



# Visiting the Farnsworth House

A little getaway home is a huge architectural legend.

TEXT AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY Stephen Harby



When the cancellation of my nonstop transcontinental flight necessitated a stop in Chicago, I decided to make lemonade from lemons with a daylong visit to an iconic modernist structure designed in 1951 by architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969): the

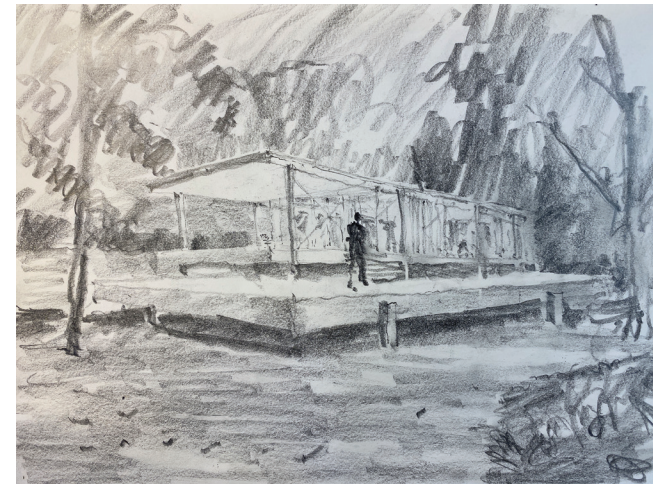
Farnsworth House in Plano, Ill. As a former architect, I'd been wanting to see this house for some time.

This dwelling was built as a weekend retreat for Edith Farnsworth, a Chicago doctor who lived on her own in the city, about an hour away. It's no typical weekend cottage! At first glance

**Farnsworth House From the South**  
(graphite and watercolor on paper, 4½x7½) captures the first impression a visitor has as the structure appears through the trees and the open platform beckons. From within the house, looking out, the effect is like that of being in a Mughal pleasure pavilion set in a paradise garden.

## FROM SKETCH TO PAINTING

My quick sketches, like the one here done in soft graphite pencil, serve three purposes: 1) They “audition” the composition for a subsequent painting; 2) they help me work out the unforgiving proportions of the structure; 3) they provide a road map for the application of light and dark values in the final watercolor paintings. In this case, capturing



the proportions of the rectangular window bays was critical. Lightly drawn diagonal construction lines helped me depict them accurately as they diminished in size along the lines of perspective.

The essence of the Farnsworth house is the way it seems to hover above the ground—an effect conveyed in both my drawing and my painting through the use of light and dark values. Another key concept of the design, seen more clearly in my painting, is the contrast between the white abstraction of the structure and the deep color of the landscape. Note the transparency of the house itself. The landscape beyond is seen through the structure, as is the inner, built-in wood component, which in turn provides a warm, rich contrast to the white of the structure.

**Sketchbook study**  
graphite pencil on paper (8x11)



**Farnsworth House From the Southwest**  
graphite and watercolor on paper (Stephen: Is this a studio painting?)



it presents itself as a rectangular glass enclosure framed with steel painted a bright white. It seems to hover a few feet above the ground and has no obvious front door or pitched roof. The interior flows openly from one area of the house to another, all positioned around a wood-clad “box.” The box provides the only element of warm color in the otherwise neutral-toned structure. The industrial precision of the house couldn’t contrast more with its setting—a grassy meadow at the edge of the Fox River, surrounded by mature deciduous trees that, on the mid-September day of my visit, were

still a lush, deep green. The house is considered a prime example of the International Style of architecture and is one of the most important pilgrimage sites for architects and architecture enthusiasts, who consider the structure to be Mies’ magnum opus.

Visiting a place one has heard so much about can be exciting as well as daunting. What to make of it? Will it live up to its reputation and, if so, what are its essential qualities? I’m trained to experience buildings through a step-by-step analytical and observational process with sketchbook in hand.

The examination begins with the immediately apparent fundamentals of setting, configuration and scale. These are all captured in a quickly sketched plan—measured by counting paces while walking—and by recording elevations through proportional observation (see Analytique, opposite). This method leads the process of discovery from the obvious to the more subtle design elements—those that distinguish a great work of architecture from a mere utilitarian shed.

As a watercolor artist, however, my scope of study expands beyond the



This view of the Farnsworth House shows the single structural object placed in the middle of the rectangular, glass-enclosed space. This interior structure houses two bathrooms and a utility room, and defines areas for sleeping, living (to the left) and dining (at the end of the inset galley kitchen on the right). The ceiling plane floats overhead, a foot or so above the wood enclosure. Whether one is inside or outside of the house, the green of the meadow and trees constitute a continuous backdrop. Compositionally, the white of the bed and kitchen cabinets provides a wedge going back into space, ending with the white window mullion at the right of the picture.

## ANALYTIQUE



The term “analytique” refers to a composite drawing showing the façade elevation (A) combined with the plan (B) and selected details (C and D). For this particular example, I sought to measure and understand the fundamentals driving the composition of the Farnsworth House: A grid of I-shaped steel columns define rectangular bays—two on a lower open platform and three on a raised enclosed platform. Two of the raised bays form the portion of the house enclosed by floor-to-ceiling plate glass. The plan follows a rigorous and consistent order originating with the module of the 24x32-inch travertine floor pavers (D).

The interior space is one open rectangle; there are no enclosed rooms other than two bathrooms and a service space, and these three spaces form a rectangular solid, which stops short of the ceiling. This volume is sheathed in an exotic wood called primavera. Its placement defines the functional living areas of dining, living, sleeping and cooking. The counter and cabinets for the latter are inset along one of the long sides of the solid volume.

The watercolor added to the graphite drawing emphasizes the juxtaposition of the abstract, regular forms of the house with the natural forms of the landscape. The colors of the vegetation change with the seasons—in contrast to the unchanging white and neutral tones of the house.

architectural particulars to aspects of texture, color and light. In the weeks since my visit, my experience of the house has deepened virtually, as I’ve explored it inside and out by means of several studio watercolors. Through this process of “seeing” through sketching and painting,

I’ve discovered for myself a rigorous and consistent system of proportions and dimensions; a harmonious and subtle palette of materials and textures; and a dialogue between a highly crafted, precise white object and a natural environment of lawn, trees and foliage. ♡

*Stephen Harby is an architect, watercolorist, former faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture and founder of Stephen Harby Invitational, which organizes travel opportunities for small groups.*