

LUIS BARRAGÁN AND THE INVENTION OF MEXICAN REGIONALISM

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Abstract

The work of Luis Barragán (1902-1988) embodies Mexican identity, and the architect is considered one of the most important figures of the Critical Regionalism movement in Latin America. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of his own private library—kept at the Barragan Foundation, Switzerland and Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán, Mexico—tells a different story. In fact, the contemporary critical reception of his work has a far more complex genesis, which might be summarised as follows:

1. Barragán, nemo propheta in patria. For many years, Barragán's work was better known abroad than in his own country. The national recognition came in 1976, with the Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes, after an exhibition at the MoMA in New York. At that time, Barragán was a 74-year old architect that had realized some of his most famous projects, such as the Casa Barragán, Tlalpan Chapel, Cuadra San Cristóbal, and Casa Gilardi.

2. Barragán, forger of an independent path. The urban project for Jardines del Pedregal was the turning point of Barragán's career, and from the mid-1940s the architect distanced himself from the research path of his colleagues. His detachment from the academic, political, and theoretical infrastructure allowed him to develop an autonomous language.

3. Barragán, a "visual" architect. Barragan defined his work as "autobiographical" and inspired by the colonial villages of his childhood. This is partially true; alongside Mexican architecture, the architect was deeply fond of the timeless aura of vernacular architecture in general. He was thus an enthusiastic reader of Bernard Rudofsky, as well as an omnivorous buyer of books from a wide spectrum of artists like Albres, De Chirico, Matisse, and Delvaux. His own library was a constant source of visual references for the projects.

Ultimately, what is today considered the maximum expression of Mexican architecture is in fact the invention of a solitary outsider.

Keywords: Luis Barragán, Mexican architecture, critical reception, Critical Regionalism, Mexican Regionalism.

Luis Barragán (1902-1988) is known today as the most influential Mexican architect of the twentieth century. He is also accredited as one of the greatest exponents of Critical Regionalism in Latin America. This has not always been the case: the comprehensive analysis of the archives – housed at the Barragan Foundation, Switzerland – tells a different story. In fact, the contemporary critical reception of his work has far more complex origins. The article is divided into three sections. The first focuses on the development of his critical success, the second Barragán's biography and the last looks at his personal library - kept at the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán, Mexico.

1.Barragán nemo propheta in patria: no prophet is honoured in his country

For years his work was appreciated abroad and it was only later that his homeland recognized its importance. It therefore comes as no surprise that the first architectural magazine that ever published his buildings was the American *The Architectural Record*, in 1931. The display copies that were collected by Barragán throughout his career are now conserved in the Barragan Foundation archive. The collection goes back to the late nineteen twenty and includes almost 250 publications that were produced between 1927 and 1985, the year of the Rufino Tamayo's retrospective.¹ This collection helps illustrate the development of the Mexican designer's critical reception. The table below offers a systematic overview of the above-mentioned journals and magazines, indicating both origin and type (fig.1).

¹ In 1983 Barragán withdraws from the architectural firm Barragán + Ferrera Asociados that was founded in 1979. Architect Raúl Ferrera was the only socio Barragán ever had. Ferrera took over the office and was one of the curator of the Rufino Tamayo's retrospective. The 1985 exhibition's layout showed the passage between Barragán and Raúl Ferrera leadirship.

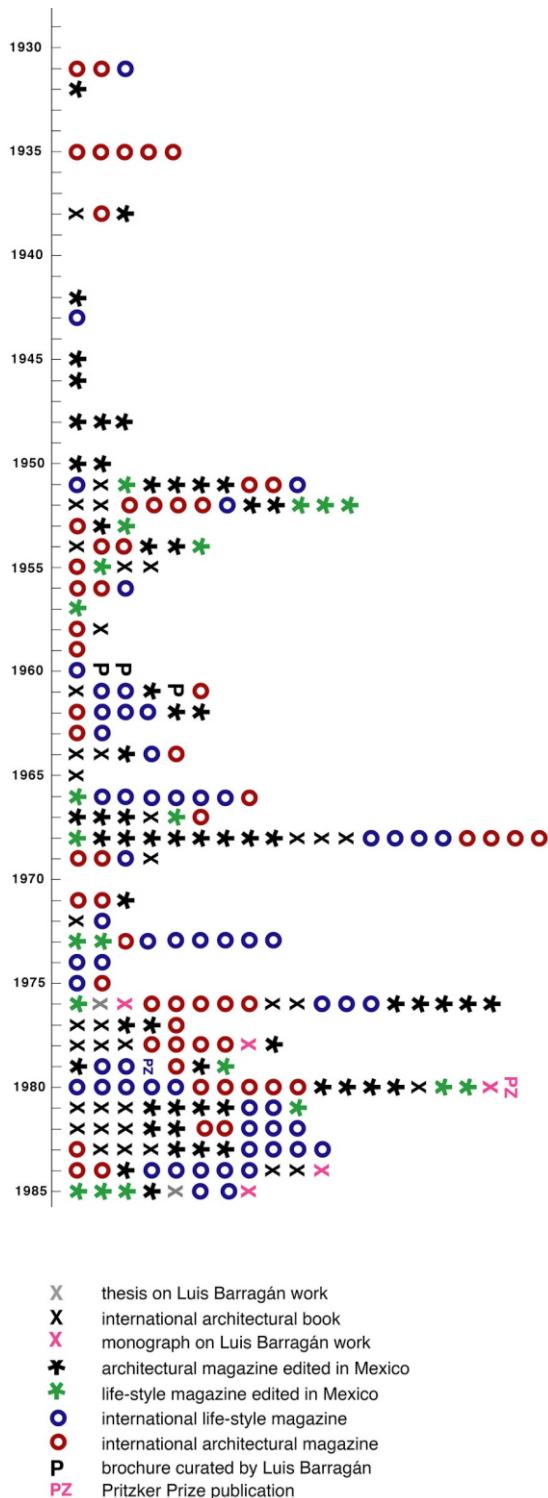


Figure 1. The Infographics represents the display copies collected by Luis Barragán between 1927 to 1985 and today kept at Barragan Foundation archive, Switzerland. The table was produced by the author.

The table allows us to make the following observations.

Firstly, the unequal relationship between the Mexican publications and those published abroad.² Secondly, large amounts of the lifestyle magazines compared to those specialising in architecture.³ Thirdly, it shows which projects were published the most frequently. Fourthly and lastly, the peaks in the graph show a direct proportional relationship between the number of publications and internationally renowned events. Several examples will make this clearer.

1952, Barragán completed the residential urbanisation of *Jardines del Pedregal de San Ángel*. In the same year, just a few kilometres away, Ciudad Universitaria had recently hosted the VIII Congreso Panamericano de Arquitectos.⁴ Professionals and experts from throughout the world met in Mexico City. Both *Jardines del Pedregal de San Ángel* and Barragán's private house in Calle. Gen. Francisco Ramírez 14 (1947–1948) began to circulate in international journals.

1967 – 1968, the Mexican capital hosted the Games of the XIX Olympiad. The international press followed the event with great interest, with extensive reportages. Designed in collaboration with the artist Mathias Goeritz, the *Torres de Ciudad Satélite* (1957) became one of the symbols of Mexico '68. Their iconic silhouette appeared in fashion and lifestyle magazines and in brochures published by the organising committee chaired by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, and of which Goeritz was a member.

1974, Barragán is nominated honorary fellow of the American Institute of Architects / AIA. Two years later, on 4th June 1976 the MoMA inaugurated an exhibition dedicated to Barragán work. This was the only time ever, that the New York institution dedicated a monographic exhibition to just one Mexican architect. The catalogue was edited by the young Emilio Ambasz, who adopted a

² In fact, the international audience interpreted the work of Barragán's as ""Mexican" and embrace it as a consumer product, but then denying its nationalist content" (O'Rourke p.327).

³ As a matter of fact, Barragán well knew the self-serving nature of photography which on the one hand popularized his work, on other hand increased his myth.

⁴ In 1952 Barragán withdrew from *Jardines del Pedregal de San Ángel* project and took a sabbatical. He traveled to Stockholm with Justino Fernández in order to attend the International Congress of Landscape Architecture, 10-13 July (Mela, 2014, p. 104). In the following months, he traveled all through Europe up to Morocco. He visited: Spain, Italy, Portugal, France, Norway, England, Holland, Belgium, Greece, and Austria. (Pauly, 2002, p. 49)

critical-interpretative approach that is still commonly used. In November the same year, Barragán was awarded the *Premio Nacional de Ciencias y Artes* in Mexico.

In 1980 Luis Barragán was the second designer ever to be awarded the Pritzker Prize. Although the news did not receive much attention and the Mexican press overlooked it, it was seen by the diplomat and future Nobel winner for Literature, Octavio Paz, who criticised harshly Mexico's indifference in the magazine *Vuelta*, which he had founded.

In 1985 the Rufino Tamayo museum dedicated a retrospective exhibition to him. This was the first and last time that Barragán's work was displayed in Mexico City before his death.

The analysis of these publications shows that the renown Barragán achieved in his own country came after he had been recognised abroad, in the United States in particular. In order to understand this undisputable fact, his unique figure must be contextualised within the panorama of Mexican architecture.

2. Barragán, forger of an independent path

He was born in 1902 in the province of Jalisco to a conservative family of landowners. He spent his childhood on the family ranch near the colonial pueblo of Mazamitla. In 1923, after graduating in Civil Engineering in Guadalajara he went on to study architecture but the unexpected closure of the faculty left him without a degree. His provincial education was expanded significantly by two educational trips to Europe, the first from 1924 to 1925, and the second from 1931 to 1932.⁵ Between the two trips he opened his own professional firm in Guadalajara. In fact, from the very beginning of his career he pursued an economic and linguistic autonomy that was only possible working free-lance.

⁵ In both cases he went to New York, and then on to Europe, where he spent a considerable amount of time in Paris. During the stay in New York that preceded his second trip he met José Clemente Orozco, Frederick Kiesler e Alfred Lawrence Kocher, director of *The Architectural Record*. On the same trip he met the landscape architect and illustrator Ferdinand Bach and Le Corbusier. It was the latter that influenced Barragán's entire production.

Nevertheless, he did not turn down the occasional collaboration, for example with his engineer brother Juan, with whom he designed *Parque de la Revolución* (1934-1935). After having designed several Mediterranean-style houses that were inspired by the work of Ferdinand Bach, he moved to Mexico City. Between 1936 and 1943 he completed approximately 20 functionalist houses and apartment blocks. The building boom in the capital helped spread the modern movement in Mexico, so much so that his architecture in that period is very similar to that of colleagues of his such as Augusto Alvarez, Juan Sordo Madaleno, Mario Pani, Juan O'Gorman, José Villagrán García, Juan Legarreta. Nevertheless, the young engineer was frustrated by the compromises he had to make in works he was commissioned with and for a while he retired from the profession and devoted himself to landscape design instead. In just a few years he had built his own house and garden in Calle Ramirez 20. At the same time he created the three gardens along Avenida San Jeronimo near the rocky wilderness area called El Pedregal. 1945 was a turning point. With a business partner, he purchased 400 hectares in the desert and transformed it into the residential subdivision *Jardines del Pedregal de San Ángel* (1945-1952). This was the point of no return. The harsh nature of the volcanic terrain led him to experiment with a new language that was able to embody the natural surroundings.

While he was busy designing and constructing gardens, squares and display houses, most of his colleagues were working on the monumental campus of Ciudad Universitaria, which was characterised by the national style called *Integración Plástica*. This was the first in a long series of public commissions and competitions in which Barragán did not take part. Whilst architects were designing vast housing complexes and outlining urban plans, Mario Pani in particular, Luis Barragán was working as a designer and entrepreneur, building private homes and residential subdivisions. His shrewd choice of clients combined with financial independence allowed him to experiment and consolidate the architectural language that had become his trademark at the beginning of the nineteen fifties.

Although he cultivated friendships with Mexican and foreign architects, he confided in Ambasz that he felt he was a stranger. "*It is a lonely road but, as he confesses, it is only among architects that he feels himself to be the stranger. Not for any anti-intellectual bias, but because he believes their education has estranged them from their own emotional and intuitive capacities*" (Ambasz, 1976: p.107-108). Barragán was endowed with both a keen aesthetic sensitivity and a pragmatic, rational mind. His multiple identities as a designer and entrepreneur made him a professional and, as such, he never saw himself as an architectural expert. In fact, he never became a professor. Despite being a member of the editorial board of magazines *Espacios* and *Arquitectura México*, he shirked the activities of assayer or writer and consequently, it was only on very rare occasions that he participated in conferences. Barragán did not forge his own theoretical infrastructure and it is this lacuna that makes his production indecipherable, so that still today it has eluded any form of classification. Rudimental analytical tools are to be gleaned from the rare interviews he gave, his acceptance speech for the Pritzker Prize and last but not least the MoMA catalogue.

3. Barragán, a “visual” architect

Despite his anti-theoretical approach, Barragán was a very learned figure and his closest friends included Mexican intellectuals such as Edmundo O’Gorman, Miguel Covarrubias and Justino Fernández. His vast personal library, today housed in the FATLB, is testimony to his extensive culture and offers a stratified portrait of its owner from when he was young until adulthood. The books he collected throughout his life offer a multifaceted picture of his interests. The heterogeneous nature of the collection reflects the image of a self-taught man, whose omnivorous curiosity was satisfied with fiction, catalogues, art books, and anthropological and architectural texts. With over two thousand items, the vastness of his library has been analysed in depth over the last few years.⁶ Studies classified the books into thematic groups. Whilst extremely useful, this

⁶ Two books have thoroughly investigated Barragá's library and personal notes. They are: *Voz de tinta dormida* and *En busca de Luis Barragán* by Alfonso Alafaro and María Emilia Orendáin respectively.

classification does not allow one to understand the library's stratigraphy, in other words, how it developed over the years. An analysis of this kind would make it possible to understand which books influenced Barragán at a specific moment in time.

I personally used this method to contextualise the masterplan of the city Lomas Verdes (1964-1967), which was the subject of my PhD dissertation. The library proved to be a precious resource in helping establish the repertoire of critical and visual references that shaped the project. Designed in collaboration with the architect Juan Sordo Madaleno, Lomas Verdes is the masterplan for a New Town with 100,000 inhabitants that was meant to be constructed on the hills near Mexico City. The project was partially realized. A multitude of visual references converge in the Lomas Verdes project, some of which can still be traced today in notes and bookmarks in Barragán's library. Following are some examples.

The towers. Like a mediaeval Italian city, the profile of Lomas Verdes was characterised by towers that were twenty floors high, with a cruciform plan. Their volume evokes the apartment towers in Vällingby, a Swedish New Town that Barragán and Sordo visited on a study trip in 1964.⁷ In 1958 the journal *Urbanistica* included Vällingby in the article called *Le città satelliti di Stoccolma*, some of the pages of which are conserved today in FATLB in the form of travel report.

The city centre: Ziggurat. Lomas Verdes had a civic centre or heart. The latter was characterised by buildings of monumental dimensions included the building nicknamed Ziggurat. This was an architectural complex that, comprising an ascending sequence of squares, led to the church at the top. According to the archive documents in the BF, the name Ziggurat is an explicit reference to the towers in ancient Iranian civilisations. The FATLB library houses the book "Sumer", and one of the numerous bookmarks identifies the unmistakeable visual reference as the Chogha Zanbil complex (Parrot, 1960, p.87). The panel

⁷ In year 1964 Barragán and Sordo travelled to Europe in order to visit the most recent urban residential developments and collect references for the master plan they were commissioned to do for Lomas Verdes. The tour included visits to five countries: Italy, France, England, Sweden, and Denmark. They visited the new towns of Vällingby, Farsta, and the newly built neighborhoods of Brøndbyparken and Nygårdsparken, Copenaghen.

depicting the general overview of Ziggurat is made with the collage technique. The lapis lazuli blue of the sky is contrasted by the red and carmine colour of the building. Both the chromatic combination and the geometrical composition of the panel evoke paintings by the artist Josef Albers, in particular one of the works dating 1967, entitled *Variation of the theme*, inspired by Mexican ruins. The painting can be found in the book *Josef Albers: son oeuvre et sa contribution à la figuration visuelle au XXe siècle* (Gomringen, 1972, p.118), which is now conserved in the FATLB.

The city centre: Edificio Símbolo. Whilst Albers' influence can be seen in Ziggurat, in Edificio Símbolo (1965-1967) -literally Symbolic Building- and its relative square one can infer echoes of Giorgio de Chirico's metaphysical painting. The office complex presents itself as two blade-like buildings juxtaposed with one another at a right angle. Their orange colour blends with the square grid of the paving. The square is surrounded by two symmetrical arcades, a wall and a colonnade. An expanse of water reflects the sky in the centre. As in the projects prior to *Plaza del Zocàlo* (1955) and *Plaza de Cigarró* (1956), once again Barragán was inspired by de Chirico's Ferrarese period. Firstly, he dilates the relationship between solids and voids so that the latter dominate. Secondly, he introduces both archetypal architecture and uses saturated colours. Doing so he achieves his objective: the architecture is suspended in both time and space.

The Lomas Verdes project was influenced decisively by both art and vernacular architecture. The heart of the city is surrounded by residential suburban districts that are divided into neighbourhoods. The architects designed a variety of residential typologies including terraced houses called "*Cuenca*". This name indicated the terraced house that, sheltered by the ravines, protrudes from the rocky wall like the same-named houses in the Spanish city. One of Barragán's few sketches seems to combine two distinct references: the city of Cuenca with the kasbahs of Atlante that he visited on his tour in 1952-1953. The numerous books he collected before and during the trip, the most important of which was "*Cimes et Vallées du Grand Atlas*", were an addition to what was already an extensive library devoted to colonial and traditional

Mexican, mediaeval Italian, Franciscan, Mediterranean, Greek and Andalusian architecture⁸.

Generally speaking, the large quantity of books on anonymous constructions is firstly documentation of Barragán's critical orientation as regards modern architecture. Secondly, it asserts the coherence of research directed at creating architecture that, whilst not regional as such, was able to incorporate the identity of the place. The line of study that Barragán followed with such steadfastness is parallel to that of Bernard Rudofsky who inaugurated the exhibition *Architecture without Architects* at the MoMA in November 1964, thus legitimising the role of minor, anonymous architecture in the global debate. We do not know if Barragán ever visited the exhibition but we do know he had the catalogue as well as *Streets for People*, and *The Prodigious Builders* books written by the same author⁹.

The variety of references that converge in the Lomas Verdes project are not only testimony to Barragán's ability to draw on, without prejudice, heterogeneous figurative and plastic repertoires and to metabolise and combine them into a new form that is also ancient. The final product has two registers. Being autobiographical in nature, the first is personal whilst the second is universal as it expresses a language that goes beyond geographical, cultural and temporal limits.

For better or worse, factors such as the elementary nature of his architecture and his unmistakable chromatic timber, the large blank stucco walls, the use of locals material all helped turn Barragán's work in the quintessential of the "Mexican aesthetics". Ultimately, what is today considered the maximum expression of Mexican modern architecture is in fact the invention of a solitary outsider "*who was detached from the ideological sides and the superstition of committed art*" (Paz, 1980, p.48).

⁸ For in-depth information I suggest the essay by Fernando Curiel Gámez: *Arquitecturas sin arquitectos: la mirada de Luis Barragán por las arquitecturas del Norte de África y Medio Oriente*.

⁹ Based on Adriana Williams' memory, in the early nineteen sixties Barragán was invited to give a lecture at Yale University. He accepted on one condition: being invited with Bernard Rudowsky in order to discuss about the book *Architecture without Architects*. The conference never took place. (Williams, 2002)

His contemporaries were not considering him the greatest representative of the Mexican identity, at a round table hosted by the journal *Arquitectura México* in 1976 he recognised him as an international author as he had been profoundly influenced by masters of the twentieth century. (*Arquitectura México*, 1976, p. 9-11). In this respect, O'Rourke (2016, p.284) wrote:

in many ways *Barragán* is perfect for an international canon of modern architecture: like Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, and Frank Lloyd Wright, many of his important works were houses or religious buildings. His roof terraces, attention to materials, clear geometries, avoidance of ornaments, and asymmetrical facades made his architecture easy place in a narrative that even today often treats "modern architecture" and "international Style" as synonyms.

Whether one agrees with this definition or not, thirty years after his death it is still evident that he continues to elude any kind of classification. That he belongs to the current of critical regionalism is justified by the works created from 1947 to 1976 such as *Barragán House* (1947-1948), *Torres de Ciudad Satélite* (1957) *Tlalpan Chapel* (1954-1960), *Las Arboledas* (1957-1962), *Cuadra San Cristóbal* (1966-1968), and *Gilardi House* (1975-1976).

However, historical criticism tends to forget the works created after 1976. Gilardi house does not mark an end of his working life. This project is the turning point of a last season of Barragan's career. In fact, under-examined projects such as *Meyer House* (1970-1980), *Valdés House* (1981-1986) and *Faro del Comercio* (1982-1984) do actually make Barragán a forerunner of the postmodern in Mexico and in Latin America.

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