

# **Postmodern Expression of Gaudí's Architecture and Its Inspiration to Contemporary Design**

**Xinyue Zhao\***

*School of Design, Xi'an Technological University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China*

*\*Corresponding Author.*

**Abstract:** Antoni Gaudí, a renowned Spanish genius architect, is hailed as the "Architect of God". The imaginative and unrestrained elements in his architecture represent his unique design style, which integrates Art Nouveau, Moorish style, naturalism, Gothic style, Baroque, and other styles. This article aims to summarize the postmodern expressions in his works by sorting out the styles and works of Gaudí's different creative stages, and also provides some new suggestions and inspirations for innovative designs in contemporary design.

**Keywords:** Antoni Gaudí; Postmodernity; Architectural Design; Naturalism

## **1. Introduction**

The period from the late 19th century to the mid -20th century was a time of historical transformation. The development of the Industrial Revolution had a huge impact on society, politics, and the economy. The population of Barcelona grew rapidly, forcing the government to re - plan urban construction. In 1859, the engineer Ildefons Cerdà proposed the plan for the expansion of Barcelona. This plan connected the old city with surrounding areas using a grid - like block system, enabling even poor workers to enjoy urban spaces of the same quality. Economic development also gave rise to the emergence of the new bourgeoisie. They spent large sums of money hiring talented architects to build their own buildings, using architecture to showcase their economic strength. Gaudí received many commissions and financial support during this period, and his Casa Milà and Casa Batlló are representative works.

In the late 19th century, influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement represented by John Ruskin and William Morris, a design movement rebelling against the pretentious Victorian style emerged in various regions of

Europe, sweeping across the entire European continent. The Art Nouveau movement did not advocate straight lines or geometric forms. Instead, it emphasized the beauty of dynamic curves and drew inspiration from various forms in nature. This movement covered various fields such as architecture, furniture, graphic design, and fashion. What influenced Gaudí the most were the Gothic revival style and natural organicism in the Arts and Crafts Movement.

## **2. Gaudí's Personal Experience**

Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (June 1852 - June 1926) was born in the small town of Reus in the Catalonia region of Spain. His entire life was closely connected to the city of Barcelona. As a child, due to rheumatism, Gaudí could not move freely like other children of his age. Most of the time, he observed the various forms in nature alone. This experience led to his unique thinking and insights about nature, laying a solid foundation for his later - formed naturalist view. Gaudí believed that "There is a great book that lies open, waiting for us to read it with all our hearts, and that is nature." [1] Born into a family of craftsmen, Gaudí was familiar with the properties and characteristics of various materials. The family's handicraft tradition also laid the foundation for his use of various traditional materials in the design process.

In 1873, Gaudí entered the Barcelona School of Architecture. During this period, he demonstrated extraordinary talent. Due to financial difficulties, he started working for architects while studying and became an assistant to the architect Joan Martorell. It was also during this time that he met his lifelong friend and supporter, Eusebi Güell, through Martorell's introduction [2]. In 1878, Gaudí graduated successfully and obtained the title of architect. When the school principal saw his graduation project, he exclaimed, "Have we

awarded the degree to a genius or a madman?" On June 7, 1926, Gaudí died in a car accident. Devoted to his work, he never married. Instead, he dedicated all his knowledge and wisdom to the city of Barcelona, creating more than a dozen magnificent and ingenious architectural works. Seventeen of these works have been listed as national cultural relics in Spain, and seven have been designated as World Heritage Sites by UNESCO, including Casa Milà, Casa Batlló, Park Güell, and the Sagrada Família [3]. These architectural works all reflect Gaudí's advanced design concepts and methods, and Barcelona has become more colorful because of Gaudí.

### **3. Gaudí's Creative Stages**

#### **3.1 The Moorish Style Stage**

Spain was ruled by the Arabs and Moors from North Africa for hundreds of years. The Moorish national culture and artistic style had a huge impact on Spanish culture, integrating the original Gothic Christian art in Spain with Islamic art style, forming a very unique artistic style. During this stage, most of Gaudí's architectural works carried the characteristics of Arab - style architecture [4]. However, he did not simply pursue revival but combined it with eclecticism, mixing traditional materials and decorative elements from different periods, creating a unique style. The representative building of this stage is the Casa Vicens. The exterior facade of the building is decorated with brightly - colored glazed ceramic tiles, showing strong Arab - style architectural features.

#### **3.2 The Stage of Mixing Neo - Gothic Style and Art Nouveau**

Influenced by John Ruskin and William Morris, Gaudí began to pay attention to the medieval Gothic architectural style and explore its architectural features in depth [5]. The representative work of this stage is the Palau Güell designed in 1884. It is a perfect embodiment of the integration of Gaudí's Neo - Gothic ideas and the Art Nouveau style. Many decorative elements in the building adopt the design techniques of the Art Nouveau movement. The organic style is also reflected in the building's gate, while the curved and slender ironwork, floral plant patterns, and pointed - arch doors and

windows all show an eclectic treatment of the Gothic and Art Nouveau styles [6].

#### **3.3 The Formation Stage of the "Gaudí - like" Style**

With the increase of his design experience, Gaudí began to seek his own design style, which was an "Gaudí - like" artistic style integrating naturalism, the beauty of curves, and nationality. He believed that "Only a madman would depict things that do not exist in the world." Therefore, he used a large number of curves in his works. "Straight lines belong to humans, curves belong to God." [7] Casa Milà is the building that best represents Gaudí's unique artistic style. The entire building, whether in its appearance or in the design of its interior doors, windows, furniture, or decorations, adopts an organic design form. There are no straight lines or flat surfaces in the building. The undulating stone exterior walls express an infinite longing for the undulating ocean waves. This work also brings the organic style and curve art of the Art Nouveau movement to the extreme.

### **4. The Postmodernity of Gaudí's Architectural Works**

#### **4.1 The Sustainable Development Concept in Naturalism**

Gaudí believed that "Creation is a return to nature." The unique forms of many of his architectural works are inspired by nature. He was good at observing various creatures in nature, extracting, reshaping, exaggerating, and deforming elements that conform to his creative concept, such as the forms of ocean waves, shells, plants, and mountains. The Catalonia region where Gaudí lived has a Mediterranean climate, rich natural resources, unique natural scenery, vast forests, and a sparkling sea, which provided him with a steady stream of inspiration [8]. In addition, influenced by John Ruskin's naturalist theory and the Art Nouveau movement, Gaudí innovatively designed and applied natural shapes such as curves, hyperboloids, and helicoids discovered in nature to architectural design, emphasizing the integration and utilization of nature both inside and outside the building, which is highly consistent with the current concept of sustainable development. Park Güell, built in 1914, aimed to create a

high - end and healthy residential area away from the urban industrial area [9]. The project was planned to be built on Mount Perada in the north of Barcelona. Instead of damaging the terrain, Gaudí used the terrain to build roads for people to walk on, and designed arcaded overpasses under the roads to shelter people from the wind and rain. In the green area, Gaudí preserved the original vegetation and added other local vegetation species. The Hypostyle Hall designed by Gaudí also embodies the concept of green ecological sustainable development. The hall can not only facilitate people's gatherings but also serves as a sophisticated rainwater recycling system to solve the problem of water shortage. The surface of the square is paved with permeable floor tiles, and there is a gravel layer underneath to filter and introduce rainwater into the water storage system. The discs on the ceiling of the Hypostyle Hall can also direct rainwater into the drainpipes hidden inside the columns. This rainwater can be recycled, solving the water shortage problem while perfectly combining with the gathering place, being both functional and aesthetic.

#### **4.2 Regionalism**

Throughout Gaudí's architectural works, regardless of the type of building, they are filled with strong regional characteristics in terms of appearance, color, materials, and decorative elements. They are closely related to the folk culture and geographical environment of the city of Barcelona, but more importantly, to Gaudí's strong Catalan national consciousness. The regional characteristics in Gaudí's works are not just a simple use of local culture but have his unique approach. Firstly, it is due to his inheritance of all things in nature and the ecological awareness in organic architecture. Secondly, he was good at using local materials and retaining the original essential characteristics of the materials, making his artworks more regionally distinctive. In addition, Gaudí was a devout religious believer. He dedicated nearly 40 years to the construction of the Sagrada Família, almost exhausting his life's efforts. His imitation and transformation of all things in nature were also because he believed that he was imitating "God's world of all things." Therefore, his architectural works are also filled with religious connotations.

On the basis of scientific design, Gaudí added many local cultural and traditional elements to Park Güell. In Park Güell, Gaudí used symbols representing the unique features of the Catalan region, such as characters from myths and legends and animals like lizards and fire snakes with Catalan symbolic significance as materials for three - dimensional sculptures. He also used many traditional plant and animal patterns to express the historical and cultural features that gradually weakened after the Industrial Revolution. These symbols with strong regional characteristics were consistently used by Gaudí in his works, and this is more evident in the design of Casa Batlló. The undulating roof of the building, combined with the unique and bright colors and ceramic mosaic design, resembles a dying dragon lying prostrate. The cross hanging high on the roof indicates that the dragon has been conquered. This unique shape is based on the myth of St. George and the Dragon, reflecting a strong Catalan national and religious consciousness.

#### **4.3 The Continuation and Innovation of Traditional Materials**

Gaudí's architectural works used a variety of materials, making his buildings visually impactful and artistic, which is one of the outstanding features of his creations. In Gaudí's works, his use of architectural materials was infused with his emotions towards various materials. He often used local or surrounding materials for creation to reduce construction costs and better integrate into the local environment, which also reflected Gaudí's naturalism. Common materials in his architectural works include stone, metal, wood, and ceramic fragments. Through decorative techniques such as collage and inlay, he fully exploited the essential characteristics of each material.

The exterior of Casa Milà uses the rocks of Montserrat Mountain in Barcelona as the main material. The apartment's shape is undulating and rounded, as if it is in harmony with the surrounding mountains. Park Güell also used a large amount of stone during construction. For example, the columns of the colonnade in the park are made of nearby stones, making the whole park fit well with the original landform environment. The exterior facade of the Sagrada Família is made of materials from

Montjuïc Mountain nearby [10]. This material not only saves costs and protects the environment but also makes the church look more solemn. Iron and metal elements can often be seen in Gaudí's buildings, which is related to his family and growth experience. His father was a blacksmith, and he had close contact with various metal materials since childhood and even worked as a blacksmith's apprentice. Ceramic fragments and glass were also frequently used materials by Gaudí. Casa Vicens was designed at the request of a glazed tile merchant. It was the first time that ceramics were used in architecture. The exterior facade of the building is inlaid with a large number of brightly - colored tile fragments, with stone bricks faintly showing through the gaps between the tiles. After that, this material was widely used in other buildings.

#### **4.4 The People - Oriented Sociality**

Gaudí's architecture is not only visually colorful and dreamy but also full of human - centered and social elements. His understanding of the sociality of architecture is unique. Although most of his works were commissioned by the upper class or merchants, he also considered the needs of people from different classes. For example, the sculptures on the exterior facade of the Sagrada Familia are images of gods from the Bible, but he used the images of real people to create these god - like images, making them more approachable. The decorative elements on the exterior facade are also images of palm leaves, chickens, ducks, and other common animals. The church is not only a religious place for the church to communicate with God but also a spiritual place for everyone to communicate with God, which is an expression of sociality full of humanistic care [11]. In addition, the design of the stained - glass windows inside the church allows sunlight to shine through, creating a mysterious and magical divine atmosphere, breaking the dull and solemn atmosphere of traditional churches and enabling people to feel a sense of relaxation and pleasure. The serpentine bench in Park Güell also reflects sociality. The bench is designed in line with ergonomics, conforming to the shape suitable for people's lumbar vertebrae, and is combined with the image of the snake often appearing in Catalan myths, being both ornamental and

improving people's comfort.

#### **5. Inspirations for Contemporary Architectural Design**

Postmodernism criticizes concepts such as rationality, objectivity, and identity. It believes that the world is full of contingency, is characterized by a spirit of free creation, is diverse and unstable, and cannot be defined by any single theoretical formula. Instead, it is composed of many continuous and developing cultures and histories. Gaudí's architectural ideas, which return to nature and are full of local culture and traditional culture, embody postmodern concepts such as sustainable development, green environmental protection, localization, cultural inheritance, sociality, and human - centeredness. These are all worthy of study and reflection in contemporary design. Gaudí's advanced ideas and his extraordinary innovative ability are truly astonishing. He used his unique architectural ideas to interpret the organic combination of architectural form, space, color, and decoration. After the 21st century, rigid reinforced concrete has filled the entire field of architectural design, making the design tend to be monotonous and formulaic, lacking humanistic feelings and emotional elements. Green and human - centered concepts have gradually become the mainstream themes of contemporary design. In this context, Gaudí and his architectural works are the best historical treasures.

#### **6. Conclusion**

This paper conducts research on Gaudí's architecture. First, it introduces the background of the era in which he created and his personal experiences, and then sorts out his creative stages. It deeply analyzes the post - modernity reflected in his architecture, covering the sustainable concept of naturalism, regionalism, material application, and people - oriented sociality. The post-modern expressions of Gaudí's architecture provide important inspirations for contemporary design in aspects such as green environmental protection and cultural inheritance.

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