

One Last Modular Game. Taller de Arquitectura and Le Petite Cathédrale

Taller de Arquitectura, Le Petite Cathedral, Modular Housing1, 1970s Architecture, Unbuilt Project

/Abstract

In 1971, while the *Taller de Arquitectura* was beginning the project for *Walden 7*, the team received the commission to build a housing complex in the *ville nouvelle* of Cergy-Pontoise on the outskirts of Paris. Continuing with the working method that began with the book "*Towards a Formalization of the City in Space*", the *Taller* established a construction system for the project of 1000 homes, which they would call *Le Petite Cathédrale*, based on working with models and creating a clear spatial order.

However, unlike the *Walden 7* project, this small cathedral began to address the concerns of the *Taller* members, seeking formal relationships with the architecture present in the Mediterranean city. For the team, in this project, the form is the "what," the final objective, and the "how" is the Cartesian arrangement of the modules. Thus, *Le Petite Cathédrale* becomes the last example of the team's modular work; an unbuilt project that marks the end of a line of research, that of the city in space, and opens the door to a new attitude in approaching a project, based on form and image.

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Building the Cities in Space

In the early 1970s, after the failed opportunity to build the proposal of Taller de Arquitectura for the *City in Space* in the municipality of Moratalaz in Madrid, Ricardo Bofill embarked on the promotion of a housing complex in the town of Sant Just Desvern on the outskirts of Barcelona, which we know today as *Walden 7*.¹

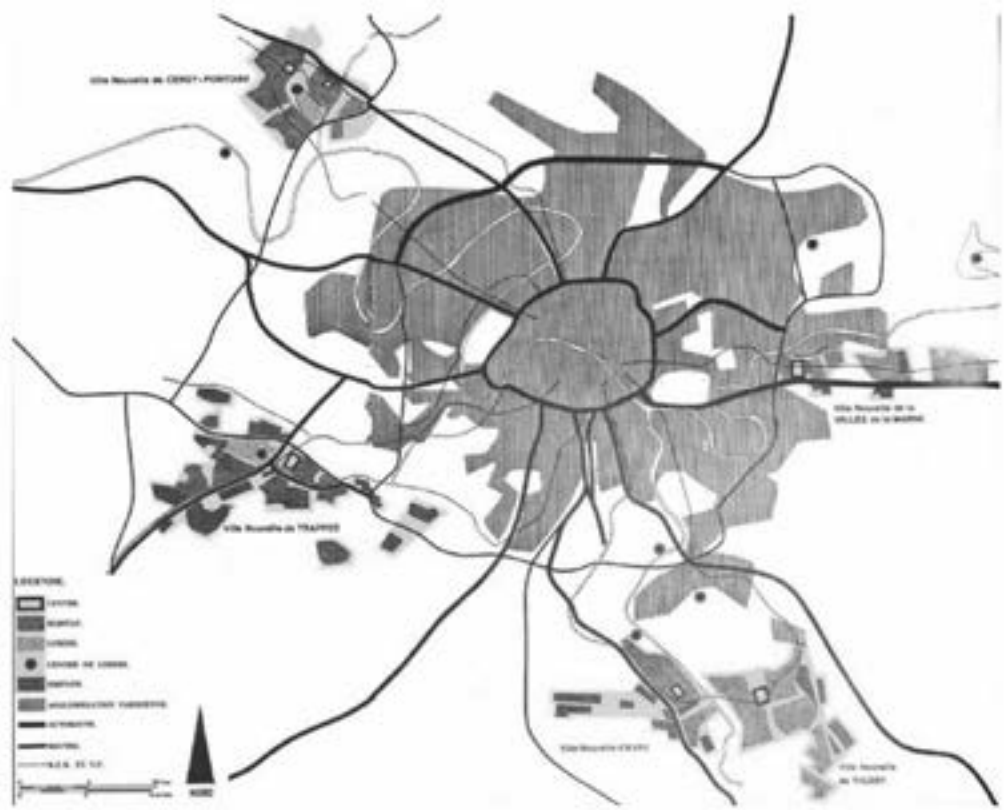
Both projects, the one in Sant Just Desvern and the one in Moratalaz, aimed to put into practice what the members of the Taller² proposed in their publication *Hacia una formalización de la ciudad en el espacio* (Towards a formalization of the city in space).³ In the book, the team theorized about the search for an urban system based on “an open, flexible structure that would allow growth and adaptation to new forms of life and relationships”,⁴ based on their previous projects. And so, the *Walden 7* project could be presented as the end of a line of research since this way of addressing collective housing problems had a short subsequent development in the Taller’s trajectory.

However, in 1971, the same year Taller de Arquitectura embarked on designing the *Walden Island* project, the team began a little-known project that, as we will see in this text, marks the end of the Taller’s search for the *cities in space*. The project, a new city 30 kilometers from Paris that was to house 1000 homes, was a proposal that was never built and that the Taller named *Le petite cathédral*.

A Ville Nouvelle in Cergy-Pontoise

In the 1960s and 1970s, France was in the midst of a major housing crisis due to the destruction of cities following World War II. This situation was exacerbated by the rural exodus to urban centers and the demographic growth experienced throughout Europe during the 1960s, known as the *baby boom*. The problem was particularly acute in the Paris area, so in 1965, the *Schéma Directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris*, the master plan for development and urban planning of the Paris region, developed a plan to build a series of new urban centers called *Ville Nouvelles*.

These cities were conceived as complete nuclei, with residential, commercial, industrial, and service areas all contemplated in the same plan.



The cities were designed to be self-sufficient to avoid the problems associated with the uncontrolled growth of large French cities such as Paris, Rouen, Lille, Marseille, and Lyon. These cities were not to house a population greater than 500,000 inhabitants, and their goal was to create urban centers that presented favorable conditions for the emergence of urban life.⁵

Nine new cities were planned, five of them located in the *Île-de-France* region around Paris. These five new cities were to establish alternative growth poles in the Paris region and thus reduce dependence on the capital as the only economic and administrative center, while also improving the quality of life for residents through the reconstruction and reorganization of urban landscapes. Additionally, all the cities were equipped with public transportation connecting all the nuclei of the *Île-de-France* region. The five new cities planned around what was called the Greater Paris were named Cergy-Pontoise, Marne-la-Vallée, Évry, Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, and Sénart [Fig. 1].

Specifically, the center of Cergy-Pontoise encompassed fifteen municipalities, and it was in this place that Taller de Arquitectura received the commission to design a complex of 1000 homes along with spaces dedicated to other uses. The residential complex was to accommodate middle-class working families, provide commercial space, offices, and solve vehicle parking for users. The project was in an exceptional location, on an elevated point of the future city of Cergy, with views of the Oise River

Fig. 1
Location of the *ville-nouvelles* at the Île-de-France region. Cergy-Pontoise is in the northwest of Paris. Barrado, J., (1974), *Las nuevas ciudades de la región de Paris*, p.4.

1 The housing promotion was carried out together with his economic partner Carlos Ruiz de la Prada and the Catalan Industrial Bank, forming the developer CEEEX3, an acronym for *City in Space Experience 3*.
2 *Taller de Arquitectura* is a multidisciplinary and international team formed around Ricardo Bofill in the 1960s, some of its most prominent members are Manuel Nuñez Yanowski, Peter Hodgkinson, and Agustín Goytisolo, who together with Xavier Bague signed the publication *Hacia una formalización de la ciudad en el espacio* (Towards a formalization of the city in space).
3 Manuel Nuñez Yanowski, Peter Hodgkinson, José Agustín Goytisolo, Xavier Bague, *Hacia una formalización de la ciudad en el espacio*, Barcelona: Blume, 1968.
4 Nuñez Yanowski, Hodgkinson, Goytisolo, Bague, *Hacia una formalización de la ciudad en el espacio*, 30.

5 Juan Barrado, “Las nuevas ciudades de la región de Paris”, *Ciudad y Territorio Estudios Territoriales*, no. 18-19 (March 1974): 75-82.

and its lake, and very close to the historic center of the original municipality.⁶

Like in *Walden* 7, Taller de Arquitectura sought to reflect in this project their ideas of what the city of the future should be. Their proposal, given the political character of the team members, was influenced by the philosophical ideas of late 1960s Europe and social movements such as the May 1968 protests. From these ideas, Taller de Arquitectura proposed a large, monumental complex called *Le petite cathédral*.

City as Housing

As mentioned earlier, the ideas Taller de Arquitectura proposed about the city reflected the political concerns of the team, as well as the theories present in international architecture. The Taller members were influenced by both the culturalist ideas of the neo-rationalist Italian architecture and the neo-futurist proposals of *Archigram* or *Archizoom*. Also, they were in contact with the international architectural scene due to the different international publications that could be found in the studio.

Thus, in 1970, the *Taller* published a theoretical basis for their collective housing works in the Spanish magazine *Hogares modernos* (Modern Homes). The text began with a reflection on the city titled *De la ciudad histórica a la ciudad del futuro* (From the historical city to the city of the future), where Taller de Arquitectura presented their hypothesis of how the settlements of tomorrow should be, from historical cities to the super-industrialized city and its conversion into centers of “knowledge of technique and art”.⁷ The Taller’s vision of the city had a marked leftist character, blaming urban capitalists for the city’s ills and emphasizing the different social groups that are part of the city and the class struggle. For the Taller, the class struggle between owners and wage earners is one of the engines of city growth, and despite the opposition of the interests of “both classes, both rival for their love of the city,” which leads the wealthy to “justify their privileges to the rest of the community by spending their money on palaces, sumptuous buildings, and public parks,” beautifying the city “according to a classical criterion,” but this process of city embellishment has disappeared due to the pressure of consumer society”⁸. For Taller de Arquitectura, it was necessary for the metropolis of the future to recover the communal character that they believed had been lost due to different plans and zonings; to once again have the appearance of a work of art, an integral spectacle in which all its inhabitants are actors and spectators.⁹

6 This information has been obtained thanks to the study of the project plans located in the Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive.
7 Ricardo Bofill Taller de Arquitectura (RBTA), *El Barrio Gaudí: una solución para viviendas económicas*, S.I: Hogares modernos, 1968, 10.
8 RBTA, *El Barrio Gaudí*, 11.
9 RBTA, *El Barrio Gaudí*, 11.

Years later, in 1975, the magazine *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* dedicated a special issue to the Taller’s work, in which Salvador Clotas wrote a text further developing the team’s ideas for the city of the future. One of the main points of interest in the city’s development was the incorporation of working-class neighborhoods within it, and he proposed a series of mechanisms to achieve a change in the urban structure of the time. One of these mechanisms was a “*deep understanding of form*”,¹⁰ according to Taller de Arquitectura, through the control of formal issues, ideas can be translated into forms, allowing a continuous mix of city zones, achieving a continuous urban fabric of functions, social classes, uses, etc., so that each individual could develop within their own space the way of life that best suited them.¹¹ In this way, housing becomes the starting point of the city proposed by the team.

Taller de Arquitectura proposed, therefore, that through the study of a system of combining cells in space, different types of housing could be integrated within the same structure.¹² The various methodological investigations carried out by the team embraced a wide field of operations, but there was a premise regarding the functional criterion that helped delimit the solution:

“The creation of spaces for community life (streets, squares, promenades, avenues, gardens, etc.), regardless of the level or direction of space, without hierarchy of one over the other (horizontal over vertical, or diagonal, for example), which means understanding all space as homogeneous, implying that architectural volumes develop in all directions of space”.¹³

This idea of infinite space, subject to a geometric law, seems to simulate the continuous structures proposed by *Archizoom* with their *Non-stop city*. However, the Taller avoids the uniform character of the continuous spaces proposed by the Italian team, as according to Norberg-Schulz, the Taller and Bofill’s desire for dramatic and magical environments cannot be satisfied solely by spatial organization.¹⁴ To the geometric order, other characteristics such as the conscious use of form, material, or even color are added to give their constructions character, in the sense of building as an identifiable place,¹⁵ placing the Taller at the threshold of Postmodernism that was about to arrive on the international architectural scene.

10 Salvador Clotas in *L’architecture aujourd’hui*, no. 149 (1970): 32.
11 Salvador Clotas in *L’architecture aujourd’hui*, no. 149 (1970): 36.
12 Salvador Clotas in *L’architecture aujourd’hui*, no. 149 (1970): 36.
13 Salvador Clotas in *L’architecture aujourd’hui*, no. 149 (1970): 39.
14 Ricardo Bofill, Yukio Futagawa, Christian Norberg-Schulz. *Ricardo Bofill: taller de arquitectura*. Tokyo: A.D.A, 1985, 11.
15 Bofill, Futagawa, Norberg-Schulz, *Ricardo Bofill: taller de arquitectura*, 11.



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Systematizing the Cathedral

To achieve an open and flexible way of working, Taller de Arquitectura defines a system capable of allowing growth in all dimensions. This system is “an orthogonal mesh structure that allows vertical and horizontal circulation, is easy to develop and grow, and makes it possible to organize life in space”.¹⁶ This system was based on the work of Taller de Arquitectura with their *Model Maker*¹⁷ and allowed the team members, led by Nuñez Yanowski, to work in three dimensions.

We can state without any doubt that the *Model Maker* was part of the formalization of *Le Petite Cathédrale* proposal, just as it was in the formalization of *Walden 7*. If we compare the photos where we see Manuel Núñez Yanowski standing on a large table in the Taller's first studio, arranging modules under Ricardo Bofill's watchful eye [Fig. 2], with photos of the working models of the Cergy-Pontoise project, we see the similarities between the two groupings. In both, Manuel Núñez plays with the modules as if they were Lego pieces to find the solution that the entire team will agreed upon. And just like in *Walden 7*, it is possible to understand the mathematical order with which the housing modules are arranged in *Le Petite Cathédrale* [Fig. 3].

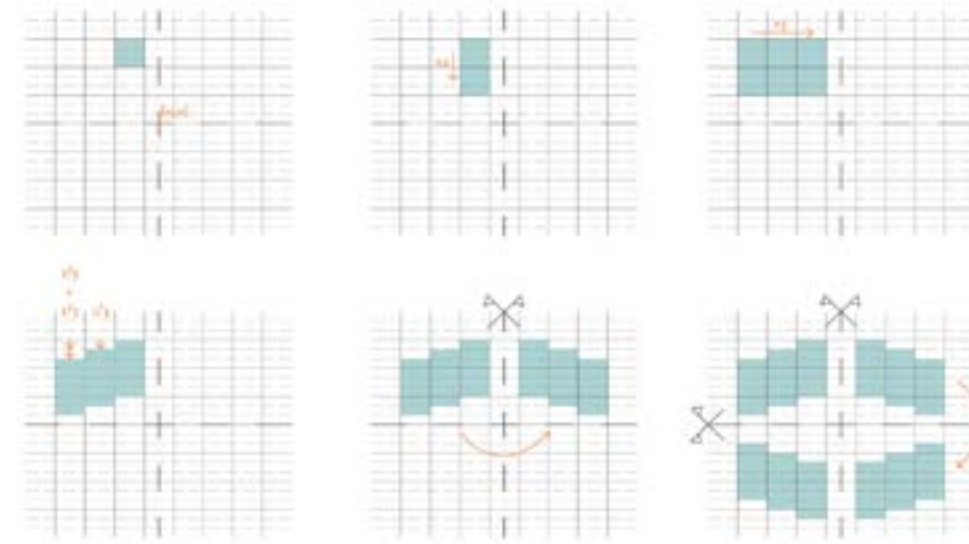
The Cergy project, like the Catalan project, responds to an orthogonal grid that arises from the Cartesian grid of the *Model Maker*. The grid starts from a



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Fig. 2
Photograph of Ricardo Bofill and Manuel Núñez Yanowski debating on the *Walden 7* work models. Courtesy of Manuel Núñez Yanowski.

Fig. 3
Work model of *Le petite Cathédrale*. BTA Archive.



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square module of 5.70 meters, establishing the two main axes in the X and Y directions. A second order is superimposed on this grid in the Y axis, dividing the module into three parts, which will mark the order of displacement of the housing cells between the different levels by one-third of the module, as it does in the *Walden 7* project.

This displacement results in a diagonal section, a stepped configuration reminiscent of the building at 13 Rue des Amiraux, designed by Henri Sauvage in 1927—a reference that is far from coincidental, given that his work was admired by Manuel Núñez Yanowski¹⁸. However, the use of the diagonal also served as a critique of modernist orthodoxy, embracing the complexity of non-conventional geometries. Although Venturi did not promote in his book *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) the diagonal as a formal system—as was the case with Taller de Arquitectura—he encouraged architects to embrace ambiguity, contradiction, and layered meanings, which often manifested in spatial arrangements that defied the orthogonal grid. This created space for the diagonal to emerge as part of a postmodern vocabulary that challenged the rigidity of modernism.

When organizing *Le Petite Cathédrale*, we could establish the center of the project as its origin, what we would call the Cartesian geometric center, the spatial [0,0]. This center establishes on the ordinates in X an axis of order on which up to five vertical axes will be arranged in the ordinates Y, establishing different partial symmetries. However, while the X axis coincides with the arrangement of the modules, the vertical axes will

Fig. 4
Diagram of the geometrical laws that creates the *Petite Cathédrale*. Prepared by the authors.

¹⁶ Nuñez Yanowski, Hodkinson, Goytisolo, Bague, *Hacia una formalización de la ciudad en el espacio*, 28.

¹⁷ Álvarez Arce, Raquel, Galván Desvaux, Noelia, and Martínez Rodríguez, José Manuel, “Maquetas y vivienda modular: la experiencia del taller de arquitectura de Ricardo Bofill”, *EGA Expresión Gráfica Arquitectónica*, no. 26 (2021): 182–193.

¹⁸ “There is a predecessor who greatly opened my eyes to this idea—well, actually, there are several. Yona Friedman, of course, is one of them, and I agree with you on that. Another is Henri Sauvage, who, quite by chance, discovered the diagonal”. Manuel Núñez Yanowski in an interview with the authors on January 19, 2021.

be placed in the center of these. By defining the axes, Taller de Arquitectura will group modules two by two on the vertical axis and subject them to displacements of one-third of the module on the horizontal axis to compose the project's floors [Fig. 4].¹⁹

The modules will be placed following a strict geometric order but responding to a formal will, resulting from working with models rather than mathematical equations.²⁰ Thus, the housing cells are placed level by level generating a third order on the Z axis. The modules are repeated in height three times, establishing a reference level, and at each level, they are displaced by one-third of the module until defining seven arrangements from the origin floor. The result is a 21-story building, with the first two floors semi-buried due to the conditions of the site where *Le Petite Cathédrale* was located.

These site conditions cause the generating grid of the Cergy-Pontoise project to undergo variations in the arrangement of its axes. If the grid that ordered the unbuilt Walden Island project underwent 90-degree turns to respond to the site's preexistences²¹ in *Le Petite Cathédrale*, one of its ends presents a 60-degree turn of the vertical axes. This modification responds to one of the building's arms being oriented towards the views of the Oise River and the Les Étangs de Cergy lake, and the other towards the road that allowed vehicular access to the building [Fig. 5].

Taller de Arquitectura will arrange the different modules following the rules they had established. The result is a covered street of 300 meters long that evokes on a large scale the nave of a church, providing a monumental and symbolic atmosphere. This character is emphasized by a formal play of the Taller. On the vertical axes, the team places ribs that resemble pointed arches, emphasizing the symbolic character of the space. Even in the Taller's sketches or what could be understood as promotional models, it can be observed how at the intersections of the main axes, the team proposes covering the equivalent of the transept with glazed vaults [Fig. 6, 7].

Beyond the various formal gestures, the Taller is capable of generating a system with a clear order that can be easily translated into a mathematical order. This allows the team to extend the system in space, opening the door to the construction of different phases of their small cathedral, as observed in one of Taller de Arquitectura's drawings [Fig. 8].

The *Petite Cathédrale* project exemplifies a vision of monumental

19 There is a series of modules that are displaced by half of the cell, located on the lower floors and intended for commerce and offices.

20 Anna Bofill's doctoral thesis translated the works of *Taller de Arquitectura* into mathematical formulas, but this translation into matrix systems is subsequent to the team's work and draws from it.

21 Raquel Álvarez Arce, and Noelia Galván Desvaux. "La Isla Walden: Reflexiones En Torno a La última Ciudad En El Espacio De Taller De Arquitectura", *ZARCH*, no. 21 (December 2023): 132-43. https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_zarch/zarch.2023218928.

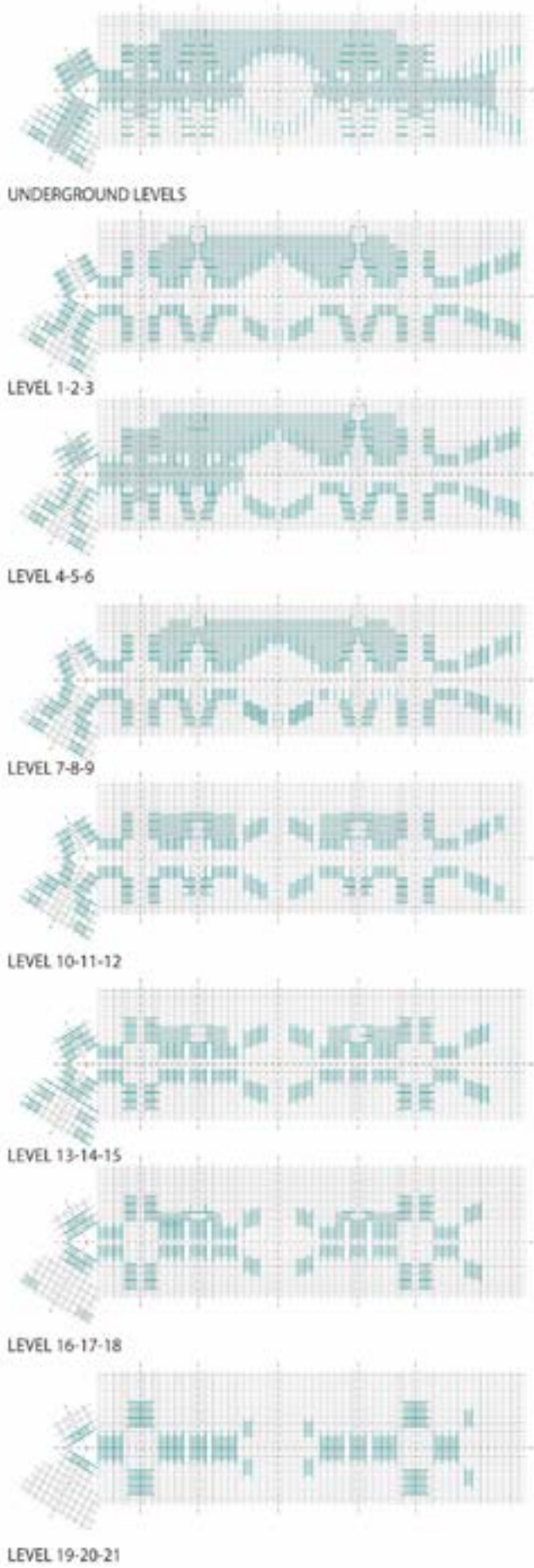
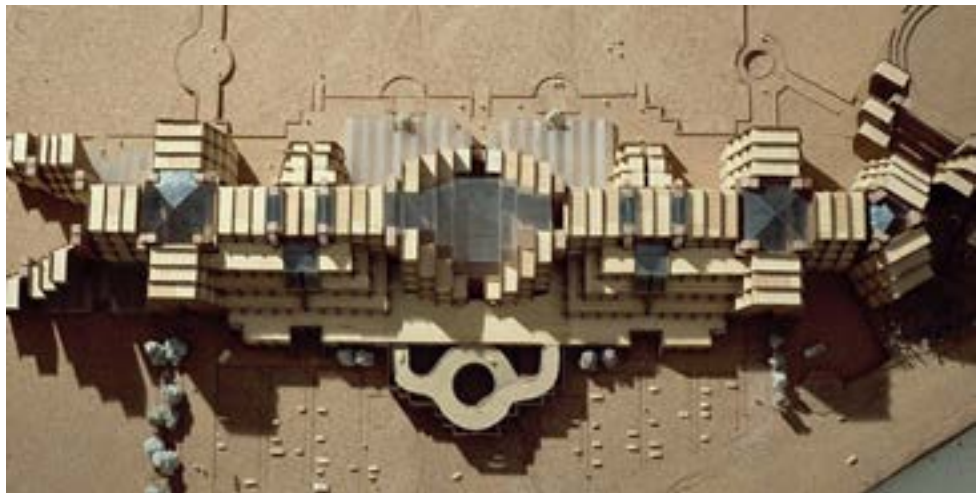


Fig. 5
Diagrams of the different floors of the project, made from the plans in Ricardo Bofill's archive. Prepared by the authors.



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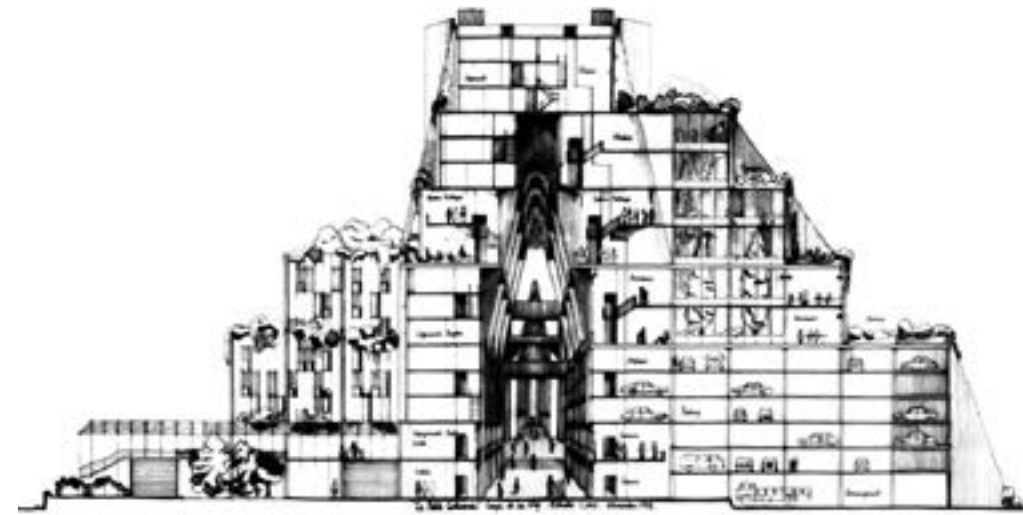
Fig. 6
Model of *Le petite Cathédral*.
BTA Archive.

Fig. 7
Model of *Le petite Cathédral*.
BTA Archive.

Fig. 8
Drawing of *Le Petite Cathédral* conquering the space, demonstrating Taller de Arquitectura system's ability to grow. BTA Archive.



8



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megastructure, where architecture becomes an all-encompassing framework. This concept resonates with Reyner Banham's idea of a vast and monumental infrastructure—comprising structure, transportation, and services—within which individuals, groups, and entire communities could autonomously shape their own environmental conditions.²²

This vision contrasts with the urban strategies implemented in the *villes nouvelles* of France, which were shaped by the principles of Team X and exemplified by the work of Candilis, Josic, and Woods in *Toulouse Le Mirail*. Their approach emphasized a flexible urban grid that allowed for individual appropriation and social integration. A comparable yet distinct proposal was developed by the AUA (Atelier d'Urbanisme et d'Architecture) for Marne-la-Vallée, where the team expanded upon Team X's ideas by introducing linear and axial compositions, typically organized around an interior street. This design gesture reflects a generational shift between the architects of the third generation and the younger practitioners of the 1960s, marking a transition from open-ended frameworks to more structured and monumental urban forms.

Inhabiting the Wall

When Taller de Arquitectura faces its urban projects, it does not renounce the idea of place. To achieve this idea, Anna Bofill, in 1971, in a presentation called "*New Urbanism*," stated that formal mechanisms were necessary to create spaces where life could develop: clear urban spaces with a clear exterior delimitation that provided identity.²³ Thus, by the 1970s, the Taller would bet on figurative compositions, where geometric distributions end up responding to a formal image, as in the case of the *Walden* project, the

²² Reyner Banham, *Guia de la arquitectura moderna*, Barcelona: Editorial Blume, 1979, 5.

²³ Bofill, Futagawa, Norberg-Schulz, *Ricardo Bofill: taller de arquitectura*, 13.

Fig. 9
Section of *Le petite Cathédral*. Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive.

unbuilt *Viaduct* project in the *Manzanera* complex in Calpe, or the project focused on in this text, *Le Petite Cathédrale*.

The Taller's idea was to build a place, but a recognizable place. This place would present the image of a street, a porticoed street like the passages of the 19th century, filtered through modern language, continuing the Taller's search for that new modern Mediterranean city

This search for a city image opens the door to the idea that form "*is the 'what'; design is the 'how'*",²⁴ and in the manner of Kahn, Taller de Arquitectura will build a form in which the material that constructs it is not mass but habitable space. Each of the housing modules with which the Taller will work in their not-so-small models will form the pieces capable of building the walls of their *petite cathédrale* [Fig. 9].

Thus, the walls of this construction are inhabited walls, the sum of housing allows the team to create a cathedral, turning the house of God into the house of man. Recovering the scenic spaces of the city, but this time, responding to the leftist character of the team members, they would not be intended for the wealthiest classes but for the working class.

One Last Game

Although the reasons why *Le Petite Cathédrale* was never realized remain unclear, we can hypothesize why it remained only in the realm of ideas. In 1974, France suffered an economic recession that severely impacted the real estate sector, causing a slowdown in the construction of the *ville nouvelles*. Even Jean-Eudes Roullier, a high-ranking French official and key figure in the development of planned cities, questioned the viability of such a project, had it been pursued in the midst of the economic crisis.²⁵

Additionally, the first post-war Paris reconstruction projects carried out from 1958 with the *ZUPs* (*Zone à urbaniser en priorité*) and the Grands ensembles quickly began to show their limits. These projects, carried out between 1958 and 1969, were sectors marked by standardized architecture and a clear profile of social housing, so Taller de Arquitectura's proposal for Cergy-Pontoise could remind French authorities of these ZUP projects. The ambition of the *ville nouvelle* program was to create real cities, not closed districts, so approaching the project for the new city of Cergy-Pontoise calmly could have led to the abandonment of the Taller's proposal.

Moreover, the Les Halles project placed Taller de Arquitectura- and particularly Ricardo Bofill- at the center of public scrutiny. *Le Petite*

24 Raúl Castellanos Gómez, *Plan Poché*, Fundación Caja Arquitectos, 2012, 189.
25 Dominique Serrell, *Bofill: The french years*, Paris: Norma Editions 2023, 61.

Cathédrale proposal was described by architect and political activist Rolando Castro as "*totally megalomaniac, and he was pilloried for it*".²⁶

But *Le Petite Cathédrale* project was also a turning point for Taller de Arquitectura. Both the unbuilt *Walden Island* project and this project perhaps made the Taller members understand the limits of systematic architecture as a way of building the *city in space*. Additionally, *Le Petite Cathédrale* project introduced a series of formal mannerisms, such as the ribs to emphasize the character of a large, covered street, heirs of the great commercial passages of the 19th century, which initiated the Taller into the new ideas of postmodernism [Fig. 10].

The opportunity that came to the Taller with this commission was also to start working in France and its new technologies. With prefabrication now within their reach, a new world of formal and aesthetic possibilities opened up for the team, which would be seen in the denigrated projects of *Les Halles* or the *Espaces d'Abraxas*.

However, perhaps the most important point in this change of mentality in how to approach the city is the dissolution of the original Taller de Arquitectura team. The first departure from the core of the team that had begun to dream of this *city in space* was Xavier Bagué, who left at the beginning of the Walden 7 project. Years later, in 1978, Juan Agustín Goytisolo left due to economic disagreements with Ricardo Bofill. And shortly after, Manuel Núñez Yanowski also left,²⁷ which perhaps marked the most significant change in the way the Taller worked, and finally Anna Bofill also left. The disappearance of the creative core of the Taller de Arquitectura during the 1960s and 1970s justifies the end of this line of research in the search for this new modern Mediterranean city through a modular game. A way of designing that for Ricardo Bofill was a utopian architecture that could not have further development, leaving the architect alone in view of a new paradigm. A set of ideas with which Bofill had already begun to work on La Fábrica project, opening the door to Postmodernism after this last modular game, after *Le Petite Cathédrale* [Fig. 11].

26 Serrell, *Bofill: The french years*, 122.
27 "And when at a certain moment in 1975, in a traffic jam in Paris, we were sitting with Ricardo in the car, chatting, and Ricardo said to me, 'Manolo, we have to stop inventing, we have to start building.' And I said to him, 'Ricardo, the day you want to do this, let me know, because I won't be there.' And indeed, three years later, I left. And Goytisolo too. We were, let's say, the three creatives." Manuel Núñez Yanowski in an interview with the authors on January 19, 2021.

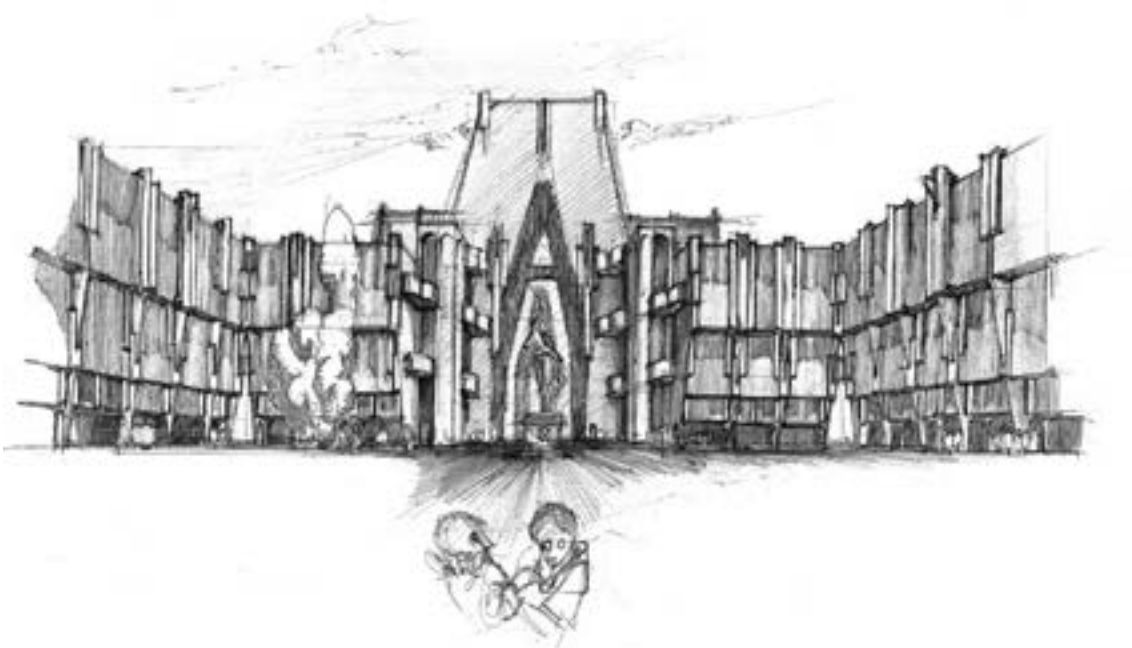


Fig. 10
Drawing of *Le petite Cathédral*. Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive.

Fig. 11
Photography of Ricardo Bofill and Peter Hodgkinson sitting next to the model of *Le Petite Cathédral*. Bofill Taller de Arquitectura Archive.

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