

BY STEPHEN FOX

# Observations on Monterrey



Street in Barrio Antiguo.

Angeles Lombreros

AS A FIRST-TIME architectural tourist, I had been warned that Monterrey was architecturally uninteresting. But I found it fascinating. Judgment depends on expectation. If Guanajuato or San Miguel de Allende is your idea of Mexico, then Monterrey will disappoint. With the exception of the small Barrio Antiguo, wedged between the Macroplaza, the Avenida Constitución expressway, and the Ojos de Santa Lucía, Monterrey lacks the narrow streets bordered by high-walled *casas-patio* that define traditional Mexican urban spaces. Even the westward extension of downtown, the Zona Centro, toward the Cerro del Obispado, initially laid out in the early nineteenth century, has wide, straight streets lined by buildings that differ in height, mass, and site coverage. Central Monterrey is not a U.S.-style city (as some have characterized it); its mixture of buildings and uses is typical of older Mexican city centers. But Monterrey is largely a 20th-century city, with diverse building types and varied urban spaces. It is not disappointing, but like Houston, it is not a city of consistent urban spaces or unified architecture.

## THE MACROPLAZA

You see this lack of consistency even in the central city. Since the 1980s the Barrio Antiguo (historically called the Barrio de la Catedral) has been isolated from the Zona Centro to the west by the Gran Plaza, or Macroplaza, as it is popularly known. The Macroplaza is lined with assertive modern buildings of

the mid-1980s that house cultural institutions and governmental agencies. The eight-block plaza terminates in front of the Palacio de Gobierno del Estado, the state capitol of Nuevo León, an imposing neoclassical building completed in 1905. Behind it rises the slender Art Déco tower of the Palacio Federal (1930). At the opposite end of the Macroplaza, at its southern foot, is the Palacio Municipal of 1973, Monterrey's city hall. The Palacio Municipal faces what had been the Plaza Zaragoza, Monterrey's original *plaza de armas* before it was stretched northward to become the Macroplaza.

The scale of the Macroplaza is not what I had expected. Because it is basically a seven-block extension of the one-block wide Plaza Zaragoza, it is less of a departure from the small scale of historic Monterrey than photographs suggest. Like most of the center of Monterrey, it shows evidence of intensive use.

In terms of design, the Macroplaza is low-key, especially in contrast to the flamboyant, gestural designs of the State Congressional Office Building, the regional headquarters of the INFONAVIT social housing agency, and the Municipal Theater (all three by Oscar Bulnes Valero and Benjamín Félix of Monterrey), the Central Public Library (by José Angel Camargo de Híjar of Monterrey), and the State Supreme Court Building (by Rodolfo Barragán of Monterrey), which line the run-up to the Esplanade of Heroes in front of the Palacio de Gobierno.

Above: Gran Plaza looking toward the Faro del Comercio, the Metropolitan Cathedral of Our Lady of Monterrey, and the Palacio Municipal.

Left: Three views of the Gran Plaza.

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Clockwise from top left:

Gran Hotel Ancira (1912).

Antigua Palacio Municipal (now Museo de Historia de Nueva León, 1818, 1853, 1887).

Banco Mercantil (1901, Alfred Giles).

La Reineria (1901, Alfred Giles).

Condominio Acero Monterrey (1959, Ramón Lamadrid) alongside the Antigua Palacio Municipal.

Edificio Monterrey (1960, Ricardo Guajardo and Armando Ravizé Rodríguez).



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The Macroplaza's amiability contrasts with a more obviously designed offshoot from the mid-1990s: the Paseo de Santa Lucía by RTKL of Dallas. The paseo begins at the Plaza de 400 Años, one level below the street. This large sunken plaza incorporates the ojos, the springs of Santa Lucía, and is the monumental forecourt to the Museo de la Historia Mexicana (1996). Another work of Oscar Bulnes Valero, this time in collaboration with the veteran Mexico City architect Augusto H. Alvarez, the history museum is boldly scaled but less exaggerated in its composition than the public buildings of the 1980s. It also appears to have had the advantage of a much higher construction budget. The Paseo de Santa Lucía is pleasant, but its suburban timidity, historically themed picturesqueness, and general lack of pedestrians seem more characteristic of North American public spaces than Mexican ones.

### THE ZONA CENTRO

Downtown in the Zona Centro, the street and block pattern dates from the 18th century, but the buildings are largely from the 20th. The Plaza Hidalgo, which abuts the 19th-century Antigua Palacio Municipal (the old city hall, now the Nuevo León Historical Museum), is surrounded by multi-story buildings, many of them hotels, including Monterrey's most famous, the Gran Hotel Ancira (1912), a wishful transposition of the Parisian Belle Époque to the skirts of the Sierra Madre.

Avenida Morelos, one block north of the Plaza Hidalgo, used to cross the Macroplaza block. Now the seven blocks of Morelos to the west of the Macroplaza are a pedestrian mall. Architectural counterparts of the Gran Hotel Ancira — the stone-built, classically detailed Banco Mercantil (1901) and La Reineria department store (1901), both designed by Alfred Giles of San Antonio — are the most venerable landmarks along the Morelos mall.

Next to La Reineria is a building that impressed me very much: the Edificio Monterrey (1960), a 14-story office tower by Ricardo Guajardo and the engineer Armando Ravizé Rodríguez. Like other Monterrey skyscrapers of the 1950s and '60s, the Edificio Monterrey has a small floorplate. It fits tightly on its site, a half block framed by two side streets that have been turned over to pedestrians. The ground floor is two stories high, with two more stories of flush-glazed lease spaces atop. An intermediate floor with a terrace is recessed, and the remaining ten floors rise in a concrete-framed tower, which contains clear plate-glass window walls set within bay-sized sunscreens on the front (south) face and blind east and west sides surfaced with orange-red Roman brick with raked joints. The building is precisely scaled. The ground floor feels monumental at street level, yet the building doesn't disrupt the fabric of the Avenida Morelos.

The Edificio Monterrey neatly sums up the city's modern architectural iden-

tity. The building is formally austere, constructionally specific, and meticulously detailed to serve the purposes for which it was built.

One other modern tower in the Zona Centro especially attracted my attention: what was originally the Edificio Financiera Nuevo León (1970). This nine-story building, located in a low-rise sector of the Zona Centro, is the work of the dean of Monterrey architects, Eduardo Padilla Martínez Negrete. Its north-facing glass curtain wall is set back behind a delicate exo-skeletal grid of reinforced concrete. Because the exoskeleton is so articulately proportioned, the tapered concrete columns and slender beams achieve a fine balance between tectonics and decoration. The exposed structure is restrained rather than melodramatic, and the problem of blind party walls was addressed with wit, flair, and precision. The contrast of the glass curtain wall and the blind end walls of glazed green brick contributes to the modernist tradition that I was beginning to interpret as emblematic of Monterrey.

### AUSTERITY AND RESTRAINT

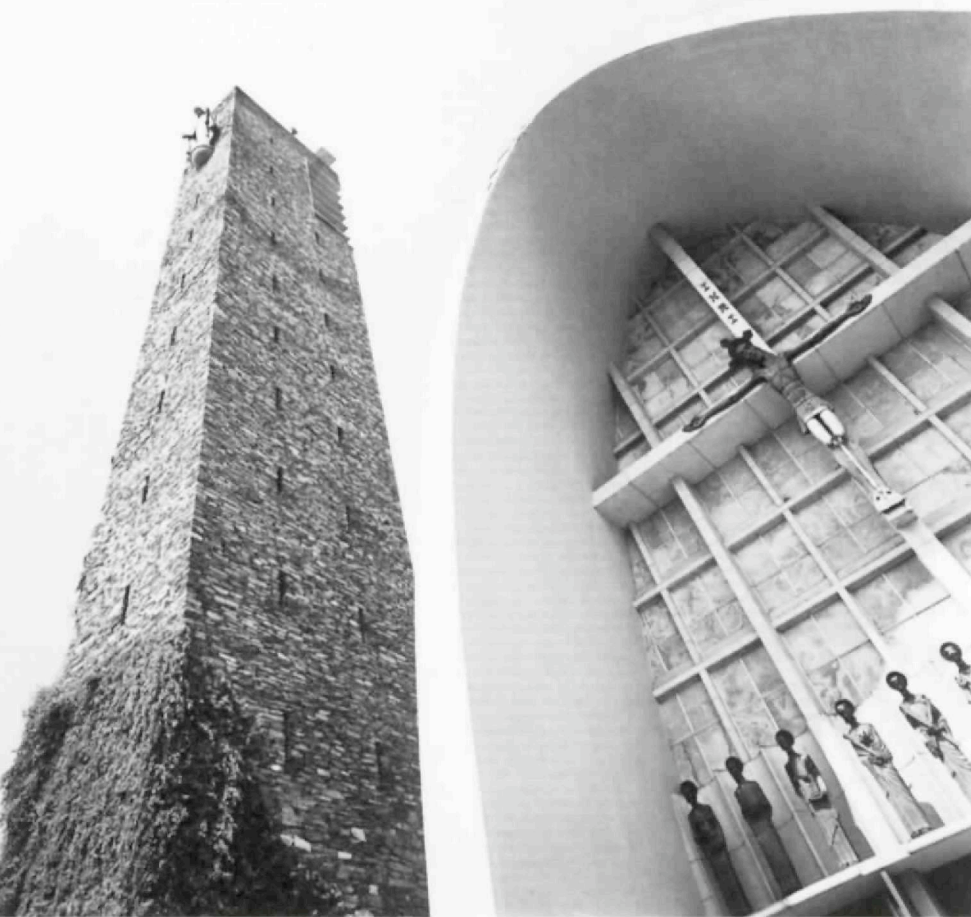
Well to the west of the Zona Centro lies what was once Monterrey's most famous building, the Basílica de la Purísima of 1946, the first modern church building in Mexico. It was the first work of architecture in Monterrey to be published in the international architectural press.

The Mexico City architect Enrique de la Mora y Palomar designed La

Purísima in collaboration with Armando Ravizé Rodríguez. The church's parabolic vaults are thick folded plates of reinforced concrete supported by a series of parabolic concrete arches. The free-standing, artfully tapered, stone-faced bell tower displays modernistic touches.

De la Mora's determined regionalism is striking, as is the joy he took in working with ordinary materials. The walls filling the concrete frame are made of rubble stone and evoke traditional masonry work. The pews were made from the roof beams of the church that previously occupied the site, grounding La Purísima's modernity in the history of the parish. The almost rustic ambiance of the interior is rigorous and austere, but leavened by such details as the golden onyx panels set in the concrete frame beneath the entry arch. The critical regionalist attitude implicit in the church reminded me of O'Neil Ford and Arch Swank's Little Chapel in the Woods (1939) in Denton, Texas.

De la Mora's work again reminded me of Ford at the campus of Monterrey's best-known private university, Monterrey Tec: the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey. The buildings that de la Mora designed (again with Armando Ravizé) were completed in 1947, and their virtues — their conscientious dedication to constructional and spatial economy, and their willingness not to be "interesting" — evoke Ford's early buildings at Trinity University in San Antonio.



Top and above: Exterior and interior views of the Basilica de la Purísima (1946, Enrique de la Mora and Armando Ravizé Rodríguez).

At Monterrey Tec the four-story classroom buildings, called *aulas*, are simple slabs lined up in rows along a wide, tree-shaded promenade that frames distant views of Monterrey's natural *signum urbis*, Saddle Mountain, the M-peaked Cerro de la Silla. The south end of the promenade terminates alongside a classic example of Monterrey modernism, the university's gymnasium of 1965 by Ricardo Guajardo, who began Monterrey Tec's school of architecture. Tec's buildings, I thought, were even more characteristic of Monterrey than La Purísima. Unpretentious, solidly built, conservatively finished and detailed, with wide, stacked, open-air patios, they combined constructional integrity with spatial flexibility and generosity.

Tec's original architecture is disarmingly modest and straightforward, especially when contrasted with that of the Ciudad Universitaria, the National University of Mexico, built outside Mexico City between 1950 and 1952 as a showplace of Mexican modernity. (De la Mora, like most of the other important Mexico City architects, contributed to it.) Monterrey's entrepreneurial elite founded Tec; its sober, solid buildings reflect what they understood to be their mythic virtues.

#### SAN PEDRO GARZA GARCIA

Monterrey Tec is located on the south side of the Río Santa Catarina, an intermittently dry river lined with high-speed, limited-access roads that splits Monterrey into northern and southern halves. The Santa Catarina also divides the west end of Monterrey from its southwestern suburban neighbor, the separately incorpo-

rated township of San Pedro Garza García. Since the 1970s, San Pedro has been where almost everything of consequence has happened in metropolitan Monterrey. It is the middle-class capital of Monterrey and, as Juan Ignacio Barragán has demonstrated, it is a model for communities that Mexico's middle class longs to construct: governed by responsive public officials, with well-planned, well-maintained public infrastructure and very few residents who aren't affluent. On the surface, San Pedro can seem very North American. Drive your SUV to a restaurant and you could be in north Dallas, except that all the people are speaking Spanish.

Juan Ignacio Barragán has documented San Pedro's transformation from rural township to metropolitan suburb. The process began in 1945, when Alberto Santos platted its first elite neighborhood, the Colonia del Valle. In 1947, Santos built the first vehicular bridge over the Río Santa Catarina, linking his new subdivision with the west end of Monterrey, where such elite neighborhoods as the Colonia Obispedo had been developed in the 1920s and '30s. The Colonia del Valle set the standard for later development in San Pedro, and by the end of the 1950s, the suburb's demographics began to attract country clubs and private schools from Monterrey proper.

Despite the oscillations of Mexico's economy between the 1970s and 1990s, San Pedro systematically displaced Monterrey as the center for corporate headquarters and luxury retail stores. Monterrey Tec's new graduate school of business, the EGADE, is nearing completion in Valle Oriente, a large, master-planned, mixed-use development near San Pedro's border with Monterrey, rather than adjacent to the Tec campus, which is surrounded by mixed urban neighborhoods.

#### ARCHITECTURE OF EMOTION

The EGADE is the work of Mexico's most internationally celebrated architecture firm, Legorreta Arquitectos of Mexico City. Since the early 1980s, Ricardo Legorreta has designed one minor and one major office building in San Pedro, two important institutional buildings in Monterrey, and several houses in San Pedro.

Legorreta's EGADE is dramatic: a spiral that encircles a stout tower. The



Gymnasium, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey (1965, Ricardo Guajardo).

building demonstrates Legorreta's skill at shaping architecture that, unlike the restrained, austere modernism of Monterrey, responds emotionally to its setting (in this case, a plain with the Sierra Madre as a backdrop). In a similar vein, Legorreta incorporated circular geometry in plan and a sweeping diagonal in section in the 1994 Biblioteca Magna of the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, Monterrey's major public university. And in a private office compound in San Pedro, diagonally sloped walls faced with yellow stucco gesture insistently toward the Sierra Madre.

Legorreta's most restrained public building in Monterrey is also the most easily accessible: MARCO, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (1991). Commissioned by Eugenio Garza Lagüera, who was then head of the Grupo Financiero Bancomer and the Fomento Económico Mexicano, as well as chairman of the board of trustees of Monterrey Tec, the museum was built to contain a yet-to-be-assembled collection of modern Latin American art, as well as traveling exhibitions. The MARCO occupies an entire block front facing the Macroplaza, next to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Our Lady of Monterrey and across from the Palacio Municipal. It is contained on the outside, but complexly sculpted inside, with sectional surprises, unexpected switchbacks and twists in circulation, and a sequence of courtyards that brings daylight and views out into the galleries. Legorreta's exterior composition is powerful and directed. But MARCO's interior does not seem rigorously connected to its program. Instead, it seems indulgent — just what the stern formal sobriety of Monterrey-style modernism was meant to guard against.

#### ARCHITECTS: IN AND OUT OF TOWN

Such well-known Mexican architects as Legorreta and de la Mora were the exceptions in Monterrey, not the rule. Although one might expect the city's corporations and institutions to commission major buildings from Mexico's leading architects (which is to say, Mexico City's leading architects), this has not been the case. Most of Monterrey's public institutions and many of its corporate undertakings are the work of Monterrey architects.

Eduardo Padilla Martínez Negrete made his mark on Monterrey with large



Aerial view of Valle Oriente in San Pedro Garza García with the EGADÉ (2001, Legorreta Arquitectos) in lower right corner.



Center for Advanced Technology in Production, ITESM (1988, Oscar Bulnes Valero and Grupo 103 Diseño).



Entrance lobby of the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (1991, Legorreta Arquitectos).

industrial complexes that he began to design for major corporate groups in the 1950s. In the 1980s, the flamboyant Oscar Bulnes Valero and his Grupo 103 de Diseño dominated institutional architecture. Bulnes's signature work is Tec's Center for Advanced Technology in Production of 1988, which sits (although "sits" is surely too static a verb) next to the Rectoría at the front of the main campus.

During the twentieth century, the out-of-town architects active in Monterrey were most likely to be Texans. Caudill Rowlett Scott designed the American School Foundation of Monterrey in San Pedro (1958). 3/D International was the architect of the Grupo Industrial ALFA's low-rise building in the Zona Centro (1981), the last major corporate office building constructed in the center of Monterrey. ALFA gave up the building during the economically turbulent '80s but kept the company's suburban headquarters in San Pedro, designed by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill of Chicago. ALFA was not alone. In the '70s and '80s, many industrial groups built low-rise headquarters complexes in secure, park-like settings in San Pedro.

#### HOUSES IN THE SUBURBS

Domestic architecture provides many more opportunities for Monterrey architects than is the case in Houston. Rodrigo de la Peña, a graduate of the Architectural Association in London, designs houses that are purposefully Mexican and modern, in contrast to the highly visible preference in San Pedro for the sort of monster "traditional" houses being built in affluent Texan suburbs. De la Peña's houses are planar constructions of masonry walls, faced with white stucco and penetrated by large glass openings but configured around patios and walled off from the street, even when they are free-standing houses. A one-story house in an established neighborhood on Via

Angélica, north of the Colonia del Valle, demonstrates Peña's ability to project a modernist identity that incorporates the street wall, entrance gate, and street-facing garage door.

The most singular domestic architecture produced in Monterrey in the last half of the 1990s has come from the former husband-and-wife team of Cecilia Rangel and James Mayeux. Cecilia Rangel is a native of Monterrey; James Mayeux is from the United States. The two met in the mid-'80s at the University of Texas at Austin, where both had returned to school as mature adults to study architecture. The house Rangel and Mayeux built for their extended family in Colonia Olinalá, on the side of the Sierra Madre Oriental overlooking San Pedro, demonstrates their distinctive approach: building lightly but articulately in the landscape. Their house rides above its steeply sloping site on thin steel columns. Decks link the street to the upper floor, a concrete slab on which a glass-walled, curved-roofed pavilion looks out over the Santa Catarina valley. Below this, and set at a right angle to it, is a second house, occupied by Rangel's daughter and her family. Wedged into the hillside and open to intensively planted natural terraces, the house feels light, spontaneous, and improvised. The upper deck seems to hover in space, while the bottom nestles into the mountain.

Armando V. Flores Salazar, who teaches at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, has focused his research on the cultural identity of northeastern Mexico. Although he is the architect of the Palacio Municipal of San Pedro Garza García, Flores lives in the Colonia Obispado in Monterrey in a handsome, planar-fronted, flat-roofed, white stucco-faced modern house that he designed. He cleverly juxtaposed the void of a street-facing carport with the roofless void of a walled front patio to spatially enliven the house's planar composition. In the more



Valle Oriente, San Pedro Garza García. The tallest building is the Torre Dataflux (2000, Agustín Landa).



American School, San Pedro (1958, Caudill Rowlett Scott).



Housing, Apodaca.

urbanized neighborhood that the Colonia Obispado became after its fall from grace in the 1960s, Flores Salazar's modern house stands out by virtue of its serenity and composure.

Eduardo Padilla Martínez Negrete designed and lives in a house in San Pedro called *El Cielo* (1988). Although free-standing, *El Cielo*'s high stucco walls are built to the curb and lot lines. Inside this enclosure, the house is shaped in plan like an irregular cross, with open-air patios at the corners of the enclosure. The patios differ in size and character. The focus of the house is a split-level living room beneath a skylight; the room's low windows offer views of the most serene patio on one side, and the narrowest and least vegetated patio on another. *El Cielo*'s walls, patios, and openness not to the landscape but to the sky bespeak the engagement of Monterrey's most thoughtful architects with the concept of cultural identity in the 1970s and '80s. Although a modern house, *El Cielo*'s introversion and purposeful rusticity evoke rural Jalisco, where Eduardo Padilla grew up. Its iconography is personal: a relief over the front door celebrates don Eduardo's grandchildren.

Ricardo Padilla, Eduardo Padilla's son and occasional collaborator, seriously pursued questions of cultural identity in the 1990s. Near his father's house, Padilla designed a house for one of his brothers. This house is modern yet also rustic, although in this case street walls are dispensed with and the house separates the rear garden from the narrow,

quiet street. Here again, not so much in the design of the house as in the determinedly informal design of outdoor space, one senses a strong parallel to O'Neil Ford, especially Ford's family's house, Willow Way, in San Antonio.

#### THE NORTHERN SUBURBS

Ricardo Padilla continues to receive the kinds of commissions on which his father's practice was built: large industrial complexes located on expansive tracts in Apodaca, San Nicolás de los Garza, and other industrial suburban cities that ring Monterrey to the north. These articulately organized, concisely designed complexes tend to be big in scale and precise in their spatial layout — unlike the working-class communities that surround them.

State-subsidized residential neighborhoods, featuring identical one-story, single-family housing units about the size of mobile homes, ride the rolling terrain of Apodaca. These are built amidst the more typical landscape of popular construction and the fluid mixture of uses that give Apodaca and San Nicolás their sprawling intensity. One comes to realize that this dense, low-rise landscape of houses and small-scale commercial establishments, interspersed with gated industrial enclaves, is much more characteristic of the suburbs of metropolitan Monterrey than the affluent sprawl of San Pedro.

#### SMOKESTACKS AND SKYSCRAPERS

Art exhibition is connected to the two most notable works of industrial archeol-

ogy and historic preservation in Monterrey: the transformation of historic industrial buildings into museums. The Cervecería Cuauhtémoc (1898), a brick-faced Victorian Romanesque-style brewery, was designed by the St. Louis architect Ernest C. Janssen and constructed by the Monterrey builder José María Siller. The brewery was the mother industry of Monterrey. In 1909, it prompted the founding of the Vidriera Monterrey, a glass company that produced beer bottles and eventually became Vitro SA. Likewise, in 1936 the brewery spawned *Empaques de Cartón Titán*, which produced cardboard boxes for the brewery and eventually became the Grupo Industrial ALFA. Since 1978, the brewery has housed the Museo de Monterrey, the city's first major art museum.

The Fundidora de Fierro y Acero de Monterrey, the first steel foundry in Latin America, began operation in 1903 and did not cease production until 1995. In 1986 the state of Nuevo León and the federal Department of Urban Development and Ecology formed a public-private partnership to transform the bankrupt foundry into an arts, trade, and convention center called the Parque Fundidora.

The site is extraordinary: 285 acres in the center of the city, three kilometers east of the Zona Centro. To date, the brewery's historic metal and brick buildings have been reused as the Centro de las Artes de Nuevo León, with sections devoted to painting and sculpture, photography, film, and the Museo de la Industria y Tecnología.

A century after the beginnings of Cervecería Cuauhtémoc and the Fundidora, skyscrapers, not smokestacks, are the prime architectural symbol of Monterrey's entrepreneurial ambitions. The two tallest have been built in San Pedro by International Investments, the consortium that developed Valle Oriente: Jorge Lozaga's 29-story Torre Comercial América (1995) and Agustín Landa's 43-story Torre Dataflux (2000). Neither building possesses the tectonic rigor of the Zona Centro's much shorter skyscrapers of the '50s and '60s. But the Torre Dataflux stands out nonetheless. Its composition of white concrete piers that slope inward near the top to frame projecting bays of dark-glazed office and apartment floors is so sculptural that the Torre Dataflux looks like it's a hundred stories tall.

#### IN SEARCH OF IDENTITY

From the winding mountain roads of Olinalá to the narrow gridded streets of the Barrio Antiguo, from Ricardo Legorreta to Alfred Giles, Monterrey presents a range of landscapes and architectural works that are varied, stimulating, and provocative. Lacking the glamour, sophistication, and star-making power of Mexico City, or Guadalajara's sense of cultural superiority, Monterrey continues to search for an identity. Perhaps it is this sense of questioning, doubt, even inferiority, as much as proximity, that allies Monterrey to the cities of Texas. Like Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, and even San Antonio, Monterrey combines



Rangel-Mayeux House, Colonia Olinalá, San Pedro Garza García (Rangel-Mayeux Arquitectos).



House in Colonia Obispedo (Armando V. Flores Salazar).



Galvak industrial complex, Apodaca (Ricardo Padilla).

entrepreneurial energy and cultural ambition with an uncertain architectural course, veering between excessive regard for external opinions and external reputations and a defensive parochialism.

The efforts of the 1980s and '90s to retrieve and rehabilitate the old city's major historical and industrial landmarks, and to construct institutions of high culture that signify that Monterrey's elite is as serious about art as it is about business, suggest a broader sense of civic awareness and responsibility. These efforts were reinforced by the prodigious activities of Juan Ignacio Barragán and his associates at the Urbis Internacional research center, as well as Armando Flores Salazar, Ricardo Padilla, and others at the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, who documented the history of Monterrey's architecture and urban development. Now debates about development, historic preservation, and new architecture can be more securely anchored in a historical context.

Monterrey's architecture of the 1990s lacks the precision of its best architecture of the 1950s and '60s. But it does not lack a desire to explore new approaches or reformulate and refine existing positions. Monterrey is fascinating for the same reasons as its Texan counterparts: the enormous potential it possesses and the possibility that this potential may yet yield works of genius. ■

Stephen Fox is a fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas.

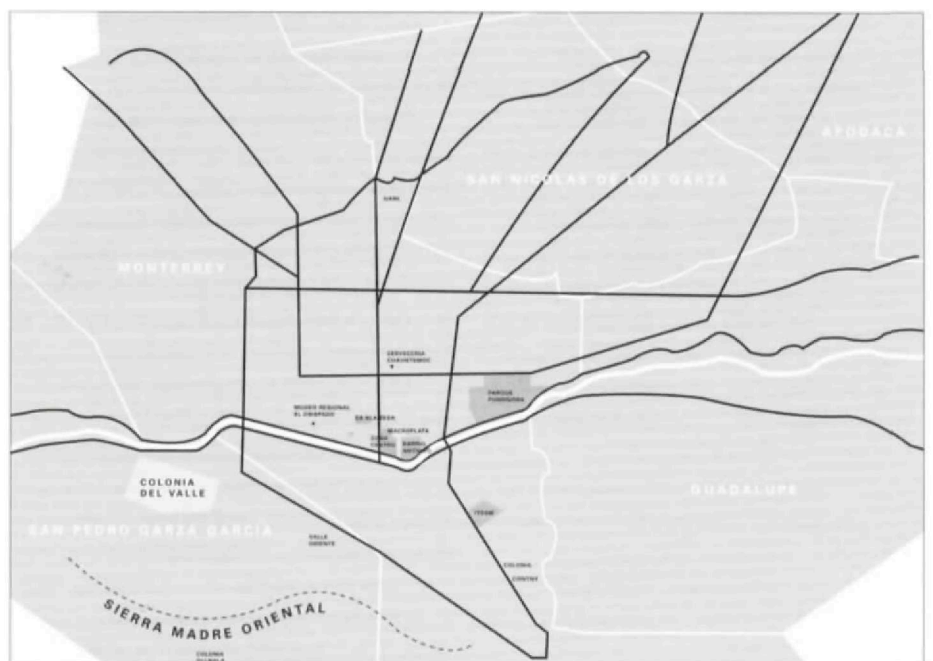
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Padilla House, San Pedro Garza García (Ricardo Padilla).



Metropolitan Monterrey.