

## The 19th Olympic Games Celebrated in Mexico in 1968 and their Architecture

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For all the world, 1968 was an important year for the course of contemporary society. The students' non-conformist movements in several cities in Europe as well as in America and Asia, such as in Berkeley, Mexico City, Tokyo, Paris, and other cities, showed societies that the new generation did not agree with the Vietnam War and authoritarianism, not only in the political systems but also within families. Mexico lived under particular cultural stress because of the following conditions: on the one hand, the students' rebellion against an authoritarian political regime consolidated from old control practices; on the other hand, the responsibility for organising the 19th Olympic Games that were supposed to be a great opportunity to show the world that Mexico's economy and culture were capable of opening up and arousing international interest.

Mexico has had a rich architectonic culture since ancient times: Mayan, Aztec, Toltec, and Teotihuacan builders made extraordinary monuments. Then, this transformed culture continued under Renaissance guidelines during the Spanish colonial centuries (16th to 18th c.), and modern and contemporary architecture first followed the academic canons. Eventually, it gained its independence as a witness to the European avant-garde. Therefore, the Olympic Games represented a great opportunity to show the world the originality – amongst the modern movement – of Mexican architecture. The slogan of the event was "*Mexico offers international peace to all countries*", summarised with the slogan "*The Olympics of Peace*". The whole organisation of the Olympic Games was in the hands of a selected group of architects, designers, planners headed by architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez<sup>1</sup> after he was appointed president of the Olympic Games Committee. Before the organising committee focused on good results for the teams in the sporting activities, it produced a large amount of graphic information for the media, for which a big catalogue of graphic designs was created by a unit led by architect Eduardo Terrazas. At the same time, the committee organised the national architectural competition for the Olympic buildings.

### Mexico City as an Olympic stage

The idea for the Olympic facilities that was proposed by the design team was not to have an Olympic park, but to transform Mexico City – the seat of the event – into a large Olympic stage. This meant not only to construct or adapt buildings for the sporting events, but to transform some parts of the city by setting up colourful graphic designs featuring all the activities of the Olympic celebration. My point of view is



*Fig. 1 Original Olympic design "The Olympics of Peace", with the stamp of the students' rebellion*

that they made this choice for two reasons: the short time they had for organising the whole event and the large budget that the Olympic commission had to have. Furthermore, this was considered a great creative opportunity for Mexican architects. Instead of creating a large Olympic park, the most ancient Mestizo City of America was transformed into the most important spectacle city, not only for the time of the sporting events, but from January 1968 when the Cultural Olympic began. Mexico City was at that time a large city (though much smaller than today's city), for which the Olympic Committee established circuits linking the places and Olympic buildings. Along those roads the graphic and urban designers placed large "papier mâché" sculptures with the image of the athletes, the logos of the sports, big balloons, information kiosks, and finally, the hosts that helped

tourists find places. Male hosts wore suits and the women wore dresses, both with the Olympic designs. Those images were in a lot of places, from buildings to ashtrays, from urban buses to daily newspapers. Under these conditions, people that lived in Mexico City took part – in one way or another – in the largest urban performance of Mexican modern times. Maybe this was only comparable to former experiences, like the army parades during the Revolution War (1910–1920), or the religious processions in the Viceroyal period in the 18th century.

Inside this ephemeral large stage some buildings were adapted for Olympic sports. The most important were: the National Auditorium (gymnastics), Insurgentes Theatre (weightlifting), and at the University Campus the Olympic Stadium and the Swimming Pool for water polo. The ones that were built specifically for the Olympic were: the Sports Palace (basketball), the rowing channel, the velodrome and the fencing room.<sup>2</sup>

### Cultural Olympic Programme (Fig. 1)

For the first time in the history of the modern Olympic Games and parallel to the sporting activities, a Cultural Olympic Programme<sup>3</sup> took place. The objective of the organising committee was to show the world historic and contemporary Mexican culture, a field in which Mexico was stronger than in sports. Thus, in 1968 there was a programme of poetry, dance, jazz, dramatic arts, which included activities with local and international artists, such as Dave Brubeck, Marcel Marceau, and others who worked together with the National Folklore Ballet of Mexico, craftsmen, dancers, and musicians.

The Cultural Olympics began in January 1968 with a symbolic cultural fire, lit up in a brazier that was designed in the shape of a pre-Hispanic one (Fig. 2) and placed outside the National Anthropological Museum, a building designed by Ramírez Vázquez that had opened four years before. Not only the cultural part of the Olympics for almost a year but the very important artistic programme, including all the arts, poetry gatherings, philatelic collectors, children’s camp, an architects’ symposium and others (Fig. 3) were the result of intensive international diplomatic connections, for which the different governments were asked to help. In the same way, Mexican artistic groups and also individuals could show their cultural importance. I guess that one of the main targets was that since Mexico had been known so far for its impressive and singular pre-Hispanic artistic legacy and also for its folkloric image, one of the main challenges was how the other image of modernity could be spread. Painters (Tamayo and Jose Luis Cuevas) and architects (Ramirez Vazquez and Candela) assumed this important task (Fig. 4).

I want to mention a particular modern heritage case that is facing a threat in the present: *the Friendship Route* of the Cultural Olympics that is in danger of completely disappearing as an urban and architectural heritage. This problem has to do with the dynamics of the modern city: changing the uses of the land, opening high-speed avenues and raising the value of urban land in the hands of the real state enterprises that have taken advantage of the disputes over owning the



Fig. 2 Kiosk in the city with sports logotypes



Fig. 3 “Cultural Olympic programme”, example of a leaflet, in this case for the national symphonic orchestra

best places to live. The example of *the Friendship Route* is the clearest; it was proposed by Mathias Goeritz to the Olympic Games committee, and the idea was to ask several countries for monumental sculptures that then could be installed on the banks of a new freeway on the southern border of the city. Many countries contributed with pieces and they were a great example of urban art related to a landscape



Fig. 4 Olympic hostesses wearing the official dresses



Fig. 5 Large ephemeral sculpture of papier mâché at the Insurgentes Theatre, the place for weightlifting

project. Unfortunately, the pieces themselves are not legally protected and under urban pressure around them. Some of the sculptures continue to stand on their original spot but the route as an artistic concept itself doesn't exist anymore (Fig. 5).

## The National University Campus

The National University was founded in 1910 with the merger of the old professional schools from the time of the viceroyalty. Those schools were housed in a baroque building of the 18th century in downtown Mexico City. The facilities of the new *campus* were started to be constructed in 1949 as part of a national political project that wanted to transform Mexico into a modern country and with a layout that won the architectural competition for the campus. When it was inaugurated in 1954, a lot of foreign architecture critics paid attention to the new complex because they perceived two very important phenomena: first, the international architectural intersections, not only the ones from the European modern movement, but others like the old idea of a large park surrounded by the buildings of Thomas Jefferson in Monticello. The second inspiration was the local architectural image; the campus layout following the open-air idea of the pre-Hispanic city of Monte Albán in Oaxaca, and the use of the native volcanic stone like a final shape. This is related to the way in which black stone is equivalent to the sensation of looking at a pre-Hispanic building, even though the majority of facades of those old buildings were covered with plaster. The murals of "Venetian mosaic" on some façades were also an important original local contribution; they came from the national cultural tendency of Vasconcelos at the beginning of the 1920s.

The other matter that surprised the local and international critics was the monumental open yard area and the inside gardens of the different schools. This was the idea under which Luis Barragán designed the "Jardines del Pedregal" neighbourhood (1948).<sup>4</sup> Both, the campus and the dwellings, occupied a large area covered by the petrified lava of a volcano, which gives this part of Mexico City a singular morphological and environmental condition.

The master plan for the University Campus<sup>5</sup> was the result of a design contest that took place inside the National School of Architecture, and architect Augusto Pérez Palacios was the author of the project for the Olympic Stadium.<sup>6</sup> The general shape of the stadium is as if the building had always been part of the natural landscape, as one of the volcanoes surrounding the valley of Mexico (Fig. 6). It also looks like a deep hole with a surrounding slope made out of native volcanic stone. Thus, the building is in perfect harmony not only with the landscape but also with the materials and colours of the place. The solution to guide a large number of people out of the stadium was found by constructing tunnels and ramps so that people did not have to use stairs.

Diego Rivera, the famous Mexican painter, made the design for the coloured high reliefs (Fig. 7) of stone that were supposed to be all around the façade of the Stadium.<sup>7</sup> However, he only completed the front part above the main entrance. When the stadium was selected for the Olympic Games, more space had to be added for the users. The solution was to dig again and lower the athletic field to increase the space for spectators. Also, for the water polo matches the University Swimming Pool was used (Fig. 8). In this way, the University Campus, which years later was inscribed in the World Heritage List, was part of the Olympics celebration. Regarding the new buildings, the most important



Fig. 6 The Olympic Stadium at the university campus



Fig. 7 The Olympic Stadium, main facade with stone mural by Diego Rivera

are: the Sports Palace, the Swimming Pool and Gymnasium buildings and the Olympic Village.

### Olympic buildings

The Sports Palace (Fig. 9) was designed by architects Felix Candela, Antonio Peyri and Enrique Castañeda Tamborel.<sup>8</sup> Actually, it is significant for being the last construction designed and built in Mexico by Candela who is still recognised as one of the paradigmatic masters of modern architecture worldwide. Even though he was born in Spain, he gained his professional maturity in Mexico in the 1950s. Particularly the Sports Palace has not the hyper concrete structure on which Candela's international prestige is based. The large inner space is covered by a system of crossing concrete beams; above them there are steel frame structures and the outer surface has copper sheets. The Swimming Pool and Olympic Gymnasium by architects Recamier and Bringas are a complex of two buildings in which – more so in the Swimming Pool – the distinctive feature is how the wide space is covered by a double curvature surface supported by several strong iron strings. 52 years later, these two big surfaces are in perfect condition. Actually, the morphology of the buildings comes from the structural condition of the roofs themselves.

The Olympic Village (Fig. 10) continues to be alongside the “Independencia” neighbourhood in Mexico City, both best examples of good urban design of Mexican architecture after the 1950s. The Village was designed by architects Ramón Torres and Agustín Hernández; the qualities of the project are: a layout in which they combined comfortable garden spaces with towers with brick facades; the brick is a construction material linked to the cultural heritage memory of most societies. The internal solution for the apartments was a hinge between the large spaces of the Mexican private dwellings of the 1950s and the smaller spaces that followed. Besides the Olympic Village was the International

Press Building for the Olympic Games. It was a flat building with glass facades and a single steel structure that allowed its construction in a short time; unfortunately, this building has been torn down.

The Sports Palace is still being used for mass events such as concerts. The Swimming Pool and the Olympic Gymnasium are used as public sports facilities, and the Olympic Village has been sold to the people that currently inhabit it. Nowadays, it has increased its added value since many people want to live there.

### Conservation of the cultural heritage

The Olympic buildings remain under the supervision of the Mexican Federal Authority because they have been included in the National List of Buildings with artistic value. The Olympic Stadium and the University Swimming Pool are both World Heritage because they are inside the Campus of UNAM<sup>9</sup>. The Olympic Village are private properties, and the Sports Palace and the Olympic Swimming Pool and Gymnasium belong to Mexico City. In accordance with the legal protection protocols for buildings inscribed in the National List of Buildings with artistic qualities, before any project undergoes construction or transformation permission must be obtained from the federal authorities.

Other facilities like the Fencing Room and Velodrome have been transformed; the reason behind this is the weakness of the Mexican legal frame with regard to modern architecture protection. Mexican ICOMOS has constantly insisted on an updating of the guidelines because Mexico is losing modern heritage. At present, it is easier to take measures to protect modern architecture if the buildings are national property (for example the Stadium). On the other hand, difficulties arise when we talk about private property, because in most cases the owners put the profits they make from the property above the cultural significance of the building itself.



Fig. 8 The Olympic swimming pool at the university campus, for water polo competition

Due to the fact that the National University<sup>10</sup> is responsible for the National Observatory, the National Library, the National Collections of shells, birds and so on, it means that the university is responsible for some historic symbols that make the Mexican society proud. The University has constantly faced the history of Mexico, for example through the promotion of the fine arts, but also other fields like sports, or the free expression of young students against the *status quo* of some governments. All these matters were analysed and selected by the ICOMOS National Scientific Committee for 20th-Century Architecture when we decided in 2005 to start the effort of getting the campus on the World Heritage List.<sup>11</sup>

The Campus has a new problem in the buffer zone. It began with the authorisation of the city government, which allowed the erection of a tall building on the border of the Campus' buffer zone. The visual axes and the contiguous surroundings of the Campus have been affected. For 60 years, the only thing that one could see was a sky full

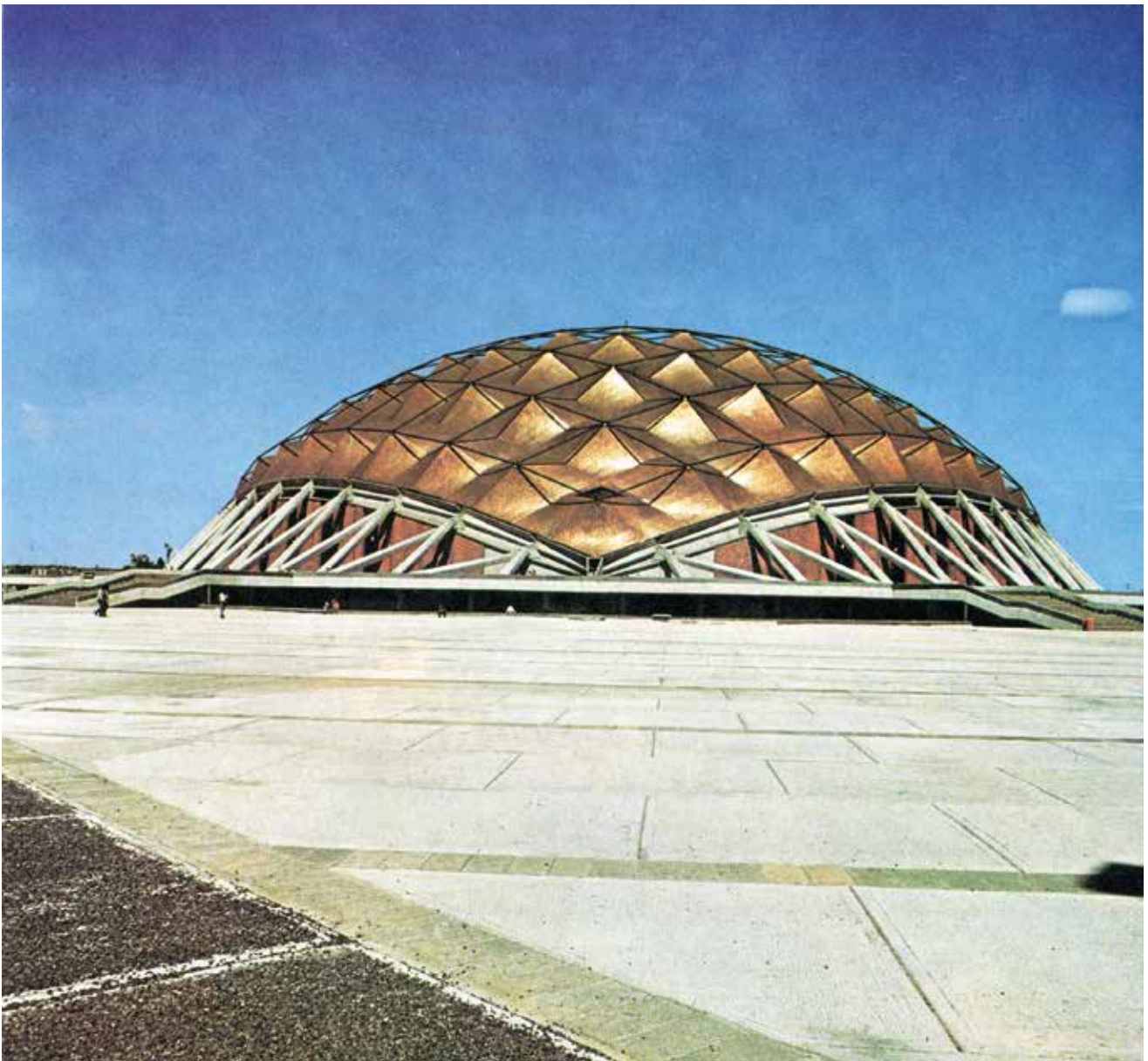


Fig. 9 The Sports Palace

of clouds; now, they want to build an apartment tower of more than 30 storeys just in front of the original entrance to the Campus. At the moment, the legal affair is being discussed, and the University has asked me to compile the documents to support the protection of the World Heritage area against the real estate enterprise. A judge will decide who is right.

Since the inscription of the Campus on the World Heritage List, the Mexican 20th Century Architecture Scientific Committee of ICOMOS has insisted on the need to develop a management plan. It was a very complicated process to carry out because there were old ideas on how a site with the importance of the Campus should be managed. The main arguments were that only physical interventions were important. After some years, it was accepted that the University had to work on a management plan, which was finally completed in 2017.<sup>12</sup> This document contains the programmes, plans and pending issues that the university has to follow to fulfil its international responsibility for culture. Even so, there are still important pending matters to work on. In this way, the university will maintain the pride of identity; it will give continuity to the generation of new paradigms supported on the basis of the knowledge produced on this campus.<sup>13</sup>

The University Campus is the place where the Mexican military intervened in 1968 and arrested many students. One month after all this violence the same place held the opening of the Olympic Games. Nowadays, not only for the University's community but for Mexican society as a whole, the University Campus is the place where the soccer fans of the UNAM team gather, also for the famous football games against the university's traditional sports opponent, the Polytechnic School. It is also the place to start a romance, to watch students walking in the surroundings, to listen to famous and beloved teachers, like Miguel León Portilla, who today is the voice of the old Mexican culture. And it is also the place where I, my generation and the generation of my daughter and my students can build the future of our country.

## Meaning

For several reasons, the Olympic Games meant new opportunities for experimentation for Mexican architecture, as new demands were made on the use of space in the buildings. Not only the large surfaces that had to be covered, but also the urban location in relation to the parking spaces and the new form of the buildings within the old city. The Sports Palace, the Velodrome and the Fencing Room were built in a long area that had the sports use specified by city planning, but the Olympic Village as well as the Swimming Pool and the Gymnasium were built in traditional quarters. In these 52 years, these buildings have been integrated into the city culture by their users with a different meaning. The Olympic Village, a cosmopolitan environment, stands for the playful experience for all people, and the Swimming Pool is the opportunity to be connected to a great sports experience day after day in one's own neighbourhood.



Fig. 10 The Olympic village

### Abstract

*Die Architektur wird in diesem Beitrag als Teil des Bereichs der Kulturgeschichte betrachtet, in dem die Architektur selbst ein Stück kultureller Dynamik und nicht ein isoliertes Werk eines Künstlers ist. Die Entwicklung des Diskurses folgt der Methodik der Kulturgeschichte. Der Artikel versucht, Folgendes zu erklären: Die olympische mexikanische Architektur ist als Teil des sozialen und politischen Umfelds Mexikos in der Zeit von 1965 bis 1970 zu verstehen, einer Periode, die sich durch Themen wie das kulturelle Projekt der Regierung von Präsident Adolfo López Mateos (1958–1964), die Entwicklung des olympischen Projekts in der Regierung Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1965–1970), die Auswirkungen des Kalten Krieges in Lateinamerika (die kubanische Revolution und das Phantom des Kommunismus) und die nationale Wirtschaftspolitik des „Desarrollo estabilizador“ auszeichnet. Das mexikanische Olympiaprojekt mit seiner Architektur wurde möglich durch das Ziel der internationalen Sichtbarkeit unter der Leitung von Präsident López Mateos und durch eine neue Art, Architektur zu konzipieren, die im gleichen Zeitraum entstand, in dem der Architekt Pedro Ramírez Vázquez eine sehr wichtige Figur war.*

*Ramírez Vázquez verfolgte mindestens zwei Linien, wie man die Realität verändern kann: eine besondere Verbindung zum Konzept der mexikanischen Geschichte der Antike (prähispanische Welt) und Stadtplanung als Lebensweise. Ramírez Vázquez entwarf das Museo Nacional de Antropología, das ikonenhafteste Gebäude des Regimes von López Mateos, mit dem beide ein besonderes Bild der mexikanischen Kultur verbreiteten, das dem prähispanischen Imaginären und den modernen Diskursen entsprach. Ramírez Vázquez war nicht der eigentliche Entwerfer der olympischen Gebäude, aber er war der Präsident der mexikanischen olympischen Organisation.*

*Ich konzentriere mich auf vier Gebäude: den Sportpalast, das Schwimmbad und die Sporthalle, das Olympische Dorf und das Olympiastadion der Nationalen Autonomen Universität, das 1967 nicht für die Olympischen Spiele entworfen*

wurde, sondern bereits eine internationale Ikone war; weil es das beste Beispiel für die mexikanische Epoche (ca. 1950) war. Die Debatte wurde über die prähispanische Tradition versus neue internationale Formen geführt.

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<sup>1</sup> MEXICO 68, Comité Organizador, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Edificios Olímpicos, 1968.

<sup>3</sup> MEXICO 68, Comité Organizador, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> EGGNER, Luis Barragan's gardens of El Pedregal, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> ANDA ALANIS, Hazaña y memoria, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> ANDA ALANIS, Ciudad Universitaria, Cincuenta Años (1952–2002), 2002.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Plan de Gestion del Campus Central, 2017.

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