

Discovering the Culture of Mexico City

Donald Trump wants to build walls, but south of the border, Mexico City's creative class is busy tearing them down: the ones between tradition and modernity, legend and reality. Welcome to the cultural cauldron of our time.



GETTY IMAGES

by MARY KAYE SCHILLING OCT 18, 2016

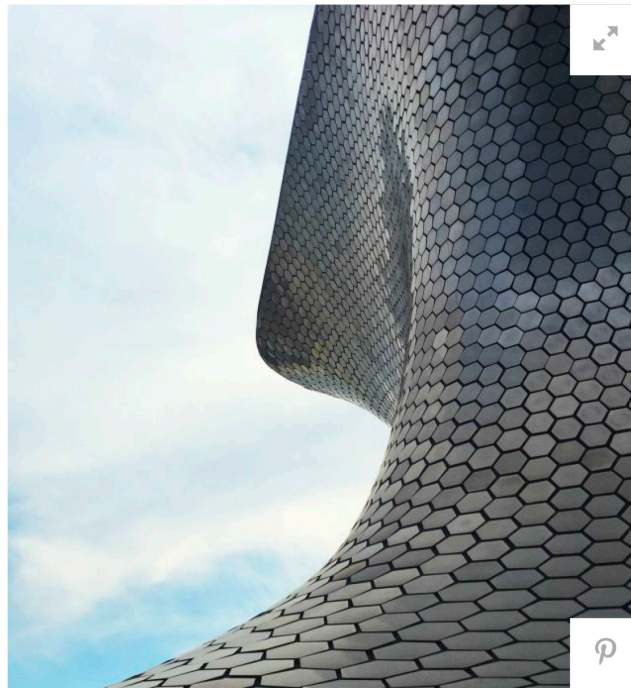
When you've spent millions of dollars modernizing your hometown, a building with your name on it just isn't enough. You get a neighborhood.

Once filled with decaying factories and a GM assembly plant, Slim City is tucked within Mexico City's exclusive Polanco district. It was born when the telecom tycoon and philanthropist Carlos Slim (Mexico's richest man—or the world's, depending on the year) began construction on a deluxe apartment tower there in 2008 and has grown into one of the most important real estate enclaves in the city, a glistening modern chest, evoking personal devastation and Aztec cannibalism. But it is also on every plate, on every street in Mexico City, in every creative endeavor as chefs and artists communicate their rich, complex culture.

Or perhaps I was just drunk. There's an old myth about mezcal causing hallucinations, and as I was going back to my hotel the car passed what could have been an apparition: A man in the middle of traffic was balancing a sword on his nose while juggling three others. I mentioned this to the driver, in the hopes that he saw it too. He wasn't surprised that such a person might exist. Then again, he didn't see him.

This story appeared in the Fall/Winter 2016 Travel Issue.

quarter with Burberry and Chanel shops, the city's first aquarium, and the irresistibly odd Museo Soumaya, named for Slim's late wife and designed by his son-in-law Fernando Romero. The structure has been variously described as a rockabilly coif and an aluminum corset (thanks to its skin of 16,000 hexagonal reflective aluminum tiles). Standing beneath its whimsical curvaceousness, you can't help but feel sorry for British architect David Chipperfield's blocky Museo Jumex, directly across the street. The latter, finished in 2013, hosts shows by contemporary art's superstars; the five-year-old Soumaya, a winding homage to New York's Guggenheim Museum inside, has a more eccentric, even random collection—everything from one of the biggest troves of Rodin sculptures in the world to turn-of-the-century cameos to ivory combs.



THE CURVY EXTERIOR OF MUSEO SOUMAYA

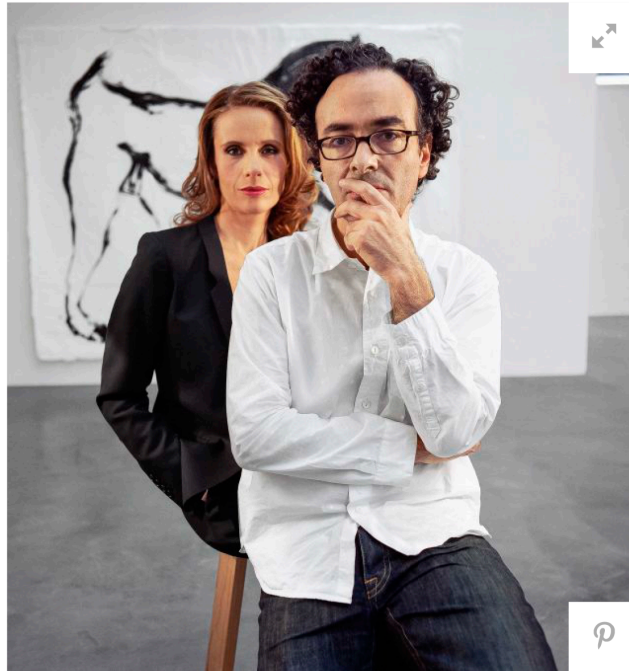
MARY KAYE SCHILLING

Both Slim City museums are expressions of the creative ferment that has seized Mexico City over the last decade, one that is attracting a different kind of traveler, one attuned to and fascinated by what native daughter, New York City resident, and frequent visitor Jana Pasquel de Shapiro calls its "cultural explosion."

The city, in fact, is having its biggest moment since Fridamania, the early 1990s love affair with Frida Kahlo that turned the tormented artist into both a proto-feminist icon and a tote bag. The restaurants here, thanks to a new generation of star chefs, now rival those in Paris, London, and New York; this year's World's 50 Best Restaurants list includes Jorge Vallejo's Quintonil at No. 12 and Enrique Olvera's Pujol at 25. Elsewhere, "Le Mexique des Renaissances" is occupying Paris's Grand Palais (through January 23, 2017). It's the largest European event dedicated to Mexican art since a massive exhibition at London's Tate Gallery in 1953, and you know what that means: Echoes of the recurring motifs and poppy colors of Mexico will be blooming on runways and at design shows.

MOST POPULAR

Blooming, too, is Mexico City's contemporary art scene, driven in part by the 13-year-old Zona Maco, one of Latin America's largest festivals (February 8–12, 2017), the latest must-stop for international collectors. "What makes it so unique is how all disciplines—fashion, graphic design, art, architecture—are interwoven. The younger artists work together in a very organic way," says Marc Foxx, whose eponymous Los Angeles gallery will be represented at Zona Maco for the third straight year.



MÓNICA MANZUTTO AND JOSÉ KURI, OWNERS OF THE INFLUENTIAL KURIMANZUTTO GALLERY

BERNARDO AJA

Yet even as so much has changed here, one thing remains, enticingly, the same: a deeply textured cultural life heavily indebted to history. "The connection to the past is very, very precious and can't be underestimated. It's what makes the art here unique," says José Kuri, who runs Kurimanzutto, arguably the most influential gallery in Mexico City, with his wife Mónica Manzutto. "That's possibly hard to relate to in America, where moving forward is often prized above all else. We have modernity, of course, but as we innovate we are talking about and reflecting on our indigenous roots. It's why pre-Hispanic art continues to be a strong reference."

Nacho Rodríguez Bach, whose electronic murals reference Mayan art, invited me to dinner at Chapulín ("grasshopper"), a restaurant in Polanco whose chef, Josefina López Méndez, also riffs on tradition, in this case the UNESCO-protected cuisine of Oaxaca, the gourmet heart of the country. Twenty years ago the usual course for ambitious restaurants in Mexico City was to hire a chef from Paris. "The best chefs now are Mexican," says Rodríguez Bach, "making the most of what's native to the country." Including, commonly, insects. I notice some black specks in the two bowls of salt on the table. "One has ants and one has grasshoppers," he says. "To us, insects are a delicacy. You really taste the earth through them." Until recently, insects weren't offered to foreign diners, many of whom consider the idea of eating a bug (or earth, for that matter) disagreeable. I would include myself among those, but when in Mexico!

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The Mexican 'jokes about [death], caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.'

Between bites I remind Rodríguez Bach of something the great writer, poet, diplomat, and Nobel laureate Octavio Paz wrote in 1950, in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*: The Mexican "is familiar with [death], jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love." He smiles and shrugs, as if to say, How could death not preoccupy us? Not only is this a country that devotes a multiday national holiday to the dead, but atrocities perpetuated by drug cartels and perhaps even the government continue to terrorize the country; 43 students who disappeared after a 2014 clash with police are still missing. "The drug cartels are becoming part of the culture. Their violence is a reality you can't deny," says Rodríguez Bach. "But you can't let that define you, as happened with Colombia. There are other stories to be told." Because of government media censorship, "art has become a way to speak out about things like political corruption and entrenched inequality."

But weren't Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Rivera's fellow muralists David Alfaro Siqueiros and José Clemente Orozco tackling corruption and censorship in the middle of the last century? "For a long time Mexican art has been about expressing revolution," Rodríguez Bach says. "In the U.S. you want to promote triumphs. Here there are no victories to document. Well, there's Cinco de Mayo, but that's it." He laughs. "But art here is moving away from the stereotypes of Diego and Frida. It's not decorative." The message may be similar, in other words, but the medium is evolving.

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Technology and sound art are major trends, and I wonder how Kahlo's and Rivera's soulfulness and humanity can be expressed via electronics. I get my answer at MUAC, the contemporary art museum on the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where I'm treated to a retrospective of Mexican-Canadian Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, an artist—gently political, often playful—who finds poetry in machines.

This reminds me of the Pritzker Prize-winning Mexican architect Luis Barragán, who similarly expressed warmth through geometry. He once wrote that he found it "alarming" that architecture magazines had banished words like "magic, spellbound, enchantment, and amazement"—expressions, he said, "that never ceased to be my guiding lights."

They strike me as words you could use on any given day in Mexico City, and certainly in the architect's former home and studio, now the museum Casa Luis Barragán, in the neighborhood of Miguel Hidalgo. It is, bizarrely, something of a secret to visitors, and yet it is one of the great highlights of the city. Through his reliance on natural light and his insistence on courtyard gardens, as well as the harmonic balance of his bold palette (I finally understood the power of pink when I first entered this house), Barragán's concrete boxes pulsate with life.



TEOTIHUACAN'S PYRAMID OF THE SUN

ART DIRECTORS & TRIP/ALAMY

This is my fifth trip to Mexico City over 30 years, and I think often of what it is that keeps drawing me back. The setting is, of course, spectacular, with several volcanoes looming nearby (only one, "El Popo," remains active), in a valley that is a fabrication: What is ground was once a vast lake. The Aztecs commanded their empire from an island in its center, and the Spaniards then filled in the lake entirely. Centro Histórico, the historical heart of the city, has gotten a \$438 million face-lift, with Carlos Slim buying dozens of centuries-old buildings for rehabilitation, but many still tilt precipitously as the land sinks, Venicelike, back into its natural state.

History has played rough here, the paving over of a lake the least of it. Occupiers came and went, some foreign, some homegrown, leaving a trail of horror, pomp, and hubris in their wake. As Paz wrote, "To us, a pessimist is a realist." He went on to add that Americans love "fairy tales and detective stories and we love myths and legends." It is a fatalistic mind-set, one appealingly at peace with uncertainty. And that is what brings me back: the people and their singular blend of melancholy and exuberance, as well as a wry humor that typically greets every setback. (To wit: An avenue of piñata shops offering, since the start of the American presidential contest, papier-mâché Donald Trumps, the candidate who wants to build a wall between Mexico and the United States.)

But until this trip, the physical beauty of the city, its romantic grandeur, had struck me as a dusty relic. Today the most charming neighborhoods fall somewhere between old and new—like the trendy Roma and Condesa, separated by the city's longest avenue, Avenida de los Insurgentes. These districts have a faded charm that I find more appealing than the slick elegance of Polanco. Both were wealthy and fashionable enclaves that went to seed, and much of the grand architecture remains (Condesa is a showcase for Art Deco– style apartments), housing the restaurants, bars, and galleries that have transformed the area into a locus for art and food lovers.



ONE OF CHEF JORGE VALLEJO'S SIGNATURE DISHES

QUINTONIL

The food, long trapped in amber, is a revelation. Take mole. I never really got the appeal of this ubiquitous Mexican sauce. It took one of the city's new generation of chefs—Edgar Núñez of Sud 777—to convert me. He served duck topped with a life-changing version; I could taste pumpkin seeds, cinnamon, and what seemed to be bananas, the whole thing more piquant than sweet, a pleasing foil to the rich meat. Núñez is, like his fellow top chefs, catapulting ancient underpinnings—old strains of corn or peppers, techniques that stretch back to Mesoamerica—into something unexpected.

I was lucky enough to get a reservation, too, at Quintonil, a relaxed, chic temple to vegetables and herbs, many of them grown in the restaurant's garden. Chef Jorge Vallejo is inspired, as was my second helping of insects: an avocado tartare with escamoles (ant larvae, or, more aspirationally, insect caviar—an Aztec delicacy), topped with a dusting of onion ashes and dried seaweed. I am now down with eating bugs.



CHEF JORGE VALLEJO OF THE FAMED QUINTONIL

QUINTONIL

My final culinary epiphany occurred on my last night, at Licorería Limantour, Mexico City's foremost cocktail bar. The tattooed hipster bartender told me there's an old saying in Mexico: "For every ill, mezcal, and for every good as well." Tequila I know well, but mezcal was the weird local brew that came with a worm in the bottle.

The bartender quickly brought me up to speed. Tequila, a style of mezcal, can be distilled only from the blue agave plant; mezcal is made from some 30 other varieties of agave native to Mexico. Very few producers include worms. Maestros del Mezcal—the "vintners" of the agave plant—are appalled by the idea of mezcal cocktails. They recommend two to three shots, tops. It is for savoring (there are notes derived from a mixture of varieties, methods of preparation, and aging), not for getting drunk—but at 55 percent alcohol, versus tequila's 31 to 38 percent, you will feel it.

All apologies to the maestros, but I prefer mezcal in a cocktail. I find that its defining smokiness, from the underground roasting of the agave, transmogrifies the most mundane of ingredients. It occurred to me, as I sipped, that this is an appropriate national spirit for a country that can spin tragedy, the ordinary, even the improbable into something transcendent. It is a Frida Kahlo selfportrait, her beating heart resting on her