

The Identity of Architecture and the Architecture of Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Architecture, as the largest artifact that a culture produces, plays a fundamental role in defining national identity. Changes in architectural production signal profound underlying cultural changes. Of lesser importance is the stylistic implication these changes may bring. Far more significant is when the historic relationship between architecture and identity is ruptured. This is becoming evident in the architecture of contemporary Mexico, which for many years was a bastion of modernism and “functionalist” design and which is now suffering, through the effects of NAFTA, an upheaval of monumental proportions. The once consistent approach to regional cultural influences found in schools of architecture and in professional practice, has been disrupted. The result has been a disconnection from the roots of modern architecture, an architecture predicated on revolutionary social purpose now replaced by attitudes that views buildings as commodities and style as a mechanism for increasing consumption. These changes reflect the cultural and political chaos of the last decade and have resulted in the degradation of architectural integrity and cultural identity.

IDENTITY AND MODERNITY IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF MEXICO

A distinguishing characteristic of modern Mexico is the intimate relationship between architecture and social purpose. This relationship is the product of an upheaval of gigantic proportions that occurred at the turn of the century, the civil war known as the Revolution of 1910. This conflagration was followed in turn by an artistic and intellectual transformation of gigantic proportion beginning in the 1920s. The Revolution of 1910, which took as many as one life in eight and destroyed much of the economic base of the country, provided an opportunity for young Mexican architects, many influenced by European currents like

the Bauhaus, to forge a modern, Mexican, “functionalist” architecture. This architecture was clearly a “child of the revolution.”¹ More so than in Europe, what occurred in Mexico was the unhampered opportunity to put into practice ideas that linked architecture to social purpose. Not only what had been destroyed needed replacement, but also perhaps even more important, there was the urgent need to develop what had been for many years denied the “have-nots” under of Diaz regime.² What occurred by the 1930s was a period of rapid expansion and extensive construction. The stated goal of the heavily centralized government was to bring social justice to all. The new “functionalist” architecture was adopted as the mechanism to solve the needs of housing, education and health, all which had been neglected since the colonial period. The fundamental ideals of this architectural revolution became institutionalized by the ruling party of the last seventy years, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and formed part of every day political thought and party rhetoric, as well as part of the continuous struggle to transform society into the shape of a political image.³ Modern architecture was a part of that concept and this was clearly understood by everyone. Thus the social ideals of European modernism were incorporated as a fundamental part of the evolution of modern Mexican architecture and culture. The seminal buildings of this period in Mexico are almost all found in Mexico City and its environs, and were built by the government for social benefit. The list of projects from the capital city include: Juan O’Gorman’s Technical Institute and other school buildings which followed his studio for Diego Rivera — then a leading artist and leftist who befriended Trotsky when he escaped to Mexico — (all from the period between 1929-35); the Huilpulco Hospital and Institute of Cardiology by José Villagran (1937); the Social Security Institute by Carlos Obregon Santacilla (1945); and a number of buildings at the UNAM campus by architects such as Enrique Yañez, José Villagrán and Juan O’Gorman.⁴

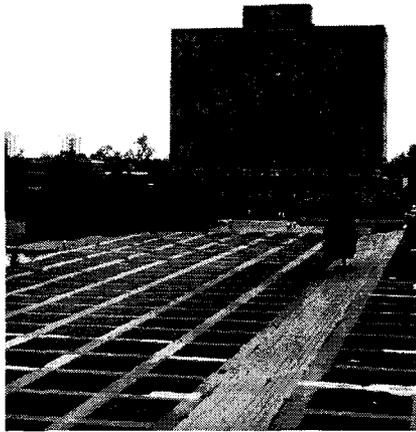


Fig. 1: Main Library, Juan O'Gorman, UNAM, CU, Mexico

The role of architecture in post-revolutionary Mexico transcended rhetoric and its real importance is seen in the changes that occurred between 1910 and 1930: the urban concentration of the population increased by 50%; the population of Mexico city tripled; and construction as a percentage of economic activity rose from practically nothing to almost 20%. These trends accelerated thereafter as well.

The pioneering work of two of the most important post-Revolution architects, Jose Villagran and Guillermo Zárraga, were followed by a second generation of designers that included Enrique del Moral, Juan O'Gorman, and Juan Legarreta, among others. For these disciples, Mexican "functionalism," whether orthodox or radical in nature, was clearly identified with socialist ideas and the glorification of architecture for the poor. Enrique del Moral, one of the leading figures in the design of the new campus for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), referring to architecture itself, said, "The program for Mexico is that of poverty."⁵ They were all involved with the programs of the government to solve the massive problems of education, housing, and health. The impact of these efforts was all the more notable for the general lack of economic dynamism in Mexico which lasted until the middle of the century and the limited capacity of the private sector or the church to generate significant projects.⁶ This dedication to revolutionary ideals has, until recently, permeated not only government action but architectural education, especially in public institutions, as well as in professional practice. The academic catalogues of the Facultad de Arquitectura of the UNAM, the largest and most important school of architecture in the country, still speak about the social and economic inequities in Mexico and the social responsibilities of practitioners, although there has been a marked decline in this rhetoric in the post-NAFTA period.⁷ The Facultad de Arquitectura is divided into sixteen "talleres" (studios), each having its own mission statement and about the same enrollment as that of a smaller school of architecture in the U.S. The catalog description for the Taller Juan O'Gorman, for example, directly addresses the issue of identity and architecture when it describes the...

*"Conscious...necessity to value the recognition of past Architects and Architecture, inscribed with the characteristic stamp of our culture, with which we will live...in spite of consolidating our own national ideology that ought to generate our own Modern Mexican Architecture."*⁸

The importance of the role of architecture in ameliorating social and economic inequities is seen in the other design studios of the UNAM and many of the other state universities as well as the architectural projects produced in them, which emphasize projects for housing, medical care and education for the masses. The idealistic notion that architecture can foment positive social change and improve lives, especially for the economically disadvantaged sectors of the population, is still a

fundamental part of the education of many architects in Mexico enrolled in public institutions of learning. As stated by the Taller Hannes Meyer of the UNAM:

"We consider it important to direct our work principally towards those sectors of the society which are found to be practically marginalized, including, among other things, the use of professional knowledge to better their conditions of living, or of reorienting expectations in relationship to the definition of an architecture that is identifiable with the cultural practices of the masses of this country."

NAFTA AND SHIFTS IN ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION

In this post-NAFTA era, major shifts are taking place in Mexico, driven by a change in the means of production. Previously, the client for most major architectural projects was the centralized government, with its commitment to social equity. With the rise of globalization that NAFTA embodies, private sector clients, especially international ones, have been creating a series of important buildings whose social purpose is distinct.

Sweeping legal changes, that implemented NAFTA, have liberalized property ownership by non-Mexicans. Previously, investment from abroad required a Mexican "socio" or partner, who retained the controlling interest — 51% — of ownership. As well, there were greater restrictions of foreigners' ownership of land. After 1994, non-Mexicans could exercise outright ownership of businesses and property, with some exceptions in certain key areas still deemed within the national interest, and had fewer restrictions on their property rights. The result was a flood of foreign investment, which played an important part in the rise of the Mexican economy during the last decade. Federal reserves in Mexico tripled as foreign investment increased from \$1 billion to \$3 billion a month for at least a three-year period. During 1999, following the last economic crisis in Latin America, foreign investment recovered to a rate of \$1 billion per month.

The 1990s saw the beginning of a wave of major projects that ruptured the traditional pattern of development. One of the first examples from that period was a 1994 Cesar Pelli design of two multi-use towers that combined apartments and offices, located in the Polanca area of Mexico City. The project made little concession to Mexico, and just as easily could have been built in Houston, where there are two very similar Pelli designs. Part of the impact of this speculative project was in part due to its size, but greater still was the all-encompassing scope of foreign intervention in the nation's capital. The project was almost a complete package, like that of the "maquilladora" industry along the border, where clothing that is designed and pre-cut in the U.S. arrives in pieces to be assembled by a low-paid Mexican workforce across the border under questionable labor conditions. The Pelli project was completed in his U.S. office, including all construction documents and specifications. While adjustments were made in Mexico to comply with local regulations, structural steel and most of the mechanical systems, as well as building finishes, were imported from Texas and other U.S. cities. Before the Pelli project and its massive use of imported assemblies, only specific materials were admitted into Mexico under special conditions. After the creation of NAFTA, many of these same materials became readily available in Mexican markets. Prior to the Pelli project, there were only a few examples of foreign designed buildings, mostly in tourist areas such as Acapulco or Cancun, or near the US frontier, as in Monterrey. Following NAFTA, a number of foreign firms have participated in developing new housing, hotel, office, and mixed-use complexes in major cities throughout the country.

What has been especially impressive has been the scale of these developments. A Canadian company is building the Alameda project, designed to rebuild one of Mexico City's oldest districts that was

destroyed in the 1985 earthquake with a mixed-use of housing and commercial activities. This project encompasses 19 city blocks and will require changes in city regulations in order to be carried out. The Torre Aguila on Reforma Avenue in Mexico City, another project currently under construction by an American firm, will be the capital's tallest building at some 50 stories in height.

However, this foreign intervention is not simply limited to Mexico City. Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico, is being subjected to a massive development scheme by the private sector, the JVC Center. An international company of Mexican origin is developing and financing the scheme. There will be ten large-scale projects built around a convention center, including hotels, theaters, and shopping facilities, designed by well-known international architects including Jean Nouvel, Todd Williams-Billie Tsien, Wolf Prix, Toyo Ito, Steven Holl, and even Philip Johnson. The impact on the architecture of Guadalajara, where Luis Barragan first began his practice, should be notable, if questionable.

Because of its scale, this project is probably one of the more egregious examples of this phenomenon. Enrique Norten, one of the two "coordinating architects" of the scheme, is quite explicit in his desire to "contrast and complement Guadalajara... to create a tension..." He later goes on to say that, "Modern public space is different from traditional public space," as a means of defending the break from the historic planning model of the city's existing urban core and the lack of a contextual response.¹⁰ The historic city center is organized by four major plazas in the form of a Latin cross, with the Cathedral at its center. It has fourteen blocks of historical arcades that complement the original urban plan.

The physical comparison between this project and the most important previous large-scale design in Mexico, the campus of the UNAM, is conspicuous, as is the cultural implication. The UNAM project also had two coordinating architects and teams of different designers, each assigned a particular building. However, there, the underlying concept and spatial development reflected an evolution of traditional ideas about public space — linked even to pre-Columbian models — that gave a specific meaning to the project and spoke directly to the role of architecture in creating cultural identity. The integration of local materials and craftsmanship into a modern idiom and the impressive manner in which buildings and site were married, created a complex that expressed "Mexicanidad," while having a radically new architectural manifestation.¹¹



Fig. 2: Campus view from northeast, UNAM, CU, Mexico



Fig. 3: Campus view from the east, UNAM, CU, Mexico

The UNAM project had such impact during a decisive moment of cultural transformation in the country, that any discussion about Mexican architecture of this century must be divided into a "before and after" of its construction.¹² In contrast, what is being proposed in Guadalajara has much less to do with anything evolved from Mexico's rich 3,000 years of building tradition. The project tries to be "new," but the result is simply alien. It is doubtful that any future discussion of the history of Mexican architecture will be divided into a "before and after" created by this project, even if it equally manifests a profound change in cultural identity.

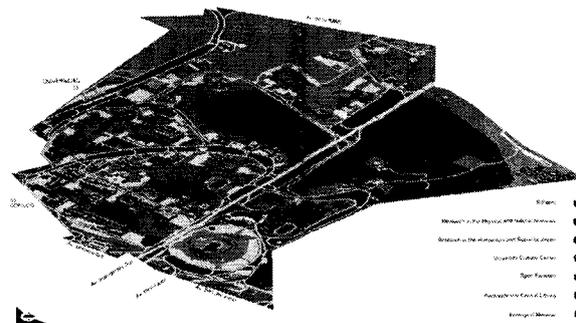


Fig. 4: Master Plan of Ciudad Universitaria, UNAM, CU, Mexico

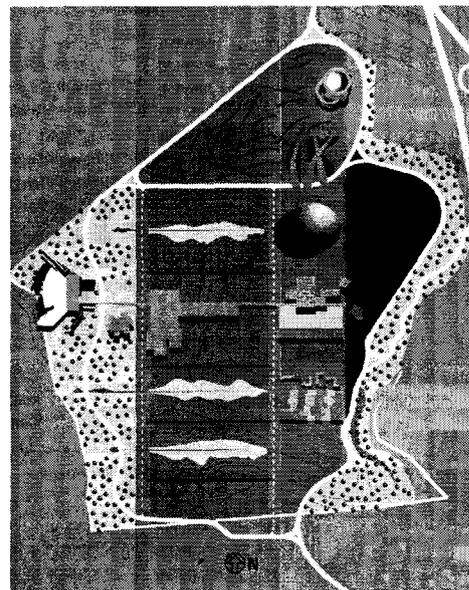


Fig. 5: Master Plan of JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico

The developer of the JVC Center project has clearly signaled the difference between the Mexican tradition of government created, large-scale development, and that of the private sector. In his own words, the developer, Jorge Vergara, explains the project by saying that, "The main goal is culture. But culture doesn't make a profit, so we bring in business to support it."¹³ The social focus of this project is a distinct break from the past. The government, historically the force for social betterment, invested resources to solve the problems of the large majority of Mexicans, building projects of mass housing, medical services and educational facilities. The new development envisioned for Guadalajara is aimed at "white collar office workers, university students, affluent families... and foreign businesspeople."¹⁴ However, given the low density of the project and the profit motive of its developer, the word "affluent" will need to be applied to all categories of users. In a country with the vast majority of population concentrated among the working poor, and where the economically advantaged make up a small fraction, the change in priorities of these projects is more notable.

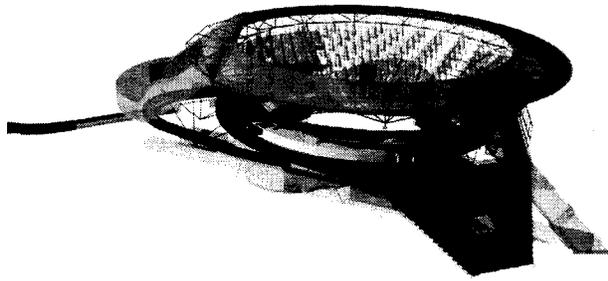


Fig. 6: "Palenque" — Stage/Stadium, Morphosis, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico

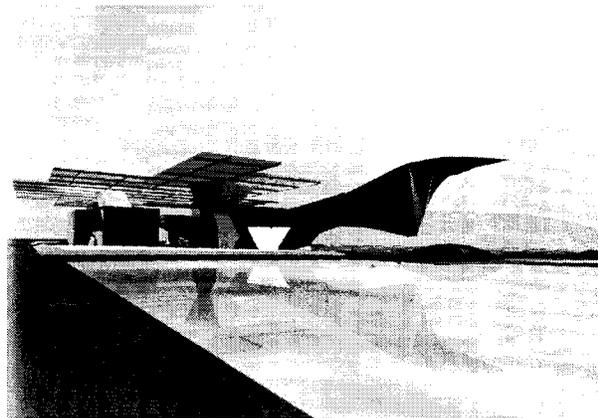


Fig. 7: Entertainment and Shopping, Coop Himmelblau and AVE Arquitectos, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico

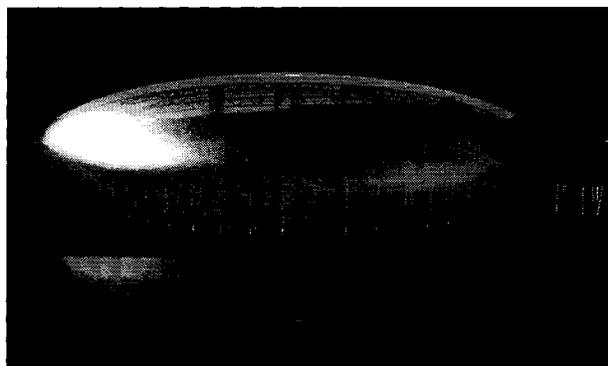


Fig. 8: Convention and Exhibition Center, TEN Arquitectos, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico

The greatest alterations in architectural identity are being brought about from these developments that represent changes in architectural production and which are inextricably linked to international corporations. Many are Mexican branches of foreign companies. They range from Hewlett Packard to IBM, from Mercedes Benz to Jaguar, and from Citibank to Banco Bilbao Vizcaya (a Spanish banking giant). While the majority of these works have been executed by international architects and a smaller number by Mexicans, global corporate interests have driven the projects and their ultimate expression. A number of these developments are complete packages produced abroad and then built in Mexico. Those projects tend to be more speculative in nature and probably are the worst examples of economic colonialism creating an upheaval in cultural identity.

These projects also represent a profound shift in the urban pattern, seen in their detachment from the urban center. A number of the more notable developments occur in newly created suburban locations. The JVC Center is a case in point. It is the first major project to be built outside of the ring road that limits the city of Guadalajara and will become a catalyst for further sprawl. Another egregious example is the new suburb of Santa Fe, being built on the periphery of Mexico City, west of town and on the highway to Toluca. It is the home to the largest collection of international corporate clients and is a veritable smorgasbord of styles and architectural intentions, quite distinct from the relative compatibility of modern works created until recently.

THE DECLINE OF MEXICANIDAD

For some Mexican architects the changes wrought by outside economic forces are creating "una apertura demasiado grande" (an opening that is too large). That lack of reciprocal opportunity bothers others; however, in the case of the United States, this lack of reciprocity is simply an extension of its "colonial" economic relationship with Mexico, an association that has cultural implications. NAFTA and the globalization of the economy have begun to transform Mexico into a net importer of culture, which is now made manifest even in architecture. Prior to NAFTA, the protectionist government, high import taxes and the strong link between architectural design and culture, limited incursions of this type. Changing economic conditions, the move towards neo-liberal policies, and the reduced government economic commitment to social justice have all eroded the hitherto important compact between the practice of architecture and improving social conditions.

CONCLUSION

There is no denying since the initiation of NAFTA, that globalization has become a part of the Mexican way of life. In the streets, restaurants and offices, life is permeated with foreign consumer goods, foreign affairs and foreign words, especially from the U.S. and Canada. Under NAFTA, Mexican exports, from beer to cars to "tele-novelas" (soap operas), have boosted the local economy, something that most Mexicans are justly proud about. Even within the architectural realm, Mexican architects acknowledge with pride the recognition abroad of Ricardo Legorreta and Luis Barragan, especially the latter's winning of the Pritzker Prize. However, their honors pale in comparison with the volume of influx of foreign projects, whether of "high" culture like the Alameda development, or "low" culture, such as the myriad of McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or others of such ilk that now are almost ubiquitous in Mexico City and other urban centers.

Globalization is now an integral part of Mexican culture. Mexicans are coming to terms with new words and their meanings: open borders, instant transactions, and free trade. Perhaps only nostalgically, Mexican architects can reflect on a past when traditional, cultural and historic roots provided identity in a time before the flood of foreign architectural ideas and projects.

With Mexico now far more open to outside forces and ideas, the relationship between architecture and culture becomes even more critical. Part of what needs defending is the idea of quality, a concept equally important as that of the effects of colonial cultural expansion from the U.S. and the E.E.C. NAFTA has transformed Mexican architectural practice in other ways besides economic. Architecture is now becoming simply a part of an economic process created by anonymous firms and unknown builders. The discussions in the architectural realm have turned from "design" and "avant-guard," to cost, size, and location. "Llave en mano" (turnkey) is a new word entering the vocabulary of practice in Mexico.

The negative perception of the changes to architectural practice and the transformation of architectural identity being wrought by globalization has been eloquently expressed by the Facultad de Arquitectura de la UNAM in their recent academic catalog ^{3/4} "What is important is to advance an independent, national development which rescues our roots, our traditions, that enriches our cultural identity, that now more than ever needs protection."¹⁵

NOTES

¹Beach Riley, "Social Progress and the New Architecture," *The New Architecture of Mexico* (N. Y.: Morrow and Co., 1937):18.

²Ibid: 18.

³F. Brandenburg, *The Making Of Modern Mexico* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964):1.

⁴Israel Katzman, *La Arquitectura Contemporanea Mexicana* (México, D.F.: SEP, 1963): 156.

⁵Francisco J. Treviño, "La Ciudad Universitaria y la Arquitectura Contemporánea de México," *La Arquitectura de la Ciudad Universitaria* (México, DF: UNAM, 1994): 112. (Translation by the authors)

⁶Ramón Vargas Salguero, "Las Reivindicaciones Históricas en el Funcionalismo Socialista," *Apuntes Para la Historia y Crítica de la Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX: 1900-1980*, Vol. 1 (México, D.F.: SEP/INBA, 1982):102.

⁷*Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 199; Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 1993* (México, D.F.: UNAM). (Translations by the authors)

⁸*Información Básica '99*: 104. (Translation by the authors)

⁹Ibid: 99. (Translation by the authors)

¹⁰Clifford Pearson, "JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico," *Architectural Record* (June 1999): 121.

¹¹Alberto Manrique, "El Futuro Radiante: La Ciudad Universitaria," *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX*. (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994): 212-13, 221.

¹²Ibid: 195.

¹³Pearson: 121.

¹⁴Ibid: 123.

¹⁵*Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 1993*. (Translation by the authors)

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1: *La Arquitectura de la Ciudad Universitaria*, José Rogelio Alvarez Noguera (México, D.F.: UNAM, 1994): 94.

Fig. 2: Ibid: 114.

Fig. 3: Ibid: 145.

Fig. 4: Ibid: 50.

Fig. 5: Grupo Omnilife, personal communication, 2000.

Fig. 6: Pearson, Clifford. "JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico," *Architectural Record* (June 1999): 139.

Fig. 7: Ibid: 131.

Fig. 8: Ibid: 124.

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