ARCHITECTURE

MEXICO CITY SURGING: D.F. ARCHITECTURE

RDA's 2010 spring lecture series, *Mexico City Surging: D.F. Architecture*, began the new year with talks by a quartet of young Mexican architects from the Distrito Federal. The timing not only marked the 100-year anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution and the bicentennial of the beginning of Mexico's war of independence, but also underscored Houston's proximity to one of the most fascinating and complex megacities in the world. Each of the four architects shared an infectious and provocative enthusiasm for D.F., as Mexico City residents often call their city.

LAS DISTANCIAS APARTAN LAS CIUDADES

THE ARCHITECTS' CUMULATIVE REMARKS DEPICTED a place shaped by extreme contrasts, opportunities, ambitions, and, yes, miracles—the fertile ground from which these designers probe the potential of architecture to build the city. Although Mexico City is often portrayed as an overwhelming reality couched in unsettling statistics, these architects see their city as a territory of innumerable possibilities whose inexhaustible literature has to be read and appropriated on a daily basis, from street corner to street corner, from wall to wall.

I have visited Mexico City numerous times over the course of 35 years—sometimes alone, sometimes with colleagues, students, or friends.

LEFT: CB-30 residential building in Polanco, Mexico City, Derek Dellekamp, 2006.

All occasions have been memorable, but I recall a particular visit in the spring of 1991 when Robert Venturi received the Pritzker Prize at the Palacio Iturbide, a marvelous building in the heart of the historic district. Venturi was in awe of what he had seen and discovered on that momentous trip, and while delivering his acceptance remarks, he marveled at the caliber of Mexico's Baroque architecture. It was not clear to the audience whether this was Venturi's first trip to Mexico City or just an enthusiastic reverie on his part; neither provoked offense as the next act turned out to be a surprise performance by the legendary singer Lola Beltrán. As a tribute to Venturi, Beltrán sang "Las Ciudades (The Cities)," a beautiful song whose lyrics were lost on the befuddled Venturi. After singing two more songs, the dazzling diva left the room just as she had entered it: an emissary from an ancient and regal city. Beltrán's performance momentarily suspended time and space, and although she was not born in Mexico City, she reminded the audience that she possessed its indefatigable spirit. I was reminded of Beltrán's spirit as I listened to the architects from Mexico City deliver their lectures at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Perhaps it was their confidence as enterprising global citizens that impressed me the most. Yet this independence of mind did not cause them to shy away from fervor for their beloved city, a place where everything is possible even though the impossible might be more the order of the day.

Jose Castillo, principal of arquitectura 911sc, began the series with a succinct and informative overview of the rapid development that has overtaken Mexico City during the past five decades. Castillo praised in particular the sociopolitical fulcrum of Mario Pani's activities in the 1950s and '60s. Pani was an architect who built on a scale commensurate with the emerging metropolis, always with the urban dreams of Le Corbusier and Ludwig Hilberseimer before him. Castillo, himself a passionate architect, urbanist, and critic, then gave ample evidence of his own explorations in a variety of projects at multiple scales. Collaboration is critical to Castillo's diverse practice, as could be seen throughout his description of his firm's works. For instance, at CEDIM (the Monterrey Center for Advanced Studies in Design), a project in Mexico's second-largest city undertaken in collaboration with Fernanda Canales, the architects delivered an imaginative solution while contributing an essay in spatial flexibility and urban improvisation. In another collaborative project, this time with Javier Sánchez, Castillo elaborated on the virtues of accepting history, not as an obligatory background, but as a charged foreground. Their Spanish Cultural Center in Mexico City's historic center elevated the discourse on how to best intertwine a many-layered history with a demanding contemporary program.

Javier Sánchez roams his beloved neighborhood of Condesa tirelessly, venturing forth as a developer, social worker, and visionary. Judging from the many buildings that he presented in his animated lecture, Sánchez has found in Condesa a mutually beneficial enterprise at all levels—economic, social,

LEFT TO RIGHT: Four buildings by Javier Sánchez—Amsterdam 322 (1999); Interior remodel of Museo del Estanquillo (2006); 13 de Septiembre (2003); and Hotel Condesa (2005).

COURTESY JAVIER SÁNCHEZ

and cultural—an enterprise that led to his winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 2003. The account of Sánchez and his team demonstrated how instrumental the relationship of vision and action can be when targeted on an urban zone in need of both.

Derek Dellekamp was the only architect in the group who referred to Mexico City as more of a launching pad to pursue works farther afield: as far away as Ordos, China, and Sully, Switzerland, places where projects might eventually see the light of day. Two built works in Mexico gave us a glimpse of Dellekamp's deft hand and minimal strokes: the graceful CB-30 residential building in Polanco (2006) and the poetic rest station titled "Circle Sanctuary" (2008). The latter is one of two projects that Dellekamp designed for the Pilgrim's Route master plan in the state of Jalisco, the second being the Open Chapel of Gratitude. These two projects demarcate particular points along the pilgrimage route venerating the Virgin of Talpa. What is remarkable about these works is their universal legibility and their economy of form. They are iconic gestures that transcend their elemental traces to bind a group of pilgrims suffused by faith.

Frida Escobedo delivered the last lecture in the series, conducting a meticulous journey through her handful of intriguing works. Escobedo explained her office's desire to pursue "the residual and the forgotten: from decadent suburbs that are being subdivided, to rundown tourist spots, to unused roofs and basements." This wish to embrace the marginal and informal has found insightful expressions in such projects as the Boca Chica Hotel renovation in Acapulco, the Casa Negra, and Casa 24. The last is an ingenious articulation of how much providence a rooftop can foster in the hands of an imaginative architect, while the Casa Negra appeared in images like a strange, yet oddly familiar object serenely anchored to its rugged garden and sloping site.

Mexico City Surging was an enlightening cultural exchange between cities. As comfortable in Houston as they would be in Shanghai or Rio de Janeiro, these well-traveled and well-educated architects from D.F. conveyed a refreshing sense of ease with their global pedigree. Though proud of their Mexican heritage, their presentations were a distant cry from the clamor of nationalistic zealotry. The works of these architects are not simply an emerging wave, but rather a reminder that each new generation must surge confidently from its origins to claim the world.

– Carlos Jiménez

IMPRESIONES DE HOUSTON

"IN HOUSTON, LIKE MEXICO CITY, WHERE THERE is no clear land-use plan, the architect has the greatest capacity to transform urban spaces through ambitious projects that emphasize public space," Jose Castillo explained like a professor as he snapped a photograph of the METRO train traveling on Main Street. I asked the four architects visiting for RDA's Mexico City series about their impressions of Houston and found, surprisingly, that there are many similarities between the cities.

Castillo showed maps in his lecture to explain that Mexico City grew drastically in the period following 1950. Looking at maps of Houston from around this same time, marked changes occurred in its own topographical distribution. Houston is a new city, forged by developers who say that you do not have to know anyone to get ahead. Mexico City, on the other hand, is rich in colonial heritage, and corruption is taken for granted. Yet I discovered through the architects that each city can learn from each other as they continue to grow.

"I spent summers on a farm in Indiana with my father," said Derek Dellekamp in an American accent, "so I prefer to travel to more natural environments rather than cities. But when I travel to cities, I love those where you do not need a car to get around." While Mexico City is larger than Houston in terms of population, it is not a very dense city; its outlying areas reach much beyond the original boundary of the Valley of Anahuac. And like metropolises in developing countries, Mexico City is feeling the pressure to embrace the car culture. Dellekamp believes it must find ways to reduce its dependence on the automobile for mobility.

Although Mexico City spreads out more than many large cities in the world, it is denser than Houston. Javier Sánchez was surprised by the low density of Houston's townhouse developments. Through his projects in the Condesa neighborhood, Sánchez has created highly efficient developments that the middle class can afford. He calls them "urban acupuncture," these site-responsive, and sensitive, intrusions in the urban landscape. When I asked Sánchez about D.F.'s notorious traffic, he responded in a-matter-of-fact voice, "I live and work in the same neighborhood; that is the only way to avoid spending the day in traffic."

As we drove down Allen Parkway, Castillo wondered why the U.S. chose multi-layered freeway systems with feeder roads instead of parkways. The former has become the model for freeways in developing countries, and yet it is an inefficient use of space where emphasis is placed on the automobile rather than the pedestrian. "Javier's work is wonderful because it places value on the pedestrian zone rather than the car," says Castillo, a close friend of Javier Sánchez.

Frida Escobedo brought her students with her to Houston because her class is looking at the growth of Houston with no zoning as an example for what Mexico City can become with its lack of regulations. In the free-for-all city of Mexico, the immense metropolis, one can find a never-ending network of oasis-like parks and neighborhood squares, populated by informal vendors and performers. The diagonal boulevards converge and lead to new parts of the city, and hidden in the metropolis is evidence of the urban acupuncture of these great architects. In Houston, too, we have our hidden treasures. Both cities are places you grow to like, as Castillo said—acquired tastes.

–Camilo Parra