

## **Hidden In Plain Sight, The “Invisibility” Of Mies van de Rohe In Detroit**

### **History**

Lafayette Park and the Mies van der Rohe townhouses were developed on land that was once a crowded, vibrant community, originally called Black Bottom, due to the dark, fertile soil. The name came to signify the teeming numbers of African-Americans who, along with scores of immigrants, poured into the neighborhood by the thousands after World War I, seeking work in Detroit’s automotive industry. They were often housed two or more families at a time in the packed, verdant blocks of Black Bottom. In 1948 my father opened his record shop and recording studio just north of Black bottom, on what was the infamous Hastings Street. Blues singer John Lee Hooker, soul singer Aretha Franklin, and many others created some of their first recorded sounds in his record shop.

I was born in the 1950s, and my father bought our family a home in Highland Park, which was, back then, a gem of a city within the city of Detroit. It was a prosperous enclave that was home to Ford, Chrysler and subsidiary industries, just a few minutes’ drive but a whole world away from the hustle and bustle of Hastings Street and Black Bottom. When I was a little girl, in the early 1960s, the homes and businesses owned by blacks and immigrants in Black Bottom were razed, in one of the first cases of Urban Renewal in the United States. My father’s shop was destroyed too in that swath of demolition. I remember standing on the earthen banks of what would become the Chrysler Freeway (I-75), looking out at the massive crevasse – the initial diggings of the expressway. It was adjacent to the land that used to be Black Bottom and would become the Mies van der Rohe homes in Lafayette Park, that came to be called the “Glass Houses”.

### **Calamity**

As a child, I watched the exodus of all of my white friends to the suburbs, relocations that had been accelerating in the years after World War II with the G.I. Bill, the selective availability of FHA loans, land that stretched for miles outside of the city, and the new freeway system to get them there. Race-baiting real estate interests often incited these moves to frantic, panicked levels and destabilized property values in large areas of Detroit. A few years later, I was witness to the 1967 Detroit riots and the mayhem that destroyed my father’s second record shop (just a few years after his forced move from Hastings Street). I watched as the riots’ aftermath precipitated the move of more whites (and black middle-class citizens as well) to

communities outside of Detroit's city limits. Both were seeking new housing and an escape from the destruction and encroaching social ruin.

The deterioration of massive zones of Detroit was the result of many factors, such as the natural aging of the city accelerated by the devastation caused by the riots and the normal turnover of real estate. It was hastened by the massive exodus and the customary, periodic shifts in automotive production, and exacerbated by changes in technology and the collapse of U.S. automotive dominance, which caused a seismic upsurge in the numbers of the unemployed. By the 1980s, I could see that a shocking new, exponential explosion of the drug trade - crack cocaine- was spreading like a pox through huge sections of the city. As a result of these colossal changes, thousands of Detroiters, once the highest paid industrial workers in the world, had - in one generation - plummeted to the level of destitution. By this time, I was a mother of two boys, watching the city change around me with increased signs of the decline that had begun before I was born. My options for a safe, viable community were shrinking as I looked for a place to raise my sons. Lafayette Park, and its high and low-rise apartments and townhouses, was a fully developed community over two decades old, a stable, urban oasis staving off the growing challenges to middle-class life in Detroit. We resided here for a few years, in a glass-cornered apartment in one of the high-rises overlooking the park, then, briefly, in the Mies townhouses. But life changes compelled me to move to other areas of the city over the next years.

In the late-90s I returned to Highland Park to renovate my family home - an oak beamed, Mission Style behemoth - though the city had been abandoned by the auto companies and had become ground-zero of the area's economic duress. Despite the town's decline, I was again surrounded by the beautiful, old homes of my childhood, but in 2008, after living there for a decade, my house was destroyed in an electrical fire. As I wrestled with this calamity, I asked for divine assistance to guide me to just the right place to live after surviving such a catastrophic event - and I was catapulted back to Lafayette Park.

### **Obscurity**

The Mies townhouse community had not changed much since I had lived here twenty years earlier, compared to the enormous changes in other areas of the city. If anything, it had become more picturesque, with two decades of trees and communal landscaping now matured into lush, urban woods. The townhouse community sits on a nondescript corner of the eastern edge of Downtown; the Chrysler freeway on one side

and an old railroad ditch on the other (recently transformed into the Dequindre Cut, a sleek, urban walkway). It is nestled amidst four Miesian high-rises and another set of townhouses and co-ops across the park, Chateaufort, Cherbeneau and Parc Lafayette; the entire eponymously named community surrounds the tranquil, green common called Lafayette Park. One can see that there is housing of some sort behind the trees on Lafayette and Rivard streets, but even Detroit-area visitors gasp upon entering the landscaped corridors of the Mies townhouses for the first time, agog at how such a bucolic community could exist, apparently immune to the decline that has afflicted other major sections of the city.

The Detroit that I know (as opposed to Detroit, City of Ruins, its current media incarnation) is a city where many stately neighborhoods – still - display their architectural wonders with a fanfare of wide lawns and grand vistas. But the Mies van der Rohe Townhouses in Lafayette Park are virtually concealed; obscured by trees and flora, with bland steel and glass exteriors that belie their internal structural design and often exquisite interiors – hidden in plain sight. The Mies van der Rohe townhouses have rarely received the level of acclaim granted to other significant structures or communities. Though property values have not plummeted relative to the decimation of the general U.S. housing market and Detroit’s economic slide, the prices for these homes are nowhere near what one would expect for the singular housing development of one of the most internationally celebrated architects in history. How can one of the most significant communities in the world remain so obscure?

### **Former Prosperity**

I have long known that the Mies Townhouses are a unique housing development. They exist, however, in a city that had some of the most spectacular housing in the United States, the result of former auto industry dominance. These important homes, built for wealthy industry owners and executives, and the solid, tasteful houses of the managerial, commercial and working classes, comprised what was (and still is in many areas) the amazing housing stock of Detroit. During my childhood, Detroit’s most prosperous ranks of industrial workers and the city’s civic and service professionals - a new, comfortable “middle-class” - had become mostly African American, and many lived in the mansions and great houses formerly owned by the affluent classes in the early industrial days. These dwellings rival any turn-of-the-century banking or railroad baronial in the Eastern U.S., or vast plantation home of the South. Such was my childhood home, and I grew up with family and friends who lived in neighborhoods full of these distinguished houses. I remember when

visitors to Detroit were astonished to behold the city's extraordinary Tudor, Arts and Crafts, Mission Style and Colonial houses, the remarkable dwellings of a city where even the most basic working class neighborhoods were comprised of comfortable brick or frame homes.

All of my life, I've been in and around significant neighborhoods in Detroit, neighborhoods such as Palmer Woods, Boston-Edison and Atkinson, Indian Village, West Village, Sherwood Forest, East Grand Boulevard, the Golf Course District, Russell Woods, Virginia Park, Rosedale Park, Grandmont, the University District, East English Village, and the extraordinary Arts and Crafts/Mission Style houses of my home-town, Highland Park. Some of these names aptly describe their original, pastoral environs, and there are many homes in these communities that - even today - could be featured in any significant architectural tome. Some neighborhoods are still magnificent and intact and some, more than others, are afflicted with or surrounded by blight and devastation. There is a Frank Lloyd Wright home on the edge of a city park, not to mention gentrified communities such as Woodbridge, Corktown, North Corktown and Midtown, with their unique, new and renovated homes of old Detroit.

In contrast with other major cities, Detroit is a town of primarily single-family homes. Conant Gardens, a community in northeast Detroit now deeply affected by the city's economic decline, was the first to build homes without "restrictive covenants" barring sales to African-Americans. There are numerous apartment buildings in various areas of the city, including a cluster of designed buildings - including an Albert Kahn - in the Palmer Park area, a handful of luxury high-rises on the river (some constructed since the demise of industry on the waterfront) and neighborhoods of two-family homes. There have always been low-income housing projects of multi-family dwellings, and in recent years, there are a growing number of stylish lofts. In the main, however, the sturdy brick or frame single-family house has always been a Detroiter's basic idea of home.

### **Oddity and Transparency**

So, in a city full of architectural wonders, the spare, glass boxes of the downtown Mies development are often regarded as featureless and bland; mere post-war architectural banality. In my conversations with some of the early residents of the Mies townhouse community, they recall that when they were built - and, even today - the two-story townhouse and one-story courthouse structures, along with their co-operative form of ownership, were looked upon as radically unconventional. The very idea of the co-ops flew in the face

of the dominant single-homeowner culture that was alien to co-operative or even condominium living, more common in major cities like New York and San Francisco.

Then there's the matter of living in a house with glass walls. To a populace accustomed to the privacy and concealment of single-family houses with solid brick walls, the idea of living in groups of co-operatively owned glass and cement boxes was profoundly unorthodox. In short, in the housing culture of Detroit, these Mies marvels were very odd, indeed.

### **Simplicity**

I believe that though Lafayette Park is often called a "suburb within a city", a sobriquet meant to evoke the attributes of suburban living amidst the urban landscape, it is really less like a suburb than it is a distillation of Detroit itself into the tree-lined leafiness of its old, stately neighborhoods. The skeletal Mies structures are a condensation of the city's Arts and Crafts, Tudors and Colonials into the bare-bones essence of home. The community, a vibrant cross-section of working folks, professionals, civic leaders, artists and intelligentsia are a social microcosm of the city itself, in its industrious glory days. In other words, the Mies community is, in reality, quintessential Detroit.

Those of us who live here tend to love living here, though I'm often amused at the segment of the community that seems to worship at the "Less Is More" altar of Mies, their homes stark, space-age modules that look to me less like design statements than virtually barren properties poised to be flipped at a moment's notice in an economy spike that never comes. Indeed, each unit has uniquely scenic views of the wooded areas outside of their massive windows that provide all of the décor that one might need, though this literal adherence to the Miesian esthetic is the exception. I'm an incorrigible collector, an adherent to the school of More is More, and most interiors here are a varied and fascinating collection of styles that range from high Bauhaus to middle-class comfort to vibrant, multi-cultural eclecticism.

### **Invisibility**

Although the Mies community is called a "suburb within the city", nonetheless, Lafayette Park is in the city, and is very much unlike the suburbs in its proximity to urban life. For despite the fact that whites are the majority of the Mies community, they are as subject to certain quality-of-life issues as the African Americans in the city as a whole. It is not uncommon for Detroit to be referred to as a "ghost town", as if the over 700,000 residents who remain here do not exist. An aspect of African-American life that is rarely

acknowledged or understood by outsiders, is the mantle of “invisibility” that obscures many aspects of life in the African-American community, concealing – especially - non-pathological behavior from the visibility of mainstream society. What would be heralded in other circumstances often goes unnoticed or even ignored, if the primary participants are, or are in proximity to, Blacks.

As Detroit became majority African-American I rarely, if ever, saw our spectacular housing featured in shelter books or other media. Only an African-American periodical such as Ebony magazine might showcase the gorgeous residence of a famous Detroit denizen. Our elegant ambassadors of style, such as the Supremes, the Gordys or other Motown luminaries, were stellar reflections of a sophisticated African-American luxury that was not at all uncommon in affluent upper-class and even working-class Black Detroit homes, though it was invisible to - or at least unacknowledged by - mainstream design circles. With all of its notable cachet and design provenance, the Mies development is home to African-Americans who have always had a significant role in the community- and it sits in majority African-American Detroit. I have noticed that despite efforts throughout the years to heighten awareness about the Mies community, residents and potential buyers looking to realize a profitable rise in value are often frustrated and aghast at how little attention is paid to its beautiful surroundings and abodes; how unknown the community is to outsiders. Among other elements effecting prices, they forget that they - by living with us - don the cloak of invisibility that we wear as a social matter-of-course.

Efforts are being made to increase the presence of the community on the Web. But for many residents, there is something to be said for the community’s peculiar invisibility; many prefer the “low profile” of the area. Moreover, should the values of the Mies van der Rohe units more accurately reflect the internationally renowned status of their designer - comparable to dwellings with similar provenance in other cities - prices might rise to levels too stratospheric for Detroit’s historically lower-priced housing market. Or, as one of my neighbors confessed, “I really don’t want the property values to go up too much - most of us couldn’t live here.”

### **Security**

I still find it amazing that, in a city with high crime statistics, and with the popularity of “gated communities”, this urban glen has few man-made barriers to ingress or egress. The transparent walls of the townhouses remain unbarred and are often uncovered; the perimeter of the neighborhood surrounded only

by trees. Despite this, the Mies community has been peculiarly insulated from much of the crime endemic to the city as a whole, with the exception of maddening car vandalisms.

The trees, landscaping, location, and the efforts of the community to remain vigilant against crime (including a security patrol) have provided a strangely effective barrier to the violent crimes of person and property common in other areas of the city. Here, there are no ubiquitous gunshots nor siren's wail piercing the aural veil. Yet, despite its reputation for safety, relative to the rest of Detroit, there have been crimes against person or property through the years, and the occasional hue and cry – always ultimately rejected - to enclose the community and make it a gated one. There is an obvious incongruity of having glass walls in a city of ubiquitous window bars, but there is a peculiar, palpable security in all of this transparency.

However, despite the neighborhood's relative safety, in November of 2010, the usual Sunday morning quiet was pierced by gunshots; in the aftermath lay three, mortally wounded in a double murder-suicide, perpetrated by an unstable resident. This shockingly uncharacteristic incident shook the neighborhood to its core, unaccustomed as it has been to any such violence. Following the tragedy, there was a collective, palpable loss of innocence; an abrupt end to what I've called a Miesian Exceptionalism that is deeply engrained in the community. Nevertheless, there was no exodus, nor did the incident fuel fears of an encroachment of increased crime. The community regarded the incident as a tragic anomaly, and comforted the families of both the victims and perpetrator. The incident was considered one that "could have happened anywhere". If anything, the uncommon act of violence proved the rule, underscoring the community's historic insulation from such crime. Even with vexing car incidents, or extremely rare crimes against households or persons, life here, in comparison to much of Detroit, can clearly be described as serene, if not idyllic.

There is a cultivated, conscious neighborliness, notwithstanding the typical tiffs and conflicts of community, especially those that rise from co-operative living and decision making. There is a self-congratulatory air in the demeanor of many of those who live here, for having the foresight, wherewithal - or just plain good luck - to be a part of such a unique place to live. Those who moved here decades ago often have a special - and justified - sense of pride for choosing this place, when the impulse of most whites and later, many blacks, was to flee the city in droves. For those who are here have chosen to live in a diverse, integrated community – unlike many of those moving back to Detroit in "hipster" enclaves, who often appear to want to live in a Detroit sans Detroiters. Detroit stands poised on the emergent brink of postindustrial

resurrection with whites moving back into the city and many middle-class blacks desiring to stay within the city's boundaries, the Mies community and its Lafayette Park neighborhood stands in readiness for the next epoch of life in Detroit. It has endured and matured as an established urban enclave, a beacon of hip, diverse, urban living.

### **Mystery**

I often walk to work; the proximity to downtown is a benefit of life in Lafayette Park. I am soothed each day upon my return to the Mies townhouses, as I enter the corridor of trees and greenery and cross the leafy veil into this utterly beautiful world that I call home. It is a veritable woodland and aviary, just steps away from the noisy expressway that I have just passed over. There is a hush incongruent with the cacophony of urban life, with only bird songs piercing the ambient freeway sounds on the perimeter. The Mies community is at peace, enveloped by the trees and foliage emerging from the fertile, primordial loam of old Black Bottom. I often wonder if the tranquility can be attributed to something other than just the location, the leafy canopy, or the diligent vigilance of the co-op organizations. I can't help but envision the former residents, the Black Bottom folks forced off of the land some 60 years ago. I think of my father standing on the dirt banks of the unfinished freeway where his business once stood, not far from what became the Mies townhouses and courthouses. There is an indelible imprint that was left by the people who were forcibly moved, the homes and businesses that were destroyed, upon the phoenix that is Lafayette Park.

I believe that the serenity of the Mies community may be a divine gift of absolution, from the Black Bottom inhabitants who were forced off of this soil, to the residents who eventually replaced them. The peace here may be a reward bequeathed through the ages, for having the commitment and audacity to maintain an integrated community in one of the most segregated cities in the United States. God is certainly in these details, as Mies might be wont to say. We have proven that it is possible to have a neighborhood of mixed colors and incomes, professionals and working class, in a collection of architectural gems, just as was envisioned at its inception. Perhaps our safety and serenity in this place is a cosmic recompense for insuring that some of the descendents of Black Bottom may have a home on this lush, hallowed ground. Most of my life I have resided not far from where my father's Hastings Street record shop once stood, where, a half a century ago, I looked out from the clay banks of the freeway that wiped an entire community away. Here, in Lafayette Park, I am closer still, and ever near to the souls of Black Bottom.