

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lilly Reich: The architecture and critique of an invisibilized woman



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Abstract The architectural modernity that prevailed in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century cannot be understood without an appreciation of the work of Lilly Reich, a brilliant designer of interiors, furniture, and ephemeral architecture who exerted significant influence from her active position as a member of the *Deutscher Werkbund*. Despite the critical recognition she acquired in the media of the time during her solo career, her association with the architect Mies van der Rohe, far from positioning her in the field of contributions, relegated her to the role of a mere collaborator. For this reason, this article aims to shed light on the extensive legacy of Lilly Reich, a woman whose figure is being acknowledged as a result of recent research but who was nevertheless omitted from the leading books on the history of architecture. The methodology employed in the research analyses comparatively “what she did” and “what was said about her”, highlighting the convergences and divergences between “work” and “criticism”. The study and its results yield interesting conclusions regarding both the recognition that Lilly Reich received during her lifetime and the criticism she received after her death and up to the present day.

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1. Introduction

No one currently studying the German avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century has doubts about the importance of Lilly Reich’s architectural legacy and its influence on the evolution of Mies van der Rohe’s professional career. It is a fact that in 1926 –the year in which they

began to collaborate– Mies began to design exhibitions and furniture, marking the starting point of the upward trajectory of one of the masters of the Modern Movement.¹

Despite this, most critics have not been overly generous towards Lilly Reich; writings such as Philip Johnson’s (1947), Peter Blake (1960), Franz Schulze (1985), or Ignasi Solà-Morales (1985) blur her personality and her work. They refer to her only in her facet as a designer and always

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¹ “I would say that 1926 was the most significant year. Looking back, it seems that it was not a year in a temporal sense. It was a year of great realization or awareness” (Mies van der Rohe, 1959: 10).

regarding the work she produced with Mies van der Rohe, without mentioning her abundant previous production. Some have even alluded to her physical appearance and personal questions about her relationship with Mies (Schulze, 1985: 139). In contrast, a small percentage of researchers have studied history in a more “transversal” way, recognizing the fundamental contributions that Lilly Reich made to architecture in general and Mies’s career in particular. Such is the case with Ludwig Glaeser (1969), Deborah Dietsch (1981), Elaine Hochman (1989), Beatriz Colomina (1999) or Christiane Lange (2007). In addition, “others” –curiously all women– to whom specific reference is made in this research, have addressed Lilly Reich’s work as a central theme of study, with the precursors being Sonja Günther (1988) and Matilda McQuaid (1996).

An analysis of Lilly Reich’s work up to 1926 reveals the not inconsiderable number of projects she successfully created as a specialist in a narrow field –fashion and interior design– which gradually evolved into ephemeral architectural projects. After associating with Mies van der Rohe, Lilly Reich increased the number of commissions and was able to enter more architectural sectors, but on the other hand, her work ceased to be recognized, and all traces of joint authorship faded away; Lilly Reich’s work was subordinated and, at times, erased from the critical scene. For this reason, this article aims to highlight Lilly Reich’s figure and give her rightful place in the history of architecture. To this end, based on an argument organized in three acts, it analyses and compares her “work” and her “criticism”, relating “what Lilly Reich did” with “what was said about Lilly Reich”.

The first act examines Lilly Reich’s development up to 1926, from her training in the minor arts to the major arts. It explores her solo career, the institutions she was a part of, the people she collaborated with, and the design traits that made her a recognized designer in the media. The second act delves into her collaborative period with Mies van der Rohe, ten years of joint work (1927–1937) in which, as their production increased, Lilly Reich’s media exposure declined. Unfortunately, Reich never regained the prestige achieved in her individual period and died in 1947 with hardly any professional activity. After analyzing her work, we proceed to the third act, that of her criticism studying the sequence of her recognition, both during her lifetime and posthumously, until the present day. Finally, conclusions are drawn from the comparison between work and criticism.

2. Act one: Lilly Reich, designer

Lilly Reich was born in Berlin in 1885 into a middle-class family, allowing her to have a privileged education for a woman of that time (Fig. 1). She trained in the Viennese workshops of the *Wiener Werkstätte* with Josef Hoffmann, where she was introduced to the knowledge of fine materials and design based on an abstract language. She then embarked on a second apprenticeship with Else Oppler-Legband at the *Die höhere Fachschule für Dekorationskunst*, a school of decorative arts co-founded by the *Deutscher Werkbund*. Her experience with Oppler-Legband introduced her to the sophisticated realm of fashion, furniture design, and set plans (Droste, 1996: 47).



Fig. 1 Lilly Reich portrait, 1914. Source: Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, photo: G. Engelhardt Fotografie.

His first major commission came in 1911 for the interior design and furnishing of the Youth Centre in Berlin’s Charlottenburg district. The plan showed great formal simplicity, using textiles as a space qualifier, and promoting efficient and versatile construction. Praise from the reputable journalist Robert Breuer (1911) in the specialized journal for woodworkers *Fachblatt für Holzarbeiter* led to her second commission, the design of a Workers’ Apartment displayed in *Die Frau’s exhibition Haus und Beruf* (Woman at Home and Work) held in Berlin in 1912. Her participation in this exhibition is evidence of the esteem in which she was already held at the beginning of her career, since the new way of living of the working class was one of the main themes addressed by the artistic media, nearly always associated with male designers (Droste, 1996: 48). Although the critic Paul Westheim (1911–12, 1912) disparagingly described Reich’s work, basing his arguments on her gender, it did not influence her election to the *Deutscher Werkbund* in the same year.

Having entered the epicenter of the German avant-garde, Lilly Reich began her work at the *Werkbund* as head of window dressing, a sector considered to be of great importance, as it provided practical education for retailers and the public (Campbell, 1978: 32). This position brought her into direct contact with the design of commercial and artistic environments, which gradually led her to the curatorship of exhibition displays. Following the principles of the *Werkbund*, she abandoned the narrative scenography and allegorical rhetoric of the surrealist showcases practiced by contemporaries such as Frederic Kiesler (Klonk, 2005). This design concept was reflected in her window display for the *Elefanten-Apotheke* in Berlin in 1913, which was published in the *Werkbund* yearbook, *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes*. Lilly Reich did not display the medicines but instead the utensils used in the manufacturing and packaging processes. On a practically bare stage, the nature and manufacture of the products –systematically stacked and arranged– asserted the individual object’s abstraction and the possibilities to configure

a spatial unity from the differentiation between background-figure (Fig. 2).

At the beginning of 1914, Lilly Reich was appointed secretary of the Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne and was responsible for drawing up the program and handling all the arrangements with the participants. She was also responsible for the section *Haus der Frau* (House of Woman) together with Ana Muthesius and Else Oppler-Legband. Shortly after this exhibition ended, the First World War broke out, but Lilly Reich continued to work for the German and Swiss Werkbund together with Lucius Bernhard's designer. During this period, she also published her furniture designs in the article by Robert Breuer (1915: 101–104) *Die Frau als Möbelbauenerin* (Woman as Furniture Builder). This writing did not overlook her gender condition.

In 1920, at the end of the war, having established herself within the Werkbund, she was elected to its board of directors, the first woman to hold this position. From then on, she was involved in a series of increasingly essential projects that brought her greater recognition. The first of these was the exhibition *Kunsthandwerk in der Mode* (Fashion Craft) together with Margarete Neumann, a show that dealt with German women's fashion and accessories. In the exhibition catalog Lilly Reich asserted the role of the artisan artist, "who had to respect the working laws of the machine, but at the same time exercise his own influence on it" (Reich, 1920: 210). The stand that Reich created for this event is also of great interest, as it introduced design mechanisms used in her later period with Mies van der Rohe (Lizondo-Sevilla, 2012): the continuous route around a free-standing, geometric plane on which to hang the material to be exhibited, and where the texture and chromatism between plane and fabric entered into a dialogue by contraposition (Fig. 3).

Again, together with Margarete Neumann, Reich exhibited a fashion collection at the Grassi Museum for the Leipzig Spring Fair. Some of the pieces of clothing shown were acquired by the Newark Museum in the United States, an institution with which she worked on her next project, The Applied Arts Werkbund Exhibition, this time in collaboration with Otto Baur and Richard L. F. Schulz (McQuaid,

1996: 12). With Schulz and Ferdinand Kramer, he returned to work almost immediately in the Werkbund House exhibition held at the International Frankfurt Fair, designing the showcases of the enclosure. Also, together with J. Modlinger and Otto-Ernst Sutter he was responsible until 1926 for the *Atelier für Ausstellungsgestaltung und Mode* organized by the Werkbund in Frankfurt. Simultaneously, Lilly Reich, Ferdinand Kramer & Robert Schmidt designed the traveling exhibition *Die Form*, in which they displayed Walter Gropius' Bauhaus production.

Even though she did not produce many writings, Lilly Reich published the article *Modefragen* (Issues of Fashion) in the journal *Die Form. Monatsschrift für gestaltende Arbeit*. Her text supported industrial production as the intellectual image of the time, as long as it emphasized the individuality of women in all facets of their daily lives: "Fashion should not be a preoccupation of the petit bourgeoisie [...] it should follow the basic requirements of the ways of life and should correspond to its time" (Reich, 1922: 7–9). These principles and the experience in shared projects with other artists were the basis for her last major solo project: the design and organization of the exhibition *Von der Faser zum Gewebe* (From Fiber to Textile), again for the International Frankfurt Fair in 1926. The exhibition's theme was weaving and industrial machinery, subjects she mastered to perfection and which she organized within the large unitary hall of the *Festhalle*. Reich designed all the stands and had all the equipment on display in operation: art and the means of production were united through the machine. The room was perceived independently, acting as a background for the textile manufacturing processes and supporting the striking signage that guided the visitor along a free and continuous route. The critics praised Lilly Reich's professionalism in creating an extremely innovative exhibition on a subject that, in principle, was not very attractive to professionals in the textile industry (Fig. 4).

In short, Lilly Reich's solo career reveals a progressive evolution towards the major arts, from interior design to ephemeral architecture, and also reveals two important aspects: that until 1926 all her projects were recognized as her own, and that she almost always worked in

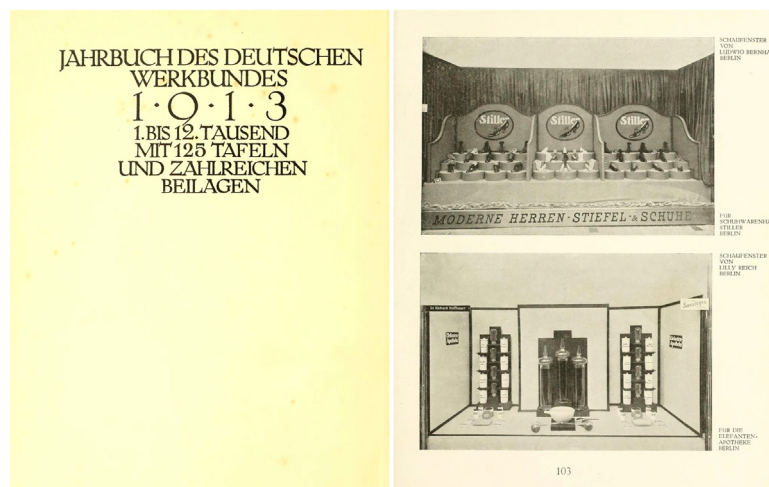


Fig. 2 Cover of the *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes* (left) including the Elefanten-Apotheke in Berlin (below right). Lilly Reich, 1913. Source: *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Werkbundes*, 1913.



Fig. 3 Fabrics display of the *Kunsth Handwerk in der Mode* exhibition. Lilly Reich, 1920. Source: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

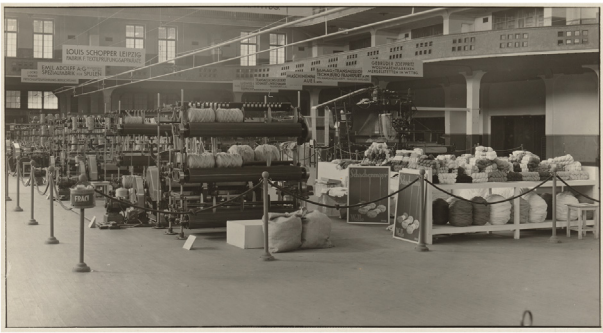


Fig. 4 The *Von der Faser zum Gewebe* exhibition in the International Frankfurt Fair. Lilly Reich, 1926. Source: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

collaboration with other professionals, men, and women, designers, and architects. At the end of 1926, Mies van der Rohe – who had only been a member of the Werkbund for two years and was already first vice-president – asked Lilly Reich to help him organize his first exhibition, *Die Wohnung* (The Dwelling). It was then that the two aspects mentioned above changed drastically in Lilly Reich's life and production: she began an "exclusive" collaboration with Mies van der Rohe, which marked both a turning point and element of discord between her work and her critique.

3. Act two: Lilly Reich, the architect

In 1926 Lilly Reich began to work with Mies van der Rohe, and as Elaine Hochman says, "Reich became his confidante, his business manager, the organizer of his [Mies'] life (...). The commissions they worked on jointly are notable for their dynamic use of color and the curvilinear forms that now entered his architectural vocabulary" (1989: 57–59). But despite the critical role that Reich played in Mies van der Rohe's life for a decade, he never spoke about this collaboration, neither during nor after. Publicly they spoke of her as his "closest assistant", attributing to her the term

engster Mitarbeiterin (Hahn, 1985: 281), a label that Mies never denied. Furthermore, they only appear together in two photographs, both in the company of Bauhaus students with whom they used to make architecture trips (Neumeyer, 2020) (Fig. 5). On the contrary, there are testimonies from students and collaborators of her studios – which were very close to each other but continue operating autonomously – who describe her way of designing as independent but coordinated; Mies thought through sketches, while Lilly Reich designed in her mind and built models (Glaeser and The Museum of Modern Art, 1977: 12). David Spaeth adds that the work balance was made possible through respect and complicity: Mies would make dozens of sketches, and Reich would sit across from him criticizing and offering suggestions (1985: 52).

With this organizational method, they prepared the *Die Wohnung* exhibition in Stuttgart, taking on different roles from the outset: Mies oversaw the master plan for the *Weissenhof* colony and the design of the only collective housing block, while Lilly Reich, in addition to the interior design and furnishing of apartment number 9 in Mies' block, was responsible for the design and organization of practically all the industrial product rooms in the *Gewehalle-Platz*. However, according to the catalog, two of the rooms were designed by both, and these spaces – adjacent and connected by pavement – are the first project of joint authorship. They are the *Linoleumraum* (Linoleum Hall, for the company *Deutsche Linoleum-Werke A-G*), and the *Glasraum* (Plate-Glass Hall, for the company *Verein Deutscher Spiegelglasfabriken GmbH*). Critics praised Lilly Reich's work, both in the interior design of the apartment (Günther, 1988: note 22) and in the staging of the industrial exhibitions (Lotz, 1927), but especially the overall project of the *Glasraum*, which was designated as the *Raumgestaltung*, term that emphasized its architectural character and set it apart from the rest (Much, 1927). Undoubtedly, the glass and linoleum rooms were innovative: recognizable architectural spaces without elements added to the material itself, composed through geometric abstraction, spatial-material continuity, and the chromatic-perceptual contrast that fascinated critics: "In the exhibition halls



Fig. 5 Lilly Reich with Bauhaus students in Dessau (1931). Source: Bauhaus-Archive Berlin, photo: Pius Pahl © Peter Jan Pahl.

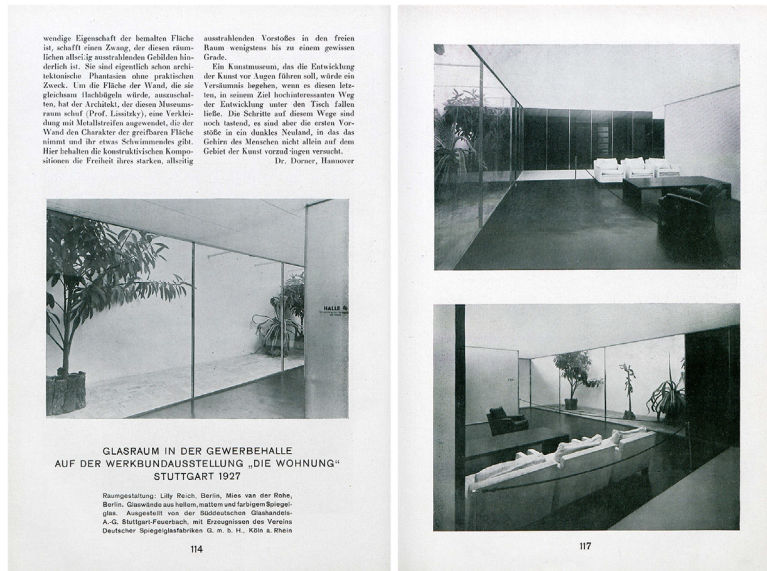


Fig. 6 Glass Raum exhibition. Lilly Reich & Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Stuttgart, 1927. Source: *Die Form*, 1927. VEGAP, Spain, 2022.

we find a strange space, thought up by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich. [Any] movement magically produces shadow plays on the wall, disembodied silhouettes, hovering in mid-air and getting mixed up with the reflections in the actual glass space” (Kracauer, 1927). The furniture was also of great importance, and there are still doubts regarding Reich’s authorship of the MR10 and MR20 chairs and the MR1 stool -cantilever model-designed for this exhibition (Fig. 6).

After the Stuttgart exhibition was over, they undertook a new assignment in Berlin, closely related to the previous one, as it was to exhibit the textiles of *Vereinigte Seidenwebereien AG*, Krefeld, in an industrial building. The *Café Samt und Seide* (Velvet and Silk Café) belonging to the exhibition *Die Mode der Dame* (Women’s Fashion), was again structured with the materials themselves, pushed to the limit of their possibilities: now it was the fabric that composed the exhibition space and which, at the same time, exhibited itself. Again, they used contrast for the vertical planes, which, light, independent, and structurally challenging, qualified the space with their colors and textures. Nevertheless, the media of the time gave Mies the absolute authorship of this exhibition.²

Something similar happened two years later at the 1929 International Exposition of Barcelona. This was a significant commission, as they were responsible for designing two pavilions –one national and one commercial for the German electrical industry– and twenty-five industrial displays of German firms. There is now ample evidence to show that the German exhibitions were in the care of Lilly Reich, as evidenced by letters and documents held at the Museum of Modern Art of New York, as well as the testimony of Sergius Riegenberg (2000), an employee in Mies’ office. The letter stated that they both equipped a specific studio

in ground floor premises near their offices for the Barcelona designs. Despite this, no media of the time, including the *Diario Oficial de la Exposición Internacional de Barcelona* (Official Journal of the Exposition), acknowledged Lilly Reich’s work. Only Epifanio de Fortuni mentioned her, albeit as a decorator: “From the magnificent national pavilion, a prodigious creation by Mies van der Rohe, in which the noblest elements are combined in an unsurpassed grandiose simplicity, to (...) the decorative art of Lilly Reich (...)” (Fortuni, 1929–1930). The journal *Die Form* (Bier, 1929) named her in the photo captions but not in the main text (Fig. 7).

Although nowadays critics are categorical in granting the authorship of the industrial displays to Lilly Reich (Martínez de Guereño, 2021), with the occasional collaboration of Mies in some stands, the imprecision inherited from the past has remained more than half a century later: “Lilly Reich’s installations in the various facilities of German industry show not only a connection with Mies but also the literal use of his designs” (Solà-Morales, 1985: 120). Which designs is Solà-Morales referring to? Those designed jointly in 1927? Indeed, the Barcelona stands had many features in common with what was done collaboratively in Stuttgart and Berlin and what Reich created on her own. The products on each stand –such as bottles, fabrics, machinery, and chemical products– once again showcased the industrial product and the space it could generate from a patterned, orderly, and abstract layout with free, fluid, uninterrupted circulation.

There was already little recognition for the design of the industrial stands, let alone for her work in “dressing” the iconic pavilion, reconstructed between 1983 and 1986 by Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Cristian Cirici and Fernando Ramos. It is curious how Lilly Reich, in her day, was not credited with the design of the curtains, the carpets, or the Barcelona chair, and yet the latest research articles and doctoral thesis give her equal credit for the pavilion’s architectural project (see, e.g., Jaque-Ovejero, 2016). It is not the

² “This Velvet and Silk Cafe was executed after a design by Mies van der Rohe”, published in: 1927. *Die elegante Welt* 19 (September 21), 59. Extracted from (Droste, 1996, note 70).



Alemania en el Palacio de Agricultura

por EPIFANIO DE FORTUNY

Modelo de organización en los numerosos Palacios en que toma parte, originalidad y buen gusto dentro del estilo moderno, la concurrencia alemana a la Exposición Internacional de Barcelona, la más considerable en superficie es, al mismo tiempo, la que demuestra una perfecta y sólida preparación de todos los hombres que en ella han intervenido, y un profundo conocimiento del país, al que ofrecen, en nuevo y lugar el más propio y adecuado, máquinas, productos o artículos que le son ventajosos o necesarios.

Desde el magnífico Pabellón Nacional, prodigiosa creación de Mies van der Rohe, en que los más valiosos elementos se combinan en una insuperable sencillez grandiosa, hasta la más vulgar instalación particular, son magníficas realizaciones en que campean; el arte decorativo de Lilly Reich, los vastos conocimientos técnicos de Karl Strauss y la sobria dirección del Dr. Malwald.

No podía en materia alguna faltar Alemania en el Palacio de Agricultura y Alimentación; su concurso en las diferentes Secciones es por demás interesante, y si bien en número exigidos, quince expositores, la calidad y amplitud ocupada por los mismos suple sobradamente lo que podría parecer, a simple vista, falta de interés.

Dentro del marco único impuesto por los dirigentes del Comisariado alemán, en el que destacan su atrevida silueta los sillones, taburetes, mesas y sillas, M. R. de Jos Müller, uno de los más Frances célticos que se habría registrado en la Exposición Internacional de Barcelona, los colores vivos del decorado marcan las secciones correspondientes: rojo vivo, la maquinaria agrícola; blanco, los abonos y semillas, y, finalmente, negro, las cervezas.

Maquinaria Agrícola

Ocupa gran parte de una de las naves de la Sección de Maquinaria, unos 600 metros cuadrados, y unos 600 en los porticos exteriores.

Se halla subdividida la concurrencia a esta importante rama de la agricultura, en maquinaria agrícola propiamente dicha, y maquinaria para las industrias auxiliares. Entre las primeras destacan, por su importancia y magnífica presentación, las tan

conocidas trilladoras de la casa Lanz, uno de cuyos ejemplares sirve de fondo insuperable al conjunto de la instalación; de la misma casa el último modelo de tractor, creado por la industria alemana, uno de los cuales se exhibe en su corte longitudinal, para poder comprobar la regularidad de su funcionamiento; ha sido uno de los elementos exhibitivos que más potosamente han llamado la atención de los visitantes extranjeros.

La casa Prinz expone sus arados, perfectamente adaptados y rematados conforme a las más modernas exigencias de cultivo.

La casa Claas de Harsewinkel, la más antigua fábrica mundial de máquinas agrícolas

y de distribuidora de abonos, que tiene empleadas en sus diferentes talleres más de 500 obreros, y que lleva entregadas a Francia en el presente año más de 400 máquinas, exhibe, igualmente que las otras industrias alemanas, sus más perfectos modelos.

Finalmente, la casa Hartung exhibe sus sembradoras de patatas y sus segadoras, y la Stock Motorflug, con su tractor origin Stock, contribuyen poderosamente a hacer interesante esta sección a los visitantes conadores de los modernos adelantos agrícolas.

Cervezas

Hackerbräu de Munich, la vieja marca que fue fundada quinientos años hace, y que a pesar de los fuertes gravámenes que supone el trabajo en la actual República germana con un capital de cinco millones de pesetas, y haber tenido que evolucionar al compás del tiempo en sus máquinas y procedimientos, ha conservado los más antiguos secretos de elaboración, proporcionando uno de los más selectos productos en forma de la tan conocida cerveza Hackerbräu, de fama mundial, toma parte, como único expositor alemán, en la Sección de Vinos y Bebidas, mostrando al visitante, en originalísimo conjunto, sobre un fondo blanco y en sencillas estanterías, las típicas botellas que contienen todas las variedades, desde la más preciosa "Liefbrandl", la cerveza de Nuestra Señora la Iglesia de Munich, a cuya sombra se cobijó la célebre fábrica, hasta la "Schubler" que se suministra a los débiles y enfermos, así como a las madres en el período de lactancia. La cerveza clara y la fuerte, los botulones grandes y pequeños, en largas hileras, destacan junto a los boteros de las levaduras, que detalladamente explican al visitante los datos más característicos.

Una de las particularidades que despiertan la curiosidad, son los boteros "Hacker", de aluminio, protegidos por capas de madera y

Exposición Internacional de Barcelona

Por causa de las lluvias, del mal estado del campo del Estadio y de la inseguridad del tiempo, queda aplazada la Fiesta del Torneo a la Antigua Usanza, que debía celebrarse el día 27, HASTA EL DOMINGO DÍA 3 DE NOVIEMBRE

Fig. 7 Hackerbräu beer stand at the *Exposición Internacional de Barcelona*. Lilly Reich & Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Barcelona, 1929. Source: *Diario Oficial de la Exposición Internacional de Barcelona*. VEGAP, Spain, 2022.

MR 1	Hacker	L	N	CHR	MR 80	Hacker	L	N	CHR	MR 100	Hacker	L	N	CHR	MR 120	Hacker	L	N	CHR
11	Stangensuhl	33.	30.	36.	80	Stuhl	340.	260.	300.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
12	Stuhl	36.	42.	36.	80	Sessel	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
13	Stuhl	36.	37.	44.	80	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
20	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
21	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
22	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
23	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
30	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
31	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
32	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
33	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
40	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
41	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
42	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
43	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
50	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
51	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
52	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
60	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
61	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
62	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
70	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
71	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
72	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.
73	Stangensuhl	36.	37.	44.	100	Stuhl	400.	440.	400.	100	100	100	100	100	120	Stuhl	43.	48.	57.

Fig. 8 Bamberg Metalwerkstätten furniture catalog, 1931. Source: Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin, photo: Markus Hawlik.

purpose of this article to go into this question in-depth, but this mythical reconstructed building would not have been the same without the “attrezzo” that complemented its emptiness.

Between 1927 and 1931, Mies and Reich produced a series of single-family houses and flat designs, the authorship of which has suffered the same processes of omission as in Barcelona. Thus, the Lange House (Krefeld), the Esters House (Krefeld), the Tugendhat House (Brno), the Ruthenberg Apartment (Berlin), the Apartment of Carl Wilhelm and Mildred Crous (Südende), the Apartment of Philip Johnson (New York) or the Hess Apartment (Berlin) were created in common even though Lilly Reich was not listed as an author until almost the 1990s (for more information see, e.g., [Glaeser and The Museum of Modern Art, 1977](#); [Lange, 2007](#)). Certain pieces of furniture conceived for these projects were published with her signature ([Graff, 1933](#)). It is particularly striking that she was the only woman to design a complete series of furniture made of steel tubes. Like Mies' furniture, Reich's pieces were manufactured by *Bamberg Metalwerkstätten*, which published a catalog in 1931 showing both collections ([Fig. 8](#)).

In 1931 Mies and Reich were involved in another major exhibition of extraordinary media impact. The Berlin exhibition *Die Wohnung unseres Zeit* (The Dwelling in Our Time), included in the *Deutsche Bauausstellung* (German Building Exposition), was the focus of debate in national and international journals and newspapers and commented on by critics of the stature of Henry-Russell [Hitchcock \(1931\)](#), Ludwig [Hilberseimer \(1931\)](#), Max [Osborn \(1931\)](#), Wilhelm [Lotz \(1931\)](#) and Philip [Johnson \(1932\)](#). Although critics attributed a secondary role to Lilly Reich ([Hoffmann, 1931](#)), she designed the entire perimeter gallery at the mezzanine level, where the different stands dedicated to building materials were located. Reich used the structural module of the nave to organize an exhibition sequence that would have a pedagogical effect on the formation of space through a progression from two to three dimensions. She also emphasized the innate and accidental visual characteristics of the materials – color, texture, malleability – and how the effects of these qualities influenced the form and flow of the surrounding space (for more information, see, e.g., [Miller, 1999](#)). In an atmosphere between everyday life and reflection, the object/material itself was shown as the origin and result of the design process of the architectural space.

From this upper level, the visitor could see the 1:1 scale construction of the flats and single-family dwellings on the lower floor, organized by Mies van der Rohe, who once again took on the “more architectural” responsibilities. Lilly Reich was involved on the ground floor, designing the interiors of two of the flats in the Boarding House block and building the first and only flat of her entire career. She achieved elegance and spaciousness in the apartments despite the minimal floor space and the furnishings were limited to the essentials and were characterized by their compactness. The interiors were highly appreciated, especially the cooking cabinet, designed by Reich and manufactured by Otto Kahn ([Zimmermann, 1931](#); [Rischowski, 1931: 251](#)) ([Fig. 9](#)). The same was not true of her Ground-Floor House. She built it connected by a wall to the House for a Childless Couple designed by Mies, but



Fig. 9 Cooking cabinet. The Dwelling in our Time Exhibition. Lilly Reich, Berlin, 1931. Source: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

conceptually it differed in its architectural fundamentals. Although Lilly Reich's house was described as realistic, functional, simple, limited, and equipped with cozy furniture ([Völckers, 1931: 270](#)), “it was architecturally rigid and lacked the elegance of the expert” ([Günther, 1988: 37](#)) ([Fig. 10](#)).

Sonja Günther places this exhibition at the highest point of Lilly Reich's professional career, basically because from then on –in the face of an advancing National Socialist government– her architecture (also Mies') began to be hindered from developing freely. Together they lived through the dissolution of the Bauhaus in 1933 and that of the *Deutscher Werkbund* in 1938, and together they continued to plan exhibitions, albeit in smaller numbers and with significant censorship. They were only involved in two more shows in Berlin: the *Deutsches Volk–Deutsches Arbeit* (German People– German Work) in 1934, and the *Reichsausstellung Exposition der Deutschen Textil-und Bekleidungsindustrie* (Imperial Exhibition of the German Textile and Garment Industry) in 1937. In addition, faced with the increasingly real possibility that Mies would emigrate to the USA, Lilly Reich began to take on some independent commissions, mainly furniture pieces, home interiors, and the design of some stands, such as the one for Villeroy and Bosch for the Leipzig Spring Fair in 1935 or the one designed for the *Exposition Internationale des arts et techniques appliqués à la vie moderne* (International Exposition of Arts and Techniques Applied to Modern Life) in Paris in 1937.

Finally, Mies van der Rohe emigrated to Chicago, and she “reluctantly accepted” to remain,³ suffering the terrible consequences of the Second World War and the subsequent

³ “In July 1939, she visited him in Chicago, and for a few brief weeks, part of which was spent working and relaxing in the Wisconsin countryside, their partnership was restored. As the war clouds gathered over Europe, the decision had to be made as to whether she should stay. But Mies never asked her, and she, proud and independent, would not remain unasked” ([Hochman, 1989: 307](#)). However, according to the testimony of [Lange \(2021\)](#) “even when Mies was already in the States and he was starting to create the campus of the IIT, he would give one of his students a model, and he gave this model to Lilly Reich; and he wanted to discuss with Lilly Reich this model of the IIT campus”.

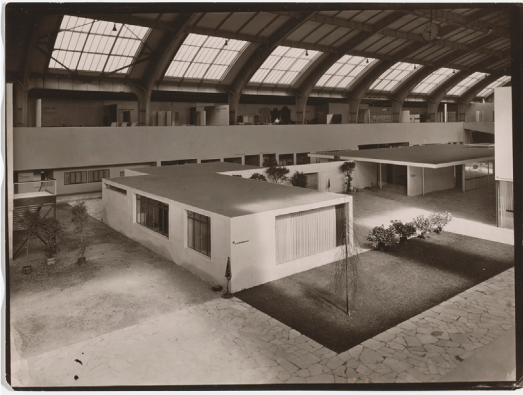


Fig. 10 Ground-Floor House. The Dwelling in our Time Exhibition. Lilly Reich, Berlin, 1931. Source: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe Archive, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 11 Tugendhat House. Lilly Reich & Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Brno, 1928–30. Source: Miroslav Ambroz, photo Rudolf de Sandalo. VEGAP, Spain, 2022.

post-war period. She had very few job opportunities in the ten years between the beginning of the war and her early death in 1947. She continued to design interiors and furniture even after her studio was destroyed by bombs in 1943 producing some furniture designs and interior design projects, mainly for the Lange family and with hardly any media coverage. Unable to make a living—as she describes in the letters transcribed by Hochmann—Lilly Reich was employed in the office of Ernst Neufert, occupied with jobs about standards for residential buildings, issues that were “far beneath her abilities” (Droste, 1996: 57), and also with Hans Scharoun, who commissioned her to remodel two large apartment renovation projects. Additionally, since October 1945, she dedicated herself to the attempt to revive the Werkbund⁴ and to the post-war reconstruction

⁴ Those former members who reactivated the Werkbund—including Hans Scharoun, Max Taut, Edwin Redslob, and Theo Effenberger—undertook anti-fascist and democratic ideas, activating design, industrial and handicraft production, educational issues, exhibitions, and competitions. Reich was mainly involved in educational projects, although she also contributed some furniture designs.

through the manifesto.⁵ But the truth is that, in silence, she continued to work alone with Mies. She was his continuator and defender (Hochman, 1989: 307): she answered his letters, paid his bills, settled his family affairs, and safeguarded the graphic and photographic material from Mies van der Rohe’s German period, now searchable in the Museum of Modern Art of New York.

4. Act three: Criticism of Lilly Reich

Recent studies of Lilly Reich’s work aim to explore her contribution to architectural history through her professional contributions. However, these works prove beneficial to highlight her critical account within the historical context of the first half of the twentieth century and, mainly, show her visibility in the texts constructing the discipline’s narrative body.

How an author is written about, and the comments made regarding a work combine to define particular historiography. In the case of architecture, as in many other artistic and professional areas, the narrative has tended to be individualistic, heroicist, certainly simplified, and in tune with the dominant values of the time (Montaner and Muxi, 2015: 112–113). The diversity of discourse and content has been subordinated or has tended to disappear. Plurality in authorship, and even collaborative formulas, are practically non-existent in the eyes of the historical narrative. If moreover, historiographical analysis is carried out from a gender perspective, the volatility of everything related to women is even more evident, and specific discriminatory mechanisms are perpetuated; the categories of these gender discriminations have been the subject of recent research. They are usually classified as (Arias-Laurino, 2018): exclusion (women disappear from the story), pseudo-inclusion (women are included in the story secondarily, minimizing, devaluing, or subordinating them), and invisibilization (women’s participation is hidden behind generic or team names).

In the specific case of Lilly Reich, the compilation of all her criticism, both during her lifetime and from her death to the present day, demonstrates different forms of recognition, not without praise but also marginalization. It must also be considered that critical value judgments often influence the currents of successive accounts, and their meaning is challenging to re-orientate. No less important is the medium in which the communication takes place: while monographic books and historical compilations usually form the primary documents of the narrative, professional journals, newsletters, exhibition catalogs, or mere advertising brochures do not usually last for a long time. For this reason, the analysis of Lilly Reich’s visibility is carried out in this research with the broadest possible time window and considering different narrative media (journals, books, photographs, websites ...) for a panoramic and diverse observation.

The first references to Lilly Reich found in the professional press date back to 1911 and refer to her first major commission: the interior design for the Youth Centre in

⁵ Reich, L., 1946. On the Reconstruction of Schools. Unpublished manuscript (April 2). Extracted from (Günther, 1988).

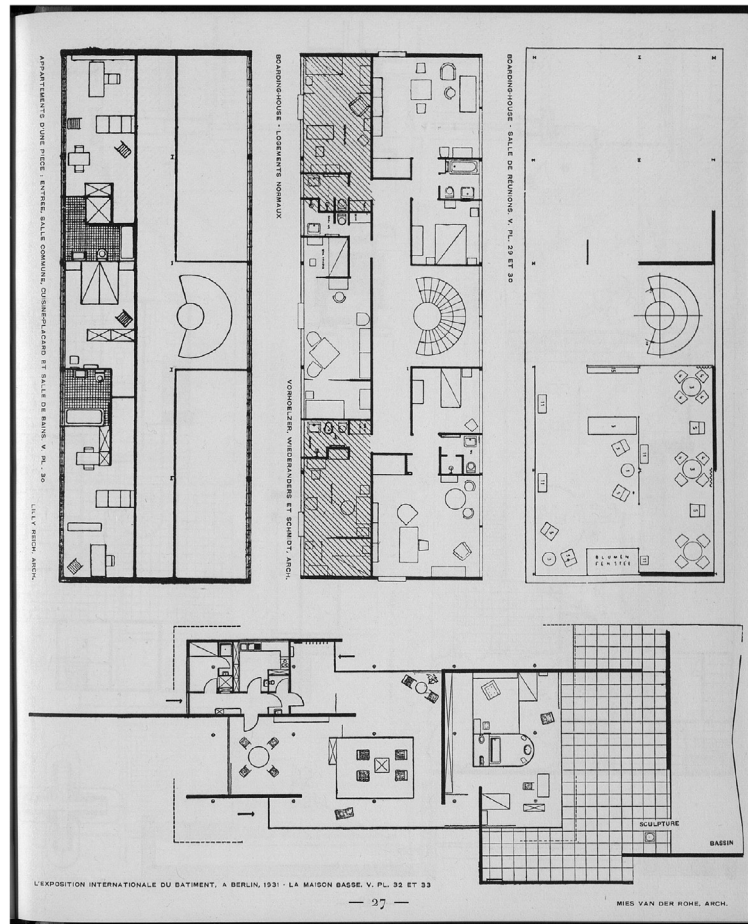


Fig. 12 Apartment for a single person, Boarding House. The Dwelling in our Time Exhibition. Lilly Reich, Berlin, 1931. Source: L'Architecture Vivante, 1931.

Charlottenburg. At the time, she was 26 years old and already a well-trained professional. For this reason, she received very favorable reviews, her authorship being made explicit with name and surname: "This home is an integral system; its functionality is perceived as a whole (...) it is an exercise in austerity, with no compromise on comfort or good taste. The spaces designed by Lilly Reich attest to this. Inventively, the prototypes have been slightly modified by changing colors and various combinations to create

rooms with a completely different character. Further proof that her architecture is not based on peculiar single forms, but a sensible and harmonious economy of simple elements" (Breuer, 1911: 42).

Her next commission for the *Die Frau in Haus und Beruf* exhibition also appeared in several journals and the exhibition catalog. However, in two different media, the same critic expressed opinions in an opposed sense to the previous story: "The core of the problem has been sacrificed to a desire for ornament, failings of the architecturally inept woman (Westheim, 1912)"; "The bit of unarchitectural cuteness the designer introduces here is, if not a misconception of the entire assignment, a concealment of her weaknesses" (Westheim, 1911-12). It is particularly noteworthy that both critics noted that the author was female.

Fortunately, Lilly Reich's career continued an upward course, and her subsequent works became increasingly visible in journals and the specialized press, as well as in the various exhibition catalogs in which she took part. It was said of her that she was "a person equally gifted as an organizer and an artist" (Werkbund-Gedanken, 1924), and in this case, she was defined as a person, not a woman. In addition, her work was valued for the contributions she made to the world of textile and interior design – "This is a pioneering display of objectivity, one that had to suffer the mistrust accorded –justifiably, often enough– to

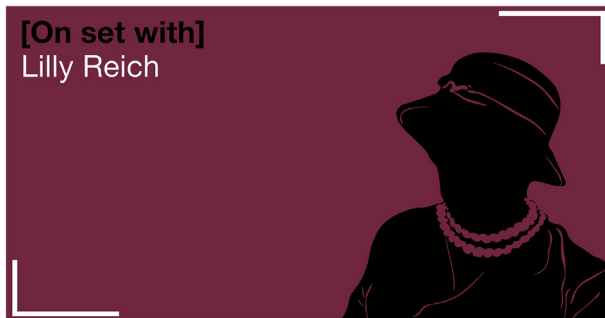


Fig. 13 [On set with] Lilly Reich. Second edition of the Lilly Reich Grant for Equality in Architecture (2020). Source: The authors.

exhibitions” (Droste, 1996)⁶—, although he was compared to a man when she adequately resolved innovative solutions: “As things now stand, she is leaving, not without giving us in the exhibition From Fiber to Textile, a last look at the expressive abilities with which she is endowed and which strike the chord of our time so clearly, as only a male hand would ever have done. As I said, today, there is not yet much understanding for that. That is why she left. We would like to hope, however, that no farewell is permanent, and that Lilly Reich will again hear Frankfurt’s call, and that we will again be able to thank her for a richer harvest than was possible until today” (Modlinger, 1926).

It is clear from the reviews of the 1920s that Lilly Reich was a visible woman in her professional context, appreciated for her excellent organizational skills and her objective approach to the selection of material for the various exhibitions she curated for the Werkbund. (Lange, 2021). Undoubtedly, she was a professional who was sure of her criteria and methods, developed and evolved from her atelier, established individually. But as Günther and McQuaid tell us in their biographies, Lilly Reich, a sought-after expert in the field of interior design, was accustomed to working in tandem with other professionals: Ana Muthesius, Else Oppler-Legband, Lucius Bernhard, Margarete Neumann, Otto Baur, Richard L. F. Schulz, Ferdinand Kramer, J. Modlinger or Otto-Ernst Sutter, were some of the colleagues with whom he collaborated in organizing different exhibitions. However, all these joint authorships did not cloud the visibility of her contributions and the recognition of her figure.

A change occurred in this narrative when Lilly Reich’s professional work became exclusively collaborative with Mies van der Rohe. From 1927 and for the next ten years, the woman who had worked alone or in coordination with various colleagues focused solely on work associated with Mies van der Rohe: he was in charge of the architectural projects, she of the exhibition spaces, and interior design. Bearing in mind that the boundaries in the definition of disciplines are blurred and that neither of them had a degree in architecture, it is a fact that the leap from minor to major arts, common in the case of men, was not recognized in the case of Lilly Reich.

An analysis of the publications of works from this period, 1927–1937, reveals a critical turning point. Although in the first of her collaborations, Stuttgart, Lilly Reich is still acknowledged (Lotz, 1927), from then on, she practically disappears. Her production increases, but she is hardly mentioned, and the joint commissions seem to have only one author: the architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Although testimonies affirm that Mies and Reich worked collaboratively, what was reported in the press rarely reflected a balance between the two. Proof of this is the accessory role Henry-Russell Hitchcock attributes to her in the 1931 Material Show of *Die Wohnung unseres Zeit*, despite being the only person responsible: “The main interest of the exhibition was to be found in Room II, which had come into being entirely under the direction of Mies van der Rohe. From the kinds of marble on display, woods,

and fabrics—which were selected by Mies and arranged by Lilly Reich—to the Mies house at the center of the composition, everything is arranged with a clarity of vision that can only be achieved by a single positive taste control” (Hitchcock, 1931: 94).

The only written mention that appears since then, in this professional stage together with Mies, is the one made by George Nelson in the magazine *Pencil Points*, when he interviewed Mies in September 1935: “He [Mies] designed a silk exhibition room in Berlin with Lilly Reich, his collaborator on most interiors, and when the room was finished he suddenly remembered that there were no chairs” (Nelson, 1935: 455). The narrative assigns Reich a secondary role, even though it addresses an exhibition commission in the field of textiles, her professional specialty, and ignores her in other projects such as the Tugendhat House, the Barcelona Pavilion, or the interiors of the apartment for Philip Johnson. Such is the case of Oriol Bohigas (1995), the promoter of the reconstruction of the Barcelona Pavilion as head of the Urban Planning Department at the Barcelona City Council, who only mentions Lilly Reich as Mies’s collaborator in the industrial exhibitions. Also, Josep Quetglas (1980), establishes multiple relationships between the German pavilion and various projects in which Mies was involved, but without naming Lilly Reich as part of the work team in his article *Pérdida de Síntesis: el Pabellón de Mies*.

Additionally, an example of this invisibilization is seen in the pages of *Die Form*, a reference journal in the field of architecture and design, published in Berlin from 1922 to 1935. In the early years, *Die Form* gave visibility to Reich’s work in the Werkbund, posting various notes, showing photographs of her clothing designs, and publicizing her only article, *Modefragen* (Reich, 1922). However, from 1927 onwards, the number of mentions of Mies van der Rohe tripled that of Lilly Reich, even though practically all the works published were joint efforts. Analysis of these references demonstrates three distinct patterns: Lilly Reich is mentioned in the captions of photos of the solo exhibitions she held in Stuttgart (Lotz, 1927: 252); Lilly Reich is mentioned alongside Mies van der Rohe when the main text alludes to joint professional commissions, as in the exhibition held in Barcelona (Bier, 1928: 423–430); Lilly Reich is omitted when a work of architecture is published, as in the case of the twelve-page feature, which includes interior photographs, of the Tugendhat house (Riezler, 1931: 321–332) (Fig. 11).

The situation in foreign journals and magazines is even more discriminatory. The Dutch *De 8 en Opbouw* (Oud, 1936: 15) published the Tugendhat house without mentioning Lilly Reich, as did the French *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui* (Argus, 1931: 85). Reich was only mentioned twice in 1931 in *l’Architecture Vivante* (Badovici, 1931: 2) and always accompanied by Mies van der Rohe in a retrospective on German architecture. It is noteworthy, however, that in the credits of the image on page 27, “Lilly Reich, arch” was written, acquiring the consideration of architect, something that had never happened before, and which to this day remains a “diffuse” and questionable subject for some people (Fig. 12).

The years after 1937, until she died in 1947, did not offer Lilly Reich the opportunity to be mentioned in the specialized press, mainly because she was barely active.

⁶ Published in: 1926. Der Konfektionär. (77) 5. Extracted from (Droste, 1996: note 65).

Her attempts to revive the Werkbund or reflections on the country's reconstruction were hardly visible. As a final mention during her lifetime, the magazine *Bauen und Wohnen* dedicated the following words to her in its obituary, remembering her, quite simply, as a great designer: "Mrs. Reich always tried to solve real housing needs and eliminate false housing pretensions. Her excellent display work, her distinctive rooms, her practical kitchens ... and all her simple furnishings radiate a higher conviction. Although he made no concessions to the most sentimental taste and used almost exclusively accurate modeling, all her works are nevertheless among the most elegant solutions of our time in terms of design and the extraordinary choice of materials" (Blomeier, 1948: 106).

From the date of Lilly Reich's death, the analysis of her work acquires a different character: it is no longer a critique of current work, but the discourse is observed with more distance, insofar as it serves to build a historical legacy. Books are now the exclusive medium where Lilly Reich is found, and it is then discovered that there is a specific resistance to change the image offered by the latest periodicals. For the next 40 years, Lilly Reich would be destined to be, with luck, "his brilliant partner [of Mies van der Rohe], who soon became his equal in this field" (Johnson, 1947: 49). And so, systematically, Lilly Reich was omitted in all histories of twentieth-century architecture. She did not exist for Bruno Zevi, Emil Kaufman, or Manfredo Tafuri. Nor did Siegfried Giedon or Nikolaus Pevsner mention it. Leonardo Benevolo listed her in a caption as "L. Reich" and Kenneth Frampton blamed her for Mies's failure to move beyond expressionist aesthetics: "Despite these diverse and compelling influences, Mies still seems to have experienced difficulty in relinquishing the Expressionist aesthetic of his *Novembergruppe* period. A similar sensibility, touched by a somewhat Russian sense of color, is still evident in the 1927 Berlin Silk Industry Exhibition, designed in collaboration with Lilly Reich, who had initially trained as a fashion designer. The black, orange, and red velvets and the gold, silver, black and lemon-yellow silks no doubt reflected her taste, as did the acid-green cowhide upholstery used for the sitting-room furniture of the Tugendhat House" (Frampton, 1980: 163). A step further in the degradation of the figure of Lilly Reich was Frank Shulze's account of her in the mid-1980s, breaking into the realm of personal relationships and physical appearance: "Mies's reputation for being partial to good-looking women hardly rested on his relationship with Lilly Reich. Physically plain, she might have appeared coarse, except that she kept herself as carefully groomed as one might expect of a professional *couturière*" (Schulze, 1985: 139).

Opportunely, shortly after that, several female architectural historians embarked on a series of investigations to offer new insights into Lilly Reich's work. Sandra Honey (1986: 19) pointed out that Reich greatly enhanced Mies' work in interior and furniture design, and this was no accident. Then Sonja Günther published the first monograph on Lilly Reich, still a reference work today. Then came the work of Matilda McQuaid, María Teresa Valcarce, Beatriz Colomina and Christiane Lange. Between them, they constructed a new profile, providing a multitude of further information on her work both alone and in collaboration. Paradoxically, these monographs have returned Lilly Reich to the pages of journals, this time of an academic nature,

where numerous research articles have delved into different aspects of her legacy.

5. The outcome

The historical narrative is constructed at a slow and continuous pace. Any scholar knows that it is necessary to distance oneself from the facts to look at them with a particular perspective. The stages into which history is classified are not watertight but follow one another through progressive transformations. Both observations apply when attempting to contextualize Lilly Reich's work within the architecture framework of the first half of the twentieth century. From today's perspective, the contribution of her work to the gradual abstraction of language is evident, through a sort of translation of her way of doing things: from the most discreet and simple shop windows to the spatial distribution and the position of the furniture in the houses she designed together with Mies van der Rohe. Something similar occurs to the sensitivity with which she dealt with textures and materials, based on a deep knowledge of the material and its means of production.

These contributions are progressive and have not been observed so clearly until now, mainly because the traces left by the historical narrative were not sufficiently clear. The reasons for this fact are diverse—none of them free of gender discrimination—and they combine to make Lilly Reich's figure manifestly invisible. She was recognized in her professional field, and her image was relegated to the background when she began to work with someone who would end up being considered a Master of Modern Architecture. The discourse of singularity overcame the discourse of collaboration. Moreover, the work they carried out together was ephemeral—except in the case of the interiors of houses such as the Tugendhat house—and, therefore, there was no solid trace left to continue reporting. Finally, documentary support plays a decisive role in the construction of history: the frequent appearances of Lilly Reich's work in the specialized press were considered secondary sources of information when architectural historians wrote the narrative of the twentieth century.

The same lengthy time needed to write a first version of history can be considered for its revision. The recovery of the figure of Lilly Reich began with the work of some historians in the 1980s and continues today with specific or context-specific research in the field of gender architecture. Almost one hundred years later, Lilly Reich is once again "on set" in the historical account of architecture (Fig. 13).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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