

The Discipline of the Existing

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Drawing time. The advantage of working on old buildings is that we were not involved in their creation, meaning we can play the role of observer. The work begins with observing what others have done. Observe by drawing, recording everything. At the Museum of the Mills in Palma de Mallorca, the gaze moves constantly between this structure and the work by Carlo Scarpa, an immediate influence in those early years of work. In Scarpa's work the different historical moments the building has passed through are defined and distinguished for visitors to recognize and reconstruct their historical development. However, gradually we began to reflect critically on this approach, considering that the division into clearly identifiable historical periods led to over-fragmentation, while the amount of detailing competed for the viewer's attention.

Therefore, we started to think about a more subconscious experience of moving around the building, where the result is more diffuse, closer to the discreet and calm whole that is the ruin when it presents itself as such, awaiting patiently, in silence, for our evaluation. This ruin that describes the passage of time in visible features, does not separate out different periods, but fuses them to make of the building a palimpsest.

Accepting the accumulation of history in an existing building requires discipline; it means accepting the ghost that manifests itself in the building's past as a physical quality imbued in things by time. This is the state that interests us: valuing all those lives with a univocal gaze, where no single one prevails over the rest, with no concern for what came earlier and what later, or for where one period begins and another ends. So gradually we began to turn our gaze away from Scarpa and towards Borromini and Jujol, and their capacity to distort by transforming buildings. This is a work of metamorphosis that modifies what it finds on the basis of the very strength of this preexisting building, of its own geometry, gathering momentum from it in order to amplify it and take it into a new dimension. The result retains much of what was there at the start; this foundation is distorted but still recognizable in the new complex. Our work has thus turned from one approach to the other, even in the midst of developing four renovation projects that occupied our studio from 2000 to today: the Museum of the Mills, the Casal Balaguer cultural center, the Providencia House and the Sala Beckett-Obrador Internacional de Dramaturgia in Barcelona.

Natural light. For the Museum of the Mills in Mallorca we worked to amplify these existing qualities and geometries, deforming them to the point that their influence on the space containing them is multiplied, thus helping to accommodate the new program. The former mill was transformed from a grain store into a city museum. This change from private to public use means that the spaces require more volume, dimension and scale, leading to the initial excavation of the ground level inside the building, which was lowered by one meter.

The building accepts this intervention without difficulty, as it seems to be a construction created out of the place itself—using the very stone that forms the bedrock of the island, it emerges from the hill on which it stands. Its vaulted interior, enclosed by thick walls, resembles a cave that is entered across a broad threshold and gives the impression it holds up a mountain. Thus, the work here is one of excavation, allowing in rays of light, with a single finish as if it really were a hollowed-out mountain. The light alone gives form to these spaces, nothing interrupts its passage. It descends with such power that it appears to deform the planes it encounters, becoming visible in the slight roughness of the surfaces that contain it. We see the light rest on these planes, filling those big skylights, and the whole experience is concentrated there: light and mass.

For us, this hypnotic power of the light, in its passage from the high-up entry point down to the ground, became a working theme that accompanies the programs and uses, allowing us to oscillate between a shared theme and one that is particular to our practice, in a constant back-and-forth where one helps to resolve the other. In the end, the project became a single thing in which the spatial quality, light and program can't be separated, making it impossible to distinguish who generated what.

Using history without distance. We value the physical quality of the time contained in the building, without giving more importance to any particular period if observation does not distinguish between epochs, then action should not create distance. We act from the interior, a physical and direct thought, transforming the building with the decision to reoccupy it, to grant it a new phase, and to extend its lifespan while making it more sustainable. Drawing the building over a long period enables us to make decisions about it, and as such the drawing gives us the confidence to work on what we found there without distances in space or time, in a temporal continuum that means the new interventions are incorporated and blended with the rest, and look as if they had already existed.

The project for Providencia House in Barcelona, designed and built between 2002 and 2008, enabled us to continue this investigation of light and skylights as the project's center of tension. The unity of the planes that contain the light is geometrical, with the continuous folding, but unlike the Museum of the Mills, where they resulted from an excavation, here the large skylight is formed from walls that draw the light down towards the ground floor. A single column of light three stories high concentrates all the tension of the project.

The project for Casal Balaguer in Palma de Mallorca was designed between 1996 and 2002. Here, the work with natural light joined with the need to restructure the circulation in a building which successive additions had turned into a confusing labyrinth, the result of the many generations that had occupied the site. Our work accepted this amalgamation of epochs on the basis of the distortion of some things into others, the metamorphosis of certain elements that are transformed as new parts of the program are added to them. An attitude of drawing what already exists as a starting point for progressing in the evolution of the building and its spaces.

For the new Sala Beckett-Obrador Internacional de Dramaturgia, we focused our observation on the existing building as the starting point for the design. The goal here was to extend a former workers' cooperative building in Barcelona to twice its size, without losing the existing spatial layout of the mansion that housed the cooperative. Treating the past as a potential future has permitted us great freedom in our approach, and we started out by retaining the original structure, together with the warmth conveyed by the various decorative details the building still retains. Our intention was to end up with a building where there is no distinction between old and new, where everything is geared towards the new use, the building and decoration functioning together.

Inheritance. We work with everything we inherit at once, without granting one period priority over another. Instead, we value the whole as a new presence that for us is contemporary and which we approach in order to decipher its rules, in order to design its own future. In all the projects presented here, despite the differences due to the way our thinking has evolved, the outcome is the generation of newness with both inherited things and new things. As we see it, it is a work of distortion that takes up what is there as the starting point for designing. It is a metamorphosis of geometry, but also of materials, of the proportions of voids, and of dimensions.

In all these cases, the length of time separating us from their original construction amounts to centuries, and at the same time they are undergoing change from private to public use, which entails a change in their spatial qualities. Their new purpose grants us the freedom to design a new building within the old one, investigating the physical and spatial qualities of the new construction. Treating it as a *construction*, without the constraints of the use for which it was intended, allows us to stop viewing it as building on a domestic scale, and evaluate its spatial and physical qualities as the starting point for a new occupation.

Discovering the unfinished quality of the original building gives rise to the idea that the actions it has undergone are not over, but that it is still evolving, imperfect, the result of a sum of stages of which ours is only one—and not the final one. This is a dialogue that begins with our trust in what we encounter, a positive approach that values and respects it as a sign of an earlier occupation, ascribing the project a sense of time that means it comes to form a part of this inheritance, one where in the end it is impossible to identify what period the building belongs to.