

A conversation with Jarauta

Murcia, 16th October 2024

Miguel Luengo: Good afternoon, Paco. Thank you very much for granting me this interview. I have prepared a script with questions that I believe we can break from the start. Does that sound good to you?

Francisco Jarauta: Thank you. The catalog that presides our conversation can be considered a fascinating story—that of Radical Architecture—understood in its broadest sense, encompassing the territories of architecture, design, and the world of ideas that, from 1968 to 1975, proposed a new dimension of utopian world as a form of struggle and resistance to what seemed to be the only civilizational path imposed by international liberalism against any possible reflection on the future, societal forms, and ways of life. From the postulates of Situationism, a parallel path was projected to critically consider possible worlds emerging from the crises of those decades. It was about articulating the materials of a history that had already begun to take shape through the work of FRAC in Orléans and other European cultural institutions.

In your script, you ask about a possible return of the radical spirit

today, and this is an element that, from a critical and political-ethical point of view, is very important. The question might be: why? Not just concerning architecture, but

also regarding broader cultural parameters. The return to the '60s and '70s, up to around 1975, has inspired many new questions across different disciplines, including art,



Fig.1 - Cover of *Arquitectura Radical*. Catalogue of the exhibition held at the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. 5th March-5th May 2002.

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Invited Editorial 

architecture, and design, which were previously distinct professional spaces. Now, cultural references have completely changed, but those years, from the late '60s to '75, remain decisive. The year 1968 can be considered the last barricade representing resistance to what could have been the legitimacy of an American Life model, a New American Life, that began to expand with political-economic structures and liberalism, along with a struggle tied to a very significant renewal of utopian thought, as proposed by the Situationists. Figures like Debord and, above all, the Dutch played a major role in this critique. Constant, in particular, was crucial in defining the key issues.

I was very close to Constant. I visited him in Amsterdam and frequently saw him, especially in the first community that emerged in Alba, near Turin. That's where Gallizio and all his friends gathered, but the intellectual leader was always Debord, who set the framework for their discussions.

I love that Constant comes up early in our conversation because I find his ideas captivating. I still vividly remember the day I asked him, "What question comes to your mind most often?" And he replied, "No... I'm old now... special questions... there's noise... but yes, there is one question that bothers me: why did certain ideas prove impossible?" That tension is key to his intellectual approach.

Constant addressed themes of emotional cartographies, rethinking the city, and using expressionist models from German cinema. He was very eclectic and absorbed everything he saw—a highly active sponge.

Debord presents a different image. He was a sociologist trained by the great masters whom he immediately challenged. He positioned himself within the perspective of city-related issues raised by figures like Henri Lefebvre. Around the same time, two books with the same title appeared without the authors knowing each other: Daniel Bell at Harvard wrote *Postindustrial Society*, and

Alain Touraine—whom I was very close to—wrote *La Société Post-Industrielle*. I once asked Touraine, "Didn't you know Bell?" Of course, he knew him, but they never discussed the subject, he told me. That period was crucial in understanding the intellectual context in which both Situationism and Radical Architecture emerged. It marked a turning point in deciding what kind of societies the future would bring.

At that time, Communist parties held significant social power. The intelligentsia was predominantly leftist, and very few thinkers dared to present themselves as conservatives. One exception was Raymond Aron in France. For Touraine, Aron was an indisputable master. However, there was a moment when being on the right was simply unacceptable because the battle was framed as an "aut-aut"—either-or—choice.

Debord came from a different legend. He was an intellectually respected professional, with a strong active radicalism. His suicide only added to the myth surrounding him. Some Galician colleagues once asked me if we could organize an exhibition about Debord, but I refused. It would have been too monographic, risking idealizing his case. Instead, it had to be framed within the broader context of European Situationism, openly incorporating friends from Radical Architecture circles.

Branzi, on the other hand, is a highly cultured, refined figure embedded in Milanese society during the '60s and '70s. He belonged to a bourgeois class that constructed its own narrative. They were liberal and great innovators, thinking about a new avant-garde. An extraordinary leader in that movement was Maldonado, who had enemies everywhere but was the only one invited by Zurich's ETH Polytechnic. He also went to Stuttgart and played a significant role in reopening the Ulm School founded by Max Bill. Given the proximity to Germany's automotive industry, leaders in industrial design were in high demand, and

even today, ETH Zurich has a space dedicated to Max Bill.

Branzi, more Milanese in his outlook, worked with the industry. Many iconic furniture brands of that era were born with great success. This is how the so-called Seminario di L'École emerged—an exploration of bourgeois Milanese interiors from the 1970s, featuring lamps, chairs, and armchairs.

ML: However, in my interview with Branzi, he emphasized the construction of identity and the severity of someone who has chosen to postulate that architecture cannot serve power and should not be dictated by it—a common practice. He cited Tafuri. Branzi also criticized Natalini a lot at the time.

FJ: I'm very glad you mentioned that. I've been to his studio... Natalini was somewhat Calvinist, whereas Branzi was more worldly, embodying the freedom of bourgeois thought.

ML: Or the freedom that comes from deciding not to build, while Natalini was criticized for drawing the Continuous Monument and later constructing postmodern buildings.

FJ: Yes, those buildings were indeed a tremendous contradiction in terminis, but also an anti-coherence. Branzi behaves as an intellectual, one of the great theorists of design and architecture, moving from the Roman school to the Venetian school. Ultimately, Tafuri became the great guru of a methodology applied to history, pointing to a new complexity.

ML: Natalini considered Superstudio a Situationist group, but beyond formal connections, I'm not entirely convinced. Could you develop this hypothesis about Radical Architecture's connection to Situationism?

FJ: I believe there is an appropriation of the concept by the radicals, who anchor it more in the territory outlined by the Situationists. The Situationists were more concerned with ways of life and the emergence of new social structures. That was their primary

focus. However, aspects directly tied to architecture as a practice did not appear in their thinking. They recognized that architecture played a prominent role in shaping ways of life, and that was a step added to Radical Architecture. Many of them, despite lacking formal intellectual training, had a remarkable cultural background. For example, Gianni Pettena and others were great travelers. They often exchanged ideas and places, but I believe the discovery of architecture as a problem specifically belonged to Radical Architecture.

ML: Because Constant, within Situationism, proposed fully architectural projects, don't you think?

FJ: Let's say they were architectural in their consequences, but as projects, they remained experimental. He often said he loved photography as a compositional element. His cartographies ended up being drawings designed to situate specific cases, but they lacked the strength to make him a necessary interlocutor for architects of the 1970s.

ML: In your text, you mention Archigram. Perhaps they can be interpreted not so much from those critical premises deeply embedded in the social and cultural, but rather as straddling positivism, linked to how Viollet-le-Duc or Laugier used technology in Archigram's projects like the mythical Plug-In City, but also in more ironic ones like Walking City. However, you do consider them purely radical because they incorporate that social and cultural component.

FJ: They always did. Even as a school, they maintained theses that entirely questioned and problematized existing models of legitimacy. The British model is very particular—they have a unique respect for technological elements. Their early studies were groundbreaking. It didn't matter to them whether they were designing airports or supermarkets. Rogers is the most convincing of all of them... but of course, he doesn't belong to what we would call the radicals, not at all. There is a matrix in British

architecture that later directly influences Archigram and spaces like Peter Cook's building in Graz. For Peter, constructing that model, that city diagram, is possibly the most brilliant example of Radical Architecture. The movement itself, however, is made in Italy. Celant coined the term, and that became the standard. Celant loved coining names. Right now, there's a major exhibition in Paris on Arte Povera that follows this line.

ML: Like the Smithsons' primitive hut?

FJ: Exactly. The Smithsons represent the dream everyone dreamed of in Whitechapel.

ML: I was thinking about models of legitimacy and one of the questions from the script that we're skipping over (laughs). Branzi himself—and almost everyone—says that Radical Architecture is not a homogeneous movement, much less a style, but rather the sharing of a state of mind. In this critique of models of legitimacy, is it very different to be a radical in England compared to Italy or Austria, and is that why their productions are so different?

FJ: Imagine Vienna in this context. All the different schools they labeled as radical present very few common parameters. It's a mindset, an intellectual device to think about things. Vienna is fascinating in this respect because it developed in a very conservative architectural environment, like the Ring, with a modernism that had no interest. I see it repeatedly, removing the elements that are essentially museum pieces. When Hans Hollein proposed that glass building in front of the Stephen's Kirche, it was a form of admirable resistance.

ML: Let's target that shared state of mind with Coop Himmelblau, Haus-Rucker-Co, etc. In contrast to projects labeled as radical, like the more conceptual Continuous Monument or No-Stop City, the Austrians actually build things. They tend to be inflatable, but they have that technological and constructive component. What's your take on that?

FJ: They are highly technological. They introduce, firsthand, a technological recovery that other architectures did not produce, and they do it effectively.

ML: Why effectively?

FJ: Effectively, because there is no debt to the rationalism of the modern movement, and there is no primacy of function. And yet, they create a machine. The idea of the Machine dates back to the 1920s and spread across all fields. There was even a moment of internal debate at the Bauhaus: whether to emphasize more on the Machine or focus on what we might call Classical form. They chose the Classical form. Look at the apartments Gropius built for professors—what's modern about them? They look like comfortable homes with some scenic views of the Saxon forests... though they aren't bad.

ML: What happens with the Austrians is that they tend to make an explicit, even aggressive, use of technology, but with a critical component, sometimes parodying the technology itself. I remember projects like Face Space by Haus-Rucker-Co, where you put on a helmet, and facial expressions are transformed into lights of different colors. It appears to be a celebration of technology, but I see it as a critique of recent mass communication media and technology itself. What's your take on Austrian irony?

FJ: It goes beyond irony. It reaches a paradox where what would seem logical ends up being unnecessary. However, there is a display of performative objects—very fixed and powerful—but it's not architecture meant for living.

ML: One could also argue that it's not just that it isn't architecture for living, but that it isn't architecture at all. There are many criticisms (perhaps superficial) of Radical Architecture as being superfluous or anecdotal because it transgresses classical definitions of the discipline. It's like saying, "You can lecture about this in class, but when you're done with that nonsense, let's talk about cubic meters of concrete—

that's where architecture really is." What do you think of the concept of non-architecture, for example, in Gianni Pettena's Anarchitect?

FJ: The Anarchitect... there was a debate that took place in the 1970s and 1980s at the Politecnico di Milano, where the great masters gathered. Pettena is an outsider. Just look at the exhibitions held at the Triennale, even in the '80s. There, you'll find an extraordinary figure, a recognized authority for everyone—Sottsass. He traveled to India, Japan, and brought back drawings that he exhibited at the Triennale, leaving all the great architecture masters in the dust. There are other architectures and magical moments, like when he invented the Valentina typewriter. All the great writing devices—Underwood machines, those war machines—were distributed worldwide and even appeared in American noir films. Even a judicial protocol had to be done with one of those machines. Yet Pettena ventured into another world, but he is not very convincing. The Anarchitect is more about developing landscapes, perhaps ruins. He even wrote a text on ruins for the Valencia Biennial. Do you have the catalog from that Biennial? There's an extraordinary final section in it. Pettena created a piece almost 30 meters high. Yona Friedman also participated with his concept of light structures. He arrived with nothing—he hadn't sent anything in advance. When we reached the shipyards in Valencia, he took a walk around and saw a construction site. He asked, "Could I borrow a wheelbarrow?" He grabbed some concrete blocks, about 20 of them, and created the base. Then, he went to a glass vendor and bought a 2x2 glass panel, placed it on top of the blocks, and said, "Let's build some floors." We bought 200 rolls of toilet paper, removed all the paper (what a job!), and used the cardboard rolls as the building's columns. Then came another 2x2 glass panel (which can hold perfectly), followed by another 200 rolls of toilet paper. He used only white and blue colors. He drew a floor plan, then another, building four vertical structures. And... this is a legacy of those ideas, challenging

the concept of who would live there!

ML: I was thinking about Sottsass's role as a mentor, both for Pettena and others. I believe they owe a lot to Sottsass, don't they?

FJ: Incomparable! Sottsass is an outstanding figure recognized by everyone. He is anti-system, but in a classic way. His cosmopolitan outlook allowed him to select elements that fascinated him without owing intellectual debts to anyone. He traveled extensively, always bringing surprises. The invention of the Valentina typewriter by Sottsass is an interesting case. At that time, Olivetti was a crucial company in Italy, driving innovation in various industries. Even Le Corbusier designed one of their plants. Olivetti was often accused of being too Catholic, which personally bothered me. However, they were an advanced industrial bourgeoisie that understood the importance of innovation. Sottsass received a commission and began tailoring his work to the company's needs.

In individual workspaces, people wouldn't use large German Underwood typewriters. Instead, Sottsass made the Valentina out of plastic. I vividly remember seeing a giant Valentina exhibited on the ground floor of the Beaubourg in Paris during a major Sottsass retrospective. People worshipped it. There was even an American project along similar lines, but Sottsass got there first. Everyone was already working on the Valentina format. He also collaborated with a playful industrial designer. However, Sottsass remains untouchable.

ML: But while Sottsass is untouchable, he also mentors theoretical "products" like the Safari divan, which, according to furniture history, was so fabulous that one almost didn't deserve it. It wasn't just a sofa; it forced you to elevate yourself to justify owning it. What do you think about this almost baroque, or at least non-classical, phase where boundaries were pushed?

FJ: Yes, there was a very active neo-baroque sensitivity during that time. I even organized a seminar

on neo-baroque at the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, with prominent figures like Calabrese, Lyotard, and others in attendance. They all shared ideas through open discussions.

ML: That trajectory aligns with Andrea Branzi's Trojan Horse theory—how these products infiltrated the calm, comfortable world of design to destroy it from within. This reminds me of a question I've wanted to ask you, Paco: Is the radical mental state still present today?

FJ: I don't think so. Sociologically, we see neo-functionalism, which lacks the rigor of 1970s and 1980s design. Back then, there was a tour de force advocating for significant formal innovation. Dorfles wrote a lot about this. Today, there's a sweeping away of the unnecessary and an imposed canon. Danish companies resist this trend, unlike the Dutch, who have shifted toward office furniture and are now the strongest in that field. Our friend Santiago Miranda, the creator of the TamTam lamp, presented a bureau design line to one of the strongest Dutch companies, raising many questions. That's when office spaces became compartmentalized, with open spaces fostering communication in work culture.

ML: If communication produces the social, and if we accept that we now live in a hyper-connected and hyper-communicated time, wouldn't that make this a radical era?

FJ: In that sense, yes, we are advancing. Large corporations already have extensive reports on how societies will be in 2050. They all agree that the most active vector will be Communication, Communication, and more Communication. Today, investments in communication are growing exponentially, but their direction remains uncertain. They drive research processes not directly linked to communication itself. Historically, the most significant event is the grand alliance between technologies and financial capital. If you want a snapshot of the 22nd century, take a walk around Basel. Along the Rhine, you'll find all the



Fig.2 - Picture of the interview by Beatriz Ballesteros Sánchez.

world's major pharmaceutical buildings, illuminated at night in a spectral way.

ML: Basel, if I recall correctly, hosted Coop Himmelblau's Restless Spheres as a critique of dormant cities, similar to Archigram's Instant City. I'm particularly interested in how communication produces the social. It's not just that people realized this—it's that the scale and communication channels have changed, with mobile phones, social networks... Do you think this impacts that "production of the social"?

FJ: We're still at an initial stage. Imagine communication content increasing 12,000 to 15,000 times beyond what we have now. We're small experimenters in the early phases of this domination by communication flows. The issue isn't just fake news; everything will become fake news—simulations. I discussed Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum during a seminar in Paris. It's incredibly powerful. When I talk about the simulacrum, I mean something we know isn't real but fundamentally occupies the space of the real.

ML: So, within the context of the spectacle society?

FJ: Exactly. Debord introduced this from a macro perspective. We're heading in that direction. Earlier, Baudelaire was fascinated by the aura of merchandise. Walking along the boulevard wasn't for the enjoyment of the voyeur but for the commercial undercurrent. Baudelaire argued that everything becomes merchandise, and he ended up exiled in Brussels, stating, "Everything transforms into melancholy, but initially, it's all merchandise."

ML: I was thinking about how Radical Architecture, even tentatively, places significant importance on communication. Their experiments weren't private exercises for a select few. If we think of Le Corbusier—who was a great communicator—perhaps communication, or even an overemphasis on communication, is essential to the radicals.

FJ: Indeed, but the parameters have changed qualitatively. Today's communicative input is vastly superior. The radicals, from a perspective of struggle (because they knew they were fighting for something), sought visibility for their work. Virilio did this well. He said the most important anthropological element was domesticating vitesse—speed. He was extremely radical and always on edge. After Hiroshima, he argued that anything could happen, even discussing biological weapons. There's radicalism in their work, but communication has fundamentally shifted. It's now a machine. We need to reclaim the concept of Machina.

ML: Do you think the concept of the machine is worth reclaiming, even in small-scale guerrilla-style operations? Can it be instrumentalized?

FJ: That's a great question for Sennett. He believes small communities must organize around struggle, not survival. You fight with your ideas, your projects, your experiences. Experience is a formidable weapon. We need to educate—to position people within that horizon of creative experience. You destabilize the house and open yourself to another space. And that space is time. The classics said, *Tempus templum*: time is the house.

ML: And what's your opinion on Koolhaas as a radical or post-radical?

FJ: I admire Rem. He's a powerful architect and thinker, though some of his projects are quite controversial.

ML: As an architect who builds buildings or more in the realm of thought?

FJ: I think he has made necessary reflections. Delirious New York is fantastic and addresses many of these ideas. The British Pop Art movement of the '50s and '60s taught us many things. Richard Hamilton put certain issues on ice and then refocused attention on them. He's an impressive artist who fascinated all of them. Koolhaas comes from a different tradition but

is also very radical. He has adopted the laws of advanced capitalism. His partners aren't moral advisers. He's aggressive and powerful.

ML: But he still shares that critical ethos, right? I recall a project of his that fascinated me, which uses research as a creative premise for preserving Beijing. He traces a timeline of preservation history from the Industrial Revolution and concludes that if historical preservation continues at its current rate, we'll eventually conserve buildings that haven't even been built yet. From there, he proposes a preservation plan for Beijing that consists of a homogeneous grid where the central core—10%—is preserved uncritically, regardless of what's there.

FJ: That fits within the radical constellation—a thought process where facts impose their own rules. The Chinese TV building in Beijing evokes vehement reactions. Its formal impact is overwhelming. I didn't enter the building, but seeing it from the outside was a shock. What I like most about Koolhaas is his writing style, where his cross-sectional analyses allow you to think deeply. He has undoubtedly taught many people. His text for *Mutations* is remarkable.

ML: I don't want to end without asking whether Radical Architecture should still be studied—not as a historical movement like Gothic architecture but as something that remains present or should be present. Or should it be archived?

FJ: Definitely not archived. It remains present in many forms. However, there aren't always appropriate imitations. I think there is a mentality, an intellectual stance, that directly questions architectural forms and problems. And I believe we can continue questioning it today. It's increasingly present in seminars and exhibitions, like the one on Gianni Piretti at FRAC in Orléans.

ML: Paco, infinite and radical thanks. I'm deeply grateful.

FJ: Thank you. Let's stay in touch.