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An Interview with Luis Barragan

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An Interview with Luis Barragan

by Damian Bayon

Bayon

I would like to ask about your experience with the Pedregal de San Angel; how did it all start?

Barragan

My experience with Pedregal goes back to my fondness for gardens, which I first found in the work of a French writer, rather than in the gardens themselves. The literature that describes them enhances the magic in those places. In this way, I acquired a taste for landscape and put it into practice here, originally on my own projects. I did not think of the possibility of putting these ideas into projects of a collective nature; and I speak of the collective aspect because it led me to a suburb like Pedregal. Thus I purchased a property "El Cabrio" on the edge of the Pedregal; there were trees on one side and an extension of dried lava on the other. There was also a hostile aspect but great beauty in its colors and forms which contrasted with protruding curls of lava and crevices.

Then when the garden was created, apart from the trees and lawns, I discovered that the places where you could better feel this magic and mystery were in those gardens formed directly on the rock. More precisely in the contrast between grass and rocks because, without doubt, the stone alone, although of great beauty and interest combined with the particular flora of the Pedregal, does not quite project a feeling of hospitality. Then finding that the gardens in which the spaces left between the masses of rock allowed for circulation, I dedicated myself to them. Sometimes a mere path between the crevices formed by the rock would end in small clearings of an incredible mystery. I then tried to purchase a piece of land simply to expand my garden and found that the owner would sell only the whole property . . . that is, more than 13 million square meters at a low price. He considered the land to be unusable since it had been idle for centuries; it is thought that Pedregal was formed some 3000 years ago. The ruins of several early towns were found buried under the layers of lava. I then conceived this adventure of using the property in a residential development and had a garden built to prove the possibilities of the place. People should not fear living in a place like that, but see the opportunity to create great beauty and interesting architecture. Unfortunately, the architecture that developed was not quite successful. It could have been *if* a program respected by those concerned had regulated all construction. I then looked to a good friend of mine and formed the trusteeship which later organized a company to develop a residential area.

As this chat began with gardens, let me add now that this project gave us the opportunity to create some sample gardens in the Pedregal. We also had the opportunity to make several fountains and do ornamental work which lend character to the streets and to the urban design in general. Regulations were established to prevent "front-tennis" courts, a fad at that time, because their enormous walls ruin the visual atmosphere of an extended zone. (It was, however, impossible to prevent some of them from appearing). Building regulations specified a contemporary style to avoid the so-



called "Californian Colonial" style, also in fashion at the time. But, from a constitutional point of view these regulations cannot be rigidly enforced and the result is a potpourri of many styles. Nevertheless, the Pedregal has a strong character despite this promiscuity of styles. I think a bigger unity is achieved there compared to other residential areas. Also, privacy is achieved. That does not happen in most North American cities where gardens are often completely open and it is the car passenger passing at 100 km/h, who enjoys them rather than the occupants. At the Pedregal we set an example, in the first gardens, of building a wall around the house, using the same stone found at the site. We left fences as ornamental objects as well as gates and doors, to provide variety and avoid the monotony which using walls exclusively would have produced. The idea of a wall which separates the street from the gardens has been retained in a great majority of the constructions in this development.

There was a lot of talk about these walls. Many people asked: why walls? why not grates? why not leave them open? The answer was: if you leave it

*One area of El Pedregal garden:
"Sometimes a mere path between the
crevices formed by the rock would
end in small clearings of incredible
mystery."*



open, like in the U.S., it will only be seen by passing cars. In certain European cities and in some towns of Mexico, when one walks between two walls on a street, to see the tree tops appearing behind these walls adds interest and more beauty. And all this because of a most important word in human life, and that is *magic*. Still another one: surprise. We have to have surprises as we walk on any street and as we arrive at any square.

Bayon

I have yet another question: In our American heritage, we find — since pre-Columbian and colonial architecture represented our own characteristics — blind walls, terraced constructions, the use of stone, of plainly painted white walls in the interior patio, shadowy spots in the house and a controlled amount of light being let into the rooms, the union between man's work and nature. Provided the new materials and technical advance, is all this to be retained by the contemporary?

Barragan

I would say that we have to keep in mind the amount of beauty that those walls represent, in spaces and shadows, and it would be interesting for modern architecture to achieve this too, as a particular design in the urban process.

To repeat what I stated earlier, we should try to produce with modern architecture the same attraction that is found in the surfaces, spaces, and volumes of pre-Columbian architecture as well as colonial and popular architecture, but it has to be done with a contemporary expression. Obviously, we cannot repeat these forms exactly, but we can analyze the essence of these elements. So that, without copying the same gardens, patios and plazas, we can transmit to people the experiences of centuries which may make their lives a bit more pleasurable. It is exactly what modern cities lack the most.

There, man is out of scale in relation to his environment, (but then hasn't he always been?), a scale which provokes in him anxiety while city traffic and turmoil makes him restless. We have to find shelter and the proper environment for this modern man.

Assuming it is difficult to use the great walls, high-placed windows, and everything we see in indigenous and colonial architecture or popular architecture in towns everywhere around the world, we still realize that it is usually beautiful and solves the problem of community life. It would be interesting to analyze what makes these solutions so good. Not merely give modern man this dose of "taste" so he can endure today's cities but also gain the sense of public life felt in most Latin American cities.

It is astonishing that modern architecture has not produced an example of work which expresses the attraction of a place. This would fulfill spiritual desires and create confidence in the inhabitants. I do think there is more "modernity" in Latin America than in Europe. That is, everything being built here — and if not all, most of it — is contemporary architecture. And the main clients (government and civil authorities, religious leaders, industrialists and people who want their residences done, rich and poor, they all want contemporary architecture. That is, they follow the tradition that says we should use the architecture of our time. It can be successful. There can be beauty in it, also ugliness; but I consider the Latin American spirit as being more modern and progressive than the European.

Although there is a contemporary spirit in Mexico, some mistakes have been and are being committed, i.e., building colonial architecture and false colonial settings and more recently, this fashion of mansard roofs, a caricature of the so-called provincial style, which has perhaps the OK from Hollywood.

And another subject: architects and authorities have taken up the noble task of remodeling pueblos, but due to time pressures these towns have become merely movie sets. All of them have been painted white, in accordance with our mediterranean architecture, although it is often also noted for its generous use of colors. A rare example where color has been used with good results can be seen in the town of Jocotitlan. A beautiful popular Mexican architectural atmosphere has been achieved. Maybe the only flaw is in the fountain in the Main Plaza. ☹



The public park in El Pedregal [opposite page] is made up of layers of lava covering ruins of earlier towns. Barragan's fountains [above] emphasized the magic of water in this dry, convoluted terrain.