

seeing through  
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Excerpt



I do not recall when I first heard of the Farnsworth House, but I feel I have lived with the house for a very long time, living in a house of images and words. I can be sure I first saw it as a representation in a magazine or book – as a photograph, a pencil sketch, a plan or elevation drawing, or a picture of a scale model with its entourage of synthetic trees. Then I came to know it more intimately from written descriptions and narratives – from accounts of its realisation between 1945-51, from stories about its architect, German born Mies van de Rohe, and his client Dr. Edith Farnsworth, and from the saga of their partnership and eventual estrangement, the law suits, the final painful settlement. When I first saw the house itself, in April 2009, it was after having traveled by train from Los Angeles to Chicago, reading, dozing and gazing out of the window at expanses of deserts, canyons and plains punctuated by scarce cities with nothing between them but occasional habitations in little clusters or alone. Memories of words read and images seen, mingled with such more recent impressions of isolation in limitlessness, to form the imaginary setting for my first visit to the Farnsworth House. [...]

Before the house there was the river, the meadow and the trees, organic life the essential forms of which have anticipated those of the house, the air between the trunks and the branches now defined as open space between the floor and roof of the terrace and further materialised in the *almost nothing* of the glass enclosure. While the slender stanchions suggest a weightless poise, the house is literally rooted in the land via its utilities stack, through which energy is brought into the house and rain water drained from its roof into the ground. Painted matt black and barely visible in the gap between the floor and the ground, the base of the stack becomes a tree trunk and the roof of the house its canopy, an abstraction of the organic form of the great black sugar maple that casts its cooling shade upon the house in the hot Illinois summer. [...]

The house was praised, and the house was condemned, both by Edith Farnsworth herself and by sectors of the popular press. Elizabeth Gordon, writing in 1953 in the magazine *House Beautiful*, launched an assault on the Farnsworth House as 'nothing but a glass cage on stilts', denouncing an architecture that promotes 'a stripped-down emptiness ... and therefore lack of possessions' and that admits of 'nothing human that might disturb the architect's composition'. In the title of her article Gordon judges the house to be 'The threat to the next America' – 'a social threat of regimentation and control'. Gordon's remarks here must be understood in the context of cold war 'Reds under the bed' paranoia and the concurrent promotion of an ideal of American domestic life – implicitly assumed to be *family* life – premised on abundant and joyful material consumption. Gordon's attack was bolstered by Edith Farnsworth's own public expression of her disappointments with her house. In 1945, while leafing through the pages of books on modern architecture, she had told herself that '... it would be unbearably stupid of me to "put up" some contractor's cottage which could only ruin the site and remain as a token of empirical mediocrity'. Six years later however she will complain about the excessive condensation on the interior glass, 'as though you are in a car in the rain with a windscreen wiper that doesn't work'; she complains about the fireplace, rendered ineffectual in winter by the necessity of opening the door and windows for ventilation; she complains about the house's vulnerability to the swarms of mosquitoes coming off the riverside meadow. Such shortcomings however may afflict even the most traditional house, and they have their technical solutions. One of Edith Farnsworth's criticisms however aimed straight at the very *raison d'être* of the house, its transparency; she writes: 'The truth is that in this house with its four walls of glass I feel like a prowling animal, always on the alert. I am always restless. Even in the evening. I feel like a sentinel on guard day and night. I can rarely stretch out and relax.'

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Entering the house I pass from the open air – filled with the sounds and scents of woodland and meadow – to the muted enfolding of glass walls. But the passage between exterior and interior is almost indiscernible, as if inside and outside

have simply exchanged places by some trick of reflection. Customary preconceptions of inside and outside are put in question by the ambiguities of this barely visible yet obdurate membrane; and the stirring presence of the living environment, for all that it is literally out of touch, envelops and suffuses interior space. This luminous volume has first been deployed with attention to the movement of the sun, and then apportioned according to functions – as an assembly of spaces not divided by walls but implied by the placing of furniture. These notional and interpenetrating functional areas are distributed around a solid volume, lined in primavera wood, that contains the bathrooms and the utilities stack and which is flanked on its north side by a single galley kitchen, and on its south side by a fireplace. Another free standing block clad in teak acts as a partition defining the sleeping area, providing storage for clothes, and housing an audio cabinet. Only the utilities stack extends entirely from floor to ceiling, thereby connecting the ground below the house to the air above its roof. Bathroom enclosures, kitchen cabinets and the clothes cabinet stop short of the ceiling, their volumes visually disengaged from the main structure, with light intruding variegated slivers of foliage and sky into the resulting gaps. The pale travertine floor and the ceiling of white painted plaster appear to not quite touch the eight supporting columns of white painted steel. Lightness, transparency, impermanence define the interior space, while its opaque and immovable core affirms the most basic of life preserving functions – keeping warm, feeding, excreting. The ‘platonic perfection of order’ remains resolutely earthbound.

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We are asked to remove our shoes before entering. We have stood together outside the house, our backs to the river, while our guide pointed out to us how the steel piers stop short of the planes of the lower terrace and roof – so that the ends of the piers not appear to break into the edges of the horizontal planes when these are viewed from a low angle. Inside the house she will stand close against an all but invisible wall to show that —such is the transparency of the glass—there seems to be nothing between her and the outside (indeed I fear she may fall out). She explains that the two faces of the glass are ground perfectly

parallel, to minimise the internal reflection of light passing through the glass, thus further reducing its material presence.

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From our first assembly at the visitor center we have walked here through sparse woodlands, eyes fixed ahead for the first glimpse of the house we already know so well. It is not only the transparency of its simple and singular volume that will make the Farnsworth House appear to us so readily and wholly graspable but our memories of the many images through which it is always already known. To enter it for the first time is to step into the already seen, already read – seen a few minutes ago as we stood outside, detained in details by our loquacious guide as we surreptitiously glanced into the house, and seen in carefully composed and uninhabited photographs, in colour, in black and white, photographs of the house in Edith Farnsworth's time its porch obscured by the mosquito screen, the original Shantung silk drapes, damaged in the 1954 flood, now replaced by roller blinds; photographs of the house after its purchase and restoration by Peter Palumbo in 1972, the bug screen and roller blinds gone, meadow cut down to a suburban lawn. And there are snapshots of Farnsworth conferring with Mies' assistant Myron Goldsmiths, of Mies himself on site supervising the laying of the travertine paving. And there are photographic portraits of Edith Farnsworth and Mies, both of them shown in early and later life, as if to suggest a common life trajectory where there was only a short-lived partnership, albeit some say a romance, that ended in feud over escalating costs and unpaid fees. And so this house, as I first see it, see through it, step into it, is already a palimpsest of memories of images of diagrammatic composure, enduring clichés, caught in the turmoil of imaginary lives. Standing before the house I may have felt that none of what I was seeing was real. To the ghosts of Mies and Ms. Farnsworth we visitors add our own ghosts as we linger and lag behind, in the hope of being left alone, forgotten, so as to live even evanescently a dream of *being* in the house, of *having* the house.

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No photographs of Edith Farnsworth 'at home' have been reproduced in the many publications I have consulted. The 2003 Phaidon monograph chooses to reproduce the two portraits of Farnsworth 'in early and later life' above those of Mies but not even a photograph *of* the house at the time of her residency that lasted almost 21 years. It is their relationship as woman and man, as well as client and architect, that is foregrounded at the expense of her relationship, as a single woman, to her house. I have found only two inhabited photographs: one shows Mies van der Rohe sitting outside the house; the other shows the house's second owner, Peter Palumbo, sitting inside the house on Mies' Barcelona daybed. Both men adopt much the same pose, upper arms close against the body, forearms resting on thighs, hands folded together. In the absence of any corresponding representation of Mies' client, the house's first owner, we might suppose an unbroken line of descent from the older to the younger man, a simple history of filial inheritance from which Edith Farnsworth has disappeared.

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In her 1992 essay titled 'Living in a glass prism' (presumably to suggest the near homonym 'prison') Paulette Singley writes that... 'while the opaque wall mimics the woman's body and her role as a protective enclave, the transparent wall consumes her in its reflection and distances her body as an erotic but untouchable object'. She approvingly cites Robin Evans's assessment of Mies' architecture as 'physical but bodiless' and Jorge Quetglas's finding that it is 'anti-sensory', to conclude that '... the body missing from [Mies'] residences is female'. Singley sees Edith Farnsworth as 'an object captured in glass', set in a 'display case'. The house, no longer the 'protective womb' of time-honoured metaphors for domestic space, is now conceived as an activator of the look. Dr. Farnsworth herself said that her house was 'like an X-ray', evoking a technological gaze that transfixes the body and lays it bare. To make sense of Singley's poetically destructive image of a female body 'consumed' by light is to place Edith Farnsworth *inside* the house viewed from *outside*, perhaps by someone standing in the meadow or walking up the paved path (laid at Farnsworth's instruction

and later removed by Peter Palumbo), or perhaps hidden in the trees. The house that one commentator tellingly describes as 'undressed' solicits the voyeuristic look and its attendant fantasies—fantasies that may then be called as witnesses in the investigation of the enigma of its inhabitant's sexuality, that of a single middle-aged woman, a sexuality that finds no accommodation in the normative familial settings of the *House Beautiful*. The lack of clearly demarcated spaces in the Farnsworth House may betray the unassignability of its owner's sexuality. Or its transparency may tell merely of the nothing to hide of an absence of sexual activity, or even of the owner's asexuality. In so many critical accounts of the Farnsworth House transparency is presented as evicting sensuality in general and sexual intimacy in particular. Sight is assumed to overwhelm the other senses, particularly the eroticism of touch which is denied by the glass wall. These accounts implicitly assume a sexuality expressed only under the covers and under cover of darkness.

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Elisabeth Farnsworth's week-end and summer retreat was to be a place abstracted from the continuum of working life, a parenthesis bracketing a non-hierarchical time regulated only by the rhythms of nature and personal inclination. Mies van der Rohe designed a house that is the projection into space of this brief—fluid, open, boundless—interpellating a body whose senses are intensified as its own boundaries soften. This all-seeing house dreams up a body released from the opacity of old walls, now bathed in light and endowed with an all-seeing skin. Far from negating the pleasure of touch, not least the touch that some feminist writers place on the side of the feminine, touch here is diffused throughout the house: most visibly in the touch of light that brings out the texture of stone, the grain of wood, the patina of painted steel, light casting ever changing colours and shadows, inviting the caress of a gaze. Peter Palumbo speaks of the sound of branches lightly brushing against the glass.

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As I walk across the main space to the sleeping area, I am aware that I never lose sight of the exterior. Unlike the picture window that frames a composition best viewed from a fixed position, the Farnsworth house invites and facilitates constant movement, as if walking along an ever-changing panoramic frieze. Edith Farnsworth said that she felt like ‘a prowling animal, always on the alert’, ‘a sentinel on guard’ – pleasure in looking turns into an acute awareness of the look one gives that is more than the simple manifestation of the organ of vision but the apprehension in the visible of what, architectural historian Jonathan Hill calls, ‘the excluded, the unknown, unclassified and inconsistent to which the concept of home is a response.’ Looking out of the glass house one reveals oneself as looking; consciousness awakened – seeing oneself being seen to be looking.

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Visitors are told that photography is restricted to the outside of the house. The entrance is set slightly off centre, a fact of which I am unaware as I enter—I shall read about it somewhere. I come to the house with assumptions of symmetry, and alignment. But my gaze is nudged to the right, sliding over and past the solid wood lined core, pulled by the luminous rhythm of the white steel columns, tracing a gentle curve forward to the end of the main space and out to the outside I have just left behind. The clothes cabinet that Mies had designed is gone. He designed it to be five feet high but Farnsworth insisted it should be six feet because, she said, ‘I wanted to be able to change my clothes without my head looking like it was wandering over the top of the partition *without a body*’. The six feet high cabinet was damaged in the flood of 2008 and is away being restored. Our guide expresses her preference that it should not be brought back as she favours the uninterrupted views. As we stand in anticipation of being released into the space, she points to the almost invisible door to the first bathroom, and the doorknob which, she says ruefully, Farnsworth insisted should be fitted against Mies’ own wish for a less conspicuous solution to opening a bathroom door. She directs our attention to one of the large panes of glass, inviting us to look through it to see how poorly it compares with the



adjacent one, free from distortions. The flood waters broke through the glass in 1996 and new building codes dictated that the original pane be replaced by a sturdier mass-produced one. She opens one of the kitchen cabinets of blond primavera – her favourite moment in the tour, she says – to reveal the effect of the passage of time on the wood, the panel once exposed to daylight a darker, sanguine shade.

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The house completed, the rift between client and architect widening, Edith Farnsworth moved in, in the spring of 1951. Farnsworth and Mies had disagreed on issues of functionality, on the colour of the drapes, and she now cancelled her order for the furniture she had commissioned Mies to design. In the words of one writer 'she filled the house with inappropriate articles – and prosaic furniture'. In one photograph, potted plants are aligned along the interior perimeter of the porch, now enclosed in the mosquito screen; in another, the pots have entered the house, similarly positioned along the glass wall, like so many sentinels keeping watch over the untrammelled meadow and woodland. In 1972 Peter Palumbo bought the house from Farnsworth whose tranquil retreat was now within sight and earshot of the busy two lane road leading South to Plano that, in 1969, came to replace the former quiet country road much further away from her property. The story goes that Palumbo saved the house from the prosaic influence of Farnsworth's demand that her house be a home, and brought it back to Mies' original design concept. Gone are the wicker chairs, the potted plants and the Chinese lion sculptures. In their place are a few classic furniture pieces, positioned 'almost as sparingly and precisely as exhibits in an art gallery', writes Maritz Vandenberg.

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The story goes that Palumbo sold the house in 2003 because he was exhausted by the unending and costly fight against the destructive forces of the Fox River, which, since Farnsworth's time have exponentially increased in extent and

severity, due to surface runoff from the runaway building developments of exurban Chicago along the river's formerly rural course. Repeatedly the Farnsworth House is defined as compromised by human pragmatism and wounded by nature – albeit a nature perverted by the hand of man. So much so that as I stand in the house, with the awareness of its form around me and the knowledge that this embrace will not last, I sense the *loss* of the house. The house I have lost and shall lose again is not a material entity but an unstable spectral projection of contradictory representations and fantasies to which the house has given rise. One of these is a fantasy of origin – as a foreign intruder, as a house that was not born and raised out of the Illinois soil, but bestowed on the earth in an immaculate conception. I find myself remembering the elevated floor planes and ubiquitous porches of the modest single-storey dwellings scattered throughout the emptiness I watched from the train, and of the cadences of vertical steel supports of a bridge as the train neared Chicago. Nevertheless the Farnsworth House stubbornly elicits the fantasy of a perfection outside of this world, created in vacuo in a moment out of time before the compromises and affronts—a fantasy acted out in the repeated restorations that have all but erased any trace of its history and habitation. Standing in the house, remembering the house I too may be forever anticipating its perfection—a dream of the house finished and expectant on the spring meadow.

