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The Islamic legacy built into Gaudí's most famous designs

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A century after Antoni Gaudí's death, a look at his iconic Barcelona masterpieces reveals how the visionary Catalan architect transcended cultural boundaries, deeply weaving Spain's rich Islamic-Andalusi heritage into his signature geometric and colorful designs.

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2026 marks a century since the death of the visionary Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí. He died after being hit by a tram in central Barcelona in June 1926, not far from the Sagrada Famìlia, his towering basilica that – despite still being under construction today – dominates the city's skyline, and recently became the world's tallest church.

Next year, 2027, will mark the 10 year anniversary of another tragedy. On August 17, 2017, terrorists pledging their allegiance to the Islamic State rammed a vehicle along the pedestrian boulevard of Las Ramblas, one of Barcelona's main thoroughfares, killing 14 people. They were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to restore Muslim rule over Spain.

But these Spanish Muslim terrorists had essentially attacked part of Spain's Muslim past. Las Ramblas comes from the Arabic word raml for "sand". Before it was urbanised, Las Ramblas was a wadi, a dry river bed.

However, the attackers' original plan was to place bombs in Gaudí's Sagrada Familia. This would have carried a similar irony to the strike on Las Ramblas. Though a devout Christian, Gaudí used Islamic motifs throughout his architecture, including Casa Vicens and Park Guell, which are extensively decorated with Moorish-style tiles known as azulejo in Spanish, a word that comes from the Arabic al-zalij.

The bombs were never detonated because the terrorists made faulty explosive devices that ended up destroying their own safe house in the small seaside town of Alcanar, on the Catalan-Valencian border. Here, the pattern repeats: "al", which translates as "the" in Arabic, features in the names of countless Spanish towns and cities.

Whether it is architects who build, or terrorists who destroy, the terrorist attacks of 2017 and Gaudi's 100-year old architecture are both a reminder of Spain's intimate connection to the Muslim world.

A deep connection

Spain has deep historical ties to South-West Asia and North Africa, the area historically known as the Muslim World or the Islamicate. For much of history this proximity was a product of geography, as Spain was only separated from Morocco by the Strait of Gibraltar.

The regions' shared history began in 711, when Muslim armies under Tariq bin Ziyad landed in Gibraltar in southern Spain. Like so many other places in Spain, the Muslim conquerors gave their landing point its modern name – Jabal al-Tariq, or "Tariq's Mountain", was eventually rendered as Gibraltar. While Muslim rule officially ended in 1492, Christian resistance – known as the reconquista, or "reconquest" – occurred on and off over 8 centuries, beginning with the Battle of Covadonga in 722.

The Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba is one of the most famous examples of Mudéjar architecture. Constructed in 785 as a Mosque, it was converted to a cathedral in 1236, during the reconquista. Alexa Tran on Unsplash

Spain also has a deep religious connection to the Middle East, beyond the Biblical connection to Jerusalem and its surrounding area. Spain's patron saint – Saint James the Apostle, who is interred in Santiago de Compostela – was said to have preached throughout Iberia after travelling from the Eastern Mediterranean.

This shared history gives Spain a unique position in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists. Lorenzo Vidino, an expert on the terrorist threat to the region, summed it up in the wake of the 2017 attacks:

> "Spain's Islamic heritage... makes it a perennial target, and is no merely symbolic factor for organizations, such as ISIS, whose primary political goal is to restore the historical Islamic caliphate to its original borders. References to al Andalus, the Muslim kingdom in Spain that ended in 1492, are omnipresent in the propaganda not only of ISIS but of virtually every jihadist group (particularly those in North Africa) that desires to reconquer lost Muslim land."

Gaudí's Muslim influences

In Andalucia, where the Muslims ruled from 711 to 1492, it is not surprising that modern architecture is inspired by the Islamic past. The region was ruled by Muslims longer than it has been part of Queen Isabel's united Spain, which was formed in 1492. However, Barcelona itself was never truly under Muslim rule – the closest it came was when it was sacked by Muslim general al-Mansur in 985.

This makes it all the more surprising that Gaudí invoked the Muslim world in his work. What is more, his use of Moorish motifs and techniques did not imitate Andalucian or other Spanish regional identities – he built on them to create his unique, treasured and distinctly Catalan style of Art Nouveau. This is evident in some of his most famous buildings.

Casa Batlló, in central Barcelona, is known for its intricate tile façade and curved balconies. Ruggerio Calabrese on Unsplash

Casa Batlló was inspired by the Spanish Mudéjar design style, the art developed by Muslims who remained in Iberia after 1492, which comprises brightly coloured bricks and tiles. La Casa Mila, also known as La Pedrera, has an undulating facade that was apparently inspired by the Sufi whirling dervish of the Mevlevi order in Konya, Turkey.

In Park Güell, Gaudi used "trencadis" techniques extensively. This neo-Mudejar Moorish art form involves breaking coloured tiles and crockery, and then rearranging the shards into

intricately patterned mosaics.

Similar techniques travelled across the Atlantic after 1492. Crypto-Muslims likely brought the Mudejar art form with them to Mexico, and worked there with indigenous craftsman.

This style, known as azulejo art, is found on the façade of San Francisco Acatepec in Puebla, which is covered top to bottom in brightly coloured tiles. In the words of poet José Moreno Villa, it "approaches delirium... All is color and brilliance." The overall effect is known as alicatado, or cut-tile decoration. The word is word derived from the Arabic al-qat, meaning "cutting".

When Barcelona was attacked in 2017, the terrorists invoked shared history, believing that they were liberating what had once been Islamic Spain. Yet just as shared history was used to destroy, it also inspired some of the country's most beautiful, treasured architecture.

Gaudi's architecture, including Park Güell, is extensively decorated with Moorish-style tiles, known as azulejo in Spanish. Pajor Pawel/Shutterstock