DESIGN IN OAXACA:
Understanding the Architectural Process and Critical Regionalism in Mexico

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Submitted under the supervision of Gregory Donofrio to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science, magna cum laude in Architecture.

May 12th, 2012
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Spring 2012
ABSTRACT

An unresolved conflict exists in architecture between international design implementations and local identity. In a world filled with advancements in technology, architects can design contemporary forms that draw no inspirations from a particular region and its past. The resulting structures are not responsive to a specific locale, culture, or time, but rather to a more general and abstract set of architectural ideas. To investigate the value of critical regionalism as a concept in design, this thesis analyzes a discourse of architecture within the specific context of Oaxaca, Mexico, through the practice and projects of current architects Daniel López Salgado and Renata Elizondo. Examined case studies include the Museo de Filatelia and Colegio La Salle, by López Salgado, and Casa del Artista by Elizondo. Their designs, which fall within established contemporary boundaries, could be dismissed by others as mundane in comparison to the startling forms of high architecture, no matter how carefully thought out or revelatory in their certain contexts. Similar to the work of well-known twentieth-century Mexican architects Luis Barragán and Enrique Nörten, these humble architects also design and create works that uphold the principles of a very simple and underappreciated concept: as people, we are much more complex than innovation alone can suggest. Therefore this study uses specific indicators to defend claims made by the architects, including types of materials used, level of site context investigation, and employment of local workers. Overall, the study reveals that these measures demonstrate it is possible to harmoniously implement and emphasize design that is rooted in a cultural understanding of place within our rapidly globalizing world.

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The purpose of this research is to examine how critically rethinking architecture through the lens of region can further explore and develop the potentials of twenty-first century design. Specifically, it is meant to uncover and highlight current architectural conditions that are able to create a cultural belonging and strong deference to a particular physical context without the desire to design avant-garde form. The architectural community’s misconception in the value of such architecture demonstrates its fixation and addiction to rule-challenging originality. If the discipline could shift its ideals to also emphasize place-based design rooted in cultural understanding, there could be a dramatic and positive change in the way architects work and think.

Critical regionalism was first explored as published terminology in the early 1980s, in essays by Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, and Kenneth Frampton. These texts described a type of contemporary architecture that connected actual built form. Tzonis and Lefaivre coined the term “critical regionalism” in 1981, Lewis Mumford wrote of culture and identity in his book The South in Architecture, and Albert Speer published “regionalism” was not simply a method of using the most available local material, or a matter of copying some simple form of construction that our ancestors used. Rather, he wrote that “regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment.” It is important to note that the ideas that form the foundation for this concept are by no means new. Forty years before Tzonis and Lefaivre coined the term “critical regionalism,” in his book The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Post-Modern Culture edited by Hal Foster, American architect Kenneth Frampton took up the thread of architectural conversation in 1983, he argued that critical regionalism’s main asset was its powerful means of resistance. In his eyes, critical regionalism, with its accentuation on a specific place, “seem[ed] to offer the sole possibility of resisting” the isolating and dehumanizing attack of the technologically- and consumption-driven world of modern society, and its resulting architecture. The restrictions put in place by “the phenomenon of universalization” force not only traditional cultures, but also more “developed” nations to abandon their “cultural past.” Yet the ideas that form the foundation for this concept are by no means new. Forty years before Tzonis and Lefaivre coined the term “critical regionalism,” in his book The South in Architecture, and Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, and Kenneth Frampton took up the thread of architectural conversation in 1983, he argued that critical regionalism’s main asset was its powerful means of resistance. In his eyes, critical regionalism, with its accentuation on a specific place, “seem[ed] to offer the sole possibility of resisting” the isolating and dehumanizing attack of the technologically- and consumption-driven world of modern society, and its resulting architecture. The restrictions put in place by “the phenomenon of universalization” force not only traditional cultures, but also more “developed” nations to abandon their “cultural past.”

The primary source of this work is a series of personal interviews I conducted with López Salgado and Elizondo from October 2011 to February 2011. Some of these interviews were answered in English, others in Spanish. They range in form from an audio-recorded in-person interview to brief email correspondences. Additionally, information from more informal conversations with the architects in Oaxaca from January 2011 to May 2011 is integrated into my interpretations. Secondary comparative sources include works of academic literature on the topic of how architecture can and should relate to a specific place or context. There are several distinctive strands of architectural design theory in reference to this subject of critical regionalism and place-based design. By examining the published work of authors such as Kenneth Frampton, Liane Lefaivre, Alexander Tzonis, Keith Eeggener, Lance Lavine, Lewis Mumford, and Doreen Massey, and filtering its contents through the physical built form of architects López Salgado, Elizondo, and their twentieth-century modernist influences, one can begin to see conceptual theories manifest into actual built form.

The term critical regionalism first emerged as published terminology in the early 1980s, in essays by Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaire, and, soon after, Kenneth Frampton. These texts described a type of contemporary architecture that connected with its specific environmental and cultural conditions in purposeful, subtle, and indistinctly political ways. In creating this loose relationship between context and built environment, theorists claimed that critical regionalist architecture “eschew[ed] both the placeless homogeneity of much mainstream modernism and the superficial historicism of so much postmodern work,” according to Keith Eeggener in his 2002 critique of his predecessors’ theoretical framework. Yet the ideas that form the foundation for this concept are by no means new. Forty years before Tzonis and Lefaire coined the term “critical regionalism” in 1981, Lewis Mumford wrote of culture and identity in his book The South in Architecture. He claimed “regionalism” was not simply a method of using the most available local material, or a matter of copying some simple form of construction that our ancestors used. Rather, he wrote that “regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment: they do not merely utilize the soil but they reject the current conditions of culture in the region.” His wording about rejecting existing cultural conditions is ironic, considering he was cautioning against the perversion of modern regionalism by the Nazis, particularly the work of Hitler’s architect, Albert Speer.

When Kenneth Frampton took up the thread of architectural conversation in 1983, he argued that critical regionalism’s main asset was its powerful means of resistance. In his eyes, critical regionalism, with its accentuation on a specific place, “seem[ed] to offer the sole possibility of resisting” the isolating and dehumanizing attack of the technologically- and consumption-driven world of modern society, and its resulting architecture. The restrictions put in place by “the phenomenon of universalization” force not only traditional cultures, but also more “developed” nations to abandon their “cultural past.” While the push for technological advancement and optimization of production and consumption are often considered to be “advancements of mankind,” Frampton also points out that this process of universalizing societies to function and look the same “constitutes a sort of subtle destruction.” This destruction references not only past and current cultural traditions and lifestyles, but also the possibilities of the natural future growth and evolution of unique civilizations.

1. These excerpts are translated from original Spanish by the author.
2. See Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis, Critical Regionalism: Architecture and Identity in a Globalized World (Munich: Prestel, 2003). In this text, the authors revisit their work of the 1980s and expand their discussion on the concept of critical regionalism.
5. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 17.
In a similar vein of thought with Frampton, Lance LaVine writes of “place-empathetic architecture” in his 2010 book *Architecture, Place, Empathy*. He asserts this type of design “does not begin with an abstract set of constructs, but with a tangible and messy reality that resists the intellectually clear definitions of more abstract architectural problems.”9 Rather, it is “bottom-up architecture:” one that hopes to transform the course of current design through “a modest series of local discoveries.”10 He argues that place-empathetic architecture searches for stability and permanence in societies that sense and know their unique identity. It gathers up and interprets the particular cultural values of a place in a “quietly insightful architecture.”11 By modestly considering the enrichments of existing constructed environments, LaVine says designers are capable of accumulating a foundation for more satisfying and fulfilling everyday life experiences.

Unlike the publications of many of the aforementioned theorists, this work delves into a more personal (and arguably more relevant because of this) investigation that involves the actual architects in the conversation. Situated at the heart of the design process, the research aims to interject a different perspective than the lofty assumptions made by academics sitting in their North American offices. Instead of simply looking at images of architects’ work from thousands of miles away, this author hopes that by filtering theories with dialogue, physical architectural work, and life experience in the specific context of Oaxaca,12 there will be more substantial evidence to support claims made throughout the work.

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10. Ibid., 144.
11. Ibid., 144.
12. I lived and studied in the city of Oaxaca de Juárez for the University of Minnesota’s Study Abroad in Mexico program from January-May 2012.

“Regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making a people feel at home in their environment.”

-Lewis Mumford
By designing architecture that displays the beauty of its structure and utilizing a construction process based on the human hand and labor, López Salgado and Elizondo allow the user to see and experience the history of their country’s built environment without trying to literally reproduce the style of either colonial or indigenous Mexican design. Their work demonstrates the significance of using local, earth-based materials instead of importing foreign, machine-produced synthetic products. Distinctly present in all their work is not only the materials that built Oaxaca’s history, but also the underlying form of the Spanish colonial courtyard building, an intimate understanding of natural light, and respect for a landscape particular to the valley of Oaxaca. These qualities are not present in a nostalgic or imitative way, but rather in a manner that allows the new to appear to develop and evolve organically from the old. Yet in order to understand the significance of Daniel López Salgado and Renata Elizondo’s work in relation to a place-based definition of architecture in Mexico, it is imperative to first be aware of their personal backgrounds: where they’re from, their education, and their beliefs about architecture.

Before moving to Oaxaca in 1999 and in the midst of establishing his own architecture firm in 1994,13 López Salgado grew up and lived in Mexico City. Situated at 7550 feet above sea level, Mexico City possesses a more moderate climate than the rest of the country. While it can be unbearably hot in other parts of the nation, the region containing Mexico’s capital city enjoys pleasant summers and relatively mild winters. Additionally, this megalopolis has over twenty million inhabitants, and is situated over a former lake in the midst of a tremulous landscape. Coincidentally, Elizondo also moved to the city of Oaxaca in 1999,14 after living and working in Monterrey for most of her life. This industrial city near the Texas border demonstrates the extreme of an arid climatic condition. It rarely rains and temperatures are exceedingly hot, with average annual high temperatures ranging from 91 to 105 degrees Fahrenheit.

13. Daniel López Salgado graduated from the La Salle School of Architecture in Mexico City, and has been practicing architecture since 1989.
14. Renata Elizondo graduated with degrees from the Technical Institute of Monterrey ITESM and the AA in London. She established her own firm in 2001, based in Oaxaca de Juárez.
According to Elizondo, their education in Mexico was based on a “continuation of the modern movement”¹⁵ that still accentuates a respect for ecological issues and technological improvements in design. Similar to the architectural education system in the United States, the foundation for Mexican design schools stem from European theories of the Renaissance, the Industrial Era of the nineteenth century, and the Modern Era of the twentieth century. In reference to their modernist influences López Salgado says, “I cannot say that I am greatly influenced by any one designer, but chronologically by my personal discovery, some important figures include: Ricardo Legorreta, Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van de Rohe, Tadao Ando, Alvaro Siza, Walter Gropius, Rem Koolhaas, Henri Cirlani, Manel Aires Mateus, Vilanova Artigas, Oscar Niemeyer, Steven Holl.”¹⁶

In the words of López Salgado, “I think everything we see and experience influences us.”¹⁷ First and foremost, they look to the pre-Hispanic architecture of the region in terms of its quality of open space and the materiality of its elements. In the valley of Oaxaca and its surrounding areas, the Zapotec and Mixtec indigenous people are most influential, especially the surviving structures of their ancient cities, Monte Albán, Yagul, and Mitla. These ancient people built their complexes of sandstone, limestone, and volcanic rock, and at a time when “London was little more than a collection of wood and thatch structures, and Venice was still hundreds of years from its founding.”¹⁸

Subsequently, the architects look to Spanish colonial architecture²⁰ in terms of the “charm in the courtyards,” the style of the small shops, and the form of the vaults and domes, which are most prevalent in the numerous Catholic cathedrals, monasteries, and convents. In the twentieth century, Luis Barragán’s work brought together both the pre-Hispanic and colonial architecture of Mexico, but also equipped it with European modernism concepts.²¹ It is in the process of continuing and developing Barragán’s efforts, in conjunction with a profound understanding of the place they design for, that López Salgado and Elizondo fall in the timeline of Mexican architecture.

17. Daniel López Salgado, email message to author, February 12, 2012. This is particularly interesting to note because he lists a mix of Mexican, European, American, and Japanese masters, both living and dead. It is a list many architects who write about themselves would wish they could have recognized.
19. For text on Spanish colonial architecture in Mexico, especially about the Santo Domingo Church in Oaxaca, see Antonio Cortés, La Arquitectura en Mexico (Mexico, D.F., OFFSET, 1966)
20. For additional information on the life and work of Luis Barragán, see Olivo Bamford Smith, Builders in the Sun: Five Mexican Architects (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Company, Inc., 1967), which discusses five prominent twentieth century architects in Mexico, one of which is Barragán. Additionally, René Burri, Luis Barragán, London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000; Ignacio San Martín, Luis Barragán: The Phoenix Papers (Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Center for Latin American Studies, 1987); and Yasuaki Sato, Luis Barragán (Tokyo: Japan Dai Nippon Printing, 1988) are also useful references for text and images of Barragán’s work. They discuss topics such as his design influences, many of which can be derived from traditional Mexican construction. This includes tall, lightly colored walls found in Mexican pueblos and the exposed structural woodwork of Mexican haciendas.
As Enrique Nörten began to do in the 1980s,21 these designers work with what is available, which in Oaxaca is the skilled handcraft of the people and a set of site-specific materials, such as the local cantera limestone. In the wise yet simple words of native Oaxacan artist Rodolfo Morales, “The Mexican people express themselves with their hands.”22 This assessment is especially apparent in the Valley of Oaxaca, where many villages specialize in a single craft, from the “rich red cochineal-dyed23 woolen weavings of Teotitlán del Valle”24 to the “distinctive unglazed black pottery”25 of the village of San Bartolo Coyotepec.

They have a firm belief in designing an architecture that is based on an unpretentious ideal: it doesn’t pretend to be something it’s not. If they are designing for a site with an existing building, it’s obvious what is new and what is historic through a contrast of materiality and clear distinction or separation between structures. “Since changes happen, let it be clear,”26 in the words of Elizondo. As a result, (new) culture is added to (old) culture through a layering of space and material, and the design becomes richer through its respect for existing design.

In the eyes of the architects, it is also important to recognize how humans are still capable of producing beautiful, significant work without the heavy veil of computer and machine technology. While machinery and software create an economic ease for designers by saving money and time, it will always be an imitation of what the human hand and mind can do. For this reason, both Elizondo and López Salgado stress the importance of hand-sketching in both the preliminary design phases and throughout the entire process of design. While they do still utilize software programs like AutoCAD, it is used more as a tool for documentation and clarity rather than as an outlet for the creative process of designing a structure. Therefore, the message they deliver is not to say that society should stop developing newer and better technology, but that it is imperative to recognize the analog talents people can still possess in the digital era.

21. For text on Enrique Nörten, see Xavier Güell and Enrique Norten, TEN Arquitectos: Taller De Enrique Norten Arquitectos (Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1995). The author of this book writes, “TEN Architects [the firm established by Enrique Nörten] does not resort to an eclectic grab-bag of symbolic, connotative elements that underlies so much post-modern architecture, but to the contrary has steadily formed and refined an architectural language rich enough to say many different things.”
23. Cochineal is a strong dye produced from a small insect that lives on the nopal cactus, a native Oaxacan plant. The red dye is produced after the female insects are ground and dried.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 63.
BELIEFS AS ARCHITECTURAL PROFESSIONALS

“Me tengo prohibido a mi mismo el usar materiales que parezcan otra cosa que no son,”27 in the words of Daniel López Salgado. Simply stated in English, the architects work with materials that are exactly what they look and feel like. Materials such as artificial wood or stone are not present in their designs. The “honesty” of their designs is not only present in materiality, but also demonstrated through their visible respect and clear responses to the circumstantial conditions of each project: the sun, wind, temperature of the site, topography, flora of the place, program that is inserted, and the financial capabilities of the future owner. This honest practicality calls for a level of creativity that is different from abstract formal designs, but just as necessary. It stems from “loving the user,”28 which López Salgado believes is another way of saying that architecture can change or improve the lives of people who live there.

According to Elizondo, “to be honest with yourself in design is not copying [things of the past], and also not simply making what the client wants.”29 Rather, she believes the architect should “find a way to design according to the place where you construct and the materials from that place.”27 Similar to how Michael Benedikt discusses the materiality of postmodern architecture in his 1987 book For an Architecture of Reality,31 Elizondo feels that dishonesty in materiality creates tension and confusion for both the architect and the user. “If a material ‘wants’ to be something, but isn’t truly what it is trying to represent, it does not have value,”30 according to Elizondo. While it has become customary in both the United States and Mexico to construct with synthetic materials, she feels this is only because it’s cheaper and quicker in both acquisition and placement. Unfortunately, this economic and construction ease causes many clients to ask for these prefabricated materials in their projects. Elizondo believes “this is where an architect has to be honest and prudent, and guide the user to utilize mainly local and natural materials, and only use processed materials sparingly.”33

With respect to material “honesty” versus artificiality in their work, there is a level of disconnect between what they hope for in their designs and the realities of building construction. For example, they use plywood molds for pouring concrete.34 While both plywood and concrete are based in natural materials (wood and stone aggregate), they are engineered products. This choice by the architects illustrates one of many decisions made in balancing economic feasibility of the client and the ideals of the designers. Products and processes that are cheaper and easier to install result in more affordable architecture, which is one of the key components in “loving the user.” The reconciliation of reality’s financial limitations and the architects’ plans in purest form is all a part of their process. By physically speaking to and educating their clients about the possibilities and resources available to them, the designers strive to meld the realms of idealistic and realistic into one holistic architecture.

In relation to what the two designers strive to avoid, Benedikt simply says, “When architects create plywood arches, chrome ioncic columns, or concrete garlands [in postmodern architecture], the arch is not a real arch to anyone, nor the column a real column, the garland a garland. These are quite simply appreciated for the novel things they are. Here, freshness is all.”35 The “freshness” he speaks of is that of avant-garde form. This type of architecture is mysterious and vague, not only in its unusual form, but in the ambiguity of its materials and their sources. Since a large part of human appreciation for an object’s materiality is related to our understanding of the natural origin of its substance and the manufacturing processes it evidently underwent, new and very synthetic materials are confusing in this way. Ironically enough, the success of artificial materials often lies in the amount of visual similarity to the “real thing” it is imitating. For example, drywall (or gypsum wallboard) finds success, even after many years of existence, in its resemblance to plastered masonry. Both Elizondo and López Salgado feel that this artificiality in materials is a significant contributing factor to the failure of buildings, not only because synthetic materials often crack, break, or rot easier, but because people feel less attached and connected to it. No permanence is achieved with this architecture, which consequently makes it less sustainable.

“I have been forbidden myself to use materials that appear as anything but what they are, I cannot imagine using ‘fake’ materials like artificial stone, plastic, or wood,”36 are the simple and blunt words of López Salgado. He and Elizondo alike believe that architecture should be authentic in the sense of “showing what it is.” The architecture must illustrate the range and use of the materials that compose it. Also, López Salgado argues that the materials “search” for their own place in the project. Despite the fact that they were originally defined and allocated by the designer, “they become what they want to be, not necessarily what the architect wants.”37

28. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. Michael Benedikt, For an Architecture of Reality (New York: Lumen, 1987). In this text, the author creates a strong basis of theoretical analysis with respect to how architecture should be honest in its materiality and function (for the people, the user, and not simply a grand gesture of the architect).
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Michael Benedikt, For an Architecture of Reality (New York: Lumen, 1987). This text, the author creates a strong basis of theoretical analysis with respect to how architecture should be honest in its materiality and function (for the people, the user, and not simply a grand gesture of the architect).
37. Ibid.
In a brief summary of his beliefs as an architectural professional, López Salgado unabashedly says,

I see a special concern in the materials, the way architecture can create a cultural belonging, and also in the idea of sincerity: the material must show what it is. Renata and I also believe that architecture must be generous with the people. Architecture is an act of faith; the faith that [design] can improve the lives of people. But there is a selfish part of architectural design: the longing for transcendence. We try to transcend through our work. That’s why it’s so important to us that our project is unique, different, and innovative.38

This simple, straightforward statement sheds some light onto the innermost architectural desires of a seemingly humble designer and his colleague in the profession. The clarity and beauty of these words are also blended together with a messy and flawed human reality: while architects may claim to be philanthropic with their design efforts, there will always be a certain level of imperfect “selfishness.”

“We are looking for an architecture that is not a big star, but one that is down to earth; one that is part of the land, contained and wrapped by her.”

- Daniel López Salgado

With its fertile farmlands, mild climate, and position at a trading crossroads, the Valley of Oaxaca was a prominent region in New Spain from the earliest days of the Spanish conquest. Many of the city’s grandest structures were built by the Dominican order of the Catholic Church, who arrived in the early sixteenth century. Yet most of the variety in colonial architectural influences stem from postconquest (late sixteenth century) to 1821, when the core of Mexican design was about decorative ornamentation, with influences stemming from Baroque, Gothic, Moorish, Neoclassical, and Victorian designs. In terms of layout, Oaxaca’s city center is made of up tightly grid streets around a central plaza. This is a classic example of Spanish colonial urban planning. Due greatly to its well preserved colonial architecture and the fact that sixteen native languages and sixty dialects are still spoken in the state, Oaxaca was recognized by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site in 1987.

On the surface, the look of Oaxaca is undeniably Spanish, but indigenous influences are by no means absent. First of all, the city is physically built of the same local stone used in the region for centuries before the conquest. Also, Oaxaca’s architecture “reflects the sensibilities of the Zapotec and Mixtec craftspeople who both influenced and executed the Spanish design, thus creating a distinctly Oaxacan style of colonial architecture.” This diverse mixture of architecture, people, and culture is precisely what makes Oaxaca unique, and what drew the architects to live and work there.

When Elizondo and López Salgado moved to the city of Oaxaca de Juárez, the designers inserted themselves into a certain set of conditions and a distinct city identity. To a visitor, it may seem that this identity of Oaxaca and its architecture is defined and unchanging: the color of the Verde Antequera limestone, the horizontality of the planes, the clear emphasis of corners, and the historic significance of the buildings from its indigenous roots to colonial applications. Additionally, typological architectural features of the Spanish colonial courtyard building, including wooden ceiling beams, stone columns, iron window grilles, and floor tiles, are prevalent throughout much of the city. It might seem like repeating or closely emulating a formula that has been used and...

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QUALITIES OF THE CITY: Oaxaca de Juárez

[Figure 15: The night view from Auditorio Guelaguetza (a performance space constructed specifically for the July dance festival in Oaxaca) shows the warm glow of the city on the valley floor.]

41. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 11.
reused for centuries would be sufficient to obtain an architecture steeped in critical regionalism. But the culture runs much deeper than the historic stock of its built environment.

One important example of the culture’s depth and multiplicity is the fact that Oaxacan locals possess talents in an innumerable variety of art forms: carpet-weaving, embroidery, intricate paper cutouts, pottery, colorful carved wooden figures, and much more. Much of this art and also the current architecture in Oaxaca is inspired by pre-Columbian Zapotec models. This becomes an issue and consideration for the architects as they face the risk of their designs becoming “folk- based” or themed. In this context, themed design is that which is not rooted in ideas, but on the basis of images and imitation. The architects are not designing in a manner that merely “re-presents” the work of their predecessors. Unlike Disneyland or a Las Vegas hotel, Elizondo and López Salgado reinterpret the Spanish colonial and indigenous design of the region, making something new without completely ignoring what is existing.

In addition to an awareness of the culture present in the built environment and the skill of the native Oaxacans, the architects also utilize the local workforce in their construction process. While this process is more elaborate, slower, and usually more expensive upfront than typical North American construction, the reward of designing unique places literally handmade by artisans and local workmen is immeasurable to the architects. In Elizondo’s case, practically everything is designed according to the abilities of the artisans’ skills. This includes a wide range of people: from the construction men who lay the limestone foundation to the craftsperson who weaves the fabric for a rug or armchair. She believes that working with the people “who make or produce things enriches you as a designer and magnifies the project, since you are unifying experience and knowledge.”

As the architect collaborates with the craftsmen, construction foremen, and other architects, she believes the design becomes more “rich.” This process and subsequent result is “unlike something that is prefabricated, and is used the same in China, the United States or Argentina [or any other country].” This type of building becomes an entity without a “soul” – a “flavorless,” according to Elizondo. By contrast, when you work with the local materials and the people of a place, the design and the construction acquire distinctiveness. It is located according to its roots and therefore acquires its own identity. The particular identity of Oaxaca is much different than any you might find in the United States. It is precisely the connection between the people of this place and the natural world that creates such uniqueness and “richness.” Rather than basing architecture

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44. For more text and images about the hand-craft talents of Oaxacan natives, see Judith Cooper Haden and Matthew Jaffe, Oaxaca: The Spirit of Mexico (New York: Artisan, 2002), and also Alberto Ruy-Sánchez Lacy, The Lights of Oaxaca (México City, México: Artes De México,1993). Additionally, see Melba Levick and Tony Cohan, Mexicolor: the Spirit of Mexican Design (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1998) for rich and colorful images and some text about Mexican handicraft in a more general sense. There are also several sections of the book that focus on Oaxacan work.


46. Ibid.
on “struggle and domination [of the land],” the fundamental belief of Oaxacan life is about “gratification and respect” both for people and the earth.

It is this concern for the landscape and how best to shape new places within it that greatly informs the work of Elizondo and López Salgado. In addition to recognizing and utilizing the skill of local labor, they are well aware of the climate and the vegetation in the region. Oaxaca possesses the greatest wealth of endemic flora in Mexico. With the plethora of native plant life to design with and for, the architects have gained a greater awareness of their work in general, and especially in its relationship to certain types of vegetative species and the natural world.

Materiality of a place is also one of the most important aspects ruling the design work of Elizondo and López Salgado. When they speak of “local materials,” this is referring to two things: the (structural) materials for building and the finishing materials. For example, in Oaxaca one can still readily get structural materials such as handmade adobe brick (made of compacted earth base, horsehair, and straw), which can be combined with cement and aggregates to create a wall that is extremely compact and characterized by a high resistance to earthquakes. In contrast, in Monterrey (where Elizondo is from), the partition wall is a hollow block, which aids in thermal insulation. Something like the Oaxacan adobe brick would be much more expensive in northern Mexico, since it is not produced locally. This is one of the reasons the architects believe that “each place calls for you to build from local materials,” in the words of Elizondo.

Additionally, there are the materials used for finishing. In Oaxaca, large quantities of limestone are prevalent throughout the landscape. In fact, the name “Verde Antequera” refers to the green color of this stone, and has been used in buildings since the founding of the city. This material is used in both the construction and finishing. Being locally mined not only makes it cheaper than the imported materials, but also helps communities gain income from the sale of material.

For all of its diverse and distinctly present history, Oaxaca doesn’t feel like a museum, with its city fabric “embalmed for the sake of preservation.” Buildings like its churches can certainly be appreciated purely as objects of religious art with their soaring gold-trimmed interiors and larger-than-life statues of Christian saints present throughout the city. Yet they gain their real power from the role that they continue to play for the region’s residents. It is in continuing this evolutionary process of change and renewal that the architects place themselves.

The physical design manifestations of López Salgado and Elizondo become extensions of their neighboring historic building typologies. With carefully-considered material palettes and a thorough understanding of context, the perceptive contemporary architecture of these Mexican designers makes “both the old and the new more vibrant while retaining the city’s image of itself.”

51. Lance LaVine, Architecture, Place, Empathy (México City, México: Editorial Piso + Daniel Escotto Editores, 2010), 144.

“Architecture is an act of faith; the faith that [design] can improve the lives of people.”

- Daniel López Salgado
MUSEO DE FILATELIA: Exploration of Oaxacan Thermal Experiences

An example of how the architects work and design can be seen in the Museo de Filatelia (Stamp Museum), by López Salgado. This non-traditional series of courtyards in the heart of downtown Oaxaca still upholds the unassuming beauty and tradition of Mexican architecture. In the project, two historic urban courtyard houses from the early twentieth century were combined to create a museum dedicated to postal stamps. In the middle of the adjoining spaces is another building that is not part of the project. This creates a U-shaped site that is divided into four open-sky courtyards. The street-facing first and fourth of these courtyards were allowed to generally retain their traditional form. The second and third courtyards that had once been back service yards offered a more open context for development and the ability to apply a heavier touch through contemporary architectural approaches. Another architect had already designed the first and second of these spaces when López Salgado took over the project in 1999. The buildings were purchased and donated to the city by the Fundación Alfredo Harp de Mexico, and the same organization commissioned López Salgado to design his portion of the project.

Alfredo Harp is a wealthy native Oaxacan whose foundation has funded many projects for the city of Oaxaca: scholarships for school children, and a yearly music festival. He is not alone in providing generous donations to his beloved ciudad (city). Others, such as renowned Oaxacan artists Francisco Toledo and the late Rodolfo Morales, were and are “deeply involved in protecting Oaxaca’s cultural legacy and building one for the future.” This demonstration of philanthropy and commitment to a relatively small city “is testimony to the deep feelings that Oaxacans have for their city.”

There is a particularly strong correlation between the idea of a sensually “honest” experience in architecture and the design of this series of courtyards. The courtyard typology forms the underlying physical and historical foundation of the city and therefore can create a strong emotional response in the people of Oaxaca, López Salgado is well aware of this connection between the people and their traditional architecture. Additionally, since the thermal environment of Oaxaca has “the potential..."
for such sensuality, cultural roles, and symbolism,54 he highlights this through his design rather than conceding to a typical international-style approach of creating a climate-controlled environment. Each individual has a sensitivity of thermal perception that has been greatly suppressed by technological advances in controlling temperature. People do not understand the world by absolute measurement. In this particular design, it is about “sensual understanding” through a series of experiences that give human minds comprehension of their surroundings.

López Salgado is well aware of the power of the historic courtyard building’s form and its thermal potential. He pushes it forward with the Museo de Fílatelia, in which he calls for the user to experience a range and depth of sensations as he or she crosses from hot Mexican sun into cool shaded gardens. In the designer’s words, “Decidí hacer más que construir, insertar pequeños gestos en el sitio.”55 In English, he is saying that he desires to “do more than to build,” and hopes to “insert small gestures,” or experiences, on the site.

Located at the core of the historic city center, this building is a short walk from the towering and elegant Spanish-colonial Church of Santo Domingo and a wide assortment of beautiful public spaces, such as the Zócalo and Parque Llano, filled with people, talking, laughter, bright colors, and enticing food smells. Yet once inside the Stamp Museum, only a small piece of the Oaxacan experience is isolated and brought to an almost stark clarity. Each courtyard calls to attention an exploration of historic form and the potentials of the Mexican climate in design.

The structure of the building may lack many formal elements of a traditional courtyard building, but through an abstraction of parts, the architect makes the essential qualities of the courtyard building typology more clear for the user. It’s not a new idea to strip away much of the elaborateness of historic formal compositions. The difference here is that López Salgado does it as a response to the traditional typology, rather than as a purely avant-garde statement of uniqueness. The (typical) surrounding arched corridors are replaced by stones of various shades of cool gray, and the arches are replaced by lush native plants or white blank walls. Throughout the course of walking between the four contrasting outdoor courtyards, the power of a sensual experience is enhanced by the elimination or replacement of formal courtyard elements. For example, the blinding light and arid heat of the blazing Mexican sun is made even more intense by abstracting most of the elements of a formal courtyard building into nothing more than plain white walls and a surrounding course of stones, with only one way to escape: a small footbridge of

wooden planks leading to an oasis of green. Once under the shade of dazzling pink bougainvillea vines, the evaporation from water and vegetation is apparent as sweat begins to slowly disappear. A shallow trickling pool and a small gathering of cool metal chairs invite you to sit and stay in the space, and maybe even have a refreshing minty drink from a nearby street vendor before returning to the powerful heat of the calle (street). It is precisely this exaggerated contrast between sensations of hot and cool that ensures a person will truly appreciate and understand their thermal attributes and its relationship to the city of Oaxaca. “The experience of each extreme is made more acute by contrast to the other.”

“When a symbol represents something considered essential to human experience, its preservation is of paramount importance.” The thermal settings of courtyards have generated remarkable significance in Oaxacan culture, and should continue to be produced and conserved. They contain many layers of meaning, from the personal to those “inherited from the experience of a culture as a whole.” Yet, a person does not need to grow up in Oaxaca to appreciate the value a building like the Museo de Filatelia has for the human experience in general. For example, the courtyard needs to create a powerfully sensual and virtually spiritual connection from the sky to the individual standing within. This is done through the physical elements that create human sensations, and as an extension, emotions. When complex form is broken down into its fundamental parts, any and all people can experience its main architectural aims and even understand (albeit subconsciously) a small piece of a place’s history in the process.

57. Ibid., 51.
58. Ibid., 50.

"When a symbol represents something considered essential to human experience, its preservation is of paramount importance."
- Lisa Heschong
The Casa del Artista (House of the Artist) has something extraordinary in terms of handcraft. It exemplifies some of the ideals that the architects have about working closely with the people of the city, since the foundation is all hand-laid in limestone by local workers, and many of the interior finishes (such as rugs and chairs) are crafted by Oaxacans. Despite the non-traditional use of a large glazed surface (versus a more typical approach of small punched openings), this building retains its strong ties to Mexican design with its thick stone wall and cool clay floors. Additionally, large wooden beams of the roof plane reflect the traditional ceiling style of colonial haciendas. Elizondo worked closely with local craftsmen, construction foremen, and other architects throughout this process, so the design became something uniquely Oaxacan.

This project is located in a privileged area in the northern part of the city of Oaxaca, and has a sweeping view of the valley. Throughout the process of undertaking the design, Elizondo was influenced by sunlight and prevailing winds in the creation of what she calls “harmonic living spaces.” In this sense, the Casa del Artista is about harnessing the climate of its hillside location and creating comfortable living spaces for its residents. This is an interesting contrast to the thermal approach of enhancing extremes that López Salgado took during the process of designing the Stamp Museum, which is most likely a reflection of the projects’ programmatic differences. In relation to sustainable thermal practice, while it is nearly impossible to avoid the use of mechanical systems (air conditioning) for controlling the temperature of Oaxaca’s semiarid climate, it is greatly minimized by Elizondo’s utilization of horizontal overhangs and by orienting the house to the north and east.

Due to the steep terrain, the house design evolved on a set of terraces. This created both “positive and negative space,” which is not unlike the basic idea of a courtyard building with its “negative” opening to the sky. These raised terraces also retain a strong relationship to the indigenous ideals of Monte Albán, with its temple platforms that elevate the ground plane. Programmatically, the negative space of Casa del Artista is used to create exterior patios where the natural tones of tezontle, a deep red volcanic stone with historic importance to Oaxaca, offers highly variable visual results when used over large surfaces.

60. Ibid.
Also in the patios is an abundance of local vegetation, such as cacti and agave. This is not only a beautiful design gesture and reflection of Oaxaca as a natural place, but also eliminates the need for extra watering, as the plants are compatible with the local climate. In the words of the architect, “I have especially focused on understanding the behavior of the construction materials. That is the reason why I have mainly concentrated on the use of local materials, understanding the climate, and respecting the local flora of each unique place where I design.”

Another important factor of this project is how the building process demonstrates the difference between design and construction procedure in Mexico and the United States. According to the architects, “the construction [process] is totally different.” Mexico does not have the same amount of technologically-advanced mechanized tools and equipment as many contractors do in the United States, nor the availability or feasibility to import many foreign materials. Yet this is not necessarily a bad thing in the eyes of the Mexican designers.

Construction in the United States is more prone to the use of prefabricated materials, lightweight artificial finishes, and also very accurate but sometimes sterile connection joints. Also, it is common to “go into a house in the United States and hear artificial, hollow sounds,” but in Mexico, buildings are solid and sturdy. This is not only a reflection of materiality, but also the care put into the construction of the building. Elizondo points out that Americans are “nomads,” while Mexicans tend to build a house and then live there “forever” (often for generations). In this context, the comparison of societal differences is only an observation, but could also be used to reassess the norm of moving behavior in the United States. In the particular case of the architects, they believe that as a “result of our ‘backward’ construction process, the details are more ‘human’ and become something unique to our capabilities (as designers and laborers).”

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63. Ibid. When interviewing the architects on October 21, 2011, I was often given visual or audio support for the topics we discussed. During this particular thread of the conversation, López Salgado proved the point Elizondo was making about American construction as he stomped on the floor boards and produced a hollow thudding sound. It was certainly effective.
64. Ibid.

Figure 39 (top): An example of an “imperfect joint,” one that is made by the human hand. This is a detail of the Stamp Museum, but it demonstrates a point that Elizondo discusses in the adjacent text.

Figure 40 (below): Pictured here are the construction laborers who are hand-laying the limestone foundation for Casa del Artista.

Figure 41: An interior view of the house that shows the large wooden beams of the ceiling, the thick thermal mass of the wall, the smooth brown clay floors, and the large glazed windows that are protected from excess sunlight by the roof overhang and adjacent terrace platform.
As was briefly mentioned with the previous case studies, the use of passive design strategies is almost instinctual to these architects. They feel responsible for understanding and mediating the circumstantial conditions of each project: the sun, wind, temperature, and native vegetation of the place. Colegio La Salle (La Salle School), a series of school building implementations in the western suburbs of Oaxaca, is an especially illustrative example of such strategies. This project is another collaboration between the monetary donations of Fundación Alfredo Harp de Mexico and the design services of Daniel López Salgado. The unique challenge of La Salle was the extremely brief period of time provided for completion. In only nine months, the design team needed to choose the location, design the project, and build it. This short time frame led to a clear and simple concept for the project, and the use of essentially two basic materials: concrete and glass.

It is an interesting example of the architects’ work, and one that illustrates how they must balance economic feasibility of the client and their ideals. López Salgado explains his choice of concrete in this context as a decision meant to keep the price of the construction and operation low. Since “concrete doesn’t need maintenance, doesn’t need painting, or plaster to cover it,” the designer feels it is necessary and a key component in “loving the user” by keeping the project affordable. The use of glass in both this project and also in Casa del Artista does present a contradiction between the architects’ rhetoric and their actual design practice, but is one born mainly of client necessity. It is used to open up the overbearing heaviness (like that of a Zapotec temple) necessary when designing in a semiarid climate region. While large thermal massing in walls is the most fundamental way to keep users cool, it is not a place where people want to live and work. By incorporating the industrial material of glass in larger openings in the thick walls, the architects provide the views and ventilation needed to keep people comfortable.

“No attempt is made in the built parts of the landscape to alter the feeling of what lies beyond its limits.”

- Lance LaVine

COLEGIO LA SALLE: Respect for the Oaxacan Landscape

90. Renata Elizondo and Daniel López Salgado, in-person informal interview with author (audio-recording), October 21, 2011.
After the initial portion of the project was completed for kindergarten space in 1999, there was subsequently the construction of the elementary and middle schools in 2001, and then a high school in 2003. In a region especially prone to earthquakes, the simple and durable materiality of the design is not only interesting, but also incredibly logical and functional. Additionally, the use of simple passive cooling strategies is prevalent throughout the school campus site. Such strategies include horizontal louvers, roof overhangs, and native trees. The highlight of shading methods utilized in this project is a series of uniquely engineered canvas coverings, which reflect the marketplaces of Mexico. This simple, yet sensible use of material was a natural choice for the architect as a shading device for outdoor spaces in this hot and dry climate. “I let the work guide me in such a way that produces a fresh and climate-friendly environment for the inhabitant,” according to the architect.

Similar to the previously described projects, the elementary and middle school campus of Colegio La Salle is designed in a way that reflects the idea of courtyard space. There is a series of “boxes gathered around courtyards under the sun.” The three main “concrete boxes” housing the classrooms are intersected by a perpendicular box that contains administrative offices, the library, medical services, and a small auditorium. While the materiality of this project is one of industrial concrete and glass, the organization of the material reflects that of traditional adobe walls and wooden beams. The true materiality of Oaxaca is reflected in the architects’ handling of the landscape. “No attempt is made in the built parts of the landscape to alter the feeling of what lies beyond its limits.” López Salgado instead reflects the dry texture of the site’s context with “rolling stone surfaces” that impose themselves on the clean lines of industrial glass as they meet the building facade with the appearance of cracked dry earth.

Figure 49 (above): This is the site plan for the high school campus. The blue portion again shows the space that reflects and demonstrates the fundamental elements of a courtyard. The chapel is located in the southeastern corner of the site.
Figure 50 (top right): The steel is “scratched” at certain areas of the facade.
Figure 51 (bottom left): Pictured here is a detail of the horizontal louvers present on the “classroom box.”
Figure 52 (bottom right): One of the low-maintenance gardens located in the central “courtyard” of the site (tucked among the classroom buildings).

67. Lance LaVine, Architecture, Place, Empathy (Mexico City, México: Editorial Piso + Daniel Escotto Editores, 2010), 128.
68. Ibid., 132.
69. Ibid.
The site of the high school portion of the project is close to the other campus for younger children, but has a different feel in its material choice and built form. The project is also very simple with a steel structure (which remains “honestly” exposed), glass blocks inserted into the structure, and a metal skin wrapping around the building components. This metal covering reflects popular twentieth-century Mexican suburban houses made of scrap metal. It is “scratched” at some moments to allow light in (on the west façade), but is mostly enclosed to avoid excessive heat intake. There are three north-south oriented buildings, and between the masses are plants scattered to prevent the dry soil from eroding. Additionally, López Salgado designed a low-budget chapel in the middle of a low-maintenance garden of agave plants on the school’s grounds. Its influences stem from both sixteenth-century chapels and Luis Barragán’s Capuchinas Chapel in Mexico City.

In this project, many of the design rules that the architects have set up are broken, especially in relation to the type of materials used, but there remains a strong tie to traditional courtyard design. What “saves the project as a distinctly regional work” is the way in which López Salgado treats the landscape and how he mediates the climate. Its design is undeniably Oaxacan.

Figure 53 (opposite page): Pictured here is López Salgado’s chapel among the school campus’s rock and agave plant garden. The gigantic wooden doors of the concrete structure open up to connect the interior religious space to the garden that provides its entrance.

Figure 54 (right): As homage to the late Barragán, the architect designed the space to allow in light through one large colored glass window. It illuminates a humble yet serene spiritual interior.
Avant-garde architecture is the ostentatious announcement of a designer's creative expertise. Unfortunately, the push for generalizing architectural thought as the search for the most creative or technologically-advanced building has led to negative implementations—ecologically, economically, and culturally. Architectural pursuit could and arguably should also focus on the evolution of local cultural values and the unique aspects of a specific location's landscape and climate as elements that are a contributing factor to people's embedded sense of belonging in and to that particular place.

None of the projects designed by López Salgado and Elizondo attack the heart of contemporary architectural implementation. Each building, whether it is a renovation of a historic Mexican courtyard building or an original built composition placed within the rugged dry expanse of the Valley of Oaxaca, exists within a conventional design vocabulary. The ambition of these architects is not to dispute or confront accepted architectural elements, but to apply them directly and thoughtfully to a specific context. Within this constraint of local focus is an astonishing opportunity for creativity to enhance the way a set of tools and components interact and function together. This creativity is essentially aimed to investigate the complex needs and wants of real people and their culture, which cannot be met solely through remote research of a place. In Oaxaca, interdisciplinary knowledge from local craftspeople can be integrated into architecture. The architects live and work in a place where they are constantly a part of the design and construction process, from initial sketch to finishing touches. They converse with their clients and guide them to make choices in real time. This is glaringly different than the practice of avant-garde architecture, where foreign “architects are often asked to dream up schemes that completely change the face of a place that they barely know.” Too often in contemporary practice, there is a generic pairing of an internationally renowned “[st]architect” with a local, “nameless” architect. This establishes an oppressive hierarchy that “subordinates the local rather than responds to it.”

The truth simply is that in the end, architecture will always be (at some level) invasive. “It’s a clumsy art.” As human beings, we cannot perform or create our ideas in their purest form, but we can shift the current focus of those ideas. When done well, architecture can demonstrate a perception of the often overlooked richness of people’s everyday lives. In this sense, the works of Daniel López Salgado and Renata Elizondo suggest a different kind of architectural understanding because they seek to call out the locally meaningful over the universally accepted.

72. Ibid., 103.
73. Ibid., 110.

Connection to Place: Conclusion

"Flux is a key part of identity. Multiple forms of foreignness combine in a local mix [to create] a unique form of heterogeneity.”

- Mark Wigley
I want to give a very special thanks to Renata Elizondo and Daniel López Salgado, who so graciously gave me images and information about their work, in addition to answering my many questions. Many thanks to my fantastic professor Lance LaVine, who so kindly gave me a copy of his new book. It proved to be incredibly inspirational for my work. I also want to thank my professors Kate Solomonson and Greg Donofrio, for their excellent advice and direction throughout the process of writing this thesis. Additionally, Professor Benjamin Ibarra thoughtfully attended and critiqued my work during multiple thesis presentations throughout the year. Acknowledgments also go to my peers and friends Brianna Bruening and Anna Nething, for their help with the writing process; and Vance Orr, Kelly Kraemer, Andrew Olson, Beth Koeppel, Jackie Saffert, Conor Brown, and Calysta Phalen for their contribution of resources, both photographs and drawings.

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Annotated Bibliography

Ashihi, Miquel and Richard Ingersoll. Mexico 90s: A Contemporary Architecture. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, 1996. The content of this book is mainly a collection of works by contemporary Mexican architects, but it also includes a short series of essays at its beginning, which begin to describe the authors’ interpretations of Mexico’s social and political situation in the 1990s, and how designers reacted to dramatic events, such as “charges of corruption, drug running, and assassination scandals” (12). Also, an interesting statement about Mexico City’s changing urban form is made by Ingersoll: “Modernity has arrived in full force in Mexico City, with freeways, highrises, subway, and other technological instruments of social evolution, but the village scale of the big city has surprisingly allowed it to resist the usual patterns of social alienation (6). This begins to speak of Mexico’s natural resilience to becoming a “placeless place.”

Benedikt, Michael. For an Architecture of Reality. New York: Lumen, 1987. Benedikt creates a strong basis of theoretical analysis with respect to how architecture should be honest in its materiality and function (for the people, the user, and not simply a grand gesture of the architect). His main theory is that architecture is more than art - it’s a way of living. According to Benedikt, even the mundane can be seen, smelled, and felt in a new way. This prolific writer on architecture, design, and social-economic theory claims the world is full of these events, if we choose to experience them.

Burri, René. Luis Barragán. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000. This book gives the reader a glimpse at the life and work of (arguably) the most famous Mexican architect of the twentieth century. It discusses his acceptance of the Pritzker Architecture Prize in 1980, where Barragán said, “it is essential for an architect to know how to see. I mean see in such a way that the vision is not overpowered by rational analysis” (19). Throughout the book are descriptions of his various works and also the author’s interpretation of how the architect was thinking about architecture and design. Burri writes that Barragán believed it was human values (such as beauty, sensuality, and spirituality) that create our ability to construct form.

This book is a collection of images, mainly of a particular cathedral (Santo Domingo) in the city of Oaxaca, Mexico. It demonstrates the many elements of Spanish colonial architecture, from the style of the exterior and facade to views of different statue types that were commonly included in such religious establishments. There is also a brief set of descriptions at the beginning of the book, which discusses the “spirit of the [Spanish] Conquest” in Mexico and how it is reflected in the “character of the construction” of colonial architecture.


This book is another collection of main images, and it also includes diagrammatic plans, elevations, and sections. It features Mexican architectural firms such as TEN Arquitectos (of which Enrique Norten is the founder) and Legorreta & Legorreta. The authors state these firms in particular “seek to unite the aspirations of the modern world with the traditions of the native culture and environment” (6).


Eggener was one of the first authors to openly critique the way critical regionalism was being defined by authors Alexander Tzonis, Liane Lefaivre, and Kenneth Frampton. He claimed the way they were describing the concept revolved around a “central paradox, a binary opposition: how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization” (234). He feels that, especially for Frampton, it is the tension arising from this problem, rather than a possible solution to it that is being discussed in his work (East/West, traditional/modern, natural/cultural, core/periphery, self/other, space/place).


The term critical regionalism is described by Frampton as “a type of recent architecture that engaged its particular geographical and cultural circumstances in deliberate, subtle, and vaguely politicized ways” (16). In making this engagement, he claims ‘critical regionalist architecture’ can eschew both the ‘placelessness’ of much mainstream modernism and the ‘superficial historicism’ of much post-modern work. He writes that the fundamental strategy of Critical Regionalism “is to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place” (16).


In conjunction with the architect himself, the author writes about the works of Enrique Norten and the founding of his architecture firm, TEN Arquitectos. He discusses how the designs of his Mexico City-based firm have soared to a position of international acclaim. “Enrique Norten is known for a robust modern style that combines elements of high-tech: a clear, at times diagrammatic expression of function; and a concern for environmental sustainability” (5). Designs shown and discussed in the book range from museums and cultural institutions to educational facilities and commercial projects.


These authors urge readers to celebrate Mexico and “preserve its fragile traditions [because of] our rapidly changing ways and the instant technologies that govern our modern world” (xii). There is a plethora of discussion about the historic process of architectural design and construction through a non-design oriented perspective. Additionally, there are beautiful descriptions of place (specifically Oaxaca), such as, “color punctuates the inner city, appearing at every bend of the road with sudden intensity on residential stuccoed walls, in storefront businesses, and in bursts of bougainvillea and jacaranda blooms” (42).


The writer loves Oaxaca and knows how to write about his passion. It is interesting to read a subjective (yet well-informed) view in this professional format because it feels very personal but also very educational. It is clearly evident that residents (and non-residents alike) have a strong love and enthusiasm for this city and its abundance of incredible aspects. It places the region in a context that is human, relatable, and emotional. The beautiful images portray a glimpse of the color, fervor, history, culture, and beauty that Oaxaca so humbly possesses.


Lance LeVine describes and examines the work of Mexican architects Daniel Lopez Salgado and Enrique Lastra in the context of the city and surrounding region of Oaxaca. As the author critiques the lack of values modern architecture has, he also opens up the question to the person feels like they belong in a place. For example, he questions how people can be located somewhere, without feeling like a building is in control or in charge. How do architects address the individual experiences each person has while in a building? Is it possible, as a designer, to predict how they will feel without knowing them at all?
A shiny wake of memorable structures." and that the "local is ritualistically sacrificed" (101) in the process. He argues that the
scope of modern architecture is too narrow and that the local context is essential for the success of a design. Wigley
argues that "vernacular architecture, too, can surprise the onlooker, by presenting uncommon solutions to practical
problems. Houses of agave or rye stalks may appear 'exotic' or 'quaint' to the outsider, yet they are functional constructions which
have evolved over time to suit local requirements" (177). This recycling of diverse and often unlikely elements is widespread in Mexico,
and yet it is quite logical to make use of elements that are literally right outside the door. Depending on the region, buildings
are constructed with adobe (sun-dried mud bricks), sheets of lamina (corrugated metal), otate (Mexican bamboo), terrado (earth,
with sand and lime), or tezontle (volcanic rock). The use of local materials and passive design strategies is intrinsic for the vernacular
designs of Mexico, yet rarely studied or celebrated.

Included in one of the ‘five builders’ is Luis Barragán. The author discusses the most prominent aspects Barragán’s designs,
which include the use of flat colored planes, the incorporation of nature into architectural design, and light (both natural and
artificial). Also, there is a careful and special concern in his choice of material, and how the architecture demonstrates the idea
of 'vernacularity'.

The authors of this book examine the history and significance of vernacular construction in Mexico. It is one of the less-told
stories of the country, in contrast to descriptions of the large beautiful monuments of indigenous and colonial time periods.
They claim that "vernacular architecture, too, can surprise the onlooker, by presenting uncommon solutions to practical problems.
Houses of agave or rye stalks may appear ‘exotic’ or ‘quaint’ to the outsider, yet they are functional constructions which have
evolved over time to suit local requirements" (177). This recycling of diverse and often unlikely elements is widespread in Mexico,
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artificial). Also, there is a careful and special concern in his choice of material, and how the architecture demonstrates the idea
of 'vernacularity'.

Another example of tactile descriptions of the country abounds in this book: “basking in southern sunlight and imbued with
energy and tradition, Mexico enjoys an utterly unique relationship with color – inspired, intrinsic, and inseparable from life itself”
(1). It focuses on the concept of color and how it radiates from all aspects of Mexican culture. “Color is everywhere in Mexico.
Street and market, food and dress, home and garden are suffused with it. Green of cactus, lime, cornstalk. Red of tomato,
watermelon. Yellow of corn, cereveza (beer), sunflower” (7). These colors are from nature and from history (of the indigenous
people of Mexico). Therefore it doesn’t feel wrong to have two dozen different colored houses lining a street.

The authors of this book delve into an idea and term originally coined by Kenneth Frampton in 1982: ‘critical regionalism’. They
argue that design can be both forward-thinking and cognizant of its geographical and cultural context. The purpose of this
book is to explore the concept of regionalism within a range of different locations and points in history as a different approach
to design, that recognizes the value of the identity of a physical, social, and cultural situation, rather than mindlessly imposing
egotiastical formulas of the designer from the top down (in a more ‘international-style’ approach).

This author discusses “an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by places” (147) and how we relate to them. While this is
a collection of Massey’s essays about a range of topics from social relations to gender roles, the ones relevant to the topic of
regionalism are those concerning space and place. In these essays, she weaves together concerns about the concept of
"place" and "space" to build an intriguing set of propositions about the relationship of people being influenced by certain places.
Within this argument, she challenges ideas of fixed identities and “universalization” of design.

This book includes a beautiful collection of images of Barragán’s designs. It also describes his architectural style, and
includes in one of the ‘five builders’ is Luis Barragán. The author discusses the most prominent aspects Barragán’s designs,
which include the use of flat colored planes, the incorporation of nature into architectural design, and light (both natural and
artificial). Also, there is a careful and special concern in his choice of material, and how the architecture demonstrates the idea
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of 'vernacularity'.

Phylogenesis is a book that describes and discusses the work of FOA (Foreign Office Architects), but it also includes a collection
of texts from several critics who investigate related topics to that of FOA’s discourse. Wisely’s essay is especially relevant to the
topic of critical regionalism, since it is about the trend of (“starchitect”) designers dreaming up schemes for international contexts
and structures that cannot be reached by a logical or rational process of thought, but by the intervention of the subconscious after a long and
painful period of hard work. This is the process which brings about artistic creation and is the basis of all inventions.” (120). It’s
more important to ‘feel’ what is right for a building first, and then construct structural boundaries off of that, not vice versa.
The bulk of this book is a beautiful collection of photographs taken by one of the authors throughout varying regions in Mexico. They focus on displaying the beauty and grandeur of Mexico’s colonial treasure, the hacienda. It even includes renovation work designed by López Salgado. Additionally, in each section of the work, there are short essays describing certain historic aspects of this unique architectural style: “Because the haciendas and colonial homes of Mexico were built over a span of three centuries [seventeenth to nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries], their diverse architectural styles reflect the geographical location and availability of local building materials” (36). This era of building is an important part of the country’s history, and the vitality of many old haciendas (both in structural stability and adaptability) demonstrates their continued relevance in influencing contemporary Mexican architecture.


This book is almost poetic in its layout and format. There are sections dedicated to different aspects of contemporary Mexican design and its influences, which include image collages and short essays about each topic. The author describes Mexico as “an intricate mosaic” with “artists and artisans of each successive generation add[ing] their own tier of influences and ideas” (13). He then argues that while Mexican architecture’s defining features (the courtyard, wall, and use of color) remain constant, there are architects in the country that are bringing “further innovations in scale and texture […] without losing the character or simplicity that is the hallmark of a unique national signature” (13).