The triangular floor pattern derives from the geometry of the



The apartment occupies the first floor of an apartment in Barcelona's gothic quarter.



t the end of 2011, and its collaborator, the artist Fiona Banner, installed the boat-like one-room hotel A Room for London on the roof of the capital's Hayward Gallery. As the project's name suggests, its designers' primary concern lay with framing a dialogue between interior and city.

The results proved richly paradoxical. Despite its diminutive size and ostensibly mobile nature, the structure demands to be read as the focus of the encompassing urban scen - a claim that rests not only on its unusually exposed location but on the mythic association with London's formation arou the Thames that its nautical imagery evokes. And yet this very publicly

oriented building also accommodates a guardedly private world within. Its redstained timber lining and liberal allocation of secret doors, mirrors and transformative furniture make for an interior of gypsy-caravan intensity. Sir John Soane's Museum provided a primary source for this treatment and the project certainly shares something of that building's conflicted relationship to its setting; both a gesture of publicity and a fantastical retreat.

Designed prior to A Room for London but completed only at the end of last year, Kohn's remodelling of an apartment in Barcelona's gothic quarter is

another interior that presents a David Kohn Architects highly charged relationship to the city beyond its walls. While the site is scarcely less central -La Rambla and the waterfront both lie within a couple of minutes' walk - its location on the first floor of a 19th century apartment block provides it with an altogether less theatrical relationship to the city than the London project enjoys.

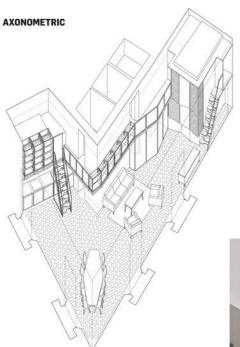
Closing a corner of its urban block, the building stands at the intersection of four narrow streets, the views from its windows extending no further

## The sense of the city pressing in is exacerbated by the geometry of the apartment's floorplan

than the 4m to the opposing facades. The sense of the city pressing in is exacerbated by the geometry of its floorplan; its two street elevations come together at an acute angle, giving the building an almost Flatiron-like presence.

The apartment has been in the ownership of Kohn's clients

– two brothers with whom he was at school - for more than 20 years. Its former layout dates from the 1950s when the building was carved up into flats. It comprised an enfilade of rooms wrapping around



TILE COLOUR GRADATION



Constructive drawing establishing the gradation in the colour of the floor tiles from green to red.



View from the lower-level



The front door is located behind a



both street facades, their modest dimensions in plan striking an eccentric relationship to their 5m floor-to-ceiling height.

The architect recalls visting when his clients were studying in the city and the apartment provided the stage for a considerably more rackety lifestyle than they maintain today. Both are now successful businessmen with families — one living in Hong Kong, the other in London — and use the apartment as a continental pied-à-terre. In essence, Kohn's task was to transform their former student dive to reflect this change in circumstance.

His first move was to strip out

the partition walls - an act that reveals the floorplan's geometry in all its naked awkwardness. A memory of the previous arrangement survives through the retention of the old moulded ceilings but the apartment's newly established unity is reinforced by a floor treatment that extends across the entirety of the living space: a pattern of coloured hydraulic tiles. manufactured by Mosaics Martí, the 100-year-old local firm which produced the tiles used in Antoni Gaudi's projects.

As such the treatment carries a powerful association to the history of Catalan architecture but it is also the product of a wider fascination on Kohn's part with the tessellated surface. That interest can be traced through

The angle at which the walls meet generates a field of triangles. each composed of 25 smaller tiles

his work as project architect on Caruso St John's Museum of Childhood and a survey of the 12th century mosaic floor in the Roman church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, which he undertook with his students at London Metropolitan University.

As in that example, the pattern employed in the Barcelona apartment derives directly from the building's plan. The angle at which the two external walls meet is employed to generate a field of non-equilateral triangles, each of which is in turn composed of 25 smaller tiles of the same proportion. The effect is to dramatise the apartment's geometry while nodding too to that of Plaça George Orwell, a triangular square which the building adoins.

The fit between pattern and rchitecture is made snugger still by the use of colour. Each of the smaller triangular units has been handmade using pigmented cement in one of four tones: a lighter and darker red and a lighter and darker green. Their combination gradates across the floor's extent, the large triangles at the kitchen end being composed exclusively of red tiles while those at the end housing the principal sleeping quarters are entirely in green. The transition is impressively imperceptible, a feat all the ore striking for the fact that it has to negotiate a change in orientation where the apartment urns the corner.

The expansiveness of this primary gesture invests the space with a scale that is far from conventionally domestic and subsequent interventions cultivate that ambiguity further. The primary sleeping quarters build on that quality most explicitly, being housed in a two-storey structure of dark-stained



A timber structure modelled on La Barceloneta houses the two bedrooms



## Kohn's tiling unsettles our sense of the scale of the objects placed on and around it

plywood that stands like a little building adjacent to the front door. In its adoption of a flexing plan geometry and provision of adjustable louvres, the structure's imagery in fact recalls a particular building that stands only a short walk away — Josep Antoni Coderch's 1951 apartment block La Barceloneta.

The living area's internal wall has also been given a distinctly facade-like articulation. Painted grey up to a line that runs a metre sty of the ceiling, it supports a narrow black-painted steel structure that extends along its full extent at first-floor level. The brothers have elevated bedrooms at opposing ends and the structure serves as a narrow glass-fronted mezzanine linking these to en-suite bathrooms which are set behind the grey-painted wall.

The structure's continuity, owever, is visual rather than practical. Between the mezzanines it reverts to a range of bookshelves accessible by way of a mobile staircase in the same language of narrow-gauge painted steel. Again, the memory of a past architecture is conjured to mind: in this case Pierre Chareau's Maison de Verre of 1928-32. As with La Barceloneta

— or for that matter, the Room for London-inspiring Soane Museum - a central appeal of Chareau's magical Parisian townhouse lies in the ingenuity

The machine-like nature of these buildings can be seen as deriving from the particular challenges of housing lives in confined quarters but their complexity can only be attributed to that imperative so far. In each case one senses an architect employing functional requirements as an alibit for a commanding display of invention. Pragmatic demands give rise to solutions of unlikely drama and frequently of an intricacy that suggests itself as a surrogate for the seductiveness of ornament.

Those qualities are much in evidence in Kohn's apartment too. The spaces around the periphery offer multiple opportunities for making entries exits - or for anyone so inclined, proclamations to the masses - of a markedly theatrical kind. The front door for example, gives onto a microvestibule formed by sliding double doors in brass-framed glass - a lovely gesture but one that answers no obvious need other than a desire to amplify the moment of arrival. The symmetrically disposed

doors come together at an angle, establishing a projecting line that is maintained by the balustrade of the mezzanine above and which gives the impression of pushing against the field of triangular floor tiles. Similar moments of visual assonance between structural components and the ornamenta ground against which they are read crop up repeatedly: in the zig-zag bracing of the mobile stair, in the brackets that support the bookshelves, in the sleeping quarters' angled louvres.

And yet, as strong as the project's attachment to the ornamental may be, it

nonetheless asks to be read at a very different scale too. While A Room for London was conceived as a retreat from the city, the apartment effectively inverts that idea, presenting itself as a city in miniature. Its remarkable floor contributes to that reading significantly. At Santa Maria in Cosmedin, the mosaics function as a map of the cosmos. Kohn's ambitions may not extend quite that far but his tiling certainly unsettles our sense of the scale of the objects placed on and around it, opening the space's dimensions to imaginative

All this is handled with admirable lightness. Emphatic as its opening moves undoubtedly are, the scheme's subsequent development offers strong evidence of Kohn's aptitude for improvisation and his readiness to borrow. promiscuously but always in a ransformative manner, from the past, Stylishness and intellectual reach come together in one architectural imagination rarely but this captivating project makes clear that Kohn enjoys both attributes in plentiful supply.

## PROJECT TEAM

Architect
David Kohn Architects
Executive architect
Ångel Martin Cojo Arquitecto
Structural engineer
Area 5
Main contractor
Brick Serveis D'interiorisme

Joinery Soldevila Metalwork EnmoMetall Furniture Knoll International Carl Hansen Hydraulic tiles Mosaics Martí