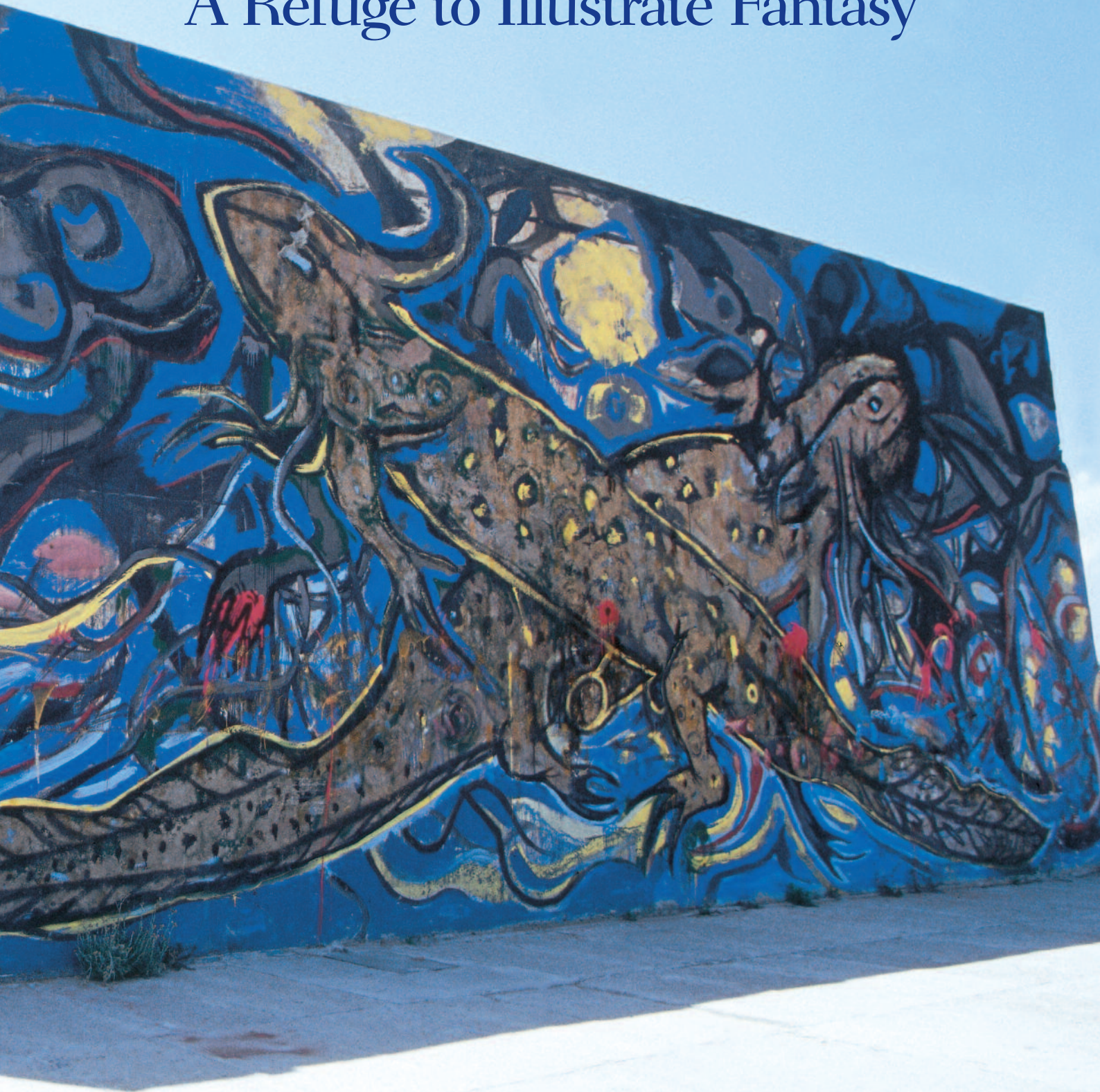




# The Lighthouse of the East A Refuge to Illustrate Fantasy



Photos by Daniel Munguía

PERHAPS HERE THE CITY SOUNDS DIFFERENT,  
ITS ACCENTS LESS LIKE A SINGLE-STRINGED INSTRUMENT...  
I THINK THAT IN *EL FARO* YOU CAN BREATHE MORE HARMONY  
THAN IN OTHER PARTS OF THE CHAOTIC DUNES  
OF VIOLENCE AND UPROOTEDNESS.

**Eduardo Vázquez Martín**, ONE OF THE FAITHFUL.

For two years, Mexico City has had a space for encounters, rooted in one of the metropolis' most conflictive areas, disguised as a factory of arts and trades: *El Faro de Oriente*, or the Lighthouse of the East. It represents an emancipating vision of culture for a city that, until 1997, had had no cultural proposal of its own and had concentrated culture in upper middle-class neighborhoods. The "invasion" of urban spaces begun that year in streets, avenues and plazas, flooding them with music, dance, sculpture, cinema and other events made it conceivable that new ways of supplying culture were possible.

Let's say that that was when Mexico City's Cultural Institute brought together the right people to reinvent a city where chaos and violence sometimes makes it impossible to hear

other voices. These people believed that building a cultural space is also a way of improving the quality of life and creating wealth. Meeting with other Faithful, visual artists, theater people, architects, all friends, they took on the task of converting an enormous vacant lot into The Lighthouse of the East Arts and Trades School.

The scene where they nurtured this idea was the East, a part of the city where conflict mixed with the inhabitants' unstoppable determination to progress: Iztapalapa. Erected on dry, nitrate-saturated soil, the only remaining vestige of an old lake, this dormitory city was rapidly colonized by people who have taken on a new identity. In their daily battle for space and survival, Iztapalapa inhabitants have been the prize for professional careerists and manipulators of every political stripe. However, their





struggles have borne fruit: every day they get more and better services, they build more walls for their homes and seek places to meet that do not end in conflicts and disagreements, but in an opportunity for dialogue, like The Lighthouse.

The story seems simple: among the Faithful, there was an architect, Alberto Kalach, who remembered that there was an unfinished building that had been planned as a headquarters for a burrough sub-station. Abandoned for eight years after the foundations were laid, the place had become an enormous garbage dump, a den for criminals and a symbol of the never-ending struggle for improving living conditions. The proposal was to use this site, have a positive impact and return the space to the inhabitants who had never been informed of what was supposed to be built there: some thought it was to have been a jail.

With the support they needed, the Faithful got the resources to finish the building and

adapt it for its new mission: being a factory of arts and trades, a place to provide jobs, begin productive chains. That is, where culture would not only be an instrument for developing creative qualities but also for producing objects for sale.

The building itself is a manifesto of this alternative vision. It looks like a ship, moored at its lighthouse, as a reminder of a city on a lake, lost many years ago. It had to be rugged, without ornament, made of concrete, that would scare no one away.

The Faithful took advantage of the experience of young people who in different parts of the world have dubbed themselves “cultural invaders” of abandoned public spaces, turning them into areas of free expression for artists who have no place in the new global village. That was where the recommendation came from to turn over The Lighthouse’s outer walls to 150 graffiti artists, the crème de la crème



of the Neza Arte Nel organization.<sup>1</sup> But this was not populism: the kids had to sit down and discuss an artistic concept before getting their hands on the walls. For 100 days, with no cops to interrupt them, the new muralists covered the walls with their own homage to the dead Texcoco Lake, with the *axolotl*, animal of legend and former millennium-long inhabitant of its waters, as a unifying factor.

Inside, the building does not frighten you away either; it is conceived to give the feeling of spaciousness with a minimum of materials and elements; its three-story-high roof allows you to go up two levels without ever losing sight of the lower floors. Even in the library, located at one end of the building-boat, the books are piled up to the ceiling. Everyone can freely circulate everywhere.

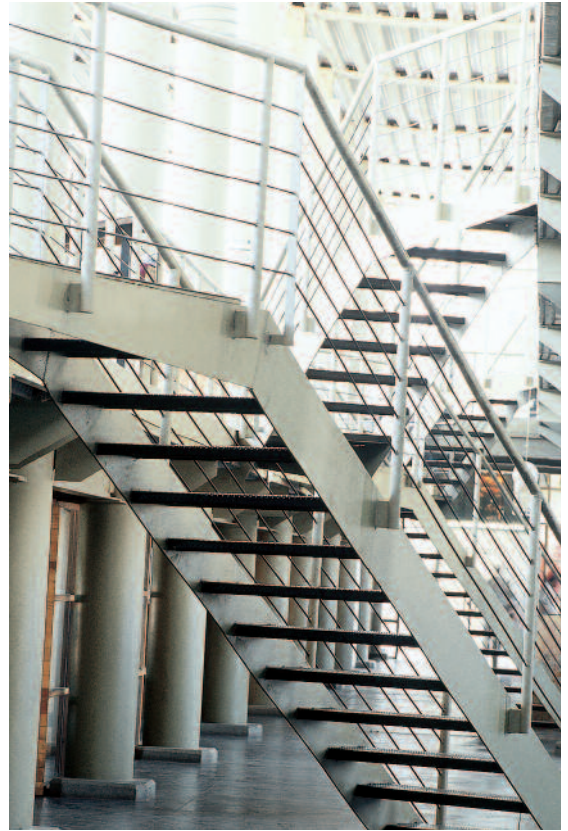


#### THE JAIL IS OUTSIDE

Since it opened its doors in June 2000, The Lighthouse is a space for liberating the sens-

es, for creating objects that not only express concerns and needs, but also promise a future that, outside, is jailed. So, entering is no problem; it is a place for everyone: neighbors and navigators from the city who want to come to hear voices different from the everyday voices, many voices that tell their stories with their hands. One thing is clear at The Lighthouse: gang youths, outside irreconcilable enemies, leave hostility and belligerence at the door, to remember together that they confront a common enemy: rejection and marginalization that inhibit the expression of their human spirit.

Once the doors to the inside were open, they started with a theater. Fifty young people who had never trod a stage, led by Commander Jesusa Rodríguez, Mexico's theatrical personality with the most proposals in recent decades, produced *El Fuego* (Fire) in four months, with their own scenery and costumes. In addition to performances in The Lighthouse, the work was shown in another theater in the city and has traveled as far as Real de Catorce, San Luis Potosí, outside Mexico City. Then, from



other parts of the city and country, a cascade of other Faithful became part of the project with different trades and crafts commanding more than 20 workshops, among them: installation art, poetry, performance art, engraving, *alebrijes* (fantastic paper-mâché animals), wood carving, hand-made paper, sculpting, silk screening, design and photography. Teaching methods are informal, the meeting of the creator with his/her disciples in a workshop; master artisans training apprentices. It is very demanding; the idea is not to come to pass the time of day, but to learn a trade or craft that in the future will also help to satisfy material needs.

Two years is a very short time to start all this, but the ship has been launched and many other projects are planned: among them, a nursery, the compost workshop, finishing the sandbox and playground for the neighborhood children. The surrounding area has changed also; the park to one side of the factory has been remodeled by the burrough government. It is the beginning of an awareness that we all deserve to open our windows to a friendly urban space.

The resources still come from city hall, which is not always in the hands of people who support revolutionary projects like this one. But, the idea is for those involved to do their own fund raising and become self-supporting to a certain extent and recruit a lot more Faithful who can help to open other lighthouses in other parts of the city, to destroy even more of those jails out there. **MM**

*Elsie Montiel*  
**Editor**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Neza” is short for Nezahualcōyotl, an enormous suburb on the outskirts of Mexico City, traditionally known as a poor, turbulent area; and “nel” is a slang word corresponding roughly to “nope” or “no way”. So the name of this group means roughly, Nezahualcōyotl Art, No Way. [Translator’s Note.]

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