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**TOURISTIC FUNCTIONS OF ARCHITECTURE AND THE URBAN LANDSCAPE:  
THE CASE OF BARCELONA**

**Abstract**

Architecture is becoming an important frame of reference in the everyday experience of visitors to Barcelona, as well as major emblem of the city's brand image and, at the same time, an overriding advantage in the processes used by the city-destination to attract economic, cultural and symbolic capital. More specifically, the city's art-nouveau heritage (*modernisme*) is presented as a key attribute bringing prestige and individuality to the tourist city; indeed, by the early 20th century, it had already become one of the main features on Barcelona's tourist landscape.

This article reflects on the ways Barcelona's visitors experience and represent the architectural landscape, while taking into account the tourism functions attributed to architecture, the role of tourism in creating or preserving architecture, and its paradoxical effects.

**Destination Barcelona**

Most cities in the so-called Western world are part of a global market in which they compete with one another. As a result, their managers endeavour to transform the characteristics of their surroundings into consumer resources. In this respect, Cocola (2010) points out that the territory becomes a factor for production in its own right, acting as a support and resource for tourism at one and the same time. Heritage-activation processes take place within the framework of these territorial strategies, on the pretext of increasing the value of the resource in question, but also with the intention of transforming it into a key node within its surroundings, thereby fostering its iconic function and bringing the urban ensemble to worldwide attention.

Tourism and architecture have forged a close relationship over the years: an interested and complementary relationship that has unleashed highly distinctive and, at times, paradoxical effects. On the one hand, it is important to note that in Barcelona, as in many other cities, people have attributed a clearly symbolic character to architecture because, among other aspects, it has been used to raise the profile and increase the value of the urban ensemble. On the other, we must take on board the fact that architecture is one of the main magnets for tourism and a key factor for attracting and producing cultural and economic capital. This is why the relationship between tourism and architecture must be understood within the framework of a broader binomial made up of the concepts of capital and culture, which organise – and partly justify – their development.

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Montaner (2005) writes that even in the early 20th century, Barcelona had a civic and political passion for town planning created from the power base; a town planning that needed to express identity, lend prestige and distinction, and create a brand. Architecture, which was to symbolise and personify Barcelona, became inextricably linked to the process of building the city as a tourist attraction; indeed, architectural creation and the official promotion of tourism were part of the same political process and pretext (Palou, 2011).

Nowadays, architecture continues to play a prominent role in building processes in Barcelona. The city has become a world-renowned urban tourism destination, particularly since the middle of the 1990s, although, as we know, the first initiatives geared to attracting tourists were implemented between 1910 and 1940. López Palomeque (2006) maintains that, nowadays, Barcelona has a rich and varied offering of recreational and cultural services and attractions and the basic infrastructures that characterise present-day urban tourism: it is a city dating back 2,000 years; it has a unique historic and monumental heritage; it is equipped with outstanding cultural facilities and dynamics, in addition to being a political, economic and administrative capital; an important centre for business tourism; a magnet for commerce; a university city; a sporting capital; and a hub for specialised services—among other tertiary functions. López Palomeque also reminds us that Barcelona benefits from a set of circumstances that broaden its current and future appeal. Most important among them are the city's strategic location in the Mediterranean axis and its status as the capital and geographical centre of one of the world's most important tourist regions; the fact that it has become a key Mediterranean metropolis; and the firm commitment of local government to tourism. López Palomeque also identifies the new spatial features of the tourist Barcelona of the present, part of which results in tourist activity spreading throughout the city and even extending beyond its administrative boundaries.

The figures showing supply and demand speak for themselves and give a very clear idea of the importance of destination Barcelona on the world map. According to Turisme de Barcelona (the destination's official promotional body) more than 7 million tourists visited the city in 2010, generating some 14 million overnights at the city's hotels. These figures, which have been growing since the middle of the 1990s, are just part of a situation that is decidedly broader in scope: there are also greater numbers of visitors who choose to stay in guest houses, hostels, apartments or with friends and family, instead of hotels, and an equally considerable number of tourists who only visit the city for the day and don't stay overnight.

Above and beyond the different sets of figures, it cannot be denied that tourists value Barcelona's architecture very highly (according to official surveys, the city's architectural offering is the most highly appreciated aspect of destination Barcelona followed by its cultural and entertainment offering). Barcelona is home to a number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and its home-grown art-nouveau landmarks make up a unique map of nodes that tourists never tire of visiting, exploring and admiring.

Moreover, as Harvey (2005) points out, we must bear in mind that Barcelona has accumulated an important symbolic capital that relies on values based on authenticity, uniqueness and special qualities that cannot be reproduced, according to which Barcelona has created local brands of distinction that other big cities would find hard to amass. All these elements make up a landscape that is exciting from the point of view of tourism. A complex, crowded, dense

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and very powerful landscape; a landscape where architecture plays many roles above and beyond its original function.

### **Architecture: a frame of reference for the tourist experience in Barcelona**



**Panoramic view of Barcelona from Montjuïc (photo: Saida Palou)**

As with most city destinations, Barcelona provides a broad range of tourist experiences because of the wide variety of opportunities it offers as a destination, the infinite reasons people have for visiting and the different ways they spend their time while they are here. However, in spite of the wide variety of experiences the destination offers, it is nonetheless true that certain gregarious behaviour patterns and similarities can be detected in tourists' preferences and evaluations of Barcelona.

The contemporary tourist experience in cities is usually brief, fast and intense. In Barcelona, the tourists' average length of stay (those staying at a hotel) is two nights. This means that tourists have a short stay which we could, initially, define as superficial and fleeting, albeit intense and lived to the full. In a short space of time, many tourists want to see as many attractions as possible and to take part in a wide range of activities, whereas others are quite happy to see the destination highlights. However, in either case, what visitors really want to do is to live and experience Barcelona; to feel it.

The dispersal of tourists throughout the city is organised according to the location of the nodes and the services it has available. As a rule, these are located in the most central and oldest area of the city (the district known as Ciutat Vella); although there are other sightseeing attractions in areas that are some distance away from the city centre (the Basilica of the Sagrada Família and Park Güell). The fact is, tourists— whether they are walking through areas which have a high density of landmarks, services and hordes of tourists of the same characteristics, or less crowded areas – always require symbolic markers that will make it easier for them to understand and view the area in question: elements which, in one way or another, will enable them to recognise the place. According to MacCannell (2005), tourist landscapes in the contemporary world must have symbolic markers that make it possible to identify the place. This is because tourists never see the destination in an empirical sense, but through the emblematic icons and elements that characterise the place. So, in this respect, unique buildings and signature architecture usually take on a very specific function in the tourist experience, insofar as they make it easier to identify the urban ensemble. It must be borne in mind that the landmark or architecture play a prominent role in the pre-conceived image tourists have of the place they are going to visit, so that it plays a key role in them looking forward to the visit and assembling their memories afterwards. According to

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Mancinelli (2009), contemporary tourists are more accustomed to recognising the place rather than knowing it: what they are looking for during their stay in the destination is to confirm that their previously constructed image of the place does, indeed, exist (in this way, something imagined resembles the real thing).



Tourists taking photos of the Casa Batlló (photo: Saida Palou)

The Sagrada Família and La Rambla are becoming traditionally sacred places in the experience and gaze of Barcelona's tourists. This is why they are a special source of satisfaction when they visit; they are well-defined, desired places that connect visitors with a more generic or abstract idea of Barcelona. These types of places are symbolic markers, to quote MacCannell, which enable tourists to feel, admire, remember and provide proof of their stay in destination Barcelona. They acquire an

undeniably metonymical value insofar as they can represent the destination as a whole (Palou, 2009). However, it is important to bear in mind that these places are not producers of identity but products of identifications.

According to MacCannell, we know that architecture doesn't usually become the overriding object of the contemporary tourist experience, but rather provides a context and important frame of reference for tourist experiences. Architecture becomes an important physical and symbolic place that can be used to guarantee a sense of belonging to and identification with the place (particularly if we are dealing with a specific type of town planning). At the same time, it can be used to suggest and evoke a particular setting, something that is very clear in the case of Barcelona, as it has established a tourism narrative in which its home-grown art-nouveau acquires special potency. The above factors lead us to consider that the dispersal of art-nouveau landmarks throughout the city makes it easier for tourists to gain a broad overview of the city (although they may have only had the chance to glimpse or view these landmarks superficially). *Modernista* architecture acquires a metonymical power that identifies the city in tourism terms, and most tourists visiting the city share this observation, albeit unconsciously.

### **Architecture: the outstanding emblem of the brand image of the city-destination**

Architecture is one of the elements that is most central to Barcelona's brand image. This is by no means an isolated or chance occurrence, but the result of historical continuity, because at the beginning of the 20th century a hegemonic image of Barcelona was being constructed. This image incorporated the most modern urban landmarks of the time, as well as some of the traditional buildings from the city and its metropolitan area. The fact is, during the first 30 years of the 20th century, architecture was an emblem of Barcelona's image and became the

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symbol and expression of the power and identity of the city. In the hands of Barcelona's first tourism promoters—men filled with euphoria and a desire to change the urban landscape— an initial tourist image was constructed that promoted Barcelona by extolling the visual qualities of its architecture. *Modernista* architecture played a key role in this process. The new urban planning gradually reorganised the life of Barcelona society, creating places for recreation, centres of power and commercial premises, among other functionalities. The building of the Gothic Quarter, carried out between 1910 and 1940, was certainly a paradigmatic example of this process. It set itself up as the new powerhouse and representative nucleus of Barcelona (Cócola, 2011).

This means that in strictly tourist terms, the new architecture was the major asset of the brand image and provided a privileged backdrop for the visitor experience. This is happening today in a way that is similar and comparable to this period. As Smith (2005) points out, there are techniques for constructing new images that go way beyond purely conventional methods (such as marketing, promotional literature and slogans). He considers that the so-called re-imagining techniques are linked to the organisation of macro events and major celebrations that attract people from around the world, or the building of unique architectural icons and buildings. Indeed, by giving impetus to signature architecture and design, with world-famous names such as Bofill, Nouvel, Foster and Calatrava, the city has helped create a new symbolic landscape for Barcelona, that includes signs such as prestige, cutting-edge design and power. These techniques are not just exclusive to the present; they are part of an important historic tradition. In the early 20th century, and today, they have helped bring prestige to the city: “in both eras, tourism and capital city ambitions complement each other” (Smith, 2007: 24).



Agbar Tower (photo: Saida Palou)

It is important to mention that some of the great post-Olympic cultural projects that were developed throughout the 1990s, including the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya (TNC), the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (MNAC), the concert hall, L'Auditori Municipal, and the opera house, the Gran Teatre del Liceu (which suffered a major fire in early 1994), not only expanded the city's cultural offering, but contributed to defining a new image of Barcelona and, at the

same time, fostered a new socio-economic form and model for the city. However, Cócola (2009) points out that the setting up of contemporary art museums in the 1990s ended up becoming a kind of social duty, insofar as the new centres were legitimised by the prestige of the architect or the publicity they gave to the building, rather than being valued for their contents. This means that the contemporary art museums, designer buildings and

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reconstructions of the city's historic past were devices that shaped and made up Barcelona's so-called brand image.

The fact is, new contemporary architectures triumph as part of the Barcelona imaginary and brand, and are becoming very powerful focal points for the global brand of the city-destination. This means that architecture is playing an important role in implementing the creation of a dynamic brand image that is rich and varied and seeks to display identity and difference, cosmopolitanism and internationalisation.

### **Architecture: an overriding advantage in the processes of attracting economic, symbolic and cultural capital**

Smith (2005) warns that the objectives of tourism today often become the main justification for developing new monumental and iconic strategies that transform the (symbolic and morphological) landscape of large and medium-sized cities. In the final analysis, the icons become one of the competitive motifs and elements that contribute to securing the position of places around the world; a competitiveness, as Smith states, that is less and less based on natural resources or former location and reputation, and is becoming increasingly focused on skilful images and their symbolic power.

Smith points out that the representation of the city, namely, the creation of an image, is always associated with a set of aims that go beyond strictly tourism-based criteria, because reshaping the image of a place is part of a process that has as its primary aim the accumulation of economic, political and cultural capital. As far as the case of Barcelona is concerned, Smith is of the opinion that this factor is, indeed, associated with a broader and more ambitious set of aims that are connected with aspects of regeneration of a more global nature.

### **Conclusion**

The dialectical gaze between past and present concerning the tourism functions of architecture proves, in the first instance, the symbolic importance of town planning throughout the decades, particularly in the way it raises awareness of, represents and brings prestige to the city-destination as a whole. As an expression of the uniqueness of a city destination, architecture performs a very important function when it comes to representing and bringing prestige to the destination in tourism terms.

The presence of tourists has traditionally been considered a positive element in the process of focusing attention on heritage and valuing town planning and culture. Indeed, their presence has validated many town-planning projects, both in the early 20th century and in the past few decades. Nevertheless, at this juncture we are faced with a contradiction or paradox, precisely because of the fact that the presence, en masse, of visitors in specific areas and heritage sites can lead to the vulgarisation or misuse of these places, rather than increasing their appreciation. These kinds of situations (which the dragon in Barcelona's Park Güell fell victim to) clearly show the need for management that takes into account the tourism functions of the city's heritage, which are often overlooked, underestimated or sidelined. The crux of this debate lies precisely here: when town planning and different heritages are used over and over again by tourists, and geared to serving a broader range of interests designed to raise the city's profile, they are often neglected from the point of view of their management as tourist

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attractions. In this respect, heritage management should take on board the fact that heritage is, in itself, a tourist attraction. Failure to do so could generate negative effects and bring the destination into disrepute. Barcelona is currently giving a great deal of thought to this matter.

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