

A HOUSE STORY

BROKEN GLASS

Mies van der Rohe, Edith Farnsworth and the Fight Over a Modernist Masterpiece

By Alex Beam



The case that animates “Broken Glass” was about a small house and the tensions between an architect and his client, the seemingly mundane matters of ever-escalating costs and a spectacularly uncooperative roof. (It leaked during the trial.)

The house wasn’t just any old house by any old architect, though. It was Mies van der Rohe’s exquisite Farnsworth House completed in 1951.

The client was a well-connected Chicago physician named Edith Farnsworth. She paid a steep price.

She had intended to spend \$8,000 to \$10,000 (somewhere in the neighborhood of \$110,000 in today’s dollars) to have the house built. After that proved unrealistic and Mies called \$40,000 “cheap,” the bill topped \$70,000 (more than \$680,000 now) and Mies sued for his fee. Farnsworth countersued, alleging, among other things, design problems.

But first came the *coup de foudre*. Introduced to the taciturn Mies at a dinner party in 1945, Farnsworth said she was looking to build a weekend house. She asked Mies if “some young man in your

office” could design something for her. Hearing Mies say he would tackle the job himself. He testified that he had told her at the dinner party that he didn’t usually bother with small houses, but that “if it could be fine and interesting,” then he would do it. What he meant by “interesting” was, of course, left unsaid.



Years 1946 and 1947 were the *wunderjahren* of their relationship: Mies’s longtime girlfriend Lora Marx had called a time out to join Alcoholics Anonymous and “Edith assumed the role of favorite in Mies’s life.” By the time Mies took the stand at the trial, in 1952, things had clearly cooled.

But she was a client, and after Mies and his underlings turned ideas and sketches into an actual structure she could spend time in, she found it troublesome. She and Mies tangled over curtains and

screens. A closet? Not in that house. Mies told her, according to the British peer who bought it from her in the 1960s: “It’s a weekend house. You only need one dress. Hang it on a hook on the back of the bathroom door.” (Eventually Mies relented and designed a closet.) Farnsworth sweltered in the summertime because Mies gave her only one door and the smallest of openable windows, and no air conditioning.

The Mies biographer Franz Schulze, who died last year, wrote that “it is simplistic to say that Farnsworth wanted the house and Mies, and Mies wanted the house and the next client.” Beam makes clear that their relationship was complicated. But sometimes, the simplistic explanation actually makes the most sense.

NEW YORK TIMES - March 2020

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/books/review/broken-glass-mies-van-der-rohe-farnsworth-house-alex-beam.html>

Now Farnsworth House is a museum:

<https://farnsworthhouse.org/history-farnsworth-house/>