

Thinking Outside the (Function) Box: What We Can Learn from Philip Johnson and Mies

This presentation looks at two lesser-known, yet significant, examples of modern interior architecture that blur the lines between functionality of space. Its purpose is to ignite a conversation about how the function of interior space can be obscured to create more dynamic, innovative projects. This exploration is beneficial in understanding how contemporary interior architects/designers design spaces that do not fit into a prescribed 'function' box.

Philip Johnson's 1967 design for the home of art collector David Kreeger in Washington, DC, is a synthesis of his residential and museum work; a hybrid of both house and museum. An examination of his design process, concepts, and architectural ideals in both building types will be explored. Mies van der Rohe's 1972 Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, also in the nation's capital, symbolizes Mies' ideals of universal space, a theme that obscured the standard thinking about functionality for which he developed throughout his lifetime. The library also blurs the lines between a building and a memorial, as it was—until 2011—the only MLK memorial in Washington. Is it the architecture, the interior, the artwork, or the events that occur within the building that create a memorial? This question will be posed, among others. Ultimately, it is clear that neither work fall within a constrained definition of what a building is 'supposed to be'. Looking to the past at projects that blur the lines about what a building is can inform the way we think about and design spaces in the future.