ARCH 5301: Theories and Analysis of Architecture 1

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The Architect as Curator:

From Pedagogical Design Advocacy to Systemic Modernist Critique

Throughout history, the "architect" has long been a multifaceted identity—place maker, civic agent, artist, graphic designer, performer, mass producer, literary scholar, activist, craftsperson, mediator of landscape, scientist, mathematician, global student, teacher, storyteller, administrator, advocate for the public. One identity that seems to encompass many of these is the role of the architect as a curator: an overseer, a keeper, one who invents, organizes, vetoes, and approves. There is no doubt that architecture is an intersectional medium. It traverses beyond the visual, the practical and functional, and even the social. In her text, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture & Design*, Fleur Watson details the history of architecture and design from a curatorial standpoint. She argues that "through the lens of architecture and design-focused exhibitions," the so-called "new curator," a term she has coined, "functions beyond the role of a 'custodian' or [...] 'expert'" and becomes a facilitator of architecturally discursive communities.[1] This notion is pivotal to my understanding of how the architect as curator is a fluctuating role

[1] Fleur Watson, *The New Curator: Exhibiting Architecture and Design,* Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021 https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351029827, 14.

that has taken a turn in the last 100 years. In this essay, I hope to expand on Watson's claim, looking closely at two modernist case studies. I will argue that the architectural curator, "new" or historical, is a pivotal identity, especially in the translation of modernist architectural ideals as well as their contemporary reception. And, perhaps deviating from Watson's "new curator", I will illustrate how in the last century, modernist architect-curators have shifted in their curatorial strategies from a place of architectural promotion to architectural critique.

The primary case studies of this essay will include the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition, *Art and Technics: A New Unity*, in Weimar, Germany, and a 21st century exhibitionary take on the beloved 1929 Barcelona Pavilion by Mies Van Der Rohe and Lilly Reich: Andrés Jaque's *Phantom: Mies as Rendered Society* (2012), in Barcelona, Spain. Before delving into these studies, a bit of context surrounding the historical exhibition of architecture is required.

The purposeful archiving of architectural materials is a practice that dates back to the 13th century.[2] Barry Bergdoll, former Curator of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art, has explained that "exhibitions presenting [organized exhibitions of] of architecture are in large measure a phenomenon of the late-twentieth century architectural and museological culture."[3] It is no coincidence that this rise in architectural exhibitions exists in tangent with the post revolution, post war era and what some call "the birth of the modern art world." Fleur Watson and Barry Bergdoll are in agreement that the architectural exhibition, as it has come to be known, really took flight as a "new typology" in terms of its impact on the curatorial landscape during this time. Both Watson and Bergdoll understand gallery sited exhibitions as the primary location or means for exhibiting architecture—staging exhibitions in museums, or in affiliation with academic institutions, often emphasizing architecture's inherent relationship with pedagogy

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[2] Watson, *The New Curator,* 14.
[3] Barry Bergdoll, 'Curating History,' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 57, no. 3 (1998), 257.

and narrative construction. Likewise, it should come as no surprise that many contemporary and modern art museums, globally, make space for architecture and design in their program of exhibitions.[4] Even further, many exclusively dedicated architecture and design museums have sprung up in the last 50 years—most notably, Montreal's Canadian Centre for Architecture (1979), the Netherlands Architecture Institute (1996), and Design Sight 21_21 (Tokyo) (2007).[5]

I believe that architectural ideals and expression becomes clearer and more pointed when exhibited without external obstruction—exhibiting architecture itself rather than fragments of it or representations of it in a museum setting. As Watson puts it, "exhibiting visual art generally involves a direct manifestation of the work, which speaks for itself," whereas "the materials used to exhibit architecture [...] can only ever be a representation or facet of the real work."[6] In other words, exhibiting a "direct manifestation" of a work of architecture, requires being able to physically experience that space. This practice is not uncommon—visitors travel from around the world to visit Fallingwater, La Sagrada Familia, the Colosseum, the Acropolis, the Bauhaus Dessau, the Farnsworth House, and the Empire State Building alike. None of these are explicitly "museums" in a traditional sense, yet all of them provide a kind of spectacle for their visitors—answering questions, sparking discussions, educating those with little experience but vast architectural curiosities. Each redefining, with every rounded corner and traversed story, architectural decision making and the motivation behind architectural curatorial expression at that time.

In 1923, one hundred years ago, in Weimar, Germany, architectural curation was motivated by the unity of all the arts with mass production and technological finesse. It was during this time that the Bauhaus hosted its first public exhibition, *Art and Technics, A New*

[4] Watson, *The New Curator,* 14.
[5] Watson, *The New Curator,* 14.
[6] Watson, *The New Curator,* 15.

Unity. The exhibition was unveiled during a tumultuous time in the history of the institution—the Landtag, or Thuringian Legislative Assembly (the Bauhaus' civic funders), requested an exhibition that would essentially depict the school's progress over the previous four years.[7] Future funding for the Bauhaus would, in simple terms, depend on the exhibition's ability to depict the successes of the institute and whether the government believed the Bauhaus's design vision was consistent with their vision for Germany's future—a tremendous challenge for a curator (not to mention the fact that the exhibited works deviated significantly from traditional German design and culture).

Thankfully the exhibition was positively received despite Bauhaus Director and exhibition curator, Walter Gropius' hesitation over the school's preparedness. The exhibition included works in the Weimar school building: "designs, murals, reliefs in various vestibules, staircases and rooms" and " international exhibition of modern architecture" which consisted of various models and drawings by Bauhaus masters.[8] Gropius paired the exhibition with a series of lectures, performances, theoretical studies, and presentation detailing the iconic Bauhaus preliminary course. The keystone of the exhibition, however, and potentially the most risky work in the selection, was the Haus am Horn (Fig. 1), a single family home designed by Bauhaus painter Georg Muche and realized by Walter Gropius.

The school experienced a curricular shift just prior to the exhibition and many of these new found ideals are expressed in the architecture of the Haus am Horn. Since the school's inception, Gropius nurtured a craft based curriculum, successful in turning out "artisans and designers capable of creating useful and beautiful objects"—an ideology that remained true to

[7] Herbert Bayer, Walter Gropius, and Ise Gropius, eds., *Bauhaus: 1919–1928* (Boston, MA: Charles T. Branford Company, 1959), 82.
[8] Bayer, *Bauhaus: 1919–1928*, 82.

his vision of a new system of living defined by the unity of the arts.[9] The Haus am Horn was built for a married couple with a child and daily housekeeper and was intended to be the first of a series of homes like it in Weimar. The project, often considered ahead of its time, was rejected by the public largely because of its material use and building method which involved a skeleton construction and large glass openings. Interestingly, this methodology often seems like the default for many newly constructed buildings a century later—hence the promotional aspect of the exhibition. The structure was produced using reinforced concrete, glass, and steel. Transparency was a hallmark of this project: legible design, simple construction, clear communication and message about the strength of uniting the arts and technology.

The building remains open to the public today and its circulation is unchanged from how the Landtag might have experienced it in 1923. The space is a "ribbon of rooms around a central room" and features many loosely enforced intersecting paths.[10] The central area, which functions as a central reception, living room, and study, has a higher ceiling than the rooms in the outer ring (the entry space, kitchen, dining room, child's playroom, child's bedroom, woman's room, wash closet, man's room, study, and mechanical room) (Fig. 2). Architectural historian, Luke Fiederer notes that each space within the Haus am Horn "was designed with an explicit program in mind, and intentionally spatialized so that it could not be used for any other purpose."[11] Each choice in the layout of this program responds to circulation and light. The strategy behind this design was not so much to limit the use of each space but rather to emphasize public and private distinction and reduce inefficient use. As design students we are familiar with this kind of spatial

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[9] Alexandra Griffith Winton, "The Bauhaus, 1919–1933," In Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bauh/hd_bauh.htm (August 2007; last revised October 2016).
[10] Jeremy Aynsley, "Bauhaus Houses and the Design Canon: 1923-2019," From De Stijl to Dutch Design: Canonising Design 2.0 (Creative industries fund NL, December 7, 2016), 28.
[11] Luke Fiederer, "Ad Classics: Haus Am Horn / Georg Muche," ArchDaily (ArchDaily, June 12, 2017), https://www.archdaily.com/873082/ad-classics-haus-am-horn-germany-georg-muche.

rigidity—programming based on user needs. There was, and continues to be, a tremendous benefit to rigid programming in architecture and in exhibiting the Haus am Horn, Gropius, architect and curator, successfully communicated this notion.

Georg Muche was incredibly selective in the amenities necessary for modern everyday living. This child's playroom is a perfect example: it features a series of primary colored wooden units (for storage, building, and wondrous invention) that encourage children to approach play constructively—applying a functionalist mentality to youthful recreation.[12] Muche also experimented with lighting in the space in addition to other new technologies. Each design choice in the Haus am Horn—color, circulation, light entry, solar and wind orientation, access, and acoustics—caters to the exhibition's aim of uniting the arts and technology as a proposal for the future of efficient and aesthetically oriented modern living. The house instills the necessity for uniting art and technology in anyone able to visit it, read about it, or remotely leaf through its sections and plans. While revolutionary at the time, its founding principles, especially in terms of explicit programming, are pivotal in contemporary design and Gropius' curatorial strategy undoubtedly exposed and advocated for this.

In the years that followed, the Bauhaus moved from Weimar to Dessau and eventually, in 1928, Gropius stepped down as director to pursue other projects. In his wake came two additional directors: Hannes Meyer (1928-1930) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1930-1933). Meyer, whose vision for the Bauhaus was initially consistent with Gropius' 1923 curricular shift—mass-producible design that was largely functionalist in nature, favored "concern for the public good" over "private luxury."[13] Meyer controversially requested that many Bauhaus masters, with respectable reputations, step down due to their formal approaches to design that

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[12] Aynsley, "Bauhaus Houses and the Design Cannon," 28.
[13] Alexandra Griffith Winton, "The Bauhaus, 1919–1933."

contradicted his functionalist beliefs. These requests were never realized and instead, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, who more realistically bridged the gap between function and aesthetics, assumed the vacant director position.

Mies van der Rohe, one of the designers (along with Lilly Reich) of our second case study, the 1929 Barcelona Pavilion (Fig. 3 and 4), directed the Bauhaus with a greater emphasis on architecture, continuing to unite the arts, bettering society through thoughtful design, while allowing efficiency and function to steer formal decision making. These ideologies are undoubtedly clear in the design of this collaborative Pavillion. Regarded by the architects as "the display of architecture's modern movement to the world," the Barcelona Pavilion was "the face of Germany after WWI" in the 1929 International Exposition in Barcelona, Spain.[14] Architectural historian Andrew Kroll notes that unlike many of the other pavilions at the exposition, Reich and van der Rohe's architectural contribution was intended to be a "building and nothing more."[15] It was to be void almost entirely of artwork and would function as a place of respite for its temporary inhabitant, King Alphonso XIII of Spain.[16] Kroll describes the space as an "inhabitable sculpture"—a rather interesting choice of words for a space intended to be free of ornamentation and disorder, but this description is not entirely untrue especially in its use of material—glass, steel, roman travertine, green alpine marble, ancient green marble from Greece and golden onyx from the Atlas Mountains.[17] The site is quite secluded though still accessible to the surrounding city. The architects intentionally framed views using glass facades and a low roof plane to give the visitor the sense of an oasis. The roof appears, in elevation, to float "above the interior volume" which gives the inhabitable space a "sense of weightlessness that fluctuates

[14] Andrew Kroll, "Ad Classics: Barcelona Pavilion / Mies van Der Rohe," ArchDaily, February 8, 2011, https://www.archdaily.com/109135/ad-classics-barcelona-pavilion-mies-van-der-rohe.
[15] Andrew Kroll, "Ad Classics: Barcelona Pavilion / Mies van Der Rohe."
[16] Andrew Kroll, "Ad Classics: Barcelona Pavilion / Mies van Der Rohe."
[17] "The Pavilion," Fundació Mies van der Rohe, October 13, 2023, https://miesbcn.com/the-pavilion/#:~:text=The%20materials,employed%20by%20Mies%20in%201929.

between enclosure and canopy."[18] The pavilion is framed between two reflecting pools which are exquisitely maintained, clear, and still bodies of water. The same can be said for the rest of the space. It provides a sense of peace because it is so void of obstruction, ornamentation, dirt, even permanent dwellers. It seems as though it is meant to be seen and not touched.

The building was disassembled in 1930 following the exposition but was eventually reconstructed on its original site in 1986 as it had become a beloved hallmark of German modernism, simplistic design, and cultural collaboration.[19] Since reconstruction, the pavilion has not hosted any long term guests and functions predominantly as a tourist destination, event space, commercial site, etc. There was a long debate over the building's reconstruction with many notable architects promoting and criticizing the project—Philip Johnson questioned the mythology of the building and wondered, rather philosophically: "should a dream be realized?"[20] Others felt that the reconstruction would never live up to the original. This debate, as well as the pristine nature of the Pavilion is likely one of the inspirations behind the 2012 exhibition *Phantom: Mies as Rendered Society* by architect, scholar and Dean of Columbia University's GSAPP, Andrés Jaque (Fig. 5 and 6).

Jaque's exhibition, significantly, was the fourth exhibition in the Barcelona Pavilion since 2008 and used the space's architecture as well as its "historical significance as a medium for another message."[21] Unlike the Haus am Horn, the curator of this exhibition was not the design principal of the project. As a result, Jaque's curatorial approach is much less promotional and instead functions as a critique of van der Rohe's design, the building's reconstruction, and its use and upkeep historically and contemporarily. Jaque's exhibitionary intervention focuses on "the

[18] Andrew Kroll, "Ad Classics: Barcelona Pavilion / Mies van Der Rohe."
[19] "The Pavilion," Fundació Mies van der Rohe.
[20] Michael Brenson, "ART PEOPLE; Mies Pavilion to Rise Again.," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1983.
[21] Nick Axel, "Quaderns 2011 – 2016," Quaderns 2011 2016 Architecture and/of the Other PHANTOM Mies as Rendered Society by Andrés Jaque Comments, March 2013, http://quaderns.coac.net/en/2013/03/phantom-jaque/.

disjunction between the image of the iconic building" and actions that place behind the scenes "to keep it recognizable as such."[22] Jaque brings the "back of house" to the forefront of the exhibition—spotlighting marble-buffing machines, chemical cleaning projects, ladders, broken tiles, worn out curtains and dog bowls—and uses the iconic architecture as the stage rather than the performer it is used to being. Jaque places these undervalued items throughout the space in "such a way that the visitor cannot avoid confronting them."[23] Barcelona based architect, Nick Axel, claims that the exhibition forces visitors to "face the aesthetic polarity and social binary inherent in the reified Modernist ideology itself."[24]

With this exhibition, Jaque, through curation, redefines the meaning of architectural transparency that Gropius was so keen to exhibit in the Haus am Horn. This time transparency is less an amplification of structural methodologies and clearly thoughtful program, but rather it provides a window into the realities of maintenance and architectural privilege. Jaque, as Axel illustrates, "makes the case that modernist ideology presupposes and is dependent upon an invisible Other," whose tools are so often banished to the basement only to rise into sight when the space has returned to "vacancy."[25] It is interesting to recall the lack of storage space in the Haus am Horn. I have long interpreted this as a response to minimalism: a modernist ideal, but perhaps, like the Barcelona Pavilion, the pristine visitor experience provided at the Haus am Horn is merely an illusion.

Curation, much like the design process, is incredibly strategic. Visitors and inhabitants experience the vision of a great overseer that was developed with them so dearly in mind. Curators aim to convey an underlying message without explicitly saying it. For Gropius and

[22] Nick Axel, Architecture and/of the Other.
[23] Nick Axel, Architecture and/of the Other.
[24] Nick Axel, Architecture and/of the Other.
[25] Nick Axel, Architecture and/of the Other.

Muche it was the necessity of unifying the arts with technology, the future of design's dependence on minimal construction techniques and thoughtful materials, as well as the importance of explicit and efficient programing. For van der Rohe, the message of his Pavilion was tranquility, respite, and the strength of German design techniques. Each of these designers used curation to advocate for their designs and design principles. Andrés Jaque, in his qualification of van der Rohe's argument for Barcelona Pavilion, curated with the intention of true visibility, exposure, unveiling the Otherness that modernist architecture is so often dependent on, and perhaps decoding a potential misunderstanding of the common architectural phrase "less is more." He was inspired to critique the existing architecture. All of these strategies are valid and similarly bound to their time periods.

At the close of this essay, I wonder if there is a difference between the Architectural Designer and the Curator. Was Muche's choice to raise the ceiling height in the central space of the Haus am Horn a design strategy or a curatorial strategy? Was Jaque's decision to orient his selected objects aesthetically motivated or socially motivated? Both curators and designers create with form, scholarship (founding principles or messages), and program in mind. They both aim to convey the meaning behind their decisions subtly—hoping that the visitor or the audience may arrive at their intended conclusion on their own. Perhaps designing is intervening; intervening is curating, and curating is designing.

Figures

Figure 1

Georg Muche and Walter Gropius, Haus am Horn, Weimar, DE, 1923.

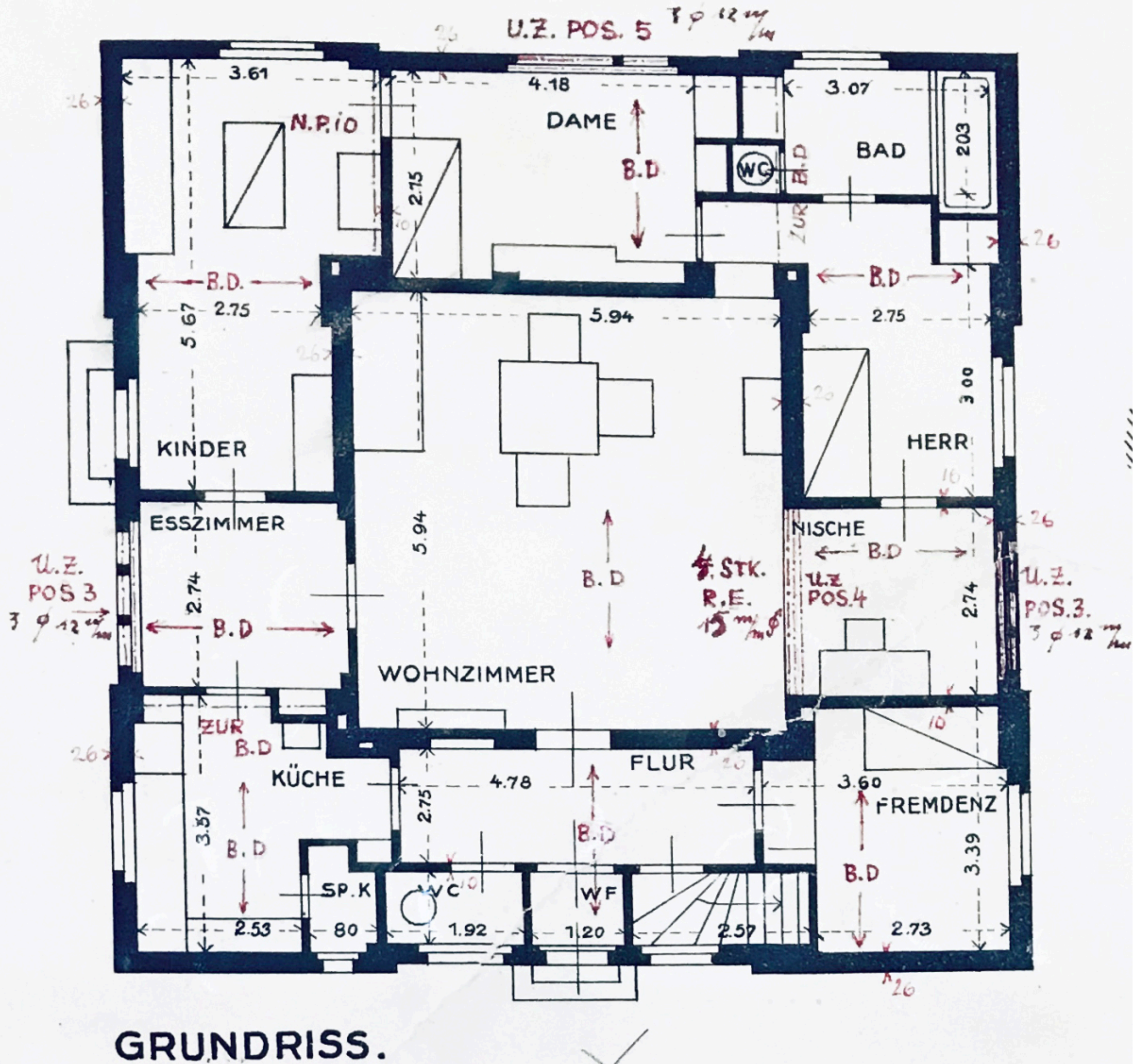

Figure 2

Georg Muche and Walter Gropius, Haus am Horn (Plan), Weimar, DE, 1923.

Figure 3

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, Barcelona Pavilion, Barcelona, SP, 1929.

Figure 4

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich, Barcelona Pavilion (Interior), Barcelona, SP, 1929.

Figure 5

Andrés Jaque, *PHANTOM: Mies as Rendered Society*, Barcelona Pavilion, Barcelona, SP, 2013.

Figure 6

Andrés Jaque, *PHANTOM: Mies as Rendered Society*, Barcelona Pavilion, Barcelona, SP, 2013.

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