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Restoration of Colonial monuments in Mexico

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Mexico has a vast cultural legacy that has given tradition and character to the country's physiognomy. Its colonial monuments reflect the knowledge and sensitivity of the Mexican people. Therefore, one of the primary purposes of affirming this knowledge consists of restoring and preserving them for future generations.

The task faced by the agencies dedicated to safeguarding Mexico's cultural heritage is overwhelming. It can be said that there have been some achievements since the creation of the General Inspection of Artistic Monuments¹ in 1914, at that time dependent on the General Directorate of Fine Arts.²

The General Inspectorate of Artistic Monuments was the first agency formed to protect and restore the cultural legacy of the colonial past. Since 1875, the protection of the pre-Hispanic past had begun to be a source of concern for the authorities, and at the time an inspector and a conservator of archaeological monuments were appointed. In 1896 and 1897, the first pieces of legislation for the protection of cultural heritage were issued. But it was not until 1930 when the Law on Protection and Conservation of Monuments and Natural Beauties³ was passed to protect colonial monuments. A new law in 1934, made the previous one more explicit and is the one currently in force.

Before this, the examples had been isolated and were due more to a new utilization of the monument than a desire for restoration. Thus, in 1884, the architect Heredia converted the Temple of San Agustín, built in the 17th century, into the National Library, "adapting it as far as possible to the new use, having the good sense to project both a transformation and a restoration of the building; accordingly, its general lines were maintained, applying ornaments in the same style as those of the old construction, the great bas-relief of the main façade representing

¹ Inspección General de Monumentos Artísticos.

² Dirección General de Bellas Artes.

³ Ley sobre Protección y Conservación de Monumentos y Bellezas Naturales.

the triumphs of the Doctor of Hipona, etcetera, was preserved, and the dome was suppressed internally by extending the vaults of the central nave,"⁴ as can be read in the transcription of Professor Manuel G. Revilla, a historian from the beginning of the century. Architect Heredia integrated his decorations with the façade, but he did this only to remove the feeling of a church, given its new purpose. Now in 1964, engineer Alberto J. Flores and architect Esponda have carried out restoration work in the Library, restructuring its interior, liberating the original level in the exterior, and removing the frame that hid the dome, which once again shines in all its splendor, thus preserving the work carried out by the architect Heredia on the exterior walls.



TEMPLE OF SAN AGUSTÍN, CONVERTED INTO THE NATIONAL LIBRARY, CA. 1911. *Image: Public domain.*

Another adaptation worth considering is the one made by architect Ignacio de la Hidalga, also in 1884, in what was the House of the Counts of San Mateo del Valparaíso, a palatial residence from the 18th century, to turn it into the National Bank of Mexico. A work by the same architect is the restoration of the façade of the old Mint, which was until recently the National Museum of Anthropology.

In 1899, architect Emilio Dondé converted the Casa de los Marqueses de Jaral de Berrio, another palatial residence from the 18th century, into a hotel, carrying out the adaptation with excellent knowledge and seriousness.

⁴ Original quotation: "adaptándolo hasta donde fue factible al nuevo destino teniendo el buen tino de proyectar a la vez una reforma, una restauración del edificio, con tal propósito mantuviéronse sus líneas generales, aplicándosele ornatos en el mismo estilo de los de la antigua construcción, consérvase el gran bajo relieve de la fachada principal que representa los triunfos del Doctor de Hipona, etc. y fue suprimida interiormente la cúpula corriendo las bóvedas de la nave central."



NATIONAL MUSEUM AT THE ANCIENT MINT, MEXICO CITY. *Image: Public domain.*

Already in this century, the extension of one more floor to the National Palace in 1926 by architect Petrichioli is the most essential adaptation work carried out before a true systematization and knowledge began to be exercised for the restoration of our colonial monuments. We could say this started in 1927 with the restoration and reconstruction of the former Augustinian convent of Acolman, a 16th-century convent-fortress, and later with the reconstruction of the convent of the order of San Diego in Churubusco. Continuing with various consolidation and restoration works in churches and convents of the republic, we should highlight those carried out in the open chapel of Teposcolula and the Dominican convent of Yanhuitlán, both in the State of Oaxaca, the Augustinian convent of Epazoyucan, in the State of Hidalgo, the Franciscan convent of Huejotzingo, in the State of Puebla and the Jesuit College of San Martín, in Tepotzotlán, in the State of Mexico.

Types of restoration practiced in Mexico

Following the method of Carlo Perogalli, inspired by the one elaborated by Giovanni, the different types of restoration undertaken in Mexico are the following: restoration of consolidation; restoration of liberation; restoration of reintegration; restoration of reconstruction; restoration of innovation and urban restoration.

Other interesting chapters are those related to the transportation of monuments, the conservation and maintenance of monuments, and the modern use of the monument. Two or three cases of each type are presented to exemplify the restoration method carried out.

Restoration of consolidation

1) The vault of the former temple of San Agustín (today the National Library) in Mexico City, 17th century. Those vaults were consolidated using internal metal tensors, re-wedging stones, and casting inverted beams to avoid any new fracture of the stones that could be caused by movements of the structure.

2) The choir of the church of San Francisco Javier in Tepotzotlán, in the State of Mexico, 18th century. Built with slabs and poor-quality mortar, the arch had suffered a settlement of 0.20 meters, making it necessary to lift it with mechanical jacks and hang it from a concrete slab cast over it, thus managing to remove all load from the choir.

3) The foundations of the church called "El Pocito" in La Villa de Guadalupe, Federal District, 18th century. Due to a considerable deformation, it was reinforced with a perimeter chain and, later, using control piles, it was straightened to its original position.



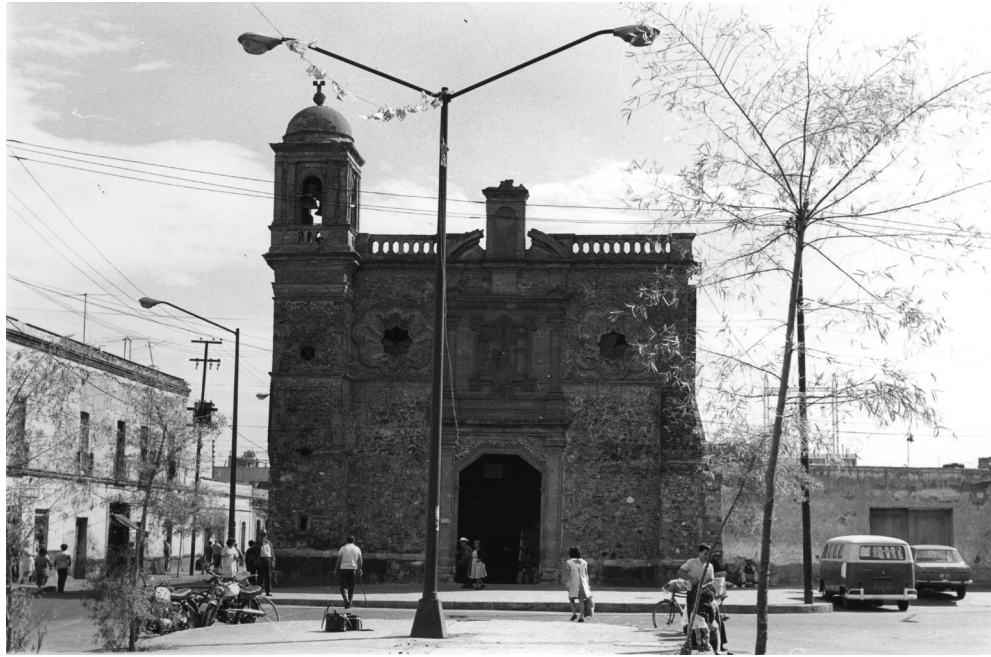
CHURCH OF EL POCITO. Image: Magdalena Vences Vidal, 1999.

Restoration of liberation

1) The liberation of the structures built on the lateral side of the church of Betlemitas (today the Historical Museum of the Military College) in Mexico City, 18th century. This is a curious example in which, due to various damages suffered by the main entrance of the church, one now enters through the apse; to achieve greater visibility, a three-story building that adjoined the church on the south side was demolished.

2) The liberation of the front building adjacent to the church of San Antonio Tomatlán, Mexico City, 17th century. A shed had been attached in front of this small chapel, located in one of the neighborhoods of the capital, to increase the church's capacity, covering its façade. The shed has been demolished, and now the façade can be seen again in all its glory.

3) The total liberation of the townhouses surrounding the convent of Yuriria, State of Guanajuato, 16th century. Within the urban regeneration carried out in this city, a significant part was constituted by this convent, where the constructions that surrounded it were suppressed, allowing this convent-fortress to be appreciated in all its magnitude.



SAN ANTONIO TOMATLÁN, 1972. *Image: Zepeda ©Fototeca CNCPC-INAH.*

Restoration of reintegration

1) The cloister of the convent of San Hipólito, Mexico City, 17th century. The sharp structural movement of two of the sections of the cloister will force its dismantling and the removal of the walls that blinded the arches in order to reintegrate it into its original position.

2) The cloister of the convent of La Merced, Mexico City, 17th century. Converted into a school, it had been transformed and subdivided into its corridors. It has been returned to its original state to allow it to function as an archive for 19th-century documents.



CLOISTER OF THE CONVENT OF LA MERCED. *Image: Public domain.*

Restoration of reconstruction

1) Side portal of the church of Santo Domingo in the town of Yanhuitlán, State of Oaxaca, 16th century. Due to the brittle nature of the stone in this region, the façade was semi-destroyed and in danger of collapse. The structural parts that endangered its stability have been reconstructed, leaving a clear record of the work carried out by means of a change in the color of the stone.

2) Main portal of the church of San Agustín in the town of Cuitzeo, State of Michoacán, 16th century. Using the same criteria, this façade has been reconstructed, one of the leading examples of Plateresque in Mexico.

Restoration of innovation

1) Santo Domingo convent in the city of Oaxaca, 16th century. Preparatory works were undertaken in this convent, so that it could become a museum without losing its character.

2) Cathedral of Cuernavaca, State of Morelos, 16th century. Integration of modern religious forms within a strong and sober 16th-century structure.



CATHEDRAL OF CUERNAVACA. *Image: Public domain.*

Urban restoration

Protection of monument cities by delimiting areas. Construction regulations, signs and billboards for the preservation of their typical appearance. Examples: Dolores Hidalgo, Guanajuato; Taxco; Guerrero; Guanajuato, Guanajuato; San Miguel Allende, Guanajuato; Coyoacán, Xochimilco, Tlalpan, San Ángel, Mexico City.

Transportation of monuments

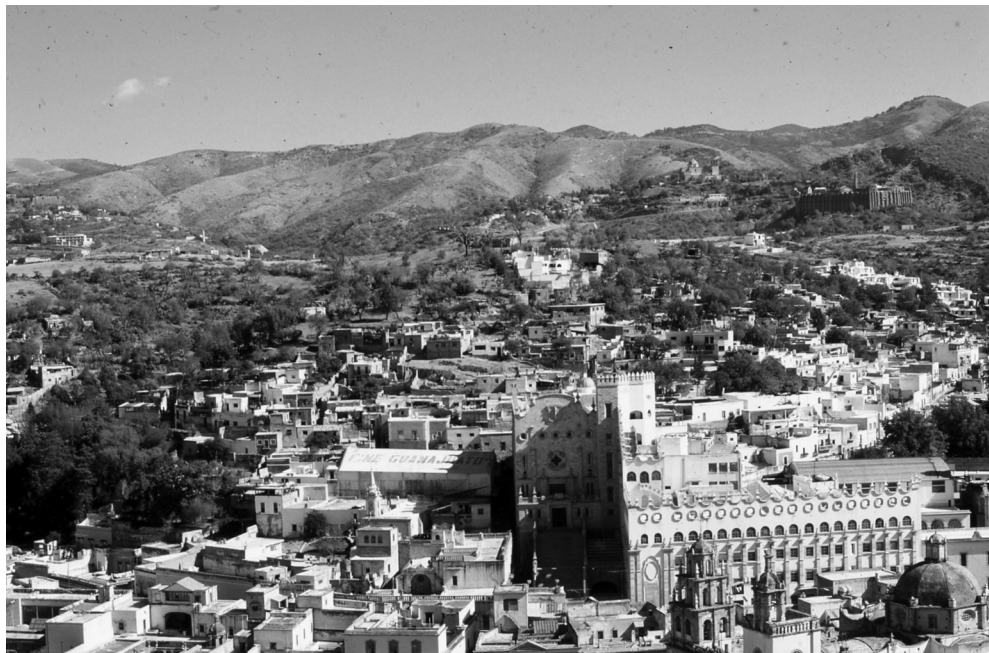
When this is necessary, it is a matter of integrating the monuments into an already existing harmonious environment.

- 1) Fountain of the Salto del Agua to the Museo del Virreinato. Due to its state of destruction, a replica was placed, and the original was moved to a museum.
- 2) Churches of mines that are no longer used, to the nearest city.
- 3) Church of Rayas, in town of Rayas, moved to the church of Belén in Guanajuato.
- 4) Church of Marfil, in the town of Marfil, to the University of Guanajuato.

The monument and its modern use

- 1) Museum of Mexico City in the House of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya, in Mexico City, 18th century.
- 2) Pinacoteca Virreinal in the Church of San Diego, in Mexico City, 17th century.
- 3) Museo Nacional del Virreinato in the Jesuit College of San Martín, Tepotzotlán, State of Mexico, 17th and 18th centuries.

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GUANAJUATO. Image: Pedro Rojas, 1973.