



Atmosphere, Architecture, Cinema

Thematic Reflections on Ambiance and Place

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palgrave
macmillan

disease, veiling embarrassment, closeting indecency and abolishing the unnecessary; incidentally reducing life to a private shadow-play.⁵²

Here we see how the precise tectonic organization of architectural settings comprise affective ambiances that are pivotal to the production of specific atmospheric effects.

CONSILIENT DISCREPANCY: FLORES PRATS

William Empson's treatment of ambiguity in literature highlighted the role of multiple and simultaneous senses of a word or phrase in producing uncertainty of interpretation and hence richness of semantic potential. One characteristic of ambiance in a work of literature, film or architecture is the coexistence of several different senses that remain disparate, unaligned and unreconciled, or "discrepant", while at the same time contributing to an overall circumstantial quality, or "consilience", that can be experienced as atmosphere.

The presence of consilient discrepancy⁵³ in a work of architecture contributes greatly to its ambiance. Two projects by the Barcelona-based architectural office of Ricardo Flores and Eva Prats are exemplary in this regard. At both the Mills Museum (1999–2002) and Casal Balaguer (2009–), Flores Prats play out a tectonic of porosity through which space and materiality are thoroughly worked into and relieved of gravity and mass. Ostensibly, these projects are renovations. The Mills Museum, situated in an old miners' neighbourhood, called for the recuperation of a ruinous seventeenth-century flour windmill and its conversion into a regional museum. The key architectural intervention involved capitalizing on existing cavities and perforations within the existing fabric by "rebor-ing" them and adjusting their positions and dimensions to create altered light sources and expanded clearings for new exhibition chambers (Figs. 3 and 4). The technique recalls the rebor-ing of woodwind instruments to alter and perfect their tuning and timbre or indeed of the cylinders of internal combustion engines to heighten their performance. By working into the masonry fabric of the building; easing into existing openings,

⁵² Robert Kerr, cited in Evans, *Figures, doors, passages*, 89–90.

⁵³ See my *Vaporous circumambience: towards an achitectonics of atmosphere*, in *Interstices* 15, 2021, 12–24, <http://interstices.aut.ac.nz/ijara/index.php/ijara/article/view/194>. Accessed November 13, 2015, and my *Agencies of the frame*, 258–309.



Fig. 3 Flores Prats, Mills Museum. Palma de Majorca, 1999–2002. Interior. (Photograph by Duccio Malagamba. Used with kind permission of the architects)

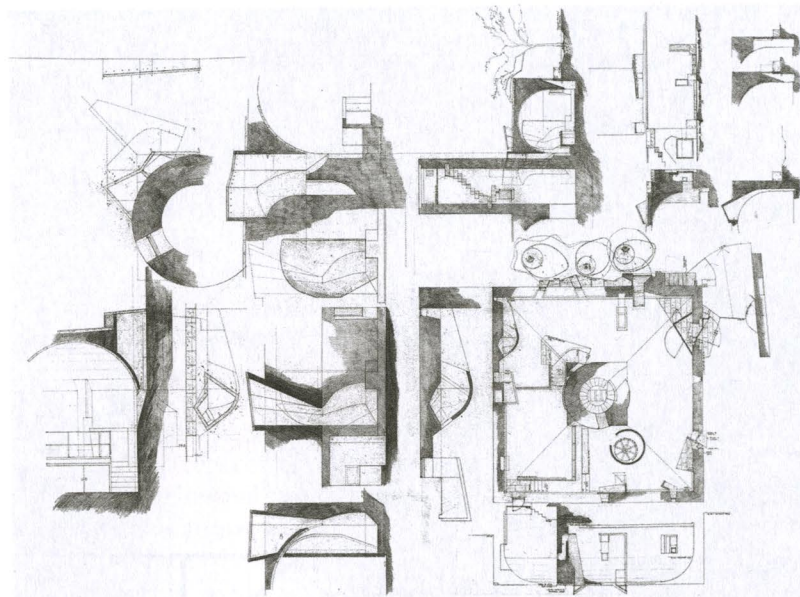


Fig. 4 Flores Prats, Mills Museum. Palma de Majorca, 1999–2002. (Assembly drawing. Used with kind permission of the architect)

shafts and hollows; and folding surfaces into and out of the walls, the architects have created new light sources, light shelves, recesses, pedestals and screens that function internally for illumination and display and externally for benches, ledges and steps within a reactivated public domain.

These interventions literally breathe into, aerate and leaven the mass. Surgically incised into the existing fabric, they do away with the need for internal divisions, since spatial zoning is achieved virtually by a repartition of light and dark (Fig. 5). These latter function as foundational architectonic materials that organize the spatial narrative and exhibition sequence. The net effect is of an interior in an interminable process of being turned inside out. The density and weight of walls and vaulted roofs is dematerialized by the in-folding and exfoliation of surfaces. Inside and outside faces become indeterminate; the boundary is rendered as a zone of indiscernibility; and the substance of the architectural fabric is vaporized by a pervasive, illuminated porosity of incisions, cuts, slits and notches. The provenance of light is masked by multiply folded surfaces of different



Fig. 5 Flores Prats, Mills Museum. Palma de Majorca, 1999–2002. (Photograph by Hisao Suzuki. Used with kind permission of the architect)

shades of illumination—as it is by the multiple reflections and refractions which together imply that it is the material of the wall itself producing and emitting light.

Likewise, at Casal Balaguer, the existing fabric dating back to the tenth century is subjected to the insertion of a new circulation network, geometrically continuous but experientially discontinuous (Fig. 6). It punctures the building, first horizontally and then vertically through to the roof by appropriating an existing, smaller courtyard. In this case, the intervention functions as an apparatus to interconnect different programs for the new exhibition and concert centre. However, it also creates gaps—new light wells, skylights and windows—that effectively disassociate and articulate the multiple histories and styles of construction that had merged over time.

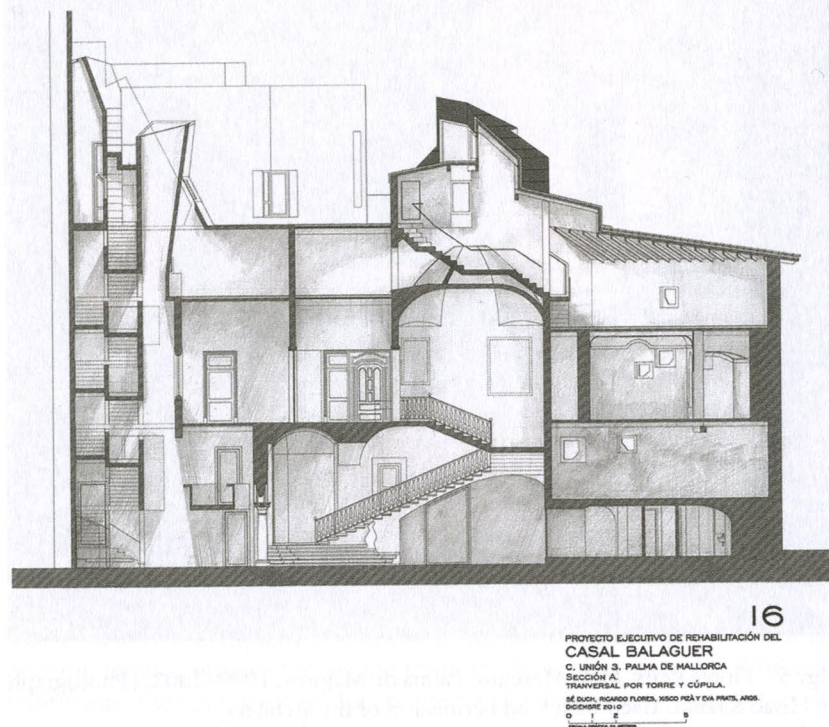


Fig. 6 Flores Prats. Casal Balaguer (2009–). (Cross section. Used with kind permission of the architect)

The play of light, shade and shadow puts into relief and relieves the building's different zones and narratives from a palimpsest in which they had become buried. New interstitial volumes render the building porous, perforate and ultimately aporetic. All is passage within a generalized impasse that both promotes and blocks any way through. The resulting spatiality is one of folds and returns that occlude any direct prospect, any vanishing point—a spatiality of stairs, balusters, surfaces and passageways that lead and disappear through clefts and fissures into unknown recesses.

The captivation of space into its own materiality and substance produces a significant ambiguity. Void space, which commonly lies over and against mass and functions to foreground it, is here itself massified and rendered substantial. Likewise, light, which commonly counterpoints darkness and functions to indicate the lineaments of form, is here identified with the void that it suffuses and condenses into palpable atmosphere. The indeterminacy between mass and void and darkness and light destabilizes and dismantles the formal and material grounds of the building. Concatenated spatiality is built out of light, shade, shadow and darkness—out of degrees of gloaming. The absence of prospect, and the identity of space with the exfoliation of perforate matter, also contests normative distinctions between form and context that are here indistinguishably and simultaneously produced out of the one luminous substance.

These projects by Flores Prats evidence an extraordinary tectonic work of crafting space from crepuscular materiality that is both radiant and dim. It produces sufficient discrepancies to complexify the architectural encounter and cause our reception of it to waver. Some of this ambiguity is inherent in the semantic potential of the components that make up the architecture. The relative status of walls, windows, doors, passages, shafts and wells is integral to a complex of meanings that could be usefully read in terms of etymology—specifically the etymons *WEL, meaning “to turn, roll, fold, wind” (wall, welt, weal, wealth, well(up), fold, flatten, field), and *PER, meaning “through, lead, passage” (port, portal, porosity, bore, pierce, aperture, periphery, perimeter, border, fjord, forest, ford, afford).⁵⁴ As in the materiality of a sponge, everything is opening: doorway, mouth, channel, access; and in a sense, the *ostia* of sponges, their constitutive orifices, parallel the *osteria*, hostels, hospitality—associated

⁵⁴ See my *Mortarium: a provisional lexicon for masonry*, in *Materiality: brick and block in contemporary Australian architecture*, ed. Ron Ringer (Horsley Park: Dry Press Publishing, 2015), 540–53.

with Hestia, goddess of the hearth—cognate terms drawn from the etymon *WES, “to dwell”. Dwelling is not incarceration but the condition of having access.⁵⁵ These senses circulate in Flores Prats’ incisive formal and material program as a kind of tectonic atmosphere, though they are never explicitly named and always subsist as discrepant sub-texts and undertones open to indefinite conjugation.

Here, we are always in the middle of things, *in media res*: we are always in the midst, *interstitium*, between the walls. The texture of this intermitence is permeable and permeating. It is made of interminable folds, intervals within intervals and interludes where sense is dramatized and played out (Fig. 7). This kind of wound up, intervallic topography and spatial structure foregrounds the being-together-*there* of human being, its *placed-ness*. As a result, tectonics engages with ethics and the atmosphere of space with the dispositions of solicitude, care and attentiveness to the other in its arrival.

The topography of the porous, the interstitial and the inter-ludic must be resolutely ethical; and its ambiance suffuses these interiors by foregrounding adjacency and intimacy—that is, the nearness of beings to each other and to the worlds they simultaneously find themselves in and produce. The incavated spaces of Mills Muséum and Casal Balaguer orchestrate an ambiguous play between inside and outside, between mass and hollowness, and into the porosities of matter that vaporize the architectonic mass. Again, the interactions between darkness, shadow, light and glare are mobilized to render the borderlines of spaces ambiguous and indeterminate. The outside is not another world visible beyond the walls. Rather, the interval is all there is, and this interval is not a third zone between one boundary and another. It is the necessary condition of space itself, of space as spacing and porosity through which it constantly defers closure and maintains its infinite finishing.

Consilient discrepancy—the coexistence of disseveral systems in unaligned multiplicity that, while never fusing, still resonate to produce emergent conditions—is a palpable characteristic, tonality or temperament

⁵⁵ In this respect, Walter Benjamin’s reading of Naples, and by implication of the city, is instructive. See Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis, Naples, in *Reflections*, trans. Edmond Jephcott (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovic, 1978), 163–73. See also Benoît Goetz, *Théorie des maisons: l’habitation, la surprise* (Paris: Édition Verdier, 2011), 122: “Cities are enormous madrepore in whose tangle, and in the midst of whose concrete or chalky matter, there will never pass enough passages and bridges and canals and ventilating chimneys and flowing spaces and interstices and clearings” (my translation).

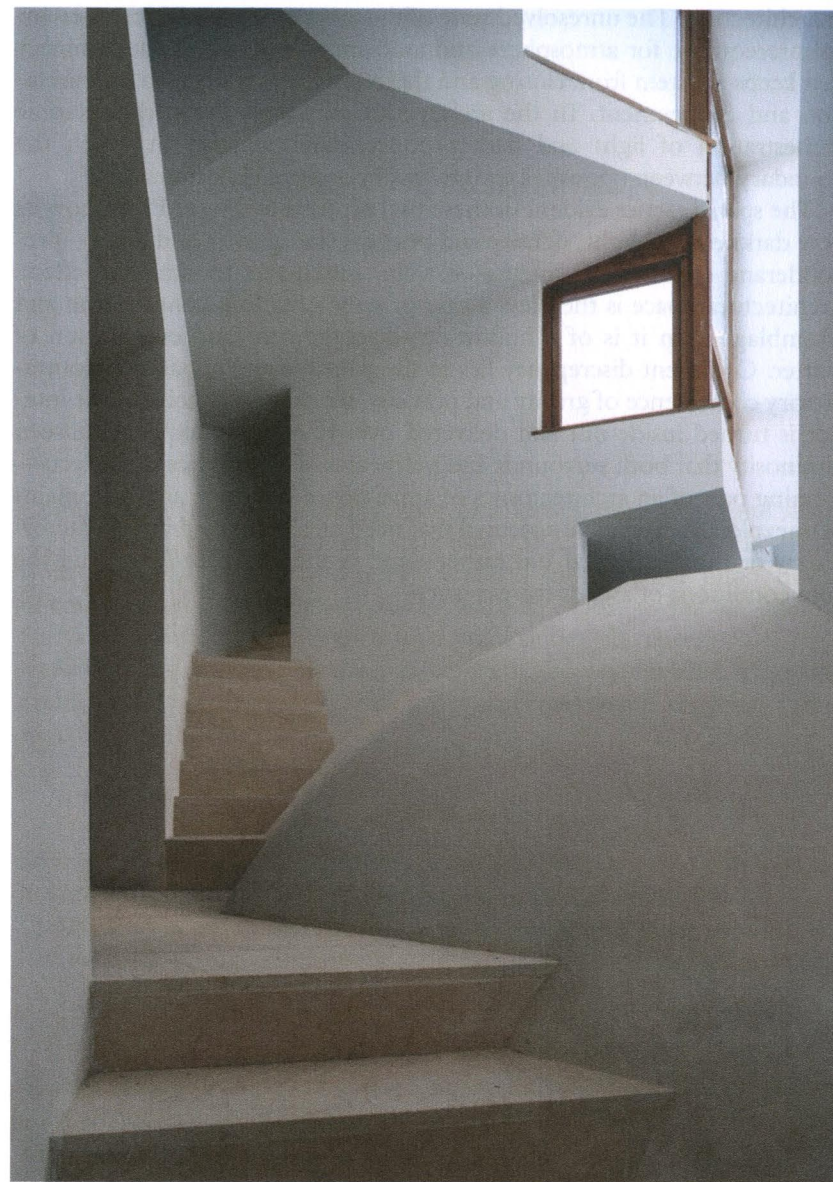


Fig. 7 Flores Prats. Casal Balaguer (2009–). (Photograph Adrià Goula. Used with kind permission of the architect)

in architecture. The unresolved state of those systems constitutes an essential prerequisite for atmosphere and ambiance—a state of indeterminacy that keeps a system from closing and therefore keeps it open to interpretation and engagement. In the architecture of Flores Prats, the tectonic orchestration of light and dark produces environments in which the boundary between opposites wavers and becomes indeterminate.

The spatial tactics evident in these two projects by Flores Prats show us how darkness and light, density and porosity and gravity and levity—preponderant qualities of cinema—can be mobilized to ambient effect. Architectural space is then less a case of sedimentation, construction and assemblage than it is of a hollowing, disgorgement and evisceration of matter. Consilient discrepancy lies in the palpable and apparently contradictory coincidence of gravity and porosity, blockage and access. The interior is turned inside out and delivered over to a circumambient, unseen luminosity that both surrounds and permeates. These tactics and affects—forming part of an architectonics of atmosphere—suggest ample domains of unexploited expressive potential that need not be sourced in the extraordinary or the spectacular but rather—and properly *radically*—within the core conditions of architecture as such.

Anatomy of Atmosphere

ADVENT

Coming. Latin *adventus*, coming, approach, arrival; from *ad*, to, and *venire*, come—from *GWA, go, come. Compare *WE, blow, and Latin *ventus*, wind (that which comes and goes); *inventus*, invent, come upon, devise, discover, breathe into; French *eventer*, let out, expose to the air; *eventail*, fan; Middle English *fent*/French *fente*, split, outlet (for water or air).

Adventure, avenue, become, circumvent, come, convent, covenant, event, intervene, invent, prevent, provenance, revenant, souvenir, venue, welcome, vent, fent.

AGENCY

Strategic force. Latin *agere*, mobilize, do, achieve, perform, drive forward, maintain in motion; from *AG, drive, draw forth, draw out, move.

Act, agenda, agent, agile, agitate, agony, ambiguous, anagogical, coagulate, cache, cogent, exact, examine, exigency, exiguous, strategy, transaction.

ALLEGORY

Spoken otherwise. Greek/Latin *allegoria*, describing one thing under the guise of another; from Greek *allos*, other, another, different, beyond, and *agoreuein*, to speak; from *agora*, assembly—hence to speak otherwise.