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Contrasting Images of Identity in the Post-War Mexican Architecture of Luis Barragán and Juan O’Gorman

KEITH L. EGGENER

National Beings

In his 1958 book, *Mexican Journal*, Selden Rodman told how architect Juan O’Gorman had recently taken him aside and said, ‘let’s take a trip together through the Pedregal Gardens ... and I’ll show you ... what Mexican architecture shouldn’t be!’ (Rodman, 1958, p. 21). Forty years later O’Gorman’s words sound odd, since for the past two decades El Pedregal’s designer-developer, Luis Barragán, has been widely regarded as the most Mexican of Mexican architects. Recipient in 1980 of architecture’s highest honor, the Pritzker Prize, and subject of numerous publications and exhibitions in Europe, Japan, Mexico and the USA, he is certainly the most lauded. His 865 acre residential subdivision El Pedregal, object of O’Gorman’s criticism, has been described by critics and historians as his most important work—one of the key examples of modern architecture in Mexico, a groundbreaking regional response to the International Style—where, beginning in the late 1940s, paradisiacal gardens and austere cubic-form houses, many of them made of local materials and subtle references to Mexico’s past, were nestled among the ancient lava fields south of the capital city (Figure 1) (Lobo, 1992, p. 59; Palomar, 1994, p. 94).¹ Yet for all of this, at the time they were made, O’Gorman’s remarks were neither isolated nor offhand. Rather, they represented one thread in a wide-ranging debate on the nature of Mexican national being and its ‘appropriate’ material expression. Barragán, less vocally than O’Gorman and many of the others involved, was also a participant in this debate; by the late 1970s, his position had come to be widely seen as among the most vital and original of the period. In the 1950s, however, O’Gorman’s criticism of his work echoed the concerns of some of Mexico’s most prominent architectural thinkers—José Villagrán García, Enrique Yañez, and Mauricio Gómez Mayorga among them. This article examines some of their concerns.

National beings are polymorphous creatures. As Benedict Anderson and many others have demonstrated, the very idea of national identity is a construct, a mutable, fictional unity masking real internal variance and conflict. Each generation reconfigures this construct according to its own multifaceted needs and aspirations, and at various times the process becomes more or less impassioned, convoluted, and pervasive (Anderson, 1991). In Mexico, in the decade and a half following World War II, as its northern neighbor, the USA,



Figure 1. Luis Barragán and Max Cetto, 140 Fuentes (Marion and Roberto Berdecio House), El Pedregal, 1949–50.

rose to international military, political, economic, and (arguably) cultural pre-eminence, and much of the rest of the world chose sides in the Cold War, this process of cultural configuration took on particular intensity, resulting in what anthropologist Roger Bartra (1992, p. 5) has called ‘an extraordinary boom’ in speculations about Mexican national identity.² Artists, intellectuals, and politicians there debated what philosopher and historian Paul Ricoeur would at this same time call the core problem of post-colonial societies: that of balancing modernization and a role in contemporary ‘universal civilization’ with the need to ‘return to sources,’ to recover and assert a personality distinct from that imposed by the colonizer.³

In one enduring work from the period, *El Laberinto de la Soledad* (1950/1985), author Octavio Paz indicated that not only was Mexican identity made of both indigenous and imported traits, but that electing one side over the other was a practical and philosophical impossibility. Paz offered a series of dynamically engaged opposites: imposed forms and explosions of individuality, the rarity of original creation and the relentless search for self, the deformations and disguises of alien institutions and the desperate longing for communion with a universal tradition. He suggested that modern Mexican identity lay in the seemingly unworkable resolution of these. The task was not simply to choose between foreign and indigenous, or present and past, but to reconcile the lot in a culturally meaningful, socially beneficial way. ‘In a certain sense,’ Paz wrote,

the history of Mexico, like that of every Mexican, is a struggle between

the forms and formulas that have been imposed on us and the explosions with which our individuality avenges itself. Form has rarely been an original creation ... The whole history of Mexico, from the Conquest to the Revolution, can be regarded as a search for our own selves, which have been deformed or disguised by alien institutions, and for a form that will express them ... Our tradition, if it was really still alive, would link us to a universal tradition that would enlarge and justify our own. (Paz, 1985, 33, 154, 166.)

Concurrent with statements like these, there was a great deal of talk in Mexico about what the new architecture should and should not be. Some, notably O'Gorman—who in the late 1920s and 1930s had been an ardent follower of the Swiss-born rationalist architect Le Corbusier—and his mentor, the painter Diego Rivera, saw pre-Columbian culture as offering the most appropriate model (Burian, 1997, pp. 127–149; O'Gorman, 1955a, p. 23; Rangel, 1986). Others, like Barragán and, in some cases, Enrique del Moral and Juan Sordo Madaleno, were more inclined toward colonial and village vernacular sources (del Moral, 1983; McCoy, 1951, p. 24). Still others—Alberto Arai, José Villagrán, Mauricio Gómez Mayorga, among them—held entirely different views, ranging from Arai's call for a stylistic 'fusion' of 'the two roots of México' (the European and the American), to Gómez Mayorga's adamant rejection of any brand of indigenism, historicism, or self-consciously formalistic regionalism (Arai, 1952, 1953; Villagrán García, 1967; Gómez Mayorga, 1961).⁴ Such diversity of opinion was nothing new among Mexican architects. What linked their thoughts was their assumption that, for better or worse, architecture in Mexico had almost always been bound to expressions of national being, and that in the future it would rise or fall through its continued contact with that being.

O'Gorman's comments on El Pedregal might thus be seen as something more than mere professional rivalry or a simple difference of taste. Reviewed today, they might open a window on a period when Mexican architects were vigorously debating the content and character of their culture and proposing a variety of vehicles for its expression: a period when O'Gorman's works—his mosaic-covered library building for the National Autonomous University (UNAM) or his own Pedregal grotto house, both completed by the mid-1950s—were not the isolated aesthetic oddities they may now seem, but among the most vital and widely admired examples of a modernism made Mexican⁵; when Barragán had not yet been elevated to his current position as the representative Mexican modern architect, but stood as one among many. A parallel reading of statements and images from these two men opens the window wider, and reveals the seriousness and complexity of the activity in which they were involved.

Aggressiveness

'I call these processed gardens,' O'Gorman told Rodman upon guiding him through El Pedregal in January 1957. 'There was too much of this crude volcanic rock, so Barragán and his boys put a clump of daisies here, a stand of colorín trees there, to soften them up. They spray it—with a detergent?—several times a day, to make the rocks look blacker, glossier, smarter. No more aggressiveness! Shall we say "French boudoir rocks"?' Rodman recalled that on leaving the site

O'Gorman dismissed Barragán's 1950 Prieto López House as 'convent modern,' built for 'the nouveau riche of the Alemán regime.'⁶ O'Gorman's objections to Barragán's work at El Pedregal appear to have been grounded in three points: the treatment of the site, with particular reference to the theme of 'aggressiveness'; the choice of historical sources; and the distinction O'Gorman made between 'realism' and 'abstractionism.'

During his Pedregal tour with Rodman, O'Gorman spoke disdainfully of what he saw as the development's artifice, its cosmetic prettiness and lack of 'aggressiveness.' This point is best approached with reference to O'Gorman's earlier fealty to the universalist functionalism of Le Corbusier, and his later, and equally fierce, devotion to the site-specific organicism of Frank Lloyd Wright. In 1936, after building several Corbusian functionalist houses and schools in and around Mexico City (Figure 2), O'Gorman wrote of 'noble technological architecture, architecture that is the true expression of life ... Architecture,' he said, 'will have to become international for the simple reason that every day man becomes more universal, collective, and educated for the world ...' (Segre and Kusnetzoff, 1981, p. 194). In 1938, however, claiming fatigue and frustration with the limitations of functionalism, he abandoned architecture for mural painting. When he returned to building after the war, he had changed his tack, casting aside Le Corbusier's example for Wright's. 'Today,' he said in 1951, 'the task is to try to produce an architecture which, irrespective of all functional rules, will be more functional, that is to say, with a better adaptation to climate, to customs and to site. It should be planned for its regional use and not as a universal utility ... We need for Mexico a Mexican architecture ...'⁷

In reading both his earlier and later statements, one immediately becomes aware of O'Gorman's dogmatic and uncompromising tone. There seem to have been few if any gray areas for him, and architectural truth—be it in material, functional, geographical, or cultural expression—was the clear and singular endpoint of a narrow path. In citing the lack of aggressiveness in Barragán's Pedregal gardens, O'Gorman apparently believed that his colleague was masking the region's pre-eminent natural characteristic, that he was, in effect, being untrue to the landscape.

As if to make this clear, he pointed to the house he built for himself, beginning in 1953, among the rocks at the Pedregal's edge (Figure 3). Sited within a naturally occurring grotto, the building was encrusted inside and out with brightly colored mosaics and sculptural elements made of the rough, local stone: Aztec gods and warriors, jaguars and monkeys and butterflies in motion, a writhing snake forming crenellations along the roof line, an eagle above the main door and giant toy soldier-like guardian figures posted at either side. Strangest of all was the effect produced by the placement within these walls of tidy metal-frame factory windows, the same sort of gridded openings to be found in O'Gorman's earlier functionalist buildings, only now, peering out from the rough-hewn, polychromed chaos, they seemed as if overtaken by some peculiar breed of petrified fungi. Though some found the house bizarre, O'Gorman claimed it as 'the most complete and satisfying work that I have done in architecture. It is an example of Organic Architecture, and I think it can be called modern and Mexican.'⁸ A letter from O'Gorman's wife Helen (1962), to writer Esther McCoy, described the house as 'a sort of thesis on what [Juan] considers so important: the integration of the building with the setting, which he



Figure 2. Juan O'Gorman, Technical School, Mexico City, 1933.

considers so lacking in the houses built in Barragán's project of the Jardines del Pedregal ...' For the architect, the house's organicism, its Mexicanness, was the direct result of its close formal and situational relationship with the local setting. This, he said, was an architecture 'whose principal component is ... aggressiveness, similar to the effect ... produce[d] by the Pedregal itself, as much ... through its volcanic origin as its ... vegetation' (O'Gorman, 1955b, pp. 30–31).⁹

Barragán, in contrast, spoke of his architecture as providing a refuge against aggressiveness. He pointed to the fast-paced, public character of modern life, and to the implications this had for both architecture and the treatment of nature:

One of the characteristics of modern man all around the world, in Mexico as well as here [in the U.S., where his remarks were made in 1951], is that he lives in public ... I ask myself at what time of the day the modern man that lives this kind of life can meditate and allow his imagination the development of creative and spiritual ideas, and also I ask myself if this way of life permits one to find the peace and serenity

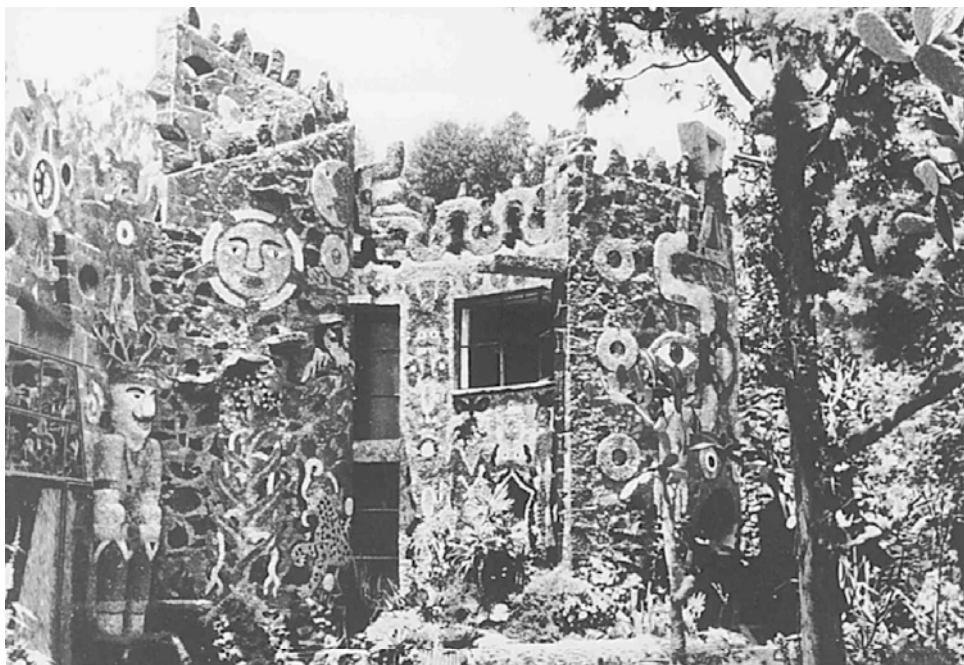


Figure 3. Juan O'Gorman, O'Gorman House, Mexico City, 1953.

that every man should have every day and especially in present times.
(Barragán, 1952, 168–169)

While O'Gorman said that architecture must be adapted to landscape, to the point even of its reproducing violent natural forms, Barragán felt it his duty to adjust nature so as to provide for human comfort and contemplation. 'In a beautiful garden,' he said, 'the majesty of Nature is ever present, but Nature reduced to human proportions and thus transformed into the most efficient haven against the aggressiveness of contemporary life' (Barragán, 1980, p. 31). At El Pedregal, according to his long-time photographer Armando Salas Portugal, Barragán 'treated the lava formations selectively: he eliminated, used or hid them with vegetation'—this despite the strict regulations that property-buyers there reportedly signed onto, aimed at protecting the region's distinctive natural characteristics.¹⁰ Unlike O'Gorman, for whom truth seemed given and fixed, Barragán's words and actions here implied that truth was something malleable, less compelling than beauty, mood, and effect.

Sources

Barragán's choice of sources—resulting in what O'Gorman called his 'convent modern[ism]'—provide another point of contrast. In 1955, O'Gorman wrote that 'Mexican architecture can only be brought into being by realizing Mexico's tradition, and the one and only tradition of Mexico is the pre-Hispanic ...'.¹¹ Another statement of 1955, not previously published in its entirety, elaborated

on this point and made clear its author's romanticized view of the past. Here O'Gorman portrayed the Spanish Conquest as a rupture, an event which, rather than giving birth to a new mixed-blood Mexican nation, forced the 'real' nation underground:

It has been said with reason that the Mexican people could never have survived the Conquest if they had not kept alive their traditions and culture. In spite of the brutal episode of the Conquest. The extraordinary art that flourished in Anahuac [Aztec name for the Valley of Mexico], center of the culture of America, was brutally cut to the ground by the Conquistadors, but its deep roots remained in the earth, and all through the Colonial period, the Independence and the Revolution, the Mexican people have continued to produce and still produce their own art.¹²

With buildings like his Pedregal house, the mosaic-covered UNAM library (1949–52, with Gustavo Saavedra and Juan Martínez Velasco), and the quasi-pyramidal Anahuacalli Museum that he designed with Diego Rivera (1944–65) to house the painter's collection of pre-Columbian art, O'Gorman saw himself as furthering the pre-Columbian tradition. Of his house he said:

I set out to make a house that would fit esthetically, harmoniously, into the landscape of the lava formation of the Pedregal, and to express the tradition of the ancient architecture of Mexico, as distinct from the Spanish and other Colonial styles imported from Europe. The house derives its Mexican character and its human root from this continuation of our tradition. (Smith, 1967, p. 33)

Barragán's post-war work (he too had been a Corbusian follower before the war), on the other hand, drew unabashedly on the built forms of both native conquered and foreign conqueror. Where O'Gorman, following Rivera's lead, drew an idealized image of a glorious pre-Columbian past that might serve as a model for contemporary cultural rebirth, Barragán favored an equally romanticized yet fundamentally oppositional image: the humble vernacular of the pueblos, with their expressively textured and brightly colored—but otherwise mute—walls, their potentially poetic undertones of tragedy, decay, and nostalgia. Likewise, where O'Gorman saw the Spanish Conquest and all it brought to Mexico as an aberration, a nightmare to be awakened from, Barragán evoked this past as a sort of deliciously fragrant dreamscape.¹³ A devout Roman Catholic, he once said:

I have frequently visited with reverence the now empty monumental monastic buildings that we inherited from the powerful religious faith and architectural genius of our colonial ancestors, and I have always been deeply moved ... How I have wished that these feelings may leave their mark in my work. (Barragán, 1980, p. 31)¹⁴

With rough, stucco walls draped in shadows, creeping vines, and sun-bleached colors, with still garden pools and austere, high-walled courtyards (some of them marked by Christian crosses), such buildings as the Franciscan convent Barragán built in Tlalpan (1953–61) and the houses he designed for himself (1948; Figure 4) and Eduardo Prieto López (1949–50), do capture something of the feeling that so fascinated him in the colonial buildings he visited: an ethereal



Figure 4. Luis Barragán, Barragán House, Tacubaya, Mexico City, 1948.

sense of presence made stronger through silence, absence, decrepitude, and the accretions and distortions of memory.

Realism and Abstractionism

In comparing the architecture of Barragán and O’Gorman, perhaps the most complex divergence emerges from what the latter once called ‘the fundamental difference between abstractionism and realism in architecture.’¹⁵ While O’Gorman apparently did not mention this point to Rodman, he did elaborate on it in a 1953 article in the Mexican art and architecture magazine *Espacios*. Though no direct mention of Barragán was made in that article, O’Gorman’s words held a peculiar resonance with others recently spoken by him. This is not to suggest that the one man was making veiled references to the other, but rather, that Barragán’s work represented a type that O’Gorman adamantly rejected. At stake was not simply what form architecture should or should not take, but what role the architect and his efforts were to play in modern Mexican society.

To begin, O'Gorman defined 'abstractionism' as

the tendency in ... architecture to ... start ... from precepts of abstract character, such as geometry ... or mechanization ... Abstractionistic architecture presupposes an international style ... it imposes itself from above and only finds regional differences in that which touches its mechanical function, either ... [through] ... construction [techniques] or ... climat[ic] differences. (1953, n.p.)

O'Gorman was here referring to work of the inter-war years by European functionalist architects and their imitators (his word) in the Americas. His four examples of abstract architecture were all designed or directly influenced by his former idol, Le Corbusier. These included: the Swiss Pavilion at the University City in Paris (Le Corbusier and P. Jeanneret, 1930–33), the Ministry of Education and Health in Río de Janeiro (Costa, Niemeyer, Reidy, Leão, Moreira, and Vasconcelos, with Le Corbusier consulting, 1937–43), the United Nations Headquarters in New York (Harrison and Abramovitz, based on a project by Le Corbusier, 1947–50), and the Natural Sciences Tower at Mexico's University City (Cácho, Peschard, and Sánchez, 1950–52).

O'Gorman's comments on abstractionism, however, might also be read as a response to Barragán. Though never to the same extent as O'Gorman, Barragán, during the 1930s, had been affected by Le Corbusier's abstract, geometrically ordered, poetically minimalistic compositions, such as the *Pavillon de l'esprit nouveau*, which he saw in Paris in 1925 (where a few years later he also met its architect). The rationalized, reinforced-concrete and glass speculation houses and apartments that he built in Mexico City during the late 1930s reveal his borrowings from Le Corbusier in their most direct form (Figure 5); yet even his later, more idiosyncratic designs—for example, the 1967–68 Egerstrom House in Mexico City, with its over-scaled Corbusian *fenêtre en longueur* facing the horse pool—and his public statements about them, bear witness to the continuing influence upon him of Corbusian abstraction. In 1951, two years before O'Gorman's first published statement on realism and abstraction, Barragán delivered a speech in southern California (soon after published in the *Journal of the American Institute of Architects*) in which he advocated an architecture of 'simplicity—abstract in quality, preferably straight lines, flat surfaces, and primary geometric forms' (Barragán, 1952, p. 171). The photographs he commissioned around this time from Armando Salas Portugal furthered the abstract impression of his work by depicting it in fragments, strictly limiting the information conveyed—a portion of a wall or gate here, some rocks and a gnarled tree there (Figure 6). In fact, Barragán distinctly requested of his photographer that he make such abstract images; while Salas Portugal produced a variety of image types for Barragán, the architect, he said preferred photographs made at close range, in black and white, offering appealing compositions but relatively little architectural, contextual, or atmospheric information. 'Abstracto,' said Salas Portugal (interview, 22 January 1994), 'was the very word Barragán used to describe such imagery.'

'Exactly the opposite of ... the abstract tendency' was how O'Gorman defined 'realistic architecture.' Here style was not imposed from above or outside; it was telluric, indigenous, 'born from the bottom.' Realistic architecture represented a 'collective expression,' aiming, 'to establish harmony between man and the land



Figure 5. Luis Barragán, Max Cetto, and Jose Creixell, Apartment Building, Mexico City, 1939.

he inhabits, ... [striving for] the development of tradition, or ... the actualization of tradition, ... [and working to attain] a style ... recognized as national' (O'Gorman, 1953, n.p.). This, said O'Gorman, was an architecture seeking to express the 'cravings and desires of the people of Mexico in its fight for liberty'—an architecture at one with the land, an architecture of color, figurative imagery, and what he called the 'plastic integration' of the arts (architecture, painting, and sculpture as one). Here again the example he offered was his own house, which he described as 'the anti-thesis of the so-called "international style",' built along 'the unavoidable route towards realism in architecture' (O'Gorman, 1973, p. 31).

O'Gorman—like his friend Rivera, who dismissed the abstract easel paintings of Rufino Tamayo and José Luis Cuevas as decadent, bourgeois, and un-Mexican—made the questionable assumption that figurative imagery was inevitably closer to the Mexican people, more relevant to them, than abstract art.¹⁶ This, it has been noted, was a position undermined by the abstract (i.e., non-naturalistic) nature of much pre-Columbian and contemporary folk art, and by the esoteric symbolism and the compositional and narrative complexity of much twentieth-century Mexican modern art, including many of Rivera's own murals (Hennessey, 1971). In language closely resembling the ideologically paradoxical Marxist-nationalist rhetoric favored by Rivera, O'Gorman concluded that abstract architecture, like abstract painting, was immoral and un-Mexican. It failed to communicate essential truths. It represented, he said

the denial of realism ... it has no action of any kind on the popular masses, to which it is completely indifferent, strange and un-



Figure 6. Luis Barragán and Max Cetto, 140 Fuentes (Marion and Roberto Berdecio House), Gardens of El Pedregal, Mexico City, 1949–50. Armando Salas Portugal photograph, real estate advertisement from *Espacios*, 38 (1953).

known ... [it] has no social human base and is performed only as the intellectualization of conditions that do not solve in any way the collective needs ... [it is] the reflection of an international class without culture ... [it is] the denial of what is Mexican, and its domineering characteristic lies in its imitative condition of what is foreign ... Only those who are proud of being a dependent colonial, or for whom it means a situation of privilege, ... can be proud of this. (O'Gorman, 1953, n.p.)

Nowhere did O'Gorman's views on architecture and Mexican national identity clash so radically with Barragán's as here. Not only did Barragán characterize his architecture as abstract, he was, in fact, proud of his Spanish heritage, boasting to Rodman of his Moorish ancestry (Rodman, 1958, p. 96). Both positions were anathematic to O'Gorman's. Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that Barragán was a close friend and collaborator of the European-born artist Mathias Goeritz, publicly attacked in the early 1950s by Rivera and David Alfaro Siqueiros as an agent of 'the School of Paris, Imperialist Abstractionism, and Neoporfirismo'.¹⁷ Moreover, Barragán was an admitted and unrepentant elitist. While O'Gorman—born into quite comfortable circumstances and something of a 'limousine liberal'—described his mosaic-clad buildings as 'collective expressions ... born from the bottom,' geared toward solving the 'collective needs,' Barragán vigorously defended his austere, minimalistic houses and gardens as

places of retreat and seclusion from an aggressive modern world, objects of beauty and delight for a cultivated class. In language that both patronized the poor and sneered at the middle-class, he asked Rodman:

Why should architecture be only for use? Why not for pleasure? ... The sense of mystery is important for life, for everyday living, just as it is for love. The sense of discovery, of adventure, promotes life. Only primitives, or very cultivated people are concerned with beauty. The masses, with their middle-class minds, don't want beauty; they want comfort, order, security, likeness ... The good architect must counter all this. (Rodman, 1958, p. 97)

Outside the Mainstream

With his rarefied, idiosyncratic architecture for elites and esthetes, Barragán had turned his back on one of the most cherished themes in Mexican modernism: that of the architect as missionary, as social engineer, serving and guiding the masses, an image expressed pointedly in the 1937 call of José Villagrán, O'Gorman's one-time teacher, for architects to 'accept their social responsibility, as indispensable elements in the evolution of our people' (quoted in Born, 1937, p. 32). With some modifications, these attitudes remained widespread in Mexico into the 1960s and 1970s (when, not coincidentally, Barragán's legacy began to be re-evaluated.¹⁸) Recounting a 1967 interview with the prominent Mexico City architect and developer Mario Pani, author Clive Bamford Smith drew an animated figure, alternately throwing up his hands and pounding on his desk, enjoining his profession in the never-ending struggle to house the masses: 'We must build for all of them. Plan! Build! Plan well! Build now!' (Smith, 1967, p. 176). A few years earlier, architect and critic Mauricio Gómez Mayorga likewise endorsed the missionary ideal. In a statement that might almost be a rebuke of Barragán's 1951 California lecture and his above-quoted comments to Rodman, Gómez Mayorga took a notably hard line. He said:

Modern architecture is not an art ... its purpose is not substantially an expressive but rather a utilitarian one ... It responds to a program and not to an intuition; it does not set up subjects but problems; it does not construct buildings to be contemplated but to be used ... Modern architecture for our country must be of service to the nation. It should be grasped by technical minds and not by artistical [*sic*] or political ones. (Gómez Mayorga, 1961, pp. 17, 25)

Thus, it might be said that where his compatriots assumed the missionary position, Barragán presented himself as a monk. In talks and interviews published since the 1950s, many of these easily accessible to his colleagues, Barragán spoke of 'spiritual function,' of magic, serenity, and mystery, of autobiographical and 'emotional architecture,' and of the dangers inherent in a world increasingly dependent on technology. In 1962 he told an interviewer that he had 'never had any particular method,' that he preferred to let himself 'be guided by intuition' (Ugarte, 1989). In 1951 he spoke of his architecture as one with 'a factor of beauty ... sex-appeal ... the element of mystery ...', intended to cause a 'man to fall in an atmosphere of spontaneous meditation ... [and] to develop the sense of beauty and the taste and inclination toward the fine arts and other spiritual

values.' Such an architecture, he said, 'helps so much in the development of personality and in avoiding [the] standardization of the mind' brought on by the hectic pace and intrusiveness of modern urban life (Barragán, 1952, pp. 169–170).¹⁹ Such an emphasis on intangibles, accompanied by a general disinterest in technology or the more mundane aspects of programming, put Barragán much closer to poets and philosophers like Octavio Paz and Cyril Connolly (whose 1945 book *The Unquiet Grave* he studied closely in these years) than to his fellows in the architectural profession.

Though by the late 1960s, in yet another reversal, O'Gorman came to praise Barragán's work, in the 1950s he had found it reactionary at worst, irrelevant at best, in its choice of sources, its emphasis on abstract forms, its elitism, and its distance from what he perceived as the proper role of the architect and the true and most pressing needs of the Mexican people.²⁰ He was not alone in finding these faults. During the 1950s and 1960s other prominent Mexican architects (José Villagrán, Enrique Yañez, and Ricardo Robina), architectural critics and historians (Mauricio Gómez Mayorga and Israel Katzmán), even former Barragán-collaborator Max Cetto, all made comments critical of Barragán: charging him with neglecting his gift and his duty as an architect; condemning his work as decorative, scenographic, commercially motivated, sometimes frivolous, lacking in economic and functional justification; saying that it placed image over substance, form over function, and that it set a bad example for younger Mexican architects.²¹ A full accounting of the texts, contexts, and implications of these critiques is beyond the scope of the present study, yet they merit noting for they provide a broader base for understanding O'Gorman's position, demonstrating that this was not unique, and reminding us of the fact that Barragán's work at one time aroused a range of adverse passions that have long since been forgotten.

Moreover, the re-emergence of this criticism helps us to locate the sources of some of the popular notions that have long circulated about Luis Barragán. Among the most widespread of these is the idea that Barragán was an isolated figure, an outsider among Mexican architects. According to Octavio Paz, Barragán was 'a silent and solitary artist, who has lived far from ideological factions and ... committed art' (Paz, 1980, p. 48). The *MacMillan Encyclopedia of Architects* maintained that he was 'determined to follow his own aspirations rather than adapting to the whims of his clients' (Harris, 1982, p. 143). Not surprisingly, such views of the man have been closely woven into discussions of his work. Architectural historian Carlos González Lobo, for example, described El Pedregal as a 'reaction to the vulgarity and bad taste which he [Barragán] perceived as characteristic of the new wealth the country had achieved in post-war years.' Earlier, Emilio Ambasz (1976, p. 12) characterized Barragán's work there as a 'holy mission' (generally neglecting the fact that it was also a quite successful speculative venture, with Barragán as developer). Working alone, unwilling to compromise, indifferent to criticism and the whims of clients: the Barragán of these reports sounds suspiciously like a sort of Latino Howard Roark, a man defiantly out of sync with the contemporary realities of his profession, yet steadfast in the pursuit of his own righteous goals.

The sources of these ideas have never been adequately described. The usual explanations—Barragán's lack of an architectural degree and resultant autodidacticism, his supposedly introverted personality—tell only part of the story.²² It

is true that he had long cultivated a monkish image, and also that he lived alone for most of his adult life. After 1953, he saw few projects to completion, and he regularly turned down invitations to lecture or teach. In what appear to have been his two lone public lectures, he emphasized the centrality to his work of privacy (in 1951) and solitude (in 1980).²³ Yet it is also true that as a younger man Barragán was actively involved in the architectural and social life of the Mexican capital, that he was an ambitious and well-connected professional, and a gracious host who regularly opened his home to an international cultural and intellectual elite.²⁴ Not only were most of his built works done in collaboration with other prominent Mexican or European architects, but during the 1940s and 1950s he sat on various important design juries and editorial review boards, including that for *Espacios*.²⁵ According to Alejandro Margain, chief of Barragán's studio between 1949 and 1967, he also ran a far more extensive and professional practice than is usually attributed to him, employing as many as twenty-four people at a time at his home-studio in the Tacubaya district of Mexico City (interview, 26 January 1994). The office files recently acquired by the Vitra Design Museum, including nearly 14,000 plans and drawings from Barragán's studio, provide evidence of a busy, professional practice.

Barragán then, at least until the mid-1950s, was hardly the dilettante or the loner he has often been portrayed as. He did, however, become more professionally isolated as the years went on, and we can see this condition taking shape in the comments made by his peers following El Pedregal's great financial and international critical success. Most of these remarks were oblique, unspecified, and more or less unintended for public consumption. The men who made them were Barragán's colleagues, in some cases, his friends. Few if any of them had any desire to vilify or embarrass him (though in some cases there may have been a measure of professional jealousy involved).²⁶ Nonetheless, as did O'Gorman, these people took genuine and reasoned exception to the course they saw him taking.

Amidst all these voices, it is O'Gorman's that provides, ironically, both the most dramatic opposite and the most direct parallel to Barragán's own. Unlike many of their more practical-minded colleagues, both Barragán and O'Gorman were intensely romantic individuals drawn to selective and highly colored views of their nation's history. Both saw their respectively mythologized versions of the past, and the physical settings where these were played out, as the keys to their nation's architectural future. That is to say, both men believed that if modern architecture was to have vitality and relevance in post-war Mexico, it must root its forms in the land and the history of the country.

Further, while the two men differed in their interpretation of this program—how to regard landscape, which elements of the past to emphasize and how best to present them—for a time at least, both sought to resolve these issues through application of the same model. Given the current of nationalism running through both Barragán's and O'Gorman's work, the nature of this model is surprising, for what both men turned to at roughly the same time was the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (Eggener, 1999b, pp. 166–183). O'Gorman, who had stayed at Wright's Fallingwater in 1938 as a guest of Edgar Kaufmann Sr., later spoke of Wright as 'the supreme architect of the century,' whose work 'revive[d] the Meso-American tradition' and bore 'a recognizable Mexican character.' He described his own house in the Pedregal one as applying

the general principles of Wright's organic architecture (Smith, 1967, pp. 18, 33). Barragán, for his part, spoke in 1951 of the 'valuable influence' in Mexico of Wright and his protégé Richard Neutra (with whom Barragán had been friendly since the late 1930s), and when designing houses and gardens for El Pedregal, he paid close attention to what Diego Rivera (in a proposal for El Pedregal's development written by 1949) called Fallingwater's 'insuperable example' for the builder 'on rocky terrain' (Eggener, 1995, pp. 3–5). In a 1951 real estate advertisement for El Pedregal, possibly designed and certainly approved by Barragán himself, there appeared a drawing of Wright's Fallingwater, set down into an imaginary view of the Pedregal as if to suggest to potential property buyers the ideal way of building on this landscape (*Excelsior*, 1951, pp. 22A–23A). As it did for O'Gorman, Wright's organicism, his interest in linking built form to landscape, played a decisive role in revitalizing Barragán's thinking in the late 1940s and early 1950s, helping him move beyond the International Style toward the site-specific regionalism for which he later became famous. This is of particular interest in the present context for it demonstrates how, even in a period of intense speculation on the national character, forms and ideas from outside a nation's boundaries can be bound up with its most self-consciously nationalistic cultural productions. National beings, in other words, quite often bear traces of a foreign accent.

Despite—perhaps in part because of—the criticism he received, Barragán was not without followers. Most of these were younger men left cold by what they regarded as the blatant imagery and technological orientation of projects such as the University City. Among their number were some of Mexico's leading contemporary practitioners, including Ricardo Legorreta, Mario Schjetnan, and Javier Sordo Madaleno; Bosco Gutiérrez Cortina, José de Yturbe, Manuel Mostre, Rodríguez and Mizutani, and many other younger Mexican architects have continued to follow Barragán's lead. These men found an appealing alternative in Barragán's more subtle, more abstract and humanistic approach, his interest, as the 1971 book *Cuarenta Siglos de Plástica Mexicana* put it, 'in the possibilities of a nationalism that eludes the dangers of facile anachronism'—an architectural nationalism, one might say, quite unlike O'Gorman's.

In 1980, an international jury composed of several prominent architects and architectural patrons granted Luis Barragán architecture's highest honor, the Pritzker Prize. According to their statement, Barragán was being so honored 'for his commitment to architecture as a sublime act of the poetic imagination ... [for] gardens, plazas, and fountains of haunting beauty—metaphysical landscapes for meditation and companionship.'²⁷ During the 1950s, recognition of these same interests led some of Barragán's most distinguished Mexican colleagues to accuse him of straying from the modern architect's truest and most responsible path. It was only when modernism itself was pronounced dead, in the writings of Charles Jencks and others, that Barragán—the proto-postmodernist, the critical regionalist heroically forging his own subversively introspective path—might re-emerge as a major figure.²⁸

Notes

1. For analysis of El Pedregal and its critical reception see Keith Eggener, 'Luis Barragán's El Pedregal and the Making of Mexican Modernism: Architecture, Photography, and Critical Reception' (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1995).

2. Among the many documents illustrating Bartra's 'boom' see the series of lectures by Samuel Ramos, Leopoldo Zea, and Emilio Uranga, originally presented at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) in January and February 1951, published under the collective title 'El mexicano en busca del mexicano', *Cuadernos Americanos*, 57 (1951), pp. 87–128; and José Alcazar Arias *et al.* (1952). For a contemporary North American review of some of these writings see Gordon W. Hewes (1954).
3. See Paul Ricoeur (1965, p. 277). Similar terms had been applied to Mexico as early as 1934 by Samuel Ramos in his *Perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* (México: Imprenta Mundial, 1934). Barragán's library contains copies of this and other works by Ramos, some of them autographed by Ramos to Barragán.
4. According to Gómez Mayorga: 'Mexico's problem [was] not to find a style, nor to resurrect bygone days according to the direction of political winds, but, keeping away from fashions and frivolities, to ... interpret the national problem ... of housing and public services through forms and useful constructions ... Our two cultural pasts are not as important as our capacity to participate in the Europe of today' (1961, pp. 15, 23). For contemporary overviews of mid-century Mexican architecture see Myers (1952) and Cetto (1961).
5. Noted architectural historian Henry Russell-Hitchcock, for example, called the UNAM library the 'most original' of UNAM's new buildings and 'the most successful example of the large-scale use of figural decoration in modern architecture' (Russell-Hitchcock, 1955, p. 77).
6. Quoted in Rodman (1958, p. 84). The Alemán reference is to Miguel Alemán, president of Mexico between 1946 and 1952.
7. Quoted in Esther McCoy (1951, pp. 26, 46). O'Gorman's references to Wright's lead in this approach appear in Juan O'Gorman (1955a, p. 31) and Smith (1967, p. 18). On Wright's presence in Mexican modern architectural theory and practice see Keith Eggener (1999b, pp. 166–183).
8. Quoted in Smith (1967, p. 33). One writer called the house a 'mosaic-mad grotto near Mexico City ... the most bizarre of all architects' homes', 'Houses architects live in', *Life* (19 January 1959), pp. 52–53.
9. For more on O'Gorman's Pedregal house see Antonio Luna Arroyo (1973, pp. 152–156, 295–299).
10. Quoted in Barragán (1992, p. 10). Barragán's regulations for Pedregal homeowners are noted in Esther McCoy (1951, p. 21).
11. 'La arquitectura mexicana sólo puede realizarse actualizando la tradición de México y la única y verdadera tradición de México es la prehispánica, que tiene hoy todavía expresión en la arquitectura llamada popular', Juan O'Gorman (1955a, p. 23).
12. Juan O'Gorman, 'Statement,' ca. 1955, *Esther McCoy Papers*. This document was reprinted in part in Juan O'Gorman (1955b, pp. 13, 30–31).
13. When painters in these years drew on the same sources, they too were in the minority. As late as 1964, Rufino Tamayo, discussing the paintings of Alberto Gironella, noted that work's Spanish element—the other perfectly valid half of our national identity—as if this were a novel and rather daring idea. Tamayo is quoted in Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser (1989, p. 44).
14. It should not be concluded, however, that Barragán was disinterested in pre-Columbian sources. In 1975 he said, '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 ... we can transmit to people the experiences of centuries which may make their lives a bit more pleasurable' (quoted in Bayón, 1976, p. 533).
15. Juan O'Gorman, 'Que significa socialmente la arquitectura moderna en Mexico?', *Espacios*, 15 (1953), n.p. This article was published in parallel Spanish and English texts, both equally prolix. The quotes printed here, were taken from the English version, compared to the Spanish, and edited for clarity by the author.
16. Rivera called Tamayo—whose work, by the early 1950s, was selling better than his own—the 'millionaires' office boy.' Of Cuevas Rivera said: 'Pessimistic and abstract art is [his] kind of art. It is no accident that Cuevas is having a success in the United States. The imperialists find his kind of art ... useful' (quoted in Rodman, 1958, p. 60). Rivera was, however, involved with the design of El Pedregal; see Keith Eggener (1955, pp. 1–8; 1999a, pp. 122–145). Rivera's proposal was originally published as 'Requisitos para la organización del pedregal', *Novedades* (3 July 1949), p. 22.
17. This term last refers to native-born, francophilic dictator Porfirio Díaz, overthrown in Mexico's 1910 Revolution. These charges against Goeritz appeared in an open letter to the rector of

- UNAM, published as 'Protesta por el cargo dado a Mathias Goeritz', in the Mexico City newspapers *Excelsior* and *El Popular*, 15 June 1954. For more on the conflict between the muralists and Goeritz see: Rodman (1958, pp. 98, 157–158), Olivia Zuniga and Mathias Goeritz (1963, pp. 34–35), Mauricio Gómez Mayorga (1954, pp. 38–45).
18. Following a period of relative obscurity in the 1960s and early 1970s, Barragán re-emerged after 1976 as one of the world's most celebrated living architects. That year a retrospective of his work opened at New York's Museum of Modern. A year later he was presented with the Mexican Premio Nacional de Artes, and in 1980 he received the Pritzker Prize. In 1985, Mexico City's Rufino Tamayo Museum hosted a second and much larger retrospective of his work. Following his death in November 1988, Barragán's body lay in state beneath the rotunda of Mexico City's Palace of Fine Arts, where Diego Rivera and other national cultural heroes had lain before him.
 19. In 1968 Barragán said: 'I believe in emotional architecture. It is very important for humanity that architecture moves by its beauty; if there are many equally good technical solutions, that which brings a message of beauty and emotion ... that one is art' (quoted in Clive Bamford Smith, 1968, p. 13).
 20. O'Gorman's praise of work by Barragán and Goeritz appeared in 'Sobre la arquitectura en México', a statement of November 1967, reprinted in Arroyo (1973, p. 266).
 21. See, for example, Yañez's foreword to Myers' *Mexico's Modern Architecture* (1952, p. 13); Gómez Mayorga (1961, p. 25); Robina (1963, p. 155); Katzmänn (1964, pp. 140–141); Cetto (1961, pp. 27, 176). One of the most trenchant critiques of Barragán's work at El Pedregal came from Villagrán, in a letter to an unnamed friend, dated 2 August 1951 (see Villagrán, 1986, pp. 288–290).
 22. Henry Russell-Hitchcock, writing in 1955, erroneously described Barragán as 'not trained as an architect, indeed with no technical training at all' (p. 183). Emilio Ambasz and many others have followed suit. The fact is that Barragán took his civil engineer's diploma from Guadalajara's Free School of Engineers on 13 December 1923.
 23. In 1951 he said: 'I support the idea of private gardens ...' (p. 168). In 1980: 'Solitude is good company and my architecture is not for those who fear or shun it' (p. 31).
 24. Barragán entertained frequently at his Mexico City home, and he earned a reputation as a gracious host; in 1989, Cathrin Cetto, wife of Barragán's sometime collaborator Max Cetto, fondly remembered the 'muy simpáticas' dinner parties that Barragán regularly threw. See Suzanne Dussel Peters, 'Investigación teórica sobre la vida y obra de Max Cetto y proyecto de administración del Hotel San José Purua, Michoacán' (M. Arch. thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1990, p. 198). For more on Barragán's social milieu see Williams (1994, pp. xiv–xv).
 25. Collaborators over the years included his brother Juan José, Juan Palomár, Ramón Hermonsillo, José Creixell, Carlos Contreras, Max Cetto, Mathias Goeritz, Andrés Casillas, Juan Sordo Madeleno, Ricardo Legorreta, Raúl Ferrera, and Alberto Chauvet. In 1945, he was listed on the masthead as one of the collaborators on Mexico's short-lived periodical, *Arquitectura y lo Demas*; an article published there in 1945 names him as one of three jurors (the others were Gómez Mayorga and Villagrán) in an important design competition sponsored by the Aseguradora Mexicana. (Barragán was the Aseguradora's personal representative on this jury; see 'El concurso de anteproyectos para un edificio propiedad de Aseguradora Mexicana', *Arquitectura y lo Demas*, July 1945, n.p.) Between 1948 and 1959 he was a member of the fourteen-person editorial advisory board of the architecture and design journal *Espacios*—a prestigious post shared by some of the top names in Mexican art and architecture, including architect José Villagrán, photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo, and painters Rivera, Siqueiros, and Tamayo.
 26. In a statement likely aimed at Barragán, José Villagrán wrote of those whose 'frantic but fruitless pursuit of innovation' lead to 'ranch houses' and 'scenography,' work that was 'inconsistent with the concept of an integrally conceived architecture.' Alluding to his own work, Villagrán spoke of 'another nationalistic tendency ... characterized by an attempt to resolve the integral, multiphased architectural problem as it is related not only to form or esthetics, but also to economics and social considerations, and [which] ignores egocentric preoccupation with the probably outmoded avidity for originality. Such construction which tries to serve the community, reveals a wealth of good intentions coupled with modesty of appearance, and for that reason does not seem to interest critics or commercial magazines, being so obviously related to our real problems, basic and pressing problems which normally are of concern only to us and, among us, to only a few' (1967, p. 13).
 27. *Pritzker Architecture Prize: Luis Barragán, 1980* (The Hyatt Foundation, 1980), n.p.
 28. See Jencks (1977). On Barragán as critical regionalist see Frampton (1985, pp. 318–319).

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