

# »Can one live in the Tugendhat House?«

## A Sketch

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»Kann man im Haus Tugendhat wohnen?« (Can one live in the Tugendhat House?) – this provocative question famously marked one of the most poignant discussions about the architecture of the modern movement, its functions and aspirations in the 1920s. Of course, the question posed by critic Justus Bier in 1931 was entirely rhetorical – after all the Tugendhats apparently managed to live quite comfortably in their famous house. What Bier really meant was: 'Should one live in a house like that? Was it even morally justifiable? Evidently, in the eyes of this particular critic, it was not. Before returning to this question, let us have a brief look at the genesis and context of the house.

The parents of both Grete and Fritz Tugendhat owned textile mills in Brünn (today Brno), and it was Grete's father Walter Löw-Beer, who had given the plot of land at Schwarzfeldgasse 45 to the couple as a wedding present and financed the house. It was situated directly above his own house on the other end of a sloping large garden and enjoyed an enticing view over the city of Brno. The Tugendhats contacted Mies after seeing his Perls House in Berlin (1911-12), (then owned by the historian Eduard Fuchs) to which he had just built a modern gallery addition, and they had probably also seen Mies' and Lily Reich's Café *Samt und Seide* (Silk and Satin Café) at a big Fashion Exhibition (Mode der Dame) in Berlin in 1927. It is not unlikely that they had contacts to the other textile merchants Mies had worked for. When negotiations began in the summer of 1928, Mies sent his clients to see some of his earlier commissions in Berlin, and two of his recent brick building, the comparatively conservative Mosler House (1924-26) in Potsdam's suburb Neubabelsberg near Berlin and the much smaller Wolf House (1925-26) in Guben (today Gubin, Poland). During the previous year, Mies had received the commissions for two large family residences in Krefeld, for the textile manufacturers Hermann Lange and Dr. Josef Esters, which were under construction when Mies and the Tugendhats met.

Mies received the commission in late summer, saw the site in September, and the essential design elements seem to have been in place by the end of December 1928, when Mies presented his design to the clients. During this time, Mies was busy with the work on the German section of the Barcelona World's Fair. He had been selected as architect of the German Pavilion in May 1928, travelled to Barcelona in June and signed his contract on November 12, 1928. Construction of the Tugendhat House began in the summer of 1929, just after the German Pavilion had been opened on May 27, 1929.<sup>1</sup>

Size and program of the Tugendhat House clearly align it with the two houses in Krefeld, whose construction had begun earlier, but which were not yet finished when the design of the Tugendhat House began. Spatially and structurally it appeared strikingly different from its predecessors and it became one of the most intensely discussed and influential buildings of the 20th Century. Instead of the mix of load bearing brick façades and vertical and horizontal steel sup-

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the building of the Barcelona Pavilion, see: Neumann 2009: 232-242.

ports that Mies was using in Krefeld, the new design was based on a pure steel frame construction, a precondition for the large expanses of glass on the lower floor. The structure and its masonry infills were covered in white stucco. In response to its hillside location, the building's entrance from an unassuming, low elevation on street level leads into what is effectively the second floor of the building, containing a vestibule, the nanny's and family bedrooms with direct access to a southwestern terrace overlooking the city. Visitors who entered the house would turn 180 degrees and descend on a semi-circular staircase into the main living room. This spectacular, 80' x 55' light-filled space is, of course, the decisive and most conspicuous part of the building.

What must have struck many contemporary visitors as shockingly new in a residential environment was the complete replacement of the two outside walls with glass, with just the edges of floor and ceiling framing the view over the garden below and the city in the distance. Two of the four large glass panels on the southern side could be lowered into the ground. The vastness of the room was enhanced by its radical emptiness and an unusual brightness that resulted from the unhindered influx of light reflected upwards from the white linoleum floor and down from the white ceiling. Apart from occasional chairs (which were scandalously unsubstantial), tables and built-in bookshelves, no provisions were made for the display of personal belongings or for family activities. The scarce furniture arrangements nevertheless hint at the key functions of a bourgeois home: reception, dining and living areas, a library and workplace for the head of the household. The space is divided by a solid Moroccan onyx wall parallel to the main front, and a semicircular Makassar ebony wood screen sheltering the dining area. 10 free-standing cruciform steel columns in a reflective chromium skin punctuate the space at regular intervals. Over the entire length of the eastern front a *wintergarden* provides a green buffer zone, filtering the morning light and obstructing views from the adjacent sidewalk. At the western edge a door leads to a terrace and a wide staircase into the garden, for which Mies designed the landscaping.

Mies had been given the creative and financial freedom to create a classic ›Gesamtkunstwerk‹, that is, a ›total work of art‹, where everything from the building itself down to the furniture, curtains and door handles was selected and designed by himself and Lily Reich. Mies carefully chose the material for the solid honey colored ›onyx doré‹ wall and made a special trip to Paris to find the right kind of Makassar wood. The radical innovation in the spatial-functional arrangements was equaled by the use of new materials and the application of recent technologies.

Mies had begun to adopt aesthetic elements of industrial architecture at the Wolf House in Guben – exposed concrete beams, flat roofs, large metal windows, and he continued to revolutionize the aesthetics of the bourgeois interior by adopting materials and visual elements from the commercial architecture of store displays and exhibition spaces. The chromium plating of his cruciform columns and chairs at the Tugendhat House and the Barcelona Pavilion had only become commercially available in 1925 and was mostly used by the automobile industry for bumpers and tire caps, for bicycles, machinery and appliances. It had never before been used for furniture.

Behind the dinner alcove, a translucent wall of opal glass could be illuminated at night from behind by fluorescent lights in the ceiling (which also furnished indirect light to the adjacent food preparation area). The same opal glass was

used in the entrance area, accompanying the hallway to the children's wing and tracing the descending semi-circular staircase. Then a recent invention, opal glass had quickly become a ubiquitous part of advertising displays in Berlin's streets, and was widely discussed as a crucial element for a new luminous, ephemeral 'architecture of the night'. The New York Times believed that Berlin was the world leader in this application, naming it *the city of opal glass* in 1932.<sup>2</sup> Mies himself had specified opal glass for his two contemporary and unexecuted department store designs in Berlin and Stuttgart, and had used it in the above mentioned glass exhibition room at the Stuttgart Weißenhof Exhibition in 1927.

2 Adams 1932: 1

The application of white linoleum on the floor of the living room and most other spaces had the photogenic effect of a space whose floor and ceiling seemed of equal brightness. While Linoleum, a product from the natural amber of trees, cork and chalk, had been manufactured in Germany since 1882, it had for the first decades generally been used in kitchens and bathrooms, then in the parlors of working class homes, often with an ornamental, colorful surface print that would imitate the pattern of an oriental rug. The standard floor cover in an upper middle class home was wooden parquet, partially covered by carpets.

In recent years, however, the Linoleum industry had consciously sought out modern architects and entered the discourse of modernity. Peter Behrens and Bruno Paul (both teachers and employers of Mies) had designed buildings and pattern for them, and members of the industry had helped to found the German Werkbund. In 1929, an industry brochure promoted *the floor as a room element* and explained:

»Floors of ivory linoleum not only create a light, bright atmosphere but also give plastic clarity to all objects. Where the interior designing demands a delicate, floating effect of the furniture, the bright, coloured, white or light grey floor will be an advantage.«

The Tugendhat house was fitted out with the latest technical amenities – apart from the above-mentioned retractable windows there was an early prototype of air-conditioning, a food elevator and an electric alarm system. Numerous pieces of furniture were designed especially for the house, by both Mies and his friend and partner Lily Reich. First and foremost the Brno easy chair, which exploited the flexibility of flat steel bands in a fashion comparable to that of the contemporary Barcelona easy chair, and several versions of a cantilevered chair, which improved upon Mies' 1927 version by removing the semicircular curve at its front in favor of almost vertical legs, and the separation of the seat support from the steel tubing. In addition, there were numerous simple shelves and tables with a Makassar veneer, as well as a sideboard which consisted of a horizontal frame with darkened glass on both sides and chromium columns that suggested the same separation of support and enclosure that characterized the Tugendhat House and the Barcelona Pavilion.

As the Tugendhat house is such a stylistic, structural and organizational departure from Mies' previous buildings, it seems worth speculating about potential reasons behind these changes. The house had at first been planned in brick, just like the Esters and Lange Houses that were on Mies' drawing board when Mr. and Mrs. Tugendhat commissioned him. Mies later explained the stylistic change with the lack of good bricks and masons in Brno. There were indeed

no regional traditions of exposed brick buildings in Moravia as they existed in Berlin or other parts of Germany. Beyond this missing regional context, several other reasons might have compelled Mies to conform here to the white stuccoed idiom of the international style.

Brno, had, for centuries, been part of the widely German-speaking Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1918 a new Czechoslovak State had been proclaimed, uniting the Czechs and Slovaks into one country under a centralist, but modern democratic constitution. As the inheritor of substantial industrial sites, Czechoslovakia was economically the most fortunate of the successor states of the Empire. Brno, the country's second largest city was one of its centers of industrial production, which was dominated by metal working and textile industries. In an astonishingly liberal political atmosphere new Czechoslovak parties coexisted with parties like the German Social Democratic Party and a Sudeten German party representing the interests of the German minority in Brno. More Czech speaking schools than previously catered to the Czech majority, but German schools continued to flourish. As German Jews, the parents of both Grete and Fritz had been active members of the *German House* in Brno, a cultural center advancing German language and culture.

Nevertheless, a certain amount of tension and competition between the different ethnic groups resulted from the recent political changes. In a conscious break with the forces of the past, many Czech intellectuals sought out new and different cultural alliances. After a visit to lecture in Brno, Theo van Doesburg reported in an article in the Dutch magazine *Het Bouwbedrijf* in 1926, that the motto of many of Brno's modernist architects was »free from Germany!«<sup>3</sup> while they sought artistic affiliations with their Dutch and French colleagues, in particular with Le Corbusier. They had wholeheartedly embraced the formal language of the International Style in publications and exhibitions and in a number of spectacular modern buildings, aptly symbolizing their decisive break with the past.

3 van Doesburg 1926: 477-479.  
English translation: Id. 1986: 124-127

While Grete and Fritz Tugendhat's choice of Mies as their architect was certainly an affirmation of their cultural leanings towards Germany, both client and architect might have felt that a building of starkly exposed brick (as in his previous villas) would have provided a rather provocative – and presumably *Germanic* – contrast to the already existing modernistic formal coherence and the cultural identity for which it stood.

Mies himself had been acutely aware that he was about to build in a city with a very active group of modern architects and probably the highest number of modern buildings anywhere in Europe. When he organized the photo survey of contemporary architecture for the Weissenhof Exhibition, Mies had insisted on assembling the Czech section himself. At that time a large exhibition was being developed in Brno and inaugurated with the 1928 *Exhibition of Contemporary Culture* in Brno, a demonstration of the young Czechoslovakian State's modern spirit and potential at its 10th anniversary. Grete Tugendhat's father, Alfred Löw-Beer and Fritz Tugendhat's brother Emil had both helped to finance the exhibition. The area contained some of the most convincing modern buildings of the time, among them the radical parabolic concrete structures of Josef Kalous, several modern exhibition pavilions by Bohuslav Fuchs and a spectacular interior by Adolf Loos.

In the center of the city a number of modern buildings had recently been de-

signed by Bohuslav Fuchs, Brno's immensely talented major modern architect and some of his colleagues and pupils, turning the city into a landscape of modern architecture, in which all major building types were represented. We can speculate that Mies, during his 1929 visit to see the site, might have stayed in Bohuslav Fuchs' 1928 Avion Hotel, had breakfast at Fuchs' 1925 Zeman Café, whose large floor-to-ceiling windows could open entirely, or if he even visited Fuchs at his own house (1928) in Hvezdarenska Street, whose interior arrangement was curiously similar to that of the Tugendhat Villa. Literally down the street from there was Josef Kranz's Era Café (1927-29), where we might imagine Mies taking Philip Johnson after their visit to the building site in 1930, as Johnson included the building in the International Style Exhibition in New York two years later. The Tugendhats could send their children to the new German school building, also within walking distance from their house (Bohuslav Fuchs, 1929) or take them to the city's Zábřdovice public pool (Bohuslav Fuchs, 1929). At the edge of the city, an entire new settlement called *Nový Dum* (New House) responded to the Weissenhof settlement in Stuttgart of the previous year with a more systematic and uniform approach, presenting individual, double and triple houses in a mature modernist style.

The fact that Mies was about to contribute to a unique ensemble of modern architecture might have informed his own design. Simultaneously, however, he also continued some of his own recent experiments and responded to the work and intense debates among his colleagues in Berlin and abroad.

Few contemporary modern architects escaped the spell of Le Corbusier – and Mies was no exception. Corbusier's seminal publication *Vers une architecture* had been translated into German in 1926 (under the title *Kommende Baukunst*) and, as Wassili Luckhardt remembered later, »expressed convincingly what we all felt.« Corbusier's Villa de Monzie (Stein) in Garches with its separation of support columns from the walls, the continuous band of large windows at the garden façade and its wide staircase leading to the garden was frequently published. Its open plan, punctured by separate curvilinear elements, and the overall rather closed geometric form all were highly influential in Germany from 1927 onwards, and their echo is certainly palpable in the Tugendhat design. Corbusier's double house at the Weissenhof Settlement prominently displayed a row of free steel supports in its open first floor.

Probably the most prominent and successful architects among Mies' friends and acquaintances in Berlin were Wassili and Hans Luckhardt. They had initiated the *Ring* in 1926, a group of progressive architects to which Mies belonged. From 1927 onwards they propagated and introduced steel frame construction for their buildings. The fact that the famous film director Fritz Lang and his wife, the screen writer Thea von Harbou moved into one of their houses in 1929 did much to further the acceptance of modern architecture in Germany. Their most acclaimed and widely published buildings were three single-family residences in Berlin (only two of them were built from 1929-1930), whose formal language echoed Le Corbusier's Stuttgart Buildings, but which also contained a number of original ideas of central importance for Mies. In each one of them the entire first floor was occupied by a vast living room opening towards a terrace through six floor-to-ceiling windows, two of which could be opened entirely by being moved horizontally in front of the fixed glass areas between them. Two free-standing cylindrical steel columns inside are covered with chromium, the main wall of the living room is polished onyx. The third, unexecuted building in this group was the most radical, containing a living

room of 28' x 40' with a greenhouse separated by a glass wall similar to the one Mies was about to use in Brno. This project also was the only one of the three in which free standing columns inside the room carried the structural weight of the cantilevered ceiling and thus permitted a practically continuous glass façade - an element that would then dominate Mies' design.

Just literally a few meters down the street Am Rupenhorn, Erich Mendelsohn built his own house simultaneously with the Tugendhat Villa. Mendelsohn had submitted the plans for his house in the summer of 1928, before Mies had been to Brno to inspect the site, and Mendelsohn's House was finished in March of 1930, when the Villa Tugendhat was still under construction. Here, several large plate glass windows of the enormous living room could be lowered into the floor entirely and offer free access to the terrace with its view over the Havel River. The large living room was openly connected to a hall and a dining area. Polished wood and travertine contributed to the carefully calibrated color harmonies. The garden façade with its continuous band of glass windows has unmistakable similarities to that of the Villa Tugendhat.<sup>4</sup>

4 See: Mendelsohn 1932

As interesting as the Villa Tugendhat itself are the passionate reactions it caused. Czech architects, who had taken the social agenda of modern architecture very seriously - and were probably disappointed that this commission had gone to a German colleague - either ignored the building or openly argued against it. The leading Czech modernist, Karel Teige, passionately engaged in developing minimal housing solutions for the working class, called the Villa Tugendhat in 1932 the *apex of modernistic snobbism* and considered it a »new version of a splendid Baroque palace, a seat for the new money aristocracy.« For his friend Jaromír Krejcar the building was merely a »precious toy for the privileged« and offered no contribution whatsoever to the real problems of modern architecture.<sup>5</sup>

5 Krejcar 1932/33: 132-133 (from: Kudelková / Macel 1999: 180-210)

The German reception began in the Werkbund Journal *Die Form*, with a long, fawning article by editor-in-chief Walter Riezler, lavishly illustrated by 15 of Josef de Sandalo's photographs commissioned by Mies. Riezler called the central living room »an entirely new type of space«, equivalent to modern music and suggested that

»no one can escape from the impression of a particular, highly developed spirituality, which reigns in these rooms, a spirituality of a new kind, however, tied to the present in particular ways and which is entirely different therefore from the spirit that one might encounter in spaces of earlier epochs... This is not a ‚machine for living in,‘ but a house of true ›luxury, which means that it serves highly elevated needs, and does not cater to some ›thrifty,‹ somehow limited life style.«<sup>6</sup>

6 Riezler 1931a: 321-332

Riezler's references to music and spirituality and to an entirely new type of space closely echo the words that critics had found for Mies' Barcelona Pavilion a year and a half earlier.<sup>7</sup> It was as much Riezler's over-the-top review as the house itself that immediately provoked a number of responses and led to one of the most interesting architectural debates of the 1920s. It documents the crucial moment when the modern movement fell from grace in the eyes of the political left. Its central legitimating claim that the new architectural forms were representatives and guarantors of social change, had lost its impact. The fact that a prototypical representative of the old system, a wealthy industrialist whose home housed more servants than family members, could

7 See Neumann 2009

effortlessly and beautifully adopt the new formal language must have been deeply disturbing.

In his famous response to Riezler, entitled: »Kann man im Tugendhat Haus wohnen?« (»Can one live in [inhabit] the Tugendhat House?«) the critic Justus Bier suggested that the house insinuated a *Paradewohnen* (ostentatious living)<sup>8</sup>. He compared its main room to the flight of representative rooms in a 19th century house, and suspected that the inhabitants were unable to use its different functions without disturbing each other. The pathos and spirituality of the space seemed *unbearable* to him. Even stronger were the French Marxist Roger Ginsburger's arguments: He referred to Mies' famous dictum »form is not the goal but the result of our work«, and explained the Marxists' preference for a sincere functionalism which had little interest in formal questions, as long as the necessities of a house were fulfilled properly and intelligently. He also reminded the readers of the contemporary economic crisis, suggesting that such ostentatious luxury at a time when millions were begging for food, was amoral and equivalent to theft.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, while Mies spent 60.000 Mark on the solid onyx wall in the living room alone, simple one-family houses would cost between 8000–25000 Mark. Architectural Historians Lenka Kudelková and Otakar Macel calculated that the entire house must have cost about 5 Million Czech Kronen, the price of about 30 smaller family homes.<sup>10</sup>

The Wall Street Crash in October of 1929 had resulted in a drastically reduced industrial production, soaring unemployment and the steep deterioration of prices for labor and materials. The Brno textile manufacturers drastically cut down production and laid off workers. While the Tugendhat House was being constructed, unemployment in the building trades climbed to 52.18 % and prices fell by at least 20% on the official index (a figure usually much higher in reality). Some of the luxury in the Tugendhat house, we can thus speculate, was financed by savings brought about by the Depression.

Walter Riezler responded to both Justus Bier and Roger Ginsburger in the *Form*, defending the building by reiterating his earlier arguments.<sup>11</sup> Ludwig Hilberseimer, often the voice of his notoriously taciturn friend Mies, emphasized in a short contribution the livability, even coziness of the large room, the differentiation between functions in the upper and lower floor, the main room's *spatial-chromatic harmony* and finally the high technical quality of the building's execution.<sup>12</sup> Hilberseimer carefully avoided Riezler's claims of some new architectural spirituality. Simultaneously he published a more differentiated and less fawning review of the house in the conservative magazine *Der Baumeister*, in which he criticized the potentially oppressive nature of precious materials such as the polished marble and established a pedigree for the Tugendhat House that included in particular Le Corbusier's House Stein in Garches and Lois Welzenbacher's House Schulz in Recklinghausen as the turning point in the development from the symmetrical, restrained floor plan towards a »dynamic balance of interconnected spatial groups« and its direct connection to nature via the outside glass walls.<sup>13</sup> Welzenbacher's house (1928–29, destroyed 1945) is an important and much lesser known part of the rich context in which Mies' new residential paradigm emerged.<sup>14</sup>

Both Fritz and Grete Tugendhat defended the house and its designer against their critics in two separate letters in the *Form*.<sup>15</sup> Neither of them responded to the accusations of squandering enormous amounts of money on luxury at a time when many workers in their factories had just been laid off. Grete Tu-

8 Bier 1931: 392-393

9 Ginsburger / Riezler 1931: 437-438

10 See: Jan Sapak's estimate, as related by Kudelková / Macel 1999: 189.

11 Riezler 1931b: 393-394

12 Hilberseimer 1931a: 431-439

13 Hilberseimer 1931b: 422-431

14 See: Sarnitz 1989: 51-61; 210-211  
This important house is little known today, and was so decisively remodeled after partial destruction during the war, that none of its original qualities are visible today. It was extensively published in the spring of 1930.

15 Tugendhat / Id. 1931: 437-438

gendhat acknowledged that a private home was, perhaps, not the best place for Mies' spatial ideas, but felt liberated by the ceremoniousness and greatness of the main room. Her husband described a sense of *beauty and truth*, that he encountered there. But indeed, how exactly this house and its famous central room functioned, how the family lived in it every day has never been looked at in any detail.<sup>16</sup> We don't know how difficult it might have been for the wealthy young couple to forego many interior design conventions of their peers. They could not bring any of their favorite family furniture into the marriage, place portraits in the main living room, or display exotic travel souvenirs. Since Grete Tugendhat's parents lived downhill on the same piece of land, some family traditions might have continued there.<sup>17</sup> The life of a modern couple, as Mies suggested it here, was supposedly unsentimental, free from the mementos of personal history and unburdened by the pressure to display tokens of a family's pedigree, wealth and heritage.

In the large room, five different table and chair arrangements offered locations for simultaneous, different activities. It is no coincidence that one of the few social functions Grete Tugendhat would remember later, happened to be a bridge tournament that her parents had organized. In the mid-thirties Fritz Tugendhat took 32 photos of the house, which, probably mindful of the earlier criticism, present the building as a lived-in space. We see the children at play in the large room or on the terrace, involved in gardening activities or Christmas preparations. The recollections of the inhabitants shed some light onto the living arrangements in the house: Mr. Tugendhat never used the desk that Mies had provided for him, Mrs. Tugendhat preferred her husband's bedroom for reading and working (her own bedroom lacked a desk), and looked forward to using her children's rooms once they had left the house. The children had to eat dinner with the nanny upstairs in their own room, to which an elevator from the kitchen would bring the food.

When there were house guests, the nanny had to move in with the children, since no guestroom had been provided. In addition, Mies' decision to place the bedrooms on the entrance level created an overlap between private and semi-public spaces that trapped parents and children in their bedrooms if they wanted to avoid meeting visitors in the entrance lobby. The conventional and time tested arrangement at the Esters and Lange Houses in Krefeld placed the main, semi-public, spaces on the ground floor, close to the entrance. The more private quarters with parents' and children's bedrooms would be upstairs. At the Tugendhat Villa, Mies had to respond to the need for an entrance on the upper level. It would have been entirely possible to place the large living room on the upper floor and arrange for the living quarters underneath with direct access to the garden. It would have solved several issues with the current design. A year later, when Mies' close friend Gerhard Severain designed a villa for his brother Alois in Wiesbaden – apparently with Mies' help – they successfully tried that solution.<sup>18</sup>

The entire arrangement of rooms on the upper floor seems strangely cumbersome – an enormous amount of circulation space serving five altogether uninspired rooms. The dense and economic clarity that characterized the arrangements of bedrooms, bathrooms and adjacent terraces upstairs at the Lange and Esters houses is entirely absent. There, on a comparable footprint, Mies had managed to assemble 11, resp. 9 rooms and 6 bathrooms upstairs. Except those for the maids and nanny, all rooms had access to a terrace. The less deft and surefooted handling of the complex room arrangements at the Tugendhat

**16** The best account of life in the house is that of Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat. See: Hammer-Tugendhat 1998: 11-28

**17** The Löw-Beers were wealthier than the Tugendhats and the parents insisted on assigning ownership to their daughter alone. The family had lived for generations in Brno and owned the Aaron & Jacob Loew-Beer and Sons' textile factory.

**18** See: Neumann 2006: 199-219



House might lie in the fact that the project architect was the young Friedrich Hirz (1907-87), who had just joined Mies' office (after briefly working for Gropius) and was only 21 years old at the time. He was responsible for much of the detailed planning and the supervision of the building site. According to Grete Tugendhat, the constellation of the upstairs rooms was redesigned after a conversation between clients and architects on December 31, 1928, when the Tugendhats requested that the free standing columns were integrated into the walls.<sup>19</sup>

The Tugendhats had a married chauffeur, two maids, a cook and a nanny. All of them had comparatively small rooms. While the ratio between serving and served spaces in the Esters and Lange Houses is about 0.5 to 1, in the Villa Tugendhat it is almost 1:1. The kitchen, food preparation and pantry areas on the lower floor seem particularly large. Never much of a family man, Mies generally lacked interest in spaces of domestic function and, instead, concentrated on noncommittal spaces, large enough to allow almost any pursuit (it is no coincidence that the main room functioned well later as a pediatric gymnasium).

The large, protected garden was not directly accessible for the children and, instead, their realm was meant to be the vast, paved terrace with direct street access out of sight from their parents. A rather moving picture, taken by Rudolf de Sandolo in 1931, shows two small girls standing naked on this terrace - their vulnerability in stark contrast to the sharp edges of the house, its metal columns and the grid of hard granite plates underneath. On the upper level, the terrace's railing ended up as a solid wall, while it had originally been a metal railing through which one would have been able to see the garden underneath and the city further below. Hanna, Grete Tugendhat's daughter from her first marriage was 6 years old, when the house was finished, the two sons Ernst and Herbert were born in 1930 and 1931 and two more daughters followed after the emigration to Venezuela. Clearly, the large living room downstairs was not meant as a realm for children. The insubstantial southern railing in front of the large windows would not have protected small children when the windows were in the fully lowered position.

The fact that a number of different functions had to co-exist in the main living room had been one of the key criticisms of the main space, and the provision of curtains as space dividers were often mentioned in defense. But in the original photographs they are rarely shown in this function. As light enters the space only from the southern and eastern sides (there greatly diminished by the greenhouse) the library area in the back, which is shielded from the southern façade by the onyx wall, is, even on bright days, rather dark. The placement of artificial lights in the main room is similarly puzzling. In order to keep the appearance of the room as empty and uncluttered as possible, only occasional ceiling lights by the Danish firm of Paul Henningsen (PH1) were provided, roughly aligned to a grid that did not correspond to the seating arrangement, except in the case of the dining alcove, resulting in highly awkward lighting conditions at night. The only contemporary image of the interior with all curtains drawn at night confirms this impression.

Other sections of the spatial arrangements are somewhat puzzling and seem unresolved. There is, for example, a sunken courtyard with very little practical use immediately adjacent to the sidewalk. It provides access to the intake shaft of the cooling and heating system, as well as access to the coal bin. After having successfully and sensibly designed a number of homes for well to do

**19** See the account of the evolution of the plans: Tegethoff 2000: 43-97, [in particular] 60 ff.

families with children and servants in Berlin, Krefeld and Guben, Mies here seems to have concentrated almost exclusively on the materials and details of the great central space while simultaneously neglecting other aspects. Wolf Tegethoff already speculated about the evolution of the house's plans during the time when Mies' attention was focused on the many issues in conjunction with the German participation in Barcelona. In all likelihood, much of the detailed design work had to be done by employees such as Friedrich Hirz.

It is the great irony of the Tugendhat Villa, that, while it became one of Mies' most widely known and influential buildings thanks to the dissemination of its striking photographs, at the same time it was his least successful response to the requirements of a functioning home. Mies had not been able to fully meet the challenges that the house's sloping site had posed both for the interior organization and for the low street facade which became the least convincing view of the building.

The critical reception of the Tugendhat House was echoed elsewhere. In Berlin, the German Building Exhibition had been held at the Berlin Fairgrounds from May 16 to August 3, 1931, and Mies and Lilly Reich were responsible for the section on *The Dwelling of our Time*. Mies and Reich each contributed a building. Adolf Behne noted in a review:

»It has long been convincingly demonstrated that a dwelling can be the more pleasant, spacious and comfortable, the more money you can spend on it. The dwelling of our time – that is – with terrible urgency – the dwelling for the people, the workers dwelling.«<sup>20</sup>

20 Behne 1931: 733-735

Karel Teige's critique of Mies House at the Building Exhibition seemed to recall Justus Bier's critique of the Tugendhat House:

»[...] the house designed by Mies van der Rohe is not even a genuine villa but a more or less irrational adaptation of his German Barcelona Pavilion transformed into a dwelling: all he did in this adaptation of his pavilion...is to add a toilet and a bathroom – and presto, the villa of the future has arrived. The whole concept is supremely impractical and governed by formal sculptural intentions, which, in turn, are based on purely abstract notions of space composition – Raumkunst – executed with luxury materials: the spaces are open-ended and flow into each other as in a maze. The skeleton is completely freestanding, and the steel columns and their connections are chrome plated. This is theater and sculpture, not architecture – snobbish ostentation, but not a dwelling.«<sup>21</sup>

21 Teige 2002 [1932]: 197

Erich Mendelsohn's house (mentioned above) that had been built at the same time and shared a number of important features with the Villa Tugendhat was similarly criticized when Mendelsohn published it in a richly illustrated monograph under the ambitious title *Neues Haus – Neue Welt* (new house – new world) in 1932. Critic and planner Werner Hegemann wrote:

»Until we have succeeded in preventing the imminent economic collapse of our country and in providing healthy living conditions for the mass of the people and their spiritual leaders, until then such luxurious-capitalist private residences as the Mendelsohn House will seem like a... rather dangerous Wilhelminism.«<sup>22</sup> (referring to Emperor Wilhelm II, the last Emperor of the German Reich until 1918)

22 Hegemann 1932: 1165-1172 (1-8)

When the German philosopher and historian Walter Benjamin published his essay *Experience and Poverty* in a Prague journal in 1933, he might have thought of the striking images of the Tugendhat villa. Benjamin knew about Mies, had perhaps even met him at Hans Richter's magazine *G*, where both had published, or at the circle of friends at the house of art collector Eduard Fuchs, who lived in a house by Mies and whom Benjamin had described in one of his pieces. Without mentioning the Tugendhat House, Benjamin described the new steel and glass architecture as the enemy of secrets and possessions, as »prophet of a new poverty«. After overcoming the crowded interiors of the 19th Century, he wrote, modern architects »have created rooms in which it is hard to leave traces«, for »men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation.« Warily, Benjamin noted that the absence of experience and traces of human heritage in these contemporary buildings readied modern man for the dark times to come: »The economic crisis is at the door, and behind it is the shadow of the approaching war.«<sup>23</sup>

Mies' last executed residential design in Germany seems like a perfect response to his critics: House Lemke in Berlin Weissensee of 1932/1933 was small and cheap while being functional and upholding the aesthetic achievements of the modern movement.<sup>24</sup> The next step towards the Villa Tugendhat's rise as a key monument of modern architecture took place at the same time, and entirely unmoved by the criticism the building had encountered. The American critic and museum curator Philip Johnson had been immensely impressed after his visit with Mies to the unfinished building in the late summer of 1930 while he was travelling in search of a new *International Style*. He told his friend Henry Russell Hitchcock afterwards (and in similar words his mother and the Dutch architect J.J.P Oud):

»It is like the Parthenon [...] without question the best looking house in the world [...]. He has one room, very low ceilinged, one hundred feet long, toward the south all of glass from the ceiling to the very floor. Great sheets of plate glass that go into the floor electrically. The side of the room is at least thirty feet and is glass to the east. This room is divided into dining room, library and living room by partial walls, which do not in the least destroy its size, but rather magnify it [...]. It has cost already a million marks which in Europe is a frightful sum.«

Mies subsequently rose to a central position in Johnson's and Hitchcock's concept for the upcoming publication and show at New York's Museum of Modern Art. When „Modern Architecture - International Exhibition“ opened a year and a half later on February 10, 1932, the Villa Tugendhat adorned the catalogue's cover, its plans had been redrawn by the museum staff and a model built which was given a prominent position next to the Villa Savoye in the main room of the show. Several of Mies' recent clients, Eduard Fuchs, Hermann Lange and the Tugendhats helped to sponsor the exhibition. Philip Johnson insisted on writing the chapter on Mies in the catalogue himself, while all others were authored by Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Lewis Mumford, who contributed brief notes on housing and the work of Otto Haesler. While Johnson conceded that Mies »never achieved a façade design as brilliant as Le Corbusier« nor could he »compete with Oud in making distinguished architecture out of cheap building«, he claimed that Mies had »no equal [...] as a creator of spaces« and called the »magnificent« Tugendhat house »epoch-making as the most luxurious house in the modern style«. Of course, it was exactly this element of luxury and acceptability by the educated haute bourgeoisie that

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin 1999 [1933]: 2-3; quoted from: Jennings 1999: 731-735

<sup>24</sup> See: Noack 2008

made the modern movement appealing to someone like Philip Johnson (whose interest in social housing or the concerns of the political left was rather negligible) and paved the way for its successful transfer to the United States. Mies created a precedent for a new spatial and visual richness that would eventually become the trademark of the rising modern American architecture. While this particular prototype might indeed have been awkward and difficult to inhabit, architects like Richard Neutra or Pierre König were eventually to present similar glass-enclosed spaces as inhabitable, highly desirable environments which found innumerable successors.

The Tugendhats, who had moved into the house in December 1930, fled from their home in March 1938, immediately after Hitler had annexed neighboring Austria, and only months before German troops marched into Brno. The house was used as an engineering office of the German occupational government during the war, and in the 1950s a Czechoslovak state health institution turned it into a pediatric hospital. After a restoration from 1981 to 1985 it served as a guest house for the government. Since 1994 it has been a museum and after an extensive restoration it is slated to reopen to the public in March of 2012.

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