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Revisit: Biblioteca Vasconcelos

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The Biblioteca Vasconcelos is not just a building for books, it is much more: garden, cultural space, presidential campaign, and territorial transformation. In the 12 years since its completion it has been closed for two, lived through three transitions in government and been managed by six federally appointed directors. Of the two million books promised for its collection, one-third have made it to the shelves. Of the 5,000 visitors it hoped to receive daily, only around 2,000 attend. It overspent its construction budget by 250 million pesos and runs on an annual budget of 13 million; far from what is required.

As such it has a greenhouse the public cannot visit due to lack of staff, a café that was never built, and a botanic garden that is merely a garden. Even though still incomplete, the edges are beginning to tarnish and small cracks starting to appear. It is a building that in its short history has been called 'the most important contemporary building in Mexico', and a 'white

elephant', in almost the same breath. But what is remarkable is that, where its ambitions founder, the building thrives in unexpected ways.

Located on the Mosqueta main road in the Buenavista neighbourhood of Mexico City, the Vasconcelos Library is a green oasis in a tough urban metropolis

The Biblioteca Vasconcelos site is bound by Mexico City's 37,250m^2 Buenavista Forum mall, a railway station, the city's north-south arterial road, and a former electrical plant. The air is thick, the pavements brittle, and the traffic corrosive. Approaching from the east or west, the library is easy to overlook, its monolithic exterior echoing, compound-like, the graffitied concrete and steel fences that retain the surrounding vegetation. Viewed from a satellite, the site can be identified by its narrow, vertebral roof stretching across an island of green in an otherwise hostile landscape of grey.

The library has been likened to structures unfavourable for human life – mastaba, mausoleum, fortress, prison – and indeed the non-human scale and cold materiality (slabs of concrete, glass, steel and marble) reinforce this impression. Once inside (past the brief patio that links the library entrance to the bookshop), the structure's cavernous, hollowed-out interior of an ossified matrix of suspended, expandable shelves presents the project as an awe-inspiring, chill-inducing spectacular that immerses the first-time visitor in the architects' vision of a library as a container, or 'ark, a carrier of human knowledge, immersed in a lush botanic garden'; derived from the Enlightenment visions of Boullée.

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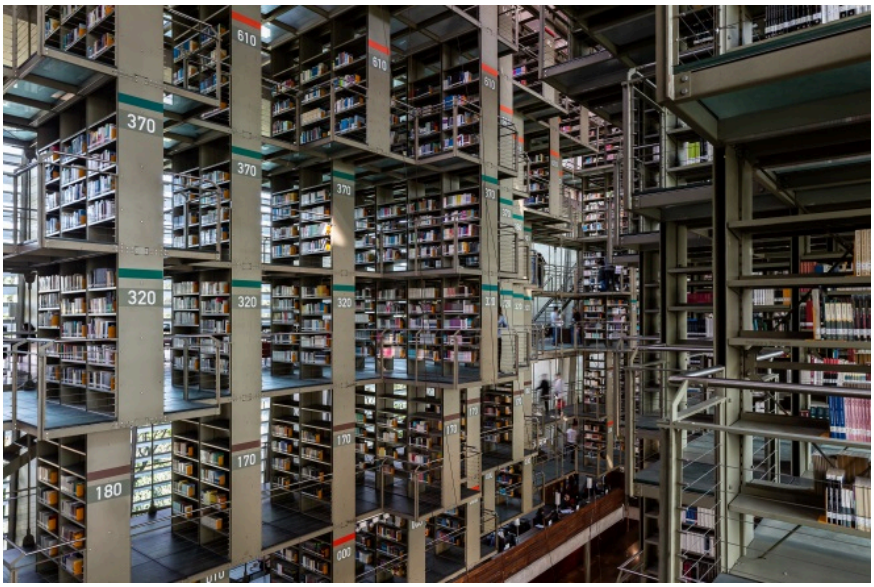


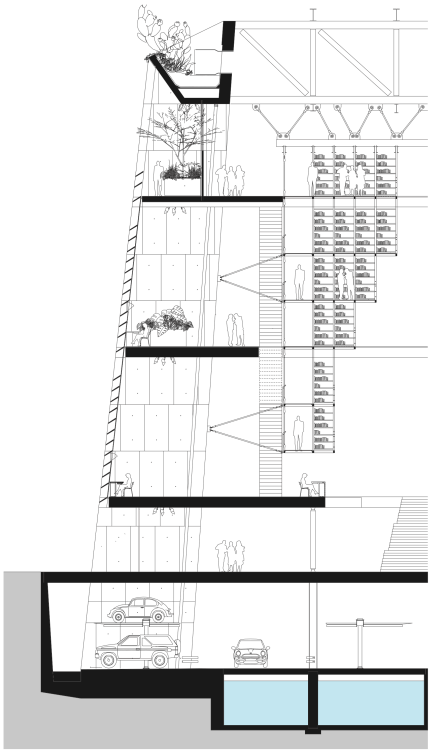
Biblical themes are apparent; Jonah appears in the project's introductory text and in Gabriel Orozco's husk of a dead whale suspended midway above the ground-floor promenade. And yet the hushed or reverent silence that might be expected from such ideas of a library – a place of dedicated study and research – is not sustained. After the gangways have been walked, the stacks climbed and the views of all sides of the city breathed in, subtleties in atmosphere become apparent. Hard edges soften in a growing awareness of enveloping greenery and, acknowledging the benevolence of a complex that turns inwards, we find ourselves at ease in a sanctuary that mitigates the unfriendly conditions at its walls.

> 'This is a library where building and garden, climate and book, learning and resting, are understood as fundamental to the act of reading and thinking as the physical materials themselves'

'Libraries are like cemeteries', reflects Daniel Goldin, director of the Biblioteca Vasconcelos for the last six years. 'They seem silent, until you pay closer attention and are able to perceive a lively murmur.' Visiting the library almost weekly for the past year, I've observed the library used in the way many public (often outdoor) spaces in Mexico City generously allow. Groups of teenagers practise dance routines up against the glass facades on the ground level, outside facing in, using the ground-floor promenade as involuntary audience. Musicians play in the garden. Older men come to read the papers and surf the internet. Students gossip over textbooks and laptops, while couples shoot Instagram Stories and old friends hold leisurely conversations, full volume, around large tables overlooking the city.

Security guards drift about unconcernedly, and open-air balconies on the upper levels allow a gentle cross breeze to naturally ventilate the vast interior. Indirect sunlight filters generously through the skylights and

slatted sides. The library accommodates space for a children's library and play area, and centres for braille, languages and music – all well used – as well as a 500-seat auditorium. Spaces for adult education classes (ranging from Excel to pre-colonial history) were added by the directorship in recent years, and temporary exhibitions and spontaneous performances make full use of the promenade.



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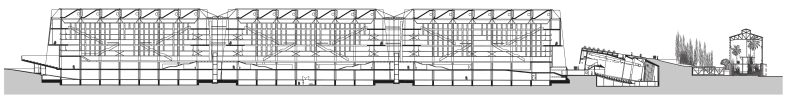

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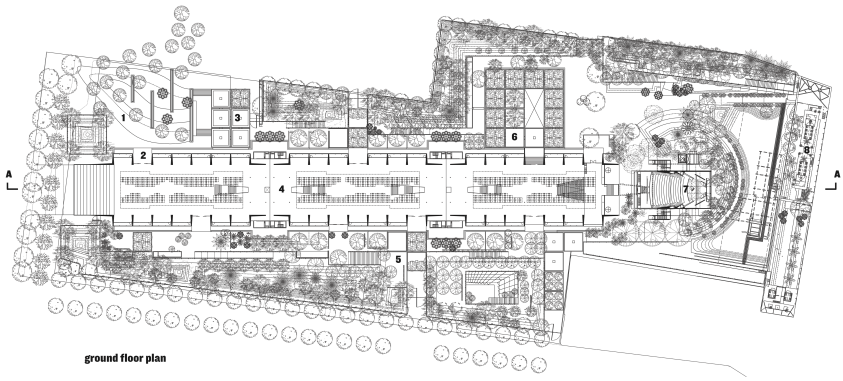

ground floor plan

1 public square
2 entrance
3 bookshop
4 library
5 garden
6 offices
7 auditorium
8 greenhouse

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Goldin confesses to feeling guilty towards the reader, for this is a library that does not serve the reader well. There are no quiet corners to hunker down with academia, and hard edges do little to accommodate soft bodies that look lost and lonely against the scale of the steel. This library is less suited to browsing than roaming, despite every item in the collection being readily available to pluck freely from the shelves. Yet it is here that an

excess of movement and space permits the cultivation of an ambience in which the library comes into its own. Building and garden successfully buffer the noise and pollution from the city, while a sense of the garden permeates to the farthest reaches of the seventh floor. A 2017 survey cites the building's spaces over use of its collection as the main reason people visit, with over half visiting regularly, often twice a week from across the city and its surrounding regions. Many say they come for the generosity and tranquillity of its space, for quiet reflection.

Despite the success of the library in the opinions of those who use it, there are some, including Alberto Kalach, who lament the way it has become 'more of a meeting place' than a place for the dedicated pursuit of knowledge. Certainly there is no denying that the atmosphere of the library is convivial, sociable even, having been explicitly cultivated by Daniel Goldin and his staff to attract a broader demographic. Through initiatives such as curated, highly topical shelves, inclusive and diverse cultural programming, and an incredibly active presence on social media – more than half the visitors are millennials – the library's base is growing. This is a director who has instructed the building's security to allow napping, and who chooses a reduced budget over government intervention, using what limited resources the library has to host its visitors rather than filling its shelves.

The hard edges of the public square at the library's entrance soften into the abundant envolping greenery of the surrounding garden

Goldin admits this careful nurturing of the environment creates 'the conditions that allow for the introduction of the books', for this is a library where building and garden, climate and book, learning and resting are understood as fundamental to the act of reading and thinking as the physical materials themselves. Yet despite differences in opinion of what constitutes a library and its success, the cultivation of conditions for the favourable introduction of beings – be they books, bodies, or buildings – is undoubtedly a vision shared by both director and architect. 'I see no boundaries between architecture and urbanism, as I see no boundaries between architecture and gardens', Kalach admits.

The project for the Biblioteca Vasconcelos was a veritable quagmire of agendas, from the administration of President Vicente Fox dictating this 'jewel in the crown' of his presidency be open to the public by the end of his term, to the micropolitics of the largest international architecture competition held in Mexico since 1896 (the winning team – Alberto Kalach,

Juan Palomar, Tonatiuh Martínez and Gustavo Lipkau – beat the office of David Chipperfield by one vote). Kalach and his team at Taller de Arquitectura X (TAX) were responsible for the executive design and supervision of works – the federal government was responsible for its construction. Given the pressure of an 18-month construction window, two contractors were hired by the government to each oversee half of the building construction. It was built from the inside out, in two halves, north to south and south to north, by 24 construction companies and crashing into a whole down the middle. Tales of corruption, incompetence and disorder are on Google. If you visit you can see the seam.

An electricity plant has been converted into a greenhouse, currently not accessible to the public. Photograph by Margot Kalach

That the Biblioteca Vasconcelos stands, albeit incomplete, is no mean feat. In March 2007, only nine months after its opening, the library closed its doors for nearly two years for essential repairs. The rainy season had arrived and water had started to stream in from the roof, flooding the seventh floor. Its garden lacks the resources to grow beautifully wild (at the mercy of unskilled maintenance) or to fulfil its aspiration as working botanic garden (lack of essential institutional collaboration). And yet the

garden is hospitable and bountiful enough to support a large variety of species of plant, insect and human activity that did not thrive here before.

The last time I visited the Biblioteca Vasconcelos was in October 2018, the week that witnessed the decision by the incoming administration to abort the Foster/Romero designed airport – Mexico's first international competition for a major public work since the Vasconcelos and a project that TAX lost out on, coming in second. While Foster + Partners totally disregarded the site's fragile ecosystem (which has since turned out incapable, literally, of supporting the project's weight), TAX proposed an airport that floated; the ultimate excuse for bringing the lake back to life in a proposal underpinned by 20 years of institutionally supported research. To use the architectural project to make the case for – and attempt – territorial transformation, rehabilitation and organisation, is not merely overreaching ambition. It is a necessity. Mexico City is a city facing unprecedented environmental and infrastructural challenges and the making of architectures, however small, can act with agency in attempts at confronting them.

Architect: Alberto Kalach + Taller de Arquitectura X

Structural engineer: Martínez Romero

Photographs: Onnis Luque, unless otherwise stated

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