

Interview with Robert McCormick/ Elizabeth Larkin October 1992

EL Hi, I am Elizabeth Larkin with the Elmhurst Art Museum Society and also the Elmhurst Fine Arts and Civic Center Foundation. I am so pleased that you can join us today on a lovely fall day and visit with Robert McCormick.

Mr. Robert McCormick was a business partner and co-developer with Ludwig Mies van der Rohe of the 860 and 880 Lake Shore Drive apartment buildings in Chicago.

Mr. McCormick, I am so glad you could join us today

RM Well, you are so nice to have me.

EL And I wondered if you could first start out and tell us a little bit about the inspiration for your lovely home?

RM All right, I would be glad to we (Mies + McCormick) were standing on LSD one day back in about 1949 or 50 and looking at the 860 building, which was being erected on the Lake Shore Dr. The steel was coming in from the manufacturer and was being hoisted into place. As we looked at it Mies said, Why must we go it like this? (Motioning with his arms in a vertical movement). "Why can't we do it like this?" (gesturing with his arms horizontally). I said "I need a house-why don't we?" And this is the house that developed from that conversation.

EL So you and Mies took the structural ideas from 860, meaning in this example you can see in the exterior the steel and the glass, and modified it for a single family house.

RM Yes, actually we put a slice of the building and put it on the ground. So, in the simplest terms, that's what this house was.

EL In fact, last night Franz Schultz, the biographer of Mies-a biographer of Mies van der Rohe, mentioned that this house represent an "Adam's rib" of those two building (860-880 Lake Shore Drive)

RM It does indeed, It's particularly today on this lovely fall day to be outside in the backyard of the house, on the patio of the house, with the lovely leaves and the sun shining and it brings to mind the, the location and the placing of all the plants

around the house. The original lot was a vacant lot with a couple of trees in it, a couple of elm trees in it. But, we decided (ALfred Caldwell, Mies, McCormick) that we needed a lot more than that to give privacy to the house and make it livable.

EL Earlier you mentioned to me, ah, you told a fascinating story about how the house was landscaped, by Alfred Caldwell, a dean of landscaping at IIT in Chicago (Alfred Caldwell, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture and Construction).

RM Yes, he is a most interesting guy (this interview was in 1992, Caldwell was still alive), and he is still living and he was out here at the house a couple weeks ago with us. Ah, he came to the house here (originally) at the request of Mies and planned the location of here (originally) at the request of Mies and planned the location of all the plants and the bushes and the trees and agreed to put them in for us. To do so, he persuaded his students to come out and actually do the shovel work and he brought a truck full of students (Illinois Institute of Technology architecture students) and a truck full of plants and he came out. And he had made a layout where each plant went. There were about a thousand of them and he supervised the students and told them where to put them and they all were put in exactly where they were supposed to be. They were native plants, native prairie plants from this part of the work and they have lived here for forty years, ah, and I don't think there are many of them missing. After he got through, I supplied the beer and he took me out and he told me I would have to put a bucketful of water in each plant for a year, I said "Yes, sir!"

EL And did you put a bucket full of water (on each plant)?

RM Do you think so?

EI No.

EL Now, we're in the inside of the building and we're going to discuss more about the interior. Now, you were telling me earlier how you built this home as a prototype for a possible future development.

RM Yes, that's right. Ah the real purpose of the house was to develop and prototype building, which could have style and distinction and be inexpensive. This was a period in the American history when the GI Bill of Right, which was a financing device that was available to returning veterans after WW2, was being used in vast quantities all over the country and some of the big developers were the Levitts. So, the vast numbers of houses were being built all over the country and being financed by the government, for the returning veterans. It appeared to Mies and other people,

other architects, around the country, that architecture was not being improved by this vast architectural expansion. And, it was his (Mies) hope that he could do something or other, to have an impact on this type of construction, this single-family construction.

When we saw the building, the steel building rising on the Lake Shore (Drive) and thought of the idea of doing them horizontally rather than vertically, and taking a slice out of that building, "Adam's Rib", as it has been said, ah, we- it occurred to us, that possibly it would be conceivable, that we could design a distinctive building and built it at a reasonable cost-using modern materials in a slightly different way than he had usually been done before. Ah, and the present building, which was built for me as a house, as a single family house, by Mies van der Rohe, might be used for this as a prototype for this sort of construction. The construction was to be a concrete slab, rectangular, with end walls of brick and long walls of long walls, so that both sides of the building would have a complete view of the outside, and the outside would be brought in and the inside would be brought out. Visually, that is. Ah, the end walls, in turn, would be of brick which would give a firm structure to the building, and the buildings roof would be of plywood with built up waterproofing on top.

So, the building, the materials for the building, could be brought together on the side and set in place. Actually, if everything came on time, the thing could be erected in one afternoon; and this was the scheme and this would develop a fairly reasonably priced structure. The partitions in the building could be flexible and could be moved from place to place, depending on family sizes and the family was of living, and so forth. So that they could be, actually, they would not be supporting partitions (as most partitions are), to support the roof and give, give it the whole building, structure. This was the scheme to implement it. It seemed to be sensible to go see what the mass builders were doing around the country. So, we took a trip down to Long Island where they were building thousands of building on what used to be potato farms and selling them on weekends by the thousands of building (them) to keep up with sales. And it seemed to be an ideal combination of building facilities and market, and we wondered if it could fit our scheme into this.

EL Now, this was (the) Levitts?

RM These were the Levitts that we went down to see and they were very generous with their time and (they) took us around the buildings and showed us how they put them together, and how they sold them and what they went through, and we were astonished at the efficiency and the success of their sales programs. They literally

were building towns in months, and major towns. They're still there, they're still around the east shore, there is one in Pennsylvania, there's one near Philadelphia, there are several on Long island. These are great cities now and they have been wonderfully successful. We were trying to fit ourselves into this kind of a thing, but we didn't take into consideration that this sort of design was ahead of the times. And people didn't want to live in a building like this (McCormick House) which seemed to be fairly, ah, cold, and a, not incorporate some of the things that were desired by the young people of that time.

EL So you and Mies researched the building of these homes. You went to see Levitt and saw how he was mass producing houses for GI's and you built this prototype. Did it work?

RM Well, to be truthful, no, it didn't work. And I think on the main reasons that it didn't work was the American public has a strange feeling about their houses and they want them to be typical. They want them to be the same. They want to have the same things in their house as their brother has in his house. They want- they don't want to embark on something new for fear of other people will think they don't have any sense. The typical house for a new family is one that is like everybody else's (house). It may be red instead of yellow; it may have a hip roof; but it has to have the same, (or) incorporate the same feature that other people's houses incorporate. This is a real necessity, you see it in the automobiles, you see it in the houses, you see it in all aspects of American social life. People don't want to embark on something new and this was a house which was very new. It incorporated all kinds of new things; it didn't have supporting walls, it had lots of glass. It would require things they maybe didn't want to have- like curtains, and different types of lighting, and just new things all around.

EL Now this home doesn't have air conditioning- was air conditioning available in other homes at the times?

RM Air condition was available but it was expensive, it was very expensive and the young families couldn't afford air conditioning. But, Mr. Levitt showed us his answer to that when we went through his houses and as we came out of the house there was a switch by the door and he turned on the switch and the whole house started to shake a little bit and he said "that's the poor man's air conditioning." he said, "We oversized the attic fans so that it makes the whole place shake and it makes them (the owner) think that they're getting cooler." And this was apparently very successful. And he was very proud of the trick he was doing.

EL One of the attributes of this house is that it gives you the ability to redefine the interior and you mention to me how when you threw a dinner party, for example, you were able to choose the spot that seemed optimal at the moment.

RM Yes, ah, actually there is no plan that says “dining room” or “living room.” Except there is one that says “bathroom”. But there is none other than that- only possibly the kitchen, that is frozen activity (single function) in that space. Ah, for instance, there is no dining room in the house. There are several places where you could dine, where you could have people to dine, depending on how many people were going to dine, or who was cooking, or who was preparing, or who was coming and going, or whether children were going to be bouncing in and out. There were different places where these functions could take place. For instance, there was a place where a formal dinner party could take place and that was, ah, in the living room. At the end of the living room there was a table which was appropriate for dining and some chairs nearby which could be pulled up to the table. And this reminds me of the time when we had two very famous architects for dinner one night. as well as some other people, and there was Mies van der Rohe, who was the head of the Institute of Design at Illinois State (Dean of the College Architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology) and there was Walter Gropius who was the head of architecture at Harvard, who had been old friends in Germany many years before. I say “friend” in a kind of a light way because really they were competitors; they were friends, too. Anyhow, the dinner went along and Gropius, Walter Gropius, talked great length about the advantages of cooperation and in architecture, the necessity of having many people involved should contribute to it, to the design. And he talked at great lengths, he talked almost the whole dinner, and you couldn’t shut him up on this (and he went) on and on about this and actually had a firm in Boston called the Architects’ Collaborative and that firm did lots of designing and all the partners were involved.

And Mies didn’t say a word, After dinner he pushed his chair back and lit his cigar and got his scotch, and said “Walter, (Walter Gropius) Walter, when you want to make a baby do you call in the neighbors.

EL Tell us how you met Mies.

RM Well, I met Mies through Herbert Greenwald, who was a developer in Chicago and he was building a building (Promenade Point Hyde Park) on the southside of Chicago and he employed Mies van der Rohe to be the architect. He had employed Mies after he had tried to get Frank Lloyd Wright and Frank Lloyd Wright was unwilling to do it for less than a sum of money which was not available, and he had

tried Walter Gropius, who was too busy to do it at the time, but Walter Gropius had recommended Mies van der Rohe, whom he had known well in Germany many years before. And so Herbert Greenwald got hold of Mies van der Rohe and began building on the southside of Chicago (Promenade Point, Hyde Park)

I later wanted to develop an apartment building in Chicago myself and I inquired about to find somebody else who was doing the same sort of thing and was recommended to Herbert Greenwald whom I contacted and he brought Mies along and we got together to do the 860 Lake Shore Drive building. SO that is how I got in touch with Mies. All through all of this conversation, ah Herb Greenwald was involved in all aspects of it as we were co developers and we operated together.

EL Can you remember the significant people in Mies van der Rohe's office that were involved in the construction and design of your home?

RM Yes, I think I can. Ah, the person who as most deeply involved in the house was Joe Fujikawa, who later became one of the major partners in the van der Rohe firm. Ah, how was a young architect recently out of Illinois Tech, and he was working in the 860 projects at the time and he was assigned to this project. Ah, we had many discussions on the details of the house. Ah, some of which were rather significant and included discussions of the use of the space in the house and joe was a disciple and if anybody was doing anything that he thought was not Miesian, he would resist. For instance, he was concerned because we wanted to have doors on the bedrooms in the house and he was very much defensive of the Mies "open plan policy" which, to his way of thinking, wouldn't be necessary in a truly Miesian house where the space was to flow and not be defined as space.

EL Well I hope you got a few door out of him.

RM Well, we finally had to go to mies and get the doors. Joe would not consent to the doors so finally I went to see Mies one afternoon about a quarter to five and said, "I'm having a problem with doors'. (Mies sad) 'We fixed it.' So, the door went on and some of it is still there. But in addition to that, Joe was very concerned about this house and he took a lot of care with it. The bricks behind us here, he selected the bricks, the colors and the texture of them. And when the bricklayers came in and started laying the bricks he came out and he inspected it and he said "No, That's not good enough" and he laid them himself.

EL So he laid the bricks himself?

RM He laid the bricks himself

EL That's devotion!

RM It was. It was real devotion. And he's had that feeling about his house ever since. And he's always been interested in it and always been involved in it. If there was anything that ever didn't work, that happened once in awhile, he came out, fixed it, or saw that it was fixed.

EL Now was it Joe's idea to give you two 1000 sq. foot houses, which is what your home is comprised of?

RM No, that was done before Joe got really involved in it. There was a requirement in Chicago that if a house had more than 1000 sq. feet in it, it had to have plastered walls. Plastered walls were extremely expensive and took several different trades to install. You had to have plasterers, lathers, and I don't know who else- finishers and son. Plaster creates a huge mess of mud on the floor and has to be cleaned up. It's very unnecessary and very expensive. So, what we wanted to do was to have movable walls, which were not fixed walls, as plaster would be, and in order to that to build these houses in Chicago, which this one isn't, they had to keep it under 1000 sq. ft. So our prototype at the 1000 sq. feet would require us to put two building up, So, we put them side by side and got away with that.

EL So you fooled them and got away with it!

RM We got away with it. Elmhurst didn't have that requirement so we were able to get away with it.

EL What did the local people of Elmhurst think about your hose that was so far ahead of its time?

RM I think the best way I can tell you that is about the assessor. The assessor called me into their office in Elmhurst. and said they were having trouble arriving at an evaluation for the house. And they thought they ought to have some help from me to do so. And so they went down a list of items and asked me whether or not we had these items. One of them was basement and the said "Do you have a basement" and I said, "No," "Do you have air conditioning?" And I said, "No." "And do you have tile bathrooms?" And I said, "No." And they said, "Do you have..." a whole list of things, "air conditioning, carpeting, attic, a garage (and so forth)?" And I said "No." And one the assessor turned to the other and said, "I think it's a class D House!"

EL One of the most distinctive features about the interior of the home is the fact that many of the walls are partitioned and can be moved to create different living spaces. Could you tell us more about Mies' defined, but did not constrain, the interior spaces?

RM I can try. The walls themselves, most of the walls themselves are- none of the walls, sorry, none of the walls are supporting walls. They're just screens; they just define space rather than contain it. The walls you see in front of us are not holding up the roof above it. The steel beams going across the are what hold the roof. So that the walls just really do screen what goes on in the house. Now the wings coming out from these walls which make the illusion of space going on for an indefinite amount of space, distance, and this is a deliberate illusion that indicates to people who are living in the room that this is a large space, it could go on for several tens of feet but they don't go on that far.

EL How do you feel about the Elmhurst Fine Arts and Civic Center Foundation's purchase of the Mies House and other plans to incorporate it into a brand new art museum here in Elmhurst, Illinois?

RM I think it's wonderful. I am so pleased. It gives me great feeling of satisfaction to know that this house is going to be carried on. And particularly so in that it's being used for a different use and that it's going to be used for something other than a house. This justifies the movability of the partitions, for instance. It shows this kind of space is completely usable and can be transferred from one purpose to another over time. In another 500 years from now it will be something else, maybe, who knows!

EL Well, thank you so much, Robert McCormick, for coming to visit us today on this lovely day in Elmhurst, October 1992. I hope you will come and visit us when we move the home to its new location in Wilder Park at that point it will be incorporated in the new Elmhurst Art Museum.

RM Well, I am certainly looking forward to it.