



Photos by Dante Barrera

## THE SANTO DOMINGO CULTURAL CENTER

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The ex-Convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán may be the largest and most important colonial building still standing in Mexico and probably in all of the Americas, for its size, artistic value and the role it played as a center for spreading the gospel and culture in what is now the state of Oaxaca. Santo Do-

mingo is part of the historic downtown area of the city of Oaxaca, declared a world heritage treasure by the United Nations in 1987.

Construction began on the convent—in contemporary terms, a monastery—in the mid-sixteenth century and continued until the beginning of the seventeenth. Eventually, it covered 40,000 square meters of land. During the colonial period, Santo Domingo was the center for spreading the Christian Gospel in

a state practically monopolized by the Dominicans.

After independence and the disentanglement of church holdings with the Reform Laws, the building's inhabitants were evicted and it was occupied by the armed forces. The church itself was closed for use in 1866 and reopened in 1902, but the monastery building continued in the hands of the Mexican army. Parts of it were gradually given back until the army vacated the building definitive-

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ly in 1993, and it was designated for cultural purposes.

Architectural and furniture restoration, museological planning and historical, anthropological and environmental research was carried out for four years thanks to joint efforts by the state and federal governments, the business community and civil society.<sup>1</sup>

Restoring the original appearance of the building took more than 50 months of work, including the repair of at least 6,000 square meters of construction and 10,000 square meters of surface. Old construction techniques used by the Dominicans in the sixteenth century were recovered, and a series of trades almost completely lost to Oaxacan artisans and workers, like blacksmithing, stonemasonry and plastering, were retrieved from oblivion.

One of the outstanding parts of the restoration of Santo Domingo is the refurbishment of 6,000 square meters of vaults, almost half of the original amount. A large interdisciplinary team was needed to do the job, including archeologists,

architects and historians. They researched both in the Oaxaca and Mexico City archives and by taking samples of the building's walls and floors to see what it was originally like in order to justify historically all the architectural reconstruction that was done.

The Santo Domingo Cultural Center finally opened its doors to the public July 24, 1998. It houses four institutions: the

Oaxaca Cultures Museum, the Oaxaca Historical Ethnobotanical Garden, the Friar Francisco de Burgoa Library and the Journalist Néstor Sánchez H. Publications Library. In addition, the center has areas for lectures, congresses, seminars, temporary exhibits, concerts, etc.

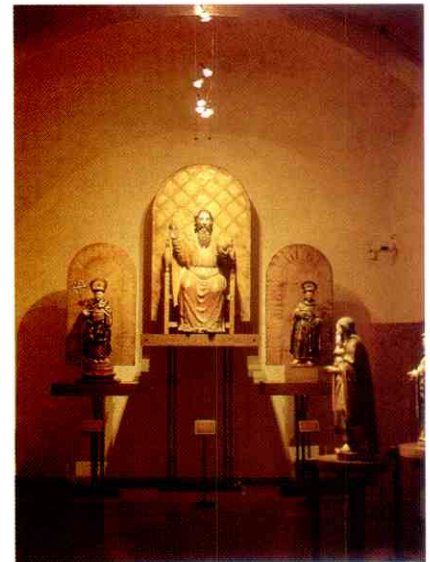
The building's upper floor holds the Oaxaca Cultures Museum. Its 14 permanent exhibition rooms and 13 themat-



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The Oaxaca Cultures Museum offers visitors a broad overview of the state's history and development.





ic rooms use a new museological language to offer visitors a broad overview of the state's history and development.

In this new area,<sup>2</sup> visitors can see how the permanent presence of indigenous groups has been a determining factor in forging Oaxaca society as it is today. The rooms give us a glimpse of the most outstanding archeological pieces from Monte Albán, Mitla, Yagul, Lambityeco, Dain-

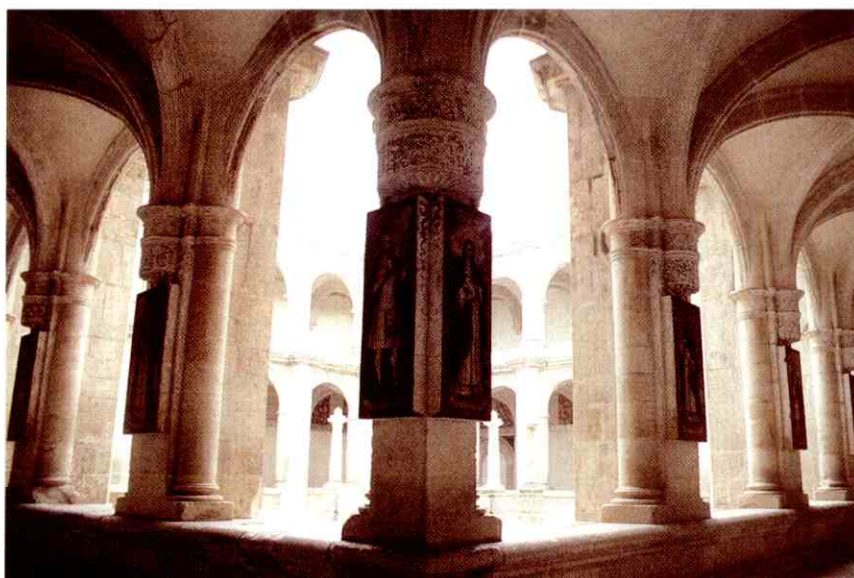
zú, Huijazoo and other pre-Hispanic sites. They also exhibit different objects that show the traits and continuity of the ancient cultures of the Zapotecs, Mixtecs, Mixes, Huaves, Triquis and other ethnic groups of Oaxaca, emphasizing that they are a dynamic part of the state's day-to-day existence.

Organized around a museographical concept that attempts to satisfy the

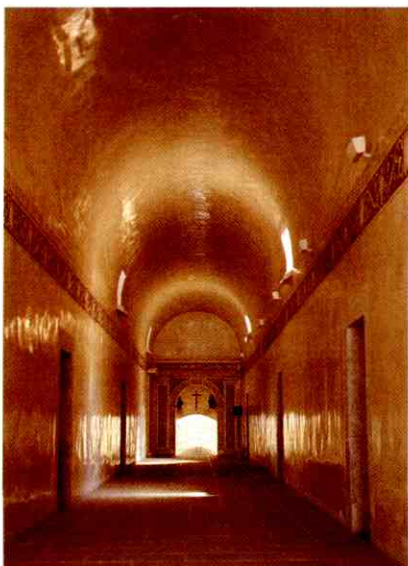
informational requirements of different kinds of visitors (students, tourists, researchers, etc.), one novel feature is the use of computer monitors in the rooms, making going more deeply into specific aspects of Oaxacan history and anthropology agile and even fun.

The museum covers 10,000 years of the state's history, from the rise of the first sedentary settlements and the flowering of the great pre-Hispanic cultures, through the conquest and colonial period, independence and up to the twentieth century. Room three is particularly impressive with its exhibit of the jewelry found in Monte Albán's tomb 7 in the early 1930s, considered one of the most important treasures of all Mesoamerica.

The so-called "interactive rooms" are in rooms five, six and seven, in 13 little cells. Here, the public can touch the objects they are looking at and get more information using multimedia technology. Among the exhibits are different crafts of Oaxaca, like textiles, ceramics, goldsmithing, wood carving and sculpture, tinsmithing, saddlery, etc.; the produc-



Construction techniques from the sixteenth century were recovered to restore the building's original appearance.



The museum's rooms are connected by long hallways.



The library boasts more than 23,000 volumes.



tion of natural dyes, such as cochineal; traditional medicine; music; gastronomy; and the production of beverages like mescal, among others.

The complex also includes the Oaxaca Historical Ethnobotanical Garden that illustrates the abundance and particularities of the state's flora and traditional crops and serves to recover indigenous peoples' knowledge of Oaxaca's flora. (see the "Ecology" section of this issue of *Voices of Mexico*).

Demonstrating in practice the links between biological and ethnic diversity, the garden complements and enriches the Oaxaca Cultures Museum in a relationship unprecedented in Mexico.

Another space in the Santo Domingo Cultural Center is the Friar Francisco de Burgoa Library, which is based on the Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca historical collection.

The library occupies what previously was the third order chapel, one of the largest rooms in the ex-monastery. It boasts more than 23,000 volumes, mainly from collections that belonged to different religious orders in Oaxaca, dating from between 1484 and 1940.

These collections were attached in the nineteenth century by the Reform Laws. Among their greatest treasures are 11 incunabula, some Mexican first editions, a manuscript in Latin by Friar Bartolomé de las Casas

and Juan Versor's 1484 Latin work, "Comentarios a la Filosofía de Aristóteles" (Commentaries on Aristotle's Philosophy). It also has large deposits of the papers of Benito Juárez Maza, Matías Romero, Jacobo Dalevuelta and Aurelio Valdivieso, reserved for consultation by scholars.

The Journalist Néstor Sánchez Hernández Publications Library, located in the old cavalry building erected by the Dominican fathers for the Mexican army in 1902 in gratitude for having returned to them the Santo Domingo Church, has two large reading rooms. Here, the reader can consult the main local and national

dailies, as well as publications in other languages. The first room holds magazines and newspapers currently in circulation, and the second, the older ones, outstanding among which are regional newspapers from the mid-nineteenth century.

Center facilities, including an auditorium, are host to exhibits, congresses, fora, concerts, courses, workshops, recitals, performances, book fairs and a wide variety of other activities. A cafeteria and bookstore-gift shop complete the services of a center destined to enrich the artistic and cultural life of the city of Oaxaca. **MM**



The entrance to the museum.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Participants were the federal government, through the National Council for Culture and the Arts and the National Institute of Anthropology and History; the Oaxaca state government; Fomento Social Banamex, A.C.; and civil society, represented by the Foundation for the Defense and Conservation of Oaxaca's Cultural Patrimony (Pro-Oax). The entire investment came to about 119 million pesos.

<sup>2</sup> Since 1972, part of the ex-convent was used as the Oaxaca Regional Museum under the aegis of the National Institute of Anthropology and History.

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