

Premio Internazionale Carlo Scarpa per il Giardino

XXXIII International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens, 2023-2024
**The *Espacio Escultórico* in the Pedregal de San Ángel,
Mexico City**

**Carlo Scarpa Prize
Citation**
edited by
the Foundation's
Scientific Committee

The Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche has decided unanimously to dedicate the 2023-2024 International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens, the thirty-third in the series, to the *Espacio Escultórico* in the Pedregal de San Ángel, Mexico City: a place which is essentially a monumental collective work of art that emerges from the same lava surface as that which served, from the late 1940s, as a platform for new residential districts and, above all, for the construction of an entire university city for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM).

The *Espacio Escultórico* was enthusiastically commissioned by the University and inaugurated in 1979, an exemplary expression of the value and significance of the volcanic-eruption-forged landscape of Pedregal de San Ángel, which acts as a sounding-board for the dialogue between the university city, its institutions and communities on the one hand and the Mexican cultural sphere and society in general on the other about the environmental and ecological values it represents and its evocative potency, but also about the conflicts that have accompanied the urban expansion of the megalopolis that surrounds it and in time has altered its nature and its meaning.

The outcome of an eruption of the monogenetic volcano Xitle, which in geological terms happened relatively recently – just fifteen hundred or perhaps two thousand years ago – the *Pedregal* (which we might translate into English as ‘stony ground’) is a sprawl of lava rock that has evolved over time and is now a dynamic landscape that retains a dense tissue of reminders of its history, despite the considerable curtailing of its perimeter and its area – originally a vast 80 square kilometres – and in spite of the transformations affecting most of a surface that had already obliterated the rich morphology of the places buried by the lava.

In recent times, more has gradually been learned about the vegetation and morphological variations covered by the basalt: evidence of pre-Hispanic times in areas not completely encrusted by the lava flows, from the experience of an ecologically evolving landscape – meagre but nonetheless valuable for the environmental stability of a constantly growing city – from the reversal of perspective through which 20th century artistic and architectural culture reappraised a landscape that had long been considered sterile and uninteresting, the kind of rough, barren land known as *malpaís*.

A series of presences, episodes and processes emerging from this profile help to understand the concepts underlying the physical and symbolic form of the *Espacio Escultórico*. Think, for example, of the circular pyramid nearby, which recalls the pre-Hispanic Cuicuilco civilization – largely destroyed or submerged by lava and then besieged by the modern city –, or of the first proposals devised by architects and artists such as Luis Barragán with his *Jardines del Pedregal* project, or Diego Rivera and his *Anahuacalli Museum*, and of the creation of UNAM, a remarkable political and cultural project that started to take shape in 1947 with the planning and construction of the new University City, which was officially inaugurated on 20th November 1952.

Finally, and at the beginning, the connective tissue linking all this: the Pedregal landscape, which the *Espacio* helps us to understand through the way it reflects the alternating wet and dry seasons, how it captures the sense of space and emptiness, how it offers a modern interpretation of the ancient, with student battles, social contradictions, scientific explorations and building development pressures, inside and outside the University City.

The *Espacio Escultórico* is an important chapter in this evolving landscape and despite (or perhaps because of) the sculptural fixedness of its appearance, it constitutes a meeting-point between past and future, a bridge linking the striking story of the construction of the University City and the evolution of an ecological conscience in its campus: a ‘landscape of resistance’ instead of a reassuring scenario of an in some ways privileged community.



A toothed ring composed of sixty-four concrete prisms set in a circular base, 120 metres across, surrounds an example of 'intact' lava, highlighting the expressive force of this landscape but also its ever-changing and fragile condition. The sequence of spaced prisms accompanies the eye as it scans the central space or responds to the continuous, dynamic lure of the narrow gaps to glimpse the nature of the surrounding landscape.

This powerfully symbolic place intimates pointers to its design, its origin and its role in the University City complex. Above all, the institutional far-sightedness of UNAM and the conviction with which, after the construction of its main buildings, it entrusted art with a central role in the design of the University City and its open spaces, from the outset envisaged as a modernist laboratory with an integrated project put into practice by a group of over two hundred internationally renowned architects, urbanists, sculptors, painters and muralists. The result is a university campus, a *ciudad* that imparts a universal lesson in how to bring together teaching, research, art, thought and life, and which, in 2007, UNESCO recognised by inscribing it on the World Heritage List.

A striking feature is the *modus operandi* and the construction process chosen for the *Espacio Escultórico*, which involved commissioning six artists from the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas – Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Hersúa, Sebastián and Federico Silva – to create a collective work, specifically ensuring that it should not reflect the character of a single artist's work, that it should focus entirely on interaction with the present landscape and with its historical heritage, and that the scope of its significance should be as wide as possible, not anthropocentric but open to the ecological features that a group of artists would shortly help to emerge in the Pedregal.

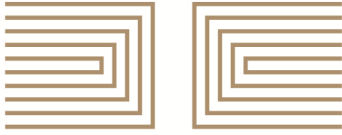
Once the *Espacio Escultórico* was completed, the next stage concentrated on the defence of what remained of the Pedregal, on protesting against its gradual destruction and on raising awareness of its importance in the scientific and student communities. In 1983, this culminated in the official creation of the *Reserva Ecológica del Pedregal de San Ángel* (REPSA) designated by the UNAM.

Much has been written about the *Espacio Escultórico* and interpretations of it are many. In the view of the Carlo Scarpa Prize it is a work whose identity is profoundly linked with a place that embodies a sense of belonging to the landscape, a commitment to defending its integrity but also to accompanying its evolution. The *Espacio Escultórico* is a place that invites personal meditation and also collective action: its history elicits reflection on the relationship between artistic gesture and ecological awareness; the choral dimension of its conception invites us to reconsider the place of the individual in landscape design and to establish new coordinates and new roles in design attitudes. The abstract character of the design and its obvious appeal to the spirit of modernity allows us to discover a sense of history, and that looking at the landscape implies listening to it and assuming responsibility with firmness of intent like that shown by the then Principal of the University Guillermo Soberón Acevedo, who undertook the task of ensuring that this huge toothed ring, only apparently extraneous to the nature of the place, was set in the heart of the Pedregal, a work that starts from an empty space and by describing it evokes a vastly bigger world, speaks of our relationship with nature and invites reflection on how we ourselves 'are nature'.

This is the second time, after over thirty years, that the Carlo Scarpa Prize is returning to places belonging to the immense world of Latin America. Indeed, the very first Prize, back in 1990, was awarded to Roberto Burle Marx's *Sítio Santo Antônio da Bica* in Brazil. And throughout the many intervening years the Prize has consistently entailed thoroughgoing reflection on landscape culture, on the universal value of the Prize-winning places and on the lessons they teach us.

The urban dimension of the *Espacio Escultórico*, for example, brings to mind another southern place, the *Maredolce-La Favara* in Palermo, which was awarded the Prize in 2015, where an Arab-Norman garden that flourished for centuries and then disappeared as it became hemmed in by urban periphery, now represents a surviving fragment of the once vast landscape of the *Conca d'Oro*.

The slowly evolving volcanic soil and skilled interpretation of its forms with a combination of artistic groundwork, ecological sensitivity and inventive planning immediately prompts the memory of the work of César Manrique on the island of Lanzarote, and his *Jardín de Cactus*,



which was awarded the Prize in 2017: a landscape which, as in the *Pedregal*, is easily described as *malpaís* but where the negative connotations of the word generate a reversal of perspective which is close to the contemporary sense of landscape. And this experimenting with land considered sterile and disengaged invites comparison with the *Natur Park Südgelände* in urban Berlin, the 2022 Prize-winner, a place of destruction and abandonment for several decades, which is now a thriving workshop in which social issues, the ability to control change, artistic research and ecological awareness converge in a single project.

p. 3

In terms of the sustained research characteristic of the Carlo Scarpa Prize, the *Espacio Escultórico* is a significant example, with its striking history, its densely packed stimuli regarding contemporary landscape culture, in which concern for ecological issues, the active involvement of inhabitants and experimentation with new planning instruments are matters of prime importance.

For these reasons, and needing to regard a place as the fruit of shared experience, a meeting-point for diverse fields of knowledge and the expression of responsible management which is hopefully unitary and as open as possible both to the university and to the city, the Scientific Committee of the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche has decided to entrust the Carlo Scarpa seal, the symbol of the Prize, to Leonardo Lomelí Vanegas, the current Principal of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. The Committee wishes also to commend Silke Cram and Louise Noelle Gras, who both play prominent roles in the UNAM organisms responsible for the care and management of the Prize-winning place.

In the hands of Leonardo Lomelí Vanegas, the Prize recognizes the continuity of a historical scenario in which the firmly held idea and commitment of a former Principal led to the creation of the *Espacio Escultórico*, and expresses affinity with and appreciation of all whose work testifies to their belief in the need for an informed relationship with the earth and a passion for knowledge, combined with a tireless desire to explore and interpret the highest and most profoundly ecological aesthetic and ethical values in the construction of landscape.