The Philosophical Conception of Architecture with Reference to Simon Mawer’s The Glass Room

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Abstract

This Bachelor thesis is concerned with the balance between rationality and sensibility in architecture, materialistic and spiritual aspect of architecture, the contrast between the transparency of modern architecture and the lack of transparency of human lives and the impact of the symmetry and beauty on people and their relationships in the period of time referred to (from 1929 until 1989), all with the reference to The Glass Room (2009) by Simon Mawer. The way the book is written is discussed as well.

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá rovnováhou mezi racionalitou a senzibilitou v architektuře, jejím materialistickým a duchovním aspektem, kontrastem mezi transparentností v moderní architektuře a netransparentností lidských životů a působením symetrie a krásy na lidi a mezilidské vztahy v době, ve které se děj odehrává (od 1929 do 1989), na základě knihy Simona Mawera The Glass Room (2009). Práce se zabývá také způsobem, kterým je kniha napsána.

Key words: modern architecture, war, freedom, human relationships
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Declaration

I hereby declare that I have elaborated this thesis individually and that all the sources that were used are listed on the Works Cited page. No other sources were used.

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Introduction

An idea for writing this thesis sprang from my interest in architecture combined with a great reader’s experience from The Glass Room, a novel from 2009 by British author Simon Mawer. My aim is to analyse the role of the architecture in the novel, specifically the roles of The Glass Room from various points of view. These also include the analysis of Mawer’s metaphorical conceptions of the Glass Room. I have chosen the theme of the thesis, The Philosophical Conception of Architecture with Reference to Simon Mawer’s The Glass Room, because the architecture is analysed mostly from the philosophical point of view while the technical details are not emphasized.

The theoretical part deals with some basic facts about Simon Mawer, with his bibliography and the major features of his style of writing. The circumstances that led him to write The Glass Room are described as well. The theoretical part also provides information about Mawer’s primary inspiration, the Tugendhat Villa in Brno, about its architect, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and about the principles of modern architecture that were employed in its construction.

The practical part is divided into seven chapters according to the topic discussed within each of them. All the topics are somehow related to the architecture, some of them directly and some metaphorically. The first chapter describes the architect in the novel, his vision of the Landauer house and his influence on the Landauers. The chapter “Transparency” tries to contrast the transparency of the modern architecture with human relationships and the chapter “Freedom” aims to analyse different aspects of freedom in the novel. In The Architecture of the Book and The Architecture of Relationships, the term architecture is used metaphorically. There is also a chapter dealing with the importance of time and its reference to the architecture in the novel. Finally, there is a chapter The materialistic and spiritual aspect of architecture which analyses these two approaches that are intertwining throughout the whole novel.
Theoretical part

The author, Simon Mawer, was for a long time not among the well-known writers. Although he published his first novel over twenty years ago, it was the novel *The Glass Room* published in 2009 which was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and has been translated into twelve languages.

Mawer was born in England in 1948 and his early years were chaotic. He spent his childhood moving backwards and forwards from England to Malta and Cyprus. This apparently influenced his writing as looking for balance and harmony is an important theme in his fiction. “These two threads – order versus chaos, impulse balanced by propriety – pursue each other through his fiction as through his life, intertwining and grappling down the pathways of his novels” (Crown 12), states the quotation from an interview in the *Guardian* in 2009.

Mawer was educated at Millfield School in Somerset and at Brasenose College, Oxford. He took a degree in Zoology and has worked as a biology teacher for most of his life. He is the author of eight novels and two non-fiction books. His first novel, *Chimera*, was published in 1989 when he was thirty-nine. It won the McKitterick Prize for first novels. Mawer’s earlier works include three not so well-known books: *A Place in Italy* (1992), *The Bitter Cross* (1992) and *A Jealous God* (1996). These are followed by *Mendel’s Dwarf* (1997), which made him a noticeable writer on both sides of the Atlantic. It is a story of a molecular biologist Benedict Lambert, who tells Mendel’s story on the background of his own. Mawer said about *Mendel’s Dwarf* that: “It clearly wasn’t going to be a biography…I’m a novelist. I don’t want to tell the truth. I want to manipulate things as I choose. I want to lie” (Crown 12). Then *The Gospel of Judas* was published in 2000, followed by *The Fall* (2003), *Swimming to Ithaca* (2006) and *Gregor Mendel: Planting the Seeds of Genetics* (2006). In 2009, *The Glass Room* was published and marked Mawer as an acknowledged author. His last novel to be published in May 2012 is *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*, in the United States *Trapeze*. Mawer chose a different title for the American edition of the novel to avoid confusion with another novel recently published in the United States.
What is typical for Mawer regarding his technique of writing is the using of multiple timelines and interest in linguistic form of the work. In The Guardian, Sarah Crown wrote that: “[Mendel’s Dwarf] tackles science with tools that have become hallmarks of his writing: multiple timelines; an exploitation of the slippages and spaces between languages; a fascination with memory” (12). As the review from The Observer in 2003 states, “Simon Mawer's work is rich with a desire to see through to the core of things” (Green 17). This quote is to be found on the home page of the author’s official website. Mawer’s insight into the psychology of his characters is indeed very profound. His novels are thematically and linguistically interesting and many reviews of his work esteem Mawer a great British writer. It is maybe a pity that he had not been well-known before The Glass Room was published. “I shall certainly look out for more of Mawer’s work and appreciate the view that he ranks amongst our best current writers, and has been underestimated to date,”¹ the Amazon review says.

Finally, The Glass Room was published and Mawer has since been recognized as an excellent writer. The author has acknowledged that he was primarily inspired by the Villa Tugendhat in Brno, though he addresses it only as Město in the novel. The fact that he used Město for the name of the city in the book could probably imply that the whole novel is fiction, though the house itself is real. However, in the Czech translation of the novel – in Skleněný pokoj, anonymous Město was changed to Brno, so the identity of the city became clear, though Mawer was not very keen on it. The Landauer House resembles the functionalist Tugendhat Villa in many aspects. These are the architecture of interior and exterior, the history of the changes it has undergone and some facts about the inhabitants of the house. For example, regarding the interior, the Villa Tugendhat has the onyx wall and the view over the city almost the same as the Landauer House: “The onyx wall is partially translucent and changes appearance when the evening sun is low. The architect also managed to make the magnificent view from the villa an integral part of the interior.”² The author therefore evidently took inspiration


from the real properties of the Villa Tugendhat. Another example is the two types of armchair – the Tugendhat chair and the Brno chair, which are still in production, with their fictional counterparts in the novel – the Landauer chair and the Liesel chair. The real chairs were designed, together with all of the furniture, by the architect. “Mies designed all the furniture and every detail, including door handles and curtain tracks” (Drexler 21). So did Rainer von Abt, the architect in the novel. Moreover, the Tugendhat Villa was built between 1928 and 1930, which corresponds with the time of the construction of the Landauer House.

Mawer actually visited the Tugendhat Villa personally. The BBC broadcasted a short video about The Glass Room with Mawer reading excerpts from the book, talking about it and about the impression that the Villa made on him when he saw it for the first time: “The house is real, the characters are fictional. I first visited the real house fifteen years ago, I suppose, something like that, and it struck me enormously at the time, I mean it is one of the most thrilling places altogether.”

Mawer mentioned that he wondered why it had never occurred to anyone else to take inspiration from the Villa before him. In fact, it was Mawer’s interest in Gregor Mendel who had lived in Brno that gave him the first impulse for writing The Glass Room. He visited Brno for the first time for the groundwork for Mendel’s Dwarf. Mawer comments on the circumstances that lead him into writing The Glass Room: “So that meant more visits to the area, and it was on one of those visits that I went to look at the Tugendhat House again and it was really then that I thought to myself ‘there is a story here’. My interest in things Czech had been growing over the previous decade, virtually, and the whole thing sort of came together in The Glass Room.”

The novel was thus written with enthusiasm on the base of sincere interest in the house and Czech history and language.

The Tugendhat Villa is named after the family that had it built. Mawer said that he had not wanted to write the Tugendhat family biography, but his reason for writing

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the novel was that he had wanted to picture how it could feel to live in the house: “What I wanted was to feel the house. I wanted to put myself imaginatively in the place of somebody who had had it designed and built and lived in it. But I didn’t want in any way to write a book about the Tugendhat family.” The author claimed that the Landauers are not even loosely related to Tugendhats. However, Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, the daughter of the original owners and art historian, told the Czech media that the novel was not about her family but against it. She added that she was very angry because the novel would be after all the novel about the Tugendhat family for public. For example, she can not stand a comparison of Viktor in the novel with her father. Mawer responded that it was a shame that she could not see the novel as fiction. Nevertheless, it is clear that *The Glass Room* did not gain only positive responses.

Recently, another thing has made Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat furious. She and her family do not approve of the plans that have been made to make a film from the novel. However, the Slovak producer Rudolf Biermann has already made an agreement with the director Jan Hřebejk. Moreover, *The Glass Room* fits very well for a film adaptation – it has a gripping plot and the majority of events happen in the stunning Glass Room. It thus has an interesting setting (the film is planned to be shot mainly in the Tugendhat Villa) on the background of the changing political situation of the 20th century. There are secrets, sex and deceit, bisexuality and art. *The Guardian* review has a subtitle “A novel of architecture, art, betrayal and sex impresses Ian Sansom” (Sansom 10). Having these features, the novel should be a base for a great film. However, while Sansom anticipates that a film will be made, he also says that it will not be able to correspond with the novel: “The Glass Room is a rare thing: popular historical fiction with integrity. When they make it into a film, which they will, they’ll ruin it” (Sansom 10). The question is whether the director would follow the subtle elegant way the book is written and if he would, whether he would succeed.

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Architecture has always reflected the spirit of the time. The house was built in the First Czechoslovak republic, at the time of big hope and optimism. It represents the modernist movement in architecture and was designed with the vision of a promising future. This can be seen in its architecture as well as in the thinking of its inhabitants. The building features large windows, lots of light, openness to the world, simplicity of rectilinear shapes, no ornaments and yet extraordinary beauty. In the First Czechoslovak republic, the Tugendhat Villa represented the very first modern building and was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2001.

*The Glass Room* gives laymen an idea of the modern architecture of the late nineteen-twenties probably to the same extend as it gives foreigners an idea of the First Czechoslovak republic. A review of the book from Amazon states: “Although I have no great liking for modern architecture, this book succeeded in enabling me to appreciate the vision that the glass house represented, and something of what architects working in angular lines and non-traditional materials are trying to achieve.” The novel truly mediates the essence of modern architecture and its philosophical basis.

“Vincent Scully Jr., Professor at Yale University, has been widely honoured as one of the most original and gifted historians and critics of architecture” (Scully, cover of the book). This note about its author is written on the cover of the book from 1968 called *Modern Architecture* with the subtitle *The Architecture of Democracy*. Although it was published more than forty years ago, the ideas within are timeless, for example the philosophical conception of modern architecture – what was its aim and meaning: “[modern architecture] Like all architecture, it has attempted to create a special environment for human life and to image the thoughts and actions of human beings as they have wished to believe themselves to be” (Scully 10). Modern architecture therefore reflected the change in the thinking of the people at that time – the time after the First World War, which was full of optimism and openness. Scully continues: “It [modern architecture] has acted as much more than a simple reflection of its society. Like all art, it has revealed some of the basic truths of the human condition and, again like all art, has played a part in changing and reforming that condition itself. From its

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first beginnings it has shown us to ourselves as modern men and told us what we are and want to be” (10). According to this quotation, architecture, like all art, is an alive entity that expresses the human condition and also modifies it. It challenges people, their ideas and perspective on life, too.

The Tugendhat Villa was designed by a German-American architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as a large and luxurious villa for Grete and Fritz Tugendhat. It is built of reinforced concrete on a slope of Černá Pole overlooking Lužánky park and the whole city of Brno. Rainer von Abt resembles Ludwig Mies van der Rohe with his opinions on architecture, so the reader of the novel can imagine what Mies’ architectural priorities were. Most importantly, he designed buildings that reflected the emerging modern society. Among the other buildings he designed, there is also the Barcelona Pavilion with a wonderful onyx wall at the centre, built in 1929.

Mies’ philosophy can be summarized by this quote: “Architecture is the will of the epoch translated into space. [...] It must be understood that all architecture is bound up with its own time, that it can only be manifested in living tasks and in the medium of its epoch. In no age has it been otherwise” (Zukowsky 17). Mies himself commented on the Tugendhat Villa: “Of my European work, the Tugendhat House is considered outstanding, but I think only because it was the first house to use rich materials, to have great elegance. At that time modern buildings were still austerely functional. I personally don’t consider the Tugendhat House more important than other works I designed considerably earlier” (Mies 20). Nevertheless, The Tugendhat Villa is definitely considered a functionalist masterpiece of the Czechoslovak republic.

The inhabitants, Grete and Fritz Tugendhat, were a couple who came from Jewish German families of industrialists and traders who had lived in Brno for several generations. Grete expressed her and her husband’s vision of an ideal house: “I truly longed for a modern spacious house with clear and simple shapes. My husband was horrified by the idea of having rooms full of objects and cloths as he had known from childhood.”7 She gave a speech in Brno in 1969 and “it was additionally a moving

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personal communication for art lovers by the woman who had made possible, perhaps unknowingly, the emergence of a work of art which she completely identified with and which became the embodiment of her views of freedom.” The Tugendhat Villa has thus been perceived as a work of art with special symbolism of individuality and freedom.

Recently, the hill where the Villa stands has obtained a new glamour. The Villa was reopened for public after two years of renovation on the 6th March 2012 and is surely worth visiting.

**Practical part**

**The Architect**

While the theoretical part deals with the real architect, Mies van der Rohe, the architect in this chapter is his fictional counterpart, Rainer von Abt. During one of the first meetings of the Landauers with him, he declares himself “a poet of light and space and form” (Mawer 16). Rainer von Abt’s futuristic ideas go hand in hand with Viktor’s belief in *inovace* and *pokrok*, innovation and progress, and that is why he considers the meeting with the architect as fortuitous. His vision is to build the house for the Landauers metaphorically out of space and light, with the use of modern materials such as glass, chrome and steel. He is full of optimism and is an embodiment of the light projected into the Landauer House, which he later on refers to as his finest piece of domestic architecture. Actually, von Abt did not only mean to design a house, but also to create a way of life for Landauers: ‘‘I wish,’ he was telling them, ‘not just to design a house but to create a whole world. [...] I will design you a life. Not a mere house to live in, but a whole way of life.’ He opened his hands as though the life were there within his grasp. ‘Your abode will be a work of art at which people will wonder’” (Mawer 28). It is obvious then that for von Abt, architecture was a kind of manifestation of his ideals.

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There is a mention in the novel that he studied under Adolf Loos, an Austro-Hungarian architect influential in European Modern architecture, a real historical figure who in 1908 wrote an essay “Ornament and Crime”. That is probably where Rainer came to the idea that ornament is a crime, emphasized more times in the novel. Jonathan Hill, Professor of Architecture and Visual Theory at the Bartlett School of Architecture, states that “according to Loos, materials should express nothing but themselves. Consequently, he rejects ornaments” (177). The idea that materials should express nothing but themselves can be interpreted in that way that the essence of a material should be only in the material itself. It should not lie in anything added or removed – in ornament. The lack of ornaments does not mean that the exterior and interior is cold or uninteresting. An example of this is the beautiful onyx wall in the Glass Room, functioning as a partition between the sitting area and the library area.

When discussing the immaterial versus the material, it should be mentioned that von Abt’s idea was essential, that it was his power of idea that gave the house its material realization. The immaterial world – the world of ideas, is always at the beginning of the process of building a house. The immaterial world is thus a basis for the material and this material one can be, under some conditions, perceived as immaterial. And this is what the architect succeeds in, using space, light, special materials and a perfect form. The form he promotes is based on the rectilinear shape with right angles and precise proportions. When the house is finally built, Mawer comments on it with these words: “That was it: perfection. Perfection of proportion, of illumination, of mood and manner. Beauty made manifest” (Mawer 74). Therefore, it is clear that the house does not have only the material dimension, but also spiritual, perfect proportions of the house transferring into the metaphor of an ideal human life. As everything new and non-traditional, the house did not have only positive responses, some people judged it as an unnecessary luxury, some could not understand the beauty of it.

To understand the architecture of the house at that time probably required really a non-traditional approach. Rainer von Abt not only follows the new advances of the contemporaneous modern architecture, rejects ornaments and promotes rectilinear
shapes, light and space; he also transfers optimism and good mood all around him – he makes people feel full of new possibilities.

**Transparency**

One of the basic principles that von Abt follows is transparency. Transparency in the Glass Room is achieved due to the large glass window panes and translucent onyx wall together with the white floor and chrome pillars which give the illusion of it. The house, relating to the Villa Tugendhat as mentioned before, belongs to the modernist movement in architecture. Transparency is generally one of the attributes of modern architecture and Professor Anthony Vidler comments on the way modernity is influenced by it: “Modernity has been haunted, as we know very well, by a myth of transparency: transparency of the self to nature, of the self to the other, of all selves to society, and all of this represented, if not constructed, from Jeremy Bentham to Le Corbusier, by a universal transparency of building materials, spatial penetration, and the ubiquitous flow of air, light and physical movement” (Vidler 144). He therefore infers the transparency of buildings from the transparency of human beings. When compared with the book, the second part about the transparency of building materials and flow of air, light and physical movement almost completely fits the ideas of von Abt. However, the transparency or lucidity of people in the book does not correspond with Vidler’s statement. Human lives interwoven with the Glass Room are actually not transparent that much. Victor is a great example of this. During the housewarming party he claims that the house would be a space of openness where an idea of self would be transparent and *who I am* clear. In spite of this, he keeps having an intimate relationship with Kata, a secret fact that he would never tell his wife. Nevertheless, the Glass Room with its transparency and beauty promotes the openness, transparency of people, the contrary of the Vidler’s idea of transparency of people represented by the lucidity of materials. Transparent living is living when people do not think they have to pretend something.
On the metaphorical level, light, the basis of transparency, illuminates people and lets their fear go away so they can be really themselves.

A reader can sense a strong humanist approach in the novel, the characters being realistic people, not idealized or stereotypical. Mawer writes freely about sex, lesbian orientation, unfaithfulness and deceit. There is not a slightest indication of any kind of judgement, which gives the novel the above-mentioned humanist feature. It is as though the author assumed the coolness and rationality of the Glass Room and writes very objectively. To illustrate this, there are a few examples that step out of the social stereotype – the extramarital intimate relationship between Viktor and Katalin is one instance, Hana’s bisexuality should be mentioned as well. Although married to Oliver, she is in love with Liesel and admits it once they are sitting in the Glass Room.

Mawer expressed his opinion on the transparency connected with the central conflict in his novel in an interview for The Man Booker Prize: “And yet there is nothing less transparent than the human mind and therein lies the central conflict in The Glass Room: the contrast between the ideal transparency of the modernist movement and the awful, looming darkness of National Socialism; and the contrast between the transparency of the Landauers’ public life and the obscurity of their private lives.” So there is also another aspect of transparency – transparency of the modernist movement in general, which is in contrast with the darkness of Socialism. This is connected with the issue of freedom, which is one of the main themes in the novel and discussed in the next chapter. The Landauers’ public life is ordered and clear, no matter what secrets are kept in private on both sides.

To sum up, transparency as conceived in the novel has two dimensions: the translucence of materials of the modernist movement and openness of human character. The first one is in contrast with the darkness of caves people once used to live in, metaphorically in contrast with the past, and with the darkness of Socialism as well. The second is opposed by not so ideal reality of a complex human nature.

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The Architecture of the Book

There is also special architecture of the composition of the book itself. The five parts of the book correspond to the five stages the Glass Room went through during the time. The first one stretches from the beginning of the novel – from the first idea of the Glass Room through its construction and the living of the Landauer family in the house, to the dispossessing, confiscation by the government. That is when the second stage starts, during which the Glass Room transforms into a Biometric Centre making experiments on people, measurements for the allegedly scientific purposes of finding the common physical features of different races (Nordic, Slav and Semitic). Having provided no accurate results the research is considered unjustified and the absurd experiments have to be finished. In the third part the war is culminating and a bomb falls near the house, fortunately only the windows are destroyed. Laník, the former caretaker, and his sister are hiding in the basement when Russian liberation comes. The fourth part maps the period when the house is being used as a hospital annexe, where Zdenka and her colleagues organize rehabilitations for children. There is also a relationship between Zdenka and Tomáš going on and finally ending in the Glass Room. The fifth part, after many years, turns the reader back to Landauer family, because the house is going to be turned to a museum and the invited Liesel and Ottilie fly back from America to see the house again. In the end there is a moving scene when Ottilie and Marika meet again after half a century.

From this, one can clearly see that the book is divided according to the state the Glass Room was in during the time. This may also indicate that what the book is about in the first place is the idea the Glass Room promotes, the idea of openness, light, freedom and eternal present, rationality and balance. Human lives that create most of the story and are very well captured are somehow subordinate to the energy of the Glass Room, present throughout the whole novel. The Literary Review published an article with this thought: “...engrossing [...] Mawer explores his themes with a subtle
intelligence. A novel of ideas, but one driven by character and story” (Bedford 54). The novel is without doubt written with great sensitivity and intelligence and one must simply agree with Bedford. In his review of the novel in *The Guardian*, Ian Sansom puts it well: “The Glass Room is not merely a piece of architecture within the book: it is the architecture of the book. All the characters interact with and within the house in some way; all plot revelations take place within its shimmering walls; history doesn't take place outside it, it comes to it...” (10). This is an accurate description of the way the author writes. In the Glass Room, form and proportion are important and that is also true of the way the book is written. History in the novel is viewed from the perspective of the house, most of the things that happen in the course of time are linked to the house, only a few events are mentioned without reference to it.

The novel is very interesting from the linguistic point of view as there are Czech and German words incorporated into the text to make it more authentic. They also enliven the text, sometimes very playfully. The author was excited, as he claims, when he found out that the Czech equivalent for *room* is *pokoj*, which has also a different meaning in Czech, that of tranquility. Also, in the original *Der Glasraum*, the *Raum* means more than just a room. It is also space. So the Glass Room may be also the Glass Space. This clever use of linguistic ambiguities is one the features of the novel that make it such a good reading.

Another part of Sansom’s review is relevant here: “It is, unexpectedly, a thing of extraordinary beauty and symmetry. The Glass Room is a novel of ideas, yet strongly propelled by plot and characterised by an almost dreamlike simplicity of telling. […] and there are occasional moments of illuminating brilliance, when the novel becomes like the Glass Room of the title” (10). These lines are probably among the best that have been written about the book. The language is really simple in the novel, the same as the architecture of the Glass Room – without ornament. At the same time, it is poetic and elegant, which are again the attributes of the Glass Room.

To conclude, the novel is composed out of five parts that correspond to the state of the Glass Room, the language is simple yet linguistically interesting. The whole work tries to find balance during chaotic times and this balance is projected into the style of writing.
Freedom

This chapter provides different notions of freedom in the novel. Each character in the novel somehow perceives the space and light of the Glass Room. The Glass Room itself can be understood as a symbol for freedom of choice of life people want to live. It is a place of balance where people do not think they are being judged. Of course, various things happen inside due to the different personalities of people. It somehow mediates the characters of these people and qualities they would like to have. The Glass Room is a symbol for freedom, which has generally a positive connotation. However, there is also a negative aspect of the freedom in the novel with negative consequences when taken by people who misuse it. For example the measurements in the Biometric Centre, though meant for “scientific purposes”, can not be justified.

The Glass Room also encourages a pure freedom of thinking. It is connected with an individuality of characters, for instance Tomáš’s conviction that the past does not matter, that the only reality is the present. Another example is Hana and her typical sincerity about her sexuality. Altogether, each character in the novel somehow feels free to think and speak the way he/she wants to, regardless the conventions.

The times of freedom in the First Czechoslovak republic were also the times when art was flourishing. In the Glass Room, the Landauers organize house-warming party and recitals, where piano music of Leoš Janáček and Vitulka Kaprálová is incorporated.

There is another important issue connected with freedom, or actually the lack of it, and that is the Second World War. When the Landauers flee to America because Viktor is a Jew, it is the fight for their freedom. The unenviable position of Jews who did not flee is described too – for example Hana’s husband is Jew and they are both transported to concentration camp, the place which is the very opposite of freedom.

During the period of Normalisation and Communism, both personal and political freedom was suppressed and architecture reflected this, for example the typical blocks
of flats which was only supposed to fulfill its purpose and lacked any kind of artistic value.

Freedom in the novel has also a different aspect – it can be understood as ideas of the architect and the Landauers free of the conservative approach to architecture, that are expressing the modern time of the late nineteen-twenties.

The novel deals with freedom on a personal as well as national level, mental freedom and physical, material one and leaves a message that freedom is nothing more and nothing less than it really is – the unlimited possibility to choose a way.

**The Architecture of Relationships**

The architecture in the book has also another dimension – it can be perceived as the architecture of relationships in the story. This chapter analyses the most important of them, focusing largely on the psychology of the characters and motifs of their actions.

The relationship of the main human characters, Viktor and Liesel, seems to be almost stereotypical one from the public point of view. They have two children, go on holidays and live an ordinary marital life of a well-off family. However, in private, each of them lead their own life, they are different personalities and there is a kind of emotional distance between them. Viktor has a lover, Kata, and a reader finds out at the end of the novel what was expected – that Liesel also had one. Liesel best describes her relationship with Viktor in a letter to Hana after many years, when Viktor is not longer alive: “It is not easy for me to talk about Viktor to you. In a way I always loved him, but he was dishonest with me just as I was dishonest, I suppose, with him. Anyway, he had his life and I had mine. There was even a time when I had a milenec” (Mawer 388).

Very special relationship exists between Liesel and Rainer von Abt. There is surely an attraction on both sides, Rainer often compliments her and they are like close friends. For example, Rainer is one of the first people who know that Liesel is pregnant. Later on, when the baby is born, Liesel wants him to watch her feeding Ottilie: “As she holds the nipple for the baby, she feels Rainer’s eyes on her like a thrilling touch”
The relationship is somehow precious, it stays on the friendship level despite the mutual attraction.

The relationship between Viktor and Kata, his mistress, is on the other hand the sexual one and based on coincidences from the very beginning. They meet unexpectedly; Kata needs some money and Viktor at least a simulacrum of love. However, as time goes on, they meet again and again and fall in love with each other. Later, again by coincidence, Kata comes to the Landauer house as a war refugee with her daughter, Marika, and stays with the Landauers as a nanny.

Interestingly enough, Mawer as a male writer had the courage to describe relationships between women in detail. There are three main relationships between women in the novel: the first one is that of Hana and Liesel, the second of Liesel and Katalin and then there is the relationship of Hana and Zdenka. What they have in common is that they are all somehow strange and nontraditional.

The relationship that stretches throughout the whole novel and is one of the most important is that between Hana and Liesel. Hana loves her as a friend as well as a lover, while Liesel has a husband and two children, so she can not reciprocate Hana’s feelings in all respects. Nevertheless, she likes her very much and they keep meeting. Later on, when Liesel has to flee with her family abroad, they write letters to each other. After many years, when the story is almost at its end, Liesel finds out that Hana survived the disasters of the war and confesses her feelings to her in the letter: “But I never knew a love like yours, Haničko, never knew one so intense and so deep. There, I have said it” (Mawer 388). When they meet after thirty years, Liesel, who has gone blind in the meantime, recognizes Hana instantly. Although the novel is written mostly with an emotional distance, this is one of a few very moving parts.

Another relationship, a very strange one, is that between Liesel and Katalin. Katalin is Viktor’s lover and he had met her years before their encounter with Liesel. Kata comes to the Landauer house by coincidence as a refugee with her small daughter, Marika. Although Liesel finds the behaviour of Viktor near Kata suspicious, everything is kept secret and she does not have any proof of Viktor’s infidelity until one day, already in Switzerland, when the noises from Viktor’s bedroom make it all utterly clear. Then there is a very interesting dialogue between Liesel and Kata, who feels sorry for
the whole situation, but explains her position, that she needed money at the time and that she actually fell in love with Viktor. Surprisingly, Liesel understands that and stays to be Kata’s friend. This conversation is well-developed and elaborate, it is almost a surprising study of female psychology that was not written by a woman.

The third relationship is that between Hana and Zdenka. This one is happening after the war, so Hana is in her late fifties or sixties and Zdenka is a young woman who organizes physiotherapy trainings for children and leads dancing classes in the Glass Room. Hana is as always very open to Zdenka, who is surprised when she finds out that Hana likes her more than a friend. Nonetheless, Zdenka and Hana stay friends despite Hana’s sudden shocking sincerity.

During the war, there is also a relationship between Stahl, a German officer and scientist, and Hana. It is a sexual relationship initiated by her. The problem is that Stahl feels that she has control over him. This unpleasant feeling even deepens when he tells her about his past – about his child that had to die because of a terminal disease. Hana meets him again, claiming that she is pregnant with him. That is the time when his frustration culminates and he becomes violent and rapes her. For Hana, it is a humiliation combined with pain. Moreover, she does not have money and needs it for a baby. The change that Hana undergoes is huge: “It astonishes him [Stahl] how things can change, how she has changed from the woman who first picked him up in the café, the woman who knew things that he had barely imagined, into this fragile creature begging for money.” However, Hana wants the child because she has always thought that she was barren. Sadly, the child is taken from her in a concentration camp where Hana is deported because her husband is Jewish. Mawer said that he had needed to create a friend for Liesel and had thought about the personality Hana should have. She is an archetype of a character which never gives up and despite tragic events always faces the difficulties of life. He also thinks that each family has its own Hana.

Finally, the relationship between Tomáš and Zdenka is one of the most developed in the novel but it will be referred to in the next chapter about time because it is very much related to Tomáš’s understanding of past and present.
There is one more thing which ought to be mentioned regarding the relationships in the novel and that is the impact of the symmetry and beauty of the Glass Room on people and their relationships. The Glass Room promotes openness and sincerity of people and most relationship revelations happen inside it since the characters express their feelings and attitudes freely, without any social restrictions.

The Glass Room and Time

Time is another theme explored in the novel. On the one hand, the Glass Room is depicted as an evolving place, on the other, it represents something constant and steady. At first, it is only in the form of an idea, but Mawer poetically points out that this is an important, if not crucial, stage: “For the moment it was without form or substance, yet it existed, diffuse, diverse, in their minds and in the mind of Rainer von Abt. It existed in the manner that ideas and ideals, shifting and insubstantial, may exist” (Mawer 25). The author then compares The Glass Room, in German *der Glashalle*, with *der Glasraum*, the Glass Space. As one letter changes in German language, the Glass Room metamorphoses into the Glass Dream. When being built, the house is being compared with the child growing up: “The house grew, the baby grew” (Mawer 52). As time passes, the building changes. Not only its exterior is shaped by the war, for example when a bomb falls and large window plates break apart, but also its interior and the way the house is used. (e.g. Biometric Centre, gymnasium etc.) This could be related to its inhabitants who are influenced by the war as well. Clare comments on this: “I particularly liked the way in which the appearance of the building changed over time as, rather like its occupants, it was battered by external forces.”10 The house is somehow personified in this particular aspect, it lives with people and is battered by the war similarly to people inhabiting it. On the larger scale, the deterioration of the house is analogous to the decadence of the moral principles of society during the war, to the fall

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10 Retrieved from the *Amazon* article “The Glass Room” by Eleanor Clare on 3rd April 2012 [http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R36JB4QON7DT13](http://www.amazon.co.uk/review/R36JB4QON7DT13).
of openness and fear of people. The subsequent restoration of the house later on corresponds with the efforts to bring the society back to normal.

A different conception of time is expressed by Tomáš. When he is overlooking the city through large windows of the Glass Room, he contemplates that history is not relevant, that the only reality is the present moment: “Why should I be interested in finding out about the past? The past is an illusion” (Mawer 335). When Zdenka starts telling him about the house, he does not want to hear about the Landauers, about the past that the house once had. Zdenka and Tomáš attend a conference in Paris, where they stay together for five days in a hotel and Zdenka starts thinking about their future together. However, after they return, it becomes the past for Tomáš and the past does not exist for him. When Zdenka asks what is going to happen to them now, Tomáš thinks about the concept of now – “How can he talk about now when now is all that there is? You cannot talk about something except by contrast with other things” (Mawer 341). For him, the only reality is the present and he does not want to commit himself to Zdenka at all. He responds: “‘Now we are going to make love,’ he says. ‘That’s what we do isn’t it, when we are here? This is the perfect place to make love. It has no points of reference, no memories, no illusions. It just is’” (Mawer 341). No points of reference, no memories and no illusions refer to Tomáš’s denial of the past, which is only an illusion for him. The Glass Room is thus also a metaphor for the present moment. As has already been mentioned, it is a symbol for eternity, too. When these two notions are put together, it could be said that the Glass Room stands for a symbol of eternal present – and that is how architecture of a place can give it a spiritual dimension. However, Zdenka can not simply throw the past away – she can not bear Tomáš’s attitude and they start slipping apart. Yet the relationship really ends when Hana brings her a photograph of Tomáš holding hands with another woman, as a proof of his deceit.

A notion that the Glass Room just is, expressed by Tomáš, also occurs earlier in the novel and refers to the whole building: “Architectural should have no politics, Rainer von Abt said. A building just is” (Mawer 100). Regarding the uneasy political times the Glass Room went through, it has really always been apolitical – a perfectly detached place of balance and rationality.
The very last sentence of the novel also deals with the issue of time: “And all around them is the Glass Room, a place of balance and reason, an ageless place held in a rectilinear frame that handles light like a substance and volume like a tangible material and denies the very existence of time” (Mawer 404). The Glass Room here stands for a symbol of eternity. Especially during the war time of uncertainty, change and chaos, it represents the everlasting principle of ideals – ideas, which are ageless and deny the very existence of time.

Materialistic and Spiritual Aspect of Architecture

In the already mentioned BBC interview, Mawer says that the Landauer house has also a transferred meaning, though he had not started writing the novel with that intention: “…I didn’t set out with the idea that this house was going to be a symbol of something or a metaphor for something, but I think the way it’s turned out is that.” The house really is a symbol of freedom and openness as has already been discussed. In The Glass Room, materialistic and spiritual dimensions of the house are intertwining – while the house has a physical, material function, it is also a symbol of freedom and modernist ideas.

When Liesel finds out that the place is going to be turned to a museum, her reaction is: “I am pleased, I suppose, that it should be kept as a museum of some kind although I don’t really like that word. Museums are where you keep works of art, but the house is a work of art in itself” (Mawer 389). It is indeed a work of art in itself, which brings harmony and balance to people who are willing to see the beauty of it. However, there is also another point of view, which is supported by Hume’s philosophy: “In 1757 Hume wrote that ‘Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them; and each mind perceives a different

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beauty’” (Hill 43). And that is an important idea that has not been mentioned yet – that the beauty of the Glass Room, as any other place or thing, is in fact subjective and thus makes different impression on different people.

Regarding architecture in general, the concepts of rationality and sensibility should be mentioned. Rationality and sensibility in architecture should be balanced. Rational architecture is based on the purpose the building should have, on an effective use of it. However, what it may lack when focused only on the form and effect is the pleasant feeling people should have inside. That is the reason for using also a sensible approach when designing a building. The architect Rainer von Abt combines both these approaches, the Landauer house hence encompasses a rational space with beautiful interior and exterior.

There is something detached, impersonal about the Glass Room, something rational that seems to have nothing to do with the war and all the chaos connected with it. For Viktor, The Glass Room is an entirely rational space. In spite of this, something rather irrational, unexpected and surprising happens – Kata with her daughter comes to his house as a refugee because she is a Jewess. The following lines form the novel depict what Viktor thinks: “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 balance of a painting by Mondrian. […] Here everything can be understood as a matter of proportion and dimension. Yet here, standing mere feet away from him, is Kata” (Mawer 137). There is therefore a sharp contrast between the rationality of the space and the irrationality of life circumstances. This contrast figures in the whole novel, the irrational aspects of life versus the rationality of space. The irrationality relates also to the war – rationality, coolness and balance of the Glass Room are in sharp contrast with the irrationality and unpredictability of the times.

The architecture of the house with its perfect proportions, symmetry and geometric forms is based on rationalist ideas. “Rational architects, following the philosophy of René Descartes, emphasized geometric forms and ideal proportions.”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{12} Retrieved from the Wikipedia article “Rationalism (architecture)” on 27\textsuperscript{th} March 2012, \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rationalism_%28architecture%29}. 
As has already been mentioned, the architecture of the house in the novel is inspired by the architecture of the Tugendhat Villa designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Arthur Drexler, who was for 35 years the curator and director of the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote a book about van der Rohe and at the very beginning of it, he compares Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier and van der Rohe. He assumes that: “[…] But Mies has responded differently. [to the technological development of the age] He has made art seem rational, as if it were science” (9). Rationality in architecture seemed to be Mies’s priority. Another reference to his rational architecture is connected to the Barcelona Pavilion: “[…] the Barcelona Pavilion is more than a unique masterpiece. It is the grammar of a complete style, an ordering principle capable of generating other works of art. But within its discipline is the beginning of that conflict between subjective space and a wholly rational order that has since come to mark Mies’ work” (Drexler 20). That means that the ordering principle is also a creative one and that a wholly rational order is not subjective but somehow objective and general.

The term sensibility generally refers to the spiritual, immaterial values of a nation, to its philosophical and spiritual traditions. Mies van der Rohe worked in Europe and later in the US and achieved to make a synthesis between American and European sensibilities: “The most spatial design in Germany during the twenties was that done by Mies van der Rohe. His work of that period also documents the contest between American and European sensibilities, which has been referred to above, and it achieved the most illuminating synthesis between them” (Scully 27).

Around the time of the beginning of the Normalisation in Czechoslovakia, the Landauers, Liesel and Ottilie, come back from America and hear the speech of the chief of the urban planning department. The house is called a jewel of modern domestic architecture. It is, certainly, not only that. For the people who have lived in it, it is much more – a jewel on the immaterial, spiritual basis. Not only does it encompass memories of the good times before the war, but it is also vibrant and alive with emotions, although turned into a museum: “But it isn’t a museum. It is vibrant and alive, a chord struck on the piano that stands there in the shadows behind the onyx wall, a complex chord that shimmers and reverberates, gaining volume with the passing of time, echoing as a piano
echoes to the noise of children and the crying of adults” (Mawer 403). This moving metaphorical description of the house through the chord struck on the piano expresses in one sentence more things – that it is a place for art and a work of art in itself, that it remembers its past and carries all the memories within and that it does not lack anything from its old days’ glamour but is even more impressive.

**Conclusion**

Architecture plays an important role in the novel. The author did not place it into the background but made it an organic part of the story. He depicts the process of the building of the Landauer house from the first idea of it to the details of the furniture. The modern architecture of the house refers to the times between the two World Wars – times of openness, optimism and transparency. The architect represents an embodiment of these attributes, which are also projected into the style of writing of the novel, that is elegant, simple and poetic. Moreover, the author made the novel linguistically interesting because he incorporates Czech and German words into the text to make it sound more authentic.

The contrast between the transparency of modern architecture and the lack of transparency of people lies in the fact that people with their emotions could never be possibly so sincere – transparent as material things. This psychological feature is connected with the architecture of relationships in the novel. Mawer creates very diverse personalities and his characters are not stereotypical or conventional. He succeeds in depicting relationships between women too, although he is a male author.

The whole novel is very realistic – it deals with relationship problems and war problems in a very convincing manner. Nonetheless, moving and difficult things are somehow enlightened and the novel is harmonious, brings optimism and balance. It has, plainly, the same qualities as the Glass Room itself, which makes it so extraordinarily ingenious.
The Glass Room has a number of roles in the novel. The architecture of the whole building and particularly of this room creates many possibilities for its function as well as gives it a special symbolic dimension.

The first role is that the Glass Room functions as a metaphor and symbol. People entering the Glass Room throughout the whole story are different personalities and their lives are usually far from being as transparent as its glass window panes. However, what people do have in common when entering the Glass Room is the sense of awe, space and light. It is a metaphor for openness and transparency of the times of the First Czechoslovak republic, the age of optimism with prospects of happy future ahead. Openness also transfers to people who are in the place, promoting sincerity but also a dark side of their true selves. The Glass Room thus stands for a symbol of freedom on a personal level, though it can be perceived also as a symbol of the freedom of architectural expression of modern architecture of the 1920s. It is a symbol for eternity and eternal present, too.

The second role of The Glass Room is that of a space for living or storage of things. Although designed for the family life, the Glass Room changes its function during the time; after the Landauers flee, it is used for measurements as the Biometric Centre, “a shelter from the storm of war” (Mawer, cover of the book), and as a gymnasium for physiotherapy by the children’s hospital. Finally, it is turned into a museum.

The last role I found is that the Glass Room could be understood as the main character of the novel. Although the main human characters in the novel are Viktor and Liesel, the whole book revolves around the Glass Room and the five parts of the book correspond with the stages the Glass Room went through during the time. All the plot and historical revelations happen inside its large space of glass, chrome and light and material and spiritual dimensions of the place complement each other. Therefore, although it is not a person, it could be perceived as the main character of the novel.

To conclude, the architecture in The Glass Room provides a philosophical basis for the message the novel attempts to communicate. The message lies in the fact that individuality of each person, openness and optimism are able to create the better future
and that the personal freedom and ability to face the problems whatever the circumstances are principles undeniably worth following.

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