

## God's architect

by Jonathan Dykes

What is the most famous building in Paris? It is, of course, the Eiffel Tower.

What about the most famous building in Sydney? That must be the Opera House, with its tall, white roofs, that look like the sails of a ship.

Now think of the most famous building in Barcelona. Some people might say Camp Nou, the enormous stadium where Barcelona FC play football. But most people would probably say that the most famous building in Barcelona is the Sagrada Familia, a large and extraordinary church that was started in 1882 and still is not finished!

The man who designed the Sagrada Familia was a Catalan architect called Antoni Gaudi. He was born in 1852 in the south of Catalonia, in a town called Reus (or possibly in a nearby village called Riudoms, nobody knows for certain.) Antoni was the youngest of five children but only three of them survived to adulthood. Life was very difficult, even for people with money back in those days!

Antoni also suffered from bad health and his doctor persuaded him to become a vegetarian, which was very unusual at the time, especially in a county like Spain where most people eat meat at least once a day.

Two of the things that Antoni loved doing were studying the natural world and drawing. He was also very religious.

Like all young men who lived in Spain at that time, Gaudi had to spend two years in military service, but because he was not very strong, he did not have to fight in the war that took place while he was in the army. Instead, he spent most of this time working in an office, or at home on sick leave.

After his military service, Gaudi went to study in the Barcelona School of Architecture. He was not a very good student. His marks were average and he sometimes failed courses. When the Director of the school gave Antoni his degree certificate at the end of the course, he said:

“We have given this academic title either to a fool or a genius. Time will show.”

One of Gaudi's first jobs as a professional architect was to design some lampposts for the Plaça Reial, a large square in the centre of Barcelona. But it was the design of a building called the Casa Vicens that made people stop and stare. This house was made using a unique mixture of materials and colours and was a new style of architecture. For example, Gaudi used tiles decorated with flowers on the outside of the building and he even decorated the chimneys. The Casa Vicens was a private home until 2014. Now it is a museum.

A rich Catalan businessman called Eusebi Güell liked Gaudi's work so much, he asked him to design a number of buildings for him, including the Güell Palace, and the Güell Park.

The Güell Palace is situated in the Raval district, very close to the Ramblas which is Barcelona's most famous street. The building has two large entrances so that horse-drawn carriages could enter on one side and leave on the other side. The main room in the house was designed for very large parties. It has a very high ceiling and if the guests looked up, they would see stars twinkling above. The guests were in fact looking at lamps that were lit on the roof of the palace. Small holes in the ceiling were uncovered so that the light from the lamps would shine through to the party room below.

The Güell Park is situated on a hill behind the city. The original idea was to build sixty high quality houses in the park, so that people with money could live far away from the smoke and smells of the city. In the end only two houses were built and Gaudi moved into the one that was built by his assistant, Francesc Berenguer.

Gaudi lived in this house with his father and the rest of his family from 1906 to 1926. He never married. Nowadays the house is a museum called the Gaudi House and it contains some of the furniture he designed.

The Güell Park is a good example of Gaudi's skill and imagination. The main terrace is surrounded by a long bench, that curves like a sea serpent. It is decorated with broken ceramic tiles of all colours, which makes every section of the bench unique. A large, colourful salamander called 'el drac' (the dragon) at the entrance to the park, is also decorated with the same mosaic technique.

Gaudi also used ceramic tiles of different colours to cover the front of one his most famous buildings, the Casa Batllo, which is situated on one of Barcelona's most expensive streets, the Passeig de Gracia. The Casa Batllo also has a decorated roof that many people say looks like the back of a dragon.

Another of Gaudi's houses on the Passeig de Gracia is the Casa Milá which is better known as La Pedrera, which means stone quarry. This building, which contains twenty fabulous apartments, is famous for its wave-like façade, its roof terrace and decorative chimneys. There are no straight lines anywhere but, as Gaudi once said, there are no straight lines in nature either.

Nature was also a model for the interior of the Sagrada Familia church, where the columns look like tall branching trees. Gaudi became the chief architect of the Sagrada Familia in 1883. Construction was slow because it was entirely financed by private donations. When asked about the slow speed of construction Gaudi answered "My client is not in a hurry."

Gaudi spent the last years of his life working almost exclusively on the Sagrada Familia. He even went to live in the workshop on site. The church was never meant to be a cathedral, but it was designed to be larger than many cathedrals. Gaudi planned to have eighteen towers or spires: twelve for the apostles, four for the evangelists, one for the Virgin Mary and one, the tallest, for Jesus. When they are finished these spires will make the Sagrada Familia the tallest church in the world.

The style of the church is typical of Gaudi. There are very few straight lines. The spires and facades are all highly decorated and combine religious symbols with sculptures of animals and plants.

On 7 June 1926, Gaudí was walking to a different church in the city centre when he was hit by a tram. He was wearing his old work clothes and people thought he was a beggar. Some passers-by took him to a hospital where he received some basic medical attention. The next day a priest recognised him, but by that time it was too late. Gaudi died on 10th June 1926. He was 73 years old. He was buried in the crypt of the Sagrada Familia.

At the time of Gaudi's death the church was only about 25% finished. The idea is to try and finish construction in 1926, which will be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death.

Not everybody likes Gaudi's design. British writer George Orwell described the Sagrada Familia as "one of the most hideous buildings in the world." But it is certainly unique, and the church attracts millions of visitors from all over the world every year.

In total, seven of Gaudi's buildings have been listed as World Heritage Sites. Six of them are in the city of Barcelona and they are all very popular with tourists.

You do not have to like all of Gaudi's designs to recognise his talent. The Director of the Barcelona School of Architecture who gave Gaudi his degree certificate would certainly be pleased. Gaudi was clearly not a fool. Most people agree that he was a genius.