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WSJ. MAGAZINE | CULTURE

The Restoration of Casa Vicens, Antoni Gaudí's Hidden Gem

Next year, an early masterwork by the Catalan architect opens to the public for the first time
—and the banking scion running it has surprising plans in store



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ORNATE FACADE | Casa Vicens, one of Gaudí's earliest buildings, in Barcelona's Gràcia district

By **FRED A. BERNSTEIN**

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BARCELONA HAS many charms, but it's hard to imagine the city sparkling the way it does without the work of Antoni Gaudí, whose unfinished Basilica and Expiatory Church of the Holy Family, known as the Sagrada Família, draws over three million visitors a year. Only slightly less popular are the architect's whimsically tiled Parc Güell and his two famous apartment buildings, Casa Batlló and Casa Milà. Both buildings have operated as tourist attractions for decades, offering such Gaudí-themed enticements as vending machines stocked with Batlló-branded water, gizmos that press pennies into souvenirs and hologram displays.

Mercedes Mora does not intend to include such gimmicks at Casa Vicens. Late next year, Mora, a member of an Andorran banking family, will open the house—one of the first major buildings of Gaudí's career—to the public for the first time. A Moorish-Orientalist extravaganza, the building was commissioned in 1882 when Gaudí was just 30. Completed in 1888, it marked not only Gaudí's coming of age, but also the flowering of Catalan architecture—a victory of the phantasmagorical over the rational that, in the succeeding decades, led to hundreds of eccentric buildings in the region. “To understand Gaudí's career, you have to see Casa Vicens,” says Mora, 39, echoing the views of many architectural historians.

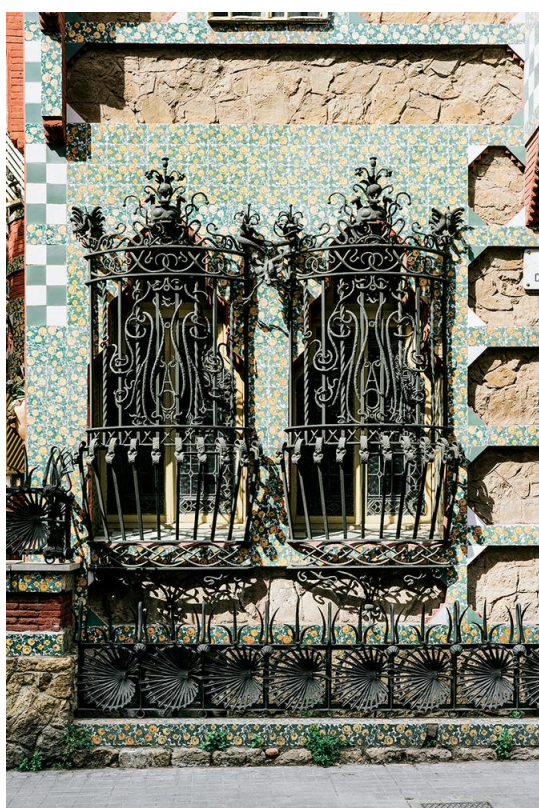
Last year, MoraBanc, founded in the principality of Andorra in 1952 by Mora's great-grandfather, bought the house for a reported \$41 million. (Mora, citing the sellers' request for privacy, declines to confirm the price.) Mora was working in real estate when she heard that her family company was buying Casa Vicens. She immediately applied for the job of running it, and the bank's twin governing bodies—the family board and the external board—agreed to put her in charge. Now she's working around the clock on a thousand details related to the opening. She isn't complaining about the hours. Instead she says, “I have taken on the most beautiful project of my life.”

Mora has loved Gaudí since childhood, when she drew his buildings around Barcelona

(she still has her drawings of Casa Milà in her mother's Barcelona apartment). But her attachment to the project isn't entirely architectural. Mora wants to use culture to help MoraBanc, still family owned, increase its market share. "The important thing here is the potential of finding a new type of top client," she says. "Imagine someone interested in entering as a co-investor in Casa Vicens: This person might become a MoraBanc private banking client, or vice versa." And for those clients, she needs the Gaudí house to make a profit.

ONE EARLY autumn day, Mora is standing outside in the rain, pointing out the unusual features of the Casa Vicens facades. The building is blocky—Gaudí hadn't yet developed the full vocabulary of catenary curves that shaped his later buildings—but turrets and gables break up its substantial volume. Surfaces are covered with green and white tiles in bold checkerboard patterns; some tiles bear images of yellow French marigolds, while ceramic sunflowers and foliage embellish small balconies.

The sidewalk in front of the building is dotted with tourists, who arrive knowing there is no chance of seeing the interiors but are happy to shoot selfies with Gaudí's riotous exterior behind them. Mora unlocks the gate of palmetto-patterned wrought iron and slips into the overgrown garden. The tourists barely notice.



Windows facing onto Carolines Street PHOTO: SALVA LÓPEZ FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Soon she is feeling her way around a musty, dark basement. The electric company failed to keep an appointment, and Mora needs to find the circuit breakers before she can turn the house's lights on. Once she does, she heads upstairs to show off some of the most delirious interiors ever created. Gaudí concealed walls and heavy cabinetry behind paintings of flying birds and climbing ivy, and made ceilings look like blue skies with palm trees growing up through skylights. Some of the effects are three-dimensional. The architect used pressed cardboard to model figures of ivy, fruit and flowers, presaging the "dripping ice cream" facades of his later buildings.

The place looks to be in disrepair, but maybe no more so than any house recently vacated by longtime residents. Later, Jordi Falgàs, an architectural historian who is working with Mora on the renovation, says, "The original Gaudí interiors are in a fairly good condition. Some of the wall paintings in the dining room have suffered due to humidity, but restoring them is mostly a matter of cleaning and preventing future damage." And he says he is optimistic that the work will get done in a little over a year. "We're lucky that during recent years Barcelona has developed a whole new school of experts in the conservation of art nouveau and modern heritage" buildings, he says. In other words, the workers he needs aren't hard to find.

Nor will visitors be hard to find. In fact, one of Mora's challenges will be to cap the number of people in the house. She says the plan is to limit entries to between 50,000 and 100,000 a year for the first three years—3 percent of the Sagrada Família's traffic. "We know that there will be a lot more demand than that," she says, "but for us, the

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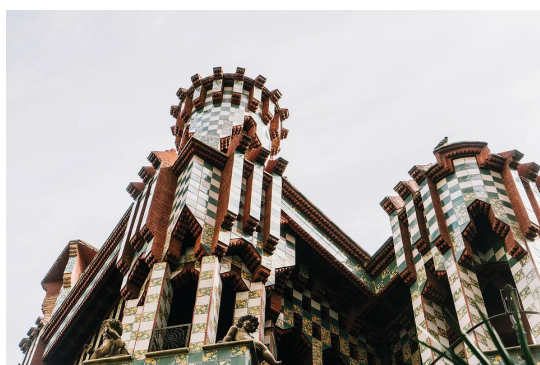
quality of visits will always be more important than quantity."

But keeping visitors out could jeopardize one of

Mora's top priorities: turning a profit. The house is owned by a MoraBanc fund formed to "offer customers the opportunity to co-invest in projects," says Mora. (Those projects include Formula E—an electric car version of Formula 1 racing—and proposals for a branch of the Hermitage Museum in Barcelona and a London hotel.) Mora expects the house to break even in the first year and then operate in the black. She is weighing two different approaches to admissions: a "VIP" option with a few visitors and lofty prices, or a more accessible ticket with a higher tourist flow.

But will what's good for the bottom line be good for Gaudí's architecture? In an era when directors of house museums are dependent on, and sometimes desperate for, donations from individuals, foundations and governments, turning to investors makes a certain amount of sense. Barry Bergdoll, who until last year headed the department of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, calls the setup "a brave and bold move" that is "definitely a development to watch."

Falgàs, the architectural historian, who has spent 20 years working for public and private museums, says, "It's great news that private companies are becoming more and more involved in historic preservation." He sees MoraBanc's goals as consistent with proper stewardship of the house. Mora agrees, saying that only a well-maintained and well-run house will satisfy her family. "All the things we talk about—the privilege of giving the house back to the public, cross-selling MoraBanc and making money for investors—have to be in balance," she says.



Casa Vicens PHOTO: SALVA LÓPEZ FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

To achieve her goals, she will need plenty of advice. She is working with the Iconic Houses network, an Amsterdam-based organization that helps the directors of modernist house museums address shared problems. According to its director, Natascha Drabbe, the biggest hurdle for most of the dwellings in the network is finding enough money for restoration—and that money

requires visitors. Only a few, including Casa Batlló and Casa Milà, can rely on steady streams of tourists to fund operations. As Bergdoll puts it, "Perhaps the craze for Gaudí is just the thing."

Gaudí's popularity was unimaginable in 1882. That's when Gaudí, four years out of architecture school, received the commission to design a house for Don Manuel Vicens Montaner, a stockbroker. As the architect's biographer, Gijs van Hensbergen, wrote in 2001, "When Gaudí first inspected the site, he found a giant flowering palm surrounded by a carpet of yellow flowers." Gaudí intended to enshrine that flora in architecture, which explains his use of yellow-flower tiles and wrought-iron palm fronds.

Vicens died just seven years after the house was built. In 1900, his family sold it to Antonio Jover, a surgeon from Havana, who opened its garden to the public every May. The house remained in Jover's family for more than a century, until his grandnieces and nephews sold it to the bank in 2014.

Over the years, the Jovers had sold off bits of the land, eventually chopping off the

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—Mora

backyard belvedere and grotto. In their place, apartment buildings crowded around the house. While the belvedere and grotto will never be replicated, Falgàs hopes to re-create the fountain designed for the porch, which, he says, “is essential to understanding how Gaudí created an interior that was an extension of the garden.”

Inside the house, which the Jovers divided into four apartments, Gaudí's original layout is being restored. Other changes will include the installation of a new stairway and elevator. It helps that the Jovers enlarged the house by nearly half its original size in 1925. (Gaudí, busy with the Sagrada Família, gave his approval to the expansion but let another architect design it.) The facade of the addition mimics Gaudí's, but its interiors are plain. “That is actually very convenient,” says Mora, “because it gives us a place for all of the new visitor services without having to occupy the Gaudí rooms.”

Altogether, 15 Gaudí rooms on four levels will be open to the public. Bergdoll may speak for millions when he says he'd like to see those rooms as soon as possible. The achievements of a mature Gaudí—Casa Batlló and Casa Milà, the Sagrada Família and several projects for the Güell family—are already familiar territory. But, he says, “I am dying to see Gaudí in this earlier mood.”

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