THE “OTHER” FARNSWORTH HOUSE

Abstract

In April 1953, Elizabeth Gordon (1906–2000) launched an attack on elitist architects and the control they claimed over lifestyle and taste.[1] In her editorial for *House Beautiful*, Gordon condemned modernist aberrations for giving up on comfort and humanity. She saw the American values of common sense, unbound riches, and individual choice under threat. What had Gordon so alarmed was what she called “nothing more but a glass cage on stilts.”[2] Designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) and completed in 1951, the Farnsworth House epitomized modern architecture (figure 1). A modest barn conversion from the same architect is its unlikely twin (figure 2). The parallel conception by the two related, yet distinctly different, buildings challenges the single-minded narratives of modernism.[3]

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About 1947, American sculptor and art collector Mary Callery (1903–1977) acquired two timber barns on Long Island. She converted the larger one as her studio, while the smaller one—with Mies’s help—was to become the “Living Barn.”[4] Interventions were limited and materials modest, yet the hand of the architect is evident in the carefully made details as well as the well-calibrated relation to the landscape around it. The Farnsworth House and the Living Barn followed parallel timelines, shared similar programs, and matched each other in size. Like the Farnsworth House, the barn was spatially generous and subtly zoned, but whereas the Farnsworth House sought communion with nature, the Living Barn achieved a symbiosis of Callery’s and Mies’s work (figure 3).

Both Callery and Dr. Edith Farnsworth (1903–1977) were independent women and highly accomplished in their respective fields. Callery’s trajectory in life and art “was not a straight-edges highway, but curved, endlessly like the lithe lines of her sculpted figures, opening new vistas at every turn.”[5] In Callery, Mies found European sophistication paired with American candor. The integrity of her artistic vision and her openness when working together with others allowed her to realize significant collaborative projects, including this barn conversion. Farnsworth, despite being intelligent and cultivated, was not as aesthetically savvy and failed to imagine what life in a glass house might actually be like, and as a result she saw herself as “a dupe and a victim.”[6] What distinguished Callery were her intellectual sensibility and artistic imagination. As a sophisticated artist,

Notes

1. For further detail, see Penick, *Tastemaker: Elizabeth Gordon, House Beautiful, and the Postwar American Home*, 115–128.

2. Gordon, “The Threat to the Next America,” 129.

3. This text relates to ongoing doctoral research under the supervision of Kathleen James-Chakraborty, Professor of Art History at University College, Dublin, Ireland.

4. Zaleski, *Long Island Modernism 1930–1980*, 216–223.

5. Adams, in Mary Callery, *Sculpture*, VI.

6. Farnsworth, letter dated March 1, 1951, quoted in Alice T. Friedman, *Women and the Making of the Modern House—A Social and Architectural History*, 140.

Figure 2: The Living Barn, north elevation, 1975. (Source: Ludwig Glaeser, photographer. Canadian Centre for Architecture, with kind permission by Nicolas Köhler.)

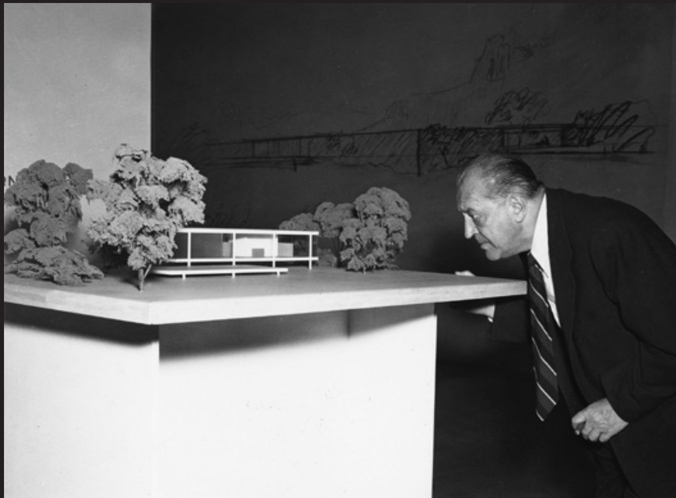

Figure 1: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with the model of the Farnsworth House, 1947. (Source: William Leftwich, photographer. Edward A. Duckett Collection, Ryerson and Burnham Archives, the Art Institute of Chicago. Digital File #198602.081216-03.)

Figure 3: Mary Callery, Seated Figure, looking toward the Living Barn, c1952. (Source: Private photo. Estate of Mary Callery.)

Figure 5: The Living Barn, post and beam structure, 1975. (Source: Ludwig Glaeser, photographer. Canadian Centre for Architecture, with kind permission by Nicolas Köhler.)

Figure 4: The Living Barn, exterior and flagstone patio, 1975. (Source: Ludwig Glaeser, photographer. Canadian Centre for Architecture, with kind permission by Nicolas Köhler.)

Figure 6: Living Barn, the main living area as seen from the sleeping loft above the kitchen and study, 1952. (Source: Gordon Parks, photographer. {ital mag title:} LIFE Magazine/Getty Images.)

educated client, and a person of "implicit womanly strength," Callery exerted decisive influence on the shaping of the environment she lived and worked in (figure 4).[7] Evidently Farnsworth got the house that Mies wanted, whereas Callery got the house that she wanted. This stands in contrast to the image of the controlling and domineering architect that had emerged as a result of the Farnsworth trial—a narrative that suited Elizabeth Gordon so well.[8]

The historic barn was a simple post-and-beam construction, at once reminiscent of medieval half-timbered houses, or "Fachwerk," familiar to every German (figure 5). Mies appreciated these vernacular buildings for their clarity of structure and integrity of form, and he admired the warmth and beauty they conveyed.[9] Making reference to vernacular buildings may have been natural to Mies, but within the architectural discourse at the time it was not. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (1903–1971) introduced the concept of the vernacular, and her position was soon interpreted as a counter-image for the modern.[10] In 1957, after five years of writing, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture* was published. As a book on vernacular architecture written for architects and inspiringly illustrated, it was the first of its kind.[11] Although less polemical than Gordon, Moholy-Nagy looked equally critical at modern architecture, and evoked the Farnsworth House as an example of regressive modernism. She criticized the house, without naming it, for departing from the traditions of the American home. Advocating for a decidedly "organic" approach, both Gordon and Moholy-Nagy wanted to educate contemporary architects and their clients. Moholy-Nagy championed the "pre-conscious building" of the past as an inspiration for contemporary designers.[12] "I was influenced by old buildings, mostly very simple buildings," Mies remembered, and he was impressed by their strength and enduring quality.[13] Looking ahead, Moholy-Nagy insisted, "As those builders of old, the architect of today has to create 'an anonymous architecture for the anonymous men' of the Industrial Age."[14] Mies could not have agreed more.

The critique of Mies' work focused on the Farnsworth House as technological, austere, and constraining. Its counterpart—native, supple, and accommodating—was largely ignored because no intellectual framework yet existed to appreciate a barn conversion as architecture (figure 6). Moholy-Nagy was among the first to address the ignorance (and arrogance) of a profession that valued only pedigreed designs. It is worth noting that all protagonists introduced here, except for the architect, are female. Callery, Farnsworth, Gordon and Moholy-Nagy belonged to a generation of remarkable women, all born in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the prime of their professional lives, in their mid-forties, and in their respective roles as clients, collaborators, and critics they actively shaped the direction of modern architecture as profoundly as the architects themselves.

The critique offered by Gordon and Moholy-Nagy resonated with a shift in architectural culture at the time. Both the Farnsworth House and the Living Barn were designed in a period of experimentation that was rich in diversity and innovation.[15] While other architects' projects tried to capture the scientific and technological innovations that were about to change global culture, the Living Barn provided a counterpoint to their efforts. In the years that followed the completion of both the Farnsworth House and the Living Barn, Mies found himself pushed to one side of a dividing line that ran between modern and vernacular architecture—an angry dispute that would have made very little sense to him to start with because Mies's modern architectural practice cannot be separated from his appreciation of old buildings. The editors of *House Beautiful* vilified European modernists, and Mies was often described as the lone hero of Modernism, who said little and thought less was more. Yet it turns out that his projects could very well be the result of creative dialogue, specific in their response to place and material and—most importantly—extremely generous in their response to people. It was left to others, architects of a younger generation, to fully appreciate and theorize this alternative approach.

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7. Adams, in Mary Callery, *Sculpture*, VII.

8. For details on the trial, see Schulze and Windhorst, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*, 247–272.

9. Mies van der Rohe, "Inaugural Address as Director of Architecture at Armour Institute of Technology," 191–195.

10. Heynen, "Anonymous Architecture as Counter-Image: Sibyl Moholy-Nagy's Perspective on American Vernacular," 469–491.

11. S. Moholy-Nagy, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*.

12. S. Moholy-Nagy, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*, 108.

13. Mies van der Rohe, *Conversations Regarding the Future of Architecture*.

14. S. Moholy-Nagy, *Native Genius in Anonymous Architecture*, 23. (Emphasis in the original.)

15. For details, see Barbara Miller Lane, *Houses for a New World: Builders and Buyers in American Suburbs, 1945–1965.*