

BEING THE MOUNTAIN

PRODUCTORA

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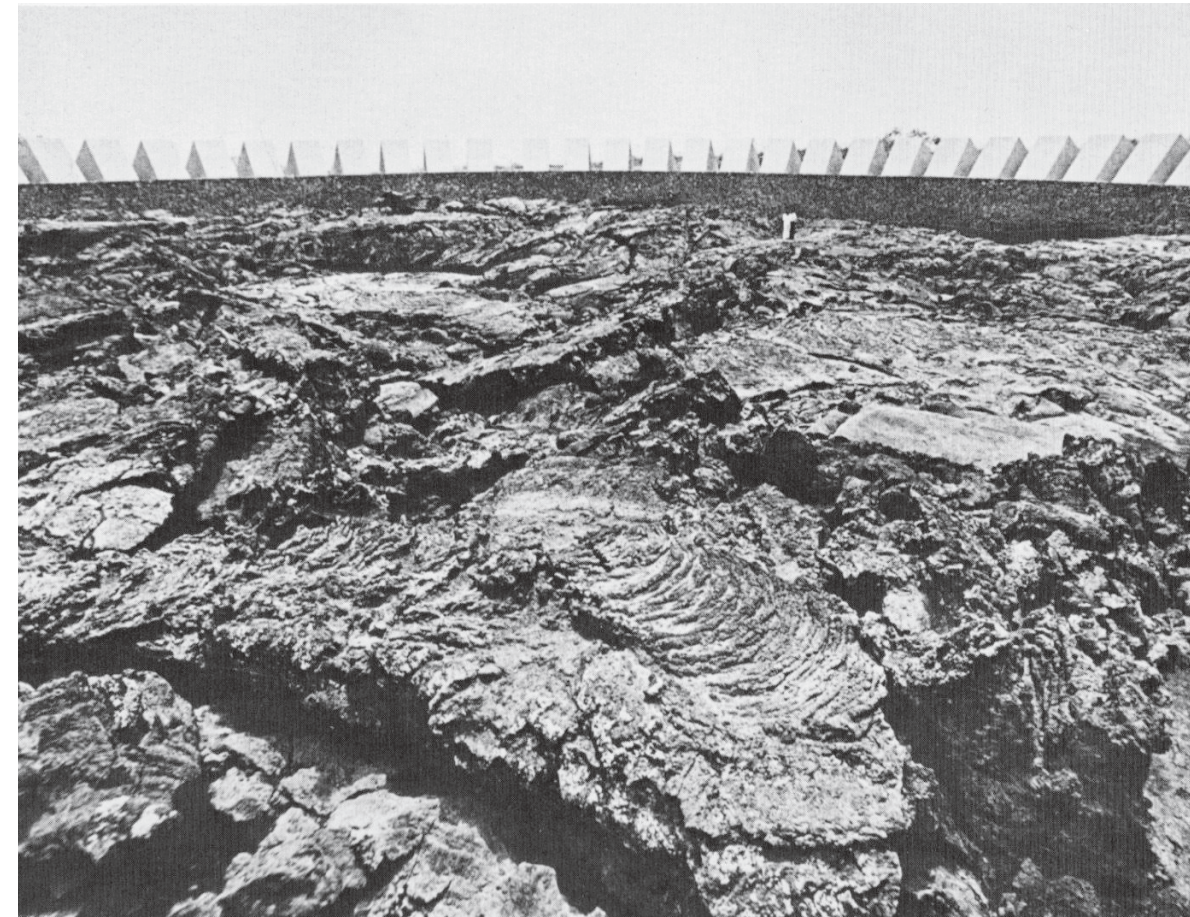
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In 1979, a group of Mexican artists realized a large-scale land art piece called the *Espacio Escultórico*. Built within the territory of the Ciudad Universitaria, the much-acclaimed campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, it was the result of a collective effort by the artists Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Hersúa, Sebastián, and Federico Silva. The work consists of sixty-four large triangular concrete volumes encircling an expressive topography of black lava-rock formations 400 feet (120 meters) in diameter. Although today the interior of the circle is striped with local flora, historical images show it as an empty and dark telluric mass. It is said that the artists used napalm—another favorite from the seventies—to eradicate all vegetation within the circle. In doing so, they transformed the existing landscape into a monochromatic texture painting:



The *Espacio Escultórico* (*Space of Sculpture*): gigantic brushstrokes of solidified magma. Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Hersúa, Sebastián, and Federico Silva. Ciudad Universitaria, Mexico City, 1979.

¹ Mansilla's doctoral thesis was later published as *Apuntes de viaje al interior del tiempo* (Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2002).

² Mansilla, 181. Author's translation.

³ Robert Smithson, "Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape," *Artforum* 11, no. 6 (February 1973): 62–66.

to national and international media. Backed by the brothers Luis and José Alberto Bustamante, who helped acquire more land in the area, Barragán launched an extensive advertising effort that included art book-like brochures and television commercials. The media campaign was supervised and coordinated by Barragán himself, who was not only a serene, spiritual figure, but also an avid real estate developer.

For the architecture of El Pedregal, Barragán envisioned built elements that, just like the pathways, fountains, and lawns, would integrate harmoniously with the existing landscape. Illustrating this idea, he constructed a sales pavilion in 1947–48 within the area of the demonstration gardens. Similar to the Prieto House, which he started building around the same time, its composition was inspired by the earthbound character of traditional haciendas: a robust architecture of colorful thick walls and clustered opaque volumes that settled firmly into the landscape. The pavilion consisted of a low, austere volume countered by a tall square tower geometrically punctured with black holes, intended to act as dovecotes. Eggener suggests that Barragán's predilection to integrate dovecotes was not only because of their modular formal quality, but also because the birds' droppings

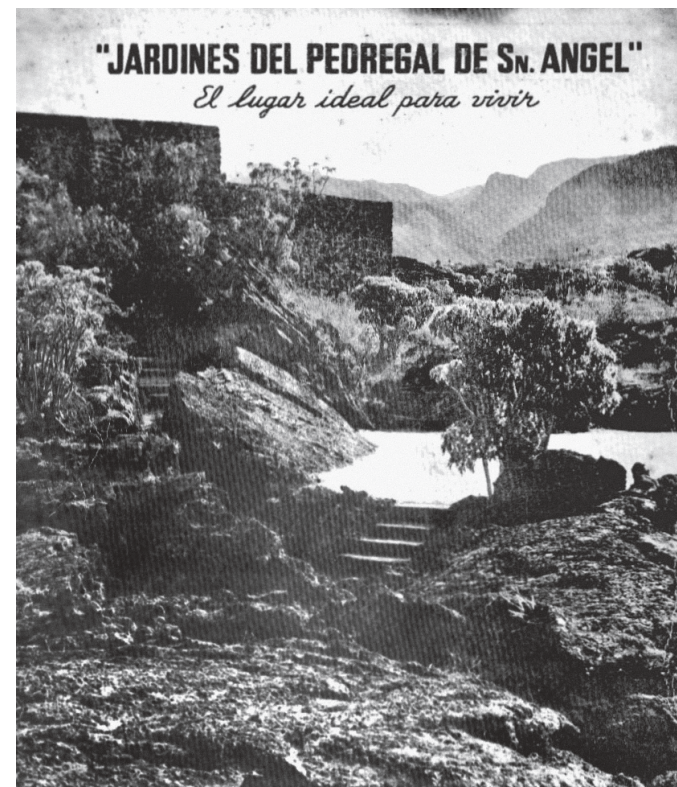


Francisco Artigas's Jardines del Pedregal sales pavilion: dynamic and transparent, with a zigzagging ramp and large windows. Roberto Luna and Fernando Luna, photographers. 1950.

solidified lava over the area and had turned a thriving region inhabited by the Indigenous population around Cuilcuoco into a tortuous landscape of sharp, purple-black rock. Apart from shepherds grazing their goats in the area, there had been little use of these wastelands covered with cacti, palo bobo trees, and dry shrubbery. The expanding metropolis created the need for new land to be developed, however, and it was Luis Barragán who turned his gaze toward this rugged landscape, called El Pedregal, and transformed the cultural imagery of these far-off badlands forever. In a smart effort of branding *avant la lettre*, he brought influential artists, such as the distinguished landscape painter and volcanologist Dr. Atl and the

young photographer Armando Salas Portugal, to the site; their interpretations slowly changed the general perception of this harsh, arid environment. Where most people saw uninhabitable crevices full of scorpions and snakes, Barragán envisioned a new suburban lifestyle in which geology, nature, and architecture would integrate in a new, meaningful way. As the North American scholar Keith L. Eggener writes in his wonderful book on the project, "It was for El Pedregal that Barragán first articulated the verbal rhetoric of mystery and magic, silence and serenity, sensuality and spirituality, that has been used to characterize his work ever since."¹

In 1944, Barragán acquired a first piece of land in El Pedregal² and began a series of small landscape interventions to illustrate his vision. By introducing ponds, irregularly shaped lawns, and steps hewn out of volcanic stone, he shaped a more acceptable version of these rugged backlands. These "demonstration gardens" were photographed by Salas Portugal and immediately used in publicity offered



The demonstration gardens: "The ideal place to live." Advertisement, date unknown.

a circular tableau with gigantic brushstrokes of solidified magma. The stern geometric gesture highlighted and glorified the drama of the natural setting, the primitive forces that shaped it and that connected it with its past. But more than a celebration of a higher cosmological order, the piece can also be understood as a posthumous tribute to a cultural tour de force that shaped the architectural thinking of Mexico, a revolution that took place in the south of Mexico City and redefined the relationship between architecture and topography in a radical way.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, this austral part of Mexico City was left largely untouched. An eruption of the Xitle volcano centuries before had extended long fingers of



Luis Barragán's Jardines del Pedregal sales pavilion: a robust architecture of thick walls and opaque volumes settled firmly in the landscape. Armando Salas Portugal, photographer. Mexico City, late 1940s.

awkward realization here is that the architectural outcome does not seem to sustain the accusation; one would expect that the result would be a blatant mismatch, but rather, the opposite is true. The slick orthogonal lines of the modern volume establish a powerful contrast with the dark, tortuous volcanic surfaces underneath, while the sculptural rock formations are reinforced by the crisp and smooth architecture that forms its new backdrop. Both seem only to enhance one another. This powerful encounter between the existing geology and a prism-based modernism was already visible in some of the published images of Richard Neutra's Kahn House, for example. But both Barragán and Cetto, his frequent collaborator (who

most prolific architect of the Pedregal development, with more than fifty luxurious dwellings realized.

Notwithstanding its commercial success, mainstream modernist design as implemented by Artigas was frequently critiqued as a globally exported style that failed to address local conditions. Artigas's sales pavilion—and, for that matter, most of his residential work in El Pedregal—constitutes the perfect metaphor for this allegation: an imported language blithely laid on top of existing topography. In the iconic images of the Casa del Risco (1952), we see an almost collage-like superposition of two different entities, a foreign idiom unconditionally inserted into a specific and local geographic and cultural environment. Still, the

impulse. The Bustamantes proposed the young and flamboyant architect Francisco Artigas to design and build a second sales pavilion to attract potential buyers. This new pavilion immediately struck a different tone: the building was utterly dynamic and transparent, with a zigzagging access ramp and large window frames. Supported by four small, round, black columns that dissipate in the shadows underneath the building, the whole object seemed to float magically above the volcanic rock, offering visitors panoramic views over the rugged landscape from a cantilevered terrace. This daring model of a newly arrived modern lifestyle was quickly accepted by the affluent society of postwar Mexico City, and soon Artigas became the



Abstract geometric volumes hovering over the volcanic landscape. Francisco Artigas, architect. Roberto Luna and Fernando Luna, photographers. Casa Federico Gómez (Casa del Risco), Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City, 1951–52.

would lend “an instant ‘aged’ patina to the setting.”³ In this sense, rootedness and history informed Barragán's work as much as modernity. His fascination with the lithograph *Pueblo Mexicano* (1930), by José Clemente Orozco, illustrates this complex coexistence well. In the lithograph, cubic architecture dances above a dramatic rocky landscape. Barragán similarly described his work at the Jardines del Pedregal as an architecture of abstract qualities, of primary geometric forms that “were intended to make [his work] distinct from but not dominant over the Pedregal landscape,” as Eggener notes.⁴ His sales pavilion, the Prieto House, and the “demonstration houses” he built in collaboration with Max Cetto were widely published and resonated within a global architectural scene looking for fresh takes on international-style modernism, but they hardly connected with the growing group of international industrialists and Mexican entrepreneurs who had more “modern” aspirations.

By the 1950s, there was very little construction work going on in the Pedregal development that was not directly instigated by Barragán, and the real estate venture needed a new



The dining table runs into lava-rock formations inside the Luis Bustamante house. Francisco Artigas, architect. Roberto Luna and Fernando Luna, photographers. Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City, 1956.

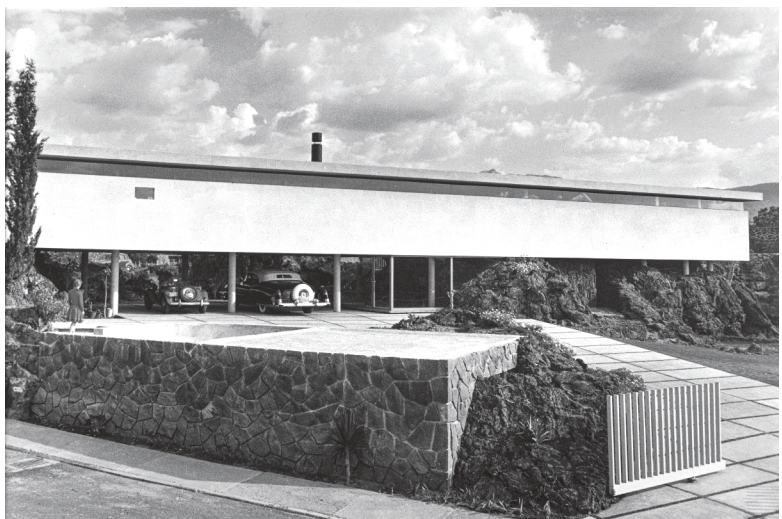
commodity. In 1944, Elizabeth Mock already suggested in the catalogue of the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Built in USA, 1932–44* that “modern planning and site engineering make it feasible to build on rugged land ... which never before had seemed usable,” adding that “a site of this kind can be chosen rather than the hopelessly flat ground favored by conventional builders.”⁶ In many cities around the world, flat land was getting scarce or expensive, and developers and aspiring homeowners were looking for new opportunities. Adventurous architects and clients discovered that the more

horizontal foundation slab and surrounded by a neatly designed garden, even if they were set in spectacular natural landscapes. (Esther McCoy notes that “nearly all of the [Case Study Houses] were on flat pads, giving little opportunity ... for a Wrightian integration into the site.”⁵) Crash-landing a diaphanous prism of steel columns and horizontal slabs in a rough volcanic setting spurred an exciting new vocabulary. The dramatic topographical conditions were a perfect remedy for the looming fatigue of a modern architecture that was increasingly being flattened into a suburban lifestyle

American version defended by Wright and his followers, on the other hand, architecture sought to blend with the environment, both in terms of topography and materiality; here, Fallingwater is the iconic reference. When Artigas imported a smooth, California-inspired modernism and posed it on top of the jagged lava sea of El Pedregal, a new type of interaction between architecture and landscape emerged. It is important to clarify that many of the projects that inspired Artigas, such as the Case Study Houses, were designed as single-story steel-frame dwellings economically placed on top of a

had even worked for Neutra in San Francisco), had always been too ideologically invested in Frank Lloyd Wright’s idea of “organic integration” that they failed to notice—or simply disliked—the spatial and visual qualities of absolute contrast and juxtaposition. Artigas, on the other hand, fully understood that potential. Instead of watering down an extremely popular mid-century design aesthetic by blending it into the landscape and adapting it to local materiality and building techniques, he established a strong play of binary oppositions: transparent versus opaque, natural versus industrial, smooth versus rugged, organic versus orthogonal.

Since the 1920s, architectural debate had been centered on the contrast between the abstract geometries of European modernism and the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright. In the European-mechanistic ideology, the interaction between modern architecture and nature was defined by an idea of control, of antagonism. Its relationship to topography had always been one of denial, suppression, and submission: through flattening or by constructing plinths, terrains were leveled into abstract horizontal surfaces. Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoie, standing so well behaved in the middle of a manicured suburban lawn, is a perfect example. In the



Francisco Artigas, architect. Roberto Luna and Fernando Luna, photographers. Casa Wasung, Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City, 1957.



A volcanic sinkhole with a swimming pool in the garden of the residence of Jose Alberto Bustamante. Francisco Artigas, architect. Roberto Luna and Fernando Luna, photographers. Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City, 1955.

adversarial the surrounding scenery was, the more heroic the architecture looked.

Peripheral places such as Mexico City, Los Angeles, and Palm Springs played a crucial role in the revitalization of the relationship between architecture and landscape. Natural elements such as crevices, rocks, and boulders were embraced as anchor points to stage architectural fantasies and to spur new plan layouts. Around the middle of the century, topographical features became a common trope within architectural production. If not enough drama was present on the plot, large boulders were hauled to a site and decoratively scattered on lawns or around swimming pools. While the Casa das Canoas, by Oscar Niemeyer, might have

been a single exception within a larger oeuvre, other architects, including Artigas, Neutra, Craig Ellwood, Albert Frey, and John Lautner, made geological presence and topographical features essential aspects of their architectural explorations.



Residencia del Dr. Gómez.
Arg. Artigas.

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In 1967, following a short stay in New York City, the American artist Michael Heizer undertook a series of journeys across the United States. Fascinated by the beauty of the landscapes, the immense objects (such as rocks) he encountered, and the vast absence of the plains, he began to experiment with a series of projects that would maintain a fundamental relationship with natural elements, whether through their presence or their absence. As he explained in a 1984 interview, "I was interested in massive objects as well as the absence of objects."¹

In some of these projects, he used large rocks as natural sculptures that he relocated, transplanted, and displaced with the idea of imposing or creating new conditions of meaning. In *Elevated Surface Depressed* (1982), three enormous rocks were placed on plinths that elevated one rock, left



Elevated Surface Depressed: three enormous rocks placed on plinths that elevate one rock, leave another at ground level, and drop the third below grade. Michael Heizer. 1982.

¹ Keith L. Eggner, *Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2001), 2.
² Emilio Ambasz, *The Architecture of Luis Barragán* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 11.
³ Eggner, 39.
⁴ Eggner, 49.
⁵ Esther McCoy, "Arts & Architecture Case Study Houses," in *Blueprints for Modern Living*, ed. Elizabeth A. T. Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), 37.
⁶ Elizabeth Mock, *Built in USA, 1932-44* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1944), 23.