



Deposited via The University of Sheffield.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/161369/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Mejia Moreno, C. (2020) There was once an empty site. *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 24 (2). pp. 129-140. ISSN: 1359-1355

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135520000214>

---

This article has been published in a revised form in *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly* <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1359135520000214>. This version is free to view and download for private research and study only. Not for re-distribution, re-sale or use in derivative works.  
© The Author(s), 2020.

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

Photographs of the site of Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion frame a spectral absence and our anticipation of the presence of this canonical structure

## There was once an empty site

*Catalina Mejía Moreno*

In 1979, Ludwig Glaeser, first curator of the Mies van der Rohe Archive at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA, New York), curated the travelling exhibition *Mies van der Rohe, The Barcelona Pavilion, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*. Not surprisingly, the pamphlet that accompanied the exhibition contains, as main representations, the widely recognised 1929 Berliner Bild-Bericht canonical photographs, alongside one perspectival drawing and one plan of the building. This is the way Lilly Reich's and Mies van der Rohe's 1929 German Pavilion for the Barcelona International Exhibition has been presented to our eyes, this is the way we always expect to encounter it.<sup>1</sup>

In 1979 Glaeser also visited the site in Barcelona where the German Pavilion had been built fifty years before, and where it had been dismantled eight months after its construction. The remaining thirteen prints that Glaeser made during this visit are today kept in his personal archive at MoMA. Some try to capture the Pavilion's context; others focus on the dusty site where the Pavilion once stood. Yet they all search for an absent referent: the Pavilion [1-6].

Glaeser's photographs of the Pavilion's empty site are not reproduced in the pamphlet that accompanies his exhibition. Instead, as an example of the history of the Pavilion, the building is present through its repeated and canonical 1929 Berliner Bild-Bericht prints. What makes Glaeser's snapshots striking is that, in all, the Pavilion is absent. Glaeser's 1979 shots accentuate the emptiness of a site that is not only inaccessible, but due to its repeated appearance in the printed media, it is in our imaginary, ever present. We remember the Pavilion. We do not need to know it at first hand to affirm that we know of it. But we cannot imagine the Pavilion's absence or the remaining empty and dusty site after dismantling and before reconstruction. This is ironic, given that the Pavilion's absence has been substantially longer than its existence.

This article will address some of the stories that Ludwig Glaeser's photographs from 1979 hold. The first one is about our fixation with a 'timeless' building, and of a certain inability to understand the ephemeral and fragile nature

of the architecture that once inhabited the site, and that was built to be dismantled. The second story that Glaeser's photographs hold concerns the stability of the Pavilion within architectural discourses, the permanence of the building within architectural history and criticism as a product of the perpetuity of the 1929 photographs. Here photography directs us towards a wider question about the tension between the building's absence, presence and photographic depictions. This story concerns the pavilion's absence as much as the negation of its disappearance. Finally, and more importantly, Glaeser's photographs hold a story that has not been told yet: the story of the interruption of that established presence of the Pavilion, and of its unquestionable permanency. Glaeser's photographs are the evidence and materialisation of the Pavilion's disappearance: they picture the void of the absent building, covered in dust and rubble, instead of the building. They portray an absent referent while, at the same time, they are a document of desire to somehow see and re-materialise the building through the agency of photography. They open an in-between condition in the historiography of the Pavilion's photographic criticism as a stage after the building's dismantling in the 1930s and before its reconstruction in 1986. This in-between condition implies and asks for a disruption of the fixed and repeated constructs to which the Pavilion has been subjected. They argue for the site's qualities of emptiness magnified by the pavilion's later reconstruction. They interrupt the Pavilion's canonical stance and its system of references that has characterised and defined it.

### **Photographs of the 1929 German Pavilion's construction site**

There are two sets of photographs of the Pavilion's empty site to which Glaeser's photographs relate: those of the construction site of the Pavilion in 1929, and the excavation photographs from the 1980s when the Pavilion's site was being explored to find material evidence relevant to the reconstruction project. In both sets the pavilion is absent, all that can be seen is the void left by a dismantled building and the void that awaits the building's reconstruction. These sets contribute to the discussion brought up by Glaeser's photographs, though in singular ways. In relation to the material fragility of the building, they suggest an alternative material reading of the building based on its constructive rather than its finished nature. And in relation to their failure as documentary evidence – as they have been generally addressed. If there is something that characterises them, it is their incompleteness.

Information about the design and construction process of the Pavilion consists of only a few photographic shots [7, 8], together with a series of incomplete drawings and scarce correspondence with suppliers. However, the more widely disseminated speculations about the Pavilion's constructive nature developed around the few existing photographic snapshots, despite the limited information contained in them. This assumption derives from the understanding that, although photography typically shows how buildings look (or, more

precisely, how we are supposed to see them), it is also through photography that one can trace and document the development of the displacement from drawing to building. Yet there is still little scholarship that addresses and reflects the unfinished state of buildings.<sup>2</sup>

Buildings under construction have been a consistent subject matter of interest for photographers and architectural photography amateurs, and especially so at the beginning of the twentieth century when new construction techniques were of interest to practising architects. Erich Mendelsohn, Walter Gropius and Georg Muche were some of the many modern architects who travelled to the United States of America in the early 1920s to document built forms. The construction site and, therefore, the construction process were mandatory subject matters. Yet the construction site had been a matter of photographic interest even earlier, since late nineteenth-century engineers documented the construction processes tied to material developments, with the use of ferro-concrete as the most telling example.<sup>3</sup> Some of the most well-known examples are the photographs of the construction of Brasilia by Marcel Gautherot (1958-60) and of Chandigarh by Pierre Jeanneret (1964), both of which provided an insight into the laborious construction process and, sometimes, the disconnect between the modernist claims of rationalisation and technological process, on the one hand, and the local nature of building processes on the other.

Construction sites have been a consistent and common photographic practice in twentieth-century photography. They were evidence of the modern ambition as places of production representing progress through material and technique. Yet, architects were usually not the ones taking the shots. Commissioning photographs was then established as a common practice for construction sites. Thus, photographers such as Hervé or Gautherot were engaged, thereby pointing towards the aestheticisation of the photographs and the photographic product as an artwork. Mendelsohn, however, could be considered the exception to the rule, since he was not a professional photographer but an architect aware of the potential of architectural publication. Mendelsohn achieved this aestheticisation instead and mainly through the printed press. His book *Amerika: Bilderbuch eines Architekten* [*America: picture book by an architect*] from 1926 is one of the most telling examples. The construction site was not one of Reich's or Mies's photographic subjects as it was for Mendelsohn. The sets of photographs of some of Mies's construction sites are usually the product of a third party. They resemble the common late nineteenth-century practice whereby the photographer was commissioned by the artisans, suppliers and commissioners rather than by the architect. Mies did have control over the images of his buildings once they were finished, but not over the photographs of his buildings while they were under construction, at least not in Germany.

Some of Mies's construction sites were, however, documented photographically. For instance, there are a few images from the construction of the

Tugendhat house, of the Farnsworth House under construction [9, 10], of Berlin's New National Gallery, and of the Lake Shore Drive apartments, commissioned by and housed at the Chicago Historical Society as evidence of urban development. These photographs all portray steel structures, whereas only two of the photographs of the German Pavilion construction show such structures. Though each of the photographs above suggest a slightly different thing, what they share is how they portray steel as the material of choice and construction qualities of steel as the modern material, as well as the relevance of architecture as process.

However, the mediatisation of modern architecture also influenced Mies's practice. Once Mies had become an established architect, photographers such as Wilhelm Niemann from the Berliner Bild-Bericht agency, Sasha Stone and Paul Schulz made photographs of his and Reich's work, many of which were printed and reprinted and distributed by photo-agencies initially in Germany and later, after his move to United States of America, there too.<sup>4</sup> Later in the US, Hedrich Blessing was one of his preferred photographers. Mies commissioned Blessing to document the design and construction process of his Chicago buildings.

The photographs of the construction site of the German Pavilion comprise a set of eleven photographs from 1928-29, from which only two have been included here [7, 8]. Due to their particular viewpoints and depictions, it is possible to assume that this set of prints has no other intention than to document certain instances of the construction process of the Pavilion, or even to document from a distance the construction site itself as evidence of an ongoing construction process. Not surprisingly, these photographs were used to fill in the gaps left by the imprecise and incomplete set of drawings, none of which can be considered to be construction drawings or documents. From the construction site photographs from 1928-29, the reconstruction team could identify the Pavilion's foundation system and the place where the pillars were anchored. But they could also clarify the role of the constructive nature of the two planes of the roof – a steel framework and eight load bearing pillars. Importantly, they also used the photographs as evidence of the use of local labour and its impact on the construction process of the building. From these photographs they could, for example, confirm that a grid structure supported the roof and that it had to be manufactured in Barcelona as a last-minute decision, as well as that the structure of the Pavilion's foundations was a series of catalan-vaults.<sup>5</sup> But that was it. Most of the information had to be interpreted from other sources. The conflicting nature of photography as a construction document is that it hides as much as it reveals. As architectural historian Michael Osman argues, all construction site photographs are 'far from an average descriptive document of a construction site', and the photographs of the German Pavilion construction site are no exception.<sup>6</sup>

These few snapshots did not make use of the photographic medium as others did. For instance, Albert Kahn produced photographs of construction that focused on the design of construction processes and the processes of production;

Kahn understood the photographic shots as an essential medium to remotely control the output over long distance.<sup>7</sup> Even many of the late nineteenth-century engineering journals in Germany focused on using photography as a way of documenting the 'new' materials used for construction, such as in the case of ferro-concrete. Gilbreth's photographs focused on space and time to document the spatial arrangements of construction sites. And Walter Gropius made micro-motion photos of progress of the construction of the Bauhaus and its master houses in Dessau.<sup>8</sup> All these photographs signified mass production, efficiency, functionalism, and progressive development. However, the photos of the German Pavilion construction do not connote these things. They are neither systematic nor detailed. Rather, they portray a construction site that seems, to some extent, basic, local (sometimes interpreted as 'precarious'), small, messy but also organised, and one that is misty and full of Mediterranean dust. It is hard to believe that they do not depict a building that was meant to rely on prefabrication. Instead, they depict a small building site in a historical and geographical context where the building's temporary nature is not evident, but where the site specificities are.

Yet as photographs of construction, some appear to suggest an archaeological excavation rather than a construction process. These photographs suggest that construction is unavoidably linked to destruction, and that combination of destruction and construction, and the inherent similarities between building sites and ruins as pointed by Reto Geiser in 'Ruins in Reverse', that makes these pictures invigorating. In the case of the Pavilion's construction photographs, the site is delimited, but the only signs of a forthcoming building are piles of soil and dust, as if bringing to mind Robert Smithson's description of New Jersey, where a motorway was constructed as a

*zero panorama [that] seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is, all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the romantic ruin because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built.*<sup>9</sup>

The photographs of the construction of the German Pavilion in Barcelona do not speak of the iconic building that was portrayed in this same site in its early photo-reproductions. All the dust, fragility and ephemerality disappeared as soon as its construction was complete, and Mies (and probably Reich too) commissioned the Berliner Bild-Bericht agency to document it, with very precise instructions on how to do it. Nevertheless, the construction photographs do speak of the dusty site that hosted the construction for eight months, and of a certain fragility entailed by the process of building. As with Glaeser's snapshots, the photographs of the construction site of the Pavilion open up an alternative and material reading of the Pavilion, and they also bring to the fore the fragility of the building's materiality. Yet Glaeser's photographs go further in their portrayal of a material in-between that exposes another fragility and ephemerality, that one of a

building that has always existed and repeatedly appeared through printed dissemination.

### **Dismantling and remains**

The ceremonial opening of the Barcelona Exhibition took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1929. A week later, all the German sections, including the Pavilion, were opened to the public. In January 1930, only eight months after it had opened, the exhibition closed and the Pavilion began to be dismantled. The construction photographs show that, despite the Pavilion's refined and long-lasting materials put together using adapted technologies available in Barcelona in 1929, the German Pavilion was a temporary building. The endurance of the long-lasting materials was addressed during the excavation process that the Spanish team led as part of the reconstruction process of the building, and in a series of interviews that assisted the team in determining the fate of some of the Pavilion's remains. The reconstruction team found that only a few of the construction materials were reused thus corroborating, on the one hand, the fragility of the Pavilion's materiality and, on the other, the unforeseeable place that the Pavilion would occupy within architectural history.<sup>10</sup>

Georges Kolbe's sculpture, *Dawn*, now stands in Ceciliengärten, Schöenberg in Berlin, the place where it was originally meant to be; it faces *Morning*, the other half of this sculptural pair. From all the Pavilion 'remains', this is the only one that it is still possible to see, visit and experience materially and at first hand [11-14]. I searched for it; echoing the reconstruction team's search for the Pavilion's remains. Searching, photographing, visiting and experiencing at first hand were products of a compulsive drive to experience some of the Pavilion's 'originality', scale and materiality. It fulfils the need to imagine how the only visible piece of the 1929 Pavilion could have inhabited the building. Above all, it involves seeing and photographing as proofs of the building's existence.<sup>11</sup>

In 1984 the reconstruction team made some photographs of the excavation process that led to the discovery of a few of the Pavilion's remains, which today part of a series of postcards printed by the Fundació Mies van der Rohe; one of them housed at the Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin. Two photographs from these sets drew my attention. The first, which has been published on several different occasions and is an object of speculation by, amongst others Spanish architect Igansi de Solà-Morales's and the pavilion's reconstruction team, portrays the remains of a cruciform column; the second shows the unobtrusive foundations. The subjects of both are covered by a garden planted with palm trees – and they have remained covered by rubble, soil and dust for more than fifty years. Above all, these photographs confront us with what is left of both the foundations and the column beneath the layer of dust and rubble captured by Glaeser in 1979. Again, the Pavilion is absent. Most of the space around these remains is empty. In an archaeological way of seeing, this emptiness is at the same time occupied by

the imagination of the observer, and, more specifically, by that of the reconstruction team in terms of what can be reconstructed from them. To quote a description of the nature of archaeological photography by art historian Frederick N. Bohrer, these excavation photographs 'invite our consideration of their past'.<sup>12</sup> It is not by chance that archaeology has been used as a metaphor in discussions on photography, and particularly photography that either looks for objects or that aims to document – or to make visible – an absence. However, what remains to be asked is if they are directed towards 'finding evidence,' which in my opinion they are not. While the excavation photographs portray traces of the lost Pavilion, Glaeser's photographs look for them. And they look not only for the traces of the Pavilion but also for what the canonical 1929 photographs depict – and even for the canonical photographs themselves. In both cases, absence is the characteristic feature, and it is only through imagination that this absence, or gap, can be reconstructed.

### **A dusty void**

One of the striking characteristics of Glaeser's 1979 photographs is the void – a void of dust and rubble – that remains years after the building's dismantling. However prominent, the void is something that the reconstruction team evades when describing the empty site of the Pavilion in 1980s. They instead focus on the vegetation that dominated the site. This is surprising, since the earliest critical responses to the pavilion as an architectural project point at the relationship between the Pavilion and its surroundings as problematic.<sup>13</sup> The description of the site as encountered by the reconstruction team could operate as a possible description of Glaeser's photographs [16]:

*This was a plot of land, roughly in the shape of a half moon, bounded by a rectilinear road which ran as far as the north façade of the Palau de Victòria Eugènia, and by a second curving, ascending road which ran from the main avenue to give access to the rear, and higher, part of the Victòria Eugènia. This plot comprises a relatively level space fronting the first of these roads, and a sloping area corresponding to the curving road to the rear. The vegetation we found on the site was basically the same as had been there at the time of the Exposition, with the enormous difference of the tremendous growth of the trees in the intervening years. The subsequent construction of a pavilion for the Instituto Nacional de Industria (INI) to the west, the removal of the colonnade and various changes to the landscaping and the fountains had all significantly altered the aspect of this part of the site.<sup>14</sup>*

The reconstruction team were pointing to a definition of the site in terms of its remaining vegetation and of new and removed built artefacts that surround the Pavilion's site. But, as mentioned above, their definition does not address the void. They do not describe the absence of the building, nor the presence of the dust that,

taking possession of the Pavilion's footprint, then stood for the building. In other words, it is the presence of the void covered by dust and rubble that is not being addressed – that is, indeed, being avoided. Following Teresa Stoppani's (drawing upon Bataille's) understanding of 'Dust' as 'form-less,' and as that which 'does not possess its own form, and it takes on that of its host', in Glaeser's photographs, dust acts as a meta-concept, operating as the definition of the Pavilion's *terrain vague* and acting as the indexical trace of the once existing Pavilion.<sup>15</sup> Dust covers and hides the Pavilion's remains; yet dust is also what stands for it; dust replaces the Pavilion. Dust is that which exposes the Pavilion's absence.

However, in this specific case what Glaeser's photographs do expose is how dust becomes a site-specific question in architecture, which means that dust might be more constitutive and honorific rather than solely base and 'informe,' as Stoppani argues. Such is the case of 'dust' in the Acropolis, and also the dust that Michelet found in the Revolution Archives when he imagined himself incorporating by breathing the remains of the revolutionaries; 'I breathed their dust.'<sup>16</sup> The 'dust' on the Pavilion site might be honorific in this way, if imagined to be continuous with the material of the Pavilion itself.

To consider dust in relation to architecture also opens-up the larger question of what architecture is and how it is represented. Seeing and photographing the Pavilion site's dust breaks the systems of reference that characterised and defined the architecture that once inhabited that site. Drawing upon Dennis Hollier's reading of Bataille, dust 'litters the representation of architecture and breaks it free (relieves it) from its network of references'.<sup>17</sup> To 'see' dust, to address it, bring it back, and look at it in Glaeser's photographs exposes 'uncomfortable' issues for architectural history: the absence of the Pavilion precedes its presence; and the 1929 photographs can be timeless, but their portrayed building was not.

The layer of dust that covers the Pavilion's site is also an expression of a material layered phenomenon. As a temporary building, the Pavilion was made to disappear. But if we think about the conflictual relationship between dust and architecture, dust also disappears. Dust is removed from architectural representations, polished away in architectural interiors, and is invisible within architectural discourse.<sup>18</sup> Photography played a determinant role in this respect, and the distinct sense of transparency and polished surfaces of Berliner Bild-Bericht prints are one of many examples. If, for Bataille, 'seeing' dust 'activates it as an agent of change', in Glaeser's photographs the dusty void activates the absence of the Pavilion, and therefore dust destabilises the history that the printed media created by perpetuating the Pavilion's presence through the repetition of its 1929 prints. Dust acts here as that which exposes an architecture and an ideological construct, while at the same time questioning its definition and its signification through its materialisation as a building which turned into dust to become a building again.

Moreover, like the understanding of the photographic image as indexical, and dust as the active agent that exposes and unveils, dust is, for Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, what reveals and exposes. Dust is an agent of the unexpected. Something that could potentially make a rupture in the margins of modern life, and something that, through being re-presented, may become the catalyst of critical thought. For Benjamin, dust allows past and present to be apprehended together; as in a dialectical image.<sup>19</sup> This reading sheds some light onto Glaeser's photographs: a dusty void prompts for a simultaneous apprehension of the dismantled building and the one to come. Yet in this case, doing so it enhances, predominantly, the 1929 building's absence.

In contrast to Benjamin, for Carolyn Steedman dust is instead what covers and protects, but she also sees dust as history, as memory and as the archive. If dust brings into architecture what is difficult to control, it also brings what is difficult to represent – the passing of time, which conventional architectural representations do not see.<sup>20</sup> In a different material interpretation, and drawing upon Steedman, Glaeser's photographs of the void left by the dismantled building have also been covered by dust collected over time in his archive at the MoMA. The legibility of Glaeser's photographs are dependent on reading them in relation to an archive, and they gain status through their situatedness in relation to this. They are not housed within Mies's archive, nor are they part of mainstream research interests. Likewise, they have not been requested for consultation as by the time I encountered them they had also not been catalogued. They remained in an untitled box, literally covered by dust. Dust therefore define the grounds on which they are viewed critically and suggest how images do their 'work'.<sup>21</sup> It suggests that they need to be seen, encountered and dusted. Dusting them from their sole archival condition allows for re-ordering: new meanings can, therefore, come to supplant previous or canonical ones, as well as to break the chain of signification.

### **Empty site photographs**

As mentioned previously, it is the overlooked absence of the Pavilion and its neglected ephemeral nature that are brought back visually by Glaeser through his 1979 photographs of the Pavilion's empty site. In Glaeser's photographs, the emptiness is both presented and represented. This emptiness differs from the emptiness that preceded the building (as in the case of the construction site photographs) or the emptiness that exposes the building through its remains (as in the case of the excavation photographs), where the emptiness awaits a building to replace it. Glaeser's photographs are mourning a lost referent – they are searching for it. They are contemplating what has gone, its absence within its site, and imagining what has been and trying to conjure it back.<sup>22</sup> Yet what Glaeser's photographs seem to mourn is the ability to re-enact the Berliner Bild-Bericht photographs precisely because of that missing object; what Glaeser's photographs

are searching for, this article suggests, is the Berliner Bild-Bericht photographs more than the missing material building.

This became even clearer for me when encountering a set of photographs by Victor Burgin for his project *Voyage to Italy* (2007) as they seem close to Glaeser's. Through video and two photographic portfolios, Burgin responds to a single photograph made in 1864 by Carlo Fratacci of the basilica at Pompeii, in which the camera stares at the ruined structures and at the woman who stands in the way [15]. After coming across *Basilica* by Carlo Fratacci at the Canadian Centre for Architecture archive, Burgin returned to Pompeii, to the original site of Fratacci's photograph, to search through photographs and a video for the 'midday ghost' of the woman.<sup>23</sup> Burgin's response in *Basilica II* addresses the relationship of the woman with the space in which she is photographed, as well as the relationship of the woman – or the ghost – with the photographer [16].

It is striking that Burgin follows a very similar process to that of Glaeser. Both are fascinated by the presence of a referent in a photograph. In Burgin's case, the referent is both human and architectural. Neither of them has the chance to encounter the referents personally and at first hand. Both encountered their subjects in archives. But both return to the sites where the original photographs were shot, and through photography try to find them. This is the impression of the site, as encountered in Burgin's words:

*It is commonplace to note the uncanny effect of photographs that show the apparently living presence of someone long dead [...] The entire architectural site of Pompeii is an impression of this kind. Like a photographic plate, the surface of the city has received the imprint of an event that has irreversibly transformed it. In a neologism, Pompeii is a catastrophic image [...] any photograph of Pompeii is therefore the impression of an impression, the index of an index.*<sup>24</sup>

This search for the lost referent (though usually triggered by the presence of a woman) is part of Burgin's wider project and is also visible in 'Mies in Maurelia'.<sup>25</sup> In this project, Burgin revisited the 1986 Pavilion in search of 'that which really exists' (in a similar way to my own visit to Kolbe's *Dawn*).<sup>26</sup> In encountering the Pavilion, Burgin fails to encounter the woman he looks for: a woman he had encountered in the Barcelona City Museum in a film still of the Catalonian Civil War. She holds a rifle, is smiling and raises her hand to shade her face from the sun. In other words, Burgin fails to encounter through this woman the reality that *Dawn* symbolises. For Burgin, the 1986 Pavilion embodies an absence: the absence of the 1929 building. Therefore, Burgin argues, the 1986 reconstruction can only be the 1929 Pavilion's ruin, memorial or mausoleum: that which the modern history of progress brought to an end in 1930. The 1929 Pavilion will always remain absent.

In Burgin's work, 'presence' (in contrast to 'absence') represents 'the return to the patriarchal principles by means of reaffirmation of the primary presence'.<sup>27</sup>

This, in Derrida's understanding, is an 'origin' and could be an 'author' of a 'reality' or a 'history'. Informed by post-modernism and drawing upon conceptual art, Burgin presents absence as a means of avoiding the eradication of accounts of difference, as well as of avoiding the eradication of division of the private and the social, of form and content, of the masculine and the feminine (thus of 'men' and 'women'), of theory and practice, and so on. The absence of 'presence' prompts, for Burgin, recognition, intervention, reorganisation – and thus the 'possibility of change'.<sup>28</sup> This is what Glaeser's photographs also prompt, and it is what the presence of the dusty void exposes: a change in the discourse, an intervention and a disruption of the Pavilion's photographic canon. Further, the presence of the woman as a 'ghost' or as the failed encounter, act here as reminders of the photograph as a 'spectral' technology as well as to the history of 'spirit photographs' as if one might discover something – a 'ghost' within the photograph that eludes the naked eye, what Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* writes as the literal emanation of the referent.<sup>29</sup> 'Though it is no longer there (present – living),' writes Derrida in his mourning work on Barthes, 'it's having-been-there presently a part of the referential or intentional structure of the photogram, the return of the referent takes the form of haunting.'<sup>30</sup> The presence of the woman is a 'return of the dead;' the referent that 'in its very image, I can no longer suspend, even though its "presence" forever escapes me, having already receded into the past.'<sup>31</sup>

The spectrality we find in the image of this woman is also manifested in the ghostly quality of Glaeser's photographs. The 1929 Pavilion is absent in the photographs of its construction site, as well as in the photographs of its excavation in the late 1980s. The Pavilion is absent because, as emphasised here, it was meant to be absent. It was conceived, designed and constructed as a temporary pavilion. This is something that Pieter van Wesamael's work has emphasised in addressing the wider history of exhibition pavilions; it is also something that has remained overlooked in the history of Reich's and Mies's exhibition design history. The construction site photographs and the excavation photographs subtly depict the fragility of a temporary building; their archaeological nature attests to this. All these examples share a sense of anticipation – of what comes or what has been, and a trigger for the imagination – of what was or what will become; of fragments of a past as much as of possible futures.<sup>32</sup>

Absence, which is one of Glaeser's photographs driving forces, has been identified as one of the singular conditions of the Pavilion. However, what is really absent in these photographs are the Berliner Bild-Bericht prints. Drawing upon Derrida's *The Work of Mourning* (2001), Glaeser's photographs 'bespeak the unique death, the death of the unique, this death immediately repeats itself, as such, and is itself elsewhere.' Derrida continues, '[they]suspend the referent and leave ... it to be desired, while still maintaining the reference. It is at work in the most loyal of friendships; it plunges the destination into mourning while at the

same time engaging it.’<sup>33</sup> Glaeser’s photographs are spectral; like the ghost they ‘represent what is not there: a present mark coincides with absent presence.’<sup>34</sup> This simultaneity of absence and presence is something that John Berger also emphasises in his essay ‘Understanding a Photograph.’ For Berger,

*the objects recorded in any photograph (from the most effective to the most commonplace) carry approximately the same conviction. What varies is the intensity with which we are made aware of the poles of absence and presence. Between these two poles photography finds its proper meaning. (The most popular use of the photograph is a memento of the absent). A photograph, whilst recording what has been seen, always and by its nature refers to what is not seen. It isolates, preserves and presents a moment taken from a continuum.*<sup>35</sup>

‘A photograph generally only tells us about the existence of the moment, but not of its quality and certainly nothing about its before and after’.<sup>36</sup> This is one of the understandings of photographs that Silke Herlmerdig criticises in her book *Fragments, Futures, Absence and the Past*. This is also an understanding that this article, and more precisely Glaeser’s photographs, contest. Glaeser’s photographs are not just evidence in Barthes’s sense as evidence of ‘having taken place,’ as well as evidence of a moment in time in which the pavilion was absent. They are not just photographs of a once visible reality. Glaeser’s photographs are belated attempts to enact repetition which, as mentioned before, is here symptomatic due to the loss of the object of desire – in this case is not so much the building itself. In the simultaneity that they offer, to use Aby Warburg’s terminology, they prompt a reading of the pavilion as an evolving process and not as a fixed product as represented in the Berliner Bild-Bericht prints. The Pavilion was built, occupied temporarily, demolished, absent, considered for rebuilding, and rebuilt. For Berger, photography cuts the arrow of time, intersecting that temporal continuum at its various points to report on them. This cross sectioning allows the event to expand in revelatory significance beyond the moment, ‘enlarging the circle beyond the dimension of instantaneous information’.<sup>37</sup> This is what Glaeser’s 1979 photographs do.

## Notes

1. Pamphlet was published with the exhibition *Mies van der Rohe: The Barcelona Pavilion*, at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., from 14 October to 2 December 1979 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Pavilion.
2. Relevant to this discussion is André Tavares, ‘Building Site’, in Diogo Seixas-Lopes and André Tavares, *The Form of Form* (Zürich: Lars Müller, 2017); and Reto Geiser, *Ruins in Reverse*, an A.W. Mellon research project on photography at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA), 2016-7.
3. See: *Beton und Eisen, Der Eisen Beton, Der Industriebau, der Neubau, Die Neue Rundschau* engineering journals among others. On photographing the

- construction processes of concrete, see Adrian Forty, *Concrete and Culture: A Material History* (London: Reaktion, 2012).
4. Rolf Sachsse, 'Mies and the Photographers: Medium and Modernity as Enigma', in *Mies and Modern Living: Interior, Furniture, Photography*, ed. by Helmut Reuter and Birgit Schulte (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), pp. 231-252 (p. 257).
  5. Ignasi de solà Morales, Cristian Cirici and Fernando Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe: el Pabellón de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1993), pp. 14-16. Other construction photographs of the 1929 Pavilion are also included in this publication.
  6. Michael Osman, 'The managerial aesthetics of concrete', *Perspecta*, 45 (2012), 67-76, (pp. 72-73).
  7. Geiser, 'Ruins in Reverse'.
  8. Published as: Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, 'Instruction Card for Operation', Herman Auckman Company, 1912, and Walter Gropius, 'Micro-motion studies of crane lowering beam and of opening "boswik" grill', Dessau, Germany 1926. In: Ivan Rupnik, 'Exporting Space-Time: American Industrial Engineering Tools and European Modernism', in *OfficeUS Agenda*, ed. by Eva Franch I Gilabert, Amanda Reeser Lawrence, Ana Milijački and Ashley Schafer (Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 2014), pp. 105-116.
  9. Robert Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey (1967)', in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 68-74 (p. 74).
  10. See Solà-Morales et al., *Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Pavilion*, and Derek Sayer, 'The Unbearable Lightness of Building – A Cautionary Tale', *Grey Room* No. 16 (2004), 6-35.
  11. 'The discovery of the Barcelona Pavilion' as part of 'A Slice of Modernity / Casa Palestra, The domestic project' part of the 1986 Milan Triennale also makes reference to the Pavilion disappearance and the existence of its scattered and mythical remains.
  12. Frederick N Bohrer, *Photography and Archaeology* (London: Reaktion books, 2011), p. 11.
  13. Contrasting opinions can be found in Wolfgang Pehnt, 'Architektur', *Deutsche Kunst der 20er und 30er Jahre* (Munich: Erich Steingräber, 1979), 'Walther Genzmer, 'Der Deutsche Reichspavilion auf der Internationalen Ausstellung Barcelona', *Die Baugilde*, 11.20 (1929), Caroline Constant, 'The Barcelona Pavilion as Landscape Garden: Modernity and the Picturesque', *AA Files*, 20 (Autumn 1990), 46-54.
  14. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Cristian Cirici and Fernando Ramos, *Mies van der Rohe: el Pabellón de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1993), p. 28.
  15. Teresa Stoppani, 'Dust revolutions: Dust, informe, architecture (notes for a reading of Dust in Bataille)', *Journal of Architecture*, 12.4 (2007), 437; doi: 10.1080/13602360701614714; In European literary and artistic imagination dust

- is often understood as a site of anxiety and fear. See David Company, *A Handful of Dust: From the Cosmic to the Domestic* (Paris: LE BAL, 2016).
16. Jules Michelet, *Ouvres complètes*, vol. 4, cited in Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 27.
  17. Denis Hollier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 1989), p. 81; Steedman, *Dust*, p. 157.
  18. This absence, or the unacceptable presence of dust in the Pavilion, has been brought to the fore through Jeff Wall's, *Morning Cleaning* and Andrés Jaqué's, *PHANTOM: Mies as a Rendered Society*, intervention in the Barcelona Pavilion 2012. In architecture Teresa Stoppioni and Emma Cheatele, as well as David Company and David Hopkins have called our attention to dust and to its agency.
  19. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin refers to dust in the section 'Boredom, Eternal Return': Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 113.
  20. See Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*.
  21. For further elaboration, see photography historian Matthew S. Witkovsky, as quoted in Claire Zimmerman, 'Reading the (Photographic) Evidence', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 76.4 (2017), 446-48 (p. 448).
  22. Relevant for this discussion is the work of American photographer Joel Sternfeld's *On This Site*, Professor of Photography Paul Seawright's landscapes, photographer Chloe Dewe Matthews's *Shot at Dawn* and German artist Thomas Demand's work. Also Ulrich Baer's *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma* (United States of America: MIT Press, 2002).
  23. Victor Burgin, 'The Shadow and the Ruin', in *Voyage to Italy* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), pp. 78-97 (p. 79).
  24. Burgin, 'The Shadow and the Ruin', p. 79.
  25. Victor Burgin, 'Mies in Maurelia', in Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp. 74-88.
  26. Burgin, 'Mies in Maurelia', p. 84.
  27. Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 48.
  28. Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, p. 49.
  29. Benjamin reminds us the possibility of the photographic image requires that there be such things as ghosts and phantoms in *Tauerspiel* ('The Origin of German Tragic Drama', 1928). See also: 'Ghosts' in Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 80-82.
  30. Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 54.
  31. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, p. 54.

32. Silke Helmerdig proposes a reading of photographs as future possibilities, allowing to think 'what could be, if'. Silke Helmerdig, *Fragments, Futures, Absence and the Past. A new approach to photography* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016).
33. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, pp. 57, 61.
34. Nick Peim, 'Spectral Bodies: Derrida and the Philosophy of the Photograph as Historical Document' in *The Journal of Philosophy and Education*, 39.1 (2005), 77.
35. John Berger, 'Understanding a Photograph', in: *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980) p. 293.
36. Silke Helmerdig, *Fragments, Futures, Absence and the Past. A new approach to photography* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), p. 148
37. John Berger, *Understanding a Photograph* (London: Penguin Books, 2013), p. 121 cited in Hugh Campbell, 'Unconscious Places – Thomas Struth and the Architecture of the City' in *Architecture and the Unconscious*, ed. by John Shannon Hendrix and Lorens Holm (London: Routledge, 2016).

### **Illustration credits**

arq gratefully acknowledges:

Victor Burgin, 16

Canadian Centre for Architecture, 9, 10, 15, 16

Catalina Mejía Moreno, 11-14

The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence, 1-8

[Original for reference:

Victor Burgin, 9

Canadian Centre for Architecture 4, 5, 7, 8, 9

Catalina Mejía Moreno, 6

The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence, 1-3]

### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the Juliet Odgers and Alex Blanchard from arq for their encouragement and support throughout the writing of this paper. Special thanks are due to the blind peer reviewers whose incisive and generous suggestions have helped this paper. I would like to thank Katie Lloyd Thomas and Mark Dorrian for their valuable feedback and for stimulating conversations on this subject since 2011. I am grateful to Hugh Campbell, Adam Sharr and Tilo Amhoff.

### **Author's biography**

Catalina Mejía Moreno is Lecturer in Architectural Humanities at Sheffield School of Architecture, The University of Sheffield. She was Andrew W. Mellon research fellow at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal CA (2016-17). Her research has been funded by the DAAD and the Getty Research Institute. She is on

the Scientific Committee of *Dearquitectura* Architecture Journal and in the Editorial Board of Birkhäuser's *Exploring Architecture* book series.

### **Author's address**

Catalina Mejía Moreno

*c.mejiamoreno@sheffield.ac.uk*

### **CAPTIONS**

1 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1561. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

2 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1560. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

3 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1563. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

4 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1562. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

5 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1559. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

6 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): Barcelona Pavilion reconstruction site, 1979. Gelatin silver print, 8 × 10" (20.3 × 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: AD1558. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

7 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): German Pavilion, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain. Construction view, 1929. Gelatin silver print, 3 1/2 x

4 3/4" (8.9 x 12.1 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object number: MMA13.309. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence

8 Mies van der Rohe, Ludwig (1886-1969): German Pavilion, International Exposition, Barcelona, Spain, 1929. Gelatin silver print, 8 x 10" (20.3 x 25.4 cm). Mies van der Rohe Archive, gift of the architect. Object no.: MMA13.308. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). © 2019. Digital image Mies van der Rohe/Gift of the Arch./MoMA/Scala

9 Myron Goldsmith, photographer. Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois) under construction, 1949-1950, gelatin silver print, 10.2 x 15.5 cm. ARCH280773, Myron Goldsmith fonds. Canadian Centre for Architecture.

10 Unknown photographer, Farnsworth House (Plano, Illinois) under construction, 1949-1950. Gelatin silver print, 21.2 x 26.7 cm. ARCH268318, Myron Goldsmith fonds. Canadian Centre for Architecture.

11-14 Photographs of *Dawn*, facing *Morning*, by Georg Kolbe in Ceciliengärten, Berlin. By author.

15 Carlo Frattacci, "Basilica" 1864, albumen silver print, 17.4 x 18.1 cm (image, rounded corners), Unnumbered plate from an album entitled "*Principales Vues de Pompeii par Charles Frattacci, Naples, 1864*". PH1983:0504:007, Canadian Centre for Architecture.

16 Victor Burgin, *Basilica II*, 2006. Gelatin silver print, 15 x 10 cm. PH2006:0215, Canadian Centre for Architecture, commissioned by CCA. © Victor Burgin.

Web abstract:

This article unveils and discusses a series of unknown photographs of the empty site in which Mies and Lilly Reich's 1929 German Pavilion in Barcelona had been built and dismantled, and shot by Ludwig Glaeser, curator of the Mies van der Rohe Archive at MoMA in 1979. It suggests that more than the manifestation of a desire to rematerialise the building through the agency of photography, Glaeser's photographs are, photographs of dust, but more importantly, a manifestation of the possibility of re-enacting the widely known 1929 Berliner Bild-Bericht photographs.