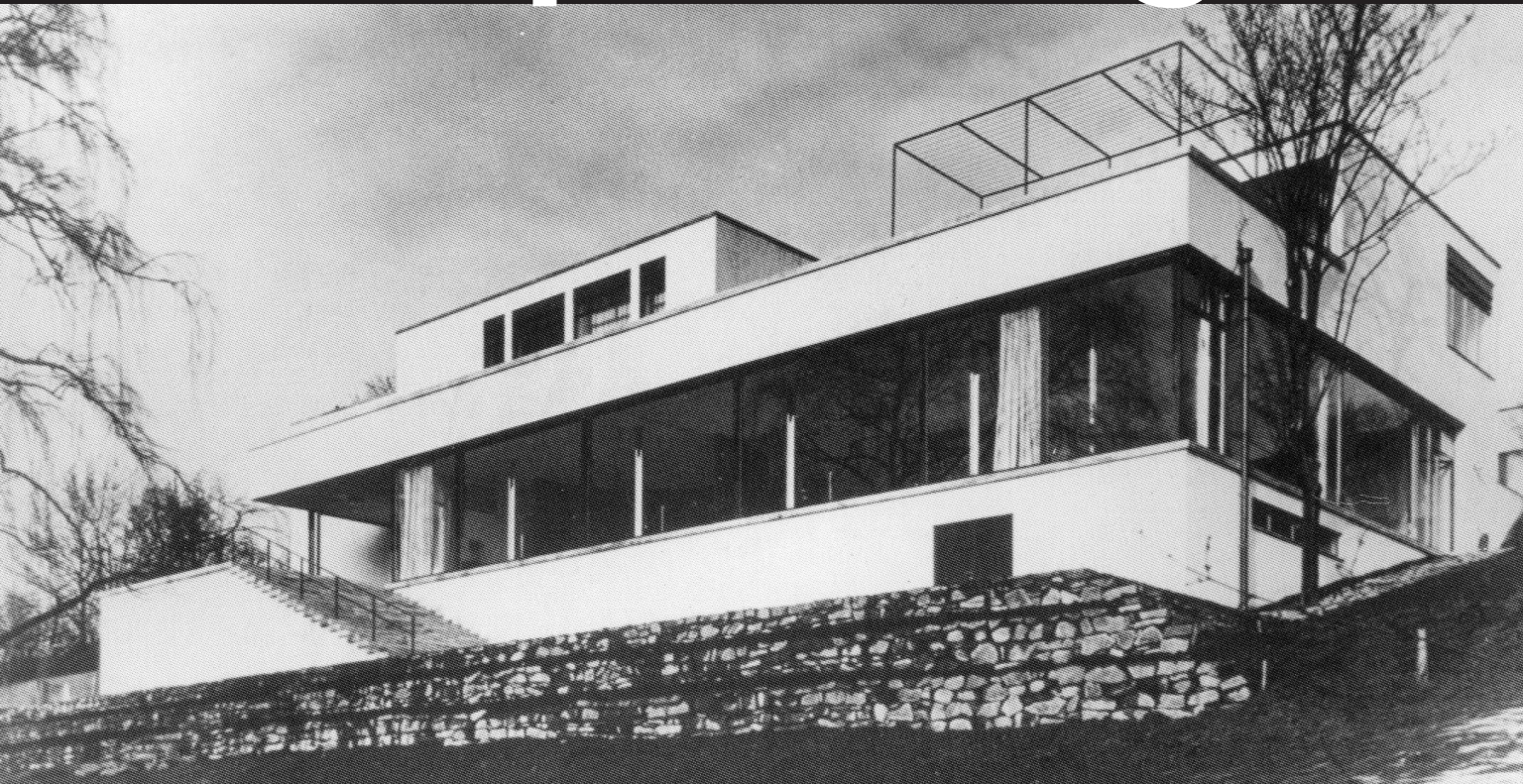


Lessons From
the Tugendhat House:
**The Beauty of
Simple Design**



By
Isaiah Olson

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe
Photo ca. 1930



Nothing in life needs to be ugly to look at. Like many of the great artists of the Bauhaus, this was the mantra of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, renown architect and master of the Bauhaus from 1930 until it was shut down by the Nazi regime in 1933. Although only a member of the Bauhaus for a short time, he continued his work until his death in 1969, and the influence of his talent as an architect can still be seen today. Widely regarded not only as a master of his craft but also as one of the pioneers of modern architecture, Mies has helped in creating a legacy of simple, beautiful, and functional design.

One of the factors that may have contributed to the great works that Mies produced—and perhaps in no small part—was his interest in number systems present in art, architecture, and nature. The thirty-three-meter-high Charlemagne's chapel at Aachen, for example, is based on a single unit of measurement, which was care-

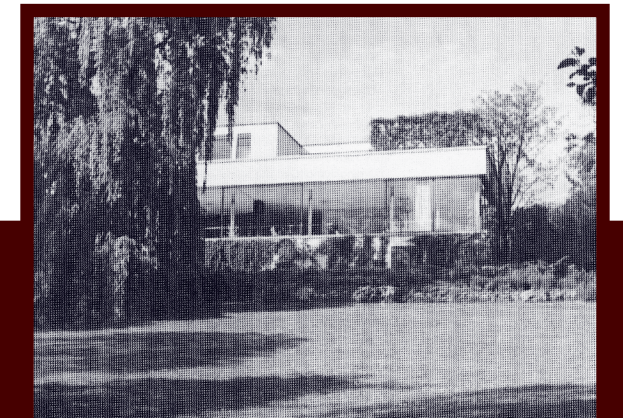
fully doubled or halved throughout its architecture. It had not only served as a reference throughout his life, but the allure he saw in these mathematical structures was Mies's introduction to the power of the visible form in regard to invoking emotion. Inspired by the resulting beauty from the deliberateness of structures like Charlemagne's chapel, designing awe-inspiring buildings would become like second nature to Mies. (Weber 454)

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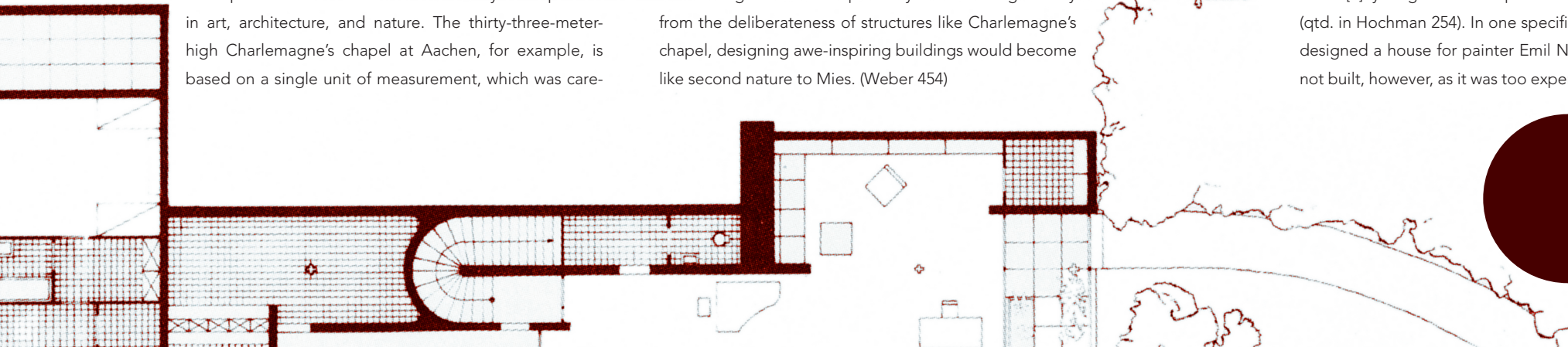
Although the buildings that Mies had produced were often regarded as being incredibly expensive, they were just as quickly praised for being just as luxurious and well-designed. For instance, after building an apartment complex in Berlin for Philip Johnson, admirer and later architect, Johnson complained that Mies had "put as much work into the apartment 'as if it were six skyscrapers'" (Weber 455). In the process of designing buildings, Mies had little concern for the budget or desires of his clients, choosing to focus instead on the quality of the design (Hochman 254). According to Mies, the single purpose of architecture is to spacially express the spirit of the times, and nothing else. This pursuit of an architectural ideal consumed him, as Mies himself stated that "[a]nything less than perfection is unacceptable" (qtd. in Hochman 254). In one specific instance, Mies had designed a house for painter Emil Nolde; the house was not built, however, as it was too expensive. Insisting in the

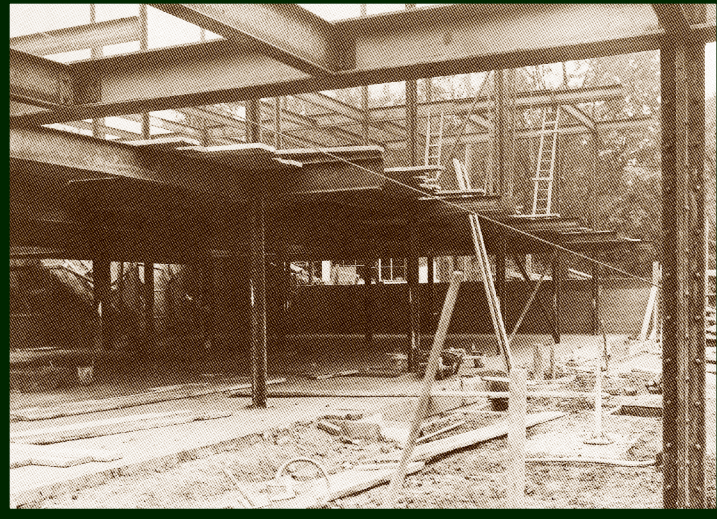
perfection of his design and settling for nothing less, Mies refused to revisit the design to make changes that may have suited Nolde's budget (Weber 455).

The provocative, attentive, and simple designs that earned Mies his reputation can be seen in each of his buildings in one way or another. Among his more well-known structures is the Tugendhat House, a project commissioned to Mies as a wedding present for Fritz and Grete Tugendhat on the outskirts of Brno in the Czech Republic. With his vigilant eye for the beauty and functionality of tmodest design, Mies was the perfect



Tugendhat House
Garden facade



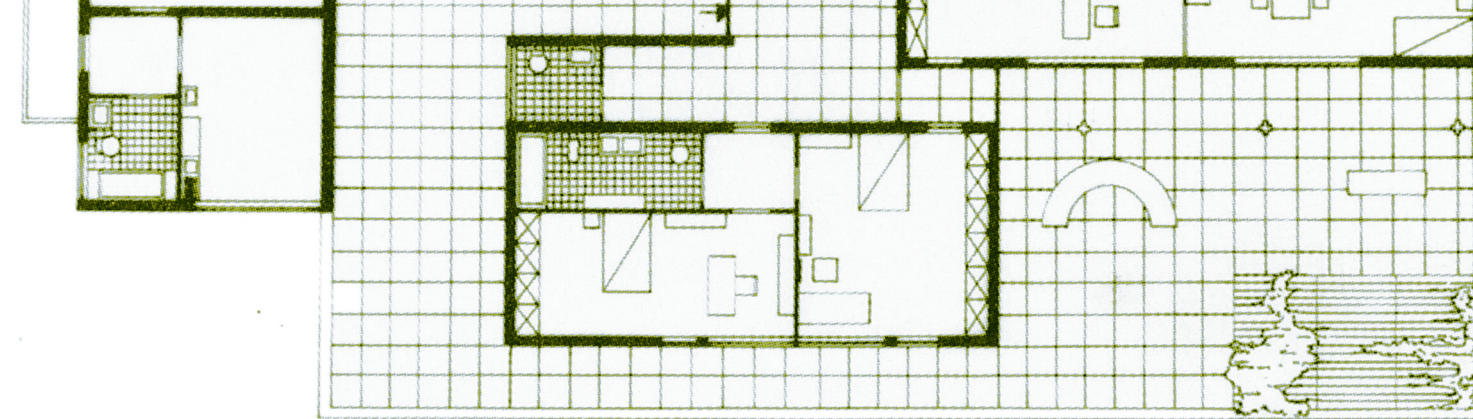


Tugendhat House
Under Construction

candidate to build the house: Grete had once reported that her husband, Fritz, had “a horror of the doilies and knickknacks that overloaded every room” in his childhood homes, and as such they both had a craving for clear and simple forms (qtd. in Weber 444). Mies would go on to sate these cravings with the finished construction of the Tugendhat House, which Johnson—as a dinner guest shortly after the building was completed—described

as having “the exquisite perfection of details” and “a scrupulousness unparalleled in our day” (qtd. in Weber 444).

The simplicity of the Tugendhat House can be seen through three basic elements of the building. The first is in the layout of the house. In looking at the house plans, it is plain to see that the house was designed on a strict grid, with all walls being perfectly perpendicular or parallel with every other wall—the only deviations in this come from the semicircular walls found in the staircase and ebony wall in the living and dining area. Even with the curved nature of these walls, however, the layout of the building is rigorously geometric, opting to choose



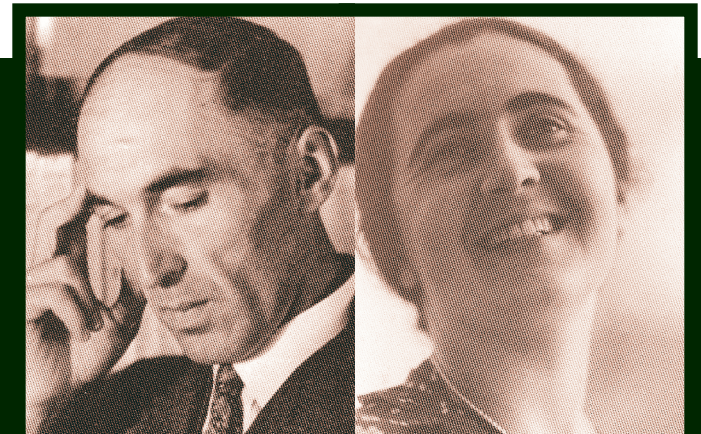
clean and functional consistency in the shapes found in the house rather than making it convoluted or complex with too much variation.

Second is in the plainly-visible nature of the more utilitarian details within the house. Throughout the living and dining areas, for example, Mies left the cross-shaped columns that hold the structure of the building to punctuate these rooms. In addition, things such as radiator pipes and frankly-welded joints were left undisguised, allowing them a chance to show the beauty of functional forms and the richness in unadorned materials that was previously neglected (Weber 444-5).

Finally, the third element is in the lack of unnecessary noise found in these details. The rooms of the Tugendhat house were left largely undecorated, offering little more stimuli than necessary in favor of creating an open and flowing space. In this vein, the house had certainly been a success: the main living and dining area of the house measures in around four-thousand square feet and is broken only by an onyx partition and a semicircular wall of Macasar ebony. A series of glass panes serve as walls to these areas of the house, creating a much more open, spacious, and simple environment as the panes overlooked Brno. Several of these glass panes were constructed in such a way that allowed for them to be elec-

The
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Left: Fritz Tugendhat
Right: Grete Tugendhat



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tronically lowered into the floor entirely, emphasizing the integration of outdoors and indoors. A set of unbleached silk curtains can be drawn in front of the windows at night, which reach from ceiling to floor and help to enhance the interior's luxurious atmosphere with their color and texture. (Wingler 537)

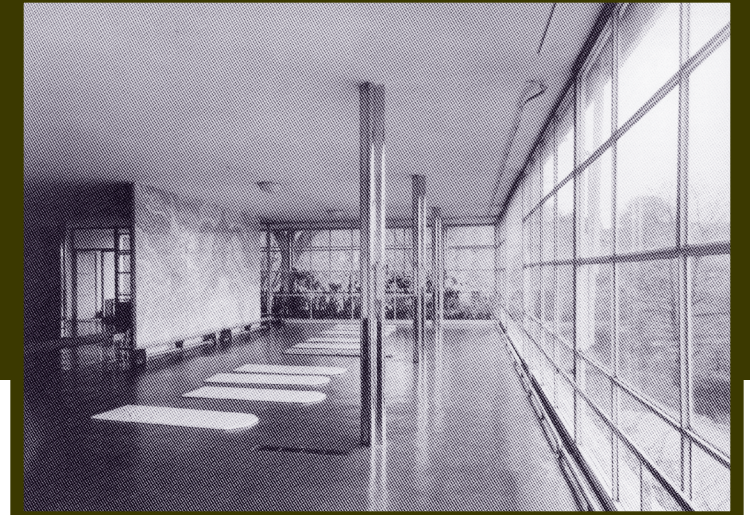
Following his creed of accepting nothing short of perfection, everything within the Tugendhat house was created and placed with exceptional deliberateness. Each detail—the heating pipes, drapery track holders, door handles, wooden-slatted venetian blinds, lighting fixtures, etc.—was designed by Mies himself. Even the furniture,

such as the black pearwood dining table and the chairs surrounding it, were put in their spots as a result of meticulous design; the placement of these objects can even be seen in the layout drawings for the house. Mies had even gone so far as to create his own furniture for use in the house. Those chairs at the dining table (referred to now as Brno chairs) were designed and built by Mies, and it shows: perhaps nothing as elementary as these chairs quite capture the true essence of Mies's aesthetic philosophy that "less is more" like the uncomplicated design of the Brno chairs. While the seat and back of the chair retain their traditional and functional arrangement, the arms of the chair are made to curve downward at the front and

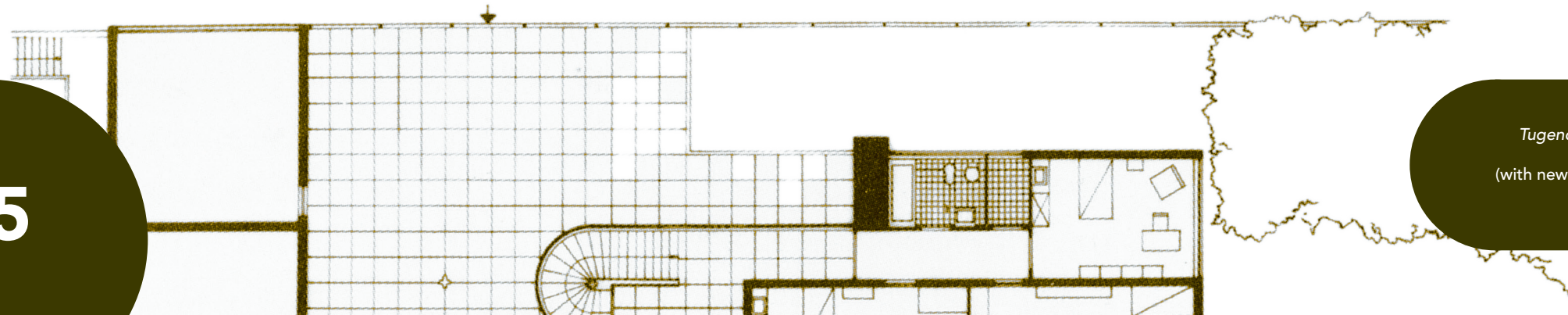
become the two legs that elevate the chair. Continuing past the legs, they curve once again backward to create the base that supports the chair. As Nicholas Weber writes in his book, *The Bauhaus Group*, "[i]t is impossible to imagine how a seat, chair back, and arms could be arranged more minimally or more eloquently than in the Brno chair" (444).

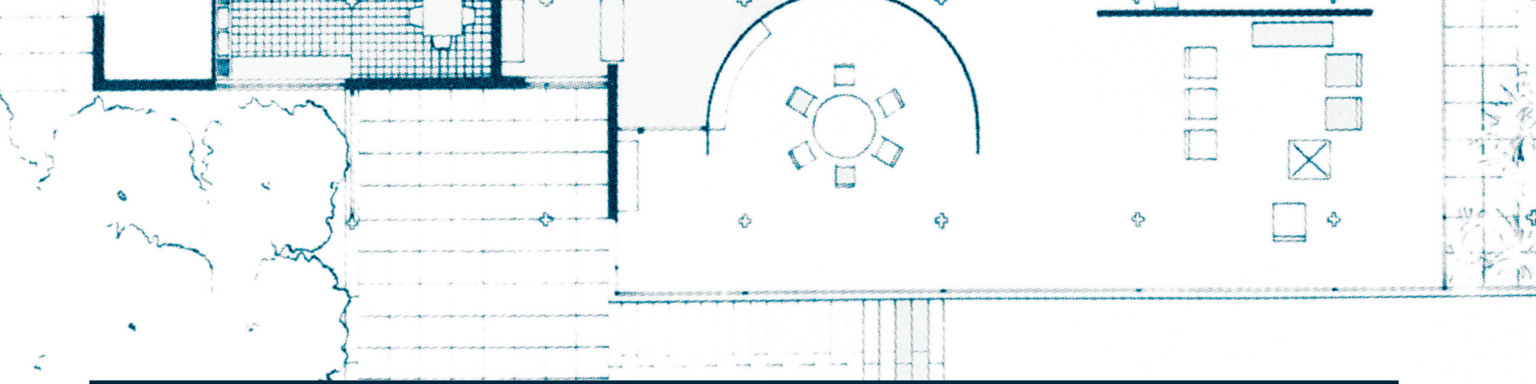
In examining the Tugendhat house, or any other building created by Mies, a certain aesthetic beauty can definitely be found in the clean and quiet design that it presents. The ideology that Mies perpetuated through his work and teachings is still vital in the world of design

Tugendhat House
Living area used
as a gym



Tugendhat House
Living area
(with new furnishing)





Tugendhat House
Entrance with curved
frosted glass wall



Tugendhat House
Glass facade overlooking the garden

today. While at first many of his students at the Bauhaus believed that his pursuit of formal perfection and his tendency toward valuable materials was a perpetuation of art for art's sake as opposed to the creativity and exploration of different materials that the Bauhaus had previously focused on, he was held in higher esteem when they began to better understand his intentions (Wingler 11). Howard Dearstyne, a personal student of Mies's, recalls those intentions as being the search of beauty and excellence in architecture--something that Dearstyne explains had been a lifelong preoccupation of Mies (222). Although Mies's creations sometimes failed to represent some of the more functional values of design, the value he placed in fulfilling purpose, understanding material, and giving his work a certain spiritual quality is to be admired.

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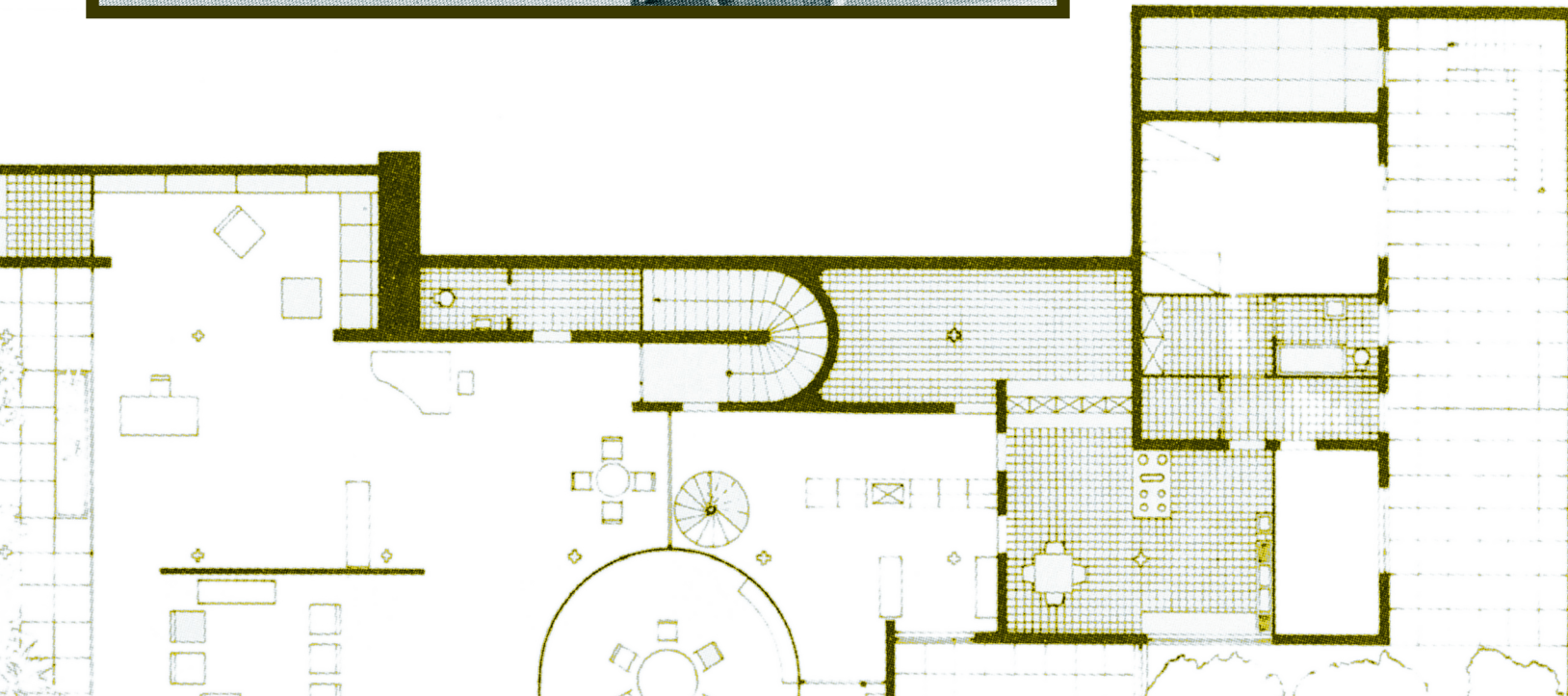
Tugendhat House
Living room
View of seating area in
front of onyx wall

Opposite Top:
Living room writing desk

Opposite Bottom:
Living room library

Mies's architecture offer glimpses into his wisdom of excellent design.

On a philosophical level, Mies sought to achieve an ideal beauty in his architecture, believing that all things in the world are capable of exerting their own magic, and he made little compromise in that search. In terms of design, Mies bolstered the minimalism of International Modernist architecture by emphasizing the importance of boldness, open spaces, and geometric composition (Dempsey 142). As a medium that works on the levels of demanding attention as well as portraying concise ideas, both of these lessons (philosophical and functional) are spoken from the heart of design. While Mies may not have achieved the ideal level he spent his life searching for, the remnants of his architecture--such as the Tugendhat house (which has recently been restored after having been harshly vandalized during the Nazi reign)--serve as milestones to offer glimpses into his wisdom of excellent design.



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