

# Caring to know : exhibition as a technique of feminist preservation

Autor(en): **Buchwalder, Milena / Flury, Sonja / Hahn, Dorothee**

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# Caring to Know: Exhibition as a Technique of Feminist Preservation

Milena Buchwalder, Sonja Flury, and Dorothee Hahn

**Milena Buchwalder** is an independent curator, and practicing architect at Architekturgenossenschaft C/O, Zurich.

**Sonja Flury** is an independent curator, a practicing architect at Architekturgenossenschaft C/O, and a teaching assistant at the Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich.

**Dorothee Hahn** is an independent curator, editor, and architect, working in Zurich and Berlin.

**1** *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*, gta exhibitions, ETH Zurich, March 8 to December 23, 2021, <https://ausstellungen.gta.arch.ethz.ch/veranstaltungen/the-power-of-mushrooms-bertrahms-pavilion-for-the-saffa-58> (accessed April 24, 2022). The exhibition was presented in five iterations: "Material Evidence," "Entangled Histories," "Images of Berta," "Close Encounters," and "The Feast." The curatorial team comprised Milena Buchwalder, Sonja Flury, Dorothee Hahn, and Larissa Müllner on behalf of the ProSaffa1958-Pavillon association, together with the codirectors of gta exhibitions, Fredi Fischli and Niels Olsen.

**fig. 1 a, b** Views of the wooden framework of the pavilion in the exhibition *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*. Photograph: Nelly Rodriguez, ETH Hönggerberg, Zurich, 2021

**2** Throughout this article, we use *women* to refer to everyone who identifies with the female gender.

For slightly more than sixty years the building stood as an annex in an anonymous industrial park, about half an hour outside the city of Zurich. It was attached to, or almost leaned on, a nondescript building that could have been a manufacturing plant or a warehouse but was in fact a farm, a mushroom farm. The annex was utilitarian, dilapidated, but even at first sight it did not quite match its neighbors. Its construction was lighter and its detailing more careful than the buildings around it. We – Milena Buchwalder, Sonja Flury, Dorothee Hahn, along with Larissa Müllner – had the pleasure to curate the display of the pavilion at gta exhibitions on behalf of the association ProSaffa1958-Pavillon. **1** fig. 1 a, b

In March 2021 we installed surviving fragments of Berta Rahm's (1910–1998) pavilion for the 1958 *Swiss Exhibition on Women's Work (Saffa)* within the gta exhibition space at the Department of Architecture (D-ARCH) of the ETH Zurich. The installation was one step in a campaign to rescue and rebuild the structure permanently, which is the aim of the association ProSaffa1958-Pavillon, founded in 2020.

The pavilion fragments mostly consist of demountable wall elements clad in corrugated metal that we reconstituted within the gallery space. They became the central element of our year-long exhibition *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*. Why take such efforts to save and valorize such fragments? For us, their preservation was both



a way to recall the historical work of women architects and a stimulus for active collaboration. **2** The collective effort was itself both a monument to and an embodiment of collective practices.

The resonance of the building perhaps requires some explanation. The acronym SAFFA refers

to the *Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit*.<sup>3</sup> The first instance of the exhibition took place in 1928 in Bern and paid particular attention to the invisibility of domestic care work. Thirty years later, in 1958, the second iteration of the exhibition, organized by several women's organizations, including alliance F, focused on



voting rights and the status of domestic labor in postwar Switzerland.<sup>4</sup> The exhibition was held in a symbolically prominent site: the grounds of the former Swiss National Exposition of 1939 on the shores of Lake Zurich. Women architects and designers were commissioned for the master planning and design of the individual exhibition pavilions, including their interiors. Berta Rahm's L-shape building, located on the periphery of the exposition site in Landiwiese park, was devoted to recreation and contemplation. It was not

<sup>3</sup> The official title is *Saffa 1958 – Eine nationale Bühne für Schweizer Architektinnen und Gestalterinnen: Städtebau, Architektur, Ausstellungsdesign im internationalen Kontext*.

<sup>4</sup> Prior to 2011, alliance F was known as the Bund Schweizerischer Frauenvereine (Federation of Swiss Women's Associations). For more on *Saffa*, see Dorothee Huber, "Die Tugend der Not: Zu den beiden historischen Ausstellungen für Frauenarbeit (Saffa 1928 und 1958)," in Petra Stojanik, ed., *Ausstellungen – Darstellungen, Beiträge zum Diplomwahlfach "Frauen in der Geschichte des Bauens,"* Vol. 3 (Zurich: ETH, 1996), 129–38.

freestanding but served as an annex to the journalists' clubhouse, the so-called Club Pavilion.

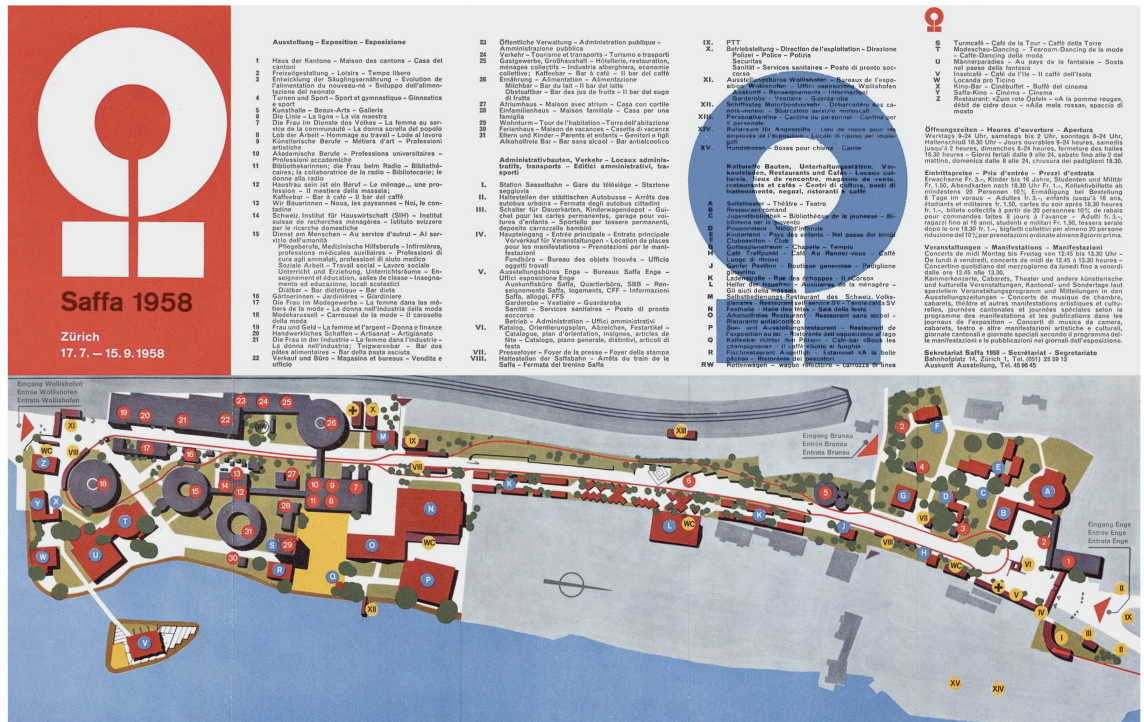
The Club Pavilion was a demountable aluminum building designed by Milanese architect Carlo Pagani for another occasion.<sup>5</sup> His structure was erected again under Rahm's supervision, whose original architectural work was restricted to the aluminum-clad annex that housed the restrooms, wardrobes, and a reading room. Not even depicted on the exhibition's site plan *fig.2*, Rahm's extension is paradoxically the only surviving material structure of *Saffa 58*. Designed to be assembled and disassembled easily, the pavilion was moved after the end of the exposition to the village of Gossau near Zurich, where it was modified for use as the canteen for a mushroom farm. *fig.3* Rahm herself supervised the reassembly on the new site. This work encompassed the laying of a concrete foundation, fitting of insulation, and the construction of an extension that contained a kitchen. The building was used for decades as a canteen and later as a show kitchen before becoming a storage shed for tires for the neighboring garage. Traces of this translocation and adaptation, not to mention years of neglect and dampness, are etched into the pavilion's material structure. Some of the columns have been partially disintegrated by colonies of wasps. In 2020, the new owner of the mushroom factory obtained a demolition permit, news of which triggered a rescue operation by a loose alliance of women.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on Carlo Pagani, see the Rinascente archives, [https://archives.rinascente.it/it/funds/archivio\\_carlo\\_pagani](https://archives.rinascente.it/it/funds/archivio_carlo_pagani) (accessed 24 April, 2022).



The preservationists Eva Nägeli and Pietro Wallnöfer first raised the alarm when they heard about the imminent demolition of Rahm's pavilion. They contacted a research group at the Zurich University of Applied Sciences (ZHAW) led by art historian Eliana Perotti, who had recently embarked on a nationally funded

**fig.2** The annex is not represented on the official site plan accompanying the 1958 *Saffa* exposition. However, the Club Pavilion, to which the annex is attached, can be found under the site plan key "F." Image: Foldable pamphlet of the site plan for *Saffa 1958*, paper, 14,2 × 8,4 cm, 1958. Design: Franz Fässler. Source: Zürcher Hochschule der Künste / Museum für Gestaltung Zürich / Designsammlung, Zurich



project researching the context and impact of *Saffa 58*. Perotti and her team knew of a similar endeavor by a multidisciplinary association proSAFFAhaus (2002–2007) to relocate Lux Guyer's model house, designed for *Saffa 1928* in Bern. <sup>6</sup> With this precedent in mind, the ZHAW researchers turned to architects Sonja Flury and Kathrin Füglister, who had become known for their walking tours of buildings designed by women in Zurich as part of the 2019 Women's Strike. <sup>7</sup> Together, they brought in Barbara Buser from baubüro in situ, an expert on the reuse of building components. In total, twelve women from the fields of architecture and art history founded the nonprofit association ProSaffa1958-Pavillon in March 2020 for the purpose of preserving and restoring Rahm's pavilion. <sup>8</sup> Nearly 80,000 Swiss francs were raised from private donors and institutions to support the costs of careful removal and storage of the structure. **fig.4**

### Berta Rahm

Rahm was an ambitious architect and committed feminist. Like many of her female contemporaries, she had a particular interest in Scandinavian architecture. After her studies at the ETH Zurich, Rahm received a travel grant and visited the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and Finland. In 1940 she opened her own architectural practice, starting with small projects – or, as she described them in

**6** The story of this relocation is well-documented in *Die drei Leben des Saffa-Hauses: Lux Guyers Musterhaus von 1928* (Zurich: gta Verlag, 2006).  
**7** For more information on the tour of buildings by women architects, see siebaut, <https://www.siebaut.org/> (accessed April 24, 2022).  
**8** For the association's website, see <https://www.prosaffa1958-pavillon.ch/> (accessed April 24, 2022).

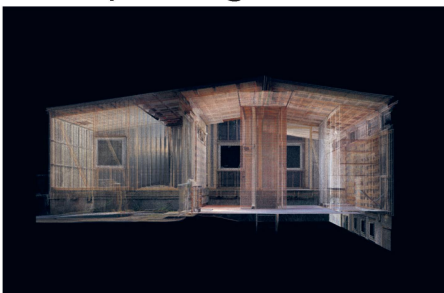


an interview with Radio Munot (1990), “the breadcrumbs that fell from the men’s tables.”<sup>9</sup> Besides planning several single-family and holiday homes or refurbishments, as she recalled in the interview, what attracted international attention was her progressive farm building (1951) in her hometown Hallau. In 1963 she represented Switzerland at the foundation of the Union Internationale des Femmes Architectes in Paris and displayed her successful projects in the accompanying exhibition.



When Rahm completed her architectural studies in 1934, eleven years after the first architecture degree was awarded to a woman in Switzerland, she entered a field dominated by men. From her diary entries, newspaper articles, and accounts in radio interviews we know how much she struggled against traditional gender roles. When she sought to establish an independent office in 1940 she not only experienced discrimination but remembered being systematically bullied and misled in the professional context: “They did not give me construction permits. They wrote for example that the property was lacking a sewage pipe. I knew for certain that a sewage pipe existed but they refused to let me see the plans.”<sup>10</sup> Despite participating in and winning several prestigious competitions, Rahm never received a public commission. Repeatedly refused building permits in her home canton Schaffhausen, she finally gave up her architectural practice in 1966 and founded the ALA publishing house in Zurich, which specialized in feminist literature and re-editions of books by forgotten female authors.

The biographies of successful women architects of the time testify that, without either teaming up or having the support of a male peer, a career in the field was nearly impossible. Many women architects came from architectural dynasties; for example, Gertrud Brenner (1905–1995), the first woman to join the Swiss Society of Engineers and Architects (SIA).<sup>11</sup> While Rahm, together with her colleague Lisbeth Sachs (1914–2002), applied for the position of chief architect of Saffa, Annemarie Hubacher-Constam (1921–2012) was ultimately appointed to the job. Rahm herself assumed that the reason for her rejection was her status as an unmarried woman and that she did not have the support of a male business partner.



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<sup>9</sup> “Unter vier Augen,” with Berta Rahm, Radio Munot, August 27, 1990, audiocassette tape, in Archiv zur Geschichte der Schweizer Frauenbewegung, Archive Berta Rahm, AGoF 521, 1:0-01, 21:10; translation by the authors. Original: “Die Brosamen, die von der Herren Tische fallen.” <https://www.gosteli.anton.ch/objects/17514> (accessed April 24, 2022).

**fig. 3** Exterior view of the pavilion after its translocation to Gossau, Zurich, in 1958. Photograph: unknown. Source: Berta Rahm Architectural Collection, Ms1998-011, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

<sup>10</sup> “Unter vier Augen,” 21:55; translation by the authors. Original: “Und häm mier also Baubewilliginge nid gää. Lüüt händ zaom Byspiel gschrybe es hägi kei Abwasserleitung aond ich ha gwüssst, es isch en Abwasserleitung dört. Dänn häns mier verweigerert d Planysicht.”

<sup>11</sup> Gertrud Brenner’s grandfather, Johann Joachim Brenner, founded the SIA in 1838. See *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/it/articles/042237/2002-12-18/> (accessed 24 April 2022).

**fig. 4** Constructed section through the pavilion before its disassembly by ProSaffa1958-Pavillon. Composite point-cloud scan, 2020. Source: Scanvision, Zurich

## Curating as Caretaking

The physical remains of Rahm's pavilion in its state of disrepair act as a material evidence for the erasure of Rahm and stood emblematically for those women architects of her generation whose work remains overlooked to this day. The remnants also actualized and extended feminist engagements revolving around the pavilion. Our aim as guest curators was not to distill one reading of the pavilion's past but to involve the community of the D-ARCH in the discourse around the pavilion's present and future. We understand our work as both caring for the pavilion's historic fabric and also making visible its immaterial histories to a wider public. Among the association – a heterogenous group of women from various backgrounds, disciplines, and generations – the question of how to care has been a continual point of discussion. Could an educational project help create awareness and ultimately raise the prospect of reconstruction? Could exhibition-making even be a means to gain new understandings of how the pavilion could work in the past, present, and future? The exhibition format that we ultimately developed continued the historical narrative of uses and spatial adaptations. It gave it, in a sense, a new chapter.

That we were granted this opportunity to display Rahm's pavilion is not coincidental. In 2021 Switzerland celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of women's suffrage, which led institutions and organizations nationwide to support women and feminist projects. Public concern about structural discrimination against women and minorities had built up in the years preceding the anniversary.<sup>12</sup> Global movements such as #MeToo only amplified the trend. When claims of sexual harassment at D-ARCH surfaced in 2019,<sup>13</sup> the calls for change voiced by a grassroots activist organization known as the Parity Group became louder than ever.<sup>14</sup>

We conceived the exhibition as a work in progress with five iterations entitled "Material Evidence," "Entangled Histories," "Images of Berta," "Close Encounters," and "The Feast." Every iteration kicked off with an event that aimed at connecting people and learning from one another. In addition to these

<sup>14</sup> During the Parity Talks 2020 we and a group of students presented the initial results of our work on the Saffa pavilion and Rahm at the guerilla exhibition *Making Space for Berta Rahm* (a precursor to the gta exhibition) that took place in an unoccupied office at the Department of Architecture (D-ARCH) at ETH Zurich. The Parity Group itself is a fluid group of students, assistants, and professors from the D-ARCH who meet to discuss issues around gender and diversity, organizing yearly Parity Talks. For a summary of the Parity Group's history, see Charlotte Malterre-Barthes and Torsten Lange for the Parity Group, "Architects Who Make a Fuss: A Speculative Investigation into the Archive of a Grassroots Initiative for Gender Parity at the Department of Architecture ETH Zurich, 2014–2017," *Site Magazine*, 2018, <https://www.thesite-magazine.com/read/architectswhomakeafuss> (accessed April 24, 2022). In 2021, the executive board of the D-ARCH answered these requests by commissioning the artist-led collective Engagement Arts (<https://www.engagementarts.be/en>, accessed April 24, 2022) to help the department analyze and tackle the systematic structures that were failing to sufficiently deter sexual harassment, sexism, and abuse of power. The results of the collective's work were presented in November 2021 as the ENGAGE D-ARCH Report, which is accessible only by ETH members. For more information, see Simon Zogg, "Ein Kulturwandel geht nicht auf Knopfdruck," ETH Zurich Staffnet, November 19, 2021, <https://ethz.ch/services/de/news-und-veranstaltungen/intern-aktuell/archiv/2021/11/ein-kulturwandel-geht-nicht-auf-knopf-druck.html> (accessed April 24, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> According to estimates, half a million people took to the streets on June 14, 2019. See "Frauenstreik 2019 – Ein historisches Ereignis," Amnesty International, June 17, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.ch/de/themen/frauenrechte/sexualisierte-gewalt/dok/2019/frauenstreik-ein-historisches-ereignis> (accessed April 24, 2022).

<sup>13</sup> See Palle Petersen, "Professor X," *Hochparterre*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.hochparterre.ch/nachrichten/architektur/blog/post/detail/professor-x/1549267882/> (accessed April 24, 2022).



five events, the space stayed open for informal gatherings or workshops, initiated by D-ARCH students and teachers.

## Displaying Material Evidence

Not being preservationists by training, we had to develop an approach toward the careful conservation of the material. To minimize harm, the wood frames were purposely not joined together but individually attached to rails along the ceiling by a support system of rods and ratchet straps. <sup>fig.5</sup> To fit the large walls into the exhibition space, parts of the ceiling panels had to be removed. The wooden frame walls, each a self-contained structural element, traced the original constellation of the pavilion's floor plan. Yet we shifted them slightly, altering the distances between them, to create new rooms of differing shapes and sizes between the pavilion and the limits of the gallery. These mediating



zones helped to open the pavilion conceptually and performatively to manifold uses. Since the inner paneling was not reassembled for the exhibition, the walls revealed how the Fural facade system of dovetailed corrugated aluminum sheets was rolled onto its fixtures. The sixty-three-year-old aluminum cladding proved to be durable and had lost little of its appearance and functionality. The translucent panels of a Scobalit wall (made of glass-fiber-reinforced polyester resins developed in the 1950s) diffusely illuminated the space behind. We did not assemble the interior fittings or the roof, only setting up the original wardrobe next to the entrance of the exhibition space.

**fig.5** View of the support system of rods and ratchet straps stabilizing the pavilion in the exhibition *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*. Photograph: Nelly Rodriguez, ETH Zurich, Höggerberg, 2021

## Unearthing Entangled Histories

The second iteration focused on the pavilion's history of use as a staff canteen and show kitchen at a mushroom farm in Gossau. The mushrooms proved to be a useful metaphor. Our investigation drew on the work of anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and biologist Merlin Sheldrake, who write economic histories of friction in an increasingly globalized world through the figure

**fig. 6 a, b** Clara Richard and Nicolò Krättli, *Family Portraits*. Photography, paper on aluminum, 2020, Gossau, Zurich. Courtesy of the artists

of mycelia. Mushrooms are made up of tiny threads (mycelia) that travel underground, connecting the roots of different plants and even different species in an area, allowing them to exchange nutrients and information that might be missing in their immediate surroundings. In our exhibition they came to stand for the often covert organization of feminist, women, and LGBTQIA+ networks and the unpredictable offspring of activism that sprout when conditions are right and that survive if conditions are ideal. In the case of Rahm's pavilion, a chain of individual efforts culminated in collective action. In stark contrast to this connective nature, we added photographs of the interior spaces of the mushroom factory to the exhibition. The photographs by Clara Richard and Nicolò Krättli, titled *Family Portraits*, capture the industrialized process of breeding mushrooms from inoculated substrate packages.



fig. 6 a, b

### Projecting Images of Berta

Iteration three built on the diaries and other surviving records from the archive of Berta Rahm held at the International Archive of Women in Architecture (IAWA) at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. These traces were brought into conversation with present-day experiences of women in architectural practice. While some things have changed since Rahm's time, others have not. Aspects of Rahm's own accounts of her professional and private life still sound familiar: sexism at work, barred access to power positions, the income gap between women architects and their male colleagues, among others. Looking closely at her biography, we tried to contextualize these struggles. We asked ourselves to what extent Rahm's experience stood for an entire generation of women architects. To do so, we invited Eliana Perotti and Katia Frey from the "Saffa 1958" research group to discuss the challenges that archival absences and a lack of sources pose for reconstructing the careers of Swiss women architects active in the interwar and postwar eras.

**fig. 7 a, b** Two views into the reading room of the Saffa pavilion Zurich. Left, from 2021. Photograph: Urs Siegenthaler. Right, from 1958. Source: Berta Rahm Architectural Collection, Ms1998-011, Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**15** Eliana Perotti and Katia Frey, "Images of Rahm," from the untitled exhibition handout for *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's pavilion for the Saffa 58*, iteration 2.









## Enabling Close Encounters

Until the semester break in summer 2021, access to the exhibition was restricted by COVID measures on the grounds of the ETH campus, and the first three events thus took place online. The last two stages, set for the autumn 2021 semester, finally offered a chance to inhabit the spaces of the exhibition, to be with one another. "Close Encounters" celebrated the publication of Rahm's diaries, edited by architecture student Friederike Merkel and the curatorial team. <sup>16</sup> *fig. 8 a, b, c* In the summer of 2016, Merkel had visited Rahm's holiday house, Laueli, in Hasliberg on an excursion as part of her studies at ETH Zurich. The owner of the house, Iris Kaufmann, brought along one of Rahm's diaries, in which she describes her work. This fired Merkel's curiosity and led her to study all of Rahm's diaries in the hope of shedding light on the architect's relation to her profession from 1935 to 1950. With the aim of creating a more intimate setting for the encounter with Rahm's personal accounts, we invited HOTMAILHOTNAIL to set up a pop-up nail studio in the exhibition space. Visitors could dive into Rahm's inner life within an intimate atmosphere of bodily well-being. Known for their collaborations with artists, HOTMAILHOTNAIL uses the guise of a nail studio to appropriate and redefine city spaces and create meeting places. They develop nail art with clients as a form of artistry and self-expression. With deck chairs and a view of the waterfront, the nail studio itself referenced the sun deck that was part of the *Saffa 58* pavilion.

<sup>16</sup> Friederike Merkel et al., eds., *Berta Rahms Diaries 1935–1950* (Zurich: gta Exhibitions, 2021).

## Coming Together: The Feast

Finally, the last iteration, "The Feast," unified the *Power of Mushrooms* exhibition with the Annexe project, which in the summer of 2021 had toured Switzerland with a reinterpretation of the interior of Rahm's pavilion. Annexe was led by fellow association members Elena Chiavi, Kathrin Füglistner, Amy Perkins, and Myriam Uzor. During its tour to Geneva, St. Gallen and Zurich, Annexe had supported lectures, discussion rounds, readings, workshops, film screenings, and cooking evenings. It had consisted of a reproduction and abstraction of four pieces of furniture Rahm specifically designed for the pavilion: the generous built-in kitchen, two long tables on a raised platform on either side of the reading room and the quiet room, and an L-shape table with shelving. For "The Feast" we brought Annexe's furniture into the pavilion and celebrated the merging of its exterior with its interior by inviting the collective Kitchuan to facilitate a cooking session and subsequent feast of mushroom dumplings on the opening evening. The kitchenette became the kitchen, the shelf turned into a bar, and the table served as a workstation.





**fig. 8 a, b, c** View of the exhibition installation and exhibition iteration "Close Encounters" within the exhibition *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*. Photograph: Jana Jenarin, ETH Zurich, Höggerberg, 2021





On the evening of the opening of "The Feast," many of the people who had become active in rescuing the pavilion or had contributed to the exhibition program gathered around a table for the first time. The hope was that their bonds would remain and grow through the future task of reconstructing the pavilion in a visible, accessible public space. fig.9 a, b

**fig.9 a, b** View of the exhibition installation for the event and exhibition iteration "The Feast" within the exhibition *The Power of Mushrooms: Berta Rahm's Pavilion for the Saffa 58*. Photograph: Simona Mele, ETH Zurich, Höggerberg, 2021

Ongoing use of any building is ambivalent, as it both preserves and consumes the building's material and its context. Had Rahm's pavilion not been in continuous use since *Saffa 1958*, it likely would have disappeared a long time ago, as institutional and societal attention to the legacy of Swiss women architects has been sparse, periodic, and partial. The publicity around the rescue mission and the subsequent actions of our association raised awareness of the pavilion's historical context, and today it is no longer perceived as a mere functional space but as a potential future (counter-)monument to Rahm, *Saffa 1958*'s historical legacy, and its engaged women protagonists. The pavilion is a reminder of the overdue recognition of the achievements and biographies of these and other women in architectural historiography. In re-erecting and reusing the Rahm's pavilion, we took on the responsibility not only to reopen this rare artifact to a larger public but also to maintain and embed the legacy of *Saffa 1958* and its women protagonists in the collective memory by creating a space for the untold histories, presences, and futures of women in architecture. We are currently amid advocating politically and contacting the authorities whose approvals are necessary for the pavilion's re-erection. Still pending are questions about an appropriate location and future use of the pavilion, the quantity of original structure we will be able to keep, and how to add new material.

In analogy to rhizomatic networks, the pavilion within the exhibition acted as a connective tissue within a wider network of knowledge production. It became a physical anchor that enabled us to address and highlight current initiatives supporting feminism in the field of architecture. Beyond preserving the past, our work of caring for Rahm's pavilion is concerned first and foremost with the imagination of, and performative enactment of, a more equitable and diverse profession.

