

Excerpt: Exhibition Pavilions by Moises Puente

Exhibition Pavilions: Introduction

Moisés Puente (Excerpted from *Pabellones de Exposición Exhibition Pavilions*, Editorial Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2000)

Taking another look at the architecture of the 20th century we find a surprising number of exhibition pavilions among its most important works. The unusual fact that such small and ephemeral buildings have managed to form part of the iconography of modern architecture is due to the mystery that has forever surrounded them and which resides in their special procedural conditions: a somewhat hasty gestation, a brief existence in time, and a sudden end. Only a few reminders of their existence remain: local press reports, the recall of some visitor or other, a few plans we cannot check against the original model, and a limited number of photos preserved in far-flung archives. What we are able to reconstruct through the evidence of these documents and photographs makes for certain discontinuities in the history of 20th-century architecture, a history which is fissured by the disappearance of a number of buildings sufficiently important for us to feel them as genuine losses,¹ as incisions that inevitably cut across it. The documents that we rely on for their reconstruction maintain them in their primary state, with few alterations: they have died young. Their ephemeral existence does not permit the years to pass, and time leaves no mark on them. By preserving their original unaltered state in the few variations we are able to discern in the documents they have left behind of their brief existence, we posit their history without any defects, without any deterioration. Registered in a snapshot which saves them from disappearing altogether, pavilions become a cult object for modern archaeology. They require a different approach to become known; we cannot visit them. Their physical non-existence, their loss, calls for a continuous re-updating, a *mis-en-scène*, every time we wish to reconstruct them.²

1.

In a pavilion almost anything goes. And this is because of a singular set of constraints: the pavilion's commissioning, client, construction, duration and destruction. Competitions are convoked in which things are allowed that aren't allowed elsewhere, pavilions are judged as prestige works, and some even manage to be self-commissioned on the part of their own creators.³ Their objective is to represent in a limited space—in a single small-sized building that doesn't normally require too much programmatic development—the *dwelling place* of an entire country, of a city, an event or an industry. One doesn't even have to worry about a conventional building, since this only has to last a

short time. While they comply with certain minimal conditions of habitability, their construction is somewhat special, since pavilions only have to last a few weeks or a few months.⁴ At times they even appear to be models, papier mâché montages, stage sets for fleeting performances. Their use is all but restricted to complementing what is exhibited in them, and at times to merely exhibiting themselves. In certain cases they're mere empty stage sets: they only contain what they are. Modern architecture is at home in the pavilion. One devotes the time required to give form to, to construct, albeit rapidly and for a brief duration, small buildings akin to manifestos. The slowest and most patient of the arts, with construction times measured in years, decades and even centuries, accelerates to exploit the immediacy and *unimportance* of such ephemeral buildings, and to use them as experiments for subsequent architectures. The speed with which the avant-gardes intervened in other artistic fields was slow to emerge in works of architecture: in the pavilion this was achieved. The confirmation of the experiment is almost immediate. In a few months the design is thought up, built and disappears without leaving more trace than a few photos. It's not in the least unusual, then to count so many masterworks among exhibition pavilions. Throughout the 20th century these have served as testing grounds for other architectures. We can detect their century-long presence in other buildings (by the same creators as well as by other architects). They're shop windows for tendencies and methods that anticipate future buildings or bring processes that are already underway to a head.⁵

2.

After grabbing the attention at the fair, after being strutting players for the short time an exhibition lasts, they suddenly disappear. Some are dismantled, others are broken up or simply fall down; the more fortunate are sold to private individuals or travel from exhibition to exhibition for as long as their fragile construction allows. Some of the more emblematic ones have seen all their magic evaporate in recent reconstructions. This has happened to Mies van der Rohe's German Pavilion, to J. Ll. Sert and L. Lacasa's Spanish Republican Pavilion, Le Corbusier's L'Esprit Nouveau or A. & P. Smithson's Patio & Pavilion,⁶ restored to London more than three decades after its original construction. Mummified replicas of what they once were, they barely endure in a time outside their own; outside a location that, while it might suit them archaeologically, is no longer theirs, alongside neighbors they don't now recognize. The interest in their reconstruction rests solely on a modern taste for collecting, for decontextualizing a work and presenting it to all eyes as an object of study, in this instance as a unique piece in a museum that is nothing save itself. The fact of reconstructing something intended, on principle, to have an ephemeral existence puts paid to the aura so sought after by modern archaeology, destroys the possibilities of its reconstruction, confining these to one alone, the one in which it has been reconstructed.

3.

The exhibition pavilion, as we understand it today, brings together a series of contents of varying provenance from the history of architecture as a whole.

Beginning with its own definition,¹ the pavilion is a building that forms an annex to something that is more important than it and to which it is attached like a satellite. The condition of being an eccentric appendage, marginal to the mother building, gives it a singular quality, permitting it that which is not permitted elsewhere. At the same time its eccentricity is a locus of freedom and of a concentration of contents. It is free of that which is not permitted to the buildings it is an appendage of, it is concentrated and self-willed. What the pavilion contains is essential and it constitutes an especially intense place. Its exquisite quality makes of it a place of extraordinary refinement, of luxury, a box of wonders, almost. It is the essence of the superfluous, it frees the main building of all illogicality by confronting the latter with its own deformity, its relative monstrosity. Its nature is profoundly ornamental: it attracts attention to itself, only to redirect this straightforward towards the buildings on which it depends; it allows for no respite other than movement towards the main buildings. The pavilion also revives the garden pagoda typology of Oriental tradition as a superfluous ornament of the landscape. Integrated into the garden it punctuates any tour by establishing points of particular intensity. It provides a pause and a privileged spot for the almost sentimental contemplation of what surrounds it. In it the attention is held for a moment in order, once inside, to be redirected towards the outside. Its interior all but serves as a framing device for observation of what never occurs in that interior, but elsewhere. Given its ornamental quality the pavilion has certain echoes of the temporary stand, market stall, open-air café. As with the mountebank's booth, the important thing is to be noticed, to attract the spectator towards what is being announced. The cry of "roll-up, roll-up!" no longer being proclaimed, it's the architecture itself that does this. The exhibition pavilion takes over all the iconography deriving from advertising architecture—colors, lights, neon signs, huge lettering, pennants, logos, illuminated marquees—in a festive atmosphere aimed at competing for the visitors' attention.

¹ See 'Appearances' by John Berger (with Jean Mohr) in *Another way of Telling*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1995.

[2](#) The purpose of this book is to aid in this reconstruction. To present in one volume some of the documents that bear witness to these losses, and hence their possible reconstruction, and to be able to rethink these (cf. Josep Quetglas' 'Final' in "A Miscellany of Other People's Opinions and Prejudices about the World, the Devil and Architecture", in *El Croquis* 92, Madrid, 1998.)

[3](#) See the L'Esprit Nouveau pavilion (1925) that Le Corbusier built for his own magazine; Les Temps Modernes (1937), also by Le Corbusier; and A. & P. Smithson's Patio & Pavilion (1956).

[4](#) The precarious nature of their construction raises certain doubts about the subsequent reconstructions that have been undertaken.

[5](#) Mies van der Rohe's German Pavilion at the 1929 Barcelona International Exhibition, the only one of his patio-house series ever built (the *German [patio-] House*).

[6](#) The German Pavilion (1929) was reconstructed on its former site in the Montjuic Park in Barcelona between 1981 and 1986; the Spanish Republican Pavilion from the Paris International Exposition of 1937 was reconstructed for the Barcelona Olympic Games in 1992; L'Esprit Nouveau (1925) was abandoned in a Boulogne park and subsequently restored; Patio & Pavilion (1956) returned to London in 1990, being installed at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (the ICA); and Jean Prouvé's One Hundred Years of Aluminum Pavilion (1954) was reconstructed in Paris Nord Villepinte (1999).

[7](#) Pavilion (From the old French *paveillon*) m. "A building which forms an annex to another larger building alongside or near it." *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, Real Academia Española, 20th edition, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1992.