

Architecture and Publicity Again

The Case of El Pedregal's Television Program, 1953-1954

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This paper presents an inedited segment of a nearly completed book dedicated to the architecture that emerged in the Gardens of El Pedregal of San Ángel in the years from 1947 to 1967. The Gardens of El Pedregal is a historic subdivision planned in 1945 and located in Mexico City sharing El Pedregal's land with the University where this international conference takes place. The book centers not in the better-known participation of Luis Barragán in the project but in how dozens of architects and hundreds of clients expanded, during the next decade-and-a-half, on the architectural concepts of the subdivision¹. The book documents five years of original field and archival research by this paper's author in equal partnership with Mexican architect and professor ... (name withdrew for review).

The paper focuses specifically in a monographic subject, the series of television programs that the management of the Gardens of El Pedregal sponsored in the emerging Mexican television of the era. Starting in January 1953, in order to publicize the subdivision, they paid for a weekly television program that lasted two full years. Our sources--previously untapped-- are based in our fortunate rediscovery of Héctor Cervera, the producer and writer of the television program. Cervera, currently 80 years old, was extremely generous with his time in a series of extensive interviews conducted in the summer fall of 2002 and edited along 2003. Cervera, after confirming the historian's heartbreaking fact that television in the era was broadcast live and not recorded, unearthed from his archive the complete and original set of scripts for all episodes of the program. These scripts are an invaluable material to document the dependency of modern architecture on publicity for operations that involve large number of people.² This paper follows with

small variations-- the first chapter of the book.

To begin a book about the houses of El Pedregal narrating, as we will here, the story of Héctor Cervera's television program is carefully intentional. It responds to the conviction that the interest of El Pedregal does not lie only in the high quality of the individual examples of modern architecture that it produced, but mostly in the fact that there were hundreds of them. The concentrated number of highly ambitious modern houses of El Pedregal, somewhere between 400 and 700, is perhaps unequaled in another contemporary subdivision worldwide, and it was so recognized by the international critics of the era³. What makes El Pedregal a unique subject of study is the mechanisms by which a broad group of people were convinced to select voluntarily modern architecture as a mode of operation for their own dwellings. This, of course, was not essentially or only a cultural operation but one of the manipulation of market forces that used publicity as a central tool. And, as we will explain, in this operation information traveled both ways. Of course from the promoters and architects to the clients but also, as in the sophisticated techniques of Cervera's market studies, from the clients in the other direction.

El Pedregal... Su Casa... y Usted, (El Pedregal... Your House... and Yourself)

Television Program on the Gardens of "El Pedregal de San Ángel".

Channel 2, Mexico City, January 1953 to December 1954.

Photograph, Close-up: Viaducto Miguel Alemán

The newest, widest, and most modern avenues of the city, orient their asphalt tracks towards the south

Photograph, Close-up: Automobile

Take your car, and when you arrive to the University City ... continue up to the demonstration lot. We will show you the place of your future residence.

Héctor Cervera, publicity script for the television program for the Gardens of El Pedregal de San Ángel 1953

In the fall of 1952, Héctor Cervera --a young free-lance publicist 28 years old--approached the promotion company of the residential subdivision of the Gardens of El Pedregal de San Ángel with an innovative proposal.

At that moment in time, Noé Carlos Botello --the general manager of the subdivision--was in the process of increasing his publicity efforts. His intention was to overcome the unlucky beginnings of the new residential area, beginnings that despite a lot of international cultural attention were not accompanied by commercial success. As is well known, the Gardens of El Pedregal had been ideated by Luis Barragán around 1945; a story that, because sufficiently known, we will only treat here in its essence. Collaborating with Luis and José Alberto Bustamante, Barragán had purchased low-cost properties in El Pedregal de San Ángel, a volcanic desert located 20 kilometers south of Ciudad de México. Together, they had promoted a subdivision that, even though it occupied only 5% of the original desert, would end up appropriating its name. The gardens of El Pedregal de San Ángel --simple known soon as "El Pedregal"-- started selling lots in 1948. Four years later, however, its managerial team was accepting that the combination of the radical urban proposal, the distance from the center of the city, and most importantly the preconcep-

tions of the public about volcanic land, known in Mexico as "malpaís" --badlands--had turned the commercialization of the land into a very difficult endeavor. Luck was also missing. Even though there was growth in sectors of the economy --at the cost of difficulties in daily life for the less favored sectors of the population--the beginnings of the subdivision's commercialization coincided with the 1948 devaluation of the Mexican currency by President Miguel Alemán. The lost of value of the Peso, nearing 100%, had heavily affected the buying power of the upper-middle class clients that the subdivision pursued in its beginnings.

Cervera had found an introduction to the subdivision through "Publicidad General"; an advertising company that shared the building in Paseo de la Reforma where the managerial offices of the Gardens of El Pedregal were located. Publicidad General also coordinated the subdivision's presence in the press, with advertisements that covered the most important printed media of postwar Mexico⁴. Ads, frequently full page, did appear weekly as much in the daily newspapers of broader circulation--such as *Excelsior* and *Novedades*--as in popular magazines as *La Revista de Revistas*. The subdivision also was heavily publicized in the few magazines specifically dedicated to architecture, such as *Espacios* and *Arquitectura*. In the latest, for instance, it monopolized its valuable back cover for most than a decade.

Under the slogan "the ideal place to live", Publicidad General's campaign --with initial control by Barragán himself--had skillfully balanced commercial and cultural aspects. As in one of the pioneer ads, appearing in 1951, where as sample of the architecture emerging in the subdivision --and before having many images of actual constructions in the area--a perspective of the famous Fallingwater was pasted into El Pedregal landscape. This extemporaneous presence of Frank Lloyd's Wright cultural icon was not the product of chance. From the beginning, as much Barragán as his partners had understood the need of using cultural aspects in promoting a place so out of the ordinary. Even though versions of this story have mythicized Barragán's original motives to create the subdivision, the publicity campaign was essentially an intelligent market operation. Even the advertisements in cultural publications addressed exclusively to architects, had also commercial intentions. The underlying idea, risking misunderstanding outside Mexico, was based in the common practice among Mexican architects

—especially among the residential architects that built El Pedregal—of acting in a role very close to the one of a construction/promotion company. It was frequent, for instance, that a client considering a future house would approach the architect asking for advice about locations, moment where the new subdivision of El Pedregal wanted to be present in the minds of the architects.

Cervera, accompanied and supported by Publicidad General's manager Eduardo Godard—who would become later his next-door neighbor in El Pedregal—proposed to Botello to move all the publicity of the subdivision to the new media of television, which had recently debuted in Mexico. Even though the pioneer Channel 4 had started with two daily experimental hours in 1949, and Channels 2 and 5 completed the early television landscape soon afterwards, it was only with the fourth presidential report of president Alemán to congress at the end of 1950 when the new media was officially inaugurated. And they had to wait until 1952, sparked by the construction of Televisión studios, for the beginning of fully developed commercial broadcasts.

Cervera proposed for El Pedregal a three-month concentrated campaign based in a weekly television program dedicated monographically to the subdivision. The idea of the program was not to rely only in direct publicity but to be culturally oriented. Direct mention of the subdivision was to be discretely included into three educational components that will take over 80% of the broadcast time. Only at the beginning, end, and both intermissions of the program, direct publicity would take over. The program was directed to the sociological group of the upper middle class that the subdivision pursued as clients. At the end of 1952, the limited number of TV sets—even though expanding rapidly—was still mainly concentrated in the most comfortable sectors of the public.

In Cervera's proposal, the three cultural sections were strategically conceived to help the public to overcome some of the factors that, since the inception of the subdivision, were still perceived as negative. The first section of the program by describing the history of El Pedregal attempted to soften in the eyes of the public the idea of reoccupying the volcanic desert. From its geological origins and moving through its long and rich indigenous past, the program would arrive along the three months of the campaign up to the apocalyptic climax of the

eruption of the Xitle Volcano and the emergence in later years of the current landscape. A continuous underlying message would be the association of the volcanoes with the Mexican identity, suggesting ideas as much of origin as of cultural renaissance. The connection with the volcanoes although always present in the cultural context, had had an enormous popular growth in 1943, with the nearly instantaneous emergence of the Parícutín Volcano, in what up to that date had been flat cultivated land. Under this light, the reoccupation of the badlands that the mythical explosion of the Xitle Volcano had created in the Valley of Mexico—the last of the great geological phenomena that defined the geography around the capital—was painted with strong esthetic and patriotic overtones.

This was of course the line of thought that Barragán had learned as much from Diego Rivera as—above all—from the artist and volcanologist Dr. Atl, Parícutín's esthetic and cultural chronicler. Dr. Atl—famous character self-named as Doctor Water in the indigenous Nahuatl language—had been the one to mentor Barragán in his learning of the cultural implications of El Pedregal as a landscape identifying with Mexican national aspirations. The skill of Barragán as architect, but even more as a businessman, consisted of—through his long walks across El Pedregal accompanying Dr. Atl—seeing the potential of a redesign of the landscape that would soften its harshest aspects. Cervera, who since he had heard of the inception of the subdivision ambited to settle in the area, not only was familiar with the cultural ideas that supported the operation, but—profoundly patriotic and proudly mestizo—wholeheartedly shared them without any shadow of cynical distance.

In attempting to lure the public to a difficult land, the program also used more tangible data. El Pedregal de San Ángel was also, in a fortunate coincidence for the emerging subdivision, the place chosen by the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) for their new University City. The new University City was intended as the great cultural project of the Presidency of Miguel Alemán and was located in land directly adjacent to the subdivision. Cervera, in his proposal for a television program, would always pair both projects, appropriating the line of thought presented by some—certainly not all—architectural critics such as the ones writing in the emerging magazine *Espacios*. This publication,

with clear intentions, would develop the habit of always presenting both projects in confronted double pages. Both selections of land, the subdivision's and the University's, were in fact supported by market criteria of availability and desirability. While the explosive growth of Mexico City was already generating close poverty rings as much in the north as in the east and west of the city, the mythical south had remained in the imagination of the middle and upper middle classes as solidly desirable. The south was also --due to the same reasons-- the direction of the most important highway investments in the capital that the government of Alemán was completing.

The other two sections of Cervera's program would be purely cultural. In one, based in modern dance, the attempt was to connect with a source of national pride. Under the directorship of the artist Miguel Covarrubias --Barragán's close personal friend who would rely on the architect as the posthumous executor of his will-- the national ballet companies and by extension cultural ballet had become very popular in Mexico.

And in its third section --the last and most important--the program would concentrate in a discussion of recent issues of architectural culture. In this segment, the expressed goal was to educate the public about the underlying logics behind the architectural modernity that, in a radical approach, Barragán was attempting to regulate as legally binding for the subdivision. Even though the modern movement was already a currency widely accepted in Mexico, it was so mainly in government sponsored buildings that would require only the acceptance of enlightened politicians, or in private operations where the reduced cost of a naked decorative approach was a convincing factor. There were of course multitude of buildings that demonstrated the tendency towards using the language of modernity. The battle, however, of coordinately convincing hundreds of individual clients in the voluntary selection of the new language in the construction of their own houses, was not by any means won beforehand.

At the intermissions, direct publicity would show footage of the new houses being built in El Pedregal and also images of all the subdivision's emerging services and facilities. The images would be chosen to present a vision of progress, including numerous and strategic views of automobiles and mentions of the great highways towards the south of the

city that the government was completing. After all, as much the new roads as the acceptance of the philosophies relying in the indispensable use of the automobile, were the authentic catalyst behind the development of a new area such as El Pedregal so far away from the practical center of the city. These habitational ideologies were being learned from the United States, whose highways were proposed as a leading example that had still not fully shown its most sinister ramifications.

Despite his being an unexpected proposal, Cervera, using the ability that would soon make him one of the most important figures of Mexican television --director for 17 years of Channel 5 and creator of such influential programs as *Telesecundaria*-- was convincing. Even though the subdivision will keep its publicity in the press, it also accepted to sponsor Cervera's program.

In the New Years day of 1953 --a Thursday-- at the evening hour of 9:30 --the peak segment of daily audience-- "*El Pedregal, Your House, and Yourself*" a program of half an hour of duration dedicated to "the esthetic and good taste in building" begun, broadcasting live in Channel 2 (XEW-TV) of Mexican television. For presenting the architectural segment, Cervera --in agreement with the managers of El Pedregal-- selected Guillermo Rosell de la Lama, an emerging figure in the Mexican panorama of architectural polemics. Rosell was a very young architect, who three years before, in collaboration with Lorenzo Carrasco had founded *Espacios*. *Espacios* --including figures such as Barragán in his editorial board--was one of the defenders of the Gardens of El Pedregal as a real estate operation rooted in cultural values. And --as we have mentioned by passing--was also a magazine that enjoyed a significant publicity contract with the emerging subdivision.

Espacios, balancing a profound interest in issues of Mexican national identity with international interests, was clearly inspired graphically by aspects of the leading example of *Arts & Architecture*. The American magazine of the Los Angeles area had then a considerable following in Mexico. This prestige was not exceptional, it is well documented that *Arts & Architecture* was one of the "cult" architectural publications of the 1950's worldwide, but it is less frequently remembered that that was especially so in the American continent in general and in Mexico in particular.⁵

Along the series of programs, Rossell would bring to the TV screen a popularized version of the cultural positions that his magazine supported. He would introduce the work of key figures such as Frank Lloyd Wright or Mies van der Rohe, and would interview figures of the Mexican art and architecture worlds such as the painters Dr. Atl, David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera, and the architects Alberto Arai, and Carlos Contreras among others. Arai, for instance, was not only one of the leading participants in the University City campus but also was a collaborator of *Espacios*, where he published his important text "Paths for a Mexican Architecture". Contreras was the co-designer of El Pedregal, responsible for the drawing and the geometrical definition of its planning. Educated as an urban planner in Columbia University in New York, Contreras was under the influence of the models of territorial development that since Olmsted's proposal for Riverside were becoming predominant in the United States. Many critics have mentioned the fact that his plan of El Pedregal, in its adaptation of the roads to the curving topography, draws inspiration from the romantic-picturesque approach of Olmsted's firm. Many years after the death of the creator of Central Park, his ideas were still a dominant component of American landscape architecture in the years that Contreras spent in the USA.

In the interviews with Rivera and Siqueiros, the issue of discussion was "plastic integration", the general concept of collaboration between architecture and the arts where many of critics of the era—with Rossell figuring prominently in this particular polemic—did search for the incorporation of Mexican traits into architecture. The identification of the Mexican architecture of the early 1950's with "plastic integration" was perhaps inevitable. Contrary to the problems of El Pedregal, the University City was growing rapidly, and the exemplary power of the painting-building-library by Juan O'Gorman and of the use of massive murals as a fundamental component in many of the university's most important buildings, was reviving the issue as the center of discussion. Rossell, and many others, did not start foreseeing that despite their convinced support to the idea of "plastic integration" the Gardens of El Pedregal would end representing a generation of architects younger than the one involved in the University City. A generation that, without opposing the issue frontally, would become increasingly aware of the limitations of promoting painting or sculpture

as saving presences for architecture. The protracted development of the subdivision, extended along the next 15 years, would only increase these differences.

In two of the programs, Rossell—due to scheduling incompatibilities—ceded his anchor position to Clara Porset, a frequent collaborator of his magazine. Porset was a furniture designer that, although born and educated in Cuba, was by 1952 a figure solidly planted in the Mexican architectural landscape. A landscape that was proving relatively generous in the inclusion of foreign talent. It should be noted however that despite this generosity, many of the figures that emigrated to Mexico, would not become influential. Only examples such as Porset—or Max Cetto, other of the protagonists of El Pedregal—that willingly underwent a process of profound immersion in the local culture, ended up becoming broadly influential. Porset—marrying in her work international culture with local methods of artisan fabrication—was a leading figure in the fields of interiors and furniture design. She was also a collaborator of Barragán, co-designing with him most of the furniture that frequently is wrongly credited to the architect alone; such as the famous Miguelito chair. The reason to invite Porset to the program was to cover the issue of the modern domestic furnishings, a field that following the multidisciplinary example of *Arts & Architecture*, was considered as an indispensable component of the total environment that the TV program was proposing for the subdivision.

Even if the program broadcasted live from the studios of Channel 2, Rossell—frequently filmed over a background with one of Armando Salas Portugal's famous photographs of El Pedregal—appeared always sitting behind one of the tables that Barragán's had designed for his own studio. Cervera had not—in fact—dealt primarily with the architect when planning the program. Barragán was, in 1952, in the latest stages of a process of separation from the subdivision that soon would be complete. At the end of 1952 however, he was still part of the picture, and Cervera had to present his project also to him. Meeting with the architect in the studio adjacent to his house in Tacubaya, Cervera would only need to justify to the architect the adequacy—today perhaps unexpected—of using TV to court the upper middle class that he still saw as the potential clients for his project. Responding to the distanced curiosity of the architect for the decoration of the TV setting,

Cervera successfully proposed to refer to Barragán's studio environment by using one of its drawing tables as the place where the interviews would take place. Every Thursday for the following months, one of Barragán's tables will be meticulously borrowed and returned to its exact position in the architect's office after the live program.

These were in fact the last moments where Barragán maintained his direct involvement in the subdivision. In December 1952, a month prior to the inaugural Pedregal TV program, Adolfo Ruíz Cortines had succeeded Alemán as president of the republic. Decided to stop the excesses of the leaving administration—excesses among which real estate was prominent—he named Ernesto Uruchurtu as "Regente" of Mexico City. This post, among the most influential of the Mexican political positions, was equivalent to major. But given the importance of the capital city in the running of the state it had the rank of a presidential cabinet post.

In the years previous to these events, Barragán had taken charge of the essentially political task of arranging the permits for the subdivision. He had conducted his negotiations with the leaving "Regente" Fernando Casas Alemán. The original permit was for a "rural development" a category that excluded all the fees and taxes for linking the subdivision to all city networks. The rural consideration --that in fairness it should be remembered that was more attuned to Barragán's original intentions than the direction that the development actually took-- implied also a minimum buildable lot of 10.000 m². At the beginning of 1953, many of the constructions were already in flagrant violation of this rule; starting basically with the first house built in the subdivision—Max Cetto's own—the minimum lot size had been illegally relaxed⁶. At the advent of the new Regente, most of the new lots being sold were already a fraction of the original legalized lot size.

As a consequence, the new administration of Uruchurtu, as one of his first measures in power, picks the prominent subdivision as a cause. He fines heavily El Pedregal, and requires its de facto incorporation into the city. The famous Barragán-designed doors in Avenida de las Fuentes that controlled the entry to the subdivision, had to be left permanently open changing the nature of what was up to then a gated community. The city also required receiving property title for a series of lots to become future public spaces. In negotiations along 1953 and

1954, the original set of promoters decided that they were not in the position of paying the heavy fine, and sold control of the subdivision to Banca SOMEX. SOMEX bought financial control but arrived to an agreement with the brothers Bustamante by which they will retain control of the sales and other commercial aspects of the subdivision, such as publicity⁷. From this moment on, the decision of adjusting the size of the lot to the growing demand for less-expensive properties, although already a de facto practice, was legally established. Coinciding with these adjustments, Barragán separates himself from the subdivision, moving his primary interests and investments to Los Jardines del Bosque a new subdivision that he designed between 1954 and 1955 for his native city of Guadalajara.

Due to the continuity of the Bustamante family in the commercial decisions, the above facts, although coinciding exactly in time with the preparation and airing of the program, did not essentially affect its substance. The first version of "El Pedregal... Your house... and Yourself..." did appear punctually at the same hour for the next thirteen Thursdays after its debut. The commercial effects, documented through the number of visitors to the subdivision on-site-sales office, were immediate. As a consequence of the success, the program's run was extended twice; continuing in modified versions for two full years until the end of 1954. The changes were multiple, in content and duration. Modern dance was already suppressed in the second run, and in the third, the duration was shorter and it was more publicity than culturally oriented. These changes, it must be clarified, were produced as a response to polling conducted amongst its viewers. This was a practice that Cervera had learned from Walter Thompson, the American advertising company leading during the post war years, in whose Mexican branch Cervera learned his TV advertising skills. At the end of 1954, the beginning of the most successful sales moment for the subdivision, the management of El Pedregal did not consider necessary to continue with the heavy cost implied in maintaining the program in the air.

According to Cervera's testimony --corroborated by the data gathered between the original occupants— the price of the lot nearly doubled with the television program run; from 32 pesos/m² at its beginning to 60 pesos/m² in the moment of closing the broadcast two years later. With the opening of University City and the establishment of more sys-

tematic public transportation, prices jumped nearly overnight to 75 pesos/m².⁸ Public transportation, despite the elevated means of the many Pedregal settlers, proved indispensable not only for the then sociologically indispensable service but also for the families that did not have multiple vehicles.

It seems clear that late 1954, the critical date in the improvement of the sales, coincides and it is probably explained by the opening of the University City. This is essentially, as in many other critical moments of the subdivision, another instance where the Gardens of El Pedregal was affected by the events of its famous university neighbor. Although Alemán had officially inaugurated the University City in November, 2, 1952, this was not more than a rushed symbolic act to commemorate himself in what he perceived as the great cultural legacy of a presidency that will end 10 days later. But it was not until the functional opening for classes in the school year of 1954-1955, when the University City sank into the collective imagination of the capital as part of daily life. And in doing so, it made its residential neighbor finally viable by bringing to its doors the systems and networks into which to progressively integrate.

NOTES

¹ The bibliography on Barragán's opus is extensive although frequently, if not always, light. Due to its monographic emphasis in El Pedregal, it is worth highlighting here the work of Keith L. Eggener, as much in his book "Luis Barragán's Gardens of El Pedregal. Princeton Architectural Press, 2001, as his previous Doctoral Thesis at Stanford University.

² The authors keep a copy of the scripts, whose originals are currently located in Héctor Cervera's extensive personal archive. Cervera's original documental archive covers extensively his involvement of 50 years in Mexican television, including being director for 15 years of Channel 2.

³ The full book will include lists of all architect's works. The number here refers to what in an inevitably subjective manner the authors identified as the work of architects documentarily committed to high quality modern architecture. This wide range in number does not speak about all the houses in El Pedregal, a number that approaches 1500; it speaks only about high quality modern houses. The range covers the discrepancy between the figures given to the authors by most of the involved architects, and the numbers that they --in collaboration with the authors-- were actually able to prove physical or documental evidence. At the end of the day the numbers in the book

reflect the work with documental evidence.

⁴ It may be arguable the use of the term Post-War Mexico. Although it is technically correct --Mexico did technically declare war to Germany and the Axis and participated with a symbolic force in W W II-- it may seem at first that the post war environment was not as clearly defined there as in, for instance, the USA. It is one of the conclusions of the book that, mainly because of its economic consequences, the Second World War did produce in Mexico the essential change of attitude that qualifies the situations of later years as defined by the consequences of a war.

⁵ This assertion is supported in the context of El Pedregal by interviews with numerous of its architects such as Fernando Luna, Antonio Attolini and Jose Maria Buendía among others. And the presence of well used complete collections of the magazine in the personal libraries of its key architects such as Francisco Artigas, who selected Arts & architecture's leading Esther McCoy as the introductory writer for his later monograph. The presence was not limited to the discipline of architecture; interesting data is how Carlos Contreras, for instance --the co-designer of El Pedregal-- in cultural articles directed to the general public and published in the Sunday cultural supplement of *Novedades* introduced to the population at large the Case Study Program.

⁶ According to interview with Bettina Cetto, daughter of the architect --contrary to the accepted belief in most accounts-- Barragán did not give the lot where Cetto's House is located as payment for his services. Cetto actually bought a lot from the subdivision. Although he had to purchase one of the originally sized lots, he immediately arranged to divide the lot in two, building in half of the property, and selling the other half as a contribution to his then economic efforts to complete the house. A house was also built in the other half.

⁷ The accounts of the SOMEX purchase emerge from a graduate thesis by Sandra Mancilla Bustamante presented in 2002 as her final grade thesis (tesis de licenciatura) for the Universidad Latinoamericana. In the thesis named "El Pedregal un Sueño Interrumpido", Mancilla Bustamante draws for these details from her privileged position as member of the current generations of the original Bustamante family whose story of involvement with the subdivision she is telling. Corroborating fragments of the story have been provided by Héctor Cervera's interviews.

⁸ The Cervera's and other figures can only be indicative since prices varied with the individual lots. Prices did change with location (some streets were more desirable and expensive than others), with the different promoters (there were already different investment characters that would commercialize lots), with the particular topographic characteristics (lots with picturesque rock formations were the most desired and valuable), and with the size (with smaller lots increasing square meter cost prices)