Fond Memories of Place:
Luis Barragan
and Ricardo Legorreta

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Nostalgia is the poetic awareness of our personal past, and since the artist’s own past is the main spring of his creative potential, the architect must listen and heed his nostalgic revelations. (Luis Barragan, 1980)

It is hard to imagine designing without engaging one’s memories. No matter how powerful zeitgeists or the imperatives of timeless design principles might be, experiences registered in memory would seem inevitably to have a place in designing. But memories of what? And what sort of memories?

Contemporary Mexican architecture offers lessons about a way of designing that depends on memory as much as on design ideologies. Two of Mexico’s leading designers of this century, Luis Barragan and Ricardo Legorreta, have drawn upon potent personal recollections in fashioning buildings and landscapes. While their design methods are complex, and as do other architects, they depend on both intuition and rationality, a striking feature of their discourse about designing is the role of memory as an impetus for and a measure of design quality. Memories provide inspiration and a standard for evaluation.

Needless to say, fond memories are not sufficient as a basis for design, and sentimentality has its dangers. I do not offer this interpretation as a foolproof or universal method for design, but as an insight into the work of these Mexican architects that could be of value to sensitive designers everywhere. Places are registered in memory, and the power of those memories in turn infuses designs with special qualities.
Villages and Village Life, Expressions of Popular Culture

Barragan: 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 areas to divide poverty from the heavy rains which fall in that area. From the earth's color was interesting because it was red earth. In this village, the water distribution system consisted of great potted legs, in the form of triangles, which ran on a support structure of three forks, five meters high, over the roofs. The aqueduct passed 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 channelled legs, covered with moss, dripped water all over town, of course. It gave this village the ambiance of a fairy tale.

No, there are no photograph. I have only its memory.

(Ambroz, 1976)

Barragan: 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 as, for instance, the sheltered zocalo, the peace to be found in patios and orchards; the colorful streets; the humble majesty of the village squares surrounded by study open corridors. (Barragan, 1988)
Barragan: Likewise I can tell, especially to people that know Mexico, about the beauty of streets lined with walls and fountains, like Pátzcuaro, where one finds the attraction of the streets opening and leading into open spaces and plazas with trees and fountains that increase the beauty of the streets. (Barragan, 1952)

Legorreta: When I go as markets, when I see the things people weave, everywhere color seems to be the way people like it. On the way to my father’s ranch in Tototepec I found a house with walls painted in opposite patterns. While I was photographing this intriguing sight, the owner appeared, and asked him, “Why did you paint it this way?” He was surprised by the question, for there was no special reason. He said, “I just enjoy painting it like that.” (Ataso, 1990)

Legorreta: I love folk art. It is naive, fresh, intelligent and deep. Ever since I was a child I have been attracted to it. I can see all aspects of life in folk art. I enjoy being surrounded by the figures. I don’t like to collect them; rather, I buy them, live with them, and they disappear. Through folk art I continually learn the freedom of color. There are no rules, just pure emotion and freedom. The results are fantastic. (Ataso, 1990)

Monastic Cloisters, Patios and Courtyards

Barragan: Being a Catholic, I have frequently visited with reverence the vast empty monumental monastic buildings that we inherited from the peaceful religious faith and architectural genius of our colonial ancestors, and I have always been deeply moved by the peace and well-being to be experienced in these unobstructed cloisters and solitary courts. Here I have wished that these feelings may have their mark on my work. (Barragan, 1930)

Legorreta: Cloister, which figure importantly in Pre-Hispanic architecture, are one part of the rich heritage of places bounded simply. Moorish gardens, another heritage, are lush endearing hidden away, the source for the Mexican courtyards which is a refuge. Most interesting, both spatially and in their place at the heart of buildings, is the patio. (Ataso, 1990)

Moorish Design

Barragan: To the north of Mexico City lies a vast extension of volcanic rock, and, overwhelmed by the beauty of this landscape, I decided to create a series of gardens to humanize, without destroying, its magic. While walking along the lava crevices, under the shades of imposing ramparts of live rock, I suddenly discovered, to my astonishment, a small prairie green valley — the shepherds called them “jardines” — surrounded and enclosed by the most fantastic, capricious rock formations wove a soft, musk rock by the onslaught of powerful prehistoric winds. The unexpected discovery of these “jardines” gave me a sensation similar to one experienced when, being walked through a dark and narrow tunnel of the Alhambra, I suddenly emerged into

Bottom: Patio. Courtesy Ayres and Ayres Archive, Architectural Documents Collection, The University of Texas at Austin.
the rescue, silent and solitary "Patio of the Myrtles" hidden in the overgrowths of that ancient palace. Sometimes I had the feeling that it echoed what a perfect garden — no matter its size — should be: nothing less than the entire universe.

This memorable epiphany has always been with me, and it is not by mere chance that from the first garden for which I am responsible all those following are attempts to capture the echo of the immense illusion to be derived from the aesthetic wisdom of the Spanish Moors.

(Barragan, 1980)

Barragan: In the case of Maroc, I was greatly impressed by the Casbah. Its plain walls spoke of a very agreeable interior life. It is very interesting to notice the integration of this kind of architecture with the landscape. It is difficult to define where the Casbah ends and the landscape begins because there is such an effective fusion. (Salvaté, 1980)

(Barragan: The Casbah is, I believe, the structure which most clearly reflects the way its inhabitants live and dress, their custom, dances, the surrounding landscape. (Ugarté, 1989)

Fountains, Aqueducts, Water Channels

Barragan: While awake or when sleeping, the sweet memories of marvellous fountains have accompanied me throughout my life. I recall the fountains of my childhood: the ditches for excess water of the dam; the dark ponds in the recesses of abandoned orchards; the carved stone of shallow wells in the courtyard patios; the small country springs, glistening mirrors of ancient giant water-loving trees; and then, of course, the old aqueducts — perennial reminders of Imperial Rome — which from far horizons bury their liquid treasure to deliver it with the rainbow ribbon of a waterfall. (Barragan, 1980)

Barragan: With the exception of Paris, Spain interests me more than any other place. The sight of the Alhambra in Granada with its fountains, fountains and water-channels affected me greatly. I would define these spaces as magical. (Salvaté, 1980)

Legoreta: I learned a very discreet and mysterious entrance sequence for the hotel, something to be discovered little by little as you penetrated the building. Part of the first discovery would be water, in I thought of a fountain — as many patios in Mexico, there would be a fountain. Then the concept grew in my mind of an aggressive fountain, one that pricks up a reaction — vigorous, thrashing water there within the shelter of the roof. (Azue, 1990)

Walls

It is noteworthy that at one time Barragan and Legorreta planned to collaborate on a book about Mexican walls. In the end, Legorreta completed the project on his own.

Barragan: A landscape has no value when seen through a plate of glass through familiarity, by-your-eye constant presence, you reduce its value. I enjoyed Madangaleh's dome most when I was in, once, through a keyhole. So why open a whole wall to bring a garden into a house? (Rudashevsky, 1955)

Barragan: [Mysterio] cannot fail to be used in the art of garden building, and to me may recall the pleasure of walking in some of the streets of Florence, limited by the walls of its large villa and garden, in the streets of Rome and in so many other cities founded by private gardens, the beauty of which was not from walls and gates, bringing forth a greater beauty and attraction than many of the streets with open gardens that one finds in America and Mexico City. (Barragan, 1952)

Legorreta: Walls reflect one Mexican history. The Pre-Hispanic wall — strong, ancient, stark and sometimes colorless — carries the dignity of its makers and the magnificence of that civilization. The Colonial wall has a different spirituality, not Spanish or Indian, but mesoamerican, the blend of two races and religions. The modern, fantasmatic and sensibility of the Indians is married to the confidence and aggressive religiosity of Spain.

Sometimes the wall rises to protect outside influence and the forces which oppress Mexicans. With walls our great nationalities defended both the sources of our pain and our struggle and hope for freedom.

When other cultures influence Mexico, the wall almost disappears, as though it is embarrassed and has gone to hide. Under French influence in the last century, and American influence today, the wall does not stand — it hides and cries. It always there is a constant, humble, discreet wall that does not die but serves the true Mexican, the glorious vernacular wall, a source of unlimited inspiration, strong, sweet and romantic, full of color — decisively Mexican. (Attos, 1990)

Ferdinand Bac, French Landscape Architect, Writer

Barragan: Then there was my discovery of the magical gardens of Ferdinand Bac, a discovery which was in fact a kind of liberation because it allowed me to see the importance of the imagination and to free myself from a lot of traditional ideas. (Sigarre, 1989)

Barragan: My experience with Pedroso go back to my foundness for gardens, which I first found in the work of a French writer, rather than in the gardens themselves. The literature that describes how enhances the magic in these places. In this way, I acquired a taste for landscape and put it into practice here, originally on my own project. (Bayon, 1976)

Barragan: The work by Ferdinand Bac... was important in this respect. There was a Mediterranean and Spanish element here which we believed was applicable to Mexico. Nacho Díaz Moroles, Rafael
Urvanos and myself began to see the importance of creating a place, a patio or a garden with an air of refinement, of establishing a relationship between the house itself and the garden, putting something of the garden in the rooms themselves. The inspiration for all this was due to Baez (Urrate, 1989).

Barragán: Ferdinand Tac趾e taught us that “the soul of garden shelters the greatest sense of freedom at man’s disposal,” and it is in this small domain, I have done nothing else but joined the millenary seductivity in which we are all subjects; the ambition of expressing materially a sentiment, common to many men in search of a link with nature, by creating a place of repose and peaceful pleasure. (Barragán, 1980)

**Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira, Mexican “Naive” Painter**

**Barragán:** It is essential that an architect in his house be able to see, to see in and out a way that the vision is not overshadowed by rational analysis. And in this respect I will take advantage of his ineffable aesthetic taste, taught us the afflatus art of seeing with innocence. I refer to the Mexican painter Jesus (Chucho) Reyes Ferreira, for whose work I publicly acknowledge my indebtedness. (Barragán, 1980)

**Entrance, Prieto Lopez House, Mexico City, Luis Barragán, 1949. Courtesy Tim Street-Porter.**

**Commentary**

There are several noteworthy observations about how these memories are an impetus for designing. First, recollections are not transposed literally into new designs, but offer qualities to be sought. Only in one case does Legero speak of a literal transposition: I used the proportions of the flight of steps at Hacienda Polipoles, as a model for the broad staircase at Hotel Camino Real Mexico City. I hope it is not only the measure, but something deeper, that I have achieved. (Attwo, 1990)

Barragán summed up the sentiment against idealism with this: He should try to produce with modern architecture the same attraction that is found in the surface, space, and volumes of pre-Columbian architecture as well as colonial and popular architecture, but it has to be done with a contemporary expression. Otherwise, we cannot repeat these forms exactly, but we can analyze the essence of these elements. So that, without copying the same garden, patio and places, we can transmit to people the experience of contact which may make their lives a bit more palatable. It is exactly what modern cities lack the most. (Bayon, 1976)

Instead of literal, the relationship between memory and design is analogous. Barragán: From coral to coral one goes, from one discovery to another, as in the patio of the Alhambra in Granada, which had a strong influence on me. (Elli, 1981).
Barragan: I look myself, if, beside gardens for private homes, we may be able to build gardens of private nature for housing groups. I believe it can be done if we study these community gardens — like those of the Generalife in Granada — at a common garden with such characteristics that the individual may feel in those partial and separate garden areas — with intimate rituals and corners — in his own garden. Of course one must be careful to have the character and atmosphere of these gardens modern and functional in their planning and design and in their plastic bases. (Barragan, 1952)

Legorreta: The plan of Camino Real Mexico is organized with interior courtyards and gardens which offer rooms a great deal of privacy and make the hotel a true refuge from the city, not unlike the monasteries of earlier centuries. In fact, during the design phase we called the courtyards “mitisios” and named them accordingly: "San Francisco," "San Juan," "La Palma" and so forth. These residential courts are removed from the public areas of the complex, ensuring quiet. (Atton, 1990)

Legorreta: [The scheme for Southlake/Westlake, Texas] is inspired by haciendas. When my [fellow architect] visited Mexico I took him to see the Hacienda Espejo de los Llanos on the edge of Mexico City. And we looked at photographs of 'real' and I talked about what really means to me. The concept was to erect a series of compounds with 'real'. Inside of each the architectural character could be unique; each architect could design somewhat independently. (Atton, 1990)

Another point is that while the memories are personal, their sources for the most part are not. Villages, popular arts, monasteries, fountains and so on are experiences shared by many Mexicans, and thus in their use in designs have wide recognition and significance. The architect's memories actually provide for cultural continuity. This is in contrast to the more solipsistic approach of architects whose sources are entirely personal to them, and which few people recognize or understand. Barragan speaks, above, of breeding nostalgic revelations. This, in conjunction with the idea of fond memories of places, clarifies the distinction between these architects' accessible memories, and other sorts of memories which might be too personal, less readily understood by others. Barragan's nostalgic reveals, so it is not what is remembered that is so important as are the qualities revealed by the nostalgic recollection. Similarly, it is fond memories of places, not personal events, that these architects speak about. Again, it is qualities that are recalled and that inspire subsequent design.

What are the implications of such a feature of the design method? One would be wary of crediting any and all of an architect's memories of places as a basis for design decisions. Memories and places are qualitatively different, and their appropriateness for a time and place varies. Yet fearing the use of memories in the creation of architecture, or embracing a design ideology that prohibits them, is just as dangerous. Barragan lamented: It is astonishing that modern architecture has not produced an example of work which expresses the attraction of a place. This would fulfill spiritual desire and create confidence in the inhabitants. (Beyon, 1976)

It would be unfair to compare these architects' work to that of others. American architects, and I saw that some American architects are just as passionate as Barragan and Legorreta, albeit passionate about other matters. But it is the quality of places fondly remembered that matters to me and that I miss in much contemporary architecture. I'd rather have to live with the embodied memories of these architects than the preoccupations of most other architects.

Notes
1. Luis Barragan (1902–1988) was awarded the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1980. Ricardo Legorreta (born 1931) has offices in Mexico City and Los Angeles.

Photography by Tim Street-Porter of Luis Barragan's work are from the exhibition "Luis Barragan: The Architecture of Light, Color and Form." A catalog, edited by Enrie Jackson, is scheduled for publication under the auspices of Montage Journal, Inc.

Sources
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