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Gone with the Earthquake Mexico's Wounded Built Heritage



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▲ The interior of the Loreto Catholic Church in Mexico City's Historic Center had deteriorated and sunk over the years, but it had withstood many previous earthquakes.



▲ After the September earthquakes, sections of the Loreto Church interior had to be shored up.

The damage is immense, almost as if last September's earthquakes had targeted the country's cultural heritage. This time, Mexico, one of the places recognized worldwide for the wealth of its vast cultural and natural heritage, went through what it never had before: the modification of its historic face. In addition to the irreparable, painful loss of human life, these earthquakes will leave their mark on the history of our country.

Our heritage is a legacy that our ancestors left to us and that we will leave to future generations. In addition to being one of the countries with the greatest biodiversity on the planet, Mexico is a leader in terms of the dimension of our tangible and intangible cultural heritage. From its popular fiestas, festivals, and celebrations, frequently including dancing, singing, and traditional food, to the hundreds of sites with

archaeological, historical, or artistic wealth, Mexico heads the list in the Americas with the most number of sites and activities listed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as World Heritage Treasures.

Being listed is both symbolic and prestigious since it also requires that the country take a position about these activities and sites' protection and preservation. Whether we like it or not, it also demands that we ask ourselves many questions about ourselves, our identity, our roots, and other more profound issues, such as our permanence as a species and our need to transcend through the most diverse cultural manifestations.

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Photos by the author, unless otherwise specified.



▲ The bell towers of the Santa Veracruz Church in Mexico City's Historic Center were structurally damaged.

The Mexican state makes enormous efforts and has achieved certain —albeit insufficient— results in the area of preservation, conservation, restoration, and maintenance of our cultural heritage linked to living cultural manifestations, beyond just inert stones. Around this, it creates spaces for memory and frequently symbols of power accompanied by artistic qualities of historic events with which they are inexorably linked. It is this heritage that was the most damaged by last September's earthquakes.

It is said that 1 822 buildings with historic and artistic cultural value were damaged by the September 7, 19, and 23 quakes. Other approximate figures are also mentioned that give an idea of the gravity of the damage. Some have estimated that restoration will take until 2020, a date I think is too optimistic, since we are also entering an electoral campaign, which slows things down and centers the attention on other issues thought to be more of a “priority.” Federal funding for these activities have not been as available as they should be, despite the fact that they are working closely with state and municipal governments; civic



▲ A few days after the earthquake, local residents organized moving solidarity in the affected areas. This is the Natividad Church in Mexico City's Benito Juárez Borough.

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and religious associations; foundations; and committed citizens. The magnitude of the undertaking surpasses everything, and our position and actions trembled —literally— in the face of a natural phenomenon.

The September 7 earthquake had an important impact in the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas; the stronger September 19 quake damaged mainly the states of Puebla, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Morelos, Guerrero, and Mexico, and Mexico City. Everywhere domes, roof lanterns, vaults, and towers came down, practically mimicking the national anthem, one verse of which mentions similar situations, but as the devastating effects of war.

A few hours after the September 19 quake, I did not yet have any way of knowing if my house in the Roma Neighborhood, one of the areas with the most collapsed and damaged buildings, remained standing. Fortunately, everything came down to a few books falling off their shelves in the library. A few days later, my

duties took me to the state of Morelos to observe the tragedy in Jojutla. In addition to the loss of life, assessing the damage to the government-owned monuments led me and a team of collaborators to reconsider our position *vis-à-vis* the tragedy. It is common to hear, “Everything can be restored,” “We mustn’t tear down anything,” “This isn’t rubble; these are the vestiges of a historic monument.”

But there are limits. When you realize that “what is restorable,” “what is recoverable,” and “the vestiges of a monument” after a natural phenomenon are no longer integral parts of a building with historic and artistic characteristics, and are putting people’s safety at risk, many things shift their meaning.

It was the first time that I found myself facing a predicament of this magnitude. In Jojutla, it looked like it had rained stones. Seeing a religious, public monument still in use in that state, with its roof caved in, full of cracks, and with its towers teetering over it clearly demonstrated just how vulnerable we are every day, and that somehow, ending its being a risk to the population could involve drastic decisions that had to be made right then. That is where the limit comes into play and we are plagued by doubt: What if we leave it as a “romantic” ruin? How many examples of this kind are there in the world and in Mexico that have taught us that that option is also okay?

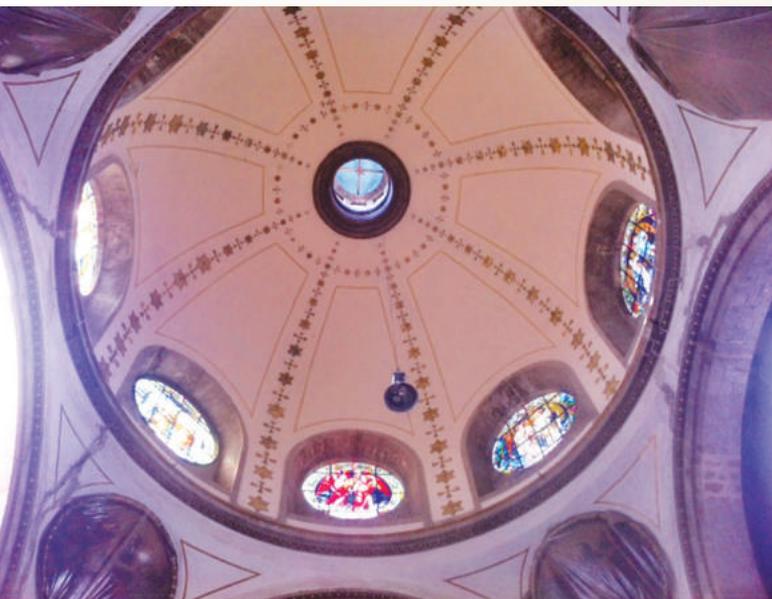


▲ Several churches in Jojutla, Morelos experienced the partial loss of structural elements like walls, vaults, and towers.

Some would say, “Look, we recreated the original site in a model, a rendering, and here was the wall that divided the cloister from the church, a very, very high stone wall that the earthquake toppled . . . that the fire destroyed . . . nothing is left except this column and this capitel...” “It’s okay. Nobody invented a fake history or made the mistake of making a new one like it used to be because it wouldn’t have been authentic, which is the value of architectural monuments,” others would say. Some might say, “It should be restored just as it was. We have enough documents to make that possible; it should be documented and all the scattered pieces should be numbered; somebody should draft a project and create an anastylosis, and up it’ll go! This is so there can again be a complete reading of the monument, that it can recover its original use and its symbolism, which is one value of architectural monuments. If whole cities have been rebuilt in Poland and Germany, and the Italians—who, if they have anything, it’s heritage—have gone through innumerable earthquakes, and just look...”



▲ The Caballero Águila House, an important sixteenth-century civic monument located in San Pedro Cholula, Puebla’s main plaza, suffered significant cracks and collapsed walls.



▲ This 2014 photograph shows the interior of the dome at the Our Lady of the Angels Church in Mexico City's Guerrero Neighborhood as seen from the church's transept.

Part of what continues to surprise us is that the churches, always bastions of psychological well-being and physical strength, have been so damaged, ripping away that halo of security and protection that they have had for centuries. A few days later, our work brought us to Mexico City, where damage was also major. Until today, federal and regional authorities are making super-human efforts to finish quantifying the damage where some sites continue to be of difficult access due to the intricate network of insufficient roads and pathways into rural areas, above all in the southern part of the city.

There is yet another “obstacle” or “facilitator” that radically changes the equation: money. Resources make it possible to make decisions and speed up processes. The lack of them creates obstacles, difficult situations in which you have to choose which limited technical and human resources to use to deal with the emergency, and even be creative and decide how to handle each case. In our country, little importance has been given to culture as something that fosters the potential for development and growth. Unfortunately, this is linked to the economic support it deserves and receives or does not receive. One of the main reasons the religious monuments were so greatly damaged is the lack of resources lent to their maintenance, which would have helped to better weather an earthquake. Naturally, the lack of preventive conservation by the users of these cultural goods—a majority are Mexican

and obligated under the law to provide it—was the last straw.

All the boroughs in Mexico City, from Gustavo A. Madero to Tlalpan, from Cuajimalpa to Iztapalapa, saw damage done to their religious heritage buildings. Of all the damaged constructions, the most noteworthy is the Church of Our Lady of the Angels in the Guerrero Neighborhood. A symbol of the area, it has been there at least since the sixteenth century, as a Marian sanctuary, giving this centuries-old neighborhood its identity. Tradition has it that in the sixteenth century, the image of Our Lady of the Angels, whose worship is deeply rooted in Franciscan tradition, appeared float-

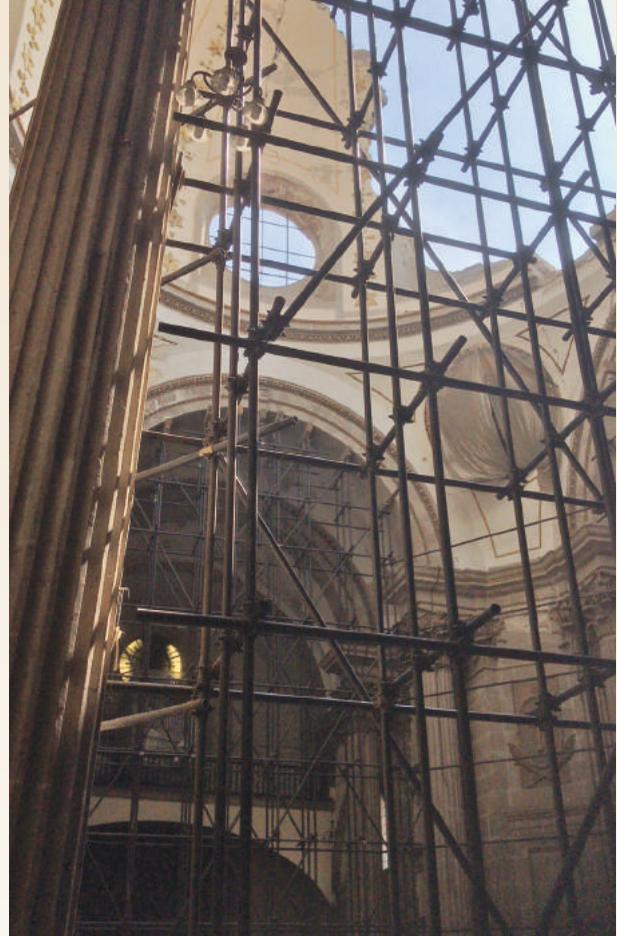
Churches, always bastions of psychological well-being and physical strength, have been heavily damaged, ripping away that halo of security and protection that they have had for centuries.



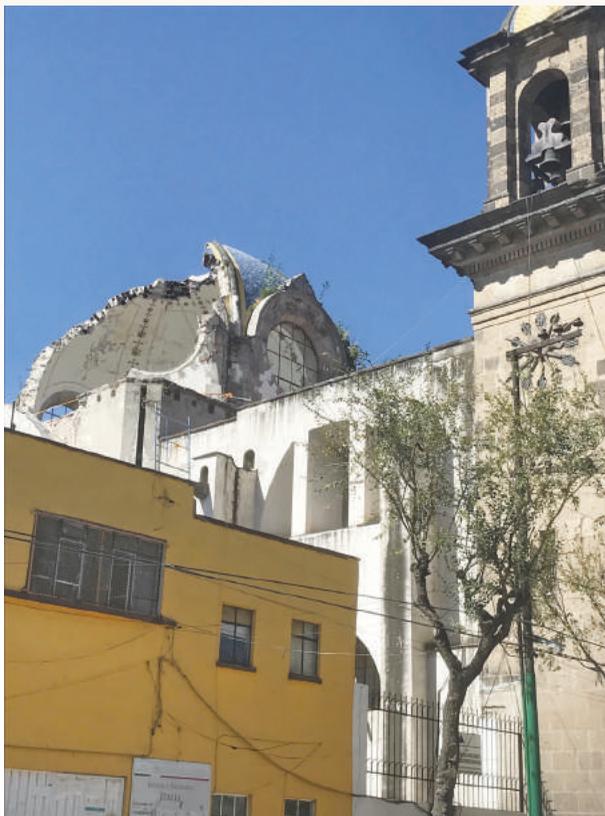
▲ On September 24, 2017, a large part of the dome of the Our Lady of the Angels Church collapsed, depositing several tons of material inside the building.

ing in the waters of the overflow of the lakes that flooded the city, causing great calamity. This painting, adopted by the population and a local indigenous strongman and seen as miraculous, was placed in a small adobe shrine that grew over the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries until it became the Guerrero Neighborhood's most important symbol.

Today, the building still hosts religious services in an improvised side chapel, looking sunken, with walls and columns that have crumbled and cracked, a broken floor, and almost half of its beautiful nineteenth-century dome almost completely turned to dust. It could not withstand the earthquake and, on Sunday, September 24, it collapsed, making a loud noise surprising local inhabitants. They also realized that it had endangered people's lives as well as the primary school next door, which fortunately had been empty at the time. But, the collapse sparked the on-going debate: What should be done? How do you deal with



▲ The interior arches of the Our Lady of the Angels Church next to the damaged area were protected: they are resting on a metal structure.



▲ Shot from the street of the Our Lady of the Angels Church dome after its partial collapse.

a “patient in intensive care”? Do we diagnose it as “brain dead” or do we revive it? Do we preserve what is left of the dome or not? Do we build another one just like it or do we use different materials? Do we keep the scaffolding that held up the arches of the transept or not? How much money is there? What is more important, the previous reading we had of it and collective memory, or its historicity, which would be dealt with through a contemporary intervention? There seems to be no end in sight to the debate, regardless of the technical aspects and the interpretation of different readings. The situation is urgent and pressure is mounting. Time passes and no resources are in sight. The monument will resist as far as it can. Whatever the result, whether due to decisions that are made or not made, time will put the puzzle pieces in their place and it will be the great master History that will judge and teach us. This is a challenge, but also a watershed for restoration in Mexico. A crisis is an opportunity, and, as the saying goes, “If you ‘lose,’ at least learn the lesson.” **MM**

