



More than a historic monument, the Angel of Independence has become the emblematic icon of daily life in Mexico City.

Mexico City boasts innumerable significant spaces and monuments that bring into material existence the individual and collective memory of its inhabitants.

The City and Remembrance

Mariana Abreu Olvera*

Beginning with Mexico's independence, new ways of understanding and symbolizing Mexican culture have been produced, many with the aim of building national identity. To do that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, different thinkers and political figures looked in history for the content that would nourish the symbolic construction of the nation. Collecting documents and using them to write national histories was common. And as part of that nationalist upsurge, identity narrative was accompanied by the erection of monuments in the capital and other important cities in the country. The Monument to Independence, for example, was conceived in the context of recognizing and celebrating the public figures who had launched Mexico as an independent nation.

* Mexican historian; mariana.abreu.olvera@gmail.com.
Photos by Gabriel González (Mercury).

During the Mexican Revolution, new concerns emerged. The dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and its attempt to “Frenchify” Mexico City were symbolized in several of the capital’s architectural projects. Some unfinished constructions were used as the foundation for new monuments, symbols of new political struggles. This was the case, for example, of the Monument to the Revolution. The penchant for nationalism was not put aside, but was re-signified in accordance with the new victories.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Mexican administrations made efforts to install a new social order, reflected in the architectural lay-out of the cities. In Mexico City, they built large housing projects in an attempt to resolve the citizenry’s problems. The monuments, far from being merely celebratory, now had a new functional, practical character. Artistic and commemorative projects would also serve as solutions for concrete problems. The Nonoalco Tlatelolco Housing Project is one of the most emblematic symbols of these new ideals of Mexican modernity.

Mexico City boasts innumerable significant spaces and monuments that bring into material existence the individual and collective memory of its inhabitants. I cannot address myself here to all of them, but only a few.

The Monument to Independence, commonly known as the Angel; the Monument to the Revolution; and the Square of Three Cultures in Tlatelolco are three examples bursting with historic, political, and cultural significance.



Bronze statue inspired by the Greek goddess Winged Victory.

What we usually see as an angel on top of a column and pedestal is actually a statue of Winged Victory, the Greek and Roman goddess who represented victory in battle.

I am interested in analyzing these three monuments since each is representative of a significant moment in Mexican history. They are evocative, very well-known edifications, part of the collective imaginary of Mexico City residents. These examples invite us to reflect on the relationship between the experiences of concrete people and the re-signification constantly underway of the spaces and monuments that hold the memory of our city.

WINGED VICTORY AND THE TURBULENT PROCESS OF ITS CONSTRUCTION

What we usually see as an angel on top of a column and pedestal is actually a statue of Winged Victory, the



The commemorative plaque states the monument’s date of construction and those of its two restorations after major earthquakes, one of which toppled the angel from its column.



Different moments in the city's architecture can be seen on Reforma Boulevard.



Reforma Avenue was to be the home of the monuments representing, respectively, the discovery of the New World, the Aztec Empire, colonial domination, Independence, and the Reform.

National Palace. The cornerstone was laid in a solemn ceremony on September 16, 1843. The base or *zócalo* (the name by which the plaza began to be known and is known until today) was built there. However, construction halted and no one spoke of it again. In 1859, a sad street light was put up on the base, leaving the project that sought to commemorate the heroes of Independence in obscurity.

Greek and Roman goddess who represented victory in battle and that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was taken on as the symbol of Mexican independence. This emblematic monument was conceived as early as 1843 during the administration of President Antonio López de Santa Anna. That year, a contest was held to build a “monument that would remind us of the heroic actions and campaigns for Mexican Independence.”¹ The San Carlos Academy was in charge of judging that first contest, won by French architect Enrique Griffo. Unhappy with the decision, however, Santa Anna paid Griffo reparations, but commissioned Lorenzo de la Hidalga, a Spanish architect residing in Mexico and who had won second place in the contest, to build the monument.

Lorenzo de la Hidalga visualized the Monument to Independence for the Plaza de Armas in front of the

It was not until 1864 that Maximilian of Hapsburg took up the idea of building a monument to independence again. After two failed calls, as Reforma Avenue was being constructed, the idea of erecting the monument along with four others to pay homage to the great eras of Mexican history was once again considered. Each roundabout on Reforma Avenue was to be the home to one of these monuments representing, respectively, the discovery of the New World, the Aztec Empire, colonial domination, independence, and the Reform. Construction began in 1877 with the monument to Christopher Columbus, the representative of the discovery of America, and continued in 1887 with the monument to Cuauhtémoc, the representative of the Aztec Empire. However, construction did not continue with the monument to colonial domination, once again holding up work on the Monument to Independence.



A monument to Christopher Columbus stands on Reforma Boulevard to commemorate the Europeans' discovery of America.

After many other initiatives that came out of different competitions and commissions that all failed, architect Antonio Rivas Mercado was commissioned in 1900 to erect the much-anticipated monument to honor the memory of the heroes of independence. Rivas Mercado, who had studied in France under the influence of the classicists, based himself on the proposals of Cluss and Schulze, as well as on those of the engineers Porfirio Díaz (son of the president) and Francisco Durini, who had been in charge of erecting the monument in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was Rivas Mercado, then, who was lucky enough to be able to finally bring those plans to fruition; and, in 1910, as part of the celebrations of the Centennial of Independence, the Winged Victory was inaugurated as a symbol of that historic process.

Today, the Independence Column is a fundamental Mexico City landmark. Although its objective was to commemorate the heroes of the independence struggle, those of us who live in the city today have given it innumerable new meanings. Demonstrations and marches that

use the Angel as the point of departure or destination; the celebration of soccer victories; free, mass concerts; and photography shoots for quinceañeras or brides are only a few of the examples of everyday events that take place at the foot of the renowned column. Perhaps the Monument to Independence is not associated in the collective imaginary with its historic significance and original commemorative aim, but these everyday experiences give it a new symbolism. The monument feeds on the new stories accumulated in the city's memory.

THE UNFINISHED LEGISLATIVE PALACE

The Monument to the Revolution was once to have been the starting point of the Legislative Palace under the regime of Porfirio Díaz. In 1898, an international call



Resistance to renewing construction of the Legislative Palace grew because it represented the French tastes of a government that had been defeated. The structure, in the form of a cage, remained intact for decades.



went out for the design of that building. The first place was declared vacant, and the project presented by Pier Paolo Quaglia, who won third place, was accepted as the closest to the contest's aims. Unfortunately, Quaglia died, and the commission was given to architect Emilio Dondé Preciat, with construction supervised by Antonio M. Anza. Since both had been members of the panel of judges, this generated criticism, particularly by Rivas Mercado. Thanks to his opposition, the decision was made to review the contending projects, and the one presented by Emile Bénard, a French architect who had studied at the École de Beaux-Arts and its classical school, was finally selected.²

In 1904, the contract was signed and work began. However, it was interrupted by the fall of Porfirio Díaz's government and the revolutionary movement. Only part of the construction was left standing. When Madero's movement won the day, an attempt was made to renew construction; however, Victoriano Huerta's coup frustrated the project once again. Later, under the different revolutionary governments, resistance to renewing construction grew because the palace represented the French tastes of a government that had been de-





begun during the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship as a legislative palace, the Monument to the Revolution was recycled to commemorate the 1910-1917 movement.



Paradoxically, the foundations of what was thought to be a legislative palace of a dictatorship ended up being the monument to the movement that brought that government down.

feated and people did not want to return to that. The structure, in the form of a cage, remained intact for decades.

For years, Bénard pressed to finish his work, which was impossible in the circumstances of social revolt. In 1922, someone thought of using the central dome to build a national Pantheon, but that never happened. In 1928, the French architect met with Alberto J. Pani in Paris and decided to come to Mexico. However, he encountered a country in crisis and was forced to return to Europe, where he died a few months later.

It was not until 1932 that architect Carlos Obregón Santacilia proposed using the structure to build a kind of *arc de triomphe* to honor the 1910 Revolution. Obregón sought out artist Oliverio Martínez, who would sculpt the four pieces that top the structure's four columns, representing independence, the Reform Laws, workers' legislation, and the agrarian laws. In 1938, construction on the monument was completed which, strangely enough, never had an inauguration.





Cuauhtémoc Roundabout, dedicated to the last Aztec monarch.

The Monument to the Revolution clearly represents how a project's initial objectives are not necessarily always those with which its construction is finished. Paradoxically, the foundations of what was thought to be a legislative palace of a dictatorship ended up being the monument to the movement that brought that government down. Perhaps without a structure that had become useless, no one would ever have thought of building a Monument to the Revolution, or at least, it would not have had the characteristics it has now.

Today, the dimensions of the Monument to the Revolution impress any visitor. The gigantic edifice is surrounded by fountains illuminated at night by colored lights; inside, visitors can go up to an observation point, see an exhibit of rifles and bullets, or go to a cafeteria and a shop that sells souvenirs of the Revolution. Today, the monument is a tourist attraction, the scene for agreeable photographs uploaded to the social networks. It is difficult to find signifiers today more deeply rooted in the collective imaginary than this monument that arose out of the need to erase an uncompleted project. Even so, it is a fundamental reference point for Mexico City, since it celebrates the victory of the twentieth century's most important social revolt

Identity narrative was accompanied by the erection of monuments in the capital and other important cities in the country.

and is, intrinsically, due to the history of its construction, a symbol of the defeat of the Porfirista government.

TLATELOLCO AND ITS LAYERS OF HISTORY

Tlatelolco is the name of a city founded by the Tlatelolcas, a cultural offshoot of the Mexicas; the city was located on an island to the north of Tenochtitlan and the site of the region's most important market. The fall of Tlatelolco was the result of the famous battle on August 13, 1521, against the Spanish conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés. The city was later sacked and the materials obtained used to build the College of the Holy Cross of Santiago of Tlatelolco, the first preparatory school in the Americas, built by the Franciscans for the indigenous people.

Little has been written about Tlatelolco's post-colonial history. However, we do know that between the



Photo: Mario Pani Archive, courtesy of Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco/UNAM.

Architect Mario Pani was the moving force behind the construction of the Nonoalco Tlatelolco Urban Complex.

Mexican Revolution and 1964, the site and the area around it were the home to heavy industry, and its railroad station was the hub where innumerable migrants came from other states, many of whom settled in the area and became workers in Mexico City. Tlatelolco, then, became a marginalized area, where tenements housed low-income people.

In 1957, during Adolfo López Mateos's presidential campaign, he promised social well-being that would come from building large-scale housing projects. In 1958, once in office, López Mateos and Mexico City Mayor Ernesto P. Uruchurtu commissioned Mario Pani to build one such project, which came to be known as the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Urban Project. Pani's proposal consisted of "installing spatial order in the face of the threat of the growth of unregulated areas that facilitated social anarchy."³

The people who had been living in the Tlatelolco tenements were displaced and promised that they would be given access to better housing that would put an end to the supposedly deplorable conditions that prevailed in the area. The paradox was that the housing project built was financially inaccessible for the previous residents, who never returned to their old homes.

Four years after the housing project was concluded, the site would be the base for a student movement that was violently repressed by the government that had promised social well-being only a few years before.

At the same time that construction of the housing project was in the planning stage, work was going on to preserve the archaeological site of the ruins of the ancient Tlatelolca city and the old College of Santiago Tlatelolco. That is how the Square of Three Cultures was founded, the symbolic center of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Project. The plaza's plaque reads, "It was neither victory nor defeat. It was the painful birth of the mestizo people that is the Mexico of today." The square is named for the three cultures that the government sees as the constituent parts of the modern Mexican nation: the first culture, the indigenous culture, is represented by the pre-Hispanic buildings; the second, the Hispanic culture, is reflected in the monastery dating from the era of the Viceroyalty of New Spain; the third, modern Mexican culture, guided by progress, is represented in the housing project and what was then the Banobras skyscraper, which later belonged to the

Ministry of Foreign Relations and is today the University Cultural Center and Memorial to 1968.

Four years after the housing project was concluded, the site would be the operating platform for a student movement that was violently repressed by the government that had promised social well-being only a few years before. Tlatelolco became a name in the collective political memory that stood for social struggle and the demand for justice. This is how the great monument that the government conceived of as an instrument for its own self-aggrandizement took on unsuspected dimensions. Tlatelolco became the basis for a symbolic social unity in which the state not only does not participate, but is actually its staunch enemy.

No other place in Mexico City offers up such visible layers of history. The Square of Three Cultures is in itself a historic discourse offering a visual journey through Mexican history. A visit to the site is sufficient to give flight to the imagination and journey in a single day through the different eras that have marked our coun-

try. From the pre-Hispanic life of the Tlatelolcas to the student massacre in 1968, Tlatelolco is home to many of the voices that echo through the historic, cultural, political, and social imaginary of those of us who live in Mexico City. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Inmaculada Rodríguez Moya, "Los proyectos para la columna conmemorativa de la Independencia en la Ciudad de México (1843-1854)," *Revista de historia y ciencias sociales no. 70*, Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, January-April 2008, p. 49. The information for the summary I present here is from Alicia Sánchez Mejorada de Gil, *La columna de la Independencia* (Mexico City: Jilguero, 1990), photography by Héctor Velasco Facio, p. 96.
- ² Humberto Musacchio, "El palacio que no fue," *Emeequis* (Mexico City), no date, <http://www.m-x.com.mx/xml/pdf/224/62.pdf>, accessed July 6, 2017.
- ³ Cristóbal Andrés Jácome, "La construcción del orden," in *Desafío a la estabilidad. Procesos artísticos en México 1952-1967* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Turner), p. 314; and George F. Flaherty, "Tlatelolco inquietante, yuxtaposiciones incómodas," in *Desafío a la estabilidad. Procesos artísticos en México 1952-1967* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Turner).



Photo: Mario Pani Archive, courtesy of Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco/UNAM.

The archaeological site, the Santiago Church, and the Nonoalco Tlatelolco Urban Complex combine the pre-Hispanic past, the colonial period, and modernity in a city that continues to grow.