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## Is modernism the enemy? The case of Mies van der Rohe

by Roger Kimball

A review of *Architects of Fortune: Mies Van Der Rohe and the Third Reich* by Elaine S. Hochman

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### BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Elaine S. Hochman

*Architects of Fortune: Mies Van Der Rohe and the Third Reich*

Fromm Intl, 382 pages, \$11.95

*For me the test of value to be applied to a thinker is his eye for the great facts of his time. Only this can settle whether he is merely a clever architect of systems and principles, versed in definitions and analyses, or whether it is the soul of his time that speaks in his works and his intuitions.*

—Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*

As the docket of modernism's alleged sins grows ever longer and more incriminatory—and what transgression, aesthetic or political, has modernism not been charged with by now?—it is inevitable that the great German-born architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) should come to occupy a prominent place on the prosecution's roster of malefactors. Few architects in this century garnered more praise or were more influential during their lifetimes; surely none so consummately epitomized modernism's spirit of embattled high seriousness. "One doesn't invent

a new architecture every Monday morning," Mies is said to have admonished, no doubt anticipating an age that would flit through architectural styles the way a debutante runs through changes of clothes. With the rise of postmodernism in the late Sixties, it was only to be expected that Mies's stock, like that of modernism itself, should suffer a sharp decline. What had once been hailed as aesthetically exacting and a model of artistic dedication was now dismissed as elitist and socially retrograde. Not since the 1930s, when modernism was attacked by rather more grisly forces, has the architect of the Barcelona Pavilion, the Tugendhat House, and the Seagram Building been so violently reviled.

The bill of particulars against Mies is long and varied. At one time or another his work and influence have been blamed for everything from urban decay to the continued vigor of American capitalism. In that charter document of postmodernist chic, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966), Robert Venturi helped set the stage for the current campaign against Mies by castigating what it pleased him to call the "puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture" — the language, that is to say, of Mies, Le Corbusier, Gropius, and other modernist pioneers. "Puritanical," "moral," "orthodox," "Modern" with a capital "m": for the postmodernist enemies of modernism, at least, a more damning list of adjectives is hard to imagine. Where Mies's stringent aesthetic demonstrated that less really could be more, Venturi's anti-Miesian brief for architectural "pluralism" dispensed with such encumbrances and insisted — in a *mot* that has become hardly less famous than the Miesian original — "Less is a bore."

## The bill of particulars against Mies is long and varied.

The architectural critic and postmodernist impresario Charles Jencks (who is sometimes credited with first floating the term "postmodern") picked up where Venturi left off. In *Modern Movements in Architecture* (1973), his well-known and polemical survey of twentieth-century architectural trends, Jencks argued that Mies's unwavering commitment to aesthetic purity was "reductive" and often resulted in an "inarticulate architecture." But that complaint was only the beginning. Jencks also assured us that the ideal of aesthetic purity as espoused by Mies was at best "farcical," at worst "highly dangerous."

Since no respectable postmodernist can regard an earnest commitment to truth as anything but a kind of joke, it is perhaps not surprising that Jencks should have ridiculed Mies's intellectual seriousness — what he contemptuously dubbed Mies's "Platonism" — as "farcical." But "highly dangerous"? Here we touch upon a central ingredient in many recent assaults on modernism — namely, the claim that modernism's aesthetic idealism is covertly allied with political views that are rigid, authoritarian, or worse. This claim comes in various registers of intensity and is at bottom one of the chief presuppositions of the whole movement to disenfranchise high culture

by reducing it to an expression of social and political forces. Proponents of the idea insist that they are exposing the dark, albeit unacknowledged, political commitments of a supposedly disinterested aesthetic; looked at in another way, however, they often appear as latter-day practitioners of that old tactic: art criticism via character assassination.

With a little help from the political theories of Karl Popper, Jencks provides a sterling illustration of this practice. Warning readers that “a belief in essences is one of the prime convictions of those who support a Closed Society,” he argues that Mies’s belief that architecture must strive to express the spiritual temper of the age drew him “to conservative arguments for a Closed Society.” Never mind that Mies himself was staunchly apolitical, or that his theories about the vocation of modern architecture were the patient musings of a philosophically inclined artist; by the pliable logic that transforms things into their opposites, Jencks arrives at the stunning conclusion that Mies’s “apoliticism, verging on fatalism, led [him] to accepting Nazism.” Indeed, he blithely—and falsely—informs us that “when the Nazis came to power [Mies] worked for them up until 1937.”

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## It would be consoling if Jencks’s performance were merely an aberration in the annals of postmodernist criticism.

It would be consoling if Jencks’s performance were merely an aberration in the annals of postmodernist criticism. Alas, this is not the case. As Elaine S. Hochman’s new book, *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*,<sup>[1]</sup> reminds us, such interpretations of both Mies and modernism have become common coin in the realm of academic reassessment. Professor Hochman, who teaches on the art history faculty at the New School for Social Research in New York City, offers her book partly as a history of Mies’s behavior from the late Twenties through 1937, when he left Germany, and partly as an inquiry into the “moral principles” of his architectural vision. In fact, what she has given us is a demonstration of how thoroughly the anti-modernist agenda of postmodernism has triumphed in academic letters.

This is not to suggest that Professor Hochman has contributed anything particularly novel to the debate about the nature and legacy of modernism or about the achievement of Mies. She is neither a cultural polemicist, like Venturi or Jencks, nor an architectural critic. Though presented as a work of “revisionist” history, *Architects of Fortune* is really a kind of anthology of what by now are received attitudes toward Mies and modernism. Accordingly, what makes her book noteworthy is not its originality but its banality. It commands our attention primarily as an example of how certain fashionable ideas become entrenched and taken for granted—become for their devotees the unexamined *donnée* of intellectual exchange.

True, Professor Hochman displays an eager diligence in ferreting out obscure details. Readers will learn more about Mies's business dealings in Germany from 1933 to 1937 than they may have thought possible. And since those dealings were exceedingly meager—the plain truth is that Hitler's rise to power effectively ended Mies's career in Germany—Professor Hochman can pore over Mies's every professional move during those years in search of incriminating evidence. And pore she has. *Architects of Fortune* has been fifteen years in the making, we learn from its preface. A glance through the book's pages shows that if it uncovers nothing substantially new or scandalous about Mies it is not for the author's lack of trying: no potentially compromising recollection is too trivial to preserve, no damaging conjecture too untrustworthy to communicate. "Was Mies's own silence about this difficult period simply a manifestation of his generally uncommunicative nature," Professor Hochman asks, "or was there something he was trying to hide? Did he try to work for the Nazis? Did his efforts to remain in Germany practicing his profession differ from what others were doing or attempting to do?" These are the sort of insinuating questions that guide her inquiry.

In the event, Professor Hochman's patient detective work didn't turn up much. Except for providing a handful of new details, none of which really enlarges our view of Mies or the period under discussion, she treads familiar territory. Her observations about Hitler and the Third Reich, for instance, are mostly straight out of the textbook. Judging from the footnotes, the textbook of choice was William Shirer's best-seller, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Similarly, her opinions about Mies and modernist architecture are very much of the off-the-rack, ready-to-wear variety, the rack in question being furnished largely by Jencks & Co., with the occasional high-quality item borrowed from Mies's distinguished biographer, Franz Schulze.<sup>[2]</sup> In a misguided effort to engage in cultural criticism, she is also given to issuing highly dubious pronouncements about the relation between art and society. In a characteristic burst of pontification, she assures us that "in return for their beneficent wisdom and aesthetic enlightenment, society has traditionally chosen to exempt artists, philosophers and poets from the common ethical standards by which ordinary individuals are judged." Hmm. Just ask Socrates about society's largesse in this department. Or Shelley. Or Gauguin. Or . . . well, we don't want to belabor the point. Yet it must also be mentioned that Professor Hochman has a tendency to overwrite, making promiscuous use of the historical present, for example (we wait with Mies for a tram at Potsdamer Platz, etc.), and drawing freely on Christopher Isherwood's Berlin stories in an effort to impart a sense of period detail and "atmosphere" to her narrative.

Professor Hochman has not, however, confined her research to secondary sources. In her hunt for the goods on Mies, she has also availed herself of all manner of primary material. For example, in her acknowledgements she thanks "Mr. Albert Speer, who, for nearly a decade, kindly shared with me his intimate acquaintance with Hitler, the leading figures of the Third Reich, and the regime's architecture practices." She quotes frequently and uncritically from Speer's writings, and her notes often refer the reader to one or another "personal conversation" with Speer as support for

judgments about Mies. Another major source was Philip Johnson, whose impish *obiter dicta* about architecture and Mies are also featured in *Architects of Fortune*. (A title, one cannot help thinking, that would have suited Johnson far better than Mies.) In other words, Professor Hochman has turned to those most impartial of sources, Hitler's chief architect and minister for armaments and Mies's infamous renegade disciple, to help discover the truth about Mies's activities under Hitler. The results are all that one might have predicted.

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**A**rchitects of Fortune is divided into three main parts, the titles of which—"Mies," "Hitler," and "Confrontation"—may be said to sum up the burden of its argument. The titles of many of the seventeen individual chapters—"A Blind and Fateful Course," "'The Iron Fist,'" "Black Leather Boots and Bayonets," "'A Shameful, Dishonourable Fate,'" etc.—make it easy to forget that Mies was an architect, not a member of the SS. Yet Professor Hochman is not so crude as to suggest that Mies actually was a Nazi. There is, after all, the historical record gainsaying that. As she puts it in her preface, the question is not whether Mies "was a Nazi sympathizer" but "what it was in Mies's outlook that permitted him, encouraged him perhaps, to ignore the moral degeneracy around him." Her answer, in a word, is modernism. Like Jencks, who informed us that a belief in "essences" was conducive to repressive political views, Professor Hochman seems to believe that Mies's brand of modernism—involving as it did a commitment to architecture as high art and a belief that architecture possessed a spiritual vocation even in a secular age—revealed his kinship with Nazi ideology.

For Hitler—no less than for his contemporaries, Mies and Gropius—architecture was an expression of the central spirit of an epoch, possessing some eternal magical power that could lead men from confusion and chaos into the serene realm of Order. . . . For them all, architecture both waged the war and assured the victory. In their visions of society, it was both cannon and crown, sword and halo; and with the exception of Gropius (who was more open-minded), each was convinced that his vision alone mirrored the footsteps of God.<sup>[3]</sup>

Reading this passage, it is hard to ignore certain troublesome details: that Mies was an architect while Hitler was a dictator in command of an entire nation; that we really don't know what Mies's "vision of society" was, whereas Hitler managed to make his "vision" all too clear; that the "war" and "victory" in question were for Mies simply the effort to produce good buildings, whereas for Hitler they conjure up rather more ominous things. Even so, Professor Hochman finds a "striking resemblance of the motivating and dynamic forces that underlay [Mies's] style (and, by implication, all of architectural modernism) . . . to the principles that supported the Third Reich."

Professor Hochman is very keen on such “striking resemblances.” Early in 1933, when Mies was head of the Bauhaus, he called on Alfred Rosenberg, a chief Nazi ideologue and himself an architect, to ask why the Nazis had closed the school and what could be done about it. “Mies and Rosenberg were more similar than either might have imagined or been willing to admit,” Professor Hochman informs us. Both were brooding, taciturn personalities, we learn, and both had an unfortunate penchant for misty philosophizing. “Like ghosts of Hegel, both justified their philosophical beliefs on flimsy webs of metaphysics and apparent irrefutability, seeking the assurance of truth in certainty and simplification; and both would have denied the assertion of Jakob Burckhardt, the Swiss historian, that in the denial of complexity lay the essence of tyranny.” Mies and Alfred Rosenberg? Mies and Alfred Rosenberg and the ghost of *Hegel*? (Incidentally, would Professor Hochman say that Hegel disagreed with Burckhardt’s claim?)

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Mies did say (in an oft-repeated phrase) that “architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space.”

Well, Mies did say (in an oft-repeated phrase) that “architecture is the will of an epoch translated into space.” Did not the Nazis, too, glory in the will? Did they not proclaim their reign an epoch? And—the clincher—did not Hitler consider himself an architect? In one staggering passage, Professor Hochman goes so far as to assert that Mies finally left Germany in 1937 “not because he opposed Hitler, but because Hitler had very strong architectural views. Mies left, in fact, because Hitler fancied himself an architect.” This is nonsense. By the time Hitler came to power, Mies was one of the two or three most famous architects in Germany. He finally decided to leave his homeland because, under the Nazis, he could not find work, because his architectural views were systematically castigated and ridiculed by the state, because his career had been thwarted at every turn by Party functionaries.

And then there is the issue of architectural modernism itself. Since the dubious nature of modernism is one of Professor Hochman’s major themes, one might think she would have devoted considerable attention to setting forth her understanding of the phenomenon. Instead, all we get is an afterthought, a single footnote when the term “modernism” appears on page three of her preface. In this note, Professor Hochman remarks that both modernism and totalitarian architecture emerged out of neo-classicism. “The mutual genesis of these two opposing branches of twentieth-century German architecture out of the neoclassical tradition helps to explain the endless disputes between the modernists and their opponents as well as their noteworthy similarities.” Does it really? If so, Professor Hochman has neglected to reveal how.

The truth is that simply mentioning this common root in the neo-classical tradition explains little about modernism or totalitarian architecture, and nothing at all about their supposed kinship.

There can be no doubt that the formal vocabulary of neoclassical public architecture helped to furnish Hitler and Speer (as well as Mussolini and many others of far less disagreeable aspect) with their idea of architectural grandeur. In fact, neo-classicism continues to shape our notions of what is appropriate in public architecture. Nor is there any doubt that one source of inspiration for German modernism in its formative stages was the neo-classical tradition of Karl Friederich Schinkel. (There were also other, equally important, sources, including early twentieth-century American glass and concrete industrial building, the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the geometrical abstractions of the de Stijl movement.) But modernism and totalitarian architecture took different things from neo-classicism. Speer, for example, emphasized and exaggerated its monumentality, transforming grandeur into something deliberately forbidding; for his part, Mies tended to emulate its formal clarity and simplicity of design, seeking to embody in his own architecture the cool rationality and balanced proportions of neo-classicism. And quite apart from what they took from neo-classicism, modernism and totalitarian architecture *aspired* to utterly different architectural visions.<sup>[4]</sup>

Unfortunately, Professor Hochman inhabits an intellectual climate where such distinctions blur under the pressure of her thesis, where Schinkel merges with Albert Speer, where the rigorously distilled aesthetic of a Mies van der Rohe is indistinguishable from the amateurish architectural fantasies of Adolf Hitler. “I do not wish to malign Mies, but to understand him,” Professor Hochman writes; “and through this understanding, perhaps to grasp an attitude that he shared with so many of his fellow countrymen.” And what was that shared attitude, exactly? Professor Hochman is not terribly precise about this, but she makes it clear enough that it has something to do with political malfeasance. She subordinates everything to the idea—really, it is an *idée fixe*—that there is a deep conceptual continuity between modernism and totalitarianism. In the section of her book devoted to Hitler, for example, her main purpose in establishing the Führer’s passionate attachment to architecture—it was, he is quoted as saying, the thing “nearest my heart”—is to show how similar Hitler’s understanding of architecture was to Mies’s. (The point being, one gathers, that Mies and Hitler, like Mies and Rosenberg, “were more similar than either might have imagined or been willing to admit.”) Indeed, it will be news to most students of Mies that “to Mies, it was clear that Hitler had a convincing understanding of architectural principles.” Along the way we are also treated to a variety of penetrating and novel psychological insights. “Hitler seems to have suffered from a defective sense of reality,” Professor Hochman reveals, as well as (poor fellow) a “deep-seated sense of inferiority.”

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## “beautiful” buildings.

Throughout her book, Professor Hochman keeps assuring us that Mies was a “great” architect who produced “beautiful” buildings. She does not actually discuss the aesthetic merits of any of Mies’s works, however, and it is not long before one realizes that her glowing praise is preliminary to damning remarks about Mies’s character or Miesian modernism. No doubt readers will be shocked to learn that Mies was not always a pleasant character. For one thing, he was overly rationalistic. “Mies’s education pushed him toward rationality and conceptualization,” Professor Hochman explains sadly, as if “rationality” and “conceptualization” were evidence of some spiritual blight. Moreover, he was aloof, self-absorbed, impatient, and worse. “His presence dominated, overpowered the space around him,” Professor Hochman clucks: “he seemed totally withdrawn into the depths of himself, unconcerned with the intensity of this personal radiating force.” These and other personality flaws, she confides, have even jeopardized his artistic standing. “[H]is authoritarian instincts, single-mindedness, and refusal to acknowledge the validity and diversity of human claims have been vigorously criticized and have triggered, to a great extent, much of the disrepute into which modernism has fallen since his death.” Furthermore, Mies did not always practice what he preached: he “built as he lived” — whatever that means — but “he was not above saying one thing and building another.” Then again, though Mies suffered from “a deep, pervasive, and lifelong insecurity about his intellectual qualifications” (see: just like Hitler!), he was intellectually and socially pretentious. “Even his name was not his own,” Professor Hochman sallies, noting that her subject was christened Maria Ludwig Michael Mies and later joined his mother’s tonier maiden name, “Rohe,” to his own with the aristocratic-sounding “van der.” In this context, it should perhaps also be noted that Professor Hochman can be selective in her telling of anecdotes. Thus she reports that when the Nazis gained their first majority in the Reichstag, in March 1933, nationalist students at the Bauhaus ran up a swastika. But she doesn’t tell us that Mies, as director of the school, immediately had the banner taken down.

Nor is Professor Hochman above contradicting herself in order to achieve a certain effect. Near the end of her book, for example, she quotes Philip Johnson: “Whoever commissions buildings, buys me. I’m for sale. I’m a whore. I’m an artist.” Professor Hochman repeats this famous — what to call it: confession? boast? advertisement? — from Johnson, adding that his “philosophy was very similar to that of Mies.” But as Professor Hochman herself is at pains to show throughout *Architects of Fortune*, Mies’s Olympian attitude toward his clients made him precisely the opposite of Johnson in this respect. Mies could on occasion be cajoled into compromising on what he considered inessential aspects of a project, but it is one of the main themes — and persistent criticisms — of *Architects of Fortune* that he was generally unbending in his commitment to excellence. “Anything less than perfection is unacceptable,” he said upon turning down the offer to work on Hitler’s plan to re-design Berlin in 1936. Professor Hochman critically cites Mies’s remark that clients should be treated as “children”: humored, but given good architecture, not what they mistakenly thought they wanted. For Professor Hochman, such sentiments are evidence of Mies’s deplorable



“arrogance,” though when it comes to Philip Johnson she seems willing to forget this line of reasoning in order to present Mies, too, as a kind of artistic prostitute.

Hence it is ironical that much of the evidence Professor Hochman has collected serves rather to exculpate Mies than to condemn him. She relates a number of anecdotes that cast Mies in a courageous, almost heroic light. Consider, for example, the story of his refusal to resign his commission to design a textile exhibition in Berlin in 1937. After patronage for the exhibition had been peremptorily appropriated by Göring, who worried that it might upstage the government’s own propaganda efforts, Mies was called in for questioning by the chairman of the Berlin city council and told that he must resign the commission. Mies replied:

“I will not resign. You are exceeding your bounds in ordering me to do so.”

“Herr Professor, if I may say, it is you who are exceeding. . .”

“I will not resign!” said Mies.

“You must...”

“I will not!”

Reaching across the table to [a] manila folder . . . , the chairman took another tack. “Herr Professor,” he said, as the room grew silent. “For your own sake, sir, . . . I think you should reconsider. There seems to be some incriminating evidence on you . . . .”

“I . . . will . . . not . . . resign!” Mies repeated. . . .

He then stormed out of the room.

**O**f course, one inconvenient fact for anyone attempting to link modernism and Nazism is that, with the exception of some statements supporting Expressionist art by Goebbels in the early Thirties, the Nazis themselves were adamantly anti-modernist. Their adjective for modern art, remember, was *entartete*: degenerate. But if this makes it difficult to establish a deep, connection between the arch-modernist Mies and the Nazis, it is by no means an insuperable obstacle. For one thing, as Professor Hochman rightly reminds us, Hitler did not completely reject modern architecture; he thought that its stripped-down, functional look was appropriate for certain industrial purposes. Nevertheless, when it came to public building—when it came to architecture as distinct from mere building—he categorically rejected modernism. It wasn’t grand enough, it wasn’t imposing enough, and of course by his lights it wasn’t “German” enough. Thus it is not surprising that the Nazis had little patience with Mies. The house Mies designed for the 1931 Berlin Building Exhibition was dismissed as a “horse stable,” his design for the Lange House was rejected as “un-German,” and so on.

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## This is not to say that Mies consistently refused to work for the Nazis.

This is not to say that Mies consistently refused to work for the Nazis. As is well known, there are a handful of projects Mies undertook—or, more often, attempted to

undertake—from 1933 through 1937 under state patronage. (It happens that Mies's chief source of income in the Thirties came not from architecture—he built almost nothing during this period—but from sales of his furniture.) For example, in February 1933, a few weeks after Hitler's rise to power, Mies, along with thirty other distinguished architects, competed for the commission to design the new Reichsbank in Berlin. Mies was one of six finalists, but his design was not in the end chosen. Then there was Mies's participation in the Reichskulturkammer, the State Culture Bureau, which was established at Goebbels's demand late in 1933. Though Goebbels later abandoned his support of modern art and "new forms" created by "young ideas," he initially instituted the Reichskulturkammer to encourage modern art and to challenge the more conservative cultural body headed by Alfred Rosenberg, then one of Goebbels's main political rivals. Mies also designed an exposition pavilion to represent Germany in the 1935 Brussels World's Fair. Though the pavilion was never built, Mies, in Franz Schulze's words, "was clearly doing what he could to gain the commission." His accompanying statement was full of the obligatory nationalistic phrases, and one of his rough designs includes a swastika. The only other project of Mies's whose commission was traceable to the government was the design of an exhibition for Deutsches Volk/Deutsche Arbeit Exposition in Berlin in 1934. As the architectural critic Martin Filler observed in an essay on Mies, this was "hardly an innocuous trade show," inasmuch as it was designed to highlight the dangers of racial impurity.<sup>[5]</sup> But it is also worth noting that while the Nazis allowed Mies to carry out his design, they disliked its modernist look enough to omit his name from the exhibition catalogue.

What are we to make of this list? According to Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's widow, Sibyl (whom Professor Hochman quotes), Mies's participation in these Nazi-sponsored projects was evidence of his "desperate attempts to play up to National Socialism" and showed that he was "a traitor to all of us." There can be no doubt that, at least until late 1934, Mies did what he could to win architectural commissions from the state. But his behavior hardly constituted "desperate attempts to play up to National Socialism"—for which he had nothing but contempt—let alone anything traitorous. Again, the truth of the case is perhaps best summed up by Schulze: "Mies's own attitude was a conflicted patchwork of indifference toward national politics in general, hostility toward Nazi philistinism in particular, dedication to architectural principle, and desire to build regardless of who asked him." As Schulze goes on to observe,

in view of the catastrophe that engulfed Germany in the years after the Brussels project [1934], there is nothing to gain by picturing Mies as some of his admirers have tried, namely, as a staunch opponent of Nazism. This was, after all, a man who within eight years' time had designed a monument to a pair of

Communist martyrs, a throne for a Spanish king, a pavilion for a moderately socialist government, and another for a militantly right-wing totalitarian state! Politically Mies was a passive soul; his active moral energies were turned toward his art and away from practically all else.

There is one sense in which Professor Hochman might well agree with Schulze (though she does not quote his mitigating assessment). For as we have seen, the core of her criticism is not that Mies was a Nazi or a Nazi sympathizer but that his commitment to modernist architecture implicated him in a dangerously idealistic view of art, a view that ignored everyday political problems and subordinated the needs of particular individuals to an abstract idea of virtue. “[M]ore than political disdain,” she writes, “simply feeling ‘above it all’ or aesthetic elitism lay behind the propensity of Mies and his peers to turn a blind eye to the moral perversities of the Third Reich. . . .” In her somewhat clotted prose, she reminds us that

time and time again during this inquiry into Mies’s actions, we are confronted with the spectacle of individuals who have been lauded for creating what has generally come to be acknowledged as the unique twentieth-century contribution to world culture pursuing participation in what is undoubtedly one of the century’s most despised manifestations. Perhaps, in Mies’s case, the reason lies in the striking resemblance of the motivating and dynamic forces that underlay his style (and, by implication, all of architectural modernism)—its idealism, deprecation of empirical reality, absolutism, and arrogance—to the principles that supported the Third Reich. Mies, like others of his generation, *including* the Nazis [my emphasis], perceived the existence of a singular meaning beyond the multifarious nature of daily life. They believed that beneath the seemingly chaotic variety, the inconsistencies and frequent absurdities that mark human existence lay something called “Truth,” or “The Good,” or, as Mies was fond of saying, “the spirit of the age” . . . . Life was perceived within a stern hierarchy of values in which all was sublimated toward this higher goal. For Mies, it was his architectural ideal; for the Nazis, it was the state.

But in fact, what this peroration tokens is a complete inability to distinguish between genuine idealism and its perversion. In ridiculing “something called ‘Truth,’ or ‘The Good,’” Professor Hochman seeks to declare her correct ideological credentials, but succeeds merely in betraying her obtuseness. For a world in which Hitler’s fantasies blend with the rigorous aesthetic of someone like Mies is more fantastic and incredible than any traditional idealism. By the time Professor Hochman has finished, not only is the “idealism” of Nazism scarcely distinguishable from modernism, it is scarcely distinguishable from orthodox Catholicism or any other non-materialistic philosophy. Even the emperor Charlemagne is suspect. Noting that the cathedral in Mies’s hometown of Aachen was built by Charlemagne, Professor Hochman (who has it on the authority of Albert Speer) informs us that Hitler greatly admired the emperor. But of course: Charlemagne, too, was authoritarian; he, too, “instituted harsh and repressive laws” and he—like Hitler and Mies—was “certain that God was on his side.”

## Professor Hochman is quite right to stress the idealistic element in Mies's work.

Professor Hochman is quite right to stress the idealistic element in Mies's work. Like many modernists, he did believe that architecture was more than mere building, that it was called upon to express the ethos of a culture—what he, following Oswald Spengler, called the spirit of the age. But far from implicating him in despotism, this element of transcendence is something that ennobles Mies's work, raising it above the myriad Miesian knock-offs that may look like something of Mies's but lack his attention to detail, his sense of proportion, and above all his spirit. "The problem of Mies and the Third Reich is more than *just* a German issue or even an architectural one," Professor Hochman observes at the end of her book. Again, she is quite right. The case of Mies is in many ways emblematic of the fate of modernism and, indeed, of high culture itself in the late 1980s. But Professor Hochman, like Jencks and many others today, is deeply mistaken in thinking that the real task is to liberate art from any sort of idealism and hand it over to whatever political and cultural sentiments happen to be in vogue. As her book shows in excruciating detail, that is a prescription not for a deeper understanding of art but for its permanent bondage to ideological currency.

1. *Architects of Fortune: Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich*, by Elaine S. Hochman; Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 382 pages, \$22.50. [Go back to the text.](#)
2. *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, by Franz Schulze, was published in 1985 by the University of Chicago Press. [Go back to the text.](#)
3. Professor Hochman reserves several generous parentheses for Gropius, whom she clearly regards more highly than Mies. E.g., "Gropius (who was personally kind and generous) saw architecture as serving people; Mies saw it as serving art." [Go back to the text.](#)
4. For an overview of Mies's distinctive contribution to modernist architecture, see my article "Modernism and Mies738221; in *Architectural Record*, March 1986, pages 73-77. [Go back to the text.](#)
5. "Building and Nothingness," by Martin Fuller; *The New York Review of Books*, June 12, 1986; pages 26-33. [Go back to the text.](#)

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**Roger Kimball** is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).

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