

# Contemporary San Angel

## From the Twentieth to the Twenty-first Century

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*In memory of Patricia O’Gorman,  
my childhood neighbor and  
friend in San Angel.*

### THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The first 25 years of the twentieth century were coming to an end. Mexico City was growing rapidly with new residential areas developing in the empty properties

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Translated by Andrea Martínez.

between the city and surrounding towns. La Gran Calzada, today South Insurgentes Avenue, was inaugurated September 16, 1924. Also known as the “New Avenue,” this public works project was 8 kilometers long and reached the recently developed neighborhood, Guadalupe Inn. At the time, to preserve the pavement, only vehicles with rubber tires were allowed to use the road.<sup>1</sup>

Almost a year later, in August 1925, the merchants of the area decided to form the San Angel Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Businesses, including those set up on the eastern side of

San Jacinto Plaza, Francisco I. Madero Street, Del Carmen Plaza and Dr. Gálvez Street were registered in the founding document. These businesses would soon make up the commercial core of San Angel and included clothing stores, bakeries, public baths, *nixtamal* mills to make corn dough for tortillas, *pulquerías* (bars specializing in *pulque*, a traditional drink made from maguey) and small shops. Teachers and doctors were also registered including Alberto Lenz, owner of the Loreto y Peña Pobre paper mill.<sup>2</sup>

This was a first step in San Angel’s transformation. In a few years time, other





San Jacinto Plaza, one of San Angel's most traditional parks.



The house on San Jacinto Plaza where the weekly Saturday Bazar is held.

circumstances were to change the way of life in this once tranquil village. The first of these was the assassination of Mexican general and president, Alvaro Obregón, July 17, 1928 in La Bombilla, a very popular restaurant of the time.

On December 31, 1928, the Federal District and Territories Law created the Federal District (D.F.) comprised of

Mexico City, divided into 13 *delegaciones*, or wards, and a consulting committee. San Angel went overnight from having a municipal form of government, in which the community was very active, to a ward structure, dependent on the state, which by nature placed a distance between the citizens and their government. A new future was in store for the capital

which required major changes in its political and social organization as well as in its economy and commerce. By 1933, Mexico City was expanding so fast that soon it went beyond its own boundaries. In a short time, San Angel would cease to be a small town on the outskirts of the city. With drastic changes in its urban layout and local administration, daily life for its inhabitants was changing quickly. The once popular La Bombilla restaurant was torn down and a monument erected in its place honoring the fallen General Obregón.

San Angel was still the seat of the ward,<sup>3</sup> but the changes in its form of government were having social implications on day-to-day life. With secularization, the church stopped having a say in educational and cultural matters. Churches and other places of worship and/or religious education were either temporarily closed or placed in the hands of the state. The El Carmen Church would remain closed for 12 years, from 1927 to 1939. At the same time, the social endeavors carried out by the Salesian Order were halted. This group supported institutions such as the María Auxiliadora School<sup>4</sup> and the Count Mario Fani Workers' Circle which benefited both wealthy San Angel residents and the craftsmen and factory workers of nearby Tizapán.

#### THE 1940'S TO THE 1960'S THREE DECADES OF PUBLIC WORKS

During the next three decades various public works in San Angel and its surrounding areas would have a definitive impact on the geographical layout of the area and on the small town flavor it had managed to



Amargura (Bitterness) Street. San Angel residents have fought to preserve the tranquility and beauty of its streets.

preserve up until then. Residents witnessed how majestic walls lining old alleyways were torn down. Small shops, haberdasheries, *pulquerías*, *cantinas* and movie theatres disappeared, stilling the voices of conversations held from one side of the street to the other between shopkeepers discussing their day-to-day successes and disappointments. These changes took place in the context of a surge in industrial activity and administrative services and amidst a tremendous increase in the city's population due to a wave of immigration. The public works were an answer to the needs of a rapidly growing population and to the decentralization of businesses and

educational and health services. But they would leave an undeniable mark on San Angel, not only on its geography but also on the life of its inhabitants.

During this time, the project to extend Insurgentes Avenue to the highway to Cuernavaca was completed and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) University City campus was built. The residential area known as Pedregal de San Angel<sup>5</sup> was also developed. In 1952 the inauguration of what today is known as Revolución Avenue would break up the area's territorial unity affecting its "historic and picturesque" character.<sup>6</sup> Given this disturbing scenario,

Don Luis Montes de Oca invited his neighbors to a meeting in his home in Los Licenciados Plaza # 3, April 27:

Dear Sir,

As you know, the picturesque and typical nature of the town of San Angel, our neighborhood, is protected by a September 1934 federal decree. One can easily conclude that this law should be enforced to preserve San Angel as a living testament of an era gone by. As San Angel residents, many of us feel the need to exchange views on this matter and to discuss ways to enforce this law in such way as to preserve the unique qualities of our neighborhood.



The San Angel Market, famous in the 1940s for its quality merchandise.



The Porfirio Parra School on the San Jacinto Plaza. The building belonged to the Silesians until the 1930s.

In order to conserve the cultural and architectural patrimony of San Angel it would be necessary to, first, delimit the “historic area” and determine that any new thoroughfares leading to other parts of the city will have to pass around this area, with the exception of Insurgentes Avenue.

Second, promote the planting of large trees in houses, plazas and streets (ash trees, laurels, cedars, etc.) and ensure a water supply for the maintenance of these gardens. Next, declare tall buildings undesirable and define the criteria which new constructions must meet in order to fit in and

not interfere with the architectural beauty of older buildings and monuments.<sup>7</sup>

Concern grew among the residents of San Angel. A citizens’ association was formed called Friends of San Angel with the aim of “discussing what actions are being taken with respect to the possible mutilation of Del Carmen Plaza if Revolución Avenue is extended up to San Angel Avenue which leads to the university stadium.”<sup>8</sup> But the decision had already been made: on September 2, 1952, a secretary in a downtown office left the following note:

17:15. Sir, your mother called saying that by order of the city government, work will begin today to tear down the house next door. They said your house will be next.

In this way, the once narrow and quaint lane known as Ferrocarril del Valle was widened and extended to the university grounds and transformed into what is today Revolución Avenue.<sup>9</sup>

An outdoor market, which every Sunday ran up and down Dr. Gálvez Street, had already disappeared a few years before. The street vendors had moved from the northern end of this street to where they are located today, between Ferrocarril del Valle —today Revolución Avenue— and Arteaga and Dr. Elguero Streets, where the La Chispa *pulquería* and a coal outlet were located. At first, the majority of the 30 to 40 merchants resisted the change because they felt this new market was too big and far away from the commercial district. But with time, the Melchor Múzquiz market —better known as the San Angel market— would be well known for the quality of its products and would become the most popular of the city’s markets.<sup>10</sup>



Archangels Plaza, another charming public space in San Angel.

The wealthiest women of the area—housewives, wives of public officials and foreigners with exquisite tastes—flocked to the market to do their shopping. Women who worked as cooks in wealthy homes, who knew their *métier* better than anyone, also enjoyed the market, discovering the best the season had to offer and on the way exchanging bits of news with neighbors.

In the 1960's, events would take place that would put a definitive end to the tranquility of old San Angel. La Alpina, a wool factory established at the end of the nineteenth century, closed its doors in Tizapán, a neighborhood very close to San Angel.<sup>11</sup> The San Jacinto Parish was broken up and its space reduced<sup>12</sup> and the traditional crafts market known as the Saturday Bazar was moved from Dr. Gálvez Street to an old mansion in the San Jacinto Plaza, drastically changing the nature of this beautiful park.

Meanwhile, nearby towns such as Coyoacán, Tlalpan and Contreras and community farmlands had already been overtaken by the constantly growing city. San Angel became a stopover for thousands of people commuting from one end of the city to the other and consequently a massive and unorganized wave of street vendors flocked to sell their goods on the sidewalks of this once quiet town.

#### FROM QUIANT NEIGHBORHOOD TO AREA OF CONTROLLED DEVELOPMENT

At the end of the twentieth century, the streets of San Angel saw new sights, sounds and problems. The change in zoning from residential to commercial use allowed for the remodeling and subdivision of old mansions, destroying many of

the gardens which had always been typical of San Angel. An increase in tourist and commercial services brought with it an enormous rise in the flow of people and traffic. All of this contributed to disrupting the once peaceful plazas of San Jacinto and Del Carmen and today threatens to invade even the cobblestone lanes leading to residential areas. Garbage, noise and night-roaming rodents have become everyday problems and public areas have been saturated with an endless array of newcomers: street vendors and people looking for work,<sup>13</sup> as well as an endless flow of tourists who flock every weekend to the Saturday Bazar. This scenario has overwhelmed many San Angel residents who have founded new organizations of longstanding residents and merchants.<sup>14</sup> Interest has even been sparked in surrounding neighborhoods. More than 50 years of history are in danger of being forgotten.

At the end of the twentieth century, the San Angel downtown area and the San Angel Inn and Tlacopac neighborhoods were declared “Designated Areas of Controlled Development” (Zedec) in order to conserve, improve and rescue them.<sup>15</sup> In 1998, 800 street vendors on public thoroughfares were relocated. The residents, although not indifferent to the vendors’ complaints and hardships, at the same time felt relieved at having recovered the area. It was decided that some of these vendors would be temporarily relocated in Las Palmas Plaza located at the intersection of Dr. Gálvez Street, Insurgentes and Revolución, which is also a bus stop. Currently, the residents of San Angel are working to conserve and promote local culture and Mexican culture in general, not only by celebrating local traditions but

also by organizing festivals and artistic activities such as concerts, painting and sculpture exhibitions and lectures in the San Angel Cultural Center, the Isidro Fabela Library, museums and other charming public areas.

#### THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

It seems that a new will is flourishing in San Angel to recover the memories and dreams that for so long had been drowning under the weight of its own overwhelming development. The fighting spirit of its inhabitants, passed on from generation to generation, will most certainly be kept alive for years to come. Gone are the tiny shops, the *cantinas* and small grocery stores. Only faint echoes can be heard of an era gone by: the whistle of a nearby factory, the train passing on its way to Cuernavaca, the call of roosters in back yards. Even church bells and the whispered prayers announcing mass or the commencement of festivities honoring the patron saint seem to be fading not only in San Angel but also in nearby Tizapán, Copilco, Chimalistac and Tlacopac. However, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, San Angel breathes new life with the ever present, enthusiastic participation of its community. Meanwhile, every day at their accustomed hour, one can still hear the chimes of the bells of San Jacinto and Del Carmen. ■■■

Photography: *Luis A. Aguilar*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *San Angel Pintoresco*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1924).

<sup>2</sup> Minutes from the meeting held in August 1925 and

charter of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of San Angel, Villa Obregón, Mexico City, 1932. Information provided by the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Villa Obregón, Mexico City.

<sup>3</sup> In 1932, San Angel’s name changed to Obregón Villa (or City), however this was never assimilated by the population.

<sup>4</sup> The same building later housed the Porfirio Parra public elementary school.

<sup>5</sup> The unique geography of the area presented great challenges. Its development is truly to the credit of talented engineers and architects, remembered well by residents of San Angel and the university community alike.

<sup>6</sup> A decree passed by President Abelardo L. Rodríguez, September 27, 1934.

<sup>7</sup> Taken from the first draft of the letter written by Javier García Lascuráin Calderón dated April 24, 1952 addressed to Montes de Oca in response to his invitation.

<sup>8</sup> Letter addressed to Javier García Lascuráin by Luís Montes de Oca and Pedro Aspe, president and secretary of the association.

<sup>9</sup> For years the stretch of this avenue in San Angel was used very little; students and teachers on their way to the university campus would turn left at the corner of Dr. Gálvez and drive one block to Insurgentes Avenue.

<sup>10</sup> The new Melchor Múzquiz market was established in 1943 and was reinaugurated by President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and the city mayor, November 12, 1958. The market’s success during this time made many consider it the best, second only to the very popular and renowned San Juan Market downtown.

<sup>11</sup> Ernesto Vázquez Lugo, *Sucedió en San Angel. Viñetas históricas* (Mexico City: Edamex, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> The San Sebastián Chimalistac Parrish formed part of San Jacinto until November 20, 1964.

<sup>13</sup> Including sex workers.

<sup>14</sup> One example is the Tenanitlan San Jacinto Organization. Although formed in 1996, this group has been working since 1978 on a solution to the urban organization and rescue of San Angel’s historic downtown, a solution that would get to the heart of the matter, favoring no one and respecting the rights of everyone involved.

<sup>15</sup> This agreement would take effect on August 6, 1993, when published in the Mexico City’s Official Gazette and will last 20 years.