

# LLUÍS DOMÈNECH I MONTANER, MODERNIST ARCHITECT



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THE "PALAU DE LA MÚSICA" IS CONSIDERED THE BEST EXAMPLE OF CATALAN MODERNISM: DOMÈNECH PUT AN IMMENSE AMOUNT OF WORK INTO ALL THE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF ITS CONSTRUCTION.

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**A**n overall picture of the different elements to be found in the work of Lluís Domènech i Montaner—educationalist, historian, politician and architect—would hardly be feasible, since the extent of his involvement in each of these activities requires that they be studied in detail, one by one. This article, therefore, is no more than a brief introduction to the architect's most important work.

Domènech was born in Barcelona in 1850 and died there in 1923. He studied at the Madrid School of Architecture, where he qualified as an architect on 13th December 1873. It should be mentioned that he maintained his links with the school between 1875 and 1920. These were also the years of activity of another architect, Antoni Gaudí (1852-1926). It is interesting that these two men, living at the same time, should have devoted a large part of their professional lives, one, to teaching, and the other, to the construc-

tion of the "Sagrada Família". Whereas Gaudí confronted the utopia of completing a project of monumental proportions, Domènech's work at the School of Architecture—first as a lecturer, then as professor and director, from 1900 to 1920—was always aimed at a programme of progress and modernity. It is worth emphasizing this point, since it reflects two very different ways of divulging a new architectural language.

Chronologically speaking, the first major

work one should mention is the Montaner i Simon publishing house, on *carrer Aragó*, in Barcelona, between the *Passeig de Gràcia* and the *Rambla de Catalunya*. This first building, completed between 1881 and 1884, already shows his wish to find a new architectural style. The simple arrangement of large windows set in brick walls, combined with elements that are reminiscent of industrial or railway architecture in their overall appearance, represented an important step on the path that was to shape the architect's career.

Earlier, at the age of twenty-eight, Domènech had written in the magazine *La Renaixença*: "En busca de una arquitectura nacional" (In search of a national architecture), the ideological declaration which led to his break with eclecticism. The article, then, should be seen as the first theoretical text setting out the need to find a new style.

At that time, Barcelona was preparing to





celebrate one of the most important urban events of the nineteenth century: the 1888 "Universal Exhibition". For this reason, Barcelona was plunged into a period of political, economic and promotional splendour. The architect Elias Rogent had the job of appointing professionals to design and construct the pavilions and other buildings needed for the event.

Lluís Domènech was given responsibility for two important buildings: the "Hotel Internacional", without doubt the most exciting architectural undertaking in the country, and the "Cafè-Restaurant de l'Exposició". The first made a great impression, both because of its size—five floors and sixty metres of frontage—and because of the eighty-three days it took to build. At the end of the six months the exhibition lasted, the building was dismantled and the only evidence of its

existence is contained in photographs and drawings of the period.

The "Cafè-Restaurant de l'Exposició" is the building that Oriol Bohigas has described as an example of honest construction and rationalist determination. For his part, Carles Flores speaks of the impressive robustness and strength of its lines and the rotundity of its brick surfaces, which are partly free of decorative elements.

These two opinions are more than mere commentaries and, if we look at the architecture of the rest of Europe, we can see that, conceptually and spatially, Domènech's work foreshadowed Berlage's structure for the Amsterdam stock-exchange, built between 1898 and 1903. Flores points out that Domènech was a talented architect who would have achieved international recognition had it not been for the varied, multidisciplinary nature of his work.

Domènech's most productive period, architecturally, can be placed between 1895 and 1905. These years saw the planning, construction and even, in some cases, the completion of such outstanding buildings as the "Sant Pau" hospital and the "Palau de la Música Catalana", as well as others, on a smaller scale but equally worthy of a proper study. Amongst these are the "Institut Pere Mata", the "Casa Navàs" and the "Casa Rull", in Reus (Tarragona), the "Casa Thomas", "Casa Lamadrid", "Casa Lleó Morera" and the "Fonda Espanya", in Barcelona and the "Gran Hotel de Mallorca" in Ciutat de Palma.

Out of the examples mentioned, the "Palau de la Música Catalana" and the "Sant Pau" hospital deserve special attention. The "Palau de la Música Catalana" is considered the best example of Catalan Modernism. Domènech put an immense





amount of work into all the different aspects of its construction, from matters connected with town-planning to the establishment of a dialogue amongst the large number of people who found themselves working together on the building. These collaborators included Domènech's son-in-law F. Guardia i Vial, responsible for the extension later added to the "Casa Thomas"; the sculptors M. Blay, E. Arnau and P. Gargallo; the glassworkers Rigalt and Granell; the modellists F. Bechini and F. Modolell; the mosaicists M. Maragliano, Ll. Bru and Ll. Querol, and many others who are not so well known.

Lluís Domènech managed to solve the problems of the irregularity and smallness of the site, set amongst narrow streets, with a perfectly ordered building arranged along axes that define its interior functionality. Special mention

must be made of the façade's double skin, in which an arrangement of columns and buttress-like elements protects a delicate inner skin that allows light and colour to flood the interior. The effect pays homage to the work of all those who collaborated.

Any mention of the "Sant Pau" hospital should be preceded by a few considerations regarding the city's layout, size and geometry. The hospital's pavilions are set at an angle of forty-five degrees to the lines of the grid system that forms the basis of the "Pla Cerdà". This has to be seen as a new, completely modern contribution to the city. The underground passages that link the pavilions and allow rapid communication between them were also a new idea. As well as allowing patients to get from one part of the hospital to another without having to worry about the weather, they are vital

to the feeling of calm one experiences in the overall view from the entrance. Once again, the layout of the large reception building, perfectly aligned with the *Avinguda Gaudí*, fits in exactly with the rest of the chamfered corners of the *Eixample*.

It could be said that Domènech, as an architect, was full of practical new ideas, lived in perfect harmony with his society and, with a rational conception, welcomed and revived traditional craftwork. His role in history is a result of his architectural work.

Josep Puig i Cadafalch said of him, "He was a real artist. He was the epitome of balance, at once a designer of buildings and of towns. He is one of our country's greatest glories".

This final comment is suitable praise for the man who was a politician, educationalist, historian and architect. ■