



### Cover Story: ARK Journal Vol.XI

#### Casa Möbius: The Life and Legacy of a Brutalist Masterpiece

An icon of mid-century Mexican design, Casa Möbius was designed by Ernesto Gómez Gallardo in 1978, and was, until recently, inhabited by the architect himself. However, in 2019, the Designer Perla Valtierra took ownership of the house, stepping into the role of custodian, breathing life into Gómez Gallardo’s visionary design.

Set in San Jeronimo, a suburb in the south-west of Mexico City, Casa Möbius is a retreat from the frenetic energy of the city itself. Positioned at the crest of a plot that slopes downwards, the house looks out onto the crowns of the trees below, high up in the canopy, and a small river, which flows at the far end of the garden, can be heard trickling past from up near the house.

Nestled in this bucolic scene is a building that is quintessentially Brutalist in style – a celebration of pure form and bold geometries, rendered in raw concrete. Based on the Möbius Strip – the mathematical concept-cum-object that has intrigued scientists and artists since its discovery in 1858 – when seen from above, the blueprint of the house does indeed follow a looped, twisting shape.

Without boundaries, edges or orientation, the Möbius strip has no outside or inside edge, no front or back, east or west, up or down – and the house has a similar feel, making smooth transitions across the three levels and from inside to out. The same slate-grey stones that are piled high, one atop the other, to create an interior wall are also used to pave the path that leads from the house out into the garden; the hexagonal terracotta tiles that are underfoot are repeated again on the terraces; and the huge expanses of glass, in various shapes and sizes, act not as windows, but as openings – a thin membrane that invites the outside in.

Notions of up and down are equally blurred, with mezzanines and double-height spaces eliminating the clear distinction between the levels, which are connected with multiple spiral staircases in cast concrete. “The Möbius is like a figure eight,” notes Valtierra, “and so when I’m moving around the house I often feel like I’m following this shape: I go down one set of stairs and come up another, like an infinite universe... I think the intention of the architect [with regards to the Möbius] was more structural, but for me, it is more about movement.”

This looping, circular motion that Valtierra follows around the house brings to mind Charles Darwin’s ‘Thinking Path’. In the grounds of Down house, Darwin’s home in the English countryside, the path became a vital element of his work, tracing the same steps many times a day as he developed his theory of evolution. Many creative minds find inspiration in motion; the author Melvin Bragg notes that of the many poets who “composed as they walked, Wordsworth is the outstanding example. And Wordsworth too, at [his home] Rydal Mount, had the equivalent of a thinking path...”

Whilst much of Valtierra’s own work as a designer feeds upon travel and exploration, the new and the novel - over the past four years, Casa Möbius has become equally integral to her process. A retreat for a restless and creative mind, the house is a place of calm focus - as it was for Gómez Gallardo too, who dedicated the entire ground floor to his studio, operating his architectural practice from the house, with employees entering the building through a separate entrance. The wood workshop that was constructed at the back of the house will, eventually, be converted into a ceramics studio for Valtierra, who describes herself as a “Designer and a Ceramicist-in-process.”

In some ways, the two inhabitants of the house have a similar desire for a life that combines the personal and the professional, a space that can hold all of the elements of a creative life – but in other ways, their needs diverge and tastes have changed and evolved over the past 50 years. The original kitchen, for example, is a reflection of the time in which the house was built – and the status of its occupants, who Valtierra describes as being a bourgeois family, and as such, the kitchen has been hidden away in “a small, dark room... It’s not like nowadays where we practically live in the kitchen...”

“I would like to open up some of the rooms, the kitchen and bedrooms particularly,” notes Valtierra, whose plans include a restructuring of the middle floor, which is currently divided into 5 modest rooms. “I imagine Gómez Gallardo designed it in this way because he had ten children. But, if he had lived alone, would he have designed the distribution of space like this? The house itself is very modern, and he had this very revolutionary aesthetic, but, in the end, he had a very traditional family who needed to adapt to his craziness, and equally, I’m sure he had to design things that his wife wanted, and for his kids ... Of course, this is only my interpretation, it’s not necessarily the truth, it’s just how I feel having lived here.”

By creating fewer, but more generous rooms, the house will take on a more contemporary character, more in line with the overall scheme. Without Gómez Gallardo’s partitions, the defining feature of the house – the concrete ceiling – will be seen in large, uninterrupted swathes. Composed of tessellating triangles, the ceiling is a three-dimensional relief of sorts, pockets of light and shade that change throughout the day, following the arc of the sun.

The ceiling brings to mind some of Valtierra’s own designs, as the Lola and Ribete series also play with ideas of flatness and relief, creating accentuated highlights and lowlights. Made in collaboration with the ceramicist Don Jesus Torres and using local Bajío earthenware, the vases and vessels are decorated with ribbons of clay, which are formed into neat waves before being attached to the main body in long rows. Distinctly contemporary in feel, this baroque flourish pays homage to the local pottery traditions of the town of Dolores, Bajío, where Don Jesus lives and works.

Working mostly in ceramic, but more recently in sand-cast glass – Valtierra’s practice takes her across the country, sourcing local craftsmen and researching local materials – including making her own clay, excavated from the land. “It is very interesting for me to work with natural clays, we mix them ourselves, and test them at different firing temperatures. At the moment, we are focusing on the local clays from Chihuahua - but my dream is to make a map of local clays [from all over Mexico].”

In her work as a designer, Valtierra produces objects that go beyond aesthetics to touch upon history and geography, craft and culture, and it is her acute sensitivity to the traditions of the past that have informed her approach to her home. Assimilating herself within its walls, she has slowly appropriated the space for herself - but always in response to what has come before. Working with what is already there, Perla Valtierra’s wish, after four years in residence, is to strip back and to simplify – to embrace the raw honesty of Casa Möbius and to remove all that is not necessary: which are, in essence, all very Brutalist concerns.