



THE ART OF

TAKING APART

**IN CATALONIA, A RESORT DISAPPEARS TO ALLOW THE  
RETURN OF A SPECTACULAR COASTAL LANDSCAPE.**

BY JENNIFER E. COOPER

**ABOVE**  
A salvaged house  
has become a dramatic  
overlook. Delicate  
connections tether it  
to the pathway.

COURTESY EMF

As you wind through the Catalan hills on the way to Cap de Creus, the rolling schist landscape makes an apt prelude. Near the sea, the stone is raw and exposed to the afternoon sun, the salt spray, and the unrelenting north wind (locally called *tramuntana*). The schist is interrupted by protrusions of creamy white pegmatite melded together by pressure and heat under the earth's crust and forced into view by the forebears of the Pyrenees 35 million years ago. This is what sets Cap de Creus apart, its singular geology exposed by the elements and set against the sea as sculpture.

*"The sea in this Pyrenean bow of Cap de Creus is a vast, untamed sea, deep blue near the coast. The coast is rough, restless, of a cosmic magnificence that can lead to obsession.... The coast, facing north, open, is uncompromisingly harsh and desolate."*

—JOSEP PLA

Cap de Creus and its beauty have figured in books, poems, paintings, and movies. Salvador Dali's famous paintings *El Gran Masturbador* (1929) and *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) were inspired by the rock formations and landscape of the area. He was so moved by the rugged coast that he made it his home. Dali's presence drew others, including Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, and Marcel Duchamp to the nearby town of Cadaqués, which quickly became known as an artist's haven.

The place naturally drew other tourism as well, and in the 1960s Club Med built a rustic 400-room resort that became one of the most notorious examples of modern-movement settlements on the Iberian coast. Its atmosphere was French, bohemian, and meant to foster a relationship with nature. But nature (unusually enough) eventually took priority, and in 1998 the cape was declared a national park. The resort, for this and other reasons, would have to go. In 2003, the Spanish Ministry of the Environment acquired the nearly 500-acre site for restoration after four decades of heavy tourism. The very thing that set the resort



**TOP**  
Tudela's beach was once filled with Club Med facilities.

**BOTTOM**  
The cape is now free of buildings and its orography is restored.



COURTESY EME



**OPPOSITE**

A circulation map shows the areas to be removed from the deteriorating Club Med (top) in tan and gray.

**ABOVE**

The restored landscape has a stone foundation repurposed as an overlook. The park road on the right blends seamlessly with the landscape.

apart as a prime tourist destination, its dramatic location, was exactly what made it a target for demolition. A new model of tourism, one based on restoration, would put the site on a route with other nearby destinations such as the Cape Lighthouse and Dali's home. It would be quite a challenge to erase the resort and restore the natural beauty of the place, but also to prepare the site for even more tourism without detracting from the environment.

A design team led by Martí Franch of EMF Landscape Architecture in Girona, Spain, and the architect Ton Ardèvol in Barcelona won the contract and set about the work of "designing deconstruction," as the team called it. The Natural Park's Management Plan calls for the "total deconstruction and comprehensive elimination of all construction, building, and installations in this area and the ecological restoration of the affected land, with the species and communities characteristic of the altered environment." But the designers expanded that brief beyond a strict restoration. The rich natural and cultural history of the site called for a deeper approach.

To create a cultural landscape experience within a restoration project on a small budget, the team had to be extremely clever. The challenging terrain and massive demolition, which pushed the team outside traditional roles and methods, called for creative reuse and economy of means. Retaining and reinterpreting structures was the ideal way to configure the landscape.

The deconstruction of the Club Med began with the stripping of more than 200 acres of invasive *Carpobrotus edulis* (ice plant) that was displacing the native species (protected by the European Union) that were adapted to the windblown rocks impregnated with sea saltpeter. Workers spent 2,000 hours removing the ice plants by hand; they then dried the plants on the site to reduce the weight for removal by 70 percent. No planting was done, so as not to disturb the recently exposed seed bank, but some native seeds were collected to hydroseed the steeper slopes that would be newly formed by recycled materials. Some native plants were already emerging on the sides of the trails, and the native sea fennel (*Crithmum maritimum*) made a delicious salty snack.

All kinds of efforts were made to cut the amounts of debris to be hauled away. The contractor was crucial to this process and even negotiated with the nearby cities through which the trucks had to travel to secure approval for a three-axle truck instead of the two axles normally permitted. Reducing the total weight to be removed through drying, crushing, and reuse persuaded the town to allow larger trucks that would make fewer trips on the whole. And in negotiations with the neighboring town of Rosas, 44,000 cubic meters of debris were able to be recycled there in the construction of a new dry dock.

The deconstruction itself was eased by the sensitivity of the original construction methods. The project architect, Pelai Martinez, had a special

COURTESY EMF; THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE



connection to the site and actually accepted the commission as a way to protect it from the poor development that accompanied the 1960s tourist boom all over Costa Brava. Martinez spent his childhood camping on the site with none other than Dali. He hesitated initially when offered the commission. But in correspondence with Pla, his friend, Martinez confessed that because he worried about the site being “violated by evil hands,” he felt he must take on the project because he “would know that it would be done with respect and affection.” He recruited Dali and Pla to collaborate on the design, and they made reverence for the landscape their guide.

The Club Med structures were designed to cause no harm to the underlying geology. The small bungalows were grouped around interior courtyards designed as shields against the strong north wind. Each group was placed on a plinth of stacked stone from the site at a level that matched the adjacent geology, so no two groups share the same elevation. In keeping with local tradition, all the structures were whitewashed and had terra-cotta roofs, and as a group, the structures undulated with the topography. The architect’s intention was that from the sea, they would resemble a flock of seagulls.

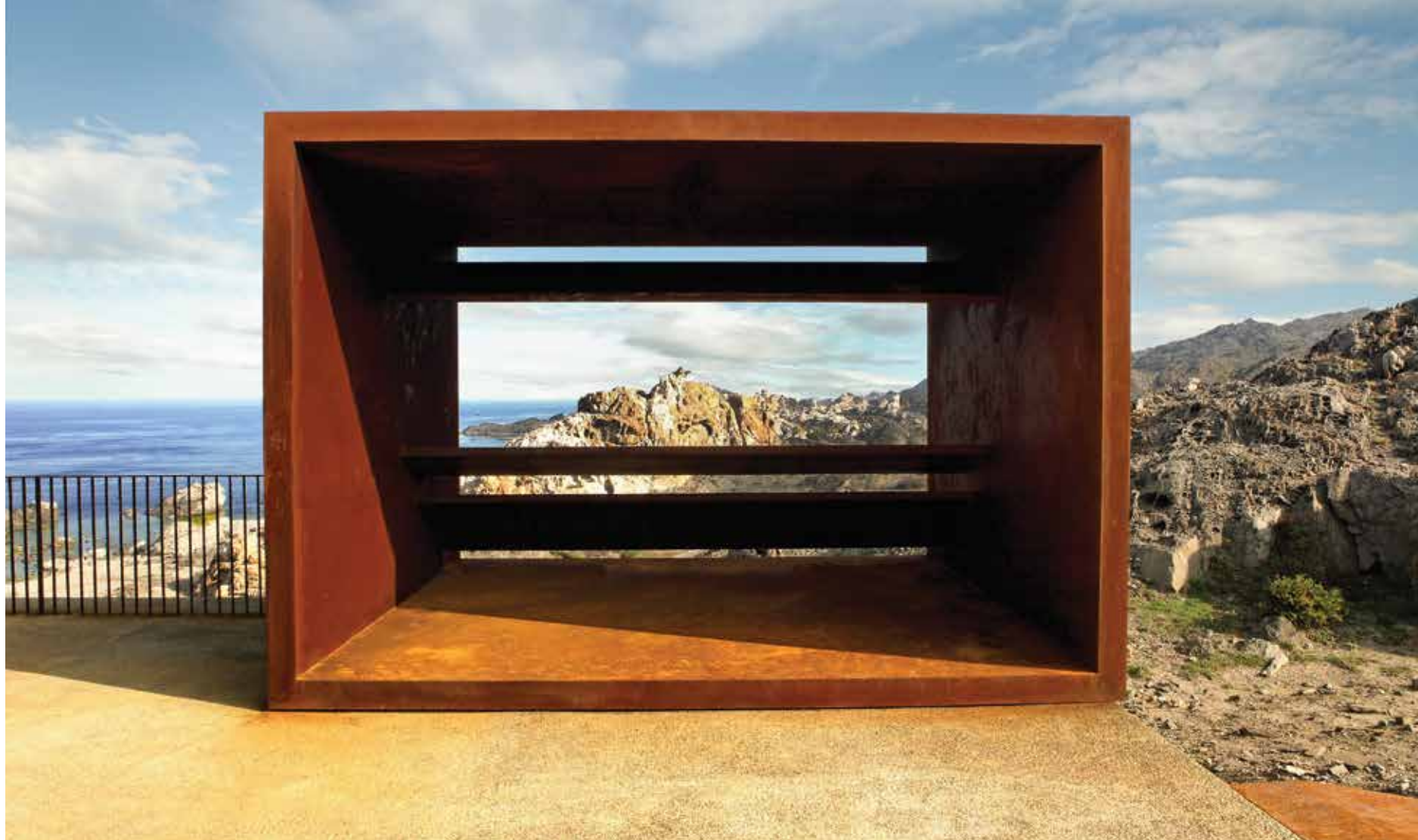
## PLANT LIST

The seeds that were collected on site to preserve the genetic population were from the following species:

***Avena* spp.** (Oat)  
***Cistus salviifolius*** (Salvia cistus)  
***Crithmum maritimum*** (Sea fennel)  
***Daucus gingidium*** (Wild carrot)  
***Echinops ritro*** (Southern globethistle)  
***Euphorbia characias*** (Albanian spurge)  
***Helichrysum stoechas*** (Eternal flower)  
***Juniperus oxycedrus*** (Cade juniper)  
***Lagurus ovatus*** (Harestail grass)  
***Lavandula stoechas*** (French lavender)  
***Pistacia lentiscus*** (Mastic tree)  
***Sedum sediforme*** (Pale stonecrop)

The following invasive exotic flora were removed from more than 200 acres of this nature reserve to prevent their expansion and the displacement of the specialized and protected maritime rocky native communities:

***Agave americana*** (American century plant)  
***Aloe arborescens*** (Candelabra aloe)  
***Aloe barbadensis*** (Barbados aloe)  
***Aptenia cordifolia*** (Heartleaf ice plant)  
***Arundo donax*** (Giant reed)  
***Carpobrotus acinaciformis*** (Sally-my-handsome)  
***Carpobrotus edulis*** (Ice plant)  
***Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*** (Oxeye daisy)  
***Delosperma cooperi*** (Trailing ice plant)  
***Gazania* spp.** (Gazania)  
***Matthiola incana*** (Stock)  
***Opuntia* spp.** (Prickly pear)  
***Pennisetum clandestinum*** (Kikuyugrass)  
***Pittosporum tobira*** (Japanese cheesewood)  
***Senecio cineraria*** (Dusty miller)  
***Senecio tamoides*** (Canary creeper)



**OPPOSITE**  
 A silhouette of the rock formation cut into a Cor-Ten steel panel alludes to its unique form without naming it.

**ABOVE**  
 The overlook cubes have viewing rails at adult and child heights.

The lightness of the construction eased removal, but to minimize damage to the underlying stone, the painstaking disassembly and sorting of 430 buildings was done mostly by hand and small machinery. The roofs and walls were dismantled, crushed, and taken outside the park for recycling as subbase; the local stone foundations were crushed and used on site for landfills and as pavement. Glass, metal, and prefabricated concrete beams were deposited in authorized dumps. The crushed stone foundations were used to reestablish drainage and sediment transport in areas near the water where flow had been cut off by road embankments. The beach’s original cross section was restored, and a bridge was built to restore drainage farther inland. To maintain trail connections across the drainage, metal grating floats through reestablished wetland grasses.

But not all of the existing structures and stone foundations were removed. Where possible, they were reused as part of a carefully choreographed system of overlooks and viewpoints. A structure that housed a former resort doctor’s residence was the most dramatic example: Perched on a high point overlooking the sea, the house had a spectacular view and acted as a visible reference point throughout the site. Deteriorated cantilevered sections of the existing building were reconstructed in Cor-Ten steel. From below, the floating boxes accentuate the sky, and from the overlook they frame the view of the landscape. The viewing boxes also have a lower rail that is children’s height so that the view is framed from their perspective as well. Delicate Cor-Ten connections between the path and structure seem to float and intensify the otherworldly feel of this dramatic overlook.

Upon descending from the doctor's house, one finds an open plaza with salvaged concrete walls that forms a backdrop for graphic exhibits. The walls are used at the original height for signage, are cut down to bench height for seating, and appear as stone lines in the paving. This gives a sense of the scale of the original buildings. Another foundation was kept as a seating area where photographs of the original panorama are shown from the same angle to make the changes to the site more apparent. Nearby, a series of remnant stone foundations was integrated into the base of a new trail. And in stark contrast to the dark stone, only one instance of the original whitewashed staircases was kept, a reminder of the former settlement. But a large concrete and Cor-Ten bench is the most contemplative part of the site. With a clear view to the sea, its large slabs seem to hover, and their generous width accommodates meditation, seating, or even a nap.

Materials used on the site were minimal: They consisted only of salvage from the site and the Cor-Ten steel, which stands up to the harsh conditions. Even the way the rusting metal stains the rocks mimics the way the wind blasts iron from one



rock to stain the white pegmatite (geologists were at first confused as to why the pegmatite contained iron). The Cor-Ten connections seem to float, and simple material changes are used to indicate shifts in grade or a geological idiosyncrasy: Asphalt changes to site-formulated concrete (made to mimic the color and texture of pegmatite) at pegmatite outcrops. A walk becomes a small steel bridge across a drainage channel. In many ways, the detailing is quietly didactic, softly gesturing toward an interesting element. This is often a challenge for landscape projects in natural areas. Many projects do not move past the initial impulse to add distracting interpretive signage; here, though, the small details combined with monumentalization of the cultural landscape clearly convey the complexity of simultaneous narratives.

The story of the rock formations has layered meaning. For centuries, fishermen have used the rocks as guideposts and referred to specific rocks by the names of the animals that they resemble. Dali also spent much time studying the rocks and derived his own meanings. They have always solicited creative reactions to their form. The designer, who wanted not to stifle this imaginative aspect of the place, traced simplified silhouettes of the formations and cut them into steel "lecterns" that face the rock without using the names of the animals. The rock



COURTESY EMF

**ABOVE**  
The ankle-height guide rail gently leads you to the best views without disturbing the stone.

**RIGHT**  
A floating grated pathway carries visitors over a wetland area.

**OPPOSITE**  
An interpretive area uses salvaged walls for signs and benches.

COURTESY EMF



and outline are in the same view. Morphing with the light and time of year, you could stare for hours without seeing the same image twice.

*"This section between the Camel and the Eagle, which you know and love as well as I do, is and must always remain pure geology, without being adulterated by anything else; this is a question of principle. It is a mythological place made by gods rather than for men, and it must stay the way it is."*

—SALVADOR DALI TO ARCHITECT PELAI MARTINEZ

As you make your journey past the rock formations and along the narrowed road, it seems to just slip past the rocks. The original road's width was pulled back to expose the junction of the geology and the terrain. As you pass through scene after cinematic scene, you approach the end as if in a long, slow single take. The grade dips gently toward the cove, and with only a minimal barrier you feel as if you will float away.

It is rare for a landscape to inspire reverence among fishermen, artists, writers, designers, and even demolition contractors. In the construction, deconstruction, and reinterpretation of Cap de Creus, it has been protected by the respect of the designers. Juries have been inspired as well to award the project many prizes such as a 2012 ASLA Professional Award for General Design and the 2012 Rosa Barba Prize at the European Landscape Biennial in Barcelona. Each designer who has acted on the site has taken it as a duty to maintain its purity and tell its story, and at every turn, the design heightens the experience of place and its history. ●

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#### Project Credits

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT** EMF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE (MARTÍ FRANCH, M. BATALLA, M. BIANCHI, A. LOPEZ, G. BATLLORI, L. MAJER, C. GOMES, M. SOLÉ, L. OCHOA, J. L. CAMPOY). **ARCHITECT** J/T ARDEVOLS S. L. (TON ARDEVOL, RAUL LOPEZ, CRISTINA CARMONA). **CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES** TRAGSA (DECONSTRUCTION); CONTROL DEMETER AND MASSACHS EXCAVACIONS S.L.U. (DECONSTRUCTION, WASTE MANAGEMENT, RESTORATION, AND REURBANIZATION); JARDINERIA SANT NARCÍS (INVASIVE EXOTIC FLORA EXTRACTION); SERRALLERIA FERRAN COLLELL (VIEWPOINTS, TOTEMS, TERTIARY PATH, ANIMAL ROCK IDENTIFICATION).



ESTEVE BOSCH

#### LEFT

A concrete and metal bench creates a perfect place to relax and contemplate the sea.