



Unless otherwise specified, photos by Maurício Degollado



A Walk Down Juárez Avenue

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Juárez Avenue is the main access to what is today known as the Historic Center or historic downtown area. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the Historic Center comprised Mexico City in its entirety. This avenue borders the city's oldest, most traditional park, founded in 1592, when Viceroy Don Luis de Velazco ordered that "an alameda be made, to be filled with a fountain and trees, which would be ornamental for the city and a center for the recreation for its inhabitants." It was called Alameda Park because only poplars (*álamos* in Spanish) were planted there, although they were later replaced by more leafy, resistant ash trees.

Initially, the park was square, but in the eighteenth century it became rectangular with the addition of two lateral plazas, the Santa Isabel Plaza and the San Diego Plaza, the latter of which had

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been used as one of the Tribunal of the Holy Inquisition's places of execution by burning. For almost 600 years, the Alameda Park has been the preference of capital residents from all classes. However, there was a time in which anyone "broken, dirty, unshod and uncovered" was forbidden to enter, which temporarily eliminated the poor, now the majority of its visitors. Today, it is one of the favorite days out for families of limited means and young people of both sexes who, decked out in their finery, make the old, traditional park their own on Sundays.

For several centuries, Juárez Avenue was home to the sinister Accords Tribunal, whose extreme efforts to combat crime led it to commit tremendous injustices. It was housed in a beautiful building erected by Pedro de Arrieta, a noteworthy architect of the viceregal period, named "first architect of the Inquisition."

Undoubtedly, however, the avenue's crowning jewel is the old Corpus Christi Church which today,



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The Corpus Christi Church still houses ghosts and legends.

finely restored, houses the Historic Archives of Notaries. During the renovation work, a fascinating discovery was made that speaks to the fact that behind legends, no matter how fantastic they might seem, there are often traces of reality. The church belonged to a convent of the same name founded in 1720 by order of Viceroy Don Baltasar de Zúñiga, the marquis of Valero and duke of Arión. The viceroy supported the petition of a group of indigenous women who until that time had not been allowed to belong to any religious order because they were considered “tender souls,” incapable of withstanding the rigors of convent life. However, everything worked out in the completely opposite way: their performance was noteworthy despite the fact that to prove themselves worthy, they had to

accept innumerable special prohibitions imposed upon them. One of these prohibitions was that they could not drink chocolate, a truly difficult burden to bear, since at the time all of society had taken to drinking the delightful beverage at all times of day.

With the support of opulent strongmen, it was decided that the same architect, Pedro de Arrieta, the builder of the Accords Tribunal and the Palace of the Inquisition on the Santo Domingo Plaza, should be hired to design the convent and church. The convent has been demolished, but the church still stands, restored for all to admire.

Now to the legend: during a solemn mass in the cathedral for the health of King Felipe V, attended by the viceroy, a beautiful young woman appeared; for a moment, her eyes met those of Don Baltasar,

who was smitten with her. Unfortunately for him, no one was able to identify her, until one fine day he saw her pass under the balcony of the palace in an elegant carriage, luxuriously dressed. He immediately ordered his servants to find out who she was. It was with great disappointment that he discovered that her name was Doña Constanza Téllez and that she, in the company of her godmother, the countess of Miravalle, was saying good-bye to her friends because she was going to enter the Santa Isabel Convent, where she would take the name of Sister Marcela of Divine Love.

A little later, when the Corpus Christi Convent was founded, nuns from several convents were transferred there, one of them, Sister Marcela. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons the marquis gave so generously to this religious institution, which became one of the city's most opulent.

When he finished his term of office, the viceroy was called back to Spain, where he went, aggrieved. When the nuns heard about his impossible

love, as consolation, they sent him the turquoise stone from the ring that Sister Marcela had worn when she entered the convent. A short time after his departure, the marquis became gravely ill; he stipulated in his will that upon his death, his heart and the turquoise stone should be sent to his beloved Corpus Christi Convent. Centuries later, during the church's restoration, his well preserved heart was found in a small lead chest. Out of respect for the duke of Arión's last wishes, the heart was returned to a small niche that it is hoped will preserve it forever.

Juárez Avenue is a space of contemporary urban art harmoniously mixed with buildings and spaces from other centuries, an exemplary model of twenty-first century Mexico which combines its rich past with its future.



The modern Juárez Plaza just opposite the Alameda Park. Fountain designed by artist Vicente Rojo.



Left: The Palace of Fine Arts. Right: Detail of the facade.

The beautiful Corpus Christi Church is now surrounded by modern buildings on the glamorous Juárez Plaza, which occupies the enormous space that had been left in ruins after the 1985 earthquake. Finally, five years ago, it began its transformation with the restoration of the old baroque church and the construction of buildings to house the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Superior Court, which occupy two beautiful towers designed by Ricardo Legorreta, one of Mexico's foremost architects. An impressive fountain designed by Vicente Rojo, formed by dozens of small metallic pyramids surrounded by bubbling water and an enormous mural-sculpture of small colored mosaics by painter David Alfaro Siqueiros, decorate the complex.

Next to this monumental group of buildings stand several towers housing 600 modern apartments with all the conveniences (laundry room, swimming pool, meeting room and gymnasium).

Two hotels have been built to accommodate visitors to the city: first, the luxurious Sheraton hotel, among whose main attraction is one of the city's finest Mexican restaurants, the Cardenal. For more modest budgets, a few steps away is the modern Fiesta Inn with complete installations. Next to the hotels is the Alameda Park mall with shops, restaurants and a gaming center.

The street ends at the Eje Central avenue; on this corner is the Fine Arts Palace, whose beauty and importance in Mexico City's cultural life deserves a separate story.

The new buildings and plazas that adorn Juárez Avenue have turned it into a space of contemporary urban art harmoniously combined with buildings and spaces from other centuries, like the Corpus Christi Church, the Alameda Park and the Fine Arts Palace; it is an exemplary model of twenty-first century Mexico which combines its rich past with its future. ■■■