

# Moving air and light

Sergison Bates' cool, mysterious, sunlit home in Cadaqués has the same qualities as the Costa Brava townscape, writes *Mónica Rivera*. Photography by *David Grandorge*

If you go to Spain, the only village on the Spanish coast that is still beautiful is Cadaqués,' said José Antonio Coderch to architects Peter Harnden and Lanfranco Bombelli in the early 1950s. Some years later they arrived there to stay.

Cadaqués is a former fishing village in Northern Catalonia, located on a small peninsula that, for centuries, was virtually cut off from the mainland by mountains. Since the beginning of the 20th century – mainly through Dalí, and later Coderch, Harnden and Bombelli – the town has attracted such influential writers and artists as Picasso, García Lorca, Duchamp, Man Ray, Max Bill, John Cage, Richard Hamilton



Location plan

and Joseph Beuys, many of them guests of others with holiday homes there.

Together with the Catalan architects Federico Correa, Alfonso Milá and Coderch, Harnden (an American) and Bombelli (an Italian) made a celebrated contribution to the cultural life and architecture of the town. As Oriol Bohigas noted, they 'wisely set the tone of the '60s in Cadaqués by providing the models to develop a current of stylistic discretion' and 'succeeded in understanding the geographical and social reality of [the town]'.

The same could be said of the recently completed house in the old town by Sergison Bates Architects, carried out in association with the >>



Barcelona-based architectural practice, Liebman Villavecchia. The new house replaces a two-storey dwelling and a neighbouring structure in a state of ruin. The architects see it as an 'act of repair to the old town, mediating with the context and creating a renewed identity'.

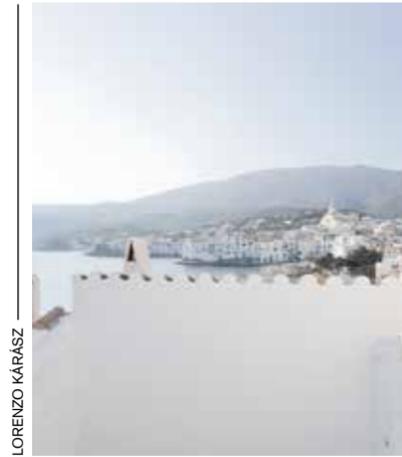
The house is essentially a linear assembly of rooms, shifted and shaped by the limits and opportunities afforded by the abutting walls, street and view to the sea. It is through a sensitive negotiation with these conditions that the architecture develops itself, giving character to each space and fitting into the fabric of Cadaqués.

Approaching the house down the narrow street from the north, the first impression is that its first room is the street itself, the bench on the house facade its first piece of furniture. At the height of the bench and flush with it is a small, fixed window with objects displayed on its interior sill, imbuing the outdoor street-room with the house's indoor sensibility.

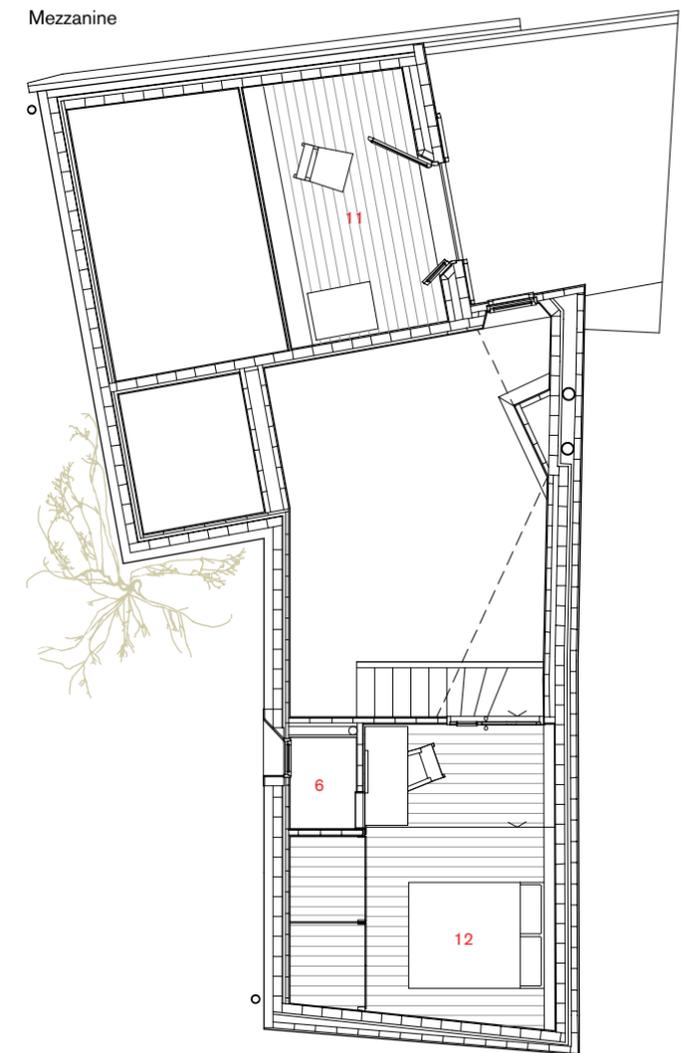
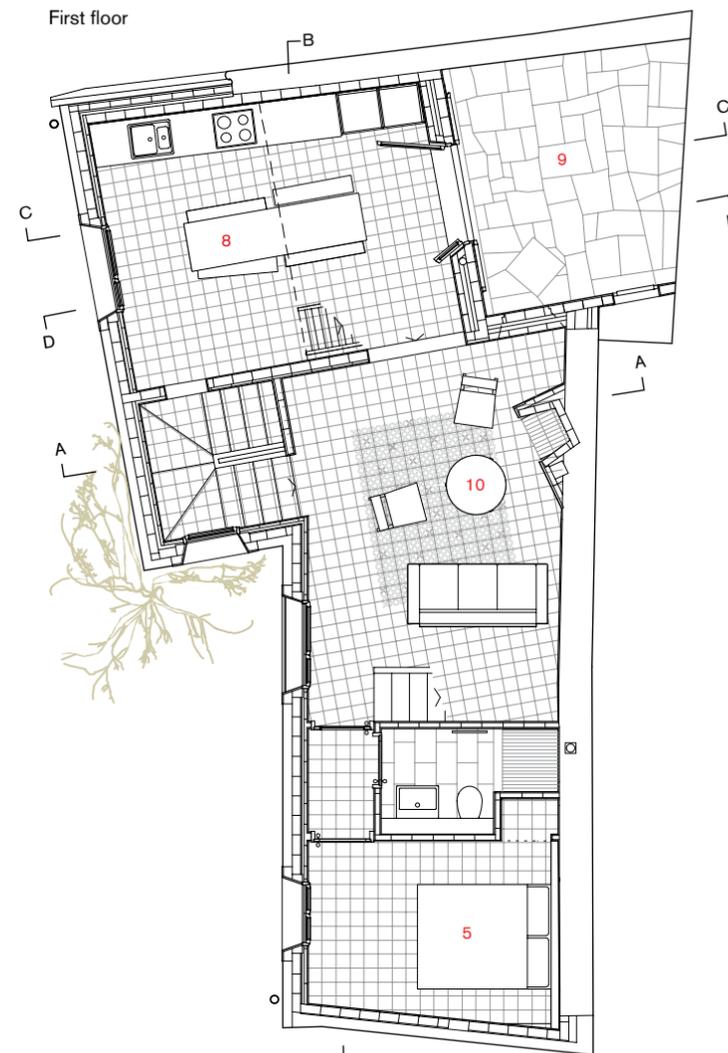
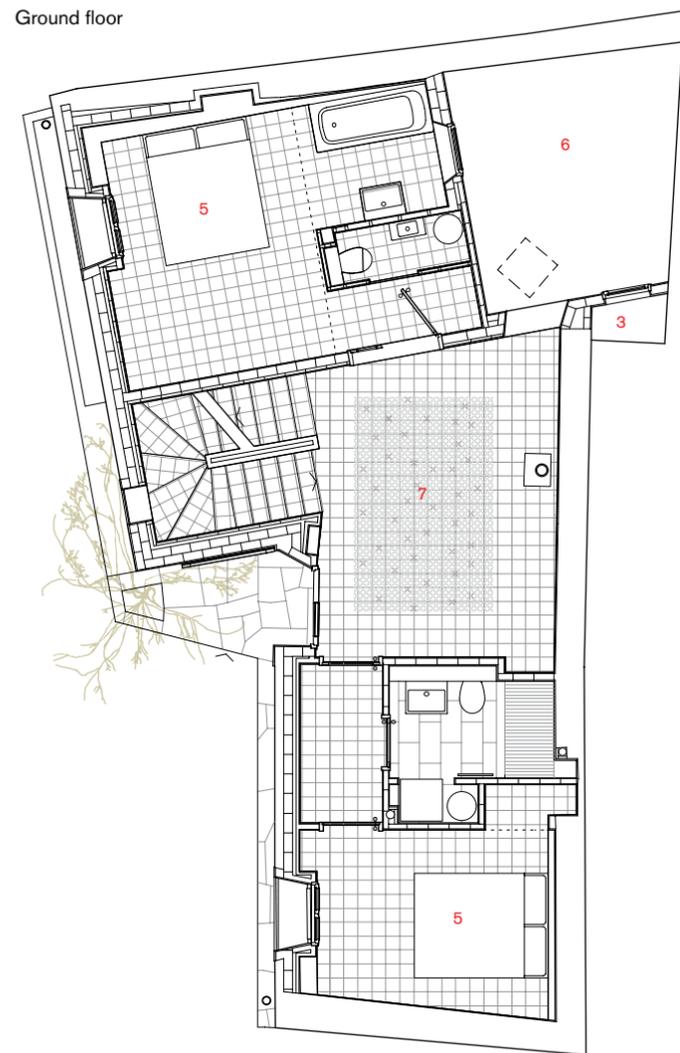
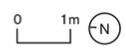
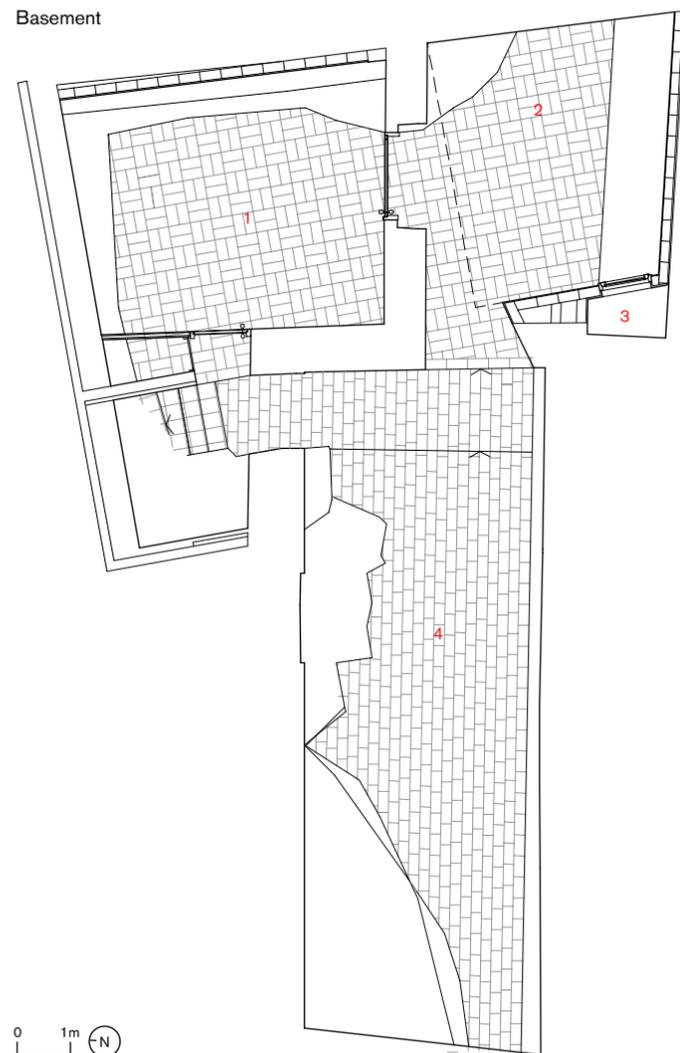
That this window has neither shutters nor curtains announces the wish for permanent yet subtle engagement with life in the street. Bending down to look through it, one catches a glimpse of the beautiful curved underside of the >>

Legend

1. Utility room
2. Tall room
3. Light shaft
4. Cave room
5. Bedroom
6. Void
7. Entrance hall
8. Dining room
9. Patio
10. Salon
11. Sea room
12. Attic room

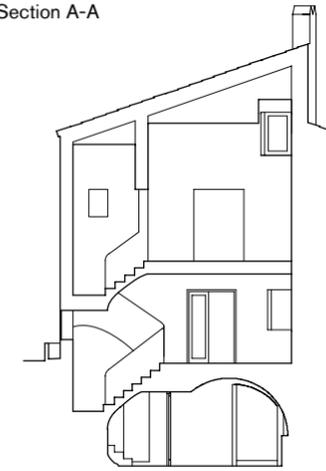


Previous spread  
Street elevation (to left) of Casa Voltes  
Far left View across Cadaqués from sea room  
Left First floor dining room Right Ground floor ensuite





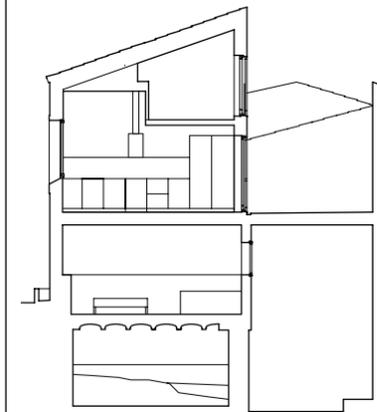
Section A-A



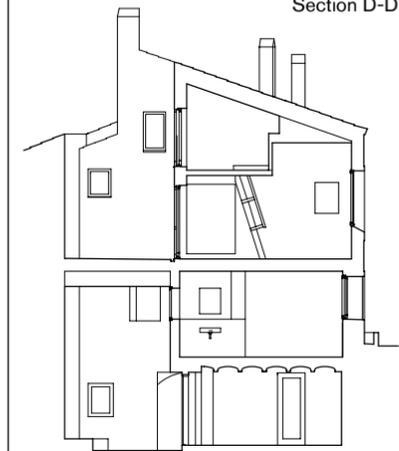
Section B-B



Section C-C



Section D-D



stairs, constructed with the traditional Catalan technique, the *volta catalana*, of layering flat, thin, terracotta tiles to form vaults.

The street-as-room feeling is shaped by a setback of the building and its entrance, a sequence of doors. The first is wooden and gate-like, flush with the facade; the feeling evoked is that it should be left open, so as to announce the presence of the family. The second door, flush with the inside of the wall, has a fixed glass window with

**A small square glass lets in light and anticipates an outdoor space above**

an interior wooden shutter, thereby developing further layers with which to fine-tune the degree of desired privacy.

The first room encountered is a large entrance hall housing a wood stove – a room for pausing and orientating oneself, it leads to and suggests others. An interior opening overlooks a tall space in the basement, above which a small rotated square glass lets in light and anticipates an outdoor space above. Between the double doors, leading into one of the two bedrooms giving onto this central hall, is yet another square glass, letting light into the basement.

Up the winding stairs is a central hall, the primary living area. Off this and a step down is another room, this one with a long table and kitchen counter. It leads to another room, >>

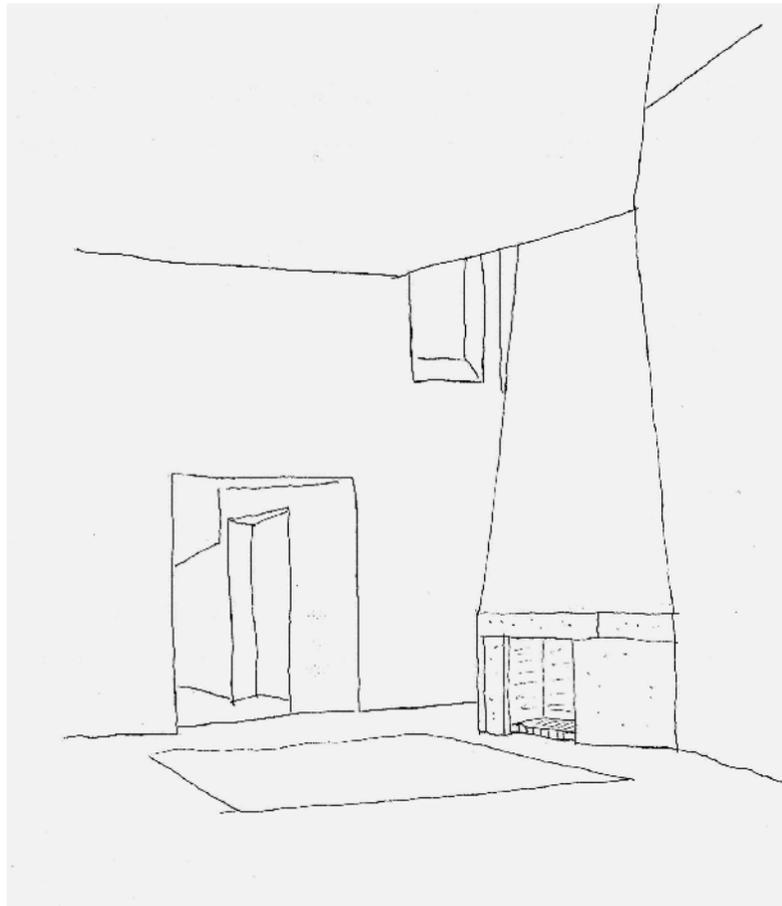
**Opposite** Entrance hall with 'drawn' tile carpet

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SERGISON BATES



**Clockwise from top left** Sketch, model and actual built salon with fireplace and tile 'carpet'

an outdoor one, a patio open to the sky.

The central hall – or salon – has a theatrical quality. With its high and modelled ceiling, double curtains at the entry from the stairs, 'drawn' tile carpet slightly rotated to emphasise the geometrical tension and its position one step above the kitchen, it acts as a stage and backdrop to the domestic life unfolding in and around it. The fireplace is the focal element, dramatically sculpted by the light from a south-facing side window. The space has the virtue of making all casual and relaxed activities memorable – the beauty of the stage embellishes the memory of meaningful gatherings around a fire.

A careful orchestration of different interior windows is found throughout the house: fixed, without glass, interior to interior, in the floor or roof, flush, recessed. Combined with shafts and

voids, they distribute light and provide cross-ventilation in every room, even the mezzanines and basement, where a masonry shaft connects a low window to a high one in the patio. It is a strategy of moving air and light, while exploiting the windows' potential for creating painterly strokes of light.

From ground level up, the heavy masonry holds a delicate and seemingly weightless interior. In contrast to the root-like underground space from which the house springs, and where rock is left exposed, above ground an overall taciturn tectonic expression is found, in which the joints between materials are present but dimmed and surfaces appear to be very thin.

The pressed-cement floor tiles are an uneven, off-white colour, resembling a wash. A soft sheen accentuates the slight unevenness of the narrow joints;

an imperfect finish counterbalances the carefulness applied to other details, relaxing the atmosphere. In both central halls, the colourful tiled 'carpets' are cool in summer and warmed in winter by the radiant floor heating.

Edges and surfaces susceptible to wear are lined with local white marble, placed flush on one side and revealing its thickness on the other. When used as window sills, the marble butts against the render, concealing its edge and resembling fire-hardened stucco, its tectonic expression disappearing.

The house's spatial configuration resists immediate understanding, thus granting spaces the paused, rich quality of old constructions that have been built additively. Sergison Bates' interest in the 'arrangement of interconnected rooms' is evident in their considered sequence – some of transit and encounter, >>





RIGHT: SERGISON BATES



others of repose and privacy. In some, uses are not prescribed. The house is shared by two families and bedrooms have no assigned owner. People must re-conquer a room on each visit by bringing a basket of belongings – a simple but powerful act that reinforces the idea of sharing and the house's semi-public character. Many holiday homes are led by the idea of a private paradise to which one escapes. This

### People must re-conquer a room on each visit by bringing their belongings

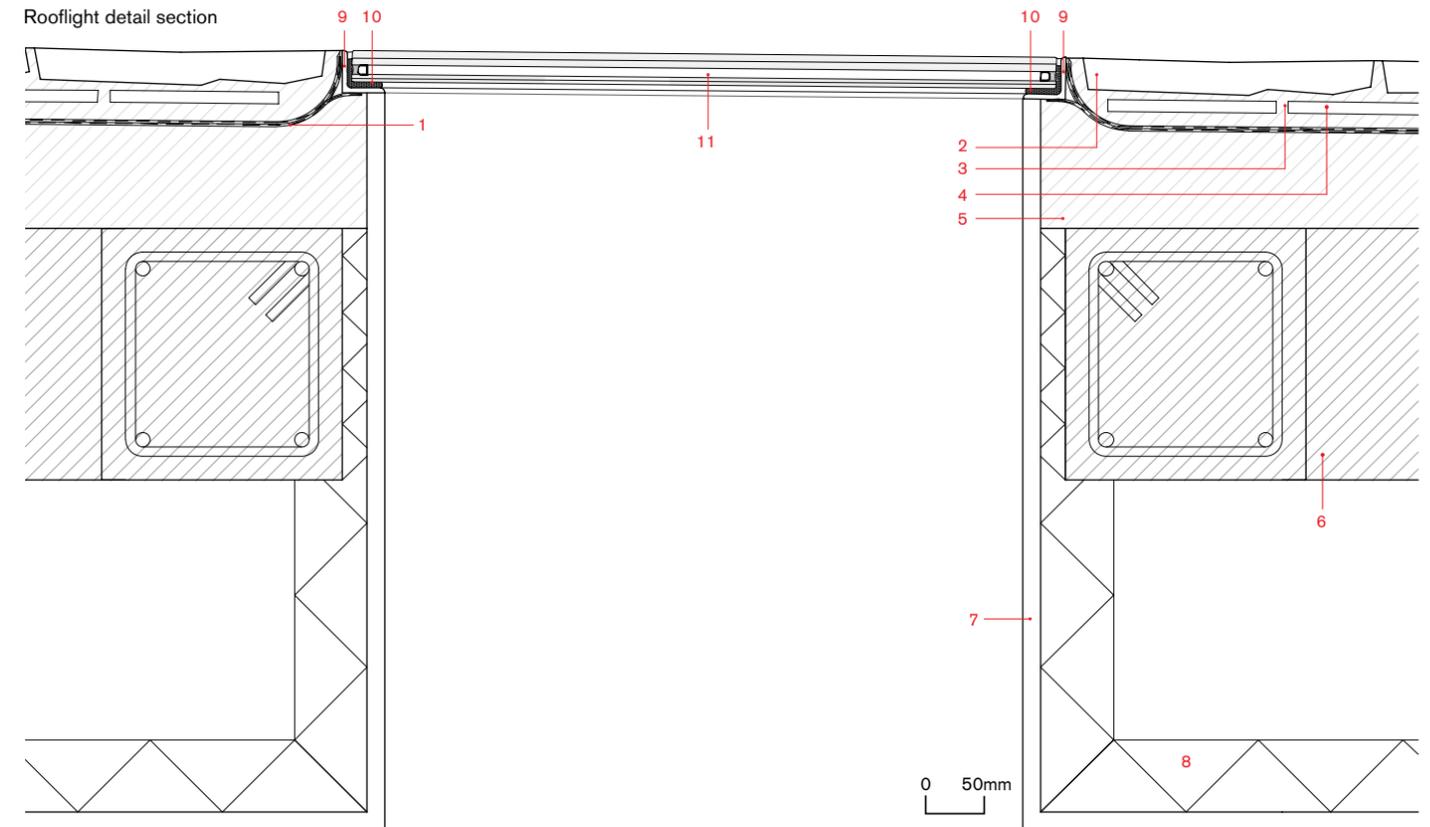
house explores the opposite – the enjoyment of participating in a place's culture. As well as challenging established notions of holidays, it offers – as did Harnden and Bombelli's work decades ago – a renewed model for intervening in the city. In explaining the birth of the classical Mediterranean city, Ortega y Gasset said: 'The house is put up to be in it, and the city is founded in order to go out of the house and meet other people who have gone out of theirs.' In that sense, the 'act of repair' goes beyond the physical; it contributes to recovering the essence of the city by making a home to be in, in the city. ■  
*Mónica Rivera is co-founder of Emiliano López Mónica Rivera Arquitectos*

**Above left** Stairs leading to basement and first floor from entrance hall  
**Top** Curtained entrance to salon  
**Above** Christmas Day at Casa Voltes  
**Opposite, top** The grotto-like basement

#### Project data

START ON SITE April 2008  
COMPLETION December 2011  
GROSS INTERNAL FLOOR AREA 192m<sup>2</sup>  
TOTAL COST £350,000  
COST PER SQUARE METRE £1,800  
CLIENT Stephen and Jane Bates, Caroline Marston  
ARCHITECTS Sergison Bates Architects  
STRUCTURAL ENGINEER Static Ingeniera  
QUANTITY SURVEYOR Tècnics-G3  
CARPENTRY Fusteria Vilà Torrents  
ELECTRICAL & PLUMBING Instal·lacions Pedro López  
PROJECT MANAGER Mireia Comajuncosa  
MAIN CONTRACTOR Construccions Granados  
CAD SOFTWARE USED Vectorworks

## Working detail



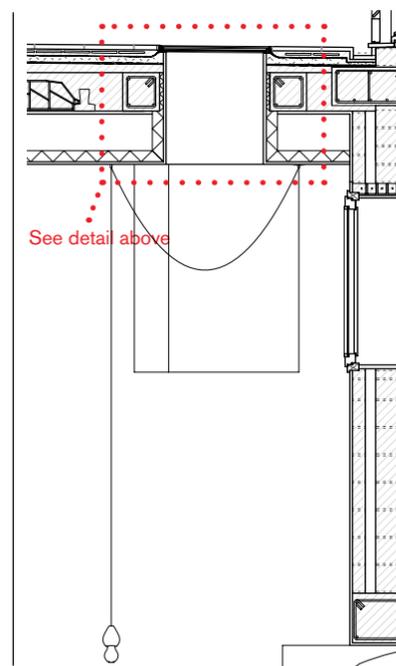
### Casa Voltes

Sergison Bates Architects

#### Rooflight detail

The two rooflights set into floors in the house in Cadaqués are typical of those found in Catalonia. I believe they originated during the *ensanche* ('widening') of Barcelona in the late 19th century.

The building regulations of 1891 allowed for extension at the rear of the block beyond the originally-allowed maximum depth. Glass plates were set into floors to bring natural light into the structures and in time they became a commonplace detail. They feature in paintings by Ramon Casas depicting the daily life of the bourgeoisie, as if to identify the



#### Legend

1. Waterproof membrane
2. Irregular stone paver
3. Mortar
4. Flat terracotta tile
5. Base and drainage slope formation: lightweight concrete
6. Structural concrete slab
7. Painted plaster on plasterboard support
8. Thermal insulation
9. 35 x 35mm stainless steel angle frame
10. Silicone seal
11. 600 x 600 x 26mm double glazed unit with laminated glass

context of *modernista* Barcelona to the viewer.

In our project, a 600 x 600 x 26mm double-glazed unit of laminated glass is set in a 35 x 35 x 3mm stainless-steel, angle frame with a silicone seal joint and laid flush with the slate surface of the first-floor patio.

The rooflight is the primary source of daylight to the 5m-high underground room below it, bathing it in ethereal light and contributing to this space having a cool and serene interior atmosphere.

In the heat of summer this basement room, together with the adjoining bodega, becomes a popular space for siestas, quiet study and exercise.

*Stephen Bates is a partner at Sergison Bates Architects and professor of Urbanism and Housing at the Technische Universität, Munich*