

Architectural Design and History

Spaces of Memory. Commentaries on 21st Century Buildings

edited by Luigi Spinelli

FrancoAngeli

The Bookseries *Architectural Design and History* intends to explore the relationships between architectural design and the contemporary city, with a particular focus on the contexts where urban transformations relate to the preservation and promotion of historical heritage. By intersecting various theories, techniques and practices, the contributions aim at unfolding the complex identity of the architectural culture, fostering connections and exchanges among different disciplines, and enhancing a strategical and evolutionary conception of architectural heritage.

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**Elisa Valero
Ramos.
Two or Three
Things I Know
About Her Work**

Luigi Spinelli

Elisa Valero Ramos' work can be understood through the reading of few fundamental themes, that are visible in her architecture and closely related to each other.

The first one is the ability to redeem the constraints that are always included in the events of the project, through a common approach to different situations, focused on the logical appropriateness of the solutions. Very often conditioned by the economy of means and time, Elisa Valero demonstrates the courage of those who are aware of being able to master the distributive characters of architectural space and to inflect the visual and tactile expression of surfaces and materials, adopting the experimental attitude of those who want to perform a service to the society they belong to through architecture, and those who show in their work a mode of strong affection for the spaces inhabited by the people¹.

When she established her new studio on *Calle Belén* in Granada in 2009, she bet on the enhancement of the quality of her dwelling and working spaces in a small size — a lot with a front of 10 meters and a depth of only 3.6 meters. Perfectly inserted in the curtain road, the tall and shallow building is organized vertically on five levels; at the ends of the rectangular plan, the vertical distribution and the services absorb the geometric irregularity of the lot and produce a free space in the center. A double height underground level, intended for archives and projection rooms, is illuminated by rectangular skylights cut out on the upper level floor. At the level of the road, a driveway accessible by a large sliding door acts as an entrance. Through a steep staircase that occupies the southern portion of the house depth, it is possible to reach the two intermediate levels, which house study and meeting rooms, illuminated by three row openings. The upper level, characterized by a double-height ceiling, is the architect's private studio, illuminated by a large horizontal window, onto which a small but functional kitchenette topped with a relaxation space² is opened. Some years earlier (2000-03) she had worked in similar conditions, when she designed the house of Luis Garzón Isác and Maria José García García in *Calle San Isidro* 54, a six level building surmounted by a terrace overlooking Granada.

As in 2009, Elisa Valero managed to achieve three results with one simple solution, which can be synthesized with the motto «a crossed

garden» — which includes the creation of an art gallery, the connection of two buildings, and the saving of a garden. The project in fact shapes a new relationship between two stone architectures immersed in a property in the Sierra Norte country, delimited by a low stone wall and dotted by oaks and corks, through the addition of an underground space, covered by a 25 cm reinforced concrete slab supporting the garden.

This new space is a gallery, housing the art collection of Plácido Arango, a collector from Madrid, and gives him the opportunity to have a continuous relationship with his artworks, day and night, without renouncing to the relationship with light and nature. The underground environment is organized on one level, with clear surfaces and a plan designed to avoid any interference with the roots of the trees. The environment is interrupted by a single longitudinal load-bearing partition, and it is connected to the vertical distribution of the two pre-existing houses (one intersecting a large reception room, the other the sleeping area and the library). A sequence of 45 rectangular skylights, arranged along staggered rows, are composed of two overlapping 8 mm high sheets, with a 2 cm cavity inside; inserted in aluminum boxes about half a meter high, they are placed on the upper edge of the garden 20 cm high turf. Beside complementing the illumination of the gallery during the day, these rectangular openings offer a double image of the sky and the trees above, through the reflection on the external surface and the view from the underground gallery, throughout the roof.

Between 2009 and 2011, Elisa Valero carried out the design of a small kindergarten for 102 children in El Serrallo, north of Granada. Here she arranges the spaces on two levels, following the topography of the site, and orienting and opening them towards the best direction to enhance the contact with nature. The following year she intervened on an ancient primary school managed by the Dominican nuns of *Santa María de Llano*, in Ogíjares, where she had to deal with the restrictions of an extremely low budget. Working as a surgeon on removals and additions to the existing brick structures, she functionally integrates the spaces with small volumes plastered in white by adopting the technique of the fragment. When, in 2013, she was asked to expand a parish school for about 250 students, that had been built fifty years earlier in the popular area of *Cerrillo de Maracena*, «the rules of the game»

were many and different, as Elisa Valero herself uses to say. The construction of a new double-height multifunctional space — with a classroom on the ground floor and a new safety staircase which connected it to the existing building, and remodeled the west image of the school — is conditioned by a limited budget (i.e. 83.000 Euros), as well as by the numerous restrictions provided by regulations, the condition of energy efficiency, and a short amount of time (as the building had to be completed in two months)³.

The same experimentation capacity, addressing the residential theme by redeeming the hilly topography and the susceptibility of the city of Granada to earthquakes, can be observed in the construction of eight experimental homes in the *Realejo* district between 2015 and 2016. Eight houses offering different dwelling solutions, tailored for the components of a neighbourhood cooperative, which share an internal garden (at a level lower than the street).

Alongside the residence and the architectures for education, the logical simplicity of Elisa Valero's solutions is also redeemed facing the theme of the sacred building. In Playa Granada of Motril, overlooking the Alborán Sea, the design of the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Carmen* in 2017 is her first commission on this theme, a challenge which allowed her to deal with expressive and symbolic richness, the call to tradition, the needs related to a community meeting, in the framework of the search for «a coherent, silent and strong space». The liturgical hall, characterized by a simple geometry, is accessed from the south through a few steps; on the opposite side, a direct access is provided to the underground crypt. The longitudinal section reveals the architectural composition of the liturgical spaces of the entrance hall and the baptistery, the choir, the presbytery, covered by a single inclined roof that favors the acoustics. The only element emerging from this simple volume, to signal the presence of the church in the surrounding garden, is the thin bell tower. The only concession to the common visual expressiveness of the church are the concrete surfaces. The only decoration is provided by the cuts of the openings distributed with precision and thrift on the tactility of these surfaces. These are the answers to the limitations defined by the orientation dictated by the liturgy, a restricted economic program, an urban regulation that assimilated the church to the surrounding two-storey residences (with

the obligation to contain the height in 8 meters with the exception of the bell tower), and the problems related to salt corrosion and acoustic requirements.

This redemption of the conditions of one's work finds its design resource in natural light, which continuously changes without renouncing to be itself.

«Architecture through the ages can be summed up in two apparently simple actions: taking away light, and adding light. How these two deceptively simple actions are carried out determines the nature of the architecture»⁴. In her book, *Light in Architecture. The Intangible Material*, Elisa Valero explains how the equation for calculating the contribution of light necessary to the architectural project can constitute the election material on which the quality of space is played, knowing how to conduct the lights and shadow game in the design process. And she demonstrates her refined knowledge of interesting pages dedicated to the Roman chapels of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and to the churches of Francesco Borromini⁵.

Hence the second aspect of her architecture that needs to be underlined refers to her sharp understanding of the value of natural light as a material of the project, and her ability to technically use it through creative control devices. Shape, size, position, exposure of the openings, the different functions performed by a window (allowing for the entrance of light, ventilation, orientation of view outside, which Le Corbusier was able to independently decompose or combine): all these aspects contribute to the design of the quality of the space, as outstandingly demonstrated in the design of the experimental residences at the *Realejo*.

In the two architectures inserted along the narrow streets of Granada, the façades receive the warm light of the east through special devices that take on the role of architectural detail and eventually also characterize the quality of the interior spaces. In the San Isidro house, the façade devices include the formal redesign of the traditional element of the closed balcony; the internal patio becomes a reservoir for the accumulation of natural light, released in a controlled way up to the innermost rooms of the house, also through the steps of the staircase; the sides of a tank, closed inwards at the top, help to reflect

the light downwards⁶. In the vertical studio of *Calle Belén*, the white screen façade is perforated from seven orders of thin vertical openings, in addition to the large sliding element on the street and the upper big window. At each level, arranged on three orders above the skirting and under the ceiling, these pierce the reduced depth of the working spaces and illuminate the underground room through openings in the floor. Horizontal devices similar to the glass plates arranged neatly on the lawn above the private gallery of the Arango property (laminated safety glass mounted on the upper edge of the steel window frame) are integrated by a removable shielding system with aluminum slits⁷. Also the 5 cm thick colored ceramic grid walls that filter the west fronts of the preschool in El Serrallo are natural light devices. In the large multifunctional classroom of the school in Cerrillo de Maracena, a sequence of vertical openings on three sides of the space allow in the light of the sun and follow its path through the shadows changing at different times of the day; these elements are designed with a series of circular holes obtained with the profiles of the downspouts and placed exactly in the center of the double height dimension.

Finally, in the church of *Playa Granada*, the bare architectural surface finds its ornament in the light. The symbol of the Trinity is obtained through the modulation of three different ways to introduce natural light inside the building: a skylight carved in the variable thickness of the concrete roof slab, at the point of transition between the assembly and the presbytery, which intercepts and deflects the light of the east towards the altar; a series of slits drawn in the wall of the choir to the west, which project the figure of a cross on the apse using the grazing light of the evening; the side wall of the nave hit by full light from the south, filtered by lateral brise-soleil⁸. The suggestion comes from the variations of light inside the chapel of the *Monasterio Benedictino de la Santísima Trinidad de Las Condes* in Santiago de Chile (1960-65), realized by the young monks Martin Correa and Gabriel Guarda, documented by a sequence of twelve shots at hourly intervals, from 7 am to 8 pm, facing the apse consisting of the intersection of two cubes on their diagonal axis⁹.

A third aspect of her work is related to precision. In a theoretical text by Alberto Campo Baeza — whose work seem to share many com-

mon themes to that of Elisa Valero — dedicates a chapter to precision, comparing architecture with poetry. «I want to propose an essential architecture, built only with the indispensable number of elements. A precise and exact architecture. A logical and simple architecture. And since I want to emphasize the importance of precision in Architecture, I dare to compare it with Poetry. [...] Poetry requires, in addition to a generating idea, concrete, precise words, placed in such a way that not only translate that idea well but are also capable of generating Beauty. For Architecture it is the same»¹⁰.

In the architectures of Elisa Valero the sign is so essential and precise as to become definitive, and it is such as to assume an ethical value. In May 2006, *Casabella* magazine published her essay entitled *In praise of precision*, where she states that «The architect, with the humble attitude of someone who interprets his profession as a service, must become a surgeon to heal or improve the living conditions of the organism that we call city. If you had to choose a single word to define its work, that would be precision. Precision understood in the double meaning that the word has in the Spanish language: as necessity and exactness, setting aside any temptation of free exhibitionism or arbitrariness, to work with the awareness that each intervention is one more tile in the mosaic of a town that must rediscover what it already preserves, and endow it with new potential. What we are asked for is simply the right answer for a place, a time and a problem; mastery can be concealed in the apparent simplicity of the solution»¹¹. An ethical testimony that recalls the essay *No son genios lo que necesitamos ahora* by José Antonio Coderch (1961): she shows the same proud character than the Catalan architect, as well as some compositional analogy — for example in the home-studio of the painter Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (1960-63), which was organized as an architectural device aimed to interact with natural light¹².

This personal ethic addresses the theme of sustainability and technically entwines it with a building solution that she often uses, patented in 2009 by engineer Manuel Rojas, professor at the University of Granada. The related structural vision refers to the beginning of her professional career, in Mexico, to the restoration of the restaurant *Los Manantiales* built in Xochimilco by Félix Candela between 1957 and 1958. The thin concrete shells, with their harmonious curved

structure, which protect this historical architecture, seem to be the prototype of an innovative structural element called ELESOPA (*Elemento Estructural de Doble Pared de Hormigón Armado Proyectoado*). Its sustainable philosophy aims to obtain a more resistant moment with the minimum use of material, and the maximum exploitation of the mechanical capacity of the materials. This system, which can be used in construction or civil works, is based on walls or floors consisting of a double or multiple wall in reinforced concrete that uses disposable prefabricated internal formworks, already designed with holes for connecting reinforcement, with external concrete finishing on both sides. The result is a hollow structure, inside which the thermal insulation material and systems are housed without interruption, with characteristics of lightness and slenderness, and excellent fire resistance; the saving of material and the ease of installation make this application economic also for construction site times, for elements that are both structure and casing. The qualities of formal flexibility and great rigidity, self-supporting and lightness are suitable in seismic areas, as is the condition of Granada.

Elisa Valero adopts this building solution in the floors and perforated walls of the studio in *Calle Belén*, in the double level of the nursery school in El Serrallo (located in a seismic area), in the volume of the Cerrillo de Maracena school, in its internal and external surfaces in exposed concrete. The eight experimental residences in *Realejo*, whose project included only one pillar, exploit the bioclimatic values of this choice, through the correct orientation, with a zero energy result. The church of *Playa Granada*, realized with 480 Euros per square meter and with minimal maintenance costs, has made the sober aesthetic of exposed concrete a symbolic value.

A further recognizable theme in the work of Elisa Valero Ramos concerns memory — an instrument of her work that is articulated in various expressions and that ensues from different experiences.

We have already mentioned the understanding of the time factor of light and its possible implications in architecture. This is complemented by a pronounced sensitivity to beauty and to the variation of light in colors, a passion that was transmitted to her by her mother, painter Elisa Ramos; and also by the numerous professional assign-

ments focused on the theme of childhood, that is the period in which memory is more precisely fixed on spaces, lights and colors. From this scenario come the re-design of the traditional material of glazed ceramic tiles, such as in *El Serrallo* and *Santa María de Llano*.

Finally, the memory theme can also be found in the knowledge and daily experiences of the historic center of Granada, where she lives and works, and where, after some research and teaching experiences abroad, since 2012 she has held the chair of architectural design at the School of Architecture. This knowledge appears in the initial part of her essay *In praise of precision*: «Granada is a land of dreams, a mix of cultures, a city crowned by the *cármenes* on which the Alhambra stands superb and majestic. City of belvedere, slopes, squares and alleys. City of water stored in cisterns and flowing sound from sources. Granada is the mosaic that shows us the traces of a history that is ours. Traces that overlap, loading with shades the perception of the city as a complex and living organism. In it, the new architecture nestles in the old one, without destroying or canceling it, and is configured by dialoguing with what preceded it. Granada is a living city that, like light, changes without giving up being itself, with a constant dedication to change, which cannot be given for completed, finished, because it responds to the concerns and needs of its inhabitants and adapts to them. It is a city where change is a condition of life, a link with the present and tension towards the future. The pretension to immobilize her would imply its death»¹³.

With this perception, Elisa Valero acts confidently by sewing up the sites of the historic city marked by small gardens and vegetable gardens recalling the Arab tradition, the *cármenes*¹⁴; she reinterprets the façades of the houses in the historic center inserted in the continuity of the urban texture, facing each other on narrow streets, impenetrable outside but inside open to heaven; she knows the views, from below and foreshortening, as well as another point of observation over the city, from the terraces on the roofs. As a place of election for her work she chose a difficult site behind *Campo del Principe*, overlooking the Garden of the Martyrs and the south west slope of the Alhambra, in one of the oldest and most characteristic areas of Granada. She interprets the ground of the ancient walls with a vertical volume in width. Her interventions take place in the Jewish quarter of the city,

the *Realejo*, of which she interprets the way of living, distributed on different levels, which can be up to 15 meters distant in altitude, and are provided with internal shared courtyards, and special views on the historic city towers. Of this context, she knows and respects the rules, although intervening with a contemporary and improving attitude. «In this beginning of millennium, intervening in Granada is not a nostalgic feat, but a rebels feat, willing to face the serious limitations that make the operation of the historic center difficult and to prevent a rich heritage from being transformed into a mere scenography, into a beautiful corpse, embalmed so that it cannot decompose, at the service of traffickers of tourists»¹⁵.

In a recent lecture she gave in Milan¹⁶, Elisa Valero defined the architect's office as the diamond factory, where three fundamental actions are taken: «la mirada atenta», that is the analysis of the raw stone to understand its authenticity and value (which in architecture are the place, the reason and time); «la talia precisa», to minimize waste (which in architecture is the theme of sustainability); finally, «un officio arriesgado», focused on experimentations, where both teamwork and the freedom of the creative act are important. I think this suggestion fits perfectly what I have tried to tell.

- 1 F. Bucci, «Tre opere di Elisa Valero Ramos a Granada», *Casabella*, 848, April 2015, pp. 42-59.
- 2 F. Dal Co, «Merry-Go-Round/ Contemporaneità dell'inattuale», *Casabella*, 809, January 2012, pp. 38-39.
- 3 F. Bucci, *op. cit.*
- 4 E. Valero Ramos, *La Materia intangible: reflexiones sobre la luz en el proyecto de arquitectura*, Ediciones Generales de la Construcción, Valencia 2004, trans. *Light in Architecture. The Intangible Material*, RIBA Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, p. 187.
- 5 Ivi, pp. 111-125.
- 6 M. Daguerre, «Dirigere, filtrare e dominare il sole», *Casabella*, 744, May 2006, pp. 30-35.
- 7 S.a., «Galerie in La Pizarrera», *Detail*, 7/8, München 2009, pp. 730-733; s.a., «Elisa Valero Ramos. Espacio para el arte en la sierra, Madrid (España)/ Art Space in the Mountains, Madrid (Spain)», *AV Monografías*, 140, November-December 2009, pp. 50-51.
- 8 G. Crespi, «Verso l'essenziale», *Casabella*, 870, February 2017, pp. 14-23.
- 9 E. Valero Ramos, *La Materia intangible*, *op. cit.*, pp. 131-133.
- 10 A. Campo Baeza, *Principia architectonica*, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milan 2018, pp. 17-18.
- 11 E. Valero Ramos, «Elogio della precisione», *Casabella*, 744, May 2006, p. 34.
- 12 L. Spinelli, *José Antonio Coderch. La cellula e la luce*, Universale di architettura, Testo & Immagine, Turin 2003, p. 60.
- 13 E. Valero Ramos, «Elogio della precisione», *op. cit.*
- 14 M. Daguerre, «Dirigere, filtrare e dominare il sole», *op. cit.*
- 15 E. Valero Ramos, «Elogio della precisione», *op. cit.*
- 16 From the lectures Elisa Valero Ramos gave within the conference series entitled *Experiences of contemporary architecture*, organized by *Casabella Laboratorio* in Milan (November 18, 2019).



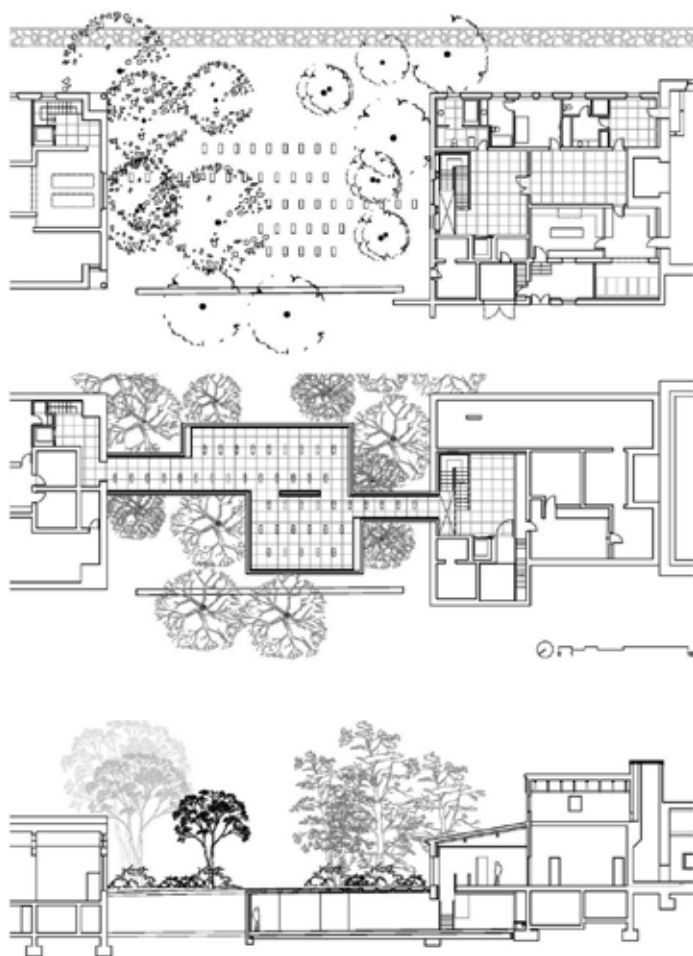
Elisa Valero Ramos, Art
gallery in the *Casa Plácido
Arango* (Madrid, Spain
2009).

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View of the garden from the
underground gallery
© Elisa Valero Ramos.



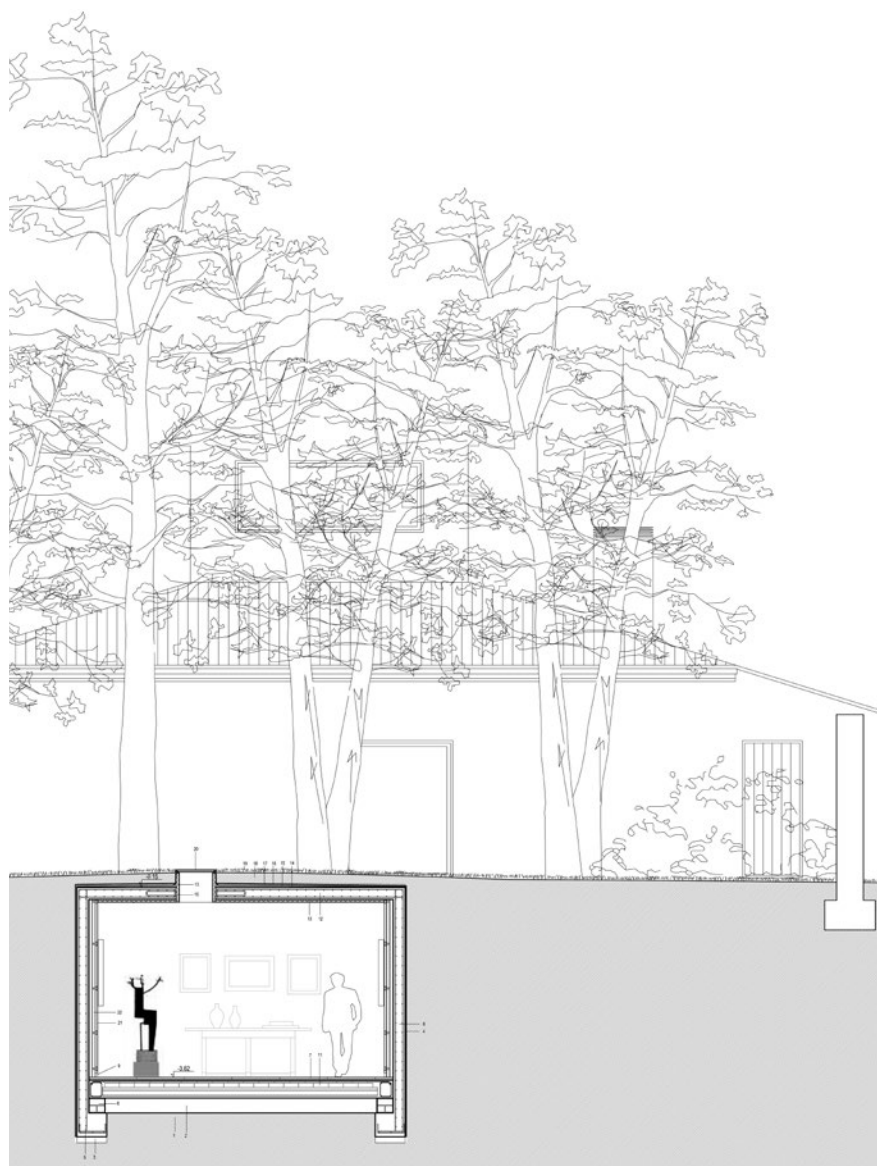
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The garden © Elisa Valero
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Plans of the ground floor and
underground floor (gallery) and
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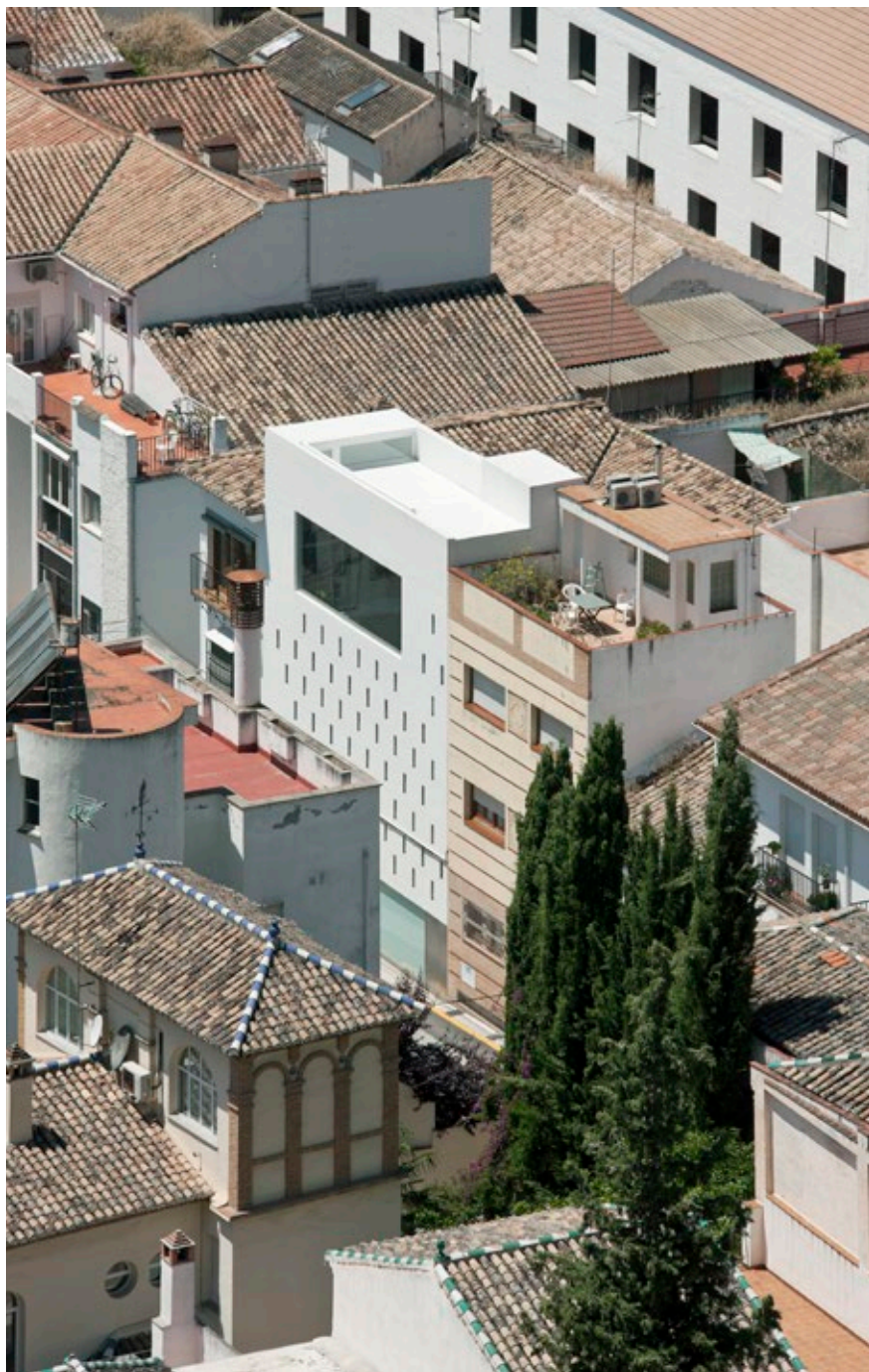


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The art gallery © Elisa Valero
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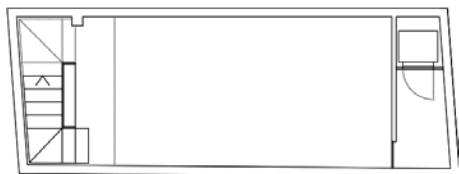
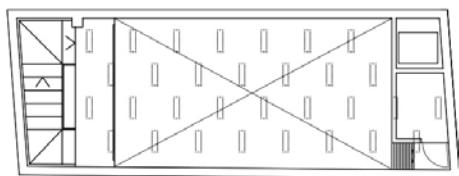
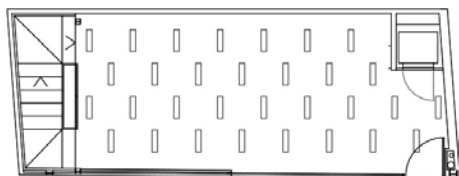
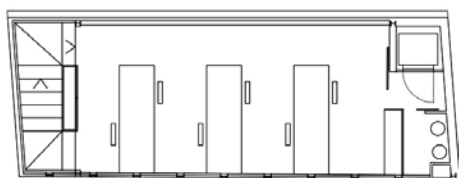
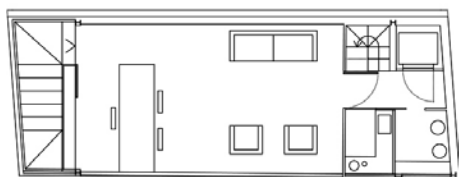
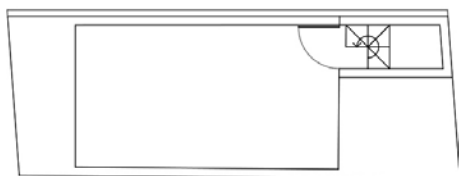
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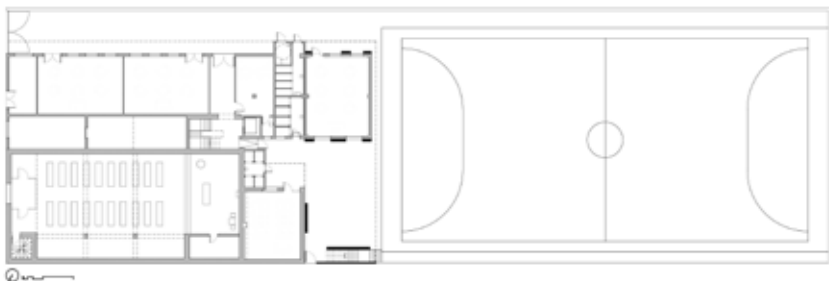
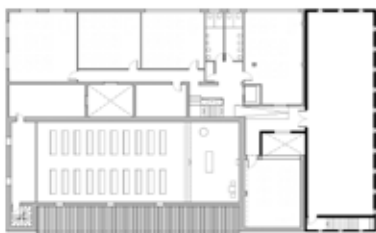
Section of the art gallery
© Elisa Valero Ramos.



Elisa Valero Ramos, Studio
Valero Ramos in *Calle Belén*
(Granada, Spain 2009).

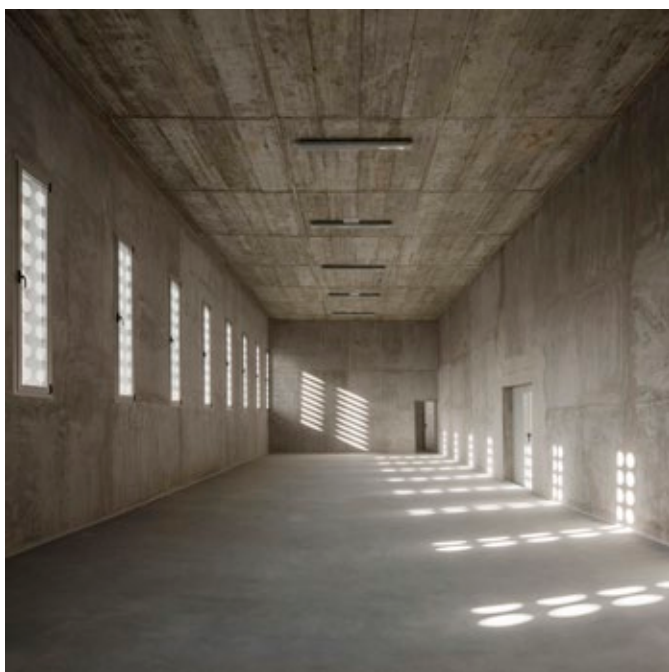
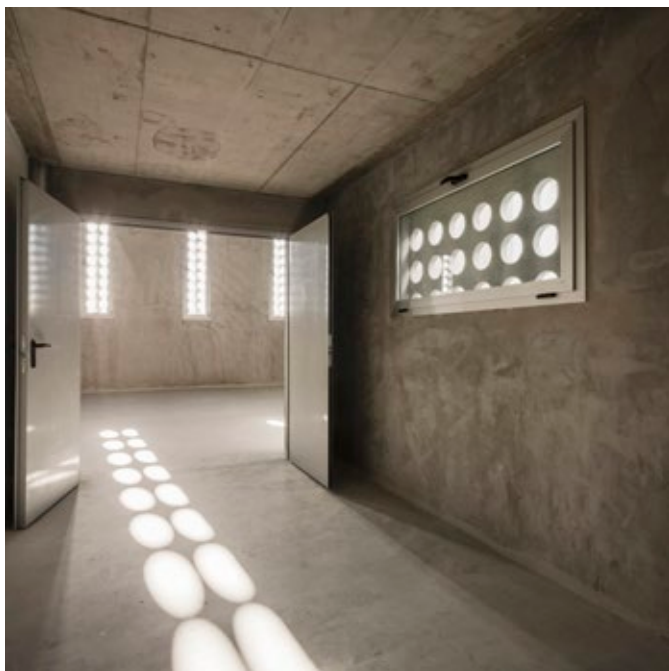
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Calle Belén, Granada
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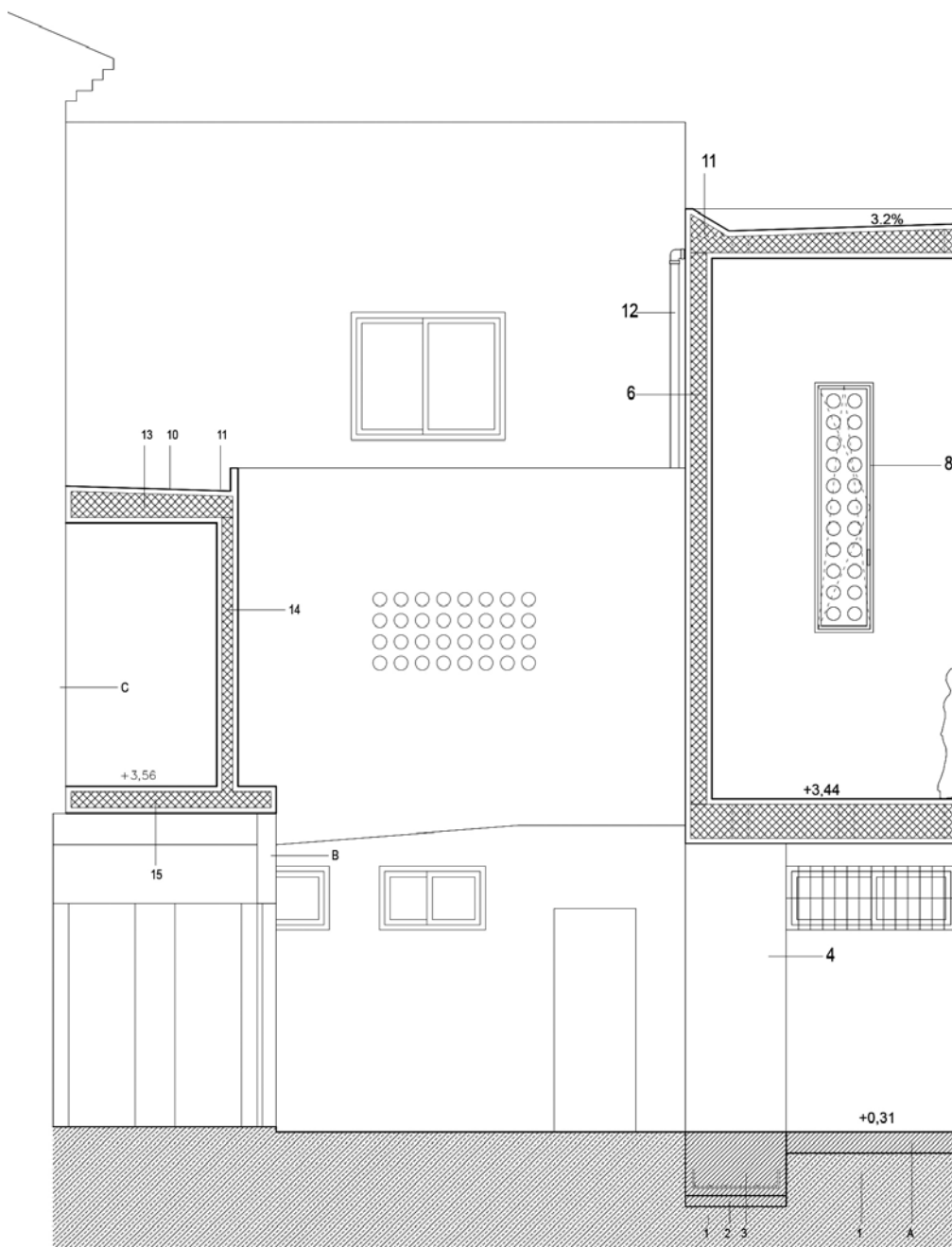
Elisa Valero Ramos,
Multipurpose space in the
Escuela Cerrillo de Maracena
(Granada, Spain 2013-14).

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Section, first floor and ground
floor plans © Elisa Valero
Ramos.

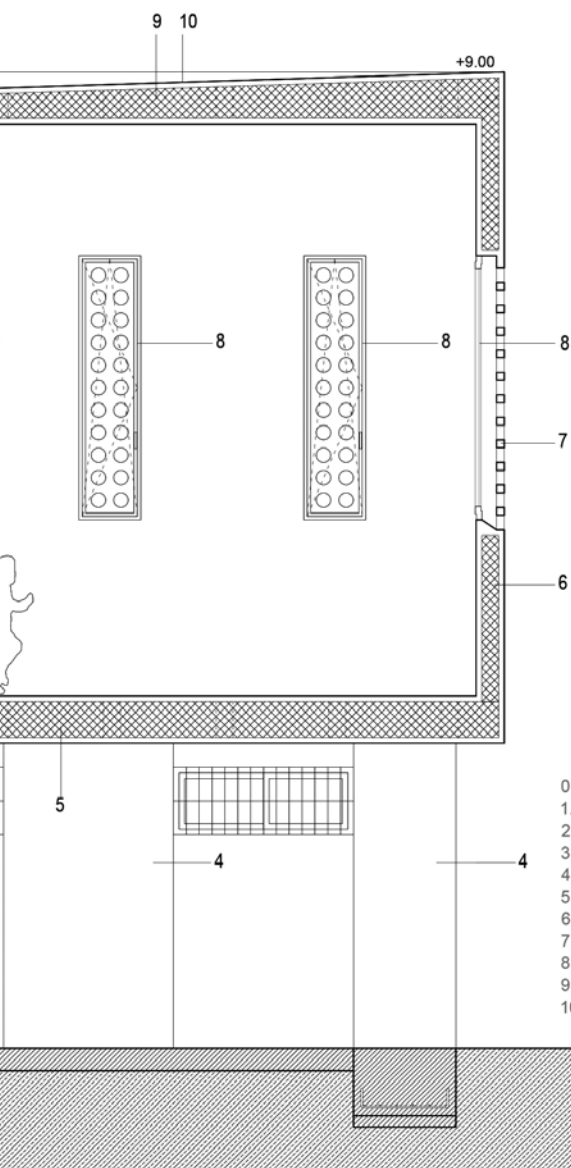


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The play of light in the interior
space © Elisa Valero Ramos.



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Detail of the cross section
© Elisa Valero Ramos.



0. Existing slab reinforced concrete
1. Compacted natural terrain
2. Flowable fill HM-10-B20IIB, 10cm
3. Running footing of reinforced concrete Ha-25-B-20-IIB
4. Wall reinforced concrete HA-25-B-20-IIB, 25 cm thick
5. Flooring structure slab concrete HA-25-B-20-IIB
6. Wall concrete HA-25-B-20-IIB, 25cm thick
7. Exterior latticework concrete, 13 cm diameter
8. Aluminium frames, with thermal break safety glass
9. Roof flooring structure slab concrete HA-25-B-20-IIB
10. Waterproofing.

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The sixteen essays explore the work of a selection of contemporary architects who have developed different interpretations and uses of memory: Andrew Berman, Renzo Piano, José Ignacio Linazasoro, Paolo Zermani, Alberto Campo Baeza, Guido Canali, Pierre-Louis Faloci, Philippe Prost, Elisa Valero Ramos, João Luís Carrilho da Graça, Miller & Maranta, Ricardo Bak Gordon, Tabuenca & Leache, Tony Fretton, Renato Rizzi, Eduardo Souto de Moura and Álvaro Siza Vieira.

The authors are part of the scientific community running the international Master of Science at the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano; the selected works refer to the many protagonists of contemporary architecture who have lectured within the *MantovArchitettura* programme — a cultural project organized by the University to foster the exploration of the relationships between *Architectural Design and History*.



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