

Conflict of Interpretations

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Language is intellect and matter; one can act upon it. As in the assessment of historical evidence, it is possible to distance language from the regulations and the corresponding eagerness of orthodoxy. It is the common denominator between structures of thought, architecture, and the development of history.

Language, interpreted as signs and symbols, has served as an engine for decision making in all areas of knowledge—from Aristotle to Ricoeur to the manifestos of John Ruskin, Eugene Viollet-le-Duc, and Camillo Boito.

With writing, the verbal meaning of the text no longer coincides with the mental meaning or intention of the text. This intention is both fulfilled and abolished by the text, which is no longer the voice of someone present. The text is mute. There is an asymmetric relation between text and reader, in which only one of the partners speaks for the two. The text is like a musical score and the reader like the orchestra conductor who obeys the instructions of the notation. Consequently, to understand is not merely to repeat the speech event in a similar event, it is to generate a new event beginning from the text in which the initial event has been objectified.

—Paul Ricoeur

*Interpretation Theory:
Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*

Following Ricoeur's final thought, this essay is intended to demon-

strate intervention as a unique interpretation; to think of the role of the architect in today's cities as conductor of an occasionally-dissonant orchestra. Operating under the conception that there is a language of buildings, there is a hermeneutic dimension to this layering, an essence capable of reinvention in which a fusion between text (city) and reader (user) can produce a unique and unrepeatable read.

Once the nature of language and the variety of its uses has been recognized, it is possible to treat language in terms of the art of constructing arguments; building and creating situations, searching for opportunities.

Mexico City Readings to Process

Mexico City, the oldest living city in the Western hemisphere; the Aztec city, colonial, baroque, chaotic, ancient, modern, city of stone and red volcanic rock. French style mansard roofs waiting for the improbable tropical snow and shattered glass buildings which do not want to last more than fifty years.

—Carlos Fuentes

With almost 21 million inhabitants and considered in the global imagination as one of the largest cities in the world, Mexico City—known in the pre-Hispanic age as Tenochtitlan—was understood by the Aztecs through the life span of its buildings. Each new temple was built atop the

old one, creating layers of history; not merely forming juxtapositions, but holding a previous urban existence in each layer.

The logic of this, like any rational model, lies in realizing that it is subject to changes throughout its lifetime. Without rules and restrictions, the system adopts new processes and undergoes modifications...it reinvents itself. The debate over the presence of the past, continuities and ruptures between tradition, modernity and heritage...this should be understood primarily as an allegory, an incarnation of the values of the time in which it is "discovered," reflecting the debate of the moment.

Language is a potential from the memory; in each fragment we remember something of our own perception. The remembrance of what once existed in a specific place indicates part of the memory belongs to the city, the material of its growth and transformation. Interpretation, then, consists of developing and unfolding what is involved in the sign. To interpret is to create, to understand the issue that concerns us, to inquire into its fragmentation—each space individually—because we know the city today through a preceding context and history.

Current policies in Mexico do not favor the transformation of the city in time according to the natural evolution of society. Realizing the potential in that which already exists, it is essential to incorporate de-

sign concepts like progressivity and flexibility. Every existing condition has its own special quality which should be recognized as a starting point. Space has always been present as inert matter. As architects we make lectures and establish what is missing to activate it, bringing to mind the punctual interventions of Aldo Van Eyck in the Netherlands—playgrounds that created a dynamic between city block and void, against any speculative operation.

Due to the constant migration to cities, the number of inhabitants of urban areas has increased, while rural populations have dwindled. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in 1950, just under 43% of Mexico's population lived in urban areas. In 1990 that number had risen to 71% and today the figure has risen to almost 78%, exhibited by the uncontrolled pattern of urban sprawl around Mexico City.

The image opposite, by Mexican photographer Pablo Lopez Luz, displays the urban condition of the city periphery. These new landscapes create problems of density, connectivity and social disparity.

Mexico City is one of contrasts—in colorful art, cuisine, festivals, religion, dialect, dance, and traditions—which are becoming increasingly segregated. The city is a reflection of both progress and the economic, social, and political setbacks within the broader context of the country.



Figure 1. Mexico City Periphery Development. Photo: Pablo Lopez Luz.

Inherited Environments

According to the World Health Organization, by 2030 60% of the global population—or five billion people—will live in urban areas, mostly in developing nations. In today's complex economy, a misguided public follows the notion that buildings are not worth renovating because it is more expensive than demolishing and replacing them. This is where proposal thinking and reading come into play; what might we interpret by renovating?

Confused concepts create “thematic” or theatrical cities, small touristic Disneylands. Inherent in the creation of this facsimile is the lack of explanation to society. The product

is a deception, tempting us to forget. And forgetting is a regression of the mind. We contemplate monuments, conceived. Many of these so-called “dead” buildings lie within city centers, holding tremendous potential for new life.

We are inhabitants of the space. What surrounds us is determined by a constant, our perspective, the place occupied by our body. According to the French philosopher Henri Bergson, “the objects that surround my body reflect the possible action of my body on them... Perception disposes of the space in the exact proportion the action disposes over time.” If we are able to understand the stages of life of a city and the buildings that compose it, if we understand that

it is a changing object, having the capacity to die, if we understand it as a reflection of the inner life and activities therein, we might begin to see the mutability in an object that starts to obtain autonomy and personality, buildings as the reflection of our souls.

Therefore, a middle ground must be found in which—through the study of regulations and policies—a sense of place might be preserved. We must maintain and capitalize upon the unique aspects of the city's past by reusing existing infrastructure.

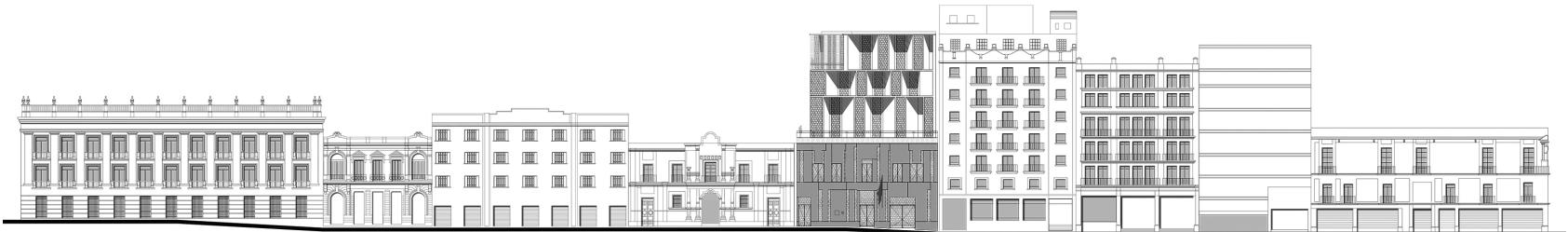
Complexity, to me, is a contrived concept, for—if by principle we understand the parts and establish what is missing—we will be able to opti-

mize and activate our environment, recycle our buildings, and revitalize our culture. Such an operation, perhaps in contrast to many an architect's instinct, requires the capacity of thought more than that of creation.

I was recently asked about the opportunities that are presented to someone after ending a career in architecture. “Many” was my answer—as many as you can visualize—for, if you are able to read the opportunities that the city offers, the horizons for exploration are innumerable.

Activating the City

The current work of Mexico City studio JS^a, led by architect Javier Sanchez, focuses on engaging the



existing context in order to compose and generate events within the city. Underlying these efforts is an understanding of the city as an organism which, when provided with the precise triggers and opportunities for new kinds of relationships, eventually will activate the urban fabric in accordance with the lives of its residents.

Spanish Cultural Center

Mexico City's Spanish Cultural Center, a collaboration between JS^a + arquitectura 911sc, dates from the eighteenth century although its history and fusion of cultures goes back 200 years farther. During the intervening 500 years, the building underwent changes in use and form

while its Baroque facade and historical essence were largely preserved.

A living space was generated that forms a connector through the whole building, linking two streets within the historic center. The building displays a tri-partite layering of pre-Hispanic, colonial, and contemporary history. The cultural program spreads into the surrounding buildings to become truly a project for the city.

Materials and constructive systems play an important role, conjugations of the time in which they were proposed: exposed concrete, wood paneling, and weathering steel latticework collaged to reproduce and reinterpret the colors and depths of the building's predecessors.

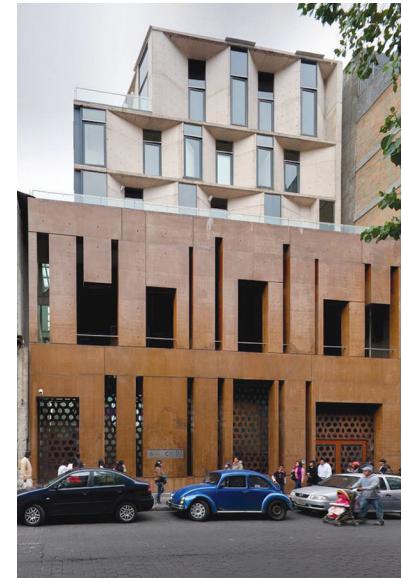
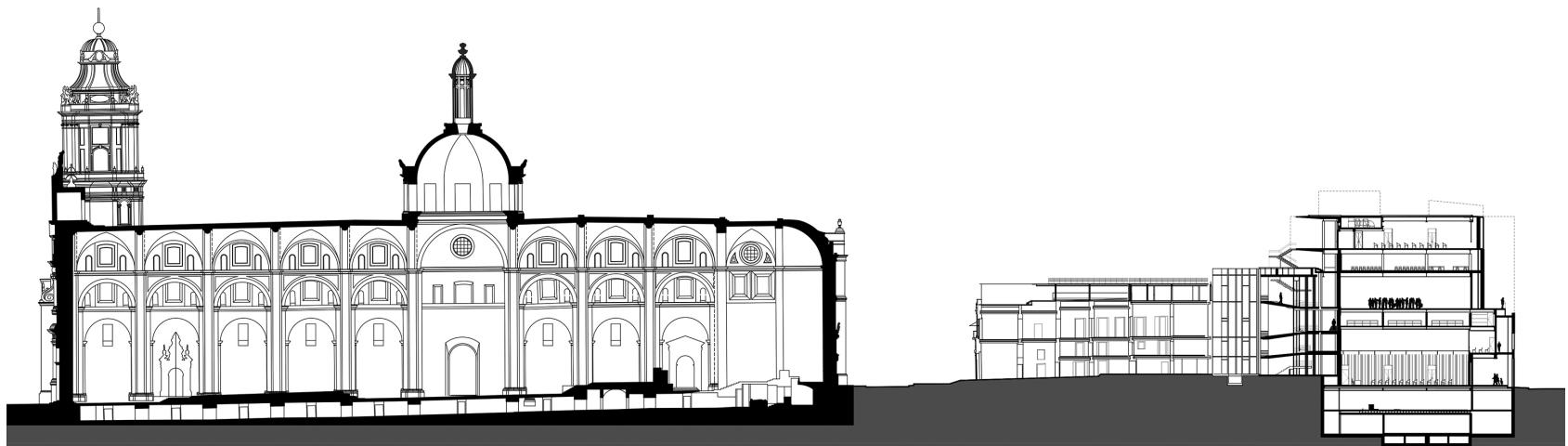
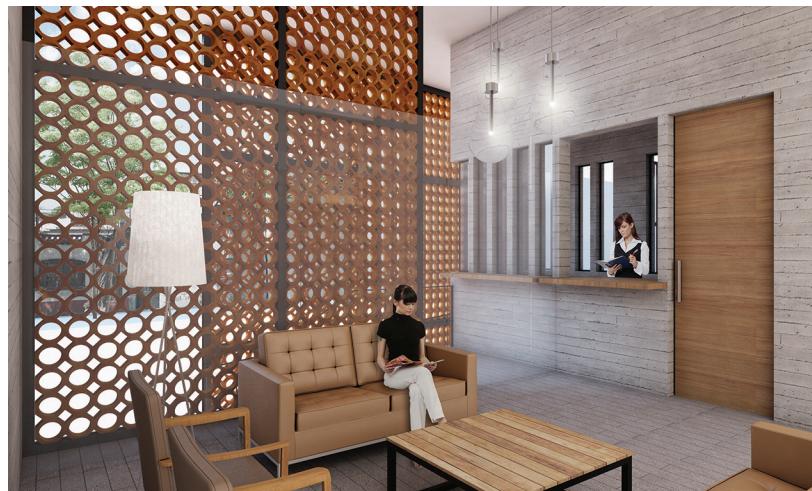


Figure 4.-5. Spanish Cultural Center Facade





La Cubana

Colonia Santa Maria la Ribera, which was formed in 1861 of a hacienda fragmentation, features French-styled architecture dating to a period between Mexico's Independence and Revolution Movements. Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, the colony became a popular district because of its social diversity and the promise of its historic architecture, although many properties initially appeared irreversibly deteriorated.

The "La Cubana" project arose from the invitation of a developer whose aim was to densify the location of a former chocolate factory within the neighborhood. The design efforts fo-

cused on finding a midpoint between the historic and contemporary in which the client and future user could enjoy a housing project with the air of a colony, inviting the discovery of a story told through its streets.

The arrangement of the volumes respects existing alignments and seeks to preserve the aesthetic value of the facades. New buildings are tucked into the old to avoid altering the scale of the colony, preserving the perception and reading of the historic fabric. Through the use of materials and elements that unify the pre-existing with the newly constructed, the project is a call to intensify and diversify life within. Coming in below the allowable square footage, the project is also a physical manifestation of a process

in which architect and developer sacrifice space in order to provide benefits to the user and community.

By accommodating a new socioeconomic scene and combining programs, relations that arise from the project will work as a trigger for the city, eradicating gentrification, optimizing resources and existing infrastructure, indeed touching on values that transcend architecture. Ultimately, I believe that improvement in the quality of life of users implies an improvement in the quality of appreciation of our environment and the enduring importance of interpretation.

To close the thinking by interpreting Ricoeur: what we want to fix

is discourse, not language as language, but the act of interpretation, exchange, and the conflicts therein. As architects, it is vital that we master language as an interpretive tool exercised in our role as moderators in the complex conversation between user, city, time, and history.

Image Credits

1. Pablo Lopez Luz
- 4-5. Rafael Gamo
- 2, 3, 6. JSa arquitectura

