Bible was translated by Hebrew scribes who thought that the clay tablets, upon which the original text was cut, was written repeatedly from right to left, the Hebrew manner of writing. The tablets were in fact cut in boustrophedon - written from left to right and then from right to left etc etc. The consequence of this, he suggests, is that every other line in the Bible has been interpreted backwards: and two religions have emerged from a dramatic misinterpretation of a text.

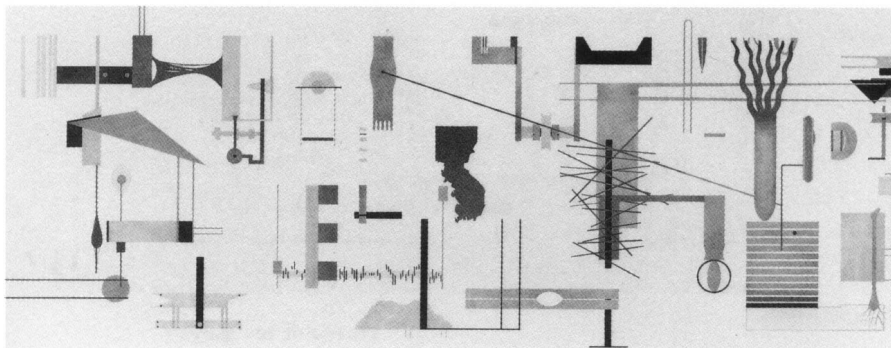
The creativity of text-making is in the struggle to interpret words even if they don't make sense. There is a passage from Mies' address that has also fallen foul of the translating process. The passage: "Durch nichts wird Ziel und Sinn unsererarbeit mehr erschloss als durch das tiefe Wort von St Agustin: " is translated in Werner Blaser's book like this: "Nothing can express the aim and meaning of our work better than the profound words of St. Augustine:". The same passage is translated by Rolf Achilless like this: "Through nothing the sense and goal of our work is made more manifest than the profound words of



2. Loaf House,
Static Plan, drawn by Boris Cubas.

3. Loaf House,
Commingle Plan, drawn by Kristina Yu.





4. Loaf House,
Contract Plan, collage by Nathaniel
Lindsey.

5. Loaf House,
Non-specific Section, drawn by Kristi

St. Augustine:". Obviously there is a glitch in the translation of the second version that makes it read as if nothingness is more valuable to the process of work than St. Augustine's aphorism 'Beauty is the Splendor of Truth' - an interesting concept and perhaps more provocative than the right reading.

Potential can fall out of stock attitudes should one wish to look for it. Contemporary readings of texts (and architecture) have fulfilled the work of the dada and surrealist thinkers, a way of thinking with which the German Mies had an intimate liaison - more so than the official line from Mies' North American circle cares to admit. These right readings make it easier to comprehend his enigmatic activity of setting down incongruities into the bowels of North American cities.

The form of Mies' Address still stands. The form of the remarks still allow his intentions to be readily available. The actuality of thinking and doing today is quite changed: clearly the spirit of our time is not the one practiced in the middle part of this century. However, once it has been identified and unscrambled it conforms, to the letter, to Mies' statement.

One Design Practice at IIT

At IIT, each of the autonomous studios is responsible for designing and building a house with the students. Clearly our task is to see if it is possible to make a house according to the reverse of the order that Mies recommends, i.e. via the route of creativity, through function, to materials. Our house is one year into its three year cycle, and we have produced a set of drawings from which the function will follow.

Our studio's house, called the Loaf House, is sited in an area off campus referred to as the Gap: so named because it was an urban void - now full of cavity lots and the quietness of weed patches, synonymous with the aftermath of an urban storm that has blown itself out.

Our desire for the Loaf House is to make a place which continuously reveals itself, in which the inhabitants could touch a place of shifting divisions. To catalyze this intention, the student team was presented with a drawing of a multiple elevation of a wall sized window. Two plan sections were drawn of the window, at different levels. Despite the fact that the students conversed minutely, the new dimensions would not align. Rather than cower at the lack of alignment, the drawing was left in an unknowing potent state.

These drawings were reworked, this time allowing the pieces in the plans to drift, on orthogonal tracks, across the page until they crossed other paths. At these points of conjunction the paper pieces spliced into each other, in the monkey grip of collage. Within this net of impossibilities, foreign bodies in the form of aircraft parts or spanish onions were set - to give perspective to the inbreeding that collaging of collaging can spawn. The finished collage drawings were recalibrated, to note the points of origin from which the instigative pieces had been set adrift.

The unstable, volatile drawings now had to be pegged to the Gap site. A half-lot was selected for a small house. The lot perimeter, dictated by the surrounding close buildings' was drawn onto paper and into it the collaged fragments of the previous campaign were reined in, along new cut rails: the component pieces moving across the paper in a disciplined, yet unbridled state. Once more, the moments of commingling were arbitrated with the precision of cut collage and three more plan sections were tamed for the House.

The dissipated state of the house is now freeze dried into eight planes located in the three axes. There now exists a desiccated rectangular space defined by five sets of drawings, each of which somersaulted out from its former state. At each turn the zone of the former spin is crafted with a watertight exactitude, yet something unutterable happens between maneuvers and it is deliberately noted and drawn. Duchamp's word for this zone was *inframince*, *inframince* being the warmth of a seat that had just been vacated. The desire of the Loaf House is to become a constructed state of the inbetween, in homage to Mies' Brick House but diagnosed as such via our own strategy.

The Loaf House drawings are constructed to have their own past; the genes of each drawing are traceable through five generations to their hereditary great great grandfather. When the drawings move to a new state, and there arises a mismatch of plan and function, the impasse can be arbitrated within the history of the drawings.

The five generations pass what they can along to the construct: different maturities of form tumble out their respective logics to coalesce into a single set of measured drawings: plans, sections and elevations. The set is latent with a strategy for structure: a structural system that permits interdependence where each part wedges against its neighbor's nature.

The Loaf House is now in a drawn state, as yet unmodeled and unset with function and materiality. This will be the task for the upcoming year.

PAYING OUR RESPECTS

To be an uninitiate within IIT's guild of pedagogical knowledge is daily unnerving, but I am, as many architects and thinkers outside it are - respectful of and grateful to Mies. Yet there cannot be a monopoly held over what Mies has left. Everybody has a right to his work irrespective of their scholastic aptitude - to learn from it what they are able and what is appropriate to their lifework, whatever that may be.

What is readily available from his work is his intention, his conviction and his method: his product, his architecture, remains his alone. It is appropriate to heed his polemic carefully and translate the materiality of his work to ours: the resulting architecture will not look the same as his but will have been faithful to its tenets. At IIT we are reworking the pedagogy by reinventing and realigning the materiality of his legacy whilst being careful not to undermine or contradict his principles.