

MARIA RIUS RUIZ

Past Futures

A Posthumous
Dialogue
with
Ricardo Bofill

On November 30, 2021, Ricardo Bofill and I met at his Barcelona-based atelier, la Fábrica, where the prominent Spanish architect and urbanist lived and worked for nearly 50 years. Wearing a spotless white shirt and smoking a Marlboro, Bofill greeted me at 4PM, sitting at the big wooden table where he worked, often surrounded by members of his team. We spoke, in Catalan, for over an hour. A month and a half later, on January 14, 2022, Bofill passed away.

Entitled *Past Futures*, this piece consists of selected passages of what became Bofill's last interview. The interview excerpts, which I have edited and translated to the best of my abilities for the specific purpose of this publication, touch upon different scales and forms of disappearance. I used this opportunity to include my own reflections on Bofill's remarks. My goal is to showcase the generational contrasts between Bofill, who practiced architecture for more than half a century, and my own voice as an architect with only a decade of experience. By reflecting on past architectural utopias from today's perspective, this posthumous dialogue between Bofill and me creates a fictional space where time dissolves.

The content of this essay belongs to a series of interviews that I conducted between 2018 and 2023 with other members of Taller de Arquitectura (1964–1975), the transdisciplinary team that Bofill brought together at the beginning of his career. These members, who I thank for their time and generosity, are Anna Bofill, Xavier Bagué, Manolo Núñez, Peter Hodkinson, Ramón Collado, Salvador Clotas, and Serena Vergano.



FIG. 1 Taller de Arquitectura collage, 1968. (Courtesy of Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura RBTA Archive)

RICARDO BOFILL (1939–2022) IN CONVERSATION WITH MARIA RIUS RUIZ.

RICARDO BOFILL Before I did architecture, I liked a lot of things—I liked the cinema, I liked politics, I liked psychiatry, and I thought a discipline like this could not just be self-contained. Architecture is a social discipline, which has to do with people and with the way we live.

MARIA RIUS RUIZ I relate to Ricardo's and his team's conception of architecture. They disassociate from the modern movement and understand the spaces we design not as functional sculptures or machines to live in, but as settings where life happens, with a huge impact on our health and well-being. Our profession, however, should take into account not only humans but all the other species with whom we share the planet. Our historically anthropocentric approach to architecture has long disregarded the ecosystems of which we are part.

RB New ideas cannot just come out of the world of architecture. Architecture is a very small world if you don't relate it to all the sciences. I always thought that you had to work with people from other disciplines and listen, understand, and work together to

blend ideas and see what happens when you cross these ideas with architecture.

MRR In a time of hyper-specialization, architects should not only build bridges across disciplines, but also blur the lines among those disciplines and work in a transdisciplinary way. When disciplinary boundaries are erased, expertise blends and new disciplines arise.

RB When I realized that architecture on its own greatly constrained me, I started to work with poets, such as José Agustín Goytisolo; with philosophers, such as Xavier Robert de Ventós; with mathematicians, such as my sister, Anna Bofill; together we all formed a working team. We all wanted to change architecture and, at that time, to change the world, in a utopian way.

MRR Has our discipline changed since then? Can we change the world with our own practices? The optimism of the 1960s contrasts with today's realism. We are in a count-down to save the planet due to the overconsumption of resources that began in what we know as modern times, all in the name of progress and individual comfort.

RB We started on Nicaragua Street [in Barcelona] in one of the first houses I built. I lived in an attic, and the studio was downstairs next to my father's office, until we planned the project of turning an old concrete factory into our studio, where we are now.

MRR When concrete production ceased at la Fábrica, the building was abandoned. El Taller de Arquitectura modified its structure to inhabit it to preserve both the atmosphere of the ruin and the memory of the original construction. Today, Ricardo is no longer there physically, but his essence and the spirit of Taller de Arquitectura manifest as one of the multiple layers of time in the ever-evolving structure of la Fábrica.

RB My mother wanted me to be an orchestra conductor. She had a very strong personality and was an Italian *mamma* who insisted you are a genius.

MRR At that time, even though the fight for women's freedom began, it was acceptable to support—economically and morally—only one's son, regardless of the extraordinary skills his sister, Anna Bofill had. She was also a member of Taller de Arquitectura (Architect, PhD) and composer, with a keen interest in geometry and mathematics. Architecture is one of the most collaborative practices. Advances in the field, as in many others, are the accumulation of long-term, collective knowledge and efforts. The myth of the solo architect, the isolated genius, which so inflects the modern architecture movement, has not yet vanished. Privileging someone as a heroic figure runs counter to the communal and transdisciplinary approach and it systematically renders fundamental efforts and contributions invisible.

RB I was under pressure; I accepted the role, but I was very anxious. My father, Emili Bofill, was an architect and contractor, and that gave me advantages. I was able to start working straight away, even before earning the title of architect. With my father's construction workers, we built almost without the need of any plans. The craftsmen were very good, exceptional craftsmen. I visited construction sites a lot, and I remember modifying the projects on the spot.

MRR Craftsmanship is rare today. Because of industrialization, many crafts have disappeared. The ten-year experience of our practice, NUA architectures, tells us that in Spain, it is significantly more expensive to build with local materials and techniques, which are better for the planet and for our health, than to use standardized ones. What used to be the most economical way to build, where available resources were optimized, is now a luxury.

RB The '60s were years of change. There were all kinds of utopian ideas circulating around the world, and somehow they arrived here. Ideas about freedom. All the individual freedoms that we accept now—freedom of sex, freedom to die, women's freedoms—it all began in the '60s. I was in favor of all freedoms. We wanted to break with the idea of the traditional family, which no longer existed. The family...we thought it was only one of all the possible ways of living in a community. We divided apartment typologies into modules, with the idea that the flats shouldn't be predefined, and that people should be able to choose the number of modules and size of their homes.

MRR Society in the 1960s was already questioning the idea of the patriarchal family. Nevertheless, most of the available real estate housing in Spain today continues to respond to the model of a traditional family. At the scale of a residential unit, this phenomenon is what the Habitar research group (affiliated with the Barcelona School of Architecture at Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya) refers to as Key house design. It typically includes a big living-dining room, a kitchen, a toilet, and a series of rooms, one of which is still commonly known as the Habitació de matrimoni (marriage's room).

RB I was very interested in affordable and collective housing. We wanted to build housing that was not rigid, that was very simple, and that was very cost-effective. Then I started doing several tests on spatial architecture through modularity. Our first large-scale experience was El Barri Gaudí, in Reus. A neighborhood of 2,000 apartments of which 500 were built. The Barri Gaudí works with two types of floorplans that are combined and articulated by geometrical operations. The result was a wide variety of shared spaces of different heights, allowing the neighbors to wander throughout the entire neighborhood and giving the opportunity for more community life to happen. After this experience, we continued our investigation with the Castillo de Kafka built in Sitges, the Xanadu and the Muralla Roja built in Calpe, and the Ciudad en el espacio

(City in Space), which was about to be built in Madrid, but which was eventually banned by the dictatorship. Most of our research and ideas from those years were condensed in Walden 7, built in Barcelona in 1975, although not completely.

MRR Although City in Space was ultimately banned, Ricardo and the Taller de Arquitectura team succeeded in constructing, within the constraints of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, two speculative and radical social housing projects: Gaudí Neighborhood and Walden 7. Today, the realization of any experimental project must navigate through the intricacies of regulations, politics and, above all, economic imperatives, which remain the primary factor shaping our built environment.

RB We then tested to see how far such systematization was possible, without becoming boring and repetitive. Above all, we wanted to create other types of housing where people could live in community. The will to break with Le Corbusier's idea of the city, where there is a place to work, a place to live, and where people live in blocks.

MRR In-person interaction has proven to be essential for human health and well-being. We are now hyper-connected digitally but more isolated in physical space than before. The interdependency and communal life that prevailed in small populations, organized around resource scarcity and optimization, has disappeared in cities today. If we want to stop asphyxiating the planet, however, we might need to challenge our understanding of comfort, build less, and share more, once again.

RB I see every single work I do as a failed experience; the Walden, for example, between the utopia we imagined and the reality that it was, a small bourgeois community that lives very well, is closed, and very much likes living there, there's a big gap. The utopian theory serves to criticize the work and to move architecture

forward. So you build something, and once it's inhabited you do self-criticism. You see what mistakes there are between what you've conceived and what's happened. Then these mistakes serve you when creating the next iteration. Perfect work does not exist, it's a race against a vacuum, a challenge in itself.

MRR Crystallizing radical ideas is important to continue walking towards a better future. Ricardo believed utopia was realizable. Yet, when utopia is materialized, it paradoxically disappears: the generative force of utopia—the concept of U-topos, or no place—lies in its inherent unattainability.

RB Utopia in general is important because it is a move towards the future. Rethinking the architecture that needs to be created in the next few years is the part I find most interesting, but we need to be careful. Utopia is good as a driving force, but it can also lead to very rigid ideas and may even come to represent authoritarian systems.

MRR I think this is an essential point. There is a very thin line between utopia and the imposition of new social structures and lifeways that may seem ideal from an individual perspective but affect collectives too. What is utopia for some might appear like dystopia for others.

RB The utopias that were built ushered in many problems; but they are necessary since, without any ambition of a better future, architecture would be at a standstill.

MRR Agreed—we need experimental architecture to move forward. But who should fund it, and who should inhabit the prototypes?

RB Today we are at a turning point because, for example, the Walden cannot be repeated. Neither laws, nor the economy, nor funding would allow it to be carried out.

MRR Today, experiments like those built in the 1960s and 1970s that offer new, radical ways of living together are no longer feasible. Hyper-regulation along with the dynamics of the real estate market leaves no room for these kinds of alternatives. While capitalism persists as a driving force, it is difficult to believe in cities where our well-being will prevail over economic interests.

RB It looks like a unique case that you've done, and you see what works and doesn't work, but it's unrepeatable. You have to invent another story.



FIG. 2 RBTA Archive in the underground concrete silos of La Fábrica, 2023. (Photograph by author)



FIG. 3 Meeting space where Ricardo Bofill and I discussed, 2023. (Photograph by author)



FIG. 4 View from one of the gardens of La Fábrica with one skylight that illuminates the RBTA Archive underground, 2022. (Photograph by author)



FIG. 5 Entrance to La Fábrica, 2022. (Photograph by author)



FIG. 6 Courtyard functioning as an exterior hall from where interior spaces can be accessed, 2022. (Photograph by author)



FIG. 7 View of La Fábrica from Walden 7, the last utopian collective housing project by Taller de Arquitectura, 2023. (Photograph by author)