

Monterrey Modernism

At first, the movement was all business

BY JUAN M. CASAS



Insets: Exterior and interior of El Auto Universal Garage.

Background: Calle Zaragoza, circa 1921, in a photograph by Alberto Flores Varela.

MODERN ARCHITECTURE ENTERED Monterrey through the back door. The city's first modernist buildings were utilitarian, designed for practical uses in industry and trade. Often, those structures employed a humble but cutting-edge new material: reinforced concrete.

THE SAN LUISITO BRIDGE

At the beginning of the 20th century, Alfred Giles, a British architect who settled in San Antonio, was well known in Monterrey. He had designed the Banco Mercantil de Monterrey (1901) and La Reinera (1901), one of the most prominent commercial buildings downtown. And though the San Luisito Bridge was essentially an engineering project, Giles was hired to design it.

The bridge would span the Río Santa Catarina, connecting Monterrey to San Luisito, a growing neighborhood to the south. Earlier wooden bridges hadn't lasted long: The previous one, built in 1904, burned in 1908. But Giles' bridge would be constructed of fireproof reinforced concrete.

He designed a simple but attractive three-section covered bridge. The central section was tall enough to allow the passage of people, animals, wagons, and perhaps even a streetcar. The two shorter flanking sections housed retail shops.

Giles knew the basics of building with concrete, but to do the engineering calculations, he sought the help of J.F. Woodyard, a St. Louis engineer. (Woodyard

later received so many job offers in Monterrey that he settled there permanently and maintained a prolific practice well into the 1940s.)

The bridge was dedicated in 1909, and only a few months later it withstood a flood that killed more than 5,000 people and washed away 40 city blocks. In fact, the bridge survived as a dense marketplace until 1955, when the Río Santa Catarina was straightened, and four car-and-truck bridges were built. Deemed antiquated, the San Luisito Bridge was demolished.

SALÓN VARIEDADES

In Monterrey, Modernism often arrived literally on top of older architecture. The city's oldest movie house opened in 1904; it shared a masonry building with El Progreso cantina. The cantina and theater were so successful that the owners, brothers Adolfo and Antonio Rodríguez, added a second floor to the building in 1910.

As the *Monterrey News* reported in September of that year, the addition was constructed of "that new material, that famed acquisition of modern architecture, reinforced concrete, which amazed both laymen and experts alike with its marvelous properties of strength."

The Variedades movie house survived until 1951, when the entire side of its street, the Calle Padre Mier, was demolished in a street-widening project.

CASA HOLCK

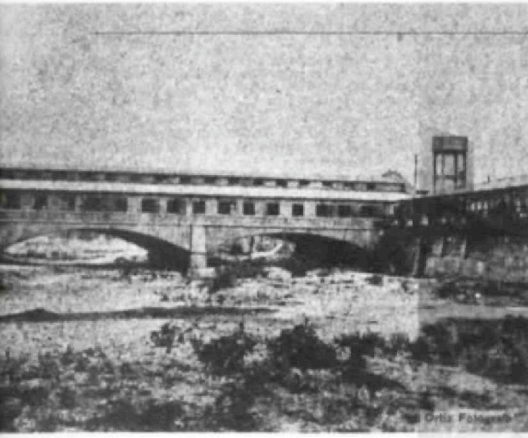
Casa Holck, a hardware store, was founded in the second half of the 19th

century, and in 1910, engineers J.F. Woodyard & Lee designed a new Casa Holck shop and warehouse. Woodyard & Lee's aesthetic composition seems conservative compared to U.S. utilitarian buildings of the time, but even so, Casa Holck stood out. Woodyard didn't exploit all the possibilities reinforced concrete offered; for instance, he proved quite moderate in the openings used for shop windows on Matamoros Street. But those windows are wider than the ones traditionally found in masonry construction, and in that way, they foreshadow Woodyard's later, bolder (but not too drastic) explorations — the large windows of reinforced-concrete structures such as the Langstroth Building (1922) or El Auto Universal Garage (1924). The tiny window openings in the large warehouse behind the shop appear antiquated, though perhaps the mere necessity of storing hardware didn't require much more light.

Put into service in 1911, the building has survived and currently provides parking for a department store. Despite the conversion, its utilitarian architecture remains impressive.

EL AUTO UNIVERSAL GARAGE

Cars changed Monterrey's infrastructure. The first garages — ancestors of contemporary car dealerships — emerged in 1909 and 1910. At first, car-related buildings were adapted from pre-existing structures, but as cars gained in popularity, buildings were designed and built specifically for automotive services.



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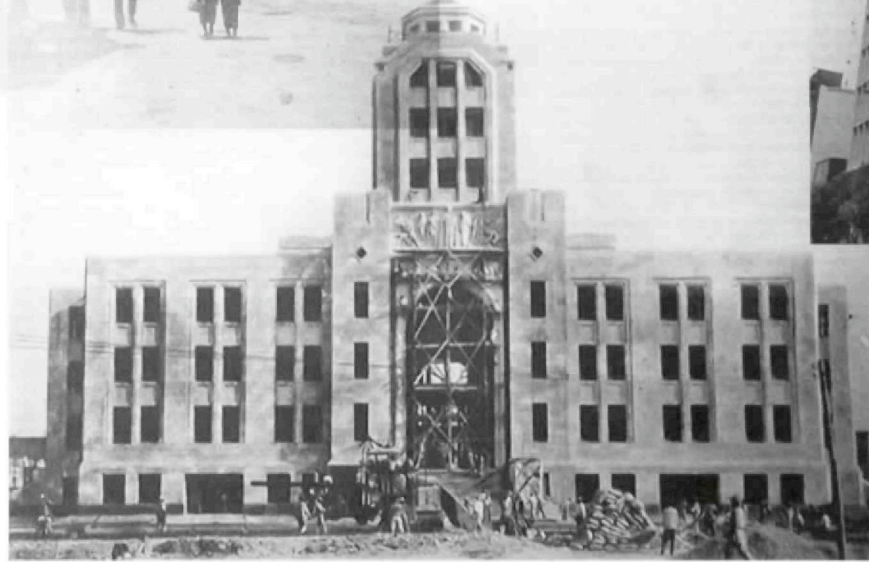
Side view of the San Luisito Bridge (1909, Alfred Giles).

Entry view of the San Luisito Bridge.

Palacio Federal (FyUSA, 1930) under construction.

Edificio Chapa (Guillermo González Mendoza, 1946).

Condominio Acero (Ramón Lamadrid, 1959).



J.F. Woodyard's El Auto Universal Garage dates from this pioneering period. El Auto Universal (also known as "The Ford Building") was not the first salesroom and maintenance garage in Monterrey, but it is undoubtedly the most architecturally notable; it is the first eloquent example of modern architecture in Monterrey. The first floor is completely transparent, allowing customers to see the cars for sale. That transparency, and the horizontal bands on the building's façade — both hallmarks of modernism — lighten the massive structure, which could easily have appeared too heavy.

THE PALACIO FEDERAL

Over the first 30 years of the 20th century, the United States heavily influenced Monterrey's modern architecture — not only through the U.S. engineers and architects who'd come to the city since the end of the 19th century, but also through the many Mexicans who studied architecture and engineering at U.S. schools such as the Illinois Institute of Technology, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Texas A&M.

Mexico City's influence on Monterrey was almost invisible until 1930, when it came on the scene strongly. The Palacio Federal, one of the political triumphs of Governor Aarón Sáenz, was designed and built by the Mexico City-based company Fomento y Urbanización S.A. (FyUSA), and was inaugurated with great pomp and circumstance. It was the first tall building in the city; it demonstrated structural possibilities for steel combined

with reinforced concrete, and it introduced to the city a new architectural language, Art Déco.

The Palacio Federal's ornamentation, although austere, shows the culture and iconography of the nation's central region. The friezes contain serpentine Nahuatl elements; the tile work is Talavera-style; and heads of Quetzalcoatl adorn the steps on the east and west facades.

The Palacio Federal at first housed all Monterrey's federal offices, as well as headquarters for the postal and telegraph administration. But the historic building is now extremely underused. Of its ten floors, only two are occupied — used only by the postal and telegraph service.

THE EDIFICIO CHAPA

Around 1946, Guillermo González Mendoza, a self-taught architect born in Monterrey, designed the Edificio Chapa, a modernist milestone. As in a high-budget film, many of the well-known personalities in the small world of Monterrey building and architecture participated in the building's design and construction — among them, architect Juan R. Múzquiz and his partner, engineer J. E. de la Vega, and engineer Antonino Sava.

The Edificio Chapa was the first building in Monterrey to introduce modern architectural elements that would be used widely in the 1950s. Although not designed with a completely open floor plan, at least half of the ground floor of the Edificio Chapa formed an outdoor lobby. The shaft of the building, supported by round, pile-like columns, features a

special window pattern. A 1997 remodeling eliminated the building's outdoor lobby and replaced it with an architecturally incompatible restaurant.

The Chapa building's architectural language bears more than a casual resemblance to Oscar Niemeyer's Ministry of Education and Health Building in Rio de Janeiro, which was completed in 1943. That modern language arrived late in Monterrey. But despite the Edificio Chapa's potential influence, the building ended up being almost alone in its class. Monterrey's architecture students looked not to their own city, but to Europe.

THE CONDOMINIO ACERO

In the '50s, Monterrey's culture of development encouraged razing buildings to make way for government-supported utopias. Those utopias failed, of course — and in fact laid the groundwork for the urban decline we see today.

Nonetheless, the private sector provided interesting modern architectural designs, the most significant of which were the "condominium" buildings made possible by the Condominium Property Act, which allowed a building to be subdivided into parts with different owners. The act was enacted in 1955, and in the next six years it made possible the construction of Monterrey's only five skyscrapers of the last great period of the modern movement: the Condominio Acero (1959); the Edificio Monterrey (1960); the Condominio Monterrey (1960); the Edificio PH (1961) and the Condominio Del Norte (1961).

Ramón Lamadrid graduated in 1954 from the School of Architecture at Monterrey Tec, and soon afterward proposed, designed, and oversaw the construction of what was originally called the Edificio Banco Popular. Renamed the Condominio Acero Monterrey a few months after its opening in 1959, the building's innovative design recalls Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's Lever House.

The Condominio Acero ("Steel Condominium") was built using materials that were standard for modern commercial architecture at that time: aluminum, marble, Siporex dividing walls, and stainless steel and red porcelain-enameled insulated steel panels fabricated in Dallas and Youngstown, Ohio, for the exterior curtain wall. Although the structural composition of the building was typical of 1950s modern architecture, Lamadrid found local justification for his design, explaining that the lower volume of the condominium was scaled and proportioned to respect the predominantly two-story surroundings of Plaza Zaragoza. Except for the recent elimination of the mezzanine terrace, the Condominio Acero remains in admirable condition. ■

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Translated from Spanish by Kirk Anderson.