

The “Bofills båge” in Stockholm. Nordic Peculiarities of a Postmodern Crescent

Bofills båge, Stockholm, Housing, Ricardo Bofill, Taller de Arquitectura

/Abstract

The facts about the redevelopment of the area formerly occupied by the railway tracks and the train station in the centre of the island of Södermalm in Stockholm began in 1981 with the competition for a new residential area. From the 125 projects evaluated by the jury, no winner was found, so the “Project group” coordinated by architect Jan Inghe-Hagström, who led the Stockholm City Planning Department at the time, implemented the best ideas in the final master plan Områdseplan84 (Area Plan84). The large area was subdivided into 14 districts entrusted to cooperatives and construction companies, including HSB, which was assigned the area to which a crescent was to be built and included a park. HSB selected the designer following a new invitation-only competition, which Ricardo Bofill won in early 1985. Until 1987, the project’s implementation details were studied in an iterative process involving Taller’s designers, architect Inghe-Hagström and contractor Ohlsson & Skarne. The start of construction in 1989 was followed by two years of building work, which resulted in Stockholm’s first crescent characterised by an extremely reduced decorative apparatus compared to Bofill’s similar residential complexes in France in particular. The demands of the client and the construction company, in view of the Nordic context historically reluctant to insert redundant decorative devices, led Bofill to make a number of changes to the first version of the project, leading to the final solution inaugurated in 1992. Although the subject of conflicting assessments, the ‘Bofill båge’ is today one of Stockholm’s most emblematic and recognisable architectures, where it stands out for its elegance and essentiality, combining traits of classical architectural language and tradition with the functional requirements of the north.

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Introduction

Ricardo Bofill’s (1939-2022) project for the redevelopment of an area of approximately 25 hectares in the centre of the island of Södermalm in Stockholm took place at the same time that Taller de Arquitectura in France had just completed or was engaged in the construction of other well-known projects. Inaugurated in 1983 Les Espaces d’Abraxas in Noisy-le-Grand a few kilometres east of Paris, the contacts between the HSB Hyresgästernas sparkasse- och byggnadsförening (Tenants’ Savings and Building Society), the project leader of the Stockholm city planning office Jan Inghe-Hagström (1944-2005) and the Catalan architect started in Stockholm in 1984, which led to the first version of the “Bofills båge”, the Bofill’s arch [Fig. 1, 2]. In the meantime, work is in full swing on Le Temples du Lac in Voisins-le-Bretonneux, Les Colonne de Saint-Christophe in Cergy-Pontoise while in Montpellier, work is underway on Le Port Juvénal in the eastern part of the urban plan known as Antigone.¹ The projects that Bofill worked on from the late 1970s onwards became the subject of a heated debate involving designers, critics and historians, which was followed by feedback in European contexts such as Sweden and then by a worldwide audience. These projects are typologically, semiologically and figuratively comparable given the constant use of crescent.

These projects are comparable in terms of typology, semiology and figurative aspects, given the constant use of the crescent. This specific compositional typology, often used by Taller, is certainly one of the most recognisable in terms of residential projects worked on by the Catalan group, particularly during the decade between the 1970s and 1980s.² The choice of this particularly iconic morphology brings to mind the famous Royal Crescent in Bath, built in the second half of the eighteenth century by the architect John Wood the Younger (1728–1782). On the one hand, the serial repetition of modular elements represented by the thirty terraced houses highlights the desire to socially and formally equalize the residents, while with the openness to the landscape, the English architect aspires to reconnect humanity with nature while still maintaining a segment of the city. This compositional exploration, conducted on multiple levels, also characterizes the crescents of the Taller, where the intended use is popular (although these are no longer terraced houses but a multitude of apartments arranged on various levels), where the properties are formally homogeneous and therefore intended to avoid social separation between residents. The tendency to juxtapose these urban areas with

1 On Ricardo Bofill’s biography and works up to the 1980s, see the 1985 monographic issue of ‘GA Architect’ and the catalogue of the exhibition held at the Musée d’Ixelles – Museum van Elsene in Brussels in 1989. See also: Joseph Maria Montaner I Martorell, “Bofill (Levi) Ricardo”, *Dizionario dell’architettura del XX secolo* (Roma: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2003), 264-268.

2 Peter Hodgkinson refers to these projects in the initial phases of the Taller’s activity, clearly identified as “Historicism, Adventure and Research 1972-1978” and “Classicism, Concentration and Success 1978-1985.” See: Peter Hodgkinson, “A personal point of view,” in Bartomeu Cruells, Paul Van Remoortel, eds., *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura* (Brussels: Centre d’Art Nicolas de Staël, 1989), 13-21.

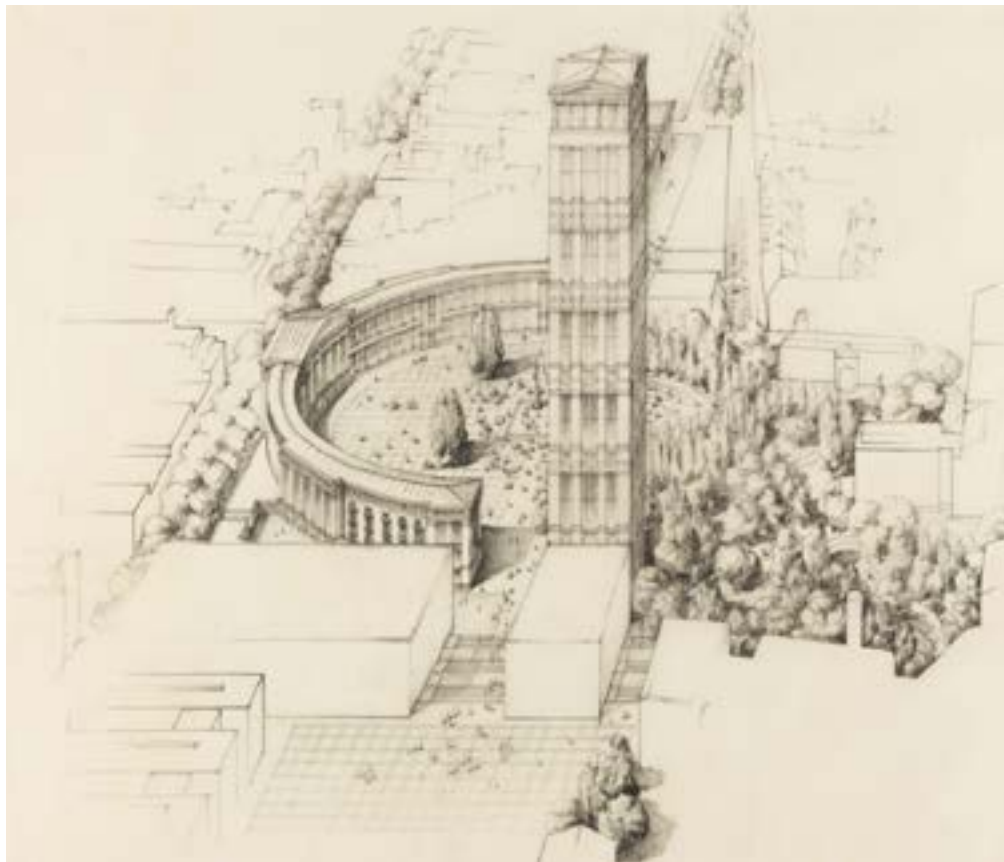
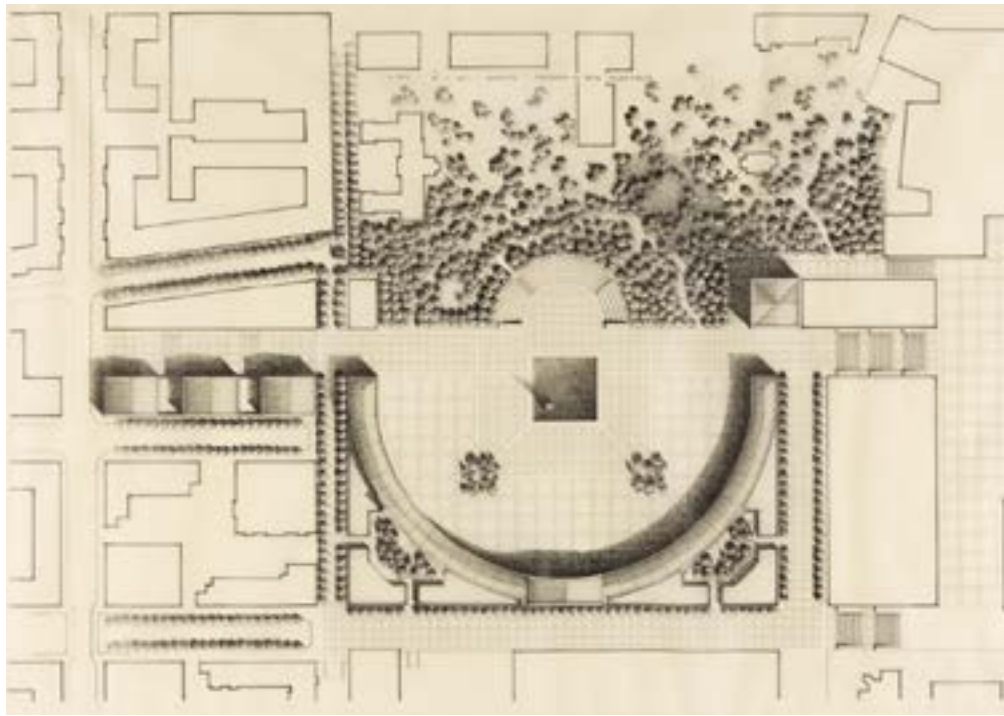


Fig. 1, 2
Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura, first version of the redevelopment project for the former Södra Station area, Stockholm, January 1985, urban plan and axonometric view. The crescent has strong classical elements, the park takes on a natural configuration towards the north and the tower has a marked vertical development. Source: Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive, Barcelona.

“natural” features as much as possible (even if artificially) such as parks, bodies of water, or gardens also indicates Bofill’s complex exploration of a more nuanced idea of the city and civil coexistence.

The Reception of Postmodernism and the Works of Ricardo Bofill in Sweden

One of the decisive events for Bofill’s global fame was the exhibition *Ricardo Bofill and Léon Krier: architecture, urbanism and history* which opened on 26 June 1985 at the MoMA in New York, curated by Arthur Drexler, director of the museum’s architecture and design department. In the catalogue published in conjunction with the event and presented on 27 June at a symposium in the presence of Bofill, Krier and Drexler and the participation of Robert Stern and Colin Rowe, the curator writes:

Bofill makes good use of modern construction techniques, particularly precast concrete [...] Bofill rejects vernacular forms, old or new, and seeks to reinstate a kind of classical grandeur once associated with the Court and the Church. Bofill has built some of the most humane and beautiful large-scale public housing of this century, succeeding dramatically where modernism has so often failed [...] Bofill has proved that the axial geometries and grand scale of French neo-classical planning can yield pleasures that cost nothing [...] Bofill is saying some thing of great importance regarding urban life at the end of this century: it is both desirable and practical to dramatise housing. Rather than being mere background, or an indifferent prop on the urban stage, housing can become the stage itself.³

This excerpt highlights some of the key elements common to most of Bofill’s projects of those years, including the use of modern construction techniques such as prefabrication and at the same time the reference to classical language. Central to Bofill’s work is the theme of housing, with respect to which the Catalan architect has hinged research from the earliest assignments of his career, both from a formal point of view and on a large scale in an attempt to build a living, participatory city. Decisive in this sense are the special skills brought by the Taller members, who range from sociology to philosophy, from art to philosophy, from mathematics to poetry, implementing the contents of the projects of the architects who, moreover, like Bofill, refer to a geographic-cultural background

³ Arthur Drexler, ed., *Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanisme, and History* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 12-13.

or at least to an international academic-university education.⁴ In this international context, it is worth highlighting the success achieved after the organization of the exhibition “Nordisk Klassicism” in Helsinki in 1982 and the publication of the catalogue.⁵ The result of collaboration between the Finnish Architecture Museum where the exhibition is being held, the Swedish Museum of Architecture, the Norwegian Museum of Architecture, Arkitek (Archives of Modern Danish Architecture) and the collection of Architectural Drawings of the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts, is the catalogue that includes essays by major historians and designers from the Nordic countries, to which was added the critical contribution of Kenneth Frampton, was distributed and translated into many languages until the Spanish edition was published in 1983 by MOPU – Spanish Ministry of Public Works and Urbanism.⁶ Rich in references to the projects of some of the most famous architects, who were certainly important for the critical success of what the English critic Philip Morton Shand called ‘Swedish Grace’, with regard to Sweden in particular, the architecture of Erik Gunnar Asplund, Carl Bergsten and Ragnar Österberg is highlighted. No less important is the mention of the work of Ivar Tengbom and, in particular, the Konserthuset (Philharmonic Hall) with its façade marked by 10 giant granite columns, which seems to refer more than any other work to the plastic façades of many of Taller’s French crescents.

In Sweden, the postmodern movement and in particular the contribution to contemporary architecture made by a charismatic personality such as Bofill was well known and the subject of publications even before the commission for the redevelopment of the Södermalm area. It can be assumed that the press campaign promoted both internationally and in the Scandinavian country may have led Jan Inghe-Hagström and HSB to involve Bofill in the project for the Söder area. In April 1980, the magazine «Arkitektur» published a first long article entitled “Rummet och arkitekturen” (Space and Architecture) in which the author Sten Gromark goes into detail by comparing Bofill’s research topics with those of the French philosopher Henri Lefèbvre (1901-1991), who devoted many comparative

studies to architecture and sociology between the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ The following year, Bofill was invited to Stockholm to participate in the *Architectural Theory Lecture Series* sponsored by the Swedish Board of Architects and also gave a lecture at the Faculty of Architecture of the KTH Kungliga Tekniska högskolan (Royal Institute of Technology).⁸ At the centre of both speeches is a historical excursus and examination of the links between the ancient and the contemporary from Palladio to Alvar Aalto, the concept of ‘prefabricated classicism’ to understand the possible interrelationship between historical languages and modern construction techniques, and in closing an interesting reflection:

The violin, as we know, consists only of four taut strings and a sound box, but from it and with the help of a solid theory of harmony and a skilled, sensitive and artistic hand, we can play popular music, Bach, Beethoven, Chopin and the Beatles.⁹

Decisive for the dissemination of postmodernist projects and theoretical positions in Sweden with particular reference to Taller’s contribution was the review «Magasin Tessin» published between 1980 and 1987. Under the leadership of editor-in-chief Thomas Hellquist (1948), the Swedish review helped to open up the debate on the postmodern movement in northern Europe as well, introducing Scandinavian readers and scholars to a broad and well-documented overview of the contemporary international environment and its deep links to the past.¹⁰ In the first issue of the journal Hellquist published an article on the role of Charles Jencks and his recent volume *The Language of Postmodern Architecture*, which preceded an essay on Leon Krier published a few months later in the second issue of the review. Limited to the first year, the space reserved for Italy is important, starting with the figure of Paolo Portoghesi introduced in no. 4 of «Magasin Tessin» where Hellquist focuses on the first “Biennale di Architettura” of Venice on the Postmodern movement and the “Strada Novissima”.

4 On the composition of the Taller and the philosophical-design approach of the group see: “Le Taller de Arquitectura de Barcelona,” *Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, no. 182 (November-December 1975): 57-95. Among the Taller members in addition to Ricardo who trained at ETSAB (Escola Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Barcelona) and at HEPIA (Haute École du paysage, d’ingénierie et d’architecture) in Geneva and the architect and pianist-composer Anna Bofill Levi (1944), we mention the philosopher Salvador Clotas (1938), the Englishman Peter Hodgkinson (1940) trained at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London, the Spanish architect of Uzbek origin Manuel Núñez Yanowsky (1942), the poet and writer José Augustin Goytisolo (1928-1999).

5 See: Simo Paavilainen ed., *Nordisk Klassicism. Nordic Classicism 1910-1930* (Helsinki: Museum of Finnish Architecture, 1982).

6 See in particular the Spanish translation of *Clasicismo nórdico 1910-1930* (Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones, Ministerio de Obras Públicas y Urbanismo, 1983) and the Italian translation of *Classicismo nordico. Architettura nei paesi scandinavi 1910-1930* (Milan: Electa, 1988).

7 Sten Gromark, “Rummet och arkitekturen,” *Arkitektur*, no. 3 (April 1980): 23-29. In the comparison between Bofill and Lefebvre, particular reference is made to the following publications: Henri Lefebvre, *La Production de l’espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974); Ricardo Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme* (Paris: Arthaud, 1978); Jean-Pierre Garnier, Denis Goldsmith, *La Comédie urbaine ou la Cité sans classe* (Paris: Maspero, 1978); Manfredo Tafuri, *Projet et Utopie* (Paris: Dunod, 1979).

On Lefebvre’s important theoretical contribution regarding the relationship between city, architecture and sociology see: Henri Lefebvre, *Le droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968); Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). On the planning of new cities or parts of them and a brief mention of Bofill’s “utopian” approach, see also: Jean Claude Widmer, “Questions à Henri Lefèbvre,” *Archithese* no. 2 (1971): 11-15.

8 See: Sten Gromark, “Ricardo Bofill och stadens arkitektur,” *Arkitektur*, no. 10 (December 1980): 31-33; Carin Brand, “Dialog mellan stad och människa. Från Ricardo Bofills Stockholmsbesök,” *Arkitekttidningen*, no. 15 (1981): 8-9; Ann Jonsson, “Hur bostäder blir monument,” *Arkitekttidningen*, no. 7 (1982): 4-6.

9 Brand, *Dialog mellan stad och människa*, p. 9.

10 On the Taller see: Sten Gromark, “Bostadsfrågan som arkitekturfråga,” *Magasin Tessin*, no. 2 (1983): 7-26; “Den franska scenen,” *Magasin Tessin*, no. 4 (1984): 44-73.



The Competitions for the Söder Area and the Involvement of Ricardo Bofill

The Swedish story of the project in Bofill's Söder area began a few years before the Spanish architect was commissioned. The area that was the subject of one of the most substantial urban redevelopments in central Stockholm in the 20th century also underwent considerable changes in the previous century. Where Fatbursparken (Fatburs Park) stands today, bordered to the south by the Bofill crescent, until the mid-19th century there was the Fatbursjön (Fatburen Lake), which was silted up in order to lay tracks and build the railway station.¹¹ The project management entrusted to the engineer Nils Ericson (1802-1870) meant that the area was ceded from the City of Stockholm to the Swedish state and then to the railway company, and after extensive work, the Stockholm-Södertälje section was opened on 1 December 1860, the first step of the railway line that would take convoys from the capital to Gothenburg in 1862 [Fig. 3]. The connection of the railway tracks in 1867 between the Södra station and the northern station completed in its final structure in 1871, assuming the function of the capital's main station, quickly made the Södermalm railway junction lose its importance for passengers but retained its function for the transport of goods.¹² Nothing changed until 1967 when the "Söder-67" urban plan envisaged significant changes for Södermalm, including a new use for the station area, but it was not until 1979 that the SJ (Swedish railway company) returned the area ceded a century earlier to the city of

11 On what happened in that area throughout history see: Casten Bergendal, ed, *Fatburen 3000 år. Från en vik i skärgården till Bofills båge* (Stockholm: Sigma Förla, 1992).

12 On the Södra station see also: Ann Katrin Pihl Atmer, *Södermalm. Husen - historien - människorna* (Stockholm: Bonnier Fakta, 2019), 240.

Fig. 3

1930s view of Söder Station. Source: Carsten Begendal, ed. by, *Fatburen 3000 år. Från en vik i skärgården till Bofills båge* (Stockholm: Sigma Förlag, 1992), 47.

Stockholm. At this point, a "Project group" led by Jan Inghe-Hagström¹³ was appointed to organise the competition for what was to become a new residential area already predominantly surrounded by neighbourhoods and residential buildings. The pre-eminent objective of the call was to have design solutions but also a clear picture of the critical issues and aspirations of the residents, who were therefore invited together with architects and engineers, to send in suggestions even anonymously. The competition jury consisting of a group of technicians and administrators evaluated 125 proposals that responded to only one, two or all three aspects (Housing and Work, Design, Energy) identified by the call, selecting around 80 projects worthy of attention and among them at least 20 worthy of mention and financial recognition.¹⁴

The most striking proposal was the one coordinated by architects Gösta Nilsson, Ragnhild Walter and Gunnar Malm on behalf of HSB, the country's largest building cooperative. Marked by the motto "Söders Manhattan", the idea was to build large building blocks with more than 20 storeys with thousands of flats, a grandiose and unrealistic project on that scale. Michal Borowski's "Le Söder" proposal, which suggested the burying of the railway line and the construction of residential buildings with an average height of six storeys, was much more balanced. Also worthy of interest is the "På gång" solution by the architect-scenographer Sören Brunes, characterised by a series of circular and linear buildings¹⁵ which, although on a smaller scale, was somehow reminiscent of Le Corbusier's 1933 urban plan for Stockholm and the gigantic curvilinear plan structure in the southern part of Södermalm.¹⁶

In 1982, the group led by Inghe-Hagström on the basis of what they had received as a result of the competition drew up a draft Områdseplan83 (Area Plan83) where the idea of the crescent was introduced for the first time. The choice of this particular type of building has mainly technical reasons, as the foundation soil of the area previously occupied by the

13 A graduate in architecture from the KTH in Stockholm in 1970, Inghe worked for most of his life at the Swedish capital's planning office, managing major urban regeneration projects such as Södra and Hammarby Sjöstad. See: Rasmus Wærn, *Jan Inghe - en stadsbyggare, in Postmodernismen i Stockholm* (Stockholm: Samfundet St Erik - Appell Förlag, 2021), 107-117.

14 On the desired topics and the contents of the call discussed at many public meetings in early 1981, see: Stellas Fryxell, "Idétävling om Södra Stationsområdet", *Arkitektidningen*, no. 1 (1981): 15-16.

15 On the results of the competition and descriptions of some of the projects, please refer to the monographic issue of «Arkitektidningen» no. 1 of January 1982 and the following references: Gunnar Mattsson, "Detta ofångbara något ...", *Arkitektur*, no. 1 (January-February 1982): 25; Robert Lavelid, "Ett politiskt alibi?", *Arkitektur*, no. 1 (January-February 1982): 26; Jan Strömdahl, "En jury- ledamots bekännelse", *Arkitektur*, no. 1 (January-February 1982): 26-27; Jan Inghe-Hagström, "Manhattan, rutnät eller park?", *Arkitektur*, no. 1 (January-February 1982): 28; Stellas Fryxell, Jan Inghe-Hagström, "Södra Station: byggstart 84/85", *Arkitektidningen*, no. 10 (1982): 14-15. See also: Jan Inghe-Hagström, "Den nya staden vid Södra station" in *Fatburen 3000 år. Från en vik i skärgården till Bofills båge*, ed. by Casten Bergendal (Stockholm: Sigma Förla, 1992), 66-78.

16 Le Corbusier's overall urban development plan for the new Stockholm, similar to those proposed a few years earlier for Montevideo (1929) São Paulo (1929) Buenos Aires (1929) Rio de Janeiro (1929) and Algiers (1930), envisaged demolishing every building in Norrmalm and Södermalm and building five huge residential blocks, four of which were arranged in a geometric form in the northern part for 170,000 residents and a single complex in Södermalm for 110,000 residents. See: "Le Corbusiers Stockholmsdröm," in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 23 December 1933.

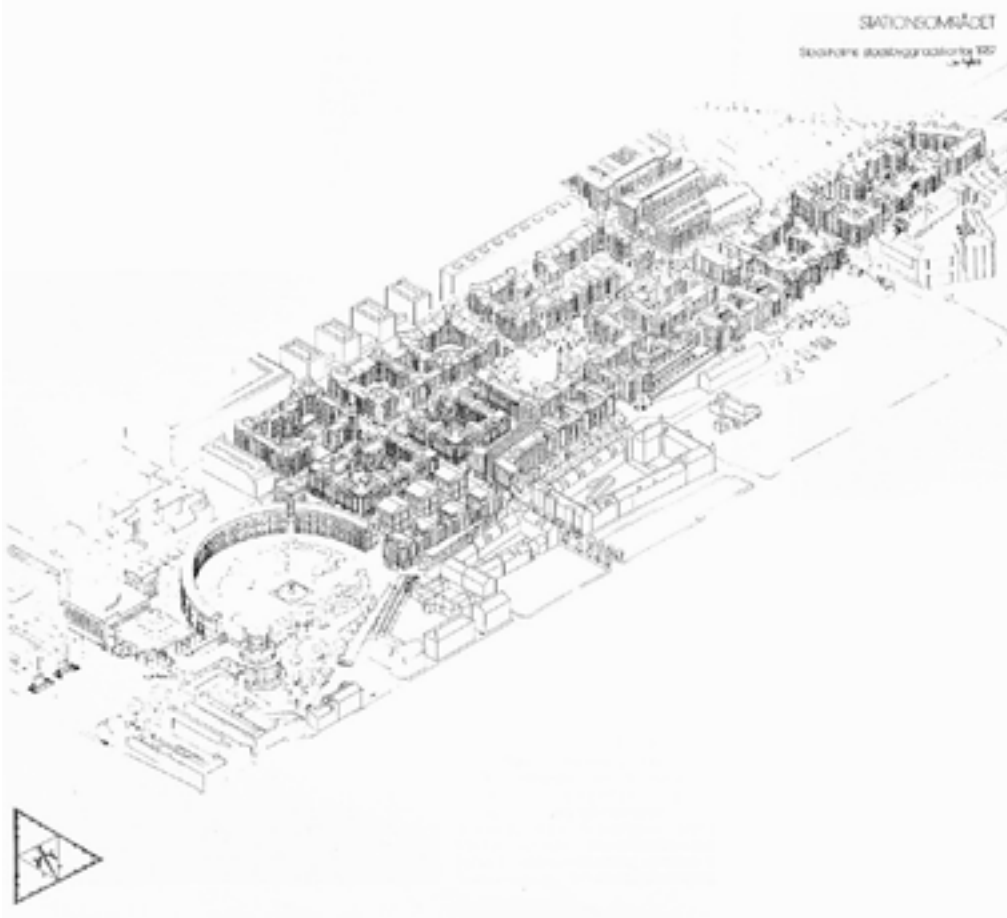
lake has mechanical characteristics that are not suitable for supporting multi-storey buildings, and therefore all that area was used as a park bordered on the south side by the arched building. Completing the project as far west as the Ringvägen street ring were dozens of residential complexes no higher than eight storeys, while on the eastern edge at Medborgarplatsen a skyscraper and a covered market were proposed.¹⁷ In the summer of 1984, the final Områdseplan84 (Area Plan84) was approved with the identification of 14 distinct work areas assigned to developers and/or construction companies that were given wide freedom over the choice of designers to whom the executive tasks would be entrusted [Fig. 4]. The leading Swedish architectural firms that had participated in the 1981 competition were selected, including White Arkitekter, Axelsson & Borowski, Kjell Forshed and Sören Eriksson¹⁸, and from abroad, the Danish firm of Henning Larsen.

The HSB group was assigned the most important area of the plan, which included the crescent, the public park and the buildings between Bangårdsgången and Fatburs Brunnsgata in the direction of the new underground station serving commuter trains. For this reason, HSB decided to organise a new competition specifically for that area, inviting three architectural firms to come up with a project between the summer of 1984 and 15 January 1985: Gunnar Malm, who had already participated in the first competition in 1981 on behalf of HSB, Bengt Lindroos¹⁹ also among the deserving designers three years earlier, and finally Ricardo Bofill and Taller were called in. The jury called upon to evaluate the three projects paid particular attention to the way the building relates to its context and the detailed solutions chosen for the crescent and the organisation of the interior spaces. Bofill's project emerged as the winner, certainly benefiting from the experience gained in the work already mentioned in France and for the skill with which he was able to modify certain details of the master plan. The first version of the crescent, characterised by a radius of 91.7 metres with gables, columns and friezes, had a width reduced to just 11 metres (compared to 22 metres in the first version), significantly lightening the impact of the building, as well as having apartments in line that opened onto two sides. Bofill also, unlike the other two competitors, only inserted balconies on the south façade [Fig. 5], while on the north side there are large glazed surfaces and in the centre of the composition is a kind of temple with a large pediment supported by pilaster stripes. The

17 On Områdseplan83 and Områdseplan84 see: *Södra Stationsområdet. Förslag till program* (Stockholm: Programgruppen för Södra Station - Stockholm stad, 1983) (Stockholms stadsarkiv - Liljeholmen, Volym: F:3, (1983-1984), SE/SSA/4708/F/F 4/3). On realised projects see: Pihl Atmer, *Södermalm. Husen - historien - människorna*, 241; Jan Inge-Hagström, "Södra Station Stockholm," *Arkitektur*, no. 7 (September 1987): 32-33; Torbjörn Ericsson, "Måttbandet och designationen FFNS ARKITEKTER AB," *Arkitektur*, no. 7 (September 1987): 34-35.

18 On the Brunnberggruppen project by architects Forshed and Eriksson: Olof Hultin, "Södra stationsområdet, Stockholm," *Arkitektur*, no. 10 (December 1986): 22-23.

19 See: Bengt Lindroos, "Erfarenheter vunna ur försök att rita en vacker bostad," *Arkitektur*, no. 4 (May 1985): 4-9.



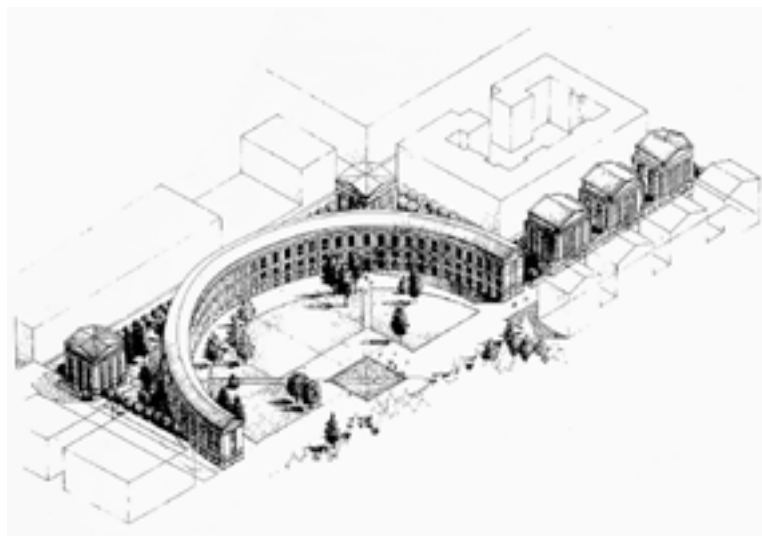
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Fig. 4
Stockholms stadsbyggnadskontor, axonometric view of the Södra Stationsområdet plan, updated to 1987. The part designed by Bofill with the crescent and the park is at the eastern end. Source: Carsten Begendal, ed. by, *Fatburen 3000 år. Från en vik i skärgården till Bofills båge* (Stockholm: Sigma Forlag, 1992), 66-67.

Fig. 5
The north crescent elevation with the balconies and the two types of windows seen from one of the corner buildings (introduced in the second version of the project) in axis with one of the portals. Source: Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive, Barcelona.



crescent would have accommodated commercial and service spaces in the double height of the ground floor and on the seven upper levels a total of 92 flats of varying size and cut from 1 to 5 rooms [Fig. 6].

The Construction of the Crescent and Its Reception

The process of adapting the final version of the project [Fig. 7] to the Swedish environmental requirements particularly involved solving technical details that Jan Inghe-Hagström did not fail to point out to the Taller's designers.²⁰ Crucial in this respect was the positive contribution of the construction company Ohlsson & Skarne, which through the technician in charge of site management Gerhard Herkommer collaborated effectively with Patrick Genard (1954), a Belgian architect and civil engineer graduated from UCL Leuven and member of the Taller sent to Stockholm to supervise the construction. In the final solution in Stockholm, unlike the French projects, the plastic appearance of both main elevations was not only significantly differentiated but also considerably reduced. While the concave part facing south is characterised by small balconies and all classical references have been eliminated, the convex north-facing façade has large glass panels separated vertically by a double row of extremely simplified pilasters, which Bofill probably intended to link to those of the nearby Lillenhoff Palace, a 17th-century building on the north side of Medborgarplatsen characterised by giant pilasters on two of its public façades. The absence of plastic elements, cornices, grooves and even deep projections or recesses in the vertical surface of the façades, as well as any kind of decorative element,

20 An excellent summary of Bofill's project in Stockholm in: Daniel Sjöborg, "Bofills bäge - tre kritiska texter," in *Postmodernism i Stockholm* (Stockholm: Samfundet St Erik - Appell Förlag, 2021), 129-137. See also: "Crescent HSB och Taller de Arquitectura," *Arkitektur*, no. 7 (September 1987): 36-37; Bartomeu Cruells, ed. by, *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura* (Bologna: Zanichelli editore, 1994), 236-237; Olof Hultin, Bengt OH Johansson, Johan Mårtelius, Rasmus Wærn, *The complete guide to Architecture in Stockholm* (Stockholm: Arkitektur Förlag, 1998), 156; Pihl Atmer, *Södermalm. Husen - historien - människorna*, 242.

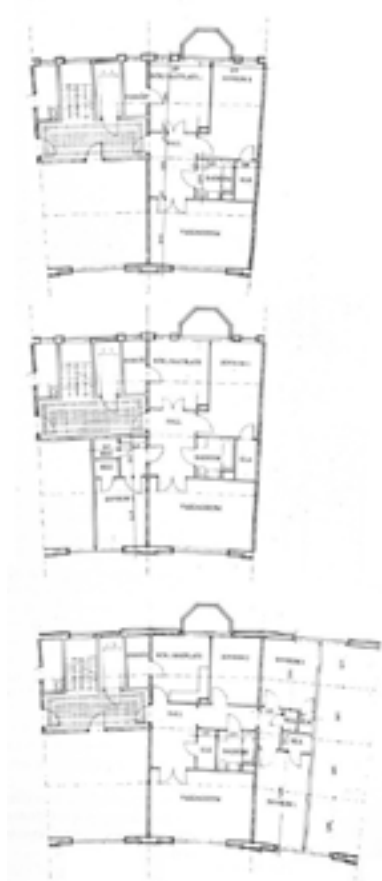


Fig. 6
Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura, Stockholm 1987, floor plans of some crescent flat types. Source: Carsten Begendal (edited by), *Fatburen 3000 år. Från en vik i skärgården till Bofills bäge* (Stockholm: Sigma Forlag, 1992), 113.

Fig. 7
Ricardo Bofill and Taller de Arquitectura, last version of the redevelopment project for the former Södra Station area, Stockholm 1987, axonometric view. On the south side two new corner buildings complete the project. Source: Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive, Barcelona.



distinguishes the Nordic crescent from the others. This choice is the result not only of a search for harmony with the sober Swedish aesthetic sense but also of a purely technical necessity: in fact, recesses and, more generally, plastic decorative elements are weak parts that are easily damaged and deteriorate as a result of the harsh Nordic winters, so it was decided not to include them, to the advantage of a greater visual cleanliness of the vertical fronts. One of the most debated issues was the need to add a window serving the kitchen, which Bofill's design did not initially provide for. This has led to the inclusion on the south façade, alongside the usual vertical glazed fields and in addition to the aforementioned pentagonal balconies, of more canonical rectangular windows also chosen to create a sort of frieze-like glazed crowning to illuminate the flats on the top floor.

Two four-storey high portals lead through the building, connecting Fatbursparken with Södermalmsallén in the southern part of the crescent [Fig. 8] where the initial design envisaged a kind of plinth that was to delimit two courtyards. Even this initially planned detail is eliminated in favour of two buildings with a square plan and vertical development, completely similar to the three buildings that Bofill identified as 'Templen' (Temples) [Fig. 9] that mark the road leading from the park to the entrance of the new underground railway station.²¹ No less simple was the choice related to the colour of the prefabricated panels used for all the material parts of the project: usually Bofill proceeded by using sand taken from the building site in the concrete mix or in any case of a colour similar to that of the context and then having the surfaces washed with an acid solution in order to obtain smooth surfaces and non-accentuated colour tones.

21 Parallel to Bofill's building site the construction of the buildings in the other 13 areas identified in the plan also proceeded at different times including the one with the entrance to the new Södra station completed in 1990 by Axelsson & Borowski Architects. See: Jan Larsson, "Stockholm Södra. Coordinator Arkitekter AB," *Arkitektur*, no. 6 (June 1987): 18-21.

Fig. 8
Detail of the north front of the crescent with the portal. Source: Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive, Barcelona.



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Fig. 9
The three "Templen" and in the background the crescent.
Source: Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive, Barcelona.

Fig. 10
Aerial view of the former Söder Station area from the east. Photo: Lennart Johansson.

But the greyish substrate of Stockholm's granite stone was an unpleasant colour to the eye, so Bofill opted for a different solution; in agreement with the construction company's technicians, yellow sand from Lake Vättern was used, mixed with white marble from Örebro and dolomite from Masugnsbyn; a warm pastel tone was thus obtained, changing according to the sun's influence between a peach colour and natural sienna. Finally, in the first version of the project Bofill also addressed the design of the tower, the height of which he emphasised in relation to all the other buildings in the plan, a design theme he later abandoned. Characterised by a naive design that was all too close to the image of bell towers with a Mediterranean flavour, the tower was topped by a sort of temple with a central plan.²² The construction site was opened in August 1989 with the excavation and casting of the crescent's foundations and then proceeded with the installation of the first precast concrete panels, a well-known construction technique already used on other major construction sites by many Swedish construction companies. The timetable, which envisaged completion in about 31 weeks, was substantially adhered to and finishing works followed, most of which were completed by the end of 1991. The opening took place in the spring of 1992 in the presence of Anna Lindh, then Deputy Mayor of Stockholm and Environment Minister in the government headed by Ingvar Carlsson.

Recalling the mention of the violin with the four strings in which we could ideally recognise Ricardo Bofill, Jan Inghe-Hagström, Gerhard Herkommer and Patrick Genard and the sounding board represented by the crescent, one can conclude by asserting that this work, like the melodies possible with a violin, was certainly well heard but not uniquely appreciated and understood. In addition to the sources already mentioned, during the execution phase and even more so after the inauguration, both the whole area and Bofill's crescent aroused discordant opinions [Fig. 10]. On the one hand, Swedish contemporary architecture historian Fredric Bedoire expresses doubts about the results of the project as a whole due to the marked stylistic inconsistency of the sections, which highlights the cultural differences between the designers involved. Conversely, he recognises in Bofill's contribution the maturity of a designer who has skilfully and modestly adapted his language to Swedish conditions, moderating the hyperbolic choices seen in similar projects.²³ On the other hand, among the inhabitants of the area and the citizens of Stockholm in general, there was no lack of perplexity about the totally new image of the crescent in relation to the architectural history of the city and of Sweden as a whole, an outcry that was certainly increased by eminent personalities of the country's culture

²² Other architects also made some attempts to define the image of the "Söder Torn" whose project was then assigned to Henning Larsen who abandoned the assignment during the works due to the insurmountable disputes that arose with the clients. See: Eva Eriksson, "Höga Hus. Tävlning om Skyskrapa i Stockholm," *Arkitektur*, no. 9 (November 1985): 14-15.

²³ Fredric Bedoire, *Den Svenska Arkitekturens Historia 1800-2000* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2015), 442-443.

such as Bengt Lagerkvist who were not fully convinced of the goodness of inserting such architecture in that type of context.²⁴ These reactions are difficult to fit into a hypothetical framework that encompasses exclusively positive or negative opinions, but rather critical assessments that almost always include nuances and oscillations, as is the case with Ricardo Bofill's projects in the French suburbs. In the first major analyses of the popular megastructures of St. Quentin-en-Yvelines and Marne-la-Vallée, conducted by more renowned contemporary historians, Kenneth Frampton, as early as 1980 in "Modern Architecture. A Critical History," praised the architect's pursuit of formal dignity and monumentality applied to popular buildings, while also expressing doubts about the Taller's conscious choice to make no concessions to those social amenities (nursery, meeting and community spaces, sports spaces, etc.) notoriously essential to creating a socially acceptable context.²⁵ More recently, Jean-Louis Cohen, in his 2011 book *The Future of Architecture*. Since 1889, recalls how Bofill skillfully fused technical research and decorative, albeit oversized, themes in a perhaps exaggerated impulse towards monumentalism and the citation of a repertoire all too rich in classical references.²⁶ Controversial opinions are also expressed by younger generations, particularly by the emerging class of architects, critics, and professionals affiliated with Stockholm's two main academic institutions (the aforementioned KTH and the Kungl. Konsthögskolan – Royal Institute of Art). In a recent publication accompanying a 2024 exhibition focusing on architecture built in Stockholm between the 1960s and 1990s, a chapter focuses on the former South Station area and Bofill's project. Authors Arram Eckerbom, Marina Ilic, Johanna Redell, Susanna Sjödin, Åse Skaldeman, and Pilvi Vanamo once again emphasize the alien nature of the crescent language and other architecture built in the adjacent blocks compared to the solid and visually reassuring buildings of the early twentieth century. The young authors also describe the feeling of "abandonment" and relative marginalization of the Fatbursparken area and in particular of the public-commercial spaces on the ground floor of the Bofill arch which, despite being located in a context characterised by a significant flow of people, are today unused and closed. A sort of enclosure also characterizes the public areas of the district, which the surrounding architecture seems to somehow seek to protect, even to the extreme of rendering them seemingly private. At the same time, however, these residential blocks, mostly characterized by courtyards, contribute to enhancing the perception of the area's green space, with the notable merit of breaking the monotony of material and sculptural references with new detail elements (arches, porticoes, polychrome decorations, etc.) that

24 Sjöborg, *Bofills bäge - tre kritiska texter*, 129.

25 See: Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture. A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 310-311.

26 See: Jean-Louis Cohen, *The Future of Architecture. Since 1889* (London - New York: Phaidon, 2011), 414.

reference a historical tradition not always geographically close. A kind of enclosure also characterizes the public areas of the complex, which the surrounding architecture seems to somehow seek to protect, even to the extreme of rendering them seemingly private. At the same time, however, these residential blocks, mostly characterized by courtyards, contribute to enhancing the perception of the area's green space, with the notable merit of breaking the monotony of material and sculptural references with new detail elements (arches, porticoes, polychrome decorations, etc.) that reference a historical tradition not always geographically close to Sweden and therefore clearly comprehensible.²⁷ From a social perspective and in terms of creating a widely shared and participatory part of the city, the urban structure of the crescent in Stockholm, and even more so in the French context, has not contributed in the way its designers expected. The architecture, often intended for disadvantaged or marginalized social classes in the French banlieues, appears oppressive to the point of being disorienting and repulsive to the residents, often leading not to the constructive debate repeatedly hoped for by the Taller but to outright clashes with administrators and law enforcement, resulting in the damage to the architecture and the abandonment of many spaces. Criticisms repeatedly raised not only in France²⁸ particularly regarding the Espaces d'Abraxas, following the feared possibility in 2012 of demolishing the entire complex, helped bring Bofill's project back into the media spotlight, leading to the decision by well-known directors and generous international productions to set famous film hits in that context. This unexpected turn of events, with fan tours and dozens of reports by amateur film buffs, is certainly not in line with Bofill's idea of participation, but rather in total continuity with the dystopian social and cultural complexity that characterises our cities today, a reality that was completely unpredictable a few decades ago when the Taller was embarking on this and other contemporary crescent projects.

27 See: Arram Eckerbom et alii, "Södra Stationsområdet," in *Arkitektur I om- prövningens tid* (Stockholm: Kungl. Konsthögskolan, 2024), 51-61.

28 See for example: Jean-Louis Violeau, "Le Palacio d'Abraxas par Ricardo Bofill," *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, no. 408 (September 2015): 116-123; Iryna Isachenko, "Inhabited monument. Correction of mistakes?," *Pragmatica*, no. 00 (March 2018): 190-201; Owen Hatherley, "Modern neoclassical architecture," *Apollo*, May 12, 2022.

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