

Project Text: Bicycle Pavilion

Bicycle Pavilion (*Pabellón de bicicletas*)

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This project, the first in a series addressing forms of display in architecture—pavilions, exhibitions, and museums—analyses the relationship between display and function. Are these two complimentary or mutually exclusive? The *Pabellón de bicicletas* takes several forms: it is a sculptural object on display, it is a lookout or *mirador* from which to gaze over the Jumex factory grounds, and it is a storage shed for bicycles.

The pavilion measures 18 metres long by 4.8 metres high by 1.8 metres wide. It is made of enameled steel and vinyl-coated glass panels. The pavilion is attached to the fence which separates the employee and visitor parking lot from the truck yard of the factory's shipping department. It has been sited to replace a shelter housing factory workers' bicycles.

Does architecture have to have a function? Mexican modern architecture was highly influenced by functionalist thinking at its outset. A central figure of this movement was Juan O'Gorman, and his public school designs and first houses strictly adhere to functionalist doctrine. In O'Gorman's early projects, "The form was entirely derived from the utilitarian function. The services, both of electricity and sanitation, were exposed."¹ This was a vision of an architecture caught up in the technical considerations of the engineer, and was at the heart of the practices of many Mexican architects from the 1930's through the '50's, many architects of the period receiving their training from the traditional seat of engineering—the Mexico City Polytechnic. The architect Max L. Cetto summed up the prevailing mood with his manifesto-like statement, "There is no such thing as architecture without utility to human beings."²

In contrast, we find the 1920's and '30's display works of Mies van der Rohe in which the non-functional aspect of display structures allowed the architect freedom to address the formal, perceptual and "spiritual" problems of architecture. About Mies' exhibition structures, Wallis Miller writes "This emphasis on perception, along with Mies' general preoccupation with the "spirit of the

time," wrested attention away from function."³ Later, in the United States, when new building technology became available Mies' display works, with their attention to formal and perceptual concerns led to technology and function-based works like the Illinois Institute of Technology campus in Chicago. This campus directly inspired the design of the Mexico City Polytechnic, by Reinaldo Pérez Rayón. But ironically, according to Alberto Pérez-Gómez, in a throwback to Mies' early concern for form, the design of the Polytechnic was a purely formal exercise: "While at IIT there is a kind of rationalization that has to do with the industrial base of the United States, in Mexico it becomes a formal device that is then carried out with conventional craftsmanship... So there is a kind of contradiction where the connection with Mies becomes purely formal rather than related to the means of production, which was the interest of Mies at the time he designed IIT."⁴ Formalism comes full circle and lands in the midst of Mexico's functionalists.

The design of the *Pabellón de bicicletas* indulges in the freedom afforded by Mies' non-functional concept of display structures. The result is an architectural folly: a structure impossibly narrow and shrouded in mysterious purpose. Yet this structure of dubious function seems to be made up of functionalist signifiers: inexpensive industrial metal framing and flooring, exposed concrete footings, standardized glass panels. The pavilion seems to grow out of the factory's standard gray metal fencing which supports it.

Even the colours employed in the pavilion are derived from functionalist renderings, themselves based on the constructivist colour schemes of van Doesburg and Moholy Nagy. The colour-contrasted exterior/interior of functionalist axonometrics and perspectives inspire the white exterior and tomato-red interior of the pavilion.

In the same way the Mexico City Polytechnic was designed to mimick a late-Miesian functionalism, the *Pabellón de bicicletas* tries to "look functionalist." But this functionalist veneer also points to the "ulterior motive" of the pavilion: the storage of bicycles. The pavilion is on the site of a daily pilgrimage by factory workers arriving by bicycle, causing them to interact with the piece in a strictly utilitarian manner. This function has been absorbed by the pavilion almost by default, occupying as it does the site of the original bicycle shed. This hybrid structure seems to vibrate with the tension between function and display. It combines and contrasts them in a way which invites further contemplation of these problems, central to the display of both architecture and art.

1. Valerie Fraser. *Building the New World: Studies in the Modern Architecture of Latin America 1930-1960*. Verso, London-New York, 2000

2. Fernando González Gortázar. *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX*. Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, 1994

3. Wallis Miller. "Mies and Exhibitions" in *Mies in Berlin*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001

4. Edward Burian. *Modernity and architecture of Mexico*. University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997