

Enterprise

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Despite the efforts of preservationists, Mies van der Rohe's masterpiece of modernism, the Farnsworth House, is nearing the auction block



AP/WIDE WORLD



JON MILLER/HEDRICH-BLESSING

Lots of light: The Farnsworth House along the Fox River in Plano is a rare example of Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" style in a residential setting.

A room with a view



JON MILLER/HEDRICH-BLESSING

By ANNE MOORE

One rm., two baths, 20th-c. masterpiece. Pool, sauna, boat house. On Fox River, 1½ hours west of Chicago. 58 acres, dramatic history. Lowball value: \$4.5 million.

An icon of modern architecture is on the auction block, despite last-minute deals and pleas from Chicago business leaders and preservationists who aim to keep the Farnsworth House forever on its grassy rise beside the Fox River.

Designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and completed in 1951, the Farnsworth House is a glass-box won-

der. Fittingly, Sotheby's will auction the house and its furnishings on Dec. 12 as a work of art.

But it's still a house, and its Chicago sales agent expects to show it to as many as 30 bidders.

"It would be good for a couple," says Carolyn Eigel of Koenig & Strey in Wilmette, who's handling showings for Sotheby's. "It's extremely open. There are no walls or doors." But much of the home's appeal, she notes, is its fame.

Despite its place in architectural history, the Farnsworth House is not protected by landmark status. It can be moved, torn down or altered. Its vulnerable sta-

tus is a disappointing setback for Chicago philanthropists such as former Sara Lee Corp. Chairman John H. Bryan and former Illinois first lady Jayne Thompson, who have been trying for several years to raise money and lobby elected officials to keep the Farnsworth House in Illinois.

Earlier plans, scuttled for budgetary reasons, called for the house to be owned by the state and open to the public for tours.

Typically, salvaging and then running an historic site is costly, Ms. Thompson notes. "We think the
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Do I hear \$4.5 million?

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Farnsworth House would be easily sustainable," she says. "It's not a huge structure, (and) it's in pristine condition."

With the auction, she and others fear the house will be disassembled, packed up and set up elsewhere.

Mies van der Rohe's work is synonymous with Chicago. The IBM Building, the Federal Center, the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) campus and the 860-880 N. Lake Shore Drive residential towers are his designs—examples of the "less is more" style that galvanized modern architecture worldwide.

By the 1950s, heavily clad stone buildings were out; sheer glass and steel buildings were in.

Unhappy client

Edith Farnsworth, a Chicago doctor, met Mies van der Rohe at a dinner party in 1945, and later asked him to design a country house on land she owned in Plano, then a sparsely populated area dotted with farms. (Now suburban, Plano is 50 miles southwest of Chicago.)

"Dr. Farnsworth was a serious and gifted figure on her own," notes Kevin Harrington, co-author of "Chicago's Famous Build-

ings." "She had strong ideas about what it meant to be alive in this time, what it meant to create a house in this time."

Although she approved the plans, once she received the \$75,000 bill—\$10,000 over budget—she sued the architect. (Many think the lawsuit had more to do with a failed love affair between the two.)

Though Dr. Farnsworth lost the suit and moved into the house, she complained mightily about its suitability as a residence. It was too hot, too cold and attracted bugs. (Mies abhorred screens.) About the house, Dr. Farnsworth said, "Less is not more, it's just less."

Today, the Farnsworth House is celebrated—and sought after by preservationists—because of its spectacularly simple design and its setting. Perched on five-foot stilts, the rectangular house seems to hover over the landscape. It's composed of eight steel columns; huge, unbroken panes of glass, and flat slabs that form the floor and roof. An old sugar maple out front provides a natural break from the home's rigid design.

"It figures as one of *the* houses of the 20th century," says Donna Robertson, dean of the school of architecture at the Illinois Institute of Technology, who puts it alongside Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye as designs that "move souls."

Even though the Farnsworth House was lifted off the ground for mundane reasons—it sits on a flood plain—that "floating" quality is a hallmark of Mies' work. Many of his non-residential buildings, such as Chicago's Federal Center, have "see-through" lobbies. And his Crown Hall, a designated landmark on the IIT campus, is on a raised platform. "But he got to do the purest expression of (that type) in the Farnsworth House," says Ms. Robertson.

Victim of budget squeeze

Despite Dr. Farnsworth's dissatisfaction with the house, she used it as a country retreat for many years. In 1972, she sold it to Peter Palumbo, a British lord and collector of architecture who also owns a Frank Lloyd Wright home in Pennsylvania and once owned a Le Corbusier home outside of Paris.

Dr. Farnsworth died in 1977. In the years since, Lord Palumbo has returned Farnsworth House

Masterpiece on the block

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house is expected to fetch between \$4.5 million and \$6 million.

The Farnsworth House will be offered alongside other 20th-century art, including a Frank Lloyd Wright window, glass by Louis Comfort Tiffany and a clock by British architect Edwin Lutyens.

Sotheby's has marketed houses as art before—a 1950 New York townhouse by Philip Johnson sold for \$3.5 million in 1989. And, a decade later, the same townhouse was auctioned off by Christie's, fetching \$11.1 million.

While it's rare to offer homes as works of art, "The Farnsworth House is art," says Leslie Hindman, president of a Chicago auction house that bears her name. "It's not unlike the dinosaur Sue coming up for sale: It's a unique object."

It's that "art" status, and the house's small size—77 feet by 29 feet—that worries preservationists, who fear the Farnsworth House will be treated exactly like a piece of art, and moved without regard for its setting.

To prevent that, the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois (LPCI) and the National Trust for Historic Preservation earlier this month each pledged \$1 million toward a Save the Farnsworth Fund (ChicagoBusiness.com, Oct. 14).

"We think it's important enough to be in on the bidding," says LPCI President David Bahlman. "We want a final solution to this."

The National Trust's involvement is "huge," says IIT's Ms. Robertson.

"The properties they own and have made available to the public represent some of the most notable examples of American architecture possible, from Drayton Hall, (a plantation house) in Charleston, S.C., to Philip Johnson's home in Connecticut."

The Farnsworth House has been closed to tours since 2001. If the preservation groups prevail in the bidding, LPCI would operate the Farnsworth House, allowing only very small groups to tour at one time, because of its size. And while it's remote, observers say the Farnsworth House would be a natural extension to other west-of-Chicago cultural attractions, such as the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio in Oak Park and the planned town of Riverside. (Another Mies residence in the area now houses the Elmhurst Art Museum.)

But that's a preservationist's scenario, and the gavel will be coming down in six weeks.

"I hate to see it sold at auction," says Ms. Thompson. "This is one of the world's most unique structures, (and) it was designed for this physical spot on Earth."