



Octavio Narváez

San Juan Bautista Church.

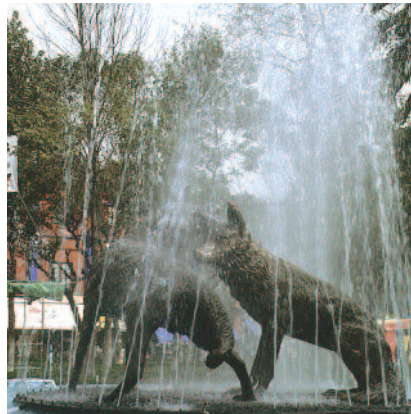
## Portrait of Coyoacán

*Luis Everaert Dubernard\**

Although Man came to the southern part of the Valley of Mexico, particularly the lake region, almost 25,000 years ago, today only a few vestiges of his earliest presence exist. Traces of human beings from later periods are more frequent and abundant, indicating the high level of general development the communities had reached with the passage of time.

This rapid evolution is explained by several factors: on the one hand they had magnificent soil, abundant fresh water, a benign climate with a well defined rainy season and a wealth of rich and varied flora and fauna easy to gather and hunt, all of which were very kind to a low-density population.

These conditions favored the passage from nomadic groups to a sedentary lifestyle, with all its accoutrements: agriculture, basket weaving, pottery, textiles and architecture on the material side, and a religion, social organization, astronomy and some incipient visual arts on the intellec-



Unless otherwise specified all photos by Dante Barrera

Coyote Fountain, a symbol of Coyoacán.

tual side. A little before the Christian era, then, in the southern part of the valley, bordering on the foothills of the Ajusco, there must have been many population centers, prospering thanks to the favorable environment.

At that point, catastrophe struck: a series of eruptions of a small volcano on the Ajusco known by its Nahuatl name, the Xitle, meaning navel, so called because of the form of its peak and crater. Enormous quantities of lava covered the valley lowlands and plains, burying several human settlements. When dry, the thick layer of magma formed what is today

called the El Pedregal area, named for its stony crags.

Only two of the human settlements buried under the dried lava have been discovered and studied: Copilco el Bajo and Cuicuilco, both in what is traditionally known as Coyoacán.

A century ago, when the granite quarries were being mined in Copilco el Bajo, a cemetery was discovered with several graves that showed evidence of ritual burial, complete with very beautiful pottery. In Cuicuilco, in the 1920s, excavations uncovered what turned out to be the largest construction in the entire Western Hemisphere, the Cuicuilco “pyramid,” built 2,000 years ago, which is actually two or three large cut-off cones superimposed on one another. Other, lesser constructions were also found, along with pottery and, very importantly, small carved stone objects, outstanding among which is the first known Mesoamerican deity, the Old God of Fire, 1,000 years later called Huehuetéotl or Xiuhtecutli by the Nahuas. We still do not know what the original inhabitants of Copilco and

\* Chronicler of Coyoacán.

Cuicuilco called themselves or their settlements, or what language they spoke.

The Xitle's eruptions extinguished what are called the Early Preclassical cultures in Coyoacán. Only five or six centuries later groups of the Teotihuacan culture appeared in the Pedregal area, but left little trace.

Around the year 1000 of the Christian era, and probably as a derivation of the creation of Culhuacán, the early

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of Coyoacán and its many neighborhoods practiced and perfected the art of stone carving. Ordered by their Mexica masters, they made the imposing monolithic statues of Coatlicue, the stone of the Sun or Aztec calendar and the gladiatorial sacrificial stones of Moctezuma I and Tizoc.

Coyoacán also makes an appearance in another of the manifestations of Mesoamerican art, the codices, with its char-

acteristic, engaging glyph that represents the full figure of a coyote with an enigmatic black circle to one side. Europe; received appointments from Carlos V and used them to make governmental decrees. In Coyoacán, Cortés would write his famous *Tercera Carta de Relación* (Third Report) to the emperor, a masterpiece of military history. But, he would also sully his name by torturing his prisoner, Cuauhtémoc, the last Mexica king.

The Franciscan friars established themselves tentatively in Coyoacán in 1526,

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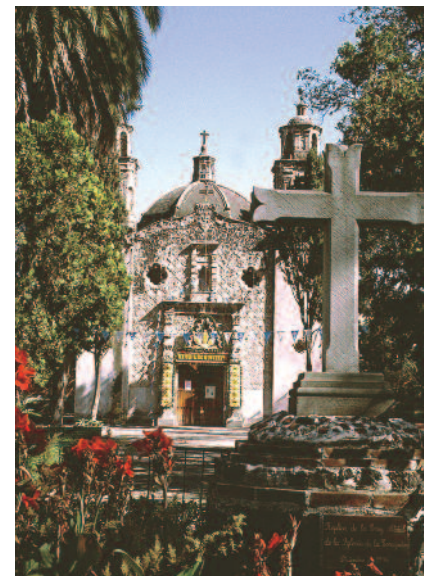
Coyoacán's plazas are an invitation to contemplation.

Toltecs, who spoke a proto-Nahuatl language, founded Coyoacán and gave it its name. The correct name seems to have been "Coyo-hua-can," or "place of those who own coyotes."

Around the year 1200, the second or third wave of Nahuatl tribes entered the Valley of Mexico, the Tepanecs who founded Acapatzalco and successfully occupied and developed Coyoacán until their lord, Maxtla, was defeated and killed in 1430 by Itzcóatl, king of the Mexicas of Tenochtitlan. At that time the Tepanec capital was dominated by the Mexicas until the arrival of the Spaniards in 1520.

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The Conchita Church, on the plaza of the same name.

and the Dominicans took up permanent residence in 1528 when they began building the large church and monastery of San Juan Bautista.

When Hernán Cortés was named Marquis of the Valley of Oaxaca by Carlos V, he designated Coyoacán the capital of his state and marquisate.

During the three centuries of Spanish domination, Coyoacán's fertile lands propitiated the creation of haciendas and

agricultural ranches, but the Crown took care to also grant communal lands to the indigenous peoples to guarantee them their own land and water rights. In the town, spinning and weaving workshops were set up with free labor, slaves and prison laborers.

Very ambitious construction was carried out all over the area: seven or eight neighborhood and town chapels, the large San Juan Bautista parish church and mo-

the priest of Churubusco, was discovered and crushed. A few days after the Battle of Monte de las Cruces, the advance of the insurgents was defeated in Coyoacán.

Once independence was won and the republic established, the town became part of the State of Mexico. But, when the area called the Federal District was expanded, Coyoacán became part of it as a municipality, which it continued to be for



Interior patio of the Camilo Brothers rest home.



The San Antonio Panzacola Chapel, part of the San Juan Bautista parish.

nastery, ranch and hacienda main houses, avenues, a half dozen large bridges, hydraulic works and canals, public works of different kinds and semi-rural country houses. Of the latter, the El Altillo ranch house survives, as well as houses incorrectly named for conquistadors, like the Pedro de Alvarado house, the Diego de Ordaz house, Hernán Cortés and the Malinche house and the Camilos Brothers Haven.

In the early nineteenth century, at the time the independence movement began with the *Grito de Dolores* (the Shout of Independence in Dolores, Hidalgo), a conspiracy headed by Father Altamirano,

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a century until 1929 when all the Federal District's municipalities were abolished.

During the War of 1847, Coyoacán was the site of a major battle, the heroic defense of the bridge and Churubusco monastery, and later was occupied for 10 months by U.S. troops along with the rest of the Valley of Mexico.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, little by little, peace returned once again to Coyoacán. The last 25 years of the century marked increased migration and new prosperity. Many wealthy families from the city moved there, but, above all intellectuals, writers, poets, journalists, musicians, priests and politicians, among them Fran-

cisco Sosa, Mariano Ortiz de Montellano, Adrián Unzueta, Francisco de Olaguibel, Rubén M. Campos, Elena Piña y Aguayo, Francisco de P. Andrade and Jesús Galindo y Villa. In 1890, all of them attended the inaugural ceremony of the Colonia del Carmen neighborhood, opened officially by President Porfirio Díaz and his wife Carmen.

At the turn of the century, as Coyoacán was modernized with streetcars, electric street lights and paving, more Mexican and foreign families began making their homes there. New names were added to the list of resident intellectuals: José Juan Tablada, Julián Carrillo, Miguel Angel de Quevedo, Zelia Nuttall, Concepción Cabrera de Armida, Luis Cabrera, Aureliano Urrutia, Cecil O'Gorman, Guillermo Kahlo and the young Agustín Lara.

The 10 years of the armed Revolution (1910-1920) brought suffering, tribulations, sadness and reversals for Coyoacán, as it did for the whole country. In Coyoacán the troubles began to abate, symbolically, with the centennial celebration of independence in 1921 when the old atrium of the San Juan Bautista parish church and San Felipe Street were remodeled and renamed Centennial Park and Centennial Street.

Urban public works and construction slowly renewed as Coyoacán and the nation as a whole tackled the tasks and activities of the postrevolutionary period.

In the cultural field, this meant the founding of the First Open-Air School of Painting in 1923 by painter Alfredo Ramos Martínez, previous director of the San Carlos Academy. The school, first located in the San Pedro Mártir hacienda, later moved to the San Diego Churubusco Monastery. The new methods of painting taught and self-esteem imbued in the students awakened true artistic vocations. Among



Part of the original building of the former El Altillo hacienda.

the most outstanding examples are Fermín Revueltas, Francisco Díaz de León, Fernando Leal, Mardonio Magaña, Guillermo Toussaint, Everardo Ramírez, Gabriel Fernández Ledesma, Rosario Cabrera and Jorge Enciso.

In the 1920s and 1930s many professionals, musicians, composers and painters moved into and worked in Coyoacán: José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. Political refugee Leon Trotsky took up residence there in the house where he was later assassinated, a house that is today

a museum. In the 1940s, many others came to live: Salvador Novo, the former King Carol of Romania, Dolores del Río, Robert Motherwell, Wolfgang Paalen, Aurora Reyes, Nabor Carrillo, José Chávez Morado, Olga Costa, Luis Cardoza y Aragón, Lya Kostakowsky, Jorge González Camarena, Roberto Cossío y Cossío, José Gorostiza, Fidias Elizondo and Angela Gurría.

The construction and 1952 inauguration of University City in the ward of Coyoacán was an outstanding event for Mexico. This attracted hundreds of UNAM



Monumentalism in modern architecture. National Center for the Arts.



The Alvarado House today houses the Octavio Paz foundation.

professors and academic researchers to the old town. At the same time, in the 1950s, Rufino Tamayo, Pablo O'Higgins, Angel Boliver, Gabriel Figueroa, Emilio Fernández and Antonio Castro Leal arrived on their own.

Salvador Novo established the La Capilla Theater and Restaurant in 1953, a major event in Coyoacán's development. It was the first hall for presenting serious theater established outside Mexico City's downtown area at a time when the capital's demographic explosion had already begun.

That change in demographics meant that from 1960 on, new neighborhoods and housing projects, educational and university centers, public works, including new boulevards, were constructed, often accompanied by the destruction of important monuments like four colonial bridges that were obliterated. At the same time, however, the building fever brought with it a series of very beautiful churches, large public and corporate buildings and urban works that occupied all the lands previously dedicated to agriculture.



UNAM University Cultural Center Library.

As the 1970s began, this process extended to the dozens of square kilometers of El Pedregal, with land takeovers by homeless people, which totally extinguished this exceptional natural park.

Coyoacán's land was practically saturated with urban development, and its picturesque nooks and neighborhoods continued to attract important figures from cultural and artistic milieus like Héctor Azar, who founded the Center for the Dramatic Arts, Raúl Anguiano, Luis Nishizawa, Arturo García Bustos, Humberto Peraza, Rina Lazo, José E. Iturriaga, Elí de Gortari, Adolfo Mexiac, Jorge Alberto Manrique, Clementina Díaz y de Ovan-do, Miguel León-Portilla, Jorge Ibarguengoitia, Rafael Solana and Sergio Pitol, among others.

The ward authorities took a very big risk in 1978 when they banned cars in downtown Coyoacán to reserve the two plazas, Hidalgo Gardens and the Centennial Plaza, exclusively for pedestrians. This abolished a central feature of traditional Mexican plazas because it eliminated their surrounding sidewalks, and turned the traffic into a nightmare by cutting off the throughway of the historical town's main street. The worst, thing, however, was that the inevitable happened: the 25,000 or 30,000 square meters of both plazas became an enormous weekend open-air market where anything goes.

Paradoxically, a 1990 presidential decree declared Coyoacán's Historic Downtown a protected monument, a concept not at all compatible with the degrading, devastating use that it is being put to today.

If a civilizing solution to this state of things is not implemented, historic Coyoacán's days are numbered. ■■■