

The Interactive Economics Museum (mid^e)

Juan Amael Vizzuett Olvera*



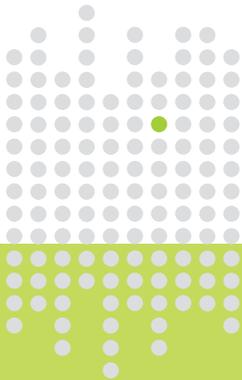
The building was born of a religious order's vocation for hospitality; it prospered during the opulent years of New Spain's capital and began its decline when the world that gave birth to it disappeared. Later, the city center's hard-working citizens adapted it to turn it into dwellings, spawning links to the community and housing thousands of life experiences. Today, back to its former splendor, the five-times-award-winning Museo Interactivo de Economía (Interactive Economics Museum, or MIDE) combines historical memories with cutting-edge technology in its permanent vocation to put play and education together.

PRECURSORS OF MEDICAL CARE

Like colonial aqueducts, this building made of red *tezontle* stone and light-colored granite links us to the Latin world, the empire of the Caesars. Arranged around square patios, its corridors ornamented with semi-circular arches create intimate open-air gardens, protected from the voices of

* Columnist at the *El Sol de México* newspaper and news editor of *Boxer Motors* magazine.
Photos courtesy of the Interactive Economics Museum.

The award-winning Interactive Economics Museum combines historical memories with cutting-edge technology to put play and education together.



the world and the gaze of outsiders. An ancient inhabitant of Pompey would recognize here the same world that Vesuvius buried two millennia ago.

“The order of the Bethlehemites took their name from Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ. Their crest bears the star announcing the nativity and the three crowns of the kings of the Orient,” the affable young hosts tell visitors. They talk about the Blessed Pedro of San José Betancur, who founded the order in 1687 in Guatemala, with its mission of helping the poor, children and the sick, not only to cure them, but also during their convalescence. The order thus became the precursor of modern medical care.

The Bethlehemites arrived in New Spain in 1674. In 1694, they built their monastery, one of the largest buildings in Mexico. In 1786, the friars commissioned an innovative architect from Granada, Lorenzo Rodríguez, with enlarging the structure. Rodríguez, also responsible for the magnificent tabernacle adjacent to Mexico City’s Metropolitan Cathedral, designed the patio of the novices with the classical lay-out inherited from Rome and Mudéjar art, with their cells flanking the patio. His original touch adorned the *tezontle* rock walls with a noteworthy geometric pattern that remained hidden for generations.

REWARDS FOR A RESCUE

If the viceregal Bethlehemites could see their main patio now, they would have no trouble recognizing the arches, the ornamented *tezontle* and the restored frescoes. But only two decades ago, nothing would have seemed familiar.

The museum has a photographic record of its own restoration so that all its visitors can remember it, too, both from what the hosts tell them and from the spectacular audiovisual projected on the



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main archways: after the suppression of the Bethlehemite order in the nineteenth century, the building operated as a military headquarters and a school of medicine, until part of it was turned into tenement apartments and the other part into a hotel.

The adaptations required that the arches be bricked up; the *tezontle* and the granite were hidden behind layers of plaster and paint. The same fate awaited the frescoes. Guests, visitors and residents could see nothing of the ancient splendor. The building continued to deteriorate during the twentieth century, even when in 1950 it was declared a historical monument. Fortunately, action was taken in time to save this undeniably priceless legacy. In 1989, the Banco de México (Mexico's central bank) purchased it and began one of the longest, most complex restoration jobs in recent history. It was also one of the most fruitful: Xiuhtecuhtli, the god of fire, was found during the excavations.

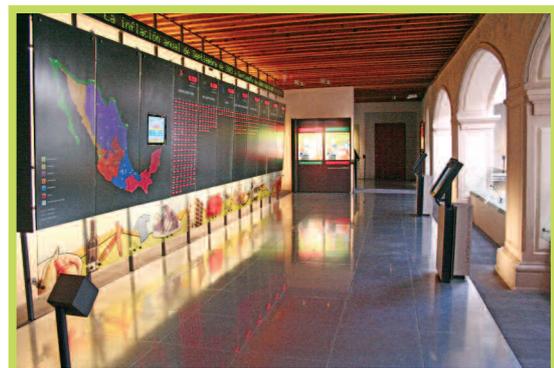
THE GOD OF FIRE

The central patio has a huge mechanical awning covering it for the projection of a documentary about the palace's history. Many screens drop from between the arches and the entire patio becomes the narrator of urban memories. The god of fire, whose effigy was found here, reminisces about the glory years of the great Tenochtitlán, a city that Bernal Díaz del Castillo said, "looked like those enchanted things the book of Amadis of Gaul talks about." Older residents reminisce about when this was a huge block of tenement apartments and the kids played in the patio, safe from the traffic that was increasingly heavy on Tacuba and Bolívar Streets. Then finally, the narration of the restoration starts.

This project took about 15 years of meticulous work by many specialists in different disciplines like architecture, engineering, history, archaeology and restoration. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) rigorously supervised the entire process from start to finish.

INTERACTIVE ECONOMICS FOR EVERYONE

The museographers in charge of the MIDE project conceived of the new building as a series of playful, surprising spaces so that visitors would have a different experience every step of the way, keeping their interest and curiosity alive.



The activities are so much fun that by the end of the visit, everybody gets a clear idea of what economists' terms mean.



Interactive museums have always been very well received by the Mexican public ever since the Federal Electricity Commission Technological Museum opened in the early 1970s in the second section of Chapultepec Forest Park. Because of its location on Tacuba and Bolivar Streets, the MIDE was destined not only to offer information accessibly to visitors but also to contribute to the restoration of the Historic Center of Mexico City.

The fact that the specialists were right is proven by the interest and attention that visitors of all ages show—but particularly children and young people—as they operate the systems and closely follow the explanations given, which are always pithy, but also brief and easy to understand.

Through a system of audiovisual recordings, new arrivals can see what economic concerns other visitors have, as well as express their own views. The procedure is to answer a relaxed but significant survey about economic concerns. The activities are so much fun that by the end of the visit, even non-specialists gets a clear idea of what terms economists use mean: inflation, movement of prices, monetary policy, fiscal policy, scarcity, the production process and commercial transactions are just a few of the expressions the public assimilates by watching cartoons and videos and playing with machines and games.

In the section about financial institutions (the stock market, banks, insurance companies), visitors themselves select the topics on a large moveable screen. The real directors of these institutions come up on the screen to explain their day-to-day activities in a friendly, accessible way. One

clip demonstrates the process of production of goods, while an animated segment—on two levels of difficulty: one for adults and another for teens—poses a series of decisions to participants, each of which will have consequences for their free time, resources and future.

The colonial decoration, the historic coining machine used for generations and the museum shop are other attractions.

One of the most exciting areas is the one dedicated to families from all over the world who experience daily the consequences of their respective nations' levels of development. Together with the economic data (literacy rates, access to potable water and health services, etc.), large-scale portraits of these families show them next to their traditional food. In the case of Mexico, the abundance of bottled soft drinks is very noticeable. All the information can be stored on visitors' tickets and downloaded and printed or sent to any e-mail address.



A LITTLE TIME TUNNEL

You can't leave without evoking the days when the original store fronts housed several of the old capital's best-known establishments, like the El Águila gentlemen's store, and the Vergara Photographic Studio. Anyone who goes through the threshold of the El Águila feels like they're entering a time tunnel: on the walls are huge advertisements that used to appear in the press, testifying to how prestigious the establishment was.

On the counter, the monumental cash register reigns supreme. Behind glass doors, bow ties and silk handkerchiefs for jacket pockets can be seen in perfect order; shirt collars, which for generations were sold separately; collarbands or yokes that kept the knot of the tie perfect and in place, plus giving a gentleman's dress the final touch; goatskin or woolen gloves; white shirts, cufflinks, scarves and other accessories that defined the dandy.

A roll-top desk from the time of Porfirio Díaz holds a typewriter typical of the golden 1920s: it has straight lines like a Model T, a black matte finish that make its nickel pieces (like the rings around the keys) shine in the face of an admiring little girl who cannot believe that once, such artifacts reigned supreme in all the offices on Earth. When she saw the wall telephone with the silk cable, the same little visitor asked how you could dial a number without a keypad. You get the vivid sensation that at any moment a linen-clad customer wearing a straw boater hat is going to walk in the door.

Next door, over the Vergara Studios' wallpaper are the faces of Mexicans of yesteryear, people who considered getting their portrait taken a ceremony that you had to go to in your best dress because, after all, that's how they were going to look forever in their family albums.



The visit shows us why the Interactive Economics Museum has won several awards in the short time since it opened to the public in 2006: the Miguel Covarrubias Prize for the best project of its kind, given by the INAH; the Gold Museum Award 2007, given by the American Association of Museums with a special mention for the Market Simulator; the Roy L. Shafer Leading Edge Award, from the Association of Science-Technology Centers; the ID Icons of Design award; and the prize from the International Council of Museums for interactive station development. **MM**

MUSEO INTERACTIVO DE ECONOMÍA

Tacuba 17, Centro Histórico, Distrito Federal

Open Monday through Sunday, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

www.mide.org.mx Phone: (52) (55) 5130-4600

General admission: Mex\$55; teachers and students with valid ID: Mex\$45