

# THE STARCHITECTS OF SPAIN

Not architects, but artists. Not buildings, but masterworks. See Spain with inspired eyes ~ BY MARK HACKING



"City of Arts and Sciences," Valencia

PHOTOS: TKT/K

**T**HERE ARE A MILLION OR MORE REASONS FOR TRAVELLERS to flock to Spain. For sun-starved vacationers, the beaches of the Costa del Sol represent a welcome respite from a classic case of post-winter blahs. For those enamored with the idea of dancing all night and sleeping it all off the following day, the island of Ibiza continues to rank among the best spots in the world for doing just that. Spain also holds significant appeal for those who prefer to seek out more subtle discoveries, such as a tapas bar tucked away along Calle Cava Baja in Madrid or a boutique dress shop nestled on Carrer Pintor Fortuny in Barcelona.

Over and above all these pursuits, Spain enjoys a rich tradition in art and architecture; more pointedly, the country seems to embrace craftsmen in these milieu that are a little bit — *¿cómo se dice?* — eccentric. Consider Pablo Picasso, co-founder of the Cubist movement, native of Malaga, the artist who conspired to place both eyes of his subject, flounder-like, on the same side of the face. Or Joan Miró, of Barcelona, the artist who turned to surrealism after deeming Picasso's own bizarre etchings to be too conventionally popular. Of course, any discussion of surrealism must also include the Catalan master Salvador Dalí, he of the dastardly facial hair and melting pocket watches.

In the world of architecture, the Spanish stage has been set by Antoni Gaudí, also from the Catalan region just outside Barcelona. Fiercely creative, Gaudí's organic style of design, influenced by nature, remains startlingly relevant more than 80 years after his death. Of the countries with the most UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Spain ranks second, behind Italy, with 43. Of these 43, seven are structures created by Gaudí. Of these seven, his master work, the unfinished Sagrada Família in Barcelona, remains one of the city's most prominent tourist attractions.

An edifice that earns UNESCO World Heritage Site designation is described as "an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural, or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates a significant stage in human history." While Antoni Gaudí has certainly made his mark in this regard, three modern architects have picked up the mantle and pushed Spain back into the international spotlight.

## SANTIAGO CALATRAVA: THE ARTIST, THE ENGINEER AND THE ARCHITECT

If the term "starchitect" hadn't already been invented before his meteoric rise to prominence, Santiago Calatrava would have been the ideal inspiration.

Born in Valencia, Calatrava studied art and structural engineering before turning to architecture, and his work today reflects all three disciplines. Although he's become famous for buildings and bridges



Hotel Marques de Riscal, Elciego

in cities such as Buenos Aires, New York and Toronto, one of his most breathtaking projects is now the focal point of his birthplace.

When the Turia River was diverted away from central Valencia following the last in a series of devastating floods in 1957, an opportunity was created. Take a stroll in the former riverbed these days and you'll discover an urban playground complete with soccer pitches and jogging trails. Walk southeast towards the Mediterranean Sea and you'll encounter a series of buildings that defy convention to such a degree, they seem to have been airlifted from another planet.

A work of staggering genius, the *Ciutat de las Artes i las Ciències* ("City of Arts and Sciences") first opened in 1998 and helped to

trigger a renaissance in Valencia, turning the once-dismal port into a vibrant centre of culture, design and sport. For example, in recent years, the city has hosted the America's Cup on a far-from-typical two separate occasions, as well as earned a regular place on the Formula One calendar.

The City of Arts and Sciences development is decidedly large-scale in nature, comprising seven separate structures — six buildings and a bridge — and Calatrava was the architect responsible for the vast majority of the work. As is often the case with his designs, there are highlights everywhere you look.

The planetarium called *L'Hemisfèric*, the first building to be completed, is surrounded by a reflecting pool; as such, it brings

to mind a Jules Verne creature cresting the surface of the ocean. Continuing this theme, the covered stadium *L'Àgora* looks like the spine of either a prehistoric animal or a 21st-century beast with direct, prehistoric lineage.

The bridge at the southernmost part of the development, *El Pont de l'Assut de l'Or*, is classic Calatrava. With its 125-metre white spire supported by high tensile white strands, the bridge mimics aspects of a monolithic crossbow, a weapon suited, perhaps, to the Greek goddess of the hunt, Artemis.

But the crowning glory of the City of Arts and Sciences was the final building to be added to the collection, the *Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia*, which was completed in 2005. Standing 75 metres

PHOTOS: TATYK

high, this opera house is the world's tallest — but its size tells only part of the story. The building is one part jet boat mixed with two parts spaceship; so visually arresting, it's a wonder that the drivers traveling along the adjacent Autopista del Saler aren't involved in one long, consecutive fender-bender.

There's a catchphrase used to describe the work of the modern-day architect: wow-factor architecture. The City of Arts and Sciences is as clear an example of this as can be found. It's also the very definition of a must-see destination for anyone who's ever designed a building — or been in one.

#### FRANK GEHRY AND THE BILBAO EFFECT

Imagine creating something so profound, it results in its own catchphrase. Such is the case with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, which has given rise to the modern-day architectural phenomenon known as "the Bilbao Effect."

Prior to the Guggenheim opening in 1997, Bilbao was a moribund port city in the midst of a dramatic de-industrialization process. The investment in urban renewal was supercharged by the museum, an edifice described by architects and architecture critics alike as the greatest building of our time.

The man responsible for the *Guggenheim Bilbao*, Frank Gehry, is not Spanish — rather, he was born in Toronto and moved to California as a teenager. He merits inclusion here because Gehry is forever tied to Spain through his work, much as the label "starchitect" is inextricably linked to "the Bilbao Effect."

Little wonder: The Guggenheim Museum is a gleaming homage to possibility, a testament to what man can create given free reign and an admittedly healthy budget. Without question a wow-factor building, it certainly stands out from its surroundings. Still, in approaching all of his projects, from the grandiose to the more modest, Gehry maintains that he studies the environment in meticulous detail, intent on making his creations blend in.

On the surface of it, this is difficult to imagine, particularly when the massive, seemingly random, titanium panels — the signature aspect of the building — are considered. Move closer to the panels, though, and you'll see that they bear more than a passing resemblance to the scales of a fish. A fish, perhaps, that might be pulled from the Nervion River that runs directly past the museum.

The panels, Gehry has also noted in explaining his design, were "shaped" by the Spanish wind and reflect the sun. Clearly, the man's work has hidden depths, layered well beyond the understanding of the casual observer.

Smaller in scale yet no less impressive is the *Hotel Marques de Riscal*, some 200 kilometres south in Elciego, Spain. Built in 2006, this building is clearly the work of Gehry — witness again the billowing, titanium panels — and it is also very clearly an example of wow-factor architecture. (So, too, is Gehry's other masterwork, the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, opened in 2003.)

Upon first glance, the small hotel, situated on one of the most famous wine estates in the Rioja region, is a shock to the senses. It's even more shocking when considered in the context of this small, 16th-century town, itself a world away from cities filled with ambition or even objectives — cities such as Bilbao.

There's no denying that this hotel is a very special one: no two rooms of the same design; and a seemingly non-linear juxtaposition

to the mirror-image rows of vines that encircle the property. You can check it out any time you like, but it will never leave you.

#### RICARDO BOFILL AND THE TALLER DE ARQUITECTURA

Any big-city politician worth his salt understands that the airport is the vital first impression for many visitors, and a gateway to the very soul of the city. Most of the time, this information is acted upon, but sometimes financing gets in the way of branding and better judgment.

At one end of the scale, we have an airport such as Keflavik International in Reykjavik, which, for all the world, appears like a space station set in the middle of a lunar landscape. In landing there, even the remotely curious will instantly want to discover more of Iceland. At the other end, there is Newark Liberty International Airport, a facility that causes the weary traveler to rethink the meaning of the word "terminal." Set among the grime of heavy industry, this airport serves to motivate people only to leave New Jersey as soon as humanly possible.

Much closer to the Icelandic interpretation is *Barcelona El Prat Airport*, which has received not one, but two separate enhancements from hometown architect Ricardo Bofill and his collaborative, Taller de Arquitectura.

Prior to the 1992 Summer Olympic Games in Barcelona, Bofill was engaged to design the extension to Terminal 2; some two decades later, he returned to complete Terminal 1. The latter is a bright, welcoming space with three tendrils of gates emanating forth from the central core.

At the heart of the terminal, which was named the Best Airport in Southern Europe in 2011, is a network of boutique shops and some of the most luxurious executive lounges on the continent. Plans are underway to have Bofill complete the trifecta by adding a third terminal, thus transitioning El Prat into a truly international hub.

For those who are doing more than just passing through Barcelona en route to someplace else, the city is arguably one of the most interesting in Europe. The fashion and design scene rivals those of Paris and Milan for sheer globe-trotting influence. The architecture pulls no punches, either.

Once you've torn himself away from the Sagrada Familia, it takes just a quick cab ride through the heart of the city to find another building of extraordinary presence — the *W Hotel Barcelona*. There are very few cities in the world where a building of such unique character could fit in: Dubai, perhaps, or maybe Kualu Lumper. In a stretch, Las Vegas.

But this billowing hotel right on the Mediterranean Sea is very much at home in Barcelona, influenced as it is by the Spanish sun and the contemporary, urban atmosphere. "I think one important factor is the climate and the quality of light to promote the integration of the architecture in the environment," Bofill says in describing why he believes Spain has proven to be such fertile ground for great building design. "There has also been an artistic tradition that has been expressed in the paintings of, for example, Goya, Picasso, Tapies and Barcelo."

The modern-day architect has, at times, been considered an artist. As far as Spain is concerned, it seems the artistic mantle has very much been taken up by those responsible for creating works of art from concrete, steel, stone and glass. (A)



Barcelona El Prat Airport (Terminal 1), Barcelona



W Hotel Barcelona

PHOTOS: TKT/TK