Re-enactment: Lilly Reich’s Work Occupies the Barcelona Pavilion

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Re-enactment is a material response to the pervasive invisibility of Lilly Reich’s work. It arises with a clear motivation: to reveal the architecture designed by Lilly Reich for the German sections of the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition inside eight Noucentista Palaces, an area that is fifty times greater in magnitude than the Pavilion itself. Re-enactment occupies the heart of the Pavilion with the reconstruction of two of the display cases that Lilly Reich originally designed and built for the Palaces. This reconstruction was possible thanks to the blueprints that Lilly Reich saved, moving them to Mühlhausen (Thuringia) during World War II, the originals of which are today a part of the Lilly Reich Collection in the Mies van der Rohe Archive at The Museum of Modern Art in New York.

The intervention transforms a vertical element of light—the milky-colored, double-glazed screen—into a lengthy horizontal display case and adds a vertical display case to the visitor’s path toward the inner reflecting pool. An unprecedented documentary sequence is built in the horizontal display case with new archival evidence (letters, photographs, patents, trademarks, and plans) that links the Pavilion with the architecture of the Palaces. Two film sequences from the exhibition opening in 1929, which reveal the Pavilion as the starting point of an attentive promenade across the unequal industrial sections, are reproduced in the vertical display case. Together, both sequences now contribute to re-enacting a work that the history of architecture had unfairly set aside.

The intervention reveals the Pavilion’s skylight for the first time. Its double-glazed screens and frontal metalwork are removed, while its dark side glass is rendered transparent and the opening of the roof is underlined with textile covering. The horizontal display case occupies now the space of the skylight and thus acquires the status of an architectural element. The new element creates an unprecedented continuity between the interior and the exterior and shows the industrial products, present during the exhibition, as those objects that surpassed social divisions during modernism.

The documentary sequence starts with a letter that Lilly Reich sent in 1944 to Eduard Ludwig, a former Bauhaus student and collaborator at Mies’s office in Berlin, with whom she maintained a close friendship. In this letter, a copy of which is kept at the Bauhaus Dessau Foundation today, Lilly Reich regretted how, after a bombing, and among many other objects of personal value, “the big photos of Barcelona” had burned. Although it is thought that no copies of these big photos have ever been found again, this letter opens an opportunity for reassessment. It works as an index, forging continuity with other photographs and postcards of the Barcelona exhibits that have been traced over time.

The fourteen images preserved in the MoMA Archive have been displayed in the upper narrative. They are all-encompassing photographs revealing the elements that Lilly Reich designed in order to endow consistency throughout the different interiors: built-in display case walls, vertical and horizontal free-standing display cases, circular tube railings, false ceilings, and continuous white-linoleum floors, as well as M.R. chairs, armchairs, stools, and tables. All show how Lilly Reich transformed the classical spaces into modern, unadorned, and consistent environments, able to reveal a German identity across different industrial sections.

In the lower narrative, twenty-three other photographs from another ten archives in Barcelona, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, Madrid, and Weimar are shown. Two uncharted photos stand out: one is from a private collection in Frankfurt and another from the Bauhaus-Archiv in Berlin. Likewise, many
other less known photographs are also included, such as one of the M.R. chairs occupying the Pavilion before the opening, held at the Bauhaus-Museum Weimar – Klassik Stiftung Weimar.

The patents and trademarks of those products that, besides being present at the exhibition, were also registered in Spain during the project development period are laid in an intermediate narrative between the two sequences of photographs. It is not a coincidence that the same industries which patented their products during this time also commissioned photographs of their stands. For many, their interest in settling in Spain was clear, as happened with the M.R. trademark, which Mies registered a few weeks after the opening of the exhibition.

These narratives of photographs and patents are preceded by the plan of the International Exposition, which is portrayed in Exposición Internacional de Barcelona 1929: Catálogo Oficial de la Sección Alemana [International Exposition of Barcelona 1929: Official Catalog of the German Section], a book edited and designed by Lilly Reich. This is a credit not granted explicitly to her in the book. It was only mentioned, in the 1970s, in interviews conducted by the MoMA curator Ludwig Glaeser with different people involved in the Barcelona project.

This overall plan of the International Exposition reveals the areas occupied with the German sections in each of the Palaces. The narrative is continued by larger plans—showing the stand distributions—of the Palaces of Metallurgy, Electricity and Motive Force (with their Chemical and the Machines sections), Communications and Transport, Textiles, Projections, Industrial Arts, Graphic Arts, Agriculture, and Southern. All are fragments of other larger plans of the Arxiu General de Fira de Barcelona, which include all national sections and which are at the origin of the invisibility of Lilly Reich’s work. By contrast, the photographs above reveal how the distribution of the industries in the Palaces was only the beginning of an architectural development of a much broader richness and complexity.

The Pavilion will be occupied by the work of Lilly Reich for only a few weeks, but her two reconstructed display cases will remain in the City of Barcelona. They will bear witness to the homage that the first edition of the eponymous grant has paid to Lilly Reich’s work, and they will serve as a material record of the effort that is still needed to acknowledge silenced authorships in architectural practices.

Re-enactment and the research that made it possible are the outcome of the first edition of the Lilly Reich Grant for Equality in Architecture, which was created in 2018.

It is a recognition of the architectural legacy of Lilly Reich, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe’s partner in the conception and construction of the German Pavilion in Barcelona in 1929, who was overshadowed in the narrative and the memory of this capital work of the history of architecture.

The grant supports the study, dissemination and visibility of contributions in architecture that have been unduly relegated or forgotten, made by professionals who have suffered discrimination because of their personal conditions. It also seeks to promote equal access in the practice of architecture.