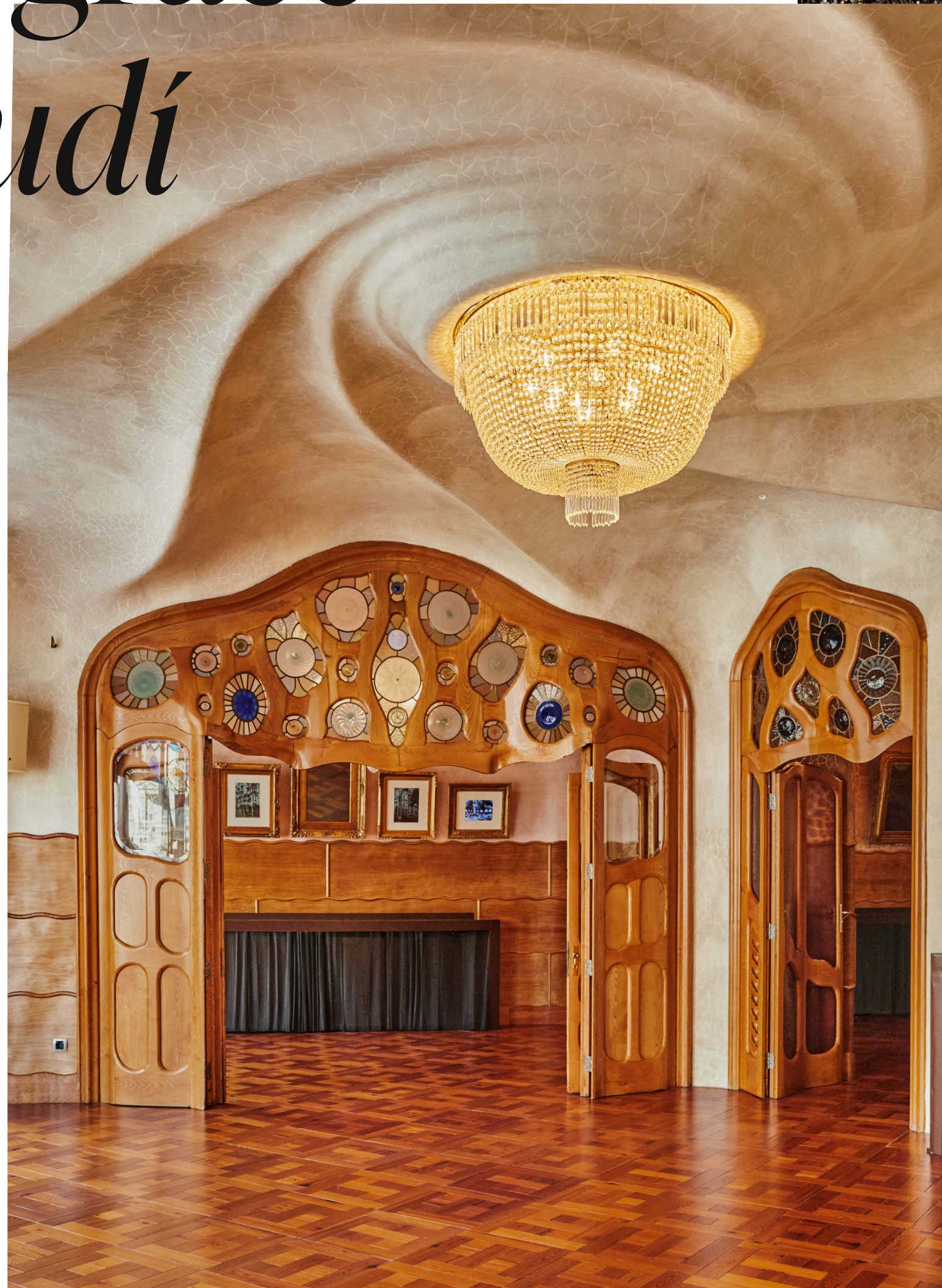


By the grace of *Gaudí*

Barcelona's architectural masterpiece Casa Batlló has had a high-tech reinvention. *Harriet Quick* ventures inside the mind of a genius

Photography by *Anna Huix*



Right: the main hall of the piano nobile of Casa Batlló. Far right: Japanese architect Kengo Kuma's installation for the house



“WE IMAGINED THE SPACE DRESSED IN ALUMINIUM-BEAD CURTAINS. IT CATCHES THE LIGHT LIKE A FISHING NET”

Left: the “patio of lights”, designed by Gaudí to filter light down to the lower floors. Above: the LED Cube, a new room by Turkish media artist Refik Anadol

It’s a work of art,” says Gary Gautier, standing on the black marble steps of a serpentine staircase inside Barcelona’s Casa Batlló. A silver curtain shimmers behind him, rippling like the scales on a dragon’s back, while beneath his feet the underbelly of the staircase resembles the spinal vertebrae of the mythical beast. Gautier is a member of the Bernat family, who have owned the house designed by the famed Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí since the 1990s. The family have fully restored his masterpiece and as CEO Gautier, 36, is now future-proofing the tourist attraction (and Unesco World Heritage Site), which opened to the public in 2002, by collaborating with creatives such as Japanese architect Kengo Kuma to enhance Gaudí’s vision with “interventions” that will create an immersive experience inside the house.

The new staircase (13 tons of Spanish-quarried, robot-cut, hand-sculpted and polished Nero Marquina marble) appears suspended in mid-air, spiralling down from the ground floor to the basement. It is a fitting emblem for the bigger ambitions of the museum – a first, in that it is the largest free-floating marble staircase in the world, designed and engineered by British specialist Ancient & Modern: Chesneys Architectural. “It really delivers a sense of wow,” says the company’s technical director João da Silva of the piece, which winds 14m from top to bottom. “We looked to Gaudí’s extraordinary methodology and vision when designing Casa Batlló. He was a fearless creative – inspired by the wonders of nature and the aquatic world, he created a house with no straight lines. We used ancient stonemasonry skills as well as cutting-edge technology to honour his work,” adds da Silva, who was tasked with finding black marble with very little veining before overseeing the installation, which was finalised during pandemic-enforced closures of the museum.

The staircase’s animalistic form and the pyrotechnic engineering continue Gaudí’s legacy of fusing innovation with artisanal skills (the architect is thought to have learnt much about materials from his coppersmith father). It also links the past and the future, connecting the newly conceived spaces in the basement with the original house on the upper floors.

Gautier and the team have expanded the museum by 2,000sq m to create a better navigational flow for guests, as well as bringing Gaudí’s wild imaginative aesthetic to life with multisensory technology. The new Gaudí Dome room creates an immersive environment with an installation by Miguel Alonso – a rotating platform from which visitors view a dome of more than 1,000 digital projections and 21 audio channels (complemented by binaural sound and scent) that transports them inside the mind of the Spanish architect. The six-sided LED Cube, by Turkish media artist Refik Anadol, explores Gaudí’s creativity with imagery and data from the world’s most comprehensive Gaudí digital library, collated using artificial intelligence. It is all billed as “the world’s first 10D Experience”.

Kengo Kuma worked on the “skin” that transforms the staircase into a jaw-dropping art installation – and guest experience. “We imagined the space dressed in aluminium-bead curtains. Its meticulous materiality catches the light, as if it were a fishing net, revealing it to us in shapes, brightness, silhouettes and shadows, thus omitting the need for any other material,” says Kuma, who collaborated with Italian light designer Mario Nanni on the showcase.

Imaginative new additions also appear in Gaudí’s original house: magic mirrors (transmitting imagery



Above: Gary Gautier – whose family own Casa Batlló – on the black marble staircase by Ancient & Modern: Chesneys Architectural

triggered by micro-sensors in the visitor's audio guide) have been installed throughout a suite of rooms that recreate scenes from the history of the house.

"Five years ago we realised we were not on a good path because culture has not evolved in the past 50 years as it has with cars or tech," says Gautier of the impetus behind the house's makeover. "So we asked what we could do to make our museum the most fun spot to be in the city. How could we make people feel excitement – and not just some people, but everyone?" Gautier is the grandson of Enric Bernat, the founder of the Chupa Chups confectionery empire, and the desire to innovate and collaborate is deeply rooted in the family. It was Bernat, for instance, who in 1969 commissioned Salvador Dalí to create the logo for his lollipops. The artist put the Chupa Chups name into a brightly coloured daisy shape – an iconic design still used for its wrappers today.

Indeed, the story of Casa Batlló is one of constant reinvention. Gaudí did not build the house (first erected in 1877); rather, he was commissioned by its then owner, Josep Batlló y Casanovas to remodel the façade, interior and inner courtyard, transforming it into something spectacular. The extensive work, which took place between 1904 and 1906, created one of the most talked-about addresses on the prestigious Passeig de Gràcia – a shimmering mosaic (*trencadís*) façade in art-nouveau style was set with Montjuïc stone balconies that appear almost liquefied with their sinuous columns and mask-like cast-iron rails. So distinctive is the aesthetic that locals call the building the "house of bones".

Inside, the architect embraced the surreal magic of nature, geometry and the exquisite proportions of classicism. He had a fondness for helicoid spirals, parabolic arches and undulating surfaces. The original carved-oak staircase that leads from the lobby to Batlló's apartment resembles a prehistoric backbone, and Gaudí's wondrous aquatic-inspired dream permeates every detail: the interior courtyard walls are covered in glazed tiles reminiscent of fish scales in aqua tones; porthole windows are inset with jewel-coloured stained glass; the roof resembles a dragon's back; and the arching ceilings and elliptical lines of the rooms echo the ecological otherworldliness of undersea caves and coral beds. You feel as if you are diving into the deep blue of the ocean.

"The magic of the building exists in the realm of the senses. No matter what time of day, you feel something," says Gautier of Gaudí's design. "Other buildings can be bigger, newer, but Casa Batlló is like discovering a cave or an especially atmospheric place in nature. It has the ability to arouse emotions and connect with the soul. Everyone who has stepped inside will recognise that magic."

Antoni Gaudí was the toast of Europe when he designed Casa Batlló. He brought a dynamic modernity and a sense of daring to architecture. A newly minted industrial class, including early-patron Eusebi Güell, commissioned Gaudí for lamp posts, shopfronts, gateways, trade-fair stands, street kiosks, factories, homes and the Güell Palace and Park, which is perched on a hillside overlooking Barcelona. In 1883, he was tasked with completing the Sagrada Família (in place of architect Francisco de Paula del Villar y Lozano), taking the design in a completely new and adventurous direction. He worked on the basilica until his accidental death in 1926 and is buried in the crypt. Although modern buildings now obscure its view over the city, it is thought that at one time you could see the church from the rooftop terrace of Casa Batlló.

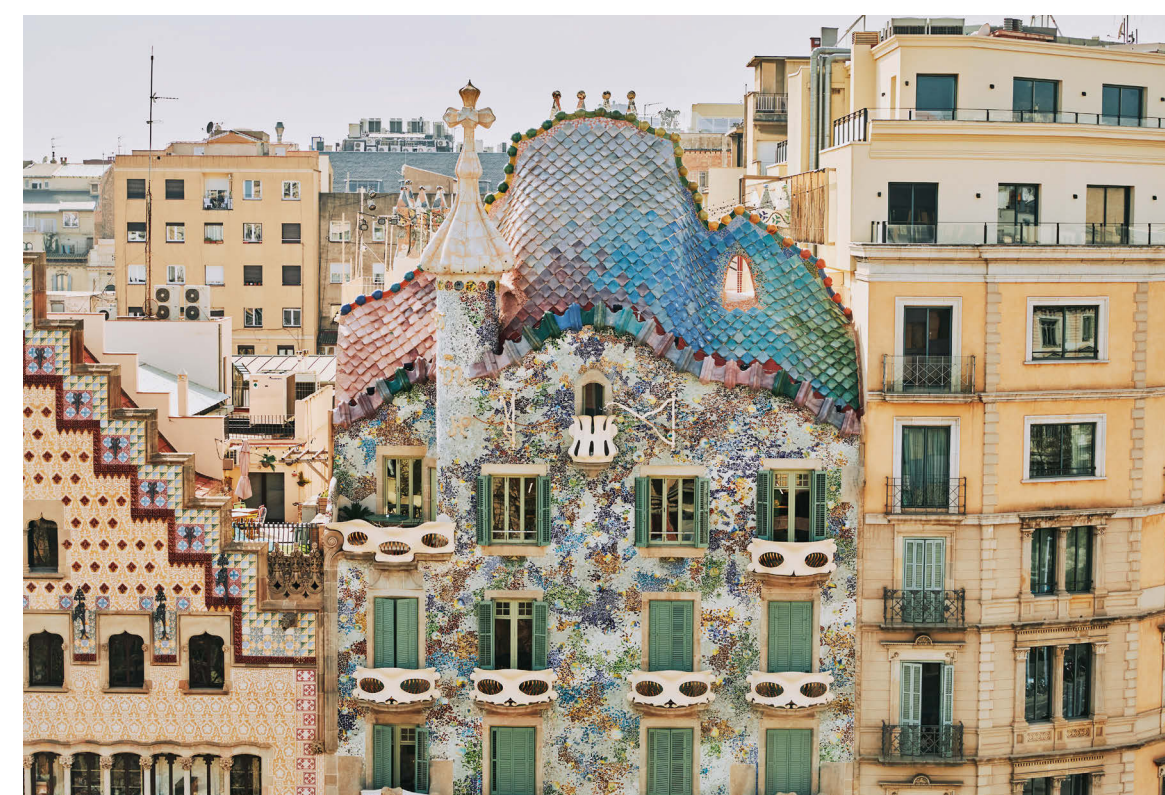
Gautier's early memories of the house are of a time when the lustre of Gaudí's magic had faded with neglect. "Back in the 1990s it was in disrepair. The building was dark, dirty and messed up inside – you would never take a selfie in front of it like today," he says. "My mother Marta led the project to bring the building back to life." During the renovations, the larger rooms on the piano nobile were rented out for corporate events and weddings to help fund the project.

As a teenager, joining the family preservation project was not on the agenda and Gautier went on to graduate and work for a global consulting company. The transition from the financial world to cultural guardian did not happen overnight. "My grandfather always said if you do what you love, you will love what you do," he says, but it took a stint at Singularity University in California (an innovation laboratory using artificial intelligence, robotics and digital biology) to galvanise his interests. He returned to Barcelona to design and oversee the customer journey experience. "I was comfortable working there and found my personal challenge – can culture be as fun as other forms of entertainment?"

The latest chapter of the building represents a €30m investment, roughly divided equally between structural renovations and technological enhancement. The first phase – the extensive restoration of the piano nobile (including the pink plasterwork, tiles and stained glass) – was completed by architect Xavier Villanueva and a team of 40 restoration experts in 2018. Once the bones were cleaned up, the second phase shifted to "interventions". By way of research, Gautier and his team visited comparable spots around the world, but with the exception of the Van Gogh Museum, Tate Modern and TeamLab, in Japan, he found such institutions well managed but largely conventional.

For some purists, his tech-driven improvements might seem wacky, but millions of others will likely find them inspirational, educational and, above all, entertaining. Visitors will not, of course, be forced to consume Gaudí's favoured vegetarian diet of boiled eggs and green plants prior to arrival, but the experience might just feed the mind all the same. "Gaudí left behind an understanding of architecture that has helped its evolution. Instead of the rationalism of previous times, he found ways of merging functionality, craftsmanship and beauty in an innovative and a disruptive way," Gautier concludes. "As this house testifies, the only constant in life is change and we need to adapt if we want to remain relevant." ■HTSI

"THE MAGIC OF THE BUILDING EXISTS IN THE REALM OF THE SENSES"



Above: the hallway leading to the piano nobile. Right: the top floor of the house. Left: its famous façade



Above: the top of the "patio of lights"