

# A TOUR OF THE "GRAN HOTEL"



GRAN HOTEL, PALMA DE MALLORCA, DOMÈNECH I MONTANER  
RESTORATION BY JAUME MARTÍNEZ AND PERE NICOLAU

THE RESTORATION OF THE GRAN HOTEL WAS A STIMULATING CHALLENGE SINCE IT INVOLVED PUTTING THE BUILDING TO A TOTALLY DIFFERENT USE FROM THE ONE IT WAS BUILT FOR.

JOSEP ANTONI MARTÍNEZ I LLABRÉS ARCHITECT

I remember the days, still fresh in my memory though remote in time, when I walked with my father through the interior of the Gran Hotel, ravaged, old, silent, sad and almost ghostly. The holidays in Palma, my home town, faded before the inevitable return to Barcelona to take up my architectural studies once more. Chance then became my closest ally: an exhibition on Catalan Modernist architecture, and more specifically on the work of Domènech i Muntaner, with the title "Lluís Domènech



i Muntaner, Orchestral Conductor", summed up perfectly his concept of the architect's trade as the co-ordinator of an entire team of artisans in which each member was entrusted to carry out a specific task. Those sketches, drawings and plans took me back to the Mallorca of the beginning of the century, when an air of modernity had simultaneously inspired poets, writers, artists..., men and women devoted to the exaltation of the spirit in favour of a common cause: a culture of our own.



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Many things contributed to the appearance of an emblematic building in Palma, a building to represent a city whose doors were open to cosmopolitan visitors who would subsequently spread the mythical image built up around the island: Gaudí, Rossinyol, Mir, etc.

A cultural amenity of this nature deserved special attention in the dialogue the façade was to establish with the city. The play of structural volumes, the windows and doors and the sinuosity of the architectural elements would see to this. Painting, pottery and sculpture together made up an ornamental whole formed by a trilogy used only by the grand masters who studied the various artistic disciplines and humbly connected with the artisan, who finally carried out the architectural project.

In the building of the Gran Hotel in Palma, Domènech seems to have wanted to break with established patterns and models, especially as regards the rigidity of geometrical forms and in the predomi-

nance of curves at the corner where two faces meet. The semicircular balconies are one of the architect's great contributions in this building, a highly successful mechanism for buildings with two faces at right angles, which he was later to apply in other constructions.

The inauguration of the Gran Hotel in Palma in 1903 coincided with the appearance of the Majorcan school in literature, two events resulting from the complex modernization process affecting life in Mallorca. The building was rather like a public proclamation in favour of modernity, something the intellectual world had already accepted some years before, and the materialization of the wish to construct our own culture in our own language, but at the same time a modern, cosmopolitan culture which looked to progress for the necessary renovation and preservation of unrenounceable socio-cultural values. It was a question of giving shape to a tradition of our own capable of finding its place in the common

project of a diverse but universal Catalan national culture.

Years later, though, the "Instituto Nacional de Previsión" totally ruined the ground floor by getting rid of the arcades and the columns, the interior was disfigured by partitions and the whole building fell victim to an uncontrolled destruction which wiped out everything that was avant-garde and Catalanist about the architecture.

Ninety years later, another orchestra of artists, artisans and technicians came together under the baton of Jaume Martínez and Pere Nicolau. The aim was to recover a central element in the history of Majorcan architecture and return the beauty of its façade to the citizens by restoring everything that had been mutilated.

The restoration of the Gran Hotel was, according to Jaume Martínez, a stimulating challenge since it meant restoring a building which was to be put to a totally different use from that it had been built



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for and at the same time studying and handling a wholly local type of stone known as *marès*, in all its different uses: as a structural material that turns almost magically into ornamentation, something which, in view of its contradictory fragility, had to be protected from the passage of time and the aggressions suffered this century.

Furthermore, in the last stages of its life the building had undergone numerous interior modifications of all sorts, including structural modifications, which made it difficult to adapt to the new distribution called for by its new functions.

The purchase of the Anglada Camarassa collection introduced new and unforeseen conditioning factors, and because of the dimensions of some of the pictures called for an exhibition space with a very

high ceiling. This was what made the most important part of this project necessary, raising the level of the skylights in the rear courtyard and removing the ironwork on part of one floor.

Another substantial operation was the construction of a hall for concerts and conferences in the basement. The building's thick load-bearing walls have been eliminated and replaced by columns which leave all this area ethereal and almost empty.

At the same time, the restoration and reconstruction of the façade has been carried out with almost archaeological rigour to achieve the full aesthetic and cultural feeling of the period: the limestone and *marès* have been cleaned, the iron railings have been restored and the ceramics enamelled, the newly restored windows and stained glass once more en-

rich the interior with their magical light effects, elements such as the arches over the ground-floor windows have had their balance, power and elegance returned to them and all the elements that were removed or destroyed at some time have been reproduced and replaced. This process of restoration is a synthesis of what it is to rehabilitate a building with the greatest respect and rigour as regards the culture that made it possible.

The columns on the ground floor, until now buried under an added stone coating that denied their cultural identity, can today be seen in all their expressiveness and force as a metaphor of the roots of a culture and tradition of our own, which once more see the light of day after all these years of silence. Now is the time to be eloquent through a building that speaks of itself. ■