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Transcending style and language

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Zaragoza-Delicias Intermodal Station (1999-2004): This important transportation hub was designed to be a light-filled 'indoor city', with a hotel and convention centre, stores, and parking lots.

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Steered by internationally acclaimed Spanish architect Carlos Ferrater, a Barcelona-based design studio reveals its philosophy through its stunning body of work.

IT was a project that was seven years in the making – from its conception in 1997 to its completion in 2004. At last, the Castellón Auditorium and Convention Centre in Spain was ready to host its first concert and make its debut as one of the few asymmetrical auditoriums in the world.

On opening night, Carlos Ferrater, the architect responsible for its design, was sitting in the audience with his son, Borja.

“In the middle of the concert, the Russian pianist stopped and stood up,” recalls Borja, who anticipated a backlash. “He said: ‘I have to say the

acoustics are amazing and I have never experienced this before.' I went 'phew!'



Wavering wonder: Benidorm Beach Waterfront (2005-2009): This 1.8km multi-functional promenade acts as a transition from the city to the beach and sea, a rest and relaxation area, and vantage point for the ocean view. The sinuous white concrete structure is evocative of a cliff and the motion of waves. OAB clinched 18 international awards for this project. — Photos by ALEJO BAGUÉ

“I often tell my students, you have to assume risks in architecture in order to innovate. Some architects have died of heart attack during the opening of their building,” Borja says, as his audience in Kuala Lumpur breaks into laughter.

Borja, 35, was one of the speakers at last month’s DATUM:KL 2013 event organised by PAM (Pertubuhan Arkitek Malaysia). Together with his father Carlos, his sister Lucía, and brother-in-law Xavier Martí Galí, Borja founded Office of Architecture in Barcelona (OAB) in 2006.

An internationally acclaimed architect, Carlos’s illustrious career spanned 40 years. Noted for award-winning projects like the Barcelona Botanical Garden and Zaragoza-Delicias high-speed train station, Carlos’ diversified portfolio – which includes everything from public and private facilities and buildings to single residences and yacht clubs – makes him a sought-after architect in Spain. In 2009, he was awarded Spain’s National Architecture Award in recognition of his career and for “having become the indisputable reference for generations of architects”.

Carlos won an international competition to design the Zaragoza-Delicias station, pitting himself against formidable peers like Norman Foster, Richard Rogers and Santiago Calatrava. Emblematic of 21st century stations, the space functions like an efficient airport – yet it is smack in the middle of a city. It takes a passenger just 40 seconds to leave a parked car and hop onto a train.



House For A Photographer II (2003-2006): Built by Carlos Ferrater for his brother amidst rice fields and orchards and with an ocean view, the house is made up of three pavilions — a living-dining-kitchen area, master bedroom, and an artist's studio. Akin to a sculptural installation, the buildings' white concrete, abstract planes and interesting geometry are Ferrater signatures.

Eschewing showy architecture, Carlos's buildings are an exercise in restraint and feature clean-cut forms, complex geometries, and abstract planes. Noted historian and critic William J.R. Curtis writes in *Carlos Ferrater* (Actar Publishers, 2000): "The sensuous materials and elegant details of his buildings reveal an intense enjoyment in construction and a commitment to the craft."

Taking risks, staying humble

Since the formation of OAB, Carlos and his young team continue breaking new ground. The small yet dynamic OAB studio comprises 18 people, including Carlos' wife, interior designer Inés Arquer, and it serves as a laboratory of ideas where architects dabble with different typologies.

The Benidorm West Beach Promenade project in the resort town of Benidorm, south-west of Barcelona, reflects the team's ingenious design sensibilities. An organic layout evokes the shape of cliffs and the waves. Serving as a transit between the city and the beach, the sinuous 1.8km-long structure comprises a sculptural concrete shell and colour-coded,

landscaped tile paths punctuated by stairways and ramps that give access to town and beach. A slender boardwalk that winds around the base allows beachgoers to stroll, cycle and jog.



AA House (2009-2011): Reminiscent of origami sculptures, the structures comprising this private residence rise from the ground with a series of sharply sloping roofs accommodating large expanses of glass that allow a visual connection with the exterior.

“A million tourists usually throng Benidorm during summer and yet there was no public space prior to the promenade,” says Borja.

With a proposed budget of 18mil (RM75.3mil), OAB had to be resourceful in keeping costs down. “Our profession is not just about making the form and letting others solve the technical issues. We had to be there, next to engineers and clients from the beginning till the end,” Borja explains.

“We take risks but we also know when to draw the line (like when costs double or triple). It’s imperative to adjust to the budget and try to understand the client. And when you work for governments, it’s the needs of society and the people’s money.”

With trial and error, the team came up with a solution of 18 prefabricated concrete moulds with different combinations to create a variation along the length of the promenade.

The project garnered rave reviews from peers and snagged 18 different international awards.

“But the most beautiful award was the one given by the city. They invented the prize to give it to us because they didn’t have such awards,” says Borja. The city also commissioned OAB to extend the promenade for another 500m. “My father always says it is one of the most fulfilling projects.”

Though OAB is willing to gamble and push design envelopes, Borja cautions against being arrogant. “We need to be flexible enough to admit mistakes and do things differently,” he explains. Tap into the knowledge of experts from other disciplines, be they engineers or horticulturists, he adds.

“My father would never have done an asymmetrical auditorium without the help of acoustic engineer Higini Arau, one of the best in his profession,” says Borja.

Winner of *Wallpaper** magazine’s Design Awards 2010, the Roca Barcelona Gallery is a collaboration between Borja and experts from glass manufacturer Cricursa as well as lighting consultants. Borja conceived a facade that would arouse curiosity and draw people into the gallery. A layering of multiple pieces of glass arranged at 90° to the axis of the facade creates effects like reflection, refraction, defraction, distortion and superimposition of images. At night, 4,200 LED bulbs illuminate the building and create a glowing box with an illusion of cascading water.

Pritzker Prize-laureate Glenn Murcutt once said, “A style doesn’t have any depth of principles behind it. A style, you can do this or do that or do something else.”

For OAB, each project is a blank slate.

“We don’t try to create a singular language or style. We start each project from scratch, with a pencil and a white sheet of paper,” says Borja.

“It’s hard because you tend to draw from your past experiences. But the style or language that defines those projects will become a dead weight on a new project.”

As Carlos states unequivocally in his monograph: “It’s not a question of consolidating a language, but of learning to master a set of tools: space, volume, light; the relationship between these elements. Because only by mastering this set of instruments can the architect arrive at the degree of abstraction needed to turn his work into something creative (*Carlos Ferrater*).”

Indeed, OAB’s works reflect the studio’s ability to deal with conditions like transitions from public to private spaces, the integration of the man-made and the natural, the flow of air, irregular topography, and the control and angle of light.

Venturing abroad

In 2007, 90% of OAB projects were based in Spain; these days, 90% of their projects are outside Spain, in countries like Brazil, Morocco and Turkey.

“I think this era of ‘franchise architecture’, working all over the world (creating generic buildings that have no local context) is over,” says Borja. “But it doesn’t mean we can’t work abroad. It’s about networking, working with local architects, trying to be in the place, understanding the culture, people and context, and construction techniques.”

A fan of Mexican architect Luis Barragán, Borja loves the idea of *mestizaje* – different races and cultures mixing.

“What comes out of a mixture of cultures is much better than being radical and trying to close yourself in,” he says.

As for OAB’s aspirations?

“We (all architects) have a big challenge. What we see here (at Datum) is 1% of what’s being built outside. The majority of things are economic-oriented, generic and far from real design,” Borja says.

“How do we find the middle ground? Our goal as architects is not to design only a pyramid for the pharaoh,” he concludes, “I can work for an NGO and a multi-millionaire and produce great architecture for both.”