Self-compacting concrete in the Temple of Sagrada Familia

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SELF-COMPACTING CONCRETE IN THE TEMPLE OF SAGRADA FAMILIA

Gemma Rodríguez, Ana Blanco, Pablo Pujadas, Antonio Aguado

Abstract

The Temple of Sagrada Familia presents singularities both in terms of the original design of the architect Antoni Gaudí and of the duration of the construction, which started more than 120 years ago. In fact, its design was conceived before the development of reinforced concrete. Therefore, the construction materials and processes have evolved in order to adapt to the new technologies without compromising the vision of Gaudí. This willing to maintain the original designs has obliged the technicians to solve details that were not defined in the project, among them is the issue of how to cast elements at great heights and with high amount of reinforcement. In this context, the possibility of using self-compacting concrete (SCC) emerged. The present study describes the different experiences in the Temple of Sagrada Familia with SCC, from requirements that led to use this material, to the design of the mixes and the casting of the elements in situ.

Keywords: self-compacting concrete, Sagrada Familia, Gaudí

INTRODUCTION

The Temple of Sagrada Familia is one of the most internationally recognised works of the Catalan architect Antoni Gaudí and it generates great interest in architecture and engineering since it is a major construction laboratory that differs from traditional construction and that applies singular methods and materials. Such interest is reflected in the extensive studies and research conducted on the architecture of the Temple (Puig Boada 1929, Bonet 1997, Faulí 2006), the symbology of Gaudí (Puig 2010, Fargas and Vivas 2009) or the evolution of the concrete used (Grima 2004, Grima et al. 2007 and 2013, Espel et al. 2009).

The construction of the Temple started in 1882 and it is still unfinished due to the great number of details in the structure and the complexity to execute them. However, the past 25 years have been intense in terms of construction since in that period the volume constructed is greater than in the first 100 years of construction (Grima et al. 2007). The fact that the Temple is visited by more than 3 million people per year has contributed significantly to that boost in the construction as a result of the funding obtained with the visitors.
In more than 130 years of construction, the materials and the construction techniques and procedures used have evolved drastically. Hence, Sagrada Familia is a unique site that combines old structures made of stone and early reinforced concrete (RC) with new elements made of special concretes such as high-strength or sprayed concrete (HSC and SC, respectively). In this regard, even though the main building material in the early years of construction was stone, Gaudí had already planned the use of RC. In fact, he was one of the first architects to use RC in Spain since Eusebi Güell, who was patron of Gaudí, was the owner of one of the first Portland cement factories in the country (Espel et al. 2009). Despite the traditional construction procedures employed at that time, Gaudí managed to take advantage of the available resources to face the complexity of building the Temple, such as installing railways to transport the material in wagons or building cranes to handle big weights.

After the death of Gaudí, his disciples and subsequent architects have followed the original ideas of Gaudí for the construction of the Temple. Their willingness of keeping the dimensions and slenderness of the original design represents a great challenge considering that the current standards and design codes are more demanding in terms of strength and durability of the structures. Therefore, new materials and construction procedures have been introduced in order to meet the requirements of the codes without compromising the original design.

Recently, self-compacting concrete (SCC) has also been used for certain elements of the Temple which are difficult to cast due to their geometry or dense reinforcement, given the ability of SCC to flow and to reach any location of the framework without the need of compaction. The use of this material in the Temple of Sagrada Familia reflects the evolution of the construction materials employed in this particular project and how techniques and construction procedures have adapted to the always changing conditions of such a unique project, which started more than a century ago.

Considering the above, this study aims at presenting the experiences conducted at Sagrada Familia with SCC, from the design of the mixes to the casting of the elements in situ, describing the strict structural and construction requirements to comply with in order to maintain the vision of Gaudí.

**EVOLUTION OF THE BUILDING MATERIALS USED IN SAGRADA FAMILIA**

The construction of the Temple of Sagrada Familia may be divided into three periods according to the architect involved in the project: the early period (1882-1926) corresponds to the time when Gaudí was the architect responsible for the construction, the beginning of the second period (1926-1985) is defined by the death of Gaudí and the takeover by his disciples and the third period starts in 1985 when an architect that did not have a direct relationship with Gaudí is appointed for the first time. Table 1 presents a summary of the main materials used in the construction of the Temple grouped according to different periods. This information was obtained from the investigation carried out by Grima (2011).
The first period (1882-1926) of construction of the Temple of Sagrada Familia is characterised by the use of stone as the only building material and by the use of traditional building techniques. Reinforced concrete was introduced in Spain in the end of the 19th century by French architects (Ignacio et al. 2016). Therefore, at the end of this first period, RC was used sporadically in some of the works of Gaudí. However, it was not until 1954 that RC was used for the first time in Sagrada Familia alongside with cyclopean concrete. Cyclopean concrete was used for filling cavities of walls, whereas RC was used in columns, foundations slabs, arches and spires. The use of concrete, either cyclopean or reinforced, spread during the second period (1926-1985) and became one of the most often used materials. Figure 1 shows the construction of the crypt of the Passion façade where cyclopean concrete was used in the lower levels and the reinforced concrete columns of the same façade (the images were obtained from the Archive of the Expiatory Temple of Sagrada Familia, hereinafter ATESF).

In the third period (1985-present), the manufacture of concrete was mechanized and a general modernization of the construction processes occurred, introducing new technologies and materials, due to the increase in the funding through donations (Gómez Serrano et al. 1996). A reflection of the modernization and the availability of resources is the use of different types of concrete, such as precast concrete, sprayed concrete and high-strength concrete. In addition, the tradition of building with stone returned for decorative purposes given the advances in stonecutting techniques.

The use of special concretes in the third period responds to the specific demands of the Sagrada Familia such as high flowability (obtained through superplastizers) in order to cast elements with high amount of reinforcement or high strength in order to bear the stresses generated by the weight of the towers designed by Gaudí without increasing the dimensions of the columns.

INTRODUCTION OF SCC IN SAGRADA FAMILIA

The use of SCC in the Temple of Sagrada Familia responds also to the need of meeting certain requirements demanded to the material. The construction of the naves, the transept and the apses of the Temple of Sagrada Familia required the use of a concrete that was compatible with the high amount of reinforcement and allowed avoiding the compaction of the material due to the long distances and complex geometries of some of the structural elements. Figure 2 shows the dense reinforcement of several elements of the tower of Jesus Christ and the

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elevation of the concrete skip from the ground floor where the concrete plant is located up to
the height where the elements to be cast are placed. In this regard, Figure 2b reveals how due
to space restrictions, the performance or efficiency in the casting is not high. Such conditions
justify the need to use a SCC in the Sagrada Familia.

Figure 2. a) Reinforcement in elements of the apse and b) elevation of a concrete skip.

In this context, in 2009 the use of SCC is considered as a feasible alternative to deal with
demands described. Besides flowability, the use of SCC had additional advantages such as
extending the service life of the frameworks (by avoiding vibration), improving the labour
working conditions both in terms of safety and health or reducing construction times.

EXPERIENCES WITH SCC

Conditioning factors

The main conditioning factor to take into account in the definition of the mixes is the location
of the concrete plant. Notice that the concrete used in the Temple of Sagrada Familia is
produced in the same work-site, where there is a small concrete plant with limited space for
storing materials. Therefore, the SCC mix cannot be defined with any materials, only with
those available in the concrete plant of the work-site of Sagrada Familia, which are the
materials used for other types of concretes applied in the construction of the Temple.

Figure 3. a) Location of the concrete plant at the work-site of Sagrada Familia (©Expiatory Temple of
the Sagrada Familia) and b) top view of the concrete plant (García 2010).

Materials

Two types of cement (grey and white) are available in the concrete plant in order to obtain
different shades. The grey cement is usually applied for conventional concrete, whereas the
white cement was introduced with the HSC. Table 2 presents the main properties of the two
cements which comply with the standards UNE 80305:2001 (AENOR 2001) and EN 197-

| Table 2. Properties of the cements used. |

Three types of aggregate (fine aggregate, medium aggregate and coarse aggregate) and a filler
are used in the concrete plant at Sagrada Familia in order to obtain a continuous grading.
Table 3 includes the properties the aggregates and the filler and Figure 4a shows the grading
curve of the coarse, medium and fine aggregates as well as the filler. Notice that the grading
of the filler used in the SCC mixes in Sagrada Familia is such that 100% passes the sieve of 2
mm, 60% the sieve of 0.125 mm and 36% the sieve of 0.063 mm. Furthermore, Figure 4b
includes de combined curves for the aggregates for the concrete mixes presented in
subsequent sections.
Table 3. Properties of the aggregate.

Figure 4. a) Grading curves of the aggregates and the filler and b) combined curves of the aggregates for the different concrete mixes.

The admixtures available at Sagrada Familia concrete plant and that were used in some of the mixes are silica fume, a superplasticizer (based on polycarboxylates) and a polyfunctional admixture (based on lignosulfate). The silica fume is mainly composed of SiO$_2$ and has a specific weight of 2.3 g/cm$^3$. Notice that even though two colours are available (grey and white), only the white silica fume is used in order to avoid coloring the concrete when white cement is used. The superplasticizer is used in SCC to improve the flowability of the mix and a polyfunctional admixture is also added to increase the superplastifying effect of the former. The specific weight of both admixtures are 1.04 and 1.18 g/cm$^3$, respectively.

Characterization tests

The fresh-state properties assessed in the study are flowability, viscosity and cohesion. The evaluation of these properties requires performing tests that are different from the previously conducted at the work-site of Sagrada Familia: the slump flow test performed according to the standard EN 12350-8:2010 (CEN 2010), the the J-ring test (a normalized ring with reinforcement bars) which is used to evaluate the capacity to pass through the reinforcement bars EN 12350-12:2011 (CEN 2011). Figures 5a present the test setup of the slump flow test. An additional test was conducted with some of the first mixes to evaluate flowability, segregation as well as how the concrete flow advances through the reinforcement and fills all the spaces (see Figure 5b). The so-called maze test consists in pouring a certain volume of concrete in a wooden formwork with the shape of a maze and with reinforcement, allowing the concrete to flow free until the formwork is filled. If the tests showed that the mixes do not meet the requirement of self-compactability the mixes were modified until the fresh-state properties correspond to those of a SCC.

Figure 5. a) Slump flow test and b) additional test to evaluate the flow through reinforcement.

The hardened-state properties were only assessed in terms of the compressive strength at 28 days. For that, cylindrical specimens with a diameter of 15 cm and a height of 30 cm were tested according to EN 12390-3:2009 (CEN 2009). The specimens were cast in disposable formworks and demoulded at 24 hours. Then, they were stored in water with lime until the date of the test.

Self-compacting concrete mixes

Several mixes were defined to meet the requirements of the different structures where the mixes were applied. Table 4 presents the SCC mixes proposed, divided in three stages that correspond to the different requirements established. Stage 1 and stage 2 correspond to SCC
mixes with compressive strengths of 60 MPa and 40 MPa. Stage 3 corresponds again to a SCC of 60 MPa with a certain color shade and embossment in the surface, which needs to be considered in the definition of the mix. The combined grading curves of the aggregates used in each mix is presented in Figure 4b.

Table 4. SCC mixes proposed for each stage (kg/m³) and properties.

Stage 1

The initial strategy consisted in taking the HSC mixes previously used in the construction of the Temple of Sagrada Familia as a reference (see Table 4) and reverse the granular skeleton. This strategy responds to the convenience of using mixes that were known by the labour in charge of manufacturing the concrete and the fact that the compressive strength obtained with these mixes was between 60 and 80 MPa depending on the type of cement used, which is a range of strengths that meet the requirements set for the SCC mix at stage 1.

The mix SCC1 was defined reversing the granular skeleton in order to increase the fine aggregate and reduce the coarse aggregate. In addition, medium aggregate was added to the mix. Furthermore, a polyfunctional admixture was also added to the mix to increase the flowability for the same w/c ratio. Despite reaching the required compressive strength, the mix SCC1 did not comply with the flowability expected. Therefore, mix SCC2 was proposed. This new mix included filler and higher content of water in order to improve the flowability. The properties of SCC2 were suitable to be applied in the walls of the apse between 45.0 m and 60.0 m above ground level, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Casting of the walls of the apse: a) plan view of location, b) profile of location, c) reinforcement at the base and d) reinforcement of the walls (©Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Familia).

Subsequently, another modification was included in the mix for stage 1 to avoid using silica fume and filler (see SCC3). The approach followed in the definition of SCC1 and SCC2 was based on a triangular granular skeleton. This means that the content of fine aggregate was higher than that of the medium aggregate and in turn the content of the latter was higher also than that of the coarse aggregate (see Table 4). The new mix for stage 1 (SCC3) sought a diabolo shape for the granular skeleton. The higher content of coarse aggregate (with a maximum size of 12.5 mm) provides higher strength. The properties of this mix were suitable, thus confirming that the silica fume and the filler are not required.

Stage 2

Given that the required compressive strength was 40 MPa, the cement content was reduced and the content of fine aggregate was increased in order to compensate for that reduction (see SCC4 in Table 4). In this case the approach followed for the granular skeleton is more similar...
to a diabolo shape with higher content of fine aggregates. The compression tests confirmed
that this mix led to values of strength that fulfilled the requirements for casting. This mix was
used in the central hyperboloid at the top of the apse as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Casting of the central hyperboloid: a) plan view of location, b) profile of location and c)
construction of the apse (©Expiatory Temple of the Sagrada Familia).

At this point it is important to highlight that the use of SCC leads to significant pressure in the
formwork, higher than in the case of conventional concrete. This phenomenon should be
considered in the design and selection of the formworks for SCC. Specifically, these
formworks should be anchored or fixed tight in order to avoid their opening due to the
pressure. In the case of Sagrada Familia, due to the always changing building materials and
construction processes, the type of formworks used in the work-site of Sagrada Familia have
adapted to the new requirements throughout the years (Gómez-Serrano et al. 2009).

Stage 3

The compressive strength required at this stage for the SCC 5 was 60 MPa. Additionally, a
certain color shade and embossment of the surface is sought for its application in the crossing
of the Temple. In order to obtain the shade, both cements (grey and white) were used at this
stage. Notice that the crossing hall will be accessible for visitors, therefore the visual aspect of
the concrete takes special relevance.

The concrete mix defined for this application presented a granular skeleton with a diabolo
shape. In addition, filler and silica fume were included. The results of the slump flow test are
satisfactory since the concrete reached a diameter of 76 cm. Furthermore, the J-ring test
performed 30 minutes after the production of the concrete also provided suitable results.
Regarding the compressive strength, the results show that the desired strength was reached at
only 4 days after casting.

Figure 8. Casting of the crossing: a) plan view of location and b) profile of location (©Expiatory
Temple of the Sagrada Familia).

CONCLUSIONS

The Temple of Sagrada Familia is a singular project that combines the challenges of building
according to the original designs of Antoni Gaudí and finding the materials and construction
processes that allow remaining true to those designs. The introduction of self-compacting
concrete in the project responds to the need to overcome these challenges by using the new
construction materials and technologies. The study described the evolution of the building
materials until present time, when self-compacting concrete has proved to be material that
complies with the structural and aesthetic requirements of the project.
In this regard, different SCC mixes were proposed according to the requirements established in each case, with compressive strengths ranging from 40 MPa to 60 MPa and, in some cases, demanding a certain flowability not only after the mixing but over time to confront the production and casting conditions at the work-site, which have influenced significantly the definition of the mixes. Nevertheless, the successful application of the mixes to elements with different shapes and with different loading demands indicates that this type of material is adaptable to a wide range of structures.

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