

Villa Tugendhat

A Turbulent History

By Judy Polan

Courtesy of Czech Tourism.



Above The villa's indoor *zimní zahrada* (winter garden) makes a smooth segue to outdoor greenery during warmer seasons.

Nestled into a hilltop on the outskirts of the medieval Czech market town of Brno, is Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Villa Tugendhat, an icon of modernist architecture. The streamlined, glass-fronted house is one of the earliest and most important the architect designed, embodying his convictions about his craft: the spirituality and rhythm of space; the close relationship between architecture and natural surroundings; the use of modern materials such as industrial steel and plate glass to define interior spaces; and a design that radiates outward from the home's center.

The serene villa, whose interior seamlessly transitions from lush indoor gardens to the outdoors, was added to UNESCO's prestigious World Heritage List in 2001. "The importance of the villa lies in its innovative spatial and aesthetic concept that proved significantly to influence 20th-century architecture," states its citation. "Its preservation is in the interest of all mankind."

Villa Tugendhat was commissioned by Mies's visionary patrons Fritz and Grete Tugendhat, the scions of Jewish families who had prospered through trade in wool and textiles. Grete's parents had given their daughter, as a wedding gift, the upper part of their own garden, a site offering a majestic view of the town of Brno and its 13th-century Špilberk Castle.

The couple shared a zest for the arts, especially architecture. Grete had grown up in a spacious Art Nouveau house in Brno and studied at the University of Vienna, where she first encountered contemporary architectural thinking. Fritz, an amateur photographer and filmmaker and professional designer of high-quality fabrics, had been "horrified," he once stated, "by the interiors of my youth, stuffed with trinkets and lace." He shared his wife's desire for an airy modern house "of clear and simple forms."

The commission accorded Mies the coveted opportunity to develop a modern architectural language. The white stucco villa is framed by a steel skeleton, reinforced with concrete pillars and brickwork filling. Travertine tiles pave the terraces and staircases. High-gloss chrome-coated pillars in the residential areas are arranged in a cross pattern. The living area is divided into separate zones by sleek honey-yellow onyx quarried in Morocco and a striking semicircular dining room wall of Macassar ebony.

The Mies-designed furniture was made predominantly of tubular steel. Three *Tugendhat* chairs were upholstered with silver grey fabric; a dramatic chaise longue with ruby-red velvet upholstery stood in front of the onyx wall, highlighting the contrast of materials.

Sadly, the Tugendhat family had but eight years to enjoy their dream house. They were forced to abandon the villa and flee the country in 1938, when the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia, and the Gestapo seized and looted the house. Damage to the villa was exacerbated by Russian liberation forces at the close of the war.

While the city of Brno claims ownership of the building, it has neglected it abysmally, citing lack of funds. The most recent repairs were done more than 20 years ago. The Tugendhat heirs have struggled for years to reclaim the villa, and have offered to restore it — at their own expense — to its original condition. (They do not wish to live there, but to open it to visitors from around the world.) The house is in desperate need of massive repair: the facade is deeply fissured and the entire structure is sliding slowly downhill.

The city of Brno decided in 2007 not to return the villa, reversing a previous decision and citing "missed restitution deadlines." However, under Czech law, these deadlines do not apply to claims for confiscated works of art. The core of the dispute, then, is whether a home in its *totality* can be defined as a "work of art." Pavel Zara, a spokesman for Brno, asserts that the "Villa Tugendhat is real estate, not a work of art. A work of art would be a painting, something you can move around." The Tugendhats's lawyer, Augustin Kohoutek, strongly disagrees. "We believe that the villa is absolutely a unique piece of art. The law pursuant to the returning of art confiscated during the Holocaust clearly applies here."

The city has flip-flopped on its position several times in recent years, and the family says they "will never give up." The tug-of-war continues. ■

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Above Mies's Villa Tugendhat sits high on a hill, overlooking the city of Brno, Czech Republic.