



## Gaudí in the US: New Foundations in Post-War Architecture Criticism

REVIEW OF

**Collins, George R. *Antonio Gaudí*.  
New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960**

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### ABSTRACT

George Collins' book "Antonio Gaudí" was published as part of the collection "The Masters of World Architecture Series" in 1960. In a moment of theoretical fragmentation around the figure of the architect, it quickly became a key text in the subsequent criticism study of the architectural work of Gaudí, and still today it is known as the first extensive monograph published in the English language.

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The book, which appeared in New York in 1960, and written by Professor George R. Collins (1917-1993), is known as the first extensive description and evaluation of Gaudí's works in the English language.

Launched in a time of revisionism, when the demands and promises of the first modern architecture had shown as insufficient and some works of the great masters were moving towards new plastic expressions,<sup>1</sup> the work of Antoni Gaudí provided of interest to the concerns of the era. That which was modern was no more a novelty and searched for its origins,<sup>2</sup> longing to establish a continuity with the History of Art. About Gaudí could be said almost anything, as seemed that removing unwanted parts of his work and life he could fit Surrealists, Expressionists, and even Rationalists (sharing with Le Corbusier an abstract and organic period). It is true that the transition architecture of the turn of the century had for decades been perceived as decadent under the modern rationality and efficiency, even so, Gaudí had his defenders, unlike most other contemporaries.

It is certainly one of the endnotes which Collins adds to the text that gives us a state of the question of the literature he encountered while writing.<sup>3</sup> A large bulk of publications made in Catalonia, with a modest portion from abroad, and only two monographs published in a foreign language.<sup>4</sup> The theoretical construction was fragmented and often dedicated to the cult of the *Sagrada Família*. Aside from the writings of those who were close to the master,<sup>5</sup> two different lines of interpretation were forged around him. The first of them placing Gaudí in the Catalan version of Art Nouveau, *modernisme*. This approach built its bases with Alexandre Cirici and was widely theorized by Oriol Bohigas,<sup>6</sup> but in fact, could be only partly defended.<sup>7</sup> The second way was that concerning the analysis of the structural functionalism and the construction techniques. Both of them aimed to keep Gaudí's ways from the popularly established image of a series of genius intuitions worked out in old construction ways, and in fact, both can be found put together in Collins' study.<sup>8</sup> However, the text does not pretend to isolate Gaudí's work as somewhat analyzable on its own, as it is shown by the diverse quotes and references to his personality and intentions.

These considerations should be put in turn with the controversy then manifested between Expressionism and Puritanism, or as David Mackay expresses in the book's review of 1961,<sup>9</sup> between the humanists and the technologists. Collins itself is aware of the big picture and makes a statement from the very beginning.

The revived interest in his work today is symptomatic of a crisis in the profession of architecture as our generation seeks to humanize and to individualize the rather impersonal, cubic and puritanical tradition that we have inherited from our fathers.<sup>10</sup>

1. George R. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1960), 28.

2. Juan José Lahuerta, *Univers Gaudí* (Barcelona: Diputació de Barcelona, 2002), 174.

3. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí*, endnote 97, 129.

4. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Gaudí* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1957) and César Martinell, *Antonio Gaudí* (Milano: Electa, 1955).

5. Such as Joan Bergós, Joan Rubió i Bellver, Isidre Puig Boada or César Martinell.

6. Oriol Bohigas, *Reseña y catálogo de arquitectura modernista* (Barcelona: Lumen, 1973).

7. Rafael Moneo, "Sobre Gaudí", *Arquitectura* 75 (1965): 10.

8. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí*, 20.

9. David Mackay, "Antonio Gaudí, por G. R. Collins / Antonio Gaudí, por J. J. Sweeney y J. Ll. Sert", *Cuadernos de Arquitectura*, no. 46 (1961): 46-47.

10. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí*, 8.

Nevertheless, the interest in Mackay's point is the comparison he makes between Collins' work and the contemporary book *Antonio Gaudí* by J. J. Sweeney and J. Ll. Sert.<sup>11</sup> We shall remember that Mackay aligned fully with the construction of *modernisme* stated by his colleague Bohigas, and that means he searched in both texts the essential role of the architect within the movement. In these terms, he considers Collins' book a valuable contribution, while he discredits Sert and Sweeney's with the terms "shy, superficial and sometimes flattering" as he cannot find any mention to *modernisme*. In fact, the introduction to the last text states clearly the conviction of the authors of the non-belonging of Gaudí to any form of Art Nouveau.<sup>12</sup> Sert had, since the early 30's decade, build the reading of a "modern" Gaudí, who took from nature the "true" architecture and provided of endless solutions against any kind of convention. Furthermore, in order to ward off Gaudí from whatever historical revival, his work was often presented as a set of fragments or details that evoked the plastic explorations of modern art.<sup>13</sup>

Collins was not fully against this approach, he too believed that dividing Gaudí's buildings into "style" groups was far from the true understanding of the architect and his way of conceiving architecture.<sup>14</sup> When evaluating the Nativity facade of the Sagrada Familia he observes:

Considering how adept he was with abstract forms and ordinary architectural ornament, we are unprepared for the dismal figure sculpture of the Nativity facade. His first error would seem to be his quite modern belief that the architect should control every detail [...]. The second was his commitment to a so severe naturalism that he employed life molds [...] to obtain exact copies of the original.<sup>15</sup>

It seems that this element did not fit inside the dialectical operative he wanted to offer to the reader. As he observes in the final evaluation, the strongest interest in Gaudí in that decade was from artists and craftsmen, which in turn had their own appreciation of abstract forms. Also, Collins points out the coincidence between the postwar interest in the architect and the raising of an American school of Abstract Expressionism.

Although sharing similar points, Collins' final text has nothing to do with Sert and Sweeney's. We may go again to the introduction of these last and find the main intention of their writing, which was to compile the connecting values from Gaudí's work to the current time in terms of "his vision of space, ability to work out fresh structural forms and to employ texture, colour and the abstract sculptor's approach in architecture."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, Collins' will was to offer some structured historical foundations for the upcoming academic interest of the historiography with a clear intention of recovering Gaudí as one of the masters of twentieth-century architecture. Knowing that for a long time architects and engineers had an ambiguous relationship with Gaudí, of limited admiration and

11. James Johnson Sweeney and Josep Lluís Sert, *Antoni Gaudí* (Stuttgart: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1960).

12. *Ibid.*, 7.

13. Juan José Lahuerta, "Sert i Gaudí" in Josep Maria Rovira (ed.), *Sert, 1928-1979: obra completa: mig segle d'arquitectura* (Barcelona: Fundació Joan Miró, 2005), 177.

14. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí*, 17.

15. Collins, *Antonio Gaudí*, 26.

16. Sweeney and Sert, *Antoni Gaudí*, 9.

quick criticism, he explicitly longed to rescue back his figure to them. The election of the book images, for example, illustrates Collins' aim to describe graphically each work of Gaudí in detail. As opposed, Sert and Sweeney built an imaginary of more and less distant relationships between the buildings and all sorts of elements.<sup>17</sup>

Collins' study on Gaudí started way later than Sert's. It was not until 1956, his first visit to Spain, when he faced the architect's work in the exposition held by *Amics de Gaudí* in the *Saló del Tinell*.<sup>18</sup> Before this happened, around 1950, Sert and Sweeney's book was almost finished,<sup>19</sup> and the MoMA exposition which would take place finally in 1957 had for years been postponed to coincide with the publication of the book.<sup>20</sup> As has been said before, Collins shared the concerns of the era and assumed the historiography of architecture of his century when valuing what was considered "modern", however, he was clearly skeptical about the approach of the MoMA about Gaudí.<sup>21</sup> The exposition of 1936<sup>22</sup> had included some works of Gaudí and he feared the monographic exposition to come would attribute Gaudí to Surrealism again, as it finally was somehow.<sup>23</sup>

It may be useful to the reader to explain by what means did Collins generate his own analysis. This is connected to the aforementioned association, *Amics de Gaudí*, which was founded in 1952 (100th anniversary of the architect's birth) and responded to the necessity of guidance to preserve the legacy of the architect in a climate of civic action. The entity engaged in a variety of activities to shape the international perception of Gaudí's architecture and created an archive of documents which was later the basis of the text under study, however, their critical criterion was not unitary. Among the group associates, Josep Maria Sostres and Oriol Bohigas (both members of *Grup R*) with Joan Prats were the ones who organized the exhibition of 1956. In the FAD conference of 1958,<sup>24</sup> Sostres lets us glimpse the leitmotiv of his conception of Gaudí's work, quoting Boccioni.

The dynamic form, by its changing and evolving essence, constitutes a kind of invisible border between the object and the action, between the absolute movement and the relative movement, between the visible and the invisible, between the object and its inseparable environment. It is a kind of analogical synthesis, which exists in the limits that mediate between the real object and its ideal plastic power, and only prehensible through intuition.<sup>25</sup>

Again, a plastic interpretation which is noticeable in the way the exhibition was conceived. The use of large reproductions of concrete aspects in contrast with the sober architecture of the XIVth century and the will to confront the traditional vision of the master. Simultaneously, the association had asked Dalí to offer a conference in the Park Güell in which

17. Such as oil jars, olive trees, bones or snails.

18. A review on the exhibition can be found in *2C. Construcción de la Ciudad*, no. 4, (1975): 48-49.

19. Lahuerta, "Sert i Gaudí", 178.

20. Helena Martín Nieva, "El MoMA y la Gomis-Prats connection, 1946-1960: Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies y Antoni Gaudí" in Josep M. Rovira, Enrique Granell and Carolina B. García (ed.), *Destino Barcelona, 1911-1991. Arquitectos, viajes e intercambios* (Barcelona: Fundación Arquia, 2018), 145-159.

21. Mireia Freixa, "George R. Collins i els Amics de Gaudí USA", *L'Avenç*, no. 408 (jan. 2015): 36-41.

22. Alfred H. Barr, Jr., *Fantastic art, dada, surrealism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

23. Lahuerta, *Univers Gaudí*, 190-191.

24. *2C*, no. 4, 53-54.

25. *Ibid.*, 53.

he asked the assistants to attend the display, arguing that “only foreigners would visit it”.<sup>26</sup>

Despite being this the first encounter between Collins and Gaudí and the start point of his interest in the architect, the book does not align at all with these interpretations. Collins met then some other integrants of Amics de Gaudí with which he would maintain a long and strong relationship (such as Enric Casanelles, who was putting together the archive mentioned before). From the exchange of materials that began then emerged The Archive of Catalan Art and Architecture, no longer as a civic entity, but a research center. This is an important issue to understand the text background; Collins was aware of the necessity to establish a documentary collection from which relate Gaudí to the context he was involved in. The book carefully reviews the main aspects of his life and work, and does not forget the ideological and symbolic content despite the short length of the text, as Rafael Moneo would express later:

I do not think, however, that going to strange influences, possibly totally alien to his work, or speaking of Gaudí as a percussor of what we call avant-garde art, exploring his work with an exclusive aestheticist approach, can take us too far; we would again distort the meaning of his work, completely forgetting the spirit with which the master conceived it.<sup>27</sup>

The reviews that appeared at the time of the book's publication and its establishment as the key text for the later criticism illustrate Collins' success in placing Gaudí among the masters of modern architecture. His contribution aimed to substantiate a complete vision of the architect, without selecting or excluding unwanted parts, in view of the subsequent study of his work.

26. Joan Bassegoda i Nonell, “La conferencia de Dalí en el Parque Güell en 1956”, *Boletín de Arte*, no. 28, (mar. 2018): 610.

27. Moneo, “Sobre Gaudí”, 12.