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Less Is Still More

The Restoration of the Tugendhat House Brings Mies's Modernist Masterpiece Back to Life

By J. S. MARCUS

David Židlický/Study and Documentation center of the Villa Tugendhat

Garden façade of the Tugendhat House

Modernist architecture is often associated with austere office buildings and anonymous apartment blocks, but a walk through the Tugendhat House, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's sumptuous masterpiece in Brno, Czech Republic, shows how Modernist ideas could inspire unparalleled domestic luxury.

Designed between 1928 and 1930, the villa was commissioned by Fritz and Grete Tugendhat, members of Brno's German-speaking elite. Spread out over three levels, which seem to disappear into the slope of a hill overlooking the city, the enormous, 2,600-square-meter house incorporated a range of exotic, expensive materials, from Moroccan onyx to Chinese silk, and featured pieces of specially designed furniture that are now icons of 20th-century design.

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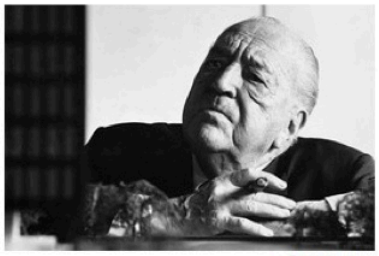
Mies's Modernist Masterpiece

David Zidlicky/Study and Documentation center of the Villa Tugendhat

Following the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1938, the Tugendhat family, who were of Jewish origin, had to leave their house behind. During the postwar period, when it was used as everything from a rehabilitation center to a de facto hotel, the house slipped into disrepair. In the 1980s, during the twilight of the country's communist regime, an attempt at a restoration led to mixed results. Declared a Unesco World Heritage site in 2001, the building and its contents, now owned by the city of Brno and administered by the Brno City Museum, underwent an extensive, €7.2 million makeover, lasting from 2010 to this winter. On March 6, the house, now a near-exact replica of the original, reopened to the public and can be visited by appointment.

"It has been an incredible fight," says Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, daughter of the original owners, adding that she has been trying for decades to return the house to its former splendor. Following the fall of communism in 1989, Ms. Hammer-Tugendhat and her surviving siblings considered their options. After receiving some of the contents back as restitution starting in 2006, the family initiated efforts to get back the house "in order to save it," she says. A lawsuit was never brought, but she believes that legal rumblings and the family's objections to the house's condition helped pave the way for restoration.

Born in 1946 in Caracas, Venezuela, where her family had sought refuge during the war, Ms. Hammer-Tugendhat is now an art historian based in Vienna. She and her husband, the architectural conservator Ivo Hammer, actively participated in the restoration process, which was devoted to using original materials and techniques.



Getty Images

Architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Ms. Hammer-Tugendhat says she doesn't know how many times she has now visited the house, but each time, the lower-level living room—a 237-square-meter, light-filled array of flowing space—fills her with awe. The room, one of Mies's signature creations, fosters a feeling that "I only know from medieval churches," she says.

After its 1980s restoration, the room, composed of a patchwork of areas, contained "very bad imitations" of original furniture, Ms. Hammer-Tugendhat says. Now, it is filled with precise replicas of the house's famous Brno, Tugendhat and Barcelona chairs.

The Tugendhat House's restoration has benefited from a new approach to preserving Modernist buildings, says Jean-Louis Cohen, a Mies scholar and professor of architectural history at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. "A new generation of experts," he says, now takes an "archaeological" view, yielding superb results.

Prof. Cohen remembers visiting the house after work was finished in 1985. Although the building's trademark flowing floor plan was still evident, he says "the grand atmosphere from the 1930s was not there." The new interiors are once again marked by opulent elements, like rosewood-veneer doors, an ebony library bench and a round, pearwood-veneer dining table.

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The glass-walled living room is dominated by a hollow slab of rich gold onyx—the hollowness allows the sun to shine through, lightening up the space. The Tugendhat House, says Prof. Cohen, "has a purity and a grandeur that you can't find in other buildings."

Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

Mies's 'Barcelona' chair, 1929.

The restoration required detective work. A macassar ebony room-divider disappeared during the war; it was thought lost for good until sections were discovered a few kilometers away at Masaryk University, in a canteen used by the Gestapo as an officers' club. The hunt for original building materials led to a Moravian sand supplier, found some 20 kilometers away, and an Italian quarry, the source of marble meal used in the plaster. "We were very strict" about the sourcing of materials, says Brno architect Iveta Černá, secretary of the Tugendhat House International Committee, composed of experts who made recommendations about the restoration.

Eighty percent of the funding for the restoration came from the European Union's Integrated Operational Program; the rest came from the Czech Ministry of Culture and the city of Brno.

The house was a design laboratory, and some of its innovations have become standard-issue. The living room contained one of the earliest plate-glass coffee tables. Millions of people now live and work with these tables in their midst, but to see the original design in its intended setting is a revelation, says Barry Bergdoll, chief curator of architecture and design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which includes the home's original coffee table in its permanent collection. The table, he says, "is incredibly resonant with the architecture." The living room's glass walls and chrome columns are echoed in the coffee table's glass top and chrome-plated brace.

The interiors have been recreated, but the actual building—which is notoriously difficult to photograph—needs to be visited to be seen. You can only appreciate its genius, says Ms. Hammer-Tugendhat, "by moving through it."

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Shades of Gray

The long-awaited restoration of the Tugendhat House comes at a time when Europe is still rediscovering the richness of its Modernist heritage. The movement produced other lavish residential projects that have been previously ignored.

Among the most compelling is "E.1027," designed between 1926 and 1929 by Paris-based Irish designer Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici, a Romanian architect and long-time French resident. Located in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin on the French Riviera, the minimalist house is known for its original interiors, designed by Gray, and colorful murals by Le Corbusier, a friend of Badovici and a frequent guest, who later built a log-cabin studio nearby.

The home changed hands a few times after Badovici's death, and became a crime scene in the mid-'90s, when its owner, a Swiss doctor, was murdered by his gardener. Later, it was taken over by squatters. According to Caroline Constant, a professor of architecture and urban planning at the University of Michigan, who went to the site a year or so after the murder, "vagrants broke all the windows and generally left a mess," but, curiously, "they did not damage the murals."

The house, now revered by design mavens, was bought by the French government in 1999, and its full-scale restoration is scheduled for completion by early fall.

The past few years have seen a dramatic rediscovery of Eileen Gray, whose creations include the bulbous, early 20th-century Bibendum chair and the now-legendary Dragon chair (1917-19), the original version of which sold for an astonishing €21.9 million at Christie's Paris in 2009.

The instigator behind the house's restoration is New York art dealer Sandra Gering, partner and executive director at the Gering & Lopez Gallery. After reading about Gray in the 1990s, she visited the derelict house and briefly considered buying it. Instead, she contacted the French government and started an organization, Friends of E.1027.

"I was attracted to Eileen," says Ms. Gering, who has a Bibendum chair in her New York apartment. "Her taste, for me, is impeccable. When I saw that her house was in decay, and Le Corbusier's little, one-room studio was perfectly redone, I was very upset."

—J. S. Marcus