barcelona pavilion

form body technique space

Heather Finley

EVDA 621 December 10, 2010
The Barcelona Pavilion was an "allegory" of the ambition of the German nation. The commission was offered to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in 1928 by the German Republic and was built in 1929 to represent Germany at the Barcelona Universal Exhibition. Originally built to be a temporary exhibit it was torn down after only 6 months of standing and the pieces scattered and never recovered. It existed and was rigorously studied in faded photographs until it was rebuilt in 1986 by Ignasi de Sola Morales, Christian Cirici and Fernando Ramos (Hill, 2002).

Mies’ design was influenced by his the culture of Germany as well as his personal upbringing. Typically architects will look to typologies of the past perhaps gain some insight and grounding for their designs (Argan, 1996). He created a building that would be formative for the modernist architect and for the study of architecture as a whole. However, the Barcelona Pavilion actually seemed to create its own typology and a building that would be a benchmark for future architects.

The Pavilion was designed after a time of uncertainty in the German Republic. After years of economic uncertainty, contributed to by the part they played in World War I, there was an air of hope for the German people. Rather than having the same expressionless air that was typical of most many modernist buildings (Jameson, 1984) the pavilion represented a new Germany where the ideals and values that dominated were those of a “production that was modernized, transparent, crystalline, and electric” (von Fischer, 2002). Quatglas suggests a different viewpoint in his book “Fear of Glass: Mies van der Rohe’s Pavilion in Barcelona” (reviewed by von Fischer, 2002). His was one where the pavilion was a barometer of the years between the wars.
He suggested that it was an “Emptiness and the future: anyone wishing to discuss the stage that Mies built in 1929 for a performance of Germany will have to repeat these two words.” Indeed the pavilion seemed to be a performance for the beleaguered nation. What they wanted to represent was a nation that had emerged from the first world war and the economic crisis whole and ready to move forward. It represented ambition and was an allegory for a nation (von Fischer, 2002).

The architect for this presentation was Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Born in 1886 in the small town of Aachen, Germany, Mies began with humble yet proud beginnings. He worked in his father’s stone carving shop until he left to Berlin to apprentice at a studio there. It was in his fathers shop that he would gain an appreciation for stone that became apparent in the Barcelona Pavilion. He practiced architecture in Germany until 1937 when he moved to the United States after his designs were rejected as being “un-German” (Shulze, 1985).

His architecture as a whole, including the pavilion, was made up of a minimal structural framework and implied free flowing open space. In all of his designs he insisted on the most elegant and expensive materials (Forgey, 1992). This appreciation is displayed in the Barcelona Pavilion with his use of travertine, onyx and marble.

The combination of these factors contributed to the creation of a beautiful and elegant building that is a deliberate orchestration for the viewer in several regards. Every surface except for the ceiling is meant to reflect, including the two pools that are placed at either end of the pavilion. The transparency of the glass does not prevent it from continuing the reflections so that the space can seem unending. This would perhaps be a demonstration of the resilient and unending nature of the German culture. Mies also used glass, placed intentionally, to guide the viewers eye to where he wanted the view to go. The viewer is allowed to see the outside to the front and then also through the house from one end to the other.

The interior is divided into two “rooms” by a single slab of onyx. The only pieces of furniture were and are two Barcelona Chairs (designed specifically for this exhibition and still widely used today) and two smaller stools. The chairs are placed in what was referred to as the “thrown room.” Indeed they are situated so that when one enters the room the chairs and those sitting there are the first sight, implying that you have just been invited to an audience with the royalty.

The austereness of the furniture also implies that visitors are welcome, but not for long. Mies placed a single statue standing in the pool at the right hand side. When you are standing on the other side of the pavilion looking toward that pool the statue is framed by slabs of marble on either side. It is a statue of a woman with her hands up as if protecting herself from something. The Barcelona Pavilion has stood as an icon for the modernist movement whether in photographs or as a physical construct. It was indeed a metaphor for the German nation at the time. The strength of its lines, openness of its floor plan, reflectiveness of the surfaces all portray a nation that was once strong and had aspirations to be again. Ludwig Mies van der Rohe designed a building that reflected his heritage, upbringing, the cultural climate and modernist tendencies. The result is a building that will stand the test of time and be studied for years to come.
The "body" of the Barcelona Pavilion needs to be understood within the framework of its history. It has three separate eras: the first being the time when it was a temporary exhibit for Germany at the 1929 Barcelona Expo where it lived for six months before it was torn down. Its second life was lived between its physical existences where it survived only in pictures. The third era belongs to the time during and after its reconstruction in 1986. It can and has been postulated that these different eras have contributed to different experiences within the pavilion (Werning, 2007). Indeed, the fact that the original building was torn down and what is now standing is a replica of the original affects how the subject might experience the space.

When the pavilion was first built every aspect of it from the material to the placement was a depiction of the hope that Germany had for renewed strength and power. There was no clear distinction from the inside and the outside: no doors, only windows. There was no hierarchy between the inside and outside (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

The experience of the subject with the object was more than just visual: it encompassed or had the potential to encompass all of the available senses. For the years following the Expo the experience of the Barcelona Pavilion was limited to photographs. One could argue that the life of the building continued through the images that remained since this was the only means of experience from 1929 until 1986. Dodds (2006) describes the master prints from van der Rohe's master collection as "the most important surviving documents of one of the most influential architectural images of the twentieth century."

There is also a collection of 16 prints representing fourteen distinct views of the Pavilion made by the Berliner Bild-Bercht Company (Dodds, 2005). These images have survived and have been scrutinized since the Pavilion was built and torn down. According to Dodds (2005) "the many stories that comprise our collective memory of the BP, like so much of Mies van der Rohe's work, are inseparable from the potency of its published images."
This lack of the tangible, the unavailable nature of the Barcelona Pavilion certainly had an effect on the subjects understanding of the object. Merleau-ponty (1945) believes that with photographs the subject maintains a controlled interaction with the object. The vision is in control of what the subject is experiencing. He posits that the subject cannot understand the object until it is experienced. Peter Eisenman would argue that this focus on the visual aspect of the subject on its object, and that being the only available sense available to understand the Pavilion, would limit the experience the subject would have.

What of the Pavilion that was built in 1986? Both of the Pavilions (1929 and 1986) were placed on the same Northern slope of Montjuic, Barcelona's southwest hill. The approach that the visitor has is the same, walking to it through the central axis, passing the National palace at the top of the hill. It is placed on a travertine podium with no adornment but its own façade. So the physical aspects were maintained as closely as possible to the original. Certainly the architects in charge of the reconstruction worked diligently to obtain the materials that most closely duplicated the original intent. But though the onyx that was found was from the same location did it have the same markings? Did it invoke the same level of detail and the same reflections? Dodds (2005) argues that even with the diligence of the new architects the new building seemed to be a fragmented copy of the original. Nuances were missing such as undulations or markings in the stone that may or may not have been intentional in the first building. These discrepancies would have separated the subject further from understanding the Pavilion as it may have originally been intended.
One feature that both the 1929 and 1986 pavilions have in common is the sense of masculinity and strength. The lines and materials are straight and strong eliciting a sense power. These strong and straight lines and solid strong materials give rise to a masculine architecture that evokes strength and hope. According to Haraway's (1992) theories on masculine architecture, the Pavilion had all the characteristics of a masculine architecture that served to repress and suppress the feminine aspect. Indeed, the only female representation was of a statue of a woman reaching up as if to ward off a repression coming from above. Strategically the statue is placed outside of the pavilion proper where, as Haraway (1992) would postulate, is another place women throughout the century have been placed both in society and architecture. Mies was intentional about creating a building that emitted strength and power and in doing so repressed or omitted the female voice.

The Barcelona Pavilion as it stands today is still a symbol of strength and power that Mies intended. Although some aspects may have been lost in its reconstruction the essence of it remains. Along with the 57 years of existence only in photographs, these changes have altered the experience of the subject with the object irreparably. Had it not been torn down the same intentions would have been evident to this day. Now, we can only postulate what it might have looked like now and hope that was is as close to what was as it can be.
The creation of order in a mutable and finite world is the ultimate purpose of man’s thought and action.

-Alberto Perez-Gomez-
In his essay “The Structure of Vagueness” Lars Spuybroek describes experiments by Frei Otto involving strings of wool and water and the geometry that can be made with the interaction of the two. The result of the experiments demonstrated general principles that apply to a grid system technique (Spuybroek, 1996). The first step contained materiality with no geometry: a simple geometrical surface. In Van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion this would be the grid system. The second involved materiality: string and water, marble, onyx, etc. The third step involved a complexity between geometry and materiality in which the final mode is revealed. For both Otto and Van Der Rohe this involved taking the materiality of their chosen techniques and letting it define the space.

Although he perhaps thought this to be a negative aspect, this type of technique would have worked well in the Barcelona Pavilion in light of Van der Rohe’s goals. Once lines from the grid are removed the remaining lines would serve three purposes: one to reveal where partitions and materials can go, one to reveal where possible views could be expressed and finally to maintain the straight and powerful face of the Germany that he wanted to be represented at the expo and after.

With specific lines removed the pattern created began to show areas where material could be placed. Taken together with voids that were created both of these aspects began to shape the views that Van de Rohe would want to emphasize. In this way he would be directing the subject’s line of site and controlling what the subject could see. The result would most likely have been away from any potential “competition” and more of a representation of the strength in Germany.
“One of the important aspects of mechanization is that work has to be dissected into its component operations.” (Parrac, 2010) In the case of the Barcelona Pavilion Van der Rohe broke it down into lines and rectangular boxes. These were then extruded and rotated to produce straight lines and clean edges throughout the building. This mechanization of the component parts of the building served to create the image of a strong and powerful building, representing a strong and powerful Germany.
The use of the grid system in determination of a design for a building that is to represent strength and durability proved to be a successful venture for Mies van de Rohe in the Barcelona Pavilion. The materials used, views created and lines projected gave the sense of a Germany that would rise again strong and sure of itself.

Eugene Thacker (2006) also introduces the notion of spaces being governed by military practices. In a state of exception the government can control everything that occurs in the society, down to what the buildings look like. This idea shown in the Barcelona Pavilion.

Whether consciously or unconsciously Van de Rohe designed and built a building that is based after the military notion of orderly space. Through his use of strong, solid materials, a building emerged that drew upon the idea that the military is strong, so the building is strong, so the nation is strong.
J. Macgregor Wise described the struggle that a nomadic space has as the struggle between spatial forces and identity (Wise, 2000). The Barcelona Pavilion demonstrates this struggle as being between the spaces of interior and exterior. These two types of spaces seem to be warring with each other for dominance in the space. Van de Rohe uses powerful materials in both of the spaces indicating that perhaps there is not to be a difference between the two. That this struggle for the nation as a whole does not need to exist. While the interior and exterior seem to be warring between each other the materials serve to unite them in their struggle.

The struggle of the German nation as a whole has been one of the struggle to define themselves. The years leading up to the Barcelona Pavilion, as well as the subsequent years, has been demonstrative of this struggle to understand themselves. Initially they were representing themselves through their military might. After the first world wobeing leaders in the athletic field rather than on the military field. They have strived and succeeded in proving themselves to be strong and independent. The Pavilion was a demonstration of this, or at least projection of what they hoped to portray.

The Pavilion represented a nation that wanted to be lifted out of mire and a bad reputation. The resulting nation is one that is strong and if they continue on this path they have no choice but to continue to be this way. The nation will continue to be strong and a leader in all of the ventures they undertake.
Rather than to think of themselves as a lone nation to conquer the world, he wanted to demonstrate Germany's desire to be a part of the world. They wanted to be a strong part of the world but a part of it nonetheless.

With his dominant use of external space Van de Rohe was paving the way as a demonstration that the German nation desired to be more externally focussed.

Van de Rohe also began to demonstrate the notion of infinite space. Reyner Banham discusses this notion as "interpenetrating spheres of influence of adjacent objects (Banham, 1975). The straight lines and powerful materials integrated this idea of infinite space and demonstrated the notion that Van de Rohe, and ultimately the German nation, wanted to extend their influence and view to a more external one.

Bibliography


