

Nora The Power Ancarola of Display Gae Archive

*Let's imagine that we take the wrong staircase and enter the MNAC through the basement. The Museum's security system and an overwhelming darkness signal that we've taken the wrong door. We nevertheless follow the path and discover that the visible parts of the MNAC have an almost symmetrical space underneath, criss-crossed by endless corridors that contain the heart and lungs that allow each of the works in the collection to breathe. Vital organs beating **24 hours a day, 365 days a year**.*

This basement is not merely a storage area, rather it is a malleable space that varies greatly depending on the route we take and the aims of our visit. We could speak of a new Museum dreamt up within the Museum itself.

On this imaginary journey, a young man appears out of a dark space and we suddenly realise that we are in the bowels of the Museum's Oval Hall. The young man, a kind of acrobatic tightrope walker, guides us to show us that it is a set design, or rather that it could be.

But let's start at the beginning.

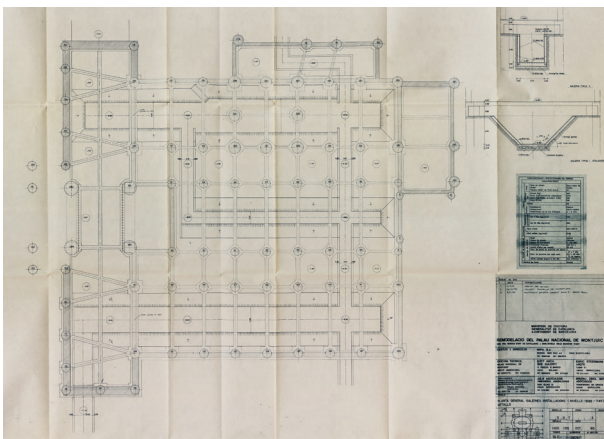
About three years ago, walking up the stairs of the MNAC with Walter Benjamin's book *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* under my arm, a book conceived and written the same year as the grand opening of the Museum and published two years later, a thought came to me: this may seem like a coincidence, but it is not. This essay was written by Benjamin when Adolf Hitler was already Chancellor of Germany, in an effort to describe a theory of art that would be useful for strategically constructing revolutionary claims within the politics of art. According to Benjamin, in the absence of any ritual or traditional value, art has political repercussions in the age of *technical reproducibility*, especially through photography and the new cinema, which no one had hitherto foreseen. Far from the debate stirred up since modernity about whether he is for or against unique works of art and/or for or against technology, here the author talks about the importance of art as a political instrument.

I continue to climb the stairs together with Benjamin and his idea of dissolving the aura of the work of art in my mind, and I can't stop thinking about why it is necessary to bring together such an important part of Catalan heritage in this massive building. Since its grand opening as a museum in 1934, we should recall that the Palau Nacional was created in 1929 for the International Exposition of Barcelona, the building and its contents started a complex journey due to the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship, during which efforts were made to safeguard this heritage thanks to people like Joaquim Folch i Torres. This complexity also included being located in a space on the mountain, Montjuïc, which contained the immigrant internment and deportation centre, the "Pabellón de las Misiones", as well as uncomfortable proximity to the shanty town and Montjuïc Castle, which would become a memorial to the victors, a place for firing squads and a military prison until 1960.

This central nexus of the museum was extended in the early 2000s, when all the collections as they are known today were unified. What could be considered a paradox rather than a coincidence is that, according to Benjamin, the architectural and conceptual consolidation of the former Museu d'Art de Catalunya was taking shape at the same time as contemporary art was being made. This questions the solidity of artistic projects as a markedly unique work with their own aura and as an object of economic and social exchange in favour of artworks marked by their context.

The Palau Nacional, now the Museum, has been subject to many different architectural interventions. After the Civil War, the roofs were repaired during the restoration carried out

in the 1960s to house the great exhibition of Romanesque art *L'art romànic*. Much later, in the 1990s and well into the 21st century, a major intervention was carried out by **Gae Aulenti**, hired to solve problems arising from the exhibition of the large number of works of art that were piling up and to adapt the large, high-ceilinged interior spaces to their function as exhibition halls. It was at this point that the **foundations of the building were consolidated**.



1. Sketch of a detail of the foundations of the Palau Nacional, c. 1926–1927. Catà i Catà Collection.
© Arxiu Històric del COAC
2. Photograph of the construction of the dome, c. 1928–1929. Domènech i Roura Collection.
© Arxiu Històric del COAC
3. Blueprint of the foundations and consolidation of the basement of the Museu Nacional. Gae Aulenti's architectural office, 1990 (with corrections from 1991–1992). © Archive of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya
4. Photograph of the basement of the Museu Nacional, 2024. © Nora Ancarola

The Museum as an archive

When I arrived at the Museum to begin my research in March 2021, in the midst of the post-pandemic period, my intuition told me to start with the archives. Pilar Cuerva Castillo, head of the Research and Knowledge Centre at the time, and her team let me spend hours there. The fact that I could also walk around without the obstacle of “open to the public” allowed me to understand the **entire Museum as an archive** and to thus visit every space interpreting it as such without undervaluing any of its content. One day, Xavier Abelló, head of the Infrastructure and General Services Department, invited me to visit “the bowels” of the Museum. That's when my investigation changed course. If, as Foucault says in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, archives are the system of objects not yet enunciated, we could say that an archive is made up of the elements that do not enter into legitimised narratives and which have not yet interacted with history.

Therefore, thinking of the Museum as a place that showcases what has already been enunciated but which, at the same time, contains, cares for and hides the archive of what has not yet been said gives us a broader vision of its contents; don't you think?

The basement as an archive and the archive as a display

If we understand architecture, as **Gae Aulenti** says, as the foundation of a place, and the Museum's archives as that which gives form and meaning to what has lost its own place, we could say that **Aulenti's** overhauled foundation generates a new landscape where something new has been built. Additionally, his way of working transformed this landscape into an unprecedented artifice in which **all the layers are visible, in which the past and the future have a common display, an expanded body.**

The enormous effort to consolidate the Palau Nacional building means that this visible architectural display is reproduced in the bowels of the Museum, where an almost impenetrable world reveals the fragile balance to which a large part of our cultural heritage is subjected. This **basement laid out as such becomes a powerful display/other** in which every square metre is susceptible of being another frame of a video work, while it clouds any remaining white cube in the space.

As Mary Anne Staniszewski ¹ warned us in the nineties, when exhibitions only showed isolated and decontextualised objects, audiovisual displays, and here I would add architectural ones as well, propose a broader cultural framework, without hiding the cultural and political potential that lies behind the interstices of the fortunately obsolete white exhibition cube.

Video installation, containment, balance, play and enigma

The installation, displayed in **two rooms** (educArt Space and Room 14), which fairly closely correspond to the places made visible in the basement, culminates a process of research into the structure of the Museum and the architectural reform by **Gae Aulenti** between 1985 and 2004. The proposal includes three circus characters who move and interact within the foundations of the building as agents of balance, containment and play.

The display is in dialogue with the layout of the architecture, understood as the accumulation of strata and layers that refer to its operations, its hierarchies and its history. The division between the visible and the invisible is thus put into question, between the museum space dedicated to art, the spaces on display and the spaces that are supposedly merely functional, often hidden, but which, in turn, are the **essential agents for sustaining this artistic heritage legacy, which is at once so powerful and yet so fragile.**

Nora Ancarola

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¹ Staniszewski, Mary Anne (1998). *The Power of Display: A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*. 1998 exhibition catalogue