

ARTFORM: SCULPTED TALES

SPECIALIST: CHALK 29

UNCOVERED: UNTITLED DESIGN

HOME REVIEW

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The adaptive reuse and extension of an industrial building in Barcelona to house the theatre activities of Sala Beckett, retains much of the old. The prize-winning proposition of Flores & Prats Architects was chosen for its sensitivity to the past, in which the ghosts of the building could comfortably live on, albeit in a benign presence.

In a seemingly informal conversation with the past, Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats have restored the historical building of the old peace and justice cooperative, adapting it for new theatrical uses. The institution, very popular with the local population, is characterised by an overt connection with its roots - this defines the entire theme of the restoration. Sala Beckett has a total floor area of 2.923 square metres.

The space reflects the dense memories profoundly rooted in the culture of the historical industrial district, which had already undergone significant changes for the 1992 Olympics and has now become vibrant due to the presence of numerous artists and creative talents.

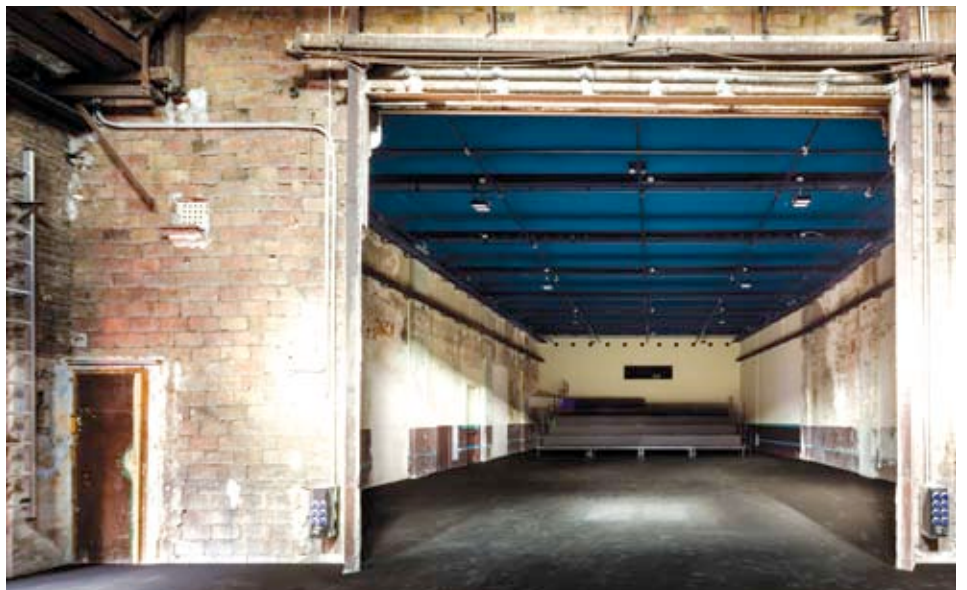
Text By Devyani Jayakar
Photographs Courtesy Adrià Goula

AND THE GHOSTS LIVED ON...



The bar has a spacious, inviting ambience with a distinct retro feel.





In the theatre, the industrial roots of the building are left undisguised.



The brief specified a rehabilitation and extension of the former cooperative building Justicia i Pau in El Poblenou, as the new house for the activities of the company Sala Beckett. This included two exhibition spaces, five rooms for drama and writing classes, a bar-restaurant, offices and technical spaces for producing spectacles, and residential spaces for invited artists - there are frequent exchange workshops and seminars with many other countries in Europe and America.

Flores and Prats studied several cases, enabling them to develop a personal and detailed awareness of the subject matter, which they then reinterpreted inside the old building with their meticulous ability to converse with spaces and their history. The design process included an in-depth study of the environmental characteristics, identified and developed through numerous drawings and detailed study models.

"The ruinous state in which we encountered the structure was of interest, not because we wanted to restore it, but rather to take the ruin forward and make it a participant, with its unfinished character of superimposed periods, in a new reality that would continue to be updated on this foundation. The challenge of the project is therefore to adapt the building to its new use without banishing its ghosts," say architects Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats.

In this adaptive reuse, an astonishing amount of the original building has been left intact, turning all the signs of age and wear into a leitmotif through which character was imparted to the design. Thus, all interventions are low key, taking an unassuming backseat to the existing structure and its identity.

There has been no attempt to obliterate the previous use of the building. **Old and new walls coexist peacefully to create an ambience in which the age of the building itself becomes a mystery, yet an overriding presence.** In the bar, reused flooring helps recall the past, while large decorative roses on walls have been left alone in their original condition of disrepair.





Curving geometries define the space, with a staircase connecting two levels at the vestibule.

The design by Flores & Prats stems from the spatial and decorative qualities of the existing building, a part of the identity assumed by the city of Barcelona at a time when the workers' associations emerged along with their surprising capacity to create space for entertainment. Each significant element has been carefully collected, from the frames to the doors, the polychrome tiles, rose windows, the stratifications present in the masonry fabric and the plasterwork.

"The corner opening in the façade makes the activities carried out on the inside visible and accessible. Most of the rooms located on the ground floor are used for public activities and this establishes a relationship of continuity with the urban fabric. Immediately after the entrance, visitors come upon a welcoming, almost domestic setting. People can get a drink at the bar or sit in the restaurant while waiting for the performance to start, or they can sit on the benches or visit the box office to buy a ticket," says Flores.

An enormous vestibule connects the three levels, while outside a big new roof transforms the old cooperative building into a big house: The New House for the Dramaturges. Light filters from above through a skylight into the entrance area, gently reaching down to the ground floor as it guides the public towards the performance areas. **A new staircase at the central patio makes a convenient connection between the different floors.**

"The ground floor also has rooms that are not accessible to the public, such as offices and changing rooms for the performers, connected to the main performance area by a peripheral corridor, which allows the artistes to enter the stage from different points. One had to also accommodate the various stage structures planned for almost 200 people," says Flores.



Rehearsal rooms are located on the first floor along with another larger room, the former ballroom, which can be used both as a workshop and as a second space for performances. Other rehearsal rooms and service areas are found on the second floor.



The rehearsal room in the former bar has a high ceiling; the evidence of decay on its walls is left untreated intentionally.

The new building maintains the characteristics of the original building, growing on top of it to give space to the new requirements. Constructed in the 1920s, the original building was in ruins; however, it had several features that Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats have chosen to retain, thereby presenting a weathered aesthetic.

“We also wanted to project into the future, turning all the signs and stratifications of time and the uses of the building into a device through which to give further meaning to the drama-related research conducted by Sala Beckett,” says Prats. The design duo has successfully created a space capable of interpreting its past role, while relaunching it into the life of its contemporary users. And surrounded by the long shadows of the past, the resident ghosts continue to live on....

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