

The Casa Vilaró lingers in purgatory. It is so certain of its past but knows nothing of its future. In the neighborhood of La Salut in Gràcia, Barcelona, the 1930 rationalist house by Sixte Illescas awaits judgement. In what feels like an unfulfilling function for a work of such historical significance, the shabby glamour of the rooms, which currently serve as a hotel, feel like they can offer us more. It is within this context that I am placed for two weeks in September 2019.

The conception of the house is already well documented, and it was never my intention to be a storyteller of its history. I believe I am no authority to do so. As resident artist, however, what *is* my role- Interpreter, translator, investigator? Is the house a problem to be solved or merely speculated upon? The following text charts my grappling with these questions over the residency period, with the existing situation and condition of the house, whilst always trying to gift an artwork to the house. One that will allow it to dream of an alternative life.

### **The Originality of Casa Vilaró and Other Modernist Myths**

The most inventive aspect of Casa Vilaró lies in its intuitive response to the existing topography. Rather than following Corbusier's principle of removing the building 'from the dampness of the soil,' the house embraces the earth, it beds itself within it. One enters on the level of the roof garden, before moving progressively downwards through a series of terraced levels made by cuts in landscape. It is the boundary wall enclosing the entire scheme that condenses this responsiveness into a single dynamic object: it deals with the steep terrain, the adjacent public stairs, creates a blind facade to the street on the upper side and a large garage door on the lower. The overall impression is that of a solid and seemingly impermeable boundary, a physical, but also strongly symbolic threshold- the interior world within the wall resides 'Modernity', and everything outside relegated to history. Vilaró wants to be a microcosm of Modernism bedded into the hillside of medieval Barcelona. However, after some investigation the boundary wall (somewhat expectedly) appears less absolute than at first glance. It actually includes an existing historic stone wall on the site, which itself dictates the plan form of the lower service level and its associated terrace. Here, history finds itself within the inner sanctuary of Modernism, taints it. This stone wall is visible on a mid-construction photo of the house, exposed, its modernising-mask of white stucco yet to be applied. This external coat of whiteness forms a visually unified surface, where age or material is irrelevant, our eyes cannot pierce below to the true multiplicity beneath.

Manuel Brullet, in his description of this mid-construction photo, states that 'almost medieval techniques were used to make the new architecture.' One might question how 'new' an architecture can truly be, if constructed with such techniques. A workman is only as good as his tools, of course. A cross-section of the house shows a typical Catalan floor construction- ceramic vaults between cast iron beams, with a flat plaster ceiling suspended below and a raised deck floor on top, leading to a very deep construction. Whilst Vilaró was being constructed, the floating, shifting planes of Mies van der Rohe, more surface than material, were simultaneously landing in Montjuïc for the Barcelona International Exposition. Although Illescas intelligently hides his depth of structure with a much more slimline canopy projection beyond, the planes of Mies are still a significant stretch away. The Mies reference comes up again, as his Villa Tugendhat was also completed in 1929, in Brno. Although similar in composition- a three storey building dug into the hillside, where the main entrance is via a glazed pavilion on the top floor, the Tugendhat again is much more Modernist in the true sense. Its interior is read as a sinuous

open space with objects freely placed to define spaces (such as the onyx wall in the living area or the dining room in the form of a tropical hardwood cylinder), whereas Vilaró is still very much a house of rooms. Do we compare Vilaró to Mies because of the serendipities in location and time, rather than architectonic form? Or do we simply wish for it to be a work that can spar with the architectural canon: the desire to celebrate it as an *idea* of a departure from tradition, rather than the physical manifestation of such? There is still no doubt Vilaró was seen as radically new at the time, irrespective of the facts. But are we too readily accepting of newness in general, without prodding below the surface?

*'The new holds an unavoidable attraction for those who request their maximum excitement from simple change.'*

-Paul Valery, *Tel Quel* (Gallimard, 1944 [translated by Cino Zucchi for *San Rocco 04: Fuck Concepts, Context!*, 2012])

My initial proposal for this project was then to attack this topic in the most direct way- to strip back some patches of the white stucco to expose the construction below. Large scale wall-drawings made by the process of removal, an archaeological approach, adding layers of meaning by excavating material. How beautiful, I thought, to take the house back to a previous state and allow sunlight once more to grace the old stone wall on the site. The intention behind action this was not necessarily to show the house as a 'lie,' but because I believe the house to be all the richer for its multiplicity.

Of course, any works to a heritage building requires one to jump through multiple hoops. 'We will pass it off as maintenance works!' we thought, 'choose areas that already need patching up, and it will look good-as-new when we reverse the artwork at the end.' Our ambitions and optimism were quashed however, when the proposal was disallowed by the city council, at least within the timeframe we had for the project. Why, when the original house has already been so heavily manipulated, would re-patching an area of stucco be so contentious? The decision brought up a whole new series of questions to do with heritage objects, sensitivity, value. So it was the alterations to the original 1930 house that became the new focus of interrogation.

## **Violence and the Altered State**

In a 1966 interview with David Sylvester, the Irish-born British painter Francis Bacon refers to the distortions, alterations and manipulations that he makes to the faces of his sitters as 'injuries.' The portraits, often made of acquaintances of his, appear forcefully manipulated but somehow still recognisable. Faces swell and skin discolors, gaps open in cheeks, curvaceous tumors coil and wrap chins and noses. Teeth and muscle become exposed in dramatic tension. It is as if the image comes from a brutal act that has been made upon the subject, rather than speculation on a fantastical view of their shadow self. Although not intended as such, the sitters themselves, instinctually read the act as a violence imposed upon them.

FB: *"No matter how much they feel for you or like you they do nevertheless, as most of them are not people who are concerned with art, feel the distortions are forms of injury."*

DS: *"Don't you think their is instinct is probably right?"*

FB: "Possibly"

- From *Francis Bacon: Fragments Of A Portrait* (BBC, 1966)

Further probing from Sylvester leads Bacon to conclude that two forms of action are present, 'a caress and a blow,' with the inevitability that 'you kill the thing you love.'

To read an architectural analogy in the above, two attitudes can present themselves in altering built artefacts. The first is that any physical changes to a building of historical value have an implied violence, even if not intended. Perhaps this view is seen through a lens of Philistinism- no great mind of culture or intellect would dare meddle with a piece of history, their respect for the past would be too great. The second, Bacon's 'caress,' comes in personalisation, taste-making, appropriating. A making-do rather than moving-on.

In the instances of both Bacon and Vilaró, however seemingly disparate in scale and medium, a similar intention is shared: that of creating a new reality, one in which the 'altered state' becomes the predominant expression of the work.

Bacon's altered figures exist as semi-recognisable, horrific versions of their sitters, instilling powerful sensations in the viewer not put forward by the sitter themselves. It is as if we are suddenly made aware that every person in the world holds this capacity- to become horrific, we just need the power of Bacon's hand to bring it to the surface. The altered Vilaró came into being only a few months after completion of the house in 1930, when the house received new owners. Despite being made by many hands, the manipulated built fabric presents itself as confused and, at times, bizarre. The library room below the stairs for example, appears to belong to an entirely different environment, more akin to a hunting lodge than a machine for living in. Some alterations appear much more unsettling than others. They exist alongside one another and the original fabric on various levels of legibility, care and appropriateness. Their role, evidently, is to turn a polemical manifesto into a functional building.

## **The Ideal Form**

For me, arrival to Casa Vilaró came with some sense of disorientation. Keen to have a thorough understanding of the house before I visited, I thoroughly studied plans, sections, and photographic documentation. I mapped the building in my mind, hoping that my initial visit would simply be a physical confirmation of what exists. The surprise, however, came immediately upon entry, when I entered from the street not into a striking glass pavilion-bridge with expansive views across the city, but a dark stairwell with textured walls and a stained-glass window.

The reason behind this confusing incident is that the house is documented only in its ideal form, following its completion in 1930. But of course, Vilaró didn't 'stop' when it was built, it merely began its ongoing dialogue with history. We are only caretakers of buildings in the present, we gift them to the next generation. As such, a building can never truly be said to be finished. The problem with the 'scientific' method of Modernism is that it presented itself as a solution;

*'The residual idea of functionalism is probably that which envisages buildings as purposeful in achieving social progress, and consequently becoming obsolete once the stated purpose has been achieved: that is, prisons would be demolished once all criminals have been corrected*

*through their use and mental hospitals closed once their inmates were returned to sanity.'*  
-Fred Scott, *On Altering Architecture* (Routledge, 2007)

I need not point out, however, that there is no 'end purpose' to dwelling. There only exists progressive versions of the same event. 'Dwelling' is based upon ideals of comfort, available technologies and tradition. On occasion, incremental development and change in what it means to dwell can become manifest in a single building.

Like Schrödinger's cat, I believed this ideal form of Vilaró to still exist until I arrived in person and opened the door. Unsurprisingly, this is the state to which the city council would like to see the building return. It is the one present in books, city guides and publications, and so has a role in tourism and the public image of the city. The current use of the building as a hotel is certainly questionable, but so too is the desire of the city council. To what end is bringing the house back to its original condition useful? Would this need to come alongside a return to original function: can it be more than simply a too-big house, or a museum of itself? Buildings need to adapt and change to survive, and I would propose this refers to their composite material as well as their function.

Mies' Villa Tugendhat has been under the administration of Brno City Museum since 1994, was designated a public building since that point, and awarded UNESCO heritage status 2001. It was renovated in 2012 for a cost of nearly €6million. It's hard to deny the beauty of the outcome. However, in Dieter Reifarth's documentary *Haus Tugendhat* (2013) a member of the team working on the Villa describes his profound sadness when entering the house for the first time after completion, when he expected to feel pride. Unable to place the feeling at first, he describes how the house will never again hear the laughter of children as they grow up. It's a curious paradox that the salvation of the house is also its death.

Closer to home, in Barcelona's Gothic Quarter resides the ancient ruin of the Temple of Augustus, which was swallowed by residential development in the late Medieval period. An 1837 etching depicts a rich, dream-like interior in which Roman capitals, massively over-scaled for the room, exist within an otherwise bland apartment occupied by a man and his dogs. An extreme but fascinating example of the dense layering of built fabric over time. A 1904 reconstruction saw the Temple hemmed-in to a tiny courtyard which seems barely large enough to contain it. Now exhibited like a museum piece, it has lost some of the magic of its (literal) entanglement with history, it exists at a distance. Why can a monument not have many functions, must it purely be observed?

### **Five Fragments**

My outcome for this project is a documentation of all significant physical changes that have been made to the house since 1930. The alterations are then reproduced at 1:10 in physical models as fragments. The remainder of the house is absent yet implied in the space between the models. The alterations represented are as follows:

Walled-in entrance pavilion and stairwell, the library room underneath this stair and its adjacent suite of rooms that enclosed what was once an open courtyard.

A service room for gardening and pool equipment that occupies the space underneath the external stair from the main living level to the terrace below.

The stair in the main living area down to what was once the service level.

The swimming pool inserted into an exterior terrace

Heightened boundary wall where it borders the adjacent public stair.

The models intend to prompt dialogue on the alterations, their inherent qualities and value. Are they useful, appropriate or necessary? If we accept that change is not only necessary, but desirable, how do we view these seemingly unsympathetic alterations? There is a strong case for and against each one, and discussing their reversal immediately brings up political decisions that begin to determine what the building should and should not be used for. It is not my role to propose a new use for the house, although a cultural function would seem appropriate, and it is this layering of new functions that will enable a richer discussion on its material reconfiguration.

The unfortunate thing about pioneering buildings that proclaim such newness is that they are often quicker to become a relic. If Illescas were still here, would he wish to stay radical? If so, critical alteration is one means. If the house left behind one 'ideal state' soon after its completion, is it possible to attain a new but different one(s) in the future?

The Casa Vilaró should not be cemented in time, should not be made obsolete. It should avoid museumification and ensure its relevance through dynamism.