

ICON

ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN CULTURE

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Why the rise of the machines
is nothing to be scared of

Designers
tackle pollution

Farrell on the
legacy of pomo

OMA's very
Dutch urbanism

Flores & Prats
rewrite history

Jason Bruges
lights up Hull



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Front

23
Scene
Hill House hysteria and dodgy donors' cash

25
Global Grad Show
Ingenious ideas from the world's bright young things

33
Show round-up
Highlights from UKCW, Design Joburg and Design Shanghai

38
Diary
The V&A floats a show on ocean liners, and more

41
Crimes Against Design
The ugly ego of personalised number plates

43
Opinion
Keep London weird, says Rohan Silva

Design

46
Pollution solution
With dirty air now a 'national emergency', can designers stop the smog?

54
Don't fear the robots
Reasons to be cheerful about the upcoming automation overhaul

71
Emerging studio
Switzerland's Egli Studio wants you to get how things work

74
Icon of the month
Peter Ghyczy's cult creation, the Garden Egg chair, is 50

76
Q&A: Jason Bruges
The lighting designer's 6m robot arms embrace Hull

ON THE COVER
Collage by
Seattle-based
artist Jesse Treece

Architecture

84
Delirious Netherlands
The unadulterated Dutchness of OMA hides in plain sight

92
Flores & Prats
A profile of the Catalan restoration masters

102
Model citizen
Bloomberg's not-so-glitzy HQ isn't that bad

110
Icon of the month
Otto Saumarez-Smith celebrates the AA Files

112
Q&A: Terry Farrell
The architect reflects on the brutalist revival and his contribution to British pomo

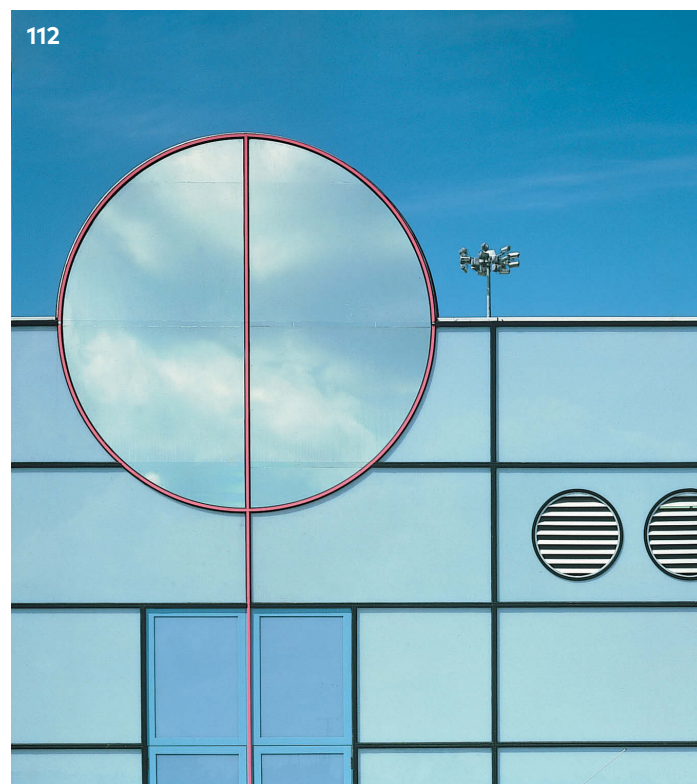
Review

122
Review: Ward Bennett monograph
The overlooked American modernist's career documented

125
Review: Jacques Hondelatte
Betts Project showcases the ethereal French architect

128
Rethink: Brit-tech
What if technology had a more British sensibility, asks NB Studio

130
Obsession: Braun
Peter Kapos has a serious soft spot for the champions of german functionalism



Flores



&

By Douglas Murphy
Portraits by Catherine Hyland

Prats



The Catalan duo's visually complex, finely detailed buildings stem from a passion for the act of building and a constant engagement with the role of history in public space

The shortlist for the architecture category of the Beazley Designs of the Year is a remarkably, perhaps consciously varied bunch. From Zaha Hadid's stunningly over-the-top building at the Port of Antwerp to the design of refugee shelters at the Calais 'Jungle', from luxury shopping in Venice by OMA to a memorial to the victims of the Utøya massacre, it's a highly diverse selection.

But, alongside the silly and the serious, there's a project by Barcelona practice Flores & Prats that's harder to pigeonhole. The Sala Beckett, a conversion of an old co-operative building into a contemporary theatre, is an exercise in the manipulation of existing material, a complex mix of refurbishment and new construction that demonstrates virtuosic handling of natural light, and ingenious, strange and sometimes witty reconfigurations of elements from the original building.

The architects, Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats, are not superstars but, since the late 1990s, have been building a remarkably consistent body of work together, mostly in Catalonia, that has been accumulating admirers along the way. A passion for the act of building, an intellectual engagement with how memory works in urban space, and a methodology based upon hand-drawing and large-scale model-making are the hallmarks of their work.

'We met at Enric Miralles's studio,' says Prats, visiting a rainy London for the awards. She had been working for Miralles during her studies in Barcelona in the early 1990s, including on his classic

Igualada Cemetery project, while Flores joined after arriving from his native Argentina. At that point, the world didn't quite know what to make of Miralles's architecture, regularly lumping it in with 'deconstructivism' because of its spatial complexity, when its joy in building and in detail was a world away from desiccated pontification or digital whimsy.

Flores and Prats absorbed much from Miralles, especially drawing techniques and methods of maintaining control of formal manipulations, but after a few years decided to set up in practice together, taking advantage of an enlightened commissioning culture in a lean period after the 1992 Olympics. 'Something important in Barcelona that is still going on is the trust in competitions,' says Flores, 'and in winning them you can go on to build them.'

Two early projects speak of their ongoing concerns: a public square in the north of Barcelona incorporated ruined walls, bricks, stones and other demolished material in its new construction, forming whiplash curves and pergolas that traced across the site. In Mallorca, for a museum of local windmills, they carved and sliced openings into the thick stone walls of an existing mill, coaxing the light in with new forms detailed with a bespoke finesse on a par with Carlo Scarpa or Sverre Fehn.

'During my studies in Barcelona, I saw how urban planning dealt with the old town, and how they were pulling down beautiful houses,' says Prats. 'It was as though they didn't know exactly the precious things that were inside.' This focus on refurbishment or rehabilitation is even more clearly stated by the ►



ABOVE Offices at the Sala Beckett, Barcelona (2016) – the conversion of a co-operative building into a theatre complex

RIGHT A half-moon opening cut into a wall. The building's interior is defined by high levels of visibility and continuity between spaces





RIGHT Flores & Prats describe the Sala Beckett as 'growing on top' of the decorative qualities of the existing building

BELOW Ground-floor changing room at the Sala Beckett



ABOVE A patio in between the Sala Beckett's classroom areas

"We try to convince the clients to get into the process with us, so that they are convinced this can give them an extra quality"

Palau Balaguer, a project to convert a dilapidated bourgeois mansion in Palma into a cultural centre. Ingenious rooflights bring daylight deep into the building, new construction runs up against previous, sometimes with extreme juxtaposition but sometimes so subtly as to make it difficult to distinguish what's new and what's old.

It's not all refurbishment: the firm has projects including villas, social housing and a number of brand new public spaces. But in all their work there is a real focus on the sequence of spaces: projects may not have a single photogenic angle, an overall structural conceit or provocatively minimal plans, but in motion they unfold

in shifting and subtle ways, bursting with complexity but also tightly controlled, and always finely detailed. References and touchstones are numerous, including – of course – Miralles, but also designers as diverse as the Smithsons or John Soane.

Palau Balaguer (featured in Icon 162) was a 20-year project originally commissioned in 1996, which, despite being executed in stages, is still an almost glacial pace. But this demonstrates one of the defining aspects of Flores & Prats, which is a painstaking and deeply methodical working method. 'It's kind of an artisan way of thinking,' says Flores. 'It's not really possible to have more than two or three

commissions at a time, because we want to give them time to get into the process. We try to convince the clients to get into the process with us, so that they are convinced this can give them an extra quality.'

This slowness is made apparent when visiting their office, spread across a number of small rooms in a block near the Plaça de Catalunya. Sheets of tracing paper lie flat on tables under anglepoise lamps, gradually coalescing into huge pencil drawings, while models sit all over the place, at every scale right up to 1:1. A custom concrete formwork mould hangs from the wall, next to a life-size drawing of how to cut slivers from reclaimed ►

BELOW The auditorium of the Mills Museum, Palma de Mallorca (2002)



ceramic floor tiles so they can be laid in a curve, while bespoke wooden cabinets open out to reveal fragmented models of various schemes. These cabinets are used both as transportable exhibits and as archives of the thought processes that go into a design.

'In every thing that we make, the scale, the fragments, everything is a project,' explains Prats, and this attitude extends right through construction and beyond. The drawings themselves are incredible, with plans and sections at multiple scales crowding onto the page and shooting off at multiple angles, finely composed yet always informational, whereas the card and timber models are so carefully made they can be delicately pulled apart into their constituent finely detailed pieces.

Starting from the cabinets, which are built after the end of a scheme, Flores and Prats continue to work through ideas as time goes on. 'The client is not asking you for that, of course,' says Flores, 'but when the project opens a window to something, a kind of construction in itself that represents a reflection or an observation, we just do it.' This kind of work includes workshops with residents on how a social-housing block the practice designed works in real life, films made as documentation ►



ABOVE Edificio 111 social housing in Terrassa, Barcelona (2010)

"In every thing that we make, the scale, the fragments, everything is a project"



LEFT Aerial view of the Mills Museum and entrance piazza

BELOW Yute's Textile Warehouse, Sant Just, Barcelona (2005)

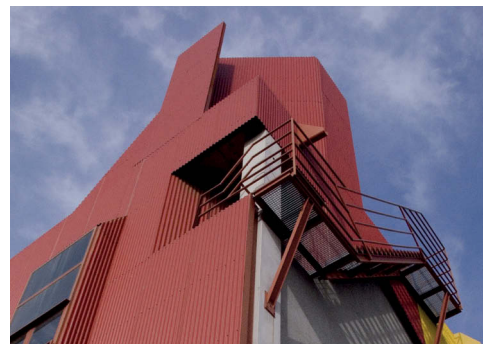


ABOVE The project was an extension to an existing warehouse and made use of a variety of prefabrication techniques

of the use of its buildings, as well as individual bespoke items. For example, the Flores & Prats website features a delirious choose-your-own-adventure journey around the office, complete with giant models building themselves in stop-motion. In addition, each of its projects is concluded with the production of a large-scale axonometric drawing explaining the entirety of the building, a methodology that bears comparison to the paintings Zaha Hadid made after her early designs.

Flores and Prats are not regulars on the Biennale circuit, and they are not part of a close-knit movement advancing their cause through publications and manifestos. But their work is becoming the focus of greater interest, including in the UK, as their faith in construction and scholarly attitude to reinterpreting previous architecture chime with a wider mood in contemporary design. 'You know, TS Eliot used to say, you build up your own tradition,' says Flores, and Prats agrees: 'We like reading things with a continuity, we like to bring history in front of us.' ♦

"We like reading things with a continuity, we like to bring history in front of us"



ABOVE The corrugated steel skin refers to the drapes of coloured fabric stored within