

New Fraternity Chapter House at I U by Ronald Kovener

A fraternity chapter house designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe will be opened on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University in 2021. The house was designed in the 1950s for Pi Lambda Phi fraternity on a lot on the south side of Third Street. It was not built at that time. Sidney Eskenazi was an undergraduate at I U when the designs was prepared. He and his wife are the



philanthropists who funded renovation of I. M. Pei designed art gallery on campus and are funding construction of the Mies's designed fraternity house on a site nearby on the north-west corner of 7th and Jordan. The building will be used for instructional and administrative purposes.

If you wonder why I refer to the architect's name simply as Mies, it is an interesting story. As Ludwig Mies was contemplating a career in architecture, he was concerned that the German word "mies" has an unflattering translation. English synonyms would be "lousy" or "crummy." He decided to expand his family name with his mother's maiden name, Rho and the Dutch conjunction "van der" rather than the similar German "von der" that signifies nobility. "Van der" translates to "originating in." Thus, his full professional name became Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.

Another famous architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, incorporated a part of his mother's name into his name. When Wright's father abandoned the family while Wright was in high school, he adopted his mother's maiden name, Lloyd, as his preferred middle name, replacing his given middle name of Lincoln. Wright displays the initials FLLW on the tiles he awards to some of his completed works of special excellence, evidencing that Lincoln is still part of his name.

There are other interesting similarities and interconnections between Mies and Wright. During Wright's brief time attending the University of Wisconsin, he became a member of Phi Delta Theta fraternity in 1886. Years later that chapter invited Wright to design a new chapter house for the chapter but decided to build a house designed by a different architect. Nonetheless, in his 90s, Wright attended the centennial of the Wisconsin chapter of his fraternity. Wright also did designs for Sigma Chi at Hanover College and Zeta Beta Tau at the University of Florida but none of those designs were built.

While chapters of Phi Delta Theta and Zeta Beta Tau did not built houses designed by Wright, chapters of those fraternities at the University of Chicago provided crucial assistance in avoiding demolition of the Robie House. (This house is part of a group of Wright works declared a World Heritage Site in 2020.) The Chicago Theological Seminary had owned the Robie House since 1926, using it for student housing and offices. In 1971, the seminary planned to demolish the house; the Robie house land with other land they owned would make enough room for a new dormitory. The chapter houses of the Phi Delta Theta and Zeta Beta Tau fraternities also bordered on the seminary property. These two fraternity chapters volunteered to vacate their houses to provide the land needed for the seminary's dormitory project and eliminate the need to demolish the Robie house.



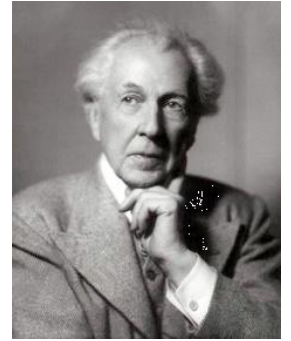
Mies had a similar experience with one of his designs. The structure known as the "Barcelona Pavilion" was designed by Mies as the focal point for the German section of a World's Fair held in Barcelona in 1929. It was immediately acclaimed a great architectural and artistic achievement. The only furnishing of the pavilion was the Barcelona chair with its ottoman. While the chair has been ubiquitous ever since,

there was no use for the Pavilion so it was demolished in 1930 after the fair closed. The significance of this piece of art was recognized so that it was recreated in 1986 on its original site in Barcelona where it can still be admired.

The Mies-Wright connections go back to the early days of both architectural careers. Wright had a publication of his works printed by a German publisher in 1911 when he was 44. He spent time prior to its publication visiting architectural firms throughout Europe to foster interest. At the time, Mies was a 25-year old architectural apprentice in Berlin with other men who also gained architectural prominence; LeCorbusier and Gropius. Wright's two-volume publication of 100 lithographs of his works with his personal monograph was published in both German and English. Reportedly, Mies and his associates stopped work on the day Wright's publication became available so they could carefully examine his achievements.



The mutual respect between Mies (left) and Wright (right) grew over the years. Mies immigrated to the U S in 1937 and promptly became head of the architecture department at the Illinois Institute of Technology (then known as the Armour Institute of Technology.) At the gala held on November 20, 1938, celebrating Mies appointment, Mies was introduced by Frank Lloyd Wright who seldom said anything favorable about any other architect. On this occasion Wright said of Mies, "I admire



him as an architect, respect and love him as a man. Armour Institute, I give you my Mies van der Rohe. You treat him well and love him as I do. He will reward you."

With Mies' "less is more" works and Wright's prairie and Usonian designs throughout the U S contribute to our country's rich and varied architectural treasures. Now, one is being added right here in Bloomington and is a great reward to all of us.