



Mexico City

Casa Manzanares 25

Descriptive report of the project

In the old Barrio de La Merced neighborhood, east of Mexico City's historical center, the house at 25 Manzanares Street raises its voice as the only 16th-century townhouse located in the city. The data are significant and generate doubts among some specialists. At the same time, it renewed the interest in the study of a transcendent architectural and urban planning period for the development of the metropolis. The most skeptical believe that it is a 17th-century building because it is difficult for a 16th-century construction to have survived the urban transformations and the ravages of natural phenomena that characterized the city's evolution.

Beyond the expected controversy generated by news of this type, the existing technical studies place this house in this temporality. Thus, it was possible to change its destiny, preserve it, and avoid the destruction of important relics of the ancient civil architecture of the city of New Spain.

The building denotes an orderly and simple architecture in which one distinguishes original materials and elements of interior design with indigenous influence and Renaissance contributions made by Europeans who had just arrived in the city.

The project results from a process of more than ten years, from its transfer to the city's public domain, through studies and resource management, to its restoration and opening as a cultural space centered on the neighborhood's child population. The restoration was the most critical step in reviving this building and putting it at the service of one of the most vulnerable sectors of the city, becoming an example of exceptional heritage recovered as an element of social cohesion.

The neighborhood

The south-eastern area of the ancient city of Mexico-Tenochtitlán formed one of the four divisions of the indigenous metropolis. This area was called Teopan, and after the conquest, it became San Pablo Teopan. The foundation of the Convent of Nuestra Señora de La Merced in the 17th century gave it its current name "Barrio de La Merced".

The presence of the acequias (waterways built during the pre-Hispanic city) through which food arrived in the city from southern communities determined its commercial character and consolidated the neighborhood as the seat of indigenous peoples from other regions. Therefore, since its origins, this district has fostered exchanges and cultural richness of a popular nature.

In 1861, the La Merced market was built, which was the city's main supply center until the middle of the 20th century. The district's character has thus been consolidated; an important transformation of the architecture occurred since many houses were converted into warehouses or transformed into small businesses. In 1957, the market was demolished and moved to another area of the city, resulting in a process of abandonment and deterioration of this area.



The neighborhood has remained true to its vocation, but it has become a dangerous and marginalized place that is home to an economically impoverished population over the years. It has a large population of children exposed to drug trafficking rings and other social conflicts.

On the other hand, the district retains its condition of meeting place and popular life. It has a rich history that manifests itself in many tangible elements, since 40% of the buildings considered monuments of the Historic Center are in this sector, which has almost one square kilometer.

The house « Casa Manzanares 25 »

The district's commercial and popular history has also left its mark on the architecture; Manzanares 25 is a notable example for its materials and the composition of its interior elements. The building was practically lost from the architectural memory of the city until the updating of the National Catalog of Immovable Historical Monuments by the National Institute of Anthropology and History highlighted its presence, attracting the attention of authorities and academics.

The house is built on land located towards the limits of the old town of Mexico-Tenochtitlán. In its northeast corner passed a ditch that determined the enclosure of the property in relation to the alignment of the street and the layout of certain rooms.

In 2010, after having had different uses, the house was occupied by families who lived in highly precarious conditions. The building was initially expropriated to be rehabilitated for housing. However, it was decided to use it for cultural purposes for the benefit of the community.

In 2016, works began to save the house. The first activities were geotechnical analyzes which allowed us to verify that the building dates from the 16th century, although it shows interventions from the following centuries. The remains of the old moat, the masonry foundation to which the plinth of the enclosure is fixed, the supporting elements made of masonry of irregular tezontle and chiluca freestone pieces and the use of adarajas, are relics that confirm the age of construction.

The building has a straightforward architectural composition; 17 adjoining rooms are aligned over a more or less rectangular plan, all around a central courtyard. The whole construction is of one body, which also makes it unique, as most of the buildings in the historic center are taller.

The architect Juan Benito Artigas, a specialist in 16th century New Spain architecture, maintains that the building's interior design is associated with the houses of the indigenous population living in New Spain at the time of the conquest.

In Mesoamerican times, this type of house was common to reunite a "large family" of natives, where lived the head of the family, and each of his descendants with their families occupied a room around the central patio, which was in common use.

The restoration

From the first discoveries on the house, a series of technical studies were carried out to determine its original materials, its deterioration, its subsequent modifications, and to define the restoration project. The work was



carried out with the National Institute of Anthropology and History and was led by Juan Benito Artigas and Rubén Rocha, specialists respectively in architecture and historic structures.

The building plan has been modified by 20th-century constructions used as warehouses and stores located on the original patio of the house.

The main facade had been modified, retaining only the access and its stone frames; the other openings had been enlarged to open commercial premises towards the street. The side facade had also been modified with the creation of large openings.

Most of the rooms had lost their original walls and were even exposed to the elements; in other cases, they had been replaced by questionable systems or reinforced concrete, compromising the structural behavior of the building.

With the analysis of materials and documentary sources on traditional building systems relating to the time, the building was freed from the remains of ironwork on the walls, unnecessary concrete surfaces, lintels and windows with impoverished wood, damaged mosaics, partitions and coats of paint discordant with the original material of the building.

The traditional beam system has been reconstructed in most roofs; in others, where the rooms had been heavily transformed, contemporary systems – but compatible with pre-existing systems – were used.

For the consolidation and restoration of the walls, parapets and planks, original systems were used with materials similar to those found on the site, and existing cracks were also treated. Adarajas, lintels and stone cornices, plinths and ironwork were recreated, and decorative elements such as gargoyles, parapets and stone reliefs. Openings that changed the image and structural behavior of the building were closed, in addition to reintegrating a final pictorial layer on all the walls.

The carpentry of the doors and windows has been renovated; stone slabs have been reintegrated into the patio floor, giving uniformity to the surface, and a new finish has been given to the floors of the rooms by means of concrete and an intentional oxidation process.

The shared wash house located in the courtyard was saved. Due to the new use of space, it was necessary to integrate a hydraulic and sanitary network, as much as possible free from the original walls of the building, connected to the sanitary network that had been integrated into the property in the first half of the XXth century. Finally, in accordance with the new use of the building, electrical and lighting installations have been introduced without altering the historical elements.

Children first

Although the community did not directly participate in the restoration project, during the restoration period of the house, workshops and activities were carried out in the public space near the house with the children from the neighborhood in order to generate bonds of trust, ownership and identity of their neighborhood. The boys and girls gave their opinions and participated in making decisions about what activities would take place inside the house as the project was designed to make them the primary users.

In December 2018, the house was inaugurated as a new cultural space in the district of La Merced.



Currently, there is a new program for the exploitation of the site, with various spaces for recreational and collective teaching of various artistic disciplines such as painting, music and body expression, as well as kitchen, urban gardens, carpentry and other traditional trades, in addition to having a games room and an auditorium.

In the culture of Mexico-Tenochtitlán, poetry, song and dance were official and governed by an institution called Cuicacalli or Casas de Canto, where boys and girls met and where art was a "language" understood as "flower and song". As it is the oldest dwelling house known to date in the city and given its notable pre-Hispanic cultural load, the project has been oriented towards this concept.

The formation of a small site museum in the building is also underway. It will tell the story of the neighborhood and the process of salvaging the house. The objective is to make inhabitants and visitors discover the cultural values of the property and the neighborhood, starting from the idea that people must appropriate heritage and, at the same time, it must be a tool to strengthen the roots and identity of communities.

After a little more than two years of operation, the experience is that this restored space generates a positive impact because it is an exceptional place for the conviviality and the cultural development of its childish population and is a reference in the field.

Courtesy translation