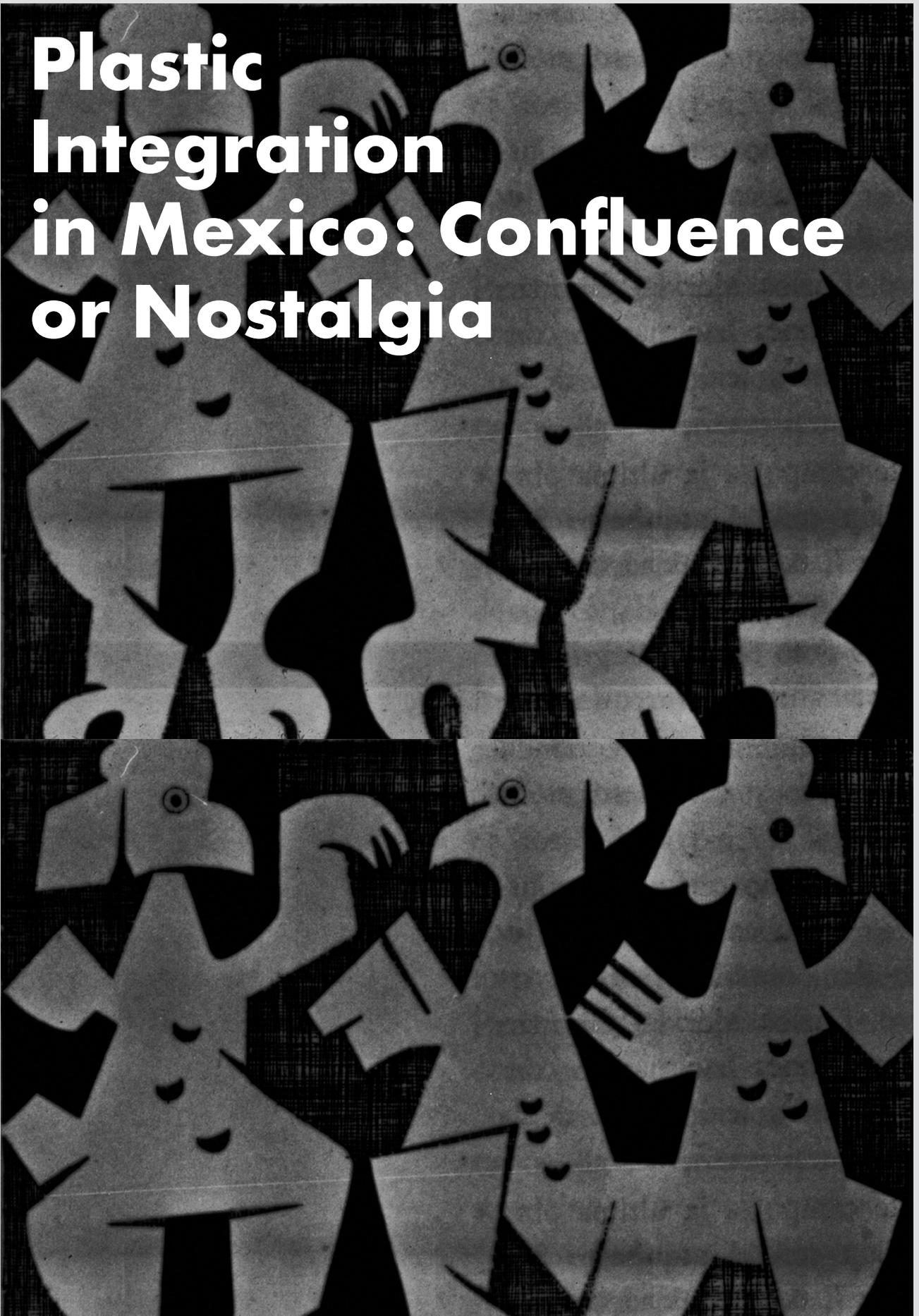


Plastic Integration in Mexico: Confluence or Nostalgia

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From the onset of contemporary architecture, the controversial presence of visual arts manifested itself as one of the approaches in its development. In the mid-twentieth century the use of the term “plastic integration” started to be widespread, exposing the confrontation between diverse stances and positions. Three of the pioneers in the forefront of this field were Carlos Obregón Santacilia, with his building for the Secretaría de Salubridad (1929), Mario Pani, with the Hotel Reforma (1936), and Enrique Yáñez, with the Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas (1936–1940). The movement, headed by the leading architects of the time in collaboration with important artists, searched for an intersection between the visual arts and architecture.

By Louise Noelle

FROM the onset of contemporary architecture, the controversial presence of visual arts manifested itself as one of the approaches in its development. In the mid-twentieth century the use of the term “plastic integration” became widespread, exposing the confrontation between diverse stances and positions. At the same time, a series of questions arose regarding the final results of a work shared between architects and artists, as the result of such a collaboration did not always meet a successful ending.

On one side, we have to remember that at the beginning of the past century arose a series of radical proposals which tried to liberate architecture from the academic weight. The voice of Austrian architect Adolf Loos might have been the one heard with more force, in the foreboding article from 1908 “Ornament and crime”. However, soon after many conciliatory postures emerged, such as the one adopted by the CIAM, which expressed that “a new conception of each architectural problem” was necessary, as well as a “creative satisfaction of all the material and spiritual requisites.”¹

Regarding the architects, the posture of Le Corbusier is worth noting, being both an architect and a painter led him to express himself in favor of a synthesis: “Architecture and visual arts are not two elements that are juxtaposed; they are a whole, solid and coherent.”² Furthermore, it is important to note that in the well known and revolutionary book *Vers une architecture*, published in 1923, together with his position on mass production and standardization, he proposed that “Architecture is the skilful, accurate, and magnificent play of masses seen in light; they call for the plastic artist.”³ As for Walter Gropius, reflecting on the foundation of the famous Dessau school, he explained that it was “inaugurated with the specific objective of carrying out a modern architectural art with the sovereign union of all the different arts.”⁴ We should not forget either another renowned pioneer, Frank Lloyd Wright, who pointed out in 1943 that “at last . . . we have arrived at integral ornament”, an “ornament meaning not only surface

qualified by human imagination, but imagination giving natural pattern to structure.”⁵

Returning to Mexico, it is precise to clarify that the term “Plastic Integration” (*Integración Plástica*) is coined mid-way through the twentieth century, even though there are examples from before this date. This movement, headed by the main architects of the time, proposed to achieve the coupling between the visual arts and architectural works. It is possible to find different proposals and concepts, from both architects and plastic artists that present themselves as *a priori* ideas, or as subsequent analysis. Probably the most comprehensive work is the one done by architect Enrique del Moral, director of the *Escuela Nacional de Arquitectura* (the National Architecture School), UNAM, between 1944 and 1949.⁶ It is of a high significance that after some years of studying under José Gaos in the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* (Philosophy and Literature Faculty) of that same university, he produced a book of a small format, with two essays entitled *El Estilo* and *La Integración Plástica*.⁷

In the text about Plastic Integration, he begins by signaling the constant reference at the time to this trend and he elaborates his own explanation: he establishes that the collaboration between artists of different disciplines has been going on throughout history, though the true integration is only accomplished in very few occasions. He continues with the idea that this integration is not the result of the adequate work of architects and artists, but the existence of “the harmonious man . . . (that) lives in a centripetal, magic, transcendent, metaphysic world . . . submerged in the world of faith, not in the world of reason” insisting that the “peoples centered vitally and principally on the religious phenomenon express themselves formally with a common characteristic: integration.”⁸ From that statement we can obviously deduce that there were no possibilities of Plastic Integration with del Moral at the time, as he disqualifies all expressions that referred to this concept, including his own.

An opposing theory is adopted by other architects

such as Enrique Yáñez, who affirms that it is possible to propose a Plastic Integration that supports itself in the “figurative realism”⁹ because it has the function of transmitting a meaning, “Art with a message”, a “work that architects undertake with other artists . . . with the goal of enriching architectural works.”¹⁰

It is essential to note that the Mexican Muralist current, which had a profound social content and a realist expression, monopolized during many decades this production of public art. The members of this movement manifested their thinking through writings, starting with the *Manifiesto del Sindicato de Trabajadores Técnicos Pintores y Escultores* (Manifesto of the Union of Technical Workers, Painters and Sculptors) from 1922, where important artists such as Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and Xavier Guerrero, signed a document drafted by David Alfaro Siqueiros that proposed to glorify “the expression of Monumental Art, because it is public property.” To support these ideas Siqueiros, probably the most spirited and lucid of the group, expressed in several occasions his feelings about all this, when he brought forward the idea that an artist should “produce a mural painting as a painting of a given architectural space” where the “integral functionality is the *desideratum* of the integral plastic art,”¹¹ understanding the social and human aspect as the integral functionality. He proposes then the realization of the “ideological voice, the ethical expression or socio-political of architecture and of the entire integral plastic art phenomenon,”¹² an integration, in conclusion, that comprises the material, the spiritual and the moral.

For his part, Diego Rivera assured that it “is important to understand that in a true mural painting is necessarily a functional part of the life of the building; a synthetic and expressive sum of its human, general and particular functions; an element of union and amalgamation between the machine which is the building and the human society that uses it which is, ultimately the only cause and reason for its existence.”¹³ He concluded saying to the architects that “if they want a true and beautiful mural painting, they should offer the walls they built to the painters.”¹⁴ This declaration is fundamental to understand that it is the architects who, in a certain way, hold the power regarding matters of integration.

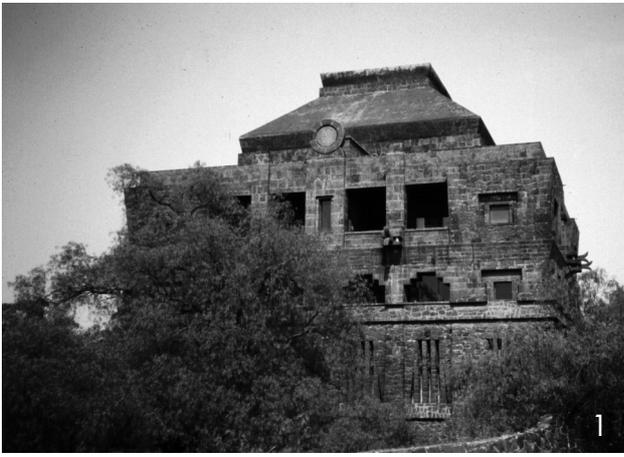
It is of great significance to include here the opinion of an accomplished architect and painter, Juan O’Gorman, author of important works in both fields. In the first place we have to remind ourselves of the long professional relationship established between Diego Rivera, the client, and O’Gorman, the architect, with the *casa-estudio* for Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, from 1931. A few years later, with the construction of the Anahuacalli they “discovered” together a method to make stone murals in the

concrete castings.¹⁵ (figures 1, 2) Afterwards O’Gorman perfected this system as he undertook the great work of the Central Library in the *Ciudad Universitaria* complex, in 1952, with 4,000 meters of mosaics made from colored stones.¹⁶ Because of this, his opinions in the article *En torno a la integración plástica* (On the Subject of Plastic Integration), are particularly attractive, renouncing his functionalist past and proposing “a realist architecture that as an artistic expression corresponds to Mexico, so that the people feel that it is theirs . . . so that when it is integrated with painting and sculpture . . . it is a legitimate contribution and original to the universal culture.”¹⁷ He shows himself thus as a champion of a “double realism”, in the pictorial and sculptural themes as much as the form of expression.

That is why, even in a concise fashion, it is “a must” to talk about a few pioneering examples of this tendency, headed by the main architects of the time that proposed to achieve a amalgamation between plastic arts and architectural works. The start took place with Carlos Obregón Santacilia¹⁸ who planned the *Secretaría de Salubridad*, in 1929, in which Diego Rivera took part with a mural that had impressive nudes in the meeting room and four very interesting stained-glass windows based on the four elements—earth, water, wind and fire. (figures 3, 4) Likewise Manuel Centurión carried out several sculptures, Hans Philling did the bas-reliefs and William Spratling designed the iron works.

The case of Mario Pani¹⁹ is marked by early forays into this tendency in the Hotel Reforma, 1936, with four controversial murals by Diego Rivera with motifs of Mexican festivities. A bit later, in the *Escuela Nacional de Maestros*, 1945, conceived by Pani as a space in which Mexican teachers of the future would feel proud, he invited both Luis Ortiz Monasterio—to participate making some bas-reliefs in stone—and José Clemente Orozco. (figure 6) The latter carried out the mural “*Alegoría Nacional*” (National Allegory), applying ethyl silicate directly over the concrete.

For his part, Enrique Yáñez and his partner Ricardo Rivas invited David Alfaro Siqueiros and his “*Retrato de la burguesía*” (Portrait of the Bourgeoisie) for the *Sindicato Mexicano de Electricistas* building, 1936–1940.²⁰ In this sense, it is appropriate to speak here of the joined proposition brought forward by Rivas and Diego Rivera for the building known as *Cárcamo de Lerma*, 1951, where Rivera painted “*El agua en la evolución de la especie*,”²¹ (Water in the Evolution of the Species) with polystyrene and liquid rubber, thinking that they would be resistant to the passing of water; he also created the fountain located at the front of the building, a sculpture/painting of Tlaloc, made with glazed tiles and colored stones.²²



However it is essential to mention that, probably, the artists that adopted an antagonistic posture to those at the *Escuela Mexicana de Pintura* (Mexican School of Painting) and its social message were the ones who achieved a higher coherence between their plastic arts proposals and their architectural postulates. In first place we can point out the painter of Guatemalan origin, Carlos Mérida, whose geometric expression—with bright and sharp colors and straight lines that are intertwined and set the boundaries of each area with precision—adapted to the interests of several architects.²³ He asserted that “the old concept of Mexican Muralism (Montenegro, Rivera, Siqueiros, Orozco) has stopped existing . . . the painting must be fused with the architectural body and should not be taken as mere ornamentation.” Because of this, with his ideas of a universal art without boundaries, he achieved an excellent participation in the *Centro Habitacional “Benito Juárez”*, 1952, by the architect Mario Pani; furthermore, in this case he employed concrete as a basic material, increasing the harmonious relationship of what Mérida himself called “Functional Painting”.²⁴

In this respect, Mathias Goeritz published an article entitled “*La Integración Plástica en el C.U. ‘Presidente*

Figures 1, 2. **Diego Rivera**, Anahuacalli, 1944-1947.

Figure 3. **Carlos Obregón Santacilia**, Ministry of Health, 1929.

Figure 4. **Diego Rivera**, Stained glass.

Photos by Louise Noelle



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Juárez" (The Plastic Integration in the C.U. 'Presidente Juárez'), (figures 5, 10) where he affirms that his colleague achieved "an extremely happy coordination of an integration obtained very rarely . . . (where) to create within a true harmony, you don't have to impose, but rather subdue oneself."²⁵ A small amount of time later, Goeritz would undertake his personal proposals in the confines of Plastic Integration with the significant building of the *Museo Experimental "El Eco"*. With the inauguration of this building he published the *Manifiesto de la Arquitectura Emocional* (Manifesto of Emotional Architecture), where he explains some of the concepts that took him to be "an architect, a bricklayer and a sculptor," achieving results of great originality. He described his posture this way: "The plastic integration wasn't understood as a program, but rather in a more natural sense", a "plastic integration to cause the Modern man maximum emotion."²⁶

Likewise, it is important to mention Enrique Yáñez again, as he undertook a good number of outstanding examples. Specially, one must note a series of works in the Centro Médico, 1957-1964, where he was accompanied by a group of architects to design the Oncology, Pneumology, Obstetrics and Gynecology and Nutrition Units. There can be found murals by David Alfaro Siqueiros and Luis

Nishizahua, and bas-reliefs by Federico Cantú. Amongst these works some stand out due to the good integrating proposals, such as the clinical lecture rooms in which José Chávez Morado participated with stone bas-reliefs that illustrate the "Evolution of the future of science in Mexico". (figure 12)

In the National Anthropology Museum by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Rafael Mijares and Jorge Campuzano, 1964, several craftsmen were invited to realize a mural, such as Rufino Tamayo, Jorge González Camarena, Miguel Covarrubias, Mathias Goeritz, Carlos Mérida, Raúl Anguiano and Feliciano Peña; in this case the prevailing role belongs to a bas-relief made by José Chávez Morado, "*Imagen de México*" (Image of Mexico), a metallic column that supports the monumental central umbrella, that achieves an exceptional integration.

A particular case is that of Enrique de la Mora,²⁷ with a good number of churches, in some instances associated with Félix Candela; for these works, he employed the presence of contemporary works of art, like the sculptures by Herbert Hoffman and a good number of stained glasses. Specifically, the chapel of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, located in the Seminario de San José del Altílo in Mexico City, from 1956-1958, has to be celebrated. (figure 5) In it, an almost abstract stained glass by Kitzia



Hoffman, with its vivid colors, intensifies the mystical attention towards the altar. Regarding the church of Santa Cruz in San Luis Potosí, from 1967, it is worth mentioning that the interior is illuminated with a series of interesting abstract stained glasses by Zita Basich.

In a certain sense the same can be said of the architect Alejandro Prieto,²⁸ who started as early as 1952 working with Diego Rivera in a pioneering theatre. With him, there is to be noted the design of two housing units, “Independencia”, 1960, and “Cuahutemoc”, where works by Luis Ortiz Monasterio, Federico Cantú and Francisco Eppens, achieve an integration that complements the generosity of the living conditions.

Amongst these examples, the house that Juan O’Gorman built for himself in San Jerónimo, 1949–1953, holds a particular place, since he achieved a totally innovative expression.²⁹ The design of the house – which unfortunately was destroyed – is both organic and dreamlike; he made the most of some existing caves to insert his home, which he then covered profusely with mosaics and tiles in a bas-relief. It can be said that amongst his sources of inspiration are Max Cetto and his interest in the Pedregal area, Carlos Lazo and the “Cuevas civilizadas” (civilized caves) and Diego Rivera and his sculptural mosaics, but specifically his inspiration can be tied to his

own paintings and their fantastical and imaginary content. Therefore this architect–painter closes his creative circle; his works, even though controversial, obtain in this occasion a unity that has been very seldom achieved.

Without lengthening this revision of outstanding works, we understand that the expressions that are included within this tendency actually known as Plastic Integration, are part of the modern movement, because they belong to buildings that are clearly identified with this current; however, we cannot omit saying that these interventions confer the buildings a unique quality, that ties them with the local, but does not stop them from belonging to the universal. In this sense *Ciudad Universitaria*, the main campus of the National University, 1950–1952, holds a leading position in this trend.

Actually, the more common voice is that of those who

Figure 5. **Enrique de la Mora** and **Félix Candela**, Chapel in San José del Altílllo, 1956–1958. **Kitzia Hofmann**, Stained glass.

Figure 6. **Mario Pani**, *Escuela Normal de Maestros*, 1945. Open auditorium with the mural *El mestizaje*, by **José Clemente Orozco**. Photos by Louise Noelle

see in Plastic Integration a complimentary road to the contemporary movement, which has become obvious in several writings. On one hand, we find those who support nationalism like Alberto T. Arai³⁰ and Enrique Yáñez, who both search to blend the neutrality of the international style in fashion at the time, with the concurrence of Mexican Muralism, with proven national roots and tradition. On the other, professionals like Mario Pani, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez or Enrique de la Mora find, next to plastic artists, a solution for the tiring boredom facing repetitive patterns in the international trends of the time.

A final consideration

It is possible to establish that, in most of the twentieth century, the confrontation of the nationalist proposals and the desires towards international tendencies will be present in the works of numerous artists and architects. Therefore, it is appropriate to take up again the ideas of Jorge Alberto Manrique to better understand which is the meaning of the different forms of expression that make up the modern movement in Mexican architecture in its relationship with the plastic arts.

In more than one sense the Mexican culture seems to be composed by consecutive moments in which periods of openness and shutting alternate. An ambivalent situation regarding the European or Occidental cultures seems constitutive of the Mexican culture, much in the same way that, to a greater or lesser degree, this ambivalent phenomenon is present in the whole of Latin America.

In the case of Mexico, this ambivalence, which reflects itself in the double possibility of interpretation, has resolved itself in time as a succession of contradictory periods, that support themselves in complex historical situations: we have postulated ourselves alternately as both equals and different from Europe, from the Occident; we jump in delight of that which is our own, the search and complacency of that which makes us different, which presents itself as a value precisely for being different and exclusively ours, and then we skip to the following historical moment, where we are afraid to stay behind, to lose our footing in relation with the rest of the world.³¹

We understand then that the artistic and architectural production in Mexico is not trying to propose alternative postures, but more likely diverse expressions, that like a pendulum, at times it leans towards the local and at other times towards the universal. This situation, seemingly conflicting, has lead today to understanding that in a paral-

lel manner to what is known as the modern movement in architecture, other expressions have developed that are not of lesser importance or are excluded from modernity. In this sense it is possible to take up again the term "Otros Modernismos"³² (Other Modernisms), that includes the tendencies that accompanied the modern movement, particularly regarding Plastic Integration, searching with this to expand the outlook of Mexican architecture and to value its contributions with higher fairness and depth.

This assertion allows us then to accept that in the past century true synthesis was achieved where architecture and plastic arts converge in an indivisible whole, a perfect plastic integration. In these cases, more than explanations or concepts by the diverse craftsmen and architects involved, it is the experience facing the results that which permits to determine the suitability of the different postulates that speak in the name of this tendency. It can be agreed then that the fact that, in some extraordinary circumstances, the precept of collaboration with solutions that are integrated and emotional, can be accomplished, finding at the end a happy confluence in creativity.



Figures 7, 8, 9. **Juan O’Gorman**,
House in San Jerónimo, 1949-1953.
Photos by Louise Noelle



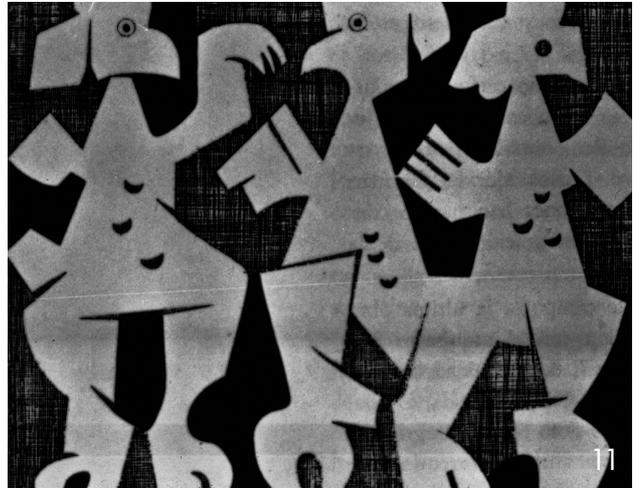
Notes

1. Official declaration of the First International Architecture Congress, CIAM, signed on June 28, 1928 by 24 participants, including Le Corbusier, Hannes Meyer, Gerrit Rietveld, y H.P. Berlage. Taken from Pere Hereu, Josep María Montaner y Jordi Olivares, *Textos de la modernidad* (Madrid: Nerea, 1994), 268.
2. "L'architecture et les arts plastiques ne sont pas deux choses juxtaposées; elles sont un entier solide cohérent", taken from Paul Damaz, *Art in European Architecture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1956), 28.
3. Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), 28; reproduced from the original from 1931
4. Walter Gropius, *Principios de la producción de la Bauhaus*, in Hereu, Montaner, Olivares, *Textos de la modernidad* (Madrid: Nerea, 1994) 259.
5. Frank Lloyd Wright, "Integral Ornament at Last," in *The Natural House* (New York: Horizon Press, 1943), 55.

Figure 10. **Mario Pani**, *Centro Urbano "Presidente Juárez"*, 1951-1952. Concrete bas-relief by **Carlos Mérida**.

Figure 11. **Carlos Mérida** design.

Figure 12. **Enrique Yáñez**, *Centro Médico*, 1957-1964. Stone bas-relief by **José Chávez Morado**. Photos by Louise Noelle



6. See Louise Noelle, *Enrique del Moral* (México: 2004).
7. Enrique del Moral, *El Estilo. La Integración Plástica* (México: Seminario de Cultura Mexicana, 1966).
8. Del Moral, *El Estilo*, 27.
9. Enrique Yáñez, *Del Funcionalismo al Post-racionalismo* (México: Limusa, 1990), 66.
10. Enrique Yáñez, *Arquitectura. Teoría. Diseño. Contexto* (México: author's edition, 1983), 189.
11. David Alfaro Siqueiros, "Hacia una nueva Plástica integral", originally published in 1948 in the first issue of the magazine *Espacios*, and taken from Raquel Tibol, *Textos de David Alfaro Siqueiros* (México: FCE, 1974), 78.
12. David Alfaro Siqueiros, *Cometido en el arte de la pintura en la Integración Plástica*, *Espacios* 11-12 (México: October 1952).
13. Diego Rivera, *Arquitectura y pintura mural*, originally published in *The Architectural Forum* (New York: January 1934), and taken from *Textos de Arte*, compilation by Xavier Moysén (México: Colegio Nacional, 1996), 196.
14. Rivera, *Arquitectura y pintura mural* in Moysén, *Textos de Arte*, 198.
15. The Anahuacalli, 1944-1957, was designed by Rivera, but the calculations and the construction were done by O'Gorman, who describes the process in Antonio Luna Arroyo, *Juan O'Gorman* (México: Cuadernos Populares de Pintura Moderna, 1973), 142-143.
16. The architectural project is by Juan O'Gorman, Gustavo Saavedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco. See *Biblioteca Central. Libros muros y murales* (México: UNAM, 2006).
17. Juan O'Gorman, *En torno a la Integración Plástica*, *Espacios* (July 1953), taken from *La Palabra de Juan O'Gorman* (México: UNAM, 1983), 63. In the article "Más allá del funcionalismo: la arquitectura moderna y sus relaciones", he assures that "In the great periods of art, sculpture and painting have been the necessary complement to architecture, to enhance and give added expressive strength to the plastic art as a whole", 53.
18. Víctor Jiménez, *Carlos Obregón Santacilia. Pionero de la arquitectura mexicana* (México: CNCA-INBA, 2001).
19. Fernando González Gortázar, *La integración plástica en el trabajo de Mario Pani*, in Louise Noelle (ed.), *Mario Pani* (México: UNAM, 2008).
20. Rafael López Rangel, *Enrique Yáñez en la cultura arquitectónica mexicana* (México: UAM-A-Limusa, 1989).
21. "Offering myself . . . which represented the most interesting job proposal in my life until now," Diego Rivera, *Integración Plástica en la Cámara de Distribución del Agua del Lerma*, *Espacios* 9 (February 1952).
22. Louise Noelle, *Integración plástica y funcionalismo. El edificio del Cárcamo del Sistema Hidráulico Lerma y Ricardo Rivas*, *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 78 (2001).
23. Louise Noelle, *Los murales de Carlos Mérida, relación de un desastre*, *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 58 (1987), 125-147.
24. Carlos Mérida, *Conceptos Plásticos*, in *El diseño, la composición y la Integración Plástica de Carlos Mérida*, exhibit catalogue (México: UNAM, 1963), 15.
25. Mathias Goeritz, *La Integración Plástica en el C.U. 'Presidente Juárez'*, in Mario Pani, *Los Multifamiliares de Pensiones* (México: Editorial Arquitectura, 1952), 104.
26. The text for "Manifiesto de Arquitectura Emocional" is taken from the volume by Olivia Zuñiga, *Mathias Goeritz* (México: Editorial Intercontinental, 1963), 30-32.
27. Alberto González Pozo, *Vida y obra de Enrique de la Mora* (México: INBA, 1981).
28. Louise Noelle, *Arquitectura*, in *Escultura*, Alejandro Prieto Posada (México: INBA, 1993).
29. Juan O'Gorman, *Un ensayo de arquitectura orgánica*, *Arquitectura/México* 112 (November-December 1976).
30. Alberto T. Arai, *Caminos para una arquitectura Mexicana*, *Espacios* 9, 11 and 12 (1952).
31. Jorge Alberto Manrique, *El proceso de las artes: 1910-1970*, in *Historia General de México* (México: El Colegio de México, 1976), 1359.
32. This is the title of the IX International Docomomo Conference, "Other Modernisms", which took place in September 2006 in Ankara, Turkey.

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