



Building a 'Showcase' Showstopper

One of the Centro Histórico's most strikingly extravagant new casas is part of the sixth annual Mérida Showcase of Homes. We talked to its architect, **Juan Carlos Alonso**, about the creative process that blends hacienda and high church.



Juan Carlos Alonso

Let's talk about Casa de las Torres, the final house on this year's Mérida Showcase of Homes to benefit Fundación BAI and its programs to combat AIDS and HIV. It's one of the most talked-about private residences in the Centro. Tell me what it was like being the architect on the project.

It was a real dialog with the house, imagining if the house were alive, so, the house was telling us what it needed. I remember when we discovered the old stencils in the old part of the house, it was the starting point for deciding what kind of furniture was needed, considering all the time the churchy and mysterious ambience. I can tell you that the house represents the owner's personality; it is an extension of him.

I am very excited about the final result, because when people enter the house the first expression is WOW! And see the happiness of the owner, that is my reward.

The owner, Greg Casini, knew what he wanted, and you gave it to him. What was the hardest part about this project?

From the beginning the owner stated: "I want a very unique house." He gave me a lot of pictures of what he wanted to incorporate in the project. At the same time, we visited around 50 haciendas and a similar number of churches in all the towns that we passed, so my job consisted of synthesizing all the information, resulting in a very unique and eclectic house, where you can find Yucatán hacienda elements as well as church elements.

We also visited other cities like Mexico City, Puebla, Morelia, Patzcuaro, Tlaquepaque, Tonalá, Dolores Hidalgo and San Miguel de Allende looking for antiques. You can see them around the house.

Your portfolio is very diverse and you are obviously as comfortable designing a modern home as you are a house with a very specific theme. I see other houses in your portfolio that are very different, like a modern one at Tamanca. What do all your houses have
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in common, if anything?

My duty is to listen, understand and synthesize everything to create a design according to their ideas, personality, lifestyle, and their dreams; a house they feel happy about because they were part of the process. I am not worried about leaving my own imprint because, in the end, they will live in it, not me.

What is your advice for a foreigner who is deciding whether or not to move to the Centro and is looking at properties for sale? How can you tell if a property has strong potential?

I think the most important thing people should ask themselves is *What kind of house do I want?* There is colonial, modern or eclectic: for a colonial, find the best preserved old structure with historic value, in order to take care of all the antique elements (pasta tiles and wood beams, etc.) and follow the same style for the rest of the house.

For modern, you could find an empty lot or a structure without any historic value, and you start from zero. For eclectic, you can find a house with at least the first two old rooms in good condition. The rest of the house doesn't have to be old but it should have a good layout to save money remodeling. If I needed to choose an architect, I would want to see how resilient he is to involve me in the process.

Can we ask about you? How long have you been in Merida? What is your background?

I came here in 1997 to study architecture at Facultad de Arquitectura of UADY, happily married with one son.

I worked 14 years in Henry Ponce's office designing and supervising. I want to thank him and all his team because that is where I developed as an architect. Now I have my own office, Alonso Arquitectos, designing and building in the Centro, city and beach.

What is the trend? What will the Centro look like in 10 years?

I imagine a cosmopolitan city with a very rich mixing of Mayan, Mexican, American and European culture, so it will create an excellent variety of possibilities for everybody. I also imagine a bohemian city with wonderful restaurants, cafés, galleries and obviously, good houses.



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If you go

▶ Seven homes are on the tour. Other homes feature design and architecture by **Victor Cruz, Carlos de la Barrera Cardeña, Alvaro Cervera and Mercedes Sánchez, Robert Holtby and Emile Romain, Gonzalo Fernando González and Deborah LaChapelle.**

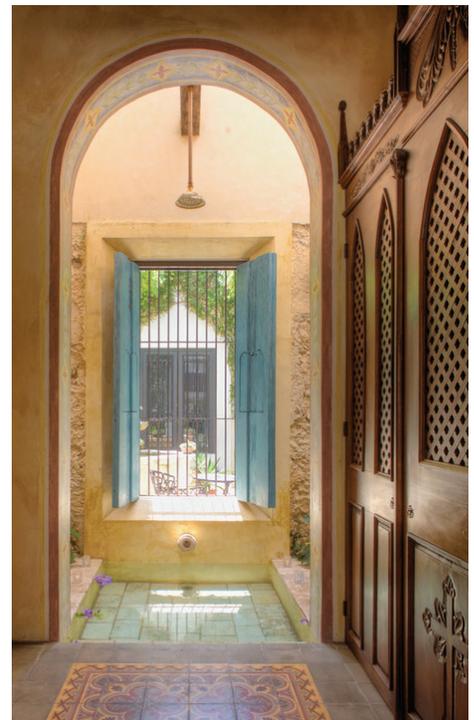
▶ Afterwards, enjoy a complimentary drink at **Hennessy's** or **Casa de Las Torres**, the house featured in this story.

▶ Read about the important work done by **Fundación BAI A.C.** at www.fundacionbai.com

▶ Tour hours are 2-5 p.m. on Sunday, Nov. 9. Tickets (MX\$300; MX\$150 students) are available on the day of the event at **Hennessy's.**

Contact the architect

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For more photos, visit the gallery at www.yucatanexpatlife.com