comment by Philip Johnson as an American follower of Mies van der Rohe

This is an extraordinary group of buildings. To an American architect like myself, and especially to a Mies van der Rohe follower such as I have been, it seems probably more extraordinary than to an Englishman or a Frank Lloyd Wright boy. And for many reasons:

1. We in the United States do not give out school jobs as open competition. An architect must have already built a dozen with the identical programme before he is considered at all; then he is picked by a committee. (How a young architect gets started in this country is a mystery even to me.) Competition is frowned on. 'May the best man win' is impractical and impractical. 'The scheme may look well only on paper.' Accordingly the British Commission is made of stern stuff. For here we have an unknown team, admittedly of talent but unknown as school architects, being allowed to win and to build.

2. Most surprising is to be built not on a conventional school, not even a Linthurst model, but something quite opposite of the prevailing trend: a formal, symmetrical, two-storied project. What a jury! It is the usual fate of competitions here to have a safe, second-rank project as a winner simply out of the desire of the jury for unanimity. The scheme with the least faults wins and the stimulating innovation comes in second. If a daring design should somehow be chosen as first its fate is to be shelled until the programme is sufficiently changed for a safe architect to be hired out of hand. 'Rational prize winners never get built' in a safe nation like this country. It would be interesting to find out how all these wonders come to use in Britain.

3. The plan is not only radical but good Mies van der Rohe, yet the architects have never seen Mies's work. And though the Smithsons may not agree, much of the excellence of their work is a truism not only to themselves but also to the genius of Mies van der Rohe.

For it is Mies who codified the exposed steel-plate-and-brick-load-bearing grammar for the rest of us to use if we wish. Since designing this school the Smithsons no longer wish to use it; therefore all the more credit to them for breaking and using the grammar as well—in my opinion as well as anyone ever has on either side of the ocean, not excluding the midwesterners who have worked directly with Mies. The Mies vernacular is not good by choice for Mies's main thesis is that architects should seek to create socially applicable ideas, not 'sports' or exciting individual buildings. He will create so that others can build well.

The Smithsons admirably had their troubles. The programme is shoe-horned into the formal pattern very successfully (except the 'cutters' and the bathrooms). Especially good is the use of the second-story height for the auditorium. (The upstairing auditorium and gymnasium is the bane of the humanitarian, ranch-type schools we see no inch of in America.) The things the architects could not have in this case (which is not of the designers of furniture). The chimney, the water tower and the kiosks by projecting symmetrically in front of the symmetrical facade disfigure the formal composition, which is so clear from the rear. But then the Smithsons are only formal at times. The gymnasium facade, the most formal, is also the most successful part of the building. Symmetry suits the programme and the openings, the framing and the brick are well proportioned indeed.

There are additional troubles inherent in any attempt to do Mies on the cheap. One should remember the reproach often thrown at Mies: 'As simple as possible, no matter what the cost.' It is correspondingly difficult to save money and keep the elegance. The Smithsons have succeeded in many ways, and where they have not I am sure they are not as displeased as I am not to be. The glass panels, for example, are ingenious and show a fine toleration that in itself is a tribute to the steel fabricators and engineers. This detail alone makes the building look in appearance, and I should imagine, reasonable in cost. On the other hand there is no other solution for roof leaders and electric conduit?

4. Perhaps the most unusual plan for an American to find a surprise is in the quality of the steel engineering. Much

* In fact, the entire house had a single overall, vertical glaze,

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*Jenaiz on page 132*