

INTERVIEW

Jong Soung Kimm

On the 15th February 2018, in New York City, Ana Tostões interviewed Jong Soung Kimm, an internationally renowned architect and educator, a collaborator at the office of Mies van der Rohe (1961–1972) and design studio teacher at Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago (1966–1978). He is founder and honorary president of SAC (Seoul Architects Consultants) International Ltd.

You left Seoul and went to Chicago to study at Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT). Did this choice have to do with your approach to tectonics and to construction?

It was my third year in middle school when the Korean War broke out. My family and I had to take refuge in the southern port city of Busan. But after the Korean War ended in armistice in 1953, I returned to Seoul and in the following year, 1954 I was about to enroll at a university. At that point, probably three quarters of all buildings in Seoul were destroyed. Although I did not have a clear understanding of what architecture was at the time, I had an idea, an intuition, that architecture must be useful to rebuild a devastated Seoul. So, in 1954 I entered the Seoul National University.

At the time, there were virtually no reference books or original texts to be found at the university, so I began to think about studying abroad. I was sort of predisposed to the United States rather than Europe, so I began to research which school to go to.

I remember reading the small Pelican book by James M. Richards, who used to be the editor of *Architectural Review* (1937–1971). His pocket book, “An introduction to Modern Architecture” (1940) gave me a general idea of Walter Gropius who had just retired from Harvard and established the TAC (The Architects Collaborative) with his former students. I read about Pietro Belluschi, Dean at MIT, William Wurster, Dean at U.C. Berkeley and of course, Mies van der Rohe who had moved to Chicago in 1938 to teach architecture at IIT. Some small photographs in Richards’ book gave me an idea that unlike some other architectural direction of inventing form just like a sculptor would, Mies van der Rohe’s work would give the impression that it was based on tectonics, that space was built with post-and-lintel. It was then that I decided to study at IIT, so I applied. I arrived at the campus in February of 1956, the same semester when Crown Hall was finished. My class even helped arrange the brand-new drafting table in Crown Hall. When I started my studies at IIT, I decided I would give up the two years’ credit I had studied at Seoul University and start from the beginning. In 1961 I completed my Bachelor of Architecture and began work on my masters that Spring. That was also the year I started working at Mies van der Rohe’s studio. I completed my graduate degree in 1964 and two years later IIT recruited me, so I began to teach there, concurrent with my other duties at Mies’ studio. I combined both. Mies van der Rohe passed away in 1969, but I stayed with the firm until 1972.

And the IIT curriculum, or, let’s say, Mies’ direction, was very different from other schools?

It was very different. And although Gropius’ curriculum at Harvard was also quite different from more traditional curricula in most American architecture colleges, Mies van der Rohe’s was very unique. He built the curriculum starting from absolute *CARTE BLANCHE*. I believe most architectural schools in America until the early 1940s were based on the traditional *Beaux-Arts* architecture education, and Mies van der Rohe built his 5 year-curriculum for IIT from his experiences at the Bauhaus. He began with the fundamentals and he would have the students learn the basics of architectural material: brick, timber, steel, reinforced concrete; and different methods of construction using these materials. Then, the last two years were devoted to studying the ideology and philosophy of architecture which Mies was trying to teach to the young generation. The fourth and fifth years were concentrated on studying structure as the starting point of architecture; an investigation on space as an architectural problem shaped by such structure. They studied the role of proportion in creating beauty and the effect of material, texture and color choice in architectural expression. And, if you think about it, we can list these five points as constituting the philosophy of Mies van der Rohe’s architecture.

You worked in a special kind of office, right? With people from different parts of the world, with you being the only Asian in the office?

We were about 36 people in the office, including Mies van der Rohe. Joseph Fujikawa, a very important collaborator of Mies, his right-hand man, although he was American born, was Japanese-American. So, other than he, I was the only other Asian. There was a sprinkling of Germans, but they did not stay long; at any given time, there were three or four young architects who graduated from technical universities in Germany who’d come and knock on the door, and Mies’ office was willing to give them one or two years of work experience. There were also several English people, some of them stayed longer than others.

I stayed 11 years. So, I worked for Mies van der Rohe all through the sixties until he died in ‘69. I spent most of my time at the studio on the Toronto-Dominion Centre, which was being designed at the same time as the *Neue Nationalgalerie* in Berlin. So, although it was in the twilight of Mies van der Rohe’s career, it was, in a way, a very important and productive period of the master.

It is clear that, until the war, he had never had the chance to work at a large-scale. But in the USA, he was able to show and to extend his experiments which were already very acute before the war. It was, in fact, incredible that he chose the US to immigrate from Germany.

I think that the United States, and especially Chicago, was probably the right environment for Mies van der Rohe’s philosophy to blossom. The people there are not temperamental or emotional, they have a very solid work ethic and are also very pragmatic. So, in that sense I think that Chicago provided Mies van der Rohe with the right environment and human resources to develop his philosophy.

You had Daniel Burnham, in Chicago, who had a very ambitious and solid plan for the city, and the work ethic of most of the population that made up the people in Chicago, German people and a lot of central Europeans. Unlike a lot of southern cities in America, more Mediterranean, more emotional temperament, Chicago was very solid. You always had to work hard to achieve what you wanted.

Although it was possible to invite Mies van der Rohe to a southern city like Miami, Florida, if we think of such a hypothetical case, Mies’ philosophy would not have blossomed. It was Chicago that provided the temperament.

Upon his arrival to the US, Mies was not completely alone as Ludwig Hilberseimer was his companion.

Hilberseimer was a year older than Mies, and, unlike Mies, who was more of a self-made architect, Hilberseimer was from the solid German intelligentsia. I believe he had provided much of the philosophical framework for Mies van der Rohe’s architecture. So, it is difficult to think of Mies’ architectural blossoming in Chicago without the presence of Hilberseimer. He would test certain of Mies’ ideas, and Mies would tell Hilberseimer his updated thinking.

Hilberseimer also gave classes in IIT, in urban planning, right?

Yes, in city and regional planning. Hilberseimer was always looking at the larger picture, not only the city plan, but the entire region. I think it was he who established city planning at the Bauhaus before Mies van der Rohe became the third director. They mutually complemented each other.

Let’s turn to your career to realize the impact of sharing space and working with Mies for 8 years.

After Mies died in 1969 I continued to teach at IIT until 1978. I taught the fourth year, what we called the core of Mies philosophy. I taught it for 12 years, from 1966 to ‘78. Then, I was asked by my client for the Seoul Hilton hotel (1983) if I would accept his invitation to design the Seoul Hilton. So I decided to leave teaching and to concentrate on building.

As far as I know, it is a very complex building, in terms of structure, and it is amazing what you

did with the void space in the middle: it is quite a structural miracle.

Yes. I was also inspired by my years of teaching at IIT. What space I could create, based on Mies' philosophy, but going beyond. Mies van der Rohe had never introduced light from above. For Mies, it was always cross-lighting, never from above. And then I started thinking, while still teaching at IIT, how would it be if Mies van der Rohe's Convention Hall in Chicago, 216m square, had a skylight in the middle. How would that be? I started thinking about introducing natural light into the Seoul Hilton design, which otherwise would be a "Miesian" building. So I brought natural light inside the building — the zenithal light — that's what I did at the Hilton.

Afterwards, you started to get commissions in Korea, namely the Kyongju Museum (1987–1991).

I may have done more than 120 buildings with my SAC for 20 years, but if I remove most of it, and then come down to maybe 10 or 12 buildings, Kyongju Museum would be among them.

Which you chose as the key buildings for the exhibition in 2014.

I may have done 20 office buildings, large and small. But SK Corporation Building (1986-1999), this is the best. The most ideal office building that I can think of. Everything is so efficient, the structure, air conditioning, the distance of 12 meters from the elevator core to the glass wall, which is the optimal distance for offices. I was very happy while doing it. I start from the function. The client says, "I want an office building of 250,000 m², the building code limits the height to 36 floors," so I start to do it and find the optimal structural systems. But then, as I learned from Mies van der Rohe himself, creating the things with a very pleasant proportion, you end up with harmony. Although I start with what the client wants, later I bring in the tectonics. I choose the correct structure and the correct use of the material.

Mies stands as a classicist from the Western world — his DNA is pure Greece, not Rome, he is so elegant! In a way, a strong character, but always very delicate. And he is also very German.

Mies is German. He is European. He is a classicist. He is Greek at heart! Those are very important components of Mies van der Rohe, the artist. What separates art from very ordinary buildings is proportion, and Mies was the unquestionable master of *Baukunst*.

You worked on the retrospective of Mies in 1968. It must have been a nice experience.

I was 32, a young assistant professor and working in Mies' office. I think Mies, together with his right-hand man, Joseph Fujikawa, his grandson Dirk Lohan and Bruno Conterato, chose me to do it because I was teaching "space problematic" at the time at IIT, which Mies himself considered very important. For that reason, they thought I was the right person to do it, more than any senior staff in the

office. So, I was lucky to work on that project, it was my good fortune.

The exhibition took place in *Akademie Der Künste*, in Berlin, in the Hansaviertel. Werner Düttmann, the architect of the building was still alive, Hans Scharoun being the president of the AdK that year. So, at the opening of the Mies van der Rohe Retrospective, Hans Scharoun came and gave a congratulatory speech.

Düttmann's building was a very active concrete building, with a skylit shed. We had a canvas stretched on the horizontal plane to make the roof plane very quiet, not too active. And that was the old trick that Mies himself used in 1928, in Berlin, with Lilly Reich.

Oh, you are talking about the velvet and silk exhibition?

Yes, and there was another one, of ladies' fashion, "*Die Mode der Dame*" exhibition where the velvet would be drawn in a curve from the roof. But Mies had a canvas stretched to create a flat anonymous plane, because the skylight was too visually busy. So, I picked up that trick: I had the blessing from Mies.

So, finally, was it easy to work with Mies? The legend refers to him as a hard guy.

It was easy. Actually, Mies died when he was 83 and toward the end of his life, he was very quiet: he would even tell the younger staff "Please, could you do this", instead of "Do this!". He would be very gentle. The story we hear of Mies van der Rohe during his life in Europe is that he was a very wild and demanding person. For example, when he became the director of the Bauhaus, after Hannes Meyer, he interviewed every student, and he expelled some of the left-wingers who sympathized with Hannes Meyer. He was a very strong-minded person.

There were two or three American students at the Bauhaus, and one of them eventually came to teach at IIT, Howard Dearstyne. When it was his turn to be interviewed by Mies, the new director, Howard Dearstyne asked Mies "Is it still correct to seek beauty in architecture?" — this was Dearstyne, shaking inside, asking the master. And then Mies, of course, was smoking his cigar, probably said "Ja, it is right to seek beauty! *Schönheit in Baukunst*".

We must not forget that he was born and lived in Aachen, where stands the fantastic cathedral, the Dom, and as far as I know he sang in the choir, when he was a young boy.

When we were invited to his apartment, he would tell us that when he was small, his mother took him to the Cathedral of Charlemagne in Aachen. Sitting there and looking at the stained-glass window from the 15th century, he would be impressed by how tall the "vindow" (Mies would pronounce w as v) was.

Mies's father was a stonemason and his older brother, Ewald, was a sculptor, who inherited the family business. They did a competition for the Bismarck Monument in

Bingen am Rhein. Mies did the scheme, and Ewald did the sculpture.

He told us at the office that, at one time, all the marble at Charlemagne's Chapel was removed in order to be redone, and he saw the bare brick behind the marble, like a Roman building.

The other thing is that he was kind, smooth, in giving orders. Was he very considerate?

He was very focused, and when he wanted to say something in English, he would speak very slowly until the end of his life. But when Werner Düttmann, the city architect, came to Chicago to discuss the *Neue Nationalgalerie*, Düttmann and Mies would have dinner in Mies' apartment, and then he would invite the people from the office to come and join afterwards. Although I did not understand German, what I noticed was Düttmann and Mies suddenly would talk like a machine gun, very quick, while Mies was very slow when speaking English.

Mies said in an interview with the students of North Carolina State College, which goes back to 1967, that when he wanted to say something, he would construct the whole sentence in his head, making sure he's not making any mistakes, only then he would say it. After saying aloud, if someone asks him to repeat the sentence, this man would repeat the sentence exactly, without changing a single word.

Mies van der Rohe, the artist, is a very complex person. Sometimes, he would do things that an architectural historian or a theoretician could not explain. He would do things clearly by intuition. At the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, there is stone masonry coming in from both sides, and then, from the wall to wall, is enclosed by glass. How much masonry to bring in? How much glass? He did it by eye. That was while I was working on the Toronto-Dominion Bank, and while the *Neue Nationalgalerie* was in progress, the Museum of Fine Arts expansion was also in progress. He would come in and look at the model, the elevation, and he would say "bring in more, bring in more, end it right there". And that was not at the module! Scholars and historians would have a hard time explaining why. But Mies did it by eye.

Looking back now, after 50 years, I think I was so lucky to have selected IIT to go and study, and then work for the master, and teach at my old school. That was my real fortune!

Jong Soung Kimm

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Jong Soung Kimm studied at Seoul National University and IIT in Chicago. Kimm worked for Mies van der Rohe during the 1960s and taught at IIT 1966-78. He established SAC International, Architects in Seoul in 1978. Kimm has been a speaker or panelist at UIA Congresses in Montreal, 1990 and Tokyo, 2011; the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art & Humanities, 1998; the CTBUH congresses in Melbourne, 2001 and in Seoul, 2011.

Kimm was the jury president for the Grand Egyptian Museum competition in 2002-03, and the Museum of Polish History in Warsaw in 2010.