

# The Juárez Neighborhood

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▲ Londres Street (1904). On the right, the house that is today the Wax Museum.



▲ Bruselas Street (1904). Today it is exclusively for foot traffic.



▲ Berlin Street (1904). Unfortunately, none of these buildings remain standing.

This year we Mexicans celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of Don Benito Juárez García, perhaps our country's most important historical figure. Many avenues, parks, plazas, hospitals, schools, auditoriums, buildings and monuments throughout the country honor his illustrious name. Let us look no further: one of our capital city's first urban suburbs was named after President Juárez.

The Juárez neighborhood is significant in the history of Mexico City for two reasons: first, because this and other developments began the enormous growth of our city; and second, because it was undoubtedly the most representative of all the neighborhoods built in the early twentieth century during the *Porfiriato*, the 30-year dictatorship of General Porfirio Díaz preceding the Mexican Revolution. The idea

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Photos on this page were taken from the book *México 1904*, Guillermo Kahlo (Mexico City: Iberoamericana University, 2004). Photos of the Juárez neighborhood today by Mauricio Degollado.

behind it was to strengthen the image of progress and refinement achieved by the entrenched government, making it the most distinguished neighborhood of its time: an authentically wealthy neighborhood reserved for the families of the Porfirian aristocracy, capitalists and foreign diplomats. Its elegance was comparable only to the elegant suburbs of the great capitals of the Old World: Paris, Vienna, Brussels, Prague. It is enough to look at photographs from the early twentieth century to see that Mexico City once had a truly marvelous, signorial wealthy residential suburb.

#### ORIGIN AND CHARACTERISTICS

This residential neighborhood was built on the site that had been the former Candelaria Atram-

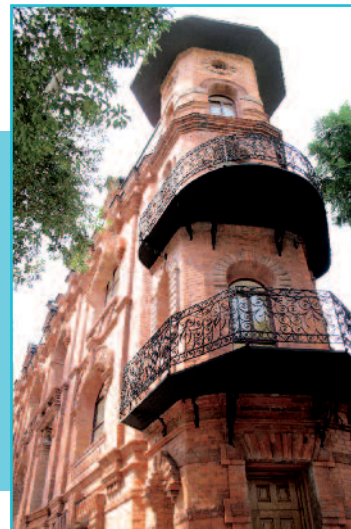
established by Emperor Maximilian of Habsburg in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1890 there were already some buildings in what would later be the Juárez neighborhood: three swimming pools (Blasio, Pane and Osorio); two bullrings (Colón and Bucareli); an electric generating plant; and a depository of narrow-rail trains, where the palace of the Cobián family, today occupied by the Ministry of the Interior, would later be built. At the end of the nineteenth century, small neighborhoods like Limantour and Bucareli began to be erected in the wedge of land bordered by Bucareli and Reforma Avenue, and others like the Del Paseo or Americana neighborhoods and Nueva del Paseo to the southwest.

The “official” foundation of the Juárez neighborhood, however, can be pinpointed on April 27, 1898, when Mrs. Adela Marquet de Limantour,



▲ The La Mascota Building on Abraham González Street.



▲ Brick building at Versailles and Berlín.

pa pasture. The land was swampy and frequently flooded. However, the three areas surrounding the pasture land were sufficiently attractive to build there. The first street was Bucareli Avenue, built by Viceroy Antonio María de Bucareli, a wide, tree-lined boulevard that had been a recreational and rest area since 1775, where high society’s carriages and horsemen regularly paraded. The second was the Chapultepec aqueduct, vitally important because it supplied the city with water; and last, the Imperial Causeway, today Reforma Avenue,

the mother of Don José Yves Limantour, then minister of finance, asked the municipal government to divide the Candelaria Atrampa pasture land that her children had inherited from their father into city blocks.

Its urban development was determined by the rectangular lay-out of the Limantour and Bucareli neighborhoods, which was the same as the rest of the city, and that of the Paseo or Americana neighborhoods and the Nueva del Paseo, whose lay-out was rectangular in part and parallel and per-

pendicular to Reforma Avenue. All these little neighborhoods were incorporated into the Juárez neighborhood, so named March 21, 1906 in honor of Don Benito Juárez on the first centennial of his birth. Its streets were an average of 20 meters wide, and the original lots varied between 15 and 20 meters wide by 35 or 40 meters deep. They were extraordinarily expensive, soaring from a few cents per square meter when the land was a pasture, to more than 200 pesos per square meter.

As was befitting its aristocratic origins, drinking water, drainage, paved streets, sidewalks and electric public lighting were all covered satisfactorily by municipal authorities. It is thought that the neighborhood does not have a main plaza because it was flanked on two sides by such important boulevards as Reforma and Bucareli. It only had a round-about (Denmark Plaza), renamed Washington Plaza in

Versailles, Lisbon, etc. Salvador Novo says of them, "Those who had gone to Europe emphasized it by living in the resplendent Juárez neighborhood, full of Hamburgs, Viennas, Liverpools, Londons and Naples."<sup>1</sup> But it had not always been like this. In the beginning, for example, Abraham González Street was called Limantour; Versailles Street, Congreso Street; Atenas had been Salazar y Ortega; Lucerna was formerly known as Las Fuentes Brotantes; and Lisboa, as Gobernadores Street. Some names, like Donato Guerra and Morelos, were left as they were.

#### DISTINGUISHED RESIDENTS

The Juárez neighborhood was originally inhabited by the capital's most distinguished families;



▲ Restored house at 33 Tabasco St.



▲ The Nacional Chamber of Commerce at 42 Reforma Avenue.

1910, where a bronze of U.S. founding father George Washington was placed, designed by Pompeo Coppini and cast in New York at the Roman Bronze Works. The occasion was the first centennial of Mexico's independence.

#### NOMENCLATURE

Juárez's street nomenclature follows the names of Europe's most famous cities: Berlin, Marseilles,

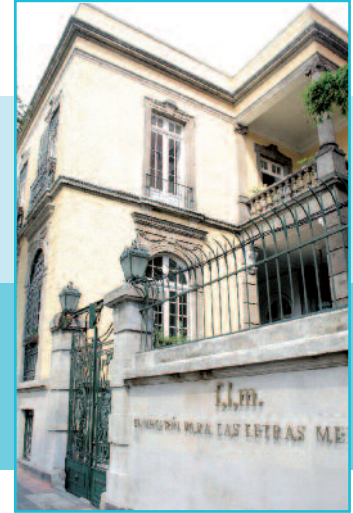
the wealthiest foreigners; top politicians; and, above all, diplomats and capitalists of different nationalities, such as Americans, French, English and German. For this reason, it was home to several embassies, legations and chancelleries, like those of Great Britain and Japan. Public figures of the period built their mansions in this neighborhood, like John R. Davis, the manager of Walter Pierce Oil Company; E.M. Brown, the general superintendent of the Mexican National Railroad; J.M. Frazer, the treasurer of the Central Railroad; Lloyd



▲ Stone house at 58 Havre Street.



▲ Building at 13 Londres Street at the corner with Berlin Street.



▲ The Foundation for Mexican Letters at 16 Liverpool Street.

R. Hamer, the owner of a linen factory; the engineer José H. Elguero; Guillermo de Landa y Escandón; Paul Hudson, the manager of the *Mexican Herald*; and E. Tuclan, the director of Mexico's mail service, among others. Don Francisco I. Madero, an important figure of the beginning of the revolution, lived for a short time in a mansion on Liverpool Street, at the corner of Berlin Street, a building that caught fire and was demolished in 1913.

#### TESTIMONY OF A GLORIOUS PAST

Given that we did not have the chance to see the Juárez neighborhood at its height, today we can use our imaginations and read the testimonies left by people who did see it in its full splendor. Famed writer Don Jesús Galindo y Villa wrote a wonderful chronicle of this wealthy neighborhood in 1906. "The Reforma and Donato Guerra neighborhood is aristocratic, truly a small city of palaces, in which large superb buildings of the most precious kinds and architectural styles have been erected, boasting the richest and most beautiful materials (jasper, onyx, marble, granite, iron and bronze all artistically carved); the glass painted and beveled; gardens with fountains and exotic plants; spacious, ventilated stables; magnificent drainage; smooth, resistant, clean pavement; electric street lamps; all the comforts, in the end, of cleanliness, wealth and art."<sup>2</sup>

#### ARCHITECTURE

The Juárez neighborhood reached its greatest splendor around 1910, with the authentic mosaic of architectural styles of its first constructions: beautiful Alpine chalets, houses that looked like castles made of rock or medieval forts, patrician villas topped with grey mansard roofs, pointy towers that evoked Paris's elegant suburbs. This variegated architectural dressing was the product of the two cultural trends that dominated Europe for a large part of the nineteenth century: romanticism, oriented to the archaic and exotic, nostalgic for anything far away in time and space; and historicism, which contributed a theoretical support to legitimize the imitation or reproduction of all the styles of any period or place, making free use of their elements. The first mansions cost between 9,000 and 12,000 pesos.

The Art Nouveau style can be seen in two small houses, one at 39 General Prim Street and the other at 41 Florencia Street. Many of the buildings were constructed by U.S. engineer Lewis Lamm; architects De la Lama and Zwicker, Emilio Donde, Manuel Cortina García and José Luis Cuevas, among others. At the celebration of the first centennial of our independence, Porfirio Díaz made much of the great progress achieved by his government in matters of housing and urbanism citing the Juárez neighborhood.

## TODAY'S IMAGE

Today, the Juárez neighborhood, no longer that luxurious, wealthy area, has become a commercial district full of service providers, stores and offices. Taking a walk around its streets is sufficient to see that nothing remains of that lordly ambiance that emanates from early twentieth-century photographs. It is difficult to find a street that preserves something of its original architectural unity since, like some of its contemporaries, it did not escape being filled with all kinds of buildings in later years: offices, hotels, stores, banks, etc. Let us say that what was one period's example of progress and refinement is now an example of urban degeneration.

Despite this, we can still admire the authentic isolated gems that made it famous and prestigious, like the extraordinary group of homes of the La Mascota Building, erected by engineer Miguel Ángel de Quevedo in 1913; the mansion at 6 Londres Street (today the Wax Museum), by the architect Antonio Rivas Mercado; the stately mansion previously occupied by a bonding company at Berlin and Londres; the residence at 67 Abraham González, by architect Rafael Goyeneche; the mansion at 43 Berlin that still wears its great silver mansard; and, of course, the Cobián Palace, today the Ministry of the Interior, created by engineer Manuel Sánchez Facio at 95 Bucareli. On Havre Street, the houses at numbers 58 and 64 to 72 are exam-

ples of typical Juárez neighborhood residences and should not be missed.

Of the few period buildings that remain on Reforma Avenue are the one owned by the *Excelsior* daily newspaper, at number 18, built by the Italian Silvio Contri in 1922; the one owned by Mexico City's National Chamber of Commerce at number 42, created by architect Manuel Cortina García in 1913; and the one that belonged to the Gargollo family, built by architect José Luis Cuevas in 1903, now home to the University Club.

Of the 262 buildings catalogued in the 1980s by the National Fine Arts Institute as artistic monuments built between 1900 and 1939, some have been renovated and turned into cultural centers, state government delegation offices or the offices of private companies and institutions. Their remodeling and adaptation to modern needs, respecting as much as possible their original facades, ornamentation and spatial distribution, allows capital residents to continue to enjoy the extraordinary architectural patrimony of this neighborhood 100 years after its foundation. ■■■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Salvador Novo, *Nueva grandeza mexicana. Ensayo sobre la ciudad de México y sus alrededores en 1946* (Mexico City: Hermes, n.d.).

<sup>2</sup> Jesús Galindo y Villa, *Ciudad de México* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación/Bellas Artes, 1906).



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