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BARCELONA

#27 FEBRUARY/MARCH '09

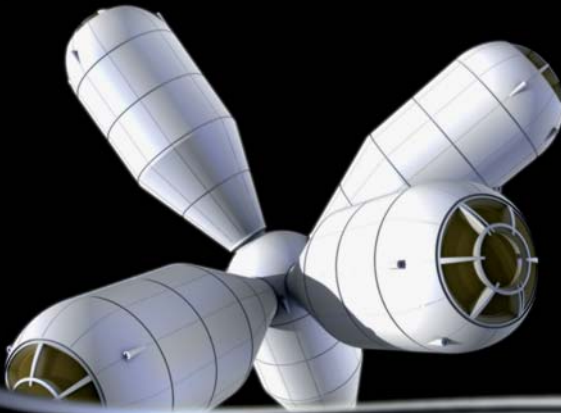


BREAKING
GROUND

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Catalan • Construction to Come

Many adults grew up fantasizing about sitting alongside Captain Kirk on the Starship Enterprise, strutting down a spacecraft hallway a la Dave Bowman in 2001: A Space Odyssey and spending the summer at space camp spinning around on flight simulators. A boy from Igualada named Xavier Claramunt shared those same visions. What makes this fast-talking and furiously hard-working architect different is that he is turning those boyhood dreams into an adult reality with the construction of the world's first space hotel, Galactic Suite.

Building is now underway on the hotel, which will offer Earthlings with enough cash the chance to indulge in childhood space fantasies. The designer of the intergalactic inn, a man with a limitless imagination and fervor for design, is not alone. Other Catalan architects are shaking things up in the sector as well by taking their out-of-this-world ideas across the pond and into foreign frontiers.

Quite possibly the loftiest of current architecture projects hopping out of Catalunya, Galactic Suite will be an opportunity for those that didn't make it into astronaut school to finally get some revenge. The unnamed donor of the \$3 billion that helped get the project off the ground may just be a fellow space school hopeful. When finished in 2012 the \$4 million per person accommodation price tag will include an intensive eight-week space-training course on a tropical island, a space shuttle voyage and three-day hotel stay. So far, Xavier Claramunt's company Equip has 38 reservations.

Those 38 and more will not only stay in a revolutionary structure, a pioneer in Earth orbiting, but will also have the opportunity to relax in a magnificently posh space. A top-of-the-line spa will make showering possible thanks to high-tech floating bubbles of water. Space age Velcro suits will be provided to hotel stayers that will stick them to the walls to combat weightlessness. The most awe-inspiring part of the stay will probably be the proximity to the stars and incomparable stargazing done through the glass of one of three bedrooms in a module radiating off the hotel's central hub.

This incredible design by Xavier Claramunt and the Equip *equipo* hopes to be seen as not only original, but

enduring. As Claramunt reflects on contemporary architecture, "We can't reinvent the architecture wheel. What's needed now are innovative and timeless designs." Growing up in Catalunya, a place world-renown for its unique and ageless architecture, Claramunt and his fellow architects have a strong base on which to develop the designs that are shaping the future architectural landscape.

Barcelona has been attracting throngs of visitors thanks to the work of architect Antoni Gaudi. Just pick up any guidebook and splashed on the pages are the Catalan architect's name, images of his buildings and tours dedicated exclusively to his works. It is also a city that boasts some of the best Architecture Institutes in the world. With increasing city regulations, the dip in the construction sector and a need to push design boundaries further, the area's architects like Claramunt are taking their designs to unfamiliar territories in addition to space. They are exploring structure setups in Asia, the United States and the Middle East.

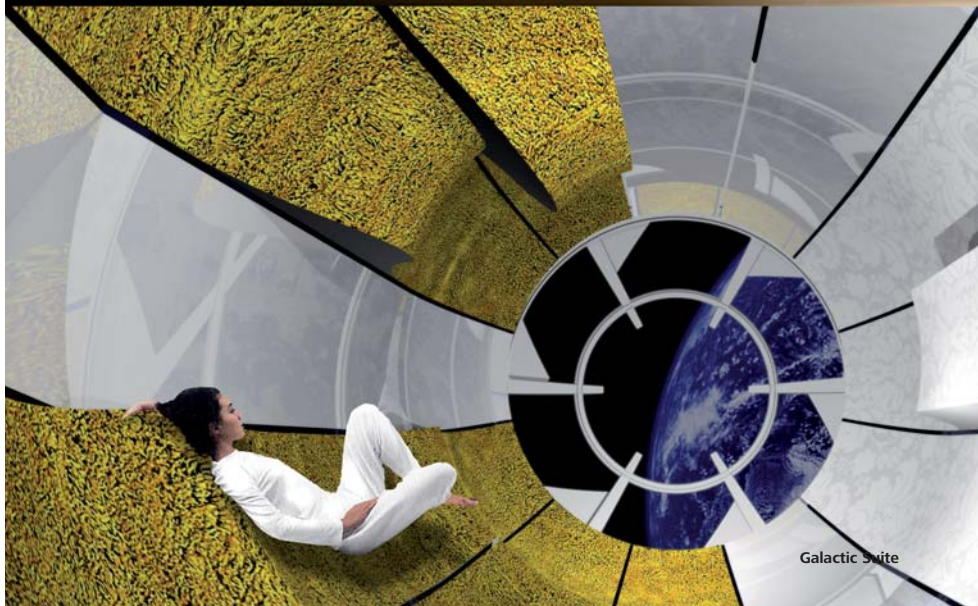
It is not only that they are infiltrating unfamiliar places; they are doing so with fresh designs for the future. One popular style Claramunt and other Catalan architects are employing is Experience Architecture. A design method focused on a guest's experience and not a preoccupation with shape, this futuristic design process integrates new media into the building plan. The space hotel Galactic Suite is the perfect example. The hotel incorporates high-tech gadgets to provide guests with an optimal galactic stay.

However, there are obstacles in the path to taking over space and global architecture the Catalan way. Xavier Claramunt points out that the roughest part of his noble



Xavier Claramunt
www.equipo.com.es

Sea Suite



Galactic Suite

Apkujung Tower



TDA House



Going Global and Galactic*

space hotel project is “to work in a sector that isn’t yours.” This doesn’t stand in his way. The architect with bold dreams is used to going where few have gone before. He’s ventured to China and opened an office to work on projects in that region. He explains that, “To work on projects in China, or anywhere for that matter, you have to have a presence in the place.” He’s not stopping at space or China; shortly he will open an Equip office for projects in architecture hotspot Dubai.

If the idea of a space hotel was difficult to wrap the mind around, Claramunt seeks to push and puzzle further with his underwater hotel habitat, Sea Suite. The passing of each day at the aqua hotel will be in sync with the sequence of the tides thanks to modern mobile gadgets. It will rest on the seabed off the coast of Alicante. Claramunt is currently looking for financial backing to take the project beyond the design stage. After all money, like location, is another element challenging the successes of Catalunya’s modern-day architects.

One pair of architects encouraged by Claramunt’s ventures into the unknown are Eduardo Cadaval and Clara Solà-Morales. A Mexican and Catalan couple in their thirties, Eduardo and Clara have studios in Barcelona and Mexico City. Although the two talented up-and-coming architects have a very different style from Claramunt’s, they appreciate the strides the schooled pro is making in the sector. Eduardo explains, “He’s very talented and pushing our discipline’s boundaries, which is great. Xavier Claramunt belongs to a school of architects who uniquely use their projects as their research.”

In their office-cum-mini-lab, Cadaval and Solà-Morales

do their own all-encompassing research. Their structure designs are heavily influenced by a location’s culture, traditions and socio-economic situation. It is this type of smart designing that have garnered the design duo prestigious international awards like the 2008 Design Vanguard Prize from Architectural Record, the official magazine of the American Institute of Architecture. Working in the international sector is nothing new for the Harvard grads that started it all in a rented basement space in New York City.

Just because they received a bunch of awards doesn’t mean their work in spreading awareness of their design talent is over. “We’ve gotten a lot of attention from the media, and invitations from clients. It wasn’t immediate, but yes, people are more interested in our work now,” remarks Eduardo. One thing they also received were invites to design competitions happening in Dubai. However, Eduardo warns, “With many of the Dubai competitions, the reality is that they don’t have the money to build the project. Based on the results, then they look for money to build. This is difficult for young architects who want to participate, but can’t afford to devote time to something that won’t prove fruitful.” For Eduardo and Clara this is a serious concern as they are a small operation. They have to be even more careful about what projects they accept.

On the flipside, for seasoned architects seeing dwindling private commissions due to the flat-lining economy, competitions are opportunities to flex design muscles and hopefully come away with some money. Cadaval and Solà-Morales have seen this as Eduardo comments, “Before the economic crisis competitions had about 30 entries, now there are 400.” This makes it even more difficult to come away with a win and added cash to keep a studio functioning, especially locations abroad.

Not only is the faltering financial climate affecting competitions

Clara Solà-Morales and Eduardo Cadaval
www.ca-so.com



Going Global and Galactic*

and making them bust at the seams, but it's also affecting construction overall. Eduardo adds, "A lot of buildings have stopped or are on hold because of the crisis. If they were just in plans 50% or more will be built and the other will never happen."

The lack of dough isn't the only thing plaguing architecture. Eduardo Cadaval thinks the increasing regulations are making for a bleak architectural future in Barcelona, "We are not in good shape regarding by-law requirements; they are getting thicker and thicker. The options for architects to respond are increasingly narrow." He goes on to mention that many of the buildings in Barcelona have two façades: the first to fulfill requirements, the second for artistic freedom. As he concludes, "This isn't true innovation, but more construction make-up." This makes Eduardo and Clara, like many others, excited about creativity limit-pushing commissions from across the borders.

In 2006, Cadaval and Solà-Morales took their talents to Seoul, South Korea to work on a tower and school combination structure. "In Seoul they are running out of space and have a severe traffic problem. The building site belonged to a public school that gave the space up in exchange for a new school and structure that would unite the neighborhood. It was a simple, but powerful design." That's right; the immense twisting structure reaching for the sky sublimely brought a fresh look to Seoul's skyline.

Enric Ruiz-Geli, an architect from Figueres and Gaudi fan is another designer Cadaval and Solà-Morales thank for advances made in architecture. His works boast green ideals and the latest technology. With a background in stage design, he also employs flashy tools like LED lighting to breathe a bit of drama into his structures. Like the rest, he too has hopped out of Catalunya and is currently working on his first US commission, the NY Aquarium renovation. An elaborate fish form structure, his design was chosen in a competition to update the NY Aquarium on Coney Island.

Another home-grown talent with a taste for dramatic, high-end design is Barcelona-born Joaquín Torres of A-Cero in Madrid. Torres was the first from Spain to set foot in the world of Dubai architecture. He is poised to

be the Catalan/Spaniard who designed the highest tower there upon completion of his Wave Tower. The competition-winning design is a 92-story structure that stretches up 370 metres tall. Designed to house a hotel, high-end apartments, business offices and commercial spaces, the project is currently in development.

Based on the shape of a blossoming flower, the tower reaches up, turns out slightly and is covered in two skins of glass. A bridge mimicking the waves of the Gulf will lead visitors to the modern structure. Both sleek and elegant, it is something extremely attractive to those planning the future of Dubai's skyline. In addition to the Wave Tower project, A-Cero has the privilege of being the only studio from Catalunya and Spain to have several projects, four in total, in the works in Dubai.

Another impressive Torres project that will begin construction this year is Nébula. This exclusive residency in the Madinat Al Arab neighborhood on Dubai's coast took away first prize for design in a private international competition. The other projects A-Cero has its hands on in the Middle East are the Isis Towers, funded by a UK company and the Phoenix Tower, for a private company from India. With all of these Torres is paving the way for other Catalan and Spanish architects in Dubai.

With a strong academic foundation and incredible sources of inspiration, but increasing challenges to make their designs happen at home, Barcelona's architects are changing the face of architecture on a global and galactic level. Claramunt is setting his sights on space. Torres has Dubai on his mind. Eduardo Cadaval and Clara Solà-Morales are working on socially conscience and environment-inspired projects in Asia and Mexico. This is only the beginning. While they may have to branch out of their beloved city due to various factors, Catalunya will always be home. Right now look beyond Barcelona and follow them as they shape the future of architecture. ■ CZ



Joaquín Torres
www.a-cero.com



Wave Tower