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Photo-Op: Curbside Cubism

By The Editors

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It looks cool in Mies van der Rohe's America, not to say cold. In war-ravaged Europe, where Mies had been director of architecture at the Bauhaus, his sleek, sparse and cerebral modernism—the Modernism of the grid—was one means of rebuilding a broken society. In Chicago, where he moved in the 1930s, it became something different—the basis of a confident style that helped to define the look of midcentury America. Soaring steel-and-glass towers like the Seagram Building in New York had a grand practicality that suited America in the 1950s. Balthazar Korab's 1960 image (above) of Mies's apartments on Lake Shore Drive captures their crystalline gleam amid the icy streaks of a Chicago winter. Mies's idea of home may have seemed inhospitable to residents, most of whom kept curtains drawn across the endless windows, and Mr. Korab has contrasted the building with a more flamboyant classic from the era—the razor fins of a Cadillac sedan. The Caddy is native American cool, dreamt up on the drawing boards of Detroit, where Mr. Korab has lived since 1955. He emigrated from Hungary at the behest of Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen, whose curvaceous designs he would capture in photographs. These form the centerpiece of the career-spanning 'Balthazar Korab: Architect of Photography' (Princeton Architectural Press, 191 pages, \$40), as the black-and-white images capture how Saarinen could stimulate, dwarf and delight the viewer with creations like his terminal at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport, whose swoops of poured concrete feel both solidly grounded and ecstatically airborne. As such buildings aged from new constructions into prized landmarks, Mr. Korab has kept working, shooting buildings by Philip Johnson, Frank Gehry and many postmodern architects. But his work's enduring value is as a document of the push and pull of midcentury, the conflict between the curve and the cube at the moment America became the center of world design.

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