

PLACE OR MYTH, UNIVERSITY CITY CAMPUS OF UNAM IN MEXICO CITY

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Abstract

The University Campus of UNAM in Mexico City, also known as CU was constructed as a 20th century example of a modern city during the 1950's, on a lava covered landscape near the pre-Hispanic ruins of *Cuicuilco*. Its importance has always been linked with its past and its nationalistic calling. Therefore, beside the physical construction of this campus, there was also a mythical construction of its meaning, that connects its present existence with its past, determined by the place or site where it is located and the historical conditions of Mexico's modernization. By way of the Spirit of Place, this analysis wishes to reflect on the true connections between the Genius Loci of the CU's physical site and history, and the construction of its meaning, using a poststructuralist and a phenomenological approach.

1. The Place

Located in the southern part of Mexico City, the University Campus of UNAM commonly known as CU is nestled in the lava rocks produced by the eruption of the *Xitle* volcano, 600 B.C. This surreal landscape of exotic plants, black rocks and soil, once referred to as a *pais maldito* or damned country or land was recognized and admired for its beauty by painters like Diego Rivera, Dr. Atl, José Clemente Orozco, architects like Luis Barragán and photographers like Armando Salas Portugal. Here 730 hectares of volcanic rock were transformed into a modern university campus. The Master Plan was created by Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral but more than 200 architects and engineers were required to construct it in less than 2 years, since it was inaugurated in 1952 (Pani, and del Moral, 1979, pp.102-103). The Rectory Building, Main Library and all the 40 different schools or faculties, like the School of Science, Humanity, Architecture, and Engineering are united by walkways, stairs and ramps organized around a central great plaza or super block, responding both a functional modern urbanism as well as to its

symbolic importance. Along with the academic buildings the sports area represented a very important part of the project. The handball courts and the CU stadium are the most significant elements (Pani, and del Moral, 1979). The courts were designed by Alberto T. Arai to mimic the neighboring hills of the Sierra de Las Calderas and to create a perspective by placing each fronton or wall, made of volcanic rock, on a different plane, giving the appearance of the ancient pyramids. The stadium's design has also been praised for its harmony with the site, creating the illusion that the stadium has always been there. The height of the structure was diminished by creating a slope on the periphery and by covering it with volcanic rock.



Figure 1. Original Volcanic Landscape of CU (CU files)

2. The Myth

Since the beginning the location of CU was recognized as important but the significance of what was being built was acknowledged as much more than a university campus. A sacred narrative was developed in order to contribute to the making of a mythical place where the dream of education and progress would turn into Mexico's reality. The myth of CU was passionately delivered by Carlos Lazo, director and general administrator of the project, as part of México's history and destiny, in his speech during the laying of the first stone ceremony in 1950:

"México, a geographic crossroads has been historically possible thanks to the collaboration of diverse forces and cultures... México has been built stone by stone... And the (CU) is one of them. This is a moment for México. In this same site where the Nahoas and Olmecas met in the valley of Mexico, in the pyramid of Cuicuilco, the most ancient culture of the continent appeared from the contemplation of this land and this sky. We are building a University in its most ample sense, integrating the thought, the hope and the labor of everyone, through culture. We are not laying the first stone of the first building of *Ciudad Universitaria*, we are laying one more stone in the fervent construction of our México" (Lazo, 1983, pp. 5-7).

CU was constructed near the lava covered ruins of the only surviving temple of Cuicuilco a Prehispanic city that was abruptly abandoned during the eruption of the Xitle volcano. According to the legend, its people vowed to return to reinstate the lost culture with a new and stronger one (Gendrop, 1982, p. 37). CU's myth was created by linking its Prehispanic origins to a prosperous outlook, as a tribute to México's past and a promise towards its future. Its importance was always to be linked with its past and its national vocation.

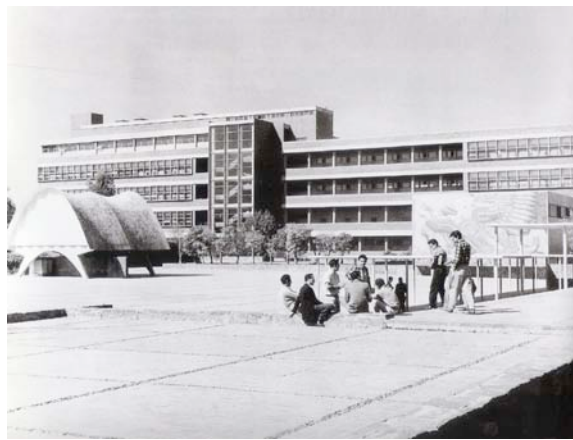


Figure 2. Students in the Central Plaza of CU circa 1958. (Ursula Bernat)

This brief analysis of CU reflects on the spirit of the place that inhabits this site, not as a pervasive notion but as a living experience that comes to life as an interpretation or reading given by its beholders as well as by those that continuously contribute to its creation and recreation. By re-thinking the spirit of place through the use of phenomenological and poststructuralist tools, CU is revealed as a

continuously changing experience that remains true to its history, landscape, city and people.

The main concern of phenomenology is to attempt to understand human existence in the course of everyday life (Von Eckartsberg, 1998, p. 3). As an interpretive study of human experience, it requires two main elements, that of place and that of being. Therefore, place is a central ontological structure of being-in-the world partly because, we exist as embodied beings or "body subject" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 76). We are bound by our bodies, therefore our bodies conforms our perception of the world in terms of here-there, near-far, up-down, above-below, and right-left; therefore influencing the way we perceive the diverse phenomena we experience. Place is not only a central ontological structure it is also the origin of human experience: "place, is at once the limit and the condition of all that exists...Place serves as the condition of all existing things...To be is to be in place" Casey (1993, pp. 15-16).

In contrast, Martin Heidegger establishes a metaphysical ontology where "being" is the right and sole theme of philosophy. "This means that philosophy is not a science of beings but of being." However to confuse phenomenology and ontology is an easy mistake to make. Yet, an appearance is "that which shows itself in something else" (1962, p. 54), while a phenomenon is "that which shows itself in itself" (1962, p. 51).

3. CU, Phenomenon or Appearance

Therefore a location as a simple position in space can be understood as a phenomenon while a significant place or the Spirit of Place can be considered as an appearance. The spirit of the place shows itself in something else. It is interpreted as a unique and distinctive place, experienced and often celebrated by people. Borrowing Heidegger (1962, p. 34) explanation, the spirit of place can not exist apart from the people that experience it, just as people do not exist apart from it but, rather, there is, an "undissolvable unity" between them (Stewart and Mickunas, 1990, p. 9).

The concept of the spirit of place can only be conceived by people that believed in the intangible, by those that believe and perceive places as having a soul, which can be found in the genius loci, or guardian spirit that gave the special characteristics of that site. The relationship between this sort of place and people is so intertwined

that not only the people dwell respectfully in this place but in return this place nurtures and protects its people. Nowadays it is difficult to find these places because there is a lack of syncretism or symbiosis between places and people. Places are mere locations. This is not the case of the CU, since it has kept a tight relationship with its dwellers and visitors.

This "existential" phenomenological explanation affirms that it is practically impossible to ask whether people make the spirit of the place or that it makes people, because both always exist together in what could be considered a holistic connection. In order to understand this subject-object dichotomy the concept of intentionality was established since all human experience and consciousness necessarily involves the context for the meaning of that experience. It requires an experience of various types that include perception, imagination, thought, emotion, desire, volition, and action. Thus, the experience includes passive and active elements that are observed, lived, or performed. In this sense, it involves perceptions and memories, their meaning as well as their interpretation.

CU can be considered an appearance since the interpretation of an experience as a significant place or the spirit of place requires a meaning and its interpretation, it can be considered as an appearance. As such it shows itself in something else, in this case it shows itself as a meta-language that can be interpreted as a text; as a series of signs, which in turn are divided into signifieds and signifiers (Saussure, 1983, p. 66).

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, language works via the pairing of a signifier or object and signified or concept. The first one is material while the other is abstract, but what is crucial is that the relationship between them is arbitrary. These two are subjectively related in a continuously undecided manner. Jacques Derrida uses his deconstruction theory to reveal the inherent instability and indeterminacy of meaning. He claims that due to the slipper relation between the signifier and the signified, meaning is never present but is always deferred because it is the direct result of a sign's relation to other signs (Derrida, 1978). The difference or 'Différance' between the thing and the word necessarily involves a gap which allows a sign, the potential to signify infinitely, again and again, each time in a different context.

For Derrida all texts exhibit '*differance*' which allows multiple interpretations. Meaning is diffused since texts give endless possibilities, making it impossible to obtain objectivity or truth. When

Derrida states "there is nothing outside the text" (1978, pp. 278- 294), he establishes that only through mediated forms like language one can have access signification. Text or language presents presence through mediation; making these mediated forms the only available forms of presence because meaning cannot appear outside of a medium.

Using these notions, a signifying place as a text or a meta-language is also full of assumptions that are constantly being interpreted and re-interpreted as they create and recreate continuously our notion of reality. These signifying places structure and shape the way we understand reality. Therefore, the spirit of a place can be explained as an interpretation of a meta-language those meaning can only be made available through its signs or elements that appear as its mediated forms.

The meta-language of the CU is constituted by its physicality or tangible elements, such as its building, landscape, plazas etc. But it is also constituted by its intangible elements that can not be perceived through the senses, and that exist only in connection with past events, experiences and preconceptions present in the memory of its inhabitants. Therefore this meta-language or 'text' is not a natural reflection of the world it is an appearance. It structures the interpretation of the CU and as a language; it shapes and creates what we understand as CU's reality. As a result, CU is interpreted through a meta-language those meaning is constantly being created and recreated. Although it appears as a tangible entity it is nevertheless an appearance that can not escape its differentially and infinite repeatability.

Conclusion

Therefore, there are places or rather locations that ontologically exist as coordinates in space and time. These phenomena however are not signifying places or possess the Spirit of Place since these are not appearances for they neither have intentionality nor meaning. As such, these places do not exist in the mind and spirit of the people that visit them. The spirit of place resides in a continuous yet arbitrary construction and reconstruction of meanings and internationalities in a meta-language that is infinite, alive and ever-changing.

CU is a location and a phenomena but more importantly it is an appearance a meta-language. Since its mythical and physical creation CU has generated integration between itself and the people that

experience it. Conceived and built at a time when Mexico's aim was to achieve both development and progress. CU was created as an emblematic and iconic site that represents Mexican modernity.

Today CU is not the same; it has changed both in its physical presence and symbolic and historical absence interpreted through the eyes of its beholders. CU has transformed, its myth remaining faithful to its past and in the new light of its present. It has become a living museum where sculptures, architecture, murals and landscape are enjoyed by students and tourists alike.



Figure 3. Night activities under the Central Library at the main campus of the CU. (Janet Jarman for the New York Times)

It is also a popular Sunday outing for local families that wish to enjoy its open spaces, gardens and footpaths. It has become an ecological reserve of over 700 hectares in the middle of one of the world's most populated city. And it continues to grow and transform by conserving and renovating its buildings and by introducing new and exciting additions, such as the Tienda Pumas, and Bicicentro built in 2006 and the new University Cultural Center designed last year by Teodoro González de León (Leal, 2007).

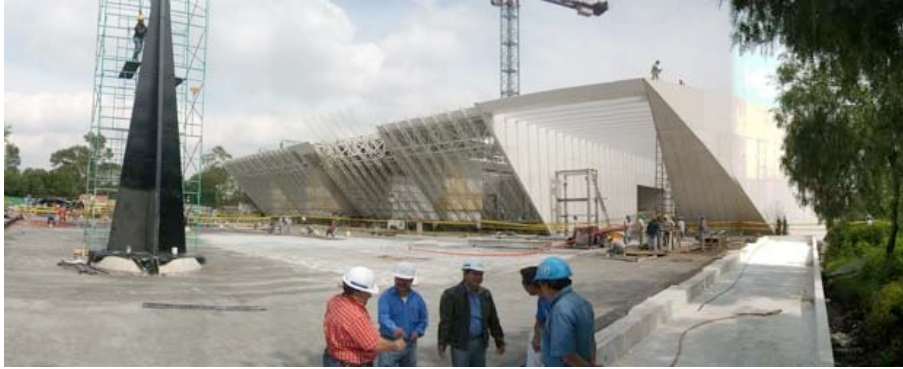


Figure 4. Construction of the new University Cultural Center. (PISO 12)

CU has evolved, changed and transformed. It was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2007. This recognition reaffirms the meaning and significance of the original project as a mixture of both tangible and intangible values inscribed in its buildings, murals, and site.

What is CU and what will CU become? Perhaps this question is similar to the question posed by the Great Khan to Marco Polo in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972, p. 163). Kublai asked Marco: "You, who go about exploring and who see signs, can tell me toward which of these futures the favoring winds are driving us." To which Marco Polo's answer would perhaps be also suitable in the case of CU, "At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of light in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them."

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