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DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4603.29

The Casa Vidua Marfà Building. A Testimony of a Past Time

ABSTRACT

The Escola Universitària Formatic Barcelona (EUFB) is a prestigious university institution located in the center of Barcelona in a listed historical building at *Passeig de Gràcia* avenue n° 66. This article investigates the origins and characteristics of the Casa Vidua Marfà, the current headquarters of the EUFB, retracing its history and that of the families who made it a reality. A period that goes from the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century at a time when Catalan traders known as 'Indians' left their mark on the architecture, gastronomy and traditions of Catalonia. The analysis of Casa Vidua Marfà constitutes an exponent of that period when Catalan merchants tended to set sail when they were young and poor and go to the Americas, especially to Cuba and Puerto Rico, in search of new job opportunities. Back from their journey abroad, if successful, 'Indians' continued to invest in businesses and industries

Suggested citation: Boyra, J., Garcia, J., Sorribes, J., Alvado, A., Schena, J., & Garcia-Lavernia, J. (2024). The Casa Vidua Marfà Building. A Testimony of a Past Time. © *Perspectives on Culture*, 3(46), pp. 461–478. DOI: 10.35765/pk.2024.4603.29

Submitted: 07.05.2023

Accepted: 02.03.2024

throughout Catalonia and, in this particular case, contributing to the urbanization process in the center of Barcelona.

KEYWORDS: architecture, heritage, Barcelona Catalan Cultural Capital, 19th century

STRESZCZENIE

Budynek Casa Vidua Marfà. Świadectwo minionej epoki

Escola Universitària Formatic Barcelona (EUFB) jest prestiżową uczelnią wyższą zlokalizowaną w centrum Barcelony, w zabytkowym budynku przy alei Passeig de Gràcia 66. Artykuł zgłębia początki oraz cechy charakterystyczne budynku Casa Vidua Marfà, obecnej siedziby EUFB, rekonstruuje jego historię oraz dzieje rodzin, które przyczyniły się do jego powstania. Okres ten trwał od XVIII w. do początku XX w., gdy katalońscy kupcy znani jako „Indianie” odcisnęli swoje piętno na architekturze, gastronomii i tradycjach Katalonii. Analiza Casa Vidua Marfà obrazuje okres, w którym katalońscy kupcy, wyruszając w świat młodzi i ubodzy, udawali się do Ameryki, szczególnie na Kubę i do Portoryko, w poszukiwaniu nowych możliwości zawodowych. Po powrocie z podróży, o ile odnieśli sukces, „Indianie” kontynuowali inwestycje w przedsiębiorstwa i przemysł w całej Katalonii, przyczyniając się do procesu urbanizacji centrum Barcelony.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: architektura, dziedzictwo, Barcelona – Katalońska Stolica Kultury, XIX w.

Introduction

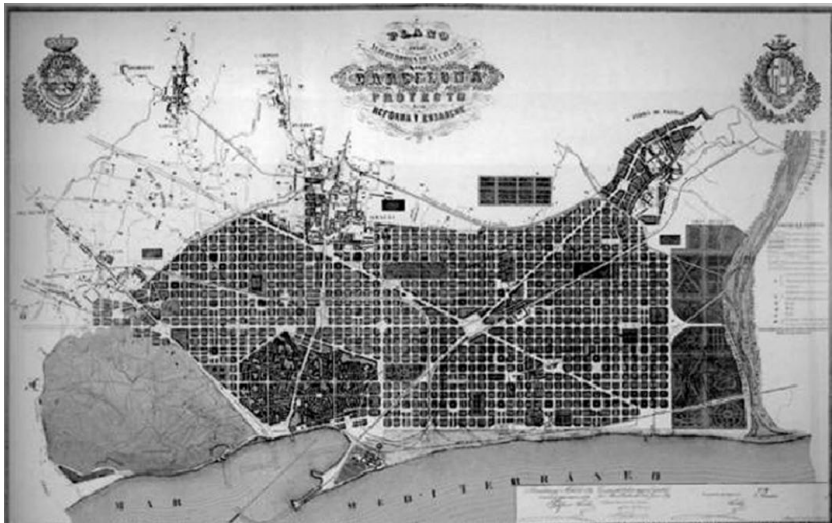
The objective of this study is to explore the significance of a specific architectural element in Barcelona, illustrating how such elements contribute to a city's cultural identity and serve as tourist attractions. This architectural feature evolves over time to become a symbol of the city's historical legacy and cultural heritage. The research employs an empirical-analytical method, utilizing an evidence-based approach to study and interpret available information about the architectural element and its impact on the city's identity and tourism.

In the nineteenth century, Barcelona transformed into an industrial hub, actively engaged in trade through its port, which maintained historical connections with other Mediterranean ports for both goods and passenger traffic. The industrial revolution led to significant urban densification, integrating bourgeois society, the working class, and factories within the confines of the medieval city walls. Outside the densely populated

urban core, the Barcelona Valley remained largely agricultural, characterized by orchards and vineyards, and connected to the Old City by rural routes. Urban development surged following the approval of the Cerdà Plan in 1859, with rapid expansion particularly evident during the early decades of the twentieth century (Pallares-Barbera, 2011).

The final decade of the 19th century marked a high point in the development of Barcelona's Eixample, as envisioned by Ildefons Cerdà's urban plan. Fueled by economic prosperity, capital repatriated from Cuba and the Philippines, and the incorporation of the eight towns that shaped the Barcelona basin, the city experienced a substantial population surge. Within just forty years, Barcelona transformed from a compact, enclosed city into an expansive metropolis (López Guallar, 2010). The Escola Universitària Formatic Barcelona (EUFB) is headquartered in two prominent buildings located at numbers 71 and 66 on Passeig de Gràcia, a central area within the Eixample. The building at number 66, known as Casa Vidua Marfà, houses various university programs, serving as a key educational site within this dynamic district.

Figure 1. Cerdà's 1861 Map for the Urban Expansion of Barcelona



Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263230559_Cerda_and_Barcelona_The_need_for_a_new_city_and_service_provision/figures?lo=1

This iconic building, known as Casa Vidua Marfà, has been cataloged as a Bé Cultural d'Interès Local (BCIL) – a Cultural Asset of Local Interest – within the Catalan Cultural Heritage Catalog of the Department of Culture of the Generalitat de Catalunya since 2000. The Casa Vidua

Marfà is renowned for its artistic, monumental, and architectural significance, noted for its originality and aesthetic appeal. Constructed in the historicist style, the building harmoniously blends elements from Romanesque and Gothic architectural traditions. It is situated at the prominent corner of Passeig de Gràcia and Carrer València, designed by architect Manuel Comas i Thos in 1901 and completed in 1905 (Garcia et al., 2017).

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Barcelona thrived in a vibrant economic and cultural environment, fostering the development of Catalan Modernism alongside the final expressions of academicism and historicism (Martínez Nespral, 2023).

Table 1. File of the Inventory of Cultural Assets of Local Interest

Name: CASA VIDUA MARFÀ
Address: Passeig de Gràcia, 66 / Carrer de Valencia 274–276
Location: Barcelona (Barcelonès)
Protection: BCIL
No. Register / Catalog: 4065-I
Disposition: Final approval urban planning commission
Disposition Date: 05/26/2000
Publication: BOP
Publication date: 06/14/2000

Source: <https://invarquit.cultura.gencat.cat/card/40400>

The Casa Vidua Marfà

Casa Vidua Marfà, originally a residential building, features five levels, including a ground floor, a main floor, and three additional stories. Its design cleverly utilizes the chamfer created by the intersection of Passeig de Gràcia and Carrer València, and includes a sloped roof on two sides, complemented by a flat, accessible roof. This chamfer significantly influences the building's internal layout, spatial distribution, and the unique character of its facade.

The facade is segmented into three distinct sections of varying widths and decorative treatments, a direct consequence of the chamfer. The central section, which is the chamfer itself, stands out as the most prominent feature. It is flanked by two tower-like elements, each extending one additional floor beyond the rest of the building – totaling six floors – topped with steeply pitched roofs.

Figure 2. Casa Vidua Marfà (1901–1905)



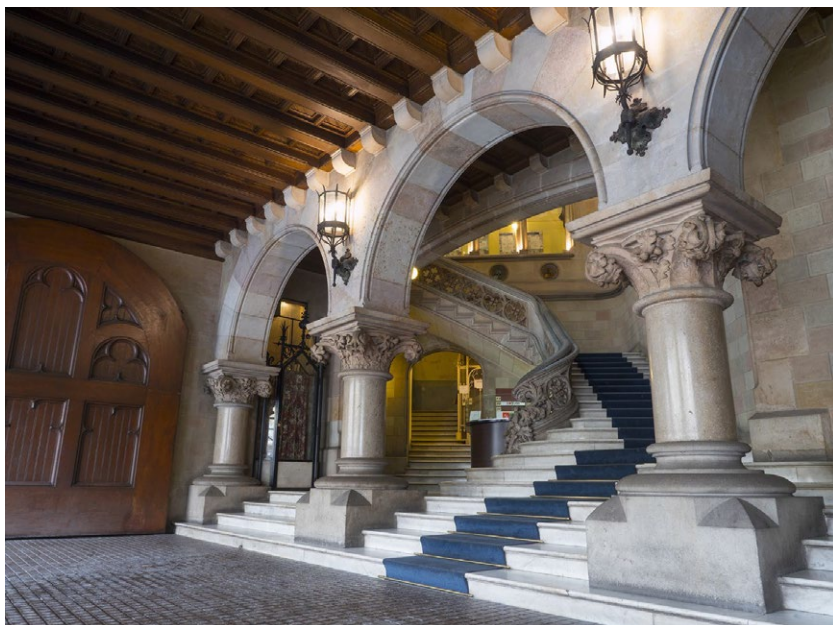
Source: <https://www.arquitecturacatalana.cat/es/obras/casa-vidua-marfa>

The towers of Casa Vidua Marfà rise from the noble floor and feature an open tribune adorned with columns capped by vegetal capitals and intricate tracery. The base of this tribune also showcases sculptural decoration inspired by natural forms. Above the tribune, a grand Gothic-style window stretches across two levels, creating a dramatic vertical opening.

On the ground floor, the building presents three half-point arcades supported by columns with vegetal capitals and short shafts. These arcades are among the most distinctive elements of the facade. Above them, a Gothic-inspired tribune with slender columns provides a contrast to the broader, more robust columns below.

This tribune, featuring an openwork tracery railing, supports a curved balcony extending from the second floor. At the center of this balcony is a prominent crown window. The remaining openings on the facade are styled with smooth lintels, framed by a decorative dust guard, further enhancing the building's architectural complexity.

Figure 3. Casa Vidua Marfà's main entrance



Source: <https://www.barcelona.cat/es/conocebcn/pics/la-casa-vidua-marfa-99400071818>

The top floor of Casa Vidua Marfà is designed as a gallery featuring a semicircular arch supported by small columns, all encased in a molding that mirrors the decorative dust guards of the windows. The wall sections flanking the facade are simpler compared to the central portion, yet they retain the same window design with smooth lintels and dust guards, ensuring a cohesive appearance.

The facade facing Carrer València is largely uniform, with the exception of the tribune on the main floor. Unlike the tribunes in the central section, this one is rectangular, adding a distinctive element to the otherwise consistent facade. Access to the building is through a porticoed entrance located in the central section of the facade. This entrance leads into an initial hall, which was originally used for carriages. From this hall, a few steps ascend to a secondary hall. The central part of the staircase connects to a grand, monumental staircase that ascends to the first floor, enhancing the building's sense of grandeur and architectural sophistication.

This staircase gives access only to the main floor, while the rest of the levels are accessed via a neighbor's staircase located in a corner of the hall and clearly differentiated formally and stylistically from the main one. Unlike the neighboring one, the monumental one is developed in a very

open space, covered with an iron skylight and polychrome stained-glass that is characterized by its angular arrangement, the result of the chamfered configuration of the estate.

Figure 4. Construction Project of the Casa Vidua Marfà (1901)



Source: Contemporary Municipal Archive of Barcelona.

The building's porticoed gallery on the main floor is particularly striking, featuring semicircular arches that rest on columns adorned with floral capitals and slender shafts. The sculpted railing further enhances the gallery's architectural appeal. Notably, the entrance door to the noble floor is crafted from wood and showcases a unique concave structure, designed to conform to the building's curved walls.

Inside, the spaces on the main and first floors have been repurposed for educational use by the Formatic Barcelona University School. The former noble floor halls are now classrooms, yet they retain several original architectural features, including the intricately designed ceilings, woodwork, and some of the original flooring.

Figure 5. The three half-point arcades above columns of the Casa Vidua Marfà



Source: Ana Meneses Nogué.

The molded plaster ceilings of the rooms facing Passeig de Gràcia and the hallway are notable for their elegant adaptation to the building's curved walls. These ceilings, along with the exposed wooden beams, enhance the architectural character of the space.

The noble floor also connects to the neighboring staircase, providing access to the first floor, which is similarly utilized by the university. Here, much of the original “noia” pavement – a polychrome tile prevalent in Barcelona's architecture from the late 19th to early 20th century – remains intact. The original carpentry is also a highlight, including the entrance door adorned with bronze elements. Noteworthy features include a latticed peephole and several molded plaster ceilings with intricate gilding, one of which includes coffered detailing and overlooks one of the building's internal courtyards (Architectural Heritage Inventory, 2016).

Figure 6. Casa Vidua Marfà's main staircase & iron skylight and polychrome stained glass



Source: <https://invarquit.cultura.gencat.cat/card/40400>

Figure 7. Access concave door of the Casa Vidua Marfà



Source: <https://invarquit.cultura.gencat.cat/card/40400>

Figure 8. Main street door detail of the Casa Vidua Marfà



Source: Ana Meneses Nogué.

The Casa Vidua Marfà therefore enjoys great tourist attraction and competes due to its architectural characteristics, alongside such emblematic nearby buildings as Casa Milà or Casa Batlló, among others.

The Marfà's: a Catalan Family and their Origins

At the turn of the 19th century, trade with the Americas presented a lucrative opportunity for many wealthy and adventurous Catalan families. The drive to “make their fortune” in the New World was often motivated by a strong network of familial trust, which was crucial for business success. The Marfà family, originally from Mataró – a coastal city approximately 30 km north of Barcelona – was emblematic of this merchant class that prospered through American trade. These prosperous returnees, commonly referred to as “Indians” by locals, had traveled to the Americas, particularly to Cuba and Puerto Rico, in search of wealth. Upon their return to Catalonia, often after decades abroad, they brought back substantial fortunes. Known in Spanish as “Indianos” or in Catalan as “Americanos,” these individuals represent a significant part of Catalonia’s economic and cultural history, though there is no direct English equivalent for the term. These merchants often embarked on their journeys as young, aspiring individuals, hailing not only from Catalonia but also from other regions of the Iberian Peninsula. The Catalan socio-economic progress of the late 18th and early 19th centuries would have not been possible without the wealth the Indians brought from overseas. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the knitwear industry emerged, which in a few years would replace the cotton industry. Thus, at the end of the 19th century and after the arrival of the Spain’s first railway (Barcelona–Mataró), the manufacture of knitted fabrics constitutes the industrial characteristic of the city and its productions acquire world fame. Precisely, one of the key industries is the one maintained for decades by the Marfà family, successors of former intermediaries who, due to the accumulation of capital, progressively mechanized their industry.

Gaietà Marfà i Guanyabens, a draper who established his business in Mataró in 1815, specialized in creating knitted goods such as stockings, socks, and gloves using manual looms (Cabana, 2001). Operating a factory in Mataró equipped with six looms (Llonch, 2007), Marfà produced items for both the domestic market and American colonies, particularly Mexico, where he benefited from the support of established Catalan merchants. Notably, his export focus was on silk stockings, renowned for their quality and desirability.

Marfà married Teresa Baladia, whose brother was a cotton spinner in Mataró. They had two children, Gaietà and Llorenç, who tragically

became orphans at a young age. Gaietà Marfà i Baladia emigrated to Cuba at sixteen to work with his uncle Jaume in Havana. After gaining valuable experience, he returned to Mataró to launch his own industrial enterprise. Under his leadership, the company expanded rapidly and became a leading force in the burgeoning knitwear industry (Museu Arxiu de Santa Maria, 2012).

Gaietà Marfà's success in the textile industry enabled him to commission the construction of the Casa Viuda Marfà at Passeig de Gràcia, 66, in Barcelona, further cementing his family's prominent status. Gaietà Marfà became one of the most veteran and recognized manufacturers in Mataró participating in the Catalan Textile Exhibition of 1877 and achieving great recognition related to the introduction of a pioneering material that consisted of the dyeing and preparation given to the fabrics of cotton knit with the appearance of wool or what is called a merino finish (Cabana, 2001).

During the peak of the knitting industry's prominence, Gaietà Marfà i Baladia emerged as a leading figure. In 1881, he established a new cotton yarn factory that became pivotal in supplying yarn for the knitting sector. This factory consumed approximately 4,000 bales of cotton annually and produced around 20,000 kilograms of yarn each week. Daily output included about 1,000 dozen T-shirts and 1,800 dozen underpants and socks. Notably, the factory employed around 900 workers, predominantly women, who received relatively high wages for that era. Additionally, Marfà acquired a warehouse in Barcelona to store part of his production (García, 1983).

Gaietà's sons, Gaietà and Emili, played crucial roles in further establishing the family business at the close of the 19th century (Cabana, 2001; Llonch, 2007). The Marfà family demonstrated remarkable innovation and industrial prowess by continually upgrading their textile production model. They integrated cutting-edge technology, transitioning from powerful steam engines to advanced electric motor systems, including 26 engines with a combined output of 314 horsepower (Costa, 1988; Llonch, 2007). By 1882, their factory was a leader in engine utilization, featuring three circular looms and 22 steam batteries (Costa, 1987).

Under the leadership of Gaietà and Emili Marfà, the business expanded further with the inauguration of a new spinning mill in Santa Eugènia de Ter, near Girona. This facility utilized hydraulic energy from the Monar ditch, allowing for a complete cycle of spinning, weaving, bleaching, and finishing. The family also relocated their office to Barcelona, initially at 246 Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, and then settling at 26 Balmes Street in 1897.

Figure 9. Company poster



Source: Cabana, 2001.

The two brothers died a few months apart, Gaietà in 1903 in Mataró, and Emili in 1904 in Barcelona. Before that, however, Emili obtains the permits to be able to build Casa Marfà on the lot that was there at that time:

permission is granted to Mr. Emilio Marfà to build a house with basements, basements and four floors and eight rooms on the terrace on a plot of land on Calle Valencia chamfer with Paseo de Gracia (...) he has satisfied by permit rights the amount of two thousand fifty and seven pesetas and eight cents (Ayuntamiento Constitucional de Barcelona, 1902).

Manuel Comas i Thos: The Architect of Casa Vidua Marfà

The Comas family, originally from Mataró, had a long-standing tradition in maritime activities. The earliest preserved document dates back to the 17th century and mentions Gaspar Comas. His son, also named Gaspar, worked as a fisherman, and his grandson, Josep Comas, was the first in the family to achieve social advancement as a merchant. Josep Comas would become the grandfather of Manuel Comas i Thos, the architect of Casa Marfà (Museu Arxiu de Santa Maria, 2008).

Josep Comas had seven children, among whom was Manuel Comas i Font. Like many of his contemporaries, Manuel left for America in search of fortune and settled in Havana. He returned to Catalonia in 1843 after spending twenty-three years abroad. During this period, trade with the West Indies presented new opportunities for conquest, adventure, and wealth. Many young Catalans seized these opportunities, with nearly 40% of the approximately one thousand peninsula merchants established in Havana being Catalan (García, 1990).

In Havana, Manuel Comas engaged in the trade of a wide variety of goods between Cuba, the United States, and the Iberian Peninsula. His transactions included rice, butter, potatoes, onions, leeks, cider, beer, chickpeas from Santander and Cadiz, lentils, oil, Catalan wine, round cheese from Flanders, pork, almonds, ham, cod, flour, and Boston beef (Museu Arxiu de Santa Maria, 2008). In 1845, Manuel Comas returned to Mataró and married Narcisa Thos i Bonshoms, a native of Malgrat de Mar and descendant of several generations of notaries. With her, twenty-five years younger than him, he had seven children, the second of whom was Manuel Comas and Thos, architect of Casa Marfà. Manuel Comas i Thos (Mataró 1854–Barcelona 1914) was graduated in 1879 by the Barcelona School of Architecture, breaking suddenly with family tradition. In particular, the architect's work is an example of how some architects of the modernist era started from the postulates of neomedievalism, specifically from Gothic forms, but adding to them floral and vegetal elements typical of Modernism in the ornamentation of the buildings (MasPOCH, 2008). His work focused on single-family homes for private use, thus materializing the usual use of patronage at the time where the bourgeoisie entrusted their constructions to a related and trusted architect, who would become his personal brand that projected to society.

The Casa Viuda Marfà stands out as the most renowned work of architect Manuel Comas i Thos. This building exemplifies a unique blend of neo-Romanesque and neo-Gothic styles, featuring two prominent side towers and an impressive façade with three semicircular arches at the entrance. The main floor includes a distinctive tribune adorned with Gothic arches (Lacuesta & González, 1997).

Comas designed the plans for the Casa Viuda Marfà at the end of 1901, and these were approved by the owner, Emili Marfà. Construction, overseen by Comas, was completed by the end of 1902. However, Emili Marfà passed away shortly after, in 1903, and his wife Isabel Palau inherited the building. This led to the building being named Casa Vidua Marfà, or “Marfà Widow House,” in her honor.

Comas's design was notably influenced by Josep Domènech i Estapà, with whom he studied at the Barcelona School of Architecture. Both

architects shared an eclectic style, characterized by its creative freedom and amalgamation of various architectural elements while maintaining coherence (Molet, 2005). This eclecticism marked a departure from Neoclassicism, which had constrained architectural creativity to rigid classical norms. Instead, Comas embraced a style rich in medieval references and intricate details such as forged elements, tiles, stained glass, and naturalistic motifs including plants and animals, all stylized with a touch of fantasy (Fontbona, 1983).

Domènech i Estapà, while influential, was also notably impacted by Enric Sagnier, another prolific and eclectic architect known for incorporating medieval forms into his designs (Permanyer et al., 2009).

Manuel Comas i Thos designed several notable buildings showcasing his eclectic style. Among these are Casa Moysi (Rambla de Catalunya, 23, 1895), distinguished by its bold volumes and intricate façade profiles, featuring a prominent elevated arch that serves as the central tribune on the noble floor. Casa Fiol (Passeig Sant Joan, 45, 1902) and Casa Aleu (Gran Via, 690, 1890) are other examples, alongside Casa Isabel Pladevall (Enric Granados, 78, 1895), and of course, Casa Vidua Marfà (Passeig de Gràcia, 66, 1902). Among these, Casa Vidua Marfà stands out as Comas's most ambitious and well-known project, exemplifying his architectural vision with its combination of modernist and neo-medieval elements across its façade and tribune.

About forty kilometers from Barcelona, Comas also designed the Palau Novella, a significant reflection of his personal style. Originally a 14th-century farmhouse, it was purchased by Pere Domènech i Grau, a wealthy returnee from America, who commissioned Comas to transform it into a grand summer residence in 1890 (Revetlla, 2012). During construction, Comas faced unique challenges, such as traveling from Sitges to the site on a donkey, guided by a local named Joan Olivella, and paying a gold coin for the round trip (Bassegoda & Alcalà, 2003).

The Palau Novella emerged as a stately mansion characterized by its eclectic style, blending romantic aesthetics with medieval and oriental influences (Olsina, 2012).

As an interesting anecdote, when the Domènech family hosted distinguished guests, they would empty the palace laundry – traditionally used for washing clothes – and fill it with spirits. These drinks, effervescently flowing from the main fountain, added a unique touch to their hospitality. Additionally, the architectural feature included small zinc wind trumpets that produced musical notes when blown by the wind (Bassegoda & Alcalà, 2003).

Since 1996, the Palau Novella has served as a Buddhist monastery, a non-invasive religious practice that has contributed to the excellent

preservation of the palace and its original elements, including the on-site chapel. The palace is situated within the Garraf Natural Park, which is protected by a special conservation plan ensuring its ongoing preservation and safeguarding the surrounding landscape.

Figure 10. The Palau Novella



Source: <https://estimadaterra.wordpress.com/tag/safareig>

Conclusion

The study of Casa Vidua Marfà offers a glimpse into the socio-economic prosperity that defined Catalan society during its time. Today, Casa Vidua Marfà stands as one of Barcelona's prominent attractions. This architectural marvel, marked by its exceptional beauty and originality, reflects the vision of both affluent patrons – many of whom were wealthy returnees from the Americas—and the creative genius of architects and artisans of the era. Such buildings now serve as significant cultural landmarks and embody the rich cultural identity of Barcelona. This brief exploration of Casa Vidua Marfà underscores the vitality, grandeur, and enduring significance of Catalonia's historical and architectural heritage.

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