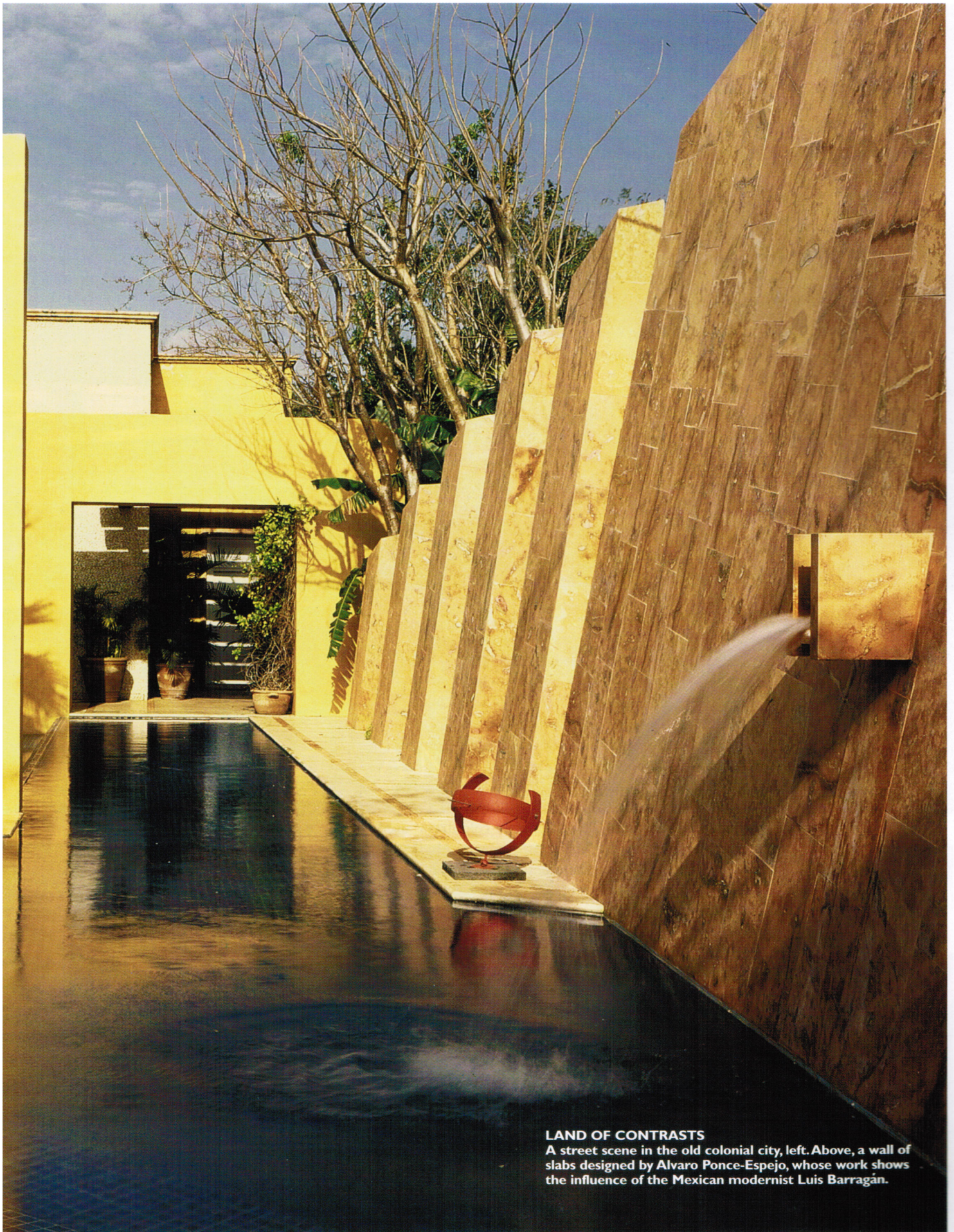


FLORIDA InsideOut

SUMMER 2005

Architecture, Design, Ideas

Pool,
Patio &
Island
Living



LAND OF CONTRASTS

A street scene in the old colonial city, left. Above, a wall of slabs designed by Alvaro Ponce-Espejo, whose work shows the influence of the Mexican modernist Luis Barragán.

MEXICAN STYLE

SLABS THAT MIMIC THE NOTES OF A SCALE

The architect Alvaro Ponce-Espejo designed a house north of Mérida for Adolfo and Margarita Padrón, seen below. Gold slabs along a pool, above, separate the house from its neighbors.



Y

ou have probably heard of San Miguel de Allende, the mountain town in central Mexico popular with tourists and American expatriates. But you may have never heard of Mérida, the capital of the Yucatan, a city bathed in light, music and history. A number of elegant homes there combine Mayan traditions, European luxury and contemporary Mexican architecture.

Founded in 1542, Mérida, which now has a population of one million, was built on the remains of a Mayan settlement known as T'ho. Spanish colonizers used ancient stones from the Mayan settlement to build the cathedral San Idelfonso, the oldest in the Americas. Yet Mérida is remarkably cosmopolitan, with connections to the Caribbean and Europe.

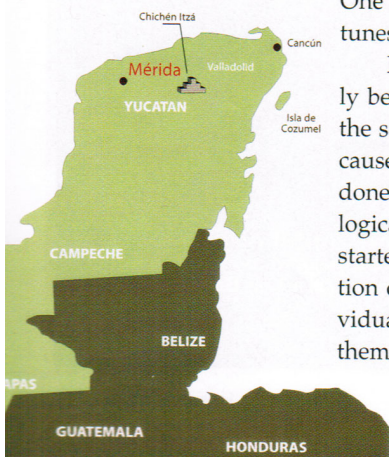
An economic boom from sisal hemp in the mid-19th century led to the building of a wide boulevard, Paseo de Montejo, connecting the city to its northern neighbors. One can still find lavish mansions, built from hemp fortunes, along the Paseo.

Hemp production in Mérida declined in 1917, partly because of competition from Brazil and Tanzania. At the same time, an agrarian reform movement in Mexico caused the mansions to soon become romantic abandoned ruins in a landscape dotted with Mayan archaeological sites. A privately owned group, Grupo Plan, started acquiring the haciendas in 1995, with the intention of turning them into hotels. As tourism grew, individuals from inside and outside the country discovered them, and prices began to rise. Today a fixer upper in



central Mérida can be had for \$50,000 U.S., while a restored Colonial Mexican home of 2,000 square feet might cost \$190,000.

As outsiders bought in, locals sold their homes in the city center and began building new haciendas further north, on ample lots. To do so, some have hired young architects imprinted with the color and texture of the great Modernist architects Luis Barragán and Ricardo Legorreta. Others were inspired to include Mayan elements in their contemporary designs. The architects Alvaro Ponce-Espejo, Salvador Reyes-Rios and Jose Eduardo Alonzo Soza offer a sampling of the possibilities being explored.



WORTHY OF A PAINTING

The bedroom has the repose of a home built centuries ago.

Below, from the left: the architect Alvaro Ponce-Espejo; an enviable shower stall surrounded by lush gardens; a sheltered terrace.



ORTH OF MÉRIDA, A NEW HOUSE LOOKS OLD



MEXICAN STYLE

Alvaro Ponce-Espejo, born in 1958, went to school at the Instituto de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. Upon graduation he settled back in Mérida, and began designing homes. His earlier work showed a strong Barragán influence, but time and experimentation have allowed him to develop a sensuous personal style, as in the Padrón House.

After years of residing in Mexico City, Adolfo and Margarita Padrón decided to purchase land 15 minutes north of Mérida. They called upon Ponce-Espejo to design and build a 2,950 square-foot home for them with a lush and serene garden. "This is my favorite spot," Mrs. Padron said, sitting on the arched terrace. "We live and entertain outdoors."

After an early morning exercise session, she and her husband often share breakfast on the long terrace that spills into the patio; afterward he will go into his studio



to handle business and she will begin to plan their busy schedule. An active board member of the New York Metropolitan Opera, Mr. Padrón masterminded the development of a symphony orchestra for Mérida: "It is a need and an obligation for a city like Mérida to have its own symphony," he said.

The Padróns frequently have company and Mrs. Padrón wanted "a very livable, warm and comfortable home with modern and contemporary details."

The only glitch in the otherwise fluid relationship between Ponce-Espejo and his clients came over what he called his "marble, three-dimensional geometric progression," the gold-colored, regimented slabs of concrete along the edge of a pool. "I had doubts," Mrs. Padron said. Now, it is difficult to imagine the house without the

IN THE MIDDLE OF MÉRIDA, CALLE 56

The architect Salvador Reyes-Rios, above left, wanted modern; the owner, Claude Forget, above right, preferred traditional. They compromised with a new section, top, that mimics the older part, right, with its water spout. The landscape designer Josefina Larrain Lagos created Zenlike lily ponds. Opposite page, the Forget house in the hush of the evening.

