

# MODERNIST ARCHITECTURE

MODERNISM IN ARCHITECTURE AND THE INDUSTRIAL ARTS AND, CONSEQUENTLY, IN DESIGN, CAN BE CONSIDERED THE MOST IMPORTANT ARTISTIC MOVEMENT IN MODERN CATALAN CULTURE.

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**M**odernism in architecture and the industrial arts and, consequently, in design, can be considered the most important artistic movement in modern Catalan culture. The movement gained such importance and strength that it cannot really be studied in the same light as its contemporary European movements such as *Art Nouveau*, *Jugendstil*, *Sezession*, *Liberty* or *Floreal*, to name just the best-known.

This new architecture, as a progressive contribution to modernity, represented a reaction to the abuse, or simply over-use, of eclecticism as a repertory of historical styles, evident in the neo-Gothic, Arab, Mudejar or stodgy Romanesque architecture of our most prestigious masters. In Catalonia, this change coincided with an ideological attitude linked to the social reality of the moment. The search for a style which could be seen as a new spirit and a national culture, as well as the need to retrieve the language, were some of the factors in the struggle for the recognition of Catalonia in Europe.

We must also define the geographical area in which the movement was most productive. Obviously, we have to look to Barcelona as being the centre of Modernism, though we should not forget other places, on the coast as well as inland, where the movement also had an influence. Barcelona produced the movement's three most significant architects: Lluís Domènech i Montaner (1850-1923), Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (1852-1926), and Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1867-1956). The first and last of these

are not only important as architects but also for their extensive humanistic training. Although Gaudí had the same training, his circumstances were very different from those of the others.

Our study of this architectural movement must be seen as a debate with the central idea of Gaudí, of whom we spoke in the first issue of this magazine, as a counterpoint to the other two architects, without taking this to mean that he was situated between Domènech and Puig i Cadafalch.

The controversy between Lluís Domènech i Montaner and Gaudí centred on the aspect of space, that between Puig i Cadafalch and Gaudí on ornamentation. In 1878, the same year Gaudí finished his training as an architect, Lluís Domènech i Montaner, a historian and architect who is fundamental to the understanding of the beginnings of Modernism in Catalonia, wrote in *Renaixença*: "In search of a national architecture", a theoretical article which looked at the need to redirect Catalan architecture along the lines mentioned above. The controversy and the impact which this article caused were not reflected in architecture until ten years later.

"The final word in any conversation about architecture, the principal question in any critique, centres inevitably on one idea, that of a modern, national architecture."

These are the opening words of Domènech's article, which, with its wide selection of examples to explain the leading architectural monuments of the world, shows the necessity of resorting to different styles "so that we can learn to apply openly the forms that new experiences and needs impose on us, enriching them and giving them expression with the ornamental treasures offered to us by monuments of all eras and by nature".

Domènech asks that the present be

sought with faith and courage and without renouncing the past.

With this purely theoretical outlook, Domènech started his professional career. He finished his training in 1873 and 8 years later work started on his first project, the *Editorial Montaner i Simón*, 255, Aragó street, Barcelona, completed in 1884.

This building, along with Gaudí's *Casa Vicens* (1880), Josep Fontseré's *Victor Balaguer* museum and library (1882) in Vilanova i la Geltrú, the *Acadèmia de Ciències* (1883) by Domènech i Estepà and finally Josep Vilaseca's *Les Indústries d'Art Francesc Vidal* (1884) are the examples which, according to A. Cirici, break with the past and form the stem of the "new architecture".

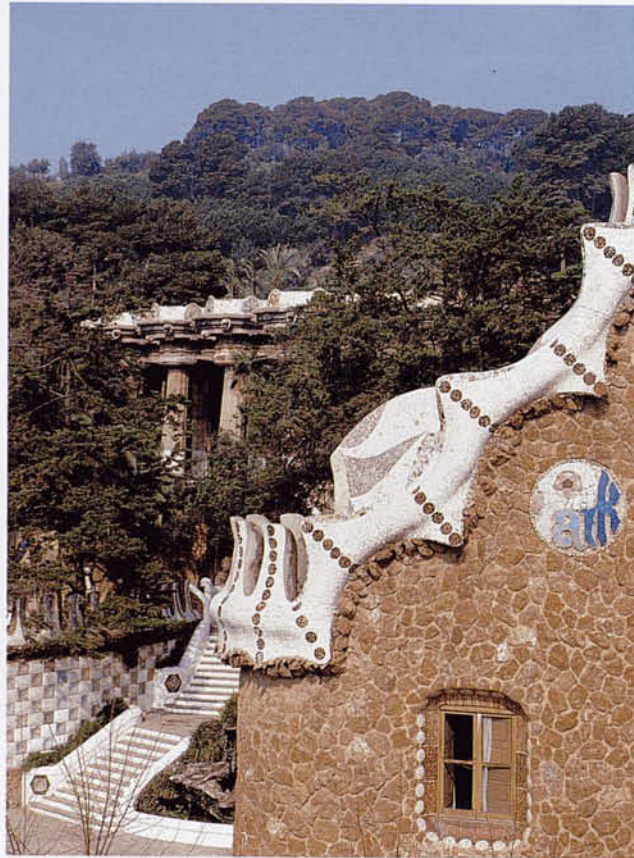
Retrieving the thread of our article, we have to go back to the debate between Gaudí and Domènech regarding the question of space. Domènech built a number of important buildings of all kinds: from private houses, theatres, hotels, blocks of flats and hospitals to others of less importance.

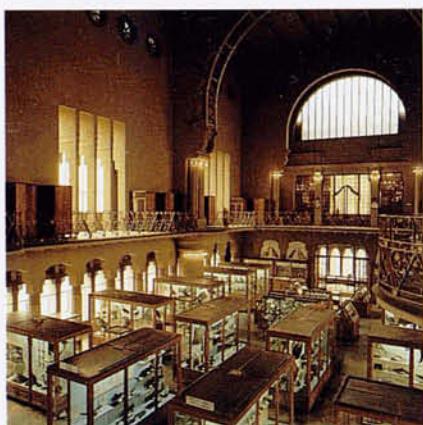
In all of them, and especially in the *Editorial Montaner i Simón* (1884), the *Cafè-Restaurant de l'Exposició Internacional de Barcelona* (1888), the *Hospital de Sant Pau* (1902-1910-1928) and the *Palau de la Música Catalana* (1905-1908), there is the wish to rationalize the concept of space, absent from Gaudí's work of the same time. The complexity and the difficulty of spatial perception in Gaudí's work contrasts with the clarity and transparency of Domènech's work.



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Of the buildings referred to, two were in the already existing urban area (*Montaner i Simón* and *Palau de la Música*) while the *Cafè-Restaurant* is an example of an isolated building whose volumetric connotations are bold enough to define, structure and shape an open space in close relation with the old part of the city. The *Hospital de Sant Pau* has to be looked at from the point of view of town-planning more than anything else, because of its situation within Cerdà's grid-system. Given the priorities of sunlight and health for a group of buildings, Domènech chose to face due south towards Gaudí's *Sagrada Família*, perfectly situated within the grid-system, and at that time consisting only of the towers of the facade of the nativity. According to Oriol Bohigas, there is the same relationship between Gaudí's and Domènech's uses of space as there is be-





tween Le Corbusier's from the *Ville Savoie* to *Chandigarh*, based on accidented and unreferable succession, and the pure prisms of Mies Van der Rohe—from the Barcelona pavilion to the Crown Hall—where the accidents always allow a constant reference to volumetric and spatial unity.

Josep Puig i Cadafalch was to be the other representative figure of this movement in Catalonia: researcher, historian, archeologist, politician and architect.

As has been seen, Gaudí and Puig coincide in formal aspects such as decoration, since it is in this field that their architecture is most attractive and transcends the intrinsic qualities of the architectonic concept itself.

Puig i Cadafalch, considered the “architect of collective forms seen as signs of a shared reality”, wrote in 1934: “architecture is not drawing: it is form as a geometrical and mechanical consequence”. He brings to mind Viollet-le-Duc with a sentence which was to be the slogan of many architects of the time: “architectonic beauty is born of the logic of forms” and for Gaudí this was to be the absolute guide to his art.

Thinking strictly about these definitions,

we see that the work of Puig i Cadafalch is always supported by a comfortable, settled attitude towards any suggestion of something new. Thus the *Casa Garí* (1898) in Argentona, the *Casa Amatller* (1898-1900) in the Passeig de Gràcia and next door to Gaudí's *Casa Batlló*, the *Casa Terrades* or *Casa de les Punxes* (1903-1905) in Avinguda Diagonal and the *Fàbrica Casarramona* (1911) in Mèxic street (at present a National Police barracks and in very bad state of repair)—all these in Barcelona—are the most representative examples of Puig's work from the golden age of Catalan Modernist architecture. They are all examples of good sense, good construction and good taste and for that reason immediately acceptable to the Catalan bourgeoisie.

Puig sought a line whose ornamentation was modest both in size and colouring, with plain mouldings and, as has already been remarked, a geometrical volume based on comprehensible and accepted figures. The only exception to this last concept which is to be found in his work is in Argentona, where the job of converting three village houses into one provides a courageous and enriching result, perhaps because it was to be his own holiday-home. On the other hand, we must bear in mind that Puig died in 1956 and that his work was the object of changes that were important enough for it to be

interpreted within Modernism, *Noucentisme* and the doubtful moments after the Civil War, keeping outside Rationalism, another historic moment of Catalan architecture.

Finally we must mention an exceptional Barcelona facade called the *Mançana de la Discòrdia*, in the Passeig de Gràcia between the streets of Aragó and Consell de Cent, where we find work by the three architects discussed. Domènech's *Casa Lleó i Morera*, on the corner of Consell de Cent, Puig's *Casa Amatller* and Gaudí's reformation of the *Casa Batlló*.

Domènech and Puig built two new blocks of flats free of any limitation that might have conditioned their use of space or design. Gaudí was entrusted with a reformation and transformed an unobtrusive block of flats into an explosive controversy. He modified and added floors, joined interior wells to make them into usable spaces and illuminated the facade's new surface like a miniature.

This then, is the only place in the city where we find the three artists studied in this article side by side: Domènech i Montaner, historian and politician, Puig i Cadafalch, researcher and archeologist, and Antoni Gaudí, architect. ■