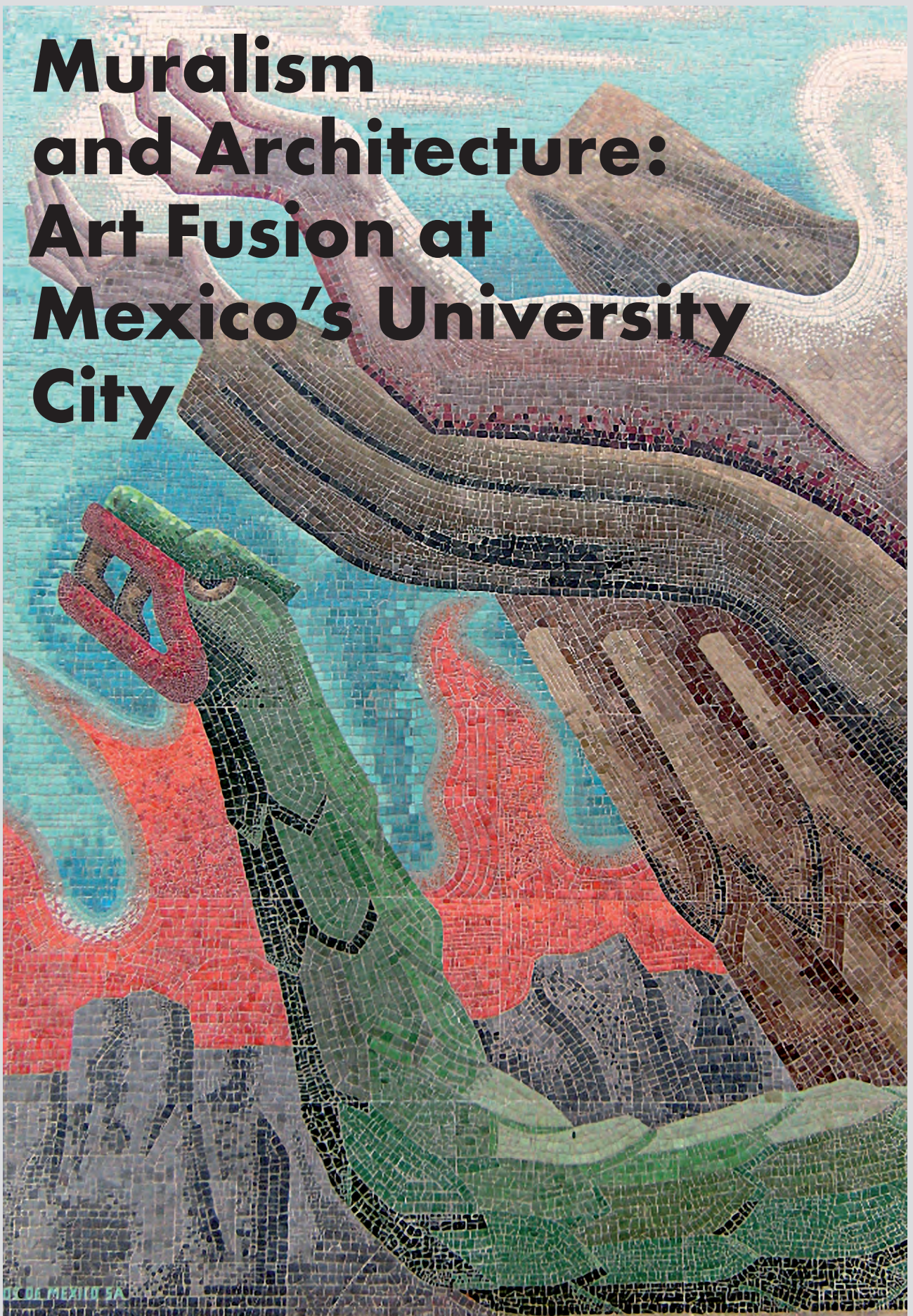


# Muralism and Architecture: Art Fusion at Mexico's University City



**U**niversity City is one of the best examples of twentieth-century Mexican architecture. It has been declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco for it managed to synthesize tradition and avant-garde to create a place where the articulating landscape design is able to assign emptiness a compositional value; while the harmonious layout of the buildings and their careful construction merge with murals that play an important role in forming their identity. These grand scale murals (1952–1956) were capable of communicating the values and spirit of the Mexican revolutionary movement, such as progress and social reform, while also teaching people about the country's history and its social struggle. The result is a very realistic, didactic, and even narrative art which appeals to the masses.

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By Lourdes Cruz

**E**VER since the end of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1917), artists felt the need to create a genuine and purely Mexican aesthetic expression, which would be capable of communicating the values and spirit of the revolutionary movement such as progress and social reform, while also teaching people about the country's history and its social struggle. The result was a very realistic, didactic, and even narrative art which appealed to the masses. Examples of these grand scale mural paintings exist among the walls of both the old university buildings—found in downtown Mexico City—, and University City.

This first stage of Mexican Muralism left us ten murals by five different artists on the main buildings of the University City's campus. Their grand scale, themes, and innovative use of techniques and materials to resist environmental hazards make them a very unique example during the twentieth-century Mexico.

### **University City at the Pedregal de San Ángel**

Located on the southern part of Mexico City, University City is the biggest university campus of the whole country and the most important element among the UNAM's vast heritage, for it is one of the best examples of twentieth-century Mexican architecture. On July 7, 2007, the campus was declared a World Heritage Site by Unesco, because it represents tangible and intangible values that make it exceptional, for it managed to synthesize tradition and avant-garde to create a place where the harmonious layout of the buildings and their careful construction, merge with murals that play an important role in forming their identity; and where the landscape plays an articulating role between the various volumes that conform the campus—assigning to the emptiness a compositional value. Also, the site was chosen because it is a public, secular, and free university, and because it is the country's cultural paradigm.

The University City project was part of a competition

won by the Escuela Nacional de Arquitectura (National School of Architecture). Architects Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral were in charge of producing the final site plan and of coordinating each particular project, appointing the architects and technicians who would take part in each one of them. Architect Carlos Lazo's presence as the project's principal manager was also decisive in the organization of the construction process, which gathered more than 150 architects and engineers, nearly a hundred contractors, hundreds of technicians and almost ten thousand workers; along with some of the best visual artists at that time.

At the end of the 1940s, the more than seven million square meters site—covered by volcanic rock from the eruption of the Xitle volcano—was located on the outskirts of Mexico City. Yet little by little the city expanded in that direction, due to the fact that Insurgentes Avenue—one of the city's most important avenues—had just been extended to reach the Mexico–Cuernavaca highway. At the same time, the neighboring Jardines del Pedregal was becoming a huge financial success. The project's plan is dominated by two main themes: the irregular spaces left-over by the absence of rock and the fact that the plot is divided by the Insurgentes Avenue. The layout is determined by a peripheral ring of two-way traffic—inspired by Herman Herrey's system—which connects with closed circuits that define the different campus zones. Pedestrian circulation is placed underneath these circuits, therefore avoiding interference with the vehicles above. The main axes that govern the site are the north-south and the east-west axes so that all the buildings respond to this grid in one way or another.

All of the Faculties were done on the first stage and centered around the idea of the *campus*, a great green open-air space without any lava residues, that has a significant physical and academic value, for it has served as a meeting point for both students and teachers throughout the years. One of the campus' most striking character-

istics is the generosity of its spaces, for even though the university was planned to hold up to 25,000 students—a number which has been totally surpassed—its open-air spaces, plazas, patios, and enormous staircases, among other elements, render it a monumental character which evokes Mesoamerican architecture. It is also worth mentioning that the spaces in between the buildings allow for porches and covered spots that protect pedestrians from the environment, and that serve as transitions between interior and exterior spaces.<sup>1</sup>

International style's paradigms such as the use of the straight line, cubic shapes, asymmetry, modulation, and standardization are present in this project. Also part of this modern discourse is the simplicity and purity of the buildings' façades. Still, the fusion of visual arts with architecture on a grand scale, the tectonics of the buildings, the character of exterior spaces such as the patio, and other isolated examples such as the Olympic Stadium by Augusto Pérez Palacios, Raúl Salinas Moro and Jorge Bravo Jiménez, or the frontón courts<sup>2</sup> by Alberto T. Arai, suggest a deliberate impulse to try and find some kind of national identity.

Buildings such as the Central Library by Juan O'Gorman, Gustavo Saavedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco; the Rectoría Tower by Mario Pani, Enrique del Moral and Salvador Ortega; and the Faculty of Science building by Raúl Cacho, Eugenio Peschard and Félix Sánchez are also worth mentioning, not only for their symbolic relevance, but also because of their value as architectural pieces.

### **O'Gorman at the Central Library**

This building is divided into two very clear sections: the ground floor where the reading rooms are, and the ten-story volume which holds the library's collection and several other offices. This nearly blind tower is covered by one of the country's biggest murals, Juan O'Gorman's "*Representación histórica de la cultura*" ("Historic representation of culture"), where the artist uses the nearly 4,000 square meters of glass and naturally colored stones set into precast concrete slabs to represent Mexican culture.<sup>3</sup> O'Gorman chose these stones—which were picked up from various parts of the country—so that they could withstand the hardships of the environment. On the other hand, he used volcanic rock for the base of the building, and embellished it with high relieves, clearly of Mesoamerican inspiration.

Each of the tower's four walls is heavily laden with iconography representing some part of Mexican history: the north façade has indigenous motifs such as Tezcatlipoca, Chalchuihtlicue, Quetzalcóatl, Tláloc, and the founding myth of Tenochtitlán, the former Aztec capital; the south-

ern façade deals with the western world—part of Mexican culture after the conquest—and includes Ptolemy's geocentric and Copernicus's heliocentric models of the universe. The west and east façades represent contemporary Mexico, with themes such as the Mexican Revolution and the university itself.

### **Siqueiros at the Rectoría Tower**

Headquarters of the UNAM's governing body, the Rectoría Tower is the highest ranked building among the campus. It is made up of a base and a tower, and holds three Siqueiros's murals. Out of the three, the most important is *El pueblo a la universidad, la universidad al pueblo* (The people to the university, the university to the people) and can be found on the southern façade. It shows a group of students holding out their arms and carrying objects that represent their professional activity, offering their knowledge to the country. The mural is a high relief, with a steel structure coated by cement and covered by glass mosaics. Its integral polychromic nature as well as its dynamic composition—which relates to the movement of the spectator walking through the open-air spaces of the campus or traveling by car along *Insurgentes Avenue*—makes this mural a great piece of art.

On the north façade, "*Las fechas en la historia o el derecho a la cultura*" ("Dates through history or the right to culture"), made of concrete and vinylite, represents the struggle of the Mexican people to attain a national culture, shown by an extended arm crowned by two intertwining hands that are trying to grab a book which shows some of the country's most important dates: 1521, the Conquest; 1810, Independence; 1857, Liberal Constitution; 1910, Mexican Revolution; while the last remains question-marked, as if waiting for the next big event in Mexican History. The third mural is found wrapped around an extruded volume on the eastern façade. Also made up of concrete and vinylite, the unfinished "*Nuevo símbolo universitario*" ("New university symbol") is a complex composition, for it shows a diagonal-line based abstraction of the South-American condor and the Mexican eagle, both part of the university's emblem.

Figure 1. **Juan O'Gorman**, *Historic representation of culture*, Central Library.

Photo by Lourdes Díaz

Figure 2. **José Chávez Morado**, *The conquest of energy*, former Faculty of Science.

Photo by Lourdes Cruz.



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Figure 3. **Mario Pani** and **Enrique del Moral**, *Rectoría Tower*.  
Photo by Lourdes Díaz.

Figure 4. **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, *New university's symbol*, *Rectoría Tower*.

Figure 5. **David Alfaro Siqueiros**, *The people to the university, the university to the people*, *Rectoría Tower*.

Photos by Lourdes Cruz.



## Rivera at the Olympic Stadium

Diego Rivera's unfinished *"La universidad, la familia y el deporte en México"* ("The University, the family, and sport in Mexico") is a natural stone high relief which decorates the stadium's eastern façade. The mural shows the UNAM's emblem — an eagle and a condor, both with their wings outstretched, standing over a nopal — which shelters three anthropomorphic figures: a man and a woman joining hands over their half-caste son, to whom they are giving a white dove. Two gigantic athletes who are lighting the Olympic fire surround this image. The original project was conceived to cover up all of the stadium's peripheral slopes, showing the history of Mexican sport from pre-Hispanic to contemporary times. However, lack of funds and Rivera's own health became obstacles for its completion.

## Chávez at the Science Faculty Building<sup>4</sup>

This Faculty is formed by many buildings: a free-standing tower, an auditorium, and a horizontal, three-story building that holds the classrooms. Its characteristic presence in the campus is not only due to its volumetric appeal, but also because it holds three José Chávez Morado murals. *"La conquista de la energía"* ("The conquest of energy") can be found crowning the northern façade of the Alfonso Caso auditorium, facing the main plaza. This three part glass mosaic mural symbolizes man's struggle to find the 'vital source', from the discovery of fire until the development of atomic fission. The leftmost part shows Death covering the Elements with its veil, while a lit up torch which is blown by the wind frames the central human figures. These men, with their arms outstretched in various directions, are pointing at a figure which rises up from the ground and wraps up the composition.

*"La ciencia y el trabajo"* ("Science and labor"), which used the same vinylite technique as Siqueiros's murals, can also be found on this auditorium on one of the sides of the ground floor though. Through a horizontal promenade, the artist depicts scenes of the various social groups that took part in the building process of the University City and that made an impact on him, from the peasants and labor workers to the architects, university officials, and the outstanding scientists of that time.

Figure 6. **Francisco Eppens**, *Life, death, miscegenation, and the four elements*, Faculty of Medicine.

Photograph by Lourdes Cruz.

Figure 7. **Diego Rivera**, *The University, the family, and sport in Mexico*, Olympic Stadium.

Photograph from Mexican Architects' Archive, Faculty of Architecture, UNAM.



The glass mosaic mural *"El retorno de Quetzalcóatl"* ("Quetzalcóatl's return") can be found within the compound's main patio. This pre-Hispanic god is shown as a serpent-shaped boat that carries various characters which represent past cultures: an Egyptian, a Franciscan monk, a man with an Ehécatl-shaped mask,<sup>5</sup> along with Babylonian, Greek and Islamic figures. Its colors and location—overlooking a water-mirror that underlines the idea of the serpentine boat—make it a very eye-catching piece. Rodrigo Arena Betancourt's bronze statue, called *"Prometeo Encadenado"* ("Bound Prometheus"), could also be found on the grounds of the Faculty, standing in the middle of a fountain. Its great realism and meaning—man's thirst for knowledge—made it a symbol for the UNAM.<sup>6</sup>

## Eppens at the Faculties of Medicine and Dentistry

Francisco Eppens, who belonged to the second generation of Mexican muralists, did a couple of glass mosaic murals, one in the Faculty of Medicine and another in the Faculty of Dentistry. These murals offer a rich insight into symbols and concepts related to ontological and cultural issues of the human being. *"La superación del hombre por medio de la cultura"* ("Man's self-improvement through culture") is the representation of the struggle of mankind, which on the one hand tries to rise up to infinity while, on the other, insists on belonging to its own place. Pictorially, the mural consists of a great diagonal axis that rips through the composition, where a winged man's head is wrapped in the gods' flames, while he finds himself tied by roots to the ground. This piece is located on the exterior wall of the José J. Rojo auditorium, in the Faculty of Dentistry.

Atop one of the buildings' western façade, the massive scale, colors, and location of the Faculty of Medicine's *"La vida, la muerte, el mestizaje y los cuatro elementos"* ("Life, death, miscegenation, and the four elements"), turn this mural into one of the most important focal points of





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the whole *campus*. Full of pre-Hispanic references, like Coatlicue's breasts and hands,<sup>7</sup> it also appeals to the vital elements: water, wind, earth, and fire. Yet the center is dominated by a triple face that represents miscegenation: the Spanish father, the indigenous mother, and, in the middle, the face of the modern Mexican. Framing the whole image is a serpent biting its own tail, eliciting eternal life.

### A tradition that is still up and running

Since its construction the fusion of visual arts with architecture has been the norm in University City, where more than forty new murals – both interior and exterior – have joined the work of pioneers and are spread all throughout the *campus*. Yet the techniques with which they were made, the themes they represent, and the quality of their making, have not been able to achieve the degree of significance of the former murals. University City's sculpture has flourished the most in all its expressions, perhaps with

better results. Busts of famous people decorate gardens, *auditoriums*, and classrooms, while abstract shapes seem to spring up from the ground to become part of the environment in plazas, streets and libraries. However, the most important sculptures can be found at the University Cultural Center (1979). This arts center is comprised by theatres, libraries, *auditoriums*, and a series of grand scale sculptures that, contrasting with the boulder-strewn volcanic landscape, form a wonderful promenade. Federico Silva's "*Las serpientes del Pedregal*" ("Pedregal's serpents") and the collective piece "*Espacio escultórico*" ("Sculptural space")<sup>8</sup> add up to the afore mentioned works, to become one of the main attractions not only inside the *campus*, but of the entire south of Mexico City. We can assume that this rich fusion will continue to flourish inside UNAM, for it is one of the strongest signs of its personal identity, and has become one of the most prolific reflections of the country's cultural scene.

### Notes

1. Unesco's declaration of World Heritage Site only includes the original project, inaugurated on November 20, 1952 and bordered on the west side by the Olympic Stadium, on the south by the frontón courts and the sporting facilities, on the east by the Faculty of Medicine, and on the north by the Faculties of Humanities. It is made up of a total of 52 buildings scattered around 176 hectares which add up to 25 per cent of the total 370 which make up the University City. For further reading go to [www.unam.mx/patrimonio/index.html](http://www.unam.mx/patrimonio/index.html)
2. Frontón is a sport played with a ball and rackets in a three-walled range. Its origins are Basque, and it is played in both Spain and Latin America, as well as in some parts of Southern France.
3. O'Gorman had already developed this technique for Diego Rivera's Anahuacalli studio, built in 1941.
4. Nowadays, this building holds many administrative offices and various other classrooms, as the Faculty of Science moved to a new location at the end of the 1970s.
5. Ehécatl was the Aztec god of the wind.
6. The statue was moved along with the Faculty of Science to their new site, and has since been replaced by Federico Silva's *El Pájaro móvil* (The mobile bird).
7. Coatlicue, 'the Mother of Gods', was the Aztec goddess of fertility; therefore its image represents life.
8. Helen Escobedo, Manuel Felguérez, Mathias Goeritz, Hersua, Sebastián, and Federico Silva.

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Figure 8. **José Chávez Morado**, *Quetzalcóatl's return*, former Faculty of Science. Detail.

Figure 9. **Francisco Eppens**, *Man's self-improvement through culture*, Faculty of Dentistry. Photographs by Lourdes Cruz.