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## FINANCIAL TIMES



PROFILE  
PALACIO BELMONTE

# Prize-winning achievement

A piece of history is being brought back to life in the heart of Lisbon in a building that shows how knowledge from the past can be used to improve life in the 21st century.

The restoration of Palácio Belmonte, a 15th century palace just below the walls of São Jorge castle, is a prize-winning example of how architectural heritage and the environment can be protected in the centre of a modern city.

Britain's Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors acknowledged the achievement earlier this month with an award for urban regeneration. Frédéric Coustols, the project director, joined other winners including the Sydney Olympic site, the London Eye and Tate Modern, to receive the award from Prince Charles.

Mr Coustols, a French specialist in sustainable

development, fell in love with Lisbon and bought Palácio Belmonte on impulse on the day he arrived for his first visit in 1994. After 26 years in Paris, where he was a co-founder of Grand Vision, a European chain of opticians, he wanted to live in a quieter city by the sea and bought the palace as a private residence.

Palácio Belmonte proved much bigger than he had judged. Its origins date back to Roman times and the building encompasses part of the ancient walls of Lisbon, known as Cerca Alcaçova and Cerca Moura. Restoring the palace has proved to be a much more onerous, lengthy and expensive task than he first thought – but the project has also developed much bigger ambitions.

Part of the building has been made into a "boutique hotel" with first-class suites providing exquisite views



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Palácio Belmonte: a building that shows how knowledge from the past can be used to improve life in the 21st century

over old Lisbon and the Tagus river. An art gallery and exhibition room has also been built. The largest area of the palace will become a business club, due to open in mid-2001, and is expected to become a leading venue for international meetings and events.

Mr Coustols brought together an extensive team that spent five years restoring the building with the help of Pierre Quirio da Fonseca, a Portuguese architect, and Lisbon City

Council's renovation department. The first two years were taken up by research that gave the team a clear understanding of the different phases of original construction, which span more than 2000 years.

By allying the latest research to traditional materials, every detail has been painstakingly restored as authentically as possible. The aim has been not only to show what can be achieved in terms of architectural restoration but

also to safeguard the environment and natural resources in the spirit of sustainable development.

The team rediscovered a way of making a special variety of lime mortar, used historically in Portugal but long since replaced by cement. "This mortar is perfectly suited to the climate of Lisbon, which is damp but not cold," says Mr Coustols. "It breathes, rarely cracks and saves energy by absorbing differences in temperature."

The mortar developed at

Palácio Belmonte is now being manufactured at two plants in Portugal and used instead of cement in the restoration of national monuments and other buildings.

All the corridors, vaults and roofs of the palace were rebuilt. Every room has been provided with natural ventilation from vents encased in thick stone, dispensing with the need for air conditioning. Water pipes under the tiled floors provide heating.

Fifty-nine panels of

18th-century hand-painted tiles – 35,000 individual tiles – were taken down, restored and re-mounted. The garden has been redesigned and replanted with local plants and vegetables. All food served is organic and all cleaning products are biodegradable.

Integrating the project with the local community has been a priority. The apartments of 21 tenants living in four adjoining buildings were restored with financial and technical help from the city council. Parts

were kept at their original low level.

Mr Coustols and his partners are proposing to expand the project to take in an adjoining area, building a five-star hotel, housing and shops to serve as a showcase for traditional Portuguese products. So far they have invested about \$16.5m in Palácio Belmonte – more than they originally expected – and have received \$500,000 in aid from the European Union.

But Mr Coustols, who has also helped to develop a similar project at Castelnaud des Fieux in Gascogne, has no intention of stopping there. He also hopes to build the world's first "sustainable town" in Portugal.

This would involve developing from scratch a community for 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants in which everything from construction, energy and garbage to farming, taxes and legislation would be approached from an environmental point of view. He is also proposing the creation of a research centre for sustainable development in Portugal.

"We have to start thinking in this way now," he says. "In 20 years, it will be too late."

Peter Wise