



## PALO ALTO INCUBATOR: REPROGRAMMING INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE

*Posted on January 24, 2026 by gaiapilia*



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The aim of the project is the refurbishment of a 19th-century factory building located within the Palo Alto industrial complex, a former industrial site in the Poblenou district of Barcelona.

The intervention seeks to restore this protected former warehouse—of notable heritage value—while introducing a new programme: a technological business incubator. One of the building's distinctive features is its lush green façade, which is also heritage-protected. The project was the winning proposal in a public architectural competition with a jury.

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ISSN : 2575-5374



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## Urban Strategy

The proposal aims to integrate the new facility into the neighbourhood, overcoming the idea of Palo Alto as a “private” compound, so that part of the new spaces in building “E” can be used for complementary public activities. To this end, a series of multipurpose rooms are placed on the ground floor to foster new synergies between the site and the surrounding city. Without breaking the concept of the compound, the current emergency exit is reconfigured as a direct access to the new building and the inner courtyard, which can also, at specific moments and in a controlled way,

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become a civic space.

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## Architectural and heritage criteria

The interior—heavily partitioned and altered—is cleared of walls and added elements to recover the original openness of the space.

First, the existing structure is enhanced, reinforced, and valued using minimally invasive strategies, maximising the load-bearing capacity of the existing systems to extend their life cycle. In addition, part of the nave where a void existed due to previous demolition is reoccupied with a new structure completing the missing floor slabs. This new structure, built with a mixed steel-and-timber system, is inserted as an independent element, without touching the historic walls, reminiscent of industrial

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mezzanines. It is designed in coherence with the historical structural layout, with a central beam and two bays. Between the new and old structures, the void is used to insert a new core with an open metal staircase that provides evacuation.



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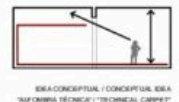
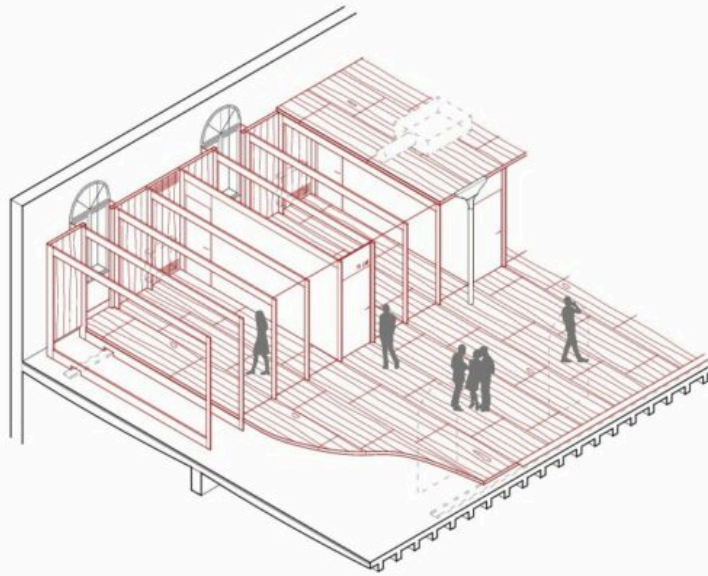
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Once the structure has been consolidated, a new element is superimposed over it (a “carpet”) to solve the programme with a single gesture and facilitate spatial understanding of the nave (continuity of ceilings, window rhythm...) without touching the pre-existing fabric. This element folds to create a defined “closeable” area and an open one, generating two types of workspaces. It also regularises the current slab deformations as a platform and acts as a technical element, supporting or concealing the installations—a technical carpet.

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## Functional criteria

The ground floor can be used independently from the rest of the building. The ground-floor rooms directly relate to the lobby and inner courtyard, conceived as open spaces that allow activities to extend outdoors.

The workspaces are arranged systematically: enclosed areas along the street-facing bay (modules, meeting rooms) and open areas facing the courtyard. The defined "carpet" area is designed as a flexible modular system, composed of a structural grid of parallel 5 m<sup>2</sup> bays, allowing any space to be expanded or reduced according to this minimum unit (1 person = 5 m<sup>2</sup>). The modular system

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resolves the rigidity of module- or “box”-based layouts.

The system, with a highly glazed frontage, enables direct visual connection between different workspaces, encouraging familiarity among community members and fostering synergies between companies.



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## **Constructive criteria**

The interior surfaces are consolidated, removing added paint layers and revealing the original stuccoes that reflect the building's history. Floor slabs and beams are reinforced, and the flat-tile ceilings between beams are stabilised. The historic staircase and goods lift are preserved and restored, and some sections of ceramic flooring are repaired. The cast-iron columns, clad with a concrete reinforcement, are freed thanks to the conversion of the steel columns on the upper floor—added during a renovation in the late '90s—into a new Fink-type truss."

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The new architecture is designed as a dry-assembled system, built with modular timber elements that contrast with the massiveness of the pre-existing space. It is conceived so that it can be altered over its lifespan, ensuring flexibility of use—a flexible, reversible, and demountable modular system.



## **Energy strategy**

Strategic interventions are made on the historic envelope to achieve a highly efficient building without compromising its heritage values. Windows are replaced with steel elements featuring thermal breaks and low infiltration; the roof is upgraded with a new ventilated system; a new ground

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slab is built, and so on. Natural cross-ventilation mechanisms are created through motorised windows.

On the street façade, external insulation with an ecological hydraulic-lime-based system is added, while on the courtyard façade—where neither internal nor external intervention was possible for heritage reasons—the bioclimatic performance of the vegetal façade is studied, demonstrating that it allows the building to achieve excellent energy performance.

With the installation of new efficient HVAC systems and a rooftop photovoltaic array with a capacity of 40.5 kWp, the building achieves an A energy rating, reducing primary energy consumption by 96.7% compared to its original state and ranking 21st in the national PIREP Plan among 500 projects submitted across Spain.

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