Utopia Spurned: Ricardo Bofill and the French Ideal City Tradition
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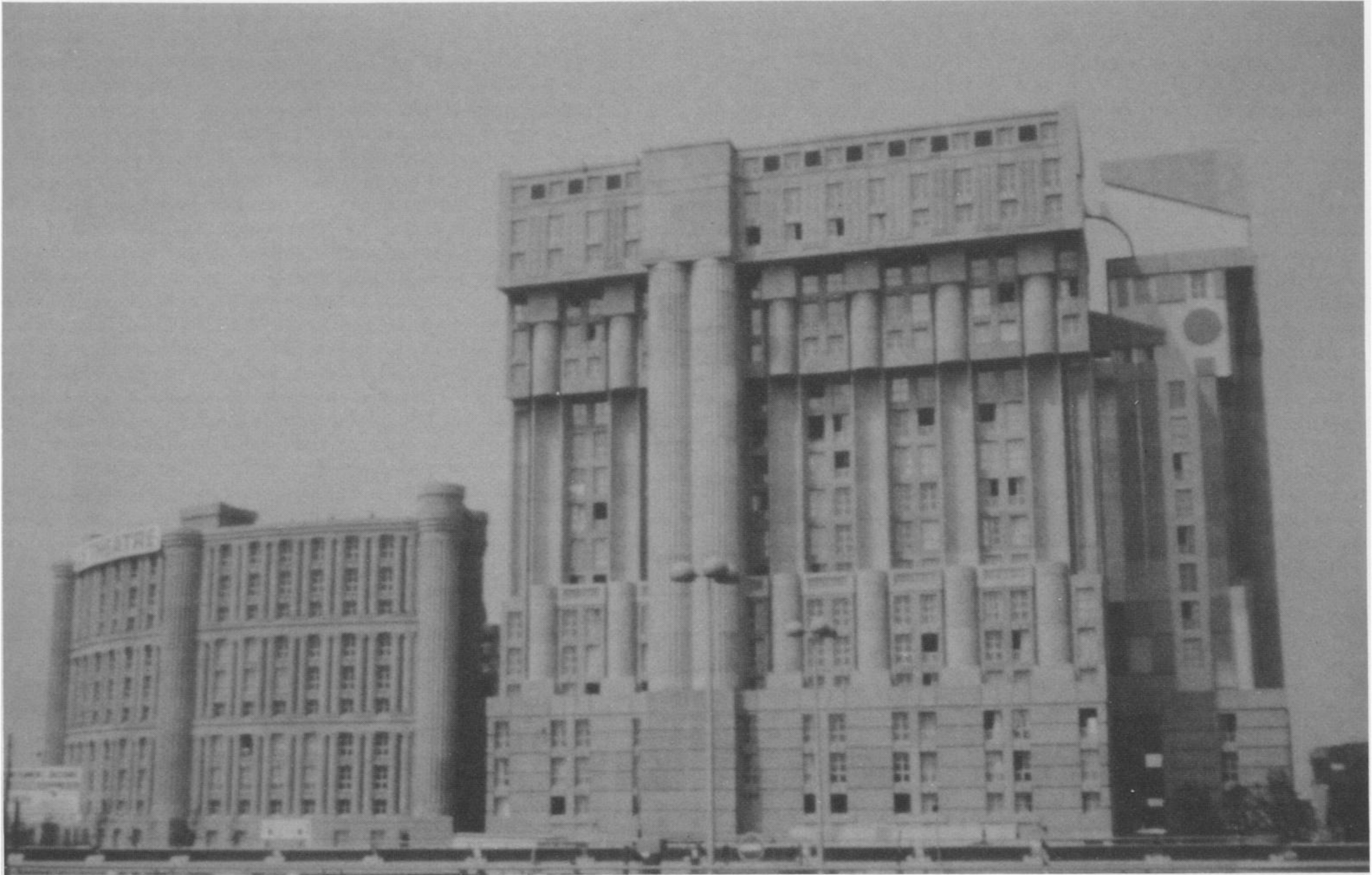
Utopia Spurned

Ricardo Bofill and the French Ideal City Tradition



1 Ricardo Bofill, Spaces of Abraxas, Marne-la-Vallée

Tony Schuman *teaches architecture at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and writes about the social meaning of built form, a subject he pursues through first-hand analysis of housing design and policy in the U.S. and abroad. His presentations on French social housing have been a staple of the past several* ACSA *conferences. In addition to the* ACSA Proceedings *and* JAE, *his articles and reviews have appeared in* Places, The Journal of Housing, Design Book Review, *and* City Limits, *and are included in two books:* The Scope of Social Architecture *(Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1984) and* Critical Perspectives on Housing *(Temple University Press, 1986).*

Over the past fifteen years, Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill's Taller de Arquitectura has built a series of public housing projects in France notable for their monumental scale, neo-Classical form and sophisticated prefabricated concrete construction. The rationale for this application of civic scale and aristocratic imagery to domestic purpose is Bofill's contention that contemporary life will invert the form and symbolism of the historic city by thrusting everyday life onto center stage, thereby "exalting" the lives of the working class inhabitants. To evaluate the significance of Bofill's proposition as a vision for human society, his work is discussed in the context of three earlier French utopian projects in the form of Ideal Cities: Ledoux's Saltworks and Ideal City at Chaux, Godin's Fourierist familistère *at Guise, and Garnier's Industrial City project and Public Works in Lyon. The design integrity of these three projects derives from the synthesis of form and content which enables them to endure as historical examples, carrying forward a message about their respective societies as revealed through architecture. Bofill's work represents a transposition of the social program of the Ideal City, centered on public life and the city, into a private world emphasizing the family and the home. His formal symbols do not challenge us to think about the future. Instead, they offer us refuge in an idealized past, dressing up the status quo with dazzling images that promote a false consciousness.*

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"The urban design of our era will take the structure, if not the dimension, of the historical city into account. It will, however, invert the symbolic values. Everyday life will take the center of the stage, while the public edifice and facility will recede into the background."

R. Bofill[1]

2 C.-N. Ledoux, Royal Saltworks, Chaux

3 C.-N. Ledoux, Royal Saltworks, Director's House, Chaux

Introduction: Form and Content

With these words, Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill explains the formal and symbolic intent of the Spaces of Abraxas, a monumental housing complex designed by his Taller de Arquitectura for Marne-la-Vallée, a new town just west of Paris. Completed in 1983, the work consists of nearly six hundred subsidized apartments arranged in a semicircular nine-storey "Roman Theater" separated from a nineteen-storey "Palace" by a nine-storey "Triumphal Arch," the whole executed with elaborate prefabricated elements of polychromatic concrete. (Fig. 1) Abraxas is the second and boldest in a series of French projects by the Taller—starting with the Arcades du Lac and the Viaduc at St. Quentin-en-Yvelines in 1972 and continuing to current projects in Montpelier and Paris. All of these are attempts to imbue domestic architecture with urban scale and civic meaning. In each instance, the built works and textual explanations reveal, beyond a preoccupation with architectural form itself, a didactic intent to induce "civilized behavior and social participation" [2] and to exalt daily life by placing ordinary activity in extraordinary settings.

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, nor 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?

To evaluate the significance of Bofill's design intentions it is instructive to review earlier efforts to express social visions in built form. For this purpose I have selected three French utopian projects which take the form of ideal cities: Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's Saltworks and Ideal City at Chaux, Jean-Baptiste Godin's Fourierist *familistère* at Guise, and Tony Garnier's Industrial City project and Public Works in Lyon. Beyond their common cultural heritage, the three projects share a desire to use architecture and urban planning and design to edify and improve the daily lives of ordinary people; all include housing as a principal programmatic element; and all exist today as full or partial built realizations of the original projects, thereby allowing on-site inspection of the works themselves. My visits to these projects over the past few years have brought to life the history book accounts, elucidated these projects' syntheses of program, plan, and imagery, and urged an assessment of their relevance to contemporary work such as Bofill's.

Ledoux at Chaux

Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) lived on the cusp of history in two respects—he was witness both to the triumph of the Enlightenment over the *ancien régime* with the French Revolution and to the incipient rise to prominence of the industrial over the feudal agricultural economy. The conflicting values of old and new in both the social and productive spheres are evident in his masterwork, the Royal Saltworks at Chaux, built between 1773 and 1779 while he served as Architect to the King under Louis XV and Louis XVI. Dismissed from the post at Chaux for the "turbulent" character of his work, as well as its "extravagant expense," Ledoux continued to work under the King's aegis, constructing a series of toll-gate *barrières* at the gates to Paris between 1785 and 1789. Perceived by the French people as symbols of their oppression under the monarchy, these gate houses were largely responsible for Ledoux's imprisonment in 1793 after the fall of the Bastille. While in prison Ledoux expanded the Saltworks scheme into a proposal for an Ideal City at Chaux, which was published in 1804 under the title *Architecture considered in relationship to art, custom, and legislation.*

For over a thousand years, salt had been extracted from underground springs at the nearby town of Salins. By 1773, however, the local supply of wood used to evaporate the water to extract the salt had been exhausted, and a decision had to be made whether to haul wood to Salins or to transport the water to another site. It was Ledoux, in his new post as Inspector General of the Jura Saltworks, who proposed to bring the water from Salins to Chaux, which constituted at that time the second largest forest in France. This was accomplished through a 17 kilometer aqueduct constructed of hollowed logs fed by gravity along the 114 meter drop in elevation. With the elaborate pumping apparatus still located at Salins, Ledoux had a simple program at Chaux: sheds for processing the salt, workshops for the blacksmiths and vatmakers, administrative offices, residences for the workers and director, and a guard house to incarcerate salt thieves (salt, being the principal means of preserving food before refrigeration, was a valuable commodity). The striking innovation of the program was Ledoux's decision to combine the elements in an idealized urban plan.

Ledoux laid out the saltworks originally in a semicircular plan, later expanded to a full circle in the Ideal City project. The entry building contained administrative offices and the guard house. These were flanked by two curving wings of dormitories for the workers and were divided into separate pavilions by craft. On axis with the entry building was the Director's House, which served as the focal point of the composition, occupying the central position on the diameter of the semicircle. The salt sheds share this prominence, stretching out laterally from the Director's House. A semicircular wall surrounds the compound, leaving space for vegetable gardens behind the workers' dormitories. (Fig. 2) When Ledoux later expanded the Saltworks into his Ideal City, he completed the circle with the addition of a variety of civic buildings which included church, stock exchange, houses of culture, and an isomorphic phallus-shaped building called an *oikema* whose purpose was to accommodate the sexual needs of the workers.

The symbolism of the plan was circumscribed, quite literally, by the ideals of the Enlightenment—the age of light, the age of reason. Images of light, and of the sun in particular, abound in works of the period—the paintings of David, the fantasies of Boullée.[3] Beyond the symbolism of the sun itself as the manifestation of the Enlightenment, the pure geometry of the plan was significant in its own right. Simple and strict geometries were proposed in writings just prior to the Revolution as

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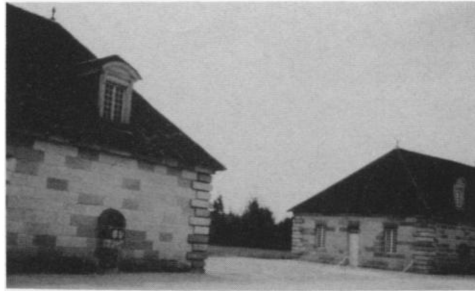
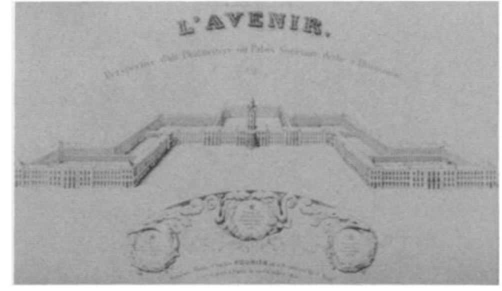


4 C.-N. Ledoux, Royal Saltworks, Workers' Pavilions, Chaux



5 Charles Fourier, *phalanstère* or social palace dedicated to humanity

the appropriate symbols of the perfect society. Ledoux himself wrote, "The circle and the square—these are the alphabet that authors use in their best works."[4]

The vision of society embodied by these symbols was one of equality, represented by the equal sides of the square and the inherently equal radii of the circle. Within this framework, society may be expressed as either an independent equality—a collective organism without differentiation by rank or class—or as a dependent equality, marked by a benevolent hierarchy. It is clearly the latter view to which Ledoux subscribed, as manifest in the central position given to the Director's House at Chaux. This compromise in the ideal of equality is not surprising given the patronage Ledoux enjoyed from the King.

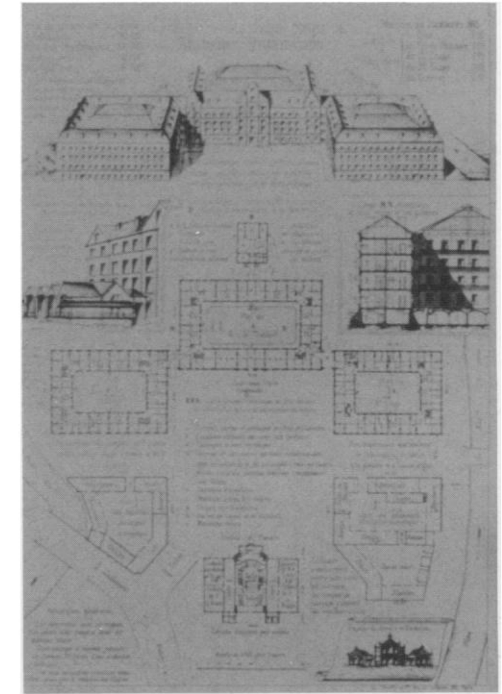
The imagery of the buildings themselves, as distinct from the site plan, reveals a second set of concerns: the acknowledgement and celebration of the dawn of industry. The plan, of course, is still of interest here, for it is altogether noteworthy that Ledoux chose to endow an industrial enterprise with a formalistic building complex. Consistent with his vision of a new social order based on dependent equality, it is the Director's House which is most articulated with traditional symbols of respectability. For this building, Ledoux invented a hybrid column of alternating circular and square sections to signal the formal entry. The columns are surmounted by a restrained pediment and pyramidal mansard roof. (Fig. 3) The walls of the Director's House are, with the exception of quoins at the entry and corners, flush ashlar masonry, a style they share with both the salt sheds and the workers' quarters, thereby suggesting the underlying equality of the participants in the enterprise. The plainness of the wall surfaces was also another symbol of the new age: no decoration, no luxury, no ornament, for these were the discredited symbols of the decadent society against which the Revolution was waged (a theme which reappears, significantly, in both the Soviet Union and Germany after the fall of the Tsar and the Kaiser).

The salt processing pavilions which flank the Director's House, and which thereby become part of the central focus of the composition, bear elements which link these pavilions to the critical parts of the complex and to the surrounding countryside as well. The quoined, arched entries

6 J.-B. Godin, *familistère* central pavilion, Guise

echo the formality of the Director's House; the pitched roofs reflect the vernacular style of the region; and the extraordinary carved stone urns from which spout thick, salty water also relieve the flat surface of the workers' dormitories. The roofs are the one gesture toward regionalism in the Saltworks and help place it as a transitional step from an agricultural to an industrial economy. The carved spouts, which constitute the sole projections on the planar wall surfaces, reinforce the link between the production process and the producers themselves, the workers. (Fig. 4)

In all, the Saltworks may be read as a paean to industry, construed by Ledoux as the new basis of society. "(Industry), mother of all resources without which nothing can exist save misery," Ledoux exclaimed, "you expand the influence which gives life; you brighten the arid deserts and the melancholy forests."[5] Industry, for Ledoux, was to be the centerpiece of the new city, a city marked by an architecture which scorns decoration while exalting idealized order. The Saltworks may be identified straightforwardly as one of the first attempts to create an industrial architecture which links production facilities to workers' housing. It may also be read as a project aimed at



7 J.-B. Godin, *familistere*, Guise

restructuring the world along principles of order, centrality, and hierarchy—an attempt to act on people through architecture to inspire and transform the world.

Godin at Guise

If the neo-Platonic principles and formal symbolism of the Ideal City at Chaux may be seen as a cerebral creation whose impact on its occupants must have been problematic, the *familistère* at Guise is more concrete. Jean-Baptiste Godin (1817–1888), the blacksmith turned entrepreneur who initiated the experiment in 1859, was also a child of the intellectual fathers of the Enlightenment—Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau—and an advocate of the grand revolutionary principles of liberty, fraternity, and equality. He was, moreover, deeply impressed by the socialist ideas of the Revolution of 1848. But his work owes its primary debt to the early nineteenth-century utopian theorist Charles Fourier, whose ideas Godin had encountered in a newspaper article in 1843. Fourier rooted the principles of the Enlightenment in a singular theory he called "passional attraction," a theory of the development of human civilization based both in behavioral analysis and cooperative enterprise, concepts which prefigure in many respects ideas of both Marx and Freud.

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In his *Theory of Four Movements,* published in 1804, Fourier propounded a vision of human society which would supercede what he saw as the crass commercialism of his day to reach a state of universal harmony. This evolution would be propelled by a natural human inclination toward twelve basic passions: the five senses plus four "affective" and three "distributive" passions. While Fourier saw cooperative enterprise based on profit-sharing as critical to his system, the primary vehicle to encourage and assist the transformation of human behavior was the creation of a physical environment which would promote "passional" association among equals through spontaneous encounters. His spatial unit of organization was the phalanx, an industrial and agricultural community in a rural setting of specified size. The main building of each phalanx was to be the *phalanstère*, a series of landscaped courtyards enclosed by wings from a central building. (Fig. 5) All parts of the building were to be served by wide, continuous "galleries of association," three storeys high, designed to encourage spontaneous meeting and weld together the social and emotional life of the community. To reinforce this communal aspect, members of the community shared dining and sanitary facilities; only sleeping quarters continued to respect the privacy of the family.

The form of the phalanx was drawn from the Palace of Versailles in an effort to place "the equivalents of wealth" before the working inhabitants of a "social palace." The image of Versailles, while certainly a more recognizable symbol than the abstract geometry of Chaux, has to be seen as a timid attempt to gain acceptance for a radical set of social ideas by cloaking them in the grandeur of the past. At best, the effort may be seen as an effort to expropriate the perquisites of royalty for the working class, a gesture which would remain without meaning in the absence of Fourier's social and economic innovations.

In this light, it is significant that Godin, in building what remains the most complete and faithful rendering of Fourier's social theories, emphasized the behavioral aspects of spatial planning over the formal imagery. When Godin undertook to construct his *phalanstère*, which he called a *familistère,* the iron works which he founded had been in operation for thirteen years. Already a successful enterprise as a leading manufacturer of stoves and other heating appliances, the foundry's economic success had two important effects on the new community at Guise: it assured the economic viability of the undertaking and it led to a concentration on the residential and service components. Thus, with the workplace already in operation, Godin commenced construction in 1859 with the first of three residential units which he envisioned as a social palace for his workers. The term *"familistère"* with which he labeled these structures conveys the emphasis on family dwelling, as distinct from the more encompassing "*phalanstère*," as Fourier called his new community under one roof.

Godin's "palaces" differed in two basic respects from Fourier's *phalanstère*. First, the locus of human association was not a linear gallery but a central, glass-roofed courtyard around which the family units were grouped (Fig. 6); second, the dwelling units were self-contained residences which included a kitchen and living room (although sanitary facilities were still shared). The only element in the site plan recalling Versailles is the positioning of the three courtyard buildings in the form of two flanking pavilions which create a forecourt in front of the central unit. (Fig. 7) Each building has a separate, central entrance, and is linked to the others by diagonal passages at the corners. The outlying buildings which contain other services and facilities are not disposed to create a formal ensemble but evoke, rather, the feel of a small village.

Godin placed at the disposition of his workers an extraordinary range of social, cultural, educational, and recreational services and facilities. Many of these, such as a pension system and medical and disability insurances anticipated France's public social services by some years. Others, such as a covered swimming pool and theater, were made available for the first time to people of modest means. Additional facilities such as game rooms, meeting halls, and a bandshell reflected Godin's encouragement of recreational and cultural activity by his workers. These activities included a chorus, an orchestra, and numerous sporting and social clubs. The three realms in which his innovations were most striking are education, cooperative purchasing, and worker involvement in management. In education, Godin provided not only an elementary school but an infant care center incorporating avant-garde pedagogical theories of child development; play structures, for example, were carefully designed to assist motor development. Secondary and adult education classes combined book learning with practical exercises. The cooperative shops for food and clothing, located on the ground floor of the *familistères,* offered favorable prices to Godin workers using special company scrip. These shops were so successful that they led to friction with the townspeople, whose wares were undersold and who did not themselves have access to the Godin commissaries.

It was with regard to worker involvement in management that Godin placed his highest hopes and offered his most far-reaching proposals. Starting with the issuance of stock certificates in the company, Godin wished to see the enterprise evolve toward worker self-management. While this ultimate goal was never reached, the foundry did become, in 1880, a cooperative production association, a status it enjoyed until it was taken over in 1968 by the giant French conglomerate, Le Creuset. In all his efforts, Godin involved his workers in various deliberative bodies within the company. Notably, he insisted on equal participation for women, sharing Fourier's belief that "In any given society the degree of women's emancipation is the natural measure of the general emancipation."[6]

The *familistère* and iron works at Guise have to be rated among the most successful of utopian experiments. The cooperative community survived for over a hundred years. It was successful both economically and socially during its time: families remained in the *familistère* for several generations, and the workers, after Godin's death, erected a statue to his memory in the forecourt of the pavilions. Today, although some buildings have fallen into disuse—the public baths and pool, the slaughterhouse and butcher shop—others are still in continuous use: the school, theater, library, the foundry itself, and, notably, the housing. When the foundry was taken over by Le Creuset in 1968, the housing passed into municipal ownership, to be operated as social (public) housing on both a rental and cooperative ownership basis. There are still families who have resided in the *familistère* for over fifty years.

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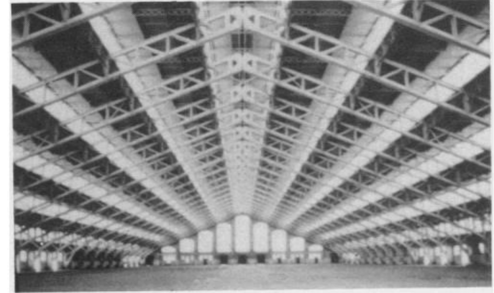
8 Tony Garnier, Grange-Blanche hospital, Lyon



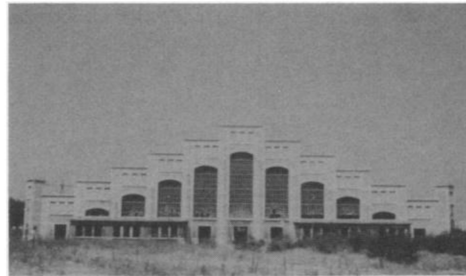
9 Tony Garnier, Markey Hall, Abattoir de la Mouche, Lyon

The form of the *familistères* themselves has been criticized for the panopticon-like qualities of the central courts, where the circulation system makes everybody's comings and goings a matter of public record. But these great halls contained no surveillance tower, no company spy watching for misbehavior. The eyes on the court belonged to peers and one can imagine the courts functioning as they were intended—arenas bubbling with social interaction, highlighted by two great annual assemblies for Work Day and Children's Day. In any event, one had only to shut the door to the apartment unit to retreat into the sanctity of the family.

Yet the utopia at Guise was a limited one in two respects: it was thoroughly dependent on the benevolent vision of its founder, and thus was an enlightened corporate version of utopia; and it failed to suscitate similar experiments in the surrounding town and region, thus remaining an isolated, miniature model for the new society. These shortcomings are at the heart of the distinctions made by Frederick Engels in his pamphlet *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*. Society cannot be transformed by the force of a limited example, he argued, however nobly conceived. That transformation can only be accomplished, in Engels' brief, by the class conscious action of the work force acting as a class in its own self-interest.

Garnier in Lyon

If the utopian experiments at Chaux and at Guise were restricted by their reliance on symbolic geometry and psychological theory, which produced in each respective case a small, self-contained model for society, Tony Garnier (1869–1948) had the breadth of vision to posit the city itself as the spatial unit for his utopian vision. Raised in a radical workers' quarter in the French textile center of Lyon, and further politicized by his studies at the Beaux-Arts in Paris during the time of Jaurès and the Dreyfus affair, Garnier developed his project for an Industrial City while a *prix de Rome* laureate at the Villa Medici. On his return to Paris in 1904, Garnier exhibited the project as supplementary material along with a more conventional study he had executed to fulfill the expectations of classical and Renaissance studies placed on Rome Prize winners. Programmatically, the Industrial city offered by Garnier has two underlying premises: it is an industrial city and it is a socialist city. The former consideration is indicated by his



10 Tony Garnier, Market Hall, Abattoir de la Mouche, Lyon

emphasis on transportation, hydroelectric power, and sufficient land to allow for expansion, as well as by the thoughtful attention given to matters of hygiene (ventilation, sunlight, vegetation) and construction technology (reinforced concrete). His socialist beliefs are revealed in the banishment of private property and walls, the absence of churches and army barracks, police or court buildings, and in the prominence given to the assembly complex containing union meeting rooms and a great public hall.

Garnier shared with Fourier a belief in the inherently cooperative nature of humankind as well as a belief in the essential satisfaction to be found in work. But it is his belief in the civilizing capacity of the city itself that distinguished his vision. This is particularly represented by his emphasis on the public arena. While the most formal expressions of this value are found in the assembly building and the civic buildings which surround it at the core of the city—a museum, library, theater, stadium, and pool—it also pervades each district of his city. Although Garnier organized his city functionally into separate zones for industry, residence, public services, and hospitals, each district was conceived as a miniature city in itself. While Fourier encouraged human association to occur most frequently within the architecture of his *phalanstère*, Garnier saw these contacts as occurring informally along the streets, paths, and gardens of his wall-less neighborhood, where all unbuilt space was to be public parkland. Where Fourier saw space as shaping human consciousness to lead the way to greater harmony, Garnier proposed a framework for a new society that will exist after the accouterments of bourgeois power have been swept away in favor of a syndicalist social organization managed directly by the workers. In this context, the realm of the city becomes the locus

11 Ricardo Bofill, Les Arcades du Lac, St. Quentin-en-Yvelines

for the free exercise of power and the concept of public space recaptures the meaning (if not the form) of the old town square and public hall: a vital source of information, exchange of ideas, and direct, participatory democracy.

In retrospect, it is easy to criticize Garnier's rigid division of the city into separate zones both as vitiating the dynamic life of the city and as impeding a framework which links living, working, and civic functions together as the continuous web of daily life. Indeed, this is the substantial criticism leveled at Le Corbusier's city planning proposals, which were strongly influenced by those of Garnier. That Garnier was aware of the values represented by older, multifunctional cities is demonstrated by his inclusion of an old medieval town in his drawings for the Industrial City, which was designed for an imaginary site in southeast France. In this light, it seems clear that the idea of separate zoning issued from his concern for hygiene—the isolating of the hospital and manufacturing districts—and his foresighted grasp of the rapid explosion of urban growth brought by industrialization. His emphasis, within each district, was on natural amenities (another theme developed by Le Corbusier) and on the open quality of the city in social terms.

While the Industrial City project remains a theoretical proposition, Garnier had the good fortune to find in Edouard Herriot, the Mayor of Lyon, a sympathetic champion. Under Herriot's sponsorship, Garnier was commissioned to execute a series of Public Works. Between 1909 and 1928, the City of Lyon built Garnier's designs for a slaughterhouse and cattle market, an olympic stadium, a municipal hospital, and a residential district known as the Quartier Etats-Unis. Of these constructions, it is the Grange-Blanche hospital, now named after Herriot, which offers

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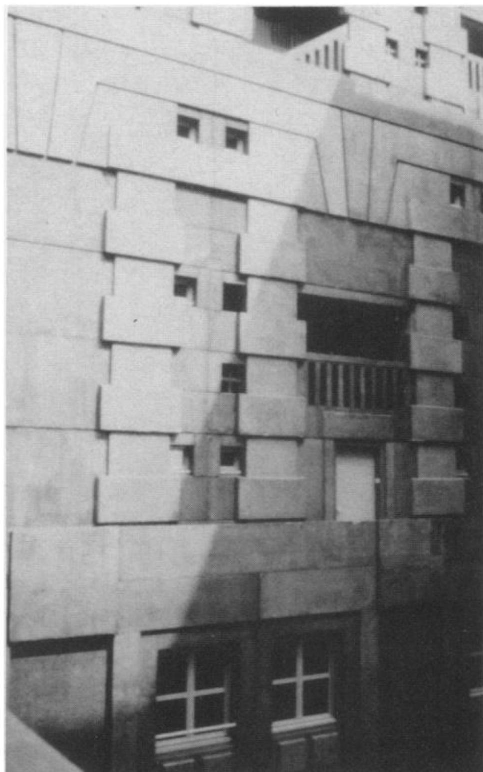

12 Ricardo Bofill, Spaces of Abraxas, Detail of Palace

13 Ricardo Bofill, "Antigone," Montpelier

the most complete demonstration of Garnier's architecture. Laid out on a gently sloping site, it was conceived as a series of free-standing pavilions separated by small gardens and a network of narrow roads in a simple grid. (Fig. 8) For functional purposes, the pavilions are linked by underground passageways.

Although the hospital does have a primary entrance and gate house, there is no formal hoopla to the scheme, no grand axes, no central building. The visual focal point is the twin chimneys of the heating plant. The design of the pavilions themselves is restrained and classical; Garnier, as a Beaux-Arts product, believed in a kind of perennial architecture, where unchanging formal considerations could be put in the service of a variety of social needs. He was more concerned with the human scale and open feeling of the ensemble than with architectural detail and contented himself on that score with simple, repetitive elements like a modest cornice or trellised entry. His priority of program and plan over detail was shared by Mayor Herriot in these words:

"A monument to be built appears to me like a problem to be solved. First one must establish the intellectual lines of the work, define the needs it must fulfill, subordinate the appearance of the vessel to the needs of what is to be contained. We have had enough of Renaissance facades and mock Louis XVI pavilions."[7]

Of the slaughterhouse/market complex "de la Mouche," also laid out as a miniature city, only the central market hall remains, but this building must be counted among the major achievements of modern architecture. The vast hall—80 meters wide and over 200 meters long—bears a tiered metal roof supported by a sweeping procession of twenty-one three-hinged metal arches. (Fig. 9) The front and rear entry walls are of reinforced concrete with enormous stepped windows over a ground level base of entry doors (Fig. 10), a device which imbues this service structure with civic meaning.

Shared Visions

The three projects—Ledoux at Chaux, Godin at Guise, and Garnier in Lyon—share a belief in the perfectability of human society and in the role of architecture as intrinsic to this transformation. Each is concerned with extending a progressively more encompassing franchise to the workers who run the industrial apparatus which, in turn, is seen as the vehicle to progress. As a group, they indicate an evolution toward higher, more complete, and more direct forms of democracy. In each instance, the nature and emphasis of the formal symbolism, program, and site planning are conditioned by their individual social visions. These in turn, are influenced both by the historical moment of their creation and by the personal backgrounds of their creators. Thus, Ledoux supports his vision of a dependent democracy with a formal plan relying on geometric symbols of neo-Platonic ideals; his is a moralizing view of human society, a statement of what ought to be. Godin centers his vision of a cooperative society on a radical new building type, the *familistère,* which relies on the buildings' plan and section to encourage the personal interaction of its inhabitants; his is a behavioral view of human society, a statement of what can be. Garnier bases his vision of a socialist democracy on the civilizing force of the city itself; his is a political view of human society, a statement of what will be.

The design integrity of these three projects derives from their synthesis of form and content. Each offers a physical form for industrial society at different stages of growth—Ledoux at its birth, Godin at its adolescence, Garnier at its maturity. Each imagines a set of social relationships to be symbolically and experientially reinforced by architecture. Thus even where the purely formal aspects may be questioned as didactic propositions, their grounding in social structure lends a certain authority. Conversely, even where the moral, psychological, or political theories might be viewed as old-fashioned, eccentric, or extreme, their expression in built form helps to clarify their meaning. It is this synthesis which enables the three projects to endure as historical examples, carrying forward a message about their respective societies as revealed through architecture.

Bofill at Marne-la-Vallée

In the light of these powerful works—in program, plan, and form—what can we learn from Bofill's Spaces of Abraxas? What can it tell us about the way we see ourselves and our society and how architecture is used to explicate this vision? To begin with, we are not dealing here with a utopian program but a single purpose building complex—housing—separated even from the corner store by a huge parking garage which lies between the housing and the town core of shops and services. The new town of Marne-la-Vallée is a linear series of five villages linked by auto and rail lines. Although there is some commercial and office space in the village centers, this new town, like the others, is primarily a dormitory suburb. Thus the concept of the new town itself represents a retreat from the historical utopian vision, which centered on public life and the city, into a private world emphasizing the family and the home.

Indeed, the Taller is quick to argue that their work here is not a utopian project:

"Far from utopia, in a state more like pessimism, we sought to construct a realistic model capable of explaining to the public and to our colleagues, that even if the utopia of 1968 had vanished, it was still possible to make a better, more rational architecture, capable of creating communal spaces."[8]

Despite this expressed pessimism, which presumably refers to the restricted funds and bureaucratic impediments in public housing construction and, possibly, to the continued need for subsidized housing at all (the rebellions of 1968 having failed to erase class distinctions in French society), the Taller attempts to overcome limitations of budget and program. "Daily life should not be banalized," Bofill contends, "but exalted to become rich and meaningful."[9]

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In architectural terms, this apparent contradiction between pessimism and exaltation is resolved by reducing construction costs through the application of rationalized construction technology in the form of progressively more sophisticated prefabricated concrete techniques. Peter Hodgkinson, the Taller's lead architect for the Viaduct and Arcades du Lac housing at St. Quentin-en-Yvelines, justly observes that this project "opened up a second generation postwar epoch of industrialization in the building trade—architectural industrialization both in plan (crane movement) and in panel design (composition)."[10] The evolution of these precast panels—from the monochromatic components with terra cotta cladding at St. Quentin to the polychromatic and integrally colored (by mixing oxides with the cement) components at Marne-la-Vallée to the current on-site panel production at Montpelier (Figs. 11, 12, 13)—is certainly one of the Taller's most striking achievements, giving them credibility with engineers and building contractors as well as cost conscious housing developers.

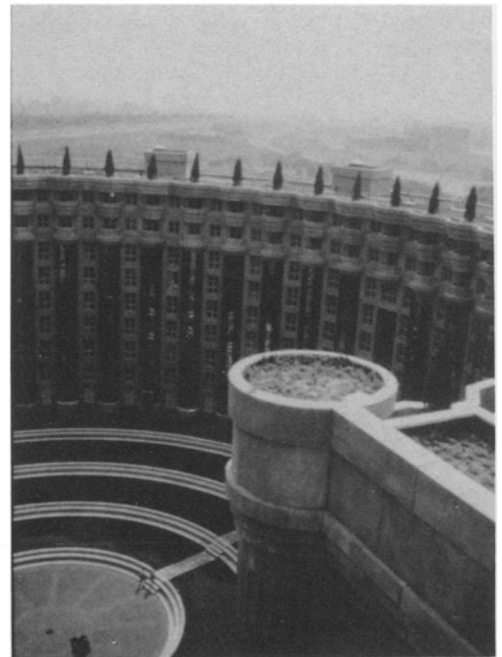
If the production technology addresses one paradox, the formal expression to which it is turned introduces a more difficult one, for what gives the Taller's work in France its special character is the use of classical elements—columns, pediments, cornices, etc.—as the basis for the precast panels. The choice of this formal language stems from an assumption that French neo-Classical architecture and urbanism of the eighteenth century remain as viable models for late-twentieth-century design, surviving a two century time warp and transcending categories of class as well. For in counterposing an image of nobility to the banality of the *grands ensembles,* the first generation of French post-war housing estates built according to the tenets of the Modern Movement, Bofill poses the second paradox—the proletarian aristocrat.

In his desire to ennoble the lives of his working class tenants and cooperative owners, Bofill has opted for a set of images meant to recall the glory that was Rome (or, at least, Versailles). The inhabitants of Marne-la-Vallée have been placed in an elaborate stage set, which Bofill has executed deliberately and literally. The semi-circular Theater defines a tiered amphitheater (Fig. 14) which looks through the (proscenium) Arch (Fig. 15) at the giant Palace as backdrop. Tall slots, or "urban windows," in the Theater and Palace align axially with the Arch to provide a theatrical succession of vistas through the complex toward the countryside beyond. (Fig. 16) But while this architecture has already been used to good effect as a backdrop for at least one recent film (*Brazil*), its appropriateness as a setting for everyday life is more problematic.

The quite secondary consideration given to the routines of ordinary living is evident in the way the unit plans are distorted to fit the precision of the formal scheme. The mirrored glass "columns," which lend formal elegance to the interior facade of the Theater (Fig. 17), result in awkward floor plans for the units inside. (Fig. 18) The bays fall haphazardly, sometimes in the living room, sometimes a bedroom, on occasion a public hall; here in the center of the room, there off to one side. Walls in adjoining units have been skewed to accommodate the intrusion of the bays. While the cooperative apartments in the Theater all have through ventilation, the rental units in the Palace are deep, with dark recesses toward the blank interior wall.

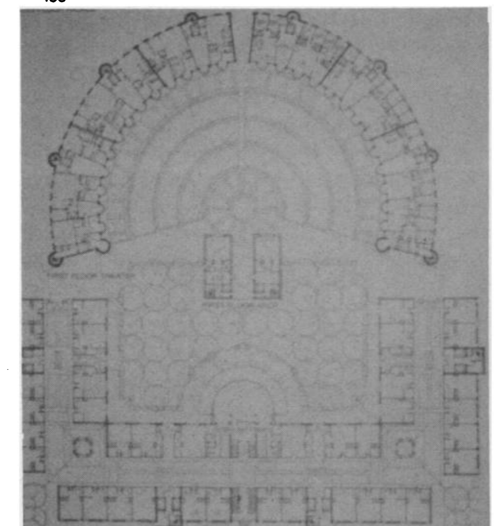
In its public space the project is an all-or-nothing proposition: either the epic drama of the whole population in the civic-scaled amphitheater, or the mini-dramas of six hundred private family lives. There are no spaces of intermediate scale designed to encourage spontaneous neighboring at different levels of association. Even the community space on the ground floor of the Palace is remote from the action in the amphitheater. It might be argued, in support of Bofill's life-as-theater metaphor, that even daily life around the house has its share of spectacle, if not drama: the various routines of washing and drying clothes, cleaning the car, children at play. But these activities have been banished from Bofill's stage, the cars to a parking garage and the children to a rudimentary set of swings *outside* the Theater. Thus, while claiming to celebrate everyday life, Bofill effectively holds it in low esteem.

This contradiction between the experience of daily life and the setting for it offered at Marne-la-Vallée follows from Bofill's inversion of the symbolic form of the classical city, where housing consti-



14 Ricardo Bofill, "Theater," Spaces of Abraxas, Marne-la-Vallée

17 Ricardo Bofill, "Theater," Spaces of Abraxes, Marne-la-Vallée



18 Ricardo Bofill, ground floor plan, Spaces of Abraxas, Marne-la-Vallée

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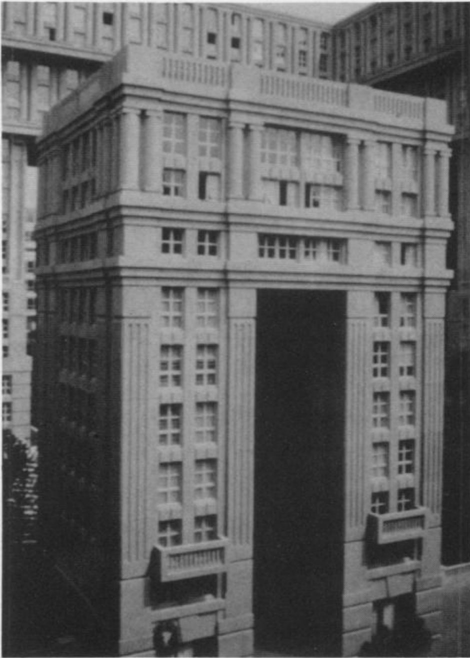
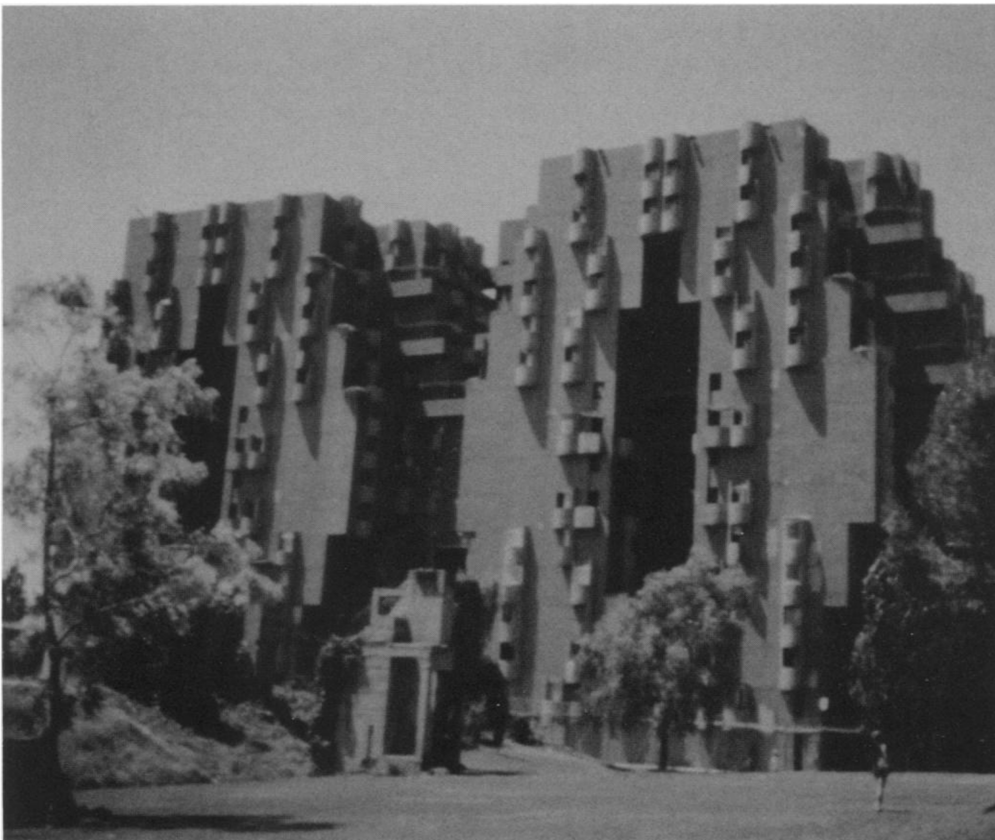


15 Ricardo Bofill, "Arch," Spaces of Abraxas, Marne-la-Vallée

16 "Urban Windows," Spaces of Abraxas, Marne-la-Vallée



19 Ricardo Bofill, Walden 7, San Just (Barcelona)

tutes a neutral ground against which public monuments are set in relief. With the Spaces of Abraxas, housing becomes an iconographic object. Bofill defines the Palace as "a monument to everyday life . . . conceived and composed in space after the rules of classical art. The transformation of space and, to a certain extent, of time, will condition and exalt the life of its inhabitants."[11] As a monument, Abraxas is most successful when viewed from a distance, as an object in the landscape on the approach from Paris. It looms as a landmark, a point of reference, a symbolic entry point for the new town. Imagine, however, the surprise of the casual traveller to find that this monumental classical complex contains not the town hall and civic center but public housing! This inversion of architectural symbolism, beyond the practical shortcomings of the plan, raises some disturbing questions about the use of formalism to convey meaning in architecture: Can civic architecture—in scale and symbol—be appropriated for domestic use? Can working class life be transformed through the visual trappings of the aristocracy?

Bofill himself is highly conscious of the ambiguity of meaning carried by architectural form. As he acknowledges:

"The new formal language which architecture is using is still incoherent and lacks the precision to express or clarify its ideas or clarify projects which are still in gestation. It is an esoteric vocabulary."[12]

Playing fast and loose with architectural syntax is most problematic when it contravenes established conventions of understanding, as in Bofill's appropriation of public scale and symbolism for domestic purpose. The gravity of this act is implicit in Suzanne Langer's appreciation of the relationship between culture and architecture:

". . . (T)he great architectural ideas have rarely, if ever, arisen from domestic needs. They grew as the temple, the tomb, the fortress, the hall, the theater. The reason is simple enough: tribal culture is collective, and its domain is therefore public. When it is made visible, its image is a public realm."[13]

In proposing that people literally inhabit "monuments"—be they "columns" or the triumphal arch—Bofill proclaims that

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these collective symbols are no longer the province of the public realm, a heresy which suggests that contemporary society has lost its cultural coherence. More ominous is the corollary that it is only in retreating from the public realm, from the world of production and civic action which forms the wellsprings of social well-being, that the richness and exaltation of life is to be found. Despite its massive scale Abraxas calls to mind the insularity of the suburban house, with its "home as castle" ideology.

In this retreat, moreover, the form and image of domestic life provided for the inhabitants of Abraxas do not promote their development through social interaction, but simply exhort them to higher self-esteem "conditioned" by the majesty of the surrounds, a disturbing echo of the reference to B.F. Skinner in the Taller's earlier Walden 7 project. The inhabitants of Abraxas are apparently meant to identify themselves with a Roman emperor (or French king) and use this enhanced self-image to achieve greater satisfaction in their lives at the work place and in the community. While it may indeed be preferable to awake in a pseudo-palace than in a typical public housing slab, it is unlikely that the power of architectural imagery can transform the reality of low-paid industrial or bureaucratic routine. Bofill has put the cart before the horse. "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their social being," Marx argued, "but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."[14] In promoting form over content, Bofill may be accused of inducing false consciousness.

If one takes seriously Bofill's aspirations to a socially progressive architecture, there is a sad irony in this critique. As a bearer of the emblem of the Catalan spirit of rebellion and cultural nationalism as well as the idealism of the 60s generation, Bofill's own history of social activism includes jailings under the Franco regime. His hero, Antonio Gaudí, is valued not only for his romantic architecture of Mediterranean light and geological form but for his political integrity as well. The Taller itself, over which Bofill presides as inspirational leader, includes philosophers, poets, and political activists as well as talented groups of designers in Barcelona and Paris.

The ideological contradictions of the Taller stem from two parallel concerns which take precedence over social content: formalism and the role of the architect. "Morphology is our proper domain," Bofill asserts, "as the knowledge of formal problems and the inherent laws of form."[15] In the early days of the Taller this search for form was rooted in geometric repetition—the "City in Space" scheme for Madrid and the early Barcelona housing projects grew out of a manipulation of cubic elements. (Fig. 19) A 1975 doctoral thesis by Anna Bofill, Ricardo's sister and Taller associate, offered "A Contribution to the Study of the Geometric Generation of Urban and Architectural Forms."

In this context, the transition from the Spanish practice to the projects in France must have felt like a homecoming for the Taller, a return to the land of neo-Classical order. Hodgkinson describes the first housing at St. Quentin-en-Yvelines as representing "our theory that all architecture had been invented, our job being only to compose according to Platonic rules."[16] This support for an eternal architecture, however, is at odds with the Taller's stated belief in a culturally relative formal expression:

"Whatever epoch concerns us, we consider it of great importance to discover the intrinsic reasons for the changes in architecture and their formal manifestations. Architecture, as a cultural phenomenon, is capable of producing an avant-garde system of symbolic expression. It thus develops a specific language in each epoch. Today, this language is concerned with the town."[17]

While the contemporary reaction to the urbanism of the Modern Movement has occasioned a renewed appreciation of traditional urban form ("the town"), it is not so evident what "intrinsic reasons" of the age impel this attention. Does the town acquire new meaning in contemporary society? If the town retains its "old" meaning as the public arena for social participation, why is this quintessential democratic activity symbolically removed in Bofill's work to the privacy of the domestic world?

The philosophical musings of the Taller tantalize like their architecture. They pose a series of provocative ideas which 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 deteminants of design—along with construction cost, building technology, bureaucratic negotiation, and political maneuvering—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. As Hodgkinson divulges, "The one all-important theme ever constant in the development of the Taller is the relationship between work and power. The architect has passed from divine creator to a supplier of service, in many countries even to a servant. . . . The architect must get above this barrier to impose his knowledge, humanism, and universality on the administrators, politicians, and bankers."[18]

Conclusion: Utopia Spurned

In Bofill's brief, then, the path of social progress lies through the superior vision of the architect, a viewpoint which recalls Ledoux, whose paean to the profession asks rhetorically, "Is there anything unknown to the architect, he who is as old as the sun?"[19] There are other parallels to Ledoux, not the least of them Bofill's success at becoming architect to the French "king" in the person of former President Valerie Giscard d'Estaing, whose support was instrumental in securing the Taller's first commissions in France. Notably, Bofill has been more successful than Ledoux in negotiating the shifting sands of French politics, winning major new contracts under the Socialist government of Georges Mitterand. In this regard, the Taller's success may be attributed to the notoriety of their early work, their mastery over construction technology and building costs, and a highly sophisticated public relations effort.

The debt to Ledoux is evident in formal terms as well, from the conifer crown atop the Theater at Abraxas to the semicircular form of the Theater itself. But where Ledoux's linking of regional vernacular with classical form is intended to give a new image to a new industrial society, centered on labor and production, Bofill's symbolism lacks programmatic clarity. This contrast is particularly clear in the treatment of the semi-circular open space

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which serves as a central element in both schemes. At the Saltworks, this area is used for unloading the shipments of lumber which fuel, literally and figuratively, the whole enterprise. At Abraxas, on the other hand, it is hard to imagine what level of domestic activity might animate the arena to the point of justifying its civic scale and architectural embellishment.

This tenuous link between form and content also impairs Bofill's interpretation of Fourier's "social palace". Unlike Godin's realization at Guise, where the architecture is meant to assist the inhabitants in their climb up the social ladder by encouraging cooperative effort through social interaction, Bofill subordinates substance to style. Compare, for example, the scale of the glass-roofed courtyards at Guise with the arena at Abraxas. Here, as in the shopless "streets" at St. Quentin, Bofill relies more on the inhabitants' interpretive powers than on their daily activity to improve the quality of their lives.

While the visual record identifies a historical and philosophical debt to both Ledoux and Fourier, Bofill's relationship to Tony Garnier presents a stark contrast. Although both men share a fascination with the technological possibilities of reinforced concrete and a belief in the Beaux-Arts doctrine of the eternal appropriateness of classical form, they draw opposite conclusions from this aesthetic premise. For Bofill, it opens the door to an endless refinement of these forms, a posture analogous to Mies' devotion to a technologically based architectural vocabulary. For Garnier, the acceptance of the Classical canon marks an end to formal exploration in favor of a discourse on the city viewed as an arena for the exercise of democratic power. Garnier sees urban housing as part of that neutral ground against which the true public monument—the cultural facilities and assembly halls—can emerge to symbolize the collective will. Against this vision one can almost hear Bofill inverting Herriot's dictum: "A problem to be solved is a monument to be built."

In an essay written for the recent exhibition he shared with Leon Krier at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Bofill expressed contempt for the idea of utopia. "These utopias [in the technological or social writings of the 1960s] destroy geniuses and masters. In the 1970s, architecture begins to concentrate on itself again. Architects rediscover the pleasure of creation, and their craft."[20]

This defense of traditional architectural formalism, unfettered by the burden of transforming society in the process, would appear to oppose design integrity to social intent, Ledoux notwithstanding. Yet Bofill is surely not suggesting that we have reached a state of social development where each individual is already "exalted" by the quality of his or her everyday life. Rather, he appears to be arguing for a window-dressing architecture that will not, or cannot, transform the underlying social structure and that is, therefore, to be evaluated within its own terms of reference. Because Bofill offers no discussion of how he imagines people will actually use the Spaces of Abraxas, we are left to rely on the imagery alone to convey the social meaning of the work.

What are we to make of the symbolism itself? On a general level, the very fact that so much attention and money have been lavished on social housing carries a message that people of modest means are valued in French society, a message which increases in significance in comparison with the paltry resources devoted to public housing in the United States.[21] But this message can be, and has been, carried by a wide range of architectural styles and partis. One must ask: why Rome? why the distant past to give form to contemporary life? When Ledoux invented new form for his Ideal City, he was using it to symbolize a new social and economic program. Bofill is using an old form to dress up the status quo. The message is that our own age has no coherence, no grandeur, no form of its own. In the midst of wide confusion and debate about what contemporary society stands for, there is a corollary confusion about what it looks like. But instead of seeking an architecture which helps us discover, understand, and transform the meaning of daily life, Bofill offers us refuge in the values of the past. Abandoning the Ideal City project of provoking our thinking and engaging our participation in looking toward the future of human society, the Spaces of Abraxas send us looking backward. And we are tempted to conclude, somewhat sadly and anticlimactically, "We have seen the past, and it doesn't work."

Notes

1 Bofill, Ricardo, quoted by Barry Bergdoll, "Subsidized Doric", *Progressive Architecture* (October, 1982) p. 74
2 Bofill, Ricardo, quoted by Christian Norberg-Schutz "Form and Meaning" in *Ricardo Bofill: Taller de Arquitectura,* Yukio Futagawa, ed., Rizzoli (New York) 1985, p. 11
3 For a discussion of the imagery of the French Revolution, see Starobinski, Jean *1789: Les Emblèmes de la Raison* Flammarion Press (Paris) 1979
4 Ledoux, C.N., quoted by Starobinski, op. cit., p. 51. All translations from the French are by the author.
5 Ledoux, C.N., quoted by Michel Parent, *Les Salines Royales d'Arc et Senans* Dermont Press (Paris) 1973, unpaginated
6 Fourier, Charles, cited by Frederick Engels *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (Marx and Engels *Selected Works* International Publishers [New York] 1970), p. 406
7 Herriot, Edouard, quoted by Leonardo Benevolo *History of Modern Architecture,* vol. 1 MIT Press (Cambridge, MA) 1978, p. 340
8 Bofill, (Rizzoli), p. 82
9 Bofill, quoted by Bergdoll, op. cit.
10 Hodgkinson, Peter "A Personal Point of View", in *Taller de Arquitectura: Ricardo Bofill* Architectural Association (London) 1981, p. 8
11 Bofill, op. cit. (Rizzoli), p. 120
12 ibid.
13 Langer, Suzanne *Feeling and Form,* Charles Scribner's Sons, (New York) 1953, p. 97
14 Marx, Karl *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* Progress Publishers [Moscow] 1973), Vol. 1, p. 503
15 Bofill, op. cit. (Rizzoli), p. 21
16 Hodgkinson, op. cit., p. 7
17 Bofill, op. cit. (Rizzoli), p. 121
18 Hodgkinson, op. cit., p. 9
19 Ledoux, C.N. quoted in *Ledoux et Paris,* "Cahiers de la Rotonde 3", Paris, 1979, p. 51
20 Bofill, Ricardo *Ricardo Bofill and Leon Krier: Architecture, Urbanism, and History* Museum of Modern Art (New York) 1985, p. 11.
21 Although this paper is focused on architectural imagery and utopian visions rather than housing policy, it is worth bearing in mind that Bofill's Spaces of Abraxas are, in fact, public housing (which the French call "social" housing). Social housing is home to a full 25% of the French population, and is a primary arena for experimentation in architecture; many of France's leading architects have produced works for this sector. There are important lessons here for housing policy in the U.S., where less than 2% of the population lives in public housing and where this housing has been produced, for the most part, in an atmosphere unsympathetic to the notion that quality housing is a public responsibility.

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1,3,4,6,8–17,19: Tony Schuman
2: Editions Combier-Macon
5,7: Centre de Creation Industrielle, Centre Georges Pompidou
18: Progressive Architecture

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