1. Thomas Florschuetz's exploration of peripheral vertical symmetries within the reconstructed Barcelona Pavilion. (Courtesy of Thomas Florschuetz)
Critics often satirize the exacting precision with which Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969) arranged furniture in his projects, especially chairs and armchairs. Inhabitants had so little room for appropriation that in 1931, an article in Die Form on the Tugendhat House went as far as to ask whether such spaces could actually be used and inhabited. Mies’s fixation with furniture arrangements can even be seen as an anachronistic element in his design process, one that several commentators beginning with Bruno Zevi and Sigfried Giedion have defined as the most complete expression of a “space-time”; in other words, an anti-perspectival, anti-illusionistic space that cannot be captured from a single vantage point.

In 1929, Mies designed the original chairs, armchairs, and tables for the German national pavilion at the Barcelona International Exhibition, now commonly known as the Barcelona Pavilion. Although the furnishings would only be used in a brief ceremony for the King and Queen of Spain, they formed as integral a part of the design as does the Kolbe statue that stands in a corner of the Pavilion. Mies’s carefully considered furniture arrangement created an unusual sense of psychological discomfort within the Pavilion’s interior. However, in the reconstructed Pavilion, which was completed in 1986, the chairs have been grouped in a more conventional layout, compromising Mies’s original design. It is my opinion that the inexactitude of the current layout results in a faulty interpretation of space. The Fundació Mies van der Rohe, which owns and operates the Pavilion as an enormously successful tourist destination, should return the chairs to their original configuration (Figure 1).

While many of his peers represented volumes in aerial or axonometric views, Mies always privileged a ground-based reading on a human scale. This preference is revealed through his use of perspective drawings, at times combined with collage, as a representational tool. As seen in his enormous charcoal drawings of the skyscrapers for Berlin’s Freidrichstrasse in 1921 and the renowned Brick House project in 1924, Mies adopted a ground-based reading that offers the most effective representation of his design ideas and understanding of space.

The attention that Mies brought to perspective rendering is echoed by his precise arrangement of furniture. To use a semiotic analogy, preserving an architectural space designed by Mies requires not only replicating the construction materials,
or signifiers, but also the contents, or the signified; in other words, an accurate restitution necessitates replicating the gaze that was intended to organize the project perceptually. Thus, the placement of furniture and the choice of seated positions are critical.

The exceptional character of the Barcelona Pavilion’s interior arises from the unique purpose of that particular structure within the context of the exhibition. Unlike other spaces designed by Mies and his collaborator, Lilly Reich, during the Barcelona Exhibition, such as the Textile Industry Building, the German Pavilion did not have a predefined program. According to Commissioner von Schnitzler, the Pavilion was intended to highlight German expertise in architecture and design by combining the best in craftsmanship and industrial skill. The building did not house an exhibition; rather, the building itself was the display. The Pavilion’s luxurious stonework, crafted from travertine and green Alpine marble, among other stones, would result in the building’s being listed in the exhibition brochure under the title “Marble Visit.” The only hint of representation was the choice of colors that formed the central space of the Pavilion. The red curtain, black rug, and ochre onyx wall suggested the colors of the Weimar Republic’s flag. Another singularity was the building’s position on its site. Mies set the Pavilion back from the ascending monumental axis that led to the Exhibition Palace. The Pavilion was placed behind eight ionic columns which delimited the plaza and acted as a visual filter. Situated laterally on a pathway that connected the main esplanade, Plaza de la Bellas Artes, to the “Pueblo Español,” a small-scale montage of a typical Spanish village, the building thus functioned as a point of passage.

The composition of the Pavilion’s interior, through its gigantic proportions as well as its strategic use of materials, suggests more an informal landscape than a domestic space. One of the characteristic features of this interior landscape is its use
3. This partial plan of the Barcelona Pavilion shows the original furniture configuration. The dark squares represent chairs, five of which infringe upon circulation pathways near the entryway. The cruciform column blocks the view of the people seated near the entrance to those seated in the middle of the room. (Drawing by author)

of transversal axes. The dividers that enclose the rooms create a partial and regular symmetry, a quality reinforced by the use of stone. Yet despite the perfectly orthogonal nature of the separating and dividing elements, the pathways cutting across the Pavilion are diagonal, and the sightlines within the space are created through transversal axes. The formal perfection of each section of the building, detached and independent from neighboring sections, is undermined by the interaction of interior elements that act as each other’s shadows or reflections.

Furniture plays an important role in the construction of viewpoints within the Barcelona Pavilion. In the reconstructed Pavilion, the original furniture designed by Mies remains, but its positioning has never been seriously considered. Today, visitors to the Pavilion cannot fail to notice that the chairs are positioned so that they look toward one another. Furthermore, the group of chairs whose backs face the picture window is placed opposite the imposing onyx wall. This closed formal layout is reminiscent of Mies’s furniture arrangements in his early projects of the 1910s, such as the Riehl or the Werner houses. In these living rooms, a circular table is positioned on the center of a carpet occupying the middle of the room, creating a focal point toward which all the other spaces of the house converge.

The projects of the 1930s invert this logic. Beginning with the Barcelona Pavilion, Mies seems to have preferred the dispersal rather than the convergence of viewpoints. In Barcelona, those seated in chairs did not face one another. Photographs of the original Barcelona Pavilion reveal that the chairs did not face the onyx wall. By turning the backs of the chairs to the wall, Mies does not face the wall. Rather than face the wall, the five chairs in the
Pavilion were staggered in an unexpected way. They were placed not on the carpet but on the travertine path in the entranceway. As a result, these chairs occupied and encroached upon the circulation space (Figure 2).

Like the furniture, the placement of the cruciform column is essential to the organization of the Pavilion’s layout. In fact, this column functioned as the pivotal element that provided balance for the asymmetrical organization of the chairs. As the Pavilion originally was configured, the column blocked the diagonal view of the visitors seated in the section of five chairs near the entranceway, preventing them from seeing the other grouping of chairs near the column. Inversely, the column blocked the view towards the five entranceway chairs. As a result, the cruciform column exerted a disruptive presence in the circular layout (Figure 3).

As it stands today, the formal layout instills a certain visual comfort. The furniture is placed inside a perimeter whose margin is created virtually by the column: the gaze cannot escape from it. A sketch by Mies’s collaborator Sergius Ruegenberg shows that the designers had considered placing the furnishings in the present arrangement as a means of separating the circulation area from the resting one (Figure 4). Yet Mies probably found this layout too dull. He preferred to pair the ergonomic comfort of his carefully-designed chairs with the psychological discomfort created by the position of the furniture and the column. This provocative gesture contrasts a stable human posture—the seated or relaxed position—with a feeling of visual instability; the seated viewer never faces the object towards which his or her attention is drawn.

Two of Mies’s later projects continue to explore the manipulation of interior spaces to create a sense of instability. In the Tugendhat House, completed in 1930, Mies eliminates certain pieces of furniture, thereby avoiding a formal composition and creating a sense of emptiness. One of the salon chairs seems to
have been removed, yet it remains present in its absence. This empty spot leads the gaze of the person seated on the chair opposite the empty space to escape the area that is delineated by the carpet (Figure 5). At the Berlin Bauaustellung of 1931, Mies again would use a column in a similar manner to block sightlines from a single chaise lounge toward the central grouping of armchairs. One of the armchairs is in a particularly uncomfortable position, as the column blocks the seated person’s view out the picture window.

We can draw two provisional conclusions from these observations of the Pavilion and the projects associated with it. First, Mies thought of his interiors as open spaces whose progression of “stasis” areas is subject to experimentation. The precise choice of vantage points, far from stabilizing or constraining perception, participates in a play of troubled perception—no view is ever complete or satisfying. Instead of accentuating the spatial enclosure suggested by the onyx wall, column, and rug, the chairs undermine any sense of confinement. Secondly, the slight discomfort results in the viewers’ need to adjust themselves towards optimal vantage points. This adjustment reveals a calculated strategy on the architect’s part to always keep the observer alert. This idea seems to echo what Walter Benjamin called the public’s “reception in a state of distraction”: the gaze that drifts across objects without seeing them. The Pavilion’s interior layout opposes the attraction of an architecture from which the gaze can easily escape. It is an architecture that forces us to look.

The project, dismantled after the exhibition, was rebuilt in the current configuration almost sixty years later by Fernando Ramos, Cristian Cirici, and Ignasi de Sola-Morales in 1986. Despite great difficulties with financing and documentation—the Museum of Modern Art in New York was at first unwilling to release the materials in its holdings—the building is successful as a tourist destination. Eventually, those in charge of the
reconstruction have even succeeded in dismantling the nearby bunker, the Olympic Federation Headquarters, an intervention that has opened the view towards the “Fuente Magica,” thereby restoring the amplitude of the esplanade where the Pavilion is situated.

The Fundació Mies has succeeded in transforming the Pavilion into an image so recognizable that it is frequently employed as a backdrop to advertising campaigns in photography and film. The building attracts an ever-increasing public of often uninformed viewers who pass through by the busload. According the Fundació, Barcelona Pavilion is by far the most visited piece of modern architecture. Since its reconstruction, the Pavilion has continued to produce new ideas about and approaches to design. The Pavilion has influenced Catalan architects’ views of their own work. It is no coincidence that, since 1986, materials such as polished stone or travertine cladding have been appearing in Barcelona on the facades of hotels, houses or lodgings in place of the brick used until now as the popular material of ideological resistance.

The ease with which the Pavilion has been reclaimed as a modern tourist destination cannot fail to fascinate us. In essence, this phenomenon is part of the infinite reinterpretation that has always characterized the Pavilion. In the past, this reinterpretation was aided by scholarship and criticism, vacillating between the enthusiasts, such as Bruno Zevi, and the disen- chanted, including Manfredo Tafuri and Josep Quetglas. Today, new objects have been periodically introduced, such as the Enric Miralles bench exhibited in 2004. In addition, photographic reproductions of the work, such as the superb series of photographs by the German photographer Thomas Florchuetz, reveal the unexpected interplay of vertical and peripheral symmetries (Figure 1).

Today, the Fundació Mies scrupulously guards the integrity of the building itself. In order to resist monumentalization, the Fundació has a responsibility to restore the furnishings to their original position, thus recreating the perspectival openness that was central to Mies’s design. In the original Barcelona Pavilion, Mies achieved a sense of spatial continuity through a very precise strategy: the elimination of a single, visual focal point. This technique is exemplified by his treatment of the onyx wall, which became a peripheral object rather than the centerpiece of the composition. Thus, recovering the initial position of the chairs is no small detail: it means returning the interior to the visual postures intended by Mies, postures that explore and exploit the instability of perception. In light of the building’s ongoing importance to tourists, scholars, and artists, the pieces of furniture must be returned to their original positions to recapture the Pavilion’s original vigor. While less immediately
obvious than the building’s form, materials, or furniture design, Mies’s meticulously planned interior layout is an equally significant feature of this iconic work.

Author biography
Paolo Amaldi works and teaches in Geneva and Brussels, where he is Associate Professor at the Catholic University of Louvain. He has taught at the School of Architecture in Montpellier, France and the Escuela Tecnica Superior in Barcelona. He is interested in mechanisms of perception in modern architecture. On the subject of Mies van der Rohe, his works include Le false certezze del Padiglione di Barcellona (Torino: Universale di Architettura Press, 2003) and Mies van der Rohe, la colonne interférente (Gollion: Infolio, 2005). In 2005, he was a scholar at the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

This article was translated from French by Annelle Curulla.

Endnotes
1 “Die Bewohner des hauses Tugendhats aussern sich” Die Form 7 (1931).
3 “We have tried to show through this edifice who we are, what we are capable of doing and what Germany means to us today. Above all, we seek clarity, simplicity, and integrity.” In Sergius Ruegenberg, “Der Keletbau ist keine Tiegware” Bauwelt. 77 n. 11 (March 1986): 347.
4 Juan Pablo Bontà, Anatomia de la interpretacion en arquitectura: resena semiotica de la critica del Pabellon de Mies van der Rohe (Barcelona: Gili, 1975).
5 On the history of the Barcelona International Exhibition, see Ignasi de Sola-Morales, L’exposicio international de Barcelona 1914–1929, Arquitectura i cultat (Fira de Barcelona, 1985).
6 The Pavilion measures 18.48 by 56.63 meters. The travertine floor module that covers the pedestal, far from being regular, has varied dimensions. In some places it is not even square. Its average thickness is 109 cm.
7 Caroline Constant interprets the Pavilion as a picturesque landscape, a mobile experience in which the viewpoints complete each other. Caroline Constant, “The Barcelona Pavilion as Landscape Garden” AA Files 19 (1990). I offer an opposing interpretation that calls into question Constant’s idea of regrouping viewpoints: Paolo Amaldi, Mies van der Rohe, la colonne interférente. (Gollion: Infolio, 2005).
9 On Mies’s villas and their relation to their modes of inhabitation in Germany see Arnold Schink, Mies van der Rohe: Beiträge zur ästhetischen Entwicklung der Wohnarchitektur (Stuttgart: Karl Krämer, 1990)
10 On the principles of composition in the Pavilion and of Mies’ projects in the 1930s, see Amaldi, Mies van der Rohe, la colonne interférente.
12 Ignasi de Sola-Morales, Cristian Cirici, Fernando Ramos, Mies van der Rohe: Barcelona Pavilion (Barcelona: Gili, 1993). See also “La ricostruzione del Padiglione di Mies van der Rohe” Casabella, 543.
13 See the two-color hotel by Pinon and Viaplana at the Sants railway station and “La Isla,” by Rafael Moneo, situated on the “Diagonal” during the years following the Pavilion reconstruction.