

**j**ujol, architect in Sant Joan Despí

Architecture understood as a discipline that maintains a tense confrontation with the natural tendency of materials to reach the horizontal, that accumulates experiences and knowledge not only to keep them standing but also to arrange them in systems of order, forms no part of Jujol's work. It is not the laborious work of the architect making use of this discipline in the project that we observe in his works, so often begun and executed, as we know, on the basis of rapidly conceived ideas (at times even the night before work began) scribbled on pieces of paper or on any available surface.

Even in a great number of his commissions, restoration or alteration work, this disordered preamble has been gone through by others. And from an examination of the drawings or buildings published here, one might deduce that the conception and construction of his works was based on conventional clichés and that the final result was often determined by economic conditions or chance happenings during the work process.

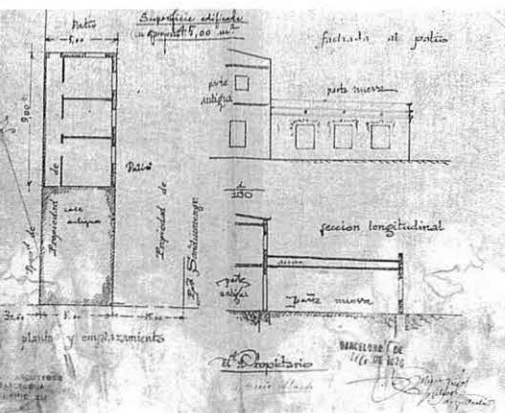
It is precisely the considerable body of Jujol's work in Sant Joan Despí that reveals (with one or two exceptions) the modesty of the subjects he tackled, to the extent that it might even be thought that in these circumstances there is no room to develop any idea of architecture.

However, the significance of Jujol's work lies not in the will to create architecture but to transform it, to carry it to another existence, radically on the fringe of reality. In this sense the intervention has no qualitative connection to the volume of the work or the time the operation takes to complete: if the

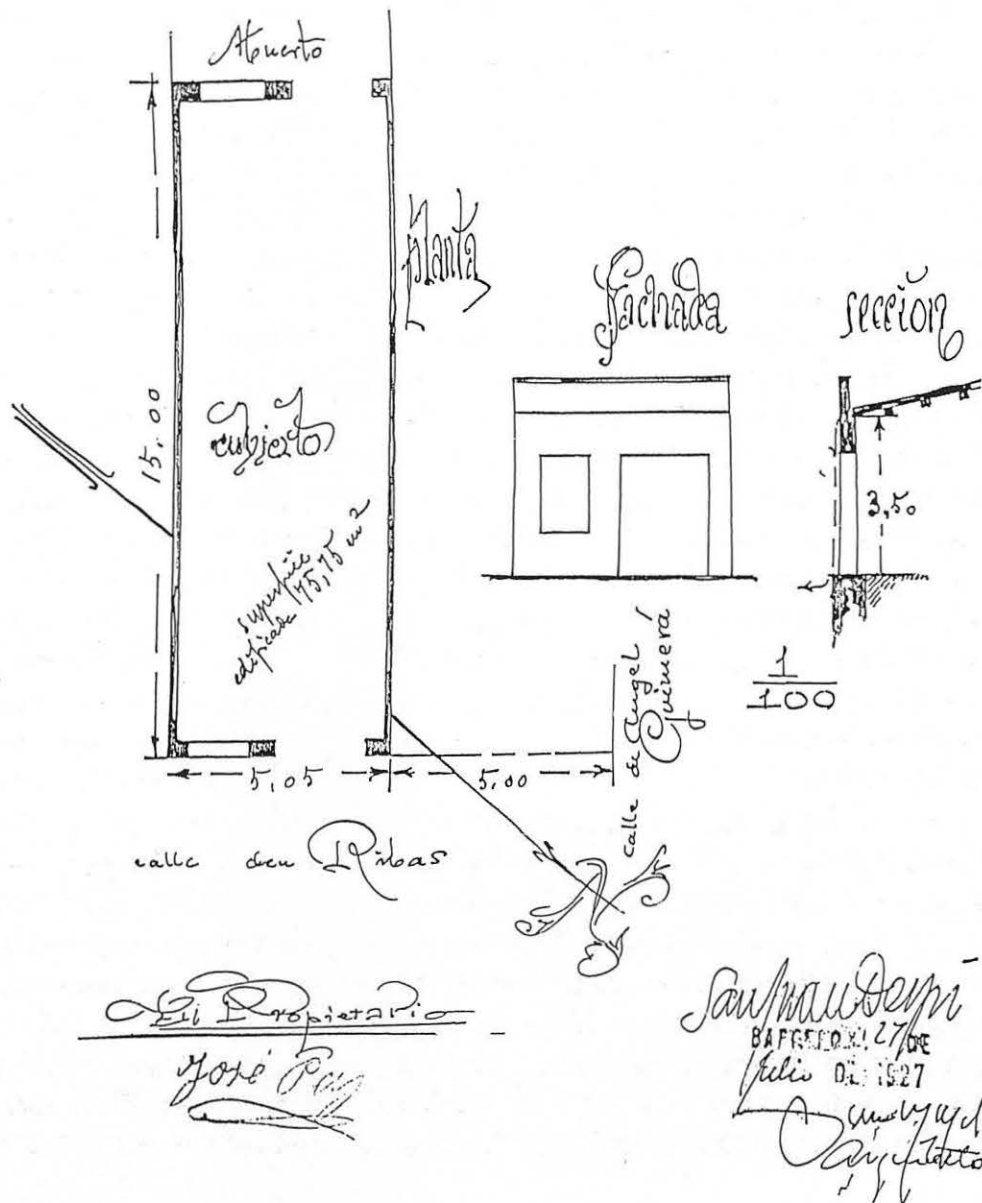
opportunity arises to transform a farmhouse over ten years, the rough construction becomes transformed into the Embassy of the Celestial Kingdom; if the task is to transform a balustrade, the metallic bars become ribbons that dance in the wind; a sign becomes a calligraphic marvel that covers the whole wall; and if the object in question is merely a site plan, the North indicator becomes an arrow that crosses the ground plan of the building and transforms the architect's drawing into a

means of cordial communication.

Josep M.<sup>a</sup> Jujol did not construct; he operated or intervened. And he did so tenaciously obliterating the path that has led architecture to setting itself down in abstract categories: a window, a gallery, a cornice, a roof, all those elements that contain architecture in a formal system, subject to specific laws, are nothing, have no value or sense from Jujol's viewpoint, in the same way that they would mean nothing to a hypothetical



Single-family dwelling, Casa Lluç,  
Sant Joan Despi (Barcelona), 1926.



Single-family dwelling, Casa Pey, Sant Joan Despi (Barcelona), 1925.

observer from another culture, whose innocent eyes would lack the deciphering code necessary to interpret them. As a result, he transformed all these architectural entities into understandable representations: a window into a cloud; a house into a mushroom; a roof into an egg; a drainpipe into an elephant's trunk; a cornice into a row of carefully selected stones; a weathervane into a lion mercilessly pursued by a cross standing on the other side of the central axis.

There is still more, however: Jujol's viewpoint, tinged with unquestionable religious convictions, mixes these direct representations of reality quite naturally, without intermediaries, with those of the celestial world, and he uses these in the same way that he uses architectural elements: if religion offers a perfect order that substitutes the world of the senses with a formal abstraction without fissures, in which geometry and numbers finally prevail over reality (the cross, the circle, the Holy Trinity, the equilateral triangle) Jujol's eye leads the Celestial Kingdom to the sphere of the concrete, so the gallery of the Casa Negre becomes the carriage in which the Virgin Mary has descended from the Heavens in order affectionately to answer a call for help, or the staircase of this extraordinary house becomes the room in which the cherub lives who, held up by his nappies, floats weightless in a night of bluing among clouds and lightbulbs.

What is left of the cross, in terms of a geometrical figure that results from the intersection of two lines, once it has passed through Jujol's hands, is a twisted, dented, living piece. It is then installed on the roof of the Torre de la Creu, or the cross of the weathervane (that no longer exists) on the Creixell belfry, which instead of a timeless symbol becomes a physical threat to the fearful lion.

This illustrates, perhaps a shade too literally, the profaning capacity of the formal and representative convictions of this prodigious architect.

In this situation, in which there is a natural coexistence, in domestic, everyday spaces, between the profane world and the Celestial Kingdom, in which cultural intermediaries have disappeared, in which form has nothing to do with its content, everything can be everything and things are seen strictly on the basis of their perceivable attributes, with no added values. The only difference between a gold ingot and a brick is weight, colour, feel, hardness and sheen. The world taken back to its condition before the advent of knowledge, architecture before the invention of the project, is the quarry from which Jujol extracts his stone. And since in this case there is no prior reflection concerning the construction of a house, Jujol selects his materials on the basis only of what they suggest to him (butane bottles, mattresses, cups or water pitchers) or because he comes across them by accident (disused agricultural implements with which to make grilles, cardboard shoe boxes with which to make capitals, stones to make cornices which the architect himself may have picked up on the way to the site).

A house built from materials found by accident, by the roadside, in which angels live harmoniously side-by-side with staircases, ducks with clouds, the Virgin with lightbulbs, vine leaves with Biblical passages, is a veritable *fortress of chaos*.

A magical space in which Architecture has yet to enter to give it form. The backroom of an enormous rag dealer's. An ante-room to Paradise, not that of the seraphim, cherubim and archangels, but that of Adam before the fatal curse: «*Thou shalt earn thy daily bread with the sweat of thy brow*».