

A Photographic Essay on His Casa Mila

Author(s): Robert J. Schdelkopf and Antonio Gaudi

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CASA MILA

PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERBERT BROOKS WALKER

TEXT BY ROBERT J. SCHOELKOPF

ANTONIO GAUDI: ARCHITECT 1852-1926

Public building during the first fifty years of the nineteenth century in Spain was marked by an importation, neoclassicism in architecture. Architecture in the second half of the century in Catalonia can best be understood as a function of a strong nationalist movement against an oppressive central government. While in Madrid Gothic was considered a fit ecclesiastical style, in Barcelona it was reinforced by political connotations of a constant campaign for Catalan autonomy. This movement, continuing today, was based on the suppression or survival of the Catalan language and usages, distinct from those of the Castilian government of Spain, and thus it tended to be literary and artistic, as well as political, in character.

The Catalans, after the long hiatus of a Renaissance which left them in political obscurity, in 1859 revived the medieval tradition of Floral Games as part of their own latter day Renaixença, and in the same year Elías Rogent, a spokesman of medievalism in architecture, was building in a Romanesque style and planning the restoration of Romanesque and Gothic national monuments. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century there was in Catalonia a flourishing school of medievalist architects. Antonio Gaudí must be considered, in his formative years, as a member of this movement, and it must be regarded as his environment, the climate of his maturity.

Antonio Gaudí y Cornet was born June 25th, 1852, in the industrial town of Reus, above the port of Tarragona. At the age of fifteen, in a short-lived periodical, El Arlequín, published with two other boys, Gaudí produced drawings for a restoration of the monastery of Poblet, one of the important 'national' monuments which Catalan medievalists were studying and discussing. Gaudí attended the School of Architecture in Barcelona where a friend introduced him to the works on Gothic architecture of Viollet-le-Duc which he took up enthusiastically, and there he early met the Count Güell who was to become his life-long patron.

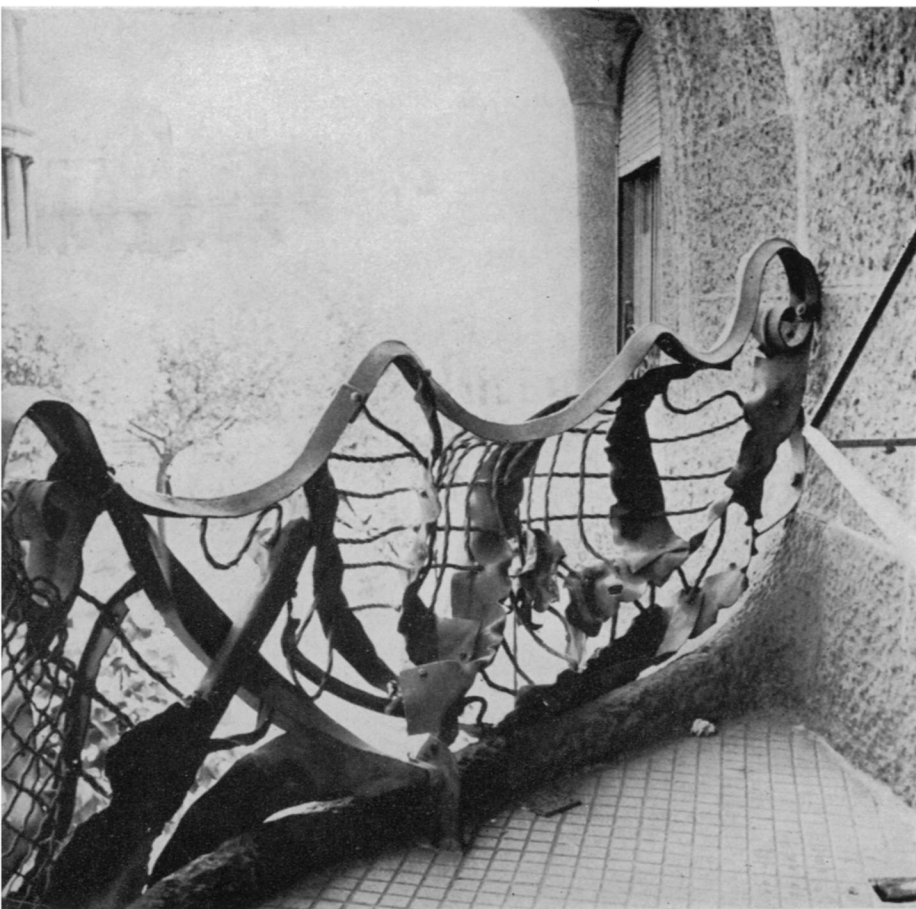
Gaudí's early buildings are of two distinguishable, general styles. One is the fairly predictable Gothic revival of such men as Juan Martorell to whom he was assistant for a time. The other is a highly variable personal idiom with certain recurring features. But even Gaudí's most traditional, and almost never photographed, early work contains occasional irrelevant, mad details which develop finally into the flaring curves of the Casa Milá. One of these recurring forms is the parabolic or catenary arch which was used both early and late in his career, either in series to produce a corridor, or alone as a means of avoiding the buttress in what he called a natural extension of the Gothic style. Gaudí felt himself to be not so much an individualistic fantasist, but rather the developer of a living medieval tradition.

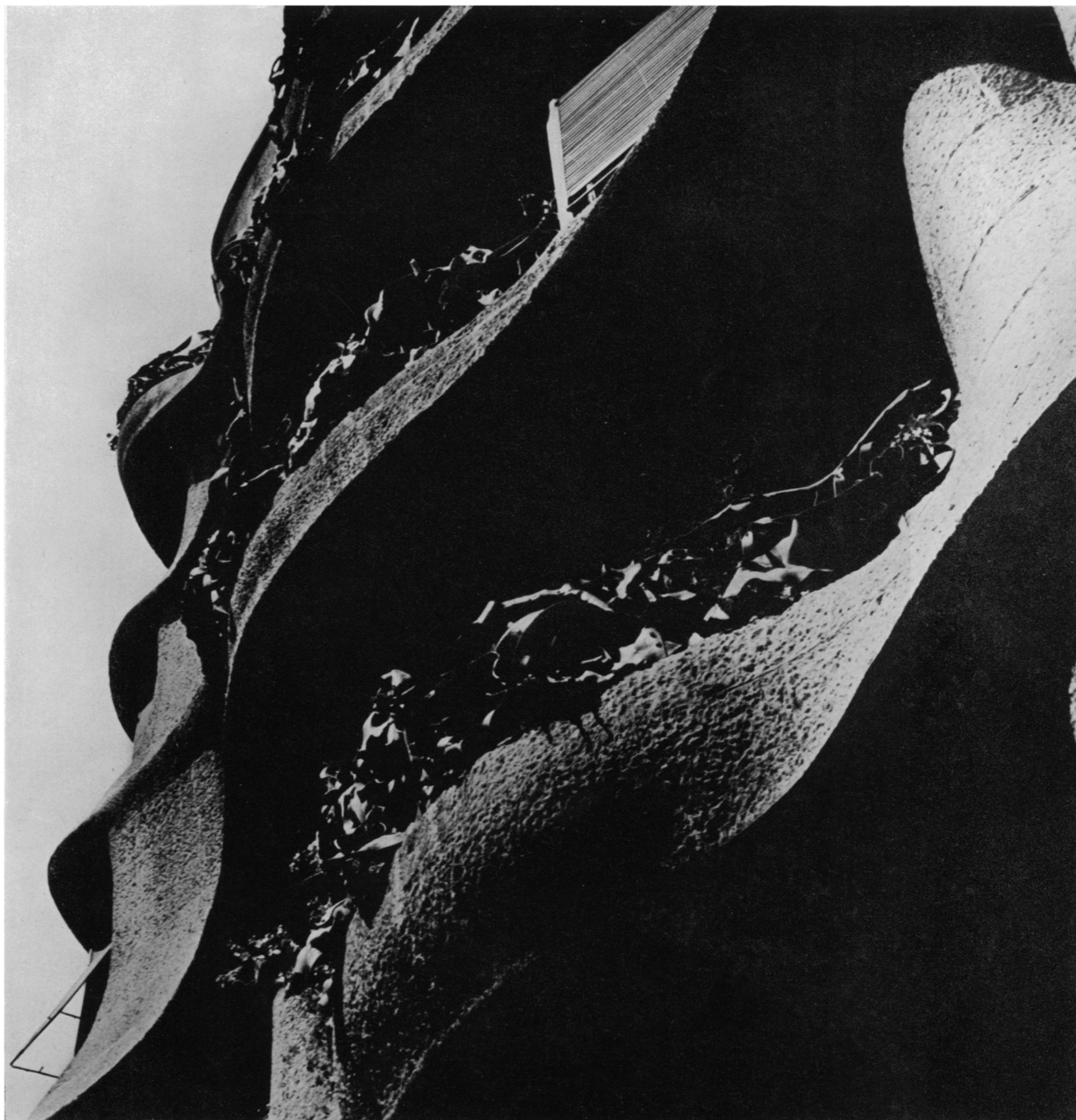
This feeling was furthered when in 1884 he was given charge of the Church of the Holy Family in Barcelona. The commission for the Sagrada Família was given to Gaudí at the instigation of the medievalist Martorell when the crypt had been almost finished by another man. The crypt, except for its furnishings designed by Gaudí, is in a traditional Gothic style. Above ground, in its sugar loaf towers and excess of sculpture, the church is the product of Gaudí's extraordinary imagination and increasing eccentricity and piety. The elaborate, but orthodox organization—a 'Churrigueresque' profusion of realistic sculpture on a basically Gothic shell—was left unfinished at the architect's death, June 10th, 1926.



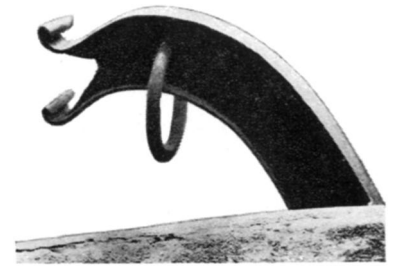
The Casa Milá is an apartment house located on the Pasco de Gracia, one of Barcelona's principal Boulevards. Its plan is roughly in the shape of a figure 8—two asymmetrical sections ranged round two small, shaft-like, concrete-floored courtyards. It was built from 1905 to 1910, while the architect, Antonio Gaudí, was remodelling the Casa Batlló on the Paseo, which in its roof and balconies bears considerable resemblance to the Casa Milá. After 1910 Gaudí accepted no further commissions, but devoted himself entirely to finishing the Parque Güell on the outskirts of Barcelona for his patron the Count Güell, and the Church of the Holy Family which more and more consumed the energies of an increasingly religious old man. Proper plans are lacking for Gaudí's buildings, although a monumental edition of his drawings, plans, and projects is in process of preparation in Barcelona at the present time.

The façade of the Casa Milá has been likened to waves breaking; the entire structure has been called an immense sculpture of the nearby geological formation of Montserrat; while the citizens of Barcelona refer to it as "the house of stones." It is built of sandstone, concrete, and majolica with ironwork draped on its bulging balconies. The six principal floors are of a dull brownish gray; recessed above them is the glaring white façade of the attic or servants' quarters with casually placed, small, awninged windows. On the roof, hidden









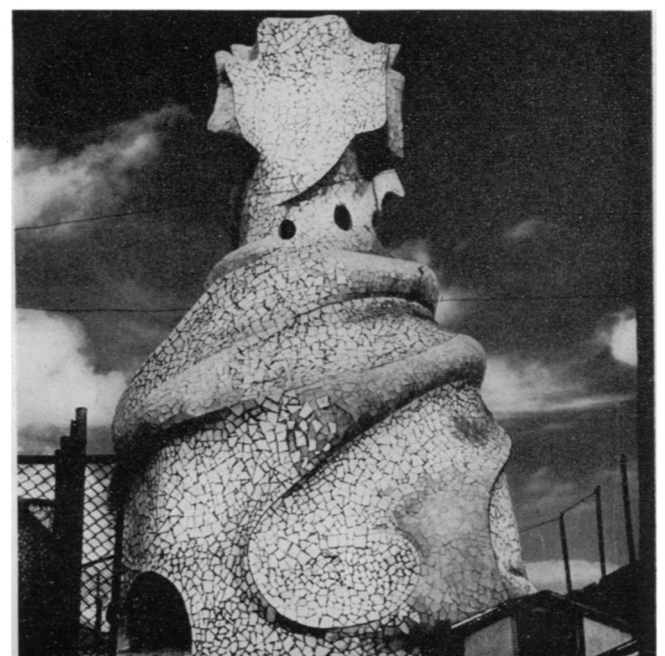
from the passerby in the street, are the fantastic forms of the sculptured chimneys, majolica and concrete archways with stairs and walks seemingly scaled for children.

Gaudí was called, and called himself, a naturalist. The birds and plants of the Mediterranean area are reproduced with the greatest care in the sculpture of the Holy Family. In a deeper sense, Gaudí believed that the straight line was man's, the curve nature's. He avoided the former, and from nature took the parabolic or catenary curve, using it not only for interior embellishment, but as the basic structural form of an entire building.

Another favorite form used in the Casa Batlló and the Casa Milá is the post as a center of window or arch with window or door curving back to the rear at a slight angle on either side.

The interior of the Casa Milá is unique. The walls were once covered with murals. Though painted over during the Spanish Civil War, the walls are still disconcerting, since they are never parallel. Individual rooms are as asymmetrical as the overall ground plan. The floors are of different types of tiles from room to room, and the ceilings have sculptured designs that sometimes give the 'naturalistic' feeling of amorphous currents in a fluid substance. Furniture and even doorknobs were specially designed by the architect, and some still survive.

During the building of the Casa Milá, the Parque Güell, and the Holy Family, Gaudí not



only designed minor items, but supervised every detail of majolica mosaic, sculpture, and general construction. His mode of work was opposed to modern methods, and attaching to medievalism, as did Morris or Viollet-le-Duc, social implications, he set up a workshop system for the craftsmen building his great church.

The questions remain. Was Gaudí a practitioner of Art Nouveau; was he a surrealist, an expressionist? It is more prudent, perhaps, to speak of analogy than of influence. Details of the Casa Milá, and especially of the Casa Batlló, are similar to the motifs of Art Nouveau. He could not have been unaware of contemporary currents in European architecture. The use of natural forms was a tenet of l'Art Nouveau.

As for surrealism, there is a deep strain of the chimerical, the exaggerated, in the Catalan nature. The popularity of Gaudí's buildings and the fact of his numerous imitators and disciples are sufficient indication of this. There is, too, the work of his fellow Catalans, the painters Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró, and the curious similarity of the latter's creatures and things to Gaudí's roof sculptures. Finally, there is the interesting comparison to German expressionism, the Casa Milá of 1910 to Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower at Potsdam of 1921. But above all, Gaudí remains a medievalist, believing the Renaissance a misdirection, turning back for inspiration to the Gothic, attempting to make from a medieval background an architecture which is, fittingly, Catalan and Mediterranean and often fantastic.

