

Santa María de la Ribera Its Wonder Remains

Agustín Jiménez*



▲ Moorish kiosk in Santa María de la Ribera Alameda Park.

I remember that when I was a child I liked to be taken on Sundays to play in the Santa María de la Ribera Alameda park. For me, it was

a pleasure to watch and play under the Moorish kiosk or listen to the adults tell the ever-changing tale of the dinosaur hidden in the Chopo Museum or try to remember all the precious stones and minerals and exhibits showing the spiritual benefits of stones that I had seen in the UNAM

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Geology Museum across the street from the Alameda. But what excited me the most was the promise of going to the Majestic movie house in the afternoon. Ramón Gómez de la Serna has already said it: lines outside movie houses, lines of hunger for fantasy.

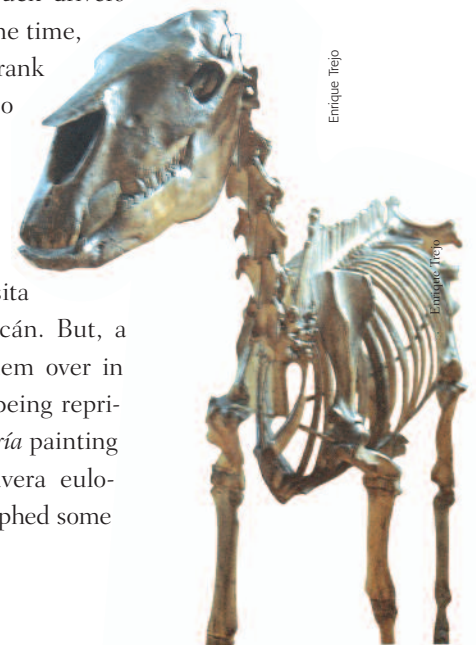
A quick list of the emblematic places in the Santa María de la Ribera neighborhood shows us the great importance it has in our city's evolution. Undoubtedly, three places come immediately to mind: the Alameda's Moorish kiosk or pavilion, the Chopo Museum and the UNAM Geology Museum, the last two of which held the famous dinosaur for a while. In addition to these places, we can also point to the Noanoalco Bridge, where Rafael Catana wrote his poems; the Dalia Market, where a death squad brought together its emotions every day to survive; and the Mascarones House, on Ribera de San Cosme Boulevard, which now holds a UNAM-sponsored foreign language school. But these are not the only important places for the Santa María de la Ribera resident. Just as important as the Alameda with its Moorish kiosk was the famous *pulque*¹ saloon, or *pulquería*, Las Glorias de Tlatilco (The Glories of Tlatilco), located behind the Consulado River and across from the Casco de Santo Tomás, that was photographed by Edward Weston, where the famous *tlachicotón*² flowed like nectar of the gods.

We already know that *pulque* was the drink of those who lived rough, of the poor, of the



▲ The Chopo Museum.

tenements, of the de-classed of the naive paradise of the Juárez or Polanco neighborhoods. Yes, stevedores drank *pulque*; truck drivers drank *pulque*; and the artists of the time, in the 1930s and 1940s, also drank *pulque*. For example, Frida Kahlo developed the idea of painting a few *pulquerías*, among them Las Glorias de Tlatilco. Kahlo had her students paint indigo and Mexican pink murals on the La Rosita *pulquería* on a corner in Coyoacán. But, a year later, the owner painted them over in white because he was afraid of being reprimanded. Yes, as we know, *pulquería* painting disappeared, although Diego Rivera eulogized it and Tina Modotti photographed some



Enrique Trejo

Enrique Trejo



Verónica López

▲ UNAM Geology Museum.

illustrious figures in front of their walls or napping on the floor of the fermenting shed. Cantinas and *pulquerías*, billiard halls and public baths, Chinese cafes and hole-in-the-wall shops, tenements and Porfirian houses, Santa María is crisscrossed with these little corners where the artists of life earned their living and daily bread, like the Callejón del Sauce (Willow Alley) where Mariachi song composer José Alfredo Jiménez played soccer with his friends, the neighborhood kids, before asking for his first tequila and singing one of his first songs.

Ancestry and hierarchy some would say; lineage, would say Don Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, who always gives the exact address of the place each of these famous people lived:

for example, Don Guillermo Prieto and Don Lucas Alamán, at 95 San Cosme Avenue; and Don Miguel Miramón, before he was president, near where the old Roxy Cinema used to be, on Ribera de San Cosme, that used to be called Tlacopán Boulevard. But if the Chopo Museum is important in this context of the city, the cultural street market that it spawned is another emblem of the national counterculture that must not disappear: history and micro-history as Don Luis González y González teaches us.

Yes, when I was a boy, I lived in a very large house. The house is at 313 Cedro Street. It was one of those old houses in the Santa María neighborhood; more than large, it was deep, very light and not at all labyrinthine. It was full of a calm and exemplary mystery. The balconies looked out to the west onto Callejón del Sauce and next to them, four eucalyptus trees filled to overflowing all the fantasies of travel and dreams that a six-year-old boy could have. For me, those trees were the proof of what was later the Santa María's Alameda with its kiosk, that time when I was a boy: a man who has not yet dreamed of time.

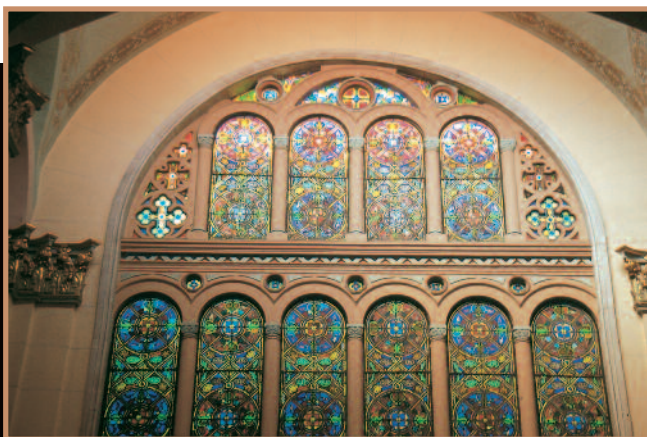
Fortunately, we know that not everything is forgotten. For example, the engineer Ramón Ibarrola was the builder of the Moorish kiosk, which has its own history in the history of Mexico City. It was built to be Mexico's pavilion at the New Orleans International Exposition (1884-1885) and in the Saint Louis, Missouri

World's Fair. It was also put up in the 1889 Paris World's Fair. When that was over, it was brought to Mexico City and set up near downtown, inaugurated September 16, 1851, on the southern side of the Central Alameda park, across from the Corpus Christi Church, where a large wooden barracks used as a cafe and meeting place had stood. When it was decided that among the new buildings put up to commemorate the first centenary of Independence Day, September 16, 1810, there should be a monument to Don Benito Juárez, the place selected was the site occupied by the Moorish Pavilion on the Central Alameda, looking out on what was already named Juárez Avenue. To make way for the semicircle Juárez monument, commissioned out to architect Guillermo Heredia, the pavilion was moved to the middle of the Santa María de la Ribera Alameda park, where it remains

today, benefitting lovers and children who by its side dream of paradise or of being pirates setting out to conquer all the lands of a thousand and one nights.

But, when was the Santa María de la Ribera neighborhood born? Arturo Sotomayor tells us that in the year 1856 there was, if not the growth of the city, at least the first opening up of streets, tracing the enormous plots of land on which the monasteries were built. This change in the city's look was born with the September 16, 1856 decree by Ignacio Comonfort to "extend the Los Dolores alleyway to San Juan de Letrán Street" (now the Eje Central). The new street would be called La Independencia; today it is 16 de Septiembre Street. The War of the Reform (1858-1861) put a stop to any attempts at enlarging the city. But, that same year, the maps show enlargements: the San-

Santa María is crisscrossed with these little corners where the artists of life earned their living and daily bread.



Stained-glass windows in the interior of the Sagrada Familia Parish.



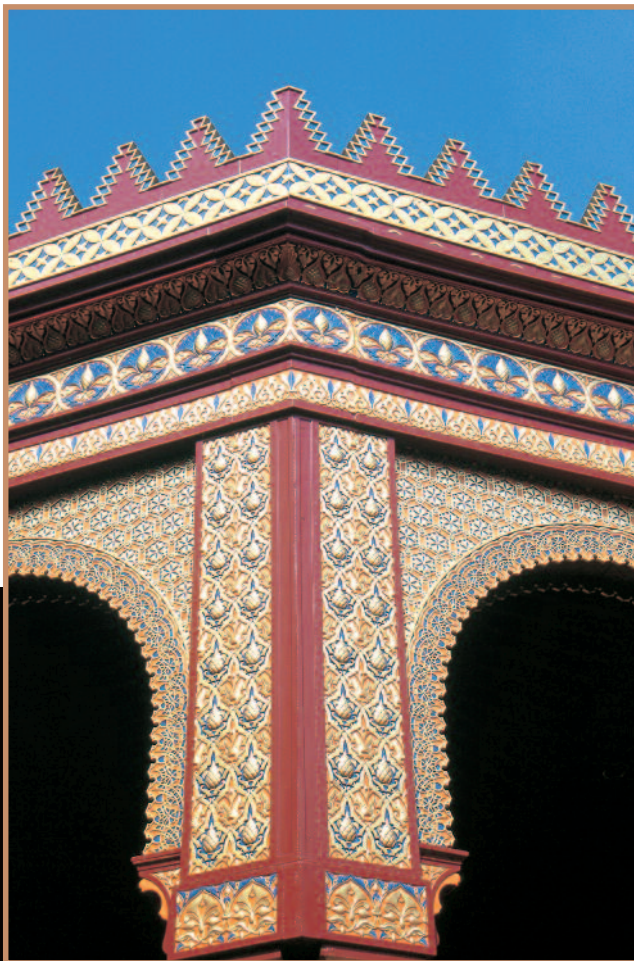
La Dalia Market has survived many battles.

ta María de la Ribera neighborhood has already been laid out and began to be populated: there were 35 buildings of different sizes. To the south of Santa María, San Cosme Boulevard has more constructions whose builders preferred the north side of the old road to Tlacopán, where the first leisure estates of Hernán Cortés had been.

The Santa María de la Ribera neighborhood was built on the land of the Estanislao Flores family and others. During the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz), an entire city block was allotted to the Alameda park and the Moorish Pavilion was placed there. Across from it was erected the building that today houses the UNAM Geology Museum and on Chopo Street —today called Enrique González Martínez Street— the Japanese pavilion was built for the festivities of the Centenary of Independence, which would

later be home to the Natural History Museum until it became a UNAM cultural center in 1975, better known as the Chopo Museum. The neighborhood is bordered on the north by Ricardo Flores Magón Avenue, formerly Noanoalco; on the east by Insurgentes Norte; on the south by Ribera de San Cosme Boulevard; and on the west by the Circuito Interior, previously known as Río de Consulado.

So, Santa María is not only a geographical space or a territory of desire where children re-learn how to live and reclaim the hopes of life from their dreams, to believe in their city again. Yes, it is not only a bunch of shops and dwellings; it is not only the weave of day-to-day desire that is transformed from second to second; it is the territory that always creates in me the effect of a strange illumination of truth. Santa María de la Ribera or, better said, our city: its urban culture and its polit-



Rubén Vázquez

Detail of the Moorish kiosk.

The Moorish kiosk was built to be Mexico's pavilion at the New Orleans International Exposition (1884-1885).



Carlos Angrogiani

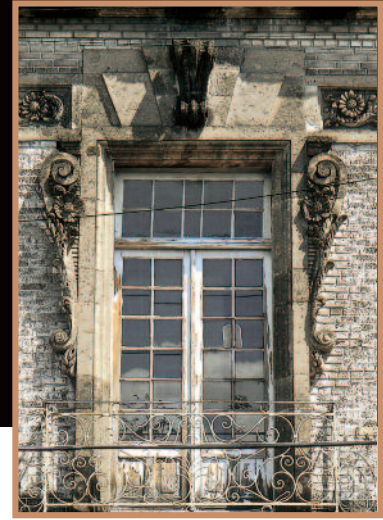
Alleyways and vecindades are part of Santa María de la Ribera's paradigm.



Carlos Angriñani



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ical culture or sexuality are subjected to an exclusive vision of hyper-reality that constitutes a unique, unrepeatable scene.

Everything vanishes before its grandiose monstrosity, even the body writing this, even the body that, due to a resulting effect of being fed up, adopts an almost transparent form, a moral lightness close to disappearance. Everything that surrounds us in Mexico City participates in this simulation of desertification except those places that pick us or

that we pick and are emblematic, like the neighborhood where I was born: Santa María de la Ribera. Yes, everything changes in the city, so that its wonder is what remains. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *Pulque* is a traditional alcoholic drink made from the sap of the maguëy plant. [Translator's Note.]

² *Tlachicotón* is slang for *pulque*. [Translator's Note.]