

# The therapeutic garden: Gaudí and the patients of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital

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**Resum.** Dins de l'antic hospital psiquiàtric de Sant Boi de Llobregat, actualment transformat en el Parc Sanitari Sant Joan de Déu, es conserven els rastres d'un jardí modernista inspirat en l'obra de Gaudí. Construït entre el 1903 i el 1912 amb la participació destacada dels malalts mentals, el jardí s'estructura a partir d'un conjunt de llacs, coves i cascades que van ocupant els límits interiors dels horts de l'hospital fins al punt de transformar-se en un jardí «a l'anglesa», tal com reconeix el 1903 la *Revista Frenopática Española*, òrgan científic de l'hospital.

**Paraules clau:** Hospital Psiquiàtric de Sant Boi · Antoni Gaudí · ergoteràpia · Modernisme · arquitectura tova · arquitectura simbòlica

**Abstract.** On the premises of the former Mental Hospital of Sant Boi de Llobregat, currently the Sant Joan de Déu Health Care Complex, the remains of a Modernist garden inspired by Gaudí's work still survive. Constructed between 1903 and 1912 with the participation of the hospital's psychiatric patients, the garden comprised lakes, caves, and cascades, quickly reaching the limits of the hospital's vegetable gardens. As described in a 1903 issue of *Revista Frenopática Española*, the Modernist garden was reminiscent of an "English style garden."

**Keywords:** Sant Boi Mental Hospital · Antoni Gaudí · occupational therapy · Modernism · soft architecture · symbolic architecture

## An invisible garden

The garden at Sant Boi de Llobregat consisted of unusual constructions that were built with the help of the hospital's psychiatric patients: benches decorated with broken tiles (Fig. 1), a Lady of Lourdes chapel shaped as a dragon's mouth (Fig. 2), bearded heads of giants resembling the chimneys of the Milà House by Antoni Gaudí (Fig. 3), and pinnacles that bend as volcanic lava (Fig. 4). The scratches on the surfaces and the rough and careless appearance of the finishes of these constructions—some completed with broken glass—in addition to the random distribution of materials and out-of-proportion compositions reflect the mental disorders of their builders (Fig. 5,6).

The almost unintelligible structures were essentially ignored from the moment of their construction; they were never considered as architectural works and were conserved only because they evidenced the patients' inner struggle towards recovery. The hospital was home to more than a thousand men, many of whom were trained to work as masons, which allowed them to work outside the hospital and thus certify their recovery. The patients centered their lives on different forms of occupational

therapy: baking their own bread, doing their laundry, or taking care of the hospital's vegetable gardens [8].

The various elements of the garden were erected with the help of an architect, and the complex structures that supported them could only have been inspired by Gaudí's architecture; there are shapes similar to paraboloids and hyperboloids, stones hanging as cliffs, and serpentine benches finished with *trencadis* (a mosaic technique done with broken tile pieces) A detailed chronological study shows that each of these ele-



**Fig. 1.** Serpentine bench in the garden of the former Sant Boi Mental Hospital (1912).

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**Fig. 2.** Capella Inundada, dedicated to the Lady of Lourdes (1911).

ments was constructed before or at the same time as the work of Gaudí that may well have inspired it. The structures that survive in the garden seem to be models of some of Gaudí's constructions: the serpentine bench of Park Güell, the Sagrada Família, or the Colònia Güell crypt. It appears as if the con-



**Fig. 3.** Giant's head, which serves as a fountain. Detail of the facade of the Cova Cascada (1907).



**Fig. 4.** "Soft" volcanic architecture of the Capella Inundada.

structions of the garden served as a laboratory for an architect seeking to realize his ideas and, at the same time, able to offer practical training to the mentally ill, a generous act of social rehabilitation.

Besides its relationship with Gaudí's work, the garden connects two important figures of that time: the Marquess of Samà and the Count of Güell. The land that surrounded the garden was owned by the Marquess of Samà, and he may have ceded some of it for the expansion of the hospital's vegetable gardens. The Marquess of Samà also owned the land on which Park Güell was eventually built. Moreover, the construction at the lake of the garden is extremely similar to that at the lake of Samà Park (Fig. 7), located in the province of Tarragona and erected by Eduard Fontseré, Gaudí's master.

Consequently, the gardens of Sant Boi hospital comprised elements of the two best gardens of Catalonia: Park Güell and Samà Park. The contract that enabled the creation of Park Güell was probably signed at Samà Park, where the Marquess and the Count regularly met during the summer. Count Güell himself used to collaborate with the Sant Boi hospital and during outbreaks of disease epidemics at the hospital would transfer patients to his properties [13]. The northern wall of the hospital garden was adjacent to the Colònia Güell. Gaudí passed



**Fig. 5.** Bench with a Sacred Heart of *trencadís*. (Photograph: Archives of the Mental Hospital of Sant Joan de Déu).



**Fig. 6.** Back of one of the *trencadis* benches, set with pebbles and pieces of broken tiles and glass bottles (1912).

by this garden on a daily basis for eight years, during the period when the Colònia Güell crypt was under construction. It was within that same period that all of Sant Boi's garden constructions were erected.

### Plans as false statements

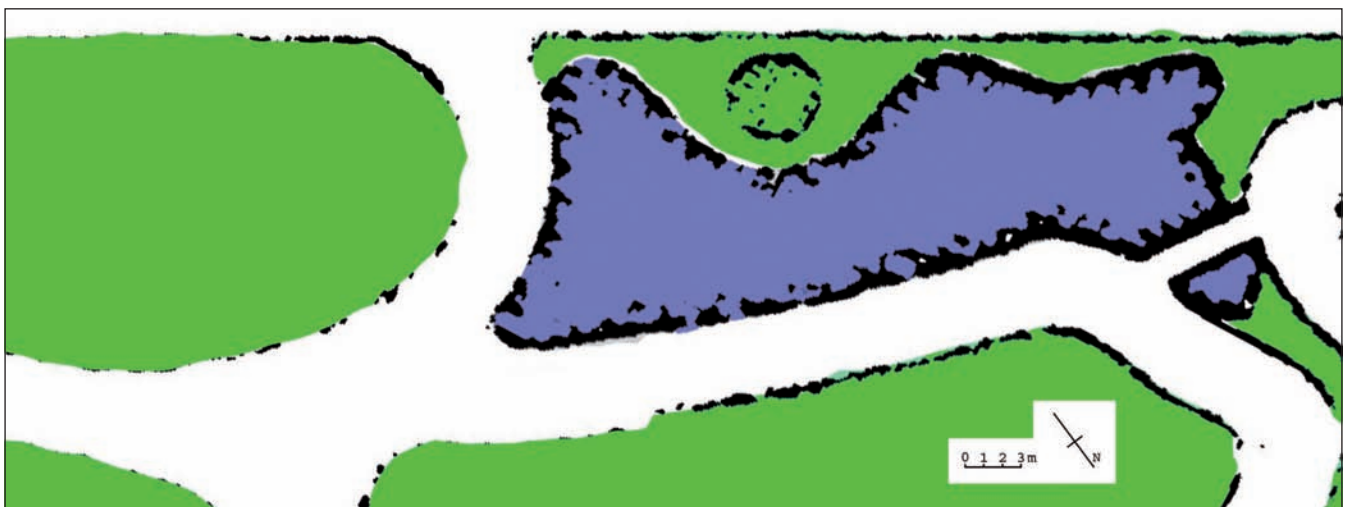
The garden's constructions progressed in fits and starts, without previous planning. The aim was to try to make the most of the labor that became intermittently available, between the different phases of expansion of the hospital itself and to take advantage of the materials at hand. The constructions at the main lake evolved in three different stages, each one lasting a short period of time. First, a large cave that served both as a water tank and as an artificial cascade was erected on the pre-existing lake (Fig. 8, 9). This was followed four year later by a chapel dividing the lake in two and allowing the lake water to flood the chapel's floor (Fig. 10). Finally, an ensemble of uneven benches with a *trencadis* finish was built, the effect of which was to disrupt the order of the garden (Fig. 15). Each of the



**Fig. 7.** Front part of the Capella Inundada; the lake is currently dry (the photograph is from the collection of Joan Vendrell and was taken in the 1970s). For comparison, the central cave of Samà Park is shown. The park was erected in 1881 by Eduard Fontseré, in Montbrí del Camp, locate close to Ruidoms, the town where Gaudí spent his childhood.

constructions included elements of the others, creating a heterogeneous superimposition of forms, symbols, and construction techniques.

The acceptance of these constructions as architectural works nullified the plan for the garden drawn up by Michelerena,



**Fig. 8.** Lake without the caves (1903?). The bridge does not appear until 1906. The plan drawn by Michelerena dates from 1911.

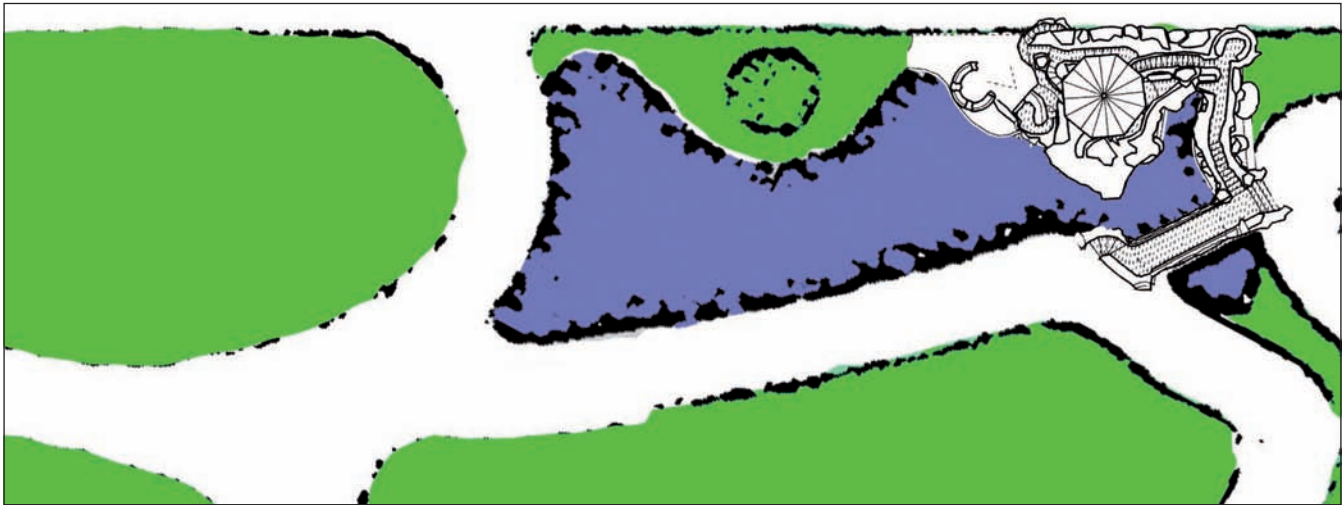


Fig. 9. Cova Cascada (April–December 1906). Superimposition on a plan drawn by David Agulló Galilea, 2003.

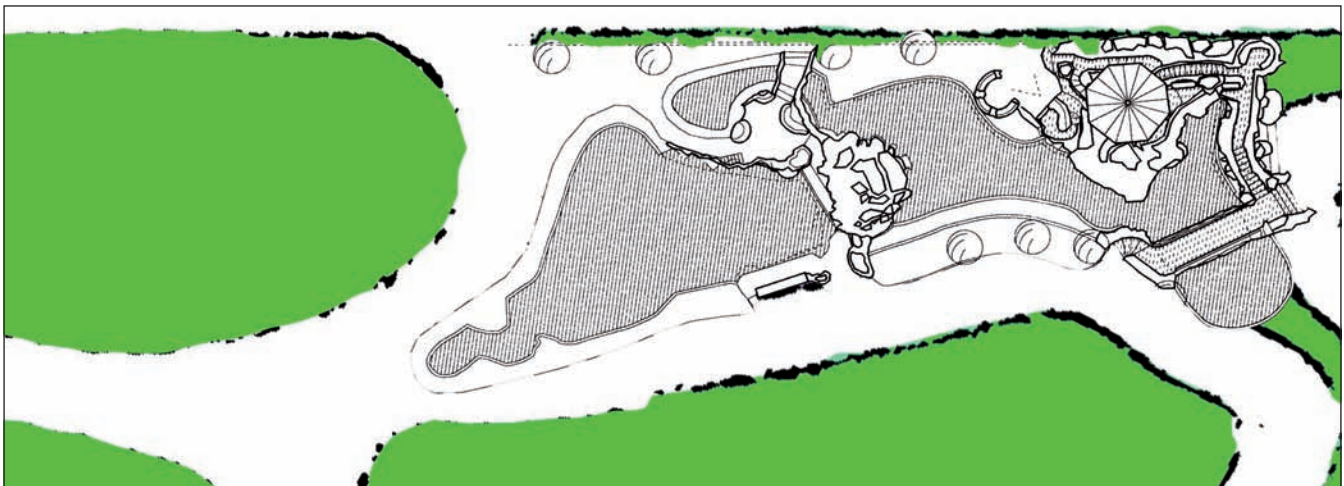


Fig. 10. Capella Inundada (October 1911–March 1912?). Superimposition on a plan drawn by David Agulló Galilea, 2003.

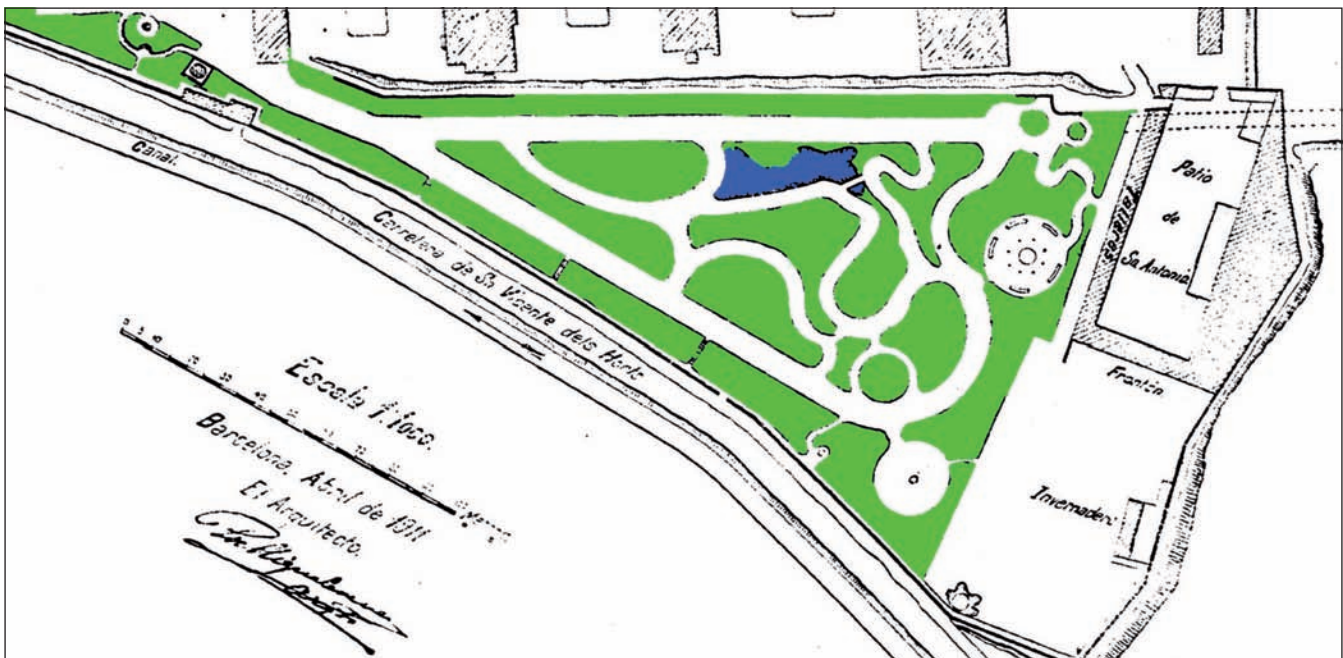


Fig. 11. Detail of the garden. This plan coincides with the “Plan completo de nuevas edificaciones y reforma de las existentes. Arquitecto Miquelerena” (Plan of the new buildings and reforms of the existing ones. Architect: Miquelerena), which was approved at the end of 1909, as appeared in the journal *Revista Frenopática Española*. The drawing of the main lake, located at the center of the garden, belongs to a plan created before 1906 [1].

who was constructing the hospital buildings and was the official architect of the hospital at the time. Miquelarena regarded the garden's constructions as the meager results of occupational therapy; he did not include them in his official plans essentially ignoring their existence (Fig. 11). If they were left unacknowledged, then they could not impede the adaptation of his own concept for the garden. However, a surprising coincidence saved the imperiled constructions: Dr. August Marie, chief psychiatrist of a mental hospital in France, started to collaborate with the Sant Boi Hospital. In his opinion, the constructions erected by the psychiatric patients were of great value to the scientific study of mental disorders. Of particular significance were the patients' drawings [12], which were being included in important specialized collections (such as that of Dr. Prinzhorn, in Germany). All this resulted in a change of perspective: the garden constructions came to be seen as essential vital part, albeit an "exotic" [1] one, of an innovative therapy being put into practice by the hospital and very different than the therapeutic approaches of other European mental institutions.

### "Soft" architecture

As the patients' garden progressed, among the benches and water pumps—conventional elements of a garden—strange forms began to appear, for instance, stone pinnacles covered with cement such that they resembled the solidification of magma which had erupted from the depths of the Earth (Fig. 12). This "soft" architecture gave form to an oneiric world of enchanted stones such as evoked by the needle peaks of Montserrat, which are immersed in legends and have been given evocative names: *El Cap de Mort* (the dead man's head), *El Gegant Encantat* (the enchanted giant), and *La Cara de la Vella* (the old woman's face). These "soft" forms began to play an increasingly prominent role in the garden, especially with the construction of the caves, and they became the central elements of the Capella Inundada (flooded chapel), dedicated to the Lady of Lourdes (Fig. 4). One of the "soft" pinnacles, which

served as a fountain (Fig. 13), mysteriously resembles the crowning of the pinnacles of the Sagrada Família, erected many years later. Other forms take on the shapes of stalagmites, fire, and lava flows.

"Soft" architecture is one of the characteristic features of Catalan Modernism [11]; Dali referred to it as "edible architecture." One of the finest examples of this style is the fence designed by Jujol in Montferri in 1922 (Fig. 14). Inspired by the silhouette of Montserrat, it was made out of cement and bed-springs frames. A similar fence can be found at the Cova Cascada. It has the form of a petrified wave—from which water actually comes out—and is also made out of cement and a distorted bedsprings frame in an organic garden (Figs. 15,16).

### The "proving bench" for Park Güell

In front of the Capella Inundada is the Plaça dels Bancs, a square surrounded by benches finished with *trencadis* (Fig. 17) that can be seen as the forerunner of the serpentine bench of Park Güell. According to an inscription on one of the benches, they were constructed in 1912, while the *trencadis* serpentine bench of Park Güell was completed, according to Juan José Lahuerta, in 1914 [9].

In contrast to the *trencadis* of Park Güell, that of the Plaça dels Bancs in Sant Boi is formed by pieces of broken tiles in homogeneous colors and without any motifs, as well as in white circles with the initial "M," for "Mary," engraved in the tiles. The relationship between the circles and chosen colors are in accordance with Christian liturgy, suggesting a biblical interpretation. For instance, a cross on a pink background with an "M" on a sky-blue background represents the incarnation of the Virgin; a cross on a red background represents the Passion. The repetition of these patterns follows the same symbolic order on all the benches of the square. Similar patterns—crosses and initials on color spots—had been used before by both Gaudí and Jujol for the terrace of Casa Batllò, but in that case, the relationship between the circles and the color



**Fig. 12.** Postcard of the former Plaça Esquirol, located in the Hospital gardens (postcard from the beginning of the 20th century; from the collection of Joan Vendrell).



**Fig. 13.** Detail of the same postcard in which the organic and "soft" forms of the fountain can be appreciated. Note the tap in the middle of the sculpture and a bowl at the base.



**Fig. 14.** Monserratina fence, built with a bedsprings frame by Josep M. Jujol in Montferri (1922).

spots was purely geometric and cannot be interpreted symbolically.

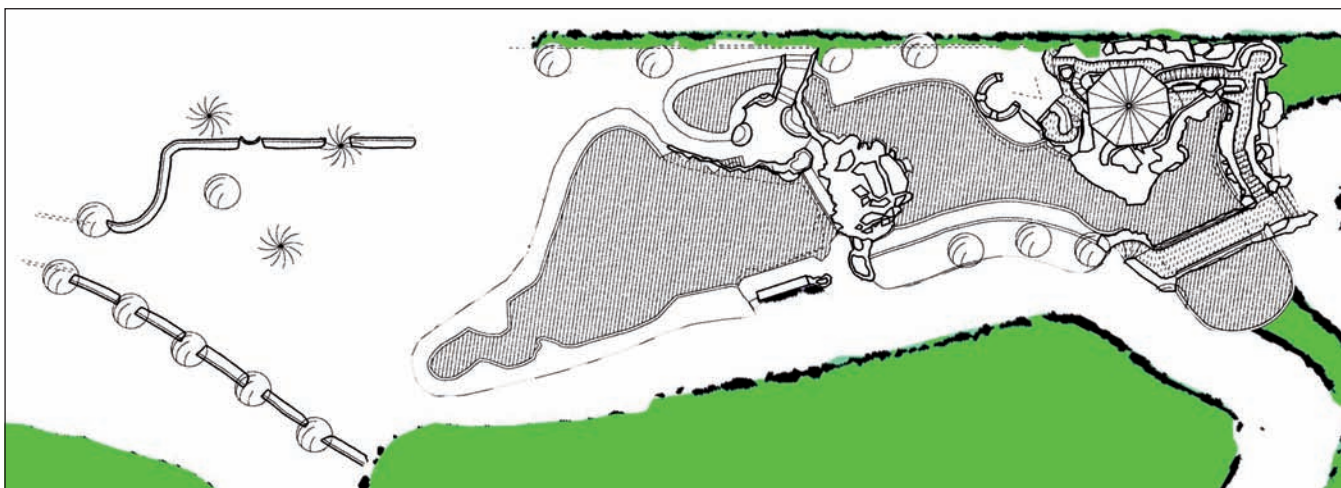
However, at the bottom part of the serpentine bench of Sant Boi, the broken tile pieces of the *trencadis* form colored circles arranged so that they bring out the contrast between the orthogonal and the curved lines (Fig. 18). There is a sense of joy in these circles that, unlike the white circles on the bench's back, include a great variety of tiles with several motifs. The motivation for these bright patterns might be that the main users of the park were expected to be children admitted to the hospital, since a children's school had been opened on the hospital premises in 1907, five years before the benches were built.

The serpentine bench of the Sant Boi garden is the result of a series of attempts practiced on the four benches located in front of it. A specific solution regarding the size and distribution of the *trencadis* was adopted for the different parts of the benches. The size of the *trencadis* comprising the seat of the serpentine bench of Park Güell corresponds to one of the solutions found in Sant Boi. One of the benches of the Capella Inundada includes a drawing of a palm leaf, which could have inspired the palm-leaf motifs of the seat of the serpentine bench of Park Güell. Another bench includes elliptical balls that are of the same size and consist of the same number of frag-

mented tiles as the elliptical balls found in the serpentine bench of Park Güell (Figs. 19,20). The only feasible hypothesis to explain these similarities is that the building workers brought by Josep M. Jujol to execute the *trencadis* work of the bench of Park Güell were the same as those who built the benches of the Sant Boi garden. In addition, four years before the construction of the Park Güell bench, one of the masterpieces of Modernist *trencadis* had been built at the bottom surface of the bridge of the Cova Cascada: a blue-tiled *trencadis* decoration that could only be seen reflected in the water (Fig. 21). An analysis of these tiles revealed that they are the same as those found in the rhomboidal grid of the facades of the pavilions located at the entrance of Park Güell. All the tiles used for the *trencadis* work in the the Sant Boi garden—at least since the year 1907—came from the same consignment as those used in Park Güell; from the same batch, some pieces were selected for Park Güell and others for the Sant Boi garden, according to the colors and motifs of the tiles.

### Water, Montserrat, and Atlantis

At the end of the 19th century, the water supply at the psychiatric hospital of Sant Boi became a serious problem because of an outbreak of typhus. Once the focus of infection was identified in the water tanks located under the building, the hospital staff made efforts to disinfect the hospital premises in order to stop the outbreak [6]. After these events, it became a priority for the medical staff, under the direction of Dr. Rodriguez-Morini, to renovate the water storage system and to ensure that there was not only a supply of clean water but also that it was large enough to satisfy the hospital's needs, which had increased following the implementation of hydrotherapy and the expansion of the greenhouses, in which more than a hundred patients worked on a daily basis. Consequently, from this new water supply system, an artificial lake and a cascade were constructed. In February of 1910, all water problems ended with the construction of a reservoir [2], crowned in its center with a cement replica of Montserrat (Fig. 22). The mountain was erected months before Gaudí's drawing of Còlònia Güell



**Fig. 15.** Plaça dels Bancs (1912). Superimposition on a plan drawn by David Agulló Galilea, 2003.



**Fig. 16.** Petrified wave, made out of cement and distorted bedspring frames, at the Cova Cascada of the Sant Boi garden (1906).



**Fig. 17.** Serpentine bench of the Sant Boi garden (1912), constructed before the serpentine bench of Park Güell.



**Fig. 18.** One of the circles made out of pieces of broken tiles; it is located at the bottom part of the hospital garden's serpentine bench.



**Fig. 19.** One of the "balls" in the seat of the serpentine bench of Park Güell (1913?).



**Fig. 20.** One of the "balls" in the seat of the serpentine bench of the Sant Boi garden (1912).



**Fig. 21.** Bottom surface of the Cova Cascada bridge; it can only be seen reflected in the water (1907).



**Fig. 22.** Montserratina structure, located in the middle of the water reservoir of Sant Boi Mental Hospital. According to the journal *Revista Frenopàtica Española*, this reservoir was built in February 1910. It also appears duplicated as “Detail A” in a plan published by Miquelerena [1] (postcard from the beginning of the 20th century; from the collection of the author). The structure directly resembles a drawing of the Colònia Güell church published by Gaudí in the same year.

church was published [10] (the Colònia Güell crypt was being constructed a few hundred meters from the hospital). It is hard to explain the similarities between the drawing and the mountain structure, unless Gaudí himself or one of his collaborators had taken part in both building works.

The symbolic elements of the garden, i.e., a blazing construction rising up from the water (Fig. 4), floods [4], an emerging Montserrat (Fig. 22), towers of large rough-stone blocks erected by Titans (Fig. 3), and giant fossilized bones (Fig. 23), evoke the poem of the *Atlantida* by Jacint Verdaguer, the Catalan nationalist poet who was regarded as mentally ill by the Catalan bourgeoisie. Verdaguer had been treated by a group of psychiatrists,



**Fig. 23.** Ceiling of the Cova Cascada resembling fossilized bones.

including the future director of the Sant Boi hospital, who later supported the therapeutic construction of the garden [7]. If Gaudí did participate in building the Lady of Lourdes chapel of Sant Boi (the Capella Inundada), he would indeed have taken into account the drama of Verdaguer, since the chapel was constructed by psychiatric patients as part of their recovery process. Verdaguer’s misfortune had started with the purchase of a shelter, traditionally known as the Vallcarca Mental Hospital, which served as a home for people who had been allegedly exorcised [5]. In addition, many of the masons who were constructing Park Güell, the Colònia Güell crypt, and the Sagrada Família came from the municipality of Sant Boi [3]; thus, it is possible that some of them were psychiatric patients of the hospital. If this the case, the construction of Sagrada Família would represent the hope of recovery for the psychiatric patients of the Sant Boi hospital— analogous, on a symbolic level, to the recovery of the exorcised patients of Verdaguer. In both cases, the Lady of Lourdes would be responsible for the miracles.

Erecting the “mountain of Montserrat” as a form of psychiatric therapy joined the patient to the spiritual projects of Gaudí and Verdaguer and confirmed a belief in the healing powers of the celestial Lady of Montserrat. Her powers were believed capable of redeeming the loss of reason afflicting the world, just as the earthly Montserrat, before it submerges as a new Atlantis, will bear witness to those who have kept the faith in the Virgin. Indeed, the Sant Boi Mental Hospital was also named the Psychiatric Sanatorium of Our Lady of Montserrat.



## Notes and references

### Notes

- [1] The Revista Frenopática Española referred to these benches as “exotic”.
- [2] Rodríguez-Morini A (editor in chief) (1910) Revista Frenopática Española, February issue, Barcelona. The Revista Frenopática Española was published at the same hospital. It encompassed a quarterly booklet which reported the most significant events and activities of the hospital (1903–1911).
- [3] “At the beginning of the century, the Park Güell, and later the Palau of Pedralbes, started to be constructed. Park Güell was built between 1900 and 1914. The architect from Sant Boi Lluís Parés participated in the building work of Park Güell and, since masons were needed, many people from Sant Boi learned masonry skills, because it was better paid than the peasant work. They were accepted to work in the building work of Park Güell.” Arxiu municipal de Sant Boi de Llobregat, Notes històriques 97-100, p. 151.
- [4] The garden was built 2 m under the hospital buildings and under the level of the Llobregat River, therefore it was periodically flooded.

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### About the author

**Daniel Barbé-Farré** is a geologist. He graduated from the University of Barcelona (UB) and carried out his postgraduate studies in Soil and Groundwater Pollution at the UB, and Sustainable River-Basin Management and Integrated

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