# CONVERSATIONS

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# Flores & Prats Architects

Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats practice architecture with lyrical precision, working into and out of the contexts where their projects are situated. Sites are read formally and culturally, with value placed on the incidental as a place for discovery. The roots of the practice lie in the time that Flores and Prats spent working for the late Enric Miralles, and the investigations from this time continue to be a source of agitation and delight. In their built works, disparate elements are held in an equilibrium in which everything impinges on everything else in choreography at once gestural, and deeply felt. Familiar elements are woven into new guises. In this interview, they discuss how they met in Miralles' office and how they see their work in relation to his. The culture of drawing is discussed in-depth, not least how they use hand drawings as a working method–Ricardo Flores (RF) and Eva Prats (EP) in conversation with Andrew Clancy (AC).

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AC Eva and Ricardo, welcome to Kingston. We invited you because your work speaks with such profound emphasis. Maybe we can start with how you were educated? How did you set up your practice?

EP We first met in Enric Miralles' office in Barcelona, where I was working as a student. I was going to university in the morning and in the afternoon drawing there. It was a very quiet studio at the beginning, and it had a kind of library atmosphere, everyone drawing with classical music on in the background. Then little by little, the studio started getting bigger. I started working for Miralles when I was 20. Then when Ricardo came from Buenos Aires, around six years later, the office moved because Miralles and Carme Pinós had split. I kept working with Miralles because he was my teacher at school. Ricardo arrived when we were in a new office, a beautiful palace in the old town. It was a really magical place, and the studio had grown more than before, but it still had a very nice atmosphere. We met there.

AC Were you working on the same projects?

RF Not really. Well, maybe for a moment on the Centre for Rhythmic Gymnastics in Alicante. When I arrived to work in the office, I started to do the drawings for the publication of this project which was under construction. Eva was drawing details for site construction. As I was new in the office, they had me prepare the drawings for publication because, from the moment they won the competition until the moment they finished construction, many things changed. Miralles wanted to update the drawings for publication. I was doing that for two or three months, but because it was also a new project for me, I knew it from a distance but not as well in detail. I had to 'catch' the project in fragments from the different collaborators.

EP By then, the office had grown. It was very much dedicated to a drawing space and a small model workshop. And, of course, a private library. Enric had the Garland collection of books on Le Corbusier. You would pick them up, and the sketches and drawings were beautiful.

AC Was it an office based on drawing and the discipline of drawings?

EP Completely.

AC You're saying that with Miralles, the project didn't stop with the building but with the drawings. They seem to have overlapped. Could you speak a little bit more about that?

RF This is something we learnt there and something that we have also extended into our practice. The site visits to look at the building being constructed is a moment where you test something, and then you go back to the office to continually build up ideas. It's not just a moment to control what has already been drawn and is being built by the contractor. You discover many things on the construction site that allow you to understand how the project



could be improved. It has a certain innocence, let's say, which we accept with all our heart. Because if you think that a project can still be changed up until it is physically built, it is a mindset that opens up a lot of possibilities within a project.

EP Also being aware that when you build, it's a state of being. It could be different, but it's good that you have deadlines, and then it has to be delivered at a certain moment while your head keeps working, and then you take these thoughts back with you to the studio. We saw this discipline when we were working for Miralles when nice photographs of the buildings arrived back to the studio. We draw them again or adjust the models. There's all this material that has helped you in building your thoughts on this issue. Even when the project is on-site, this material is still around you, and you produce even more thoughts. It's not only the finished building. To build is not the end of these thoughts. It still has some extra content. Then they move from one project to the other. It's a kind of continual testing.

AC Sometimes we can't make the decisions on site. You may recognise the problem, but you need to be abstracted from the site to understand what the required adjustment is. How does that work as a conversation? Does it happen as a combination of drawing and talking? Is it about the distance from the site?

EP Yes, you need it. We are very afraid of giving solutions or changing things onsite because everything is connected in a project. You may not know where the problem is. We say something to the builder, but then there is an unexpected chain of issues that you affect. So, it's good to sit back and test the issue by drawing. You can see the effects on the project. You always need what we call this 'quietness' to check the drawing and to consider it fully. To have this experience on site is very difficult because you lose this quietness.

The reality is so rich that you lose the peace, and you need the abstraction of the drawing.

RF We try to think in the abstraction of the drawing as the reality on site is so full of 'things'. You can't really look at the problems. But when you're in the studio, on your drawing board, you can see the whole project clearly again. You can concentrate on why this window was there and what was its size and the position, etc. You can think about what the builder has asked you to do and see it in relation to everything else. Then you remember your own thoughts on the paper that's attached to your drawing board, and then you can work on them, but only in the studio.

AC It's interesting that we're starting with the conversation about the completion of a project. I think that's no accident because it's in those moments that you find the beginnings of other projects. It's kind of an interesting idea, which is why it's so complicated describing the cultivation of practice within a school of architecture. In Barcelona, would Ignasi de Solà-Morales have taught you?

EP Yes.

AC He wrote very eloquently about building the ground under your feet and how you build a conversation about architecture from yourself up. How much commonality do you see from those early conversations with Miralles to where you are now?

EP I think it's really a school. It was a way of learning by being next to him. I almost never read anything he wrote because you were inside his world, and that was enough, but working with him gave us discipline. I think we rely on this discipline and its trust in drawing. I went to the university in the morning, and it was nice to meet other good teachers, that generation, as I was growing as an architect in parallel. This was very



nice. But probably the real school was in the afternoon with Miralles and Pinós, which I remember as a very concentrated period.

RF What we learned there was the value of your intellectual process, more than geometry or your language. However, you want to describe it. That was much more exigent. Also, we learnt about this fluid way of thinking that means you have the freedom to change everything until you don't want to anymore, even after it's already been built. This is something that Miralles had very clearly; he would have no doubts in changing something in a project, even if it had already been decided or completed if you had the possibility of doing it even better. This approach guides us all of the time in everything that we do.

EP It was impressive to see this effort for the documentation of a project. I remember going to the site with these drawings, where everything was drawn in the same intensity of black lines. You learned that what you bring to the site or how you start your conversation with these drawings is vital. If you want people to respect you, you first respect your preparatory work and what you're showing to people in the meetings. It will establish the conversation on a particular level. This is something that we learnt from him. I remember when I was going to university, my colleagues were asking me about these drawings, and they were amazed that these were the construction documents; they were impressed.

AC The non-hierarchy of line in those drawings produced conversations for me as a student. I wonder whether part of the drawings' gift was the necessary act of interpretation for the builder. Or perhaps the builder becoming embedded in the language of the office because the drawings were not immediately understandable?

EP It was unique. You would help them understand that this line is the projection, but there was also an effort from the builder. At some point, however, we could see that the builder *needed* us to explain the drawing to them. They would wait for us to measure properly. Those drawings were not a document that was very easy to understand. They couldn't take it from your hands and start work. They always needed you to translate a little.

AC That must be really valuable–you can inflect the geometries on-site without anybody noticing...

EP Or to be there and know that they are doing what you want. They can't interpret it. You have to go to the site and help by explaining to them what this line means and what that one indicates, etc. But we have changed the way we draw, though.

RF Yes, now some things are easier to understand in our drawings, but because the geometry is often very complex, they need our help to set out the work correctly.

AC If you take the number of drawings that would have been required to make a complex building a hundred years ago, there would be far more drawings required today to do something much smaller. Today a small house would require the same amount of information as a reasonably sized public building 150 years ago. It seems to me that this change is about an ever-increasing reliance on the certainty of the drawing. When you track the current concern with BIM and with parametricism, it's the final triumph of the drawing in a way. It suggests that the drawing is certain, and the architect's job on-site is merely to monitor progress. It's certainly not to intervene in the complex mathematics of a BIM model or a parametrically derived form. But what we've been talking about is something more nuanced. It requires an embodied knowledge that cannot be abstractly depended upon alone.



EP Yes, it is a question of reality. Construction is complicated: there are many internal and external factors. You draw a universe, and when you get to the site, the builder is in charge, and everything is so 'real'. When on-site, you never know where a problem might come from. It might be the stupidest thing or least expected problem.

RF Also, the model is important in controlling the process, representing the spaces, or helping solve possible problems. Often when we draw, we try to test with models to help ourselves be more convinced and secure about what we're going to do. If you work with all of these processes normally, the reality is better because you're working in a richer, better-informed environment.

EP Sometimes when you draw the construction documentation, you have to draw everything, even the screws and nails, working out exactly how we want to build. You remember projects from the 1950s with ten drawings, but now this sort of project would require 100 drawings. Sometimes I feel lazy, and I would like this aspect of the 1950s to return. But that time can't return, and there is a reason why you have to draw more. It's because the builder doesn't have the same sensibility as us.

RF They don't have the knowledge. They don't have the skills that builders used to have, so instead, and you have to draw the building precisely for them.

EP There is a lot of construction culture that has been lost. Suddenly people who are trained as architects are supposed to know about many more things related to construction. I think our honorarium should be much bigger because they ask for a lot of information from us. At least in Spain, we have a lot of responsibility, and we have to draw the whole project. With a good builder, we can talk with him, we can discuss this or that joint with him, and we can rely on him.

RF Or if you're working with a good carpenter, you don't have to draw the project in as much detail.

AC Do you have builders who you repeatedly work with that are part of the conversation?

RF We never know in advance because, in a public commission, you never can choose. It's a tender process. It's always a lottery. Sometimes they're good. Sometimes they're not.

EP Once it's under construction, there are all these economic pressures. You can develop things, but sometimes they don't offer the best quality of work, and they would rather offer the easiest solution.

RF They have economic interests, and you have something else.

AC That's fascinating because the complexity of the work that you make is dependent on very precise construction. Like Miralles, there is a concern with collision and overlay and juxtapositions of geometries and somehow a delamination of construction. I'm interested in how you build up this layering. Do you work through this with drawings?

RF Normally we make a plan on which new drawings are overlaid, and we try to think through that.

EP We make a drawing and then test this through making models. But usually, it's always working with a drawing first – it's more analytical or more abstract. If a drawing becomes complex, it's because we keep adding issues and asking questions. The complexity of the drawing depends on how many issues you add. Sometimes there are things in the project that get more intense, but that's because we keep adding things onto them. Perhaps you're thinking about the shell on the Sala Beckett, and it's because the machinery for the theatre is above it, so we had to move the skylight to one side. Complexities like that emerge, and we have to ask questions through drawings. Often this results in moving things to a certain part of the project, which becomes more intense.

AC It's interesting that spaces are allowed to impinge upon other spaces. So a staircase might



absorb the geometry of a surrounding space in a way that is both disruptive to and absolutely intrinsic to this new space thats made.

RF There's always a work of unfolding and compressing. I think the densification of some points is related to collision or simulation with natural light. With other simulations, there is an interest in the densification of the plan for social activities to happen. Or, alternatively, unexpected things happen, which make them pull in different activities, the circulation of different movements of people in the same place. That's why sometimes themes get over densified in some points of the plan because we expect that these will produce a series of situations that are much more interesting, as they can provoke unexpected activities.

At the Casal Balaguer [a Baroque palace in Mallorca], there is an inflated space above the dome, which suspends the light before it 'falls' into the awkwardness of the dome. In this project, we focus on this space as a chamber of light that would orientate all the spaces around it, like a compass. This dome has a delicacy on the convex side, which was not used because you could only see from it above. The way we designed, it was to have this rear light sliding gently in the back curve of the dome and then falling into the space.

EP You can move around, underneath this space, and you can go to a triangular room that was dislocated because of the growth of this palace... We designed the plan so you can go through this space to the terrace. The light becomes a solution: through the light, you can get outside in the open air. We wanted to provide a kind of joy when living in a place like this day to day.

AC What's remarkable for me is that the found geometry of the existing building and your architecture are synthesised. Nothing is given a hierarchy.

EP This was an enigmatic moment. The roof of the building wasn't finished when they announced this palace in the eighteenth century.

RF Well, it was finished but without its complete geometry.

EP The construction was never completed because of the weakness of the soil that they were building on. The plan of the roof, how a nave can connect to a dome, was unresolved. We could imagine that it might be a clean, perfect geometry of aligning everything based around the dome. Still because the building was contingent and had grown over the centuries, the plan was full of complex and broken geometrical figures without any kind of centre. This made the design very difficult. We drew it over and over again.

RF What happened here, the complexity of the two geometries (something which also happened in other projects like the Sala Beckett) is something we really want to engage with, and we do this through drawing. We drew the dome many times, and when you have drawn the dome many times, then the dome becomes yours. In a way, you become the original designer of the dome, which is not true, but you have adopted it. Then you continue to design around the dome, and at the end, everything comes together in one building. That's why the new and the old don't look different but appear to be unified.

AC What you say about drawing reminds me of something that Herman Czech said to me a few years ago, that you're always a prisoner of the work of another architect. Sometimes that architect is another architect from a hundred years ago, and sometimes it's yourself a year ago.

RF If you have the opportunity of drawing your own project again, it can be both very enjoyable and difficult. Somebody may ask you to modify your work from ten years ago, perhaps because their family expanded or the building's ownership changed. You have



to criticise your work; you may have to break apart or make a new element. But that's exciting. In the same way, you may have to adapt a building from 100 or 700 years ago for a new use. Our attitude is to recuperate buildings. Sometimes these buildings can be quite poor in construction or arrangement, but there is always something to appreciate. In the palace in Mallorca it was very easy, there was a lot to admire. Then you start to draw that element, and from there, often, the project appears.

AC Much of your work is based on existing structures...

RF Always. Even if it is with public space, there is always something that existed before.

EP Sometimes it is the landscape, like with Edificio 111 [in Barcelona].

RF Yes, or like the Microsoft campus in Milan. There the existing landscaping was so overwhelming.

EP And the building was an existing one.

RF There's always something that you refer to. We always try to look at what is there before. It's impossible not to do so. The ideas come from the survey, from our observation. There are no ideas but the ones that come from those.

AC And do those things evolve through you drawing them?

RF That's right.

AC Is that where the hardline hand drawings are still used?

RF Yes, because it's slow to make hardline drawings with a set-square by hand. This way of thinking and making slowly allows many things to come into the project. We are not interested in the speed of the machines in the moment of thinking because then the process moves so fast that it doesn't allow you time to think.

EP Also, because we don't look for solutions for a long time, we are trying to understand what is there on

the site, what is not there, what the programme is about, and how it could be composed. That's the way we work. We try to be flexible so we can keep adding material from the client or from the site information. We prepare the drawings for new things to be added or changed. It's never absolute. There is always doubt in the project itself.

AC Do you only engage with CAD when you're deciding to draw a solution?

RF Yes, when you have to translate the project to the builder or the engineer.

EP Yes, it helps it to become a common language. Auto CAD is more a communication tool for us than a technique for reflection.

AC Do you two still have time to draw yourselves in the office?

RF Yes, it is the most difficult thing. But we can still find time to draw, and we spend many hours a week doing it. Some days are more difficult because we have teaching or a visit to the construction site. So on some days, you don't draw at all, which is very painful, but then the next day you can draw. We try to draw every day.

EP When we thought about what sort of office we wanted to have, we thought about what we wanted to do during the day. I think we want to draw. This meant that the office needs to be small. It was one of our clients that made us think about the size of our business. Maybe there are people that can draw and organise a big office, but we thought we should make time in the day to draw.

RF Also, because of so many years of drawing, we've got used to that physical exercise. When you're moving your hands on the table, it's like going to the gym. You exercise your hands and your mind. After a few days of drawing consistently, you feel happier. Other days you might be in a bad mood, and then you understand why: it has been a week



since I last sat down and spent an afternoon drawing. Then you start drawing again.

AC I do really enjoy drawing, and sometimes I say this to students, and you realise that you look like a dinosaur to them. I remember very fondly the art of taking two or three hours to do a drawing by hand. In that space, which is rare, nobody phones you, you don't get emails, and nobody interrupts you with a silly question. You can just draw, and the thinking kind of flows in a way that's not linear. It emerges from the meditation. I wonder, do you teach your students to think about drawings in a similar manner to how you practice?

EP/RF Absolutely.

AC How does that go down with them?

RF I teach the fifth year. Eva teaches the sixth year, the thesis year. In the beginning, I always tell my students, 'I don't want a solution', which is something they're not used to hearing. They're used to reacting to problems and finding solutions quickly. Instead, I invite them to become lost in a problem, to draw the site, to find a real interest in a place that sparks a more complex project. For them, this is new and not how they have been trained before the fifth year. I love working this way. I can tell them not to worry or to hurry. I can say to them if you need one or two more weeks to work on their project, it's fine. With a programme like housing, say, I want them to design a project that is deeply related to the place and based on their observations of the site. For me, this is fantastic. But for them, it's a process that sometimes creates a crisis because they're not used to observing or working slowly and carefully. They like to move fast. And what I teach, or what we teach, is that slowness.

EP The slowness allows us to get to know the world. You might be working in a run-down neighbourhood of a

city, but it's full of energy of the people, and then both us and the students come to understand that area a little better. The students go to visit the streets, they get to know neighbours, and they get information from them about the place. You need time to visit and meet people and begin to understand the neighbourhood.

RF This work is very important for the students, in my opinion, because we want them to be able to form criteria about what is valuable rather than solving problems immediately.

AC It's interesting to have doubt and yet still to be able to produce things without really knowing what they are.

RF Exactly. Often you have to draw something many times, and you wonder whether it will be really useful for a project, and yet you still continue drawing. Then you say, 'I'm going to erase it', but I continue drawing it, and I say, 'Why am I doing this?' Well, because I like the ideas that are emerging out of the drawing and sometimes you don't know, even if you pretend to, and sometimes it ends up being part of the project later on. I think doubt is key in the process of design.

AC So are the methods you use, the drawing of the site and then talking about those drawings used in the atelier?

EP That's right. Also, we go with historic maps. Before we visit a place, it's good to understand that the present condition hasn't always reigned and maybe there have been better moments before. Still you begin to understand the transformation of the city, which is often very rich. In particular, Barcelona is a city that reinvents itself so often. It's amazing when you look at the old maps how different it was. The city was complete 100 years ago, everything was beautiful, and then they destroyed it.

As an atelier, we study maps, and we visit sites very closely, but we always want them to make an extra



abstraction. Sometimes when we go on-site, we don't like to make decisions, similar to our decisions in practice, as we were talking about earlier. The students have to do this too: we go back to class, we're abstracted from the world, within our personal thoughts, and we think about the projects. Then you might go on site again and become 'contaminated' by all of the ideas and observations that can be found there.

RF But also experiencing and observing the neighbours as well. We try to collect all the dimensions of the site, historical, topographical, social... all in one piece of paper. We work hard to not lose the complexity of the reality but comprehend what is there and how you can make new content.

EP There's also something that worries me a little bit. Now there's this tendency, at least in Barcelona, of trying to react or respond far too directly to a community. In reality, a city is much more complex than that.

AC I think that it's true to say that rapid temporary reactions to social contexts are currently being celebrated. And I think it's a necessary escape valve simply due to the scale of most commercial architecture, which is alienating. I agree that it has problems because all architecture that's meaningful has to be socially engaged. I think it's a misunderstanding to see a separate sphere of architecture that calls itself 'socially engaged architecture'. To have a synthesis of social issues grounded in the expertise of architecture and its construction is a complex and time-consuming task that is often economically impossible.

EP But also, it's a task that is not only the responsibility of architects but also of governments.

AC That cultural conversation has been hugely diminished. I don't know how it is in Barcelona, but in Ireland, there are issues around how the state views architecture beyond the value of its

immediate use. The cultural content of a new building is not something that you'd find a civil servant articulating the value of as a metric to determine who might be awarded a commission. One of the problems of the EU is that it has set these procurement methods which are to do with economics and insurance levels and turnover, which leaves very little space for the thing that actually makes Europe interesting, which is the cultural content of this territory and how that is an embodied, living knowledge. How work is procured is an interesting problem for this generation of architects to face. Is this similar in Barcelona for your students?

RF Yes, I don't think young practices would have the possibility of getting this public work due to the same issues as you mentioned. Often now, they are meeting in groups and making collectives to work together. Then they can be more cost-effective maybe because they can share commissions between themselves and also continue to look for more work. I think their way of working would be much more based around interaction with society on different levels, maybe helping to understand the social issues of a place or a site or a neighbourhood, rather than drawing or building.

EP I think there's also a political problem, where responses to social issues are often underfunded or temporary. Governments should take social issues more seriously and spend money to support society, not just have a public meeting with a neighbourhood and offer a cheap public space to solve much larger problems.

AC It's reneging on a certain part of the social contract, in effect. All of the lawyers and accountants who oversee these processes make sure that they're equitable or very well paid. Why is the first thing that happens when a project runs into difficulty that they cut the architect's fee?



RF Yes, why not cut everybody else's fee except the architects.

AC The decision to cut fees between competing architects is an interesting one. I think we have to educate students about this today.

EP Sometimes in a major competition, like the Sala Beckett one, there were five teams competing, and we all told the client that we wouldn't undercut one another on fees.

RF There is some kind of solidarity sometimes. The time involved in making something worthwhile is incalculable.

AC It's not often talked about, but there is not just the difficult task of developing a critical position for a practice but also establishing a sustainable economic one.

RF When you set up the practice, you have to decide where you want to be. If you want to run a practice with a criticality that tests and investigates architecture, you have to accept that there will be a struggle economically all the time. You have to accept that from the beginning, as it is key to the way that your practice will develop.

AC To wrap up, we end these interviews with the question: if you had a single piece of advice to give to somebody studying the subject, what would it be?

RF Architecture is a great thing to study. You don't need to start thinking that you will definitely end up building something. The subject is both rich and wide. You might work more closely for a construction firm or in the public realm as an advisor. There are many things that you can become.

AC It is a very broad education and architects operating in, say, policy or government are every bit as valuable, but maybe we don't celebrate their work enough.

RF Exactly. They are key in allowing other architects

to do things well–this kind of conversation among people who are on both sides.

AC An enlightened person in that sphere is arguably much more influential than a single practitioner could ever be, precisely because they make space for things to happen.

EP Another thing as a student is that you don't know how technical your education is. In our experience, it was very technical; you study drawing as well as structures, physics, mathematics, and then you have to mix all these together in the design courses. It's incredible how all of these topics become synthesised on the drawing board. I also think education is a pity when it's seen too much about employment and getting work. This is an issue within the university. Like Ricardo was saying, it should be about education and making you a reflective person. We appreciate when young architects come to our studio and have remained open and reflective. They can see things differently and offer rich thoughts about any part of the project or any presentation or whatever they are involved in, or even make a container for the models. It means that whenever they see a project, they can develop it with richness.

AC But that's really interesting because they're both really good pieces of advice. Ricardo's was about valuing the idea that you're always an architect no matter what room you're in and yours is about reflecting. Several times today, you've both talked about quiet time. How on earth do you make quiet time? Do you turn off the phone?

RF Yes, we tell everyone else in the office to pick up the phone and take notes.

EP So there is a moment in the day when you stand up, go to look at the notes, see who called, and return the calls.

RF It's not always possible, but we try to sometimes close for a few hours and try not to book meetings. Time is our treasure.



AC This is an interesting one too for students, I think, which is to take the time to work. It might be 30 minutes per day, and it might be the whole afternoon, to work on something nonspecific.

EP It's important that you get bored in front of the drawing board. You lose your thoughts, and you come back again.

RF The thinking is never straightforward. You never know when the thing will come. You might be concentrating on drawing, and then your mind drifts off, then you focus again, and then you remember something else, and your thoughts drift off again. Then you might remember an old conversation with a friend or the memory of a building, and then you incorporate this in the drawing. You need time to get bored, in a positive sense, in the sense that you remember particular themes or that you can talk about your questions and problems with other people. These experiences will enrich the drawing. The drawing is never a linear thing.

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