

From: *Museums for a New Millenium. Concepts Projects Buildings*, curated by V. Magnago Lampugnani, A. Sachs, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 30 May - 26 August 2001), Prestel, Monaco-Londra-New York 2001, pp. 92-98.

Ricardo Legorreta
MARCO, Contemporary Art Museum
Monterrey, Mexico, 1989 - 1991

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If you study Legorreta's architectural vocabulary carefully, as seen at MARCO, its depth and meaning can be read. The clarity of his architecture is a result of his use of the basic architectural elements of wall plane, column, vault, geometry, and light, but it is his deft handling of these elements in his search for the essential meaning of the wall plane, and their fusion into a language of space, that satisfies the eye so well. He is also aware that spaces acquire various meanings when imbued with the memory of the viewer. And this is just the beginning, a backdrop for him to be slightly mischievous, as he layers the spaces with emotion, mystery, and mysticism. This combination is what makes his architecture so magical.

People have often referenced Legorreta's architecture to that of Luis Barragan. While similarities may exist, especially in the use of the wall plane and how light is used to modify space, one can also say that their architecture is based primarily on a vernacular tradition. This is certainly true in the abstract power of the wall plane and the intensity and use of deeply saturated colors. You just have to visit the hillside town of Guanajuato to realize that color is in use in all walks of Mexican life. According to Legorreta, Barragan's primary influence on him was in the integration of landscaping, both hard and soft surfaces, into his architecture, and this influence is reflected in the sculpture court.

The design of the museum was inspired by the traditional plan of a Mexican house; an active central courtyard, flooded with natural light and edged by a shaded arcade that provides direct access to the adjacent spaces. The external walls of the Mexican house are flat planes penetrated only by an entrance and by minimal openings. This design parti has been repeated as a central theme in several of Legorreta's projects. This design was then integrated with the urban setting - a key corner of Monterrey's Macroplaza flanked by the cathedral and the slightly more pretentious palace (Governmental Buildings), and facing Monterrey's bustling hotels and business district on the opposite corner. The museum corner was cut away to create a void, an urban plaza in which was then inserted a monumental abstract dove by the Mexican sculptor Juan Soriano, signifying peace.

The design of the rear of the museum is just as carefully detailed as its more popularly known front. From the narrow, quiet streets of the modest neighborhood you see the less glamorous side and a corner that contains the parking garage entrance. But the astute handling and attention paid to this façade has resulted in a convergence of flat planes in one of its purest forms. The walls are solid, blank, undecorated planes perceived as a series of masses pierced by small, stark rectangular openings. From a distance the planes appear as singular masses, but upon approaching close up you can distinguish the subtly dimensional texture of the rough plaster. Each plane is painted in a single uniform color of misty mauves or intense beige/oranges, with shadows cast across the planes, shifting in time. The magical quality of the early morning and late afternoon Mexican light wreaks

wonderful havoc with the color planes and enlivens the surface as the plaster absorbs and reflects the changing colors of mauve/blue in the early morning and yellow/orange toward sunset, as if the wall plane has a strange life of its own. It is a backdrop to the neighborhood as mystical scenery.

The main pedestrian access to the museum is through the entry plaza in which Juan Soriano's gigantic dove appears to pay nostalgic homage to Luis Barragan's pigeon house. Legorreta has collaborated with the artist extensively in his public projects. The fan-shaped entry plaza is enclosed by two towering wall planes that direct you to a colonnade with oversize blue columns that denotes the commencement of the entry sequence. Above the entry colonnade, a contextual connection is heightened by an arcaded balcony that pays reference to the arcade of the cathedral rectory across the street. But Legorreta's balcony is not meant to be functional but simply a contextual memory. The openings are square in a regulated pattern along a straight line, as if capitals to the columns below. The colonnade leads you to the entrance doors located at one end of the colonnade.

One walks through the inconspicuous entry doors to the vestibule, which is a high space with carefully controlled light and color. This change in spatial sequence, the large entry plaza and the visually small-scale entry doors, heightens the sense of spaciousness of the entry vestibule, a sense of illusion. Initially the space is easily readable and is perceived as a singular space. But after pausing in the space you realize that the vestibule is a more complex and layered space, and ever changing due to the shifting light patterns as the natural light passes across the wall planes. The space is not bathed with light uniformly, as the dark of the entrance at one end is counterbalanced by the brighter light of the skylight at the opposite end. In this space one can see Legorreta's elements of architecture begin to blossom. Flat plaster walls act as planes that form geometric masses that engage each other to form a composition that becomes the perimeter of the room. A bright yellow square column that hangs from the ceiling and floats above the floor penetrates the space, provides light to, and notates the information desk. A lattice, a wall plane perforated by regular rectangular openings, another Legorreta element, filters light passing through the skylight and diffuses a singular strong source of light into a myriad of smaller rays, and several openings of different sizes cast varying shafts of light across the space. A wide honeycomb screen allows the visitor fragmentary glimpses of the central court that is the visual center and heart of the museum. This previewing technique allows the viewer to see the adjacent space with out actually entering, while simultaneously sensing that the second space is connected to the first space.

After visitors pass under a sculptural lattice, they arrive at the two-story central court that also serves as the focusing element, circulation center, and access point to all the galleries. As you pass into the central court, you realize the enormousness of the space, with the monumental columns of the colonnade on three sides of the court providing a sense of formality and of the importance that this central space holds in the design of the museum. The influence of the surrealism period of the painter Giorgio de Chirico may be in evidence here, with his paintings illustrating subtractive monumentality with the skewed scale and the ascending perspective that is often fictitious. The initial impact is one of severity, but as you pause in the space, it takes on a different character, one of serenity. This sense of change of the impact of a space over time is a characteristic trademark of Legorreta. He purposely layers a space with different meanings that are realizable only over time. A trickle of water flows constantly into the courtyard, which doubles as a shallow pool and, when drained, a functional place for special concerts and receptions. The water emanates from a vivid red recess cut into the side of the grand staircase, the primary vertical movement system of the museum. Periodically the courtyard is flooded with a torrent. This sudden movement of water is designed to energize and refresh the environment of the museum's focal point, the opposite of the eternally frozen space.

The interior of the galleries is off white, in stark contrast to the color-saturated wall planes of the

building's exterior and of the two courtyards. On the second floor, natural light penetrates the galleries evenly and indirectly through parallel rows of narrow, elongated half vaults that cover the ceiling wall to wall. The floors of the galleries are finished in natural woods in a square grid inlay pattern. These exhibition galleries are spaces and environments of different proportions, forms, and heights, with strategically located shafts of natural light penetrating the spaces. Natural light succeeds, but there are momentary lapses, as at most museums, with rays of light interfering with the presentation of the art. Carefully placed openings in the walls of the galleries frame a view of the city or the mountains and also keep the visitor in touch with the public space and central court without distracting from the art.

These voids appear to occur everywhere in the walls of the galleries. This is the opposite of most museum spaces, which tend to contain you and force the visitor to concentrate on the art at hand. At MARCO, while viewing the art of one gallery, you have glimpses through lattices, grilles, and window less voids of the art in the adjacent galleries or back to the central court. You cannot pass through, but you are connected to the adjacent spaces and you are made aware of your present place. A gallery may open out onto the orangerie courtyard with deep purple walls, or the two-story space of the sculpture courtyard with its vivid magenta walls, lattice roof, and river-washed pebble floor. The exhibition galleries have resulted in exciting and successful exhibits that challenge the Mexican artists who are displaying their art. The materials of the building and the intense colors complement the informal and elegant characteristics of the building and challenge the curators to take advantage of the natural light, texture, and color.

The museum has become a cultural center for Monterrey, an active place and a positive contribution to the city. As you leave the museum, sunset may have crept in. The walls of the entry court have become iridescent, radiating intense color, the colonnade is lighted, emphasizing the void in the wall, and the dove, dominating the cityscape, appears as an elusive form in outline against the sky. Peace has again returned, and you realize that on your visit to MARCO, Legorreta has toyed with your emotions.