

CARLOS FLORES MARINI  
THE "PLAZA DE LAS TRES CULTURAS"

Mexico has a rich artistic legacy and a remarkable creative potential that gives meaning and character to the cultural and historical life of the country.

For a long time the essential role played by the artistic manifestations of our ancestors in the consciousness of the nation's ideology and sensibility was not evaluated. As a result of such carelessness, Mexico has a great number of destroyed monuments, which require an intensive job of conservation and restoration.

The present government, conscious of its responsibility has shown great interest and has devoted a considerable amount of its patrimony to restoration and conservation projects. Above all in the case of monuments, where work was sorely needed.

Due to the fact that many of these monuments are within urban centres of intensive growth, we encounter two different problems for their integration into the present life. One of the problems is the existence of 11,000 archaeological zones (pre-Colombian cultures). Due to their conditions these buildings must be considered as dead monuments. They mark a continuous architectonic development starting from 600 A.C., to 1521, when the social, political and religious structure ended with the Spanish conquest.

The second problem is created by the 50,000 monuments of the Colonial period, built during the three centuries of Spanish domination, that ended with Independence in 1821. Being the in the majority religious buildings, their urban integration is in a certain way simple, due to the continuity of religious idiosyncrasy.

One of the cases in which this integration of the two periods in our actual culture has been achieved is constituted by "Plaza de las tres culturas" (Square of the Three Cultures) which forms part of the urban development named "Nonoalco Tlatelolco".

Tlatelolco was a city of great importance during the pre-Colombian and Colonial periods which fell into decay. It became a slum area where people lived in insalubrious and miserable conditions.

As this region was overpopulated, its total regeneration was urgent. The government achieved it by designing a housing development that resolved the popular housing problem. The architect, Mario Pani, was commissioned by the Banco Nacional Hipotecario Urbano y de Obras Pùblicas to design "El Conjunto Nonoalco Tlatelolco" (The Nonoalco Tlatelolco Development) with a capacity of 15,000 families.

Upon the creation of this "Plaza de las Tres Culturas" a series of problems

arose, concerning the historical continuity of the city of Mexico. It was founded in 1325 with the name of Tenochtitlan by the Nahoas tribe of the Mexicas. It constituted the most important centre of military rule and commercial life at the arrival of the Spaniards.

It was located on an island surrounded by canals. Populated centres in its periphery communicated with the great metropolis by three avenues. One of these avenues led to Tlatelolco. Tlatelolco was a centre of great importance, not only commercially but historically, as it was the residence of Cuauhtemoc, the last great Mexican king who distinguished himself by his valor against the conquerors during the final attack on the city.

During the Colonial period, Tlatelolco was not only the site of the great catholic church devoted to Santiago and built over the pre-Hispanic temple, but also the famous school for Indian noblemen "Colegio Imperial de la Sta. Cruz" through which passed learned instructors such as friar Pedro de Gante and Bernardino de Sahagun.

As elements of both pre-Hispanic and Colonial periods were preserved, it was necessary to integrate them with a great sense of respect. "La Plaza de las Tres Culturas" is the combination of these dissimilar elements, incorporated into present life and creating a historical-cultural centre, which synthesizes in a living form the development of Mexican architecture. It is an example of the possible compatibility of modern environment and the conservation of historical culture; the conciliation of realities apparently contradictory, through careful, integral, organic planning; a demonstration that tradition and modern life are not necessarily antagonistic. It can be established therefore as a point of contact and equilibrium.

Of the pre-Colombian period the only visible remains were those of the Great Temple. The National Institute of Anthropology and History commissioned the archaeologist, Gonzales Rul, to perform a series of excavations meant to delimit the pre-Hispanic area. A great number of temples and platforms were discovered. Simultaneously a total restoration of the Colonial constructions was performed, the Catholic Church of "Santiago", the Imperial College of "Santa Cruz" (which was occupied later on by a military prison) and the "Tecpan".

When the pre-Hispanic area, larger than the Colonial area, was defined, it was necessary to integrate these areas into modern life. It was achieved by the creation of a square at the lower level of the modern and Colonial constructions (pre-Colombian level), which is at the same level as the lower level of the new building for the "Secretaria de Relaciones".

The staircases of the pre-Colombian platforms are used to ascend to the second level (Colonial and modern) where an esplanade was created that gives access to the "Development" where ritual dances are performed on Santiago's day.

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RÉSUMÉ.

*L'un des cas qui reflètent, à Mexico, l'intégration de la période préhispanique (600 av.J.C. - 1521) et la période coloniale, correspondant à trois siècles de domination espagnole, est la « Plaza de las tres culturas » qui fait partie de l'ensemble urbain appelé « Nonoalco Tlatelolco ».*

*Pour en effectuer la restauration, il était nécessaire de respecter les éléments appartenant aux deux périodes en les intégrant à la partie moderne. La « Plaza de las tres culturas » est la conjonction de ces éléments dissemblables incorporés à la vie actuelle pour créer un centre historique et culturel qui synthétise, sous une forme vivante, le développement de l'architecture mexicaine.*

*De l'époque préhispanique, on ne voyait que les restes du Grand Temple et c'est pourquoi l'I.N.A.H. chargea l'archéologue Francisco Gonzales Rul d'accomplir une série de fouilles tendant à délimiter l'aire préhispanique: on découvrit alors un grand ensemble de Temples et de plateformes; on procéda, dans le même temps, à la restauration totale des constructions coloniales: le Temple catholique de Saint-Jacques, et le Collège impérial de Santa-Cruz.*

*Ayant délimité l'aire préhispanique, plus grande que l'aire coloniale, on pensa à l'intégrer à la partie moderne: on créa à cet effet une place à un niveau inférieur à celui des constructions modernes et coloniales (niveau préhispanique) qui s'intègre au niveau inférieur de l'édifice du: Secrétariat aux Relations.*

*Les plateformes préhispaniques sont utilisées comme gradins pour monter au second niveau (colonial et moderne) sur lequel on a créé une place pour accéder à l'ensemble où se déroule un spectacle de danses très intéressant et pittoresque le jour de la Saint-Jacques.*