Juan O’Gorman was a man given to extremes. The idols he raised were the idols he later smashed. In a lecture delivered in Mexico City in 1933 he railed against the romanticism and aestheticism of most architects then working there, calling for an architecture shaped by rationalism, industrial technology, and an internationalist outlook. At this time he was building austere houses and schools modeled on the work of Le Corbusier, whose _Vers une architecture_ he claimed to have read four times before his twentieth birthday. By the late 1940s, however, O’Gorman was damning Le Corbusier’s work as the antithesis of everything Mexican. Now he painted fantastic, lost worlds and designed lavishly decorated structures inspired by Gaudi, Simon Rodia, and the ancient Aztecs (Figure 1).

O’Gorman’s built work supplies tangible evidence of his outlook; the lectures and interviews that he gave and the articles he published throughout his career seek to explain it. Yet one of his most strident and sustained statements was never made public. Written in English between late 1954 and April 1955, “The Degeneration of Architecture in Mexico Today” was an attack on International Style modernism—on Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies, and their Mexican followers—and a call for architects in Mexico to free themselves from foreign influence and rediscover their roots. O’Gorman planned to publish this in the _Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians_, possibly in the special Spanish Empire issue slated for March 1956. The essay did not appear in the _JSAH_, however, and it was quickly forgotten. Recently uncovered, it casts light on the career of one of Mexico’s most significant modernists, and more broadly, on a period in Mexican architecture when designers there drew international attention for their daring mixtures of the native and the foreign.

O’Gorman himself was of a similar mix. Son of a Mexican mother and an Irish immigrant father—the mining engineer turned painter Cecil Crawford O’Gorman—Juan studied medicine and then architecture at Mexico’s National University. He graduated in 1927 and over the next few years he worked for various architects in Mexico City, including his former teacher, the rationalist José Villagrán García. Striking out on his own during the early 1930s, O’Gorman gained a reputation as one of Mexico’s leading modern architects. He built about a dozen houses around Mexico City, including the famous conjoined house/studios for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, modeled on Le Corbusier’s 1923 Ozenfant Studio in Paris but localized via bright exterior colors and the surrounding cactus fence. In 1932 O’Gorman was one of the co-founders of the rationalist-oriented School of Architecture and Engineering at the National Polytechnic Institute.

By this time conditions in post-revolutionary Mexico had stabilized enough that the national government was focused on political consolidation and public (re)building. Schools, hospitals, government ministries, offices, factories,
housing, hotels, and recreation and cultural facilities began going up around the country. O’Gorman’s rigorously utilitarian, bare-boned designs promised maximum efficiency for minimum cost, and thus earned the architect some well-placed supporters. In 1932 Narciso Bassols, Mexico’s Marxist Secretary of Public Education (1931–34), named O’Gorman head of his ministry’s architectural office, and in that role he built or remodeled more than fifty school buildings in two years and on a budget of just one million pesos. The close resemblance of these to European prototypes, O’Gorman explained, was the result not of cultural dependency but of applying similar solutions to similar problems. “Architecture must become international for the simple reason that every day [through education and industry] mankind becomes more universal.”

His view soon changed. By 1936 O’Gorman had stopped building. “I did not know where to turn from functionalism,” he later said, “and I had no intention of becoming a businessman.” Dismayed by the tedium of running an office and by the corruption in Mexico City’s building trades, he was also troubled by the way his architecture, intended to serve the masses, served capitalism even better: while workers and residents may have found standardized reinforced-concrete factories and housing, however serviceable, bland, and unfamiliar, real estate developers and industrialists appreciated them as cheap, quick, and profitable. Moreover, it now occurred to O’Gorman that his earlier buildings were unsuited to their Mexican settings—not indigenous, but an alien and invasive species.

After 1936 he made paintings and mosaics and he continued to teach theory and design. But on only a few occasions did he build again. Between 1944 and 1966 he assisted and then succeeded Rivera on the design and construction of the painter’s neo-prehispanic Anahuacalli Museum in southeastern Mexico City. From 1949 to 1952 he worked on the ten-story, mosaic-covered central library at the new University City complex (home of the Universidad Nacional Autómana de México, or UNAM). Closer to his heart was his own mosaic-covered cave house, built between 1949 and 1956 around a naturally occurring grotto in the Pedregal lava fields south of Mexico City—a house he called “the antithesis of the so-called international style” and “the most complete and satisfying work that I have done in architecture . . . the beginning [perhaps] of a new regional tradition” (Figures 2, 3).

O’Gorman’s new orientation was aired on several occasions during the 1950s. Photos of his architectural and mosaic projects appeared in popular and professional publications at home and abroad. He discussed his work and the state of Mexican architecture in lectures and a few short articles published in Mexico and the United States. But his most substantive comments, in Spanish or in English, were those he aimed at the JSAH in the spring of 1955.

His text begins like a boxing match, with architects in Mexico divided into two camps and gathered in opposing corners. In one are the “non-objectivists,” the majority, who follow the International Style; he does not name names but he does point to the University City as filled with their work—“examples of an architectural sickness which we can call Le Corbusitis and . . . Mies van der Rosis.” In the other corner is a tiny minority of “realists”—Rivera, Alberto Arai, and himself—who have rejected the International Style and rooted their work in popular, regional traditions. Architecture is at a critical point, he tells his readers. International Style Modernism is “practically exhausted,” with nothing to offer the future but the academic repetition of formulas. And yet, it will not go down without a fight.

O’Gorman next outlines the history of architecture in Mexico from the late nineteenth century through the First World War, touching on the academy and the colonial revival and ending with the importation of European functionalism. He asks what Mexico gained and lost through its embrace of functionalism. On the plus side were the efficient use of resources, an important consideration in a poor country, and the subversion of the academy, which made way for new methods and new technologies. In the negative column was his perception that architects, under the sway of functionalism, had neglected beauty and pleasure. These he now sees as essential. Functionalism, he says, was “mechanically reasonable and humanly illogical because man is not a machine.”

Like many, O’Gorman had welcomed functionalism because it seemed to promise economic independence and the welfare of the masses, but things quickly went awry. By the mid-1930s it was already being aestheticized—turned into a style bearing little relation to its original social and economic programs. Architects employed functionalist features—cubic forms, ribbon windows, metal railings—for purely decorative effect, resulting in superficially “modernistic” buildings that looked functionalist without being especially economical or efficient. Ideas of “maximum efficiency for minimum cost” gave way to “maximum rents for minimum investment” as profiteering developers crowded Mexico City with shoddily constructed apartments and office blocks. Functionalism in this account now became a tool of political reactionaries, “revolutionary demagogues,” who used it to their own advantage, in part because the forms associated with functionalism carried “liberal and progressive” connotations. These became a beneficent-looking mask for greed and corruption.
Resistance, however, was mounting. The Mexican people, O’Gorman says, will inevitably reject the International Style, for it runs counter to their character and traditions. “Antiseptic and de-humanized,” a “rancid” and alien form of “Swiss Puritanism,” the International Style is but the latest chapter in the history of Mexico’s exploitation by foreign powers. It is an imposition of foreign taste and power. Popular or folk art, meanwhile, carries on the ancient pre-hispanic traditions. It “expresses . . . popular aspirations and preserves its regional character.” It is a life-affirming realist art, rooted in the earth and in the real lives of the country’s poor yet righteous people. This art has endured, he writes, “in spite of Coca-Cola, juke boxes and the architecture of the International Style.” “We shall go on fighting to free Mexico from foreign dependency. The arms will be different . . . but the principles are the same. The Battle of the Conquest is not over and there will be a victorious ‘Noche Triste’ that will become a bright day for all who have any love for Mexico.”

The manuscript concludes with a brief history of modern architecture designed to show just how its degeneration had come about. Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, and Le Corbusier are all singled out for criticism—Gropius for his “lack of understanding of organic architecture,” Mies for his abstractionist distortions, Le Corbusier for his “Swiss Puritanism” and “Fascistic . . . machine mentality.” The heroes of this section are Gaudi—“the forgotten man of great genius,” lauded for his imagination and spirituality—and Frank Lloyd Wright, at whose Fallingwater O’Gorman stayed in 1939 as a guest of the Kaufmann family, who invited him to Pittsburgh to paint a mural at a Jewish community center they supported there. Wright’s work was a revelation for O’Gorman. Elsewhere he called Fallingwater “one of the most beautiful buildings in the world,” while Taliesin West, half-buried in its rocky site like O’Gorman’s own Pedregal house, he deemed “the greatest modern house built in this century . . . one of the most important works of art of all times.” Wright, he tells us, was the
inventor of modern architecture, a man whose “living and vigorous art . . . signifies the passing from the servile veneration of European stupidity to a confidence in the creative capacity of America.” He faults his education and lack of insight for his failure, during the 1920s and ’30s, to recognize that Wright “was then, as he remains today, the modern expression of our own [Mexican] tradition.” Wright’s organic architecture, O’Gorman says, evolved from his close study of ancient Mexican sites, and he spoke of his Pedregal house as a Mexican application of Wright’s Mexican-inspired method, a completion of the circle. Indeed, Wright’s impact on postwar Mexican architecture was deeper and more direct than is generally recognized.

By late December 1954, O’Gorman sent a draft of his JSAH article to Esther McCoy, the American writer best known for her pioneering studies of California modern architecture. Active in leftist political causes since the 1920s, McCoy had become interested in architecture while writing about low-cost housing in Los Angeles during the 1930s. She later took drafting classes, got a job drawing for Rudolph Schindler, and published her first full-fledged piece of architectural writing, on Schindler, in 1945. In 1950 she went to work for John Entenza’s Los Angeles–based journal Arts and Architecture and began making trips to Mexico, where she met most of the important architects of the day. She first wrote about O’Gorman in 1951, as part of a larger piece on Mexican modernism for Arts and Architecture, and she soon became friends with the architect and his North American–born second wife, Helen Fowler.

O’Gorman asked McCoy to edit his text and this she did, cutting it from thirty-one to sixteen pages, mainly by removing the discussion of architects and architecture outside of Mexico. O’Gorman approved her edits in a letter of 31 March 1955.

Six weeks earlier, on 12 February, Helen O’Gorman had written to McCoy, indicating that Juan’s manuscript was planned for the JSAH. “The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians has written Juan another frantic letter asking for the article on “The Degeneration of the Arch. of Our Times.” Though I have found no correspondence between O’Gorman and the JSAH, it is possible that someone there approached him about contributing to the special Spanish Empire issue planned for the following year. Published in March 1956, the issue featured papers that had first been presented in New York in January 1955, at a Latin American architecture session at the joint annual meeting of the College Art Association and Society of Architectural Historians. Yale’s George Kubler chaired the session; O’Gorman was not involved. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, however, was a speaker, and he knew O’Gorman—they had met the year before in Mexico, while Hitchcock was working on his book Latin American Architecture since 1945 and the related exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art. He might have raised the idea either with O’Gorman or with someone at the JSAH. In a recent interview, John Douglas Forbes, formerly on the faculty at the University of Virginia and editor of the JSAH between 1953 and 1958, did not remember corresponding with O’Gorman. Neither he nor the SAH office in Chicago retain any records related to this era of the journal, so it is unclear who initiated contact—O’Gorman or the JSAH—and why. What is clear is that by 27 July 1955, O’Gorman had lost interest in the journal, possibly because its editors were no longer interested in him. On that day O’Gorman told McCoy, “please pay no more attention to the Arch. Hist. Soc., which I found is one of those private club affairs.” He was now hoping to include his article in an anthology that he said would be published later that year. This would have a large circulation in the U.S. and in Mexico and would be preferable to publication in “a magazine, because [its] serious character . . . will have more weight with the public that will read it in Mexico. . . . Writing another article in English is more than I can tackle,” he said, “therefore I am asking you not to give it [the JSAH manuscript] in complete form to any one because it will have to be exclusive for this book.” It does not appear that this book was ever published, at least not in any form that included O’Gorman’s essay.

If O’Gorman’s manuscript was rejected by the JSAH, as seems likely, it is not difficult to see why. Pugnacious, opinionated, without citations or illustrations, it is a polemic, not scholarship. Compared to the journal’s more typical fare, O’Gorman’s words read like those of a colorful and possibly violent crank. The more interesting question is why he might have wanted to publish there in the first place. This may have had something to do with the fact that O’Gorman was a rather difficult and mercurial personality who frequently sabotaged his own personal and professional best interests. His autobiography is in large part an unrepentant accounting of his running battles with his father, with his brother (the noted historian Edmundo O’Gorman), with the painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, with former Bauhaus director Hannes Meyer (in Mexico from 1939 to 1949), with Carlos Lazo (director of planning and construction for the University City project), and so on. In 1953 O’Gorman quit or was fired by the Polytechnic over disagreements with the school’s administration: “I stopped being a professor of architecture,” he said, “but I kept my dignity.” Responding to a critic who he felt had slighted him, he published an article titled “Raquel Tibol, Ignorant in Architecture and in Many Other Things.” Diplomacy
and reasoned debate were not among his strong suits. His 1937 murals at Mexico City’s international airport were removed when it was noticed that he had included vicious and readily identifiable caricatures of Mexican political, military, and church leaders, and of living foreign capitalists and politicians. Invited to Pittsburgh in 1939 by the Kaufman family, his drawings for the Jewish cultural center murals there ruthlessly skewered local capitalists Mellon, Carnegie, Frick, and Westinghouse; the commission was rescinded and O’Gorman was sent packing.30

O’Gorman eventually turned against everyone, including himself. In January 1982, crassly depressed, suffering from a variety of physical ailments, and separated from his wife, Helen, he ended his life with a combination of electrical wire, cyanide, and gunfire. In a final act of aggression, he called Helen just before taking his life, inviting her over so that she might find his body.31

O’Gorman’s turn to the JSAH and his praise for Frank Lloyd Wright are related to a broader cultural shift in Mexico.33 While before 1945 Mexican intellectuals studied French and gravitated toward Europe, now they learned English and looked north (as well as inward). Allies during World War II, Mexico and the United States were increasingly bound by economic and cultural ties, as Mexico under the pro-business, pro-U.S. administrations of Presidents Miguel Aléman (1946–1952) and Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952–1958) dramatically expanded the country’s industrial base, and hundreds of U.S. companies, urged by the U.S. State Department, opened new branches there.34 Old-school Marxists like O’Gorman still distrusted the U.S., especially now in its postwar role as global superpower; they were scornful of U.S. policies toward Latin America—

Figure 3 Juan and Helen Fowler O’Gorman playing chess, O’Gorman House (Juan O’Gorman, 1949–56. demolished 1969), Mexico City, 1958
Washington’s anti-communist meddling during the Cold War—and leery of economic and cultural imperialism. Yet they respected the country’s power and influence, its technological and industrial might, its prestigious museums and universities. U.S. opinion mattered, even if O’Gorman hated to admit it. Finding little support for his idiosyncratic brand of architecture inside Mexico, he may have looked outside for approval, believing that this would win him acceptance at home. In this, as in so many other things, he was disappointed.

Nonetheless, O’Gorman was correct in his belief that the International Style in Mexico was waning. Or rather, it was then undergoing a transformation that would render it unrecognizable to its 1930s-vintage self. He had ended his acceptance at home. In this, as in so many other things, he was disappointed.

Yet, by the early 1950s, with the international recognition of such ambitious projects as the University City, Mexican architecture was in vogue. Newspapers and magazines around the world published stories about this new architecture along with photos of the work of Luis Barragán, Félix Candela, Mario Pani, and others. These architects were praised for their regionalized modernism and their varied responses to technology and to local climate, landscape, and culture. O’Gorman’s work was represented as one of many regionalist strains then popping up in Mexico—colonial or vernacular inflected-Miesian minimalism, site-sensitive evocations of Richard Neutra’s California projects, neo-pre-hispanic ball courts and museums. Architects in Mexico would continue to build glass-walled boxes well into the 1970s, but rising alongside these were decidedly different structures blending the minimalism and materials of the International Style with recollections of the Mexican past—the late work of Barragán and Juan Sordo Madaleno, the emerging work of Ricardo Legorreta, Pedro Ramírez Vásquez, Agustín Hernández, Teodoro González de León, and others.

Midcentury Mexico pulsed with nationalistic fervor, architectural and otherwise, and O’Gorman was far from alone in his desire to subvert foreign influences. He was, however, distinguished among his colleagues by the clarity and openness of his rage. He said what others did not. For him the Revolution endured. He sought to publicize it in the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians.

Notes
3. O’Gorman’s built and painted work is amply illustrated in Rodríguez Prampolini, Juan O’Gorman.
7. “La arquitectura tendrá que hacerse internacional, por la simple razón de que el hombre cada día se universaliza más,” published in Rodríguez Prampolini, Juan O’Gorman, 74.
8. Smith, Builders in the Sun, 16. See also Luna Arroyo, Juan O’Gorman, 125.
15. Ibid., 13–18.
17. Ibid., 21–25.
18. Luna Arroyo, Juan O’Gorman, 138; and Smith, Builders in the Sun, 18.


28. Luna Arroyo, Juan O’Gorman, 158.


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Figure 3. Eliot Elisofon, photographer. Time & Life Pictures, Getty Images