

# Mies in the Basement.

## The Ordinary Confronts the Exceptional in the Barcelona Pavilions<sup>1</sup>

Andrés Jaque

### The Unaccounted-For Inaccessible Basement

Although not easy to recognise at first sight, this photograph depicts something that is decisively shaping the way most of us view a key item in the modern architectural legacy: the basement of the 1986 reconstruction of the German Pavilion that Mies van der Rohe originally built for the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition (Fig. 1). The original 1929 Pavilion just had a foundation, but its 1986 reconstruction included a reinforced concrete underground enclosure, that occupies the Pavilion's entire footprint. The pieces of broken glass leaning against the concrete wall were originally installed as one of the grey-tinted panes that filter the light as one looks to the southwest from the Pavilion's main space (although their shade is slightly lighter than in the original glazing brought from Germany in 1929).

In 2010, I was invited to create an installation that was exhibited at the Barcelona Pavilion itself in 2012. The Pavilion is one of the most venerated works of architecture, which means that any intervention within it is read not just as a self-referenced action but also as a way to challenge architecture as a discipline, and as a factual manifesto of an architect's practice and position. Any transformation of the Pavilion's image or

spatial configuration, even if temporary, inevitably unleashes debates on the way architecture evolves and how its boundaries are transformed. Seeking to avoid any fetishistic or metaphysical approach to the Pavilion, however, I decided to initiate the process involved in designing the installation by first taking stock of the place as it stands now, in its actual materiality. I wanted to make an inventory of the Pavilion's basic facts on a wholly pragmatic basis: from the standpoint of materials, maintenance and management; to the way the building is preserved and reproduced as a piece of real, everyday architecture; to the forms of habitation into which it has been configured. And so I found myself underground doing something no one had ever attempted to do before: namely, taking pictures of the hitherto unnoticed basement of one of the most photographed architectural icons of Modernity. The Pavilion's basement is the place where an assortment of derelict items is hidden from the eyes of visitors: red velvet curtains that are beginning to fade, worn-out white leather cushions from the famous Barcelona chairs and stools, broken pieces of travertine that have been replaced by new slabs (Fig. 2, 3).

The concept of transit seems to be the key for understanding the actual way that the Pavilion is constructed. While the building has been characterized many times as something that contains the unchanged legacy of Modernity, it is actually made out of transitory realities. The Pavilion is not a snapshot of a single moment, but instead a blurred photo depicting layers of moving and transitory realities. The Pavilion was a project to bring the Weimar Republic into Barcelona, constructed by German architects, in transit in a foreign city, on their way to moving from one concept of architecture to another, to represent a society starting to gain distance from the post-war in order to become something new. The structure was made of materials that had travelled from Algeria, Italy, and Switzerland; opened by a king about to leave the country for good; and later reconstructed by architects willing to see



Fig. 1 Fragments of grey-tinted glass stored in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion.

<sup>1</sup> A first version of this text was presented at the Columbia GSAPP Seminar on Critical, Curatorial and Conceptual Practices in Architecture entitled "Interpretations: Promiscuous Encounters" on March 23, 2012. The text was presented as an address that was critiqued and discussed by Keller Easterling, Markus Miessen and Felicity D. Scott, among others.



Fig. 2 Fading curtains stored in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion.



Fig. 3 Fragments of marble stored in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion.

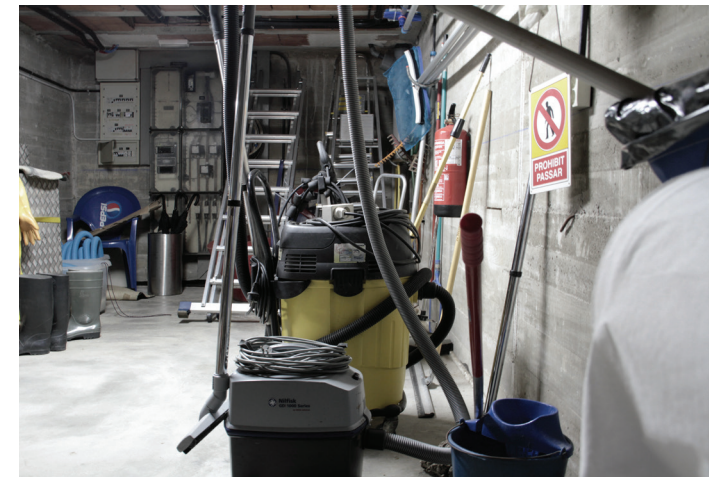


Fig. 4 Props and equipment for events stored in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion.

their political and cultural environment evolve, with the support of institutions hoping to retell the history of Modernity. The Pavilion was redesigned on the basis of criteria which had already shifted from Modernism to Postmodernism, which then moved to the 'landscape approach' that is now being challenged in the discussions unleashed by new decisions required in the maintenance of the Pavilion, with arguments related to ecosystemic thinking. The two-story Pavilion seems to be the specific architectural translation of an assembly of realities in the course of changing. Many things have happened in the last forty years. Works like those by Cedric Price, Gordon Matta-Clark, the International Situationists, Stalker or Ant Farm—to list just a few—or very recent social movements like 15M, Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, Fair Trade or LGBTQ have focused not on 'final states' or non-evolving entities but on the implications and features of symbolic, material, political and social transits. The Barcelona Pavilion, precisely because it was reconstructed for the impossible project of freezing May 1929 reality, required the development of a specific architecture to deal with and hide the change. It is not the German Pavilion any more, but the translation of something that was perceived as an immutable reality (when it was not), precisely because it was effectively working as a device to manage change and make it invisible.

As part of a two-year research project, I recorded long conversations with people who had been involved in the 1980s reconstruction of the Pavilion, as well as with those in charge of its management and maintenance, including architects, public administrators, security guards, gardeners, cleaning staff and managers. While in aspects such as

2 It is interesting to see how this ellipsis of the ordinary both in architecture and in its archives constituted a shared sensibility in the 80s among many Spanish architects. For instance, Alejandro de la Sota wrote in 1996: "A scruffy person should not enter Mies' Barcelona Pavilion. This is important [...] This applies to people. It also applies to things. You should not have a house full of architecture that has been hidden, full of things that are visible. Architecture selects things and people. Then we see, in good Architecture, when it is empty, people and things that, without being there, are present. If they are not there, it is because their presence has been renounced and good architecture is full of all sorts of renouncements." De la Sota, A. (1986). *Pabellón de Barcelona. Arquitectura* 261–63, p.4.

form, composition and precious materiality the Pavilion has been massively documented, its ordinary life has remained an almost totally unstudied reality.<sup>2</sup> This discrepancy explains why the basement has been an unknown entity for twenty-five years.

One would normally expect such things as distressed curtains and glass fragments to be either somehow reused or summarily thrown away, and yet the Pavilion's maintenance staff seem to feel the contradictory need to both preserve and hide this mass of assorted clutter. The unseemliness or impropriety of all these items in their current state of decay is paradoxically accompanied by the countervailing awareness that, although as aging objects they may no longer be fit to respond to the immediate experience of the never-aging Pavilion (or Mies van der Rohe's sense of propriety, for that matter), they nevertheless retain a measure of value that justifies the effort (rather extraordinary in the case of the heavy travertine slabs) required for their storage and preservation in the basement. It is a game in which all these un-dead, un-discarded fragments of the Pavilion's original brilliance are hidden from view, allowing everyone to pretend they did not exist, while their continued existence is ensured all the same. These hidden items are the architectural equivalents of the eponymous picture in Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. In the eyes of the people in charge of maintaining the building, it is as though the dilapidated pieces of velvet, glass or travertine, by virtue of having once been part of the Pavilion's material substance, somehow magically retain the structure's soul: in other words, the essence of Mies van der Rohe's critical programme. The visible presence of these items on the ground floor would

paradoxically jeopardize this programme, as they can no longer fully enact it in their current ruinous condition. Like the portrait in Wilde's novel, they must be simultaneously hidden and preserved for the sake of what they once ideally represented. The Pavilion's basement is also the space where a number of other items are stored: mostly spare parts, tools and machines with the power to prevent us from seeing the qualities of objects in and around the building—the purity and transparency of water, the shape of the bushes, the cleanliness of the glazing—as evolving features rather than permanent states (Fig. 4). All the hardware required to manufacture an aesthetics of the unchanging, based on images of a fixed, predictable nature, needs of course to be kept out of sight to hide the evidence that the world does not actually match any of these properties. Likewise, in the basement's northwest area, the flags of Barcelona, Catalonia, Europe, Germany and Spain are preserved in brown boxes to dispel any perception of the Pavilion's politico-institutional contexts as multiple or controversial.<sup>3</sup> In the central room one can see a number of assorted props and gear (spotlights, pedestals, microphones, etc.) which are employed in events for which the Pavilion is rented on certain occasions, and then which are immediately removed from sight and carefully stored away after the end of the functions.

At one end of the basement, connected to the water filtering system of the Pavilion's larger pool, is a sink where the staff wash the dishes they use when they dine together around a plastic table. On the wall right above the sink, staff workers have carefully pinned pho-

tographs, portraits, exhibition flyers and newspaper cut-outs—not so different from those Mies himself employed to envision and materialise his un-built projects. Their shared intimacy and their affective ties gain visibility there in the basement, but leave no trace on the floor above.

When reconstruction of the Pavilion was in the design stage during the 1980s, a point was reached where a critical decision had to be made. The architects then in charge of the reconstruction—Cristian Cirici, Fernando Ramos and Ignasi de Solà-Morales—confronted an unavoidable problem: whether or not to make the staircase leading to the basement accessible for people with disabilities in accordance with current regulations. Eventually, after a number of alternative schemes were considered, the team of architects decided that the only access to the basement would be via a rather dangerous and uncomfortable sixty-three cm wide spiral staircase. This design choice was deliberately intended to pre-empt the possibility that the basement would ever be included in tours for visitors to the Pavilion. Arguments were made as to the role possible exhibitions located in the basement might play in helping visitors understand various aspects of the original 1929 Pavilion and its 1986 reconstruction, such as their historical and political contexts; their underlying technological and constructional materiality; the locations in Algiers, Germany, Egypt, and Italy where the building materials had come from; or even the wealth of documentary resources potentially accruing from the partnership between New York's MoMA, the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Berlin, the Escuela

3 The difficulty may be considered of attending representations that have changed since 1929 as much as the German, European or Spanish, or as controversial as the Catalanian or, again, the Spanish. Furthermore, the Pavilion's entitlement has evolved and presents representational difficulties, in the way it passed from being the Weimar Republic's German Pavilion to becoming the Barcelona Pavilion. All these conflicts have a material witness in the collection of flags kept in the basement.

4 With the demolition of the Instituto Nacional de Industria building (a concrete structure located on the east side of the Barcelona Pavilion) an opportunity arose to keep its basement as an interpretation center connected with the Pavilion's basement. This possibility was discussed and discarded. Fernando Ramos in conversation with Andrés Jaque. Barcelona, 2012.

