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RESEARCH ARTICLE

MIES AND MINIMALISM: A PERFECT COALESCENCE.

Srikanth Sakleshpur Venkatesh.
 University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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Abstract

The renowned architect, Mies van der Rohe, revolutionized the sphere of architecture by adopting the famous aphorism 'less is more' in his buildings. The concept of Minimalism, which was seen in artworks, was adopted into architecture. He borrowed from the art theory which talks about the object qualities and aesthetics. Mies buildings called 'masterpieces' encompass this theory which show that architecture can also be an art, just like painting or sculpture. With specific reference to one of Mies's very famous 'work of art', the 'Farnsworth house', this paper will try to illustrate how the concept 'less is more' is beautifully incorporated into the architecture of this building, thereby showcasing the perfect coalescence that exists between Mies and minimalism.

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Introduction: -

Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe, born in the year 1886 in the German town of Aachen, is considered the most influential architect of the 20th Century. His apprenticeship with Peter Behrens, a German architect and designer, was one of the turning points in his life. Under him he discovered the new way of looking at architecture, especially learning the use of materials like steel, and glass. The adage 'less is more' was unveiled to him in Behrens office. In 1930, Mies became the Director of 'Bauhaus'- a German art school, which later added architecture as a medium of art in its program, and developed the Bauhaus style of Architecture. Mies adopted this new style which favored the use of steel, glass, and reinforced concrete. In 1933, when the Nazi regime closed the art school, Mies shifted to the United States in 1938, and become of one of the most innovative leader of this modern movement in architecture called minimalism. (Clemence, 2006).

This minimalist movement, which was first visible in the visual art, like sculpture and painting, arose in the 1950s. It was characterized by the use of simple and massive forms, which were aesthetically appealing. The artistic creation was not perceived within any pre-determined fore bonding, but was self-contained (Mertins, 2014).

Mies van der Rohe adopted this movement in architecture at a time when it was the age of rationalization, structural rigidity, and mass production. His buildings were simple in form, had minimum use of material like steel, glass, and concrete, but were aesthetically immaculate. They were neither an imitation of any works from the past nor were they based on any social ideas or individual emotions. They were like a moment in history. They were self-referential, like any work of art (Mertins, 2014).

According to Chave (2008), Minimalism in art has two tenets – materialistic and idealistic, wherein the idealist adopts a spiritual approach, which is almost 'auratic' in nature. Mies adopted both these tenets and created a minimalist style of his own, which for almost a century, proved very popular. For him, architecture was 'sacred',

meaning divine and meant for a secular society, but supported by science and adopted to the ever-changing aspect of the universe. His buildings were discernible physical objects that when looked at, shaped one's perceptions and affections towards them.

Vasilski (2016) adds that the simplicity of objects that minimalist art postulates, are also seen in Mies's works. For him, the simplicity lay in the built form, relying only on the essential, by using minimum material for his structures, but without really compromising on the utility (Chave 2008).

This paper shows how the concept of 'less is more' adopted by the architect Mies van der Rohe could be a benchmark for minimalist architecture. How from one medium of expression, that is minimalist art, Mies transcended it and evolved the modern movement of minimalist architecture. With specific reference to one of Mies's very famous 'work of art' in the United States, the Farnsworth House, this paper will try to illustrate how the concept 'less is more' is beautifully incorporated in this building, thus showcasing the perfect coalescence that is visible between Mies and minimalism. To quote Macarthur (2002), "The 'look' of the object, in this case the Farnsworth House, connected with the people, and came to be called a 'poem', an artwork, just like a painting or a sculpture."

To begin with, let's discuss how minimalism in architecture is perceived as an art: As Macarthur (2002) states, minimalism in visual art is a known fact. However, modern art, which considers architecture too as a form of art, sees the emergence of minimalist architecture, which assumes that, like in visual art, buildings are physical objects and the 'look' of the object is very important. Though buildings are seen as simple objects, whereas other visual arts like painting and sculpture are seen as real artwork, minimalist architecture sees the building as an aesthetically created object, which is considered artistic by the look they provide, thus making them a critical object and not just a material one. However, some architects believe that a building can aspire to be a form of artwork only if it not designed for utility. This raises the question whether all buildings should be then considered as just buildings or as artworks? Mertins (2014) says that Minimalist architecture tries to provide an answer to it by displaying the works of architect Mies van der Rohe, who believed that the method of construction itself was an art. It was in the concept of built object. Buildings, like trees, were objects, and if the material used on them, looked back at the person looking at them, then that architecture was art.

Mies's connection to minimalism can be better understood by examining the different principles of minimalistic art: Though minimalism in architecture was also considered art, different tenets to minimalism in art are seen. It is generally seen as a materialist undertaking. The East-coast of USA sees minimalism as being more materialist, whereas the West- coast perceives it as being more idealist. Donald Judd, an American artist believes in the "research of truth with simple forms". He also adds that, "To make good things, you have to have some sort of belief". Idealist minimalism has a more spiritual approach. Mies van der Rohe's minimalism intersects between materialist and idealist (Chave, 2008). According to Mertins (2014), though Mies's architecture is considered as philosophical, it is also very scientific in character. A self-taught person, Mies studied both philosophy and science, and he put this education into his profession. His concept of sacred architecture, in a secular world, but primed by science, is very evident in his buildings like the S.R Crown Hall at IIT campus in Chicago and the Seagram Building in New York.

The philosophy behind Mies's minimalism: If one argues Mies architecture as being philosophical, then it could mean that it also aspires to make the world a better place. It decrees that the space we live in should be inspiring. Architecture is something that should be experienced to be understood. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher avers that minimalism in architecture and the philosophy of experience of life, go hand in hand. It means that the space one lives in is essential to understand architecture. What we perceive and what we feel in a living space is important (Vasilski, 2016).

Furthermore, if the space that we live in is essential to understand architecture, then understanding different elements of the building structure is important in order to perceive and feel the space we live in. In this context, Vasilski (2016) postulates that in minimalism, light is also an important structural element. In the space we live in, one can experience this light as proximity to time. And at the same time, in the silence one feels the space. Providing purity, harmony, transparency, and simplicity of life is the ultimate goal of minimalist architecture. According to Mertins (2014), Mies van der Rohe also adheres to this notion. He was drawn to the critical philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher. He believed that the search for the essence by shedding the superfluous was possible.

His architecture was considered philosophical. He postulated that it was possible to integrate cosmos with humanity's place in it. Spatial fluidity and continuity from interior to exterior was an example of harmony between nature and the living world. Thus, minimalism in architecture provided Mies with a concept of sensation to perception through tangible physical objects, which were pure and simple. In this way, Mies van der Rohe's buildings coalesce perfectly with the aphorism he adopted very early in his career, 'less is more': a tenet for minimalist design and architecture.

This paragraph examines how the essential elements seen in Mies's buildings integrate the aphorism 'less is more' perfectly in them. According to Vasilski (2016) all the elements associated with minimalism that we enumerated above, like simplicity in design over complexity are visible in Mies's works. Chave (2008) says that buildings built with essential elements, like steel and glass, create harmony with free flowing open spaces, and provide clarity, utility, and effect through the aesthetic appeal that they carry, by making use of invisible qualities like natural light, sky, earth, and air, thus providing the sublime spiritual experience. Vasilski (2016) states that this experience is observed in Mies's masterpieces. Whether it is the Barcelona Pavilion or the Farnsworth house or the Seagram Building, which are a pure and open 'skin and bone' architecture, wherein the steel structure is the 'bone' and the glass about it is the 'skin' but also some of the foremost examples of functionalist aesthetic buildings (Mertins, 2014).

The Farnsworth House, one of the best examples of minimalism among Mies van der Rohe's 'masterpieces' in the United States: In the design of this house, Mies's motto 'less is more' reaches cathartic dimensions. Located on a 60-acre site, it is the only private home ever designed and built by Mies for his friend Dr. Edith Farnsworth at Plano, Illinois between 1945 and 1951. Made completely of steel and glass, Farnsworth House's essence lay more on its spiritual qualities than functional qualities. According to Clemence 2006, Mies said that materials used were the grammar of architecture. And unless grammar was mastered, one could not speak good prose and much less become a good poet. Though, Mies's architecture generally invokes the objective mind, Farnsworth House implores both the subjective and objective mind, as art is a mixture of both. And Farnsworth house was an architectural poem. According to Mies, a poem is a spiritual creation that never ceases to delight. This house was built in such a way that it seemed to fly above the ground. There seemed to be no visual barrier between the interior and the exterior (Clemence, 2006).

Additionally, we shall deliberate how the Farnsworth house looks suspended among trees in an undisturbed landscape. It almost seems part of nature. Mies states, "...we should attempt to bring nature, houses, and human beings together into higher unity. If you view nature through glass walls of Farnsworth House, it gains a more profound significance than if viewed from outside...it becomes a part of a larger whole" (Clemence, 2006). Meant to be a weekend retreat, this glass box pavilion, containing 'almost nothing', but just one room, provided an unobstructed space that was flexible to use. The space contains certain freestanding components and one central wood core that provided veiled spaces meant for sleeping, cooking, sitting, dressing, and eating. The house in 2006 was earmarked as a National historic landmark (Clemence, 2006).

Conclusion: -

Mies van der Rohe, beautifully encompassed the aphorism 'less is more', which is the tenet of minimalist design and architecture, in his buildings, during the period of rationalization and mass production, and brought about a new vision in the sphere of architecture (Mertins, 2014).

The simplicity in basic geometrical forms, the use of simple materials like glass and steel, and invisible qualities like natural light, sky, earth, and air, all portray a sense of order of simple and clean spaces. This is the only art form that allows you to experience the 'live' movement, that one can discern 'inside' the object, which in this case is the building (Vasilski, 2016).

According to Mies, architecture could never become complacent, hinting that a building should not be something that you 'search', but something you should 'find'. This was possible only if the building was built by virtue of transparency, economy, and obviousness. And this is what one would call the aesthetic experience of minimalism, and that's found in the works of Mies Van der Rohe (Mertins, 1994).

His buildings, often referred to as 'skin and bone' architecture, as he used glass enclosures on steel structures, became pioneers of minimalist architecture expression. His various typologies, like the skyscraper typology, visible in the

skyscraper the Seagram building; the pavilion typology, visible in buildings like the Barcelona pavilion and Farnsworth house, and a combined typology of both skyscraper and pavilion typologies, visible in the Chicago Federal Center, have set a benchmark in the world of minimalist architecture (Rosenfield, 2016).

Mies postulated that the primary objective of architecture is to unequivocally represent its epoch, and that it's the role of the architect to bring to light and articulate the significance of the time. Till today, this postulation of his has credence among the generations of architects he has inspired and continues to inspire (Mertins, 2014). And his buildings bear testimony to this conviction.

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