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words **Fatema Ahmed**

images **Francisco Urrutia**

The Spanish practice Factoria Uda, working with Carles Bassó and the interior designer Merce Borrell, has restored the Hotel España in Barcelona, upgrading it in the process from a two-star to a four-star hotel. Built in 1859, Hotel España was remodelled in 1903 by the Catalan architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner. Montaner designed a new central courtyard and lounges and commissioned artworks from Ramón Casas and a 5ft-high alabaster fireplace from the sculptor Eusebi Arnau.

The aims of the restoration were twofold: to upgrade the hotel's facilities in keeping with the ground-floor features, which are widely regarded as masterpieces of Catalan art nouveau, and to restore those listed features to their former glory. Fátima Peres of Factoria Uda explains that the original wooden floors in the main areas, for instance, had been replaced with "a poor ceramic" floor in the 1980s. "All this restoration, using materials faithful to the originals, was made possible by studying pictures."

Merce Borrell's use of gold throughout in the colour scheme is a deliberate attempt to reconcile the old and new parts of the hotel. "It looks modern but it also respects all the old elements," says Peres.

Factoria Uda's most significant interventions were in the non-listed parts of the hotel, such as the Nuns' Courtyard (named after its residents during the Spanish Civil War), which was formerly an enclosed space above the dining room. Access to the hotel's bedrooms is along the balconies, which extend around the sides of the Nuns' Courtyard and provide a view into the dining room now that the ceiling has been opened up.

Casas' sgraffito decoration in the dining room itself, known as the "sirens' room" for its motifs depicting mermaids, was



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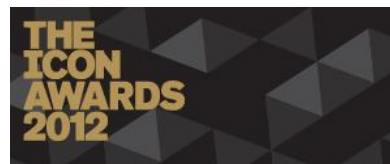
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cleaned and repaired. Once the space above was opened up, and a glass roof installed, light fittings consisting of strings of golden baubles were made to trail into the room, descending from the hotel's true ceiling and drawing attention to its height. "It's a kind of joke," says Peres. "The hanging lights over the restaurant were designed as mermaids' bubbles."



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