



Xilitla
The Architectural
Delirium of Edward James

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HISTORIC REVIEW

Xilitla is located in the southeastern part of what is now the state of San Luis Potosí in the Huastec region. It borders on the north with Aquismón and Huehuetlán, on the east with Axila de Terrazas, Matlapa and Tamazunchale, on the south with the state of Hidalgo and on the west with the state of Querétaro. It is about 350 kilometers from the state capital.

The name Xilitla comes from the Nahuatl word for “place of the snails,” and it was called that by the Aztecs who lived in this region once their empire dominated the Huastecs during the fifteenth century.

After the study of codices and ancient chronicles, it was discovered that what we call the Huastec culture is based on the Olmecs. An agrarian society *par excellence*, the Huasteca produced extraordinary art that had its golden age between 100 B.C. and A.D. 900.

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Photos by Mauricio Degollado.



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Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Huastecs were invaded by groups of nomadic, hunting and gathering Chichimecs from the north. By that time the golden age of the great Huastec culture was long over, and although groups of Huastecs had joined the migrants who left Pánuco for Tula, there continued to be Huastec communities in the area, which is what the Chichimecs encountered on their raids.

These blood-thirsty nomads were not the only enemies of Huastec inhabitants: in the mid-fifteenth century the Mexicas arrived headed by Moctezuma Ilhuicamina, who consolidated the vast empire of Tenochtitlan, subduing and conquering the fiefdoms and kingdoms that bordered on the great metropolis.



Moctezuma was succeeded by Axayácatl, Tizoc, Ahuizotl and Moctezuma Xocoyotzin. The latter, apparently to consolidate his domain, instigated a plan to colonize many sites in what is today the municipality of Xilitla.

It was in the time of Moctezuma Xocoyotzin that Hernán Cortés landed on the beaches of Mexico and put an end to the Aztec Empire in 1521. A little later, he commissioned several of his captains to travel to different regions of the country to consolidate the conquest. He himself left Coyoacán at the head of an army to conquer the Pánuco region, which included the Huasteca.

The so-called spiritual conquest began when the Augustinians decided to evangelize what was then called the High Sierra in 1537, naming Friar Antonio de la Roa as the missionary there. He was the first to spread the Gospel in the area and is credited with many feats and is even considered a saint.

In 1553, as part of the campaign to spread the Gospel, construction began on the Xilitla Monastery, which would also serve as a fortress to resist the Chichimec onslaught. It was attacked and burned in 1569 and 1587 by groups of Chichimecs, with the resulting total destruction of the vault and the theft of many objects from the vestry. Faced with so many problems, the Augustinian friars decided to withdraw from Xilitla at the end of the sixteenth century. The monastery stopped being a priority, and more work was done instead on the Huejutla monastery. The building then became a simple hostel for a few Augustinians who remained there until 1859, when they had to leave it because of the Reform Laws.

LAS POZAS

In addition to its pre-Hispanic and colonial past, in Xilitla there is a place that might seem like the vestige of any of the aforementioned ancient civilizations, but in reality is not. Xilitla's Las Pozas is something quite different. Let's call it a whim, or perhaps the largest outdoor surrealist monument ever conceived. Here, the paintings of Escher, Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Remedios Varo or another



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Mexican artist, Leonora Carrington, stop being something living on a canvas and become an uninhabitable garden city conceived in the imagination of the English aristocrat Edward James (1907-1984). Today, his labyrinth and his city without walls dialogue with the lush vegetation of the Huastec forest of San Luis Potosí.

Las Pozas is not on the most conventional tourist itineraries. It is located where the Eastern Sierra Madre becomes a forest, in what was mainly a cof-

fee-growing area until the bean's international price plummeted so low that cultivation practically disappeared a decade ago. It was here that Edward James, the heir to several fortunes and possible bastard grandson of Edward VII, had an epiphany while swimming in Xilitla's natural pools when he was surrounded by Monarch butterflies. That was in 1945.

Just like in the language of his friends and protégées, including Salvador Dalí and René Magritte whom he supported for years, the symbol took a physical form. Over a period of 20 years, he would build 30 hectares of architectural delirium: he built stairways that reached toward the sky, columns that support nothing but air, arches that look like plants and cement flowers, birds and legs. We would make no mistake if we said this was the garden Lewis Carroll would have liked for his Alice.

"I built this sanctuary so it could be inhabited by my ideas and my chimeras."¹ That is how James designed his garden of fantastic architecture. Nothing is useful in Las Pozas, but it is all beautiful. There is no premeditation, but there is mystery. Las Pozas surprises you as you walk through it, as you climb, as you suddenly find yourself faced with a cliff next to columns that look like bamboo plants. It is not only physical vertigo, but vertigo of the imagination.

Only whimsy resided in Las Pozas. Edward James was a passionate lover of orchids, which was what first brought him to Xilitla and kept him there until 1962 when frost destroyed all his plants. James collected them compulsively. It was then that his furious building began, when he populated hectares of his property with animals (from deer to ocelots and snakes), erecting houses without walls, cages without bars. For them and for himself.

James wandered nude or dressed only in a long white robe, surrounded by his animals, with a



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macaw on his shoulder, imagining new impossible forms, thinking about how to populate his imitation cement jungle, his invisible, labyrinth, ecstatic city. Today, Las Pozas is a place for play, like it was for James.

Just as he wanted, the work continues to be under construction. But now it is not his hallucinatory hand that imagines the cement and guides the dream: now it is nature, the forest's humidity, that makes Las Pozas a work in progress. James never declared it finished. He never wanted to. For that, he would have needed hundreds of years and to have finished at some point any of his ideas.

The surrealistic game, with its dose of surprise and humor, is the raw material holding up Xilitla's structures. André Breton already

said that Mexico was "naturally surrealistic." And he was right.

The English aristocrat's paradoxical city would not have been possible without the help of a practical man: Plutarco Gastélum, a Yaqui Indian whom James recruited in the Cuernavaca post office in the 1940s and who became his friend and overseer. Gastélum accompanied James from the beginning to the end of his San Luis Potosí adventure.

The materialization of the chimeras would also not have been possible if Edward James had not sold part of his vast collection of surrealist art and invested about U.S.\$5 million. Las Pozas also reveals much of the genius for crafts of Xilitla's native artists and masons.

Undoubtedly eccentric, or, as Dalí would say, "the only true madman," in many ways Edward James continues to be the man with his back to the viewer who Magritte painted in *Reproduction Prohibited*. A mysterious man whose face very few people ever saw and fewer understood, whose imagination never stopped growing.





“My house has wings and sometimes, in the depth of the night, it sings,” wrote James.² The epitaph on his gravestone at his West Dean residence in the United Kingdom, today headquarters for a foundation and one of the world’s most prestigious schools for restoration, reads simply: “Edward James, poet.” He wrote a great deal of poetry, though it was not very enthusiastically received during his lifetime, but his architectural fantasy is and will

continue to be the great work of this rich kid who said he was born a surrealist. **MM**

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NOTES

¹ Taken from Sara Brito, “Reportaje fuera de ruta. Casas que cantan en la selva”, *El País*, May 6, 2006.

http://www.elpais.com/articulo/viajes/Casas/cantan/selva/elpeanviaame/20060506elpviavje_13/Tes

² *Ibid.*

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