



Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, view of the main staircase. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph of Guillermo Zamora, 1962.

The House of Augusto H. Álvarez in Mexico City: an Integral Architectural and Personal Project

BY LOURDES CRUZ

In his 56 year professional career, Augusto H. Álvarez (1914-1995) built around thirty apartment buildings and over fifty houses. This article analyzes the emblematic house he built for his family between 1959 and 1961, which has been reinvented over time. It's a work that faithfully reflects Álvarez's appropriation and interpretation of the ideas of the Modern Movement, revealing a modulated, diaphanous, ordered and flexible space enclosed by a simple volume. It was an integral project because, aside from the structure, the architect also designed its furnishings and system of natural lighting, implementing materials that were hitherto-unused in a private residence.

Augusto H. Álvarez: a Mexican architect with a universal spirit¹

The global conflict provoked by WWII stimulated the Mexican economy as products began to be manufactured domestically that had previously been imported. As Mexico's economy entered a period of accelerated industrial growth, the population began to concentrate in its major cities, considerably increasing the demand for urban infrastructure such as hospitals, schools or buildings for commercial and financial enterprises. These latter two representatives of modernity and economic growth needed a coherent image, one similar to that found in developed nations. Among the many architects that formulated a response to this problem was Augusto H. Álvarez.² His domestic and international prestige was primarily due to the over fifty banking, financial and other offices he designed.

His works express his time, one of economic boom and technological progress. Ever since his student days, he revealed his modernism. His restless spirit drove him to constantly explore all that which left the past behind, not just in architecture, but in all aspects of everyday life. He was passionate about products that represented progress and innovation because he loved design, technology and new materials. This lifestyle and way of thinking was reflected in the four houses he built for himself,³ especially the one located at Calle Lazcano 20, San Ángel Inn, Mexico City. Built between 1959 and 1961, in collaboration with his colleague Luis Guerrero López (1936-2019), this house is the subject of this article.⁴

He was a man of his time and knew that technological progress and communication breakthroughs would make us global citizens, rather than of just one country. This helps explain his approach to architecture and his conviction as to how people should live and work, appropriating universal materials and technological systems. His affinity with the Modern Movement therefore did not come about by chance – it was natural for someone who, ever since he was young, firmly believed in a universal world, as he expressed below:

We live in a world in which distances are ever shorter, in which communicating is ever easier, leading peoples and cultures to influence each other and mix together. This allows the achievements of science, technology and industry to no longer be the patrimony of one nation, but a good held in common. I don't believe I have the right to renounce my participation in the genesis or gestation of a new culture and a new form of universal life in which the characteristics of nations will become increasingly diluted.⁵

He understood modernity as an ideological attitude rather than a passing trend, as a constant exploration that did not admit tradition except to be reinterpreted. He was never satisfied with applying the same techniques over and over and, when tackling a new project, he always did something different, arguing that he had the obligation to provide new responses to old problems through innovative solutions and formal expressions.⁶ By the beginning of the 1950s, Álvarez had defined the characteristics of his architecture and was convinced of the universal language of the Modern Movement, with which he fully identified. Ever since the beginning of his career, he had a preference for European architectural publications over those from the United States of America (USA) and acknowledged the deep influence of Le Corbusier (1887-1965) on his work. He also identified with Dutch and German architects: "I feel that these influences are, above all, those that one absorbs thanks to an affinity of temperament."⁷ Later on, the work of Mies van der Rohe (1886-1969) played a determining role in his career, assimilating its structural sincerity and painstaking attention to detail.

A strict rationalism was expressed in his volumetric purity, stripping architecture of any ornamentation and thus achieving a total simplicity. This became almost a slogan for him, as he often repeated: "I want to build calm works, ones that don't provoke unease, that simply feel natural and normal."⁸ Another of his trademarks was



01 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, view of the south facade overlooking the garden. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph of Guillermo Zamora, 1962.



02 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, view of the family room. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph of Guillermo Zamora, 1962.

transparency, especially in the use of glass. He deeply loved natural light, taking maximum advantage of the sun as a natural resource; the use of glass surfaces was something that he occasionally took to an extreme. As he once so clearly expressed, “for me, a window is not just a form of illuminating or ventilating a space. For me, a window is a transparent wall.”⁹ He designed ingenious systems of screens, implemented with refined technique.

The House at Lazcano 20:

its location on the lot and the volumetric solution

Augusto H. Álvarez was 45 years old when he decided to build a house for himself in southern Mexico City. He had reached professional maturity at this time, having built emblematic buildings across the capital, which positioned him as one of the most important Mexican architects of the 20th century and gave him a solid economic position.¹⁰ He had a very clear idea of what he wanted when he began this project as the concept had existed in his head for some time, without reference to where it would be built. He wanted a simple, austere space, without complications, one that would fit his lifestyle and his architectonic ideas. For this new residence, he utilized innovative concepts and solutions that he would later apply in other buildings. As he said,

I have one great concern: the process of building unsettles me. I “love” the challenge, that of having to do something new and different, something that’s worth it. Even if it’s small, it still represents a step forward for me – one thing leads to another, you become inventive, you transform things, you extract qualities from the raw materials. It’s a game, I feel like I’m a child again.¹¹

Álvarez bought two contiguous lots – very close to his house on Calle Yarto¹² – that together had an area of 830 square meters (m²). The land was flat, free of topographic anomalies and mostly rectangular, with the back of the

lot forming a trapezoid. The side facing the street was 20 meters (m) wide and it was oriented in a north-south direction. He located the house at the front of the lot, so as to have a large backyard and to give easier access to service personnel. He placed the structure against the lot’s western boundary in order to have a shady side patio to the east that would lead to the backyard. He designed the house in a square shape with two floors, with a total area of 460 m². It was an open plan house and, in the style of Le Corbusier, he decided to put all the services on the ground level floor, with living areas on the floor above. On the ground level floor, he placed a four-car garage and service areas towards the north, with a model train room, a study and a covered terrace overlooking the garden (irrigated with a spray system) to the south. On the upper floor, the kitchen and complementary services were located to the north, the bedrooms to the east and the living areas to the south. A simple layout, revolving around a central patio with a skylight illuminating the main staircase. The facade was closed off to the street, turning the house inwards to create a more private, intimate world.

The result was a simple cuboid, without formal pretensions, with a nearly blank wall facing north on the upper floor and a marked chiaroscuro on the lower floor. The eastern exterior wall exposed the bedrooms and service rooms. Here it’s worth mentioning the wooden beams that formed an integral part of the walls, supporting the guillotine windows. To the south, the white walls and the enormous pane of glass contrasted with the shade of the covered terrace and the colorful hydrangeas.

Modular discipline and structure

To understand why this house had an integral design – as will be explained below – it should be mentioned that, ever since he was little, Álvarez had two complementary abilities: he was a careful observer and he was skilled with his hands, and he would remain that way throughout his

life. He learned to draw in high school, which reinforced his manual skills despite his disability;¹³ before starting his architectural studies, he already knew how to draw plans and build models. He was convinced that, to be able to design anything, you should know how to build it; he would never abandon this professional premise.

Ever since the start of his studies, he was distinguished by the use of modulation in his designs, as it allowed him a simple, consistent method of relating the whole to its parts. Devoted to architectonic rationalism, especially in the clarity of compositional schemes (public, private and service areas), clear and coherent patterns of circulation and controlled costs, he adopted modulation and, therefore, standardization. He started using imperial units because he was convinced of their advantages in terms of building at a human scale; many industrial materials, such as steel, glass and wood, are also sold based on these measurements. The foot – that is, 30.5 centimeters (cm) – became the unit that formed the basis of his explorations in combinations such as 61 cm, 1.22 m or 2.44 m. This method allowed him to avoid wasting materials, thus saving him a great deal of money. He argued that, while it seemed to be an inflexible system to some, it was a path that allowed him to ensure rhythm and harmony in his works.¹⁴

His house in San Ángel Inn became an exemplar of this, as both its architectonic design and the design of its furniture, closets, doors, screens, ironwork, kitchenware and storage areas all followed this parameter. Modular discipline allowed him to give order to the house because everything was based on Álvarez's own designs and executed by his greatest allies, the blacksmith and the carpenter.¹⁵ As this house was a comprehensive project for family living, the architect's greatest collaborator was his wife Fina. She was the "heart" of the home, organizing, experimenting and proposing improvements. As their son Javier said,

Once a design was tested out, she was the one who said, "this doesn't work because of this and that." He then made all modifications necessary so as to meet the house's cleaning needs, which were not insignificant, and to make sure that nothing looked out of place (...) the house was an experiment, not just as an architect, but also as an inventor.¹⁶

The house was based on 90 cm x 1.2 m modules, which resulted in a 14.4 m x 14.4 m square architectonic plan with four inter-axial spaces of 3.6 m in the north-south direction and two inter-axial spaces of 7.2 m in the east-west direction.

It was a mixed structure formed by 15 columns of steel made by two angles of five degrees with I-beams and reinforced concrete slabs. The walls were made of pressed bricks painted white with asbestos cement panels with metallic profiles in specific locations. He experimented here for the first time with this material that, he confessed, had captured his attention. This meticulous modulation allowed the house to undergo many transformations over the years without losing the essence of the precepts of modernity.

Social and private space: a masterful relationship

After going through the front gate, there was a wall to the right that separated the garage from the pedestrian access. To the left, there was a reflecting pool along the path to the front doors. The first was the service entrance, immediately followed by a more impressive door whose look befitted the house of an architect: a glass pivot door, with the tension bars in the inner side. After going through this door, one could make out the garden on the other side of the metal-and-wood main staircase, arranged in a single flight, were illuminated from above by the skylight. Here a small potted tree grew, which could be appreciated from the living room above. Passing the staircase on the right, one could find the model train room, an astonishing space devoted to one of Álvarez's favorite hobbies: his HO-scale electric trains, to which he added miniature houses, hotels, stations, bridges and even a church. This was an endless project, full of imagination and skill, that he was constantly reinventing and rebuilding and which only came to a stop a few months before his death.

On the other side, with a view of the garden, was a study for his sons. As Manuel recalls, "initially, it was a room with four desks. We each had a key and you could go in and do your homework, supposedly without distracting your brother." These modularly-designed desks were later complemented with a Knoll armchair, "as it should be," and a record player, constituting a multipurpose area that evolved as his sons grew up.¹⁷ This room, along with the covered terrace and the backyard, hosted countless family gatherings and parties, as Álvarez and Fina were excellent hosts. The backyard was also where his children played soccer, so Álvarez purposely planted two trees to serve as the goalposts and installed a small metal rhomboid mesh fence to protect the hydrangeas, as can be seen in the photograph. His children remember the house as a place of play, despite the strict established order.¹⁸

Upon ascending the staircase, one reached the living room. Immediately to the left was a door that led to the bedrooms, marking the border between public and private life. The stairs were covered by a dome letting in natural light, filtered by blinds, creating an ideal environment for a series of planters placed on a metal grate that allowed for water to drain. To the left, there was a modular wooden bookshelf with a metallic structure, which could also be used as a bar, next to a work table. The living room had Knoll armchairs and tables, with a blue Florence chair facing the chimney, which was integrated with the closet or storage space with a Formica walnut laminate finish. The dining room, featuring a round table of the same brand, also had a modular piece of furniture designed by the architect himself that served to delimit this space from the planters. All this contrasted with the parquetry on the ceiling, which often astonished visitors. The dining room was actually rarely used, as the family preferred the dinette, even when working, thanks to the unique environment provided by its planters and the light filtering through a translucent window, yet avoiding a view of the service areas.

The south-facing “wall” was a major innovation and the focus of the architectonic design. It consisted of a large, 2.4 m x 7.2 m sliding glass window, the largest in Mexico at the time. It had to be shipped from England and then moved by train, raised into position with a crane and installed with a specially-built scaffold. The automated system for opening and closing the window was the most sophisticated part of the house, as the glass moved on the outside of the exterior wall.¹⁹ It opened in its entirety – even though this was risky, given its great height – because the view of the garden was what the architect most enjoyed about the house.

Once the door had been crossed into the private area, the environment was different. The generous space of the common areas was reduced, both in the bedrooms and in the bathrooms. Álvarez had a very specific, rational conception of these areas – surely inherited from the customs of his hometown – because the bedrooms were practically only for sleeping, with austere furnishings consisting of modular beds, nightstands and dressers with fine finishes: “they were based on the idea that a bedroom was not a luxury, but a cell in which one should save space so that more could be devoted to socialization.”²⁰ The living room was primarily for the parents, although the arrival of television meant that its uses had to be shared and expanded. Only the master bedroom had a walk-in closet and a private bathroom; the other bedrooms had to share bathrooms. All these spaces were illuminated by skylights and ventilated from outside. The relationship between the social and the private was thus masterfully resolved, as the architect created an internal circuit that connected the bedrooms with the service areas without passing through the living room. The house’s residents could then go down the service staircase to the ground floor, passing through the kitchen and the laundry room. This internal mobility is one of the most widely appreciated aspects of this house.

Nothing was purchased for the kitchen – except for the stove, the refrigerator and the freezer – as everything was meticulously designed especially for this house. This was also true of the wine cellar against the north wall, which was protected with a metallic screen, and the garbage chute. Going down the service staircase, one came to the laundry room and the other services areas, including the servant’s room, which had access to the side patio. In the machine room, there was a heating system for wintertime and here it should be mentioned that Álvarez hated low temperatures because Mérida, where he spent his childhood, is very hot. One technical innovation that was implemented in a house for the first time was the hydropneumatic system with a boiler and two alternating pumps. He also experimented with asbestos flooring, which had to be covered with linoleum (inside) and washed gravel concrete (outside) when it was later learned to be a carcinogen.

In terms of color, he identified fully with those pioneers of the Modern Movement that used white as a synonym for modernity, purity and hygiene: all of the house’s interior and exterior surfaces were this color aside from the upper panels of the eastern wall, which were painted blue

(like the plumbago flower), one of his favorite colors. Most spaces were illuminated through indirect light, using tubes, recessed light fixtures and double walls with strategic designs that allowed for easy maintenance.

In sum, this house’s value lies in it being an integral project, the result of a rigorous analysis of the architectonic program, of a deep, innovative study of hitherto-unused materials and techniques and a very simple formal intention, thus fulfilling the personal project of the architect Augusto H. Álvarez.

The house: its transformation and conservation

The house’s rigorous modulation has shown its advantages over time. When Álvarez died in 1995, the house intermittently accommodated two of his sons and their families until it was finally sold to two buyers in 2002. As the house was built on two lots, it allowed each buyer to buy one part and the land was thus divided. It is important to note that the interventions performed are reversible, as they were carried out by two excellent architects who understood the value of the house: the intervention on the western side was done by Pola Zaga and the one on the eastern side by Javier Sánchez. Dividing the house prevented its destruction, but no matter how well the interventions were done, it still lost the value of its internally fluid space. The new owners preserved part of the integral furniture designs due to their efficiency and this versatile structure, with its singular staircase and breath-taking transparency, still preserves a spirit of modernity.

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Notes

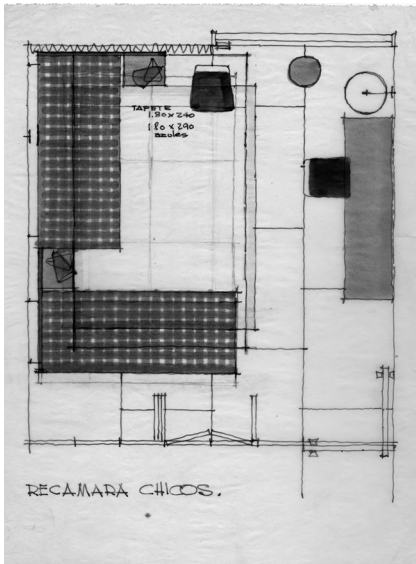
- 1 In 2002, the archive of Augusto H. Álvarez was donated to the Archive of Mexican Architects at the Faculty of Architecture, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).
- 2 He was born on 24 December 1914 in the city of Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico. In 1933, he enrolled in the National School of Architecture, graduating on 18 August 1939 with the dissertation “Project for a Maternity Hospital in Mexico City.” He married Fina Fuentes Ogarrio and together they had four sons – Augusto, Manuel, Jorge and Javier – which is relevant information here. He received the National Architecture Prize in 1983 and died on 29 November 1995. To learn more about his life and works, see Lourdes Cruz González Franco, *Augusto H. Álvarez. Arquitecto de la Modernidad*, Mexico City, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2008.
- 3 The three others are the house at Simón Yarto 39, San Ángel Inn, Mexico City, 1949; the house in the La Peña subdivision, lot 1, Valle de Bravo, Mexico State, 1969-1970; and the house at Calle 17 109, Itzinná, Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, 1992-1994.
- 4 San Ángel Inn is a residential neighborhood in southern Mexico City that, since the early 20th century, has been known for its shady cobblestone streets. According to Virginia Armella de Aspe, it was promoted from the 1940s on as being “a bucolic place with fresh air, soft sunlight and the ever-present smell of pine,” in “Historia de San Ángel,” *Artes de México*, Mexico City, Vol. 17, No. 117, 1969, 14-15. Just a few blocks away from the house at Lazcano 20, one can find the first modernist houses in Mexico, built between 1929 and 1931 by the functionalist architect Juan O’Gorman for the painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo.
- 5 Augusto H. Álvarez, “Una obra, una postura,” *Calli*, No. 29, Mexico City, September-October 1967, 40.



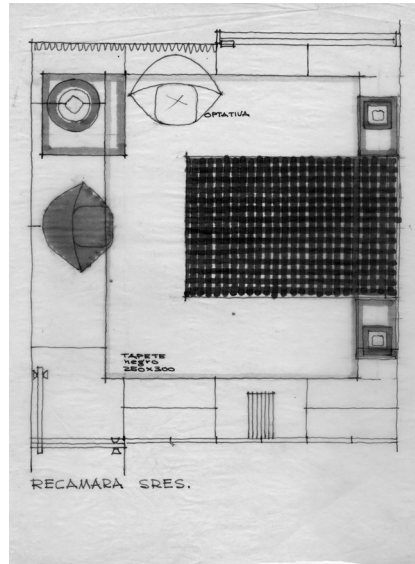
03 Augusto H. Álvarez. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



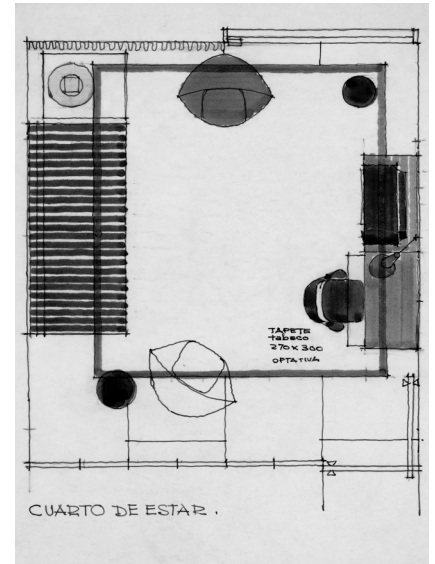
04 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, view of the east facade, remodeling in 2002 by the architect Javier Sánchez. © Photograph of Luis Gordoa, 2002.



05 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, sketch of the children's bedroom, a drawing of Augusto H. Álvarez, 1961. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



06 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, sketch of the parents' bedroom, a drawing of Augusto H. Álvarez, 1961. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



07 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, sketch of the living room, a drawing of Augusto H. Álvarez, 1961. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



08 Augusto H. Álvarez, house at Lazcano 20, Mexico City, Mexico, 1959-1961, View of the family room. © Fondo Augusto H. Álvarez, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph of Guillermo Zamora, 1962.

- 6 “Arquitectura es vivencia,” in *Obras*, Year XII, Vol. XII, No. 142, October 1984, 55.
- 7 Graciela de Garay, *Historia Oral de la ciudad de México: testimonios vivos de sus arquitectos (1940-1990)*. Augusto H. Álvarez, Mexico City, Instituto José María Luis Mora, 1994, 15.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 73.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 1.
- 10 Some important buildings constructed through 1961 were the building for the National School of Business and Administration in Ciudad Universitaria, Pedregal de San Ángel, 1950-1952, designed with Ramón Marcos Noriega; the Mexico City International Airport, 1950-1952, with Enrique Carral Icaza, Manuel Martínez Páez, Guillermo Pérez Olagaray and Ricardo Flores; and the Torre Latinoamericana, 1950-1956, with Adolfo and Leonardo Zeevaert.
- 11 María Teresa Gómez Mont, “Galardonará el presidente Miguel de la Madrid con el Premio Nacional de Arquitectura a Augusto Álvarez,” *Novedades*, 15 June 1984.
- 12 The quality of the house at Calle Yarto 39 led it to be included in the book *18 Residencias de arquitectos mexicanos*, Mexico City, Ediciones Mexicanas, 1951.
- 13 At the age of fifteen, he lost sight in his left eye due to an accident.
- 14 See “La enseñanza del diseño: Mesa redonda,” *Cuadernos de arquitectura y docencia*, No. 2, Mexico City, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, October 1986.
- 15 The author would like to thank the sons of Augusto H. Álvarez for their ideas, memories and suggestions, which enriched this text on the house in San Ángel Inn. These interviews were conducted in July and August 2020.
- 16 Interview with Javier Álvarez Fuentes, 13 August 2020.
- 17 Years later, this space, together with the covered terrace, housed Augusto H. Álvarez’s offices, while a two-story workshop was built at the back of the garden, taking advantage of the excavation of a swimming pool that was never completed.
- 18 Interview with Javier Álvarez Fuentes, 13 August 2020.
- 19 The photograph of the exterior wall facing the garden shows this window partially open. Unfortunately, due to the effects of an earthquake years later, this mechanism stopped working and some openings were made to allow for the room to be ventilated.
- 20 Interview with Javier Álvarez Fuentes, 13 August 2020.

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