

III) BORGES AND NERUDA, ARCHITECTS (1)

(1989)

Enrique Browne

Frank Lloyd Wright used to say that a great architect must necessarily be a great poet. I understand the part about shapes and spaces, but not about literature. Because in today's world, multiple genius does not exist. Borges and Neruda each had great literary, but not architectural, talents. However, their excursions into this field are interesting, despite the fact that neither of them ever worked as an architect in the strictest sense of the word. Neither ever drew a single plan. Borges thought and wrote his architecture. Neruda constructed his. I will refer to the relationships that both could have had with architecture, restricting myself to Borges Library of Babel and Neruda's three houses.

The Argentine (1899 - 1985) and the Chilean (1904 - 1973) nearly shared time and place. Dozens of books have been published all over the world about their lives and their works. Both have been widely praised but also insulted. In the case of Borges, for example, some critical acids, like the Argentine novelist Alan Pauls writing on the "Borges factor" indicated that he gives a prodigious illusion of knowing, manipulating a culture that basically was alien to him, extracted from encyclopedias². But in truth, its position is minority. The respected Harold Bloom classifies Borges among the 100 geniuses of the history of the literature, especially because of his essays. Among them he prefers Kafka and his precursors of only two and a half pages³. This conciseness has brought him illustrious admirers. Among them Italo Calvino, that in Why read the classics? qualifies as a "master of the brief writing ... the fundamental invention of Borges... (is that with him) is born a literature raised to its square and at the same time a literature as extraction of the square root of itself: a potential literature⁴.

Despite their fame, none of them have any interest in pedagogy. Neruda would say in his old age, "I won't leave anything in print — not even a bit of advice, a way or a style for new poets to receive a drop of my supposed wisdom."⁵ Along the same line, Borges said late in his life, "I don't feel like a teacher. I cannot leave a message for future generations because I, myself,... don't even know if I have known how to manage my literary work."⁶ They also shared a few passions. Among the classics Homer,

1 A preliminary version of this essay was published in Ladeco America [Santiago, Chile], no. 6 (November-December 1989). While reviewing that article in 1997, I became aware of Cristina Grau's book, *Borges y la arquitectura* (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra S.A., 1995), which made me rethink several points of the original article. The idea to write this essay arose with the publication of "Las Casas de Neruda," in *Summa* [Buenos Aires], no. 255 (November 1988), and Antonio Toca's article, "Construir la biblioteca de Babel un tributo a Borges," *Plural* [Mexico], no. 208 (January, 1989).

2 Christopher Domínguez: "No hablar borgesianamente de Borges". *Revista de Libros. El Mercurio*, Santiago de Chile, 2005

3 Harold Bloom: "Genios". Grupo Editorial Norma. Bogotá, 2005.

4 Italo Calvino: "Porqué leer los clásicos". Tusquets Editores. Barcelona, 1992.

5 Pablo Neruda, "Verdad o poesía," Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, in Pablo Neruda, *Obras Escogidas* (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Andres Bello, 1972).

6 Esteban Peicovich, *Borges, el Palabrista* (Madrid: Libertarias/Prodhuvi, 1980).

Virgil and Dante. Then, and in very special form, Shakespeare and Whitman. At the same time, both considered Quevedo as the great father of the Spanish language. In fact, Borges referred to him in his writings 59 times,⁷ while Neruda dedicated his essay Viaje al corazón de Quevedo to him as well.

During their youth they were close friends. They published and praised mutually their poems. In 1924, Borges published in the magazine Proa a critical comment on Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair. It indicated that "the Twenty poems will place him very high among the modern lyricists of hispanic language"⁸. Neruda in turn, with the pseudonym of Sashka, commented the initial book of Borges, Fervor in Buenos Aires, indicating that its author was "one of the most original lyrical voices of the young poetry of our America"⁹. Later his discrepancies predominated, especially in politics. Nevertheless they respected each other as poets. Roberto Alifarro who was at times an intermediary between them when both were elders, relates that after reading The gold of the tigers, Neruda commented with admiration the book of Borges. "One must acknowledge him as a poet... He is a teacher of the word; listen to this moving sonnet..." When Borges knew about Neruda's sayings, he indicated "I also respect him and I admire Neruda; he was a great poet, above all a great poet of love". But, Borges and Neruda differed in other things, besides the politics. Mainly in their way to be: one was intellectual and austere, the other was vital.

When Borges published "The Library of Babel," he was 43 years old and libraries had been his home. He was born and bred in them. His father, an attorney, cultured, polyglot, translator and professor, had a magnificent library, and his son spent long, happy hours in it. Borges once said in a speech, "For years I thought that I grew up in a suburb of Buenos Aires... but the truth is that I grew up in a garden behind a long wall and in a library with limitless books in English... I usually think that I have never really left that garden and library. What have I done since? What would I do without weaving and unraveling images derived from them?"¹⁰ To a great extent, his contact with the world was always relatively filtered through books. His biographers say that Borges was precocious; they say that at the age of seven he wrote a summary of Greek mythology and at eight his first story — both in English, which was spoken daily in his home.¹¹ From 1914 to 1922, he lived in Europe with his family. In 1938, shortly after the death of his father, he began to work as a modest, associate municipal librarian. The following year, he conceived of the idea of The Library of Babel, which was first published in 1942. In 1955, he was named the Director of the National Library. His blindness worsened that same year. About it he wrote, "Nobody is reduced to tears or reproach/ This declaration of God's mastery, with such magnificent irony / He gave me both books and the night."¹² He resigned from that position in 1973. At 85 years of age, Borges summarized his life with characteristic conciseness, "I was one of those people who lived wisely and prolifically every minute of his

7 Ilan Stavans, "Quevedo en Borges," *Plural* [Mexico], no. 208 (January 1989).

8 Roberto Alifarro: "Una secreta relación literaria". *Revista Artes y Letras. El Mercurio*. Santiago de Chile, September 28, 2003.

9 Roberto Alifarro: "Una secreta relación literaria" *Op. cit.*

10 Cristina Grau, *op.cit.*

11 Didier Anzieu, "El cuerpo y el código en los cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges," *Plural* [Mexico], no. 208 (January 1989).

12 On the back cover of Jorge Luis Borges, *Inquisiciones* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Seix Barral, 1994).

life.” On another occasion he said ironically, “I don’t drink, I don’t smoke, and I eat very little. My only vices are the Encyclopedia Britannica and not reading Enrique Larreta.”¹³

The life of Neftalí Reyes was quite different. He was born in Parral, in the south of Chile, with that “powerful geography of forests and rains, of sawmills and winters, of trains and river steamboats, of fields and harvests.”¹⁴ He never knew his mother, who died very young. His father had several different occupations, but especially worked on trains. His son accompanied him when he could, visiting small villages and observing nature. He was fascinated by its beauty and strangeness. He gathered “stones, plants, insects, animals. He collected spiders and had pockets full of beetles, he cared for dying swans. He sensed the non-human life of the trees in the forests and experienced the intense rains like almost no other.”¹⁵ He began to write poems. He admired Rubén Darío and later Baudelaire. At the age of 16, he took the name Pablo Neruda, and was so known from that moment on. In 1921, he moved to Santiago and attended French classes in the University of Chile’s Teaching College and frequented the hot spots of bohemian night-life. When he was 20, he published Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair, that catapulted him to fame. From then on, his life consisted of literature, love affairs, travel, politics, diplomacy, collections — everything — including the construction of his several homes. There’s almost nothing foreign to his poetry. “He was intimate with objects, and he speaks to concrete and abstract phenomena and declares his love for them”¹⁶. He sings to sadness and happiness, as well as the onion, the atom, wood, the ocean or the day. He proposes a poetry without purity, “worn out as if by acid by the efforts of the hand, penetrated by sweat and smoke.” He also includes melancholy and sentimentalism, saying “Those who run from bad taste slips on the ice.” To summarize, it is best to refer García Lorca’s definition of Neruda upon his arrival in Barcelona as the Chilean consul. He described him as “...a poet closer to death than philosophy, closer to pain than intelligence, closer to blood than ink.” When Neruda received the Nobel Prize he said, “I never learned any recipes in books for the composition of a poem.”¹⁷ We could say that, in many ways, Neruda was diametrically the opposite of Borges.

Borges’ story, The Library of Babel, is an intellectual creation of pure reason, with a few minor unusual aspects. It has no context as it encompasses the entire universe or floats in interstellar space. The absence of gravity can be inferred from its structural elements, which are concluded to have inalterable dimensions. In its first version, published in 1944, Borges describes it like this: “The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite and infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between them and surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty five shelves

¹³ Esteban Peicovich, op. cit.

¹⁴ Prologue by Jaime Quezada to the book Pablo Neruda Antología fundamental (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Pehuén, 1988).

¹⁵ Arthur Lundkvist, “Neruda,” in Pablo Neruda Obras Escogidas (Santiago, Chile: Editorial Andrés Bello, 1972).

¹⁶ Arthur Lundkvist, “Neruda” Op.cit

¹⁷ Pablo Neruda, “Verdad o Poesía,” op. cit.

with five long shelves per side cover all but one side. Their height, which is the distance from floor to ceiling, scarcely exceeds that of a normal bookcase. The free side leads to a narrow hallway which opens onto another gallery, identical to the first and to all the rest. To the left and right of the hallway, there are two very small closets. In the first, one may sleep standing up; in the other, satisfy one's final necessities. The spiral staircase also passes through here, descending to the greatest depths and rising to the remotest heights". The library contains all the possible books based on the multiple combinations of the 25 orthographic signs: 22 letters, two punctuation marks and the space between words. Up to here it is almost a mere two-dimensional transcription in plan, superimposed infinitely in height. But Borges reprints his story in 1956, modifies it so that the module would expand in height and width. For this reason the description remains like this: "Twenty shelves, with five long shelves per side, cover all but two sides " (the underlined is mine).

The story suggests fascinating speculations. The first to intrigue the reader is whether or not the library is infinite. Borges removes any doubt when he says that "it is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries," (emphasis mine). He makes the game explicit when he adds, "In the hallway there is a mirror which faithfully duplicates all appearances. Men usually infer from this mirror that the Library is not infinite (if it really were, why this illusory duplication?); I prefer to dream that its polished surfaces represent and promise the infinite." On the other hand, Borges defines very precisely the format of the books, indicating that "...each shelf contains thirty-five books of uniform format; each book is of four hundred and ten pages; each page, of forty lines, each line, of some eighty letters..." This format invariably allows us to establish the possible combinations of the 25 orthographic signs. These are not infinite, but nearly so. The number of books would be, according to mathematician Le Lionnais, 25 to the 1,312,000th power. Didier Anzieu went so far as to calculate the possible number of sentences uttered by everyone in the entire course of human history and the books that would result from them. The result would not surpass 10 to the 20th power. In other words, it would occupy the most insignificant place in the library.¹⁸ Borges resolves the problem in the final lines of the story, saying, "I venture to suggest this solution to the ancient problem The Library is unlimited and cyclical. If an eternal traveler were to cross it in any direction, after centuries he would see that the same volumes were repeated in the same disorder (which, thus repeated would be an order: the Order)."

The conclusion then is that the Library is infinite. Therefore, it has neither center nor limits. In an interesting essay, Cristina Grau indicates that the story's source of inspiration is found in Pascal's book Penseés (Thoughts), which Borges had in his home. "Thought" no. 72 says, "The universe is a sphere whose center is everywhere; there is no circumference." Borges transfers that concept to the library, indicating that it is "a sphere whose exact center is any one of its hexagons and whose circumference is inaccessible."¹⁹

¹⁸ Didier Anzieu, op. cit.

¹⁹ Cristina Grau, op. cit.

Being infinite, the library is composed of parts that are equal and precise, so precise that they can be drawn. However, here a new problem arises. Two architects have drawn it: Antonio Toca in 1989²⁰ and Cristina Grau in 1995²¹. The last one, sadly deceased in 1997, dedicated her life to teaching and investigation and had a true obsession with Borges. She presented that the Library would be one of the so many labyrinths utilized by Borges. Anyway, her results are different to the ones of Toca. According to Grau, each fragment of plant would be a juxtaposition of hexagons, square and circles. According to Toca, it would be a structure composed entirely by hexagons, corresponding the narrow hallways to the thickness of the open sides, which contain the two small cabinets. The inevitable reference is a beehive.

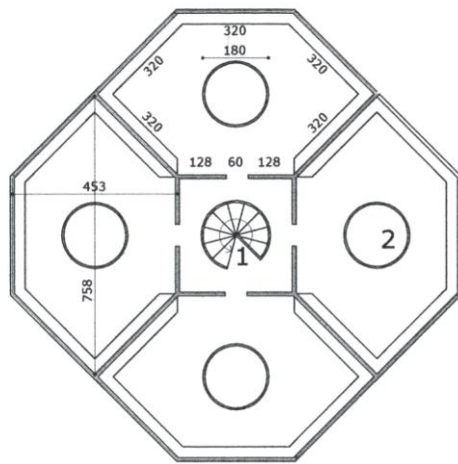
These discrepancies made me carry out my own versions. To start I drew in plant the first version of the Library (published in "Fictions" in 1944), including the stairs in spiral (Graphic 1). This plant based on Grau combines 4 irregular hexagons with a central square for the hallway, plus the circles of the ventilation well, a graphic interpretation that does not adjust to the description of Borges. Besides the units can be superimposed only vertically. Even the two cabinets do not have space to be included²². The solution of 1944 gives a sensation of confinement more than confusion, no matter how more the plants are repeated indefinitely in vertical. The main circulation is hierarchical and unique and not multiple: neither "labyrinthine", which is the thesis of Grau. It would permit certain orientation if one or more floors were marked as a reference. It remains clear that the correction of Borges in 1956 is not a product of an exaggerated perfectionism, but a need of the story.

The second version was drawn by Grau and contains the same three geometric figures, but is expanded horizontally. That does give the idea of indefinite repetition. But the other problems subsist. Especially the existence of three geometric figures. Even more considering that in an interview Borges indicated that his first intention was to work with a series of circles, but "the circles left some spaces between them that disturbed me. Then I made up my mind for the hexagons that adapt themselves to each other without needing other figures" (the underlined is mine). To my understanding the squares of Grau take the place of the interstitial spaces among the circles, which Borges wanted to avoid. More faithful to the story, are the drawings of Antonio Toca. All are hexagons and they all have the same dimension by side. Upon including the bookcases and the cabinets to the walls, these take a uniform thickness of 0.70 mts. Toca's version is previous to Grau's (1989 to 1995), but is probable that she did not know it. They only coincide in the length of the sides (3.20 mts to axis).

²⁰ Antonio Toca, "Construir la Biblioteca de Babel: un tributo a Borges," and Cristina Grau, op. cit.

²¹ Cristina Grau, *ibid.*

²² "Las claves arquitectónicas de Borges en Buenos Aires hablando de laberintos" (21/12/1982). En Grau, Cristina: "Borges y la Arquitectura" Op.cit



PLAN

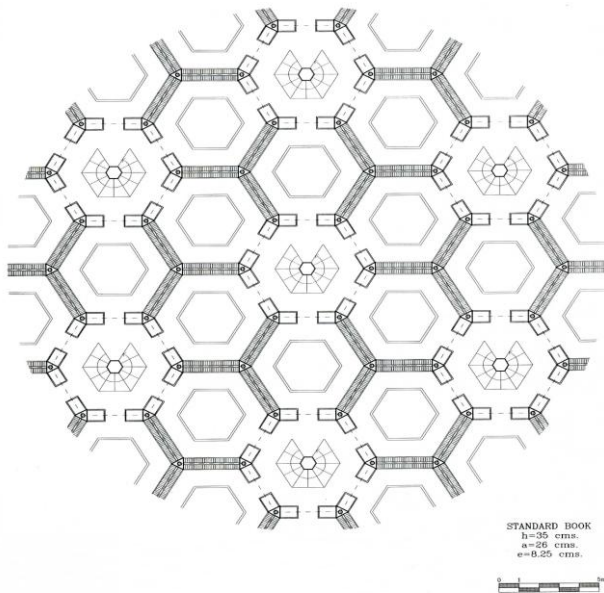
1: SPIRAL STAIR
2: VENTILACIÓN WELL



NOTE: THE STAIR IS NOT INCLUDED IN GRAU'S SCHEME

Illustration 1: Plan view of the Library of Babel version (1944)
According to Cristina Grau, adapted by E. Browne
1995

Illustration 2: Plan view of the Library of Babel
According to Cristina Grau
1995



STANDARD BOOK
h=35 cms.
a=25 cms.
e=8.25 cms.



Illustration 3: Plan view of the Library of Babel
According to Antonio Toca
1989

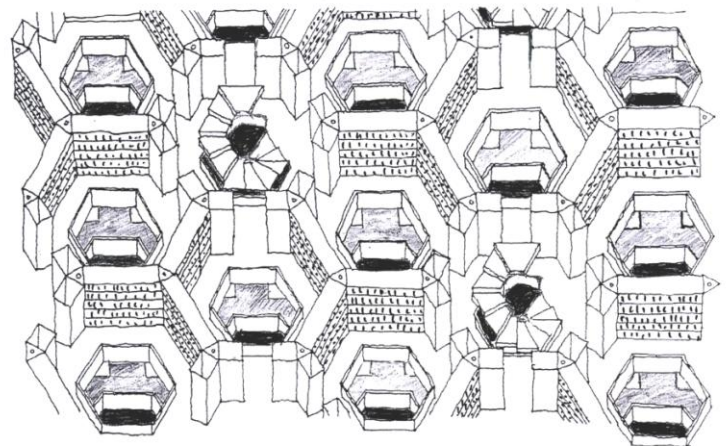


Illustration 4: Axonometric Library of Babel
E. Browne according to the original from Antonio Toca
1989

Anyway I drew my own version with the direct data of Borges, the books included (1997). It gave a similar result to the one of Toca but with differences in the length of the sides, given by the dimensions of the books (2.80 v/s 3.20 mts). Also in the width of the bookcases (0.80 v/s 0.70 mts). Small but disturbing differences. The third reason, I re - calculated the dimensions, coming to the conclusion that the sides should be of 3 mts. exact. This conclusion calms me down. Is congruent with the mental design of someone who is not an architect and also blind. An integer number is much easier to calculate and to combine.

prevents any exchange among men²⁵. Borges relates in the end of the story that “Epidemics, heretical conflicts, peregrinations that inevitably degenerate into banditry, have decimated the population. I think I’ve mentioned the suicides, more frequent every year. Perhaps old age and fear have deceived me, but I suspect that the human species — the unique species — is about to be extinguished, and the Library will endure: illuminated, solitary, infinite, perfectly motionless, and equipped with priceless volumes that are useless, incorruptible and secret.

Neruda’s architecture was not in the least speculative and barely rational. A friend of his said that “Neruda was a born architect. I always saw him involved in building houses.”²⁶ He didn’t have, however, the spatially-abstract imagination that this profession requires. He was rather a passionate builder who adapted the spaces according to his taste and needs. His contact with architecture began in 1939 and didn’t end until his death. At that time, he bought a stone house in Isla Negra with a view of the Pacific. As he, himself, tells it, “I began to work on Canto General, and I needed a place to work. I found a stone house facing the ocean in a place that no one knew called Isla Negra. Its savage coast and tumultuous oceanic movement allowed me to surrender myself passionately to the business of my new song.”²⁷ Surely what impressed him most was the sea. He would later say, “The Pacific Ocean stuck out from the map! There was no place to put it. It was so big, unruly and blue that it didn’t fit anywhere. That’s why it was left in front of my window.”²⁸ In order to make changes to the house, an architect was hired²⁹, but shortly thereafter, Neruda himself began to act as the architect and worked directly with the construction workers. The house was enlarged and changed innumerable times. Matilde Urrutia, his wife, commented several times that “the first thing Pablo made was this huge living room, entirely of stone. He loved wood and stone for his constructions. I remember having lived in this house, where he was always building something. When Pablo finished the library, I thought that this house wouldn’t grow any more, but that wasn’t the case. It was 1960. There was a big earthquake in Valparaíso (very near from Isla Negra)³⁰. Pablo was heartsick, his large horse from Temuco had been left out in the elements... ‘I’ll make him a very nice room’, Pablo said to me, ‘and next to it, I’ll make myself a little work room, very rustic, like a small cubbyhole.’” And that’s how it was. With all that, the house took on an aggregate character, full of objects of both good and bad taste and not particularly functional. For example, to reach the library you had to go outside. This couldn’t have been more different from that of Borges. “This library is unexpected, you enter through a very narrow hallway, and then at the end it opens up, and here it is difficult to talk about objects,

²⁵ Anzieu, Didier: “El cuerpo y el código en los cuentos de Jorge Luis Borges”. Op.cit.

²⁶ In “Las casas de Pablo Neruda,” op.cit.

²⁷ Pablo Neruda: “Confieso que he vivido. Memorias”. Editorial Seix Barral S.A., Barcelona, España, 1974

²⁸ Matilde Urrutia, *Mi vida junto a Pablo Neruda* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1986).

²⁹ Germán Rodríguez A.: Catalan architect from GATCPAC, refugee in Chile in 1939.

³⁰ Parentheses by Enrique Browne.

there are so many and they are so different... They were almost always salvaged from old houses or markets... They kept us company on boats, trains, and planes.”³¹

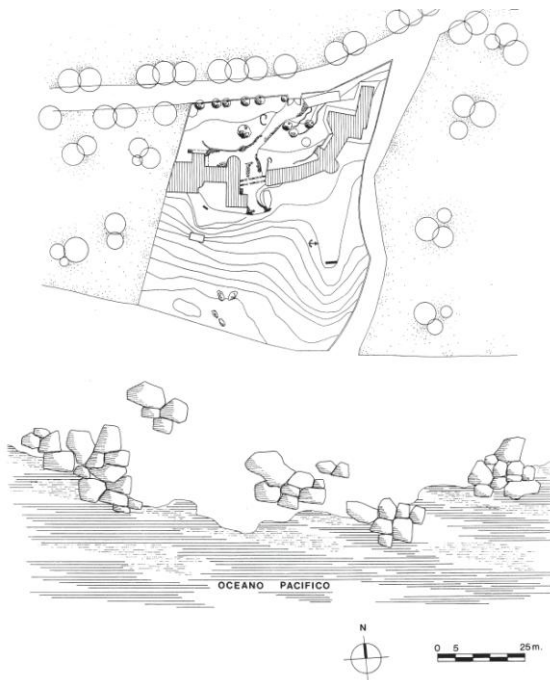


Illustration 7: General Plan House in Isla Negra
Pablo Neruda

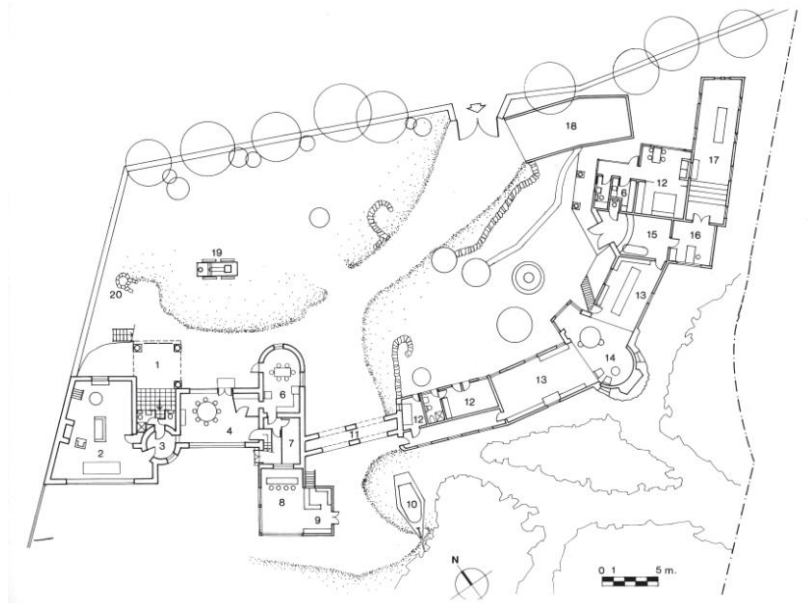


Illustration 8: Plan level 1_House in Isla Negra
Pablo Neruda

- 1- MAIN ACCESS
- 2- MAIN LIVING ROOM
- 3-TOWER HALL
- 4- DINING ROOM
- 5- DINER TABLE
- 6- KITCHEN

- 7- STORAGE
- 8- BAR
- 9- BOTTLE EXPOSITION
- 10-BELL TOWER
- 11- ARCHS
- 12- BEDROOM
- 13- LIBRARY

- 14- LIVING ROOM
- 15- HORSE'S BEDROOM
- 16- STUDIO
- 17- SNAILS EXPOITION
- 18- GARAGE
- 19- LOCOMOVIL
- 20- CHINESE STOVE



Illustration 9: Exterior view_House in Isla Negra
Pablo Neruda



Illustration 10: Interior view_House in Isla Negra
Pablo Neruda

³¹ Matilde Urrutia: “Mi vida junto a Pablo Neruda”. Op.cit.

Meanwhile, in 1953 he began “La Chascona” in Santiago on the side of San Cristobal Hill, with a view of the mountains. Germán Rodríguez Arias, who was initially in charge of the project, laughed when he saw the site and predicted, “You’re going to spend your life going up and down stairs,” as the site was more vertical than horizontal. Rodríguez drew up his plans, but Neruda changed them over and over again until Rodríguez finally remarked, “This isn’t my house any longer, it is a house designed by Neruda.” In addition to its abrupt rise, it is necessary to go outdoors to go from the dining room to the living room, as was also the case for the library.



Illustration 11: Plan view of La Chascona
Pablo Neruda
1953

- 1- GUEST ROOM
- 2-SERVICE ROOM
- 3-DINING ROOM
- 4-KITCHEN
- 5-SERVICE ACCES
- 6-PATIO

- 7- LIVING ROOM
- 8- OBJECTS DEPOSIT
- 9- STUDIO
- 10-BATHROOM
- 11- LIBRARY



Illustration 13: Exterior view _La Chascona
Pablo Neruda
1953

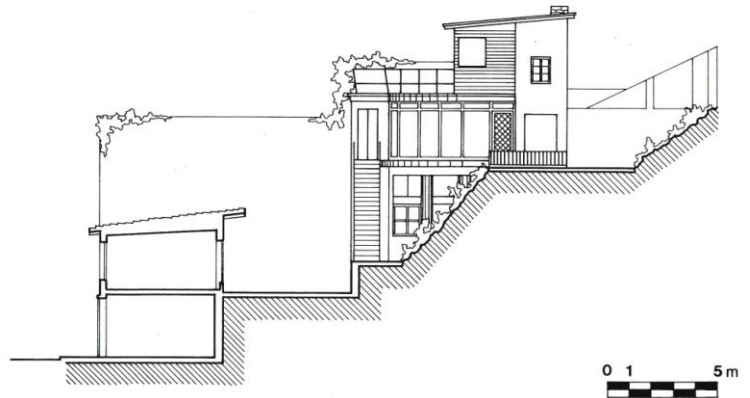


Illustration 12: Section A-A'
La Chascona
Pablo Neruda
1953



Illustration 14: Interior view _La Chascona
Pablo Neruda
1953

The peculiar rationality of Neruda's houses can also be seen in "La Sebastiana" in Valparaíso, begun in 1958. He bought a structural shell attached to a movie theater that had been abandoned for ten years. It has a beautiful view of the port, but, "to tell the truth, architecturally speaking, the house that was planned was completely crazy, the most non-functional imaginable. There was no real comfort. Each ascent was like climbing up the hill again."³² Neruda seemed conscious of the illogic of his house, which took three years to finish. When he referred poetically to the house, he suggests the construction in reverse: "I built the house / First I built it in the air / later, I ran up the flag / and I left it hanging / of the firmament, of the stars / of darkness and light / ...but it grew / ... And so the tower dances / the stairs and doors dance, the house rises until it touches the mast / ... Something happens and life goes on / The house grows and speaks, it remains on its feet / ... what it needs is to bloom. And this is the work of spring."³³ Neruda's fervor for collecting filled the house, as it did the others, with objects of both good and bad taste. Someone said, "Perhaps the accumulation of curious objects from different parts of the world gives this house a certain overly-baroque air."

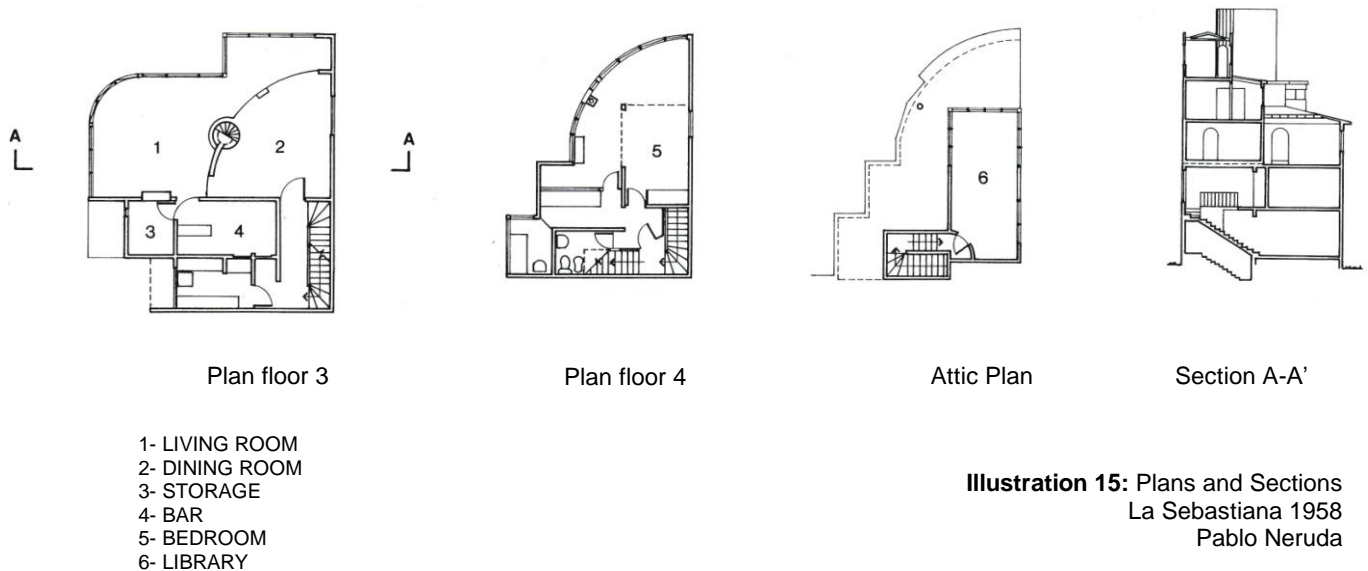


Illustration 16: Exterior view
La Sebastiana 1958
Pablo Neruda

³² Pablo Neruda, "Oda al espacio Marino," in *Antología Fundamental* (Santiago, Chile: Pehuén Editores, 1988).

³³ "Las casas de Pablo Neruda". Revista SUMMA No 25. Op.cit.

Neruda's three houses do have some features in common. They all mix diverse activities residence, work, meeting place, museum. They also show how much Neruda loved distant views and natural landscapes. They are all situated on hillsides for the best view. The houses in Isla Negra and Valparaíso look out over the sea; the one in Santiago faces the mountains. Neruda had pronounced tastes and was willing to do without comfort to satisfy them. In his houses, one needs to constantly go up and down stairs, as well as go in and out to go from one part to another. They also all have an aggregate character as a result of their progressive growth. The best example of this is "La Chascona," which is nearly a small town. Neruda shows his fondness for natural materials in his homes, especially for stone and wood. They are also all profusely decorated with objects of very disparate quality. Neruda's love of books was contrasted with his love of certain objects that provoked memories or predilections the "loco-mobile," that reminded him of his father; the anchor, shells and mastheads that reflected the terrestrial navigator. Other things recalled his many travels. This multitude of objects muddles the spaces, but also bestows upon them a warm, autobiographic nature. The disorderly, informal and even dysfunctional aspect of Neruda's houses gives the impression of coziness.

Borges' architecture was the product of intelligence; Neruda's reflected his life. However, both point from different angles to the same direction. Borges' Library is nowhere and has no interior space, as the spaces are interminably equal. His rigid rationality, the absence of surprise and location, are the framework that impede and bind individual and social life. Through this apparent order, the Library brings with it chaos and miscommunication. The books, in phonetic order, serve no human use. Nor does the repetitive architectural order. This architecture has neither vestiges of nature nor features that evoke feeling or emotion; it nullifies any manifestation of real life. Something that, while not very refined perhaps, animates the houses of Neruda.