

# JACK

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**haus tugendhat  
from the film by  
dieter reifarth**

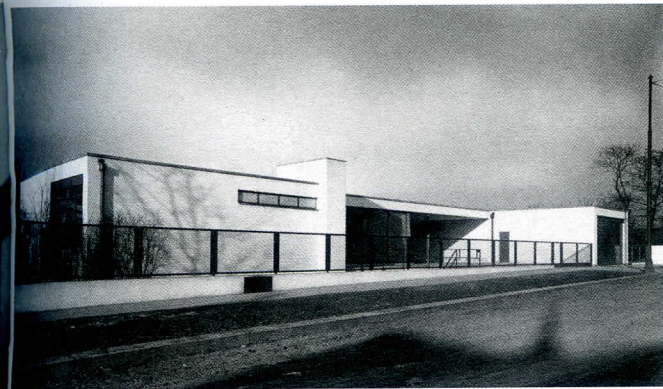
by Pedro Bandeira



*Mies Van Der Rohe at Villa Tugendhat,  
Fritz Tugendhat, 1931*



*Haus Tugendhat, Rudolf Sandalo, 1931*



Dieter Reifarth's film on Villa Tugendhat, designed by Mies van der Rohe in the Czech city of Brno in 1930, is a documentary that while being easily perceptible to a wider audience is still informed enough to stimulate a more reflective discussion. Through interviews, photographs and films, it covers the story of the house, of its family and other occupants, without shying away from the controversies it sparked, from its origins to its more recent restoration. Without any major formal claims, the seven-minute prologue lays music of atonal inspiration, by contemporary composer Robin Hoffman, over a thoughtful combination of black and white photographs, period statements and recent colour footage, from smooth camera movements along the present-day house. An essentially chronological structure organizes the content, engaging the viewer for the two hours of the film. The DVD edition comes with two extra features: one on the recent restoration process (2010-2012), with a more technical approach, and the other on the images that mediatized the house. But the greatest attribute of the film may well be the moment in which it surfaced, after the restoration and at a time when the world was convinced that all had been said and written about Mies van der Rohe and the Villa Tugendhat. Focussing more on the history/story of the family than on the architecture itself, this documentary prompts a reflection about the Europe we have inherited, not without its ghosts. In 1931, Justus Bier asked, *can one live in Villa Tugendhat?* The answer is, sadly, still no — but for other reasons we will address.

*When I allow these spaces and everything inside them to influence me as whole, I clearly feel what beauty is, what truth is.*

This text fragment alone, by Fritz Tugendhat, should have been enough to silence all the clamour regarding the livableness of the house; after all, it was a private house that had only its owner's expectations to live up to. There is little doubt that the Jewish Tugendhat family lived happily there from 1930 to 1938, when the Nazis occupied Austria, prior to their arrival in Brno.

But, from early on, the house was at the centre of a heated public debate. Mies van der Rohe himself, in defence of his work, hired photographer Rudolf Sandalo to illustrate Walter Riezler's article *Das Haus Tugendhat in Brünn in Die Form* (1931), in which he praised a *new spirituality, a new idealism*. Objections to the article were swift, questioning the house's functionality, comfort or lack of privacy. Not less importantly, there was criticism for such degree of ostentation in a time of crisis and for the *immoral luxury* (Roger Ginsburger) of a house that cost the equivalent of thirty regular family houses. In the living room's onyx wall alone, Fritz Tugendhat spent 60.000 Czech crowns (a family house, at the time, could go from 8.000 to 25.000 crowns). As historian Dietrich Neumann points out in a 2012 article about the Villa Tugendhat (*Wolkenkuckucksheim* #32, p.87-99), modern architecture became *bourgeois*, turning away from its social concerns of the 1920s and from a *sincere functionalism*. If, on the one hand, Rudolf Sandalo's photographs for *Die Form* contributed to communicate Mies' new spatiality — based on hygienist values, in formal purity, in literal and



*Physical Education Institute of Karla Hladká, children on the stairway of the garden terrace with Karla Hladká, 1945-1950*



*Children's Rehabilitation Centre, Milos Budík, February 1959*

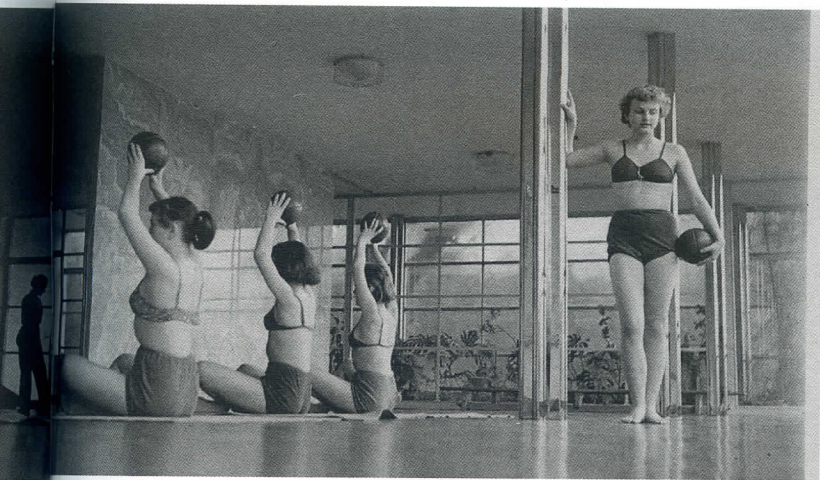
symbolic transparency, or in the technology of the time — on the other hand, these same images devoid of people also questioned its livableness and appropriation for everyday use. In fact, it becomes hard to envision alterations to Mies' design and layout of the furniture and harder yet to imagine children playing freely in this extremely refined space. Dietrich Neumann recalls Walter Benjamin, who stated, with no short amount of scepticism, that modern architecture, lacking in ornament or traces, was the enemy of *secrets and possessions*, a beautiful metaphor for *the men who have adopted the cause of the absolutely new and have founded it on insight and renunciation*.

Dieter Reifarth's documentary offers a more humanized outlook on the house, as comes across in the interviews to the children of Fritz and Grete and even to their nanny, Irene Kalkofen. In their accounts, there is no hostility whatsoever towards the space, and Irena goes as far as describing the house as a simple space but filled with happy memories. Dieter Reifarth also pays particular attention to the photographs that Fritz Tugendhat took of his family going about their everyday life in the house. Fritz, an amateur photographer who built himself a dark room in the basement, gives a visual account of an intimate, blissful and comfortable domestic atmosphere, while also revealing a special sensitivity in his choice of framing, light variations, use of reflections and softness of colours. Had it been his photographs published in *Die Form* and the controversy may not have been so magnified (at least, when it comes to the house's livableness).

After the family's forced exile, the house was taken over by the Nazis and rented out, in 1943, to a German family who found it uncomfortable but, paradoxically, generous and exotic. The apparent contradiction was settled by dividing the main living room into smaller areas, which were made

supposedly more inviting through the new rustic interior decoration (in the original design, Mies accounted for the possibility of subdividing the space, only through curtains, which went missing along with the wooden panels that lined the semi-circular eating area and that only recently were found in the walls of the dining hall of the University of Brno, formerly the Gestapo headquarters in Brno). With the end of the war, the house was nationalized by the communist regime and adapted to function as a physical therapy centre and a gymnastics and ballet school. The film documents the fond memories of former students, both of the house and of that time: *It was amazing how free I felt the first time I went there*. Meanwhile, without any maintenance work, the house grew into disrepair. Only in the 1980s it was subject to a first intervention, whose main objective was an overall renovation of the building, without going into an extensive restoration. This investment allowed for the house to be a representative structure that held municipal and national events and it was not by chance that ministers Václav Klaus and Vladimír Mečiar chose it to make the announcement, live on television and from the entrance lobby, that, from 1 January 1993, there would be two independent states: the Czech Republic and Slovakia. With the entry of both states into the European Union, in 2004, there were finally funds available to make a full restoration based on historical research (which included retrieving the original wooden panels from the university canteen). Reflecting the European policies for culture, the Villa Tugendhat became a museum in 2012 and also the location for numerous commercial and marketing campaigns.

Villa Tugendhat, Mies van der Rohe designed ideological space for *the new man*, started off as the home of a Jewish family, resisted the Nazis and the communists, was the expression of a young democracy that saw through the coun-



V.T. NR.39, Dirk Brömmel, 2010

try's *velvet divorce* and finally reflects the musealization and mass culture logic of the capitalist Europe of the markets. On the day of its opening, after the restoration, with all the fanfare, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat and Ivo Hammer (the technical coordinator of the restoration project) declared themselves pleased with the result (even if the furniture was not the original). Daniela talks about the surfaces, the textures, the glass, the immateriality, but the question remains of why she is not truly happy. Ivo Hammer provides the answer: people don't live here anymore.

And Walter Benjamin comes back to mind, as does his belief that modern architecture, its polished surfaces, its glazing, its reflections and transparencies, unlike the architecture of the 19th century, does not seem to be able to seize history. A reminder that this restoration only brought the house back to Mies van der Rohe's image of it and to Rudolf Sandalo's photographs with no people on them. Only the Tugendhat family could disprove Walter Benjamin but Germany would not let them, and now neither does Europe, albeit for other reasons.

Yet another reading can be made of this restoration process. The current musefication of the house, with all the superficiality that comes with the loss of its domesticity, is also the expression of a collective appropriation, with ethically questionable contours. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat reminds us, for instance, of Simon Mawer's fictional romance, *The Glass Room* (Booker Prize shortlist in 2009) or of Dirk Brömmel's photomontages, published by Kerber Verlag, from images of Fritz Tugendhat.

In the book's preface, Simon Mawer writes: *Although The Glass Room is a work of fiction, the house and its setting are not fictional. I have disguised both with name changes but that will not fool anyone who knows the building on which the Landauer House is modeled or the city that hides behind the*

*name Mesto*. Obviously, the Tugendhat family cannot reclaim for itself the exclusivity of the story, but it is, nonetheless, rather unfortunate that the several interpretations and narratives, all formal virtuosity aside, end up contributing to an aestheticization (not to mention an effacement) of a story that has had its own share of drama and complexity and that should be treated with the utmost caution.

We can only venture that that care was taken in the physical restoration of the house but that its state of ruin, with all of its fissures, would very likely best represent the scars that were left open. After all, this house, in all its peculiarity, is also the history of Europe itself, and one that should not be forgotten.

#### END NOTE

The writing of this text coincided with the reading of Martin Amis' *The Zone of Interest*, which is about the Holocaust, "a love story that unfolds in a setting of the purest evil". —

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