

**TEACHING WITH ON-LINE PRIMARY SOURCES:
DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

**LESS IS MORE:
LUDWIG MIES VAN DER ROHE, GLASS HOUSES, AND IMMIGRATION**

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When the Armour and Lewis Institutes of Chicago merged in 1940 to form the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), the director of architecture, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, was asked to develop plans and design the buildings for the newly expanded 120-acre campus. Not since Thomas Jefferson's design of the University of Virginia in 1819 had a university campus been the work of a single architect. This responsibility was accorded to van der Rohe just two years after his entry into the United States and foretold the pivotal impact that his architecture would have on America and the world. Soon after his retirement from IIT in 1958, van der Rohe was awarded Gold Medals by both the Royal Institute of British Architects and the American Association of Architects. Five years later, President Lyndon Johnson presented van der Rohe with the Presidential Medal of Freedom, America's highest civilian award.

The featured document for this essay is Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1938 Declaration of Intention to become a citizen of the United States. Immigration documents like these provide interesting and valuable information about future citizens of the United States. While the information provided might appear to be straightforward statements of fact, in many cases an interesting story or intriguing question lies behind every completed blank. For example, on the first line of his declaration, van der Rohe lists his name as "Ludwig Mies, formerly Ludwig Mies van der Rohe." However on the form, at some point in the process, "formerly" was struck out and replaced with "alias." In 1921, when his marriage of eight years ended, he changed his name from Ludwig Mies to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe by adding the Dutch "van der" and his mother's maiden name of "rohe." But why was "formerly" replaced by "alias," and why did he indicate that his name was formerly Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, when in fact his name was formerly Ludwig Mies? Also, the document is dated August 29, 1938, but he did not become a citizen until 1944. Is there any significance to those dates? Van der Rohe indicated on the form that he was a resident of Berlin, Germany, but that he entered the United States from Cherbourg, France. Why was that? The vessel named was the *SS Europa*. Research indicates that this particular ship was German and had a fairly long and illustrious record. No, this was not one of the common transports that carried thousands of immigrants to the United States just prior to World War II; this was a semi-luxury liner, capable of record speed for the time. What does this suggest about why and under what circumstances van der Rohe left Germany? Below is the story behind the document.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe was born in Aachen, Germany, on March 27, 1886. His father operated a construction business, and at a fairly early age van der Rohe acquired some experience in stone carving. As a teenager, he was also employed as a draftsman for architect Peter Behrens, who specialized in building modern industrial buildings. Walter Gropius, who later became the famous founder and director of the Bauhaus school of design, was also employed with Behrens. While with Behrens, van der Rohe was exposed to the current design theories and to progressive, avant-garde German culture. Having no formal architectural training, he nonetheless gained considerable experience and confidence through several independent commissions. In 1912, at 26, he opened his own architectural firm.

After World War I, van der Rohe continued to successfully design traditional custom homes, but began experimenting with steel frame-glass wall designs that culminated in his stunning proposal for an all-glass-faceted skyscraper in 1921. In future designs, he increasingly integrated the concepts of open floor plans, simple lines, pure use of color, space rather than mass, asymmetry, functionality, cubic shapes and right angles, the extension of space beyond the interior, and American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's style of free-flowing spaces that take in the outdoor surroundings. Much of his developing style was seen in his 1927 masterwork of the German pavilion for the Barcelona International Exposition in 1929. This pavilion hall had a flat roof supported by columns, but the internal walls were made of glass and marble, and because they did not support the structure, they could be moved around to suit any purpose of the space. Again, the emphasis was on fluid spaces that flowed from one to another and from indoors to outdoors. In 1930 van der Rohe met the famous American architect Philip Johnson, who, two years later, invited van der Rohe to exhibit his architectural ideas, including some furniture designs like the Barcelona chair, at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The result was instant fame and recognition for van der Rohe in America.

At the same time in his career, van der Rohe had joined Gropius and other avant-garde artists, architects, and teachers at the famous Bauhaus school of design in Weimar, Germany. The major philosophical goal of the Bauhaus was to find an artistic compromise between the aesthetics of design and the demands of modern industrialism and commercialism. Influenced by socialism, the Bauhaus was particularly focused on creating aesthetically pleasing, yet functional, housing for workers. Van der Rohe's ideas of free-flowing open spaces, steel frame, pre-cast concrete, and glass walls were supported and expanded by his colleagues during his tenure at the Bauhaus. The Bauhaus had physically relocated from Weimar to Dessau and finally to Berlin by 1932. Van der Rohe served as its director for two years until its closure.

Less than three months after their rise to power in Germany, the Nazis made it clear what they expected of German art. As in the Soviet Union under Stalin, Hitler, an amateur artist and architect in his youth, was determined that German art and architecture would symbolize and represent the ideals of German culture under the Third Reich. Rather than focusing on literature as the Soviet Social Realism style did

in the Soviet Union, the Nazis concentrated on visual art and architecture. It was to be neoclassical in style and anti-capitalist, and to evoke historic German romanticism, heroicism, and nostalgia for past German greatness. The architectural style of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Bauhaus were a universe apart from what the Nazis required. As a result of continuous criticism from the Nazis that the Bauhaus style was not "German" in character, and that the school had been associated with socialist, communist, and other left-wing, progressive ideologies, van der Rohe was forced to close the school. For some time after that, van der Rohe actually tried to convince the Nazis of the merit of his architectural designs and repeatedly pressed for and attended meetings with Nazi officials, but to no avail. Reluctantly, after enduring financial and psychological oppression from the Nazi government, he left for the United States in 1938, accepting a commission for the design of the Resor House in Jackson, Wyoming. As mentioned earlier, he was also offered the directorship of an architecture school in Chicago. Van der Rohe's reputation in America was already well established as a pioneer of modern architecture and as one of the major proponents of the international style of architecture. American architectural giant Frank Lloyd Wright now had serious competition for the position of America's greatest living architect.

Returning to the featured document, most of the story behind Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's departure from Germany is known. His "difficulty" with the Nazis might explain his departure from Cherbourg and his financial success as an architect in Germany might explain his untypical transport to the United States. His Declaration of Intention also indicates that he had three children, all of whom remained in Berlin at the time. His departure on August 29, 1938, was just a year and a few days before the Nazi invasion of Poland and the start of World War II on September 1, 1939. His Declaration of Intention was not completed until a year after his arrival in the United States and just a few months before the invasion of Poland. It is worth noting that he decided to become a U.S. citizen before the war started.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's thirty-year career in the United States from 1939 until his death in 1969 was stellar. As mentioned above, his first major project was the campus buildings at IIT in Chicago. These buildings remain classic examples of his "glass box" design as simple cubes, framed in steel and covered with glass: "less is more." His residential masterwork is the Farnsworth House (designed and built between 1946 and 1951), located on sixty acres outside Chicago along the Fox River. It mirrors the Barcelona pavilion, from a decade earlier, with an elevated platform, simple rectangular shape, and all-glass partitions that let nature and light permeate the interior space. In one structure, van der Rohe demonstrated that industrial materials like glass, steel, and concrete could be used to create aesthetically great architecture. His other major triumph in Chicago was the design of four high-rise apartment buildings on Lake Shore Drive. Unlike other typically brick residential buildings, van der Rohe's towers were a radical departure and had facades of glass and steel. They became the models for hundreds of other luxury high-rise apartment buildings built in Chicago and elsewhere around the country.

In 1958, van der Rohe designed what is considered the pinnacle of modern corporate high-rise, industrial, skyscraper architecture: The Seagram Building in New York City. In an aggressively innovative approach, much copied since, van der Rohe set the tower back from the property line and created a front plaza, courtyard, and fountain area on Park Avenue. This 38-floor masterpiece was clad in bronze and remains today the epitome of skyscraper architecture.

In ironic conclusion, van der Rohe's architecture, with its origins in the socialist internationalist style from the Bauhaus, has now become the style of choice for large American corporations. Nonetheless, in his career, he painstakingly created and promulgated a new architectural style based on a new era of technological invention. He believed, philosophically, that architecture should communicate the meaning and the significance of the culture in which it exists.

NOTE: For access to the document, visit www.archives.gov/research/arc/. After clicking the yellow search button, type the identifying ARC #281856 into the keyword box and check the box for "descriptions linked to digital copies" just below the keyword box. The document may be printed and duplicated in any quantity. This document is from Record Group 21, Records of District Courts of the United States; the National Archives Great Lakes Region, Chicago, Illinois.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. Document Analysis: Defining Immigration

Ask students to complete the document analysis worksheet at http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf in order to glean the basic information about van der Rohe's immigration to the United States. Lead a discussion about the form and the type of information asked. Explore with students the ways in which van der Rohe's application might be unique. Ask students to consider what has changed since 1938 and create a declaration of intention form for 2007. When students have completed their forms, share with them the actual form used at <http://www.uscis.gov/files/form/n-300.pdf> and ask them how their form compares and what considerations have changed since 1938.

2.. Cross-Curricular Activity—Geography: Mapping the International Style of Architecture

Van der Rohe is considered the father, or at least the major proponent, of the *international style* of architecture. Help students define and explain the characteristics of that style. (The following might be useful <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~twp/architecture/international/>.) Then divide the class into small groups based on the continents, and ask each group to create a large-format map of their continent and illustrate it with images from the various sources of buildings in this style in various cities. Groups should prepare an oral presentation on their continent that includes the characteristics of

international style for each of their examples and background on the individual buildings.

3. Group Comparative Analysis Activity: Immigration Policy Then and Now

Divide students into five groups (groups based on chronological periods of forty or fifty years each), and ask them to create a chart that lists and defines United States immigration policy from 1790 to present. Ask each group to analyze and report to class on key policies, their origins, and results. During the discussion of their findings, push-and-pull elements of immigration—those factors that would push people out of a country or pull them into another country—should be included. Encourage students to cite examples of American immigration or immigrant groups that fit these factors. A discussion of refugees might also be useful. Finally, lead students in a discussion of the various historical incidences and experiences of immigrants who have been excluded from countries, for example, Jews from Nazi Germany and Chinese from the United States. During the concluding class discussion, examine current issues effecting of immigration around the world, such as racism, economics, cultural conflict of language and customs.

4. Group Comparative Analysis Activity: Buildings from Rome to New York

Divide students into groups based on architectural period and style and ask them to create an illustrated annotated timeline of architecture from early Greek and Roman times to the present. Some example periods and styles are: Ancient Architecture, 3000 B.C. to 337 A.D.; Early Christian and Medieval; Romanesque, 500 to 1200; Gothic Architecture, 1200 to 1400; Renaissance Architecture, 1400 to 1600; Baroque Architecture, 1600 to 1700; Rococo Architecture, 1650 to 1790; American Colonial Architecture, 1600 to 1780; Georgian Architecture, 1720 to 1800; Neoclassical/Federalist/Idealist, 1750 to 1880; Greek Revival Architecture, 1790 to 1850; Victorian Architecture, 1840 to 1900; Arts and Crafts Movement in Architecture, 1860 to 1900; Art Nouveau Architecture, 1890 to 1905; Art Deco Architecture, 1925 to 1935; and 1900 to present. Set uniform standards for the size of the paper for each group. Direct the students to present their findings and to fit their timeline pieces together. During their presentations, they should explain how van der Rohe's belief that architecture should communicate the meaning and the significance of the culture in which it exists applies to the period they studied.

5. Cross-Curricular Activity—Architecture, Art, and Physics

Jointly with a physics teacher and physics class, explore the connection between technology, invention, culture, and architectural engineering. Ask students to demonstrate their learning by constructing model buildings of any style from any materials. Or, with an art colleague and art class, explore and compare the context and origins of American art from the perspective of landscapes, seascapes, and van der Rohe's creation of the cityscape. Ask students to consider how the evolution of these

art forms reflects the evolution of American culture. For this activity, the classes could be divided into three groups with each group focusing its research on visual representations of landscapes, seascapes, and cityscapes for a class presentation.

6. The Declaration of Intention for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe only represents one document that could be used to develop his biography. Brainstorm with the students to develop a list of other records that could be used to document his life. Ask students to develop an oral presentation of their own biography using various records and documents of their own. Examples might be birth certificates, photographs, video recordings, and artifacts. Allow students time to tell their story to the class through these documents.

7. Architecture and Your Community: Local History

Ask students to photograph businesses and residences of interest to them in their community and trace the style of the architecture and its cultural context within their community. For example, how does the architecture of a train depot suggest the history of the community and the time period in which the depot was built? Allow class time for them to share their findings.

8. Becoming a Citizen

Ask students to research the process whereby a person becomes a citizen (see <http://www.uscis.gov/portal/site/uscis>) and create an individual visual illustration of the process (perhaps a drawing of the Capitol with the process written on the steps). Ask students to consider the steps and requirements and what has changed since 1850. Students might want to check with local officials to identify the process in their own community: How is it done, who becomes a citizen, and how many are naturalized each year?

NOTE: Skyscrapers and architecture from the *Mini Page*: see the November 26, 2006 issue of the *Mini Page* by Betty Debnam and the National Building Museum (www.nbm.org) for various activities and information about skyscrapers and architecture.

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