

**ESTEVE CAMBRA, Ramón**

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# **The Essence of Contemporary Mediterranean Living**

Ramón Esteve

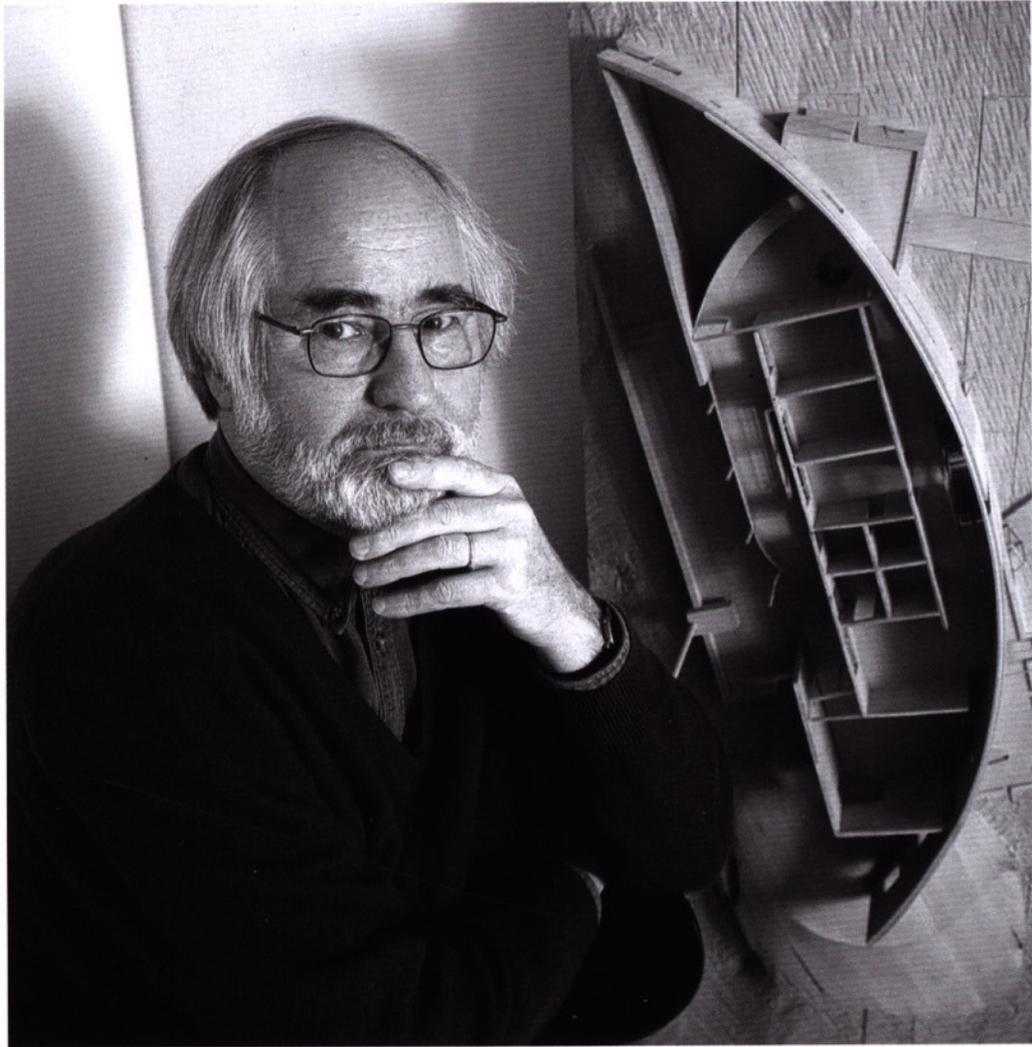
**BETA-PLUS**

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Portrait of Juhani Pallasmaa, courtesy of Juhani Pallasmaa Architects, Helsinki – Archive.

**Juhani Pallasmaa** is a Finnish architect, educator, and author, widely regarded as one of the most influential architectural theorists of the 20th and 21st centuries. Born in Hämeenlinna, Finland in 1936, Pallasmaa has had a distinguished career that bridges practice, academia, and writing. He is best known for his humanistic approach to architecture, emphasizing sensory experience, atmosphere, and the psychological and existential dimensions of built environments.

Pallasmaa studied architecture at the Helsinki University of Technology, graduating in 1966. He later served as Professor and Dean at the same institution and was Director of the Museum of Finnish Architecture from 1978 to 1983. His architectural work includes both buildings and exhibitions, but his influence is especially profound through his writing.

He gained international recognition with his seminal book *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (1996), in which he critiques the dominance of vision in architecture and advocates for a multisensory experience of space. His other notable works include *The Thinking Hand*, *The Architecture of Image*, and *Encounters: Architectural Essays*.

Pallasmaa's ideas draw from philosophy, phenomenology, art, and literature, reflecting a deep concern for the cultural and spiritual dimensions of architecture. He has taught and lectured globally, inspiring generations of architects and students.

Today, Juhani Pallasmaa remains an active voice in architectural discourse, continuing to challenge and enrich how we think about space, perception, and the human condition.

# ARCHITECTURE AS MINDSCAPE

FOREWORD BY JUHANI PALLASMAA, ARCHITECT,  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS, WRITER

Buildings are usually understood as aestheticized material objects, but in my writings, I have been especially interested in the conversational or dialectic relationship of architecture and its natural, cultural, and temporal settings. I have regarded architecture primarily as mindscapes rather than mere material constructions. Architecture enables us to dwell in the world, or, as Aldo van Eyck, the promoter of anthropological and Structuralist architecture, put it: "Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man's homecoming."<sup>1</sup> The task of architecture is to enable us to dwell by making our situation in place and time understandable and inviting. In human mental reality, architecture is a verb rather than a noun; it facilitates our existence instead of being the purpose.

I have always written hesitantly about buildings that I have not encountered in their true scale, materiality, spatiality, and context. Buildings are essentially contextual and relational entities, and the buildings that touch and move us most deeply are densely intertwined with their physical, cultural, temporal, and social settings. Meaningful buildings create endless experiential associations and continuities.

After some hesitation, arising from my lack of lived personal experiences with the built works of the Ramón Esteve Estudio, I decided to write this piece based on the numerous fine photographs, precise drawings, and project descriptions I received from the studio. Besides, I have, of course, visited these houses several times in my imagination. Buildings are in constant conversation and exchange with their settings and neighboring buildings, and this interaction is regrettably weak when architecture is encountered only through documents.

The most valuable buildings engage in a dialogue with the history of architecture and the deep layers and deposits of culture. Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out the open-ended and conversational essence of art in general: "We come not to see the work of art, we come to see the world in accordance with the work."<sup>2</sup> This openness of artistic works is often misunderstood, as both art and architecture are usually viewed in isolation and regarded as independent material entities. In my view, looking at buildings as isolated and detached objects is a fundamental error. Buildings of genuine architectural quality are open conversations in place, time, culture, and human meaning. Furthermore, every building is—often unknowingly and unintentionally—a transparent display of the values and aspirations of its builder.

The repeated intention in the superbly executed buildings of the Ramón Esteve Estudio is the fusion of the surrounding landscape—both intimate and expansive—with architecture, its structures, materials, scales, and interiors, in a continuous flow of interactions. All meaningful buildings and houses are endless conversations and narratives. The functional schemes of the Ramón Esteve houses, as well as other buildings by the team (cultural and art centers, offices, laboratories, and renovations), are developed and articulated with determined precision, frequently communicated by metaphorical sketches of the project's essential conceptual structure. The buildings are constructed from carefully selected materials, from quarried stone and organic elements to industrially fabricated materials, reflecting an experiential and refined sensibility. These constructions, forms, and surfaces are as much haptic and tactile as they are visual; this architecture arises from bodily stimuli as much as from visual or intellectual intentions.

Most of the houses of the Ramón Esteve Estudio are built in beautiful landscapes, without the need to tune them to existing buildings. However, their urban houses and buildings in historic settings adjust their volumetric compositions, proportions, materials, and colorations to the character of the inherited surroundings. These buildings project a respectful, quiet, and responsive attitude. Responsive architecture always enhances the experiential value of its setting and reveals hidden layers and dimensions of the site and neighboring buildings.

The ambiance of these residential projects echoes the abstract character of Modernity in its various forms. I find the strongest affinity with the progressive and inspired residential designs in California before and after World War II, especially the Case Study Houses commissioned and published by Arts & Architecture magazine in Los Angeles. These houses reveal an optimistic and utopian view of the future and human life. The work of the Ramón Esteve Estudio projects a similar confidence in the aesthetic value of architecture and the possibilities of humane dwelling enriched through aesthetic reduction.

The extension of the studio's work to the scale of furniture and architectural objects—such as architectural light fixtures—reflects the modern desire for an extended aesthetic that achieves a contemporary variation of Gesamtkunstwerk (the complete work of art). In today's materialistic and commercialized world, this vision of a fully aestheticized environment has largely been lost, as houses now tend to consist of fashionable design objects selected from commercial products. Since the early decades of Modernity, a century ago, architecture has lost much of its confidence in the mental value of beauty. Independent aesthetic judgment has been replaced by commercialized fashion and conventionalized taste. We also tend to forget that ethical values are closely related to aesthetic values. "*Beauty is not the opposite of the ugly, but of the false,*" as social psychiatrist Erich Fromm writes.<sup>3</sup>

In today's commercially driven world, architecture has frequently turned into aesthetic and stylistic manipulation. However, real architecture is not about itself; it mediates our existential relationships with the world, time, and culture. Architecture enables us to dwell in the world. It is fundamentally a mediating, relational, and contextual art form—it is about our existential condition and experience, about the relationships between buildings, their location, their purpose, and even the broader world, historicity, and time. Authentic architecture communicates with our entire existential world.

Architecture is our instrument for taming the world by defining our place and relationships as individuals and groups, structuring our spatial experience from bodily intimacy and proximity to the distant horizon and beyond. "*With vision, we touch the sun and the stars,*" Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes poetically.<sup>4</sup>

Architecture is often seen as a material construction, but its experiential and mental essence arises from immaterial and relational encounters. Architecture is not static or lifeless materiality. Buildings speak—or, as poet Paul Valéry suggests, they even sing. "Tell me, have you noticed, in walking about this city, that among the buildings with which it is peopled, certain are mute; others speak; and still others, finally—and they are the most rare—sing?"<sup>5</sup>

Architectural thinking is also close to the synthetic imagery of painting. "It all began in painting," Alvar Aalto confessed in his project description of Villa Mairea in 1939.<sup>6</sup> In his early years, he often referred to painting, especially the masters of the early Renaissance. He also saw architecture as a landscape. He admired Andrea Mantegna's painting *Christ in the Garden* (1460) as "*an architectural vision of a landscape*" and "*a synthetic landscape.*" "*For me, the rising hill town has become a religion, a disease, a madness—call it what you will,*" Aalto confesses.<sup>7</sup>

Meaningful architecture engages in a respectful and polite conversation with its setting, and this relationship is fundamentally dialogical. A window, as a material frame, is not architecture, but the view of the horizon of the sea, the sun hitting a distant mountain top, or the blossoming apple tree in the garden, seen through the framed window—these are gifts of architecture. Such selections reveal the politeness of architecture. Meaningful architecture does not merely consist of material, performative, or formal elements; it arises from the experience of the dialogical relationship between the house, its location, and the continuum of time. It does not only enable us to dwell in a place—it also allows us to dream and dwell in the continuum of time.

<sup>1</sup> Aldo van Eyck et al., Aldo van Eyck (Amsterdam: Stichting Wonen, 1982), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 409.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, source unidentified.

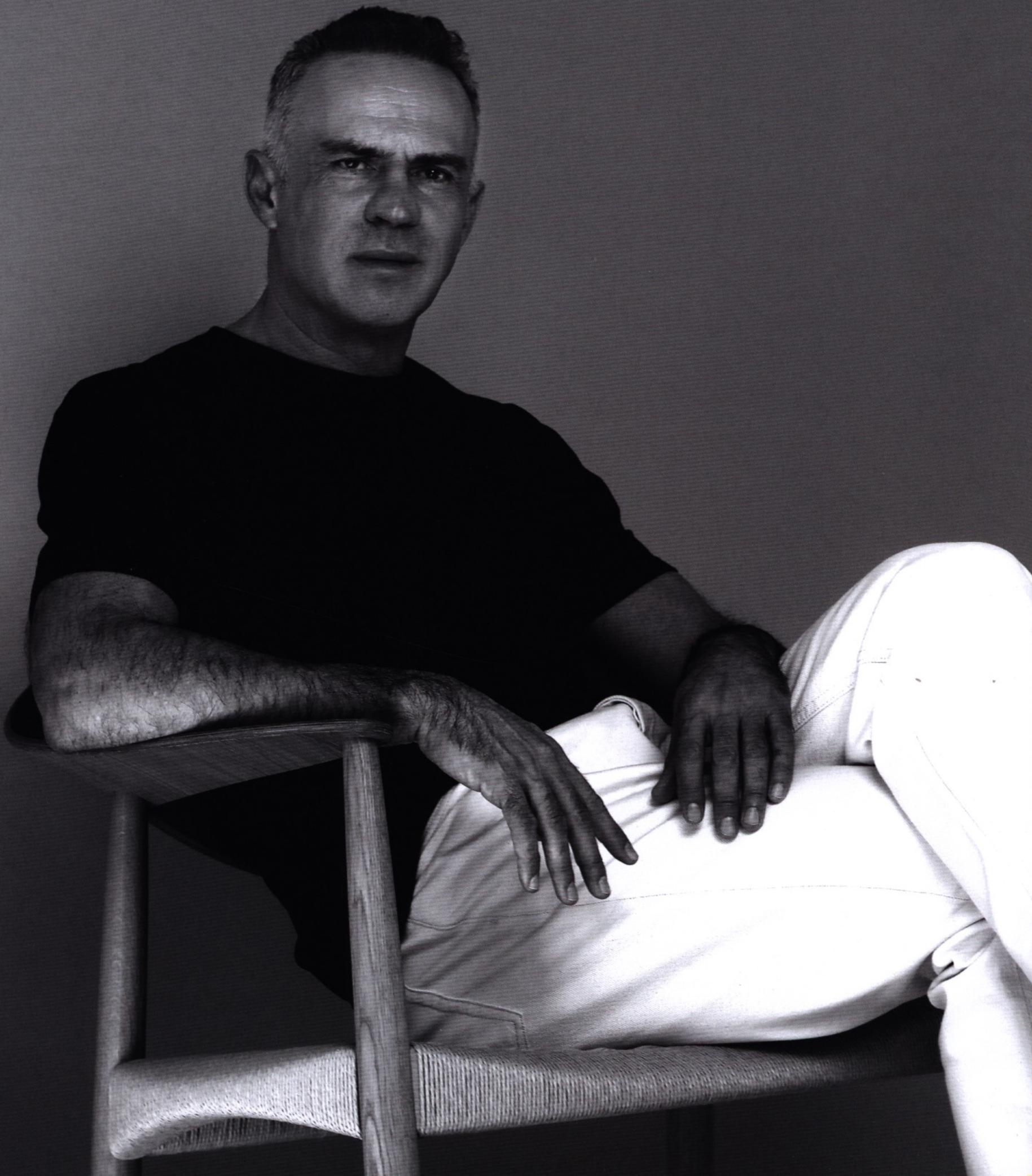
<sup>4</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, quoted in David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos, or The Architect* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1956), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Alvar Aalto, Project description of Villa Mairea, *Arkkitehti: The Finnish Architectural Review*, 1939.

<sup>7</sup> Alvar Aalto, *Hill Town* (1924), republished in Alvar Aalto in His Own Words (Helsinki: Otava, 1997), 108.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Matisse in Georges Duthuit, *Le feu des signes* (Paris - Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1962).



This book is a reflection on my approach to creating a home, a manifesto and a laboratory, where place, program, scale, light, and materiality converge to shape a unique experience. The Mediterranean is a constant physical, emotional, and cultural reference, yet this exploration reaches beyond borders. Each project I undertake begins as a dialogue with the client and the site, with the ultimate goal of creating a true home.

To me, architecture is a craft rooted in both sensitivity and knowledge. Every project is a tailor-made piece, like a finely crafted suit, whose essence lies in transcending pure functionality to become the existential stage for its inhabitant.

The house is the first architectural expression, the origin of our relationship with space as something habitable. From its beginnings as a primitive shelter to its evolution into complex structures, its essence remains unchanged: it is the stage where life unfolds. It constitutes the intersection between private and public, between the individual and the community, between the body and the world.

When designing, I pay equal attention to technique and aesthetics, two faces of this same discipline. Technique means knowledge applied to construction, the ability to transform materials into livable spaces. Aesthetics, by contrast, is the natural result of well-applied techniques: it is how I create ecosystems where structure, function, and environment merge in absolute coherence.

Every building is a place where tradition and modernity meet. Based on intuition, vernacular architecture, which is architecture without architects, remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration and knowledge. I distill its essential principles and engage with gravity and statics, turning constraints into creative opportunities. In doing so, I shape spaces with identity, ones that remain in memory and evoke emotion.

Light reveals form and texture, while materiality adds layers of meaning to this constructed reality. Together, they shape an architecture that evolves over time, living, breathing, and constantly transforming. To complete this experience, texture, sound, and scent awaken the other senses. My homes are meant to be felt before they are understood. Visitors often tell me that photos do not do them justice; they cannot quite explain it, but encountering these spaces in person goes beyond the visual.

My ideal house is one that someone instinctively feels is their own, without having to add anything. It is an essential form of architecture: an existential refuge and cultural expression of its place and time. A symphonic composition of emotion, comfort, and transformation — a place that is immediately felt as home.

*Xavier Esteve*

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