

## Rejection of the Archive

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Núñez, Roberto. La Alameda

Mainstream architecture narratives in Mexico have traditionally been Mexico City centric, completely overlooking the north of the country. Historical tension between the north's entrepreneurial elites and the central government as well as physical distance has kept the north separated from the rest of the country developing an identity that is different from what is thought to be as "Mexican". If you look up the phrase "Mexican architect" you will find be flooded by images of the works of Luis Barragan. The materials and colour palette in his works translate into an image of modern Mexico that can easily be understood in New York or Paris. This collective imaginary of what Mexican architecture is or should be is fueled by the more recent work of the most prominent contemporary Mexican architects, whose usage of lattice, exuberant gardens, and wood corresponds to their central Mexico context, where most of them are based. This postcard image does not really fit with the reality of Northern Mexican architecture. Northern Mexico conjures up images of narcos, hot, desolate landscapes, and cheap manufacturing facilities or maquiladoras; images that are an awkward kind of Mexican, or at least not as enticing as pyramids, charming, colonial towns, sunny beaches, or Luis Barragan.

Stuck in the middle between the industrialized "modern" United States and the "romantic" Mexico, norteño architecture has always been considered less legitimate than its nationalist counterparts, however it is impossible and unjust to subject it to these comparisons. It is simply not possible to compare the cultural baggage of a city such as Tenochtitlan with the northern city of Torreon which is only 100 years old.

The impact of been considered less culturally significant has been profoundly negative to the architecture of Northern Mexico. Historical buildings have been completely destroyed or modified beyond recognition as the absence of a local tradition of architecture criticism or preservation give the locals the impression that there is nothing worth preserving. It is common for locals to dismiss whatever little is left with the phrase "Aquí no hay nada" which translates to "There is nothing here". This idea is enforced by the National Anthropology and History Institution, INAH, who does not consider anything built after the 19th century as heritage sites. This is detrimental to the memory and identity of cities that mostly developed during the 20th century as they are immediately considered not worthy of protection or preservation.



Gomez Nora I. Rio Santa Catarina. Cuando el Rio Suena



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Encouraged by its economic strength, Monterrey's answer to this apparent nothingness has been to build. Being the third largest city in size and the second largest economy of the country, there is no shortage of construction sites in Monterrey, however the architecture of the city seems to be one that is desperate to assert its economic power and place in the contemporary world. In the attempts to redeem itself, Monterrey has destroyed entire blocks of historic neighborhoods to build its 400,000 m<sup>2</sup> Macroplaza in its town center, built a massive bridge that looks like one designed by Santiago Calatrava, built sports facilities and markets on the Santa Catarina river only to have them destroyed by a hurricane every two years, commissioned projects to Norman Foster and Zaha Hadid, and most recently launched a proposal to build a bridge that would mean the near destruction of one of its most notorious and historic neighborhoods, Colonia Independencia. In its search for an identity and a narrative, Monterrey is still not sure if it wants to be a quaint town in the center of Mexico, San Antonio, or Houston. This is a story that repeats itself across Northern Mexico. A three-hour drive from Monterrey, in Torreon, there is not one, but three replicas of the Eiffel Tower and eight-lane, palm adorned boulevards that echo those in Los Angeles.

The narrative of Monterrey has so far been based on a process of selections and exclusions of memory. The stories that are being told are those of investment capital, developers, and government officials. They are written in the city's monuments, public spaces, and buildings. However, there is no place for everyone in a single story. In this narrative of progress there is no room for those that exhibit the system's flaws or the violence of everyday life. There is no place for the poor, the middle class, children, the elderly, the homeless, pedestrians; basically no one else.

As we walk through the city it is possible to find the urban ruins, territories, and spaces that tell us the unofficial stories. One of these spaces is La Alameda, where we can recognize an image of Monterrey that is defined not by its elites or institutions, but by its inhabitants. Every morning in one corner you can see the long line of men waiting for the pick-up trucks that will take them to the different construction sites of the city while in the opposite corner are the buses coming from rural Mexico. Between them, there are Central American migrants, students, human rights defenders, street vendors, junkies, sex workers, the homeless, and simple passers-by taking refuge from the sun. Space is regulated by nothing more than people's spatial negotiations. It is a symbol of tolerance that is governed by the customs of the people who use it. The Alameda is the sanctuary of the city, a place where Monterrey has reconciled itself with its territory, recognizing it as an inclusive, multicultural, multifaceted space. From the Alameda we can continue the construction of Monterrey as a mosaic city in which millions of stories are interwoven. How can we, as architects, give a voice to these other stories?

Crossing the city is probably the biggest of the city's urban ruins, the Santa Catarina river. On the second of July of 2010, Hurricane Alex hit the ground in Monterrey. It left a scar across the city by destroying a series of sport facilities that had been built on the usually dry river. Hurricane Alex reminded us that the river is not a public space meant for entertainment, or at least not entertainment in the shape of a soccer field. Hurricane Alex eliminated all attempts to make the river a "public space" and therefore all attempts to domesticate the river. Now empty, the Santa Catarina river took a step back as a central character in the story of Monterrey and became part of the backdrop of the city. In its emptiness, the river developed a vocation much more than just being part of the landscape. It became a refuge





Canseco, German. Tragedia en Casino Royale. Revista Proceso 2017

for the most vulnerable beings of the city, the homeless, immigrants, and the natural elements. In its invisibility it became a place where nature could take over. The river has become a forest with a biodiversity that is noticeable in the many willows and poplars and the herons that fly over them. The river became a symbol of a space where diversity and vulnerability meet. The best thing that could have happened to the river is that for the last 10 years Monterrey forgot it existed. With a deficit of green, public spaces and its poor air quality, Monterrey cannot afford to deny the environmental services that this space now offers the city.

The so-called ruins in the landscape of Northern Mexico are difficult to appreciate aesthetically or culturally because they are still very much part of our present. Not enough time has passed in order to remove any pain associated with the trauma in order to delegate the events that occurred in response the infamous drug war had on the city to the nameless force of “history”. The impact that the violence had on Monterrey’s dynamics became evident as aspirations for the redevelopment of the city center got paused giving way to a narrative of isolation and security concerns. Ten years after the initial escalation of violence, Monterrey’s city center is coming back to life with developers eager to build new high-rises in the area, however there are scars left throughout the city that act as constant reminders of the city’s violent past. One of the most notorious are the ruins of the former Casino Royale, a casino that got burnt down by organized crime in 2011. A monument to its 52 victims made out of fake greenery and blue, Venetian glass-mosaic was erected on the traffic island in its front, but the true memorial lies in the still untouched, scorched ruins of the actual building.

In Northern Mexico, our ruins are not pyramids, our wounds and scars remain open. The exploration of memory to achieve a true understanding of the territory

cannot be done without the notion of establishing a relationship with historical trauma, scars and all. If Louis Kahn once said, “The significance of the ruin is not the age but the silence between the walls” in relation to his decision build beside instead of on top of the ruins of the Hurva synagogue giving each building its place in history, then how can we revisit our memory to articulate a new past that allows us to reconcile and love our present?

If the National Anthropology and History Institution, that is, if the official archives bypass the stories of Northern Mexican architecture, then norteño architects are left to their own devices to create a narrative of their own. Without the constraints of proper classification, obsolete 20th century urban infrastructure and the ruins left by the recent violence become heritage sites. The absence of the archive is therefore an opportunity to merge a revised past with the identity of the present to define the narrative of the future. The cities of Northern Mexico became cities due to industrialization and commerce, therefore for norteño architecture abandoned industrial infrastructure is just as vernacular and historically significant as brick and adobe. The rejection of the archive is the opportunity to constantly revisit our past, shift conversations, and reshape our identity.

Architecture that involves recent ruins is emotional and disruptive. It is confrontational and political because it inadvertently makes a statement of what the future of the community should be. If we consider that there is no progress or evolution without disruption then these temporary states of chaos and the ruins they generate are opportunities to move forward, the destruction is therefore not a sign of death but part of a cycle of evolution. In this temperamental present Northern Mexican architects have the opportunity to build an autonomous architectural culture that can define who we are but above all who we want to be.

Covachita is an architecture studio based in Monterrey, Mexico. In a city where industriousness is considered a virtue and practicality a source of pride, it is not surprising that the moving forces of the city are the infrastructures that control and regulate its landscapes. These initial surroundings have led Covachita to start a dialogue with the city that focuses not on grand, ideal projects, but on the everyday behavior of its citizens and the ways we can modify the language of the city by reprogramming what is already available. Covachita has designed public spaces, cultural centers, community centers, exhibitions, and masterplans for local and state governments as well as private residences and workspaces. These projects share the genetic code of being foremost a critique of the contemporary city using negotiation and dialogue with all actors as the backbone of their actions.

Katia Zapata is the Research and Publications Director of Covachita and the executive director and cofounder of Carnem magazine. Katia is responsible for overseeing the everyday operations of the publication from relations with contributors to managing a team of translators, editors, and graphic designers. Katia oversaw the creation of Colegio de Arquitectos de Nuevo León (CANL) new publication, *Arquitectura y Seres Urbanos*, now on its third issue, as co-editor and content strategist. She is cofounder, along with Pablo Landa and Roberto Nunez of the independent research project and workshop *Division del Norte*, which seeks to document and revalue the often overlooked architecture of Northern Mexico. Katia is the head organizer of the *Division del Norte* dialogues, a series of workshops, interviews and discussions on the role of architectural memory in creation of city identity. Katia has a BA in International Business from Tecnológico de Monterrey and the University of Central Lancashire in the UK. She has additional studies in Public Policy from Tecnológico de Monterrey's Graduate School of Public Administration and Policy.