

BEING THE MOUNTAIN

PRODUCTORA

BEING THE MOUNTAIN PRODUCTORA



IITAC





11	INTRODUCTION PRODUCTORA
19	BEING THE MOUNTAIN LEGORRETA'S HOTEL AT IXTAPA Wonne Ickx
27	TOPOGRAPHIC ARCHITECTURE KENNETH FRAMPTON'S INTEREST IN THE GROUND Véronique Patteeuw
37	ON TENTS AND CAVES Frank Escher
47	GEOLOGIC GESTURES Jesús Vassallo
55	BADLANDS OF MODERNISM Wonne Ickx
65	ELEVATED SURFACE DEPRESSED Carlos Bedoya
73	CONTRIBUTORS
77	ON TOPOGRAPHY PRODUCTORA AT S. R. CROWN HALL PROJECTS 2006–17

BEING THE MOUNTAIN
LEGORRETA'S HOTEL AT IXTAPA
Wonne Ickx

"The new design would not be a tower; it would not be a form on the mountain but *be* the mountain, with rooms terraced down the slope. It wouldn't fight with nature but blend with the topography."¹

In 1981, the architect Ricardo Legorreta and his firm finished the construction of the Camino Real in Ixtapa, an impressive holiday resort draped over an ocean-facing slope of the Sierra Madre, on the Pacific coast of Mexico. The hotel was key in the development of Ixtapa, a tourist destination north of Acapulco that the Mexican government began promoting in the late sixties. By the time of this commission, Legorreta had become famous for his remarkable hotel designs, especially the Camino Real in Mexico City, built to host visitors to the 1968 Olympic Games. Heavily influenced by the hyper-rationalist José Villagrán, Legorreta's early work had mainly consisted of highly functional and cost-effective commercial projects, such as medical



A holiday resort draped over an ocean-facing slope of the Sierra Madre. Postcard from the Hotel Camino Real, Ixtapa, Mexico (1981), date unknown. Ricardo Legorreta, architect.

architect,” Legorreta mocked⁴—would be completely beyond the project’s budget, according to the architect and his advisors. But if the client could acquire a different piece of land, Legorreta assured, he could generate a hotel that would have “the way of life of Las Brisas” within the established budget.⁵ The client purchased a different piece of land with prominent topography and a private beach, and the project went ahead.

Just like in Las Brisas, the topography of the site defined the identity of the resort: it was realized as an extended volume enveloping the surface of a hill sloped toward the beach. Rooms are stacked one on top of the other, following the same inclination as the underlying topography—a fairly straightforward solution. Although from the ocean it can appear massive, with ten stories or more, the building rarely rises more than two levels above its foundations. Unlike the organic and spontaneous architectural clusters that covered the landscape at Las Brisas, in Legorreta’s proposal, the mountain itself was transformed and abstracted into architecture. Budgetary goals were met by eliminating air conditioning in nearly the entire hotel: as Legorreta explained, “Only sleeping quarters would be mechanically cooled and even in these there would be the option of a simple ceiling fan; the living

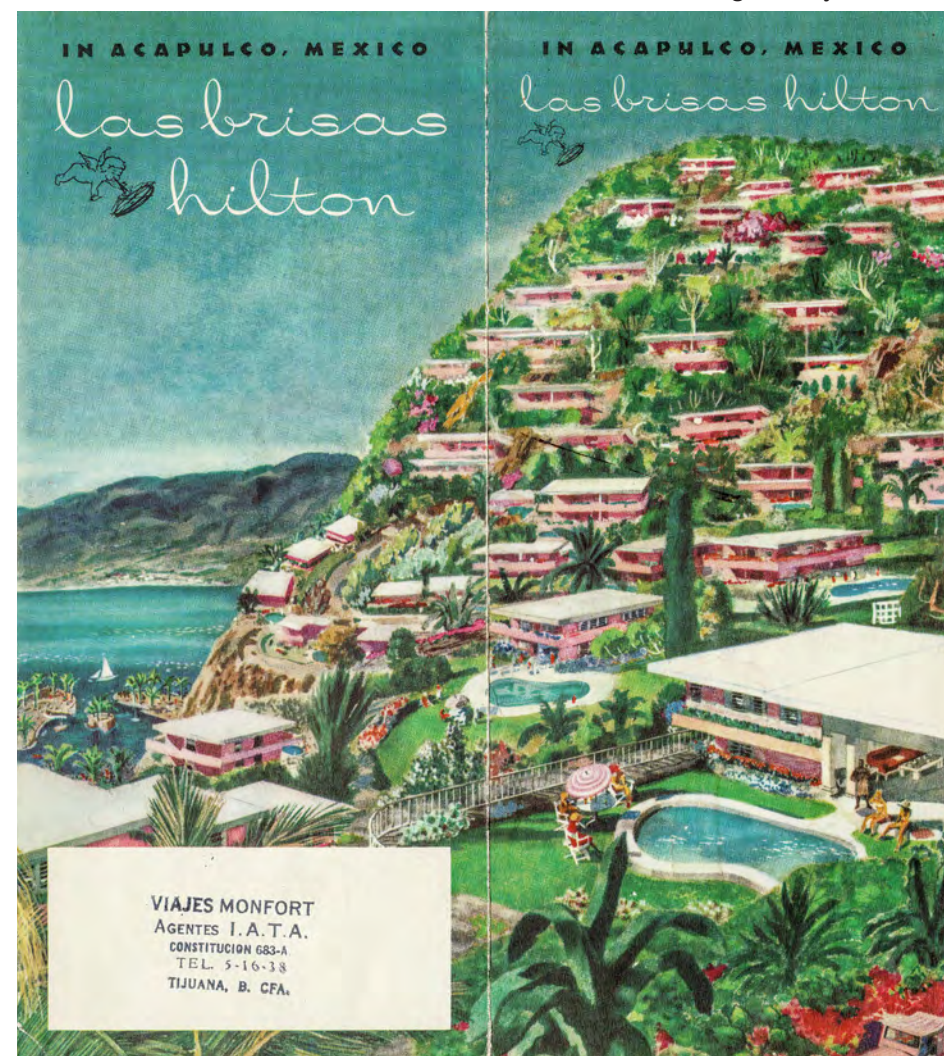


The Las Brisas hotel, a scattered organization of bungalows on a hill. Postcard, date unknown.

tality is very important and that is deduced from the pleasure of walking, which we had forgotten. The radical change that the elevators brought along, had changed architecture,” he explained in a 2013 interview.³

Legorreta repeated this horizontal approach in 1975 at the Camino Real hotel in Cancun, but in Ixtapa, the hotel operator initially asked him for a rather conventional layout: a tower with gardens, restaurants, and pools at ground level. Nevertheless, at the same time, the client also longed for an atmosphere like that of the acclaimed Las Brisas hotel in Acapulco, a 1950s resort that covered an entire hill with pink-and-white bungalows and plunge pools. Such a scattered and loose organization—“designed by a sailor, not an

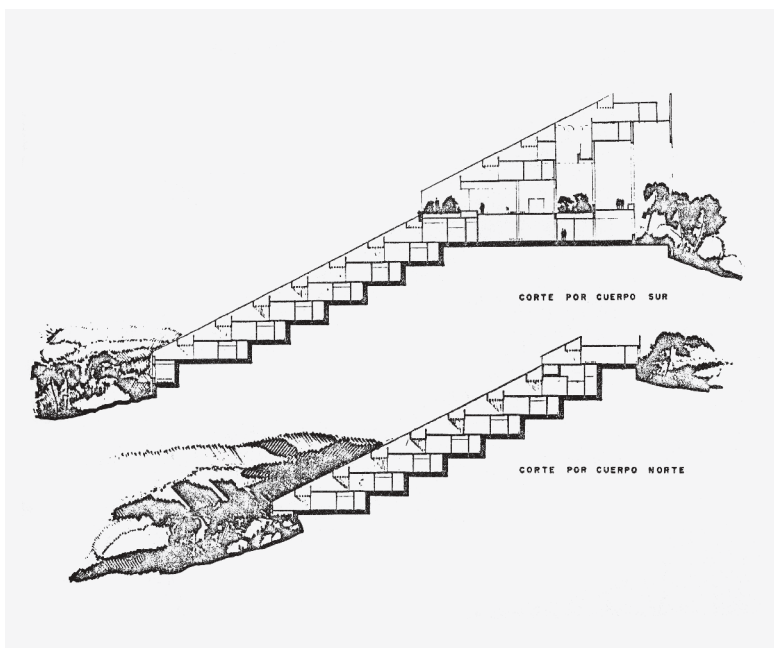
circulation, and chose a low-rise scheme. Wide and well-lit hallways would take visitors to their rooms horizontally, multiplying the distance covered but adding a pleasant architectural quality to the experience. As a critic writing for *Architectural Forum* reported, “Guests have to do a lot of walking. Brockman [the owner of the hotel chain] briskly remarks that ‘If the guests don’t like to walk, they can always go to another hotel.’”² Legorreta relates this idea to a different interpretation of monumentality. Generally seen as a quality related to height or mass, for him, monumentality “was also in the horizon.” “I think that that was a discovery—not just mine, but something that many people started to understand—that the horizon-



A brochure promoting the 1950s Las Brisas hotel in Acapulco, Mexico, date unknown.

laboratories, car manufacturing plants, schools, and corporate offices. For the high-profile Mexico City project, the young Legorreta—then thirty-six years old—surrounded himself with an amazing group of designers and artists including Luis Barragán, Mathias Goeritz, Alexander Calder, Anni Albers, Pedro Friedeberg, and Rufino Tamayo. The encounter with artistic talent of such caliber defined a turning point in his career, infusing Legorreta’s functionalist mindset with a desire for emotion and color and a deep interest in the roots of Mexican culture.

While the Camino Real in Mexico City played a crucial role in Legorreta’s switch to what became a highly exportable “regionalist” style, it was also the first project in which he could test a horizontal hotel layout. Mid-century international hotels were typically large tower-and-plinth structures, combining a horizontal distribution of amenities and public programs in the base with an effective vertical circulation for both visitors and staff in the tower. However, to meet demanding deadlines that would ensure that the hotel would open in time for the Games, Legorreta was forced to explore different means of construction and



Although from the ocean it can appear massive, the Hotel Camino Real rarely rises more than two levels above its foundations. Ricardo Legorreta. Sections, Hotel Camino Real, Ixtapa, 1981.

tions, the architect pursued a specific interest in integrating his buildings within the surrounding geography. His earthship-like additions to the Hotel Hacienda in Baja California, from 1972, truly merged architecture and landscape into one single entity. There, at the southern tip of the peninsula, Legorreta felt that “any idea of architecture would be powerless to compete with the natural environment.”⁹ He decided to bury the required condominium units underground, hidden within an existing sand dune next to the hotel. The cave-like underground spaces, accessible by sunken patios and

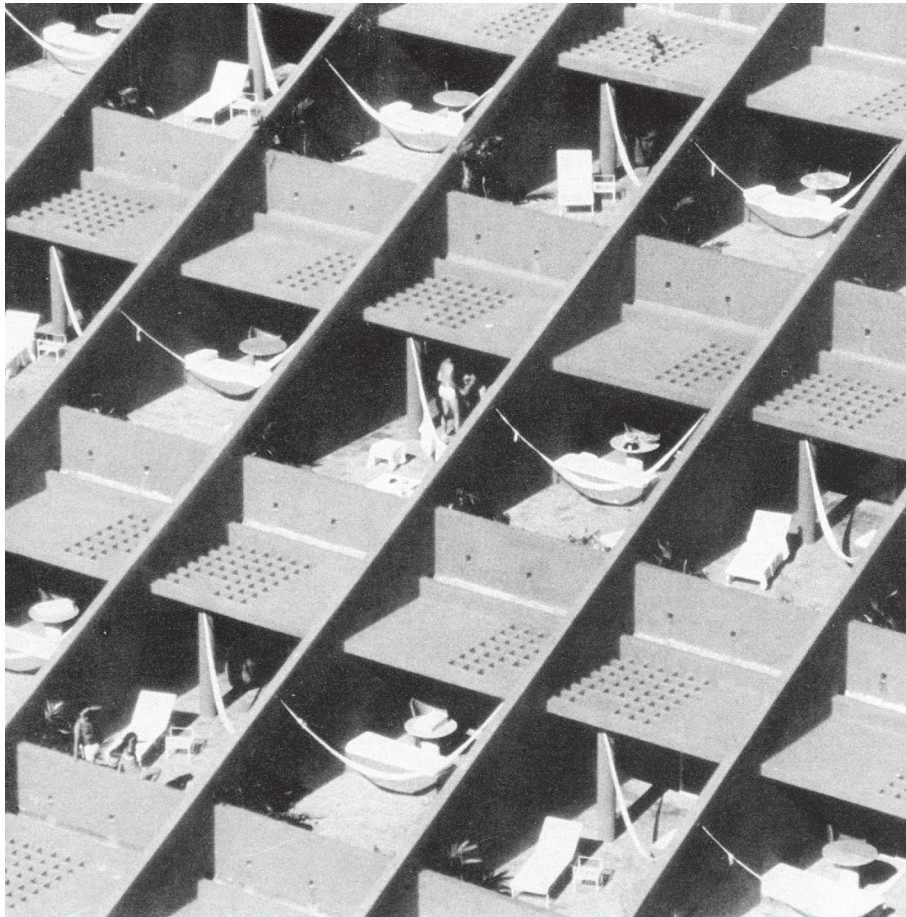
ment through the public areas of the hotel. In her well-researched PhD thesis, Mara Partida illustrates in detail the beauty of this sequence, in which lobbies, corridors, staircases, and works of art come together in an extremely evocative spatial composition.⁷ Legorreta, who always preferred no-nonsense, self-evident rationales, laconically attributed the design of this succession of split levels to “the height difference of about 1,50 meters that exists in between Mariano Escobedo and Leibnitz.”⁸

Along with developing interior qualities through sectional composi-

an unbroken floor slab in a corporate tower, was perhaps one of his most ingenious solutions. By applying an external structural system based on hanging tension members and organizing the plan in four gradually stepped parts (each platform ninety centimeters above the previous segment), he managed to create a work floor that spiraled fluidly upward and that could be freely subdivided by the company. At the Camino Real in Mexico City, we witness an incredibly elegant sequence of staircases, each fourteen to fifteen steps high, that orchestrates gradual move-

area of each guest room would be placed outside on a terrace with a hammock and dining place, plants, and a view over the Pacific Ocean—in short, a relaxed living area naturally cooled...⁶ Zooming in on the terraces, some with private pools, we can appreciate the meticulousness of the hotel’s formal logic. Rooms are set back into the volume, organizing a smooth progression from dark to light; punctured brise-soleils create different shade conditions. In the middle of each terrace, a non-structural column separates an area for a hammock to hang and the circulation pathway.

Legorreta had employed the building section to solve construction or programmatic requirements in many of his projects, a continuous search for alternatives to the modernist ethos of simply multiplying by stacking. The Celanese Mexicana offices, an early project in which he achieved



Ricardo Legorreta. Balconies at the Hotel Camino Real, Ixtapa.



The roof as an abstraction of the existing topography, drawing a sharp diagonal line through the forest landscape. Ricardo Legorreta. Casa de Fin de Semana, Valle de Bravo, Mexico, 1973.

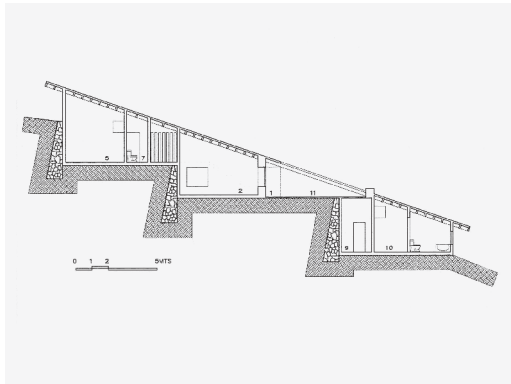
lit by skylights, allowed the architect "to leave the landscape untouched."¹⁰ A year later, in 1973, he completed a three-bedroom weekend cottage for his family, set among trees on a hill in Valle de Bravo. The primitive structure is topped by a wood-shingled roof that radically mimics the slope of the existing landscape. This basic formal gesture shapes a cut-out central terrace, establishing the outdoor space as the project's center of gravity. The duplication and abstraction of the existing topography draw a sharp diagonal through the vertical lines of the trees. Despite its small scale, Legorreta published the house in Valle de Bravo both nationally and internationally, illustrating the enthusiasm he felt for the scheme.

The accumulated knowledge of these previous projects comes together in Ixtapa, creating a particular, massive structure that is both architecture and topography at the same time. It reminds us, for example, of Cesar Pelli's project for Sunset Mountain Park in California, Moshe Safdie's Habitat Puerto Rico, and many stepped housing projects developed and built during the late sixties and seventies that used the hillside condition as an alibi to add the diagonal to a modernist idiom defined mainly by horizontal and vertical components. These postwar projects illustrate the paradoxical ambition to be at once megastructural and embedded in a site, combining in a provocative way the abstract geometries of early modernism with ulterior

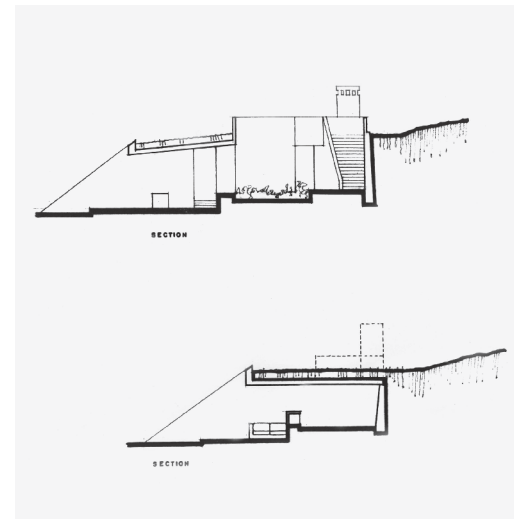
environmental concerns. Legorreta's bold gestures at Ixtapa constitute a powerful example of an architecture that consciously engages with the geographic conditions of the site while avoiding a sentimental contextual approach.



Cave-like condominium units on the beach side of the Hotel Hacienda.
Ricardo Legorreta. Hotel Hacienda, Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, 1973.



Ricardo Legorreta. Section, Casa de Fin de Semana, 1973.



Ricardo Legorreta. Section, Hotel Hacienda, 1973.

In 1980, just a few months before the opening of the first International Architecture Exhibition of the Venice Biennale, British architectural historian Kenneth Frampton resigned from the curatorial team. His co-curators, Paolo Portoghesi, Robert A. M. Stern, Charles Jencks, Christian Norberg-Schulz, and Vincent Scully, had settled on an approach that emphasized the glorification of the past and positioned postmodernism as an architectural style of historicist eclecticism, in fierce opposition to Frampton's ideology.² Although Frampton was critical of the legacy of the modern movement, he shared Jurgen Habermas's commitment to "the unfinished project of modernity"³ and argued for an architecture that would resist the universalizing hegemony of the postmodern times he was witnessing.

Frampton's "criticism from within," as Léa-Catherine Szacka has suggested, prepared the field for alternative sensibilities in architecture through which his interest in the ground



Aris Konstantinidis anchors his weekend house in Anavissos, Greece, to its ground, a bare shore in an isolated setting. 1962.

1 Wayne Attoe in Wayne Attoe, ed., *The Architecture of Ricardo Legorreta* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990), 154.
 2 Victor R. Zavallos, "Camino Real," *Architectural Forum* 129, no. 4 (November 1968): 89.
 3 Quoted in Miquel Adria and José Castillo, eds., *Ricardo Legorreta: El verdadero lujo está en el espacio* (Mexico City: Arquine, 2013), 28. Author's translation.
 4 Quoted in Attoe, 151.
 5 Quoted in Attoe, 151.
 6 Quoted in Attoe, 154.
 7 Mara Partida, "Hotel Camino Real. Cruce de Artistas y Arquitectos en la Ciudad de Mexico, 1968" (PhD thesis, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona, 2004).
 8 Quoted in Adria and Castillo, *Ricardo Legorreta*, 26. Author's translation.
 9 Quoted in C. Ray Smith, "Low Density in the Dunes," *Progressive Architecture* 57, no. 9 (September 1976): 68.
 10 Smith, 68.