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Intervention work to Santa María de Sijena Royal Monastery (Villanueva de Sijena, Huesca, Spain)

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DESIGN REPORT: INTERVENTION WORK TO SANTA MARÍA DE SIJENA ROYAL MONASTERY

Santa María de Sijena Royal Monastery—a group of medieval monastery buildings of high historical value—has undergone big changes over the years due to fires, partial neglect and ruin, and reconstruction work at different points in time. Despite this complex evolution, the basic structure of the monastery's naves and cloister has survived, together with its walls, which still bear the traces of their history. In recent decades, various steps have been taken to restore its spatial characteristics and to ensure its stability, paving the way for current interventions aimed at giving it a modern use without relinquishing the historical overtones of the whole monastery.

This was the background framework for this intervention, focused on adapting the eastern and northern naves for use as an exhibition space, kitting them out technically while also preserving the atmosphere of the monastery. The project seeks to achieve the harmonious integration of old and new, avoiding historical recreations by simply adding built layers with a functional, educational and expressive purpose.

The project is based on three complementary action plans:

The restoration and consolidation of the original structure of transverse arches and stone and earth walls through reintegrations which add to the monument's evolution without erasing its history.

- The creation of a “ceramic rug”, the key feature of today's modern intervention. This is a raised access floor which conceals the wiring and cables while also protecting the space from groundwater rise. It is separated very slightly from the walls to create a protective perimeter.
- The floor surface is made up of triangular terracotta tiles laid diagonally, a solution that fits in with the shape of the nave, giving it a modern appearance without

detracting from the solemnity of the monastery. The texture and shade of the tiles interact with the other materials, playing an essential role in the new spatiality.

- The incorporation of sober-looking, removeable museum furniture and fittings (display cases, benches, latticework, and secondary furniture), evocative of the layout of the monastery's former cells, taking care not to impact on the architecture's structural rhythms. The area is closed off by a big glass partition, ensuring visual continuity through to the end courtyard and hence boosting the nave's sense of depth.

With this intervention, the historical and expressive value of the existing walls and arches is preserved, while also adding a precise, modest modern layer able to lend this area a new function. The simple, austere yet suitably befitting clay floor plays a major role in this transformation, bringing the monastery forward into the future without relinquishing its identity. It could be said that this is not the monastery of bygone times—it is the monastery that it has become, in an ongoing process over the years, although today it upholds its merits and its past echoes, whether they stem from the original monastery or whether they were acquired with the passing of the years.

Ceramic tiles used in the project

Cerámica Elías (handmade 40x40cm tiles cut diagonally)