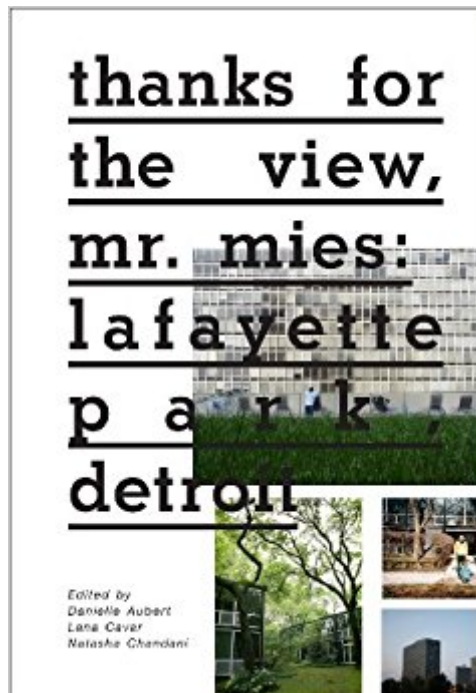




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# Thanks For The View, Mr. Mies: Lafayette Park, Detroit



## Synopsis

Lafayette Park, an affordable middle-class residential area in downtown Detroit, is home to the largest collection of buildings designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the world. Today, it is one of Detroit's most racially integrated and economically stable neighborhoods, although it is surrounded by evidence of a city in financial distress. Through interviews with and essays by residents; reproductions of archival material; and new photographs by Karin Jobst, Vasco Roma, and Corine Vermeulen, and previously unpublished photographs by documentary filmmaker Janine Debann, *Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies* examines the way that Lafayette Park residents confront and interact with this unique modernist environment. Lafayette Park has not received the level of international attention that other similar projects by Mies have. This may be due in part to its location in Detroit, a city whose most positive qualities are often overlooked in the media. This book is a reaction against the way that iconic modernist architecture is often represented. Whereas other writers may focus on the design intentions of the architect, authors Aubert, Cavar and Chandani seek to show the organic and idiosyncratic ways that the people who live in Lafayette Park actually use the architecture and how this experience, in turn, affects their everyday lives. While there are many publications about abandoned buildings in Detroit and about the city's prosperous past, this book is about a remarkable part of the city as it exists today, in the twenty-first century.

"*Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies* is a superb field guide to the diverse cross-section of inhabitants, the variety of habitats they have constructed within their brilliant biome, the lush and abundant flora and the ground fauna of Lafayette Park. The variety of environments created by each particular species in their words, actions and images is a joy to behold. And like the best field guides, wonderfully instructive."

—Phyllis Lambert, founder, Canadian Centre for Architecture

"This beautiful and wonderfully ambitious book tells the comprehensive story of a unique place — Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's magnificent modernist vision built in the midst of a city undergoing the worst of the urban crisis. The story is told through a collage of archival records, insightful essays and, above all, interviews with the residents and photographs of what they have made of Mies. The collision between Mies's purer-than-pure modernism and the realities of Detroit is both comic and tragic — surprising, disturbing and, finally, inspiring."

—Robert Fishman, Taubman College of Architecture and Planning, University of Michigan

"*Thanks for the View* is a surprising paean to human passion and idiosyncrasy, terms not usually associated with the International Style or the architecture of Mies van der Rohe — which in large part is what makes this book all the more welcome. As charming as it is well researched, *Thanks for the View* celebrates the mutual effect that

Mies's Lafayette Park and its longtime residents have had on each other and, by extension, on the city of Detroit. • Joe Scanlan, Visual Arts Program, Princeton University

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## Customer Reviews

...a fine-grained publication that celebrates Lafayette Park's residents and daily life there. That book conveys a sense of a complex, diverse ecology: from college students and retirees to herons, pheasants, and possums. (Mariana Mogilevich Public Books) This inspiring 288-page volume from Metropolis books captures the convivial atmosphere the authors found at Detroit's Lafayette Park, a housing development designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe that encompasses 32 hectares of towers, townhouses and parks. I visited the area 15 years ago, the book took me right back to its quiet streets, green spaces and distinctive glass and steel design. The three editors (also the book's graphic designers) bring Lafayette to life, primarily through interviews with residents and photographs of them in their apartments. The images provide an intriguing glimpse of how personal style rarely conforms to strict Modernism. (Helena Grdadolnik Azure) Thanks to a master plan by architect Mies van der Rohe, urban planner Ludwig Hilbersheimer, landscape architect Alfred Caldwell and the spirit of its residents, the neighborhood turned out to be one of the most successful communities in Detroit. Or, as essayist Marsha Music, who lives in one of the 183 town-houses of Lafayette Park, puts it: "The peace here may be a reward, bequeathed through the ages, for having the commitment and audacity to maintain an integrated community in one of the

most segregated cities in the United States. God is certainly in these details, as Mies might say."It's the prime achievement of "Thanks for the view, Mr. Mies" to show those details in all their significance, and to show them in a very clever and never all too earnest way. See glossy photos of bathroom doorknobs and mail slots, learn more about early community newsletters, whistle with the neighborhood bagpiper. In two words: Be amazed. (Sebastian Hofer The Detroit News) In their new book, "Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies," which is due out at the end of the month (Metropolis Books, \$29.95), the editors Danielle Aubert, Lana Cavar and Natasha Chandani, graphic designers all, offer a portrait of Lafayette Park very different from the classic Mies monograph. Contents include interviews with residents of Lafayette Park's towers and town houses; archival materials from the complex's history; an account of nine days spent trying to climate-control a corner apartment; and essays on Mies in Detroit, the Lafayette Park landscape, bird-watching and a record of bird-strike deaths (birds and plate glass don't mix). At-home portraits of residents by Corine Vermeulen show Mies's architecture as a strong frame for personal expression. Some homes look like shrines to 1958, while others reflect the lived-in decor of decades. Jacqueline Neal, an interior designer and 12-year resident of the Pavilion, the smallest of the complex's three towers, spoke last month about living and accessorizing with Mies. (Alexandra Lange The New York Times, Home Section) "Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies" explores how Modernist architecture improves lives in the Lafayette Park section of Detroit, which has the world's largest concentration of Mies van der Rohe buildings. (It's also one of the most racially integrated neighborhoods in what might well be America's most segregated city.) (T: The New York Times Style Magazine)

Personally, I live in the Pavilion (of or Mr. Mies designs) so it was fascinating to read about the history of the Black Bottom/Lafayette Park area. This book is very eclectic in its style. There are personal essays, letters, and history lessons scattered throughout the book. If you are interested in reading about the rise and fall of Detroit in a different light than the other post-apocalyptic books that people make Detroit out to be, check this book out. Also, this book is definitely hip. It's also sold in the painfully expensive "Shinola" store in Detroit, so it's totally legit.

I was barely aware of Mies' work on Lafayette Park and this book was a pure joy to read. Hats off to the authors for a creative way of telling the story; or, rather, letting others tell their stories. I'm glad it wasn't just a book about the architecture, landscape, and site. There's a lot of that here, but the human stories of the occupants are what really sets this apart. More architecture books need that

kind of perspective. Well done.

I bought this for my nephew but he was thrilled with it and said the book is a keeper and he just love it so I am happy I ordered it for him. :)

Seen from the user's perspective. always a useful thing, but it's largely anecdotal. Not a substantial or thorough survey. The interviews themselves are moderately informative but a more systematic work would have attempted to survey everyone on a standard series of questions that would have produced more data that in turn would have been more accurate. It's also impossible to compare the results with anything else so the developments of plan configuration, faÃ§ade development, site planning landscaping and parking layout cannot be truly evaluated.

This unique book brings Lafayette Park to life. Besides being beautifully designed, the stories and interviews really shed light on this Detroit community and the man responsible for building it. The authors show a genuine curiosity and tenderness for their subjects and the writing is filled with curiosity. It's rare to see a book that works both visually (excellent photography and design) and is also so well written and edited in such an original way.

Real people living in ideal buildings designed by my favourite architect. Mies should be alive to see this. An exhaustive report of the living conditions in a planning neighbourhood.

I agree that this book tells the end users' story in great detail ... and a "nice" history it is! Unfortunately for a professional designer, urban planner or architect, It would have been nice to also learn the other half of the story .... some of Mies' sketches, models, drawings and details to understand what Mies wanted this housing project to be. I would also suggest that the book design is just average, and the photographs are more like snapshots from someone's point and shoot camera. If you are interested in the people who live at Detroit's Lafayette Park, the birds that have nested there, and photographs of the current occupants' living rooms ... this book is for you !

Right off I should point out that I grew up in Lafayette Park many decades ago (though I live in Japan now), so by no means am I an unbiased reviewer. The only other volume I've found on Lafayette Park, Waldheim's 2004 *Lafayette Park Detroit (CASE)*, focuses primarily on the architecture, so for that point of view I'd suggest hunting down that book. In contrast "Thanks..." is

unabashedly focused on the neighborhood's residents and their experiences. Living as they do in the heart of the apparent oxymoron "a lovely neighborhood in downtown Detroit," it's an interesting point of view that is rarely encountered in the media (whose only message seems to be "Detroit is long dead.") The Lafayette Park residents WANT to live there -- they've chosen to live there -- and this book, written by those residents, tries to show us why. The architecture is certainly a vital component. More fascinating though is the way it's all come together to create an actual community, and how that community has remained solid, vibrant, and deeply integrated for over 50 years. More than anything, that's what this book is about. In this community, it just worked. Why?"Thanks..." is close to 300 pages, almost completely in full color. It's split into three parts: "The Townhouses" (where I lived), "The Neighborhood," and "The High-Rises" (The Pavilion and the twin Lafayette Towers). The book concludes with a number of site plans and floor plans that give you the details that help you visualize along with the text. Throughout the book are innumerable photographs showing the neighborhood both as it is now and in years past, the diverse ways in which people have decorated their homes, and even some old documents like a couple of pages from a 1960s fundraiser cookbook! Personally I loved the comparative shots taken from the same relative position in each unit, showing how differently the "same room" can be decorated. It was also fun to see the collection of photos documenting all of the original fixtures that I remember from my time there in the '70s (those window handles, that futuristic late-'50s fold-down stove...). As many of the units have inevitably been remodeled over the years, many of them quite attractively, it's nice to see photos preserving samples of the original aesthetic. The appeal of life in Lafayette Park lies in the balance between Mies' glass-and-steel boxes with the landscaping that's only become more lush in the decades since I lived there (and it wasn't bad at all back then!). Each supports and balances the other, and the floor-to-ceiling glass walls in the townhouses really allow a feeling of being right there in the trees, and among your neighbors. (A side note: one "problem" that I noticed long ago, and I laughed when I found it mentioned in the book, is that after growing up with two walls of your house being completely [I mean literally, truly] made of glass, I've never again found a home that feels like it has anywhere near enough windows.) If you're interested in learning more about a community that's been relentlessly, anomalously successful in the heart of a city that's often been described in perhaps less-glowing terms, then I'd highly recommend "Thanks for the View, Mr. Mies." And for me of course it was also a nice, big self-indulgent nostalgia-fest!

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