

A Critique of Modernism: A Case of Sagrada Família

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Abstract

The Sagrada Família, Antoni Gaudí's magnum opus, stands as one of the most recognizable and symbolically rich architectural projects of the modern era. In stark contrast to the industrial ethos of Modernism – which emphasized functionality, minimalism, standardization, and mechanized aesthetics – Gaudí's design embraces organic forms, intricate craftsmanship, and profound spiritual meaning. This paper examines how the Sagrada Família operates not only as a monumental religious structure but also as a critical response to the dominant principles of Modernist architecture. Through a detailed analysis of form, structure, materiality, and symbolism, the study highlights how Gaudí drew inspiration from natural geometries, employing biomimicry and complex spatial systems that challenge rigid, linear design approaches. The basilica's sculptural facades, hyperboloid vaults, and tree-like columns reflect an architectural language rooted in nature rather than industrial repetition. Furthermore, Gaudí's integration of light, color, and narrative elements transforms the building into an immersive spiritual experience, reinforcing a deeper connection between architecture and human emotion. The paper also explores the socio-cultural implications of Gaudí's work, positioning the Sagrada Família as a bridge between traditional craftsmanship and innovative engineering. By prioritizing artisanal techniques and symbolic storytelling, Gaudí resists the depersonalization often associated with Modernist production methods. Ultimately, this research argues that the Sagrada Família presents an alternative architectural paradigm – one that re-establishes the relationship between built form, nature, and spirituality. In doing so, it challenges the perceived limitations of Modernism and redefines architecture as a holistic and expressive human endeavor.

Keywords: Antoni Gaudí, architecture, critique of modernism, curves, highly decorative, modernism, nature, organic architecture, organic form

INTRODUCTION

Modernism emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to the rapid industrialization of the world, promoting functionality, rationalism, and a rejection of historical styles. Architects, such as

Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, championed the notion that architecture should be stripped of excess ornamentation, focusing on purity of form and efficiency in design. However, Antoni Gaudí, working in the same era, pursued a completely different trajectory (Figure 1) [1].

Gaudí's work, especially the Sagrada Família, does not conform to the mechanistic aesthetic of Modernism. Instead, it embraces complex forms, intricate symbolism, and a deep connection to nature and spirituality. This paper argues that Gaudí's architectural approach, particularly as seen in the Sagrada Família, presents a powerful critique of Modernism's drive for industrialization, secularization, and minimalism [2].

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Thesis Statement

Antoni Gaudi's design for the Sagrada Família defines Modernism's principles of functionalism, secularism, and mass production, offering a more spiritual, organic, and handcrafted approach to architecture.



Figure 1. Aerial view of Sagrada Família, Barcelona.

GAUDI'S VISION VS. MODERNIST RATIONALISM

Modernist architects sought to rationalize design, often reducing it to its most functional elements. For them, the machine was the ideal symbol of progress (Figure 2). Gaudi, however, took a fundamentally different approach, seeing architecture as a vehicle for spiritual expression rather than mere functionalism [3].



Figure 2. Aerial view of Sagrada Família within the urban grid of Barcelona. Spirituality as a design foundation.

While Modernism aligned with the rise of secularism, Gaudi's Sagrada Família is deeply infused with religious symbolism. Each aspect of the basilica – from the soaring spires to the detailed façades – communicates a spiritual message. The Nativity Façade, for example, is a celebration of Christ's birth, laden with natural and religious motifs that convey a sense of divine presence in the architecture itself [4].

Gaudi's commitment to spirituality is a direct rejection of Modernist ideals. In a time when many architects moved toward a secular, humanist approach to design, Gaudi remained devoted to creating spaces that uplifted the soul and served a higher purpose.

Critique of Modernism's Industrial Efficiency

Modernism placed a premium on efficiency, mirroring the industrial processes of mass production. Buildings were designed to be functional, quickly constructed, and standardized. Gaudi's approach to

the Sagrada Família was the opposite. He favored slow, painstaking craftsmanship, seeing the building as a living organism that would grow and evolve over time (Figure 3) [5].



Figure 3. Interior ceiling of Sagrada Família, showing intricate columns and vaults.

The branching columns of the basilica’s nave, which evoke the structure of a tree, are a testament to his belief in architecture as something organic, rather than mechanical. The fact that the Sagrada Família remains unfinished over a century after its construction began stands as a critique of Modernism’s obsession with speed and finality. Gaudi saw architecture as a process, not a product [6].

SYMBOLISM VS. MODERNIST FUNCTIONALISM

Modernism famously embraced the mantra of “form follows function,” stripping buildings of what was deemed unnecessary ornamentation. Gaudi, on the other hand, believed that symbolism could enhance a building’s meaning and experience without detracting from its functionality [7].

The Rich Symbolism of the Sagrada Família

Gaudi filled the Sagrada Família with rich Christian symbolism. The Passion Façade illustrates the suffering and death of Christ through angular, almost skeletal forms that convey a sense of pain and sacrifice. This narrative quality, embedded within the architecture, directly contrasts with Modernism’s rejection of storytelling and ornamentation (Figure 4).

Where Modernism sought to remove historical references, Gaudi embraced them. He saw architecture as a medium through which complex theological ideas could be communicated to the public [8]. Every spire, façade, and sculptural detail of the Sagrada Família has a deeper religious or natural meaning, from the heights of the spires representing the apostles to the intricate flora and fauna that decorate the walls.



Figure 4. Sagrada Família with rich Christian symbolism.

Tension with Modernist Functionalism

Modernist architecture reduced buildings to their simplest forms, often avoiding decoration in favor of pure functionality. Gaudi's designs do the opposite – using form to convey profound meaning. The elaborately ornamented Nativity Façade is not merely decorative but serves as a visual scripture, communicating the beauty and mystery of the birth of Christ [9]. For Gaudi, the symbolic and spiritual layers of a building were just as important as its structural elements, challenging Modernism's minimalist ethos.

MATERIALITY AND CRAFTSMANSHIP: A CHALLENGE TO MASS PRODUCTION

One of Modernism's defining features was its embrace of industrial materials, such as steel, concrete, and glass, which allowed for rapid construction and standardized forms (Figure 5). Gaudi's approach to materiality was entirely different, favoring hand-crafted details and natural materials over industrial mass production.

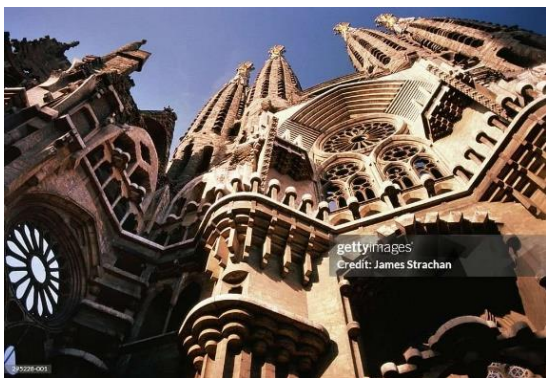


Figure 5. Low-angle view of the façade and spires of Sagrada Família.

Gaudi's Embrace of Traditional Craftsmanship

The Sagrada Família exemplifies Gaudi's commitment to craftsmanship. He incorporated artisanal techniques, such as *trencadís* – a mosaic created from broken ceramic pieces – which adorns the towers and various parts of the structure [10]. This handcrafted approach stands in stark contrast to the factory-like production methods embraced by Modernists, who often valued speed and uniformity over the uniqueness of handcrafted elements [11].

Handcrafted vs. Mechanized

While Modernist architects, such as Le Corbusier, sought to design buildings that could be replicated like machines, Gaudi's work emphasizes the importance of individuality and human touch. The intricate stone carvings, stained glass, and mosaics of the Sagrada Família were crafted by skilled artisans, offering a tactile and emotional richness that Modernist architecture often lacks (Figure 6) [12]. Gaudi's insistence on using handmade elements critiques Modernism's dehumanizing reliance on mechanization and mass production, reminding us of the value of craftsmanship in an increasingly industrial world [13].



Figure 6. Sagrada Família biomorphic forms.

ORGANIC FORMS VS. MODERNIST GEOMETRY

Modernism favored clean, geometric lines and simple shapes, often taking inspiration from industrial products. Gaudi, however, found his inspiration in nature. The Sagrada Família is full of biomorphic forms that evoke the organic growth of living things [14].

Nature as an Architectural Blueprint

Gaudi's use of natural forms is most evident in the branching columns inside the Sagrada Família, which resemble tree trunks and branches that rise to support the roof. This use of Nature as an inspiration for structure and design contrasts sharply with the rigid, mechanical lines favored by Modernist architects.

By turning to nature, Gaudi rejected the Modernist ideal of rational, machine-like precision. His designs blur the boundaries between architecture and the natural world, making the Sagrada Família feel alive, as though it is a part of the natural environment rather than a mechanized product of the industrial age.

Critique of Modernist Uniformity

Modernist architects often imposed strict geometric order on their designs, reflecting their desire for control and predictability. Gaudi's designs, on the other hand, are unpredictable and fluid, like nature itself. The undulating curves and irregular forms found throughout the Sagrada Família challenge Modernism's preference for rigid uniformity.

In this sense, Gaudi's architecture can be seen as a rebellion against the cold, detached rationality of Modernism, reintroducing emotion, unpredictability, and the natural world into the built environment.

THE UNFINISHED SAGRADA FAMÍLIA: A SYMBOL OF ANTI-MODERNISM

One of the most fascinating aspects of the Sagrada Família is its unfinished state.

While Modernist architects sought to complete projects efficiently and neatly, Gaudi's Basilica remains under construction after more than 140 years. This slow evolution of the building can be seen as a deliberate critique of Modernism's obsession with completion and perfection (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The unfinished Sagrada Família.

The Building as a Living Entity

The Sagrada Família is a building that grows, much like a living organism. Its long construction process reflects a respect for time and patience, qualities that are often undervalued in the modern world. Gaudi understood that great works of art and architecture are not products of speed, but of time, labor, and devotion.

Resistance to Modernist Efficiency

The unfinished state of the Sagrada Família offers a symbolic resistance to the Modernist ideals of speed, industrial efficiency, and finality. In a world that increasingly prioritizes rapid completion, Gaudi's vision serves as a reminder that true beauty and meaning often take time to emerge.

CONCLUSION

Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Família stands as a profound and enduring critique of the principles of Modernism. Through its rich symbolism, emphasis on craftsmanship, and organic forms, the basilica challenges the dominant narratives of secularism, industrialization, and minimalism that defined Modernist thought. Rather than reducing architecture to function and efficiency alone, Gaudí repositions it as a deeply expressive and experiential art form that engages the senses, emotions, and spirituality of its users.

The Sagrada Família demonstrates that architecture can transcend mere utility by fostering a meaningful connection between human beings, nature, and the divine. Its intricate geometries, inspired by natural systems, and its reliance on artisanal skill highlight the value of creativity and individuality in an age increasingly driven by mechanization. In this sense, Gaudí's work resists the homogenization often associated with Modernist architecture and instead celebrates diversity, complexity, and cultural identity.

Moreover, the ongoing construction of the Sagrada Família reinforces its significance as a living architectural process rather than a static monument. It bridges past and present, combining traditional craftsmanship with contemporary technologies, thereby illustrating how innovation and tradition can coexist harmoniously. This evolving nature also symbolizes the continuity of human aspiration and collective effort in shaping the built environment.

Ultimately, the Sagrada Família redefines architectural discourse by proposing an alternative paradigm – one that values spirituality, contextual sensitivity, and artistic expression alongside functionality. As it continues to rise, it remains a powerful testament to the enduring relevance of human-centered design and the limitless potential of architectural imagination in challenging established norms.

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