

A long, narrow courtyard in San Rafael, Chile, featuring a series of brick arches and a red wall at the end. The courtyard is flanked by brick buildings with arched windows and doorways. The ground is paved, and several potted plants are placed along the sides. The lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The text "San Rafael The Pulse of the City" is overlaid in the upper center, and "Sury Attic*" is in the upper right. The photographer's name "Daniel Munguia" is written vertically on the right side.

San Rafael The Pulse of the City

Sury Attic*

In contrast with the rest of the Christian —and not-so-Christian— world, in Mexico City, mentioning San Rafael is not mainly a reference to the archangel who, with his flaming sword on high, leads the celestial hosts in the eternal struggle against evil. Or was the one with the flaming iron, always at war, Gamaliel or perhaps Gabriel? I don't know. In any case, in this city, San Rafael does not have a very religious connotation. So much so that instead of calling it by its full name, we shorten it to San Rafa, which here, even though it is not at the point of a blazing sword, is aglow.

As a neighborhood, San Rafa is a very modern suburb. It is in fact the first suburb built outside of what we know as Mexico City's historic downtown. I consciously call it a suburb and not a settlement because from the start, from the first

moment it was conceived, San Rafa was planned for housing. A settlement is, by contrast, an area inhabited randomly with or without a prior plan. I make the distinction because being the first planned space outside the downtown area in this city is not of small merit. What is more, on reviewing its history, clearly it stayed practically the same size from the time of its foundation in the pre-Hispanic era, to the last layout done by the Spanish conquistadors in the sixteenth century to make a residential area before it became the San Rafael neighborhood.

The first suburbs outside Mexico City were created to accommodate the immigration that saturated and flooded the area built in the second half of the nineteenth century. These urbanized areas were given the name “*colonia*,” or “colony” which we still call them today. The word had its origin in the groups of foreign immigrants who settled in the city, organizing around their communities; the area

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San Cosme Damián Parish.

Mario Ruiz Rocha



Detail of a facade on Serapio Rendón Street.

Daniel Munguía



Housing complex on Serapio Rendón Street.

Daniel Munguía



Mauro Ruiz Rocha



Daniel Munguia

The neighborhood's architecture is still a rich mixture.

San Rafa is in fact the first suburb built outside of what we know as Mexico City's historic downtown.

where they settled was known as the foreign colony, for example, the French Colony or the American Colony, which were in what we now know as the Colonia Juárez, or the Juárez neighborhood. We must not call these areas “*barrios*” (another word for neighborhood in Spanish) because *barrios* refer to a very traditional, old, pre-nineteenth-century settlement like, for example, the La Candelaria *barrio*.

It was not until 1859, practically 550 years after the foundation of the city, which had maintained its urban layout unchanged, that on land known as the Potrero de la Horca, an influential, successful real estate promoter, Fernando Somera, began to project what at that time was called the Colonia de los Arquitectos, or the Architects' Neighborhood. It was initially conceived as a suburb for fine arts students of the San Carlos Academy, which still exists. This neighborhood would have a privileged location. On the north was the boulevard that led to Tacuba, called Tlacopan —now Ribera de San Cosme— and on the east it was very close to the Paseo de la Reforma.

When you look at a map of the area, noting the urban layout, you immediately see that the east side is different from the west. This is due to the fact that the neighborhood developed in two dif-

ferent stages. The first stage, dating from 1859, was built in an irregular fashion, taking advantage of the servants' footpaths through the fields. To have more lots to sell and make more money, crossways streets were not built: this is the origin of such long blocks on the north-south axis and the haphazard, angle shape of Gómez Farías Street, for example. This first stage is bordered by Sullivan, Insurgentes Centro, Gómez Farías and Rosas Moreno Streets. Years later, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the second stage of San Rafael was begun on land belonging to a ranch of the same name, this time with French investors. The layout of the eastern area is more regular, with almost square blocks, about 100 meters on each side, with model lots.

The interior of the neighborhood's urban layout is very homogeneous and uniform. Some buildings might catch your eye, such as a private university on Gómez Farías Street. In the area where everyday life goes on, time has made for a mixture of uses, although the buildings were conceived mainly as dwellings. Architecturally speaking, the scene is very similar to nearby neighborhoods, which today make up the city's center. This is why we find a rich mix of styles side by side. They go



The Plaza Hotel designed by Mario Pani.



The neighborhood continues to be basically residential.

from the eclectic homes built during the *Porfiriato* (the 30-year dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz ending in 1910), which imitate the pretentious mode of architecture typical of France in that period, to Art Deco, the search for a national architecture, severe functionalism and recent buildings.

Since it was mainly intended as a residential area, San Rafa does not have important public spaces, like the nearby Santa María de la Ribera to the

north, which has an Alameda park, or the Tabacalera neighborhood to the east, where the structure originally intended as the legislature is now the Monument to the Revolution, and is surrounded by an important open space. Although its buildings are not large or monuments, the importance of the San Rafael neighborhood lies in its location, strategic to the city. The avenues built after urbanization and which today form its perimeter make the neighborhood function as a hinge, or a giant round-about that organizes a great deal of the movement in what is considered the city center. That is why although internally there is not a great deal of movement, the avenues that make up its perimeter are especially vibrant. It is the point where Insurgentes Centro, San Cosme, Circuito Interior and Parque Vía come together. Without these arteries that surround San Rafa, the city would be paralyzed and would not function as we know it today.

Within this perimeter, there are two architecturally important buildings that should be mentioned. The first was designed by Matías Goeritz with the assistance of Luis Barragán, on Parque Vía Avenue. It is called “Echo,” a museum of movement or space to “generate moments,” a milestone in twentieth-century architecture since, according to some critics, this building was the beginning of what has been called “emotional architecture.” Today, the building holds a small university forum called “El Tecolote” (or “the Owl”), and although the space is totally unrelated to what the architects built, it is adapted to the original structure and anyone familiar with the project could easily imagine its origins.

The other building is the Plaza Hotel at the corner of Parque Vía and Insurgentes. This hotel is the only building constructed by Mario Pani as part of a master plan to change the location of the city’s financial and business center. The unrealized project consisted of organizing a series of multiple-use buildings around a very large rotunda, just at the intersection of Reforma and Insurgentes. The building’s design is similar to another hotel that Pani constructed previously in downtown Morelia. Last year, the Plaza Hotel was sold to a group of investors working on a project to rebuild it.

An urban space of exchange and contrast, with a marked difference between the neighborhood's perimeter and its interior. With the years, a few dives and old-fashioned taverns like the Golden Bar have insinuated themselves among the homes.

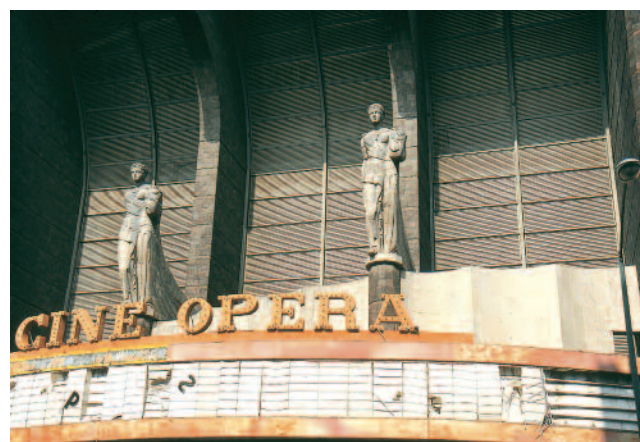
As I have said, San Rafael is a *colonia*; however, time and the steadfastness of its inhabitants have given it the life of a *barrio*. It is a neighborhood that also has its temperament without being as rough as the nearby *Colonia Guerrero*, where people habitually kill because somebody gave them a dirty look. As Jaime López says, "Here, only the brothers rule." Not only because traditionally many public employees have lived in this *colonia-barrio*, but because the streets themselves boast many crooks, and not only the kind that sit behind desks.

In other, more pretentious, milieus, when you are a public servant with good taste, even if only on payday, the appropriate behavior is to go and enjoy a moment of leisure and tranquility with the boss's secretary at the Sanborn's bar on Insurgentes Avenue. There, the decoration backdrops covered in burned wine-colored velvet with diamond-shaped crossed tape, combined with the pine chairs burnished to a chocolate mahogany hue, coordinated with the mirror-topped tables reflecting the same dark wood, imitation coffered ceiling, help create an intimacy ideal for inviting erotic-romantic contemplation.

Like in little-town stores, in the San Rafael neighborhood, nothing is ever out of stock: from romantic spaces, seductive and inviting intimacy, to streets where, if you're sufficiently macho, you can shoot off your gun just to know who rules. But other kinds of people, the ones who want to raise their cultural level, or those who already did and are educated, also fit in. Here in the San Rafael neighborhood, famous writer Renato Leduc lived and gave the once-over to every more or less decent-looking girl. Who doesn't remember that the 1937 Republican immigrants made their first beachhead in the city and that Arana's itinerant bookstore had its starting point here. Who doesn't know that the temptations of illicit, unregulated love can be found here. Yes, there are many



Building on Sadi Carnot Street.



Old abandoned movie houses are not forgotten.

contrasts in this great neighborhood: theaters and dying cinemas like the Cosmos, dance halls or churches, Boca del Río ("the River's Mouth," a famous restaurant) where you can eat delicious seafood. Yes, for example, on Sadi Carnot Street, you can browse through used books in the La Nave de



Mario Ruiz Rocha

The building of the Valley of Mexico University is representative of San Rafael's architectural splendor.

San Rafael was initially conceived as a suburb for fine arts students of the San Carlos Academy, which still exists.

Lulio bookstore. You can dive into the piles of books in the no bigger than 15 square meters of bookstore and, with dedication and patience, if you know and love books, you can even find a tome by a well-known author, a first edition with special binding, autographed and dedicated to another, no less notable writer. With the little book in hand, if you have time to look through it, the least you can

do is have coffee a few steps from there, at the corner of Antonio Caso in the Café Gran Premio, one of the best known spots in the city's coffee-lovers' circuit. A glowing city that reminds us of its beginnings to the tune of mambo, bolero or danzón, a sensual neighborhood that discovers its impulses when a poet looks at it or a slip of a girl pitilessly walks its streets. **MM**



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