



# THE SATELLITE CITY TOWERS

Icon, Indicator, and Symbol

Ana Cecilia Terrazas\*

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\*Freelance journalist, [acterrazas@gmail.com](mailto:acterrazas@gmail.com).

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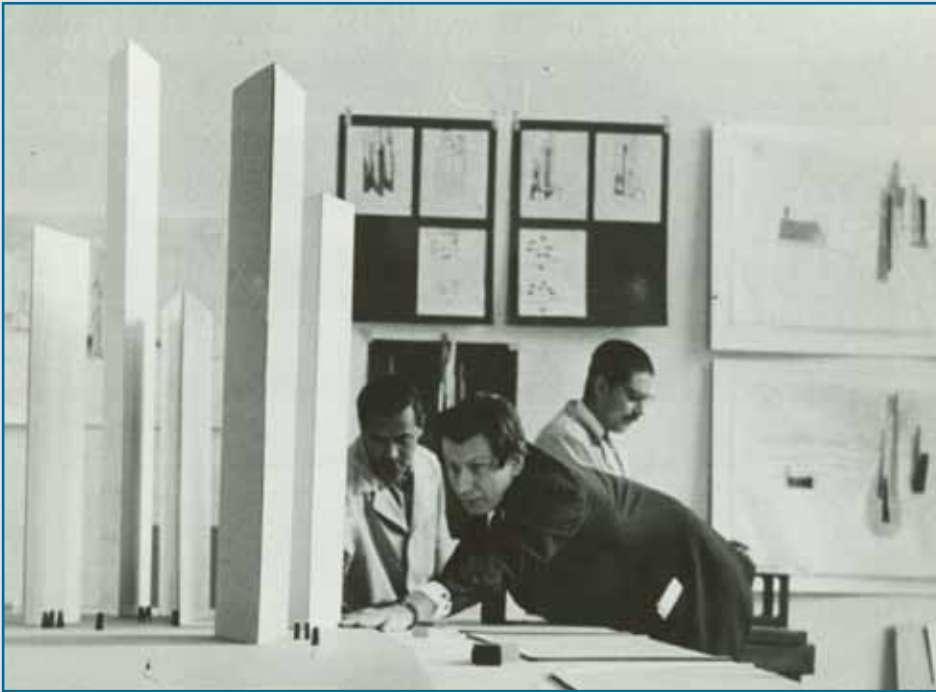
It was a great stroke of luck for the Satellite City Towers to have the best possible narrator, Fernando González Gortázar, to tell their whole story in all its splendor!

Architect, sculptor, landscape painter, writer, and creator González Gortázar published *Las Torres de Ciudad Satélite* (The Satellite City Towers) (Editorial Arquine) in early 2015, with book launches in both Mexico City and Madrid.

Anyone who reads his book will gain a fully knowledgeable understanding of the towers' impact. The reader will not be able to move through the north-western part of Mexico City without taking into account its five crowning effigies. The author reveals key information about their history, their mysteries, their creators, and their monumental importance in the context of international art, and what is today an enclave in an overflowing metropolitan valley.

There are five towers, just as there are five windows placed here to enter into them through the clues González Gortázar has given us.

Marianne Cost



Anonymous

Mathías Goeritz at work in Luis Barragan's office.

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### BRIEF HISTORY

The Satellite City Towers were inaugurated in 1958 to symbolize a housing development with the same name. Two or three years before that, the contract for the development had been handed to real estate promoter Mario Pani by two investors, banker Luis Aguilar and former President Miguel Alemán Valdés, who had only recently stepped down from office. The book explains that Pani owned "the Urbanism Workshop headed by José Luis Cuevas and other renowned professionals."

Around the same time, Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, former mayor of Mexico City for more than a decade, had closed the city to explosive urban growth by creating incentives for decentralized construction. Satellite City fit into that idea both because of the viability of its development in an adjoining urban area and because of the "cosmopolitan fantasy" prevalent at the time.

With his literary craft, González Cortázar points with precision to the place's historic, place-name, conceptual, and cultural "composition" in those years at the end of the 1950s. Post-revolutionary nationalism was coming to an end and the Generation of the Break was rearing its head; "people were



Anonymous





Creative uses of the towers as symbol.

ruminating about what it meant to be Mexican.” Side by side with increasing industrialization and the yearning for modernity, a middle class was growing and becoming stronger, and it was precisely for that kind of middle class that this new housing development was conceived.

Initially, a fountain had been imagined at the foot of the towers; later, a stairway that was never built was considered; and ideas of a traffic island were bandied about. In the end, the towers were built with no more noise about their base in three colors: three white, one yellow, and one orange. The original pigments changed with time for different, “chance” reasons.

Eventually, from standing alone on their borderlands, they have been accompanied randomly by the city’s growth.



Goeritz with the towers in the background.

Ursula Bernath



## TENSION ABOUT WHO AUTHORED THEM

Architect Ignacio Díaz Morales, the head of the University of Guadalajara School of Architecture at the time, invited German sculptor Mathias Goeritz to come to Mexico as a guest professor. Goeritz arrived in 1949, when he met Luis Barragán. Goeritz, Barragán, and painter Jesús Reyes Ferreyra, known as “Chucho” Reyes, became fast friends over the years. The three talented colleagues spent a great deal of time together. Nine years later, Pani invited Barragán to participate in the Satellite City project and he, in turn, invited his colleague Goeritz.

Based on the documents and testimony, it is irrefutable that Barragán and Goeritz were co-designers of the towers. However, years later, the friends were caught up in what González Gortázar called “a painful battle,” in which “both behaved very badly” and tension reigned about who had actually been the creator. Without making any priorities, the book explains some of the ins and outs of that dispute, with the author underlining that determining “the exact, individual, exclusive paternity of this majestic work” is both “a utopian and unnecessary task.”

Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that it is undeniable that the building of the towers was “a dialogue between geniuses.”

The text even provides a colorful anecdote in which Chucho Reyes says that the New York skyscrapers he painted also played a role in the creation of the towers.

The most recent interlude in proving who the real creator(s) was (were) had as its protagonist the young PhD. in history, Daniel Garza Usabiaga, who spoke at González Gortázar’s book launch at the Tamayo Contemporary Art Museum last February 21. Garza stated that Goeritz’s special stamp on the towers could be seen in their wedge-like shape when seen from Mexico City, looking north, whereas, the typical Barragán “particularity” could be observed if they were observed from Querétaro toward Mexico City, when they would appear “monolithic.”

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González Cortázar

### FIFTY-SEVEN-YEAR-OLD MIRACLE

In 2007, when the towers celebrated their fiftieth birthday, Catalina Corcuera, the director of the Luis Barragán Studio House, and José Vigil, the president of the Luis Barragán Guadalajara Architecture Foundation, invited González Gortázar to give a talk, which he entitled “The Satellite City Towers: 50 Years of a Miracle.”

This “informal” talk, “corrected and expanded,” inspired Miquel Adrià, the head of Aquine Publishers, to put out the book *Las Torres de Ciudad Satélite*. The volume includes an introduction by Federica Zanco, the director of the Barragán Foundation in Switzerland, and a large selection of letters, vignettes, illustrations, and photographs that aid readers in their visit to many of the stages in the towers’ history.

The edition spares no efforts in graphically explaining the icon, indicator, and symbol the towers represented in their time, all of which were widely publicized together with the housing development they stood for.

The construction of González Gortázar’s text is also an architectural play of light, space, thought, creation, movement, ethics, and aesthetics. All with the accent on Mexico.

### GONZÁLEZ GORTÁZAR AND THE TOWERS

At 15, Fernando González Gortázar heard the call of the towers’ fame and wanted to see them. During a visit to Mexico City, he asked that he be taken to see them and he thought they were “an absolutely fantastic, inconceivable vision . . . on a kind of gigantic no-man’s-land crisscrossed by empty streets; they rose up, soaring and majestic, and as far as I remember, they still had no color. . . . It had such a shattering effect on me that that experience certainly is the very basis of my professional vocation.”

That vocation, marked initially by the Satellite City Towers, as he confesses, contains hundreds of honorable epi-





The Satellite City Towers were an advertising icon.

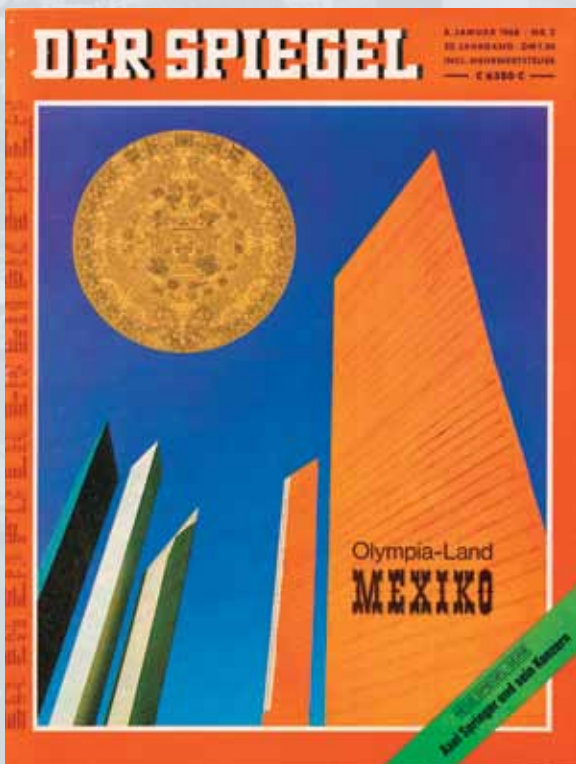
“When they were finished in early 1958, the towers were an instant success: they were written about the world over and generally considered a masterful conception, something completely new.”

sodes. Among the most recent are the 2014 retrospective exhibition “Summary of Fire” that brought together 50 years of his artistic career at the Museum of Modern Art and his being awarded the Fine Arts Medal that same year.

A talented witness, no one could write as intimately about the towers as González Gortázar, since as he says, they are also strung together by three geniuses he considers his artistic fathers: Ignacio Díaz Morales, who invited Goeritz to Mexico, Luis Barragán, and Goeritz himself.

González Gortázar’s biological father also played an important role in the matter. He remembers that when he was perhaps 12 years old, he visited his father’s hometown in Jalisco while he was the governor of the state. The local priest asked his father if he should build the bell-towers or a roof for the church that would help people stand the cold and protect them from the rain. González Gortázar remembers his father’s answer, since he recommended the priest build the bell-towers, since “the roof is not a symbol of anything; the towers are.”

That was when González Gortázar understood that people “had not only the capability, but the need to create symbols, signifiers, and that the priority is not always obvious.” That is also the origin of his delight in the paradoxical or false uselessness of large-scale emblematic works. As he says, “Art proclaims that there are other ways of being useful,” among which he points to appropriation, a feeling of belonging, an imprint, the idea of the collective, the possibility of creating in ourselves citizenship, and love of place and recognition.



#### EPIC AND UNDECLARED

Different documents have mentioned that the Satellite City Towers demonstrate Barragán’s taste for the San Gimignano Towers in Tuscany. Federica Znaco has also



given them a schismatic importance on a par with León Tolstoy's *Ana Karenina* or Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* in literature.

For González Gortázar, when the towers were born, "there was nothing else like them in the world." He describes them categorically and unerringly as a "milestone," also giving them "an epic character, an interior greatness, and an eloquently diaphanous simplicity." He also praises their elegance, the colors, the texture "of that escalating, sliding metal centering," their capacity for momentarily dancing through the appropriate "virtual kinetic art they were planned with, for enjoying while in movement." He even celebrates the "archaic" aspects, "between the primary or minimalist language and their almost Expressionist impetuosity, simultaneously dramatic and triumphant."

Above all, finally, he confers on them the quality of providing important service as public urban sculpture: "[This is] what urban art must be: a buoy, a compass, something that guides, provides the essential backbone of the formless; an accent, a fracture in the landscape and routine, a visual alarm clock, a sign of optimism, a murmur of the spirit."

As early as 1993, González Gortázar's conception of urbanism as "a promise of happiness" was already being quoted.

It should come as no surprise, then, that among the few but indispensable voices demanding that Mexico declare the Satellite City Towers a national art heritage treasure, González Gortázar's was the very first.

From 2008 on, right after the golden anniversary of the towers, he opposed building a second-story freeway that would irreversibly gobble up the monument, because he considers it to be "the greatest example of universal art of the twentieth century."

He described it this way in the national daily *La Jornada* in the middle of that year: "When they were finished in early 1958, the towers were an instant success: they were written about the world over and generally considered a masterful conception, something completely new, a proposal that changed the way of understanding art for the new urban dimension in the era of the automobile. The Satellite City Towers marked a before and an after in art made for the city."

Those are the Satellite City Towers; that is what is thoroughly argued in this book that redefines and remembers them. ■■■

