

Barragán House and Studio (Mexico)

No 1136

1. BASIC DATA

State Party: Mexico

Name of property: Luis Barragán House and Studio

Location: Mexico City

Date received: 24 January 2003

Category of property:

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *monument*.

Brief description:

The House and Studio of Luis Barragán in the suburb of Mexico City represent an outstanding example of the architect's creative contribution in the post-Second World War period. Barragán's work integrates modern and traditional artistic and vernacular currents and elements into a new synthesis, which has been greatly influential especially in the contemporary design of gardens, plazas, and landscapes.

2. THE PROPERTY

Description

The House and Studio of Luis Barragán form a single construction located on two adjacent lots on a small street (12 and 14, General Francisco Ramirez Street) in Daniel Garza neighbourhood, a suburb of Mexico City. The total surface of the building is about 1161 m². The urban context consists of workers' housing, which are modest, small-scale houses reflecting the typology recurrent in Mexico City. They are tenement houses interconnected by a linear pathway. The structures include workshops, grocery stores, construction material distributors and small restaurants, as well as important urban infrastructures, such as highways and telecommunication masts. Adjacent is the so-called Ortega House, which is also designed by Barragán.

The House and Studio of Luis Barragán was built starting in 1948. It is built in concrete with plaster rendering. It has a ground floor and two upper stories, as well as a small private garden. The entrance is directly from the street on the east side of the building. The garden opens toward the west. The studio takes the northern part of the building, with an entrance directly from the street (no. 12); the rest is occupied by the private residence of Barragán (no. 14).

The entrance façade, in the words of the nomination document, 'aligns with the street and preserves the appearance of the neighbouring façades. It is a massive boundary with precise openings. Due to its austere, almost unfinished expression, the house would almost be unnoticed, except for its scale, which contrasts with the rest of the buildings in the neighbourhood. The house

announces the dwelling of an upper-class gentleman, it is true, but at the same time, its materials speak of an introspective and intimate nature, paradoxically humble. All the windows of the eastern façade represent the possibility of hiding the direct communication between domestic space and the city ... The translucent, closed reticulated library window is the single item projecting over the plane of the façade. Almost the entire exterior conserves the colour and natural roughness of the plastered concrete. ...'

From the street, next to the garage, there is a modest entrance door to the residence - leading first to a small entrance hall. From here, there is access to the living room that opens to the garden and the library that faces east. Some of the subdivisions or screens were introduced later. From the hall as well as from the living room there one can access the separate dining room. Next to this there is a small breakfast room and the kitchen. All these spaces open toward the garden. On the first floor there are the master bedroom and a guest room with their services, as well as an 'afternoon room'. On the second floor, there are service spaces and a roof terrace. The upper stories are accessed via narrow stairs without railings. The levels of the different floors are not regularly placed, but are designed so as to allow spaces of different heights. Thus, the living room has a double height.

The north side of the property is reserved for the studio with its direct access from the street. There is an internal access also from the living room. The main studio space is linked with the garden through a patio. On the street side, there are two small offices, and on the first floor there is a small private office.

On the garden side, the building has a very different aspect compared to the street side. 'The western façade of the house distinguishes from the practically impenetrable boundary of the street's façade not only by the proportion of its openings, but also in its conception as a dialogue mechanism between the house and its garden. It is through this façade that nature accompanies and provokes the living experience that occurs in its interior. ...'

The qualities of Barragán's architecture are expressed especially in the treatment of the spaces inside the house, where he plays with strong non-harmonic colour schemes, as for example in the sequence from the entrance: 'The raw volcanic stone on the vestibule floor extends through a second door to the hall. Known as exterior pavement, it accentuates the paradoxical sensation of being in an internal courtyard at the centre of the house. This second door also separates the golden penumbra of the vestibule from the intense light of the hall, composed by a mechanism of reflections: from the outside yellow southern plane, light shines onto the golden surface of an abstract altarpiece, created by Mathias Goeritz, and bathes the intense pink discovered for the first time in this hall. The light fills a space that could be perceived as a carving of white matter on the walls, rather than an area delimited by bi-dimensional planes. ...'

The garden was initially conceived as a large extension of grass. However, later, Barragán decided to allow the garden to grow more freely resulting: 'in the garden's current personality, an opulent, almost wild garden that evokes ancient orchards where vegetation took a life of its own and made its own decisions. It is an oasis in the

middle of the urban desert that Mexico City has become. The garden is essentially monochromatic; save for the white or orange jasmines and narcissus, it is composed of several shades of intense green, a colour never used in Barragán's palette. ...'

History

Luis Barragán (1902-1988) was trained as an engineer, but he then became a self-taught architect. Having travelled in Spain and France, he settled first in Guadalajara (1927) and then in Mexico City (1936). In his early career he was involved in real estate management.

The property on which the house and studio were built was probably purchased in 1939 together with a larger area. This moment coincides with his shift of interest from real estate activities towards architecture. He built the so-called Ortega House, making use of a pre-existing building. He took up his residence in this house in 1943. The house in number 14 was built in 1948. The first drawings for the project were realized for Mrs Luz Escandón de R. Valenzuela. However, in summer 1948, Barragán decided to take the house for himself. The rest of the property was sold to the Ortega family. The plans of the house were gradually developed over the construction period. In fact, the house became a sort of laboratory for the architect, who lived here the rest of his life, until 1988.

Management regime

Legal provision:

The property is owned by the Government of the State of Jalisco and the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán, A.C.

Based on the Federal Law on Monuments and Archeological, Artistic and Historic Sites, May 6, 1972, Architect Luis Barragán's house (n° 14) was declared a National Artistic Monument in a decree published in the Official Gazette of the Federation on Tuesday, November 29, 1988. The studio part (n° 12) was not included in this protection. The Fundación has initiated efforts to obtain the relevant designation.

Management structure:

The management of the property is guaranteed by the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán, which is a private non-governmental organization. The annual work plans of the 'Casa Museo Luis Barragán Fund' are prepared by the Fundación in collaboration with the National Council for the Arts and Culture, the Government of the State of Jalisco.

The area where the house is situated is controlled by the Federal District's General Programme on Urban Development (1996). The land use, defined as residential, is determined by the Plan de Desarrollo Urbano de la Delegación Miguel Hidalgo (1997).

Resources:

The care and management of the property is financed from a fund called 'Casa Museo Luis Barragán Fund', following an agreement between the Government of the State of

Jalisco, the National Council for the Arts and Culture, and the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán A.C.

Justification by the State Party (summary)

The Casa Estudio Luis Barragán (Luis Barragán House and Studio) owes its singularity to the fact of being a personal and therefore unrepeatable reflection. This autobiographical circumstance does not prevent that this artistic manifesto has gone beyond its time and its cultural field to become a distinguished reference for the 20th century fine arts and architecture. ...

Luis Barragán is able to synthesize a wide range of inspirations, apparently distant from each other. This work was motivated by a nostalgic mood that moves the artist to seek for the roots which nourish him, as he often stated. He was also moved by the desire to propose a better architecture for his time, without making any historicist or picturesque concessions. ...

Casa Estudio Luis Barragán is 'a masterpiece of human creative genius', able to express universal values in a work of timeless beauty. (*criterion i*)

The artistic manifesto of Casa Estudio Luis Barragán is the result of the criticism and renovation of the Modern Movement in architecture, achieved by synthesizing other cultural traditions and artistic styles, fundamentally Mexican heritage, but surpassing its cultural horizon with many other approaches. For this reason, Luis Barragán's masterpiece succeeds in 'testifying an important exchange of influences in a determined stage in human history and within a cultural area of the world. (*criterion ii*)

3. ICOMOS EVALUATION

Actions by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited the nominated property in August 2003. ICOMOS has consulted several experts in different countries, as well as DoCoMoMo.

Conservation

Conservation history:

The house was inhabited by the architect Barragán until his death in 1988. The house (n° 14) was legally protected in 1988. The protection of the studio part is under way. The property is currently under the care of the Fundación de Arquitectura Tapatía Luis Barragán, A.C. At the moment, the house is used as a museum and as the base of this Fundación.

State of conservation:

The house is in a reasonable state of conservation. At the time of the ICOMOS expert visit, the roofs and ceilings of the studio were being repaired. In the future, attention will be required to other elements as well, such as the terrace doors, etc. The garden will also need special attention.

Management:

The nominated property is managed by the non-governmental Foundation, who prepares the annual work plans in collaboration with representatives of authorities.

Concerning the building itself, and particularly its interior, the current management system is considered well done. The management can also be complimented for their efforts to raise awareness of cultural values in the neighbourhood. As a result, one can note that there are less graffiti in this area than elsewhere.

Nevertheless, problems are indicated with the context of the property. Even though a buffer zone has been established, the planning control is not sufficiently effective. In fact, a new multi-storey building is currently being built inside the proposed buffer zone infringing the view from the house beyond the garden. ICOMOS has been informed that the Foundation would have taken an initiative to acquire the multi-storey building and demolish the upper stories. In another building next door, a new storey has been added over the existing structure. These changes show that there is an obvious lack of control of the volume and height of the buildings and other structures in the surroundings of the nominated property. There is thus pressing need to establish and properly implement the relevant planning instruments.

It is observed that current management relies much on personal relationship and affection. It would be necessary to establish the management on a more formal base and to clearly define the conservation objectives and management policies of the property and the collections housed therein. This would guarantee a more sustainable base for their care. This will be all the more necessary when the materials are being affected by the ageing process, and when alternative solutions need to be contemplated. This concerns also the institutional interests and participation, currently the responsibility of the ministry of tourism of the State of Jalisco.

Risk analysis:

There are various risks that need to be noted. These include the problems of urban development, which are particularly sensitive in a low-density residential suburban area of a large metropolis. In fact, the area is potentially subject to increased density.

Another problem is the seismic risk. The Barragán House itself has resisted earthquakes in the past, showing that it has been well built. However, it is necessary to make regular inspections to and assess the environmental impact of the heavy infrastructures, storage buildings and other constructions in the surroundings, and to take necessary preventive measures.

Such prevention should concern not only earthquakes but also possibility of fires, and other problems. It is noted that the property is situated in the axis of one of the major approaches to the international airport of Mexico City.

Authenticity and integrity

The house and studio of Barragán are conserved with great respect, including not only architecture but also the Cadillac of the architect and kitchen installations. Conservation is extended to the various changes that have occurred over time. In this sense, the property certainly meets the test of authenticity.

The question of the garden is more problematic, considering that there is no detailed documentation.

However, taking advantage of the persons who have known the architect and who have worked with the garden, the Fundación has the intention to research on this aspect.

A problematic issue relates to the context of the property. This has consisted of a workers' suburban area of low density, generally a single storey, which corresponded to the wish of the architect. At the moment, the area is subject to transformation, including infrastructures and streets with heavy traffic and increasingly high constructions. During the ICOMOS mission, in the neighbourhood, a building of 8-10 stories was under construction; this will directly infect the garden views of Barragán house. The use of publicity also gives a strong impact on the environment, as well as the telecommunication masts that intrude the visual integrity even of the private spaces, such as the garden and the terraces of the Barragán house.

It can be noted of course that the character of Barragán house is introvert and intimate. Therefore, the exterior is possibly less important than in some other cases. However, it becomes a problem when the internal space and integrity risk being disturbed. In fact, serious concern can be expressed about the sensitivity of the planning authorities in this regard at the moment.

Comparative evaluation

The nomination document presents a comparative study, which however – rather than making a comparison with his contemporaries - is focused on the exploration of the original sources that have contributed to Luis Barragán's work and particularly to his own house. He is identified as an architect of the 'third generation' in the evolving Modern Movement, together with Lina Bo Bardi, José Antonio Coderch, Fernando Távora, and Jørn Utzon. Their work is not seen as 'a simple antagonistic reaction but rather the result of a far more complex and fruitful evolution of these modern precepts integrated into different realities than its original contexts'.

Barragán travelled extensively throughout Europe, and his ideas were shaped by the traditional architecture of the Mediterranean, the gardens by architect Ferdinand Bac, the work of Mathias Goeritz, and the writings and theories of Le Corbusier. Reference can be made to the spatial concepts in the Rietveld-Schröder House by G. Rietveld in Utrecht (World Heritage 2000) and the Tugendhat Villa in Brno by Mies van der Rohe (World Heritage 2001), as well as how Frank Lloyd Wright integrated the Falling Waters house with the natural environment. Mention is made of Adolf Loos' spatial design in Villa Muller in Prague and Le Corbusier's concepts of roof terraces as the fifth façade.

Barragán was the second to be awarded the renowned Pritzker Architecture Prize, in 1980 (in USA), after Philip Johnson. This prize is awarded to living architects, and it has so far also been received, e.g., by James Stirling, Richard Meier, Hans Hollein, Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi, Alvaro Siza, Sverre Fehn, Renzo Piano and Jørn Utzon. This brief list in itself is an indication of the contemporary context. For Barragán, the citation of the prize states: '*We are honoring Luis Barragán for his commitment to architecture as a sublime act of the poetic imagination. He has created gardens, plazas, and fountains of haunting*

beauty— metaphysical landscapes for meditation and companionship.'

Barragan did not design many houses though those that he did have been published in several colourful editions. His greatest influence has been in the design of gardens and landscapes, particularly urban landscapes. One of his main works is considered to be the master plan for *Parque Residencial Jardines del Pedregal de San Angel* (México City, 1945-1950), a volcanic area subdivided into suburban plots with public landscaping and ornamentation. Another well-known work is the urban master plan for the so-called *Los Glubes* (1963-64), with landscape features and elements such as *Fuente de Los Amantes*.

While going in some depth with the influences that Luis Barragán has received, his relation to contemporaries is not discussed in the nomination document. Nevertheless, in consultation with DoCoMoMo and taking note of existing studies, ICOMOS is satisfied that the work of Barragan has been greatly influential in the development of contemporary architecture in the second half of the 20th century especially in the American continent. His major works have also been introduced in the teaching of various architectural schools elsewhere in the world. The greatest impact of his work has been in the design of landscape gardens and urban landscapes.

Outstanding universal value

General statement:

The work of Luis Barragán represents the late phase of the International Modern Movement in architecture and design, of which the influences go back to the 1920s (e.g. De Stijl, Bauhaus, Le Corbusier). In the period following the Second World War, the movement entered a new phase, which was characterised by the regional application of the modernist ideas in the different parts of the world, including Latin America, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, but also other world regions. In his work, Barragan has been innovative in integrating elements from the Modern Movement with ideas from the Mediterranean and Islamic traditions (e.g. Morocco), such as the use of water elements and fountains in gardens and landscapes. He has also been sensitive to indigenous Mexican traditions, and has used all these elements to create highly philosophical and minimalist ensembles, recalling some works of surrealism (e.g. de Chirico).

While recognizing the great variety of modern creative effort in the second half of the 20th century, and the number of excellent designers, the work of Barragan stands out for its particular qualities and identity, which have made it a significant contribution to the development of modern creative thought.

The choice of the architect's own residence should be understood in what it represents. In fact, the question is not so much about the person of the architect or his autobiographical work. It is rather about the significance of this construction as a synthetic reflection of the creative ideas in an embryonic form, later elaborated in the landscape designs and urban master plans, for which Barragan has become best known. Ideally, in fact, the present nomination could be seen as a significant element in a potentially serial nomination.

Criterion i: the work of Luis Barragán represents an outstanding synthesis of the new ideas developed by the Modern Movement in architecture and design, integrated with traditional elements from the Mediterranean and Mexican vernacular heritage, as well as from contemporary painting and sculpture. The House and Studio, built in 1948, represents the beginning of the most creative period in his career. The ideas and concepts that were reflected and first expressed within the house project were elaborated in his later work, particularly in the design of gardens, urban landscapes, and related features.

Criterion ii: the House and Studio of Luis Barragán exhibits an important interchange of the values that developed in the architecture and design of the 20th century, integrated with traditional features and colours drawn from the Mediterranean region and Mexico. His work, of which this nominated property is a notable example, has significantly influenced the development of architecture, and particularly the design of gardens and urban landscapes, in the second half of the 20th century in the Americas.

4. ICOMOS RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation for the future

Considering that, at the present, only the residential part of the property is legally protected and that the protection of the studio is in process, it is recommended that legal protection be enforced on the entire nominated property as a precondition for the inscription.

Considering that the urban context of the property is subject to changes, which may undermine the qualities of the site, and taking note of the increased building heights in the neighbourhood, it is recommended that the planning control within the proposed buffer zone be formally enforced and that steps be taken to remove any infringements that could disturb the visual integrity of the nominated property.

Recommendation with respect to inscription

That, subject to satisfying the above conditions legal and management conditions, the property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria i and ii*:

Criterion i: The House and Studio of Luis Barragán represents a masterpiece of the new developments in the Modern Movement, integrating traditional, philosophical and artistic currents into a new synthesis.

Criterion ii: The work of Luis Barragán exhibits the integration of modern and traditional influences, which in turn have had an important impact especially on the design of garden and urban landscape design.

ICOMOS, March 2004