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### **Modernisme and the 1888 Universal Exposition of Barcelona**

The time of birth of the Modernisme Movement's is often a matter of debate. Some scholars (notably Alexandre Cirici) place it in the 1880-85 period, when emblematic Modernista buildings such as Gaudí's Casa Vicens, Domènech i Estapà's Academy of Sciences or Domènech i Montaner's Editorial Montaner i Simon were completed. By contrast, a few others have refused to view early Modernisme as little more than inspired eclecticism, and delay the birth of Modernisme as a truly new style to the late 1890's, when Catalan artists of all disciplines began to catch on to the influence of Belgian and Parisian Art Nouveau, and soon also of Viennese Secesion. However, nowadays there seems to be some sort of consensus in establishing the year 1888 as the moment in which Modernisme could be safely said to be more than a few peculiar and isolated works, and had become an artistic movement by its own right. Perhaps a suitable synthesis of these three hypotheses would be to say that Catalan Modernisme made its first steps in the early eighties and by 1888 had become the prolific and popular, albeit polemic movement that was to dominate the Catalan artistic scene for the next two decades, during which it would successively embrace Art Nouveau, Secesion and Jugendstil, importing ideas and solutions to blend them into the Catalan "inspired eclecticism" of early Modernisme.

Be it as it may, one fact does stand undisputed: the huge influence of Barcelona's 1888 Universal Exposition in making this new art known to the Barcelonan and Catalan general public. Because it is true that the few Modernista buildings erected before 1888 were seen by Catalans, and even by the majority of Catalan architects, as mere eccentric exceptions. But after the 1888 Expo, Modernisme became the new artistic fashion. Indeed, the 15 years that followed have often been described as those of "the Modernista fever". However, it must be pointed out that only two of the pavilions and buildings of the Exposition itself, and hardly half a dozen other monuments or elements, could be considered Modernista. Most of the Exposition's architecture was not only deliberately ephemeral, but also apparently quite unremarkable –with the exception perhaps of a two-metre sculpture of a castle carved out of Manchego cheese- and nearer to the idea of a hangar than to any artistic ambition. The real Modernista exhibition was not within the Expo premises, but outside, in real life. It was the city itself: obviously, in palaces, monuments and markets already built or under construction. But above all, Modernisme was in the spirit of Barcelonans. Modernisme –and this it shares with Art Nouveau, Secesion and Jugendstil- was not only a style,

but a new way of understanding the world. A new synthesis of contemporary urban life in which tradition and innovation, craftsmanship and industry, nationalism and internationalism were not incompatible opposites but productive dialogues which could produce a better and more beautiful life. From 1888 to 1926, Modernisme evolved a great deal in style, and there is much formal diversity, but this spirit of a new modernity remained unaltered throughout the period. In this presentation I will try to explain this social phenomenon –why did Modernisme grip the Catalan society with such force?- rather than analyse the works of art related to the 1888 Exposition.

During the 1870's Barcelona and Catalonia in general became a much better place to live in. The so-called Spanish Restoration began in 1874 when King Alfonso 12<sup>th</sup> was crowned, and the last Carlist war was brought to an end. The Carlist wars (three in succession) had blotted the Spanish 19<sup>th</sup> century after the Napoleonic wars and were especially bitter in Catalonia, hampering any chance of sustained economic progress. But by 1875, it seemed that at last a period of peace and stability may lie ahead. This was the opportunity the emergent Barcelonan bourgeoisie had been longing for: after the stuttering growth that business had managed between wars, now they would be talking real business.

Commerce with the American colonies was crucial to this economic recovery. Catalan merchants and shippers made fortunes by exporting manufactured textiles and brandy to the Spanish American colonies and bringing cotton, sugar and other goods on the way back (shipping slaves from Africa to the Caribbean was also a big business, it must be said). This also became the big time for *Indianos*, Catalans who had migrated to Cuba or Puerto Rico and by one means or another acquired a sizeable fortune. Many of the great business concerns of 19<sup>th</sup> century Barcelona were set up by *Indianos* who decided to return home, start a family and settle down to a prosperous and respectable life. Powerful family clans like the Güell, Arnús, López (Comillas) or Quadras dynasties, all of them founded by *Indianos*, dominated the economy of Barcelona for over a century, and became the natural patrons of Modernisme. Not only did they have vast sums of money and an adequate degree of vanity and pride in their American success to wish to spend it ostentatiously: these people had been around. They had seen the North American cities and much of Europe -particularly the revered London and Paris- and this showed in the way they conducted business and were constantly on the lookout for new technologies to improve their industries, but also in their acquired cosmopolitan taste and readiness to appreciate new forms of art.

A good example of this are the Güells, who were the main patrons of Antoni Gaudí. Joan Güell was the son of a small-town artisan who left Catalonia to seek fortune in the Caribbean, and after a swift bottom-to-top career in the Cuban textile business, he came back to create the largest business emporium in Barcelona, which included textile mills, cement factories and machine production. His son Eusebi married the daughter of another wealthy *Indiano*, Antonio López, first Marquis of Comillas, and then proceeded to spend a large part of the family's fortune in Gaudí's work: in 1884 he asked Gaudí to design a new gate to his father's country estate. The architect produced the famous "Dragon Gate", and Güell jr. liked it so much that the next year he was commissioning Gaudí with his own mansion in Barcelona, Palau Güell.

American commerce was to have a great impact on agriculture, too, particularly vine-growing. Catalans learnt how to make brandy, which was much easier to transport and made better profits than wine, and exported it to the American colonies. Soon, land was being cleared to plant more vines as small farmers and peasants saw that brandy could be the way out of hardship. Roads were improved, ports were enlarged and railway lines were opened: city markets were able to offer better quality and grater variety of foods, and burghers had more money to spend on them. Barcelona's old

markets became small and impractical, and the City Council decided to build new municipal markets. For example Mercat de Sant Antoni (1876-1882) and Mercat d'Hostafrancs (1888), both by Antoni Rovira i Trias and still in use today. Of course the main market built in the seventies was Mercat del Born (1873-82), a huge iron and tile structure by Josep Fontseré, which was the largest iron structure in the Spain of the time (it is said that Fontseré intended to rival James Bogardus's iron warehouse in Havana).

Another sector that grew rapidly was construction. In 1854 the Spanish government had finally acquiesced to Barcelona's petition to tear down the walls that were choking the city within an unhealthy and overpopulated precinct. Ildefons Cerda's Eixample, a plan to develop the surrounding country -previously a no-man's-land security belt around the walls- was approved five years later. This opened a whole nine square kilometres of relatively cheap land to the real estate market, plus the need of railway and tram lines to communicate the new district to the old town. All these endeavours required investment, and this fostered the creation of new private companies set up to develop specific construction or engineering projects with funds from shareholders. The urbanization of this new Barcelona came to add on to the growth of industry and agriculture in a general trend of economic progress which, after the 1875 peace, sent investor's confidence high. For a few years (roughly 1875 to 1882), the Barcelona stock market plunged into a frenzy of activity, with fortunes changing hands by the day. Narcís Oller described this period in his 1892 novel *La Febre d'Or* (*Gold Fever*): from god-fearing, gullible new-rich families to artful swindlers and merciless speculators, everyone who had some money was having a go at this new vogue of buying and selling shares at the Barcelona Llotja (stock market), and everyone seemed to be getting rich with amazing ease. And all of this, of course, remote-controlled by the bourgeois clans: again, the Güells, Gironas, Arnúses, Comillases... The Gold Fever was for them the ideal opportunity to extend their tentacles to almost every area of Catalan economy.

Another important factor to consider when interpreting the importance of the 1888 Exposition for Barcelonan society is the rise of cultural and political catalanism. The *Renaixença*, or Catalan Rebirth, had started in the 1820's as a literary movement in which poets and playwrights had the audacity of writing as they spoke, that is in the Catalan language. Spanish politics must be kept in mind here: Catalan had been officially banished from all areas of public life and substituted by Spanish since 1714, but the liberal airs that the French Revolution and Napoleon's armies spread across Europe brought a certain relaxation that made the *Renaixença* possible. And once poems and plays in Catalan were possible, songs were written, magazines were published, the Catalan medieval classics recovered from archives and published anew, and Catalan history was researched and re-learnt (and of course re-interpreted). In the midst of a starved, all-Spanish official life, such cultural vigour must have indeed appeared to be a rebirth of Catalonia. Eventually, political essays on Catalonia and the rights of Catalans saw the light, and this translated to public awareness and political organization. The first daily newspaper in Catalan (predictably named *El Diari Català*) began in 1879; the first catalanist political party, *Centre Català*, was founded in 1882.

The *Renaixença* was to continue into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and right up to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936) and its influence of Catalanism on Modernisme is well known: the works of Gaudí, Domènech, Puig and the rest are full of references to Catalan history and legends. Gaudí's "Dragon Gate", for example, is based on the epic poem *L'Atlàntida*, written by the great "National Poet" of the *Renaixença*, Jacint Verdaguer, in 1877. Put in this perspective, it could be said that Modernisme was the most daring architectural expression of the Catalan *Renaixença*, as much as it was the expression of a new generation of artists and architects who would rather follow Viollet-

le-Duc, Semper and Labrouste than Vitruvius. It is interesting to point out here that Barcelona did not obtain permission from the crown to open an official School of Architecture until the 1870's: its first director, Elies Rogent, taught all the first-generation Modernista architects, including Gaudí and Domènech. Rogent, inspired by Viollet-le-Duc, had abandoned classical canons to experiment with a modern reinterpretation of Catalan Romanesque and Gothic architecture, and his new school – gifted with such students, too!- must have been an exciting innovation lab, particularly in the context of the construction boom, the Renaixença and the Gold Fever.

A good example of this excitement is the monument to Christopher Columbus (1882-1888) by Gaietà Buïgas. This is still today the largest monument in the world to Columbus, who stands on top of a 62 metre-high iron column on Barcelona's old port. The monument was considered –by Barcelonans, at any rate- a technological and architectural challenge, something Barcelona was going to be proud of. For one thing, the construction brought with it electric light, which was installed all along the new seafront avenue, so the Passeig Colom became the first street in Barcelona to be lit by electricity. But was also, in a more subtle way, the monument was a proclamation of Catalan pride. Indians could see themselves represented in the figure of Columbus as the great discoverers and successful adventurers of the Americas. Also, as it happens, there has always been a story in Catalonia that Columbus was in fact Catalan, not Genoese (History Channel recently programmed a documentary on this hypothesis). It is interesting to note that the friezes surrounding the base of the column depict only Catalans who accompanied Columbus and other Catalan “discoverers” of America. So we could say that Columbus's monument is the Gold Fever years in a (huge) nutshell: it has technology, architecture, modernity, daring... a deep “Catalan meaning” to it –and of course an outrageous budget. In fact Columbus's monument was rushed to be in time for the 1888 Exposition, and was badly finished, and has needed constant care and restoration ever since.

In the early 1880's, however, this economic and social euphoria was to come suddenly to an end. In 1879, the Phylloxera (*Phylloxera vastatrix*), an aphid that killed vines, crossed the Pyrenees from France into Catalonia. In a way, the rural catastrophe of the Phylloxera mirrors the thoughtless greed of the urban Febre d'Or. Phylloxera had already wiped out the French vineyards in the 1860's, and threatened move to south into Spain. But when French wine and brandy disappeared from the markets, prices went sky-high, and Catalan farmers decided to increase production to seize the day. Other crops were discarded and substituted by vines, and new land was opened, even right up to the Pyrenees. This, of course, only made it easier for the Phylloxera to spread over the country, and in a few years nearly half a million acres of vineyards were devastated. Suddenly, Barcelona's economy was crippled. Some affluent families, who ironically had acquired rural estates seeking stability, suffered a severe blow. But it was merchants and entrepreneurs who were totally ruined. Suddenly there was no brandy: nothing to export, nothing to transport, nothing to buy or sell. For the workers it was worse, because not only were they out of work, they also had to compete to find a new job with all these peasants who were flooding in from the country, ready to work for almost nothing... The population of Barcelona grew rapidly: from little more than 100.000 in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to half a million by the end of the century.

When the Phylloxera crisis was pushed further by the effects of a slump in the Paris stock market in 1882, the bubble of the Febre d'Or burst apart. The Barcelona Llotja crashed, and hundreds of fortunes were lost within weeks, industries closed down and commerce was halted. Signs of mild economic recovery a few years later were swept away by the prohibition of slavery in Cuba and Puerto Rico after 1886, and a drop in the prices of Cuban sugar cane brought by the introduction of sugar beet. Barcelona

could have seemed to some as being on the brink of disaster in 1887. Certainly mayor Rius i Taulet, an enthusiastic entrepreneur yet staunch conservative, was not amused. Bad business meant less taxes –and with population growing and jobs disappearing, radical groups, especially the Anarchists, were a growing influence among the working classes. It was in this context that Eugenio Serrano de Casanova appeared, bringing with him the idea of an Exposition in Barcelona.

Serrano, a retired Carlist soldier, had migrated to Paris after 1875 and then to Philadelphia, where he worked with the Spanish delegation in the 1876 Exposition. He later collaborated in the Antwerp Universal Exposition (1884) and eventually made his way back to Barcelona, and managed to convince mayor Rius i Taulet that an international Exposition was what Barcelona needed. First, his arguments were, every city which wasn't just "any city" had had one or wanted one; second, this was a perfect way to prove that Barcelona was a European –not just a Spanish- city; and last but not most important, an International Expo was the best way to bring Barcelona back on her feet, to inject some confidence into the citizens. Serrano offered Rius to bear all the risk by finding private sponsors to organize the event, taking only a percentage of the entrance fees to recover the investment. He even threw the promise of an iron tower six times the Eiffel Tower, then under construction for the Paris 1889 Universal Exhibition, into the bargain. Rius i Taulet was seduced by the project, and he decided to endorse it, though after obtaining funds from the Madrid government he swiftly decided to get rid of Serrano and make it a wholly public affair. True to his cocksure manner, in June 1887 he announced with great pomp that in 1888 Barcelona was to hold an Exposition that would dazzle the Universe.

The site of the Exposition was to be the new Ciutadella Park, 270 acres of land resulting from the demolition of the a huge military fortress attached to the city, which was torn down two decades later than the walls. The Citadel had been built in 1714, and used since then by the Spanish army as a castle to control the city, rather than defend it, and was hated by Barcelonans. Holding the Expo over its trampled ruins was thus a certain restitution of the city's honour, a symbol of freedom from repression, a triumph of progress over the *Ancienne Regime* –and again as some sort of Catalan "Rebirth". In fact, the park that was already being developed on the site had much of this spirit of restitution about it, too. This was a design of Josep Fontseré, who followed Olmsted's Central Park philosophy ("Gardens are to the city what lungs are to a man") to devise a park that connected the old city to the new industrial areas to the north while still providing an atmosphere totally disconnected from the city. The plan was a large horse-shoe shaped avenue in the ordained, French garden style containing a rather more casual, English-style park within. Fontseré tore down the whole Citadel and designed new streets, erasing the memory of the hated fortress from the modern city map: only the old arsenal building was allowed to remain (this is today the Catalan Parliament, in a further act of symbolic restitution...). The surrounding streets and the central avenue leading to the park were also laid out, so that Fontseré's plan was rather more than a park, it was modern urban planning.

When the Exposition was announced, Fontseré feared that his carefully designed plan would be permanently altered, and vigorously protested. Undeterred, mayor Rius fired Fontseré and commissioned Elies Rogent with the construction of the Expo. By then there were hardly eleven months to go before the opening day, and Rogent wisely decided to leave many of the elements already built by Fontseré untouched, incorporating them into the general design of the Expo rather than altering them. The urban layout was maintained, as were all the buildings erected on the southern side of the park, which Fontseré had consciously placed to interact with Mercat del Born, less than a hundred metres away. These buildings included the Hivernacle, a modern glass-house designed by Josep Amargós, and the Umbracle, a peculiar iron and wood laths

shade-house by Fontseré himself. Other elements of the park, like the perimetral iron gate and the central waterfall monument (in both of which some see Gaudí's hand) were respected too. The Passeig Sant Joan, a majestic avenue leading to the park's main gate which Fontseré had lined with a spectacular iron balustrade and populated with statues of historical Catalan heroes, was also incorporated to Rogent's plan as the main entrance to the Exposition by adding a Triumphal Arch at the head of the avenue.

As director of the Architecture School, Rogent could rely on a team of brilliant and enthusiastic young architects, artists and engineers to develop the Exposition pavilions and infrastructure. The author of the Arch, for instance, was Josep Vilaseca, author of many Modernista buildings in Barcelona, and his sculptor was none the less than Josep Llimona. Antoni Gaudí is also said to have contributed, though to what extent is still unclear today. But the architect that stood out above them all was Lluís Domènech i Montaner. Rogent gave him two of the Exposition buildings, the Hotel and the Café-Restaurant. The Restaurant still stands today (now the Zoology Museum) and is a fine example of early Modernisme, with its steel structure and brick façade, and a fairy-tale air about it in the fusion of Gothic, Romanesque and Arabic elements. Domènech's greatest achievement was, however, the hotel that Barcelona needed to host the many visitors that were expected, which was built on Passeig Colom, near the Columbus monument. The architect managed to complete the *Hotel Internacional*, with its 500 rooms and service areas complete, in little more than fifty days. Barcelonans admired Domènech's organizational capacities as they saw the hotel grow, and dubbed him "the orchestra conductor". To make construction easier, Domènech designed a structure made of standard railroad rails, and applied the proportions of a single brick as the main factor to calculate all the dimensions. To make it faster, he made good use of the new electric lighting of the avenue and organized teams of masons in twelve-hour shifts, working day and night around the clock. The hotel was to be torn down after the Exposition, but despite this and the almost impossible schedule, the building was not without its harmony and taste. Its demolition was regretted by many Barcelonans, and one magazine published a cartoon depicting the hotel as a beautiful ocean liner sinking into the waters of the port.

In contrast, the rest of the exposition pavilions, which were also designed to be ephemeral, were quite unremarkable and designed more to be useful rather than to be admired. Nevertheless, Rogent's several teams worked with some efficiency, and it must be said in his credit that when the Exposition officially opened most of the constructions were finished: only Domènech's Café-Restaurant and Vilaseca's *Arc de Triomf* were still in scaffolding. Architecturally, the 1888 Exposition was a great success. The actual exhibition, however, was another matter. Coordination of the attending nations was a nightmare: the machines and other contraptions that were brought to Barcelona were different to those that had been announced, and exhibits had to be rearranged even as the opening ceremony was being conducted. The exhibits themselves were also quite disappointing, as most of the machines were no real novelty and had been in the market for years already. Clearly, Barcelona was not seen as an important commercial node by foreign industrial and financial concerns, and though it is true that mayor Rius had given extremely short notice of the 1888 Exposition, it is also true that many reserved their novelties for the Paris 1889 Universal Exhibition which, having already attracted attention with the construction of the Eiffel Tower, promised to be a much more exciting event.

If the 1888 Exposition was a commercial and financial flop, and not at all Universal, its effects on the city of Barcelona were very different. For one thing, the six-million-peseta resulting debt (1.2 million dollars of the time) was not too worrying; if one considers that the city was already into three times that much debt *before* the Expo. And anyway, the main economic goal had not been to make money from the Expo itself rather than to

activate the Catalan business and labour market. And that it did: more than two thousand workers were employed in construction works, while another 3.000 found jobs in services related to the Exposition. More than that, it placed Barcelona on the European map and provided Barcelonans themselves with a sense of achievement at having organized an International fair –and in a time of depression, too! There was of course an added sense of pride in that Barcelona had organized such an event before Madrid or any other Spanish city (in fact this didn't happen until a century later, when Seville hosted the 1992 Expo). The Exposition also helped to modernize the rest of Catalonia. Most of the two and a half million visitors were Catalans who saw such machines for the first time, and many went back home with a desire to bring technology to their towns and villages.

And this was true, too, of art and architecture: Catalans saw and admired the new Modernista creations and so Barcelona Modernisme began to extend to the whole of the country. Because, beyond the exhibition proper, in 1888 Barcelona itself was an exhibition of the new art that was rising. We have already seen some of the early Modernista works built before the Exposition (Casa Vicens, Editorial Montaner i Simon and Mercat de Sant Antoni). And in 1888, some important buildings were being constructed, like Rovira's Mercat d'Hostafrancs or Domènech i Estapé's Hidroelèctrica, and very notably Gaudí's Palau Güell and the first foundations of the Sagrada Família. These buildings embodied the Barcelonan euphoria of 1888: a combination of a sense of modernity and trust in technology and its potential, with a newly-found pride in all things Catalan and the wish to recover Catalan traditions, legends and crafts. In a way, the Barcelona 1888 Universal Exposition represents the definite turning-point of Catalan art, the moment of Modernisme, which was to triumph unquestionably in Catalan taste and preferences for over two decades.

In the late 1890's and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as has been said, Modernista artists and particularly architects, began to follow the aesthetic and stylistic trends of French and Belgian Art Nouveau. This influence can be seen in the mature works of the great geniuses, as in Domenech i Montaner's Palau de la Música, and in Gaudí's Casa Milà or La Pedrera. These works are clearly different to the ones we have seen, prior to or contemporary of the 1888 Exposition, but they are still unquestionably part of the same artistic, cultural and social movement, Modernisme. Barcelona had a long Modernista life and therefore the movement experienced a significant evolution, from the "inspired eclecticism" of the 1880's to the later works with pre-rationalist, nearly avant-garde solutions, as in Josep Maria Jujol's Casa Planells (1926).