

The double Obsolescence of the Farnsworth House

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ABSTRACT

Rarely does architecture reach its functional obsolescence. The usual is disenchantment: an obsolescence of enthusiasm that reveals the emotional exhaustion of its inhabitants, of a cultural group, or a whole society. Given the narratives that describe obsolescence as a stage prior to that of re-founding, one might think about it as a state of multiplicity that results from the coexistence of lives projected around the same built object. To revert one of these obsolescences may suppose ending the existence of the other. From this perspective it is possible to devise a non-binary project strategy to pose a more complex and asymmetric coexistence. In the case that we are presenting here, the living years of the Farnsworth House, this possibility emerges from the conception of a soft architecture, subversive and critical, capable of embracing the complexity of its own exhaustion and constant reinvention.

Rarely does architecture reach its functional obsolescence, that is, the state of ruin where it's no longer able to remain standing. The usual thing is that it is of another kind: an obsolescence of enthusiasm that reveals the emotional exhaustion of its inhabitants, a cultural group or of a whole society. To overcome the cultural resistance of an exhausted architecture without having to revert its physical condition, one must also re-describe the matter that constitutes it. Given the narratives that assume that obsolescence is a run-down state prior to re-foundation, it's also possible to think of obsolescence as a state of multiplicity, simultaneous and contraposed, triggered by the cohabitation of lives projected around the same built object. To revert one of these obsolescences may imply to definitively end the existence of the other. From this perspective it is possible to think of a non-binary project strategy that, in the face of the obsolete/updated dichotomy, may pose other more complex and asymmetrical relations of coexistence. In the case that brings us here – the living years of the Farnsworth house – this possibility emerges from a notion of a soft architecture, capable of being subversive, critical and, at the same time, accepting the complexity of its own permanent exhaustion and constant reinvention.

In 1953, the editor of House Beautiful proclaimed with a j'accuse: "something is rotten in the State of Design" (Gordon, 1953, p. 127). Elisabeth Gordon invoked Hamlet to give a sense of the seriousness of her statement: The triggerer of that accusation was none other than the private dispute arisen between Edith

Farnsworth and the architect she had hired to design her house, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. From the pages of a decoration magazine arose a claim for common sense in architectural design. On the background of this polemic was an attack on domestic austerity imposed by modern architecture and the impossibility of inhabiting it. On the one side were those who saw in Mies' design a form of tyranny. On the other, those who dismissed anybody who didn't see the purity and exquisiteness of the design as being backwards and blind. Some considered Edith Farnsworth a victim of creative fascism; others, a vengeful client insensitive to the beauty that van der Rohe had created for her. Farnsworth had to deal with all of that, aware of living in a unique work where an impossible way of life was imposed.

The object of the polemic was the rectangular pavilion that, in the early forties, the forty-two-year-old nephrologist – and also bachelor in English literature by Chicago University – had commissioned to be built in a costly cottage on the banks of the Fox river in Plano, Illinois. Fearful of leaving the construction of her house in the hands of some insensitive contractor incapable of appreciating the beauty of her 22 Acres of prairie and woodlands, she asked the Museum of Modern Art in New York to provide her with a shortlist of possible candidates to design her house. Finally, after a meeting with him, she decided in favor of the German emigrate architect. They dedicated five years, from 1946 to 1951, to the process of design and construction of the house.

During that time, client and architect worked alongside in the materialization of the project.

By 1947, the design of the house was advanced enough to be featured in the exhibition "Mies van der Rohe" held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The exhibition gathered a selection of the main works by the architect. The model of the project was showcased in a central place in the exhibit, making evident that the house was a new center of gravity in Mies' upcoming work⁽¹⁾ (Friedman, 2006, p. 134). The process of design and construction, however, was greatly delayed, and started to dent the relation between client and architect. Be it for the impossibility of imagining what was being designed at the architecture studio, or because the sensations of what was built were not as expected, Farnsworth evidenced her disenchantment with the result, maybe not about the house in itself as for the effect that the process had had in the life of both. Mies sued Farnsworth for unpaid fees. She counterattacked with a lawsuit for fraud in which she claimed that the architect had kept from her the real cost of the house and in which she questioned his ability as architect⁽²⁾. The house became a battleground. A contest that started with the dispute between architect and owner and ended in 1972, when the house was sold to Lord Peter Palumbo – real estate developer and architecture collector – who, in the end, would become its embalmer.

Before its completion in the beginning of 1951, the expectations about the house had begun to develop beyond the private sphere between architect and client. The house had become a paradigm of the dissolution of the conventional home and an epitome of modern architecture. For Mies, it was the consummation of

what design could do for architecture: privacy, sexuality, imperfection, or even life, had been eradicated in favor of what many have described as an "essential" experience (Schulze, 1960, pp. 256-257). This approach aimed at a single direction: if the house was perfect, then, its dweller, incapable of living in it, was, by logic, imperfect.

In this process of mythification, Farnsworth had been expelled from her house by the construction of a larger narrative in which her character no longer had a place. At a certain point, what we know as the Farnsworth House started to exist in duplicate, in two parallel dimensions: on the one side, the Farnsworth House and, on the other, Farnsworth's house. The threat of obsolescence had arrived in two ways, through the house and through its inhabitant. The coexistence of both led to an unresolvable status.

The Farnsworth House, the one that is in the architecture books, is the one that has somehow prevailed vis-à-vis the house that actually was. Its existence is so linked to purity, to material perfection, to poetics, to its transcendent condition, that to question it is to go against its beauty. The canonic history is that of the house as a mineral certainty, as a bust, as an inert effigy. A history in which the house is presented as inalterable against a world that changes around it. Token of its grandeur is its iconic perseverance against the changes of the seasons, to which it responds as a rock and, at the same time, with the transparency of glass. The house overcomes even the most extreme conditions with its immutable levitation.

There are few records of Farnsworth's house in the years when it was inhabited. The photographs that remain belong

to Edith Farnsworth's personal archives and, most of the times, have been used to discredit her. Those images defied and challenged the canonical image of the house. The drift of the house, in the hands of Farnsworth, was considered an offense. As if the process of inhabiting it would denature it. The deviation from the ideal model is evident in the way in which Lord Palumbo, dismayed, describes what he found when he visited the house in 1971: dilapidated cobblestones, the porch closed by mosquito screen that forced to access the house via a wire mesh door, nondescript furniture, unwashed dishes...⁽³⁾ (as cited in Vandenberg, 2003).

However, findings like these aren't but the reflection of this double existence: the ideal house that had remained in the cultural memory and the lived one. The house was incapable of becoming a home and the dweller was incapable of reproducing the immaculate life that the house demanded. The conjunction of both caused reciprocal obsolescence. It was precisely the bastard architectural strategy applied by Edith Farnsworth, removed from canons, what could mediate between the two, evidencing at the same time the consequences of this schizophrenia.

In the hands of Farnsworth, the house not only changed physically, but also in the way in which it is captured. The viewpoints are no longer canonic, they are less monumental and show a domestic side. The gaze is subjective and fragmented, doesn't show the object complete. Mies' house is blurred to incorporate other materials. The first thing that stands out in the photographs is the relation between the house and its surroundings. Contrary to the uncluttered condition usually portrayed, the photographs in the Farnsworth archive show how the vegetation takes on a prominent role. The exterior vegetation is

freed from the domesticated landscaping that Palumbo will impose on it in the seventies. The photos show a more integrated house, more complicit with the place. The treetops are close to the façade and the plants grow around the columns that were driven into the soil. The glass amplifies the vegetation in the proximity of close contact. Farnsworth remained critical of the strong sun exposure the house had during summer, so she most likely favored the growth of trees to make use of their shadow over the façade. Mies did not project any element to protect the façade from sun exposure. The purity of the piece required sacrifices.

The vegetation also made a move towards the inside of the house. The tension house-interior versus nature-exterior that derived from the memory of Mies had been dissolved in the owner's living project. Farnsworth always remembered how in reality, at nightfall, all this landscape disappeared to become a mirror of what happened inside. Maybe incorporating the vegetation in the interior was a way of putting in between body and glass, certain matters that blurred this sensation of caged animal that the owner referred to. The house may be defined as a portion of air trapped between floor and ceiling (Drexler, 1960); perhaps Farnsworth's house moves the position of this surrounding fixed by Mies van der Rohe between man and nature and places it in nature. By having vegetation on one side and the other, it builds a project that is much more coherent with Farnsworth's original desire: to live above the marvelous landscape that she had found and, by extension, to belong to it.

Interior plants also constitute the territory of the furnished. Farnsworth always speaks about the difficulty of using her furniture. Mies' drawings,


vastly published, set in a precise manner a way of inhabiting the house that never actually existed. The house was never lived as Mies drew it and, yet, this is the way of life that is remembered of it. In Farnsworth's images, the furniture is in disarray, it is heterogeneous: a soft sofa with a worn rug, some Nordic-style chairs... All this furniture constructs an erroneous constellation (Friedman, 2006, p. 144). The furniture became a private and public front of dispute⁽⁴⁾.

Most of the descriptions elaborated from the discipline share a similar approach; the house is an exemplary observatory on the world, where nature builds the house, while a body, not exposed to these occurrences, supervises and enjoys them from an apparent immateriality. But, actually, all these appreciations completely neglect the sensitive body, a body that not only looks, but also inhabits a nature that cannot be contained by the prophylactic existence of a piece of glass. Nature runs through the house and also the bodies. Once again, one year after it was inhabited, the dispute became explicit by the appearance of the sensitive body. The instigators of the polemic were the thousands of mosquitoes that besieged the house on the warm months. The problem originated from not being able to inhabit the exterior without having to endure chastisement by the insects. Farnsworth didn't want to renounce her exterior porch and demanded a solution. Soft technologies made again available a mediation. The mosquito screen was built with a thinly weaved tensed textile that connected both slabs and closed the volume with a transparent veil. The criticism escalated after its placement despite that, as the model of the house exhibited at the MoMA warned, the mosquito net was considered as part of the project. It was during the

construction process that Mies van der Rohe dismissed it. With the installation of the mosquito screen, Farnsworth insists again on the project's generative concept. When the temperature of the air is not the problem, the glass can lighten until it becomes a mesh, a bag with hardly any matter that controls the minimum parameters to be able to, in the end, inhabit over the world.

For many, the house was reconquered in 1972 when Lord Peter Palumbo bought it as part of his 'collection' of architectural pieces, which included among others Kentuck Knob by Frank Lloyd Wright (1953-1956, Chalk Hill, Pennsylvania, USA) and Maisons Jaoul by Le Corbusier (1951-55, Neuilly-sur-Seine, Paris, France). The house stopped functioning as a home and now, devoid of interior life, recovered an ideal state. For some critics, the house entered the happiest phase of its life after being sold (Schulze, 1960). As if the matter that conformed the house had been tortured during the years it had been inhabited. The ideal client should erase the original client.

The change in ownership put an end to the double obsolescence. Mies' house, paradigm of modern architecture, and Farnsworth's house, casual resting pavilion, had been boycotting each other since their construction. The first, incapable of unfolding in full splendor the ideals of the new architecture. The second, subjected to public scrutiny for becoming an uninhibited and intimate space of leisure. However, despite everything, an alternative way of making architecture made this coexistence possible. What for twenty years was considered an anomaly is now presented to us, from within the paradigms of ecology or feminism, as a strategy that makes possible a complex way of living, an immersive and relational way of living.

Edith Farnsworth hybridized the unstable materiality of plants and textiles with the – apparent – imperturbability of glass to make the transparent bubble a homely enclosure. She used architectural techniques to subvert the modern canon. The soft, the organic, the mutable, or the perishable reformulated a way of inhabiting that had been imposed and opened the door to a way of living that is more aware of belonging to a vast and interconnected system such as the world. 

NOTES

- (1) Farnsworth wrote in her diary: “it was the pivotal point of the exhibit, and I was happy as I boarded the train back to Chicago, reflecting that our project might well become the prototype of new and important elements of American architecture” (as cited in Friedman, 2006, p. 134).
- (2) Some critics like Vanderberg (2003) or Schulze (2016) have insinuated that behind this break in the relation hid an asymmetrical love between Mies and Farnsworth. However, other more recent readings, like Alice Friedmann’s (2006) deny that the love relation was behind this dispute and that it was instead due to a frustrated friendship.
- (3) “He was depressed to see an approach path of crazy paving; the western terrace enclosed by mosquito screens so that one entered the glass pavilion via a wire mesh door; the once-beautiful primavera panels veneered to a blackish, reddish color; the floor space unpleasantly blocked by mostly nondescript furniture; and the sink piled high with dishes which had not been washed for a several days” (as cited in Vandenberg, 2003, p. 15).
- (4) “Any arrangement of furniture becomes a major problem, because the house is transparent, like an X-ray” (Barry, 1953, p. 266).

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