



Wet Architecture: Rogelio Salmona's Quimbaya Gold Museum¹

Ricardo L. Castro



I. Coffee in Bogotá

It is also refreshing to hear the water, to see it flowing. I use water as company. The trajectory and the sound seem very important to me. In the Guest House, in the patios, there are meetings of water. In the Alhambra the water flows and remains in the ponds, then goes out and falls. I try to have waters meet, even to have them form filigree, to go out, to be heard, to be seen and to be accessible to the touch.²

On many evenings during my visits to Colombia in the early 1990s, I sat with Rogelio Salmona in his atelier, located on the top floor of the building he designed for the Colombian Society of Architects. We sipped coffee and contemplated the panorama of Bogotá's urban texture against the overwhelming verticality of the Andes, the gigantic natural limit to the city's eastward growth. With the tape recorder running, we discussed the current state of architecture in Colombia. In contrast to the political situation of the country, architecture is healthy and strong, in part due to

Salmona's great influence. One evening, Salmona described his deep fascination with the concept of "encanto"—enchantment. I could not have found a more appropriate idiom to describe the Quimbaya Gold Museum.

The Quimbaya Gold Museum and Cultural Centre in Armenia, Quindio, Colombia, is a wet building. It enchants because instead of protecting itself, it embraces and takes advantage of water. Like the object that intercepting light casts shadows, making known both its presence and that of the light, the Quimbaya Gold Museum is fully revealed only when it interacts with water. The building engages us symbolically and experientially through a mesmerising interpenetration of form and water, using and controlling water in its various states and at various scales. While the surrounding landscape gently welcomes and celebrates rain, the action and presence of water alchemically transform the Museum, enhancing the experience of the place with reflections, smells and colours. The flow of water through the interior spaces, for example—through the spouting fountains, down the various canals and over the surfaces of the building—is mirrored almost every day at a larger scale when one of the region's tropical storms turns the whole complex into a truly wet artifact. Then, as if the Museum were a baroque fountain or some pre-Columbian ceremonial site, water activates the porous building surfaces of brick and tile. Although traditional brick and clay tablets are used, their arrangement and combination with pre-cast concrete elements such as fountain walls and basins, or with metal elements such as skylights and windows, create an exuberance of surfaces, patterns and earth colours. These combinations serve both to hold and control water and are enhanced in turn by the water's presence. This sensitivity to water "is something that has not been lost in European architecture," claims Salmona: "Here we have forgotten that in Bogotá, in the Viejo Caldas, even in Cartagena every thing becomes wet. Stones become wet, then they start drying and the sparkling on them changes. There are different degrees of shimmer. As they dry, they change colour. This is a very important fact."³

II. A History of the Quimbaya Gold Museum

Rogelio Salmona designed the Quimbaya Gold Museum and Community Center in 1985. The complex, which belongs to Colombia's "Banco de la Republica" (Bank of the Republic), was inaugurated in 1986. A

terracotta building made of several kinds of brick and clay tablets, it is located on a sloped site at the north entrance of Armenia, capital of the Department of Quindio, on the national road that connects this city with the northern part of the country.

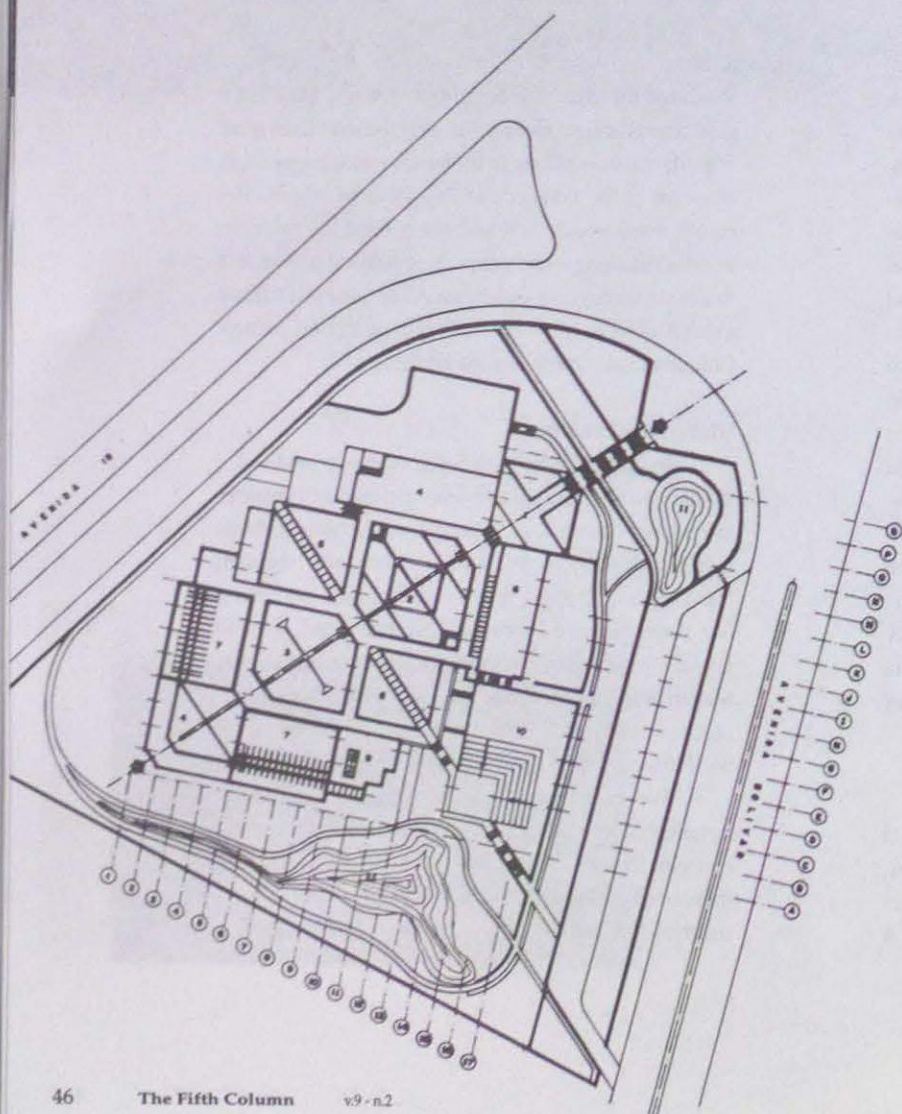
Armenia is a modest and rather recent city. It is one of the coffee centres of the country. Here, the softest type of the aromatic plant is grown on the slopes of the Central Range of the three mountain chains that form the Colombian Andes. The foundation of Armenia dates back to 1889, the time of the so-called *Colonización Antioqueña* (Antioquia Settlement). In the mid-nineteenth century, settlers coming from the Northern region of Antioquia colonized a vast territory known as Viejo Caldas. Viejo Caldas had already been settled, although unsuccessfully, by the Spanish Conquistadors in the sixteenth century. For three centuries, until the 1800s, the region remained mostly abandoned and covered by jungle. In 1966, Viejo Caldas was divided into three new departments: Caldas, Rizaralda and Quindio.

Before the arrival of the Spaniards, though, a tribe of famed Indian goldsmiths known as the Quimbaya inhabited the area. Although thousands of Quimbaya gold objects are in collections all over the world, the most important pieces belong to the famous and unique Gold Museum of the Banco de la Republica in Bogotá. Recently, the Banco de la Republica opened the museum in Armenia along with several other cultural centres and museums throughout Colombia. All of these institutions exhibit objects from the national collection of pre-Columbian and colonial gold artifacts.⁴

III. Wet Architecture

In Armenia, Rogelio Salmona has re-ordered a local landscape through a series of architectural gestures impregnated with a geometrical will. These gestures help us, visitors-*flâneurs*, in our "promenade" through the complex, directing our movement and controlling our views. Salmona also uses geometry and place to evoke a pre-Columbian past. Inspired by the ancient Mayan cities of Chichen Itzá, Uxmal and Palenque, the outdoor and indoor places of the Quimbaya Museum result from a skillful weaving of masses and courtyards.

We enter the museum high on the slope of the mountain along a North-South axis which diagonally connects four courtyards. As in the Mayan complexes, these courtyards are linked at the corners. The two main courtyards of the complex are defined by galleries that



wrap around the central space. This is another spatial type dear to Salmona, derived not from the Romanesque cloister that it resembles, but from Medieval pre-Columbian American architectural forms.⁵

Water accompanies us on our promenade down the stepped courtyards. Calm water appears in the two triangular basins that symmetrically flank the path. It re-appears in the fountains and canals, descending at different speeds through the two intermediate courtyards. Finally in the fourth courtyard, tranquil water fills the triangular basins that again symmetrically flank the canal and stairs. At this point, the canal abruptly stops. The liquid disappears almost magically, to be conducted underground beyond the walls of the complex where it joins the stream that originates in a pond next to the entrance. This pond feeds the hydraulic complex of the Quimbaya Gold Museum in two different manners. In the interior, an architecture of courtyard troughs controls and canalizes the water. In the exterior, water runs freely through an architecture of sinuous canals and free-form ponds, nourishing the lavish landscape of regional plants that surround the northern part of the complex.

As at the President's Guest House in Cartagena, another of Salmona's outstanding buildings from the 1980s, it is possible to walk over the roofs of the entire complex of the Quimbaya Gold Museum. The vertical dimension and the concepts "above" and "below" acquire true meaning here. From the roofscape the building unfolds progressively, revealing layer after layer: rooms and stairs behind the galleries, aediculae, a new transversal axis directing the visitor's attention to the outdoor theatre, the lush garden and the mountains to the North and East, a view of the valley and far away mountains to the South and West. Walking on the roofscape evokes memories of wandering on roof-terraces of Mayan palaces and ceremonial compounds.

IV. A Reading of the Quimbaya Gold Museum

The canals in the courtyards of the Quimbaya Gold Museum—which Salmona calls "atarjeas" using the old Spanish-Arabic name—are subject to various interpretations. They may refer to Colombia's European past, symbolizing the utopian world of the Islamic garden so pervasive in the Spanish Colonial heritage of the Americas, as they do at the Guest House in Cartagena. But the canals are also related to the geometrical patterns that are carved or depicted in such pre-Columbian artifacts as the elegant Tumaco printing clay rolls, the Quimbaya gold ornaments, the inexplicable Nazca land-

scapes, and the richly decorated surfaces of Meso-American architecture.

Reference to the Columbian Southwest is ever-present in Salmona's surface treatment of the courtyards. In the archeological zone of St. Agustin, unknown carvers sculpted the rocky bed of a river creating a hydraulic and sculptural masterpiece. Known as the "Lavapatas" (feet washing basin), the sculpture comes to life as the river flows through it. After a thunderstorm we realize that the entire museum has been similarly conceived to act as a gathering device for and container of water. When viewed from the terraces, the courtyards and the geometrical canals carved into the floor acquire a new presence: the complex clearly reveals its hollowness, as if it were a pre-Columbian clay vessel.

Salmona's multi-faceted exploration of the symbolic and experiential aspects of water may well serve to explain the notion of enchanted domain, *lugar encantado*, which the architect is so fond of. It is this awareness of the qualities of water that makes the Gold Museum a unique building. Having been nourished by an early tradition, the museum speaks of a new tradition. Thus despite times of great disillusion and architectural banality, here resides a significant work. In combining the simple ingredients of building with a deep knowledge of landscape, forms, history, and local culture, Salmona demonstrates that he is an architectural sorcerer capable of creating an enchanted place.

1. This essay is an abridged version of one of the sections in my book *The Marvelous-Real and the Architecture of Rogelio Salmona* (forthcoming). In 1988 I visited Cartagena and participated as a guest teacher and critic in the International Workshop on Republican Architecture offered by Los Andes University. During this stay of several weeks in Cartagena I succumbed to the spell of this magic city and to that of one of Rogelio Salmona's highly praised buildings, the President's Guest House. Project grants from the Canada Council allowed me to return to Colombia in 1991 and 1992 to document the Guest House, the Quimbaya Gold Museum and several private houses, and to interview Salmona extensively.

2. Ibid. p. 18.

3. Ibid. p. 19.

4. The design and program of the Quimbaya Gold Museum incorporate a Cultural Center for the city. The program includes a documentation center specialized in regional themes, a hall for travelling exhibitions, a multi-use hall for concerts, theater, lectures and movie and video screening, an outdoor theatre, a children's wing and staff offices, as well as permanent exhibition facilities where the gold and ethnographic pieces are displayed.

5. I refer here to Medieval American architecture as defined by Pál Kelemen in his *Medieval American Art*, rev. ed. (New York: Dover, 1969).

Ricardo Castro is a professor at McGill University presently on sabbatical. He enjoys drinking coffee in Bogotá.

