

Rediscovering the world of celebrated architect *Ricardo Bofill*. Interviewed by *Miguel Figueroa* and photographed at his *factory* by *Nacho Alegre*.

If the architecture world was compared to *Star Wars*, Ricardo Bofill would be a *Jedi Master*, a sort of *Obi Wan Kenobi* of the world of construction. *Bofill* is an inspiration, not just to his peers, but to rebellious voices across the world. Expelled from his university, barred from working in his home country, Bofill became an international legend, erecting buildings in every continent across the world. From the *W Barcelona* to *77 Wacker Drive* to his masterpiece, the *Walden 7*, Bofill's designs set to change the way we view the world. Our San Juan – *Barcelona* conversation began chatting about an unfinished project he had design for the capital of *Puerto Rico*. The now cement infested *Convention Center* area was originally designed as a seashell like park that would've completely transformed the island's urban planning. But, alas, it made it only to blueprint. For 45 minutes, we had a metaphysical conversation about the creative process, the importance of a nomadic life and why modern architecture, as we know it, is approaching its swan song.

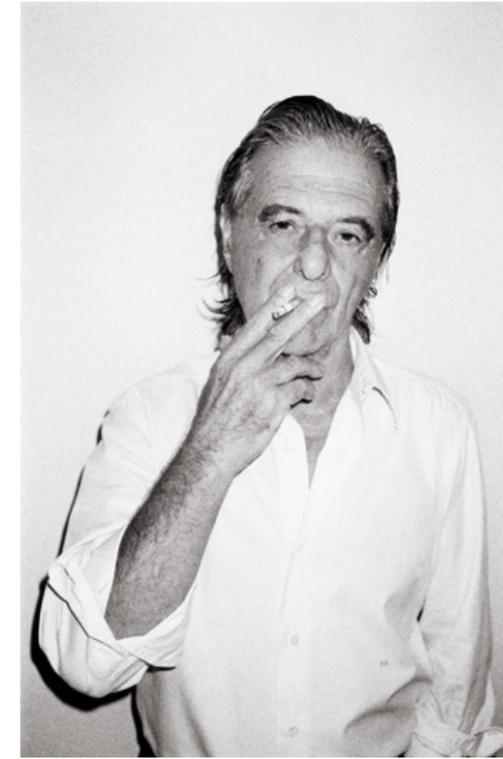


Ricardo Bofill

RB. You're living in Puerto Rico? **MF. Yes. I'm back. I lived in Barcelona for four years and three in New York. Like you do, I consider myself a nomad.** [Laughs] The new nomads! **Yes, indeed. And very proud of it.** I follow the Tuareg's principles. They were the ancient nomads. We are nomads of the soul. I met them during one of my trips to the Sahara. They are an ancient tribe and I explain in my past essays how they viewed architecture, space, their lifestyle, their intelligence and family customs; as well as other ideas on individualism. They are a matriarchal society; they form their families and leave once more. They don't know the concept of a "normal" bourgeois family. I learnt a lot from them, but those were other times and today there are rules of formalism that do not apply to the Tuareg. It was the most beautiful trip I ever did. Anyways, what are we talking about? **I have a series of questions....** Don't mind me. **Why were you expelled from the university?** At that time Barcelona was a very sad, grey and ugly city. It was during Franco's regime and I wanted to change things and change the city. Once I entered the university, we formed the first free labor union for university students. At the time, there was very vertical and Franco-driven union. We thought it was conventional to have one. It was the first labor union in Spain. We had a problem with the police, I was caught, thrown into a jail cell and was forbidden from finishing my career. From there I had to flee and go to Switzerland. **Was this the beginning of your nomadic life?** Yes, it was. I was very curious to know what was happening in the rest of Europe and in other countries. I worked, studied and jumped back and forth from Geneva to Barcelona. After that, I started the Taller de Arquitectura, which as a multidisciplinary that consisted of more than just architects: there were engineers, poets, writers, philosophers and mathematicians. We were all there to think about other types of architecture. We wanted alternatives to the architecture that was the norm at the time, which was uniquely austere. We thought that we needed an alternative and we thought about other movements that were happening in England and Japan. We wanted to create change through the liberalization of certain customs that were illegal at the time, such as sexual and personal freedoms, as well as a space for different forms of social unions and families. We did projects that broke from the bourgeois mold and allowed us to think of a different architecture that was not meant for mom,

dad and their two kids. There were many possible forms for the community and matrimonies, so the architecture had to be for everybody. Not just small bourgeoisie families. This was the beginning of the Taller de Arquitectura and from there new projects began to surface. We also started to publish books. We got to work and created various examples of architectures that were possibilities. Eventually we did this whole theory of the city within a space from where the Walden 7 was our firstborn. **The Walden 7 is a masterpiece.** I wanted to create a different community for people and for this there were no promoters, builders, nothing. I had to take care of all the marketing and visibility. We had to create new forms of entrepreneurship. The Walden 7 had no property titles, people participated in certain actions from a society within and the building partners lived in the community. It was a specific democratic theory where at the same time personal freedom was the most important aspect. Homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia were fully and freely allowed. The architecture had to reflect these ideals and when you're creating something new, like when we tried to construct a Walden in Madrid, there was police intervention because we were still under the regime and Madrid's mayor at the time barred me from working in Spain, so, I left once more. I went to France and Algeria. From there, I went to the north and worked from Sweden, all the way back to Africa, making my way through Holland, France, Luxemburg, Spain, Morocco, Senegal and from there, the rest of the world. Canada, Japan, China, the United States and India followed suit. This has allowed me to have a completely different vision from most people in the world. When you're a nomad, and you should understand this, sometimes you feel isolated because you have problems with the people closest to you due to their endogamy. **Absolutely. After being away for seven years, you return wanting to educate and change your country.** Yes, yes. That's exactly what happened during my life journey. You always have to travel. It's a different lifestyle. It has its pros and cons. The good thing is that you're always curious to know and work in a new continent. If you want to be an architect, you have to learn the social, political, economical and cultural problems. They are all different. You have a polyhedral view of the world because you see it as a ball. You're in a specific place, looking at the rest of it. You can be in New York, but you're thinking about what's happen-

Right, Walden 7.



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Ricardo Bofill



ing in Africa. I remember the first building we built in Chicago. It was a 200 million dollar building and I thought, “This is the national debt of an African country.” Through architecture you learn at the same time about the differences between scale and magnitude, but also about a country’s culture, its buildings, streets and human behavior. You see people and their culture as they are. The world gets smaller and smaller and we need to be wary of all the climate change. Everything is becoming so relative, but then you visit China, learn their culture from within and encounter these cultures that are over four thousand years old, speak two languages, have their own traditions and way of progressing. In every place there is a totalitarian vision that is different and it’s difficult to talk about it with other people except those who are like you and singers. Young people nowadays love to travel and it’s easier for me to talk to you guys than with a typical, bourgeoisie Catalan family. **It can be tough to talk to people from my generation who’ve taken the petit bourgeoisie route. I’m 32 and starting to see two roads ahead; one that’s nomadic and can be very lonely at times. Sometimes I talk with specific artists who have given up already at my age and I can’t fathom the idea of quitting.** When you choose a life like this one, you have to deal with loneliness. You must have an intense and important personal life and you must have an objective. What I’ve done – and I don’t know if it’s been the correct thing or not – has been to project my future, more than reminisce, be nostalgic or bickering about what’s happening around me... **... that’s awful...** It is awful! [Laughs] You must always have new projects, especially life projects; scope your next couple of years, plan what you want to do and how you can renovate yourself. Being authentic to yourself is not the same as being pretentious. At the end of the day you are visualizing your life ahead and the projects you want to build. **Seems that an architect’s life mirrors that of a writer or a filmmaker. How is the Taller de Arquitectura still going on?** Yes, my son is in charge with a new team. We work in different parts of the world and continue to work in China, India and the United States. It’s very important to have projects and complete them. **I returned to Puerto Rico for that; to finish projects that are pending and until I finish them, I’m not going anywhere.** You’re doing the right thing. The relationship you have with your family and the relationship that you have with the people from your country

when you are a person like you are is more difficult as you go to places and travel, you notice how people tend to repeat themselves. They are caged in a circle, talk about the same things and at the end of it, they’ve been blabbering as if time stood still. What are you working on? **I’m writing my first novel.** Did you feel free in Barcelona? **Yes, I did. I’m really happy that I chose to live in the Old World before moving to New York. It’s that passing of time, what you were mentioning about China, which never helped to settle into the United States. It’s such a young country.** At least New York is an open, cosmopolitan city. If you go to other parts of the country, the xenophobia and prejudice that run rampant in the deep parts of the United States... **The thing is that New York is a bubble within the American mass.** The good thing about understanding the world is that it gives you a different way of seeing it. I don’t know if it’s good or bad, but you have a vision of the world that’s more global and a sharp perception of how people are. You have superior intelligence. You understand why we have wars and change needs is imperative. You understand why we revolt and there are discrepancies within societies. Now with all the climate change we’ve started to notice that there is only world, and if we don’t do something about, the results will be catastrophic. **It’s our only home.** These are difficult times if you’re an optimist or not. If the world ends or continues is difficult to have a perspective about it if you live in a world that is so self destructive and if humans are going to destroy themselves the way things are going now. It’s a type of uncertainty that’s been generalized and politically it’s starting to take notice in an international level. **There are so many changes. Not only climatic, but also political.** Information, new technologies, further class distinctions. We are swimming in world topics that bring great uncertainty and the changes prove that the 21st century will be very different from the 20th. **We can’t escape the gender revolution. What is male? What is female?** In a civilized society this shouldn’t be a problem because there are no distinctions. It’s all a mix. To certain degrees, we all have a masculine and feminine side. But, try getting an alpha male to understand this... complicated, but... [Both laugh] **As long as you understand it personally, the journey is set. It’s all about educating.** As you get older, you realize that time begins to shrink. You notice that death is not important. With age come a whole other set of new prob-

lems regarding the relationship between space and time that become very important and fundamental. **How does this reflect in your personal work? Do you feel the necessity to leave a legacy or do you see it as a continuum of humanity?** Well... You’re also a small molecule in the whole of the earth, aren’t you? And you also take part in its surroundings. This is also changing, but you maintain your basic, essential and original ideas. At the same time you become less utopist because you mix different utopias. I’ve tried to build them and it’s impossible. Sometimes I’ve ended up in the wrong side of the tracks and you become more realistic and you simply want to build the best things possible. But, the construction of your work is intertwined with the construction of your own personality. **Absolutely.** The work that you do – in your case, writing – is an extension of your personality and it must be built at the same time that your work is growing. You have to be your toughest critic. I’m not interested in people who are satisfied with what they do. I like it when people change and they do one thing and another. I always discuss Picasso and Miró as an example of this. Look at Picasso; he was constantly changing because he was never content and constantly wanted to change. Picasso wanted to change his own culture. He was his toughest critic. Meanwhile, Miró, always did the same thing and went deep into it, but his world was quite reduced. **Picasso’s plurality is impeccable.** Of course, Picasso was a painter who was constantly changing. Not being contempt with yourself is what makes you change and modify your ways. You have to be your toughest critic. In the long run, what other people say about you does not matter that much. What counts is your own criticism and your necessity to create and continue doing so. Creativity is linked to your personality. Creativity is constantly looking forward to your next project and criticizing for the way that you are. You have to try not to modulate your way of being. You need to construct yourself somehow. With your head you are able to construct your personality. **Some people forget they have that power.** Yes, everyone does. I learnt it from my mother as a child. Everyone, from a shoemaker, to an engineer, a thinker, a philosophers... even Einstein and Newton had levels of creativity. But, everyone can be creative. One who puts his capacities to good use, does an activity well or has an ample capacity for abstraction and can generate mathematical or formulas from physics that are very com-

plicated. We all have the creative capacity, and the need to keep learning and searching for new things. Isn’t that so? **I’d like to go into film eventually.** You have to be really specific with your steps. At your age, I also had different perspectives of things that I wanted to do. For a while I wanted to do film, then I wanted to become a psychiatrist and then I went through a politics phase. But, this is risky because when you jump from one discipline to another, your work offers diminish. Sometimes, you have to set yourself on a specific path. Keep writing. Write, write, write. This will eventually lead you one day to do film. **This is a great piece of advice. Thank you so much.** [Laughs] Now, don’t get nervous. You have to dive into your work and from there dive deeper into it and automatically your literature will be transformed into some sort of image. Many of the things you do as a writer will help you somehow, somehow to do other things in the future. **Do you write often?** I do, but poorly or in a very disorderly manner. I don’t like writing neither stories nor even writing about myself. I like to scribble my thoughts or try to write and formulate through words or ideas. I like that. **You’ve said that being in the military was worse than being in jail?** [Laughs] Yes, I did. Luckily, I was stationed in a beautiful unit in an isle outside Menorca. The scenery was beautiful, the light changed and the contrast between the earth and the sea was precious. But that type of order made me really nervous. I get claustrophobic if I have to do a line to do anything. For me, it was really difficult and when I could, I would sneak out for an hour to watch the sea and admire the earth. It was a short, but, torturous period. And yes, I said it was worse than being in jail, because, at least there you can hang out in your cell, laying down, thinking about your ideas and you are not so obliged to do be part of those formations that gave me severe claustrophobia. **I don’t get it. You’re an architect and architecture is about control, unity.** From an artistic point of view, architecture is the space. The difference between these arts, the construction of the space is the profound sentiment that’s architecture and I’ve always felt in tune with the space. I built architecture for the natural enjoyment of the space. I’ve never been into artificial spaces. A space makes you understand where you are, how you are going to react and look around it. Architecture teaches you to broaden your horizons. Unlike a painter, who focuses on a specific spot, we look at the 180. We really open



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Top, Walden 7.

our eyes and see the space, its object, and people within it and how they move through it. **Architecture can affect ones psyche.** Yes, yes. Back then; we used to do psychiatric tests with people who had psychological problems. We would record them and study them afterwards to analyze their reaction to the space and how it conditioned them. Through these tests we were able to understand how you can diminish someone by just the space that they inhabit. That's why it's important to change and to travel, to broaden your personality. **Nowadays a nomadic life is rare. The internet has made everyone so comfortable, that they barely go out of their homes anymore. How do you guys see this challenge at the Taller de Arquitectura in order to visualize the future?** We are trying to understand this new era. It's an important change. Here in Europe, we are returning to the 1930s. There's a sort of regression to that decade through the great European economic crisis, as well as with the recession, the technological changes, the Internet and all the new theories on information. This is creating a really strong process of change for the beginning of a new century. To a certain point, we are re-starting certain elements from the 20th century. It's all cyclical, going back to what it was and in a certain way and in new cultures, as you mentioned earlier, it affects the way people mesh together through computers and telephones. Therefore, ways of living are changing. There's an unbalance between endogamy and globalization, as if both of them were two totally opposing vectors stressed against each other. We are living in an era of very rapid changes and discovering these and recognizing them makes it complicated to know where we are going and more so if there seems to be a very destructive vision that looks at men as we were back to the 18th century; the destroyer, the animal who could fix things is creating an atmosphere of doubt and antagonist psychosis. What's happening today is really schizophrenic. These antagonisms converge and depend on the moment. If you can be severely realistic you can live, observe and have fun trying to understand these changes. It's more difficult than ever to make predictions and have a perspective in this moment than it was during the past century. **Do you see this as a challenge?** It is. When you are older, you can only imagine that you will find young people that are going to

live through this and will be able to understand it and participate of the process. Of course it's a challenge. Knowledge, understanding the world and yourself within this changing world and what is your position in it is the main challenge to understand de the construction of personalities nowadays. **I have a lot of young architect friends who've had traumatic divorces with the field.** The thing is that architecture of auteur, to a certain extent, is extinct. These are other times and architects now focus so much on the work, but aren't able to express themselves. Firms are just a bunch of initials. They can't express their personalities. The world is too complex and the profession has become a certain type of partnership like lawyers. Arquitectura de autor... there's so little left. And there's even less in developed countries like the United States. Architects are now grommets inside a machine that's fed by speculation, promotion, and marketing and within all of that lies the highly specialized architect. The architect per se, he who can start and finish a project is becoming extinct quickly. **Why have we reached such a definitive and final moment?** Well, because you build for people when society has the need to construct a determined model of society. France was built during the 18th century, Italy during the Renaissance and in China, lately, so much has been built but without an architect's passion. Their drive is disappearing. They've become employees of money and power and this is how you lose your personality and your capacity for expression. **Is there any outlet that's still available for freedom of expression and for being able to create some sort of change in the world?** I believe in the individualistic work of a writer, a painter or a thinker. These are people who are thinking about other places, other countries and currents that can speak certain languages and may converge in a common project. This is possible for someone who has the desires and ambitions that you have. Individualization and internationality, at the same time, are the way to go. That's why I think you are in the correct path. At the end, your desire is not for money, nor fame or fortune. It becomes a specific necessity that's related to creativity. Without your self, you are not capable of achieving this. **This is not a deal you do with the devil. It's a pact you have with your own self.** Yes, that's true.