

Structural Rationalism, Mies van der Rohe, *AND THE* Seagram Building

Michael Tyznik

The Seagram Building in New York City is often cited as a pinnacle of corporate modernism. Its industrial yet clean design gave it at the time of its completion a completely unique appearance that would be replicated countless times from that point forward. But looking at the client for whom the building was designed, the previous designs of the architect in question, and the idea of structural rationalism, I wonder whether the design that was built in 1958 was truly the most appropriate.

Formally, Mies van der Rohe designed the Seagram Building as a glass box surrounded by vertical steel members. The glass is tinted a bronze color, an allusion to the products of the Segrans' company. This is a clever and somewhat successful gesture, although the effect is somewhat marred by the presence of the black steel in the façade. If, instead, the façade were allowed to be a flat plane of bronze glass—like the Lever House across the street—it would mirror the appearance of a bottle of whiskey, the appearance of liquidity would be much more successful.

Ironically, the steel in the façade of the Seagram Building is not even structurally necessary. The structure of the building, like that of the Lever House, is pulled back behind the skin, but Mies felt that there should be some allusion to the structure, so he attached decorative vertical steel mullions to the exterior of the building. This, in my mind, goes completely against the idea of structural honesty. When an architecturally-ignorant person looks at the Seagram Building, they see vertical I-profile elements and think "these must hold up the building." Even at the

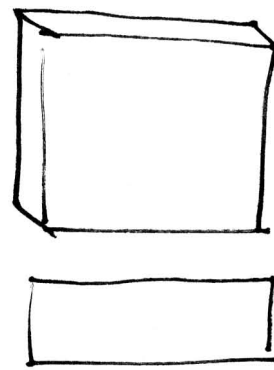
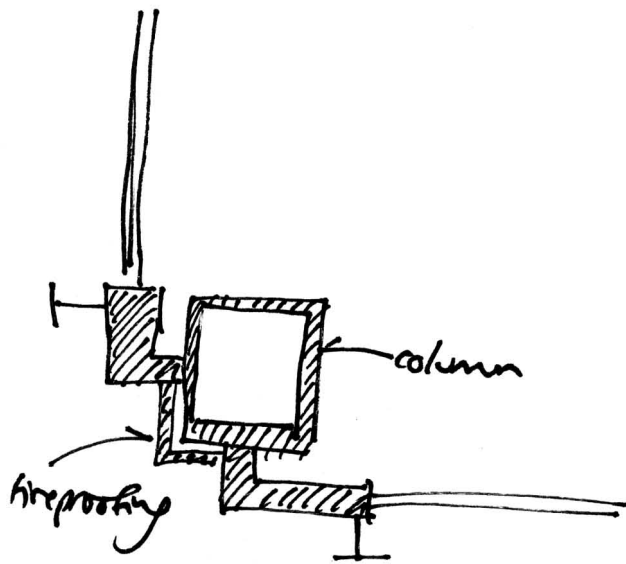
corners, where Mies pulls back the skin to allow the columns to peek out, what one sees is not the actual column holding the structure up, but the fireproofing assembly that surrounds that column.

This calls into question the entire rationale behind Mies's desire for structural honesty in this building. Looking strictly at the needs of the client, there was no specific reason for this building to show its structure, and looking at the technology of the time, I am not sure it was even possible to make a steel building structurally honest at the time. The fireproofing technology did not allow exposed structural steel. If Mies truly wanted to make the building structurally honest, he could have made it from brick—the Monadnock building is structurally honest—but that was not necessary. In contrast, the U.S. Steel Building in Pittsburgh, for example, had both a client need and the technology required to use steel in a structurally honest way—the client wanted to show off the features of its Cor-ten steel product, and fireproofing was rendered unnecessary by filling the columns with water. When a person looks at the columns in the U.S. Steel building, they are seeing what is holding the building up.

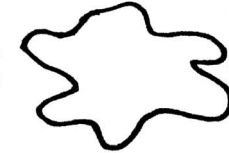
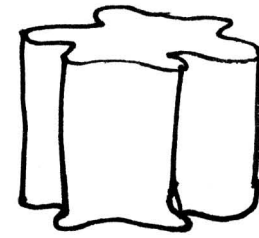
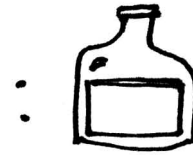
Looking at the back-catalog of Mies's design work, I can readily find a design that is much more appropriate for this client—the unbuilt "Amoeba" glass skyscraper. Its form can allude to the movement of whiskey being poured from a bottle into a glass, and its curves are evocative of the curves of a Crown Royal bottle. The structure is within the skin, giving the surface a smooth, glassy, liquid appearance. I think this design would have suited the client better and perhaps even had a greater impact on architectural history.

SEAGRAM BUILDING

— MICHAEL TYZNIK



plan

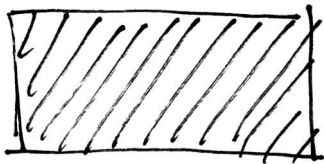


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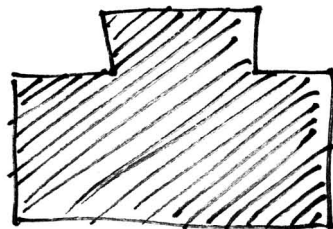


SEAGRAM BUILDING CORNER ASSEMBLY

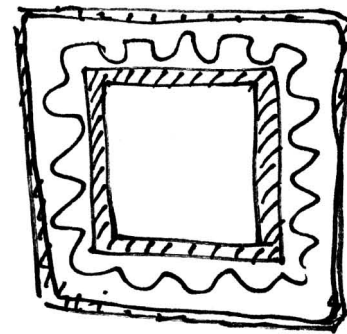
The actual column is covered to fireproofing.



APPARENT MASSING

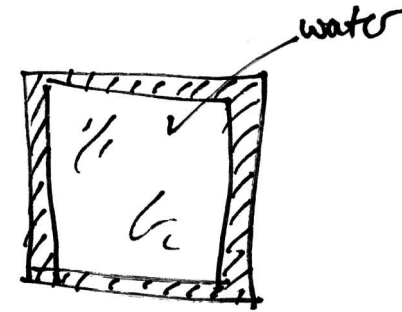


ACTUAL MASSING



SEAGRAM

FIREPROOFING



US STEEL