

Mexico City in the work of its writers

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“Streets are the soul of a city; offerings of neighbors, whose facades are their countenance, and they have the heavens for their roof.” While this might seem to be a poem, it is urbanist Louis Kahn’s definition of a city.

There is a parallelism here. The urbanist and the poet are professional observers of the city, especially of its streets. The historian Lewis Mumford succeeded in developing both disciplines in his famous *The City Through History*. The city is a mystery to be deciphered. Thus we call the street an artery, because it carries the blood and energy of the metropolis—that is to say, of its people.

Since the 15th century, when Mexico City—then capital of the great Aztec empire—was called Tenochtitlán, poets have praised its grandeur. As did the citizens of Rome, Aztecs thought their city had been built for eternity. But it was in the 19th century when the city lost its allegorical character and became an active protagonist.

The best 19th-century chronicler of Mexico’s urban landscape expressed himself not in words but with images. His name was Casimiro Castro, and he was the main artist of *México y sus alrededores* (Mexico City and Its Surroundings). Foreign artists emphasized the monumental character of the metropolis and

introduced human figures only to add local color, whereas for Castro the street and its people are part of a single representation. The city is not only its buildings, but also its people; the two elements are interwoven in a unique tapestry.

In a work painted by Juan O’Gorman in 1949, you can see the city where my parents lived, walked, fell in love and conceived me.

When I was born, it had been ten years since Efraín Huerta published *Los hombres del alba* (Men of the Dawn), the first poetry book entirely dedicated to Mexico City. The metropolis had gone beyond its traditional ways to become part of the postwar world economy. It seemed a smiling and placid city that only flirted with progress but it provided stories that could happen only in a great metropolis.

It is the city where we can laugh about Cantinflas’ satires in his film *Gran Hotel*, but also where Huerta’s vagabonds “have a mad dog for a heart.” In his book *Nueva grandeza mexicana* (New Grandeur of Mexico), Salvador Novo discovers that in this city, in 1946, “if one lives there many years, he will get to know only a few places.” José Chávez Morado’s contemporary engraving *The Capital Becomes a Great City* warns us about the dangers of a megalopolis. We suffered the consequences of this transformation during the earthquakes of September 1985.

What tools can be used to explain a city’s influence on writers? Again, I

will use a painting: *Early Sunday Morning* by the American artist Edward Hopper. The city has awakened. At dawn, the only living creatures are the buildings and the sun casting its shadows, modifying depths, colors and forms. The city is an architectural landscape; the painter, like the writer, reveals the internal codes that daily spectators overlook.

Like most of poets of my generation, I don’t believe in the idea of the city as an asphalt jungle. On the contrary, I think that as the city grows in size and dangers, we learn more about life and fraternity. The clearest example of this was seen during the 1985 earthquakes, when grass-roots efforts overwhelmed the authority of a government that thinks itself almighty.

To illustrate this feeling of fraternity, allow me to present one of my very first poems. I was then around twenty years old and immensely admired Spider Man. I believed that I myself was Spider Man and not Peter Parker. Like him, I was lonely and rejected by women, and loved walking around the city at night, challenging crime. Yet I was always safe, since drunkards, teenagers and superheroes have a special halo that protects them. Since then, I have not stopped exploring the city, both as a poet and as a literary critic.

The poem I wrote is entitled *Elogio de la calle* (In Praise of the Street). It was translated by Alicia Gaspar de Alba, then a student (and now perhaps a Ph.D.) who was a member of Ricardo Aguilar’s creative

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writing class at the University of Texas at El Paso:

To leave the theater
After having murdered misery
In a perfect crime,
And among the multitude to feel
That all men are Chaplin
And to see Catherine Deneuve in
all women.

To wield the eyes like scissors,
Cut down black buildings
Against the cobalt sky,
Collapse a Cadillac's tires
And await its furious owner,
While little by little tearing out
the leaves

Of a Walt Whitman book,
Watching the pages dance with
the autumn leavings
Upon the dark river of the street;
To snatch the guitars away from
blind musicians,
Make a bonfire with all of them
And hear the concert of creaking
strings and wood.

At last to throw our being
Weary of existence into the
chance hotel,
And at the surrender of sinews
and eyelids
To remember you still
And to love you even after
the battle
Although tomorrow upon
awakening again
We ask ourselves, City, what
the hell

Are we here for.

The writer is the emotive cartographer of the city. His mission is to record the different transformations that take place within it. When the novelist transforms urban space into an autonomous reality, not limiting himself to the stage for his representation, an epiphany arises between the reader and the text, forcing us to contemplate that fragment of the city with a different vision.

I use the theological term "epiphany" on purpose, for this magic and close encounter with the soul of

the city could only be compared to communicating with something divine. This occurs in the poem "Working Girls," included in Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems*, in Walt Whitman's Manhattan or in Victor Hugo's Paris in *Les Misérables* or *Nôtre Dame de Paris*.

As Kevin Lynch points out, a street, a piazza, a bridge—urban landmarks that give identity to the users of the city—can become more alive than real people. *Plaza de Santo Domingo* is the narrative cycle where Manuel Capetillo explores the oldest and most traditional piazza in Mexico City. In his short story "Parque Hondo," José Emilio Pacheco uses a familiar site to build a metaphor about the loss of innocence, or paradise lost.

Carlos Fuentes is the author of the most important novel about Mexico City, *La región más transparente* (The Clearest Region). But he has also written several short stories where fantasy and reality are mixed. From the first pages of his short novel *Aura*, he forces his reader to simultaneously see the past and present. With the eye of a film maker, Fuentes shows us a new dimension of Donceles Street:

You will be surprised that someone lives in Donceles. You've always believed that no one lives in this part of the city. Walking slowly, trying to find Number 1815 in this conglomerate of old Colonial palaces, turned into workshops, shoestores and soda fountains. The numbers have been adulterated: the old tile numbered 47 has now become 924; as you look up, you can see the second floor. There, nothing changes. The juke-boxes don't disturb the peace, the mercury bulbs do not give off lighting, the cheap windows do not decorate that second facade of the buildings. The unity of volcanic rock, the niches with their mutilated saints, crowned by doves, the elaborate stonework of Mexican baroque....

A few days ago, as I approached one of the old buildings in the

downtown sector, I discovered they had closed an old and very traditional restaurant where I used to go with my father when I was a child. I instantly remembered a poem written by the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. It is a love story I will always associate with the city and especially with this restaurant. Let me tell you why.

This restaurant was frequently visited by Salomón de la Selva, a poet from Honduras. He lived, wrote and loved—to use Stendahl's expression—in the first half of this century, and above all his virtues and achievements, he loved and was loved by the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay. In homage to that love and to the poet, she wrote a poem whose Spanish title is "Recuerdo" (Remembrance). We could say that every poem is a remembrance of having been in the timeless heaven of lovers. I will quote the poem because Millay establishes a love triangle between a man, a woman and a city, that territory which becomes the shield and the stage for lovers:

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry;
And you ate an apple, and I ate a pear,
From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere;
And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
And the sun rose dripping, a bucketful of gold.

We were very tired, we were
 very merry,
 We had gone back and forth all
 night on the ferry.
 We hailed, "Good morrow,
 mother!" to a shawl-covered head,
 And bought a morning paper,
 which neither of us read;
 And she wept, "God bless you!"
 for the apples and pears,

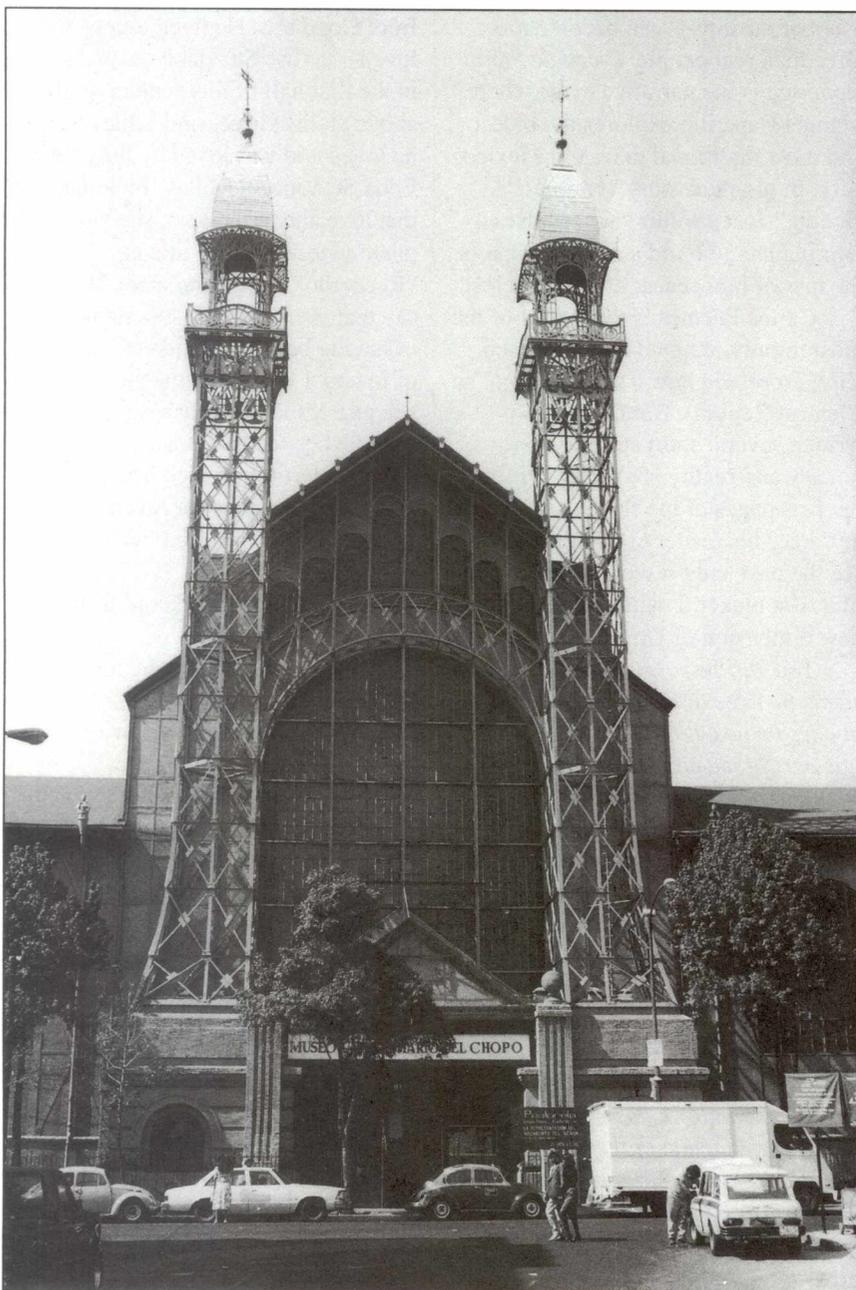
And we gave her all our money
 but our subway fares.
 In the same way in which a corner
 or a restaurant may become part of our
 intimate city, there are buildings that
 witness our daily and ignored
 odysseys. One of the places that may
 be used as a symbol is the hotel. "The
 old Hotel named the Earth," sings the
 Italian author Claudio Bagglioni.

Every city is full of those places where
 we can glimpse our ephemeral stay on
 Earth. Thinking about that, I wrote a
 poem which was translated into
 English by Reginald Gibbons:

A Woman and a Man

A woman and a man can,
 for example,
 Go into a hotel (that hidden temple
 That will appear if you only
 invoke it)
 And love each other in broad
 daylight.
 But a woman and a man should go
 Beforehand to a movie even if
 they never notice
 What's happening on screen
 And he stares at the peach down
 on her cheek
 And she squeezes his thigh when
 she's frightened.
 Or a woman and a man can
 Go out for a walk and his
 hand seems
 An extension of her waist—or
 vice versa—
 And then the rhythm
 Of the woman's stride slows
 (Because the only thing like this
 Is the sailing of a deep-water ship
 On certain days in spring)
 Or pay for the coffee that's
 already cold
 When their eyes and hands have
 said yes a thousand times.
 And without even touching,
 fixing themselves up or speaking
 A man and a woman can, finally,
 Go into a hotel and give each
 other their bodies,
 Leave the window open so that
 The hot breeze from the parks
 comes in, and the memory
 Of those leaving the movie theater,
 Of the clinking of spoons
 against cups,
 Of the weak voice that is saying,
 "Yes, that way."

In his book *Image of the City*,
 Kevin Lynch talks about the main
 elements that give us the right to the
 city. As noted before, buildings are



Arturo Pizarro

The old Natural History Museum, now El Chopo.

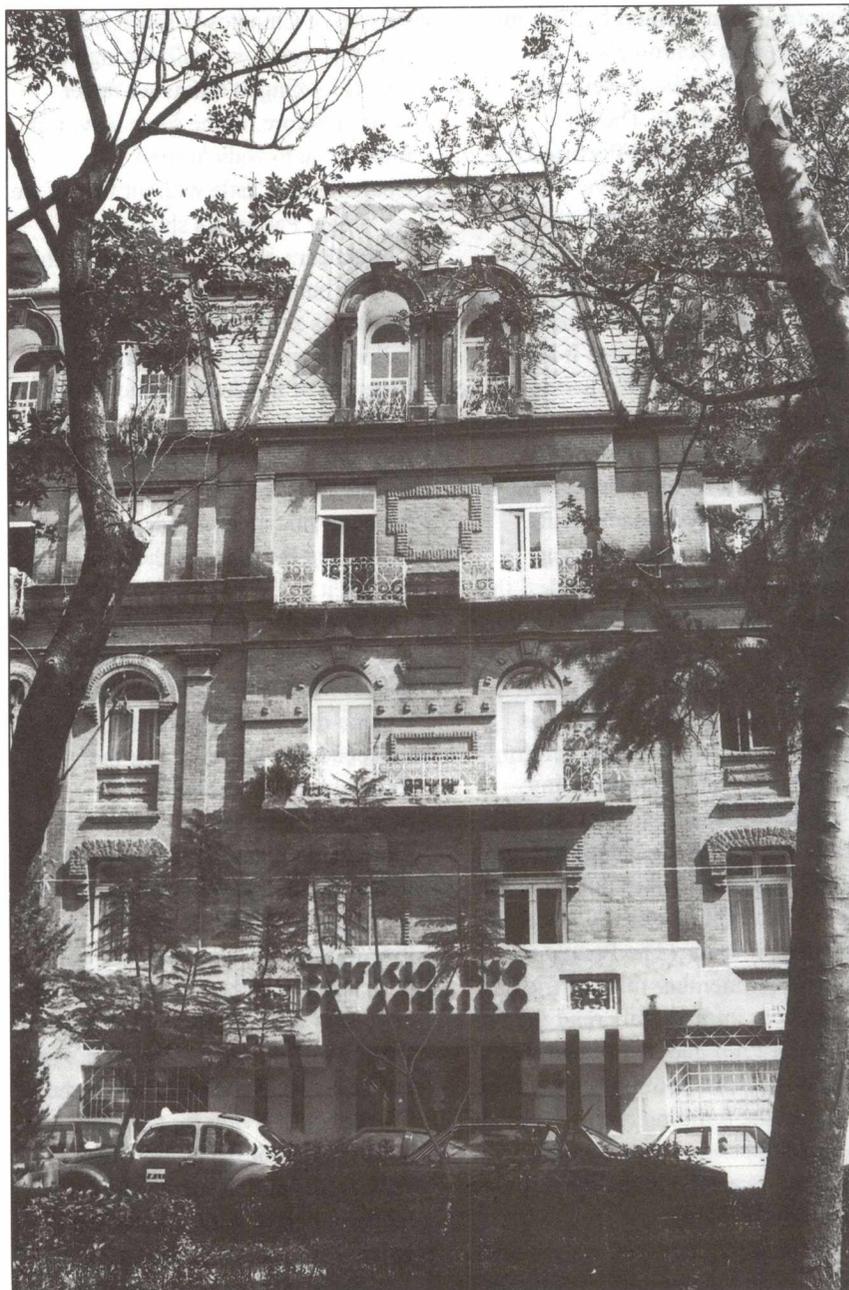
elements of the urban image as a whole. Traditionally, Mexico City has treasured its architecture, from the expression, attributed to Alexander von Humboldt, that it is the "City of Palaces," to the poem where the Renaissance poet Bernardo de Balbuena praises the beauty and harmony of Colonial architecture. Let me tell you about a modern experience of this relationship between man and the architectural landscape.

In 1975, our National University of Mexico organized a short story contest. The only theme was the old Natural History Museum. I stood in an abandoned, bizarre and beautiful building located in one of the city's most popular old neighborhoods.

The reason was that our university was reconstructing the building, and wanted people to grasp its feeling once again. Its enigmatic, mainly glass and steel architecture, and the many visits we made to this place when we were children, made the building a treasure for my generation. The university not only offered three first prizes, but also the opportunity of having a story published. You can imagine the interest that provoked among writers.

With different styles and narrative perspectives, writers talked about their relation with the building. Fantasy, humor, historical reconstruction showed how a building may be transformed in the mind of a user of the city, and may become as alive as a tree or an animal, to mention other creatures of our urban space that are part of our literature.

I won the third prize. In order to write my version of the building, I started a research project related more to the historical background than the artistic work. I learned about the process of the building's construction; I was lucky enough to get in touch with relatives of its former owners. By reading newspapers of that time, I reconstructed the celebrations of our



Historic building Rio de Janeiro.

first Independence Centennial, the occasion when the building was inaugurated. Following the painter Claude Monet's lesson on the Rouen Cathedral, I visited the building at different hours of the day. It is only on a few occasions such as those that I have so enjoyed the projective and imaginative process which comes before the slow, ungrateful

and sometimes fruitless process of writing.

I had all the elements for reconstruction. The problem was how to carry it through. How to turn the building into a protagonist, instead of using it as a decoration. Finally, I wrote three short stories that took place on three different dates in Mexico City. The first may be more

historical than literary, but it is my favorite. It is a chronicle of the inauguration of the museum on September 4, 1910. The main character is President Porfirio Díaz, although his name is never mentioned. Everything he sees and feels and smells is caused by the building.

Another historic building in our city is the one called Edificio Río de Janeiro in Colonia Roma. It is a massive red-brick construction whose strange appearance led neighborhood people to call it the House of the Witches. I lived there for several years and had the privilege of having neighbors such as the poet and translator Guillermo Fernández, the young Colombian author Eduardo García Aguilar and the diplomat and novelist Sergio Pitól.

We all knew that Pitól was writing a novel about the building, and it was a strange and funny sensation listening to him type all night long, shaping characters and situations born within our common space. The result was the novel *El desfile del amor* (The Parade of Love). I remember that some of the neighbors immediately read the book to see if Pitól had mentioned them. They were disappointed, for a simple reason: the building recreated by the novelist becomes part of literary fiction; its aesthetic reality surpasses immediate reality.

Nature imitates art. As we have seen before, writers discover different aspects in familiar sites. It is not the same to say "This story takes place in a city called X" as to describe, recreate and authenticate the space in which characters are developed. It is not enough to name a street. Our artistic duty is to make the reader feel the smell and the personality of that street.

This is what happens in Rafael Bernal's thriller *El complot mongol* (The Mongol Plot). The action takes place on Dolores Street, our small

version of Chinatown. Once we have read the novel, we walk through those streets looking at things we never noticed before. In the same way, it is impossible to walk around Chapultepec Castle without fear, if we remember Pacheco's short story "Tenga para que se entretenga" (This Is for Your Entertainment), where the ghost of a soldier of Maximilian's so-called empire takes children to the kingdom of the dead. In Pacheco's work, as in Fuentes', horror stories are a symbol of history and its weight. In Fuentes' "Chac-Mol," a stone idol becomes human and ends up killing and taking the place of the man who bought it.

The writer who talks about the city talks with the city. He makes it talk. His literary obligation is not to be a name-dropper but to obtain the independence of the city or the fragments he talks about. The metropolis must be a living entity, more than a stage. This act of magical transformation is achieved by James Joyce in the Dublin of *Ulysses*. A new kind of Ulysses, a modern man who does not live in the city but lives the city; he is the city. He is "The Man of the Crowd" of Edgar Allan Poe's tale, but he is also Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield," living for ten years in a hotel in front of the house where his wife awaits him. René Albérès, a modern literary critic, has written about this symbolical reading:

Every action has a meaning. For the artist and for God, everyday familiar reality is an allegorical poem. Every man lives, day by day, an Odyssey, on his way to the office or the bar. Life is not what it seems to be. It is not the daily mediocrity of an insignificant being, for in those mediocrities, art may find the invisible map of an epic poem.

The unsung saga of the common man is illustrated in Carlos Valdés' short story "La calle aún es nuestra" (The

Street Is Still Ours). Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are personified by two vagabonds who walk under the rain, just to recover the dignity of their existence. With that same pride, Bartleby, Herman Melville's unforgettable character, lives in his office in the desert of Wall Street. With that same rebellious spirit, Gavroche, the little boy from *Les Misérables*, vindicates the right of humble people to take over the streets.

In one of his short stories, the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges talks about a city under siege. The enemy outside threatens to kill everyone in the city except for one person. The chosen one is a poet, because he is the one who will tell the story. Remember the last words pronounced by Ishmael, the narrator voice in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*: "And I only escaped to tell thee" (Job).

Every man is part of the city, but the writer is its memory. His work may not be important for societies worried about economic growth and global war. But his writings are a testimony to the greatest virtues and defects mankind displays. We writers may have doubts about ourselves, but never about the benefits of thought and sensibility. If we did, it would be like rejecting rain because it makes us wet. Allow me, then, to finish with a poem where the rain, the city and my little niece are three figures making up a single feminine power:

A Portrait of the Rain

The rain is like a little girl walking barefoot down the street. She may be slow, like a sugar cube dissolving in your mouth, and then she becomes a friend of the open window. At times she is angry and turns the city into a kingdom of umbrellas. But the rain is always a little girl who retires, exhausted, to her kingdom, while the sun opens its fan, and gently crowns the high clouds to watch over her slumber ✎