

Barragán: A Spiritual Master

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When I think of Luis Barragán, I think of a spiritual master more than an architect. Sure, he was an architect with a civil engineering degree; but, every time I walk into a Barragán site, I immediately and effortlessly feel calm and at peace, and that to me is the merit of a spiritual master or, at the very least, a true artist.

I have heard from people who knew him that he was indeed a fervent Catholic. He was also quite solitary, never married and never had a family. He enjoyed spending peaceful time alone. His home, Casa Luis Barragán, declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2004, certainly reflects this mood. It feels like you are in his own private monastery.

I am not an architecture expert, simply someone who has had the privilege of seeing his work many times over. I have witnessed his evolution from his early years in Guadalajara, where he was born in 1902, to the master works he called Emotional Architecture. These are the works known for their thick, high walls; intense, colorful palette, and emphasis on courtyards and gardens. They are the works that eventually made him the only Mexican architect to receive the Pritzker Prize.

The beautiful book you are holding in your hands right now highlights two of Barragán's most iconic works in Mexico City: Cuadra San Cristóbal (1969) and Casa Giraldi (1976).

Cuadra San Cristóbal is a private residential complex built for the Egeström family on a huge 30,000 square-meter property that consists of horse stables, fountain, plaza, swimming pool, main house and gardens. It is very well worth the approximate one-hour drive from the city center to the outskirts.

This project became symbolic of Barragán because of the use of water, geometric abstraction of the diverse surfaces and color, recurrent elements throughout his work. The result is a poetic composition of colors that contrast against a dramatic water mirror.

Casa Giraldi, on the other hand, is a very small private home right in the middle of the city in the neighborhood of San Miguel Chapultepec. If you are walking down the street and don't know it's a Barragán house, you could simply walk by without noticing. That is the case with many Barragán houses. The facade was never really important to him, it's what's inside that matters. Personally, this idea resonates with me for both practical reasons as well as the obvious metaphorical significance.

The house is small in size but definitely not in importance to his career. He came out of retirement to work on this project and it was the last one he completed before he died in 1988. It was designed around a jacaranda tree that was sitting in the middle of the plot of land before construction, so the whole design is based around this tree that is, of course, its main resident to date.

The most characteristic feature in the house is the indoor pool, which you discover after walking through an intense yellow tunnel of a hallway with striped windows on one side. It is a dramatic transition. Beyond double doors is a mesmerizing composition of intense cobalt blue, red and—depending on the hour and day you visit—a shifting natural light show that comes from the clever design of the windows. It's really something that must be lived to be understood.

Barragán lived in Mexico City from 1936 until his passing in 1988 and it was here where he created most of his best-known works. A trip to Mexico City definitely should include at least one of his sites, whether you are an architecture fan or not, as they have become symbols of the city and are an intrinsic part of its history and culture.

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