

The Gaudí Memorial

In describing the types of memorials being sought for Thanatopolis, it was stated that we were hoping for projects that were somewhat generic in character. The installations should be ‘readable’ as memorials to a general audience without the need for an explanation by the artist or designer. And, at least for this phase of the project, while we were looking for creative and affecting pieces, in terms of being provocative, we were striving for ‘less shock’ and ‘more awe.’

And yet, there was a concern that perhaps framing the mission in this way could result in memorials that might be lacking in focus, vitality or impact – and that perhaps some potential applicants might even consider the project, therefore, uninteresting.

By proposing the Gaudí Memorial, we hope to address this concern by providing a clear theme and identity while striving to engage several other important elements of the Thanatopolis concept.

Gaudí’s work was informed and inspired by his observations of and experiments with nature. His architecture was intensely site responsive and deeply rooted in his Catalan culture and landscape. As well as a visionary architect, he was an artisan, engineer and project manager – very grounded and practical. His extreme focus on and devotion to his projects, as well as his prodigious work ethic and perfectionism, were legendary. While he assembled a great team of craftsmen to help him execute his ideas and was a traditionalist in terms of religious doctrine, he was, at core, a deeply principled, uncompromising artist – the sort of idealized creative spirit that I-Park has always aspired to support. Certainly for those who doubt that one individual can make a real difference in the culture and that it’s still possible to bring something new and profound into the world, Gaudí’s life and work make a strong case for the proposition that much is possible. He has become, therefore, an inspirational figure for architects and other creative practitioners around the world.

As envisioned, the Gaudí Memorial will be an homage to this spirit as well as to his personal memory.

Beyond that, one of the core premises of Thanatopolis is that, despite the virtual space that increasingly dominates our lives and the weakening of the emotional bonds of geography and background, we still have a need for very real physical spaces as well as a sense of familiarity to and possession of these spaces – at least at some important times in our lives. Those who have visited Barcelona and its environs do not need to hear that photos do not do justice to the transcendent power of Gaudí’s work. Those returning from a ‘pilgrimage’ there often speak in terms of experiencing a state of near rapture upon encountering the *Temple of the Sagrada Familia* for the first time. Gaudí’s work clearly establishes the principle that, at least in certain

realms, place most definitely matters and that we are wise to invest in the development and nurturing of such.

Another tenet of the Thanatopolis concept is that nourishing the immediate surviving generation after death is the most important role of the memorial park. By removing the focus on eternity, a wide world of potential is opened in terms of the use of alternative materials and forms. Rather than being restricted to the use of hard, cold, heavy elements like granite and stone, we grant ourselves permission to use the soft, warm, light structures and associations of life itself and that are, at least in theory, more appropriate to the commemoration of human life, receptivity to memory and to the emotional comfort of those in grief. While Gaudí was himself, in contrast, most assuredly concerned with eternity and universal truths, and worked most famously with native stone, his lush use of organic imagery and his mimicking of the surface textures of life achieved a visual accessibility and emotional appeal that is impossible to deny. He has set the tone for ‘soft architecture.’

While the Gaudí Memorial need not be designed by an architect, it might be expected that the scale of the proposed open or enclosed space(s) will be relatively larger than most other memorials. This would allow us to experiment with the notion of the Affinity Memorial, a group memorial that accommodates/incorporates a large number of interment niches. These would be offered to those who are drawn to the particular aesthetics of the space or those who choose to be associated, in death, with the named individual. While Gaudí was widely ridiculed in his time, the cultural affinity to him today is so strong that this could be viewed as a laboratory test of the credibility and acceptability of this manner of group memorial.

The Gaudí Memorial will certainly be a daunting challenge. Gaudí’s actual burial spot and monument in the crypt of the Temple of the Sagrada Familia is, in fact, quite modest, in deference to his ascetic lifestyle and religious beliefs. To those submitting proposals in this area, the quality expectations will be exceptionally high. For Thanatopolis, there must be no suggestion that it is seeking to arrogate to itself the power of his name and his works or to legitimize what is, in essence, a modest aesthetic experiment in memorialization. To that end, the title of this piece may be entirely impertinent and might, upon reflection, need to change.

And yet, to an extent, the project is simple in that there are so many rich points of entry. At minimum, we would like for the Gaudí Memorial to challenge the imagination and to test, at least loosely within the context of the Thanatopolis concept, new and better ways to commemorate an important life. We trust, and will ensure within our ability, that the memorial will be respectful to Gaudí’s legacy. At best, this will be a celebration of the light that this exceptional, solitary individual brought to the world and of a visual language that still speaks to our generation.