

Bofill: the French Adventure and the Launch of an International Career

Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura, Les Halles, Paris, Spanish Architecture, Social Housing

/Abstract

This text is a special contribution to this monographic issue on Ricard Bofill Taller de Arquitectura, commissioned from Dominique Serrell, author of *Bofill. Les années françaises / The French Years*, published by Norma Éditions in 2023. As the former director of the Taller de Arquitectura in Paris, Serrell provides a comprehensive analysis of Bofill's principal projects and achievements during his career in France between 1971 and 1985.

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Dominique Serrell is a professional advisor in the fields of design and architecture. From 1975 to 1983, she worked as the Director of Taller de Arquitectura in Paris. She played a pivotal role in the Les Halles project in Paris and was instrumental in the success of most of the Bofill's projects in France. In 1983, she established the agency Terres Nuages, which has since supported numerous creators, now internationally recognised, in their professional development. She is Professor at both ENSCI41 Ecole Nationale Supérieure de Création Industrielle, Paris, and LISAA42 Institut Supérieur des Arts, Paris. She authored the books *Exercer le métier de designer: Du statut au contrat d'exploitation* (Paris: Eyrolles, 2015) and *Ricardo Bofill, Les Années françaises* (Paris: Norma Editions, 2024).

Part One: 1971-1974.

From La Petite Cathédrale of the 1970s to Les Halles de Paris project 1974-1978.

Ricardo Bofill was invited to France in the 1970s by the engineers responsible for the new towns, developed under the leadership of General de Gaulle and particularly of Jérôme Monod, Michel Picquard, and Paul Delouvrier, to provide a solution to the expansion of cities in the Île-de-France region by finding an alternative to the existing suburbs.

Indeed, it was through a mission formed by a small number of high-ranking officials, mostly engineers from the Ponts-et-Chaussées, that the Central Group of New Towns (GCVN) was created in 1970 under the direction of Jean-Eudes Roullier, an inspector of finances.

The works of the Taller de Arquitectura in Spain, along with its research in social housing and intergenerational living, resonated within the European architectural scene and drew the attention of the French mission. The latter was seeking young talents to propose alternatives to the “*grands ensembles*.”¹ A documentary produced by the advertising agency Hautefeuille² under the direction of Jeanne Girardot was broadcast on French television, introducing these engineers to the Barrio Gaudi in Reus, built by the multidisciplinary group from the leftist movement, Taller de Arquitectura. Ricardo Bofill, its leader, appeared on screen in full view.

“Bofill’s arrival in France was akin to Bonaparte at the Pont d’Arcole...”

One could observe a population originating from agricultural provinces, bringing their chairs out onto the streets, recreating the atmosphere of a traditional Mediterranean public space, characterized by strong intergenerational interaction. Bofill presented himself with the appearance of a wise sage.

Ricardo Bofill was a true phenomenon. Guy Salmon-Legagneur³ remarked upon seeing him for the first time: “He is Bonaparte at the Pont d’Arcole.” At the age of thirty-five, Bofill had already completed remarka-

1 The term *Grands Ensembles* refers to large-scale high-rise public housing developments built in France during the mid-20th century. While often translated as “housing estates” or “large housing complexes,” the phrase carries specific historical and social connotations tied to post-war urban planning and state-subsidized housing policies. Similarly, HLM (Habitation à Loyer Modéré) denotes a regulated social housing system with subsidized rents, a concept that may not have a direct equivalent in other contexts. (Translator’s note)

2 The Hautefeuille advertising agency gained notoriety through the publication of a full-page advertisement in the October 23, 1970 issue of *Le Monde*, featuring a photograph of Albert Einstein with the caption “Einstein had long hair,” as a form of protest against the dismissal of a carpenter who had been fired for having long hair.

3 Technical advisor to the Prefect of the Paris Region, Deputy Secretary-General of the Groupe Interministériel des Villes Nouvelles de la Région Parisienne, then of the GCVN: Group Central des Villes Nouvelles (Central Group for New Towns, 1968-1978), Secretary-General of the GCVN (1978-1983), Vice-President of the GCVN (1983-1984).

ble architectural works in Spain. A few weeks later, the first study trip to Spain was organized in early summer 1971, followed by a second one in September.

Paul Chemetov, an influential architect and founding member of the A.U.A.,⁴ was the first to collaborate with Bofill in submitting a proposal for the Évry competition.⁵

Following the broadcast of a documentary on *Barrio Gaudí* on television, a segment of the French avant-garde press seized upon the magnetic, youthful, and refreshing figure of Ricardo Bofill, likening him to a charismatic young matador. Under the initiative of Patrice Goulet,⁶ Alice Morgaine—then editor-in-chief of *Jardin des Modes*—published a photographic feature depicting Bofill in this neighbourhood of Reus, near Tarragona. The images captured him leaping from one staircase to another amid the peaceful residents and women hanging laundry on the communal terraces.

For the first time, an architect was featured in a women’s magazine—a ground-breaking moment that sent shockwaves through the French architectural establishment. This establishment, largely composed of dignitaries from the era of the Modern Movement, reacted with growing resentment. The controversy that ensued marked the beginning of an unprecedented public debate on architecture, amplified by *L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui*, the leading architectural journal at the time, directed by Bernard Huet.

In the 1970s, as Spain was emerging from Francoism, Bofill declared that he was young and eager to invent new forms that bore no resemblance to anything familiar: “Ancient architecture seemed condemned to us. I sought my models elsewhere—in the desert, in the Moroccan South. It was an interesting yet narrow path (...) If one wants to understand my work, what connects my projects and why I was so determined to change styles (which the French fail to grasp), one must know that the city was the primary reference for all my explorations. Everything revolves around the city; I have always wanted to be part of it”.⁷

The A.U.A. partnered with the Taller de Arquitectura for its first competition in France, focusing on the urban design of the new town of Évry. The competition model was later incorporated into the collections of the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. However, deemed too avant-garde, the project was ultimately not selected. Nonetheless, this endeavour led to the Taller being invited to participate in a second competition, this time for the

4 Atelier d’Urbanisme et d’Architecture (Urbanism and Architecture Workshop), associated with Boja Huidobro.

5 Jean-Eudes Roullier, interview with Sabine Effosse, 10 July 2002.

6 Patrice Goulet, architect, architecture critic, head of the Création-diffusion department at the Institut Français d’Architecture (French Institute of Architecture).

7 Bertrand de Saint-Vincent, interview with Ricardo Bofill in *Le Figaro Magazine*, May 6, 1995.



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new town of Cergy-Pontoise. For this project, the team proposed an urban design comprising housing, commercial spaces, and public facilities, structured around a master plan inspired by the layout of a cathedral. [Fig. 1] La Petite Cathédrale (The Little Cathedral), an emblematic and ambitious project endorsed by the Secretariat for New Towns (*Villes Nouvelles*), was ultimately rejected by the Regional President on political grounds, as it was considered too subversive. The project was never realized, marking the Taller's first major disappointment in France—an experience they perceived as a profound injustice.

Second part: 1974–1978 Les Halles Competitions.

The Garden of Les Halles de Paris: A Promenade from the Palais Royal to Beaubourg

In the summer of 1974, shortly after his election, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing invited the Taller de Arquitectura to participate in an international consultation for the redevelopment of the central district of Paris, where Baltard's *carreau des Halles* once stood.⁸

Since 1971, the demolition of Baltard's pavilions—initiated by former President Georges Pompidou in his pursuit of modernity—had deeply unsettled the cultural world, outraged many Parisians, and ignited intense controversy.

Fig. 1
Design perspective of the Le Petite Cathédrale project for the new town of Cergy-Pontoise. Ink drawing by Peter Hodgkinson. Source: BTA Archive

⁸ Wholesale food market in the centre of Paris, since moved outside to RUNGIS.

It was through this competition—of which the Taller emerged as the winner—that Ricardo Bofill burst onto the French media scene as a veritable “star.” The project sparked lasting controversy, led by proponents of modernist architecture and defenders of Le Corbusier’s legacy.

This period saw the development of four projects, which demonstrated Ricardo Bofill and his team's unwavering determination to challenge the prevailing norms of modern architecture. Their proposals sought to offer a response to the historical fabric of Paris, drawing inspiration from the classical architectural tradition of the École des Beaux-Arts while reinterpreting the design principles of Haussmann and Adolphe Alphand.⁹

Bofill continuously advocated for what he termed an “*architecture à la française*”—a vision that his critics dismissed as “*baroque*” or even as “*pastiche*.” His designs were structured around a rectangular plan aligned with the axis of the Bourse de Commerce and the modern *Beaubourg* (now the Centre Georges Pompidou¹⁰), featuring a formal French garden reminiscent of the Palais Royal, located nearby, close to the Louvre [Fig. 2].

It is important to emphasize that during this period, the postmodern movement—particularly in the United States (with figures such as Charles Moore), in England, and elsewhere—was shaping architectural discourse. This movement, extensively documented in Charles Jencks’ work,¹¹ sought to break away from a modernism that had strayed from its original clarity and had been diluted by the oversimplification of large-scale housing developments.

Following his victory in the initial consultation, Bofill found himself at the centre of intense political controversies. These tensions arose between the French administration, the various agencies responsible for the redevelopment of Les Halles,¹² and the Ordre des Architectes, which upheld the principles of the Modern Movement, as previously mentioned. Additionally, the newly elected President’s demand for a “classical architecture” and a formal garden clashed with the grandiose projects previously envisioned—most notably, the International Trade Center—whose realization depended on substantial state funding.

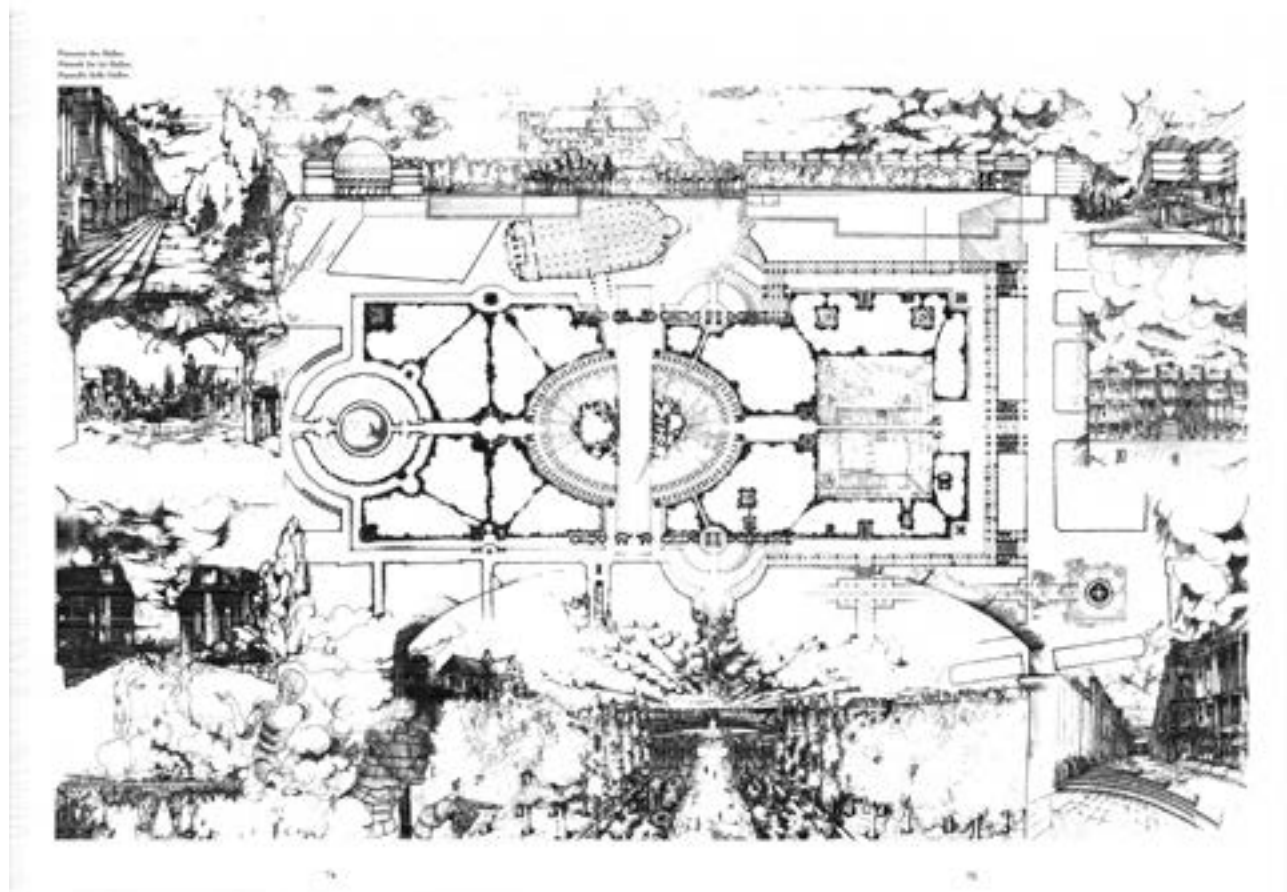
Ricardo Bofill observed that in France, what truly mattered was the arrangement of buildings within the public space. His aim was to create a façade and develop a compatible architectural language that could integrate with prefabrication techniques while maintaining control over the

⁹ Adolphe Alphand (1817-1891), ‘Ingénieur des Ponts et Chaussées’ is known for his work on the embellishment of Paris with Baron Haussmann and later as director of works for the city of Paris. “He is considered to be the father of the green spaces of Paris. He directed the development of promenades, tree lines, planted squares, parks and gardens designed to clean up Paris”. Source: Wikipedia.

¹⁰ Centre Georges Pompidou inaugurated by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1977.

¹¹ Charles Jencks, *The language of post-modern architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1977).

¹² The S.E.M.A.H (Société d'Études Mixte pour l'Aménagement des Halles- a semi-public company for the development of Les Halles) headed by Christian de Malène, an opponent of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.



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Fig. 2
Presentation panel of the master plan for Les Halles, with perspectives and details, Project 1974, T.A. Watercolor on paper. Source: BTA Archive.

Fig. 3
Model of the Les Halles de l'Hôtel de Ville project, 1975. © Deidi von Schaewe. Source: BTA Archive.

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architectural project. In response, he devised a new architectural language for prefabrication—one that was richer and more classical in its expression.

"For me, Postmodernism is a critique of the Modern Movement. It engages in dialogue with the city, ornamentation, architecture, and urban form—embracing the square, the street, and the relationship between architecture and the urban fabric."¹³

During this period, Bofill frequently made headlines in newspapers and appeared on radio and television programs. His bold and provocative statements—such as "I am the best architect in the world"—sparked both fascination and irritation. Although he lived between Barcelona and Paris, he primarily resided in the French capital. At that time, France became the primary source of commissions, while the design team, led by Peter Hodgkinson, remained based in Barcelona.

Manolo Nuñez-Yanowsky, co-founder and resident member of the Taller, took charge of the Les Halles project. He brought in his Catalan collaborators—exceptional draftsmen from Barcelona, the Guardia brothers and Xavier Llistosella—before assembling a team in Paris. In September 1974, this small group settled in a suite at the Hôtel Pont Royal, in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. It was there that I joined them.

The institutions requested revisions to the initial project, prompting Nuñez-Yanowsky to collaborate with the architects of the commercial forum, Claude Vasconi and Georges Pencreac'h, as well as landscape architect Alain Provost. This partnership resulted in the creation of a massive scale model, crafted in Barcelona and unveiled to the public in April 1975 at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris [Fig. 3]. Over several days, large crowds gathered to view the project, which was met with widespread public enthusiasm. However, once again, the institutions ensured that, despite its positive reception, Bofill's proposal was never officially selected.

Bofill was then asked to collaborate with two additional architects, including one of his competitors from the Hôtel de Ville competition—Bernard de la Tour d'Auvergne, a close friend of President Giscard d'Estaing—and Henri Bernard, a Prix de Rome laureate, author of the Maison de la Radio, and a staunch defender of the Modern Movement. To this trio, Marc Saltet, an architect specializing in historic monuments, was also added.

Following the sudden death of Bernard de la Tour d'Auvergne from a heart attack in October 1976, the partnership was dissolved. This unlikely and incongruous collaboration produced little beyond countless nights spent refining models and 13 notebooks filled with original ink and watercolour drawings of remarkable artistic quality, created by the Taller's team.

¹³ Interview by Dominique Serrell on 20 June 2022 with Antoine Grumbach, architect, town planner, direct witness.

The garden project was put on hold. However, the Taller was entrusted with the design of a residential development along Rue Rambuteau, comprising over 200 housing units. A building permit was secured, and construction began in late 1977. Yet, shortly after his election as Mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac abruptly halted the project, cancelling the permit he himself had approved just months earlier. He declared: “From now on, the architect of Les Halles will be me—plainly and unapologetically.”¹⁴ This statement was not directed at Ricardo Bofill, but rather at his political rival, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.

The exclusion of the Taller de Arquitectura and Ricardo Bofill from this project caused an earthquake in the team and in the mind of Ricardo Bofill, who, in order to avoid legal proceedings and in accordance with a secret agreement with Jacques Chirac, undertook never to speak of this project again and that Chirac would never criticise Ricardo Bofill’s architecture, entrusting him with the realisation of an equivalent programme in Paris-Montparnasse.

Ricardo Bofill was then commissioned to provide technical assistance for the construction of 100,000 housing units in Algeria through the creation of a workshop of multidisciplinary Algerian architects, the ‘Taller de Arquitectura style’. Young Algerian philosophers, poets and sociologists joined Juan Goytisolo and Xavier Rubert, who travelled between Algiers and Barcelona.

Ricardo Bofill and his team of Catalans, French and Belgians lived between Paris and Algiers. Franco had died and the literary critic Salvador Clotas had left the directorship of the Taller de Barcelona to become Secretary of State for Culture. His sister Anna and Peter Hodgkinson were in charge of the Taller de Barcelona during this period.

Third part. 1972-1987: Bofill’s Low-cost Housing.

Living Organisms, a Monumental Setting in which the Inhabitant is the Actor

“The Industrial Revolution made its mark on the evolution of architecture; above all, it caused a rupture in the continuity of that evolution. From then on, there was excitement about certain short-sighted visions of the preeminence of the machine. There was the belief that the house was a machine for living in, and that the city could be mastered by certain mechanisms, in the same way as a car or a business can. I don’t believe any of that. I think that the city, or the home, is not akin to a machine, but instead to an organism [...]. Technological, functionalist thinking postulated that form resulted from

14 François Chaslin, «Le projet de Chirac», *Macadam* (Feb. 15- March 15, 1979): 151.



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function. I fought against that. [...] Of course there are correlations between society and form, and between technology and form, but the task of architecture remains that of geometry and its translation into physical form.”¹⁵

1972-1987. New Town of Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines: Le Lac. An Iconic Project whit Enthusiastic Residents Forty Years on

“It is the architect’s duty to magnify people’s everyday lives”¹⁶

Le Lac (The Lake) is the first major social housing development to be commissioned from Taller de Arquitectura in parallel with the battle for the Les Halles district in central Paris.

Le Lac is a social housing complex (HLM type¹⁷), comprising 676 dwellings offered through a state-assisted purchase programme.¹⁸ There are apartments and terraced houses spread around an expanse of water [Fig. 4].

The three main parts of the development were built between 1978 and 1987 around a rainwater retention lake: La Sourderie, on land within the the town boundaries of Montigny-le-Bretonneux and Voisin-le-Bretonneux; Les Arcades du Lac (The Lake Arcades, 378 housing units spread across 5 storeys) and Le Viaduc (The Viaduc), 74 units spread across five storeys, [Fig. 5] and finally Le Temple and Les Templettes (224 housing units),

15 Ricardo Bofill, *L’Architecture d’un homme*, entretien avec François Hebert Stevens (Paris: Éditions Arthaud, 1978), 24-25.

16 PAP: *Programme en accession à la propriété*. (State-assisted purchase programme for home ownership).

17 HLM: «habitation à loyer modéré» (lit. ‘Housing at moderate rent’), is a form of low-income housing in France. It may be public or private, with rent subsidies. (TN)

18 From 1977 to 1995, the now extinct PAP played a key role in helping low-income households buy a home (usually a new one). In 1977, it took over from HLM accession loans and special loans from Crédit Foncier de France.

Fig. 4
Les Templettes, viewed from Le Viaduc. Source: BTA Archive.



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some of which are individual terraced houses, other grouped dwellings in detached blocks in the centre and in the side pavilions.

1972-1980. Les Arcades du Lac: “Versailles for the people”¹⁹

“To give back to humanity that which humanity would give to its gods”

“Although it’s never its primary or main meaning, my architecture also has a sense of militancy. Some people reproach it for disguising functions. A social housing scheme that doesn’t look like a social housing scheme. Uproar, jealousy, social tensions: y social housing projects are better-looking than the housing blocks around them. [...] This apartment block looks like a palace. Of course, inside them, because of budget constraints, the apartments are sometimes more conventional [...], and the charm of a harmonious street on the top of the pure satisfaction of every-day functions. People need signs and spaces just as much as they need televisions and baths.”²⁰

It was a very different time from the present. The architect -and Ricardo Bofill in particular- wanted to reverse the balance of power and play at least on an equal footing with the men in power. As he said: ‘Successful projects are those based on a relationship of complicity and trust’.²¹

Serge Goldberg, then director- general of the Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines New Town, summarizes the objectives of that he had given to Taller:

“I wanted to come up with something quite snobbish, something that would bring in fashionable people who could serve as a show-

¹⁹ The epithet used for the complex by the press, and notably by the newspaper *Le Monde*.

²⁰ Ricardo Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme* (Paris: Éditions Arthaud, 1978).

²¹ Ricardo Bofill and Jean Louis André, *Espaces d’une vie* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1989), 147.

Fig. 5

Le Viaduc and the Arcades du Lac. Source: BTA Archive.

case for publicity (...) Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines was invented from scratch for the sake of promotion (...). I thought we could do something that would astonish. But who could do that? I thought of Ricardo Bofill (...) I said to him: ‘I’d like us to make housing that attracts a very snobbish population, celebrities. I said to Bofill: ‘You couldn’t do the La Petite Cathédrale project (...) You’re going to do a five-storey social housing project for me. But what I want you to study is the arelationship between housing and the street’ [...]. One day, he came to see me with an extension out over the Viaduc pond (which is in fact a rainwater regulation reservoir). It was tough, but at the same time, it was strict (...). And it’s true that the façades had a relationship with the street. So he responded to my request.”²²

Prefabrication, a Technique for Controlling Costs

On the subject of social housing, Bofill pointed out:

“I managed to demonstrate to Frace as a whole that social housing is not synonymous with brutality or resignation, but that on the contrary a certain solemnity, a sense of rhythm and beauty are appropriate. Without necessarily the costs to shoot up.

‘Suburbs are not necessarily wastelands, but can also be monuments to mankind. Concrete, long considered a second-rate material, can be a noble one [...] Classicism allows us not to impose a building type, but provides the principles needed to create new ones [...] A new industrial aesthetic? [...] Arcades, windows, doors, each of these elements can be manufactured separately, mass-produced, in line with the imperatives of industrial production. The building is made up of a basic structure, onto which factory-moulded elements are placed. To be profitable, the moulds need to be used as many times as possible. The aim is therefore to design a limited number of elements, which means very seriously paring back decorative motifs. I can therefore be faithful to classical architecture, which provides the rules of composition and the basic vocabulary, while at the same time conforming to the demands of industrial production. [...] Always within the constraints of an economic system. I was excited to discover this, some fifteen years ago.”²³

²² Excerpts from an interview with Sabine Effosse, professor and doctor in history, lecturer at theUniversity of Tours, 2002.

²³ Bofill and André, *Espaces d’une vie*.

1978-1982. Le Viaduc, named Le Chenonceau.²⁴

1982-1987. Le Temple and Les Templettes.²⁵

“I wanted to give back to humanity what which humanity would give to its gods: to introduce the archetype of the temple into a ‘social’ dwelling, to divert the nobility and solemnity of religion towards the most underprivileged in our society’.²⁶

The project asserts a fusion of theories from the Renaissance and Antiquity: the group of buildings is laid out around the banks of the lake according to a typical Palladian villa layout. It is composed of building-objects inspired by the archetypes of Greek temples, spatially isolated and interconnected by voids rather than solids. These units are linked by rigorous geometric relationships that reflect the project’s overall compositional system. Classical composition and modern architectural language.

As Bofill explained:

“Three recurrent forms: a courtyard temple, a crescent and two small temples. And always the same parts, deliberately repeated. The construction itself loses its weight, nothing distracts the eye and architecture reconnects with its essence: beyond the anecdotal, the composition of space”.²⁷

The housing scheme comprise three architectural pieces:

The Temple. This large, four-storey, rectangular building, with a large grassy inner courtyard at its centre, is composed of through-planning, dual-orientation flats.

They are entered through a small hallway to the side of the living room. On one façade there is a suit that comprises the living room at the centre, opening onto two bedrooms –one to each side. On the other façade are the other bedrooms, separated by a small hall or antechamber between them and the bathrooms. All of the openings are placed centrally within each of the rooms or on the through axis, which is treated as transparent, making the double orientation of the dwelling really perceptible.

Particular care was taken over the shared spaces and staircases: comfortable dimensions and gradients, well-finished surfaces and materials, natural light and specially designed landings, each belonging to two of the dwelling units.

Les Templettes. These two edifices, each ranged around a quarter-circle in a continuum, are composed of small two-storey detached houses. Access is via the convex rear façade, on the park side, through a private

individual garden. The entrance lobby and kitchen open to the rear, while a large living room had glazed double doors to the inner side that open onto a terrace overlooking the lakeside.

The single-flight staircase has a false perspectival plan and is positioned on an axis, counterbalancing the distortion caused by the radial structure, similarly to the arrangement in large ‘crescents’ of houses. It provides access to the upper storey, which is composed of a large bedroom on the lake side and two smaller bedrooms on the garden side to the rear, as well as bathrooms set to either side of the central landing.

The Pavilions. These two four-storey buildings on a centralized square plan comprise four double-oriented flats per floor, around a central square module with vertical circulation, accessible from a double-height entrance hall opening onto the lake. The upper level contains large two-storey apartments in the pediments.

A park. The backbone of the entire project, a romantic counterpoint to the three classical buildings, the park is laid out according to the rules of French-style gardens (perspectives, alignments, framing of views and backdrops). Integral to the park, the planted areas, clearings and vistas are planned out as if in urban fabric composed of squares (living rooms) and streets (paths). The immense garden in this composition, with its expansive, wide open lawns, grassy pyramidal platforms and substantial plantings, completes the exceptional natural setting for this twentieth-century garden city.

Marne-la-Vallée : Les Espaces d’Abraxas

1979-1982. Le Palacio d’Abraxas.²⁸ Promising Urban Utopia: ‘a Monument-Project’

“The project for the Theatre and the Palacio d’Abraxas consisted of building 600 social housing units at the entrance to the new town of Marne-la-Vallée, 10 kilometres from Paris [...] While discussions and conflicts were going on in Paris about the Les Halles project, I was in Algeria [...], and at that very moment, the representatives of the new town of Marne-la-Vallée commissioned me to work on this ‘monument project’, which I soon realized was an excellent opportunity. The objective for the town council and for the architectural coordinators, Aymeric Zublena _ Macary-Zublena SCAU_ was to give the New Town a strongly expressed symbol that was both striking and representative.”²⁹

24 Social housing whit 74 dwelling units. Client: Société de HLM – CNH 2000, directed by Michel Vitry.
25 224 detached housing units in strips.
26 R. Bofill, *L’architecture d’un homme* (Paris: Éditions Arthaud, 1978).
27 Bofill and André, *Espaces d’une vie*.

28 441 social housing units. Client: Société de HLM-CNH 2000.
29 Ricardo Bofill, memory report on “Marnée-la-Vallée”, 1981. Rep. in Ricardo Bofill Taller de arquitectura. *Los Espacios de Abraxas, el palacio, el teatro, el arco*, Annabelle d’ Huart ed. (Paris: Editions l’Equerre, 1981), 14.



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As the partner of Taller de Arquitectura, Peter Hodgkinson asserts: 'It's a Walden 7 with façades inspired by the Arcades du Lac, and influenced by Charles Jencks.'³⁰

The pursuit of the overall composition concept includes the operation of homeownership acquisition for Le Théâtre and L'Arc de Triomphe (the Theater and the Arc of Triumph).

Jean-Pierre Carniaux, partner of Taller and architect collaborator in the project explained:

"For France we wanted an assertive aesthetic, particularly for the three buildings in Marne-la-Vallée: Le Palacio, Le Théâtre, the inhabited Arc the Triomphe and the tiered gardens. As with the earlier project at Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines and the Jardin des Halles, and later Cergy-Pontoise for the Saint-Christophe district, our aim was to maintain a strong overall composition to provide the town with an identity and a theatrical framework for the lives of the inhabitants, who would become the actors in the space constructed".³¹

Bofill explained how "the project slowly took shape and was added to the list of a long series of assignments. But gradually became our most important achievement, and in terms of both theory and fulfilment, one that would mark an essential step forward, in the series of successful and unsuccessful ventures that had punctuated Taller de Arquitectura's constant evolution".³²

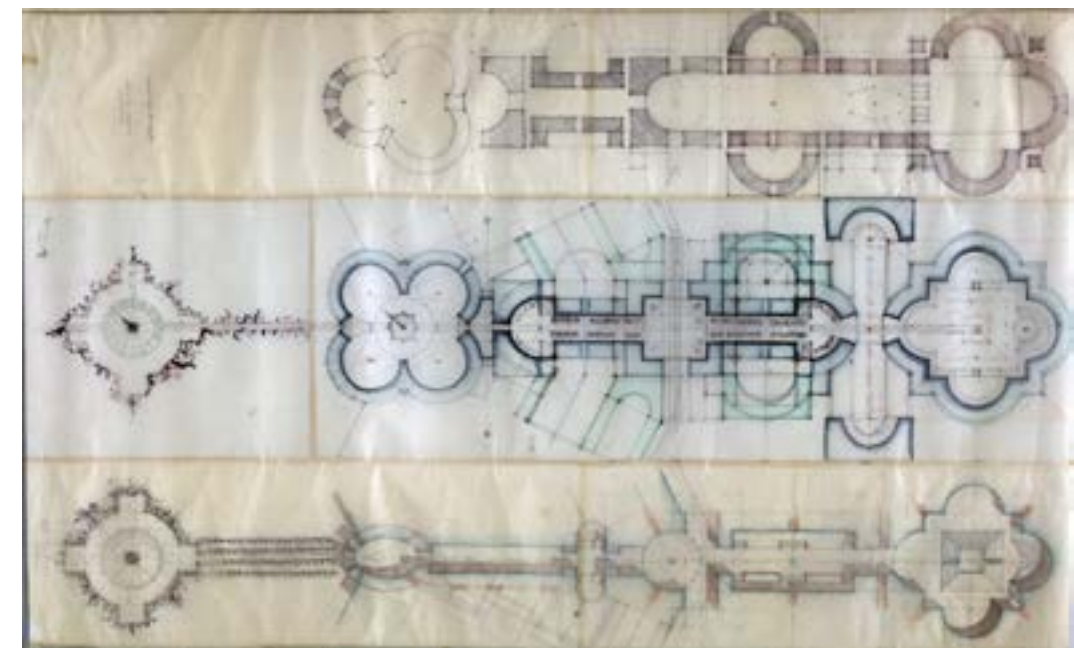
Le Palacio is a 19-story building, representing the maximum height chosen for this compositional exercise. Its façade, structured through a combination of geometric forms—rectangles, triangles, cylinders, and

Fig. 6
Les Espaces d'Abraxas,
Marne-la-Vallée. Press ex-
cerpt. Marie-Hélène Camus,
interview with Marcel Cornu,
"Modernité ou prudence
passéiste?", *L'Humanité*, Dec.
11, 1981.

30 Peter Hodgkinson, architect from the AA of London, interviewed by Dominique Serrell in 2023.

31 Excerpts of an interview to Jean-Pierre Carniaux, MIT architect and RBTA partner, with the author, November 3, 2022.

32 Ricardo Bofill, report memory on Marne la Vallée, 1983.



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cubes—is arranged in a U-shaped layout. It incorporates a front wall on the garden-facing façade, which serves as the backdrop for the Theater.

The façade is made up of three orders structured around a central urban gateway, two windows onto the town and two additional corner windows on the side elements. The whole is a monumental composition [Fig. 6]. For the Taller de Arquitectura, this project represents the first compositional exercise on such a large scale, integrating both a reflection on volumetry and its spatial integration.

The Theater & the Arc de Triomphe³³

The Theater is a protruding semicircle, structured by a grid system that maintains regularity both in its longitudinal and vertical development. The theatricality of this inhabited temple is expressed through its vertical order, composed of a series of reflective glass columns that transform according to the light, energizing the structure and directing the gaze elsewhere. A fluid, elemental, and fragmented theatricality. A closed, convex space—rigorous yet ever-changing.

The theatricality of the plazas encourages a reversal of roles: the actor becomes the spectator, and the spectator, the actor.

The Arc. Located at the centre of the interior space, a third building comprising 20 housing units enhances the overall theatrical composition. As both a spatial and temporal divider, this central and essential element appears as the formal resurgence of the two other structures.

Fig. 7
Antigone, Montpellier: Mas-
ter plan drawing, ink on pa-
per, by Jean-Pierre Carniaux.
Source: BTA Archive.

33 150 Social Housing Units with state-assisted ownership. Client: HLM Society Les Trois Vallées.

Late 1979 – 1994: Antigone, Montpellier

The project was commissioned by Georges Frèche, Mayor of Montpellier, with the directive: “Grandiose, powerful, and Mediterranean.”

“I advocate for a structured and controlled urban expansion policy... In Montpellier, my objective was to revive the approach attempted during the Renaissance by Francesco di Giorgio Martini in Urbino: to integrate a newly designed district into a city shaped by successive empirical interventions and historical additions—what is now known as ‘L’Écusson.’ Rather than creating a completely independent new town, which would have been destined to fail, this approach ensured that the city’s expansion remained anchored in a comprehensive vision. A system of pathways, staircases, and passages was established to connect the Place du Nombre d’Or with the historic city center.”³⁴

While Ricardo Bofill and his team were returning from Algeria, a request came from the newly elected socialist mayor of Montpellier, Georges Frèche, and his deputy, Raymond Dugrand. Without hesitation, both men drove to Barcelona to ask Bofill to design a new city on a 25-hectare military site stretching to the Lez River and the sea [Fig. 7]. Their vision was for a “grandiose, powerful, and Mediterranean” city, in stark contrast to the developments of their right-wing predecessor, François Delmas, at Polygone commercial centre.

Bofill recalls:

“For me, it all started at Montpellier, with an election that was won by a man who had pinned his flag to the mast with the slogan: ‘Change the city.’ Young and eager, Georges Frèche was an academic, a historian and former HEC student. His deputy, Raymond Dugrand, was a geographer. Both men knew what they no longer wanted to see: the dull, grey buildings of Polygone and Nouveau Monde tower blocks. They sought to reconnect with Mediterranean architecture. Initially, they considered Pouillon, but then they approached me [...] We flew over the city with the mayor, Peter, and Jean-Pierre. To the east, the land was open and vast. The Place du Nombre d’Or serves as both the driving force and the reference point for the Antigone project. From this square, the axis extends toward Place du Millénaire, whose dimensions mirror those of Piazza Navona in Rome, with a width of 48 meters. This axis continues to the Esplanade de l’Europe, where Montpellier is reconnected with the Lez River. The esplanade is framed by a crescent-shaped colonnade that opens onto the revitalized water basin. The Arc of the Hôtel de la Région, dominating the composition with its height, becomes the essential articulation

34 Bofill and André, *Espaces d’une vie*.

point, linking to the emerging new axis: Port Marianne. Where trees and gardens will have more space. The catalyst of the project will be this 300-by-100-meter water basin, which will be developed around the harbour master’s office.” ³⁵

However, challenges soon arose, as the plan required modifications to the Plan d’Occupation des Sols (POS- land use planning), a decision of national jurisdiction. The former mayor, François Delmas, actively sought to block the project for nearly four years.

After 1981, with the new governmental majority, the project moved forward. A semi-public development company, SERM³⁶, was established to oversee its implementation. Initially resistant to the involvement of an architect from outside the region, local architects eventually embraced the project’s ambition. Drawing from his recent experiences in Paris and Algeria, Ricardo Bofill abandoned the idea of designing the entire project himself. Instead, he integrated local architects into the overall plan, while retaining control over the master plan and certain key elements, including Place du Nombre d’Or, the Hôtel de Région, Port Juvénal, and the Olympic swimming pool.

1979-1984. La place du Nombre d’or: a Strong Gesture

The Place du Nombre d’Or (Golden Ratio Square) was a huge project, vast and disproportionate compared to the size of the city at the time. ³⁷ [Fig. 8] As Bofill points out: “I then decided to make a bold statement by starting with the construction of Place du Nombre d’Or.”³⁸

Jean-Pierre Carniaux, responsible for the overall design, recounts the project’s evolution:

“As a confirmed Hellenic academic, Frèches was won over by the classicism. The initial proposal for this one-kilometer urban axis featured an office building adjoining the current Galeries Lafayette. The original idea was to create an open-air street cutting through the shopping centre: the Les Échelles de la Ville (City’s Ladders). Unfortunately, the Galeries Lafayette never allowed for a clear passage through their premises. As a result, visitors coming from the city centre only discover Antigone after trekking the shops. The Antigone district unfolds as a sequence of plazas leading toward the Lez River. Each one serves a residential complex and each was assigned to different architects and

35 Bofill and André, *Espaces d’une vie*.
36 SERM: Société d’Équipement de la Région de Montpellier (Public Amenities Association for Montpellier) created in 1961.
37 224 social housing HLM in the town center. Client: SERM.
38 Bofill and André, *Espaces d’une vie*, 147.

developers, who were to follow the pre-established specifications on composition, heights, horizontal and the general architectural vocabulary as defined by us.

The façade of the square serves as the city's face, embodying the expression of communal living and shaping public space. There are neither balconies nor shutters; instead, '*béton architectonique*', a material pioneered by the Taller, acts as the new regional stone, with a sand-coloured finish. [...] The second square follow the axis and is similar in form and dimension to the Forum of Rome. The Olympic swimming pool was the subject of a competition won by the Taller. It is both a competitive facility and a recreational pool, with a gymnasium housed beneath a suspended roof."³⁹

Thanks to the Taller's expertise in construction techniques using pre-fabricated 'béton-pierre'—referred to as 'architectonique'—the project adhered to the cost constraints of HLM housing at the time, with only a 10% increase, which was offset by revenue from the ground-floor commercial spaces [Fig. 9].

With broad support from stakeholders, the project was able to expand toward Port Marianne through a series of operations awarded by competition to local architects. These competitions followed a general framework established by the Taller, which acted as the project's chief architect. The lessons learned from the Les Halles project in Paris had left a lasting impact.

Gradually, the project attracted renowned national and international architects, including Chemetov, Krier, Portzamparc, Architecture Studio, Rogers, Tusquets, Meier, and Foster, who were invited to participate in design competitions for various sections of the development.

The Antigone district sparked controversy, particularly among certain journalists and architects associated with the modernist movement [Fig. 10]. However, Jean Nouvel, in an October 1989 issue of the journal *Actuel*, cited it as "an example of architectural independence: Montpellier reimaged by Bofill."⁴⁰

In 2022, Roland Castro, the French architect who passed away in 2024, shared his perspective—offering both praise and critique:

"I was surprised by Place du Nombre d'Or in Montpellier and fascinated by the fact that Ricardo was doing something exceptional. However, the design guidelines imposed on the district, when interpreted by architects lacking his talent, resulted in failure—it never works,' as they say.



Fig. 8
Antigone district, overall aerial view.

Fig. 9
Les Arcades du Lac, architectural concrete panels tinted in the mass with terracotta in the mold background. Source: BTA Archive.

Fig. 10
Antigone, Montpellier. Press excerpt, François Chaslin, "Du social de gauche en grand apparat", *Le Monde*, June 18, 1984.

39 Excerpts from an interview with Jean-Pierre Carniaux, partner at Taller de Arquitectura, conducted on November 3, 2022.
40 Jean Nouvel, "Montpellier reimaged by Bofill", *Actuel* (October 1989).

“In reality, Bofill disrupted established narratives, particularly within the so-called ‘humanist’ movement that emerged in Berlin as a break from the *Beaux-Arts* tradition. Through a series of projects that fostered a strong sense of livability and an intelligent approach to domesticity, Bofill challenged this movement. To some, including Castro himself, this made his work appear regressive.

“In my view, the legacy of the Taller de Arquitectura and Ricardo Bofill is largely positive. Bofill sought the well-being of people and championed ‘decor.’ He aimed to create monumental living spaces where people could feel at ease. Ricardo Bofill is the architect in all his splendor. His works are the only ones from this era that will endure over time.”⁴¹

As Bofill said: “Renovating the city and putting an end to the discomfort it spreads is one large-scale project that a country should be undertaking today”.⁴²

Indeed, it was this project that brought Ricardo Bofill recognition as an urban planner and launched his international career, with projects in China, the USSR, India, and other places, where colossal projects were entrusted to him.

1981-1986: The Saint-Christophe District, New Town of Cergy-Pontoise

“Les Colonnes”: 380 social housing units for rent and for homeownership, design by Peter Hodgkinson, in collaboration with Dany Karavan. As Patrick Génard assets: “A very beautiful project, an axis that runs down to the Seine and climbs up to the other bank!”⁴³

And if Ricardo Bofill had succeeded in his bet to rethink the city for its inhabitants?

The master plan is organized around a major crescent-shaped square on six levels to the south, overlooking the valley, and includes two square plazas of four levels to the north. Strongly articulated geometrically, the buildings create perfectly regular volumes and controlled spaces. The crescent layout, applied later to Port Juvenal in Montpellier and in Stockholm, refers to the famous Circus and Royal Crescent by John Nash in Bath, United Kingdom.

The apartments are through units with double exposure. The entrance

⁴¹ Statements by Roland Castro, French architect and political activist, collected on July 13, 2022.

⁴² Bertrand de Saint Vincent, citing Ricardo Bofill in *Figaro Magazine*, May 6, 1995.

⁴³ Patrick Génard, Taller's partner and architect responsible for the project. Interview with the author on November 3, 2022.

distributes all the rooms, and the architecture of the façades enables the creation of spacious interior volumes.

In this modern garden city, the landscape, nature, and architecture are treated and mastered within a single grand and harmonious vision of space.

Prioritizing the Design of the City: A Building is Not a Beehive

“What is a social housing? It is the response to an economic and social system that requires fast, affordable housing for a disadvantaged part of the population. My concern, when I started building in France, was to demonstrate that this function and these stringent costs did not impose an aesthetic limitation. [...] In Marne-la-Vallée, in Cergy-Pontoise, I was constructing these theatres, arches, temples—culturally significant forms that belonged to the collective memory of a country that had spent fifty years trying to forget them. [...] A building is not a beehive. The façade must be composed. One can stretch an opening over two floors, masking the floor with glass [...]. It is out of the question to line up blocks one after another just to ensure each apartment had the same orientation and sunlight exposure: whether we built in a circle or an ellipse, all the apartments crossed through the building from one side to the other. Distributing day and night spaces based on the sun's curve wasn't complicated. Our objective was to design a space, to regain a sense of the street that had gradually been lost, and to create distinct landmarks in new cities that had never been conceived in a holistic way. New-town housing programmes would then naturally find their place.”⁴⁴

“We segment, we talk about the housing problem, about the suburbs, but we refuse to understand the city as a whole. It remains a distant, unknown thing that we do not know how to confront. Yet, renovating the city, putting an end to the discomfort it spreads, is the only large-scale project that a country should be undertaking today.”⁴⁵

At that time, some ambitious projects that would have changed the face of certain iconic cities in the “territories” did not come to fruition. This was the case in 1975 in Sainte-Maxime, where plans were put forward to restructure the town centre: the project involved the development of the port, with housing, shops, offices, and the creation of a square. The aim was to transform Sainte-Maxime into the 20th-21st century, but the project was abandoned following the sudden death, at the age of thirty-one,

⁴⁴ Bofill and André, *Espaces d'une vie*, 147.

⁴⁵ Bertrand de Saint-Vincent, *Le Figaro Magazine*, May 6, 1995.

of Aymeric Simon Lorière, its mayor and UDR (Union of Democrats for the Republic) parliament member for the Var.

In Dreux, a proposal for a terrace overlooking the town was drawn up to request of the new socialist mayor, Françoise Gaspard, but, withdrawn for political reasons. And it was the same for Saint-Cyprien, Occitanie.

Fourth Part: 1985-1995: Prestigious Headquarters. The Development of the International Career

The Antigone project in Montpellier stretched over more than twenty years and introduced the urban planning work of the Taller de Arquitectura and Ricardo Bofill to the world.

In Paris, the notable projects include “Les Échelles du Baroque”, a complex of 270 housing units located on Place de la Catalogne in the 14th arrondissement, given as compensation for the break in the contract regarding Les Halles by Jacques Chirac. Also noteworthy is the Market Square of Saint-Honoré, housing the headquarters of the Banque la Hénin, positioned along the axis of the Tuileries Gardens and the Opéra Garnier. His style marks a departure from postmodernism and incorporates the double-skin curtain wall technology.

In 1985, the American adventure began, marking the end of the social housing programs and the opening of the New York office. The exhibition with Léon Krier at MoMA brought eight original drawings into the museum’s collection.

In Paris, Bofill designed numerous corporate headquarters, including those for Jean-Claude Decaux, AXA, Rochas, Banque la Hénin, and Cartier, as well as the Retiro near La Madeleine. The 1992 Barcelona Olympics brought attention to Ricardo Bofill and his son, Ricardo Emilio Bofill Maggiora Vergano Junior,⁴⁶ a Harvard graduate. From San Just Desvern, where they have operated internationally, they expanded their work across Japan, China, India, Russia, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, with over 200 collaborators led by Pablo Bofill-d’Huart,⁴⁷ Ricardo Bofill’s second son, born in Paris.

⁴⁶ Graduate at Harvard, 1992.
⁴⁷ Graduate at ESADE Business & Law School in Barcelona.

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