



Three places: The architecture of Barragan

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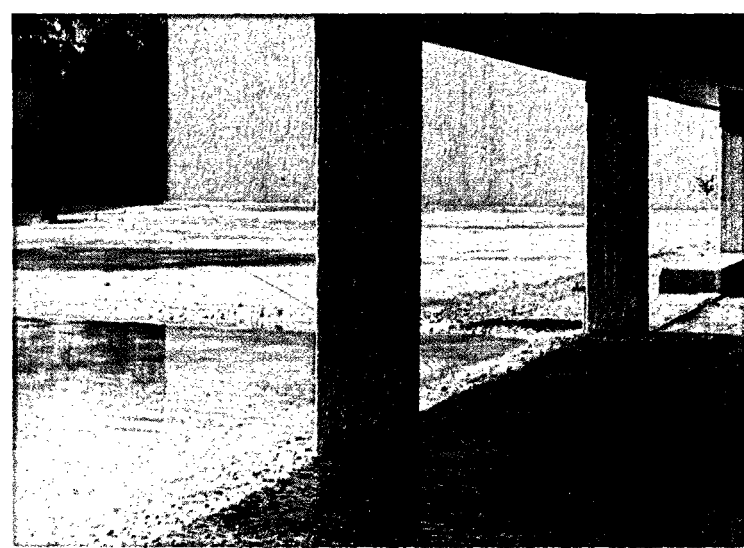
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THREE PLACES:
THE ARCHITECTURE OF

BARRR



Coming in one sees the incomparable volcanoes, then the sprawl, the endless reaching of the streets, veining out from the center and into the hills beyond the valley where the noble Aztecs built their city. Aztlán, from which *Azteca* is derived, means “white land,” and into this brightness Luis Barragán has placed the richest architecture of modern Mexico.

Stone-solid, the Barragán structures still carry themselves with an air of the insubstantial, the evanescent—an effect only brilliant color on plaster or paper could evoke before the Mexican sun. Octavio Paz, word-architect of the same country, describes better than anyone the light and landscape Barragán holds.

*Light is laying waste the heavens
Droves of dominions in stampede
The eye retreats surrounded by mirrors*

*Landscapes enormous as insomnia
Stony ground of bone*

*Limitless autumn
Thirst lifts its invisible fountains
One last peppertree preaches in the desert*

*Close your eye and hear the song of the light:
Noon takes shelter in your inner ear*

*Close your eyes and open them:
There is nobody not even yourself
Whatever is not stone is light*

Octavio Paz, “Piedra Nativa”

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Barragán's spaces are splendidly private, consistent with the ancient and protective course of Mexican compound architecture. The high—higher!—walls that enclose his places increase the sky and intensify its blue. The walls direct us upward, inevitably, to the superior, the Divine, which in Mexico is as sure and above as the sun.

The concentration that results from a walled Barragán terrace or patio or fountain "personalizes" the space while comforting us *precisely* by its delimitation. When one is there, the space becomes one's own. This architecture, he says, is "emotional." It inclines to the beautiful. We know it flatters our streets. But it is not color nor special space alone that manifest the Barragán genius. His is, too, a Ruskinian genius of shadows.

After size and weight, the Power of architecture may be said to depend on the quantity (whether measured in space or intensesness) of its shadow; and it seems to me, that the reality of it works, and the use and influence they have in the daily life of men . . . require of it that it should express a kind of human sympathy, by a measure of darkness as great as there is in human life . . . and I do not believe that ever any building was truly great, unless it had mighty masses, vigorous and deep, of shadow mingled with its surface. And among the first habits that a young architect should learn, is that of thinking in shadow; but conceiving it as it will be when the dawn lights it, and the dusk leaves it; when its stones will be hot and its crannies cool; when the lizard will bask on the one, and the birds build in the other.

John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*

The lizards bask, the birds build, in all the works of Luis Barragán.

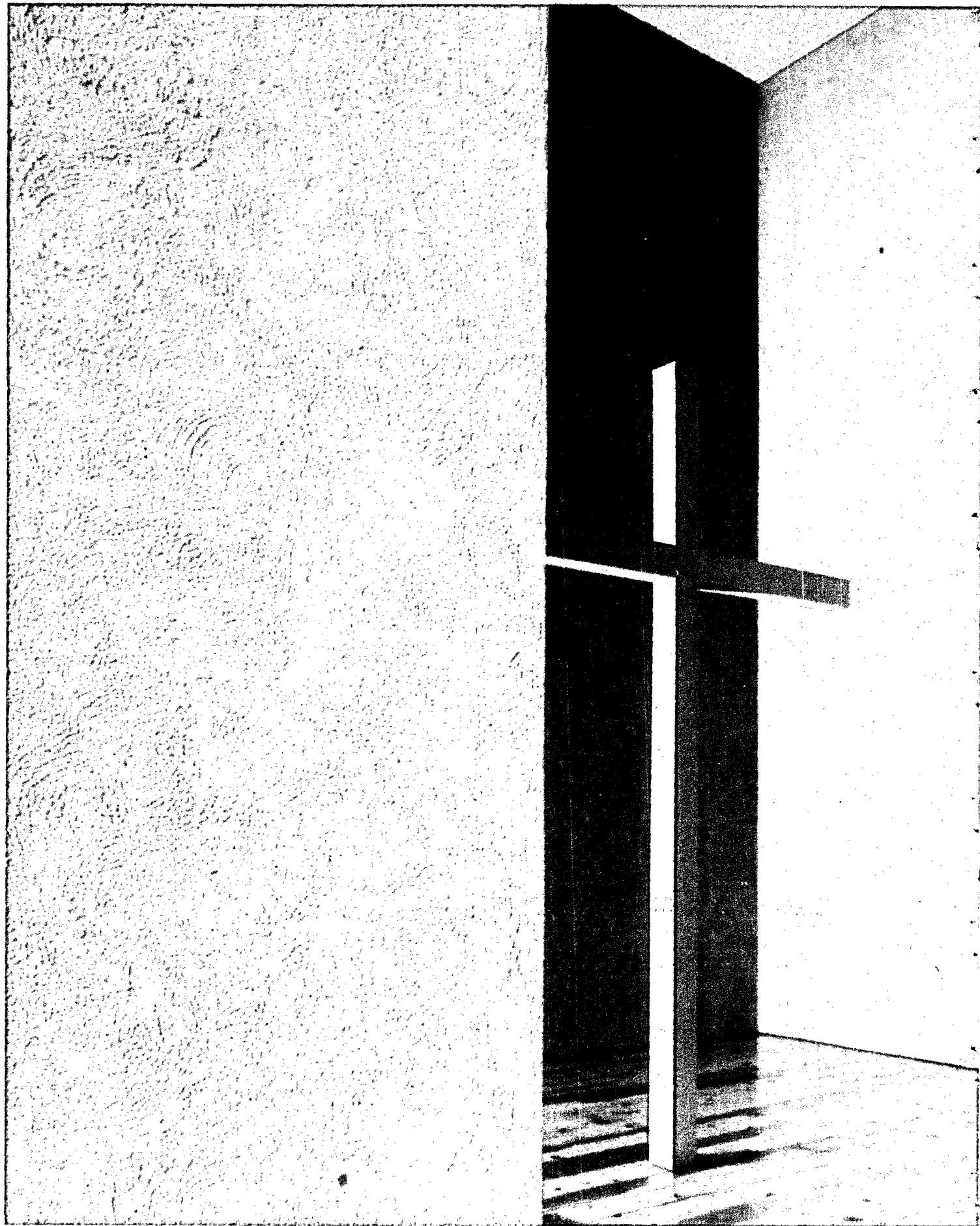
The street of Barragán's own house, in an old section of Mexico City, gives off a thoroughfare and is a quiet diverticulum. The house does not at first attract our attention. It defers to its neighbors. We might have passed it by for the eye-catch across the way—a yellow-gated modernist confection—had we not, on approach from the corner, looked up, above the ground floor, where an orange wall and another in yellow top the street in greeting and signify the architect's residence.

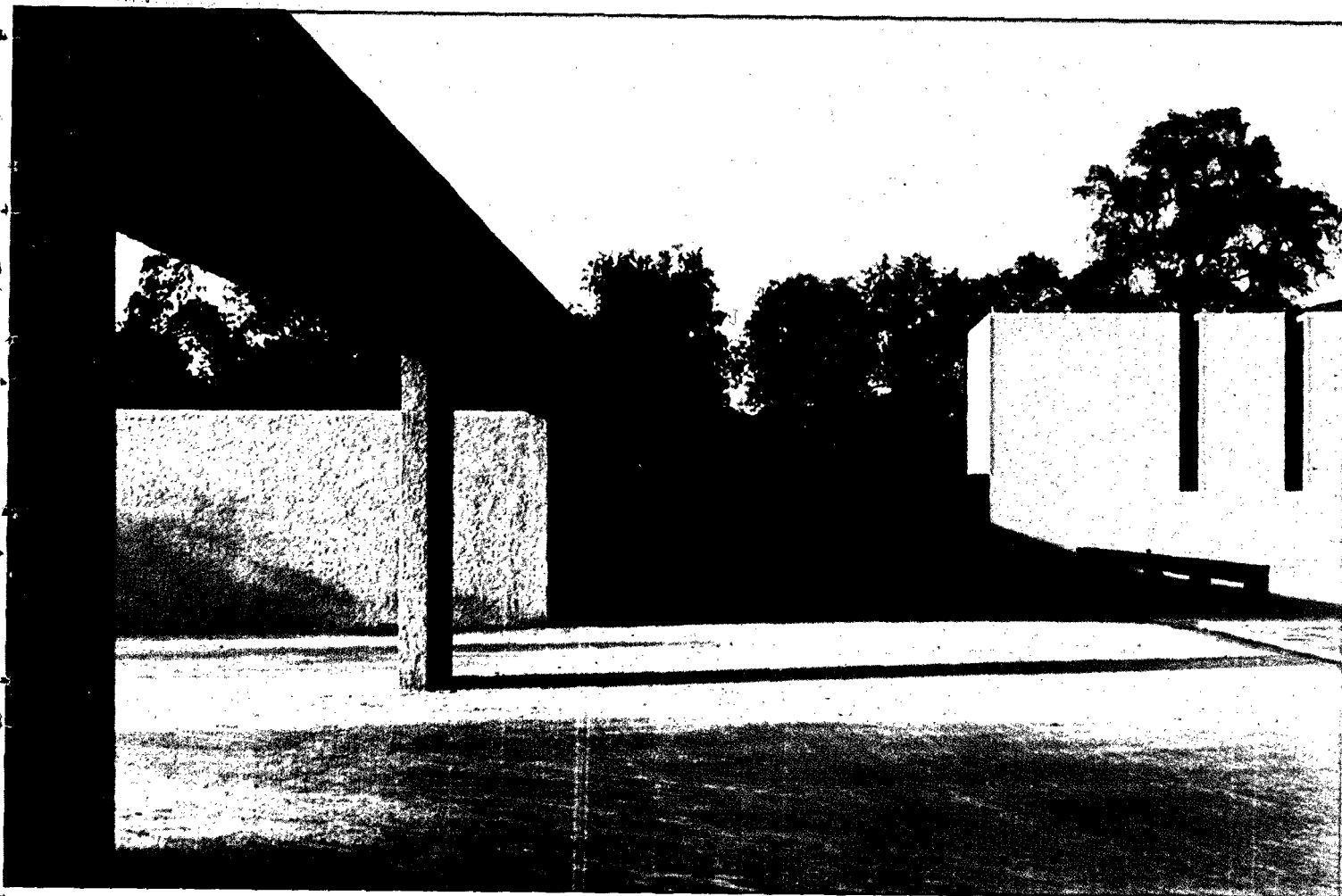
This property, built in 1946–47, is the second home of the architect on the same street. The earlier one still stands, acquired just after his move from Guadalajara, his native city, where he had built and restored houses from 1927 to 1936.

The residence is famous, principally, for three elements. The first are the extraordinary terraces or patios. The second is a living-dining room of double-height, and the third is the cantilevered staircase in the library.

The terraces affirm a Franciscan austerity that is fundamental to Luis Barragán's architecture. While the walls have been changed occasionally, either in height or in colors, the effect—gathered from older photographs, more recent ones, and a 1985 visit—is the same: These are the purest spaces of the land, the man, and the sky of Mexico.

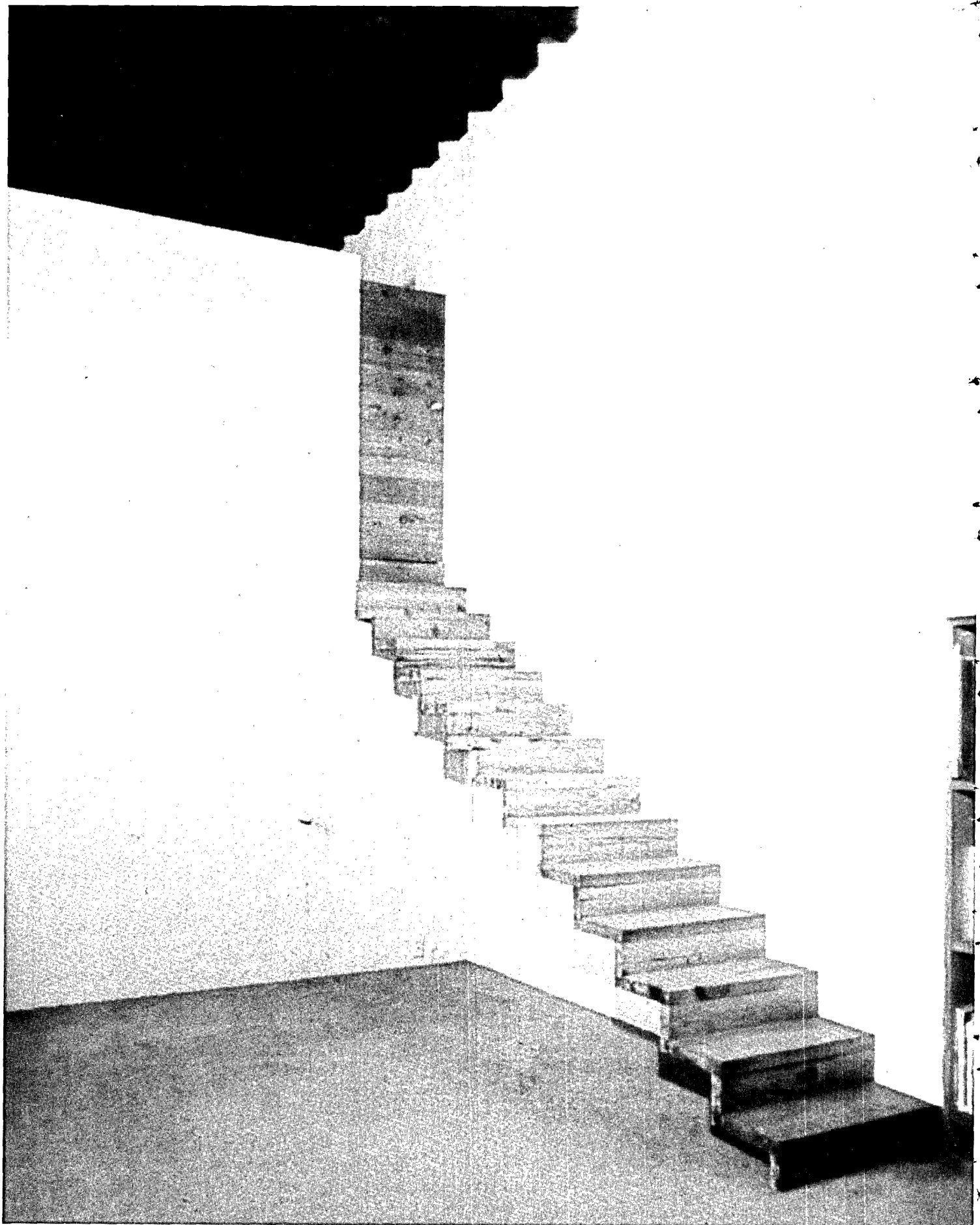
The living-dining room features a great height crossed at the ceiling by stout beams in wood of natural color. A large, square window gives onto a garden. The

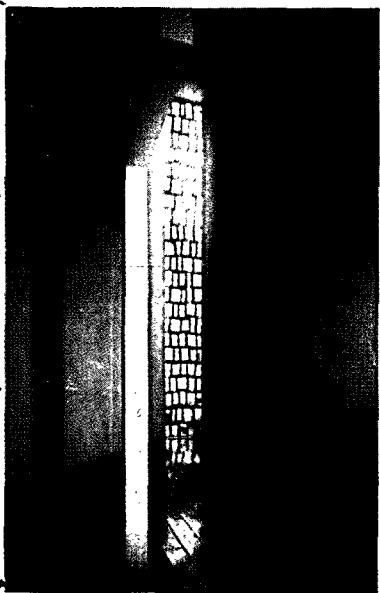




Above: San Cristóbal

*Left: The Sacramental Chapel of
the Capuchines*





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Far left: Barragán Residence

Left: The Sacramental Chapel of the Capuchines

Photographs courtesy of the Museo de Tamayo, Mexico.

elegant cruciform which fixes the deep-set window acts as the architect's personal and reverential frame for nature. Barragán prefers but little furniture for his room. He is predisposed to local and simple woods in their natural colors for tables, chairs, shelves, and cabinets. The highly polished floors in his home are of pine.

In *The Architecture of Luis Barragán*, the brilliant tribute that presaged the Mexican master's international reputation, Emilio Ambasz writes: "A very graceful stairway of cantilevered pine boards leads to a door that is always closed, and although the stair is very sturdy, its visual delicacy is such that to ascend it would seem possible only if gradual weightlessness was achieved." He continues by asserting the origins of the stair to be a drawing in the early seventeenth-century book *Perspective*, by Jan Vredeman de Vries.

This celebrated and much-photographed stairway climaxes in a door also of knotty pine. The door, without frame, is short of the beamed ceiling. It is the emotional "center" of the house, a beckoning vertical plane. Beyond the door are two rooms. The first is an antechamber for the bedroom behind. Both are beautifully proportioned and have windows with four-part interior shutters.

Luis Barragán frequently places in his houses a gold-leaf wooden panel. The first of these hangs in the entrance stairwell of his home. The panel anchors light and serves perhaps as a sentimental echo of the spectacular golden reredos at the altar of every great seventeenth- or eighteenth-century church in Mexico.

The Sacramental Chapel of the Capuchines at Tlalpán, an eighteenth-century district of Mexico City, is considered, rightly, to be a Barragán masterwork. Dedicated in July 1959, after seven years of study, design, and construction, the chapel and facilities for an order of strictly cloistered nuns allowed the architect most fully to

express a personal devotion. It is a structure of successive spaces suffused with light. The light falling into the chapel, the choir, and the transeptal oratory, across the court, and onto the altar becomes, itself, an expressed devotion. It palpably and richly prepares the devout for their duty. Light—coming from unseen sources—fountains onto a freestanding thirty-foot cross of strongest pink. It rests on a golden triptych at the altar, nestles in the yellow lattice of the oratory, and reaches the purple confessional. It is illimitable and extravagant. Like a Shakespearean sonnet, with few and simple devices the artist achieves perfection.

San Cristóbal, the stables at Los Clubes of the Folke Egerstrom family, is the setting for Luis Barragán's most complex domestic architecture. The architect is a distinguished equestrian, and he brought to bear on this design an intimate knowledge of his subject, a knowledge that is revealed in all aspects of the finished work. Maintained in perfect order for nearly twenty years, San Cristóbal grandly affirms the architect's control of large space, horizontal and vertical planes, color, and scale.

The ground enclosed by fountain trough, wall, gate, hay barn, and stables is sand. Long black hitching posts parallel the longer pink wall, opened by two "windows" of equal size. The wall stands thirty hands high and becomes an "opera" set before which the horses parade. There is a cooling pool for the animals, and dark trees stand guard on the hills outside among glimpsed alfalfa fields. San Cristóbal is assured, serene in color and shadow. It is the Barragán architectural equivalence of Venice.

In the afternoon emptiness of a silent Mexico the Barragán buildings are the sentinels of an aesthetic felt around the world. The sacred cross, the erotic horse, and this man stand in the sun "with dust and light living in time..."