

Spain!

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Travelling on his Carter Holt Harvey Environmental Award of 1994, Peter Diprose recalls his encounter with the Barcelona Pavilion.

In late April of 1995 I travelled to England and rendezvoused with Steve Downey, a London based graduate who had agreed to accompany me on an architectural tour of Spain. Several days later we flew to Malaga choosing to spend the first ten days of our sojourn travelling around the white villages and towns of the south. During that time, we covered more than two and a half thousand kilometres, enjoying the sights, sounds and aromas of Andalucia in springtime - bullfighting in Ronda, a fiesta in Seville, the gardens and window boxes of Cordoba and Granada's renown Alhambra. After embracing Hemmingway's 'Espanya' we drove one thousand kilometres north to Barcelona, the capital of Catalunya, arriving there on May Day. At the time both Steve and myself were recovering from burns acquired two days earlier, the consequence of an impromptu climb to the top of the 3481m foot tip of Pico de Veleta, from where we glimpsed Africa across the Mediterranean sea.

Settling into a seedy pensione just off the Plaça Reial we set out upon a preliminary reconnaissance of the city. The dark and slender streets of old Barcelona, open out dramatically onto that most famous of boulevards, Los Ramblas, its wide sunny pavement heavy with the sweat of tourists, the consumption of souvenirs, beer and 'takeaway' paella. Dispersed through the throng of tourists, booksellers, flower merchants were those on the edge of the law and possibly the edge of sanity. Petty thieves and pavement entertainers, living statues of Caesar, Scarecrow, and the Virgin Mary. Having only a limited palate for this spectacle we set out on our pilgrimage to that place in Barcelona free from the banal congestion of living bodies, that space reified by architectural texts for over thirty years. I refer of course to the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies Van der Rohe.

The original German Pavilion of the 1929 World Exposition was removed from the site after six months, and is still missing. Until recently the mythology of this construction was based on secondary accounts and black and white photographs. Reconstructed, it has become an object in context. Instead of its artifice being forever lost in avant-garde discourse, it may again be encountered viscerally rather than virtually.

Stepping from the soft dust of the clay piazza east of the Pavilion, the hard travertine of its plinth spread out to form a Cartesian island. Walking up the steps, and turning hard right I prepared to enter the delicate Platonic structure. Once inside, its reflective polished surfaces accentuated the click of my riding boots. The host dressed in blue serge cordially greeted me with a smile and a request for 200 pesetas. His statuesque female counterpart stood by the enclosed pool, omniscient in her survey of spatial axes, while he remained outside on sentry duty. Like Pygmalion I could not resist at least one dance with the charming figure.

The backdrop of trees to the rear of the pavilion reinforced the greenness of marble around reflective pool while enhancing its sense of spatial containment. Correspondingly, the view back

across the large pool to the south is terminated by the Palau de Victoria Eugenia. To my delight that pool was filled with symmetrical grey pebbles the size of small eggs, a surprisingly bulbous texture in counterpoint to the paper flat surfaces of stone grid and watery rectangle. More conspicuous was the poolside signage «Pohibido Banarse» - to ensure antipodean architects did not dip their sticky feet into the water.

Sitting on one of the Barcelona chairs my overall impression of the architecture was one of cerebral comfort. A distinctly quiet architecture at home in this temperate climate. While contemplating the pavilion, memories of low-design interjected, and Smirnoff-like invaded the purity of my experience. The expansive glass wall became ranch sliders, and the large eaves reminiscent of a veranda. Outside a bench seat could be glimpsed beside the barbecue area and swimming pool, to the rear our hostess now stood with champagne flute and towel beckoning me towards the spa. Snapping out of the trance I pondered what to take home from this encounter with the Pavilion? Perhaps Sierratone wallboard with plastic jointers, or the grain of plywood and packing-case might substitute for the Pavilion's pattern of onyx? Quickly dismissing this idea, I realised that of most import was the experience of an architecture in context.

Although this icon of modernism, like its textural mythology was fabricated distant from the site, it responded appropriately to the demands of locality. First hand experience of the Pavilion, reinforced my beliefs that architecture is best designed mindful of context, and that plans, cross-sections and photographs will necessarily remain limited sources of design inspiration. For this reason the true value of the grand tour endures, architecture being best experienced (and designed) in the contexts of climate, contour and city, its people, culture and natural environment.

I would like to thank Carter Holt Harvey for providing me the opportunity to experience the reconstructed Barcelona Pavilion in the flesh.