



Cultural Center

Gaudì Calls the Future

Etsuro Sotoo talks about his work and Gaudí's legacy to posterity.

**Wednesday, April 30, 200 at 7:00 PM
Fordham University, New York, NY**

Simmonds: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank the co-sponsor of tonight's event, the Department of Visual Arts at Fordham University, and Radius, the Fordham student club that helped organize it. We are very honored to have with us tonight Etsuro Sotoo as part of our "Face to face with..." series of events. The idea of this series is simply to create occasions for us to encounter men and women whose life and work we find striking and fascinating, and to ask them to share with us their experience. Words like "encounter" and "fascination" seem especially appropriate in the case of Etsuro Sotoo, since all of his life and work have been marked by his encounter with another man, the great Spanish architect Antoni Gaudí. For over 30 years, Mr. Sotoo, Japanese by birth, has been working as a sculptor on Gaudí's unfinished masterpiece, the basilica of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Spain. The encounter with Gaudí has transformed not only Etsuro Sotoo's art, but all of his life, and has been decisive in his conversion to Catholicism. In an age when it is assumed that artistic creation is just a reflection of an artist's genius, it is remarkable to meet someone who recognizes that great art also involves obedience: both obedience to the vision of another man, but more deeply obedience to one's original experience of beauty, which points to the Mystery of God. In fact, this obedience and the fascination with the Mystery of God were some of the deepest characteristics of Gaudí himself, who always believed that the designs of nature are the masterworks of the Creator, and that his own life's mission was to produce beautiful creations that incorporated nature's themes and glorified God's work. He liked to say that men create nothing, but can make their contribution by observing nature in order to capture a sparkle of the beauty of God. This insight applies to all of us: We all participate in the Mystery of creation by going through our daily work, if only we live the same openness to the presence of the Mystery that Gaudí witnessed to us.

To help us in our encounter with Etsuro Sotoo, we have here tonight a great friend of Crossroads, Prof. Francis Greene of St. Francis College, who is a distinguished art and architecture historian, as well as an accomplished architectural photographer. Dr. Greene is also a great expert of Gaudí and of the Sagrada Familia, and it is with great pleasure that I hand him the microphone to start our dialogue with Etsuro Sotoo.

Greene: Thank you, Rita. Before I introduce our guest, our speaker this evening, I'd like to say a personal word about my experience of the Sagrada Familia. I went to Barcelona for the first time in 1993. Of course, I was overwhelmed by the city, its cosmopolitan qualities. I started with the Ramblas, and then I began my exploration of Gaudí. I began first with the domestic architecture, with the Casa Batlo, the Casa Milà, then I went to the Guel Park, and I had seen some of the earlier buildings, and then finally I came to the Sagrada Familia in June of that year. As any visitor, I was completely overwhelmed. There's so much happening there. First of all, a great cathedral, partially Gothic in

inspiration, but encompassing many other styles—modernismo and many other aspects. The fact that it's a rare occasion to be able to see a cathedral still being worked on 100 years later in an age when in our city a high rise can rise while we're away on vacation. To see the sculpture, the spires, and the progress on the nave, to be able to visit Gaudí's grave, to see the architectural models and all the scientific planning that he had put into it, and then, finally, I came to the façade and stood in front of the Gaudí façade. I think, that, like any visitor, I came to realize that there was something there more than the totality of all the parts—a presence, a power that I suspect was both artistic and spiritual. And in my own experience there is only one other place I had been where I experienced that, and that was at Assisi.

So it is my pleasure this evening to welcome the sculptor of the Sagrada Familia, and to introduce Mr. Etsuro Sotoo, who was born in was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1953. In 1977, he graduated from the Kyoto University of Fine Arts and worked as a teacher in Japan. In 1978, he started working in Barcelona as a sculptor in the Temple of the Sagrada Familia, designed by Antoni Gaudí. He has been a professor at the Escola Taller attached to the Temple since 1989. He has sculpted hundreds of pieces for the Temple, and in 2000 he completed, with the "15 Angels," and in so doing completed the Nativity Façade of the Sagrada Familia which was started by Gaudí himself over one hundred years earlier. Also in Barcelona, in 1991, he collaborated in the restoration of the Domenech i Muntaner di Canet de Mar Museum, and in 2004 he authored the monument to Luis Vitton in Barbera del Valles. Sotoo has also created several works of art for his hometown, where he plans to work as a university professor starting in 2008. He is the author of several publications, and was awarded the Ars Spiritus Prize of Lladro in 2002 and the Fukuoka Prize for Culture in 2003. Mr. Sotoo, we welcome you, and we are honored to have you with us this evening.

We're going to begin our dialogue about art and about the Sagrada Familia and about Mr. Sotoo's work, by asking a series of questions to which he will respond, and on behalf of our audience, we ask this question: We know that beauty impacts our humanity and our personality, and it (beauty) forces us to see that our heart is made to recognize beauty. What impact has working on Gaudí's Sagrada Familia for 30 years made first on your sculpture, and on your work as an artist? How has it changed your perception of beauty?

Sotoo: Good evening. Thank you very much for coming. I hope to answer this question during my whole presentation.

First of all, I'd like to explain how I arrived at the Sagrada Familia. As Professor Greene has explained to you, I had worked for a year as a professor. Every day my life was dynamic and passionate, but I had all my students questioning me, but I was asking myself, who do I ask MY questions to? I was very young and I needed something to receive all of the force, not only of my psyche, but also of my own body. Still, as a young man I would try to break the rock. I could handle wood, and I could handle metal, but I couldn't handle the rock. I wanted to mold this to my own will, but the rock wouldn't let me, and the following day it would just fall apart. At first, and still young, I would cut the rock, and I would think, I am the artist, and I am the one who is going to transform this, but the rock wouldn't let me. The rock also has its own spirit. We are all brothers and come from a father and a mother, but each one has a different character. So I really have to get to know each piece of rock because I can't change the character of the rock. So little by little I realized that I couldn't really change the rock, but the rock is going to change my way, and little by little I started finding my way through the rock. So I'm not going to change the rock; the rock is going to change me. I discovered a mystery.

So I wanted to change the way I was going, so I was a professor, I stopped, and I was going to follow the path where the rock was, and this was sculpture in Europe. And rock brought me to Europe, and Europe has presented to me the Sagrada Familia. This is the map of 1859, the time of Gaudí, that I'm showing. In Gaudí's time, Barcelona was just growing and it was just this small area that was there. Nowadays it's this, and this is the Sagrada Familia which is in the heart of Barcelona. When I arrived in Barcelona, I was surprised that the whole city was made of rock, but mostly the Sagrada Familia was made completely of rock. I am Japanese, and I was looking at the Sagrada Familia like every Japanese—with my mouth wide open, but I came to look for the stone. Next to the Sagrada Familia there was a whole pile of stone and this was the stone I was looking for to see if I could touch one of those pieces of stone. I tried to talk to two of Gaudí's disciples, they were older people, and I was showing them pictures of my work, and one of them was a rock that was twisted. My interest was just that, the stone, the rock, not the Sagrada Familia. They gave me an examination, but I didn't really understand Spanish or Catalan, but somebody came to me and said, "Congratulations." My idea was I was going to cut a piece of stone and then go back to Japan. But it was my luck that I didn't speak Spanish because they took me as a sculptor.

As a sculptor of the Sagrada Familia, I had to get to know the person who made it—Gaudí. This was my first job. In 1978 I didn't know anything about Gaudí or what he wanted to accomplish. This first job set before me two problems: As I calculated, this structure ends up 1 centimeter thick. You can get the stone to be one centimeter (that's a little less than an inch) thick, but why do it? And the other thing is that structurally this is very weak. The other question was how I would set up the composition of the sculptures. And thinking about it, there were days I couldn't even sleep. But Spanish wine helps one sleep! So finally I found that the question about the weak structure and where to put them were all in one question, it hung together. So for that weak spot it would be putting sculptures of leaves, and this would also help in the composition. This was my first contact with Gaudí. So even though he died in 1926, all of this has been Gaudí's teaching to me. Even if the person is long gone, if the student is there doing his work, the person is alive. This was my first contact and my first lesson from Gaudí, and it was very important. And it was very important because structure and sculpture can't be separated. And also the structure and the sculpture coming together with the symbolism—that's the lesson of Gaudí.

Each new piece that I've made has been a new lesson from Gaudí; for example, the next one which is leaves and fruit. Each sculpture is 800 kilos or one ton of rock. For each one I start cutting the rock on Monday and I finish on Friday, that's five days. And I've done hundreds of the stones. That's why you see I'm very strong for a Japanese man! And I also had to think about why Gaudí wanted to put all these leaves and fruit throughout the Sagrada Familia. And one of the reasons is Gaudí liked fruit. But that's not the reason for the sculpture. Here is the Temple. What is it? Every day the good words of Jesus are spoken. Gaudí had to express this very important work, and he also learned from nature and used nature. So imagine this—we love fruit so we go to the supermarket. But in nature you find fruit and many leaves. We don't buy the leaves, only the fruit. But in nature you need hundreds of thousands of leaves because without the leaves there's no fruit. And thanks to the leaves we change CO₂ into oxygen, and this is a great job that they do. This is a great symbol to us. This is life. In Spain nobody knew exactly why—not the priests, not the bishops, they didn't know why there was so much fruit. In the Bible the most important thing that we know exists is the Word. The Japanese and Chinese use symbols. In Japan we write "word" with the symbols "page" or "leaf." (I'm speaking in Spanish, but I would like to speak Japanese, but I don't have any Japanese friends here to translate. I'm speaking in Spanish so I can understand you; it's a little complicated, but I have to say it.) Be it Spanish or English, out of my mouth are leaves coming out. With these leaves, I'm putting energy or nourishment out, and I'm hoping it arrives to you where it will be energy and nourishment. In life, words are very important,

but the words by themselves don't carry nourishment, and we need that. A word that comes from the heart, reaches the heart. A word that comes from the brain will reach the brain, but it won't reach the heart. And that has no nourishment. Each year there are new leaves and new fruit, and more leaves and more fruit, but the form of the leaves is the same. And a leaf from last year is no good. Energy from the root of the tree needs to give birth to a fresh leaf. And thanks to thousands of these fresh leaves, fruit comes out. So the fruit is our soul, our heart. And this is why Gaudí wanted all this fruit.

Here is a window and it's full of fruit. And at the top of everything there's fresh, ripe, colorful fruit with no leaves because when our body gives up, our soul rises. When a person has heard a lot of good words and has read a lot of good books, his soul is ripe fruit, but up there there are no words; you don't need any words. You only have enriched souls, and each country is a different culture, so there are different fruits that we have. Our life is given us so we can enrich our souls. So we like to read good books, see good art, or hear good music to enrich ourselves. So they are all words, leaves with pure nourishment. So up there you have all the ripe, colorful fruit—cherries, plums, peaches. And here are leaves that are already done with their work and are starting to dry. And at the bottom we have both leaves and fruit—the fruit isn't ripe yet; our soul is still green; it hasn't been ripened. Up there they're separate. So at the bottom I had to make fresh leaves and at the top, leaves that are starting to dry. At the bottom there's a shield that I designed; it represents the artisans because thanks to the artisans, this whole structure is held up.

Here is an important part. This is the only interior that Gaudí completed. All of Gaudí's blueprints were kept here when the war started in 1936. All the blueprints that were burnt and destroyed were Gaudí's. Now a Japanese man has come and restored, and that's me. Here I found that I was restoring Gaudí's will, his testament. For example, the bomb that fell here and killed 20 people, most of these people were known by Gaudí. And Gaudí wanted to express drama when it happened. Behind this person there is a lizard, a demon, who is saying, "Take this." And this person threw the bomb. We already know his name—Santiago Santiago. Gaudí wanted to represent him before he threw the bomb. This hand that is almost ready to grab the bomb hasn't grabbed it yet. Before grabbing the bomb, he looks at the Virgin. And he is convinced that we have to throw this bomb; we have to change the world. So a man, when he's convinced in his ideology, that's the point where the demon comes in. A humble person who's not really convinced about doing something, the demon cannot really convince him. So the man who has already decided, it's me who has to change things; it's me who has to throw the bomb, that's where the demon comes in.

This picture doesn't show it very well, but on the other side there's a young woman who is asking the Virgin for money. "I'm the one who's doing something right. I'm getting this not for myself, but to save my neighbor who needs some medicine, so give me the money." All of this is the story that I have to invent so I can find the expression of the face. This young girl has a good heart and a good intention, but this is the moment that the demon enters. Gaudí is asking, even though she has a good heart and good intentions, is she going to grab the money?

This room here is called "The Rosary Room," but it's really the room of temptation. And this is what happens throughout the history of humanity. It happens on a day to day basis. All of this had disappeared, so I had to do it, and I finished all of this. And I understood that this was a very important part; this was the heart of Gaudí; this was his testament. A great blueprint to build the future Sagrada Familia because if we fall into temptation, whoever builds the temple, it's not going to be a temple. Here we also have David and Solomon who also fell into temptation, Isaac and Jacob who also did. Gaudí didn't only express it through the Bible, but also through his feeling, because there are no bombs

in the Bible. And here is where the blueprints were burnt, but this is the most important blueprint for the temple.

There is little time left, so we're going to rush a little bit. I've worked for 30 years on this, but there was always a question in my mind, how could a man 80 years ago draw all of this? For example, this was the first angel that I did. There was no money to do this, but thanks to this angel, there was more to make. And the harp and the second bassoon, that's the music of religion. And the violin and the zither are the classical instruments. And the piccolo and the harmonica and the drum are typical local musical instruments of Catalonia. And finally, then there was money, so I finished the nine children of the chorus. So 15 Angels that were missing from the façade that Gaudí started, I finished. But we can't forget humility. All this is thanks to Gaudí. I finished this façade in 2000, and in 2005 it was named Heritage by UNESCO. There is another façade that's been finished, but it hasn't been named. I didn't do that one.

The pelican is in the exact center of the whole façade. It's the most important place, but it's a pelican. It's a symbol of the love of a mother, the symbol of the love of God. Because we can't say that a physical object is the love of God. But the love of a parent to his or her children is the love of God. This was restored, but there were no chicks. This is what I put in and this is marble, strong. This is a symbol, the hungry chicks, and before restoring I wanted to see it up close, but I couldn't see Gaudí's original. The only way was you'd have to set two boards, and there was 16 meters, which is over 100 feet down; it was nothing. And why did Gaudí hide the love of God in such a difficult place? Because the love of God, the love of your mother, if you're near, you can't see. There are several young people here. If they live with their mother or their parents, it's very difficult—how you eat, sleep, but one day you leave home—Oh, yeah, freedom! But the first thing you feel is that you miss the love of your mother who took care of you. I know it because I'm very far from my mother. This relates to art a little bit—freedom and art. You want to feel freedom, but at first you can't feel freedom; you feel fear. So Gaudí said that art is the splendor of the light of the truth. Truth without love does not exist.

Gaudí was born in Tarragona where there is Roman culture. There are a lot of things left over from the Romans. Here is the house of Gaudí's grandparents, and as a child he always lived here and he didn't go to school because he was sick with rheumatism, and his older sister and brother died before he was born, so his parents didn't mind that he didn't go to school. They just wanted him to survive. Because Gaudí couldn't go to school, he was always alone. It's a lot more difficult for a person who is always by himself, but in Gaudí it awoke his power of observation. So there was a lot of nature around his grandparents' house, and it became Gaudí's best friend. This is called "Cats Claw." I went there, and only this was near his grandparents' house. Doesn't it look like this sculpture? At 70 years old, Gaudí already knew all the dogma and all the theory of religion, but he didn't place it on top of these spires. He thought about it for a long time and then he decided he was going to put something that meant true happiness for him. Thanks to his friend, Nature, he didn't feel alone. This was the true thing that made him happy. There's no thinking reason here, only the heart. And placing this here, Gaudí put all the symbols, the miter, the hat, the staff and the ring—those are the important symbols of the apostles. Gaudí said, "If I want to make important things, first is love, and then technique." Nowadays, it's either the other way around, or it's forgetting about love. We have to remember the doors of the future open with passion, with fire, not with thought. When the universe began, the first thing was light. I hope that here in New York, so full of theories and materials, you remember the opening of the doors for the future is with passion, with heart.

I'd like to explain a lot more things. You can't forget that nature never forgets. But if we look for

harmony within nature, then our future is forever. After finishing only one of the towers in 1926, Gaudí died in a transit accident. His last words before the accident were, “Gentlemen, tomorrow we’ll do better.” I’m saying to you, tomorrow we live better, with heart, and nature. Thank you very much.

Greene: Thank you, Mr. Sotoo. Thank you so much. I think many of us, when we came here this evening, we had studied the Sagrada Familia or we may have visited it, and we thought we understood it, but tonight you have given us new eyes to begin to see it and truly understand. Thank you.

Sotoo: I’m here with you. This time and space is unique. I want to live with you, and to live we need to talk and question and ask, and we share this authentic space and time that we have been given. Time which we think is clock time, is not. If there are any architects here, you’ll say, okay, space is a measurement, meters. That is not so either. Great scientists say that time is relative to each one’s speed. Space is also the same. Each one feels his own in his heart. And we share the same space, but it’s different because we all are of a different heart. But if there’s a question that’s from the heart, and I can answer, reply from the heart, then we are sharing the same space and time.

Question: How did you work on the Sagrada Familia without Gaudí’s original plans?

Sotoo: I explained that Gaudí’s blueprints were burned. But there is stone around with works that come from Gaudí’s ideas. But if we look carefully at the stone, if we touch carefully the stone, if we ask the stone the right question, the answer is right there behind the stone. I speak to the stone. I trust you won’t tell anyone, but that’s the truth. I speak to the stone and the stone answers, sometimes in a brisk way, because I work pretty strongly with the stone and with a hammer, but that’s the way it comes out. But I’m not breaking the stone. I’m bringing it out. It’s like when you come into a room; it’s new, but it happens. So I’m asking, “May I come in, or not?” And by the sound of the stone, I understand. And so I’m just a tool, as well as Gaudí. We coincide in that we have respect for the stone and we also have respect for the work.

There’s a story. There was one of the workers who was a drunkard. His wife spoke to Gaudí. She said, “Please, my husband isn’t bringing in the money.” So if this is a normal enterprise to work on this temple, this worker should be out in the street. So Gaudí spoke to this worker. He said, “First and foremost is the family. This work is not that important. First you have to take care of your family. What is more important, the work, or your family?” And incredibly, even nowadays, Gaudí had valued each family. Because if we’re talking about work alone, and the worker doesn’t matter, then the work cannot be done. Gaudí made this school for the children of the workers so the workers could be happy working because hope is the best thing that a worker gets. If this didn’t exist, this wouldn’t be a temple. And also in 126 years that this has been being built, there has not been one single fatality of any of the workers. What is important is that all the workers have love for this temple. We don’t think of this as we’re building. But we’re raising. It’s a lot. It has its own life. And each of us, if we have love, this grows. And this is the most important blueprint for the building of the Sagrada Familia. And if you can understand this, then love is the best architect for the temple.

Question: You said that all of his blueprints were burned. Was this accidental?

Sotoo: The disciples of Gaudí who took me in to work on the Sagrada Familia, after Gaudí died, they took all the blueprints to the house, and they would study them, and the following day they would give the order. And then Franco decided that he wanted to build a fascist Catholic country, and the Catalans were against it. So you had the two enemies—the Catalan people and Franco. And by enemy I mean

they couldn't share the same time and space for the future—that's the enemy; the reason doesn't matter. The temple was between these two enemies, so the disciples had to hide the blueprints here. This disciple's house was a regular house, and so he put the blueprints there and he sealed them so they couldn't be seen. But in a war, everything happens. They discovered the blueprints, they burnt them, and for half a century they were breaking the sculptures and taking out the stone. So that's the story.

I'd like to add something else. We modern people think that if we're going to build something we automatically need a blueprint. But more than 100 years ago, no. For example, for a Japanese house, there are no blueprints. And medieval cathedrals didn't have blueprints. They were done as it was necessary at the moment, or as the budget was approved. But the real blueprint was in the boss's head. The same as a music sheet, but there's music we know about that doesn't have a music sheet. We can communicate without a blueprint, without a music sheet, without an order, if you want to do it, because we don't listen to or hear or see what we don't want to. We only see and discover and hear what we want. That's why in reality we don't always coincide, and that's our truth. But we don't have to cry. The fact that we are imperfect is perfection. We have to know it. If we think that we're perfect then nothing is going to work. The wise man who says he's a wise man is not a wise man. A saint who proclaims himself to be a saint is not a saint. The important thing is humility. That doesn't mean to be like the Japanese, bowing all the time. Humility from the inside, to know yourself, not to fool yourself, because the easiest thing to do is to fool yourself. And also we should know what we have because no one knows what we have, and the only way to find out what we have is when we lose it. And that imperfection is what we are. But we should rejoice. As young as today is, there's nothing. And never will our hearts grow old, we just ripen like fruit.

Greene: Before the next question, I wanted to follow up on something you said in reference to the medieval cathedral that didn't have a blueprint. It's most often said, through Victor Hugo, that the medieval cathedral in any country was a book in stone, a book before there was printing. Is that analogy good for the Sagrada Familia? It seems to me there are differences.

Sotoo: All churches are a dramatic history. I haven't studied as much as you, so I can only talk about the Sagrada Familia. Why do we build the Sagrada Familia? Is just placing sculptures the construction of the Sagrada Familia? In the Sagrada Familia we are building to build within ourselves. To find the directives of Gaudí in the stone is really finding the directives to build yourselves. You seem to be shy. Nobody's been asking, when do we finish building the Sagrada Familia? Since nobody's asking, I'm going to answer. The Sagrada Familia will be finished when we are finished. Day by day we have to be building ourselves. That's why there's so much left to this work. It's very important, all the data and all the ideas of Gaudí, but what's important for me is to see where Gaudí was looking. Everything outside of it is not so important. The important thing is to arrive where Gaudí wanted to arrive. We want to see where Gaudí was looking; we want to think where he wanted to look. This changes our way of seeing Gaudí.

Question: You said you were an instrument, a tool. When it became hard, could you foresee the beauty of the outcome? Could you tell it would be beautiful when you started? How did you deal with your failures when the outcome wasn't what you expected?

Sotoo: I'm not Gaudí, so I don't know if I can answer in one answer, two questions, but I think this is one in the same question. I like to break rock because it comes to a point where I feel I'm nothing. I don't hear any noises, not cold, not hot, no pain, and then there's a moment when the whole day is over, I feel like I'm out of the stone, so I think, oh, I was inside the stone. When someone concentrates,

that person is inside whatever, and you're not thinking, when do I finish? or how much am I charging? or this boss is an SOB. You forget about yourself, and you just concentrate on doing well, and I invite this wonderful world, all my disciples, my co-workers and you, when you get to this wonderful moment, that's when things happen, good things come out. And when good things come out, the first thing you say is, "I haven't done this because I didn't exist. It's just concentration." I don't know if I'm explaining myself.

Greene: Rita is just about to help us conclude our evening, but I just wanted to say, on behalf of our audience, those of us who have studied the cathedral and have read about it, we thought we understood. The art critic Robert Henry said, "The greatest voyage to discovery is to see through the eyes of another." Tonight we know we have to return to Barcelona and to the Sagrada Familia. Seeing it through your eyes we hardly begin to understand what Gaudí began and you have continued. Thank you for blessing us.

Simmonds: We warmly thank again Mr. Sotoo and Dr. Greene for the beautiful dialogue, and our charming translator, Mr. Roberto Isaza.

If you are interested in receiving updates on Crossroads' activities, please leave your name, address and e-mail (printing clearly) at the information desk, where you will be added to our e-mail list.

Starting on Wednesday, May 14, 2008 at 7:00 PM, at the Museum of Biblical Art (MOBIA) (and for the subsequent 3 other Wednesdays in May, always at 7:00pm), "American Music: The Unanswered Question" a 4-lecture course in music appreciation given by Jonathan Fields and Maurizio Maniscalco, musicians and composers. You can find material about this course at the Crossroads desk.

Thank you and good night.