

Architecture, ideas, and faith

In my Walter Mitty life, I'm not turning two with Cal Ripken at Camden Yards, or playing the Emperor Concerto with the National Symphony; I'm not even writing the Great American Novel. No, when I imagine a different life it's as an architect.

On the face of it, my architectural fantasies are quite absurd. I can't draw a circle. My mathematical skills are challenged by the family check book, and I'm clueless about engineering. But I love great buildings, and to think of the exhilaration involved in designing and building one is ... well, exhilarating.

Which brings me to one recent experience, and one splendid book.

The experience took place in Barcelona where, this past November, I fulfilled a longstanding ambition to visit Antonio Gaudi's Temple of the Sagrada Familia, perhaps the world's most famous unfinished structure. How to describe the Sagrada Familia? It's an utterly unique mix of naturalism and the gothic, sprawling over an entire city block and weaving elements of nature and classic Christian symbols together into a stone fabric unlike anything in the world. From another point of view, it's a kind of colossal Christian forest, inside and out; there will eventually be eighteen exterior spires (Jesus, Mary, the apostles, the evangelists), and inside the gothic nave, the supporting columns resemble nothing so much as gigantic trees. The three facades - Nativity, Passion, and Glory - are mini-catechisms of the basics of Christian doctrine.

I was in Barcelona to receive an honorary degree along with my old friend Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, former secretary to John Paul II and current archbishop of Cracow; we climbed to the very top of the temple, hundreds of feet above Barcelona, neither one of us feeling at liberty to tell our hosts that hiking up open-air scaffolding at those altitudes wasn't our favorite pastime - and the cardinal did it in a cassock! But we made it, and I'm glad we did, because it's only from that angle that you can get a full sense of both the enormity of Gaudi's vision and his remarkable attention to detail. The current head of construction told us that they hoped to finish what Gaudi had begun in 1892 in, say, twenty-five or thirty years. I hope they make it - and I hope Barcelona isn't the capital of the Islamic Republic of

Catalonia when the Sagrada Familia is done.

The splendid book in question is *The Architecture of Ralph Adams Cram and His Office*, by Ethan Anthony. In the first half of the twentieth century, when architectural modernism was riding high, Ralph Adams Cram was the leading classical architect in America. His most famous buildings include the Princeton University Chapel, the Post Headquarters at West Point, St. Thomas Episcopal Church at Fifth Avenue and 53rd Street in New York (home to the greatest stone reredos in North America), Fourth Presbyterian Church on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, and, of course, the never-completed Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York. In addition to his magnificent churches – which he did in Gothic, Romanesque, Tudor, and Spanish Colonial, among other styles – Cram designed college campuses (Princeton, Rice, Sweet Briar, Boston University), public buildings, offices, and homes.

As Ethan Anthony puts it, neatly, Ralph Adams Cram was the “crusading knight” of American architecture, contesting for buildings that gave expression to the nobility of the human spirit and our aspiration to touch the true, the good, and the beautiful. If, as architect-friends tell me, contemporary construction economics make Cram’s stone-based work impossible to replicate, then we are the much the poorer, aesthetically, for it.

Antonio Gaudi and Ralph Adams Cram were two very different architects, whose work could hardly be considered parallel. Except, I would submit, in the most important sense: both men worked out of a profound Christian sensibility, informed by classic Christian ideas about the way the world is – and the way our stewardship of the world should function. If the banal plainness of Bauhaus modernism bespeaks spiritual aridity, the architecture of Gaudi and Cram is redolent with an intellectually sophisticated faith that never loses sight of the mystical, of that which is beyond our reason. That’s why their works soar.

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