The Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, a sustainable heritage space

After a century as home to the installations of the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau, in 2009, following the transfer of all healthcare activities to the new hospital, an ambitious rehabilitation project recovered the heritage and artistic value of the Sant Pau Art Nouveau Site, the work of the architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner.

The historical complex of the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau was declared World Heritage by the UNESCO in 1997 for the singularity of its architecture and its artistic beauty. Designed as a garden-city, the Site was built between 1902 and 1923, and comprises twelve Art Nouveau pavilions, a kilometre of underground tunnels interconnecting the pavilions, and gardens with forty different species of trees.

Since its rehabilitation, the Art Nouveau Site has become a landmark space in the city of Barcelona, where history and innovation exist side by side. As well as providing a showcase for artistic and heritage wealth, Sant Pau is home to several leading institutions in the fields of sustainability, health and education, among others.
From La Santa Creu to Sant Pau

The history of the Hospital goes back to 1401, when the six hospitals in the Barcelona of that time were merged into one: the Hospital de la Santa Creu, the building in the Raval district that now houses the National Library of Catalonia. By the end of the 19th century, it was in a state of collapse, the installations had become obsolete, and a new hospital was needed.

Meanwhile, in 1896 the Catalan banker Pau Gil died in Paris. In his will, he left half of his estate for the construction of a civil hospital in Barcelona, to be dedicated to Saint Paul.

After a process of negotiation, the administrators of La Santa Creu (the Most Illustrious Administration, MIA) and Pau Gil's executors came to an agreement to construct the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau on a tract of land now bounded by Ronda Guinardó, Carrer de Sant Antoni Maria Claret, Carrer de Cartagena and Carrer de Sant Quintí, a surface area equivalent to nine street blocks of the Eixample.
A pioneering hospital

The designer of the project was the architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner, a key figure in Modernisme, the Catalan Art Nouveau, and the creator of emblematic works such as the Palau de la Música, Fuster House and Lleó-Morera House.

In his will, Pau Gil specified that the new hospital was to be built in the image of Europe's leading hospitals. Accordingly, Domènech travelled around France and Switzerland to discover the most advanced healthcare architecture, influenced by the hygienist trends of the early 20th century.

The result is a complex of 48 independent pavilions (not all were built) interconnected by a network of underground tunnels to channel services and the provision of food and medicine.

The Art Nouveau Hospital of Santa Creu i Sant Pau, like its predecessor in the Raval, was a hospital for the poor, and Domènech designed it with a maxim in mind: the wellbeing of the patients. Here, we have to think of the context, and imagine the contrast between Gothic installations in the middle of the old town of Barcelona, built up and overcrowded, and the new installations which, at the time, stood outside the city, surrounded by countryside. Natural lighting, good ventilation and pleasant decoration of the wards made the Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau a unique place worldwide, a new model of hospital that introduced the importance to patient treatment of open space, ventilation and natural lighting.
Lluís Domènech i Montaner was born in Barcelona on 27 December 1849 into an enlightened, well-to-do family. His father, Pere Domènech i Saló, was a prestigious bookbinder, and his mother, Maria Montaner i Vila, was the daughter of an old noble house in Canet de Mar, a town in the Maresme to which the architect remained closely linked.

Just after completing his studies at the School of Architecture in Madrid, his father died, and in 1873 he returned to Barcelona to help out in the family bookbinding business.

In 1875 he joined the staff of the Barcelona School of Architecture as a temporary lecturer, and was associated with the School until 1920.

He combined his praxis as an architect, over a period of 50 years, with participation in social, cultural and political life.

Towards the end of his life, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and, disenchanted with politics and with some of his professional colleagues, he delegated much of his activity to his son, Pere Domènech i Roura, who completed work on the Art Nouveau hospital when Lluís Domènech i Montaner died in 1923, and to his son-in-law, Francesc Guàrdia i Vidal, devoting himself to the study of history and, above all, heraldry.

Domènech’s architectural production ranges from urban projects to large monumental complexes and small-scale commissions. The work of his practice was carried out with the collaboration of a consolidated group of technicians, artisans and industrial manufacturers, who formed a guiding thread through his work in search of the total artwork. In Domènech’s work, Professor of Art History Mireia Freixa highlights the integration of the decorative and the constructive arts.
The old Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau in Modernisme, the Catalan Art Nouveau

Domènech i Montaner was one of the great promoters of the Art Nouveau in Catalonia, and the former Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau is his masterwork.

Art Nouveau was an artistic trend that emerged in Europe in the late 19th century and manifested itself in the various countries with different singularities. In Catalonia it was a political and cultural movement that aspired to develop a culture that was at once modern, cosmopolitan and national.

The movement stands out for the quality of its architecture, which became a total artwork, with a whole range of applied and decorative arts, ceramics, stained glass, wrought iron, furniture and hydraulic tile flooring, among others. Old crafts were recovered alongside materials produced by modern industries. New construction technologies and innovative materials such as cast iron were also incorporated, in combination with traditional systems, such as the timbrel or Catalan vault, according the same importance to aesthetics as to functionality.