

The Edificios Condesa And Mexico City's Artistic Hub

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The concentration of artists in specific districts in large cities is a generalized urban phenomenon. Spatial agglomeration of artists has mainly been studied for its role as a driving force for urban renewal and gentrification,¹ and local economic development,² while less attention is paid to its impact on artists' work. With this in mind, we can ask two central questions: Do artists living closely together collaborate among themselves? And, are artists living in proximity part of artistic circles?

I based my study on three dimensions of artistic work: the importance of residential space, artistic production as a collaborative process, and the formation of artistic circles. First, for some artists, their residence is both a place for private life and work. When this is the case, residential spaces are key for observing artists' interactions. Secondly, Howard Saul Becker has shown that artists' work involves many forms of collaboration and partnership; collaboration with other artists as well as with persons who complement their activities or support them.³ Collaboration and partnerships are essential both for people who produce individually, such as writers and painters, and for creators who work in groups, such as in the performing arts or film. Third, artistic work takes place in social circles. A "social circle is a particular form of a network which has no clear boundaries, indirect interaction; the core or cores have a greater density but [it] has no leadership, lacks formal instituted structures or norms, and gravitates around other structures."⁴ Many types of circles exist; the most important is the movement circle that aims "to create against certain established aesthetic principles or images."⁵

Artists' residence patterns show concentration in specific neighborhoods. Mexico City artists' spatial distribution has



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its particularities linked to the city's history and general transformation, in particular, the absence of a significant concentration of artists in and around downtown, up to very recently when the historic center went through urban renewal by attracting artists. Nowadays, artists' residential patterns indicate two main hubs within the city: one in the area around the Roma-Condesa neighborhood and the second in the area

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Photos courtesy of the author.

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known as Coyoacán-San Ángel, which has important cultural infrastructure, including the main campus of the National University and many concert halls and museums serving the entire city.

In the Roma-Condesa neighborhood, a residential apartment complex called “Edificios Condesa” (the Condesa Buildings) has been the home of many artists since at least the 1930s. This complex has 220 apartments in three buildings, occupying an entire city block and sharing an internal private street. I chose these dwellings to conduct my research because of the high number of artists living there, and because artists have occupied it for around 80 years. Edificios Condesa offers a contained space for studying artists' collaboration and its residents' membership in artistic circles. I conducted qualitative interviews with artists living there or who had lived there in the past. The questions explored the decision to live there, staying or leaving the building, and the collaborations the interviewees have carried on with other residents. I also examined the meaning of Edificios Condesa and the impact living in the building has had on individuals' careers. The interviews cover three generations of residents. I complemented this information with a historical analysis of cultural journals and magazines, artists' biographies, and the residents' artistic production.

The Edificios Condesa are in the Condesa neighborhood, founded in 1902. Early modern European, English-style architectural style inspired the buildings' design by Thomas J. Gore, and they were built between 1911 and 1925. Initially developed for the high-ranking employees of the El Águila oil company, the complex is one of the first modern apartment buildings in Mexico City; Gore changed the traditional model of apartments around a shared patio and designed independent buildings around private streets. Another change Gore introduced was the separation of service and residential circulation areas. By the 1930s, middle-class professionals, artists, and intellectuals had replaced the original residents. Later, in the 1970s, a new building was put up in what had been the original buildings' garden area. The new 12-story-tall building was rapidly occupied also by intellectuals and artists. The complex continued to be owned by a single land-

lord, and in the early 1980s, after a tenants' movement against rent hikes, the owners sold the apartments to their occupants. By that time, many artists could afford to buy their apartments.

**A PLACE OF DIVERSITY: DISCIPLINES,
GENERATIONS, FAMILIES**

I identified a total of 154 artists (and two publishing offices) that have occupied the building since 1934. The list is not complete but indicates its role as an artists' hub. The distribution of artistic disciplines is as follows: set design and theater, 22 percent; actors, 21 percent; painters, 19 percent; musicians, 18 percent; design and publishing, 10 percent; writers, 9 percent; dancers, 7 percent; sculpture, photography and art dealers, 4 percent each; and film, 3 percent. The remaining 12 percent includes philosophers, journalists, intellectuals, professors, and the like.

Living in the building creates the chance to come in contact with many generations and their social networks. I identified five generations that have at some point lived there at the same time: a) those who arrived in the 1940s, a visible group of Spanish exiles, like Eduardo Nicol, Ramón Xirau, and Pedro Garfias; b) 1960s arrivals, a large group of artists. Some are still living in the building; others lived their entire lives there; c) those who arrived in the 1970s-1980s and are now in their sixties; d) those who arrived in the 1990s, and are now in their 40s and 50s; e) and the newest residents, now under 40. Many of the artists on my list have lived with their families and raised their kids there. Some of those children grew up and decided to stay in the building, and now a third generation has grown up to also be artists; in some cases they have decided to return to the homes of their grandparents or parents. Some apartments have been passed down within families, generations moving in and out leaving the space for the next one. Other families have decided to rent, in many cases to other artists they know. Others have used the apartments to open offices/studios related to their line of work. Generations grow up together exploring and playing with art, and the children were present in both their parents' artistic events and social gatherings. For many, this communal experience was a determining factor in their decision to become artists.

Artists use the apartments for work. All classical musicians use their apartments as the main place for rehearsal, composition, and work-related transactions. Designers, pho-



tographers, and writers spend most of their working hours at home, and in some cases, especially designers, their home is also their official business address. Theater people and actors use their apartments less intensely, but also report that they use them to develop projects. Those few who have separate studios choose locations within walking distance from the building. Painters use apartments as studios, and a couple of former residents had had their publishing houses in their apartments at different times.

Two artistic movements had central figures as residents. They existed simultaneously and had similar intentions, separated conceptually only by their media; one was made up of writers, the other, painters. The Mid-century Generation was a literary movement that covered both fiction and critical essays about theater, film, and painting. The second was known as the Generation of the Break, made up mainly of painters. Both opposed the dominant nationalist discourse and took a critical view of the post-Revolutionary state and its cultural policies. Both looked to cosmopolitanism and diversity in opposition to nationalism and statism. Central figures of the two circles lived in the building. However, it was a sub-group of them, the House on the Lake Group, that actually centered its activities in the building. The core of the group were writers Juan Vicente Melo, Juan José Gurrola, Juan García Ponce, Inés Arredondo, Eduardo Lizalde, and Tomás Segovia, and painters Fernando García Ponce, and Manuel Felgueres. For them, meetings and parties in the building's apartments are mentioned not only in their accounts of how their aesthetic intentions developed, but many of their works also deal with

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the building itself and the life of its residents. The group got its name because Gurrola, Segovia, and Melo were all directors of the House on the Lake in Chapultepec Park, a National Autonomous University of Mexico cultural facility, also within a walking distance of Edificios Condesa. They used it for producing multidisciplinary projects and to disseminate their aesthetic and political views.

Although other movement circles cannot be intimately associated with its residents, the building's significance as a social gathering space for broader networks of artists is well documented. Here, I can mention two who are central figures in Mexico City's cultural life around whom broad artistic-social circles have formed and have continued for more than 30 years. One was created around the Pecannins family, and the other around the contemporary classical music composer Mario Lavista.

The Pecannins sisters (Montserrat, Ana María, and Teresa) opened a gallery in 1964, which became an essential place for the Generation of the Break and a connection to European painters in the 1960s and 1970s. The three sisters moved into the Condesa buildings in the early 1960s, and their apartments were an extension of the gallery and a place for social gatherings of artists. Montserrat married Brian Nissen, a sculptor and painter, in 1965; they still live there. The second and third generations of the family became artists in different fields: music, painting, film, and most of them remain in the building, continuing the tradition of hosting resident and non-resident artists' social gatherings.

Another social circle has gravitated around Mario Lavista. He came to the building in 1972; also in contact with the House on the Lake Group, he participated in their cultural activities and through them became a resident. Lavista, besides being Mexico's most important living classical music composer, is a leading figure in the Mexican cultural scene. Mario is the founder of and continues to direct the musical journal *Pauta* and for many years has published a column of musical essays in the influential journal *Letras libres*, initiated by Octavio Paz. Lavista's apartment has been the gathering place for a variety of artists and intellectuals. Besides his occasional



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soirées, he hosts a weekly meeting with friends. In these social events, both residents and visitors participate.

Social interaction among residents has given rise to various forms of aesthetic influences, as well as artistic, economic, and political support, and what can be called accidental dissemination of different kinds of information and knowledge. Artists related accounts of common forms of implicit, unplanned collaboration; and other examples of partnerships were documented in biographies, published interviews, and other artists' reports. Musicians have produced the most collaborations that have resulted in co-authored work. They not only collaborate with each other, but have also participated with artists in many other disciplines and media. Composers and performers ranging from classical to pop and from different generations have lived in the building. In the past, Plácido Domingo spent his younger years in his parents' apartment there, along with the most beloved Mexican composer of children's music, Francisco Gabilondo Soler, "Cri-Cri." In recent years, the building has been the home of the string quartet Cuarteto Latinoamericano, the pianists Alberto Cruzprieto, Luisa Durón, and Teté Cuevas, and classical composers Lavista, Álvarez del Toro, and Joaquín Gutiérrez Heras. In other fields of music, film score composer Pablo Valero and film music designer Lynn Fainchtein also live there. In the pop music vein, I have found members of the rock groups, Café Tacuba, Zoe, Love la Feme, Jorge Reyes, and jazz and pop singers Betsy Pecannins, Margie Bermejo, and María del Sol. Collaboration

among them and with theater directors, film directors, dancers, and other theatrical artists abound.

Mario Lavista gives us the best examples of the sort of collaboration that happens among the residents. Together with Joselo from Café Tacuba, he composed the music for the film *Vivir mata* (Living Kills), in what Lavista calls an "exotic and strange partnership." He and painter Sandra Pani put together an exhibition of 36 of her drawings with his original music to be played along with them. With dancer Columbia Moya and playwright Juan José Gurrola, he created a multidisciplinary show that was performed in the Fine Arts Palace, Mexico's most important music venue. In particular, he has collaborated on many occasions with the Cuarteto Latinoamericano. Arón Britan, the quartet's second violinist, lived in the apartment above Lavista for 20 years; he remembers Lavista calling him to his apartment or knocking on the door to show him a piece he had just written and asking for his opinion on the composition and on the technical matters in his string works. Lavista composed different pieces of music for the quartet, but one, in particular, summarizes my argument: *String Quartet #3 Music for My Neighbor*, dedicated to Arón Britan, his upstairs neighbor, written in Edificios Condesa and recorded by Cuarteto Latinoamericano.

Edificios Condesa is an exceptional case of such a high density of artists living in a single small block for almost a century. My research has documented various forms of formal and informal collaboration among its residents. Regarding the formation of artistic movement circles based on the building, I have found only one clear example; however, many residents are/were leading art figures in Mexico City and their homes have been nodes of many social artists' circles. ■■

NOTES

- ¹ S. Sukin, *Loft Living, Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1982).
- ² R. Florida, "Cities and the Creative Class," *City & Community* vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 3-19.
- ³ H. S. Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1982).
- ⁴ D. Crane, *Invisible Colleges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).
- ⁵ Charles Kadushin, "Networks and Circles in the Production of Culture," *American Behavioral Scientist* vol. 19, no. 6, 1976, pp. 769-784.