

NAFTA and Globalization: The Degradation of Architectural Integrity in Mexico

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Introduction

The architecture of Mexico, for many years a bastion of modernism and “rationalist” design, has suffered, through the effects of NAFTA, a “globalization” process. The once consistent approach to regional cultural influences found in schools of architecture and in professional practice has been disrupted by the appearance of buildings apparently imported from the United States or western Europe. Far worse than simply a stylistic invasion, the result has been a disconnection from the roots of modern architecture in Mexico, an architecture predicated in revolutionary social purpose, replaced by architecture better known for its fashionable stylistic manipulation. The result has been a degradation of architectural quality and cultural identity.

Roots of Mexican Modernism

A distinct factor that stands out in Mexico is the historic relationship between social purpose and architecture. At the turn of the century there occurred a social and political upheaval of gigantic proportions, the civil war known as the Revolution of 1910. This revolution led to an artistic and intellectual renovation in the 1920s. The Revolution of 1910, which took as many as one life in eight and destroyed much of the economic base of the country, provided an opportunity for young Mexican architects, influenced by the Bauhaus and other European currents, to forge a Mexican modern architecture, with a tendency called “functionalism.” This architecture was clearly a “child of the revolution.”¹ What occurred in Mexico, perhaps more so than in Europe, was the opportunity to put these ideas unhampered into practice. Not only what had been destroyed needed replacement, what had been denied the “have-nots” under the previous Diaz regime, needed development.² What occurred by the 1930s was a period of rapid and extensive construction. The government, which was heavily centralized, had as its stated goal bringing social justice to all. The new “functionalist” architecture became the mechanism to solve the needs of housing, education and health, all which had been neglected since the colonial period. The fundamental ideals of the revolution became institutionalized in what was to become the ruling party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) — still the major political party in contemporary Mexico — and formed part of every day political thought and party rhetoric, as well as part of the continuous struggle to transform society into the shape of a political image.³ Modern architecture was a part of that concept and was clearly understood by everyone. Thus the social ideals of European modernism became reflected as a fundamental part of the evolution of Mexican architecture and culture. The seminal buildings of the day, almost all found in Mexico City and its

environs, were built by the government for social benefit. The list of projects from the capital city include: the Huilpulco Hospital and Institute of Cardiology by José Villagran (1937); Juan O’Gorman’s Technical Institute and other school buildings which followed his studio for Diego Rivera — then a leading artist and leftist who befriended Trotsky when he escaped to Mexico — (all from the period between 1929-35); the Social Security Institute by Carlos Obregon Santacilla (1945); and a number of buildings at the UNAM campus, including the main library, also by Juan O’Gorman.⁴

The importance of architecture and urban development in the country is evident in the changes that occurred between 1910 and 1930: the urban concentration of the population increased 50%; the population of Mexico city tripled; and construction as a percentage of economic activity rose from practically nothing to almost 20%. These trends continued thereafter as well.

The pioneering work of two of the most important post-Revolution architects, Jose Villagran and Guillermo Zárraga, were followed by a second generation of designers which included Enrique del Moral, Juan O’Gorman, and Juan Legarreta, among others. These disciples clearly identified Mexican “functionalism” with socialist ideas and the glorification of architecture for the poor.⁵ This closely paralleled the programs of the government, that of solving the massive problems of education, housing, and health. In part, the impact of these efforts was all the more notable for the lack of economic dynamism until the middle of the century, which limited projects from the private sector or the church.⁶

This dedication to revolutionary ideals still permeates architectural education and practice. The recent academic catalogues of the Facultad de Arquitectura of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), the largest and most important school of architecture in the country, still speak about the social and economic inequities in Mexico and the social responsibilities of practice.⁷ That school is divided into sixteen “talleres” (studios), each with about the enrollment of an individual school of architecture in the U.S. The Taller Juan O’Gorman, for example, addresses the “*Conscious...necessity to value the recognition of past Architects and Architecture, inscribed with the characteristic stamp of our culture, with which we will live...in spite of consolidating our own national ideology that ought to generate our own Modern Mexican Architecture.*”⁸

It is also seen in the design studios of the UNAM and the architectural projects produced in them, as in many of the other state universities, which emphasize social problems of mass housing, medical care, and education. The idealistic notion that architecture can foment positive social change and improve lives,

especially for that sector of the population least economically advantaged, is still a fundamental part of the education of many architects in Mexico. As stated by the Taller Hannes Meyer of the UNAM: *"We consider it important to direct our work principally towards those sectors of the society which are found to be practically marginalized, including, among other things, the use of professional knowledge to better their conditions of living, or of reorienting expectations in relationship to the definition of an architecture that is identifiable with the cultural practices of the masses of this country."*⁹

NAFTA and Globalization

A major shift is taking place in Mexico that is driven by a change in the means of production. Previously, the client for most major architectural projects was the centralized government with a commitment to social equity. With the rise of globalization, private sector clients, especially international ones, have been creating a series of important buildings whose social purpose is distinct.

The greatest changes followed the national government's January 1994 institution of a law to liberalized private ownership by non-Mexicans. Previously, investment from abroad required a Mexican "socio" or partner, who retained the controlling interest—51%—of ownership. As well, there were greater restrictions of foreigners' ownership of land. After 1994, non-Mexicans could exercise outright ownership of businesses and property, with some exceptions in certain key areas still deemed within the national interest, and had less restrictions on their property rights. The result was a flood of foreign investment, which played an important part in the rise of the Mexican economy during the last decade. Federal reserves in Mexico tripled as foreign investment increased from \$1 billion to \$3 billion a month for at least a three-year period. During 1999, following the last economic crisis in Latin America, foreign investment recovered to a rate of \$1 billion per month.

An example of the major projects of that period was a 1994 Cesar Pelli design of two towers in the Polanca area of Mexico City that combined apartments and offices. The project made no concessions to Mexico, and just as easily could have been built in Houston, where there are two similar Pelli designs. This speculative project had a large impact in part due to its size, but greater still was the all-encompassing scope of foreign intervention in the nation's capital. The project was almost a complete package, like that of the "maquilladora" industry along the border, where clothing that is designed in the U.S. arrives in pre-cut pieces to be assembled by a low-paid Mexican workforce across the border under questionable labor conditions.

The Pelli project was completed in his U.S. office, including all construction documents and specifications. Some adjustments were made in Mexico to comply with local regulations. Structural steel and most of the mechanical systems as well as building finishes were imported from Texas and other U.S. cities. Before the Pelli project, and its massive use of imported assem-

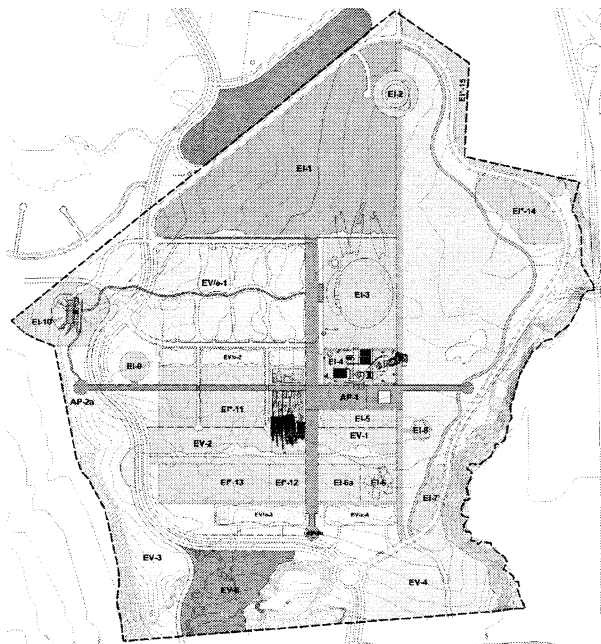


Figure 1. Master Plan for JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico.

blies, only specific materials were admitted into Mexico under special conditions. After the implantation of NAFTA, many of these same materials became readily available in Mexican markets. Prior to the Pelli project, there were only a few examples of foreign designed buildings, mostly in tourist areas such as Acapulco or Cancun, or near the U.S. frontier, as in Monterrey. Following the Pelli project, a number of U.S. firms have participated in developing new housing and hotel complexes in major cities throughout the country.

The scale of these foreign developments has been nothing if not impressive. The Alameda project, to be built by a Canadian company will be a mixed-use, housing and commercial project designed to reconstruct one of Mexico City's oldest districts that was destroyed in the 1985 earthquake. This project encompasses 19 city blocks and will require changes in city regulations in order to be carried out. Another project, currently under construction by an American firm, is the Torre Aguila on Reforma Avenue in Mexico City. It will be the capital's tallest building, some 50 stories in height.

This invasion is not simply limited to Mexico City. Guadalajara, the second largest city in Mexico is being subject to a massive development scheme by the private sector. In this case, the financing comes from an international company of Mexican origin. There will be ten large-scale developments around a convention center, including hotels, theaters, and shopping facilities, designed by well-known international architects including Jean Nouvel, Tod Williams-Billie Tsien, Wolf Prix, Toyo Ito, and even Philip Johnson. The impact on the architecture of Guadalajara, where Luis Barragán first began his practice, should be notable, if questionable.

This project, because of its scale, is probably one of the more egregious examples of this phenomenon. Enrique Norten, one of the two "coordinating architects" of the scheme, is quite explicit in his desire to *"contrast and complement Guadalajara...to create a tension..."* He later goes on to say that, *"Modern public space is different from traditional public space,"* as a means of defending the break from the historic planning model of the city's existing urban core and the lack of a contextual response.¹⁰ The historic city core is organized by four major plazas in the

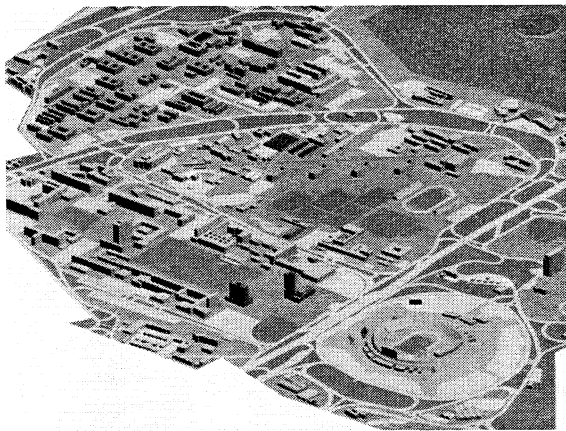


Figure 2. Master Plan for Ciudad Universitaria UNAM, Mexico, C.U.

form of a Latin cross, with the Cathedral at its center. Fourteen blocks of historical arcades complement the original urban plan.

The comparison between this project and the most important previous large-scale design, that of the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), is conspicuous. That project also had two coordinating architects and teams of different designers, each assigned a particular building. However, there, the underlying concept and spatial development reflected an evolution of traditional ideas about public space—linked even to pre-Columbian models—that gave real meaning to the project.

The integration of local materials and craftsmanship into a modern idiom and the impressive manner in which buildings and site were married, created a complex that reflected “*Mexicanidad*,” while being a radically new architectural expression.¹¹

The UNAM project had such impact, that any discussion about Mexican architecture of this century must be divided into a before and after of its construction.¹² What is being proposed in Guadalajara has more in common with the Corbusian model that was used to create Brasilia, than anything evolved from Mexico’s rich 3,000 years of building tradition. The project tries to be “new,” but the result is simply alien. It is doubtful that any future discussion of the history of Mexican architecture will be divided into a “before and after” created by this project.

The difference between the Mexican tradition of government created, large-scale development, and that of the private sector, is apparent in the developer’s own words. Jorge Vergara explains the project by saying that, “*The main goal is culture. But culture doesn’t make a profit, so we bring in business to support it.*”¹³ The social focus of these projects is a distinct break from the past. The government, historically the force for social betterment, invested resources to solve the problems of the large majority of Mexicans, building projects of mass housing, medical, and educational facilities. The new development envisioned for Guadalajara is aimed at “*white collar office workers, university students, affluent families...and foreign businesspeople.*”¹⁴ However, given the low density of the project and the profit motive of its developer, the word “affluent” will need to be applied to all categories of users. In a country with the far greatest percentage of population concentrated among the working poor, and where the economically advantaged make up a small fraction, the change in priorities of these projects is more notable.

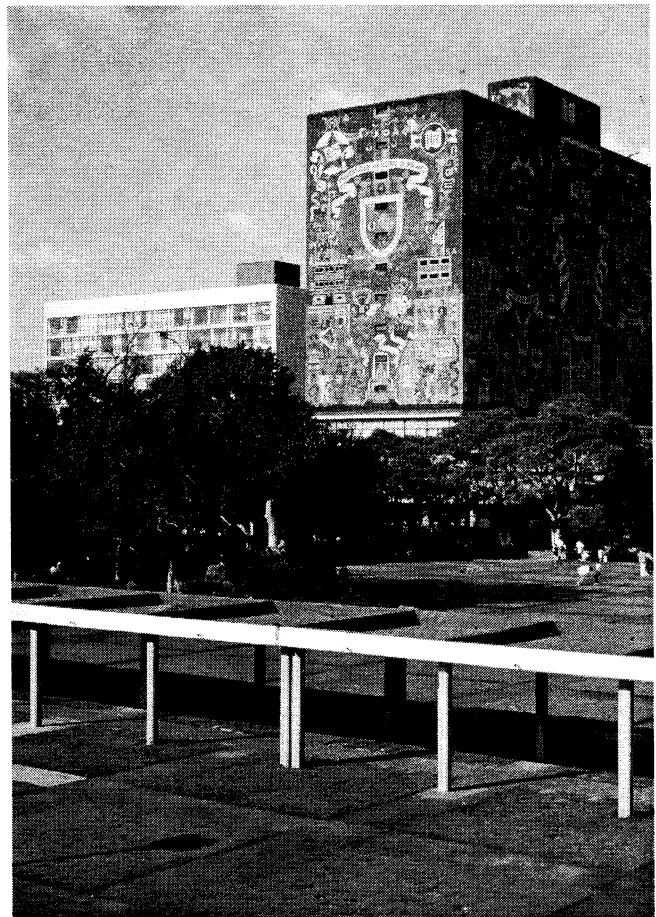


Figure 3. Central Library, Juan O’Gorman, UNAM, C.U., Mexico.

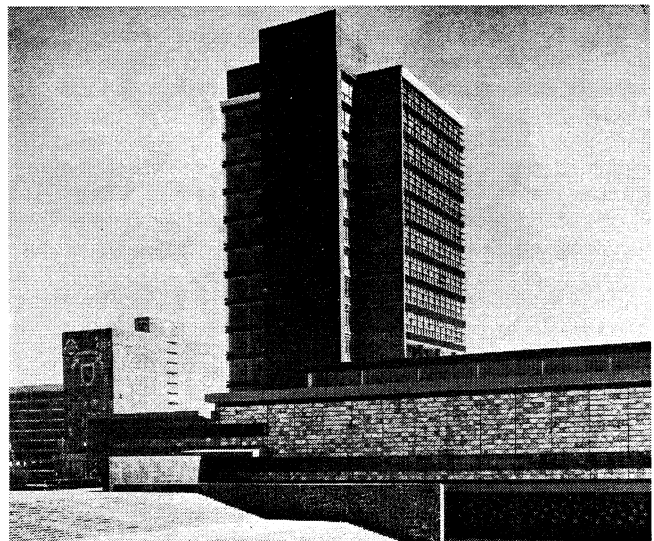


Figure 4. Administration Building, UNAM, C.U., Mexico.

The developments that are bringing about the greatest alterations in practice are inextricably linked to international corporations. Many are Mexican branches of foreign companies. They range from Hewlett Packard to IBM, from Mercedes Benz to Jaguar, and from Citibank to Banco Bilbao Vizcaya (a Spanish banking giant). While the majority of these works have been executed by international



Figure 5. Campus View from Northwest. UNAM, C.U., Mexico.

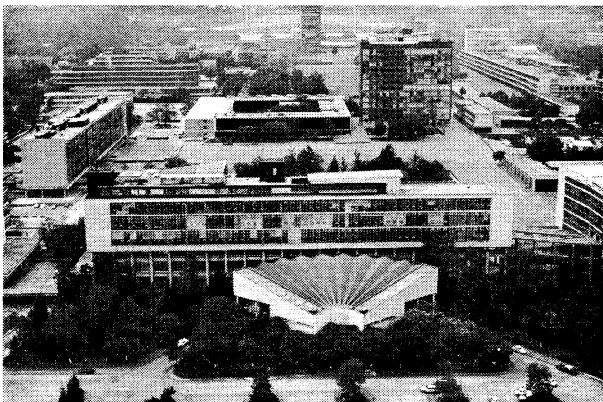


Figure 6. Campus View from West, UNAM, C.U., Mexico.

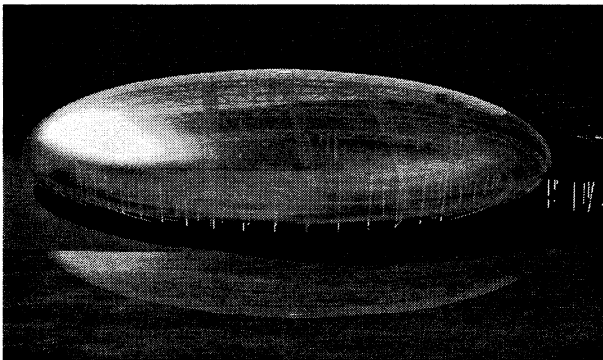


Figure 7. Convention Center, TEN Arquitectos, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico.

architects and a small number by Mexicans, the projects and their ultimate expression have been driven by corporate interest. A number of these types of developments are complete packages produced abroad and then built in Mexico. Those projects tend to be more speculative in nature and probably are the worst examples of economic colonialism.

A characteristic of these projects is their detachment from the urban center. A number of the more notable developments occur in newly created suburban locations. A good case in point is the new suburb, Santa Fe, being built on the periphery of Mexico City, west of town and on the highway to Toluca. It is the home to the largest collection of international corporate cli-

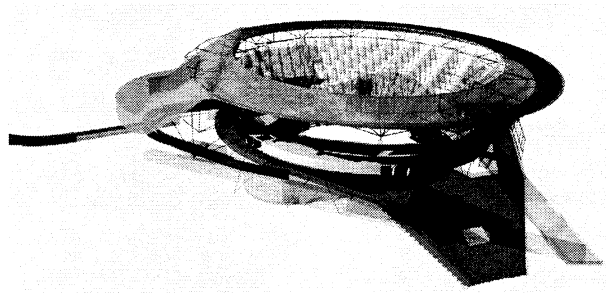


Figure 8. Palenque, Morphosis, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico.

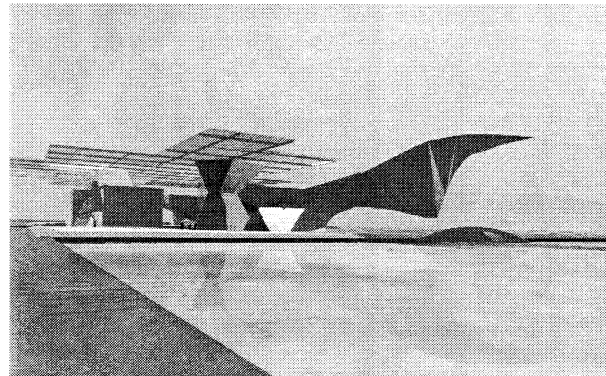


Figure 9. Entertainment and Shopping, Coop Himmelblau and AVE Arquitectos, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico.

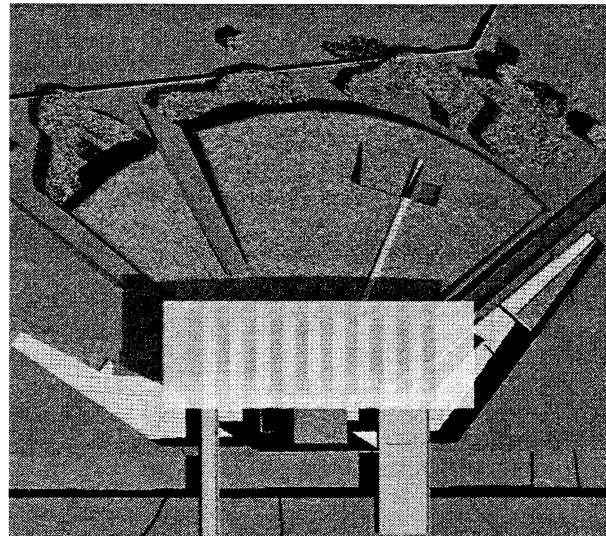


Figure 10. Amphitheater, Todd Williams, Billie Tsein & Assoc. and Grupo LBC Arquitectos, JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico.

ents and is a veritable smorgasbord of styles and architectural intentions.

Degradation

Some Mexican architects see the changes wrought by outside economic forces as creating “una apertura demasiado grande” (an opening that is too large). What bothers others is the lack of reciprocity of opportunity; however, this lack of reciprocity is simply an extension of the “colonial” economic relationship between Mexico and the U.S., a relationship that has its cultural implications. That relationship is clear in the Mexican proverb,

"If the U.S. sneezes, Mexico catches a cold." NAFTA and the globalization of the economy have made Mexico a net importer of culture, which is now even manifest in architecture. Previously, the closed economy, high import taxes, and the strong link between architectural design and culture, made Mexico more impervious to this type of incursion.

Changing economic conditions, the move towards neo-liberal policies, and the reduced government economic commitment to social justice have all eroded the hitherto important compact between architecture and social conditions.

Conclusion

It must be accepted, after almost five years of NAFTA, that globalization has become a part of the Mexican way of life. Foreign consumer goods, foreign affairs, and foreign words, especially from the U.S. and Canada, permeate life in the streets, restaurants and offices. Mexican exports under NAFTA, from beer to cars to "tele-novelas" (soap operas) have boosted the local economy, something that most Mexicans are justly proud about. Within the architectural realm, the recognition abroad of Luis Barragan, especially his winning of the Pritzker Prize, as well as the international practice of Ricardo Legorreta, is acknowledged with pride by Mexican architects. However, the influx of foreign projects, whether of "high" design like the Alameda development, or "low" design, such as the myriad of McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or others of such ilk that now are almost ubiquitous in Mexico City, are not well received.

Globalization is now an integral part of the Mexican "way of life," which means Mexican culture. Mexicans are coming to terms with new words and their meanings: open borders, instant transactions, and free trade. Perhaps only nostalgically, Mexican architects can reflect on a past when traditional, cultural, and historic roots provided identity in a time before the influx of foreign architectural ideas and projects.

Now that the cultural doors have been flung open, the role of architecture becomes even more critical. Part of what needs defending is the idea of quality, a concept equally important as that of the effects of colonial cultural expansion from the U.S. and the E.E.C. The economic focus of NAFTA has transformed Mexican architectural practice in other ways. Architecture is now becoming simply a part of an economic process created by anonymous firms and unknown builders. The discussions in the architectural realm have turned from "design" and "avant-guard," to cost, size, and location. "Llave en mano" — Turnkey — is a new word entering the vocabulary of practice in Mexico.

The Mexican perception of the changes being wrought by a globalization of architecture in the country was eloquently expressed by the Facultad de Arquitectura of the UNAM. "What is important is to advance an independent, national development which rescues our roots, our traditions, that enriches our cultural identity, that now more than ever needs protection." ¹⁵

NOTES:

- ¹ Beach Riley, "Social Progress and the New Architecture", *The New Architecture of Mexico*. (N. Y.: W. Morrow and Co., 1937.), pp. 18.
- ² Ibid, pp. 18.
- ³ F. Brandenburg. *The Making of Modern Mexico*. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp 1.
- ⁴ Israel Katzman. *La Arquitectura Contemporanea Mexicana*. (Mexico, D.F.: SEP, 1963.), pp. 156.
- ⁵ Ramón Vargas Salguero. "El Imperio de la Razón," *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX*. (Mexico, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), pp. 98.
- ⁶ Ramon Vargas Salguero. "Las Reivindicaciones Historicas en el Funcionalism Socialista," *Apuntes Para la Historia y Critica de la Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX: 1900-1980*, Vol. 1. (Mexico, D.F.: SEP/INBA, 1982.), pp. 102.
- ⁷ Información Básica de la Facultad de Arquitectura. (Mexico, C.U.: UNAM, 1990, 1993). Translation by the authors.
- ⁸ Información Básica '99, *Facultad de Arquitectura*. (Mexico, C.U.: UNAM, 1999), pp. 104. Translation by the authors.
- ⁹ Ibid, pp.99. Translation by the authors.
- ¹⁰ Clifford Pearson. "JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico," *Architectural Record*, 6/99 (1999), pp. 121.
- ¹¹ Jorge Alberto Manrique. "El Futuro Radiante: La Ciudad Universitaria," *La Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XX*. (Mexico, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994), pp. 212-13, 221.
- ¹² Ibid, pp. 195.
- ¹³ Clifford Pearson, pp. 121.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 123.
- ¹⁵ Informacion Basica de la Facultad de Arquitectura, 1993. Translation by the authors.

ILLUSTRATIONS:

- Figure 1. Grupo Omnilife. Personal communication, Jan. 2000.
- Figure 2. Alvarez Noguera, José Rogelio (Ed.). *La Arquitectura de la Ciudad Universitaria*. (Mexico, C.U.: UNAM, 1994), pp. 50.
- Figure 3. Ibid, pp. 94.
- Figure 4. Ibid, pp. 110.
- Figure 5. Ibid, pp. 114.
- Figure 6. Ibid, pp. 145.
- Figure 7. Clifford Pearson. "JVC Center, Guadalajara, Mexico," *Architectural Record*, 6/99 (1999), pp. 124.
- Figure 8. Ibid, pp. 139.
- Figure 9. Ibid, pp. 131.
- Figure 10. Ibid, pp. 136.

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