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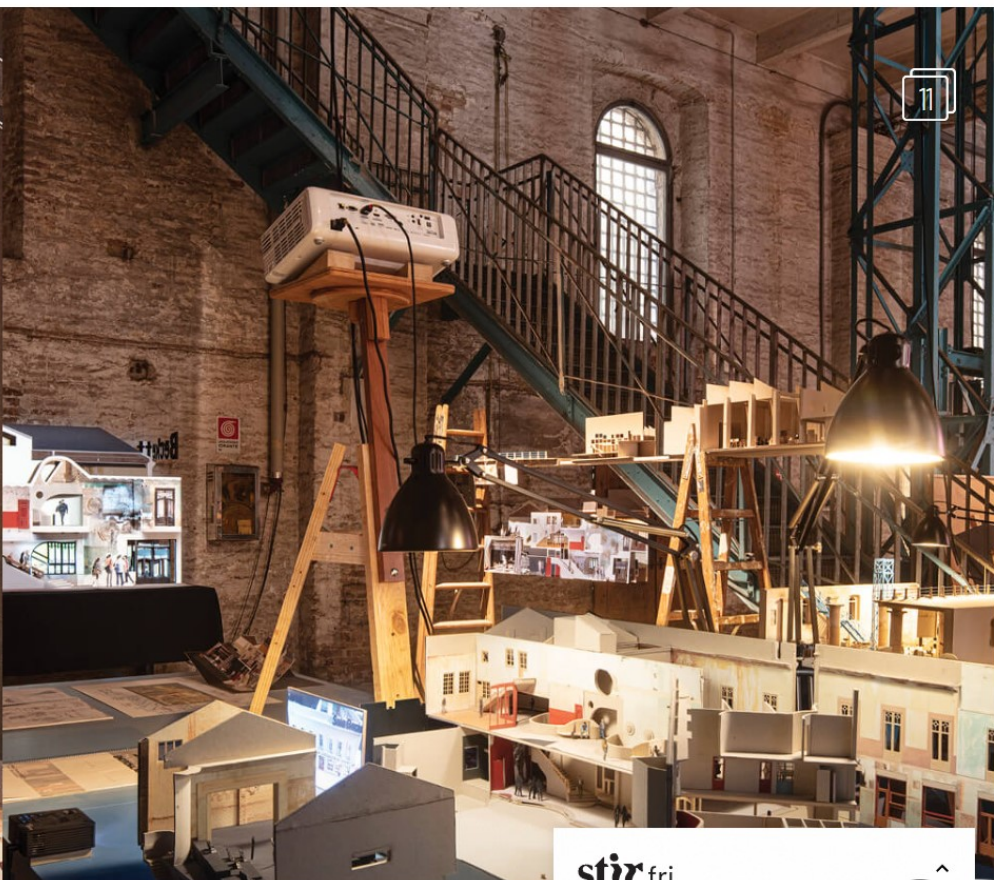
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Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores on working with light and emotions

In conversation with Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores of Prats & Flores Arquitectes, who avoid solving design problems too quickly; they strive to achieve moments of joy and happiness.

by Vladimir Belogolovsky | Published on : Sep 28, 2023



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Before speaking over a video for the following interview with Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores, the founders of [Barcelona](#) practice Prats & Flores Arquitectes, I had a chance to meet them in [Venice](#) in late May during the opening days of this year's 18th [Venice Architecture Biennale](#). Under the impressive 12-metre-high roof of Arsenale's Corderie, the couple felt perfectly at home as they greeted crowds of friends and guests. The architects re-enacted the creative atmosphere of their own Barcelona studio, complete with drafting tables, stools, light fixtures, easels, drawings, and both study and presentation models. Passing through these wonderfully assembled objects and images visitors visibly slowed down their relentless walk-throughs for the unusually close examination, including touching whatever hands can reach. It is a theatre, and suddenly, you feel joyous, realising you are right in the midst of it.

Prats was born in Barcelona and Flores in [Buenos Aires](#), both in 1965. They graduated the same year, in 1992—she from ETSAB, Barcelona School of Architecture, and he from the Faculty of Architecture in Buenos Aires, FADU-UBA. Flores then did his Master in Urban Design at ETSAB in 1993-94, graduating in 1996. Before starting their practice in 1998, the architects apprenticed at Enric Miralles's office in Barcelona. After many years of practice, both completed their PhDs—he at ETSAB in 2016 and she at RMIT in 2019.

The architects' portfolio is dominated by their ingenious [adaptive reuse](#) projects; among others, the following buildings stand out for their amiable qualities: Casal Balaguer Cultural Centre and Mills Museum in Palma de Mallorca, and Providencia House and Sala Beckett in Barcelona. We talked about learning from Enric Miralles and [Carlo Scarpa](#), looking for moments that can make you smile, not liking to remove too much from what's already there, accentuating different authorships, and working with [natural light](#) and emotions.



Emotional Heritage for Venice Architecture Biennale 2023
Image: Adri  Goula, Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

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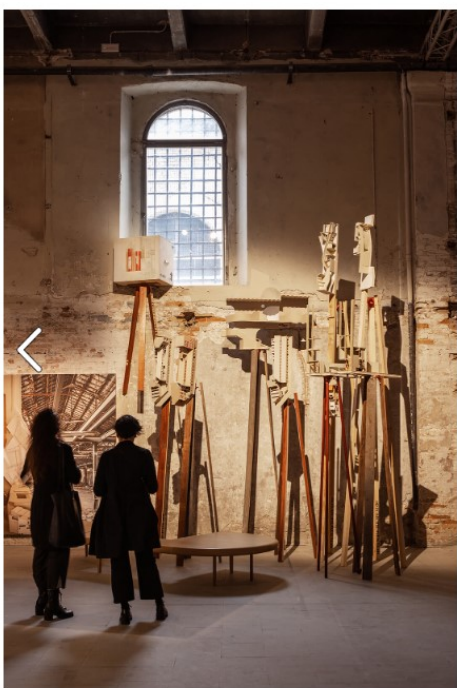
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Image: Judith Casas, Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

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Initial concept collage of Emotional Heritage
Image: Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

Vladimir Belogolovsky (VB): Eva, you started your practice with Ricardo in 1998 after both of you worked at the office of Enric Miralles. But before that, you had your own practice since 1994. What were those first few years like and how did the two of you join forces?

Eva Prats (EP): We overlapped for about one year at the Miralles office, from 1993 to 1994. I left it because I then just won the EUROPAN III International Housing Competition with a friend who also worked at the Miralles office. The project was a real commission and was going to be built. Then we won another competition. Those projects were the reason for me to start an independent office after spending about nine years at the Miralles office. We started our own office with my friend right here at the apartment that we now occupy with Ricardo. At that time, it was subdivided into several spaces where young design studios rented rooms. Soon we became quite busy with such projects as a public space in Barcelona and the Mills Museum in Mallorca.

Ricardo Flores (RF): By 1998 I had been at the Miralles office for five years and was thinking about leaving to start an independent practice. I enjoyed working there but it was very demanding and by then I was already 33. So, I thought it was the right time to move on. We were already a couple with Eva for about three years and we decided to give it a try and start working together. Our first project was a competition for an urban plan for a small town near Barcelona and we won it. That was the beginning of our practice. Then I started working on Eva's other projects and soon we had new commissions. We continued working in similar ways we did with Enric—drawing, trying again and again, drawing over, making models, continuing to draw, and so on. It was very natural for us to work together after spending so many years with Enric. The way we work is as if we try to avoid solving problems too quickly. It is more about testing different themes until we identify the most challenging way through. something that would be new for us and that would allow us to get into new research, a new world that the project opens for us.



Entrance square at Mills Museum

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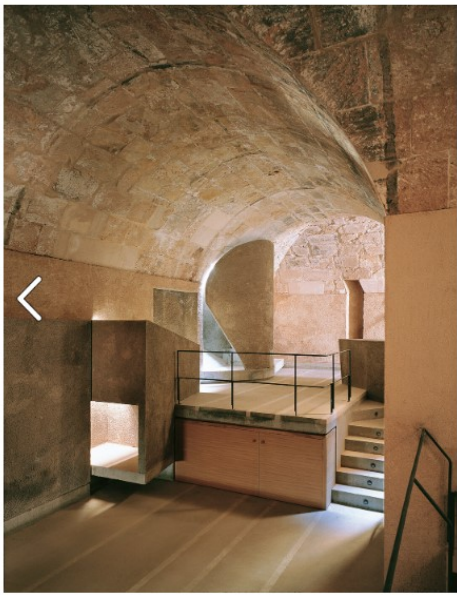
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'Auditorium' at Mills Museum
Image: Duccio Malagamba, Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes



Door and exhibition setup at Mills Museum
Image: Duccio Malagamba, Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

VB: When I talked to Benedetta Tagliabue about Enric's working methods she told me, "He was constantly going forward... Constantly! He was so fast. There was constantly a crisis around him. Constantly bringing new ideas, abandoning the old ones, changing directions." Do you recognise him in this description and how did this impact your own design strategies?

EP: He was for sure very quick with his mind. It is true that whenever he visited construction sites, he was always complaining that it was coming too slowly. But in the office, he was quite patient with developing projects. Projects constantly evolved and changed but never drastically. He would not change directions. He pretty much followed his initial thinking. And he never made different options. His drawings and models kept growing. He would not abandon his concepts and start from scratch. Every project was a reflection of a particular interest he had at that time. He was constantly moving on and projects were developed little by little, testing each piece by piece. He would not move back but rather modify as he moved on.

RF: Our way of working is similar; we have a fear of moving too fast and losing things as our projects develop. Time gives us the possibility to think and to look back and reflect on what was there before. Also, we continue to learn. We may visit another building that we like and it may influence our thinking. So, we like to take our time and be able to incorporate ideas as we move on. And similarly, to Enric, we don't develop more than one option. We may take one direction or another but we keep developing one scheme.

VB: You just mentioned that you may see something interesting in other buildings and incorporate similar ideas into your work. Any particular examples that influenced you in your renovation project?

EP: From the beginning Carlo Scarpa's work, particularly his Castelveccchio in Verona was quite important to us and we even used his buildings as a reference in some of our early projects. Then there is a tradition of working with existing buildings in Catalan architecture. For example, Jujol, the former collaborator of Gaudi, worked on existing farms in the countryside. Another source for us is Borromini who sometimes would add to older buildings and it is hard to tell what was there before and what came later. We find Scarpa's work more like dealing with episodes, although we love his amazing projects. Whereas, in the cases of Borromini and Jujol architecture, both new and old, seem to be entirely merged. That's what we like the most. We see these examples as educational for us.

RF: Borromini and Jujol are so moving and we get inspired by their capacity to make things levitate and lighter than air, and so emotional. Another example for us was the house that Enric and Benedetta designed for themselves in Barcelona near Santa Caterina Market. At the same time, the way Enric worked with older buildings was different; the new architecture was always dominating. The act of the contemporary architect is quite obvious in his work. In our case, our architecture is not as visible. We work a lot more with what we inherit. We try to preserve as many traces as possible. We aim to capture the original atmosphere of the building we work with.

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EP: There was another architect here in Barcelona, Albert Viaplana who co-founded Viaplana Piñón Arquitectes. He was an influential professor at the Barcelona School of Architecture. In the 1970s there was not much work, so he developed very fine line drawings, which Enric and Carme followed as a sort of Viaplana school. His best-known work is the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona completed in 1993. It is a radical transformation of an existing building with big interventions and rerouted circulation. He worked with the existing buildings quite aggressively. Enric was not as aggressive. His buildings were more joyful and also more sensitive to the visitors.



Old and new windows connecting the Bar with the



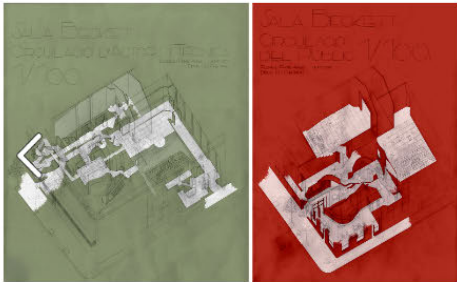
Entrance and front façade of Sala Beckett
Image: Adrià Goula, Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

VB: You have said, "Architecture can work with emotions." Could you elaborate?

RF: This is the most difficult yet the most special thing that architects can do for people who will visit their buildings. That's a gift that architects can deliver, something beyond the program. This is what no one asks architects but we all hope to be able to achieve it. It is about the quality of light or glancing at something that may make you smile. We are constantly looking for such moments in our buildings.

EP: We design our buildings in ways to allow you to move through them intuitively and come across things unexpectedly. Our buildings evolve in ways that we hope will surprise you. We are inspired by such examples as the Stockholm Library by Asplund or The Bank of London and South America in Buenos Aires by Clorindo Testa. Also, the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Connecticut by Kahn, which we find incredibly beautiful. All these buildings, despite their monumentality, are fully dedicated to their uses. Yet, they make you enter in such magical ways; there is such a beautiful light. These buildings appear as if they are waiting for you to come. They welcome you graciously. There is such a sequence of surprises, a beautiful flow. These are some of the buildings that we think about when we work on our drawings. We want to bring similar energy into our buildings.

RF: We always think about people's reactions and how they will experience different moments of joy and happiness. If we can bring that into our buildings that is our ultimate goal. Among other influential architects for us, in addition to those already mentioned, I would also name Sigurd Lewerentz. Then there are such rich historical precedents as Palazzo Ducale in Urbino by Francesco di Giorgio, Villa Adriana in Tivoli, and the ruins of Pompei. Or if you carefully look at villas by Le Corbusier, which are so subtle and fragmented into areas painted in different colours, you will realise how he was fragmenting the scale of the eye. These examples teach us so much about multiple characters of buildings and their sensibilities. We bring all these lessons into our own buildings, as well as to our teaching.



Axonometric drawings explaining circulation at Sala Beckett
Image: Courtesy of Prats & Flores Arquitectes

VB: You explained that in your projects you make the existing elements part of your own. Your work continues what was started before. And describing your Sala Beckett renovation, you said there is no hierarchy in how memories of the old, the time of abandonment, and the new are articulated. Everything is mixed and fused, right?

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RF: We like it when we don't have to value one life over another, one time over another time. Why should we think the first life of a particular building was more important than after it was converted into something else? New circumstances also can be very important. And we don't like to remove too much from what's already there. First, it may be quite dangerous from the structural point of view [Laughs.]. The less you touch an old building the better. When you inherit old walls and details you cannot do better.

EP: Yet in other cases, it is by removing partitions or ceilings that we can expose and articulate the generosity of space of original buildings. That's why first, we try to read the building, and only then do we impose the program.

VB: In a way, you work with multiple authors.

RF: That's true. The challenge is to preserve and accentuate different authorships, as they may be quite fragile. Because even if the point is to preserve a particular space that, in the end, may look as if nothing had happened, in reality, there is a foundation that may need to be repaired, new fire codes implemented, the structure may need to be replaced, and so on. So, in the end, there may be a lot of work done but to a visitor, it may not be apparent.

VB: What would you say is common in all of your buildings?

RF: For sure, our attitude towards research. We work with very different programs but we always work with light, the way we focus on welcoming people, and how we treat the surrounding context.

EP: We don't have any preferred materials. We use what the market offers and whatever our next building offers. But we always work with natural light because that's what will bring up the quality of any material we use.

VB: In one of your interviews, you said that you use light as a construction material, which is very poetic.

EP: We absolutely think so.

RF: After all, it is a free material.

EP: That's where the emotions come from, the light!

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About Author



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Vladimir is an American curator, critic, and columnist with STIR. He graduated from the Cooper Union School of Architecture (1996) and after practicing architecture for 12 years, founded New York-based Curatorial Project. It focuses on the curation and design of architectural exhibitions. He has interviewed over 400 architects; written 15 books, including *Conversations with Architects* and *China Dialogues*; curated over 50 exhibitions, and has lectured in more than 30 countries.

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