

A Quiet Icon

BY FRANCISCO QUIÑONES

Mexican slang contains few words as charged with historic meaning and indicative of the idiosyncrasy of the entire nation as the adjective *malinchista*. Referring to someone who privileges anything foreign over that of its own culture—a person disloyal to their own origins—*malinchismo* is a term that originated during the Spanish conquest that still haunts Mexican society to this day.

When speaking of traditions Mexican culture is incredibly rich. So it is ironic that is extremely underappreciated by a majority of its population; a society *malinchista* to the bone. This condition not only overshadows all areas that comprehend the apparatus of the entire culture but also manifests in an explicit inability to be “critical”. Architectural criticism—the fundamental reflection of our profession on itself, its values, and its worth—is not safe from the affliction of *malinchismo* either.

Museo Jumex arrived in Mexico City in November 2013, a new

architectural landmark in a city increasingly overflowing with them, swinging its doors open into the burgeoning cultural and commercial center known as *Nuevo Polanco*. British architect David Chipperfield’s office led the design of the building, their first in Latin America. The museum—a building type that has slowly become Chipperfield’s specialty with more than a dozen amassed around the world—houses in this case the private art collection of the *Jumex Foundation*, an institution created by young Mexican heir Eugenio López, with the mission to promote the production, reflection, and knowledge of contemporary art in Latin America.

The critical response to the Museo Jumex in the weeks since its opening have been nothing if not friendly.

Reviews alternate between shades of superficial description. According to most, Chipperfield’s building is nearly flawless; “*successfully holds a dialogue with the city,*” “*engages with its urban context,*” “*corresponds to the eclectic nature of the neighboring buildings,*” “*has a sophisticated and modern atmosphere,*” or “*it is sensible to Mexico’s weather*” If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. But more importantly, whatever happened to architecture being a cultural practice, whose impact on the city goes beyond the material and spatial, into the social? According to the present crop of criticism available in Mexican architecture, the priorities of building are in dire need of reformulation.

According to the architect, the first concern



Museo Jumex, 2013, David Chipperfield Architects

was to design a museum suitable to its context. In several interviews Chipperfield expressed his worry about the context, calling it “unclear,” and justifiably so considering its precarious site. The museum’s parcel is small and triangular—not easy to work with according to the architect—delimited at its back by a 23-story tower, at one of its sides by a road, and on the remaining side by train tracks. A few meters beyond those tracks sits one of the biggest multi-purpose complexes in Latin America—*Plaza Carso*—composed of five residential and office towers, a shopping center, a 1,500-seat theater, and the recently controversial *Museo Soumaya* designed by Mexican architect Fernando Romero for the world’s richest man, Carlos Slim to house his art collection. Indeed, this context is any urbanist’s nightmare and presented a huge challenge for the architect.

At first visit the positive critical response seems justified. The elements that make up the envelope—its shape, openings, and material—were deftly chosen and seemed to successfully carry out the architects’ earlier stated intentions. The geometry of the box appears strong enough to stand up to

its challenging setting—still and hulking, without directly competing with the giants that surround it. Its openings to the outside seemed right for the purpose of a contemporary art museum, and the material elegant.

Approaching the entrance of the museum from the plaza it became clear that in order to achieve the so-called full permeability of the building, the architect had lifted up the façade. In several interviews, Chipperfield argued that the lifting-up of this façade allowed for the building to have a dialogue with its own plaza and therefore with the city. More than inviting, the

lifting-up of that “skirt” letting the street in feels kind of moderate, and thus fails to draw you from the plaza to the museum as shown in the preliminary renderings released by Chipperfield’s office, which depict a situation not achieved on site.

Inside, the building’s core is composed of a small public elevator, a freight elevator, and a staircase. Together they form what is surely the best part of the building. The details are simple but masterfully executed, everything from the encounter of the travertine on the walls and floor with the stainless steel elevators, to the perfect





welding of the steel plates that give shape to the handrail for the staircase, to the exceptional quality of the concrete walls is sublime. Before making my way up to the 3rd floor I decided to take a detour and go down to the basement where the museum bookstore, auditorium, and bathrooms are located. The lower floor was no exception; the details and construction quality in the bathroom and public areas were executed according to the highest standards and reflect the seriousness with which the

architect took his job. What was perhaps the biggest surprise was the design for the floor in the bookstore with its palette of marble varieties—a breath of fresh air in a building as controlled as this.

The 3rd floor gallery—supposedly the museum’s main gallery space—is sadly a different story. In an interview with a local architecture magazine, Chipperfield expressed his excitement over the last floor gallery space, “*it should feel like a loft!*” he said. Unfortunately

for the architect, even with its stunning natural light coming in through the building’s signature sawtooth roof, which has given the museum the nickname of “Bart Simpson” among Mexico City’s inhabitants, the moment one steps into this space the expectations drop; the spectacular quality that this space could have had if preserved only as a vast, clear shed for art is killed by its random division with walls that rise from its floor and randomly cut this industrial-looking roof,

pleasing—perhaps—only the museum’s curator. The details and construction quality in this floor and the one below, the other gallery space, are not comparable to everything seen before in the building; from the detail of the slightly crooked blinds that filter the light coming in through the roof, to the inverse encounter of the travertine floor with the white plaster walls where the wall goes down below the level of the floor accumulating dirt no matter what, the main gallery space leaves a lot to be desired. The same story occurs with the gallery space below on the second floor.

Finally, at the end of my visit I went down to the first floor gallery—which saved the day—where I finally found some character added to this otherwise unsurprising building. This gallery—the only one in which the architect’s concern to respond to Mexico City’s unique weather can be actually felt and seen—is a space dramatically perforated on all four sides of the building holding in its center a small, almost precious glass box that can be fully closed by a burgundy thick velvet curtain.

Overall, the museum feels *right*: proper to its context, simple and well finished, open to the city, and indeed correctly

designed for the local weather. Regardless of such appropriateness of design however, a visit to this new icon leaves a sense of palpable despair, both in the building and the public’s response to it. Perhaps the *malinchista* tendency in me had unknowingly generated an undue expectation. Perhaps as well, in simple comparison with Chipperfield’s other major museum projects, the Jumex is too small, and maybe even, in too foreign a context for his talents to shine as they do elsewhere.

Ultimately the critical response to the building

has let down both the architect and the user. Architecture’s ability to make social political critique relies heavily on the critical community. If that community fails the architect by not seriously engaging with his or her work, then the entire apparatus falls apart.

Chipperfield’s new Museo Jumex—just like its critiques—is proper, predictable, and rather boring.

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