



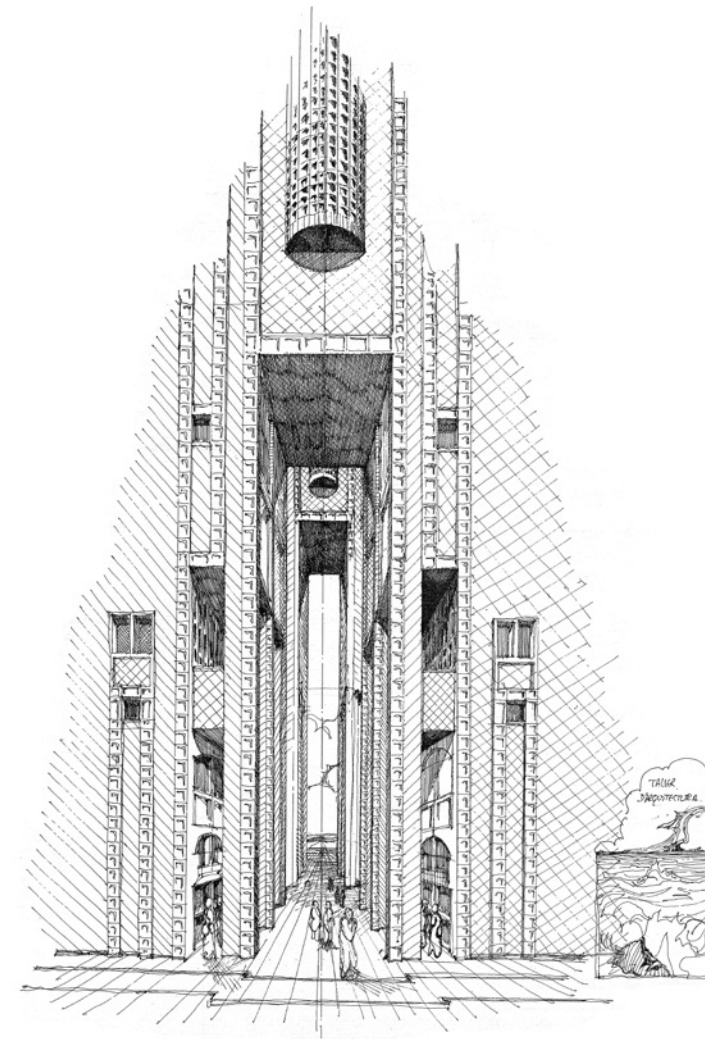
Details from the internal corridors of Le Palacio, featuring classical decoration. The estate manifests Bofill's career-long mission to express excellence in the architecture of city outskirts.

Les Espaces d'AbraXas. "For once, it allowed them to do something more than to make a profit, and to introduce elements of civil engineering to public housing," explains Bofill.

The facades of Les Espaces d'AbraXas were entirely prefabricated, in order to keep construction costs down. Concrete was selected as a discreet material that would harmonize with the urban landscape around it, while alluding to the qualities of stone as used

"I WAS BEGINNING TO UNDERSTAND HOW VITAL IT IS FOR AN ARCHITECT TO BUILD. THEORY AND DESIGN ARE NECESSARY BUT INSUFFICIENT ELEMENTS FOR SOMEONE WISHING TO TAKE PART IN THE HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE. OUT OF THESE CONTRADICTIONS, THEN, THIS PROJECT AROSE AND, ALONG WITH IT, THE VISION OF A NEW WORKING METHOD."

in ancient civilizations. The concrete panels were cast in a mixture of sand, gray-and-white cement, and oxides, creating slight color



A sketch showing how traditional proportions from classical architecture were stretched and emphasized.

variations, from very light ochre to violet blue. Texture was also studied. "Prefabrication allows us to work on the material and on the design of detail: concrete can be processed. Because it is liquid it can be modulated and its texture controlled," says Bofill. This building technique—with the load-bearing structure

contained internally—liberated the architects in terms of design and allowed for a bold take on the classical orders, in which proportions were stretched to their very limits. Traditional elements were played with; architectural emblems were borrowed and rendered strange. The elevations of Les Espaces d'AbraXas feature a catalog of complex architectural references. The usual French order (a sequence of elements traditionally arranged vertically in a quarter-half-quarter proportion), for instance, has been disrupted through a manipulation of the volumes, and a frieze has been added in order to "corrupt" the usual conventions even further. Bofill was inspired by the earlier buildings of playful neoclassicists Étienne-Louis Boullée, Claude Nicolas Ledoux, and Jean-Jacques Lequeu in this respect. Another example of this reimagining of architectural forms is an archway that stands alone, enclosed by the towering wings of Le Palacio behind it.

Drag your eye away from the pomp of its surface, though, and what Les Espaces d'AbraXas provides is high-density housing planned out well. Le Théâtre houses 130 dual-aspect units, all of which look out over the inside of the development and to the outside. The "columns" of this structure are in fact made up entirely of windows. Their reflective curves shimmer, bringing liveliness to the semicircular facade. The building curves around an amphitheater that has been given over to greenery. The public space that lies in between the built components is a hugely important part of life at Les Espaces d'AbraXas, and such zones were featured in the Baroque compositions that Bofill refers to as sources of inspiration. Baroque spaces are mindful of all possible spatial viewpoints and draw movement into otherwise static arrangements, creating scene-scapes in the manner of a painting or drawing. This approach is in evidence at Les Espaces d'AbraXas not just in the use of greenery but also in the constructed urban "doorways" that frame space.

Le Théâtre is complimented by Le Palacio—the high-density U-shaped "block" of the development. The block consists of 400 units reached by a series of external covered streets (known as "galleries"). It rises 18 stories high and consists of apartments that face either into the grand public spaces of the development's interior or outwards, into the city beyond. Bofill describes it as a monument to everyday life, conceived of and composed in space after the rules of classical art. "The transformation of space and, to a certain extent, of time will condition and exalt the life of its inhabitants," he says.

Sitting in the middle of this stage set is the main player: L'Arc. While many examples of postmodernism were known for rendering icons of architectural and design history useless and decorative, here Bofill has done the opposite. He has taken the triumphal arch—the archetypal, grand, but ultimately useless architectural gesture—and filled it with homes. The decorative landmark becomes functional edifice. "Situated in the centre of the interior space, this third edifice serves to accentuate the effect of a stage set," says Bofill. "A division in time and space, a vital central element, L'Arc gives the impression of being the formal resurgence of the two other edifices."

It was originally intended that the rooftops of L'Arc would be landscaped so that greenery would tumble down, making this contemporary rigid structure for mass housing appear like a forgotten ruin. Instead, its roof, like the inaccessible tree-planted top of Le Théâtre, is manicured and cared for—a symbol of the pride residents take in this lived-in monument.