Legorreta + Legorreta: Themes and Variations in Modern Practice

The architecture of the renowned Mexican firm Legorreta and Legorreta, originally established as Legorreta Arquitectos, in 1964, reflects a complex blend of influences. It is firstly modern; the forms are mostly cubic or primary shaped masses carved and punctured in abstract asymmetrical compositions. The resulting interplay of solids and voids are ideal expressions of what Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French architect and acknowledged principal inventor and apologist for international modern architecture, described as, the "magnificent play of masses brought together in light."[i] Second, the work is intrinsically Mexican, reflecting the vernacular spaces of Spanish traditions - courtyards, fountains and plazas, combined with a solidity and imposing presence that evokes the monumentality of the Country's Aztec and Mayan remains, no doubt an insistent presence for architects; the heroic 2000 year old ceremonial Teotihuacan complex lies just 30 miles from Mexico City. Another way one senses the Mexican heritage of the work is through the coloring, which is almost always, bold, striking hues; hot reds, yellows, and oranges, even pink, contrast dramatically with the region's cobalt blue skies. The third most defining characteristic of this architecture is its emotional appeal. The plans are often centered on a shared space, outdoor courts or dramatically high interior spaces. These are gracious rooms, but the mood is unpretentious. The spaces are generous, but casually so. Whether in residential interiors or the major spaces of large public institutions, they are reassuringly protective and hospitable rooms for unhurried social gathering. This facility to meet the needs of modern uses while sustaining traditional feelings of shelter and repose that makes the Legorreta's work both Mexican and modern, and it is what enables the Mexico City based firm to build so successfully elsewhere in the world. Their unique vision remains intact while they accommodate their forms to suite each context in which they build.

Ricardo Legorreta began his career working for Jose Villagran, (1901-1982) a modernist in the European vein, who is best known for his Le Corbusier-inspired master plan of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), in Mexico City, where he also chaired the Faculty of Architecture and where Legorreta earned his degree, in 1953. The architect with the most profound influence on Legorreta, and whose buildings his work most resembles, was Luis Barragan, (1902-1988). Barragan, who received world acclaim and architecture's most prestigious award, winner of the Pritzker Prize, in 1982, in part for defining a distinctly Mexican expression of modern architecture. His profoundly personal style relied upon a strictly abstract vocabulary of rectangular forms, often saturated with bold colors. In his best known projects - mostly residential - Barragan featured Mexican vernacular elements including walled gardens, plazas, and fountains, rendered in rough plaster, tile and timber to stirringly poetic effect. Legorreta's career owes much to these two prominent figures in Mexican architecture, both of whom provide connections between the heroic modernism of the 1920s and 1930s and the contemporary, more pluralistic global culture of architectural practice.

When Legorreta's work attracted international attention, initially under Ricardo's sole direction, and later in collaboration with his son, Victor, the firm began to receive commissions beyond Mexico, first in the United States, and then in other parts of the world, including Asia and the Middle East. As the architects built in new areas, they adapted their style to reflect influences from these different contexts. The work has remained distinctly their own, but informed by local contexts. As Victor Legorreta, who would eventually inherit the practice, describes their approach to international work, they seek, "not to export Mexican architecture to another place, but to bring Mexican [themes], and mix them with local influences."[ii] Ricardo Legorreta's success at home and abroad earned him and his firm praise and distinction. In 1999, he received the Union Internationale des Architects (UIA) Gold Medal and In 2000, he received the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Gold Medal, "for an architect who has had a lasting influence on the history and practice of architecture." The firm's practice now includes prestigious large-scale institutional and commercial projects in many parts of the globe. Ricardo Legorreta's design of a residence for Massy Mehdipour, in Pebble Beach, California, done in collaboration with his son, Victor, would be his last residential project. The architect passed away on December 30, 2011, at 70 years old, in Mexico City, after returning from Tokyo, where he had received Japan's Praemium Imperiale, the first Mexican to achieve this annual global art award.

The Legorretas' first work outside Mexico, was in California where the firm has built a variety of projects; civic, institutional, commercial and residential. His work is in some ways well suited for California's climate and social context. While the larger buildings have been well received, their residential projects, always a significant portion of the firm's work, are the most sympathetic to the local environment. They demonstrate most successfully the firm's ethos of Mexican-modern blending. California is a place that, for modernists, encourages adaptation. Since the early part of the 20th Century, when modernism was blooming in Europe, there has been a brand of California Modern, and it's regional influence is profound. Distinct from Europe's more orthodox modernism, a typically austere style of crisp white rectangular volumes, planar, unadorned surfaces and expanses of clear glazing, used equally for cultural institutions and civic monuments as well as housing for urban workers, California Modernism found its niche in single family residential design. The canon of heroic modernism in Europe combined minimalism with industrial construction techniques that, even in the most luxurious instances, yielded pristine, isolated pavilions. Here, on the West Coast, the founding modernist principles of clean, simple forms and generous transparency were adapted by regional practitioners, some of whom began their careers in Europe, to suit the region's benign climate, abundant natural settings and casual lifestyle. Using natural materials, including stone and redwood and organizing layouts with indoor-outdoor planning, California Modern architects integrated homes and gardens into organically unified living spaces.

Although the Legorretas have found California a hospitable context, it is not a perfect fit. While several of the State's more famous touchstones of California Modernism parallel their work, some of the more distinctly Mexican aspects of their design are out of place here, and the designers have had to adapt. Early works in the California Modern style, including the San Diego architect, Irving Gill's Dodge House, built in Los Angeles in 1916, with it's simple cubic massing and asymmetrical punched openings is a particularly compatible example. It recalls the Legorretas' houses in San Salvador, where, high-up on hillsides, the Legorretas' oft-used courtyard plan is opened on one side to the landscape, resembling the north-side of the Dodge house with its carved-in rear terrace opening to the garden. Another touchstone of California Modernism that resembles the Legorretas' approach is the 1908 Gamble House, in Pasadena. Greene and Greene's classic Craftsman is a noble looking manse, symmetrical and orderly from the front that on inspection reveals a sensualist's spirit. Large interior living spaces open onto terraces, shaded by second story wood-framed outdoor sleeping porches where the occupants, Midwest natives, could spend their nights in the open air. At the rear a broad landscaped patio delineated with a meandering stone wall gathers in the natural landscape including a pond and two massive Eucalyptus trees. While the spirit of these Californian icons is similar to much of the Legorretas' work, there are formal differences. Californian designers habitually turn living spaces outward to the landscape, extending interior rooms with porches, terraces and decks that stretch living areas into the open, beyond their enclosures. By contrast the Legorretas' residential designs are typically square shaped in plan and inwardly focused, often featuring an internal court. Deep layers of space comprising patios or terraces tucked under the shelter of overhangs or second level rooms insulate the major spaces from the sun, and living areas are nestled in close to the core. The Sala, or Living Room, can be difficult to locate in plan at first, because it is often not the largest interior room, taking a second place in the formal hierarchy to the Dining Room. Almost always it is the central courtyard that dominates and organizes the plan.

By mid-century, when development began to fill in the Los Angeles basin, the best archetypal California Modern houses were being built on hillsides, extending in linear shapes along downward-sloping sites, broadside to expansive views, and architects revised their strategies to suit these new conditions. Mid-century designs by leading California Modernists, including Harwell Harris and Gregory Ain, who gained prominence with their designs for Los Angeles hillside sites in such areas as the Hollywood Hills and Pacific Palisades, preferred open plan figures; Broad L-shapes and landscape-embracing U-shapes or simple rectangles, that let the outdoors in. Exemplary of this type is Harwell Harris's Granstedt House, built in 1938, on a wide, shallow hillside lot facing into a canyon, in Los Angeles. The plan is a rectangle with the major rooms facing the view and opening onto a terrace that runs the length of the house. The dominant formal element is the roof; described by the West Coast architectural writer, Esther McCoy, as, "a three dimensional lineal sculpture,"[iii] with rafters extended to form a trellis-like projection that shades the glazing.

When the Legorretas have worked on sites in California where they are unconstrained by neighbors or limited by topography, they have responded by turning their usually inwardly focused plans outward to face the landscape. In Petaluma, north of San Francisco, they designed a house, in 2004, that adapts in significant ways to regional imperatives. For starters, the client, like many Californians, is a car enthusiast, and a large portion of the plan is taken up with a garage, the facade of which shares almost equal importance with the main entry. Formally, the house is strung along a crest of the site, rooms jutting out into the garden on two sides, and the Master Suite sits between two free-standing walls set at right angles that gather in the landscape in a dramatically open embrace. In another accommodation to local preferences the color palette of the plaster is attuned to the context, reflecting the colors of grass and soil in the surrounding natural environment. Contrasting colors are reserved for private inward facing spaces only.

As with the best known and best loved of California Modern typologies, the linear house that sits on a bench carved into a west facing hillside with an ocean view is an ideal. The Legorretas' proposed design for Massy Mehdipour occupies such a site along the Pebble Beach shoreline. Here again the architects have adapted their style to suit this classic California setting. The house is laid lengthwise, nestled into a west facing slope. The plan is linear, organized along a north-south circulation spine with the living spaces arranged to permit access onto generously sized terraces that extend the length of the house on the view side. The massing of the house is carefully composed to ensure that, while there are three levels, they are never stacked directly, so viewed from the road, and more crucially when seen from the beach, it appears as only two stories. Ricardo was adamant that a house on the dunes should not be three stories high. This west facing elevation is divided in half at the mid-line between the first level, clad in natural stone, and the plaster-clad second floor, which is set back beyond the terraces, so the compositional emphasis is horizontal.

The living spaces are crowned with a heavy timber roof, a Legorreta signature, but here rendered with a difference. In Mexico, such a roof would be sloped down to the outside to create a deep overhang protecting interior spaces from the sun, but here, on the Monterey Bay, where over-heating is rarely a problem and the view is the dominant theme, the roof is inclined the other way, tilting upward and opening the house toward the ocean. And consistent with the horizontal compositional emphasis the rafters are oriented lengthwise along the primary axis, paralleling the terraces and softening the gesture of the overhang.

The house accommodates its context in more detailed ways as well. As one would expect in a contemporary California house, but atypical for a Legorreta design, the west-facing elevation is largely glazed. The base is clad with locally-quarried stone, tying the building to its site. Lastly the color that often characterizes a Legorreta building has been toned down. The plaster here has been made a light brown

color, a response to concerns from local community members and, according to Victor, to harmonize with the native dunes.[iv] Yet with these formal concessions to local context and traditions the house still asserts a Mexican-ness. The living spaces are comfortable and family-oriented. “Like in Mexico,” says Victor, [they are] “large spaces, in and out, for gathering.”[v] This house, Ricardo’s last residential design, would be his only building in this region - an expression of his particular vision of an architecture for and about this unique environment. In this work, as in their other designs around the world, the firm has restated its distinct vocabulary, in a voice that, as Paul Goldberger, architecture critic for the New Yorker has observed, “is wholly its own yet is capable of evolving to respond to a range of different situations.”[vi]

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[i] Le Corbusier (Charles Jeanneret), *Vers une architecture* [Towards a new Architecture] (1923)
[ii] Interview with Victor Legorreta, April 3, 2012
[iii] Esther McCoy, The Second Generation, Gibbs-Smith, 1984, p. 52
[iv] Interview with Victor Legorreta, April 3, 2012
[v] Interview with Victor Legorreta, April 3, 2012
[vi] Paul Goldberger, Forward to Legorreta: Architecture 2003 -2010, Area Editores, 2010, pp. 18, 19.