

REFLECTIONS IN THE GOLDEN EYE OF MIES VAN DER ROHE

**On the Crystal Pavilion at the Casa de Campo Park and Fair Grounds in
Madrid, by Asís Cabrero**

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"Each decision leads to a special kind of Order. Therefore, we should be clear about what principles of Order are possible and formulate them. The long road from the material, passing through function, to the creative work has no more than a single goal: To Create Order in the desperate confusion of our time."

Ludwig Mies Van der Rohe. 1938

In the torrid summer of 1965, Mies Van der Rohe passed through Madrid. And the marvelous woman who told me about it took him to the Prado Museum, to the wonderful Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace) in Retiro Park and, as evening began to fall, to the imposing Royal Palace. And there inside, through the windows facing the Campo del Moro Park and beyond to the larger Casa de Campo Park, an old Mies discovered the piece. Sparing in words, he demanded to be taken there to see it immediately. My friend, surprised, hurried to fulfill his wish, and after bringing the Palace visit to an abrupt end, they bundled into the impeccable Mercedes and within a few minutes arrived at the Crystal Pavilion in the Casa de Campo. As fate would have it, the building was empty. The exhibition inaugurated in May at the Pavilion had just been taken down. As if he already knew the building, Mies examined the space thoroughly from top to bottom, front to back, and side-to-side, all the while muttering unintelligibly to himself. And when he stopped in the center and alone facing the city, as the sun of Madrid's twilight started to gild the majestic cornice that crowns the Manzanares River, an enraptured Mies Van der Rohe, with the saffron colored landscape reflected in the light in his eyes, exclaimed, now with strength and clarity, "Das ist es! Das ist es!" (This is it! This is it!)

As if in a movie, images of the Convention Hall he'd dreamed of for Chicago ten years before and of his project for the Mannheim National Theater which he would never see built must have passed through his head. Wasn't it too much of a coincidence that even the dimensions were so similar? Who in the devil was this architect who seemed to have exposed his game better than his own so-called disciples? Cursed Craig Ellwood! Wretched Myron Goldsmith!

Mies Van der Rohe wanted to meet Cabrero, but as circumstance would have it, Cabrero was in Santander at that time in the summer and the old master was never able to meet the man he admired.

(My friend told me that after the visit to Cabrero's Pavilion she had no choice but to take Mies to the Maravillas Gymnasium by de Sota, where Mies actually levitated! But I'll leave that remarkable story for another occasion).

Cabrero's Pavilion, in full Miesian coordinates, is one of the most rigorous and beautiful architectural pieces in Madrid. To be seen before or after de Sota's Maravillas Gymnasium. The glass box, Modern Architecture's obsession and paradigm, is built here with true sense and meaning. The sound structure sustains, covers and protects the reality of the ideal floor plan on and from which the viewer may be enraptured by the amazing panorama of Madrid's western cornice.

Mies's dream and obsession was to give humanity the glass box, in one way or another. The white god of Architecture placed man vertical on the horizontal plane so that he might dominate earth. And he covered him with a flat surface to protect him from the rain and snow. And he surrounded him with transparent glass to protect him from the cold and wind. And thus he gave him almost everything with almost nothing. More with less.

And Mies Van der Rohe's dream, that architecture that Foster, Rogers, and Piano seek desperately and in a thousand ways, is made real in Cabrero's Pavilion with almost nothing. With two words, like Poetry.

Tafuri, in a slightly more pedantic manner, called it the "neutral sign", as he did when speaking of Mies' Crown Hall: "The entire building appears as neutral sign. The will to dominate chaos is entirely contained in the intellectual act that takes its distance from the real in order to affirm its own essence." I would prefer to translate it as "naturalness", with the will to disappear so that continuous space may be materialized.

And if, as Curtis notes, Mies' architecture "represents a singular combination of the austere intellectual search for impersonality (typical of Mies Van der Rohe) and the possibilities of American expertise and high quality", Cabrero's architecture, like Mies' in the first (in its will to hide or disappear), must fight or rather depends on the lack of expertise and quality so common in our country. And thus, without a doubt, that greater load of "naturalness", a careless natural ease, that makes the work of the Spanish master so attractive.

The author of this article had the good fortune to be commissioned, along with Alejandro Gómez's effective collaboration, to prepare Cabrero's Pavilion for the latest edition of ARCO (Madrid's International Art Fair). After analyzing the building, understanding it and enjoying it, we decided (naturally!) that the best idea was to bring its merits out; we liberated its edges and we cleaned

the glass façades. And we placed some steps from which to contemplate the beautiful panorama. Inside? Outside? All of us had the same identical feeling of rapture that Mies had during his visit. I recommend that you try it: between one exhibition and another, the Pavilion is empty and it is very easy to reach in the Casa de Campo. (By Metro, the station is Lago, one arrives easily and cheaply). I assure you that the sensation of domination of space felt on that enormous floor in that continuous space is unrepeatable.

The figure of Cabrero, of the stature of Lewerentz, Lubetkin, Plecnik, Fuchs or Owen Williams, may be discovered by critics at any moment, as they have already done with some of those mentioned. The changes that Modern Architecture has been undergoing in recent years can be seen translated in his architecture with as much firmness as naturalness. His Pavilion in the Casa de Campo, like the Arriba Head Office and the Sindicatos Building, are key pieces of the Spanish Architectural history.