Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the Third Reich: A Question of Purity and Danger in the Urn and Chamber Pot

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Karl Kraus once wrote, "All that Adolf Loos and I did—he literally, I linguistically—was to show that there is a difference between an urn and a chamber pot, and that in this difference there is leeway for culture."[1] This curious but telling statement suggests the dependency of culture on the represented distinction between two vessels symbolizing the limits of a corporeal existence: the cremation urn marks the threshold of life and death and thus spirituality, while the chamber pot marks the threshold of clean and dirty and thus materiality. Although it may be culturally necessary to establish the limits of sacrality and profanity to establish a clean or pure mode of existence, the act of doing so makes the margins of culture perilous territory. Differentiation through cleansing entails the elimination of aspects of culture, such as worn out traditions, modes of artifactual production, and--in the extreme case of ethnic cleansing—human beings. The present study utilizes Kraus' unique formulation of the theme of sacrality and profanity to investigate two parallel Germanic contexts--one ancient and one modem (notably, selected Third Reich buildings), in order to raise a question regarding a third context: the pre-Nazi work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.[2]

The analysis begins with the archetypal Germanic "chamber pot." According to Roman historian Tacitus, the Germanic people offered two modes of execution. Some criminals were used as examples and hanged on trees, whereas the most serious offenders (cowards, shirkers, and sodomites) were "pressed down under a wicker hurdle into a slimy mud of bog."[3] The peculiar anthropomorphic ramifications of this latter technique emerge when we recognize that the ancient Germanic words for mud (quat, kot, dreck) are synonyms for excrement. Words more exclusively used to reference excrement developed from the notion of "'to separate,' whence dis-charge from the body."[4] Additionally, in light of body-centric Indo-Germanic mythology the execution technique suggests that those committing "deeds of shame" were aggressively separated from the cultural body and placed into the symbolic space of dis-order, the realm of mud, of excrement[5]

Diametrically opposed to this representation is the Mother Earth icon standing upon an island precinct. Unlike the offenders who are thrust across a threshold of mud, this venerated icon is actually cleansed upon "her" return to the sacred precinct.[6] Although more will follow regarding this revered object, an analog to this cleansing ritual is found in the contents of early Germanic cremation urns. These urns "frequently contain miniature sets of toilet implements, shears, tweezers, and knife, usually made of bronze."[7] These paradigmatic toiletries, meant to accompany the dead to the otherworld, mirror the transcendent cleansing of Mother Earth, suggesting the threshold of sacrality is crossed by those in a clean state, just as the threshold of profanity is crossed by those in a dirty state.

Underlying both the somatic activities of spiritual grooming and the merging of offenders with symbolic mud are archetypal forms of personal hygiene which anthropologists and psychologists present as fundamental ordering principle.[8] The affinity of bodily hygiene to order is suggested in our word for universal world-order, cosmos. Cosmos stems from the Greek kosmeo, I put in order, tidy.[9] The Latin synonym for kosmos, mundus, stems from mundo, I clean.[10] Mundus also signified the basket used by Roman women as a cosmetic box. The basket's domed lid, suggesting the heavenly vault, complements the relation of grooming to universal order. Recognizing personal hygiene as a model for cultural constructs, Mary Douglas argues that, "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment."[11] In a constantly changing world, organized efforts at sanitation are never ending attempts at maintaining order by differentiating between the holy and the defiled, the hygienic and the scatological. These acts continue to be made manifest in a variety of Germanic cultural forms, including literature,[12] humor,[13] folklore,[14] and architecture.[15]

The architectural programs of the Third Reich differentiates the "urn" from "chamber pot" following their categories of Self (the purified Aryan race) and Other (Gypsies, Homosexuals, political opposition and especially Jews). The exaggerated techniques for segregating the Other from the Self coincide with the archaic procedures for excluding

cowards, shirkers and sodomites. Auschwitz, for instance, is homologous to the archaic "chamber pot" and, in fact, Nazi physicians referred to the concentration camp as "anus mundus."[16] An Auschwitz survivor states,

> There was one latrine for every thirty to thirty-two thousand women and we were permitted to use it only at certain hours of the day. We stood in line to get into this tiny building, knee-deep in human excrement."

The architectural significance of the integration of human beings and human feces is typically avoided in discourse. Yet, the impact of this situation did not escape the attention of the helpless prisoners, nor should it escape ours.[18] Another survivor reports,

> At the outset the living places, the ditches, the mud, the piles of excrement behind the blocks, had appalled me with their horrible filth. And then I saw the light! I saw that it was not a question of disorder or lack of organization but that, on the contrary, a very thoroughly considered conscious idea was in the back of the camp's existence. They had condemned us to die in our own filth, to drown in mud, in our own excrement....[19]

The camp's Order, that is, its scatologically-based Dis-order, also has a precedence in the iconographic allegories of medieval Germanic Christian architecture. In the convent cloister at Millstatt, for example, the religious are presented with the depiction of a female figure licking a lion's anus;[20] on the Freiburg Cathedral there is a rainwater-cleansed rear end of a human-shaped gargoyle;,, yet, most telling is the Judensau.

The Judensau ("Jew sow") is an exclusively Germanic anti-Jewish motif that first appeared in the twelfth century and remained "popular for some six-hundred years"[22] in both religious and secular texts. The motif depicts Jews eating and drinking the excrement of the animal that cleaned medieval streets. The representational association of Jews with excrement is not unlike that found in the urban fabric of some seventeenth century towns where Jews had been forced to live in undesirable sections. Herman Pollack notes, "Thus, the Portuguese Jews of Hamburg lived close to the 'debris mound,' [the] dreckwall, the city refuse dump...the Frankfort Jews had their homes 'near the moat' of the city which was used for 'garbage disposal'."[23] In all, these representations of "filth" clearly contrast Nazi representations of the clean and aggressive Aryan community.

Alex Scobie in his study of Hitler's state architecture points out:

> In Mein Kampf Hitler had referred to the public baths of imperial Rome as examples of ancient Gemeinshaftsbauten...therefore it is not too surprising that a massive bathing establishment was planned for Berlin's north-south axis...partly adjacent to the east side of Hitler's gigantic triumphal arch.[24]

This inclusion of Casar Pinnau's classically modeled bathing facility (1941-1942) in the dictator's urban pronouncement of Germany's imperial glory presents cleansing as symbolically integral to the Nazis' aggressive ideal of immaculate order. The relation of hygiene to the tactics of dominance is suggested in the sanitation efforts corresponding to the build-up of the nation's armament.

Consider the widespread efforts of a program launched earlier, in 1934, under the direction of Albert Speer to beautify radically the German industrial plant through cleaning, painting, remodeling and new construction. This program, the Bureau of the Beauty of Labor, generally facilitated the rationalized labor processes of the largely armament-producing industries; however, sociologist Anson Rabinbach notes,

> The [Bureau's] inordinate amount of attention paid to the most modem conveniences in washing apparatus, cleaning of the work space, personal hygiene, modem toilets, faucets, lockers and changing rooms, cannot be explained by German fastidiousness in these matters.[25]

This obsession with maintaining dirt-free skin reveals itself not only at the personal scale of the toiletries but architecturally as well.

The 1936 Heinkel-Werke, an industrial and residential complex established for the assembly of bombers, exemplifies the Bureau's efforts at cleanliness.[26] Of special interest is the structured requirement for workers to pass through the light-filled lavatory to reach the outdoor rest area. This hygienic threshold is similar to both the foot pool in the recreation building entry hall and the foot bath circumscribing the swimming pool. Such hygienic details designed by architect Herbert Rimpl, a student of Mies van der Rohe, surpass instrumental hygiene. These details authenticate the "Cleansed Body" just as the pools of excrement at Auschwitz engender a "Filthy Body."

The 1934 Zeppelin Feld—a project hosting Party Congresses and serving as a parade ground for flexing Germany's growing military might—embodies the Nazi ideals of aggression and cleanliness.[27] Albert Speer acknowledged that his inspiration for his first monumental commission from Hitler was the long-lost Pergamon Altar, unearthed by German archaeologists in 1871.[28] This world wonder, described by Roman historian Lucius Ampelius as a "great marble altar... with colossal sculptures, representing a battle of giants,"[29] was the only large-scale reconstruction of ancient architecture in the world when displayed in Berlin in 1930.

While Speer's design embodies many qualities of the resurrected altar, the architect's comparison of the vast Zeppelin Feld to the Baths of Caracalla betrays additional hygienic inspiration.[30] The project's lavatories (entombed within the massive stone vaults) create a sanitary perimeter for the metaphoric battleground used in military marches. These lavatories are devices of cathartic transcendence, shaped like massive coffins (topped with an equal number of masts as there are pole bearers), complement both Arno

Breker's *Readiness* and the Pergamon Altar, all serving to reference the archetypal warrior's purified transcendence.[31]

The merging of iconography relating to warfare and hygiene at the parade ground, as well as those subtly promoted by the Bureau of the Beauty of Labor in the armament-producing industry, suggests something more profound than a curious coincidence.[32] Roman authors noted that Germanic warriors bathed in rivers even in the cold whereas Latin soldiers were apparently less concerned with the relation of hygiene to armed conflict." In addition to the toiletries found in ancient burial urns, a shield was a common burial item for males and females.[34] In all, these representations illustrate the pairing of aggression and cleanliness.[35]

While Zeppelin Feld, Heinkel-Werke, and Auschwitz embody the Nazi hierarchy of values, the Nazis represent extreme aggression and therefore, of course, do not characterize Germans as a whole. With this obvious provision in mind, let us examine Mies van der Rohe's approach to differentiating the urn and chamber pot. We begin this analysis with an example of his work that appears most parallel to Nazi hygienics: Mies' 1933 entry in the National Socialists' design competition to create an addition to the Reichsbank, the German national bank. An examination of this project's design development reveals that the spaces of bodily grooming are increasingly emphasized.[36] An early parti sketch shows that the empty light courts and the corresponding plans indicate that the rest rooms as well as the changing areas were scattered throughout the plan. Later these spaces were pulled into the light courts, first at one end and then the other. Of course, it may be argued that this controlled gathering of the hygienic spaces into the court stems from the architect's desire to secure natural light and ventilation. But this functional argument unwittingly dismisses what may be the architects most telling and eligible iconography.

In addition to its three dimensional quality standing at either end of the Reichsbank courts, the space of hygiene does not have the horizontal banding of brick and glass characteristic of the building, thereby reinforcing the verticality suggested in the form. Most significant is that these "towers of hygiene" are buffeted from the outside world by the office slabs defining the court. This sheltering of an emphasized, hygienic motif aligns the Reichsbank most closely to Nazi hygienics more than his early work which emphasizes hygiene in an open fashion. Consider, for instance, the 1929 Friedrichstrasse Office Building II. This project consists of three identical curved slabs oriented to form a triangle with convex sides and an interior court. The building's exterior is uniform on all elevations, with each facade interrupted only by the passage between the side of one slab and the end of the other. Mies' located the elevator core and the hygienic facilities at this junction, thus revealing them to those on both the inside and outside. Making public the idea of cleanliness is a recurring theme in Mies' other pre-Nazi works, but most notably in the model dwelling he designed for the 1931 "Future of our Dwelling" exposition in Berlin."

In this effort, scorned by the Nazis,[38] the partitions freely slide in and out of the house and those defining the courtyard off the master bedroom are held apart allowing hygienic iconography to clearly emerge: the place of plumbing fixtures rendered sculpturally with a curved wall and clerestory and the sculpture of a nude female figure, Georg Kolbe's Traveler standing next to a small pool. These two sculptural objects are not only unified by their mere proximity, but also through their common association with the archetypical cleansing and purifying medium of water. Similarly, at the Barcelona Pavilion, Kolbe's Morning and the place of hygiene are juxtaposed by their placement at opposite ends of the "corridor."[39] The view down the corridor is either of a framed representation of a paradigmatic body rising vertically above a black tiled pool or of a bearing wall structure containing the means to hygiene. The latter view includes the project's only punched opening which throughout the design development had been associated with the hygienic space. Although a last minute design change resulted in the relocation of the toiletries, the unique aperture associated with water closet requirements for light and ventilation while securing privacy remains, as if to cast a hygienic eye upon the anthropomorphic figure who, knowingly, returns the glance.

This motive also occurs in Mies' rendering of the Gericke House project of 1932 where the horizontal bathroom windows provide meaningful background details to the nude, anthropomorphic sculpture in the foreground. The cleansed body's centrality to the architect's thought is also evident in Mies' photomontage of an early scheme for the "The Dwelling of Our Time" exhibition where the sculpture stands nude next to the pool as if in deep introspection.

Mies' hygienic gesturing raises critical concern. In order to give focus to the question that I would like to pose, I return to the archaic Mother Earth. According to Tacitus, Mother Earth was the most revered mythological figure in ancient Germanic thought, and the icon of this figure--probably a coarsely carved figure in wood--stood on a sacred island precinct. That is, the iconic form resided across transcendent hygienic waters, a common location of the other world in Indo-European mythology. The historian reports that on certain occasions the revered artifact was shrouded in a veil and taken in a chariot drawn by cows through the Germanic lands. Upon its return, the figure was cleansed in precinct waters by slaves who were subsequently killed as no one but the high priest was permitted to touch the icon.

As noted earlier, this cleansing of Mother Earth is the extreme counterpart to the execution in the bog of mud. Similarly, the obsessively clean Nazi is the counterpart to the excremental homicide occurring in the Death Camps. This parallel does not indicate that Germans are unique in their culture-defining hygienic rituals as clearly all cultures have curious and occasionally horrifying traditions. The parallel simply illustrates archaic and modern manifestations of the continuum of dirty and clean. Both illustrations suggest that dirt does not stand alone but is conceptually linked to the

clean, making the threshold of the profane contiguous with the threshold of sacrality. Douglas definitively supports this point when she argues, "Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system....dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity."[40] The systemic linkage of dirt to purity allows me to raise a thorny question:

What is the dirty counterpart to Mies' clean architecture?

That is, what does his celebrated work demand that we eliminate in order to glimpse that which is retained? And the junction of Miesian hygienics to that of the Nazis —no matter how distant we hope it to be—demands introspection not so much to comfortably reflect upon the desirable eliminations long attributed to Mies but to constructively wrestle with the eliminations we regret.

The gravity of the holocaust demands that this question of hygienic elimination not be localized to Miesian or Germanic architecture. Hygienic elimination is an aspect of living required by all cultures and, in fact, all living entities, human, animal, insect and microbe. Alberti acknowledges this requirement is his statement to architects that a bird knows to keep its nest clean. The widespread nature of hygienic elimination demands that it be more generally understood. In this regard, the question asked of Mies' work is also directed to any approach to building and especially that which crosses the dangerous outer threshold of praxis to construct radical dualisms of sacrality and profanity, clean and dirty, formalism and plumbing. Beyond the outer threshold of praxis lies the realm where fantasy governs the proposals for cultural elimination, such as the elimination of worn out traditions, modes of artifactual production, and—with them—the related human counterpart. When fantasy guides construction, dualisms are the ritualistic chant that tends to disassociate the act of elimination from the pain it creates. Consequently, the construction-related acts of purification take place without question, without regret.

The scenario is quite different within the boundary of praxis. Here the pain of construction is felt. This feeling alerts practitioners when the natural pursuit of purity crosses into those dangerous territories not part of the geniune, humane architecture of urn and chamber pot.

NOTES

[1] Kraus, Karl. *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, 1957 p.66 (trans. by Harry Zohn in Karl Kraus [New York, 1971], p.89).

[2] See, Richard Pommer's "Mies van der Rohe and the Political Ideology of the Modem Movement in Architecture" in *Mies van der Rohe: Critical Essays*, Franz Schulze editor (Cambrigde, 1989) p.96-147; Elaine Hochman's *Architects of Fortune* (New York, 1989); Hochman's study is reviewed by Roger Kimball's "Is modernism the enemy? The case of Mies van der Rohe" in *The New Criterion*, May 1989, vol. 7, No.9 pp.67-77.

[3] Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*. Translated by H. Mattingly, (New York, 1970) p.134-5.

[4] Buck, Carl Darling, *A Dictionary of Selected Synonyms in the Principal Indo-European Languages*, (Chicago, 1988) p.275 and also see p.20 and pp.1080-1082.

[5] For a discussion of early Germanic creation mythology see Bruce Lincoln's *Myth, Cosmos, and Society: Indo-European Themes of Creation and Destruction* (Cambridge, 1986) pp.1-40 and Paul C. Bauschatz's *The Well and the Tree: World and Time in Early Germanic Culture*, (Amherst, 1982) pp.1-84.

[6] Tacitus (note 3), ibid.

[7] Leeds, E. T., *Early Anglo-Saxon Art and Archaeology* (Oxford, 1936), p.30. For a fascinating discussion of early Germanic burial rites and artifacts see Bauchatz (note 5), pp.33-58. Lincoln (note 5) describes rituals of disposing hair and it significance in Indo-European cosmology, pp.87-98.

[8] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Boston, 1978) pp.2,5,35,39,115,160-161. Douglas' position that the body and its hygiene serve as a model for socio-cultural behaviors is followed in spirit in the analyses of Robert Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983) and Michael Newton, *The Concept of Purity at Qumran and in the Letters of Paul* (Cambridge, 1985). Lincoln (note 5) describes bodily maintenance as integral to Indo-European cosmology, see chapters four and six. Psychologists beginning with Freud have identified the "anal personality." Although some of Freud's conclusions have been undermined by subsequent research, Seymour Fisher and Roger Greenberg have examined dozens of studies since Freud and offer support to one of his major tenets. They conclude that there is a significant correlation between the anal personality traits and the types of behavior that Freud presumed would arise from these characteristics; see *The Scientific Credibility of Freud's Theories and Therapy* (New York, 1977).

[9] Buck (note 4), p12-14.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Douglas (note 8), p.2.

[12] Rollfinke, Dieter and Jacqueline. *The Call of Human Nature: The Role of Scatology in Modern German Literature*. (Amherst, 1986).

[13] Legman, G. *Rationale of the Dirty Joke: An Analysis of Sexual Humor* (New York, 1968), p.15.

[14] Dundes, Alan. *Life is Like a Chicken Coop Ladder: A Portrait of German Culture Through Folklore* (New York, 1984).

[15] Anson G. Rabinbach examines some Gemanic issues of hygiene in his article, "The Aesthetics of Production in the Third Reich," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11, (1976), 43-74. Germanic Modernists, such as Adolf Loos and Henrich Tessenow, have written articles directly indicating the central paradigm of hygiene in their esthetic positions. See Loos' "Plumbers" (trans. by J. O. Newman and J. H. Smith in *Spoken into the Void* [Cambridge, 19821) and "Ornament and Crime" (trans. by Ludwig Munz and Gustav Kunstler in *Adolf Loos: Pioneer of Modern Architecture*, New York, 1966, p.226-231). See Tessenow's *Hausbau und Dergleichen* (1916), trans. Wilfried Wang, 9H (1989), pp.21-22.

[16] Note discussion of the "excremental assault" inflicted by Nazis see Terrence Des Pres' *The Survivor* (New York, 1976) p.51-72, Rollfinkes (note 12) p.98-138, Dundes (note 14) p.128-140.

[17] Perl, Gisella. *I Was a Doctor at Auschwitz* (New York, 1964) p.33.

[18] Robert Jan Van Pelt noted, "For the last 45 years architectural historians have been unwilling to fit Auschwitz into their retrospective schedule of architectural development. They circumvent the question raised by the [concentration and death] camps." See "After the walls have fallen down" *Queen's Quarterly* vol.96, Autumn 1989, no.3, p.643.

[19] Lewinska, Pelagia. *Twenty Months at Auschwitz* trans. Albert Teichner (New York, 1960) pp.41-42.

[20] Sheridan, Ronald and Anne Ross. *Gargoyles and Grotesques* (Boston, 1975) pp.65-66.

[21] This gargoyle is prominently illustrated in German postcards. See Rollfinkes (note 12) p.19-20.

[22] Isaiah Shachar studies extensively this art form in *The Judensau: A Medieval Anti-Jewish Motif and its History.* The Trinity Press, London 1974.

[23] Pollack, Herman. *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648-1806)* (Cambridge, 1971) p.1.

[24] Scobie, Alex. *Hilter's State Architecture: The Impact of Antiquity* (University Park, 1990) p.119.

[25] Rabinbach (note 15) studies the Bureau's efforts, p.59.

[26] See the government supported monograph on the Heinkel-Werke, Herbert Rimpl's *Ein deutsches Flugzeugwerk: die Heinkel-Werke Oranienburg* (Berlin, c.1938).

[27] The Zepplin Feld is desribed in Albert Speer's *Albert Speer* (1932-1942) (Brussels, 1985).

[28] Albert Speer describes the influences on his design of the Zeppelin Feld in *Erinnerungen* (1969); translated into English as *Inside the Third Reich* (New York, 1970) p.92.

[29] Stanley Meisler examines the museum and archaeological context of the Pergamon Altar in "For the Pergamon, a rebirth in reunified Berlin," *Smithsonian,* October, 1991, Vol.22, No.7, pp.76-89.

[30] Speer (note 28) ibid.

[31] For the archetypical responsibilities of the warrior class in the Indo-European tradition see Lincoln (note 5), pp.144,148,151-154, 163-166; Bauschatz (note 5) considers the Germanic tradition, pp. 40-41, 142-166 and especially the author's analysis of Beowulf pp. 85-116.

[32] Rabinbach (note 15) argues the esthetics of hygiene promoted by the Bureau of the Beauty of Labor generally had a sublimating effect on the workers.

[33] See Lynn Thorndike, "Sanitation, Baths, and Street-Cleaning in the Middle Ages and Renaissance" in *Speculum* 3:192-203.

[34] See note 7 above.

[35] Douglas (note 8, Chapter 6) notes that in time of great socio-cultural stress marginality is no longer tolerated and is commonly dealt with agressively.

[36] For Mies' approach to the Reichsbank Competition, including his original asymmetrical as well as his final symmetrical approaches, see project's design drawings and textual description in Arthur Drexler, *The Mies van der Rohe Archive,* (New York, 1986) vol. 3 p.432ff. Hochman (note 2) argues that Mies was greatly interested in winning this politically significant competition, see pp.126,150,152-56,166.

[37] The project is listed as "Ground Floor House" in the exhibition guide, *Deutsche Bauausstellung* Berlin 1931, May 9-August 2, Official Catalog and Guide, published by the Exposition, Fair, and Tourist Authority of the City of Berlin; see Wolf Tegethoff's *Mies van der Rohe: The Villas and Country Houses* (New York, 1985) p.70. Tegethoff offers what is perhaps the most detailed reporting on the circumstances surrounding this project. Mies directed the organisation of this exhibition and it is perhaps noteworthy at the hall's perimeter household products were displayed including rooms of plumbing fixtures amply doucumented (above all other products) in the *Mies van der Rohe Archive,* Museum of Modem Art, New York.

[38] Hochman (note 2) notes that the Nazis dubbed the Berlin House as a "horse stable," p.75.

[39] Jose Quetglas aptly references the "corridor," see his article "Fear of Glass: The Barcelona Pavilion" in *Revisions,* edited by Beatriz Colomina (Princeton, 1988), pp.123-51. See Tegethoff (note 41) for a detailed description of the German Pavilion. However, Tegethoff s description of the Pavilion's design development fails to reference the potentially significant development in the plumbing which includes a last minute design change to the placement of the water closet. For a more complete indication in the design sequence, see archival drawing in Drexler (note 36) vol.2. I explore the this issue in the paper cited in note 39, above.

[40] Douglas (note 8), p.35.