

The Concept of The Sublime in Gaudi's Sagrada Familia

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Abstract

Sagrada Familia is considered Antoni Gaudi's most outstanding piece, which is well known for its parabolic structure and hanging-chain strategy — the related design strategy for creating organic space. However, it has not been investigated so much as how this organic space may be related to the concept of sublime in Gaudi's holistic design for Sagrada Familia. To answer that question, this paper investigates two critical aspects for understanding this building: the design purpose and the architect himself. First, following its strongly religious mission, Sagrada Familia is a sacred space for people to meditate and reflect on themselves. Then, materiality, craftsmanship and architectural concepts are related to Gaudi's personal approach to architectural design and theory, as it is integrated with his religious ideology, all fused together into the church Sagrada Familia. Adding on to those, the complicated personal reactions to church as an organization that people may have, the sublime emerges as an architectural concept that explains better the overarching meaning of the Sagrada Familia for both religious and non-religious people. In architectural theory, sublime, a philosophical concept, is distinguishable from the picturesque, a tangible one. In architectural design, the sublime is about the scary and daunting that inspire great admiration or awe; the picturesque could be achieved by experiencing delightful and charming elements through various senses. This paper shows that the concept of the sublime in Gaudi's Sagrada Familia can be revealed through its grand scale; the architect's austere religious, almost monastic life; the techniques used in producing realist sculptures; the passage of time; and the imagination by its inhabitants. Imagination is especially important. It is built upon interpreting both literal and symbolic concepts together in its infinite possibilities because it separates the ordinary, the special, and the sublime.

Keywords: Antoni Gaudi, Sagrada Familia, Sublime

1. Introduction

The Basilica de la Sagrada Familia is a masterpiece of the famous architect Antoni Gaudi. This paper examines its comprehensive architectural meanings beyond the traditional investigations of its construction methods. It is self-evident that the Sagrada Familia as a church is designed to assist the religion through materiality. The chapels are designed for religious believers to communicate with God through their sensory experiences and imaginations. Cathedrals in the past were sometimes designed as institutional architecture to create fear and build authority through their grand scale. Such intention does not follow the idea of the picturesque but the idea of the sublime, which consists of daunting and gloomy scenes. The grand scale of the Sagrada Familia evokes fear and daunting emotions; therefore, the Sagrada Familia links with the concept of the sublime.

Building on top of the effects resulting from the grand scale of the Sagrada Familia, the hyper-realistic sculptures on the façade additionally strengthen the idea of the sublime. The lifelike sculptures created by Gaudi's design team visualized the stories in the Bible to convince the visitors of the existence of God. This followed Rene Descartes' idea about God's existence and God's divine attributes, which comprise omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence,¹

and that humans in their finite existence should have the fear of God. Accordingly, the Sagrada Familia as a church is associated with God and considered heaven on earth, which intentionally places the fear of God on the visitors through its architecture.

Since the concept of the sublime consists of the fear as well as the admiration, the Sagrada Familia builds the fear through the grand scale and the realistic sculptures on the exterior and arouses the admiration through the interior atmosphere. Essentially, the religious devotees admire and worship God due to its divine attributes. Besides the omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence of God that contributed to the meaning of the Sagrada Familia on the exterior, two other divine attributes of God are simplicity and externality, which is what the interior is trying to accomplish.² Specifically, the structure of the Sagrada Familia allows the light to penetrate through the colorful Murano glass to create the calming and peaceful ambience, which awakens delightfulness and piety.

The message of the sublime, thus, was constructed upon the grandeur of the Sagrada Familia, the realistic models on the façade, and the calming ambience of the interior. However, the full notion of the sublime was not yet finished as the Sagrada Familia was more than an expression of the religious missions, it was also the dialogue between the architect, Antoni Gaudi, and the visitors. Furthermore, architecture exists across a long span of time, which allowed Gaudi to deliver religious expressions through his architecture across time. Therefore, through Gaudi's religious principles, the plausible understanding of the architecture among visitors, and the passage of time should also be studied to interpret the comprehensive notion of the sublime. In sum, all these factors combine to create the experience of the sublime, including grand scale, Gaudi's monastic principles, his hyper-realistic sculptures, the inhabitants' imagination, and the passage of time.

2. From The Grand Scale To Fear And To The Sublime

The Sagrada Familia is towering and impressive in the city of Barcelona, Spain. It occupies one city block and becomes the center of Barcelona as the city grows.³ Within the compact city grid, visitors can capture the church from a far distance and are often stunned by its height, 566 feet tall.⁴ When finished, it will be the tallest building in the city, a designation that currently belongs to the 505-foot-tall Hotel Arts, built in 1992.⁵ Taking 6 feet as the normal human scale for calculation, the building is about 94 times taller than a typical human, which immediately arouses feelings of insecurity and inferiority. Those reactions are associated with the description of the sublime as being scary and daunting.

Architecturally, form often follows function and ultimately follows architectural concepts. Some churches had been designed as grand institutional architecture to evoke fear and piety. During the medieval era in particular, Gothic chapels with pointed arches were constructed loftier in comparison with the post-and-lintel construction. The Sagrada Familia was expected to be Gothic style. However, Gaudi sought to break the established formula of the Gothic cathedrals and to design unachievable tall naves through his unique methods.⁶ Learning from the skeleton as an entity supporting various parts of the flesh, Gaudi was determined to have internal crutches in every direction to avoid the external buttresses shown in the initial design proposal.⁷ The funicular form finding strategy, achieved his structural wishes, found the desired shape through pinning down both ends of a chain with calculated loads attached to the specific points. According to Gaudi, "a Gothic building becomes expressive only in a state of ruin, half-covered with weeds and ivy, and contemplated in moonlight or at dusk -- in other words when we are barely able to see it."⁸ Clearly, the Sagrada Familia was not created as a fake ruin; it instead diffused similar intimidating moods as his expressed, which connects to the concept of the sublime. Thus, the funicular form solidified into his incredible parabolic vaults (Figures 1-2), emphasized the large interior solids and voids (Figure 3), and attained the initial step in laying down the daunting atmosphere for the sublime journey.



Figures 1 and 2. Funicular model showing structural design of Sagrada Familia by Gaudi
 [Image source: Descharnes, R., Pujols, R., Prévost, F., Pujols, Francesc, & Prévost, Clovis. Gaudí, the visionary. New York: Viking Press, 1982, Figs. on p.128 and 129]

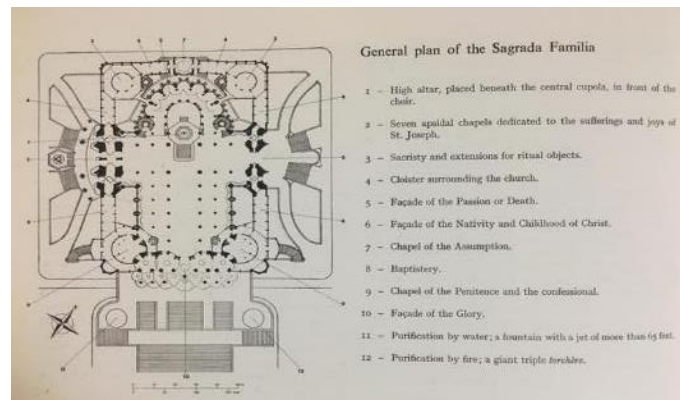


Figure 3. General plan of the Sagrada Familia
 [Image source: Descharnes, R., Pujols, R., Prévost, F., Pujols, Francesc, & Prévost, Clovis. *Gaudí, the visionary*. New York: Viking Press, 1982, Fig. on p.54]

3. From The Local Influences To The Peacefulness Of The Interior And To The Sublime

Both the Sagrada Família, located in Barcelona in the region of Catalonia, and its chief architect since 1884, Antoni Gaudí, are Catalanian.⁹ Culturally, the Catalonia region claimed independence due to its advanced industrial technology, abundant economy, and unique history dated back to the middle ages.¹⁰ The local culture further motivated its people to glorify their region and transformed Barcelona into a capital of the arts in the twentieth century.¹¹ Currently, an increasing number of visitors to Barcelona praise its unique architecture with a highlight on the Sagrada Família.

Barcelona is in the northeast of Spain with a shoreline offering views to the Mediterranean Sea, and Gaudí's Sagrada Família was potentially inspired by his observations of the Mediterranean Sea.¹² According to Rene Descartes, one's intellect is the output of senses and imaginations.¹³ Correspondingly, the Sagrada Família was Gaudí's production of his senses and imaginations, which inescapably are stimulated by nature or the material world. As claimed by Francesc Pujols in his book, *Gaudí, the Visionary*, Gaudí contemplated the sea as a fluid space in terms of its depths, movement, and reflectiveness, and concluded that "the sea has been and must be involved in the most stupendous enterprises of humanity".¹⁴ It, hence, has some continuities between the reflection of the Mediterranean Sea (Figures 4 and 5) and

the light penetrated through the translucent Murano Glass on the envelopes (Figure 6).¹⁵ Like today, people would contemplate in front of the sea since the reflection of the sea recalls tranquility. The visitors inside of the Sagrada Familia experience similar peace through contemplation. The interior of the Sagrada Familia is surrounded by translucent lights, an effect which responds to the admiration within the sublime concept.



Figure 4. (left) Color of Mediterranean Sea

[Image source: Limited, Alamy. "Stock Photo - Mediterranean, Pebbles, under Water, Refracted Light, Ripples, Sea, Green, Color, Clear, Clean, Fresh, Light, Pattern, Blue." Alamy. Accessed May 01, 2018.

<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-mediterranean-pebbles-under-water-refracted-light-ripples-sea-green-87555629.html>.]

Figure 5. (middle) Color of Mediterranean Sea

[Image source: "Unique Elafonisi Beach with Pink Sand and Light Surf of Mediterranean Sea with Mountains at Background on Sunny Summer Day, Crete, Greece." Shutterstock.com. Accessed May 01, 2018.

<https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/unique-elafonisi-beach-pink-sand-light-510925330>.]

Figure 6. (right) Interior of Sagrada Familia

[Image source: "Spain - Barcelona - La Sagrada Familia." RVCH Photography. December 18, 2016. Accessed May 01, 2018. <http://www.rvch.net/barcelona-la-sagrada-familia/>.]

4. From Gaudi's Artistic and Religious Inputs to the Sublime

Gaudi's artistic techniques on the Sagrada Familia reflects his religious objectives, which eventually leads to the sublime. Antoni Gaudi had been on the side of the Anticlericalism in 1885 but became "a vegetarian who preached the virtues of austerity and poverty" within ten years.¹⁶ The drawing by Gaudi's assistant Opisso in 1894 illustrated Gaudi's material sacrifice, showing his wretched room with the peeling wallpaper, the sagging bed, and an uncomfortable sofa (Figure 7).¹⁷ Gaudi even criticized the religious tepidity in his country, quoting "the man without religion is a man spiritually ruined, a mutilated man!"¹⁸ He verbalized his strict faith that "Mortification of the flesh is the joy of the spirit. Sacrifice is the only act of true love; it alone can enrich, it alone can help us make our way to inner truth, a way without which there can be no true art."¹⁹ All these claims disclose his religious proposition that the material sacrifices are for the final spiritual fulfillments.



Figure 7. Gaudí's living condition

[Image source: Descharnes, R., Pujols, R., Prévost, F., Pujols, Francesc, & Prévost, Clovis. Gaudí, the visionary. New York: Viking Press, 1982, Fig. on p.43]

Such austere ideologies could be interpreted as the sentimental combination of the external suffering as well as the internal joy. One step further, such paradoxical feelings describe the ideal results of Gaudí's sublime architecture with the daunting, gloomy and mystical exterior but the attractive, pleasing and calming interior.

Conforming to his life motto of chasing the true art, Gaudí dedicated his work on modeling hyper-realistic sculptures on the façade to seek the inner beauty and magnify the sublime as the result.²⁰ He would first analyze the skeleton to establish the fundamental understandings of all kinds of physical movements before employing models to perform specific movements.²¹ Taking the trumpeting angels on the large columns of the Nativity Façade for example, Gaudí would have many iterations throughout the processes, from making the metallic structures to casting models for angels (Figures 8-11).²² After figuring out the right structures, he would invite many real models to play trumpets constantly and he would take ample photos at every possible angle to capture the movements of their muscles and physiology, such as to see their cheeks puffed out.²³ To mimic the natural shapes and movements of the wings, Gaudí's assistant Opisso killed the birds and experimented with numerous arrangements of their wings to create lifelike flying angels.²⁴ Gaudí would further correct the ratios of the models through making and evaluating different sizes of the rough models in order to produce even more precise models.²⁵ All his efforts on the vivid models makes the Bible stories expressed through them even more convincing, which leads to amplifying the power of the religion and to encourage religious sincerity from the inhabitants. Lifelike sculptures on the façades, built upon the daunting atmosphere created by the grand scale, is bound with the concept of the sublime.



Figures 8- 11. Anatomical Studies by the studio at the Sagrada Familia

[Image source: Descharnes, R., Pujols, R., Prévost, F., Pujols, Francesc, & Prévost, Clovis. (1982). Gaudí, the visionary / Robert Descharnes ; [photographs by] Clovis Prévost ; preface by Salvador Dali. (Rev. ed., A Studio book). New York: Viking Press., p 123, 125, 126]

5. A Possible Believer's Perspective to Sublime

Since the sublime stimulates sustained reactions rather than a momentary sentiment, the journey was constructed through physical movements, starting from the access of the site to the interior of the Sagrada Familia. The large open natural landscape, taking over one city block, is adjacent to the Sagrada Familia and enhances the gigantic structure along with the concept of the sublime. For example, a religious believer with rich imaginations could consider this green space in front of this church as a shortened version of the Way of Saint James.²⁶ This threshold situates in-between the material world and the religious zone, where devotees calm down, refresh and maybe introspect before entering the church. The purpose of this threshold potentially links back to Gaudi's spiritual chase to the inner beauty but without actual sacrifice and mortification. Accordingly, there is a probable intensive emotional shift ranging from shame or pain to certain degrees of emotional comforts, since the relief is the desired consequence that most believers expect to reach when they go to a church.

From a design perspective, the water feature in the park (Figure 12) is like a mirror. It not only creates a reflection of the Sagrada Familia but also elongates the verticality of the cathedral as interior designers today tend to place a mirror in a tiny room to "enlarge" the space. Imagining the overall atmosphere during the rainy days, the Sagrada Familia will be hidden inside the fog, and the sculptures on the façades as well as the entire building will appear even more daunting and mystical than in the sunny weather. In contrast, the interior with simplified but remarkable appeal washes out the dingy reactions from the exterior and brings out the tranquility and religious devoutness under the rainbow colors that project across the interior space. For instance, the gloomy and daunting image (Figure 13) visualizes one potential sublime view looking up from the entrance so that the gigantic skyscraper seems like an old castle from a far distance but a huge monster in a closer view. For example, on Instagram these effects are still being documented (Figure 14).²⁷ However, the point of these various interpretations is merely a way to intrigue people to enter the cathedral for a relief moment from the spiritual superpower. The simple but colorful interior creates a huge contrast with the decorated exterior. Rather than delivering symbolic stories from the Bible like the exterior, the interior focuses on the sensory human perceptions, which is about perusing inner peace and beauty through mortification and sacrifice, as derived from Gaudi's religious ideology. Again, such attractiveness and the designed alterations among senses and feelings dissolve into the notion of the sublime in the Sagrada Familia.



Figure 12. View of Sagrada Familia from Placa de Gaudi, 2017

[Image source: Sagrada Família. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagrada_Família. April 30, 2018]



Figure 13. (left) the Daunting sky above Sagrada Familia

[Image source: Chahine, Aline. "Gaudi's La Sagrada Família: Genius or Folly?" Architecture Lab, May 16, 2016. Accessed February 09, 2020. <https://www.architecturelab.net/gaudis-la-sagrada-familia-genius-or-folly/>.]

Figure 14. (right) The Daunting Façade of the Sagrada Familia

[Image source: "Basílica De La Sagrada Família on Instagram: "Avui I Demà, T'animem a Compartir L'esperit De Nadal a La Sagrada Família a Través De La Narració Del Nadal I Del Naixement De Jesús,"" Instagram. Posted on Dec. 22, 2018 Accessed March 04, 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrsRSKgBoPy/>.]

Besides the visual aspects of the sublime, the sublime architecture calls forth multisensory experiences, including vision, smell, touch, hearing, and taste, compared to only one singular aspect of the sublime expressed in other media, such as music or literature.²⁸ Gaudi's Sagrada Familia specifically involves birds singing; people talking; the smell of the fresh air; the temperature of the space; the texture of the materials; and the acoustic disparity between inside and outside, to name just a few. Unlike the dominant scale of the Sagrada Familia designed for a universal reaction, the related emotional and cognitive responses to the sensory occurrences differ among various people due to their personal experiences, perceptions, and ways of thinking. Even though the personal interpretations of these phenomena are independent, the guided experience would still be similar in terms of the emotional change from the negative or neutral to the positive, from pain to relief. If we associate contemplation with imagination, the interior of the Sagrada Familia could be understood as the infinite imaginational space. The idea of the sublime, unlike other architectural experiences, may only be noticed when participants start to observe, experience, and think about the finite subject and perception, ending up with imagining the infinite existence, God, and its perception and representation.

6. The Time of the Sublime

The sublime pilgrimage linked with the Sagrada Familia essentially assembled not only upon the grand scale; the local influences; Gaudi's religious and artistic inputs; the inhabitants' interpretation; but also time. As mentioned previously, the Sagrada Familia is open to the public before it is finished, which conducts various experiences of the Sagrada Familia due to the time when they visit the chapel. Similarly, visitors are constantly changing, and their interpretations are drastically different compared to the first visiting group to the most current one since this building has been under construction over a hundred and thirty years and the global culture has been reshaped during this period. What's more, there is no guarantee on the actual finishing height as well as the final design of this building since the design group could have different interpretations of Gaudi's initial design and how the building should be assembled.

The Sagrada Familia was initially designed for people to worship but currently under the global tourists' culture, many visitors have no religious attachments but their curiosity. That being the case, the sublime of the Sagrada Familia is more designed for the intended religious followers other than most tourists who cannot imagine and interpret the religious meanings behind. It is evident that believers would have longer impacts by the churches since they contemplate on the series of sensory experiences. Nevertheless, non-religious people could only maintain a short astonishment as they are not likely to seek the meanings beyond the grand scale, the sculptures related to the Bible, or the cultural influences on the architect. Non-religious visitors are also less likely to believe the infinite existence of God and people as finite beings; hence, the big size of the Sagrada Familia only means "big" instead of having any symbolic connotations. There is also a doubt that visitors would build the association among God, humans and architecture. For example, God is not limited by time but human beings are; the cathedral has a potential to live longer

period than regular human lifespan but still can never be infinite. Clearly, all of the above are linked to the idea of time and time itself is part of the sublime as Gaudí wrote that “the drama is a result of the ages long past when faith itself and religious fervor built innumerable cathedrals.”²⁹

7. Conclusion

The sublime, as a philosophical concept, would occur mostly when people initiate their own deductions supported by the senses and imaginations. Initially, one feels the terror and the uncertainty from grand size and vivid statues on the exterior of the Sagrada Familia. To this experience, the overall visitors’ movement through the threshold, the natural landscape, can be added. After the primary sensational exposures, one might get into the next level of rationalization based on the fundamental experiences of the sublime, which are fear (insecurity) and calmness (admiration), as a way of measuring and understanding what the sublime means physically and mentally. Since imagination and thinking of the finite subject and perception are indefinite, the interpretation of the meanings of the sublime of the Sagrada Familia is also indefinite.³⁰ Hence, this paper merely provides a plausible entry point of the sublime of the Sagrada Familia from a modern perspective through the structure;³¹ the giant scale; the modeling methods; Gaudí’s religious values; the interior ambience; and the notion of the time.

8. Acknowledgements

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9. List of Illustrations

Fig. 1 and 2. Funicular model showing structure design

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Fig. 6. Interior of the Sagrada Familia

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Fig. 8. Anatomical Studies by the studio at the Sagrada Familia.

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Fig. 12. View of the Sagrada Familia from Placa de Gaudi, 2017

[image source: Sagrada Família. Wikipedia, http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sagrada_Família. 30 Apr. 2018]

Fig. 13. The Daunting sky above the Sagrada Familia

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- 29 Robert Descharnes, Clovis Prévost, and Francesc Pujols, *Gaudí, the Visionary* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 54
- 30 Ibid., 189.
- 31 In the pages 179-191 of the book, *Magnificence and the Sublime in Medieval Aesthetics: Art, Architecture, Literature, Music*, by Jaeger, C. Stephen., the author emphasizes the difference between the modern sublime and medieval sublime and thinks he is revealing more about the medieval sublime through medieval text. However, in this paper it is more about how a modern could think about medieval sublime instead of focusing on the differences among the two.