

## Marvels in Barcelona

### The Work of Antonio Gaudí 1858-1925

Of three famous 20th century Catalans — Gaudí, Miro, and Picasso — only Gaudí remained completely attached to Barcelona, the capital of Catalunya, the Catalan-speaking region of Spain comprising the “provinces” of Barcelona and three others. Miro had a house in Paris and Picasso spent most of his life in France. There is a Picasso museum in Barcelona which is well known for its collection of his early works. And there is a bright and modern Miro museum in Barcelona’s Montjuich Park. But Barcelona itself is the architect Antonio Gaudí’s own museum. Much has been written about Gaudí and in several languages. In one of the books which I consulted, an effort is made to establish a theoretical basis for his work, but I found it not particularly helpful.

Gaudí was part of the Art Nouveau movement which began in the 1890s and introduced forms from nature in architecture, furniture, pottery, lamps and graphic design. In Juan Bassegoda Nonell’s book *Gaudí - Le Genie des Formes* (also translated into English), Nonelle reports that the design for the spiral columns found in the Colegio Teresino was derived from the trunk of the eucalyptus tree. He devotes a chapter each to Oriental, Gothic, and naturalistic influences, and to geometric research. The book is richly illustrated. The introduction relates Gaudí’s fascination with all natural forms including plants, snails, animals, and human beings. Clearly a big problem for any theoretician is the exuberance, even playfulness, of the early and middle periods. If the international style of architecture (Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Saarinen et al.) in vogue in the second half of the 20th century had as its motto: “Form Follows Function,” Gaudí’s motto might have been “I want to tell you yet another story.” Other generalities are also possible. Although much of the work is a century old or older, it does not seem dated. A number of buildings were commercial such as office buildings and appear to be functioning well. Gaudí’s patron, Eusebi Güell, sponsored other structures and money for these was no object. The government, whether municipal, regional or federal, has recognized the touristic and heritage value

of the work and there is little chance that any of it will be allowed to deteriorate. It is difficult to describe Gaudí’s substantial output in words — how does one describe a waterfall in the woods? — and the effort below is limited to only three examples: 1. Parc Güell, 2. Casa Milà, 3. Sagrada Familia

#### 1. Parc Güell

This park is a UNESCO heritage site because it contains many of Gaudí’s ideas translated into non-monumental expressions. The park was originally intended as a Güell urban-renewal project, an idea eventually abandoned. Gaudí used decorative ceramics— the colours of which are still vibrant today — in fountains, curving walls and benches, the children’s play terrace, and in the entrance pavilions. The western one is a house without sharp corners with a white and blue striated bell tower. One of the façades looks quite like gingerbread from a distance, whereas the other side of the house has somewhat of a grotto-like appearance. Unlike Disney castles which are derivative of a 19th century German castle, the Gaudí pavilion is unlike anything seen before. One might imagine a small, friendly dragon, its exterior covered with cheerful ceramic platelets sallying forth to greet visitors.

#### 2. Casa Milà

This building in the heart of the business district is also a UNESCO heritage site. Imagine a five-storey office building, entirely normal in its vertical dimension but having no corners! The structure’s horizontal lines, including the balconies, gently weave around it. The balconies are decorated with ironwork in the shape of the leaves of tropical plants. The roof is open to visitors and has an undulating walkway. All chimneys, ventilation systems and other machinery have been transformed into vaguely humanoid creatures about eight feet (2.4 m) tall. The total effect is baffling and unforgettable. Although Casa Milà is not lofty, the view from the roof is unobstructed and includes the Sagra Familia, about 3/4 of a mile (1.3 km) to the east.

### **3. Sagrada Familia (Church of the Holy Family)**

Were it closer to the city centre it would have become the equivalent of the Eiffel Tower in Paris or St. Paul's Cathedral in London — a landmark without equal. However, Sagrada Familia is in fact somewhat off the beaten track, and the seat of the archbishop is in the cathedral located in the old part of Barcelona known as "Gotic." Sagrada Familia is enormous and impressive. Its four substantially completed tall spires are complemented by eight smaller ones, and in common with some other Gaudí-designed structures, terminate in colourful ceramic details. The church has a number of themes besides the Holy Family, and the sculptures and bas reliefs on each side tell different stories. The Nativity façade, for example, comprises three doorways: Faith, Hope and Charity. Another façade is dedicated to the Passion of Jesus. This means that a visitor needs to go around the entire structure to appreciate it. The project was originally started by Francisco Villar in 1882 and taken over and substantially redesigned by Gaudí in 1883 when he was 25 years. As he became older, this project gained greater and greater importance for him and he spent the last two years of his life in cramped quarters on the site. There have been many comments on Gaudí's great religiosity, and indeed the design could not have come from someone with merely a casual relationship to Christianity. The church is not finished, and on visits one always finds construction cranes in operation. Much of the exterior is completed but little of the interior. The building is in its third century. Fortunately Gaudí's spirit still resonates in the hearts of Catalans although many are no longer part of organized religion.

### **Notes for tourists**

*Any suspicions on the part of the reader that the writer is inordinately fond of Barcelona are justified. It is a very special place, even in Spain which has a number of ancient cities with beautifully preserved inner cores. But Barcelona is the most important port by far, is bilingual, lively, splendidly situated between sea and Montjuich, has a good public transportation system but is excellent for walking and has many museums and other points of interest. If the reader has not visited Spain, two cautions are in order: In any 72-hour period there is a 75% chance that someone in the hospitality business in Paris will be nasty to a visitor. The chances that this will happen in Switzerland or Austria are 5%. In Spain you never know. In one of the better-known hotels in Granada, the people at the reception were rude, in Sevilla totally unhelpful, in Toledo friendly and charming, and in Barcelona most helpful. Secondly, there is a persistent problem of pickpockets in all cities. Zipped up handbags, "fanny packs" and other devices are not thief proof. But there is another, almost infallible solution: Leave everything where you are staying. Take with you only a debit card, a credit card and about \$40 U.S. in local currency. The necessity of having to "identify" yourself with a passport is nonsense. It might be useful if you have to file a police report about having been robbed. If you are not attractive to pickpockets, you are not likely to come to the attention of the police. Police in Spain are generally polite to tourists and don't bother them unless the tourists become part of the drug scene.*

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