

José Villagrán and Enrique del Moral: Pioneers in the Defense of Heritage

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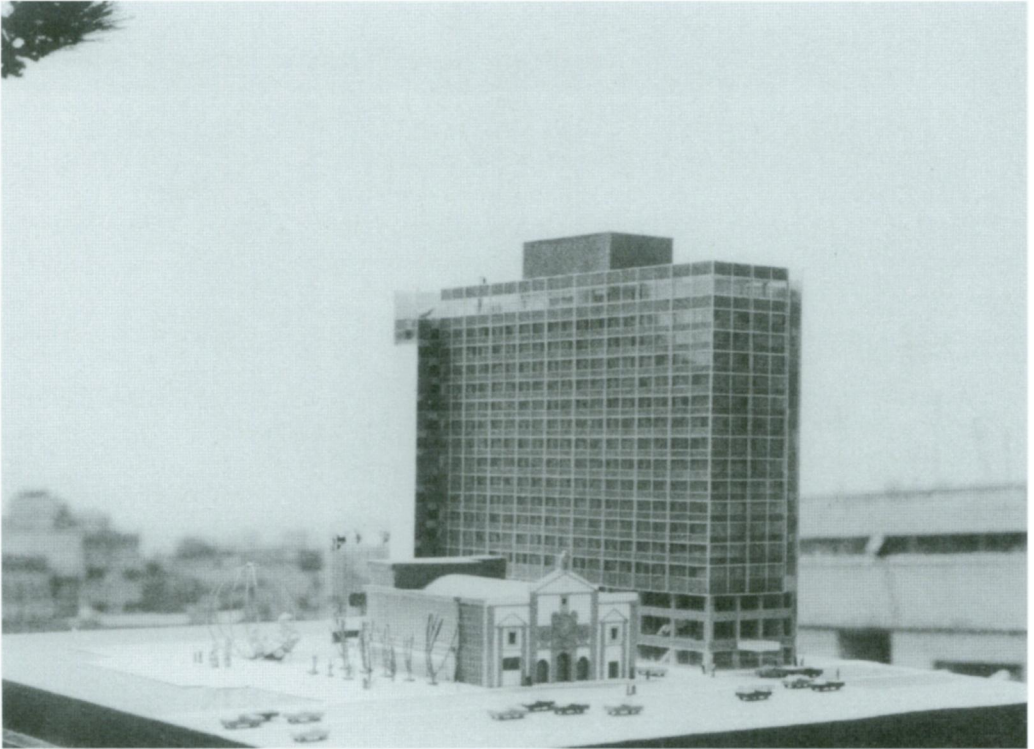
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1. Model of the Hotel Alameda, Mexico City, José Villagrán García, architect, 1961. Photograph courtesy Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA).

José Villagrán and Enrique del Moral Pioneers in the Defense of Heritage

Our past is an integral part of who we are . . . that is why we need to preserve the most representative cultural expressions of that past.

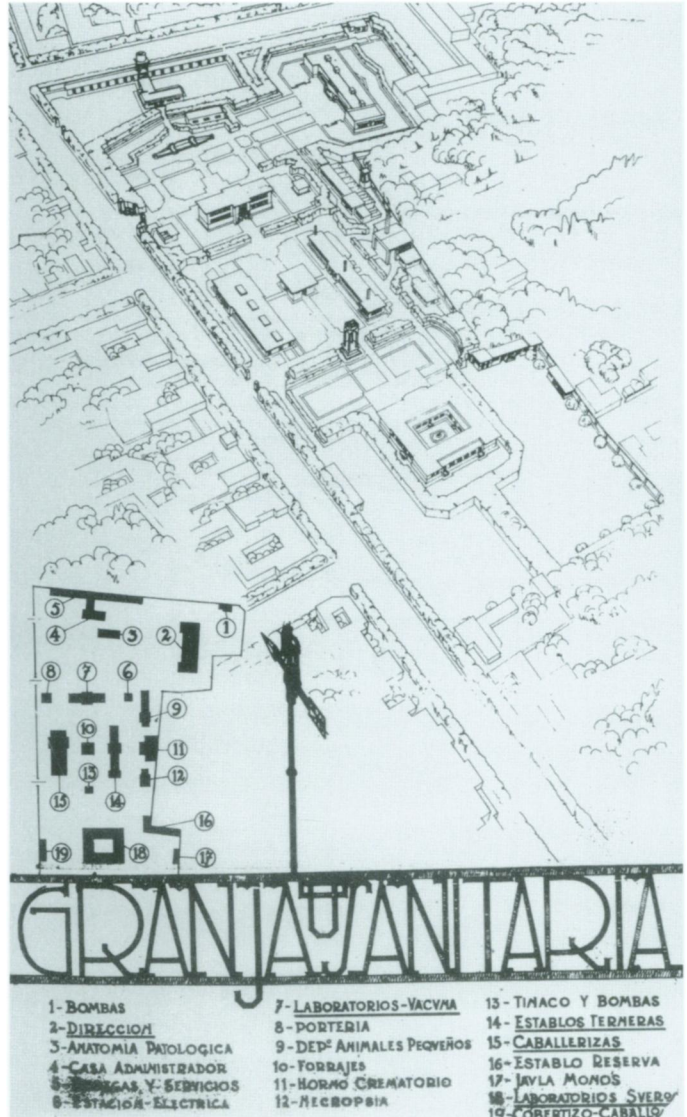
— Enrique del Moral, *Defensa y conservación de las ciudades y conjuntos urbanos monumentales* (1977)

Enrique del Moral's statement may seem uncontroversial to us today, yet there remains a gulf between our belief in this sentiment and its realization, especially if we consider that the "cultural expressions of the past" must today include modern architecture. The two renowned Mexican architects who are the subject of this article, José Villagrán and Enrique del Moral, were pioneers of modern architecture in Mexico and, at the same time, also pioneers in the defense of the country's architectural heritage. The double thrust of their thinking may provide some guidance in how to treat the preservation of twentieth-century architecture.

José Villagrán García

José Villagrán García (1901–1982)¹ is today recognized as one of the masters of twentieth-century Mexican architecture. In 1925, he designed the Granja Sanitaria de Popotla, accepted as the first modern building in Mexico, both in style and in spirit (Figure 2). Parallel to his design work, his theory of architecture and his writings made him a pivotal figure in architectural pedagogy in Mexico. In 1926, he became a professor at the Architecture School at the National University (UNAM), a post he held until 1982. Besides his teaching, he brought together a group of theories and ideas that allowed him to influence several generations of students in a contiguous body of intellectual work. In analyzing his 1963 collection of writings, *Teoría de la arquitectura*,² the influence of French thinkers is unequivocal in his early essays, since Beaux-Arts ideas, especially those of Julien Guadet, were still prevalent at the time of his studies (Figure 3).³ The central point of his proposal was to establish four intrinsic values of architecture: the *useful (útil)*, the *true (verdadero)*, the *aesthetic (estético)* and

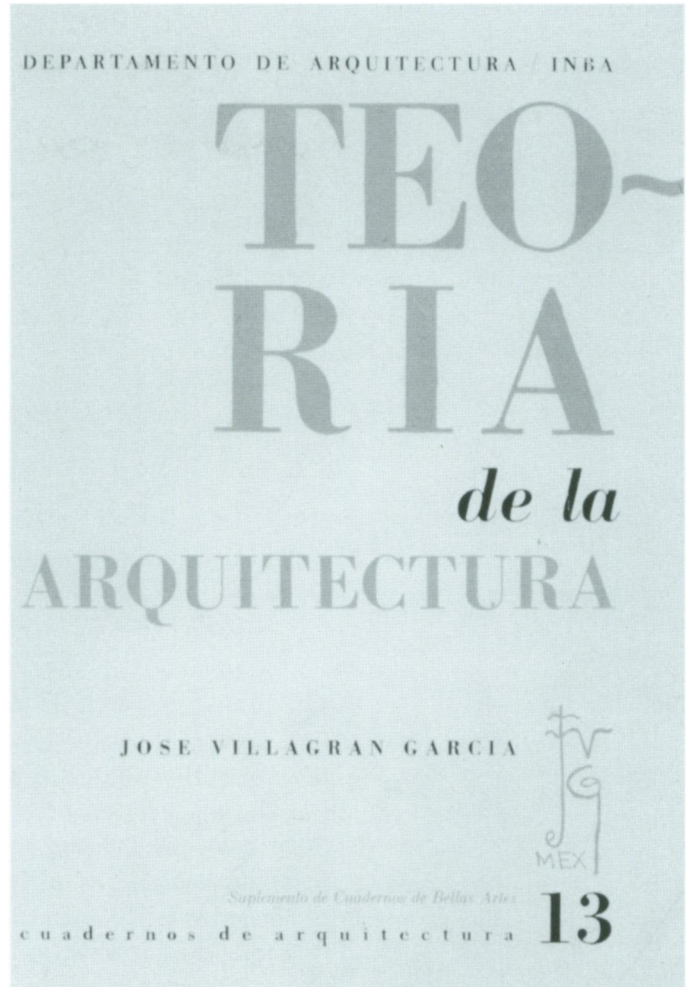
2. Granja Sanitaria de Popotla, Distrito Federal, José Villagrán García, architect, 1925. This complex is widely acknowledged as the first work of modern architecture in Mexico. Courtesy INBA.



the *social* (*social*); the latter was an addition to the familiar Vitruvian trinity of *utilitas*, *venustas*, and *firmitas*. This quadripartite breakdown is fundamental to understanding Villagrán's significance in a country that was emerging from the Mexican Revolution and developing a strong sense of nationalism.

His first projects were inspired as much by the ideas of nineteenth-century French theorists and architects⁴ as by those brought forward by the new European movements of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier, who looked to solve functional needs through pure, well-defined shapes and simple materials. One of Villagrán's main preoccupations was the architecture of hospitals; his major contributions were the hospital for tuberculosis patients in Huipilco (1929); the Instituto Nacional de Cardiología (1937); and the Hospital Manuel Gea González

3. José Villagrán García, *Teoría de la arquitectura* (Mexico City: INBA, 1963).



(1942). In all those instances, his design followed the specific treatment requirements for the particular ailment in which each hospital specialized, and they included the most up-to-date medical equipment. These design ideas sought to simultaneously care for the well-being of the patient and to elicit the most efficient service from the medical staff. In 1942, Villagrán, along with Dr. Salvador Zubirán,⁵ established the Seminario de Estudios Hospitalarios, fostered by the Secretaría de Salubridad y Asistencia Pública (Ministry of Health and Human Services), to rationally resolve the problem of the backward national hospital service. To this end, Villagrán and Zubirán involved architects and doctors alike (Figure 4).

It is also important to note Villagrán's decisive presence in the realm of educational architecture, with the establishment of the CAPFCE (Comité Administrador del programa Federal de Construcción de Escuelas [Administrative Committee of the Federal Program to Build Schools]), also in 1942, which he headed, along with José Luis Cuevas, Mario Pani, and



4. José Villagrán García, Unidad de Academias Médicas del Centro Médico, Mexico, City, 1958. Photograph by Louise Noelle.

Enrique Yáñez. The CAPFCE inaugurated a program of school construction across Mexico. All these schools share a common denominator: Villagrán's care in designing useful, efficient buildings to benefit a large number of people, always cognizant of the aesthetic satisfaction buildings have to offer.

Also in Villagrán's oeuvre, we find a good number of works for private clients, including commissions for office buildings, cinemas, and hotels. He also actively participated in public projects including the markets of San Cosme and San Lucas (1954), and the high schools for the National University (1963–1965), all located in Mexico City. His production was of the highest quality, in line with international architecture, without being shrill, and very responsive to the programmatic requirements. In some instances he worked in collaboration with other architects, including his students, Juan Sordo Madaleno, Ricardo Legorreta, and Enrique del Moral Domínguez.

Enrique del Moral Domínguez

Enrique del Moral Domínguez (1906–1986)⁶ studied at the National University, where he attended Villagrán's classes on composition and theory. The beginnings of his professional career are linked with those of his classmate Marcial Gutiérrez Camarena, whose work shows a firm commitment to find solutions for the working class. Del Moral and Gutiérrez Camarena also designed private homes in the same period, conjugating avant-garde trends with a concern for local influences.

In his individual work, Del Moral worked in hospital and school building, participating in the initial period of the CAPFCE as area chief in his native state of Guanajuato from 1944 to 1946. The school he designed in that period in the village of Casacuarán is noteworthy for its original proposal to employ regional techniques and materials. The use of local resources was, on one hand, of course the result of working in villages that had no access to modern construction techniques, but it also resulted from his particular insight into the rich and appropriate indigenous responses to the local economy, climate, and culture.⁷

Del Moral carried with him above all an interest in housing, and understood that a home is intimately linked to local customs. The houses for the De Yturbe family, in Acapulco (1944), and in San Angel, Mexico City (1946), may be the most representative of Del Moral's work, as they combine a search for tradition within the terrain and the recuperation of the lessons of vernacular architecture to create a new architectural language. It is also worth noting that these houses were erected prior to the celebrated house of Luis Barragán that many consider the pioneer work of Mexican regionalism.⁸ In this manner, Del Moral throughout his career looked for a way to resolve the dichotomy that resulted from the avant-garde trends from abroad and the search for an identity that came from within Mexico, sometimes achieving a remarkable synthesis.⁹ In the later years he participated in many important projects, sometimes in collaboration with Mario Pani, of which the Master Plan of the National University is the most celebrated. (Figures 5 and 6).¹⁰

Villagrán and Del Moral: Preservation Theories

These summaries of Villagrán and Del Moral's architectural careers put their writings on preservation and heritage into the necessary context. In that light, it is critical to note that even if both men invested themselves in the *theory* of conservation of monuments and sites, their architectural work in fact shows few examples related to conservation or restoration. Nevertheless, even though the two scarcely worked directly on notable monuments, they were able to put their theories into practice in the various projects in which they designed modernist buildings within historic city centers, and it is in the relationship between new construction and historic context where Villagrán and Del Moral made their most profound contribution to preservation theory. Also, their significance as designers and teachers accounts for the transcendence of these conservationist proposals among their colleagues and pupils; their influence is wider than their works.



5. Enrique del Moral, Mercado de la Merced, México City, 1957. Photograph by Louise Noelle.

Among their diverse publications, the most noteworthy are the 1967 text by José Villagrán García, “Arquitectura y restauración de monumentos,”¹¹ three lectures given at the Colegio Nacional the year before, and Enrique del Moral’s 1980 book *Defensa y conservación de las ciudades y Conjuntos urbanos monumentales*,¹² published by the Academia de Artes. The circumstances surrounding the publication of both these books are relevant to their content. The Colegio Nacional, of which Villagrán was a member, was founded in 1943 as the main Mexican institution to bestow recognition on scientists and artists. To preserve their status, members of the Colegio Nacional are required to give a certain number of public presentations every year. Likewise, the Academia de Artes, constituted in 1967 with Del Moral as a founding member, brings together the eminent artists of Mexico. The Academia de Artes requested that Del Moral conduct the research that became this book. Both sets of texts have been included in the compilations of their writings, *Teoría de la arquitectura* and *El hombre y la arquitectura*, and were published recently in *Arquitectura y conservación*.¹³

In “Arquitectura y restauración de monumentos” Villagrán proposes to “reach . . . a dynamic criteria that makes us better understand the sense that is assigned today . . . to the restoration of architectural monuments; a criteria that can lead to judge, as well as to do.”¹⁴ It is interesting to see that for him “in each monument that is restored there is a meeting of two architects: the one that authored it and the one that restores



6. Enrique del Moral, Clínica Hospital IMSS de Cuautla, Morelos, 1968. Photograph by Louise Noelle.

it; both, in my judgment, are creators; but both work in reverse in a way.”¹⁵ He then points out the need for a “real theory in the restoration activity,”¹⁶ dedicating himself to the proposition in the meticulous way that is characteristic of his writing.

Villagrán’s work is composed of three parts, corresponding to the lectures as delivered at the Colegio Nacional. In them, Villagrán employs his best rhetoric to demonstrate that the “relatively young”¹⁷ activity of restoration (compared to architecture) can have theoretical precepts or rules that support and guide those who work with them. In the first lecture, he offers an analysis of the main precepts he believes the new theory must support itself in, including the opinions of two unavoidable nineteenth-century authors, Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc in his *Dictionnaire raisonné de l’architecture française du XIe au XVIe siècle*, and John Ruskin in his *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, leading to an analysis of the 1964 International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites, more commonly known as the Venice Charter. Within his lecture he succeeds in something that seems improbable: to demonstrate that Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin in fact possess complementary concepts, the same that we much later find expressed in the Venice Charter.¹⁸

In the second part, the author proceeds to “comment on the contents and synthesize them in an objective definition.”¹⁹ For him “restoration is the art of safeguarding the solidity and the historical shape and matter of the monument by means of

operations and additions that prove its actuality and its programmed finality.”²⁰ He states that restoration is a “techno-scientific art” whose purpose is to protect and extend the life of the monuments, not only through the consolidation of the structure but by the restitution of their “complete state.”²¹

In the third part, Villagrán systematically and methodically exposes his investigations to be a search for the “elemental and foundational ground upon which to build better standards for the restoration architect,”²² where the latter cannot escape “the subjectivity of every restoration” and where his “subjective creations”²³ incorporate themselves into the category of the historic and the appraisal of the aesthetic. For Villagrán, it is of great importance to see this activity as the “art of preserving the solidity and the form-matter of monuments, through operations that exhibit their contemporaneity and programmatic end”;²⁴ in this sense he relates to his own *Teoría de la arquitectura*, where he considers the program as the basis for all architectural procedures.

Despite the fact that he barely pursued his theoretical research in preservation apart from these lectures and their subsequent publication,²⁵ his interest in the defense of heritage was nevertheless present throughout his career. In 1965, when the national committees of ICOMOS (International Council of Monuments and Sites) were organized, Villagrán served on the founding group in Mexico and became its first president. Later, he also became member of the Executive Committee and the Advisory Committee of ICOMOS International.

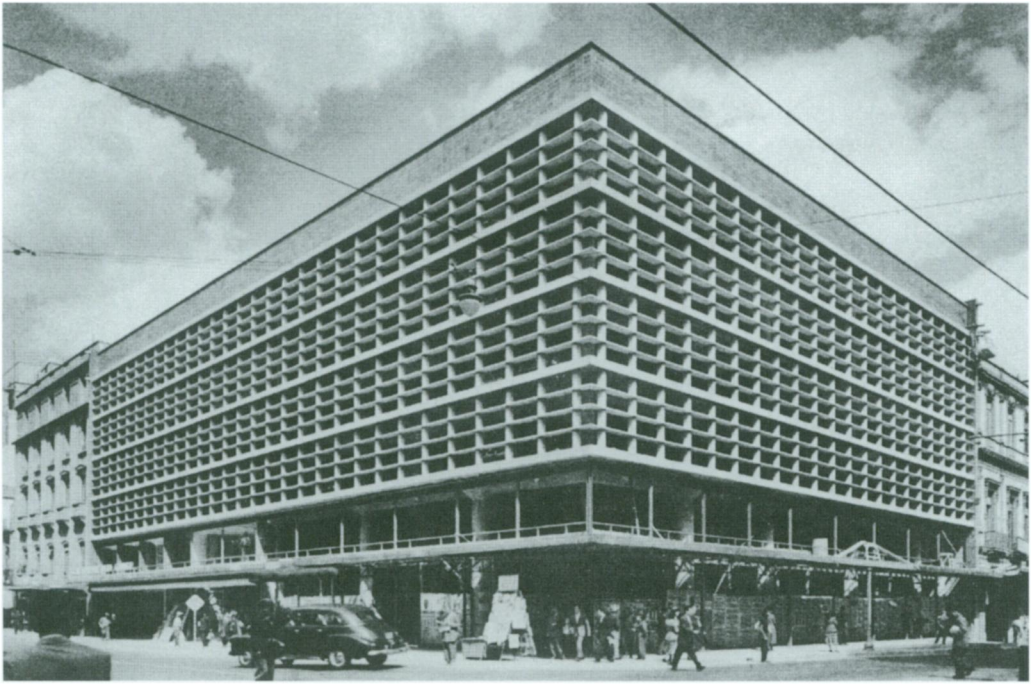
In *Defensa y conservación de las ciudades y Conjuntos urbanos monumentales*, Del Moral offers a perceptive proposal for the protection of heritage that provides an innovative approach, at least in relation to thinking in Mexico at the time: he establishes that one should not only take into consideration the monument but also its surroundings. As quoted in the epigraph to this article, he stressed the importance of the historic context in all preservation decisions, advancing the proposition that “in our cities, what could be known as the historic and monumental old quarters should be kept in order that it may be recognized.”²⁶ He adds that it is “imperative that, in the monumental areas, the architectural work built in our times—when it is necessary to perform it—should not stand out by showing off creatively and should not be individualistic in its nature, ignoring the values of those neighboring buildings.”²⁷ Nonetheless, Del Moral does not arrive at any clear determination of how to place modern architecture in historic urban cores. He identifies the problems, but never enters the realm of possible architectural solutions, leaving them instead in the realm of theory.

In his analysis, after reviewing a number of diverse examples of American and European cities, he suggests a series of practical measures that should help to safeguard the historic cores, and establishes eleven recommendations.²⁸ In them, he raises issues that might seem obvious to us today but that, in many cases, have yet to be resolved through legislation or by preservation authorities in Mexico. Among the most salient is the question of clearly defining the protected area in a historic district; he states that there should be a thorough analysis of which services can be allowed and which are incompatible in a specific area. In addition, he highlights the problem of “traffic flow,” and how it best to control circulation and diminish it in protected sections of historic urban cores. Also of note is his very interesting proposal that in “surrounding sectors”—that is, the areas in the vicinity of historic districts—there should be a strict control on new buildings, especially in respect to their height. Likewise, Del Moral considers it desirable that housing should be preserved in the historic cores; he summons inhabitants, architects, and government organizations to achieve in a joint manner the conservation of these spheres, all the time “watching over the strict adherence” to the laws and regulations.

Influence: Modernism and Preservation

In this brief overview of José Villagrán García’s and Enrique del Moral’s theoretical ideas on preservation, it should be noted that their thinking has had a critical influence on restoration practice in Mexico and on many of the non-government professionals who have worked in this field in the country. Nevertheless, their theories resolutely did not have as resounding an impact in the architectural domain, since many architects simply ignored these proposals for new buildings in historic centers or for restoration projects. As for the government and other institutions charged with safeguarding the patrimony, the ideas of Villagrán and Del Moral had little, if any, influence, perhaps touching only a handful of the civil servants in charge.

In Mexico and elsewhere, twentieth-century buildings have had to face the contempt of those who do not accept that these gleaming avatars of modernity can be considered historic. These buildings have not only suffered negligence and destruction, but, in some cases, they have been denied their rightful place in the historic urban fabric. It cannot be disputed that the insertion of modern buildings into historic quarters begs controversy, and that is why I consider it important to round out this discussion of Villagrán and Del Moral with an analysis of some of their modernist interventions in historic centers, as a way to better understand their positions



7. José Villagrán García, Edificio de estacionamiento "Gante," Mexico City, 1948. Photograph courtesy INBA.

and to perhaps find links between their theoretical proposals and their creative activity.

Concerning Villagrán, an early example is his Edificio Comercial at 30 Palma Street, Mexico D.F (1935). It was built in a modern language that respected the existing façade heights and street alignments. The Edificio Comercial Hospital de Jesús, on 20 de Noviembre Street, Mexico D.F. (1943), carefully considered the church of the old hospital as well as the cloister, while offering a contemporary façade rendered in modern materials. The Estacionamiento para Automóviles on Gante Street, Mexico D.F. (1948), is even more important in terms of the present discussion (Figure 7). There Villagrán respected the height of the neighboring buildings, included ground-level shops to acknowledge the commercial nature of the street, while providing necessary parking above.

Villagrán was also capable of contradicting his own theories. The Edificio Comercial Condesa, Mexico D.F. (1950), designed in collaboration with Del Moral, was a modern structure inserted next to the La Mutua building, with little consideration for the historic context.²⁹ The Conjunto de Edificios América (1954) and the Hotel Alameda (1961), both in Mexico D.F., were even more notorious and less integrated into their historic context; these were International Style, tall buildings with glazed façades, enveloping the old Corpus Cristi chapel, which they retained but also overwhelmed³⁰ (Figure 1).

Not much can be said about the work of these architects in the realm of restoration. Villagrán designed only one intervention in a building of the viceregal era, the cloisters from the old School La Enseñanza, which now houses the Colegio Nacional, where he used part of the structure for an auditorium, built in 1958.³¹ Del Moral designed practically no interventions in monumental areas that could illustrate his theory. One can point only to the adaptive reuse of a house from the nineteenth century in Xonacatepec, Morelos (1961), that was respectfully and successfully converted into a vacation residence.

A consensus has yet to be attained on how to intervene in historic architecture or how to insert new buildings into historic contexts; property owners, architects, and preservation scholars are still often at odds. The proposals advanced by José Villagrán and Enrique del Moral were by no means original or novel, but their importance lies in their popularity and dissemination in Mexico, which was a function of their status as well-known and respected architects and teachers. It is important to recognize their foresight in theorizing how to defend and conserve the architectural patrimony, initiating some of the first Mexican publications on the subject: they were not only pioneers in the design of contemporary works of architecture, but they also set an example in the theoretical study of heritage and its protection.³²

Author Biography

Louis Noelle is the former editor of *Arquitectura/México*, a researcher at the UNAM (National University of Mexico), and is author of many publications on architecture and urbanism, including *Arquitectos contemporáneos de México*, *Guía de Arquitectura contemporánea de la Ciudad de México*, *Luis Barragán, búsqueda y creatividad*, *Mario Pani, un arquitecto para la ciudad*, and *Enrique del Moral, vida y obra*. She has served on the Comité International des Critiques d'Architecture (1979), the Mexican Arts Academy (1991), ICOMOS (1993), and DOCOMOMO (2003), and is an honorary member of the Society of Mexican Architects (1998), and the Argentinean National Academy of Beaux Arts (2006).

Endnotes

- ¹ See José Villagrán: *imagen y obra escogida* (Mexico City: INBA, 1986); and Ramón Vargas Salguero, *José Villagrán García* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004).
- ² José Villagrán first published "Apuntes para un estudio" in *Arquitectura/México* nos. 3, 4, 6, 8, and 12 (July 1939, January 1940, July 1941, and April 1943). Afterward he grouped the articles into *Teoría de la arquitectura* (Mexico City: INBA, 1963). See also José Villagrán García, *Teoría de la arquitectura*, foreword by Ramón Vargas (Mexico City: UNAM, 1988).
- ³ Julien Guadet, 1834–1908, was the first Premier Grand Prix de Rome in 1864, professor of theory in the École des Beaux-Arts, and well known for his book *Eléments et théorie de l'architecture*, 3 vols. (Paris: Aulanier et Cie, 1901–1904.)
- ⁴ Especially the theories of Julien Guadet, Leonce Reynaud, and Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc.
- ⁵ Salvador Zubirán, 1898–1998, was a surgeon that held the position of vice minister of health 1940–1943, and was dean of the National University 1946–1948.
- ⁶ For more information see Louise Noelle, *Enrique del Moral* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2004).
- ⁷ It has to be noted that Del Moral lived in the small town of Irapuato before attending university, and thus he knew first hand the culture and the architectural techniques.
- ⁸ The "Casa-Estudio de Luis Barragán," in Mexico City, 1948–1950, was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2004.
- ⁹ His articles show these ideas: "Lo general y lo local," *Espacios 2* (October 1948); and "Modernidad contra tradición, integración," *Arquitectura/México 45* (March 1954). See also the compilation of his writings, *El hombre y la arquitectura* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1983).
- ¹⁰ The National University was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 2007.
- ¹¹ José Villagrán García, "Arquitectura y restauración de monumentos," in *Memoria* (Mexico: El Colegio Nacional, 1967).
- ¹² Enrique del Moral, *Defensa y conservación de las ciudades y Conjuntos urbanos monumentales* (Mexico City: Academia de Artes, 1977), published also as "Defensa y conservación de las ciudades y conjuntos urbanos monumentales," in *El hombre y la arquitectura* (Mexico City: UNAM, 1983), and in *Arquitectura y Conservación* (Mexico City: INBA, 2002).
- ¹³ José Villagrán García and Enrique del Moral, *Arquitectura y conservación*, ed. Louise Noelle, with an introductory text by the architectural conservator Ricardo Prado Nuñez (Mexico City: INBA, 2002). A translated version of the third part of this text appears in this issue of *Future Anterior*.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ To my mind, the idea of the restoration activity being "young" derives from the fact that ICOMOS and the Venice Charter were quite recent.
- ¹⁸ This is not a new idea, since it was first stated by Camilo Boito as "the third way" and then developed by Gustavo Giovannoni, who marked the birth of the *Athens Charter* (1931) and the *Carta Italiana del Restauro* (1932), but it was a novel idea for many in Mexico.
- ¹⁹ Villagrán and Del Moral, *Arquitectura y conservación*, 13.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 16.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 26.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.
- ²⁵ The only continuation of this line of theoretical research was in 1974, when he gave two lectures under the title "Integración del valor arquitectónico" (Integration of the architectonic value) in the School for Restoration of Mexico, but they were not published.
- ²⁶ Enrique del Moral, *Defensa y conservación*, 7.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24–26.
- ²⁹ This building was damaged in the 1985 earthquake, leading to its demolition.
- ³⁰ This complex suffered severe damage in 1985; therefore it was demolished and today two buildings by Legorreta+Legorreta occupy that plot of land.

³¹ This auditorium was eliminated in an unorthodox and major intervention by Teodoro González de León in the 1990s.

³² On the importance of these writings for the defense and restoration of patrimonial buildings and cities, see by "Prologue" of the well-known architectural conservator Ricardo Prado Nuñez to Villagrán García and del Moral, *Arquitectura y conservación*.