

The Sagrada Familia: the Philosophical Evolution of Art from Naturalism to Post-sacredness

Zhicheng Cai

the college of arts, Sichuan University, Chengdu 610000, Sichuan, China
lucascaizhicheng@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper investigates the spatial and symbolic transformation of the Sagrada Familia, tracing its shift from Gothic sacred architecture to a post-sacred cultural icon. It examines Gaudí's creation of a "natural sacred" language influenced by Catalan Modernism and Art Nouveau, and analyzes Subirachs' interventions through existentialist aesthetics, drawing on Merleau-Ponty. The study argues that the Sagrada Familia now functions as a multisensory, media-driven urban symbol, reflecting how sacred architecture evolves within postmodern and secularized societies.

Keywords: Sagrada Família; Gaudí; post-sacred space; Art Nouveau; existential architecture; cultural landscape

1. Catalan Modernisme — Gaudí's "Natural Sacredness" Space during His Time

From the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, Modernism emerged as a dominant architectural movement in Europe, marked by a rejection of classical architecture and eclecticism. Its proponents advocated for innovative forms that addressed the demands of industrialized society — favoring tall structures, wide spans, and the use of modern materials and construction methods. However, the expression of Modernism in Catalonia took a distinctive turn. In his influential article *Exploring a National Architecture of the Homeland*, published in *La Renaixença* (February 1878), Lluís Domènech i Montaner argued that the new architecture should not simply reflect regionalist aesthetics, but embody the values of a new civilization. He proposed a synthesis of historical styles with modern forms, technologies, and societal functions, encouraging the incorporation of natural motifs and monumental references from diverse historical periods into contemporary buildings. Antoni Gaudí responded directly to this intellectual call. Unlike the mainstream Art Nouveau and Modernist architects in continental Europe who often rejected historical precedent and traditional materials, Gaudí embraced and reinterpreted them. He retained the use of traditional Catalan materials—such as ceramics, stone, shells, and mosaics — many derived from the region's maritime and geological resources. Architecturally, he integrated the structural and symbolic language of Catalan Gothic churches with modern construction innovations, developing a unique formal vocabulary rooted in both tradition and transformation[1-3].

This position directly challenges the claim made by Yao Meikang in his 2009 article *Reading Gaudí's Architecture through the Lens of Culture and Nature* (Art Criticism, July 2009), where Yao asserts that Gaudí opposed historical styles. Such a statement overlooks Gaudí's conscious architectural continuity with Catalan heritage, as evidenced throughout his oeuvre. Rather than rejecting the past, Gaudí reconfigured it to meet the needs and expressive ambitions of a new age—precisely in line with the broader Catalan Modernist ethos initiated by Domènech[4].

Gaudí's architectural vision is grounded in natural theology and a cosmic worldview. As he stated, "Nature is my teacher; I learn her logic, not imitate her appearance" (Gaudí, in Collins, 1960). Drawing from medieval traditions, yet reshaped through modern organic holism, his designs emulate natural forms — tree-like structures, curves, and spirals — articulating a sacred geometry rooted in life itself. As Germain Bazin observed, Gaudí made architecture a cosmological statement, integrating structure, ornament, and theology into a unified system. In the Sagrada Família, sacredness arises not through traditional iconography but through natural symbolism, evoking a divine presence in space — a notion echoed by Norberg-Schulz: "True religious architecture must evoke a sense of being placed in the cosmos." Aligned with Art Nouveau ideals of fluidity and organic unity, Gaudí infused symbolic meaning into form. The towers represent Christ and the apostles, the facades narrate biblical stories, and stained glass modulates spiritual atmosphere through light and color. As Paul Frankl aptly stated, "Form is theology; structure is faith."

This symbolic depth is embodied in Gaudí's "Light-Form-Structure" trinity. Through colored glass and architectural rhythm, light animates the interior, creating a dynamic presence consistent with Norberg-Schulz's view of light as the foundation of spatial experience. The Sagrada Família is thus not merely built form, but a bodily, perceptual theater. As Merleau-Ponty argued, space is not external but a "field of meaning" lived through the body. The liturgical sequence — Faith,

Suffering, Glory — is choreographed spatially via shifts in density, light, and height. As Pallasmaa noted, architecture holds temporality and emotion. The vertical ascent of tree-like columns is not just structural, but perceptual: a bodily intuition of transcendence, turning verticality into an embodied logic of sacred elevation[5-7].

2. Symbolic Break and the Invasion of Existentialism — The Transformation of the Sagrada Familia’s Modernity After the War

With the death of Antoni Gaudí in 1926 due to a car accident, the epic architectural project of the Sagrada Familia was interrupted for a prolonged period of time and reconstruction. During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a large number of design drawings and models were destroyed, causing Gaudí’s unfinished architectural ideas to face the risk of being lost. Successor architects, although striving to continue the formal structure, experienced profound differences from Gaudí in their philosophical foundations and aesthetic spirit, transforming the Sagrada Familia from a “divine natural manifestation” into a building container of “human existential tension.”[8-9]

2.1 The Introduction of Subirachs and Existentialist Sculptural Language

One of the most controversial and stylistically turning points in the post-war Sagrada Familia is the Passion Façade, designed by sculptor Josep Maria Subirachs, which he began in 1987. This façade contrasts sharply with Gaudí’s Birth Façade: the latter is filled with details of natural growth and the joy of life, while the former uses sharp, fragmented, geometric, and cold sculptural language to express the narrative of Christ’s passion. Subirachs’ sculpture has been described by critics as “an existentialist theatre of suffering.” He himself admitted that he was profoundly influenced by the philosophy of Camus and Sartre. In his design, the face of Jesus is abstract, and his posture is rigid, deliberately omitting the “compassion” and “glory” emphasized in traditional religious imagery to highlight the loneliness and inevitability of suffering — symbolizing Camus’s “absurd man.”

“Jesus did not ascend to heaven; he was simply taken away.” [10] This approach reveals the broken transformation in post-war religious spatial language: the sacredness is no longer endowed by decoration and light but is instead formed through expressions such as “absence,” “silence,” and “rupture,” creating emotional tension. It no longer “decorates faith” but expresses “spatial anxiety after the end of faith.” In existentialist philosophy, the “death of God” does not only refer to the collapse of religion, but to the total failure of the meaning system. Subirachs projected this idea into his sculptural language, turning the architectural space into a field that bears the “silent tension of God’s absence.”

2.2 The De-Sacralization of Architectural Language

Following the war, the Sagrada Familia underwent a significant stylistic transformation. Beyond changes in sculptural language, the architecture itself shifted toward structural rationalization, geometric standardization, and symbolic restraint. Reinforced concrete replaced Gaudí’s biomimetic stone-based logic, turning the space from an organic “forest” into a problem-solving structure akin to engineering design. This marks a transition from a vision of cosmic expression to one of physical implementation. As Adorno noted, when art adopts the language of technology, it risks losing its capacity to reflect social suffering.

Subirachs’s existentialist sculptures, the rationalized structure, and the fading symbolism mark a transitional phase from divine sanctity to post-sanctity. The Sagrada Familia, no longer a site of pure religious devotion, has become a post-sacred cultural phenomenon. Its meaning now emerges through visibility, bodily perception, and digital mediation. Ritual participation has been replaced by acts of viewing, photographing, and sharing—aligning the architecture with contemporary demands for placemaking and experiential consumption.

Yet, the building retains sensorial depth. Echoing Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, spatial meaning arises through embodied movement. Light, density, and circulation shape a perceptual journey beyond visual gaze. As such, the Sagrada Familia exemplifies the post-sacred paradigm: a spiritual space no longer anchored in theological authority, but redefined through cultural experience, global imagery, and perceptual interaction—a shift from divine dwelling to a stage for meaning-making in the postmodern world.

3. Conclusion

the Sagrada Familia exemplifies the post-sacred condition—not as a space that negates religion, but as a dynamic process in which religious sanctity is transformed, deconstructed, and reconstructed within cultural frameworks. It represents the full migration of sacred architecture into cultural landscape, perceptual event, and global visual simulacrum. More importantly, it signals the emergence of a new paradigm of spiritual space: one where space is no longer the dwelling place of God, but the stage for the generation of meaning.

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