



The **University Olympic Stadium** Harmony in Time and Space

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Majestic, and at the same time discreet, when seen from afar, you inevitably think of the constructions erected by the ancient indigenous civilizations surrounded by the natural landscape.



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The foundation was then laid for the third sun.

Its sign was 4-Rain.

It called itself Sun of Rain [of fire].

It happened that during it, it rained fire, those who lived in it were burned.

And during it, it also rained sand and they said that in it rained the little stones we can see, that the *tezontle* rock boiled and that then the crags reddened.

Legend of the Suns

**Voices of Mexico* staff writer.

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Inaugurated November 20, 1952, the University Olympic Stadium emerges from the earth, from the fields of lava rock, out of an area that, despite its wildness, was fruitful and provided the main materials used to build it: earth and rock, like those constructions from pre-Hispanic Mexico that we marvel at so much today. Its creation is linked to that remote past, to the history and the natural phenomena that gave rise to the site where it was erected. On this same site, thanks to the vision and technical and artistic capability of a team of architects headed by Augusto Pérez Palacios, all the elements came together to make the University Olympic Stadium one of the most renowned in the world, not only in its time, but even today in the twenty-first century.

The research about it by Dr. Lourdes Cruz González Franco, researcher and coordinator of the Archives of Mexican Architects, together with her assistant, architect María Eugenia Hernández Sánchez, is ample proof of this. Their study, based on Pérez Palacios's archives, made possible an exhibition inaugurated September 3, 2008 in our university's School of Architecture. The exhibit carefully reviewed all the information collected about the stadium, the details of its construction and the impact it had on a world scale. Cruz González Franco is also preparing a book on the topic, the source for the quotes used here about the stadium's construction, in addition to an interview she gave this writer, essential for developing this article.

After looking over its construction details and architecture, the Olympic Stadium can do no less than reveal itself as a kind of lasting work of art and sculpture. This is not only because of its form, but because of the way it was built. This fundamental aspect, its construction, is what invariably leads us to eras as remote as that of the eruption of Xitle Volcano in A.D.300, which resulted in the formation of the Valley of Mexico's San Ángel Lava Rock Fields (the Pedregal de San Ángel), where the stadium stands today. The decision to build it there is the start of the fortunate history of the space, about which Pérez Palacios commented,

I believe that the solution we arrived at is the best demonstration that we proceeded logically, because the Olympic Stadium is one of the most beautiful structures in University City. To favor the economy of construction, one of the main rules is to have the materials as nearby as possible. In building the Olympic Stadium, we used the magnificent material we had at hand, the very earth where it was going to be erected.¹

Thus, the integration of the natural surroundings —what so many people talk about when a new work of architecture is about to be built— was successful. The land chosen already had a natural depression and was then excavated to form the cone of the elliptical base that became the playing field and then part of the bleachers. Later, the earth extracted was used to build a circular embankment around the playing field, whose talus is nestled in the natural resting place of the material that was later covered with volcanic rock, also dug from this site. Finally, the upper bleachers were built on the embankment.

The site where the stadium was built was undoubtedly the first determining factor for its final form. The edifice's simplicity results from using the materials found on the grounds (more than 100,000 cubic meters of earth and rock) and the combination of ancient and modern building techniques. As Cruz González Franco said in her interview,

The University Olympic Stadium is one of the main works of University City as well as of contemporary twentieth-century architecture, since it brings several qualities together: a contemporary building with contemporary language, which uses construction systems from the Mesoamerican past, like the base for pyramids, and at the same time advanced systems, like dams being built at that time in Mexico.²

If the terrain was a determining factor for this building, the memory of the Mesoamerican past, present in architect Pérez Palacio's creative thinking as well as in that of artist Diego Rivera, was fundamental in consolidating the stadium as an element of national identity, reaffirming the memory of our roots and the desire for progress, because we should remember that the stadium is part of the National University's educational project.

Visual integration was an original part of the architectural conception of University City, and that is why Mexico's most renowned muralists were invited to contribute to several of its buildings. Diego Rivera, a great friend of Pérez



The architect, Augusto Pérez Palacios, explaining the project to President Miguel Alemán.

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Palacios, was commissioned to create the mural that now graces the central part of the stadium's eastern façade.

Rivera's original idea was for a mural that would completely cover the stadium's exterior, depicting human figures playing a sport or during an episode in Mexico's history. This project could not be completed, however, due to Rivera's delicate health and probably for economic reasons. Nevertheless, the work he was able to finish became yet another symbol of University City. It is nationalistic and historical, exalting the past and the mixture of cultures, but it also speaks to the present. It is made up of the National Autonomous University of Mexico coat of arms, which depicts the American condor and eagle posed on a nopal cactus. In their wings, they hold a man with European features and an indigenous woman who are handing their mixed-blood son

the dove of peace. On either side are enormous figures of male and female athletes lighting the torch from the Olympic fire. It should be said that the mural is a mosaic, done by tracing the figures on the wall and then sculpting them in relief using naturally-colored stones like Mexico's red *tezontle*, *tecali* (a transparent marble), white marble, green and pink stones and river rocks.

In the words of the artist himself,

The development of sports in Mexico from the pre-Hispanic era until today links University City's Olympic Stadium, a current reality in space, to the total space and time of the people who built it. That is, our intervention as sculptor-painters has given the aesthetic monument greater historic and social reality, but of an absolutely and very profound social and public function. We have achieved public social art.³

This historic and social reality is materialized with the creation of the stadium, which, as mentioned above, owes its originality to the site where it was erected and to the memory of the pre-Hispanic era, but also to the harmonious combination of construction techniques from the past with the more advanced techniques of today. Thus, there is equilibrium and consistency between the role this venue would play in society and its architectural form.

Architect Augusto Pérez Palacios was able to project a space that brings to mind the history and roots of a people, that alludes to them subtly but forcefully, and that at the same time fulfills all the requirements of a contemporary building. It even innovates in different areas: internationally, it was the first to have a press, radio and television box, known as "the Dovecot"; it pioneered the use of the Tartan track; and it has appropriate dressing rooms and bathrooms.



Panoramic view of the stadium and all of University City in 1954.



Diego Rivera's mosaic.

Diego Rivera created the mural that graces the central part of the stadium's eastern façade, yet another symbol of University City.



The best solution in terms of the stadium's functioning, bleachers, isoptics (the calculation of spectators' visibility), form, lighting and structure was achieved in great measure thanks to the study Pérez Palacios made of several stadiums abroad and of different proposals he found in contemporary publications. His architectural solution was based on a diagram by American Gavin Hadden, according to which the form of stadiums should be determined by the way spectators naturally seat themselves: first they sit in the center, and then, in a descending pattern, occupy the sides. Another very functional thing is access to the venue, which is level or by ramps: since it does not have stairs, the stadium can fill up and empty more quickly and without people stumbling.

The success of the University Olympic Stadium can be measured by the influence it had on the construction of others worldwide, like in Rome for the 1960 Olympic Games, and the remodeling of the Tokyo stadium for the 1964 games. Its originality and transcendence as a work of architecture can also be appreciated in the critiques of it by some of the most important figures in modern architecture of its time:

The stadium of the University of Mexico is just right for Mexico....It is there that the great, ancient traditions of Mexico that bring honor in modern times can be appreciated. But this structure does not imitate. It is a creation in the true sense and will take its place among the great works of the Architecture of today and tomorrow. (Frank Lloyd Wright, March 15, 1954)⁴

In the end, the most favorable result of this superb structure is its convincing scale in harmony with the landscape surrounding it and the felicitous visual integration of its architecture with the gigantic sculpture-painting created by a master: Diego Rivera. (Walter Gropius, March 18, 1954)⁵

About the University City Stadium, I can certainly say with complete conviction that it is one of the most forceful structures I have had the privilege to see under construction, and that it incorporates great innovations, both in its general solution and in its details. (Richard Neutra, March 16, 1954)⁶

When you look at the stadium, you can say without hesitation that a symbiosis was achieved between the totality of the building, with its volcanic rock and Rivera mural, and the structures of reinforced concrete: the balcony, tunnels, press box and lamp posts. The simplicity of their form identifies them and unites them at the same time. The elements do not clash with each other; they complement each other, creating a harmony between the traditional and the modern.

This place has witnessed many, many sports victories and matches: the 1954 and 1990 Central American and Caribbean Games; the 1955 and 1975 Pan American Games; the 1968 Olympics; the 1970 and 1986 World Soccer Championships; and the World *Universiada* in 1979, among others. Many records and achievements were set here during the

1968 Olympics. But, above all, right up until today, the stadium has fulfilled one of its main functions: being a public space for leisure and entertainment. In that sense, it fits completely with what Rivera called “public social art.”

Last, but not least, it can be said that the stadium is a space that is integrated not only into the whole University City, but into the landscape around it. The spectators who go there have the feeling of being inside and outside at the same time, thanks to a line of sight that allows you to be a part of the surrounding landscape even when you are inside.

Majestic, and at the same time discreet, when seen from afar, you inevitably think of the constructions erected by the ancient indigenous civilizations in the open air, surrounded by the natural landscape. Its form, defined by Rivera as an “architecturalized crater,” reminds us of the Xitle Volcano, which can be seen from inside the stadium, next to the Ajusco Hill.

From the day of its inauguration in 1952 until today, time and again the sounds of the voices of the people have rung through the stadium, the ovations, the shouts of “Goal!” the applause and the cheers, that as soon as they are made,

echo back, because the stadium is a living space, that palpates with every competition, with every match, with every meet. More than half a century old, the University Olympic Stadium continues to be sound; it has not aged, but rather has become one more of the symbols of the wealth of our university culture. Its virtues have given it a definitive place in the modern architecture of the world and in the catalogue of the most representative constructions of contemporary Mexico. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Lourdes Cruz González Franco, “Notas sobre el proyecto del libro *El estadio olímpico universitario*,” developed for the September 2008 School of Architecture exhibit. Author’s photocopy, p. 8.

² Interview with Dr. Cruz González Franco on April 12, 2010, in her offices in the School of Architecture’s Lino Picaseño Library in University City.

³ Cruz González Franco, op. cit., p. 29.

⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶ Ibid., p. 26.



The world’s first stadium with a special press box.

Mexico’s University Olympic Stadium exerted tremendous influence on others worldwide, like Rome’s and Tokyo’s for the 1960 and 1964 Olympic Games.





THE SPACE AND ITS CONTEXT

The University Contemporary Art Museum (MUAC) opened its doors in November 2008 after more than two years of conceptualization and construction. Located in the University Cultural Center, the MUAC eloquently expresses the National Autonomous University of Mexico's commitment to cultural exten-

sion, and a response to the on-going, lasting demands for spaces for the arts with structure and infrastructure. Architect Teodoro González de León, experienced in museum architecture, designed the MUAC. He conceived its location as part of a harmonious, articulated cultural space that also took into account the privileged natural, geographical surroundings that the development of University City managed to preserve in the face of Mexico City's overwhelming growth.

The MUAC's design reconciled this transparent dialogue with its surroundings with the demands for space and installations needed for a contempo-

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Photo of the facade by Pedro Hiriart, courtesy of the MUAC. Photos of interiors by José Antonio Ruiz, courtesy of the MUAC.