THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PRESS JOURNALS DIVISION

Luis Barragán: The Process of Discovery

Author(s): Ignacio San Martin

Source: *Landscape Journal*, Fall 1996, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1996), pp. 99-112
Published by: University of Wisconsin Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/43323394

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Wisconsin Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Landscape Journal*

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Luis Barragán: The Process of Discovery

Ignacio San Martin

Ignacio San Martin is Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design, Arizona State University. He holds MLA and MCP degrees from the University of California, Berkeley. Upon graduation he became a researcher at the Center of Environment, Development and Research (CEDR) and the Institute for Urban and Regional Development (IURD) at Berkeley. His areas of interest are history and theory of Landscape Architecture and Urban Design. He is a member and past chair of the Challenge Design Review Panel at the National Endowment for the Arts, and a resource member of the Mayors' Institute on City Design at NEA. He is currently the president of the Arizona Chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects.

Abstract: *Luis Barragán was awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1980, as recognition for his work "as a sublime act of poetic imagination." Barragán's career spanned over 50 years in search of an autogenous architecture that rejected the three prevalent canons of architecture: neo-classicism, eclecticism, and international modernism. His constructed work is, in essence, anti-academic and a testimony of a sedulous dedication towards the pursuit of an existential architecture free from rational and theoretical rules to express "time," "place," and "sensation." This paper is the result of a series of interviews with five architects who formed the core of Barragán's studio from 1945 to 1968. It examines Barragán's thinking and design process and reflects on the significance of his work to the environmental design disciplines.*

Knowledge of Barragán's work came to most of us via the exemplary publication of Emilio Ambasz (1976) as the result of MOMA's exhibition of Barragán's constructed work represented by the extraordinary record of Mr. Salas Portugal's photographs. Yet, despite this powerful document and the subsequent prestigious Pritzker award in 1980, Barragán's seminal contribution to our field has escaped the pen of our most gifted historians and critical theoreticians. Brief references to his work are noted in Kassler's revised publication, *Modern Gardens and the Landscape* (1984), and Frampton's third edition of *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (1982). Yet, it is quite surprising to find Barragán's work absent in Norberg-Schulz's later publications, *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* (1984) and *Architecture: Meaning and Place* (1988), themselves dedicated to the exploration of the phenomenology of architecture.

It is important to mention at the outset that an in-depth investigation of Barragán's work is, at this time, considerably difficult. My original purpose was to focus on his design process, and to conduct an inquiry into the relevance of Barragán's work in today's environmental design discourses. Unfortunately, Barragán's studio archives are not open for investigation, and attempts to analyze firsthand graphic or written records on any aspect of his projects can elicit threats of litigation rather than collegiality.[1] Barragán's personal library is, fortunately, under the custody of Professor Ignacio Diaz Morales in Guadalajara. I visited with Mr. Diaz Morales three times during the course of this research.[2] He always welcomed my visits to Guadalajara and our long conversations on Luis Barragán. However, Barragán's library, which I was allowed to see for about 20 minutes, was in a stage of formal organization, cataloging, and registration and therefore in no condition (although I was quite tempted) for serious investigation. I was told it contained over 3,000 volumes and hopefully would be open to the public for research by 1995.

If those problems were not sufficient grounds for discouragement, there is currently another layer of difficulty in studying Barragán's constructed work, primarily from that period between 1947–1969 when his capacity as landscape architect, urbanist, and architect reached its critical and unique maturity. With the exception of some private residences (including his own), such as Egerstrom (1967), Galvez (1955), the Convento de las Capuchinas (1955), and Gilardi (1976), most of his gardens and urban work, such as Torres Satelites (1957), El Pedregal (1945), Las Arboledas (1958), and Los Clubes (1963), the latter including its numerous fountains, are, unfortu-

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

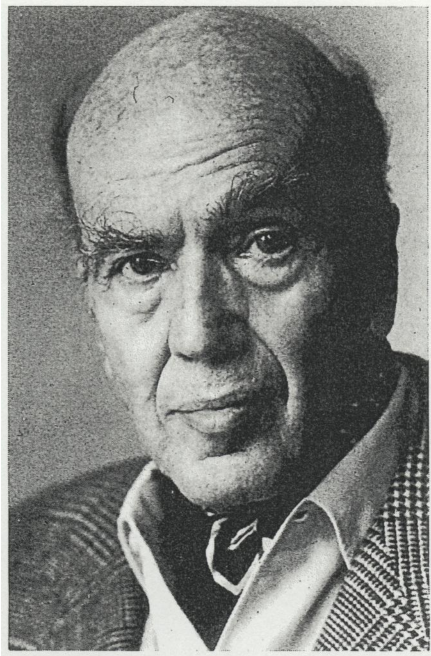


Figure 1. Portrait of Luis Barragán. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

nately, in an extreme state of deterioration. The entrance to El Pedregal is almost nonexistent. The only element left is Mathias Goeritz's serpent sculpture, abandoned outside its intended original context. The Bebedero fountain in Las Arboledas, immortalized in the photography of Salas Portugal, was at the time of my second visit still the resting place for the vicinity's garbage dump. Los Amantes fountain in Los Clubes is missing one of the lovers, and the lively cascade of its fountain is long absent. Likewise, the monolith prisms of Torres Satelites, the gates of Ciudad Satelite, designed as a metaphoric gesture to San Gimignano, have been stripped of their vibrant colors, exposing their grey concrete origins, the only color that Barragán clearly detested.[3]

His Personality and Influences

> Luis Barragán was born with a unique virtue that God provides to very few men—common sense. He was a genius at seeing the essence of things.
>
> Ignacio Diaz Morales

Luis Barragán (Figure 1) is the only architect to be awarded the Pritzker Prize for his contributions to the architectural field "as a sublime act of poetic imagination." In our current climate of design evolution where, for the last 25 years, both architecture and landscape architecture have been influenced by positivistic methods, and architectural consonances have taken us from functionalism to semiotics and poststructuralism, Barragán's architecture is about poetry and beauty, two long-forgotten words in our design vocabulary.

> 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 solutions to a problem, the one which offers the user a message of beauty and emotion, that one is architecture. (Ambasz 1976, p. 8)

It is not possible to enter into meaningful interviews regarding the architecture of Luis Barragán without everyone taking a pause to reflect on the persona of Don Luis. According to his collaborators, he was an especially independent individual, never following any specific school of thought, and was little interested in professional labels.

> He was given to periods of long reflection and study for which persons around him often characterized him as introverted and mystic. He always conducted himself with great naturalness and humility . . . but he had also his temper . . . yes, a very magnetic personality.
>
> Alejandro Margain

Barragán's first 35 years were centered in Guadalajara, with constant incursions into Manzamitla, the land that received his birth in 1902. His youth in Guadalajara was not without significant influences. In the early 1920s, Guadalajara was the crucible of important and intensive intellectual activity in Mexico. Painters, poets, historians, writers, musicians, architects, and thinkers were at the root of a brilliant intellectual climate where Luis Barragán met Ignacio Diaz Morales, who thereafter became Barragán's closest friend and confidant. We know that Barragán graduated from the School of Engineering in Guadalajara as a civil engineer in 1925, but he also expanded his studies in architecture under Agustin Basave and Aurelio Aceves. Agustin Basave was Barragán's first great formal influence in the areas of art history and aesthetics. According to Diaz

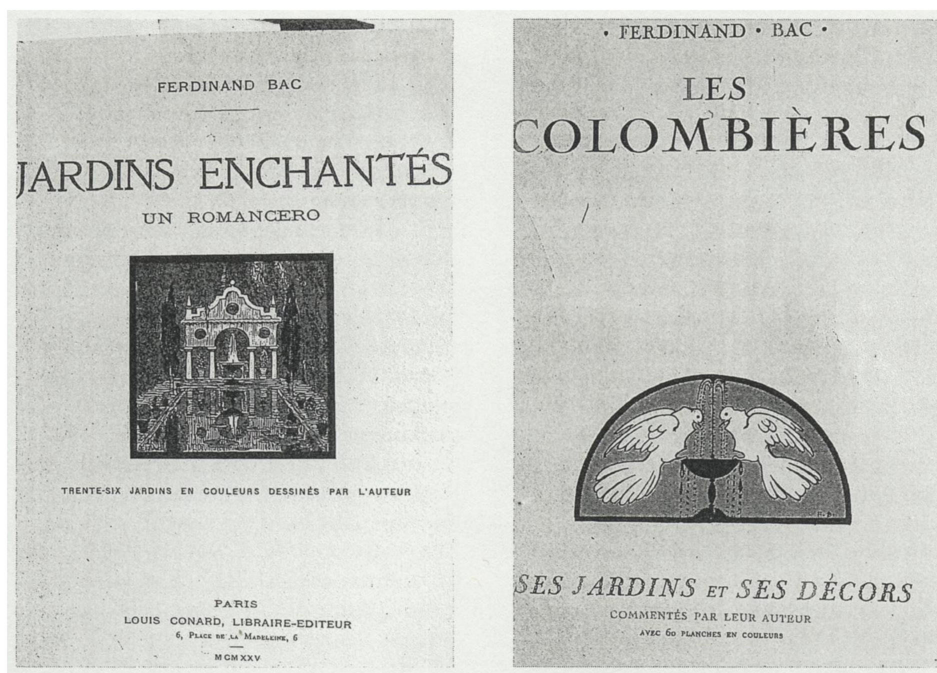


Figure 2. Ferdinand Bac's *Jardins Enchantés* and *Les Colombiéres* were first published in Paris by Louis Conard in 1925. Both publications have been reprinted in a limited edition by Editorial Agata, 1991, and Editorial Conexión Grafica, 1990, respectively. I am grateful to Lorenzo Aldana for providing me with original copies.

This content downloaded from 2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

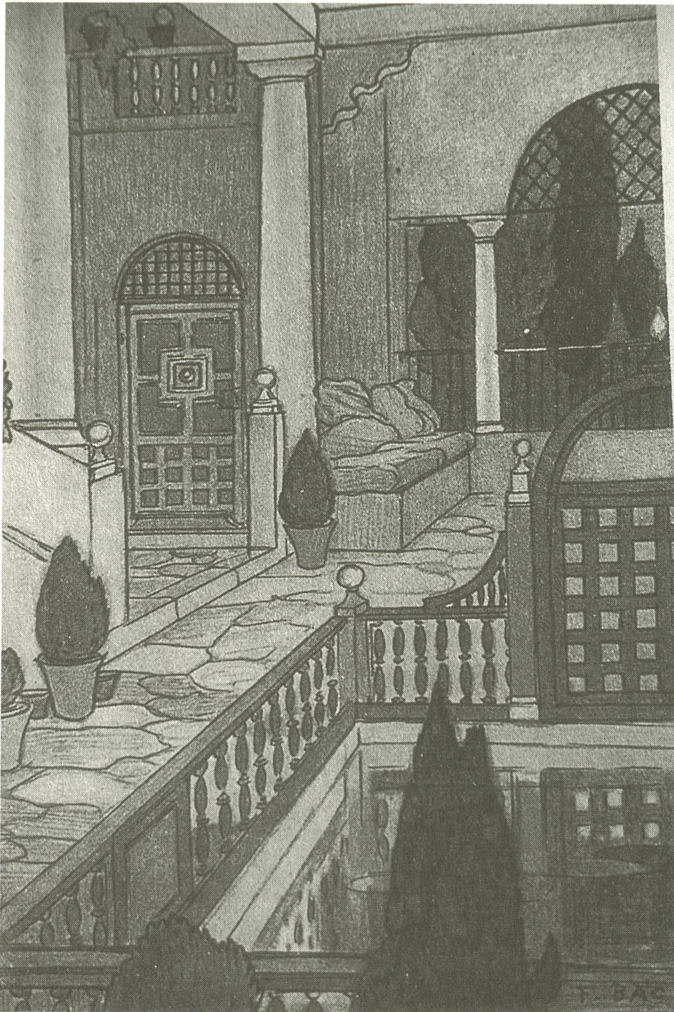


Figure 3. "Le Bain de la Sultane." Ferdinand Bac's sketch drawing from *Jardins Enchantés,* 1925.

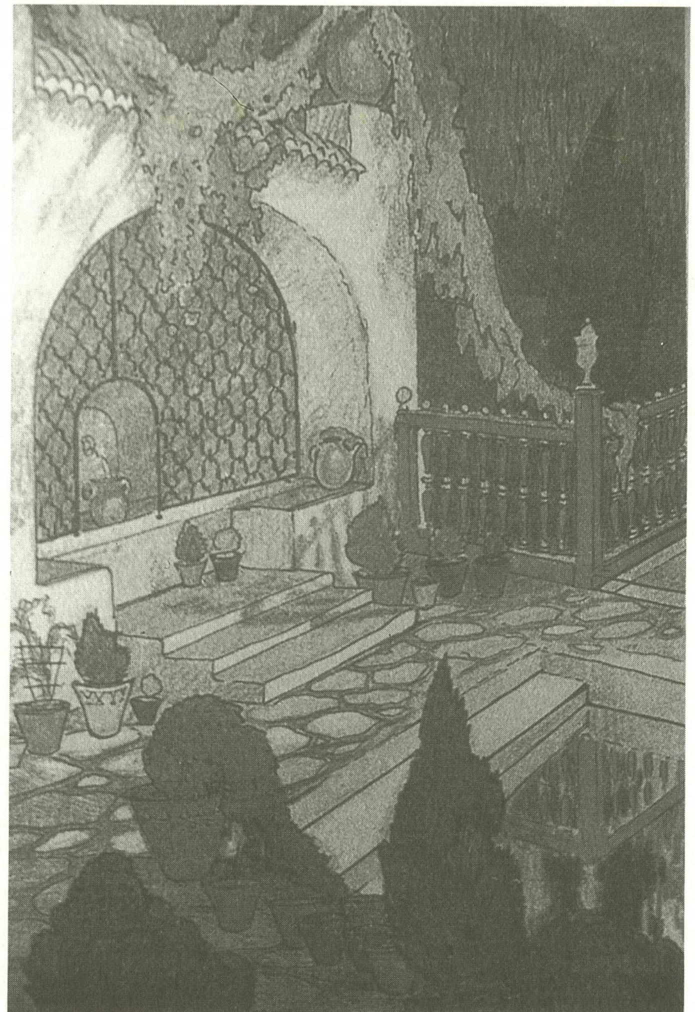


Figure 4. "La Source a la Grille Noire." Ferdinand Bac's sketch drawing from *Jardins Enchantés,* 1925.

Morales, Barragán fulfilled his requirements for the title of architect, including his architectural thesis, which was completed and approved under Agustin Basave. Unfortunately, he left for Europe (after completing his thesis) and never had the opportunity (or interest) to defend it and was never awarded the title of Architect (Gortázar 1991, pp. 26–28).

His first trip (1925), which lasted two years, took Barragán to Paris, where he attended the Exposition Internationale des arts décoratif to which, according to Diaz Morales, "Barragán reacted with deep rejection." Yet it was there where his future took a clear and decisive formative step. His only solace at the exhibit were the drawings for a garden and residence designed by Ferdinand

Figure 5. Exterior courtyard at Efrain Gonzalez Luna's residence, Guadalajara. Luis Barragán, 1928.

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Bac, which was titled *Les Colombieres*. Bac's major contributions, *Jardines Enchantés* and *Les Colombieres,* were both published by 1925 (Figure 2). Upon invitation by Bac, Barragán visited the coast of southern France, and then he traveled to southern Spain to visit the Islamic gardens of Alhambra. It is there, in Spain and southern France, where Barragán discovered, for the first time, the "Mediterranean spirit," the importance of "habitable space" in architecture, and the concept of "intimacy."

To say that he found for the first time intimacy and the Mediterranean spirit may not be quite realistic, since Barragán was exposed to the Mediterranean spirit, as related to architecture, since his birth in Manzamitla, as most of these Mexican villages have in their vernacular tradition the essence of the Mediterranean heritage. Nor was the concept of intimacy a new issue for Barragán. He was a frequent visitor (with Diaz Morales) to sixteenth-century Mexican monasteries, in particular, "The Franciscan Monastery of Tenango, where Luis found [also] important chromatic lessons indigenous of precolumbian architecture" (Gortázar 1991, p. 36). What appears to be more plausible is that, while visiting southern Spain (Alhambra), seeing the work of Ferdinand Bac (which has strong Moroccan influence) and reflecting on the vernacular tradition of his beloved Mexico, a profound impact for an architecture of intimacy was clearly re-established.[4]

Still, his impressions from this first trip were undoubtedly significant. On his return to Guadalajara, Barragán's first five residences—Robles de Leon (1927), Garibi (1928), Aguilar (1928), Gonzalez Luna (1928), and Cristo (1929)—are clearly Mediterranean in spirit, reflecting Bac's influences and with a strong Islamic sense of intimacy in their preference for secluded courtyard gardens (Figures 3, 4, & 5).

> The construction and enjoyment of a garden accustomed people to beauty, to its intensive use, even to its pursuit (Barragán 1952, pp. 167–172).

In 1931, after the completion of Gonzalez Luna's residence, Barragán embarked on a second trip abroad, including Spain, Morocco, Italy, Greece, and North America, which indicates his continued interest in the pursuit of the Mediterranean spirit. Yet, on his return to New York, he met with Clemente Orozco and became fascinated with Orozco's cubist lithographs, and a long friendship was established. There, Barragán's curiosity, if not serious interest, in the architectural possibilities of modern art seems to have been confirmed. Of course, Barragán did not need to travel to New York to find news of modernism. He must have known about it before his first trip to Paris. Examples from the modern movement in painting, literature, and architecture, including the Bauhaus manifesto, had been published in Guadalajara since 1919, ideas, which according to Diaz Morales, were the subject of enthusiastic discussions, as well as some confusion.

In understanding the persona of Luis Barragán in relation to the modern movement, his admiration for Orozco's work is, I think, of interest. While Orozco's work at the time, such as "Pueblos Mexicanos" (1930), is cubist in the manner of Braque's "Houses at L'Estaque" (1908) or Picasso's "Factory, Horta de Ebro" (1909), Orozco's lithographs express a stronger sense of "mystery" and nostalgic expression, pointing his work closer to the characteristics of surrealism (Figures 6 & 7).

Barragán's attraction for intentionally creating "mystery" and "solitude" in architectural space is one of his signatures that starts in El Pedregal (1945) and his own residence in Tacubaya (1947) and continues through Casa Gilardi (1976).

> Luis did admire 'plastically' the modern movement, but not architecturally . . . Architecturally he rejected both, neoclassicism and modernism. For Luis, architecture is not about volume but space.
> Ignacio Diaz Morales

No direct statements from Barragán himself denouncing modernism have been found, yet statements by his closest design team at his Mexico City studio corroborate Diaz Morales' testimony.

> (In architecture) it is not an issue of rational functionalism. For Luis, architecture is about 'life,' for which there are no methods or formulas. Each program is unique.
> Javier Guido Dorantes

None of the individuals, however, who worked in Barragán's studio during these series of interviews knew Barragán prior to 1949, and the relationship between Barragán and Ignacio Diaz Morales since the former's departure for Mexico City in 1935 appears to have been weak. Yet there is no doubt, and plenty of built evidence exists, to indicate that Barragán explored the language of modernism from 1936 to 1940. His association with the architect Max Cetto in El Pedregal indicates an appreciation towards modern functionalism.[5] However, the impression of Barragán embracing modernism and becoming an "orthodox functionalist" (Lobo 1992, p. 59) seems to be unjustifiable.

The period between 1936 and 1940, referred to as Barragán's second period of design evolution, reflects, I believe, the struggle of an architect from Guadalajara establishing a professional presence in the country's capital. As soon as his financial base improved, Barragán focused his energies on developing his own client network and the pursuit of an independent design inquiry.

The reputation of Barragán as a talented designer and independent thinker, strongly committed to expressing his own visions of design, appears in his third stage, which starts with the urban planning of El Pedregal de San Angel (1945) and continues to Casa Gilardi (1976). It is in El Pedregal that he demonstrated fundamental departures with respect to the international approach to urbanism. His unique attention to the characteristics of the region—its topography, geology, and indigenous vegetation—becomes critical in the urbanization scheme. His prime design concern was to demonstrate how an otherwise rugged and adverse volcanic terrain could be transmuted into an extraordinary garden for

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

human habitation. It is his unique vision of including the site's "hostile beauty" to accept human habitation that is at the core of El Pedregal's landscape design (Figures 8, 9, & 10).

> My first task at El Pedregal was to produce a detailed topographic map including the location of large trees, unique vegetation and volcanic formations. It was an impossible job . . . We had good professional help for doing it.[6] Then he told us that the new roads must follow the natural topographic contours . . . including water and sewage. No . . . we were not allowed to cut trees or significantly modify the existing volcanic terrain. The houses should be built within the existing terrain . . . Naturally. This was a very different way of doing things here in Mexico . . . I had to learn my engineering profession again.
>
> Alejandro Margain

During the 1940s, however, the predominant direction in Mexico City towards urbanism reflected an adherence to the vision expressed by Le Corbusier. Mario Pani, Enrique del Moral, and Jose Luis Cuevas were the most active urbanists at the time and proud followers of international functionalism.[7] Examples of their work include Multifamiliar Modelo (1949), Ciudad Universitaria (1950), Multifamiliar Juarez (1952), and Tlatelolco (1964). If Barragán was an "orthodox functionalist" he would have expressed similar urban intentions, yet the development of El Pedregal is more related to the Garden City ideologies.

His awareness of the Garden City movement cannot be clearly established until his personal letters and library are available for research. Fortunately, El Pedregal is not the only project to provide evidence of Barragán's concerns with approaching urban development from the Garden City ideology. A more seminal revelation, which reveals Barragán's thoughts to be similar to the Garden City ideology, came from the interview with Javier Guido Dorantes:

> I don't remember the exact year, probably 1959, but it was after the work at El Pedregal was quite advanced. Luis asked me 'to get ready' for sketching two large bird's-eye views of the entire Valley of Mexico. One of the perspectives was to reflect the Valley under a future vision of continuous sprawl development. The second perspective, reflecting the central development of Mexico City surrounded by a 'green belt' with polar development concentrated along existing villages. Actually I drew many ver-

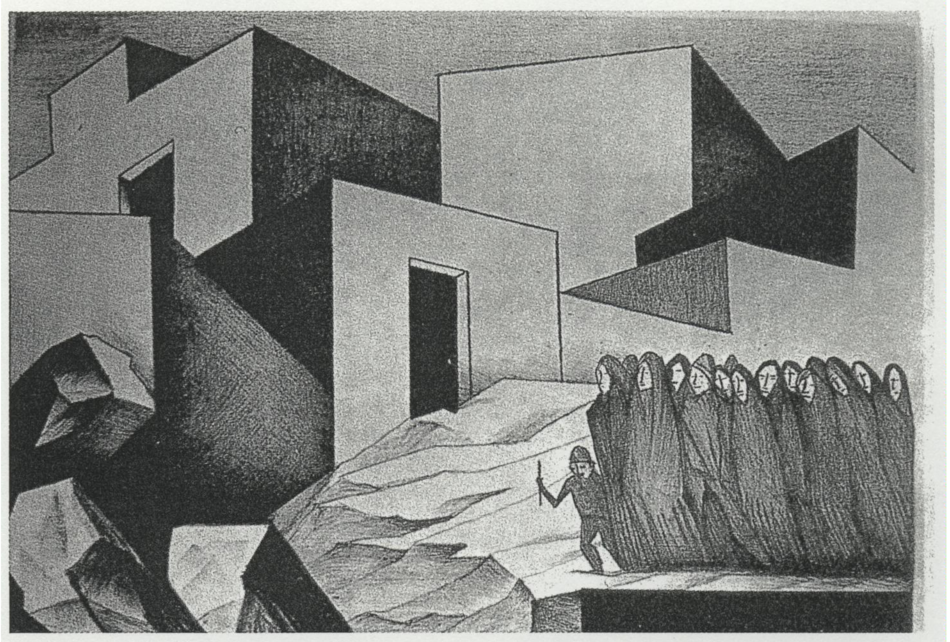


Figure 6. "Pueblo Mexicano," lithograph by José Clemente Orozco, 1930. (Courtesy of the Instituto de Cultura Puertoriquena, Universidad de Puerto Rico.)

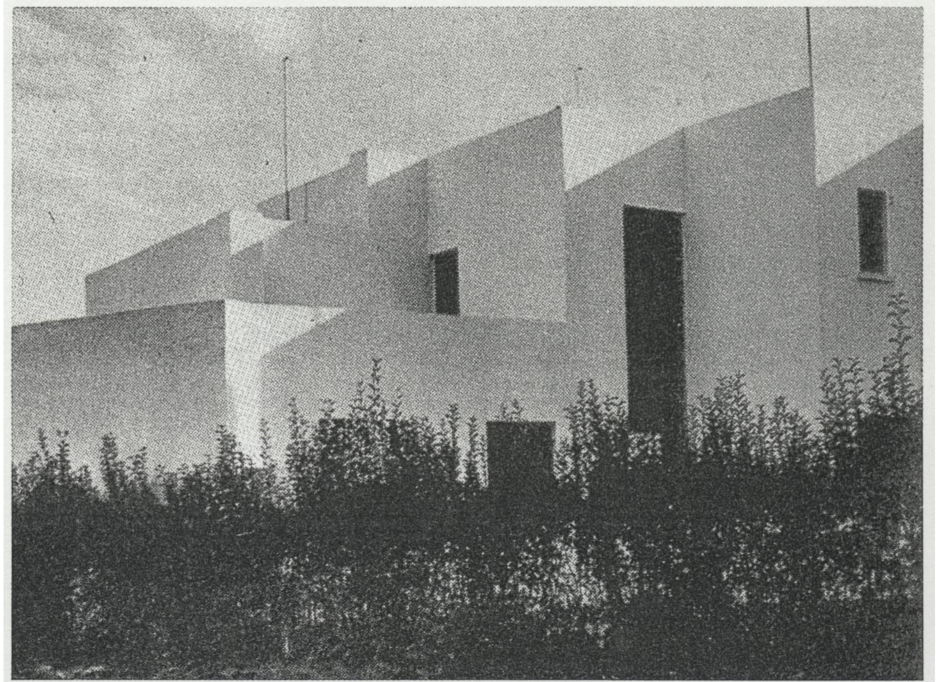


Figure 7. Eduardo Villaseñor's residence. Luis Barragán, San Angel, D.F., 1940.

This content downloaded from 2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

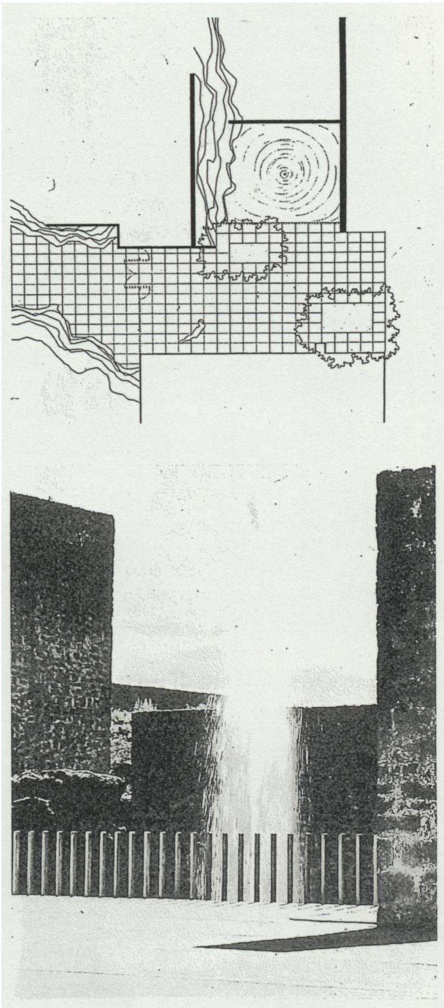


Figure 8. Entrance to El Pedregal de San Angel, Luis Barragán, 1945. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

> sions of both ideas indicating the impacts of reduced vegetation as water consumption for urbanization increases. It was something he was doing with Diego Rivera . . . It was part of a large proposal . . . I think several volumes. Yes, I still have the original of one of the perspectives.

The idea of Barragán concerned with "ecological" concepts deserves, I think, some clarification. Barragán himself was not an individual given to philosophical statements, nor did he have much interest in formal theoretical discourses. For him, ecology had more to do with the "region's" physical, cultural, and aesthetic manifestations. I asked Ignacio Diaz Morales to clarify this issue for me:

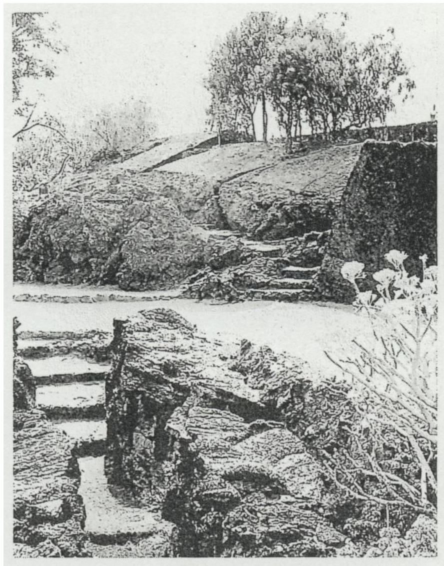
> It is true that Luis was not given to philosophical discourse, although he was very well read. For him ecology was very close to the spirit of the Greek concept—Oikos—house . . . For Luis there are two 'houses,' the small one, the dwelling, and the big one, the city. Barragán's work is a lesson of how to build the 'small' house and the 'big' house . . .

Luis Barragán's diversity and talent as a designer does not end with his work as landscape architect, architect, and urbanist. On a few occasions, he designed silverware for an important company—the Ortega family—and, from 1945 on, he designed the carpentry and furniture for each of his projects (built by his master carpenter Eleuterio Cortex), including the Convento de las Capuchinas (1952). During my second visit to the Convento, I was informed that Barragán was also the designer for all of the clerical clothing used during religious ceremonies at the Convent. I was allowed to see it, but photographs or sketches were not permitted.

His Design Process

> We work hard, intensely, all the time. There is not a single momentary inspiration that brings us to the right answer. To the contrary, we have to work and work to obtain satisfactory results. I think that original ideas require deep reflection and discussion before sketching the first line. Thereafter comes the laborious searching for the right answer that we think to be correct. This search requires serious work. My office produces few projects as a result of investing much time in each of them; nevertheless, I think it is the only way to produce architecture. (Luis Barragán quoted in Figueroa 1989, p. 12)

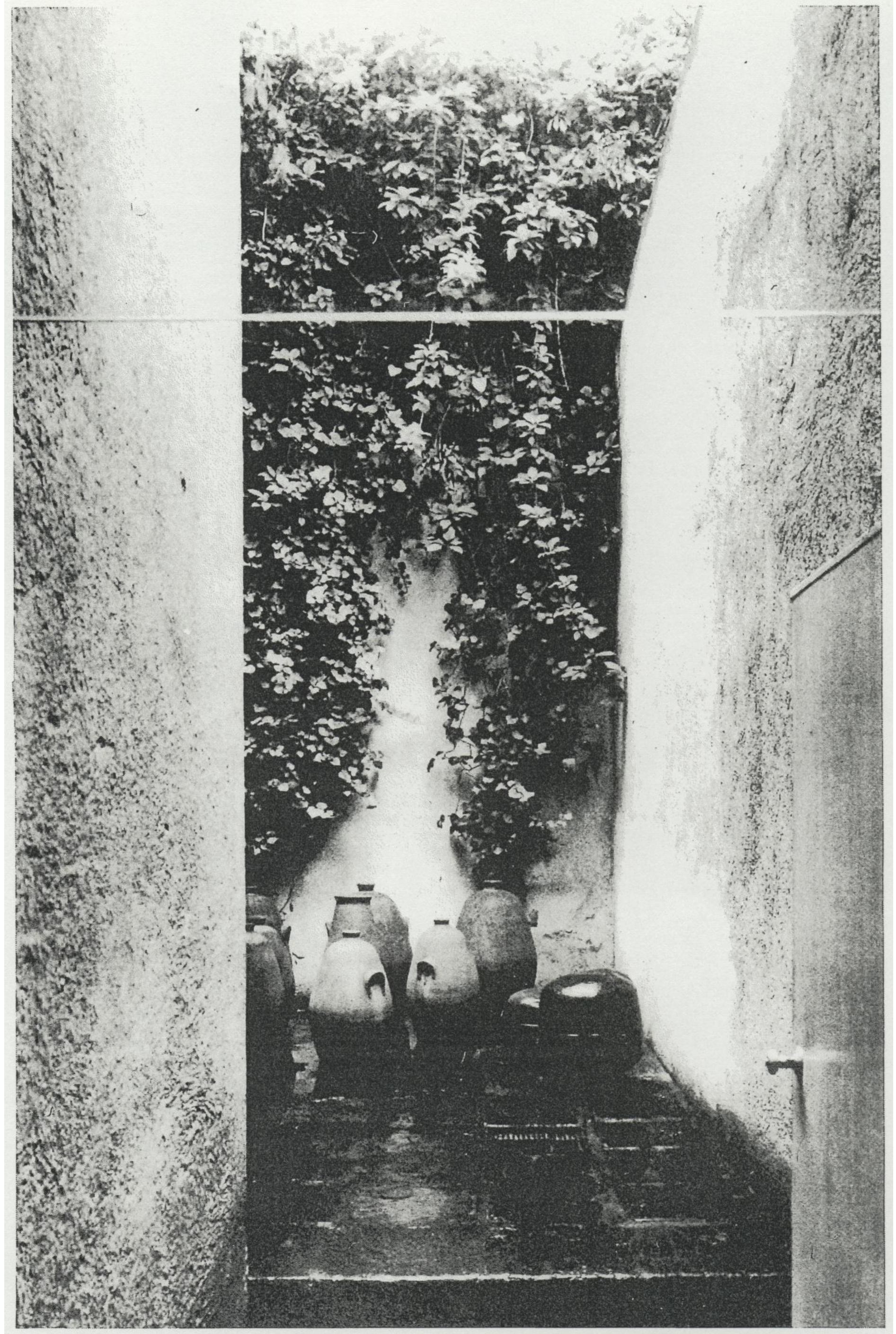
Barragán's studio never exceeded twenty-five individuals, which included engineers, architects, draftpersons, model-makers, and a photographer. Among the core of Barragán's staff were studio head Roberto Salcedo, the engineer Alejandro Margain, and the architects Javier Guido,



Figures 9 & 10. Gardens of El Pedregal de San Angel. Luis Barragán, 1945. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figures 11 & 12 (right). Barragán's residence and atelier, Tacubaya, 1947. (Photos by Armando Salas Portugal.)



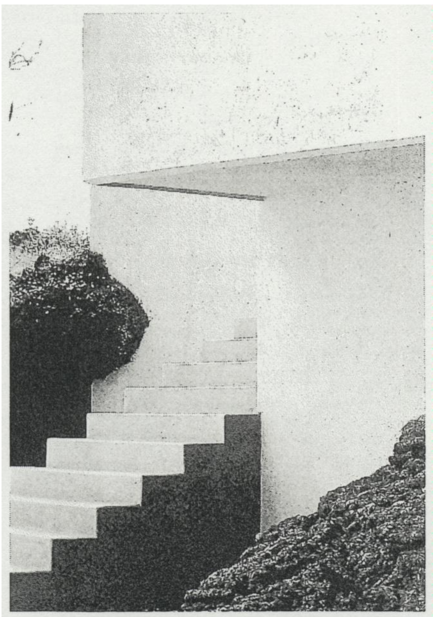
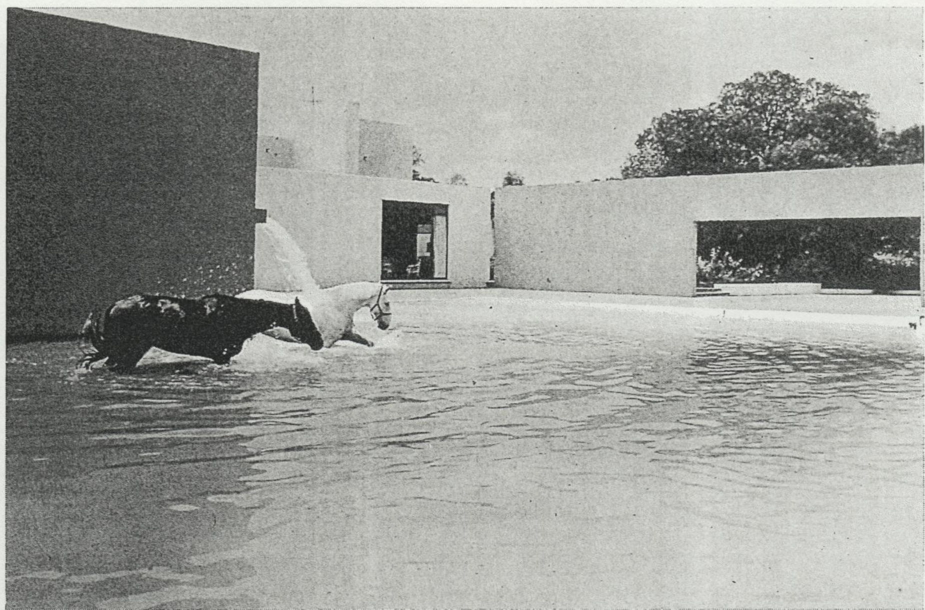


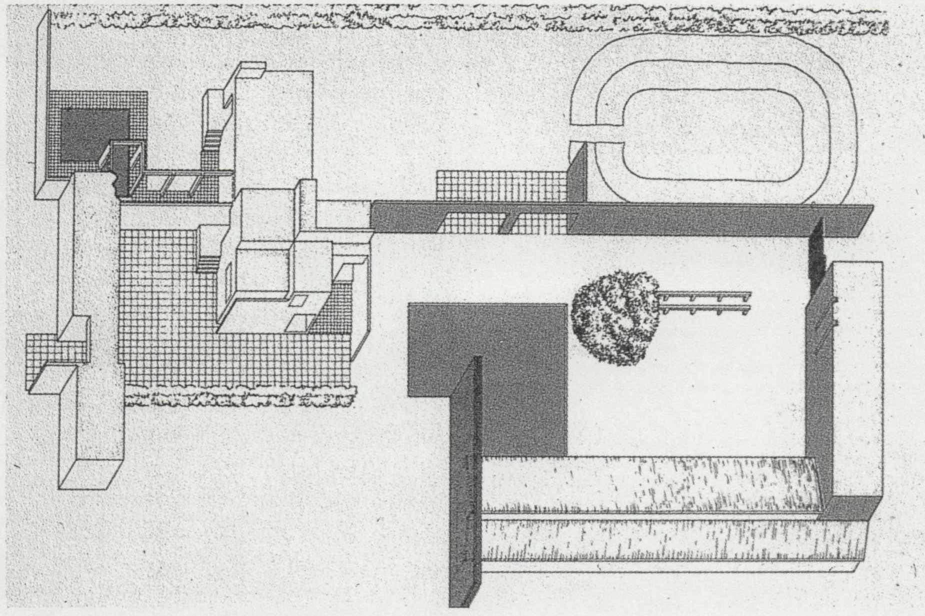
Figure 13. Two Houses, Luis Barragán in collaboration with Max Cetto, El Pedregal de San Angel, 1948. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

Damasco Garcia, his brother Mario and, later, Antonio Cortex, the son of Barragán's furniture maker. After the departure of Roberto Salcedo, Alejandro Margain became studio head from about 1950 until his departure in 1969 shortly after Barragán employed Raul Ferrera, who became Barragán's final associate.

In attempting to understand Barragán's architectural production, which with some caution might also be called his design method, it is useful to reflect on the language that Barragán uses to communicate the "task" of making architecture. For him, designing is a "process of discovery . . . in search for the right answer . . . to be perceived by the senses," and as to the way one knows which solution is the right one, he refers to "that which contains a message of beauty and emotion." He cautions us

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms





Figures 14 & 15. Egerstrom residence, Luis Barragán, San Cristobal, 1967.

that, before drawing the first line, "original ideas should be given deep reflection."

> When I start a new project, I start without touching a pencil and without drawings. I first sit down and start thinking wild ideas. After imagining these ideas, I leave them resting in my mind for a few days. After this, I begin making a few sketches and perspectives in my notebook. (Luis Barragán quoted in Schjetnan 1982, pp. 9–12)

Where do his original ideas generate from? How does he evaluate them, and where does his search for beauty and emotion end?

> I don't have a method or process of analysis like other professionals do. It is a constant process of discovery to be perceived by the senses. . . . via a play of walls and colors. (Luis Barragán quoted in Gomez and Quevedo 1981, p. 126)

Architectural production at Barragán's studio may appear, at first, to have been somewhat chaotic, but after repeated discussions with his studio team, it reveals itself as an iterative process whereby the nature of the project was continually questioned at each stage of development. In Barragán's architectural production the process of discovery and critical evaluation came first via his own investigation during the schematic design process, and secondly, via Barragán's invitation to critically discuss the project with specific individuals that included poets, painters, art critics, and historians. In fact, this process of evaluation often extended into the construction phases where the meaning of the architectural spaces could be correctly assessed, as their tectonic expression was cumulatively influenced by scale and the effects of daylight on walls, colors and textures.

> Here in my house I have done what I wanted. It has been under constant change. I have added or taken walls and windows . . . A house never is completed, it is an organism in constant evolution. (Luis Barragán quoted in Figueroa 1989, p. 102) (Figures 11, 12, & 13)

But again we should not interpret the above statement as if Barragán's architectural production was without a method, for in most cases during my interviews, references were clearly made to the following stages: 1) needs assessment, 2) site investigation, 3) space analysis, 4) construction assessment, and 5) field verification. The first three stages contain the essence of Barragán's "process of discovery" and search for the "right answer." The fourth stage involved consultation with the structural engineer(s) and the master builder. It was only after the fourth stage that detailed architectural drawings were for the first time executed. Field verification, the fifth and final stage, was of paramount significance. Here, Barragán's

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

involvement with the project was direct, primarily during the erection of walls, texture application, color preparation, and the testing and monitoring of the effects of daylighting on the overall "sensing" of architectural spaces. Although these five stages of design process may be considered logical and somewhat parallel to "standard practice" in the United States, Barragán's design method contains unique variations.

First of all, the needs assessment stage involved, in principle, understanding the user's needs from which a space program of requirements was developed. But it involved, in addition, a second and more profound aspect of needs assessment which Ambasz quite appropriately named a program of "metaphysical imperatives."

> Functionalism should not be guided by our understanding of the individual's basic and immediate needs . . . but to the needs of recreating the soul of our human spirit. (Luis Barragán quoted in Gomez and Quevedo 1981, p. 126)

Barragán speaks of an architectural program that is responsive to the needs for "housing" our psychological self, via an architectural program that facilitates reflection on our human condition. Giving form to such immeasurable requirements has been, in essence, Barragán's quest in architecture. The uniqueness of Barragán's constructed program is that it communicates to the senses more than it stimulates the intellect. His preference for the "sensible" over "the intellectual," the psychologically human over the rationally human, is one of Barragán's gifts to the design professions.

> Corners, wall heights, gardens and textures. I use them in order to demonstrate three things: time, place and sensation. (ibid.)

Time and place are both characteristics of space. For Barragán, "time" appears to contain at least two meanings: one which is culturally and temporally "now," such as modernity, and the other which is inseparably linked with "roots," a dimension of time which is culturally and historically bound to locale and region.

> In the villages of Mexico, Barragán found our indigenous heritage from which he extracted that wisdom . . . light, color and texture as elements of architecture.
>
> Ignacio Diaz Morales

In addition to creating a design that communicates the "now" of time (modernity) and the roots of a vernacular heritage (colors and textures), Barragán's design program contains a third dimension. That is, his constructed spaces evoke a "sensation," a psychological response that communicates to the mind a sense of belonging and a feeling of nostalgic freedom.

> 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. (Barragán 1980)

Barragán does speak of "place," but in his discussions, place has strong references to locale, i.e., region, site, even to untamed nature or to a broader concept such as Mexico. He was once approached by an important client who wanted to build a house and brought to Barragán achitectural photographs from his native country, Scotland.

> Look, I can do whatever you want me to do. But reflect on this: It is not possible to make Scotland in Mexico. If you want your guests to enjoy the ambiance . . . I think it will be more convenient for you to build a residence that speaks of Mexico and the time in which you live. (Luis Barragán quoted in Gomez and Quevedo 1981, p. 126) (Figures 14 & 15)

The importance that Barragán placed on the understanding of the region brings us to his second stage of design method, i.e., site investigation. For him, site investigation involved more than the rational documentation of physical features. It was more related to a process of "reading" the landscape to extract character and meaning so that they could be incorporated into the design and building construct.

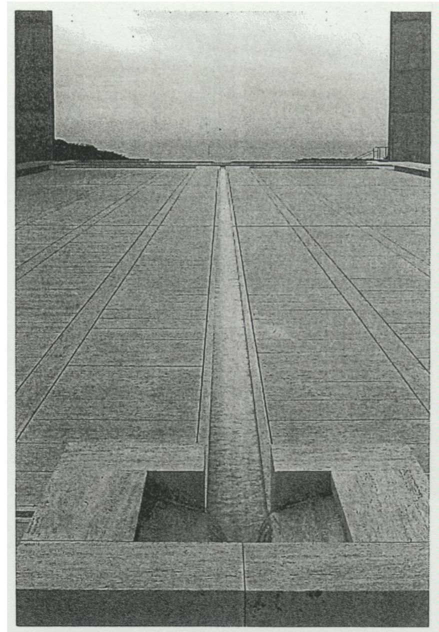


Figure 16. Central courtyard at the Salk Institute, Louis Kahn, La Jolla, 1965.

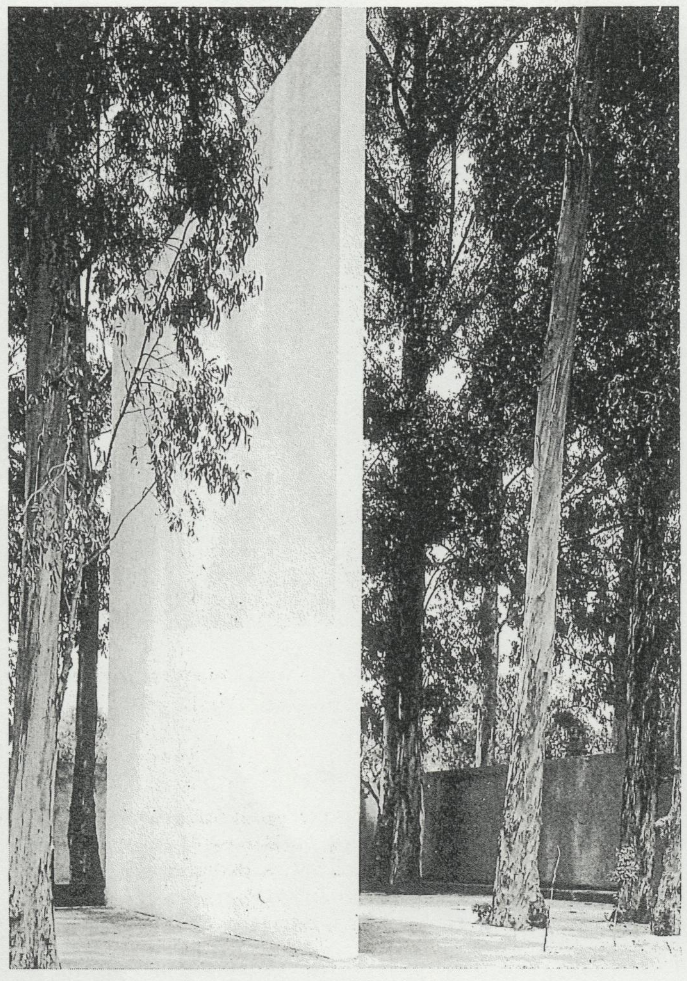
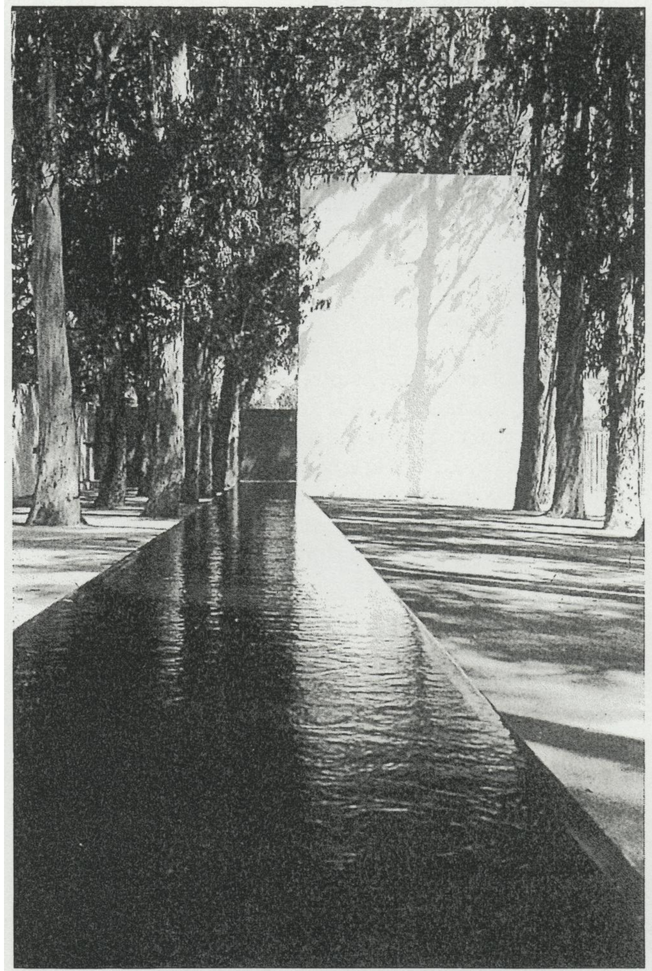
> It is essential for an architect to know how to see: I mean to see in such a way that your vision is not dominated by rational analysis. (Luis Barragán 1980)

In this respect, he is grateful to his friend and critic Jesus (Chucho) Reyes for his "multiple wise lessons on learning to see 'innocently.'" His site visits were usually conducted early in the mornings. He often brought with him to the site one or two members of his studio (usually Margain or Guido) to document his observations.

> We used to walk the site taking notes of his observations, such as the character of the light, views, native vegetation, topography, etc. If the site was within an urban environment, references were made to the lot orientation, view to be blocked and noise conditions . . . He was very conscious of the impacts of noise . . . and its absence.
>
> Alejandro Margain

Once the information from the site visits and program requirements was completed, Barragán allowed one, and sometimes two, of his senior architects to prepare schematic layouts for his review and comments. He often gave the lead designer signifi-

This content downloaded from 2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Figures 17 & 18. El Bebedevo Fountain, Las Arboledas, Luis Barragán, 1958. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

cant freedom in initiating a project, but he critically reviewed the initial sketches, making modifications as he thought necessary.

> The study of elevations, I do them by drawing only the outline of volumes leaving the masses in white. Then, I cut off pieces of black cardboard of different proportions putting them, that is, white against black in absolute juxtaposition establishing diverse relationships. I often do ten alternatives from which I select the most attractive. (Luis Barragán quoted in Schjetnan 1982, pp. 9–12)

As soon as plan layouts, sections, and elevations were "in the right direction," he constructed large-scale models where the character of spaces could be subject to more rigorous study. This space investigation, Barragán's third stage of design process, was critical in fixing the correct location of the walls, establishing their relative heights with respect to each other, and initiating his chromatic and texture studies. It was at the model stage where color and texture examinations were first considered.

> The correct location of important walls was determined by studying the space characteristics at the model stage . . . drawings were modified accordingly. Color and texture were applied to specific surfaces by mixing paint with talcum powder and affixing it to walls with a paint brush. We repeated this process endlessly. With some projects, as in the Convento de las Capuchinas, he ordered to build large-scale models so that he could insert his head through the base and study the spaces.
>
> Alejandro Margain

After the model stage was completed, Barragán invited some of his closest friends for consultation. It included the painters Covarruvias, Dr. Atl, and Diego Rivera; the historian Edmundo O'Gorman; the art critic Justino Fernandez; and Jesus (Chucho) Reyes, who was Barragán's confidant in terms of colors. The exact nature of these conversations is not well known since they often occurred at breakfast or late in the evening. Nor is it implied here that projects were significantly modified after such conversations. It appears that, after the project was firmly established in Barragán's mind and documented in drawings and models, he enjoyed discourse with respect

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to issues of "essence." The design intent, and as such, its tectonic construct were subject to dialogue with individuals that Barragán respected for their unique talents. If the project was a garden, models were similarly constructed and discourse in such case included botanists (e.g., Mario Oguri), horticulturists (e.g., Juan Ernandez), and agronomists (e.g., Juan Silex), all of whom were proprietors of important nurseries at the capital.

There is a strong conviction that for Barragán, exterior and interior spaces were inseparably part of the same program. Both were part of meticulous analysis at the model stage.

> I believe that architects should design gardens to be used, as much as the houses they build, to develop a sense of beauty . . . and other spiritual values. (Luis Barragán 1952, p. 169)

> Architecture and landscape architecture are both creations of space, on the same continuum. Landscape architecture is architecture without a roof. (Luis Barragán quoted in Schjetnan 1982, p. 9)

Significance of His Design Method

The investigation into the method of architectural production favored by Luis Barragán unveiled distinct characteristics which in themselves provide a clear insight into the nature of his thoughts with respect to the role and intent of architecture. First, he was cognizant of the importance, within the architectural program, to account for multiple dimensions as a response to our human needs for sheltering, physical as well as psychological requirements. His concern for giving form to such a dual program was indicative of his awareness of the phenomenological possibilities of architecture.

Secondly, Barragán's inclusion of dialogue in his design process with individuals not directly related to architecture was indicative that, for him, architectural production was not an issue of adherence to, and the proper execution of, specific technical or theoretical rules which in themselves legitimize the autonomy of architecture. The inclusion of artists, scientists, and critics within the design process was, for him, a substantive step in the design process to arrive at the clarification of meaning. Time, place, and the sensation of beauty, serenity, joy, and silence were for Barragán real and necessary entities that must be expressed by design. The architectural elements in such a discourse include, in addition to the site's unique structural components, tactile expressions of textures, colors, and the effects of daylighting, all of which are architectural elements as real and necessary as columns or beams.

The third significant lesson in Barragán's space analysis, and one which cannot be arrived at without the reliance on models, is that the qualities of time, place, and sensation are not properties of the spaces themselves but are suggestive expressions of the manner in which the spaces are framed, defined, and structured. The entire notion of "architectural essence" is communicated by the essential construct and materiality of the surfaces that enclose the space.

Yet, the drive in Barragán's design and as such his guiding compass was his power to transmute memorable experiences. Memories of places and experiences are at the roots of his design inspiration. His "search," however, was the difficult task of creating a more humane architecture which he found in the resonance of poetic minimalism.

> While walking along the lava crevices (in El Pedregal), under the shadow of imposing ramparts of live rock, I suddenly discovered, to my astonishment, small secret green valleys—the shepherds called them "jewels." The unexpected discovery of these "jewels" gave me a sensation similar to one experienced when, having walked through a dark and narrow tunnel of the Alhambra, I suddenly emerged into the serene, silent and solitary 'Patio of the myrtles' hidden in the entrails of that ancient palace. Somehow I had the feeling that it enclosed what a perfect garden—no matter its size—should enclose: nothing less than the entire universe.

> This memorable epiphany has always been with me, and it is not by mere chance that from the first garden for which I am responsible all those following are attempts to capture the echo of the immense lesson to be derived from the aesthetic wisdom of the Spanish Moors. (Barragán 1980)

The Relevance of His Work

Notwithstanding the serious limitations as noted earlier in this article about researching Barragán's archives, it is still difficult to avoid the question related to the significance of Barragán's architectural work, with respect to our current architectural and landscape architectural discourses here in the USA. As a footnote to the foregoing discussion, it should be noted that, prior to the 1980s, Barragán was not considered in Mexico, by most counts, an architect but an engineer. His architecture and landscape architecture have been pejoratively called by many of his contemporaries "scenography." It was only after his acceptance of the Pritzker award that negative comments with respect to his work were silenced.

For Diaz Morales, Luis Barragán was, with respect to Mexican architectural evolution, *un hombre brujula.* This reference is made towards Barragán as being "a guiding compass" during twentieth-century Mexican architecture. Barragán's rejection of functional modernism was because of its persistence with puncturing exterior walls with large windows which he thought to be, not only inappropriate, but "an act of impudence" to the human needs for privacy and intimacy. To the modernist insistence with "transparency," Barragán explored *el muro* (the wall) which, in Barragán's architecture, transmutes itself into unique surreal manifestations.

While the need for "privacy" was indeed central in Barragán's design intent, his explorations of architectural space via massive walls had a deeper significance. Such explora-

This content downloaded from 2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tions were in direct response to the alienation and fragmentation of the architectural and urban space brought on by the process of modernization.

> There (in modern cities), man is out of scale in relation to his environment, (but then hasn't he always been?), a scale which provokes in him anxiety while city traffic and turmoil make him restless. We have to find shelter and the proper environment for this modern man. (Luis Barragán quoted in Bayon 1976, p. 531)

In a way, Barragán is anticipating the effects of progress and modernization upon human life. As noted by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity,* the price to be paid for progress with respect to the human cognition of space is the total subjugation of space over the domain of time. "Indeed progress entails the conquest of space, the tearing down of all spatial barriers, and the ultimate 'annihilation' of space through time. The reduction of space to a contingent category is implied in the notion of progress" (Harvey 1989, p. 205).

It is precisely here that the significance of Barragán's work becomes truly relevant. His constructed spaces are persuasive arguments for the need of creating a new architecture that can free our minds from the tyranny of the modern effects of "space-time compression." He confronts that by providing the architectural possibility of a new typology of space which can gather the dialogue of infinite memories. Barragán is conscious of presenting an architecture of shock with a very persuasive humanistic argument against the chaotic signs already present in Mexico, and suggestive of a modern urban and cultural condition of fragmentation.

Not only does El Pedregal reject international urbanism, but it brings into cognition, first and foremost, the potential of the region's unique character, it's biophysiography, as the principal force in the planning scheme. Barragán presents us with a poetic view of architecture that favors the possibilities of culture and region as unique constructs for creating architectural spaces that preceded Kenneth Frampton's regionalist position.[8]

It is here, in my opinion, that Barragán provides an insightful vision. That is, how to interpret modernity and still be true to tradition; how to be modern while still being rooted to a world of direct experience; how to present a new architecture without regressing to historicity; how to inhabit a place without sacrificing the region.

Barragán's incorporation of culture into architecture is strikingly unique. His interpretation is not linked to any specific time or specific materiality of culture. It consists of extracting existential qualities of human behavior or needs which, in Mexican as well as Mediterranean cultures, imply "intimacy," "serenity," "silence," and "mystery" which, for him, are all "sensations" and manifestations of beauty.

His interpretation of history is, in essence, relativistic in that he combines the external energy and aesthetics of surrealism with the ethnovernacular chromatic characters: colors, light, and textures, all of which mediate in a timeless manifestation while maintaining their roots to sources. Louis Kahn, the only American architect to have collaborated with Barragán at the Salk Institute, observed this quality: "The architecture of Barragán is timeless, it could have been constructed 100 years ago or 100 years from now"[9] (Figure 16). The timeless existential nature of Barragán's architectural space is accentuated by his use of walls and natural materials—lava rock as structural elements and interior floor finishes—and also, by the striking self-denying expression of his furniture and the idiosyncratic construction of stairs, with their surreal effects of gravitational opposition, all of which are important architectural elements to further communicate the sensation of surreal beauty (Figures 17 through 21).

By the 1940s, Barragán had mastered a unique interpretation of architecture that preceded the "postmodern" critique by over 40 years in a manner that anticipated Norberg-Schulz's singular observation, "There

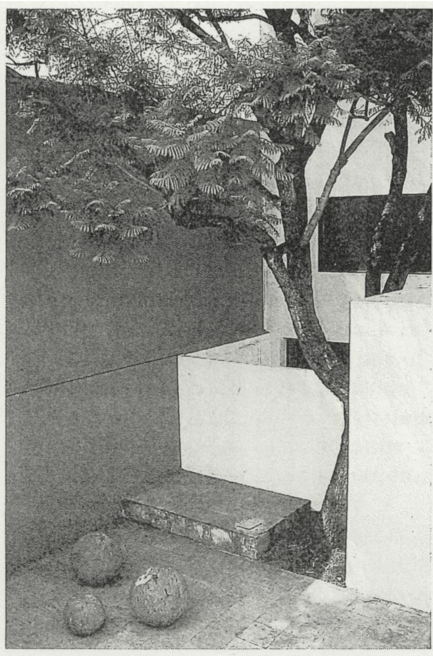


Figure 19. Gilardi Residence, Luis Barragán, Mexico, D.F., 1976.

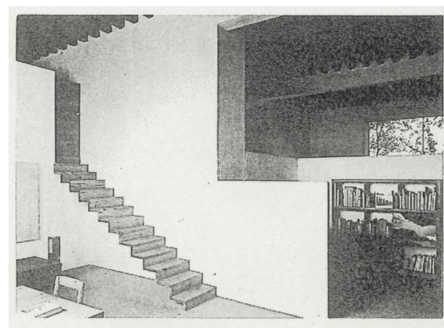


Figure 20. Stairs, library room, Barragán's residence, Tacubaya, 1947. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

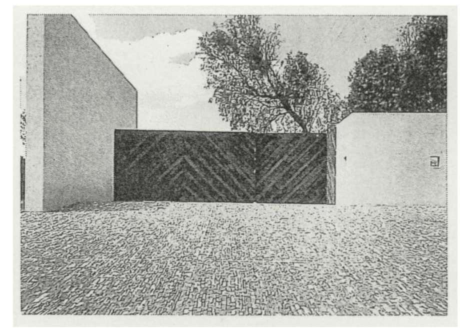


Figure 21. Equestrian entrance to Los Clubes, Luis Barragán, 1969. (Photo by Armando Salas Portugal.)

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

is not a different 'kind' of architecture . . . but only different 'situations' that require different solutions in order to satisfy man's physical and physic needs."[10] By the time Barragán completed his last project, Gilardi residence in 1976, he was able to demonstrate that it was possible to create a modern architecture outside of linguistic or literary theories and without making literal transpositions of history.

There is a strong impulse to link Barragán's architectural work to the phenomenological discourse implied in Heidegger's "Building, Dwelling, Thinking." At the present time, I am skeptical of such a connection. It is true, however, that within the implied language of Heidegger, enough potential exists for speculation which, in my view, should remain silent without additional research in Barragán's personal library. Even if it can be proven that Barragán knew of Heidegger's architectural connotations, the most plausible conclusion could be that Barragán constructed the architecture that strengthens the phenomenological proposition.

Barragán died in 1988, leaving no text on his architectural theory. His views on the role of architecture are, however, spread through a multiplicity of magazine articles, and of course, were superbly phrased during his acceptance address for the Pritzker Prize. His career spanned over 50 years in search of a new architecture which is, in essence, anti-academic and a testimony of a sedulous dedication towards the pursuit of an existential architecture that is free from rational and theoretical rules. His detachment from academic and professional labels allowed him to carry his design inquiry into the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, and urbanism, each of which he was able to express with the same distinctiveness of poetic minimalism to manifest "time," "place," and "sensation." This was, in his view, the primary intent of architecture—that is to create habitable places where humans can experience their own existence. Barragán's work offers multiple possibilities that would result from applying his ideas to different situations, cultures, and regions. In Barragán's words:

> I don't think that my architecture should be imitated, because it is not a style, but a personal expression. My personal view is that if you want to study my architecture, you should visit my sources, so that you do not copy the results, but make your proper synthesis. (Luis Barragán quoted in Figueroa 1989, p. 124)

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for a number of sources and colleagues who provided the basic references and discussions for this work: Ignacio Diaz Morales, Armando Salas Portugal, Alejandro Margain, Javier Guido Dorantes, Antonio Cortex, José Maria Buendia, Lorenzo Aldana (President of Mexico's Federation of Architects), Mr. and Mrs. Gilardi, Mr. and Mrs. Galvez, Luis Barragán (nephew of Mr. Barragán), Jorge Alessio Robles, and Professor Ballina Garza, Dean of Architecture at Universidad Iberoamericana. The major sources were, in addition to the above interviews, Anival Figueroa (1989), Gomez, L. and Quevedo, M. A. (1981), and Gortázar, F. G. (1991). I am quite grateful to Tim McGinty for his insightful comments during the drafting of this paper and to the editorial advice given by Elaine Rose.

I am deeply appreciative to Arizona State University for supporting this research through the Faculty Grant-In-Aid Program.

Notes

1. Currently, Barragán's project archives are under the custody of Mr. Raul Ferrera, Barragán's last partner. Mr. Ferrera's claim to ownership of Barragán's studio archives is currently under litigation.
2. Professor Diaz Morales died four months after my last interview with him. I cherish our long discussions on Mr. Barragán's work and his own lucid understanding of architectural theory and history. Diaz Morales was, in my opinion, the authority on Luis Barragán and himself a renowned architect, former professor of architectural theory, and founder in 1948 of the Guadalajara School of Architecture.
3. Alejandro Margain, unpublished memoir, July 1992.
4. According to Diaz Morales, Barragán visited Morocco at least twice and became quite impressed by the "cubist" vernacular expression of its villages and their integration with the regional landscape. See also: Salvat, J. 1980. "Luis Barragán." *Archetype* 21:20.
5. Max Cetto, German-born architect, became a student of Hans Poelzig and later of Walter Gropius, whom he met at CIAM. Cetto left Germany before WW II, first to the USA and then to Mexico City, where he worked for José Villagran Garcia and later with Luis Barragán at El Pedregal. See: Gomez, L.; and Quevedo, M. A., "Interview with Max Cetto," *Testimonios Vivos,* Vol. 15–16, Instituto de Bellas Artes, Mexico, May, 1981, p. 115.
6. The Urban Design layout of El Pedregal was executed in collaboration with the architect Carlos Contreras. See: Luis Barragán; *Gardens for the Environment* Address before the California Council of Architects 1951, *AIA Journal* 17 (1952): 168. Carlos Contreras was educated at Columbia University and was on the faculty from 1918–25. Among his many accomplishments, he became Vice-President of the National Planning Commission of Mexico, and author of the 1927 Master Plan for the Federal Capital.
7. Mario Pani graduated from the Beaux Arts School in 1935; thereafter, he became a close follower of Le Corbusier. On his return to Mexico City he became associated with important projects via his uncle, Alberto Pani, former treasury secretary. His close association with Jesús Mina, director of public housing for Mexico City, provided him with numerous urban projects.
8. According to Frampton "the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism is to mediate the impacts of universal civilization with elements derived 'indirectly' from the pecularities of a particular place . . . It may find its governing inspiration in such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a 'tectonic' derived from a particular structural mode, or in the topography of a given site." *CENTER,* Vol. 3, 1987, 20–27.
9. Luis Barragán was a consultant to Louis Kahn during the design of the central court, and at the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California. The quote is from Figueroa 1989, p. 106.
10. Norberg-Schulz, Christian, *Genius Loci, Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture,* New York: Rizzoli, 1979, and his subsequent work *Architecture: Meaning and Place,* New York: Electra/Rizzoli, 1988.

This content downloaded from 2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

References

Ambasz, E. 1976. *The Architecture of Luis Barragán.* New York: Museum of Modern Art.

Arias, E., and J. Diaz. 1980. *La Estetica, El Bien Común, La Casa en la Teoria y Hobra de Ignacio Diaz Morales.* Guadalajara: Escuela de Arquitectura.

Barragán, L. 1952. "Gardens for the Environment." *Journal of the American Institute of Architects* 17:169.

———. 1980. Pritzker Prize Acceptance Address. Washington.

Bayon, D. 1976. "An Interview with Luis Barragán." *Landscape Architecture* 66(6):530–533.

Figueroa, A. 1989. *El Arte de Ver con Inocencia: Platicas con Luis Barragán.* Cuadernos Temporales #13. Mexico: Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana.

Frampton, K. 1987. "Ten Points of an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic." *CENTER* 3:20–27.

Gomez, L., and M. A. Quevedo. 1981. "Interview with Max Cetto." *Testimonios Vivos: 20 Arquitectos* Vols. 15–16. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes.

Gortázar, F. G. 1991. *Ignacio Diaz Morales habla de Luis Barragán.* Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara.

Harvey, D. 1989. *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. 1975. *Poetry, Language, Thought.* Translated by Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper Colophon Books.

Lobo, G. 1992. "Luis Barragán." *Miramar* 43.

Norberg-Schulz, Christian 1979. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture.* New York: Rizzoli.

———. *Architecture: Meaning and Place.* 1988. New York: Electra/Rizzoli.

Salvat, J. 1980. "Luis Barragán." *Archetype* 21:20.

Schjetnan, M. 1982. "Interview with Luis Barragán." *Entorno* 1:9–12.

This content downloaded from
2.35.100.216 on Fri, 01 Oct 2021 00:23:43 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms