

Does Gaudí's Church Need a Big Staircase? Grand Vision Divides Barcelona

A plan to build a giant new entrance for Sagrada Familia is riling up neighbors; 'a theme park for tourists'

The Sagrada Familia basilica in Barcelona is still unfinished. ALBERT GEA/REUTERS

By *Pietro Lombardi*

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BARCELONA—Nearly a century after the architect Antoni Gaudí was hit by a tram and killed while crossing a road in Barcelona, his successors are still decoding what he had in mind for his unfinished masterpiece, the city's surrealist Sagrada Familia.

The basilica has divided opinion for years. Parts of it resemble giant termite hills towering over the city, delighting visitors with its exuberance. Others thought it hideous. George Orwell wrote that “the Anarchists showed bad taste in not blowing it up when they had the chance” in his civil war memoir “Homage to Catalonia.”



The 144-year construction project

A private foundation appoints teams of architects to figure out how Gaudí intended to finish the building. Some of them work on it for years, poring over the fragments that remain from his notes. “Gaudí knew he wouldn’t finish the Sagrada Familia and left us a path,” said head architect Jordi Faulí, who aims to complete a 566-foot-high spire by the time a new building permit expires in 2026, making the temple the tallest religious structure in Europe. “It’s a constant challenge, but we

always find it.”

Local residents would rather he wouldn’t try so hard: The next phase of construction might mean the demolition of their homes to make way for a sprawling new staircase and a grand surrounding area, up to 200-feet wide and stretching across two blocks, leading up to the main entrance 16 feet above the sidewalk.

“The foundation likes to present themselves as the heirs of Gaudí, but

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The foundation likes to present themselves as the heirs of Gaudi, but they interpret his work as suits them best,” said Joan Itxaso, a spokesman for a neighborhood group lobbying against the latest expansion of the project.



A new building permit for the Sagrada Família will expire in 2026, a century after Antoni Gaudí's death.

PHOTO: ADRIANO MARCHESE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

In a city where a surge in tourism is pricing many people out of the place where they grew up, the question of what form the Sagrada Família will finally take is throwing gasoline on the fire.

The church generates a lot of money. It is the most-visited site in Barcelona, attracting 4.5 million visitors a year. (By comparison, France's Notre Dame had around 12 million visitors in 2018).

In Barcelona, visitors to Sagrada Família pay between \$22 and \$36 each to take the tour, generating 95% of the foundation's revenue. The foundation had revenue of \$113 million last year, up from about \$87 million in 2018.

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The main facade and its crypts, where Gaudí himself is buried, are listed as a Unesco World Heritage site. Municipal authorities expect to collect 36 million euros, about \$39 million, from the

foundation over the next decade to help pay for improvements, maintenance and other costs in the surrounding area.

“The Sagrada Família wants to build a theme park for tourists, a Disneyland,” said Salvador Barroso, president of an association representing roughly 400 of the 3,000 people the group says would be affected by the staircase. “And to do it they want to kick us out of our homes and raze the buildings.”





Tourists visit Sagrada Família, the most popular site in Barcelona. A plan to expand it is dividing the city. PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES; ASSOCIATED PRESS; ZUMA PRESS

Residents estimate about 1,000 homes would be demolished to make way for the expansion.

The city says no final plans have been made and all options are on the table. The city's master plan currently allows for demolition of buildings in the two blocks south of the main entrance.

Mr. Barroso and other residents in the areas around the busy Calle Mallorca, the street which runs between the church and the buildings that might be razed, have filed legal complaints and held protests against plans to bulldoze their apartments. They have sold T-shirts to raise funds and designed banners showing a Sagrada Família-shaped boot trampling their homes.

For some, like Francesc Pla, who runs a pharmacy in one of buildings earmarked for demolition, it is a source of family disputes. "My parents love it, while for me it's a disaster," he said. "There are only two places I would never set foot in: the Sagrada Família and IKEA."



Construction workers begin the day's shift. Some residents are protesting a possible expansion plan. PHOTO: ADRIANO MARCHESE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Other residents rattle off a litany of problems caused by the hordes of tourists already besieging the area. “Sometimes I fantasize about gathering a few friends and, armed with carts, forming a compact group to take the sidewalks and face the throngs head on,” Fernando Diaz, 68, said on a recent Wednesday as a large group of visitors piled into the restaurant where he was sitting.

“Once I had to confront a tourist guide who, as I was exiting the building, was explaining how it will be torn down to make room for the staircase,” said Mr. Diaz, who lives in an apartment opposite the church.

“I hope they’ll be gracious enough to let us know in advance rather than razing my apartment while we’re there,” he recalled telling the guide.

The crux of the problem is whether it is possible to decipher how Gaudí envisioned the church, whose first cornerstone was laid almost 138 years ago.



A worker hangs from a pillar on the facade that would extend toward the sea where residential buildings currently stand.

PHOTO: ADRIANO MARCHESE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Gaudí took over the project roughly one year after construction started. He spent much of his career on the project, writing extensive notes and building intricate models before his death in 1926 at the age of 73, but many of his outlines were destroyed in a fire in the 1930s. Just one facade was near completion when he died.

Mr. Fauli, the lead architect, is adamant that it is possible to determine what Gaudí wanted. “Interpreting Gaudí’s work is like discovering the grammar he left us. We have to identify, learn and develop his language, which continues to evolve,” he said.

He says a plan dating from 1916 and signed by Gaudí shows a depiction of the staircase causing the debate.

Residents say they have documents demonstrating the staircase wasn’t part of Gaudí’s grand design at all, and was added to the plans by his assistants.

The city government, which is responsible for deciding whether construction should go ahead, hasn’t decided how to resolve the issue.

What matters isn’t whether Gaudí designed the staircase, but what is in the city’s best interests when feelings are running high over the amount of tourists coming to Barcelona, said Janet Sanz, the city’s

amount of tourists coming to Barcelona, said Jordi Borràs, the city's deputy mayor for urban planning. "The decision is not only about realizing Gaudi's work or kicking out residents," she said. "It's about the kind of city we want."



Architects aim to complete the church, including a 566-foot-high spire, by 2026.

PHOTO: ADRIANO MARCHESE/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Negotiations will begin in the coming weeks. The foundation overseeing the Sagrada Família says it wants the best solution for everybody, but so far is standing firm. "We'll defend Gaudi's project in its entirety, including the staircase, to the bitter end," said its general director, Xavier Martínez.

So, too, are local residents.

"It's like in the Wild West, when some rich and powerful people wanted to build a railway through the lands of small farmers," said Mr. Pla, the pharmacist. "We are the farmers, and we'll do what we can to defend our rights."

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