

“Artists in Architecture” is an interdisciplinary project that states how temporary artist interventions in cultural heritage buildings are a valuable method to re-evaluate a future conservation or restoration approach and define future uses of specific heritage sites.

Promoted by the Centre for Fine Arts (BOZAR), the Fundació Mies van der Rohe and the University of Naples-Federico II, and selected for co-funding by the Creative Europe programme of the European Union as cooperation project in the framework of the European Year of Cultural Heritage 2018 (EYCH), the project responded to the objectives of the Year through a common narrative focusing on houses where important European cultural figures from the 20th century such as artists, intellectuals, and active citizens have lived and met, or houses built by the most avant-garde architects of the time.

The initiative established a collaboration between general public and artists, architects, students, professionals in the field of heritage and at the same time, opened an intergenerational and interdisciplinary dialogue that helped define a contemporary vision as well as a future approach to conservation, restoration and reuse of this very delicate architectural heritage.

Through a series of artists’ residences organized between July and September 2019 in a selection of six unique houses located in Tervuren and Uccle (Belgium), Praiano and Pompeii (Italy), Bucharest (Romania) and Barcelona (Spain), the project aimed to debate and galvanize the tangible and intangible heritage value of much of the European modern domestic architecture; to discuss the present, past and future of these architectures, so fragile but decisive of the modern movement, and on the possible strategies for their preservation, adaptation and (re)use.

In the case of Barcelona, the residency took place at the Vilaró House (1928-30), the first work of the young Sixte Illescas (1903-1986), an architect who in the future would be one of the members of GATCPAC (Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Progress of Contemporary Architecture). The Vilaró House is one of the first exponents of explicit modernity, as well as an example of the best rationalist iconography, both in the city of Barcelona and in the entire Spanish State. It was built in parallel to two other single-family houses that between 1928 and 1930 would be presented as a "manifesto" of modernity, avant-garde and rationalism: the Villa Savoye by Le Corbusier that reflects the five points of modern architecture and the Villa Tugendhat by Mies van der Rohe, a domestic and habitable version of what the German architect had rehearsed in the German Pavilion of 1929 built in Barcelona for the International Exposition. The Vilaró House, designed according to the aesthetic language of the machines defended by Le Corbusier in his book “Towards an Architecture” (1923), stands out for its outstanding articulation. From terraces, platforms and gardens, to a completely white facade, without decorative elements or balustrades but with horizontal lines marked by the overhangs and railings reminiscent of a ship; inside it still retains furniture of the time, without mouldings or ornaments.

Out of 362 applications from visual artists, architects, writers, musicians, dancers, set designers, actors, etc., six artists were selected to reflect and work in situ during their residency in the house and to express a particular relationship with the house and its heritage challenges: Luke James (LeWitt House), Jacques Ligot (Strebelle House), Susanne Mariacher and Helene Schauer (Iancu House), Elena Mazzi (Fiorelli House), Something Fantastic (Julian Schubert, Elena Schütz, Leonard Streich) with Fernanda Tellez (Van Der Meer House) and Ben Weir (Vilaró House).

For the residency in Vilaró House, the Fundació Mies van der Rohe formed a jury of experts composed by Teresa Grandas, curator of exhibitions at the MACBA (macba.cat), Lluís Nacenta, director of Hangar production, research and visual arts center (hangar.org), Rebeca Franquesa representative of the property of Vilaró House (casavilaro.com) and Ariadna Perich, coordinator of “Artists in Architecture” project at the Fundació Mies van der Rohe (miesbcn.com). The jury chose the Belfast based artist and architect Ben Weir (benweir.co.uk) for his specific interest and critical attitude towards architectural heritage (especially Modernism), expressed both in his motivation letter and several materialized projects that resulted in art productions. The jury valued the additive process and layered meanings used in his works to interrogate historic artefacts and existing realities and give them a new relevance, reintroducing them into the contemporary discourse. By using suggestive concepts and strategies that involve displacement, decontextualization, speculation, disruption, fiction, layering, disassembling and reassembling, among others, he is able to produce works that question our relationship with the built environment, contributing to the understanding of it as cultural artefact. Through site-specific sculptures, writing, photography and drawing, Weir’s work seems to follow a very characteristic methodology and a scope of research, which the jury considered sensitive, suggestive and open enough to develop a unique project for the artistic residence at the Vilaró House.

Along Ben Weir, the jury also gave a special mention to four other artists: Marketa Hlinovska from Prague, Czech Republic (hlinovska.com), Claudia Larcher from Bregenz, Austria (claudialarcher.com), Michiel Huijben from The Netherlands (michielhuijben.nl) and Andreas Schlaegel from Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Kongo and based in Berlin.

The proposal developed by Ben Weir draws attention to the alterations and extensions that the house has suffered, which have considerably modified the spatial sequence and the original experience of the house, as well as its relation with the limits of the lot. The artist proposed the production of large format models. These objects will reproduce these added and altered fragments of the house. They will be a way of documenting and investigating its current condition, but also a way of questioning the value, necessity or role these alterations have nowadays in the current context of protected heritage building.

In his own words: *“The Casa Vilaró didn’t ‘stop’ when it was completed in 1930, it merely began its ongoing dialogue with history. Rather than attempt to solve the issue, or fate, of Casa Vilaró, concerning its unlauded status internationally or its unsympathetic additions, I aim to produce work that will discuss the richness and complexity of its current condition. A singular object has a multitude of histories, and I wish both to unearth and add upon them. In doing so, I hope to bring to the fore wider discussions on how we relate to our architectural heritage.”*

This publication or small catalogue, intends to leave notice that in some moment, an artistic event took place. It illustrates and documents the work conceived by Ben Weir as a result of his artistic residence at Vilaró House, Barcelona, in September 2019, along with a text written by the author that explains his experience, approach and concept behind the art work produced. The images of the models and plinths designed by Ben Weir at the publication were taken in a unique photo session at the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich by the photographer José Hevia; for one day, like an unanimated performance, several fragments of that physically changed an imperfect Vilaró House, inhabited and dialogued with the architecture of the pavilion. Like the random visitors of that day, the models silently occupied and temporarily altered its crystal reality.

The catalogue, together with the built models and plinths, the interviews recorded or the articles published, will prolong the outcome of the artistic residence and remain a tangible testimony of that moment of time.

FUNDACIÓ MIES VAN DER ROHE

Fundació Mies van der Rohe was created in 1983 by the City Council of Barcelona with the initial goal of rebuilding the German Pavilion designed by Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) with Lilly Reich (1885-1947), for the International Exposition of Barcelona in 1929.

In addition to conserving and disseminating knowledge about the Pavilion, the Fundació Mies van der Rohe promotes debate and awareness on issues related to contemporary architecture and urbanism, organizing prizes, congresses, conferences, exhibitions, workshops and interventions. Among these activities is the organization of the program of events that includes dance, cinema, music, art and collaboration with other institutions in the city.