

On the Work of Ricardo Bofill
**The Man who Mistook
 Style for a Living**

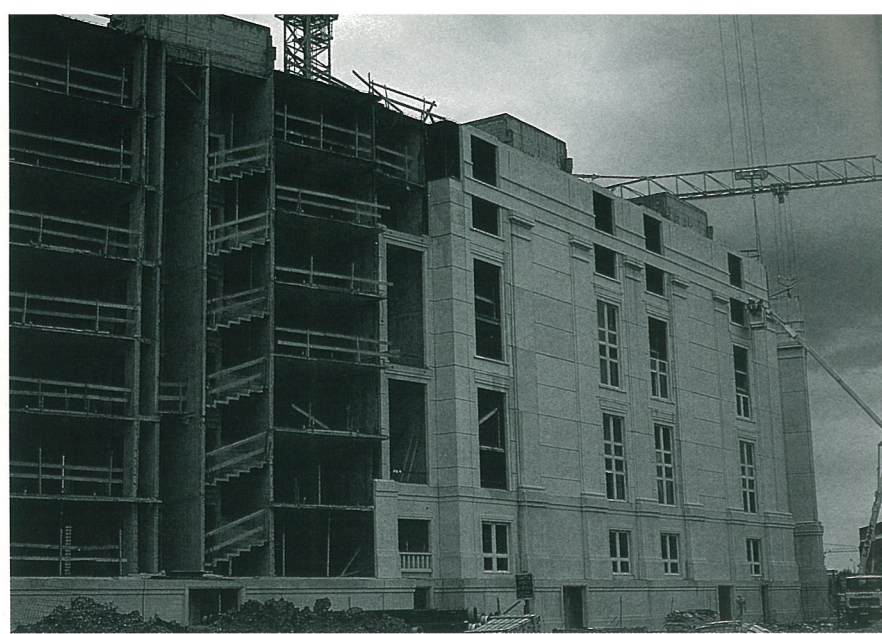
Ricardo Bofill is perhaps better known to the general public than any other living architect. It is hard to imagine a more photogenic style of architecture than his. Countless viewers must have seen, at some time or another, a television fashion show, an erotic film or an Open University programme with one of his buildings in the background. Yet his work is at the same time extremely controversial, probably precisely because of his mass popularity. Commentary on Bofill's palaces has often been devastating. Here are a few phrases, just to remind you: mastodons in the urban tissue; disregard for the public sphere; you cannot make a gentleman out of a prole; soulless prefab Classicism; with Bofill, if you want to be beautiful you have to suffer in a cramped little box; the iron will of a flamboyant superstar... These are just a few snatches from a discourse that needs no repetition here. These critiques have always given the impression that no one could really wish to live in such lordly mansions. But in the meantime it is surely clear that quite the contrary is true.

Many of Bofill's projects betray a passion for the crescent. Bofill succeeds in using this type to give his housing developments a grandeur recalling the stately architecture of the aristocracy of former centuries. Now, however, this grandeur is available to one and all. The renowned crescents of Bath stand as examples. Co-architect Peter Hodgkinson put it as follows:

'Within the Taller Bofill, we look to Bath as a dream model – by no means utopian, but totally realistic. Bath was built all in one go by a small group of financiers and developers and architects who could impose – and that is the important word – impose their will on the general public.'★ This approach has gained a fitting epithet in history: enlightened despotism. Everything for the populace, but nothing by the populace.

The populace may now live in Walden, Les Arcades du Lac, Les Echelles du Baroque, Les Espaces d'Abraxas, Le Théâtre, l'Antigone. When you take up domicile in one of Ricardo Bofill's residential projects, you don't live just *anywhere*. The inhabitants often have visiting cards proudly printed with logos of their imposing dwellings. The power of style seems to have turned into the style of power. As long as one can identify with the greatness of the past, that is to say the past of the big male overlords (slight exception for Antigone), it doesn't matter too much if there is something missing from these *grands ensembles* of reincarnated self-respect. As long as the inhabitants can flatter themselves with the idea that their home is literally their castle, they are hardly likely to be put off by the thought that the justification for these castles is no longer their social legitimacy but the added value of an architecture with an arrestingly dramatic iconography. As long as one's own lifestyle is fully furnished with the right status symbols, the empty centre is not a problem. So Bofill has no reason whatsoever to be concerned about the dubiousness of the content. His concentric courtyard is empty and partly forbidden territory, a

★ Peter Hodgkinson, quoted in Games, Stephen, *Behind the Façade*, London 1985, p. 22.



Port Juvenal, Antigone, housing, Montpellier, 1989

domain for the all-seeing eye of the unsurpassed French concierge whose presence you suspect somewhere behind the mirror glass of the fake colonnades. It is not a (chaotic) public sphere that prevails here, but the self-centred morality of imposed beauty. A certain message seems to keep springing to mind: *il est interdit de...*

From Noblesse Oblige to Sine Nobilitate

The urban complex in Cergy Saint-Christophe forms a notable exception to the above point of view. The artist Dani Karavan has been permitted to add a central sculptural accent. At first he wished to mark this location with a gigantic obelisk. When he started working together with Bofill, he realised that the order an obelisk imposes on its environment would be too much of a good thing. So Karavan opted for a slightly twisted and leaning column which seems to compromise the morality of the strictly geometrical order. The rest of Karavan's contribution, on the other hand, supports Bofill's status strategy with all its might. It extends the chief axis of the residential complex for several kilometres intersecting, among other things, a majestic *belvedere*. No doubt the inhabitants will take their friends on evening walks to this viewpoint and boast 'Over there, in La Défense, in those tall towers, third from left, 38th floor, that's where I work'. (As Gertrude Stein said, 'There's no there there, when I get there.')

But that twisted column in the empty centre, that ironic commentary on the all-dominating focality, calls for a visit. When we were viewing this location and arrived at the heart of the complex, we noticed a door in Karavan's column. You could go up it. It was possible to stand at the centre, like a warder in your own panopticon, and imagine yourself the absolute monarch *par la Grâce de Dieu*. Up there, you could muse that you were the one and only master of this boundless empire. At your feet would lie the palace, with its many wings and gardens. On the skyline, you would be able to make out Paris, your capital, your subjects.

Alas, this pleasurable fantasy was denied us. The door was locked. A small board sul-

Within a Classical conception of the discipline, architecture is conceived as monument, a principal signifier bearing the most profound meanings of life, death, and eternity. The formal perfection of the Classical monument is designed to identify the individual with permanence and symbolise the immortality promised as the reward for subservience to the structural order of the state and the state religion. While architecture serves in this way to represent a transcendent order in the spatial organisation of things and people, it also forms them into subjects in direct bodily ways; this kind of organisation trains individuals as subjects to see themselves and the world through representations of higher authority.

The Classicism of Taller de Arquitectura is not the Classicism of the academic tradition, nor that reinvented (and so very much impoverished) by post illuminist, academic culture, emptied of its contradictions and entirely oriented towards analysis. Bofill confronts historical Classicism, considering it as a fundamental reference for any operation of enrichment and development. This is a Classicism being rediscovered and redefined in order to assure its continuity, to augment its infinite history of dialectical variation and change.

In the case of the Taller de Arquitectura, History has been a constant presence, not only in the form of the continuing analysis and interpretation of the culture and architecture of the past, but also by means of the impetus and importance given to new tendencies, to involvement in the social movements of the day and the continual creation of alternative responses to contemporary problems.

Ricardo Bofill's legendary firmness in his dealings with clients, and the Taller's efforts to define a style of its own, with the greatest indifference to the dominant vogue of the moment, have on more than one occasion proved to be sharply in conflict with what the

market wanted. The Taller's history, in a kind of spatio-temporal paradox, has taken the form of a serious reflection on the history of architecture itself and the main currents in contemporary art and ideas.

Function does not create form; rather, a given form can be used in very different ways. Thus we [Taller] have lamp-columns, window-columns, stair-columns, even wardrobe-columns.

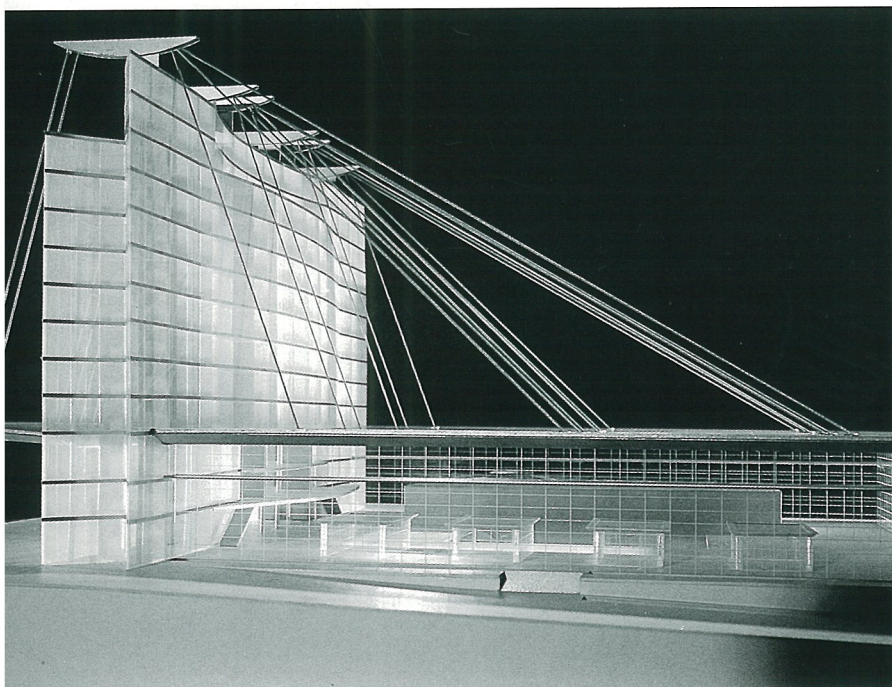
lenly informed us that we would have to visit the concierge if we wanted the key. The concierge, apparently, was the absolute master here over the dreams of the populace. Guardianship of the key allowed him or her to keep a close eye on whatever members of this already select community might harbour such high-falutin ideas. *Il est interdit de rêver*, or at least, you would first have to pass this concierge who – how could it be otherwise – might only be disturbed by key-requesters during closely specified hours. So save up your visions. For us, the only possibility was a purely imaginary levitation above this architecture. In the circumstances, a remark by neurologist Oliver Sacks sprang to mind:

'We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative – whose continuity, whose sense, is our lives. (...) We must "recollect" ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man *needs* such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.' ★

Bofill's architecture can be viewed as a display case of ingredients for this drama. By his acute emphasis on the stupendous façade, he offers people a dramatic sense of aliveness from which, for want of anything better, they can draw their own identity. Bofill's work shows how people are prepared to offer up some of their privacy, comfort and social contact in exchange for this meretricious identity. Into the bargain, they accept the cramped, functionalist floor plan of their apartment, the dark, desperate corner for a dustbin, and the labyrinth of echoing, sombre, claustrophobic corridors. But what they get in every case is drama.

★ Sacks, Oliver *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, London 1985, pp. 105-106.

Mediterranean Cultural Centre for Barcelona, project, 1992



The Classical laws of proportion and harmony have subsequently guided Taller's design of everything from streets and squares to perfume bottles.

Bartomeu Cruells

The Taller has, in effect, put forward the model of the Mediterranean city, with its well-defined thoroughfares and public spaces and its absence of zones exclusively devoted to different functions, as the model to be followed in new town planning schemes. The accusations of gratuitous historicism and imitativeness have been numerous, but with the passage of time it seems increasingly evident that the only chance for the survival of the great cities lies in the

defunctionalisation of their constituent neighbourhoods and a return to the allocation of mixed uses to their buildings.

Bartomeu Cruells

The orderly design of the Taller's parks or gardens, criticised on numerous occasions as being excessively strict, is something that Bofill has consciously pursued as a differentiating element in what would, otherwise, be nothing more than a natural space. The Taller's architecture does not work against nature but it does impose itself as an ordering element.

Bartomeu Cruells

Since drama comes first, there are two prominent attributes that appear repeatedly in Bofill's work. Firstly the project must be as big as possible; for outside, in the drab urban periphery where it is normally situated, the drama sits oddly with reality. If the project were to stop suddenly around the corner, it would deny its own intentions. Secondly, the work must be as dramatic as possible in scaling and articulation. Everything must be subjugated to a coherent, overpowering narrative.

But the problem – and the crux of this argument – is that this coherence and overpoweringness is based on kitsch, on histrionics. Standing between the dream and the reality, there are regulations and practical impediments. So the drama is expressed solely in form. And it is prefab form, which you can order from the builders' wholesalers.

Kitsch Makes The World Go Round

The history of kitsch is also the history of the insurance trade, which arose when it became possible to spread and reduce the risks. Legislators and underwriters effected the spreading of risks by means of statistics and social laws. But reducing the risk was something you always had to do largely for yourself. The formula for achieving that was ... good behaviour.

This formula found wide acceptance. Most people are keen to earn a substantial no-claims bonus. By leaving everything as it was, by daring nothing, they ward off nasty surprises. Besides getting a discount on their premium, they also enjoy a feeling of safety and pride in their own good sense. And meanwhile, the certainty, the guarantees and the reliability stretch much further than conditions on a policy. The spirit of insurance proliferates like a benign growth into the remotest corners of the life cycle. Life and burial were already insurable; soon, with the aid of prenatal gene therapy, birth will follow. And if that is not enough, Bofill's work will even insure you against the dark depression that strikes whenever you momentarily recall how your life course differs from what you pictured for yourself in May 1968.

That is kitsch, the dramatic form of a world where certainty, predictability, caution, problem avoidance and averageness are the senile senators; the world of code, consensus and convention. Kitsch is the dramatic mask of a calculating mind in a glass head. One can not be certain, of course, but there is a strong suspicion that the thousands of inhabitants of Bofill's palaces do not get all that agitated about what one might call the drama of life. On the contrary, their preoccupations are more likely to be as follows:

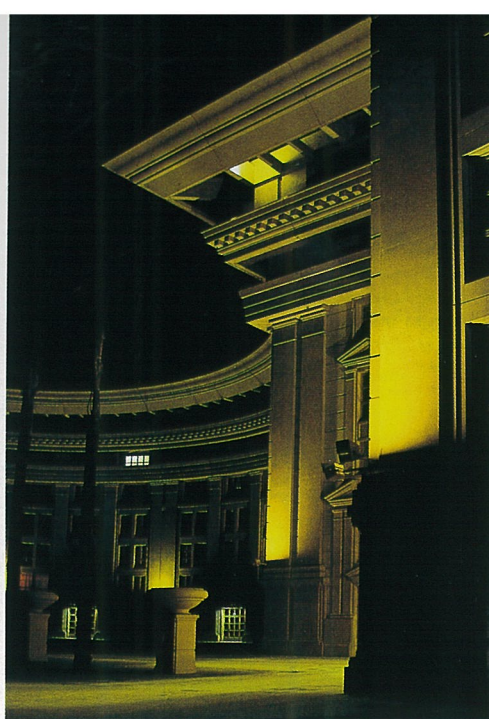
- Credit buying. We will worry about paying later, they say. But that worry is fragmented into x instalments, so the stress of repayment is continuous instead of deferred.
- Pension continuity. The threat of a pension gap does wonders to foster massive immobility, despite automobility. Commute, don't relocate.
- Insurance policies. Insurers increasingly insure only what is predictable. New risk categories are defined and carted off to the ghetto of uninsurability. (We'll bet you this ghetto will never be called *Les Echelles du Baroque!*)
- Daily amusement, i.e. the suffering of the world as a stream of infotainment, legitimised by the freedom of opinion and the press.

A profound conviction of the need for dialogue between people as the mainspring of culture and tolerance informs the design of all of the Taller de Arquitectura's projects for public buildings. This is the source of the spacious vestibules, the cloisters, the hypostyle halls which seem not to derive from the specific programme for each construction. Nevertheless, any space that facilitates meeting and encounter contributes to the use for which a public building was designed and built.

Bartomeu Cruells

From the first studies for the city in space, by way of competitions, projects and proposals for various developers, the Taller has been involved in detailed study of skyscraper typology on countless occasions. Amongst the unbuilt schemes which now form part of the Taller's historical archive there are projects for skyscrapers ranging from basic premises in line with those of Kahn and Archigram through to Classical and High-tech schemes. The first of their tower blocks, constructed, naturally, in the United States, demonstrate the Taller's new dynamic and the versatility and experience in a variety of fields possessed by the team as a whole.

Bartomeu Cruells



La Place du Nombre d'Or, apartments and shops, Montpellier, 1995



Le Palácio, apartments, Marne-la-Vallée, Paris, 1982

Kitsch sells well and insures the buyer against excessive stress. Kitsch makes the world go round. It offers a place for everybody. Common place requires commonplace.

Reflections on Bofill's Counter Revolution in France ★

We live in a staccato culture, a *Life* magazine of *faits divers*. Therefore the following:

- A garden gnome, a weeping Madonna in a television set converted into a showcase; an electric coal fire; plastic roses; a fake palace with drive, formal French garden, Classical orders and all the other accoutrements of a palace.
- This architecture is 'false'.
- Kitsch architecture is architecture of the stereotype.
- Kitsch is cliché, commonplace and – in the best cases – myth.
- Clichés: invisible quotation marks around a realistic effect.
- Commonplace: reference to bon ton and what the appropriate attitude should be.
- Myth: Ricardo Bofill, *cavalier seul*, foe of the tastelessness of existence. His weapon: lack of taste.
- Architecture for the kitsch personality: it holds nothing back, its signs have no depth, it does not conduct a 'subconversation'.
- The kitsch personality is one big façade, one big false claim to status. Dominates every conversation in which he or she participates. Complete identification with the discourse of a specific class. Subordinates his/her voice to the collective voice. No source, but authoritative. Appeals to timeless values – Family, Fatherland, Justice, Decency, La Révolution Française e *tutti quanti*.

★ With acknowledgements to Roland Barthes, Walter Benjamin, Hermann Broch, Edmund Burke, Gillo Dorfles, Umberto Eco, Gustave Flaubert, Ludwig Giesz, Klaus Kocks, Klaus Lange, Abraham Moles, Maarten van Nierop, Nathalie Sarraute and the rest of the world.

- The kitsch of this architecture is a censure with a velvet glove which imposes values we can not evade.
- Architecture of the *Doxa*, the mind of the majority, the consensus of the petit bourgeois, violence of prejudice. 'Doxa, that is public opinion, the truth which is repeated as though there were nothing wrong with it. It is Medusa; it petrifies those who gaze at it.' In this architecture, the bottom point has been reached: the petrification of the soul's petrification.
- 'Kitsch is work that is eager for effect, that hopes to justify its function by flaunting beauty that was created elsewhere and that tries to sell itself as unalloyed art.'
- 'What is involved here is the concocting of a compensatory purpose as a reaction to experiencing a lack of purpose in reality.'
- '... a simulated space for action in compensation for an oppressively imposed everyday passivity or contemplativity.'
- In other words, the world is exorcised of its demons. The sharp edges of human existence are replaced by romantic idylls. A retarded attack on existentialism – and that in Paris, too!
- (By the way, did you know that the word 'kitsch' came from mud that is smoothed over with a Kitsche, for example in mud and wattle building? Appropriate, don't you think?)

To sum up, there are three classes of argument against kitsch:

- Subject qualification: shameless, pretentious, coquettish, unconvincing, snobbish. Kitsch is a comfortable lie that forces itself on you.
- Object qualification: stylistic imitations, glossy mediocrity. It discloses a discrepancy between the nature of the material and what that material is used to express, between

Subsequent to the construction of a pharmaceutical laboratory and the Taller de Arquitectura's own offices, the design of buildings as places of work constitutes the expression of a point of inflection in the Taller's style in the late eighties. While maintaining the validity of Classical proportions and laws of harmony, there was a progressive introduction of elements that had formerly been exclusively associated with the vocabulary of High-tech: steel and glass. The Taller de Arquitectura, with worldwide expertise in the most advanced techniques in the use of architectural concrete, shuttering systems and industrialised building methods, decided to pursue its study of the glass curtain wall, already used in the housing projects for

Marne-la-Vallée and Montparnasse, in order to obtain more architectonically suggestive façades.

Bartomeu Cruells

The designing and building of the *villes nouvelles* allowed the Taller to acquire and then transform the technological base which converted the dream of utopia into reality: the construction of high-quality, aesthetically attractive and harmonious subsidised housing at competitive prices. The considerable experience they gained in this field allowed the Taller to go on to design housing of all kinds, with less economic restrictions.

Bartomeu Cruells

In elevating housing design to paradigmatic urban dimensions and linking it to a broader set of social intentions, Bofill places this work within a rich French tradition of 'ideal city' proposals. It is a comparison he invites through written and visual references to Ledoux, Fourier, and Le Corbusier, among others. With these forebears Bofill shares a philosophical intent to link built form with an ameliorative vision of human society. In pursuing this goal through a limited public housing program, which includes no shops, workplaces, or social institutions, Bofill imputes to formal imagery alone the power to transform people's lives. That he pursues this goal at all distinguishes Bofill from many of his contemporaries, broadly grouped under the

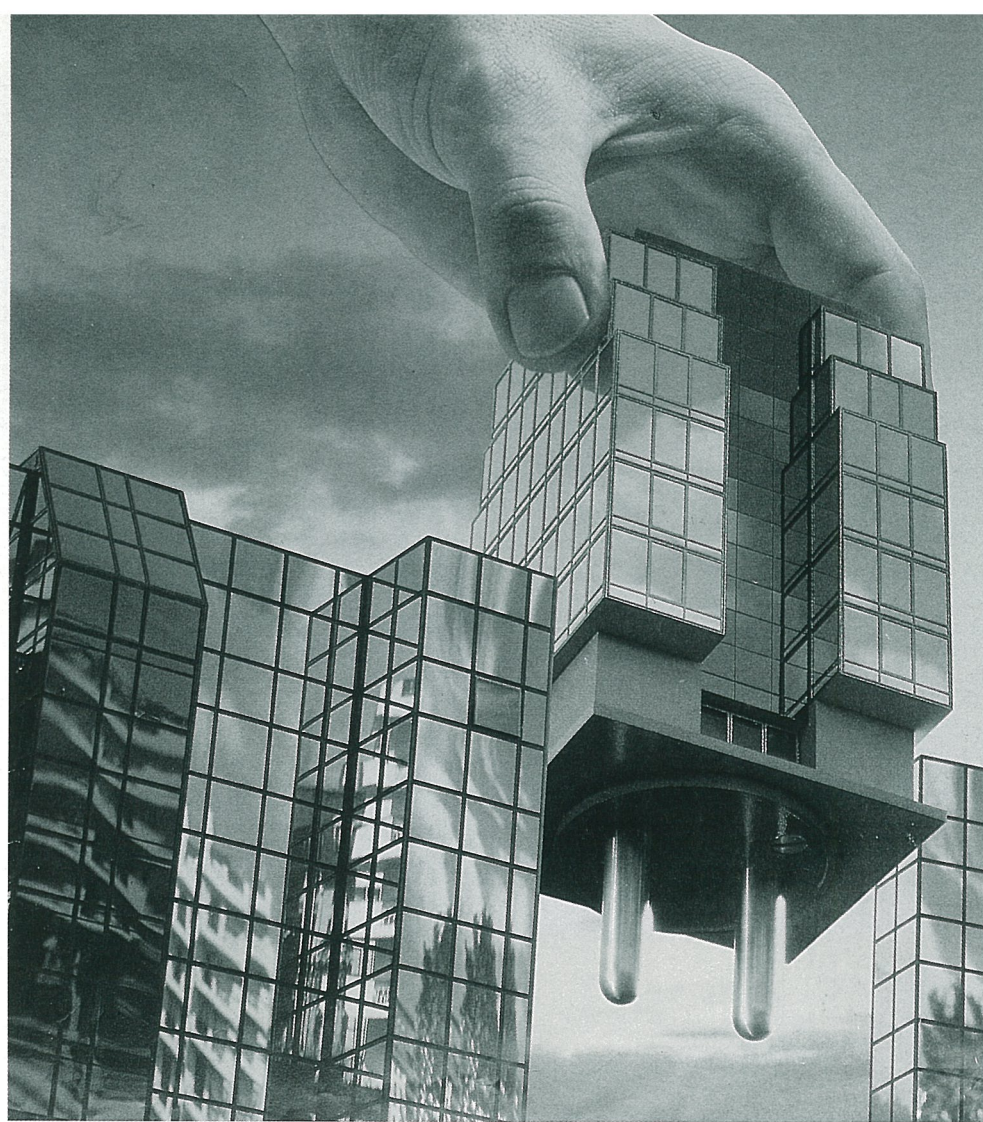
'Post-Modern' label, who also employ historical motifs to give new allure to conventional building programs. At the same time, however, there is a serious question as to whether Bofill's formal approach is adequate to his social purpose: can daily life be exalted by a dazzling set of historical images when the fundamental structure of that life remains unchanged and unheralded?

Tony Schuman



Barcelona Airport, 1991





the new use and the original source of the form, and with the environment.

- Social contextual qualification: mass production, mechanical reproduction, commercialisation.

After his victory over the Austrians, the enlightened despot Frederick the Great had a huge new palace built near his beloved Sans Souci. He was heavily criticised for this gesture in the later DDR. Visitors to the Sans Souci palace prior to the *Umwertung aller Werte* of 1989 were given to hear that this residence was worthy only of scorn, built as it was by a ruler who had led his people to the slaughterhouse and had bankrupted his country. These crocodile tears from the moribund regime were kitsch, not criticism.

When Bofill's buildings are criticised with the remark that they are nauseating if one considers how much social and cultural harm was involved in their erection, that is the kitsch of criticism. Palaces do not come into existence without harm, not even those built for the man in the street. Does that mean we have to do away with all palaces?

According to Bofill, it is a mistake to take it all as seriously as it looks. (After all, kitsch

is related to the unbearable *lightness* of being.) 'I would like to point out that all the terminology we use, all the communication systems at our disposal, remain strictly in the domain of suggestion. None of it should be taken too literally. It's a mistake to think that way.'★ This same paragon of modesty also stated: 'They took me along to see the Les Halles site. (...) In an almost unconscious manner, I accepted the invitation to take part in the competition. But with one condition: total freedom, without having to justify myself towards any restriction or programmatic demand whatsoever...'

★ Ricardo Bofill, *Architecture d'un Homme, Entretiens avec François Hébert-Stevens*, Paris 1975, p. 216.

This reminds us of the tale recorded by the Brothers Grimm called 'The Fisherman and his Wife'. The fisherman of the title catches a fish which grants him and his wife a wish. So she wishes for an endless number of wishes. The moral of the story is known to us all – 'Pride comes before a fall'.

The philosophical musings of the Taller tantalise like their architecture. They pose a series of provocative ideas that play on our sense of history (both architectural and social) and imply a bold new direction for socially responsible architecture. The failure to clarify the implications of these gestures lies in the identification of social objectives as only one among many determinants of design - along with construction cost, building technology, bureaucratic negotiation, and political manoeuvring - all of them subservient to the pursuit of architectural form. The content of these social objectives, moreover, is left to the benevolent imagination of the architect, whose empowerment is the overriding goal of the Taller.

Tony Schuman

Bofill's designs are slightly unnerving in that they can at first seem to echo the architecture of less elevated historical episodes such as Mussolini's Rome. But there is a less quasi-modern stylisation, and more, albeit prefabricated, attention to social enclosure than to triumph in architecture. The buildings convey a sense of both providing secure, pleasant, traffic-free living space and of an ironic representation of the particular local history of these French cities as parts of the Romanised empire. Moreover, by providing such palatial-looking accommodation (inside the apartments are cramped functional-Modern) for public sector tenants the point is made that in the contemporary period there is no need for palaces only to be associated

with the luxury housing of the rich. The class transgression and the care with which the open space, shopping and drinking amenities have been incorporated into the overall design suggest an improvement albeit idiosyncratic, on the alienating products of modernist housing policy.

Philip Cooke

We're trying to find out the essence of the composition, of the proportion and the livability of the spaces which Palladio created, and reduce these to modern sizes, and then build them with materials which are in themselves of noble aspect, and then sell them at a low market price.

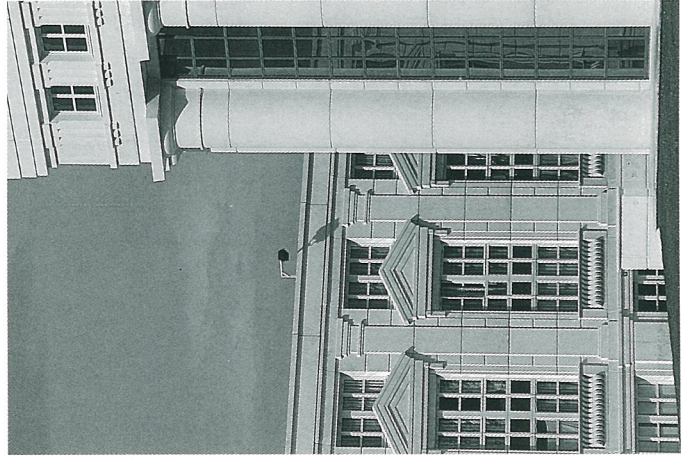
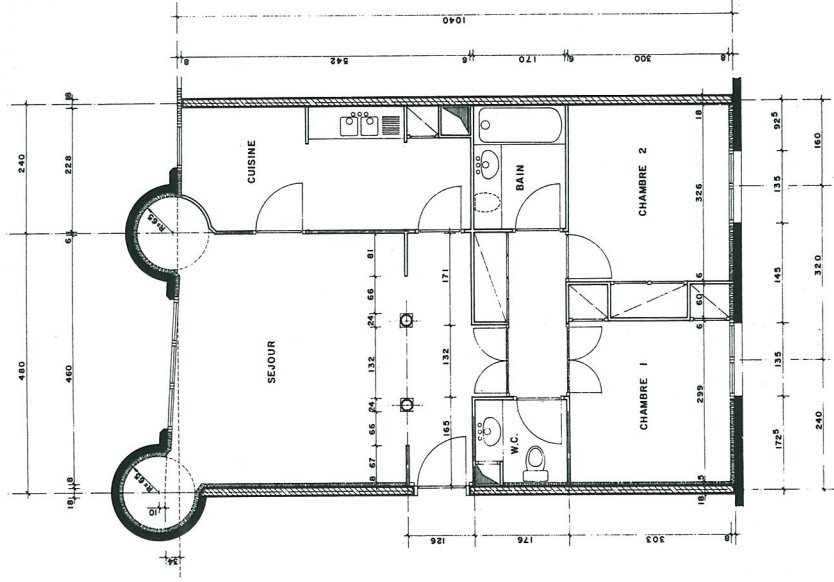
Peter Hodgkinson

It is not the appropriateness of Classical architecture which is in doubt but that of contemporary architecture.

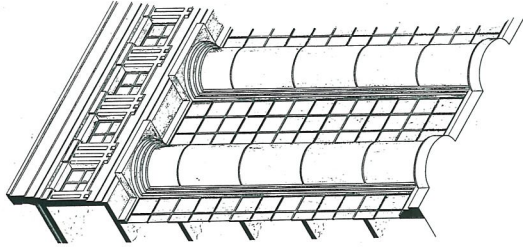
Leon Krier

People say you can't have up-to-date office space, with all its ducts and cables behind a neo-Georgian or more traditional façade. Well, I've looked into this, and you can.

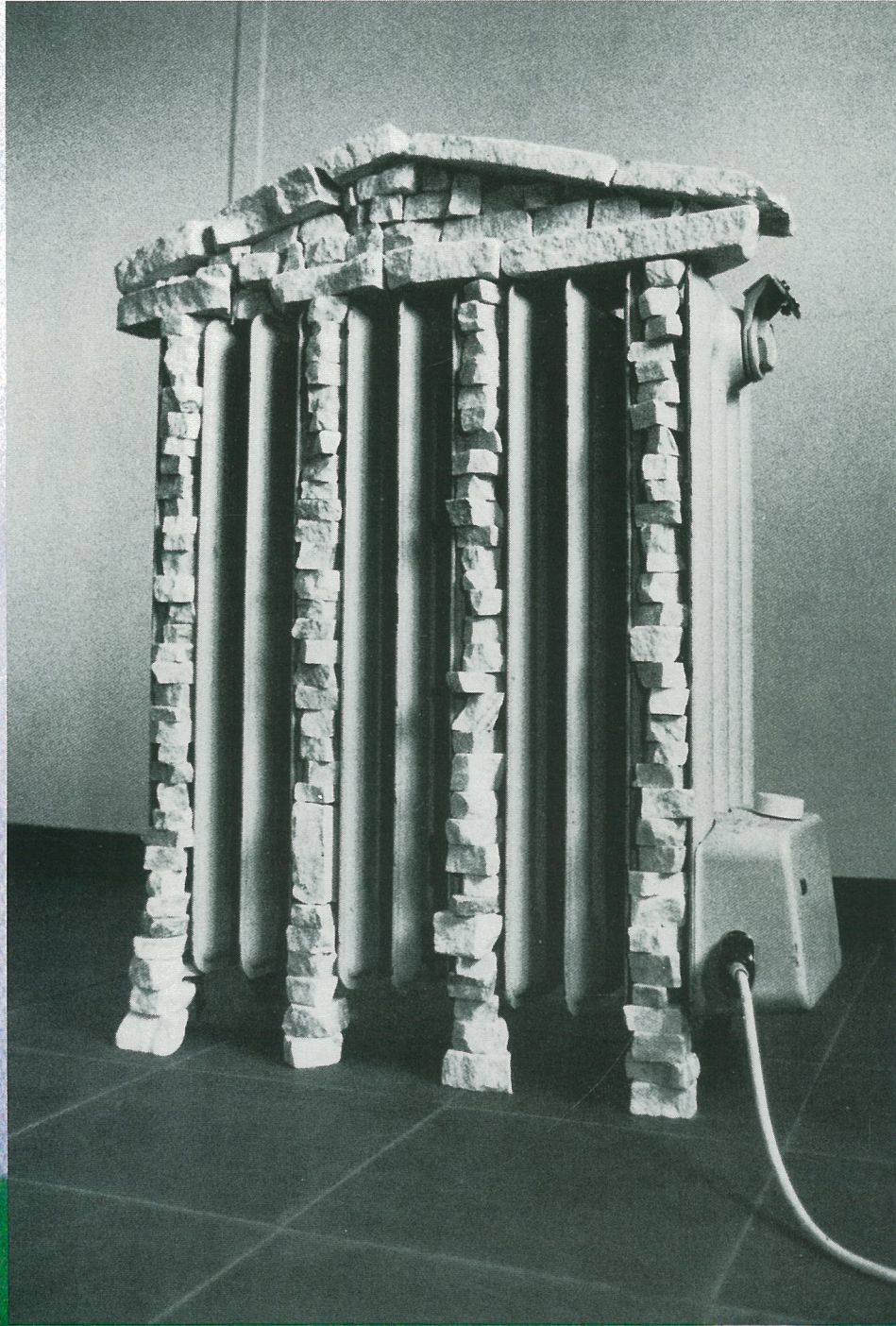
Michael Graves



Les Colonnnes is a polymorphous complex of 380 apartments, shops and public garden areas, occupying the highest point of the valley of the river Oise. The project contains three buildings that enclose a circular central plaza. Lawns run from the plaza toward the six-storeyed crescent at the south side of the project. This building is oriented towards the valley, overlooking downward sloping lawns and the public gardens to the south-east. The apartments are at this side vertically separated by protruding blocks which contain the staircases. At the inner side of the crescent, the façade is dominated by columns. At the north side, the central space connects with a cross-shaped passage that is formed by four volumes protruding from two square buildings, each containing four storeys. The grand lawns surrounding the crescent are repeated on a more intimate scale within the two squares. From the central space, one can enter these courtyards by means of a narrow passage: a similar passage runs through the crescent to the south-east into the gardens. While the façades have a residential character, the buildings comprise in fact small family apartments. The French windows, deriving their scale from palatial prototypes, conceal the fact that they run over two storeys of apartments. The details remind one of the classical



tradition. Overblown, flattened out or in other ways adapted, they are not simply citations of this style. In the centre of the circular plaza stands a tower-like sculpture. In contrast with the orthogonal geometry of the architecture, the four-sided white tower is slightly tilted and twisted. The sculpture and the plaza are part of a landscape design by Dani Karavan, which also includes a monumental axis over three kilometres in length. In fact, the commission of Karavan preceded the choice of Bofill as architect. Originally, Karavan intended to put an obelisk in the centre of the plaza. In interaction with the design of Bofill, this might have given an absolutist air to the axis. The present tower, reminiscent of the family towers in medieval Italy, refers instead to specificity as opposed to the centrality of the general layout. In the same line of thought, the axis cannot be said to have a starting or ending point in the tower. The passage through the crescent is part of it, and prolongs itself into the gardens from where La Défense shimmers in the distance. Based on: Daniel Abadie, et al. (eds.), *l'Art et la Ville. Town-planning and contemporary art*, Geneva 1990; and: Tzonis, Alexander, Liane Lefaivre, 'Memory and Invention', in *Architecture in Europe since 1968*, London 1992.



Albert Hien, Untitled, 1982-83



