

CASA BATLLÓ, LIGHT & COLOUR

Daniel Giralt-Miracle

The Japanese architect Tokutoshi Torii explains in his book *El mundo enigmático de Gaudí* that the first time he saw the façade of the Casa Batlló, after stepping out of the metro station, he was astounded, not only because it was the first work by Gaudí that he had seen in person, but also due to its formal and chromatic strength. This was a pivotal experience for him that led him to devote many years of study to the architect until he finally decided to compile the results of his research in the two extremely detailed volumes that make up the book we have just mentioned.

However, Torii is not the only person who has been fascinated by the façade of the Casa Batlló. Every year thousands of people are transfixed by the building, especially now that it can be visited inside and toured from top to bottom, something that was not possible when the Japanese architect discovered Gaudí's building, since public visits were not allowed.

What, is it about this building that arouses such interest? I do not think there is one simple answer to this question, because this admiration is probably due to a number of reasons. Nevertheless, I would venture to say that the Casa Batlló as a whole holds the key as it showcases the greatest number of characteristic elements of Gaudí's architecture inside a building with a small footprint. Casa Batlló represented a serious challenge for Gaudí.

Both life itself and the visible
owe their existence to light.

John Berger

Although he had been commissioned to demolish the building at number 43 Passeig de Gràcia, which Mr Batlló had bought, and design a new one on the site, after thinking it through, he chose to make use of the original structure of the property and give it a new personality. Thus, instead of following the rectilinear outline adopted until then in the houses in the Eixample, he decided to introduce sinuous floors and surfaces. Just as he had been asked to do, he wanted to make a building that was visible, which is why he chose to make it stand out by steeping it in symbolism related to popular legends and with historical narratives, and using unconventional materials to showcase its artistic quality. It is easy to conclude that Gaudí's project was so ambitious that only someone like him, who was endowed with such creative skill, could bring it to fruition. Indeed, the architect from Reus showed that it was possible to combine all these elements in a harmonious way with his building solutions. It is therefore no coincidence that one hundred years after it was built, the Casa Batlló still triggers this emotional experience, in experts and the uninitiated. While the experts analyse each and every detail and make us see the innovative elements that Gaudí applied to the building, the uninitiated are led by their feelings and delight at seeing a landmark that is so different, surprising and original to them.



Postcard published by Jorge Venini. Barcelona, 1911.
JUAN JOSÉ LAHUERTA COLLECTION

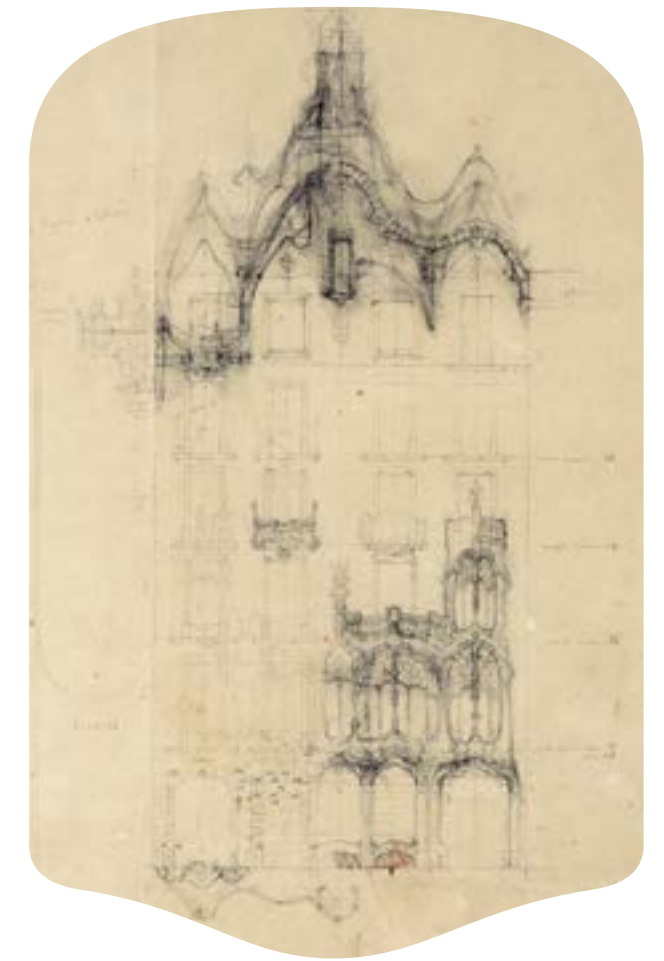
A work of maturity

Gaudí was born in 1852 and qualified as an architect in 1878. He began practising in 1879 and by the time the prosperous textile industrialist, Josep Batlló, had commissioned him to rebuild a house on Passeig de Gràcia, he had already made remarkable contributions to housing, experimenting with new forms in the construction and design of homes. The Casa Vicens was strongly influenced by the Moorish revival, or Mudéjar, style; the Palau Güell saw him follow to the letter the remit to design a large family mansion for an aristocrat; the Casa Calvet allowed him to bring to fruition the plans he had drawn up for a modern city dwelling slotted in between two adjacent buildings, marking his departure from the orthogonal floor plans adhered to by master builders at the time and a shift towards his own alternative building methods and forms. However, it was the Casa Batlló that allowed him to give free rein to his creativity.

Mr Batlló wanted to have the most ostentatious house on the newly laid out Passeig de Gràcia and Gaudí set out to

draw up a project that would put him at the forefront of the hallowed architects of the day. It is important to bear in mind that the Casa Batlló was to stand on the same block as buildings by the other leading lights of Catalonia's home-grown art nouveau movement, *modernisme*. Josep Puig i Cadafalch had already refurbished and remodelled the house at number 41 for the Amatller family and Lluís Domènech i Montaner had redesigned the building at number 35, for Albert Lleó Morera. The disparity of styles led the row to be nicknamed the "Block of Discord". In 1904, Gaudí was fifty-two years old and had a great deal of experience in the field of architecture and crafts, because he had studied or worked with the most reputed professionals of the day and frequented the most prestigious craft workshops, where he had learnt the rudiments of sculpture, ceramics, glasswork, ironwork and woodwork. This means he was fully equipped to undertake a project that brought together the most varied repertoire of different crafts.

Original drawing by Gaudí.
Preparatory studies for the façade
where we can still see traces of the
previous building.
CÀTEDRA GAUDÍ. ETSAB-UPC



An unconventional way of working

The first impression we have when analysing the Casa Batlló as a whole is that, like all of Gaudí's buildings, it is rooted in the romantic tradition, yet steeped in a desire to innovate, as befits the avant-garde spirit. However, if we look at it a little more closely, we realise that the design was based on the two questions that most concerned the architect at the time: firstly, the building process, which he had a solid knowledge of, and secondly, the empirical methods he had total faith in, since experimentation enabled him to constantly discover new options to continually enrich his concept of art. This perception is confirmed when we dig a little deeper and see that, at the Casa Batlló, Gaudí remained true to his way of doing things. When Mr Batlló commissioned him, the project was limited to a series of plans that were signed on 6th May 1904 in order to comply with the official guidelines that would allow work to go ahead. However, they had little or nothing in common with Gaudí's final project, which was redrawn by the

draughtsman Ramon Berenguer in 1957, under the supervision of the architect Lluís Bonet Garí. The fact is, Gaudí was a professional who was totally devoted to his work, which he understood as a daily process of adjusting and correcting. This is why he produced a series of plaster models to express the variations he would later put into practice. As a rule, this resulted in disagreements with the owners, and many more with the authorities. In actual fact, we could say that Gaudí was the conductor of an orchestra, who guided and worked closely with his team. This is probably what makes the Casa Batlló so fresh in terms of the distribution of the spaces, the use of colour, the management of the light and the many ornamental details that we find throughout the building.

The main façade

“Gaudí was the *conductor* of an orchestra, who *guided* and *worked closely* with his *team*”



Without a shadow of a doubt, colour is the standout feature of the Casa Batlló and plays a much more important role than it does in Gaudí's other buildings. We find it in abundance on the main façade, on the rear façade, the coping and the chimneys on the flat roof, and especially in the inner courtyards. Although colour was used in a more subtle way in his early works, such as the Casa Vicens or El Capricho in Comillas, and more playfully or uninhibitedly at the Park Güell, it speaks for itself at the Casa Batlló. We could even say that the Casa Batlló is an explosion of colour, strengthened by Gaudí's use of materials, such as painted glass and glazed ceramics that make the colours more intense.

Here the use of colour is more pictorial than architectural, which is why connections have been made between the Casa Batlló and impressionist paintings and abstract trends. Gaudí's team told us that the execution of the façade did not follow the plan that was drawn up on paper, painted in watercolour, gouache or oil. On the contrary, the architect would stand in the middle of Passeig de Gràcia and tell the construction workers where they had to place the fragments of coloured glass and ceramics and the glazed discs, so that the distribution of the colours and forms would be random yet harmonious and balanced as a whole. In reality, with this solution, Gaudí gave the building a new skin that protects the façade from inclement weather and imbues it with life through its use of colour, when it reflects the sunlight and when it is artificially lit. For this reason, many people have associated the façade with Claude Monet's canvases, Kandinsky's seascapes and abstract figures, and have even found similarities with North American action paintings, particularly Jackson Pollock's drip paintings.





The light-well

The clear alliance between light and colour is most apparent in the inner courtyard of the building. It is the result of the ingenuity of Gaudí's project and his inventive use of form and colour. Gaudí channelled the intense light that penetrates through the large skylight above the light-well (the result of joining the two original ones together) using undulating glazed tiles to cover the walls. The glazed surface intensifies the light that reaches the basement through the skylight and light-well. Gaudí's control of colours appears again in the tonal gradations of the tiles, which fade gradually from deep blue at the top to a light blue on the ground floor. This combination of blues – in addition to the reliefs on the tiles and the effects caused by the light reflected in the glass panes in the windows that protect and mark the position of the landings – aims to transport the people walking through this part of the building to the bottom of the sea.



Attic and rooftop



When we talk about the façade of the Casa Batlló, the part of the roof that overlooks Passeig de Gràcia immediately springs to mind. However, the roof is so much more than the dragon's back we see from the street and is another fine example of Gaudí's superb command of colour. There is no denying that the façade is a riot of colours that reaches its crescendo in the sinuous form that runs along top of the building and also defines its outline. Here, Gaudí paid attention to the smallest detail, giving form as much importance as colour.

The roof bears no resemblance to the ones in the adjacent buildings. It is not a neglected space – as was customary in the buildings in the Eixample – where the stairwells, water tanks and chimneys were arranged in a haphazard manner. Gaudí's integrated approach to the building led him to transform the flat roofs into a thought-provoking, expressive universe, which gave free rein to his creativity. He was also keenly aware that the roof could not feature a random assortment of different shapes and colours, but had to form a coherent whole. At the Palau Güell, Gaudí had already hinted at his later designs, with geometric chimneys in vivid colours, but at the Casa Batlló he let his imagination run wild and created some part-sculptural,

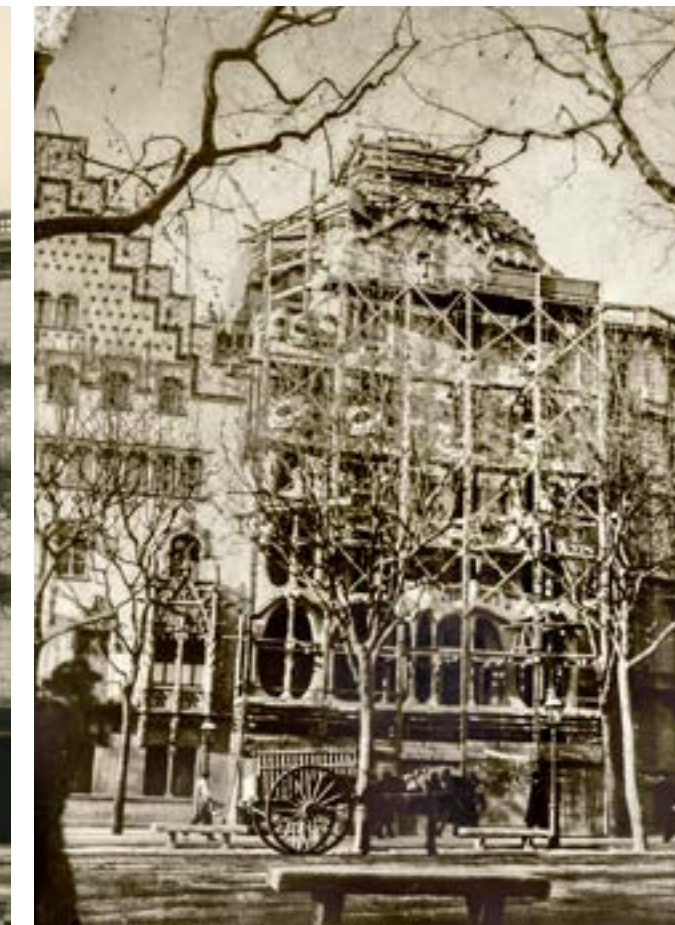
part-architectural, smooth and undulating forms, clad in deep-coloured glass and ceramic *trencadís* shards. The rooftop floor is now covered with thin tiles but was originally clad in randomly arranged fragments of recycled tiles in different colours and shapes. This clearly demonstrated Gaudí's desire to create a space that combined plant, animal and geological forms. He skilfully distributed the small rooms on the rooftop and placed metal railings around the rooftop edge. The chimneys were grouped into clusters of four and have conical cowls with tiny spheres on the top, resembling the pom-poms on a hat. The chimneys were enclosed by two elements: the dragon's back on the side of the building on Passeig de Gràcia and the winding railings and balustrade along the rear façade, which, like the chimneys, he also covered in multicoloured *trencadís* mosaic, using a broad repertoire of forms reminiscent of flowers and plants.



HISTORY AND USES OF CASA BATLLÓ

Mireia Freixa

Previous page: Casa Batlló, 1906.
Photograph: Frederic Ballell.
ARXIU FOTOGRÀFIC DE BARCELONA



On the left, the building before Gaudí's intervention, in a photograph by Pau Audouard, c. 1901.
INSTITUT AMATLLER D'ART HISPÀNIC. ARXIU MAS

On the right, the house during its refurbishment in 1905.
COL·LEGI OFICIAL D'ARQUITECTES DE CATALUNYA

Changes in Barcelona's urban environment

In Barcelona, during the Catalan art nouveau, or *modernista*, period, the apartment blocks on Passeig de Gràcia served a very different purpose than they do now. Well-to-do families wanted comfortable, spacious dwellings where they could live with their servants. They also needed an attic space for the laundry, store rooms and a roof terrace to hang out the washing. The ground floor was let to the prestigious shops that had moved to the city centre at the beginning of the century. Now, everything has changed. Passeig de Gràcia has undergone a major urban transformation and is the city's main shopping, business and sightseeing area. The former apartment blocks are gradually being converted into hotels and offices, and the ground floors into boutiques selling top luxury brands. But let us escape this new reality. We invite you to travel back to the time the Casa Batlló Godó was remodelled between 1904 and

1906. Before that, however, we will have to travel back to the previous century... In the 1860s, before the advent of Catalonia's home-grown art nouveau movement, *modernisme*, Passeig de Gràcia was a place where people would spend their leisure time, with huge mansions set among gardens. Multifamily dwellings were built according to regulations dating from 1856, which had been devised with the old town in mind and specified that all façades should be uniform. New regulations were drawn up in 1891. They introduced new public hygiene measures and gave permission to build more dwellings, giving greater leeway to the way the façades were decorated: galleries, corner turrets and crestings bringing a decorative freedom that paved the way for *modernista* decorations. In a short period of just ten to fifteen years, the mansions were demolished and many

SPACES, ART AND SYMBOLISM

Amilcar Vargas & Alfredo Ruiz

The main façade and its multiple readings

Casa Batlló is one of Gaudí's buildings that has been the subject of the most diverse interpretations, both by the experts and the general public. This is because of the inexhaustible details that are still being discovered coupled with the ones that have been revealed since 1906.

Only a landmark of such universal value, like the Casa Batlló, can make and maintain a connection between millions of people around the world and the feelings triggered by the surprises and emotions stirred by its façade and interiors. This connection becomes even stronger when we decipher the codes that Antoni Gaudí's brilliant mind must have clearly envisaged but never transformed into written words. Perhaps this was so that they could be appreciated through the gaze of the spirit.

Gaudí drew inspiration from nature and followed its unwritten rules faithfully, bequeathing us a building where every detail performs a function, like the muse that inspired him, and leaves it to us mortals to interpret them from our own rational, functional, emotional, spiritual, religious and many other points of view.

The main façade is a work of art that brings together architecture, engineering and symbolism, in which Gaudí successfully creates a union of material and symbolic opposites, confirming that extremes, like day and night or life and death, converge in an endless, continuous cycle.

Life is represented by the light and colour of the glass *trencadís* mosaics placed onto a slightly undulating surface, which suggests the movement of a calm sea, and whose tones are in harmony with the inimitable multicoloured nuances of the ceramic discs. For its part, death is depicted in the balconies that resemble flayed skulls, their balusters forming eyes that stare out impassively; and in the columns of the galleries that are shaped like slender, lightweight bones. Gaudí brought together life and death in these columns by carving leaves and flowers in the centre, referring to vitality and beauty, summarising in a

Cartoon by Brunet inspired by the façade of the Casa Batlló, published in the illustrated supplement *El Diluvio*, Barcelona, 29th September 1906.



Brunet, "Barcelona Nueva", cartoon published in the illustrated supplement *El Diluvio*, Barcelona, 27th January 1906.





Cylindrical turret with the monograms of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, surmounted by the four-armed cross.

The gallery is adorned with bone-shaped pillars sprouting plant-like shapes.



single element the natural life cycle of living beings, and the spiritual cycle of death and resurrection. Moreover, the composition of the gallery, which is made with stone from Montjuïc, is a sculptural grouping that can be interpreted as a giant bat, its wings outstretched. A nocturnal animal associated with death, the bat at the Casa Batlló performs a function associated with water, namely to divert raindrops away from the building. In this way, water – the quintessential fluid, vital element – flows over rock – the most rigid and inert material – which are brought together by Gaudí's genius. And our astonishment continues when we see that, ironically, the figure of the nocturnal mammal lets in light, as its forms frame a large stained-glass window that is a milestone of world architecture. As if these wonders were not enough, the rooftop of the façade is the most wonderful evocation of the legend of

Saint George, or Sant Jordi, the patron saint of Catalonia. It is a veritable work of art made of ceramics, whose shapes and outlines suggest a defeated dragon, its side pierced by a lance – which is inscribed with the monograms of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the biblical Holy Family – with a hilt in the shape of a four-armed cross. The monograms of the Holy Family are placed in hierarchical order from top to bottom and also arranged according to their astronomical orientation regarding the sunrise on the Mediterranean horizon. The monogram of Jesus, which forms the pinnacle of the tower resembling the lance below the hilt, is the first to receive the sun's rays in the morning in a kind of celestial greeting, a paean to the triumph of light over darkness, of life over death. For its part, the dragon – which has been slain but still retains its vivid colours that shift from pink and purple to blue and green – and its single eye, gives a knowing



Rooftop of the main façade clad in ceramic pieces in the shape of scales. The ridge is made more eye-catching with semi-spherical pieces placed over cylindrical ones.

THE HIDDEN LEGACY
OF CASA BATLLÓ.
DISCOVERIES FROM A
HISTORICAL RESTORATION

*Joan Olona,
Ignasi Villanueva,
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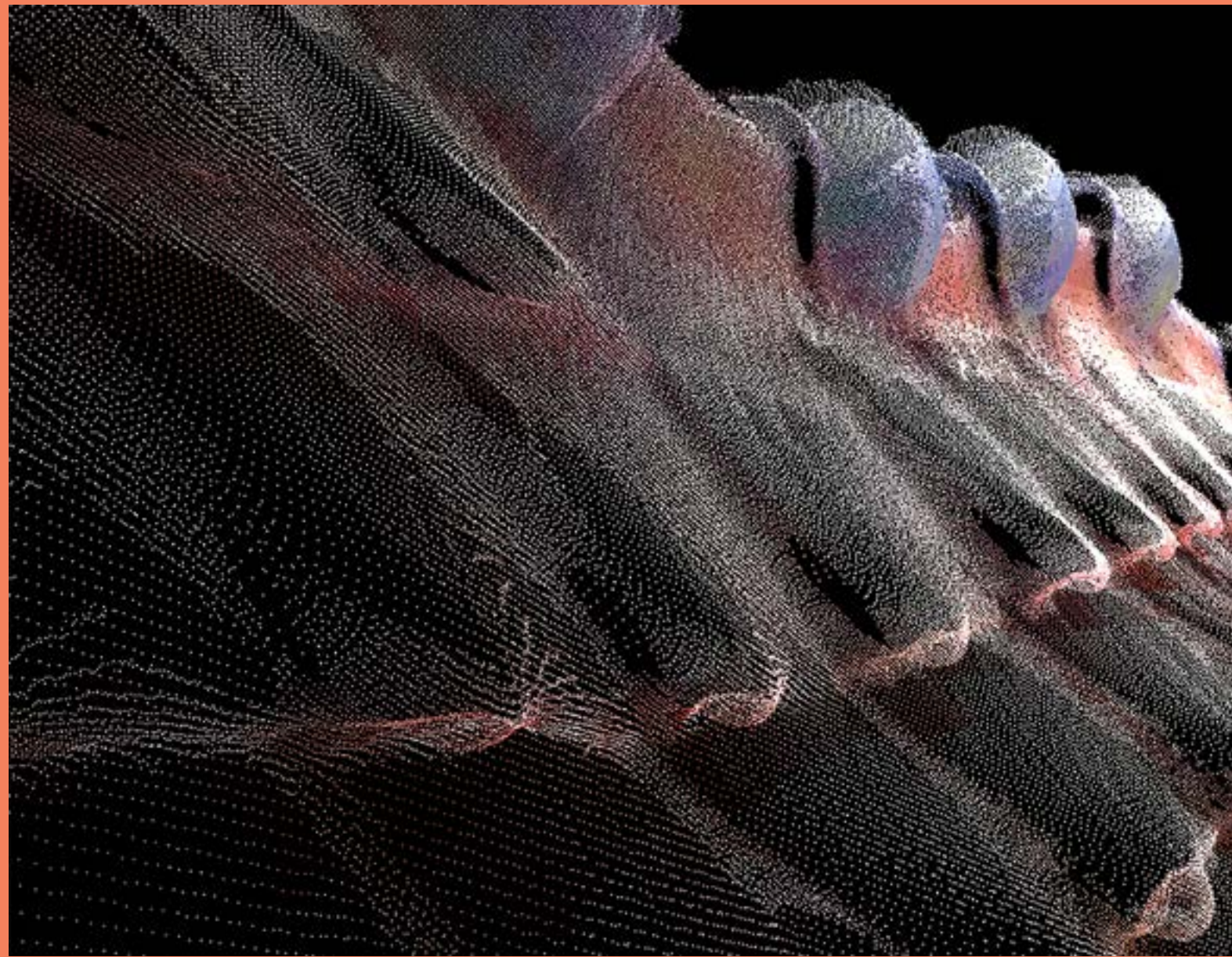


Dining room, c. 1927. INSTITUT AMATLLER D'ART HISPÀNIC. ARXIU MAS

The restoration of the Casa Batlló is an ongoing process: a journey to the origins full of challenges that always has surprising discoveries in store, and raises new questions at the same time.

Restoration is not only about recovering original elements; it is about returning to the spirit of the time, to the life of spaces, to the feelings each room triggered in its inhabitants. In this case, we are talking about the spirit of the house where Josep Batlló Casanovas, his wife Amalia Godó Belaunzarán, and their five children, José, Mercedes, Carmen, Felipe and Luis, lived. It is also the search for the spirit that led Josep Batlló and Amalia Godó to hire the services of the architect Antoni Gaudí and the builder Josep Bayó to remodel and extend an apartment building on Passeig de Gràcia. The project was carried out from 1904 to 1906, and the builder's ledgers allow us to

follow its progress. Skilled craftsmen worked on the project: the carpenters, Casas Bardés; the ironsmiths, the Badia Miarnau brothers; the ceramicist, Sebastià Ribó; and, on the main façade, the masons, the Barceló brothers. In this article, we will focus on a historical restoration that took place between 2018 and 2020: a period when the façade, stucco work, wainscoting and flooring on the main floor, or *piano nobile*, and different iconic elements, were worked on. Period photographs of the *piano nobile*, where the Batlló family lived, reveal a lively home, where partition walls, doors, stucco work, wainscoting and lights create unique living spaces for a well-to-do family. However, after the deaths of Josep Batlló (1934) and Amalia Godó (1940), the *piano nobile* and first floors were occupied by offices. Major alterations were made to the building in the late 1950s, after the family had sold the property



Point cloud technology has been used to perform the study and create a 3D model of the building.

was vague and sketchy in parts and made up of a series of fragments. Some of these fragments could be seen and compared from the photographs of the interior of the house taken in 1927. However, they were like brief notes that hinted at a much more extensive storyline. Other documents allowed us to piece together and shape the rest of the narrative.

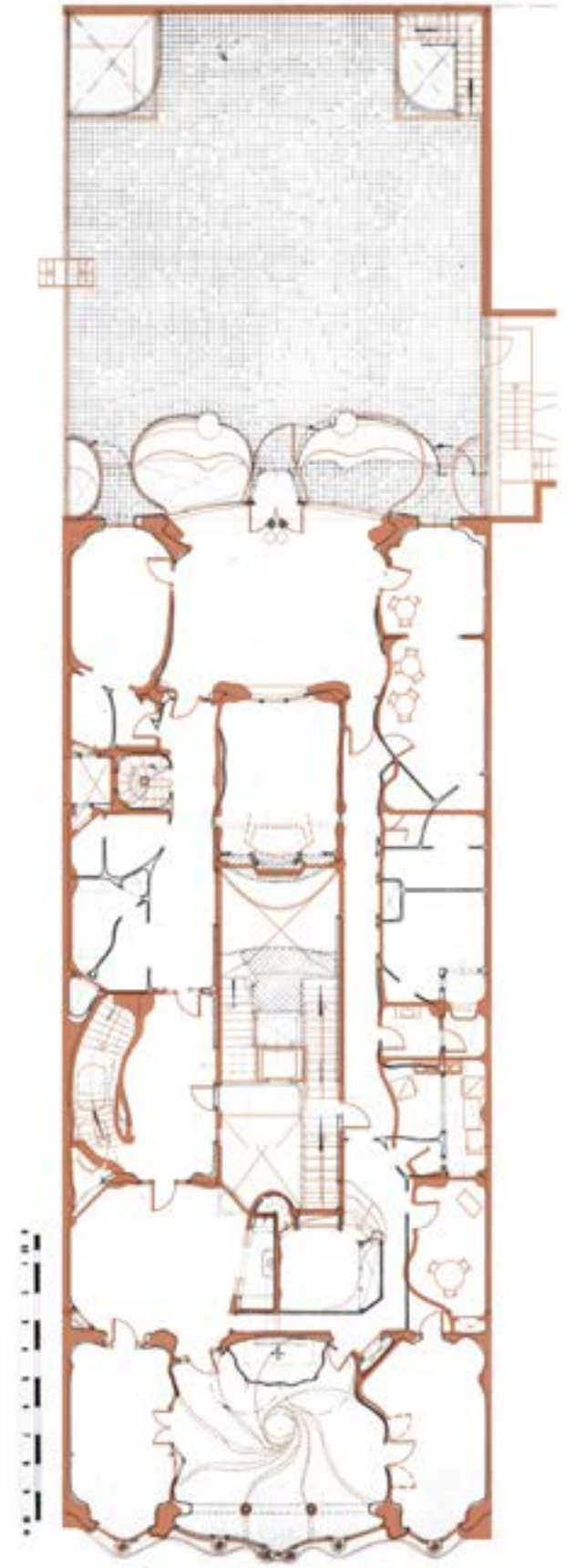
In 1952, to mark the centenary of Gaudí's birth, the association of friends of the architect, the *Associació d'Amics de Gaudí*, was set up. One of its first tasks was to produce planimetric drawings of all the buildings Gaudí had designed. The drawings were done by the architect Lluís Bonet i Garí and some architecture students. They are documents of immeasurable value because they show us the building just before the major alterations that took place when it became the head office of Seguros Iberia.

The developer Josep Bayó, who worked with Gaudí on the refurbishment of the Casa Batlló, gave two interviews to the then director of the *Càtedra Gaudí*, the architect Joan Bassegoda, at his home on Carrer del Clot on 9th and 21st January 1970. The interviews are just as valuable as the plans and digitised audio copies have been preserved, which allow us to hear Josep Bayó, who is a direct link with the time the building was erected. Although he was ninety-two years old at the time of the interviews, the lucidity of his answers is astonishing: they are clear and unhesitant. This recording, and its subsequent transcription in Bassegoda's book, *José Bayó Font, contractista de Gaudí*, as well as the plans by the Friends of Gaudí and research in different archives, provided us with rigorous information for the restoration process. These documents faithfully describe and give us a greater insight into the initial con-

Superimposition of two building phases: on the right, the walls built by Gaudí and the ones that survived. On the left, superimposition of the buildings: the one built by Gaudí and the one before Gaudí.



Red: walls and dividers in 1952, Amics de Gaudí.
Black: walls and dividers in 1875, Emili Sala's building.



Red: walls and dividers in 2014, master plan.
Black: walls and dividers in 1952, Amics de Gaudí.