

# the glass house

The American architect Gerald N. Jacobs built a house for himself and his wife in Mexico City. The striking feature of his design is the use of glass - light penetrates the interior through huge windows on all sides. Step by step the problems involved in building with large glass panels were overcome, and the resulting building is unique for Mexico. A modern house, prolonging in its own way the tradition of the Mexican master architect, Barragan.



The American architect Gerald N. Jacobs built a house for himself and his wife in Mexico City. The striking feature of his design is the use of glass - light penetrates the interior through huge windows on all sides. Step by step the problems involved in building with large glass panels were overcome, and the resulting building is unique for Mexico. A modern house, prolonging in its own way the tradition of the Mexican master architect, Barragan.

Above: the view from the patio through the glass-walled house into the split-level sitting-room. Even the fireplace surround is made of glass.

Facing page: top, the glass rear wall of the house Gerald Jacobs built for himself and his wife in Mexico City.

Below: the closed facade at the street side.

text: Izabel Spike  
photos: Michael Calderwood



# MEXICOCITY

The house was built in San Angel, a neighbourhood in Mexico City classified as having exceptional historical interest. The traditional houses have closed facades on the street side. The old 16th-century churches and cobbled streets tie in naturally with the modern style of architecture introduced by Barragan. That is where the architect Gerald Jacobs has built his house, in a secure compound, where Barragan's chief assistant had already built a house for his sister.

"I learnt a great deal from his design and was impressed by the purity of style and attractive touches he achieved with colour. However, I noted that the shape of his windows didn't make optimum use of natural light. Not that it's easy to put in windows everywhere when a house is in a relatively densely populated district. That's why, when I was building my house, I had to look very carefully where to place the windows to make the best possible use of natural light and the effect of the shadow of the old tree, without having problems with the neighbours."

Gerald Jacobs has always been fascinated by glass. The more than one hundred 'Aca Joe' high-tech casual wear stores he has built in Mexico and America have large glass fronts. He is a great promoter of glass as a building material.

The glass suppliers Impulsora Morbiz appreciated that fact, and their director Ignacio Moro promised to supply him with the necessary glass with which to build his house.

"A gesture for the sake of architecture", in Jacobs's words.

Jacobs and his wife inherited the plot, but the financial means with which to build their dream house were limited. Interest on mortgages in Mexico is such that loans are not an attractive option, so it was a matter of 'cutting the coat according to the cloth'.

He decided to go ahead, made a design and instructed a contractor to start building the foundations. And, to his surprise, the foundations actually materialised: now there was no going back, but it took another six years before the house was finished.

Building had to be stopped at regular intervals, until there was enough money to proceed. The house measures 300 square meters, divided over three floors. It has a communal area, three bedrooms, a family penthouse and 3 bathrooms. On top of the sunken garage there is a bedroom and

Mexican bathroom for the maid, plus office space. The entire interior has been painted in pale lavender, which is cool like white, yet warm like purple.

"There are more than enough orange and terra-cotta houses in Mexican style. And I was inspired by the white-blue flowers of the jacaranda trees on the plot," according to the architect, who has underlined the transparency of the glazed walls with his colour scheme. A covered passage leads from the street to the vestibule and garden and back terrace, which is paved with large travertine



Right-hand page: the terrace and small garden with jacaranda trees at the home of the architect Gerald Jacobs.

Left: the architect himself. Below: the staircase to the office above the garage. Under the stairs, the architect built in the pressure system for the water supply. That space also houses the large water tank. Left: the corridor which connects up nearly all the rooms and affords a view of the patio. Bottom: outside looking in from the patio.



tiles. From there you can see most of the rooms: interior and exterior merge together seamlessly. The combination of glass and mirrors immediately makes the house seem more transparent and the effect is enhanced by the sunken door and window rabbets, which have been sprayed in the same colours as the walls. This is a new construction technique within traditional Mexican architecture.

The split-level sitting room extends under part of the glass canopy, with a slant of 45 degrees. The joining of these glass panels to the rest of the glass structure proved to be one of the most difficult jobs, since the structure is practically self-supporting. The staircase leading to the home office is an unusual element. It not only contains the water pressure system, but also a large water tank, which has been ingeniously concealed. In the end, Gerald Jacobs overcame all the difficulties and now there is a house in Mexico City that prolongs Barragan's legacy in a com-



