

Quiet life

If we combine the terms Ibiza and residential with John Pawson, anti-opulence and sustainability, things look good. The British architect tells us about the two villas he has designed at Sabina Estates, a respectful complex with a holistic approach on a 17-hectare estate. They are very much him, understated luxury, with the vernacular brought to his domain.

Although it may seem so, John Pawson is not a hieratic man: little unconscious tics and a great sense of humour break what should be a serene facade. But his architecture is. A champion of the minimal gesture, of restraint, convinced of constructive and aesthetic austerity, he is considered one of the fathers of architectural minimalism. Calvin Klein, the alter ego of this fashion trend, turned to him for his New York flagship store in the 1990s, and from there came the label, which he allows himself to hang up. Author of contemporary abbeys (NovyDvur), church-like houses or quietly opulent hotels for Edition, the last one in Madrid. Now he is preparing two villas in Ibiza, Can Adelfa and Can Almendro, for Sabina Estates, a developer that wants to bring together the words ecology, luxury and holistic in residences designed by him and other top names like Chipperfield or Marcio Kogan and local talents like Jaime Romano or Rolf Blakstad, author of the Clubhouse.

What does an architect like you do in a project like this?

The developers asked me if I would like to design a house here. And I said yes. There were no prior contacts or explanatory briefings. It was 2018. I came and they let me choose the land. I kept the best one, with the raven facing the sea. What did surprise me was when they asked me for 900 m2 built. I have done bigger houses, but not usually because it is more complicated to achieve good proportions and elegance. Here I have achieved it by hiding part of the volume.

Were there any more specifications, materials or sustainability requests (the common thread of Sabina)?

That has been a matter of course in architecture for years. In my studio we always take into account issues such as air conditioning and enclosures; we have limited glazing as much as possible and built very thick walls to ensure a stable temperature. This is an environment that you don't want to "stand out", you want to blend in with it. Hence the use of local stone, the Mediterranean whitewashing.

You always work with a direct client, but in this case, it is a developer.... What has been the most complicated thing?

You can't tell the end client how elegant the interiors will be, how harmonious the proportions will be, how different the atmosphere will be thanks to imperceptible details such as certain switches, the light, the absence of noise. These houses are physically and visually quiet. The things you leave out make more of a difference than the things you put in. And that cannot be seen in a floor plan or a model.

What design decisions have you made in this regard?

The amount of square meters, always looking for an intimate effect and avoiding the monumental, and the sloping terrain have been the ones that have commanded. Casa Almen-dro has a single floor divided into five levels with a three-meter slope between each one. This helps the scale and the fact that from one level you can't see the one in front of you. You have to be modest when it comes to locating a building in this wild terrain.

This is not the first time he has worked in the Balearic Islands. He has already done three houses in Mallorca. A renovation of a farmhouse in the countryside. Then came Neuendorf. Later another one in Palma. He was familiar with the dry stone technique, the small windows, the thick walls....

When I arrive at each new site I try to soak up as much as possible, the village, the area, the local architecture, the landscape, the location.... I can retain 90% of everything, while the architects who come with me absorb about 50% of all that. I need to take in all that additional information quickly and write it down to use when designing.