

JOSEP MARIA MUÑOZ

Conversation with the architect Oriol Bohigas

Of all the Catalan architects, **ORIOL BOHIGAS** (Barcelona, 1925) is the one who has been most in the public limelight over the past fifty years. On the basis of his essential realism and a reforming stance in design, he has been one of the great path-breakers of architectural modernity in Catalonia. Since 1961, Josep M. Martorell and David MacKay have been his inseparable partners in the MBM office. His intellectual inquietudes led him to a pioneering vindication of modernist and rationalist architecture. Since their earliest beginnings in the sixties, he has been associated with Catalanism-inspired cultural projects and was a conspicuous member of the group known as *gauche divine*. In the democratic period, he has been the Barcelona City Council delegate for urban planning (when Narcís Serra was Mayor, from 1980 to 1984) and Councillor responsible for Culture (with Pasqual Maragall as Mayor, from 1991 to 1994). As the man who inspired municipal town planning policy, he was artificer of the “reconstruction of Barcelona” and designer of the Olympic Village. He has published two books of memoirs, two collections of journalistic articles, along with several books on architecture and urban planning. He has received numerous prizes and awards in recognition of his work.

It is difficult to embark on an interview with someone of 82 with a trajectory such as yours, but if I had to single out one particular item of your extensive career, I would say it is your dual, successive and extraordinary condition as urban planning delegate and Councillor responsible for Culture in the Barcelona City Council.

Yes, there are two different fields but with points of relationship.

What led you there?

I think there are many kinds of architects. Yet there has always been a group of us who are motivated by certain intellectual pretensions. This means that there was a time when you could participate in the urban planning definition of Barcelona and another where you could be active in the field of culture. When I was named delegate for urban planning I could see quite clearly that there were many variants involved, from the purely technical and social aspects to the clearly cultural and intellectual ones. It therefore situated me close to culture management. This was time when the Museums Plan was being worked on and many of the problems with that were connected with urban planning. The location of entities that are as potent as museums tend to be doesn't only change the city's urban layout but the cultural aims of society as a whole. Hence, urban planning had a predominant role in collective urban culture. I hadn't given any thought to going in as

Councillor for Culture until Pasqual Maragall asked me to do it. In fact I didn't really hesitate because I thought it was an interesting line of work in which to try my hand and then it turned out to be very difficult. While we managed to achieve a lot of things in urban planning, creating models and ways of working that have been useful later and if it might be said that, one way or another, we contributed towards the transformation of Barcelona, I think that my time in culture was only useful in making a very critical analysis of the situation at the time. As for positive results, I didn't achieve any, and this was so much the case that I left after having produced a little book that I called *Gràcies i desgràcies culturals de Barcelona* (Cultural Graces and Disgraces of Barcelona, 1993). The basic problem was that, with the Council's budgets for culture, there was no way we were going to finish any museum or start any collection, or resolve the problems of music teaching, or the issues connected with the social vision of culture. I also realised that the position of delegate for urban planning was in some way easier than that of councillor of culture because, in urban planning, there's a touch of technical and professional solvency that lets you pass over a lot of obstacles if you've got relatively clear ideas about how to make a city. Culture, however, is such a diffuse thing requiring intervention in the form of top-level decisions and —let there be no mistake about this— I realised that the top-level decisions weren't being taken in the City Council but in carrer Nicaragua¹, and I wasn't a party card-holder and so I wasn't there where the budget was being brewed. If you can't participate in the management and conceptual justification of a budget then it's very difficult to work seriously.

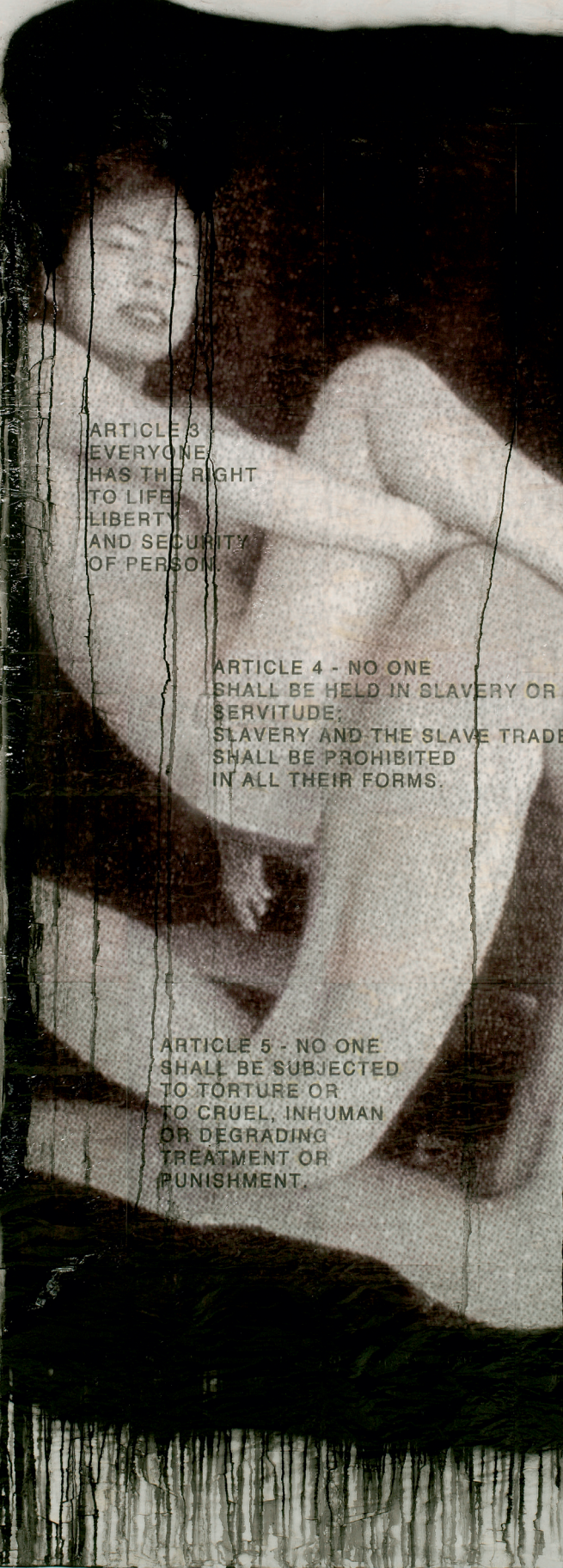
**We'll come back to that later but now I'd like to go back to the start.
You were born in 1925 and still recall the schooling of the Republican years.**

It's true. I've got fantastic memories of my schooling in the Republican years. It's surprising to think not only about the cultural and educational work that was done in the Republic but also during the Civil War, when a lot of positive things were done in education. Despite the bombing attacks, despite the fact that a lot of teachers had gone off to the front, the quality of education kept increasing. It was a tremendous job they did...

Your father was a journalist who, as a young man, had written in left-wing publications and later worked in the administration of municipal cultural institutions. What is there of him in you?

Although they are distant, I have extraordinary memories of my father, of his cultural commitment, his educational commitment, his honesty as a public servant, and so on. My father, as a result of his journalistic work, was very keen on the history of Barcelona. He had a substantial library, much of it specialising in different aspects of the history of Barcelona. This enthusiasm for Barcelona, which came through to me when I was still a small boy rummaging around in my father's books, helped me to understand or to participate in an understanding of what the city was, of what the phenomenon of "city" was.

■ ¹ This is the headquarters, at number 75-77, of the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (Socialist Party of Catalonia), which is affiliated with the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party). [Translator's note].



ARTICLE 3
EVERYONE
HAS THE RIGHT
TO LIFE,
LIBERTY
AND SECURITY
OF PERSON.

ARTICLE 4 - NO ONE
SHALL BE HELD IN SLAVERY OR
SERVITUDE;
SLAVERY AND THE SLAVE TRADE
SHALL BE PROHIBITED
IN ALL THEIR FORMS.

ARTICLE 5 - NO ONE
SHALL BE SUBJECTED
TO TORTURE OR
TO CRUEL, INHUMAN
OR DEGRADING
TREATMENT OR
PUNISHMENT.

My parents, then, were the ones that steered me towards the intellectual bent —I don't know what to call it without seeming pretentious— my mother in music and my father in history. They were painful years in which intellectual pretensions were on a very tight rein and even domestic calm was too. Everyone was talking about the war but, for us, the post-war years were even worse. My father was purged and penalised for two years without work or salary. For him, being jobless was very difficult both economically and socially. When the situation settled down a bit and there was relative normality under the Franco dictatorship, he died.

When you enrolled in the School of Architecture were you interested in linking up with pre-war architectural culture?

At the time, they took a dim view of Modernism and modern rationalist architecture at the School of Architecture. The teachers were bearers of residues of Noucentisme² and, more importantly of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, pitted against the modernism of Domènech i Montaner, Gaudí and even Jujol himself. Again, there was animosity towards contemporary architecture to such a degree that it seems that, when they reopened the School after Franco came to power, they threw out all the library books that dealt with contemporary architecture.

The Silk Road XIII (La Ruta de la Seda, XIII)

Jaume Plensa (2006)

Mixed media and collage on paper, 238 x 112 cm

So, these are two enthusiasms that constituted our subversive stance within the School. When I was still a student there, I wrote an article about GATCPAC³, which wasn't published because the censor banned it. This only egged us on to study it more, and study with revolutionary zeal—a very home-grounded revolution—because it was based on the intellectual fact that was the renovation of modern architecture, which we knew was happening all around the world at the time but we didn't know, even though we suspected it, that it had to take these paths. The first time we had any contact with international architecture was on the end-of-degree trip, in 1951, around Italy. It was a most diverting trip because we went back to visiting the great renaissance, baroque and classical monuments while also discovering the contemporary architecture that was making great strides in Italy with architects like Terragni and others that came from the modern movement. We had the good luck that, just when we had finished our degree, we found a simple, clear and evident aim, that of recovering contemporary architecture, which was by then being done the world over.

In your twofold activity as architect and intellectual, there is a moment where they come together in the early sixties when you began to get involved in publications that Catalan culture was then producing, for example the review *Serra d'Or* and the publishing house Edicions 62.

In the fifties there was a relatively major change in Spain (though, in fact, it was only a gloss on the bad general situation): the borders were opened up, there was more contact with other countries and the system of isolation of the Franco dictatorship was considerably eased. However, it was in the nineteen sixties, when this change took on greater proportions and when a lot of things were going on in Catalonia, that I feel I was involved in one way or another. One of these events was the student revolution, which I was part of (I wasn't teaching in the School till 1964). The other was the creation of *Serra d'Or* and Edicions 62. It started out as something that seemed unimportant and then it turned out to be very important, not so much for the production itself but for what it generated around it. I remember that one day two lads came knocking at my door, half timid and half aggressive, to say that they were about to produce the review *Serra d'Or*. They wanted to have a section on architecture, so I started to write under the heading of "Design, Architecture and Urban Planning", in an attempt to make a single concept out of the three disciplines, on the basis of that thesis of functionalism that says that designing an object is the same as designing a city. It was a series that offered news of what was starting to happen here and what was being done abroad, in matters that were closest to what was of interest here. In 1963, I published my first book with Edicions 62, *Barcelona, entre el Pla Cerdà i el barraquisme* (Barcelona, between the Cerdà Plan and Slum Construction), which is a history of the architecture of Barcelona on the basis of positive and regressive episodes, divided into two parts: the neoclassical and conservative standpoints and

■ ² The early-20th century, urban-based Catalan cultural movement that arose mainly in reaction to Modernism, in both art and ideology. [Translator's note].

³ Group of Catalan Architects and Technicians for the Improvement of Contemporary Architecture, part of the Spanish group formed during the Second Republic to promote rationalist ideology in architecture. [Translator's note].

the revolutionary visions of Modernism and rationalism. It was at this time that my university adventure also began, as an assistant lecturer. I taught for a year and a half until the Caputxinada⁴ (March 1966), which resulted in my being expelled from the university. I was then out of the university for a long time but still keeping open a number of lateral contacts there. Finally, in 1971, they called for applications for the chair and, despite my objections about having been expelled, I applied and was unanimously appointed. That was shortly after the Montserrat lock-in (December 1970) and, just after coming out of that, full of anti-Franco euphoria, I had to take up the chair. They wanted me to sign a document stating my support for the principles of the [National, Falangist] Movement and I refused. After a three-month battle, they stripped me of the chair and I didn't get it back until 1975. It's a complex story but one that is in keeping with the state of affairs then.

This decisive period of the sixties also had a frivolous side: the *gauche divine*⁵, the nights at the Bocaccio...

I think the *gauche divine* is one of the nicest and most effective things that happened to us because there was a shift towards changing customs and going beyond the hypocrisies of the time. The people of the *gauche divine* had some very serious features. I find the name quite diverting and accurate, yet it only seems to highlight the frivolous and slightly ridiculous aspects of the situation. A lot of demonstrations in support of the unions and workers' rights started with these people. The famous Montserrat lock-in came out of the Bocaccio! Moreover, they were all very hard-working. There were architects that generated a new vision of the profession, some excellent poets, and publishers who brought about a total transformation of the publishing industry. Hence, the practical results, from both revolutionary and professional-excellence points of view, were very positive. This also coincided with a slight economic improvement. We bought our first [SEAT] 600s and, of course there's a big lifestyle difference between a 600 and the train.

From the start, the focus of your concerns was the city of Barcelona. What was the city like then?

You don't remember the things from your youth as being as bad as you have later found out they were. You see it afterwards, when you analyse and remember things that you didn't think were so bad then because you'd got used to them. Barcelona had two great contradictory problems: it was a dead city and yet it was all too alive at the same time. Too alive and too dead, along with the huge error and dreadfully wrong myth of the

■ ⁴ On 11 March, some 500 students and teachers from the university faculties and schools of Barcelona, along with invited intellectuals, staged a lock-in at the Capuchin monastery in Sarrià, where they constituted the Democratic Students Union of the University of Barcelona. Known as the "Caputxinada", this was a major event in the democratic opposition to the Franco regime. [Translator's note].

⁵ The name of the group of upper-middle class friends (architects, models, publishers, writers, etc.) who met to talk about love, sex, politics and freedom, especially in the bar of the Bocaccio discothèque, was coined by the journalist and playwright Joan de Sagarra who, writing about the launch of the publishing house Editorial Tusquets, rather than listing all the sufficiently well-known names of those present, preferred to merely comment, "The whole Gauche Divine was there". [Translator's note].

Mayor, Porcioles. What was disgusting was the apparent pseudo-patriotic Barcelona-ism of Porcioles' world: the Great Barcelona, the creation of the housing estates that were presented as a big social reform for immigrant workers, while in reality it meant the destruction of the urban planning panorama of the whole metropolitan area. Within this general death, there was a wish to revive the city in the wrong way, with very serious mistakes. Porcioles did two things that have been irreparable in urban planning terms: first, the creation of residential nuclei outside the urban areas, cancers that have still not been remedied, despite some efforts; and, second, the destruction of one of Barcelona's most beautiful skylines, that of the Eixample neighbourhood. They added two extra storeys to those buildings, an attic and then another one above that.

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The Barcelona of the oldest part of the Eixample district, around the passeig de Gràcia and the Rambla de Catalunya, which had a unity in its architecture, was destroyed thanks to crudely constructed additions of different heights that were spawned by pure speculation. The destruction of the character of the central neighbourhood of Barcelona and the creation of residential nuclei that never became neighbourhoods, because they never set out to be that from the start, are two things that greatly mark the sixties.

You have always moved between architecture and urban planning.

I started out being more interested in urban planning than in architecture although, eventually, in the exercise of my profession I was more inclined to architecture, especially at the beginning, but this changed after 1992 because, thanks to Barcelona's successes in urban planning, the biggest jobs we have are in urban planning. This went against the grain because what still interests me and amuses me is common-or-garden architecture. It's curious, then, that in my career there's been a first approximation to architecture through urbanism, then a professional period clearly concerned with architecture pure and simple and, finally, an increasing engagement with urbanism in recent years.

In 1980, with the return of democracy to the councils, you were named delegate for urban planning. This is the epoch of the "reconstrucció de Barcelona" (reconstruction of Barcelona), which is the title of a book you published in 1984. What characterised the urban planning policy of the new democratic council?

Reconstruction is the most outstanding aspect of the democratic urban planning model we wanted to create. The first thing we agreed on was that we would not take what might have seemed the most obvious step, which was to abolish the general plan and do it again because that would have drawn us into a discussion lasting ten years. What was required was to fix things that already existed. This is why we speak about the "reconstruction" of Barcelona, by which I mean remaking the city and making the part that had not been made. It was a way of offering an immediate service to the population. This is why specific projects were more important than the general

plan, not only in improving conditions of life but also in spilling over into the surroundings in the positive sense. I'm talking about squares but also of sports centres, schools and cultural institutions. This worked and it's true that the most important aspect of Barcelona's attempt at an urban planning model is that of reconstruction as opposed to expansion, and assessment of

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projects had to be on the basis of considering the city as public space since private space would benefit from improvements in public space.

In those years people went so far as to talk about a “city of architects”, in which one imagines your group had a lot of influence, and a mayor who played the “Prince”. What is true in this journalistic image?

The princely denomination is an exaggeration. It happened to be a time in which architects were made responsible for certain kinds of tasks. Precisely because, in economic terms, it wasn't a very euphoric period we architects had to take on public positions, public spaces and public buildings and this generated some enthusiasm. I'd say that, in general, we performed very well, did a good job and so there was a certain pride in being an architect, and in the public recognition that things were being done well. The politicians saw that that they needed to use this professional quality of architects, which had not happened to such an extent previously. Nowadays, there is so much diversification in such assignments that the politicians are not so interested in playing around with the specific quality of works but rather with notions like efficiency and engineering. One of the things we did in those years was to try to get the engineers working at the orders of architects, which we achieved very effectively. Now, however, the reverse is happening: engineers and functionaries are having a lot more say, but without the slightest trace of the intellectual aura or sense of triumph that we architects had in former times. What existed then was a very significant degree of understanding between politicians and architects.

In 1986, at this time of understanding between architects and politicians, Barcelona was chosen as the venue for the 1992 Olympic Games, and this brought about a change of scale in urban planning intervention.

While the exercise of reconstructing the city was happening piecemeal, and long before there was any certainty that we would be hosting the Olympic Games, the four Olympic areas were agreed upon as early as 1984. The idea was that it was necessary to use the same method as other urban projects but on a different scale, and that we shouldn't waste time on excessively broad-sweeping views of the territory. It was agreed that it was all to be done within Barcelona, and that we should make

the most of the occasion to resolve some of the more difficult and conflictive situations. At the time, there was some dispute over where to locate the Olympic Village. I and the people in my department insisted that it had to be constructed in the most complicated part of the city, a space occupied by obsolete half-closed factories that was also Barcelona's most important access point to the sea. Some politicians said it would be too expensive, that it wouldn't work and that they'd prefer to construct some apartment blocks in the Vallès region because it would be quicker and there wouldn't be any problems of cost or territory. However, we had Maragall's support and that of a sector among the politicians who were convinced that if we didn't take this opportunity to carry out this operation in the worst zone of Barcelona, the part that needed the most major reforms, it would never happen. It was a chance to erase a totally lost industrial area where the city's effluents ran in open drains, and where there were the negative memories of the Camp de la Bota⁶, etcetera. It was a magnificent site for a new seaside neighbourhood. This went ahead because it was an application of the new system of reconstructing the city.

■ ⁶ Between 1939 and 1952, the Franco regime executed 1,704 people Camp de la Bota. [Translator's note].

The Silk Road XX (La Ruta de la Seda XX)

Jaume Plensa (2006)

Mixed media and collage on paper, 238 x 112 cm



From a sensibility that in those years was surely not so evident, today's work in Poblenou is seen as excessive perhaps in the sense that it has left little trace of the industrial past of the city.

I think that, in relative terms, the Olympic Village area was relatively built up but we believed (and I still do) that it should not be conserved because, while the whole theory of reconstructing Barcelona was based on maintaining the existing milieus and respect for historic architecture, it was only up to a certain point. I think that Catalonia and Spain in general have repeated the errors of Italy, where a policy of indiscriminate conservation (and of things that are old rather than ancient) has brought about collapse in the city. In Catalonia we need to move beyond this falsely progressive volition to hang on to the old because maintaining the old has never been progressive.

In the planning of the Olympic Village, you reintroduce your old concerns about the housing block or "island".

I always think back to an article I wrote about the "Poble Espanyol"⁷ on Montjuïc which suggested, very early on (I think it was written in 1959), that we should see the Poble Espanyol as something more than a horrible stage set, asking why there are some streets in it that appeal to us so much. It's because they maintain two basic ideas: the street and housing built around the closed block. This housing block and the street have to constitute the matrix of the habitable city once again. This is what we did with the Olympic Village. I think this is its most valuable aspect, thanks to which people can go from the Cerdà-designed Eixample district to the Olympic Village without problems of continuity, even though the population of the latter is much lower and the zone has been less inhabited in historical terms. The other thing that we were very keen to do in the Olympic Village was to produce an urban project in which the form and characteristics of each block of houses would be determined and whole thing would be handed over to thirty architects to work on and this is what gave it, as I understand it, this feel of a traditionally-constructed city.

In 2004, you published a book with a great title: *Contra la incontinència urbana. Reconsideració moral de l'arquitectura i la ciutat* (Against Urban Incontinence. A Moral Reconsideration of Architecture and the City). What do you say in it?

This book was written with the idea of summarising everything I've championed and defended over the years: at bottom, it's the same idea of reconstructing the city. What does a city have to be in order to be a city? Sometimes I think of Eugeni d'Ors, when he said, talking about "post-historic objects", that objects that can't change, can't evolve and that, if they do change, they are no longer those object. One example is the bicycle: if you change something of it, it ceases to be a bicycle because its totality is essentially a bicycle. This can be applied to the city, which is a post-historic phenomenon: if something changes it stops being a city. There are these out-of-control Asian cities that are more than human agglomerations, but a real city is based on a street, a square, housing built around

■ 7 El Poble Espanyol was built for the Barcelona International Exhibition in 1929. It is a real "ideal-model" village with a surface area of 49,000 m² and the main characteristics of towns and villages in Spain, in which 117 buildings, streets and squares are reproduced to scale. [Translator's note].

a block, a representative building, continuity of public space, design, cohesion. The worst thing that can happen to a city is incontinence, overflowing, escaping from its strict setting to become a non-city. The architecture being done nowadays all over the world is typical of urban incontinence, where the building flies in the face of the urban structure in order to be —as advertising— more representative or more contradictory.

The last few years have heightened this view of Barcelona as an incontinent city. Would you agree?

It's very difficult for me to pass judgement on what's happening. What's clear is that what we call Barcelona today is no longer strictly what we used to call the "Barcelona model" in the eighties and nineties. I think it lacks a project of urban space, as a priority. It can't be compared with the project of the Olympic Village and the Forum, which is not to criticise, although these are obviously two very different ways of understanding the city. If you compare it with Diagonal Mar, the difference is even more acute because the Olympic Village was a project of the public administration with the idea of giving continuity to urban space, while Diagonal Mar is an attempt to isolate, psychologically or visually, as the case may be, a neighbourhood that has no relationship with its setting and that was designed in keeping with the interests of a promoter, who also intervened. It is a space without urban reference.

Some time ago, there was an exhibition about you in the Virreina Palace in which were exhibited *inter alia* several of your ties, and socks too, no doubt. Might one say that there is a "Bohigas style"?

I always wear loud socks and ties, but rather than having a style, it's a matter taking a small swipe and making a comment. I'd say I'm an exception in this regard because architects, both the ones from my generation and the younger ones, get around dressed in black. This uniformity annoys me. Moreover, old people look awful dressed in black. The only way to disguise old age is to wear light colours as in the English bourgeois tradition. In this sense, maybe it's true that I constitute a kind of sideswipe against the general scene of architects because the only one who wears light colours is me.

You just used the word "sideswipe". The "Bohigas style" has been declamatory too, wouldn't you say? Do you enjoy being controversial?

I haven't particularly set out to be controversial. I love conversing and exchanging views and, if you like that, there are times when, perforce, you have to overemphasise your statements a bit and, if you do this with friends, you know they have to be able to interpret you properly. So, sometimes, one goes over the top with them. Yet I'm not looking for arguments. What happens is that I haven't ever been very dependent on structures that are superior to my own and I've always been able to say what I've wanted because I've always been willing to step down from commissions I've had. By chance, rather than by merit, I haven't had to dissimulate things too much. I only recall losing my temper on a few occasions. I'm not the type to get angry II