

Right: From the book, an image shows resident Marsha in her townhouse in Lafayette Park. She says of it: 'This was viewed as a little off the wall'



## >>BOOK

### **THANKS FOR THE VIEW, MR. MIES: LAFAYETTE PARK, DETROIT**

Edited by Danielle Aubert, Lana Cavar and Natasha Chandani  
Distributed Art Publishers, £16.95  
Review by Herbert Wright

Mies van der Rohe is not often associated with harmonious community living, and neither is Detroit, the paradigm of American urban dysfunction and decay. But when three graphic designers immersed themselves in the life of the Mies van der Rohe-designed Lafayette Park residential complex, that was exactly what they found.

This book engagingly documents the findings of their obsessive engagement with its residents and staff, backed with photography by Corine Vermeulen and Vasco Roma and archived material. The casual but focused approach and a photojournalistic slant make it fun to dip in anywhere.

Lafayette Park, planned by Ludwig Hilberseimer with Mies van der Rohe, was built between 1958 and 1963. It comprises three 22-storey towers – as griddy and boxy as Mies van der Rohe's seminal Lake Shore Drive (1951) in Chicago, but not framed in black –

and 186 one and two-storey 'townhouses' repeated in rows, each not exactly a Farnsworth House but nevertheless rectilinear with big glazing. There's also a park, elementary school, swimming pool and shops.

David Byrne of Talking Heads described the towers as 'models for an evil architectural meme that has yet to be stamped out', but as the author points out, Byrne was just cycling past. Motown Records founder Berry Gordy had a townhouse, but Martha Reeves and Diana Ross lived in the adjacent 1300 Lafayette Tower, designed by Gunnar Birkett with an un-Miesian service core stump on the roof.

The site had been an African-

### **BIG POLITICAL ISSUES THAT CONTEXTUALISE LAFAYETTE PARK ARE GLIMPSED OCCASIONALLY IN THE TESTIMONY OF RESIDENTS**

American inner city community called Black Bottom, forcibly cleared in the early Fifties. Despite that, Lafayette Park was intended to be not just middle class but also multiracial. United Auto Workers president Walter Reuther, who applied political pressure for the development, was a socialist and later civil rights activist.

Big political issues that contextualise Lafayette Park are not the subject of this book, but are glimpsed occasionally in the testimony of residents. Barbara Matesa, for example, recalls how they were protected from the race riots of 1967 because the mayor and police chief lived there, but that's after she's talked about her cats. Architects lived here, but when asked if any lived in her co-op (one of four covering the townhouses), Matesa adds: 'No, I think we're lucky.'

The authors claim Lafayette Park is the largest collection of Mies van der Rohe buildings anywhere, but they may

be picking a fight with the Dominion Centre, Toronto (1969). This book is not about his architecture but about how people live in his spacious, light-filled boxes. They can obsess about tiny changes that betray his original design – especially architects such as Bill Dickens. 'Mies didn't cantilever. I hate this,' he fumes, examining a garden gate.

Mies famously said 'God is in the details', and we're offered it in words and pictures here. We see an I-beam used as a bookshelf, visiting fauna including birds killed after impacting windows, residents' recipes for soup and fondue, the life of locust trees planted in the Alfred Caldwell-landscaped grounds. There's even a nine-day log of switching heating on and off and opening windows in an apartment – Miesian glazing can bake or freeze interiors (when one co-op installed a geothermal system in 2000, the air-conditioning and heating bills plummeted).

Architecture is ultimately about creating spaces for human life; any architect would learn from the lives presented here. For example, as the book title indicates, people love big views, so why do we build estates and budget hotels with mean, little windows? Lafayette Park was once marketed as tomorrow's homes – the authors show it still has lessons to offer in that regard.

