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## About architecture (in the Barcelona Pavilion) Exhibition as a form of research

Francisco Muñoz

Mies van der Rohe was thinking about architecture when in 1929 he designed the German Pavilion for the Barcelona World's Fair, a building that set out to portray the new Weimar Republic. Without a programme as such, and with hardly any time, its ultimate purpose was to showcase itself as the culmination of a previously dormant research project studying a series of exhibition stands for German industry. It was a temporary museum for a new genre of architecture that depicted the myth of "permanent void" once it was disassembled, with fourteen images considered as examples of a new spatial arrangement. Barcelona City Council was thinking about architecture when it decided to reconstruct the Pavilion in the 1980s, while each year a call is made out to architects and artists to think about architecture by holding a series of temporary installations, highlighting the paradoxical value of the exhibited exhibitor and the (in)visible void ABOUT the key characteristics that (un)define it.



### OVER-EXPOSED. THE GENESIS OF A PAVILION ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

Every exhibition involves a call to talk ABOUT what is being exhibited. Alluding to this does little but underline the need to emphasise and highlight the object on show. Placing something on top of something else is, basically, to delocalise

the object in order to intensify its exhibition by alienating it in that context. A classic museum. But what happens when the theme subject to exhibition is architecture? Or what's more, when form and content are blurred, are their roles exchanged? Or is the framework that makes it possible simply the product of multiple independent elements<sup>1</sup> floating in an infinite space that paradoxically is ultimately the object on show? The latter is the case of Mies van der Rohe's architecture. A type of architecture that could be branded as "museographic" by nature. OVER-exposed. While visibility and transparency are famous characteristics of his work, equally so are the mechanisms of a column, reaching the condition of an object shown in equality with an accompanying chair or sculpture. His genesis was an extraordinary fusion of architecture stemming from the exhibition spaces of trade fairs and the value of each one of the key materials and elements. But it's also a profound reflection ABOUT the void as a guiding axis of the modern project. This is the summarised genealogy of a Pavilion created to showcase a new type of architecture, which today remains an unfinished project.

### THE PAVILION AS AN EXHIBITION STAND

In the 1920s, German industry underwent growth comparable to the pre World War I period, all thanks to the Weimar Republic's expansionist policy that left behind the years of austerity suffered by Germany due to the war. This industry needed to showcase its products not only within the country but also in Europe, and so it opted for a format of industry-specific exhibitions in artificial environments emulating reality. This period bore witness to Stuttgart's Glas Raum glass pavilions and Berlin's Café Samt und Seide, both dating from 1927, when Mies van der Rohe and his artistic and romantic partner, Lilly Reich, were designing for the most influential businessmen, making this format a clear form of research not just into the possibilities of the materials used, but also into the architecture achieved through them. The radicalism of stressing its possibilities, in a clear strategy of "over-exposing the product by saturation", served as an intellectual basis for what would later be the leap "into the void" of a design such as the Barcelona Pavilion. Textile or curved glass walls were eloquent examples from the paradox of a form transformed into content. Focusing and delocalising spaces to showcase a piece, as if it were a work of art, were here subverted in a mixture of abstraction, understood as segregation of elements, which unwittingly (or otherwise) paved the way for a new genre of architecture. Overexposing entails blurring the boundaries between the exhibitor and the exhibited. When the exhibitor is of the same nature as the exhibited, thereby losing its apparent neutrality, the spectator experiences a significant, emotive, recognisable and memorable confusion. A calculated design that mobilised the senses for its compression. When in 1929 Mies van der Rohe was commissioned by the German government to design a space portraying the new state<sup>2</sup> at the Barcelona World's Fair, his approach was to take the maximum advantage of these "test tube" exhibitors and make the architecture itself the object to be exhibited.

Proof of the speculative nature of this process was the non-existence of a closed project throughout its construction and, on the other hand, an evidentiary model-based<sup>3</sup> manipulation of the different arrangements of the walls, the roof, the floor plan and the water surface that define this work. The travertine flooring<sup>4</sup> itself was an abstract grid of real-scale control of the elements. A type of architecture that stemmed from this local constructive order wherein each material considered its own grid pattern. It was as if the symmetrical veins of the marble or golden onyx walls were echoes of other balances of the elements. Canvases of condensed matter fused into multiple reflections of glossy surfaces that normalised a museum setting typical of exhibition installations, which drew on the infinite replicas to dematerialise in a continuous overexposed space.

However, "blindness" was the first category that Bonta addressed when talking about the Barcelona Pavilion in his 'Anatomy of the Interpretation Process'. He attributes it to how much this work was overlooked by everybody (including specialists) in the short time that its "exhibition" lasted<sup>5</sup>. Although it was not exactly like that<sup>6</sup>. Instead, maturity was required to consider it one of the "great achievements of the twentieth century"<sup>7</sup>. Maturity about something non-existent, physically, given that the Pavilion was disassembled. Maturity, in using fourteen<sup>8</sup> photographs to perceive a value that made it worthy of that consideration<sup>9</sup>. Bonta explains it best by saying that when a work of architecture departs from culturally established patterns, it is not enough to see it in order to understand it. "A process of collective clarification must take place, meaning has to be verbalised, and new interpretive canons are to be set up"<sup>10</sup>, he added. And that is something that runs through all Miesian architecture and, by extension, modern architecture. It is inevitable to link its birth and subsequent development to this kind of exhibition object. "If Mies adhered to some sort of logic, he did it in the logic of appearance. An oxymoron between the real and the virtual".

Proof of this is the exhibition between late 1947 and early 1948 at the MoMA in New York by his leading mentor in America, Philip Johnson<sup>11</sup>. On this occasion, appealing to the ambiguity previously used on the German Electric Utilities Pavilion at the Barcelona World's Fair, an open-plan and closed prismatic container is "wrapped" by a group of large-scale photographs that construct an unreal atmosphere that dissolves the clear limits of the box. The same strategy was transferred to the MoMA wall panels, where an image covering the entire height of the room simulated the black-and-white dramatised vanishing point of the horizontality typical of the Barcelona Pavilion. A trompe l'oeil that uses a photograph to show a fluid, unlimited space, conceived from the logic of appearance, of what may be exhibited, rather than from real life.

The final part of the story was about to arrive. We're talking here about the past thirty years or so, ever since the Pavilion was reconstructed in 1986 by three Catalan architects who underlined the intimate nature of this building as an exhibition space. Its innermost DNA<sup>12</sup>. The very ups and downs of this commission from Barcelona City Council to commemorate the centenary of its architect's birth underlined the symbolic burden that surrounded the Pavilion. The refusal of Mies van der Rohe's family led by his grandson Dirk Lohan, or the truly resounding resistance of Philip Johnson<sup>13</sup> himself, were only defused by Mies van der Rohe himself in a letter to Oriol Bohigas describing his interest in overseeing the reconstruction himself. Every detail of this work is in itself a sign of what it means to design a work of architecture for architecture. An object that engulfs its content, which is nothing else than a void that powerfully synthesises this new style of architecture. The arrival in this final stage of a series of artistic interventions has resulted in this hypothesis.

#### EXHIBITIONS THAT ARE TEMPORARY AND...SPATIAL

For over fifteen years, a total of twenty-six temporary installations have taken place, at a rate of one or two per year. The surprising thing about these exhibitions is the unanimity of the results faced with the variety of characters and the artistic

licence on display. What's more, each of them has proved to be persistent in the visualisation of the space. Some "active interpretations"<sup>14</sup> that should be exalted include thinking ABOUT the unlimited, the weightless, the unfinished and the immaterial as defining qualities. "Non-exclusive" denials of attributes of the architectural style<sup>15</sup>. The criteria that shaped the form had, for Mies van der Rohe, remained largely unresolved. Only the "negative" layout of the space as "non-material" could resolve this non-formal "paradox" that ultimately led to the possibility of a space-effective construction independent of its boundaries.

#### EXPOSED SPACE. ABOUT UNLIMITED, WEIGHTLESS, UNFINISHED AND IMMATERIAL ARCHITECTURE

Starting with the unlimited, the true limit found in the Pavilion is influenced by the human scale itself, which ends up in the hands of the materials themselves. A dilation that keeps the dimensional relationships invariant, and therefore, the

form, but not the size. Xavier Veilhan's installation entitled "Architectones" has an impact on this questioning of our perception by manipulating the size of a reproduction of the 2.45-metre-high Georg Kolbe statue "Dawn" (fig. 02). As the only figurative element, its alteration results in Mies van der Rohe's Pavilion failing to take on a certain scale<sup>16</sup>. When we look at a photograph of his works, we need that human reference made in the space. Nothing emanating from there is in that register: no doors, no windows. "There's no sense of human scale to construction when you visit Barcelona..."<sup>17</sup>, "like when Mies van der Rohe asked Miss Farnsworth to pose in front of her house to give it some scale"<sup>18</sup>, because you always run the risk of being in front of a model.

The "unlimited" SANAA installation at the Pavilion consisted of transparent acrylic curtains arranged in a spiral inside the space known as the "throne room"<sup>19</sup>. The strategy was to "change the original with soft reflections that slightly distort the pavilion"<sup>20</sup>. The "play on reflections" becomes even more intense by boosting the reflective properties of the materials themselves and those caused by the curved wall (fig. 03). When curved surfaces are present, these reflections progressively multiply to dissolve the centre. The only one that existed in the Pavilion<sup>21</sup>. On the onyx wall, the axial symmetry of the grain of the material is distorted by the cloud of reflections of the acrylic. Conclusion: a pavilion more homogeneous in its maze-like nature. A maze inside another maze, where limits appear and disappear. They are added or they are cancelled out. Where there is no visual closure, only a distorted closure. The array of reflections shown dissolve the space into an evanescent atmosphere, isotropic in its infinity.

The installation by Enric Miralles and Benedetta Tagliabue<sup>22</sup> alludes to this weightless nature around the existing and fictitious columns as if they both remember this paradoxical condition of "binding" rather than "holding". The panels of the exhibition formed floating ribbons bearing printed documentation of the project on display, forming unclosed centres or alternative plans that did not touch the floor or the ceiling (fig. 04). In the spatial maze, the disorientation of the walkways unites with the levitation of these elements. There's no gravity in this space, just like in the roofs of the Scottish Parliament Building alluded to by this exhibition. The supports are tensors in their meagre materiality; in any case proof of the recognition of the existence, not of them, but of the weightless void which they portray.

Titled "The Mies van der Rohe Pavilion. Second Reconstruction", the installation by photographer Jordi Bernadó<sup>23</sup> consisted of the simple action of disassembling, moving and placing the two sets of doors which existed outside of the place. This was an advocacy of Mies van der Rohe's "view" of his building as a contemporary and intuitive vision of its understanding as an ephemeral construction, considering it a "representation pavilion", as its intention was to evoke thoughts and not its permanent physical materialisation in the space. Mies was convinced that the construction wouldn't last in time and that only the idea and its images would remain. By using plans and materials, "Bernadó interprets that the German architect designed the Pavilion without doors (fig. 01) and ordered it to be photographed without doors"<sup>24</sup>. The unfinished nature was a necessary condition. Essential in the process.

"On translation: Paper BP/MVDR"<sup>25</sup> calls on the written and graphic memory kept by the MoMA as the only temporary reference for which the Pavilion was known for years. Two devices installed next to the file holders in the wall of light were used to incorporate the time elapsed between the original and the replica. Muntadas (fig. 05) understands that the current reconstruction is incomplete, lacking the history of this journey that made it possible, and somehow accepts the impossibility of a temporary reversibility as the Smithsons admitted, when they suspected that "this illusory nature of invention is the most vulnerable when reconstructing the myth: the exact touch of the time, the real smell of the period and the impact of minds and hearts cannot be reconstructed. The change of mentality that the original achieved cannot be recreated"<sup>26</sup>.

In an attempt to show the other realities of a recent yet historical piece, Andrés Jaque highlights everything that is usually hidden (fig. 06) and that is somehow responsible for the idyllic image known to everyone. "PHANTOM, Mies as Rendered Society" underlines the issue of the passage of time in modern architecture and especially in the Pavilion. The impossibility of ageing and deteriorating considers the unfinished as a parenthesis of suspension. A moment frozen in time, which unlike Muntadas erases the ghosts of the future. The complexity of the "shaded" works required to keep this machinery in perfect condition was expressed by Jeff Wall's huge photograph entitled "Morning Cleaning" (1999), in which an attendant

is in the process of cleaning the glass-panelled walls. All bright, new, aseptic, inhuman for its immortality.

The installation entitled "With Milk \_\_\_ find something everybody can use" explores the ever-changing sense of this element, water, which is renewed every day without anyone ensuring the process and which in the Pavilion has a markedly static condition, triggering reflections<sup>27</sup>. Weiwei's "ready-made" proposal consists of replacing the water in the larger pool with milk (fig. 07) and in the smaller pool with coffee. Regardless of the reflections on the timeless meaning of a building, the installation alters the reflection mechanism of these elements, which in the Pavilion are a mobilisation of space, as Hilberseimer said. The Pavilion becomes more unlimited on the plinth of the pool, with the reflection of the indirect light being increased in this case by the action of the horizontal "white plane". On the contrary, though, it reduces the spatial widths triggered by the reflection of water. In the small pool, in contrast, the "toasted" colouring of the coffee reduces the effects of light-dark and the shades in the reflections of the marble. "Glass was a material of similar paradoxes"<sup>28</sup>, because that was the idea, another piece of glass, in this case, reflective. The key idea of the project still lies in its (im)materiality, because any of them, including water, can produce similar visual effects<sup>29</sup>. Equating materials in immateriality<sup>30</sup>.

"Spectral Diffractions" (fig. 08), the sound installation by Edwin van der Heide, uses a reflective immaterial symmetry to "exhibit" as a sound creator. A system of forty loudspeakers, placed on the roof, uses various frequencies to broadcast the partial sound of a human voice, intertwining between them and generating sound patterns similar to those found in the Pavilion itself. These partial frequencies, heard separately, don't seem whatsoever to come from a voice but, given the highly reverberant nature of the materials, the listener hears overlays of simple sound waves and, as they move through the space, can at times hear the sound of this voice, reassembled from its key components<sup>31</sup>.

Finally, Anna & Eugeni Bach transformed the Pavilion into each and every one of these negative qualities with their project "Mies missing materiality", eliminating any exposure of their materials. Covering all its surfaces with a white vinyl that makes it a 1:1 scale model (or 1:20) of itself (fig. 09), "they highlight the representative role of the building; both the original and the replica, depicting the former".

Without a doubt, these temporary exhibitions are representations of an idea ABOUT architecture, of an idea and ABOUT space.

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## Notes

**01.** The pavilion was conceived as an image of the new Germany that meant the impulse made towards modernity by the Weimar Republic. In fact its denomination was "Repräsentationspavillon". Justified in the weak argument of serving as the reception of the Kings of Spain and authorities.

**02.** Mertins, *Mies*, p. 146. "Mies uses not only sketches (mostly made by his assistant, Sergio Ruegenberg) but also a flexible model with a plasticine base to test alternative configurations, moving small glass or plastic panels around, along with glued cardboard strips on Japanese colored papers, to simulate alternative visual and spatial effects".

**03.** That the supply company Köstner & Gottschalk elaborated in Germany before sending piece by piece to Barcelona. It constitutes a whole open puzzle where the 1.10 x 1.10 m module tries to colonize the entire podium by assembling and adjusting infinite corrections seeking to adapt to reality and not vice versa.

**04.** Although J.P. Bonta speaks of a year, the truth is that it was six months his physical existence. Source: Ignasi de Solà Morales, Cristian Cirici, y Fernando Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe: El Pabellón de Barcelona*, ed. Gustavo Gili (Barcelona, 1993).

**05.** Solà-Morales describes a significant number of favorable reviews from the beginning, and that it was a known work without reaching its current status of myth.

**06.** Bonta, *Anatomía de la interpretación en arquitectura. Reseña semiótica de la crítica del Pabellón de Barcelona de Mies van der Rohe*.

**07.** They were sixteen, of which only Mies authorized fourteen. They have thirteen in the Mies van der Rohe Foundation in Barcelona.

**08.** Mertins, *Mies*, p. 139.

**09.** *Ibid.*, p. 2.

**10.** The content of the exhibition is well known thanks to the book *Mies van der Rohe* by Philip Johnson, published as a catalog by MoMA in 1947. This is the first book about the German architect, so it became the canonical account of his person and his work.

**11.** DE SOLÁ MORALES, Ignasi, CIRICI, Cristian, y RAMOS, Fernando, *Mies van der Rohe: El Pabellón de Barcelona*, ed. Gustavo Gili (Barcelona, 1993), p. 30.

For fifty-seven years he was known for a series of images. He himself is a representative image of modern architecture. Its reconstruction, materialized image of the original. Ignasi Solà-Morales defended his reconstruction not as a copy but as a "reinterpretation".

**12.** MUÑOZ CARABIAS, Francisco, *La paradoja de Mies: Las simetrías invisibles a través del Pabellón de Barcelona*. Tesis doctoral. 2016. ETSAM-UPM. Philip Johnson, in an emotional letter, tries to convince Oriol Bohigas, responsible at the time of town planning, not to rebuild the Pavilion in these arguments: "I would rather remember the pavilion from photographs than try to build a building which I feel could in no way be accurate enough to represent Mies' ideal". In Johnson's opinion, Mies's ideal was a compendium of images. The emblem building of architectural modernity and the most paradoxical, whose conception was closely linked to space, had to remain in the virtuality of fourteen images manipulated by Mies himself.

**13.** As indicated on the page of the Foundation. <https://miesbcn.com/es/totes-les-activitats/intervention-es/>

**14.** MUÑOZ JIMÉNEZ, María Teresa, *Cerrar el círculo y otros escritos* (Madrid: CoAM, 1989), "La casa Tugendhat: El canon de lo moderno", p. 256. "The unhindered deployment of the Miesian space occurs, indeed,

on more negative criteria than positive ones"

**15.** CARTER, *Mies van der Rohe at work*, p. 24.

**16.** MARTÍNEZ SANTA-MARÍA, *El árbol, el camino, el estanque, ante la casa*, p. 67.

**17.** ESPUELAS, Fernando, *Madre Materia* (Madrid: Lampreave, 2009), p. 82.

**18.** Planned as the setting for the signature in the guestbook by the Kings of Spain.

**19.** SANAA, *Intervención en el Pabellón de Mies van der Rohe*, ed. Actar (Barcelona, 2010), p. 8.

**20.** DE SOLÁ MORALES, CIRICI, y RAMOS, *Mies van der Rohe: El Pabellón de Barcelona*, p. 14. "The figures that the onyx produced, its bright and diffuse color and its large dimensions (235x135x3 cm each slab) turned this rich material into a true jewel that caused, perhaps stronger than any sculpture, a center of interest in the fluid circulate inside the building".

**21.** The Barcelona Pavilion is the place chosen to present the project of the Scottish Parliament building. They had previously presented the installation designed for the week of the Venice Architecture Biennale.

**22.** From March 13 to April 21, 2014.

**23.** BERNADÓ, Jordi, *Segunda reconstrucción*. Second reconstruction. Exhibition catalog. (Barcelona, Fundación Mies, 2014).

**24.** March 6 - May 5, 2009.

**25.** SMITHSON, Alison, SMITHSON, Peter, *Changing the art of living* (Gustavo Gili, 2001), p. 36.

**26.** Hilberseimer, *Mies van der Rohe*, p. 25. "The space seemed to be in motion, flowing from one part to another, the fusion with the stagnant water and finally with the outer space".

**27.** Constant, "The Barcelona Pavilion as landscape garden: Modernity and the picturesque", p. 49.

**28.** RILEY, Terence y ÁBALOS, Iñaki, "Mies, Solà-Morales and the" adventure "of circulation and reflection", en *Teorías de la arquitectura*, 1ª ed. (Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña, 2003), p. 50.

**29.** For Descartes, space is identified with extension, and extension is linked to material objects, according to which everything there is matter, Einstein's idea is different because the impossibility of emptiness does not occur because everything is extension (material objects according to Descartes or only fields) but because where there is no matter there is some kind of field, magnetic, electric or gravitational.

**30.** In the words of the author: "To describe and analyze a sound we can break it down into its sinusoidal overtones. This implies a hierarchy of that sound over its overtones. "The installation tests an autonomous control of the different overtones, with the purpose of reversing this hierarchy. The overtones are treated as independent entities (such as the material elements of the pavilion) that can form certain dynamic relationships, but also maintain an autonomous or "intermediate" state.

## Images

**01.** Jordi Bernadó. The Mies van der Rohe Pavilion. Second Reconstruction. 13/05/2014 – 21/04/ 2014. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**02.** Xavier Veilhan. Architectones Barcelona Pavilion. 26/06/2014 – 31/08/ 2014. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**03.** SANAA. Intervention in the Pavilion. 26/11/2011 – 18/01/ 2012. ©. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**04.** Enric Miralles y Benedetta Tagliabue. Exhibition: Scottish Parliament Project. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**05.** Muntadas. On Translation: Paper BP/MVDR. 05/04/2009 – 05/05/ 2009. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**06.** Andrés Jaque. PHANTOM. Mies as Rendered Society. 13/12/2012 – 17/01/ 2013. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**07.** Ai Weiwei. With Milk \_\_\_ find something everybody can use. 09/12/2009 – 30/12/ 2009. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**08.** Edwin van der Heide. Spectral Diffractions. 11/06/2014 – 14/06/ 2014. © Mies van der Rohe Foundation.

**09.** Anna & Eugeni Bach. Mies Missing Materiality. 8-11-2017 < 28-11-2017. ©Adrià-Goula.

## 13

# The museum of innocence: the construction of a story

Jaime Ramos  
Ana Santolaria

*The Museum of Innocence* is a novel and a museum created by Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk that tells the story of two young lovers in Istanbul through the objects of everyday life. *The Museum of Innocence* project is a collection of objects arranged in the form of a novel and displayed in a museum, calling attention to the importance of the narrative both in the building of the collection and in endowing the museum with spatial form.

It is a tale of passion, told through the objects that trigger the characters' memories in different places in the city. For this reason, it is also the story of a time and a city. In particular, it is a reflection on the importance of our houses, of the people who live in them, their objects and their stories, and how they can be turned into museums.



- "You know that I've been taking away things from this house, Aunt Nesibe," I said, with the ease of a patient who can at last smile about an illness he was cured of long ago. "Now I'd like to buy the house itself, the entire building."

- (...)

- Kemal, my son, I can't leave this house and all its memories...

- We will turn the house into a place where we can display our memories, Aunt Nesibe"<sup>1</sup>.

(fig. 01) Kemal Basmaci, the protagonist of the novel *The Museum of Innocence*, is a young businessman from a wealthy family. His distant cousin Füsün Keskin, on the other hand, is a girl from a humble family, the daughter of a retired teacher and seamstress. At the beginning of the story, one afternoon in 1975, Kemal encounters his cousin, now a very attractive young woman, and falls completely in love with her.

*The Museum of Innocence* (2008), a work by the acclaimed Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk, winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize for Literature, narrates the obsessive relationship between these two young people from Istanbul, painting in the process a portrait of the social and cultural landscape of a period in time through the objects of everyday life. *The Museum of Innocence* is the story of a life and a passion, narrated through the objects that trigger the characters' memories in different places in the city. For this reason, it is also the story of a time and a place.