

The Sculpture Zone

*Emilio Coral García **

The Sculpture Zone Center, located in University City's cultural area, is a place where visitors encounter a surprising integration of the modern and the historical, the earthly and the ritual. Its 64 monument-size concrete modules are a kind of reference, based on modern architecture and sculpture, to Mexico's pre-Columbian past with its numerous archeological monuments, found in places such as Teotihuacan, El Tajín, Palenque and Bonampak.

The Sculpture Zone displays artworks which aim to have a strong impact not only on the senses but on the deepest emotions of visitors. One is struck by the magnificence of works which, in addition to being sculptures, make up an urban space —perhaps a space which connects passersby with the energy of the cosmos, which even the most down-to-earth perceive one way or another in this site.

The zone consists of a wide plaza built around a center of volcanic rock, made up of very old stones that have been there since the memorable eruption of the Xitle volcano in pre-Hispanic times, which gave rise to what is now known as the San Angel stone formation. The stones are like a prolongation, reaching towards the sky, of the formidable natural energy of the volcano.

The modules of this magnificent work are arranged in a wide circle. Each is separated from its neighbors by a short distance, and the gigantic

circle made up of these megalithic pieces has an exterior diameter of about 360 feet; the interior diameter measures approximately 300 feet. The surrounding red clay highlights the stones.

This huge collective sculpture, inaugurated in 1979 by then UNAM Rector Guillermo Soberón, was made by six of Mexico's foremost artists: Mathias Goeritz, Hersúa, Sebastián, Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez and Federico Silva. In the Sculpture Walk, an area near the Sculpture Zone, visitors can view various pieces of geometric sculpture individually made by each of these artists.

Geometric design is an important trend of composition in abstract art. In the Mexican art world, the creators of the Sculpture Zone have been key exponents of "geometrism" in sculpture, noteworthy for their

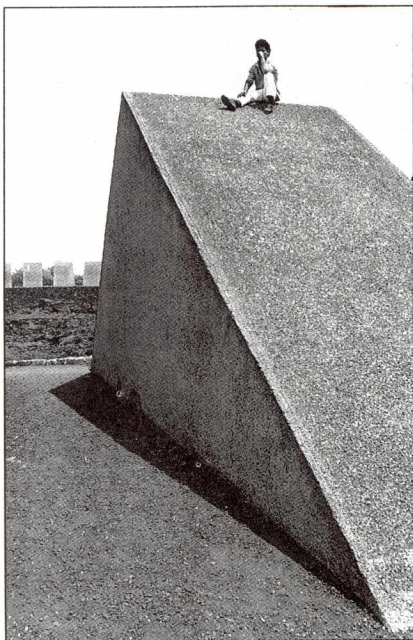
experiments with the handling of space as well as the dissection of geometric figures in order to achieve astounding compositions.

A visit to the Sculpture Zone, as well as the Sculpture Walk with its many works, is like an educational trip through the panorama of geometric sculpture in our country. One is struck not only by the artistic quality of the pieces but by their monumental dimensions as well.

Geometric design has its origins in nature and is a kind of concrete reference to all the different kinds of forms that man takes in as part of the process of getting to know that which surrounds him. The Sculpture Zone puts the spectator in contact with this learning process, revealing that which goes beyond what his or her senses grasp in an immediate way —since attentive viewers will find many



* Art and Culture Department of UNAM's General Property Office



opportunities here to perceive things in new ways. Just one example of this is the impressive vista of Mexico City one obtains by climbing one of the modules.

Parallel with the building of this space—which provides viewers with a majestic scene that brings culture and nature together—the artists responsible for the project published a “Manifesto of the Sculpture Zone.”

They declared their commitment to an art which would go beyond the borders of individual creation in order to achieve new forms of artistic experimentation. This is important in light of the fact that few collective art works have been as successful as this.

It is no easy task to carry through a monumental work of art in a collective way. In order to do so, the participants must share a commitment to cooperation as well as a certain affinity in their aesthetic convictions. That the creators of the Sculpture Zone shared these qualities was key to the realization of this work, which has become a landmark of contemporary Mexican art.

Walking through this part of the university campus, one encounters a series of cement structures engraved with references to the individual works in the Sculpture Walk. A little further on, we begin to glimpse the circle of megaliths among the bushes and other abundant vegetation that surround it.

The volcanic rock at the center of the concrete modules tempts those who enjoy jumping and playing among stones. One location is especially marked as the center of the whole ensemble; looking around him or herself from this vantage point, the spectator feels the force of being in a place that seems like the center of the entire universe.

The 64 modules of the Sculpture Zone are divided into four quadrants; each corresponds to one of the cardinal points and is made up of 16 modules. This is a way of recalling how important the four main directions were in pre-Hispanic cultures.

In Aztec myth, the world looks as if it were a great island divided into four huge quadrants. The east is a place of light and abundance; its color is white. The west, whose color is red, is related to the sun. The north has to do with the place of the dead; black is

its color. The south is related to the world of fertility and its color is blue.

We are reminded of the four main roadways which crossed the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan before the arrival of Cortés: Tlacopan, Tlalpan, Nonoalco and Iztacalco. Walking among the megalithic concrete blocks, climbing them, or simply looking at them from a distance, one can come in contact with the sensations of grandeur and abundance that must have been awakened by the great pre-Hispanic cities, and the deep religious feeling found there.

A site like the Sculpture Zone is most important for its effort to recover the oldest roots of Latin American art and bring them together with contemporary artistic values. Thus, visiting this monument to culture can become a ritual act involving contemplation, silence and the sharpness of the senses of the spectator, who can suddenly feel him or herself transported to other times and places, other dimensions which are found not in external reality but rather within the visitor—in the very place where the deepest dreams and fantasies are born. M

Photos by Arturo Piera.

