



**Mela\***Books

# REDEFINING THE LOBBY OF THE MACBA STUDY CENTER

*Selection of proposals*

edited by the Museu d'Art  
Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA)

## Beyond the Display Case. Proposals for New Formats in Documentary Exhibitions

→ ISABEL BACHS AND MELA DÁVILA FREIRE

Isabel Bachs (Barcelona, 1956) earned a degree in Architecture from the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona (ETSAB) in 1984. She has worked on different building design and construction projects, such as the Mies van der Rohe Barcelona Pavilion and Richard Meier's Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA). She has been the architectural curator and restorer of both buildings since they were built, and since 1990 she has been the head of the MACBA Department of Architecture and General Services. She is a founding member of the Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura (ESARQ-UIC) and an Associate Professor at ETSAB since 1995, developing different studies on project design, construction and conservation of public buildings.

Mela Dávila Freire (O Grove, Pontevedra, 1970) holds a degree in English and German Philology from the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and postgraduate studies in Publishing. Since 1996, she has held various positions at contemporary art institutions, and in 2007 was appointed director of the new MACBA Study Center, where she had the opportunity to implement innovative practices in the management and dissemination of a comprehensive document collection about contemporary art. Since 2012, she has lived in Hamburg, where she does independent research and works as a consultant in the field of archiving and contemporary culture.

Site plan of the MACBA buildings.

The MACBA Study Center (CED) opened its doors in 2007 with the aim of “strengthening the development of the Museum, broadening its scope beyond exhibitions to act as a centre for research, a structure for dialogue and mediation, and as a social space and one of diffusion”.<sup>1</sup> The expansion of the activity in this direction, a project developed at length by Manuel Borja-Villel, fitted into a vision of the Museum as producer of discourse and developer of knowledge, in which actual exhibitions were complemented by other activities – public programmes, educational activities, publications, research projects and so on – through which MACBA aspired to reach a similar and not necessarily overlapping range of the visiting public: “Discursive activities play a central role at MACBA. We aim to counteract the hegemony of the device of exhibition (and thus the ruling policy of maximum visibility) as the principal method or discursive public space of the museum. We think that visitors are different and have differing interests, and that we must facilitate different and not hierarchical uses of the museum for these different visitors. These uses are not limited to the exhibition space, nor should they be unduly dominated by the imperative of visibility.”<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, the CED – a library and an archive set in a museum structure – built up MACBA’s potential to generate historiographical and artistic discourses, sought the involvement of new sectors among its public, specifically the university and research community, and at the same time benefited from the Museum’s own strategies of dissemination and dynamism to broaden the traditional uses of library and archive through the dedication of divulgatory resources such as the exhibition of documents, among other things.

This conception of museum was shared by Bartomeu Marí, who took over as director of MACBA in spring 2008 with the clear intention of continuing along these same lines, as was obvious from the editorial in the *Agenda: the MACBA’s news bulletin* published in the summer of that year.<sup>3</sup>

In architectural terms, for MACBA, the creation of the CED meant a *de facto* and significant expansion of its space: added to the 15,500 m<sup>2</sup> of Richard Meier’s building and the Capella del Convent dels Àngels, were 2,750 m<sup>2</sup> of the convent itself, spread across four floors and dedicated to the housing of the CED’s installations. The proximity of the two buildings, on either side of the Plaça dels Àngels, provided for each of them a variety of shared services and gave substance to the use and inauguration

1 The Study Center’s mission, as described at [www.macba.cat](http://www.macba.cat) (page consulted in September 2011, no longer features on the institution’s website as of November 2012).

2 Jorge Ribalta, “Contrapúblicos: mediación y construcción de públicos”, [http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01\\_es.pdf](http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_es.pdf), accessed in November 2012 (“Mediation and Construction of Publics. The MACBA Experience”, [http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01\\_en.htm](http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm)).

3 “What has come to be known as the “MACBA model” constitutes a particular understanding of the museum as a space for debate and conflict, a critical rereading of the modern tradition that has articulated artistic experimentation, social wisdom and action in the public sphere as a means to reinvent the field of art and endow it with new meaning a social legitimacy. [...] The legacy received cannot be stopped or monumentalised, but must be deepened and reinvented.” (*Agenda: the MACBA’s news bulletin*, summer 2008, p. 1).

of a whole design by Barcelona's architectural studio of Clotet and Paricio for the City Council and conceived as a newspaper library, but which had stood without permanent use due to lack of financial resources since 1985.

With the creation of the CED, MACBA was endowed with the structure, means and resources to *gather, preserve* and *disseminate* documentary and bibliographical assets that illustrate and analyse contemporary artistic practices, understood in the broad sense and not only from the perspective of the history of art but also of other disciplines in the field of cultural studies. At its opening, the CED already possessed a substantial library (approximately 60,000 volumes) and the seeds of an archive destined to house all those documents considered "special", be that due to their artistic nature – artists' publications – or because they were unique documents, generally either unpublished or distributed in very small numbers: documents from personal archives, photographs, collected letters, etc.

As the CED came into being, work began to identify, find and acquire new documents, and also to establish the most suitable protocols for the cataloguing and preservation of each category of material. Shortly afterwards, a programme of temporary documentary exhibitions was launched on the ground floor of the Center's headquarters. The space these collections occupied had been remodelled to turn what had been an entrance lobby into an exhibition space, to resemble as far as possible the "white cube" of the museum hall. Over the next three years, the exhibition programme formed the most visible and public activity of the Center, which continued its documentary support to the Museum's curators, attended to the needs of the library and archive's users, as well as carrying out the task of acquiring and cataloguing new items.

At the end of this period, MACBA decided to close temporarily the CED's exhibition space and evaluate the results of the recently concluded programme. During this stage of reflection, some significant weaknesses, which had been detected in exhibition after exhibition, were highlighted:

- The building which houses the CED did not have a public presence: despite its size and privileged position on Plaça dels Àngels, it was still basically a flat facade, opaque and thus invisible both to the visitors to MACBA's Meier building and also the pedestrians crossing the square.
- The documentary exhibitions mounted up to that point had followed, almost without any variation, the model of exhibitions in the Meier building and based on contemplation, ignoring the fact that documents require different dynamic approaches to works of art that are more centred in active interpretation, and in many cases richer if they are based in an active model of dialogue and participation.
- The exhibition format implies prior selection, and tends to create expectations in the visitor that the artefacts displayed are "the best", "the most significant", etc., often from a retrospective point of view. The exhibition, however, does not lend itself so readily to the presentation of phenomena that exist in the present, still in the process of

development and not suited to encapsulation in historic selection. Documentary presentations through exhibition did not, therefore, allow the CED to realise its potential as disseminator and sounding board of current activity at the intersection of art, publishing and the world of the archive, an intersection that forms its main focus. In other words, the CED's mission is to collect materials from the past (the past simple, a tense of completed action), but also to make public and known these same materials and those who produced them, and to reflect on the act of publication itself, in real time (the present continuous, what is going on now). The exhibition format had shown itself to be too static and inflexible to fulfil this function.

In the light of these conclusions, the Study Center considered the physical reconfiguration of the ground floor exhibition space, with two aims. On one hand, the task was to create a space that allowed the development of alternative models of documentary exhibition and solved the deficiencies that had been identified. On the other, it was necessary to increase the visibility of the activities and services the Center programmed or housed: not just the library and archive services, but also the Independent Studies Programme (PEI), book launches, guided visits to selections of documentary collections, and so on. Also, this ideally needed to be achieved while aiming for the visual association of the CED building with the "MACBA conglomeration", which, spread across Plaça dels Àngels, consists of the Museum's main building, the Capella, the Auditorium and the Study Center itself.

Based on these reflections, the need was seen to give physical form to a hybrid, dynamic and social space, whose layout was sufficiently flexible to allow the development of certain functions of other spaces without being limited only to one: a classroom / a lounge / a projection room / an assembly room / an auditorium / an exhibition hall / a meeting room / a reading room / a café / a workshop. The physical layout of this room therefore needed to be aimed at the combination of uses traditionally associated with libraries and archives, others that usually take place in auditoria and still others that, to an extent, are in fact those of an exhibition hall. The expectation was to achieve a space that facilitated activities related to study and reading: connecting to the internet, working with the computer itself, reading, working in groups, studying videos... and also that at certain times of day (by previous arrangement) small-format public activities could be accommodated, in which barriers between teacher or speaker and listeners would be eliminated, in such a way that conversations could take place in a non-hierarchical way. All the while not abandoning the possibility of using the space for documentary presentations that eschew the purely contemplative format, adopting methods of presentation beyond the usual display cases, through which documents could be truly accessible to visitors.

In short, creative designs, distanced from the familiar exhibitionary practice of museums, were sought. The ideal context in which to call for these designs turned out to be *MeLa – Museums and Libraries in an Age*

*of Migrations*,<sup>4</sup> a four-year research project (from 1 March 2011 to 28 February 2015) financed by the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission, in which MACBA had been invited to participate in collaboration with eight other museums and research centres across Europe. This project set out to analyse the role performed by museums in the building and spreading of European cultural property, centring on a number of particular areas, among them museum libraries, and identifying new paths arising through today's context of movement and social, economic and human change. Among the project's main aims is that of offering support to the museum and library community as well as experts and political administrators in their definition of new purposes and formats for museums and libraries "in the age of migrations".

In the context of this project, the CED launched a call for ideas, aimed at final year undergraduates and postgraduates at faculties of architecture and design. The intention was to select and publicise the most interesting suggestions to reconfigure the documentary exhibition space in order to make it suitable for the uses previously described, and reinforce its public visibility as an integral part of MACBA through intervention in the urban space.

The process was set up with the aim of promoting places of reflection in the university world where the focus was on projects of space and the design of support mechanisms and means of communication. This reflection took place within formal courses in each of the participating institutions, and resulted in a range of projects across the four categories of intervention that had been put forward:

1. Intervention in the facade and Plaça dels Àngels, which had to tackle not only the questions of the Center's visibility but above all its accessibility and relationship with the rest of the public space, and the identification of the home of the CED as an integral part of MACBA.
2. Distribution of uses and design of the interior spaces, where the complexity of the programme places discourse at the limits of the available space, its relationship with the outside and the incompatibilities between some uses and the necessary flexibility previously stated.
3. Design of furnishings, which is to say a programme of structures capable of storage and the design of auxiliary items adaptable for various purposes.

---

4 This project was formed by a consortium of academic institutions and museums from five European countries, coordinated by the department of Architectural Projects of the Politecnico di Milano. As well as the reviewing of formats and classic exhibition spaces that arose as the result of the evaluation of documentary exhibitions, MACBA's participation in the project, channelled through the Study Center, was based on the notion of the exhibition as a discursive instrument that contributed to reflection on theory and the analysis of case studies from the history of exhibition, and in the formulation, based on MACBA's experience in the management of its own historical archive, of a series of models for archives and documents. The project was renamed a year after its launch, and became known as MeLa – Museums in an Age of Migrations. *Reinterpreting Europe's Cultural Heritage in the 21st Century* ([www.mela-project.eu](http://www.mela-project.eu)).

4. Graphic design and communication strategies, on different scales: identification in the city, the relationship with MACBA, the reading of uses in the interior and the accompanying recognition of the various framings.

Stemming from this invitation to tender ideas, various educational institutions of architecture and design decided to “adopt” the problems put forward in its precepts, converting them into course material for their project work: in Barcelona, the Escola Tècnica Superior d’Arquitectura de Barcelona (ETSAB) and the EINA, Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art; in Milan, the Architecture Department of the Politecnico; in Naples, the Facoltà di Architettura. And so, over a period of a year, the CED received visits from many groups of under- and postgraduates who were able to analyse *in situ* the Center’s characteristics and spaces, and the positive and negative features of its headquarters, especially of what had come to be used as an exhibition space. At the end of the period for the submission of presentations, the CED had received a total of forty-one proposals from 180 students of architecture and design.

The submissions that were received surpassed all the original expectations of the tender, in their variety and number, and in the quality of many. The urban landscape was approached from complementary and distinctive points of view: the building discipline and that of signage. The projects focusing more on alteration to the existing building and those suggesting new facades were put together more largely by schools of architecture, while those concentrating more on the communicative power of these constructions, and steps aiming to correct or increase them, were led generally by groups from design schools. In these considerations, graphic design solutions were dealt with, of brand, logo and their application in various framings. The line common to almost all these exercises has been the introduction of a system or programme that allows for different scales of intervention and which, especially when applied to the interior space, confirms the variability of the programme.

At the end of the process of formulation and selection of the proposals presented, the experience shared by university and museum in a joint research project has turned out to be enormously positive for both parties. For the museum, from the quantity and quality of new ideas brought by the students, and also their freshness, often free of the conditions imposed by “classic” or more usual formats of both exhibition and museum communication. For the universities, as the problem behind the call for ideas was a real situation, relating to an existing building and the need to resolve a series of parameters and clearly verifiable limitations in a practical way, it became an exceptional exercise in “reality” (as many lecturers in charge of the projects classified it) that was very useful as a training tool for future architecture and design professionals. From here on, it is to be hoped that, as far as resources allow, the proposals selected by the members of the project’s evaluation committee are gradually adopted and then put into practice, advancing the construction of the hybrid, dynamic and social space that MACBA aspires to achieve as it aims to enrich and bring versatility to the informative activity of the CED.