

Hidden Figures: Vera Jansone at Mies's IIT

Figuras ocultas: Vera Jansone en el IIT de Mies

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Abstract

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe transferred his experience as an architect to the classroom, not only spreading his architectural philosophy, but also having students participate in his own search processes on many occasions. This article seeks to shine light on the figure of Vera Jansone, the first woman who graduated from the master's program of the Illinois Institute of Technology under Mies, in 1952, and her master's thesis, hidden until now, entitled "*An Art's Club*".

The analysis will expand on the two most important aspects of Jansone's thesis, function and structure. Jansone's project is not only the sole approach to the functional typology of an Arts Club under Mies, it also contains an analysis of the structural alternatives that make its construction possible.

In consideration of the number and content of graduate theses on art centers, it posits that Jansone's thesis represents a fundamental part of the search process towards structural clarity led by Mies which continued to be pursued by the next generation of architects at IIT.

Key words: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; Vera Jansone; architectural education; female architects; structural architecture; IIT graduate program

Resumen

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe trasladó su experiencia como arquitecto al aula, no solamente difundiendo su filosofía arquitectónica, sino también haciendo que, en muchas ocasiones, los alumnos participaran en sus propios procesos de búsqueda. Este artículo busca arrojar luz sobre la figura de Vera Jansone, la primera mujer que se graduó en el programa de posgrado del Illinois Institute of Technology bajo la dirección de Mies, en 1952, y su tesina fin de máster, oculta hasta ahora, titulada "*An Art's Club*".

El análisis se centra en los dos aspectos más importantes de la tesina fin de máster de Jansone, la función y la estructura. El proyecto de Jansone no solamente constituye la única aproximación a la tipología funcional de club de arte bajo la supervisión de Mies, sino que además contiene un análisis de las alternativas estructurales que hacen posible su construcción.

Considerando el número y el contenido de las tesinas de posgrado que versan centros relacionados con el arte, se postula que la tesis de Jansone representa una parte fundamental del proceso de búsqueda hacia la claridad estructural liderado por Mies, y que continuaría persiguiendo la siguiente generación de arquitectos en IIT.

Palabras clave: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe; Vera Jansone; educación arquitectónica; mujeres arquitectas; arquitectura estructural; programa posgrado IIT.

Introduction

The teaching work of a master of 20th century architecture such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe has often been relegated to the background, precisely because of the repercussions that his projected and built work has had on critics. Similarly, the renowned name of Mies has, on countless occasions, overshadowed the participation of those collaborators whose voices have almost always been silenced.

However, many of these names often ignored by the history of architecture have contributed to the development of architectural works conceived within the Mies van der Rohe office, being, moreover, on many occasions, related to the academic field. And it is thus, already in the Bauhaus school, but, above all, after his arrival in the city of Chicago, that Mies's architecture classes became a true laboratory of ideas in which to test new solutions.¹

Widely known, for example, are the projects developed by students George Danforth and Paul Campagna in the early 1940s, which were the starting point for the unbuilt Museum for a Small Town and Concert Hall projects, or the work collaboration carried out by Mies and three of his graduate students in the development of the most ambitious of his projected structures, the Convention Hall.²

Yujiro Miwa, Henry Kanazawa and Pao Chi Chang submitted a later version as a joint master's thesis a year after the publication of the project developed with Mies in the office.³ These are three figures that, in addition, demonstrate the cultural and gender diversity that was attracted by the arrival of Mies at the school, a factor that, on occasions, has contributed to these voices being relegated or hidden. (Fig. 1)

The University Archives and Special Collections at IIT holds forty-eight master's theses presented between 1939 and 1959, the twenty years during which Mies was in charge of the school of architecture. Together they represent a multitude of hidden voices, which, incidentally, are part of a continuous search process led by the master. (Fig. 2)

- 1 See, Luciana Fornari Colombo, "Theoretical Projects, Nature & Significance through the Case Study of Mies van der Rohe's Work", Doctoral Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2012.
- 2 Franz Schulze, *Mies van der Rohe: una biografía crítica* (Barcelona: Blume, 1986), 238.
- 3 See, Zaida Garcia-Requejo, Pablo Rodríguez Rodríguez and María del Pilar Salazar Lozano, "El Convention Hall de Mies: confluencias entre docencia y arquitectura", *Cuadernos de Proyectos Arquitectónicos* 9 (2021): 18-27.

Figure 1. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer, sitting on the sofa, surrounded by graduate students including student Pao Chi Chang, in the early 1950s. Courtesy of Louis Rocah. Source: Courtesy of Louis Rocah.

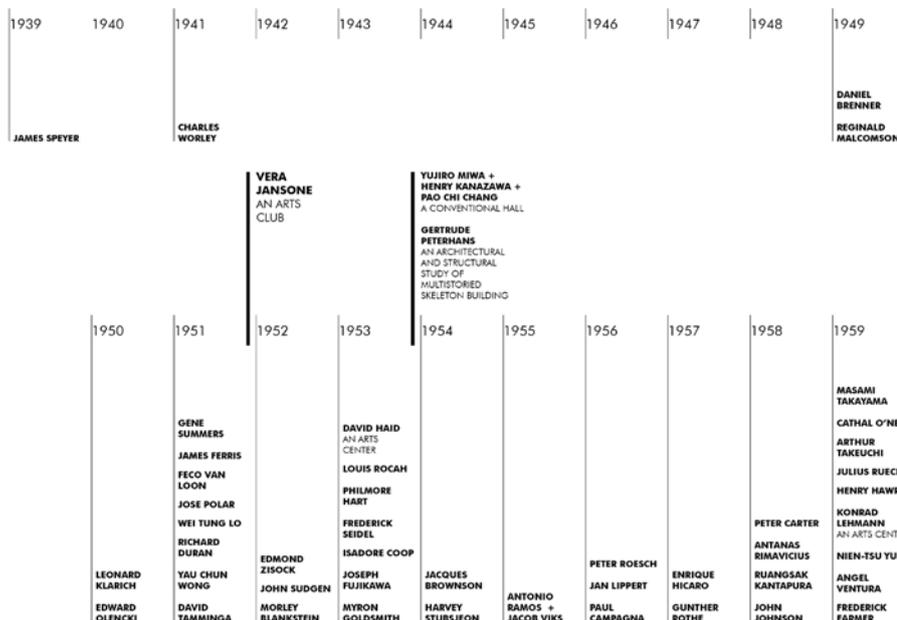


Figure 2. List of final master's theses carried out within the graduate program in architecture of the IIT (1939-1959). Source: Elaborated by the authors.

- 4 After their divorce, she remarried Donald Kerbis, from then on being known as Gertrude “Gert” Lempp Kerbis.
- 5 Gertrude Kerbis, interview by Susan F. King, 2007, Oral History of Gertrude Kerbis, transcript, 10; CAOHP, Department of Architecture, Art Institute, Chicago.
- 6 Gert was also the first female president of the Chicago Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) and the eleventh woman to join the AIA College of Fellows.
- 7 The thesis “A Convention Hall. A Co-Operative Project” is the first joint thesis developed within the graduate program. Only one other, titled “Interior Studies of a Large Hall”, delivered by Antonio Casimir Ramos and Jacob Karl Viks, and which can actually be considered an extension of the first, shares the peculiarity of being developed by more than one student.
- 8 Pao Chi Chang and Alfred Swenson, *Architectural Education at IIT, 1938-1978* (Chicago: Illinois Institute of Technology, 1980).
- 9 Most of Vera Jansone’s work was donated by herself to the International Archive of Women in Architecture, held by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), in Blacksburg.
- 10 In addition to works such as The Fox Plaza, while she was part of the Victor Gruen Associates studio, underground stations for The Bay Area Rapid Transit System, while working with Ernest Born, or other large-scale commercial, institutional, and residential projects in collaboration with other major San Francisco firms, Jansone is the author of the house where she lived with her husband, built in 1976 in Greenbrae, California.
- 11 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, “6 Students Talk with Mies”, *Student Publications of the School of Design, Raleigh* vol. 2, n° 3 (1952): 21-28.
- 12 There are two master’s theses that resolve the functional theme of an arts center, delivered by David Haid in 1953 and Konrad Lehmann in 1959.

Of the forty-eight, only three are signed by women: “An Arts Cub”, by Vera Jansone; “An Architectural and Structural Study of Multi-storied Skeleton Building”, by Gertrude Peterhans; and “A Convention Hall. A Co-Operative Project”, by Pao Chi Chang in collaboration with two colleagues.

When they have been mentioned by critics, Peterhans and Chang have often been accompanied by other male names. At the time she submitted his master’s thesis, Gertrude Peterhans was married to Walter Peterhans and had taken his surname.⁴

“Gert” was, at first, involved in the development of the project for a Convention Hall, together with the other three students, but, after six months of work, she decided to leave the team to focus on the development of her own project.⁵

Considered a pioneer in architecture, Gert founded the first studio run by a woman in the city of Chicago, Lempp Kerbis, in 1967, after having worked for renowned studios of SOM and C.F. Murphy, and she was one of the founders of Chicago Women in Architecture.⁶

Pao Chi Chang has regularly been linked, in addition to the two co-authors of the thesis, Miwa and Kanazawa,⁷ to her husband Alfred Swenson. Both were Mies’s students at IIT and, later, members of the faculty in addition to being authors of one of the books that best collects Mies’s architecture teachings, both undergraduate and graduate.⁸ Of the three, Vera Jansone was the first of the female students to obtain her graduate degree under Mies and has been the most hidden voice.

Vera Jansone (1915-2004) was born in Riga, and it was in her native country, at the University of Latvia, where she studied architecture, engineering and art history.⁹ At the end of World War II, Jansone left Latvia to accept a scholarship at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris, where she studied from 1945 to 1949. After this training, she worked full-time at the Atelier Le Corbusier. Upon receiving her French license, she was offered a position as an associate at the J.L. Humbaire studio.

In 1950, Jansone obtained a scholarship from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) for full tuition and travel expenses to enter the Illinois Institute of Technology for graduate studies under Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, obtaining her master’s degree in 1952. She briefly returned to Europe until, in the early 1960s, she moved with Emanuel Frederic deFischer, whom she had married in 1952, to the state of California, where she developed much of her professional career.¹⁰

Responding to the call “The Precursors”, this article focuses on the figure of Vera Jansone, addressing a study of her master’s thesis, it delivered in 1952 under the title “An Arts Club”, with the aim of identifying it as one more step in the search for structural clarity led by Mies.¹¹

It is also the only master’s thesis carried out within the program that addresses the theme of an arts club. Thus, this project is one of the many academic exercises that, under Mies’s supervision, tested different possibilities; a forgotten contribution that, without constituting a definitive solution, forms part of a joint learning process and that, therefore, deserves to be valued.¹²

An Art's Club

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe began his teaching career in the United States in the fall of 1938, taking office as director of the Department of Architecture at the Armor Institute of Technology (AIT).¹³

Mies accepted the position, under the condition that he would be free to modify the study plans, not only undergraduate but also graduate, something he began to work on while still living in Europe. Thus, a year before his arrival, he developed his *Program for Architectural Education*, which marked the path towards a definitive architectural paradigm in which *Means, Purposes, and Planning and Creation* would be integrated into the Sphere of Architecture.

Similarly, he modified the graduate syllabus, which he structured in two phases: first, the student had to take *Advanced Architecture* courses; once passed, the student was allowed to start developing the master's thesis. In the same way that Mies introduced modifications in the undergraduate studies, he also proposed modifications in the graduate program. Thus, already in the 1939 bulletin, the objectives of the architecture courses that preceded the thesis were defined, and the structure was positioned as the first of the architectural factors.¹⁴

Vera Jansone entered the IIT graduate program in the early 1950s and, after three semesters, defended her master's thesis "An Arts Club" in June 1952. The first page of the delivered document is signed by her advisor, Ludwig Hilberseimer. As Mies's student and collaborator, Reginald Malcolmson explains:

*If you did a graduate thesis in architecture Hilbs was your advisor.
If you did a graduate thesis in planning, Mies was your advisor.*

(...)

*The role of advisor was to see that you were complying with all the conditions of the thesis. That you knew how to write a thesis, that you hadn't left anything out that was of any importance, that they were there to suggest areas of research if you were in trouble finding material, and so on. They were there simply to discuss the problem.*¹⁵

The document delivered by Jansone contains 17 pages of text, and 13 pages of drawings and photographs.¹⁶ The document is divided into 5 chapters: Introduction, Program of the arts club, Choice of the principle of construction, Analysis of preliminary studies and Description of the final project. The five chapters are preceded by a preface and a list of images, and concluded with a bibliography. This bibliography is revealing of the background that Jansone had acquired not only as a student at IIT, but also during her years in Paris.

Thus, among the fifteen bibliographical references collected, there are three monographic entries on Le Corbusier,¹⁷ Mies's monograph edited by Philip Johnson,¹⁸ and three unpublished master's theses, delivered by former students of the graduate program, Daniel Brenner, Feico Van Loon and Yau Chun Wong.¹⁹

13 In 1941, the Armor Institute of Technology (AIT) and the Lewis Institute merged to form the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT).

14 Graduate Program Bulletin, Illinois Institute of Technology, 1939, preserved at UASC, IIT.

15 Reginald Malcolmson, interview by Betty J. Blum, 1987, *Reginald Malcolmson Oral History, transcript*, 51; Chicago Architects Oral History Project (CAOHP), Department of Architecture, Art Institute, Chicago.

16 Vera Jansone, "An Arts Club", Degree of Master of Science in Architecture in the Graduate School of Illinois Institute of Technology, 1952.

17 “Immeuble de Le Corbusier a Marseilles”, *L’homme et l’architecture 11-14* (1947); Le Corbusier, *Le Corbusier et Pierre Jeanneret: oeuvre complete* (Erlenbach: Les Éd. d’Architecture, 1947); Le Corbusier, “Le Modulor”, *Architecture d’aujourd’hui* (1950).

18 Philip Johnson, *Mies van der Rohe* (Nueva York: The Museum of Modern art, 1947).

19 Daniel Brenner, “An Art Museum” (Degree of Master of Science in Architecture in the Graduate School of Illinois Institute of Technology, 1949); Feico Van Loon, “A Protestant Church” (Degree of Master of Science in Architecture in the Graduate School of Illinois Institute of Technology, 1951); Yau Chung Wong, “The Student Union” (Degree of Master of Science in Architecture in the Graduate School of Illinois Institute of Technology, 1951).

20 Jansone, “An Arts Club, 4.

21 *Ibidem*, 1.

22 The solution first proposed by Mies for the unbuilt Cantor Drive-in Restaurant in the mid-1940s was reconsidered on several occasions by his graduate students. See, Zaida Garcia-Requejo, “The School of Architects and Engineers: Mies, Kornacker, and their followers”, *Prometheus: Chicago Schools: Authors, Audiences, and History 2* (2019): 88-91.

In the preface, Jansone begins by defining what an arts club should be: a building that encourages artists from different disciplines to meet, where they can present their work to the public for the first time. She affirms that such a construction must be materialized in steel and glass, two typical materials of the industrial era and that, therefore:

*Allow a clear expression of the structure.*²⁰

She ends her preface by thanking Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Ludwig Hilberseimer for their help, and the American Association of University Women for granting the scholarship.

The introductory chapter constitutes a declaration of intentions of the architectural philosophy, instilled by Mies, from which the students learnt during the time of the development of the thesis. Jansone echoes, almost literally, the words of her professor, and states:

*Architecture is the art of building (...) The structure is more than the framework which supports the building; it is the principal order, the spirit of the construction.*²¹

After this statement, in the next chapter the student compiles the programmatic needs of the arts club: a conference room for 250-300 people, with its corresponding lobby; architecture, painting and sculpture exhibition halls, both exterior and interior; office space; service areas, storage and facilities.

Taking this program into account, the student concludes with the need for a building with approximately 40,000 square feet of floor space, including the different outdoor areas.

In addition, given the different nature of the different rooms, it is considered ideal to have rooms of different heights, so Jansone explores three possible typologies: a one-story building with a mezzanine; a grouping of several buildings on one floor, but different heights; or, a building on two levels, either configured as a two-story volume, or as a one-story volume raised on stilts.

Considering the different alternatives, the following chapter deals with a study of the *construction principles*, that is, a trial of the structural typologies that best respond, in each case, to the needs of the building. She begins by questioning the feasibility of using a grid of columns spaced 20 feet (6.10 m) apart, an option that she discards due to the high number of resulting interior supports. As an extreme solution, she considers the possibility of having two trusses in the longitudinal direction,²² generating a space free of intermediate structural supports.

However, she rejects this option as it is considered unnecessary for the purpose. The last of the discarded options consists of the provision of frames with three 60-foot (18.29 m) by 20-foot (6.10 m) bays repeated 12 times, which is mainly due to the creation of a directional space. With the intention of generating an isotropic space, Jansone opted for a solution based on the use of square modules, starting from a dimension of 32 feet (9.75 m) on each side.

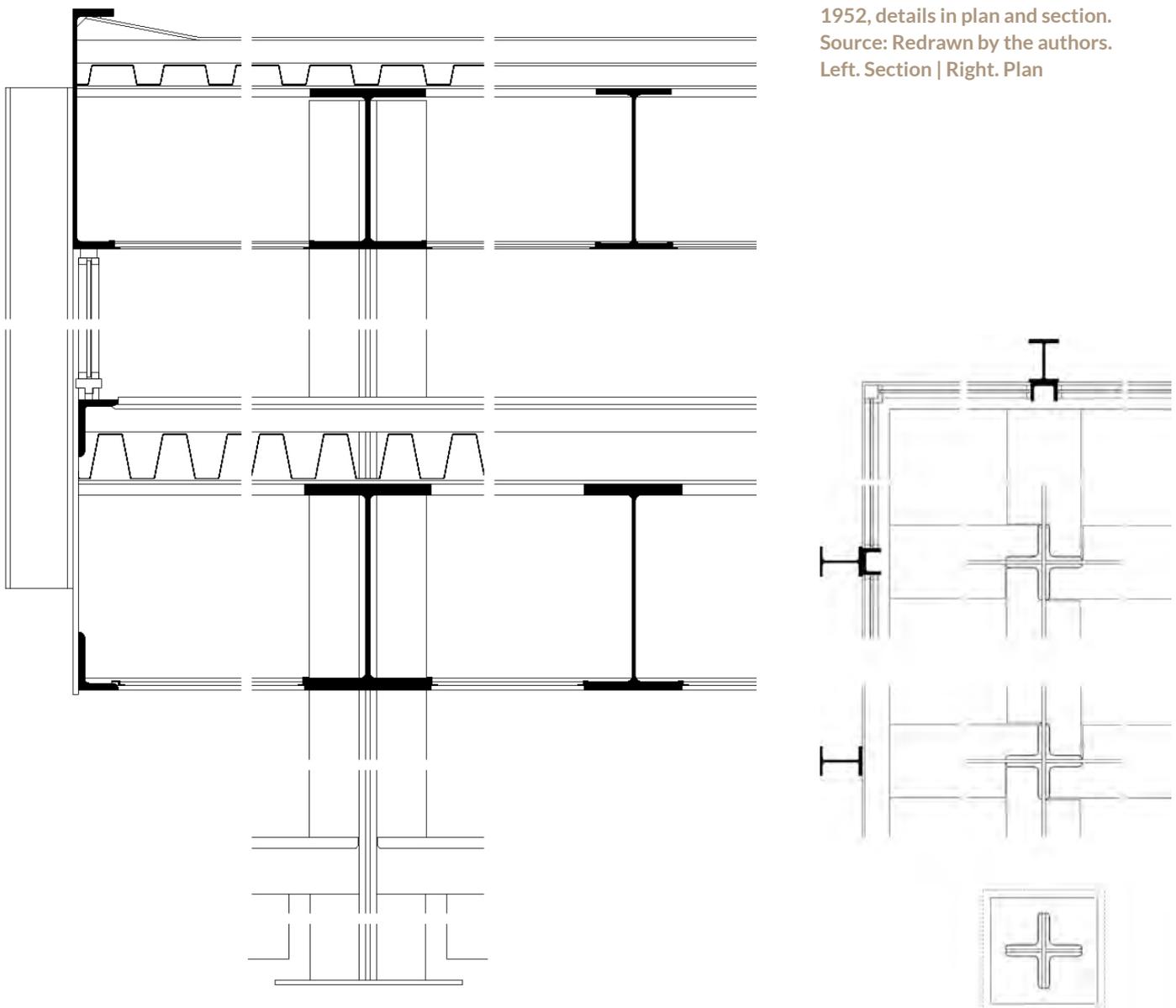
Once this decision has been made, the student experiments with various arrangements of the structural elements, without losing the idea of obtaining an isotropic span. Initially, and for the first time within the graduate program, Jansone considered the option of using a diagonal structure,²³ before opting for the final solution, which consists of arranging beams in two directions, alternating the direction of the secondary elements in adjoining bays.²⁴

The following sections of the chapter consider alternatives for the section profile of the column, the connection between columns and beams, and the dimension of the cantilever. Between a cross section, formed from two standard WF (wide flange) sections, and a star section made up of four angles of equal dimensions, Jansone chooses the latter, as it allows an easier connection with the beams, and reduces eccentricity in the columns. (Fig.3)

23 Between the years 1950 and 1952, Mies worked on his proposals for the 50x50 House project, for which a diagonal structure is also proposed.

24 This solution allows the use of structural elements of similar depths by distributing the loads in a balanced way between them.

Figure 3. Vera Jansone, "An Arts Club", 1952, details in plan and section. Source: Redrawn by the authors. Left. Section | Right. Plan

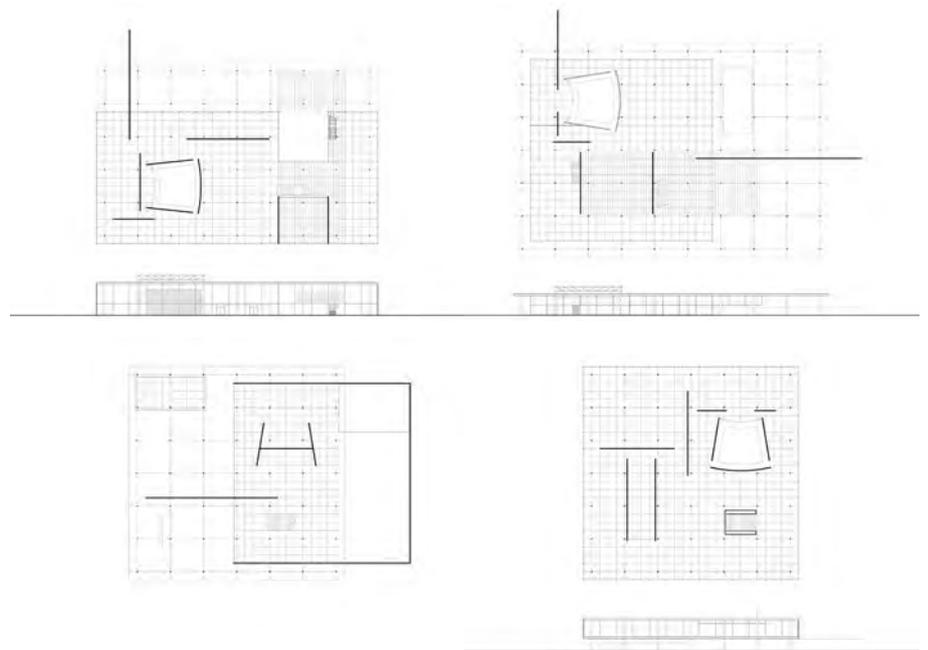


Architecturally the result would be that the principal structure is independent of the skin, and the column, as a plastic element, stays free in the space.²⁵

25 Jansone, "An Arts Club", 11.

Only once the structural and construction configuration has been decided, does Jansone undertake the study of the plan layout of the program.

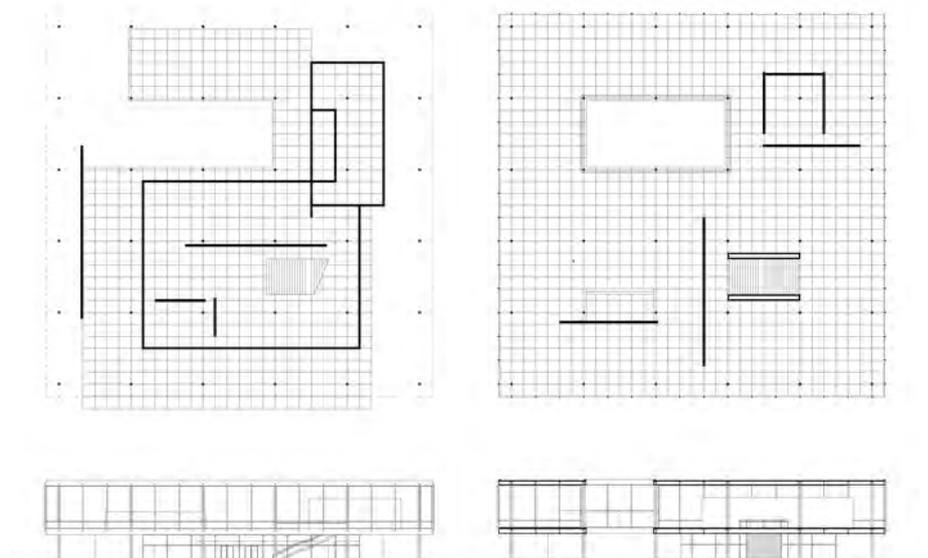
Thus, she considers three alternatives, all of them based on a square grid of 32 feet (9.75 m) on each side: a one-story building with a rectangular plan of 8 by 5 bays, with a mezzanine; a one-story building, also rectangular in shape, 9 by 6 bays, with a mezzanine; and, finally, a raised building on stilts, with a square plan of 6 by 6 bays plus a perimeter cantilever, leaving the space under the closed upper volume free. (Fig.4a, 4b, 4c y 4d).



Figures 4a, 4b, 4c and 4d. Vera Jansone, “An Arts Club”, 1952, preliminary studies.
Source: Redrawn by the authors.

Based on the studies carried out, the fourth chapter describes the final version of the project. It is an elevated building on stilts, with a square plan of 170 feet (51.82 m) on each side, with a glass enclosure rhythmically marked by mullions. On the lower floor are the reception, the dining room, linked to the patio, and a core that houses the kitchen and equipment. (Fig.5)

Figure 5. Vera Jansone, “An Arts Club”, 1952, plans and elevations.
Source: Redrawn by the authors.



The upper floor houses the library and the exhibition area, both separated by a hall. Thus,

*Except for the structural columns, space for exhibitions is left entirely free (...)*²⁶

In addition, on the lower floor, part of the outdoor space is used for the exhibition of sculptures or other objects that are not likely to be damaged by weather conditions, and

*Still more durable objects will be in the garden.*²⁷

Jansone defines the materials that make up the interior partitions: the partitions on the lower floor are made of marble, while on the upper floor they are made up of metal substructures with a wood finish. Likewise, she establishes the provision of curtains around the entire perimeter glass enclosure.

*In the first stages the design of an architectural project is very complicated, both in the method of construction and the integration of the different functions of the building. With further development— concentrating the necessary features, eliminating the superfluous ones, simplifying the construction— clarity and simplicity are obtained. In other words, as Mies van der Rohe maintains, “less is more.”*²⁸

The graduate program as a laboratory of ideas

Mies never formalized a proposal for an arts club, so a comparison cannot be established between two projects that resolve the same functional theme, one resolved by the professor, and the other by the student. However, and despite dealing with different programs, it is possible to relate the master's thesis developed by Vera Jansone and Mies' architecture. Specifically, a connection can be established between the structural and spatial proposal for the student's arts center, and one of the projects that Mies worked on at the beginning of the forties and which, in turn, is related to another academic project: the Museum for a small city.

In both cases, the grid of structural supports allows the desired spatial flexibility, resolved in one floor in the case of Mies, and in a raised floor on stilts in the case of Jansone. In addition, the interior space articulated by the supports is further defined, in both cases, by sliding partitions and interior courtyards. A similarity can also be identified in the materialization of the supports, being in both cases columns constructed with metal plates. In other words, it is possible to identify Mies' teachings materialized in Jansone's project. However, both projects differ in another aspect: Jansone discards the use of a rectangular plan, betting on isotropy both spatially and in relation to the behavior of the structure.

The solution of a grid of metallic supports forming a square plan had already been tested previously in the graduate program, although with a different formalization. Jansone includes in her bibliography the master's thesis delivered in 1949 by Daniel Brenner, entitled “An Art Museum”.²⁹

26 Jansone, “An Arts Club”, 15.

27 Jansone, “An Arts Club”, 16.

28 Jansone, “An Arts Club”, 17.

29 It is worth mentioning that Vera Jansone cites Daniel Brenner's master's thesis in relation to the arrangement of works of art in the continuous interior space, making use of small metal pieces embedded in the forging, and not in relation to the plan isotropy.

Brenner proposes the use of the interior grid of columns, although in his, the supports are closer to the enclosures or interior partitions, so as not to interfere with the interior space. In this way, with regard to the configuration of the elevations, the perimeter structural supports are aligned with the envelope on the upper floor.

Jansone's is the first of the proposals with a square floor plan that proposes a structure of two stories based on a grid of supports, which has a perimeter cantilever on the upper floor, thus allowing the separation of the planes of structure and enclosure. It is also possible to establish connections between Jansone's proposal and subsequent master's theses, such as the one delivered by Jan Lippert in 1956, which resolves, as in the case of Brenner, an art museum.³⁰

30 See: Laura Lizondo Sevilla, José Santatecla Fayos and Zaida García-Requejo, "El museo en la arquitectura docente de Mies van der Rohe: la fiesta del arte", *BAC Boletín Académico* 9 (2019): 69-92.

The decision to raise the museum to two stories, defining the spaces through interior courtyards and double heights, led Lippert to opt for a structure in the form of an isotropic grid. Thus, although the unitary exhibition space is also reminiscent of Mies's proposal from 1943, the configuration of the building on two stories and the exterior formalization can be considered an heir to Jansone's proposal. Including, the way in which, first Jansone and later Lippert, configure the glass enclosure of the upper floor, defined by the position of vertical metal mullions whose spacing is related to the interior support grid and which are cut halfway up the slabs, evokes the solution used by Mies in the Bacardi Building built in Mexico, completed in 1961. (Fig.6)

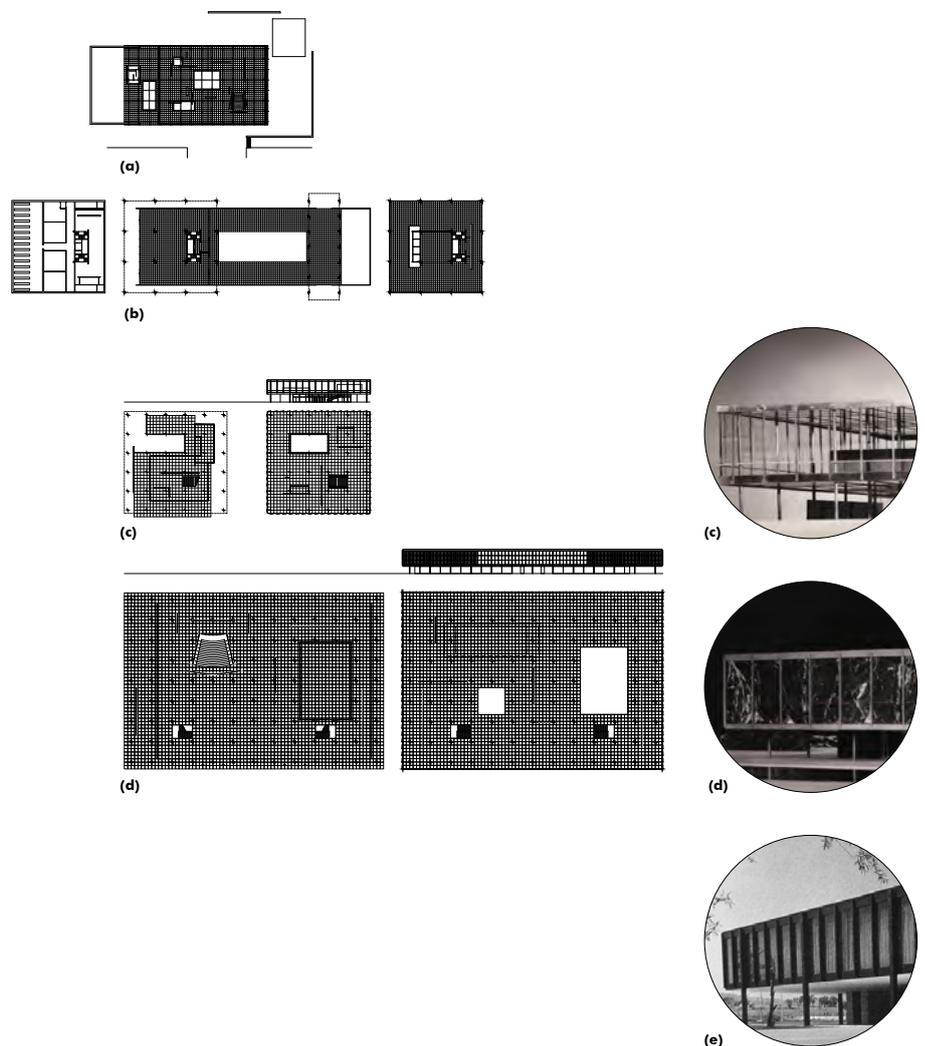


Figure 6. Established relationship between:
 (a) the Museum for a small city project, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe;
 (b) the master thesis "An Art Museum", by Daniel Brenner;
 (c) the master thesis "An Arts Club", by Vera Jansone;
 (d) the master thesis "An Art Museum", by Jan Lippert; and
 (e) the Bacardi Mexico Building, by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.
 Own source: Redrawn by the authors. Photos from the master's theses.

Conclusions

Many of the students who entered the graduate program in the 1940s and 1950s moved to Chicago with the intention of studying under a distinguished professor like Mies van der Rohe.

However, the study and relationship of the work carried out by all of them, both within the classrooms, and sometimes in the office of their professor, reveals a reality different from that which architecture criticism often reflects.

All these voices, hitherto ignored, learnt from the teachings of the same professor, they were part of the process, making progress possible:

Mies van der Rohe never used the word "I" when talking about his work. His "we" always included everyone who worked with him.³¹

This research has addressed a study of the master's thesis submitted by the first of Mies's female graduate students in architecture at IIT, Vera Jansone, making use, for the first time, of the original documentation kept in the IIT University Archives and Special Collections (UASC), and has related it to the professional career of her professor, as well as other academic works developed within the program, bringing to light its pioneering and forgotten status.

31 Werner Blaser, *Mies van der Rohe. El Arte de la Estructura (México: Hermes, 1965)*, 12.

From the analysis of Vera Jansone's master's thesis, the one delivered previously by Daniel Brenner and later by Jan Lippert, as well as some of the architectures developed by Mies and his colleagues in his office, a proximity in resolution can be deduced of the architectural problem. Both in the case of a building intended for the exhibition of artistic works, and in the case of the center for the enjoyment of art, students and professor propose flexible, unitary spaces, which, although materialized in different ways, reflect the first of the established objectives in the graduate program: the identification of the structure as the first architectural factor.

On occasions, the students reconsider proposals that Mies had previously explored, as is the case of the work carried out jointly with his student and later collaborator and IIT professor George Danforth, which marks the beginning of the process of searching for unitary space with a proposal of a museum.

The process is continued by Brenner and Lippert. In other cases, what is proposed in the classroom anticipates solutions used by Mies and other students at later times. In this case, Jansone is the first to propose a two-story building with a square plan, a dynamic space that even anticipates some solutions later used by Mies.

Thus, the proposal for an arts club prepared by this pioneer highlights the role of the experiments carried out by the students inside the classrooms, under the eye of the master, hidden until now: a process of continuous search, of comings and goings, of which each project is a part.

This story of a woman architect, and an architecture produced by a woman who belongs to this educational legacy, therefore, deserves to be considered.

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