

AUGUSTO H. ÁLVAREZ

A Classic of Architecture

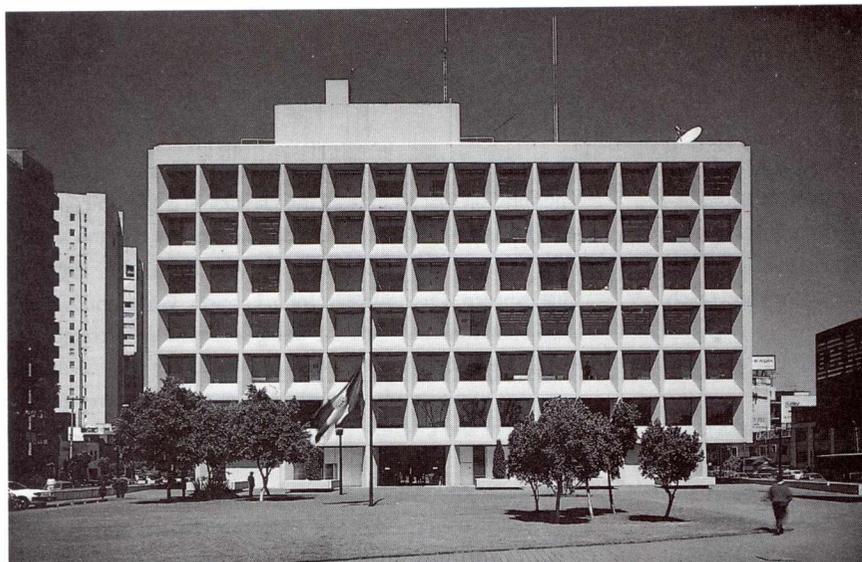


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Photos: Augusto H. Álvarez

Jaysour Real Estate Company building.



IBM of Mexico building.

Álvarez always said that to be an architect “a great vocation for service is needed.”

“Being a classic in architecture is being able to throw the user of a building into the abyss of creation and deposit him, unharmed, in an unknown paradise.” This ability, according to Manuel Larrosa, was one of the main characteristics of the work of architect Augusto H. Álvarez, who died in Mexico City last November 29.

Born in Mérida, Yucatán, December 24, 1914, Álvarez always said that to be an architect “a great vocation for service is needed.” This conviction can be seen not only in what he built, but also in his teachings during the 40 years he was a professor of architecture.

Álvarez studied at the National School of Architecture of the UNAM (1933-1937). He began work on his own in 1940, combining it with his work as an academic. Between 1942 and 1970, he was a full-time professor of composition at UNAM’s National School of Architecture, a professor and director of the School of Architecture of the Israeli School and the founding director and professor of the School of Architecture of the Iberoamericana University in Mexico City. As a teacher, his main interest was the overall education of the student; he believed that projected spaces had to be conceived as a whole into which the architect integrated all the elements at his disposal, without losing sight of

the ends and uses for which those spaces were being created.

As a professional, he participated in projects and the construction of buildings for public use, like hotels, hospitals, schools, banks, office buildings, etc. Regardless of the material used—cement, steel, aluminum or glass—, his work always showed a reverence for order and cleanliness—a reflection of his own personality—as well as a clear mastery of geometry.

He earned innumerable prizes and distinctions both domestically and internationally. Among them are an Honorable Mention at the Sao Paulo, Brazil, Biennial (1961), the National Prize for Architecture (1983), Honorable Mention at the First Biennial of Mexican Architecture (1990) and First Place in the Mathías Göeritz Prize (1995). He also collaborated with distinguished Mexican and foreign architects in carrying out different projects and was both full and honorary member of several Mexican and Latin American societies of architects.

Álvarez was a good friend, partner and teacher to all who knew him, an example of openheartedness, elegance and solid thinking, true in word and deed. *Voices of Mexico* includes in this issue the eulogies of Don Augusto H. Álvarez by two outstanding Mexicans. With them, we join in the homage paid him by his colleagues. ❧

History of an Irresistible Vocation

Augusto H. Álvarez —architect, friend and teacher— leaves all those who were blessed to know him the great example of a fruitful and creative life. We are also left with the memory of a simple life, true to itself, led by an incomparable human being.

Many of us received as a divine gift his guidance and teachings about how to be true Mexicans.

Augusto was, on principle, ordered and measured in all things, particularly in his central vocation in life: architecture.

There are innumerable examples of his work throughout the country. Dedication, effort and affection were always the centerpieces of any work he was commissioned to do.

It was not, however, only his work as an architect which distinguished him, but also his work in teaching and administration, as well as the friendship he offered everyone, starting with his schoolmates, all the way through his young disciples and collaborators until the end of his life.

He taught composition in the National School of Architecture and later founded the School of Architecture of the Iberoamericana University, where he was influential in orienting the learning process toward a global education for architects.

Álvarez's teachings and work were always consistent and his vocation clear; he always conceived of projected spaces as a whole in which the architect could conceive of and integrate all the elements which make up architecture, using the spaces for the ends for which they were created without exhibitionism and always upholding, with great elegance, quality of thought, in word and deed.

But above all, his truth, values, openheartedness and great friendship captivated all of us who had the good fortune to know and deal with this teacher and friend in the workshop, in his office and in any sort of professional collaboration on a day-to-day basis, which he did with so many architects from Mexico and abroad.

No one should doubt that among all these virtues there was any lack of spontaneous joy in his pleasant, often funny, remarks, charged with healthy irony, particularly when he was criticizing himself.

Augusto's full life could be seen in the meticulous care he took in preparing trips all over the world to capture the real sense of human life. He always made these trips in the company of friends who shared his ability to analyze and observe, and of course, always carrying a camera, a small notebook and a well-sharpened pencil poised to express his fertile imagination.

All this made him the true representative of our School of Architecture which has borne many fruits for our country. I am sure I speak for all those he distinguished with his friendship, teachings and affection.

José Adolfo Wiechers Escandón
January 1996.

A Maturing Voice

One of the most courageous voices of Mexico —which will undoubtedly last as long as the classics— is the voice recorded by Augusto H. Álvarez in his buildings. He had the ability to communicate the emotions that Aeschylus, the *Popol Vuh*, Shakespeare, Orson Wells, John Lennon, Goya and so many other classics have left us. Being a classic in architecture is being able to throw the user of a construction into the abyss of creation to deposit him, unharmed, in an unknown paradise.

Silent and discrete, almost timid, the voice of this architect is, however, stronger and more powerful than the clamor of all today's self-advertisers in this field.

Just like with birds, any stridency chases away classicism from a space. Augusto (as he was frequently called to combine his name with the adjective denoting respect and veneration due to how imposing and majestic his work was)¹ was never strident, either in his behavior or his work. It is clear that the elimination of stridency in his work is another factor in Álvarez's classicism.

When a certain kind of rigorousness also possesses propriety and precision, intentionality and vehemence, it does not exclude pleasure. This is the kind of rigorousness that Augusto H. Álvarez employs in his spaces, through modular geometry, in honor of apotheosis, to the benefit both of users and observers of his buildings.

Without the voice of this architect, transformed into inhabitable space, Mexico would not be what it is; it would not have seen its territory covered with constructive rationality melded with beauty that this artist spread through his work and the teaching of generations of students. In his work and thought, reason has been witness to the efficiency of the emotions.

The National University of Mexico has collected the oral history of Mexico's great creators in the very valuable collection *Voz Viva de México* (The Live Voice of Mexico). The live voice of Augusto H. Álvarez, heard in his architecture, does not need to be preserved aurally: it is preserved in the cement, steel, glass and wood which delimit the space he created, as well as in the values of his disciples.

Manuel Larrosa
January 1996.

¹ "Augusto" in Spanish is not only a name, but the adjective "august," meaning "inspiring reverence." [Translator's Note.]