

# ARCHITECTURE: MODIFYING MIES

## Peter L. Gluck Rises to the Modernist's Challenge

By Paul Goldberger

COURTESY PETER L. GLUCK AND PARTNERS, ARCHITECTS

*Before*



In augmenting an International Style house in Connecticut designed by Mies van der Rohe in 1955, architect Peter Gluck was forced to confront a vision of architectural purity. Gluck did two additions—a pool with two pavilions and, later, a bedroom wing connected to the house. ABOVE: The original Mies residence—one of only three extant in the United States—was built by the brother of Herbert Greenwald, a great patron and friend of Mies's.

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TOP RIGHT: Gluck held true to Mies's basic tenets while adding his own touches, such as contrasting the horizontal façade of the bedroom wing with the vertical elements of the original house, at right. ABOVE: He modified the Mies design by staggering the innovative glass curtain walls to create a small greenhouse in the master bath.

FEW ARCHITECTURAL problems are as vexing as adding to a building by Mies van der Rohe. First, any Mies building by definition possesses the status of a historic artifact, protected by an ethical presumption if not by a legal requirement that any future architect tread lightly. But the nature of Mies's architecture leaves almost no room for anyone else anyway. How do you expand a glass box that aspires to Platonic perfection?

Architect Peter L. Gluck recently completed his second addition in less than a decade to a little-known Mies house in Weston, Connecticut, and his work proves that Mies, if resistant to the amendments of later architects, is not wholly defiant of them. The Gluck additions not only respect the original Mies design, they broaden

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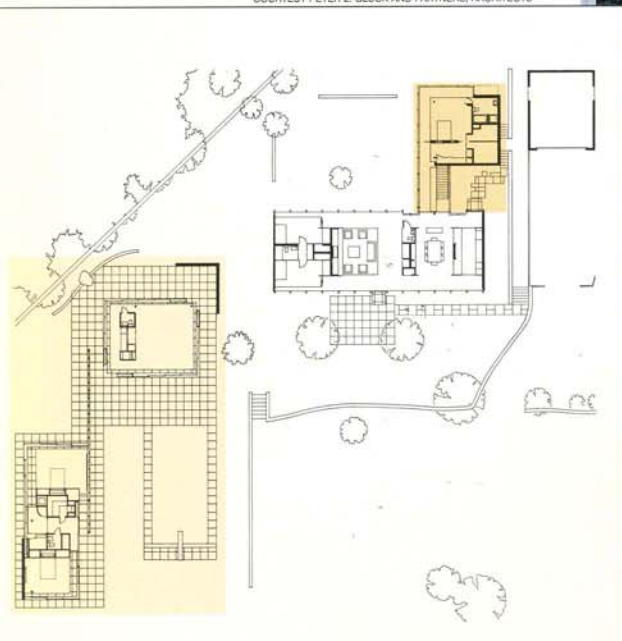


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In the first addition, Gluck designed a pool complex with a guest pavilion and an entertaining pavilion apart from the main house. RIGHT: "The importance of traditional Japanese architecture to the early modernists was echoed in such details as the raised living platform, sliding wall panels and fold-away beds," says Gluck. "Recalling the freestanding marble wall of Mies's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion, the perforated steel wall links the two pavilions."

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and expand its reach, bringing it into a wider architectural dialogue while being at the same time altogether faithful to its modernist patrimony.

"This house has a striking history," says Gluck. "It was built in 1955 for Morris Greenwald, brother of Herbert Greenwald, the Chicago developer and patron of Mies who commissioned the celebrated Lake Shore Drive apartments, Mies's most important early Chicago commission, in 1951." To know this piece of background and then to look at this house is to bring forth a smile, for the house could almost be a fragment of the



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ABOVE LEFT: The plan shows the two additions: the separate pool complex and the bedroom wing adjoining the original rectangular house. ABOVE RIGHT: In the back of the house, three vertical columns were removed to insert the hall into the addition, right. "The design was a study in historicism with detailing, proportioning and material selection sympathetic to modernism in general and to Mies in particular," Gluck concludes.

Lake Shore Drive tower, sliced off and plopped onto a lushly landscaped site in Fairfield County.

But the house not only looks like a fragment of the tower, in one sense it actually *is* one, since it was built out of sections of the glass curtain wall Mies had designed for the Chicago skyscraper. When the building was completed, some of the leftover window frames were shipped East and erected on the Connecticut property.

Since Mies had first sketched out the glass wall design as the façade for a row house scheme that was never built, in a way the Connecticut house is a step closer to his original intentions than the apartment tower. Nonetheless, it's not his most graceful work by any means; there is something about its lack of a cornice, and about the industrial quality of its glass, metal and grayish-brown-brick structure that denies it the lyricism of the great architect's major works. In the end it *does* feel like a section of a skyscraper cut out and placed abruptly on the ground.

How, then, to make it work, especially for the new owners, who wanted to make it suitable for their two

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young sons? The Greenwalds had raised children in the house, but not everyone could be expected to have that family's Miesian fervor, which was so strong it allowed the elder Greenwalds to live for years without a fully private master bedroom. And the owner in between the Greenwalds and the present family was a businessman for whom the house served as a weekend retreat. It was he who brought Peter Gluck and his partner, Kent Larson, to the house to create the first addition in 1982, a freestanding entertaining pavilion and a guest pavilion, a design based on Mies's Barcelona Pavilion of 1929.

In designing the complex, Gluck found a point of intersection between Mies's International Style modernism and Japanese architecture, which has long fascinated the Yale-educated, New York architect, who worked in Japan for a couple of years in the early seventies. His pavilions induced Mies's building into what can only be called a vastly richer and more vibrant interaction with the landscape. Both forms are transparent, with sliding glass panels, making the structures more open than the Barcelona building that inspired them. And in his most innovative change, Gluck reinterpreted the marble wall that ran through the Barcelona Pavilion as a transparent grid of white-painted squares of steel.

The gridded wall sets the tone for the second addition, the only one directly connected to the Mies building. To make the house more workable for the owners and their two sons, Gluck replaced the master bedroom alcove in the original building with a new master suite that extends out perpendicularly from the structure. Some of the new wing is sheathed in the same brick as the solid ends of the Mies building; the main walls, however, are a grid of glass panels, not like Mies's glass wall but compatible with it.

Replicating Mies's original wall was never considered: "I felt it was important to maintain a sense of sep-

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aration between the addition and the original building," says Gluck. "The glass walls of the addition are strongly horizontal in proportion, in deliberate contrast to the vertical emphasis of Mies's glass wall." Not even the most casual visitor could confuse the Peter Gluck wing with the Mies structure—especially not after seeing the whimsical reverse-step pattern of the glass wall around the new master bath.

Adding directly to the Mies house was something Gluck embarked on with hesitation. As he recalls, "I had argued the case for building the separate pavilions by saying that the house was a self-contained object that should not be altered.

"I thought long and hard before taking it on," he says of the current owners' request to add to the house. But he came ultimately to feel that it would be done with suitable deference to Mies—and that he, as the architect who had worked on the residence before, was in the best position to do it sensitively. And the project overall was still, to Gluck, "a historic restoration—it was just that the history we were restoring was modernism." Because of budgetary constraints, the floor had initially been done in vinyl tile and the paneling in the living room and dining area in low-quality wood. Gluck replaced the paneling with European oak and the floors with travertine, fulfilling a generation later the architect's intention.

The space freed up by the removal of the original master bedroom alcove went to a large, eat-in kitchen and a new dining area, all done in the spirit, if not to the letter, of Mies. These spaces, like both additions, respond to Mies van der Rohe not in the manner of weak imitation or arrogant defiance but with dignified and determined respect. Peter Gluck has designed in a similar but not an identical language to Mies van der Rohe—and in so doing he has provoked an enlightening architectural conversation. □