





Pedro Hinart

TEODORO GONZÁLEZ DE LEÓN RENOVATOR OF MEXICAN ARCHITECTURE

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Goethe said that architecture
is frozen music,
but I think it is petrified music,
and cities are symphonies of time spent,
concerts of visible forgetfulness.
HOMERO ARIDJIS

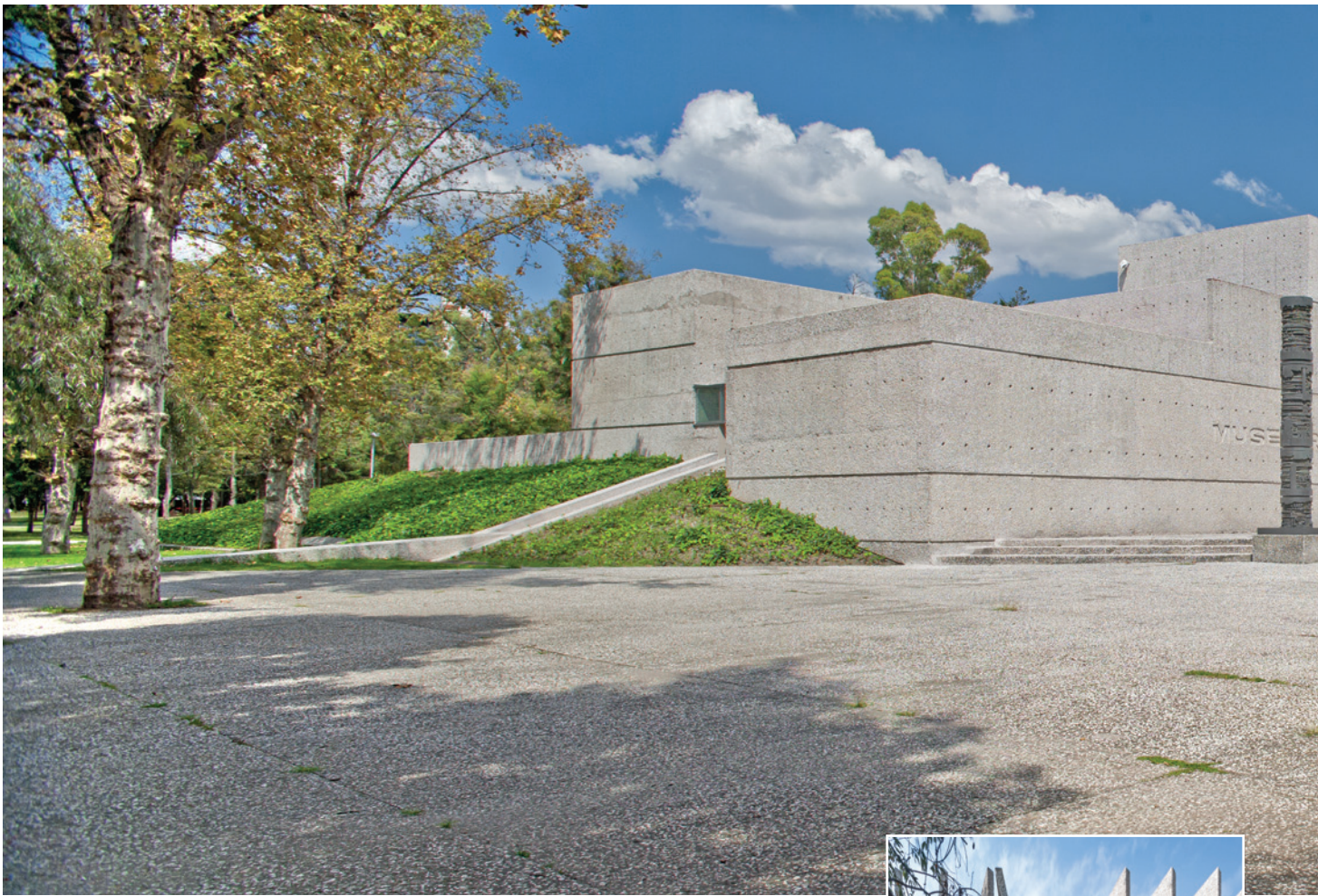
Just as they say that a book only comes alive when someone takes it down off the shelf, opens it up, and starts to read, we can also say that architecture only comes alive when it is lived in, when it is walked through and enjoyed; when it becomes beloved and dear to us. For Mexican architect Teodoro González de León (1926-2016), passion and emotion were essential when designing a new project. Perhaps that is the main reason it is impossible to go through one of his works and remain indifferent.

González de León's relationship with the architecture of Mexico City began with his studies at the National Autonomous University of Mexico's National School of Architecture,

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All photos are courtesy of Teodoro González de León's architectural firm.

◀ Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabłudovsky, El Colegio de México (The Mexico College), Mexico City, 1974-1976.



which used to be housed downtown. For Teodoro, this would be one of his best periods: it was there that he rubbed shoulders with artists, painters, and sculptors, for at that time the School of Architecture was in the same building as the School of Visual Arts, the San Carlos Academy.

It was during his student days that together with two schoolmates he developed the first project for University City, today a World Heritage Treasure, built in 1950. He was very attached to Mexico City, where he was born in 1926, and was a disciple of Le Corbusier, one of the twentieth century's main proponents of modern architecture. Undoubtedly, this period was a determining factor in creating a concept of architecture in which beauty and simple spaces are fundamental.

PUBLIC WORKS

González de León's experiences in France with Le Corbusier and his knowledge of Mexican and pre-Hispanic cultures came together in the first important buildings that he designed. One of these is headquarters for the Institute of the National Workers Housing Fund (Infonavit), which he designed jointly with architect Abraham Zab-ludovsky. He also collaborated on other works with Zab-ludovsky, such as El Colegio de México (The Mexico College), the remodeling of the National Auditorium, and the Rufino Tamayo Museum.



Camila Cossio

▲ Teodoro González de León, El Colegio de México Library (detail), Mexico City, 2015.



▲ Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludovsky, Rufino Tamayo Museum, Mexico City, 1981. Remodelling and Expansion by Teodoro González de León in 2012.

Architecture only comes alive when it is lived in, when it is walked through and enjoyed; when it becomes beloved and dear to us.

González de León was a cultured man who enjoyed designing public buildings more than private homes; he was aware that knowledge and culture were essential to the life of a country, and in this case, of Mexico City. Those who knew him speak of his love for reading and art, as well as painting, and sculpture, which he practiced himself and incorporated into his oeuvre.

But, what is exciting about Teodoro González de León's architecture? No self-respecting denizen of Mexico City has not been in one or another of his creations. A place like Mexico City changes every moment; it is in constant movement. Designing the spaces required for a city with so many millions of inhabitants is no easy task. González de León resolved every one of his by combining the open, monumental spaces so characteristic of pre-Hispanic architecture with elements of modern architecture.

The huge esplanades and interior patios are two characteristics that define his work. One of Mexico City's emblematic buildings is the National Auditorium. A large esplanade welcomes us to it; from afar, from Reforma Boulevard, it is imposing. A large fountain invites visitors to approach and climb the stairs even if they are not planning to go into the auditorium. The huge open space calls out to passersby, compelling them to experience a walk along that rough but at the same time warm material, the chiseled exposed concrete so characteristic of González de León's buildings.

A warm, rose-colored tone emanates from the huge walls of El Colegio de México (Mexico College), one of our country's most important educational institutions. The large patio welcomes you as you walk in. For this architect, patios are not contemplative

spaces only perceived from afar and at a distance, but places for coming together, for crossing paths, for movement that imprints dynamism on the building. They are places that connect people. Architecture, in this sense, even though static, facilitates the movement of those who inhabit it.

Two other buildings complete the area: the Fondo de Cultura Económica publishing house and the National Pedagogic University. The former is very tall, but nevertheless, is integrated into the landscape and with the other two buildings soberly and beautifully. The concrete opens the way to glass, covering the concave space of a vertical construction; a green, tree-filled area surrounds the entire construction.

The Rufino Tamayo Museum is emblematic of Mexico City's museum architecture. Located in the Chapultepec Forest, it is an example of the influence of pre-Hispanic architecture in González de León's work. The building harmonizes with the landscape around it, and the use of plant-covered sloping platforms achieves a natural, friendly interaction with the surroundings. The esplanade once again welcomes visitors, inviting them in. It is impossible to resist: it seems like a different kind of air is breathed there; the open space envelops us, even though that sounds contradictory.

One of González de León's pieces of advice in an interview with architecture students was to constantly renew and never repeat oneself. He said that even if you were successful with a project, repeating the formula or copying it in your next work was not desirable. You had to be inventive, come up with different ideas, find possible solutions. Over time, he himself changed his way of doing architecture without losing the essence

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Teodoro González de León,
University Contemporary Art
Museum (MUAC), UNAM
University Cultural Center,
Mexico City, 2005-2008. ▼



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◀ Teodoro González de León,
Reforma 222 Complex,
Mexico City.

The Rufino Tamayo Museum is emblematic of Mexico City's museum architecture. It is an example of the influence of pre-Hispanic architecture in González de León's work.

that always characterized him, like using lasting materials and the importance he gave to the emotions that the spaces he created could evoke in people who visited them.

One example of this constant renewal is the University Contemporary Art Museum (MUAC), inaugurated in 2008 in the UNAM University Cultural Center. The museum was built on the site of a former parking lot, an area the architect used to create an esplanade welcoming the visitor to the Cultural Center.

Entering the museum is an experience difficult to forget, not only because of the exhibitions it offers, but because of the experience itself of moving through each of its spaces. If the visitor enters from the Cultural Center itself, he or she will first encounter the huge esplanade with Rufino Tamayo's *The Sprig*. Then, reflections compete with each other: reflections from the museum's enormous sloping glass wall and from the water that gently gives life to a mirror. The large exposed concrete building leans forward; a skylight leads the way to the entrance, and everything is illuminated. The six- to twelve-meter-high rooms allow for the needs of today's contemporary art, where some artists create large-format works. The architect had to think about all the possibilities and not be stingy with the dimensions. González de León was inspired by other con-

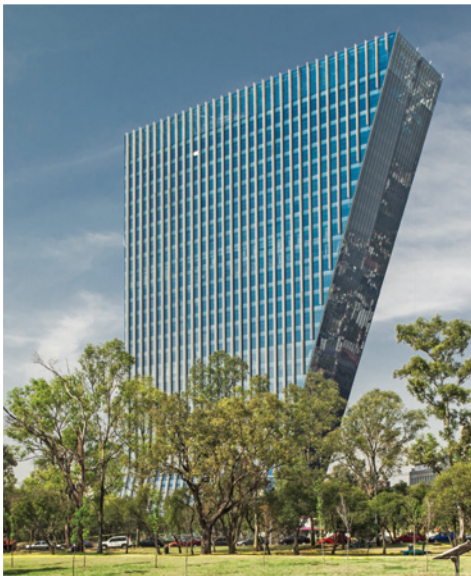
temporary art museums around the world. He was an architect who knew how to look inward, but also to enrich his work with references from without.

Moving through the MUAC's rooms is an experience in being enveloped in today's art, but it is also letting oneself be thrilled by the building's architecture. The interior patios are places for repose and contemplation. The visitor goes to them naturally. It is impossible to walk through the halls, encounter a glass door that the exterior peeks through, and not go outside, at least to satisfy your curiosity and admire the rocky and arid —but also tree-filled— landscape surrounding the University Cultural Center.

PRIVATE WORK

González de León's private work has also had a determining influence on Mexico City's new look. One emblematic work of this kind is the Forest Arches Tower I (1996), a skyscraper that is part of an eight-building complex, which people have dubbed "the pair of pants" because it is two enormous towers joined by a 161-meter arch. Today it is the symbol of the Santa Fe neighborhood, which concentrates one of the country's

Teodoro González de León,
Torre Virreyes (Viceroy Tower),
Mexico City, 2010-2015. ▼



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Teodoro González de León
and Abraham Zabludovsky,
National Pedagogical University,
Mexico City, 1979-1981. ▼



Manuel Alaiza



▲ Teodoro González de León, Francisco Serrano, and Carlos Tejeda, Arcos Bosques (Forest Arches) Corporate Office Building Complex, Mexico City, 1990-2008.

most important clusters of corporate offices. This work, created in collaboration with architect Francisco Serrano, uses mainly two materials, glass and white chiseled concrete. Even though from afar it is imperceptible, this preserves the Mexican tradition of using massive, strong, lasting materials.

Finally, one of his most recent works is the Reforma 222 mall. Located on Reforma Boulevard, one of the city's most important thoroughfares, Reforma 222 is made up of three high towers (measuring from 90 to 126 meters), designed for different functions. Tower 1 holds different kinds of offices, while Towers 2 and 3 are for residential use. This ensemble is also part of the new image of a city in constant change. The materials used are glass, steel, and chiseled concrete. Today, the modern tower that holds the shopping mall is a meeting place and point of reference for Mexico City inhabitants.

There is no doubt that Teodoro González de León's work in Mexico City is vast and imposing. However, it maintains that discreet, solemn, and at the same time monumental air of pre-Hispanic cities. His buildings dialogue with the history of the city and its inhabitants. Entering these places, even if they are exteriors, is a way of being aware of the space of a city where at times it is difficult to breathe. In the buildings designed by González de León, you give yourself time to breathe, to stop a moment and feel the freedom of movement that moving through this gigantic city sometimes denies you. This city is marked with the imprint of an architect who knew how to read it, to renew it, to leave almost imperceptibly but enduringly an impression and even a bastion of identity in the memory of those who have experienced it: the inhabitants of Mexico City. **NM**

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