

Modern wonders

In Barcelona, famed architect Antonio Gaudí carved the modernisme style with curves

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BARCELONA, Spain — How not to love a city that is so proud of its architecture?

Barcelona has its own singular style — modernisme. And modernisme has its own master architect: Antonio Gaudí. Gaudí, Barcelona and modernisme were, and are, eternally intertwined, creating a design identity that few cities can claim.

The Barcelona City Council declared 2002 International Gaudí Year, and while the official festivities may be over, a visit earlier this year made it clear that this Mediterranean port city doesn't intend to ever stop celebrating its own architectural glory.

It's a kind of cultural pride that comes from the city's centuries-long quest for independence.

Barcelona both is and isn't Spain. Though now considered the country's second largest city after Madrid, Barcelona is the capital of the semi-autonomous region of Catalunya — the area was only fully incorporated into the nation in 1714.

Catalans still speak their own language — Catalan, a Latin-based tongue — and that's after several attempts over the centuries by the Spanish to outlaw its use in favor of Castilian. Especially since Franco died in 1975, pride in the Catalan language has flourished. Today, street signs and museum brochures sport Catalan first and Castilian second. And the chatter overheard in cafés or on the metro, particularly among young people, is most always Catalan.

Indeed, modernisme and Catalan nationalism went hand in hand. Toward the end of the 19th century, Spain was a pessimistic country besieged by colonial disasters (chiefly the loss of Cuba and the Philippines).

But in Catalunya, a separatist movement flourished, gaining legitimacy from the Catholic Church, which recognized Catalunya's claim to sovereignty. Barcelona's population exploded, the city's wealthy business class was flush, and artists and designers began to interpret this new freedom.

They created a dynamic mix of old and new, revived the role of the artisan, rejected as unnatural the straight line or mechanical form and looked to the past for symbolic inspiration. Modernisme, in essence, symbolized the desire to build a new Catalunya that would be open to the world while still remaining true to itself.

To visit a handful of Gaudí's best-known projects is to revel in this unique experiment's success.



In the early 1900s, master architect and modernisme father Antonio Gaudí helped give Barcelona its distinctive look. A gatehouse at the Parc Güell sports a fantastical tile roof typical of Gaudí

Palau Güell

What would architecture be without its patrons? For modernisme, that patron was Eusebi Güell, a wealthy industrialist who was deeply passionate about Catalanist nationalism. Güell financed most of Gaudí's now-famous buildings.

Gaudí's first major commission: Extend Güell's mansion on the busy central street known as the La Rambla. Now known as Palau Güell, the building was completed in 1888, presumably just in time for the prominent family to entertain important visitors to the 1888 Barcelona World's Fair.

Gaudí was just 36 when he began designing Palau Güell. It offers a peek into the occasionally bizarre mix of past styles that fueled his imagination (in this case Gothic and Islamic), but it also boasts what would become signature Gaudí features.

One of those is the parabolic arch. Two of them adorn the street entrance, and the form dominates the massive house, culminating in the main hall on the second floor. There looms a four-sided parabolic pyramid, with each wall an arch stretching three floors up and coming together at the top to form a dome that is shot through with small openings letting in rays of light. It's the kind of architectural high drama for which Gaudí would become famous.

It's fortuitous that Güell shared Gaudí's dramatic flair. Güell was extremely rich, and he liked to show off.

Composed of a basement with a stable, a main floor, a floor with salons, two upper floors of bedrooms and servants quarters, Palau Güell boasts rooms decorated with finely carved wood and rare marble. But Gaudí had earthy and innovative ideas, so he used what were then considered ignoble materials — unfinished brick and wrought iron — extensively. He gave wrought iron a whole new cachet, crafting magnificently florid lamps, window grilles and front gates.

In the end, however, the overall feel of the Palau Güell is a bit gloomy and Gothic — until you climb to the flat, plaza-like roof. History has it that Güell gave Gaudí free reign up here. Gaudí designed a bizarre battalion of whimsical tiled chimney pots, no two alike, each a mosaic marvel. It was exactly the kind of roof spectacle Gaudí would create for two of his later buildings: Casa Batlló and Casa Mila.

Casa Batlló

Casa Batlló may, indeed, be one of Barcelona's gems, but Gaudí didn't build it from the ground up. At the behest of textile magnate Batlló, Gaudí transformed an 1877 apartment building into a wonder that shimmers and undulates in an almost hallucinogenic riot of colors and forms.



Gaudí populated the roof of the Palau Güell with a variety of imaginative chimneys.



The architect favored detail around windows, such as this one on Gaudí's house within Parc Güell.



For Casa Batlló, Gaudí dreamed up a serpentine blue tile roof and balconies that look like skulls.

a constant sense of motion. The staircase hall lined with blue tile swirls like an underwater passageway. A fireplace is tucked into a wall within what looks like a mushroom-shaped cave opening. The main salon seems to palpitate, with large wave-shaped windows framed by curving wood overlooking the fashionable avenue below.

Casa Batlló is one of three residential buildings that make up "La Mansana de la Discorde" — the "block of discord"— which gets its name from three very different buildings built by three very different modernista architects, each a commission by a socially competitive patron.

Next door to Casa Batlló sits Casa Amatller, designed by Puig i Cadafalch. Topped with a tiled gable borrowed deliberately from Dutch urban architecture, the noble building sports a few whimsical touches, such as the pillared entrance hall lighted by stained glass and framed with two differently sized main doors, each dripping with sculptural adornments. Inside, the ground floor houses the Modernisme Center, where you can pick up tourist information. The remainder of Casa Amatller is closed to the public.

The last of the discordant trio is Casa Lleo. Designed by Domenech i Montaner, it sports flourishing Art Nouveau carvings on the exterior, bulging balconies and an eclectic assortment of different shaped windows. It is not open to the public.

Casa Mila

Just up the street from Casa Batlló is Casa Mila, a six-story apartment building also known as La Pedrera (the stone quarry). Gaudí started work on it just as he was finishing Casa Batlló.

The greystone facade flows around the corner like a wave, interrupted by rows of curvaceous windows buried deep within the rolling folds of stone. At ground level, Gaudí's deliberately uneven pillars carry the sinuous surface to the ground. That motion continues inside, where the apartments and offices swirl around two interior courtyards.

Sprinkled with bits of mauve, blue and green tile, the facade is interrupted by wave-shaped windows on the first floor and farther up by balconies that look like jawbones or carnival masks — all of which rise to an undulating blue tile roof that resembles the body of a dragon and is capped with a single cross-shaped tower.

It's little wonder that Casa Batlló long ago became known as the "house of bones" or "house of the dragon." By day, it glows and shimmers in the sun. By night, illumination exaggerates all its fantastic ins and outs.

Casa Batlló is Gaudí's first fully individual work. The architect was 52 when he designed it and confident with his own architectural language: no need to quote from the Gothic or Islamic traditions. He also banished right angles

and straight lines.

Since the Gaudí International Year, the main floor of Casa Batlló has opened with regular visiting hours. Like the outside, the inside is a riot of textures and colors. It conveys

Just outside the main entrance is a booth where you can buy a ticket to visit the rooftop and attic, where you can see models and videos about Gaudí's work and, one floor below that, visit an apartment ("La Pis de la Pedrera") that has been preserved and furnished as if a well-to-do early 20th-century family lived there. No, you can't live there — although you wouldn't be the first visitor to wish that aloud. The curvaceous, open floor plan and simply elegant period furnishings will make you fall in love with the space.

You can climb up a floor to the attic and visit Espai Gaudí, a museum-style display of models of the master's work smartly displayed among the rib cage of brick parabolic arches that rivet through the attic and give the building its undulating roof.

Even after being immersed in Gaudí style, nothing quite prepares you for the roof. Like multicolored medieval chess pieces, the array of figurative chimney pots that dot and cluster the undulating roof seem ready to move the moment you look away. But do try to glance away — the views of Barcelona from the rooftop of La Pedrera are marvelous.

Parc Güell and Casa Museu Gaudí

Call it Gaudí's Utopia.

Parc Güell started when Güell bought about 28 acres on a tree-covered hillside high above Barcelona. Both patron and architect hoped to establish a privately financed garden suburb that would be a living essay in Catalan nationhood — a carefully masterminded colony of like-minded Catalan intellectuals.

But only two houses were ever built: one for Güell and one as a prototype for potential residents. And though Parc Güell was a commercial flop (Güell stopped promoting the place in 1914, and the city bought it for use as a park in 1922), Gaudí saw his designs for two gatehouses, some three kilometers of roads and pathways and a large plaza realized. In 1906, he bought the prototype house — known as Torre Rose because it's pink — and lived there until a few months before his death in 1926.



A covered walkway in the Parc Güell shows off one of Gaudí's signatures: the parabolic arch.

The seven-sided tract features seven gates to mimic the ancient Greek city of Thebes. Sixty triangular plots were designated for houses and connected by winding cobblestone roads — many elevated and supported by expanses of Gaudí's signature parabolic columns — that switchback up the steep hill and are often lined by neat rows of benches. There's a wistfulness that laces these roads today. Wandering along them, it's hard not to imagine what an entire town filled with Gaudí's inspired, otherworldly houses might look like.

Today, the principal entrance to Parc Güell is flanked by two pavilions, each with a distinctive, whimsical tiled top. Meant to function as a gatehouse and a gatekeeper's house, the two structures now house a bookstore and small museum, respectively. Guarded by a mosaic dragon, the steps just inside the entry gate lead up to a colonnade of 84 Doric columns meant to house a marketplace for the utopian suburb.

Stairs to the left lead up to a large plaza on top of the colonnade whose centerpiece is the Banc de Trencadís, a vibrant, snakelike bench made of bits and pieces of ceramic tile collected by the workers who crafted it. It's a blend of low art and high art seldom achieved.

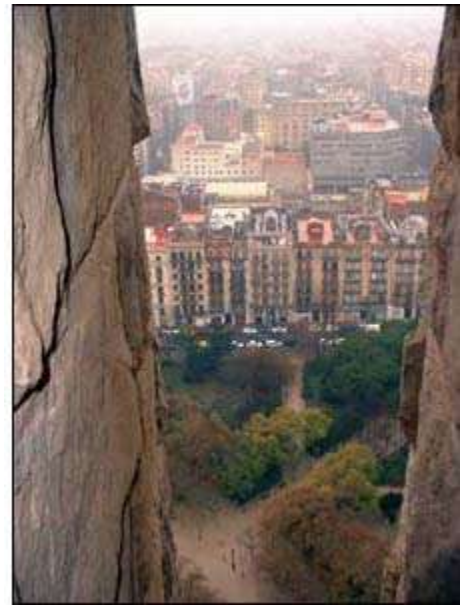
On a more intimate level, Casa Museu Gaudí offers by far the most intimate look at Gaudí the man. It can all be seen in his second bedroom. While the house is furnished with many fine examples of furniture designed by the Catalan master, his bedroom is simply, almost austere, furnished. Above a single bed (Gaudí never married and by all reliable accounts remained celibate his entire life) hangs a simple wooden crucifix.

La Sagrada Familia

Gaudí died in 1926, when the stubborn 74-year-old, who believed pedestrians should always have the right-of-way, stepped into the street and was struck by a streetcar. (He was so ragged at the time of his death that no one recognized him at first, though later all of Barcelona turned out for his funeral.)

When he died, Gaudí's largest and most ambitious project — Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Familia (Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family) — remained unfinished, even though he had poured all of his time and energy into it in the last decade of his life.

The building is still unfinished today, with official estimates placing its completion at least 30 years from now. Begun in 1882, La Sagrada Familia, as it is commonly called, is the only piece of modernisme Catalan architecture whose history spans the 19th, 20th and now 21st centuries. It still is being built according to Gaudí's vision, even though many of his original plans and models were destroyed in the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.



Within the towers at La Sagrada Familia, visitors are treated with a spectacular view of Barcelona.

This temple earned Gaudí the title of "God's Architect," and not only because of his zealous devotion to it. He envisioned a temple longer than 300 feet with a central tower 560 feet tall. When finished, it will seat 13,000 people. Twelve of the towers (four on each facade) represent the Apostles (eight have been built), while five others represent the four evangelists and the Virgin Mary. Soaring above them is a sinewy, twisting bulbous central tower representing Christ. Each of the three facades was designed to tell a story — Nativity, Passion and the Glory of Christ.

Inside and out, Gaudí unleashed his considerable vision, giving the towers swelling outlines and encrusting them with a tangle of sculpture that seems to grow out of the stone. And of course, the building shuns straight lines. Gaudí didn't believe straight lines existed in nature and thus were not divine creations — so no straight lines on God's temple.

By the time of Gaudí's death, fund-raising — and subsequently construction — had slowed. The Spanish Civil War and World War II halted construction for nearly two decades. Work restarted in 1952 and continues with financing solely from private donations.

That means that what you visit today is an active construction site. The completed sections inside and a basement-level museum (full of information on Gaudí and La Sagrada Familia) can be explored unguided. Yet the public areas in the main nave are just on the other side of a fence, where craftspeople carve stone and build massive columns. It's worth pausing to watch.

For an extra \$2, you can ride an elevator into one of the towers and then can climb up narrow stairs to grab stunning views. But don't forget to return to Earth: Beneath the church lies the crypt — and Gaudí's grave. At his request, he rests eternally within his beloved final project.