

Ricardo Bofill from Both Sides of the Wall. RBTA’s reception in German Architectural Journals during the Late Cold War (1975 –1990)¹

Ricardo Bofill, Villes Nouvelles, West Germany (FRG), East Germany (GDR), Cold War Architecture

/Abstract

This article examines how *Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura* (RBTA) was produced, contested, and instrumentalized in the architectural journals of West and East Germany between 1975 and 1990, with brief antecedents from the early 1970s. Using a reception-studies approach to texts from *Bauwelt*, *Baumeister*, *ARCH+*, *Der Architekt*, *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, and *Architektur der DDR*, the paper argues that RBTA's combination of classical monumentality and prefabrication during the so-called "French years" operated as a technology of image whose meaning shifted with the patronage regimes and evaluative frameworks on each side of the Wall.

In the FRG, criticism crystallized around three value regimes—moral-aesthetic (the trauma of monumentality), urban-functional (the user and the built environment), and political-economic (the image of public power and corporations)—turning RBTA into touchstone of local cultural debates. In the GDR, reviewers acknowledged technical prowess yet evaluated RBTA primarily through the lens of industrialisation and socialist planning priorities. By triangulating these readings with Bofill's own programmatic texts, the article shows how German journals did not merely "reflect" RBTA; they constructed it as a sign within late–Cold War urban politics. The contribution is twofold: a comparative map of RBTA's German receptions and a broader diagnosis of how prefabrication can act as symbolic accelerator—either as a public expression of authority or as an operation of urban legibility—depending on the political context.

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In the late 1970s, Ricardo Bofill remarked: "the world is divided into two blocs—socialist and capitalist—each seeking to appropriate it"¹. For the *Taller de Arquitectura* (RBTA), the task was to explore "the intermediate zones", where the contradictions of both systems might be resolved "at the level of form, through new syntheses and new lines of development". The point of departure is RBTA's first, journal-led internationalization: during 1960–1975, works executed in Spain circulated widely through international architectural periodicals². Building on that media platform, this article examines how architectural journals in the Federal Republic (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the 1980s received and reframed the subsequent internationalization associated with RBTA's French-built projects—in contrast with the earlier wave of German publications. In doing so, the journals are treated as privileged witnesses from both sides of the Wall: they reveal how West and East codified the same work under distinct evaluative regimes, thus operationalising Bofill's initial claim about his architectural synthesis attempt in a world divided in two.

The hermeneutical procedure of the analysis is to confront the main concepts used by Bofill's praxis during those years—mainly "historical expression", "industrialization" and "power"—with the professional discourse developed in German architectural periodicals. The sources and methods follow a media-reception approach applied to a fixed corpus of journals between 1979 and 1990: *Bauwelt*, *Baumeister*, *ARCH+*, *Der Architekt*, *Deutsche Bauzeitung* from the FRG and *Architektur der DDR* from the GDR. The central claim is that the same concepts—under specific regimes of patronage and representation—elicited divergent criteria across the Two Germanies. The analysis argues that FRG and GDR periodicals produced, rather than merely reported, Bofill's public meaning, and that their contrasting readings map onto the cultural logics of the two Cold War blocs. Throughout, the German fonts are cross-checked against Bofill's own programmatic writings—*L'architecture d'un homme* (1978), *Espaces d'une vie* (1989), and *L'architecture des villes* (1995)—to confront intention with reception. Analytically, the argument proceeds through three cross-cutting themes: (1) grammars of history (type, legibility, monumentality), (2) from technique to image (prefabrication, series, standardization), and (3) the political economy of form (patronage, representation). In the West German material these themes crystallize as three evaluative regimes—moral-aesthetic, urban-functional, and political-economic—against which the FRG press positioned RBTA; the GDR readings mobilize the same themes through the lens of construction industrialisation, social utility and planning priorities. This framework turns the journals into a compar-

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1 Ricardo Bofill, *L'architecture d'un homme* (Paris: Arthaud, 1978), 72.

2 Marisa García-Vergara and Julio Garnica, "Bofill, heterodoxy and mass media. From utopia to history (1960-1975)" in *Crossing frontiers. International networks of Spanish architecture (1939-1975)*, eds. Antonio Pizza and Enrique Granell (Madrid: Ediciones Asimétricas), 116-137.

ative laboratory for testing how prefabricated monumentality can register either as theatre of authority or as operative urban legibility, depending on context.

Between Form and Technology in the Late Francoism

The creation and early internationalisation of the Taller during the second half of the Franco regime (1960–1975) unfolded in the pursuit of materializing a utopia as a response to the social ways of life developed under the Spanish dictatorship. It was in this anti-establishment period that projects such as *el Castillo de Kafka* (1968) near Sitges, *el Barrio Gaudí* (1968) in Reus, *Xanadú* (1968) and *la Muralla Roja* (1973) in Calpe and *Walden 7* (1975) in Sant Joan Despí took shape. Their formalisation drew on the mathematical research introduced to the *Taller* by Bofill's sister, Anna, following her incorporation in 1963 and condensed in her 1975 dissertation *Contribución a la generación geométrica de formas arquitectónicas y urbanas* (Contribution to the geometric generation of architectural and urban forms). The main objective was to get over “the uniformity and monotony of the *international rationalist*” by establishing a standard unity that allowed “an industrialisation of its construction” and could be replicated in all space directions by finding those “geometric laws capable of generating volumetric structures”³. This subversion of form underpinned the intention to create “an architecture without a façade”, in which the interior was articulated through “a multiplicity of walkways”, reviving “the urbanism of the Casbah” with a “surrealist note”⁴. What these works share is a location away from historical centres, enabling utopian refuges capable of subverting the National-Catholic family model upheld by the regime. As Bofill later put it, in Spain they had worked little “with the constraint of history”: “we operated on peripheral sites, where everything was to be invented”, and the regime's inertia “pushed us to do entirely new things, architectures that no one had yet dared to imagine”⁵.

From a West German vantage, *Baumeister 10/1969*⁶—under the headline “Kafkaeske Burg”—read the Sitges project as a paradox: a plug-in spiral “castle” achieved on ordinary budgets and schedules. The piece stressed that the self-service hotel of about ninety units in Sitges was assembled from brick stair-core towers, simple steel posts, and lightweight “plug-on” elements. In so doing, the article stripped mainstream architects of the pretext that standardised block architecture was the inevitable price of efficiency and cost rationalisation. While the formal logic was compared

3 Anna Bofill, *Hacia la ecomorfología: Entre la utopía y la realidad* (Madrid: Asimétricas, 2025), 67-69.
4 Ricardo Bofill, *Espaces d'une vie* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1989), 145.
5 Ricardo Bofill, *L'architecture des villes* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1995), 242.
6 “Kafkaeske Burg. Do-serve-yourself-Hotel mit 90 Appartements in Sitges, Spanien”, *Baumeister*, no. 10 (1969): 1293–1300.

to Archigram's capsule urbanism, in Bofill's hands the plug-in/plug-on vocabulary was re-engineered to local means: independent staircase towers received “mother units” in a rising spiral, onto which further pieces were attached. *Architektur und Wohnform 7/1971*⁷ echoed this appraisal, noting that “It was built with traditional means, although the hotel could also have been realised using prefabricated assembly systems (at the time not yet introduced in Spain)”. In short, German critics located RBTA's formal experiment at the bridge between form and technology: a modular, capsule-like conception executed with conventional craft given Spain's infrastructural limits in the late 1960s. As Marisa García-Vergara and Julio Garnica report⁸, Zevi's contemporaneous critique centred precisely on this disjunction between form and technique—precisely what Archigram sought to conjoin. On the contrary, that did not appear as a deficiency to German journals, but as an example of the conjunction between form and available technologies within a rational cost-time efficiency framework.

In the FRG press, RBTA's formal experimentation was read as internationally legible, even as it emerged from the periphery. West German reviewers recoded RBTA's ‘capsule’ formalism as an adaptive use of available techniques rather than as a failure of technological coherence. This would change markedly with Bofill's turn to France, in both formal expression and technological innovation.

Bofill's French Turn after the Transición

As noted by Dominique Serrell—former member of RBTA— in her recently published monograph about Bofill's French years, the international trajectory of the *Taller de Arquitectura* (RBTA) in the 1980s centred on the *villes nouvelles*—a state response to the housing shortage that sought “to organise urban expansion in the Île-de-France region by finding an alternative to the existing suburban realm” of the *banlieues*⁹. In parallel with the launch of the Walden 7 project in 1970, Bofill had “the opportunity to take part in a congress on the industrialisation of housing, held in France, where I was able to meet the administrators of the villes nouvelles”¹⁰. RBTA's projects attracted the attention of the French administration after a documentary on *Barrio Gaudí* (Reus) was broadcast on French television. Following visits to Reus and to Walden 7, Bofill was invited to develop a project for Cergy-Pontoise comparable to Reus —seed of the French–Gothic–inspired, ultimately unbuilt *Petite Cathédrale*.

7 “Apart Hotel ‘El Castell’, Sitges, Spanien”, *Architektur und Wohnform*, no. 7 (1971): 300-302.
8 García-Vergara and Garnica, “Bofill, heterodoxy and mass media”, 123.
9 Dominique Serrell, *Bofill. Les années françaises* (Paris: Norma éditions, 2023), 25.
10 Bofill, *L'architecture d'un homme*, 110

The move to France entailed a stylistic turn: from experimental, peripheral megastructures and ‘utopian’ modularism to a Beaux-Arts–inflected classical monumental vocabulary—what Bofill called “the memory of French architecture”¹¹. This formal shift also involved a recalibration of politics: if, under the dictatorship, his “utopias” had acted as safety valves shaped by a student-era oppositional stance, in France his posture pivoted towards navigating—and persuading—state and municipal power brokers across party lines. Bofill himself frames this post-Transition shift in *Espaces d’une vie* (1989) and its Spanish counterpart *Espacio y vida* (1990), whose tones and details notably diverge despite the latter being a translation. In the French edition he recalls early contact with Santiago Carrillo around 1956 and having aided the PCE’s policy of national reconciliation, despite not having “taken part in the party’s mass actions”¹²; once the party was legalized in 1976, he “then ceased all collaboration” because “the mechanisms of resistance and the seizure of power had interested me” while their exercise “left me indifferent”. By contrast, the Spanish edition omits Carrillo and the PCE, noting instead that he “spent time with communist students”¹³, that he and his generation supported the democratic transition, and that by 1976 he lost interest in political activity, adding that all ideologies seemed partial and politicians lacked creativity. This self-fashioning also tapped a broader rhetoric of resistance—a response to the Spanish dictatorship that crystallized the topos that “contra Franco se vivía mejor” (“against Franco life was easier”), to the point that sectors of the Catalan bourgeoisie (the so-called *Gauche Divine*) could appear progressive, even anti-system, simply by opposing the regime, often in defence of privileges they felt the dictatorship impaired.

Those editorial asymmetries become sharper when read against *L’architecture d’un homme* (1978). There, Bofill recounts: “I began to read Marx, whose books were forbidden at that time, and I became a Marxist”¹⁴, and, when asked directly, replies: “I am ‘also’ a Marxist. Marxism gave me a method of thought that I have preserved”, while noting that his intellectual formation was “necessary, but not sufficient”. In the same sequence he insists on “never being a victim” of Francoism—contrary to the prevailing attitude of left-oriented parties—and even declares that “we were therefore all responsible for Franco’s rule,” since no genuine force had been capable of resisting it. Read together, these claims expose a revealing tension: Marxism is retained as a portable “method” while political commitment is bracketed, enabling a pragmatic, ideologically undetermined posture that suits his French commissions. That self-styled distance—method without

11 Bofill, *L’architecture des villes*, 242.

12 Bofill, *Espaces d’une vie*, 13.

13 Ricardo Bofill, *Espacio y vida* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1990), 17–18.

14 Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme*, 102–103.

militancy—sits uneasily with the very rhetoric of resistance just evoked (including the bourgeois progressivism it often licensed), and helps explain the ease with which his architecture could oscillate between oppositional narratives and the imperatives of state-led urban development.

Nowhere is the entanglement of form, technique and power clearer than in *Les Halles episode* (1971–1979)¹⁵, which Bofill himself presents as a lesson in “the politics of architecture”—a shift in scale and patronage he would leverage thereafter¹⁶. As this public image consolidated, German editors were already parsing the costs. In his 1985 *Bauwelt* review of the recently published book *Ricardo Bofill Taller de arquitectura* edited by Annabelle d’Huart¹⁷, Gernot Bayne called the luxuriant, wordy self-explanations a kind of “forward defence” against charges of eclectic classicism, and—crucially—observed that the book accompanying the French phase said little about the immense technical and co-ordination apparatus behind those precast ensembles. That silence reinforces a core claim of this article: a mid-1980s pivot from oppositional utopias to the construction of power imaginaries.

In 1985 the Museum of Modern Art presented the joint exhibition *Ricardo Bofill and Léon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History*, effectively aligning RBTA’s French production with Krier’s postmodern neo-traditional urbanism and projecting their shared concern for legible form onto an American stage. The catalogue¹⁸ showcased RBTA’s French set-pieces—*Les Arcades du Lac* and *Le Viaduc* at Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, *Les Espaces d’Abraxas* at Marne-la-Vallée, *Les Échelles du Baroque* in Paris, and the “Green Crescent” at Cergy—thereby consolidating Bofill’s international profile from within France’s grands ensembles context. Bofill’s own project notes fixed the terms of reception: *Les Arcades* and *Le Viaduc* were cast as a “paradoxical synthesis between classicism and industrial and constructive rationalism”; *Abraxas* as a heavy-prefabricated composition whose “complex and wide architectural language” came from series and repetition; Cergy’s crescent as a monumental, semicircular colonnade with “voluntarily constant and repetitive” rhythm in architectural concrete; and *Les Échelles du Baroque* as a triad of urban rooms (circular, elliptical, theatrical) tuned to the surrounding street profiles. In short, the book paired prefabrication with monumental legibility and presented stand-

15 The *Les Halles* competition in Paris marked Bofill’s first major attempt to intervene in the historic core of a European capital. In *L’architecture d’un homme* he presented it as a lesson in the “politics of architecture,” signalling a shift from peripheral utopias to centralised commissions; in practice, RBTA’s early involvement was abruptly halted and the commission effectively withdrawn—an episode later described as a “courtly intrigue”—after which he was pushed toward peripheral operations. He would later characterise France as “a democracy, with a monarchic tendency, but a democracy nonetheless,” a remark that helps situate his navigation of French patronage. See Ricardo Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme*, 104–109; *Espaces d’une vie*, 21; *L’architecture des villes*, 242.

16 Dominique Serrell, “The ‘Jardin des Halles’: Creating a Promenade from the Palais-Royal to Beaubourg,” in *Bofill. Les années françaises* (Paris: Norma Éditions, 2023), 95–107.

17 Gernot Bayne, “Ricardo Bofill – Taller de Arquitectura,” *Bauwelt*, no. 43 (1985): 1702.

18 Arthur Drexler, ed., *Ricardo Bofill and Léon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), exhibition catalogue, exhibition dates June 27–September 3, 1985.

ardisation as civic order rather than mere economy. These are precisely the concepts around which the German journals would subsequently coalesce—accepting, qualifying or disputing the coupling of prefabrication and monumentality.

The West German Reception of the “French Years”

West German architectural journals registered sharply polarised reactions of Bofill’s French years, with a first crest in 1983 as *Les Arcades du Lac* (Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines) and *Les Espaces d’Abraxas* (Marne-la-Vallée) came into public view. The same autumn Bofill lectured in Karlsruhe—“*Stadt, Industrie und Eklektizismus*”, 2 November—during the city’s Catalan Weeks¹⁹, helping to frame a debate that would intertwine design, technology and politics²⁰.

The article entitled *Prefabricated classicism. About two residential quarters in Paris by Ricardo Bofill* published in *Baumeister* 11/1983²¹ [Fig. 1] offers a key testimony about the general feeling of the projects in the West German context, as it comprehends fifteen different voices from the architectural panorama including professionals, academics and students. The collected texts analyzed and criticized Ricardo Bofill’s constructions on the outskirts of Paris, particularly *Le Palacio d’Abraxas* and *Les Arcades du Lac*. Authors expressed both fascination and, above all, skepticism toward the monumentality and symbolism of these buildings.

Some contributors praised the serial precision, material finish and the ambition to confer dignity upon social housing—Peter Kulka noted a “strong spatial formation” against suburban chaos; Jens Freiberg observed how names like *Le Palacio* or *Le Théâtre* rebranded social housing with festive grandeur. Yet the same writers worried about functional concessions and an authorial image that left “little room for others.” The recurring charge was not only one of style but of urbanity: Gabriel Epstein argued that axial symmetry without contextual integration reinforced a sense of urban chaos and disconnection with the environment; others pointed to the lack of shops, cafés and everyday programmes as evidence that urban life cannot be conjured by scenography alone.

The most contentious strand linked RBTA’s monumental language to authoritarian associations [Fig. 2]. Rolf Keller warned that the public’s fascination with Bofill echoed the affective pull of spectacle in the 1930s; more



Fig. 1
Pages of the article “Prefabricated classicism” in *Baumeister* 11/1983 depicting both Palacio de Abraxas and Les Arcades du Lac. November 1983.

Fig. 2
A page of the article “Prefabricated classicism” in *Baumeister* 11/1983 comparing Abraxas main courtyard with monumental architectures: Perret’s residential Skyscraper (1927), a residential tower in Moscow from the 60s, A building from Louis Deperthes in New York (1892), a residential tower from Elmyer Roth in Central Park (1930), and the Albert Speer’s project for Berlin’s South Station from the 20s. November 1983.

19 Stadt Karlsruhe, *Europäische Kulturtage Karlsruhe 1983. Kunst und Kultur Kataloniens* (Karlsruhe: Stadt Karlsruhe Kulturreferat, 1983), 88. Although we have not been able to access the full content of the conference, the title suggests a close relationship with the French years’ projects and a temporal coincidence that must be noticed.

20 As Gernot Bayne later noted, however, parts of the talk slipped into a “naturalist” register (learning “the relation between horizontals and verticals” in the Sahara), a telling divergence from the industrial/eclectic brief signalled by the title.

21 Helge Bofinger, Wolfgang Braun, “Vorfabrizierter Klassizismus: Zu zwei Wohnquartieren bei Paris von Ricardo Bofill,” *Baumeister*, no. 11 (1983): 1043–1057.

broadly, West German caution around monumentality—amid renewed discussions of Speer’s legacy²²—favoured an austere modernism as the sign of democratic transparency. Part of that allergy was double-coded: monumentality was suspect not only because of Nazi classicism but also owing to the didactic gigantism of Soviet socialist realism. Caught between those two “forbidden” genealogies, FRG discourse steered architects towards an ostensibly neutral repertoire—transparency, lightness, exposed structure and pure geometric form—the techno-rational idiom that High-Tech discourse elevated as democratically legible and historically unburdened.

Set against that frame, RBTA’s prefabricated classicism read to many not as process-led construction but as a return to symbolically charged representation. As Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm²³ argued, a specifically German *Ausdrucksmangel* (difficulty with architectural expression) made classicist references culturally fraught and pushed practice toward “neutral” technocratic forms as a safe default; a complementary, historical account by Simone Hain and Hartmut Frank²⁴ shows how, in the post-1945 FRG, monumentality was routinely equated with compromised politics while transparency and lean geometries were cast as democratic virtues. Bofill, for his part, defended monumentality as a necessary symbolic register: “men need signs and spaces besides television and bathtub”²⁵.

A parallel, more political-economic reading came from Otto Steidle: rather than ideology per se, RBTA’s classicism indexed the commodification of architecture—grand imagery as market value, where “the more monumental, the better.” In this sense, he compares it to advertising, stating that the more visually striking a building is, the more value it holds in the consumer market. That line of critique converged with concrete habitability complaints (Asmus Werner on deep rooms, tiny windows, unusable loggias) and Keller’s insistence that dwelling should be intimate rather than staged, all of which sharpened scepticism toward the Paris ensembles’ liveability claims.

By 1988, *Deutsche Bauzeitung*²⁶ radicalised the verdict. In a polemical review of Antigone, Holger Fischer described “theatrical architecture from monumental stage sets,” invoked a “faschistoider Schock,” and criticised plan and climate performance (no cross-ventilation, overheating) as sacrificed to image. He also noted that a symposium in Heidelberg, held that

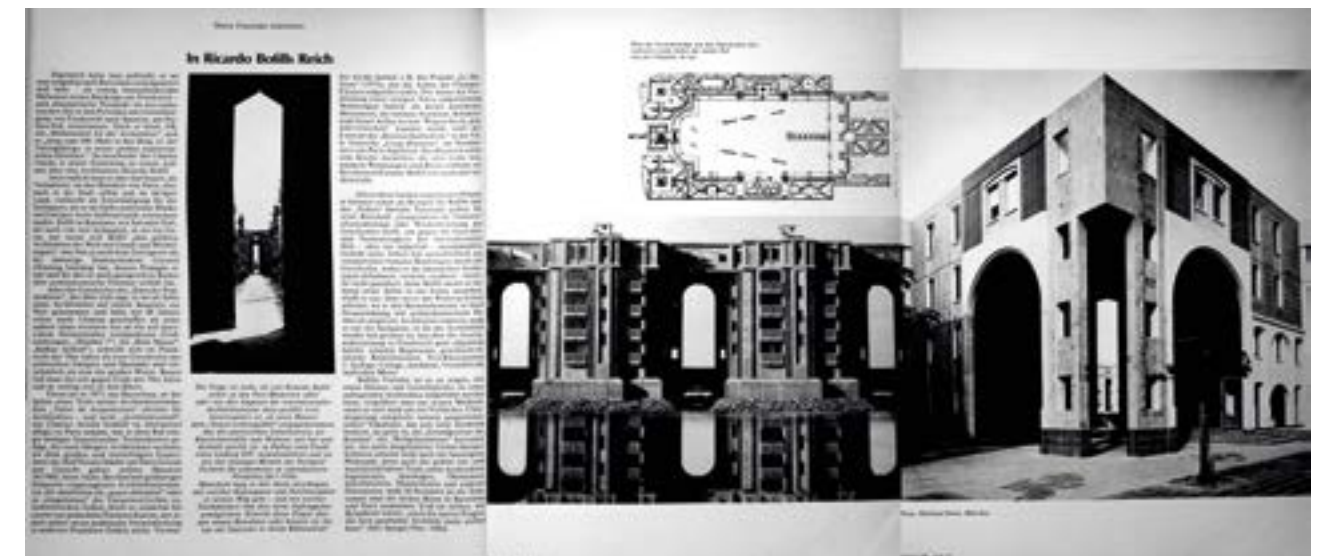
22 Albert Speer, *Architektur: Arbeiten 1933–1942* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Vienna: Ullstein, 1978). In 1985, a French-English edition appeared with commentary by Léon Krier and the Swedish architectural historian Lars Olof Larsson: *Albert Speer: Architecture 1932–1942* (Brussels: Archives d’Architecture Moderne, 1985). This publication sought to distinguish Speer’s architectural language from its National Socialist political context and to reclaim it as a valid stylistic tradition.

23 See: Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, “Warum ist die deutsche Architektur so subaltern?,” *ARCH+*, no. 118 (1993): 92.

24 Simone Hain and Hartmut Frank, eds., *Zwei deutsche Architekturen 1949–1989* (Berlin: Edition Axel Menges, 2004), 12–25.

25 Bofill, *Espaces d’une vie*, 175.

26 Holger Fischer, “Menschenfeindlicher Profilierungswahnsinn? Ricardo Bofill gestaltet das Montpellier der Zukunft,” *Deutsche Bauzeitung*, no. 2 (February 1988): 95–99.



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November to accompany an exhibition on the Antigone project—organized as part of the city’s twinning with Montpellier, and moderated by Heinrich Klotz—had deliberately avoided ideological questions, a sign that the FRG debate had shifted from design to image politics.

For its part, *Bauwelt* 1-2/1983 [Fig. 3] published a monograph entitled *Post-history, Postmodernity, or The Impossible Present*, which included a critical review of Bofill’s work²⁷. Beyond aesthetic concerns, the article placed particular emphasis on the political context of his French projects, highlighting the intersection between architecture and state power. Similarly, *Bauwelt* 7-8/1986²⁸ then traced his shifting fortunes at Les Halles (a “courtly intrigue” turned political exile), mapped the zig-zag of sponsorships from Giscard d’Estaing to Chirac and to socialist mayors like Georges Frêche in Montpellier (where “there is no left- or right-wing architecture” served as an alibi for monumental representation), and showed how these alignments displaced RBTA from the historic core to the periphery.

Threading through the FRG debate was a process-and-technology frame. The MoMA catalogue (1985) itemised RBTA’s construction systems—in situ tunnel formwork with factory-cast cladding/panels at *Les Échelles du Baroque* and mixed systems at *Cergy-Pontoise*—and thus codified an export script of prefabrication joined to legible monumentality. Yet *ARCH+* 77²⁹ (1984) [Fig. 4] had already anatomised the mechanism in greater detail: it read the façade as a device (thin precast skins and surface treatments that let concrete read as “stone”; the concealment of two storeys behind a single “classical” bay) and then turned from envelope to urban use, asking whether the new plazas were a “Kulisse oder Erlebnisraum” (stage-set or lived space). It flagged lifeless pedestrian axes and an emerging “touris-

27 Maria Franziska Adelman, “In Ricardo Bofills Reich,” *Bauwelt*, no. 1–2 (1983): 26–35.

28 Ruth Henry, “Architektur machen wie man Theater macht,” *Bauwelt*, no. 7–8 (1986): 240–243.

29 Hans-Jürgen Serwe, “Antigone, Monumental, Grün, Sozialistisch und Mediterran,” *ARCH+*, no. 77 (1984): 14–15.

Fig. 3
Pages of the article “In the Realm of Ricardo Bofill” in *Bauwelt* 1-2/1983 depicting Les Arcades du Lac. February 1983.



Fig. 4
Pages of the article about Antigone appeared in the Zeitung section of ARCH+ 77/1984.

tic" reception of the ensembles, suggesting that the scenographic charge risked outpacing everyday programmes. By doing so, *ARCH+* registered how RBTA's French classicism leveraged industrial means to produce a pictorial, highly legible order, while casting doubt on whether that order translated into robust urban life.

Der Architekt sharpened both the critique and the counterpoints. In 1984, Andrea Mesecke's piece on Valencia's Gärten des Turia read RBTA through an additive, tree-and-water urbanism—legible sequences by stretches and unusual civic participation—reminding readers that Bofill could operate beyond the grand theatricality of façades³⁰. In 1985, Günter Bock flipped the register, stressing popular acceptance and the disciplinary merit of RBTA's push for *Großtafelbauweise* (large-panel prefabrication), arguing that Bofill had put industrialised building back at the core of architectural practice³¹. In 1986, Dieter Robert Frank's dissection of *Les Échelles du Baroque* cast it as a "monument of the administration"—a *Betonbarock* of staged voids, desocialised columns, fuzzy public/private boundaries and an over-heated glass crown—turning industrial means into bureaucratic spectacle³². And in 1987, Volkmar Nickol's visit to *La Fábrica* proposed an alternate grammar summed up by the triad "carve, clean, complete", a process meant to awaken memory rather than impose a façade³³. Taken together, these texts map the FRG spectrum—from urban-functional appreciation to moral-aesthetic suspicion and process/technique recognition—complementing *ARCH+*'s concern with façade-devices and the everyday life of the new rooms.

Across the FRG journals, three evaluative regimes coalesced: urban-functional doubts about everyday life; moral-aesthetic suspicion of monumentality's associations; and political-economic/process critiques that prized integrated technics over pictorial order. The West German line did not deny RBTA's technical prowess, but disputed the direction from technique to image and the social claims attached to it.

30 Andrea Mesecke, "Die Gärten des Turia. Ein Projekt der Taller de Arquitectura Bofill in Valencia," *Der Architekt*, no. 4 (1984): 189–190.

31 Günter Bock, "Eine Meinung zu Bofill," *Der Architekt*, no. 7–8 (1985): 295–296.

32 Dieter Robert Frank, "Bofill fürs Volk?," *Der Architekt*, no. 4 (1986): 193–197.

33 Volkmar Nickol, "Der Kuß der Fee," *Der Architekt*, no. 6 (1987): 334–336.



Fig. 5
Pages of the article "New Residential Quarters in Marne-la-Vallée near Paris" in *Architektur der DDR* 4/1985 depicting Palacio de Abraxas from Bofill and Les deux Camemberts from Manolo Núñez. April 1985.

Reception in the GDR: Social Utility, Typification, and Spectacle

As for the GDR, East-German readings filtered RBTA through the standards of social utility and typification. The GDR's leading journal, *Architektur der DDR* (1985), reported from a Franco–GDR planning colloquium that toured the *villes nouvelles* (Lille, Paris, Montreuil, Angers and Le Mans)³⁴ paying particular attention to the work of Bofill [Fig. 5]. Against a background of decentralised governance and communist-led suburban councils seeking regulated rents and resident participation, the article tracks a policy shift in Île-de-France from earlier high-rise estates to mid- and low-rise fabrics—and then tests Bofill's ensembles against those priorities. The verdict admires French engineering prowess and the precision of prefabrication but doubts the necessity and liveability of prestige set pieces in Marne-la-Vallée and Noisy-le-Grand.

The article notes how soaring land prices and towers at large residential complexes disrupted the city's silhouette. The effects of urban speculation were most visible in the periphery, where new residential districts have emerged—often at the expense of architectural and social coherence. Initially, the emphasis was on high-density, high-rise developments, but by the 1980s, there was a clear shift toward lower-density, mid-rise housing and even single-family homes. This change, the article explains, was driven by a desire to counteract the social isolation and aesthetic monotony of earlier developments. In communist-run suburbs the emphasis fell on rent control and citizen involvement, with the aim of reducing social segregation. Within that frame, RBTA's work appeared as architectural extravagance that subordinated everyday parameters (costs, maintenance, integration) to monumental image; the authors professed surprise that France entrusted two major housing ensembles in the Paris region to Bofill.

One of the most striking observations in the article is the comparison between Bofill's work and Soviet-era architecture. While the Stalinist

34 Rolf Lasch, "Neue Wohnquartiere in Marne-la-Vallée bei Paris," *Architektur der DDR*, no. 4 (1985): 247–249.

architecture of the USSR was designed to symbolize a new socialist order, Bofill’s neoclassical references seemed to serve no ideological purpose beyond aesthetic spectacle and historical pastiche. On site, the delegation experienced *Le Palais d’Abraxas* as a theatrical machine: a triumphal-arch axis, semicircular blocks, colossal half-columns, and amphitheatre motifs. The report questions what ideological or social purpose such neo-classical rhetoric serves beyond aesthetics—especially given unmet housing needs globally and growing homelessness even in developed economies³⁵. The architects were left wondering: Was the goal to create awe? To make the inhabitants feel insignificant? The long, narrow corridors, enclosed by 18-story facades, created an environment where footsteps echoed like in an empty metro station at night. The author found it impossible to imagine children laughing or playing in such an environment³⁶. The underlying doubt was both ethical and programmatic: does this “representational” monumentalism correct earlier estates’ monotony, or does it merely deliver image value at the expense of habitability?

Read against that GDR framework, Bofill’s own account of his USSR engagements is revealing³⁷. He contrasts East/West uniformities—calling the Soviet territorial order “stricter, more rigorous” and warning that émigré architects of the 1930s were “absorbed by the system” and their work banalised³⁸—an explicit caution about ideological capture³⁹. In *Espaces d’une vie* he pivots from “objects” to process: after a Soviet delegation visited Antigone in Montpellier⁴⁰—at a moment when Moscow was planning roughly 40 million dwellings within a decade—RBTA proposed a mixed-economy joint venture with government, local research cells of architects and engineers, and even a pilot prefabrication plant to reconcile beauty and industry, supplying a catalogue and standardised systems that could be massively applied. He stressed that “true success does not lie in producing one-off objects but in setting a creative dynamic in motion.” The stance acknowledges the Soviet institutional landscape—no private practice, architects embedded in multidisciplinary state combines—while preserving RBTA’s managerial authorship. It also sits alongside concrete entries in the late-1980s portfolio: Khabarovsk–Vladivostok engineer-

ing studies for a prefabricated housing complex (1988), the International Quarter, Moscow (studies begun 1989), and an office building in central Moscow (1989–91).

From a GDR perspective, this Soviet-facing, process-first narrative aligns—at least in principle—with socialist criteria (typification, maintenance, distributional logics) and with Bofill’s own critique of Soviet serial monotony at the level of lived urbanity. Yet it also throws into relief the gap that East-German reviewers perceived in France: if RBTA could advocate “system and typification” in Moscow, why did the French ensembles lean so visibly toward theatre? The GDR reception thus recasts RBTA not as an ideological adversary but as a case of misaligned optimisation—industrial means that can serve typified reproduction (USSR discourse) or prestige scenography (French practice), depending on patronage and programme.

The upshot is a double-edged lesson. GDR critics acknowledged RBTA’s technical finesse, but kept judgement tethered to use-value, long-term upkeep and allocation—criteria by which French-period monumental classicism remains rhetorically compelling yet programmatically weak. Bofill’s own Soviet chapter—joint ventures, research cells, pilot plants—shows he could theorise an alignment with socialist planning metrics; the East German reception simply asks why that alignment seldom materialised in the celebrated French works.

Recast from the East, the contrast is stark. GDR writers could recognise RBTA’s command of prefabrication and Soviet-style serial logics, yet judged value by typification, allocation, maintenance and everyday use. By comparison, in France the same techniques were redeployed to deliver rapid, economical construction in the service of a singular, emblematic image in each case—an image first legible as “classical” monument, even when underlying family resemblances persisted. Bofill himself underlined the translatability of his practice across blocs. In *Espaces d’une vie* he notes that, though he had opposed skyscrapers in Europe, in the United States he drew his “first skyscraper,” with work under way in Chicago—evidence of a deliberate shift to match ideological and market contexts⁴¹. He frames his role as adapting the project’s “stakes” to each situation—“the context determines the nature of the project”—in order “to overcome political divides,” presenting himself not as a mere servant of power but “as a partner” operating at the intersection of politics and economics. His self-presentation discloses prefabrication as a mobile instrument: systematic where socialism demanded it, image-driven where capitalism rewarded it.

35 After Stalin’s death, the USSR focus shifted from stylistic representation to mass housing production, prioritizing affordability and standardization o address homelessness and economic inequality. Achim Feltz, *Zwischen Feuerstelle und Vollkomfort*(Berlin: Neues Leben, 1986), 3-37.

36 In contrast to Abraxas, Noisy-le-Grand’s housing projects by architects such as Sarfati, Ciriani, Portzamparc, and Grumbach emphasized livability and human-scale urban design, providing an alternative to the rigid formalism of earlier mass housing developments.

37 For Bofill’s USSR strategy, delegation context, targets and the process-first programme, see *Espaces d’une vie* (esp. the passages on joint ventures, research cells, pilot plant and “réconcilier le beau et l’industrie”).

38 Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme*, 210.

39 That was aligned with the soviet context, where no private architectural practice was found. Instead, architects integrated multidisciplinary teams in public office in order to create architectural typologies that could be industrially mass produced. See also Thomas Barth and Thomas Topfstedt, *Vom Baukünstler zum Komplexprojektanten: Architekten in der DDR. Dokumentation eines IRS. Sammlungbestandes biographischer Daten* (Erkner: IRS, no. 3 Regio Doc, 2000): 20–23.

40 Ricardo Bofill, *Espaces d’une vie*, 101-105.

41 Bofill, *Espaces d’une vie*, 79.

Conclusions: Form and Ideology

The German reception of RBTA at the end of the Cold War makes plain how postmodern architecture, politics and urban representation were tightly entangled. Bofill’s French-period ensembles became lightning rods for questions about the appropriateness of monumentality and aesthetic formalism in social housing. Beneath those disputes lay deeper ideological and economic concerns: the standardisation and commodification of architecture. Under the capitalist logic, industrial techniques can slide into making architecture an interchangeable commodity—yet they can also be mobilised to produce a distinct civic order. Which tendency prevailed depended on patronage and on the evaluative frameworks applied in West and East Germany.

On the FRG side, the unification of industrial means and legible classical figures in Bofill’s French projects met a reception that prized process, programme and everyday life. Critics parsed RBTA’s façades as superficial and theatrical devices (thin precast skins, two storeys masked behind a single “classical” bay, surface treatments that read as stone) and then asked whether the resulting spaces functioned as habitable rooms or stage-sets. Liveability critiques (deep rooms, small openings, climate performance) further undercut any claim that scenography alone could deliver urbanity. In parallel, other writers reframed RBTA’s classicism less as ideology than as market strategy—monumental images as exchange-value in an economy of attention. Taken together, FRG debates did not deny technical competence; they also questioned the transition from technique to image and the social and political claims attached to it.

The GDR comparator sharpened the stakes. East German journals weighed RBTA against criteria aligned with socialist planning—typification, allocation, maintenance and use-value—acknowledging the precision of French prefabrication while doubting the necessity and liveability of prestige set-pieces. The Soviet model exemplified in the GDR was premised upon the belief—mistaken yet ideologically powerful—that scientific and technical rationality should guide political action whereas, in reality, it is politics that directs science towards objectives⁴². Ironically depicted in Eldar Ryazanov’s satirical film *The Irony of Fate*⁴³, this approach resulted in architecturally monotonous, context-insensitive mass housing, dissolving the liberal figure of the individual architect into bureaucratic multidisciplinary teams. By contrast, RBTA leveraged prefabrication and technical mastery precisely to facilitate aesthetic flexibility, enabling the strategic creation of distinct architectural entities, disguised by abundant but ultimately empty social utopic rhetoric. Ricardo Bofill himself embodies this duality, an entre-

42 It remains to be seen whether these “objectives” are ultimately compatible with democratic principles—whether they genuinely reinforce democracy or instead lean toward a paternalistic form of state control.

43 Eldar Ryazanov, *The Irony of Fate, or Enjoy Your Bath!* (USSR: Mosfilm, 1975).

preneurial figure skilfully employing the commercially appealing persona of the *enfant terrible*, cloaked in provocative rhetoric yet fundamentally detached from genuine ideological commitment⁴⁴. Experimental formalism allowed Bofill to create a politically undetermined architecture that should ultimately be sold around the globe. It can clearly be seen in the contrast between Bofill’s own critic to serial planning during the post-war reconstruction and yet, when addressing the USSR, advocated a process-first alignment (joint ventures, local research cells, even a pilot plant) to “reconcile beauty and serialised architecture.”

Bofill’s self-presentation complicates the ledger. In *L’architecture d’un homme* he keeps Marxism as method— “nécessaire, mais non suffisante”—while suspending militancy; in *Espaces d’une vie* he casts himself as a nomadic professional able to operate across political economies, noting that while he had opposed skyscrapers in Europe he nonetheless designed his first skyscraper in the United States, adapting to the ideological and market context at hand. This entrepreneurial stance—method without militancy—helped his work oscillate between oppositional narratives and the imperatives of state-led or market-led urban development.

Taken together, the German dossiers and Bofill’s writings show that architecture here was never “just” form. It mediated ideological struggle, political representation and economic calculation. Postmodern eclecticism promised release from modernist uniformity; RBTA’s career shows how readily that promise could be co-opted into spectacle and commercial success, yet also how the same industrial means could deliver operative urban legibility when aligned to programme and long-term maintenance. As debates on reconstruction, social housing and representation continue, the “Bofill case” remains a live test of whether architectural commodification can be squared with democratic ends or whether it rehearses a subtler, market-driven paternalism under the guise of social innovation. By 1989–1990, as the Wall fell, FRG and GDR evaluative frameworks began to merge; RBTA’s French ensembles survived that transition less as models than as exhibits in the argument over post-socialist urban identity.

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44 Lefebvre’s later disenchantment with Bofill stemmed from ideological differences. However, it must be noted that Lefebvre’s aestheticized hedonism concerning the “popular classes” fell far short of the Marxian concept of proletarian revolution. Instead, it represented a fundamentally reformist position—conservative and ultimately aligned with maintaining the *status quo*.

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