

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics

Special Issue – Architecture beyond the building



Growing up with Mies and Saarinen

Author

PAUL GUYER AND
LAURE VAN HEIJENOORT

Affiliation

BROWN UNIVERSITY
INDEPENDENT

Abstract: Paul Guyer interviews his cousin Laure van Heijenoort, who as a teenager lived for several years with her parents in one of Mies van der Rohe's Lafayette Park townhouses in Detroit and attended school at Eliel Saarinen's Cranbrook campus. She reports on her experiences of living and studying in both, experiences still vivid to her and now to a broader audience.

Paul Guyer: Apart from the occasional anecdote – Frank Lloyd Wright telling his patron Herbert Johnson to move a chair if he didn't like the leaky ceiling above him or Dr. Farnsworth's complaints about the weekend house Ludwig Mies van der Rohe had designed for her – we rarely get many first-hand reports about what it is or was like to inhabit works of architecture that we know from books or visits. As a teenager, my first cousin Laure van Heijenoort had the unusual opportunity to live and go to school for several years in buildings designed by two of the greatest twentieth-century architects, namely Mies' Lafayette Park townhouses (1959) in Detroit and Eliel Saarinen's Kingswood School Cranbrook (1931), then for girls. The school was part of the Cranbrook Educational Complex in nearby Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, which was largely designed by Saarinen.

Laure's parents were unusual people. Her mother, my father's sister "Loretta" Bea, was involved in the arts in one way or another throughout her life, and met her father Jean van Heijenoort, the French-Dutch logician and historian of logic in Mexico City, where he was working as Leon Trotsky's secretary. Van Heijenoort's father came from Delft and Laure still has Van

Heijenoort cousins living there. At the time of her Detroit sojourn, however, Loretta had been long divorced from Jean and was married to Wynn Ruff, the stepfather to whom Laure refers below. Ruff sold prints for a living, so he too was involved in the arts (I have a Piranesi *veduta* that was a wedding gift from Loretta and Wynn). The period Laure discusses was the beginning of the 1960s, but of course her parents and stepfather are now long deceased. She was obviously an unusually observant and gifted early teenager, and her remarks offer glimpses into a turbulent period of US history, as well as into the experience of the architecture of Mies and Saarinen.

What follows takes the form of an interview; that is, Laure's responses to questions that I formulated, partly on the basis of our earlier exchanges. Since Lafayette Park may not be among Mies' best-known projects, I preface the interview with this description taken from Wikipedia, especially since it parallels Laure's description:

[T]he Mies townhomes [there are also towers - PG] would ultimately be 186 units in four designs: there were a small number of two, three, and four-bedroom ranch style townhomes with courtyards, with the balance being three-bedroom, two-story townhouses. The low-rise housing was set several feet above grade to minimise views of automobiles and generally features central parking lots serving multiple buildings, but the courtyard homes had driveways that led to the front door. The general construction of the low-rise houses was a lightweight steel space frame from which 3-inch concrete slabs were hung for floors and glass panels for front and rear walls. The units are separated by fire brick walls and topped with flat roofs. The ends are capped by a grey-beige slip-coated brick common to the era. Two-story units are essentially glass on both sides, bisected on the first floor by a mechanical core, containing the kitchen.¹

Unfortunately, Wikipedia's description of the Kingswood School Cranbrook is purely programmatic, with no hint at the building's style or construction:

The Kingswood School has only one building, which includes supporting facilities. It houses dormitories, a dining hall, an auditorium, classrooms, lounge/common areas, a bowling alley and a ballroom. The education at Kingswood School Cranbrook was initially primarily viewed as a 'finishing school'. Today, students take classes in English, History, Religion and Art at Kingswood. The art classes available are Foundations in Design, Sculpture, Drawing, Weaving, Ceramics, Fashion Design, Painting and Photography.²

The formerly separate girls' and boys' upper schools at Cranbrook have been co-educational since 1985. Presumably other subjects, such as the STEM subjects, are taught at what used to be the boys' school. Later in

the interview, Laure gives us a sense of the style and construction of Saarinen's work as she experienced it. With these preliminaries out of the way, here is our interview.



Figure 1: Mies townhomes

PG: Readers of this journal would love to know about your experience living and studying in these monuments, and how your experience comports with some of the rhetoric about these buildings from the architects and others.

Your mother and stepfather both had some background in the arts, and if I remember correctly, they were operating an art gallery in Detroit in those years, although both were native New Yorkers (from the Bronx, to be specific). Do you know if they picked Lafayette Park because of its design, Mies' fame or was it just what they happened to find available? Did they ever talk to you about Mies, or why you were living there? And how about Cranbrook? Did either you or your mother select it because of your interest in the arts, because of your knowledge of Saarinen or was it just what seemed to be the best school available to you?

Laure van Heijenoort: Regarding the Lafayette Park townhouse, the move from South Miami to Detroit was rather sudden. Wynn had to travel

to sell lithographs to his various art gallery clients. After a trip to Detroit, he came home and announced that he had bought an art gallery located on the mezzanine of Hudson's department store on Woodward Avenue in downtown Detroit. Your aunt was not happy. There was a whirlwind of activity related to selling the Miami house, packing up and driving off in our Buick. I don't recall much discussion about where we would live, but I imagine they took whatever they could find on short notice that was reasonably close to both the gallery and a school for me. I had just started 8th grade in Miami. After the move, I went to Chrysler Elementary School, a short walk within Lafayette Park. Although I could walk to the gallery to help out after school, it meant going through a rough neighbourhood. I remember a drunken man throwing a liquor bottle at me as I passed him.

Chrysler Elementary only went through 8th grade and the public high school I was destined to attend in downtown Detroit had a reputation for violence, so my mother and father managed to scrape up the money (with a partial scholarship) for me to go to Kingswood School Cranbrook. Because it was outside of Detroit, I could go as a residential student, which turned out well for me because the gallery caused a great deal of stress between my mother and stepfather and living with them was not fun.

PG: Tell us what you liked about your experience living in a Mies house. What worked for you and/or for your parents, what did not?

LvH: We moved from an early 1960s one-story house with a swimming pool in Kendall, South Miami, to a two-story townhouse in Mies' Lafayette Park project. Of course, there was the contrast between what was then the lush wilderness of south Florida and the timid boxwood trying to survive brutal pruning next to the townhouse. The entire front and back of our unit featured windows that connected us with the greenery outdoors, but also to the dismal, seemingly always-cloudy Detroit sky. The back windows, unfortunately, looked out on a brick wall that was the end of another row of townhouses placed perpendicularly to ours. It did not look as though there was enough thought given to the placement of the buildings and I imagine some of the units had better views.

There was an open floor plan on the first floor, with a breakfast area by the front window wall and door, then a structure that formed a galley kitchen and enclosed two closets and a half bath. This left a space for the staircase and a walkway to the living area on the other side. The walls were painted an off-white colour and the floor was covered in practical, yet uncheery black linoleum tiles. For a family that took pleasure in preparing foods from many cuisines, the kitchen's counter space was meagre. It had a regular depth counter on one side and a narrow counter on the other with two side-by-side two-unit electric cooktops that could flip up to create more space. When they were down, the four burners were positioned in a line. The galley was open

on both ends. My mother was both a terrific cook and a resourceful person who made it work. The stairs were a spare metal structure with wooden treads and no risers, so it also felt open. Upstairs there were three bedrooms (two facing the front street) and one bathroom which my mother painted a pumpkin orange, giving it a bit more life with a colour that curtailed the starkness of the place. She really worked her magic by arranging our Floridian rattan furniture, colourful carpets, and modern paintings and sculpture in a way that gave life to the spare architectural design elements.

The best part was the basement. In order to accommodate mechanical and plumbing systems, it was not perfectly rectangular, which made a townhouse that otherwise had only predictable spaces more interesting. There was a door to a subterranean hallway that connected the ten units and, in my imagination, led to some mystery and fantasy, although it was probably just used for trash collection. The basement held a washer and dryer, but also my upright piano and a small chemistry lab that I set up. Mostly, I enjoyed having random and undedicated space, perhaps a proxy for the wild outdoors of palmettos and slash pines I had in Florida, where we lived on the last street of a subdivision. On the other side of the street lived an old man who grew hydroponic tomatoes and put ships in bottles.

The basement of the townhouse also provided storage space for artworks when they were not on display at the gallery, which was unfortunate because a plumbing anomaly caused a flood in the basement and ruined many of Chagall's Bible series lithographs that had been carelessly placed directly on the floor. This led to the end of the art gallery venture and a move east where I finished my last two school years at Great Neck South Senior High School.

What I found to be sterile and uninteresting because of its predictability and lack of quirky little spaces, others might cherish as efficient and uncluttered. In hindsight, the beauty of it was taking concepts that made a great deal of sense for large institutional buildings, such as offices and schools, and showing that they could be applied to residential architecture. Other newer homes that I've since lived in or seen since Detroit have taken these ideas and created more interesting spaces, although probably, in part, because of Mies' contributions.

My mother and stepfather, novices at running a business, put their energies into making the gallery work rather than focusing on our home, so I don't remember conversations about the design of the townhouse. Had we owned the unit and stayed permanently, it might have been a wonderful canvas for colourful or textured wall treatments, accent lighting, plants and floor coverings.

PG: A critic of Mies' greatest residential work, the luxurious house he built in 1930 for Fritz Tugendhat and Grete Löw-Beer Tugendhat (both children of wealthy textile manufacturing families) in Brno, Moravia, claimed that that house showed that 'starting from the purely rational and functional premises

of modern architecture, it is still possible to create something spiritual? As a teenager, did you feel anything like that living in Lafayette Park? If not, might that have been because the Lafayette Park houses were so much smaller and more economical than the Tugendhat house, or would that have sounded like BS to your teenage self no matter what?

LvH: Certainly, scale affects whether a space feels spiritual or at least puts one at ease. If all of the space is used for the practical aspects of living, there is probably little left to encourage or facilitate contemplation.

Another difference is how many sources of natural light a room has. While a wall that is completely glass will let in a lot of light, if it is the only source of natural light in a room it will be harsher than the light that comes in and blends from two (or more) aspects of a room. I suspect that the Tugendhat house had at least two windows in each room, which creates a much softer feel than just one light source – the large end window – that a sandwiched townhouse will have. This was certainly a big difference between the Mies townhouse and the house in which we lived in Miami just before moving to Detroit.

But what has been most determinative for me in various places I've lived and visited is a building's connection to the outdoors. Had the townhouse looked out on a forest, a lush garden, a prairie or a desert vista instead of some sad little bushes and a brick wall, I would have felt more peace in it. The pictures of the Tugendhat house that I've seen show that it was built into a slope with a substantial amount of green space around it. I'm sure that living in that building at that location was an entirely different experience than living in a typical house in central Europe that I imagine had a few small windows, steep and curving staircases, a toilet (if any) in the basement, and many interior walls creating a warren of small, crowded rooms.

PG: Grete Tugendhat herself wrote, 'I never experience the rooms as possessing pathos. I find them large and austere simple; however, not in a dwarfing but in a liberating sense'. The Tugendhat's daughter Daniela, who was born only in 1949, after her parents and older siblings had fled from the Nazi takeover of Czechoslovakia and were dispossessed of the house, wrote that 'My mother told me that [the] experience of space was an essential quality of life in the house: while providing seclusion and privacy here was a feeling of belonging to a larger totality at the same time'. Did you feel any of that – liberation, a feeling of privacy yet belonging to something larger – living in Lafayette Park? Say, in comparison to other, more ordinary housing that you knew, like houses that you experienced in Florida (before Detroit?) and Great Neck (afterwards), my parents' house in Lynbrook or others that you knew? In other words, did living in a Mies house feel different from being in other houses that you knew. Or what about Aunt Fran's house in Fairlawn, NJ, if you can remember it? That was a mid-century modern house of a

fairly lavish sort, at least compared to the homes of the rest of our family. Did you sense any similarity or difference between a Mies house and another mid-century modern house?

LvH: Living in Lafayette Park allowed me to walk to school while I was in 8th grade and to run with our dog and to bike in the park, which I would not have easily been able to do elsewhere in or near downtown Detroit. So placing the townhouses adjacent to a large park was terrific. There was the tall Stroh's brewery building at the north end of the park and some days there was a strong, almost caustic smell of beer in the air.

Until I was almost ten, my life was spent mostly in an apartment on King Street in Greenwich Village/ Little Italy in New York. It was a beautiful railroad apartment – the rooms were mostly all in a line – that had little light but three entrances, two fireplaces, and a dumb waiter. The long, eat-in kitchen, in the back, had a fire escape where I often played. It was on the second floor and the family below had a girl just my age so I was often able to play in the garden. On the top floor was another girl my age and I remember her mother reading aloud to us what I think was all of *Romeo and Juliet* while we were in the upstairs version of the same kitchen one Saturday. My first and second grade school was, literally, across the street (it is now condominiums), and the third and fourth grade school was P.S. 41 on 11th street, so I could walk along 6th avenue or take the bus to it.

From there we moved to Florida just after I started 5th grade – my mother was indifferent to the beginnings of semesters – into a completely different lifestyle and architecture. The house had terrazzo floors which stayed cool in the heat and jalousie windows that never completely closed, so that pressure would not build up in the house during a hurricane. There was a living room defined by its ridiculous sunken floor and cheap wooden paneling, and sliding glass doors opening onto a screened-in “Florida room” with a pool, the most significant part of the house for me. And there were mosquitoes, lots of them, as well as palmetto bugs – the large, crawling kind. Trucks drove the streets spraying DDT into the air and my mother gave me containers of Chlordane powder to sprinkle along the outside perimeter of the house in a futile attempt to keep things from crawling into it.

My stepfather took me to school the first day. We walked into the office and we could hear screaming from the back. After a few minutes it stopped and the principal came out with his paddle which he replaced on its hook on the wall and calmly asked what we wanted. What I wanted was to get out of there, but I was registered and stayed. The school was segregated and the racist jokes from the other kids were nauseating. The second year the district integrated the school by bringing in two black children, a brother and sister, whom I imagine were quaking in their shoes.

After three years, in the middle of my first semester of eighth grade, my stepfather came back from a sales trip to the Midwest and announced that

he had bought an art gallery in Detroit and that we were moving, so off we went in the Buick.

I can't say that living in the townhouse was liberating because I found it – and Detroit – gray and cold, although the spaces were generous given the total size of the place and mostly did not feel crowded. Aunt Fran's house, as I remember it, was another matter: the relatively open floor plan worked exceedingly well because it flowed through spaces that did not appear to form just one large rectangle. There was the excitement – and perhaps one could call it a feeling of liberation – of being able to run out to and among the five or so terraces that were at somewhat different ground levels and the delight of seeing the built-in aquarium next to the sofa. To the extent that Mies and his contemporaries inspired the creation of residential architecture with open flows and large glass egresses to the outdoors, his residential work was a great success.

PG: In a 1938 talk, Mies said that the role of architecture was 'to serve, not to rule'. Did you feel that he lived up to that in the design of Lafayette Park, or did his design impose a conception of how inhabitants should live, e.g., he tried to rule rather than to serve? Mies was influenced by an early twentieth-century Catholic philosopher, Roman Guardini, who said, 'the forces of technological progress had to be bridled to leave enough room for "life"'. Did you feel that Mies accomplished that with Lafayette Park?

LvH: Mies' design of the townhouses was space-efficient and in that sense probably provided more value to their inhabitants than conventional designs would have. Certainly, the open living room/dining room space of the main room provided more choice in how to use the spaces than one would have had if those spaces had been defined by partition walls. And given the constraints inherent in a townhouse or apartment, the townhouses certainly provided us with more light as well as a better connection to the outdoors than we would have had otherwise – both qualities I would associate with life. The one we lived in (there were four or more floor plans in the complex, but I never saw any of the others) just seemed so severe in its simplicity. Again, had we owned it, it could have been a great canvas for more individual expressions of life style.

PG: What about Saarinen and Cranbrook? Was the architectural heritage of the school anything that was talked about by your teachers or with the students? What was it like to be a student in those surroundings? Was it very different from any other school you attended over the course of your education, from kindergarten through law school? Better or worse?

LvH: Most people at Cranbrook seemed to appreciate and enjoy the beauty of the place – both the architecture of the buildings and the landscape, although no specific discussions spring to mind. There were a lot of wealthy students there who probably took such luxurious surroundings for granted.

Kingswood was a world apart from Detroit. A lake separated the girls' school from the boys' school. We played lacrosse on a field next to the lake (girls' lacrosse – we were not permitted to hit our opponents with our sticks as the members of boys' and men's teams were). During a game one day one of the best athletes in my class ran with the ball in her stick all the way around the lake to tire out her opponents. [**PG:** There are no strict boundaries to the field in women's lacrosse: a ball is only out of bounds when the referee says it is. If the referee allowed that play, she was pretty liberal.]

The buildings had graceful proportions in the slope of the roofs and the ceiling heights relative to the room sizes, which varied greatly as one made one's way through the building. The materials were warm: most of the exterior was a reddish-ochre colour of brick and there was a green tile on the walls of some of the more public rooms that was luscious. The layout of the spaces was happily unpredictable: there were conspicuous staircases that led to banks of classrooms and inconspicuous staircases that led to unexpected spaces, such as the piano practice rooms or just rooms where a few people could meet, sitting on built-in pieces upholstered with beautiful fabrics. There was a weaving room with looms of different sizes and a Swedish weaving teacher. There was a fantastic ceramics studio; I still have and use some pieces I made there. The dining room was formal, with round tables that seated six and thus encouraged conversation, and a high ceiling with a double bank of small clerestory windows running the length of the room on either side. Many of the windows contained leaded arts-and-crafts designs and some of the walls were wood-panelled with the names of members of graduating classes engraved in them. The dormitory rooms had handsome wooden built-in desks and book storage, large walk-in closets, and a bathroom between every two rooms. Most of the rooms were singles.

I loved the physical environment, the beauty of the place, but the atmosphere was a bit stuffy for me, with girls who judged others by how up-to-date their clothes were and the social rank of the boys with whom they were seen. Mitt Romney and Ann Davies were students there then while Mitt's father, George, was governor.

PG: George Romney was the president of American Motors before becoming governor of Michigan. As an adult, his son Mitt Romney became governor of Massachusetts and ran unsuccessfully for US President against Barack Obama in 2012. Currently a US Senator from Utah, he married Ann Davies in 1969.

LvH: The teachers were excellent but the administration was socially conservative. When I was in 9th grade, I went to a school dance with a Cranbrook student who was also a friend from my 8th grade Chrysler Elementary, inner-city Detroit class. The headmistress called my mother to tell her that I had been seen with a Negro boy. (He later went to Princeton.)

The law school that I attended, the University of New Mexico, was designed by Antoine Predock and brilliantly open. The Forum was the heart of the school and was a large space designed to facilitate informal conversations among students and faculty, which it certainly did. (It helped that the administration had a policy of encouraging extensive student–faculty interaction.) One crossed the Forum to get to any classroom or to the spacious library with windows looking out on the Sandia Mountains and the University’s North golf course. There was a fully enclosed Moot Courtroom in the centre of the Forum. My first year, there were even female urinals in the women’s rooms, but they were soon replaced with more conventional toilets.

PG: Thank you, Laure! What you observed as a child and what you remember of it is remarkable.

Note: After earning her law degree at the University of New Mexico, Laure van Heijenoort spent her career as a lawyer in New Mexico, mostly representing labour unions and their health and benefit plans. I’m going to conclude with a paragraph from an earlier exchange, in which she responded to a few comments on the environmental responsibilities of architects in the concluding ‘Looking Forward’ chapter of my 2021 book *A Philosopher Looks at Architecture*.

LvH: Finally, I appreciate the ideas in ‘Looking Forward’. The energy efficiency in the use of locally produced materials is certainly a concept that ties into the [Adolf] Loosian aesthetic of using beautiful materials that speak for themselves and, of course, is something near and dear to me in my love of most things New Mexican (adobe, rammed earth, adobe-covered hay bales, exposed wood ceilings, window frames and doors). On the other end of the spectrum, perhaps, are 3D printed homes in Mexico and now in Texas that use Lavacrete, a concrete product that might have all of the energy-intensity/CO₂ emissions that you mention, but still allow the cheap production of small homes for people who might otherwise live in slums or remain unhoused.

paul_guyer@brown.edu

NOTES

¹Lafayette Park, Detroit.

²Cranbrook Schools.

REFERENCES

Cranbrook Schools. Cranbrook Schools — Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Online; accessed 10 January 2023.

Lafayette Park, Detroit. Lafayette Park, Detroit — Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Online; accessed 10 January 2023.

COPYRIGHT:

© 2023 Paul Guyer and
Laure van Heijenoort

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.