



The University City Central Library *A Universe of Ideas*

Isabel Morales Quezada*

It is difficult to imagine University City without the Central Library. It has two histories: the architectural history, from conception to construction, and the one told by Mexican architect Juan O’Gorman’s murals, linked directly to the ideas that made it a reality.

Historically, Mexico, at a geographic crossroads, has been possible thanks to the collaboration of different forces and cultures....Mexico has been built stone by stone....This is one of them.¹

This collaboration of forces and cultures is what O’Gorman portrayed, turning the Central Library into the Nation-

al Autonomous University of Mexico’s most emblematic building. But, before describing the murals, we should say a little something about O’Gorman’s life and his conception of architecture.

Born in Mexico City in 1905, he was an architect, a painter and a muralist. This explains his interest in integrating other forms of art into architecture. While studying, he collaborated with architect Carlos Obregón Santacilia, did several frescos in a cantina and decorated three *pulque* bars in Mexico City. A great friend of Diego Rivera, he learned artistic composition from him and became interested in folk art.

He introduced Le Corbusier’s functionalism to Mexico, with the difference that, for O’Gorman, the objective of architecture was not to produce aesthetic pleasure, but to serve as an effective, practical tool for low-cost construction, as he demonstrated with the design and building of 26 Mexico

*Staff writer.

Unless otherwise specified, photos by Mauricio Degollado.



[1] Juan O'Gorman, right.



[2]



[3]



[4]

[1] IIE-UNAM/Juan Guzmán's Collection

[2] [3] [4] IIESU-UNAM archives/Universidad Collection

The Central Library murals are a work of art, but their process of creation and construction was a work of craftsmanship. The total surface to be covered was 4,000 square meters.

City primary schools. Nevertheless, the functionalist-style house O'Gorman designed for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Altavista, in Mexico City, has irrefutable aesthetic value.

Later, when he designed and built his own home in San Jerónimo, he experimented with “organic architecture,” that style oriented toward the explosion of geometric forms that would be more easily assimilated into natural and fantastic figurative elements, fully integrated into the spaces.

As a muralist, O'Gorman created fantastic environments clearly influenced by surrealism, but he also did realist murals, displaying his interest in Mexican history and its heroes. The canvases he did in the 1950s include portraits, still lifes and fantastic, imaginary landscapes. At the end of his life, he drifted away from architecture and muralism, but he continued to paint canvases. Juan O'Gorman died on January 18, 1982.

O'Gorman's career is evidence of his very diverse interests, his great capacity for creation, his appreciation of folk

art and his humanism, and makes it possible to understand the reasons behind the conception of the Central Library.

THE BIRTH OF UNIVERSITY CITY

Though designed according to the canons of mid-twentieth-century international style, using simple, unadorned forms, glass-covered buildings and concrete as a construction material, University City adds something more. The architects in charge of the project decided to fuse the canon with Mexican culture and called on several Mexican artists like David Alfaro Siqueiros, José Chávez Morado, Diego Rivera and Juan O'Gorman himself to put murals on the walls of some of the campus's buildings.

O'Gorman said that people were tired of the “monotonous, boring repetition of modern architecture, the canon

of glass and smooth walls taken out of U.S. and European magazines.”² So, he tried to develop a style of architecture fused with Mexican culture, that people could identify with, “rooted in the traditions of the Americas, rooted in functionalism so they would be useful, effective and at the same time expressive.”³

The building was planned and erected in 1949 and 1950 under the watchful eye of Carlos Lazo, who directed the construction of University City. It is a huge, 10-story, blind parallelepiped built on a three-meter-high platform, designed to hold one million books. It also houses a reading room leading onto a closed garden and a semi-basement that would have workshops for printing and binding books.

Juan O’Gorman told Carlos Lazo about his idea of covering the walls with colored stones in “the impressionist manner, that is, like splashes of color that at a certain distance would be distinguishable as figures.”⁴

A WORK OF BOTH ART AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

The Central Library murals are a work of art, but their process of creation and construction was a work of craftsmanship.

The total surface to be covered was 4,000 square meters. Given the magnitude of the job, O’Gorman needed materials that would not require constant maintenance, so he decided to use naturally colored stones. He traveled all over the country to find what he needed, collecting 150 samples of

original stones. He eventually picked 12 basic colors of stones that were the most resistant to rain, the sun and temperature changes. Since he could not find the blue stone he wanted, he used pieces of colored glass broken up to be like stones. The preparation of the stones is also worth mention: a team of 15 masons broke it up into about three million two- to four-centimeter sized pieces. This process took about seven months.

O’Gorman’s design was reproduced on a 42-meter-by-6-meter wooden board, on which the full-scale compositional rendering cartoons for each of the panels were created. Rolls of paper were nailed onto the board a meter away so the artist could transfer the drawing. The colors of the stones were indicated on the cartoons and each one was marked with a number and a letter on the overall design. The paper cartoons with the design on the back were then placed on the bottom of the mold and the stonemason placed the stones on it. Then the mold was filled with cement, sand and gravel; later these slabs were prepared and placed on the wire netting covering the Central Library’s brick walls.

From the very beginning of its construction, the building followed O’Gorman’s idea about artistic integration:

It’s all about creating realist architecture as an expression of art in the Mexican style so people feel that it’s theirs, linked to tradition and to our regional character, so that when it is integrated with realist painting and sculpture we create visual art as a human manifestation of the culture, differentiated by its own style and character.⁵



Left to right: south wall, colonial period; east wall, duality: industry and countryside; north wall, symbol of the foundation of Tenochtitlan.



O’Gorman said that people were tired of the “monotonous, boring repetition of modern architecture.” So, he tried to develop a style of architecture fused with Mexican culture.

Juan O’Gorman believed that under capitalism, the arts acted independently, giving rise to painting and sculpture and spurring artists to sell their work as individual products. What had previously been learned in artist-craftsmen’s workshops was now repressed by art schools, which, in O’Gorman’s view, served the bourgeoisie to make sure that art did not function “as a [means of] expression contrary to the class interests of the bourgeoisie itself.”⁶ In academies, architects spent their time copying the styles of the past. For O’Gorman, architects were no longer painters and sculptors, but “managers producing buildings, with no imagination.”⁷ His aim with the Central Library was to recover that “craft-based art.”

As an artist, he would not be satisfied with reproducing the international style prevalent in his time, just as the architects who planned and constructed the building would not either. They both sought a way to give it a national character that would identify the work and make it relevant worldwide.

THE MURALS’ THEME

O’Gorman’s work reviews the history of our culture, from the founding of Tenochtitlan and the Spanish conquest until today, where he grants a fundamental place to the National Autonomous University of Mexico as a factor for the development of Mexican culture.

The mural has a central axis drawn on each wall. On either side of it are different scenes, sometimes counterposed, but also indispensable for understanding the development of

our culture. Our pre-Hispanic past is present on all the walls, as the basis, the origin, the part of our identity that cannot be forgotten.

The north wall, divided by a central vertical axis and two horizontal axes symbolizing rivers, portrays the foundation of Tenochtitlan. On either side of the vertical axis are elements reminiscent of the life-death duality, symbolized by the sun and the moon. Here, mythical elements, indispensable in Mexica culture, dominate.

The south wall alludes to the colonial period and the dual nature of the conquest: both the spiritual, pious aspect and the violent conquest by force of arms. A column depicting architecture from different periods forms the central axis dividing this duality. O’Gorman pays tribute to the popular painting he admired so much by including angels, churches, fortresses, shields and cannons here.

The east wall presents the duality of tradition and progress, using two aspects of Mexico’s social evolution: the city and the countryside. Here, he proposes a new world view with the atom at the center, generating the vital energy of living beings and the potential energy of minerals. At the top is once again the sun-moon duality, corresponding to life and death. This wall shows two facets of Mexican reality: on the left is the world of workers and industry, depicting factories, industrial production and a banner with the slogan “Long Live the Revolution,” and on the right is the rural world, represented by a traditional peasant house, the fruits of the earth, an indigenous couple and the figure of Emiliano Zapata, accompanied by a revolutionary holding a flag emblazoned with Zapata’s best known slogan, “Land and Liberty”.

At the center of the west wall, O’Gorman put the crest of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Out of it come two symmetrical axes that refer to the university’s creative and recreational activities and its role in contemporary Mexico. At the upper left are the initials of the National Library, and at the upper right, those of the National Periodicals Library. (This is because the original plan was to transfer both these institutions’ collections to this building; but in the end, it never happened.) The left side of the wall symbolizes the permanence of our culture through the Mexican people’s traditional dress, in addition to a pyramid reminiscent of pre-Hispanic temples. On the right are representations of science, technology and sports, activities inherent to the university.

Every event depicted on Juan O’Gorman’s murals contributed to consolidating our culture and defined what we are as Mexicans today. Here we find not only historical elements, but also the ideals of progress that have inspired our nation, these depictions will forever be on public view inside the Na-

tional Autonomous University of Mexico, one of the country’s most important sources of knowledge and development. **NMM**

NOTES

- ¹ Carlos Lazo, *Pensamiento y destino de la Ciudad Universitaria de México* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1983), p. 3.
- ² Juan O’Gorman, “Hacia una integración plástica en México,” Ida Rodríguez Prampolini, *Juan O’Gorman: arquitecto y pintor* (Mexico City: IIE/UNAM, 1979), p. 121.
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Luis Roberto Torres Escalona, *Representación histórica de la cultura: mural de Juan O’Gorman* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2003), p. 28.
- ⁵ Juan O’Gorman, *op cit.*, p. 93.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*

FURTHER READING

- Pani, Mario and Enrique del Moral, *La construcción de la Ciudad Universitaria del Pedregal. Concepto, programa y planeación arquitectónica* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979).
- Rojas, Pedro, *La Ciudad Universitaria a la época de su construcción* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1979).