

# In Search of New Forms The Architecture of the Mexican Revolution

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The old Medical Center collapsed in the 1985 earthquake; it was later replaced by the Twenty-first Century Specialties Center.

The culmination of the Mexican Revolution would bring with it a program for national construction. The development of this nation, reemerging from the world's first twentieth-century revolutionary movement, centered on creating a political apparatus that

would promote nationalist values and foster development. This would only be achieved through a program for advancing in three priority areas: education, housing, and health.

When I say that the nation was just beginning to build itself, I literally mean that the government made a priority of erecting buildings that would not only supply the services needed to fulfill its political program,

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Photos by Gabriel González (Mercury).

but that they would also represent, in and of themselves, the ideals of the Mexican Revolution.

In the 1920s, after the armed movement ended, considerable concern existed for the Department of Health to be forged as a strong institution for society. This meant it would undertake great works: the Popotla Health Farm; the department's head offices; and the Tuberculosis Hospital, located in the southern part of Mexico City. In the 1940s and 1950s, more spaces for health care were created, such as the Gea González and La Raza Hospitals and the Medical Center.

In the field of education, monumental works were erected such as the National School for Teachers; the National Conservatory of Music; the Zacatenco campus of the National Polytechnic Institute; and the jewel in the crown of educational infrastructure, the National Autonomous University of Mexico's University City.

In the 1930s, housing for workers would be created; its simplicity of form, materials, and construction would seek to provide decent housing for society's most vulnerable groups. Later, the great housing proj-

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ects and residential estates such as Satellite City and the Pedregal de San Angel area would be built when, toward the middle of the twentieth century, architects and urbanists would turn their gaze to the city's outlying areas. It is quite well known that in those decades, the country went through a phase of rapid "modernization," reflected not only in its economy, but in the cultural reference points of modernity, such as buildings, which became its iconic forms. One example of this is the Latin American Tower in downtown Mexico City.

In addition, forms from abroad began to be more frequently noted in the work of Mexican architects. José Villagrán García and Juan O'Gorman adopted and defended the functionalist architecture reminiscent of



The Ministry of Health building constructed in 1953 was declared an artistic monument in 1991.





The National Conservatory of Music boasts important artistic pieces, such as Armando Quezada's group of sculptures on the façade and murals by José Clemente Orozco.

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Swiss architect Le Corbusier and the German Mies van der Rohe.<sup>1</sup> This architecture was taught to the new generations of students, with the result that they incorporated the ideology of greater efficacy and lower cost into their projects. However, around the 1940s, many of these young architects decided on experimentation in the form and use of new materials as a response to the fervent quest for a Mexican identity in architecture that had begun in the 1920s. However, initially, even all the nationalist efforts had not managed to delineate the concepts of “the Mexican” that the architects were to take into account. The definition of this nationalism they were working toward would become, then, a field of formal experimentation throughout the 1920s and would be represented in different constructions.



Patricia Pérez Ramírez

The National Autonomous University of Mexico's Central Library is a master work by Juan O'Gorman, a mosaic of small colored stones.

Just as muralism in the field of art paralleled an aesthetic-political program linked to the country's reality, architecture was inserted under the same guidelines using its own medium. Based on its own formal particularities, historical research, and exploration with regional materials decades later, architects began to establish a dialogue among themselves about how to represent the Mexican experience. In addition, magazines and books from abroad and the trips they themselves took promoted a closer look at the architectural trends from other places, mainly Europe, and above all, the maximum representative of the modern movement, Le Corbusier. This link would create a kind of awareness of the post-revolutionary architecture as a blank page that allowed for experimentation with the values of the architectural avant-garde. The quest for new ways of building and the lack of definition of a Mexican architectural identity made it possible for other forms to be taken on board within the pantheon of proposals. Thus, the architecture of the post-revolutionary period not only referenced a constant quest for defining the parameters of nationalism, but also an exploration of architectural modernity.



The monumental National Teachers' School is home to the 380-meter-long mural *Allegory* by José María Orozco.

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In the art deco style, the Handball Court of Mexico was the capital's first inside sports venue.



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In this context, great works stand out that are in and of themselves the result of the first crosscutting theme that structures post-revolutionary architecture: the representation of “what is Mexican” and the value in terms of identity of a renewed nation. Architects like Carlos Obregón Santacilia and José Villagrán García began to explore this objective through different formal lines and were commissioned by the Department of Health to build its headquarters and the health farm, respectively.

Construction began on the Health Department building in 1925, and it is one of the most emblematic examples of the encounter between the quests for modernity and nationalism. Located in the triangle formed by Lieja Street and Tacubaya Avenue in Mexico City, next to the Entryway of Lions opening onto Chapultepec Forest, the building’s formal line is reminiscent of art deco, but combined with a series of characteristics that make it uniquely authentic: black granite framing the entryway fuses with the mixed structure of the entire building; different materials, like the steel in the bridge connecting different spaces, together with the reinforced concrete mezzanine; and the integrated visual artwork, like the reliefs and sculptures by Manuel Centurión and Hans Pillig; William Spratling’s designs; and finally Diego Rivera’s stained-glass windows and murals. The building represents the joint efforts of architects and visual artists and/or designers to present a comprehensive work, an ideological stance that would be adopted decades later by the architects of what was called the Movement of Visual Integration. It is no coincidence that later, in the 1940s, the Medical Center, built by Enrique Yáñez, would also be a joint effort by architects and artists to raise the construction to monumental stature, in which the concepts of national identity and architectural modernity had matured.



The Latin American Tower, for many decades the city’s highest building, has never been damaged by an earthquake.

The Popotla Health Farm and Hygiene Institute (1925), created for experimentation in creating vaccines, were built from a merely modernistic design based on a lack of ornamentation and a minimization of forms. In addition to the sanitary specificity this architecture required, Villagrán proposed this hygienic trait as an aesthetic value he would repeat in his later work (the Huipulco Tuberculosis Hospital [1929], the Jesús Hospital [ca. 1934], and the Medical Center's National Cardiology Institute [1937], just to name a few of his many hospitals).

In education, building new architectural complexes that would provide a healthy atmosphere conducive to children's development would also be a priority. José Vasconcelos's educational program emphasized the construction of spaces that would be appropriate for the development of the nation. In the 1920s, once again, Carlos Obregón Santacilia, commissioned by Vasconcelos to build the Benito Juárez Educational Complex (1924-1925), would do outstanding work. This project, even before the Health Department building, represented an exploration not so much in terms of modernity, but in the development of Mexico's identity, where the architect used neo-colonial style as a solution.

Obregón Santacilia recognized the racial mixture that the Mexican baroque evidenced in terms of materials and formal elements as key for representing "the Mexican" as a formula linking the two cultures, the indigenous and the Spanish.

In terms of government works, the neo-colonial style seemed not to work in the context of post-revolutionary modernity. Strict adherence to primary values of Mexican culture led to the use of neo-Mayan formulas and Mesoamerican motifs to create another architectural proposal. Mexico's pavilion in Seville's 1929 Ibero-American Exposition, designed by architect Manuel Amábilis, was the clear result of how pre-Hispanic elements were integrated into a government-promoted architecture seeking to represent the country's progress. However, these forms were also surpassed by the exaltation of the values of European architec-

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Today the esplanade of the Monument to the Revolution is used for leisure activities and social protests.

tural modernity that for young Mexican architects was the most viable solution for building the city.

Juan O’Gorman is one of the foremost representatives of that avant-garde. Between 1931 and 1932, he built the Diego Rivera Studio House in the San Ángel area. The house is known for its merely functional architecture, completely devoid of ornament, openly displaying the concrete walls with floor-to-ceiling windows and simple metal molding. After this first proposal, in 1933, Minister of Education Narciso Bassols commissioned him to build a series of schools designed on functionalist principles, which adapted perfectly to the country’s hygienist needs, leading O’Gorman to call this new architecture “building engineering.” His achievement was to build 25 schools in only six months, clearly showing the advantages of the architectural avant-garde as a solution for the country’s needs and representative of the ideals of the revolution: quickly providing the population with what it needed at minimum cost. Functionalism then became the banner that represented the values of the avant-garde and the socialist stance that was growing in the 1930s. Projects

such as those of the Mexican Electrical Workers’ Union and workers housing became representative and symbolic buildings of modern architecture.

With the years, the maturation of the quest for national identity linked functionalism to fixed characteristics such as regional materials, the abstraction of pre-Hispanic forms, and the integration of the visual arts. This amalgamation then proposed a modern Mexican architecture, developed with contemporary techniques and materials, but linked with specifically Mexican techniques, materials, and motifs. University City is the culmination and maximum symbol of modern Mexican architecture. Among its many buildings are the Rector’s Tower, covered with windows, and the library, whose basalt base boasts pre-Hispanic motifs. In the esplanades are buildings constructed on pillars, leaving the ground floor free, as well as those reminiscent of the bases of pyramids, such as the open ball courts. University City, finished in 1952, shows a way of building that would later be emulated in the Ministry of Communications and Public Works and the Medical Center, to name just two of the most important projects.

The Diego Rivera Studio House in the San Ángel area is known for its functional architecture, completely devoid of ornament.



The Diego Rivera Studio House was designed in the functionalist style by Juan O’Gorman (1931).



Photos courtesy of the Diego Rivera Studio House Museum/Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes





Photos: Mario Pani Archive, courtesy of Centro Cultural Tlatelolco / UNAM.

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In its time, the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Urban Complex was the faithful expression of the “stabilizing development” period in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus, monumental construction was one of the visual, aesthetic, and affective values that became characteristic of post-revolutionary architecture, which then becomes a monument erected as representative of the political values of the time. It was hegemonic, and, proposed from the seat of power, through the years it achieved formal consolidation, becoming a symbol of progress, with examples like the Monument to the Revolution and the Latin American Tower.

Many of these buildings are now empty, not having adapted to the needs of today. Buildings like Mexico’s Handball Court (1929), built by Joaquín Capilla and Teodoro Kinhard, which until only a few months ago was in disuse and basically a ruin, is one of the most representative of art deco in Mexico. Villagrán’s Health Farm was also demolished using the argument that the city had to be modernized, just like the Tuberculosis Hospital, whose remodeling put an end to its original forms; and the Juárez

Multifamily Project and the Prado Hotel, were destroyed by the 1985 earthquake. All of these huge works exalted in their forms the need to transcend, and now transcend from their ruins, or in our memories.

The architecture of the Revolution represents a quest that symbolizes a revolution. Its ways of projecting itself and being built celebrate the revolution, but it also attempts to take a political position of its own in the face of the country’s circumstances, proposing a series of monuments that even today continue to represent an imaginary and a set of ideals of its place in past history and our own present. **NM**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Alberto Manrique, “El proceso de las artes: 1910-1970,” in Martha Fernández and Margarito Sandoval, comps., *Una visión del arte y de la historia*, volume V (Mexico City: UNAM-IIE, 2007), p. 92.