

Mies' Brick Country House

History and Theory Studies

Term 1 Essay Submission

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to analyse and understand Mies' use of the Grid in his *project for a Brick Country House*. Its spatial properties and functions are among the different topics which will be discussed throughout the text. The way in which one experiences space mainly depends on how this is divided and what purpose this chosen division serves, in other words: why did Mies arrange the walls in this project in the way he did? How does this affect the person walking through this space? Mies' thoughts and reasonings behind the development of the few existing drawings for this project revolve around his idea of *spatial continuum* and the possibility of having one whole space with no interruptions, bordered only by the edge of the paper sheet.

grid /grid/

(noun)

A pattern or structure made from horizontal and vertical lines crossing each other to form squares.

The Cambridge Dictionary

In the 1920s, Mies van der Rohe was in the process of creating a new architectural language. Trying to develop a new architectural vocabulary, putting aside the ornamental and decorative features of his period's architecture by emphasising his strong conviction that the form of a structure should be shaped through its function rather than "dictating" it, by forcing a function to fit within a fixed shape.

His most emblematic project of these was the Brick Country House, which, together with the Concrete Office Building and the Concrete Country House, compose his collection of *paper projects*: never actually built and forever remaining just a series of drawing including plans and sections of these buildings. These paper projects were first presented to the public at the *Novembergruppe* 1924 exhibition (an event organised in Berlin by a German expressionist group including both artists and architects) Mies had been working on the idea of joining house and its external spaces such as its garden together, having these spaces fuse and flow into one another. Even if he experimented this concept several times in the past, this was the first time it was actually possible to fully understand Mies' intentions and why he did so and what does this bring into his project¹ thanks to the variety of drawings which relate to each other allowing the user to see the bigger picture. This House proposal was composed only by few drawings he compiled in order to display his concept, the plan being the most widely known nowadays; as well as being of vital importance for the analysis of the building in this essay, more than any other illustration.

The project has often been compared with Van Doesburg's 'Russian dance' painting made in 1918.² As a matter of fact, in this same period the Stijl movement was expressing a very similar concept, which is probably why, to a certain extent, it has been one of the art movements which mostly influenced the architecture present in this specific project Mies was working on. With artists such as Piet Mondrian and Theo Van Doesburg looking and working with grids, a dialogue between the architect's work and the Stijl was nearly inevitable. By taking a closer look on the two works one can clearly observe that they both spark a very similar 'visual identity' and resemblance between each other, using the Grid in the same way, exploiting its ordering powers to apply and place the different shapes onto the this geometrical area, creating spaces within a regulated set of lines.

¹ Schulze, F. and Windhorst E. 2012. p. 92

² Hartoonian, G. 1989 p. 2

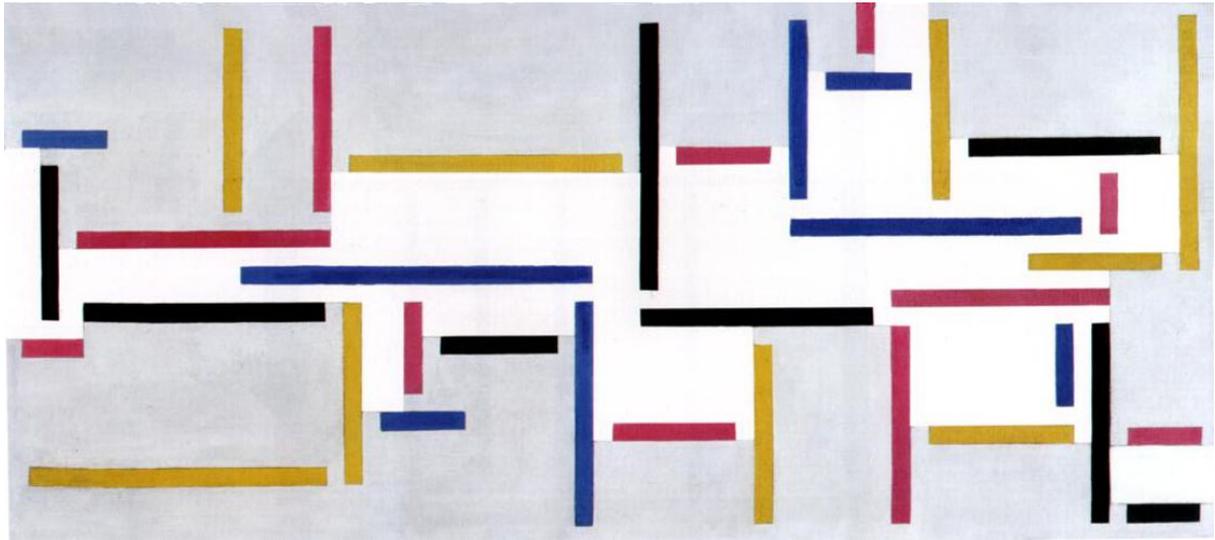


Fig. 1 - *Rhythm of Russian Dance* by Theo van Doesburg

These lines may be extended or interrupted depending on the way in which they are placed and orientated, relating to one another, breaking the continuity of the line, stopping the Grid from its tendency to extend infinitely, and braking the harmony which revolves around the whole concept of order as well as nullifying the main purposes of the Grid. The fragmentation of this order can be obtained by leaving a white border at the edge of the frame, making it impossible for it to give the impression of its infinite extension beyond the canvas. A good example of this can be Mondrian's diamond canvas. However it must be noted that, even though on a two-dimensional line of thought the two look very similar, by translating Mies' plan into a three-dimensional space, this last gains a lot of potential which a pictorial representation of the Grid cannot obtain, bringing to life its function in relation to the space it is set in.

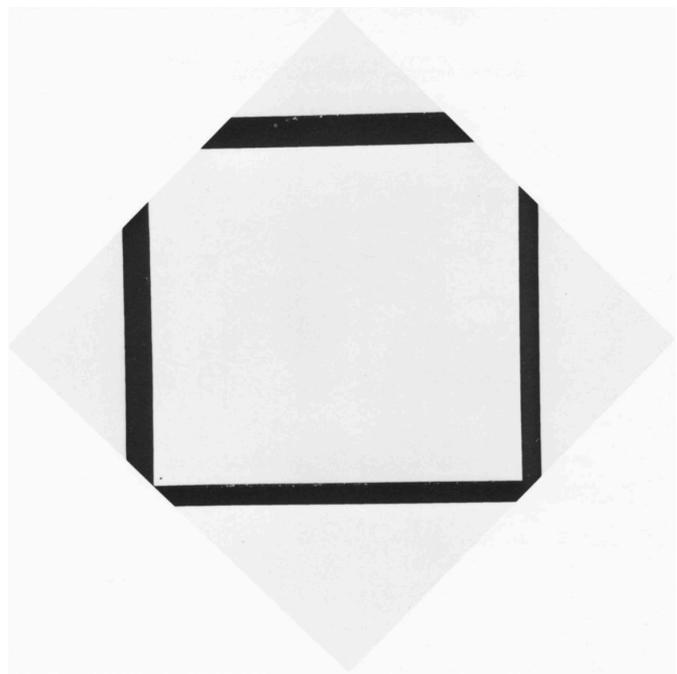


Fig. 2 - *Composition No 1: Lozenge With Four Lines* by Piet Mondrian

The Brick Country House project, with no specific client nor site, consisted in a series of unenclosed rooms, connected to one-another through an opening without the use of doors. Moreover, it included a series of external areas such as garden spaces and terraces, all connected in some way to keep the passage from one 'condition' to the other not too obvious and contrasting.

The choice of material for this building is not random, in fact (in the architectural world after 1900) contrary from what was the opinion regarding concrete and glass, brick was "considered a primitive, elemental and thus appropriately modern material."³

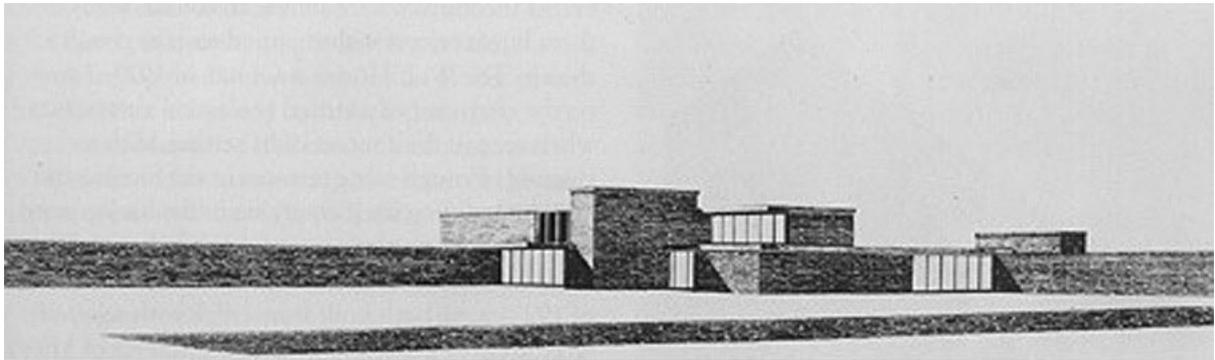


Fig. 3 - *Brick Country House, project, Perspective* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

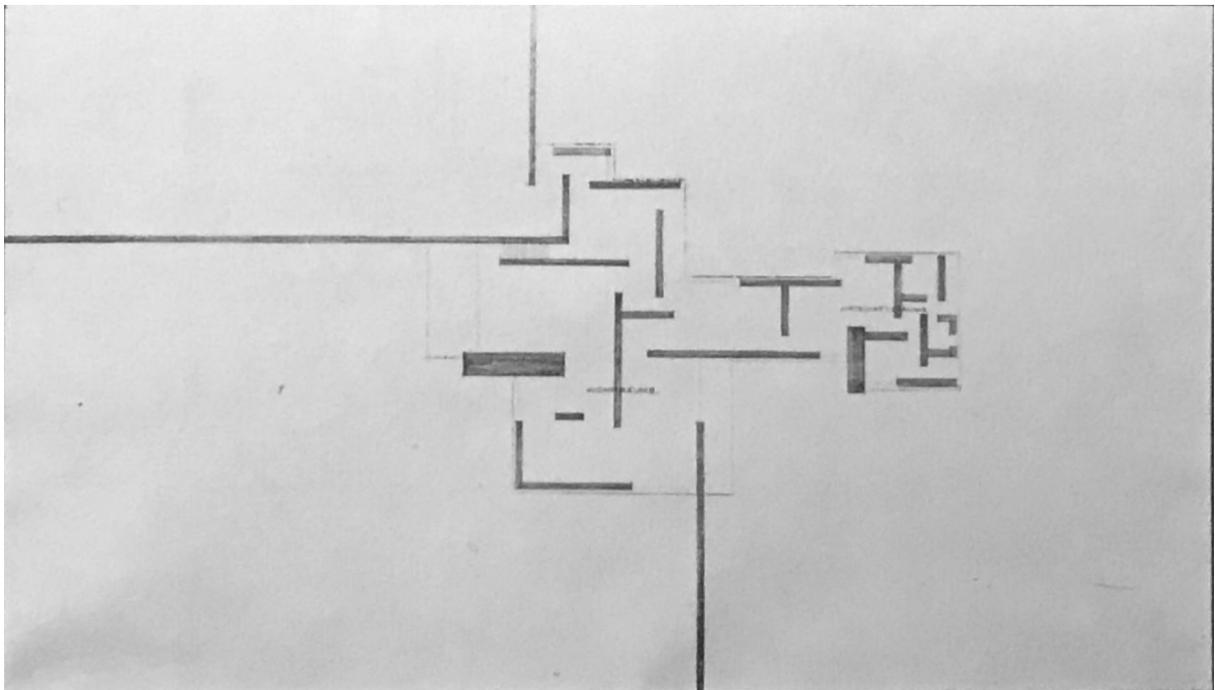


Fig. 4 - *Brick Country House Plan* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. 1924.

³ Schulze, F. and Windhorst E. 2012. p. 99

The Plan

For this project Mies was trying to blend the different spaces, which are usually very clearly divided and distinct between one another. By introducing his concept of *spatial continuum*, taking advantage of his will and desire to eliminate unnecessary elements such as small windows and doors, he was able to exchange them with bigger floor-to-ceiling glass windows and forming ‘passages’ by *breaking the line* created by the wall, utilising these thresholds as the component which allows the user to move through the space.

By implementing these modifications, Mies was experimenting the idea of the *open plan*, the one he was greatly exploring at this time. A similar belief to the one expressed by other noticeable architects of that time such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier⁴, the latter one with his globally acknowledged *five points of architecture*. The outcome that can be achieved by utilising such open plan programme results in a series of advantages, both functional and aesthetical.

One of the most peculiar aspects in Mies’ Plan drawing is his decision to ‘distort’ the way of representing information through his lines, altering all indications to size and measurements by representing all of the windows as single lines without any thickness and, with an even more abstract approach, generalising and ‘equalising’ all the walls thicknesses to the same a uniform width.⁵

As stated before, the integration of the garden within the whole space of the house allowed Mies to intensify his strong belief in spatial ‘fluidity,’ this is because he directly attaches the garden and terraces to the House’s structure, with no pathway or corridor to link the two and therefore the user is able to pass through without a sudden and ‘heavily noticeable’ change in space.

What Mies was hoping to achieve was to influence the experience the user lives because of being inside this particular space. What effect does this ‘spatial continuum’ have on the individual? Does it help to orientate oneself inside the space or does it just make it more confusing? — Even though the Grid delivers a sense of order, it is not directly related to the ease the person can move through the space. For example, instead of having corridors, where one can easily find and enter the right room, Mies’ spatial continuum forces the user to find out his location within the space and moving accordingly.

⁴ Schulze, F. and Windhorst, E. 2012. p. 89-90

⁵ Davies, C. 2006.

Order and spatial rhythm have always been essential to architecture. The Grid is one of the few visual geometric rules which people working in this profession have been using over and over again. It is what contrasts man-made from nature's work, it is schematical, mathematical, and infallible, it is the organised system inside a universe of chaos and disorder, spread by nature's randomness.

Mies often takes advantage of the Grid, and the Brick Country House project is no exception. By looking at the plan for this building, it can be found very easily. Alongside to a clearer perception of how the space is organised, the Grid is often also used to fulfil a specific function which would be essential for the structure.

The same pattern can be also noticed in other project such as the Concrete Office Building and the Concrete Country House; both very similar to the Brick Country House. Even though they were developed with a one-year difference between one another, they all share a main skeleton, a key concept. Mies always expressed his strong belief in giving form to his work through its function⁶, not by forcing it or doing it backwards (from end to beginning,) adapting function to the already set form of a structure. In the Brick Country House, this spatial organisation is also formed through the use of the Grid.

The way in which Mies places and intersects the multiple walls of the House, is aided by an abstract (yet so concrete and visible) concept of the Grid. He configures the structure's plan in such a way to evoke a sense *spatial continuum*, as if he would fuse the individual rooms into one, single, unique space; blending the spaces together, making them flow into one another, and unifying the surrounding environment with the building itself.⁷

This spatial aspect is crucial when considering Mies' determination to allow the possibility of *free movement* within space. This *experience* is then extended through the placement of the walls, three of which Mies stretches out to the plan's drawing's border, giving this impression of infinite extension of these lines. There is almost a perception of something acting as a *centrifugal force*, with its centre of rotation placed at the geometric centre of the House's plan, which conceptually revolves and spins the structure around that one point and which causes these lines to extend, pushing the boundaries of the drawing towards the outside; strengthening the concept of *spatial continuum* the House emanates.

⁶ Richter, H. 1923.

⁷ Drexler, A. and Schulze, F. 1986-1992. p. 90

The overlapping and intersecting of these horizontal and vertical lines found in Mies' plan, help the manifestation of the Grid. In the Brick Country House, Mies interprets these lines as dividers, delimiting spaces, transforming them into walls; obtaining, doing so, a blank and empty grid where to distribute and allocate the different purposes of the rooms. The dynamisms expressed in these dividers aids the viewers perception of space (letting one realise and perceive the movement which takes place within the different areas of the House and the way this relates to the invisible Grid which acts as a template and scheme to which assign functions.) Unifying space, one, as a whole, which is sometimes partially obstructed by the dividing walls.

“The wall loses its enclosing character and serves only to articulate the house organism”

Jean-Louis Cohen⁸

This sense of order has often been associated with architecture's fundamental need to aesthetic attraction to geometrical order and a clear structure to deliver the optimal comprehension of space. “The grid delivers a sense of order...(they) are able to host the complexities of our realities.”⁹

Just like Mies states in an interview from 1964 for the *20th Century* magazine with Peter Carter, *order* always manages to emerge somehow, even in other aspects of architecture such as *civilisation* and *culture*, defining them as the “material order” and the “spiritual order” respectively.¹⁰

This *need for order* is what generates the Grid. The necessity for the simplest yet most advanced way to divide, organise, and link one *thing* in relation to another; just like two empty spaces formed by the one line dividing them. The Grid is this force which is always present and influences the way Mies develops his projects, giving it order and logic. In his *project for a Brick Country House*, he takes advantage of it in order to enhance the perception of space one has when in it and let him test the idea of spatial fluidity found within the walls of the House.

⁸ Krohn, C. 2014.

⁹ Manfredini, E. 2015. p. 33

¹⁰ Casabella. 2006. p. 3

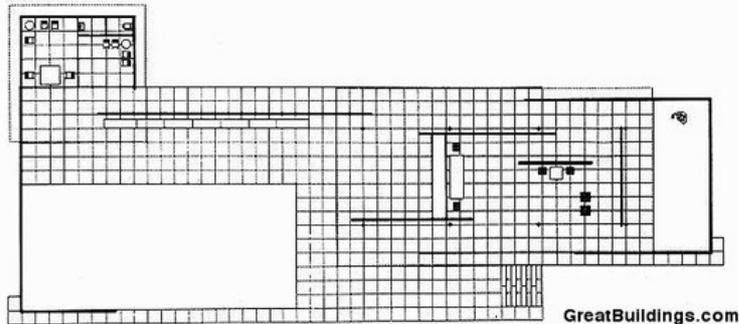
Postscriptum

Fig. 5 - Barcelona Pavilion, Plan, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

As the Brick Country House was actually never built, its understanding is unfortunately limited to our own perception of Mies' drawings regarding this one project. However, it is possible to say that, to a certain extent, both the Barcelona Pavilion, in Spain, and the Wolf House, located in Gubin, Poland,

were realisations strongly resembling what were the key ideas and features Mies focused on when developing the Brick Country House. The Pavilion clearly demonstrates the advantages of the Grid and how Mies uses it to direct the visitors to walk through space which, just like the Brick Country House, is one unique area, uninterrupted and undisturbed by any corridors or thresholds. On the other hand, the Wolf house reflects the more aesthetic aspects of the House, making the utilising bricks and tall windows; merging the main space with an exterior area which functions as a garden, a similar idea to the one present in the Brick Country House project.



Fig. 6 - Wolf House by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

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Images:

Fig. 1 - *Rhythm of Russian Dance* by Theo van Doesburg. Courtesy of Gevork Hartoonian, from *Mies van der Rohe: The Genealogy of Column and Wall*.

Fig. 2 - *Composition No 1: Lozenge With Four Lines* by Piet Mondrian. Courtesy of Rosalind Krauss, from *Grids*.

Fig. 3 - *Brick Country House, project, Perspective* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Courtesy of Archinect.com. 23rd October 2016.

Fig. 4 - *Brick Country House Plan* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Courtesy of The Mies Van der Rohe Archive.

Fig. 5 - *Barcelona Pavilion, Plan*, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Courtesy of Archdaily.com. 6th December 2016

Fig. 6 - *Wolf House* by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Courtesy of Curbed.com 30th November 2016.