

# The Continuity of the Ancient Quest for Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Modern Architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

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In the book *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter* (2012), distinguished Professor of Cognition and Education at Harvard University Howard Gardner argues that modern culture has unprecedentedly tended to disregard the classical virtues of truth, beauty, and goodness as arrogant, vain, and subjective. According to Gardner, this disregard has hindered the fundamental human quest for these virtues, which are necessary for excellence in intellectual, artistic, and moral endeavors.<sup>1</sup> Using this argument as a starting point, this presentation explores examples of how this challenging situation can be approached in architecture. These examples are taken from the work of the renowned twentieth-century architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe for he perseveringly strove to continue this quest in the face of a rapidly changing technological age that tended to prioritize utility, individual liberty, and economic profit over the classical virtues. Although he did not use to refer to these virtues as a triad or formula, or even specifically as “virtues”, he consistently highlighted their importance in terms of values, concepts, and principles that were necessary to give architecture a more solid and meaningful direction of development. Mies believed that without such a clear common direction, chaos would prevail and even the work of the most gifted talents would degenerate into commercial banality and passing fashion.<sup>2</sup>

The presentation is organized in two parts. The first part extracts Mies’s concepts of truth, goodness, and beauty from his writings, lectures, interviews, papers, personal library, and philosophical sources; and reflects on how these concepts interconnect. This study is necessary because publications dealing with the philosophy that underpinned his work have focused on his concept of truth, and given little attention to his concepts of goodness and beauty.<sup>3</sup> The second part of the presentation identifies some principles and strategies used by Mies to implement these concepts in his architectural practice. Within his oeuvre, focus is given to skyscraper projects because their stricter technical requirements, more rigid building codes, higher cost, and higher pressure for profit and commercial success substantially challenged his quest for truth, goodness, and beauty in architecture. Furthermore, this focus facilitates the study of the transition between

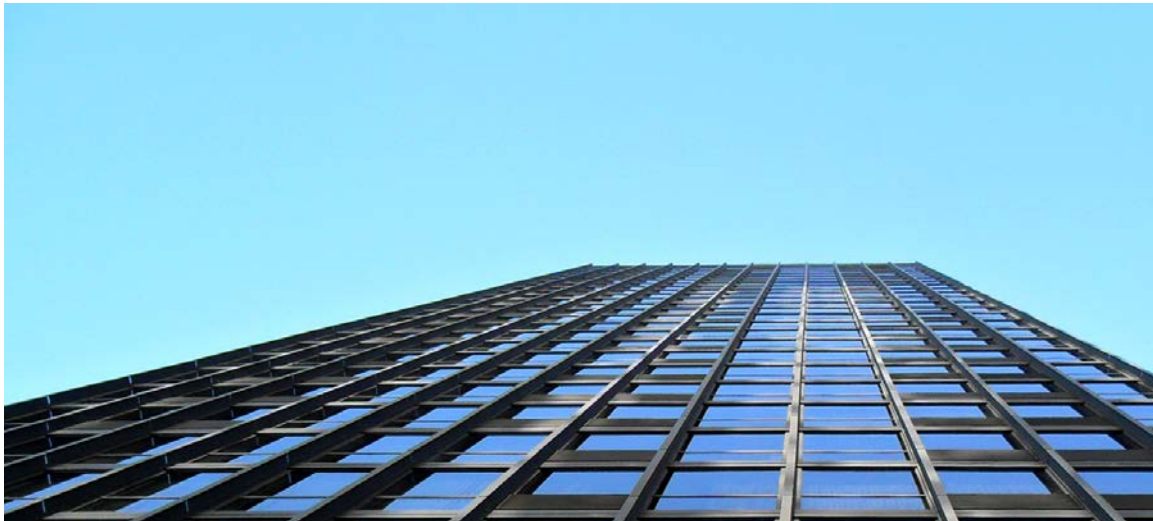
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<sup>1</sup> Howard Gardner, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Age of Truthiness and Twitter*, Reprint edition (New York: Basic Books, 2012); Howard Gardner, *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Building Art and the Will of the Epoch! (1924),” in *The Artless Word: Mies van Der Rohe on the Building Art*, by Fritz Neumeyer (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 245; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “The Preconditions of Architectural Work (1928),” in *The Artless Word: Mies van Der Rohe on the Building Art*, by Fritz Neumeyer (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991), 299; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “Mies at 77 Explains,” *Chicago Scene*, February 1964, 31.

<sup>3</sup> Mies’s concept of truth was explored in: Heynickx, Rajesh. “Conceptual Debts: Modern Architecture and Neo-Thomism in Postwar America.” *The European Legacy* 22, no. 3 (April 3, 2017): 258–77; Colombo, Luciana Fornari, “Reconsidering Mies van der Rohe’s Concept of True Architecture Through Its Philosophical Foundations.” In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 33, Gold*, ed. AnnMarie Brennan and Philip Goad, vol.33, Gold (The University of Melbourne: SAHANZ, 2016), 190–198; Murphy, Peter and Roberts, David, “Truth in Building: Mies van Der Rohe,” in *Dialectic of Romanticism* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005), 106–14; Padovan, Richard. “Mies: The Correspondence of Thing and Intellect.” In *Towards Universality: Le Corbusier, Mies and De Stijl* (London; New York: Routledge, 2002) 146–73; Peterson, Steven K. “Idealized Space: Mies-Conception or Realized Truth?” *Inland Architect* 21, no. 5 (May 1977): 4–1.

general principles and specific solutions because Mies developed his skyscraper idea slowly, first as speculative, experimental projects, and later as built works.



900-910 Lake Shore Drive Apartments, Chicago, 1953–1956, Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (photo by author, 2010).

The presentation shows that, adhering to the moderate realism of Thomas Aquinas, Mies believed that universal properties, such as truth, goodness, and beauty, were present in things with variable intensity.<sup>4</sup> The more perfectly a thing fulfilled and expressed its essence by becoming what it ought to be and by occupying its proper place, the more intensely it manifested these properties. Also in agreement with Thomistic philosophy, Mies saw truth as perfection of correspondence, such as between ideas in the mind and the broader reality, and between external appearances and internal essences. This view of truth closely related to his view of goodness. For Mies, the latter regarded the effort to seek, accept, and fulfill significant correspondences, and to explore potentials in order to elevate things to a higher level of realization. Moreover, truth and goodness were requirements for beauty, which consisted in the refined manifestation of things that made their essences and virtues more perfectly accessible to sense perception and reason. Being intangible, these essences could not be directly manifested, but only indicated by means of analogies, symbols, and similitudes.

To intensify the presence of truth, goodness, and beauty in architecture, Mies strongly relied on the principle of clarity. This principle consisted in avoiding distortions motivated by bias, whims, and personal interests; and in attempting to fulfill and express essences in the most natural, direct, logical, and accurate way. One of the most striking elements developed by Mies to achieve clarity in architecture was the modern glass skin. Used in place of the conventional opaque and

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<sup>4</sup> Mies's extant personal library includes the following books on or by Thomas Aquinas: Thomas and Gerald B Phelan, *Saint Thomas Aquinas on the Governance of Rulers [De Regimine Principum]* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1938); Thomas Aquinas and Anton C Pegis, *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1945); Theodor Steinbüchel, *Der Zweckgedanke in der Philosophie des Thomas von Aquino* (Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1912). For a more complete list of Mies's books, see: Werner Blaser, "Some Books from Mies' Library," in *Mies van der Rohe: The Art of Structure* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1993), 228–31; UIC, "Online Catalogue. Richard J. Daley Library; University of Illinois at Chicago; Rare Books Section; Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Collection," 2008, <http://library.uic.edu/home/collections/manuscripts-and-rare-books/rare-books-at-the-richard-j.-daley-library>.

heavy masonry walls, this thin and transparent skin substantially enhanced clarity not only in the physical sense of light reflection and transmission, but also in the sense of understanding and legibility. Being almost immaterial in appearance, this skin clearly conveyed the modern construction principle of concentration of loads on the inner skeleton. In addition, the glass skin took greater advantage of the relief of load on the walls to optimize views, spatial openness, and natural illumination. In his skyscraper projects, this glass skin received metallic mullions, which, besides resolving various artistic and construction questions, also contributed to evoke, by means of similitude, the inner steel skeleton or steel reinforcement that made this monumental building type possible. Ultimately, when understood from the perspective of his quest for truth, goodness, and beauty, these celebrated Miesian devices and ideas acquire a new meaning and emerge as sources of inspiration for the renewal and continuation of the quest for these essential virtues.



IBM Building, Chicago, 1966–1973, Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (photo by author, 2010).