



BAR WALL OF SALA BECKETT WITH REMAINS OF OLD OCCUPATIONS. PHOTO BY FLORES PRATS.COM

HISTORY OF AN ASSOCIATION

BY ALBERT FORNS | 16 OCT 2018

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This theatre space has not only become a local milestone but the association will be reproduced in Venice Biennale. The curators of this year's architectural exhibition were delighted with the project, and to explain the ins and outs of the refurbished building, Flores i Prats have reproduced part of the new Sala Beckett amidst the Venetian Arsenal

During the 1960s, Poble Nou offered few sites as bubbly and full of life as the Association Pau i Justícia. The basement flats, built in 1927, swarmed with people coming in and out of the consumer co-op, the grocer's where working-class customers were stocked up with all sorts of affordable foodstuff, from well-filled shelves of fruits and greens to cured ham hanging off the wall or food cans that somebody piled up patiently to form a gigantic pyramidal structure. There was also space for a shoe shop and, somewhere, another space sold brooms and brushes. There was also space for, of course, crockery, bulk wine and even small fridge with snails, as can be seen in these period images. The association was also provided with a bar with billiard tables and a theatre premiering popular classics like *La criada nova* (The New Maid) or *Deixa'm la dona* (Can I borrow your wife), or *Cisquet*, and the upper floor hosted a chess club, a hiking association, a women's association, a library and a school (where the sculptor Subirats used to go to, as he lived in the neighbourhood).

In those glorious times, the 1,250 members of the association went even further and embarked on a real estate development project: the *bloc Civit*, located in a site that would later become the Diagonal, is a good example of self-managed real estate development, which gave a home to 300 local families. In fact, the building Pau i Justícia had been made possible thanks to the entrepreneurial efforts of some 50 members, who, for months, sacrificed their Sundays and holidays to build the block of flats, in an unprecedented endeavour of co-operative spirit of the time.

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Unfortunately, the appearance of supermarkets and a shift in consumer habits forced the association to close down. In the 1990s, the block numbers 228-232 of Pere IV Street only hosted a gym and a sauna parlour, and later the doors were bricked up to avoid squatting. In 2011, already in the hands of the City Council, it was decided that Pau i Justícia would host Sala Beckett, forced out of Passeig de Gràcia, whose theatre and drama school had achieved worldwide recognition. To make it happen, an architectural competition was launched and a whole selection of diverging projects were submitted: some architects, like Jordi Badia, suggested leaving the space untouched, and simply apply a coat of paint, while Carme Pinós' studio proposed knocking down the building and raise the umpteenth landmark building, on the basis that the obsession of preserving and maintaining memory institutions was a lapse into «political correctness» ([this video](#) shows the heated debate between the contestants).

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Luckily, the winners of the competition, [Flores i Prats Studio](#), presented a handicraft proposal that preserved the essence of the building to the limit: without relinquishing modernising the architectural structure and opening up spaces, the new Beckett has maintained most of its 1920s doors, windows and hydraulic mosaics, often relocated in new spaces. This represents a co-

existence of the old and the new, in a wise interplay between memory and theatrical tone: as Toni Casares, Sala Beckett's director, puts it, «when theatre-goers take their seat, they see the walls and their imagination runs free».

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