



Luis Barragán, Casa Pietro Lopez, Pedregal, México, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Facade to the garden. © Louise Noelle, 2014.

Luis Barragán's House in Pedregal A Successful Restoration

BY LOUISE NOELLE

Luis Barragán (1902–1988) produced few works in his prime, among which, other than his own house, in the *Jardines de Pedregal* only the *Casa Prieto López* (1950) has been preserved intact. It was successfully restored when Cesar Cervantes purchased it in early 2014 and hired architects Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze. After extensive research, the architects, respecting the context and simplicity of design, eliminated additions and carefully conserved architectural details and furnishings; the color of the walls was restored based on stratigraphic findings that revealed surprising tones very different from the traditional Mexican palette.

The work of Luis Barragán (1902–1988)¹ has acquired great importance in spite of the small number of projects he produced in his prime — a dozen, mostly residences —, but the fact that his own house (1948–1949) has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO² supports this contention. Much has been written about this period of Barragán's life and the great richness of expression in his work, from mysticism to the reclamation of that which is Mexican, thus engendering the birth of a new architectural language. Suffice it to mention some of its characteristics such as an exploration of vernacular roots; affirmation of the emotional; the search for the mystical and aesthetic; the exaltation of beauty and harmony with nature which is translated into massive structures, thick walls with small openings; a usage of local materials with textures and bold colors; the dosing and extolling of light; an expressive employment of water; and an emphasis on landscaping.

In his life's work we also find a tendency toward the field of urban and landscape architecture. In particular, we refer to the *Jardines del Pedregal de San Angel*, a development that he started in 1945, which marks a milestone in his professional development with a new concept of the urban in Mexico³. His landscaping work, which was widely influential, is epitomized in the "Showcase Garden"⁴, designed around a large pond that featured an unusual rock formation; the idea was to highlight the special characteristics of the site with endemic and local plants.

Barragán produced a number of works in the area, such as two showcase houses, in collaboration with Max Cetto, which have since been altered. There were also others, such as the transformation of an existing structure into a private home with a large surrounding garden, but that too has been lost. Therefore, the residence that Barragán built for Eduardo Prieto López in 1951 and its successful restoration has special importance⁵. This house was purchased at the beginning of 2014 by the entrepreneur Cesar Cervantes,

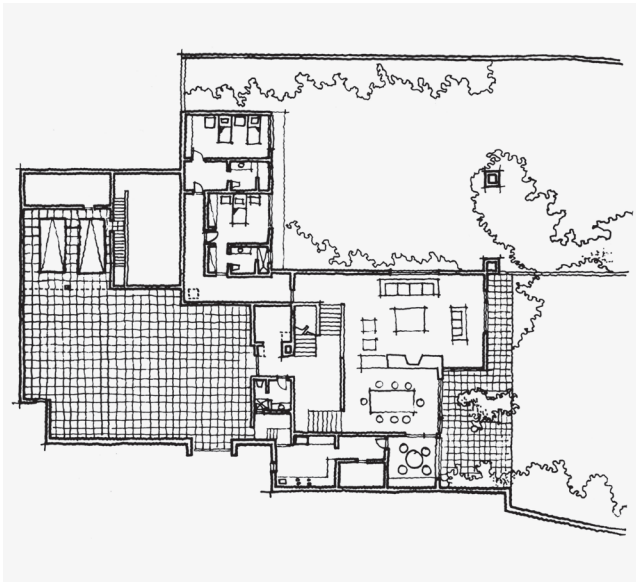
who undertook the task of restoration with the architects Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamin Gonzales Henze of the architectural firm *Parque Humano*⁶.

The Casa Prieto López

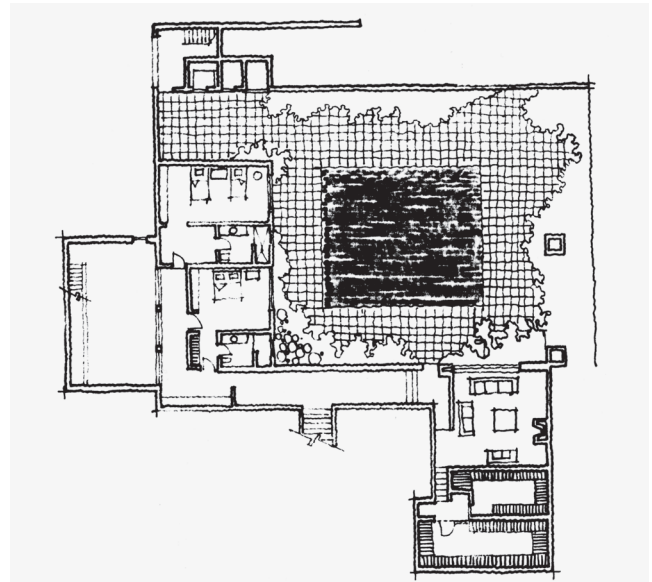
The building known as *Casa Prieto López*, which in deference to the new owner we can also call *Casa Pedregal*, represents a process of aesthetic and emotional experimentation which the architects sought to recover⁷. This home, which was conceived based on the requirements of a client with a large family, emphasized the idea of adapting the structure to the land, particularly taking into account the force of volcanic rock. The design, in spite of its simplicity, belies the fact that we are dealing with dwelling spaces for a wealthy family, with ample and spacious common areas which are respected and emphasized.

Here it is necessary to underscore the theme of color and its embodiment in the work of this singular artist, who gave special attention to the surface finish and the selection of hues. It must be remembered that most of modern architecture practically excluded the use of color. In the case of Barragán, much has been said about rescuing colorful popular architecture, in conjunction with and influenced by Jesus Reyes Ferreira⁸. This antiquarian and self-taught painter on various occasions collaborated as a color consultant. However, it is also necessary to note the friendship and consequent influence of other artists such as Josef Albers, whose treatise *Interaction of Colors* we find in Barragán's library, as well as one of his "square" paintings⁹.

Finally, it is indispensable to note that this architect, from his earliest projects in Guadalajara, always paid special attention to the plaster or whitewash that covers the walls¹⁰, and furthermore, he always tried to apply lime-based paint, and only with the passage of time did he begin to use commercial color materials. Furthermore, it is known that in order to decide what color to apply to any given wall,



01 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Plan, main floor. Drawing by Claudia Mereles, from the book: Louise Noelle, *Luis Barragán, Búsqueda y Creatividad*, UNAM, México, 1996.



02 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Plan, lower floor. Drawing by Claudia Mereles, from the book: Louise Noelle, *Luis Barragán, Búsqueda y Creatividad*, UNAM, México, 1996.

he would have it painted in its entirety in order to be able to make a decision with certainty, sometimes changing the tone before reaching a final color¹¹. These changes made by the architect, along with the chromatic variations caused by sun and rain, make it difficult to determine the original color in a stratigraphic study¹². However, in the case of the *Casa Pedregal*, it seems that there were not many tonal permutations, so that in all instances the architects were able to follow the evidence revealed by the analysis and thus recover the surprising original shades.

The Restoration Works

The architects Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamin Gonzales Henze engaged in preparatory research work in May 2014. On the one hand, they studied various publications and photographs from the 1950s, seeking to understand the spirit of the work by Barragán at that time; in addition, they visited the Barragán Foundation in Birsfelden, Switzerland in order to examine photographs and other documents about the former *Casa Prieto López*, and to substantiate various decisions.

As they started on-site work, they carefully analyzed how to eliminate some latter additions, in particular the one to the household entry; finally they decided to reconstruct it in a manner most closely resembling the original design in both structure and coloring. The elongated window by the main entrance recovered its original shape, reclaiming also the illumination in the vestibule, with a very dramatic effect. It has to be added that for the original designer it is of utmost meaning the play of light in the interior spaces and walls; for this the restaurateurs observed with exceptional care the original graphic materials, to convey the same meaning to the light, its effect, as well as with the artificial illumination.

At this time their research also led to the discovery of a system of proportion, constant in Barragán's design that is

used throughout this house; the module employed corresponds to squares and rectangles organized in the ratio of 4 by 3, which conveys a balanced and orderly structure, where the walls and openings have a poised organization and, furthermore, where the play of inside light can reach its maximum effect. This breakthrough helped the architects in taking many decisions in the restoration process.

In addition, the care invested by Barragán in the solution of various architectural details was taken into consideration by the architects of *Parque Humano*, following as much as possible his diverse solutions. Thus they retained the original furnishings, some designed by Clara Porset¹³, but the interior spaces regained the purity and starkness of the first times.

Indeed, the simplicity, both spatial as well as in terms of adornment of those spaces, noticeable in the 1950s photographs of Armando Salas Portugal, has been recovered; but probably the replacement of the lost colors, both interior and exterior, is the most striking aspect. It is not only the visual and sensory impression that these colors give us, but the realization that in this case, traditional Mexican colors are not used; on the contrary, I dare to propose that that we are dealing with a range of tones and shades emanating from a Renaissance spirit. To this we add a particular attention to the conservation of the plaster — by simply removing the various layers of paint the original texture is restored.

Also various elements such as wardrobes and chests, were kept in the original format, and the new ones followed in their design. Finally the ironwork of the outside doors and windows was kept, avoiding the use of materials as aluminum, to preserve the integrity of the original design. It is interesting to underline that in the family room adjacent to the swimming pool, the exterior volcanic formation continues inside; this piece of lava so dear to Barragán, was discovered behind a false wall and left untouched, as an homage of the designer of these rocky landscapes.



03 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. View from the poolside during restoration. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.



04 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Pool and back facade. © Louise Noelle, 2014.



05 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Living room and dining room. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.

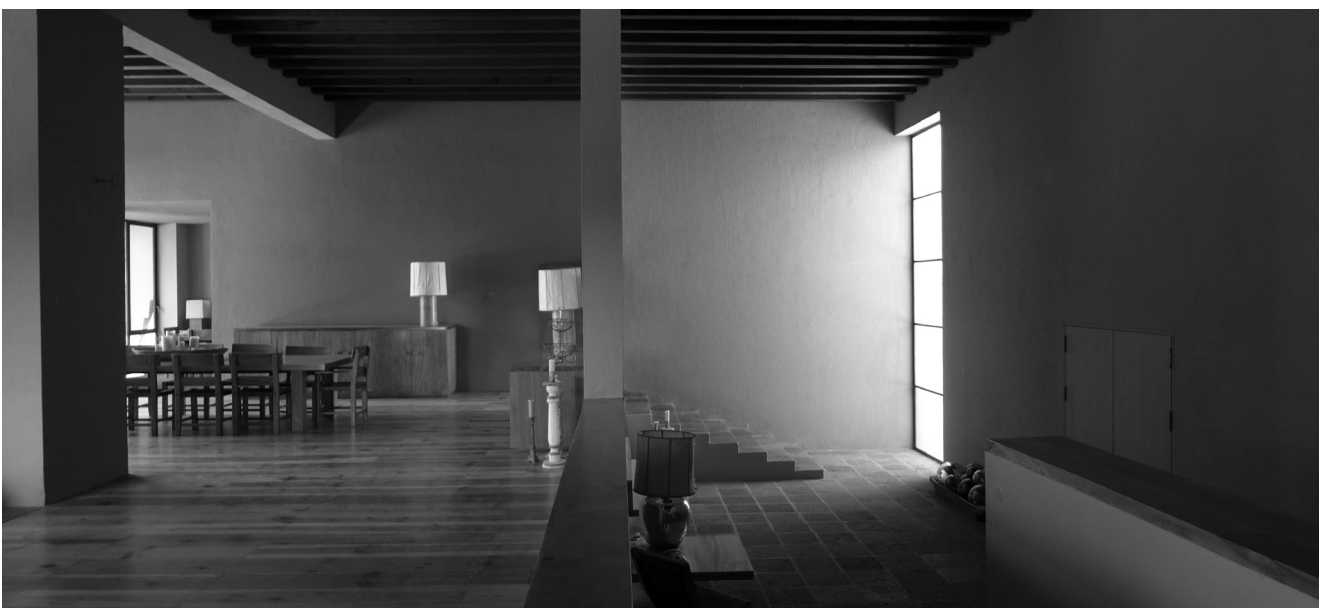


06 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Family room with the rock that continues from outside. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.

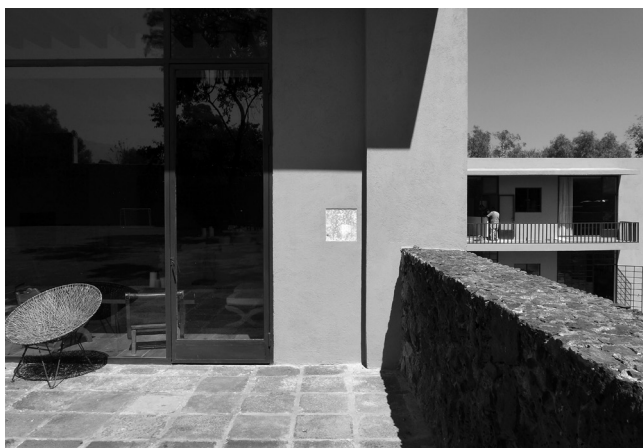


07 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. © Photo by Armando Salas Portugal from the book: *Barragán. Obra Completa*, Tanais Ediciones, Madrid, 1995.

08 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Main entrance. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.



09 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. The access. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.



10 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. View from the garden, with a stratigraphic evidence. © Archive *Parque Humano*, 2014.



11 Luis Barragán, *Casa Pietro Lopez*, Pedregal, Mexico, 1950. Restoration by Jorge Covarrubias and Benjamín González Henze, 2014. Facade to the garden. © Louise Noelle, 2014.

Of special note is the swimming pool, which was rebuilt close to its original size after it had been reduced when the first owner divided and alienated part of a very large garden; the same colored cement with which the pool was originally covered was also replaced. In this sense, the recovery of the finish and color of the swimming pool is not only a major accomplishment, it also provides a special meaning to the element of water, knowing how much it fascinated Barragán.

It is necessary to add that a restoration work with this quality and precision, owes not only to the careful intervention of Covarrubias and González Henze, but to the privilege they had in being able to rely on an excellent, conscientious and accountable team of workers, including masons, carpenters, blacksmiths and painters. These builders had been part of former teams that had worked for Legorreta + Legorreta, and in some cases even with Barragán himself. One can say that they are workmen faithful to the tradition of craftsmanship in building, with a longstanding wisdom and knowledge that allowed the architects to achieve a recuperation of the house to its original condition and liveliness¹⁴.

It is then appropriate to recall the *Nara Document on Authenticity* (1994) that calls upon the values attributed to the cultural diversity and their appropriate conservation; in this case, not only the house continues with its original use, reinforcing the meaning of its domestic vocation; also, the conservation works took into account the material elements, but it also contemplated the spiritual and local components, studying the architecture and the ideas of Barragán, to take informed decisions to achieve a comprehensive result.

In short, we can say that this renovation, that concluded in November 2014, was a felicitous intervention in one of the paradigmatic houses of the *Jardines del Pedregal de San Angel* and the work of Luis Barragán. This exemplary work of architectural modernity is combined with a language that revitalizes the vernacular in a personal quest for the emotional and spiritual. In this instance, both the architects and client were aware of these circumstances and have achieved a full and exciting recovery of the dwelling spaces worthy of commendation. ■

Notes

- 1 See, among others, *Barragán. Obra Completa*, Tanais Ediciones, Madrid, 1995; Louise Noelle, *Luis Barragán, Búsqueda y Creatividad*, Mexico, UNAM, 1996; Antonio Riggen Martínez, *Luis Barragán. Mexico's Modern Master, 1902–1988*, New York, The Monacelli Press, 1996; and *Luis Barragán: The Quiet Revolution*, Milano, Skira, Editora Federica Zanco, 2001.
- 2 In July, 2004.
- 3 Keith L. Eggner, *Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal*, New York, Princeton Architectural Press, 2001.
- 4 This garden, originally property of Jose Topete, was subdivided and lost.
- 5 The restoration work was approved by the Office of Architecture of the National Fine Arts Institute (*Dirección de Arquitectura y Conservación del Patrimonio Inmueble, of the INBA*), the institution in charge of safeguarding our 20th century heritage.
- 6 Jorge Covarrubias, with Benjamin Gonzales Henze, is the founder of the architectural firm Parque Humano. Among their various projects it is important to mention the design of the museum exhibit "Luis Barragán: The Silent Revolution" in 2002.
- 7 To write this article, I visited the Casa Pedregal on November 19, 2014, and interviewed the architects on January 12, 2015.
- 8 Jesús "Chucho" Reyes Ferreira, 1882–1977; see Lily S. de Kassner, *Jesús Reyes Ferreira. Su Universo Pictórico*, Mexico, UNAM, 1978.
- 9 See a thank-you note to Joseph Albers from Luis Barragán for this painting in Antonio Riggen, *Luis Barragán. Escritos y Conversaciones*, El Escorial, El Croquis Editorial, 2000.
- 10 The worker who did this type of finishing work in Mexico City was known as "maestro pianito" and Barragán always trusted in him.
- 11 See Paolo Mora, Laura Mora y Paul Philippot, *Conservation of Wall Paintings*, London, Butterworth-ICROM, 1984 on the subject of these types of applications and materials, as well as the studies to determine the original colors.
- 12 See Louise Noelle, "The Public Spaces of Luis Barragán: Losses and Recovery", *Restoring Postwar Heritage*, New York, **docomomo** US, 2008.
- 13 See Louise Noelle, "Clara Porset, A Modern Designer for Mexico", **docomomo Journal**, No 46, Barcelona, 2012.
- 14 Interview of January 12, 2015.

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