

The Architecture of Mexico's Evolving Identity

A rich pre-hispanic culture, the Spanish invasion and its own modernist tradition have all influenced Mexico's built environment. Its thriving architectural scene introduces contemporary building with a sense of returning to its ancestral roots.



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Mexico is often afflicted by an ailment known as *malinchismo*. It is a derogatory term that originates from the treachery of an indigenous Nahua woman known as La Malinche or Malintzin, who sided with the Spanish invaders in the sixteenth century and served as interpreter and aide to the conqueror Hernán Cortés. Particularly prevalent in the built environment, the accusatory term *malinchista* is applied to structures that emulate first-world buildings. Mexican architectural heritage from the colonial period and revolution is highly regarded and protected by the state, but pre-Hispanic architecture, modernism, and particularly vernacular buildings are seldom recognized in the same way. While foreign architects and scholars readily acknowledge the heritage of

Mexican architecture, it has been a challenge for Mexicans to recognize it themselves. In 1961, German émigré architect Max Cetto wrote: “True, in the first quarter of the [twentieth] century, Mexico had no pioneer of the caliber of a Gaudí, Perret, Henry van de Velde, or Wright; but in the people themselves the joy of creative art is



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- 01 / 03 Pyramid of the Magician in Uxmal, Yucatan, Mexico.
- 02 Mosaic mask, from the 15th or 16th century, of the deity Quetzalcoatl. A mask like this one, was reportedly given to Hernán Cortés by Moctezuma II.
- 04 Church of Santa Prisca de Taxco, constructed in the Baroque style in the 1750s in Guerrero, Mexico.



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present in such abundance that, within a generation and without direct influence from the outside, Mexican architecture became fluent in the idiom of our age.” He concluded, “our modern buildings need not fear comparison.” A history of combining stylistic choices under the premises of colonialism, imperialism, and even socialism created an incomparable woven landscape, which has informed the present architectural landscape. Today, Mexico is facing more than just identity issues. In September 2017, earthquakes caused considerable damage in Oaxaca, Morelos, and Puebla. Hurricanes and flooding are a constant threat to the entire nation of Mexico, and there is an urgent need for shelter and housing. Reconstruction and preventive measures are pressing, especially given the uncertainty of climate change.

The Search for Mexican Identity

Architect Fernanda Canales established her firm in 2002 and is one of the most important voices in contemporary Mexican architecture. She has studied the complex history that influenced her country's buildings. In her comprehensive volume *Architecture in Mexico, 1900–2010* (Arquine, 2013), she writes: “Mexican cities have been built on the basis of destruction: the center of New Spain erected over the ruins of Tenochtitlan, the late-eighteenth-century neoclassical city created

over Baroque treasures, the liberal country of the nineteenth century overlying the viceregal heritage, the modern twentieth-century metropolis tearing down everything, and the twenty-first century now refusing to recognize twentieth-century buildings as a legacy worth protecting.” This destruction-based process is off-putting. As is the lingering question, “What if we were more like a first-world country?” Nonetheless, it is hard to understand the complex context of Mexican architecture in the twenty-first century. Until the 1920s, the Mexican national identity in architecture remained a work in progress. A decade after the revolution, a miscellany of European influences remained. Monumental government buildings, baroque catholic churches, city plazas, grand mansions, and gardens, together with a gridded urban plan in the capital, were the result of the long Iberian occupation. Following the overthrow of dictator Porfirio Díaz in 1911, the architects guild rejected the French neoclassical style that had been installed together with a sort of “Haussmannization” of Mexico City during the rule of Archduke Maximilian of Austria in the late nineteenth century. However, the question remained as to what modern Mexican art and architecture might become.

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In 1921, Minister of Education José Vasconcelos established a government-funded program to push education, labor, and culture forward through the arts and industry—an initiative that would later be referenced by the Works Progress Administration in the post-Depression US. Under this program, Mexican patrimony was recognized with an element of pride, and the revolution became the subject of study and artistic expression, particularly in the muralist movement. Institutional buildings expressed their “Mexicanness” through the representation of indigenous heritage and the triumph over New Spain in monumental murals or stone mosaic murals, and three-dimensional wall surfaces that became known as *integración plástica* in some of the first functionalist buildings.

The advent of Mexican modernism as such was recognized by architecture historian Ramón Vargas Salguero through the work of José Villagrán García, who in 1925 completed the Granja Sanitaria, a research and vaccine production facility that for the first time joined the modern concept of hygiene with the budding functionalist architecture style. Other explorations in functionalism and significant

influence from Corbusian concepts are most evident in the “University City” of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), developed in the 1950s by Mario Pani, José Villagrán García, and Enrique del Moral, among others. Their unique vision included the artistic representation of Mexican history and culture through *integración plástica*. Artist and architect Juan O’Gorman, who built the first rationalist home in Latin America in 1929, was one of the most influential proponents of this movement. In 1951, he finished the central library at UNAM with a 40,000-square-foot (3,700-square-meter) natural-stone mosaic mural. Architecture historian Louise Noelle describes this period: “The concern was to achieve a local expression that, without abandoning rationalist precepts, offered a new path for shared creativity.”

- 05 *Representación histórica de la cultura*, mural by Juan O’Gorman on the facade of the library, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).
 06 Colonial-era street near to Plaza Borda in Taxco, Guerrero.
 07 The Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, designed by Abraham Zabludovsky and Teodoro González de León.

International Panorama

A seminal moment in history occurred when Mexico City was selected to host the 1968 Olympic Games. It was a source of pride for the entire country, a coming-out party, in a sense. Architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was named artistic director by president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, who told him, “what matters is the image the country will give to the world of its organizing capacity; that we can do it, and we can do it well. It is, therefore, an issue of image before the whole world. What is needed is efficiency.” Amid the civil rights movements and student protests happening in Mexico and all around the world, the desire to project a good image above all else remains a burden for Mexican culture.

With increasing population growth, particularly in the capital, which is home to over 21 million people, lack of housing has always been a critical issue. Both Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán and Conjunto Urbano Nonoalco Tlatelolco, built by Mario Pani in the late 1940s and early 1960s, respectively, were the first high-density developments known as *multifamiliares*. Noelle states, “Its zigzag plan is a formal and conceptual reference to Le Corbusier’s *redent* form in the *Ville Contemporaine* (1922).” Unfortunately, today, the concept of the *multifamiliar* has transformed into poorly constructed high-density developments that focus primarily on quantity, in an effort backed by the government to build shoe-box-style homes with almost complete disregard for living conditions.



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During the 1980s and 90s, a generation of architects like Ricardo Legorreta, Abraham Zabludovsky, Teodoro González de León, and Agustín Hernández worked toward an aesthetic that was uniquely Mexican, referencing pre-Hispanic architectural elements. Their singular expression was monumental and solemn (like the Museo Tamayo and the Auditorio Nacional by Zabludovsky and González de León), with an incomparable majestic energy (Legorreta’s coastal hotels, or Hernández’s futurist vision for the Heroico Colegio Militar, or Hernández’s sister’s Folkloric Ballet School).

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Contemporary Issues

Like Fernanda Canales, other architecture practices today are acutely aware of this background and its underlying issues, although it has seldom been an approachable subject. Reactions are evident through sustainable social housing models, from those by Tatiana Bilbao Estudio and Frida Escobedo to TACO; the reconstruction of disadvantaged communities seeking optimal environmental conditions, like the work of Comunal in Tepetzintan; singularly adaptable institutional buildings like the Pátzcuaro courthouse by Mauricio Rocha and Gabriela Carrillo, and the Teotitlán del Valle Cultural Center by PRODUCTORA; and the focus on transforming the urban landscape through the study of the country's past, like Alberto Kalach's proposal to bring back the original lake beds of Mexico City.

Some Mexican architecture practices in the twentieth century explored the values ingrained in vernacular architecture. It is particularly

evident in the late work of Luis Barragán, who constantly referenced the traditional homes of his native Guadalajara and adapted similar construction processes in his own architecture. Architect Óscar Hagerman, author of the essay “Design in the Service of Mankind” (1979), has spent most of his life studying the typologies of traditional Mexican architecture in Chiapas, Puebla, Jalisco, Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Guerrero while working with farmworkers and indigenous families in rural Mexico to build schools, clinics, and social reintegration centers. Similarly, new practices like TACO and Comunal are strong advocates for marginalized communities. The use of elements like compressed earth by architects Tatiana Bilbao and Frida Escobedo has proved vernacular references go beyond stylistic choice. Instead, materials are chosen based on what has the least environmental impact.

Founded in 2015 in Mexico City, Comunal is led by architect Mariana Ordóñez Grajales and architecture scholar Jesica Amescua Carrera, who describe their work as a “participatory social process” that aims to preserve vernacular typologies in rural districts. One of their most important projects is the Social Reconstruction of Habitat, which after the earthquakes of September 2017 focused on rebuilding and preserving the ways of living of the Mixe people of Oaxaca, without disregarding quality and functional design. Likewise, Mérida-based TACO is a multifaceted family practice that works with local materials and construction methods to create versatile spaces that consider everything from climate to local customs.

An important characteristic that relates to *malinchismo* is the way colonial and neoclassical architecture is, at times, revered to the extent that it becomes intimidating. Contemporary architects have approached the need for welcoming public spaces through the construction of pavilions that are open to the public and built around human interaction. Canales's Museo Abierto (Mexico City, 2018) was a temporary open-air museum where the visitor became part of the exhibition through a series of transitional patios. The reactivation of public space like TACO's Parque la Rejollada in Yucatán, which sits over a former *cenote*, or sinkhole, that collapsed into itself, now serves as a meeting place for local

08 A live/work space for a photographer in Mexico City designed by Taller Mauricio Rocha and Gabriel Carrillo.

09–10 The “Satellite Towers”, concrete sculptures designed in collaboration with Luis Barragán, constructed in the north of Mexico City.



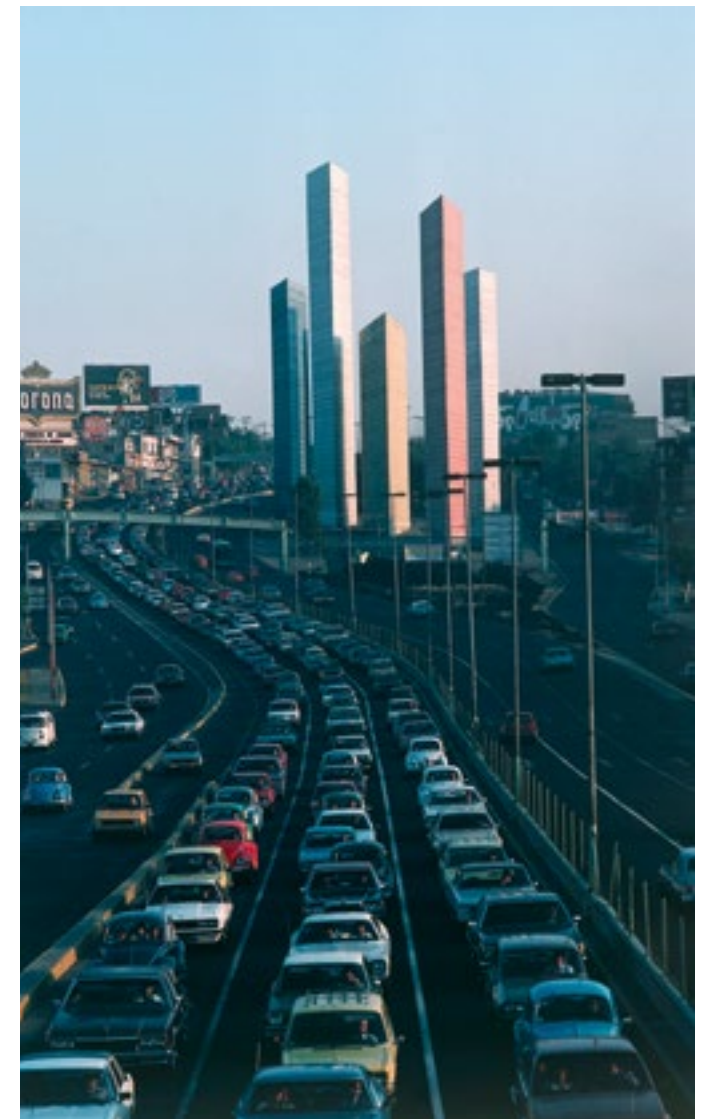
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residents. Tatiana Bilbao Estudio's Capilla Abierta (2010) is an open sanctuary built along the Ruta del Peregrino (Pilgrimage Route), part of a masterplan that included, among others, works by Ai Weiwei, Christ & Gantenbein, and Alejandro Aravena.

Mexico's cultural wealth has been cultivated for centuries. There is something in human nature that makes us return to our roots—in a cyclical manner, through phases of discovery and innovation, we remind ourselves we have been there before. Eventually, we come to terms with our problems by looking back to our ancestors for answers. Today, there is growing instability of multilateral institutions and large-scale migration crises, exacerbated by populist and isolationist attitudes worldwide; architecture and design practices have shifted and now confront the need to adapt and respond. Mexico's complex and layered history cannot be ignored. It is a crucial part of what the country is today. It is what helped it strengthen and rise from the rubble over and over again.

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