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 unending 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 91 inc., 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 Hilbermeier 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 Monterey Center for Advanced Studies in Design), a project in Mexico’s second-largest city undertaken in collaboration with Fernando 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 interweave a many-layered history with a demanding contemporary program. Javier Sánchez romps 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, and cultural—and to his winning the Venice Biennale of Síntesis and by how instrumentally vision and action are in need of 95.

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In Polanco, Mexico.

In 1991, when Robert Leidy at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City was asked to give his monumen
tal lecture on the Baroque, he instead made a surprise talk about how to build a modern city. He
suggested to the audience that it would be better to build a new city, rather than try to modernize
existing ones. The audience was shocked, but the idea of creating a new city in a new location
was revolutionary at the time.

Derek Dellekamp was the only architect in the group who referred to Mexico City as a launching pad to pursue works farther afield. His firm, Dellekamp, is known for its innovative roof designs and minimalistic approach to architecture. He was a key figure in the development of modernist architecture in Mexico.

Frida Escobedo delivered the lecture in the series, conducting a meticulous journey through her firm’s work. Escobedo’s work often incorporates traditional materials and techniques with contemporary design elements, creating a unique blend of old and new.

Mexico City’s architecture is constantly evolving, with new developments and projects taking shape every day. The city is a hub of innovation, with architects and designers pushing the boundaries of what is possible in urban design.

In Houston, like many other cities, the relationship between architecture and urban form is complex. The city is known for its diverse architecture, ranging from historic buildings to modern skyscrapers. The city’s growth has been rapid, with new developments sprouting up all over the place.

Houston is a city of contrasts, with both wealthy neighborhoods and areas of poverty. The city’s architecture reflects this diversity, with buildings of all styles and periods coexisting side by side. The city’s skyline is constantly changing, with new buildings being added to the mix all the time.

Houston is a city of dreams, where anything is possible. The city’s architecture is a reflection of its spirit, a mix of innovation and tradition, of old and new. The city is always evolving, always growing, always changing. And it’s all reflected in its architecture.