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11 June 2012 at Nunez's house & office in Paris, France*

* The interview was originally conducted in French. It was later translated into English by the interviewer.

Léa-Catherine Szacka: I came today to talk about a very particular event i.e. the 'Europa/America: Centre Storico-Suburbio' show presented in 1976 at the Venice Biennale. At the time, you were part of the Taller d'Arquitectura in Barcelona and, as shown by the events shots, you were present at the Magazzini del sale on the day of the exhibition's opening.

Manuel Nunez Yanowsky (Manolo Nunez): Yes! That is true. Ricardo [Bofill] called me one day and said: "we are invited to the Biennale. What should we do?" To which I replied: "I don't know". I had no clue because at the time I was in the middle of the battle concerning the Jardin des Halles project here in Paris. As usual, I understood that we would be exhibiting with a group of architects that were very well prepared and aware of what they were doing since they really had this culture of exhibitions, Biennale, etc. which wasn't at all the case for us. So we had to improvise something and I suggested that we presented the project for les Halles. So I went to Venice taking with me some documents concerning the project (I don't remember if they were in color or only black and whites....I think they were both). I didn't know the place or the format of the exhibition. In fact, I knew nothing at all! The only thing I knew was that the exhibition was going to be in Venice. So I rented a big convertible and took with me a few friends. And we drove to Venice. Upon arrival, we discovered this magnificent exhibition space: The salt salon that had just been recuperated by the municipality and by the Biennale. We were placed in between, on the one side Carlo Aymonino and Aldo Rossi and, on the other side, James Stirling. So for me this was already paradise! Just for this, it was worth the trip. Because 1976 was when Rossi had just completed his project at Gallarate. He was a star, as were Vittorio Gregotti and Aymonino. We spent a few days with Stirling (who came very prepared for the exhibition, with all his panels ready) and one of his collaborators. Aymonino and Rossi only showed up on the opening day, but before I think they sent someone from their studio.

L-C.S.: So what did you decide to display in the end?

M.N.: Well, I cogitated for a few days...I didn't know what to do. Then, I realized that the Halles project may had been interesting for us, in our trajectory – because it allowed us to go out of Spain and open up to the world – but perhaps didn't had the same interest for the visitors of the Biennale.

L-C.S.: You were asked to present something on historical city centers right?

M.N.: Yes, so the Halles project fitted perfectly within this thematic. Only that, in this case, the historical centre was massacred: Baltard's pavilions had been turn down so there were two huge holes in which we had to built the RER station, all the metro lines, the commercial centre by Claude Vasconi, etc. And our project was like a hat, a decoration for all that. In a sense, what we did was to come back to historical city centers. And the reason why we won the competition was, I think, that Michel Guy, then French minister of culture, realized that our project was perhaps the only one that was acknowledging this particular demolished and disappeared Parisian ambiance. In other words, he realized that we were simply trying to do an exercise of reinsertion in the devastated site. In fact, at the time, we thought that the most avant-gardiste gesture would have been to do buildings that resemble Haussmanian's one, buildings in U-shape, in order to close the perspective on the other side of the Bourse de commerce, and by this, to trace the rectangle of the disappear Baltard's pavilions and complete by a large garden that had the particularity of creating a piazza. A little like Saint-Pierre de Rome's piazza because it was a detached colonnade. Like Bernini at Saint-Pierre, we were trying to articulate many detached things.

L-C.S.: This was your first project in France?

M.N.: No, our first project was the competition for the ville nouvelle d'Ivry, with Jean Delaiva, Paul Chemetov and Henri Ciriani. For this, we arrived second. But it was an important project because already at that time (1971-1972) we were putting forward a return to the street and the place. And it didn't sound very good to say those kinds of things since we were still in the middle of a total delirium of post-war architecture. It was the time when we had to exaggerate and make some sort of caricatures to say this is a 'street' and this is a 'piazza'. The Ivry project was very important. First, because it allowed us to discover France but also because it was the first time we collaborated with a French studio. The second project was Cergy Pontoise. Then we did a study regarding la Défense. The project was called 'l'axe majeur' and was between the Louvres and La Défense. Then, la petite Cathédrale was our first project alone. We did a weeklong brainstorming for that. We had a very specific way of working: we would meet in different moment, with different people, and we would constantly re-question the same themes. We were recording the discussions. La petite Cathédrale was meant to explain to French people that it was imperative to recuperate urban spaces.

L-C.S.: I have brought with me the catalogue of the 1976 Biennale as well as some photographs to see if some memories would come back to you.... I see from the installation shots that the Taller's display at

the Biennale was very spectacular. You said you didn't know what to do, but it turned out to be a very 'modern' type of display.

M.N.: Well, you know that this was the time when Spain had just got ride of Franco's dictatorship

L-C.S.: And there was also, in the same Biennale, an exhibition on Spanish art under the dictatorship?

M.N.: Yes! But since we were all formed as anti-franquists, to paint walls was also for us a mode of expression. There were very violent phrases! The idea came from Jose Augustin Goytisolo who was our poet – I loved working with him because as I am not an architect myself I rather prefer to work with people who were not architect...

L-C.S.: What do you mean? You are not an architect?

M.N.: No, I am not. My background is in Theatre. So I told Goytisolo: "listen, I don't know what to do. I think if we cannot do a subversive act, this isn't us..." So the first intention was to tear apart the drawings and to do a sort of 'collage' on the walls, on which we would then write. But, finally, we decided to somehow use the plan as posters.

L-C.S.: On the installation shots from 'Europa/America' one can see a picture of you in front of a large exhibition panel on which it was paint the phrase 'compromesso storico', an obvious reference to Italian politics. Why?

M.N.: Well we were all communist so the 'compromesso storico' [the historical compromise] was a message for the Italians. It was just a way to say "we are with you".

L-C.S.: And everyone was free to exhibit what they wanted and how they wanted?

M.N.: Yes, and I think that is what made this exhibition particularly interesting, that there was no such thing as unity, like the kind of unity that exists today in exhibitions where everyone has to correspond to standard dimensions, heights, materials, etc.

L-C.S.: And I assume that there was also the fact that you were all in this exhibition space for a few days, building your respective display?

M.N.: Yes, for me the most interesting days were the preparation days.

L-C.S.: And also assisted to the Lido debate on August 1st?

M.N.: No. I wasn't there for the debate. But the 'Europa/America' debate was a dialogue of the deaf. I think that Italians were expecting much more from this exhibition. 1968 was too far in people's minds. the hippie movement was slowly disappearing. Although there was this will to meet and provoke a dialogue.

L-C.S.: But we weren't yet strictly into postmodernism...

M.N.: Yah, we weren't yet ready for Auschwitz! [laugh]

L-C.S.: It was the first time that there was an international exhibition of contemporary architecture at the Biennale.

M.N.: Yes, It was still very Italian in a way. I would say it was the first and last homage to this ideological fusion that had been created across the Atlantic. They were two or three survivors from Team X but it was the birth of something that would become the postmodern. For us, it was also the first experience to do something outside of Spain.

L-C.S.: But at the time you were already working in Paris?

M.N.: True. In 1976 the Taller had already open an office in France (and this slowly took the smell of a split.) You need to understand that the Taller was started, as a family enterprise, a building enterprise, and I will always be grateful to Ricardo's father because I learned loads from him. But once we went to Paris was, for me, when the Taller really started. What happened was that a French journalist had filmed the Gaudi neighborhood in Reus. Then, a certain Jean Roulier, who was the general secretary of the villes nouvelles, had seen this story on TV. So he gathered people from Cergy, Saint-Quentin-en-Yveline, Marnes, and La Défense (who had the status of ville nouvelles at the time) and they came to the Taller in 1970 or 1971. All this to say that the Taller was born because we were somehow extracted from our original core which was the Bofill family enterprise, and we had the opportunity to work in France. But neither me nor Ricardo were architects! So we had to produce documents and present them to the Ministre de la culture to get the architecture diploma.

L-C.S.: And you came to France to work on the Halles project?

M.N.: Yes, but then around 1974, Ricardo called and said that we needed to all see each other in Barcelona. At the time, we already knew we had won the competition for les Halles. The model had been exhibited at the Hôtel de Ville and that has been my French school because I had to explain the project to French people...I was there day and night explaining the project to everyone. So Bofill said that les Halles was the project of his life and so he wanted to take care of it. Remember that in 1974 Franco was still there. So this project was an instrument of anti-franquist's struggle. I left the Taller in June 1978. Because I didn't want to work in those conditions any more. Bofill continued to do a double play: Taller de Arquitectura/ Ricardo Bofill.....Ricardo Bofill/Taller de Arquitectura.....Any way, so Ricardo left for Paris in 1974 and I was wondering how long that would have last. I thought it would last a month or so. Yet after only two weeks he called me and said "Manolo, you need to come to Paris". I replied that I couldn't because I was working on the interiors of Walden Seven. I said: "look, we talked about this before." And he said: "No, but les Halles is so big, there is enough work for everyone. I'll give you part of the project." And when I arrived in Paris, he said, we should create Taller – Paris. Ricardo was talking to the press while I was doing the project. And between us it went from worst to worst. He was going to Barcelona or Algeria, then he was coming back and making some declarations to the press that had nothing to do with the project. It was a very complicated project. The Halles project did launched Ricardo on the international scene, but I think it also marked the death of the Taller.

L-C.S.: And what happened in 1978, when you eventually left the Taller?

M.N.: In June 1978 Jacques Chirac won the Mairie de Paris and he decided that he had to brush aside everything that had to do with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. So Chirac didn't want to hear a word about Ricardo Bofill. Yet people with whom I was working on a daily basis (people from the SEMAH etc.) wanted me to continue working on the project. One day, some guy from the SEMAH called me and said: "Bofill isn't doing the Halles project! But we still want you on the project. What will you do?" I asked some time to think it over and I called Bofill and said I was quitting the Taller (at least for three months). But I didn't stay in Paris, I went to Brussels to work for some local architect. Initially it was to do a film on Salvador Allende....but this never happened.