

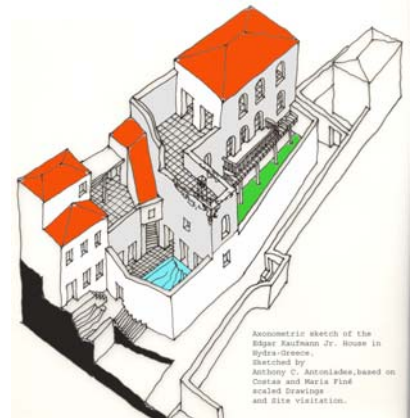
## Mystery and Surprise

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....Take for instance the Guggenheim in Bilbao. We have seen pictures everywhere, even before going there. The newspapers and magazine articles have already shown us pictures of this enormous sculptural building ; some have equated it to piled pieces of fish, others thought of it as seals on the coast of the Atlantic, some others, who knew Gehry's love for ice hokey , have even called it "piled up bodies of hockey players on an ice ring following a violent fight" . There is hardly anything new when you first see it, unless you see it illuminated at night ; in that case , the abstraction of the dark of the night will help you read it as a very impressive outdoor sculpture , perhaps the largest you may have seen on earth; Apart from that, there is no mystery , nor surprise, because we already know everything about it before even going there .



Now take a look at the simple wall of the sketch to the right . You walk down the street and you don't care , one way or another to get inside. It is like any other wall you have seen in your town or in the village you are visiting. You assume that behind this wall there is probably a garden, some trees, perhaps a sculpture, a covered shed , like in all the other houses behind such walls you have seen. But assume you are once invited to get in. That is , once you are permitted to "go through the hole on the wall" if you see the gate as a hole. Then , Wow ! And upon entering a great pool of water just behind the tall wall (see visuals in p, from edge to edge, only the path to walk under the shadow of the dark corridor ahead of you, to the light at the end of it, coming from the other end, only to be called by the welcoming voice of the host as you have done a few steps toward the light, just now discovering the forty five degree diagonal stair that will take you to the second floor of the Edgar Kaufmann Jr. House in Hydra. We'll talk more about it later (see "Pop vs. High") .



On another occasion , some other "holes" , on another wall again, this time thousand miles apart from Hydra, in Mexico City. You enter through the gate, to experience another first "Wow"!!! A huge round beam light in one case, a real beam in another case, a humongous oak supporting the small shed , spanning from the one end of the wall to another, without the traditional little wood columns everybody else would have done, without the small dimensions of beams you has been accustomed to see ; This huge tree trunk makes you mind already travel miles away ; "where did they brink it from ? What trucks must have carried it ?"; under the spell of its linearity, you walk already with the trunk over your head to the left , under the shed, toward the dark "mass hole" which is the house entrance from the front yard Patio. And then a dark corridor, as if to keep your eyes in the dark-which is as we'll see fundamental in the whole concept of "mystery and surprise" , as you will turn to



the right ; there you will finally see your host or if you are more familiar and they wait for you downstairs, you'll be directed by the "crafting" and the right moves of the circulation to take the stairs down , coming face up with a crucifix at the landing, appropriately illuminated by light coming from the left. This is a case of a house by Ricardo Legorreta in a suburb in Mexico City , a time-space-psycho mental experience to be found in almost all his works , carefully and strategically arranged : "Mystery and Surprise" through turnings, holes on walls and ceilings, through slots on walls ! Ricardo Legorreta, is the consistent master of this design duality, while there have been of course several others who have excelled in this, namely Alvar Aalto, Jörn Utzon , Aldo van Eyck, Tadao Ando, Kaija and Heiki , to name only a few.

What then is this magic strategy ?

I mentioned already above words that might have already given a hint. Dark , like dark eyes, "Closed eyes". "holes", take apart your hands, "surprise" ! It is not though that easy. Let us take things from the beginning.

Mystery comes from the Greek word "Mystirion", a composite word with root of the word "mys" and the verb "myo" which verb means to close the eyes. The composite means, "an experience or ceremonial performance you go through, with the eyes closed , toward something you haven't experienced before". At the point in which the ceremony permits you to open your eyes, to reveal to you its "secret" conclusions, you have the surprise, for which the Greek word is "ekplixis", meaning : a psychological condition caused by the unexpected, especially pleasant" .



When the eyes are closed, or when you work in the dark, that is when the flesh ("mys") is in tension, the brain is also placed in some tension, the heart beats differently, and assuming before hand you don't go to the guillotine , in which case you'd be filled with fear and terror, your whole being starts operating and beating in a positive way, which eventually culminates with the "epiphany", a surprise in celebration , an experience of new and rejoice.



All this can be achieved by very simple means , as simple as what you've already heard, holes on walls, turns left and right, and there is no need for the extravagant. What is important is the strategy, the planning of the process, the ceremonial of going there, the amount of "dark" and perhaps "discomfort" , and the concluding end, what you'll find when there, at the moment the dark corridor or the abrupt turn will "release your eyes". Mystery and surprise is a physico-psychological strategy of architecture in time. It is particularly significant as a means to predispose the guest, those living outside the particular premises, till they become "mystes", communicators of our own life, which must have the means to operate in calm and serenity , to let us perform the daily tasks within the concept and ceremonial of our own life. The trivialities of "function" and comfort are definitely needed in order to permit life to occur on a normal basis in any building. If the recipe of "mystery and surprise" is to be found in every piece or in every section of a plan, then the building becomes cumbersome ,labyrinthic, intolerable for everyday use, tiring and tyrannical, making its users disgusted ; even unable to dust and clean it



properly, inappropriate for older members of the family, a living nuisance. There has to be measure.

The word “ekplixis” also composite, comes from “ek-plixis”, meaning to “take you out of the boredom”, (*ek*: take out, relieve, *plixis*: Boredom) . We want to make architecture that takes boredom out of the people; we want to give them the prizes of joy and happiness in the daily occasionally “boring” surroundings of their life. The Latin word “surprise” actually means the “end prize”, or “the hidden prize” .

There has been no better example historically, to the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. With nothing to suggest anything special on the outside, after a procession through triviality and after passing some common spaces upon entrance , all of a sudden you find yourself floating over the clouds as you see the interior of the open garden with the rocks.

I will focus however on Ricardo Legorreta, the twentieth century architect who worked on this design strategy consistently and who represents for me the epitome of this strategy . I use Legorreta to start with, because as we’ll see in his effort to achieve this he mobilized most of the design tools that I will address in later chapters, many of which have historic roots as well, but never argued or appreciated properly by many people , that they constitute fundamental parts of an inclusivist design palette.

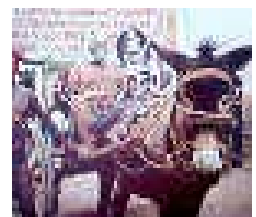
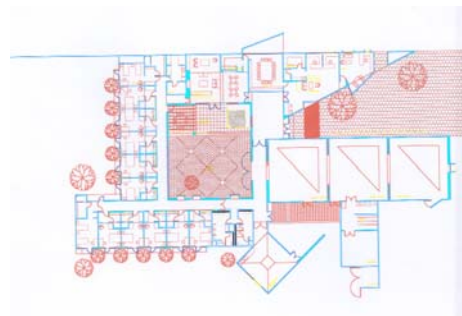
Legorreta achieves Mystery and Surprise, through the use of Mass, color, symbol , light and lighting , through holes, slots, squeezes and releases. His color is Red, deep blue, yellow, pink and Lilac. Pure color, as if it came out of a painter’s tube. His teacher in all this has been vernacular

architecture which has been also teacher to many other good architects. Charles Moore for instance used to show during his public

lectures tombs of Mexican cemeteries that had the form of peasant had been excreted on his own architecture by the vernacular architecture of Mexico. Ricardo Legorreta, showed images of painted

modest adobes , shacks, and vernacular artifacts , inspirational artifacts celebrating life as opposed to death. In the case of Moore and Legorreta we have the opposition of two currents of influence, Life and Death , both involved in the whole philosophy and the design strategy of mystery and surprise . The answer is in the balance , in the right dose; how much “life”, how much “death”, how much adversity vs. Joy you are going to offer through the design alternative you’ll eventually adopt.

The answer to “how much” comes eventually from the architects own perception of the cosmos, his experiences and struggles through life, his attitude toward what constitutes “good” , what “bad”. Legorreta’s poetics , has been the poetics of struggle , of a humanity that lives and struggles with color, with the elements of nature, the difficulties of development under the



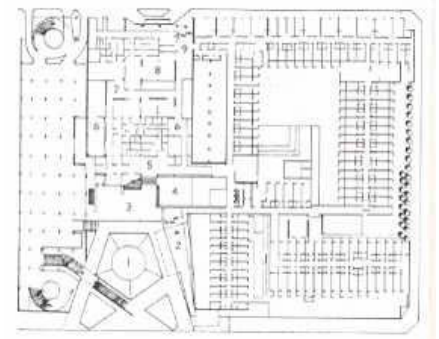
influence of powerful neighbors (USA and Canada) , poverty and authority, and the inevitability of death. “So , lets live joyously as long as we are alive”.

His preoccupation with these subjects has been contemplatively intellectual. In his own “hands on” way, without written texts or manifestos, he was able to show to the world, since the early ‘70’s when he started becoming widely known , an exceptionally human and pleasing way for the solution of social problems through architecture. The Bungalows of Camino Real in Baja California,



and the ceremonial sequence of entrance spaces in the Camino Real hotel of Mexico City are good cases in point. With their simplicity , human scale and their overall anthropocentric disposition, point to the route that should have been followed in public housing in Mexico as well as elsewhere. When other

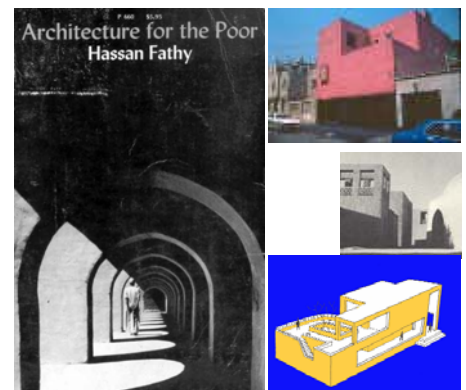
architects, darlings of the government, were loading in the ‘60’s Mexico City with high density schemes of socialist and Northern European origin, with key prototype Le Cruiser’s Marseilles block , Ricardo Legorreta was preparing to offer Mexico an architecture out of its own land, inherited and inherent in his own country. This was to be an architecture built by the hands of local builders, with local material , enriched with the spirit and juices of life on could find in Piazza de Garibaldi and during the Mexican Fiestas. While the



element of “Life” was absent for most part of the twentieth century from the official architecture of Mexico, which was looking elsewhere for prototypes, architects such as Luis Barragan and Ricardo Legorreta, in collaboration with the sculptor Mathias Goeritz were building exemplary environmental wholes for the visitors of their country, through the chain of Camino Real hotels. The bars , the commercial and the social spaces in the rather labyrinthic plan of the first such hotel in Mexico City,



evoke the spirit of the market , of the neighborhood , of the people. This hotel was his first applied demonstration of the major inspiration he had received from the reading of Hassan Fathy’s great book, “Architecture for the Poor”. Legorreta recommended to me to read this book. For him, Fathy was the greatest architect of the twentieth century. Years later I found out that Hassan Fathy had worked for Doxiadis associates at some point. And I had felt so good when I discovered this intricate set of circumstances.



Architecture is autobiographical, like the good literature...

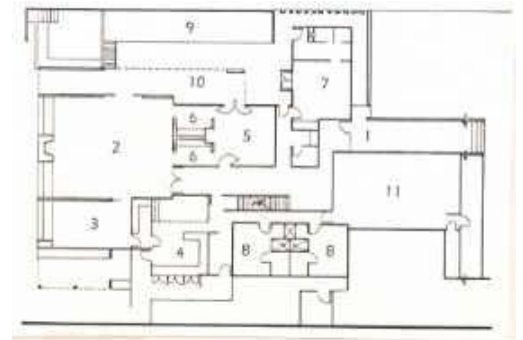
Even in cases of literary abstraction and metaphysics, as for instance in the cases of Borges and Garcia Marquez the Latin-American “Ego” and the artists personality are ever present. The south American metaphysician and the builder can not separate their “ego” from the world. The universe he creates is his own and nobody else’s ; springing out of his inner struggles, the trials of his people, his own race. An “Erendira” or a “Camino Real” by Legorreta have purely Mexican seeds. The seeds of an absolutely Mexican authenticity. If one were to accept the analogue of the difference between the referential realism of Octavio Paz and the realistic abstraction of

Borges, and if one were to look for its counterpart in architecture, then one could conclude that the synthesis of both is the architecture of Legorreta. He has managed to synthesize their uniquely Latin-American qualities and express them through the language of architecture, three-dimensionally. He took his inspiration from the reality of his land, the Mexican wall and its small openings, the color and the textures, the shadow and the shining of the sun, the life and the mystery of the street, the music and the songs of people, the liveliness of the dress and of the talisman of the tribes. He managed to bring together the occasional opposing differences, of land and people, to synthesize in harmony the native-American with the Spanish, the American with the European, the poor with the wealthy, the harmony between authority and people, through persuasion and dialogue... all of the above, unsubstantiated here by academic footnotes, yet all derived through the numerous occasions I had to discuss these issues with the architect, hidden in my memory and our thirty year long correspondence.

All of the above I believe has given Legorreta the ability and the discipline, to create highly sensual and soul uplifting wholes that possess the right dose of the element of mystery and surprise. Because there is need for extraordinary discipline to know where to stop, what is necessary.

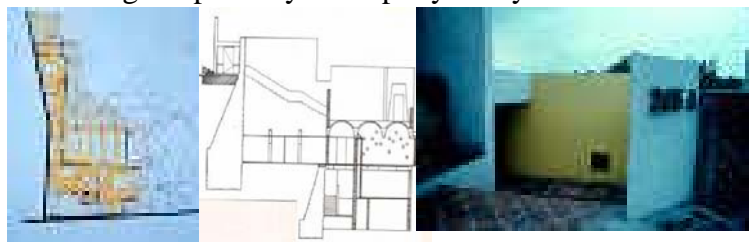


Because beyond this point, the architecture may fall to the other end, become a “circus” of curiosity. He has demonstrated repeatedly that he knows how to break the conventional laws of composition, and he produces plans that to the eye of the uninitiated in this strategy (the non “mystic”) may look clumsy and naïve; by making minute breaks or abrupt stops in the circulation, by situations in the use of natural lighting, by strategically distributed situations of tension or dead ends, and by using structural elements that occasionally are superficially larger to what is structurally necessary he achieves authentic results. Add the element of material tactility, sound and light as well as use of color, which for the majority of people is the trademark of his architecture, and you get the whole, something that you can fully appreciate only when you are there.



Legorreta’s greatest plans in this respect are the plan of the Camino Real Hotel in Mexico City, the House of Ricardo Montalban and the house of the young couple in the suburb of Mexico City which has the huge round tree-trunk I mentioned earlier and the crucifix. Although “mystery and surprise” is intended for the user, it should not be achieved accidentally by the architect. In fact the architect as well as the user (especially when the users are committees) one should make up his mind during the design stage, through the use of large scale models. Only through them final decision should be made, as to which mystery and what surprise alternative would be spatially the best. The models have to be large to permit you to put your eye at the level of the user when inside the space

, and see many design alternatives and possibilities. I will never forget how surprised I



was when Ricardo Legorreta told me that to decide the final proportions of the lounge of the Camino Real Hotel in Mexico City he had done 127 models in very large scale . No computer modeling can be substitute for the design of such spaces and no computer graphic has been able to give the real ambiance of the space prior to its construction . The models that the computer can make are in the site plan and urban design scale, often ordered by large architectural firms in computer model- making specializing firms ; it is really sad to hear architects saying “ we don’t have time to make ... study models or massing models in-house anymore” ( see Michael Bordenaro , “Creation of 3D architectural models...” in *Architectural Record* , 11.02, p. 187). This is really regrettable and it is a by- product of mediocre mentality; some firms are so much loaded with commissions that they do not have time to make even site plan study models in their office; of course the large scale models, like the one to one scale dental booth my boss Paul Rudolph had us make in New York, is out of the question .Richard Meier has also written of the large models he was making to show the Getty committee, some of which, fragments of galleries or of significant interior spaces, were large enough to get tree people inside. (see “Building the Getty”, p. 88).

A great asset in the mystery and surprise aspect of the Legorreta buildings is that they have not been published to the extreme, and that their published pictures do not cause lasting impression, such as for instance is the lasting impression one gets from published pictures of the interior of the Ronchamp, or of the interior of the side chapel of La Tourette. The visual impact of the photographs of these Corbu projects is tremendous; highly graphic ; When in the real place, the space is much like , if not inferior to the image already

generated by the published pictures. This is not the case for the Legorreta or even the Barragan buildings. Thus the actual impact through the visit of the space is exponentially higher; At least so I felt when I was there. And to take this a step further; the black granite veneering of the side wall and the three storey staircase of the Tadao Museum of modern Art in Fort Worth, can not produce memorable pictures, something which is a plus I believe for the ultimate impact of architecture, for the few visitors who will discover and have the experience of this staircase. Because Tadao Ando is also one of the masters in “mystery and surprise”, the one to purposefully utilize light and lighting as a means to this experiential architectonic end.

I speak in more detail on Tadao Ando later when we’ll talk on light and lighting in architecture.



