Diary 1969: 
Bernard Rudofsky’s 
Personal Account 
of his Discovery of 
Frigiliana

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“Man’s physical freedom manifests itself
no doubt in his ability to choose the place
on earth where he wants to live. Whereas
immature reflection tends to judge by
usefulness alone, a discriminating mind may
ask its share of beauty. Neither privations
nor danger will deter man from selecting a
spot that provides him with the exhilaration
generated by a superb landscape.”

This quote from the catalogue of the well-
known 1960s MoMA exhibition entitled
Architecture Without Architects could well
be applied to the particular case of its author.
At the end of that same decade, Bernard
Rudofsky would choose the Spanish town
of Frigiliana to design and build his own
house, La Casa’ [Fig. 01], for which he had
yearned since the 1930s, and which would
finally come to an end in this idyllic corner
of the peripheral periphery. Moreover, he
would do so, following the quote, at a moment
of full maturity, after having disseminated
his ideas—among radicalism, eccentricity,
and controversy—about architecture and
domesticity through his exhibitions and
writings. Nevertheless, in addition, this
“manifested physical freedom” would have to
face quite a few difficulties that were reported
in his detailed personal diaries.

This research aims to investigate the couple's
adventure in searching for the perfect plot of
land in rural Spain at the end of the sixties,
and subsequently building a house that is
as personal as it is suggestive. An enclave
that could not have been discovered by the
marriage without the mediation of Sibyl
Moholy-Nagy and José Guerrero, a Granada-
born artist living in New York8. The diaries
kept at The Getty Research Institute are
a testament to the fact that the enormous
ambition and intellectual dimension of this
house could not have come to fruition without
the perseverance, tenacity, and dedication
of Rudofsky, who spared no effort in dealing
with a multitude of problems throughout the
two years of its construction9. The adventure
of buying the plot in El Paraje de Galera a year
before was the first big test; in short, it is an
unpublished personal account, whose value
lies both in the relevance of its protagonists
and the work that would be erected there, as
well as in representing a true example of what
it meant for a foreign architect to build and
design his own house in Spain at that time.

The world as a border: concerning the
search for a place to build a house that had
been maturing for over forty years

Since Bernard Rudofsky died in 1988, Berta
would go to La Casa alone every summer
until 2005, the year she died. Despite her age
and the exhausting journey from New York,
Berta would not fail to return to the place that
had become the melting pot of Rudofsky’s
thought10. Perhaps this is the most eloquent
proof of the couple’s degree of commitment
to their home11 and everything surrounding it.
Rudofsky had devoted his life to investigating
the most reliable and pleasant way to live
at home. However, it would not be until he
was faced with the task of creating his own
house in a well-determined place that he
put all those principles, their applicability,
and their relationship with architecture
to the test. Moreover, its postulates would
face the challenge of building in a context
characterized by a technically limited
workforce, the scarcity of construction
materials, the language barrier, and some
stereotypical Spanish attitudes12.

Previously, up to four approaches to the
project of his own home can be traced over
almost forty years. Indeed, not a minor
matter; this illustrates the perseverance in
the decision of the company. First, there
is evidence of a design from 1932 entitled
with the letter B9, on the island of Capri10. In
1935, Rudofsky would expand on this same
idea of ideal housing inspired by traditional
Mediterranean typologies, this time on
the island of Procida, and which would
be published in Domus14 in two suggestive
articles accompanied by his illustrations
and photomontages. Although it was not a house
for himself, the collaboration with Luigi
Cosenza cannot fail to be mentioned in this
period, which resulted in the spectacular Villa
Oro in 1934 (and whose construction would
culminate in 1937 in Naples) or the Villa in
Positano in 193615. In 1947, already settled in
the United States after passing through Brazil, he would propose a simple house
for two made up of a single volume and two
patios, most likely to be built in the County
of Berkshire (Massachusetts)12. Three years
later, in Amagansett (New York) he would
develop this new way of working by proposing
a somewhat more realistic scheme, with a
slightly more conventional treatment of the
domestic program, but which at the same
time would incorporate part of the language of the
well-known garden project for Constantino
Nivola in New York16 [Fig. 02].

These four attempts would eloquently
synthesize some of the avenues of work that
cannot be renounced for the architect and
that would be crystallized in retirement in
Malaga. On the one hand, the vernacular
domestic model typical of the Mediterranean
would be explicitly assumed with the
first ideal versions and would be based on
the theoretical postulates exposed in his
exhibitions and writings. This is how the
patio would acquire crucial value charged
with a symbolic meaning18. On the other hand,
and indeed by contrast, a modern lexicon
of simple volumes and clean compositions
would be constantly used as a premise in
the design, which serves other issues of greater significance for its designer and user. One latter, a model of radical domesticity aligned with Rudofsky’s postulates would be advocated; this would encompass the way of sleeping, sitting, eating, or washing oneself, among others. To this must be added the fact that, for the architect, a house in the full sense should be designed for the summer (as he does in all his attempts) and that, precisely for this reason, he should understand the exterior spaces to be rooms typical of the house in which nature intervenes in their characterization [Fig. 03] as if they were architectural elements: “These ancillary structures were an integral part of the house; they were contained within the house. All were true Wohngarten, outdoor living, rooms without roofs, and they were invariably regarded as rooms”17.

With what has been said, it is worth examining the possible relationship between these elements, which remain constant in all the designs and the characteristics of Frigiliana [Fig. 04], the latter understood on two scales: the one that would place the enclave in the world and the one that would fixate it in physical terms. Firstly, Rudofsky would most likely choose the town in Malaga because of its Mediterranean nature—also present in his first European designs—which would enhance the symbolic value of The House given the obvious affinities it presents with popular domestic architecture in this area. Precisely, this Mediterranean stamp is capable of naturally welcoming the composition of disaggregated volumes. A number of compositional guidelines that would fit perfectly with the town of whitewashed houses scattered on a gap that is next to it and that could well have appeared in Architecture Without Architects. In addition, the climatology of the town would allow the development of an architecture “with summer in mind”, as was his wish. On the other hand, this tempering and Mediterranean climate would ensure the use of outdoor spaces. Rudofsky would voluntarily choose a plot on a slope with scattered and medium-sized vegetation typical of the dehesa landscape as a fundamental element. This space would thus be conducive to being colonized by different built elements (stairs, pergolas, walls, swimming pool) in close dialogue with the existing vegetation—which explains the meticulousness with which he would take notes in his diary of each of the trees after purchasing the plot.

In sum, it can be said, on the one hand, that the different designs, although developed at various moments in their life, would constitute a single project tied to the life course of the couple and that this precedes the discovery of the site. On the other hand, Frigiliana would have the necessary characteristics to house that project and would act as a lever. Therefore, on this occasion, the usual work dynamics of the architect are inverted as the project was developed based on a certain demand for an established place. In this case, the project matured enough in the mind of its author before they were able to ascertain the precise characteristics according to which it would be built. So, the search for the place becomes an element of the development of the project in an intermediate phase. Hence, it may be of interest to identify the challenges that led the couple to choose this specific enclave, as they appear in the architect’s diary. 

El Cortijo de San Rafael as a destination: exploring Bernard and Berta discovery of Frigiliana and the story of an adventure in a diary

Rudofsky’s diaries comprise a large part of the personal archives held in The Getty Research Institute. Among them, the item entitled 1969 [Fig. 05] describes phases of the process of acquiring the plot on which to build La Casa on the outskirts of Frigiliana. It is a notebook with 144 handwritten pages in English, most of which are not easily legible18. The issue includes the chronicle of the architect’s longest trip through Spain to that date19. The couple stayed in the country for almost five months, from May 1 to September 23, 1969. Rudofsky used these months not only to acquire a piece of Andalusian land but also to obtain first-hand, detailed knowledge of a country that he had already visited in 1963 and that he had previously studied through his research work in New York libraries20, as well as his epistolary relations21 in the preparation of the exhibition entitled Architecture Without Architects [Fig. 06]. Consequently, it presents a revealing document, which includes the personal testimony of the author during the process of exploring the exact corner in the peninsular periphery in which to build his own house. It should be added that the main interest lies not only because it is the unique case of Rudofsky and Berta, but also because it serves as an illustrative example of what it would mean for a foreign architect to settle in Spain at a time of slight expansion for the country. However, the text presented below is a summary made by the authors of this research from the documentary source. For this reason, the story that is introduced offers a summary exposition of the information found in the file, and which may perhaps facilitate future research.

The 1969 diary

On May 1, 1969, Rudofsky and his wife Berta crossed the border through the Pasajess pass. Together, they travelled through the Basque Country, Navarra, and Castile and León until they reached Madrid. From there—after stopping in Toledo—they crossed Castile-La Mancha to finally reach Andalusia22. They arrived in Frigiliana 23 days later [Fig. 07], staying in the neighboring Parador de Nerja. They stayed in the town of Malaga for four days, during which they explored the town and its surroundings, while simultaneously restoring an old Renault.

Rudofsky describes the landscape that greeted him upon his arrival at Frigiliana in his notebook and noted how he felt at that precise moment. Although his expectations were not high, the municipality seemed to please the architect due to its virgin status; he highlighted that “it keeps its roots intact”23 and even goes so far as to affirm that her beauty surpasses some of the recommendations that Coderch had given him. According to these notes, this first contact with Frigiliana could have played a determining role in convincing the couple of their eventual decision to build their house there. After paying 21,000 pesetas for the repair of their car, they returned to their tour of Spain. Having covered Andalusia almost completely, they travelled to Murcia and from there to Valencia and Zaragoza. Once the northermost point of this incursion had been reached, they made their way towards the south again, reaching Andalusia, now passing through Cuencia to reach Frigiliana from Granada.

On July 10, they reached Nerja once more, where they stayed until the 15th of that month. On the first day in town, they met with the abstract painter José Guerrero, who showed them his farmhouse—located halfway between Nerja and Frigiliana—and invites them to eat with their family [Fig. 08]. That same day they visit three different properties: an orchard, an old sugar factory, and the house of an English diplomat that was for sale—on this last visit, it would be his friend Sibyl Moholy-Nagy who shows it to him in the absence of its owner. None of these houses was to the taste of the Rudofsky couple. The next day, they visited Guerrero’s house again. José himself accompanies them to a nearby farmhouse that was for sale for around 600,000 pesetas. The vast extension of the plot and the small building—“a mere stable” in Rudofsky's words—derailed the possible operation.

On July 12, they resumed the business of buying a house or finding a place to build their own. They visited Guerrero's farmhouse in the afternoon and, although they cannot talk about it, they met the Danish museum director Knud Jensen24, who had become a good friend of the couple in Frigiliana. A day later, they pick up Sebastián, who shows them a place with no water that is dismissed. Later, Guerrero accompanies them to see a piece of land that could be seen from the highway, although again the lack of water and the extremely difficult access discourages Rudofsky and his wife from carrying out their possible purchase.

On July 14, they met with Sebastián and Kumpan in Frigiliana, albeit in low spirits; that same morning, they had given up on going to the town hall to gather information, and José himself had discouraged them from continuing with the task. However, Sebastián managed to encourage the couple and showed them a new plot, albeit one that was too small. The next morning, Sibyl visited them at the Parador de Nerja; at 11 o’clock, they examined a plot owned by a farmer with whom they had arranged to meet the day before through the mediation of Guerrero. They reject it and, when they were about to leave, José showed them two more plots. Unfortunately, neither managed to convince the couple either.

They resumed their tour, now passing through Andalusia and ascending the peninsula to Toledo and, later, to
Extremadura. On the way, in Zafra, a type of window struck Rudofsky, and he drew it in his notebook, an unusual feature in these diaries where drawings are scarce. The window was quite vertical in its proportions, broken down into identical square elements. The façades without windows. Furthermore, he dedicates a few lines to it in the diary. However, its purchase seems complicated, given that the property had been inherited by seven brothers with serious difficulties in reaching an agreement among themselves. That same afternoon, Sibyl invites them to stay in her house for as long as they need the following summer to remodel their potential “farmhouse”.

A day later, José encouraged them to take over the plot from the day before. He maintained that the asking price—600,000 pesetas—was reasonable. Subsequently, Rudofsky’s wife sensed that José is “[j]ired of the search and wants to get the matter over”27. Almost on the verge of deciding to go ahead with it, they reject it due to their “[f]ear that we might coop up in Frigiliana”28. Later, Sibyl showed them the houses that were for sale in the La Mollineta neighborhood, but the prices were too high, and their size and characteristics were not at all to the couple’s liking.

After a week in Frigiliana, the negotiations for the purchase of the land remained at a standstill. José Guerrero then led them to the area known as El Cortijo de San Rafael, but the plot deeply disappoints them. They feel that José was beginning to tire of the matter: “Apparently, he is at the end of his wits”29. In the afternoon, Sibyl showed them another plot located in the same area as El Cortijo de San Rafael.

The following days were increasingly agonizing according to the diary entries: they visited a large number of plots thanks to the efforts of their friends José and Sibyl, although still not able to find the perfect one in any of the cases. There always seemed to be a conflicting feature that ruled each one of them out: size, difficult access, lack of water or electricity. For several days, José insisted that they visit some of Philip Hylton’s properties [Fig. 09]. By this point, time was running away from them and the search was still fruitless. Through the mediation of Antonio Agudo, they were persuaded to buy one of the plots, although a problem with the water supply forced them to back down in the end. The date of the return trip loomed, which made Bernard and Berta impatient; on August 28, he writes: “Completely discouraged; time is running up”30.

However, on the morning of August 29, they finally found the plot where La Casa was to be located. On the recommendation of José Guerrero, they bought a property from Hylton, in the area of El Cortijo de San Rafael. The agreement amounted to 400,000 pesetas in exchange for 3,500 m² of uneven land31. The next day, they visited the notary and formalized the purchase.

Released from the enormous pressure of the task that had kept them busy for the previous month, Bernard and Berta began to get excited about the project. On August 31, they visited the site again, at which time they decided on the location of the living room and the garage. They returned in the afternoon and ascertained that the bedroom and a seven-meter-long corridor that would join the day area with the night area would be. All trees, even the smallest, bear fruit, he noted.

On September 1, Rudofsky reconsidered where to place the living room and, in addition, decided to locate a terrace to the east. The position of the study and the pool are also determined. On September 2, he photographed the same plot in color and, in the afternoon, from the opposite hill. On September 3, he collected a number of measurements and decided to partially cover the corridor that goes from the entrance to the room. On September 4, he decided on the lower terrace, as well as on a porch structure among the trees and imagined building a kachelofen (masonry heater) in the living room. He opted to place the dining room between the living room and the kitchen. On September 5, he inspected the plants and trees on the plot and selected which of them to uproot. In his diary, he also noted his intention to build one of the forty-meter façades without windows. Furthermore, he chose to widen and cover the aforementioned corridor, which was transformed into a covered terrace—and would finally become the central porch of the house32.

On September 6, he photographed the farm again [Fig. 10]. On September 9, he made his last visit to El Paraje de Galera, where he collected a series of detailed photographs.

On September 10, the marriage began the trip back to New York, and took the opportunity to cover the entire Spanish geography, detouring through a large part of Castilla y León33. On September 23, a plane took Bernard and Berta back to New York.

Conclusions
The entire account is a reliable recreation of the adventure embarked upon by the Rudofsky couple to find the perfect plot on which to build their desired home. A story that, on the other hand, also brings to light on the couple’s degree of commitment to the project. Thus, of their almost five months spent in the countryside, Rudofsky and Berta devoted seven weeks traveling and twelve weeks inspecting plots and other properties in two separate periods. If we add to this the fact that in total, they visited around twenty different lots, an orchard, a sugar factory, a diplomat’s house, houses in the La Molineta neighborhood, and even a stable, it can be said that Rudofsky and Berta did not spare any effort and manages to combed the area exhaustively.

Secondly, it is thought that this experience can be perfectly extrapolated to some others that took place in a period in which Spain began to open its borders after a period of international isolation. The cases of Harnden and Bombelli in Cadaqués, Erwin Bronner in Ibiza, Jorn Utzon in Málaga, or André Bloc in Carboneras surely must have involved not dissimilar events. In this sense, the role played by the colonies of illustrious foreigners as a recruiting pennant for new residents is revealed as essential. This is proven in this case in which the intense and continuous mediation of José Guerrero and Sibyl Moholy-Nagy was important, but it was most probably no different in other places with similar characteristics such as Cadaqués or Ibiza.

Thirdly, the enclave offers a double reading of Rudofsky’s nomadic dimension and the house project developed over a lifetime. The House could be considered to be the conclusion to a discourse maintained for decades and that, now, at last, will find concrete physical and temporal coordinates in which to materialize them through architecture. The scaling of this supposed horizon allows us to obtain some conclusions that may be of universal interest and that can pave the way today to conceive projects that are sensitive to the place and intimately linked to its designer and inhabitants. Indeed, it is a sought-after encounter between the spatial architect and a found territory that fits perfectly into his purposes, making both place and architecture resonate.

According to this, on the one hand, Frigiliana should be considered as a place of welcome, for a voluntary refugee, in which the protective function of architecture is sublimated, involving a modest expression of its formal definition. Hence the house materializes with spartan simplicity in its composition. It is not surprising that, once the site was found, Rudofsky conceived the main lines of the project in just six days, according to the diary entries. On the other hand, this biographical component provides the place with an ideal space for personal reflection, which elevates the contemplative function to a higher significance. This explains the location of the piece. Given the top of the plot, the central position of the porch, the leading role of the vegetation, as revealed in the diary, and the rich spatial proposal of the garden. Lastly, the remote Frigiliana of the late 1960s is the perfect enclave to serve as a repository of intimacy, which facilitates the display of personal domesticity resulting from the reflection that had accompanied Rudofsky throughout a wandering lifetime.
Arts and Architecture, no. 14. Bernard Rudofsky, “The Bread of Architecture”, Op. cit., 27. Original text: ““These ancient gardens were an integral part of the house; they were contained within the house. All were true Wohngarten, outdoor living, rooms without roofs, and they were invariably regarded as rooms”. 18. The notebook contains hardly any drawings; it is written in pencil and the different locations visited are highlighted in red. Being a diary, the writing is hasty and direct.


20. Despite the fact that the Architecture Without Architects exhibition featured photographs from around the world, Rudofsky had rarely visited those places. However, he would later go on to visit many of them.

21. José M. Pozo, “De cómo el Metropolitan Museum nos ayudó a ver ‘The Invisible Spain’”, in Las exposiciones de arquitectura y la arquitectura de las exposiciones, coord. José M. Pozo Municio, coord. Héctor García-Diego, coord. Beatriz Caballero (Pamplona: Tz, 2014), 49-60. One of the photographers with whom he maintained an intense correspondence would be José Ortiz-Echagüe (who would contribute eight photographs to the MoMA exhibition), and with whom he would discover through the MET the Spectacular Spain exhibition according to Pozo, and who contributed several letters. As for the photographs taken by Rudofsky from Spain, they were perhaps taken on the trip he made a year before the opening of the exhibition in MoMA in 1963. According to the archives preserved at Getty, a long trip took place that year throughout the Spanish geography that began on May 19, 1963 from the Hotel Reina Victoria in Murcia and can be seen in Bernard Rudofsky, Europa 1963A. The Getty Research Institute, Rudofsky papers, ca. 1910-1987, in Series II. Travel notebooks and photographs, box 8. 22. The following Spanish populations have been extracted directly from the text: Pasajes, San Sebastián, Zarauz, Orio, Pamplona, Olite, Tafalla, Sangüesa, Soiz, Ujár, Caparroso, Tudela, Cascante, Tarazona, Soria, Almadén, Sigüenza, Torija, Guadalajara, Alcalá de Henares, Madrid, Guardia, Ocaña, Témbleque, Consuegra, Manzanares, Baeza, Encina, Jaén, Granada, Lanjarón, Pumpanera, Copilfería, Almohocar, Salobreña, Almuñécar, Nerja, Frigiliana, Torrox, Malaga, Torremolinos, Mijas, Fuengirola, Marbella, Estepona, San Roque, Tarifa, Cádiz, San Fernando, Arcos de la Frontera, Jerez de la Frontera, Utrera, Sevilla, Osuna, Estepa, Antequera, Bename, Lucena, Aguilar, Córdoba, Almodóvar, Alcalá la Real, Granada, Guadix, Almería, Sorbas, Mojácar, Domínguez, etc. 23. The following towns were entered in the Getty database: Tordesillas, Toro, Zamora, Toro, Valladolid, Burgos, Tosantos, Santo Domingo, Najera, Navarette, Logroño, Estella, Mañeru, Pamplona, Lecumberri, San Sebastián, Bayona, Langen… to Paris, where they take the flight to New York.

Bernard Rudofsky
La Casa
Frigiliana
Diary
Inhabit