

# The sculptures of University City

Lourdes Cruz González Franco \*

**F**rom the time of its construction in 1952 up to the present day, University City<sup>1</sup> has been enriched with sculptures by a number of important artists. These works are products of different eras and motivations. The majority of them were made expressly for specific sites on the university campus. Others were donated by private institutions and are set as single pieces at various schools and departments of the university.

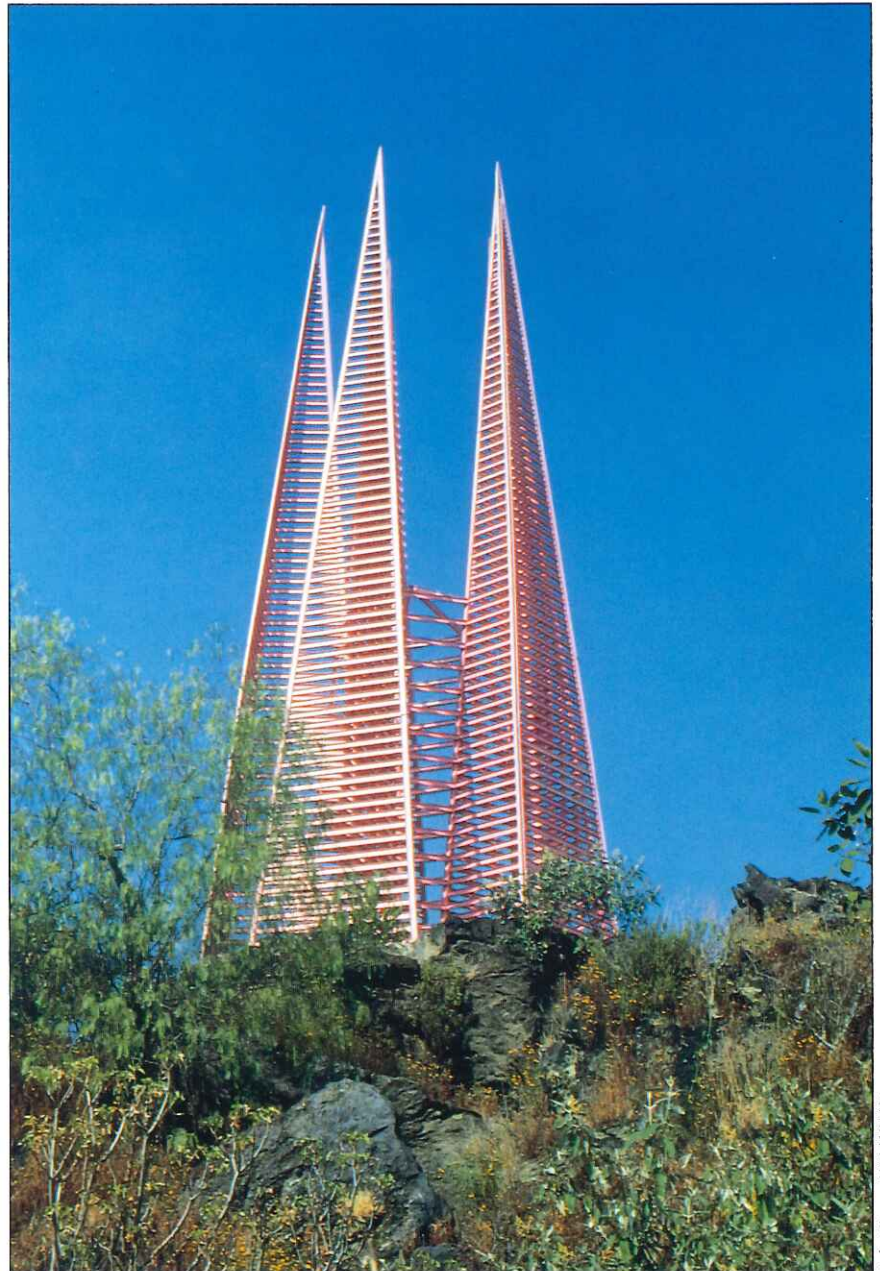
In the 1950s, a stylistic tendency known as plastic integration arose in Mexico as a result of international influences. This current sought a fusion between sculpture, painting and architecture, as a means of forming a unitary whole.

University City served as a canvas for various painters who enriched several buildings on the campus with important murals. Sculpture, such as Rodrigo Arenas Betancourt's *Prometheus bound*, was also involved in the project. This bronze sculpture was originally located in the east patio of the building housing the School of Science (now Humanities Tower II). It was transferred to the new science building in 1977.

This work of tremendous realism symbolizes the human thirst for knowledge. The quest is depicted by a human figure leaping from a

<sup>1</sup> University City is the huge central campus of Mexico's National University (UNAM), located in the southern part of Mexico City.

\* Institute of Aesthetic Studies, UNAM.



Mathias Goeritz, Pedregal crown (University Cultural Center).





Rodrigo Arenas Betancourt,  
Prometheus bound.

plumed serpent representing Quetzalcóatl. The design of the piece gives the viewer the sensation that it is suspended in mid-air. With the passage of time, the sculpture has become a symbol of the university.

On the site where *Prometheus bound* had been located, a stainless-steel sculpture by Federico Silva,

Lourdes Cruz / IIE / UNAM.



Portrait of Rosario Castellanos (Faculty of Philosophy and Letters).

known as *Bird mobile C*, now stands. This light work is well integrated with the "water mirror" in which it stands, as well as with the surrounding gardens.

There is also an isolated work created by sculptor Germán Cueto, known as *The runner*. This was a cultural contribution to the 1968 Mexico Olympics and is located on university property near Insurgentes Avenue. The sculpture, done in concrete, depicts an abstract figure representing an athlete.

The concrete sculptural mural in the School of Engineering is also noteworthy. This three-dimensional mural was constructed by Federico Silva on the exterior wall of the Javier Barros Sierra auditorium.

Aside from the previously mentioned sculptures, busts of famous personalities are to be found in several university schools. Among them are Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada at the School of Law, Dante Alighieri, Rosario Castellanos and Fray Alonso de la Veracruz at the School of Philosophy and Letters and Albert Einstein at the School of Sciences.

### The University Cultural Center

Between 1976 and 1980, an architectural complex was built in the southern part of University City, devoted to cultural diffusion. The complex includes the National Library, concert halls, theaters and cinemas.

A series of large-scale, open-air sculptures also forms part of this architectural space, providing visitors with an interesting visual experience. The sculptures, made from a variety of materials, depict abstract and geometric forms.

Several artists participated in this project, such as master artist Rufino Tamayo, whose work *The University, germ of humanity and wisdom* is on display; so are Federico Silva's *Eight rabbit* and a work commemorating fifty years of university autonomy. Also represented is Sebastián with

Cecilia Gutiérrez / IIE / UNAM.



Federico Silva, Plaza of the serpents of the Pedregal.

Colotti; Helen Escobedo with *Coatl*; Mathias Goeritz with *Crown of the rocky slopes*; Manuel Felguérez with *Variation on Kepler's key*, and Herzua with *Bird two*.

Within the National Library, there is a four-story, domed central patio, providing access to most of the building's offices. Two large-scale

IIE / UNAM.



Rodrigo Arenas Betancourt,  
Prometheus bound.





Cecilia Gutiérrez / IIE / UNAM.

Sculptural space.

large surface made of volcanic rock at its center.

The work itself consists of a round platform measuring 120 meters in diameter, made of stone and red *tezontle* rock. 64 concrete triangular modules rise from the circle. Six artists collaborated on

### The serpents of the pedregal and the City of Humanistic Research

The monumental volcanic-rock sculpture known as *The serpents of the pedregal*, by sculptor Federico Silva, was completed in 1987. Its purpose was to separate the University Cultural Center from the City of Humanistic Research located to the east of the National Library.

It is made up of two 400-meter-long serpents of volcanic rock, whose heads meet at a plaza.

The site also includes a “water mirror” containing a geometric sculpture made of painted concrete, by the same artist. The plaza is surrounded by gardens, offering a pleasant view.

Various humanistic research institutes, distributed around a

sculptures are located in this patio: *Dino*, by Federico Silva, made of metal and suspended from the domes—its form reminds the viewer of prehistoric birds—and *The union of the human sciences* by Hersua. These works are well-integrated into the building, enriching the architectural space.

### The Sculptural Space

The Sculptural Space, inaugurated in 1979 in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of university autonomy, is located to the north-east of the National Library. In line with the original idea of combining art and ecology, the enormous sculpture is open to pedestrians and includes a

Cecilia Gutiérrez / IIE / UNAM.



Federico Silva, Serpents of the Pedregal.

this piece: Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Hersua, Sebastián, and Federico Silva. Aside from being an aesthetic space, over the years it has become a natural stage for concerts and recreational events.

Lourdes Cruz / IIE / UNAM.



Hersua, The union of the human sciences (National Library).

garden, are located nearby, and there is a large, bright-red vertical metal sculpture in the center of this garden. The complex is dominated by the work of Sebastián, serving as a symbol of the area.

Only the most important works have been mentioned here, although others also make up part of the university's cultural legacy—a legacy that will surely be enriched in the future by the work of other Mexican artists ✕



Pedro Cuevas / IIE / UNAM.

Helen Escobedo, Coatl (University Cultural Center).