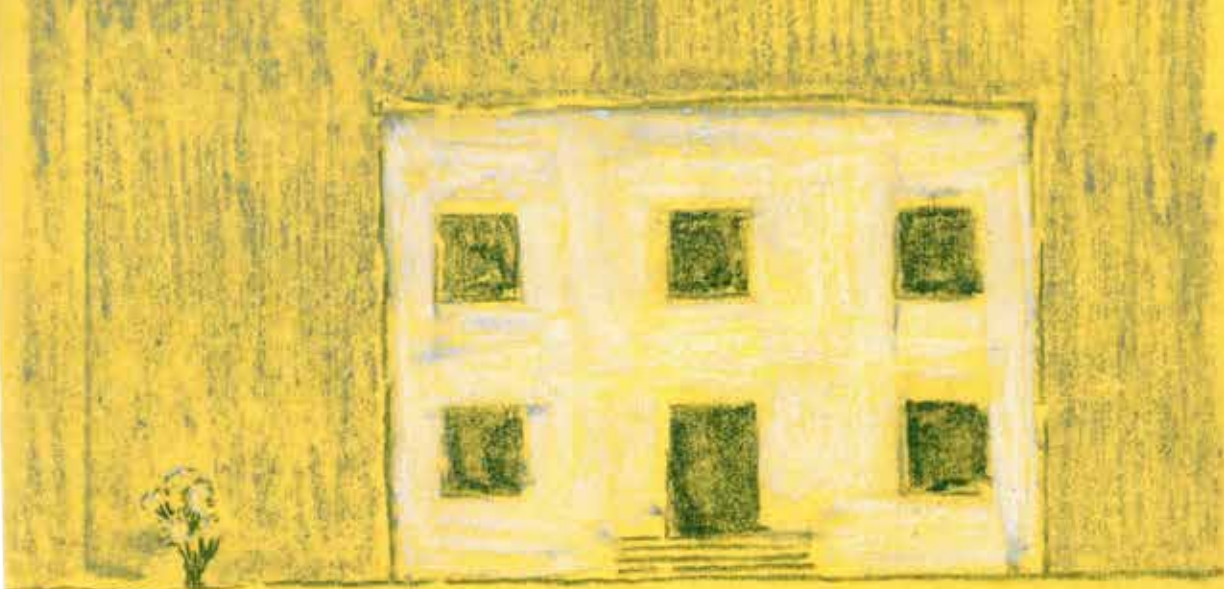




ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Step 1 Build four walls using baked bricks and cement, Punch equally spaced holes for windows. At bottom center take hole all the way to floor. Once walls have set place concrete lid above. Add steps to front door if desired, Preheat oven



The heart of starkness

Antoni Gaudí's Sagrada Família is still under construction and will be completed in 2026, a hundred years after his death. It is a physical ode to Gaudí's vision and the epitome of his understanding of architectural truths embedded in the heart of nature

SARITHA RAO RAYACHOTI

The year: 1926. The place: Barcelona. The old man lying on the street looked homeless, and seemed to have been knocked down by a tram. There was no identification on his person. Someone tried to hail a taxi to take him to a hospital, but every driver refused to give the unkempt man a ride. He was eventually taken to the Hospital de la Santa Cruz, where he died three days later. Identified just before his death, the old man was given a hero's funeral. All of Barcelona mourned his passing. The man, mistaken for a homeless nobody was the reclusive architect of one of the most iconic structures in the world which has been under construction since 1882. As a fitting tribute, he is buried in the building he designed for his very patient client.

'In the Sagrada Família, everything is providential.'

Eighty nine years after Antoni Gaudí's death, I stand transfixed by the otherworldliness of his masterpiece, the Sagrada Família.

Many have tried, and ended up frustrated by attempts to describe the basilica. Stunning. Kitschy. Grotesque. Emblematic of the city of Barcelona. Surrealist Salvador Dali was said to have been inspired by it. Author George Orwell considered it 'one of the most hideous buildings in the world'. Others wonder how the architect translated his grand vision on to paper and models, and had the wisdom to document it so the work could continue after him.

The city of Barcelona is laid out in a grid, and one of the blocks in that vast grid is occupied by the

Sagrada Família. Work began on the church in 1882 and Gaudí was commissioned to work on it a year later. While the style started out as neo-Gothic, Gaudí decided to change course to design a different, more innovative structure that would capture the essence of Christian faith in stone. Gaudí worked on the Sagrada Família for 43 years until his death, spending the last few years living on-site. There is still much work to be done towards getting the Basilica completed by 2026, exactly 100 years after Gaudí's death. The lengthy duration of construction is not only because it is funded entirely by visitors' contributions and donations, but also because of the immensity and complexity of Gaudí's vision.

*'The straight line belongs to men,
the curved one to God.'*

The Nativity Facade teems with life. It looks like the immense trunk of a tree. Branch. Bark. Leaf. One almost expects to see nests. A lone cypress. Palm trees. Birds. The Facade also looks like an exoskeleton. Fossil. Eroded rock. The arches, like melting wax. Like ice thawing in the wilderness. The coming of summer. Life. The Annunciation. Just above the doorway is the Nativity scene. The birth of Christ. The adoration of the Magi. There are also heralds with trumpets held aloft. Medallions on chains. Not a straight line in sight. Soft. Touched by nature. It's a sensory overload and there is more to come.

Once I step through doors crawling with foliage and bugs, I find myself in a forest, with its tree columns, branches and fronds, with the sun streaming

through the dense stone foliage. The Japanese have a name for it. Komorebi. I lose track of time, caught in the present moment, in the throes of a comforting, humbling void. A cocoon. A place of safety, of solace. The most primal definition of home. It's like being inside a kaleidoscope, where with a slight shift, the patterns and colours change. I find the need to sit, to gather my thoughts. Is there noise or silence? Is it cold or warm? There are so many people, I am alone. Poised in space and time. Here. Now.

The floor is awash with the colours from the stained glass windows that instead of depicting saints and apostles, swirl with colour. Along one length of the basilica, I wade through water, the blues and greens of the Mediterranean Sea. On the other, I am immersed in a volcano, with its reds, oranges and yellows. Do you find yourself

here or do you lose yourself?

It's only the audio guide that keeps me on course, reminding me of other sights to see, to be overwhelmed by.

In the stark Passion Facade, the western sun casts sharp shadows. The columns are angled. Lines. Drama. The human figures are gaunt, severe, sombre. The concave face of Christ on the crucifix and the convex impression of his face on the veil of a faceless Veronica. The Last Supper. Judas kissing Christ. A magic square with grids adding up to 33, the age of Christ when he died. The ominous presence of soldiers.

At first glance, it is as though disparate elements have been thrown together to build the Sagrada Familia. But this is no simple ode to nature. There has to be a nucleus that throbs at its core, making it work, bringing it alive.

Sagrada Familia, Barcelona



'Originality consists of returning to the origin. Thus, originality means returning, through one's resources, to the simplicity of the early solutions.'

The aspect of complementary opposites is everywhere in nature.

It abounds in the wild, in a liminal space like the forest. Summer Winter. Morning Night. Birth Death. Male Female. Yin Yang. There's a dynamism, a force that arises from the interplay of these opposites, each an entity, but incomplete without the other. If one dominates, the other diminishes, maintaining balance.

What if this aspect of nature, of complementary opposites, of the play of balance, is at the core of the design of the Sagrada Familia?

There is chaos but there's also an undertow of order. The form and the structure of the basilica are not disparate, they are one. This is not a superficially embellished structure, it is also an architecturally sound one. Every structural element is also decorative and every embellishment also serves a structural purpose. The interplay of light and shadow.

It is in the symbolism. The Nativity Facade is lush with life, the rising sun casts its soft light on it. The Passion Facade is stark, the setting sun casts sharp light on it. There are cherubs, there are executioners.

It is in the play of scale. The top of the columns angle towards the immense ceiling that looks like the underside of a diminutive insect.

A solid stone spiral staircase is built like the fragile whorl of the snail shell. Fibonacci.

The aspect of complementary opposites is in the very use of trencadis, mosaic-work using tiles and glass; creating from shards. It is in the use of soft stone and hard rock.

And from this interplay of opposites arises dynamic, organic harmony. The curve and angle as navigators of horizontal and vertical. The confluence of sound and silence by soaring song. The crucifix at the altar suspended between earth and sky.

'Nothing is invented, for it is written in nature first.'

This begs the question then, about another facet to complementary opposites, of how they manifest in the human mind.

The complexity of Sagrada Familia is not the work of an ordinary mind, not of conformist neurons structured by society's expectations, nor an act of rebellion. That a neo-Gothic church aspired to be much more than the elements of the style it was built in, is but a starting point. Gaudi was perhaps walking the thin line between madness and genius. And the complexity of his vision perhaps arose from the interplay of left brain and right, working in tandem, straddling the worlds of intuition and logic, imagination and skill.

Understandably, Gaudi's exuberant vision within was bound to find balance in frugality without. Clothes, food, shelter were a functional part of his existence to make way for the grandeur inside his mind. This was how he lived his last days, moving inexorably inward as his outer world shrank to a few belongings.

'My client is in no hurry.'

Gaudi knew that he would not live to see the completion of the Sagrada Familia. It had to ride on other shoulders, and they would

bring their own skill and interpretation to his work. It is this foresight that must have led him to distil his vision into plans and models, some of which were lost during the 1936 Spanish Civil War. The responsibility of interpretation falls on those after him and there has been severe criticism directed at these architects, artists, sculptors and artisans, accusing them of showcasing their own individual prowess, rather than celebrate Gaudi's vision. Many believe that Gaudi's vision died with him and nobody can attempt to match his genius. That the Basilica was best left unfinished after his death.

But some of these interpretations, when viewed as complementary opposites, dovetail into Gaudi's vision. The Passion Facade designed by Josep Maria Subirachs is the complementary opposite to the Nativity Facade. The stained glass windows by Joan Vila-Grau celebrates colour through light and shadow. To glorify Gaudi as the sole force behind this Basilica would diminish the contributions of those who strive to translate his vision to reality. It would perhaps be more fitting to regard Gaudi as the visionary and the Sagrada Familia as the longest running collaborative structure. Although Gaudi has been regarded an eccentric, I doubt that the devout architect ever wanted to play God. I think he was merely speaking the mother-tongue of nature, and teaching its grammar to those who came after him. He was simply an architect carrying out an assignment for a client, to build a forest in the heart of the city.

Quotes attributed to Antoni Gaudi

Interior of the *Sagrada Familia*



Details of the *Nativity Facade*, Birth of Christ, *Sagrada Familia*



The *Passion Facade* of the Basilica of the Holy Family, *Sagrada Familia*



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Gulfam 03

Step 7

Accept builder's offer to demolish house and build flats. Take money, buy plot in suburbs, and start again from Step 1.