

Constructing the Exceptional Norberto Feal

CONSTRUCTING THE EXCEPTIONAL: ON LUXURY IN ARCHITECTURE

Posted on January 25, 2026 by gaiapilia



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The concept of "luxury" in architecture has sparked extensive debate within both academic and professional spheres over the past decades. First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that luxury in architecture transcends mere material ostentation, embracing instead a more holistic conception that encompasses design excellence, the quality of materials, the anthropic dimension, and a refined spatial experience.

Luxury in architecture resides in the creation of spaces that evoke a sense of belonging and meaning—where every detail is meticulously crafted to offer a unique sensory and emotional experience. In this sense, the selection and manipulation of materiality play a central role in the expression of luxury. In his thesis *Adolf Loos: Visions of Luxury in Architecture*, Sergio Bruns Banegas argues that "the transition from the classical world to the modern world also entails the transition from public luxury to private luxury"; he further notes that "throughout history, luxury has driven innovation. Technology has played a vital role, giving rise to new spatial possibilities." This perspective underscores the interplay between form, materiality, and technology as a means of achieving new heights of architectural sophistication, while also identifying the home as the natural domain of luxury.

Moreover, luxury in architecture is defined by its ability to offer exceptional and exclusive experiences to its occupants. This was demonstrated, more contemporaneously than Loos but no less luxuriously, by David Chipperfield. As Inmaculada Maluenda and Enrique Encabo observe, Chipperfield "has his best work in the territories of luxury" and "an understanding of modernity that is more serene than dogmatic." One might even say more contemplative. This notion highlights the importance of the human dimension in the conception of luxury—placing the individual and their lived experience at the center of the architectural process. Ultimately, luxury in architecture reveals itself as a continuous pursuit of excellence and innovation in creating spaces that inspire and enrich human life. As Barragán noted in his Pritzker Prize acceptance speech, "a life deprived of beauty is not worthy of being called human"—a sentiment further illuminated by Alfonso Alfaro in his essay *The Ethics of an Aesthetic: The City and the House*, where he observed of Barragán, "His luxuries were light and simplicity."

Understanding "luxury" in contemporary Latin American architecture is both a fascinating and complex exercise. Traditionally, in our region, luxury has been associated with ostentation, opulence, and exclusivity. Yet in contemporary Latin American architecture, the concept has undergone a significant evolution: rather than focusing solely on these attributes, many contemporary architects are redefining luxury to reflect deeper and more meaningful values. In this sense, luxury architecture

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in Latin America often embraces sustainability, integration with nature, and cultural sensitivity as essential and distinctive values. Luxury projects now often incorporate sustainable building techniques, the use of local materials, and traditional construction methods—not only respecting the environment but also promoting local economic development and cultural preservation. As Umberto Eco observes in *History of Beauty*, luxury is not merely a manifestation of material wealth, but also a reflection of cultural and social values deeply rooted in the community it inhabits.

Thus, the aesthetic of luxury in Latin American architecture is founded upon the pursuit of beauty and excellence in façades and surfaces, in interiors meticulously designed to create elegant and comfortable environments, and in the harmony of elements that combine the quality of materials with painstaking attention to construction and finishing details. Furthermore, much of today's Latin American architecture explores the idea of luxury as a sensory and emotional experience—one that fosters tranquility and well-being. Spaces are designed not only to be visually striking, but also to evoke emotions and create memorable experiences for those who inhabit them.

Likewise, luxury in suburban or rural Latin American architecture is often expressed through a harmonious integration with the surrounding natural environment. In this sense, there is a call for an architecture that engages in dialogue with nature and respects the cultural and geographical contexts into which it is placed—exalting them. In summary, it is about creating exceptional spaces that inspire admiration, comfort, and exclusivity through design quality, materials, construction, and attention to detail—spaces that elevate the spirit of their inhabitants.

ISSN : 2575-5374

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