

Antoni Gaudí: Casa Bellesguard as the Key to His Symbolism

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Part I

A STUDY OF CASA BELLESGUARD

The historical importance of Bellesguard

The first thing to know about Casa Bellesguard is that it is built on a site of special significance for the history of Catalonia: in the late Middle Ages, King Martin the Humane of Catalonia and Aragon lived there.

As his letters and the chroniclers of the period say, the king particularly loved this place, set on the slopes of a low range of hills, for the climate and the views that it gave him of the plain down to the city of Barcelona and the Mediterranean Sea.

When the king arrived there, he took charge personally of remodelling it, and he had a selection of fruit trees planted next to a small stream of sparkling water. King Martin, by then a widower, loved to go walking there and observe the ships putting into port, to see if he could identify any that might be bringing him news of his son Martin the Younger, who was on the island of Sardinia fighting against the local rebellion.

Nevertheless, within the period of a year, between the spring of 1409 and 1410, a series of events took place here that changed the course of the country's history. On 14th July 1409, at Bellesguard, the king received the good news of his son's victory in the Battle of Sanluri. The whole city was festooned with decorations for a few days. However, the happiness did not last long, for on 4th August another ship arrived from Sardinia with two messengers, who quickly went up to Bellesguard and gave the king the sad news of the death from a fever of Martin the Younger, his only remaining son.

This was the start of a serious crisis over the succession in Catalonia that required quick negotiations and decisions. Within a few weeks, a new marriage was organized for the king. Three candidates were presented, and King Martin, by then old and frail, chose Margaret of Prades, the youngest and most beautiful, whom he married on 17th September in the chapel at Bellesguard.

For a year, the king and the queen tried to produce a new heir at Bellesguard, apparently by resorting to all kinds of stratagems, including potions prepared by the best alchemists. But nothing worked, and on 3rd May 1410 King Martin the Humane died childless in the convent of Valldonzella, not far from Bellesguard.

From that moment onwards, a great struggle broke out between various supporters of one or another successor to the throne, until on 28th June 1412 the Compromise of Caspe proclaimed Ferdinand of Antequera, king of Castile, as the new sovereign of the Crown of Aragon. This signalled the end of the House of Barcelona, the Catalan dynasty that had reigned for over 600 years.

After the death of King Martin, the castle was inherited by his widow, Margaret of Prades, and it later passed from one set of hands to another over the centuries. It is a fact, though, that those events have marked Bellesguard. In 1888, it was purchased by Joan Baptista Grau i Vallespinós, a scholarly archaeologist who was in love with the place and its history. He was the bishop of Astorga and a personal friend of Gaudí's. But Bishop Grau died in 1893, just when Gaudí was building his bishop's palace, and the castle was placed in the hands of his executors.

Some time later, on 12th June 1900, one Maria Sagués Molins, the widow of Jaume Figueras, purchased the estate from Bishop Grau's executors. The person who signed the contract of sale on behalf of Maria Sagués was Antoni Gaudí, because –so they say– she could not write. A few days later, Gaudí began building Casa Bellesguard.

At that time, the *Renaixença*¹ was in full swing in Catalonia, a movement standing up for Catalonia's language and culture. Influenced by the ideas of German Romanticism, it presented an idealized picture of the Middle Ages. Gaudí had been personally associated with some of the intellectuals, artists and patrons who had been promoting the movement for many years, and he played an active part in some of its most important institutions.

In other words, Bellesguard is historically very important for the Catalan nation. It symbolizes great expectations, but also profound disappointment. There can be no doubt that when, in 1900, Gaudí decided to construct a building there, he was fully aware of the place's importance in his country's history.

¹ The Catalan word *renaixença* means "rebirth".

A description of the estate

Now, when we visit Casa Bellesguard, we can see and list a number of features.

The grounds are encircled by a low battlemented wall, and just after passing through the entrance gate, on the left we find the ruins of the castle that King Martin had lived in, and which Gaudí restored. His renovation left a small-scale representation of the fortress with very sober lines, contrasting with the textural and chromatic richness of the building that he created a few metres away.

The castle, then, consists of a portal between two towers, an inner courtyard and a staircase leading to a walkway that runs around two sides of the walls. The most significant thing about it is a coat of arms designed by Gaudí himself and set above the central voussoirs of the portal. This coat of arms is the first puzzle we come across. It features the Catalan flag in an inverted square and, on the four sides, two years and two badges: on the left, at the top, the year 1409, and below it, a face with a bandage over the eyes and another passing over the chin; and on the right, at the bottom, the year 1909, and above it, a sun. The year 1409 could refer to the moment when King Martin received the news of his son's death, and 1909 to the moment when Gaudí finished Casa Bellesguard. But what about the face with the two bandages and the sun? What do they mean?

In front of the castle ruins, we find a boundary cross. Its base is formed by a *trencadís* (a mosaic of small pieces of coloured pottery) depicting a sea and four blue lions. An iron shaft topped by a two-armed cross rises from the base. On the surface, it looks like a simple boundary cross with features typical of Gaudí's style. But upon observing it more closely, one realizes that there is a prevailing overall directional idea: the four lions seem to be guarding something in a rough sea, and emerging from it, by way of the helicoidal shape of the shaft, there is a force that rises and culminates in the cross. An arm with a lamp that lights the way at night comes out of the top of the shaft. At the end of this arm there is a small, subtle undulation that seems to be pointing towards the house, in the centre. Indeed, the whole boundary cross synthesizes and anticipates what we shall find in the building's pinnacle. This culminates in a helicoid-shaped flag, a crown and another cross, this time with four arms.

After walking up a slightly winding path through rose bushes and ancient trees, we come to the main façade of Antoni Gaudí's building. It is a neo-Gothic style detached house, the vertical nature of which is imposing. The ground-floor windows have spiky window boxes looking like animals' claws about to attack anyone who dares come close. Above them are long windows with long thin mullions, giving the effect of exaggerated slenderness. At the top we see a row of windows with mullions that are also spiral-shaped, crowned by narrow merlons.

On the left-hand side of this main front, there is an ensemble that we can see has a unity of its own, and which is composed of the entrance door surrounded by geometric mouldings, symmetrically arranged windows, hierarchically set raised balconies, and elongated stained-glass windows. In the middle of this formation, over the door, we find the aforementioned window, in which the hierarchical verticality of the front wall is reproduced. Here, however, it is through a shape that is staggered at the bottom, lobulated at the top, and a window with vertical bands that end in the multi-coloured stained glass eight-pointed star, surrounded by a dark-blue tiled intrados with bright white five-pointed stars.

About this window, many things have been said.¹ Indeed, one could spend a long time there looking at it and letting one's imagination roam. And yet, of all the impressions, there is one that I feel is crucial: the fact that in this mysterious ensemble one can make out something quite precise, whose meaning, however, cannot be grasped at first sight. An interpretation such as this may be the point of departure for new research.

At the top of this left-hand side of the house, there is the pinnacle ending in the three features mentioned above, done in brightly coloured *trencadís*. These are the red and yellow striped flag in the form of a helix, the white crown and the four-armed cross, white too but with red ends. And here, the same vertical force that in the boundary cross emerged from the bottom of the sea seems to well up from inside the house, culminating in these three components that may be understood as symbols of the rebirth of the Catalan nation, the recovery of sovereignty and the spreading of the Christian message, respectively. In truth, this left-hand side has a richness and uniqueness that is not repeated on any of the house's other walls.

Thus, by adding up all the elements that I have just described, one realizes that the work itself suggests the idea that something of great value inside the house is

¹ Joan Bassegoda, in his book *Gaudí*, p. 91, says about it: "On the staircase there is a stained glass window with a star in relief, with polychrome panes of green and purple hues, which may symbolize Venus, given that the façade faces westwards, where the evening star shines, and it may signify both the fall of the Catalan dynasty and the royal wedding celebrated there." Bassegoda also says in *El gran Gaudí* (The Great Gaudí), p. 441: "Various authors have said that in this window there must have been a depiction of the birth of Christ and that the star was a figuration of the one that accompanied the Three Kings of Orient and that, as it was a royal star, it must have been a tribute to King Martin. However, the fact that this window faces southwest seems to disprove the hypothesis of the star of Orient. Given its orientation, it seems more logical to consider that this star represents Venus, the evening star, which when it is furthest from the sun shines at night in the west. If this hypothesis were true, it would explain the place of this star on the west wall, and as Venus is the goddess of love it could be dedicated to the wedding of Martin the Humane and Margaret of Prades".

being defended tooth and nail. However, this allusion appears expressed in such a grotesque and light-hearted way that visitors cannot fail to feel tempted to go inside to discover for themselves what this valuable thing is that it wishes to preserve.

Inside the house

To enter the house, we have to push a solid door with a wrought-iron grille representing boating knots. On its lintel, in very large letters, an inscription can be read reproducing an ancient greeting that used to be made here alluding to the dogma of the Immaculate Conception: “Ave Maria Puríssima, sens pecat fou concebuda...” (Hail Purest Mary, Conceived Without Sin).

Once inside, in the stairwell, what immediately strikes us is the great amount of light there, accentuated by the whiteness of the walls and by the austerity of the decor. In contrast to that is the vividness of some elements such as tiles and stained glass windows, especially the one with the multi-coloured star, which seems to expand from within like a beating heart.

Moreover, the verticality perceived on the outside continues inside, suggested with details to be found on the bars and knobs of the grille, on a central light, all of them done in wrought iron worked as if it were paper, configuring pyramidal and helicoid shapes that point upwards. This upward thrust is also felt in the rooms of the apartment, with arches rising to high ceilings, suggesting hazy ribbed forms. All in all, it produces a feeling of fragile and delicate balance that, however, breathes and maintains itself as if it were an animate creature of nature.

Inside, however, the verticality is above all experienced, disturbingly, as one goes up the staircase and the steps get narrower, producing a slight feeling of breathlessness, and the impression of being subtly introduced into a sort of initiation process. For a few moments, this feeling fades when we reach the top of the staircase, open a small door, and find a large brightly lit square-shaped room, with the rows of windows on all four sides, and vaults formed by ingenious combinations of bricks.

Upon leaving this room and going up the last part of the staircase, the narrowest of all, we reach a second smaller attic, with an equally square-shaped base and four walls that meet the ceiling by way of Gothic arches. It is a silent cavity, where one perceives a very special light that enters through four windows; very bright, but dense and corpuscular, it suggests through plastic means the states recounted by medieval mystics. In my opinion, this is the fundamental part of the entire visit.

After descending the last steps, we can go outside, where there is a walkway going round the four walls of the house, and also some flights of steps zigzagging

up to a small square-shaped terrace above the second attic. This is the highest accessible part of the house, very close to the pinnacle, where the four-armed cross points to the four points of the compass. From here, you have a magnificent view of the port of Barcelona, where you actually can see the ships entering and leaving.

Nevertheless, after visiting the inside of the house one cannot fail to feel to some extent surprised and at the same time disappointed: nothing has been found to indicate from where that vigour emerges, that elevating and hopeful force that was perceived from the outside, but which inside is only indirectly expressed, through the light. And it is here that one begins to become aware that in Casa Bellesguard there is a very well connected symbolic whole, whose meaning, however, can only be understood through a more in-depth study.

What has been written about Casa Bellesguard

When you read what has been written about Casa Bellesguard, the first disconcerting thing is that there is very little about this building in comparison with other works by Gaudí.

Secondly, it is also strange that there are quite a few doubts about exactly when and how the architect planned it, how it was built, who took part and to what extent. Nevertheless, I believe that the following stages in the construction and participation can quite probably be accepted:

- a) Once the building license had been issued on 25th October 1901, Gaudí concentrated on building the house until 1902.
- b) He subsequently diverted the path leading to Sant Gervasi cemetery, which until then passed between the two towers of the castle ruins, and he built a viaduct for the new path. In the meantime, he rebuilt the castle, joining together the two towers with the voussoired portal and placing the coat of arms at the top. Finally, he enclosed the grounds with a wall that included the castle, the house and a few hectares of land.
- c) By 1909, Gaudí's work at Bellesguard was done. But in 1916 he ordered his assistant Domènec Sugranyes to put a few finishing touches to the estate, which included a porter's lodge, the boundary cross, some *trencadís* benches, and a few wrought-iron and ceramic decorative elements inside the house.

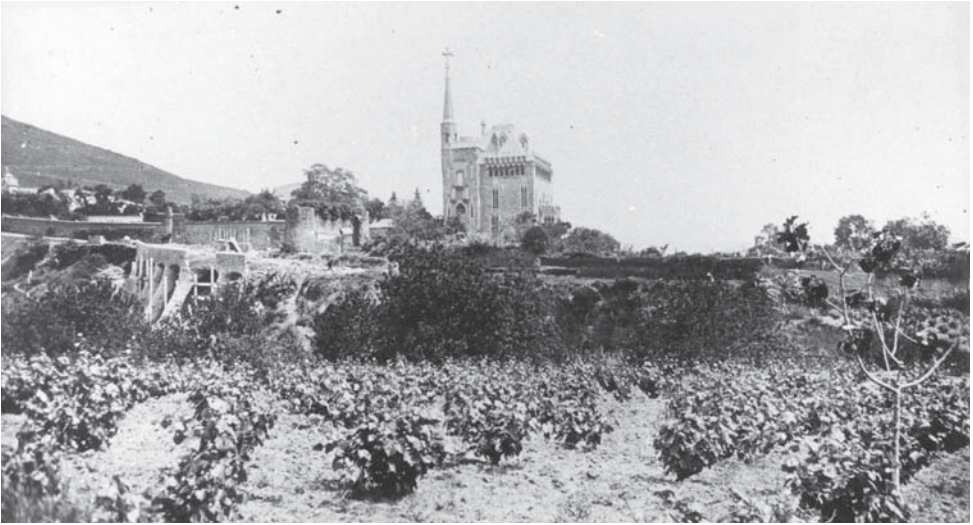


Figure 1. Casa Bellesguard around 1908.

Thirdly, in all that can be read about Casa Bellesguard, there are two things that have caught my eye:

- a) The fact that at Bellesguard, unusually, Gaudí did not want any of his regular collaborators to help him.¹
- b) And that ever since the work was finished different architects have wondered how Gaudí managed to get the attics to stay up.¹¹

In my opinion, these two points make the idea that there is something to discover in this building more believable, something that Gaudí left there and which must be guessed by interpreting the work itself. And, moreover, that in this search

¹ On this question, according to Joan Matamala, Joan Rubió i Bellver, one of Gaudí's usual helpers, once said to him: "Mister Gaudí wished to plan and direct Bellesguard from the beginning to the end. He did not want us to help him" (*Antoni Gaudí. Mi itinerario con el arquitecto* [Antoni Gaudí. My Itinerary with the Architect], p. 140.)

¹¹ In reference to this matter, besides the testimonies that I have gathered from certain people that over the years lived at Casa Bellesguard and which I shall explain later, there is also what some scholars have written about it. Thus, for example, Joan Bassegoda states that, "the architect Rubió was right to say that there were many things at Bellesguard that he did not know how they stayed up" (*El gran Gaudí* [The Great Gaudí], p. 443); and Josep M^a Poblet says that, at Casa Bellesguard everything "stands up," it seems, "haphazardly", and that "it is, moreover, a new geometry, at one and the same time implausible and decorative" (*Gaudí. L'home i el geni* [Gaudí. The Man and the Genius], p. 89).

the house's attics occupy an important place, something that coincides with the aesthetic impression that one gets when visiting the inside of the building.

The analysis of the plans

At this point, we must now examine the plans of Casa Bellesguard (see figure 2).

So, in a first interpretation of the plans, we see that in the house's structure the square-shaped floor plan stands out, which can be clearly seen in the attics.

Also, the diagonals of this square shape point north, east, south and west, just as the four arms of the cross on top of the pinnacle do. This means that the four sides of the house face northeast, southeast, southwest and northwest.

Moreover, when analysing the figures in this square shape in the loft, which consist in several concentric squares –some of them inverted in relation to the previous one– we can infer the three basic shapes in Euclidian geometry, the square, the circumference and the triangle.

And furthermore, in the plans of the house's two main apartments, one can see a similar arrangement consisting in a central nave around which the rooms are distributed; and that the naves in the apartments are perpendicular to one another, so that if we superimpose the two plans, the shape of a Greek cross is also outlined in the square-shaped floor plan.

In short, we can say that a square shape predominates in the plans of Casa Bellesguard, in which we can make out the square, the circumference, the triangle, the Greek cross and the diagonals (see figure 3).

All these figures have the same central point, which in the vertical section corresponds to an axis (see figure 4). This central point-axis is what we have already seen alluded to as a force in the shaft of the boundary cross, in decorative features of the house and in the three elements that crown the pinnacle, the helical-shaped flag, the crown and the four-armed cross. However, we now see that after analysing the plans we have found its principal location in Casa Bellesguard: right in the middle of the square-shaped floor plan, as the centre of the geometry of the whole building.

And yet we have not managed to clarify much, because as can be seen inside the house, this central point-axis has no decorative or functional features coinciding with it, and which therefore could show us how it manages to become the force it is and what significance it has.

Therefore it seems as if Gaudí had arranged everything in this work to make visitors feel questioned –just as Socrates questioned his interlocutors– and thus begin to seek its meaning for themselves.

A STUDY OF CASA BELLESGUARD

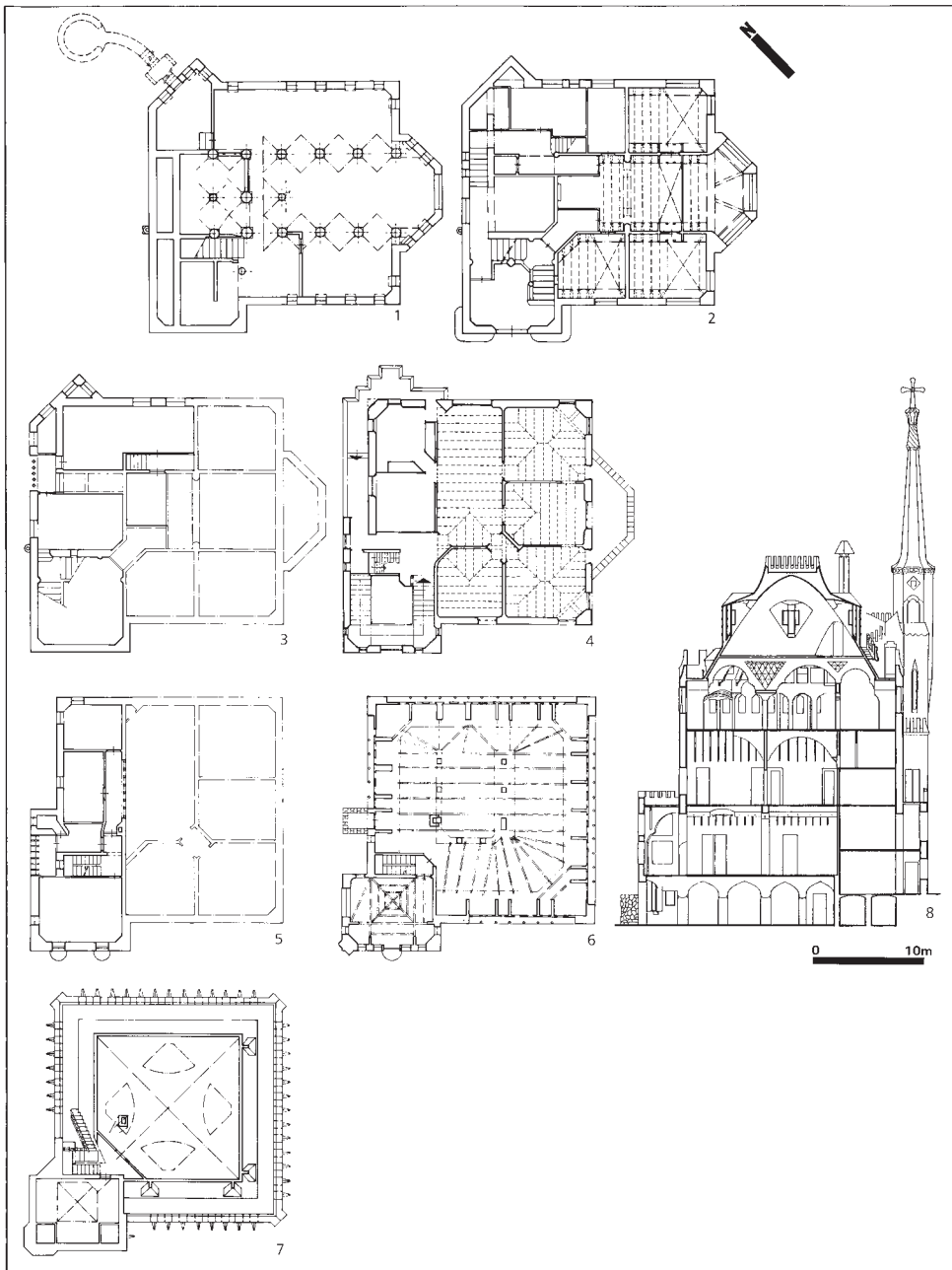


Figure 2. Plans of Casa Bellesguard.

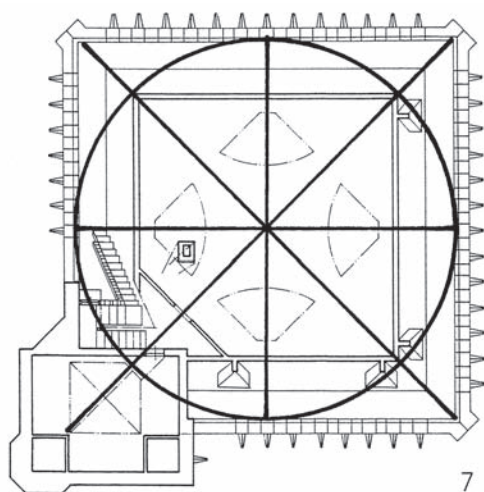


Figure 3. Basic geometric shapes, in the square plan of Casa Bellesguard.

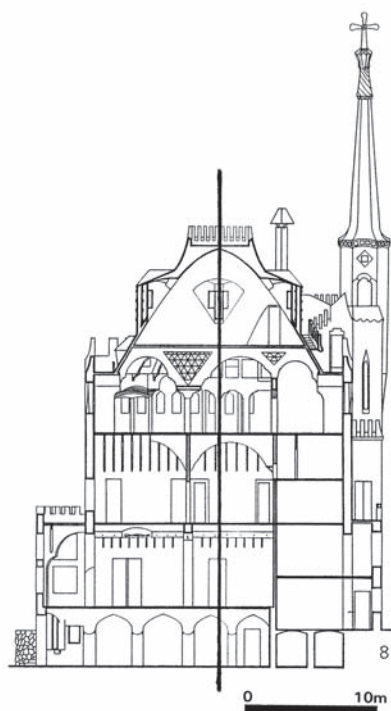


Figure 4. The central point-axis, in the vertical section of Casa Bellesguard.

First conclusion

To recap, after visiting the grounds and the inside of Casa Bellesguard, after reading what has been written about it and analysing its plans, one becomes aware that from the beginning this entire building—the arrangement of the various features, the decorative forms and the geometry—is organized in such a way that it points to the existence of a central point that is also a vertical axis, a central point-axis, however, that for the moment is a great mystery, the answer to which does not seem to be at Bellesguard. This implies that this meaning may be elsewhere, a second place that has to be sought.

And then, in this empty space, the questions come thick and fast: what could this second place be? Where must we look for it? Where do we begin looking?