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Casa Gomis

A portrait in defense of a Catalan icon

Marisa Gupta

A jewel of Catalan Rationalist architecture, and a nodal point of Catalan music and culture at large, the Casa Gomis on La Ricarda estate, is now under threat. Marisa Gupta retraces the remarkable history of this place, that welcomed composers, performers and artists during the Franco years and beyond, and calls for a better appreciation of its current state.

With mass tourism threatening the distinct atmosphere of its local culture, Barcelona's politicians and residents are undergoing a process of profound soul searching concerning the rampant growth of the travel industry in the city. Yet far from the sight-seeing magnets of the city's most famous streets and focal point of the debate, nestled in the back roads of El Prat de Llobregat lies another, overlooked victim overwhelmed by the commercial interests of the mass tourism industry on Barcelona. In this case, the culprits are not speculators raising rents and prices of basic necessities, but, rather, a monstrously encroaching airport, whose expansion in the last decade has turned a source of familial pride and a significant gathering place for artists during Francoist Spain into a heart-breaking albatross for its current owners.

This victim is a storied family home — the Casa Gomis-Bertrand on the La Ricarda estate — resting upon a setting of serene natural beauty. Completed in 1963, it is a masterwork of architectural and cultural significance. One of the prime examples of Catalan Rationalist architecture, the home was designed by the architect Antonio Bonet (1913–1989) in close partnership with its owners Ricard Gomis (1910–1993) and his wife Inés Bertrand Mata (1915–1992). More than that, it was a meeting place for the avant-garde (including John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Josep M. Mestres-Quadreny, Joan Prats, Roberto Gerhard, Antoni Tàpies, Joan Miró, Joan Brossa, and Joaquim Homs, amongst many others) during the last years of Franco.

Its activities offer outsiders a glimpse into what musical life was like in isolated Spain during the time — the grass-roots efforts by private individuals to support the development and dissemination of contemporary music and art in general, despite the limitations imposed upon culture by the Franco regime.

RICARD GOMIS AGAINST THE GRAIN

The significance of the house and its cultural activities lie in the interests, enthusiasm and efforts of the family's patriarch — Ricard Gomis. Ricard Gomis was a civil engineer and member of the Catalan bourgeoisie. A great music enthusiast, he was fascinated by the possibilities offered through the electrical recording of music. Though he was not a professional in the field, his extensive knowledge meant he was often consulted by experts in the field. This interest led to the formation of the Discòfils, Associació Pro-música by Gomis in 1934, which aimed to spread music through records.¹ The group had a desire to present all kinds of music including works of little commercial interest, contemporary music, jazz, medieval and renaissance music. It organised public record presentations with accompanying conferences. The organisation started in Barcelona but the idea was to take music inland into villages. According to his daughter Marita Gomis "It was easy to take records and a record player in your car. Because there were no orchestras and radio was very scarce, music didn't arrive into the villages. Thus, the idea was 'Let's take music to the people'. All kinds of music". Ricard Gomis was the president. The composer Roberto Gerhard was appointed as a salaried artistic advisor, with the responsibility of selecting pieces and presenting accompanying lectures, as well as attending to the musical and artistic needs of the society for two years, until the Civil War brought it to an end.²

Both musicians and audiences suffered during the war, with a depletion of the cultural offer and institutional support. The deterioration is evident in the coming decades with limits imposed on forums in which to create, a lack of exposure to new currents in music and artists like Gerhard and Casals driven into exile. All of this served to push Spain further onto



Casa Gomis, exterior. Photo: courtesy of the Town Hall of El Prat de Llobregat

the periphery of mainstream European modernity. Within this framework it was the presence of private initiatives — such as the activities at Casa Gomis-Bertrand — that were to be vital for the propagation of avant-garde movements and artistic activity in general.

After Ricard Gomis married Inés Bertrand-Mata in 1944, though their primary residence was in the Barcelona city center, the couple decided to build a weekend home for themselves and six children on a property that belonged to Bertrand-Mata's family since the end of the 19th century. The property, on the La Ricarda estate on the outskirts of Barcelona, was an exceptional setting, surrounded by woods and the sea, populated by birds, relatives who built on other nearby plots of land owned by the family, and what was then a small airfield.

The architect chosen for the project was the Catalan architect Antonio Bonet, who after working for Le Corbusier in Paris, settled in Argentina. When Gomis and Bertrand-Mata decided to build a house for themselves, they put forward all kinds of ideas of what a house should be, the kind of life they wanted in it, and how it should be related to the landscape. From the outset the house had been designed to balance the needs of a large family with the desire to use the home to hold concerts.

In the early 1950s, a first project was proposed by Bonet, though it was abandoned. A second project was initiated in 1953 — the one that eventually came to fruition. The idea was for a “total” work of art — not just attention to the building,

but also to the landscape, accessories, materials, and furnishings (Bonet was one of the designers of the iconic “Butterfly” chair). Anything associated with the house — decoration, paintings and sculptures — had its own place. Music was also a part of this.

Around the same time as plans were being drawn up for the house at La Ricarda, Ricard Gomis was active in a dynamic initiative called Club 49, a group of intellectuals, collectors and artists who attempted to revitalize Catalan culture and disseminate avant-garde movements. The group's activities were driven behind the scenes by Joan Prats. A hatter by profession, he was cultivated and knowledgeable about the arts, suggesting lines of activities for the group, and was the contact point for foreign artists and intellectuals visiting Barcelona during that time. Amongst those who were members and received support included Antoni Tàpies, Joan Brossa and Joan Miró. Within the group were also entrepreneurs, appreciative of all art forms, who invested time and resources in organizing cultural events. In 1960 Club 49 began a cycle called “Open Music” with the aim of presenting concerts of contemporary music pieces by composers well known in an international context (such as Edgar Varèse and Karlheinz Stockhausen) along side recent works by Spanish composers such as Luis de Pablo, Joaquim Homs, Josep M. Mestres-Quadreny, Juan Hidalgo and Roberto Gerhard.³

Once Ricard Gomis' house was completed in the early 1960s, in addition to hosting concerts of traditional classical music and record presentations, Gomis' house also became a host for some of Club 49's events. The home's large rectangular main room of 140m² was easily adaptable and able to accommodate nearly 100 people.⁴

The final certificate of completion for the house dates from 1963. The opening of the new house was marked by a concert on 23 November 1963, with a programme consisting of 7 *Haikus* by Roberto Gerhard, *Music for 5* by J. Homs and *Divertimento "La Ricarda"* by Josep M. Mestres-Quadreny. The work by Mestres-Quadreny was written especially for the occasion, and conceived to make use of some of the architectural features of the room.⁵

Gomis' support of artists extended beyond visits to the house and performances of their music there. He had a particularly close friendship with Roberto Gerhard, having a shared interest in the technique of electrical recording.⁶ Gomis had commissioned Gerhard's *Nonet* for winds and helped him through financial difficulties.⁷ In an expression of gratitude, Gerhard dedicated his *Concert for 8* to the Gomis family.⁸ In addition to the concerts of Club 49 and presentations of contemporary music, internationally renowned artists who were frequent visitors to the house included Joan Miró, Antoni Tàpies, Montserrat Caballé, Jean-Pierre Rampal, John Cage, Merce Cunningham, and others.

Concerts continued to be held at the house until the late 1970s. By the 1980s, however, Gomis' declining health prohibited him from driving, putting an end to the artistic activities at the house.

CASA GOMIS TODAY

Inés Bertrand-Mata died in 1992, followed by her husband Ricard who passed away in 1993. The house is now owned by their six children, with the three residing in Barcelona responsible for running cultural visits, coordinating matters related to publicity and dealing with maintenance. There are numerous requests to visit the house; organizing and guiding tours has become an almost full-time job for the Gomis-Bertrand children. There are also a number of requests for publicity shoots for fashion, furniture and occasionally for films.

When the house was built, Bonet was living in South America, making sporadic visits to the site. One of the site supervisors was Emilio Bofill, whose son, the architect Ricardo Bofill designed Barcelona Airport's Terminal 1 decades later (inaugurated on 16 June 2009); sitting within 500m of the house, it has irreparably altered the fate of Casa Gomis-Bertrand. Grotesquely, this house built for a family and for music is now unable to house either, due to the overpowering roar of air-planes. According to Marita Gomis, "You never know how much noise you're going to have and how often. At times it is every three minutes that the planes are taking off. If they take off facing south it is not so bad but if they take off facing north, they fly over the house and the noise is terrible. Perhaps inside

it is not so bad but outside you have to stop talking because you will not hear each other." Furthermore, the noise makes the house difficult to inhabit. All of the other houses on the La Ricarda estate have some kind of insulated glazing, but it is impossible at Casa Gomis-Bertrand because instead of walls, there is glass. It is a huge, virtually impossible job, and would destroy the aesthetics of the house. The family has been in discussion with the airport authorities about carrying out the work but have been told it cannot be done. Furthermore, while the airport authorities have funds allocated for the protection of houses, these funds cannot be used for compensation.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

A large question mark about the future of the house looms over its current owners. For the family, it is something they strongly feel they want preserved. In the words of Marita Gomis, "According to the experts, it is one of the best examples of rationalistic houses. Everything was conceived for the house, with the architect and owners working together. It has a sense of being a complete work. A house much related to the landscape where it stands. All in all it is something to be kept. Some people say it should be turned into a house museum, but that is something we cannot do on our own." The obstacles are many, the first being finance. There is a great deal of restoration to be done — a daunting task considering the experimental nature of the architecture. According to Marita Gomis, the municipality offers little help and the regional government has no money; while the town hall of Barcelona does have money, there have been cuts in education, health and social services. Unfortunately, Casa Gomis-Bertrand is not a priority within this long queue.

If able to mobilise the resources, the Gomis-Bertrand family would like to create a foundation and is on the lookout for different sources of funding, though this has proven to be a long-standing challenge. The home has become part of a network called "Iconic Houses"⁹, which aims to connect owners of architecturally significant houses from the 20th century. Through the network they have been able to raise the profile of the house and make contacts outside of Spain. Certainly, they would like the house kept as a reference for the history of architecture and art, although there are many other possibilities. In the words of Marita Gomis:

We have had feedback from more than one architecture professor telling us "You don't know how important it is, especially for 1st year students, to come into a house like that. To be able to step into it, to see it, to get explanations, to be told its story. Because out of that, the mental scheme of the students comes to a complete change... they learn a great deal from those visits." There are so many things that can be done: studies on architecture and furniture design.

Another line of research we have proposed to the town hall concerns the natural environment. There is cause for concern because we are on a plot of land that is under super-



Casa Gomis, main room. Photo: Asier Rua

vision as a natural space because of special kinds of natural life. Now with the airplanes flying over, and the chaos and pollution that come with it, who knows what will happen to the natural life? It is something that progresses slowly but will almost certainly effect the vegetation and wildlife there. So there is a line of research that could be undertaken to survey its evolution. But we as a family can do nothing about that. It is for the municipality to be interested and to put forward the propositions to the universities and other relevant bodies.

And of course we have a lot of restoration to do – it was a house constructed in a very experimental way. It would be possible to conduct research on how materials react, how you can apply new technology without disturbing the aesthetics of the house.

Photos of the house have been the subject of many exhibitions. That could be another idea – exhibitions in the house. Some people have suggested that the garden is a wonderful place to have sculptures and exhibitions...

There are many things that can be done with the house. We as a private family have offered many ideas of what could be done, but we need feedback and support from other places.

The one glaring omission from Marita Gomis' exhaustive list of possibilities is, of course, music. The noise from the airport is certainly present, and particularly outside the roar of airplane engines is overwhelming. However, inside the house there remains a remarkable sense of calm. Though noise from the airplanes is present inside those able to "tune it out" and relegate it to the category of background noise will find that the house could still serve as a peaceful work space and source of inspiration away from the stresses of everyday life. Though in the past it was a place whose activities were tailored to the very specific Spanish context of the time, it could in the future become a place for a new generation of artists and composers to come for periods of work, retreat and inspiration — perhaps modeled after other more well known centers for artistic residencies (Villa Medici, Villa Concordia, Künstlerhaus Boswil, etc). There has been a precedent for this already at Casa

Gomis. In 2006, the Belgian artist Michel François invited thirteen artists including musicians and choreographers, to stay at the house for three days each to collaborate on an experimental film inspired by the house for an exhibition at the Centre d'Art le LAIT.¹⁰

The possibilities are many and full of promises, but despite this the future of the house remains uncertain. What is urgently needed is a wider awareness of the existence of the house, its history and cultural value, and the current challenges faced by its owners. Only with the support and collaboration of benevolent individuals, public and private institutions, and the government, can the house be preserved and its prospects realized to the fullest of its immense potential.

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