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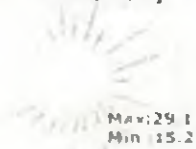
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The striking genius of Gaudi

Barcelona is full of architect Antoni Gaudi's lovely creations, write Ashish Kothari and Kanchi Kohli

Few cities can be identified so closely with one architect, sculptor, or artist, as Barcelona is with Antoni Gaudi. Visitors to this bustling Spanish city, cannot escape being proudly pointed to his incredible creations by the local populace. Buildings, parks, sculptures, lampposts, benches, gateways, pillars, and more.. they feature on the covers of most guidebooks, they appear on posters in the city's trams and buses, they are imitated in tourist curios of all shapes and sizes.

In these and many other ways, Barcelona beckons you to take at least one look at what one of the 19-20th centuries' most audacious creators produced. And even though Barcelona got a complete makeover at the time of the recent Olympic games, it has continued to reflect Gaudi's creative charm.

Interested in architecture? There are the houses Gaudi created, looking like they stepped straight out of some fairy tale, but perfectly livable and lived in. The Casa Batllo, for instance, was designed by Gaudi for Josep Batllo, a wealth aristocrat, as an upmarket home. The colours and shapes of marine life were the inspiration, for instance, the colours chosen for the façade are those found in corals, and various rooms remind one of boats. The family lived there for several years before the place became a tourist destination.

You are in for an unreal experience. The windows, doors, and fittings that look like they were made of each other, some creating the shape of a whale, yet others next to a giant mushroom on the roof. A

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most famous icons...a gigantic lizard made of a patchwork of small tile pieces that produce a brilliantly scaly reptilian effect. The iguana also doubles as a water spout! Wandering up the initial stairs, one comes to a massive chamber of pillars, with a ceiling characterised by colourful circular mosaics.

Remarkably, many of the pillars are also water harvesting structures, channelling rain falling on the platform above, into storage tanks...this a hundred years before rooftop water harvesting in cities became an environmental necessity. The acoustics in this hall are amazing.

The platform above has its own charm, with a series of benches that curve along its edge like a serpent, and occupied by a lively bunch of curio sellers. Gaudi himself lived here for 20 years, in what is now converted into a museum of his work.

Across most of these works, Gaudi's preference for curves and non-symmetrical shapes is very evident. Casa Battlo has no sharp corner, no squares, few perfect circles. Gaudi's inspiration came from closely observing nature, in which he noted that squares, triangles, and circles hardly existed. Instead, plants and animals had more easily flowing, flexible shapes and forms, and that one of the keys to this was the inner strength that fibres provided to them. So his own constructions, which seemed like they could simply not stand, relied a lot on providing reinforcement from inside.

Gaudi's most ambitious project, regrettably, was never completed in his lifetime. The last 20 years of his life were devoted to the construction of what must surely be the world's most remarkably unconventional church.

The Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Familia (Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family) was conceived by Gaudi as a "Bible in stone", and inspired by the shape of a jagged mountain and the structure of a high forest. He never could complete what he set out to do...and over a century later, the city and artists from all over the world are still finishing the task, more or less as he conceived it. Eight towering spires of the church now impose themselves on Barcelona's skyline; four more are still to be built, together representing Christianity's 12 apostles. Its exterior looks far more symmetrical than Gaudi's other creations, but a closer look at the towers reveals asymmetry in the detail. The curves on the top are in the form of snails...like Gaudi wanted to put these 'lesser' creatures of nature on a pedestal!

Gaudi did not finish the Sagrada church because he was, tragically, killed by a tram in 1926. No one can what else he would have created had he lived longer. But by the time he died, he had already stamped his unique vision and creativity on the city of Barcelona, in a way that will continue to inspire architects, artists, sculptors, tourists, and the city's own residents, to think 'out of the box', to be unafraid of convention, and to stand up and be counted.

Ashish Kothari and Kanchi Kohli work with Kalpavriksh - Environmental Action Group.