

**THE LIGHT OF BARRAGAN'S LIGHT**

PUBLISHED IN

Barragán: his house. Editorial RM. Barcelona, 2022.

## THE LIGHT OF BARRAGAN'S LIGHT

It has been a long time since I first became acquainted with the work of the Mexican architect Luis Barragán. And I have written several, many texts about him, which I still subscribe to one hundred percent. And now, on the occasion of this celebration, and of this new book, I am once again asked, and I am delighted to do so, to write a new text about the master.

I am listening at this moment, and enjoying enormously, to Gween Daniel, a pianist who plays Bach, just piano, nothing but piano. A marvelous thing. Because if Bach is sober, even more, much more, with just piano. And when I listened to it, I enjoyed it and I remembered Barragán. Because our architect has something of that extreme sobriety. Sobriety that he translated into his beautifully sober architecture and his sober life. Bachian Barragán!

### LIGHT

How can we not understand that LIGHT is the central and main theme of Luis Barragán's architecture? LIGHT is the central theme for every architect, how could it not be for Barragán?

I would like to suggest that you take a look at a small element that the master created for his own house in Tacubaya in 1947. A shutter. Barragán articulates it, or better still, disarticulates it in such a way that, in constant movement, it bears witness to LIGHT and its movement. The tall windows of the afternoon room, the so-called "white room", which seem to sing "window on a window", with their multiple and fragmented shutters, wickets as the Mexicans call them, are two, far from what appears in the images, where they may seem to be only one.

The various folds and their movement are, more than a living sculpture, an architectural mechanism of dialogue with the LIGHT, turning it into a protagonist with the capacity to tense, to refine this space. Prodigious. If you look at it now - haven't you noticed? you will understand everything immediately. LIGHT, direct and reflected, becomes the protagonist of this piece and a clear symbol of the master's interest in LIGHT. Because that shutter, and most of that house, are white. But wasn't Barragán the king of color? Well, that's just it.

Barragán manipulates light with these elements in a masterly manner. There is almost a Bachian cantata of light and shadows, such as the precision of the intervention. Precision, not caprice. Wisdom of the master.

If we analyze any of Barragán's works, we discover that, before color, an adjective, there is LIGHT, the noun of all of them.

## COLOUR

If you, like me, had the patience to count the proportion of white walls compared to colored walls in Barragán, you would be surprised. So much has been published, and only about the master's colored walls, that it has ended up in an identification that is far from the truth. Barragán often uses color as a qualifier to enhance or qualify his spatial operations. With mastery and skill, but always in an adjectival way.

At the Egerston farm in San Cristóbal, in 1968, he put color to the hilt on all the walls and fences that relate to the horses, but not so much on the house itself. Of course, what is repeatedly published are the colored facings, how could one resist!

Both his own Casa Taller of 1947, and the Casa Gálvez in Santo Ángel DF of 1955, have few colors. His house, with a white façade and roofs with white walls. And at the top, a golden facing that makes all the interior light-tinged with gold. This is what I was inspired by for my house in the Sorteo de Monterrey. In this 1947 house by Barragán, the transparency of the large window with the cross carpentry and the large lectern starring the space is fascinating.

Alvaro Siza sums up Barragán in accurate words: "An architecture that envelops us as a physical presence, simple and dense, impossible to describe, to imitate or to photograph; universal and contemporary". "And from the visit to Barragán's house, the color I remember is gold".

Although I know that the Gilardi house is a prodigy of colors and that it is perhaps the one of which most images have been disseminated. And it is to blame for Barragán's identification with color.

## WORDS

A poet friend of mine used to tell me that to sing was to take words for a walk. And he was right. If you take words for a walk, they sing. As Paul Valery would say in his *Eupalinos*.

Beauty, silence, solitude, serenity, joy, death, gardens, fountains, architecture and, nostalgia. These were the words, all of them, that Barragán used, brought out, in his precious speech when he won the Pritzker Prize in Washington in 1980.

Barragán protested in his speech that "In alarming proportion, the words beauty, inspiration, enchantment, magic, sorcery, spell, enchantment, and also others such as serenity, silence, intimacy, and astonishment have disappeared from the lexicon of architecture and architects". For my part, and knowing this, I titled my speech of admission to my Royal Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando in 2014 with an expressive: *Searching boldly for Beauty*. And there I quoted, of course, Barragán.

## ROOFTOPS

How could we not be in awe of Barragán's roofs? They are so simple that their high spatial quality might not strike us. The famous King David, where he discovers Herodias bathing, is on a rooftop that could well have been made by Barragán. And he is so taken with her that he orders her husband, Uriah, to be put on the front line of battle, so that he falls. You know the rest of the story as well as I do. A rooftop by Barragan!

Whenever I have been able to, I have worked with that precious architectural mechanism that is a rooftop. Perhaps because in my city, Cádiz, it is as common a mechanism as in Mexico. I always remember as a child accompanying my mother to hang out the washing there. In the work that, under the protection of Barragán, I did for the house of the lottery in Medellín, Gilberto Rodríguez and I built a roof with a wall in which we opened a hole to frame a beautiful view of the Sierra Madre. A very simple, white rooftop terrace, always with Barragán in mind. The result was marvelous.

## NEWSLINE

In 1992 I was a subscriber to NEWSLINE, the architecture magazine of COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY. The best of the best. And there in issue 10027 of November-December 1992, a full page by Kenneth Frampton devoted to Barragán. There, Kenneth Frampton, with the title borrowed from Adolf Loos: LUIS BARRAGAN: THE MEXICAN OTHER, sets up a very laudatory article on the master.

Frampton accurately nails Barragán's work at the heart of architecture when he proposes "that it may at first glance appear 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", and Frampton goes on to say that this simplicity "is absent from the work of some fashionable architects who seem to insist on being recognized more as artists than as architects". More clearly, water.

## EL MISALITO

My next encounter with Barragán and his work was through a wonderful architect from Granada, Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas, who left us not long ago. On my desk was a copy of ARTES DE MEXICO, issue 23 of March-April 1994, dedicated by Antonio. It was a real discovery. I treasure that magazine like gold.

Antonio told a funny anecdote that has been widely spread: that of the "misalito" (little missal). The College of Architects of Cádiz published, promoted by Tomás Carranza and Julio Malo de Molina, a small white book on Barragán for which I was commissioned to write a text: LA BELLEZA MISMA (BEAUTY ITSELF). I wrote it from the heart. It turned out so well that they decided to make a special edition, a short print run, where the covers and the protective box were gilded. The cleaning lady at Antonio's house didn't know where to put it and left it under an image of the Virgin of Antonio's mother. Since then we have called it the "misalito".

## DISARRAY

At first sight, the untidy appearance of Barragán's plants, which I wrote about at the time, I attributed to a certain influence of the Arab architecture that interested Barragán so much. To the Alhambra in Granada, which he visited in his day. And I believe now that, while that is true, the careful study of the master's plans speaks of a precision that is not necessarily Cartesian. He handled with great naturalness the skewed paths and the compressions and dilations both in the plan and in the section. He accentuated these operations with color, adjectivizing them.

## DETAILS

"Details are often so clear that sometimes they seem to disappear", Alfonso Alfaro tells us when talking about Barragán. What if that is not what happens in this large square window in his house in Tacubaya? The carpentry disappears and the glass is set directly against the walls, lintel jambs, and loft, with a naturalness that surprises us and makes the space flow there.

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

The glass without joinery in its encounter with the walls, far from being a mannerist detail, much less a minimalist one, is an overwhelmingly effective mechanism for expressing the continuity between inside and outside. The breakdown of the door leading out to the garden next to the large opening only adds to the Corbusierian idea of separating functions. And so sometimes color, far from being, as in so many others, a whim, or in some others a corrector of defects, becomes in Barragán a precision mechanism impossible to imitate.

A 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".

## LIGHT, LIGHT, LIGHT

But I will never cease to insist that LIGHT is the central and main theme of Barragán's architecture, of architecture itself.

I have written more than once that when, at last, an architect discovers that LIGHT is the central theme of Architecture, then he begins to understand something, and he begins to be a true architect. And that, in Barragán, is evident from the very first moment.

LIGHT is not something vague, diffuse, or taken for granted because it is always present. It is not for nothing that the sun rises for everyone, every day. LIGHT is something

concrete, precise, continuous, material. A measurable and quantifiable matter if ever there was one, as physicists know very well and some architects seem to ignore.

LIGHT in architecture has as much material entity as stone. We think and write that the Gothics performed marvelous sorceries with stone, making it work to the maximum of its possibilities, to achieve LIGHT, more LIGHT. More properly we should think and write that what the goths did was to work with LIGHT as a material. As they knew that the sun attacks diagonally, they lengthened their windows, they raised them, to catch those diagonal, almost vertical rays, preluding what would later be possible to do today. Rather than organizing the stone to trap the LIGHT, we can read the Gothic as a desire to organize the LIGHT, the material LIGHT, to tighten the space.

We know that matter is neither created nor destroyed; it is transformed. That is why, rather than modern materials, we must speak rigorously of materials used in a modern sense, after a reflection of centuries whose decantation we enjoy. As always, in the end, a question of Thought, of Reason. Thus, stone, the ancient stone, is transformed in the hands of Mies Van der Rohe into the most modern of materials. And steel and flat glass did not come out of nowhere. The two materials that have revolutionized architecture are, have always been latent. It is only now, elaborated with a new idea, that they are capable of producing these spatial miracles. Barragán not only understands this perfectly, but he puts it into practice in all his works.

Could we then now consider that the key to Barragán's architecture lies in the profound understanding of LIGHT as matter, as material, as modern material? Could we not understand that the moment in the History of Architecture has arrived, a tremendous and exciting moment, when we must face LIGHT.

Let there be LIGHT! And LIGHT was made. The first created material, the most eternal and universal of materials, thus becomes the central material with which to build, to CREATE space. Space in its most modern understanding. The architect thus returns to recognize himself once again as a CREATOR. As the master of the world of LIGHT.

And to finish, I have not found more appropriate words than those of a poet, José María Buendía, capable of summarising all that has been said about the master: "And who will this Barragán be? who thus moves away, and leaves the walls weeping, when he leaves".