

# Tlatelolco Memory of a City

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*There are people who detest a place  
because it is linked to fateful moments in  
their lives; others see in a place its happy  
nature; these experiences also  
make up the city.*

ALDO ROSSI





Tlatelolco is a landmark in the city. Memory is our starting point for defining Tlatelolco: we find different historic moments of urban integration there, allowing us to understand the city we see today. It can be recognized by the Three Cultures Plaza, which brings together a ceremonial pre-Hispanic center, the Santiago Tlatelolco Franciscan church, the *tecpan*, or the indigenous government imposed by the Spaniards, the No-noalco-Tlatelolco housing project, the Foreign Relations Ministry tower and the subway line: this sums

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up some of the most significant moments of what is today Mexico City.

Dramatic stories are also an inseparable part of its history, like the October 2, 1968 student massacre in which the army shot into the crowd of unarmed young people participating in the student movement, and the September 1985 earthquake, when Tlatelolco was one of the city's most severely affected areas, with the collapse of the Nuevo León building and serious damage to others.

Tlatelolco was one of Mexico City's first settlements in the pre-Hispanic era. The first moment of architectural integration occurred when the first settlers established the indigenous city on an island in the Texcoco Lake in what we now know



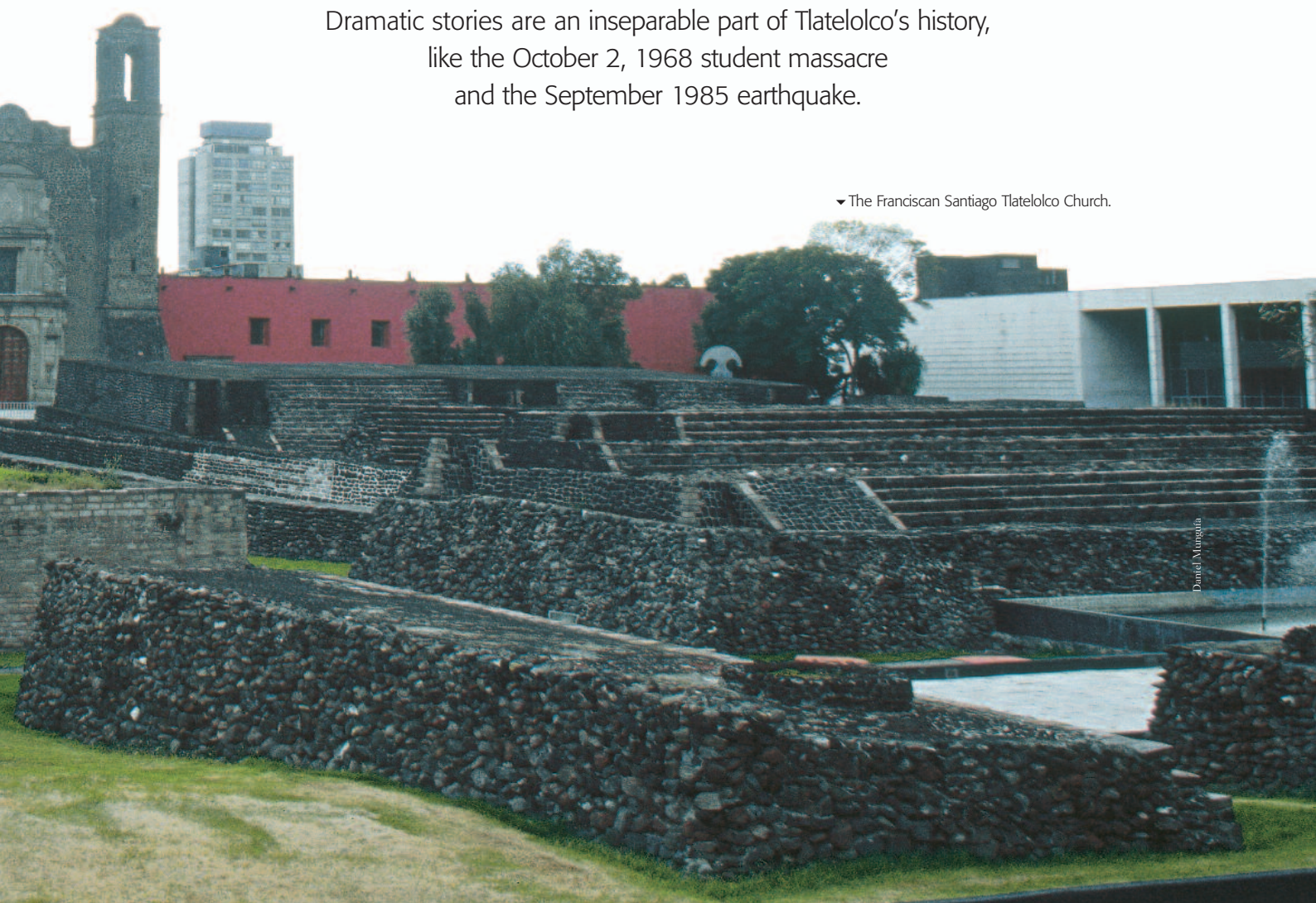


as the Valley of Mexico. The most important sites were Tenochtitlan in the middle and Tlatelolco in the north, where Mesoamerica's main pre-Hispanic trade center developed. But this caused military clashes with the inhabitants of Tenochtitlan. According to other sources, after the city of Tenochtitlan was founded, the Mexicas scattered to the four corners of the world and in 1337 a group of malcontents settled between the lake and the banks of reed-grass on a terrace (*ilatelli*) connected to the mainland by five or six avenues, two of which went directly to Tlatelolco. It is also said that the Mexicas lived together in Tenochtitlan 12 years and then some separated off and founded Tlatelolco Xilliyacac.

With the arrival of the Spaniards, the imperial College of the Indies of Santa Cruz of Santiago Tlatelolco was established in Tlatelolco to teach (or impose) their faith. At the same time the cities of Tlatelolco and Tenochtitlan were razed, and on top of them, what would be the city of Mexico was traced, using some elements of the pre-Hispanic city, like the direction of the streets and avenues. This was the beginning of the destruction of the lake city; the drying of the lakes was an unfortunate policy the results of which we still suffer from today, particularly the loss of the area's ecological balance. The valley had four lakes where *chinampas*, or artificial islands, were used for dwelling and agriculture.

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▼ The Franciscan Santiago Tlatelolco Church.





Carlos Ameghiani



Enrique Trejo

The population explosion and the massive use of automobiles changed the face of the city from the first half of the twentieth century.

*Chinampas* caused only minimal changes in the physical environment, and the city had an efficient transportation network inherited from the pre-Hispanic settlement made up of channels. These, however, gradually disappeared along with the *chinampas*, except for a few that survived into the mid-twentieth century and the ones in Xochimilco, the only reminder of what the lake city had once been.

Tlatelolco's second moment came at the end of the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries, when Mexico City achieved a real identity and a style of its own. It rose on the site of what had been the city of Tenochtitlan. Tlatelolco was still on the periphery of Mexico City and small, scattered constructions on what were undoubtedly *chinampas* could still be seen there.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church was stripped of many of its worldly goods. Since it was the owner of almost half the land in the city, this meant that the Franciscans' properties in Tlatelolco were trans-

ferred to government hands. The monastery was turned into offices and a military prison. New streets and avenues were opened up, becoming the basic elements of the urban transformation. Six neighborhoods for workers and lower income people were founded in 1884: Morelos, La Bolsa, Díaz de León, Maza, Rastro and Valle Gómez.

In the early twentieth century, the eighteenth-century city had been embellished upon by the new architecture from the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz). This was the case of the Juárez neighborhood, which was very representative of the pomp of the *Porfirista* elite. There, European architecture, mainly French, would mix with Art Deco and the Californian style characteristic of other recently founded neighborhoods like the Condesa, the Roma and later, the Hipódromo Condesa, structured around several avenues vital for the city like San Juan de Letrán, Juárez, Insurgentes and Reforma. This marked the beginning of an unprecedented demographic explosion, interrupted by the 1910 Revolution. But Tlatelolco continued to be





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Daniel Munguia



Verónica López

▲ The Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing Project (1960).



on the periphery of the city, preserving the church-plaza-market residential layout. Crisscrossed by innumerable railroad tracks, it was home to important railroad installations, the city's main *pulque* customs house, demolished in the 1960s, a graveyard fed by the Revolution and a train cemetery, around which innumerable stories and legends arose.

Finally, the third moment came with the end of the Mexican Revolution. When the city began to grow more vigorously, important housing began to be built like the Ermita Building in Tacubaya (1930), designed by Juan Segura, and later the Barurto Building in the Condesa neighborhood (1942), designed by Francisco J. Serrano, perhaps the best proponents of Art Deco architecture.

In the 1940s, state economic policy produced high inflation, with a dramatic effect on the price of rentals, making life particularly difficult for lower income groups. At the end of that decade, the first high density housing project was built in the city, the President Alemán Urban Center (1949), designed by Mario Pani. Later, this kind of housing project would culminate in Tlatelolco with the beginning of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing Project (1960), designed again by Pani, on an area previously occupied by an expanse of miserable shantytowns dating from the nineteenth century. It was in these shantytowns that, years earlier, Luis Buñuel had filmed *Los olvidados* (known in English as *The Young and the Damned*), a film recently declared a World Heritage Treasure. The end of

the 1950s also saw violent clashes in the plaza and surrounding areas between railroad workers and police, a precedent for the bloody repression of 10 years later. The church continued to be used as a military prison and the former college was Public Junior High School 16. Industries and shops were established there and broad avenues were built to accommodate the massive use of automobiles.

The layout of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing Project would not conform to the previous pattern of the streets: the buildings were isolated from the street, voluminous shapes located independently of the outer boundaries.

Later, centralist policies and the lack of opportunities throughout the nation caused massive migration to the capital in search of better living conditions. With that, Tlatelolco's housing project and surrounding neighborhoods like Morelos and Peralvillo began to fill up. Frequently, the inhabitants of these neighborhoods built their own houses, copying middle-class commercial architecture in an attempt to satisfy their wishes for modernity. When the building is finished, even if a dwelling may be adequate from the material point of view, the architectural quality and incorporation into the urban landscape are very poor. This happened to Tlatelolco, the emblem of the profound transformations of the city over the years and an example of how cities are forced to take on new roles. If they did not, life itself as a human congregation would be threatened. ■■■

