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Luis Barragán Morfín: Regionalist Architecture?

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Abstract

Luis Barragán Architecture has been considered by Theoreticians of Architecture as a Regionalist one, but is it really the case? Through the analysis of the correspondence, writings and interviews made to the architect along his life, this question search to be answered in this essay.

Keywords: Mexican architecture, Luis Barragán, Regionalism, Cultural References

Luis Barragán Morfín ¿arquitectura regionalista?

Resumen

La arquitectura de Luis Barragán ha sido considerada por teóricos de la arquitectura como regionalista, ¿pero realmente es así? A través del análisis de la correspondencia, escritos y entrevistas realizadas al arquitecto a lo largo de su vida, se busca contestar esta pregunta.

Palabras clave: arquitectura mexicana, Luis Barragán, regionalismo, influencias culturales

Introduction

It has been said that Luis Barragán architecture is a regionalist one, but is it really regionalist? Is it the result of the site in which it is built? Does it really represent Mexican Architecture values and ideas? Many of these questions can be answered by reading his correspondence, interviews and essays that the architect produced along different stages of his life.

Along its three architectural periods, Barragán had different influences in his architecture, some of them from national sources but most of them came from international ones, also the influences received by the architect came not only from other architects but from artists such as painters, sculptors or writers whose ideas enriched and in some cases transformed his architecture.

Barragán's architecture was the result of international architectural ideas that were developing mainly in Europe at the time; only on his third architectural period, which is the one that has obtained international recognition, is the one in which the architect collected some of the elements than Mexican traditional architecture had developed in the Occidental area of the country, and which by the way is the result of different traditions in itself.

Overseas Influences

Barragán had a vast artistic background, result of his family status and position

among the Guadalajara society and government, fact that allowed him to travel several times to Europe and the United States, being the first one to Europe in 1925.¹

On this journey, he got in touch with the first elements that became part of his architectural influences, as he visited in Spain the Alhambra and the Generalife in Andalucía, which were a very stimulating discovery for him, and from which he had long lasting memories when he recalls: "to visit the Arrayanes' Patio in the Alhambra, you must walk through a very small tunnel and in a moment combined with the smell of myrtle a beautiful space open in front of me, a patio with arcades that contrasted against heavy walls and the sound of water. I have never forgot this emotion" (Riggen: 115).

Also he traveled to Paris and visited the *Exposition Internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*, in which he had the opportunity to see Le Corbusier's Pavillion of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Melnikov's Russian Pavillion, but the most interesting discovery he made was a little garden designed by Ferdinand Bac, which as Barragán mentioned was of great influence in his earlier work allowing him to get in touch with the Mediterranean Architecture, although some studies suggest that also the influence that he received came from the Spanish Colonial Revival Style that prevailed in America especially in Los Angeles and Miami at the time.

Although Barragán mentioned that the architecture showed at the exposition was

¹ Mexico was struggling to recover after the War of Revolution and only very rich people could do travelling to Europe.

worthless, the interest for this “new” architecture was sowed into him, proof of this idea can be seen with his subscription to the most important European magazines of the time as soon as he arrived into Mexico; magazines which could keep him up to date with the new architectural ideas that were developing in Europe, such as the ones of the Bauhaus or the ones expressed by Le Corbusier in *Le Esprit Nouveau*, artistic movements that were almost unknown in Mexico at the time.

This European experience influenced his first oeuvres in Guadalajara, buildings in which the Mediterranean style elements in architecture and gardens, inspired by Ferdinand Bac were taken into account in their conception, being this manner closer to the stylistic ideals and way of life of a very traditional society. Although in his houses, the usual scheme of a patio’s inner life distribution is transformed into a house isolated in the middle of a garden, idea that left aside the customary architectural distribution of domestic architecture built in Mexico since the sixteenth century.

Another important moment at the conformation of his architectural style was in 1931, when in a travel to New York got in touch with José Clemente Orozco, from whom Barragán received a great influence² and also introduces him into the Delfic Studio where he meet the Austrian architect Frederick Kiesler. With Kiesler, Barragán discussed the new world’s ar-

chitecture but also learn from him that the concept function could have different acceptations and not only the one of Le Corbusier “the machine for living in”, also function should imply the heighten and lighten of the spirit of the people that would inhabit it.

Also in this year he travels to Europe, but this time his travel was more focused on architecture. Finally at this trip he meets Ferdinand Bac personally, also along this trip Barragán made an important acquaintance which would be of great influence to his work, Le Cobusier. In this trip Barragán visit Le Corbusier studio and got introductory letters so he could visit the Ville Stein-de Monzie, the Ville Savoy and the Charles Beistegui’s apartment at the Champs Elysees.

The visit of this three oeuvres, gave Barragán a new light into Le Corbusier’s architectural ideas, but fundamentally the Charles Beistegui’s apartment played a key part at the third period of the architectural work of Barragán. This work of Le Corbusier as it has been mention by some authors is one of the least studied, but from this oeuvre Barragán took different elements that became part of his architectural language. The first one and more easily recognizable is the stair formed of a thin flat slab that looks just like a silhouette, this stair would be used years later in his own house in Mexico City. Also from this apartment a clear relation can be established between the roof terrace that Le Corbusier created

2 Through the paintings of Orozco, Barragán confirmed the importance of heavy walls to create harmonious and private architecture.

for Charles Beistegui and the roof terrace that Barragan design in his own house.

This roof garden was the size of a large living room with a carpet of grass and surrounded by white walls of approximately five feet in height, which allowed in a stand position to observe some of the most important monuments of Paris; such as the Arc de Triumph or the Eiffel Tower. Also an inner outer relation is created, as it has no roof, so it allowed only to see the sky from a seated position, transforming it into the ceiling of this living room. This surrealist idea of the inside-outside space and isolation that could be created through the use of walls and the contemplation of the sky were valued by the Mexican architect.

Another lesson learned by Barragán from Le Corbusier work but in particular from Beistegui's apartment was the use of circulations as an element that helped to create complex spatial sequences. Analyzing the isometric drawing of the apartment it can be seen how the circulation through the platforms that conformed the garden and terraces allowed to create different sensations and views of the Paris skyline, lesson that would be kept on the subconscious of the architect and would be used in his third architectural stage.

This apartment, but particularly the roof garden suggests some of the connections of Le Corbusier to the surrealist movement idea that could lead also to understand the line that joins the affinity that Barragán propose between his works with the work of surrealist painters. In an

interview he clearly stated that De Chirico was a great influence for him "the magic that I always looked for I founded it in him. When I saw his paintings I thought: This is what also I can do in landscape architecture"³ "My work resemblance the Chirico's landscape as it reflect solitude" (Riggen: 112).

As result of this second voyage to Europe, the second architectural period of Barragán develops, being most of the work built in Mexico City, which is characterized by the use of an architectural vocabulary influenced by Le Corbusier and the Modern Style. Also along this second architectural period Barragán received the influence of Richard Neutra, whom his partner Max Cetto made introduction in 1938. From Neutra Barragán took the ideas of the relation between the inner an outer space and the fusion of both of them, also he learned the concept that the house or building should respond and be related with the place in which it is going to be built.

Also is important to highlight that along these two architectural periods, one of the elements for which Barragán's architecture is know worldwide, "color" has not been used. On the works of these two previous periods, color was used in a subtle way, maybe for a detail in a handrail or the frame of a door, but the exploration of planes painted in bright solid colors was not yet done. That is another interesting part of Barragán's work; he had always been interested in the way in which light affects and create new per-

3 For Barragán didn't existed a clear difference between architecture and landscape architecture, everything was architecture.

ceptions in architecture. So maybe it is not so coincidental that his third architectural period can be related with his third trip to Europe, where he spent almost a year and a half and his travel took him to the Magreb.

In here he gets in touch with Islamic and Desert Architecture such as the Casbahs, which impressed him a lot as he recognizes that “this is architecture that comes from the ground and the wall rocks” (Riggen: 110) it is an architecture that is attached to the place, the people and its religion. This encounter with the Mediterranean architecture confirms the idea acquired by Barragán at the Alhambra, the sensations and effects that a heavy wall can create in an architectural space through the use of it.

In relation with the use of color and light, during this third period that goes from 1952 until his death, Barragán had two strong influences that marked the use of both elements in his work, the first one was Jesús Reyes Ferreira, a Mexican artist whose inspiration could be traced in the popular culture of Mexico; markets, squares or little towns. From this artist Barragán learned the use of color but also the value that Ferreira gave to sensitivity and perception; for him the aesthetic experience was a pleasure and he believed in the intrinsic qualities of the beautiful that mean only beauty (Riggen: 165).

Also Barragán got the influence of different artists such as Orozco, De Chirico and other surrealist painters, but an artist that played a key role in the use of light and color for Barragán was Josef Albers. Barragán and Josef Albers were acquainted along the 60's as some letters from Anni

and Josef Albers on Barragán's archive prove. From this relation, Barragán got to know the work of Albers related with the exploration of abstraction and color, the psychological effects of color and space and the nature of perception, themes that were of great interest for the architect and that were applied at the architectural work of his third period.

Luis Barragán's House

The decantation of all these influences and elements along Barragán's life, gave as result his third architectural period; period in which it can be observed how although it has been said that his work corresponds to a Mexican traditional culture and therefore comes its regionalist denomination, it could be better understood as a contemporary architecture based on the state of the art principles in architecture at that time.

Looking the façades of the houses designed by Barragán, their expression is of a Modern Style image, the differences come as the interior of the oeuvre is experienced, the enclosure of space or the ambiances that the decoration and light creates, maybe it could be said that it is when regionalism starts to emerge.

An excellent example of this process of assimilation and transformation, which took Barragán around thirty years, is his own house in Mexico City. The design of the house began around 1947, during his second architectural period, when it was published in the Mexican Architectural magazine *Arquitectura Mexico* in 1951. The plans published in the magazine show a house with a conventional distri-

bution, based in flowing open spaces and big screen windows. It is only through the reflection of the ideas he had acquired along his trips, readings and experiences that the house starts its slow and gradual transformation, turning into what became known as “Barragán Style”.

In an interview done by Elena Poniatowska in 1976 Barragán declared: “Man needs a place where he can get protection, a place to rest and isolate. Look, here there was a big window, after a few months I realized that it perturb me and I closed it; over there, between the dining room and the living room, there was no separation, from here where we are seated the garden could be seen, that annoyed me to, I didn’t need to much light; I built a wall and near the wall I placed this armchairs where we are seated. Immediately I felt better. Enclosed spaces are the ones that create tranquility.” (Riggen, 1996: 109). This isolation was reinforced through the creation of a spatial sequence with mobile elements such as a screen, which blocks the view of the living room from the hall.

Also Barragán started to experiment with color, as Díaz Morales evoke “at first instance the colors in Barragán work were ochre, blue, vermilion or cream” (González: 45) in his house the architect made experiments using bright colors such as yellow in order to create the sensation that the sun was lightning the space; or he used fuchsia in elements such as doors or frames creating great areas of color that in combination with light gave as result a different perception of the space.

Color is used also at the roof terrace, which as it has been already mentioned was influenced by Le Corbusier’s Beistegui apartment; it is another room of the house, in which the inner and outer spaces blends and where the sky become the ceiling. In here Barragán found solitude and serve him as a meditation space, so the height of the walls within the years continue increasing until it became a space completely isolated with out any intrusion of its surroundings.

Also on this terrace Barragán decided to experiment with color. Initially he used earth colors such as terracotta although in the course of time the color pallet evolved, transforming some walls with orange, fuchsia or blue paint, which created different sensations in the space.

Another transformation which Barragan made to the original design was enclosing the workshop area, originally the façade of this space was a glass curtain wall but few years latter the architect decided to built a wall that enclosed the space and open a door which lead into a patio with a very original fountain conformed by big terracotta clay pots which usually are used to produce pulque.

Conclusions

The architecture of Barragán as Ambasz mention is autobiographical, but Barragán’s biography includes lot of influences and meaningful learnings obtained from sources that did not come from Mexican tradition, though his architecture is the decantation of different traditions achieved

from European, American, Mexican and Asian sources which can be clearly seen in the design of his landscape work.

If it is Regionalist, it depends on the definition that it is given to the term as much of the work done by Barragán in this last period was developed in Mexico City, in which the use of these bright colors in vernacular architecture is not common. Also if it is taken into account what Barragán

himself thought about his architecture, he never considered him as a Regionalist Architect, on the contrary he consider that his architecture was a contemporary one, which responded to the ideas that were developing at the time in the Architectural International context, looking for perfection through the use of local materials, color, light and vegetation; creating with all of these elements timeless pieces of art. 🏡

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