

UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN GARDENS OF EL PEDREGAL

Jardines de El Pedregal, as we know it today, is the development project born when the Architect Luis Barragán acquired and undertook an unprecedented "real estate landscape" operation, between 1945 and 1952. The discovery in terms of "learning to see the landscape" of petrified lava and stony lands, as a possibility of a way of life exalted by the beauty of nature in the periphery of Mexico City, persists until today. From a distance, the evolution that the development has had both in its architecture and in its urban design is striking, especially if we realize that it is a unique heritage site, and at risk.

Barragán designed, with the collaboration of the Architect Carlos Conteras, created the first "garden-city" master plan, which in very general terms safeguarded the ecosystem with a very low density in plots of 2,000 to 10,000 m², which were later reduced to lots of 1,000 to 5,000 m². Here Barragán carried out extraordinary landscape works such as the Plaza de Acceso, Plaza Las Fuentes, parks, and sample gardens (such as the abandoned Teololco garden). All this exterior work as a whole was conceived as the setting for the best modern architecture of the time. Here, it is surprising that the first houses that were built there by Barragán himself with Max Cetto completed between 1950 and 1951, Casa Muestra Av. de las Fuentes 130 and Casa Prieto López on Av. de las Fuentes 180, are from the same "vocabulary".

Jardines de El Pedregal is an area where the houses and gardens were built in a lava desert field that takes on the most peculiar shapes. The buildings of houses and gardens highlight the beauty of the stones, along with the original character of the landscape. "We can have the possibility of developing and creating private gardens, one for each house, limited and surrounded by walls, trees, and foliage that prevent the outside and neighboring houses from being seen. I believe, however, that architects have to make gardens to be used, like the houses they build. They also have to develop a sense of beauty and good taste, leaning towards fine arts and spiritual values. We can add to these streets, bordered by walls, and decorative works; these limits will not destroy the privacy of the gardens. With groups of trees planted before the natural limits of the streets, fountains, and other elements we can have "Street Gardens" with a special appearance, as well as an attractive aesthetic: the sex appeal of the gardens, the element of mystery. Together with these ideas that served as a reason, as a guide in the parceling out of Pedregal, we studied how to preserve the harmony between architecture and landscape".

Barragán withdrew from Jardines de El Pedregal in 1952, leaving the place ready to receive a notable group of architects, who understood the place as an opportunity to exalt nature just as he proposed it, but with different approaches. Today it is impossible to imagine Mexican architecture without the Jardines de El Pedregal chapter. "The essential thing about Jardines de El Pedregal is the realization, in Mexico, of an alliance between modern structures and adapted landscape, so perfectly resolved at the point of Mexicanidad that, from any of its aspects, it shouts to the visitor: you are in Mexico".

One of the premises of the urban proposal was to preserve the particular characteristics of the natural landscape of the land, which served as the basis for the design of the new development. Juan Palomar emphasizes that "the great significance of the residential development was the total, intellectual and physical appropriation of a virgin landscape to establish a new alliance between man and the land" In the first stage, the design obeyed a criterion of adaptation to the landscape, in the second, a criterion of contrast with the landscape. Beyond the formal differences, in all cases, the large windows, the terraces, the wide interior spaces, swimming pools, and extensive gardens stand out.

The current diagnosis corresponds to a reality that has little to do with what Barragán imagined in the 40s, especially about the overcrowding of houses or schools, and therefore of inhabitants and automobiles in terms of what was originally conceptualized. If we consider that in these matters there is no reversal”, fortunately, action has already been taken on the issue of density and land use (Jardines del Pedregal Partial Plan). It remains to review what concerns the safeguarding of the urban, architectural, and landscape heritage, of what remains (geological remnants). Seeing it in terms of sustainable public space (of heritage value) must guarantee a better future or safeguard the cultural identity and geo-heritage.

Barragán once said: “Don't do what I did, see what I saw”.

The sample gardens were created by bringing in topsoil and using the native Pedregal cacti, wildflowers, graceful pepper trees, and gnarled Palo bobo (crazy tree). Steps and pathways were carved into the rocks; Water pools and stone walls were disposed of in such a seemingly effortless manner that the gardens seemed to have been born together with the sea of lava. The first exercises in El Pedregal did not have a clear use, they were not designed for anyone in particular, nor with a specific function, they aimed to experiment. The sample plot or sample garden, although designed as a public space, was planned as a model for the development of private space. They were to illustrate Barragán's idea of correct construction on site, promoting a kind of “harmony” between architecture and landscape. Currently, the plot of the sample gardens is completely covered by houses, without any trace of what they once were. I intend to uncover the gardens, shown and thus expose the geological heritage of El Pedregal.

Mexico basin has suffered extremely rapid and destructive urban growth during the last 50 years, and the preservation of the last remains of fauna and flora that is endemic to this region and unique in the world strongly relies on the conservation of the Xitle lavas, whose elevated diversity in morphology and vesicularity creates a wide range of microhabitats that host a considerable number of species.

My operations on the sample gardens plot are based on an understanding between house and garden, the garden must be freed from the house therefore a partial demolition process must be executed to find the original relationships between the house in the garden and the garden in the house. These operations must give the possibility to recover the public aspirations of the landscape and must make evident the historical memory of the place. My intention with this project is to evoke knowledge and sensibility towards the geological and modernist heritage of Mexican history.