

**ALWAYS BARRAGAN**

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In the air, Bach's Mass in B minor. Qui Sedes.

What can one say at this point about Barragán? Of course, on the other hand, it is impossible to hold a Congress on Architecture in Latin America without talking about Barragán.

Others before and better than me and, perhaps with more knowledge of the cause, have spoken and written about Barragan. From two of my favorite writers, Octavio Paz and Alvaro Mutis, to Antonio Ruiz Barbarín, for whose book I wrote an introduction. From Emilio Ambasz, who organized the 1976 exhibition at the MOMA in New York with photographs by Salas Portugal that led to his being awarded the Pritzker Prize in 1980. Or Felipe Leal, or Juan Molina Vedia, or Antonio Toca or José María Buendía. Or even Enrique de Anda, who wrote about Luis Barragán as a "classic of silence", and with whom I had the good fortune to see Barragán's works in Mexico City, and who is also participating in this Biennial. Or so many others.

I have only written a long text, written with my head and my heart, for a beautiful booklet published by the College of Architects of Cadiz, who are well aware of my fondness for Barragán. And the prologue mentioned above.

### I AM BORN AT LAST

Well, after writing about and admiring Barragan so much, I have finally seen some of his works in Mexico this year, live and in person. And I must confess that they have far exceeded my expectations.

To see the Gilardi House, the last work designed by Barragán, with that flash of fire reflected in the blues. See the Tacubaya House, which is a succession of spatial lessons. Seeing the Convent of the Capuchinas is like being in heaven on earth. All these visits have been a strong shock for me.

I will repeat what I wrote in my first text on Barragan. André Gide said that when Goethe first arrived in Rome he exclaimed: "At last I am born". And I added that when I first came to know Barragán's work, the same thing happened to me, I became aware of my existence as an architect. Well, now the same thing has happened to me, but to a greater degree. I have felt a deep emotion when visiting the master's works directly.

## ANALYSIS

I will dare to tell you about some of the architectural mechanisms of Barragán's most famous work. His Tacubaya house: the only individual house declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in Latin America.

When our gaze stops at the large window of the living room, we discover that there is only one wall. The wall on the right advances towards the garden, while the one on the left ends and is almost flush with the carpentry itself. And after studying the floor plan and the orientation, one discovers that this protruding wall faces south and serves as a support for the sunlight that enters and exits through the glass, without touching or staining it, in order to obey the architect.

The other trick of not putting carpentry, or almost embedding it, hiding it in the joints with the jambs, with the lintel and with the floor, we have all copied it many times. Wise and natural mechanisms of the master.

The tall windows of the afternoon room, the so-called "white room", which seem to sing that of "window over window", with its multiple and fragmented shutters, the Mexicans call them shutters, are two, far from what appears in the images, where it may seem like only one. Barragán manipulates light with these elements in a masterful way. He uses the high part of the dihedral, perforating the two walls, one to the south and the other to the west, in such a way that the flow of the sun, combined with the controlled movement of the shutters, the Mexicans would say shutters, produces almost a Bachian cantata of light and shadows, such is the precision of the intervention. Precision, not caprice. Wisdom of the master.

At first glance, the disarray of the plants I have already written about, I attributed it to a certain influence of the Arab architecture that interested Barragán so much. To the Alhambra in Granada that he visited in his day. And I believe now that, while that is true, the careful study of these plants speaks of the precision, not necessarily Cartesian, of the master. He handled with great naturalness the slanted paths and the compressions and dilations both in plan and in section. He accentuated these operations with color.

By the way, have you ever noticed that when the master of color arrives in your living room, he chooses white as the dominant color?

## ANECDOTES

And I can not fail to tell some glorious anecdote of this live visit to Barragan that, for me, has been like going to the Holy Places.

When we entered the Capuchin nuns, we were attended by a nun who was very old in age and very small in stature. I decided to call her, her name was Sister Dilecta. The first thing she told us was that it was not allowed to take pictures there. Delicately during the tour I discreetly slipped her a generous alms that must not have seemed bad to her because, at the end of it all, already in the courtyard of the overflowing water basin, she

not only left us, but she herself wielded the huge professional Canon camera that Gilberto Rodriguez was carrying, to take a souvenir photo of us. The scene was unrepeatably: the little nun up on a mezzanine taking our picture. I was sorry I didn't have my camera to bear witness to such a situation.

But, regardless of the nice anecdote, the Capuchinas Chapel is a true masterpiece. And you can feel that Barragán left his soul there. And what is not the soul because he paid for everything.

The naked altarpiece gilded with only gold leaf shines like heaven itself so that the Monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament shines in the center, starring that indescribable space. No eye has seen, no ear has heard.

The large orange cross on the left, on the orange background that changes in shadow with the light, never ceases to amaze us. So much with so little.

Everything in the Capuchinas is sublime. Like a piece of heaven on earth.

After that visit, I had asked to go to the Basilica of Guadalupe. To pray to the Virgin. The Basilica, the work of a famous Mexican architect, was a horror. Outside and inside. If only Barragán had built it. Another rooster would have sung for us.

And many of you already know the story of the golden book because I have told it in writing more than once.

I made that special text about Barragán for a collection published by the Colegio de Arquitectos de Cádiz. The covers of the small book and the box where it was kept were white. But another edition was made, "collector's" where both covers and box were golden. Wonderful. I gave a copy to one of the best architects in Granada, Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas, who lost it. After a few days he found it at the foot of the image of the Virgin in his mother's bedroom. The tata, seeing a small golden book around the house, thought it was a missalito and put it in the right place.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To try to finish I would make three recommendations.

Buy and read and study and enjoy the book on Barragan published by Antonio Ruiz Barbarin. They have almost everything there. And the very complete bibliography, where everything published so far on Barragán appears, is appreciated.

Read and meditate on Barragan's testament. For a true testament are his words, brief and accurate, which he pronounced when he was awarded the Pritzker Prize.

Go to Mexico to see the master's works live and direct. There you will discover how Barragán's work "creates atmospheres rather than containers" and "makes Architecture into spaces for encounter", an Architecture where the idea of "relationship" that, with the help of Philip Drew analyzes and proposes Miguel Angel Alonso del Val, is patently clear.

And after such reflections, go to eat lamb at Arroyo, washed down with Gabriel, a magnificent red wine from the Mexican winery Los Arcángeles. You will thank me.

#### FINALE WITH SLOW TEMPO

To all that has been said about Barragan, I would like to add one more important point.

Prompted by Kenneth Frampton on a recent visit to Madrid, I searched for and discovered a text by Ósip Mandelstam that I consider essential for anyone involved in creation: Colloquy on Dante. It is not to be missed. It is a profound and brilliant essay on artistic creation by such a wonderful poet that, imprisoned by Stalin, in prison he read Virgil aloud to the other prisoners.

In chapter VII he speaks of the slowness of the honey as it spills over the rim of the tilted jar. He does this to make us understand the "slow tempo" of the cello. I could not help remembering the "slowness", the "slow tempo" of Barragán's architecture which, like the music of the cello, leads us to calm and tranquility and to an immense peace. The one I would like for my architecture and for all of you. The immense peace that Barragán gives us with his architecture.