

Figure 1.

Site Resonance and  
Sense of Distances:  
Rogelio Salmona's Nueva Santa Fé  
Community Centre in Bogotá

text and photos Ricardo L. Castro

THE RECENTLY INAUGURATED Nueva Santa Fé Community Centre in Bogotá manifests some of the important themes that characterize the practice of Colombian architect Rogelio Salmona.<sup>1</sup> It is a metonymy for a very prolific career that spans almost fifty years: from Salmona's active participation in Le Corbusier's atelier at 35, rue de Sevrès in Paris, to his current work on significant domestic and public projects, all built in Colombia. Salmona, like several other significant Latin American architects, perhaps with the exception of Luis Barragan and his disciple Ricardo Legorreta, remains practically unknown north of the Rio Grande.

Salmona's buildings serve as gatherers of a sense of distance. This characteristic gives his work its "marvelous-real" quality (a theme with which I have dealt extensively elsewhere).<sup>2</sup> His architecture gathers three distinct distance domains: the immediate, the intermediate and the panorama (the horizon or limit).<sup>3</sup> His architecture thus transcends mere materiality—its tectonics—and becomes poetry of site, of forms and ultimately of inhabitation. His projects build the site and the entire surroundings. They have the encompassing quality of the classical



Figure 2.



Greek theatre, which incorporates the panorama (fig. 2 and 3.).

Salmona's architecture is also the result of an attentive listening to the resonance, the aura, that is unique to each site. This resonance carries with it echoes that pertain on one hand to time, to history as it were, and on the other to the permanent presence of the site. His projects are "site-responsive," in direct contrast to the more traditional ideas of contextual and site-integrated projects.<sup>4</sup> They speak of a history that is immediate, intermediate and distant in a way analogous to physical distance.

### Site

In the Nueva Santa Fé Community Centre, inaugurated in 1997, Salmona found another opportunity to transform and enhance a deteriorated southern sector in Bogotá's historical zone. With the Centre and the Archive of the Nation (Archivo), a magnificent complex completed in 1995, Salmona consolidated one of his earliest interventions in the sector, the Nueva Santa Fé Housing complex. This large housing complex, designed in collaboration with other local architects during the early 1980s, consisted of 1800 apartments distributed in several blocks that occupy a zone in the southern outskirts of what used to be, during the Colonial and Republican periods, the heart of the city.<sup>5</sup>

At the urban level, evoking an intermediate historical distance, the design of the apartments followed and extended to the south the gridiron pattern which originated in the Colonial period. The new brick apartment units are grouped in large superblocks, the size of a traditional Spanish *manzana*. The Nueva Santa Fé blocks, however, unlike their Spanish Colonial predecessor, contain large interior courtyards that function as communal green areas.

Like the Nueva Santa Fé apartments, the recent project occupies its entire site—the Community Centre sits to the south—on the sloped terrain that forms part of the foothills of Monserrate and Guadalupe mountains. These are typical formations of the mountain range, which, rising to the east, acts as a formidable natural backdrop to the projects and to the city. Impassive, Monserrate and Guadalupe have witnessed the development of the city since its foundation in 1536.

The Community Centre occupies an adjacent lot across a pedestrian street along the south façade of the Nueva Santa Fé complex. The Centre can suc-

cinctly be described as a building with a square courtyard surrounded by a gallery that opens to the various facilities. All located on one level, these include a library, administrative areas, a theatre, a performance/daycare area, classrooms and activity rooms.

### Building

In the Community Centre site, history and distance become integral elements of Salmona's form-making process. Salmona, like writer Alejo Carpentier, mines the past in imaginative ways. Carpentier finds in the present inspiration to create a marvelous-real world; but he also finds it in "the marvellousness of the past, which was revealed to him in the ruins of Henri Christophe's palace of Sans Souci and the astounding citadel of La Ferrière."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Salmona finds inspiration in the immediate history of the site, as well as in the intermediate and in the distant history of pre-Hispanic America. The possible organizational and formal intentions expressed by the extant ruins in Mexico and Peru serve him as appropriate precedents. It is not accidental that the modulation of windows and openings of his buildings strongly evoke the rhythms utilized in such places as the ceremonial complexes of Uxmal and Chichen-Itza.

Furthermore, it is not accidental that Salmona reintroduces the important concept of roof ambulation evident in pre-Colombian buildings and poetry. The roof promenade permits a definitive encounter with the vertical dimension of the projects, emphasizing the phenomenal apprehension of the concepts *above* and *below*.

Salmona often refers to one of the Mayan concepts of the house in relation to the notion of dwelling on the roof. He points out:

This is very characteristic of the pre-Hispanic architectures. One enters the patio and climbs onto the roof. There is a great ceremonial sense that has an important relation with the surroundings, let's say with the cosmos. At night for instance, under the stars, the celestial concavity aids the folding into oneself. Hence, that famous poem: "I enter the house, I enter the earth, I exit, I climb up to heaven."<sup>8</sup>

Wandering and wondering are both possible in the project. The invitation to circulate over the roofs of the Centre is accentuated by the manner in which the entrances and the stair-ramp in the middle of the court have been arranged (fig. 4). This is then a third aspect based on pre-Hispanic precedents: the skewed access to buildings along diagonal lines. This bias is in contrast with the centralized axiality found in many



of the historical periods of western architecture. The circulation of the Nueva, Santa Fé as well as those of the Archivo and the Community Centre, follow this diagonal strategy. At the centre, visitors have the opportunity to enter the project from any of its four corners, either climbing a ramp or descending stairs along the NE to SW diagonal, or entering at level on the SE to NW diagonal. These axes are also the continuation of the diagonal lines that act as circulation and spatial organizers of the Nueva Santa Fé apartments.

The Community Centre strongly resembles the quadrangle of an old Mayan complex, becoming a microcosm of the city and evoking the character of a ceremonial pre-Colombian centre. Its delicately proportioned court is but a small plaza, a place of public appearance where the user will be able to participate in a variety of ways: detachedly from above the edges of the quadrangle or below in the galleries surrounding it, or actively in the open quadrangle.

There is yet another example of the important role the diagonal has played in the organization of Salmona's buildings. This is a vertical diagonal that connects below with above and vice versa: the ramp previously exploited in one of the most significant projects by the architect, The House of Illustrious Guests in Cartagena, becomes here the stair-ramp that allows vertical displacement and turns into a tamed cascade during periods of rain.

At another experiential level, the dialogue that Salmona establishes between open and closed spaces reaches the marvellous in the hollowed curved wall that separates one of the galleries of the quadrangle from the performance/daycare room (fig. 1 and 5). The bonding of the wall, made with bricks and voids, permits the free movement of wind, smells and sound through it. It also allows the gaze to reach beyond the traditional limit of the room (the wall) into the further confines of the quadrangle: the wall of the ramp-stair.

All these gestures thrive on modest circumstances that, suddenly, through the architect's skill, become transformed into the extraordinary or, as it often happens in the recent poetry and literature of Latin America, into something marvellously real. Salmona's gift is to make the extraordinary out of the ordinary. This is the gift of magicians and poets. And it is through this gift that his buildings gather physical and conceptual distances acquiring a special aura that speaks of history and meaningful dwelling.

1. I have discussed and illustrated extensively these aspects in *Rogelio Salmona* (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 1998). The book is published in separate English and Spanish editions. Parts of this essay have been extracted from the book.

2. In a paper, originally published in the *Proceedings of the 82nd Annual Meeting of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, ACSA* (Washington DC: ACSA Press, 1994), 255-260, I argued that the concept of the marvellous-real, first conceived by Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier as a strategy to describe and explain an existing reality, was also appropriate as a framework in which to construct that reality physically. The marvellous-real is essentially a strategy, a technique which is "designed to sharpen our awareness of the astonishing richness of observable reality" (Donald L. Shaw, *Alejo Carpentier* [Boston: Twayne, 1985], preface). Carpentier explicitly documents the moment at which the awareness of the idea first struck him, on a visit to Haiti in 1943 (Shaw, *Alejo Carpentier*, 22). Shaw points out that Carpentier's sudden epiphany was the result of an architectural encounter, nourished and informed by his own intellectual and social perspective:

What the trip to Haiti seems to have done was to stimulate suddenly once more in Carpentier a realization that "in [Latin] America surrealism is an everyday, commonplace, habitual thing." Not only, "as he had perceived in his descriptions of naniguismo and magical beliefs in earlier works, was there to be found the marvellousness of the present, but also the marvellousness of the past, which was revealed to him in the ruins of Henri Cristophe's palace of Sans Souci and the astounding citadel of La Ferriere (Shaw, *Alejo Carpentier*, 27).

For further references on the subject see: Alexis Marquez Rodriguez, *Lo barroco y lo rea-maravilloso en la obra de Alejo Carpentier* (Mexico: siglo xxi editores, 1982), 29-178. Alejo Carpentier, in the prologue of *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of this World*), trans. Harriet de Onis (New York: The Noonday Press, 1989), his second novel, had already sketched out the constitutive elements of the concept of the marvellous-real. They were further elaborated in his collection of essays *Tientos y diferencias* (Montevideo: Editorial Arca, 1967).

3. These are parallel to the concepts of "rerum natura," first nature, as well as second and third nature developed by theorist John Dixon Hunt, who uses them to explain garden design. He maintains that Baroque Gardens contain the three natures that define landscape. The first nature is the farthest away, the one which was unattainable or unconquerable at one time, the environment that we see disappearing faster and faster today. The second nature is the nature of the cultivable and grazing lands and forests; the third nature, the one closer to architecture, is the garden with its formal patterns. Dixon Hunt maintains that all gardens are Baroque gardens since in effect they contain those three natures (parterres, bosquet and selvatico in the traditional Baroque garden).

4. I borrowed here the idea of site-generated art from American artist Robert Irwin. See: Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing is Forgetting The Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 194-95. See also, Russell Ferguson, ed., *Robert Irwin* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1993).

5. The firms of Camacho & Guerrero and Pedro A. Mejía, Arturo Robledo, collaborated on the Design, 1985-87. Germán Téllez offers an incisive commentary on the history of the project in his *Rogelio Salmona: Arquitectura y Poética del Lugar* (Bogotá: Escala, 1991), 324-25.

7. See note 2. This encounter took place in Haiti.

8. Interview with Rogelio Salmona, 24 January 1997.

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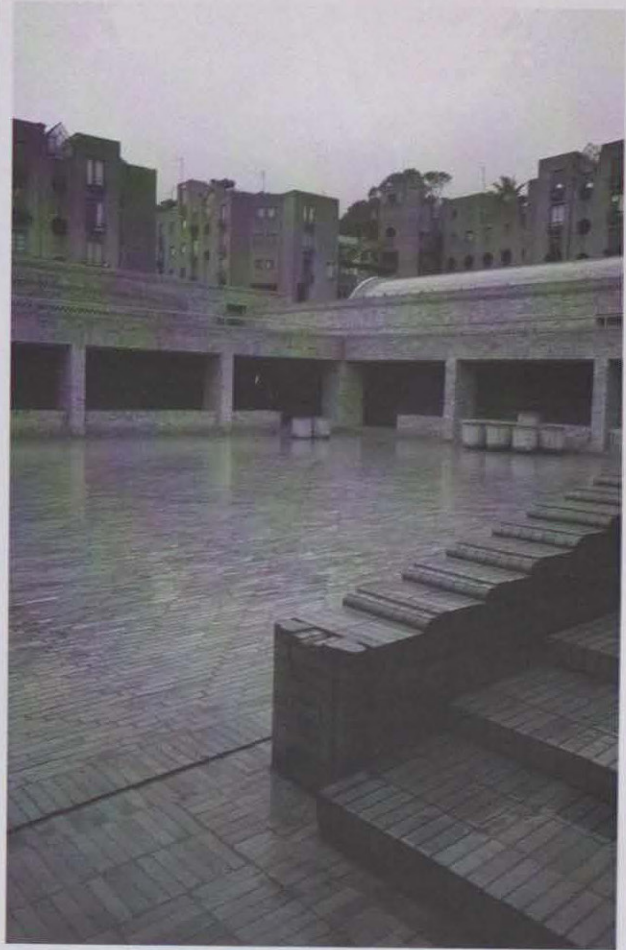


Figure 3. Figure 4.

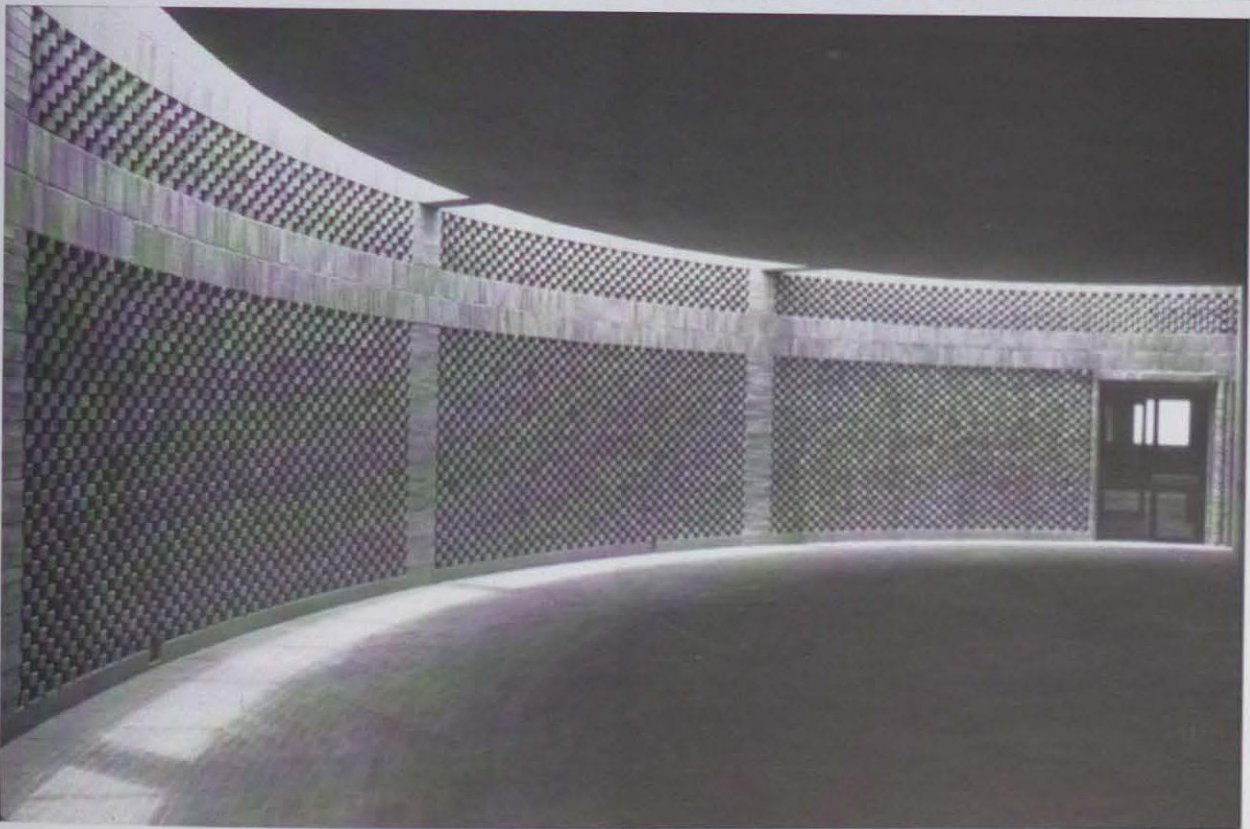


Figure 5.