

BEAUTY ITSELF

On Luis Barragán

PUBLISHED IN

Luis Barragan. Ed. Arquitectos de Cádiz, Cádiz, 2003

Pensar con las manos, Madrid, 2008 (1º ed)

When in the last century Ralph Vaughan-Williams composed his impressive "Fantasia on a Theme by Tallis", taking his inspiration from the English composer Thomas Tallis, who in Shakespeare's days created marvelous vocal polyphonies, he not only expresses his admiration for the earlier composer, but he also sets up a sublime music still capable of moving us deeply and communicating to us a peace and serenity than only masterful music produces.

Thus I wish my words about Barragán were capable of awakening something of his work's deepest truths, of revealing its essence and of inspiring more than mere admiration for this Mexican master.

This essential character of Barragán's architecture has been well understood by authors like Kenneth Frampton who in all of his writings underlines the universality of the master. In his most recent book "Labour, Work and Architecture"(1) Frampton fixes with precision Barragán's work in the architecture's center when he writes: "This deceptively simple yet complex synthesis, simultaneous uniting the polarities of <architecture versus art>, <tradition versus innovation> and <nature versus culture>, is largely absent in the work of some architects who seem to insist in being recognized as artists rather than as architects".

THE LECTERN

Shortly after Barragán's death in 1988, Antonio Jimenez Torrecillas(2), a very good architect from Granada told me about his visit to the master's house in Tacubaya, with all the emotion that this architecture inspires. Barragán's house is conserved as though the architect were still living in it. Recently ironed jackets hang impeccably in the closets. His books and writing tools lie on the desk as if he'd just left them there. And on the enormous lectern that presides his living room, that which appears in photos in front of the window, a publication was lying open. Is it still open? It is the book that the Association of Architects of Malaga published about my works in 1986(3), with an exquisite design by Roberto Turégano and in which I had inscribed such a warm dedication that it still gave heat.

But this history began long before that. In the early 1980's, we invited nearly all of the most brilliant architects inhabiting the architectural firmament to the School of Architecture of Madrid. Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman and Mario Gandelsonas came, who after the invention of The Five spread their doctrine from the IAUS in New York through their journals Skyline and Oppositions impeccably designed by Massimo Vignelli. And Alvaro Siza came, for his first lecture in Madrid, like Tadao Ando. And Silvetti and even

Mario Botta. And a few more. We decided to crown that avalanche of lectures, always full houses, by inviting Barragán, who moreover had just been awarded the Pritzker. He answered our invitation with a lovely letter, saying movingly that he would love to return to Spain-- ay Spain! ay the Alhambra! -- but that he was not well and was preparing "to die well". Altogether, a lesson in life. I did not wait to respond: I sent him that flushed publication which most likely still remains open on the lectern.

The story does not end there. Last year, in a pleasant meal that we tend to have during examination boards for the graduating class at the School of Madrid, Gabriel Ruiz Cabrero told me that during his last visit to Mexico he also saw the publication there, on the trip he made to Barragán's house with Antón Capitel. You may imagine that my admiration and affection for the Mexican master have been strengthened by such testimonies.

LIKE GOETHE IN ROME

I first had conscious news of Barragán in 1980, when an interesting interview he made with Jorge Salvat was published in the July issue of *Archetype*(4), the counterpoint of *Skyline*. As a result of those pages in black and white and those words in every color, I became hooked.

André Gide recounts in his "Conseils au jeune écrivain" (5) that when Goethe arrived in Rome, he exclaimed "At last, I am born!" thus expressing the profound consciousness of himself and his existence that the stay in Italy produced in him.

So, just as Goethe felt in Rome, I felt with Barragán. When I "arrived at Barragán", I took stock of my existence as an architect. Just as I had done earlier with Mies Van der Rohe and with Le Corbusier. And with Sota. And with only a very few others.

Perhaps some of you reading these lines may experience the same thing, and you now "arrive at Barragán" and take stock of your existence as architects. It would be well used. And so in order to arrive at the master, it would be a good idea to point out some of the aspects that strike me as crucial in his architecture, such as: a certain untidiness of his floors, the conquest of the upper level, the refining and tuning of his ideas, his treatment of light and color, and a few others.

THE UNTIDINESS OF THE FLOORS

One might say that more than compose floors, he ran through them; he conceives them to be run through. On first reading of the mere trace of his floors on white paper, they could strike us as even clumsy. From his first works, the most "regionalist" in style, as in his second and long "functionalist" period, and of course in his last and most widely spread period, it is not easy to understand his floors at first glance. He almost always avoids the solidly horizontal plane. There are always small changes in the floor level that are connected by small steps. Movement in space is accentuated over and beyond composition. Fluidity more than transparency. Syncopated passage more than visual continuity. And classical mechanisms, such as "enfilades" and symmetry, are abandoned.

Barragán is not a "Miesian" architect of continuities, transparencies and canonical compositions. More like the architects of the Alhambra, he concatenates spaces as each one has its reason for being. Perhaps we could associate him with the raumplan that gives absolute priority to the quality of the interior space and that suggests to us a certain resemblance to the world of Adolf Loos, sometimes so close to the master. Perhaps also because of a certain "dandyism" both practiced.

Or perhaps, in a simpler reading, Barragán did everything with the freedom that wisdom provides. He throws out the classical mechanisms of composition and makes what he feels like, with knowledge and conscience, and with such good results. Since, after the apparent untidiness of his floors, with the third dimension, the vertical, Barragán raises spaces full of beauty, full of that naturalness that all his works, and especially those of his last period, possess.

BARRAGÁN IN CÁDIZ

When writing a text in praise of Asís Cabrero, I invented a visit of Mies Van der Rohe to Madrid(6). In it everything was possible and believable, seasoned with true facts. They came to tell me about it without knowing that I had written it. I tied in that story with Mies's visit the next day to the Gimnasio Maravillas, by Alejandro de la Sota, to whom I had to divulge my literary invention(7). Some people didn't like the formula, used so often by very good writers, and they were quick to refute it and to publish it. Save the differences, it is as if someone one day warned us that the entire Quixote is no more than Cervantes's invention.

On this occasion, we are not going to fictionalize Barragán's visit to Cádiz, although he was there when he made his trip to the Alhambra. But I do want to point out how much of Cadiz's flavor exists in his works. The flat roof-terraces like spaces "open to the heavens" that Le Corbusier discovered in Algiers and that have been present in Cadiz since the beginning of its history. The courtyards and patios like spaces secluded between walls. And the fountains and the ponds and the flowerbeds. One could imagine perfectly the Gilardi house in Chiclana or the Tacubaya house in Zahora.

It is curious to discover how Barragán, from his first works, systematically uses the flat rooftop terrace as a fundamental element. And he never ceases to use it. What made possible the modern technique of roofing with a horizontal plane capable of expelling water allowed the possibility of conquering that privileged spatial situation. The lesson that Le Corbusier communicated so well and that Barragán learned so well from him. Some time ago, Eduardo Gómez T., a young architect from Guadalajara, gave me a splendid book by Alfonso Alfaro on Barragán's spiritual itineraries. In "Voces de tinta dormida" ("Voices of Sleeping Ink" (8)), as that beautiful text is called, he brings us closer to the master by means of the books in his library. And on speaking of his relationship with Le Corbusier in moving detail, he mentions the Beistegui penthouse on the Champs Elysees. Le Corbusier's rooftop terrace could well have been built by Barragán. The conquest of the upper plane for man. That which, in full conscience, Mies never wanted to do in order not to break the rationale of his eye-height horizontal plane, his dominant podium and his "piano nobile". The classical base that dominates the earth versus the upper plane that opens to the sky. Not trivial matters, either of them. Mies, Le Corbusier and Barragán.

THE FINE TUNING

Some architects need to take refuge in the details to compensate for their lack of ideas or creative inspiration. The details of the masters always tend to be accents that strengthen the ideas developed in their works. In this way, the details tend to be so clear that they sometimes seem to disappear. They disappear for the sake of the main idea. That is what Barragán's details are like: elemental, simple, nothing by dint of a lot.

Glass without carpentry in its meeting with the walls, far from being a mannerist detail and much less a minimalist detail, is an overwhelmingly effective mechanism to express continuity between interior and exterior. The breakdown of the door leading to the garden next to the big hole does no more than share the Corbusieriana idea of separating functions. And even then, sometimes color, far from being a whim, as in so many others, or a

means of correcting defects, as in others, becomes in Barragán a mechanism of precision that is impossible to imitate.

Juan Molina y Vedia, who knows Barragán well, refers to this as “Barragán’s fine tuning.” And speaks of how the master not only starts from a clear idea, but also tunes it to the end, with “fine details” and with a “fine balance.”

This term I have written a long text for my students in which I expound on this theme, under the expressive title: “The Measure of Ideas: Ideas in Architecture have Measures.” Perhaps I should have added, under Barragán’s guidance, that they also have color.

AND COLOR

It is not easy to speak of color in Barragán. Especially when his imitators intoxicate everything with colors and confuse the unwary.

Barragán uses color with a lot of tact and in a very precise manner. Curiously, in his house in Tacubaya, the main space is white, with a time given patina. And he only puts color, masterfully, in very few elements, among others, the rooftop terrace. With the freedom that privacy concedes in the heights, he proceeds to paint the vertical adornments in a sublime manner, creating, as if he were god, bits of a dreamy, Mexican and universal heaven. And then, the season opened, came the other works. And in the end, the drunken profusion of the sometimes so disputed Gilardi house.

Years ago, I translated the text with which Aldo Rossi prolonged a wonderful book by Benedetto Gravagnolo on Adolf Loos(9). And Rossi said there that if those pink painted walls of the Viennese Secession had been white and had been stripped of all ornament, those works could well have passed for rationalist.

The same is true for Barragán. The false barragans have proliferated. Some believe that it is enough to paint their walls fuchsia and pink and red in order to be like the master.

In Barragán, the color is just right, measured and studied and sought after so carefully that it looks accidental. He tells us the multitude of questions he made until reaching the exact tone, the desired nuance. It is not enough to label him Mexican because his intense colors can and do evoke the colors the Aztecs may have used. The colorist ornaments of folklore abound in Mexico and in architecture, but there is only one Barragán and he is inimitable.

AND LIGHT

There is an image of the Pedregal gardens that always impresses me. A very tall white wall, judging from the size of the children sitting at its base, that receives the shadow of a few branches from some nearby eucalyptus trees. Although it is only a photograph, and in black and white, the shadows can be seen in it rocking sweetly, as if caressing the white wall ennobled by the passage of time. And these shadows, like a certain reticence in all his architecture, are capable of awakening our sensitivity to beauty.

In that same line: the radiant light of the bare altar touched in gold leaf at the chapel of the Capuchin Nuns. Gold leaf means using the minimum amount of gold necessary to achieve that rich result. In his short and savory text on Barragán, Alvaro Siza, with the profound insight that characterizes him, notes that “the color I remember is gold” (10), with its capacity to retain light and return it to us glorified. Very Barragán.

Or the moving description Louis Kahn made of the silver achieved by Barragán, in this case with no more than water and light. With almost nothing. “Every drop was like a silver filament that formed silver rings that brimmed over the surface and fell to the ground.”

To speak of Barragán’s other light, that which filters through the tricks that he goes placing for it, is more obvious. With infinite wisdom, he sometimes tints it with colors until he gets to the Gilardi house, where he puts a smudge of red in the sea water between blues and greens, thus suspending time in air. Or he stains the hallway a saffron yellow that intoxicates us. There is no architect capable of copying him.

AND WORDS

In his address on receiving the Pritzker Award, Barragán protested that “the words beauty, inspiration, magic, sorcery, enchantment” and also “serenity, silence, intimacy and wonder” had disappeared from architectural publications. And the master was right. These terms could seem to belong to a diffuse, ethereal or unreachable world reserved to only a few, like the druids of architecture(11).

Barragán knew well that those qualities architecture can claim, above or in addition to pure construction, are not the product of a burst of inspiration. They are, in architecture and in any creative effort, the result of a perfect control of the elements with which the created work is composed. I have often used the example of recipes that turn into sublime meals when made

with precision. They are never a burst of inspiration. As in poetry. As Italo Calvino said, in the chapter dedicated to exactitude in his "Six Proposals for the Next Millennium" (12), that "poetry is the great enemy of chance." It is that clear.

SUSPENDING TIME

We could analyze Barragán's work from many points of view: the naturalness that leads him to what we have called untidiness on the floors, the precision we have called finely tuned, the use of light and color as indispensable ingredients, or the words he manages to make palpable on his walls. But, what constitutes the center of the architecture of a creator who claims beauty and inspiration, magic and enchantment, bewitchment and charm? And at the same time, intimacy and silence and serenity and wonder?

Beyond everything that has been said about Barragán, I understand that the most specific thing about his architecture, his most essential achievement, is the suspension of time. That so subtle and at the same time so real something, palpable in a well tempered space, that is the feeling that time has stopped there. Like San Juan de la Cruz's "I stayed myself and forgot myself" or "everything ceased and I left myself", which is ineffable but can be understood there in an instant. Along with Barragán, we architects know well that we too can achieve this precious gift with our works. Like one's dream of one day reading some of those lines by San Juan de la Cruz out loud between the colored walls of the roof terrace at Tacubaya. And you can be certain that it would not be the first time those walls heard those poems. They will sound like the breath of a soft breeze in which Elijah, the torn prophet, found his Lord.

Contemplating Barragán's work produces tranquility and invites one to be quiet. And the "sonorous silence" speaks to us of that suspension of time. Something that the cloistered nuns may well feel when they pray in the space blessed by the golden light of their chapel at Tlalpan.

Beyond time, Barragán belongs to yesterday, today and tomorrow. That is how Louis Kahn understood him when fascinated by his architecture he called upon him(13). It doesn't seem easy for a master like Kahn, something of a curmudgeon, to call another architect to collaborate with him. And much less still to listen to him in everything. He asks for a garden and Barragán gives him a desert, a bare space with a single plant. And so, together they create a constituent space, a podium of Roman stone plowed by water. A podium that speaks of the desire to settle there forever, that speaks of remaining and of leaving time suspended.

THE END

José María Buendía concluded his text with a moving verse that he put in the mouths of a group of little girls: "And that Barragán, who is he that moves away like that and leaves the walls crying when he goes"(14) that I must transcribe in my text, it seems such a lovely way to evoke the master.

I return to Louis Kahn who also said in that short text on Barragán, "his house is not simple a house, but rather the House Itself". That is the way I would like to understand Barragán's architecture. Beyond his masterful use of color or light, or his sublime understanding of simplicity or his trapping of time, I believe that Barragán's architecture goes to the very center of the questions that architecture poses. To its essence. Paraphrasing Kahn, Barragán's architecture is not simply architecture; it is architecture itself, BEAUTY ITSELF.