



Research

Series Editor: Adrian Sudhalter

Object(s): Frederik Kiesler, *Plan for a Department Store* (interior perspective drawing), 1928

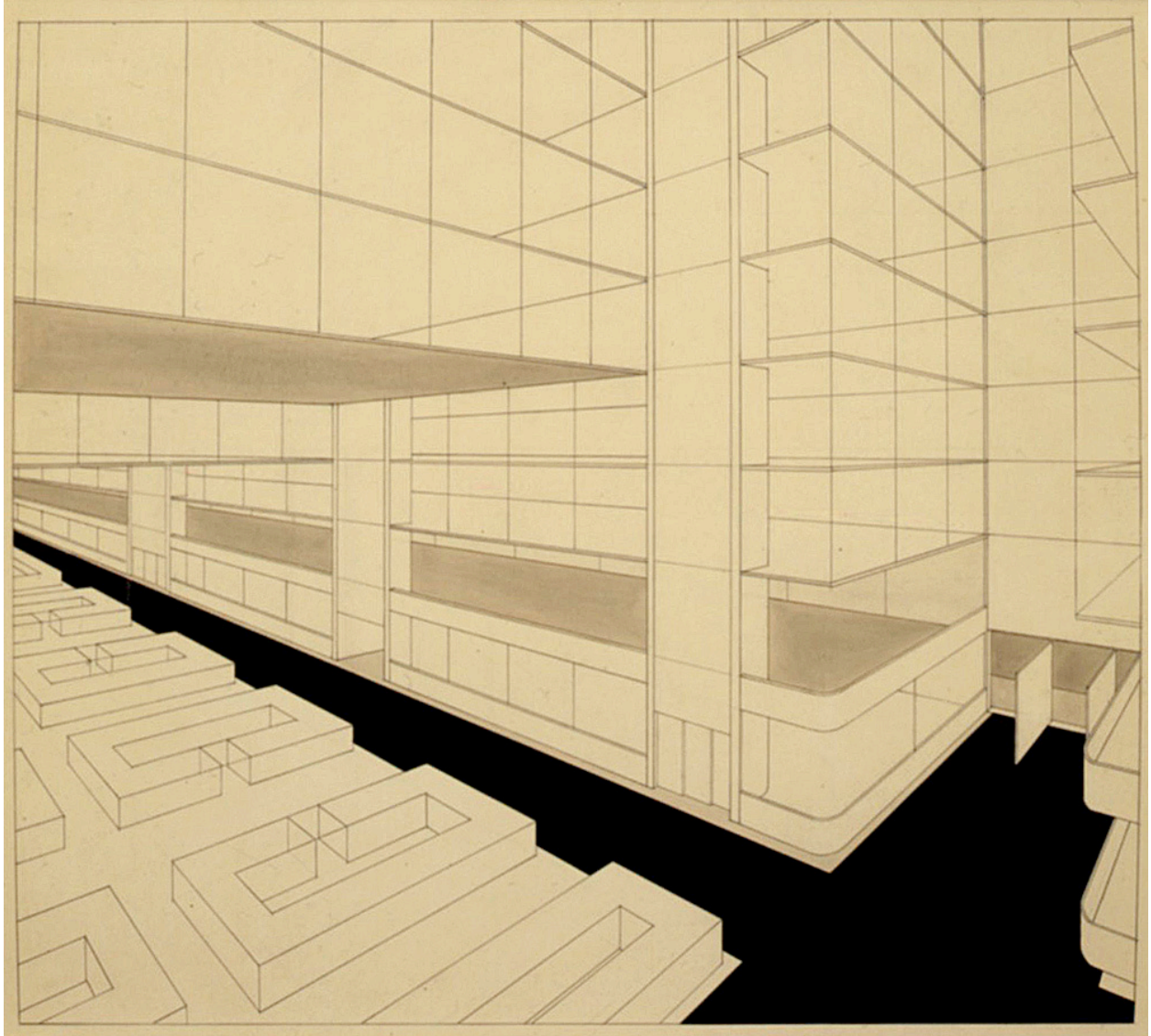
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Frederick Kiesler
Plan for a Department Store (interior perspective drawing), 1928
Ink on board
17 x 20" (43.2 x 50.8 cm)
Merrill C. Berman Collection

Frederick Kiesler (American, born Austria-Hungary. 1890–1965)
***Plan for a Department Store* (interior perspective drawing), 1928**

Adrian Sudhalter

Frederick Kiesler was trained as an architect in Vienna. After the First World War, he was active in avant-garde circles in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris. At the invitation of Jane Heap, co-editor of *The Little Review*, Kiesler arrived in New York in 1926 to install the groundbreaking *International Theatre Exposition*, together with Heap, at the Steinway Building [fig. 1]. Thereafter, Kiesler made the city his home. In 1928, he was commissioned to design the shop windows for the Saks Fifth Avenue department store.¹ According to his own account, Kiesler's innovation was to treat the fourteen street display windows as a single continuous whole and to create a shallow, reusable, gridded armature, based on Constructivist principles, to display goods.² The same year, Kiesler began to radically reconceptualize the department store building as a type. For this theoretical project—which seems to have been an independent rather than commissioned undertaking—he applied principles of avant-garde art, architecture, and theater

design to the temple of commerce in the world's capital of capitalism.

The Berman drawing, which was acquired from the Kiesler estate in the late 1980s, almost certainly belongs to this conceptual project, as does another original drawing, still belonging to the estate [fig. 2]. Inscriptions on these works indicate that they were intended for reproduction, most likely in Kiesler's major theoretical tract *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* [fig. 3], although they were not ultimately reproduced there.³ This richly illustrated book, published in 1930, included reproductions of avant-garde art and architecture, examples of successful and unsuccessful designs for stores (including images of Kiesler's own Saks windows [fig. 3 (p. 141)]), and drawings for Kiesler's theoretical project interspersed throughout [fig. 3 (pp. 57, 83, 95)].⁴ Of the latter, the key image was an exterior view identified as a "Project for a department store on Fifth Avenue, 1928"

1. This commission is discussed in Cynthia Goodman, "The Art of Revolutionary Display Techniques," *Frederick Kiesler*, Lisa Phillips, ed., exhibition catalogue (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1989), pp. 57–60, and in Barnaby Haran, "Magic windows: Frederick Kiesler's displays for Saks Fifth Avenue, New York in 1928," *Sculpture and the Vitrine*, John C. Welchman, ed. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 69–93. The two original drawings reproduced here [plate and fig. 2] appear on the checklist of the 1989 Whitney exhibition, identified respectively by their Kiesler Estate numbers KE652 and KE651, but neither is reproduced or discussed there or in Haran's article.

2. "In the Saks Fifth Ave. windows I simply took out all the side walls which separated the fourteen windows and

created a free rhythmic background throughout the entire window space. Each window seemed to continue into the next." Frederick Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* (New York: Brentano's, 1930), p. 108. On p. 67 of this book, Kiesler refers to this commission as the "first extensive presentation of modern show windows."

3. The inscription on [fig. 2] reads: "no pencil remarks on this drawing! (all remarks to the printer on cover!)."

4. Photographs of Kiesler's Saks windows appear on pp. 24, 140, and 141. Photographs of his theoretical project appear on pp. 57, 83, and 95 (and two less directly related on pp. 49 and 97).

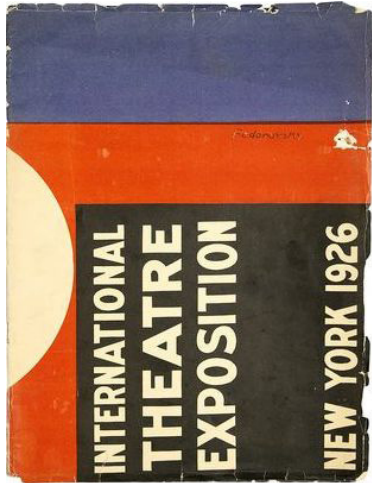


Fig. 1 Frederick Kiesler. Catalogue cover: *International Theatre Exposition*, Steinway Building, New York (27 February–15 March 1926), exhibition organized by Jane Heap and Frederick Kiesler (New York: Theater Guild, 1926). Lithograph, 11 1/4 x 9" (28.5 x 22.8 cm). Merrill C. Berman Collection



Fig. 2. Frederick Kiesler. *Plan for a Department Store* (exterior perspective drawing), 1928. Cut-and-pasted photographs, ink, and pencil on cardboard, 23 1/2 x 18 1/2" (59.7 x 47 cm). Austrian Frederick und Lillian Kiesler Private Foundation, Vienna

[fig. 3 (p. 57)]. It was accompanied by a detailed explanatory text:

Floors of sheet glass. All walls of the building, both inside and out, are of colored plate glass. Second and third floors are of opaque glass. Floor levels are marked by duraluminum channels. The building has no windows. By means of double walls, which house between them heating, cooling, and ventilating systems, the store remains independent of outside weather conditions and literally manufactures its own climate. The entire front space is used for display purposes. There are no columns between the displays because the steel columns have been shifted back six feet from the building line. The floors are cantilevered. The central verticals indicate the elevators.

Kiesler represented the exterior of his department store prototype as a massive block of glass occupying the corner of a city block. He used a simple perspectival line drawing to represent the all-glass façade of this building, set in contrast to the photographically-represented brick and stone façades of its neighbors. Although it is not identified as such, the site could be that of Saks Fifth Avenue at 611 Fifth Avenue (its home since 1924), as viewed from the corner of Fiftieth Street and Fifth Avenue, where the stepped back façade is facing Fifth Avenue.

Kiesler's description of steel columns, cantilevered floors, and a continuous glass façade recall Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's groundbreaking theoretical projects of the early 1920s, as does his use of photomontage to represent his structure. Indeed, Kiesler reproduced a number of buildings by Mies in his book, including Mies's contemporaneous 1928 design for the S. Adam Department Store, planned for the southwest corner of

Friedrichstrasse and Leipziger Strasse in Berlin [fig. 3 (p. 42, top)]. In Kiesler's book, this project was accompanied by Mies's statement:

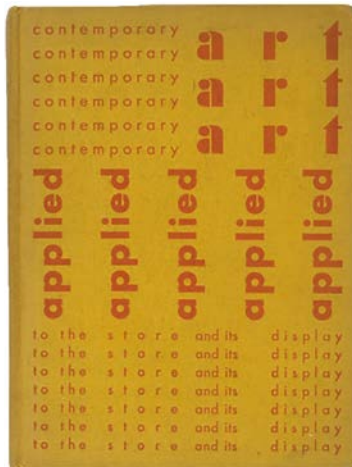
Materials produced by chemical processes will characterize the future style of building. Not materials such as stone, marble, and baked clay, but glass, metals and new chemical compounds, which will rival the natural materials in quality and practical utility. This project [...] is in glass and metal. The emphasis in metal on the horizontal is here thoroughly natural and functional. No decorative tricks.⁵

In 1924, four years earlier, Kiesler's name appeared alongside Mies's on the masthead of the third issue of the Berlin-based *G: Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* (Journal for Elemental Form-Creation). This issue famously reproduced Mies's glass curtain wall for his (unrealized) Friedrichstrasse skyscraper on its cover and his iconic photomontage of the building in situ within [fig. 4]. It was Mies's first use of photomontage to present a building as a visual clearing, an oasis within the disorder and visual cacophony of an existing urban landscape. It was accompanied by the journal's utopian mission statement: "Civilization and the supreme technical products are not sufficient to guarantee the existence of men. Without culture or high ideals [beyond] those of comfort, civilization must fall. G collects material for a possible culture." Mies's Friedrichstrasse photomontage and those that followed it, such as S. Adam, utilized contrasting media to distinguish the real (represented photographically) from the ideal (drawn); the old from the new; the extant from the potential.

Instrumentalizing Mies's neo-Platonic, quasi-spiritual, reformist ethos, Kiesler presented his fully glazed façade to declare the building's function.

5. Kiesler 1930, p. 42. Mies's S. Adam photomontage was reproduced in Arthur Korn, *Glas am Bau als Gebrauchsgegenstand* (Berlin: Verlag E. Pollak, 1929), p. 18, and in numerous periodicals in 1929 and 1930, including: *Das Neue Frankfurt*, *Baumeister*, *Das Kunstblatt*, *Der Industriebau*,

Bauwarte, and *Architectural Record*. When I compiled the entry on the S. Adam project for Terence Riley's and Barry Bergdoll's exhibition catalogue *Mies in Berlin* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2001), p. 230, I was unaware of Kiesler's reproduction and Mies's accompanying statement there.



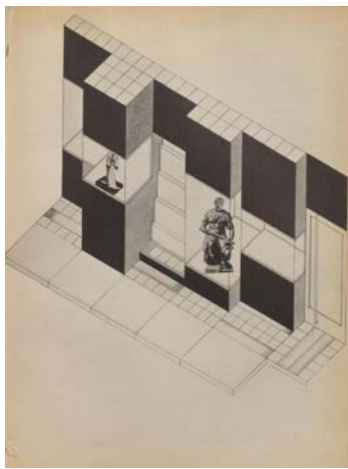
cover



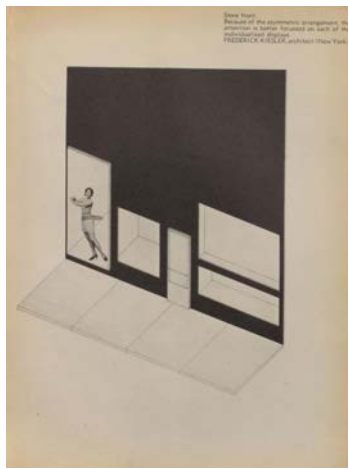
p. 42



p. 57



p. 83



p. 95



p. 141

Fig. 3. Frederick Kiesler, *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and Its Display* (New York: Brentano's, 1930).
McGill University Library

Fig. 4. G: *Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* (Journal for Elemental Form-Creation), no. 3 (June 1924), cover and p. 3.
The Museum of Modern Art, New York (SC189.2010)



The shop window, the locus of visual desire within modern commodity culture, governs the building as a whole. In Berman's drawing, the overview of the interior [plate], Kiesler utilized thin ink lines to indicate a light-filled, glassy, transparent cubic structure containing the cantilevered floors, display area unobstructed by columns, and incremental verticals indicating elevator shafts. An atmosphere of transparency and lightness rises above the opaque black plane representing the negative space of the floor. In his exterior perspective drawing [fig. 2], Kiesler again used thin ink lines to represent an exterior wall (to judge from the direction of the doors pointing inward), upon which an opaque screen (again solid black) rises some four stories in height for the display of billboards. The billboards here are photographically represented and are either adhered or possibly projected.⁶ A variant exterior perspective [fig. 3 (p. 83)] shows a "rhythmic storefront" of built-in vitrines of varying levels and depths; "a series of setbacks at intervals from the building line [...] exercising a suction-like effect upon passerby."⁷ Another exterior perspective [fig. 3 (p. 95)] shows a flush surface which, due to the "asymmetric arrangement," focuses attention on "each of the individualized displays."⁸

In his preface to *Contemporary Art Applied to the Store and its Display*, Kiesler stated, "The book was written because the country [the United States] has been flooded with examples of poor and distorted modernism."⁹ He positioned the book as a corrective. It was both an accessible introduction

to European contemporary art and a guidebook for Americans on good design principles. "The new art," Kiesler declared, "is for the masses. If ever a country has had the chance to create an art for its people, through its people, not through individuals and handicraft, but through machine mass production, that country is America today. It will be adaptation and a rebirth. It will be American."¹⁰

Despite his European, left-leaning, avant-garde background, any hint of a critique of American consumer culture was conspicuously absent from Kiesler's book. Even the section "The Ideology of the Shop Window" bears nothing of Karl Marx's understanding of the operations of commodity fetishism, whereby the smokescreen of fantasy surrounding the object severed it from the processes of production, or Walter Benjamin's musings on the capitalist phantasmagoria. By contrast, Kiesler invested in the system in his bid to improve it. Aimed at an American audience, the book was anti-elitist, utilitarian, and patriotic. It constituted a strategic plea, isolating a constructive purpose or service Kiesler could offer to his new, adopted country. Kiesler's preface is dated "Autumn 1929," and the book was published in 1930. The months in between saw the greatest blow to capitalism the world had yet experienced, thwarting Kiesler's efforts and the book's reformist program, with the side effect of relegating his theoretical project for a department store on Fifth Avenue to relative obscurity.

6. Intriguingly, the 1989 Whitney catalogue (cited in note 1) describes this drawing as a "Plan for a department store with film projections as billboard," but the source of this description is unclear. It may be based on Kiesler's discussion of the potential of television and "sensitized panels which will act as receiving-surfaces for broadcasted pictures" (Kiesler 1930, p. 120). Mies's glass S. Adam façade was to be

opaque above street level, allowing for advertising to be affixed.

7. Kiesler 1930, p. 82.

8. Kiesler 1930, p. 95.

9. Kiesler 1930, p. 9.

10. Kiesler 1930, p. 67.