

Case study:

La Pedrera



La Pedrera (also known as Casa Milà) is a residential building located on the monumental Passeig de Gràcia in Barcelona, Spain within the autonomous community of Catalunya. It was designed by the renowned Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí and opened in 1912. Since 2013, La Pedrera has been owned and operated by La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera (La Fundació), which is also based in the building. It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1984 alongside additional Gaudí buildings in Barcelona, including Palau Güell and Parc Güell.

La Fundació is an NGO and associate member of the International National Trusts Organisation (INTO). Administration and management of La Fundació is led by a board of trustees, currently headed by Germán Ramón-Cortés Montaner. La Fundació's general manager is Marta Lacambra Puig; this management team also includes Miquel Rafa Fornieles, Director of Territory and Environment, with whom we collaborated closely in the development of this case study. The foundation's purpose is to improve the futures of Catalans through social programs conducted at the sites they own and manage, including the former monastery Món Sant Benet and nature reserves in Catalunya (Món Natura Delta) and the Pyrenees (Món Natura Pirineus).



Key lesson learned in the study of La Pedrera:

Explore new and creative methods and partnerships to channel short-term transactions into lasting social benefits for the local community.

Other important and related learnings from the study of La Pedrera came up during our analysis.

- Tourism's complex interrelationships in a large city demand a nuanced and unwavering examination of a heritage site's contribution to addressing tourism's challenges, for better and for worse. While the immediate impacts of La Pedrera were easily mitigated, the social impacts have required far greater commitment to being a good neighbor and a positive force in Catalans' lives.
- In the wake of Covid-19, La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera developed a new five-year plan which assumed that international tourists would not return at previous levels. This model acknowledges that a return to business as usual is unlikely and provides greater resilience against future social, economic, and environmental conflicts, including the global climate crisis.

Brief history

“La Pedrera” was not always a term of endearment: during its construction and initial years, the building gained the epithet from disgruntled Barcelonans due to its sloping limestone walls resembling those of a “quarry.” Originally constructed from 1906 to 1912 for Roser Segimón and her husband, developer Pere Milà (for whom the building was officially named Casa Milà), its sculptural forms of stone, iron, and ceramic immediately differentiated the building from its surroundings. Its roof is made of 270 parabolic vaults, turning the rooftop into a stepped, sloping landscape of peaks and valleys, featuring chimneys, skylights, and entries covered in fragments of marble and Valencian tile. Notably, the stone façade is self-supporting, which allowed for large windows and great flexibility in adapting the apartment spaces to residents’ needs.

Segimón sold the building in 1946 to the real estate company Immobiliària Provença and occupied it until her death in 1964. Despite varying mixed uses throughout its history, La Pedrera has remained an active apartment building since its opening. The period of 1964 to the early 1980s marked the most distressed era for the building, when some more discrepant renovations and high maintenance costs led the building to fall into disrepair.

The bank Caixa Catalunya, through its Social Foundation, bought La Pedrera in 1986 and soon thereafter began an extensive refurbishment to restore the original features of the building, an undertaking that would require 10 years. La Pedrera’s current uses, as facilitated by the renovation, reflect the attraction of the building itself: it has become a significant tourist site in Barcelona, drawing 1.18 million visitors in 2018. The building also includes shops and café spaces, cultural exhibition spaces, and administrative offices for La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera.



Preservation and conservation

Since its construction, La Pedrera has been viewed as an exceptional structure, in some cases quite literally: in 1909, the commission responsible for local planning within the Barcelona City Council saved La Pedrera from required demolition of the incomplete attic and rooftop, acknowledging that the building was essentially a monument, and as such it did not need to strictly comply with the building codes it had violated. Other such acknowledgements would follow many decades later: in 1962, the Spanish government awarded La Pedrera its first official recognition of historic status, adding it to the inaugural list of Artistic Heritage in Barcelona. This was supplanted in 1969 by its classification as a Category A Historical and Artistic Monument of National Interest, the highest possible status. In 1984, UNESCO added La Pedrera and two other Gaudí structures, Palau Güell and Parc Güell, as World Heritage Sites, stating that they “represent an eclectic, as well as a very personal, style which was given free reign [sic] in the design of gardens, sculpture and all decorative arts, as well as architecture.” Furthermore, the structures “testify to Gaudí’s exceptional creative contribution to the development of architecture and building technology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”

The extensive renovations over the late 1980s and early 1990s included converting the underground carriage parking into an auditorium, the main floor into an exhibition space, the attic into a cultural heritage space dedicated to Gaudí’s life and legacy (Espai Gaudí), and the roof as an open space accessible to the public. The renovation of the attic and rooftop won multiple awards, including the best cultural and artistic initiative from the Catalán Association of Art Critics (ACCA), and the National Prize for Culture (Cultural Heritage) from the Government of Catalunya. These renovations set the stage for the building’s current uses, which include extensive cultural events throughout the year, such as nighttime rooftop jazz performances, a speaker series, and art exhibitions.



Tourism and its impacts in a major city

La Pedrera opened to tourists in phases, beginning with the roof in 1987; the renovations were completed in 1996. In 2004, the building saw 870,000 visitors. By 2019, that number had increased to 1.068 million. These numbers are supplemented by approximately 300,000 visitors a year who come to the building for corporate, institutional, and cultural events.

“In a few short years, Barcelona has become a tourist city. The sustained increase in visitors has transformed the city’s urban fabric, mobility and economic activities, as well as the daily life of many neighbourhoods. Tourism has become an inherent and integral part of the city, and that requires a change in perspective regarding tourism policy, which can no longer be merely a strategy for that sector; it must become a collective project.”

Ada Colau, Mayor of Barcelona, Barcelona Tourism for 2020

To understand the relationship between La Pedrera and tourism, we must first understand the greater context in which it exists: Barcelona as a “tourist city.” Since the run-up to the 1992 Olympics, Barcelona has aggressively developed and marketed itself as an international tourist destination. While this has resulted in economic growth, Barcelona exhibits many negative impacts traditionally associated with overtourism, such as overcrowding and an impact upon the real estate market. Many former working-class neighborhoods have seen displacement as apartments have been adapted into short-term rentals (like Airbnb), which can command significantly higher daily and weekly rates than monthly renters would pay. One such example is Barri Gòtic in the Ciutat Vella, whose population fell by 45% from 2007 to 2015. Access to affordable food has also worsened, as more grocery stores have been unable to afford the higher rents. These impacts have become significant factors in local politics and elections: the past two mandates from local elections have brought left-wing mayors critical of tourism’s impact on Barcelonans, albeit to varying degrees. Nevertheless, the current mandate advocates a measured approach to managing the impacts of tourism and tourist sites.

In 2016, the Department of Tourism for the City of Barcelona released the document “Barcelona Tourism for 2020: A collective strategy for sustainable tourism,” which details the city’s challenges to adapt its mass tourism model to a more collective, equitable, and responsible framework. The report notes:

“[Tourism] is still too often dealt with as an outside phenomenon, something unconnected with the city.... the treatment of tourism as an exogenous and disruptive phenomenon; as a discrete and perfectly bounded object; as a sector — or even industry — on the margins of the city’s economic functioning.”

In discussing the complicated interrelationship between heritage and tourism, the report highlights the following as key aspects:

- “Intensity of uses, forms of consumption and compatibility of functions are important challenges that have to be taken in management.
- We need to ensure that heritage contents and values are not distorted, trivialised or impoverished whilst ensuring quality in transmitting knowledge of heritage and making it accessible and adapted to the various types of public.
- Tourism can help to emphasise heritage that is neither hegemonic nor iconic, by reawakening an interest in visiting and promoting such assets, by seeing to aspects of their material management and ensuring their variety.”

In this respect, the use of La Pedrera as a celebration of Gaudí’s work, a venue for diverse programming, and an architectural attraction per se closely aligns with the ideals the city has set out for ensuring that cultural experiences can remain reflections of Barcelona’s unique attraction which enrich the lives of its citizens.

KEY CHALLENGE:

Building a wider foundational mission to redress the physical and social impacts of mass tourism in Barcelona takes commitment, resources, and sensitivity to local issues.

KEY LESSON LEARNED:

Explore new and creative methods and partnerships to channel short-term transactions into lasting social benefits for the local community.

Challenges. Responses. Lessons learned.

In the study of La Fundació and its stewardship of La Pedrera, we learned the value of taking a wider view of organizational mandates and partnerships. Communities that are under intense pressure, such as from overtourism, may look to the stewards of heritage sites to help with the mitigation of those impacts.

La Fundació’s mission statement calls for the organization to build “a better and fairer future.” As such, it operates under a far greater mandate than simply owning and operating La Pedrera.

Rather than focusing solely on the heritage site, the organization also conducts extensive social, educational, and environmental initiatives in the region of Catalunya, with projects in social welfare, culture, ecology, education, research, and nutrition, touching over 500,000 beneficiaries in 2018. These wider programs leverage La Fundació’s sites and the platforms they provide as assets that can contribute to the mission for an improved and equitable future.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGE:

Understanding the complex interrelationship that exists between tourism and a major city can extend beyond the capacities of just one NGO and, in any event, require long-term commitment to support the sustaining of resilient and equitable communities. Long-term plans also need to be refocused to emphasize resilience against social, economic, and environmental shocks.

OTHER IMPORTANT LEARNINGS:

Tourism's complex interrelationships in a large city demand a nuanced and unwavering examination of a heritage site's contribution to addressing tourism's challenges, for better and for worse. While the immediate impacts of La Pedrera were easily mitigated, the social impacts have required far greater commitment to being a good neighbor and a positive force in Catalans' lives.

In the wake of Covid-19, La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera developed a new five-year plan which assumed that international tourists would not return at previous levels. This model acknowledges that a return to business as usual is unlikely and provides greater resilience against future social, economic, and environmental conflicts, including the global climate crisis.

The projects also help mitigate negative social impacts that the greater tourism market in Barcelona has had upon Catalans by reinvesting tourism-related revenue for the public good. In this way, the heritage site becomes more than the ample opportunity it already presents for visitation and education and plays an active role in sustainable tourism efforts in Barcelona. The social work conducted by La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera redistributes tourism revenue toward social programs for Catalans focused on promoting talent, creation, and education, as well as protecting natural and cultural heritage. These programs including: educational mentoring; resources for elders beginning to experience cognitive deterioration; education around science, technology, nutrition, biodiversity, and climate change; and musician residencies, speaker series, cultural exhibitions and performances.

La Pedrera has contributed to detrimental physical impacts requiring local intervention, such as overcrowding, significant queueing, and tour bus traffic. These impacts were largely mitigated with the development of online ticketing and a program undertaken by the city called Zona Bus to create more designated bus loading areas. Having already addressed the issue of queues and crowds on the sidewalks, La Fundació was in an advantageous position when such a concern became a public health necessity upon reopening after the lockdown.

While La Pedrera sees over 1 million visitors per year, it has exhibited only some of the typical socioeconomic impacts of mass tourism. The direct impact upon the local real estate has not been as acute as other parts of the city: being located in the most affluent sector of the city, the demand for Airbnbs has not removed as many housing units from the market, unlike the impact of other Gaudí structures in less affluent areas, such as La Sagrada Família. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the complexity and heterogeneity of large cities typically make such direct correlations difficult to ascertain, unless in the case of exceptional sites lacking many other major attractions in the immediate vicinity. The other cultural heritage sites along Passeig de Gràcia (including another Gaudí apartment building, Casa Batlló) make such a direct correlation nearly impossible to establish.



This case exemplifies how thorny the challenge of contributing to the greater social good can become. On one hand, such diffused impacts can make it easy to deny that heritage sites can directly contribute to the greater social ills afflicting cities/regions and their citizens; on the other hand, diffused impacts can also lead to unfocused responses. In both instances, the outcome is the same: ineffective leadership in the realm of sustainability. Effective intervention requires a pragmatic process of identifying the assets of a site and organization, and how creative leverage of those assets can lead to unique opportunities to benefit the public.

In addition to the contingency measures precipitated by the immediate circumstances of the pandemic and lockdown, La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera also developed a new five-year plan which assumed that international tourists would not return at previous levels. La Fundació set the goal of having a €20 million (\$24.3 million USD) endowment by 2025.

Without the assumption of revenue coming from tourists or renting out the auditorium/commercial exhibition spaces, La Fundació was in need of finding new sources of income. Those new sources will include membership-related and private donor sources, adding tuition to their pre-undergraduate science/technology incubator programs for those who could afford it (and grants/financial aid for those who could not), and EU grants for cultural institutions expected in upcoming funding rounds. This new model acknowledges that a full return to pre-Covid-19 business as usual is unlikely. Furthermore, it provides greater resilience to future conflicts, including the global climate crisis.

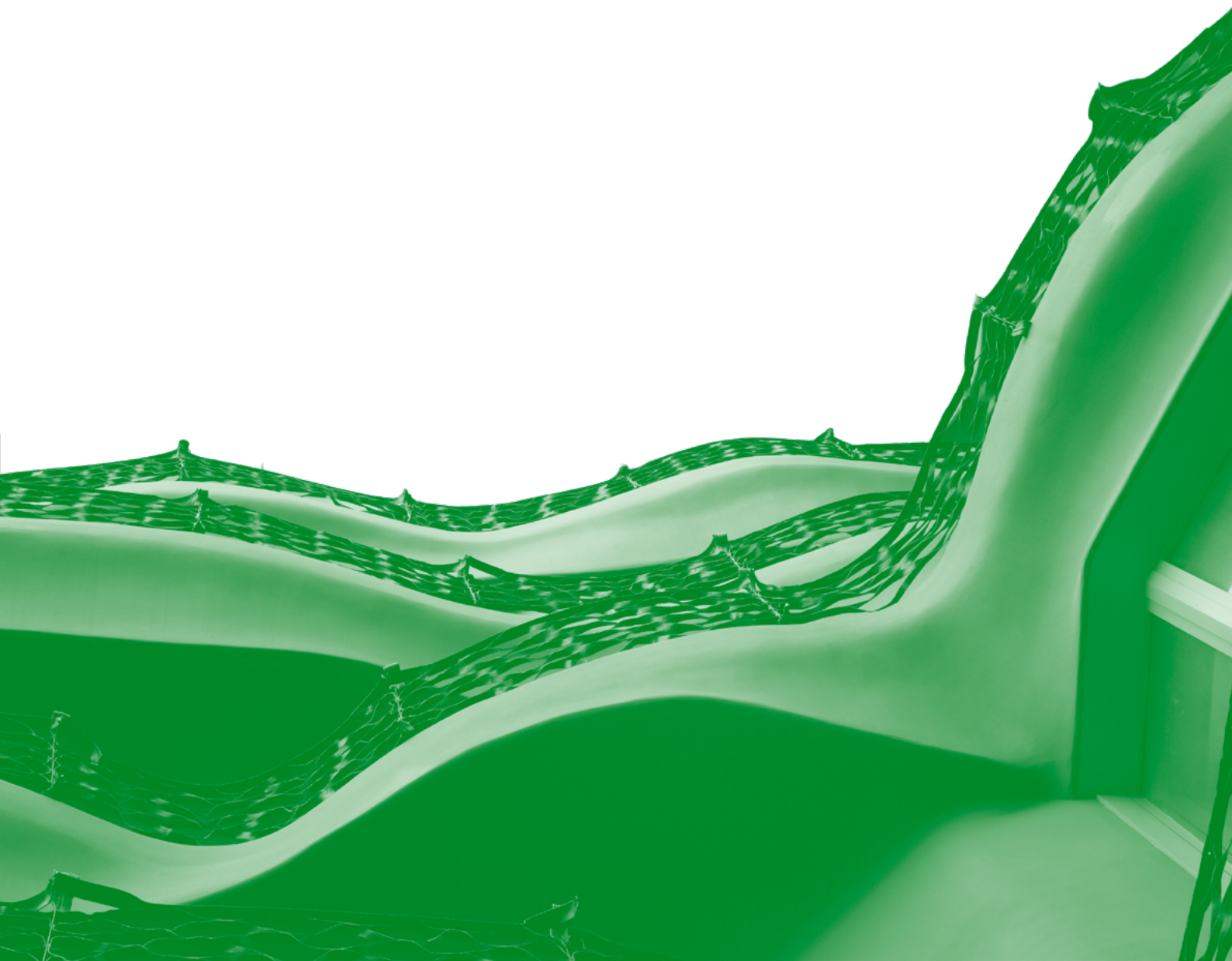


Explore new ways to create lasting social benefits: Other voices and views

Beyond the efforts of La Fundació Catalunya La Pedrera, we uncovered others involved in the study and work of exploring new methods and partnerships to create lasting social benefits for local communities.

National Trusts around the world have always had a broader mandate than just the built environment. They are playing their part to protect and promote nature as being a vital part of the recovery as well as a fundamental right and value for humans as we move forward in the 21st century. The ecosystem services of recreation, tourism, intellectual development, spiritual enrichment, reflection, and creative and aesthetic experiences are keys to sustaining resilient and equitable communities.

“Nature is more than a mere economic good,” writes Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta in *The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review*, a 2021 study commissioned by the UK Treasury. In fact, “we are embedded in nature.” Dasgupta adds that “nature nurtures and nourishes us, so we will think of assets as durable entities that not only have use value, but may also have intrinsic worth.”





- The intrinsic worth of nature can be seen in western Uganda, where the climate crisis is impacting both landscape and culture. With funding from the British Council's Cultural Protection Fund, conservationists from Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire, cared for by the National Trust, have teamed up with the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU) to share international lessons in preparing for climate change — drawing on the UK's experience in flood management, and community dialogue expertise in Uganda. The project seeks to urgently preserve and document cherished, local heritage in the fabled region of Rwenzori, once thought to be the source of the Nile, and the Alur area of Northern Uganda. Brought together by INTO, the partnership highlights the pressing need for global cooperation to tackle global heating and safeguard heritage and culture for generations to come.

The Rwenzori Mountains World Heritage Site is home to some of Africa's last remaining glaciers, central to the traditional belief systems of Uganda's Bakonzo community. But these belief systems are threatened by climate change, as climate scientists indicate that these tropical glaciers will cease to exist within the next ten years. Intangible cultural heritage practiced here creates a blueprint of meaning for all elements of Bakonzo life. Waterfalls are the grounds for rites of conflict resolution, hot springs for physical and spiritual healing, while river confluences act as sites of consultation with the spirits in times of crisis.



