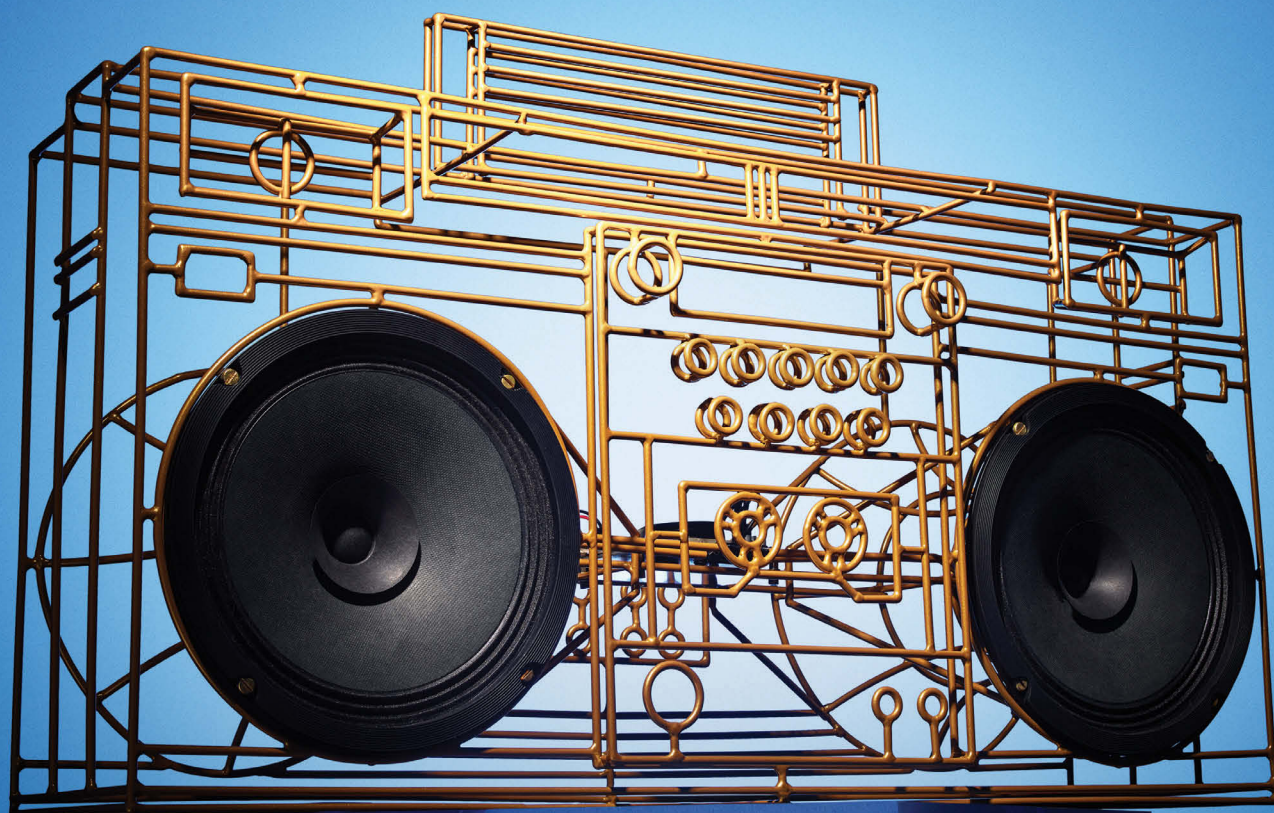


# ICON

ARCHITECTURE + DESIGN + CULTURE



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ISSUE 162  
DECEMBER  
2016  
UK £5.00  
EUR €9.99  
USA \$15.99



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# Casal Balaguer, Palma

Flores & Prats' clever restoration has transformed a historic Mallorcan palace into a modern cultural complex. It is, they say, just another layer in the building's accumulation of time

BY DOUGLAS MURPHY





IMAGES: ADRIÀ GOULA



The project began as a simple repair and restoration of the palace's roof



## The whole building has a mystery and a labyrinthine quality

constitute something like a building within a building – one of the main functional requirements was for new services and circulation that could transform the structure from a familial residence into a public building, so a primary element of the design was a stair core that would give access to all floors.

This sounds simple, but the result is anything but. The stairs themselves sit within a larger concrete shaft, a vertical space through which the stairs thread, twisting around to connect with the different existing levels. As well as creating routes through the various functions of the building, this new construction also introduces daylight in ingenious ways, spilling down from rooflights into the circulation core and scattering across the vertical surfaces.

The use of light is one of the key elements of the palace's transformation. A number of lightwells reach down to illuminate the deepest parts of the building, while new openings under the restored roof illuminate the library. Diffuse light is drawn into the gallery mezzanine from the courtyard, while elsewhere it is reflected back from hidden windows, entering almost unexpectedly.

'We were very impressed by the disordered sequence of rooms, fragmented staircases and windows of different sizes, which gave to the whole building a mystery and a labyrinthine quality,' say the architects. 'We somehow remained with that image always in our minds, and the whole effort of the project is how not to lose that accumulation of time in the building.'

This sense of accumulated time is apparent throughout the project, and it can be satisfyingly difficult to tell the layers apart. The concrete interventions are clearly contemporary, as are the irregularly shaped windows in various places. But many of the finer and more considered details – often creative ►

**C**asal Balaguer, in the old centre of Palma, Mallorca, is an aristocratic palace with a history that stretches back 700 years. In a project that itself has spanned almost 20 years, the building has been converted into a cultural centre, including gallery, museum and library spaces. Designed by Barcelona architect Flores & Prats with local practice Duch-Pizá, it is a painstakingly sensitive work of architecture that looks deep into the historic layers of the existing building to draw out the logic of its new interventions. 'In our work we value the physical quality of the time contained in the

building, without giving more importance to any particular period,' explain Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats. The palace began life in the 14th century, received an extension in the 16th, but the main fabric is a baroque building of the 18th century built around a courtyard. Along with other additions and subtractions, these layers had created a historically rich edifice that nevertheless was in a state of dilapidation by the end of the 20th century.

The initial project began simply as the repair and restoration of the roof, but the municipality eventually extended it to become the total transformation of the palace. Flores & Prats' interventions



ABOVE Irregular windows are a rare overtly contemporary intervention

BELOW A concrete stairwell threads between the existing levels

reinterpretations of vernacular elements – are so subtle that they appear to blend into the building's history.

This kind of deeper engagement is a rare thing in architecture, and Flores and Prats have a design methodology that is tantalisingly drawn out – huge unfolding working models are built at a scale where details can be properly tested, and fabulously worked-up pencil drawings tease out the spatial complexity of their designs through axonometric and section. 'Drawing the building over a long period gave us the confidence to work on what we found there without distances in space or time,' say the architects. 'In a temporal continuum that means the new interventions are incorporated and blended with the rest, and look as if they had already existed.'

This fragmentary approach to contemporary design, engaging deeply with existing fabrics and forms, produces an architecture all of its own. In recent years we've seen Astley Castle

in Warwickshire by Witherford Watson Mann, and David Chipperfield's work at the Neues Museum in Berlin. We can also look back to Carlo Scarpa's Castelvecchio museum in Verona and the Hamar museum in Norway by Sverre Fehn. Add to that the influence of the Catalan lineage of José Antonio Coderch and Enric Miralles (for whom both Flores and Prats once worked), and you have powerful architecture that thrives on its historic entanglement.

But Flores and Prats have another building in mind when they describe their work at Casal Balaguer: Sir John Soane's Museum in London: 'For us, this was the perfect image of the intensity of time accumulated in the actions of the architect: how to make a private building become public, without losing the mystery and the spell of the lives that the family lived there.' ♦

**NEXT ISSUE** *Amanda Levete's swooping MAAT in Lisbon gets the Icon once-over*

