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# *The Glass Room:* Housing space, time and history<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract.** This article presents *The Glass Room* (2009), a novel by the British author Simon Mawer set in Brno, the Czech Republic, as a unique literary portrayal of a historical period and Modernist architecture in fiction. Shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the novel marked a turning point in its author’s career, inspiring both theatrical and film adaptations, and, perhaps more importantly, it sparked a resurgence of interest in its model, the famous Tugendhat House, a revolutionary piece of Modernist architecture built between 1928 and 1930 by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The narration of the novel is determined by the centrality of both the Landauer House and its main living space, *the Glass Room*, and their capacity to frame the intimate histories of the characters as well as the tumultuous social, political, and cultural developments of Central Europe. The spatial poetics of *The Glass Room* reflects this thematic complexity, whilst expressing the key aesthetic and ethical preoccupations of Modernist architecture and contributing to the novel’s role in providing a multifaceted insight into history and architecture.

**Keywords:** *The Glass Room*, Simon Mawer, architecture in literature, Modernist architecture in literature, historical fiction, neo-historical fiction.

*The Glass Room* (2009) marks both a turning point in Simon Mawer’s writing career and its culmination. Prior to the publication of *The Glass Room*, Simon Mawer had had the reputation of being “a quiet stylist, a writers’ writer” (Crown 2009), mainly amongst literary critics and scholars, but was otherwise little known by the general reading public. The Booker Prize-shortlisting of the novel marked a watershed in Mawer’s career and turned him into a critically and commercially successful novelist (Cooke 2012). At the same time, *The Glass Room* revisits a number of signature aspects of Mawer’s works, such as a tempestuous dramatic historical period, a culturally and geopolitically highly

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complex area,<sup>3</sup> protagonists whose identities are intertwined with radical historical, social and cultural transformation and, finally, the employment of a powerful and complex central conceit, which concentrates the central dilemma of the novel and embodies the essence of its poetics. In this case, it is the eponymous Glass Room, a spacious room with walls made entirely of glass, which frames the course of the tumultuous twentieth century in Central Europe<sup>4</sup> and shelters the histories of individuals against the backdrop of the traumatic events of the period.

This article studies the ways in which *The Glass Room* develops the leitmotifs of Mawer's literary creation, i.e. his treatment of history, space and place. Mawer's approach to history, mostly recent history, inspires an enquiry into the concept of historical fiction and its contemporary understanding. The main focus of the interpretation, however, is the novel's unique spatial poetics, which echoes the topocentric qualities of Mawer's novels whilst presenting a singular portrayal of a piece of Modernist architecture during the dramatic events of the twentieth century in Europe. Out of a host of possible directions of research this study will take the two most prominent, firstly contrasting the aesthetic and ethical purism of the ideals behind Modernist architecture embodied by the Landauer House from the novel with the realities its materialisation, the Tugendhat House, was forced to endure. Secondly, the relation of houses and historical narratives is developed as a part of an enquiry into the spatial poetics of *The Glass Room*.

## ***The Glass Room* from the perspective of historical fiction**

In spite of Mawer's thinly veiled attempts to fictionalise the setting of *The Glass Room*, the novel's depiction of the fate of the Landauer House and the family of its first owners bears a striking resemblance to the Tugendhat House and its original inhabitants. The Tugendhat House, which was granted UNESCO World Heritage status in 2001, was designed by the German architect Mies van der Rohe between 1928 and 1930, and is considered, together with his Barcelona Pavilion, to be the peak of his European career and the embodiment of the ideals of the modernist conception of (domestic) architecture as well the articulation of the principles of the International Style (Davies 2018: 132). The impact of WW2 and its aftermath was compounded by several highly unprofessional

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3 For more information concerning Mawer's treatment of historical details, see Topolovská, T. 2021. Through the looking glass: space and place in Simon Mawer's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. In: Bubíková, Š. & Roebuck, O. (eds.), *Places and Spaces of Crime in Popular Imagination*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.

4 At the time of its writing, it was Mawer's fourth venture into the area of Central Europe, more specifically the realm of where the Czech Republic is to be found nowadays, with one fiction book, *Mendel's Dwarf* (1997) and one non-fiction work, *Gregor Mendel: Planting the Seeds of Genetics* (2006), situated there as well, only to be followed by his latest excursion into the tormented Czech past, *Prague Spring* (2018).

and insensitive restorations (Černá & Černoušková 2011; Davies 2018: 132; Zimmerman 2009: 45-51).<sup>5</sup> Before extensive restoration, which took place between 2010 and 2012, the historical site was known as “one of the most grievous casualties suffered by the modern movement during its post-1933 extremity” (Schulze & Windhorst 2012: 135).<sup>6</sup>

Mawer acknowledges the role of the Tugendhat House in the conception of the novel; upon visiting it in the early 1990s he saw the house as “emblematic of the Czechoslovakia of the interwar period – a place of progressive ideas, of culture, of light and openness – and the dreadful double disaster of Nazism followed by Soviet Communism” (Rawsthorn 2012). In the same interview, commenting on the reopening of the Tugendhat House to the public, he claimed that given its unique qualities and its narrative capacity, “the appeal for a novelist was obvious” (Rawsthorn 2012). Irrespective of the inspiration for the conception of the novel and the inclusion of a number of historical details based on extensive research, Mawer insists on the fabricated nature of the story, cemented by the employment of a generic toponym “Město”, which simply means “town” in Czech (Mawer 2009: 75),<sup>7</sup> his use of fictional names, and some degree of deviation of the Landauers’ plotline from the history of the Tugendhat family. In spite of these efforts, the choice of subject matter – the historical and spatial setting of *The Glass Room* – has been criticised by some of the members of the Tugendhat family.<sup>8</sup> The dispute over Mawer’s treatment of history illustrates possible reservations concerning his classification amongst historical novelists and also reflects some tendencies of contemporary historical fiction.

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5 The house’s Jewish owners were forced to flee Nazi persecution, then the house was confiscated by the Gestapo, subsequently hit by a bomb and later seized by the Communist government and turned into a gym.

6 Nowadays, the villa has become an incredibly popular historical site, with visits needing to be booked months in advance. The popularity of Mawer’s novel plays an integral part in the general renown of the place. It has inspired both a successful theatre adaptation and a less critically-acclaimed film, *The Affair* (2019) (Lodge 2021), which was shot in the villa.

7 In his 2010 interview with Marek Sečkař for *Host*, Mawer claimed that he was dissatisfied with the decision of Lukáš Novák, the author of the widely-acclaimed Czech translation of the novel, to replace Mawer’s neutral “Město” with Brno. For Novák, the obvious referentiality of Město to Brno outweighed Mawer’s desire to “keep formal distance.”

8 Professor Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, one of descendants of Greta and Fritz Tugendhat, repeatedly expressed her dissatisfaction with the novel, accusing Mawer of robbing the family of their history. Upon the occasion of her lecture “Das Haus Tugendhat und Seine Bewohner” which took place in The Ministry of Culture in Prague on 1st October 2012, she insisted that the author should have contacted and consulted the family in the first place. In any case, he should have either avoided the history of the family altogether or resisted his poetic licence and remained truthful to their actual history (Hammer-Tugendhat 2012).

The 2009 shortlist of the Man Booker Prize for Fiction, which included *The Glass Room*, consisted entirely of works of historical fiction, testifying to the growing popularity of the genre. The media coverage of the shortlist opted for a critical perspective, accusing the judges of Anglocentrism and of being “reactionary” and “backward-looking” (Miller 2009). One of the judges, literary journalist and novelist Lucasta Miller, explained in her 2009 article defending the choice of the nominations, that the novels, in spite of being set in the 16th, 19th and 20th centuries, did not linger in the past and were considered for the prize because of the “depth of sophistication and not the genre” (Miller 2009). She further declared that the quality the novelists shared was a uniquely individual voice, which contributed to the diversification of different approaches to historical fiction, and proved that although “the average historical fiction may be easier to pull off than the average novel, simply because you don’t have to invent so much. [...] the best transcend genre, adding something that a nonfiction treatment could not.”

Texts with similar qualities have been subjected to the scrutiny of literary scholars who focus on contemporary historical fiction, such as Elodie Rousselot or Jerome De Groot. De Groot is particularly interested in the nature of the narrativisation of the past and asserts that fiction, and novels in particular, are no longer perceived as merely fictitious and therefore dubious (De Groot 2016: 6). Quite the contrary, throughout his monographs De Groot repeatedly demonstrates that narrativisation conditions the very understanding of the notion of pastness and thus different fictitious representations of the past act as highly useful tools for its investigation.

In accordance with this new understanding of the role of historical fiction, Mawer actively rejects the label of historical novelist (Flood 2016)<sup>9</sup> and mainly stresses the liberating properties of fiction that grant him poetic licence and allow him “to manipulate things as I choose” and even “to lie” (qtd. in Crown 2009). He researches the period detail meticulously whilst simultaneously adding to the dynamism of his novels’ free reimagining of the past by mixing fact and fiction.<sup>10</sup> He thus explores “the dissonance and displacement between then and now, making the past recognisable but simultaneously authentically unfamiliar” (De Groot 2010: 3). Although his work is rarely mentioned in the recently published academic overviews of contemporary British literature, Mawer may be classified amongst authors who, like him, focus on historical

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9 He paradoxically did so while receiving the 2016 Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction for *Tightrope* (2015), the critically-well received sequel to the spy novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2012) (Flood 2016).

10 Mawer frequently projects his personal experience into his writing (Pengelly 2015). As far as (auto)biographical novels are concerned, there is the semi-fictional account of living in Italy in *A Place in Italy* (1992). Surprisingly, he acknowledges *Swimming to Ithaca* (2006) as his only (auto)biographical work (Sečkař 2010).

themes, narrativising the past and analysing and problematising the parallels between the past and the present, which echoes the preoccupation of the contemporary genre of neo-historical fiction. Elodie Rousselot connects the recent resurgence of historical fiction with “critical re-appraisal of specific historical periods and of their social, cultural, and political contexts” (Rousselot 2014: 1). *The Glass Room* invites its readers to relive and, more importantly, review the key moments of 20th-century Czech history – the First Czechoslovak Republic, Nazi and Communist rule, the relatively liberal period of the 1960s and the newly democratic 1990s. Rather than stressing the difference between the present and the past, the narrative steers towards a highlighting of the parallels between them, which Mawer considers to be one of the dominant concerns of his fiction since the similarities mediate an understanding of the present and condition our approach to the future: “if we do not understand where we’ve come from, then we won’t have any idea where we are going” (qtd. Flood 2017).

### ***The Glass Room* and the ideals of modernism**

*The Glass Room*, apart from mediating a nuanced portrayal of Czech history by means of a house and a room, provides an extensive commentary on Modernist architecture, its ideology and its creators, and that acts as one of the key elements of its spatial poetics. Although the novel covers the time span of almost the entire 20th century, its focal point is the First Czechoslovak Republic, the time when the design of the house is conceived out of the desire of a newly-wed couple, Viktor and Liesel, both from upper-class, German-speaking industrialist families, to sever ties with tradition. They reject “this clinging to the past. This is everything our new house will not be!” (Mawer 2009: 9). Driven by the wish to inhabit a domestic space which would project their beliefs in progress, the future and the emergence of an unconstrained society governed by reason and democratic values, they let the (fictitious) architect, Rainer von Abt, build a luxurious futuristic house incarnating their beliefs: “It’ll be a revolution. [...] A casting off of the past. A new way of living” (Mawer 2009: 66). The exorbitant cost of the villa should not demonstrate fortune and privilege, but rather the philosophical principles of both the owners, the future inhabitants and their architect: “The whole essence of *the Glass Room* is reason. That is what Viktor thinks, anyway. For him, it embodies the pure rationality of a Greek classical temple, the austere beauty of a perfect composition, the grace and the balance of a painting of Mondrian. [...] There is nothing convolute, involute, awkward or complex. Here everything can be understood as a matter of proportion and dimension” (Mawer 2009: 137).

In the novel, the chief spokesperson of Modernism’s desire to “reshape the world” (Vidler 2001: 52) by revolutionising the way people live is Rainer von Abt, a fictitious German architect, a “composite modernist” (Vidler 2001: 52), acting as a synthesis of a number of pioneers of architectural Modernism, most strikingly Adolf Loos (von

Abt proclaims himself to be his disciple (Mawer 2009: 17)), Le Corbusier, and Theo van Doesburg (Mawer 2009: 17). There are both direct mentions of them in the text, most often made by von Abt himself, or their famous statements are presented as voiced by von Abt. Von Abt is portrayed as a true trailblazer in the field of the conception of architecture and the profession of architect. Rejecting the label of architect, he considers himself to be “a poet of light space and form” (Mawer 2009: 16), who works with “nothing but ideas” (Mawer 2009: 22), “creating a work of art” (Mawer 2009: 21).<sup>11</sup> Echoing Loos and his abhorrence of superfluous ornaments, von Abt can design nothing but “form without ornament” (Mawer 2009: 23), where he encloses space into “ruled lines as sharp as razor cuts, a mathematical precision that is beyond natural” (Mawer 2009: 41). Architecture, in his view, had for a long time been dominated by nothing else but “cave building”, but his desire is to “take man out of the cave and float him in the air. I wish to give him a glass space to inhabit” (Mawer 2009: 18). He demonstrates his embrace of the Wagnerian conception of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by wishing not “just to design a house but to create a whole world. I want to work from the foundations to the interior, the windows, the doorways, the furnishings, the fabric of the place as well as structure. I will design you a life. Not a mere house to live in, but a whole way of life” (Mawer 2009: 28).<sup>12</sup> The design of the Landauer House is conceived as a universal, international project (Mawer 2009: 64), which shall act, first and foremost, as a home: “It is not intended to be a sensation. It’s intended to be a home” (Mawer 2009: 63).

The main living space of the Landauer House, *the Glass Room*, is repeatedly characterised as “open, infinitely extended, and thereby cleansed of all mental disturbance” (Vidler 2001: 51). Its invisible walls evoke the myth of spatial and social transparency that Modernist architecture shared with the thinkers of the late eighteenth-century and creates the effect of ineffable space (Vidler 2001: 54).<sup>13</sup> However, in spite of the literal

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11 “Architects such as Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, who looked upon their buildings as works of art, were criticized as ‘formalists’” (Davies 2018: 108).

12 For more detailed information concerning the conception of architecture in the novel and parallels between Rainer von Abt and the masters of Modernist architecture see Topolovská, T. 2013. *The Glass Room: Architecture as a poetic emotion. Prague Journal of English Studies* 2(1): 65-79; Topolovská, T. 2013. On the analogy between the language of architecture and language of literary work: The role of the conception of architecture in generating the poetics of *The Glass Room*. In: M. Hirschová (ed.), *Filologické studie*, 15-31. Prague: Karolinum.

13 In his 2001 monograph *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture*, Anthony Vidler highlights the role of Le Corbusier’s fascination with the demolished Parthenon in the conception of *ineffable* space. This sublime experience of the pioneer of architectural Modernism defined his view of space. He therefore stipulated ineffability as its chief quality, dissolving walls and opening “the inside to the outside, an outside now simply framed in order to testify to its visual existence, but open more or less panoramically around the entire building. Ineffable space would then be that dreamt and idealized, worked and realized experience that matched the heights of Periclean Greece”

transparency of their main living space, which brings and merges the inside and the outside (“[t]he inside and the outside will be the same thing” (Mawer 2009: 43)), the Landauers’ dreams of domestic life inside a work of art do not materialise. Although Viktor Landauer cites André Breton’s *Nadja* on the occasion of the housewarming party and identifies his wife Liesel and himself with the house (“this glass house says who Liesel and I are” (Mawer 2009: 76)) and boasts that “[i]n our wonderful glass house you can see everything” (Mawer 2009: 76), the lofty ideals are not fulfilled. The house and its central living space become sites of deceit, violence and neglect.

In spite of its purely abstract aspirations (or at least those of its designer, Rainer von Abt’s), the space of the Landauer House is not portrayed as an “enclosed space, a box” (Mawer 2009: 308). Quite the contrary, it “transcends geometrical space” (Bachelard 1994: 47) as it is a lived-in space and becomes a shared experience of the characters and the readers alike. Both personal and social histories intervene, and the building and the room are repeatedly depicted as silent witnesses, sometimes even victims of different types of atrocities. *The Glass Room*, in spite of its powerful sensory effect, eventually proves to be only “as rational as the people who inhabit it” (Mawer 2009: 360). By employing the complex spatial conceit of the Landauer House and, more importantly, *the Glass Room*, Mawer is able to provide a far-reaching commentary on the moral aspirations of architecture and art. As *The Glass Room* exemplifies, “a building just is” (Mawer 2009:100), it cannot directly shape its inhabitants since it should not have any “politics”, it may only inspire them by its perfect proportions and the impression of balance and classical beauty it radiates. The central spatial conceit of the novel, *the Glass Room* and its apparent indifference and neutrality, enables it to successfully frame history whilst accentuating the tragedy of “the rough tides” (Mawer 2009: 100) of those years.

## The spatial poetics of *The Glass Room*

What defines Mawer’s literary creation is the role played by the setting. His novels convincingly and self-assuredly inhabit space and time while echoing the mental processes of the protagonists and accentuating the overall thematic focus of his works. Both the temporal and spatial settings of Mawer’s fiction are highly prone to profound transformation. Therefore, their common denominator is a deep social, historical, and

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(Vidler 2001: 55). The resulting impression of boundless, limitless, unconstrained space demonstrated its transcendent quality (Vidler 2001: 54). Le Corbusier’s approach restricted the positive and purely aesthetic quality of such space and emphasised its terrifyingly sublime nature (Vidler 2001: 55). Yi-Fu Tuan stressed the ambiguous nature of open space in his *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*: “space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat. To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable” (Tuan 2018: 54).

cultural change, as a result of which the protagonists' lives suffer an enormous upheaval. In the case of *The Glass Room*, the first idyllic years of the family and their new house are contrasted with the ominous atmosphere before the Munich Agreement and the German Protectorate. The following citation is taken from the chapter dedicated to the housewarming party and its atmospheric depiction of an impending storm, symbolising the looming war years: "They crowd into the space of *the Glass Room* like passengers on the observation deck of a luxury liner. Some of them maybe peering through the windows onto the pitching surface of the city but, in their muddle of Czech and German, almost all are ignorant of the cold outside and the gathering storm clouds, the first sign of the tempest that is coming" (Mawer 2009: 78). The Landauers are forced to flee because of their Jewish origin, and their house is confiscated by the Gestapo and turned into a laboratory focusing on the study of eugenics.

Mawer comments on the striking change of circumstances by developing an equally striking contrast by juxtaposing two expressions of appreciation of *the Glass Room*. The first one is uttered by Liesel and Viktor Landauer, the first owners of the house, upon their visit to the almost complete room, and refers to the liberating effect created by its space and light:

Liesel and Viktor stood and marvelled at it. It had become a palace of light, light bouncing off the chrome pillars, light refulgent on the walls, light glistening on the dew in the garden, light reverberating from the glass. It was though they stood inside a crystal of salt. 'Isn't it wonderful,' she exclaimed, looking round with an expression of amazement. 'You feel so free, so unconstrained. The sensation of space, of all things being possible.' (Mawer 2009: 65)

The second time the same qualities of *the Glass Room* are praised, the context cannot be more different from the first occasion. The room is being inspected by the Nazi scientists who wish to transform it into a eugenics laboratory. The significance of the light and space acquires suddenly a shockingly dissimilar dimension: "*Gläzend!* Even more impressive than the photographs: a great open space of a place, almost the entire floor area of the whole building. Open plan. Stahl likes that. Ideal for a laboratory" (Mawer 2009: 218). Later, the house gets almost destroyed during an air raid, and the horrors of war are followed by the stifling rule of the Communist Party. The Landauer family first escapes to Switzerland and later to the United States, while the novel portrays the fate of those who stayed behind, mostly the character of Hana Hanáková, the prototypical incarnation of the *femme fatale* of Mawer's novels, who tries to protect the house from any further harm.

The spatial poetics, and in fact the whole narration of *The Glass Room*, is dominated by its double centrality. Firstly, there is the centrality of the house in relation to the



narration and, secondly, there is the dominant role of *the Glass Room* within the villa. Mawer employs the archetypal literary device of a building symbolising the history of a community, often employed by writers and even described as universal by some theoreticians (Bachelard 1994: 6). Thus, in *The Glass Room* “a real house effectively becomes the subject of a biography” (Miller 2009). Though the house may survive a precarious period, some of its inhabitants do not, and thus it serves as “a testimonial to our tragedies and our triumphs, to depravity and to all the soaring heights of which humans are capable” (Robertson 2015: 115). The home and its most canonical, archetypal representation, a house, is closely related to the study of place as a category of both scientific research and human understanding (Creswell 2015: 1). Humanistic geographers who stress the mutual conditioning of the category of place and human life, such as Yi-Fu Tuan, have been building upon the works of Martin Heidegger and Gaston Bachelard (Bachelard 1994: 8; Creswell 2015: 39). Heidegger developed the concept of dwelling as the expression of authentic human existence: “Man’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken” (Heidegger 2001: 157), while Bachelard draws parallels between the role of the house in human life and its employment in literature, stressing the decisive, defining role the house has in the way we perceive other places in life as well as in literature. One of the most noticeable tendencies in fiction is to employ (and exploit) the integrative potential of the enormously potent archetype of the house to narrate social and individual histories. The capacity of the Landauer House from *The Glass Room* to represent the history of a family is “a literary device that has been employed to powerful effect to depict a building that has survived dramatic times, even as some of its inhabitants have not” (Robertson 2015: 94).<sup>14</sup> In the preface of their 2012 monograph, *The House of Fiction as the House of Life: Representations of the House from Richardson to Woolf*, Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Soccio state that the house has become a popular subject of scrutiny “to the point that in many ways houses seem to be situated at the very core of the creative, artistic and cultural domains of contemporaneity” (Saggini & Soccio 2012: 2).

The second form of centrality *the Glass Room* takes in the novel is the role of centre within a centre. Featured in almost every chapter of the novel, its prominence supports Bachelard’s conception of the “house imagined as a concentrated being” (Bachelard 1994: 17). The central image of *the Glass Room* simultaneously acts as the leitmotif, setting

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14 Robertson’s text on the parallels between the fate of the Budapest Glass House and that of its original owners is to be found in the 2015 monograph *Global Perspectives on the Holocaust: History, Identity, Legacy*. It is no coincidence that the film adaptation of *The Glass Room* was screened during the London Jewish Festival in 2019 to illustrate the effect of the Holocaust in Central Europe.

and symbol of the intellectual and aesthetic aspirations of its creator, of its inhabitants<sup>15</sup> and their historical periods. Thus, beside demonstrating its centring ability, *The Glass Room* surpasses purely literary qualities and aspirations to historical accuracy and ventures into the cross-disciplinary realm. The following citation illustrates the need to apply a wider scope of disciplines in the analysis of the novel because of the transgressive, genre-bending parts of the work, which mix fiction with other modes of artistic expression – poetry and architecture.

She dreams. She dreams of cold. She dreams of glass and light, *the Glass Room* washed with reflection, and the cool view across the city of rooftops, the cold view through the trees, the crack of snow beneath your boots. She dreams of a place that is without form or substance, that exists only in the manner of dreams, shifting and insubstantial, diffuse, diverse:

space

glass, walls of glass

a quintet of chairs, placed with geometrical precision

a sweep of shining floor – ivory linoleum

white and black

the gleam of chrome

These things move, evolve, transform in the way they do in dreams, changing shape and form and yet, to the dreamer, remaining what they always were: *der Glasraum*, *der Glastraum*, the single letter-change metamorphosing from one into the other: *the Glass Room* become the Glass Dream. (Mawer 2009: 304)

The excerpt relies on a prominent employment of syntactic parallelism within the repetition of the same elements of the sentence structure, beginning with: “She dreams”, which secures the coherent form of an evocation of impressions. The middle part of the citation acts as a catalogue juxtaposing the individual elements of the imagery into a list, whose organisation clearly indicates a rhythm and marks both the oneiric nature of the sequence as well as its proximity to poetry. What is more, the textual and visual component of listing the individual parts of the spatial experience mediated by the text, e.g. “glass, wall of glass, a sweep of shining floor, a quintet of chairs” corresponds with a caption to be found in architectural plans and emphasises both the explicit and implicit architectural dimension of the text.

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15 Petr Anténe attributes a similar function to universities and mainly their liberal arts departments. Not only do they provide the setting for the novels discussed in his monograph *Campus Novel Variations: A Comparative Study of an Anglo-American Genre*, but they “have often been seen as one of the pillars of this very society” (Anténe 2015: 7).

The highly evocative imagery of *The Glass Room* provides an apt as well as atmospheric insight into the aesthetic and ideological preoccupations of Modernist architecture. Its principles are repeatedly and aptly summarised by the character of Rainer von Abt, the fictitious architect. The qualities of Modernist architecture seep into Mawer's mode of expression and the resulting text thus acts as an intermediary between the sphere of architecture and that of language. What is more, *The Glass Room* pertinently contrasts the utopic nature of the premises of Modernist architecture (Benton 2007: 148-223) with the realities of history and human nature. *The Glass Room* bears testimony to Mawer's capacity for apt use of poetic language to effectively communicate the spatial poetics of the novel. Beside similes, the author often relies on a number of unexpected parallels (Mawer 2009: 52), such as when he underlines the organic process of designing and building a house by comparing it to the development of a baby:

The house grew, the baby grew. The latter was a strange and rapid metamorphosis, punctuated by events of moment: the grasp of her hands, the focus of her eyes, her first smile, her recognition of Liesel and then Viktor, the first time she raised herself on her hands, the first laugh. The growth of the house was more measured: the laying of steel beams, the pouring of concrete, the encapsulating of space. (Mawer 2009: 52)

In accordance with these tendencies, Rosa Ainsley described *The Glass Room* as an example of "archi-fiction" in her article for *Architecture and Culture* (2020). In her view, novels such as *The Glass Room* "look again to architecture to provide a location, to set a specific stage for the narrative, adding some notion of authenticity (this is real!) and importance (this is a highly significant building!)" (Ainsley 2020: 21). In terms of fiction inspired by actual architectural works, Ainsley proposes the term "artefactual" (Ainsley 2020: 21) to describe works such as *The Glass Room* in which architecture surpasses the role of mere backdrop and becomes an instrument for framing complex social, cultural, political and individual histories. This tendency is foreshadowed in the Prologue, which sees Liesel Landauer returning to the house after more than 30 years of exile and reminiscing about one peculiar quality of *the Glass Room*, its retractable window panes. Mawer employs this unique aspect of the room, and mainly its effect of "temporary equilibrium", as a symbol of the former life of the Landauers in the First Czechoslovak Republic and the failed liberal ideals and aspirations of the period.

The slow slide of the pane downwards as though to remove the barrier that exists between reality and fiction, the fabricated world of the living room and the hard fact of snow and vegetation. There is a pause during which the two airs stand fragile and separate, the warmth within shivering like a jelly against the wall of cold outside. And then this temporary equilibrium collapses so that winter with a cold sigh intrudes, and

presumably, their carefully constructed, carefully warmed interior air is dispersed into the outside world. (Mawer 2009: 4-5).

## Conclusion

The storyline of *The Glass Room* revolves around the archetypal anchoring trope of a house, in this case the fictitious Landauer House, modelled upon the famous Tugendhat House, situated in Brno in today's Czech Republic. Based on its integrating properties, the microcosms of the house and the eponymous room reflect the macrocosm of the world. Because of its singular, multidisciplinary character, the novel may be approached from a number of different perspectives, the two major being Mawer's vision of history and the work's topocentric qualities. As this study determines, Mawer's stance on the depiction of historical events echoes the preoccupation of neo-historical fiction, which often narrativises the past in order to be able to critically assess it and approximate it to the present. The spatial poetics of *The Glass Room* is defined by the double centrality of Mawer's narration. The Landauer House centres a narration while sheltering individual and social histories. These are placed in *the Glass Room*, which appears in nearly every chapter of the novel.

Another vital aspect of the spatial poetics of *The Glass Room* is its presentation of the ideals of Modernist architecture. The novel provides an evocative commentary on the nature of Modernist architecture, with its utopian belief in its own liberating power and its ability to promote and mediate ideas of unconstrained freedom and inevitable social and cultural progress (Benton 2007: 148-223). What is more, *The Glass Room* contrasts the utopic premises of Modernism, mainly its moral and aesthetic purism, with private and official histories. As a result, not only does the narration of *The Glass Room* exemplify a unique fusion of literature, architecture, history and politics, but it also provides a suggestive meditation on art, its aesthetic and ethical functions and their limitations.

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