

The El Chopo University Museum

A Cultural Project for the New Millennium

Arturo Saucedo*

Few places enjoy a history so closely associated to universal dreams and aspirations and the great projects of modernization in Mexico as the El Chopo University Museum.

Built from 1903 to 1905 as part of the *Porfirista* dream,¹ it was originally intended as an industrial exhibition hall. The huge steel, brick and glass structure was designed and manufactured in Germany and reassembled in Mexico. After hosting the Japanese industrial exhibition in 1910 as a part of the celebration of the Cen-

tennial of Mexican Independence, it was dubbed the Japanese Pavilion or the Crystal Palace.

In 1913, the building was turned into the Museum of Natural History and from then on became known as the El Chopo Museum because it was located on El Chopo Street in the Santa María la Ri-

* Former head of the Department of Performing Arts, El Chopo University Museum.

bera neighborhood. It was also called the Museum of the Dinosaur because at the time it had on display an impressive reproduction of the skeleton of a Jurassic dinosaur, the diplodocus. The scientific dream found in the El Chopo Museum an extraordinary setting for situating Man among the other species. In addition to a very complete collection of dried and stuffed animals, fossils, the bones of an imperial elephant from the Valley of Mexico and an impressive whale, it had a botanical section with a sizeable collection of Mexican medicinal plant specimens gathered from the sixteenth century on by illustrious naturalists like Spain's Francisco Hernández (1517-1587) and Ger-

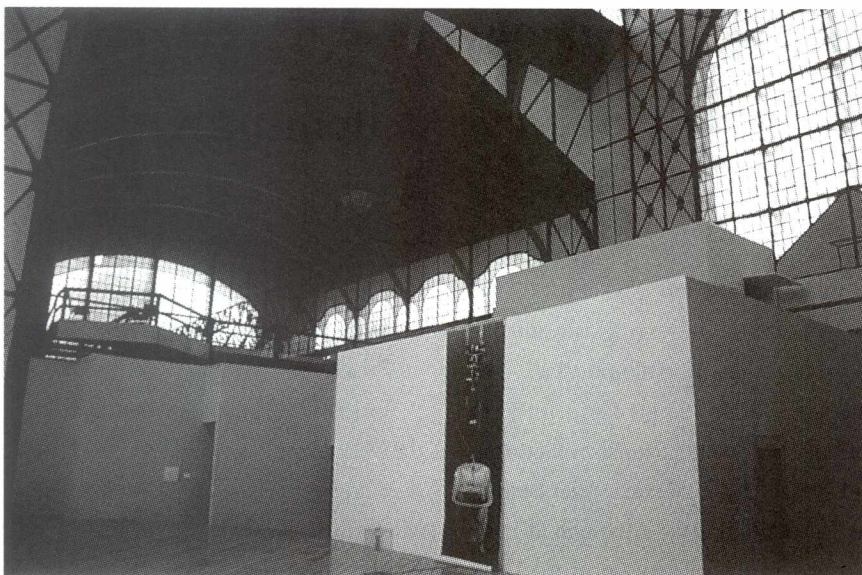
many's Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859). It also boasted an amusing collection of dressed fleas used to illustrate certain social situations and curious cultural characteristics of Mexico. The museum attained such popularity that even today some of the older inhabitants of the neighborhood still remember it as "the Museum of the Dinosaur." El Chopo Museum stopped operating as a natural history museum in 1964 and was abandoned for nine years. As a result, the magnificent building was on the verge of being lost; some people even proposed its demolition.

In 1973 the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) decided to come to the building's rescue, do the ne-

cessary restoration work and finance it as a museum to disseminate the arts and university culture. Though done with all due dispatch, the work took almost two years and on November 21, 1975, the El Chopo University Museum, a venue for avant garde art, was inaugurated. Thus, university autonomy contributed to the dream of having a place where the dynamics of modern culture could be disseminated with an openness and tolerance non-existent at that time anywhere else in our country.

Since then, the museum's different directors have molded the project into what it is today. Outstanding among them have been writer Angeles Mastretta (1979-1983); the multifaceted artist, theoretician and Mexican-Canadian curator Arnold Belkin (1983-1985); writer Elba Macías (1985-1988); art historian Montserrat Bali (1989-1994); and the current director, museologist Lourdes Monges, who has been a collaborator of the museum since it opened.

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Twenty-two years after its founding as a meeting place and venue for cultural performances and exhibits at the end of the century, much can be said about the El Chopo University Museum: it is a multiple fora which fosters and disseminates the vast, plural culture of today; it is internationally known because its six rooms have hosted individual, thematic and collective exhibitions of artists both from Mexico and abroad; it develops international exchange projects that make it possible to share art work, cultural projects and museological ideas from the world over.

To give the reader an idea of its innovative, diverse exhibitions, suffice it to mention the wide gamut of art forms that have been housed under its roof: everything from collage and object art, situation or play art, both environmental and ephemeral art, neofigurative trends, behavioral or body art, conceptual art and neoconcrete or technological art.

On March 4 of this year Mexico City's first exhibition of virtual art, "The Second," with the work of 16 Dutch artists rooted in the experience of time, was inaugurated. Undoubtedly this was a major museological event nationwide.

"The Dinosaur Forum," a series of free workshops offered to the public and the radio program "The El Chopo Airwaves"² complete the museum's cultural project.

"The Dinosaur Forum" is a three-sided stage which hosts alternative music groups, contemporary dance, performance art, multimedia presentations and interdisciplinary art. During the 1970s it was the perfect venue for countercultural groups like La Maldita Vecindad, El Tri, Café Ta-

cuba, Jaguares and Molotov, to mention just a few.³ Among the many groups from abroad who have performed there are Die Totten Hossen, from Germany; The Cranes, from England; the musicians from the Canadian Music Competitions; and Human Drama and Love Spirals Downwards from the United States. Jazz and electronic artists, as well as classical and avant garde Mexican and foreign musicians congregate here. The forum also hosted Mexico's first festival of performance art (although today the main venue for performance art is the National Institute of Fine Arts' X Teresa Alternative Art). The area is also used for lectures, debates and conferences about art at the end of the millennium.

Twenty-two years after its founding as a meeting place and venue for cultural performances and exhibits at the end of the century, the El Chopo University Museum is recognized as a fora which fosters and disseminates the vast, plural culture of today.



El Chopo's free workshops offer the general public, including children, senior citizens and the artists themselves, the opportunity to train in areas like dance, music, visual arts, poetry, theater, folk dancing, literature and writing, film appreciation, sexuality and short story and narrative creative writing.

"The El Chopo Airwaves" radio program, broadcast live every Friday, first aired in 1991 as a co-production with UNAM Radio. It is a space for the expression of art and alternative culture, where a special effort is made to make available to the public the most important alternative music at the end of the millennium as well as ideas about contemporary aesthetics. It is a link between creators and listeners who constantly show their interest in alternative art forms and find

both in the museum and in the program a horizon of their virtual dream, a space for expression, dialogue, debate and creation.

We should point out the specific commitment the El Chopo University Museum has to the university community and its general commitment to the public and the community in northern Mexico City. Members of the university community have access to a space for cultural education and recreation, to the exhibition rooms and performance halls on a daily basis. El Chopo hosts both individual and series of exhibits and performances specifically designed to showcase students, teachers and alumni from both the UNAM and other institutions. The museum also puts its services and infrastructure at the disposal of inhabi-

tants of the surrounding Santa María la Ribera neighborhood, as well as northern Mexico City and the Historic Center, for their cultural activities. In this way, the dream of a plural space committed to Mexico's cultural dynamic is shared by all those who express their authenticity through culture. ■■■

NOTES

¹ *Porfirista* refers to the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz that ended with the 1910 Mexican Revolution, but which also created a particular "Frenchified," modernizing ethos among the upper classes of its time. [Translator's Note.]

² The Spanish word for "wave" or "airwave" is *onda*, which in Mexican slang also means "attitudes" or "activities" and particularly connotes youth culture. [Translator's Note.]

³ All those mentioned are recent decades' most famous Mexican alternative Spanish-language rock groups. [Editor's Note.]

EXHIBITIONS AT THE EL CHOPO MUSEUM 1998 CALENDAR

Title	Artist/Sponsor	Medium	Date
<i>Rights and Humans. Sexuality, Open Sea</i>	— Gay Cultural Circle	— Paintings, sculpture, graphics, photography, installations	— June 17 to August 9
<i>Change. Mexico-New York Visual Arts Exchange</i>	— Exchange with New York	— Installations, photography, graphics, painting, sculpture	— August 13 to Sept. 27 (to be confirmed)
<i>All Things of Nothing</i>	— Carla Rippey	— Alternative graphics, object art	— August 19 to Sept. 20
<i>Reborn</i>	— Mónica Cervantes	— Digital photography	— August 7 to Sept. 6
—	— Rosa María Robles	— Sculpture, sketches, photography	— Sept. 23 to Oct. 25
<i>Chiapas: on the Edge of Silence</i>	— Antonio Turok	— Photography	— Sept. 23 to Oct. 25
<i>Straight Ahead</i>	— Vida Yovanovich	— Photo installation	— Sept. 23 to Oct. 25
—	— Oweena Fogarty	— Photography and installation	— Sept. 10 to Oct. 11
—	— Dorit Jacoby	— Painting	— Oct. 14 to Nov. 15
<i>Poster Biennial</i>	— Poster Biennial	— Graphic design	— Oct. 14 to Nov. 15
<i>The Song of the Frogs</i>	— Marliess Poss	— Installation	— Oct. 29 to Nov. 22
<i>Ninth Cultural Commemoration of the Struggle Against AIDS</i>	— United Against AIDS	— Painting, photography, graphics, installations	— Nov. 25 to Jan. 17, 1999
<i>Sixth International Biennial of Visual and Experimental Poetry</i>	— Visual Poetry Biennial	— Collage, visual poetry, installations, cybernetics	— Nov. 18 to Jan. 17, 1999
—	— Alvaro Muñoz	— Photography	— Nov. 18 to Jan. 17, 1999

NOTE: There might be last minute changes in this calendar. To confirm, please call 622 62 07 or 622 62 14.