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fig. 1
Juan O'Gorman in Diego
Rivera's studio, ca. 1934,
Archivo DACPAI,
Conaculta, INBA.

JUAN O'GORMAN: ARCHITECTURE AND SURFACE

Alejandro Hernández Gálvez

Translated by David A. Auerbach

Alejandro Hernández Gálvez is an architect who lives and works in Mexico City. He has been a finalist in competitions for the renovation of the city's Zócalo and for the Biblioteca José Vasconcelos, and won the competition for Centro, a new institute of design, cinema, and television. He has been co-curator at both the São Paulo and Venice Biennials. He was editor of the journal *Trazos*, *cuadernos de arquitectura*, and has edited or contributed essays for a number of books, including volumes about Bernardo Gómez Pimienta and Clara Porset. He is on the faculty at Universidad Anáhuac and Universidad Iberoamericana, and is a member of the Sistema Nacional de Creadores del Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.

In 1936, having earned a reputation as a leading advocate of functionalist architecture in Mexico, Juan O'Gorman (1905–1982) famously “abandoned” architecture in favor of painting (fig. 1). This essay offers a new reading of O'Gorman's repudiation of architecture, arguing—based on his work and writings—that rather than truly leaving architecture behind, O'Gorman actually developed a nuanced stance that sought to integrate architecture with other arts, especially painting and sculpture. Only by restoring the expressive character of architecture, he believed, would architects be capable of addressing ideological functions he deemed essential to modern Mexico.

Born in Mexico City in 1905 to an Irish father and Mexican mother, O'Gorman studied architecture at the National School of Architecture during the post-Revolutionary years of the 1920s. During this decade, he also worked four years for Carlos Obregón Santacilia, one of his teachers and the designer of important post-Revolutionary structures such as the Ministry of Public Health. In 1929, O'Gorman designed a structure at 81 Calle de Palmas in San Ángel that, he would later claim, was Mexico's first functionalist house.¹ This home impressed his close friend Diego Rivera, who asked O'Gorman to design a residence and studio for himself and Frida Kahlo in this new architectural style in 1931. The structure that O'Gorman designed remains the most famous example of Mexican functionalist architecture (fig. 2).



fig. 2
 Juan O’Gorman, Rivera–
 Kahlo House, Mexico City,
 1931. Photograph ca. 1970.
 Archivo Museo Casa–
 Estudio Diego Rivera y
 Frida Kahlo.

This photograph shows additions made after Rivera’s death by his daughter, Ruth Rivera Marin, who added a ground floor to Rivera’s part of the complex (in red) and to the bridge joining the two house-studios. These additions have since been demolished.

including historian and colonial art specialist Manuel Toussaint, astronomer Luis Enrique Erro, folklorist Frances Toor, and Minister of Education Narciso Bassols, and built the now-demolished building for the Filmmakers’ Union in 1934. In addition, from 1932 to 1935 O’Gorman designed twenty-four schools for the Ministry of Public Education.

O’Gorman was also a renowned painter, known for his surrealist landscapes and urban vistas. He painted murals for the Ministry of Education schools and won high-profile contests, including one sponsored by the Tolteca cement company in 1931—discussed by James Oles in this volume—and another sponsored by the newspaper *Excelsior* in 1949.² His works as a muralist also include the famous mosaic murals covering the facades of the Central Library (1952) at Mexico City’s Ciudad Universitaria, a building on which he also participated as architect, along with Gustavo M. Saavedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco.

After 1936, O’Gorman devoted most of his efforts to painting—both murals and works on canvas—returning only occasionally to his original vocation. In 1948, for example, he designed his own home at 162 Avenida San Jerónimo, Pedregal de San Ángel, which he called “an essay on organic architecture and the only true work of architecture” that he created in his life.³ Although O’Gorman was no longer chiefly an architect after the mid-1930s, he did continue to participate in international debates about the status of architecture and its integration with other arts. His engagement with Le Corbusier—first as an advocate, later as a fierce critic—was particularly intense. This essay explores O’Gorman’s interventions in these debates and their relationship to his work as an architect and an artist.

During the 1930s, along with Juan Legarreta and Álvaro Aburto, O’Gorman defended such functionalist architecture and its advocates among the European avant-garde, especially the Swiss architect and writer, Le Corbusier. In 1932, he was among the founders of the School of Engineering and Architecture at the National Polytechnical Institute, where he taught until 1948. He created residences during the 1930s for leading cultural figures of the time,

O’Gorman’s “Three Moments”

The renowned art critic Raquel Tibol published an essay in 1967 titled “Juan O’Gorman en varios tiempos” (Juan O’Gorman at Various Moments) in the Visual Arts section of the journal *Calli*.⁴ (The issue was dedicated to the School of Engineering and Architecture at the National Polytechnical Institute.) Each of the three moments identified by Tibol corresponds to a particular contribution that O’Gorman made to discussions among Mexican architects and artists.

In her description of the “first moment,” Tibol referred to the functionalist ideas espoused by O’Gorman in the “Discussions on Architecture” organized by the Society of Mexican Architects in 1933, and in a text he published in *Frente a Frente*, the main publication of the League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists.⁵ O’Gorman’s statements at the time reveal the influence of Le Corbusier, a pioneer of, and vigorous propagandist for, functionalist design. Le Corbusier’s 1923 book, *Vers une architecture* (*Towards a New Architecture*, as it has been translated into English), in particular, served as a formative guide during the early part of O’Gorman’s career. In the “Discussions on Architecture,” O’Gorman insisted that:

The front door to the worker’s home shall be the same size as the front door to the philosopher’s home. Essential necessity is resolved in each case through precision. The window through which sunlight enters must be exactly the same size for both such houses, and should be devised precisely in such a way that it resolves, in the best way possible, the problem of illuminating the lives of either person, and it is thus that all technical problems should be approached.⁶

O’Gorman, at this time, opposed an architecture of “subjective values,” in favor of one that was objective, defined, and precise: “Gentlemen: I believe that architecture that resolves material and palpable needs—which are not to be confused, which exist, and which can be proven to exist, and which are, at the same time, fundamental and true to all humanity—is the only true architecture of our time.”⁷ The architect who strived to satisfy spiritual or sentimental needs, which are entirely subjective, risked becoming little more than an “exterior decorator” whose work was of use only to a minority. Technical architecture, of the kind O’Gorman promoted at this point, was meant to serve “humanity.”⁸

No building better defines this first phase than does the famous Rivera-Kahlo house (figs. 3, 4). To reflect the independence of each artist, O’Gorman created two separate, yet similar, structures of exposed concrete (with walls painted *al fresco* in different solid, strong colors and large expanses of windows), which were linked by an exterior bridge. The roof

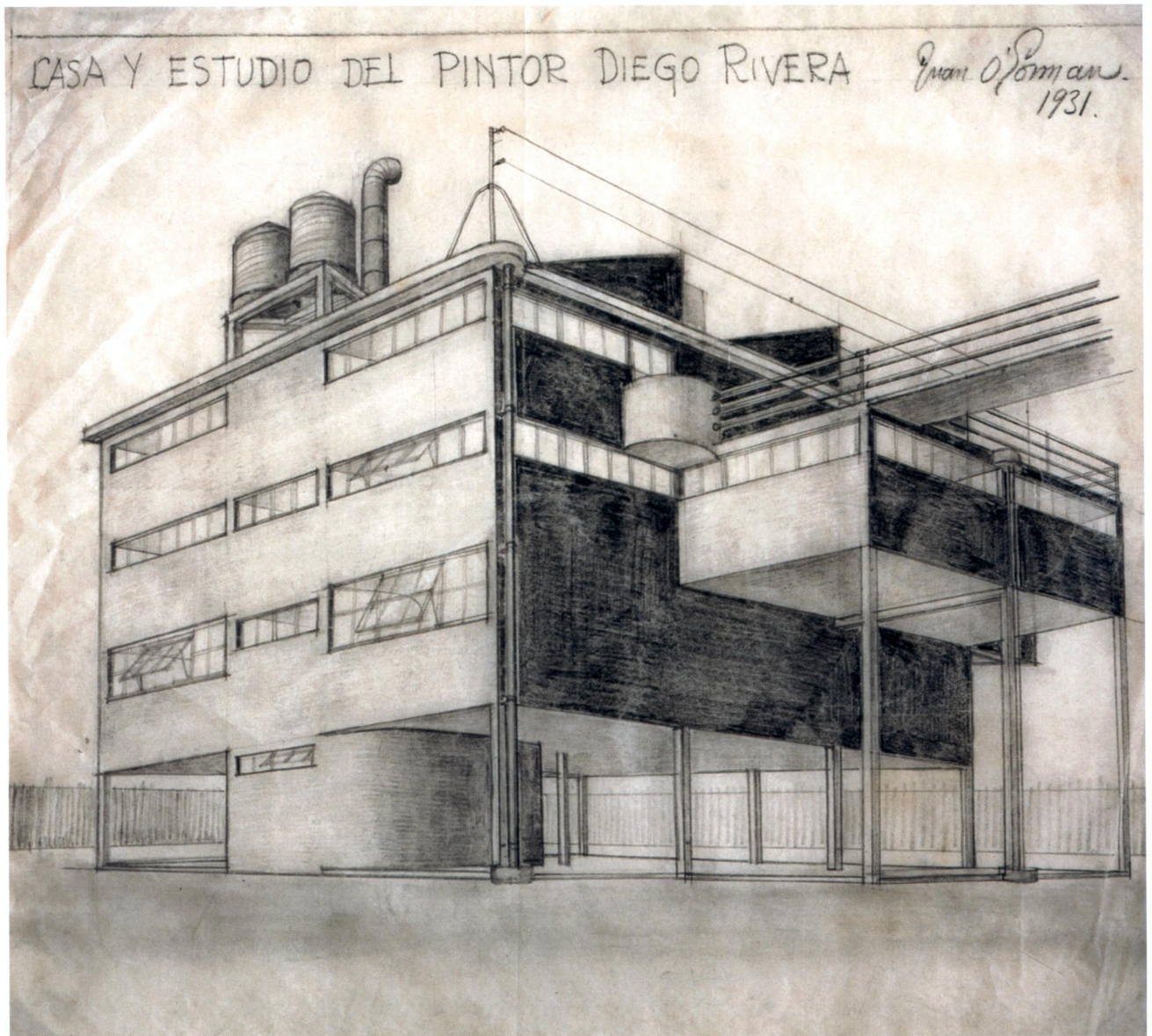


fig. 3
Juan O'Gorman, House—
Studio of Diego Rivera,
drawing, Mexico City, 1931.
Archivo Museo Casa—
Estudio Diego Rivera y
Frida Kahlo.

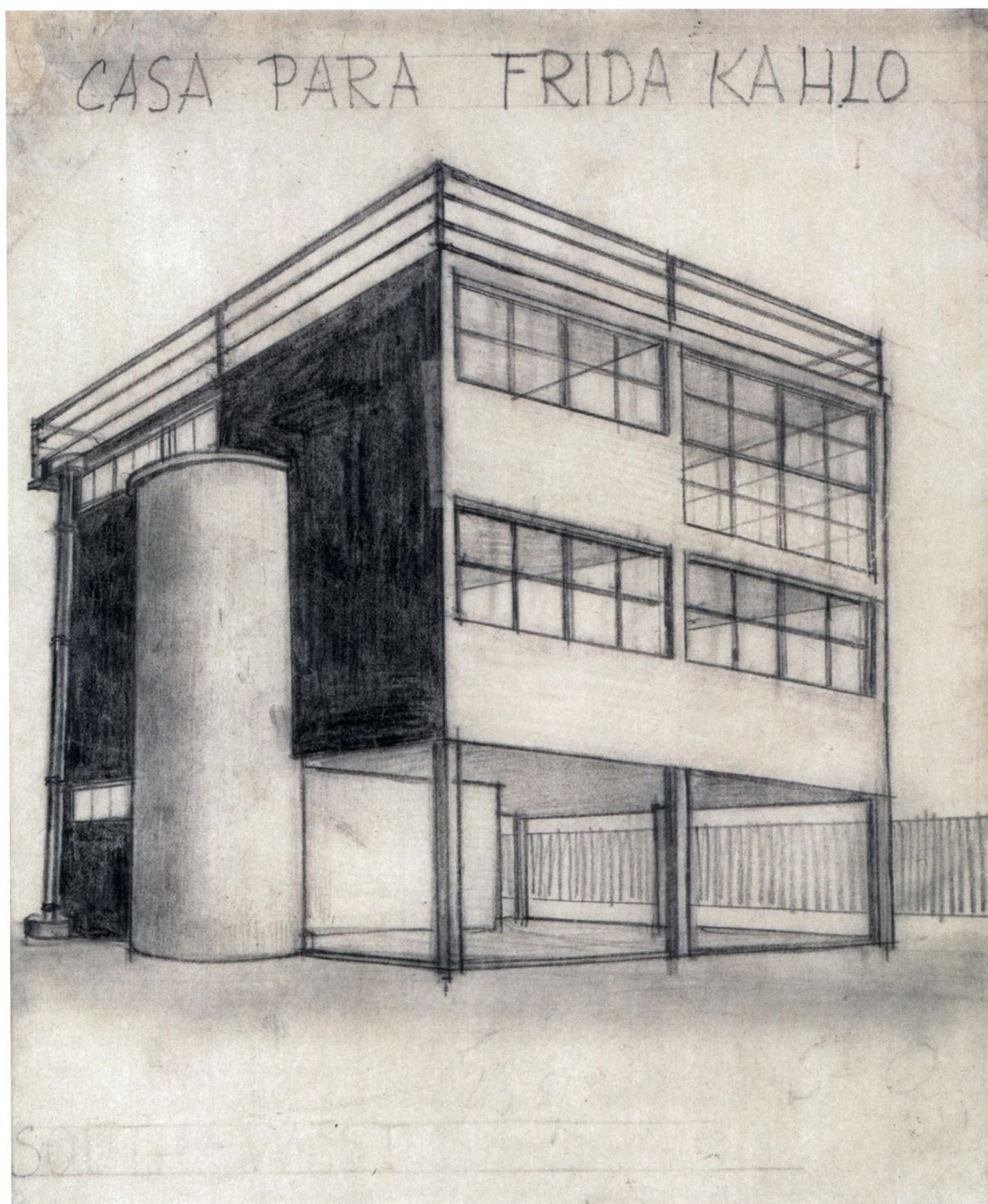
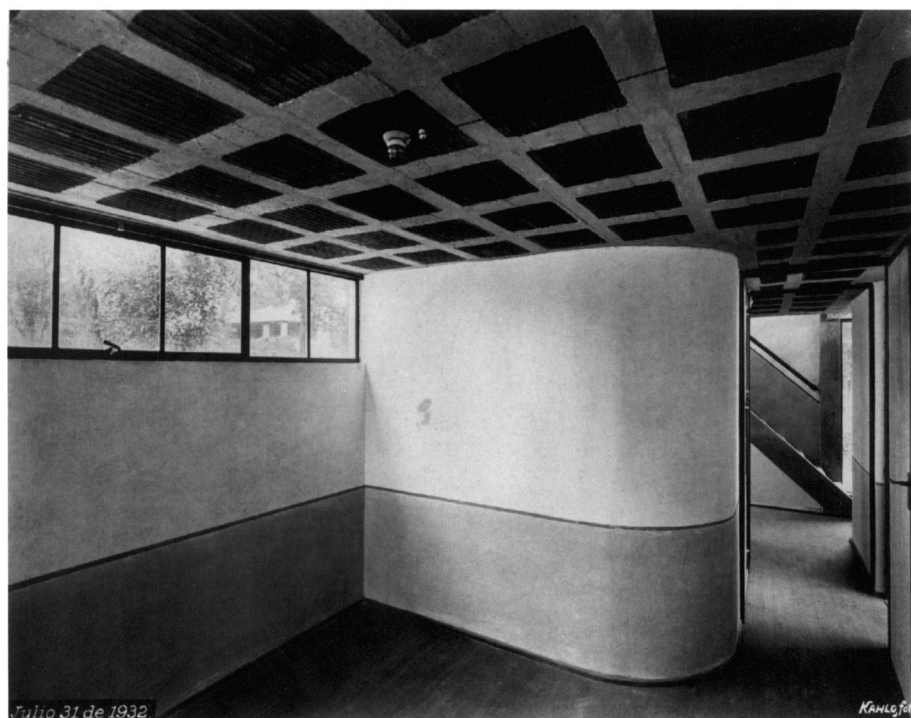


fig. 4
Juan O'Gorman, House-
Studio of Frida Kahlo,
drawing, Mexico City, 1931.
Archivo Museo Casa-
Estudio Diego Rivera y
Frida Kahlo.

fig. 5
 Juan O’Gorman, House—
 Studio of Diego Rivera,
 bedroom on the second
 level, Mexico City, 1931.
 Photograph by Guillermo
 Kahlo, 1932. Archivo Museo
 Casa—Estudio Diego Rivera
 y Frida Kahlo.



terraces and *pilotis* (slender concrete piers) echoed very directly Le Corbusier’s writings and his example as an architect. The interiors, with their unfinished surfaces, geometric forms, and lack of ornament, distilled the notion of an architecture that aimed to satisfy solely “material and palpable needs” and that matched the standards of ideological neutrality that O’Gorman proclaimed in this period (fig. 5).

In the numerous homes he designed for other prominent Mexicans, O’Gorman used the same materials—concrete, glass, and steel—and modernist features (fig. 6). He also adapted the same materials and style he had used on the Rivera house in his designs for schools. The practical, modular structures were relatively easy and inexpensive to build, thus facilitating the Ministry of Education’s desire to provide an education to all classes throughout the country. Functionalism enabled O’Gorman to practice architecture in the service of social reform and egalitarian ideals (fig. 7).

The second of O’Gorman’s “moments” identified by Tibol corresponds to the construction of the Ciudad Universitaria on the main campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, or UNAM). More specifically, this period is embodied in the murals O’Gorman created to cover UNAM’s Central Library building (1952), which exhibited overstated surface embellishment that, Tibol argued, signaled a radical change of path for O’Gorman.



fig. 6
Juan O’Gorman, House of
Julio Castellanos, Mexico
City, ca. 1930–36. From
Esther Born, *The New
Architecture in Mexico*
(New York: W. Morrow &
Co., 1937), 93. Photograph
by Esther Born.



fig. 7
Juan O’Gorman, Technical
Industrial School, Mexico
City, 1933–34. From Esther
Born, *The New Architecture
in Mexico* (New York: W.
Morrow & Co., 1937), 24.
Photograph by Esther Born.

For the library, O’Gorman and fellow architects Saavedra and Martínez de Velasco asymmetrically superimposed a vertical windowless cube that holds the stacks over a long horizontal structure housing the reading rooms, which are illuminated by expansive windows. O’Gorman then covered every inch of the vertical structure with mosaics created from colored rocks native to Mexico (fig. 8). His panoramic subject joined pre-Hispanic cosmology and Western religion with the history of Mexico. O’Gorman’s pictorial language deliberately recalls the flattened and geometrized style of pre-Hispanic codices, and some of the forms even evoke ancient gods.

As Tibol related, the National Institute of Fine Arts and the Society of Architects organized a series of conferences by architects, critics, sculptors, and painters in 1954, shortly after the building was completed. O’Gorman’s presentation was titled “La degeneración de la arquitectura de nuestra época” (The Degeneration of Architecture in Our Time) and represented a repudiation of his earlier functionalist views. “Architecture nowadays,” O’Gorman affirmed, “is a battlefield shared by two disparate trends: one comprising the so-called abstract and non-objective faction, and the other, the objective or realist faction.”⁹ He identified a dichotomy between the “engineering of buildings”—a term he used when referring to architecture that, according to him, was principally technical in nature—and what might be termed “proper architecture,” which involved expression and supplement. The engineering of buildings implies two basic techniques: construction and distribution (“the knowledge required for



fig. 8
 Juan O’Gorman, Gustavo M. Saavedra, and Juan Martínez de Velasco, Central Library, UNAM, Mexico City, 1952. Archivo Fotográfico Manuel Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.

providing the appropriate relationships, according to correlative functions, for the parts of a building”).¹⁰ He argued that the standardization of form characteristic of functionalism, however, impeded free artistic expression.¹¹ By this time, O’Gorman had come to believe that proper architecture involved “what lies beyond technique,” namely the expression of fantasy.¹²

The third and final ideological “moment” determined by Tibol occurred in 1958, with a series of discussions about problems of realism and function in Mexican art, organized by the Visual Arts Front.¹³ O’Gorman’s presentation, titled “Algunas consideraciones sobre el problema del realismo” (Some Considerations on the Problem of Realism) elaborated on and added complexity to his earlier rejection of functionalism. Realism in art, he explained, is “the abstract expression of reality, just as mathematics is a diagrammatic, numeric, and abstract representation of reality employed to understand certain phenomena.”¹⁴ O’Gorman’s favorite example for explaining his concept of “abstract realism” was the work of the nineteenth-century Mexican landscape painter José María Velasco, whom many “highly realist” painters he claimed, had erroneously deemed academic (fig. 9).¹⁵ Velasco’s importance, he argued, lay not in “the representation of hills and trees, or the stones or foliage in a given landscape, but in the relationship of visually organized tonalities used to achieve a profoundly grandiose and monumental composition, thus creating the *real painting of space*.”¹⁶ Velasco’s paintings of space and matter

were objective as representations of apparent reality, in that they were based on studies the painter had undertaken about anatomy, geology, mineralogy, and botany. They were also, O’Gorman argued, abstract: “without any need to use perspective, which is only a diagram, a simple graphic representation indicating the third dimension, one that never carries us optically from the foreground to the infinite.”¹⁷ O’Gorman admired that Velasco created space abstractly—by relying on a scale of color tones of his own invention—in order to layer forms and objects in his paintings, and did not rely on a strict perspectival system.

If O’Gorman valued Velasco’s art because it was both abstract and objective (in the sense of being based on a natural reality), he applied this same set of values to his classification of different schools of architecture. O’Gorman now asserted that functionalism and the so-called international style that had grown out of it, although they were abstract, were not derived from any reality (except, in the case of functionalism, the reality of the technical demands of a particular project). The architectural counterpart to Velasco’s abstract and objective realism was manifest, above all, in Frank Lloyd Wright’s organicism. Realism in architecture, for O’Gorman, meant an interest in popular tradition, landscape, and the social condition of the masses. Realist architecture would be “one which, through the most appropriate construction means and techniques, efficiently responds to the human need for shelter, and,

fig. 9
José María Velasco, *La Hacienda de Chimalpa*, oil on canvas, 41 x 62½ in. (104 x 159 cm), 1893. Museo Nacional de Arte, Conaculta, INBA. Reproduction authorized by INBA, 2009.



as a work of art, updates tradition in harmony with the landscape in which it is constructed.”¹⁸ By rejecting this kind of realism, the abstract architecture of functionalism and the international style (like abstract expressionism in art) rejected the possibility of any broad social impact and, thus, became “a reflection of the impotency of the class which conceived this form of art.”¹⁹ In O’Gorman’s own work, this “moment” is represented by the residence he designed for himself around 1948 at San Jerónimo—discussed below—in which he incorporated a natural grotto and other aspects of the local landscape, inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater (1936–39).

Tibol concluded her commentary by stating that her discussion of O’Gorman’s aesthetic ideas shows that he “has been a coherent, [albeit] mercurial and highly emotional expositor of many of the fundamental ideas of modern art in Mexico, and that his opinions and his works have greatly influenced the ongoing development of reintegrating painting with architecture and sculpture.”²⁰ O’Gorman responded to Tibol in the following edition of *Calli* by complaining that she had made him out to be “an opportunistic circus showman,” without any consistency to his ideas.²¹ By looking more closely at O’Gorman’s views about art, painting, and architecture, it is possible to move beyond Tibol’s “three moments” and create a more intelligible picture of O’Gorman’s break with the functionalism of his early career. Three themes in O’Gorman’s thought emerge, offering a more nuanced and complex understanding of his apparently contradictory conceptual progression.

Architecture and Building

The difference between architecture understood as art and architecture as mere building has been articulated, rearticulated, and reasserted throughout the history of the discipline. The “architectural metaphor,” as Denis Hollier has recently termed it, does not refer to what is constructed in a building, but to the way in which architecture transcends mere building, to that which is aesthetic in itself.²² Thus for the French architect Étienne-Louis Boullée, as stated in his well-known treatise from the early 1790s, building was nothing more than a secondary art, one that would become redeemed, covered, or embellished by the primordial art which is architecture.²³ Boullée rejected what he perceived to be an erroneous definition of architecture offered by the Roman architect and writer Vitruvius, as “the art of building.”²⁴ A half century after Boullée, John Ruskin, in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849), also emphasized the distinction “between Architecture and Building” by defining architecture as “the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man, for whatever uses, that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power, and pleasure.”²⁵ Karl Marx, writing two decades after Ruskin, contrasted the work of a bee to that of an architect: “a bee would put many

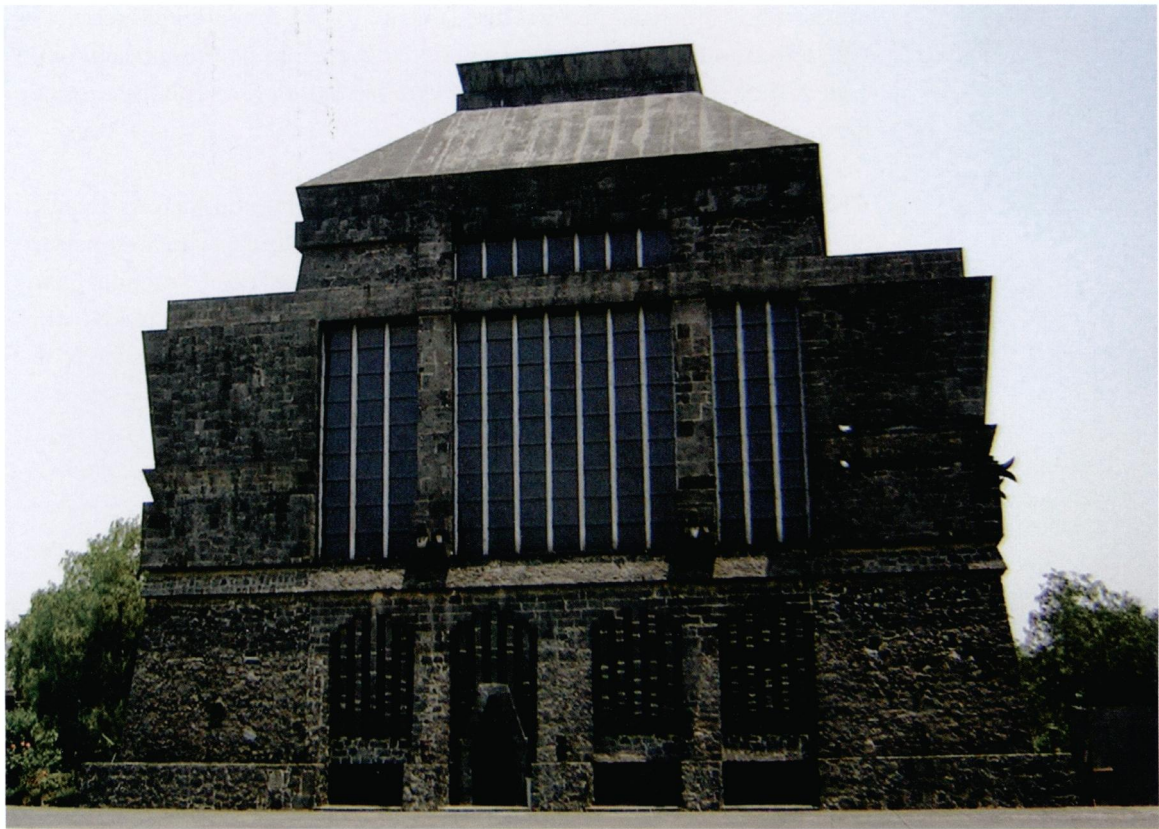


fig. 10
 Juan O'Gorman and Diego
 Rivera, Anahuacalli, Mexico
 City, mid-1940s.
 Photograph by Deborah
 Caplow, 2005.

architects to shame in the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.”²⁶ O’Gorman’s rejection of functionalism was, in part, a matter of applying this distinction between architecture and building to contemporary developments. For him, the purely technical engineering of buildings, without the supplement of expression or fantasy, never becomes architecture.

In 1970, O’Gorman explained to an interviewer that the idea of covering walls with multi-colored stone mosaics—as he did at San Jerónimo and at UNAM’s Central Library—came to him while working on Anahuacalli, a museum for Diego Rivera in El Pedregal de San Pablo Tepetlapa during the mid-1940s (fig. 10). A squat and blocky structure with a pyramidal roof, Anahuacalli’s exterior vaguely recalls the forms of Mesoamerican architecture. “During the construction process, Rivera posed the following problem: What can we do to avoid seeing these concrete structures?”²⁷ Rivera was suggesting a way to make the architecture visible by rendering the mere construction invisible. This simultaneous disappearing/appearing act would involve reintegrating other arts into architecture, namely, painting and sculpture, which up until the twentieth century had been considered a single unit. Rivera, for instance, had written in 1952 that in

pre-Hispanic Mexican architecture—as in any pre-modern architecture—“there was no way of discerning where sculpture and painting began or ended, they simply formed, together *with the building*, a visually seamless harmonic whole.”²⁸

Rivera's influence on O'Gorman was considerable. He considered Rivera to be—along with Velasco and Frida Kahlo—one of the three greatest painters in Mexico.²⁹ Rivera, like O'Gorman, had become a critic of functionalism:

Architecture, given that it is destined to be used by human beings, cannot be truly functional if it does not provide for the needs of the human endocrinosympathetic apparatus, i.e., for the needs of aesthetic emotion through the presence of what we call beauty. Harmonic conditions are capable of producing that emotion in human beings.³⁰

Both artists believed—despite the house O'Gorman had built for Rivera during his radical functionalist phase—that the functionalist tendency was not only a reduction, but also a threat to architecture in general, particularly within the context of Mexican artistic and cultural traditions.

Strangely enough, Rivera's and O'Gorman's criticisms coincided with the evolving critical views about radical functionalism and its corporate counterpart, the international style, adopted by Le Corbusier and some of his allies after the Second World War. In 1947, at the Sixth International Congress on Modern Architecture, the architectural historian and critic Siegfried Giedion affirmed that considerations relating to the standardization and planning of cities, a central concern for modern architects during the early twentieth century, were now giving way to an “almost intangible issue”: aesthetic problems, or, as he preferred, emotional expression.³¹

Nevertheless, neither O'Gorman nor Rivera was particularly predisposed in his criticism of functionalism to join the ranks of those they both considered, at least to some degree, their enemies. Rivera claimed that the architecture of Le Corbusier was merely for “dandies,” that none of his well-known five points of new architecture had any real application, and that, in the end, he was a reactionary.³² For O'Gorman, Le Corbusier's style, like any other such style imported into Mexico, was necessarily alien to the “tastes and interests” of most Mexicans.³³ “The Swiss puritanism of Le Corbusier's architecture,” he now argued, “is an exact antithesis of the visual arts of Mexico.”³⁴ This scorn for Le Corbusier and his followers was countered by his inversely proportional admiration for the ideas and work of Frank Lloyd Wright, whom Rivera also recognized as a true master. O'Gorman pushed the distinction between these two architects even further, while apparently confessing to his own former culpability:

As for my own personal involvement, I wish to state that between the years 1926 and 1935, I did actively foster the implementation of functionalism in Mexico, using as my model the architecture of Le Corbusier. On the one hand, this demonstrates the lack of any real orientation and the vacuousness that resides in our academic training. It also points to my own lack of talent, since the works of Frank Lloyd Wright were certainly within my reach, and at the time, these represented an updated expression of our own traditions. By 1938, I had become aware of this grave error, and from that point onward I abandoned architecture to devote myself to painting.³⁵

From the use of walls painted in strong colors (authentic abstract frescos) in the joined homes he built for Rivera and Kahlo in San Ángel in 1931, to the construction of sculptural murals in his own residence in San Jerónimo in 1948, O’Gorman would eventually weave together, helped along by the ideas of Rivera, his own conception of architecture as art and, even more, as a national art, based on the difference between mere construction and proper architecture, between—in other words—the wall and the mural.

The Wall and the Mural

In December 1979, Juan O’Gorman, the painter, presented a talk at the Mexican Academy of Arts titled “Técnicas de la pintura” (Techniques of Painting). Although he stated at the outset that it “would be quite boring, except for those who paint,” it is in fact rather interesting for helping understand the other O’Gorman, the architect. “The generalities of painting are as follows,” he said: “one can paint on any surface, be it a table, a wall, this book, or even a rock.”³⁶ The issue of what can be used as a painting surface—the support, the base—“is far more important than we might imagine.”³⁷ Good painters—traditional painters, O’Gorman suggested—are those who begin painting with the preparation of the canvas, from the moment the support is actually constructed. What happens when the support is a wall?

If the intended surface is a wall, i.e., an architectural component, the construction of the surface implies, at least in some way, the reconstruction of architecture, and implicitly all civilization, as art—since, according to O’Gorman, “the absence of painting and sculpture is one of the characteristic modalities of our unhinged civilization.”³⁸ He claimed that architecture had been divested of decoration, in part due to “a mechanical principle which, in its own way, is a reflection of the Industrial Revolution,” and had been reduced to engineering.³⁹ O’Gorman concluded that muralism, based on “monumental realist painting,” might restore architecture to the category of art.⁴⁰ The process of reconstructing architecture as art is equivalent to the process of preparing the surface to receive a painting, that is, transforming the wall into a mural.

Given the standpoint of O’Gorman, the painter, it is hardly mysterious that the other O’Gorman, the architect, should so vehemently distance himself from Le Corbusier, who struggled his entire life to gain the same recognition as a painter that he enjoyed as an architect. For Le Corbusier, the painted wall had a very different relationship to architecture than it did for O’Gorman. In a letter from 1932 to the Russian architect, journalist, and writer Viktor Nekrasov, Le Corbusier referred to certain Byzantine frescos and noted that, while in some cases these paintings “did not undermine the architecture,” he was still unsure if “they added anything to it.” Le Corbusier accepted “fresco not as something which provides emphasis for a wall, but rather *as a means for violently destroying the wall, removing any notion of stability, weight, etc.*” He ended up asserting that, in the case of the Sistine Chapel, “if it was the intention to preserve the walls and ceiling as form, they should never have been painted with frescos; this means that someone wished to remove forever their original architectonic character, and create something else, which is acceptable.”⁴¹

The original architectonic character of walls and ceilings, forms and spaces, their condition as true objects that radiate power, emerges—as Le Corbusier required in his famous “Law of Ripolin”—under a coat of whitewash that annuls any possible symbolic expressivity.⁴² He prescribed: “Each citizen must remove all wallpaper and chintz and draperies, to be replaced by a solid coat of white paint.”⁴³ This aesthetic purism was not far removed from moral puritanism:

We clean our house. There are no dirty, dark corners. *Everything is shown as it is.* Then we clean within ourselves, since the path we have adopted leads to a refusal to allow anything at all which is not correct, authorized, intended, desired, previously conceived: there is no action before conception.⁴⁴

In contradiction to the “Law of Ripolin,” Le Corbusier did use color in his actual practice—from the polychromatic walls of his own blueprints to the collections of color samples, *claviers de couleurs*, that he designed for the Swiss wallpaper company Salubra in 1931—but continued to conceive of architecture and painting in antagonistic terms.⁴⁵ The most extreme example, perhaps, is house E.1027, which Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici designed for themselves in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, France, between 1926 and 1929.⁴⁶ From 1937 to 1939, Le Corbusier painted his first mural in the living room of the Gray-Badovici house, after Fernand Léger had painted one the year before on an adjacent patio wall. In Badovici’s view, the point of these murals was to “destroy the walls through the use of color,” and Léger made a very similar statement.⁴⁷ For Le Corbusier, in the words of the architectural historian, Beatriz Colomina, the mural was “a weapon against architecture, a bomb.”⁴⁸ For O’Gorman, by contrast, the mural was a means of redeeming architecture as art.

O’Gorman believed that his residence—since demolished—at San Jerónimo was his most successful expression of the redemptive power of murals for architecture, and of his attempt to balance abstraction with realism. He designed a structure in Mexico City’s El Pedregal district that mimicked organic shapes and incorporated the natural landscape, which was formed by a field of petrified lava rock left by the eruption of the Xitle volcano more than fifteen-hundred years earlier. Like Wright at Fallingwater, he integrated the natural rock walls already present on the site into the structure itself. These walls and other surfaces on the exterior and interior were decorated profusely with stone mosaics and sculptures that recall ancient pre-Hispanic architecture. The architect’s wife, Helen Fowler, filled in the outdoor spaces with a dense garden (figs. 11-14). Through such means, O’Gorman wanted to achieve at San Jerónimo two of the conditions that he defined around this time as central to the practice of realist architecture: harmony between building and natural location, and the expression of indigenous cultural traditions.

fig. 11
 Juan O’Gorman, House on
 Avenida San Jerónimo,
 Mexico City, 1948.
 Photograph by Juan
 Guzmán, ca. 1960. Archivo
 Fotográfico Manuel
 Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.

Architecture, Art, and Politics

La creación artística es en sí misma un acto político.

(Artistic creation is in itself a political act.)

– Juan O’Gorman⁴⁹









fig. 12 (page 222)
 Juan O’Gorman, House on
 Avenida San Jerónimo,
 Mexico City, 1948.
 Photograph by Juan
 Guzmán, ca. 1960. Archivo
 Fotográfico Manuel
 Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.

fig. 13 (page 223)
 Juan O’Gorman, House on
 Avenida San Jerónimo,
 Mexico City, 1948.
 Photograph by Juan
 Guzmán, ca. 1960. Archivo
 Fotográfico Manuel
 Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.

fig. 14 (opposite)
 Juan O’Gorman, House on
 Avenida San Jerónimo,
 Mexico City, 1948.
 Photograph by Juan
 Guzmán, ca. 1960. Archivo
 Fotográfico Manuel
 Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.

As we have seen, for O’Gorman “the so-called international style represents everything that is contrary to tradition and regionalism and is thus the antithesis of any art trend that is acceptable to the masses.”⁵⁰ Once architecture or art are no longer popular, “they cease to be of any use to the bourgeoisie as an instrument or medium of struggle and thus become transformed into a mere parlor game for the diversion of snobs.”⁵¹ Architecture that is only abstract without also being realist—or, better yet, that is not primarily realist and therefore only abstract—becomes reduced to pure geometry, in other words, to the magnificent play of volumes beneath a Corbusian light so disparaged by O’Gorman.

The views on architecture of O’Gorman and Rivera were presaged in Victor Hugo’s romantic vision, *Notre-Dame de Paris*. Since the beginnings of humanity up through the Middle Ages, Hugo wrote, all manifestations of art “were obedient and submitted to the discipline of architecture,” and it was “the architect, the poet, the master” who “summed up in his own person the sculpture carved over his facades, the painting illuminating his windows, the music that set his bells swinging and breathed through his organ.”⁵² And thus, continued Hugo, “until the coming of Gutenberg, architecture was the main, the universal form of writing.” With the invention of the printing press, “human thought discovered a means of perpetuating itself not only more durable and resistant than architecture, but simpler and easier.” Architecture then lost everything: from that moment it became “one art among others, once it ceased to be the total, sovereign, tyrannical art, it was no longer strong enough to hold on to the other arts. So they freed themselves, threw off the yoke of architecture and each went its own way. Each one gained from this divorce. Sculpture became statuary, imagery became painting.” Architecture, however, “grew bare, its leaves fell off, it wasted visibly away, it was mean, poor, of no account.” Hugo anticipated pure, functional architecture: “The architectural form of the building becomes steadily less evident and makes the geometrical form stand out—a play of pure volumes beneath the light. . . . A building is no longer a building, it is a polyhedron.” And yet, Hugo argued: “Architecture took great pains to conceal its nakedness.”⁵³

For many of those who espoused functionalism and the international style, architecture could accept its nakedness and need not take any pains to hide it. But for O’Gorman, the reduction of architecture to pure geometry meant the negation of architecture. He believed in the possibility of restoring meaning to architecture and, more specifically, reinvigorating its capacity to have an impact on the masses through monumental, realist painting. O’Gorman believed that pure abstraction was equal to impotence, that the rejection of ornamentation and the symbolic power of architecture represented a simultaneous rejection of its social character and its artistic potential, as well as an uncritical acceptance of capitalist specialization.

O’Gorman, like Rivera, believed that architecture reintegrated into art would serve very real social, didactic, and even libertarian functions. In order to achieve these goals, architecture must respond to the painted or sculpted surface. Rivera felt that the architecture of the Ciudad Universitaria’s stadium and courts was organic, connected to the landscape and to tradition due to its openness, which was “fundamentally popular and democratic.”⁵⁴ He opposed these structures to the functionalist academic buildings, which he considered to be intended for the heirs of the pre-Revolutionary bourgeoisie and the post-Revolutionary nouveaux riches. As O’Gorman admitted self-disparagingly, the Central Library of the Ciudad Universitaria did not attain the standards sought by Rivera, who commented that the main architects participating in the University project saw the library’s murals as “a few serapes strapped to four posts.”⁵⁵ O’Gorman himself conceded that the library was a “simplistic juxtaposition of painting with a Mexican character onto a body of foreign architecture,” echoing similar criticism from the muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros.⁵⁶ Although O’Gorman believed that the integration of architecture and painting (as he conceived the library’s surface murals) had clear social and didactic aims, he agreed that his mosaics amounted to little more than surface decoration, independent of the overall form of building—what would later be termed a “decorated shed.”⁵⁷ Unlike his own house at San Jerónimo, the mosaics here did not organically change the form of the building, but merely adorned its functionalist shape (fig. 15; see also fig. 8).

For O’Gorman, Mexico would serve as the launching ground for a “movement aimed at reincorporating painting and sculpture on a grand scale.”⁵⁸ This movement had its own profound historical and social origins, which allowed it to fuse the organicism of Wright with the concepts of revolutionary Mexican muralism embodied by Rivera. From the oxidized reds and intense blues used in the homes of Rivera and Kahlo in San Ángel, to the sculptural walls of his own residence in San Jerónimo, where “without any camouflage or concealment,” architecture disappears behind “mosaic applications of natural-colored stone, which serve as an architectural analogy of local flora,” O’Gorman waged his own war for architecture.⁵⁹ Like Le Corbusier’s efforts in the Gray-Badovici house, O’Gorman began by first attacking the walls, but—unlike Le Corbusier—he “sought [to create] an objective and realist architecture,” which, as Tibol asserted, eventually veered into “the snares of overstatement and surface embellishment.”⁶⁰

But, where Tibol read contradictions in the trajectory of O’Gorman’s work and ideas—from his early, functionalist moment to the organicism of San Jerónimo—O’Gorman himself saw a progression. Even in the functionalist buildings, the abstract surface colors (such as the red and

blue exteriors of the Rivera-Kahlo house) announced the possibility of the “real architecture” that O’Gorman would later advocate and pursue, culminating at San Jerónimo, where architecture became a natural support for expressive painting and mosaic. In O’Gorman’s view, he consistently responded to the conditions of the site, whether these were the functional requirements of the Rivera-Kahlo house or the natural and logical formations of the lava at San Jerónimo. In the end, he believed in a consistent development in his work that ultimately led him to create the expressive surface of San Jerónimo, where painting and sculpture had meaning for everyone, and where he achieved his ultimate goal of a socially and politically relevant architecture.

fig. 15
 Juan O’Gorman, Gustavo
 M. Saavedra, and Juan
 Martínez de Velasco,
 Central Library, UNAM,
 detail of exterior, Mexico
 City, 1952. Archivo
 Fotográfico Manuel
 Toussaint, IIE, UNAM.



NOTES

1. *Las casas de Juan O'Gorman para Diego and Frida* (Mexico City: INBA, 2001).
2. Adriana Zavala, "Mexico City in Juan O'Gorman's Imagination," *Hispanic Research Journal* 8, no. 5 (December 2007): 491–506.
3. "Juan O'Gorman explica" (article originally published in *Calli*, no. 29, 1967), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, eds. Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, Olga Sáenz, and Elizabeth Fuentes Rojas (Mexico City: IIE, UNAM, 1983), 203.
4. Raquel Tibol, "Juan O'Gorman en varios tiempos," in *Calli*, no. 28 (July–August 1967): 7–10.
5. *Pláticas de Arquitectura 1933* (Mexico City: Conaculta, INBA, 2001).
6. *Ibid.*, 18.
7. *Ibid.*, 25.
8. *Ibid.*, 29.
9. Tibol, "Juan O'Gorman en varios tiempos," 9.
10. Juan O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo" (text delivered at a conference at Unidad Profesional de Zacatenco, ca. 1962), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 125–26.
11. Juan O'Gorman, "Arquitectura funcional" (from the Archive of the Academia de Artes, nd), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 122.
12. O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo" (ca. 1962), 127.
13. Tibol, "Juan O'Gorman en varios tiempos," 10.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Juan O'Gorman, "Velasco, pintor realista de la materia y del espacio" (from the Archive of the Academia de Artes, nd), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 324.
16. O'Gorman, "Una de tantas tesis y algunos de los muchos mitos en el arte de la pintura de hoy" (text delivered on the occasion of O'Gorman's admission to the Academia de Artes, from the Archive of the Academia de Artes, March 23, 1972), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 241. Emphasis my own.
17. *Ibid.*, 324.
18. "Entrevista a Juan O'Gorman acerca de la arquitectura" (interview originally published in *Espacios*, March 7, 1955), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 178.
19. *Ibid.*, 177.
20. Tibol, "Juan O'Gorman en varios tiempos," 10.
21. "Juan O'Gorman explica," 199.
22. Denis Hollier, *La prise de la Concorde, Essais sur Georges Bataille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 66.
23. Étienne-Louis Boullée, *Arquitectura. Ensayo sobre el arte*, trans. Carlos Manuel Fuentes (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1985), 40.
24. *Ibid.*, 41.
25. John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Leipzig: Bernhard Tauchnitz, 1907), 27. (First published 1849.)
26. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 284. (First published 1867.)
27. "Entrevista" (interview with Olga Sáenz conducted July and August, 1970, Mexico City), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 24.
28. Diego Rivera, "Un pintor opina," in *Guía de arquitectura mexicana contemporánea* (Mexico City: Editorial Espacio, 1952), quoted in Rafael López Rangel, *Diego Rivera y la arquitectura mexicana* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1986), 116. Emphasis my own.
29. Antonio Luna Arroyo, *Juan O'Gorman, autobiografía, antología de juicios críticos y documentación exhaustiva sobre su obra* (Mexico City: Cuadernos Populares de Pintura Mexicana Moderna, 1973).
30. Rivera, "Diego Rivera opina," quoted in López Rangel, *Diego Rivera y la arquitectura mexicana*, 33.
31. Siegfried Giedion, "Architect's Attitude Towards Aesthetics," in *Architecture, You and Me, the Diary of a Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 72.
32. These views were attributed to Rivera by Guillermo Rossell Raúl Cacho in the article "A la defensa de Monsieur Jeanneret," *Espacios*, 1 (September 1948), referenced in López Rangel, *Diego Rivera y la arquitectura mexicana*, 42.
33. Juan O'Gorman, "Autocrítica del edificio de la Biblioteca Central de la Ciudad Universitaria" (from the Archive of the Academia de Artes, November 30, 1953), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 164.
34. Juan O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo: la arquitectura moderna y sus relaciones," (text delivered at a conference of Sociedad de Arquitectos Mexicanos, from the Archive of the Academia de Artes, October 18, 1955), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 188.
35. *Ibid.*, 197.

36. Juan O'Gorman, "Técnicas de la pintura, primera parte" (text delivered at a conference of the Academia de Artes, from the Archive of the Academy of Arts, Mexico City, December 7, 1979), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 254.
37. Ibid., 256.
38. Juan O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo" (1955), 188.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid, 190.
41. Quoted in Brian Hatton, "The Problem of Our Walls," in *The Journal of Architecture* 4 (Spring 1999): 76. Emphasis my own.
42. Le Corbusier, *L'Art décoratif d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 193. (First published in 1925.)
43. Ibid., 191.
44. Ibid. Italics in original.
45. Verena M. Schindler, "Prefabricated rolls of oil paint: Le Corbusier's 1931 colour keyboards," in *AIC 2004 Color and Paints, Interim Meeting of the International Color Association*, proceedings, 198–202.
46. Beatriz Colomina, "War on Architecture: E.1027," in *Assemblage* 20 (April 1993): 28–29. See also Caroline Constant, "E.1027: The Nonheroic Modernism of Eileen Gray," in *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 53, no. 3 (September 1994): 265–79.
47. Badovici is quoted in Constant, "E.1027," 278; see also, Fernand Léger, "On Monumentality and Color," in *Architecture, You and Me*, 43.
48. Colomina, *War on Architecture*, 29.
49. Juan O'Gorman, "Entrevista" (1970), 10.
50. Juan O'Gorman, "En torno a la integración plástica" (article originally published in *Espacios*, July 1953), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 62.
51. Ibid.
52. Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, trans. Alban Krailsheimer (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 185–186. (First published in 1831.)
53. Ibid., 201–203
54. Diego Rivera, "La huella de la historia y la geografía en la arquitectura mexicana," 1954 conference, in López Rangel, *Diego Rivera y la arquitectura Mexicana*, 113.
55. Ibid., 109.
56. O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo" (1955), 190.
57. The term was coined in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).
58. O'Gorman, "Más allá del funcionalismo" (1955), 190.
59. Juan O'Gorman, "Ensayo acerca de arquitectura orgánica, referente a la casa ubicada in Avenida San Jerónimo 162, San Ángel, D.F.; construida por Juan O'Gorman" (text originally published in Arroyo, *Juan O'Gorman, autobiografía*), in *La palabra de Juan O'Gorman*, 156.
60. Tibol, "Juan O'Gorman in varios tiempos," 9.