

Gaudí and Mediterranean Culture

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The works of Gaudí, and especially his most representative creation, the Sagrada Família, show the extensive richness and abundance of the Mediterranean. With his architectonic legacy, Gaudí seeks to discover the latent secrets of Mediterranean nature through its metaphorical meaning and religious system of symbols. Therefore, his buildings are constructed based on reminiscences of Mediterranean culture, geography, light and metaphors and his style is a declaration of ethical principles of Christian genesis for everyone who contemplates his work. This Mediterranean style consists of two basic elements that distinguish the work of the Catalan architect: light and forms of nature, which evoke the heritage of Mediterranean civilisations. All of them (trees, cypresses, birds and palm trees) transmit a system of symbols of mystical and spiritual roots, used by the three religions of the Mediterranean shore: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

In the 19th century *Modernisme* emerged in Catalonia, Modern Style in England, *Stilo floreale* in Italy and Art Nouveau in France. Romanticism had spread a return to the essential, to the natural, which later became abundant references to nature. Gaudí, immersed in this environment, went beyond his historical moment and introduced himself into the cultural roots of inspiration in nature throughout history, above all the countries of the Mediterranean basin, and later did not attempt a servile imitation of the natural environment but rather to understand the creative and functional processes that nature conceals. In this article we will focus, firstly, on the influence of the Mediterranean, both in terms of culture and the geographical and light position

in Gaudí's way of building, and secondly, we will explore the metaphors of Mediterranean roots that appear in his works.

Antoni Gaudí had a great sensitivity for the styles that had been developed on the Mediterranean coasts. In one of his early works, Casa Vicens (1888), he uses a style that recalls the Mudejar palaces, with abundant mosaic on its exterior. In the interior smoking room, the ceiling with Arab honeycomb works recalls the Generalife in the Alhambra in Granada. Also notable is the introduction of writings on the walls, in the style of the Arabs: "The writings in stone," explained Gaudí, "reveal lost thoughts within us, like drops of dew on the grass. Arabs already knew how to exploit this idea masterfully."¹ This is why he populated

1. Salvador Dalí, Robert Descharnes and Francesc Pujols, *El pensamiento artístico y religioso de Gaudí*, Barcelona, Aymà, 1971, p. 141.

Casa Vicens with sayings taken from popular wisdom such as “from the hearth the fire, long live the fire of love”, and left his mark on the benches of Park Güell with invocations to Mary and in the Sagrada Família (an example is “Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus” written on the towers of the Temple).

But his Mediterranean style goes far beyond an inclination towards a style. It is rather a constructive and formal declaration of principles. We will begin by explaining Gaudí’s appreciation of Mediterranean light: “Do not go to the north to seek art and beauty, this is found in the Mediterranean; from its shores – Egypt, Syria, Greece, Rome, Spain, North Africa – have come all works of art. In the North and the tropic they do not receive the light at 45 degrees, which best illuminates objects for a perfect viewing; when light is scarce or is overly zenithal, objects with inadequate lighting appear deformed; northerners, instead of the object see the ghost of the object; their heads fill with ghosts and in them fantasy predominates. In the North, literature is fantastic and Gothic architecture, too. We in the Mediterranean do not have eyes accustomed to ghosts but to images, which is why we are more imaginative than fantastic, and therefore more appropriate for the visual arts.”²

According to Gaudí, the light situation of the Mediterranean is the most appropriate to observe an object, as thanks to this we can see it in accordance with its reality, neither deformed nor subject to what our mind imagines about what we cannot see clearly. It is a light that warms but does not scorch, which allows life and offers man an adequate intensity and duration. In this way, the peoples of the Mediterranean create an art based on proper observation of reality. This characteristic is especially important in the observation of na-

ture, a factor present in *Modernisme* and in Art Nouveau that Gaudí adapts in a personal way to integrate it into the structure of his buildings. Much of Gaudí’s work can be framed within his dialogue between nature and the search for harmony. In this respect, we can make a comparison with Greek civilisation, a period when the first philosophers started to reason on the different natural elements. One of the main guides for their constructions consisted of following the formula of the golden section, present in nature’s way of development.

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Following the reasoning of the suitability of light in the Mediterranean region, Gaudí’s constructive and decorative style gives great importance to the reception of light by spaces and the way these spaces can best exploit the light they receive, for example through colour. In the Sagrada Família the glass windows are not figurative; that is, they do not represent moments or symbols related with the Gospel or the lives of saints but, although they possess a religious theme, are formed by glass of different colours that illuminates the space in a determined way according to the time of day and how the sun illuminates each glass window at each moment. In this way, a great variety of colours and lighting are created in the interior of the Sagrada Família, which reminds us of the idea of having entered a different space, in the sacred space of the temple. In other spaces, such as some houses or Park Güell, we find an explosion of colour owing to the use of the mosaic characteristic of Gaudí’s work, called *trencadís*.

2. Isidre Puig Boada, *El pensament de Gaudí*, Barcelona, Dux, 2004, p. 90.

With respect to the Sagrada Família, Gaudí ensured that there was zenithal lighting thanks to the use of hyperboloids, which through their shape allow the light to bounce and have an indirect effect in the temple, creating a space with perfect lighting. This type of lighting developed in the beginnings of Greek culture, with the megaron temples and the skylights lit by the roof; in Egyptian culture, where the interior of the temples was lit by skylights created by the difference in height between naves, and in Arab culture, whose best examples are the mosques of Cordoba or Granada.

Another constructive element of the Sagrada Família common to other Mediterranean civilisations in direct observation of the world of nature is the idea of the tree as a support for the interior structure and its proportionality with man. "All styles are organisms related to nature; some are isolating crags, like the Greek and Roman; others mountain ranges and peaks, like the Indian. All consist of a minimum support; in other words, the column and the supported horizontal parts. The whole is the tree, and its proportions are similar to the human figure, so that it is not a tree-tree (as the building has distinct functions to that of a forest) but a tree-man. And this embraces and explains all styles: including the Egyptian, Greek, Byzantine, and Gothic tree-man."³ In the search for the creation of a support, man comes across the image of the tree, which will later adapt to a proportion analogous to the human figure and to that which he himself can reach through sight. The Sagrada Família synthesises the idea of the support of the columns through the form of a tree that, effectively, rises up thanks to the interior structure of the catenary arches.

The observation of nature and its laws led Gaudí to apply the catenary arch system in his

works. The way nature is organised according to the weight of gravity is the catenary form, through the form of the conoid, whether downwards or upwards. The first project in which Gaudí begins to manage forms close to the catenary is that of the Catholic Missions in Tangiers. This was Gaudí's first great project, for which he had to seek out structural solutions in what he had studied, in the observation of the original environment and in the place where he was going to construct his work: "The secular architectonic burden means that most current architects, instead of constructing buildings full of humanity, only create enormous paperweights. All buildings are a product of the earth, like the tree that sprouts from it, and is identified with it."⁴

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In the Tangiers project, which never came to be constructed, we can already appreciate the forms that would be used in the Sagrada Família, which come from the observation of nature we can find in many diverse places. The mountain range of Montserrat is an example, as are, according to George R. Collins, the constructions typical of some tribes in North Africa. These seemingly offered a better distribution of the weight and greater protection against wind and water, just like many forms developed by nature in this respect: "In terms of his style, it seems that what was studied by Gaudí in North Africa was not current Muslim decoration, but an indigenous tradition of mud castles with turrets constructed by some Berber tribes."⁵

3. Ibid., p. 92.

4. Antonio de Lemos, "Gaudí el iluminado. Comentarios de su arte", *Blanco y Negro*, No. 1832, 17th June 1926, p. 53.

5. George R. Collins, *Antoni Gaudí*, Barcelona, Bruguera, 1961, p. 13.

The Use of Metaphors of Mediterranean Root

For this section, we will start with the distinction between symbol and metaphor. The symbol, according to the Real Academia Española, is the “sensorially perceptible representation of a reality, in virtue of features associated with it through a socially accepted convention.” The key is the last part of the definition: a symbol represents another kind of reality through a social convention and not for another cause. In contrast, the metaphor is the “application of a word or an expression to an object or a concept [...] with the aim of suggesting a comparison (with another object or concept) and facilitating its comprehension.” In other words, in the symbol, the relation between the two realities is a social convention; in the metaphor, this relation is a fundamental and shared quality that enables our understanding.

Firstly, we will analyse an element very present in the Mediterranean basin which is the grapevine, a kind of vine that climbs walls or different types of vertical supports. In Mediterranean culture this type of plantation abounded, as it was located on one of the walls of the house together with a structure that created a great shady space. There, with the appropriate arrangement of a table and chairs, it was possible to share intimate moments, hold banquets, shelter from the sun and offer hospitality to strangers.

In terms of the system of symbols of the Sagrada Família, Isidre Puig Boada, disciple of Gaudí and head architect of the temple between 1966 and 1974, tells us: “Suspended in the triumphal arch there will be a canopy that will cover the altar; it will be crowned by a cross, from the foot of which a grapevine will emerge that with its leaves and bunches will weave the

whole canopy. ‘Can you imagine anything more beautiful,’ said Gaudí, ‘than a table prepared under a grapevine?’”⁶ The metaphor between the grapevine and a house on the Mediterranean coast and the altar is based, first, on the association with a pleasant, protective, space where one is comfortable. On a level of more profound meaning, the grapevine was the place where the family or the people of the house welcomed the guest and showed their intimacy. On the altar, it is God himself who welcomes us and makes us participants in his intimacy through his blood and flesh, represented by the symbols of wine and the Eucharist respectively.

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The second metaphor is that of the tree of life in the form of a cypress, embodied in the Sagrada Família in the cypress that crowns the Nativity Façade. For the Romans, this tree was a metaphor of the kingdoms of the underworld, those mysterious kingdoms that exist under ground associated with life after death. The cypress was dedicated to Pluto, Roman God of the underworld, as its roots are deep. This is why the cypress is present in many cemeteries of the Mediterranean basin that belong to Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The reason for this presence is that in the three religions the deep roots that the cypress buries in the ground are united with its elongated figure that points towards the sky. It thus becomes a metaphor of the hope that enables men to connect again with divinity, linking the underworld with its deep roots with the world above, through its elongated form. Moreover, the cypress is a metaphor of

6. Isidre Puig Boada, *El templo de la Sagrada Família*, Barcelona, Omega, 1952, p. 135.

eternity as its leaf is perennial; that is, it remains alive and coloured throughout the year, and its wood is strong and lasting, as can be seen in the doors of Saint Peter's in the Vatican, made of cypress wood, which after more than a thousand years are still in good condition.

On the Nativity Façade of the Sagrada Família we find this tree protecting the figure of a pelican opening its chest with its beak to give its flesh and blood, just as Christ feeds men who want to receive him and returns them to life with his sacrifice. The cypress renews the life that had been denied man after having disobeyed God in Paradise. Thus, the cypress of the Sagrada Família is filled with birds that climb the tree, a metaphor of the souls of the just who ascend to God. We say metaphor because the cypress usually shelters different birds under its thick foliage. The bird represents, moreover, both for Islam and for Christianity the soul of man who searches, who ascends from the earthly to the spiritual. The medieval writer Farid ud-Din Atar wrote in the 12th century the poem *The Conference of Birds*, in which he describes the journey of a group of birds in search of their king, a reflection of man's search towards the divine.

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Moreover, we find that the fruit of the cypress, when it is closed, is a compact and circular fruit, and when it opens it expands in the four directions, following the way nature develops. Gaudí uses the fruit of the cypress to represent the form of a cross in three dimensions which he introduces in almost all his buildings.

Lastly, we will explore the metaphor of the palm tree, present again in the Nativity Façade of the Sagrada Família, and whose function is to act as a column between the portals of Faith, Charity and Hope. The palm tree is a tree that

grows in warm and temperate regions, and is characterised as growing with little water in places where other trees cannot. For the Egyptians, it was an element of great importance because it provided a great quantity of nutrients through its fruits and the objects that could be obtained through it (paper, rope, sugar, liquors...). Its leaf, the palm, was a symbol of victory for the Romans and its fruit, the date, nourished the idea of abundance in the desert. Therefore, in the imaginary of both Islam and Judaism we find numerous references to palm trees. There are examples in the Old Testament: "The righteous man will flourish like the palm tree" and in the Koran: "It is He who sends down water from the sky, and with it we bring forth vegetation of all kinds, and out of it we bring forth green stalks, from which we bring forth thick clustered grain. And out of the date-palm come forth clusters of dates hanging low and near." In the Jewish festival of Passover, the Hebrew people receive Christ with palm branches that represent power and victory. Later, Christianity places the palm branch in the hand of the saints who have suffered martyrdom, representing the victory of faith over the world. In the Sagrada Família we find two great palm trees like transoms in the central portal of the Nativity Façade. They are two columns that support the façade, metaphor of the victory that the birth of Jesus Christ means in the world. Above them, we find four angels (two per column) with the trumpets of the Apocalypse heralding the arrival of the son of God.

We can conclude by affirming that the Mediterranean is present in Gaudí's work and way of thinking for two very clear reasons. First, because of the influence of the cultures located in the Mediterranean basin, the importance of the use of light and colour and the particular observation of nature as a consequence of its geographical and light position. Second, because of the natural metaphors that Gaudí uses.