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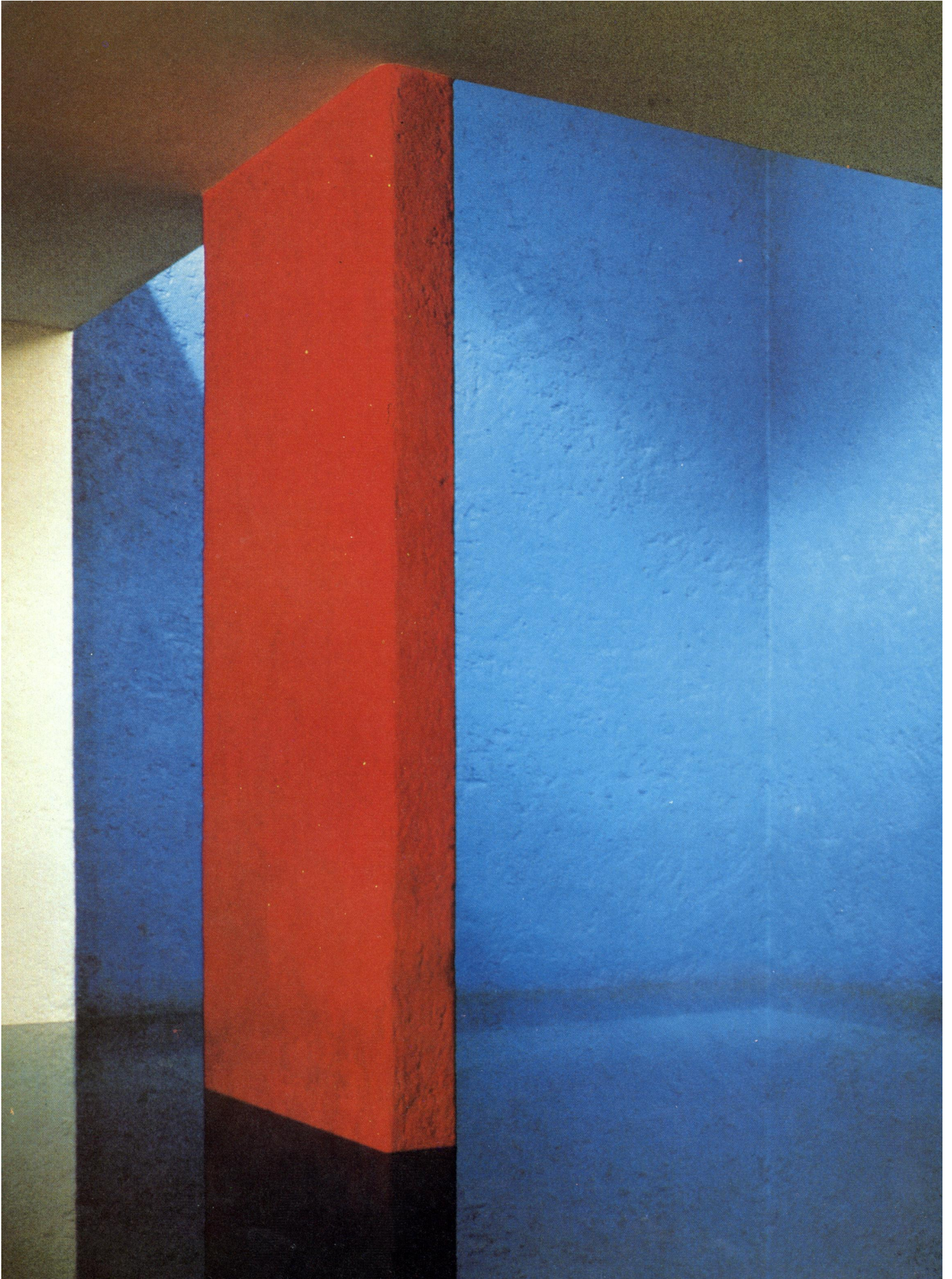
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Luis Barragán

The Influential Lyricist of Mexican Culture

By Mario Schjetnan G.

A QUIET PERSON, NON-POLEMICAL, non-political and introspective, Luis Barragán has gradually emerged to become recognized as one of Mexico's foremost artists of the 20th century.

He now joins such world-renowned Mexican artists as: painters Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Rufino Tamayo; musicians such as Carlos Chavez and Silvestre Revueltas; poets such as Carlos Pellicer, Jorge Cuesta, Jose Gorostiza; and writers Juan Rulfo, Alfonso Reyes, Octavio Paz, Juan Jose Arreola; photographers such as Manuel Alvarez Bravo, and sculptors like Francisco Zuniga.

All of these people mentioned are over 65 and of course there are other younger, talented and well-known around the world. But in my opinion these are the originators, the carvers of Mexico's contemporary face. They have not only influenced Mexican culture in this century, but have molded it, shaped it. In some way or other all of them have captured the essence of this country, and through their work, be it

mural, canvas, concert, poem, novel, figure, garden or house, Mexicans have found part of their own identity.

Luis Barragán, the architect and landscape architect, only recently has been recognized as such a figure. As time passes, his work becomes more important. This is probably so because Barragán, nearly 80, has consistently worked in solitude, with patience and persistent dedication to his art, never seeking the limelight or front page.

Barragán studied engineering and is a self-taught architect and landscape architect, one who learned directly from experience, through travels in Europe, Spain and North Africa, and by absorbing the environment of his childhood in the small towns of the State of Jalisco with their haciendas and churches. Also, through close relationships with such painters as Gerardo Murillo ("Dr. Atl") and Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira; sculptors such as Mathias Goeritz; and poets such as Carlos Pellicer; historian Edmundo O'Gorman, and architects such as Max Cetto and

Interior pool. The Gilardi House, Tacubaya, Mexico City. Designed by Luis Barragán and Alberto Chauvet, collaborator, 1980.



RENE BURRI

Luis Barragan and Raul Ferrera at their studio.

more recently, through a younger generation of architects-collaborators. Barragan himself mentions Andres Casillas and his present young partner Raul Ferrera.

To gain insight into these relationships we should consider them in some detail: "Dr. Atl" was an excellent landscape painter and vulcanologist, much interested in painting landscapes of volcanic lava rock. Chucho Reyes was a peculiar person, an antiquarian, a naive painter and also decorator; a fantastic character who formerly decorated altars and other spaces for religious festivities. For many years he was Barragan's main critic and consultant. Mathias Goeritz, a sculptor-painter-architect, was born in Hungary, later lived in Spain, and came to Mexico in the late 40s to teach in the newly-founded School of Architecture in Guadalajara. He is one of the creators of minimalist sculpture, an abstract urban-sized sculpture. He is also a person knowledgeable in the theory of art, and a most influential person in Mexico's art world of the 50s and 60s. He worked with Barragan in the Pedregal, among other places, doing the beautiful Lizard sculpture in one of its entrances' and also on the famous Satellite City Towers near Mexico City.

Barragan's Philosophy and Insight

Unfortunately, Luis Barragan has not been an author, theoretician or lecturer. He continuously describes himself as a 'lyricist', in the same manner as a musician who plays by ear. Of course the latter is only partly true. He has a deep understanding and knowledge of culture and art, and also of literature, and of tendencies in architecture and landscape archi-

“I believe that architects should design gardens to be used, as much as the houses they build, to develop a sense of beauty and taste and inclination toward the fine arts and other spiritual values.”

ecture. Rather, he has been a lyricist in the manner of a poet, inasmuch as he considers architecture and landscape architecture — that is, his work — as a “sublime act of poetic imagination.” He adds: “Consequently it is my belief that I am only the instrument for those who love beauty and poetry.” Only on rare occasions has he written parts of his philosophy — as when he received the Pritzker Prize of Architecture in 1980. We quote directly some excerpts from Barragan’s speech at that ceremony, when he modestly asserted that the jury was, in fact, “honoring everyone who has been touched by beauty.” Beauty then, is the central word in his work; it is his altar, his reason.

“In alarming proportions the following words have disappeared from architectural publications: Beauty, Inspiration, Magic, Sorcery, Enchantment and also Serenity, Mystery, Silence, Privacy, Astonishment. All of these have found a loving home in my soul, and if I am far from having done full justice to them in my work, I have used them as my lighthouse.

“Religion and the Mythical. We are not capable of understanding the history of art without taking religion into consideration nor the mythical concept behind the artistic phenomenon. Without this concept, would the pyramids of Egypt have existed, the Grecian temples, the Gothic cathedrals, the marvelous Haitian ritual dances, or the African and South Seas ritual dances?

“My good friend, Edmundo O’Gorman, has said and, I, for one, concur in his opinion and adopt his phrase as my own, with or without his approval, that ‘in the art of all times and of all the nations of the world, the irra-

tional logic of the mystical is the underlying factor.’

“Beauty. The invincible difficulty philosophers have had to define beauty is an unequivocal sign of its deep mystery. Beauty speaks as an oracle, and man always has paid homage: through body tattooing, in a humble tool, in temples and palaces, even in industrial products of advanced technology. Life without beauty is not worth being called human.

“Silence. In my gardens, in my houses, I have always strived for the dominance of the placid whisper of silence; and in my fountains, silence sings.

“Solitude. Only in intimate communion with solitude can man find himself. It is a good companion and my work is not for those who fear it or reject it.

“Serenity. It is a great antidote against anguish and fear and today, more than ever, man’s dwelling should provide it. In my projects and my work this has been my only goal. Through the use of a palette with limited colors, as well as with a few basic elements, he has always endeavored to create this sensation. We have the need, as well as the obligation, to create serene atmospheres. We must try to make others aware of it and communicate this feeling.

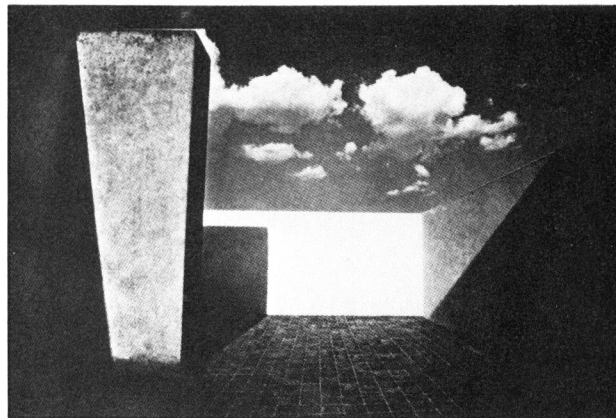
“Joy. How can we forget it? I think a work reaches perfection when it incorporates the emotion of joy, silent and serene joy, enjoyed in solitude.

“Death. The certainty of our death is our fountain of life. When human creations outlive their creators, then death becomes life.

“Gardens. In the garden the designer invites nature to collaborate. A beautiful garden is a permanent presence of nature, but a nature reduced to human proportion and in the service of

man. It is the most efficient refuge against the modern world’s aggression.

“‘The soul of gardens,’ Ferdinand Bac used to say, ‘contains the greatest amount of serenity in all of man’s work.’ And it was Bac who aroused in me the desire of landscape architecture. He said: ‘In this dominion (his own garden in Les Colombiers) I have looked for no other thing than to unite myself with the old solidarity which attracts all of us — that is, the ambition to express through matter a common sentiment in many men and women in search for a contact with nature, through creating a place to rest, of pleasant serenity.’ So we see it is a [necessary] condition for a garden to connect serenity with joy. There is no other better expression of vulgarity than a vulgar garden. Gardens, to me should be poetic, mysterious, bewitching, serene and joyous.



“In a vast extension of lava in the southern portion of Mexico City, I set myself, shaken by the beauty of that old volcanic landscape, to build some gardens which would become human without destroying that marvelous setting.

“Strolling through crevices of lava, protected by the shadow of those great walls of living rock, I

Roof terrace of Barragan’s house.



“Torres de Satalite,” an arrival symbol for an urban area by Luis Barragan and Raul Ferrera.

suddenly discovered — oh beautiful surprise! — small secret green valleys, limited by the most capricious, beautiful and fantastic rock formations, sculpted by the melting rock, the powerful prehistoric winds.

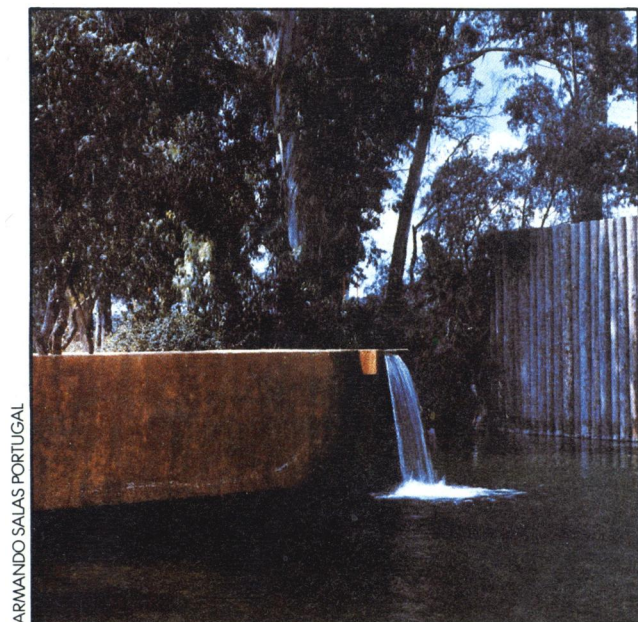
“Such a wonder in discovering those valleys was produced in me similarly when, walking through a narrow and dark tunnel in the Alhambra in Granada, the beautiful Patio of Myrtles, silent and solitary, come to me in that old Palace. It had what a good garden must contain: simply the whole universe.

“Garden of Silence. It was during 1941 that I created my first garden in Mexico City. I purchased a plot of land that contained various levels, and complemented this terrain by creating several platforms in order to constrict a garden that had several compartments which in my mind recalled the beauty of the Alhambra and Generalife gardens and patios.

“Fountains. A fountain brings us peace, joy and restful sensuality. Fountains are joyous and serene, and when we can also qualify them as bewitched, then they are perfection itself. This brings to my mind some marvelous fountains I have seen, the fountains of my childhood. I also remember the excess water drains in the dam, the water reservoirs and ponds that we had on our aqueducts that came from afar and deposited their contents into the pond.

“Architecture. Basically, the entirety of my life’s work is mainly autobiographical, as was pointed out by Emilio Ambasz, in his book regarding my works that was published by the Museum of Modern Art of New York. My memories are of the horses on our ranch, as well as the various provinces of my country. My work transposes my nostalgia for

“I believe in an ‘emotional architecture’. It is very important for humankind that architecture should move by its beauty; if there are many equally valid technical solutions to a problem, the one which offers the use of a message of beauty and emotion, that one is architecture.”



ARMANDO SALAS PORTUGAL

Fountain at Las Arboledas.

these elements into our contemporary world.

“From early childhood I enjoyed tremendously my country’s native architecture: the whitewashed walls; the joy and enchantment that peace brings; the patios and orchards; the colorful homes; the aqueducts; the troughs and granaries. Finally, all the spaces that were filled with such tremendous spontaneity in the fields, as well as in the towns. At a later date, I was able to appreciate and to accept the native architecture of the North African, Moroccan, Tunisian and other nations.

“Being a Catholic, I have often visited convents and churches; I have always found a sensation of peace and well-being in cloisters and religious environments.

“My wish has been to transpose all these traditional concepts through a process of renovation and to display the beauty with which a communal lifestyle can be solved, in order to offer mankind a strong dose of ‘taste’ which would afford him a

richer inner life and the possibility of a spiritual retreat that is lacking in our modern cities.

“The Art of Seeing. It is essential for the architect and landscape architect to see: I mean, to see beyond the level of purely rational thinking. And I would like to pay homage to a great friend. Through his infallible aesthetic taste he was a great master in the difficult art to see with innocence: Jesus (Chucho) Reyes. It pleases me now to recognize my debt to him for his profound lessons. And it is not out of place to quote a few verses from another dear friend.

Mexican poet Carlos Pellicer:

Through sight good and evil
come to us
unseeing eyes
souls which nothing expect.

“Nostalgia. Nostalgia is the poetic awareness of our personal past, and since the artist’s own past is the mainspring of his creative potential the architect must listen and heed his nostalgic revelations.”

The Art to Do, or How to Do Art

In various interviews conducted over last year (1980), we established a beautiful dialogue, deepening a relationship that had started in 1969 and was kept alive over the years in sporadic visits to his famous house in Mexico City, his own convent of solitude, introspection and creation.

Luis, can you define or establish a difference between architecture and landscape architecture?

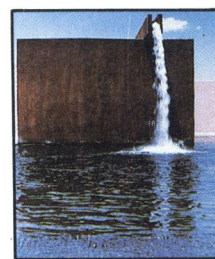
No, both are really a creation of space, a same continuum. Landscape architecture is an architecture without ceilings.

You have always emphasized the use of water and fountains in your gardens. Can you tell me more about it?

Architecture, besides being spatial is also musical. That music is played with water. The importance of walls is that they isolate one from the street’s exterior space. The street is aggressive, even hostile; walls create silence. From that silence you can play with water as music. Afterwards, that music surrounds us. Louis Kahn also talked very much on water and fountains. He used to tell me that I was a creator of fountains; however, he said something I liked very much: ‘When designing a fountain it must be as beautiful with water as without it.’

A few years ago, in one of my visits to your house, you told me that in your opinion the Alhambra in Granada was one of the most beautiful monuments of humanity. When I visited it, besides being captured by its beauty, I was impregnated by it and I started to recognize some of your things. From that day I started to be fascinated by

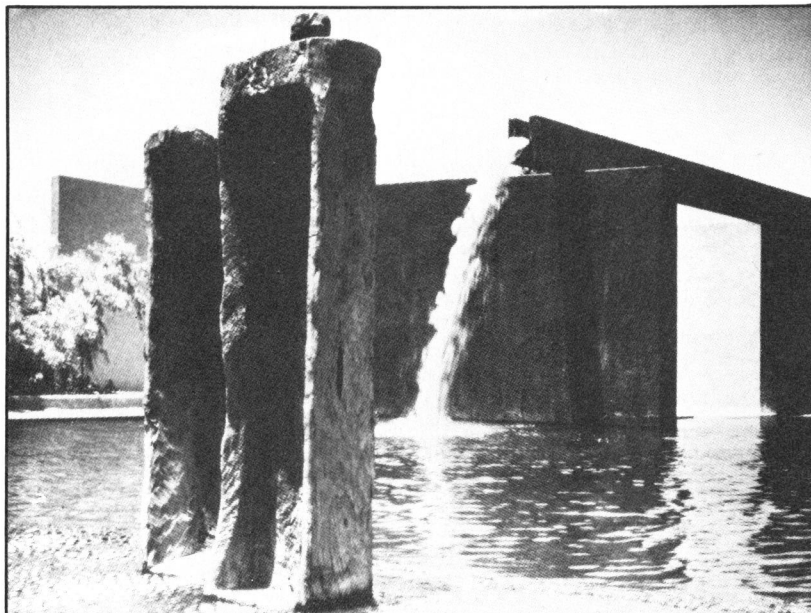
Fountain at Los Amantes (The Lovers) at Los Cubes development.





ARMANDO SALAS PORTUGAL

Above: Pool and garden for private residence built into lava beds at El Pedregal de San Angel, by Luis Barragan and Max Cetto. Right: Another view of "Los Amantes" (The Lovers) at Los Cubes development by Barragan.



Islamic architecture.

Well, the beauty of Islamic architecture is in the fact that two extremes are touched: the mystery of religion and the magic of sensuality, almost an eroticism.

You continuously mention the word mystery in your work; could you explain it?

Well, there is mystery when you see part of a tree, behind a wall.

Luis, many people have written on your gardens and patios and houses, but little has been mentioned about the creative process; in the way you design, how you go about a project, and your daily life.

I start to work early, — about 7:30 a.m. — and have lunch here at home with the staff; I finish working about 4:00 p.m.; I spend the afternoons looking at books of art and architecture and reading novels.

When I get involved in a project I usually start without touching a pencil, or a single sketch. I sit down; I try to imagine the wildest of things. It is a process of madness. After imagining those wild things, I let the idea rest and keep it in my mind for a few days, even longer. I come back to them again and start to sketch small drawings in perspective. I usually do those sketches in a drawing book, sitting on a chair. I do not design on a table or drawing board. Then I give those drawings to a draftsman to put them in plan and elevation. We usually make models in cardboard, to work on them, to make continuous changes. I usually do studies of facades and volumes by drawing the edges, leaving the mass in white. Then I start to locate black pieces of various proportions, that is, black and white in ab-

“Any work of architecture which does not express serenity is a mistake. That is why it has been an error to replace the protection of walls with today’s intemperate use of enormous glass windows.”

solute oppositions; I put them in various ways, establishing different relationships. Usually I do about ten alternatives, put them together on a wall and start to contemplate them. Finally, after a few days I choose and define the one that attracted me most.

Once we are building, I usually make the workers thicken walls and even lower them, or even elevate walls. I think that if painters can change a whole painting, architects must do it with our work. We do not have to feel guilty or to touch our heart to change and bring down. Work in itself is a creative process. Sometimes I tend to put a fake wall or to block a view. At Mrs. Egerstrom’s* house there was opposition regarding a tall and beautiful wall at the entrance that she did not want. So one day I made the men build a wooden structure and cover it with a cloth to simulate a wall. Finally they were convinced and that wall stayed.

How do you define color in your buildings?

Color complements architecture. It is useful to enlarge or shrink a space. It is also useful to add that touch of magic a space needs. I use color, but when designing I do not think in it. I define it when the space is built. Then I visit the place continuously at different times of the day, and start to ‘imagine color’ from the most wild and incredible tones. I go back to books on paintings, I see the work of surrealists, in particular de Chirico, Balthus, Magritte, Delvaux and those of Chucho Reyes. I go about the pages, looking at images and paintings and suddenly I identify some color I had imagined. I

*The Egerstrom House, Los Clubes, North of Mexico City, in collaboration with Andres Casillas, 1968.

select it. Later on in large pieces of cardboard, I ask the painterman (*maestro pintor*) to reproduce them and take the cardboards to the unpainted walls. I leave them for a few days and change the tones and contrast them totally; finally, I select the most appealing to me and order it to be painted.

However there are colors that will fade off with the sun and with the rains.

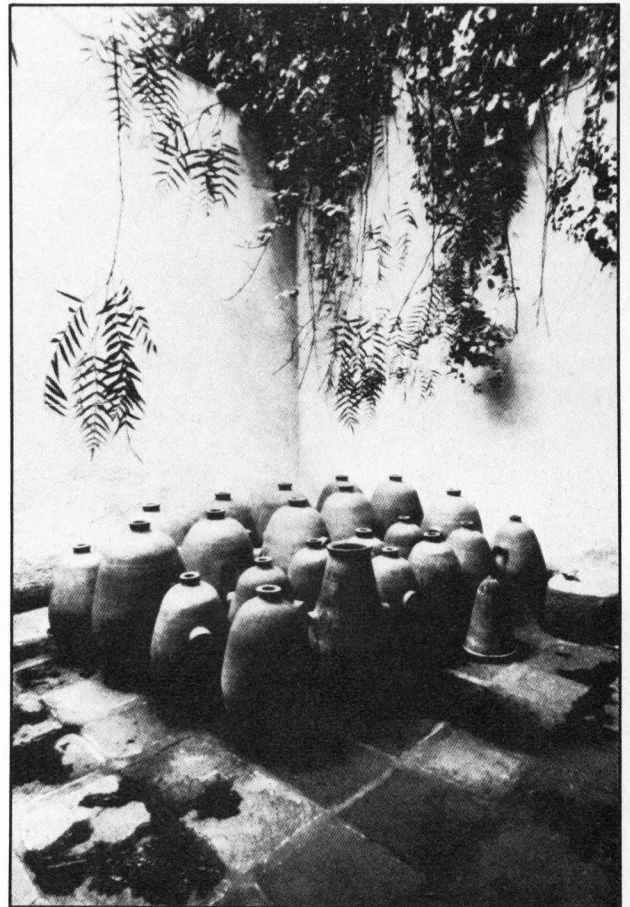
Yes, walls are made to be painted over, I think every two years the whole ‘ouvre’ has to be painted over.

In the last house I made, for Mr. Gilardi,* colors play an important role. The patio is in lilac, very vibrant. The corridor prepares the voyage through the house to arrive at an important space, a dining room with a pool. Suddenly, from the pool a pink wall cuts the water and almost touches the ceiling. The wall gives sense to that space, makes it magic, creates tension over the space. From the ceiling a light well bathes that wall, emphasizing its role.

Finally Luis, I would like to ask you what do you have to say about the transformations, or even destructions of some of your works, not those private and remote but, unfortunately, the ones most notable and public, such as the Entrances to El Pedregal and the central park in that same section (which are destroyed); as well as the beautiful ones of Las Arboledas such as the Orange Wall, the horse trough and the fountain with trunks.

Unfortunately, we are living in a time whose supreme value is money. In this value-frame,

*The Gilardi House, Tacubaya, Mexico City; Alberto Chauvet, collaborator, 1980.



architecture and, even more, landscape architecture, become fragile values, painfully ephemeral.

Corner of roof patio, Barragan’s own house.

Bruna Zevi, a famous Italian art critic and author, has said of Barragan’s work:

In Barragan’s atemporal and undisturbable landscapes an authentic essence vibrates, the intimate meaning of a hieratic silence, the will to capture a remote and lost paradise, immersed in a mythological peace against the brutal aggression of reality. The Egerstrom house-ranch is a proposal of a micro-model of the native habitat-pueblo, with its house, plaza, horse, the familiar tree and the water coming from afar. □