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THE LUCKY ONES?

SZCZĘŚCIARZE?

A b s t r a c t

The text describes the fate of four houses designed and constructed for the Muellers (Prague), the Lemkes (Berlin), the Tugendhats (Brno) and the Wittgensteins (Vienna). Each of these houses is an architectural work of art, but their fates were as dramatic as the fate of their owners, as was the epoch. Does this mean that the great buildings and their proud owners were lucky? It is best that we do not try to answer this question, leaving the reader with a description of the events and their own thoughts.

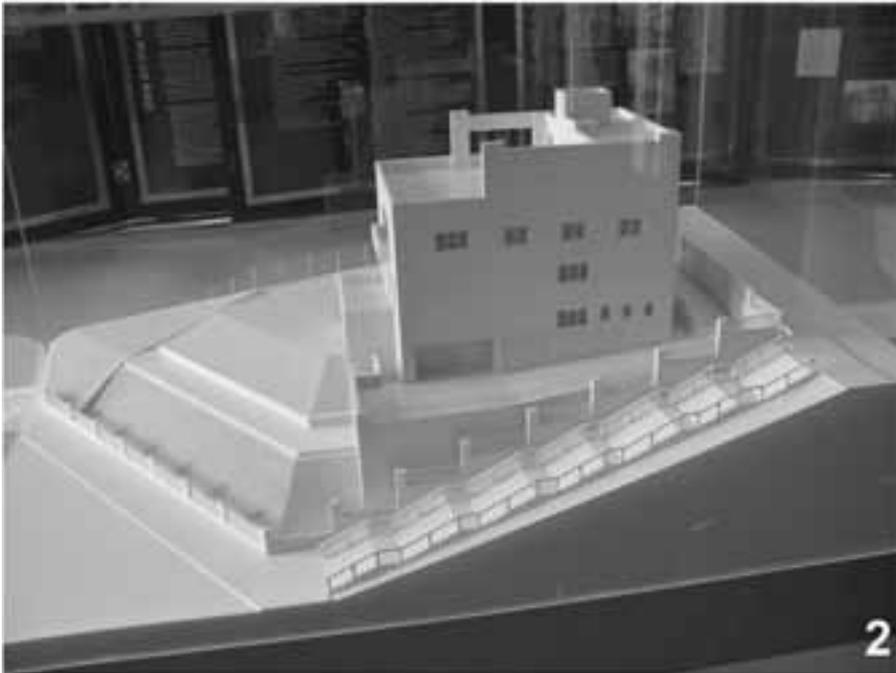
Keywords: house, architect, investor, happiness

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W tekście opisane są losy czterech domów jednorodzinnych zaprojektowanych i zbudowanych dla rodzin Muellerów (Praga), Lemke (Berlin), Tugendhatów (Brno) i Wittgensteinów (Wiedeń). Są to domy – dzieła sztuki architektonicznej, ale losy ich były równie dramatyczne jak losy ich właścicieli, taka to była epoka. Czy wobec tego wspaniałe budynki i ich dumni właściciele byli szczęściarzami? Lepiej na to pytanie nie próbować odpowiadać, pozostawiając czytelnika z opisem zdarzeń i jego własną refleksją.

Słowa kluczowe: dom, architekt, inwestor, szczęście

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- III. 1. Müller's villa, Prague, arch. Adolf Loos, (photo S. Gzell)
III. 2. Müller's villa, Prague, arch. Adolf Loos, model (photo S. Gzell)

1. This text, which is supposed to talk about the owners of houses and the architects hired to design and build them, could be composed in many ways, as the number of such projects can be counted in thousands, if not millions. Narrowing the topic is then necessary, so I will take advantage of author's privilege to focus on the fate of certain sites and people.

2. Who are the eponymous 'lucky ones' and why is this accompanied by a question mark? First, I consider 'lucky' those who managed to persuade the outstanding actors from the world of architecture—already outstanding at the time the buildings were commissioned—to design a house for them. Second, the building itself is lucky, as it is not only marked with the architectural style of someone famous, but also still stands today. But in both cases, these fortunes turned out to be incomplete, and the people as well as buildings experienced some hard times—hence the question mark in the title. Because in such times, when the selected sites were built, neither them, nor the people could be sure of saving their lives.

3. In the years of 1928 to 1930, Adolf Loos, famous for declaring that decorating buildings with ornaments is a criminal act, built a house in Prague for Milada and Franciszek Mueller. The neighbourhood was and still is beautiful—even developments in the surrounding streets cannot interfere with that—and any determined person could reach the Prague Castle on foot from the Muellers' villa. Franciszek Mueller must have been a brave person, as he decided to hire Loos, but perhaps the personal opinions of Loos were attractive to him (the architect Karel Lhota is also said to have had a hand in this). Note that Mueller was an experienced building contractor (from the company Kapsa-Mueller) so he would have been well versed in dealing with architectural ideas that did not suit him. Finally, thanks to the tandem architect-investor, one of the best examples of the design theory known as Raumplan. This 'spatial plan' appeared at the same time as Corbusier's 'free plan', but it was probably richer from an ideological point of view because it moved the design and generally the thinking about building, as we would call it today, from 2D to 3D. The Muellers' villa consists of boxes, which are individual rooms, pervading in fragments, hooking on to each other, and connecting with each other as pieces of the walls are removed. A staircase, almost without walls, freely passes through the floors, and the floors and ceilings in the lower parts of the house are also freely arranged in space. This swing of floors is made possible by the fact that the house is situated on a slope. The image is completed by expensive finishing materials on the walls and floors, built-in and freestanding furniture, carpets and artwork, the garden and views from the terraces.

The villa belonged to the Muellers until 1948, when the state got rid of capitalists. It then became the seat of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism and a museum, while two rooms were left for the Muellers. In 1951, Franciszek died (when dealing with a boiler CO – carbon monoxide?), and Milada passed away in 1968. In 1989, the villa was returned to the Muellers' daughter, but she sold it back to the city in 1995. Three years later, in 2000, after a renovation, the villa was opened to the public as part of the Museum of Prague.

So, the building survived, it is in good shape, but throughout its 90-year history, it had not served its owners for 50 of those years. Did they consider themselves lucky? Did they believe, walking away in difficult times, that their home would one day return to the hands of the family? We do not know.

The villa is now besieged by tourists and researchers of the history of architecture. One of the most interesting works about the house is the essay by Beatriz Colomina 'The Split Wall:



- III. 3. Lemkes house, Berlin, arch. Mies van der Rohe, view from the entrance (photo S. Gzell)
III. 4. Lemkes house, Berlin, arch. Mies van der Rohe, view from the garden (photo S. Gzell)
III. 5. Lemkes house, Berlin, arch. Mies van der Rohe, the garden (photo S. Gzell)

Domestic Voyerizm' (in *Sexuality & Space*, Princeton Architectural Press, NY, 1992). Its author describes the open, penetrating interiors of the villa to be, at the same time, the stage and the audience of a home theatre, separated by matte-glazed windows from the outside world. Residents and visitors were thus both actors and spectators, the private space became public, and vice versa. This is perhaps the suggestion that life is a game, and therefore both collapse and happiness mean nothing, because after the dark curtain falls, the victim and the lucky will be disguised in their everyday dress and return to reality. But where is this reality, if not in one's own home, which is only a stage? Perhaps the realisation of the Raumplan theory was an early announcement of Bauman's fluid reality, or maybe this implementation was announcing Tschumi's concept of cities: events that put urban activity between rational and accidental actions?

4. Now, we discuss two houses designed by Mies van der Rohe, differing in size, or rather in the scale of design, but not in concept. The first is the well known villa for Greta and Fritz Tugendhat, built in the years 1929–1930 in Brno. The second is the home of Martha and Karl Lemke from 1933, situated by lake Obersee in the north of Berlin. There was no hiding that while the first of the houses was supposed to be a show of the financial force of the Tugendhats, the second one, for financial reasons, was designed in the simplest L-shaped form possible. In the Tugendhat house, a three-story steel-frame construction was implemented, while the construction of the Lemke house was limited to a ground floor of brick lined with brick. As regards the interiors (co-designed by Lily Reich), the Tugendhat house contained onyx, mahogany, big, movable glass panels and a form of air conditioning; the Lemke house also contained some ebony and leather furniture, which today is exhibited by the Berlin Museum of Decorative Arts.

The owners of the two houses did not live in them for long. The Tugendhats emigrated to Switzerland and then to Venezuela immediately after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Germans in 1938, and never returned to Brno. Lemke lived over the Obersee until 1945.

After the Tugendhats, their villa was occupied by the Gestapo, then the Russian military, a sanatorium, and even a dance school—none of them looked after the house. Fortunately, the house was renovated in the years 2010–2012 and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

After the Lemkes, their home was also occupied by the Red Army, who transformed it into a garage. In the 1960s, a new host moved in—the Stasi—changing its use from time to time: a laundry, a kitchen, a flat. Since the late 1980s, the home has been looked after by the city and is now maintained by the specially established foundation that restored the building.

So both these houses by Mies van der Rohe survived the worst of times, when they were deprived of their true owners. They were lucky, as the name of their architect, together with the architectural quality of the buildings, saved them. This is a triumph of the ability to apply formally minimalistic solutions in transforming the space, so that both what is being restricted and what is being separated from became a work of architectural art. We have the usual surfaces of floor and ceiling, but there are not too many walls in the traditional sense, as they are replaced with glass walls, allowing seamless linking of the house with a garden and the further landscape, so that the views replace paintings usually hung on the walls. The sun flows into the interior through the glass walls and moves around the furniture and objects inside, it creates inner landscapes of silhouettes or shadows on the floor and walls. Even a detail like a door being the full-height of the walls influences the feel of the interior, which then becomes more monumental and deprived of the horizontal divisions disliked by the architect.



- III. 6. Tugendhats villa, Brno, arch. Mies van der Rohe, view from the entrance (photo S. Gzell)
III. 7. Tugendhats villa, Brno, arch. Mies van der Rohe, view form tha garden (photo S. Gzell)

The history of both houses has ended well, which assigns the role of ‘lucky one’ to us, visiting the buildings to admire and study them. They can be photographed, drawn, touched, perhaps even stroked or sniff. They inspire respect and sympathy. Long may it last. And in the case of these two buildings, we do not have to give any thought to the smart conversion of the modernist idea ‘less is more’ into ‘less is a bore’, because it is not.

5. Only a few years earlier (between 1926 and 1928), the architect Paul Engelman, a student of Adolf Loos, was building a house in Vienna for Margarethe Stoneborough, sister of Ludwig Wittgenstein. We can imagine the discussions between these four about what was to be implemented in the building; the echoes of these discussions have reached through the building. It is sufficient to say that the project was commissioned in 1925; Engelman drew three overlapping blocks; and Ludwig Wittgenstein focused on details like door handles, radiators, windows and metal curtains for them (weighing 150 kg each), raised and lowered to the floor using a specially devised mechanism. Wittgenstein was very obstinate, which was exhausting for his interlocutors; he also guarded what he considered the right links between all elements of the building, which explains the specific spacing of windows or the proportion of the number and size of windows compared to the walls. Perhaps he wanted to see in space his concept that the ideal is certain coldness, that the building should create only the background for the passion, but not to interfere in it, which would happen if one of the elements of the house dominated the other. The issue of ordinariness, which he was analysing in his philosophical and philological treaties, was realised in the building by detecting nonsense and bringing everything to order. Perhaps it was the aphorism ‘one shall not ask about the meaning but the use of’ that inspired the general idea of the interior in the form of an architectural promenade. Everything was grand (though expensive even for a wealthy family like the Wittgensteins), such that when the family celebrated the completion of the house, the eldest sister of Ludwig stated that it is rather a house for the gods, than for someone as insignificant as she. The rest of the siblings (Ludwig had seven sisters and brothers, two of whom committed suicide) also did not like the house. Ludwig (on reflection?) found that the house was too severe, although so ‘well arranged’. But such a result of his own architectural activity—a perfectly cool building through which he could see the truth of his thesis about the need for a neutral background for the passions of life—did not change his philosophical views.

After the war, the house was occupied by the Russians and transformed into barracks and stables, which immediately suggests the state it was left in. Wittgenstein did not live long enough to see Russians leave Austria; and anyway he had moved far away, to Cambridge in the UK. In 1968, there was a plan to demolish the house, but it was rescued and listed by the Viennese commission for monuments. In 1975, it became the centre for the Bulgarian culture, with an exhibition of Bulgarian folk artists, events of the same kind and sit on the furniture from a department store.

The history of the Wittgenstein House, as it is called in Vienna, is thus rather depressing. One gets the impression that what was important for the architects and owners was the design of the house itself: that the house was a kind of toy and the construction a kind of fun. They did not seem to care for habitation, which was the reason for building it, after all. The Wittgensteins were a bit like children endowed by fate with giant Lego bricks, but discarding any instructions on how to use the bricks. They took the risk, managed to build what they wanted, but then were disappointed. It is then hard to call them lucky, at least when it comes to this matter.



- III.8. Wittgenstein House, Vienna, arch. Paul Engelman (photo S.Gzell)
- III.9. Wittgenstein House, Vienna, arch. Paul Engelman, ground floor plan (photo S. Gzell)
- III.10. Wittgenstein House, Vienna, arch. Paul Engelman, main entrance elevation (photo S.Gzell)

6. The four stories described here should not lead us to make any general judgments, according to scientific caution, but we can still draw some journalistic conclusions. All four houses stand out in the architectural landscape of the twentieth century; when built, they were undoubtedly works of art, and yet throughout their existence, they have not enjoyed constant respect. They have not become capital investments either, but finally, after some dramatic perturbations, they are monuments of the architectural thought of the time. The owners were all less fortunate; none lived long enough to see this moment. Did they leave their houses with a feeling of defeat? We cannot know that. Did they consider themselves lucky? That will also remain a secret of the Wittgensteins, the Lemkes, the Muellers and the Tugendhats.