

THE McALLEN STYLE:



Jorge Loyzaga, architect, De la Garza Evia House, San Pedro Garza García, 1983.

Northern Mexico has been invaded by a strange phenomenon that is spreading to more traditional central Mexico. The "McAllen-style" house – so called by some Monterrey designers – is becoming the most popular architectural expression in many residential areas in Mexico's northeast.

It may seem odd that in a country with a rich architectural tradition, boasting such architects as Luis Barragán and Ricardo Legorreta, the middle and upper classes prefer to imitate commercial construction in the suburbs of South Texas. This can be explained in a brief historical summary.

THE FRAILTY OF ARCHITECTURAL TRADITION IN NORTHERN MEXICO

The rich culture of the viceregal Spanish colony, which lasted three centuries, did not equally affect all parts of Mexico. In fact, much of what is today northern Mexico lay on the periphery of the centers of cultural influence. Monumental colonial works are sparse in the north: a few churches in Saltillo, Chihuahua, and Monterrey. The cultural isolation persisted during much of the 19th century. An architectural tradition was not firmly established in the region until the "Porfiriato" (1890–1910), when, as a result of the industrial boom, local and foreign businessmen built their houses in contemporary European styles.

After the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), the European fad vanished, and once again austerity reigned. It was thus that European and American rationalist architecture was introduced by engineers and architects who had studied in Mexico

City or in the United States. Houses designed with a Bauhaus or Richard Neutra look, sometimes even in the Frank Lloyd Wright or Le Corbusier style, dominated construction in the 1950s and 1960s. By then, all links with traditional architecture had been lost. At most, a few Neocolonial houses – the Mexican term for the picturesque Spanish-Mediterranean style – were built during the 1930s. But even this ended by the mid-1940s.

ECONOMIC EXCHANGE AND CULTURAL TRANSPOSITION

During the 1960s, several factors led to a rapid expansion in economic and demographic exchanges across the border between Mexico and the United States. In 1965, Mexico launched the Border Industrialization Program to develop its northern cities and towns by fostering the establishment of *maquila* industries and stimulating demographic development. At the same time, the cities of South Texas underwent rapid growth in commercial and service activities. Large shopping malls, built in the 1970s, drew shoppers not only from the border but from interior cities such as Monterrey and Saltillo. And South Texas experienced a tourist boom, particularly along South Padre Island. These changes had a strong impact on the culture of northeastern Mexico. An increasing number of Mexicans living in border cities came into daily contact with "the American way of life" through the mass media and shopping. Many of these were immigrants who in moving to the border left not only their home towns but many aspects of their traditional culture as well. Beginning in the 1970s, middle- and upper-income

families from Matamoros, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo moved across the river to Brownsville, McAllen, and Laredo and adopted American consumption habits.

As for the inhabitants of the interior of Mexico's border states, they began paying frequent visits to the Texas border towns, not only to shop but also to spend holidays on the beaches of Padre Island or in the discos of McAllen and San Antonio. It is estimated that 20 percent of the purchases made in shopping malls in Texas border towns are made by Mexicans living in the interior. At the end of the 1970s, almost 25 percent of the condominiums in South Padre Island were owned by Mexicans.

shelter magazines. As a logical consequence, Mexican merchants and distributors began to take advantage of the market by offering imported or "American-style" construction materials and building accessories.

SOME EXAMPLES IN MONTERREY

Architectural-cultural transposition is particularly evident in Monterrey's residential districts. Monterrey is the most important city in northern Mexico and the country's most progressive; many of Mexico's major industries and financial institutions have their headquarters there, in buildings that are imitated in other Mexican cities.



Carlos Galán Galán, architect, Treviño del Bosque House, San Pedro Garza García, 1988.

Simultaneously, middle- and upper-income Mexican culture underwent an assimilation process by adopting the consumption standards and the aesthetic values of South Texas. This became evident in popular fashion: Mexicans began aping American television stars, eating hamburgers and other junk food, acquiring furniture appropriate for American "traditional" dwellings, and overequipping their kitchens. It was most obvious in the design of houses.

The stylistic standards of American subdivision houses became familiar to Mexicans who saw and photographed such houses while traveling through the residential districts of Brownsville or McAllen or who read such books as Andy Lang's *101 Select Dream Houses* (Hammond, 1982). The influence of published images increased during the eighties and nineties with the appearance in Mexican bookstores of *Architectural Digest* and other

The assimilation of American styles began as early as the 1930s and 1940s, when a group of Mexican architects educated at the University of Texas and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology came to Monterrey. As the first professional designers to settle permanently in the city since the Mexican revolution, they had a tremendous impact on Monterrey's cultural life. Joaquín A. Mora was the founder of the School of Architecture of the University of Nuevo León (1946) and later became its dean (1955). He favored European styles for his residential work, with a noticeable preference for Norman lines. Lizandro Peña, one of the most important designers of his time, became famous for Hollywood façades and neo-California houses. Through him, Monterrey became acquainted with Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture. Arturo V. González was the creator of many Georgian-style houses and seduced Monterrey with *Gone With*

ARCHITECTURAL TRANSPPOSITIONS

JUAN I. BARRAGAN

the *Wind* columned porticoes. The engineer-architects Eduardo Belden and Luis Flores incorporated Art Deco in their commercial buildings and built houses influenced by American traditional architecture.

is forgotten. What can be said is that the American traditional style has become a local tradition in Monterrey, one enriched by newly arrived trends from the United States. But imitation of South Texas building styles remains the guideline for these creators.



José Ortiz de la Huerta, architect, Elizondo House, San Pedro Garza García, 1985.

The trend reached its peak with a designer who studied at the University of Texas but graduated from the University of Nuevo León in 1952, Juan V. Padilla. For almost four decades, Monterrey's high society lay under Padilla's spell. His work was extremely functional but was overlaid with an American "traditional" aesthetic. The decoration was sumptuous, combining traditional and exotic elements in the vein of *Architectural Digest*. With his associate, Adrián Audiffred, Padilla was a prolific designer. Examples of his creativity are everywhere in the city's residential districts.

Padilla's social and financial success made him a model for young architects of the 1960s and 1970s. Enrique Rousseau, Felipe Mier, Roberto Scott, Ignacio Gómez del Campo, Armando Garza Cavazos, Guillermo Cárdenas Jiménez, and Carlos Galán Galán are only a few of Padilla's successors. Their work extended American traditional styles to middle-class neighborhoods, adding such new elements as the use of materials with a rustic look – available on the market since the 1970s – and incorporating their own innovations and variations on the American style.

The list of architects is so long and interpretations of the original models so numerous that sometimes the prototype

THE LIMITS OF CULTURAL TRANSPPOSITION

The transposition of Texas residential architecture styles south of the border has been severely criticized by Mexican architects, especially those from central Mexico, and by nationalists. Architects in the border states are accused of aping American styles and sacrificing their own traditions.

Actually, the imitation is quite superficial. American architects when asked about the McAllen style answer simply, "This doesn't look like McAllen." A recent study of the values and meanings of Monterrey's residential architecture noted that authentic Mexican elements remain, camouflaged in American settings. Siting, use of surrounding walls, construction with solid concrete, interpretations of the inside-outside concept, and especially plan organizations that retain the spatial hierarchies of the Mexican family and its social system are examples of persistent cultural elements. To illustrate the latter, one example will suffice. A middle-class Monterrey house can have up to seven spatial zones of sociability to which guests are admitted depending on their degree of acquaintance with the host. This can range from a couple of benches on the entrance porch, to similar benches on the inside

McAllen Style?

The "McAllen house" is as likely to be found in the suburbs of Brownsville or on the outskirts of Rio Grande City as it is in McAllen. Indeed, the "McAllen-style" house notwithstanding, what strikes the casual visitor to McAllen is the sheer number of houses there that seem to have been designed by architects.

O'Neil Ford and Frank Welch are each responsible for a McAllen house, and the Chicago architect James Nagle produced a modern house in Pharr, on McAllen's eastern edge.

Houston architect Kenneth Bentsen designed the influential Winn House in McAllen in 1965. Its planar walls, flat roof, arched openings, and interior patio garden are a modern paraphrase of the 19th-century border brick style. Thus, while Monterrey's elite pay tribute to American suburban house types and styles, their Valley counterparts have demonstrated a consistent fascination with Mexican architectural themes. A happy medium is perhaps established by Roger Rasbach: he is both McAllen's and Monterrey's favorite Houston architect.

porch, to the foyer near the entrance, to an informal living room, to the formal living room, to the television room, and finally to the private sitting room in the main bedroom – a degree of functional differentiation vastly more complex than that of any American suburban house.

The houses look American because of the use of ornamental bricks and tiles, pitched roofs, bay windows, porches with columns, and a pastiche of European traditional types. But their proportions, greater density of surface materials, and daring solutions of spatial problems are totally uncharacteristic of American suburban houses. Ultimately, the cultural transposition is iconographic rather than essential. Monterrey's houses indeed have an American touch, but they do not constitute a break with the local tradition. They are instead a vivid expression of the cultural dialectic of the border

We do not intend to deal here with how the phenomenon of transposition affects American families who, during business or leisure trips, discover Mexican architectural elements and integrate them – often with an exaggerated touch – into their houses, except to observe that the phenomenon works both ways. The great success of Tim Street-Porter's book *Casa Mexicana* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989) in the United States is only one sign of this.

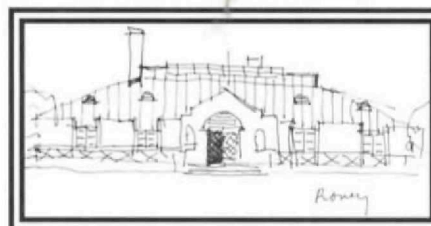
It could even be said that the work of untalented architects who try to imitate foreign formal patterns stripped of their expressive essence can only be a pastiche. But this is a common phenomenon in the history of architecture.

Those who visit the cities of northern Mexico expecting to find them filled with colorful buildings and massive volumes in the style of Barragán and Legorreta will experience disappointment. There are, in fact, a few such buildings in our cities, but nowadays they are easier to find in Dallas or Los Angeles. ■

For more information, see Juan I. Barragán and Enrique Díaz, *Arquitectos del Noroeste* (Monterrey: Urbis International Publications, 1992), and Barragán, *Genesis de un Municipio de Vanguardia: San Pedro Garza García* (Monterrey: Urbis International, 1990).



Kenneth Bentsen Associates, architects, Winn House, McAllen, 1965.



Frank Welch & Associates, architects, Roney House, McAllen, 1985, elevation drawing.