

MEXICO

Tacubaya, a traditional area of Mexico City

Introduction

Within the most traditional areas of Mexico City is found the ancient villa of Tacubaya, an important establishment with prehispanic origins, dating to before the Aztecs came to Lago de Texcoco; a big area known as *Atlacuihuayan*, whose meaning gives us the idea of 'where water was taken from'; a valley surrounded by rivers, generous in natural resources, where its population hunt and trade a variety of products with their neighbours.

Its most ancient structures include two important aqueducts, one



La Santísima Trinidad church, built in 1598, now surrounded by a highway with billboards, traffic and pollution

called Santa Fe and the other Chapultepec (of which several arches and a fountain called Salto del Agua remain today). Both were built to help irrigation and drinking water distribution among the Aztecs established in the city of Tenochtitlan, surrounded by a salted lake and harvest areas. Over the centuries, from 1449 to the middle of the 19th century, this water system worked perfectly – more than 900 arches connected and distributed potable water to the north and south of Mexico city.

During the colonial period, Spanish priests (*dominicos*) and other principal landlords worked toward the establishment of a variety of churches, water mills, haciendas and other buildings that formed Tacubaya's urban configuration, which was kept and recognised for many centuries. All of these were built over the ruins of prehispanic temples and other structures, located in the eleven districts named after saints and the corresponding church: San Juan Tlacateco, San Lorenzo Suchiguacan, Santa Maria Nonoalco, Santiago Tequisquinahuac, San Miguel Culhuacatzingo, Tlaxco, Xihuatecpa, Huitztlan, Texcoac and Coamalcatitlan. With the establishment of dominics, two big convents were also built: San Diego (now destroyed – the church remains in the middle of Mexico's principal highway) and Santo Domingo, where we can find original 16th-century cloisters with the names of the districts that participated in its construction.

Water mills were located at the highest point of this complex: Santo Domingo, San Jose, Valdes or *De Abajo* (rescued around 1950 as an exclusive housing area), *En Medio*, Belen, Santa Fe (these last three have now disappeared) and Molino del Rey (now a museum, located inside the president's house). Among these water mills was an Archbishopal palace with an enormous and beautiful garden and the greatest view of Mexico City and the volcanoes. This palace was the main place to visit and stay for many important national and foreign personalities of the 19th century; in the following years the palace helped to establish a Military School and the National Astronomical Observatory in the garden area. This observatory has been subsequently destroyed but the palace remains and sustains a beautiful façade, fountain and an impressive map collection.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Tacubaya was known as one of the most festive, agricultural and industrial settlements around Mexico City. Many of the principal citizens of Mexico City built their suburban villas with great gardens, fountains, chapels and bridges; from these the only two houses that remain are Casa de la Bola and exotic garden, now a museum kept as its last owner left it, and Casa Amarilla, now used as the local government offices, while its chapel (Guadalupe) is now used as a library. Between these two great houses is a big park, Parque Lira, which was once the garden that belonged to Casa Barron. It retains some fountains, a beautiful road surrounded by plants and a bridge that connects one area of the park with the other. Another chapel that remains is the one that belonged to the house of the Mier and Celis family; it is an exact copy of the Pantheon of Rome and is found inside an elder's assistance home.

The main connection between Mexico City and Tacubaya was a rail system called 'tranvia'; trains arrived from downtown's main plaza to Cartagena Plaza in Tacubaya, and to other arcades located in different locations of the village: Portal de las Flores, plazuela de la Ermita and Portal de San Juan, all of them now destroyed.

With the coming of the 20th century also came new residents, who settled in new districts created in the harvest area to the north of Tacubaya, called San Miguel Chapultepec. New domestic archi-



ecture was built for the middle class – it incorporated one level of construction and two windows and a porch or a door in its main façade. The harmony between these houses, little streets, churches and plazas has been retained up to now.

Another district was created inside the area of one big hacienda, Hacienda de la Condesa, with a different architecture: two-storey houses with gardens and some apartments surrounded by parks. The other way to provide new housing for new residents was to destroy all existing houses and gardens and to construct big buildings with mixed applications, as is represented by the Ermita building: a six storey art deco construction with commercial stores in the bottom, a cinema at the back and four levels of apartments.

As the years go on, a thirst for progress has resulted in many mistakes: big avenues were built where groups of houses had been established, rivers were kept under tubes and more roads were created instead. The result was that districts that had formed one cohesive urban configuration were divided and separated forever.

The METRO system (subway) was created around 1970 and its main station was established here, where millions of people transit and move around this station. The result has been a growing trading presence and other transportation services, with no security and considerable damage to the area's main streets and buildings.

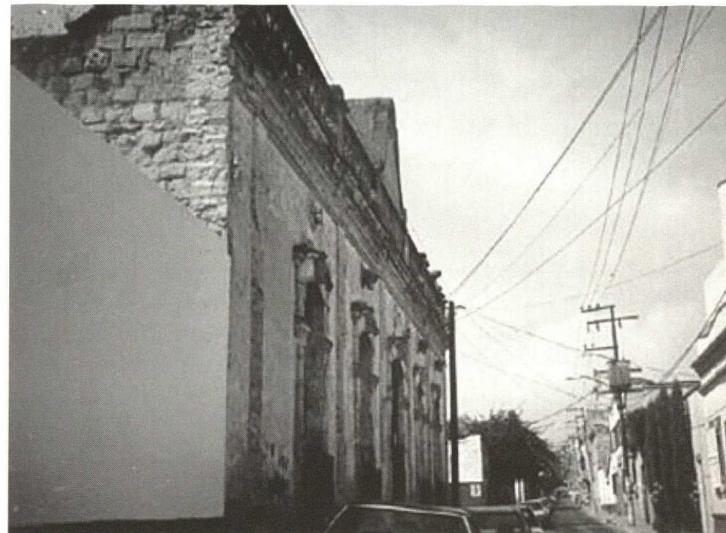
Because of this panorama, and under commercial and real estate pressures, Tacubaya's original residents left their homes and now live in the south and west of Mexico City; their beautiful houses were kept under real-estate control and big housing developments were created with no respect for the surroundings and no control, destroying the overall harmony.

What remains and should be preserved

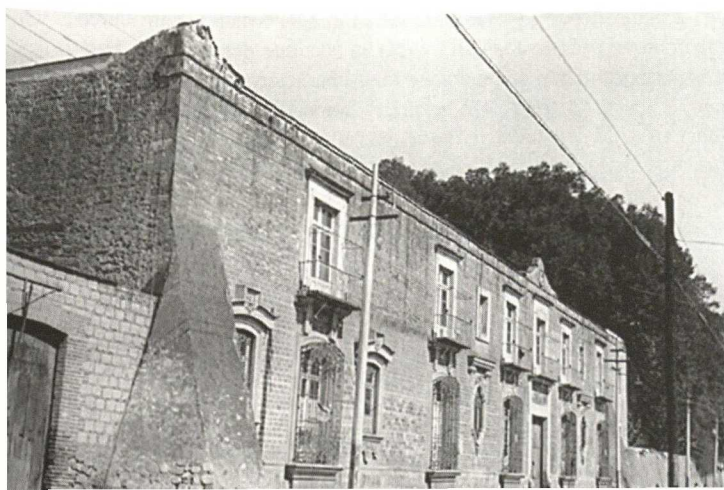
At first sight, a person travelling through the main streets of Tacubaya can view destruction and chaos, many cars and shops, informal traders, people, signs, billboards and garbage; beyond all of this are the little streets that keep Tacubaya's traditional houses and other structures 'safe' from destruction. Inside these streets and houses we can find little shops, galleries, publishing houses, architects' and lawyers' offices and the studios of intellectuals and artists who have found a shelter inside this big city.

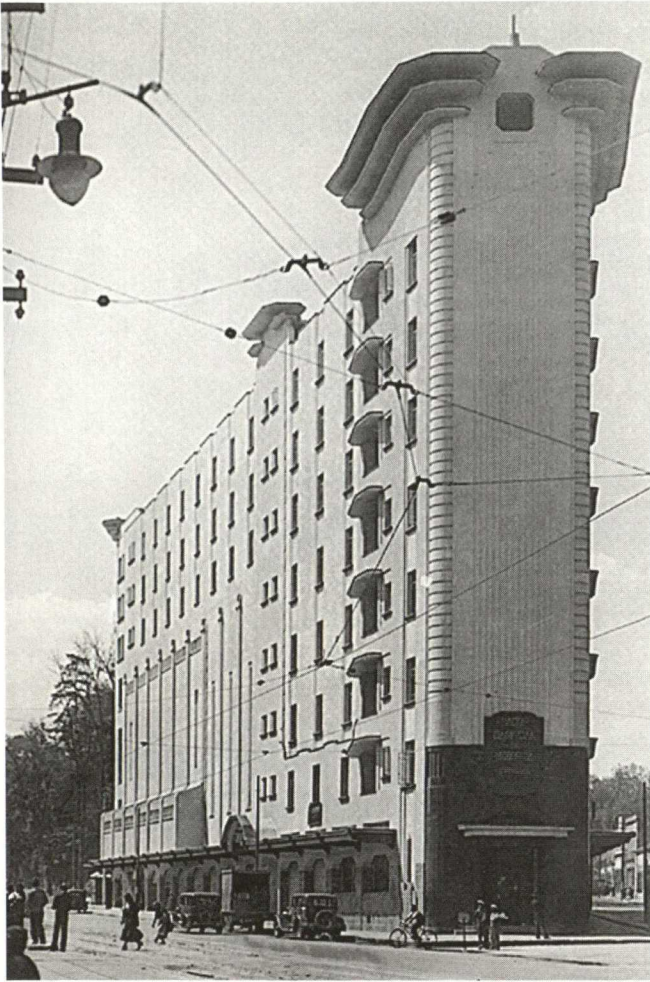


Casa de la Bola Museum, built in the 18th century, now surrounded by new buildings with no respect for the context



Casa de los Perros, built by the end of the 19th century – unique one-level house with two patios surrounded by an 'L' shape and a great façade with sculptures of dogs above windows, located in one of Tacubaya's most traditional streets.





Ermita building, before and after. This magnificent 1931 Art Deco example seemed to fly above the streets of Tacubaya. It is now forgotten, but surrounded by Revolution Avenue with correspondent traffic, trade, billboards, people in constant motion and by pollution.



The beautiful art deco Ermita building and a group of houses, Isabel designed by architect Juan Segura around 1930, are unique examples that show how housing construction was planned and developed in Mexico City. Its open spaces, such as parks Parque Lira and Alameda de Tacubaya, and other little plazas and gardens give its inhabitants and people from outside the area the opportunity to play, walk or rest between big trees, fountains, playgrounds and roads.

The image of church domes and towers, the sound of their bells among traffic sounds, call people to prayer or just to find a shelter. The biggest and oldest cemetery in Mexico City, Panteon de Dolores is found here, with exotic tombs of Mexico's main artists, intellectuals and families; we can also find a 19th-century Jewish cemetery with complete sobriety and order in its black and white stone tombs.

Three different museums from three different centuries give us the idea of how Tacubaya was perceived through time: Museo Casa de la Bola – with a big patio and unique colonial garden from the 18th century – keeps a way of life with original furniture, paintings, sculptures and other objects from its last owner, who also kept its main rooms as left by previous owners; Museo Casa del Tiempo of UAM University, an art gallery with different painting and photography exhibitions inside a late 19th-century house; and Museo Casa Luis Barragan, home of the Mexican architect and Pritzker prize-winner – who also found shelter in Tacubaya by the middle of the 20th century – has been kept as he left it. Main architecture conferences have been held here.

A new museum was installed inside San Diego church and its main purpose is to house a big exhibition of maps and other documents from military property.

Protection measures

Mexico City's government has placed Tacubaya under a protection programme from 2000, through a document called 'Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano de la Zona Patrimonial de Tacubaya'. The document includes a complete study of its urban configuration, as well as economical and social information. This document also evaluates its heritage and public areas at risk and its vulnerability; for this purpose, some proposals and measures have been established in relation to housing, transport and urban equipment.

Unfortunately time and money were not dedicated to this programme and one new government after another rules with its own rules and keeps this kind of programme under the desk. In addition there is no organisation that can have a complete control or review of the activities done in behalf of Tacubaya's preservation. Because of this, at the moment there are no architectural or urban projects developed in relation to urban image, which is considered the main regenerative activity. With an accurate design, main public spaces can keep and enhance their character or image, making people aware of their own heritage. Some of the main activities that can be of assistance in the preservation and showcasing of this heritage include the following:

- make a study of plazas, gardens and open places in Tacubaya in order to define their character, and make a connection with the surroundings and inhabitants in order to bring or enhance a new image and use proposals for this resource;
- make a study of the character and form of its streets, categorise them and define image and use, in order to establish rules to maintain them and to ensure new buildings retain the character;
- select a building from its heritage in every district that can be

transformed into a civic centre where people can gather and learn a little more about its heritage story and development;

- rescue Parque Lira's environment – a landscape architecture proposal will need to be prepared to keep its vegetation and to incorporate new and appropriate plantings; establish uses and generate a proper place of reunion for its habitants;
- make a study of house morphology and physical conditions in order to apply a rescue and renovation programme; there are a large number of buildings that allow a mixed use for housing, small business and office purposes;
- create a tourist guide and establish different journeys or routes that illustrate the main places to visit, and to make a visual connection between districts;
- encourage the establishment of a local organisation, with inhabitants' participation, in order to supervise government and public activities in relation of Tacubaya's preservation and diffusion.



Parque Lira, a park that shows how open spaces have been combined with other structures, creating a perfect equilibrium. Now it is a welcome place to take refuge from annoying traffic.

Conclusion

Tacubaya is a very special place to preserve. I am certain that the lack of information or concern about it is because there are no apparent cultural assets to preserve, but we have seen that this is not the case – indeed there are many structures that need preservation and protection. It is true, more than ever, that economic interests are favoured above cultural interests and from one day to another real estate pressures can destroy a unique heritage – this heritage cannot be found in any other area of Mexico City or the country as a whole.

Araceli Garcia Parra, Architect



Remains of the pergola and terrace of Casa Barron (now destroyed), chapel of Guadalupe in the back, now a library. This area inside Parque Lira is used as a soccer playground, and could be a great open auditorium for cultural purposes.

Tacubaya's traditional houses that have been preserved by owners, together with newer buildings constructed under no architectural or urban rules.

Some of Tacubaya's one-level houses that give a continuous line but with different versions of windows, doors, baseboards, finial and other ornamental elements of each house.

