

Salamanca's Friar Juan de Sahagún Ex-monastery

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New Spain's monastery architecture was the ideal tool for gathering scientific knowledge and manifesting the Christian missionary spirit. And the Augustinian monastery complex in Salamanca, Guanajuato, is no exception. It was built during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, noted for the baroque in Mexico. The whole complex originally had a church in the shape of a Latin cross, a small cloister, a large cloister and an orchard and gardens, irrigated by waters of the Lerma River.

The large cloister was built in the eighteenth century to create an Augustinian University,

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imitating the Pontifical University of Salamanca, in Spain. Work began in 1750 and the monastery was finished under the direction of Friar Nicolás de Ochoa in 1761, when it was dedicated to Friar Juan de Sahagún. Once finished, the Augustinian's idea of founding a university was quashed because the Franciscan friars of Celaya had already founded the Royal Pontifical Franciscan University. Felipe II's royal patent prohibited the foundation of missionary institutions like these in towns so close together.

In the nineteenth century the buildings were damaged considerably: the French intervention and Juárez's Reform Laws were the basis for



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their partial destruction. The church bells were melted down to make canons and contempt for religious buildings favored pillage and theft.

The twentieth century was even more devastating. During the Revolution, the large cloister was turned into an army barracks and the losses were enormous. Later, in 1950, the oil workers union used it as a sports and recreation center, holding parties and boxing and wrestling matches there. Others later made spontaneous, improvised use of it, almost always occupying part of the building: as an arts and trades school, a primary school, a municipal jail, a Masonic lodge, a fire station and for tenement-like living quarters.

Two centuries of abuse made for very important architectural changes: barrel vaults and buttresses were demolished; sentry boxes were built while it was a jail, and anything that impeded visibility was eliminated; whole walls and corridors were ripped out; spans were walled up and exercise yards built for the prisoners. In addition to all of this, the excessive use of

underground water deposits has depleted them drastically, making the subsoil subside and cause a diagonal crack on the southeast corner of the building.

In an effort to recover this part of Mexico's colonial patrimony, conservation work began in 1999 on the building. Its priorities are very concrete:

1. Consolidating the building's structure so that it can withstand the movements of the subsoil in order to avoid more fissures.
2. Detecting the building's original features and evaluating their degree of deterioration in order to restore them.
3. Taking out the elements at odds with the original conception of the architectural space and those that—as long as they are not original or have no historic value—overwhelm the design.
4. Promoting uses of the building that will allow it to be preserved in decent condition and also made available to the public. **MVM**

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