

Mies and Malevich: Form as a Historical Process

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Abstract

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This thesis explores how Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and Kazimir Malevich (1897-1935) contextualized their work within history. This takes the form of three broad lines of investigation: First, it considers how Mies and Malevich contextualized their ideas historically in terms of the intellectual and aesthetic inheritance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and how this influenced their work's development. Second, it examines how Mies and Malevich positioned their work in relation to contemporary historical processes during the years following the Russian and German Revolutions of 1917 and 1919, exploring the extent to which this underlies what was, for both, a formative period of artistic development. Finally, this thesis seeks to understand how Mies and Malevich conceived of the development of form as being the result of a historical process by examining their abstract architectural experiments and theoretical writings. Contrary to the consensus of historiography on Mies and Malevich, this thesis argues that they did not see their work as a reflection of eternally valid principles. Instead, it suggests, they interpreted their work from a historical standpoint.

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Introduction

Eternity and History

This thesis arose from an interest in understanding the emergence of modernism as a historical process rather than a historical discontinuity. As this interest evolved into the beginnings of a project, it became clear that to straightforwardly assert modernism's historical continuity would be just as unsatisfactory in describing modernism's emergence as assuming its discontinuity. Accordingly, this thesis is premised on the hypothesis that it is possible to understand modernism as a historical process in its very discontinuity with inherited form. Instead of minimizing the novelty of modernism, could discontinuity itself be the basis of its historical continuity? From its earliest stages, this thesis gravitated towards Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) and Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935). Their work is uniquely systematic in its development of abstract form over the course of an extended time period, providing a well-organized historical sequence of discontinuities in form that is conducive to the goals of this study. Mies and Malevich's work spans multiple media, as the broad gaze of this study necessitates, but has a strong emphasis on architecture, centering the thesis. While independent enough to make this study of them relevant to modernism at large, Mies and Malevich were interdependent enough to give this study focus and depth. Most importantly, Mies and Malevich have attracted a large body of secondary literature and art-historical criticism, ensuring that the subsequent discussion is informed in its attempt to differentiate its conception of modernism.

Conventionally, Mies and Malevich, by virtue of the very systematicity of their abstraction, have been understood as being preoccupied by the pursuit of eternally valid aesthetic forms which, whatever their actual relation to their historical context, were conceived of as *tabula rasa* creations epitomizing modernism's historical discontinuity. Challenging this

consensus, this thesis argues that they intended for their idiom of modernism to be understood as the outcome of a historical process.

This thesis explores how Mies and Malevich interpreted their work's place within history in three senses. First, it explores how Mies and Malevich, looking backwards from a later date, conceptualized their intellectual development during the first two decades of the 20th century, a time when they were beginning their respective careers and had only just begun to differentiate their work from their mentors and peers. Next, it explores how they conceived of their work's historical role in relation to contemporary political, social, and economic developments as part of a broader avant-garde movement that came into force during the 1920s in the wake of the Russian and German Revolutions. Finally, this thesis lays the groundwork for a general conception of form as a historical process through a close reading of Mies and Malevich's writings on the philosophy of form.

Mies and Malevich's work, like modernism at large, has often been understood in terms of its ostensible historical discontinuity. For many critics, the seemingly self-referential character of their work implies a disconnect from inherited context and contemporary problems. Mies and Malevich are frequently understood to have sought forms which are eternal, absolute, and autonomous from context. To borrow a term which appears frequently in their historiography, Mies and Malevich have been broadly characterized as "Platonic." For some early critics, this interpretation was cast in a positive light. MoMA's Philip Johnson, the author of the first monograph on Mies, described Mies' "high, objective, truthful pursuit of the nature of things."¹

¹ Adolf K. Placzek, ed., *Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture: Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van Der Rohe, Wright: The Verbatim Record of a Symposium Held at the School of Architecture, Columbia University, March-May, 1961* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 111–12.

In a similar vein, an essay in *Construction and Geometry in Painting: From Malevich to "Tomorrow"* – a 1960 exhibition catalog in Mies' personal library – described Malevich as having created the “first authentic nude in the history of art.”² Couched in the language of nature and authenticity, such criticism measured the value of Mies and Malevich in terms of their perceived distance from the context and contingency of history. Discontinuity, then, in the most absolute of senses, brought Mies and Malevich celebrity in the postwar period, creating a persistent narrative which has informed subsequent criticism of a rather different tenor.

New directions in criticism manifested themselves dramatically in a wave of forceful invective brought against Mies and Malevich that had reached full strength by the late 1960s. Sharing earlier critics' assumption of Mies and Malevich's historical discontinuity, this first generation of revisionist critics of modernism bemoaned what was perceived to be a breach in the historical continuity of inherited traditions, prompting an interest in “semiotics” and other conceptions of direct semantic transfer in explicit opposition to the universalizing gestures of Mies and Malevich. Charles Jencks famously condemned Mies in 1977 as the singularly worst perpetrator of “univalence,” or fetishization of a single architectural value.³ For Manfredo Tafuri in 1968, Malevich became the ultimate “symbol” of the avant-garde, intrinsically “affirmative, absolutist, totalitarian.”⁴ Although with the passage of time the polemical character of this wave of criticism dissipated, subsequent literature continued to strike a similar tone; Fritz Neumeier's

² Micheal Seuphor, “The Idea of Construction: Notes and Reflections,” in *Construction and Geometry in Painting* (New York: Galerie Chalette, 1960).

³ Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, 4th rev. enl. ed (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 15.

⁴ Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 104.

The Artless Word, while explicitly framing its 1986 study of Mies' writings as a revisionist response to Jencks' generation, still characterized Mies as "Platonic."⁵ Over the course of nearly four decades of postwar criticism, a consensus on the correct interpretation of Mies and Malevich had emerged which transcended wildly antagonistic judgements of their work.

Criticism has hitherto largely agreed on both the validity of a straightforward, absolute conception of historical discontinuity and the validity of an equally straightforward reduction of historical continuity to inherited tradition. Yet, as this thesis aims to demonstrate, Mies and Malevich's own interpretation of their work suggests a much more complex notion of historical continuity in which discontinuity is not just admissible, but integral. If Malevich was of the opinion that "An artist is under the obligation to be a free creator, but not a freebooter," Mies likewise preferred to be "good" over being "interesting."⁶ In Mies' conception of design, good – absolute correctness in the broadest sense possible – was an end in-of-itself. In a favorite quote he attributed to the physicist Schroedinger, Mies described how "The creative vigour of a general principle depends precisely on its generality." Structure, Mies' catch-all term for his architectural vision, was not "special solution," but a "general idea."⁷ What was good was an objective end. Objectivity was a worthy goal precisely because it aspired to this highest level of generality. Yet generality – and thus historical discontinuity with the inheritance of a particular tradition – as a goal does not straightforwardly equate to the pursuit of eternal, absolute, and unchanging values,

⁵ Fritz Neumeyer, *The Artless Word: Mies van Der Rohe on the Building Art*, trans. Mark M. Jarzombek (Cambridge (Mass.) London: MIT press, 1991), 26–27.

⁶ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, interview by John Peter, typed transcript, 1955, 21, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Interviews with Mies, Library of Congress.

⁷ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Building Details" (Unpublished draft, n.d.), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Writings by Mies, Library of Congress.

even though the congruence of generality and eternity has been a major assumption of many of Mies and Malevich's interpreters. The universalism of Mies and Malevich's aesthetics should not be conflated with the absolute historical discontinuity of eternity. Mies and Malevich's own interpretation of their work suggests that it was not conceived of as eternal, unchanging, or perfect in realization. This thesis argues that Mies and Malevich's work was intended to be understood in terms of its engagement with history, not its removal from it. For Mies and Malevich, it argues, form was a historical process.

The first chapter investigates how Mies and Malevich's engagement with the historical context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shaped the development of their work as they began their careers. Mies and Malevich interpreted the influence of prewar intellectual and artistic trends on their later work in terms of a complex interaction between historical continuity and discontinuity. Critique of the intellectual milieus under which they began their work shaped Mies and Malevich's personal development and constituted far more than a straightforward rejection or affirmation of their early peers and mentors. For this reason, the chapter explores how Mies and Malevich's absorption, then critical exit from various milieus in aesthetic thought during the first two decades of the twentieth century formed a staged progression, each phase building on the last, creating a foundation for their eventual realization of major formal innovations. This chapter draws parallels in Mies and Malevich's response to the increasingly interconnected, commercialized global economy of the late nineteenth century and considers the specific progressions of artistic influences during the early twentieth century which shaped their personal development. Pulling together these disparate strands, the chapter concludes with a more general exploration of how Mies and Malevich, rather than pointing

towards specific inheritances, interpreted their intellectual development through a staged progression of qualitative transformations.

Mies and Malevich conceived of their work in terms of its role within contemporary historical processes and explored this extensively in their writings. For all the historical discontinuity that their formal innovations embodied, Mies and Malevich's interpretation of their own work demonstrates a shared sense of historical purpose. The second chapter of this thesis explores how Mies and Malevich attempted to contextualize their own work within the avant-garde tendencies that emerged following the Russian and German Revolutions, tracking how their critical mediation of conflicting intellectual tendencies influenced their development of new forms. Namely, it considers both the messianic Expressionist pathos of the immediate post-revolutionary period and its antithesis, the cool-headed subordination of art to political agitation and construction, that characterized the majority of the subsequent decade. This thesis then positions their work within a substantive process of international exchange between Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany, attempting to demonstrate how the transfer of Malevich's ideas to Mies through organizations arising from this exchange is indicative of the formation of a new tradition of historical continuity among the avant-garde. The historical rupture which the avant-garde proclaimed confidently in the 1920s was premised on the study of contemporary processes in society, and stemming from this, the identification and advancement of progressive tendencies. The very discontinuity of Mies and Malevich's work arose from their mediation of historical continuities which connected their present to its future.

The final chapter seeks a working understanding of Mies and Malevich's conception of form as a historical process on a general level. First, it develops this understanding gradually over the course of the chapter's first section through a close reading of some of their writings on

the philosophy of form. While stressing the unity of their thought, Mies and Malevich's conception of form as a historical process is differentiated along the lines of two main tendencies which are nevertheless in close dialogue with one another. In one tendency, of which Malevich is more representative, an overarching historical continuity of form transcends its particular, discontinuous material realizations. The other tendency, closer to Mies, ascribes the qualitative leaps represented by formal discontinuities to the intellectualization of existing processes, framing historical continuity in a forward-looking, materialist vein. These two tendencies are then explored at greater length through an analysis of the stage-by-stage development of form in Malevich's architectural concepts and Mies' Court Houses.

Finally, as a means of concluding, this thesis addresses ongoing intellectual debates by exploring how Mies, Malevich, and aspects of their conception of form as a historical process became major targets of criticism during the latter half of the twentieth century. It argues that this conception of form as a historical process suggests new perspectives on modernism at large which challenge widely held assumptions that have emerged in the wake of this wave of criticism. Arguing that it is useful to understand modernism on the terms of its creators, this thesis uses a case-study of Ivan Leonidov – a contemporary of Mies and Malevich who hybridized their respective idioms – to lay out foundational questions for future studies of modernism based on the conception of form as a historical process which this thesis has developed.

Chapter One

Mies and Malevich on Their Historical Context

Mies and Malevich's aesthetic theory responded critically to the economic and intellectual context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, highlighting aspects of their later work's historical continuity with trends from this period while still maintaining the fundamental historical discontinuity of their formal innovations. Mies and Malevich were raised within a similar context wherein non-mechanized production characterized by a minimal division of labor sustained an unstable interaction with an increasingly global market for commodities. Arguably, the anxieties of this context foreshadowed major objects of study in Mies and Malevich's work. The alienation of labor from handicraft methods by the development of more efficient and centralized means of production had its parallel in the search for a kind of artistic praxis which could accommodate mechanization. Although an interest in resolving issues presented by the increasing division and specialization of labor was a continuity throughout Mies and Malevich's work, it is primarily through the discontinuities and major intellectual transformations Mies and Malevich navigated during the early twentieth century that they would construct a more complex form of historical continuity in their work.

Having explored Mies and Malevich's broad socioeconomic context, this discussion shifts to a study of the particular progression of Mies and Malevich's aesthetic ideas prior to the outbreak of the Russian and German Revolutions, emphasizing how each stage of this progression, as a qualitative transformation and historical discontinuity was integral to Mies and Malevich's back projection of historical continuity. In Mies' case, this progression takes the form of Mies' transition from the *sachlich* classicism of his early mentor, Peter Behrens, to the earnest materialism of the Dutch architect H.P. Berlage. Mies' interpretation of this transition as

a shift from a form-forwards approach towards structural expression is inconceivable without his undergoing this particular progression. Rather than a rejection of Behrens or a clarified appreciation of Berlage, Mies' interpretation of this transition stemmed from dialectic critique mediating their influences. Likewise, Malevich's mediation of a series of stylistic successors to the hegemony of impressionism in Russian painting during the first two decades of the twentieth century brought increased autonomy of expression to form relative to figural depiction. Malevich's writings demonstrate that he interpreted the genesis of Suprematism in 1915 as the product of form becoming self-conscious of its capacity for autonomous expression by undertaking this progression of styles, and not as a *tabula rasa* invention.

The chapter concludes by synthesizing its discussion of both continuities in Mies and Malevich's broader social outlook and the important discontinuities which characterize their stage-by-stage intellectual development into more general reflections on form as a historical process. Contrary to the expectations set by much of the historiography on Mies and Malevich, this chapter demonstrates their concern with interpreting the historical context of their work. Yet, rather than describing an eclectic assemblage of influences, each of which maps onto some element of their later work in a straightforward mode of historical continuities, Mies and Malevich interpreted their work through chains of discontinuities in which the emergence and resolution of contradictions defined a more abstract mode of historical continuity.

Mies and Malevich's Common Context: Socioeconomic and Intellectual

Mies and Malevich's work demonstrates historical continuity in its response to problems of aesthetic representation raised by the novel socioeconomic circumstances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mies and Malevich came of age in contexts shaped by the development of more centralized and efficient production methods during the latter half of

the nineteenth century. Malevich grew up in Western Ukraine in the heart of a commercial agricultural economy which was rapidly displacing less-intensive modes of agrarian production. Mies, although the son of artisans, grew up in Aachen at a time when the Rhenish city was being transformed by the birth of a large manufacturing industry centered around steel production.

Although Malevich grew up on a plantation manned by a peasantry transformed into farm laborers and Mies was born into a thinning clade of artisans in an industrial town, it was their own early careers that most embodied the changing class dynamics of the society around them. Mies quickly worked his way into the field of design, unthinkable without the division of former artisan labor into separate intellectual and manual spheres. Malevich's nostalgia for the disappearing world of subsistence agriculture as a young artist was a product of that world's disappearance, which had afforded Malevich's family, agents of the plantation, sufficient income to fund his education. Mies and Malevich, with one foot in the world of artisans and peasants and the other firmly rooted in the world displacing them, were sensitive to the declining fortunes of those marginalized by this process. This sensitivity was a major source of historical continuity in Mies and Malevich's outlook, shaping their subsequent work's development.

Malevich's portrayal of his childhood in Ukraine in his autobiographical writings reflected the changing socioeconomic context of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in its agrarian manifestation. Kazimir Severinovich Malevich was born in 1879, the oldest son of a Polish-speaking family living in Kyiv, then a provincial capital within the Russian Empire.⁸ At just four years of age his family moved to a village in the Podillia Governorate, part of a rich

⁸. Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: Rekonstrukcje i Symulacje* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 46–50.

agricultural region along the Dniester in southwestern Ukraine.⁹ His father, Severin Antonovich, worked as an engineer on a sprawling sugar beet plantation with a thousand-person workforce, and Malevich, neither integrated into nor isolated from the peasants surrounding him, spent his early years observing these “‘colorful’ workers.” Malevich was clearly fascinated by peasant life, stealing away from his family to eat meals with them, listening to their work songs, and seeking out the company of peasant children who “as it seemed to me, lived freely, in the middle of nature.” Malevich’s idealized conception of an artist-creator in many ways can be traced to his early life among the peasantry, whose capacity for creation in their songs and celebrations seemed to contrast with the dictates of production that drove the plantation’s operation. Even though these farm laborers were only peasants in the loosest of senses, Malevich’s ideal of the peasantry as an artist-creator, however illusory, offered a hopeful vision of a future in which society worked towards creation rather than the empty rationalization of production.

Yet Malevich’s memories also convey a palpable sense of isolation; the plantation was firmly bifurcated between the “factory” where beets were processed and the peasants who worked the fields, and Malevich, as the son of an engineer, was part of the factory and not the peasantry, despite his revulsion for factory life and especially the other children there. One cannot help but see echoes of Malevich’s later work in one such moment, when he describes at length his childhood awe at how sugar beets, with their earthy irregularities were transformed into pure, crystalline forms by a machine worked by his father in the factory.¹⁰ Caught between

⁹. See Editor’s footnote, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, “K.S. Malevich. Glavy Iz Avtobiografii Khudozhnika,” in *Malevich o Sebe, Sovremenniki o Maleviche: Pisma, Dokumenty, Vospominaniia, Kritika*, ed. I. A. Vakar and T. N. Mikhienko, vol. 1 (Moskva: RA, 2004), 19.

¹⁰. Malevich, 17–19.

two worlds, Malevich dreamed of uniting them through the development of an artistic praxis that could accommodate new forms of production. Instead of being displaced by mechanization, could the peasant artist-creator of Malevich's idyllic fantasies instead absorb the potential of technology?

Mies, in contrast to Malevich, grew up on the margins of new industrial development. Ludwig Mies, as the architect was originally known, was born in Aachen in 1886. Once Charlemagne's capital, this city on the westernmost fringes of Germany, with suburbs stretching into the Netherlands and Belgium, had once again begun to assume greater significance in Mies' time as a major center of steel production.¹¹ His father, a stonemason, spent much of his career cutting gravestones, approaching his work with an ethos that at times, by Mies' admission, ran counter to economic contingency in a time of diminishing gains for such traditional artisans.¹² There seems to have been little consideration of Mies achieving an academic education — by the age of thirteen he was enrolled in a trade school focused on drafting techniques, and by fifteen worked as a bricklayer. Mies quickly exhausted means to apply his budding skills as a draftsman in Aachen. After some run-ins with an employer under which he drafted designs for stucco ornament, he found himself in an architectural studio. A local architect, Dülow, candidly advised Mies that his talents would better be put to use in Berlin, and Mies, high on his mild successes as a draftsman and, unlike his elder brother Ewald, without the obligation of taking over the family business, had little to lose. Some drawings were sent out, job offers were received in short order,

¹¹. Franz Schulze and Edward Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, New and revised edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 5.

¹². Schulze and Windhorst, 8–10.

and Mies left his hometown at the age of nineteen to try his luck in the capital.¹³ Although Mies grew up amongst stonemasons, this artisanal upbringing must be considered in the context of Aachen being a major center of steel production.

The artisanal environment of Mies' youth was not only disappearing, but already dependent on the very manufacturing-centered economy that was driving it into extinction. Perhaps it is for this reason that Mies was wholly unsentimental about his upbringing; "My receptiveness to the beauty of handwork does not prevent me from recognizing that handicrafts as a form of economic production are lost," he stated matter-of-factly in a draft version of his 1924 article *Baukunst und Zeitwille*.¹⁴ Like Malevich, however, this was premised on a fundamental ambition to resolve the division of intellectual and physical labor which Mies, as a designer, now embodied. In a 1955 interview, Mies conveyed how his work was intended to be universally legible through the anecdote of an auto mechanic, who, no matter their location, had a homogenous knowledge of the functioning of a given automobile.¹⁵ By promoting the mechanic – not so much as an actuality than as an idea – Mies attempted to mediate between the engineer who designs and the worker who manufactures, imagining a single figure that unites their divided labor. In this sense, there is a straightforward historical continuity in motivation which ties Mies' career back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

¹³. Schulze and Windhorst, 12–14.

¹⁴ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Building Art and the Will of the Epoch," in *The Artless Word: Mies van Der Rohe on the Building Art*, by Fritz Neumeyer, trans. Mark M. Jarzombek (Cambridge (Mass.) London: MIT press, 1991), 246.

¹⁵ Mies van der Rohe, interview, 1955, 16–17.

The socioeconomic context of Mies and Malevich's upbringing and early career was characterized by the tension created by the centralization and intensification of production, whether that took the form of a disappearing class of artisans living in the shadows of the steel mills of Aachen or a peasantry increasingly subordinated to the sugar beet plantations of southwestern Ukraine. Mies and Malevich's desire to resolve this division of labor into manual and intellectual spheres corresponding to laborers and the designers of factors of production, would in many ways be a historical continuity uniting all stages of their career. This desire demonstrates the intertwined character of historical continuity and discontinuity in the reflections of Mies and Malevich.

From Zarathustra to Structure: Mies before the First World War

Mies began his career during a transitional period among progressive architectural tendencies in late Wilhemine Germany. During the last decade of the late nineteenth century, these tendencies expounded an Arts and Crafts ethos, stressing the importance of resolving problems presented by the division of labor in a manner not dissimilar to Mies and Malevich. Yet by 1907, when Mies received his first commission, the intellectual basis of progressive architecture was rapidly shifting. With his admonition to create new values rather than taking for granted what is empirically understood or striving for what is moral, Nietzsche became a symbol of revolt against both academic architecture and the ethos of the arts and crafts movement. Although in the decade leading up to the beginning of the First World War various architectural tendencies manifested this revolt in Germany, the most unequivocally Nietzschean of those tendencies was the milieu around the architect Peter Behrens. Embracing the division of intellectual and manual labor intrinsic to the role of the designer, Behrens interpreted it as the kind of aristocratic, hierarchical self-expression that befitted what he deemed his

“Zarathustrastil.” This made it well-suited for Behren’s ideal clientèle, the emergent industrial *haute bourgeoisie* of late Wilhemine Germany, for whom he pioneered the occupation of industrial design as the in-house artist for electrical equipment manufacturer AEG. It was in this context that a young Ludwig Mies would enter the office of Peter Behrens in 1908, the son of an artisan in the studio of a radically self-assertive designer. Mies, in clarifying his opposition to Behren’s ideology, underwent a qualitative transformation which itself constitutes the basis of his historical continuity with Behrens.

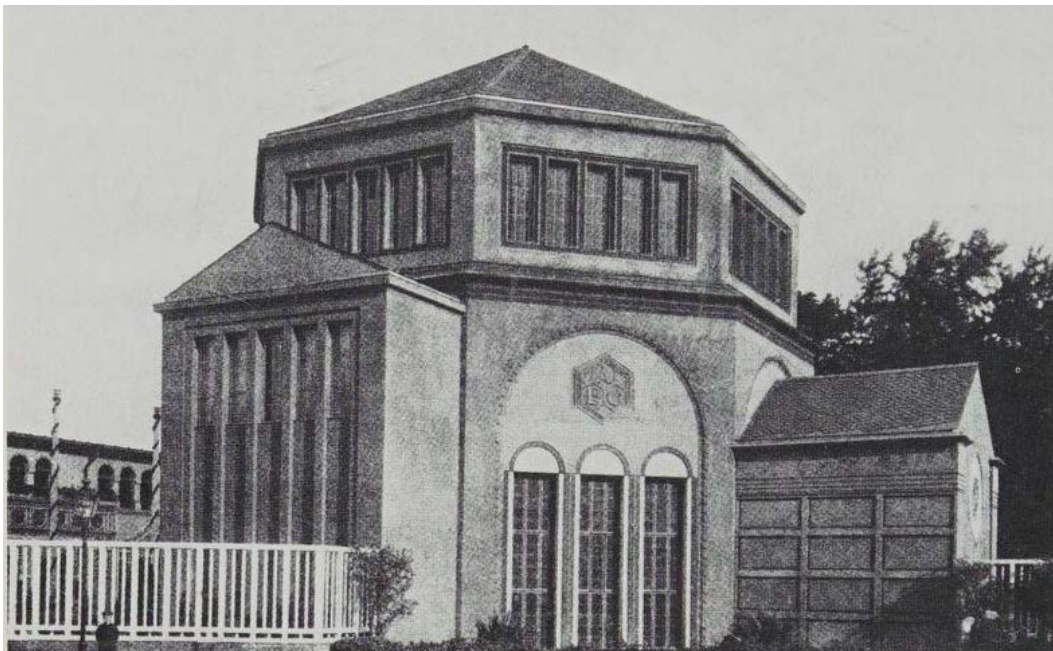


Figure 1. Peter Behrens, AEG Pavilion, First German Shipbuilding Exposition, Berlin, 1908, in Alan Windsor, Peter Behrens: Architect and Designer (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981), 84.

Mies’ architectural experience matured substantially in 1908 with his entry into the studio of Behrens.”¹⁶ The latter’s pavilion for AEG at the First German Shipbuilding Exposition, constructed that same year, is indicative of the Nietzschean interpretation of architecture Mies

¹⁶. Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe*, 25–26.

would have encountered while working in Behren's studio. The pavilion's use of a semantically familiar formal vocabulary retains an affinity to classicism, as if to evoke Nietzsche's eternal return. This is countered by its stringent avoidance of direct quotation from historical architectural precedent, fulfilling Nietzsche's admonition to create new values. Mies likewise would avoid quotation in all but a handful of early domestic projects and, by the time of Mies' American period, it was not unheard of to make semantic comparisons of his work with classicism. In spite of this similarity, the sources of continuity between Behrens and Mies are sparse. A more profound sense of Mies' inheritance from Behrens can be gleaned by a study of what Mies criticized and moved beyond in Behren's architecture.



Figure 2. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Perspective View of Bismarck Monument Project, Bingen, Germany, 1910, photo collage and ink on illustration board, 30 x 40," Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The extent to which Mies himself absorbed the architectural ideas of Behrens can be measured by his submission of a design to a competition for a memorial to Otto von Bismark during a brief period of absence from the firm in 1910 when he returned to Aachen.¹⁷ The photomontage Mies created for this colossal structure, towering over the banks of the Rhine from its perch atop a series of stark, cubic terraces, reiterates aspects of Behren's architectural idiom. Its restrained, slightly abstracted interpretation of neoclassical models is devoid of overt ornamental citation but adheres to proportional and compositional precedent. In a manuscript likely dating to Mies' early years at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Mies looked back to the year 1910, reflecting on that period's failed "attempt to revive architecture from the standpoint of form." Mies sought to transcend the division of labor between intellectual and manual work, reflecting the experiences of his upbringing, explaining his increasing aversion to the "subjective" approach of Behrens and his contemporaries. As his later manuscript would argue, the "authentic approach to architecture must always be the objective."¹⁸ Yet rather than prompting a straightforward, absolute rejection of Behrens, Mies attempted a more dialectic critique, finding the solution to the "subjective" approach within its very contradictions. It was Behrens' more imperfectly realized work that captured Mies' critical interest:

...the only valid solutions at that time were in cases such as industrial building, where objective limitations made subjective license impossible.¹⁹

¹⁷. Schulze and Windhorst, 31–32.

¹⁸ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Untitled" (Typewritten Manuscript, circa 1940), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Writings by Mies, Library of Congress.

¹⁹ Mies van der Rohe, 1.

Lingering beneath the surface of Behren's outward expression of form in his industrial works for AEG was a materialism quite incompatible with the Zarathrustrian ideal. The "limitations" Mies identified bounded the individual expression of the designer, forcing Behrens to accommodate functional problems. Although of his industrial projects, his *Turbinefabrik* is by far the most well-known, his High Tension Materials Factory (Figure 3) is more illustrative of Mies' point, since it is far more dichotomous as an architectural ensemble, with one designed façade and another functional façade. One could eschew embellishment but not functional considerations. This dichotomy makes clear that, in practice, function took precedent over form, even for an architect like Behrens sworn to the exact opposite. This was significant on a more profound level for someone like Mies; it demonstrated that rather than achieving an autonomous architecture living up to the Nietzschean idea of creating values, Behrens was simply adding a formal appliqué to a functional program over which he had no influence. The bold historical discontinuity which Behren seemed to personify as one of the foremost representatives of his period's progressive architecture revealed itself rather superficial in the face of the economic continuities on which his work depended. For Mies, this was a fertile contradiction which triggered a qualitative transformation in his philosophy of form. The attempt to simply create new forms *tabula rasa* had failed, suggesting that it was through consideration of the very functional considerations anathema to Behrens' theory and the larger historical continuities they reflected in economy and society that the potential for a truly new architecture could be determined.

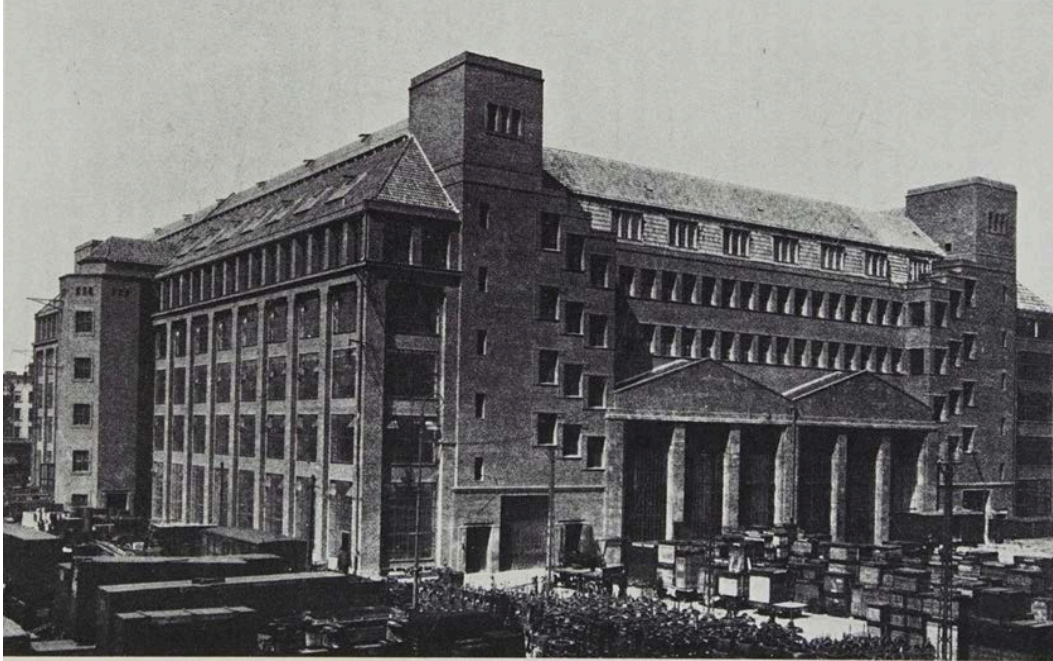


Figure 3. Peter Behrens, AEG High Tension Materials Factory, Berlin-Wedding, 1910, in Alan Windsor, Peter Behrens: Architect and Designer (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1981), 96.

The most consequential project of Mies' in furthering his shift to an "objective" architectural approach was his work for the Kröllers, a family of wealthy industrialists in the Netherlands. Initially brought onto a project for a new country villa near The Hague commissioned by Helene Kröller-Müller under Behrens' supervision in 1911, Kröller-Müller's growing dissatisfaction with Behrens' design resulted in a coup for his junior partner. Calling for a second round of designs, from which Behrens was excluded, Kröller-Müller invited Mies to compete with the Amsterdam-based architect Henrik Petrus Berlage. This windfall coincided with Mies' final departure from Behrens' firm in 1912. Shuttling throughout the Netherlands, Mies began to assert his artistic independence. This included an appreciative study of Berlage's work, an architect whose abandonment of historicist proportion in favor of an assertively cubic

massing and expression of materiality Behrens disliked, Mies reported, with particular intensity.²⁰

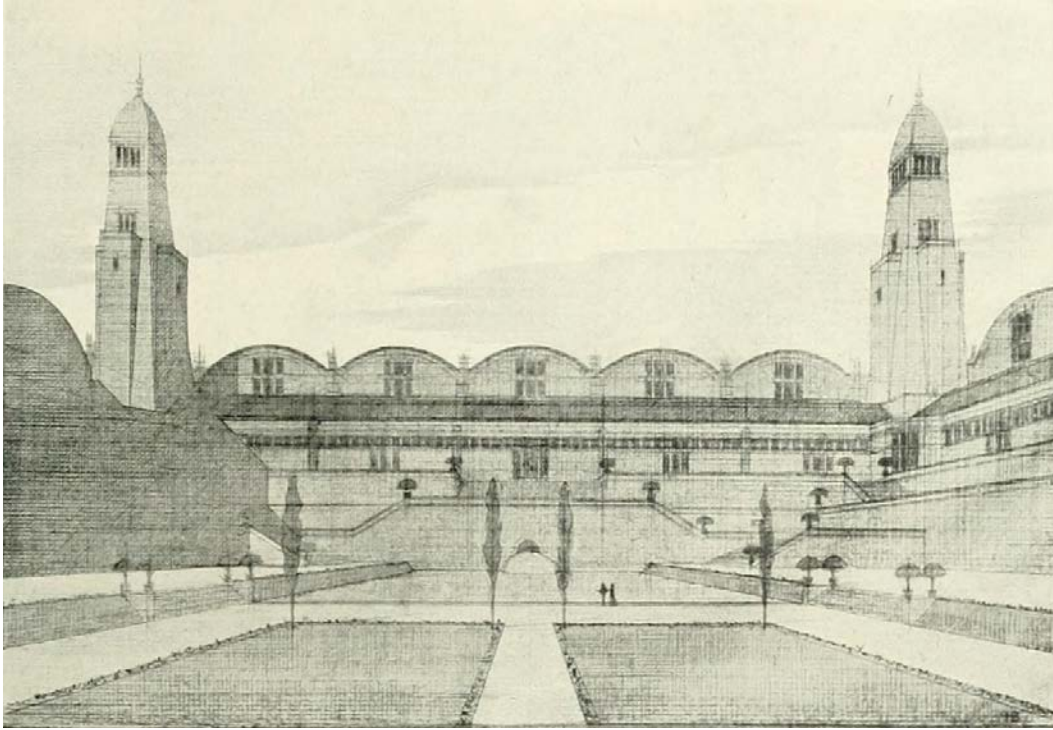


Figure 4. Henrik Petrus Berlage, *Idee voor een Tentoonstellingsgebouw* (Idea for an Exhibition Building), 1907, in K.P.C de Bazel et al., *Dr. H.P. Berlage en zijn werk* (Rotterdam: W.L.&J. Brusse, 1916), 105.

Mies' discovery of Berlage encouraged his cultivation of an objective, materialistic architectural aesthetic opposed to Behrens' subjective creation of forms. A number of characteristics salient to Mies' work can be seen in Berlage's *Idee voor een Tentoonstellingsgebouw*. Materiality does not translate into functionalism. Instead, function is an outgrowth of a study of the material and building process. Naïve functionalism can lead to inefficiency. Rescaling and reconfiguring historical precedents to fit new typologies and scales, while quantifiable and oriented towards a specific objective, can result in absurdly complex

²⁰. Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe*, 38–41.

engineering solutions that are far from functional. Instead, Berlage allows function and form to follow from the potential realizations of a given material. Brick, laid into a series of barrel vaults which are tailored to the material's compressive strength and tensile weakness provides both a new form for an exhibition hall and a qualitatively new kind of space. In Berlage, Mies had discovered a way to locate historical discontinuity in the very continuum of history, not by resuscitating old forms but by setting materials into motion towards their future potential realizations. In a far cry from the Nietzschean Eternal Return, Mies had begun to develop a working conception of form as historical process.

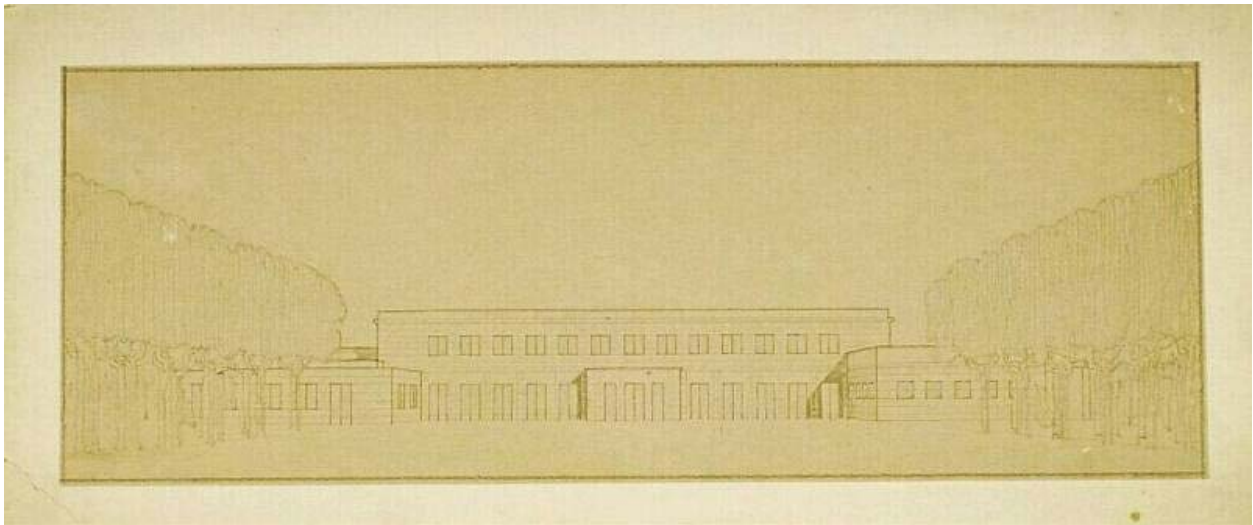


Figure 5. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Drawing of “Ellenwoude” (Kröller-Müller Villa), Wassenaar, Netherlands, 1912, 17 x 46.5 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands.

A comparison of Mies' 1910 Bismarck Monument with his 1912 plan for the Kröller-Müller Villa, demonstrates the productivity of Mies' studies of Berlage during the 1910s. There is no expression of form as such in the villa. Form exists only insofar as it is the product of spatial decisions which follow from an appreciation of the intrinsic potential of the villa's building materials. Yet, ultimately, there is little direct formal continuity between either Mies' Behrens-esque or Berlage-esque phases and his later work. Instead, it is the intellectual legacy of

the qualitative transformation he underwent as he passed from one phase to another that constitutes his most significant inheritance from this period. Berlage's significance is specific to the context of Mies' break with Behrens, while Behrens' "subjectivism," could only be retroactively formulated by Mies as the result of his shift toward Berlage. The historical continuities Mies located in the stage-by-stage development of his architectural theory as he shifted from the orbit of Behrens to Berlage are inextricable from the discontinuities which delimit each stage.

Increasing Autonomy of Form in Malevich's Post-Impressionist Painting

Like Mies, Malevich drew up lines of historical continuity within his oeuvre not through an inventory of specific points of inheritance, but through a narrative of staged, qualitative transformation in which a sequence of major historical discontinuities precipitated a broader intellectual movement which bound them together into a historical continuum of formal development. While Mies' reflections on the early twentieth century are largely retroactive, dating to his American period, Malevich created a substantial corpus of historical criticism to accompany and contextualize his Suprematist paintings as they were produced. This corpus of work demonstrates Malevich's intention for Suprematism to be understood as the product of a particular chain of historical developments and not as a purely abstract and idiosyncratic gesture. The main current in Malevich's work, based on his writings, is the increasing autonomy of form in the wake of the demise of impressionism in Russian painting through a succession of styles – "Cézannism," Cubism, and Futurism, to use his words – which terminate in the absolute autonomy of form achieved by the realization of Malevich's Suprematism in 1915. Bringing Malevich's criticism from this period into dialogue with his contemporary painting augments and challenges the largely formal analysis which has hitherto dominated Malevich's historiography.

Malevich's artistic career accelerated rapidly after his move to Kursk in 1896. During this period he experimented with a rapid succession of post-impressionist idioms, each of which, by his own account, contributed an important stage to the eventual realization of Suprematism with the exhibition *0,10* in 1915. Fashioning himself as an "artist-impressionist," Malevich spent great amounts of time outdoors in the company of other artists, attempting to channel the "music of the fields, birds, and color" into his painting.²¹ This phase of his artistic life continued for some time, even after moving to Moscow in 1904 to join a group of like-minded "communards" in a compound of wooden-buildings where they lived together and immersed themselves in their work. Increasingly, however, he fell under the influence of what he called the "primitive forms" used to depict peasant life in the art of the naturalist, realist painters Shishkin and Repin.²² The revolution of 1905 challenged the monastic, quasi-religious atmosphere of Malevich's commune, with its internal debates "spilling out onto the street" and into political life.²³ This unresolved tension between an intense, essentially introverted spiritual drive and an extroverted, political-artistic project anticipates Malevich's turn to abstraction. One gets a sense of Malevich's waning contentment with impressionism as he describes how it caused him to see nature with "new eyes" and awoke within him a new "spiritual energy." This new "nature" was not satiated by the object-driven technique of impressionism. Instead, the naturalists drove Malevich towards a point at which he would be more receptive to abstraction. Reflecting on these artists in his memoirs, and in particular the biblical realist paintings of Nikolai Ge, Malevich argues that they

²¹. Malevich, "K.S. Malevich. Glavy Iz Avtobiografii Khudozhnika," 25–26.

²². Malevich, 27–28.

²³. Malevich, 29.

“lived emotionally non-objectively, but made objective things.”²⁴ Although painters like Ge were still constrained by the objective limitations of figural representation, Malevich saw within their work the latent possibility of an autonomous form.



Figure 6. Kazimir Malevich, *Woodworker*, 1912, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 46.

By 1912, Malevich’s work had actualized what had only been latent in the naturalist and impressionist tendencies of a half-decade earlier: a direct expression of form. In *Woodworker*, the artist’s decisions in terms of the composition and coloration of two-dimensional forms are explicitly rendered through a subdivision of the canvas into discreet entities rather than

²⁴. Malevich, 32.

constituting an integral figural scene. Nevertheless, form still follows from decisions in composition and coloration made in order to depict the object of the painting figurally. Although the direct representation of form is not subordinated to figuration, form is not autonomous.



Figure 7. Kazimir Malevich, *Commode*, 1913, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 60.

Soon, however, Malevich would achieve a less hierarchical balance of form and figuration as he entered what he deemed his Cubist phase. As his 1913 *Commode* demonstrates, the figural origins of his work were still explicitly depicted in Cubist phase. The eponymous

commode's lacquered wood and cast-iron hardware are clearly visible. *Commode* differs from *Woodworker* in that figuration cannot be said to be the goal of his painting towards which all decisions of composition and coloration are oriented:

In Cubism, the attempt to disfigure the forms of reality and the breaking-up of objects represent the striving of the will towards the independent life of the forms which it has created.²⁵

Cubism, then, for Malevich, was identified with a major historical discontinuity; form had not only achieved direct expression on the canvas, but an independent expression. Yet Malevich interpreted this rupture as the very basis of a larger historical continuity, a "life" of form which thrived on this kind of qualitative transformation. The very "breaking-up" of figuration in its finitude sets form into motion within the movement of ideas from the particular to the universal. For all this, however, form was still derived from figuration and competed with it for space on the canvas. Although independent, it could not be said to be wholly autonomous.

²⁵. K.S. Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 33.



Figure 8. Kazimir Malevich, *Portrait of the Artist M.V. Matiushin*, 1913, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 61.

Characteristically for Malevich, the contradictory, competing expression of form and figuration in his Cubist paintings precipitated its own solution. Malevich's portrait of his colleague M.V. Matiushin exhibits this tension to such an extent that its status as a portrait – that is, to say, a figural expression of Matiushin – can be thrown into question:

[...] in our era of Cubism the artist has destroyed objects together with their meaning, essence, and purpose. The new picture has sprung from their fragments.²⁶

In securing the independence of form from figuration, Malevich found that figuration increasingly had the character of appliqué. In a similar mode to how Mies had found Behrens'

²⁶. Malevich, 36.

formal approach superfluous to his building's functional program, Malevich discovered that figuration, while a source of raw material for the artist, was a secondary consideration to the underlying formal decisions of composition and coloration in constructing a painting.



Figure 9. Kazimir Malevich, *Cow and Violin* (Left), 1913, and *Aviator* (Right), 1913, in D. V. Sarbianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 56, 70.

Much of Malevich's work could be superficially portrayed as an attempt to channel the subconscious into art. "I reject the soul and intuition as unnecessary. On February 19, 1914, at a public lecture I rejected reason," he wrote in one of his earliest published writings, begun prior to his Suprematist phase; "A work of the highest art is written in the absence of reason." Malevich, not wishing to leave the reader guessing as to what this entails, provides a poetic example: "I

have just eaten calves' feet.²⁷ What Malevich rejects, however, is not so much reason per se as any external rationality imposed onto painting. Malevich attacks "soul," "intuition," and "reason," equally because he wished to facilitate the autonomous, internal development of form within a painting. Far from arbitrary or relativistic, Malevich conceived of this internal development of form as part of a historical continuum which he conceived of as universal:

In the depiction of movement, the wholeness of things *vanished* as their flashing particles hid themselves among other running bodies. And in constructing the parts of the running objects, they tried to depict only the impression of movement.²⁸

By removing all externalities constraining the autonomous development of form, Malevich attempted to dissolve the particularity of the image into a movement of form which unites all its finite realizations. This is more readily apparent in his Futurist idiom from the early 1910s than his more Cubist idiom. *Knifegrinder* (Figure 10) demonstrates this depiction of potentiality rather than precise figuration; on becoming rather than being. Although it is not obvious at face-value, this is fundamentally similar to Mies' nearly contemporaneous development under the influence of Berlage. Just as Mies believed there were underlying strains of historical continuity latent within the materiality of a building that could form the basis of major discontinuities in form, Malevich proposed an internal movement of form which transcended the finitude of figural representation. Although for Mies a material continuum drove formal change and for Malevich, a formal continuum displaced its ostensible material object,

²⁷. K.S. Malevich, "From 'Secret Vices of the Academicians,'" in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 17–18.

²⁸. Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," 29.

both harbored an increasingly comprehensive notion of form as a historical process around 1912, pointing to a more profound unity of thought beyond their difference in emphasis.



Figure 10. Kazimir Malevich, *Knifegrinder*, 1913, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 53.

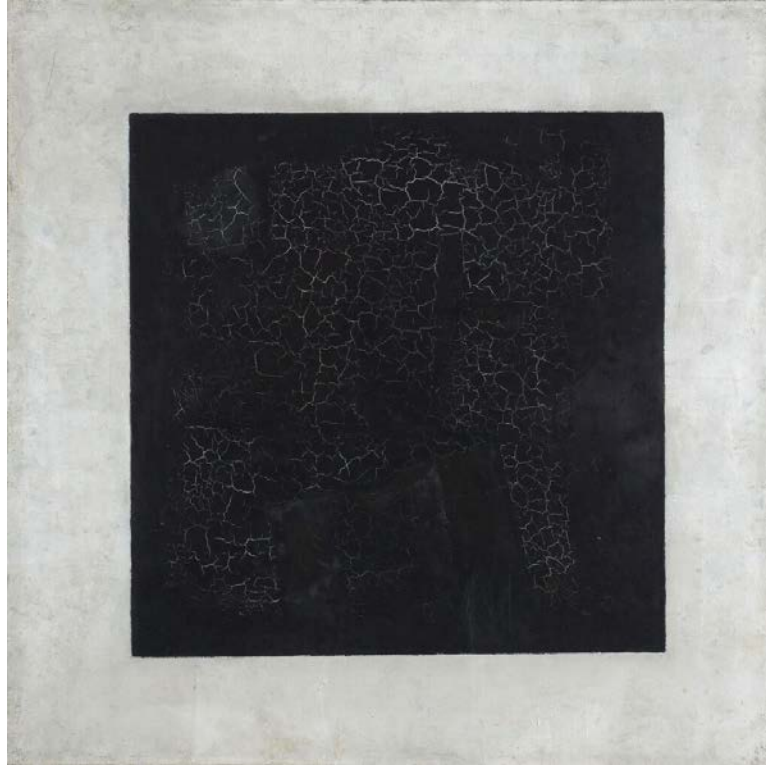


Figure 11. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Suprematist Square*, 1915, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russian Federation.

Black Square, insofar as Malevich wished it to be understood in 1915, symbolized nothing. Not a square in the geometric sense; this ever-so-slightly oblique polygon is meant to be understood literally, as a mass of black paint on canvas, whose form is not a representation, but the actuality of decisions made in composition and coloration. Bearing no relationship to any external referent, geometric symbolic or figural, it actualized what had hitherto only been a notion of the autonomy of form. Yet, having transgressed the limit point at which form becomes truly autonomous – not just independent from figuration but entirely outside of its influence – towards what end would Malevich’s painting develop, now that it had achieved its goal? A pamphlet Malevich included as part of the 1915-1916 Petrograd exhibition *0,10*, where *Black Square* debuted, lays out the coordinates of “Suprematist” painting, where autonomous form reigned supreme:

Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas and shameless *Venuses*, shall we witness a work of pure, living art. I have transformed myself *in the zero of form* and dragged myself out of the *rubbish-filled pool of academic art*.²⁹

For Malevich, the attempt to depict nature with figuration is a parody of itself. Academic art's "little corner of nature," he explains, referencing the traditional placement of the Orthodox icon in the upper corner of a room, is a sort of ventriloquism; in spite of appearances, it is not the object itself that fills the canvas but rather the decisions in composition and coloration that the painter imposes onto it. In art, he argues, there is a need not for "sincerity," but for "truth."³⁰ Suprematism is a *mélange* of ruthlessly sober literalism and metaphysical idealism. Malevich's forms may merely reflect decisions made by the painter in arranging paint on canvas, but, by usurping the place of the icon with *Black Square* in the arrangement of *0,10* (Figure 11), they also convey a notion of a transcendental truth that assumes theological overtones. To create is to broach perfectibility.

²⁹. Malevich, 19.

³⁰. Malevich, 19.

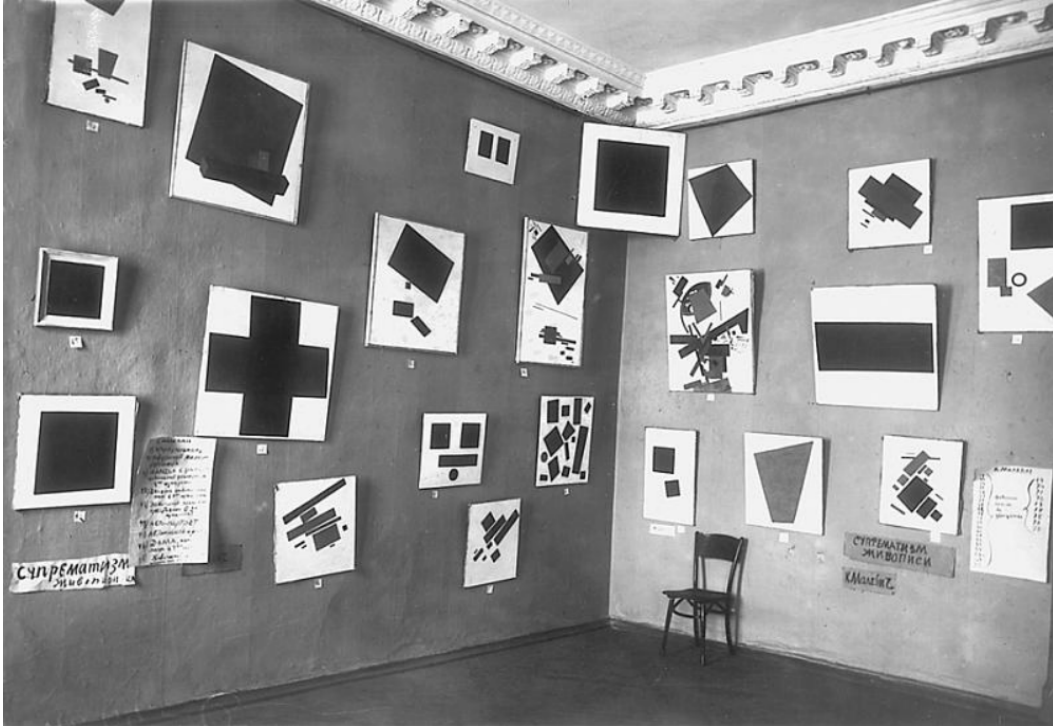


Figure 12. Works by Kazimir Malevich in *0,10. The Last Futurist Exhibition*, Petrograd, Russian Empire, 1915, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation.

To this end, Malevich reverses the paradigm of mimesis; instead of imitating things, things will imitate him. Malevich transfigures the mind into a sort of absolute origin point — the “zero of form.” Let paint and canvas apprehend this zero point, and the product will be an actual, non-objective product of the mind rather than the mind’s arbitrary rendition of an object. Figuration is arbitrary in that it comprehends only a particular realization of its ostensible object. Malevich envisions capturing all potential realizations of an object by submerging it within his own cognition, as wrought in forms on canvas. The very non-objectivity of the new Suprematist art is precisely the basis of its objective truth for Malevich.

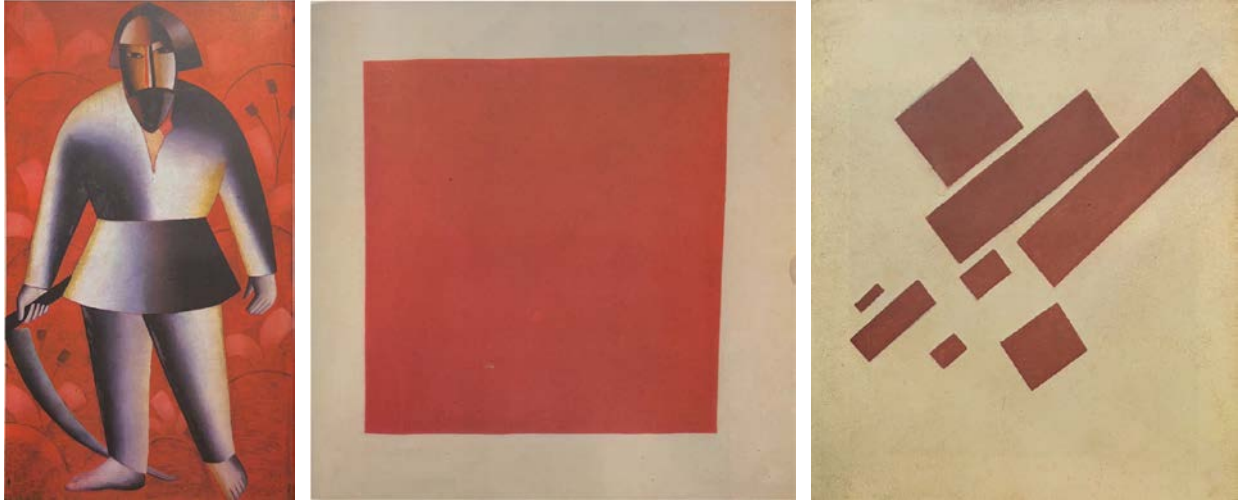


Figure 13. Kazimir Malevich, *Mower* (Left), 1911, *Red Square: Realistic Painting of a Peasant in Two-Dimensions* (Center), 1915. *Suprematism (with Eight Rectangles)* (Right), 1915, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 54, 81, 79.

Whatever the definitiveness of the historical discontinuity Malevich enacted with the realization of his “zero of form” at the advent of Suprematism, he stressed that Suprematism was an outgrowth of the critique of figuration as opposed to the absolute rejection of figuration. There is in this sense, an undercurrent of historical continuity which weaves together the progression of styles leading up to Suprematism. The *Black Square* did not so much invalidate figuration as realize its latent goal. Malevich was opposed to any conception of a static, unchanging, unthinking nature; the truth of an object was its non-objectivity, its capacity to think and transform itself. Malevich decries the “inquisition of nature,” arguing that the “idealisation of the form of man is the mortification of much living sinew.”³¹

Figuration, in attempting to depict the essence of things, transforms into its opposite by denying things their capacity to become. For Malevich, the essence of things lies not in their

³¹. Malevich, 25.

particular manifestation but in the maintenance of their unity across a series of qualitative transformations:

[Absolute creation] is possible only when we free all our art from vulgar subject-matter and teach our consciousness to see everything in nature not as real forms and objects, but as material masses from which forms must be made, which have nothing in common with nature.³²

It is useful to explore the relationship between Malevich's earlier figurative work and his Suprematist paintings. The perplexing, frequently-omitted subtitle of *Red Square, Realistic Painting of a Peasant in Two Dimensions* (Figure 13), becomes more comprehensible if one interprets it not as a symbolic representation of a peasant, but rather a literal red square painted on canvas which is result of formal decisions made through Malevich's comprehension of a peasant as a series of "material masses." If in *Mower*, this process is intermixed with a simultaneous commitment to figural representation, *Red Square* is the direct record of the formal decisions Malevich expresses only latently in *Mower*. *Suprematism with Eight Rectangles*, then, could be said to take these formal decisions and attempt to express more fully the totality of their potential realizations beyond their isolated figural realization in *Mower*. Malevich explanation for why the artist "should know what, and why, things happen in his pictures" is useful for understanding this process of coming to consciousness of a greater share of the totality of potential realizations of formal decisions:

³². Malevich, 25.

[...] when asked why this face was crooked, or green, [the artist] could not give an exact answer. 'I want it so, I like it like that...' In the end this desire was ascribed to intuitive will. Consequently the intuitive feeling did not speak clearly. And in that case, its condition was not only subconscious, but totally unconscious.³³

The entropic process of consciousness realizing more completely the potential realization of formal decisions is not significant to Malevich simply as an aesthetic phenomenon; it is a process of developing objective knowledge. Malevich's issue with the various post-impressionist deformations of figurative art was that they were unconscious of the form-generation process they undertook, and as a result assumed a mysterious aura, summarized in Malevich's word by the truism "I like it like that." Yet the truth, Malevich argues, of these post-impressionist deformations is not how they modify figuration, but rather the deformations themselves as forms, since only this is a measure of the autonomy of form. In other words, the movement of consciousness from unconscious to subconscious, and then to objective knowledge corresponds to the extent to which form is utilized consciously and directly by the artist, since only by the latter can one begin to capture the greater extent of the potential realizations of their formal decisions. When one's work consists of the conscious manipulation of "painted units of colour" they have laid the groundwork for a new, higher "realism."³⁴

³³. Malevich, 32.

³⁴. Malevich, 38.

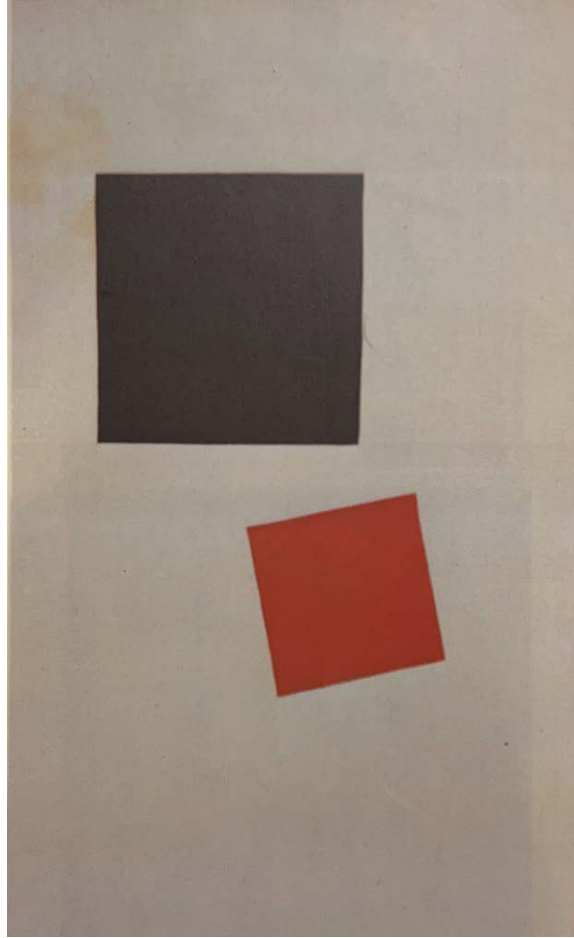


Figure 14. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist painting. Black and Red Squares*, 1915, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 86.

The inscription of formal decisions onto canvas is dynamic. When Malevich refers to the movement of formal decisions which binds their particular realizations into a larger totality embracing all of their potential realizations, he describes it in terms of “weight, speed, and direction of movement.” In *Black and Red Squares* there is no external relation which binds one form to another in a compositional hierarchy. Instead, Malevich has attempted to realize movement, placing two autonomous forms on canvas which are “living” in that they are capable of directing themselves to new states of existence through their free mutual interaction. In

Malevich's words, "Forms must be given life and the right to individual existence."³⁵ He provides a vision of what a more fully realized stage of this process might entail:

An artist is under the obligation to be a free creator, but not a freebooter. An artist is given talent in order that he may give to life his share of creation and increase the flow of life. Only in absolute creation will he acquire this right.³⁶

Ultimately, Malevich's Suprematism envisioned a universe that is in its essence both thinking and creative. Having achieved the autonomy of form from what is unselfconscious in painting and attempted to conduct formal decisions consciously, Malevich believed himself to have better encompassed the totality of all particular realizations of these formal decisions, and in this sense, to have increased "the flow of life." This creative universe is entropic; Malevich's *Eighteenth Construction* and *Dynamic Suprematism* (Figure 15) illustrate the increasing compositional complexity the canvas assumes as it expands towards a consciousness of its broader realizations. For Malevich, a notion of form as a historical process had begun to take shape by the time of his first series of Suprematist paintings in 1915. Latent in each Suprematist form, in its very discontinuity with inherited precedent, was the basis of a historical continuity universal in its ability to interweave all possible particular realizations of form into a single totality.

³⁵. Malevich, 24.

³⁶. Malevich, 25.

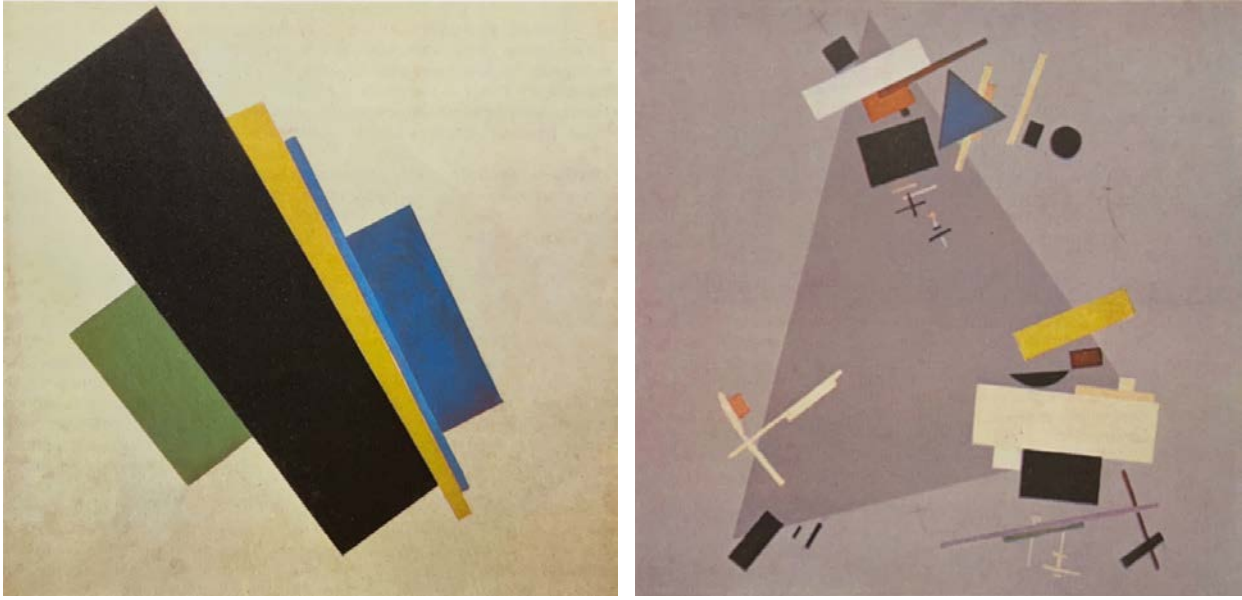


Figure 15. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism. Eighteenth Construction*, 1915. *Dynamic Suprematism*. (Supremus No. 57), 1916, in D. V. Sarabianov and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich: zhivopis, teoriia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1993), 84, 85.

Mies and Malevich's work during the 1910s was characterized by major historical discontinuities in form, whether in Mies' dramatic shift away from Behrens to Berlage or in the flurry of stylistic shifts in Malevich's painting that lead up to his unprecedented Suprematist idiom. Mies and Malevich interpreted this period largely through the lens of historical continuity, and a basic set of motivations permeates this period in its entirety. Among the most salient of these was a commitment to unifying manual and intellectual work through a new kind of artistic praxis that descends from the experiences of Mies and Malevich's upbringing. Still, such continuities are largely inadequate to explain the great formal discontinuity of their work during this period. Mies and Malevich interpreted historical continuity through a string of discontinuities. The qualitative transformations which permeate the stage-by-stage progression of their work during this period are the basis of its very historical continuity. Just as Behrens was a necessary foil in Mies' eyes to Berlage, and the specific progression of "Cézannism"-Cubism-Futurism a necessary prologue for Suprematism to Malevich, it was the dialectical mediation of

this period's intellectual phases that would later constitute Mies and Malevich's greatest inheritance from this period.

Chapter Two

Mies and Malevich on Their Historical Role

Mies and Malevich contextualized their work during the 1920s within contemporary social, political, and economic developments stemming from the Russian and German Revolutions. Mies and Malevich, while framing their work as a marked discontinuity with pre-revolutionary precedent, saw their work as part of a larger historical continuum, looking forwards into the future as part of a wider avant-garde. The development of Mies and Malevich's aesthetics between the outbreak of revolution and the mid-1920s mirrors the broader intellectual developments driving this period's social and political changes. Mies and Malevich's work mediated rival artistic currents, broadly characterizable as Expressionist and Anti-Expressionist, which attempted to position themselves as aesthetic representatives of the recent political revolutions. This major intellectual and artistic exchange between the early Soviet Union and Weimar Germany also manifested itself in the productive interaction between two particular factions closely tied to Mies and Malevich, respectively: the journal *G* and the organization UNOVIS. Examining Mies and Malevich's work within these factions demonstrates how specific formal innovations were self-consciously embedded within a broader historical process. If Mies, Malevich, and the wider avant-garde sought to break with precedent, they nevertheless strove to emphasize their work's historical character.

Expressionism in the Wake of the Russian and German Revolutions

The millenarian ethos of the immediate post-revolutionary years is best captured by the word which stood for it in Germany during this period, Expressionism. Art was interpreted as fulfilling a messianic role in its enaction of a terminal break with all received form. This would lay the stage for the perceived recovery of an authentic ur-form. Although Mies and Malevich

lack a distinct Expressionist phase, their critical response to the movement at the height of its strength injected a lasting sense of historical purpose and engagement with contemporary political, social, and economic developments into their work. The terminal historical discontinuity of Expressionism was challenged by Mies and Malevich, who qualified this apocalyptic vision through an emphasis on historical continuity. In spite of this, they still absorbed aspects of the moral intensity with which Expressionism fought for new forms.

The upending of Mies' life during the revolutionary years is useful context for the broader phenomena of Expressionism. A dull, harsh conscript stint in Romania that began in 1917 took Mies away from Berlin, where crowds of enthusiastic war supporters still celebrated the Hohenzollerns in their seat of power. When Mies returned to Germany on November 22, 1919, Berlin was now the capital of a republic.³⁷ Mies had stumbled into the midst of the *Novemberrevolution*. Workers' and soldiers' councils controlled major cities while politicians scrambled to formalize the institutions of a provisional government in order to create the resemblance of public order. In Berlin, the latter's efforts were opposed by calls from street demonstrators affiliated with Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht's Spartacist League for the councils to bypass the formation of a provisional government and directly constitute themselves into a council republic.³⁸ The very names of the artistic movements which arose in Berlin during this period – *Novembergruppe*; *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Worker's Council for Art) – demonstrate that there was no meaningful separation at this time of highly informal, decentralized, and chaotic direct democracy between political and artistic organization. Avant-garde groups

³⁷. Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe*, 54–55.

³⁸. Eberhard Kolb, "The Revolution and the Foundation of the Republic, 1918/19," in *The Weimar Republic* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 7–11.

assumed the language and organization of the councils because, for a brief moment in 1918 to 1919, they were difficult to disambiguate and had shared motivations. While worker's councils attempted to wrest control of Berlin's industry from its management and institute a form of self-management, the Novembergruppe's central working-committee likewise called for the "remission of exhibition space" to achieve the "elimination of privilege and capitalist influence."³⁹ Staid, correct, and formally dressed Mies would, within a matter of months, find himself in the midst of such councils. Mies arrived in Berlin in January of 1919, the same month Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht were murdered by paramilitaries supporting the provisional government. One day, Mies would be responsible for the monument marking their graves.⁴⁰

Mies wasted little time in becoming involved with the incipient avant-garde scene in Berlin. As early as February 11, 1919, he wrote to Walter Gropius, an old coworker at the office of Peter Behrens and now a leading figure in the newly formed *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, sending photos of his Kröller-Müller project from the Hague that he hoped would be included in the group's upcoming *Exhibition of Unknown Artists*.⁴¹ "What is architecture?" asked Walter Gropius in a leaflet handed out at the exhibition: "The crystalline expression of man's noblest thoughts; his ardour, his humanity, his faith his religion! That is what it once was!"⁴² Mies'

³⁹. R. Bauer et al., "Richtlinien Der 'Novembergruppe,'" in *Die Novembergruppe*, by Helga Kliemann (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst e.V. (Kunstverein Berlin), 1969), 57.

⁴⁰. Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van Der Rohe*, 55.

⁴¹. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to Walter Gropius, February 11, 1919, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin.

⁴². Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, and Adolf Behne, "Gropius/Taut/Behne: New Ideas on Architecture," in *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture*, ed. Ulrich Conrads, trans. Michael Bullock, 19th printing (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Pr, 2002), 46.

rejection from this exhibition was not received well, highlighting his relative disconnect from an avant-garde that had long since embraced Expressionism.⁴³

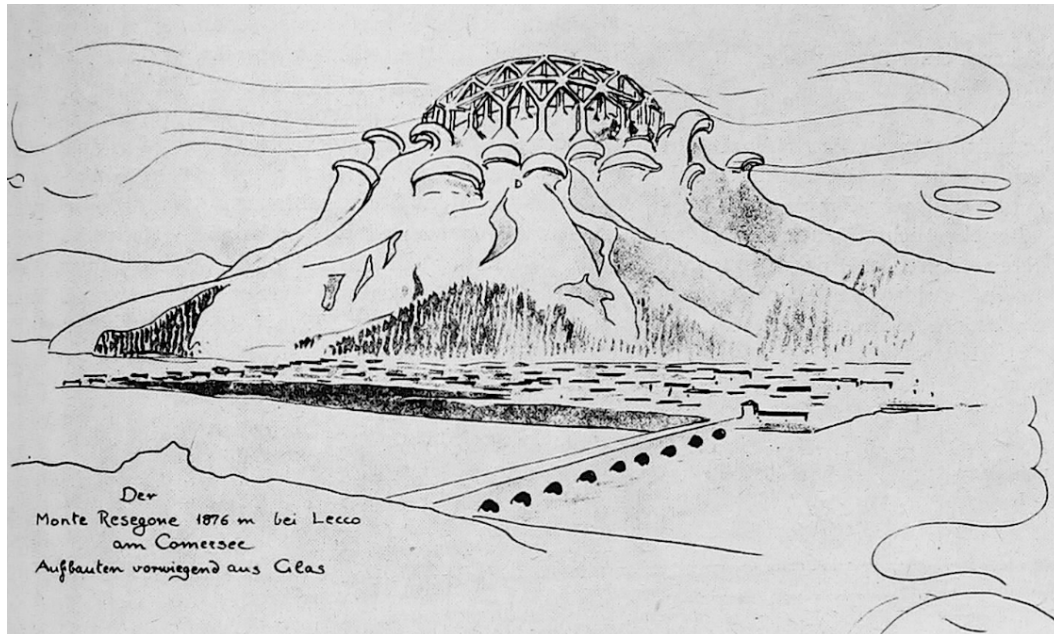


Figure 16. Bruno Taut, Drawing of a Monument, Monte Resegone, Italy, 1917, in Kurt Junghanns, *Die Beziehungen zwischen deutschen and sowjetischen Architekten in den Jahren 1917 bis 1933*, Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin 14, no. 3 (1967), 377.

The work of Bruno Taut, another member of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* and future collaborator of Mies', was indicative of this Expressionist ethos. Taut's "Alpine Architecture," drawn up in the years immediately preceding the German Revolution, epitomized the absolute historical discontinuity lauded by the Expressionists. Imagining massive crystal structures which crested mountaintops in what was imagined to be a purified architecture, Taut's creations were rid of all precedent or purpose. Although there was no question of Mies' interest in furthering the cause of new form, a certain disconnect between the Expressionists and his personal outlook had

⁴³. "Theoretical Projects for the Metropolis," in *Ludwig Mies van Der Rohe*, by Jean-Louis Cohen, 2nd and updated ed ed. (Basel ; Boston: Birkhäuser, 2007), 27.

already begun to manifest itself as early as 1919. Mies was unprepared to jettison the appreciation for form as an extension of the historical development of building processes that he had developed in the last decade through a mediation of Behrens and Berlage. He would strategically withdraw his work from the avant-garde, waiting until he had found a means to embrace the avant-garde's discontinuity in a way that accommodated his own commitment to the study of continuous historical processes.

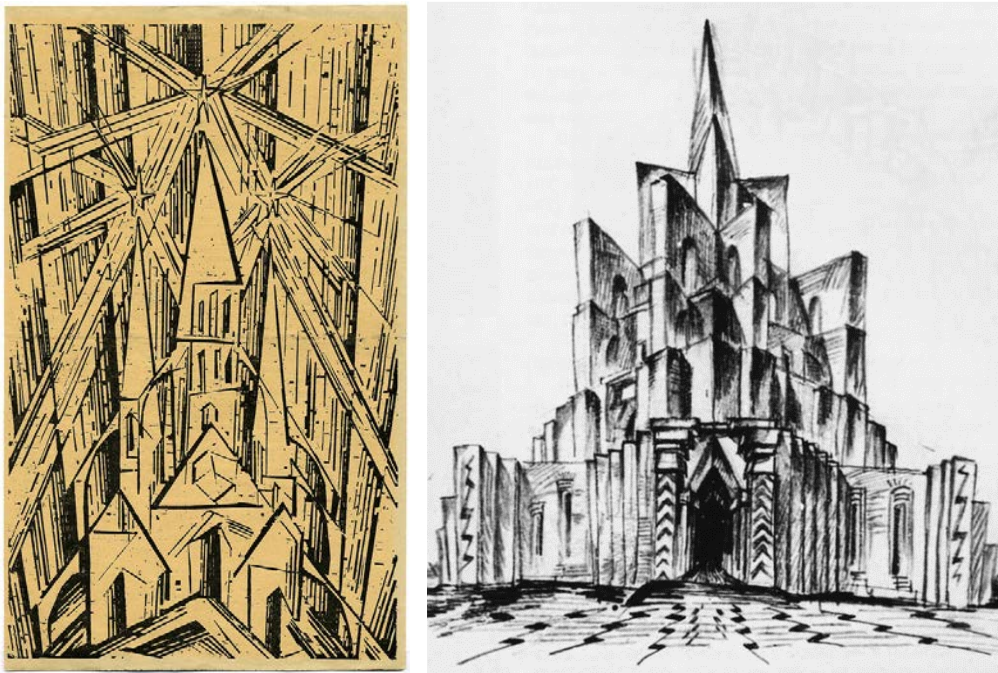


Figure 17. Lyonel Feininger, *Kathedrale (Cathedral)*, 1919, woodblock print, Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin. Nikolai Istselenov, *Temple of Communication among Peoples*, 1919, in Richard Anderson, *Russia: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion, 2015), 93.

Expressionism became the architectural language of international revolution. In Germany as in Russia, scores of architects turned to the crystalline aesthetics of Expressionism, dedicating towering citadels to the future of humanity. It was virtually impossible to escape the influence of this ethos in some form or another, and in this respect, Malevich was no less affected by the post-revolutionary atmosphere than Mies. The Russian Revolution challenged Malevich's aesthetics

by giving what had hitherto been only an abstract, intellectual historicism a concrete basis in real events transpiring around him in Moscow. Prior to the revolution, Malevich's conception of the artist's role in society was one of enlightened withdrawal, precluding any political involvement. Intellectual history had no relation to the realm of what Malevich called the "utilitarian;" it existed in a world and timeframe of its own. As Malevich wrote in *From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting* at the beginning of 1916:

Intuition is the new reason, consciously creating forms. But the artist, enslaved by utilitarian reason, leads an unconscious struggle, now subjecting himself to an object, now deforming it.⁴⁴

The intellectual history of form was an internal process of intuition. The artist disestablished themselves from the world by ceasing the futile attempt to shape objects into form, allowing them to embrace form in-of-itself as an object of artistic creation. Malevich interpreted worldly developments through an essentially eschatological frame of reference that reduced all "utilitarian" matters to an inscrutable process of "the Divinity ordering crystals to assume another form of existence."⁴⁵ This, then, was the context in which Malevich announced plans to launch a journal, *Supremus*, propagandizing his aesthetics on the eve of the revolution in late 1916.⁴⁶ If revolution had long been a *cause-célèbre* for Malevich's circle and the intelligentsia at large, they were caught off-guard by its unexpected materialization. To remain

⁴⁴. Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," 37.

⁴⁵. Malevich, 32.

⁴⁶. Nina Gurianova, "The Supremus 'Laboratory House:' Reconstructing the Journal," in *Kazimir Malevich - Suprematism*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York, NY: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 46.

relevant under these drastically different circumstances, Suprematism would have to assert its contribution to the revolution. The articles Malevich prepared in the subsequent revolutionary year of 1917 are largely attempts to convert Suprematism from a private ideology of withdrawal into a political program. Eventually published in a series of installments in the journal *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy) in 1918, Malevich's writings emulate the political manifestos they appeared side-by-side with:

At the moment of a radical turn in the old way of life, when all that is new and young is striving to find its form and reveal its 'ego,' corpses crawl out and try to put their cold hands on the living. The social revolution which smashed the chains of capitalist slavery, has not yet smashed the old tables of aesthetic values. And now, as the new building and creation of cultural values is commencing, it is essential to guard oneself against the poison of bourgeois banality.⁴⁷

Here, it is the social revolution, and not "intuition," which is foregrounded as the origin point of form. The artistic ego is socialized. It is no longer a vessel of aesthetic withdrawal, but the substantive expression of the negation of the "old way of life;" worldly exploitation is explicitly related to the "aesthetic values" which underpin it. Culture is conceived of as a tangible collective construction project, not part of a realm of *a priori* truth exterior and superior to the everyday. And this new notion of culture, while borrowing the historical character of Malevich's earlier conception of intellectual development by conceiving of itself as a cumulative process, radicalizes the old notion by insisting not only on a worldly point of origin but a stake in politics. Malevich describes the social revolution as if it were in lockstep with a cultural revolution, the one influencing the other's tactics and outcome; "bourgeois banality" is as much

⁴⁷. K.S. Malevich, Aleksei Gan, and Aleksei Morgunov, "The Problems of Art and the Role of Its Suppressors," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 49.

to be guarded against as actual counterrevolutionary assault. The more pertinent question, then, is not so much the extent to which Malevich changed as a thinker, politicizing his aesthetics, but rather how Suprematism was carried over into this new period, absorbing new meanings. In another article from *Anarkhiia* in 1918, Malevich described in broad strokes his plan for a politicized Suprematism:

Before us stands an enormous task: to build up a living conflagration in Russia, and to kindle its flame in the broad spaces of the sea. To raise art in the soul of the people. This can be so, wherever it is possible to create a whole free 'state' of artists.⁴⁸

Art was not to be an individual end, but a social end. The old Suprematism declared the independence of form from content, of individual artistic freedom from social limitation. Radical non-objectivity was the origin point of all subsequent worldly activity, serving as a gateway through which the artist departed from phenomenal existence into the realm of higher aesthetic truth. Over the course of 1917 Malevich reversed the direction of travel through the gateway. Suprematist forms would descend from the abstract realm of truth and freedom into the concrete world of ignorance and bondage. It is the fiery landscape of a fallen world painted by Malevich's language, and not some ethereal place external to it, that provides the real basis of freedom. Malevich's notion of artistic freedom was no longer an individual exit from limited social existence, but provided the basis for a new praxis that would enact freedom as a collective artistic endeavor and negate the prior, limited stage of social existence. Malevich continues to elaborate this vision:

⁴⁸. K.S. Malevich, "A Little Dead Stick," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 56.

And we will arise and set up museums, organize Moscow, divide the treasures amongst the towns, setting up museums in them. We will establish studios for creative workers. The field of art belongs to us, and each of us will occupy his own strip in his own realm. It is there that the army of artists will be divided up and will stand on the new road of common work.⁴⁹

If the pre-revolutionary understanding of culture euphemized class distinction as an intellectual distinction, the weathering of this façade gave new attention to the material basis of cultural production. In a society where culture was conceived as something external to everyday life, the lack of a visible material basis to culture reinforced its exalted aura. The Malevich of 1917 acknowledges no such aura. The old culture is little more than infrastructure to be redistributed. The old culture's very materiality would provide the basis for the collective project of artistic production that Malevich believed would supersede it. Art was not an aura, but the contradictory remainder of material things. Malevich reduces Moscow's "treasures" to mere instruments as a means of resisting their instrumentalization for a concept of culture that depends on the denial of its own content. Art is instrumentalized against instrumentalization. Malevich explores this in his 1919 essay *On the Museum*:

Instead of collecting all sorts of old stuff we must form laboratories of a worldwide creative building apparatus, and from its axes will come forth artists of living forms rather than dead representations of objectivity.⁵⁰

The medium of painting could not accommodate the increase in scale Malevich envisioned for his "laboratories." For this reason, Malevich turned to writing as a means to

⁴⁹. Malevich, 57.

⁵⁰. K.S. Malevich, "On the Museum," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 72.

develop his ideas, hoping a strategic retreat to theoretical development would lay the groundwork for a future mass artistic practice on a social scale. Malevich was aware that architecture had a similar scope as a field and harnessed similar collective labor but was careful not to conflate his emerging vision of artistic practice with architecture. Malevich believed art had an objective historical role to play that could not be reduced to either subjective taste or to any external rationale such as functionalism:

Before the sculptor lies a system which must be turned into a monument. Before the bricklayer lie plans which must be turned into houses. There is no place for anything internal or individual, or of the ‘I understood’ variety. If there is no skill, if you yourself are not sharpened into a chisel, if your forehead cannot be a hammer, your breast an anvil, and your hands lamps, then leave the making of monuments alone, for they will be ‘not created by human hands’⁵¹

Malevich’s vision for mass artistic practice interprets monumentality in language recalling his earliest attempts to theorize form in Suprematist painting. In both cases, form contradicts itself as an object. Form is no longer the unconscious product of the artist’s attempt to create a given object. By abandoning the object of the work’s content, the artist becomes self-conscious of form as an end in and of itself. Form itself becomes the artist’s object. To be “sharpened into a chisel” is to create monuments which bypass subjective caprice by objectifying form itself. Malevich further elaborates this idea through another anecdote:

⁵¹. K.S. Malevich, “Monuments Not Made by Human Hands,” in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 67.

Art has moved its avant-garde from the tunnels of the past. The body of art is constantly being reincarnated and strengthens the basis of the skeleton in solid, strong links, in accordance with the time. The volcanoes of the new embryos of creative forms sweep all away, pulverize the shell, and erect a new one⁵²

Malevich's notion of an objective form is not a static conception. Form is objective only insofar as it supersedes its content through a historical process. Malevich invokes the process of convection by which magma rises within a volcano, most sinking back down, some congealing into a new layer of rock. The external manifestation of form is but a reflection of a larger, cyclical process of creation and negation which underpins it. This cyclical process is imperfect; a remainder escapes its confines and accumulates as something substantive. Form is objective in its capacity to negate both its content in its finite, extant state and its ephemeral quality as an infinite process, transcending itself as a subject that comes to self-consciousness by integrating the movement of its historical states. For Malevich, the world is no longer merely a prism through which form is gleaned via an external cognition, but a historical process of cognition in which the world comes to self-consciousness of itself as a form-giver:

Clean the squares of the remains of the past, for temples of our image are going to be erected. [...] we form our own time, with our time and forms, and place the stamp of our face, leaving it in the flow of centuries where it will be *recognized*.⁵³

With Malevich's admonition to build "temples in our image," architecture becomes the expression of the extant's coming-to-consciousness. The extant is particular, and thus estranged.

⁵². K.S. Malevich, "Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 61.

⁵³. K.S. Malevich, "To the New Image," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 51, emphasis added.

The actual is universal, and thus self-conscious. For Malevich, any future architectural praxis must be a microcosm of the particular's recognition of itself in a universal creative spirit.

Mies and Malevich, already established in their respective fields by the time of the Russian and German Revolutions, were caught off-guard by the explosive growth of Expressionism. In the last pre-revolutionary decade, Mies and Malevich had developed a complex conception of the dialectic interplay of historical continuity and discontinuity in constituting form. Now, that balance was thrown off by a broadside of millenarian Expressionist fervor, proclaiming an absolute discontinuity through its preoccupation with crystalline forms imagined to constitute a primal vocabulary that could revoke all historical precedent and begin architecture anew. Mies and Malevich's response to Expressionism was multifaceted. While they responded positively to Expressionism's glorification of new form, they attempted to redirect its emphasis towards one that, building on their pre-revolutionary theory, acknowledged historical continuity as an integral component of the development of form. Soon, however, Expressionism would be met with vocal challengers, and Mies and Malevich would have to differentiate their work from tendencies on an entirely different end of the theoretical spectrum.

Agitation and Construction: Post-Revolutionary Anti-Expressionism

Expressionism waned quickly as the initial euphoria of the early revolutionary period was diluted by a brutal civil war in Soviet Russia and a counterrevolutionary victory in Germany. Although the entrenchment of a centralized wartime government in Soviet Russia and disestablishment of workers' and soldiers' councils in Germany dealt a major, if not fatal blow, to the political revolution, its optimistic ethos lived on in the arts, albeit in transformed form reflecting new conditions. While Expressionism tended to conceive of the revolution as a terminal historical discontinuity, Anti-Expressionists committed themselves to a grittier,

prolonged revolution which was seen as a continuous historical process. Arguing for sobriety, political agitation, and construction to meet social needs, these new Anti-Expressionist tendencies contributed to the formation of a juncture between Mies and Malevich's work, with Mies critically appropriating these tendencies in a manner that distanced him from Malevich.

As *Freikorps* prowled Berlin and revolutionary dreams were displaced by the hysterics of reactionary conspiracy, the ahistorical millenarianism and fantasy-like vocabulary of Expressionism came deeply into question. The caricature artist and painter George Grosz, a future contact of Mies', reflected in a 1920 essay on the trajectory of art since the revolution – “dependent on the bourgeois class and, with them, dead” – by mocking how quickly artists move from “not-coping-with-the-world” to affirming “life.” They were, as a class, “mostly duped and under the tow of the great reactionary spirit-swindle.”⁵⁴ Escape from the world could no longer be the premise of revolutionary art. This *sachlich* outlook appears to have resonated with Mies, as he is one of the rare figures in Weimar's avant-garde not to go through an Expressionist phase. Having struggled to find traction with Gropius' Expressionists, Mies bypassed Expressionism and began to frequent the most vocally Anti-Expressionist artistic circle in the city: the Dadaists. With a look of polite bemusement, Mies can be seen in an image of Berlin's First International Dada Exposition in 1920, looking at an image of the Flatiron Building in New York.⁵⁵

⁵⁴. George Grosz, “Statt Einer Bibliographie,” in *George Grosz*, by Willi Wolfradt (Leipzig: Verlag von Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1921), 14.

⁵⁵. Detlef Mertins, “Architectures of Becoming: Mies van Der Rohe and the Avant-Garde,” in *Mies in Berlin* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2001), 111–13.



Figure 18. Mies attending the First International Dada Exposition, Berlin, 1920, in *Mies in Berlin*, ed. Terrence Riley and Barry Bergdoll (New York: MoMA, 2001), 102.

Many of Mies' future collaborators were also in attendance at the Dada Exposition, including George Grosz. The Dadaists thrashed the Expressionists' ahistorical longing for a return to an organic society, explicitly denigrating the distinction between the organic and the artificial, as Grosz suggested cheekily in his 1920 painting *Republican Automaton* (Figure 19). The challenge of the new revolutionary art was not to escape the trappings of modernity, but to appropriate them from their alienated context and reconfigure them as instruments of self-conscious creation. Rather than reproducing the limited form of life the artist was confined to before the Revolution, the machine would become an instrument for the liberation of form. Like Mies, the Dadaists had developed an acute sensitivity to the formal potential latent within seemingly mundane historical processes.



Figure 19. George Grosz, *Republican Automatons*, 1920, watercolor and pencil on paper, 23 5/8 x 18 5/8," Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Still, there were important differences between the burgeoning Anti-Expressionist appreciation of the study of historical continuities and Mies' own conception. Namely, amongst the Anti-Expressionists, there was no parallel emphasis on the role of historical discontinuity in constituting socioeconomic processes. If Mies and Malevich had rejected the absolute historical discontinuity of the Expressionist wing of the avant-garde, Mies now found himself having to temper the historical continuity of the Anti-Expressionist wing. It is in response to this context that Mies most Expressionist work, the Friedrichstraße skyscraper project, must be understood.

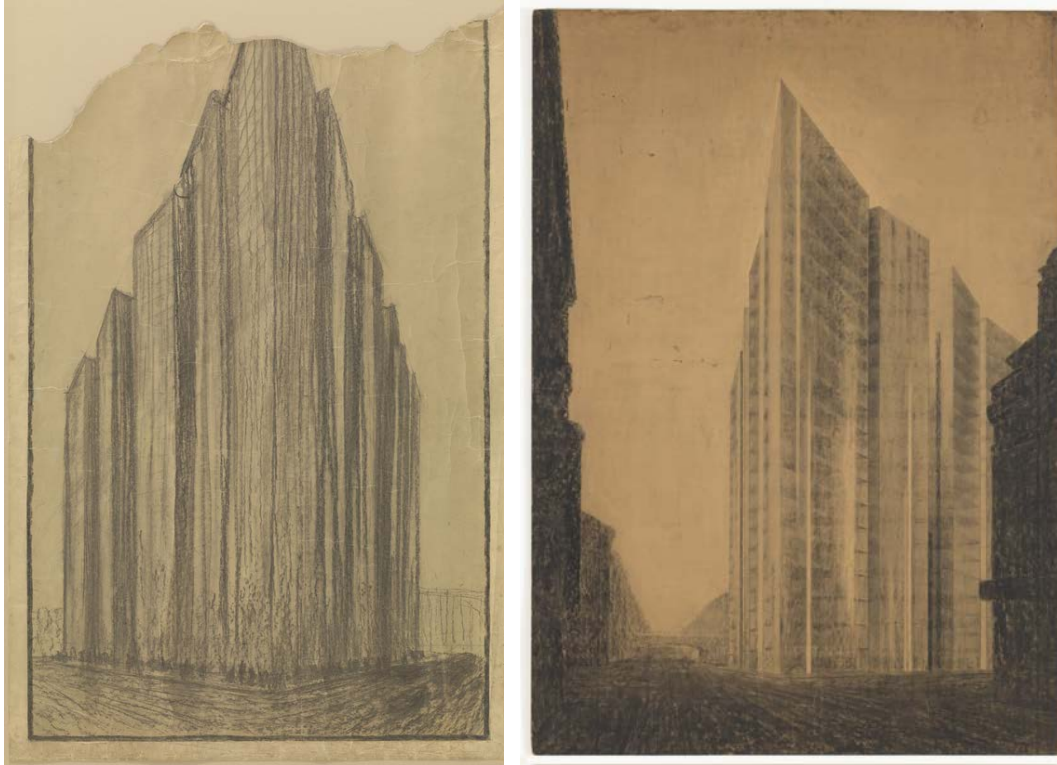


Figure 20. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Friedrichstraße Skyscraper Project, Berlin-Mitte, Germany, Perspective of First Version (Left), 1921, charcoal and pencil on paper, 42 3/4 x 29 1/2," and Exterior Perspective from North of Second Version (Right), 1921, charcoal and graphite on paper mounted on board, 68 1/4 x 48," Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In Mies' first version of the Friedrichstraße skyscraper project, the building's floors are rendered simply as a texture through a series of lines which do not correspond to the actual intervals between floors. Form, in the manner of the Expressionists, is an end in its own right. In the second version of the skyscraper project, structure is articulated in its own right. Texture disappears from the graphics, and the building is reduced to an interaction between light and internal structure. Mediating between Expressionist and Anti-Expressionist tendencies, Mies attempted to navigate a course for his architecture that could locate the historical discontinuity of the Expressionists in the sober appreciation of historical continuities of the Anti-Expressionists.

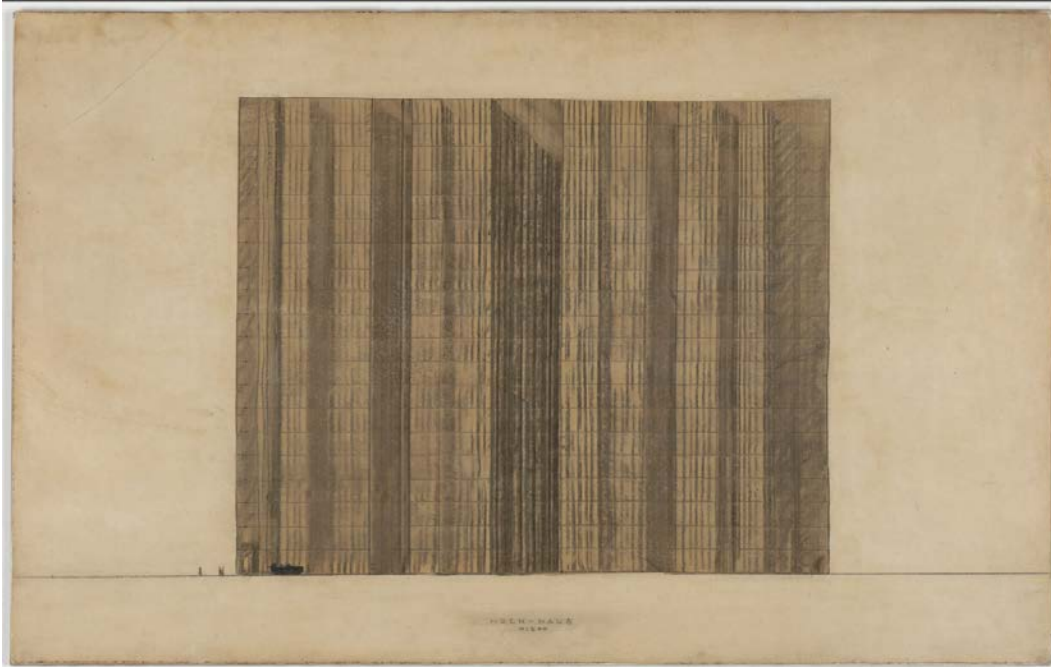


Figure 21. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Friedrichstraße Skyscraper Project, Berlin-Mitte, Germany (Elevation Study), 1921, charcoal and graphite on paper mounted on board, 68 1/4 x 48", Museum of Modern Art, New York.

By the time of the creation of more finalized graphic representations of the Friedrichstraße project, Mies had begun to approach a new idea of the totality; a totality not drawn from the absolute correspondence of content and form, but rather a critical exertion of discreet architectural components pointing towards a total critique. Instead of creating *tabula rasa* with a pretense of authenticity in the mode of the Expressionists or dryly emphasizing the finitude of things in the manner of the Anti-Expressionists, Mies attempted to convey a sense of the whole within the particular as a potential. In this sense, Mies' development of the Friedrichstraße skyscraper bears a resemblance to Malevich's dynamic conception of Suprematist form.

Altogether, the Anti-Expressionist wing of the avant-garde had a more pronounced impact on Mies than on Malevich, reflecting the rapport between their concern with contemporary historical processes and Mies' studies of developing the material possibilities of

structure. This seeded the basis of a schism between Mies and Malevich along materialist and idealist lines, respectively, although this was yet to occur. Indeed, Mies and Malevich, around the time of Mies' Friedrichstraße project, were on the brink of what would amount to their most productive exchange with one another.

Intellectual and Cultural Exchange between Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany

Mies and Malevich, like the Expressionist and Anti-Expressionist currents they mediated, were immersed within a comprehensive intellectual and cultural exchange between Soviet Russia and Weimar Germany. Although Malevich's Suprematist forms had epitomized historical discontinuity, in this new context of exchange they would contribute to the foundation of a new kind of forward-looking historical continuity as they were passed on to Mies through a series of intermediaries who each left their own mark on the final product. UNOVIS, in its attempt to propagandize on behalf of Malevich's Suprematism, transformed the style as they participated in the wider cultural life of Soviet Russia and translated its basic language into new mediums. A network of organizations then facilitated the transfer of Suprematist form from Soviet Russia to Weimar Germany, providing the basis for *G*'s subsequent appropriation of aspects of Suprematism. Finally, completing the circle of transfer, Mies absorbed Malevich's Suprematism from *G*, working it into his Brick Country House project of 1923.

UNOVIS was born out of desperate circumstances. El Lissitzky found Kazimir Malevich in Moscow in 1919, hoarse from a year of agitation for artistic revolution and on the verge of starvation. With little to lose, the pair set off for the city of Vitebsk, off in the provinces where food supplies were less tenuous. There, Lissitzky had secured Malevich a teaching position at a

new art school set up by Marc Chagall.⁵⁶ UNOVIS was born as an internal faction within the art school, waging Malevich's Suprematism against Chagall's more idiosyncratic, loosely Expressionist idiom.⁵⁷ UNOVIS, like the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* in Berlin, had aspects in common both in origin and in practice with the revolutionary councils that had emerged throughout the former Tsarist empire. Malevich's post-revolutionary work, culminating with UNOVIS' activities, demonstrates that his most mature attempts to historically contextualize his work did not simply establish dialogue with past developments, but also attempted to situate his work within contemporary world-historical processes.

⁵⁶ Willem Jan Renders, "Vitebsk: A Turning Point in Lissitzky's Life," in *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922*, ed. Angela Lampe, trans. Christian Herbert, English edition (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2018), 89–90.

⁵⁷ Tamara Karandasheva, "Chagall and Suprematism," in *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922*, ed. Angela Lampe, trans. Galya Korovina, English edition (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2018), 65–66.



Figure 22. El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism* (Stage Design), 1919 (Top), gouache, watercolor, graphite, and india ink on paper, 49 x 62.5 cm, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russian Federation, and Suprematist decorations on the exterior of the Committee for Struggle against Unemployment's headquarters (Bottom), Vitebsk, Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania and Belorussia, December 1919, in Tatiana Gorcheva, *UNOVIS No. 1* (Moscow: Skanrus, 2003), 11.

Malevich worked to translate ideas from Suprematist painting into architecture through UNOVIS, where he found a means to realize his ideas on a social rather than merely intellectual

level. Yet, as Malevich attempted to extend his ideas, they were transformed by the context that received them. His earliest attempts at a Suprematist architecture, like the stage design he attempted with Lissitzky for Vitebsk's Committee for Struggle against Unemployment (Figure 22), show an attempt to translate the three-dimensional illusion Suprematist painting achieved through the collation of two-dimensional forms of solid color into a representation of a three-dimensional space. Form contradicts itself by assuming the qualities of an object when the viewer perceives three-dimensional depth that is not actually indicated by the painting. Yet, in spite of the complexity he achieved in his plan for the Committee's stage decorations, Malevich's conceptual success in the three-dimensional representation of Suprematist architecture did not necessarily translate into success in realizing it in practice.

As images of building decorations he created with Lissitzky for the same arts project with the Committee for Struggle against Unemployment (Figure 22) demonstrate, the perception of depth purely through color blocking was less effective when viewed from an oblique angle other than the single perspective of the painting, since it began to compete with actual, and not just simulated, perspective. As a result, what became clear was that any Suprematist architecture could not merely be an appliqué to an existing architectural typology; it would need to independently constitute a new three-dimensional environment unconstrained by a visual relationship to the standard vocabulary of architectural form and proportion. By extending Suprematist ideas through UNOVIS to the Committee for Struggle against Unemployment, Malevich challenged his own conception of work, realizing a key limitation in its applicability to an architectural context. This provided the impetus to explore a number of solutions which would, in turn, also transform Suprematism as an aesthetic theory.



Figure 23. Nikolai Suetin, *Railway car with UNOVIS emblem*, 1920, gouache, watercolor, and indian ink on paper, 27.5 x 43.8 cm, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation.

Nikolai Suetin, one of Malevich's pupils in Vitebsk, captured the outward-looking spirit of UNOVIS with his design for a railcar that would transport the group's members to an exhibition in Moscow. Emblazoned with the Black Square, UNOVIS' export of Suprematism resulted in hybridized realizations of Malevich's ideas as members of the group attempted to apply his theory towards more architectural projects. One conception of Suprematist architecture reflecting this export which was particularly strong among those with Moscow connections was based on the use of axonometric renderings to translate Suprematist forms directly into three-dimensional space. Instead of developing new, three-dimensional forms, Lissitzky, Gustav Klutsis, and other adopters of this technique established in each rendering a standard set of angles which explicitly articulated the image's surface as a three-dimensional field, isolating the shape of each form from its orientation, which had previously been ambiguous. Depth, and thus the relative position of objects within the image's field remained subjectively determined. By

incorporating orientation into Suprematist composition, these axonometric renderings, unlike Malevich's earlier painting, were now in theory directly transferable into a physical space assembled in accordance with the image's single perspective. In practice, the large number of floating components made such a field impossible to recreate without additional supports that could compromise the subjective perception of different forms' relative depths by explicitly articulating their positions relative to the ground and each other. In adapting Suprematist forms to this axonometric idiom, UNOVIS' members created a new shared language, transforming the original content in what, for all of its break with precedent, was a sort of new historical continuity within the avant-garde.

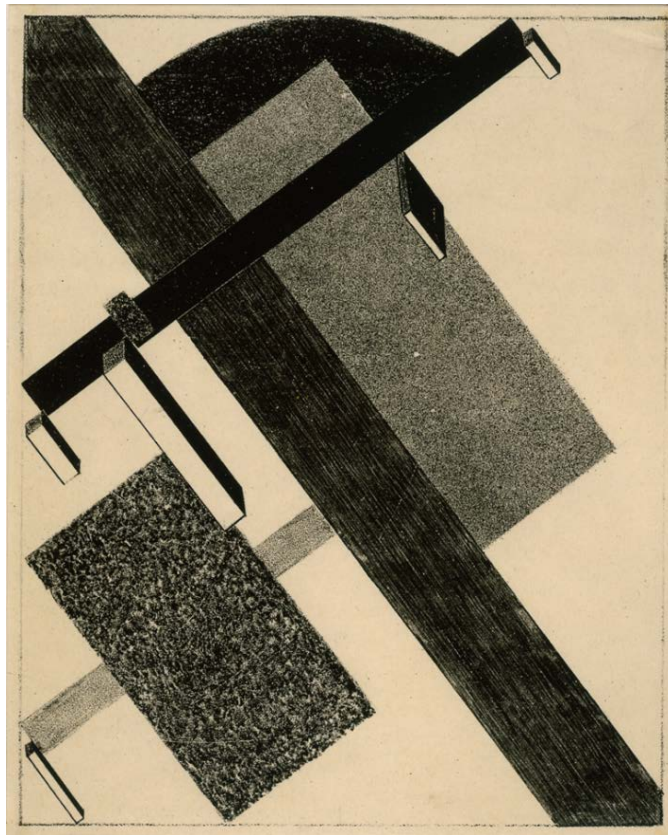


Figure 24. El Lissitzky, *Proun*, c. 1920, lithograph, 32 x 26 cm, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands.

In his version of the new axonometric rendition of Suprematism, Lissitzky qualitatively transformed the spatial characteristics of Suprematist architecture. At its most fundamental level, this technique could be described as the isolation of all representational elements. Line no longer bounds plane or volume, but is a device in its own right. Texture is not assigned to a surface other than itself, but is instead placed directly into the image as an infinitesimally thin plane. The purpose of this technique is to complicate conceptual classification of the image by suppressing the direct visual representation of how individual elements relate to one another as parts of a whole. Generalizing this effect results in an image that does not explicitly convey orientation, scale, proportion, or figural resemblance. Counterintuitively, this technique does not prevent the viewer from conceptualizing the image as a three-dimensional, architectural space. The lack of explicit orientation, scale, or proportion is not immediately obvious to the viewer. Although the image appears to be a well-defined space with an objective configuration, the perceived space is actually the product of the viewer's subjective mediation of abstract pictorial elements.



Figure 25. David Yakerson, *Polychromatic Suprematist Composition*, 1920, Vitebsk Regional History Museum, Vitebsk, Belarus.

The extent to which this new axonometric rendition of Suprematism was amicable to transfer can be seen in its adaptation by the little-known Vitebsk sculptor David Yakerson. Up to this point, in older Suprematist paintings, color and shape had been used to articulate the perceived depth, size, orientation, and relative position of different forms. It was not possible to introduce texture, which, by establishing a certain visual rhythm, would explicitly articulate orientation in much the same way that a rhythmic repetition of angles conveys a three-dimensional field. While Yakerson maintained this limitation as he embraced the new axonometric method, others found new possibilities. The new axonometric Suprematism, having

discarded the dependence of orientation on shape and form, found itself free to embrace texture, which, as Moscow UNOVIS member Gustav Klutss' *Axonometric Construction* (Figure 26) demonstrates, was slowly generalized throughout the graphic environment.

If Suprematism in a broad sense had been born out of an examination of form's tendency to contradict its content as an object by creating the latter, transcendent object, figuration and texture in the new axonometric conception attempted to directly portray form contradicting its content as an object in a single graphic environment. The axonometric conception of Suprematist architecture examined how the particular extant contained within itself the universal actual as a potential by examining their contradictory coexistence in a single graphic environment.



Figure 26. Gustav Klutss, *Axonometric Construction*, c. 1921, lithograph, 19.5 x 17.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

UNOVIS' ideas were thrust into the midst of a flurry of new organizations which had sprung up to facilitate exchange between Soviet Russia and the Weimar Republic during the early 1920s, many of which were tied to the Berlin-based Comintern affiliate, Workers' International Relief. Far more than an effort aimed simply at its original stated goal of alleviating post-Civil War famine in Soviet Russia, the Workers' International Relief formed organizations to engage with an international intelligentsia, like the Society of Friends of the New Russia, as well as organizing major exhibitions that had provided the avant-garde a platform for their work.



Figure 27. Mies' membership card for the "Society of Friends of the New Russia," 1926, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Collection, Box 1: Private Correspondence 1923-1940, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

Mies, from the moment of the organization's inception, was on the mailing list of the Society of the Friends of the New Russia, receiving the society's leaflets and newsletters from mid-1923 onwards. As a public intellectual with increasing recognition in Berlin's cultural circles, Mies was specifically solicited by the organization's general secretary, Erich Lehmann-Lukas, just weeks after the group's inception to join on account of what were seen as his concurrent "goals and ambitions." As a typical example of the group's activities, Mies was

invited to attend a lecture by his colleague, the theorist Adolf Behne, on the “development of Russian art up to the present day.”⁵⁸ At nearly the same time, Mies was in contact with Behne, one of the Society’s founding members, who he had sought out in order to get photos of his most recent work published in Behne’s 1923 *Der Moderne Zweckbau* (Modern Functional Building).⁵⁹ Although the members of the Society differed in their perspectives on art, they recognized a mutual sense of historical purpose which they saw as an integral component of their formal innovation. This manifested itself most clearly in their collaboration on exhibitions.

⁵⁸ Erich Lehmann-Lukas to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, June 25, 1923, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 1: Private Correspondence, 1923-40, “R,” Library of Congress.

⁵⁹ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to Adolf Behne, June 2, 1923, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 1: Private Correspondence, 1923-40, “B” (No. 1), Library of Congress.



Figure 28. Workers' International Relief, Cover of Catalog for the First All-German Art Exposition, Moscow and Leningrad, 1924, in *Pervaia vseobshchaia germanskaia khudozhestvennaia vystavka: Moskva-Leningrad 1924g* (Moscow and Leningrad: Mezhrabpom, 1924), Berlinische Galerie, Berlin, Germany. Mies is listed in the catalog's appendix as an exhibitor, along with Ludwig Hilberseimer, Hugo Häring, and Bruno Taut, among others (Ibid., 36).

Mies was involved in exhibitions set up by Workers' International Relief, which allowed his work to receive an audience in the Soviet Union. In April of 1925, Mies received a letter out of Leningrad from the painter Otto Nagel sent to all of the Workers' International Relief exhibitors celebrating their work's reception following the traveling exhibition's Moscow and Saratov, which had drawn nearly 50,000 visitors. Indeed, before the Leningrad show had even

opened, the People's Cultural Commissariat of Ukraine had already expressed an interest in the exhibition subsequently traveling south to Kharkiv and Kyiv for an encore.⁶⁰

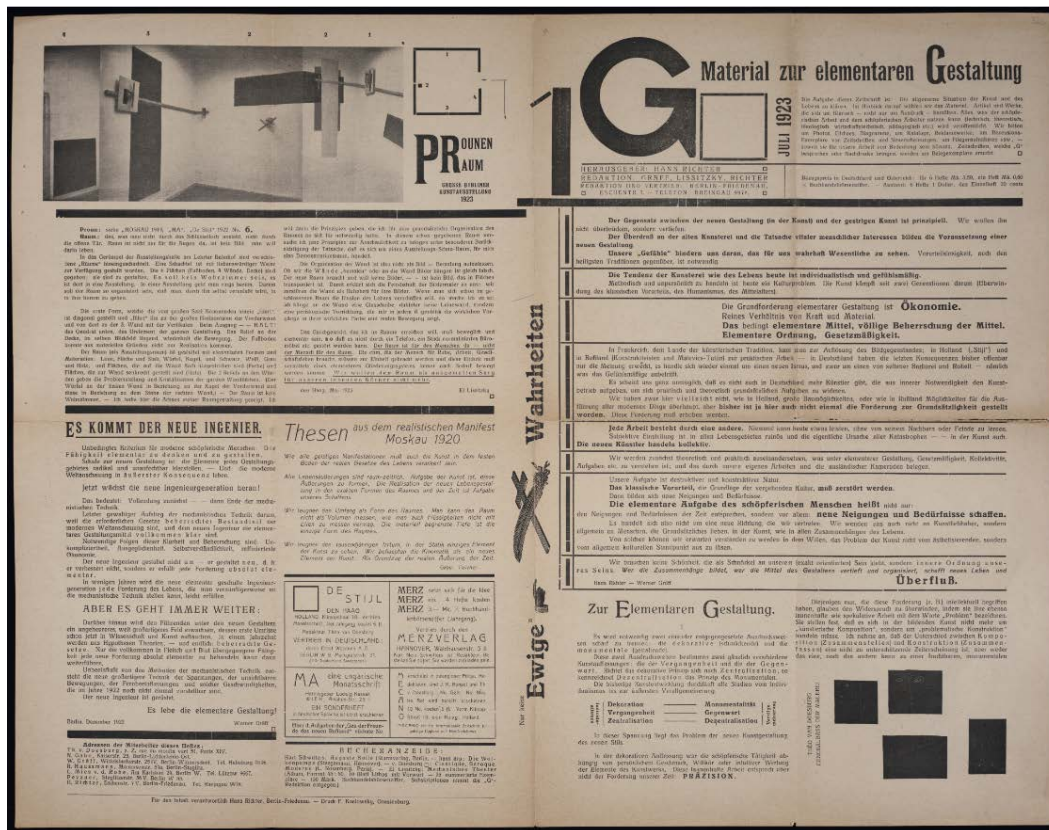


Figure 29. Title Page of Hans Richter, Werner Graff, and El Lissitzky, 1923.

Soon, influences from Soviet Russia were not constrained to organizations specifically formed to facilitate cultural exchange with Weimar Germany, as Berlin spawned its own offshoots of Soviet tendencies which harmonized well with local existing anti-Expressionist tendencies. One such group of profound importance to the development of Mies' career was the

⁶⁰ Otto Nagel to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "An Alle Aussteller Der Deutschen Kunstausstellung in Sowjetrussland," April 1, 1925, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 1: Correspondence, Bund Deutscher Architekten, 1921-1926, Library of Congress.

journal *G: Material zur Elementaren Gestaltung*, which arose around a newfound friend of Mies', Hans Richter. "No eternal truths," proclaimed the magazine *G* in its first issue in 1923. These maxims set the tone for all subsequent issues of the journal. In stark contrast to the cosmological musings of UNOVIS, *G* would from its outset take a doggedly materialistic line on questions of art. *G* saw the work as UNOVIS as fundamentally compatible with their ideas and went to great lengths to feature it and incorporate its iconography. Next to the boldface "G" of the first issue's title sat a familiar square (Figure 1).

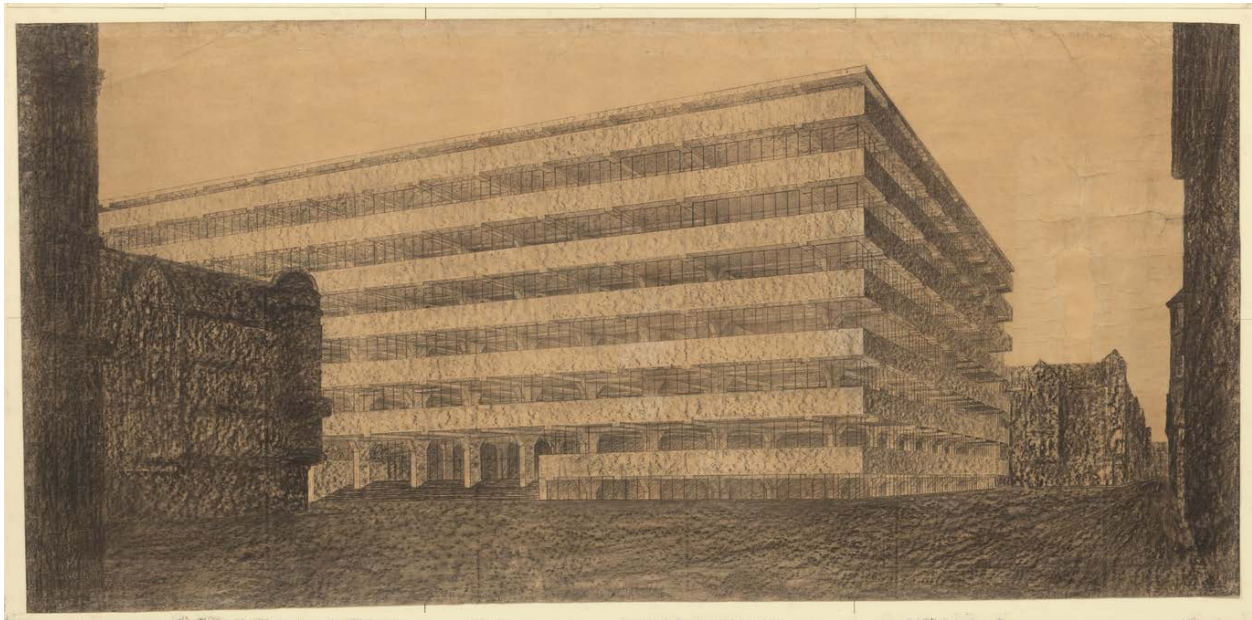


Figure 30. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Concrete Office Building, Berlin, Germany (Exterior Perspective), 1923, charcoal and crayon on paper, 54 1/2 x 113 3/4," Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Mies' concrete office building is indicative of the work of the milieu around *G*. When form itself is disfigured as a reified object, even the most vulgarly materialistic notion of objectivity is a truer notion of form as an ideal. A concrete office building has the virtue of being something other than an office building. To simply be built of something in particular as opposed to some other thing challenges the tendency to assimilate architecture as such to its concept.

When it is understood that the architect's job is to faithfully recreate architecture and the engineer's, engineering, the architectural expression of engineering triggers an existential crisis for both. Abandoning the self-sure alienation of the architect who adjusts an engineer's work to make it "look right" and the engineer who tempers the architect's flourishes to make them "work," the architectural expression of engineering, in its attempt to eschew deference to another's expertise through subjective determination of the correct solution, puts the lie in the objective expertise of both architect and engineer by showing both to have objectified exactly this subjective process in the other's person.



Figure 31. El Lissitzky, Proun, c. 1921-23, gouache and chalk on paper, 46.7 x 39.5 cm, Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands.

Rather than the absolute break with all precedent that Malevich's *Black Square* seems to suggest at face-value, it led to a protracted series of gradual improvements in the hands of

successive artists, each transforming it as they fashioned it towards new tasks. El Lissitzy's *Prouns*, such as those from his Berlin period (Figure 31), translated the two-dimensional language of Suprematist painting Malevich had developed into a new, axonometric rendering of three-dimensional space. Mies, continuing this tradition, reworked this visual language in order to transfer it from painting to a new medium, the architectural drawing. Mies' Brick Country House (Figure 32) built on his experiences within *G*. It represents the culmination of a new tradition hatched by the avant-garde, breathing historical continuity into the very forms which had precipitated a break with the past.

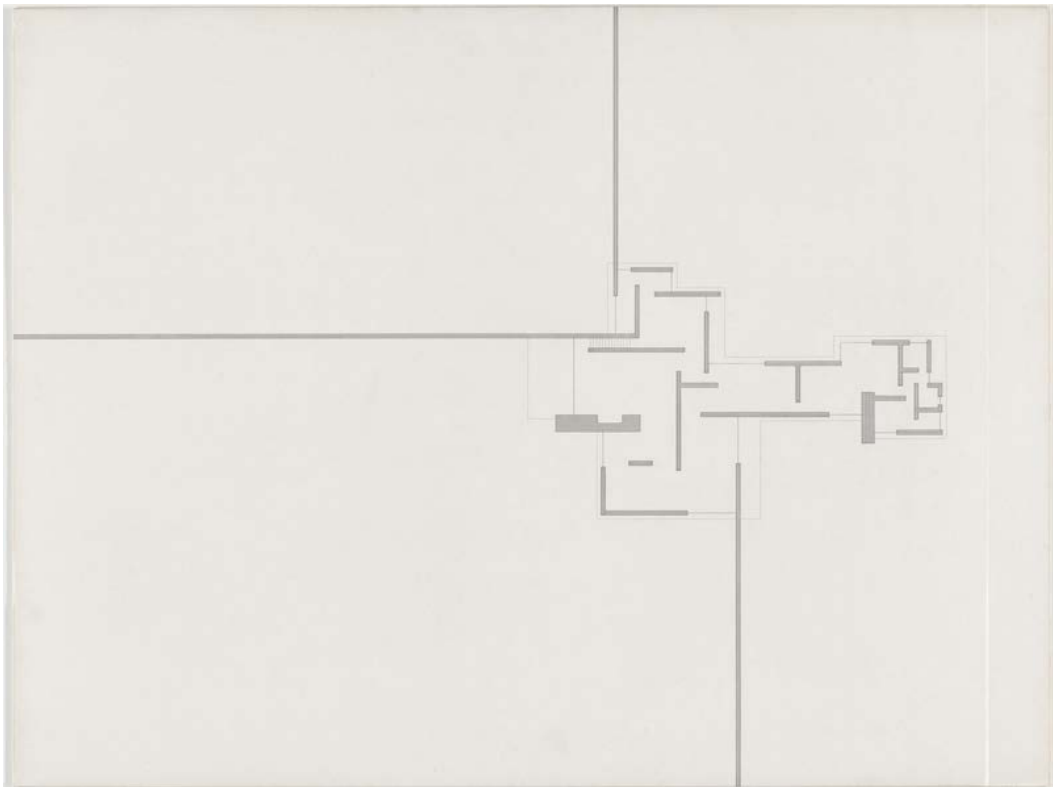


Figure 32. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Brick Country House, Plan, 1964 (Original 1925), ink on illustration board, 76.2 x 101.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

As the world of art reconstituted itself amidst a very different set of coordinates following the Russian and German Revolutions, Mies and Malevich worked to make sense of what quickly

became fiercely competitive tendencies. While Mies and Malevich were both broadly sympathetic to the moral clarity with which Expressionists declared the triumph of new forms, they attempted to qualify the Expressionists' absolute historical discontinuity with a conception of form that accommodated historical continuity. Yet this historical continuity was no less forward-looking than the Expressionists. Rather than drawing lines of continuity to the past, Mies and Malevich attempted to link present realities with future potentialities, interweaving their work with the broader objectives of the revolution. In this vein, Mies found allies in the Anti-Expressionist tendencies beginning to emerge in Berlin, although he critically moved away from what he perceived as an overemphasis on process that precluded the discontinuity of new form. Ultimately, Mies and Malevich were in dialogue throughout this formative period. As demonstrated by the transfer of Suprematism from UNOVIS to the *G* milieu, this new avant-garde tradition played an important role in Mies and Malevich's development of new forms during this period.

Chapter Three

Mies and Malevich as Historical Thinkers

Mies and Malevich contextualized their work both within prewar artistic tendencies and as part of a broader avant-garde during the 1920s. The interdependence of historical continuity and discontinuity in Mies and Malevich's interpretation of their work reflects a complex notion of form as a historical process. This chapter undertakes a close reading of Mies and Malevich's theory and condenses it into a more systematic conception of form as a historical process. The validity of this conception is then tested through an extended case study of two of their long-term projects: Malevich's architectural concepts and Mies' development of the standardized architectural vocabulary used in his Court House concepts of the 1930s. In both case studies, this conception of form as a historical process is further clarified by juxtaposing it with different understandings of form advanced by contemporaries of Mies and Malevich who were hostile to their work. While Mies and Malevich emphasized different aspects of form as a historical process, their interpretation of their work is fundamentally similar in its explanation of the emergence of form through the mediation of historical continuity and discontinuity.

Form as Historical Process

Mies, Malevich, and their immediate circles' interactions with each other suggest that they maintained a shared sense of form as a continuous process arising from the substantive negation of determinate aesthetic concepts. Rather than affirming a positive, invariable understanding of what constitutes correct abstract form, they offered a tentative, continuously variable notion of how abstract form arises from a chain of negations. In addition to being epistemologically historical thinkers, Mies and Malevich were epistemologically negative thinkers. These two facets of their thought are complementary.

The assertion of an overarching historical continuity in form which unites the stylistic idioms of different eras is an important component of Mies and Malevich's conception of form as a historical process. This continuity lies not in the maintenance of a particular stylistic idiom, but in the maintenance of a process of form-giving. Malevich explored this in his 1922 booklet *Bog ne skinut* (God is not cast down), where he argues for the existence of a form-giving process whose historical continuity both encapsulates and transcends any particular realization of form, which he refers to as "stimulus:"

The basis and reason for what in society we call life I consider to be a stimulus which reveals itself in all possible forms – pure, unconscious, inexplicable; its existence has never been proved; it is without number, precision, time, space and absolute or relative condition.⁶¹

Although the stimulus "reveals itself" in a particular realization of form, Malevich insists on the imperviousness of this stimulus to any empirical definition based on an external frame of reference that could locate it in particular terms. Malevich prohibits the formation of any static conception of the stimulus, regardless of whether or not that frame of reference is in motion or at rest. Historical continuity is conceived of in strictly dynamic terms. It has no static manifestation, whether in "absolute or relative condition." Historical continuity in form is contradictory, premised not simply on perpetual change, but on a perpetual process of qualitative transformation:

⁶¹ K.S. Malevich, "God Is Not Cast Down: Art, Factory, and Church," in *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Anderson, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Plus and Arnold McMillin, Second edition (New York: Wittenborn and Company, 1971), 189.

Stimulus is a cosmic flame and lives on what is non-objective; only in the skull of thought does it become cool in real concepts of its immeasurableness; and thought, as a certain degree in the action of stimulus, white-hot from its flame, moves deeper and deeper into the infinite, creating in its path worlds of the universe.⁶²

While Malevich's "stimulus" is premised on continuous, qualitative transformation, it manifests itself through a series of forms which condense "in the skull of thought." Form can only come into existence by departing from the "cosmic flame" of stimulus as an isolated precipitation, intrinsically discontinuous. Since the qualitative transformation that defines the stimulus takes the form of a series of discreet realizations, discontinuity is the basis of form's historical continuity. For Malevich, formal discontinuity is fundamental to historical continuity in form. Moreover, the literal continuity of form across time is a false continuity of form:

Man's skull represents the same infinity as for the movement of conceptions. It is equal to the universe, for in it is contained all that it sees in it. [...] Epoch after epoch, culture after culture, appear and disappear in its infinite space.⁶³

Time, for Malevich, is merely another dimension. His stimulus resists definition in terms of time just as would resist definition in terms of any other metric. As it undergoes qualitative transformation, the continuum of the stimulus precipitates a particular discontinuous realization of form which takes up space in time no differently than it takes up three-dimensional space. Literal continuity of form across time is thus a dimensional attribute of a particular form – akin to its width – and not what imparts to it historical continuity. The pace of formal discontinuity, and not the literal progression of time, is the truer measure of the historical movement of form for Malevich. Far from being a conventionally teleological process culminating in an ultimate

⁶² Malevich, 190.

⁶³ Malevich, 193.

realization of form over the course of time, Malevich's conception of form as a historical process has a different pace of movement in different eras and no particular direction within time. As a result, there is not a chronological hierarchy of different eras as lesser or more perfect realizations of form. Time is not the axis of historical continuity, but one dimension among others which, in delimiting discontinuity, actively facilitates historical continuity as a dynamic process:

It may be taken as a mark of perfection of the universal world movement or God that man himself has discovered that nothing disappears but merely takes on a new form. Thus disappearance from view does not mean that everything has disappeared. Appearances are destroyed but not the essence, which, by man's own definition, is God; it is not destroyed by anything, and if the essence is not destroyed nor is God. Thus God is not cast down.⁶⁴

Rather than the historical process of form terminating in a perfect realization of form, the ideal of perfection is realized for Malevich in form as a historical process. "God" is used by Malevich to articulate the ideal which stimulus reaches towards by weaving together its discontinuous realizations as particular forms, not over the course of time, but simultaneously in all time and space. On the one hand, every discreet realization of this ideal necessarily exits the historical continuum of the stimulus and is thus an incomplete, discontinuous realization that cannot encapsulate the totality of a "universal world movement." On the other hand, this movement is defined by the continuous progression of these incomplete realizations. "God is not cast down" in the sense that the gap between the ideal and its realization is integral to maintaining the process of form-giving which constitutes perfection.

⁶⁴ Malevich, 222.

Mies articulated a similarly complex notion of form as a historical process. Malevich emphasized how historical continuity – stimulus, to use his term – was dependent on historical discontinuity generated by the inability of any particular realization of form to realize the totality of the universal stimulus. In contrast, Mies located his conception of historical continuity less in an idealized universal process than in a physical, material process of transformation. His 1924 essay *Baukunst und Zeitwille* is indicative of this difference:

The building art is always the spatially apprehended will of the epoch, nothing else. [...] One will have to understand that all building art arises out of its own epoch and can only manifest itself in addressing vital tasks with the means of its own time.⁶⁵

Like Malevich, Mies is interested in understanding one's place in time less in a literal, chronological sense than in an intellectual-historical sense; he is interested in one's epoch, as opposed to their decade or century. Unlike Malevich, Mies makes a strong connection between the epoch and its socioeconomic basis. Indeed, in his claim that "The entire striving of our epoch is directed towards the secular,"⁶⁶ Mies argues that the process of intellectual distinction that constitutes an epoch is dependent on embeddedness within the mundane:

The purpose of its building is its actual meaning. The buildings of all epochs served purposes, and quite real ones. These purposes were, however, different in type and character. [...] It determined the sacred or profane form.⁶⁷

Mies denies that the outwardly religious character of previous epochs was of a fundamentally different character than the secularity by which he characterizes his present

⁶⁵ Mies van der Rohe, "Building Art and the Will of the Epoch," 245.

⁶⁶ Mies van der Rohe, 246.

⁶⁷ Mies van der Rohe, 246.

epoch. He insists on the mundane aspect of even these religious periods, reducing the church to a method of social production fundamentally similar to the economic orientation of his present day. Behind Mies' materialism, however, is a clearly idealistic tendency; what, after all, does a church produce and how could that parallel his own contemporary environment if production is conceived of in elementary economic terms? Mies' conception of production refers not to the manufacture of commodities, but the collective production of an intellectual self-conception that, in realizing itself, constitutes the epoch. The production of this epoch, realized in architecture as a new formal solution, has the appearance of a historical continuity, appearing as something new and radical, but its origin within the study of fundamental socioeconomic processes cannot be stricken from its basic character. Formal discontinuity is, to Mies, inextricably intertwined with the historical continuity of socioeconomic processes; what appears to be a rupture is merely the intellectualization of existing processes.

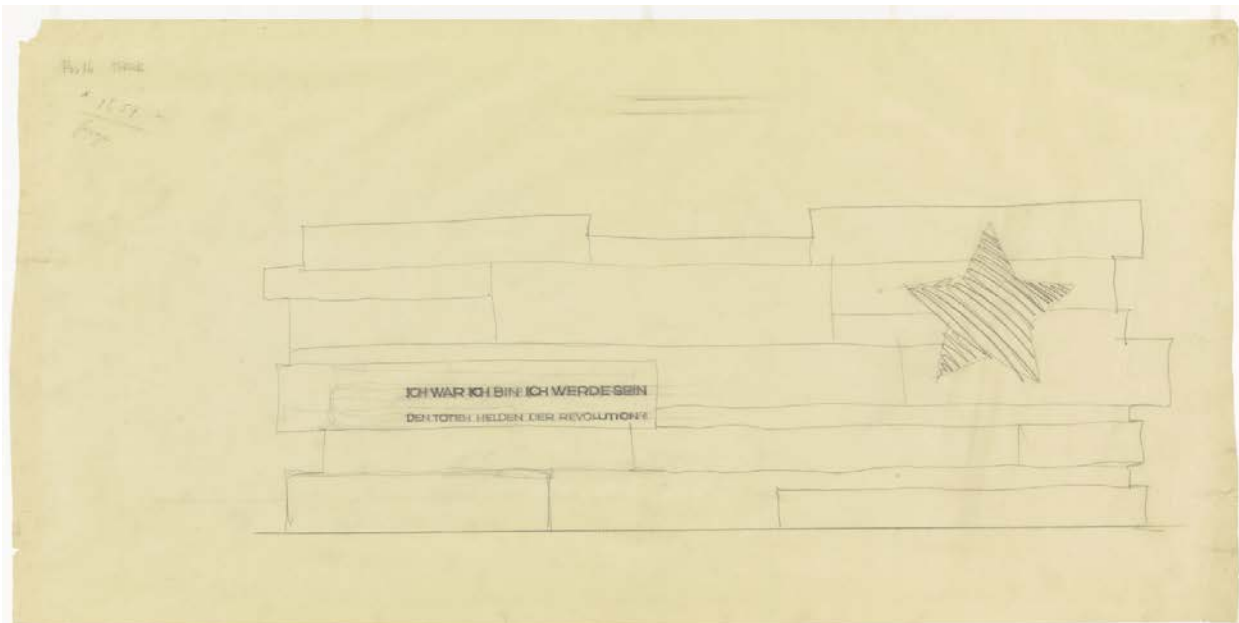


Figure 33. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Monument to the November Revolution, Berlin-Lichterberg, Germany, Lettering Study, 1926, pencil on tracing paper, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Mies' concern for the study of existing processes was far from either fatalism or positivism. "I was, I am, I will be" — Mies' decision to plant Rosa Luxemburg's final words on his Monument to the November Revolution speaks to the radical side of the intellectual production of one's epoch; the coming to consciousness of humanity as a collective subject endowed with agency. The death of the revolution and its leadership is not the end of its ideal. Instead, the hopes and aspirations of the November Revolution add a brick to the broader collective construction of the epoch, and in doing so, encompass the literal brick wall in front of which the revolution's martyrs once were shot, absorbing the physical world into a self-conscious creative subject which overcomes and transcends limitation and unfreedom. Insofar as Mies' Monument to the November Revolution seems to be a brick wall coming alive, revolting against the world, it is due to this notion of the epoch coming to consciousness of itself as a collective creator.

Malevich left the Soviet Union briefly in 1927 to attend major exhibitions of his work in Warsaw and then in Berlin, where he was allocated a special exhibit with its own room in the annual Berlin Arts Exhibition. Malevich's visit to Berlin left him with an array of contacts, and he eagerly inquired in subsequent correspondence with his former Berlin host, the artist Alexander von Riesen, about the work of Mies and Richter.⁶⁸ Indeed, it was to Mies' friend and Zehnerring colleague Hugo Häring that Malevich gave custody of his works exhibited in the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung upon his return to the Soviet Union. This likely stemmed from the extensive work of Häring's wife, Russian-emigrée and actress Emilia Unda, to connect

⁶⁸. Kazimir Malevich and Alexander von Riesen, September 6, 1927, 195, in *Malevich o sebe, Sovremenniki o Malevich: Pisma. Dokumenty. Vospominaniia. Kritika*, ed. I.A. Vakar and T.N. Mikhienko, vol. 1 (Moscow: RA, 2004).

Soviet artists and intellectuals with a German audience via the Society of Friends of the New Russia.⁶⁹ During this time Mies had the opportunity to meet with Malevich. Their conversation, as summarized by Malevich's Polish associate Tadeusz Peiper, who likely served as translator, indicates their different interpretations of form as a historical process:

A few days before leaving for Dessau, we were visited by the German architect Mies van der Rohe. Malevich had come to the conclusion that architecture, as both an applied art and an art in general, developed exclusively under the influence of aesthetic ideas, without the input of historical factors (social, economic, and so on). He was able to create architectonic models assembled from new elements but built in a gothic manner. Mies, however, stressed that in our times these gothic constructions had nothing whatsoever to contribute. "Who knows!" replied Malevich [...] Then, he said that the forms of furniture would not change if aesthetic ideas did not change. Mies countered this with the claim that – for example – the forms of chairs must change because a person doing sports sits differently than an earlier person would have.⁷⁰

Mies and Malevich's opposing interpretations of the mechanism of change in the form of furniture is illustrative of their divergence from one another along materialistic and idealistic lines, respectively. If for Malevich, furniture reflects intellectual movement between epochs, the functional minutiae of furniture merely being an accessory and derivative aspect of a broader "stimulus," Mies inverts Malevich's interpretation, insisting that the broader intellectual characteristics of a given epoch depend on precisely the minutiae of how one sits in a chair, among other functional metrics. Yet, it should be stressed, both Mies and Malevich are similarly far from functionalism in the most straightforward sense of the word. For both Mies and Malevich, form – the object's intellectual aspect – is of primary interest. Mies, unlike Malevich

⁶⁹. See editor's footnote Malevich and von Riesen, 195.

⁷⁰ Tadeusz Peiper, "W Bauhausie," in *Malewicz w Warszawie: Rekonstrukcje i Symulacje*, by Andrzej Turowski (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 478.

is not interested in form as such, but his interest is still formal in the sense that form is the outcome which constitutes and realizes function. Although they derive the discovery of form from differing origins, Mies and Malevich both are interested in the discovery of the epoch's basic characteristics through a process which produces radically different forms and transforms life qualitatively, not just on an aesthetic, but a functional level. This is far from a functionalism that takes for granted its intellectual basis and merely aims to increase the efficiency of existing processes within received metrics.

Echoes of these interwar-period debates followed Mies across the Atlantic after his 1938 emigration. Mies could at times be unequivocal about his stated intent for his work to be understood historically. His colleague Alfred Caldwell paraphrased a conversation during a drive to an IIT retreat in 1950 where Mies discussed at length his belief that architecture was a “historical process.” New architecture was not an a priori creation, but “something going on and on thru [sic.] many lifetimes.”⁷¹ Caldwell's recollection is consistent with Mies' own language. For instance, while speaking with students in the latter half of the 1950s, he was accused of moving away from “the new kind of space,” the supposed “great Miesian invention.” Chafing not at the accusation leveled, but underlying premise of the question, Mies was emphatic in dispelling the student's notion of “space” as something that can be invented *tabula rasa*; “architecture depends on an epoch, as I said before. It is not a fashion and it is not something for eternity.”⁷²

⁷¹ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, interview by Alfred Caldwell, Recollection of interviewer, 1950, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Interviews with Mies, Library of Congress.

⁷² Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Architectural League, n.d., 8, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Interviews with Mies, Library of Congress.

Malevich had been dead for decades by the time Mies was at the apex of his postwar career in the 1960s. One gets the sense that, extricated from the broader milieu of organizations, exhibitions, and journals connecting the Soviet Union and Weimar Germany – within which he had undergone such fundamental development during the 1920s – Mies was somewhat lonely and resentful of a basic inability to convey his ideas to an audience which was, in its flamboyant discipleship, all the more infuriating to navigate. Mies was consistent and unambiguous throughout the many interviews and public appearances he made during his American period in stressing his architectural theory's historical and anti-formalist character, even though he has largely been characterized as the opposite: a master of eternal forms. In the final years leading up to his death, Mies articulated his resentment, lamenting in 1966 that "They used my work for awhile [sic.] but they did not understand it."⁷³ In an undated set of handwritten speaking notes for a lecture in German which likely took place in Chicago during the 1950s, Mies conveyed his conception of history in what is, to wit, its most systematic statement:

Yesterday man still spoke of eternal forms of art; today, of their dynamic change. Both are false points of view. Architecture is bound to neither the day-to-day nor eternity, but to the Epoch. Only a historical movement gives it space to grow and imparts to it first and foremost what it is. Architecture is the comprehension of a historical event.⁷⁴

For Mies, architecture is not eternal. It is neither timeless nor dynamism in and of itself, since both are ultimately static conceptions. Rather, it descends from the motion of concrete

⁷³ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Untitled" (Unpublished draft, 1966), Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 62: Writings by Mies, Library of Congress.

⁷⁴ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, "Manuscript of One Important Address Mies Gave Here in Germany" (n.d.), 8, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 61: Miscellaneous Drafts for Speeches, Library of Congress.

events as they are brought from random happenings into the fold of historical understanding. History is not accidental to form. Nor is history merely a linear metric against which form unfolds as it changes across the years. Instead, for Mies – even in his later years – form was a historical process; history was integral in the development of form.

Form as a Historical Process in Malevich's Architectural Concepts: Case Study

For Malevich theory and practice were not clearly delineated due to his work's highly conceptual character and must be understood together. Building on the conceptual categories developed through a review of his writings, a case study of the stage-by-stage development of his architectural concepts during the 1920s illustrates how form can be understood as the result of a historical process in Malevich's work. One conception of what a Suprematist architecture might entail arose from Malevich's efforts to create volumetric Suprematist forms. The volumetric method attempted to directly translate the principles of Suprematist painting into three-dimensional construction. As such, there was no two-dimensional prototype for what came to be Malevich's *arkhitektons*; they were created anew as sculpture. Forms in Suprematist painting consisted of a single, two-dimensional shape, and a single color, which was conceived of as intrinsic to the shape. All forms in Malevich's *arkhitektons*, in contrast, were representations of pure volumes, in which shape and color were proscribed as independent variables through their homogenization as white rectangular prisms. Malevich's volumetric conception of Suprematist architecture attempted to express how any particular realization of form existed within a universal stimulus that contained all of its potential realizations.

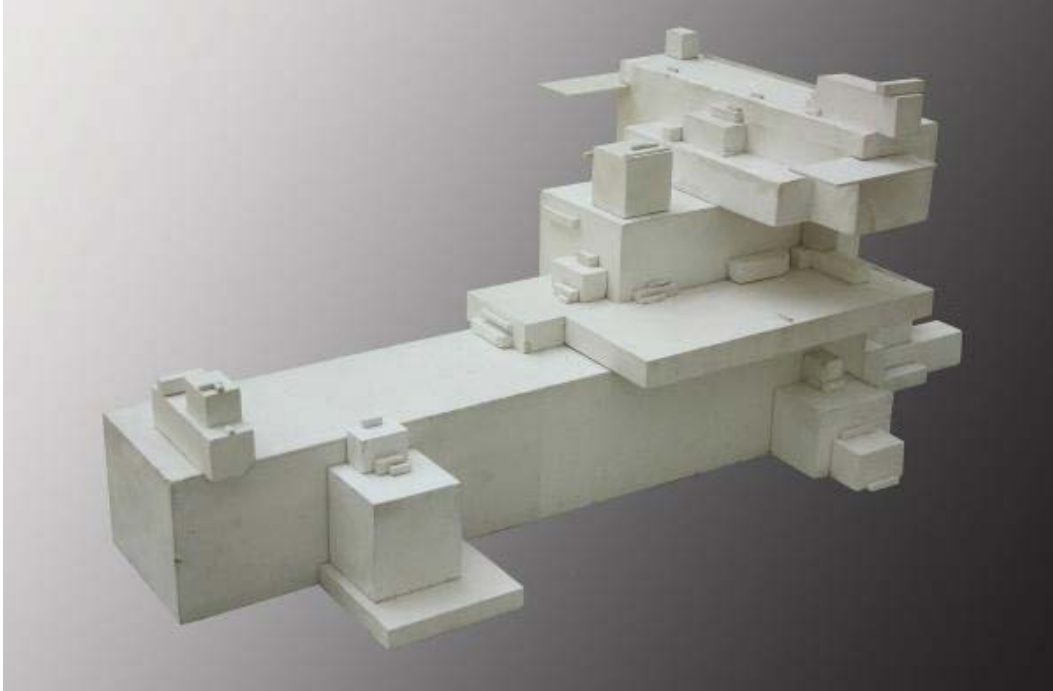


Figure 34. Kazimir Malevich, *Alpha (Arkhitekton)*, c. 1923, plaster on wood and cardboard, 31.5 x 80.5 x 34 cm, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation.

In Malevich's arkhitektons there is a radical homogenization of form; they are intended to suppress visual expression of any particular realization of form to the maximum extent possible. This occurs to such a degree that the physical basis of the sculpture is reduced to a sort of placeholder; a representation of volume as a uniform, colorless rectangular prism. Malevich's intention in carrying out this reduction is to convey the permeation of the universal stimulus throughout the object. In his arkhitekton *Alpha*, an attempt is made to negate the particular, but rather than an absolute negation, this results in a substantive negation. The particular realization of form, in its finitude, makes possible the infinity of the universal stimulus. The imperfection of *Alpha* in particular allows for the possibility of perfection in general.

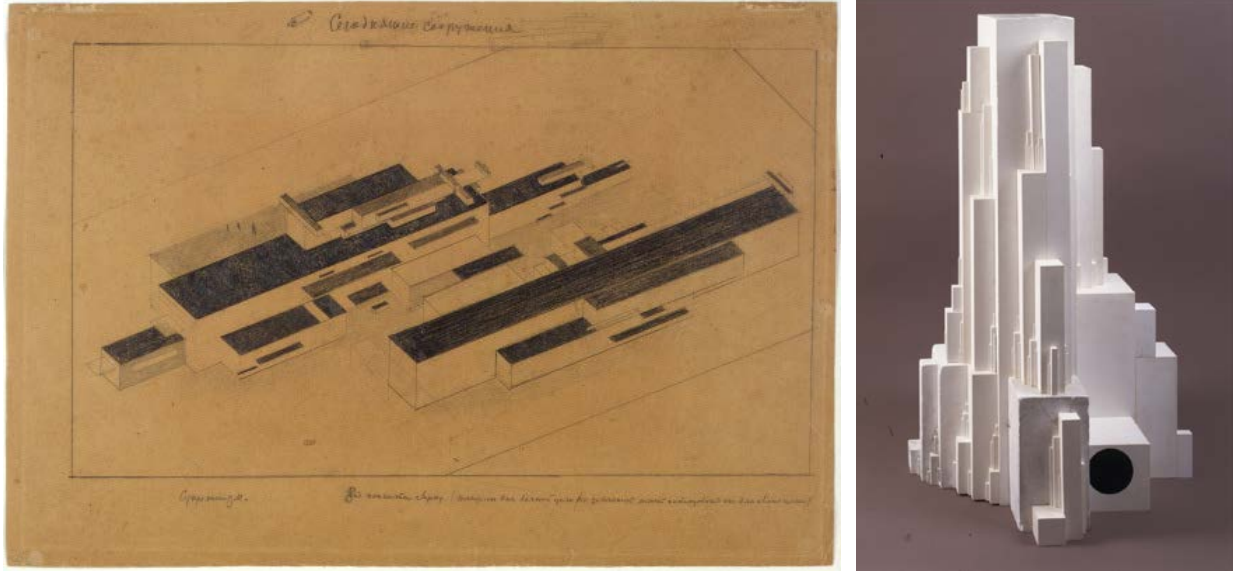


Figure 35. Kazimir Malevich, *Contemporary Buildings (Planit)* (Left), c. 1923, 36 x 53.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands, and *Gota (Arkhitekton)* (Right), 1923, plaster on wood and cardboard, 85.3 x 56 x 52.5, State Russian Museum, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation.

Malevich's *planits* are not the prototype of the *arkhitektons* but, rather, a simultaneous and slightly different development, a sort of halfway point between Suprematist painting and architecture. Axonometrically-rendered cubic volumes are extruded from the standard shape-color forms of Suprematist painting, attempting to give their implicit depths within the image's field an explicit volumetric expression. What is significant in these abstract architectural conceptual experiments of Malevich, beyond their homogenized visual language, is their suppression of any kind of visual hierarchy. While their homogenized visual language is a means of suppressing the particular and finite in terms of the universal and potential, it is equally clear that they are not intended to represent the absolute. *Gota* makes clear Malevich's striving for an absolute of aesthetic perfection in the unprecedented polarity of its volumetric structure, oriented towards a single terminus. Importantly, this terminus is not achieved; Malevich makes a point of articulating the incomplete character of *Gota* by a blunting of the sculpture's terminus. One can

envision this sequence repeating indefinitely yet arriving at the same conclusion. The absolute is an asymptotic ideal, unattainable, yet extant and, in fact, primary in influence.



Figure 36. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Ornaments* (Replica), 1978 (Original 1927), plaster on wood and cardboard, 27.5 cm (Height of tallest item in set), Centre Pompidou, Paris, France.

In 1927, *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* published a lengthy article on “Suprematist Architecture” written by Malevich, featuring his arkhitekton *Alpha*, his “Suprematist Architectural Model” series, and even the Workers’ Club of his pupil Khidekel.⁷⁵ What is one to make of the concept of “Suprematist Ornament?” How was Suprematism, intended as a language which could become an end in and of itself, meant to adapt to the decoration of the extant? Was

⁷⁵. K. Malewitsch, “Suprematische Architektur,” *Wasmuths Monatshefte Für Baukunst Und Städtebau* 11 (1927): 412–14.

decoration equivalent to affirmation? Instead of assuming a major epistemological shift on the part of Malevich, it is perhaps safest to assume that the increasing political pressure against Malevich's work encouraged a retreat back into the comfortable realm of Neo-Kantian noumena, where Suprematism had safely developed in the 1910s. Indeed, the rise of Stalinism seemed more than adequate evidence of the futility and inscrutability of the phenomenal world.

Malevich shifted towards an ambiguously-historicizing style between the late 1920s and the mid-1930s. As with Mies, one of the difficulties in interpreting this shift lies in separating the artists' own changing ideas from what is doubtless also the influence of external motivating factors, whether the introduction of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union or the far more insidious anti-modernism of the Nazis. Indeed, in the case of Malevich and his devotee Suetin, there is at least one plausible, even teleological, line of development which leads directly from Suprematism's later stages to what is perhaps the most definitive statement of Socialist Realism in architecture: Boris Iofan's Palace of Soviets project.

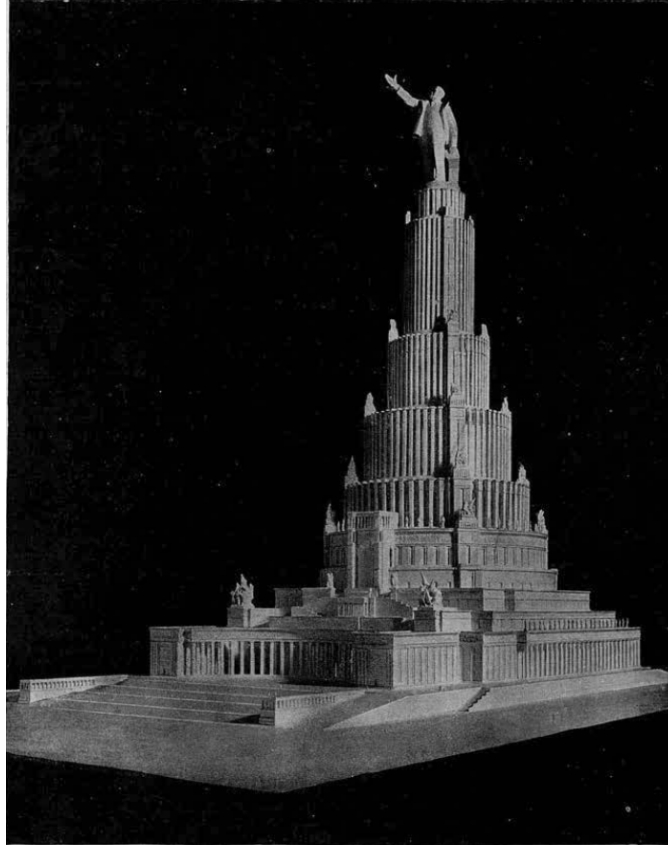


Figure 37. Vladimir Gelfreikh, Boris Iofan, and Vladimir Shchuko, *Final Variant of the Palace of Soviets Project*, 1934, in *Arkhitektura SSSR* 2, no. 3 (1934), 3.

Given Suetin's later collaboration with Iofan on the 1937 Paris World's Fair Soviet Pavilion (Figure 38) and the level of publicity – positive and negative – accorded to Suprematism in the landscape of Soviet cultural periodicals, it is unlikely that Iofan's design for the Palace of Soviets had no relationship to Malevich's architectural concepts. Nevertheless, there is a certain perversion in the adaptation of Suprematist forms, merged seamlessly with a vaguely defined classicism, to an absolute defined in completely certain terms; the palace terminates in a figural representation, not the infinite reduplication of Suprematist volumes. The equivocation of form with content is reasserted, reviving the worst aspects of nineteenth century positivism in a new, Stalinized, guise that does a great disservice to both Malevich and Lenin.



Figure 38. A postcard displaying the Soviet Pavilion (Top Right), by Boris Iofan, and the German Pavilion (Top Left), by Albert Speer, International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris, France, 1937, public domain, and Nikolai Suetin, Model of Ceremonial Staircase, Soviet Pavilion (Bottom), International Exhibition of Art and Technology in Modern Life, Paris, France, 1937 (Model 1936-37), in S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i Arhitektura: Problemy Formoobrazovaniia* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 451.

The curious striving for verticality that begins to characterize Malevich's work in the late 1920s finds its perverse realization in Iofan's design for the Palace of Soviets. Although Iofan's design, at a granular level, is pieced together from the standard kit of classical Greco-Roman orders, its overall form is highly divergent methods of composition taught by any of the various

historicizing schools which dominated at the turn of the 20th century. Namely, the loosely classical orders which enclose the ascending volumes of its main spire do not support anything; they exist as independent, almost pure articulations of volume in a way that recalls Malevich's *arkhitekton Gota* and experiments with Suprematist ornament. Collaborating with Iofan on the interior of the latter's 1937 Paris World Fair's Soviet Pavilion, Malevich's student Suetin seemed to confirm this unexpected concord between the Iofan and the remnants of the avant-garde in his placement of the Palace of Soviets model at the apex of a progression through an interior design of explicitly, systematically Suprematist origin (Figure 38). Suetin's preparation of an interior mock-up of the 1937 Paris World Fair's Soviet Pavilion is rich with textured, ambiguous meaning. What is the focal point – the model of the Palace of Soviets or the black square behind it? Does the progression of Suprematist forms build to infinity or does it terminate with the apex of the Palace of Soviets model, and if the latter, why is the model offset?

Form as a Historical Process in the Development of Mies' Court Houses: Case Study

Between the late 1920s and his move to America in 1938, Mies increasingly focused on isolating individual material elements of architecture which could transcend their typology, pointing the way to an intrinsic, unrealized capacity of architecture's material basis to generate new forms of life not bound to the ideological limitations of the present. This took the form of his Court Houses, a conceptual experiment in abstract architecture that explored the spatial possibilities of an arrangement of cruciform columns, sheet glass, and floating partitions within one or a handful of courtyards. Mies was explicit in drawing a direct line of continuity between his Barcelona pavilion and his Court House projects of the 1930s:

These projects developed from the architectural ideas of my earlier buildings. Both the brick house and the Barcelona Pavilion possessed structural and spatial characteristics which may be seen in the court houses.⁷⁶

In Mies' drawings, the study of historical processes precipitates novel forms. Mies' work during this period was the opposite of the "universal space" for which he has alternately been praised and chastised. Instead, he effectively created a non-space; a mere collection of concrete objects delimiting, but not defining, a space. Mies' vision of universality lay not in creating a universally-valid space, but rather in creating an architecture so radically severed from its ideological reflection – so radically empty – that it could accommodate the fullest possible range of potentialities.

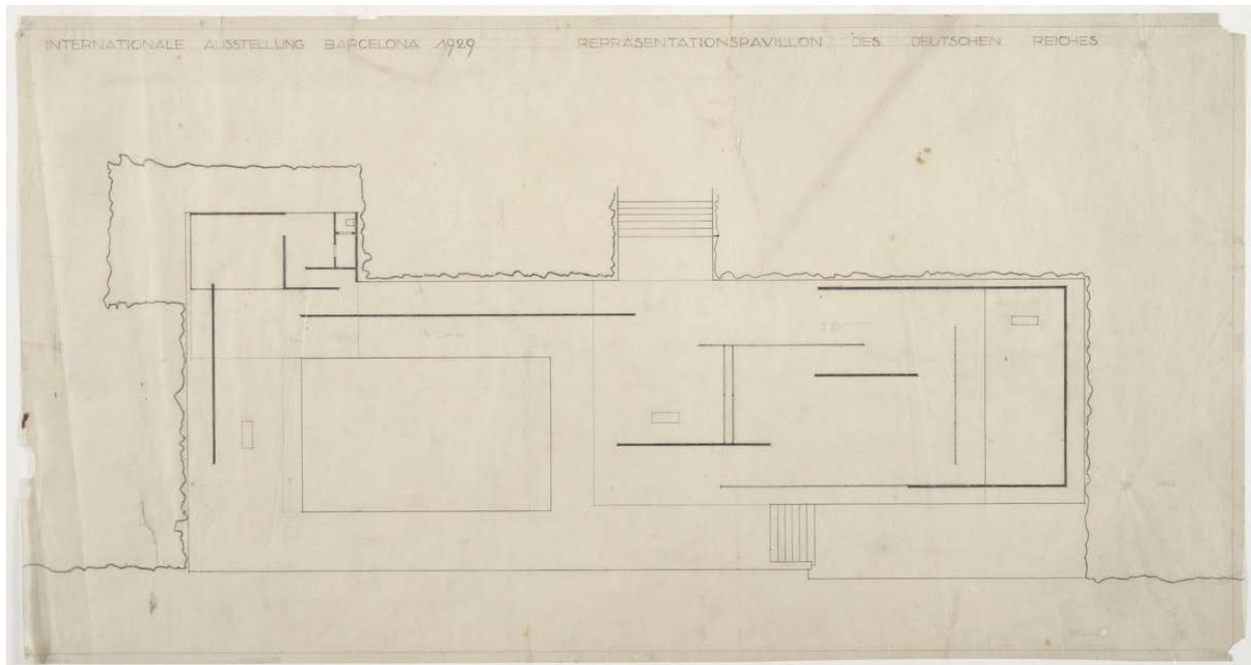


Figure 39. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain, Floor Plan (Preliminary Scheme), c. late 1928, pencil on tracing paper, 48.3 x 91.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁷⁶ Ludwig Mies van der Rohe to Stefano Desideri, January 29, 1962, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Papers, Box 5: Personal, 1930-69 "D," Library of Congress.

There is a certain tension within the preliminary scheme Mies produced for the Barcelona Pavilion; how can one accept the arrangement of planes which constitutes the interior space as anything more than an arrangement as such and not something of objective substance? The relative proportions of the volumes and the arrangement and flow of interior space in this preliminary version are similar to the final version, but one major element is lacking: the cruciform columns which support the structure and define it as a gridded object. In a subsequent study of an interior perspective of the Barcelona Pavilion, it is clear that Mies had begun to isolate the vertical element as a delimiting element of the pavilion.



Figure 40. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain, Interior Perspective (Top), c. 1928-29, graphite on illustration board, 99.1 x 130.2 cm, and Horizontal Column Section (Bottom), 1929, ink and dot pattern on illustration board, 50.8 x 76.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Mies' graphics of the pavilion's vertical column are highly unusual in that they are not intended for manufacturing, lacking any dimensions, or for conveying the pavilion's design to clients or press, since it shows an isolated view of a structural component which is in any case hidden from view.

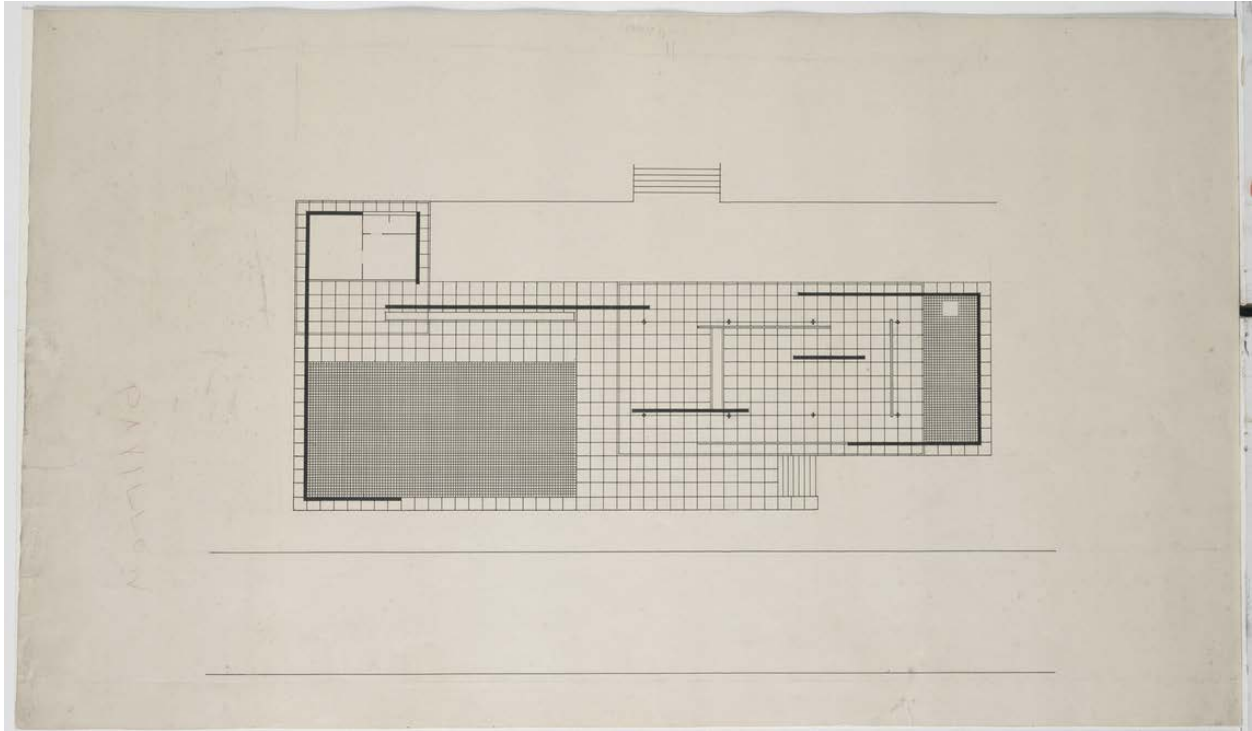


Figure 41. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain, Floor Plan, 1929, ink and pencil on paper, 57.2 x 97.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The addition of the vertical columns to the pavilion radically changed it as an architectural space. Instead of being an arrangement of forms, it is a collection of materials which delimit a space. The ideal is displaced by the potentiality enabled by a surrender to the concrete. This enables a higher idealism — an idealism that exists in potentiality, undelimited by the extant.

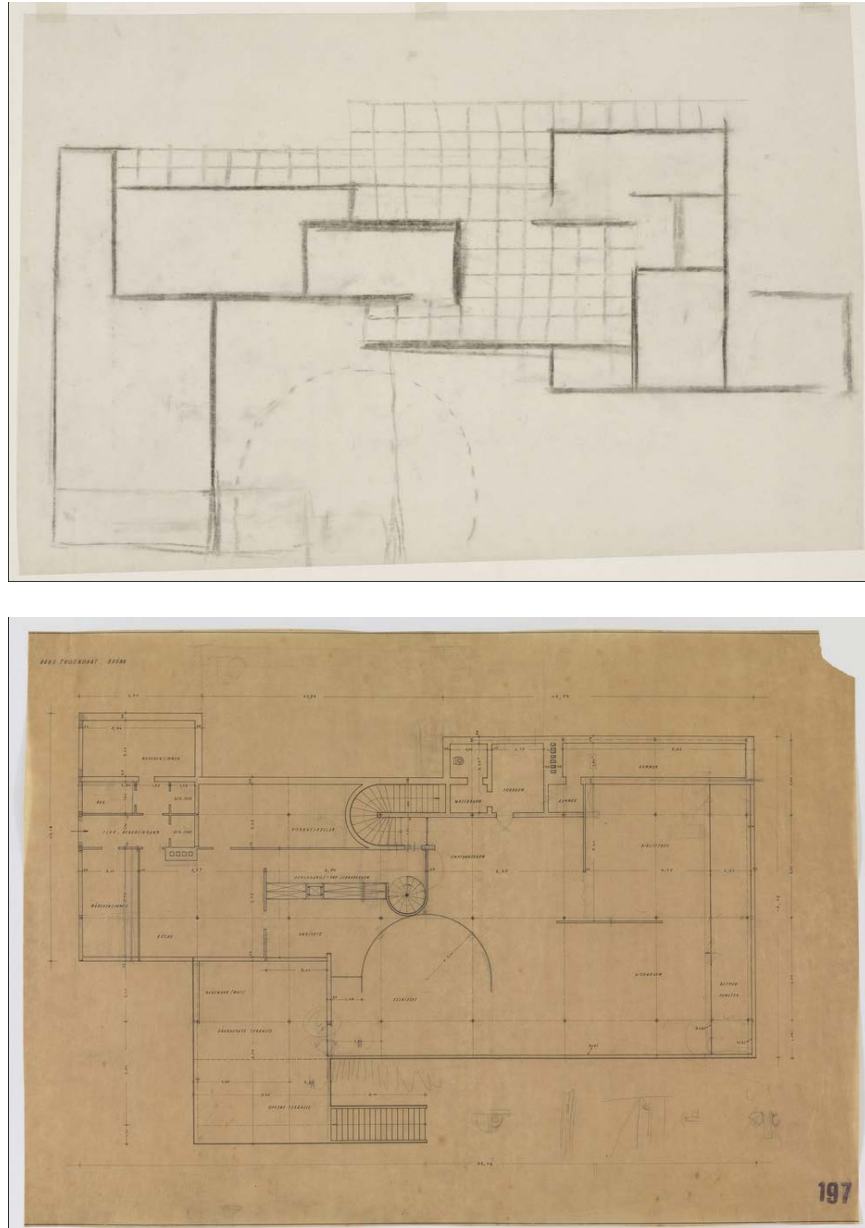


Figure 42. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Tugendhat House, Brno, Czechoslovakia, Floor Plan (Top), 1928-1930, charcoal on tracing paper, 45.1 x 66.6 cm, and Ground Floor Plan (Bottom), 1928-1930, pencil and ink on paper, 62.9 x 87.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

By bringing out the ideal within the concrete instead of subordinating the concrete to an uncritical ideal, Mies' structural system enabled a radical absence of space. This non-space, in which the ideal could realize itself, translated into an unlimited array of typologies. In this early version of the Tugendhat house, prior to the conceptual limitation imposed by the insertion of

furniture and other partitions and functional devices, the process of formation brought forth by this material system becomes visible through the open-ended development of space it facilitates. Mies' subsequent implementation of the structural grid underpinning the Tugendhat house demonstrates the autonomy from typology with which he sought to endow structure. Note, for instance, the curious spacing of the columns directly above the dining area; neither distant enough to define an independent volume nor in close enough proximity to be integrated with the wall of the dining area.

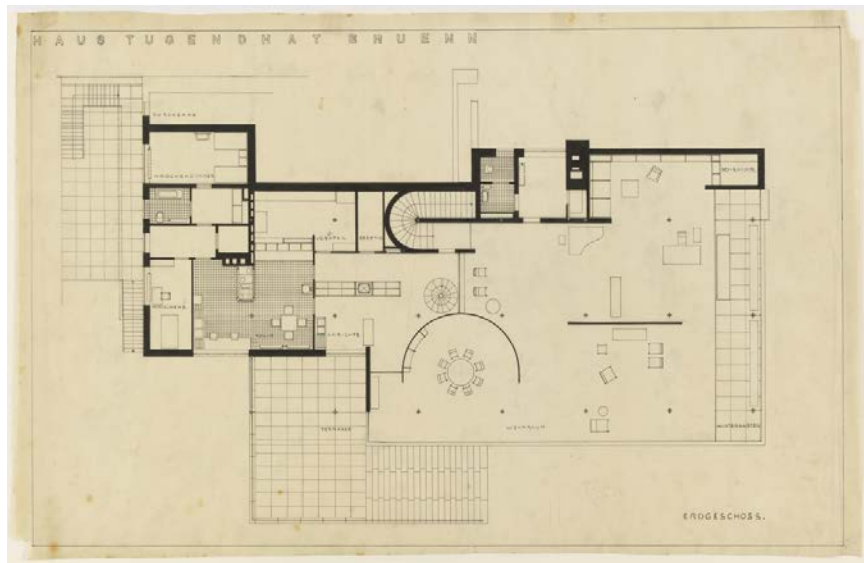
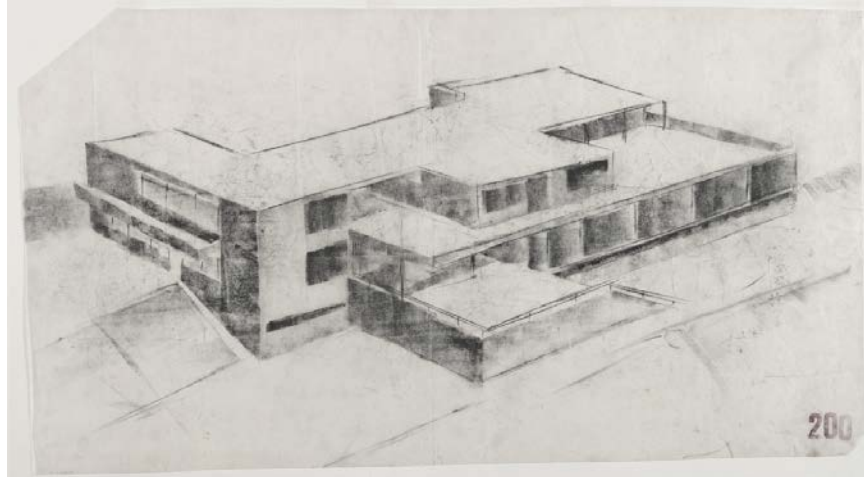


Figure 43. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Tugendhat House, Brno, Czechoslovakia, Perspective View (Left), 1928-1930, charcoal on tracing paper, 40 x 74.3 cm, and Ground Floor Plan (Right), 1928-1930, ink and pencil on tracing paper, 62.2 x 97.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The anti-monumentality – indeed, the illegibility – of the Tugendhat house as a total architectural object speaks to the central role of structure as a critique of the ideological grasp of typology. The peculiar coldness, so to speak, of the Tugendhat house is, in fact, its greatest strength; the absence of any subconscious ordering system forces the inhabitant to reconstruct the space themselves. Mies places every item of furniture and every partition within the Tugendhat Villa's neutral structural grid rather than arranging them into a comprehensive

aesthetic vision. In doing so, he expresses the ideal as a potential realization of structure rather than as a static, external frame of reference.

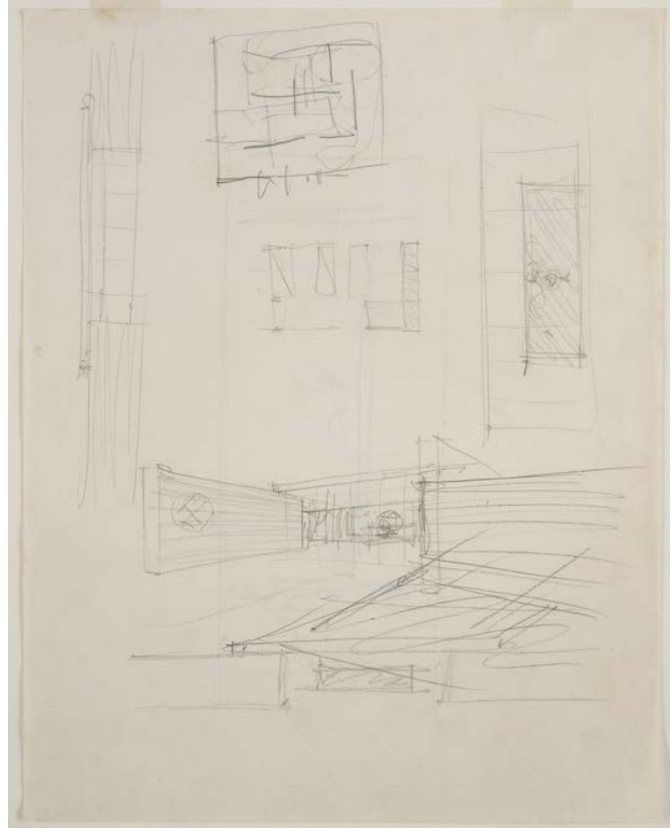


Figure 44. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, German Pavilion, International Exhibition, Brussels, Belgium, Perspective View, 1934, pencil on paper, 28.6 x 22.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

It was not until the Nazi takeover, however, that Mies' oeuvre reached its ultimate degree of introversion: the courtyard. In his design for the 1934 German pavilion – an invitation which he was in no position to refuse, given his past – the contrast with the 1928 pavilion manifests itself through the development of an enclosing device, while otherwise remaining within an identical vocabulary of composition. The competition's brief required not only Mies to adhere to the Nazi's program for exhibits, but mandated Nazi iconography be displayed on the building's exterior, including a swastika and an eagle. Mies scribbled these on to meet these requirements after completing a design in which they were conspicuously excluded from all but the final steps.

In a sense, the absolute rejection of any sort of symbolic or aesthetic content by Mies' architecture was a closeted rebuke of the iconography; the exhibition structure's content was hostile to the forms imposed on it.

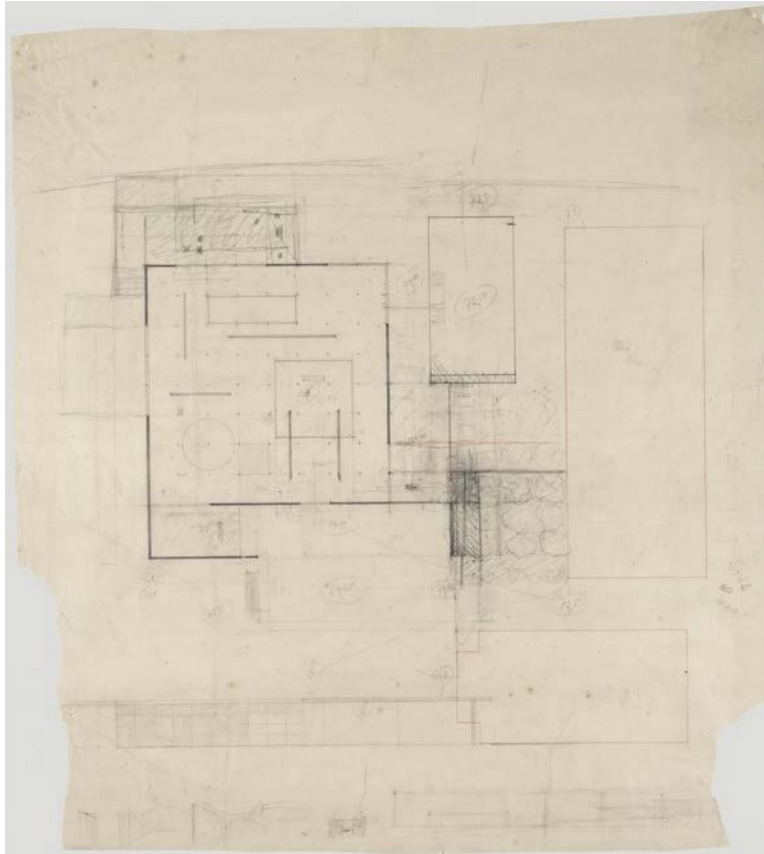


Figure 45. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, German Pavilion, International Exhibition, Brussels, Belgium, Floor Plan, 1934, pencil and colored pencil on tracing paper, 78.1 x 69.9 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

There could not be more of a contrast between the faux materialism of the Nazi exhibits, with their “blood and soil” ideology, and the columnar grid set up by Mies unto which they were superimposed. The former eviscerates any actual material content, replacing sediment with sentiment, whereas the latter sets materiality before all ideological reflection. There is a certain melancholy in the pavilion's overall effect; the infinitude of potentiality is swallowed by a finality that cannot help but feel as forced and feeble as the tiny eagle perched atop the building's

main interest. Mies' removal of the iconography from most of the pavilion's graphics speaks to the ephemerality of such symbolism. With time, it is not arbitrary heraldry of hierarchical society that remains, but the work of labor. The congealed labor forming the basis of a future society climbs from the ideological wreckage of the class society that preceded it.

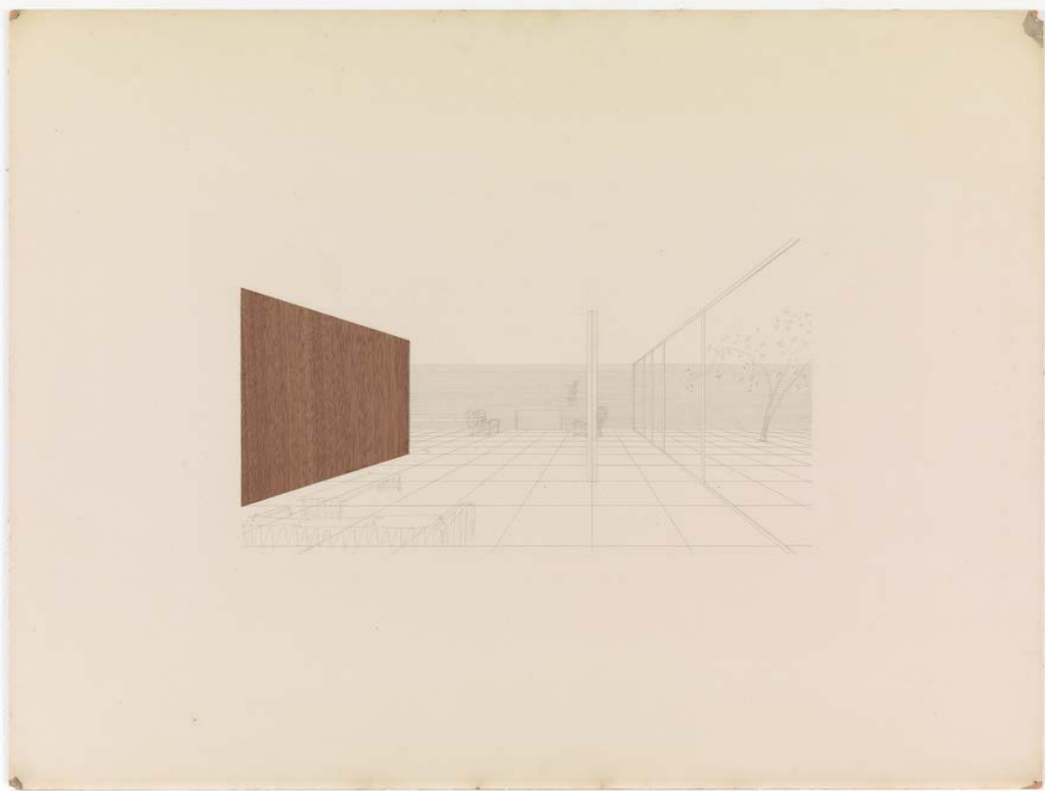
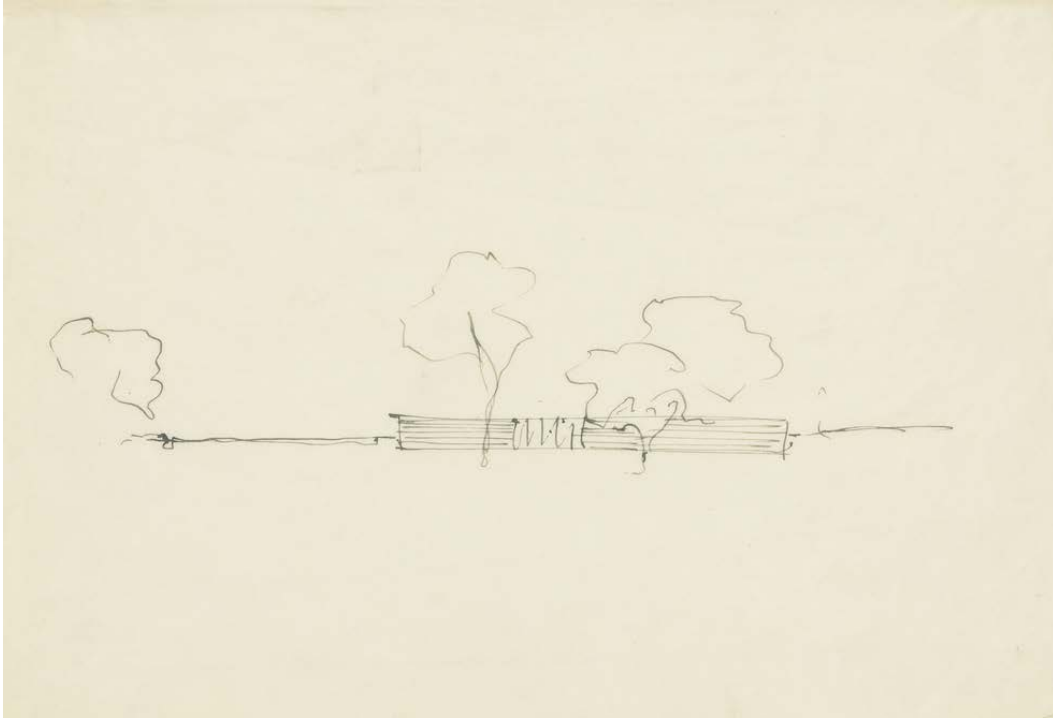


Figure 46. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Court House, Elevation (Top), 1934, ink on tracing paper, 21.6 x 29.8 cm, and Court House, Perspective (Bottom), 1934, ink, pencil, and wood veneer on illustration board, 76.2 x 101.6 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

In the wake of the twin humiliations of the German pavilion and the Bauhaus' closure, Mies, largely devoid of commissions, became preoccupied with his idea of a Court House. In a time in which mandatory symbolism – the equation of form with content – began to pervade public life, the Court House offered a retreat into the remaining vestige of contradiction and open-ended potentiality that remained within individual life. There is something of an alien landscape, and more than a touch of surrealism, in this series of designs which, from their exterior, appear to exist as islands of the real in the desert of the extant.

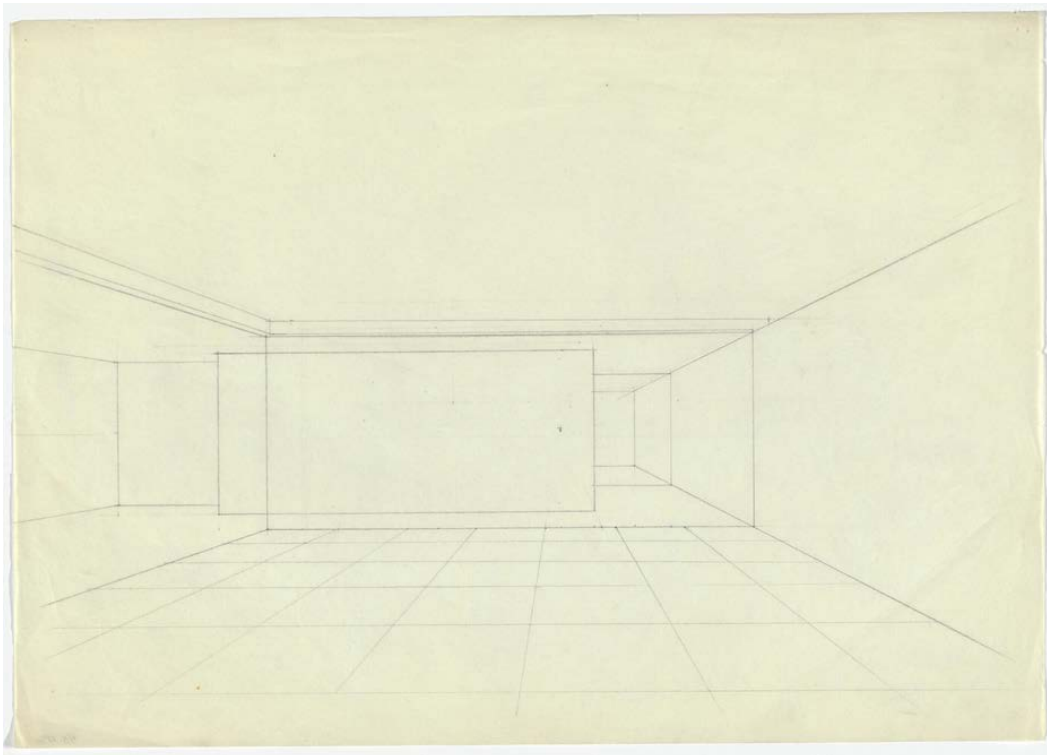


Figure 47. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Court House, Interior Perspective, 1935, pencil on tracing paper, 41.9 x 29.8 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Within the Court Houses, the details of everyday life cannot help but become as ephemeral as the furniture appears in Mies' three-dimensional graphics. Yet, dissolved into potentiality, into an absolute, the everyday is also granted a dignity that transcends any ideological signifier or sentiment that chains it to a static present. Born out of despair, the Court

Houses present a proposition to the viewer that is equal parts disquieting and millenarian: are they ready to embrace a radically historical situation, devoid of surety, organic growth, inevitability, and eternity?

Mies and Malevich's understanding of form as a historical process reflects a shared artistic vision. Malevich's *Bog ne skinut* demonstrates his idealistic interpretation of form as a historical process centered around the idea of a stimulus which binds together particular discontinuous manifestations of form into a unity that embraces all of their potential realizations as a single historical continuum. In contrast, an analysis of Mies' *Baukunst und Zeitwille* points towards a materialistic conception of form in which the study of ongoing historical processes precipitates radical historical discontinuities in form. Both interpretations center the complex dialectic interplay of historical discontinuity in form within wider processes that constitute a continuum throughout history. Mies and Malevich's theory is reflected in the particular formal decisions they made in their more abstract architectural studies. Ultimately, Mies and Malevich shared a humanistic vision of a universe which comes to consciousness of itself as a unified creative subject.

Conclusion

Modernism, History, and Their Critics

Mies and Malevich's conception of their work's historical context and contemporary historical role bore an important influence on the development of their work, reflecting a broader notion of form as a historical process. A similar paradigm promises to be useful in interpreting modernism in general. By using the conception of form as a historical process it has developed to problematize contemporary debates on their aesthetic "metanarratives," this thesis points to a more general issue in the historiography of modernism. In response to questions raised through this exploration of contemporary debates, it proposes a specific extension of its conception of form as a historical process through a case study of the architect Ivan Leonidov. In doing so, this thesis aims to demonstrate the validity of this conception in an open-ended manner that raises foundational questions for future studies of modernism.

Contemporary Problems: Postmodernist Polemics

Broadly, speaking a major trend in "postmodernist" thought which has dominated criticism for the better part of the last half-century is a tendency to criticize universalistic thought, framing it instead as one of many competing narratives; a universal narrative or metanarrative, to use a common coinage. This manifests itself in the fact that, for the better part of the last century, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Kazimir Malevich have harbored a reputation as egregious metanarrativists. It was as early as 1979 that Jean-François Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* could speak of an increasingly generalized "incredulity towards metanarratives,"

coining what has since become a stock-phrase description of the present predicament.⁷⁷ If Lyotard sympathized with history as narrated by “a people mired in the particular positivity of its traditional knowledge,” the accusation of metanarrative was leveled at the “universal ‘history’ of spirit,” a “metasubject” which, “giving voice to [its believers’] common grounding, realizes their implicit goal.”⁷⁸ In the current intellectual climate, where Lyotard’s conception of history is hegemonic, Mies and Malevich have proven quite useful to those who wish to reinforce the consensus that modernism, in its break with historical form, also sought to break with history.

⁷⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Theory and History of Literature*, v. 10 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

⁷⁸ Lyotard, 34.



Figure 48. Stanley Tigerman, *The Titanic*, 1978, photo collage, gelatin silver print, cardboard, 28 x 35.7 cm, Art Institute, Chicago.

Stanley Tigerman's *Titanic* is indicative of the fate of Mies in an environment with a prevailing prohibition on metanarratives. Mies' Crown Hall at the Illinois Institute of Technology sinks into Lake Michigan and, with it, universal space. Mies' theory of architecture is not so easily reduced to this sort of "platonic" paradigm., because to do so would erase the concerns with the historical development of form that dominate his writings. In order for one to propose the demise of Miesian universal space, they must first convince their audience of the validity of their own "metanarrative," universal space, which bears only a tenuous relationship to its ostensible object.



Figure 49. Alexander Kosolapov, *Malevich-Marlboro Triptych*, 1985, acrylic on canvas, 183 x 112 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris.

Soviet-American artist Alexander Kosolapov's *Malevich Marlboro Triptych* makes the provocative comparison between Malevich's Suprematist forms and advertising language; a playful twist on the idea of pure form. Yet, as with Tigerma's *Titanic*, the comparison of Malevich to Marlboro is premised on a misinterpretation of the intent of his work as seeking pure form, when Malevich was not so much interested in any Platonic metaphysics of form as he was in developing a historical understanding of the development of form. Because Malevich's theory centers becoming and not any finite, discreet state, the semiotic quality of advertising is not as

relevant as might seem the case at face-value, since Malevich's Suprematist forms are intended to be devoid of symbolism in a systematic manner.

Postmodernist criticism of Mies, Malevich, and, more broadly, of the universalistic and historically minded ethos they share is unconvincing. Although such criticism ostensibly favors the particular over the universal, in the case of Mies and Malevich, it has arguably done the opposite, eschewing the particularities of their own interpretation of their work in favor of a generic interpretation of them as "platonic" thinkers concerned with ideal forms. Rather than promoting a plurality of narratives, there is no small amount of irony in the fact that postmodernist criticism has done a great service to promoting – even canonizing – the very metanarratives regarding modernism it set out to vanquish in the first place. Whatever its valorization of the particular, in shedding the universal, postmodernism has delivered the generic. Lyotard distinguishes metanarrative from narrative in the latter's self-consciousness of its finitude. Yet could one not also say that the universal is distinguished from the generic in terms of the latter's ignorance of its universality? Mies and Malevich engaged in an open-ended, pluralistic debate which, in its very aspiration to the single truth of universality in theory, prohibited any particular interpretation of truth from usurping and monopolizing truth in practice. Rooting out universalizing narratives in postmodernist criticism of Mies and Malevich in order to emphasize the particularity of their interpretation of the truth, by contrast, has, under the aegis of particularism and relativism, forwarded a homogenous and reductive interpretation of their theory.

Form as a Historical Process: Extensions

Decades of poststructuralist intellectual hegemony have not produced satisfactory answers to important historical questions regarding the emergence of modernism.

Fundamentally, an approach which axiomatically rejects both history and abstraction without substantiating its assumption, is flawed. It is more productive to reexamine modernism without assuming its invalidity on account of adherence to metanarrative. This approach has allowed this thesis to develop a working conception of form as a historical process in Mies and Malevich's work. The suitability of this synthetic conception of Mies and Malevich's ideas to the wider study of modernism can be explored through a similarly synthetic case study of the architect Ivan Leonidov, a contemporary of Mies and Malevich who drew from both of their works critically.

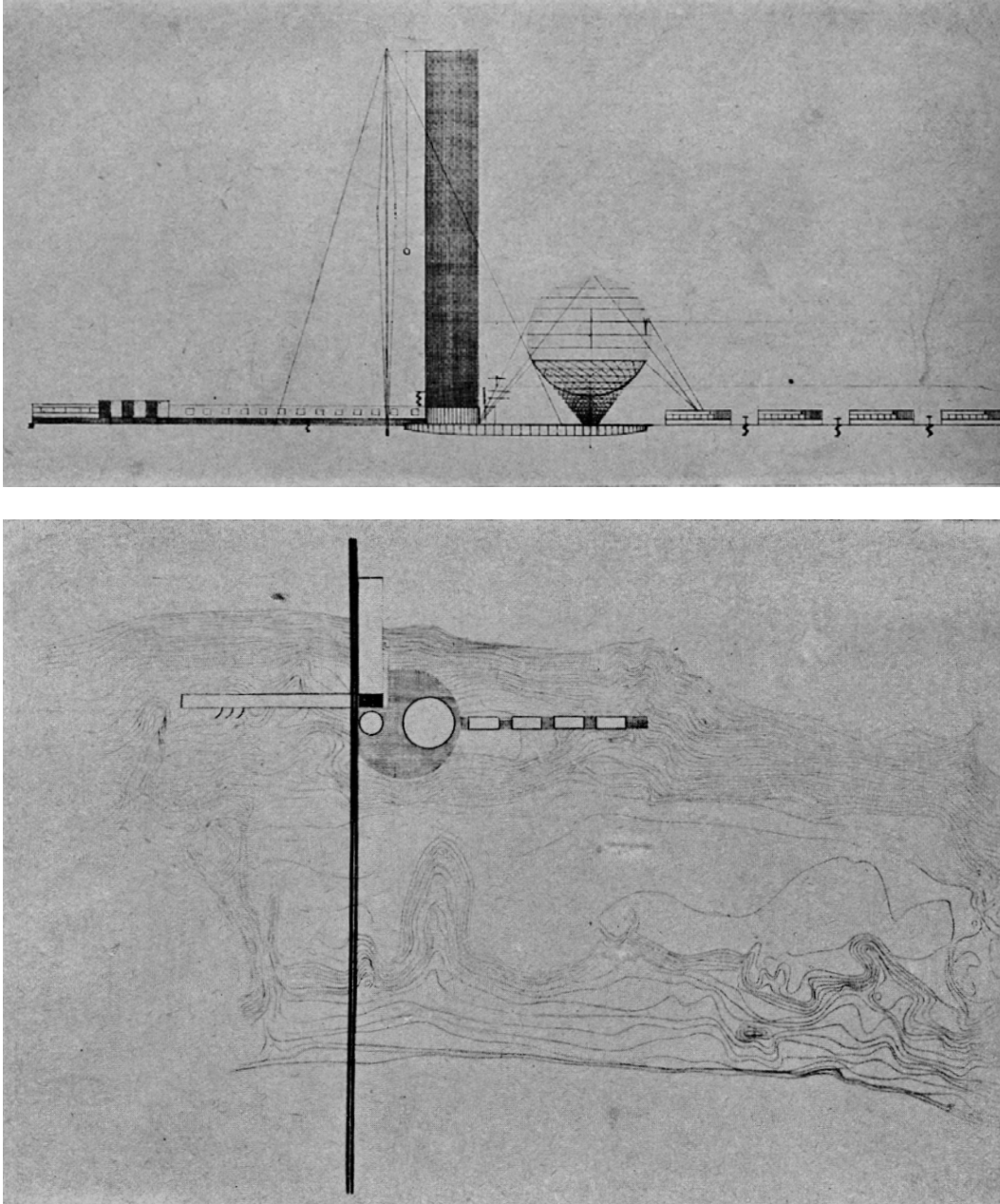


Figure 50. Ivan Leonidov, Lenin Institute Project, Moscow, RSFSR, Elevation (Top) and Plan (Bottom), 1927, in *Sovremennaiia Arkhitektura* 2, no. 4-5, 122-123.

In the Lenin Institute, both objects – a balloon, a radio mast – and forms – a Suprematist painting, a topographical map – take on new meanings that transcend the previous limited state of their existence. If in Malevich's Suprematist painting form became the true content of painting, in Leonidov's architecture space becomes the true function of architecture. Rather than

being dependent either on eternal laws of proportion or on the economic contingencies of the present, Leonidov's architecture pursues the creation of space for the sake of creativity. If there is an uncertain, unstable character to his work, it is indicative of the impossibility of any particular realization of architecture to realize what Malevich would have called the "stimulus." Balanced in its asymmetry, the Lenin Institute evokes this stimulus, uniting the finite with the infinity of its potential realizations. From its *sachlich* materialism, rife with imperfection, arises an ideal of perfection. These two traits, as in Malevich's work, are inextricably intertwined.

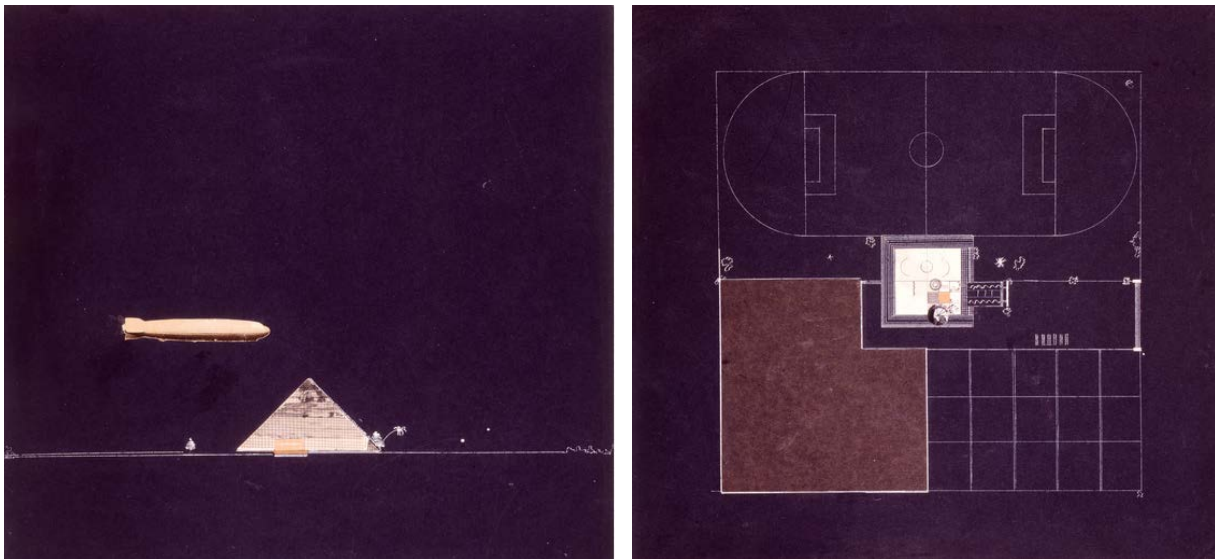


Figure 51. Ivan Leonidov, Proletarskii Raion Palace of Culture Project, Moscow, RSFSR, 1930, whitewash and cut-and-pasted paper on black paper mounted on cardboard, 33.2 x 35 cm, Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow, Russian Federation.

In Leonidov's design for Proletarskii Raion one gets a sense of an almost childlike naïveté. A zppelin; the Great Pyramid; a football green — Leonidov's design triggers the submerged childhood impulse to endow toys with the actuality of the thing they imitate, to drift between and combine wildly different scales, and to form a coherent whole from elements conventionally understood to be discreet. The striving of objects to become subjects realizes itself in practice, not just in theory. Although it is more overt in Leonidov, this playfulness can

also be seen in Mies' work. After all, what is Mies' Friedrichstraße Skyscraper Project other than the interplay of glass? In the Brick Country House, building blocks defy their instrumentalization towards the construction of a conventional house and constitute a new kind of space. Mies' Court Houses, for all their introversion, speak to a future of unlimited play in which pure creation through the recombination of a simple architectural vocabulary is available to all. Rather than fatalistic nonchalance, Mies' conception of structure is premised on anarchistic freedom.

For Mies and Malevich, form had no objective existence prior to human knowledge of it. Nor was it merely the illusion of subjective caprice; it was impossible to disentangle form as an objective thing from the evolution of its subjective reflection. Form was in a constant state of flux, but it was not dynamism in and of itself. As a historical process, form's evolution was a function of human knowledge, objective insofar as it was congruent with one's self-conscious action, subjective insofar as it remained estranged as an external object. By reevaluating Mies and Malevich's work in terms of a historical process contingent on the interplay of human action and self-understanding, the complexity and context of their aspirations can be restored. If the dreams of the past are not granted substance but are simply invalidated, as has been the fate of Mies and Malevich's work under the prevailing prohibition on universal narratives, then there is little solid ground on which to face the future. Even the falsehood of an unrealized dream is objective in its relation to the truth. In order for a whole to be false, it must first aspire to the whole.

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