

Fond Memories of Place: Luis Barragan and Ricardo Legorreta

Wayne Attoe

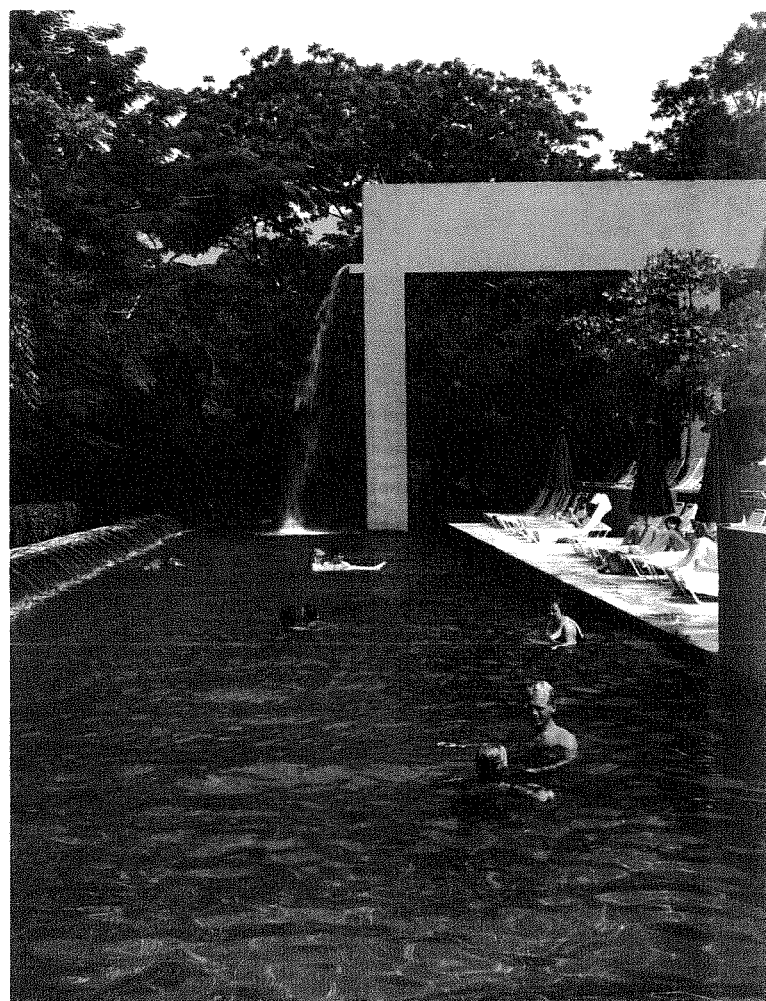
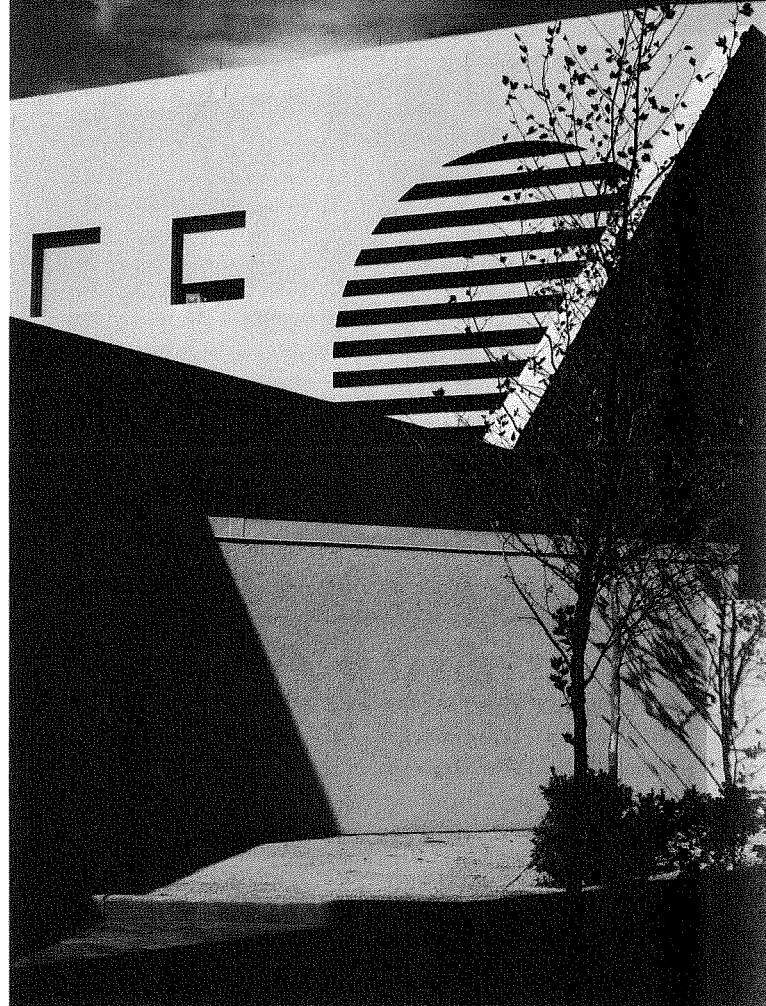
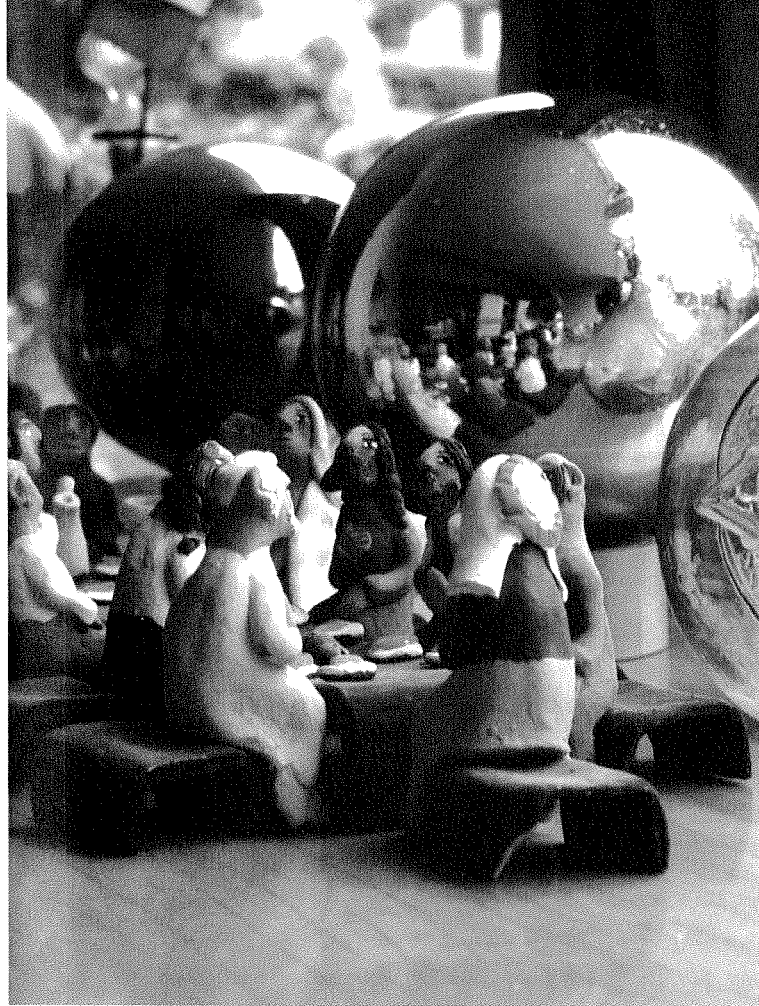
Nostalgia is the poetic awareness of our personal past, and since the artist's own past is the mainspring of his creative potential, the architect must listen and heed his nostalgic revelations. (Luis Barragan, 1980)

It is hard to imagine designing without engaging one's memories. No matter how powerful zeitgeists or the imperatives of timeless design principles might be, experiences registered in memory would seem inevitably to have a place in designing. But memories of what? And what sort of memories?

Contemporary Mexican architecture offers lessons about a way of designing that depends on memory as much as on design ideologies. Two of Mexico's leading designers of this century, Luis Barragan and Ricardo Legorreta¹, have drawn upon potent personal recollections in fashioning buildings and landscapes. While their design methods are complex, and as do other architects, they depend on both intuition and rationality, a striking feature of their discourse about designing is the role of memory as an impetus for and a measure of design quality. Memories provide inspiration and a standard for evaluation.

Needless to say, fond memories are not sufficient as a basis for design, and sentimentality has its dangers. I do not offer this interpretation as a foolproof or universal method for design, but as an insight into the work of these Mexican architects that could be of value to sensitive designers everywhere. Places are registered in memory, and the power of those memories in turn infuses designs with special qualities.

Top left: Folk art in Legorreta's office. Courtesy Lourdes Legorreta.
Top right: "Solana," Westlake/Southlake, Texas, Ricardo Legorreta, 1986. Courtesy Lourdes Legorreta.
Bottom left: House, Oaxaca. Courtesy Wayne Attoe.
Bottom right: Bathing area, Hotel Camino Real, Ixtapa. Ricardo Legorreta, 1981. Courtesy Lourdes Legorreta.



Barragan's and Legorreta's fond memories cluster around several themes: childhood memories of agrarian places, villages and village life, monastic buildings, Moorish design, walls, and particular individuals. These are the "what" of their memories. As to the sorts of memories they draw upon, it is not replicable elements, but qualities, and in particular qualities that evoke emotional responses.

Childhood Experiences of Ranchos and Haciendas

Barragan: *Underlying all that I have achieved — such as it is — are the memories of my father's ranch where I spent my childhood and adolescence. In my work I have always strived to adapt to the needs of modern living the magic of those remote nostalgic years.* (Barragan, 1980)

Legorreta: *When I was a child my family went to haciendas for lunch. Haciendas had been great agricultural complexes sometimes employing hundreds of people all living as a single economic and social unit, so the scale of the buildings and spaces among them was often grand. There were many rooms to hide in, especially at haciendas that were somewhat abandoned, which made them all the more intriguing for us kids. The spaces I remember most were particularly mysterious, large and somewhat empty, and suggestive of so much that had happened in them.* (Attoe, 1990)

Villages and Village Life, Expressions of Popular Culture

Barragan: *My earliest childhood memories are related to a ranch my family owned near the village of Mazamitla. It was a pueblo with hills, formed by houses with tile roofs and immense eaves to shield passersby from the heavy rains which fall in that area. Even the earth's color was interesting because it was red earth. In this village, the water distribution system consisted of great gutted logs, in the form of troughs, which ran on a support structure of tree forks, five meters high, over the roofs. This aqueduct crossed over the town, reaching the patios, where there were great stone fountains to receive the water. The patios housed the stables, with cows and chickens, all together. Outside, in the street, there were iron rings to tie the horses. The channeled logs, covered with moss, dripped water all over town, of course. It gave this village the ambience of a fairy tale.*

No, there are no photographs. I have only its memory. (Ambasz, 1976)

Barragan: *The lessons to be learned from the unassuming architecture of the village and provincial towns of my country have been a permanent source of inspiration. Such as, for instance, the white-washed walls; the peace to be found in patios and orchards; the colorful streets; the humble majesty of the village squares surrounded by shady open corridors.* (Barragan, 1980)



Street elevation,
Pátzcuaro, Michoacán.
Courtesy Wayne Attoe.

Barragan: *Likewise I can tell, especially to people that know Mexico, about the beauty of streets lined with walls and fountains, like Pátzcuaro, where one finds the attraction of the streets opening and leading into open spaces and plazas with trees and fountains that increase the beauty of the streets.* (Barragan, 1952)

Legerreta: *When I go to markets, when I see the things people weave, everywhere color seems to be the way people like it . . . On the way to my father's ranch in Texcoco I found a house with walls painted in opposite patterns. While I was photographing this intriguing sight, the owner appeared. I asked him, "Why did you paint it this way?" He was surprised by the question, for there was no special reason. He said, "I just enjoyed painting it like that."* (Attoe, 1990)

Legerreta: *I love folk art. It is naive, fresh, intelligent and deep. Ever since I was a child I have been attracted by it. I can see all aspects of life in folk art. I enjoy being surrounded by the figures. I don't like to collect them; rather, I buy them, live with them, and they disappear. Through folk art I continuously learn the freedom of color. There are no rules, just pure emotion and freedom. The results are fantastic.* (Attoe, 1990)

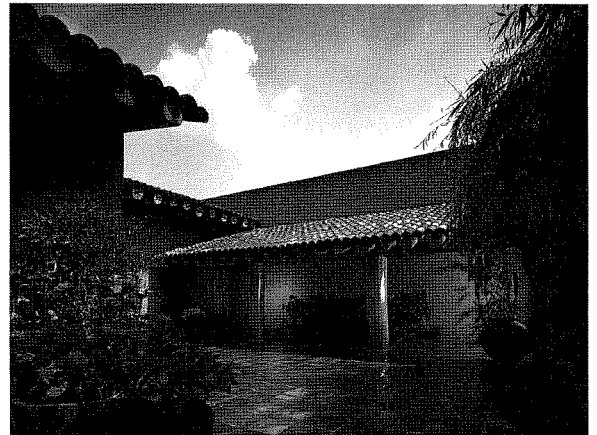
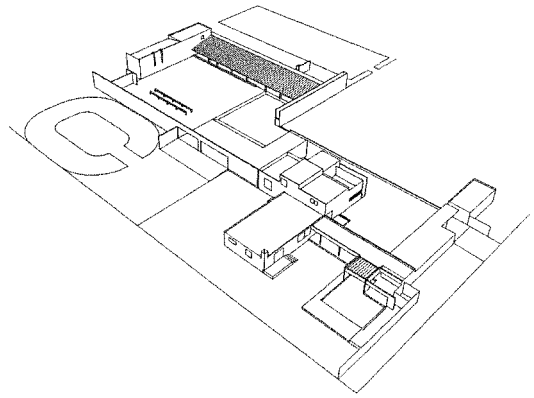
Monastic Cloisters, Patios and Courtyards

Barragan: *Being a Catholic, I have frequently visited with reverence the now empty monumental monastic buildings that we inherited from the powerful religious faith and architectural genius of our colonial ancestors, and I have always been deeply moved by the peace and well-being to be experienced in those uninhabited cloisters and solitary courts. How I have wished that these feelings may leave their mark on my work.* (Barragan, 1980)

Legerreta: *Courts, which figure so importantly in Pre-Hispanic architecture, are one part of our rich heritage of places bounded simply. Moorish gardens, another heritage, are lush enclaves hidden away, the source for the Mexican courtyard which is a refuge. Most intense, both spatially and in its place at the heart of buildings, is the patio.* (Attoe, 1990)

Moorish Design

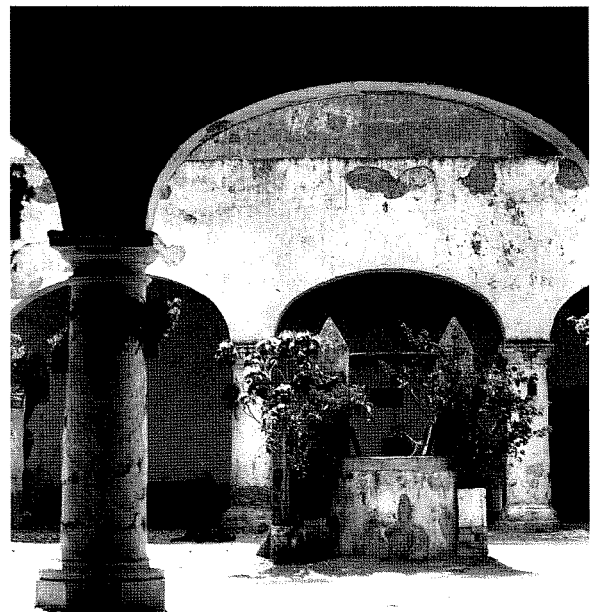
Barragan: *To the south of Mexico City lies a vast extension of volcanic rock, and, overwhelmed by the beauty of this landscape, I decided to create a series of gardens to humanize, without destroying, its magic. While walking along the lava crevices, under the shadow of imposing ramparts of live rock, I suddenly discovered, to my astonishment, small secret green valleys — the shepherds called them "jewels" — surrounded and enclosed by the most fantastic, capricious rock formations wrought on soft, melted rock by the onslaught of powerful prehistoric winds. 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*



Top: San Cristobal (Egerstrom complex), Los Clubes, Mexico, D.F. Luis Barragan, 1967-68. Courtesy Gordon Cameron.

Center: Molina House, Mexico City. Ricardo Legerreta, 1973. Courtesy Julius Shulman.

Bottom: Patio, Courtesy Ayres and Ayres Archive, Architectural Documents Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.





Pool, Casa de Rancho, Calif. Ricardo Legorreta, 1987. Courtesy Lourdes Legorreta.

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. (Barragan, 1980)

Barragan: *In the case of Morocco, I was greatly impressed by the Casbah. Its plain walls speak of a very agreeable interior life. It is very interesting to notice the integration of this kind of architecture with the landscape. It is difficult to define where the Casbah ends and the landscape begins because there is such an effective fusion.* (Salvat, 1980)

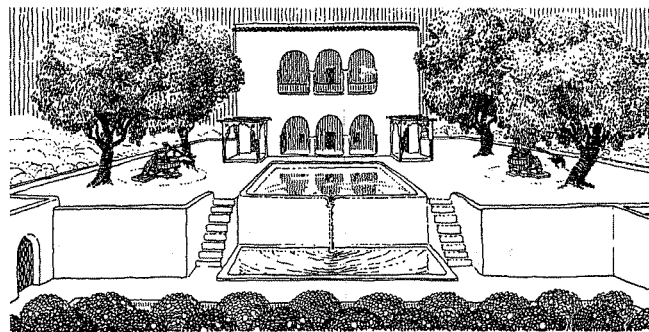
Barragan: *The Casbah is, I believe, the structure which most closely reflects the way its inhabitants live and dress, their custom, dances, the surrounding landscape.* (Ugarte, 1989)

Fountains, Aqueducts, Water Channels

Barragan: *While awake or when sleeping, the sweet memories of marvelous fountains have accompanied me throughout my life. I recall the fountains of my childhood: the drains for excess water of the dam; the dark ponds in the recess of abandoned orchards; the curb-stone of shallow wells in the convent patios; the small country springs, quivering mirrors of ancient giant water-loving trees; and then, of course, the old aqueducts — perennial reminders of Imperial Rome — which from lost horizons bury their liquid treasure to deliver it with the rainbow ribbons of a waterfall.* (Barragan, 1980)

Barragan: *With the exception of Paris, Spain interests me more than any other place. The sight of the Alhambra in Granada with its spaces, fountains and water channels affected me greatly. I would define these spaces as magical.* (Salvat, 1980)

Legorreta: *I wanted a very discreet and mysterious entrance sequence for the hotel, something to be discovered little by little as you penetrated the building. Part of the first discovery would be water, so I thought of a fountain — like many patios in Mexico, there would be a fountain. Then the concept grew in my mind of an aggressive fountain, one that provoked a reaction — vigorous, thrashing water there within the shelter of the hotel.* (Attoe, 1990)



Moorish garden. From Jean Gallotti, *Moorish Themes and Gardens of Morocco* (New York: William Helburn, 1926).



Lomas Sporting Club, Mexico City. Ricardo Legorreta, 1980.
Courtesy Julius Shulman.

Walls

It is noteworthy that at one time Barragan and Legorreta planned to collaborate on a book about Mexican walls. In the end, Legorreta completed the project on his own.

Barragan: *A landscape has less value when seen through a plate of glass; through familiarity, by your own constant presence, you reduce its value. I enjoyed Michelangelo's dome most when I saw it, once, through a keyhole. So why open a whole wall to bring a garden into a house?* (Rodman, 1958)

Barragan: *[Mystery] cannot fail to be used in the art of garden building, and so we may recall the pleasure of walking in some of the streets of Florence, limited by the walls of its large villas and gardens; in the streets of Rome and in so many other cities bounded by private gardens, the beauty of which goes out from walls and gates, bringing forth a greater beauty and attraction than many of the streets with open gardens that one finds in America and Mexico City.* (Barragan, 1952)

Legorreta: *Walls reflect our Mexican history. The Pre-Hispanic wall — strong, ancient, stark and sometimes colorless — conveys the dignity of its makers and the magnificence of that civilization. The Colonial wall has a different spirituality, not Spanish or Indian, but mestizo, the blend of two races and religions. The mystery, fantasm and sensibility of the Indians is married to the confidence and aggressive religiosity of Spain.*



Door to the mysteries beyond. Courtesy Ayres and Ayres Archive, Architectural Documents Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.

Sometimes the wall rises to protest outside influence and the forces which repress Mexicans. With walls our great muralists depicted both the sources of our pain and our struggle and hope for freedom.

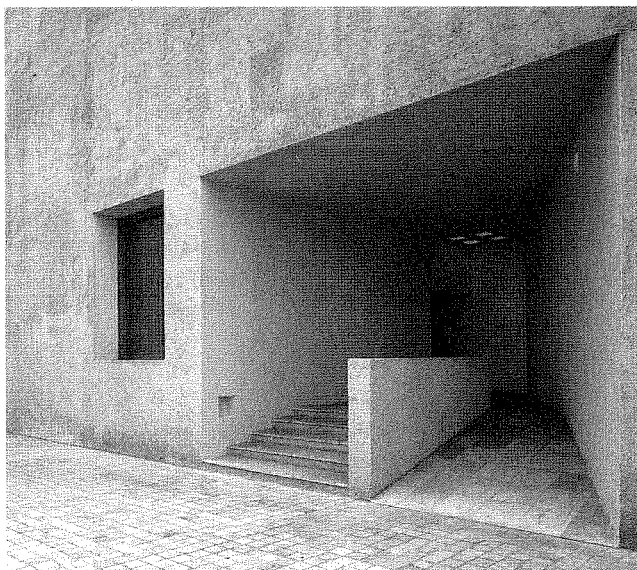
When other cultures influence Mexico, the wall almost disappears, as though it is embarrassed and has gone to hide. Under French influence in the last century, and American influence today, the wall does not shout — it hides and cries. Yet always there is a constant, humble, discreet wall that does not die but serves the true Mexican, the glorious vernacular wall, a source of unlimited inspiration, strong, sweet and romantic, full of color — decidedly Mexican. (Attoe, 1990)

Ferdinand Bac, French Landscape Architect, Writer

Barragan: *Then there was my discovery of the magical gardens of Ferdinand Bac, a discovery which was in fact a kind of liberation because it allowed me to see the importance of the imagination and to free myself from a lot of traditional ideas.* (Ugarte, 1989)

Barragan: *My experience with Pedregal goes back to my fondness for gardens, which I first found in the work of a French writer, rather than in the gardens themselves. The literature that describes them enhances the magic in those places. In this way, I acquired a taste for landscape and put it into practice here, originally on my own projects.* (Bayon, 1976)

Barragan: *The work by Ferdinand Bac . . . was important in this respect. There was a Mediterranean and Spanish element here which we believed was applicable to Mexico.* Nacho Diaz Morales, Rafael



IBM Technical Center, Mexico City. Ricardo Legorreta, 1977. Courtesy Legorreta Arquitectos.

Urzua and myself began to see the importance of endowing a place, a patio or a garden with an air of bewitchment, of establishing a relationship between the house itself and the garden, putting something of the garden in the rooms themselves. The inspiration for all was due to Bac. (Ugarte, 1989)

Barragan: *Ferdinand Bac taught us that "the soul of gardens shelters the greatest sum of serenity at man's disposal," and it is to him that I am indebted for my longing to create a perfect garden. He said, speaking of his gardens at les Colombiers, "in this small domain, I have done nothing else but joined the millenary solidarity to which we are all subject: the ambition of expressing materially a sentiment, common to many men in search of a link with nature, by creating a place of repose of peaceable pleasure."* (Barragan, 1980)

Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira, Mexican "Naive" Painter

Barragan: *It is essential to an architect to know how to see: I mean, to see in such a way that the vision is not overpowered by rational analysis. And in this respect I will take advantage of this opportunity to pay homage to a very dear friend who, through his infallible aesthetic taste, taught us the difficult art of seeing with innocence. I refer to the Mexican painter Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira, for whose wise teachings I publicly acknowledge my indebtedness. (Barragan, 1980)*



Entrance, Prieto Lopez House, Mexico City. Luis Barragan, 1949. Courtesy Tim Street-Porter.

Commentary

There are several noteworthy observations about how these memories as an impetus for designing. First, recollections are not transposed literally into new designs, but offer qualities to be sought. Only in one case does Legorreta speak of a literal transposition: *I used the proportions of the flight of steps at [Hacienda] Pipioltepec as a model for the broad staircase at Hotel Camino Real Mexico City. I hope it is not only the measure, but something deeper; that I borrowed. (Attoe, 1990)*

Barragan summed up the sentiment against literalness: *We should try to produce with modern architecture the same attraction that is found in the surfaces, spaces, and volumes of pre-Columbian architecture as well as colonial and popular architecture, but it has to be done with a contemporary expression. Obviously, we cannot repeat these forms exactly, but we can analyze the essence of these elements. So that, without copying the same gardens, patios and plazas, we can transmit to people the experiences of centuries which may make their lives a bit more pleasurable. It is exactly what modern cities lack the most. (Bayon, 1976)*

Instead of literal, the relationship between memory and design is analogical:

Barragan: *From corral to corral one goes, from one discovery to another; as in the patios of the Alhambra in Granada, which had a strong influence on me. (Tol1, 1981).*

Barragan: *I ask myself if, beside gardens for private homes, we may be able to build gardens of a private nature for housing groups. I believe it can be done if we study these community gardens — like those of the Generalife in Granada — as a common garden with such characteristics that the individual may feel in those partial and separate garden areas — with intimate nooks and corners — in his own garden. Of course one must be careful to have the character and atmosphere of these gardens modern and functional in their planning and design and in their plastic beauty.* (Barragan, 1952)

Legorreta: *The plan of Camino Real Mexico is organized with interior courtyards and gardens which offer rooms a great deal of privacy and make the hotel a true refuge from the city, not unlike the monasteries of earlier centuries. In fact, during the design phase we called the courtyards “missions” and named them accordingly: “San Francisco,” “San Juan,” “La Palma” and so forth. These residential courts are removed from the public areas of the complex, ensuring quiet.* (Attoe, 1990)

Legorreta: *[The scheme for Southlake/Westlake, Texas] is inspired by haciendas. When my [fellow architects] visited Mexico I took them to see the Convento Desierto de los Leones on the edge of Mexico City. And we looked at photographs of walls and I talked about what walls mean to me. The concept was to enclose a series of compounds with walls. Inside of each the architectural character could be unique; each architect could design somewhat independently.* (Attoe, 1990)

Another point is that while the memories are personal, their sources for the most part are not. Villages, popular arts, monasteries, fountains and so on are experiences shared by many Mexicans, and thus their use in designs can have wide recognition and significance. The architect's memories actually provide for cultural continuity. This is in contrast to the more solipsistic approach of architects whose sources are entirely personal or arcane, and which few people recognize or understand. Barragan speaks, above, of heeding nostalgic revelations. This, in conjunction with the idea of fond memories of places, clarifies the distinctions between these architects' accessible memories, and other sorts of memories which might be too personal, less readily understood by others. Barragan's nostalgia reveals, so it is not what is remembered that is so important as are the qualities revealed by the nostalgic recollection. Similarly, it is fond memories of places, not personal events, that these architects speak about. Again, it is qualities that are recalled and that inspire subsequent design.

What are the implications of such a feature of the design method? One would be wary of crediting any and all of an architect's memories of places as a basis for design decisions. Memories and places are qualitatively different, and their appropriateness for a time and place varies. Yet fearing the use

of memories in the creation of architecture, or embracing a design ideology that prohibits them, is just as dangerous. Barragan lamented: *It is astonishing that modern architecture has not produced an example of work which expresses the attraction of a place. This would fulfill spiritual desires and create confidence in the inhabitants.* (Bayon, 1976)

It would be unfair to compare these architects' work to that of lesser American practitioners, and I am sure that some American architects are just as passionate as Barragan and Legorreta, albeit passionate about other matters. But it is the quality of places fondly remembered that matters to me and that I miss in much contemporary architecture. I'd rather have to live with the embodied memories of these architects than the preoccupations of most other architects.

Notes

1. Luis Barragan (1902-1988) was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1980. Ricardo Legorreta (born 1931) has offices in Mexico City and Los Angeles.

Photographs by Tim Street-Porter of Luis Barragan's work are from the exhibition “Luis Barragan: The Architecture of Light, Color and Form.” A catalogue, edited by Estelle Jackson, is scheduled for publication under the auspices of Montage Journal, Inc.

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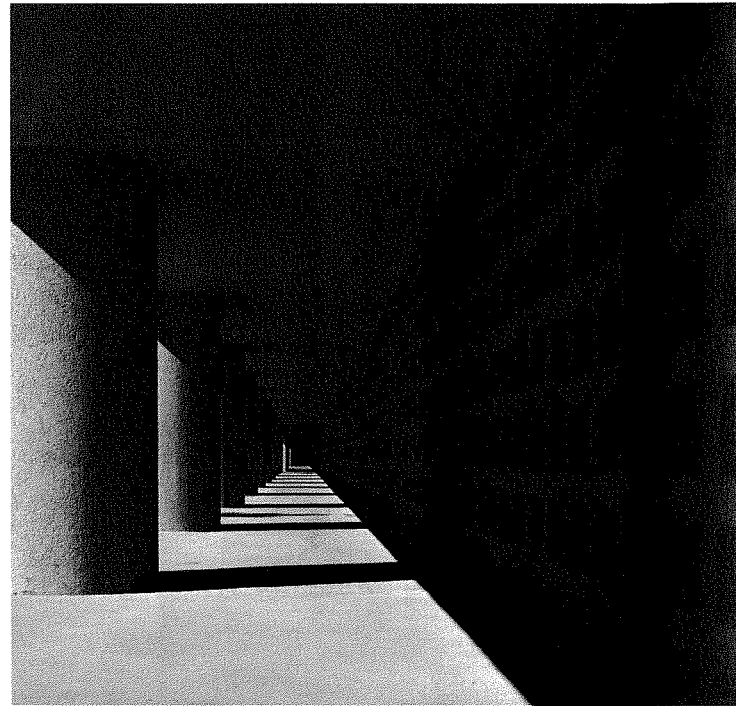
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Left: Chapel at Tlalpan, Mexico, D.F. Luis Barragan, 1952. Photo by Tim Street-Porter; courtesy Montage Foundation. Right: IBM building, Solana, Westlake/Southlake, Texas. Ricardo Legorreta, 1986. Courtesy Lourdes Legorreta. Below: Hotel Camino Real. Ricardo Legorreta, Ixtapa, 1981. Courtesy Wayne Attoe.

