The history of Mexico City

(Final Part)

*Luis Ortiz Macedo**

Caballito Tower.

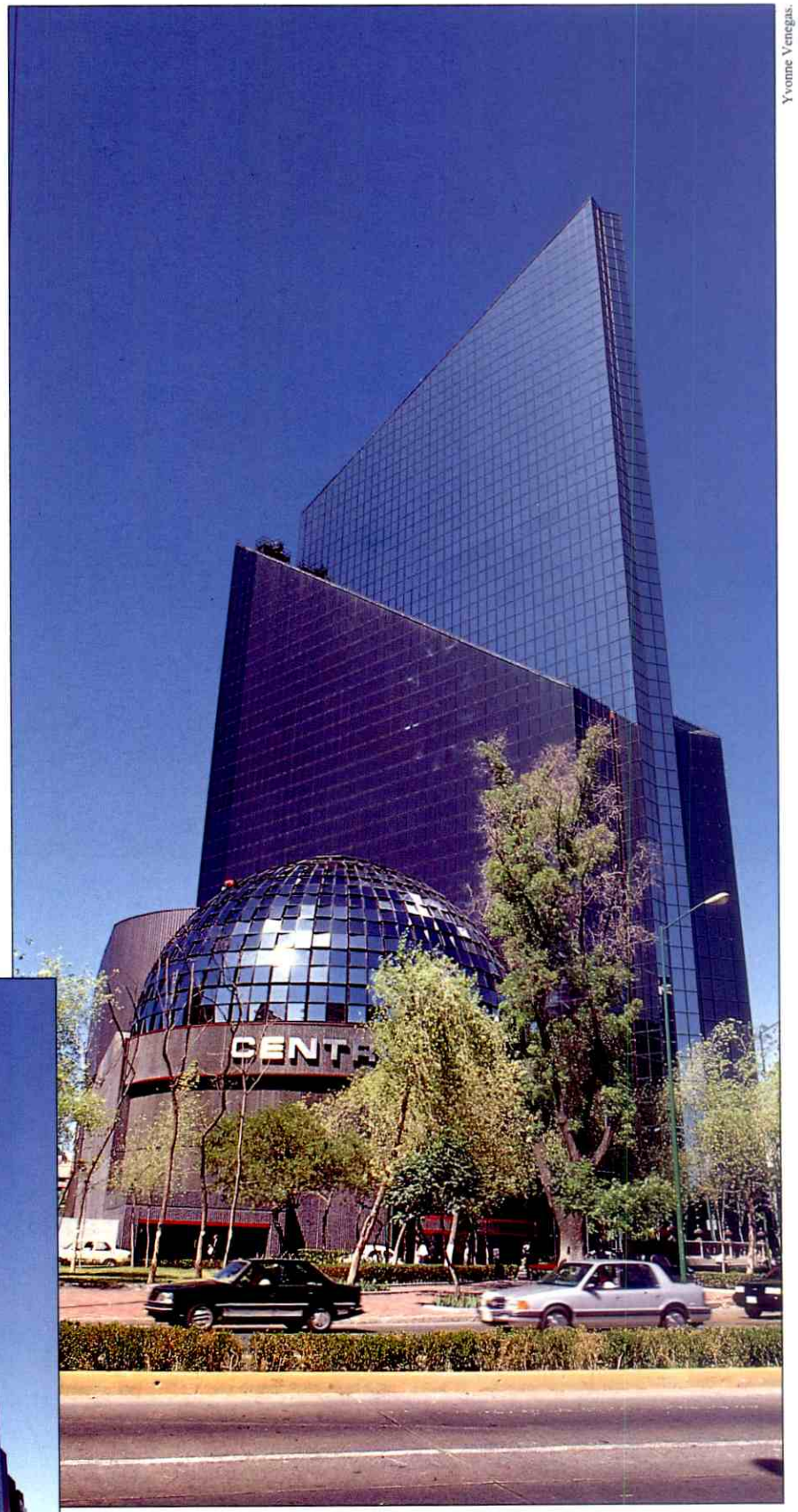
* Professor of Architecture.

The 20th century

The revolution broke out in 1910 at the end of the First Centenary of Independence celebrations. After the bloody episode known as the Tragic Ten Days (1913), people who still lived in the old part of town fled to outlying districts. Their former residences were turned into cheap housing, small businesses, warehouses and large shops.

Not until the 30s were conditions once again stable enough to allow public works to be undertaken that attracted or generated the capital necessary to rekindle the construction industry.

The presidential administrations popularly known as the Maximato (1928-1934) commissioned huge construction projects to activate the economy and fortify its official image. During the 30s, the so-called Legislative Palace was converted into a Monument to the Revolution, and work on the Bank of Mexico building and the National Theater, henceforth known as the Palace of Fine Arts, was completed. The impressive Department of Health was built opposite Chapultepec Wood.



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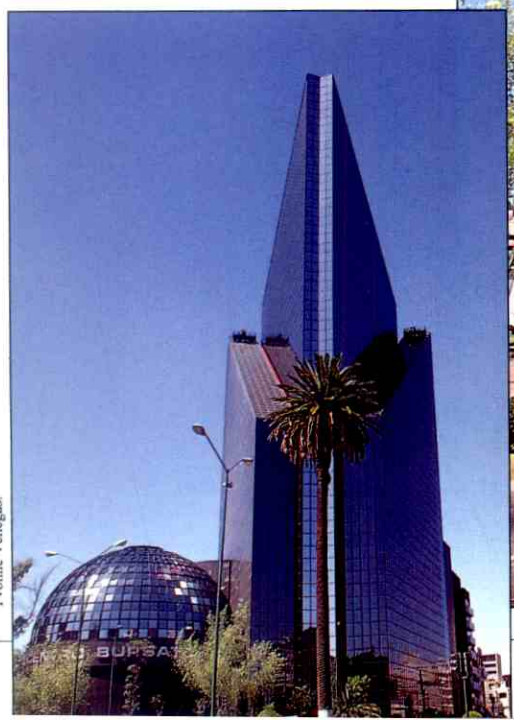
The Mexican Stock Exchange's building.



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Mexico's City Main Square.

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This period also saw the flowering of *art-deco*. In Mexico, attempts were made to adapt this international style to a peculiar form of nationalism. Another style that emerged was neocolonial, attempting to reproduce baroque and neoclassical architecture of colonial times.

The Municipal Council ceased to function in 1929 and the city became the Department of the Federal District. From then on city planning was ill-conceived and erratic. In the early revolutionary years it favored the expansion of segregationist subdivisions and the creation or expansion of roads encouraging heavy traffic and swift,

uncontrolled changes in land use and population density.

All this gradually upset the aesthetic balance of the city's neighborhoods as they were forced to accommodate the constant influx of immigrants to the capital. Its population doubled from 1910 to 1940, so that there were now one million inhabitants and still no real city planning.

From 1940 on, urban planning became more professional, although still tended toward remedial measures rather than radical solutions to contemporary problems and urgently needed long term planning. Ever since then, despite the adoption of diagnosis and projection, professional city planners have experienced great difficulty in having their ideas and projects accepted.

The 50s brought industrialization and uncontrolled population growth. Authorities were patently unable to control the random settlements put up by rural workers drawn to the capital. Shanty towns built on farm-land at the outskirts of the city meant that crops had to be planted ever farther away from the city center.

The University City and large housing units were built to an urban model inspired by unsubstantiated optimism over high-rise buildings, some of which were even planted in the city's Historic Center. This misguided belief culminated in the construction of the Latin American Tower, the tallest skyscraper in America, outside of the US, thus beginning the congestion of the city center, a problem yet to be solved.

The same decade also saw the multiplication of urban centers, in view of the incapacity of the traditional center to contain the city's growth. Conurbation rapidly enveloped towns in the valley basin, a process that reached its peak 30 years later. Insurgentes Avenue, Polanco and the Juarez districts, designed to accommodate much smaller numbers, all became densely populated, upsetting the existing balance between population and services. Growing numbers of subdivisions began to spread outside the Federal District, as a response to attempts by mayor Ernesto P. Uruchurtu to curtail urban expansion in the capital.

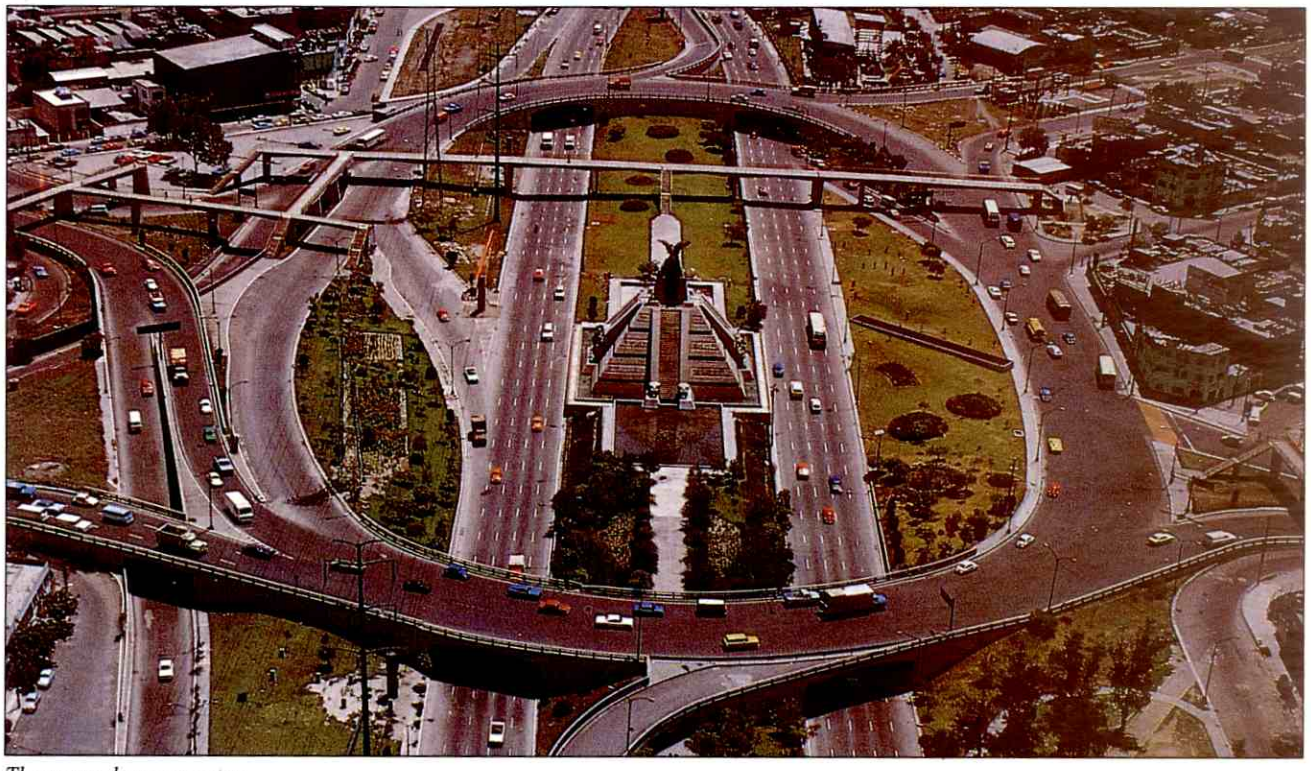
At the same time as planning organizations proliferated and urban legislation changed, problems continued to multiply rapidly, accentuating city dwellers' feelings of dissatisfaction and displacement.

Protecting the city's monumental heritage

This essay attempts to assess what has happened in the historic parts of Mexico City and to make projections

Yvonne Venegas.

The National Auditorium.



The new urban geometry.

for the present and possible future. It concentrates on changes taking place since the 50s, when urban development was suspended owing to lack of space.

The fact that Mexicans have only recently become aware of the need to preserve their national heritage warrants some explanation. The nationalistic ideology that emerged from the Revolution emphasized the importance of appreciating our traditional values and recovering our indigenous cultures. Great interest was shown in pre-Hispanic monuments, and popular and indigenous art was highly valued.

At the same time, José Vasconcelos, from his positions as University Rector and Secretary of Public Education, drew up an ambitious educational plan. He also encouraged the establishment of the Mexican School of Painting and gave artists scope to paint on the walls of public buildings.

He encouraged architects to follow colonial architectural style and ordered schools to be built with this type of façade. Architects who designed buildings with neocolonial façades were actually exempted from paying city taxes.

With a few interesting exceptions, the results left much to be desired: ten-storey civic buildings faced with volcanic rock and dressed stone, gas stations with mixtilinear decoration and tiled panels, furnishing for city parks and public places made of stone and wrought iron, to mention but a few of the countless unlikely combinations.

The original idea of having new buildings blend in with traditional architecture in the historic center and the so-called typical areas of Tlalpan, San Angel and Coyoacan may have been valid in theory, but results were so mediocre that the scheme was soon abandoned.

The work of two architects, Carlos Obregón Santacilia and José Villagrán García provided new alternatives. The latter achieved success by incorporating elements of international functionalism into his work, devoid of nationalist features.

As a result of this trend in city planning, architectural forms were plain and well-defined. Bare materials, predominantly horizontal combinations, totally incompatible with traditional architecture prevailed, putting an end to hopes of an aesthetically pleasing city-scape.

As we have seen, city planning from the 40s on, concentrated on widening streets to improve traffic flow. San Juan de Letrán, 20 de noviembre, José María Izazaga, Anillo de Circunvalación and Pino Suárez Avenues, destroyed the maze of tiny streets around the Historic Center.

Revolución, Insurgentes and Universidad Avenues cut right through San Angel, Tlalpan and Coyoacan, permanently upsetting the balance of their visual harmony.

Proposals for high-rise buildings on either side of these avenues were approved. The growing number of contemporary architectural features inserted into these areas will

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The Angel of Independence.

eventually put an end to the balance of shape and form that, for a number of reasons, was preserved until the past decade.

Public opposition in 1958 prevented Tacuba and Guatemala streets from being turned into main thoroughfares. The 1934 Law for the Protection of Monuments and Typical Areas only catalogued outstanding monuments, without providing for the preservation of secondary ones that are constantly being demolished to make room for new buildings.

Two additional factors have contributed to the diminution of Mexico City's monumental groups; the 1945 Law on Freezing Rents, which hastened the decay of numerous buildings, and arbitrary changes in land use and population density.

Unquestionably the 1972 Federal Law on Monuments and Historical and Archaeological Areas, and the 1980 decree declaring the Historic Center a protected area, prevented the demolition of structures that are part of our heritage.

To them must be added the tragic 1985 earthquakes that provided the stimulus to finally enact laws limiting the height of buildings. The earthquakes also provided the opportunity to restore several residential buildings under the emergency plan known as Housing Renovation.

All this suggests that renewed interest on the part of authorities and increasing numbers of activist groups may suffice to guarantee the preservation of our historic buildings. However, the effect of all these good intentions will be minimal, unless certain measures are taken:

a) Controlled land use, to favor housing tracts.

b) Reduction of land use by small businesses and offices, that generate traffic greater than historic urban planning can accommodate.

c) Relocation of street vendors who have taken over whole streets, causing traffic jams, unsanitary conditions, and whose stalls block cultural and tourist routes.

d) Creation of parking lots peripheral to the Historic Center, as the only permanent solution to traffic congestion; provision of nighttime garbage loading and unloading, and containerized garbage dumps; establishment of collective gas stations, and use of concentrates in restaurants and soft-drinks stalls to avoid traffic jams caused by bottled soft drink delivery trucks and collection points for empty bottles.

In 1988, Mexico City's Historic Center was added to the list of Humanity's Heritage, along with Xochimilco and its surrounding lake areas. Incumbent authorities have so far carried out the following measures:

1. They have established fiscal and credit incentives for the owners of buildings declared monuments, as well as providing professional advice for their restoration.
2. The water in Xochimilco's canals has been cleaned and its residents encouraged to use plots and "floating gardens" again for agricultural purposes, to forestall further urban encroachment.

Although the Historic Center covers an area of only 10 km^2, consisting of 668 city blocks, just a fraction of the city's 660 km^2, successive administrations have found it surprisingly difficult to achieve their aims, testimony to how difficult it is to improve deteriorating urban conditions in Mexico.

Potential cultural and economic benefits accruing from preventive and corrective measures should be assessed in the light of the following:

1. Increased real estate and municipal rates value.
2. Fewer man-hours wasted in travel, and improvement of services.
3. Cultural use of space to complement current educational policies.
4. Utilization of tourist resources (including substantial economic benefits and international presence).
5. Balance between housing and services, proximity to the workplace, and the benefits of having cultural activities close at hand.

According to previous models, historic centers should not become museum cities, filled with expensive boutiques and devoted to the indiscriminate use of tourists.

Recent cultural festivals and the proliferation of museums and theaters have already affected the everyday lives of residents in the Historic Center and districts such as San Angel, Tlalpan and Coyoacan, that have managed to preserve their heritage.

Such changes have accelerated at the expense of certain values. Former orchards have been subdivided to make room for horizontal condominiums, and tall buildings have sprung up on the outskirts of these districts, where street parking blocks traffic.

Current speculative real estate pressure on these privileged areas indicates that, unless rigorous controls are applied, it will become increasingly difficult if not impossible to halt destructive urban sprawl.

Universities have begun to produce specialists in diverse aspects of restoration and institutes responsible for preserving the national heritage have retained large staffs of such specialists. The private sector has also become increasingly involved, providing additional financial assistance for these purposes.

Mexico has signed a number of international agreements, placing her at the forefront in this continent in matters of cultural preservation and restoration.

Excellent results have been achieved in some cities, where the harmful effects of growth have been mitigated, as in the case of Zacatecas, San Miguel de Allende (Guanajuato) and Alamos (Sonora). However, numerous obstacles often make the possibility of restoration seem remote.

Efforts should not be limited to restoring the natural or man-made beauty of certain parts of the city, but enhanced until they match the success of similar undertakings in other parts of the country and the continent. It is essential to maintain the level of commitment to this task that increasingly requires the active involvement of all sectors of society VM

Juan O'Gorman, *The Upsala map and Mexico City in 1942.*