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The Hipódromo Neighborhood A Flavor All Its Own

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The Colonia Hipódromo (Hipódromo Neighborhood) was one of the first land developments created at the end of the Mexican Revolution. In contrast with the others, it was laid out in a modern, dynamic way, breaking completely with the rectangular system used up until then. This neighborhood boasts the first valuable examples of modern architecture combining the neocolonial, functionalist, Californian and especially art deco styles, giving it a flavor all its own.

It is traditional in our city for the names of neighborhoods to almost always be decided in accordance with some natural, cultural or historic characteristic of the land where they were established. The Hipódromo is no exception: it was built on the land occupied by the Condesa race track promoted by the Jockey Club of Mexico, a group set up in 1881 by society's elite.

In the early twentieth century, the Jockey Club bought 300,000 square meters of land from the Colonia de la Condesa Land Development Company to build a race track and other sports

[1] The interior of the Basurto Building in the shape of a horseshoe.

[2] Stairway in the Armillita Building. Photos: Gustavo Sotomayor

Woman with jars at the entrance to the open-air theater in Mexico Park. Photo: Rubén Vázquez ▶

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Ironwork on entrances to buildings on Amsterdam Avenue. Photos: Gustavo Sotomayor

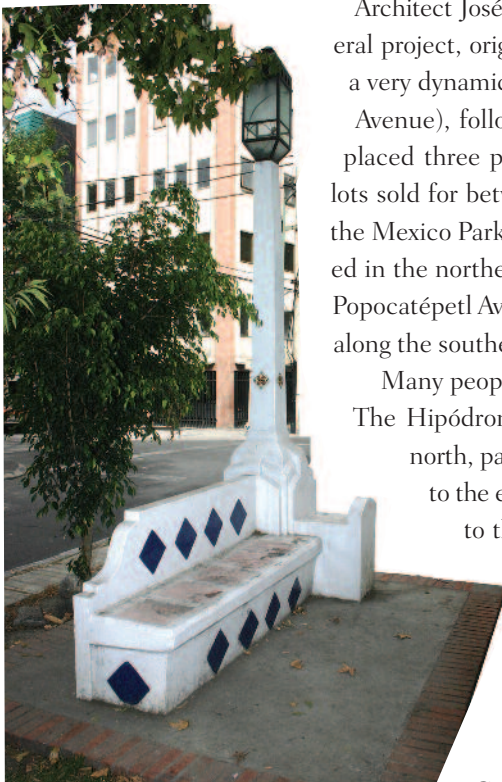
arenas. The Condesa race track was inaugurated October 23, 1910, with the cream of Mexican society in attendance, elegant gentlemen and fine ladies in their best clothing. The entrance was located on what is now Nuevo León Avenue and the stands on what was later to become the intersection of Parras and Amsterdam Avenue. The outbreak of the Revolution meant that the race track only operated a short time, and in the next few years it was used as a stadium for sports and military events, motorcycle and automobile races (in which the vehicles went as many as 75 times around the track). On November 18, 1924, the Jockey Club signed a contract with the Hipódromo de la Condesa Land Development and Construction Company to divide up, urbanize and sell the land on which the former race track had stood.

Architect José Luis Cuevas was in charge of designing the development's general project, originally called Insurgentes-Hipódromo. His initial plans showed a very dynamic design above all along Hipódromo Avenue (today, Amsterdam Avenue), following the race track's oval shape. Along that same avenue, he placed three plazas: Popocatépetl, Citlaltépetl and Iztaccíhuatl. The corner lots sold for between 35 and 40 pesos per square meter; the ones across from the Mexico Park for 28 pesos per square meter; the most expensive ones, located in the northern part of the development between Insurgentes, Yucatán and Popocatépetl Avenues, cost 50 pesos per square meter; and the cheapest ones, along the southern side of Campeche Street, went for 19 pesos a square meter.

Many people confuse the Colonia Hipódromo with the Colonia Condesa. The Hipódromo neighborhood originally had the following borders: to the north, part of Jalisco Avenue (today, Álvaro Obregón) and Yucatán Street; to the east, Insurgentes Avenue; to the south, Aguascalientes Street; and to the west, Nuevo León Avenue. Like in the Colonias Roma and

Condesa, the streets of this area continued to be named after Mexico's cities and states: Celaya, Teotihuacan, Loreto, Sonora, etc. On Amsterdam and Sonora Avenues, several cement benches covered with tile and attached to a lamp post were installed.

The park we all know as Mexico Park has been officially named General San Martín Park since October 25, 1927, and was inaugurated December 6, 1927. Its creators, architect Leonardo Noriega



Reproductions of the original benches on Amsterdam Avenue. Photo: Gustavo Sotomayor

and engineer Javier Stávoli, included many benches shaped like tree trunks but actually made of concrete, as were the lamp posts. The main entrance to the park was at the intersection of Mexico and Sonora Avenues, near the Amalia Castillo Ledón Library.

The stupendous open-air theater with its high colonnade cost 72,500 pesos to build; it holds 8,000 people, and its entrance was divided in two by a fountain designed by José María Fernández Urbina. The fountain boasts the sculpture of a robust nude woman holding two jars pouring water at her feet. The theater was given the name of a foreigner, Charles Lindbergh, who visited our city in late December 1927. North of the theater, a small waterfall lent a touch of freshness to the area, together with three artificial lakes with their—in those days— crystal-clear water. In the southern part of the park, local residents enjoyed an octagonal tower with a clock and a powerful radio transmitter.

The Hipódromo neighborhood is one of the world's few large-scale art deco residential areas. This distinctive air comes from buildings erected in the style that emerged from the International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Art held in Paris in 1925. The style can be seen in the geometric forms of its reliefs, the scaling of the volumes in the facades and the use of new materials such as polished marble, steel, bronze and aluminum. Some examples are the Jardines buildings, with their multi-arched entryways; the Del Parque building, with its elegant granite planter; the Picadilly building, with its artistic geometric reliefs; and the San Martín building, recently restored to display its original beauty.

The Hipódromo neighborhood was also fertile ground for developing a new architectural concept that came from Europe, rationalism, known in Mexico as functionalism. Internationally renowned Mexican architect Luis Barragán built a couple of houses in this style on Mexico Avenue. The Basurto building was built between 1942 and 1946. Its splendid horseshoe-shaped lobby reaches 11 stories upward. An excellent example of the architectural style similar to “ships run aground” that emerged in the 1930s can be seen in the Armillita building, originally owned by the famous bullfighter Fermín Espinosa. It was built in 1939 and still preserves the pergolas



The Basurto Building. Photo: Gustavo Sotomayor



Column Clock in Mexico Park. Photo: Rubén Vázquez

of its roof garden. The colonial Californian style, fully developed in the Polanco neighborhood, one of Mexico City's most exclusive areas, was first seen in the Hipódromo area, where there are still numerous houses with the decorative elements of this current: spiral-shaped columns on terraces and windows, baroque frames, mixed curved and straight-edged caps and tiled gabled roofs.

Over its 80 years, the Hipódromo neighborhood has been home to noteworthy figures like Agustín Lara, Mario Moreno "Cantinflas" (who had his offices in the Rioma Building on Insurgentes Avenue), the musicians Pablo Moncayo and Ricardo Palmerín; the actress Maricruz

Olivier; writers like Salvador Elizondo, Guillermo Sheridan, Paco Ignacio Taibo I and Luis Rius, among many others. Other well-known figures in the neighborhood were Don Hilario, who rented bicycles to children to ride around the Mexico Park; Don José Ruiz Gómez, better known as "blondy", a shoe-shine man, who shined Cantinflas's shoes for 36 years for what was then a hefty 10-peso tip.

Many shops and locales in the Hipódromo neighborhood have become traditional not only for residents, but for many other inhabitants of Mexico's capital: the old Lido Movie Theater, inaugurated in 1942; the Flor de Lis, a tamale shop established between 1935 and 1940; the La Naval grocery shop; the Gran Vía pastry shop; the La Espiga bakery; the Las Américas Movie Theater, and many others.

We should not forget that the Hipódromo neighborhood was originally a Jewish area, since that was the first place this community went to live when their downtown businesses flourished. Several schools like the Yavné and the Hebrew Tarbut school, founded in 1942, were set up there. Among the Jewish public figures who have lived there are the poet Jacobo Glantz, who had to stop going to class and sell bread to make a living; rabbis Jacobo Goldberg and David Shloime Rafalín; painters Leonardo Nierman and Moisés Zabudovsky; actors Susana Alexander and Wolf Rubinsky; and news anchor Jacobo Zabudovsky and his wife Sara, who lived on Benjamin Franklin Avenue. Some of the traditional establishments included El Buen Trato; the Hipódromo Bakery, which made delicious black, onion and Sabbath braid bread; the Rody House and the Kadima Club, where prayers and social and recreational activities were held, as well as being the headquarters for a time of the Jewish Boy Scouts of Mexico.

It took less than 20 years for all the lots in the Colonia Hipódromo to be occupied, from 1926 to 1945. This was a very successful business venture for the developers, and architecturally, its buildings were very uniform in style. This stylistic unity has undergone some transformations in the beginning of the third millennium and some traditional buildings have been sacrificed to put up loft apartments whose designers have made no efforts whatsoever to adapt them to the neighborhood's original style. The erection of monstrous condominiums has also changed the original face of Amsterdam Avenue, and on Insurgentes, enormous billboards rest on traditional buildings, whose ground floors have been turned into store fronts. Thanks to the local residents, the Mexico Park has been saved from some hairbrained schemes like the 1993 proposal to build an underground parking lot there. Despite everything, the Hipódromo neighborhood continues to be one of our city's urban architectural jewels. ■■