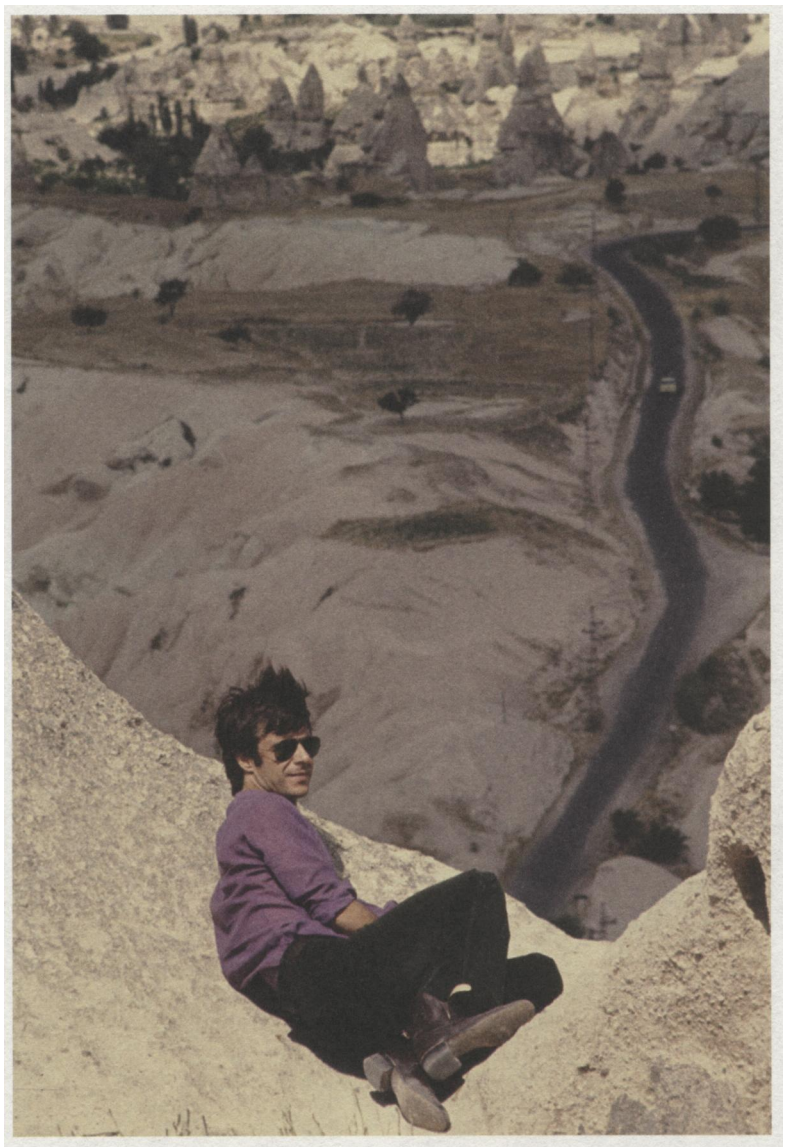
Ricardo Bofill
in conversation with
Christopher Pierce & Thomas Weaver



Ricardo Bofill,
Algeria, *c* 1978

This conversation had its genesis in two separate encounters earlier in the summer of 2014. The first was with the French critic Françoise Fromonot, who when asked which architect, working anywhere in the world, she would recommend to approach for an engaging conversation, immediately replied 'Bofill' (she was actually suggesting Anna Bofill, sister of Ricardo, who ran their Spanish office while her brother was based in Paris, but added that either sibling would be interesting). The second was a few days later when the Barcelona architect Benedetta Tagliabue recalled the more memorable moments from a party she'd been to a few nights before. This involved wide-eyed descriptions of the luxurious former industrial space where it had taken place, a precise analysis of each of the dishes served, and her own re-enactment of the moment towards the end of the meal when a troupe of young women entered the space, wearing nothing but cat's whiskers, and performed for the guests. When pressed for the name of her host, she casually replied 'Ricardo Bofill, of course'.

To architects of a certain generation (not least our own), Ricardo Bofill immediately conjures up a period in the 1980s when his name was synonymous with the more celebrated images in architecture. This was a moment defined by all those *Architectural Design* and *GA* profiles, with their gushing homilies by Christian Norberg-Schulz and Charles Jencks, to say nothing of the buildings themselves, notably the striking silhouettes of Bofill's first built works in Alicante and Barcelona, and his later, wildly neo-classical, French projects in Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, Marne-la-Vallée and Montpellier. In their flamboyance, eclecticism and celebrity these works were sold to us as resolutely postmodern, even if the unabashedly commercial aspects of this association somehow passed over the fact that this was also an architecture of good intentions, with each of these signature projects being built as social housing. Bofill himself had unwittingly signed up to this characterisation a few years earlier by accepting Paolo Portoghesi's invitation to contribute to the Strada Novissima at the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale, but when his work was exhibited at the AA the following year it was presented more simply for what it was – ground-breaking projects and buildings produced by an exuberant Spanish office whose staff consisted of a polyglot cast of young designers together with a resident poet and philosopher.

The studio these architects then shared is the space that Bofill still occupies today, La Fábrica. To call this space a converted cement works is to seriously underplay both its scale and its beauty. Located in the western suburbs of Barcelona, immediately alongside one of Bofill's first completed works – the Walden 7 housing block – the complex is structured around a series of converted concrete silos, juxtaposed against the hulking relics of its industrial past and lush, verdant gardens. Although Bofill would later describe it as an exercise in re-use and a poke-in-the-eye for modernist functionalism, in many ways La Fábrica also represents its own kind of kingdom. At the centre of it all, of course, is Bofill himself, and our journey towards him therefore unfolded as a Conradian *Heart of Darkness*, working our way further and further up the river, excited and anxious in equal measure about the architect we might eventually encounter, and even deluding ourselves that the bewhiskered naked catwomen of Barcelona might make another appearance.
—*Christopher Pierce & Thomas Weaver*

CP Ricardo, I read somewhere that one of your earliest ambitions was to change the world.

RB Yes, that's right.

TW Do you still want to?

RB No. But only because I've changed my mind. When I was young I didn't realise how complex life really was. I was only thinking of it in idealistic, utopian terms. But my decision to become an architect came out of this idealism. I am very much a product of my context and my particular moment in time. I was born in 1939, and so my first memories and experiences are those of the immediate postwar years and of Franco's Spain. My family were all progressive, cultivated, vehemently anti-Franco and very much part of the Catalan liberal bourgeoisie – my father was a builder and property developer and my mother was Venetian, Italian and Jewish (in that order); a sort of sublimated Jewish mother. When I was young I was always closer to my mother, but after they both died, I realised that my father was a big influence. He taught me about politics, about liberal thinking and about architecture. My mother just told me I was a genius.

CP What was your upbringing like?

RB My childhood was a mixture of little privileges and extreme austerity – privileges because of my family, hardships because of the Second World War and Spanish Civil War. Poverty and restriction were fundamentally part of Spain at that time. I remember when I was ten waking up overlooking a Barcelona street, and thinking of it as a very grey, horrible, sad kind of environment. It was from this context that I began to construct my own personality, or create a personal revolution against everything around me. I realise this all sounds a bit *Reader's Digest*, but all my life has been structured as a project looking towards the future.

TW It's interesting that you speak of how cultivated your family was – presumably as a child you were exposed not only to architecture but also to literature, music, the arts – because when it came time for you to set up your own office, which you did when you were still very young, you structured it as a vehicle that contained lots of different disciplines. I mean, didn't you have a poet and a philosopher on your staff? How did you balance this engagement with lots of ideas and practices with the singularity of choosing a profession and being an architect?

RB When I say that I wanted to change the world, it was not only through architecture, but through all the different disciplines I was interested in – film, theatre, music, philosophy, everything. But in the end I chose architecture for two reasons. The first was because I suffer from claustrophobia and so I felt I had to do something that relieved this; architecture produces space. And the second was because I wanted to be immortal.

CP This sounds like your mother again.

RB By this I mean that architecture lasts longer than a life. Film eventually disintegrates. Even politics or philosophy or psychology are only really the consequences of a particular time. But through a building your work could last 300 years, longer even. This also means that architecture somehow becomes a way of handling death. When I was young I never really dared admit this because, you know, I come from a very Christian, very Catholic country, but architecture defies individual death. Of course, now that I am older I think differently. Now I'm totally in favour of euthanasia and suicide – the last act of freedom!

CP But that multi-disciplinary office model is so unusual, especially in a profession like architecture. The closest comparison I can make to your factory here is Andy Warhol's Factory in New York.

RB I think this even predates Warhol.

TW But there seemed to be the same sense of excitement, even mysticism around it. When you read Peter Hodgkinson's text about the *Taller* in the small AA booklet produced to accompany a show of your work in 1981, you get a sense of the thrill he and the others in your office were feeling.

RB Yes, his essay is so full of adjectives. But remember, Peter had just come out of the AA, from a defiantly architectural background, and was just expressing his freshness and enthusiasm for being surrounded by poets, intellectuals and philosophers. Of course, I love the AA, but in some way it was also my adversary.

TW Really? By adversary, do you mean your resistance to Cedric Price and Archigram, and all that stuff about lightness, flexibility, movability; precisely the things you didn't want to do?

RB In the 1960s the utopian approach was always through technology. This wasn't unique to Archigram or even the Japanese metabolists, but was part of a wider cultural affiliation. The

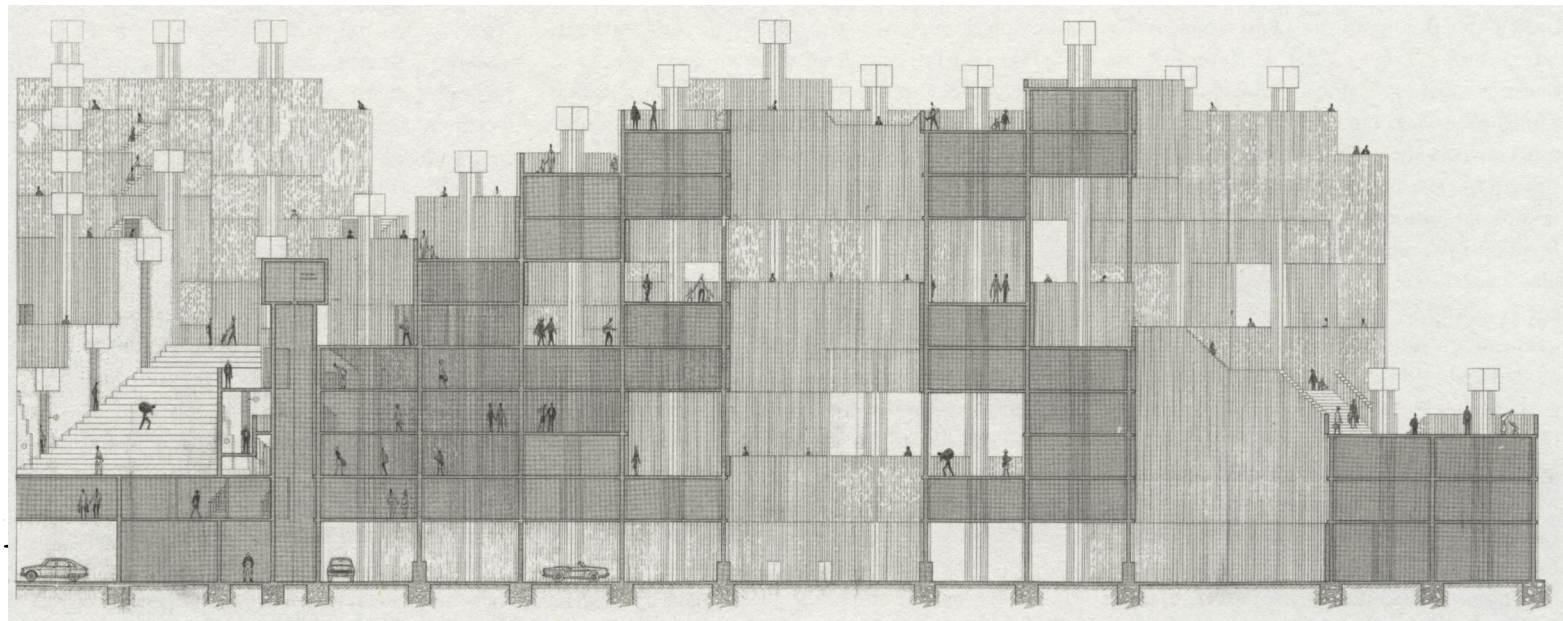
English have always been pragmatists. For you, the evolution of architecture is always explained through technology or construction. So an Englishman would see the gap between two Greek columns as being defined only by the distance a stone slab placed on top of them could span. And I say that as someone who comes from a very anglophile family. We've always loved the English culture. My very first memory is listening to the radio during the end of the Second World War, when there was all this repression from Germany and from Franco, and my father suddenly jumping up and shouting, 'we're going to win the war'. He was so captivated by the BBC World Service. But of course, I'm also Latin, the son of Italians, and I see architecture not only through technology but through language, society, politics. It's a little like the step one would make in going from a domestic house to a temple; a distinction between construction and composition. Of course, technology is still important, even if it has never really existed here in Spain.

CP Okay, so you're resistant to technology and highly receptive to other ideas and disciplines. But still, you had to work and the office had to function. How, then, in the early days in the mid-1960s did clients come to you with a project?

RB They didn't. In those days I never really had any clients. There were a few small things, but these were mainly brought in by my father. Most of the bigger projects then were self-initiated. On Walden, for example, I was the developer, the architect and the builder. I basically had to invent the building process myself. It was the same with the City in Space project. When I gave a presentation on this to some officials in Madrid, which involved all kinds of images and films, I was both the designer and the client, the promoter. Nobody else wanted to touch it. The next day I was banned from the profession in Spain by the Franco government. It was all too controversial for them. So my own start as an architect is a bit different. It's also not one I would recommend others follow.

TW Your own imprint of the architect is also largely autodidactic. Although you seem to have studied for a time in Barcelona and then Geneva, you are basically self-taught, no? Similarly, the model of your office is also an older, artisanal one, where the office teaches people and doesn't necessarily take people who already know what they are doing.

RB I don't really like the idea of a school of architecture, and I don't like histories of architecture where everything is presented as beginning with the modern movement. I've never liked Le Corbusier. So I've always tried to follow a different path. I was helped in this by the fact that my father worked as an architect and builder, and so I could learn more immediate things directly from him. I've also always been attracted to the less academic architects, like Mies or Gaudí, neither of whom were really the product of a particular school. And like them, I have tried to educate myself, or even form myself. But you're right, the office model is artisanal. This is all part of a Barcelona tradition. Even in Gaudí's time the city would be full



City in Space,
Madrid, 1968–70

of little shops that sold things in the front and made them in a workshop in the back. Architects were always working with these kinds of suppliers. This is also why when we had to come up with a name for our office we called it *Taller de Arquitectura* – an architectural workshop.

TW But to me this is one of the many ambiguities you have maintained throughout your career. You've always had these ostensibly competing things going on at the same time – in one sense you are interested in the vernacular, the local and the small scale, but you are also attracted by the absolute and the abstract, philosophical ideas from above. You are interested in the specific, yet you also like the global; you are interested in history, but also the universal, even the immortal.

RB I know, I know, my life is full of these contradictions. The thing is, when I was young I was a bit of a Marxist, and so I believed in theory. But then later, as an architect, I came to believe in theory *as* practice – the idea of construction, and always trying to learn from my mistakes. My idea was never to repeat myself, to be constantly changing – mainly for the very simple reason that I get easily bored.

TW Yes, there's a line in the AA catalogue where you say, slightly heroically, that 'every building I do should be different'. So with each project, you were redesigning not just a building but an entire aesthetic. Which is obviously contradictory to a classical model of architecture where everything is based on a singular, repeating standard.

RB Oh, I'm still heroic, but in a different way. There's no real answer to these contradictions. But what I want to say is that I like modernity – in painting, in film and in literature – and I've always preferred the avant-garde over more established models. With architecture it's different. I've never really liked the modern movement. I don't like its theories or even its whole aesthetic. So from the very beginning I've always looked instead at traditional and vernacular architecture, which I really like a lot. At the outset of a project it's always been my first inspiration, the source I draw on. I became very good at this way of working, developing a methodology that really did allow for change and variety. This was a stage in my life when every project was a kind of trial. But then, as you say, I've also always had a classical aspect. Let me try to explain that. In the late 1970s, after working for 15 years or so, I became increasingly interested in construction, particularly industrial construction for affordable housing. For one reason or another I went to Algeria, where I advocated the introduction of a whole new system which would have revolutionised their housing industry. I then made a series of proposals for cities all over the country, but in the end the Algerian government ends up buying a Polish prefab system instead, and so I say bye-bye Algeria, bye-bye to this whole adventure. I then go to France – that is, the place that invented precast concrete. I visit as many factories as I can. I learn about the system, how to produce the perfectly repeatable single piece. But the obvious problem was the pieces they were prefabricating and repeating were not perfect, not harmonious or well proportioned. So I start researching proportion and harmony, which takes me to the Italian Renaissance. I study every one of the Renaissance architects, visit all of Palladio's villas, every Michelangelo, following these buildings like an *apoderado* (an agent or coach) follows the matador, never once taking my eye off them. And so there is a real classicism to what we do, but I see it less about creating copies and standards and more about investigating, rewriting, trying harder.

TW But in many ways, all these seemingly competing ideas again show you to be a product of your particular moment in time. You are not rejecting Le Corbusier in 1930, but in 1965, the year of his death and with it the end of modernism. Your interest in the local and the vernacular, as well as your ability to reference and reject the modern, then becomes celebrated in the late 1970s and 1980s as something that comes after the modern, as postmodern.

RB I love this conversation. Even if what you say is not really a question. Yes, the things I like are contradictory. As I said, the architecture I like is not the architecture of Le Corbusier or Gropius and their whole rejection of history – or rather, their belief that history started with them. I don't subscribe to that at all. The history of architecture is 4,000 years old, and what they were advocating ruptured this history. Le Corbusier's urban ideas were also insane, flattening everything that existed and zoning the city's inhabitants into various functional types and groups. But you know, a bit later I actually did start liking Le Corbusier some more, especially the Le Corbusier who did La Tourette and Ronchamp, which are incredible works of architecture. And of course I recognise the immaculate way Mies simplified and resolved the junction between the horizontal and the vertical.

TW Could we talk a little about the application of those ideas, for example, in the factory space that we are in now, or in the spaces next door with Walden?

RB Walden was the application of an earlier theoretical project, The City in Space. It was built in the suburbs as a kind of monumentalised *kasbah*, a genius loci heavily influenced by the architecture of the south. It doesn't really reference any particular architectural narrative, mainly because there is no history here in Catalunya, or at least no classical period.

CP But it was also built at the same time as your office here, in this converted cement factory, so you chose to work in a place immediately next to one of your own, large projects.

TW Isn't it also a bit ironic that despite your rejection of Archigram and English pragmatism and technology you choose to live and work in a factory?

RB The two projects are two completely different experiences. Walden was about the construction of a utopian community on a tabula rasa on the edge of Barcelona. It was utopian but also highly realistic. I mean, we built it, and as a community it is thriving today more than ever. La Fábrica used to be the most horrible, polluted cement factory you could possibly imagine. I wanted to do an anti-modern movement project by changing its use while keeping most of its structure. How do you go from something that was so dysfunctional and toxic to somewhere you want to occupy and inhabit? In this sense it was influenced by many aesthetic movements – brutalism, surrealism, different avant-gardes, etc. I fundamentally believe that changing the use of obsolete places within the city is one of the main activities architects should involve themselves with.

CP But are these two places so very different? They both seem to work because of their heaviness, their mass, their weight, which is part of their language. So when you speak about construction, are you also talking about tectonics? To me, one is about technology whereas the other is about a whole aesthetic. When I look at Walden and the factory I see Louis Kahn: tectonic and massive, but also a distinct aesthetic.

RB Oh, I love Kahn. You know, he came to visit me here once. I spent two days with him and the conversations we had – about architecture, construction and even, I remember, about the desert, because I had then just come back from the Sahara – are perhaps the best of my life. It was just a memorable moment, discussing different working approaches with someone I so admired.

CP And as a designer, how do you work? Do you only work through sketches, or models? How much do you delegate or abdicate certain responsibilities?

RB Things are a little different now because I have my two sons working with me, but it always used to begin with me looking closely at the site, the situation, the problem, and then balancing the wishes of the client with my own longer-term strategy. But the actual design work has always happened here, in Barcelona, and always with paper and pencil. I do some sketches, make some notes, think about a direction, and then when a kind of clarity emerges we form a project team. The office is quite vertical, but it also has a horizontal component. I've always thought of it as a bit like an orchestra where everyone has their own instrument, everyone plays together, and at some point everyone has a chance to play the cadenza. Peter Hodgkinson, for example, has

been with me since the mid-1960s. As I said, he has a very pragmatic, functional mentality and he's probably the best airport designer in the world. All the other members of my office have their own expertise. Architecture is so complicated and so large and diverse that there will always be someone who knows more about it than me.

TW Do you therefore think that one aspect of being a genius is a certain degree of ignorance?

RB Ha, ha, maybe. When I was younger I had a real ego. I was 18 when I started designing architectural projects, and perhaps because of my mother, I would have hated the idea of being ignorant, because I believed in my own genius. But as soon as I turned 45 the usual things like fame, money or glory didn't motivate me any more. I just wanted to work.

CP Wasn't it around that time, when you were 45 or so, that there was an exhibition at MOMA of your work alongside Léon Krier?

RB That's right. I exhibited a classical tower I had designed for New York and Léon presented a redesigned Washington DC. Léon is a great draftsman, a great artist, and at that point I was obsessed with the Renaissance and certain strands of classicism so we were grouped together. But 20 years later, after I did a project for a high-speed station in Bologna with a much more contemporary vocabulary, he supported a petition against it. I like Léon very much as a person and as an architect, but progress is difficult with the kind of position he adopts now.

CP Do you therefore now reject the way you were part of that celebrated architectural scene in the 1980s?

RB No, that was an important part of my life. At the 1980 Venice Biennale we invented postmodernism, but within a few years it had become a kind of official national architecture of the US, and an architecture of success. I knew instantly it was finished. No one seemed to understand that when we write a new architectural vocabulary based on classical history, or any other movement, it's not a final position, not the only solution, but simply part of an ongoing story. I still very much believe that architecture can be expressed in different languages, one of which can be derived from classicism. I've never wanted to be a model for only one way of working, or a single school of thought. I want to change and be able to experiment. And so if I had to explain my own architectural story I would characterise it as one of failure.

TW It's very unusual for an architect to admit to failure. The history of architecture is always presented as a series of successes, even the historiography of your architecture. And so if we go back yet again to this great little AA catalogue of your work, the book ends with an amazing text by Charles Jencks, writing perhaps more euphorically than ever, in which he describes you first as the Napoleon of architecture, then as the Bobby Fischer of architecture and then finally as the Muhammad Ali of architecture – saying that you'd knocked out Moshe Safdie, Archigram, Paul Rudolph, I M Pei and even Jencks' favourite, Michael Graves – basically, that by 1981 you were the champion

Construction site of Walden 7 and the future La Fábrica, Barcelona, 1970–75

La Fábrica, 1973–75

of the world. And so I really like the fact that in the second half of your life you've come to appreciate the idea not of winning but of losing, of failure.

RB Ah, yes, although you should bear in mind that if you're born and raised in London or New York, you'd expect always to have winning ideas. But if you're born in Barcelona you have to get used to failure. Losing is part of our way of life here! And the thing is, I really like all those architects Jencks mentions. I never see it as about victory or defeat. I like Richard Meier, and I can recognise the huge talent of Frank Gehry. I even like parts of what Norman Foster does, parts of Zaha Hadid. I don't especially like to do twisted buildings myself, but I do appreciate the more graphic component of architecture. It's more contemporary architecture that I engage with less, numerical, computational architecture that seems only to come out of the world of animation. This architecture seems only good for magazines.

CP How do you fight against architecture turning into an advertisement?

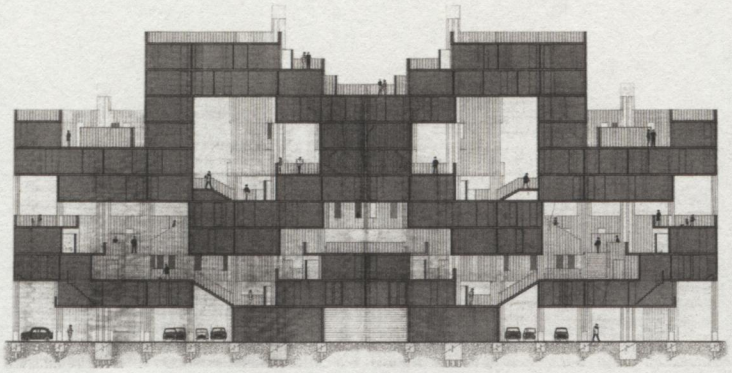
RB You can't. Sometimes I even think it signifies the end of the profession.

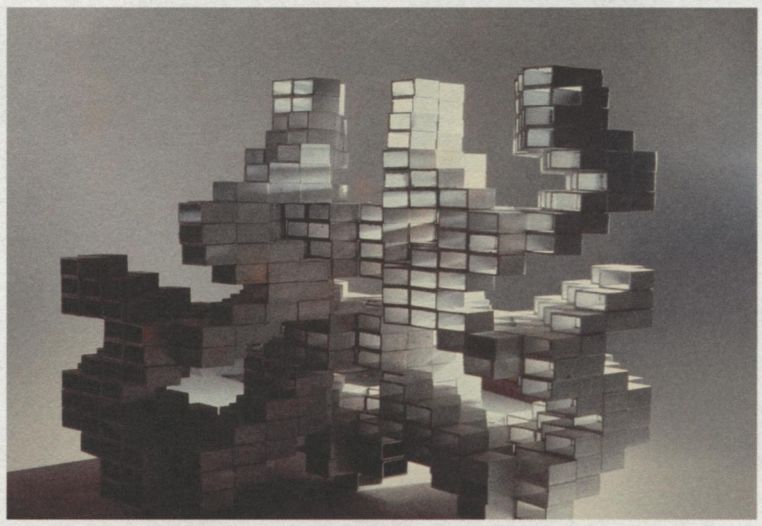
CP But Ricardo, there was a moment when your own buildings were the image of that profession.

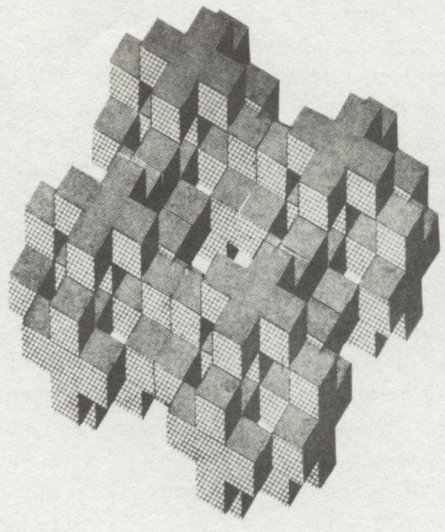
RB Times have changed. I always used to think of the profession of architecture, the making of a building, as like writing a novel, in the sense that you don't need anything especially complex or technologically advanced to produce something really meaningful. Even engineering, at its heart, is like this. When you build a big bridge all you really need to know are the number of piers, the spans and the loads the structure needs to support. You just figure it out. I like to think that we could do engineering or architecture using exactly the same technologies as were available in the nineteenth century. But the reality is that things have changed. Newer computational technologies are required. And in this period now when the star architect is disappearing we have something even worse, when the architect is just one small component of a much larger management process. It's as if architects have become like lawyers – diluted into bigger associations and partnerships. Architecture is becoming a service provider, which for me is really the death of the profession.

TW Perhaps the alternative model is to go back to the little Barcelona workshop, the atelier that makes in the back and sells in the front?

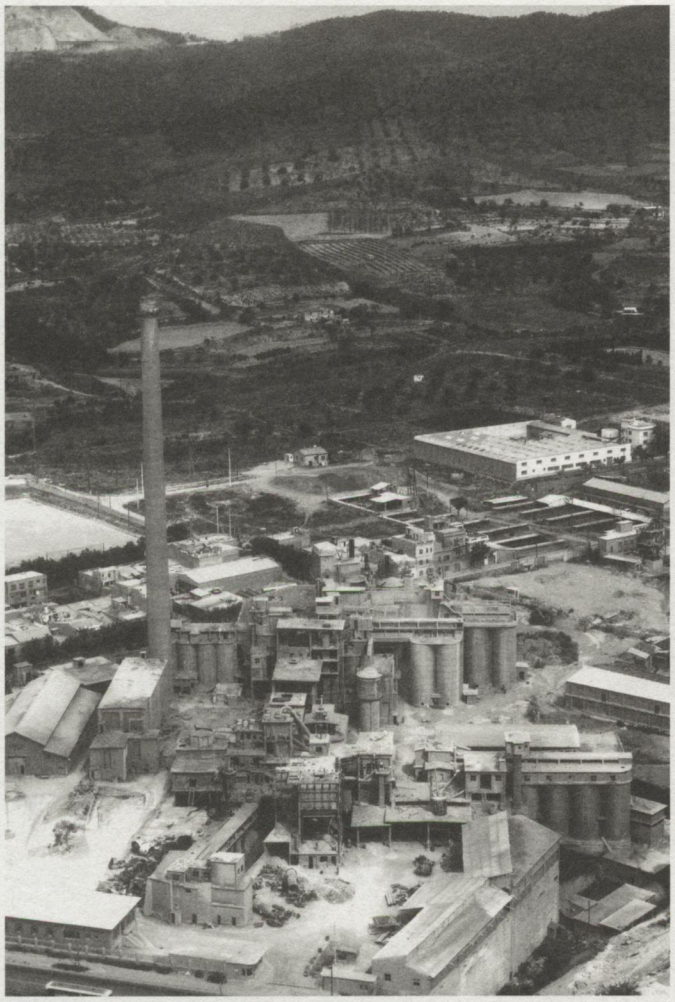
RB Catalunya today has lost its finances, its politics and many of its traditional values, but it will always be somewhere that has its own cultures of production and resistance. And so if you were to promote that workshop, I'd definitely back you up. This is what I do now, I co-operate and support. But you must know two more things: my projects and my creativity are the reasons I live my life. The moment they end, perhaps I will too. Of course, I still want to change, even if I don't change as much now as I should, or would like to, but everybody here in Catalunya is an artist or an artisan, everybody wants to invent something, and in the end I'm no different.

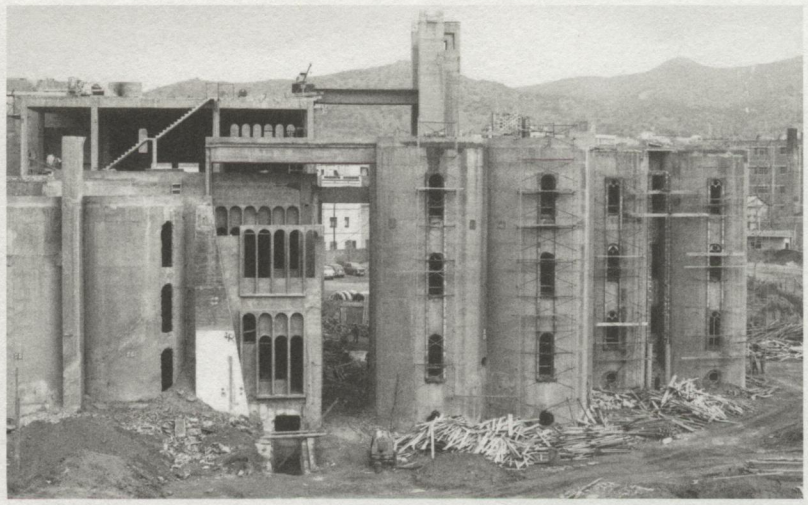


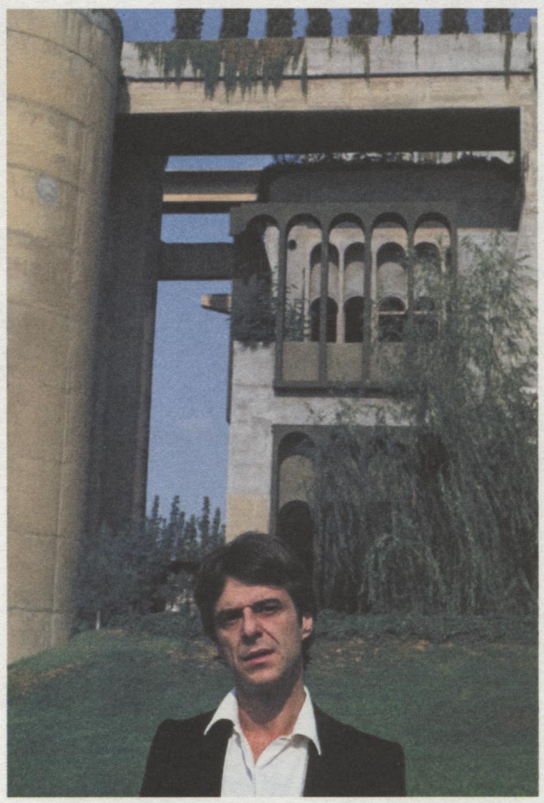




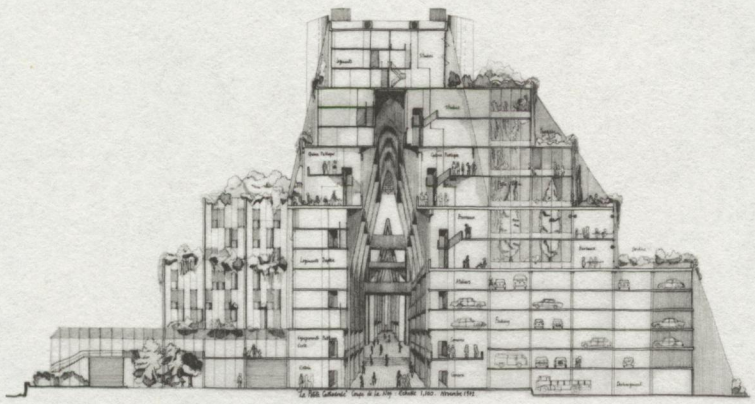
Top right: Gaudí District, Tarragona, 1964–68
Middle and bottom left: Walden 7, Barcelona, *c* 1975
All others: City in Space, 1970

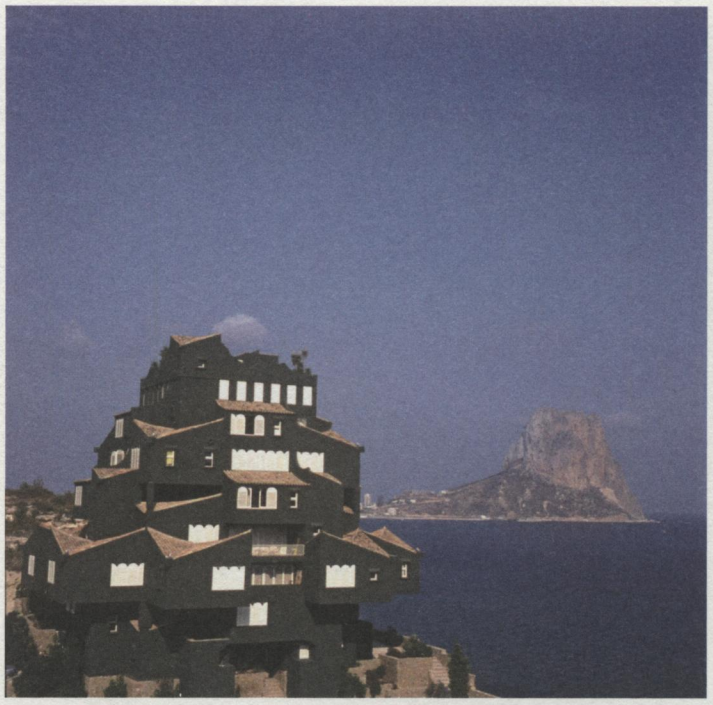


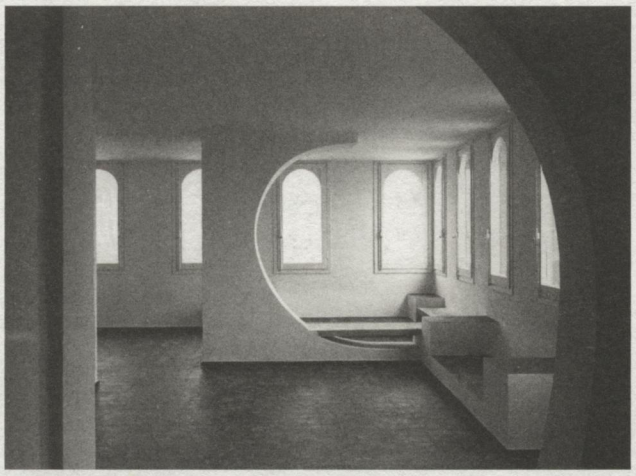


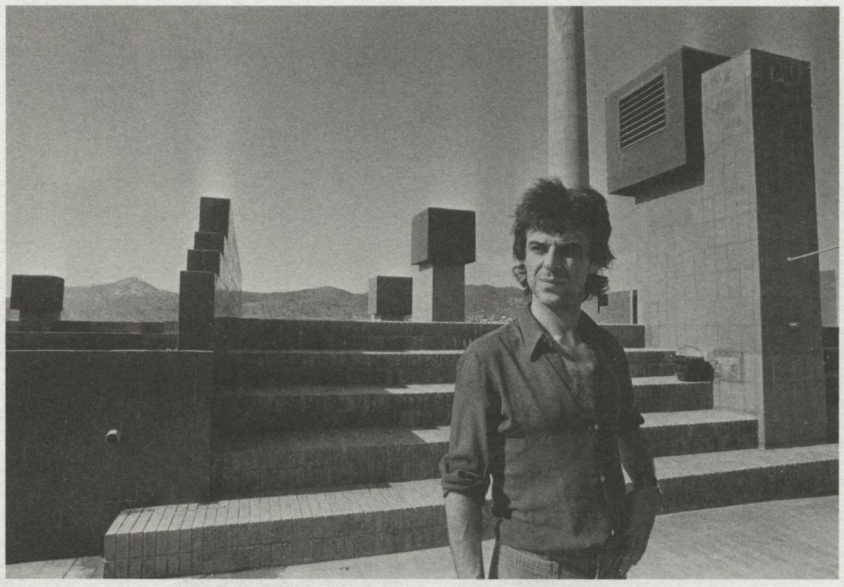


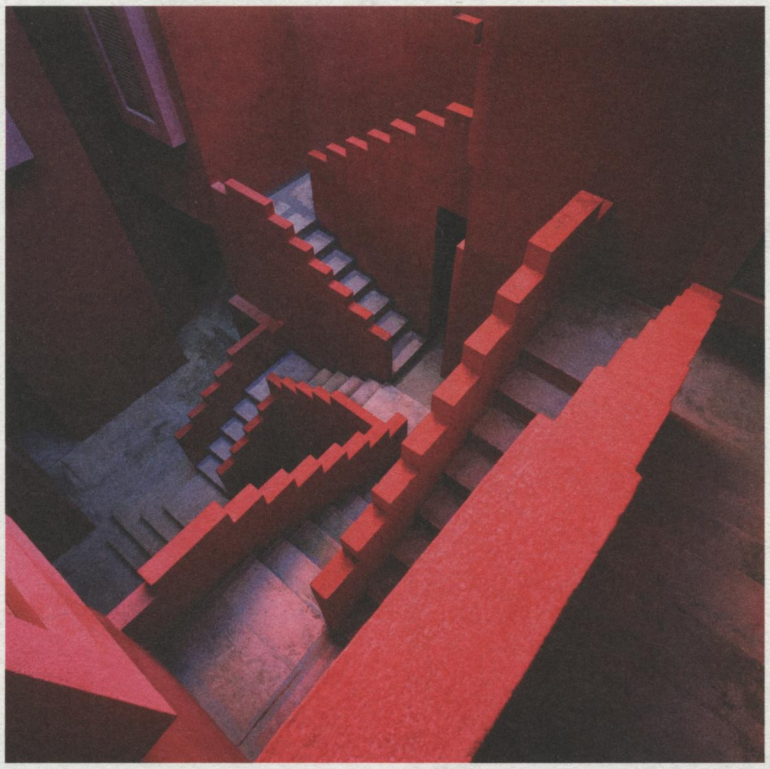
Construction,
interior and exterior
views of La Fábrica

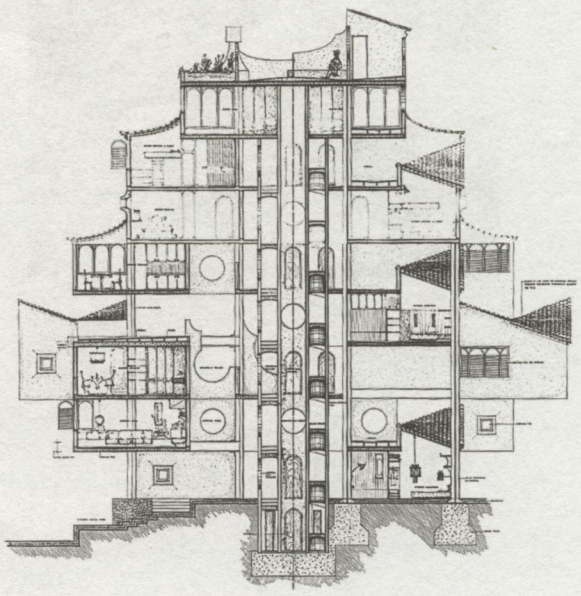




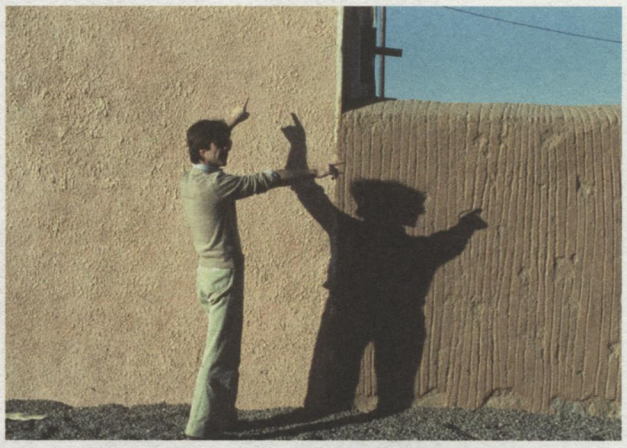


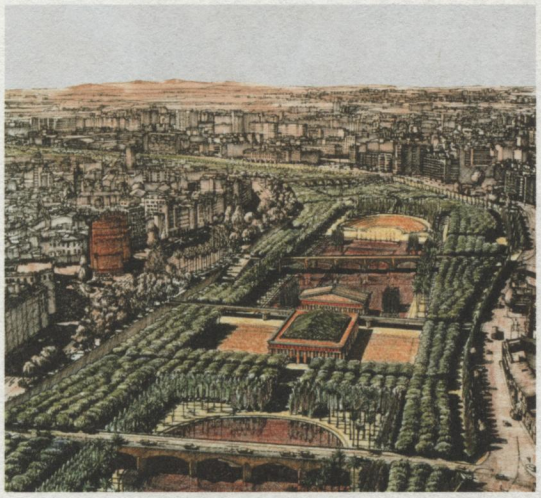






Top left: La Petite Cathédrale, Cergy-Pontoise, 1971
Bottom left: Muralla Roja, part of the resort complex
La Manzanera, which also houses Xanadu, Alicante, 1973
All others: Xanadu, 1971





Top left and middle right: Les Espaces d'Abraxas, Paris, 1982
Top right: Site visit
Middle left: Les Arcades du Lac, Paris, *c* 1982
Bottom: Turia River Gardens, Valencia, 1986

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