

BARCELONA 1929

MIES VAN DER ROHE



THE SECRET LIFE OF COLUMNS

FRITZ NEUMEYER

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After visiting the Barcelona International Exposition in the summer of 1929, the German architect and art historian Walther Genzmer published two articles on the Exposition, in which he gave a firsthand account of the German Pavilion designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Compared to all of the other exhibition buildings and their rather poor artistic and architectural performance, only the Pavilion by Mies managed to be, in Genzmer's words "somehow arousing as well as demanding intellectual engagement".¹

This explicit appeal both to the senses and to the mind has evidently kept the spirit of fascination with this icon of twentieth-century architecture alive to the present day. Although it existed as a building only for the short lifespan of six months, and thereafter only in a small set of black and white photographs, this rather limited form of existence did not prevent the Pavilion from being established as one of the definitive monuments of twentieth-century architecture [figs. 1, 18]. With the physical reconstruction of the Pavilion as a permanent building in 1986, an almost mythical project has turned into something real.

Entering the reconstructed Pavilion provides a singular and fascinating architectural experience. Interior and exterior space are meshed in a kind of free-spirited playfulness in which the complex relation between the inside and the outside is further augmented by the deliberate choice of materials on the basis of their reflecting, mirroring and opaque surfaces.

The Pavilion was a display structure that pointed to architecture itself as an artwork of space.² Approaching and entering the Pavilion encourages the participation by the spectator, physically, psychologically and cognitively. A process of simultaneous assertion and denial of the distinctions between mass and void, inside and outside, opening and enclosure reveals itself only to the observer moving around and through the Pavilion; all in all, the aesthetic properties of the Pavilion set in motion the dismantling of paired opposites, which initiate a powerful dialogue as elements of a morphological continuum.

What from outside appears to be the corner of a supposedly closed volume turns out to be a hollow U-shaped element containing the interior space of

1. Walther Genzmer, "Der Deutsche Reichspavillon auf der internationalen Ausstellung Barcelona", in *Die Baugilde* 11, no. 20 (1929), 1655: "Einzig der deutsche Reichspavillon ist irgendwie

erregend, verlangt, dass man sich mit ihm geistig auseinandersetzt, stellt Probleme und führt sie – soweit heute schon drüber geurteilt werden kann – einer allgemeingültigen Lösung zu."

2. Justus Bier in his 1929 review calls the Pavilion a "Raumkunstwerk", an art environment. See Justus Bier, "Mies van der Rohes Reichspavillon in Barcelona", in *Die Form* 4, no. 16 (1929), 430.



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Un momento único, sublime, emocionante, de la Fiesta del Fuego y del Agua, en que la magia de los Fuegos de Artificio pasa como una enlazada pirueta sobre este Apoteosis de Agua y de Luz que forman las maravillosas cascadas, fuentes y proyectores de la EXPOSICIÓN INTERNACIONAL DE BARCELONA 1929-1930.

J. BIS. IMPRESOR
Viladomat, 108 - Telef. 32318
Barcelona

THE NAVIGATORS OF WONDERMENT

The Unprecedented Presence of the German Pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition

CARMEN RODRÍGUEZ PEDRET

From time to time it is necessary to shift one's position in order to consider afresh some too familiar thing, to push it into the background, readjust the focus and forcefully change the habitual view. Perhaps the thirtieth anniversary of its reconstruction is a good time to take a stroll around the Pavilion that Mies van der Rohe designed for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition, to dig into what remains of its original surroundings and bring to light some peripheral episode that probably does not coincide with the moments that have centred the attention of official historiography. The focus here is switched towards a history of the production of the object inscribed within the communications media, considering the Exposition and the Pavilion from the perspective of their first public presence. This is a complementary point of view, a gaze that is not nourished by plans or construction reports but contemplates the object through another lens, that of local print media contemporaneous with the event: magazines, newspapers, advertising, tourist guides and one or two other literary sources.

The itinerary is articulated around three scenes: the first depicts the sociological landscape of the Exposition in relation to the imaginary promoted by the government of General Miguel Primo de Rivera; the second centres on the transformation – always within the particular media context – of the location of the event: the Montjuïc hill, and, by extension, the city of Barcelona; the third focuses on a German

Pavilion which appears here not as an isolated or self-enclosed object but in correspondence with the two previous scenes. It is important to bear in mind that this Pavilion is not the one we see now but the one that would have been seen by the people who visited the Exposition during the months it was open to the public.

It is more than slightly paradoxical that the first great mass event of contemporary Spain was at the same time almost the final swan song of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (13 September 1923 - 28 January 1930) and the reign of Alfonso XIII. Together with the Ibero-American Exposition in Seville, the Barcelona event helped to delay the agonizing end of a regime that used both events as sounding boards for its particular operetta-like-aesthetic [fig. 1], with the collusion of the city's financial and political élites. When the spell had been broken, with the drawing up of the balance sheet at the end of the Exposition and the dictatorship, and all the criticisms were unleashed, Barcelona woke from the dream to the painful bottom line of the burden of debt, as the writer and journalist Francesc Madrid noted, the city was "surprised to learn the cost of those military parades, those solemn processions, those feasts which served only to dazzle gaping crowds and the poor and childish of spirit, in front of the glittering vanities of the asinine, the immoral, the fools who usurped the true representation of the people.



This volume, devoted entirely to Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich's Barcelona Pavilion of 1929, addresses for the first time the forgotten contexts of the Pavilion's genesis. Habitually thought of as an abstract, unpolluted and splendidly isolated building, a precursor of Mies's American period, the Pavilion is revealed here as a thoroughly European work, perhaps less pristine but more authentic. With expert contributions from:

REMEI CAPDEVILA-WERNING
BEATRIZ COLOMINA
LAURA MARTÍNEZ DE GUEREÑU
DIETRICH NEUMANN
FRITZ NEUMEYER
SPYROS PAPAPETROS
LUTZ ROBBERS
CARMEN RODRÍGUEZ PEDRET

