

# Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House – Weightless Living

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In his review of Franz Hessel's *"Spazieren in Berlin"*, Walter Benjamin noted that the author celebrated the "last monuments of an old culture [...] for which cosiness came first", but whose time had come. The new architecture transferred "the domicile of men [...] into a transit passage of all imaginable forces and waves in light and air. The future stands under the signature of transparency".<sup>1</sup> Two years earlier, Siegfried Kracauer wrote about the exhibition of the *Werkbund* entitled *"Die neue Wohnung"* (The New Home) in 1927. Here, the attempt "to undermine the former isolation of the individual by dismantling the external partition walls" became evident. But perhaps "only the anonymous existence of the mass bound to capitalistic economy is granted a voice".<sup>2</sup>

By Monika Wagner

The consciousness of fundamental changes in the architectural space by *Neues Bauen* and thereby for living and its significance for the subject as well as for society was widespread at the end of the 1920s. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century in European cities, the ramparts were pulled down so that they could expand across the enclosing walls. It was now the houses and domiciles, which were no longer considered strongholds of the individual or family, that opened up and became transparent. The deprivation of the enclosing armature for some meant liberation, for others it meant the destabilisation of privacy and individuality.<sup>3</sup>

Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat House in Brno as an ideal realisation of a new overall conceptualisation not only of architectural space but of living itself, allows an exemplary reconstruction of what the transformations implied. On the occasion of the Stuttgart exhibition *"Das neue Bauen"* in 1927, Mies van der Rohe himself termed contemporary architecture "a link in the great struggle for new ways of living".<sup>4</sup>

Between 1928 and 1930, the house in the industrial town of Brno, which has recently been restored again, was built for the Tugendhat family.<sup>5</sup> The architecture, fittings and furniture<sup>6</sup> appear so weightless and with such an ease that they seem to almost allow a weightless living. This is chiefly due to the materials used and the way their surfaces are worked.

The first approach from the street already shows that horizontal stretch out, which in contemporary debates was connected to the "dynamisation" of all living conditions and specially to the new automobile traffic flow. "The horizontal, the sign for movement defeats the vertical with all its ponderosity of the earth" stated Walter Gropius in 1926,<sup>7</sup> referring to the period's much discussed relation of load and support in architecture.

From the garden of the Tugendhat House, the small wall areas above the belt windows literally seem to float due to the steel frame construction. This was often described by contemporaries as a typical phenomenon of the new architecture of the 1920s and connected to the conquest of the sky by the aeroplane.<sup>8</sup> This meant that even architecture—the genre that so far had been characterized by the ponderosity of the earth—corresponded to Friedrich Theodor Vischer's criterion of the arts, "the power to outplay heavy-weighted materials".<sup>9</sup>

The basic relation of horizontal and vertical, of dynamics and statics was newly adjusted during the 1920s and innervated with far reaching impact: "men of our time" declared the Berlin architect Erich Mendelsohn, "out of the excitement of a busy life, one can only get compensation from the idle horizontal".<sup>10</sup> The vertical instead was connected to an architecture of power and intimidation, which to Siegfried Kracauer appeared to be an "upright act of violence".<sup>11</sup>

Not only the horizontal structure of the floors, but also the materiality of the surfaces contributed in the Tugendhat House to the impression that gravity was overcome. Mies van der Rohe, the perfectionist among the architects of *Neues Bauen*, was well aware of the effects of high quality materials and the textures of their surfaces. Besides the often discussed transparency of the perfectly rolled plate glass<sup>12</sup> for the belt windows, which capture the ceiling height, the subtle plasterwork of the walls was also of enormous importance for the atmosphere of the entire building. Particularly in Brno, where the Baroque tradition of stucco work was still alive, Mies van der Rohe was able to return to craftsmen and their corresponding know-how as part of a commission that did not impose any constraints.

Thanks to the intensive historic examination of the architecture and the minute analysis of the materials brought to light by Ivo Hammer, thus benefitting the recent restoration of the Tugendhat House, the assumption of a purist smooth surface in aseptic white is contradicted.<sup>13</sup> In the

<. The Tugendhat House by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, 1928-1930.

Tugendhat House, the plaster of the outer lime skin exhibits tiny yellowish, brownish or reddish sand grains,<sup>14</sup> which emerge stronger by abrasion and affect the texture of the wall. The surface owes its visual brilliance to the addition of the sand, for where the grains appear on the surface they reflect minute particles of light. Thereby the extremely lively skin of the building emerges, which is permanently modified by the moving light incidence and one's own movement. The hardly discernible modulations are decisive for the atmospheric effect. At close range, the tiny mounds prove to be subtle tactile offerings, while from a distance with their equally tiny shadows they appear as visual variations of the bright surface which they allow to become undulating and weightless.

Similarly, this also applies to the interior of the Tugendhat House. The lavishly floating living room opens on two sides towards the garden thanks to the continuous belt windows. It may depend on the light and the weather if the surrounding nature is considered more as a "wallpaper" in the sense of a closure or as an opening of the architectural space.<sup>15</sup> The room with its open, floating floor plan is structured in a sophisticated manner.<sup>16</sup>

On the one hand, there is a curved niche of the dining area made of the rare tropical Makassar [figure 1] and, on the other hand, there is a free standing onyx wall which separates the library from the living area. Both elements—wood and stone—with their polished surfaces bring elements of nature into the interior. The continuous vertical brown and black wood grain of the exquisite wood and the grand veined onyx are ornaments of nature itself.<sup>17</sup> Following up Adolf Loos, it belonged to the rules of the aesthetics of materiality, that "the simpler it is, the more distinguished the material has to be, for compensating by the display of its appeal for the lack of decorative ornaments".<sup>18</sup> Grete Tugendhat reported that Mies van der Rohe had also mentioned during a conversation on the planning of the Tugendhat House in 1928 "how important the use of fine materials was, particularly in Modern, unadorned rooms".<sup>19</sup>

In the large room, the half-cylindrical dining area opening towards the windows and the garden surrounds an equally round table with steel-tube chairs. Due to the cylindrical form and the vertical pattern running from the floor to the ceiling, the origin of the wood from a huge tree is suggested. This niche seems to assume the function of a haven and it marks the daily meals as collective rituals of the family. The free standing, polished onyx wall, which runs parallel to the long line of windows to the garden, reflects in its cloudy, veined and grained surface the sky as well as the plants of the winter garden and the garden outside [figure 2]. Thus unfolds a sophisticated intersection of various materials as well as images of na-



Figure 1. The dining area with the Makassar wall.

ture, of the eternal and the ephemeral, of stability and mutability.

Both of the elements structuring the room, elegantly recall the traditional heavy building materials, wood and stone, and remind one through their height of their former architectural function of support. In contrast, the shiny chrome-plating camouflages the static function of the grinders [figure 3]. The Makassar niche and the onyx wall are complemented in their function to graduate the room by a textile partition materialized in bright and dark velvet and silk curtains. They do not only make it possible to conceal on demand the enormous windows in order to prevent reflections, as Grete Tugendhat explained,<sup>20</sup> but they also create temporary compartments within the living room. To form spaces by textiles ties in with Gottfried Semper's understanding of architecture as originally deriving from textile protection. The sporadic subdivision of the living room by monochrome panels suggests furthermore the actual temporary feature, which Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich designed in 1927 together for the Berlin exhibition "Die Mode der Dame" (Fashion for the Lady). For the exhibition café, with its programmatic name "Samt und Seide" (Velvet and Silk), they used the same textile materials, silk and velvet, as in the Tugendhat house. From different heights of the Berlin *Funkhalle*, generously falling coloured velvet—and silk panels produced flexible space compartments in the "floating space [figure 4], which offered open and intimate spaces for abidance".<sup>21</sup>

When Justus Bier, the curator of the Kestner Museum in Hanover, critically questioned the living facilities of the Tugendhat House in 1931, he concluded that its architecture forces "the inhabitants to perform an unbearable exhibition living [...] which overwhelms their personal life".<sup>22</sup> Fritz Tugendhat heavily dissented,<sup>23</sup> while the well-informed Bier had perhaps not only Mies' Barcelona Pavilion and its transparency in mind. Rather, the Berlin

exhibition *“Samt und Seide”* with its textile walls offered a reference for textile subdivisions in Brno. Moreover, the exhibition café was furnished with prototypes of steel-tube chairs, among them Mies’ newly developed cantilever chair,<sup>24</sup> which the author specially ordered plated with polished nickel.

In the Tugendhat House, the cantilever chairs as well as the other furniture, such as seats, tables and cabinets, also contribute to the atmosphere of immense lightness in the large living room. All of them have steel tube “legs” and “feet”. Because of the light reflection on the silvery gleaming metal, the elegant curves or the slim legs which carry the seat, the tabletop or the cabinet almost dissolve visually.

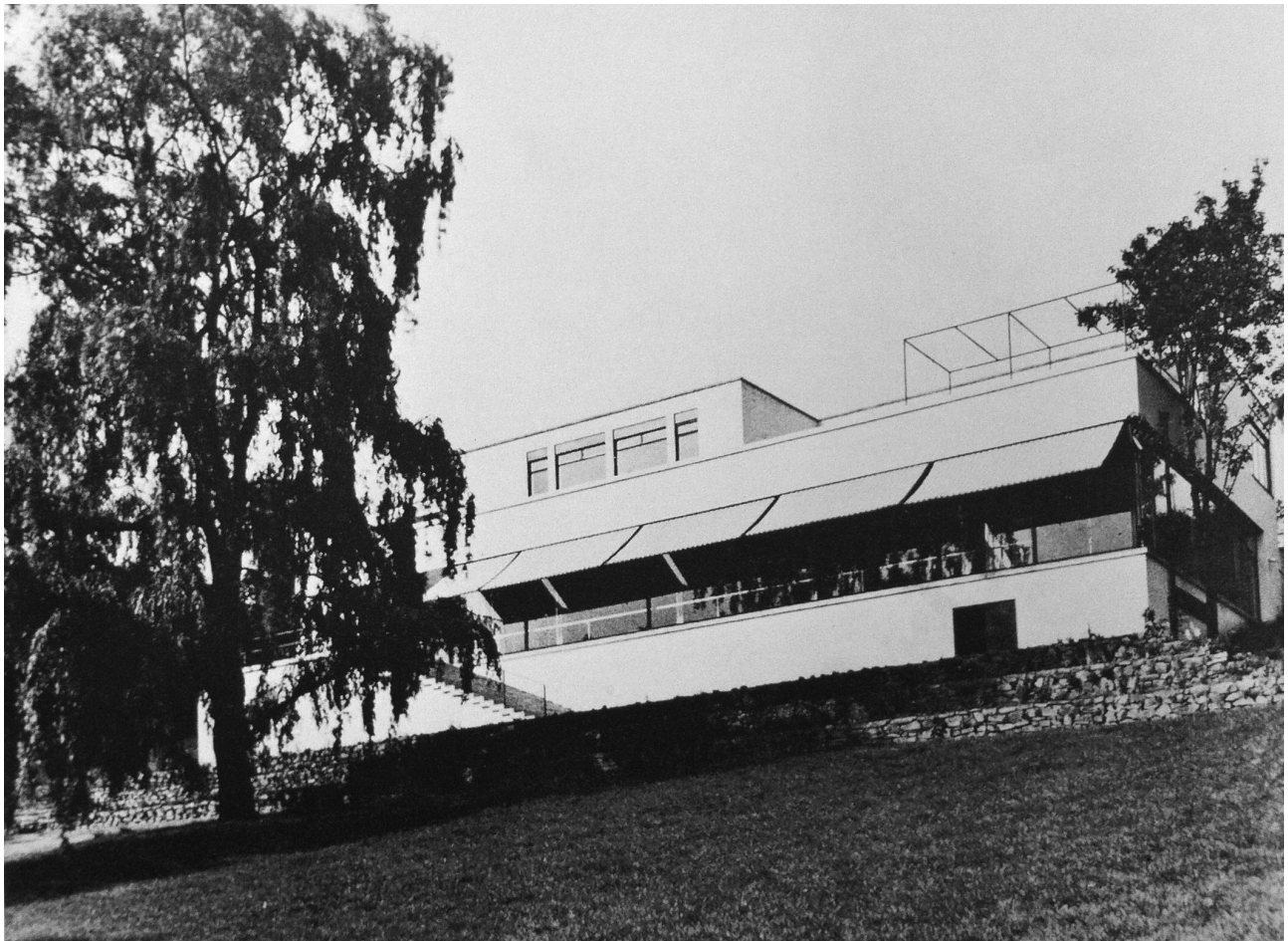
Even the cabinets themselves seem to float above the floor since their steel tube legs are recessed. This impression is reinforced where the steel tube furniture is placed on the bright and shiny linoleum, which reflects the polished metal while the ornamental carpets [figure 5], which form islands on the overall linoleum floor, visually integrate the thin bases of the cantilever chair or the legs of tables in their patterns.

In the light of the widespread interests in the overcoming of gravity, it comes as no surprise that the designer Marcel Breuer, who himself had developed steel furniture at the Bauhaus, in 1926 self-deprecatingly commented the development of seats from a wooden chair via a steel-tube chair up to sitting on an “elastic air column” in a “filmstrip” [figure 6]. Though Mies van der Rohe himself developed dematerialisation strategies in architecture and design he never abstained from the potentials of tactility. In the Tugendhat House the visual qualities of shiny metal and transparent glass are contrasted with the haptic desire that wood and velvet arouse. All these materials contribute to a festivity of the senses.

#### Notes

1. Benjamin, Walter, *“Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs”*, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Hella Tiedemann-Bartels, Frankfurt, 1980, III, 187f.
2. Kracauer, Siegfried, *“Das neue Bauen”*, *Siegfried Kracauer Schriften*, Inka Mülder-Bach, V. 2, Aufsätze 1927-1931, 69.
3. See the discussion about living qualities of the Tugendhat House in *Die Form* 1931.
4. Mies van der Rohe in the Introduction to the exhibition catalogue *“Die Wohnung”*, Fritz Neumeier: *Mies van der Rohe. Das Kunstlose Wort*, 319.

Figure 2. View of the house from the garden.



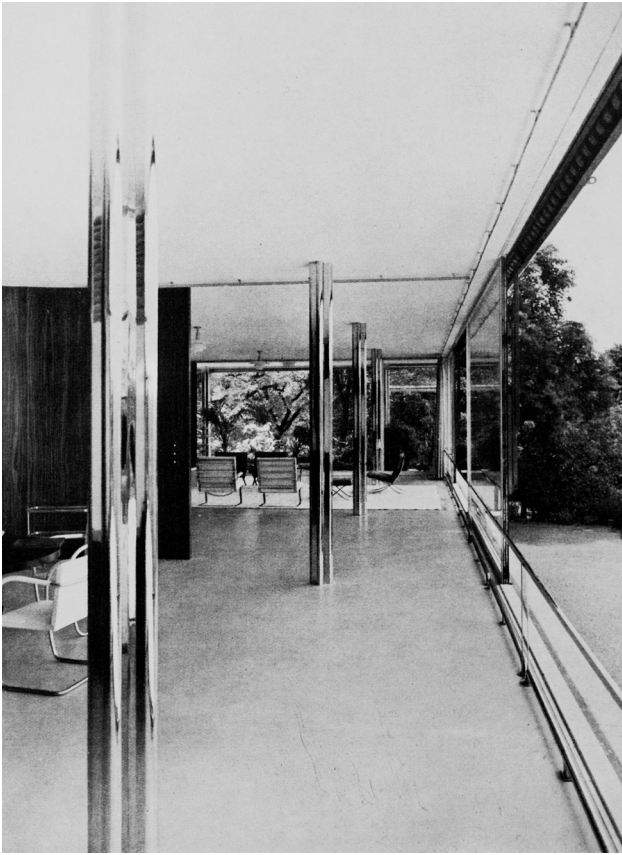


Figure 3. The chrome-plating camouflages the static function of the structure.



Figure 4. *Samt und Seide*, Berlin, 1927. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich.

Figure 5. The ornamental carpets.

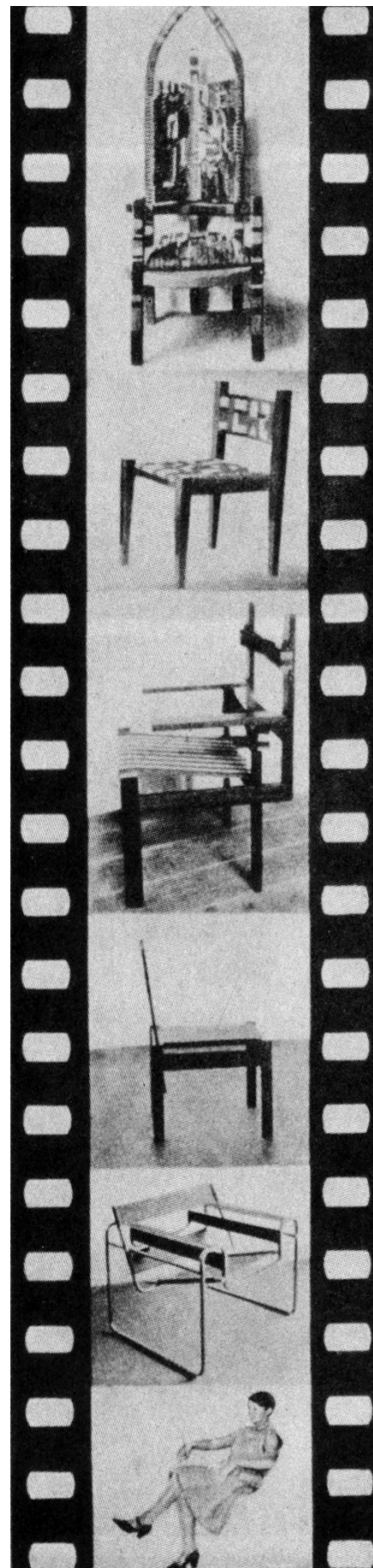


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5. Among the many titles see: Hammer-Tugendhat, Daniela and Tegethoff, Wolf, ed., *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Das Haus Tugendhat*, Springer, Wien, New York, 1998.
6. Among the present furniture are many replicas—consequently the patina of a private house that people lived in, is missing.
7. Walter Gropius, “Glasbau” (1926), Probst, Hartmut and Schädlich, Christian, *Walter Gropius: Ausgewählte Schriften*, Berlin (DDR), 1987, 3, 103.
8. See Ilya Ehrenburg (1929), *Visum der Zeit*, Leipzig 1982, S. 94 with a description of Gropius’ Bauhaus building in Dessau.
9. Vischer, Friedrich Theodor, *Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft vom Schönen*, Bd.III, Stuttgart, 1852, S. 15.
10. Erich Mendelsohn, “Die internationale Übereinstimmung des neuen Beugedankens oder Dynamik und Funktion” (1923), Heinze-Greenberg, Ita and Stepan, Regina, ed., *Mendelsohn: Gedankenwelten*, Ostfildern 2000, 48.
11. Siegfried Kracauer (see note 2), V.3, 152.
12. Monika Wagner, “Immaterial Materials”. The Tugendhat House within the context of the aesthetics of materials, Cerná, Iveta and Hammer, Ivo, ed. *Materiality*, Brno, 2008, 26–32.
13. Ivo Hammer, “The project of conservation/restoration research at Tugendhat House. Materials and surfaces of the rendered Façades”, *Materiality* (see note 11), 164–172. Ivo Hammer: The material is polychrome! From interdisciplinary study to practical conservation and restoration: the wall surfaces of the Tugendhat House as an example, MS, to be published in the proceedings of SUPSI, autumn 2012. I am grateful to Ivo Hammer who let me see his manuscript of the article.
14. Ivo Hammer: with detailed data (see note 13).
15. Quetglas, Josep, *Der gläserne Schrecken. Mies van der Rohe’s Pavilion in Barcelona*, Basel u.a 2001, S. 86. For a further discussion see Wagner (as note 12). Grete und Ernst Tugendhat.
16. Wolf Tegethoff, “Ein Wohnhaus der Moderne im Spannungsfeld seiner Zeit”, *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Das Haus Tugendhat*, Hammer-Tugendhat, Daniela and Tegethoff, Wolf, ed., Wien, New York 1998, 43–100.
17. Monika Wagner (see note 12), 30.
18. Pazaurek, Gustav E., *Guter und schlechter Geschmack im Kunstgewerbe*, Stuttgart, Berlin 1912, S.
19. Quoted in Ivo Hammer, “Rohe – Restaurierung. Zur materiellen Erhaltung des Hauses Tugendhat in Brünn und anderer Denkmale des Neuen Bauens”, Cramer, Johannes and Sack, Dorothea (Hg.), *Mies van der Rohe. Frühe Bauten. Probleme der Erhaltung. Probleme der Bewertung*, Petersburg 2004, S. 12
20. Grete Tugendhat in: *Die Form. Zeitschrift für gestaltende Arbeit*, 6, 1931, 11, 437, reprinted in: Hammer-Tugendhat, Tegethoff, (as note 5), 35.
21. Rupert Shaldrake, “Typ und Prototyp: Der Freischwinger für Stuttgart 1927”, Reuter, Helmut and Schulze, Birgit, ed., *Mies und das Neue Wohnen*, Ostfildern 2008, 118.
22. Quoted in: Wolf Tegethoff, “Ein Wohnhaus der Moderne im Spannungsfeld seiner Zeit”, Hammer-Tugendhat, Daniela and Tegethoff, Wolf, ed., *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Das Haus Tugendhat*, Wien, New York, 1998, 87.
23. Letter from Fitz Tugendhat to the editor of the *Werkbund* periodical *Die Form*, published in 1931, 9, 438.
24. Cf. Sebastian Hackenschmidt: “Cantilevered. Chairs as Material Experiments”, Exhibition-catalogue *Frei schwingen. Stühle zwischen Architekturmanifest und Materialexperiment*, Vienna 2006, 31–54.

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Figure 6. Marcel Breuer’s film strip, 1926