



Casas Singulares (Singular Houses)



Keywords: Tourism, Cultural Heritage, History

The aim of the project: To explain the history and heritage of Catalan culture and architecture through tours of some of the homes that make up this history.

Partners: 2 individuals (Laura Pastor Durán and Isabel Vallès Audouard) in conjunction with the following historic houses in Barcelona (and the organizations currently resident in them): Biblioteca Arús, Casa Museo Amatller, La Llotja de Mar, Casa Rocamora, Casa Felip, Palau Baró de Quadras, Palauet Casades, Real Academia de Bellas Artes, Palau Macaya, Casa Batlló, and Estudio de Oleguer Junyent.

Project implementation time: Ongoing implementation since its start in 2010; no specific end date anticipated.

Budget: Not specified.

Priority line/Specific objective: To promote the historical and cultural heritage of the local area by highlighting the architectural innovations of these houses.



Context:

Before the pandemic, Barcelona welcomed varied types of tourism (mass, leisure, cultural, business, etc.), although mass and leisure tourism comprised approximately 70% of the tourism reported in 2019. This led to growing tensions between tourists and city residents, as the negative externalities of these specific types of tourism (dirtiness, noise, overcrowding in public spaces, rising rents and home prices, increases in the general cost of living, gentrification, etc.) created difficulties in peaceful coexistence. Even before the pandemic, the increased use of cultural tourism has been considered by tourism and government authorities as a way to decrease the negative effects of mass tourism listed above. However, it is important to note that cultural sites, attractions, and activities have always been a draw for tourists visiting Barcelona, at least since the city hosted the Olympic Games in 1992 and began to promote itself as an international tourism destination. In the last

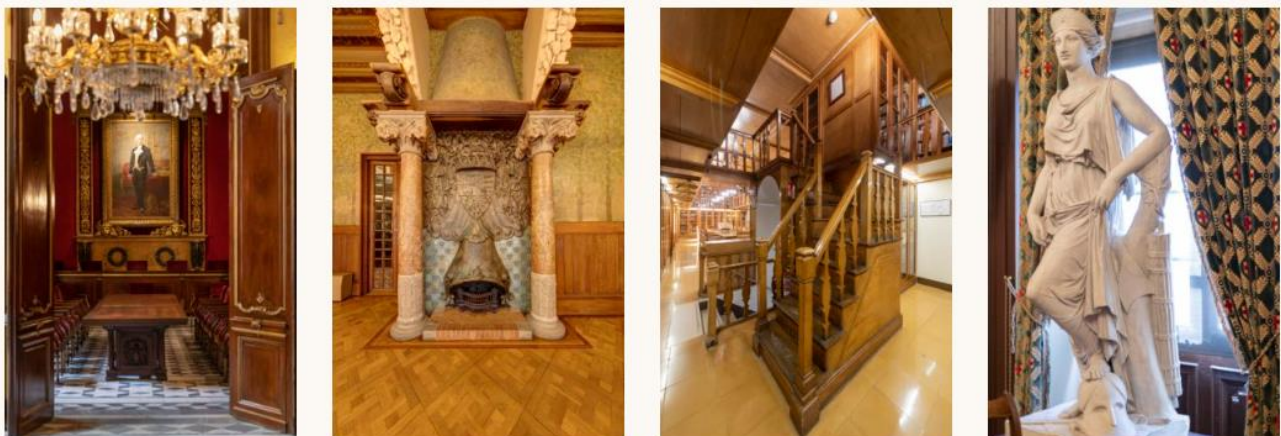


decade or so, the city has seen many new cultural projects, sites, and initiatives crop up with the specific goal of attracting tourists and sharing the city's culture, history, and heritage with them. The effects of the pandemic remain to be seen, though discussions on future tourism policy have begun to consider the importance of cultural tourism as a means of attracting "quality" tourism rather than mass tourism.

Description:

The Casas Singulares (Singular Houses) project is one example of an initiative that arose to share Barcelona's local history and cultural heritage with visitors and the local community, through tours carried out in specific houses that have been the protagonists of the city's history and cultural heritage over time. The owners of this business initiative believe that the houses they have selected for partnerships provide an interesting window into society at the time these houses were at their prime, including explorations of how the owners lived and worked, the architects who designed and built them, and what these houses represented in their wider urban contexts. Most of the houses participating in this initiative were constructed during the Catalan Modernist period and belong to the Art Nouveau (Catalan Modernist) architectural style. Thus, they contribute a special view of Barcelona during a pivotal moment of transformation for the city: specifically, the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Barcelona began to expand beyond its medieval city center and come into a new era of self-definition. In addition to communicating this historical view, the leaders of Casas Singulares also sustain that knowledge of the past can help both tourists and local residents understand "not only where we come from, but also where we might go in the future".

One of the project's main goals is to bring the public closer to the city's heritage, much of which is privately-owned and therefore often difficult to access. This difficulty in access is true for most of the Modernist houses and buildings in the city on a general level, as their overwhelmingly private ownership either means they are either not open at all to the public (except on special occasions), or are open to tourists at prices, times, and occupancy rates that make city residents far less likely to visit. To carry out its mission, Casas Singulares provides a rotating offer of guided tours at participating houses, depending on the time of year and the access agreements made with the organizations that are resident in these houses. In addition to general guided tours, the organization also offers special private group tours for groups of 10+ people, educational tours for school students, and even theatrical or thematic tours at certain times of the year. It also organizes periodic events such as musical concerts, conferences, and other activities in these houses in order to provide an even more in-depth experience of the locations and their relationship to the city's cultural heritage.



Results: Although the project has no formal published results available, the 11-year trajectory of the organization's efforts and its survival of the first part of the COVID-19 pandemic points toward its success. Individuals who have taken part in the group tours tend to offer positive testimonials of the experience, according to the organization's leaders.

Success factors:

Although the project is indeed open to any visitors who book tours on the website, it has primarily served a local audience since its inception. This fact likely contributes to the organization's continued success, as the ups and downs of coexistence between tourists and residents have been well-documented, and the access to visiting many of the city's Modernist houses is often more difficult for residents than for tourist visitors (due to expensive ticket prices, opening schedules, and overcrowding, among other factors). This also means that the organization is in a good position to survive the crisis occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shifted tourism toward a more local audience for the time being.

Another success factor is the organization's adaption of the tour experience to the specific house at hand (i.e. place-based tourism and experience tourism). For example, a ticket to the Casa Amatller may include a guided tour explaining the house's history, the history of the family who inhabited it, an explanation of the groups that now use the space, and a special gift such as a cup of hot chocolate, a unique connection with the legacy of the family who had the house built (the Amatllers were chocolatiers). This differentiated approach, based on the legacy and heritage of the specific location, creates an experience that then cultivates visitor loyalty and repeated visits.

In addition, the initiative has carefully chosen partnerships with houses that are not open to the public year-round, thus offering a degree of exclusivity that attracts visitors to participate in order to experience a site they could not otherwise enter.

Finally, the organization offers its tours and experiences at a price that is either competitive with or more affordable than the other Art Nouveau sites around the city that are open to the public year-round, which is an attractive proposition for local audiences who are tired of being left out of the latter sites.

**Limiting factors:**

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly been a limiting factor for this initiative, as for most tourism- and heritage-related businesses. Another limiting factor may be the competition posed by other Art Nouveau sites in the city, as many of these sites are indeed open to the general public on a more regular basis, have greater numbers of people on their management teams, and have greater reach in terms of marketing to potential visitors. This has meant that the initiative still feels quite "underground" or "grassroots" despite its 11 years in existence, especially when compared to other sites like the Sagrada Familia church, or the Casa Batlló or La Pedrera houses (all of which are owned by private organizations with much greater budgets and more widespread marketing). In this sense, the focus on a more local audience may also be a limiting factor for the organization strictly in terms of economic growth, although their mission and objectives seem to point toward privileging the preservation and sharing of cultural heritage sites above the massification of these same sites solely for economic benefit. This is one indicator of the initiative's participation in a more sustainable type of tourism.



Applicability and upscaling:

This initiative seems to be quite easy to apply or upscale to other areas, regardless of the size of the area and the organization seeking to implement the practice. Interested entrepreneurs could begin this kind of activity with an agreement with just one cultural heritage site, and then build up to their desired portfolio of organizations over time. This would require establishing connections of trust with the sites or groups they wish to promote (something the founders of this organization already had, as they had previously worked at one of the houses on their roster). It would also require critical thinking regarding the implementation and management of the program based on the area's specific context, including considerations of the target audience, the types of attractions they would like to visit, the prices they would be willing to pay, the timetables that work with their schedules, etc.

Other Resources:

Cases Singulars website in English: <https://casessingulars.com/en/>

Please see the Spanish and Catalan versions of the website for their news and updates via their blog:

<https://casessingulars.com/>

<https://casessingulars.com/ca/O-+>



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