

The Central Library building murals of The University City (UNAM), an embodiment of Mexico in the 1950's

LUNA VALERIA RESTREPO*

* Correo electrónico: luna.valeria.restrepo@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper will examine the Central library of the University City of the UNAM, which opened in 1956, built on 16 thousand square meters and is now part of the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2007.¹ Under the supervision of Carlos Lazo, Juan O’Gorman created an iconic mural onto the walls of the library. This artwork integrated into the architecture of the university is only one of many, which participates to what is often qualified as the “synthesis of the arts”. The synthesis of the arts will be considered as works of art linking an iconography through different mediums and processes, and highlighting the importance of collaboration and the effects of each material involved.² This paper argues that the Central Library of the University City of the UNAM is an emblem for the synthesis of the arts, which embodies Mexico in the 1950’s. I will examine the vision of a synthesis of the arts in Mexico City at this time, analyse the Central library and its aim to embrace a socially united Mexican society, and explore the limits of the synthesis’ practical application.

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- 1 ARTIGAS HERNÁNDEZ, Juan Benito. La ciudad universitaria de México y su inclusión en la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO [en línea]. Apuntes: *Revista de Estudios sobre Patrimonio Cultural - Journal of Cultural Heritage Studies*. Apuntes, 2009, 22, no. 2, Bogotá, p. 104-115. <<http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/apun/v22n2/v22n2a02.pdf>>.
 - 2 DE LA ROSA, Natalia. Integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo [en línea] <<http://campoderelampagos.org/critica-y-reviews/12/1/2019>> [Consulta: 7 febrero 2019].

“It is an american woman disguised as a China Poblana”,³ said Siqueiros, one of the key muralists of the 1950s, in relation to the mural of the Central Library’s wall of the UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México)’s University City. “China poblana” refers to a traditional clothing for women in Mexico City. As much as this humoristic quote gives us a reason to smile, it says much more about the Mexican identity in relation with its self-assertiveness and its contact with the international scene. The library opened in 1956, built on 16 thousand square meters and is now part of the UNESCO World Heritage List since 2007.⁴ Under the supervision of Carlos Lazo, Juan O’Gorman created an iconic mural onto the walls of the library. This artwork integrated into the architecture of the university is only one of many which participates to what is often qualified as the “synthesis of the arts”. I will consider the synthesis of the arts as works of art linking an iconography through different mediums and processes, and highlighting the importance of collaboration and the effects of each material involved.⁵ I argue that the Central Library of the University City of the UNAM is an emblem for the synthesis of the arts which embodies Mexico in the 1950’s. I will examine the vision of a synthesis of the arts in Mexico City at this time, analyse the Central library and its aim to embrace a socially united Mexican society, and explore the limits of the synthesis’ practical application.

From the outset of this essay, it is important to establish the birth of the synthesis of the arts as a major cultural agent in Mexico. I will go through the development of this synthesis in Mexico as well as its influences (particularly the muralist heritage) and its position as a response to the rise of a new modernity.

The aspiration for a synthesis of the arts was largely nourished in Mexico City. The Central Library was designed in 1948 by Juan O’Gorman working with Gustavo Saavedra and Juan Martínez de Velasco⁶ and entirely covered with a mosaic by O’Gorman as a result of this flourishing artistic culture.⁷ Natalia de la Rosa, in her article “integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo” (plastic integration and public art: from the well-being State to new liberalism), offers us an insight of the rise of this synthesis. In 1933, the term “integración plástica” (plastic integration which often refers to the synthesis of the arts) first emerged with the painter and muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros referring to a dynamic and collective type of painting.⁸ However the term evolved with different historic contexts, responding to discussions around the future of the nation. The author also, refers to the “talleres” (workshops), which have been key to the artistic production of this time: the “Taller de integración plástica” (TIP), created in 1949 and clearly influenced by the Bauhaus in its desire to cease the separation between “low” and “high” arts, as well as the “Taller de Artesanos ‘Carlos Lazo’”, amongst others.⁹ The latter workshop, was founded in 1954, by Carlos Lazo, manager of the University City project. As an active agent in the rise of the synthesis of the Arts in Mexico, it is important to establish the relationship between his role in the history of this concept, and his role in the supervising of the Central Library, to observe the building as part of a broader aspiration that is the synthesis of the arts. Moreover, this artistic evolution was not only observed within a pedagogical approach (workshops), but in the artistic and architectural production of this time. The Central Library was one of many buildings constructed during this artistic and architectural growth. One of the best examples is the “Teacher’s School” in Mexico City, built in 1948 by Mario Pani, made in collaboration with the

3 DE ANDA ALANIS, Enrique Xavier. The Preservation of Historic Architecture and the Beliefs of the Modern Movement in Mexico: 1914–1963 [en línea]. *Future Anterior: Journal of Historic Preservation, History, Theory, and Criticism* 2009, 6, no. 2, p. 58-73. <<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/387038>>.

4 *Op. Cit.* ARTIGAS HERNÁNDEZ, Juan Benito. La ciudad universitaria de México y su inclusión en la Lista del Patrimonio Mundial de la UNESCO.

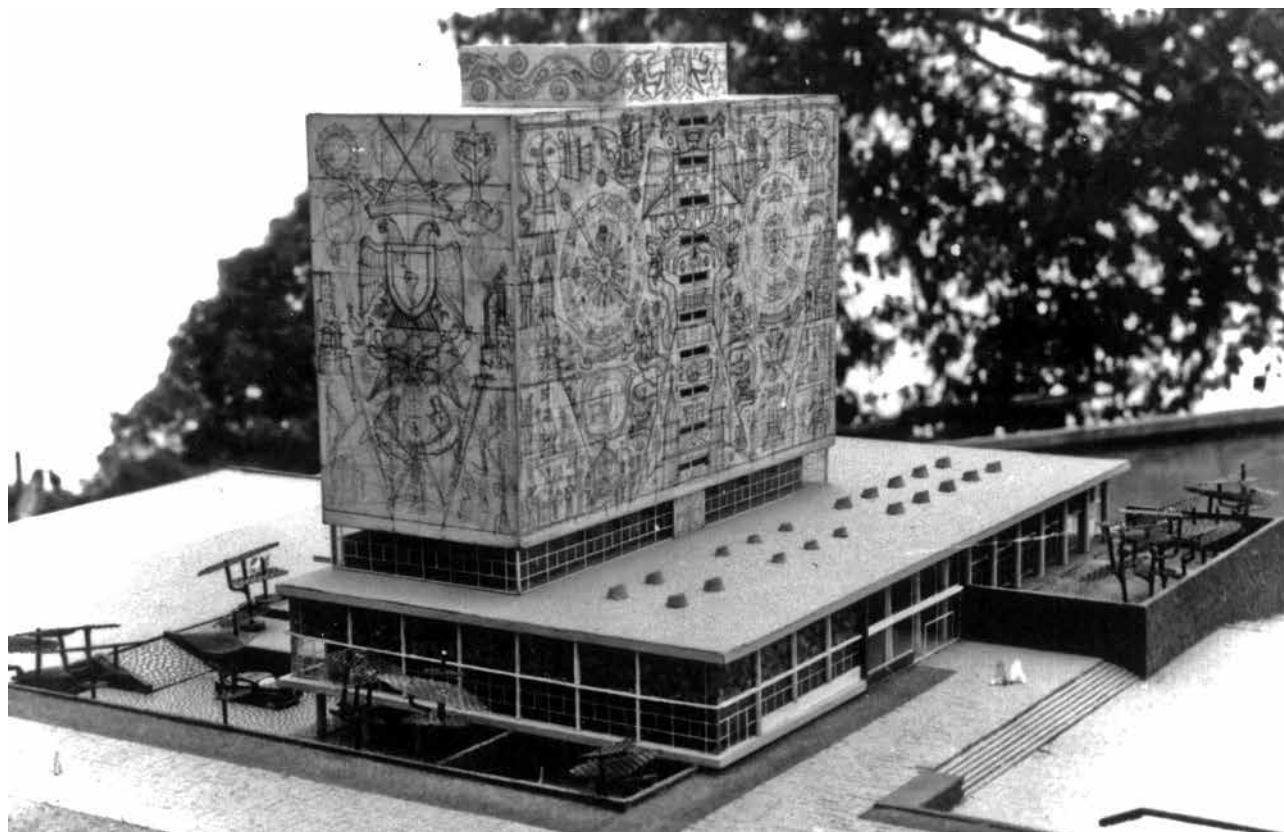
5 *Op. Cit.* DE LA ROSA, Natalia. Integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo.

6 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. El edificio de la Biblioteca Central [en línea]. Acerca de la biblioteca. <<http://www.bibliotecacentral.unam.mx/murales02.html>> [Consulta 14 abril 2019].

7 HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), 138.

8 *Op. Cit.* DE LA ROSA, Natalia. Integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo.

9 *Ibid*



painter José Clemente Orozco and the sculptor Luis Ortiz Monasterio and features a significant mural painted by Orozco for the “social-realist” school, “the subject of Orozco’s mural is a classical one: the struggle against the darkness of the past, and the emergence into an ideal enlightened future.”¹⁰ (Damaz, 1963, 129) The “teacher’s School” show us here the use of collaboration between architect and artists and the correlation between the synthesis of the arts and social aspects of the Mexican society of the 1950’s.

The synthesis of the arts in Mexico City arose from a local artistic heritage. The essential movement that we can refer as an influence is muralism. The movement is part of the post-revolution (1910-1920) period. It taught the ideals of the Mexican revolution constituted by working classes demanding more from the Porfirian government.¹¹ At that time, José Vasconcelos, minister

of public education, was essential to the country’s educational program which promoted the Mexican traditions of mural in the pre-hispanic period, as well as the idea that a “cosmic race” that could emerge from the combination of indigenous and Spanish people. Artists travelled to Europe to see French and Italian masters, mainly helped by government funding. Inspired by Italian frescoes, they came back painting public murals which aimed to privilege the collective over the individual and the social over the bourgeoisie.¹² The aim for collectivity within muralism is reflected when gathering different mediums in the Central Library. The mosaic that made O’Gorman for the Central library is a mural as it covers the entire walls of the buildings. It also retakes the subjects that were at the center of muralism as the concept of “cosmic race”. Indeed, as I will further explain, the mural shows not only the violence of colonialism, but its spirituality, and hence, it opens a dialogue around the different mentalities confronted during the colonial period. We can appreciate in the mural a full wall dedi-

10 *Op. Cit.* HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.

11 ROCHFORD, Desmond. Early beginnings. In *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books,

1998. p. 23-31.

12 *Ibid*

cated to pre-hispanic history and Tláloc -god of rain and fertility-, can be observed in the sculptural work onto the base of the building and the fountain of the north entrance.¹³ Lastly, Natalia de la Rosa highlights the heritage of muralism on the synthesis of the arts by stating the different stages of public art in Mexico City: “the Mexican muralist Renaissance (1920-1925), the plastic integration (1940-1960) and the new muralism (Since 1970).”¹⁴ Her article, defining the different artistic periods, show explicitly the development from the muralist Renaissance to the plastic integration.

Finally, the synthesis of the arts represented a need to respond to the rise of a new modernity. The Central Library is itself part of the UNAM which had a big role in the modern politic revindications. It held amongst other events, the anti-Porfirian manifestations, the conferences of the Ateneo de la Juventud (a cultural association), and the manifestations for the medical movement among other political events.¹⁵ The architectural modernism was expressed through the mix of European functionalist influences and local ones. Indeed, the modern architecture appeared after the revolution and took a shift from its nationalistic stance to a fully European functionalist architecture with José Vasconcelo's successors in the Secretary of Public Education, Moisés Sáenz and José María Puig Casauranc.¹⁶ The architecture had to respond to urban growth and the new need of the population. Kathryn E. O'Rourke declares.¹⁷

In that period architects began to acknowledge Mexican architectural history in new designs even

as they integrated elements from the international languages of Art Deco and Modern Classicism, and responded to avant garde buildings in France and Germany of the 1920s. Simultaneously, the idea that “national” architecture reflected Mexico's history of European and indigenous cultural mixing grew.¹⁸

As much as the European canon influence the architecture, it also transformed itself because of the region. The “modernism” became something else, developing its functionalist aims with the geographical needs. For instance, the materials were one way of adaptation. Luis Barragán was one of the predominant modern Mexican architects who used specific materials as adobe, stucco, cobblestones, and unfinished wood.¹⁹ Other evidences of an adaptation is the use of indigenous motifs and materials, the interest in matching the surroundings with an emphasis on aesthetic, and the synthesis of the arts with the plastic integration onto the buildings.²⁰ The idea of a social Modernism was the gathering of what was called the modern movement (constituted by the European influences and the technological progress as well as the growth of the population's density), and the desire to promote the local culture, as for Vasconcelos program.²¹ One example of how functional architecture was established in Mexico City was the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (1963). Mario Pani, -lead architect-, designed this huge complex with nearly twelve thousand apartments housing some seventy thousand people in the north of Mexico City.²² In the Central Library, modernism is really well illustrated with the O'Gorman's mosaic with natural stones reinterpreting archaic picto-ar-

13 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Muro Norte [en línea]: el pasado prehispánico. Acerca de la biblioteca. <<http://bc.unam.mx/murales06.html>> [Consulta 14 abril 2019].

14 *Op. Cit.* DE LA ROSA, Natalia. Integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo.

15 MARTÍNEZ DELLA ROCCA, Salvador, ORDORIKI SACRISTÁN, Imanol. La UNAM y su incidencia en el desarrollo cultural de México [en línea]. *Problemas del Desarrollo*, 1992, 23, no. 89, p. 163-184. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43837228>>.

16 SCHÁVELZON, Daniel. Los orígenes de la Arquitectura Moderna en México [en línea]: las Escuelas al Aire Libre (1925-1927). <<http://www.danielschavelzon.com.ar/?p=954>> [Consulta 14 abril 2019].

17 O'ROURKE, Kathryn E. Architecture in Mexico City, 1940-1980 [en línea]. *Oxford University Press* (July 2017).

18 *Ibid*

19 Guillén, Mauro F. Modernism Without Modernity [en línea]: the Rise of Modernist Architecture in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, 1890-1940. *Latin American Research Review*, 2004, 39, no. 2 June, p. 6-34. <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=mgmt_apers> doi:10.1353/lar.2004.0032.

20 *Ibid*

21 *Op. Cit.* DE ANDA ALANÍS, Enrique Xavier. The Preservation of Historic Architecture and the Beliefs of the Modern Movement in Mexico: 1914-1963.

22 *Ibid*, p. 29.

chitectonic techniques,²³ onto the modern architecture. Hence, this mix between the application of local techniques and the functional architecture illustrates perfectly the modernity of the Mexican society. In the past O’Gorman has shown involvements with politics and economics in the country, for instance with his public work “Man’s conquest of the air” (1939), which revealed links between the communications and the advances of fascism.”²⁴

Now that I have examined the birth of the synthesis of the arts in Mexico in order to situate the Central Library in its time, I will highlight the aim of the building to embrace the Mexican society of the 1950’s as a socially united one. After a visual analysis, I will examine the mural focusing on its materiality and its embodiment of a synthesis of the Mexican culture.

The Central Library is part of the University City which opened in 1952 under the supervision of Carlos Lazo. This project completed by over 150 architects, co-existed with multiple national artists. It was built following the studies of José María Luján on the running of the main libraries in the world.²⁵ Hence, the aim of the building to stock million of books for members of the faculty was part of the functional architectural movements that occurred at that time, as the function of a university library is pretty similar regardless the country.²⁶ This twelve-floor building has a fountain in front of the north entrance (although it was constructed in 2000) and a garden in the ground floor with fences all around. The mural called “Representación histórica de la cultura” (Historic representation of the culture) by O’Gorman covers the wall of the building (4000 square meters) and is made with volcanic rocks found in different states of the republic and held together with cement.²⁷ The mosaic covers 4 walls which have each

one, specific figural depictions but can be imagined together as a whole, as an “open book” narrating the Mexican history from its pre-Hispanic origins to its modern society, promoting the role of the educational programs.

The color scheme of the murals is constituted mainly by earth and warm tone: orange and brown, cut with a light blue and a neutral white. Every wall is composed by miniature figures, architectural elements, geometric figures and symbols from cosmology. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, makes an iconographic analysis of the mural in a very concise way:

The north wall is devoted to the pre-Hispanic era, with the symbols of the Sun and the Aztec eagle surrounded by Aztec gods. The south wall represents the Colonial period, and two circles with the concepts of the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems. The side walls are reserved for modern culture. The rest of the building may be classed as standard functional architecture, except for the three lava-stone walls which surround the small garden courtyard and on which are carved bold, flat-cut stone reliefs, of obvious Aztec inspiration and well integrated in the stone texture.(...) The overall application of mosaic as exterior wall treatment softens the lines of the building and makes a brutally heavy rectangular block appear to rest lightly on the glass walls of the lower floors.²⁸

The mural is also constituted by dichotomies on each side of the walls which is visually created by a vertical axis in the middle of the composition. The north wall opposes life and death with references to gods associated to the sun and moon. The left side is rather dedicated to the creative deities of life while the right side focus on deities are associated with death and presents narrative around war and human sacrifice.²⁹ The pre-Hispanic deities are depicted but the wall is

23 *Op. Cit.* DE LA ROSA, Natalia. Integración plástica y arte público: del Estado de bienestar al nuevo liberalismo.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Op. Cit.* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. El edificio de la Biblioteca Central.

26 THOMSON, Godfrey. *A Curious Mind: the Secret to a Bigger Life*. London: Butterworth Architecture, 1989. p. 5.

27 *Op. Cit.* Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. El edi-

ficio de la Biblioteca Central.

28 *Op. Cit.* HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.

29 BAHENA, Miguel A., TORRES ESCALONA, Luis Roberto. The UNAM Main Library Juan O’Gorman’s Visual-Historical Meditation [en línea]. *Voices of Mexico*, 1988, 44, p. 81-87.

also constructed around their vision of the origin of the world: two sides coming together to form a whole, an inherent connection between nature and humanity and a synthesis of the sun and darkness to form the city.³⁰ The south wall emphasizes the tension during the colonial time displaying on one side the violent conquest, and on the other, the more spiritual part of it. The left side is dedicated to the latter and focus on the Christian belief of the “good”. In the Eastern wall, the modernity prevails, offering a depiction of the tension between the city and the countryside. In the west side, the dichotomy is less present and O’Gorman was perhaps tempted to realize an actual synthesis of the different walls and where the nation is heading to. The university is here at the center of his thought, for instance with the university sport symbols.³¹

In a more deeper –intrinsic–³² level of understanding, the four walls are connected together as an “open book” which depicts the history of Mexico while –I would say–, expressing the inherent dichotomies of the Mexican society (European versus pre-Hispanic origins, violence versus growth, life in the city versus countryside, traditional versus modernity, amongst others). The eagle, symbol of the nation, comes from the Aztec myth that the founding of Tenochtitlan –ancient site of today’s Mexico City–, started because they were guided by an eagle who ate a rattlesnake on a cactus where the the city was founded.³³ This eagle not only makes a reference to Mexico but to the unity of each wall towards a common element: the nation. The four walls are then revealing several dichotomies and a rich history and are all necessary to the construction of the Mexican society. O’Gorman depicts a modern society that would not exist without its roots.

The repetitions of the symbols displayed on different walls show this inherent link. For instance, the presence of Aztec cosmology (with the sun and moon for example) appears on other walls as the east one which depicts modernity and the scientific advances. These repetitions reveal the presence of pre-Hispanic religious beliefs simultaneously with the advances of a modern society. The walls seen together horizontally could form a whole, as a historical timeline. A tension can be as well observed in the complexity of the mural as a historical timeline. The myriad of miniatures may be qualified as too complex to be didactic enough for the Central Library, while their complexity could be seen as a truthful way to depict the Mexican society and hence, represent a historical truth. Nonetheless, by putting the university in the center of the west wall, one could argue that the didactic aim is realized through the promotion of the UNAM as the final “page” of the mural, a hub of knowledge which participates to the modern synthesis of the timeline.

Since the narrations present on the mural are abundant, I will focus on the bottom section of the north wall’s left side and the eastern wall’s right side, to illustrate my comments about the mural’s meaning. These two sections come into contact in the Central Library and are united through their proportions and grey background. The bottom of the north wall’s left side depicts pre-Hispanic warriors dressed with animal skins and shields called “chimalis”.³⁴ The warriors are “águila” (eagle) which designates a certain type of warrior, guardian of the city and who is, in the pre-Hispanic cosmology, the representation of the day.³⁵ The bottom section of the eastern wall’s right side depicts peasants in the countryside, the snake in the clutches of the eagle, Emiliano Zapata on his horse and a banner with his motto: “Tierra y libertad” (Land and freedom). This scene narrates the revolution in the countryside led by Emiliano Zapata and its agrarian movement,

30 WITTKOWER, Rudolf. Eagle and Serpent [en línea]. a Study in the Migration of Symbols. *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 1939, 2, no. 4, p. 293-325. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/750041>>.

31 *Op. Cit.* BAHENA, Miguel A., TORRES ESCALONA, Luis Roberto. The UNAM Main Library Juan O’Gorman’s Visual-Historical Meditation.

32 SHIN, Un-Chol. Panofsky, Polanyi, and Intrinsic Meaning [en línea]. *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 1990 24, no. 4, p. 17-32. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3333104>>.

33 *Op. Cit.* WITTKOWER, Rudolf. Eagle and Serpent. p. 305.

34 *Op. Cit.* ROCHFORD, Desmond. Early beginnings. p. 23-31.

35 QUIROZ ÁVILA, Teresita. *La Ciudad de México* [en línea]: *un guerrero águila*. México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2006. <http://historiaycultura.azc.uam.mx/libros/La_ciudad_de_mexico_un_guerrero_guila_BAJA.pdf>.

fighting for a better distribution of land.³⁶ The eagle once again unites the narration to the nation and might imply a fight not only for the possession of the land as such, but in a more patriotic way, a fight for the land where Mexico was born, the land of the eagle. Hence, the two sections represent a part of Mexico's history and show an evidence of an interest around cosmology, pre-Hispanic origins, and national symbols. Moreover, the two sections are part of the duality created by each wall. The left bottom section of the north wall nourishes the "life" side of the wall with the warriors "águila" and their symbolics, while the right section of the eastern wall nourishes the countryside part of the wall versus the city. Even though the two sections respond to two different narratives, they are united and might imply the constant fight of the Mexican society regardless the historic period. Their connection shows the possibility of the mural to be read as a book, where the eye wanders as it pleases.

The technique used by O'Gorman for this mosaic is local and reflects the artistic heritage of the country. The application of natural stones onto the walls to create a mosaic was a technique applied as well by Diego Rivera when he planed "La ciudad de las artes" (City of the arts), which was constructed in 1964 after his death and aimed to gather the greatest amount of artworks that he could into a museum in order to show the Mexican artistic heritage.³⁷ O'Gorman, student of Rivera, applied this technique onto the walls of the Central Library with volcanic rocks. "The mural is a medium high relief covered with native colored stones which might symbolize the fusion of the two races, Indian and Spanish, and the birth of the new Mexican race".³⁸ The rocks are not only the reflection of the nation, but their relief also create an allusion to Tláloc, the god of fertility and rain.³⁹ They also refer to the



site of the mural –the University City–, which was built on a solidified lava coat near the ruins of Cuicuilco.⁴⁰ Celia Esther Arredondo Zambrano, in an essay called "place or myth, University City Campus of UNAM in Mexico City" proposes another dimension to the use of volcanic rocks: she says that by choosing this material, the Central Library is the testimony of a desire to connect present and past. As much as the University evolves, its desire to gather past and present remains, as a mythical and physical creation expressed in each of the buildings, including the Central Library.⁴¹

O'Gorman, by depicting the complexity of the Mexican society, creates an "open book" which embraces the Mexican society of the 1950's. Like an "illustrated

36 *Op. Cit.* ROCHFORD, Desmond. Early beginnings. p. 23-31.

37 Museo Anahuacalli. ¿Qué es la ciudad de las artes? [en línea]. <<http://museoanahuacalli.org.mx/ciudad-de-las-artes/ques/>> [Consulta 14 abril 2019]

38 *Op. Cit.* HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.

39 *Op. Cit.* BAHENA, Miguel A., TORRES ESCALONA, Luis Roberto. The UNAM Main Library Juan O'Gorman's Visual-Historical Meditation.

40 Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. La Ciudad Universitaria del pedregal de San Angel [en línea]. Acerca de la biblioteca. <<http://bc.unam.mx/murales01.html>> [Consulta 14 abril 2019].

41 ARREDONDO ZAMBRANO, Celia Esther. Place or myth, University City Campus of UNAM in Mexico City [en línea], Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Campus Monterrey. 10 p.

codex",⁴² it reveals what the Mexican society really is, as it dismantles western myths of what this society is. For instance, the myth of the Spanish seen as god during the conquest, nourished by the egocentric European projections,⁴³ is confronted with the south wall which does not refer to it but opposes the violence exercised on the Aztec against the Christian spirituality felt by the Spanish. The aesthetic of the mural also refers to the Aztec codices that consisted of pictorial representations painted on bark paper and animal hides.⁴⁴ The style of the mural is reminiscent of Adolfo Best Maugard's drawing method, who proposes a method which promotes that art as a subconscious process, waiting to be awakened. The method consists in using seven geometrical forms to highlight the mestizo (pre-Hispanic and Spanish mix) legacy. Vasconcelos was a fervent supporter of this method as well as promoting muralism.⁴⁵ The geometrical forms present in the four walls of the murals and the sculptural works of the fences of the building, are influenced by the Maugard's method and informs us on a common aim: the desire to promote the mestizo legacy, maybe a *need* to do so. Moreover, the common aims that gather the Mexican society and that are represented in the Central Library of the UNAM, mainly with its mural, also reveal a Mexican *spirit*. O'Gorman himself talks about this spirit, mentioning the style of the building influenced by Le Corbusier, too far of the interests of the Mexican, who find their attachment to the Central Library in the appreciation of the murals.⁴⁶ Henry-Russell Hitchcock comments:

"Obviously, functional architecture has never satisfied the Latin American soul. (...) they experience a certain satisfaction at the sight of color and plastic forms and that the most logical structure or the most refined execution is, for them, of secondary importance." This quote informs us on the visual appeal of the Central Library in terms of color scheme and plasticity for the Mexican people. The architecture also embraces the Mexican culture. In fact, modern architecture in Mexico shifted from Le Corbusier's influence to Frank Lloyd Wright's interest in organic architecture and the interest with the building and its site.⁴⁷ In the 1950's, O'Gorman showed these architectural influences in his buildings,⁴⁸ and it can be seen in the Central Library, with the ground floor influenced by Le Corbusier while the building is harmoniously related to its surroundings. The entire campus expressed the Mexican government's desire to combine education and modernization through its site -the Central Library and the entire campus sits on the Pedregal lava beds- showing a rising modernization over the pre-Hispanic roots.⁴⁹ Kathryn E. O'Rourke also evokes "the planning principles of the campus associated with the International Congress on Modern Architecture (CIAM) and evocations of pre-Columbian cities" (O'Rourke, 2017),⁵⁰ informing us on the modern approach for the construction of the University City. By covering the entire walls of the buildings, the mural fusions with the environment, and, we get the impression that it almost becomes the building itself. The aim of gathering artistic and architectural mediums together to share a similar view on the Mexican society of the 1950's only intensifies this vision, by connecting all these form of expressions together and actually creating a synthesis of the Mexican culture.

42 *Op. Cit.* HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.

43 VENTO, Arnold Carlos. Aztec Myths and Cosmology [en línea]: historical-Religious Misinterpretation and Bias. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 1995, 11, no. 1, p. 1-23. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1409038>>.

44 SMITH, Michael E. Aztec culture [en línea]: an overview. *Arizona State University* 2006, p. 1-7. <<http://www.public.asu.edu/~mesmith9/1-CompleteSet/Smith-AztecCulture-WWW.pdf>>.

45 GONZÁLEZ MATUTE, Laura. A new spirit in post-revolutionary art: the open air painting schools and the best maugard drawings method 1920-1930. *Mexican Modern Art, 1900-1950*. Mexico City: INBA ; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1999. p. 28-43.

46 O'GORMAN, Juan. Autocrítica del edificio de la Biblioteca Central de la Ciudad Universitaria. En: *La palabra de Juan*

O'Gorman, edited by Rodríguez Prampolini, 36. México: UNAM, 1983.

47 GUILLEN, Mauro F. Modernism Without Modernity [en línea]: the Rise of Modernist Architecture in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, 1890-1940. *Latin American Research Review*, 2004, 39, no. 2 June, p. 6-34. <https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1203&context=mgmt_apers> doi:10.1353/lar.2004.0032.

48 *Ibidem*

49 *Op. Cit.* O'ROURKE, Kathryn E. *Architecture in Mexico City, 1940-1980*.

50 *Ibidem*

Finally, while I argued that the Central Library of the University City of the UNAM is an emblem for the synthesis of the arts, it is also an evidence of the limits of this synthesis.

When Siqueiros said, “It is an American woman disguised as a China Poblana”,⁵¹ talking about the mural, as I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, to the Mexican modernism which might be defined as the gathering of local roots and European influences. As well as this mix can become an alternation of the canonical modernism, it can also be perceived as a gap between the Mexican architectural culture and the advances of modernism. O’Gorman himself auto criticized the Central Library as a product of the synthesis of the arts and commented that there is not a chance of a harmonious relationship of plastic expression between its architecture and the mosaics that cover the walls. He mentions the European international style having an abstract quality while the mosaics have a national and regional style which results in a decoration for the “cuerpo extranjero de la arquitectura” (foreign body of architecture).⁵² Moreover, the confrontation between abstract forms and figurative expression defends the understanding of the Central Library as a non-harmonious synthesis of the arts.

A painted abstract form, being nonrealistic, is essentially two-dimensional and consequently can be represented on a wall without violating its integrity (...) For one thing, modern architectural forms have been influenced by the same currents of thought that are at the basis of contemporary abstract art.⁵³

Hitchcock also agrees with O’Gorman by applying his thoughts to the Central Library mentioning the lack of similarities between the architecture and the murals

in terms of “style and spiritual content”.⁵⁴ This fusion is for him, “the failure of a grandiose attempt.”⁵⁵ Additionally, the debate around the didactic role of the Central Library is also at the center of this discussion. As a building which takes part in the educational program of the university, the mural might bring a didactic aspect to it. While I argue that the mural is a historic timeline which makes us learn the origins of the country and the current society of the 1950’s, the mural could also be too complex to reach this goal. O’Gorman in his autocritic, declares:

From the point of view of the theme, the exterior murals of the Central Library of the University City of Mexico suffer from the defect of not being clear enough. The people of Mexico ask: what do they mean? Therefore, they do not fill their function as a way of communicating ideas.⁵⁶

As much as this building embraces the Mexican society of the 1950’s regarding its cultural and social evolution, it also highlights the conflicts of this society and help us have a deeper understanding of the Mexican society in relation to the world. The limits of this synthesis in the case of the Central Library also offer an overview of those limits in a broader scope. Could the synthesis of the arts be a utopia? Are we ever going to know if the Central Library was or not completely successful in its desire to reach a fusion? Did the discussions around the building tear apart the population instead of bringing it together? These questions might no be possible to answer but even though the Central Library has raised doubts, the building is still considered today as an emblem for the synthesis of the arts.

To conclude, the Central Library of the University City of the UNAM is an emblem for the synthesis of the arts which embodies Mexico in the 1950’s by fusing the mosaics of O’Gorman with the functional architecture

51 *Op. Cit.* DE ANDA ALANÍS, Enrique Xavier. The Preservation of Historic Architecture and the Beliefs of the Modern Movement in Mexico: 1914–1963.

52 MARTÍNEZ DELLA ROCCA, Salvador, ORDORIKÁ SACRISTÁN, Imanol. La UNAM y su incidencia en el desarrollo cultural de México [en línea]. *Problemas del Desarrollo*, 1992, 23, no. 89, p. 163–184. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43837228>>

53 *Op. Cit.* HITCHCOCK, Henry-Russell. *Latin American Architecture since 1945*.

54 *Ibid*, 15

55 *Ibid*, 14.

56 *Op. Cit.* O’GORMAN, Juan. Autocrítica del edificio de la Biblioteca Central de la Ciudad Universitaria. En: *La palabra de Juan O’Gorman*, edited by Rodríguez Prampolini, 36. México: UNAM, 1983.

of the library and simultaneously fusing the Central Library with the Mexican society, depicting its roots and nourishing its own modernity. This fusion can be seen as an attempt, but nevertheless the impact that the Central Library in Mexico at that time cannot be denied. O'Gorman hoped for a future national and modern architecture⁵⁷ while theoreticians like Sara Topelson, already believe that O'Gorman explored this national architecture through his social concerns.⁵⁸ The contradictory thoughts around the Central Library cultivated discussions, but always seem to converge into one point: The Central Library of the UNAM reflects the society of the 1950's and represents the synthesis of the arts in Mexico, whether it accomplishes or not this concept. I will finish with a reflexion by Nuria Carton de Grammont, a Mexican Professor at Concordia University, which reflects the importance of this building for the synthesis of the arts: "The Central Library of the UNAM, symbol of the modern nation, is as well the reflection of a period's contradictions: the plastic integration is the invention of an aesthetic identity which tried to reconcile to post-revolutionary society with the international demands of modernity."⁵⁹ ■

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57 *Op. Cit.* MARTÍNEZ DELLA ROCCA, Salvador, ORDORIKA SACRISTÁN, Imanol. La UNAM y su incidencia en el desarrollo cultural de México.

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