

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

Mies in the Basement.

The Ordinary Confronts the Exceptional in the Barcelona Pavilions¹

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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, wornout 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 postwar 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

1 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.

120 Jaque 121



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.

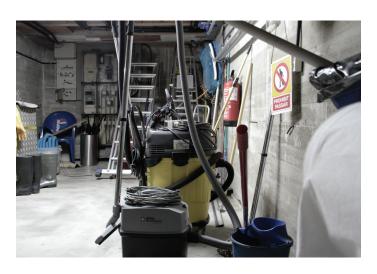


Fig. 4 Props and equipment for events stored in the basement of the Barcelona Pavilion.

122 Jaque 123

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 LGTBO 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

form, composition and precious materiality the Pavilion has been massively documented, its ordinary life has remained an almost totally unstudied reality.² 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

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. 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 buildingthe 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 politicoinstitutional contexts as multiple or controversial.3 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-Moralesconfronted 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

124 Jaque 125

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 Catalonian 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.

Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Barcelona and the Barcelona City Council—all to no avail.

The overriding concern was and still is to this day—to preserve the 'original experience' of the building as a reception space, shorn of any attributes suggesting any other possible exhibition functions.4 Commitment to that goal has been renewed on a daily basis ever since the Pavilion was reconstructed. When interviewed, the architect currently in charge of supervising the maintenance of the Pavilion stated: "When an event is organized [such as a cocktail party or the shooting of a commercial],⁵ I make sure that the look of the place remains, as far as possible, the same as you can see now: an empty space, let's say, with nothing in it. And what does that mean? It involves a host of functional difficulties, you know. But that [original look] is what I have to protect, preventing many things from being placed here. [...] When it comes to intervening in the building, it's important to ask oneself what Mies van der Rohe would have done. Don't you agree?"6 This reference to Mies' criteria was already vital during the process of reconstructing the Pavilion. The difference between Mies' a priori criteria and the interferences of ordinary circumstances in shaping the 1929 Pavilion became important from the very beginning of the reconstruction work.

The study of the documents and photographs that recorded the short

existence of the 1929 Pavilion shows that its design and materiality were not as pure and coherent as the architects involved in the reconstruction initially thought. They decided to make a distinction between what they called "Mies' idea" and what they thought had been the result of circumstantial accidents. "Mies' idea" was what they had to reconstruct, and the other facts were what they had to eliminate in the reconstruction. This criterion was disclosed in an article published by Cirici, Ramos and Solà-Morales in 1983: "If we talk about idea and materialisation, it is because from the study of the project documentation and other works by the architect from the same period, we learn that the execution of the building—either for economic reasons, lack of time, or simply due to technological limitations—did not always imply realisation of the idea that before, during, and after was proposed as characteristic of the building."7 This way of thinking, pervasive both in the reconstruction and in the maintenance of the Pavilion, proposes the improbable possibility of the autonomy between ideas and circumstances. This approach also suggests that, during the process of reconstruction, the German Pavilion's value was considered to be that coming from the unmediated translation of Mies' thinking into material architecture. The Pavilion's value was not accounted for as the result of the confrontation of a number of collective projects. Those

5 It is important to note that even though the 1929 Pavilion was very much engaged with the task of selling the German industry of the time, and that the structure was part of a fair oriented to maximize commercial exchange, there is a hidden agreement among many people that it should remain liberated from any commercial or advertising engagement, Just to provide an example, Ascensión Hernández Martínez, in 2004, stated in an academic address: "[The Barcelona Pavilion] curiously because of its symbolic value as an icon of modernity is frequently used as the scene of numerous commercial shoots for very different products, that by the way produce in us a certain sadness." Hernández Martínez, A. (2004). "¿Copiar o no copiar? He ahí la cuestión." Paper presented at the XV Congreso Nacional de Historia del Arte (CEHA), Palma, October 2004.

6 Architect in charge of the maintenance of the Pavilion in conversation with Andrés Jaque, 2011.

7 Cirici, C., Ramos, F., de Solà-Morales, I. (1983). Proyecto de reconstrucción del pabellón alemán de la Exposición de Barcelona de 1929. Arguitecturas 44, p. 10–11.

collective realities, when considered, were mainly expressed in the shopdiscussions as problematic facts that prevented Mies' genius from fully developing. From my point of view, the story could be explained in a different way. Both pavilions might be seen as collective arenas in which a number of sensitivities, interests, and projections were confronted and experimented with. From this perspective, the conflicts between the preconceived ideas and the way they were realized—like the lack of time the fair authorities imposed in 1929, economical limitations, ideological conflicts or technical decoupling—are actually what would need to be considered as the authentic outcome of the two collective constructions.

The Pavilion as Social Construction.

Collective Awareness vs. Shared Non-Calculability

The function the basement serves can thus be summarised in the following terms: it is the mechanism whereby the traces and reminders of all the negotial ations, experiments, accidents, dis sions, evolutions, and compromi define the Pavilion's enduring through time, in nature, acr ent political contexts and nomic schemes—are b and effectively render Pavilion's baseme the place where by an import around the vation,

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different in functional terms.

Considering the way that visitors relate to the building, it might be said that the architecture of the ground floor is designed to make visitors aware of a number of selected realities, people and stories—for example, materials: marble, onyx, velvet, glass; Mies; Minimalism; and Georg Kolbe's Dawn, the sculpture standing in the green pond. This awareness is achieved through the interaction of a number of carefully designed fead tures, ranging from the Pavilion's lo tion to its formal and spatial lay its connection with the city. The ment, in the way it is used # nary facts from visitors' ates unawareness in the visi ing we might call shared Λty.

Managing eness, making things nd challenging b xing or setting ob its through section we normally assig ics. Upon clo any of these daily life tions, technical this case, spiral lls, sinks, filter with flags in them, It extent, could itectural in nature. to be understood deavour to create new , there is much to e role architecture plays of daily life visible or lable or non-calculable, non-prestigious, accounted ounted for, Among many other Barcelona Pavilion, in its two-, is making these distinctions.

> What does it mean to be an inhabitant of the two-story Pavilion?

What can we learn from the encounter between both floors?

The significance of all these issues in the context of contemporary architectural practice needs to be explained further.

As is invariably the case, architectural

in network theory to a type outs and outputs are accountthe transference process remains opaque and excluded scrutiny.