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MARCH 2013 | £5.50 | €19 | US\$20 |  
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ARCHITECTURES

# GHOST OF MIES AT MANSION HOUSE

If Mies van der Rohe's controversial proposal for Mansion House Square had been built, how would we regard it today? **Matthew Butcher** critiques a spectral building

**Illustration** Postworks with Adam Shapland

**LOOKING WEST FROM** Threadneedle Street through the winter morning sun at Mansion House Square, in all its stark glory, it is difficult to imagine the controversy that Mies' tower and square caused before their eventual construction in the early 1990s. This controversy seems particularly incomprehensible now, in a London peppered with buildings such as the Gherkin and the Shard, made entirely of glass and steel.

Few representations of the project capture its identity. It continually shifts *under the play of light and weather, from total opacity to total transparency*<sup>1</sup> – a bronze ghost laid bare against the blue grey sky of London in mid winter.

The scheme was the conception of Peter Palumbo, former chair of the Arts Council and property developer. Determined to bring to the city of London a true modernist masterpiece he approached Mies in the early 1960s. Mies proposed a scheme for a new public square and 20-storey tower in the city. It was granted planning in 1968 – with several conditions – a year before Mies' death. But it took a further 11 years for Palumbo to renegotiate the existing lease on the site, by which time the political and philosophical landscape in England had changed. In 1981 he applied for planning again, and was denied. Palumbo appealed to then secretary of state Peter Jenkin and the case was brought before a public inquiry. To great









surprise and after much deliberation it was granted planning on 22 May 1985.

There is a melancholy to the square today, as you would perhaps expect of a mid-morning in the city. There is little activity and this sense of quiet gives the building an unreal transcendental quality – I am reminded not of this scheme but the drawings of Mies' proposal for the tower at Friedrichstrasse in Berlin – black and white with a faded and highly contrasted palette. *The building here, as with that drawing, presents itself as a crystal tower that when the sun glints off the glass emerges from the city around it*<sup>2</sup>. It is difficult with a building like this to appreciate the difference between your perceptions of it and the myriad of photographs published at its completion.

Mies had told Palumbo he didn't want the square to be filled or cluttered – providing a space was enough to attract people. He cited St Mark's Square in Venice as an example. Mies' classical sensibilities demanded the square just as they had in New York at the Seagram, and in Chicago – it was central to his idea of architecture. This point was missed in evidence given by Roy Worskett to the public inquiry in 1984. Stating that the city's character was formed by a medieval plan overlaid by intersecting neo-classical streets, Worskett said squares were not the character of the area. He seems to have missed the irony in his own evidence – that until the 19th century nor had the grand neo-classical streets been integral to the medieval plan. This square is just another element of the collage that defines the character of a city like London – which has been cultivated by development, rather than planned.

Regardless of the imposition of the square on the city, the tower itself is definitively contextual – it sets out to both mirror and highlight the architecture around it – the height of the ground floor lining up with Lutyens' and Cooper's Banks to the north of the square.

That said the square itself still feels as if grafted in to the city, a strangely unfamiliar entity that has landed in London – never quite seeming to conjure a complete identity among its parts. Its scale is made more extreme by the medieval alleyways and streets that feed into it. But maybe this was the idea; perhaps the project was always intended to be a montage into a city. A scheme to offset the old against the new, the grid – against the more archaic

BELOW: A significant moment in the City's evolution, Mies' tower is a landmark of its time. But now?



JOHN DONAT | RIBA LIBRARY PHOTOGRAPHS COLLECTION

**'The building . . . presents itself as a crystal tower that when the sun glints off the glass emerges from the city around it'**

city plan – is an act potentially worthy of Mies' roots in the Avant-Garde and Dadaist groups of 1920s Berlin.

*After it was completed Mansion Square became a relative hive of activity, initially holding free concerts and performance events, as well as becoming the main point of call for workers on their lunch breaks who utilized the food markets in the arcade below the square. Fears that the square would be abandoned as a windswept desert were unfounded, and for a while we saw the square absorbed into the intensity of the*

city<sup>3</sup>. Today there is less activity; the arts programme that was initiated in conjunction with the construction has been abandoned due to funding cuts. And the food hall below the square is under renovation. Without this focus it seems the space has become a place to travel through, not to occupy.

Crossing the square across the still immaculate granite paving towards Victoria Street, traversing from east to west, the city seems to recede as the grandness of the building starts to engulf you – *in the bronze glass of the entrance doors reflections of the exterior context are folded, then juxtaposed, with the interior of the grand lobby*<sup>4</sup>.

The building has never been fully occupied. The bad press it received during the public inquiry, in particular reports stating that there would be problems with solar gain, the proposed air conditioning system and overall environmental condition of the building, drove away prospective tenants. The project's reputation as a grand and innovative workspace was irreparably damaged.

The inquiry also ensured that the debate as to the purpose and meaning of the building

TOP: All set up in photographer John Donat's studio in 1981, the Mansion House Square model.

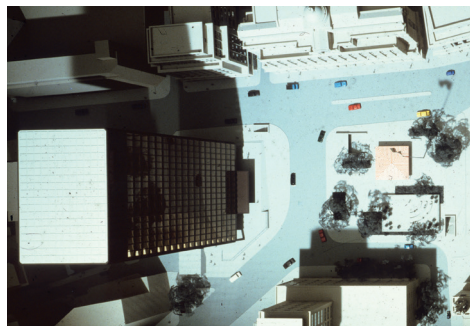
BOTTOM: Bird's eye view of the new square at the foot of Mies' tower.



continued. In particular, questions were raised as to how a building designed in the 1960s could be read in the context of the postmodern 1980s. How was this building to be occupied, imagined, and described? Was it already a historical monument, had Palumbo commissioned a sculptural testimonial to modernism, not an architecture?

Currently just over half the offices are occupied; the other half are up for rent but desperately need modernising. It is ironic that the delay caused by the controversy of the project allowed the city to catch up with itself, now readily facilitating and promoting the construction of globally competitive office space of the sort that Palumbo had dreamed of, and argued for — all of which now presents competition to the Mansion House block.

Floors six to nine are completely unoccupied, partitions that were originally transparent have been replaced with ply wood panels which create a disparate maze of spaces. Standing at the lift core in the centre of the building you are encased in an interior world — here the essence and intent of the architecture is denied. There is no notion of the spaces, translucent and



reflective, so central to Mies' project. At least these temporary panels follow the grid of the structural bays, which cannot be said of other areas of the cheap re-fit instigated by the last tenant. A loose grid of carpet tiles, in strange pink, rupture the building's proportions — auxiliary lighting tracks sit at a diagonal.

The upper floors from 13 to 16 have fared better. This is partly due to the consistent occupation by several small banking companies since the building's construction. Here we can see more clearly Mies' original intentions. *The open plan layout, with glass partitions reflected against the bronze glass curtain wall,*

*and behind it the city of London*<sup>5</sup>. The generous height and order of the space is testament to Mies' constant reworking of the scheme and the money that was spent on the building. *It is here, in operation, that we can see the untouched original features and furniture that Mies designed. These floors are testament to the totality of Mies' singular vision*<sup>6</sup>. It is easy in retrospect to criticize our fascination with this master, a true modernist, a forefather.

Derelect and battered, the project remains a triumph, a fact laid bare by the totality of the architectural vision that still remains in pockets of this great building. It is chilling to think of a scenario where one of the 20th century's greatest buildings stood on the cliff — surrendering to history as a nearly ran. The building's presence is now assured in the consciousness of London, but *what might the notion of presence mean for such a building whose identity is both stable and unstable, autonomous and contingent*<sup>7</sup>.

History, they say, is always written by the victor, yet the history of the project, post the construction's consent, is nothing of the victorious. ■

This article has drawn on articles published at the time of the 1980s inquiry by then environment minister, Peter Jenkin. The articles used were *The Architect's Journal*, volume 33 issues: Aug 15 p.16-17, Aug 22 & 29 p.24-25. Sep 5 p.56-57 and Sep 12 p.48-49. And *UIA international architect* 'Special issue. Mies van der Rohe: Mansion House Square and the tower type', no. 3, 1984, p.8-54. The text has also been partly constructed, in particular when describing the building, from other sources; either descriptions of another Mies building, or photographs of other Mies towers. These 'collaged' insertions are in italics, below they are listed as chronological in the text.

1: Quote from the introduction to *The Presence of Mies*, ed Dettlef Mertins (New York: Princeton Architectural Press 1994), pp.23, made in reference to photographs of Mies' Toronto Dominion Theatre by Peter MacCallum.

2: Description of drawing of Mies' Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project for Berlin, 1921.

3 and 4: Description of a drawing of the Mansion House scheme and photographs taken of lunch time activity in the square outside the Toronto Dominion Centre published in *Mies van der Rohe at work*, by Peter Carter. (London: Phaidon, 1999. Images 333, 349 and 351, 352.)

5 and 6 describe photographed interiors of the Seagram Tower in Peter Carter's book (see above). Image 134-137

7: Quote from *The Presence of Mies*, pp.23.