

Architect Peter Gluck adds to a classic house by Mies van der Rohe

A MASTERFUL MEETING

BY MICHAEL SORKIN PHOTOGRAPHS BY HENRY BOWLES



Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed a small house in 1955 for a site on a Connecticut river, one of only three built by the architect in the United States. His client was the brother of a Chicago developer who had commissioned Mies's great apartment project on Lake Shore Drive. Family ties did not end here. The little house incorporated into its façades the same pattern of mullion and glass used in the Chicago apartments—suburbanized with a coat of white paint—and even used surplus materials from the Chicago job site.

This borrowing was no simple economy. Rather, it was expressive of a central preoccupation. Mies, the great apostle of "less is more," was a Classicist, a believer in universal values, and his was a search not for variety but for perfection. The Connecticut house not only resembled the Lake Shore apartments, it was a virtual twin to a 1951 row-house design meant as a prototype for urban mass housing (a vision, it seems, that fired the enthusiasm only of the rich). But even beyond such similarities as these, it is the hallmark of the Miesian system that every work accomplished according to its rules is a little *summa*, making conspicuous in all its parts the tenets underlying its construction. In the Connecticut house, the simple plan, with its unimpeded flow of space, the reliance on a gridded geometry, the frank, unadorned use of materials, the penchant for glass and steel, are not just immediate particulars but emblems of a life's work.

Not long ago, the property changed hands, and New York architect Peter Gluck was hired to add guest quarters, entertainment space, and a pool to the compact original, which together would considerably exceed the size of the existing house. Gluck's was a double challenge. First, he faced the preservationist imperatives of dealing with an impeccable given. And second, he was to be designing a response to a specific architectural ethic now widely seen as barren of domestic charm. Fortunately, this latter difficulty pretty much solved itself. The new owner was looking less for a comfy primary domicile than for a place to entertain, not for domestic privacies but for poolside party pavilions that would take full advantage of a lovely wooded site. It was a set of requirements that virtually invited glass houses, and Gluck—responding to the scale and spirit of the original—provided two.

Dealing with the first problem was considerably trickier. To simultaneously respect a seminal idiom and satisfy his own designer-hubris, Gluck had to avoid apishness and self-obliteration. His solution proved to be a piece of design that is clearly in the manner of Mies; but it incorporates gestures and elements that are both deferential and fresh.

Gluck's additions begin with the idea of celebrating the quintessential components of Miesness. The transcendent icon of the master's rationality is the grid, and undergirding the plan of the new construction is a classic tartan pattern. This serves both as an organizing principle for the disposition of spaces and as an expressive motif. The grid appears in the pattern of the stone paving that knits the new pool and structures together and in a long sculpted steel screen that more literally links Gluck's two pavilions. Most important, Gluck uses the grid as Mies did, to generate form and spirit. One reads in the project's cruciform columns the very idea of intersection. In the rectilinear quality that suffuses the work is an almost religious striving for a legible perfection. Mies's mighty aphorism, "God is in the details," means exactly this: heavenly order is revealed in the smallest elements, in the ability of the system to find consistent and logical expression down to the tiniest bit.

In building the addition, Gluck was himself caught up in the search, becoming a dedicated—if temporary—apostle of the Miesian aesthetic. As he recounts it, he found himself trying to "out-Mies Mies," and as a result, the project grew to be a greater and greater technical challenge, a quest for a scrupulousness of construction that would match the precision of the idea behind it. This called for enormous sophistication in the craft of building, and Gluck finally chose to take on the role of contractor himself, riding attentive herd on a building process that stretched over a period of two years.

Perhaps the most seminal work in the Miesian canon is the celebrated Barcelona Pavilion of 1929. Almost more than any other modern building, this was an act of pure composition, architecture as sculpture. It set a demanding standard against which Mies's subsequent work had to be judged. If Mies's architecture is generally associated with the "form follows function" dictum, this was a building that was essentially functionless, a building "about" such ineffables as clarity, order, the sensuality of materials, and the flow of space, concerns that remained the architect's highest preoccupations, whatever the mundane function to be accommodated.

But the Barcelona Pavilion also crystallized a type. To

GRID LOCK

Preceding pages: The meeting of architecture by Mies, at right, and Gluck, at left, on a Connecticut river site. *Opposite:* A scrupulously detailed corner of the entertainment pavilion. Within, a cruciform steel column emerges from the intersection of grid lines. Raised floor and dropped ceiling define a sense of enclosure.

CARTESIAN COORDINATES

A corner of one of the pavilions shows ranks of tracks for the sliding glass panels that permit virtually the entire structure to be opened to the outdoors. Seemingly, even shadows must conform to the right-angle perfection of the Miesian idiom.

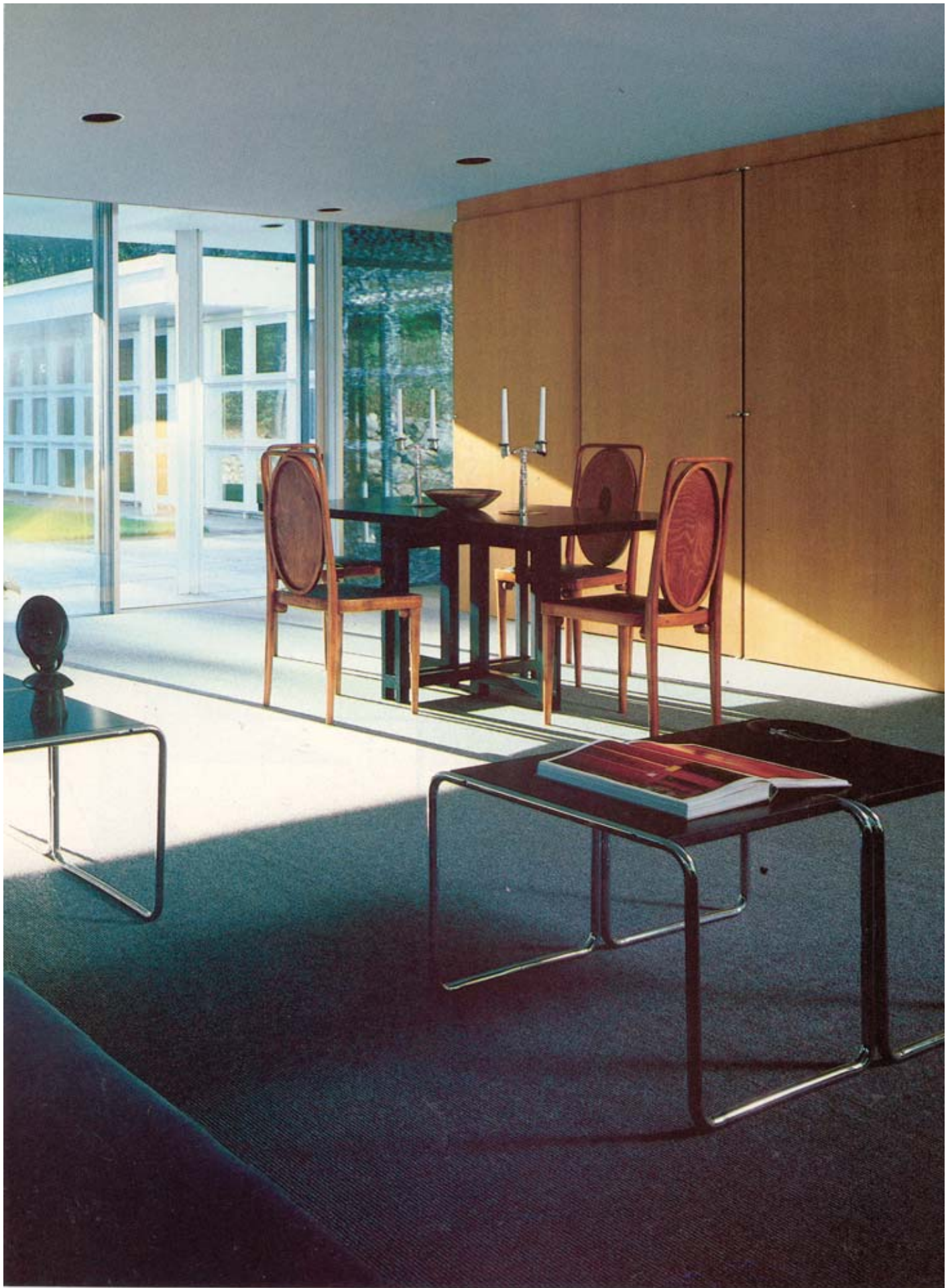






THE BRIGHT PAVILIONS

Entertainment and guest pavilions are arranged at right angles around a swimming pool. Josef Hoffmann chairs from Galerie Metropol surround a table designed by Peter Gluck. The small sculpture is by Max Ernst, from Suellen Haber Gallery.





SPATIAL DELIVERY

Linking the two pavilions is a steel screen wall that reflects the dimensions of the planning grid, here visible in the pattern of the stone pavers. Walls of glass invite reflection, dematerializing the buildings' edges.



the last, Mies was preoccupied with “pavilions,” with a sort of secular analogue to the classical Greek temple. Both of these types take as their “problem” the enclosure of a simple space with measured means, striving for a universality of expression in the quest for absolute proportion. In his own Connecticut pavilions, Gluck has used Barcelona as a major source but has tempered his borrowings with references to subsequent work. The structure housing sauna, bathing facilities, and guest bedrooms explicitly alludes to the Barcelona plan, a relationship continued in the placement of the swimming pool, reminiscent of Mies’s reflecting pool at Barcelona.

The Spanish project is also evoked in the way the newer structures exploit the play of planes of materials of varying densities: tile, wood, glass, steel. Their perimeter is composed of sliding panels of glass and screen mesh. As one panel is slid behind another, the buildings can be opened to the outdoors, erasing the barrier between inside and out and abetting the flow of space that is a hallmark of Miesian modernism. As they stack up, though, the panels themselves are transformed, their density and reflectivity subtly altered. With a screen behind them, moiré patterns are created and the layers of glass begin to look almost like polished stone.

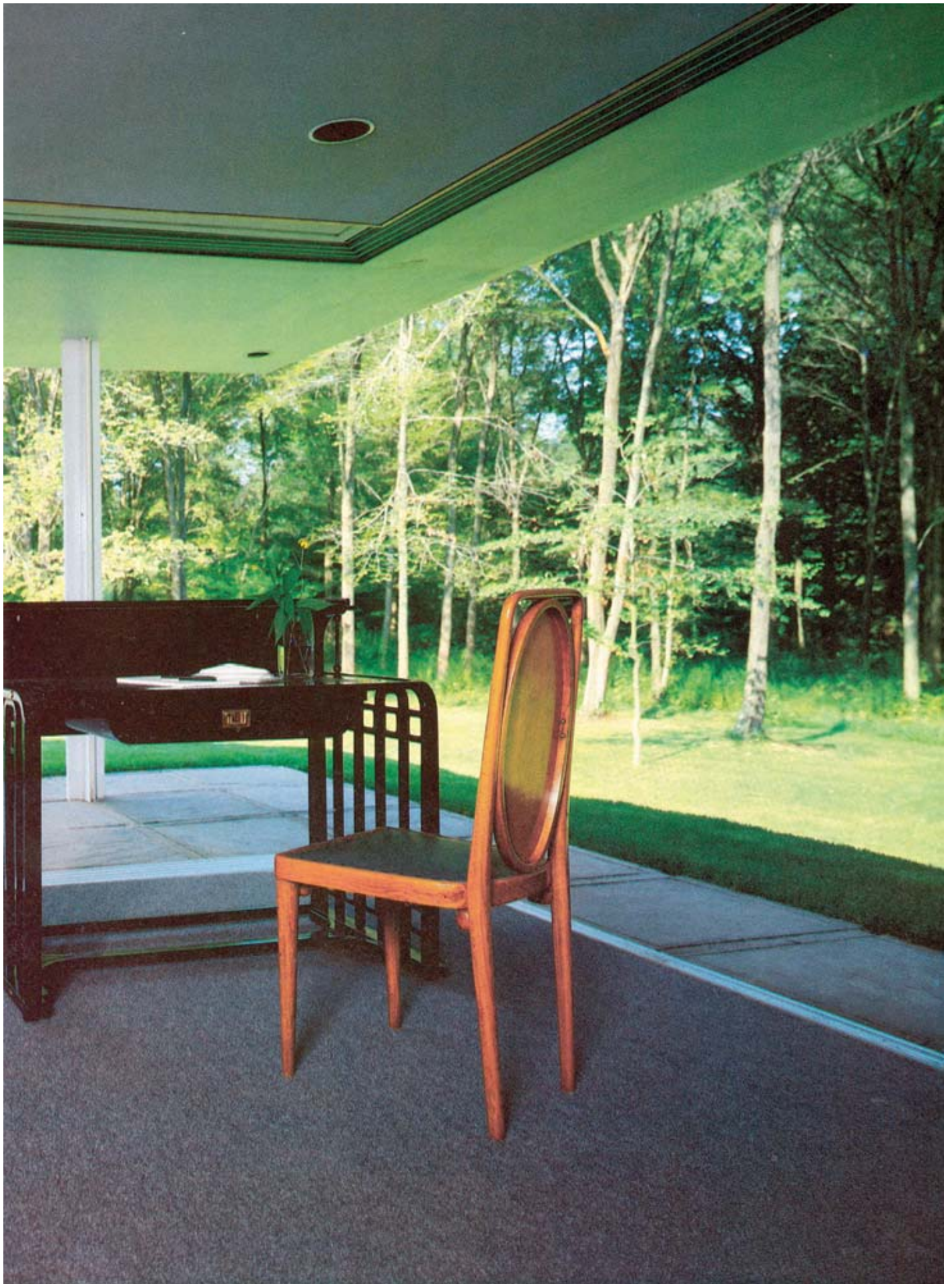
This system of panels—even though constructed of modern materials in the service of a rigorously Modernist image—is reminiscent of the movable walls in traditional Japanese architecture. This is not coincidental. In much of his work, Peter Gluck has drawn on Japanese sources, and the Connecticut additions are no exception. Indeed, Gluck sees Miesian and Japanese systems as linked at the source, kin through a common focus on the Classicizing refinement of post-and-beam construction—and, one might add, through a shared concern with the materiality of space and with the idea of impermanence and flux. Finally, the two ways of building find equal fascination in temples and pavilions: Gluck’s works would serve happily as teahouses.

Peter Gluck’s Orientalization of Mies proceeds in several ways. First come those panels and their powers of modulation over light and enclosed space. Second, the architect has dropped ceilings and raised floors within the pavilions by several inches. This step up and floating plane above are classic *(Text continued on page 165)*

ARCADIAN CORNER

A Josef Hoffmann desk from Galerie Metropoli looks out on a verdant landscape framed by a deep roof overhang. The single column signals the building edge and further frames the view, pulling the verticality of the trees into the larger composition.





MASTERFUL MEETING

(Continued from page 114) Japanese devices for defining space. The little platform is a kinesthetic invitation to ritual shoe removal, a subtle barrier that transforms “out” to “in” despite the absence of an opaque wall. More explicitly, the guest pavilion features a Japanese bath, right at home. But a Japanese style of behavior is invited throughout. The project is virtually unfurnished—even the beds are out of sight, custom-made Murphys—and demands to remain so. In a pavilion/shrine the pressure for perfection is intense, completely contrary to the happy disorder of conventional domestic arrangements. Here, furniture must be genius or not at all.

The general image of the two new pavilions evokes such late Miesian works as the monumental art museum in Berlin and the somewhat earlier project for a headquarters building for Bacardi in Havana. These pavilionlike structures have relatively thick-looking roof slabs supported by large columns, an almost Attic configuration. Gluck's domestication of this form is not entirely successful: his roofs are simply too thick, a problem created partly because of cost and such technical requirements as roof drainage. Thickness also afflicts the project in the long gridded screen wall, which likewise needs a little more of less. But these are small cavils: Gluck's proportions mainly hit the mark.

There's a way in which this project is an aberration, a rare congruence of program and method that has permitted Miesian austerity to flourish. However, it's also a measure of Peter Gluck's skill that the place is both visually and functionally satisfying, that neither component is compromised, that the buildings' delights are so thoroughgoing. More, Gluck has succeeded in producing work in the manner of Mies that transcends an exercise in imitation or role playing. It succeeds by not being exactly Mies while always being about Mies, an absorbing gloss in steel and glass. It's exactly the deference the master deserves. □ *Editor: Elizabeth Sverbeyeff Byron*