



Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, view from Paseo de la Reforma.
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The Japanese Embassy in Mexico: a Fortunate Association, a Threatened Heritage

BY LOURDES CRUZ

An examination of the architectural value of the Japanese Embassy in Mexico, designed by Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, which is in danger of being demolished. The context of mid-century Mexican architecture is addressed in order to situate this work within its historic moment, thus confirming its importance. This building was the result of an intellectual encounter between one Japanese and two Mexican architects, who exchanged ideas, concepts and criteria, resulting in a building with an innovative formal design, due to the use of reinforced concrete, and the flexibility of its structural concept, which allows it to be adapted to different uses. This article is essentially based on the archive of the architect Manuel Rosen Morrison, held by the Archive of Mexican Architects at the National Autonomous University of Mexico's Faculty of Architecture.

A brief look at the architectonic environment of mid-century Mexico City

Ever since the fourth decade of the 20th century, the Modern Movement had been patronized by the post-revolutionary Mexican government as a way to project an image of the power and progress that it consolidated following WWII; Mexico presented an image to the world of a prosperous country, full of opportunities that would not come twice.

The rationalism that accompanied this architecture was based on the myth of an orderly, scientific society that admired technology and the machine. In those years, architects believed in a universalist world, in which distances were shrinking and knowledge was expanding through the use of modern means of communication. This explains their convictions regarding the use and adaptation of technological systems and materials that were used abroad.

The global conflicts provoked by WWII were of decisive importance for the Mexican economy, which began to produce products that had previously been imported; Mexico slowly began to develop industrially, which led to the concentration of its population in its major cities. The growth of the cities required housing for all sectors of the population and health, educational, commercial, cultural and recreational infrastructure.

Towards the end of 1962, the foreign press began to discuss the "Mexican miracle," as the country enjoyed international prestige and an apparent internal stability. The desire to present an image of progress and modernity was manifested in Mexico's major cities through the use of an architecture in line with the avant-garde of developed countries. Functionalism underwent a transformation and the International Style, which made its first domestic

appearance in the 1940s, became practically a construction norm in the 1950s and 1960s in urban areas.

Mexican architecture was internationally renowned, thanks to foreign magazines that showed off the country's enormous urban-architectonic complexes as proof of the government's achievements. For example, the primary example of this in the field of education, remains to this day, University City (1950-1954). In the field of health, one outstanding project was the construction of the National Medical Center (1952-1962), led by Enrique Yáñez (1908-1990), in which, like University City and other government buildings, the concern with affirming Mexican nationalism was manifested by the presence of artistic interventions. There were also housing projects of considerable magnitude, such as the residential units designed by Mario Pani (1911-1993) and Alejandro Prieto (1924-1996). Likewise, it is worth emphasizing the series of museums designed by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez during the Adolfo López Mateos (1909-1969) administration (1958-1964), which formed an important part of the government's cultural program, which will be discussed in greater detail below.

The many athletic facilities built in Mexico for the 1968 Summer Olympics were the most important construction projects at the governmental level during the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1911-1979) administration (1964-1970), expressing the government's desire to show off its prosperous economy to the rest of the world. The design of these sports facilities revealed that Mexican architecture had entered another phase, in which certain concessions were made to the Modern Movement in terms of the search for technological innovations and experiments with reinforced concrete. In this sense, Manuel Rosen Morrison's

designs for the Olympic Swimming Pool and Gymnasium were especially outstanding.

The Importance of Reinforced Concrete in Mexico (1960-1975)

Ever since the 1950s, certain architects from around the world have been concerned with exploring and experimenting with the structural and plastic possibilities of reinforced concrete; each one of them approached this differently, from so-called Brutalism to refined, painstaking detail work, both in the structure itself as well as in the facade.

In Mexico, the use of reinforced concrete became popular due to its ability to reduce labor costs, as well as the expressive freedom it allowed. This formal exploration originated, above all, as a way to overcome the rationalist flat roof: here, it is necessary to mention the hyperbolic paraboloids that covered churches and chapels, an endless number of manufacturing spaces across the country and the markets built by Félix Candela's (1910-1997) company Cubiertas Ala, or by other outstanding architects, such as Enrique de la Mora (1907-1978), Fernando López Carmona (1921-2018), Alberto González Pozo (1934-) and Juan Antonio Tonda (1931-). At the same time, there began to appear a variety of prominent buildings around the country in which reinforced concrete revealed a concern for exploring the possibilities of this material, which offered improved everyday technical possibilities, including the Indigenous Institute (1963), by Alejandro Caso (1926-2004) and Margarita Chávez de Caso (1929-); the Grupo ICA building (1970), by Augusto H. Álvarez (1914-1995) and Jorge Flores Villasana; the IBM building (1972), by Augusto H. Álvarez, Enrique Carral (1914-1976) and Héctor Meza; the Cuauhtémoc Delegation (1972), by Teodoro González de León (1926-2016), Abraham Zabludovsky (1924-2003), Jaime Ortiz Monasterio (1928-2001) and Luis Antonio Zapiáin (1942-); the Heroic Military College (1971-1976), by Agustín Hernández (1924-) and Manuel González Rul (1923-1985); the Institute of the National Housing Fund for Workers (INFONAVIT) headquarters (1973-1975); the College of Mexico (1975) by Teodoro González de León and Abraham Zabludovsky; and the Japanese Embassy, the subject of this article.¹

A Fortunate Encounter: Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Manuel Rosen Morrison and Kenzo Tange and the Japanese Embassy in Mexico

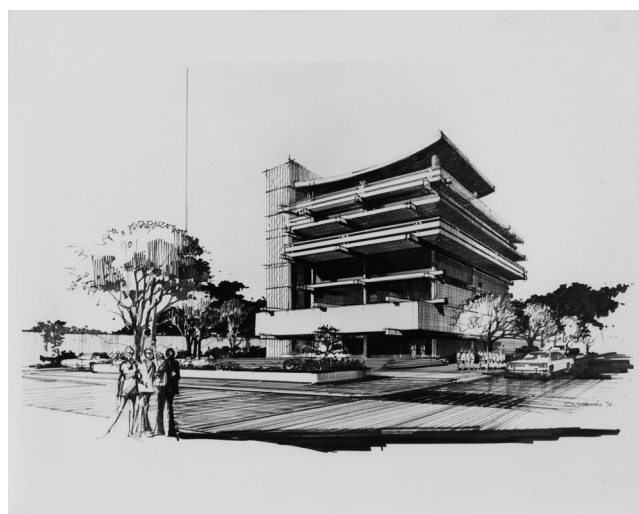
To understand the association of these three architects on this project, it is necessary to situate them in their time, understand the importance of their careers and explain how they met, as well as why this cultural exchange provided such positive results.

Pedro Ramírez Vázquez is considered to be one of the most important and varied Mexican architects of the 20th century. Since 1944, his firm designed emblematic architectural and urbanist projects at the national and international levels, as well as many graphic design and furniture projects for all types of companies. He saw architecture as a way to serve society and, within the precepts of the Modern Movement, designed countless schools, markets, offices and

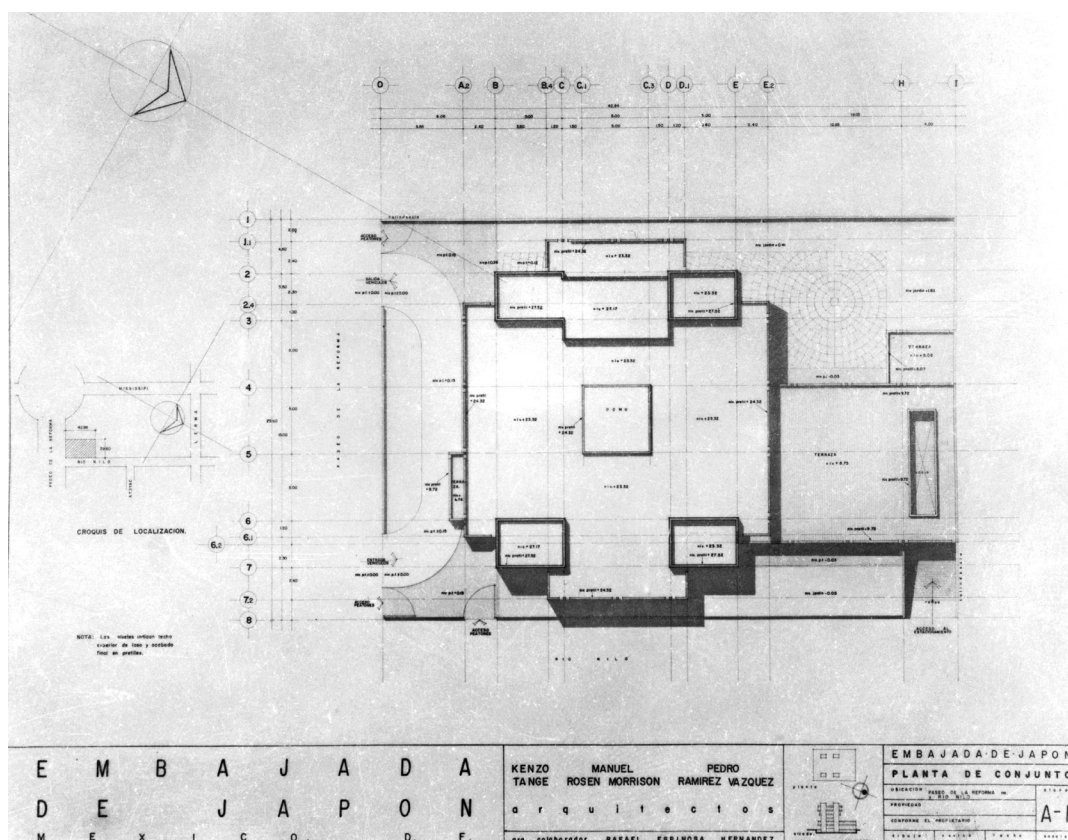
government buildings, museums, athletic facilities and exhibition pavilions, among other projects.²

Parallel to his professional work, he occupied a series of government positions, such as the General Director of the Federal School Construction Program's Administrative Committee from 1958 to 1964. During this time, he oversaw the construction of 35,000 prefabricated schools around the country, based on a prototype known as the Rural Schoolhouse, which won him the gold medal at the *Triennale di Milano*. In 1966, he built the monumental Estadio Azteca in reinforced concrete after winning the competition alongside Rafael Mijares (1924-2015) and Luis Martínez del Campo.³ The 1960s were an especially productive decade in Pedro Ramírez Vázquez's career, primarily because of the museums he designed and for his role presiding over the XIX Olympiad in 1968, which consolidated his international renown as one of Mexico's most important architects.⁴

Some years later, he began to collaborate with an architect seven years his junior, Manuel Rosen Morrison, who had always had an interest in foreign architects and architecture. At the young age of 26, he attended the *Panamerican Congress of Architects* held in Mexico City in 1952, at the brand-new University City built in Pedregal de San Ángel, primarily motivated by the desire to meet internationally-renowned foreign architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvar Alto (1898-1976) and Mies Van der Rohe. This desire or ability to make friendships was a constant in his life, and he was distinguished in the world of architecture for being a great host. He was a friend to writers, painters, actors and renowned Mexican architects. Thanks to his English fluency, his charisma, his interest in foreign cultures and the support of his family, his house was the site of countless gatherings featuring his friends from around the world. One friend, Dr. Víctor M. Pérez Valer, described him as follows: "His most sublime achievement as a person is to be a builder of bridges across religious, linguistic, cultural



01 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, first draft proposal, with finishes featuring warped surfaces that evoke pagodas. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



02 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, master plan of the complex. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.

and national divides.”⁵ These relationships, along with his countless trips and his love of reading, gave him a broad sense of culture, leading the architect Mario Pani, editor of the magazine *Arquitectura/México*, to invite him to form part of the Crítica group, made up of Vladimir Kaspé (1910-1996), Félix Candela, Gianni Cosco and Mauricio Gómez Mayorga; he would later write for many other international magazines. This concern with reflecting on his profession and the built environment led him to be invited to speak at domestic and foreign universities on numerous occasions.

From the end of the 1940s, he designed many houses and apartment buildings in luxurious neighborhoods of Mexico City, as well as offices and government buildings. He’s undoubtedly most famous for the Olympic Swimming Pool and Gymnasium, built for the 1968 Olympic Games. Together with Eduardo Gutiérrez Bringas, Antonio Recamier and Juan Valverde, he won the competition, undoubtedly for his design and innovative constructive system, based on a hanging roof supported by cables, allowing him to cover an over 80 meter span, considered to be a difficult feat at the time.⁶

After this sports project, he associated with Pedro Ramírez Vázquez on the Japanese Embassy in Mexico, located on the corner of Paseo de la Reforma and Río Nilo in Mexico City’s Cuauhtémoc borough, in collaboration with the famed Japanese architect Kenzo Tange; the Japanese-Mexican Lyceum (1976); and the Children’s Psychiatric Institute (1977), located in the south of the city, designed with Rafael Espinoza, among others.⁷

At the beginning of the 1970s, Manuel Rosen Morrison, while continuing to work as an architect, launched a business venture in which he and his partners attempted to open a Mexico City franchise of a famed Japanese restaurant. This failed venture allowed him to visit Japan and, at the same time, build a close relationship with important people at the Japanese Embassy in Mexico. Influenced by Manuel Rosen Morrison, the Japanese diplomats became concerned with building a new embassy in Mexico that would properly represent their country’s importance. For this purpose, they hired Manuel Rosen Morrison and Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, who immediately sought out Japan’s most important architect at the time, Kenzo Tange. Pedro Ramírez Vázquez discussed this in an interview given during the construction process:

We already knew how the services of an embassy were used or needed in Mexico, and how Japan operates in Mexico. That gives us the program, and the Japanese embassy officials could tell us what they need. But the architectonic interpretation? We’ve never built in Japan. How do the Japanese feel a space? We’re not Japanese, and so we need a Japanese person to tell us, and it would be better if that Japanese person is someone used to creating spaces: an architect. And among them, of all the Japanese architects we’re familiar with and whose work we enjoy, there’s Kenzo Tange... He has built in many countries, and so is obviously used to working with technicians from different backgrounds, to working on a team.⁸



03 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, view from Paseo de la Reforma. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph from 1976.



04 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, view from Río Nilo. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph from 1976.

Kenzo Tange was then internationally renowned in the fields of architecture and urbanism. His style was revolutionary and innovative, combining the precepts of contemporary international architecture with the traditional construction techniques of his home country. He became famous after WWII, when he won the competition to rebuild the devastated city of Hiroshima with a new urban plan and the Peace Center, 1949. He built many government buildings, libraries, etc., but is particularly known for the facilities he designed for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, which revealed a mastery of technique in the organic forms of the stadiums' suspended roofs. Ever since his earliest projects, he was distinguished by the use of reinforced concrete, as in the Kuwaiti Embassy in Tokyo (1970), a project that was influential on the Japanese Embassy in Tokyo, as we shall see below.

The Development of the Project

One of the important milestones of this embassy is the fact that, for the first time, the Japanese government invited architects from a different national background – in this case Mexicans – to design a building for one of their embassies. In an interview, Manuel Rosen Morrison said that, “For us, it was very satisfying to learn that, for the first time, the Japanese government has invited architects from another country to design one of their embassies.”⁹ Here it should be mentioned that Manuel Rosen Morrison's archive was donated to the Archive of Mexican Architects at the

National Autonomous University of Mexico's Faculty of Architecture in 2007. Studying this archive, several questions about the contracting and design process arise.

The first is that the contract, signed by the Japanese Embassy and the Mexican architects on 16th May 1973, specifically states that the drafts, executive project, blueprints and structural drawings for all of the embassy's facilities, along with any spreadsheets, must all be approved by the Japanese government by 30th July 1973. The architects would also have to establish the guidelines for the bidding process for construction.

Reviewing their correspondence, which contains letters and telegrams, it becomes clear that it was not easy to reach an agreement with Kenzo Tange regarding the issues of authorship and honoraria, although these matters were eventually resolved so that all three would share architectonic credit and the profits would be shared equally. Based on the archive, it seems that Kenzo Tange only came to Mexico once, which made Manuel Rosen Morrison uncomfortable. The latter went to Japan on at least two occasions, and also met with the Japanese architect in the USA. This can be explained by examining Kenzo Tange's career, which was quite busy during those years. The embassy was an important project, but a small one, and he surely trusted the professional skill of his partners.

Examining the archival documentation, there's no indication as to which architect had the initial idea or made the first sketch, but after analyzing Kenzo Tange's design

for the Kuwaiti Embassy in Tokyo (1970), it's evident that he provided the project's conceptual framework. There's a clear similarity between both embassies in terms of their spatial and structural conceptualization: in the nuclei of circulation and sanitary services contained in a reinforced concrete structural support that adjoins and connects spaces, the surface area expanding up to the highest levels and the use of reinforced concrete not just as a structural material, but as an expressive element.¹⁰

It could be argued that the design process occurred through an exchange of ideas, concepts, studio mock-ups, photographs and proposals between these three architects. There was a transfer of knowledge between two cultures, as can be seen in the eight drafts that exist in the archive. As Manuel Rosen Morrison said in an interview, "We made eight draft proposals. Finally, in my last visit to the Japanese capital, I brought with me a general idea, and it began to be developed here in our country."¹¹

The Japanese government selected a privileged site for its new embassy, on Paseo de la Reforma – the city's most important thoroughfare – surrounded by hotels, financial centers and other important embassies, and located just meters from important urban landmarks such as the Angel of Independence and the Diana the Huntress Fountain. It is located near Chapultepec Forest and not far from the historic downtown. In sum, a unique location.

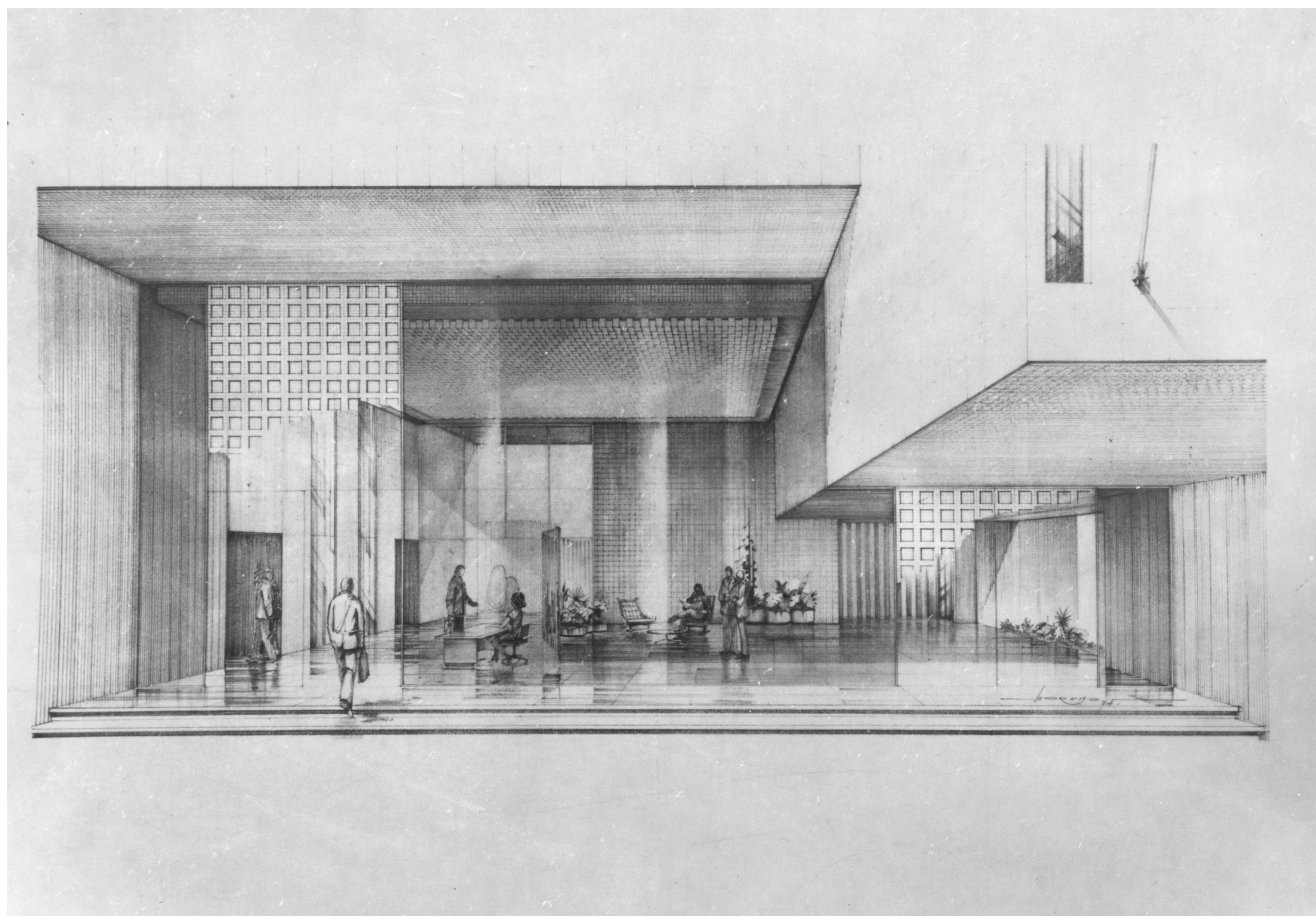
The Architectonic Solution

The project was built on a 1,270 m² rectangular lot on the corner, with a design involving two intercepted volumes – one, horizontal, that extends towards the back of the lot, and another, vertical, at the front of the lot, yet set back from the street and separated from its surrounding structures to draw attention to it.

The design was based on the everyday functions of an embassy, the movement of the public and East Asian customs, but its primary objective was to order the functions of each floor. For this reason, four massive support structures made of fluted reinforced concrete were used to support the progressively larger floors, creating the form of an inverted pyramid made of smooth reinforced concrete. The building was hierarchically organized from the bottom up, with the ambassador's office located on the final level.

The four structural supports placed at each extremity contain stairs, public and private elevators, sanitary services for each floor, ducts and storage areas, allowing for the full use of each floor. The layout of offices, conference rooms and other necessary spaces was therefore extremely flexible, as there was no structural grid that conditioned their distribution.

As has been mentioned above, there were at least eight draft proposals, which were all based on architectonic



05 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, perspective drawing of the lobby. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.



06 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, interior view of the lobby. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph from 1976.



07 Kenzo Tange, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez and Manuel Rosen Morrison, Japanese Embassy, Mexico, interior view of the lobby. © Fondo Manuel Rosen Morrison, Archivo de Arquitectos Mexicanos, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM. Photograph from 1976.

forms that evoked Japanese regionalism, utilizing structural elements with large, horizontally-extended surfaces. In the first, a warped surface can be seen that evokes the form of pagodas. As the project evolved, all ornament was stripped away, leaving only the contrast between glass and projecting platforms, creating a sort of chiaroscuro. This staggered, inverted structure functions as a natural sunshade that regulates the direct sunlight received by interior spaces. The play of light and shadow is emphasized by the building's gaps and the geometric composition formed by the intersection of the four vertical supports with each floor. The careful treatment of bare concrete was very original at the time, as an imported additive was used on both the smooth and fluted concrete, giving it a warm color.

Through the plaza on Paseo de la Reforma, the public was funneled towards the front entrance, while the underground parking garage was accessed via Río Nilo. The ground floor was used for dealing with the public, with waiting rooms, reception areas and multipurpose rooms, while consular and diplomatic functions were reserved for the upper floors. Inside, the architects sought to use modulated dividing elements that were in good taste, with fine finishes, because Japanese culture has always been associated with perfectionism. They took care to ensure the authenticity of the embassy's visible materials and its garden's design.

This diplomatic building continued to function for many years, aging gracefully. It remains standing at the same site, unoccupied and in danger of being demolished because the embassy has been moved elsewhere, due to the need to expand its facilities. Nevertheless, the embassy should be protected and conserved because of the domestic and international importance of its three architects, because it represents one of the first domestic partnerships between Mexican and foreign architects and because of its sober presence in the urban environment, in which it serves as a representative witness to its era, with an innovative, delicate formal design, expressed through impeccably executed glass and reinforced concrete. Inside, the flexibility of its architectonic design has allowed it to be adapted over time, and it was built to properly withstand Mexico City's frequent earthquakes.¹² We would be pleased if the Japanese government once again took advantage of these facilities, perhaps to give Mexico City a cultural center promoting the country's great culture.

Acknowledgements

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 Joshua Stone Neuhauser, translation.

Notes

- 1 For more information, see: Juan Ignacio del Cueto Ruiz Funes, "La 'Piedra del siglo xx' en la arquitectura mexicana," in *Teoría e Historia de la Arquitectura. Pensar, hacer y conservar la arquitectura*, Iván San Martín, Mónica Cejudo (eds.), Mexico, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 143-160; Mónica Silva Contreras, "El concreto armado en México. Material plural del siglo xx," in *Historia de la Arquitectura y el Urbanismo Mexicanos. En la antesala del tercer milenio*, Vol. IV, No. 11, Lourdes Cruz González Franco (coord.), Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM, 2015, 179-194.

- 2 To learn more about this architect's work, see the many articles contained in the book *Arquitectura/Pedro Ramírez Vázquez*, Mexico, Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2013.
- 3 "Nuevo estadio de fútbol. Estadio de fútbol Azteca," in *Calli. Revista analítica de arquitectura*, No. 21, Mexico, May-June 1966, 17-20.
- 4 The most important was the National Museum of Anthropology and History, which involved a large group of specialists under his leadership, in collaboration with Rafael Mijares and Jorge Campuzano (1931-2018). The result was a magnificent, 45,000 m² building that, to this date, is considered to be Mexico's most important museum at the global level, thanks to its architectonic and artistic quality and the valuable pieces it exhibits. The other two museums are the Gallery of History, also known as the "Snail Museum" due to its spiral form; and the Museum of Modern Art, designed with Rafael Mijares and Carlos Cásares, a controversial project at the time because of its free, wavy forms, covered by large glass surfaces. See Ramón Vargas Salguero, *Pabellones y museos de Pedro Ramírez Vázquez*, Mexico, Noriega-Limusa, 1995.
- 5 Manuel Rosen Morrison. *Arquitectura*, Mexico, Editorial Limusa, 2005, 23.
- 6 See "Alberca 68" in *Calli, Revista analítica de Arquitectura Contemporánea*, No. 30, Mexico, November-December 1967, 32-35; "Alberca Olímpica," in *Secretaría de Obras Públicas. Obras Olímpicas*, Mexico, May 1968, 18-25; "Proyecto de piscina para los Juegos Olímpicos," in *Nuestra Arquitectura*, Buenos Aires, March 1967, 35-36.
- 7 The final, and perhaps most important, project that he did with Pedro Ramírez Vázquez was the Tijuana Cultural Center (CECUT), Baja California, Mexico. See "Centro Cultural y Turístico de Tijuana B. C. N. Fonapas," in *Arquitectura y Sociedad*, Mexico, Year xxxv, No. 12, 1981, 9-14.
- 8 Alberto Bonifaz V., "Un proyecto notable: la Embajada de Japón," in *Construcción Mexicana*, Vol. 15, No. 13, June 1975, 24.
- 9 "Embajada de Japón... 'Un edificio que canta,'" in *Constru-noticias*, No. 144, Mexico, January 1976, 73.
- 10 Habitual Taller de Arquitectura, "Arquitectura metabolista en México: la Embajada de Japón," <https://mxcity.mx/2016/06/arquitectura-metabolista-en-mexico-la-embajada-japon/>. Retrieved 28th March, 2020.
- 11 Manuel Rosen Morrison, "Embajada de Japón... 'Un edificio que canta,'" in *Constru-noticias*, No. 144, Mexico, January 1976, 73.
- 12 The embassy is registered in Louise Noelle and Carlos Tejeda, *Guía de Arquitectura Contemporánea de la Ciudad de México*, Mexico, Banamex, 1993, 96.

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