



*The Roma  
Neighborhood  
A Glorious Past*

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The Witches' Castle, Rio de Janeiro Plaza. Photo: Elsie Montiel



Upper left: Island on Álvaro Obregón Avenue. Upper right: Façade of an art nouveau building at the corner of Mérida and Guanajuato Streets. Lower left: Romita Plaza. Lower right: Balmori Building's private street. Photos: Elsie Montiel



The Colonia Roma, or Roma neighborhood, has some of Mexico City's longest-standing traditions. Founded December 30, 1902, it was the first residential area of the twentieth century. The neighborhood was developed by the Chapultepec Avenue Land Company, headed up by English businessman Eduardo Walter Orrin, founder of the famous Orrin Circus. The land the new neighborhood was to be built on bordered a little pre-Hispanic town called Aztacalco, which means "in the house of the herons." In the eighteenth century, this town was re-baptized Romita ("little Rome") because it had a beautiful tree-lined avenue (Chapultepec Avenue) that went all the way to the Chapultepec forest, which was very similar to one that existed in Rome, Italy. When the land for the new development was laid out, it took the name of the old town.

Around 1530, the Santa María de la Natividad Church was built in Romita, where Friar Pedro de Gante baptized the local indigenous, and which to this day preserves one of the crucifixes sent by Carlos V, an image of Our Lord of Buen Ahorcado and a series of interesting eighteenth-century paintings by Antonio Torres. In the 1940s, the quarter was declared a "typical

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area” and in the 1990s, its picturesque plaza, located one block from Cuauhtémoc Avenue, was restored. The streets and alleys of Roma were silent witnesses to the filming of the movie “Los olvidados” (released in the U.S. as “The Young and the Damned”) directed by Luis Buñuel. Among its traditional watering places is the famous *pulquería* or *pulque* saloon “La hija de los apaches” (The Daughter of the Apaches).

In the century-old Roma neighborhood, three fundamental factors came together to distinguish it from its contemporaries: the urban, the social and the architectural. The Roma neighborhood was the first residential development to offer all necessary infrastructure and services: drinking water, paved streets, sidewalks, street lighting, a drainage system, trees and finished houses.

The Roma neighborhood exhibited innovative urban concepts like its broad streets (usually 20 meters wide), such as Orizaba and Yucatán, with their novel central islands covered in grass with marble and bronze sculptures of lions. The 30-meter-wide Veracruz Avenue (today Insurgentes) was designed for quite a bit of vehicle traffic and with time, would become the city’s longest street. Another contribution of the Roma neighborhood was 45-meter-wide Jalisco Avenue (today Álvaro Obregón Avenue), with its ample central island flanked by two lines of magnificent trees, then described as a “Parisian boulevard.” Another novelty were its street names, the names of Mexican cities and states, since by that time numbered streets, in vogue since 1887, had become confusing. It is said that streets in the Roma neighborhood were named after all the places the Orrin Circus visited on its tours.

In the heart of the neighborhood a beautiful garden was built called the Roma Park (today known as the Rio de Janeiro Plaza), with a simple circular fountain at the center. The lots were large: the smallest measured 400 to 600 square meters. In 1906, the land cost 25 pesos per square meter and the houses sold for between 14,000 and 18,000 pesos.

The Colonia Roma has been home to many famous people, well known not only in the city, but nationwide. There were historic figures like Álvaro Obregón; the poet Ramón



▲ The Gallego Center on Colima Street. Photo: Elsie Montiel

▼ The Sacred Family Church. Photo: Mónica Tapia





Left: Façade on Jalapa Street. Upper right: Replica of Michaelangelo's David. Lower right: Art nouveau façade on Chihuahua Street.  
Photos: Rubén Vázquez

The area boasts splendid examples of eclectic and French-style art nouveau buildings that have become landmarks.

López Velarde; Sara Pérez, the widow of President Madero; Father Miguel Agustín Pro. From the world of business came Nequib Simón, the first owner of the Mexico Bull Ring, and, Don Adolfo Prieto, one of the founders of the Monterrey Iron and Steel Foundry; writers like Fernando del Paso, Pita Amor, Sergio Pitó; great artists and musicians like Andrea Palma, María Conesa, Enrique Alonso “Cachirulo,” Enrique Bátiz, Leonora Carrington, Katy Orna, Arnold Belkin. The list would be endless.

Some historic events took place there, such as the failed assassination attempt against General Obregón and the religious persecution of the second half of the 1920s during the Cristera War, which in the Roma neighborhood led to mass being prohibited, the Sacred Family Church being closed and the celebration of clandestine masses in basements by Father Pro. Places, objects and events live on in the memory of local residents: the Son-Sin, Kukú, Eréndira and Donaji restaurants; the El Globo cafe; long-gone nightclubs like the Río Rosa, the Quid, the Monte Blanco, the Nacatamal; the former Royal, Balmori and Roma movie theaters; the Chiandoni and La Bella Italia ice cream parlors, followed by the Álvaro Obregón Biscuit restaurant; schools like the Vallarta, the Oxford, the Mexico, the Renacimiento and the Anglo-Español, among others; the ice cream cart La Heroica that used to stand at the corner of Orizaba and Álvaro Obregón; the fiestas organized by Father Benjamín Pérez del Valle at the Vanguard Cultural and Sports Center; the celebrations of San Francisco Javier in the town of Romita and the Silent Procession.

The third outstanding factor is its architecture. The Roma neighborhood was the last place that eclectic and French-style art nouveau buildings that characterized the Porfirio Díaz regime were built. The area boasts splendid examples that are now landmarks like the Witches' Castle, the Sacred Family Church, the National Autonomous University's Book House, the Renaissance Institute, the Balmori

Building, the Lamm House (today a cultural center), the Gallego Center, the Parián; three magnificent examples of art nouveau style, one at Chihuahua 78 and the other two at the corner of Guanajuato and Mérida; and a series of French-style houses on Tabasco, Colima and Durango Streets. Taken all together, they give us an image of what the Roma was like in its golden age.

After the 1940s, the neighborhood was invaded by the middle class, a large part of whom came from Mexico's Southeast. This led the monied families to move to new residential areas in search of tranquility. The new residents demanded housing, education, work, recreation. They also established small businesses —mom-and-pop corner stores, bakeries, dry cleaners, etc.— which began to transform the neighborhood's initial residential character. In the 1960s the Roma neighborhood became mainly an area of shops, schools and offices, with the resulting increase in population flow and vehicles, plus the noise and crowding that they bring with them. Its traditional tranquility has been disturbed down through the years: to be precise, six high-speed avenues crisscross the Roma today.

We should also not forget that the Roma was one of the areas most affected by the devastation of the 1985 earthquakes; some of its many contemporary buildings collapsed, four of them bringing down old buildings with them.

For obvious reasons, the Roma today is far from being just a residential district. Its proximity to Mexico City's Historic Center makes it part of it. Its layout has changed somewhat, with for example, the construction of the Insurgentes Subway Station Plaza; the elimination of the island in the middle of the first Orizaba Street; the replacement of the intersection of Durango and Orizaba Streets by the Rio de Janeiro Plaza. Many of the great figures and families who lived there have gone forever. But today, a few remain: painter Leonora Carrington, historian Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, Gilberto Aceves Navarro. More than 1,000 buildings that are representative of its golden age (1906-1939) are still preserved today, fighting to remain standing, and giving the area its identity, struggling to continue to be functional and, of course, to be admired.

How is this neighborhood dealing with the third millennium? For the last few years, the Roma neighborhood has been undergoing a rebirth, becoming a cultural area with a series of galleries, art schools, bookstores and museums that have opened their doors there. Despite pressure from a current real estate boom, fortunately some young architects, companies and institutions have reassessed the value of the Roma's early-twentieth-century constructions, facilitating their restoration, conservation and maintenance. The aim here would not be that the Roma become a big static, lifeless museum, dedicated only to the contemplation of its old buildings, but rather that the material characteristics that gave it its particular style and still distinguishes it from its surroundings be preserved. In this enterprise, zoning regulations should be compatible with the quality of life aspired to by its inhabitants, those who work there, go to its schools or just visit, and that that quality of life improve every day. Every time a building is destroyed or changed for mercantile reasons, the identity of this neighborhood is damaged; now, entering into its second century, the Roma is fighting to preserve and continue to exhibit its glorious past. **MM**

The Balmori Building at the corner of Álvaro Obregón Avenue and Orizaba Street.  
Photo: Mónica Tapia ▶

