

Mies van der Rohe's Esso Service



Montreal is indeed fortunate to have on Nun's Island an unusual yet quietly outstanding example of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's skill as a designer. It is an Esso service station, built for Imperial Oil Limited in 1967-68.

Commissioning world-class architects to design automobile service stations is not a new phenomenon. In the 1930s, Gulf, Shell, Texaco, and other oil companies commissioned the most outstanding architects and industrial designers of their time to design prototypical service stations. The intent of the oil companies was to foster corporate identity and customer loyalty by establishing a standardized and familiar roadside image which was distinguishable from that of their competitors. Designers sponsored by the companies included Rudolf Schindler, Raymond Loewy, Walter Dorwin Teague, Clarence Stein, and Mies van der Rohe. The results raised the standard of gasoline station design in the 1930s to an extremely high level. Frank Lloyd Wright, for one, attached great civic and architectural significance to gas stations in his designs for the utopian community of Broadacre; in fact, he envisioned that "a well-designed station would develop into a meeting place" for the community.¹

Three decades after this foray by the oil companies into leading-edge architectural design, Imperial Oil commissioned Mies van der Rohe to design an Esso service station on Nun's Island (*Île des Soeurs*) in Montreal.² The result, built in 1967-68, became — and remains — a role model for service stations. Montreal's economy in the 1960s was expanding, culminating with the national festivities of Expo 67. Imperial Oil, a principal investor on Nun's Island, combined forces with Metropolitan Structures, a local development firm, to create a planned development on the island. Mies was commissioned to design three apartment buildings and the service station.

Mies (1886-1969) was in his eighties when he designed the Nun's Island station. True to his ideals, he created a crisp, spacious, practical, and grand design. It had an immense cantilevered flat roof which rested on two pavilions, one containing a garage and the other washrooms and customer services. Between these pavilions was an island for the pumps and a cashier's box. The station's structure was revealed and celebrated: steel beams supported the roof, and free-standing grey-tinted glass curtain walls created a transparent effect to the building. Inside, ingenious wall-to-wall racks held spare automobile parts.

The station's project architect was Joe Fujikawa, an architectural student of Mies who later became one of his partners in his Chicago firm. Local architect overseeing the project was Paul Lapointe. Fujikawa, now 67, still practices architecture in Chicago, and still remembers in detail the 23-year old Nun's Island project. He speaks affectionately about

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Station on Nun's Island, Montreal



Mies, whom he describes as modest and human, in spite of others' assessment of him as cold and impersonal, like his architecture. Fujikawa noted that Metropolitan Structures had worked with Mies on other projects, so it was natural they called on him to design their Nun's Island buildings.³

Of the station, Fujikawa stated it "is not very large, and it was never designed to be monumental. Imperial Oil was given the exclusive right to build a service station and they wanted it to be a prototype station, unique among stations." Said Fujikawa: "One of our main concerns was that the station fit into its environment. Therefore, we depressed the station three feet into the ground so that the residents of the island who knew the station was there would not have an eyesore as part of their landscape. The sign was placed at the eye level of the motorist so as not to disturb or draw too much attention. The immense roof was meant to act as a shelter for the cashier going back and forth; it was logical and practical, for the 'umbrella' roof would not expose the cars."

The size of the Esso sign initially caused some controversy. In 1970 Bernard A. Baker, senior architect for Imperial Oil, wrote a rebuttal to a *Canadian Architect* editorial which had suggested the "enormous sign" was erected as an afterthought. Baker did not want readers to assume the addition of the red and blue Esso oval had spoiled the purity of Mies' design. "In fact," wrote Baker, "the size and the setting of these graphics were integral to Mies' design, as the photographs show. [Mies'] wry comment at the time was that this element in the concept was unique, being neither rectangular nor coloured black or white."⁴

Mies designed with the same care and precision whether working on the New National Gallery in West Berlin (1962-68) or the service station on Nun's Island. Every detail was designed with precision and clarity; nothing was overlooked. Technology was his discipline, for it provided clarity and meaning, and gave structure to his work. Mies' philosophy was straightforward: "I want things to be simple. Mind you: a simple person is not a simpleton. I like simplicity, probably because I like clarity, not because of cheapness or something like that. We never think of reducing cost when we work."⁵ (In the case of the Nun's Island station, it had been rumored that the architect's fees were worth more than the construction of the building.) The Nun's Island station stands today as "a reminder that Mies' universal spaces and universal details are valid for even the most mundane of human activities."⁶

- 1 Roger Conover, "Gas Station to Mark Gateway to City," Portland, Maine, *Press Herald*, 17 January 1990. Portland has opened a "National Gateway Gas" competition to architects, industrial designers, and others to design a service station for that city.
- 2 See Albert Martin, "The Origins of Service," *Imperial Oil Review* 54 (April 1970): 4-7.
- 3 Telephone conversation with Joe Fujikawa, 28 March 1990.
- 4 *The Canadian Architect* 15 (March 1970): 8, and 15 (May 1970): 6.
- 5 "Mies Speaks. 'I Do Not Design Buildings, I Develop Buildings,'" *Architectural Review* 144 (December 1968): 451, cited by David Spaeth, *Mies van der Rohe* (New York: Rizzoli International, 1985), pp. 15-16.
- 6 *The Canadian Architect* 13 (October 1968): 9.

Photo: Imperial Oil Archives 68-701