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‘Patio and Pavilion’ Reconstructed

Alison Smithson

The following text is based on a lecture given at the Independent Group exhibition at the ICA, London, 1990, which included a reconstruction of Patio and Pavilion from the This Is Tomorrow exhibition of 1956.

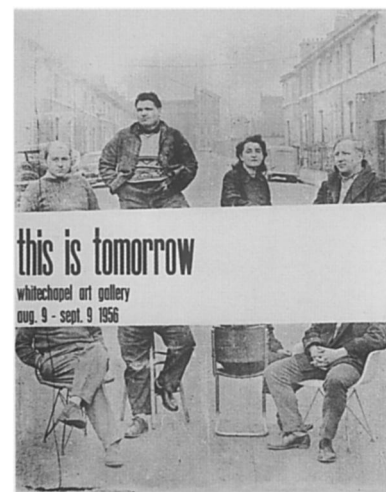
In 1990, a reconstruction was made of our 1956 *Patio and Pavilion*¹ as part of an exhibition on the Independent Group activities of the early 1950s. A previous reconstruction had been shown in New York from November to December 1987;² the shards made by American curators for that first reconstruction were sent over for the second. This summer they will travel to Valencia for a repeat exhibition, before returning to America to be exhibited in three locations during 1991. Consequently, we not only join our grandfather architects Le Corbusier and Mies – whose exhibition pavilions *Esprit Nouveau* and Barcelona Pavilion have both been reconstructed as well – but also, and stranger still for us, we experience the arrangement by the exhibition makers of similar-but-not-the-same artefacts. This is art by proxy: the American museum curators have acted for Nigel Henderson (who, alive, would not have been so lax as to delegate, although he might have rethought the layout, as he did in his lifetime when he reworked several of his collages of the 1950s) and Eduardo Paolozzi (who simply went to look).

Reconstruction is often touchingly faithful – take, for example, the desks and chairs of Alexander Rodchenko’s *Worker’s Club Reading Room* that recently toured to London. Indeed, encouraged by film and television, the public have come to expect reconstructions to be ‘real’. Anything that is merely a symbolic reminder of reality brings letters of protest – as did, for example, the tenement room arranged for Hogmanay in our *Christmas X Hogmanay* exhibition (Edinburgh, 1980–1).

Patio and Pavilion was made expressly for symbolic inhabitation – to focus on the art of ‘dressing’ one’s domain. As architects, we feel that the dressing by proxy of the reconstructed *Patio and Pavilion* is a sign of the times: somehow, it is already a Heritage Event peopled by waxworks. It is like Viking York, or the growing number of other ‘inhabited pasts’ that are springing up all over England and Wales, providing yet more places to go for the education of the car-owning proletariat! These are today’s equivalents of the nineteenth-century Mechanics Institute Reading Rooms that workers in English industrial towns once filled, or the Carnegie Libraries that many Scottish towns still enjoy. But no reconstruction can represent (even with tape recordings) the intense philosophical arguments, the excitement, the transmitted fire, the urgency and the youthful energy of these past beginnings.

Our documents are now treated by curators as art history, but, by virtue of being relatively recent, they are subject to a certain ‘uncomposted taste’ concerning what is representative of the period (i.e., worth exhibiting). We can now sympathize with Eduardo Paolozzi: being asked for documents from one’s past can, at times, be like running a mortician’s parlour.

To reiterate: the 1956 *Patio and Pavilion* artefacts found, and the shards made and then arranged by Nigel Henderson and Eduardo Paolozzi, were what the architecture of *Patio and Pavilion* directed the visitor’s attention towards, and the intellectual message of the artefacts and shards supported that which was intended to be in, and conveyed by, the architecture. For the shards of the reconstruction not to have the quality of



From top: *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition poster, 1956; *Patio and Pavilion* at *This Is Tomorrow*, 1956.



This page: *Patio and Pavilion* at the ICA, 1990.

Opposite page, from top: *Patio and Pavilion* drawing with Eduardo Paolozzi collage, 1956; *Patio and Pavilion*, one-point perspective, bird's eye view, 1956.



Eduardo's thick line and not to be subject to the magical arrangement of Nigel and Eduardo makes a travesty of the 'inhabitation' that was the intention of this exercise in domain-dressing.³

But let us defend the curating fraternity: the catalogue is thorough (even if one senses a mortician's presentation) and rather uncerebral – as it must be when the excitement of philosophical sparring can hardly be re-created, even by the original participants themselves in what they have individually written. The result is literal, comprehensive and very American. The exhibition is well received, and although the ICA have played it straight-down-the-line cool, people are saying how good it is to see it again, and younger Europeans are planning to visit it, 'to see something of our roots in the 1950s'. On our part, we have taken photographs both from the same positions as those we had adopted to take the few colour slides in 1956, and to match the black-and-white images by Nigel Henderson.

Among our contributions to the 1990 catalogue, certain paragraphs of the text 'The "As Found" and the "Found"' are directly applicable to an understanding of the odd double timeliness of the reconstruction, in that it is – by political coincidence (the recent collapse of the Iron Curtain) – an appropriate message, quite other than the time to remember the image-as-cultural-food intention of the American curators. We wrote, with hindsight, in August 1987: 'The "As Found", where the art is in the picking up, turning over and putting-with'.

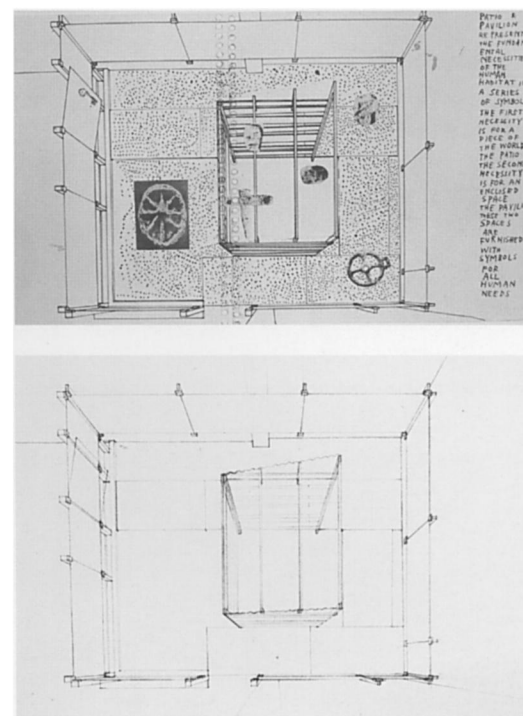
In architecture, the 'as found' aesthetic was something we thought we named in the early 1950s, when we first knew Nigel Henderson and saw in his photographs a perceptive recognition of the actuality around his house in Bethnal Green:⁴ 'children's pavement play-graphics; repetition of "kind" in the demolished-house doors used as site hoardings; the items in the detritus on bombed sites, such as the old boot, heaps of nails, fragments of sack or mesh and so on.'⁵

Having set ourselves the task of rethinking architecture in the early 1950s, we meant the 'as found' to refer not only to adjacent buildings but also to all those marks that constitute 'remembrancers' within a place, marks that are to be read as a means of finding out how the existing built fabric of the place had come to be as it was. This might, for example, take the form of a respect for mature trees as providing the existing structuring of a site to which a building was to be an incomer. As soon as a work begins to be thought about, its ideogram should be so touched by the 'as found' as to make it 'specific to place'.

Thus, the 'as found' provided a new way of seeing the ordinary, an openness as to how prosaic 'things' could reenergize our inventive activity. It was also a recognition of what the postwar world was actually like: a society that had nothing.⁶

It follows, therefore, that at that time you reached for what there was, for previously unthought of things that, in turn, forcibly impressed on us the way in which the new could reenergize an existing fabric – in 1957, a coat of white paint could renew a ship.

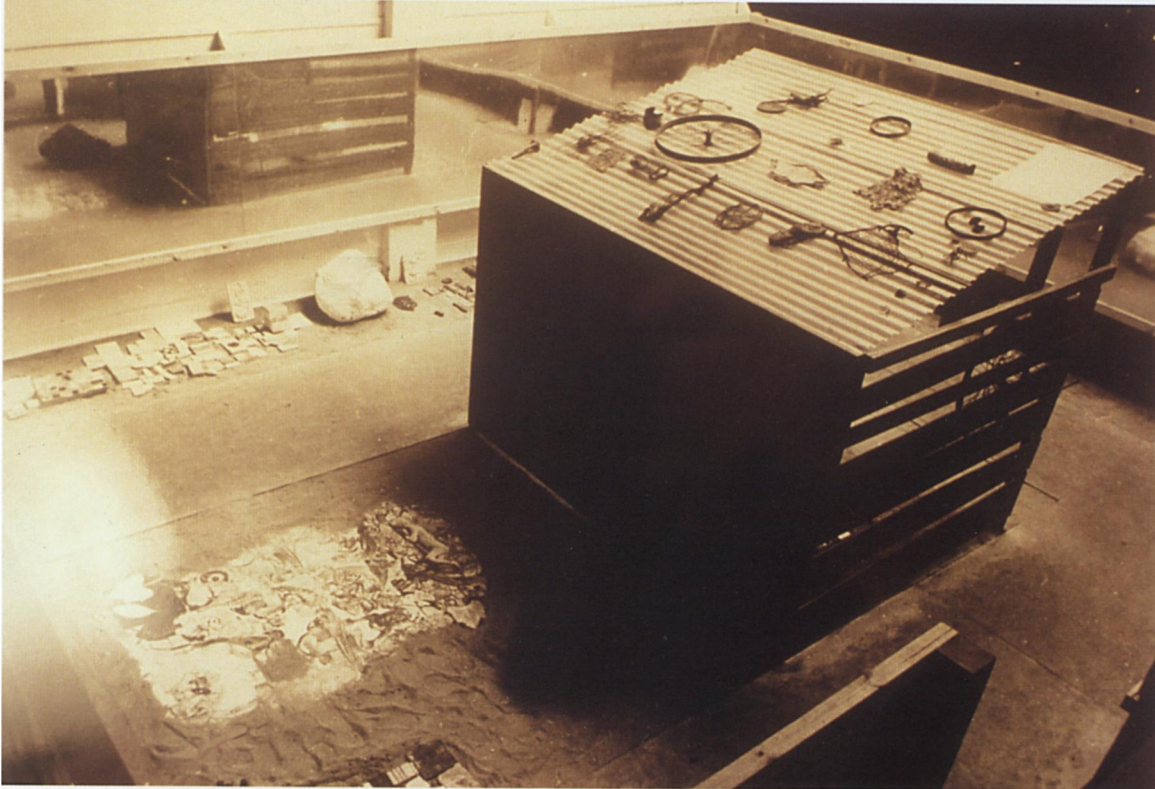
We were concerned, too, with seeing materials for what they were: the woodness of wood;⁷ the sandiness of sand.⁸ And with this, there came a distaste for the simulated, for the new plastics of the period that were printed to simulate an existing natural material.⁹ We acquired a dislike for certain mixes with technology, such as the walnut dashboard in



THE TWO LIVES OF PATIO AND PAVILION 1956/1990

1956 - The First Life

Patio and Pavilion had its first life in the exhibition This Is Tomorrow, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. In my recollection, the idea for the show can be traced to an invitation from the French Groupe Espace to an English constructivist to set up a similar group in England. The idea was discussed in Bill Scott's and other top-floor studios in Fitzroy Street over the winter of 1955-6. Ultimately the Groupe Espace notion was rejected; we each wanted to do our own thing. But with the help of some meagre funding found by Theo Crosby, then technical editor of Architectural Design, This Is Tomorrow emerged. Our Patio and Pavilion was defined by March 1956. The exhibition ran from August to September 1956. In its first incarnation, it stood in the far



This page, from top: *Patio and Pavilion* from above, 1956. Photograph by Nigel Henderson; *Patio and Pavilion*, 1956.
Opposite page: *Patio and Pavilion*, 1990.



a car. We were interested in how things could be at a time when technology touches everything and everyone, and we foresaw that a general reappraisal of values would occur, as we 'read', through the aspirational images on offer in American magazines, the approach of an acquisitive society.

In our reaction to the 1940s – *design*, for us, was a dirty word – we tried never to be negative. By taking up a position, we rejected the then fashionable (but for us too simple) literal and literary attitudes, represented, to socialist-minded intellectuals, by the writings of Herbert Read. We were the generation stepping aside from politics, as it seemed no longer appropriate to our needs. All this was an intellectual activity that we extended to a care for literacy in the language of architecture. We worked in the belief that a building in formation would reveal its own rules and define its self-required form.

The 'as found' aesthetic fed the invention of the 'random aesthetic' of all our *Cluster* ideograms, diagrams and theories, which we took first to CIAM 9 at Aix-en-Provence, then to La Sarraz and, finally, to the Team 10-programmed CIAM 10 at Dubrovnik.

Our *Patio and Pavilion* answered a programme of our own making, offering a definitive statement of another attitude to collaboration that concerned 'the art of inhabitation'. We were taking up a position in the acquisitive society as it began its run, by offering in a *gîte* a reminder of other values and simpler pleasures.¹⁰ With the transparent roof of the Pavilion made to display Nigel's arrangement of the 'as found', the sand surface of the Patio chosen to receive our collaborators' tile and object arrangement, and the reflective compounding walls to include every visitor as an inhabitant, 'the art of the as-found' was made manifest.

The complete trust in our collaboration was proved by our *Patio and Pavilion* being built to our drawings and 'inhabited' by Nigel and Eduardo in our absence, as we were camping on our way to CIAM 10.

Now, in 1990, the *Patio and Pavilion* is reconstructed, and we, as architects, are bound to reassess, even rethink, our position (the European has a constant need to measure personal contribution alongside history). Through this measuring, which comes naturally to those among whom we work, a shared intellectual activity becomes one of many contributory factors to the achievement of an extension of the inherited language.

Back in the early 1950s we were conscious that we had to prepare our minds as architects to meet the aspirations of a society that would first emulate, then parallel, America in plenty. Consequently, I believe that our attitude, leading to what we subsequently developed in buildings, urbanism and theory, will be of interest to young people of Eastern Europe as they start the long haul into a postindustrial society. But today the process is already overhung by the spectre of McDonald's-ization: 50 years ago we foresaw only plenty.

That is our first conclusion after seeing our *Patio and Pavilion* reconstructed; that it is an action that might turn out to carry a positive message for Eastern Europe... and even America?

A second conclusion can only be answered through events: we would have preferred to have been asked for an exhibition that commented on our thoughts of the 1950s, because a number of our exhibitions have been undoubted steps towards a response to the emergent 'too much'.



right-hand corner of the gallery, under a roof light, but shielded from direct sunlight.

We explained the piece as follows: 'We have worked on a kind of symbolic "habitat", in which are found, in some form or other, the basic human needs – a piece of ground, a view of the sky, privacy, the presence of nature and animals – when we need them – and symbols of the basic human urges – to extend and control, to move.

'The actual form is very simple: a patio, or enclosed space, in which sits a pavilion. The patio and pavilion are furnished with objects that are symbols for the things we need: for example a wheel – an image for movement and machines.

'The method of work has been for the group to agree on the general idea, for the architects to provide a framework and for the artists to provide the objects. In this way, the architects' work of providing context for the individual to realize himself in, and the artists' work of giving signs and images to the stages of this realization, meet in a single act, full of those inconsistencies and apparent irrelevancies of every moment, but full of life.'

In the event, the separation of the activities of the architects from those of the artists was complete: the



From top: *Patio and Pavilion* 1990, 1956, 1956, 1990.

Verbal Illustration 1

The exhibitions *A Parallel of Life and Art* (1953) and *Patio and Pavilion* (1956), both created with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson, celebrated the 'as found' aesthetic that was to dominate the next two decades.

The House of the Future was 'staged' (also in 1956) as an exhibition house, confronting the changes that domestic machines, the emergent consumerism and anticipated technology would bring about during the 1980s, just as two generations earlier the *Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau* had confronted the use of the products and technology that were assumed would soon be generally available.

In the 1960s, the exhibition *Painting and Sculpture of a Decade, 1954–64* at the Tate Gallery explored a cranking counter-aesthetic within the spaces of a conventional Edwardian art gallery. Later that decade we used an exhibition as an opportunity to engage with the notions of devices and decorations. The fabric of the city and its dressing by events was the theme of *Wedding in the City* (Milan Triennale, 1968), a simple, everyday, enjoyable happening that highlighted the constant renewal of the permanent fabric of the city by transient events and decorations.

We pursued the theme of dressing by events in the 1970s, through a series of exhibitions based on the surviving popular festival of Christmas, with all its familiar layers of transformation. We started modestly, with *The Entrance Made Festive* at the Bartlett School (London, 1978). The entrance theme was deployed again, but in a more specific sense, as cupboard doors in *24 Doors to Christmas* (Cambridge, 1979).

The lattice frame and its potential for interlayering ran the gamut of the different connotations expressing the theme at *Christmas X Hogmanay* (Edinburgh, 1980). We were offering the concept of a continuing re-creation of images and emblems for Christmas in order to maintain and renew this festival of renewal.

In 1981, for ILA&UD¹¹, P.S. wrote about his attitude towards exhibitions in *Staging the Possible*:

'The architects of the Renaissance established ways of going about things which we unconsciously follow: for example, between the idea sketchily stated and the commission for the permanent building came the stage-architecture of the Court Masque.... The Modern Movement (in Architecture) follows this tradition in seizing the chance.

'In the second generation of Modern Architects it was through exhibitions that the Eameses first extended the inherited language.... There is a striking coincidence of stance between the immediate postwar exhibitions of the Eameses and the staging of the plays of Berthold Brecht: each, it would seem felt 'a compulsion towards the real'... for the intention to be carried by freestanding 'real' things and by managed light. In Brecht's productions in East Berlin in the 1950s, the observer was transfixed by a remote, (symbolized by everything being touched by grey) reality intensified; freestanding stage

objects and actors realer than real... indeed the lighting and the setting might have seemed to overwhelm the author's stated intention except in its aim to hurt as it penetrated; to change minds.

'We in the third generation also found that ideas could be realized in exhibition as in a theatre, with transient material, but in real space.'

Now we seem to be in a situation where an exhibition can – in the manner of music, theatre, film, tapes, photographs, books – be replayed (dare one say, conducted?).

You might say, why not? (we, for one, have never been wholly satisfied with the few photographs of Melnikov's 1925 Paris exhibition). But it still feels strange to these architects who always look to the approaching future, who take up a position ahead of aspirations in order to offer tangible alternatives. This can be communicated most persuasively through exhibitions. And fresh exhibitions – as no doubt the Russian constructivists said – need cost comparatively little compared to other performance arts.

Between 1985 and 1986, while Mies's pavilion was being reconstructed, our attitude was that reconstruction destroys a dream and that it cannot, by way of recompense, recreate for a subsequent generation that excitement, or the impact, experienced by a third-generation architect on first discovering photographs of a lost pavilion from the heroic period of modern architecture. We visited the pavilion through the stages of its reconstruction in Barcelona and had time to consider our attitude in the run-up to Aachen's celebration of the centenary of Mies's birth in 1986.¹²

Verbal Illustration 2

MIES'S BARCELONA PAVILION:
MYTH AND REALITY:
THE LEVEL OF THE GROUND...

Some six or seven years ago, I picked up a book from someone else's shelves and read, at great speed, an essay that described the steps in the canonization of the Barcelona Pavilion. It said that at the time of its building the pavilion was received coldly or antagonistically, even by critics who reviewed it from within the modern movement (such as – from memory – José Luis Sert and Alfred Roth).

A rereading this year of Hugh Thomas's book on the Spanish Civil War brought forth one small further fact that perhaps bears on the circumstances that lie behind this rejection. The exhibition in Spain took place at the time of the right-wing dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera (which lasted from 1923 to 1930). The architects of the second generation were from just those liberal and professional middle classes that opposed the dictator and would, somewhat naturally, regard any participation in the exhibition – even the participation of the new German Republic – as a betrayal of their cause. To those committed to the left, any participation at all would have been immoral.

The pavilion reached me as a real historical fact through Philip Johnson's 1947 book on Mies, which I bought in 1949. The plan in that book (sections

architects set up the space with its potential for occupation, the artists realized that potential. The architects went off to Dubrovnik for the CIAM 10 meeting; when they returned, the inhabitation had been achieved.

1990 - The Second Life

The second life of Patio and Pavilion occurred in a travelling exhibition organized from America by Jacqueline Baas. In London it was housed at the Institute of Contemporary Art, in the Mall. As a reconstruction it was astonishing, although different to the original, because even industrially produced materials or processes do not stay the same over 34 years. But the truly magical transformation was largely a question of light; whereas in 1956 the natural light was flat, at the ICA we could control the entry of sunlight through the traditional window shutters facing southwards onto the Mall. This light, combined with the increased reflectiveness of the aluminium-faced plywood patio-walls, was astounding. In 1990, sunlight had become a component of the design.

- PS, February 2002



From top: *Patio and Pavilion*, 1990. All photographs by Pevo Smithson unless otherwise specified.

of the Barcelona Pavilion were *never* published) reinforced the myth I had always held to be true that the building was essentially a platform, raised up clear of the natural ground on all sides. But *Quaderns*, the Catalan architecture magazine, published the original plan variants and an old photograph of the back of the pavilion. In that photograph, the back entrance can be seen as being level with the ground; indeed, from that side, the pavilion was seen downslope onto the roof.

For my myth to survive, it was necessary for the pavilion to be demolished after the exhibition closed, thus allowing the idea of the still, perfected object floating above the ground to become absolute. But now we see it in facsimile, rebuilt on its old site, and it is clear that it was not a platform but a ledge, a passing-through stop on a route, more propylaea than pavilion.

It was a propylaea whichever way you moved through it, whether from the end of the terrace to the steps, or from the steps back along the terrace. With this thought in mind, one realizes that, in its plan, the Barcelona Pavilion is as enigmatic as the propylaea to the Acropolis. It is, because of its unsimple nature, what we have termed a conglomerate building: it is of an order other than the pavilion, whose type, throughout Europe, we all recognize in the Chinese pavilion of the English landscape garden.

So, we have no idea what a young European architect, walking through *Patio and Pavilion* reconstructed, can find of his – or our – roots in the 1950s; or whether he will recognize a historic connection or have some insight that will provide a tool for his future use.

– AMS, MARCH 1990.

Notes

1. Later, in the same year as our *House of the Future*.
2. Where Dr Reyner Banham saw it before his death in early 1988.
3. Even though this disengagement might, one suspects, in Eduardo's opinion, have nicely sent up the critics' and curators' carefully constructed world of taste.
4. In the East End of London.
5. See *Uppercase 3*. Also A+P.S.'s *Grille* for CIAM 9 at Aix-en-Provence, which was in the *Independent Group* exhibition and is now in the Centre Pompidou.
6. The 'as found' was born of austerity: food rationing ended slowly, only in 1954; between 1952 and 1953 we waited the better part of a year for sufficient steel to build Hunstanton School.
7. Upper Lawn, Solar Pavilion and Folly.
8. Iraqi House, Piccadilly.
9. The wood-remembering pattern on the laminate for the kitchen of the 1956 *House of the Future* was drawn by us.
10. Those that are now termed green.
11. Giancarlo De Carlo's International Laboratory for Architecture and Urban Design, Urbino.
12. During the period of a seminar held in parallel, *A Fragment of an Enclave: The Pavilion as Idyll... the Idea of Saint Jerome's Study*.