Encompassing La Sagrada: An Indivisible Approach to Spaces of Experience

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Research Site

Undergoing constant construction since 1882, The La Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona, Spain is a remarkable feat of architecture. Designed by canonized architect Antoni Gaudi, La Sagrada boasts a whimsical blend of religious figures and natural symbols depicted through an array of innovative materials and structural solutions. This unprecedented cathedral is the largest tourist attraction in Spain, catering to just under three million visitors each year.

Methodology

I had the fortune of conducting a six-week ethnography of La Sagrada in the Summer of 2015. While I was able to access the cathedral’s archives I spent the majority of my time within the site itself, taking observations and speaking with tourists. My research was bolstered by also visiting other Barcelona cathedrals, museums, and monuments.

Evoking the Indivisible

Fluid Architecture

Architecture, often perceived as static, is in actuality continuously transforming in both a physical and utilitarian sense. This idea of transformation resonates with Henri Bergson’s concept of durée, which argues that life is a fundamental flowing continuity. Unlike Atomism, durée begs that this flow not be segmented into a profusion of singularities. La Sagrada particularly exemplifies the notion of an indivisible site in motion. The cathedral’s lengthy construction as well as its experiential development can be understood as a single dynamic process. Rather than say La Sagrada is a series of phases, it is a fluid and whole entity.

Conflating the Origin and the Result

Henri Bergson argues that artists have the power to expand our perception. It follows that artistic creations, such as architecture, have a latent potential to collapse incongruous attributes and challenge our conceptions. La Sagrada extends a perceptual challenge to its audience: to see an inorganic structure as something imbued with life. While all architecture is derived from naturally occurring geometries, Gaudi’s work not only highlights this biological legacy but implores that his organic inspiration be seen within his structural product. The light is water and the columns are trees. Display practices stress that La Sagrada’s origin not be divided from its result, but rather each should be superimposed onto the other.

Spaces of Experience

There is a temptation to contrast La Sagrada’s distinct spaces of experience, to extract the cathedral’s religious, museological, artistic, touristic, and monumental attributes from one another. These spaces do vary in meaningful and drastic ways, but as argued above, they are nonetheless encompassed by a site which elicits a unique air of indivisibility and so in viewing them it is crucial that the larger whole not be forgotten.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to the Anthropology, Writing Seminars, and Museums and Society departments for their encouragement and aid and specifically thank you to my mentor Professor Pandian for his ongoing commitment to my project. This endeavor would not have been possible without the generosity and guidance of the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship.

All images sourced from, The La Sagrada Basilica Website, La Pedera: The Origins, and usable domain on Google Images.

Citations:

- Twentieth century French philosopher Henri Bergson was especially influential. I also benefited greatly from the ideas presented by Spyros Papapetrou’s On the Animation of the Inorganic: Art, Architecture, and the Extension of Life and George L. Hersey’s The Monumental Impulse: Architecture’s Biological Roots. I am indebted to these thinkers among many others.

- Architecture’s Biological Roots
- The Aim

The La Sagrada Familia Cathedral is exceptional not only for its architectural peculiarities but also for its mixture of religious, museological, artistic, monumental, and touristic functions. However, my research strives to challenge the tendency to dissect spaces based off such distinctions and instead recognize that certain, extraordinary locations resist such division. La Sagrada, I argue, is in fact a unique site whose essence of indivisibility encompasses even the most varied attributes.