"Our Projects Are like Detective Stories": In Conversation with Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores

Written by **Vladimir Belogolovsky** Published on October 10, 2023

Eva Prats and Ricardo Flores started their Barcelona-based practice, Flores & Prats Arquitectes in 1998 after both worked at the office of Enric Miralles. They overlapped for about one year there, from 1993 to 1994. After her nine-year stint with Miralles, Eva won the EUROPAN III International Housing Competition with a friend. The success that led to a real commission and was going to be built, served as the springboard for starting their independent practice. Shortly thereafter they won another competition. Ricardo joined Eva after working for five years with Miralles. By then they were a couple for three years and decided to start working together. Today they practice out of the same sprawling apartment where Eva's original studio rented a room along with several other young architects and designers. Even though the office now occupies the entire space—the architects told me they typically employ ten, no more than twelve people—they keep traces and memories of the former "dwellers" alive. Curiously, Eva and Ricardo implement the same strategy in their architectural projects as well.

The very first competition project the architects worked on together, they won. It was an urban plan for a small town near Barcelona. Soon new commissions followed. The partners kept working in similar ways they did with Miralles—drawing, drawing over, making models, and continuing to draw. In our recent interview that follows a short introduction, they told me, "The way we work is as if we try to avoid solving problems 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."

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Eva Prats was born in Barcelona and Ricardo Flores in Buenos Aires, both in 1965. She studied architecture at the ETSAB, Barcelona School of Architecture, graduating in 1992, while he studied at the Faculty of Architecture in Buenos Aires FADU-UBA, also completing his degree in 1992. Ricardo then did his Master in Urban Design at ETSAB in 1993-94, graduating in 1996. Both architects completed their PhDs after many years of practice—he at his Alma Mater, ETSAB in 2016, and she at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, RMIT in 2019.

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The architects' work is strikingly atmospheric. It is thoroughly tactile and palpable. Its essence is in its materiality, craftsmanship, and accumulation of traces of history. They focus on dealing with older buildings, although their practice is not at all about preserving them. They simply refuse to start from scratch and consciously look for open-ended opportunities to build on and to keep adding on. The result, which is always incomplete, is quite fascinating. Their buildings and interiors seem to grow quite organically as they continue to adapt to new programs, uses, and specific situations and moments. Among the architects' widely published projects are such as Providencia House (Barcelona, 2006), Casal Balaguer Cultural Centre (Palma de Mallorca, 2016), Mills Museum (Palma de Mallorca, 2002), and Sala Beckett (Barcelona, 2016). The latest has become a seminal project for practitioners around the world since their methods of dealing with history have turned into a movement of sorts.

Vladimir Belogolovsky: Let's start with your studio space which you've been occupying all along. I understand that you use it as a kind of design laboratory. How so?

Eva Prats: This apartment makes us aware of preindustrial construction techniques from the late 19th century. There are old doors and tiles that are very delicate, beautiful, and inspirational. There is a gorgeous staircase with Catalan vaults with overlapping arches, similar to the ones that Guastavino built in New York but on a much smaller scale, of course. This stair is really striking. I remember when I was working here in the very beginning, I was so afraid of going up that I was trying to walk very carefully and close to the walls. [Laughs.] The whole structure looks so impossibly thin! I couldn't understand how it all worked. There is a lot of culture and ingenuity embedded in such structures. For sure, our building has an influence on us, and our eyes are used now to many beautiful techniques and sensibilities that we come across here all the time. Unlike other architects who like to take things out and replace them with their own, we enjoy observing what this apartment is offering to us.

Ricardo Flores: Our eyes are constantly getting used to how things age and we learn how not to interfere with this process, which in itself is so beautiful. The accumulation of history and different traces is an asset for us and we try to preserve as much as possible. In this apartment, most rooms have changed users and functions but many traces remain. We still call some of the rooms by the names of the former occupants and there are features that remind us of their presence. We gladly accept what we inherit. Projects like Sala Beckett benefited from what we learned and tested right here first. The apartment is somewhat pedagogical for us; it points us in certain directions that have become our overarching strategy, first unconsciously and now quite purposefully. If we know that old doors can be beautiful why throw them away and replace them with something that has no character? We constantly ask how we are treating our heritage. We can't keep on demolishing buildings. We should treasure our memories.

VB: When you describe your work, you use such words and phrases as observation, a state of ruin, scars, uncertainties and doubts, intuitive, adaptive reuse, second life, quality of the unfinished, old-fashioned architecture, and no urgency for a solution. What would you say your work is about and what kind of architecture do you try to achieve?

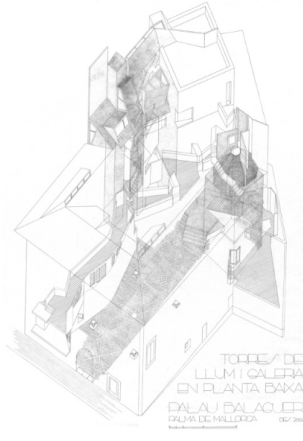
EP: We dedicate our work to future users. We think of our work as a sort of present to the people who will enjoy it. We work with our clients a lot. They are the ones who give us lots of clues. We need freedom in these relationships but we also need to condition our work with specific requirements. In each project, we are working towards creating a relationship with the client and becoming confident that they are getting the best possible project from us. We try not to specialize in what we do but we develop ideas in how we do it. We never jump to solutions too fast; we need to learn so much before that.

RF: Among the things you mentioned, uncertainties and doubts, are very important because every project opens a series of possibilities, questions, and interests. Every project is a research field for us. That's why we have no urgency in finding a solution because we want to investigate where different possibilities may take us. Research doesn't need urgency. It is about having a passion for trying again and testing new ways of designing. That's what we like and enjoy—being able to draw again and again to discover new findings. We don't fear failure; we enjoy the process.

VB: I am very curious about your design process. I know that Enric Miralles would typically start with a plan, which continuously accumulated layers of information. He tended to postpone expressing a final vision. It would materialize slowly, like a journey. How do you start and work on projects?

EP: I think very much the same way. We also start with the plan. Mentally we control all the heights and we have an idea about the section without drawing it. We also need to incorporate all the context around it. And yes, it is like a journey.

RF: We like our plans to incorporate different conversations with our clients. One of the advantages of hand drawing is that it has an open condition. It invites new players to join our conversation. When we go over our drawings everyone understands them as a process and things can be argued and improved. This material is open-ended and we constantly feed and update it with inputs from our clients and consultants. We enjoy this process very much. We try to be flexible enough for our projects to keep growing with information and complexity. That's why we use the kind of geometry that would allow such flexibility for adapting to changes. For that reason, we avoid using any kind of system or module. Our geometry is entirely situational and very specific. That's what makes our drawings and projects incomplete and adaptive. They can be extended by new conversations. The same is true for our choice of materials. Some things we are sure of, while others may lack certainty. Some conditions are drawn and others are left blank for the time being. And parallel to using computers our main material is produced by hand on paper. We think as we draw. We add another layer of vellum paper and we continue to draw. We are interested in reflections, not solutions.



VB: Architects tend to complain about being pushed by clients to work very fast. But you keep insisting on working slowly. Does this mean that you are specifically looking for slow projects? Where do you find them?

RF: [Laughs.] They seem to find us. But this does not mean that we don't meet deadlines. And we do work for the municipality here, which has very tight schedules and fixed budgets.

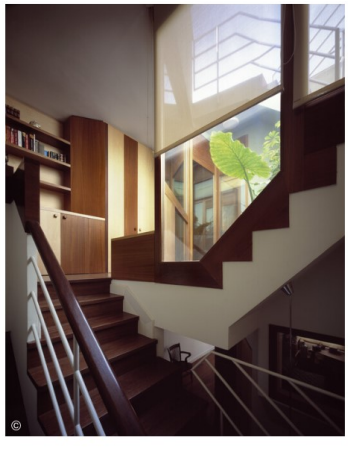
EP: What allows us to work this way is that we are not distracted by many projects. We never work on more than three projects at a time, including two major ones. We make sure we have time. And we have a small team, typically just ten people, never more than twelve. Some are our current or former students and others come from other parts of the world.

VB: Miralles has said, "To be permanent is contrary to existence. Things are forever changing." He called his architecture, "A machine to collect time." What do you think about this idea of architecture being edited and adapted to new realities?

RF: Of course, we agree with Enric's point of view. We never try to preserve ruins; we adapt them to new uses. We love working on projects that constitute containers of time. There is no hierarchy for us. Each time and use are equally important. We add our own hands to all previous hands that have touched the projects we are working on.

VB: You have said, "We think that simply preserving the old building is not respecting it." Why is that?

EP: Because pure preservation makes buildings difficult to use. Buildings should be incorporated into the contemporary lives of cities and people. First, buildings need to respond to their programs. This is what we call the right to inherit. We try to make buildings useful. That's what will ultimately make the occupants happy. We find it very enjoyable working with older buildings because they offer very different conditions for living and working. They are typically much more generous in terms of space and materials.



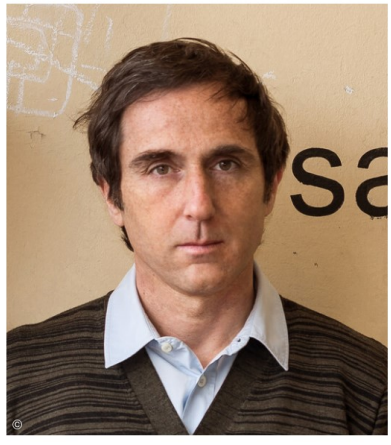
RF: We think it shows how much we respect a historical building by not simply preserving it but by bringing it into our own time. Ruins are simply beautiful to look at but an old building should be more than that; it should be useful again in new and exciting ways. But if you leave it untouched and preserved, you leave it to die, in a way. It is like saying to the building, "You are no longer able to participate in contemporary life. You are finished." By touching and modifying old buildings we show our respect to them and we want them to be useful again.

EP: We also want to work with these buildings' special qualities. We want people to be emotionally touched by buildings. We experiment with these ideas all the time, both in our practice and in teaching. It takes time and skills to match a building with its new program. How the two are aligned is crucial.

VB: Your work seems to be fully focused on adaptive reuse. Did you pursue this direction from the beginning? What triggered this interest and where did the idea of keeping as many traces of old structures as possible come from?

EP: It so happened that many of our projects from the beginning were existing buildings that needed rehabilitation. That kept our focus on dealing with older structures. We liked that because by then we developed an empathy for old buildings because, in the late 1980s, we experienced widespread demolition when Barcelona was preparing for the 1992 Summer Olympics. We thought that process was uninformed and quite radical. We believe that more surgical strategies could be implemented and many beautiful buildings could have been saved. We were shocked because we knew people living in those buildings. There was so much history, culture, and beauty being lost. It was senseless to lose buildings with such exquisite carpentry, stonework, and so on. So, for us that became a point when we decided to focus on giving old buildings a new life. We thought architects were focused too much on new construction. We did not want to be a part of that movement. That's when our concern grew and perhaps coincidentally, many of our projects were renovations of apartments, factories, and so on. Eventually, adaptive reuse became a conscious focus for us.

RF: Many of our projects are done through competitions and typically when we decide on what competition to enter, we choose those that focus on adaptive reuse. As Eva said, our initial concerns were based on intuition. But with experience, we decided to work predominantly on adaptive reuse projects and even brought this theme to our school projects where we examine them quite methodically. We find these exercises with students very effective because when you work on a new project, you can design almost anything. But when you work with existing conditions your response is like a dialogue. That's why we enjoy these projects more than those that are entirely new. We value the idea of continuity more than inventing something from scratch. To us, our projects are like detective stories. There are so many questions about what happened in the past. It is like gossiping, in a way. There are all kinds of intrigues in these projects. There are so many clues and traces that trigger your imagination. That's how a conversation begins.



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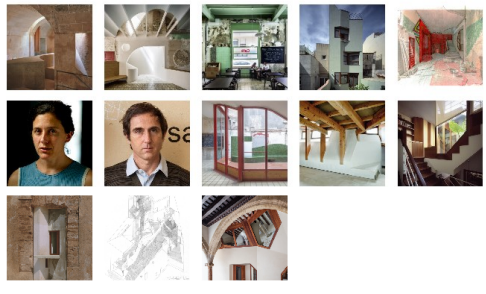

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