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860–880 Lake
Shore Drive,
Ludwig Mies van
der Rohe Architect,
Associate
Architects Pace
Associates,
Holsman,
Holsman, Klekamp
& Taylor

[CHICAGO]: 860 LAKE SHORE DRIVE
TRUST, CA. 1951

John Ronan

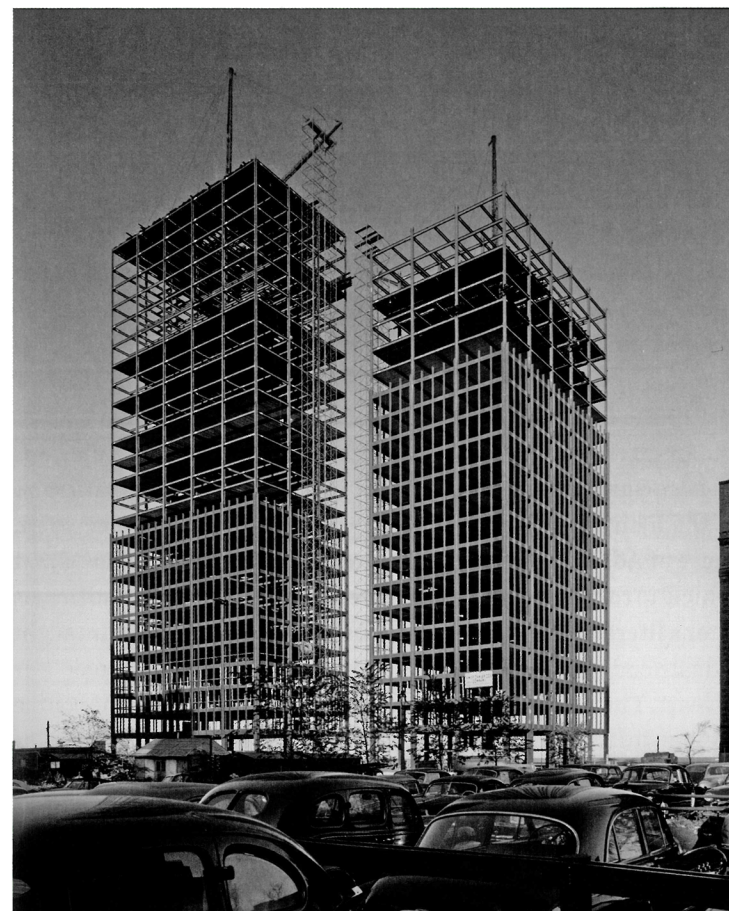
How strange they must have looked when completed in 1951: elegant and mysterious, identical twin towers standing in dialogue at the city's edge, their radically reduced palette of steel, aluminum, and glass more like the cars rushing past on Lake Shore Drive below than the stone buildings nearby. Described in the sales brochure as “a spectacular upsweep of glass and steel,”¹ their facades seem to alternate between transparency and opacity, one face opening up while the other closes down. Each reveals, in a radical breach of protocol, the structural steel frame concealed behind the neighboring stone and brick edifices. The apartment interiors were similarly radical: windows of “thick plate glass . . . housed in specially designed aluminum frames”² are bisected by the horizon line of Lake Michigan, offering an ever-changing minimalist artwork, one's very own Mark Rothko.

The buildings' architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969), the German-born son of a stonemason, had made his name in Europe for his abandonment first of historical styles, then of ornament altogether, in such notable structures as the Barcelona Pavilion (1929). Mies was the director of the renowned Bauhaus when it was effectively shut down by the Nazis in 1933. With opportunities in his homeland dwindling, he fled in 1938 to the United States, where he was invited to run the school of architecture at the Armour Institute (later the Illinois Institute of Technology) in Chicago. Mies's stripped-down aesthetic found a welcome home in the city, the no-nonsense capital of the Midwest.

Commissioned by real estate mogul Herbert Greenwald, the developer-friendly (read: economical) design for 860–880 Lake Shore Drive is the result not of a burst of inspiration but rather of decades of research and experimentation into materials and construction. Here the architect realized his true expression of the steel-and-glass building, with all ornament stripped away until only essential elements remain. As the sales brochure for the buildings states, “The design is so simple, so clean, so uncluttered by meaningless detail.”³ Germans had a word for this—*Sachlichkeit*—a certain matter-of-fact quality that implies objectivity. Mies called it something else: “skin and bones architecture.”

For Mies design was the result of a rational and empirical process, involving the important question of “how,” not “what”:

I tried . . . to develop a clear structure. We are just confronted with the material. How to use it in the right way is what you have to find out. It has nothing to do with the shape. What I do—what you call my kind of architecture—we should just call it a structural approach. We don't think about the form when we start. We think about the right way to use the materials. Then we accept the result.⁴



This represented not merely a stylistic alternative but a radical new approach to building design that even *sounded* different, for Mies spoke not in the flowery artistic terms of his some of his contemporaries but with the mathematical objectivity of a scientist. For him buildings are less artistic creations than objective “solutions” to the “problem” of building, his conclusions carrying with them the authority of an essential rightness with which any rational architect would concur. And so many did. Mies's steel-and-glass solution would be imitated ad infinitum across the American landscape (including by Mies himself), though it would never be improved upon. In retrospect the uneven quality of 860–880's descendants serves to foreground the deceptive simplicity of Mies's design and expose its *real* truth: 860–880 Lake Shore Drive is not an objective “solution” to a building “problem” but a rather subjective and enigmatic work of art.

The two elegant glass-and-steel apartment buildings by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe that rose on Lake Shore Drive in 1949–51—shown here still under construction—reveal the formal purity and attention to detail that are hallmarks of the Chicago-based architect's style. They would spawn countless imitations throughout the world.