

# Urban Heritage Management Processes in the city of Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico.

## Interventions: Social and Institutional Participation

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### ABSTRACT

This text presents a study on the Historical Center of the city of Xalapa, in the state of Veracruz, to explain the current conditions of its built heritage. Starting with an analysis of the sociopolitical context which has generated the city's transformation: losses, appreciation, and defense of historical buildings. Based on documentary sources and fieldwork, it builds an interpretation of the phenomena that affect the way this heritage is appreciated and intervened; furthermore, it presents the main points of view and evidence of representative cases that offer a glimpse of the complex challenge of conserving Xalapa's heritage.

### KEY WORDS

built heritage; Xalapa, interventions; defense of heritage; assessing values

### INTRODUCTION

**X**alapa, known as the “Athens of Veracruz” has reached the twenty-first century with a collective feeling of great loss regarding its built heritage. The social perception seems to be contrasting if considered one of the first Mexican cities with

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the declaration protection to its historic center (1988 and 1990). Assuming that this is due to legal or institutional protection failures would be a hasty conclusion: the reality is more complex. Exploring these protection actions reveals various phenomena related to the appreciation of this population center, its historicity and significance.

As for Veracruz's capital city, Xalapa clearly underwent a notable increase in population during the twentieth century, which translated into a diversification of activities and a demand for services, infrastructure and mobility; these were addressed with the idea of improving, beautifying and favoring progress, giving way to new architectural and urban types. Hence the question: which factors have affected the ways of understanding and intervening in what is now called the city's historical center, and to what extent did they become causes of alteration and loss, as well as ways and means of protecting that which is valued? The present text is an advance on research which aims to explain the diversity of interventions in the Historical Center of Xalapa based on the identification of phenomena that transformed the city, the losses and struggles to preserve the historical memory, a tendency that does not appear to have entirely satisfactory results.

### **HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE OF XALAPA**

Gilberto Bermúdez Gorrochotegui (2018) relates the process by which the original Totonac neighborhoods were conformed: a settlement which during the Colonial period favored an irregular trace, composed of streets and alleys and neighborhoods<sup>1</sup> with masonry houses with central patios and covered with gable roofs with tiles.

The modernist impetus of independent Mexico made what is now the capital of the state develop commercially and in production thanks to its strategic location; thus various factories and haciendas were established, whose extensions of land and economic dynamics surrounded the urban area even up to the third decade of the twentieth century (Villanueva, 2011, p. 137). The architectural splendor the city displayed was characterized by eclectic expressions in its institutional works and merchants' homes, contrasted

<sup>1</sup> The prehispanic nuclei were the basis for the viceregal layout to conform to the indications in *Ordenanzas de descubrimiento, nueva población y pacificación de las Indias* ordered by Philip II in 1573, mainly with regard to the urban structuring of neighborhoods. Thus, Xalapa was conformed of neighborhoods identified according to their temples or patron Saints, such as El Calvario, San José, Santiago and the Franciscan Monastery of the Nativity of Mary, central nucleus of the urban configuration that bestowed the name of Xallapan (see: Bermudez, 2018, p. 39-40).

with the sobriety and poverty of certain neighborhoods, such as Xallitic. From the 1930s, the city added neocolonial style to its repertoire, followed subsequently by functionalist productions that demonstrated the influence and impact the Modern Movement had in the capital.

### **EFFECTS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY MODERNIZATION**

The twentieth century combines the existing dichotomy between saluting progress and the feelings of loss that followed rampant development. On the one hand, the promotion of modern constructions and radical solutions to urban challenges; on the other, the promotion of research and archeological rescue, accompanied by legal actions for the conservation of historical monuments, reveal the intense impact it had on Xalapa's urban fabric. Along with the modification of streets and mutilation or substitution of old buildings, this included laying a public sewer system (1951) and paving of central arteries, launching a transformation process that favored vehicular mobility, the icon of progress.

The widening of certain streets gave rise to buildings that are now considered emblematic of the Modern Movement in the city, for their multi-storied concrete and glass structures and the mixed use of these buildings gradually became part of the twentieth century socioeconomic dynamics. Taking advantage of unused floors in three of the main buildings (known as Tanos, Enríquez & Estela) for passageways turned them into icons, using them as commercial pedestrian thoroughfares where the passerby can also take shortcuts.

The works to dig a tunnel under Juárez Park in 1972 uncovered vestiges of the Franciscan Monastery of the Nativity of Mary,<sup>2</sup> illustrating how fragile the historical past is when facing modernization's drive. The very same criterion was used to carry out demolitions to widen roads so as to facilitate the continuity and fluidity of traffic: the opening of Ávila Camacho Avenue, between 1941 and 1942; the widening of Enríquez Street, in 1950 (Pasquel, 1979, p. 58); the construction of Xallitic Bridge, in 1956; the upgrading of streets for means of transport (in 1970 Miguel Palacios Street went from a cobbled pedestrian alley to a road for vehicular traffic, though in 2011 it was recovered as a pedestrian walkway) and the controversial extension of the first two segments of Xalapeños Ilustres Street in 1990, among others (Pabello, 1988; Pasquel, 1979; H. Ayuntamiento de Xalapa, Veracruz 1987-1992) (Figure 1).

<sup>2</sup> Main evangelical center, dating back to 1534 (Gutiérrez, 1981, p. 14).

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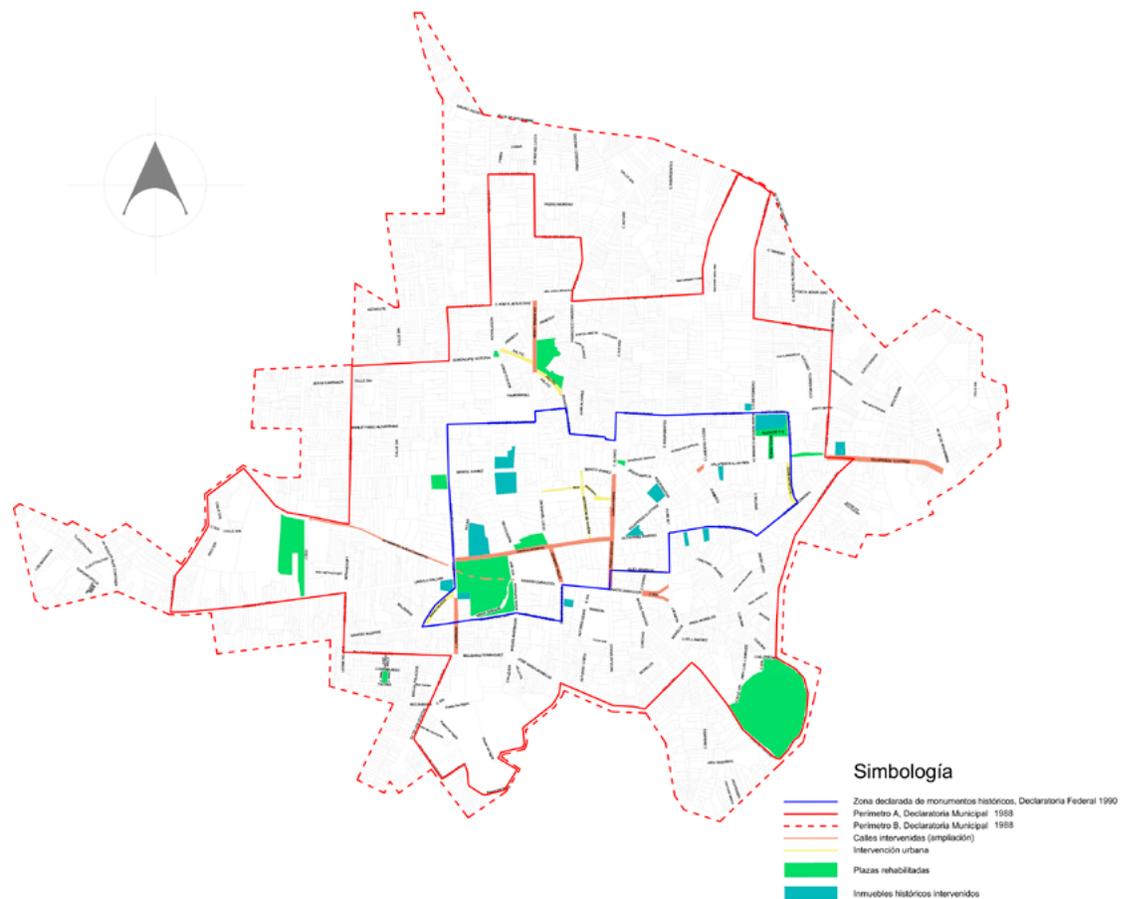


FIGURE 1. Map of the Historical Center of the city of Xalapa, state of Veracruz, with the main interventions indicated by colors: blue for buildings; green for squares; brown for widened streets; yellow for improvements to urban image and sidewalks; blue line for the Zone of Historical Monuments by Federal Decree in 1990; red continuous line for perimeter A, and red dotted line for the protected perimeter B, by municipal decree in 1988 (Map: Morales, 2021).

Although the initial state protection policies were born in the first half of the twentieth century,<sup>3</sup> the related legal instruments did not appear until the end of 1978,<sup>4</sup> the same year the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, Mexico) created its delegation for the State of Veracruz in Xalapa, which three years later would move to the port of the same name, leaving a representation office

<sup>3</sup> One of the first purposes was to evaluate the prehispanic vestiges, which in 1957 helped achieve the founding of the School of Anthropology and the Museum of Anthropology of Xalapa—subsequently, in 1978, of the Universidad Veracruzana (UV)— with the INAH, that set up its state delegation for Veracruz, established in the museum and directed by Alfonso Medellín Zenil (Núñez, & Ortiz, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> When the State Government revoked the 1944 Law and created Law Number 339, on the Protection and Conservation of Typical and Natural Beauty Sites, in accordance with the 1972 Federal Law (Segobver, s. f.; Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz-Llave, 1978).

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in the capital (Núñez, & Ortiz, 2019). That same year the Universidad Veracruzana's Institute of Anthropology created a registry with over 1,600 buildings (Ortega, 1981) which highlighted that, despite the losses, ample architectural heritage still existed. In 1988 the municipality issued its Declaration on the Historical Center, with corresponding regulations, that established an area organized into two perimeters of protection, according to the density and value of the 308 buildings included. Finally, in 1990, a Federal Declaration was emitted regarding the Historical Monuments Zone, which comprises 51 buildings.<sup>5</sup>

Although Xalapa displays a lower density of monuments in relation to other cities in the country (Díaz-Berrio, 1986, p. 171), it shares the interest of many to preserve the past. This opens another perspective to analyze the phenomena that affect the protection of its heritage.

### SOCIAL APPRECIATION AND DEFENSE OF HERITAGE

Several associations emerged to reduce the effects on Xalapa's cultural heritage and recover the city's historicity: *Pro-Defensa del Patrimonio Arquitectónico, Histórico y Cultural de Xalapa, A. C.* (in 1982), the *Comité Pro-Defensa de la Vivienda de Xalapa* (in 1989), as well as *Patrimonio y Conservación, A. C.* (2009), and *Xalapa Antiguo* (in 2014), among others (Figure 2). The regional representation of the International Council of Monuments (ICOMOS) was created, in which the School of Architecture participated. In addition, from 1995 to 2001 the Universidad Veracruzana (UV) offered a Master's in Architectural Restoration of Cultural Goods.

FIGURE 2. Citizens protest the demolition of old houses to widen Xalapeños Ilustres Street (Source: *Xalapa en la historia*, 2017).



<sup>5</sup> These criteria are the object of a wider research which is already underway and will provide a basis for the selection of buildings, the aspects evaluated, and the differences in said criteria.

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Notable achievements among these groups include: suspending the demolition of the old Xalapa cemetery and obtaining a Federal Declaration concerning it, as well as for the architectural complex Salvador Díaz Mirón, opposite Los Berros Park; suspending the partial alterations to Juárez Park and modifications to the project that would have altered the original language of the building that now houses the Carlos Fuentes Library. Numerous academic activities were also organized in support of respectfully valuing, disseminating, conserving, and restoring heritage. The Committee to Conserve and Control the Historical Center was created at the municipal level (1989), followed by the Office of the Historical Center (1998) as well as the Historical Center and Urban Image Unit (2010), though the latter unfortunately ceased to exist in 2018.

### FORMS OF INTERVENTION AND CRITERIA

By the country's general safeguarding criteria, the valuation of heritage was based on temporality, monumentality, and density of buildings.

The criterion of temporality, established in both the 1972 Law and in architectural conservation practice, emphasized the value of Colonial architecture and the prehispanic origins of the city's neighborhoods that were consolidated during the Viceroyalty. This criterion left preservation of nineteenth century architectural splendor and its transition to the twentieth at a disadvantage.

In practice, far from the theoretical-methodological rigor of authors such as Carlos Chanfón Olmos (1996) and José Antonio Terán Bonilla (2004), the first recovery works prioritized facades over the architectural structure, in certain cases modifying the face of buildings by imposing traditional or so-called "neocolonial" expressions on them, with the justification of recovering the city's "Colonial" image. Valuing the stylistic and building dimensions, related to the concept of *monumentality*, counters the value of temporality. This vision has put many buildings which have been part of the city's historical fabric at risk.

Over the past twenty years, state and municipal governments have carried out various interventions in the public sphere. The most relevant include the recovery of the Plaza Alcalde y García (2000) and the small Carbón square (2012); the creation of the Carlos Fuentes Corridor (2013), a space gained from Miguel Palacios Street, downtown; the rehabilitation of the Xallitic square and neighborhood (2013); the remodeling of 5 de Febrero Park

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and the recovery of the small Manuel Maples Arce square (2016-2017) (Figures 3, 4 y 5).



FIGURE 3. Work process to recover Plaza Alcalde y García, in the San José neighborhood, in 2000 (Photograph: Polimnia Zacarías, 2010).

FIGURE 4. Recovery of Plaza Alcalde y García, in the San José neighborhood, in 2021. (Photograph: Gladys Martínez, 2021).



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FIGURE 5.  
 Rehabilitation of 5  
 de Febrero Park, in  
 2013 (Photograph:  
 Polimnia Zacarías,  
 2015).



Though most interventions positively altered the urban image of the sites where they took place, more recent ones have aimed to enhance that image, from the elimination of strung electrical and telephone wires, placing them underground instead, to the widening of sidewalks, from the installation of urban furniture to the creation of cycling lanes, all with the intention to look beyond the objects, at the citizens themselves (Figure 6). The temporality criterion focused on recovering the Colonial past, favored the rehabilitation and emphasis on a few large houses from that period while managing to maintain their character. The main actions consisted in reusing and repurposing them, mostly for cultural or educational uses.

Finally, it should be noted that nineteenth and early twentieth century architecture have motivated different forms of intervention, even if they feature more compositional and aesthetic elements in their facades, their interiors have been excessively modified. Only a few sites, such as the former Exploratory Geographic Commission, the Juárez Highschool, or the Industrial School, preserve their construction phase visible.

There has been an increased use of nineteenth and twentieth century buildings by chains of shops,<sup>6</sup> restaurants, or cafeterias in the center. Interventions repeat the practice of preserving facades, but with two differences in certain spaces: depending on the size

<sup>6</sup> E.g., VIPs, Miniso & Mumuso.

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FIGURE 6. Former Calle Real, now Enríquez Street. In the foreground the 2017 interventions: widening of sidewalks, placing of stone benches extracted from the Colonial road during repaving excavations; in the background, urban image intervention (1986-1989) with modification to the facade of the functionalist building known as “Enríquez” (Photograph: Gladys Martínez, 2021).



of their sales floor, they are underused, and sets have been built within to make them considerably more attractive.

## CONCLUSIONS

The dynamics of growth and modernization, along with land speculation, fostered constant changes in the Historical Center of Xalapa. The perception and criticism of loss of heritage led to the rejection of typologies derived from the functionalism that was identified with modernity and as the cause of the destruction of the historical past. Collective reflection in the face of modernization demanded the protection of Xalapa’s heritage, which resulted in three lines of action: institutional and legal protection, the reconstruction of collective memory and active defense on the part of society. How these three aspects develop, interlink or counter is articulated in the characteristics of the historical center nowadays. The Universidad Veracruzana and the three levels of government launched the process of building a protective legal framework, strongly driven by the mobilization of civil society.

The forms of intervention in Xalapa’s architecture have the following characteristics:

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- Respect for the architectural type of dwellings in Xalapa
- Conservation or reconstruction of the building's main facade
- Reusing and repurposing, preferably for cultural or educational uses
- Combination of contemporary building systems and traditional materials

Though Xalapa has preserved a good deal of its Viceregal constructions, other periods do require attention. Among nineteenth and twentieth century architecture, those from the period of Porfirio Díaz attain legal protection but research is lacking; while postrevolutionary architecture has not been sufficiently appreciated or researched. Neither have the contributions derived from the Modern Movement or the various architectural and social stages reflected through the urban elements of the buildings' physical structures, such as murals and sculptures, and of public spaces, such as squares, gardens, alleys and, of course, natural elements, such as the springs that gave rise to the city. Understanding how they all relate in the social dynamics from a trans-disciplinary perspective remains to be done.

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