

MEXICAN POSTMODERNISM: TEODORO GONZÁLEZ DE LEÓN'S COLEGIO DE MÉXICO EXPRESSES MODERN ARCHITECTURE'S NEW HISTORICIZING SENSIBILITIES.

MEXICO

SINCE THE BEGINNING of the twentieth century, the nationalist project of modern architecture in Mexico—in many of its variants—has sought to incorporate historical sources and elements to create local, legible, and/or comfortable variants of modernist forms. In other words, like the postmodernist architecture developed by the North American architect Robert Venturi and the Italian Aldo Rossi, Mexican architecture has been characterized by eclecticism and the cannibalization of architectural styles from the past that, according to the critic Fredric Jameson, characterize postmodernism. Because of a lack of clear periodization, it is difficult to evaluate what distinguishes postmodernism in Mexico in the decades of the 1970s and 1980s from the work done previously. Another problem in understanding Mexican postmodernism is centered on how postmodernist architecture expresses its unmediated relationship with capitalism. Mexico, despite its stabilized development following World War II, began to suffer economic problems in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of its failed economic policies of import substitution industrialization (which isolated it by producing only for the domestic markets), among other things. The presidencies of both Luis Echeverría (1970–1976) and José López Portillo (1976–1982) created large public debts that put the country into a downward economic spiral that would end with the severe devaluation of the Mexican peso and one of the worst economic crises since the 1930s. Throughout their tenures, large infrastructural and public projects were made; however, because of low investor confidence, large-scale and private architectural commissions remained limited. In addition, Mexico never had the political situation that enabled postmodernism to emerge in other Latin American countries as a subtle critique of political or, worse, military dictatorships (as was the case in Brazil or Argentina; see 1979 and 1985-a entries). In these cases, the development of systems of architectural communication, the so-called “turn to language,” as well as the investigations on the

autonomy of architecture from politics through the use of drawing, collage, and formal explorations, provided “escape valves” from the censorship and control. Mexican architects in the 1970s and 1980s did not emulate—as other Latin American architects did—the styles and forms developing in North America or Europe despite their proximity to the United States or Mexico's relatively open political system. It was not until the early 1990s when the Mexican economy began to recuperate that the country, and its architecture as a result, became more open to outside influences as a consequence of the establishment in 1994 of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Despite these circumstances, a particular form of Mexican postmodernism developed as a response to these conditions, and we can define four characteristics or expressions of it. The first and most recognizable one is based on the popularity of the architecture of Luis Barragán. Due to its canonization and international recognition via the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York (1976) and the awarding of the Pritzker Prize to Barragán in 1980 (see 1980 entry), his work became the emblem of what Mexican (and, to a certain degree, Latin American) architecture would be as seen from abroad. In this way, the historical references embedded in his work became a synecdoche for traditional Mexican architecture that had undergone the process of modernization. The references pointed to very specific historical forms and colors of the central region of Mexico as well as colonial architecture and its Mediterranean nuances—all of which were associated with Barragán's past and with his travels to Europe. These forms represented an unproblematic Mexican past devoid of any social project characteristic of nationalist searches following the Mexican Revolution (see, for instance, the 1922 entry). So, to reference Barragán's architecture in Mexico meant to focus only on the architecture of Barragán while precluding a more general look at the history of architecture (as had been the case with Venturi's work)

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Ricardo Legorreta, interior courtyard of Hotel Camino Real, Mexico City, 1968.

or at the populist and collective notions embedded within typologies and forms (as argued by Rossi). Thus the use of specific elements—bright colors; architectural components such as the staircase in his house; unornamented, plain, heavy, thick walls, etc.—became emblematic of a regionalist response to modernism but also a continuation of the experiments of the twentieth century. Characteristic of this tendency is the work of Ricardo Legorreta, best known as Barragán's most direct protégé. His influence can be seen in Legorreta's design for the Hotel Camino Real (Mexico City, 1968) that has the chromatic references through the use of bright pinks and yellows; the inward focus; the artistic associations (such as the large-scale entry screen by Mathias Goeritz, who collaborated extensively with Barragán); the thick, unornamented walls; and other elements that are present in many of Barragán's works. Legorreta's later works, such as

the Hotel Camino Real (Ixtapa, Guerrero, 1980–1981) and the City of the Arts Master Plan and School of Visual Arts (Mexico City, 1994) continue this trend. Both structures show the contrast of bright colors highlighted by natural light, use of large-scale sculptural elements, and the use of historical forms (such as the water troughs from Mexican ranches typical of Barragán, in the first, or the domes from the colonial Capilla Real in Cholula or the pyramidal-shaped spiral stairs reminiscent of pre-Columbian ruins). The formal elements of the Barragánist “kit of parts” could be seen reproduced most obviously in the Gutiérrez Cortina House (Mexico City, 1987–1988) that reuses the stair without handrails, the contrasting bright colors, and the expression of the wood rafters on the ceiling that can all be found in Barragán's own house (Mexico City, 1947–1948; see 1947-a entry). In these works, we can see how Barragán's work became representative of a protopostmodernism: historical citations without social content that announced the end of the social project of modernism and the avant-garde.

While the “hyperchromaticism” of Barragán was the most prominent style, a more North American type of postmodernism did emerge in Mexico that, as in the previous case, was equally devoid of any theoretical armature. Neither Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) nor Venturi, Scott-Brown, and Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas* (1972), which developed as historical systems through which to criticize the limits of the modern movement, became points of reference. In addition, there was no clear connection with or influence by the so-called New York school—characterized by the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies under Peter Eisenman—or, even, with the Spanish neo-avant-garde, such as the architects and theorists who revolved around the Barcelonan magazine *Arquitecturas Bis*—a sort of response to the polemics coming from North America—which was involved in investigating the character of European architecture and theory at the time. For Mexican critics like Antonio Toca, the lack of quality work produced during the eighties was really the result of the financial situation, the trauma following the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, and a sort of uncertainty experienced by the architectural profession: “Mediocrity has been the answer to [postmodern historical references], and the very few buildings built—because postmodernism has manifested itself primarily through remodelings and decorative interventions—clearly show its theatrical



Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludovsky,
interior courtyard of the Colegio de México, Mexico City,
1974–1976.



Agustín Hernández, Heroico Colegio Militar, Mexico City, 1973–1976.

qualities.”¹ These tendencies can be seen in Félix Sánchez’s own architectural office (Mexico City, 1986). A rehabilitation of a historical building, the project’s forms and details are typical of a North American postmodernism influenced by Michael Graves’s early work: exposed steel structure, glass block, wood, gray-painted steel tube handrails, inset arches within square openings, among others. Other examples to be cited include the myriad of buildings designed in the Santa Fe district of Mexico City that, at the time, became one of the new centers of financial activity and information economy based on the emerging globalization. Emblematic are office buildings and shopping centers that are modeled primarily on their North American counterparts (see 1994-b entry).

The third expression of Mexican postmodernism is tied to a monumental tradition that is indebted to pre-Hispanic architecture but also to Le Corbusier’s post-World War II turn to exposed and expressive reinforced concrete. As we know, the importance of and presence of Le Corbusier in Mexican architecture extends as far back as the 1920s (see 1933 entry), as does the interest in incorporating pre-Columbian forms, which were most polemically addressed in the 1929 Mexican pavilion for the Ibero-American Exhibition (see 1929-a entry) or in Alberto Arai’s handball courts for UNAM (see 1952 entry). A more recent example of

the integration of both can be seen in Pedro Ramírez Vázquez’s National Museum of Anthropology (see 1964-b box) where free-plan spaces, utilized for museographic purposes, surround a pre-Hispanic-inspired and -decorated central courtyard.

Following many of these tendencies is the work of Teodoro González de León. According to the North American critic Richard Ingersoll, this work can be characterized as “neo-Aztec.”² As an architectural student, González de León was on the winning team—along with Armando Franco and Enrique Molinar—for the design of the Ciudad Universitaria competition held in 1946 (see 1952 entry). By 1947, having received a scholarship, he traveled to Paris, where he worked for Le Corbusier between 1947 and 1949 as the latter was finishing his design for the Unité d’Habitation (Marseilles, 1947–1952). Upon his return to Mexico, González de León developed work that was characterized by different formal and stylistic explorations: from glass boxes inspired by Mies van der Rohe, to designs that incorporate various Corbusian elements and forms, to apartment complexes that—like the work of Louis Kahn—utilize service towers to define interior spaces while providing a monumental appearance on the exterior. Along with Abraham Zabludovsky,

González de León developed a new architectural language that would become emblematic of a monumental postmodernism. The works from the early to mid-1970s are composed of geometrically stark and pure volumes constructed in reinforced concrete. For the Colegio de México (Mexico City, 1974–1976), the primary organizational system is a courtyard that, for González de León, references both colonial and pre-Hispanic plazas. Given the 42-foot grade change in the site, that central open space becomes subdivided into a series of platforms that allow access into the different programs and levels of the building. In addition, the design introduces a triangular geometry in plan to make the experience of moving from the large open entry portico through the courtyard more dynamic. The concrete used for the construction is hand chiseled to expose the marble aggregate, giving it, in the

words of González de León, a “warm, craft-like texture akin to that of natural stones, reflecting the fact that human hands have been at work on it.”³ Through these last elements, the work becomes less monolithic and signals a return to the importance of the handicrafts of construction. A similar organizational system and approach to handicrafts is present in J. Francisco Serrano’s campus for the Universidad Iberoamericana (Mexico City, 1981–1987) that is arranged around a multilevel central courtyard. Like its predecessor, the Colegio de México, the layout of the campus also uses diagonals as a compositional method. Its stepped terraces create a dynamic spatial sense that also allows access to the surrounding structures at differing levels. And, while the structure is built with reinforced concrete, the most notable differences from the Colegio de México is the use of brick as cladding and infill throughout, giving the different zones and elements a unified and coherent reading.

Although it’s easy to see how these examples—formally, materially, and spatially—could be characterized as neo-Aztec, it is truly the work of Agustín Hernández that is most emblematic of this and even of a “Hi-Tec Aztecón” (Aztec High-Tech). Hernández, by using contemporary technologies, generates forms that pre-Columbian people had built in the past. The Heroico Colegio Militar (National Military Academy; Mexico City, 1973–1976) demonstrates this clearly not only because of its overall organization around a large open plaza—reminiscent of the main plaza in Monte Alban, Oaxaca—but also because many of the buildings that surround the plaza—in addition to those that make up the whole complex—have glass curtain wall façades that angle inward to give a pyramidal profile. In other cases, the forms are monolithic constructions with continuous horizontal bands of windows that subdivide the buildings’ masses. One particular structure appears to be a typical International-style building, with horizontal windows and expressive floor slabs, that has tipped over and, thus, appears pyramidal. The most emblematic is the Administration Building, which, formally, looks like an enormous pre-Hispanic mask: its mouth composed of a reinforced concrete tribune, eyes made of cantilevered and angled volumes with horizontal windows, the nose of a protruding volume with glass openings. Paradigmatic of the coming together of extreme future and past, the Military Academy’s architecture—which inspired the forms of the Tyrell Corporation in a dystopian future Los Angeles



Carlos Mijares, interior of Christ Church, Mexico City, 1991–1992.

in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982)—was used in the futuristic film *Total Recall* (1990).

The final variant of Mexican postmodernism, the work of Carlos Mijares, has had the fewest repercussions and is, perhaps, the most difficult to stylistically characterize. This work is most akin to that of the Uruguayan architect and engineer Eladio Dieste and, like it, features formal manipulation of space based on the use of brick to make primarily industrial architecture and religious buildings (see 1955 entry). In structures such as the Mortuary Chapel (Jungapeo, Michoacán, 1982–1985) or the Christ Church (Mexico City, 1991–1992), the central feature is a hyperarticulated roof plane composed of elaborate brick pendentives, in the first, and

overlapping brick arches, in the second. In both cases, the spans of the brick structure allow for the simple square plan to rotate as it moves upward, creating a visual effect reminiscent of the baroque architecture of Guarino Guarini or Piranesian spatial layering. While the material and inspiration is based on local traditions of construction, the work is hardly regionalist and difficult to define as characteristically Mexican.

FURTHER READING

Ingersoll, "Mexican Architecture at the End of the Millennium."

Toca Fernández, *México: Nueva arquitectura*.