

Highrise Classicism: Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura in the United States

Postmodernism, Chicago Skyscrapers, Venezia Biennale 1980, New York MoMA and Architecture, Architectural Journals

/Abstract

A glance at the catalogue of works produced by Ricardo Bofill and his Taller de Arquitectura is enough to reveal their international ambitions. From Barcelona, the firm expanded to Paris, New York, Tokyo, Moscow and North Africa. But Taller de Arquitectura, established a special relationship of mutual respect with the architectural profession in the United States that lasted several decades and bore fruit in three unique architectural projects: two skyscrapers in Chicago and the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University in Houston.

This article analyses Taller de Arquitectura's relationship with the profession in the United States, taking into account not only its built work, but also its own writings, exhibitions of its projects in museums and galleries across the country and the development of design proposals for projects, both built and unbuilt, within this new cultural and economic context.

In short, the article provides a comprehensive overview of the more than thirty years during which Ricardo Bofill cultivated an intense intellectual and professional relationship with the United States, which contributed greatly to the development of his commitment to postmodern classicism.

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At the end of the 1960s, Spanish architecture was hardly a reference for the profession in the United States. By then, few Spaniards had made their mark on the other side of the Atlantic. Catalanian architect Josep Lluís Sert was certainly seen as a leader; he participated in CIAM's US branch, served as Dean at Harvard's Graduate School for Design and built several buildings in New England and New York. But by the end of the 1970s Sert had been practicing for three decades in Boston, so US-based professionals would have viewed him more as an American than a Spaniard. Madrid architect Javier Carvajal received critical acclaim for his Spanish Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair, which subsequently appeared in several American magazines. But apart from these and a few other noteworthy exceptions, modern Spanish architecture was almost entirely unknown in the United States. In fact, in the late 1970s and early 1980s *AIA Journal*, the official voice of the American Institute of Architects, presented Spain as a backwards hinterland, describing the country as "wild and remote at the uncharted western end of the Mediterranean."¹ It was as if some sectors of the profession in the United States refused to see Spain as anything other than a source of worn-out, traditional ideas.

Against this backdrop, from the late 1960s onward, the Catalanian firm Taller de Arquitectura established a relationship of mutual respect with the country that had given birth to the skyscraper. Lasting for several decades, this friendship gradually grew until it materialized in three singular built projects: two Chicago highrises and the Rice University School of Music in Houston.² Founded in 1963, Taller de Arquitectura was an innovative, multidisciplinary collaborative of forward-thinking designers, writers and artists including sibling architects Ricardo Bofill and Anna Bofill, along with Salvador Clotas, Ramón Collado, José Agustín Goytisolo, Joan Malagarriga, Manuel Núñez Yanowsky, Dolors Rocamora and Serena Vergano.³ However, while the firm's initial appearances in US magazines sometimes acknowledged the work as that of Taller de Arquitectura, over time American editors and critics eventually attributed the work to Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura (RBTA), or even more frequently, simply to Ricardo Bofill.⁴ For example, in an April 1988 article in the Los Angeles

1 Norman Carver, "Villages of Iberia," *AIA Journal*, 71 no. 5 (1982): 48. The *AIA Journal's* insistence on seeing Spain as a backward hinterland was the focus of Brett Tippey, Íñigo Cobeta Gutiérrez, Marta García Carbonero and Laura Sánchez Carrasco, "From Folk to Modern: The AIA's Evolving Criticism of Spanish Architecture, 1975–1992", Architectural Transatlantic Dialogues Conference, October 2024, Escola Superior Artística do Porto, Portugal.

2 The studio also built the home of singer Paulina Rubio in Miami, but it is not analyzed in this article since it reflects personal relationships rather than professional circles.

3 Vincent Scully, "Ricardo Bofill: Vincent Scully Assesses the Radical Classicism of the Spanish Architect's Housing Projects," *Architectural Digest* 45 no. 4, (1988): 59.

4 In order to reveal the impressions American professionals would have had, throughout the article we attribute authorship of each project exactly as it is attributed in the US press.

edition of *Architectural Digest*, critic Vincent Scully centered his analysis of the firm’s “radical classicism” on Bofill as a singular figure. Scully buried his only recognition of Taller de Arquitectura towards the end of the article, where he described the collective as “Bofill and his team.”⁵

Bofill’s acceptance in the United States resulted from several years of travels throughout the country, the growing critical acclaim his architecture and ideas on urban planning received in the US press, and a series of exhibitions and recognitions of his work. It also benefitted from the wide coverage of his European oeuvre, especially in journals dedicated to the professional public, such as *Architectural Forum*, *Architectural Record* and *Progressive Architecture*.

In contrast with Europe, Bofill noted significant differences in both the professional discipline and the role of the architect in American society.⁶ In the US he discovered the ways in which market forces applied to the arts (including architecture), and it was here that he came to understand that “good architecture is good business for everybody.”⁷ As a self-proclaimed nomad, Bofill knew how to readily adapt to the changes provoked by his American adventures, yet without compromising his own interests:

“[...] This isn’t about arriving in New York expecting to change the system, transplanting European methods or objectives. [...] What should we do, then? We submit to the system, we accept it, and then we take it, from the inside, to a higher level of beauty that it has yet to reach.”⁸

In this article we will analyze Bofill’s and Taller de Arquitectura’s relationship with the profession in the United States over several decades, considering not only design proposals and built work in the US, but also its writings on and exhibitions of its oeuvre in museums and galleries across the country. On one hand, it will argue that Bofill’s adaptation of classical motifs in his own buildings corresponded not only to the post-modern aesthetic that dominated the US at the time, but also to the widely held belief amongst American architects that Spain continued to be a viable source for older ideas. On the other hand, it will investigate the ways this new cultural and economic environment produced nuances in Bofill’s architectural theory. It will also reveal that, although Bofill operated as the head of an innovative collective of architects (Taller de Arquitectura), the

5 Scully, “Ricardo Bofill: Vincent Scully Aassesses the Radical Classicism of the Spanish Architect’s Housing Projects”, 59.

6 In this article, the term “American” is employed to mean “from the United States,” a simplification that emerged from within the country itself and, although it constitutes an unjust metonymy, it is commonly accepted and enhances readability.

7 Ricardo Bofill and Jean-Louis André, *Espacio y vida* (Barcelona: Tusquets Editores, 1990), 91. Translated into English by Brett Tippey from the original quote in Spanish: “una buena arquitectura es un buen negocio para todo el mundo.”

8 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 103-104. Translated into English by Brett Tippey from the original quote in Spanish: “[...] no se trata de llegar a Nueva York esperando cambiar el sistema, trasplantar métodos u objetivos europeos. [...] ¿Qué hacer, entonces? Someterse al sistema, aceptarlo hasta llevarlo, desde dentro, a un grado de belleza que todavía no ha alcanzado.”

US professional press presented the collective’s projects to their US-based readers primarily as works created by a single architect: Ricardo Bofill.

The Debut in the US

Their first projects quickly began to appear on the other side of the Atlantic following the firm’s founding in Barcelona in 1963. With editor Peter Blake at the helm, in 1968 *Architectural Forum* rushed the publication of the Xanadú Condominium complex in Calpe on Spain’s eastern coast, years ahead of the building’s completion in 1971⁹ Forum attributed this project to “Bofill-Arquitecto.” Appearing alongside articles on Eero Saarinen’s Gateway Arch in St. Louis and images of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill’s John Hancock Tower in Chicago (then under construction), the article on Bofill’s condos drew attention to fragmented volumes, vernacular gestures and impish combination of formal motifs. The article was written by English architect Peter Hodgkinson, who had collaborated with Taller de Arquitectura since 1966. Hodgkinson showed off the firm’s bookish, eclectic and unconventional character to Forum’s American readers. To describe the project, Hodgkinson’used Jimi Hendrix’s lyrics, George Orwell’s commentary on the Sagrada Familia and quotes from Robert Venturi and Reyner Banham. The following year *Forum* portrayed the 1968 Kafka’s Castle in San Pere de Ribes (Barcelona), which it attributed to “Bofill Architectural Workshop”¹⁰. This time Hodgkinson’s prose was more precise and conventional, and he openly acknowledged Archigram’s influence over the project. *Forum*’s final piece on Taller de Arquitectura appeared in 1971. It presented an English-language translation of an article originally written in Spanish by José María Carandell.¹¹ Carandell described the collective’s project for Barrio Gaudí in Reus, Gaudí’s hometown, as an imaginative solution built with local materials and a flavor of Spain, “an underdeveloped economy [...] on the brink of becoming a consumer society.”¹² Even more surprising, for *Forum*’s editors this project was so relevant to their American readers that they featured it on the cover.

After these initial exposures, Bofill visited the US for the first time in 1969. This trip sparked his first critical reflections on American architecture across a range of scales, from the regional to the individual building site. In subsequent writings, like his 1990 book *Espacio y vida*, he reiterated these reflections and references to the United States.¹³

9 Peter Hodgkinson, “Xanadú in Spain,” *Architectural Forum* 128, no. 5 (1968): 52-59.

10 ED., “Kafka’s Castle,” *Architectural Forum* 131, no. 4 (1969): 35-41.

11 “Barrio Gaudí,” *Architectural Forum* 134, no. 4 (1971): 22-27. Text written by Jose Maria Carandell, “a well-known Spanish journalist” and translated from Spanish into English is by Tom Burgess.

12 “Barrio Gaudí,” (1971): 25.

13 Of special interest is the chapter titled “En el seno de lo político y lo económico” (“In the bosom of politics and economics”), in which he included a conscientious review of skyscraper typology. See: Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 81-114.

While Bofill was familiarizing himself with the profession in the United States, other US magazines joined Forum in noticing his work. Known for its readiness to publish innovative, forward-thinking projects, *Progressive Architecture* took interest in the office's work in the 1970s. The July 1975 issue used its "News" section to announce that Bofill/Taller de Arquitectura (sic) had won the competition for Les Halles thanks to a popular vote amongst the city's residents.¹⁴ A few months later, in September 1975 it published a retrospective organized by British theorist Geoffrey Broadbent, titled "The Road to Xanadu and Beyond."¹⁵ Broadbent's exhaustive analysis gave American architects a glimpse of the rapid evolution then underway in the studio: Taller de Arquitectura was quickly moving away from the artisanal vernacular of the first houses in Calpe, towards the classicism of Les Halles (never built) and the additive, modular composition of Barrio Gaudí (1968) and Muralla Roja (1973). *Progressive Architecture* even featured this last project on the issue's cover (figure 3, left). Broadbent's theoretical discussion linked Bofill's work with the central ideas then being postulated by architects in the US, such as Peter Eisenmann's "deep structures" (as Broadbent called them) or Robert Venturi's and Charles Moore's preference for symbolism over orthodox functionalism.¹⁶ In fact, for *Progressive Architecture*, Bofill's reliance on symbolism was so relevant that the journal returned to the subject a year later in an article titled "To a Once and Future State". It featured Bofill's 1976 Le Perthus Pyramid, which Taller de Arquitectura envisioned as a postmodern homage to Bofill's native Catalonia.¹⁷

But these were not the only projects by the Taller that drew attention in US journals in the 1970s. Although throughout the 1970s and 1980s *AIA Journal* typically presented Spain as a backward hinterland, in October 1978 it did publish three projects designed by the office: Xanadu, Walden 7 and Muralla Roja. These buildings by Bofill were among the few modern Spanish buildings to appear in the journal prior to *El Milagro* of 1992, when Barcelona hosted the Olympics and Seville hosted the World's Fair. However, reiterating its treatment elsewhere of Spain as a backwards looking country, *AIA Journal* (renamed *Architecture* in 1983) described these buildings as the "natural descendant of Gaudí and the Moorish tradition." Clearly, for the editors of *Architecture* these projects were more



Fig. 1
Inside pages of the June 1968 issue of *Architectural Forum* magazine dedicated to RT-BA's Xanadu complex.



past than present.¹⁸ Nevertheless, author Nory Miller included Taller de Arquitectura in a broader investigation of the greatest architects of the 20th Century. Miller used a direct quote from Bofill to introduce the Taller's projects: "Through color, architecture can be brought to life, a living breath to animate the coldness of the building."¹⁹ For Miller, Bofill no longer represented the faraway Spanish Mediterranean, but an authority on color in architecture.

Charles Jencks and Arthur Drexler also contributed to Bofill's expanding presence in the United States and abroad. Their books published in the 1970s helped to establish Bofill's image as a singular architect, thereby downplaying the role of the Taller. In his 1971 book *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods*, Charles Jencks included Bofill in Chapter 7 ("The intuitive tradition"), alongside Hans Hollein and Archigram. For Jencks, the common thread among these three architects was that they all intended to improve architecture by incorporating references outside of itself.²⁰ Jencks also noted that, for Archigram, Hollein and Bofill, form was an end unto itself. As evidence, Jencks offered Bofill's Xanadú and Kafka's Castle. Likewise, the chapter titled "Historicizing", in Drexler's 1979 MoMA exhibit catalog *Transformations in Modern Architecture*, praised Le Perthus [Fig. 2] not for looking forward, but rather for flirting with history.²¹ Although the exhibit also included Spaniards Miguel Fisac, Francisco Javier Sáenz de Oíza, Lluís Clotet and Óscar Tusquets, Bofill was the only one to maintain a consistent presence in the United States thereafter.

By the end of the 1970s Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura became known in the United States for creating architecture that emerged from an eclectic and constantly changing array of influences. This incipient success was confirmed by US-based awards such as the American Society

14 "Parisian vote on Les Halles project," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 7 (1975): 22.

15 Geoffrey Broadbent, "The road to Xanadu and beyond," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 9 (1975): 68-83.

16 Broadbent, "The road to Xanadu and beyond", 76.

17 Eleni Constantine, "To a once and future state," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 5 (1979): 90-91.

18 Nory Miller, "The Re-Emergence of Color as a Design Tool," *AIA Journal* 67, no. 12 (1978): 41-55.

19 Miller, "The Re-Emergence of Color as a Design Tool", 49.

20 Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods* (Praeger Publishers, 1971), 93-95.

21 Arthur Drexler, *Transformation in Modern Architecture* (New York: MoMA, 1979), 162. The exhibition catalog only included the Le Perthus pyramid, but the exhibition itself also included a photograph of Xanadú.

Fig. 2
"Transformation in Modern Architecture", MoMA exhibition (1979). On the left is the Xanadu project in the foreground. In the center of the second image, on the right, is Le Perthus pyramid. MoMA, accessed November, 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1773>. Left: Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN1250.10. Photograph by Mali Olatunji / Right: Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. 250.15. Photograph by Mali Olatunji.

of Interior Designers International Prize in 1978 and their growing presence in *Progressive Architecture* [Fig. 3] and other publications.²²

Postmodern Classicism

The circulation in the United States of Bofill's work increased throughout the 1980s. US-based press outlets readily embraced Bofill's recent turn towards the classicist idiom, perhaps influenced by the spirit of the moment and the wide reception of two exhibits separated by five years. The first of these events was the 1975 MoMA exhibit "The Architecture of the École des Beaux-Arts." A half-century had passed since the heroic period of modern architecture, which by 1975 was facing increasingly intense critique and scrutiny. Arthur Drexler's exhibition catalog mused that this show attempted to investigate what lessons the contemporary vanguard might learn from history. And Drexler posited the nineteenth century as a prime source.

The other event was the first annual Venice Biennale, directed by Paolo Portoghesi in 1980, titled "The Presence of the Past". In *Architectural Record*'s March 1981 interview with Robert A. M. Stern, Taller de Arquitectura-Ricardo Bofill's façade fragment appeared alongside those of other noteworthy American architects such as Frank Gehry, Michael Graves, Hans Hollein, Charles Moore and Venturi/Rausch/Scott Brown.²³ But readers did not have to content themselves with viewing the facades of the Venice Biennale only from photographs. "The Presence of the Past" traveled from Venice to Paris, then to the Fort Mason Center in San Francisco from May to July 1982. Here, American architects could see Bofill's façade in person and touch it physically.

It was a good moment for the classical idiom in the United States, and *Progressive Architecture* dedicated an entire issue to the topic in October 1981. In this issue Taller de Arquitectura/Ricardo Bofill's work was literally front and center. The firm's Le Viaduc project in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, France, was featured on the cover (figure 3, right). Inside the issue, editor John Morris Dixon situated Les Arcades du Lac-Le Viaduc among the most impressive and successful projects for the *villes nouvelles* designed to relieve congestion in Paris.²⁴ A year earlier, Dixon had



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Fig. 3

Two covers of *Progressive Architecture* magazine with RBTA's work. To the left, the Muralla Roja on September 1975 issue. To the right, Les Arcades du Lac-Le Viaduc on October 1981 issue.

reported on these newly created cities, applauding Le Viaduc's successes:

The brilliant, unpredictable designers from Catalonia are combining 18th-Century formalism with 20th-Century technique to give the Paris new towns one of their few truly precedent-shattering landmarks.²⁵

In that same issue, Dixon cited Peter Hodgkinson, who recognized the expedience of a return to classical ideas in architecture. But Hodgkinson asserted that Taller de Arquitectura effected this return to history by making use of the most up-to-date prefabricated construction systems. This paradoxical blend of the old and the new echoed Bofill's contribution to the Venice Biennale. The oversized keystone and exaggerated rustication of his façade presaged his later use of precast concrete to reclaim classical forms or, as he quipped, to "prefabricate the Renaissance."²⁶

Progressive Architecture continued this discourse by publishing Les Espaces d'Abraxas exactly one year later, in October 1982.²⁷ From that point onward, *Progressive Architecture* gradually lost interest in the firm's work, as well as the broader postmodern movement. But *Architectural Record* quickly took up the cause and eventually became Taller de Arquitectura's primary connection with the United States. With Walter F. Wagner as *Record*'s editor, in 1986 the magazine published three of Bofill's latest projects in France in its engineering section, a surprising place to discuss projects driven by formalism and Classical motifs. Moreover, by including these European buildings, *Record* contradicted its own ostensive goal of focusing on the latest developments in the profession within the United States.

Debora K. Dietsch's headline ("Precast Classicism") and opening paragraph stressed the paradox and irony apparent in Bofill's work.²⁸ Dietsch highlighted the virtuosity of the application of precast concrete in residential buildings in three housing projects (Les Echelles du Baroque in Paris, Les Espaces d'Abraxas in Marne-la-Vallée and the Green Crescent in Cergy Pontoise) a sector in which the material and construction technique were uncommon.²⁹ Simultaneously, the Max Protetch Gallery in New York attested the fact that the interaction between classical forms and modern construction techniques was central to Taller de Arquitectura's work. Having established its position as a preeminent venue for avant-garde ideas and the progressive work of young architects since 1978, in Autumm 1986 the Protetch organized an entire

22 Warren A. James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura: Buildings and projects 1960-1985* (Rizzoli New York, 1988), 215.

23 Charles K. Gandee, "Behind the Facades: a conversation with Robert A.M. Stern," *Architectural Record*, no. 3 (1981): 108-113.

24 John Morris Dixon, "Wageearners' Versailles," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 10 (1981): 94-97.

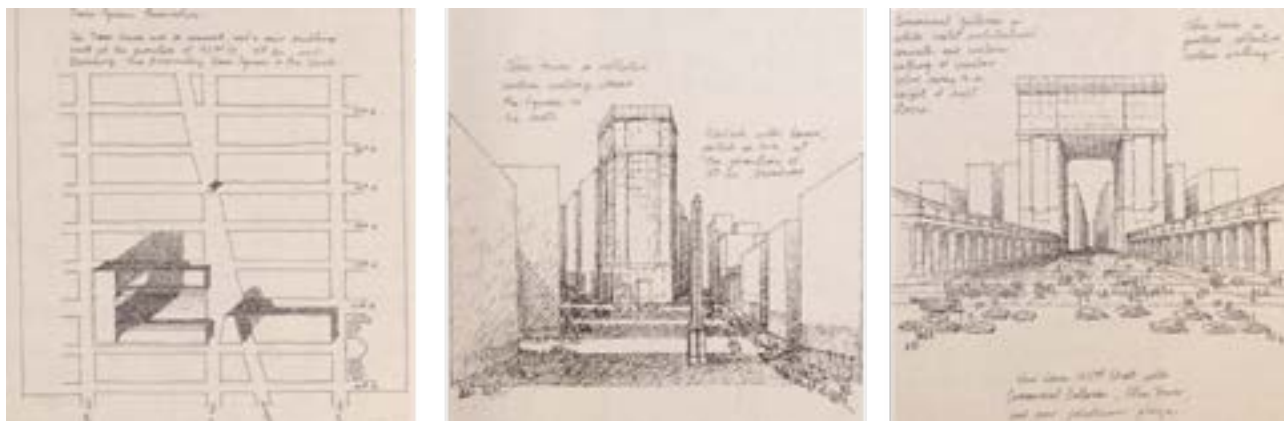
25 John Morris Dixon, "Environs de Paris," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 9 (1980)a: 67.

26 Fondazione MAXXI, "Dentro La Strada Novissima," https://www.maxxi.art/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/MAXXI_StradaNovissima_PressKit_ENG.pdf. (Accessed on July 31, 2025).

27 Barry Bergdoll, "Subsidized Doric," *Progressive Architecture*, no. 10 (1982): 74-79.

28 Deborah K. Dietsch, "Precast Classicism," *Architectural Record*, no. 1 (1986): 131.

29 *Architectural Record*, no. 1 (1986): "Neo-Baroque in Paris," 132-134; "The Theater, the Palace and the Arch," 135-139; "New Georgian, New Town," 140.



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exhibition on the office titled “Ricardo Bofill, Taller de Arquitectura: The City, Classicism and Technology.”³⁰

Thanks to Dixon and Dietsch, Taller de Arquitectura acquired new recognition among US-based practitioners. Their recent successes in Paris showed Americans that these Spanish architects were no wild and remote bumpkins. Instead, their ideas were both contemporary and relevant for similar projects in the United States. The firm’s trend towards classicism and away from regional and vernacular sources made its work even more germane to market forces in the US in the 1980s. Bofill-style Classicism afforded precisely the kind of legibility and monumentality that capitalist-minded American clients wanted. Not surprisingly, commissions for Bofill and the Taller to design US-based projects quickly followed.

In the early 1980s, Taller de Arquitectura designed a pair of never-built and little-known projects for sites in the US, including a 1980 residential complex in Houston and a 1984 urban design competition to revamp downtown Escondido, California.³¹ More media-worthy was the invited competition for a private residence and winery in California’s Napa Valley, convened by the founders of vintner Clos Pegase in collaboration with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Ultimately, the team formed by Michael Graves and Edward Schmidt took first place and eventually built their proposal. But SFMoMA displayed Bofill’s entry in its corresponding exhibition on the competition.³²

That same year (1984), Taller de Arquitectura was also unsuccessful in another important competition convened by The Municipal Art Society to remodel Times Square, which received 565 entries. This time the competition focused on stimulating debate about urbanism and the problem of the city, following the controversy generated by Johnson’s and Burgee’s previous plan. Taller de Arquitectura’s proposal explored an integration of

Fig. 4
Proposal for the redevelopment of Times Square, New York. From left to right: site plan showing the full proposal, image of the tower at the intersection with Broadway and office building on the west side. In: James, Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura: 153. Drawings: Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

30 The exhibitions held at the Max Protetch Gallery in the 1980s can be consulted on its web site: <https://www.maxprotetch.com/home-2-4-2>. Accessed on January 20, 2025.

31 The project in Houston and the Escondido competition are mentioned in Warren A. James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura: Buildings and projects 1960-1985* (Rizzoli New York, 1988), 210-212.

32 James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura*, 217.



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pedestrian space, architectural elements and New York’s famous grid that recalled bygone historical periods [Fig. 4]. These elements included an obelisk cloven in two by a laser beam, a triangular tower at the intersection with Broadway and an office complex that emulated a triumphal arch with its two towers unified by an upper bridge. Formally speaking, this last component recalled his 1982 proposal for the Arche de la Défense in Paris.

In 1985 the firm took on another urban development project, the Port Imperial in New Jersey, on the banks of the Hudson River.³³ In this case, the site faced Midtown Manhattan, one of the world’s most emblematic skylines.³⁴ This unique American context dominated Bofill’s thinking during the design phases. The project arranged over 2000 dwelling units and a diverse array of services around two symmetrical, circular plazas that opened views towards the Manhattan silhouette. The less desirable view (towards New Jersey) was obscured by a rhythmic composition of four narrow porticoes [Fig. 5]. The original version included a campanile and three urban voids of varying shapes, while the subsequent plan was more geometric and uniform. Both the composition of urban space and its individual elements came from the classical European tradition, yet Bofill respected the singularity of this new context and described the project as “un projet sculpté, des espaces traités de manière classique, mais en tenant compte de l’échelle de New York.”³⁵ In the 1980s he used a similar urban strategy in a housing project (never built) located on the outskirts of Chicago, which he described in *Espacio y vida* as a Greek theater around which he organized residential towers, 150 meters in height. Again, the central void opened onto views of the city.³⁶

33 James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura*, 174-179.

34 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 38.

35 Annabelle D’Huart, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura* (Milano: Electa Moniteur, 1989), 151.

36 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 132.

Fig. 5
Port Imperial, New Jersey. Second version with Manhattan skyline in the background. In: James, Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura: 179. Drawing: Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

1985 was a prolific year in Bofill's activity in the United States. He designed the unbuilt Urban Palace in New York's Upper West Side. This corner residential structure housed 120 units divided into two volumes differentiated by height but united by pilasters and bay windows. He described this building as "the first serious attempt to deal with other architectural issues present in the United States which are not perceived from a European point of view."³⁷ Mostly, these "issues" boiled down to the distinction between public and private space according to the American mindset.

As evidence of the reputation Bofill had built in US professional circles, that same year the American Institute of Architects named him Honorary Fellow. Bofill was the fourth Spaniard to earn this award. He followed Luis Jesús Arizmendi (1972), Juan González Cebrián (1975) and Rafael de La-Hoz (1980). But Bofill's naming as Honorary Fellow preceded, by several years, those of other noteworthy Spaniards: Oriol Bohigas (1993), Rafael Moneo (1993), Juan Bassegoda Nonell (1994) and Ignasi de Solà-Morales (1995).

But Bofill's greatest achievement in the US in 1985 was MoMA's exhibition titled *Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History*, held between 26 June and 13 September. Curated by Arthur Drexler, it was the first of five shows financed by the Gerald D. Hines Interests Architecture Program to recognize new trends. In the following years the Hines program financed four other exhibitions, three of which focused on the work of other leading foreign architects: Mario Botta (1986–1987), Emilio Ambasz (1989, with Steven Holl) and Tadao Ando.³⁸ In the first exhibit, MoMA rejected modernity in favor of classical architecture and its ability to revitalize cities. To emphasize this point, Drexler organized a symposium with Robert A. M. Stern, Colin Rowe and the show's protagonists, Bofill and Krier, on 27 June 1985, one day after the exhibition opening. The symposium speakers opined about the ability of architectural tradition to enrich contemporary architecture. Despite obvious differences in their work and speech, the exhibition transformed Bofill and Krier into elegant dance partners. *Record's* Roger Kimball perceived two crucial differences in the exhibit's material.³⁹ One of these differences was the relationship between form and technique. While Bofill embraced modern construction materials and processes, such as precast concrete, Krier rejected them to the point of inciting a return to load-bearing stone walls. This discrepancy was already apparent in Krier's and Bofill's writings. Krier was much more antagonistic towards modern architecture, while Bofill openly accepted the ideas of Mies van der Rohe and Alvar Aalto. The other difference was

³⁷ James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura*, 166.

³⁸ Mario Botta (20-11-1986 / 10-02-1987), Emilio Ambasz y Steven Holl (09-02-1989 / 04-04-1989) y Tadao Ando (03-10-1991). The fourth exhibition focused on Deconstructivist Architecture (23-06-1988 / 30-08-1988).

³⁹ Roger Kimball, "In search of the ideal city: The architecture of Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier," *Architectural Record*, no. 8 (1985): 77.



apparent in each architect's response to Drexler's invitation to design a project for New York to be shown in the exhibition. Based on his disdain for the city's high density, Krier ignored Drexler's proposed New York location, choosing instead to work in the setting of Pierre L'Enfant's neo-classical Washington DC. But Bofill accepted the challenge and took his first stab at the skyscraper as a quintessential American type. The result was the never-built Jefferson Tower.

Bofill had already declared that the skyscraper had no place in the European context, but he fully appreciated its worth in the American city. He even affirmed that, as a type, the skyscraper could not easily or rationally be transferred to any other continent because it was the perfect embodiment of the American capitalist system.⁴⁰ As Bofill retraced the history of the skyscraper, he highlighted the stylistic variability that the type underwent in its earliest days, the subsequent formalist simplification that culminated in the 1940s and its transition towards weightlessness and transparency in the works of Mies van der Rohe and SOM in the 1950s.⁴¹ And regarding function, he claimed that the skyscraper's greatest virtue was the views it gave its inhabitants.⁴²

By the 1980s, it was time for another revolution in skyscraper design, and Bofill used the Jefferson Tower to project his own contributions to the development of this American type. The elevation drawing of the Jefferson Tower occupied the terminus of the main axis in the MoMA exhibition, and it extended from the gallery's floor to its ceiling [Fig. 6]. Bofill designed the skyscraper for a fictitious site in New York's Upper East Side and he highlighted its slenderness. The tower's footprint, measuring 30 meters by 30 meters, and the maximum height of 210 meters—self-imposed by Bofill—allowed him to evenly divide the façade into seven perfect cubes stacked in a classical tripartite organization.⁴³ The five middle cubes formed the central shaft, each separated by a double cornice and housing ten floors. According to Paul Goldberger, Bofill's lowest and highest cubes, serving as

⁴⁰ Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 99.

⁴¹ Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 100.a

⁴² Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 99.

⁴³ James, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura*, 172-173.

Fig. 6

Two views of the section dedicated to Ricardo Bofill in the MoMA exhibition "Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History" (1985). MoMA, accessed November 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1778>. Left: Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN1402.5A. Photograph by Kate Keller. / Right: Photographic Archive. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. IN1402.2B. Photograph by Kate Keller.



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base and capital, followed a compositional strategy that “applies classical devices more successfully to the problem of the skyscraper than most of Mr. Bofill’s predecessors have been able to do.”⁴⁴ But for Bofill the Jefferson Tower presented a problem that he would attempt to resolve in future skyscraper designs: the façade was 40% solid, a composition that significantly diminished the skyscraper’s most characteristic and valuable quality: its views [Fig. 7].

With the exposure provided by MoMA, and the foresight that Bofill’s ideas would quickly materialize in built work, Taller de Arquitectura opened its New York office in 1987. That same year, Boston’s Central Artery project [Fig. 8] offered the collaborative a unique opportunity to explore its ideas on the urban scale. For several years the city had carefully studied multiple options to bury the interstate highway that bifurcated the downtown and to investigate solutions to convert the highway’s ground-level footprint into usable urban space. Among the competition’s many entries only four, including Taller de Arquitectura’s, advanced to the stage of public comment. The other three proposals that accompanied it were submitted by the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA), Alex Krieger (then Associate Chair of GSD’s Department of Architecture) and the Central Artery Task Force of the Boston Society of Architects.⁴⁵ Bofill and the Taller proposed a

Fig. 7
Interior perspective. Jefferson tower (1985). MoMA, accessed January 2025, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/467>. © 2025 Ricardo Bofill.

Fig. 8
RBTA proposal for Boston Central Artery (1987). In: Annabelle D’Huart, Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura, (Electa Moniteur, 1989), 163. Drawing: Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

44 Paul Goldberger, “Architecture view; embracing Classicism in different ways,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1985.

45 See: Avigail Shimshoni, “The Central Artery Project in Boston: A Museum to Grow With,” (Master Thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1992), 53-67.



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unified composition that connected directly with the port along a bending axis that terminated in spaces designed according to historic European urban design strategies.⁴⁶ Bofill had recently completed part of a similar project, Los Jardines del Turia in Valencia.

The result of this design competition demonstrates the level of respect Bofill had earned by then in the US professional community: BRA hired Bofill as a consultant for the continued development of the project, along with his competitor Krieger. The final version of the Central Artery was inaugurated in 2008 as the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway.⁴⁷

The Materialization of Ideas

In 1988 MoMA opened “Deconstructivist Architecture,” the third of the exhibits financed by the Gerald D. Hines Foundation. By then both the profession and academia had begun to tire of Postmodernism’s excesses. But many US clients, like universities and large corporations, were smitten with the style’s symbolic value and contrived sense of history. Such was the context for Taller de Arquitectura’s first two commissions to build important projects on US soil. Both came from clients that continued to place their bets on classicism’s sustained value in the US marketplace.

Construction on Bofill’s first built work in the United States, Rice University’s Shepherd School of Music in Houston, finished in 1991. The US professional press’s wide coverage of Taller de Arquitectura’s housing projects in France must have had an impact. Dr. Michael Hammond, Dean of the School of Music, confirmed to *Architectural Record* in 1992 that the committee’s selection of Bofill’s office was motivated by “the need for the ‘neutrality of Classicism’.”⁴⁸ In plan, the school’s composition organized the various functions around interior patios, while the compact red brick façade, with its blocky entablature and its overscaled engaged columns

46 Shimshoni, “The Central Artery Project in Boston,” 55.

47 Alex Krieger, *Boston 2000. A Plan for The Central Artery Progress Report* (City of Boston, 1990), 35. Bofill’s proposal could not be built because the plan approved in 1991 required more green space and fewer buildings than in Bofill’s version.

48 Gerald Moorhead, “Classical Music,” *Architectural Record*, no. 3 (1992): 76.

Fig. 9
Main facade of the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, Houston. RBTA website. Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

in a quasi Doric order, complemented Ralph Adams Cram's (1863–1942) original design for the campus [Fig. 9]. For Bofill, this solution, "tinged here with critical regionalism," adapted Classicism to Houston.⁴⁹

But for American observers it was more than an adaptation. In *Architectural Record*, Gerald Moorhead wrote that this project combined "monastic, Mediterranean and Wrightian imagery."⁵⁰ The first adjective paired the lives of monks with those of the musicians that would use the building, because both lifestyles require great discipline and hours of solitary concentration. Moorhead's parallel was evident in the building's cloister-like organization of multiple practice cells. His second reference, to the Mediterranean tradition, stemmed from the building's axial organization along two streets that divide the building into quarters. For Moorhead, this strategy was reminiscent of the urban plan of Roman cities. Moorhead also recognized the building's use of interior patios with fountains and channels of water, which he connected to Islamic spatial ideas. Perhaps most surprisingly, Moorhead linked the building's horizontality, asymmetry and insistence in crowning the colonnade with a heavy entablature to similar compositional strategies in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, whom Bofill had praised on multiple occasions. Moorhead also pointed out the facade's subtle curvature, the alternation between square and circular columns, and the variation between double and single height. These aspects integrated the building into a campus in which all the buildings, irrespective of their style or year of construction, were built with orange brick and gray limestone. In these ways, Bofill maintained the inertia of his European sources, yet he replaced the limestone with precast concrete, which gave the columns a greater sense of monumentality because they could be manufactured in a single piece.

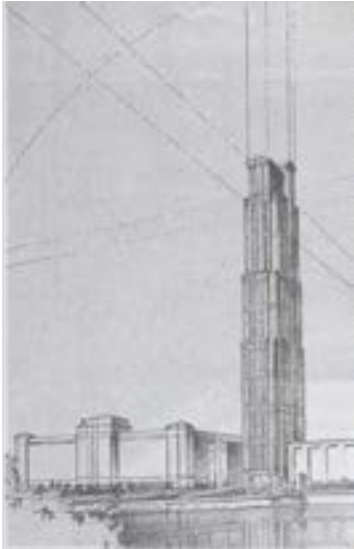
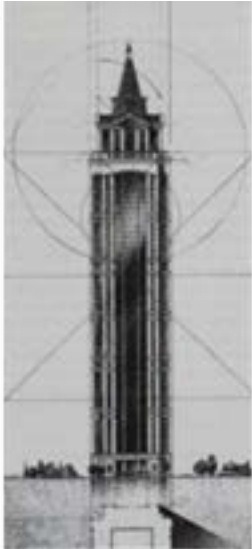
Taller de Arquitectura developed the Shepherd School of Music in parallel with Bofill's first skyscraper, 77 West Wacker Drive in Chicago, which finished construction in 1992 [Fig. 10]. This project resolves his self-critique of the Jefferson Tower's all-too-solid façade. On West Wacker Drive, Bofill and partners transformed the Jefferson's heaviness into a much lighter object. Bofill had already used this strategy in a project for northern Manhattan: Central Park North (New York, 1988, never built). More ambitious than a single tower, Bofill designed the project as a series of skyscrapers that would become Harlem's new façade towards Central Park. One drawing incorporated the historic pyramidal setbacks of New York's 1916 zoning regulations [Fig. 11, left]. The tower was a stack of rectangular volumes in which each piece took on a different formal solution: solid and massive at the base, a combination of glass and solid in the shaft, and slenderer and more transparent at the top.

49 D'Huart, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura*, 154. Translated from the original French by Brett Tippey: "se teinte ici de régionalisme critique".

50 Moorhead, "Classical Music", 75.



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Fig. 10
Sketch and image of 77 Wacker Drive building. RBTA website. Drawings: Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

Fig. 11
Unbuilt skyscrapers proposal in the United States. From left to right: Central Park North, NY (1988); Houston Lighting & Power (1990); 300 North LaSalle, Chicago (1990). In: Cruells, Ricardo Bofill *Obras y Proyectos*: 141, 145, 147. Drawings: Archivo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

Bofill reprised this idea for the site in Chicago. But this time the solution was even more materially and volumetrically unified. Bofill was convinced that the developers had trusted his sense of Classicism “because they do not want International Style architecture and its coldly ostentatious materials. When you live in the country of steel and triumphant industry, you dream of stone and tradition.”⁵¹ So, on the shore of the Chicago River he proposed a dialogue between white Portuguese granite and the up-to-date technology of silver-gray glass and curtain wall construction. In the façade he used stone only to emphasize the structural and organizational lines with a mannerist’s sense of symbolism. For the crown he recurred to the temple archetype that he had used so often in his European projects, but this time without compromising transparency. The stone demarcated the compositional lines of the gable, cornice and triglyphs, while he filled the tympanum and metopes with glass. He also highlighted the base, constructed entirely of stone interspersed with voids that terminated with pediments according to the Renaissance strategy of alternating geometries. The shaft was much lighter in appearance and was subdivided vertically into three zones defined by triple-height panes of glass. The plan, nevertheless, is arranged in a conventional core-and-shell organization. The recessed corners provided a unique yet efficient means of resolving and illuminating the corner offices. After it was completed in the early 1990s this combination of solid and fragile materials was attractive even to Hollywood. In the 1998 crime thriller film *The Negotiator*, Samuel L. Jackson played wrongfully accused Chicago police officer Danny Roman, who holds hostages inside Bofill’s building as a last resort in his demand for justice. Despite the inevitable gunshots and explosions, this skyscraper-temple stood strong.

In 1990, Bofill further refined these ideas in two never built skyscrapers: the Houston Lighting and Power Building and 300 North LaSalle in Chicago. The Houston tower maintained 77 West Wacker’s core-and-shell plan and recessed the corners, although with a double setback. But in this building he invented two new solutions for the exterior volume. He converted the façade’s central module into a single, multistorey pane of glass and, he topped off the building with a Gothic needle, whose four facades and cruciform plan again resembled a temple [Fig. 11, center]. Although the project advanced through several development stages and even had a projected date of construction, it was never built.

The project for 300 North LaSalle in Chicago also demonstrated Bofill’s willingness to question his own prior critiques of skyscraper design. Previously, Bofill had rejected the use of multiple overlapping elevator shafts, a strategy used by some skyscraper architects to gain additional

51 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 81-82. Translated into English by Brett Tippey from the original quote in Spanish: “(...) porque ya no quieren arquitectura internacional y sus materiales fríamente ostentosos. Cuando se vive en el país del acero y la industria triunfante, se sueña con la piedra y la tradición.”

height. But here, Bofill used precisely this same strategy. As it rose the tower grew ever slenderer, and he demarcated each of the shaft’s four parts with pairs of four-story windows framed between exaggerated vertical lines. Again, he differentiated the upper part with a cruciform plan and four identical facades, but this time he crowned each of them with a shallow curving pediment [Fig. 11, right]. These solutions fulfilled the image of the skyscraper as Bofill comprehended it: “To understand the mechanisms secreted by this strange object, the skyscraper; to study the capitalist system; and, as a result, to synthesize these with my own aesthetic disposition.”⁵²

Following these projects the US professional press continued to promote Bofill’s European projects. His continued presence in the United States was partly due to his work, along with other Spanish architects, for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. By then, Bofill had earned his own place among the most referenced architects in the United States.⁵³

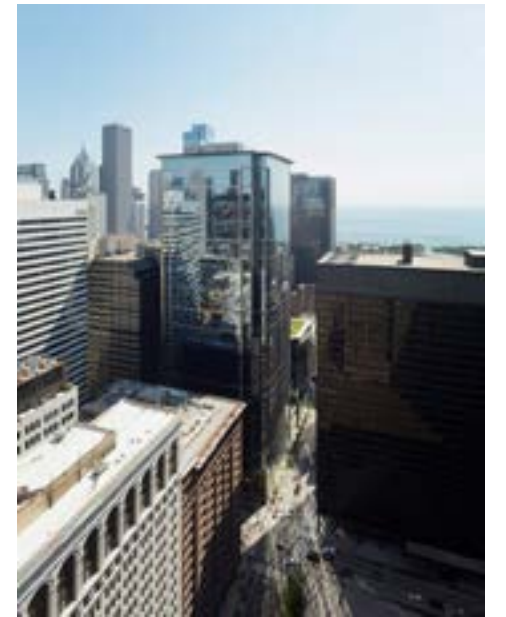
At the dawn of the 21st century, he built his last Chicago skyscraper, 131 South Dearborn Street (2003), across the street from Mies van der Rohe’s John C. Kluczynski Building [Fig. 12]. The building sits on a half-block and is divided in two parts vertically. At the intersection of Adams and State Streets, an eleven-story volume is veiled from the surrounding context. At the intersection of South Dearborn and Adams Streets, its thirty-five stories sit catacorner from Calder’s Flamingo. Among Bofill’s long list of designs for skyscrapers, this building, more than any other, has the most cohesive aesthetic. Although the vertical division of the building’s forms is clear thanks to the double lines of stainless steel, the tall form is composed as a single classical shaft built of reflective glass. Both volumes are capped by a flat cornice that overhangs and offsets the perimeter and reveals a subtle curvature in the curtain wall. Having spent years introducing European elements into this quintessential American type, with this building, the most American of his skyscrapers, the Catalanian bid *adéu* to his adoptive country.

A Legacy of Classical Rigor

Between the construction of this last building and Bofill’s death in 2022, Taller de Arquitectura and the profession in the United States moved

52 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 105. Translated into English by Brett Tippey from the original quote in Spanish: “comprender los mecanismos que secreta ese objeto extraño que es el rascacielos; estudiar el estado del sistema capitalista y realizar a partir de eso una síntesis con mis propias orientaciones estéticas.”

53 Some examples of these publications about his work for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics are: H. Aldersey-Williams, “A Designer Olympics,” *Progressive Architecture*, no. 6 (1988); David Cohn, “Barcelona Gets Ready for 1992 Olympics,” *AIA Journal*, no. 9 (1989): 23-26.



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Fig. 12
Dearborn Center. Archivo
Bofill Taller de Arquitectura.

apart. But for roughly thirty years Bofill had worked to establish himself as a reference in the United States, a country in which, according to his own words, “the real history of post-war architecture is centered.”⁵⁴ Other Spaniards like Rafael Moneo and Ignasi de Solà-Morales also made their marks in the United States, having arrived in professional circles only after extensive sojourns in American universities and theory-focused journals like the *Oppositions*. But Bofill’s focus was always on integration with US professional circles.

In the earliest years, the US professional press presented the Taller de Arquitectura as an innovative, multidisciplinary collaboration of creative individuals. Texts written by various members of the collective, such as Peter Hodgkinson, appeared in magazines like *Architectural Forum* and *Progressive Architecture*. However, as the editorial boards of US-based journals increasingly assigned these articles to American architectural critics like Vincent Scully, Charles Jencks and Arthur Drexler, or to staff writers and correspondents like Deborah Dietsch and Gerald Moorhead, the focus shifted away from the collaborative spirit of the Taller and towards the individual figure of Bofill. Ultimately, Bofill became the most published Spanish architect in the US professional press in the 1970s and 1980s and the only Spanish architect to design and build two skyscrapers in Chicago at the close of the twentieth century.

In the US Bofill learned to introduce rigorous classicism at all scales. He effectively adapted geometric spatial organizations from past centuries, such as those with which he had previously experimented in France. But he never replicated his French projects such as Le Viaduc or Les Espaces d’Abraxas. Instead, he adapted his US projects to suit American sensibilities. As Bofill stated in *Progressive Architecture* in 1971: “Better to be crazy than copy or repeat yourself.”⁵⁵ Far from “crazy”, Bofill’s combination of Classical forms and modern construction materials and techniques were exactly what American capitalist clients desired.

His approach produced two distinct results. On one hand, the US economy and marketplace, along with the physical restrictions of the site and municipal ordinances, required him to rethink, and in most cases to dramatically increase, the scale of his projects. And, in general, his solutions for these projects were much more aesthetically restrained than his more exuberant European projects. On the other hand, he appreciated the beauty of the American city, as well as its ambition to conquer ever greater physical heights. As a result, he transformed the skyscraper into a *mirador*, a belvedere of sorts from which the American people could contemplate expansive views of their skylines while inhabiting grand open spaces in

54 MoMA, *Ricardo Bofill and León Krier: architecture, urbanism, and history* (New York, MoMA, 1985), https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1778_300296406.pdf. (Accessed on January 20, 2025).

55 “Barrio Gaudí”, 25.

the sky. Had they been built. his urban design proposals for places like Boston and Times Square may well have been equally evocative places from which to contemplate American ideas at the ground level.

Nonetheless, the three buildings Bofill did build on US soil demonstrate his success in translating the classical language into an American context, even in the skyscraper, the modern American building *par excellence*. He never abandoned the geometric rigor that always characterized his work, and all his designs for skyscrapers reveal a clear tripartite organization and systematic modular composition. Whether built or not, his tall buildings are characterized by a meticulous application of classical proportions, as well as by his interpretation of archetypal elements such as Doric columns and pilasters, or overt references to Greek temples. These elements confer on his modern buildings a strong sense of monumentality and permanence, two characteristics that are visible even when heavy classical stone yields to lightweight modern glass. Although glass dominates his two built skyscrapers, Bofill successfully steered clear of the stereotypical glass and steel box through subtle moves such as curvature in the glass panes, or the use of glass as fill for the voids between composition lines that are derived from classical sources.

But even the growing distance between Bofill and the profession in the United States did not diminish his status as an important cultural reference in the US. Savvy moviegoers might have recognized his work in popular dystopian films. Les Espaces d’Abraxas served as Lowry’s apartment building in Terry Gilliam’s 1985 cult classic *Brazil*, and as the neoclassical backdrop for a battle scene in Francis Lawrence’s 2015 action film *The Hunger Games Mockingjay - Part 2*. If, as Bofill claimed, “good architecture is good business for everyone”, then the bond between the architect and the United States was a win-win liaison.⁵⁶

56 Bofill and André, *Espacio y vida*, 91. Translated into English by Brett Tippey from the original quote in Spanish: “una buena arquitectura es un buen negocio para todo el mundo.”

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