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Barcelona: Bodies in Space(s)

By Jane Peterson, PhD



Casa Batllò ceiling

Don and I recently had the opportunity to go to Barcelona, Spain. (Thank you fellow constellation facilitators & consultants [Veronica Menduïña](#) and [Pablo Tovar](#) , for your generous hospitality during our visit.) We loved Barcelona. It's a beautiful city and our visit there gave me the opportunity to explore some of the architectural works of [Antoni Gaudí](#), something I have wanted to do for many years.

We first visited the [Sagrada Família cathedral](#), Gaudí's last, longest, and still unfinished project, an on-going construction effort in the city of Barcelona. Before we entered the cathedral, we went into the little school Gaudí designed that has been reconstructed in front of the cathedral. Within this curious, humble little building, stand many of Gaudí's machetes and original plasters that survived the bombing of the Sagrada during the Spanish Civil War. These models show Gaudí's astonishing understanding of the geometric order hidden within Nature's complex forms. Gaudí was an experimentalist; he worked with the buildings as they were being constructed, working out solutions and evolving his understanding of his building materials as he went (sounds a bit like constellation work, doesn't it?) His keen vision and felt sense of the order within the complexity of nature can be seen in these models.



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Structural model of parts of the cathedral

With that preparation, we entered the main hall of the Sagrada Familia. Walking into the Sagrada was like entering the mind of a giant. The space soars, sweeping you up to the celestial portals to the divine in the gilt tiled ceiling. (In this photo, the windows on the roof are still in construction and not yet open to the sky.)



Ceiling of the Sagrada Familia Cathedral

Here, like Mozart or Beethoven, was a rare mind among human beings, one that had penetrated the mysteries of the order hidden within the chaos of Nature. One who built from simple bricks a cathedral for giants, yet a cathedral so exquisitely sensitive to size, shape, and form of its human visitors that my body felt quite at home in this soaring space. Fluting in the pillars at the base that seemed large from where I stood, blended into finer and finer divisions as the pillars swept up to touch the star-filled ceiling. At the same time, the bench beneath the first balcony of pews is perfectly scaled for human bodies, and indeed, people nestled there quite comfortably.



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Casa Batllò, street view

Casa Batllò (a house commissioned for Gaudí by a local wealthy merchant named Batllò) was another experience of Gaudí's amazing understanding of the human form moving through space. The building is an homage to the beauty and rhythms of our beautiful (and now troubled) ocean. From the subtle veining of the plaster on the walls, reminiscent of the dappled pattern of reflected light on the surface of waves, to the small water meditation chapel at the top of the building, flow, the sea, and the rhythm of waves inform this space.

Most people walked through these buildings with the audio-guide held close to their ears, glancing up at the building from time to time, absorbed in inner images as the guide explained the trivial details of the lives of the Victorian era inhabitants. They missed so much! If only they had put those guides down, and let their bodies and eyes carry them through the mastery of Gaudí's use of space, form, and human sensation.

Gaudí understood Gibson's concept of [affordances](#) - the way that each particular creature can make use of (and therefore creates) objects in the world - in an intimately practical way. These buildings are shaped around the human being/body.

One of the most amazing spaces is in the top of the house - the place where water was stored and people came to do their laundry and other mundane tasks. In this normally pedestrian place, Gaudí executes a sublime architectural feat. The long corridors on the side of the building consist of a series of parabolic arches, about human size (okay, a tall human.) Light is filtered in through slits in the side-wall, creating a soft rhythm of light and shadow and space. Walking at a measured pace through these arches creates a soft sense of waves of light and pressure lapping against one's body - rather like waves of water lapping against a shore.



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Casa Batllò top floor hallway

It requires an extraordinary understanding of human perception and sensation to create something like this. It was truly a transporting, spiritual experience. And, I suspect from observing my fellow tourists, most people missed this experience entirely and focused instead on Victorian laundry!

Our bodies know relationship. Gaudí understood this. His buildings bring the body into an intimate shared physical experience of space and time. I suspect Gaudí would have understood immediately what constellations do with bodies in space to improve our understanding of our relationships. He would understand how constellation allow us to use this sublime physical form that is always in relationship with it's environment, with family, with each other, to find the deeper rhythms and orders that shape our human lives over time.



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Casa Batllò "dragonback" roofline

SPACE, THE "LOCAL" FRONTIER

Using our experience of Gaudí's exquisite spaces as a guide, here are some ways you can "tune" your body to be more sensitive to space. From our sense of our selves in space comes our sense of ourselves in relationship.

First, take a moment to actually feel your own body. Feel first your spine. If you are seated, wiggle back and forth a bit in your chair or sway slightly from side to side, front to back if you are standing. Feel the action of those amazing joints as your whole body adapts to the shift of weight. And speaking of weight, feel the weight of your body as it moves in space.

Second, feel the space that you take up. If you can, bump gently up against the arms or back of your chair or a near-by wall. Feel the physicality of your body. Feel the weight of your body on your seat or on your feet if you are standing, the mass of your hands as they hang on your arms. Feel the space that you occupy. You literally need a PLACE to stand in this world in order to exist.

Third, notice your skin, the so-called border between you and "the world." Feel how that supposed boundary is part of the world how it puts you into intimate relationship with what is in your world, including other people. Take a moment and feel your skin as a living sensing part of you from head to toe.

Fourth, start to move. Move slowly through the room you are in. Notice the feeling of the



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air against your skin, the pressure of light and sound against your body. Notice how your body responds to each of these. Imagine or sense that you are constantly engaged in a lover's dance with this living world.

Finally, ENJOY! You are a miracle. Being alive is a gift. Experience it fully.