

BEAUTY ITSELF

On the essential architecture of Luis Barragán

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When Ralph Vaughan-Williams composed his impressive Fantasia on a Theme of Tallis last century, he was not only inspired by the English composer Thomas Tallis, who in Shakespeare's time created marvelous vocal polyphonies, but he also expressed his admiration for him and created sublime music that is still capable of moving us deeply, transmitting a peace and serenity that only masterful music can produce.

I would like my words about Barragán to be capable of revealing something of the deepest part of his work, of discovering the most essential aspects, of awakening more than just admiration for the Mexican master.

This essential character of Luis Barragán's architecture has always been well understood by authors such as Kenneth Frampton, who in all his writings has emphasized the master's universality. In his most recent book *Labour, work and Architecture*¹ he accurately nails Barragán's work at the center of architecture when he proposes to us "that it may seem at first glance simple, but that on the contrary, it is a complex synthesis capable of simultaneously unifying the opposites of architecture versus art, tradition versus innovation and nature versus culture" which, Frampton continues, "is absent from the work of some fashionable architects who seem to insist on being recognized more as artists than as architects."

THE LECTERN

Shortly after Barragán died in 1988, a very good architect from Granada, Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas², told me about his visit to the master's house in Tacubaya with all the emotions that this architecture provokes. Barragán's house is preserved as if the architect himself were still living in it. The freshly ironed jackets hang impeccably in the closets. And his books and belongings on the table as if they had just been left. And he was telling me that on the huge lectern that presides over his living room, the one that appears in the photos in front of the window, a publication about my works made by the College of Architects of Malaga in 1986³, with an exquisite design by Roberto Turégano

¹ *Labour, Work and Architecture*, Kenneth Frampton. Phaidon Ed. London - New York 2002.

This is the latest book published by Kenneth Frampton. He dedicates a chapter to Barragán. He did me the honor of dedicating it to me this winter at the beginning of my stay at Columbia University in New York.

² AQ 7. C. O. of Architects of Eastern Andalusia. "Luis Barragán visits the Alhambra", Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas. Granada 1991.

Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas is not only a great admirer of Barragán, but also a splendid architect. He has built the José Guerrero Center next to the Cathedral of Granada, a marvel that has just been awarded by the C.O.A. of Granada.

³ *Campo Baeza*, C. O. of Architects of Eastern Andalusia. Málaga 1985

The publication made on the occasion of an exhibition at the C.O.A. in Malaga, exquisitely designed by Roberto Turégano, had two editions, one in Spanish and the other in English. The one Barragán received was the Spanish edition, of course.

and on which I had stamped such a dedication, so ardent, that it has not yet finished fading, was open -will it still be like that?

But this whole story had begun much earlier. In the early eighties, from the chair of Carvajal, with Ignacio Vicens and the help of a group of enthusiastic students, we had invited to the School of Architecture in Madrid almost all the most brilliant architects who swarmed by then in the firmament of the stars of architecture. Richard Meier and Peter Eisenman and Mario Gandelsonas came, who, after the invention of the Five, were spreading their doctrine from the IAUS in New York through the Skyline and Oppositions, wonderfully designed by Massimo Vignelli. And Alvaro Siza gave his first lecture in Madrid, as did Tadao Ando. And Silvetti and even Mario Botta. And a few more. We decided to crown that avalanche of conferences, always multitudinous, with the coming of Barragán, who had just been awarded the Pritzker Prize. He replied to our cordial invitation with a beautiful letter in which he said with emotion that he would like to return to Spain, oh Spain! oh the Alhambra! but that he was unwell, and that he was preparing himself "to die well". Quite a life lesson. My reply was not long in coming: I sent him that luminous publication that must still be on the lectern today.

The story does not end here. Last year, at a nice lunch that we usually have during the end-of-degree exams at the Madrid School, Gabriel Ruiz Cabrero told me that on his last trip to Mexico he had also seen the publication there, during a visit he made to Barragán's house with Antón Capitel. It is understandable that my admiration and affection for the Mexican master are reinforced by such testimonies.

LIKE GOETHE WITH ROME

My first conscious news of Barragán dates back to 1980, when an interesting interview with Jorge Salvat was published in July of that year in Archetype⁴, the counterpoint of Skyline. As a result of those black and white pages and those words in full color, I was hooked.

André Gide tells in his *Conseils au jeune écrivain*⁵ that when Goethe arrives in Rome, he exclaims: "At last I am born!", thus expressing how his stay in Italy made him take in a special way a deep conscience of himself, of his existence.

Well, just like Goethe with Rome, it happened to me with Barragán. When I "arrived at Barragán" I became aware again of my existence as an architect. As had already happened to me with Mies Van der Rohe and Le Corbusier. Or with Sota, and with very few others.

Perhaps the same thing may happen to some of those who read these lines, that now at this point "reach Barragan" and become aware of their existence as architects. It would

⁴ Archetype Fall'80. Interview with Jorge Salvat. New York 1980

⁵ *Conseils au jeune écrivain*, André Gide. Proverbe Ed. Paris 1993

Another gem to never stop reading. I am finishing a translation into Spanish. It seems so essential to me.

serve them right. And to reach the master, it would be good to point out some aspects that seem to me crucial in his architecture, such as: the certain disarray of his plans, the conquest of the upper plane, the refinement of ideas, his treatment of light and color, and some others.

THE DISARRAY OF THE PLANTS

It would seem that rather than composing plants, he walks through them, he conceives them to be walked through. In a first reading of just the imprint of his plants on the white paper, they might even seem clumsy. Already from his first works, the most regionalist, as in his second and long functionalist stage, and of course in his last stage, the most widespread, it is not easy to understand his plans at a first glance. He almost always avoids the single horizontal plan. There are always small changes of level in the ground plane, which are connected with small steps. Movement in space is emphasized more than composition. More fluidity than transparency. More the syncopated path than the visual continuity. And classic mechanisms such as lines and symmetry are abandoned.

Barragán is not a Miesian architect of continuities, transparencies and canonical compositions. Rather, he is an architect who, like those of the Alhambra, concatenates spaces where each one of them has its *raison d'être*. Perhaps we could relate it to the *raumplan* that gives absolute priority to the quality of the interior space, and that suggests a certain relationship with the world of Adolf Loos, so close at times to the master. Perhaps also because of that certain dandyism that both of them practiced.

Or, in a simpler reading, Barragán did everything with the freedom that wisdom provides. He throws overboard the classical mechanisms of composition, and does with knowledge and conscience what he wants, with such good results. For behind the apparent disarray of his plants, with the third dimension, the vertical, Barragán raises spaces full of beauty, of that beauty full of naturalness that always had especially the works of the last period of the master.

BARRAGAN IN CADIZ

In order to write a laudatory text about Asís Cabrero, I invented a visit of Mies Van der Rohe to Madrid⁶. Everything there was possible and credible, seasoned with true facts. They came to tell me about it without knowing that I had written it. I linked that story with Mies' visit to Alejandro de la Sota's Gimnasio Maravillas, to whom I had to give an account of the literary⁷ invention. Some did not like the formula so many times used by very good writers, and they hurried to deny it and to publish it. It was as if someone would

⁶ The Constructed Idea. "Reflections in the golden eye of Mies Van der Rohe", Alberto Campo Baeza. University of Palermo Ed. Madrid 2000.

The book has already had three editions, the first two in the collection published by COAM. The third with a large print run has been published by the University of Palermo.

⁷ La Idea Construida, "El día que Mies visitó a Sota", Alberto Campo Baeza. University of Palermo Ed. Madrid 2000.

one day warn us that, with all distances saved, the whole of Don Quixote is nothing more than an invention of Cervantes.

Well, this time we will not novelize the visit of Barragan to Cadiz, because it was when his trip to the Alhambra. But I do want to point out how much of Cadiz have their architectures. The roofs as rooms "open to the sky" that Le Corbusier discovered in Algiers and in Cadiz have been since the beginning of its history. The courtyards as spaces between walls. And the fountains and the pools, and the flowerbeds. One could perfectly imagine the Gilardi house in Chiclana, or the Tacubaya house in Zahora.

It is curious to discover how Barragán, from his earliest works, systematically uses the roof as a fundamental element. And he will never stop using it. What made possible the modern technique of covering with a horizontal plane capable of expelling water, gave the possibility of conquering that privileged spatial situation. The lesson that Le Corbusier transmitted 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 the spiritual itineraries of Barragán. In *Voces de tinta dormida*⁸, which is the name of the beautiful text, he approaches us to the master through the books in his library. And when talking about his relationship with Le Corbusier with exciting details, Beistegui's penthouse on the Champs Elysees is mentioned. That rooftop of Le Corbusier could well have been built by Barragán. Man's conquest of the higher plane. That which, with full awareness, Mies never wanted to do in order not to break the reasons of his horizontal plane at eye level, of his dominant podium, of his piano nobile. The classical base that dominates the earth in front of the upper plane that opens to the sky. Both are not trivial matters. Mies, Le Corbusier and Barragán.

TUNING

Some architects need to take refuge in details to compensate for their lack of ideas, their lack of creative breath. The details of the masters are always accents that enhance the ideas they develop in their works. Such details are often so clear that sometimes they seem to disappear. They disappear for the sake of the main idea. That is how Barragán's details are: elemental, simple, nothing by dint of much.

The glass without carpentry in its encounter with the walls, far from being a mannerist detail, much less minimalist, is a mechanism of overwhelming effectiveness to express the continuity between inside and outside. The breakdown of the exit door to the garden next to the large opening does nothing more than abound in the Corbusierian idea of separating functions. And so sometimes color, far from being, as in so many others, a

⁸ *Voices of sleeping ink*, Alfonso Alfaro. Arte de México Ed.

The book, in a beautiful edition of Libros de la Espiral, was given to me by Eduardo Gómez T., a wonderful architect from Guadalajara.

whim, or in some others a corrector of defects, becomes in Barragán a mechanism of precision impossible to imitate.

A good connoisseur of Barragán, Juan Molina y Vedía, calls this the "tuning of Barragán". How the master not only starts from a clear idea, but refines it to the end "with fine details" and with a "fine balance".

I have written this course for my students a long text, in which I expand on this subject with the expressive title "The measure of ideas: ideas in architecture have measures". Perhaps I should add that, according to Barragán, they also have color.

AND THE COLOR

It is not easy to talk about color in Barragán. Even more so when his imitators make everything drunk with color, confusing the unwary.

Barragán used color very tactfully and precisely. Curiously, in his house in Tacubaya the main space is white, patinated by time. And he only uses color masterfully in very few elements, among others the rooftop. With the freedom granted by the privacy of the heights, he proceeds to paint the vertical walls in a sublime way, creating, as if he were God, pieces of a dreamed sky, Mexican and universal. And then, open season, came the other works. And finally the drunken waste of the Gilardi house, sometimes so controversial.

Years ago I translated into Spanish the text with which Aldo Rossi prefaced a wonderful book by Benedetto Gravagnuolo on Adolf Loos⁹. And Rossi said there that if those pink-painted walls of the Viennese Secession had been white and had been stripped of any ornamentation, those works could well have passed for rationalist.

The same with Barragan. False Barragans have proliferated. Some believe that it is enough to paint their walls in fuchsia and pink and red to be like the master.

The color in Barragán is so just, so measured, so studied, that by dint of being sought after, it seems casual. He tells us about the multitude of questions he asked himself until he reached the exact tone, the desired shade. It is not enough to label him as Mexican because his intense colors may evoke, and they do evoke, the colors used by the Aztecs. Folkloric colorful ornaments abound in Mexico, also in architecture, but there is only one Barragán, inimitable.

AND THE LIGHT

⁹ Adolf Loos, Benedetto Gravagnuolo. IDEA BOOKS Ed. Milano 1982.

I met Benedetto Gravagnuolo on the jury of the Cosenza awards. He is an intellectual. He has recently been appointed director of the Naples School of Architecture.

There is an image that always impresses me about the Pedregal gardens. A white wall, very high judging by the size of the children sitting at its feet, shaded by the branches of the nearby eucalyptus trees. Although it is only a photograph, and in black and white, the shadows can be seen gently rocking, as if caressing the white wall ennobled by the passage of time. And those shadows, like the certain reticent character of all its architecture, are capable of awakening our sensitivity to beauty.

In the same line, the radiant light of the naked altarpiece touched in gold leaf of the chapel of the Capuchin Mothers. Gold leaf that means the minimum essential amount of gold to achieve the richest result. Alvaro Siza, with that deep insight that characterizes him, in his brief and tasty text on Barragán notes that "the color I remember is gold"¹⁰ with its ability to retain the light and give it back to us glorified. Very Barragán.

Or Louis Kahn's excited description of the silver achieved by Barragan, in this case with only water and light. With almost nothing. "Each drop was like a silver filament forming silver rings that overflowed from the surface and fell to the ground."

It is more obvious to speak of the other light of Barragán, the one that sneaks through the traps he sets for it. He, with infinite wisdom, sometimes dyes it with colors until he reaches the Gilardi house, where to the sea water, between blues and greens, he adds a splash of red that suspends time in the air. Or he dyes the corridor with a saffron yellow that intoxicates us. There is no architect capable of copying him.

AND THE WORDS

Barragán protested in his speech upon receiving the Pritzker Prize that "the words beauty, inspiration, enchantment, magic, sorcery, enchantment" and also those of "serenity, silence, intimacy and amazement" had disappeared in publications dedicated to architecture¹¹. And the master was right. To someone it might seem that these terms all belonged to a diffuse, ethereal or unattainable world, reserved only for a few as druids of architecture.

Barragán knew well that those qualities that can be claimed to architecture above or beyond pure construction are not the product of a stroke of intuition. They are, in architecture and in any creative work, the result of a perfect control of the elements with which the created work is composed. I have often given the example of cooking recipes that lead to a sublime result when they are made with precision. They are never a stroke of intuition. As in poetry. Italo Calvino said very well in the chapter dedicated to accuracy in his Six proposals for the next millennium¹², that "poetry is the great enemy of chance". So clear.

¹⁰ Barragán. Complete works. A.A.V.V. Tanais Ed. Madrid 1995.

¹¹ Luis Barragan. Constructed work 1902-1988. A.A.V.V. Junta de Andalucía Ed. Seville 1989.

¹² Six Proposals for the next millennium, Italo Calvino. Siruela Ed. Madrid 1989. I consider this book an essential reading for any architect. It is a text that is at once profound, suggestive and beautiful. To read it a thousand times.

SUSPEND TIME

We can analyze Barragán's work from many points of view: the naturalness that leads him to what we have called slovenliness in the plants, the precision that we have called refinement, the light and color as essential ingredients, or the words that he manages to make palpable in his walls. But what is the center of the architecture of a creator who claims beauty and inspiration, magic and enchantment, sortilege and enchantment? And at the same time intimacy and silence, serenity and amazement?

Above all that has been said about Barragán, I understand that the most specific aspect of his architecture, his most essential achievement is the suspension of time. That something so subtle and at the same time so real, capable of being touched in a well-tempered space, which is the feeling that time has stopped there. As the "stay me and forget me" or "ceased everything and let me" of San Juan de la Cruz, which are something ineffable but capable of being understood there in an instant. We architects know well that, with and as Barragán, we can also achieve with our works that precious gift. Like someone's dream of one day reading aloud among the colored walls of the roof of Tacubaya, some of those verses of San Juan de la Cruz. Surely it would not be the first time that those walls would hear those poems. They will sound like "the breath of a soft aura" in which Elías, the torn prophet, found his Lord.

It is calming to contemplate Barragán's work and invites us to be quiet. And the sonorous silence speaks to us of that suspension of time. Something of what the Recollect nuns must feel when they pray in the space blessed by the golden light of their chapel in Tlalpan.

Barragán, beyond time, is of yesterday, today and tomorrow. And that is how Louis Kahn understood it when, fascinated by his architecture, he called him for consultation¹³. It does not seem easy that a master like Kahn, somewhat cantankerous, would call another architect to collaborate with him. And even less so that he would listen to him in everything. He asks for a garden and Barragán gives him a desert, a bare space without any plants. And there they create together a foundational space, a podium of Roman stone furrowed by water. A podium that speaks of the desire to settle there forever, to remain, to leave time suspended.

FINAL

José María Buendía ended his writing with a moving couplet that he put in the mouth of a group of girls: "And who is that Barragán? That way he moves away, and leaves the walls crying, when he leaves"¹⁴ that I do not want to transcribe in my text, so precious it seems to me to evoke the master.

¹³ Studies in Tectonic Culture, Kenneth Frampton. The MIT Press Ed. Cambridge. Massachusetts 1995

¹⁴ Barragán. Complete works. A.A.V.V. Tanais Ed. Madrid 1995.

I turn to Louis Kahn who in that short text about Barragán also said: "His house is not simply a house, but THE HOUSE ITSELF". This is how I would like to understand Barragán's architecture. Above and 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 core of the questions that architecture raises. To its essence. To paraphrase Kahn, Barragán's architecture is not simply architecture, but Architecture itself, BEAUTY ITSELF.