

The Visual Dimension in the Work of Ricardo Bofill / Taller de Arquitectura.

In conversation with Gregori Civera

Ricardo Bofill, Architectural Photography, Gregori Civera, Media, Visual Culture

/Abstract

Conversation with the photographer Gregori Civera on January 28, 2025 to discuss his personal trajectory in relation to architectural photography and in particular his long collaboration with Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura, which makes him the main visual interpreter of the formal, material and plastic identity of this fiery architecture, deserving today a new recognition precisely because of its remarkable visual nature.

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Iñaki Bergera holds a PhD (2002) and a professional degree in Architecture (1997) from the University of Navarra and teaches architectural design as Full Professor at the University of Zaragoza since 2008. Supported by Fundación 'la Caixa', he obtained an MDesS with Distinction from Harvard University in 2002. He has been main researcher of the national project "Photography and Modern Architecture in Spain" and curator of two major exhibitions on the same topic held at ICO museum in Madrid (PHotoEspaña 2014 y PHotoEspaña 2016). Author and editor of over twenty books (for publishers such as Abada, Turner, La Fábrica or Arquia), he has written numerous scientific papers in journals and has participated as a speaker in over thirty international conferences. In 2001 he studied photography at the Harvard School of Visual Arts with the British photographer Chris Killip, and since then he has carried out a personal photographic work around the same research topics embodied in various individual exhibitions such as America, Urban Landscape (2006), In the Landscape (2010), Twentysix (Abandoned) Gasoline Stations (Scan Tarragona 2014, PHotoEspaña 2015 and MUN 2018) and Empty Parking Spaces (Madrid-Zaragoza 2020); as well as in collective shows such as The Creation of the Contemporary Landscape (DKV-Alcobendas, 2016), Unfinished (Venice Biennial, 2016) or Motion, Autos, Art, Architecture (Guggenheim Bilbao, 2023). www.bergeraphoto.com.

Gregori Civera (A Coruña, 1971) graduated from the Institut d'Estudis Fotogràfics de Catalunya in 1991. Over the course of more than three decades, he has developed an extensive photographic practice, mainly focused on architecture and editorial commissions (portraiture, fashion, advertising, etc.). His work has been featured in major newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Financial Times Weekend*, *The Guardian* or *El País*, magazines such as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair* or *Wallpaper*. He has also worked with clients such as *BMW* and *Zara*. Civera first photographed one of Ricardo Bofill's works in 1996 and, from 2009 onwards, became the official photographer for the Taller de Arquitectura, documenting both contemporary works and the entirety of the studio's legacy. This role has positioned him as the foremost interpreter of RBTA's passionate architecture, which, over five decades, has engaged with postmodernity and metabolism in an interdisciplinary fashion, encompassing collective housing, urban planning, and singular architectural landmarks. This diverse body of work is underpinned by a powerful visual substrate, defined by its formal, material, and chromatic syntax—precisely the universe that Civera knows intimately and interprets with technical coherence and visual sensitivity.

Gregori, how long have you been interested in architectural photography?

I finished my photography studies at the Institut d'Estudis Fotogràfics de Catalunya in 1991, a year before the Barcelona Olympic Games. At that time, architecture, photography, design, and even comics were in a state of profound transformation. The latest venues designed by Tusquets or Alfredo Arribas quickly became places of pilgrimage. Photography was a way to engage with that wave of modernity. During my studies, I had photographed architecture, but I hadn't yet practised architectural photography—an important distinction for me. In fact, I still don't consider myself an architectural photographer. At the Institut, there was a strong emphasis on categorising photographic genres—fashion, architecture, etc.—as separate disciplines. That approach never resonated with me. I've always been drawn to photographers like Irving Penn, who applied a singular, recognisable perspective to vastly different subjects. I'm a photographer who happens to photograph architecture, among other things. The genre of architectural photography, as such, doesn't particularly interest me, nor does its professional practice—even though I do practice it. I'm interested in architecture as a system for analysing and understanding the world, which, in many ways, mirrors photography itself. I'm interested in the process, which is ultimately about a way of looking.

Knowing how this activity has changed and evolved, how do you think architecture should be photographed?

I've often discussed this with my friend Manolo Laguillo. The first question is whether to use a tripod or not—not so much for technical reasons, but because it allows for a more precise definition of the point of view. I'm interested in describing the material world, and architecture is deeply intertwined with that. Jorge Ribalta and I are currently collaborating on a photographic project centred on the GATCPAC Tuberculosis Clinic in Barcelona, which Ribalta has titled 'Fiebre de la materia' [Material Fever]. This is what drives me: the exaltation of materiality, of how things are constructed and how they function. What makes this project particularly interesting is how it takes me back to my very first commission in architectural photography.



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What was that commission? Did you work for any of the architects involved in Olympic Barcelona?

In 1993, Antonio Pizza approached me through a mutual friend and asked me to photograph the Tuberculosis Clinic for a book he was preparing¹ [Fig. 1]. When I graduated in 1991, I teamed up with Josep Maria Molinos, a photographer from Barcelona who had extensive experience in industrial photography. Together, we set up a small studio equipped with nothing more than a typewriter, a Hasselblad 500, an 80mm lens, and a 50mm lens—that was all we had. We worked together until 2000, collaborating with numerous architects and clients closely linked to the construction industry.

And when did you first come across Ricardo Bofill?

In 1996, he completed the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, and thanks to one of our industrial clients—though I can't recall exactly whether it was an installation company or what its specific role was—we were commissioned a photographic shoot on the project. It was more extensive than

¹ Antonio Pizza, ed., *Dispensario antituberculoso de Barcelona, 1933-1937*: J. Ll. Sert, J.B. Subirana and J. Torres Clavé (Almería: Colegio de Arquitectos de Almería, 1993).

Fig. 1
Tuberculosis Clinic in Barcelona, a GATEPAC project. © Gregori Civera.



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initially requested, as we took full advantage of having access to the building, just in case it might be of interest to others. I also remember that, for a short period around that time, David Cardelús was collaborating with us and he contributed some of the photographs. I took the initiative to contact the Taller de Arquitectura, which led me to Serena Vergano, who was then in charge of publications and communications at the studio. The photographs were shot on plates and slides—a highly professional process that required significant technical expertise. They were very pleased with the results [Fig. 2], and the photos have been widely used and reproduced since. I thought they might call us again after that, but they didn't.

Did you throw in the towel?

After 2000, I parted ways with my business partner and distanced myself from architectural photography. I didn't feel totally fulfilled by the professional dynamics of the field. Two years earlier, in 1998, I had given it one last chance and travelled to Stockholm to work on something that I genuinely enjoyed, something that wasn't a commissioned assignment. I photographed Rafael Moneo's Museum of Modern Art. I had arranged to meet Moneo, and during our encounter, I also took several portraits of him. The photographs of the Museum turned out to be intriguing but they weren't particularly publishable because the building wasn't finished, although when I planned the trip, I was told it would be. But the portraits themselves were good. Before leaving, I handed my card to the museum's communication manager, who had been very kind. A few days later, I received a call from *Vogue España*. They had followed the same logic I had: Ghery

Fig. 2
Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, Barcelona. © Gregori Civera.



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had achieved acclaim in Bilbao and a Spaniard, Moneo, was making his mark in Stockholm. They had visited the Museum but hadn't taken a photograph, so they asked me for the photographs. I sent them the images and they published a full-page portrait of Moneo. Over the next four to five years, I worked for *Vogue* and *El País Semanal*, focusing on portraiture, which eventually led me to venture into advertising photography. These projects broadened my repertoire significantly.

And when did you resume contact, this time for good, with Bofill's Taller?

I had forgotten about architecture until 2009, when *Vanity Fair* commissioned me to take a portrait of Ricardo Bofill at La Fábrica. After more than a decade, I reached out to Serena again. Ricardo's younger son, Pablo Bofill, had just joined the management team at RBTA. The assignment for *Vanity Fair* went well and Pablo, knowing my work and my earlier connection to the Taller, made me an offer: to photograph the entirety of the studio's built work—everything constructed over the span of 50 years. The idea was to photograph new projects while gradually revisiting the archive.

And what was the RTBA archive like at that time? Going over that documentation, which photographers had Bofill worked with during the most celebrated years of his career?

The archive was managed by a single person, responsible for both the plans and the photographs, but it was in a state of considerable disarray. The topic of period photographs is fascinating. Many of the photographs

Fig. 3
77 West Wacker Drive, Chicago, 1992 © Gregori Civera.

were taken by the Taller's own people, especially Serena—an accomplished photographer—and Annabelle d'Huart. Some may also be by Català-Roca. Yukio Futagawa photographed several projects for *GA Architect*, and there were contributions from a German photographer who was living in Barcelona, Deidi von Schaewen, as well as some images by Hisao Suzuki.

It's curious, then, this lack of interest in photographic documentation of the Taller de Arquitectura's work.

Let me share an anecdote. Pablo Bofill told me one day that we might need to go to Chicago to photograph the skyscrapers [Fig. 3]. The Taller had built two impressive towers in downtown Chicago and they only had a single slide—and a bad one at that—provided by the developer. Ricardo was never interested in the past; he always looked to the future.

As one would expect in the 1960s and 1970s, rather than viewing architecture as an object, there was an interest in documenting it as a setting, as a backdrop to collective life.

Certainly. There are some incredible photographs from the time of La Fábrica, Gaudí district, Walden-7, and other projects, that I'm now rescuing from the archive, digitalising and editing them, because photography played an extremely important role during that phase of the Taller's development. Everything was documented. There are some amazing photographs, for example, of the performance-concert held in the late 1960s in Moratalaz for the launch of the City in the Space. These aren't strictly



Fig. 4
Gaudí District, Reus, Tarragona, 1968 BTA Archive.

architectural photographs, but rather documentary or even performative. In the photographs of the Gaudí district, there are artists and actors. Photography was used as another tool within the architectural project and, in a way, they flout convention. There was more interest in the experience of architecture than in describing it [Fig. 4]. These photographs are also sensual and experimental.

Your definitive arrival at the Taller in 2009 did indeed mark a more structured interest in the photographic documentation of the projects.

That's right. My first assignment was the Hotel Vela in Barcelona, followed by the Sanctuary of Meritxell, in Andorra. Later I photographed the Gaudí district and the Mont-Ras house. We began combining newly completed projects with historical ones. In 2015, Pablo Bofill asked me to go to Calpe, though I wasn't entirely sure what I would find there or in what condition. This photo shoot of La Muralla Roja [The Red Wall] ultimately became a significant milestone in my photographic work on Bofill's architecture, as well as for the Taller itself. The vertical photograph of the staircases is my most successful and widely reproduced photo [Fig. 5]. For 30 years, no one paid much attention to that project. It had been largely neglected, the price of the apartments had plummeted and the community was on the verge of bankruptcy. These were the years of the rise of *Instagram*. That precise shade of pink, *Millennial Pink*, had just been named Pantone's colour of the year. The algorithm did its job and the photograph triggered a snowball effect that swept us all along—both us and La Muralla Roja itself. The place began attracting floods of tourists and enthusiasts, which allowed the community to recover financially and undertake the restoration and repainting of the buildings.

It's an extremely fascinating case study of how a single architectural photograph can produce a radical change in the collective acceptance of architecture and architects.

It wasn't just one photograph; others soon followed. The photos I took at the time are good, but this isn't solely my achievement. It was Pablo's idea to give renewed value to the older projects, and this, among other things, ultimately contributed to Ricardo Bofill being awarded an honorary doctorate by the ETSAB in 2021, shortly before his passing. His relationship with the School had always been peculiar. The architects who studied



Fig. 5
Muralla Roja, Calpe, Alicante, 1973 © Gregori Civera.

in the 1980s and 1990s thought that Bofill's architecture was rather out-dated. When the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya was completed, the harshest criticism came from my architect friends. Moneo, who later designed the Auditori, compared his work to an oil tanker and Ricardo's to a luxury yacht. However, younger architects, who are active consumers of social media, have begun to reassess not only La Muralla Roja but also Walden-7 and other examples of utopian architecture in a new light. This interest extends beyond the architecture itself to the interdisciplinary model of architectural production as a collective experience whose transformative ambition is once again highly relevant in today's re-evaluation of the means and ends of architecture itself.

It is also true that Ricardo Bofill's career is remarkably broad, spanning many stylistic registers, especially in his early years. Projects like the housing on Juan Sebastián Bach Street in Barcelona or the Nicaragua apartment building, for example, still adhered to a certain orthodoxy of the Modern Movement and the Barcelona School, as embodied by Coderch.

We shouldn't forget that Ricardo's father, Emilio Bofill, was already aligned with the modernist ideals of GATCPAC in the 1930s. Ricardo's early projects were developed in collaboration with him. Emilio, for instance, was the builder of La Ricarda. We're currently working on the correspondence between Emilio and Antonio Bonet regarding the project, and it is clear that certain design decisions came from Emilio Bofill. In any event, Ricardo launched the Taller de Arquitectura very soon afterwards, an interdisciplinary space for experimentation that challenged orthodoxy right from the start.

In 2023 you held an exhibition of your photographs of the Taller de Arquitectura's work at the Unité d'Habitation in Marseille. How do Bofill and Le Corbusier engage in dialogue, so to speak?

Bofill used to say that Le Corbusier was the devil incarnate. Yet, the programme of Walden-7 is essentially the same as that of the Unité. Ricardo and the Taller team, with all the arrogance of youth, embraced Le Corbusier's concept of collective housing but chose to reinterpret it in a far more sensual and fun way, breaking free from the shoebox. The spirit is entirely different—much more playful, challenging social conventions in a way. At Walden-7, people are free to live as they please; the project not only addresses the problem of access to housing, but also proposes a game of communal life, loosening social norms and customs. The interiors of Walden-7, with their carpeted level changes, invite you to lie down, to let go of formalities.

However, your photographs do maintain a sense of composure. You photograph Bofill's work with exquisite technical rigour and an undeniable formal orthodoxy in terms of framing, much like Ezra Stoller photographed Saarinen in the 1950s, to draw a parallel. Moreover, your recent photographs of Bofill's career succeed in lending his work—anachronistic in its time—a timeless quality that comes to its rescue, as we have seen with La Muralla Roja, and which has contributed to its critical acclaim.

For me, photography is an exercise in composition. My photographs are fragments of architecture because, for me, that's a photographer's task. The modern overuse of wide-angle lenses means that it's the lens, rather than the photographer, that takes the picture. It's a technical resource that creates a language based on repetition. I am interested in being the author of my photographs. It may seem blatantly obvious, but I want to take good photographs that, removed from their context or the need that prompted them, work as images. That's my goal. I don't manage it in every photo, but that's what I strive for, beyond merely explaining a project. The photographer's work lies in framing. Framing and composition receive far less attention than they deserve. Photography is a cut into reality, and the 'what' and 'how' of the reality you represent are framing and composition.

The concept of authorship, in the positive sense in which you use it, is what actually defines the identity of the best architectural photography. It's not so much about what I see, but how I see it.

Julius Shulman, for example, had a highly theatrical approach to photography. His photographs not only serve the architect but also work for him as a photographer. Stoller's photographs of the TWA terminal possess an elegance, a plasticity, a composition... one can't wish for more in architectural photography, though I wouldn't settle for less either.

Some argue that one of the goals of architectural photography is to capture the essence of a building, much like a good portrait of a person—their gaze—reveals the soul of the subject.

I find that absurd. Capturing the essence of a building is to confuse the thing with its image. I produce images of things, buildings or people, it's all the same to me. But they must work as images. When you look at them, they should make you question something. A photograph must work apart from its subject, have its own identity. It must take flight, transcend, detach itself from the subject—otherwise, it doesn't work. Well, it might serve the commissioner's purpose, but that doesn't interest me. In the 1990s, when I photographed architecture, I expected a call from Gehry

to shoot the Guggenheim in Bilbao. Now I think it would have been difficult, it would have been very complicated to achieve that level of image autonomy: you would always see the Guggenheim, not the photograph.

But undoubtedly, some architectures are more photogenic, offering a richer visual load from which to construct a new image. Think back to the early 2000s, before the real estate bubble burst, when, leveraging the star-system architecture, many architects designed buildings thinking about their skin, their outer layer, crafting facades that might end up as images of another kind of facade, the cover of an architecture magazine.

Bofill's architecture offers certain elements on a platter, but it's up to the photographer to make something of them. There is a photograph of one of the studio's skyscrapers in Chicago that is impeccable [Fig. 6], partly thanks to its urban context. If a client commissions a photo shoot, I must return with something worthwhile, not just the first thing that comes to mind. But I'm interested in being able to remove that photograph from the context of the assignment and have it work on its own. And how does an architectural photograph work? For me, composition involves an essential sensual and plastic quality.

You also worked several years in fashion photography. What did you take from that field to architecture?

Unlike my approach to architecture, at first I wanted to experiment and find new angles, unconventional framing, etc. Soon I realised that I was wrong, that my way of looking was much more graphic. So I returned to my large-format camera for fashion photography. Why did I eventually stop working in fashion? Because I understood that most of those photographs satisfied the client, met requirements and expectations, but they didn't satisfy me. They didn't work outside their intended context. I could see how much effort went into creating something with an extremely short lifespan, as they had no autonomy beyond the specific context for which they were made for. I'm not particularly interested in genres as such—whether fashion or architecture. I am a photographer, not an architect or an architectural critic. I'm interested in gaining access to certain things and capturing them from my own point of view.



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Fig. 6
Dearborn Center, Chicago,
2003 © Gregori Civera.

What's curious is that architectural photography these days lacks that sense of authorship, most images are markedly similar.

A particular style of photography has become clearly established, shaped by the nature of digital photography and the excessive use of wide-angle lenses that make it possible to take spectacular photos. In the 1990s, incredible wide-angle lenses began to appear for large-format cameras. However, the classic photographs of Stoller, Shulman, and others were taken with standard or moderately wide lenses. Those photographs are elegant, expressive and well-composed. From the 1990s, commercial architectural photography began to show signs of this exaggeration. The characteristic vignetting in those photographs is a good example of how a technical issue generates a language. A technical flaw becomes a defining feature, a sophistication that reveals the use of a large-format camera. The flaw—the vignetting—becomes a code, signalling a certain technical sophistication. I'm not particularly interested in sensationalism. In my conversations with Laguillo, we identified two schools of thought in architectural photography, each of us aligning with a different one. The first relies heavily on wide-angle lenses, often positioning the camera very close to the building to create a monumental image. This is something I try to avoid. The second involves stepping back as much as possible, using lenses that offer a more natural, normal angle of view. This is the approach I follow. I mainly use a 135mm lens and 180mm lens with my large-format camera, both of which closely resemble the normal angle of view. This method aligns with how I see things, and ultimately, what I see is what captures my attention.

Also in technical terms, we're witnessing a return to analogue processes today, much like vinyl in music—whether through physical means or the application of digital filters that emulate the patina of old chemical films.

Many of my photographs of Bofill's work are digital. I now have a fantastic drum scanner that allows me to scan film really well. But in the past, I worked with an Alpa tilt-shift camera with a digital back. I mention this because it's not always easy to distinguish the processing of my digital images from those shot on film. They share the same plasticity. Film for the sake of film doesn't interest me; I'm not drawn to nostalgia. I'm interested in the image itself. That said, film offers something that digital photography doesn't: a three-dimensionality that particularly benefits architecture. To replicate that three-dimensionality digitally, you need to stitch multiple shots together. For example, the photograph of Cergy [Fig. 7] is actually a composite of two vertical images merged into one. No one notices, but a particularly observant viewer might spot a child with a ball



who appears twice, on the left and on the right. By merging them, I achieve a larger format and begin to get that three-dimensional quality inherent to film.

Earlier you mentioned your interest in describing the materiality of architecture, which isn't obvious.

Architecture is both material and language, and I try to respond to that. When you photograph architecture, you're, in a way, producing architecture. Consciously photographing architecture is a constructive exercise, a way of rebuilding. With the tripod, the large-format camera and other tools, you engage in a compositional exercise that is inherently constructive. You move the camera until the composition feels right. The world is chaotic and disorderly, yet, from a specific viewpoint, the camera creates an illusion of order, suggesting relationships between elements that would otherwise seem unrelated. All of this is achieved through light and composition. These are the kinds of plays that interest me in architecture. Consider Hervé's photographs, for example. Le Corbusier's work is dry, austere, and sober, yet Hervé, through his play with light and shadow, reveals something sensual in that architecture—something tied to the experience of architecture rather than its mere description. His is a subjective photography that narrates what he's experienced within those works by Le Corbusier. Guido Guidi's *5 Architectures*² is brilliant. It features photographs of details of buildings, rather than the buildings themselves. The photos are almost identical, with subtle changes in the camera or light. That's what interests me, exercises that involve living and experiencing

² Guido Guidi, *Le Corbusier, 5 architectures* (Berlin: Kehrer, 2017).

Fig. 7
Les Colonnes de Saint-Christophe, Cergy-Pontoise, France, 1986 © Gregori Civera.

architecture. If I need to produce an elevation, I do, but I like to include a counterpoint. I'm drawn to the unfinished, the imperfect. Something unexpected that shouldn't be there but enriches the image and makes the photograph work. A perfect photo of a flawless elevation doesn't interest me. Architectural photography often avoids anecdotal elements to focus on the permanent. But the anecdote is inherently photographic; it gives the image autonomy from the object, making it specific.

Gregori, what is your current work with RBTA in the short and medium term?

Since Ricardo's passing on 14 January 2022, the situation has been quite atypical. After 15 years of collaboration, my relationship with the Taller de Arquitectura team is one of close friendship. My role at the Taller reflects this and on many occasions I do consultancy work. In 2020 we began revisiting the archive and we discovered incredibly interesting material that no one had seen in 50 years. This material— catalogued and restored in my studio—will help to better understand and share the fascinating history of the Taller de Arquitectura.

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Fig. 7

Les Colonnes de Saint-Christophe, Cergy-Pontoise, France, 1986 © Gregori Civera.