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 archaeo-
logical 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 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 Públicas 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 Nahua tribe of the Mexicans.
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 con
queros 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 commis-
nioned 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 “Secretaría 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 Santia
go’s day.
Carlos Flores Marini
La “Plaza de las tres culturas”.
RÉSUMÉ.

L'un des cas qui reflètent, à Mexico, l'intégration de la période préhispanique (600 au 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 « Nonodico Tlateolco ».

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 savait que les restes du Grand Temple et c'est pourquoi l'I.N.A.H. chargea l'archéologue Francisco Gonzales Ruiz 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 Sécrétariat aux Relations.

Les plateformes préhispaniques sont utilisées comme gradins pour monter au second niveau (colonia) 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.