

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

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**1. Name of Property**

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historic name **Farnsworth House**

other names/site number

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**2. Location**

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street & number **14520 River Rd**  Not for publication  
city or town **Plano**  vicinity  
state **Illinois** code **IL** county **Kendall** code **093** zip code **60545**

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**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

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As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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Signature of certifying official

Date

**Illinois Historic Preservation Agency**

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. (  See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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Signature of commenting or other official

Date

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State or Federal agency and bureau

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American Indian Tribe

**4. National Park Service Certification**

I, hereby certify that this property is:	Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<input type="checkbox"/> entered in the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined eligible for the National Register <input type="checkbox"/> See continuation sheet.	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> determined not eligible for the National Register	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> removed from the National Register	_____	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> other (explain):	_____	_____

**5. Classification**

## Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private  
 public-local  
 public-State  
 public-Federal

## Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)  
 district  
 site  
 structure  
 object

## Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing
<u>  1  </u>	2 buildings
<u>  1  </u>	_____ sites
_____	<u>  1  </u> structures
_____	_____ objects
<u>  2  </u>	<u>  3  </u> Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register **N/A**

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

**N/A**

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**6. Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

**DOMESTIC/single dwelling**

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

**DOMESTIC/single dwelling**

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**7. Description**

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Architectural Classification  
(Enter categories from instructions)

**International Style**

**Other: Miesian**

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation **Steel**

Roof **Steel**  
**Concrete**

Walls **Glass**  
**Steel**

other **Marble (travertine)**

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**See continuation sheets**

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**8. Statement of Significance**

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Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations (Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

- A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B removed from its original location.
- C a birthplace or a grave.
- D a cemetery.
- E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F a commemorative property.
- G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

**Architecture**

Period of Significance **1951**

Significant Dates

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation **N/A**

Architect/Builder **Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig**

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**See continuation sheets**

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**See continuation sheets**

Previous documentation on file (NPS)

preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.

previously listed in the National Register

previously determined eligible by the National Register

designated a National Historic Landmark

recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State agency

Federal agency

Local government

University

Other

Name of repository **National Trust on Historic Preservation, Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois**

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**10. Geographical Data**

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Acreage of Property **7 acres**

UTM References

Zone Easting Northing Zone Easting Northing

1 **16 372128E 4610442N** 3 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_ 4 \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**See continuation sheets**

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**See continuation sheets**

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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name/title **Anthony Raynsford, consultant**

organization **Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois** date **March 1, 2004**

street & number **53 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 752** telephone **(312) 922-1742**

city or town **Chicago** state **IL** zip code **60604-3699**

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**Additional Documentation**

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

**See attachments**

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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**Property Owner**

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name **Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois (as co-owner with the National Trust for Historic Preservation)**

street & number **53 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 752** telephone **(312) 922 - 1742**

city or town **Chicago** state **IL** zip code **60604-3699**

name **National Trust for Historic Preservation**

street & number **53 W. Jackson Blvd., Suite 350** telephone **(312) 939 - 5547**

city or town **Chicago** state **IL** zip code **60604-3699**

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 1

Farnsworth House

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Narrative Description

The Farnsworth House is located south of Plano in Kendall County, Illinois. It faces the Fox River just to the south and is raised 5 feet 3 inches above the ground of the surrounding floodplain, its thin, white columns contrasting with the darker, sinuous trunks of the surrounding trees. The calm stillness of the man-made object contrasts also with the subtle movements, sounds, and rhythms of water, sky and vegetation. The dominance of a single, geometric form in a pastoral setting, with a complete exclusion of extraneous elements normally associated with habitation, reinforces the architect's statement about the potential of building to express dwelling in its simplest essence. While the elongated rectangle of the house lies parallel to the course of the Fox River, the perpendicular cross axis, represented by the suspended stairways, faces the river directly. With its emphatically planar floors and roof suspended on the widely-spaced, steel columns, the one-story house appears to float above the ground, infinitely extending the figurative space of the hovering planes into the surrounding site. At the same time, the prismatic composition of the house maintains a sense of boundary and centrality against the vegetative landscape, thus maintaining its temple-like aloofness. The great panes of glass redefine the character of the boundary between shelter and that which is outside. The exterior glazing and the intermittent partitions of the interior work together dialectically, shifting the viewer's awareness between the thrill of exposure to the raw elements of nature and the comforting stability of architectonic enclosure.

The architecture of the house represents an extreme refinement of Mies van der Rohe's minimalist expression of structure and space. It is composed of three strong, horizontal steel forms - the terrace, the floor of the house, and the roof - attached to attenuated, steel flange columns. The architect Werner Blaser has described its material reductivism: "The construction of the house is reduced to a minimum - in terms of static, only that which is necessary to fulfill the function: 8 external columns with 6.60 meter spacing support the floor and ceiling slabs. The column-free interior, with a height of approximately 2.85 meters, is divided only by the utility core containing the kitchen and bathroom."<sup>1</sup> This reduction of constructive parts, together with the transparency of their composition, produces an elemental trabeation, a contemporary rendition of the Greek temple. Such constructive expression also tempers the spatial abstraction, breaking up the floating volume of the house into an emphatically composite structure of vertical supports and horizontal planes. At the same time, this trabeated structure is expressed in a radically modernist fashion. Rather than resting on the steel columns, the horizontal planes have been welded to their vertical edges, giving the appearance of nearly weightless suspension.

Following the minimalism of form and structure, the different materials and colors have also been reduced to a minimum. The visible exterior materials have essentially been confined to three: painted steel,

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<sup>1</sup> Blaser, Werner, *Mies van der Rohe, Farnsworth House*, Birkhäuser, Berlin, 1999, p. 39

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 2

Farnsworth House

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natural stone, and transparent glass. The columns, perimeter frames of the horizontal slabs, and window mullions are all composed of steel painted white. The floors, of both terrace and porch, are covered in a grid of rectangular, travertine stones, and the stair treads are covered in similar travertine slabs. The remainder of the exterior is composed of the large glass plates, also encompassing the front door. The interior materials are similarly confined to three: wood, stone, and plaster. The fixed, vertical partitions of the interior core, including the built-in cabinets and wardrobes are all veneered in primavera wood. The interior floor continues the travertine stones of the exterior. Finally, the ceiling is finished in a smooth plaster, painted white. The colors, then, are restricted to a few shades of white and to the light brown of the interior woodwork.

The main volume of the house is defined by the floor and ceiling slabs, connected at their longer edges by the external steel columns. The exterior walls are entirely formed by floor-to-ceiling glass panes, separated only by a few thin, steel mullions. In the modernist tradition of the Bauhaus, the corners are left free and transparent as each end is cantilevered over the landscape. A second rectangular floor, forming the terrace, lies closer to the ground, supported on six steel columns, two of which also constitute the main columns of the house. The glazing encloses slightly more than two thirds of the volume of the main house, leaving an open porch to the west, adjacent to the terrace.

In plan, the house consists of two parallel, gridded rectangles with offset axes, such that one appears to be sliding away from the other, separated only by the width of a single steel column. The smaller rectangle, situated in front of the other consists of the terrace, suspended just below the floor level of the main house. The larger rectangle, whose lower left side lies adjacent to the upper right side of the smaller rectangle, encompasses the plan of the main house. Two short flights of steps, one leading from the ground to the terrace and a second from the terrace to the main house, align perpendicularly to the direction of the two rectangles, producing a secondary axis at the center of adjacency (or apparent overlap) between the two rectangles. This asymmetrical, overlapping relationship between main house and terrace produces a dynamic rhythm between the two otherwise symmetrical and classically composed elements.

The interior of the house continues the spatial themes of the exterior by confining all interior walls to the center and leaving the perimeter glazing entirely free from obstruction. As a result much of the interior volume becomes legible and transparent, continuous within itself and with the exterior beyond. Most of the interior walls occur around the service core, into which are concentrated all the utilities, such as electricity, plumbing and gas, as well as the areas requiring privacy, namely the two bathrooms. This rectangular core, paralleling the rectangle of the main house, lies in the northeast quadrant and contains a linear kitchen along its north wall, facing the north windows of the house. Except at the center, the walls of this interior core do not reach the ceiling plane, allowing the ceiling to float free as an independent object. A lower, free-standing partition in teak, containing a built-in wardrobe, separates the sleeping area on the east from the rest of the interior.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 3

Farnsworth House

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The front (south) elevation is three bays wide and faces the Fox River. Two sets of steps approach the center of the leftmost bay, four steps leading to the lower terrace and five steps leading to the main house. This leftmost bay is open and unglazed up to the right-hand edge of the steps. The steps themselves appear as narrow, floating planes, echoing the larger planes of the floors and ceiling. The enclosed portion of the façade is glazed symmetrically around the third column from the right. Two narrower panes fill in the outer edges of this glazing. The left-hand pane fills in the area between the front steps and the second column while the right-hand pane fills in the area between the fourth column and the outer edge of the house. The two bays on either side of the third column each contain two large, nearly square panes.

The west elevation is one bay wide, with the floor and ceiling planes of the house suspended from the edges of the outer columns that frame the entrance porch. To the right of this main façade, the terrace and steps are visible in profile. The main entrance door to the house, consisting of a double, glazed door, lies slightly to the right of the center of this façade within the porch. These doors, like the windows, are glazed from floor to ceiling. Asymmetrically flanking the entrance are two large panes, equivalent to those on the other façades.

The north elevation mirrors that on the south, except that the terrace and steps are here on the rear of the house on the right-hand side and are only partially visible. An extensive lawn lies in front of this elevation.

The east elevation is one bay wide and is composed of three large, glass panes and two, smaller, operable panes for ventilation. Two large, square panes lie at either end of this elevation, extending from floor to ceiling. The three remaining windows occupy the central third of this elevation, with a large rectangular pane above and the pair of operable panes below.

Since its completion in 1951, the Farnsworth house has been meticulously maintained and restored. The most important restoration took place in 1972, when then owner Peter Palumbo hired the firm of Mies van der Rohe's grandson, Dirk Lohan, to restore the house to its original 1951 appearance. The restoration involved removing the screens, which Edith Farnsworth had ordered to be placed around the west porch shortly after moving in. The restoration also involved replacing the roof, which had deteriorated considerably, and upgrading the climate control systems. The only visible change made to the house itself was the addition of a single hearthstone to the fireplace in order to make it more functional. Palumbo also installed appropriate furniture, such as Mies-designed Tugendhat chairs to enhance the architectural character of the house. A second restoration took place in 1996, after a devastating flood damaged the interior. Although the house was built to

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 7 Page 4

Farnsworth House

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resist floods in 1951, building in the surrounding area has caused higher flood levels in recent decades. After the 1996 flood, the interior woodwork was restored.<sup>2</sup>

The landscape architect, Lanning Roper, was also hired at that time to redesign the area immediately around the house in an English landscape tradition, shortening the grass and greatly extending the lawn to the north. Palumbo has written eloquently about the importance of the landscape in relation to the house. Preserving the stillness and pastoral qualities of the site has, and will continue to be, essential to preserving the architectural integrity of the Farnsworth House.

Also located on the property are a garage, boathouse and pool. The garage was constructed in the late 1950s and is considered a non-contributing structure. As Mies van der Rohe did not make any provisions for automobile use in his original plan, Edith Farnsworth had this conventional, 2-car garage built at the north end of the site, well hidden from the house. The boathouse and pool were constructed for the use of Peter Palumbo after 1972 and are considered non-contributing resources. These structures also remain well hidden from the main house.

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed description of the post-1971 restorations, see Vandenberg, Maritz, *Farnsworth House*, Phaidon Press, London, 2003, pp. 24-27

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 5

Farnsworth House

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### Statement of Significance

The Farnsworth House is nationally significant for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C, both for its architectural significance in the history of modernism and as an exemplary work of renowned architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. The Farnsworth House, built in 1951, is one of the most famous examples of modernist domestic architecture and was considered unprecedented in its day. Together with Philip Johnson's Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, it is one of the most frequently cited examples of mid-century modernism's attempt to reduce the architectonic expression of the house to as few elements as possible while increasing the transparency of the enclosure, thus erasing all the usual boundaries between interior and exterior. Transcending any traditional domestic function or program, the importance of the house lies rather in the absolute purity and consistency of its architectural idea. As historian Franz Schulze has remarked: "Certainly the house is more nearly temple than dwelling, and it rewards aesthetic contemplation before it fulfills domestic necessity."<sup>3</sup> First conceived in 1945 as a country retreat for the client, Dr. Edith Farnsworth, the house as finally built appears as a figure of Platonic perfection against a complementary ground of informal landscape. This landscape is an integral aspect of Mies van der Rohe's aesthetic conception. The period of significance for the property is 1951, the year the house was built.

The idea for the Farnsworth House began at the end of 1945, when Mies van der Rohe was introduced to Edith Farnsworth. At that time Dr. Farnsworth raised the possibility of building a country retreat on a small property by the Fox River. It was a type of commission that very much suited Mies van der Rohe's aesthetic conceptions, and the architect responded enthusiastically to the opportunity. By 1947 the design had been completed, but for financial reasons construction did not begin until September 1949. By the time the house was completed in 1951, the relationship between architect and client had turned hostile. Mies van der Rohe sued Edith Farnsworth for unpaid fees, and she counter-sued for cost overruns and faulty construction. Behind the legal entanglements, however, lay a more personal drama. By historical accounts, Edith Farnsworth had developed a romantic interest in Mies van der Rohe, imagining that the two of them would share many hours together in the country retreat he had built. However, it seems that Mies van der Rohe did not return these affections. Their subsequent legal dispute re-emerged in a national discussion of domestic architecture and the legacy of Bauhaus design in America. In 1953 Elizabeth Gordon, a writer for *House Beautiful*, used Edith Farnsworth's public dissatisfactions with the house to attack European modernism in domestic architecture. In her polemical article "The Threat to the Next America," she accused Mies van der Rohe's architecture of being sterile and unlivable. Indeed, Mies van der Rohe's uncompromising aesthetic statement must have seemed somewhat shocking to many Americans in the 1950s, who were used to a very different image of domesticity.

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<sup>3</sup> Schulze, Franz, *Mies van der Rohe, A Critical Biography*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985, p. 256

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 6

Farnsworth House

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### Historical Significance of Mies van der Rohe as an Architect

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe has long been considered one of the most important architects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and his significance to the field of modern architecture is beyond dispute. In Europe, before World War II, Mies emerged as one of the most innovative leaders of the modern movement, producing visionary projects for glass and steel and executing a number of small but critically significant buildings. In the United States, after 1938, he transformed the architectonic expression of the steel frame in American architecture and left a nearly unmatched legacy teaching and building. Already in 1932, while Mies van der Rohe was still living in Germany, the architect was canonized by Henry Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson in their seminal book, *The International Style*, in which they declared: "The four leaders of modern architecture are Le Corbusier, Oud, Gropius and Miës van der Rohe."<sup>4</sup> Sigfried Giedion's equally seminal, *Space, Time and Architecture*, first published in 1941, summed up the architect's significance in the following words: "If later investigation is made as to which of the architects of our period have best understood how to link a continuously flowing interior space with the shaping of precisely limited forms, Mies van der Rohe will appear as the clearest exponent of the inherent volition of our period."<sup>5</sup> In 1961 a symposium held at Columbia University named Mies van der Rohe as one of the "Four Great Makers of Modern Architecture," together with Walter Gropius, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright. Since that date, the number of academic studies on Mies van der Rohe and his work has expanded exponentially. Mies van der Rohe's students and followers continue to teach and practice all over the world. The term 'Miesian' is now even used to describe a general type or style of architecture derived from his work, a use recognized by the National Register of Historic Places.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe began his career in Europe, becoming one of the pivotal leaders of the architectural avant-garde by the early 1920s. Born in 1886 in Aachen, Germany, Mies van der Rohe had his most important early apprenticeship in the offices of Peter Behrens between 1908 and 1911. From Behrens, whose work for the AEG factory combined classical refinement with exposed steel columns and expansive glazing, Mies van der Rohe learned many of the elements that would characterize his architectural transformation of industrial materials. He was equally influenced in this period by the work of the Dutch architect, Hendrick Berlage, whose structural rationalism and truth to materials Mies adapted to his own work. After World War I, Mies van der Rohe joined the utopian artists of the *Novembergruppe* and founded the avant-garde magazine *G(estaltung)*. His earliest work in this period experimented with the architectural expressionism, with all its romantic and visionary qualities. Around 1920, Mies designed several projects for glass skyscrapers in central Berlin, in crystalline, vertical facets of glass and suspended floor planes, just as German expressionists such as Bruno Taut and Hugo Häring were calling for a revolutionary architecture of transparency and organicism. After 1923, Mies van der Rohe's style shifted, and he came heavily under the

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<sup>4</sup> Hitchcock, H.R. and Johnson, P., *The International Style*, W.W. Norton, New York, 1965 (1932), p. 33

<sup>5</sup> Giedion, Sigfried, *Space, Time and Architecture*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1967 (1941), p. 617

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 7

Farnsworth House

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influence of Dutch neo-plasticism and Russian suprematism. The former influence, along with the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, drove Mies to experiment with independent walls and ceilings arranged in an open, pin-wheeling manner. The latter influence drove Mies to consider the reduction and abstraction of these elements into dynamic and contrapuntal compositions of pure shapes in space. These experiments culminated in one of Mies van der Rohe's most significant works, the German Pavilion built for the Barcelona World Exposition in 1929. Commonly known as the Barcelona Pavilion, this small, temporary structure with little program, has since become one of the most recognized objects in the architectural history of modernism. Composed mainly of a raised terrace and a simple rectangular structure with eight cruciform columns, it set an important precedent for the Farnsworth House. Here, however, the walls are more forcefully expressed, remaining strongly independent of the roof plane, sliding out into the exterior, and causing the space to flow asymmetrically through the pavilion and across the terrace. In terms of leadership and education, Mies van der Rohe was equally significant the development of modern architecture. In 1927, he directed the building of the *Weissenhofsiedlung*, one of the most influential model housing developments of the period, bringing together architects from many parts of Europe, including Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. In 1930, Mies succeeded Hannes Meyer as director of the Dessau Bauhaus, remaining in that position until the Bauhaus was forcibly closed by the National Socialist government in 1933. Less overtly political than many of his fellow modernists, Mies attempted to remain in Germany for a short period, finally emigrating to the United States in 1937, when it had become clear that his architecture would have no place under the Nazi dictatorship.

After his arrival in the United States in 1937, Mies van der Rohe went on to significantly change the American architectural landscape, particularly during the rebuilding that immediately followed World War II. It was in the United States that Mies had his most prolific period, both in terms of the number of projects he was able to build and in terms of the number of followers and disciples he influenced, either directly or indirectly. During this period, he transformed what had been primarily a pragmatic construction technique for large buildings, the steel frame, into a refined art form in which the steel itself became one of the primary expressive elements. At the same time he monumentalized his abstraction of space, moving away from the dynamic, pin-wheeling forms of his 1920's works, and returning to a more severe classicism, with cubic volumes, often raised over carefully paved plazas and asymmetrically balanced against surrounding buildings. Such classicism, however, was interpreted in a radically modernist manner, with the transparent walls and continuous ceiling planes extending sight lines beyond the interiors, in the attempt to represent infinitely receding space. Following a trip to Wyoming in 1937, Mies van der Rohe designed a house for a rural site, the unbuilt Resor house, whose rectangular form would have bridged a small stream. Soon afterwards, he accepted a position as head of the architecture department at the Armour Institute of Technology, soon to be renamed the Illinois Institute of Technology. At his inaugural lecture as director of the department in 1938, Mies stated: "In its simplest form architecture is rooted in entirely functional considerations, but it can reach up through all degrees of value to the

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 8

Farnsworth House

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highest sphere of spiritual existence into the realm of pure art.”<sup>6</sup> This sentence summarized what had become Mies van der Rohe’s consistent approach to design: to begin with functional considerations of structure and materials, then to refine the detailing and expression of those materials until they transcended their technical origins to become a pure art of structure and space. In 1939, he began preliminary designs for the campus of Illinois Institute of Technology on the south side of Chicago. Its composition of low-slung rectangular buildings, arranged as subtly juxtaposed figures on a cleared urban site would constitute one of the most important examples of modernist urban design. In 1946, Mies would begin his work on the Farnsworth house, in which he was able, as in the Barcelona Pavilion, to pursue his ideas of structure and space, with minimal requirements of program. After World War II, Mies would become perhaps the most significant designers of American skyscrapers, transforming the common steel frames of such structures into subtle expressions of module, proportion and detail. Buildings such as 860 Lake Shore Drive in Chicago (1948-51) and the Seagram Building in New York (1958) have become canonical monuments of modernism and are studied by scholars and architects all over the world. This later American work of Mies van der Rohe has been used to define what has commonly become known as the “Miesian” style. Its elements most typically include: the expression of steel-frame construction through exposed steel-flange columns; the careful expression of joints and details; free-standing internal walls; uninterrupted ceiling planes; the use of continuous, machine-tooled surfaces of a single material; and the use of large glass panes on the exterior to produce a transparency of enclosure. Less typically, this style involves the expression of a concrete frame construction, or the solid filling of external walls in brick. Here too, however, the same minimalist aesthetic and attention to details apply.

#### The Significance of the Farnsworth House in Mies van der Rohe’s Overall Work.

The Farnsworth House is one of the most significant of Mies van der Rohe’s works, equal in importance to such canonical monuments as the Barcelona Pavilion and the Seagram Building. Its significance is two-fold. First, as one of a long series of house projects, the Farnsworth House embodies a certain aesthetic culmination in Mies van der Rohe’s experiment with this building type. Second, the house is perhaps one of the fullest expressions of modernist ideals that had begun in Europe but which were consummated in Plano, Illinois. As historian Maritz Vandenburg has written in his monograph on the Farnsworth House: “Every physical element has been distilled to its irreducible essence. The interior is unprecedentedly transparent to the surrounding site, and also unprecedentedly uncluttered in itself. All of the paraphernalia of traditional living – rooms, walls, doors, interior trim, loose furniture, pictures on walls, even personal possessions – have been virtually abolished in a puritanical vision of simplified, transcendental existence. Mies had finally achieved a goal towards which he had been feeling his way for three decades.”<sup>7</sup> In many ways also, Mies was able to realize spatial and structural ideals that were impossible in larger projects, such as the Seagram Building. For example, the I-

<sup>6</sup> Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig, “Inaugural Speech to the Armour Institute,” quoted in Spaeth, David, *Mies van der Rohe*, Rizzoli, New York, 1985 p. 111

<sup>7</sup> Vandenburg, Maritz, *Farnsworth House, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe*, Phaidon Press, London, 2003, pp. 11-13

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 9

Farnsworth House

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beams of the Farnsworth House are both structural and expressive, whereas in the Seagram Building they are attached to exterior as symbols for what is necessarily invisible behind fireproof cladding. In addition, the one-story Farnsworth house with its isolated site allowed a degree of transparency and simplicity impossible in the larger, more urban projects.

The immediate precedents for the Farnsworth House were the Barcelona Pavilion of 1929 and the Tugendhat House of 1930, built in Brno, Czech Republic. At the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies van der Rohe had few programmatic requirements and was able to experiment in the spatial possibilities of transparency and independently expressed wall and ceiling planes. The use of materials and the composition of the plan into the rectangular forms of terrace and pavilion anticipate those of the Farnsworth House. However, the Barcelona Pavilion gives more emphasis to the solid elements on the exterior, resting on a plinth and extending its solid walls out beyond the ceiling plane. The Tugendhat House, likewise, anticipates the use of materials and the disposition of interior walls developed in the Farnsworth House. The Tugendhat House, however, had to accommodate a much larger, more complex program, and consequently, it lacks the Farnsworth House's utter simplicity. A new type of simplicity did emerge in 1938, when Mies van der Rohe received a commission for house in rural Wyoming. Designed as simple rectangular bridge over a ravine, the Resor House, however, remained unbuilt.

The significance of the Farnsworth House was recognized even before it was built. In 1947 a model of the Farnsworth House was exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Describing it, along with the unbuilt Resor House, as a "radical departure from his last European domestic projects," Philip Johnson noted that it went further than the Resor house in its expression of the floating volume: "The Farnsworth house with its continuous glass walls is an even simpler interpretation of an idea. Here the purity of the cage is undisturbed. Neither the steel columns from which it is suspended nor the independent floating terrace break the taut skin."<sup>8</sup> In the actual construction, the aesthetic idea was progressively refined and developed through the choices of materials, colors and details. The Farnsworth House became the undoubted inspiration for Philip Johnson's own Glass House, built in 1949, which similarly reduced to the idea of the house to has few elements as possible, expressed in glass steel, now however, resting on the ground without the extending floor and ceiling planes. At Johnson's House also the steel flange columns are brought just inside the exterior glazing, de-emphasizing the structural articulation of the frame.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, Philip, *Mies van der Rohe*, Museum of Modern Art New York, 1947, p. 162

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 8 Page 10

Farnsworth House

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The Farnsworth House, more than any of Mies van der Rohe's smaller projects, exemplifies what has come to be considered the Miesian style. It embodies both the extreme aesthetic refinement of an architectural idea and culmination of a high modernist tradition. While subsequent debates and lawsuits sometimes questioned the practicality and livability of its design, the Farnsworth House would increasingly be considered, by architects and scholars alike, to constitute one of the crystallizing and pivotal moments of Mies van der Rohe's long artistic career.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 9 Page 11

Farnsworth House

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National Park Service

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Section 9 Page 12

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Section 9 Page 13

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
CONTINUATION SHEET

Section 10 Page 14

Farnsworth House

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Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Beginning at the intersection of Fox River Drive and River Road running east about 500 feet, turning 90 degrees and heading south 600 feet to the Fox River, turning 90 degrees and heading west along the shoreline of the Fox River about 450 feet, turning 90 degrees and heading north about 650 feet to the point of beginning. The property is bounded by Fox River Drive on the west, River Road on the north, and property line established at S01°21'00" on the east and the Fox River to the south in the SW1/4, SE1/4, NE1/4 and the SE1/4, SW1/4, NW1/4 of Section 34, Township 37 North, Range 6 East of the Third Principal Meridian, Kendall County, Illinois.

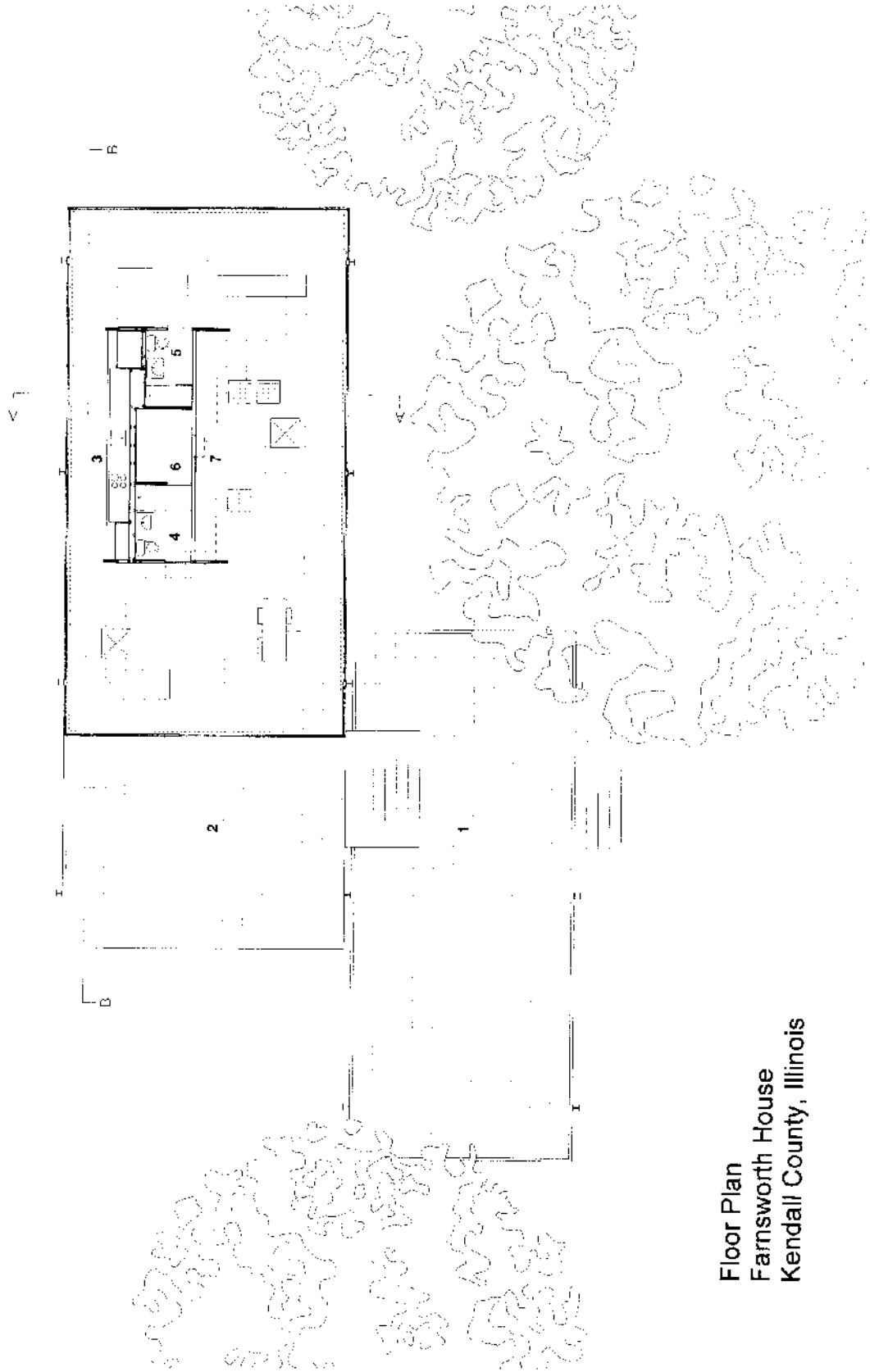
Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the house and the original seven acres of property owned by Edith Farnsworth in 1951.

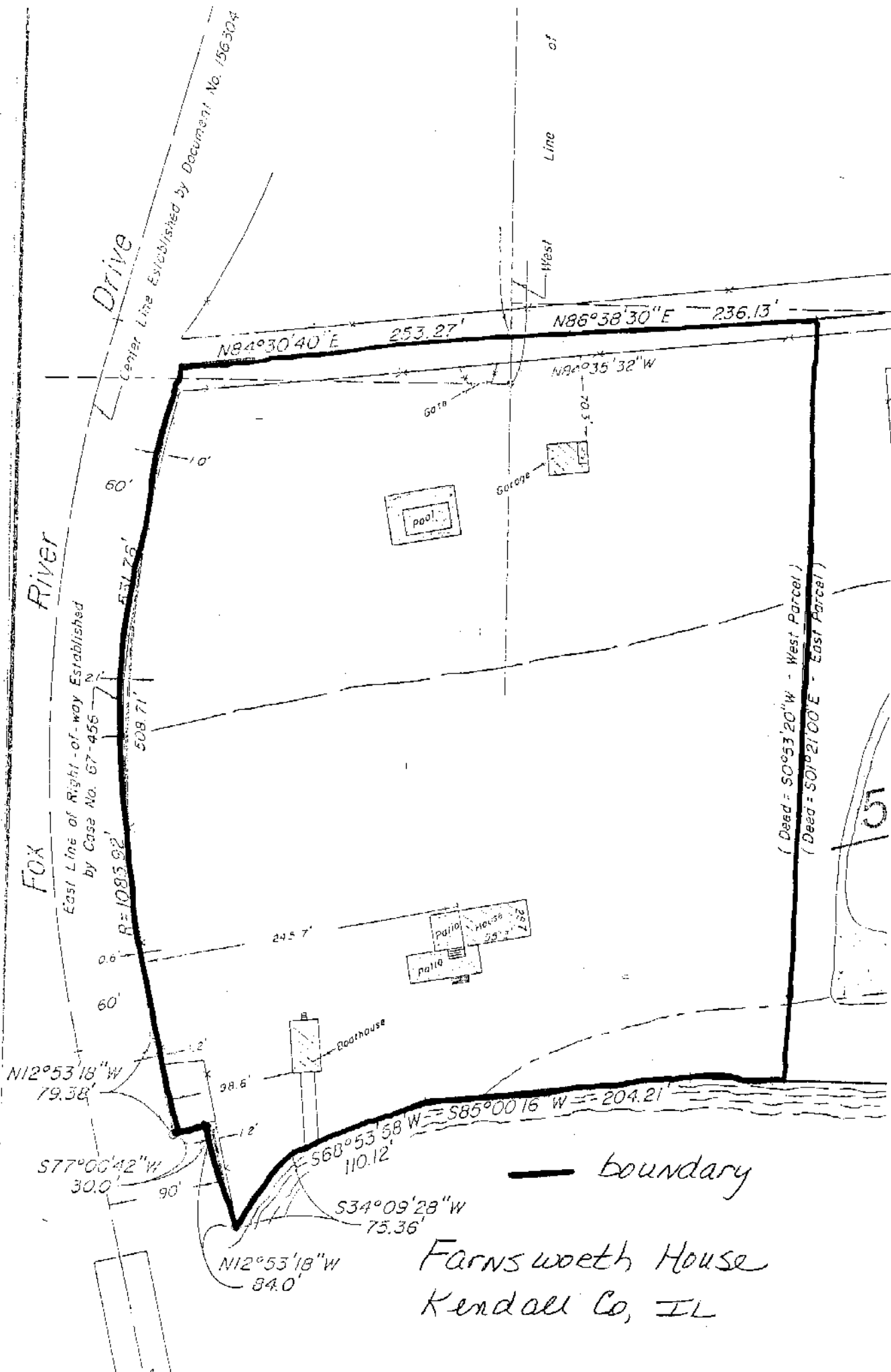
**Floor plan**

scale: 1:200

- 1 terrace
- 2 porch
- 3 kitchen
- 4 shower room
- 5 bathroom
- 6 boiler room
- 7 fireplace



**Floor Plan**  
**Farnsworth House**  
**Kendall County, Illinois**



Drive

River

FOX

East Line of Right-of-way Established by Case No. 67-456

Center Line Established by Document No. 156304

Line of West

(Deed =  $S0^{\circ}53'20''W$  - West Parcel)  
(Deed =  $S0^{\circ}21'00''E$  - East Parcel)

— boundary

Farnsworth House  
Kendall Co, IL

5255 CO 60,  
Johnstown, 04001112,  
LISTED, 10/06/04  
(Ornamental Concrete Block Buildings in Colorado MPS)

GEORGIA, CRISP COUNTY,  
O'Neal School Neighborhood Historic District,  
Roughly bounded by the Seaboard Coastline Railroad, Owens St. 16th Ave. and  
6th St.,  
Cordele, 04000339,  
LISTED, 10/06/04

ILLINOIS, KENDALL COUNTY,  
Farnsworth House,  
14520 River Rd.,  
Plano vicinity, 04000867,  
LISTED, 10/07/04

LOUISIANA, LINCOLN PARISH,  
Hedgepeth Mounds,  
Address Restricted,  
Vienna vicinity, 04001080,  
LISTED, 10/03/04

LOUISIANA, WEBSTER PARISH,  
Miller Farmstead,  
224 LA 518,  
Minden vicinity, 04001113,  
LISTED, 10/06/04

MASSACHUSETTS, MIDDLESEX COUNTY,  
Rocklawn Cemetery,  
Stevens St.,  
Marlborough, 04001115,  
LISTED, 10/06/04

MASSACHUSETTS, MIDDLESEX COUNTY,  
Spring Hill Cemetery,  
High and Brown Sts.,  
Marlborough, 04001114,  
LISTED, 10/06/04

MONTANA, MISSOULA COUNTY,  
Catholic Block Historic District,  
400, 420 and 430 W. Pine St., 435 W. Spruce St.,  
Missoula, 04001084,  
DETERMINED ELIGIBLE, 10/01/04

NEW YORK, CHEMUNG COUNTY,  
Woodlawn Cemtery and Woodlawn National Cemetery,  
Walnut and Davis Sts., West Hill and Bancroft Rds.,  
Elmira, 04001117,  
LISTED, 10/06/04

NORTH DAKOTA, BARNES COUNTY,  
Rainbow Arch Bridge,  
Main St., E, across the Sheyenne River,  
Valley City, 97000170,  
REMOVED, 9/23/04  
(Historic Roadway Bridges of North Dakota MPS)

NORTH DAKOTA, CASS COUNTY,  
Smith, Chesebro, House,  
1337 Broadway,