



RICARDO BOLFILL

Architect, 73

OUR MAN IN...

Barcelona

The veteran Spanish architect dreams of building an entire city

My life has been that of a nomad architect; I've worked in more than 35 cities and on more than a thousand projects. I started building when I was very young, winning a lot of prizes and experiencing a lot of success. At the age of 40 I was one of the most well-known architects in the world. But that was a long time ago, so my ego has relaxed about that kind of success now. That I have accomplished so many things doesn't have much value, because for me, what's important is what's coming next and all the projects that I would like to realise. I laugh when people say I'm successful. There are so many things I haven't achieved, I haven't even built a whole city yet.

In 1957, during the Franco regime, I was at university. I was a founding member of a student movement against the dictatorship. During a demonstration I was arrested and expelled from university and sent into exile. This left me with the desire to dedicate myself to study in other European universities. Upon completing my studies in Geneva, I went to Paris, and then Algeria. Since then my work has taken me around the world.

I always returned home though. It's a privileged place. Barcelona is special because it isn't a capital. There are two kinds of cities: cities that are the capital of the state, and regular cities. Cities that aren't capitals, such as Barcelona, rely on civil society to give

the city a reason to exist. And that's why Barcelona has always had to reinvent herself and has always stayed fresh and current.

As it's not the centre of anywhere, it has been able to play a role in counterculture, and the people here have always challenged the status quo. And it's a place where the battle for personal freedoms is constantly played out. I have inherited that desire to defend personal freedom; even as a child I had that fire.

I feel Barcelona and its people are influenced by living by the Mediterranean. We have been imbued with the characteristics of the sea. It has made us non-violent, open-minded and with a love of freedom. And, as with any port city, it has the mixed community and influences that come with a lot of traffic.

Before the 1992 Olympic Games the city had turned its back on the sea. The coastline was a wasteland of industrial buildings. The first and most important thing we did was to face the city towards the sea. I am proud to have been a part of its transformation.

I was drawn to architecture for many reasons. I suppose one reason is that when I was growing up the inner city here was very grey and underdeveloped. Spain was still recovering from the civil war, and the cities only inspired boredom in the population. I studied lots of different disciplines but found that architecture has a relationship with everything that I







TOXIC DISASTER /

When Ricardo Bolfill bought the cement factory that he now calls home it was a wreck spewing out pollution (see above left).

ART WORK /

Bolfill turned the building into "a work of art", partly Brutalist, partly surreal and partly traditional, which he says is still a work in progress (see top right).

was interested in, plus I got to influence and manipulate space, which was very interesting for me as I am claustrophobic.

My favourite project in Barcelona is the building where I live and work [a former cement factory]. I have projects around the world that are more intellectual and more impressive than this, but for me, this is the best. The history of this building is interwoven with my life. Forty years ago I had a small office in Barcelona, but I wanted a big place where I could create a new kind of community. I have achieved that here. At that time nobody wanted to make the projects that I was designing so I had to be everything; the architect, the builder and the PR. I wanted to create a community that represented another kind of economic system, another way of living that had cultural implications that no one dared to do. So I had to do it myself.

I took over the cement factory. It was a big risk for me. It was a toxic environment that created so much smoke and pollution. I dared to transform this disaster into a work of art. It is an on-going project, as it's such a huge space. There are still so many areas under construction. It's an artwork that has to be seen from many perspectives. In part it's Brutalist, because of its rawness; it's also a homage to vernacular industrial buildings; it has a surrealistic quality; and it contains elements of Catalan history and has been influenced by all the places I've ever visited.

I feel that this building is an expression of myself, so it's difficult to sum it up in a few sentences. It's very eclectic and contains so many visions and





aspects. I don't like to repeat myself in architecture – I like to keep evolving. My whole life has been dedicated to trying not to be satisfied with what I have created, so that I can keep developing and honing my style, and this building is testament to that

Gaudi was an amazing creative force: the most remarkable in history. He never repeated himself. He never made two doors or windows the same. But now we live in a different time. We don't have the means or workmanship that they had then. What have I tried to do is keep his philosophy alive, and to never repeat myself. I try to allow each of my projects to be nourished by the genius and cultural infusion of its surroundings.

The most distinct neighbourhood in Barcelona, the one that best represents the individualistic quality of the city, is Eixample. It was built in the era of modernism, in the time of Gaudi. Every house, every building, is distinct. The metal workers, carpenters and artisans were all producing their best work in order to outdo the building next door.

The spirit of Barcelona comes from being an invaded city that, as I said before, is not a capital. The city itself has to constantly reinvent itself and its people have to make things happen. Everyone in this city is open-minded, individual and an artist. Even the business people, under the layers of money and transactions, aspire to become artists, photographers, film makers... That's why people say that rich families never last long in Barcelona, because their children always leave to become artists. The drive to create beauty is stronger here than the drive to create money.

Barcelona is a great city to become a nomad, to throw out the guidebook

and explore on foot. You get the best sense of the vibrancy of the city by strolling from one neighbourhood to the next. You can go to Gracia, to el Born, the beach, Montjuic, and the ambience changes so much – all these areas offer a unique glimpse of the city.

In Barcelona there is great food everywhere, so you can stop off in any place that you like the look of. I like to go to the restaurants at the W Hotel and the National Theatre of Catalonia. But you can eat in world-class restaurants or go to Barceloneta and eat in one of the simple seafood restaurants and it's just as good.

The nightlife here offers so much variety, and it's not very segregated. You can go out in the evening and mingle with people from all walks of life. The night is also a perfect time to walk around and take in the flavours of the different neighbourhoods. In one night you can easily feel that you have visited five different cities, but you can be yourself everywhere. ricardobofill.com

SETTING SAIL /

The W Barcelona (top left), known as the Sail Hotel, due to its shape is one of Bolfill's most famous, and part of the expansion of the Port Of Barcelona.

PORT CITY /

Port Vell (middle left) was part of the development of the city before the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, which Bolfill says he is proud to have played a role in.

ROYAL PLAZA /

Placa Reial is a public square next to the famous La Rambla in Barcelona, popular with tourists and locals alike. Bolfill liked to go out at night and mingle with the diverse group of people in the city (bottom left).

