

A User's Manual: Justification and Singularity of this Building/Book

Ricardo Devesa

As the editor of this book, I intend to address two questions by way of introduction. Two questions that anyone thinking of buying a book dedicated to a work of architecture should ask themselves before doing any reading-perusing-studying-analyzing. First, why has an entire book been dedicated to this penitentiary? Second, what should we expect from the book's content? In other words, how should we go about delving into the material that was created and compiled for it? In short, the "why" of this book and, subsequently, the "what".

Let's look at the first question. What justifies dedicating a monograph to a building in general, and to this building in particular? Would it be enough to say that it provides adept technical and building solutions? No; if that were the case a few pages in a technical magazine would suffice, for example. The same would be true if it were distinguished by its construction process, or its flexible uses, or its ingenious form. In all those cases, a photographic feature would be ideal, which could be distributed via an online platform or a commercial magazine, perhaps.

So then, what makes a building deserving of a monograph? Let's look at some projects that have been the subject of monographs in the past. For example, there is the Yokohama Maritime Terminal, by FOA, or the Seattle Library by OMA/LMN, as well as the Sendai Mediatheque, by Toyo Ito (all published by Actar). These singular designs were the object of an entire book because their overall approach was completely new and they introduced new areas for debate in the discipline derived from their complexity, their spatial configurations, their programmatic organization, their contextual relationships. Moreover, they resolve all of these aspects comprehensively and in a different way than it had been done before.

Aren't these distinctive approaches, which extend beyond familiar solutions, precisely what Mas d'Enric Penitentiary offers? Indeed, Mas d'Enric proposes an original and unprecedented way of addressing the prison program; the design is developed with a regard for the inmates, who are provided with an experience of the outside in the very place that apparently exists to cut them off from it: all of which is addressed using inherently architectural qualities like spatial delimitation, functional organization, and the establishment of a relationship with the environment.

Now let's move on to the second question. How can we gather together all of the architectural value of the building into one print publication? Which material and what content should be used to describe the bravery and singularity of Mas d'Enric? The immediate response that any architect would support would involve a comprehensive compilation of the project's graphic documentation. Obviously. And that is the case here: a third of the pages are dedicated to drawings and photographs that describe the constituent parts of this large-scale penitentiary complex.

All the same, the design information alone would not be enough to really explain its idiosyncrasy. Why not? Because all of the reflection that is distilled into the building is relevant enough to warrant gathering the thought processes that unfolded during the design, in addition to a careful post-construction examination. A number of speculations and critical contributions were developed specifically for this occasion, based on reflections proposed by Roger Paez, one of the project's architects and author of this book. This block of discursive content is organized as a response to the seven concepts used by the architects as a starting point for Mas d'Enric, and which they gradually refined throughout the design and construction process. The seven keys were: visibility, genealogy, discipline and freedom, totality, vibration, the outside and typology-topology.

We have contrasted this reflective section derived from architectural discipline, with one that has nothing to do with it: a third block of content that was prepared transversally and across disciplines. In this case, seven artistic contributions introduce and present different possible readings of the new reality offered by the design for Mas d'Enric. A series of materials were created *ad hoc* based on the penitentiary, including a model-sculpture, a number of mixed-media assemblages, a literary text, a series of photographic diptychs, a piece of music, an architectural reinterpretation of the design and finally a fictional film, which was shot at the prison.

The order in which these three large sections are organized in the book is as follows: the conceptual comes first, then the descriptive, and finally the fictional. This order was chosen because our rational logic demands a presentation of the facts in keeping with architectural process: reflect, design, interpret. However, I recommend that readers begin at the end, like we tend to do with newspapers, because any other possible order for the three blocks is equally fitting. I would even advocate a skipping, disorderly reading of the sub-chapters included in each of the three parts. One way of putting it, I would approach the print publication as though it were a website: jumping from one section to the next, as curiosity dictates.

In any case, use this book as if it were a drawer full of material waiting to be discovered, each piece with its own storyline, its own unique perspective and particular observations. Free up the content that has been locked linearly onto the printed page. Don't settle for the confinement of how this prison's architecture is presented on these pages. Take apart the content that has been articulated here. Once it's out of order, then put it back together according to your own vision and understanding. That's the only way you'll be able to see why this building deserved its own monographic.