

Luis Barragán – Stylistic and Cultural Influences in His Works

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Abstract: *Luis Barragán is the only Mexican architect to have received the most prestigious recognition in architecture, the Pritzker Prize, which he was awarded in 1980. He grew up in a wealthy, Catholic family, and divided his time, in his early childhood, between his hometown and his parents' farm (hacienda), "Los Corrales", located on the outskirts of the city of La Manzanilla de La Paz. His memories regarding his homes are going to follow him throughout his life, and have been a constant source of inspiration for his design, as himself acknowledges oftentimes. In his acceptance speech, he mentions several feelings and concepts that not only best define his work but also guide his creative process—concepts that we will explore further: religion and myth, beauty, silence, solitude, serenity, humble, joy, death.*

Keywords: *Creativity; Inspiration; Concept; Childhood; Memories;*

Introduction

Luis Barragán is one of the most prominent architects of the twentieth century, and his works cannot be understood without knowing the context in which he designed them, his home country, Mexico, and the people that influenced him, the people he surrounded himself with. This study aims to make correlations between Barragán's memories regarding his childhood and the way it influenced and it is reflected in his designs. I made use of the numerous interviews he gave, on which occasion he almost always recalled spaces or facts related to his early years growing up in the state of Jalisco, Mexico.

1. Beginnings

Luis Barragán was born on March 9, 1902 in Guadalajara, the capital of the Mexican state of Jalisco, as the son of Juan José Barragán and Ángela Morfín. He grew up in a wealthy, Catholic family, and divided his time, in his early childhood, between his hometown and his parents' farm (hacienda), "Los Corrales", located on the outskirts of the city of La Manzanilla de La Paz.

Luis Barragán is the only Mexican architect to have received the most prestigious recognition in architecture, the Pritzker Prize, which he was awarded in 1980. He was also the second recipient of the prize, following Philip Johnson in 1979. In his acceptance speech, he mentions several feelings and concepts that not only best define his work but also guide his creative process—concepts that we will explore further: religion and myth, beauty, silence, solitude, serenity, humble, joy, death.

His work must be seen in the context of the Tapatío school, called in Spanish Escuela Tapatía or El Regionalismo Tapatío, which "operated" between 1927 and 1936. This included (his friends) the architects: Ignacio Díaz Morales (1905-1992), Rafael Urzua (1905-1991), Pedro Castellanos (1902–1961), Enrique González Madrid and Mathias Goeritz (1915-1990). Barragán

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was influenced not only by them but also by his university professor at the Escuela Libre de Ingenieros in Guadalajara, Agustín Basave (1886–1961), from whom he inherited his passion for architecture and the fine arts. Last but not least, his work is influenced by the civil engineer and urban planner Juan Palomar y Arias (1894-1987), by the muralist José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), by the painter Jesús “Chucho” Reyes (1880-1977) and by the lawyer José Arriola Adame (1890-1962), passionate about music and literature.

2. The Three Periods of His Work

His work can be divided into three periods: the traditional period (1925–1934), the Cubist period (1935–1939), and the period of maturation (1940–1988). Chronologically, his trajectory is coherent, with his personal and professional evolution clearly reflected through his works.

In the first phase he designed and renovated houses only in his hometown, Guadalajara, and a conceptual and formal timidity can be observed. The best known works are the González Luna house (1928), the houses for Emiliano Robles León on Avenida de la Paz (1928), the renovation of the Carmen Orozco house (1934) and the renovation of the Barragán family house in Chapala. The influence of Ferdinand Bac's Mediterranean works and Moorish architecture on these projects is very present.

The second period, between 1935 and 1939, is marked by Barragán's relocation to Mexico City – a capital characterised by a progressive and expansionist atmosphere. Adapting to this context, Barragán responded to market demands by constructing, in a relatively short time, numerous residential apartment buildings as well as a few rental houses. Between 1931 and 1932, he undertook two important trips abroad – one to New York and another to Europe – which significantly influenced his approach to residential design during this period: efficient, practical homes created with minimal means for maximum profit. This phase represents a radical transition – from his earlier Moorish-inspired projects, distinguished by their sensitivity, attention to detail, and Mexico-adapted color palette, to stark, imported modernist prisms rendered in white. The materials lost their former refinement; metal, concrete, and glass were employed in their raw, unpolished states. The driving force behind these projects was economy – of space, of color, and of poetic expression. Notable works from this period include: the J. Chávez Peón de Ochoa House (1936–1940), the Lorenzo Garza House, the Ribot Apartments (1936–1940), the Carmen R.G. de Cristo Apartments (1936–1940), the Widow Alzar House (1937), the House of Dr. David Kostovetsky (1938), and four painters' studios (1939).

The final period, beginning after 1940, marks Barragán's phase of maturation. His style becomes increasingly defined, harmoniously integrating everything he had seen, experienced, and read up to that point, all filtered through his personal values and passions: a love for beauty, serenity, color, gardens, fountains, horses, religion, myth, peace, and solitude. His most renowned works originate from this period, all located in Mexico City: his own house on General Francisco Ramírez Street (1948), the masterplan for Las Arboledas (1958–1961), the masterplan for Los Clubes, the San Cristóbal stables and residence, the house for Antonio Gálvez (1955), the Capuchin Chapel (1952–1955), and the Gilardi House (1975–1977).

3. Beauty. Serenity. Color.

“My architecture is autobiographical...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, for instance, the whitewashed 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”².

The harmony of Barragán’s compositions is achieved through balanced proportions and a human scale, the natural integration of architecture within the landscape—resulting in luminous spaces—the careful selection and combination of materials, and, last but not least, a distinctive chromatic palette that sets him apart from his European contemporaries. The sense of serenity that Barragán seeks to evoke in his mature works is attained through the seamless integration of interior and exterior spaces, a vibrant color palette—dominated by yellows and bold pinks, his signature—and the poetic balance of forms, reminiscent of a painting by Giorgio de Chirico. Materiality also plays a crucial role, stimulating the haptic sense and enhancing the feeling of warmth and welcome, reinforced by the human scale of his architecture. All these characteristics are more prominent in the maturation phase, and can be mostly seen in his works in Mexico City: Gilardi House (1975–1977), Pedragal House (1948-1951), Galvez House (1955), or in his own house and studio (1948).

4. Religion. Mith. Quietness. Solitude.

“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 wellbeing to be experienced in those uninhabited cloisters and solitary courts. How I have wished that these feelings may leave their mark on my work”³.

The Capuchin Chapel (Capilla del Convento de las Capuchinas Sacramentarias del Purísimo Corazón de María) was designed and built by Barragán between 1952 and 1955, funded entirely from his own budget, which afforded him significant creative freedom. In this project, we once again encounter elements reinterpreted from traditional Mexican architecture – features that have become hallmarks of Barragán’s style: honey-colored wooden floors and doors, vividly textured walls, the play of light, and a strong connection to nature. The play of light is achieved through various means, each contributing to the chapel’s mystical atmosphere: stained glass windows by Mathias Goeritz, a yellow openwork wall, and concealed light sources. The courtyard also offers a serene, calming presence. Its natural elements – plants and a tree – contrast with the geometric simplicity of the openwork wall, the fountain, and the gray paving, all evoking memories of Barragán’s childhood in Mazamitla.

The five Satellite Towers (Torres de Satélite), built at the entrance to Mexico City in 1958, represent a secular urban sculpture with religious inspiration. Barragán drew inspiration from his visit to the towers of San Gimignano in Italy, while also being influenced by his close collaborators, Jesús Reyes and Mathias Goeritz. They were designed to serve as visual markers – visible from a distance, from the highway, and from fast-moving cars – to signal the residential development of Ciudad Satélite, a project that was ultimately never completed. The towers vary

² Barragan, Luis. 1980. *Ceremony Acceptance Speech*. Retrieved April 1, 2025 https://www.pritzkerprize.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/1980_Acceptance%20Speech.pdf, p. 2.

³ Barragan, Luis. 1980. *Ceremony Acceptance Speech*. Retrieved April 1, 2025 https://www.pritzkerprize.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/1980_Acceptance%20Speech.pdf, p. 3.

in height – 57 m, 48 m, 39 m, and 34 m – and were constructed layer by layer, a process that remains visibly evident both to pedestrians and passing vehicles. The towers' textured surfaces and vivid colors evoke the whitewashed façades of traditional Mexican homes.

5. The Garden. The Fountain. The Horses.

“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, 5 meters high, above 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 ambiance of a fairy tale.”⁴

Between 1958 and 1961, Luis Barragán and several partners acquired a large tract of land in Mexico City intended for horse enthusiasts. Barragán was responsible for the subdivision, the design of housing regulations, and the development of infrastructure for both residents and horses – the latter being the central element of the project. Water, horses, and gardens – his lifelong passions – are harmoniously interwoven in this development, which was named *Las Arboledas* (The Groves).

Horses are a recurring theme in Barragán's work – often a pretext, yet ultimately becoming the primary 'beneficiaries' of his designs. Between 1963 and 1964, Barragán undertook a project similar to *Las Arboledas*, located nearby, called *Los Clubes* (The Clubs). In this development, he assumed multiple roles – investor, developer, architect, and urban planner – granting him considerable creative freedom, ideal for a visionary like Barragán. The San Cristóbal Stables and the Egerström House were designed in collaboration with architect Andrés Casillas. The entire ensemble is rich in references to Barragán's childhood experiences in both urban and rural Mexico: vivid colors, a solid wooden entrance gate crafted in the traditional style, textured paving, and *Fuente de Los Clubes* (or *Fuente de los Amantes*), a refined reinterpretation of a rural drinking trough, inspired by those found in Mazamitla.

During his first trip outside of Mexico in 1924–1925, Barragán visited the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris (1925), an event that would broaden his artistic horizons. He was particularly captivated by the exhibition of Ferdinand Bac (1859–1952), a French illustrator, landscape designer, and writer, known for works such as *Les Colombières* and *Jardins enchantés*. Bac's influence would resonate throughout Barragán's entire career. Through Bac's personal example, Barragán found motivation and clarity in addressing two of his own anxieties: How can one create meaningful architecture without formal academic training in the field, and how can architecture authentically express Mexican culture and identity? The answer to the second question lay within it: by understanding and embracing the relationship between architecture, the garden, and the natural environment – not just the physical context (as Bac did with the Mediterranean coast), but also the cultural legacy of a place. This contextual

⁴ Ambasz, Emilio. 1976. *The Architecture of Luis Barragan*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art. p. 9.

approach, deeply rooted in local identity and landscape, would become the guiding principle of Barragán's work after the 1940s.

5. Conclusions

Luis Barragán's works are abundant in references from the places he grew up in, as he himself acknowledges, and due to the authenticity of his works he is still a source of inspiration for Mexican architects and not only. An architecture deeply rooted in the Mexican tradition, but also filtered through his own personality, by his experiences, travels and interactions with so many interesting individuals, it is proof that quality is not pastiche, but a thoughtful choice of means of expression, creating an emotional experience.

6. References

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