

Mexico City in Juan O’Gorman’s Imagination

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This essay offers a new interpretation of Juan O’Gorman’s Paisaje de la Ciudad de México (1949), which won first prize in a contest sponsored by the Mexico City newspaper Excelsior that year. Since then, the painting has been hailed as a positive representation of Mexico City that seems to support the policies of the government of Miguel Alemán. Undertaking a careful iconographic analysis of the painting, and situating it in relation to the artist’s other works, including his extensive writing on architecture, I argue that the painting is a critique of the ideological shifts and the developmentalist policies underway in the 1940s. O’Gorman is also hailed as the founding father of architectural modernism in Mexico, but his criticism of the style and its politics has not been brought to bear on his pictorial production. In 1936, O’Gorman abandoned architecture and turned to painting. His pessimistic images have been categorized as Surrealist, but have yet to be examined contextually. This essay recontextualizes Paisaje de la Ciudad de México, considering its sources, ranging from Diego Rivera to Ambrogio Lorenzetti. It then reflects on O’Gorman’s engagement with the ideological shifts of the 1940s and with the modernization of the urban environment.

Introduction

In 1949, Juan O’Gorman’s *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* (Figure 1) won first prize in a competition sponsored by the Mexico City newspaper *Excelsior*. The theme was ‘Mexico City Interpreted by its Painters’, and the contest was intended to provide an opportunity to celebrate the physical aspect of the capital city, its people and customs (*Excelsior* 1949a: 7). In accounting for the selection of O’Gorman’s painting as the prize-winner among over 200 works by one hundred and fifty artists, the jury stated that O’Gorman’s was chosen because it was superior in its originality and artistic qualities, including an excellent composition, fine drawing and exquisite handling of colour and medium. The commentary noted as well, that the ‘symbolic elements conjoined the idea of yesterday, of today and of always [...] The humble image of the anonymous but effective builder of the city, gave the painting a positive meaning, and secured for it a place among the great vistas of the city’ (*Excelsior* 1949b: 9). Following that assessment, scholars have since interpreted O’Gorman’s painting as an ‘optimistic’ and ‘meticulous rendition’ of Mexico City, particularly when compared with the other works that were awarded second, third and fourth prizes respectively (Ramírez 1995a; Pérez Gavilán 2005).

Paisaje de la Ciudad de México offers the viewer a panoramic view of the Mexico City skyline. The downtown area is seen from the west and the image appears to be cartographically accurate. A map, held up by a pair of hands in the extreme foreground,

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FIGURE 1. *Paisaje de la Ciudad de Mexico*, 1947–49, tempera/masonite, 66 × 120 cm. (Collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City. Reproduced courtesy of Landucci S.A. de C.V.)

reinforces the allusion to accuracy. The map depicts an island in the centre of a system of lakes. Whereas the island is distinguished by the orderly grid-system of streets that overlie it, the surrounding mainland is dotted with trees, mountains and a root-like system of interconnected roadways. At the top of the map, O'Gorman has added an inscription that reads: 'Plan of Mexico City attributed to Alonso de Santa Cruz 1540.' Even without that inscription, however, any educated denizen of Mexico City would immediately recognize the mapped territory as the valley of Mexico, and the gridded island, as Mexico-Tenochtitlán.

Looking beyond the map, the urban skyline recedes into a dense network of buildings, including several clearly visible landmark buildings. Interspersed are several incomplete steel-frame structures. Well-maintained colonial buildings make reference to the city's venerable past and finally, the skyline is set against the valley's iconic volcanic horizon. As Keith Eggener has noted (2007), however, allegorical elements defy the realism otherwise in evidence.

In the pale blue sky, the uppermost register of the canvas, hover, from left to right, a feathered serpent signifying the Mesoamerican deity Quetzalcoatl, an eagle with a blank scroll in its talons, and two flying nude female figures bearing a tri-colour banner on which are imprinted the words *Viva México*. These symbolic elements are a clue to the fact that in addition to rendering the city with a draughtsman's accuracy, O'Gorman encoded the image with his own interpretation of the vista spread before him. Indeed, I suggest that two planes of reality operate within the painting simultaneously: the first is the socio-cultural reality of 1949; the second is the history of Mexico's relationship to its dual indigenous and European heritage. The compositional clarity serves as a background against which these conceptual planes operate in dialogue with one another. As spectators, we oscillate between the two, attempting to make sense of the realistically

rendered skyline, against and inflected by the strange, unrelated symbols that float above. The map serves to guide our interpretive process.

While symbolic elements hover in the sky, a curious sense of scale is established by two crucial juxtapositions: first, the monumental scale and colour of the artist's hands contrast with the figure of the dark-skinned mason. In the context of Mexico's racial/cultural politics, O'Gorman's white, educated hands hold the key, literally and metaphorically, to understanding the relationship between past and present. Conversely, in his hands, the working-class mason holds a blueprint and trowel. These are tools through which the structural, economic, and historical relationship alluded to, is given material form. Second, the map, which O'Gorman holds, is a copy of a sixteenth-century map view of Mexico City, once attributed, as the inscription states, to Alonso de Santa Cruz, Royal Cosmographer to Emperor Charles V. While both O'Gorman's vista and the map show roughly the same locale, in the centuries spanning their creation, Mexico City had undergone a complete transformation.

Relying on the early modern tradition of the city view, or *veduta*, here O'Gorman employs symbolism, allegory and juxtaposition, in order to 'construct' Mexico City; in so doing, he transforms a seemingly realistic and optimistic representation into one that is more complex. Apparently dismissing the significance of the prominently placed symbolic elements, scholars have failed, however, to read the image as an allegory. The map is the crucial element within the painting's allegorical structure. It literally maps the post-conquest Aztec city, just as the *veduta* serves as a map of the modern city (present and future). At a more abstract level, however, the relationship *between* the sixteenth-century map and the vista of the modern city conveys a secondary narrative not readily apparent in the surface representation of the skyline. At the level of the first order, it reminds the viewer that Mexican culture has been, since the conquest, a hybrid mixture of indigenous and European traditions. By 1949, urban Mexican culture was also a mixture of local and modern international influences, as well. In addition, the relationship or juxtaposition between the sixteenth- and twentieth-century views breaks down the realism of the painted image, offering O'Gorman the opportunity to moralize on the community of the nation.

In his analysis of the painting, Fausto Ramírez astutely compares O'Gorman's city view to Salvador Novo's chronicle, *Nueva grandeza mexicana* (1946), arguing that in each work the artists expressed 'pride and optimism' over the modernization of Mexico City (Ramírez 1995a: 76). While I appreciate Ramírez's comparison, both the painting and Novo's text convey ambivalence over the transformations underway. My interpretation of *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* therefore differs considerably from that of Ramírez, which employs O'Gorman's painting as a foil for understanding the more overtly critical symbolism in José Chavez Morado's contemporaneous painting *Río Revuelto*. The latter claimed the third prize in *Excelsior's* competition and has been the subject of extensive analysis. Both Ramírez and Ana Isabel Pérez Gavilán argue that *Río Revuelto* offers an explicit satire of corruption and graft in late-1940s Mexico City (Ramírez 1995b; Pérez Gavilán 2005).

By taking a closer look at O'Gorman's image, I would argue that *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* is not a literal depiction of Mexico City in the late 1940s. It is, instead, structured in the tradition of city views, which functioned as 'moralized geographies' (Schulz 1978). In other words, the painting is an allegory that invites the viewer to contemplate the erosion of Mexican culture under the economic reforms inaugurated in the 1940s, dubbed the 'Mexican miracle', by drawing parallels to the erosion of Aztec civilization under Spanish colonization.

Crucially, and in addition, *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* needs to be understood in relation to O'Gorman's contribution as an architect to the modernization of the urban landscape. A complete understanding of O'Gorman's use of allegory and realism in this painting is enhanced through an assessment of his highly critical discourse on Mexican architecture, and his allusions to the social, political and economic transformations underway by 1949. Situated in that context, this essay offers an iconographic analysis of *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* in order to demonstrate its allegorical structure and consider its persuasive import, or how it mediates O'Gorman's, his viewers, and our relationship to the world depicted.

Rather than reading O'Gorman's *Paisaje* as a literal depiction of the city as he saw it in the late 1940s, we should investigate what O'Gorman was trying to communicate. What factors may have affected his experience of the city? Why did he layer unusual symbolic elements over an otherwise straightforward rendition of the western edge of downtown Mexico City? In addition to contributing to a better understanding of O'Gorman's pictorial production, this essay considers, briefly, how this painting relates to his role in the architectural modernization of the city. It argues that O'Gorman's *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* alludes to the psychic effects of the changing urban landscape, both in the sixteenth and in the mid-twentieth century.

The 'Mexican Miracle'

The cultural, sociopolitical and economic complexities of 1940s Mexico are crucial to understanding *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México*. At first glance, the painting seems an advertisement for the prosperity anticipated during the regimes of Manuel Ávila Camacho (1940–46) and Miguel Alemán (1946–52). Its realistic depiction of the modernizing architectural character of the city has been described as a 'song to the city' (Ortiz Gaitán 2005: 111). For most, the painting appears to endorse the new vision for Mexico that sought to transform the revolutionary nation into a modern, urban and industrial one.

The 1940s was a decade of dynamic economic, industrial, urban and demographic growth, especially in Mexico City. Mexico prospered, first, as a result of its ability during the Second World War to supply the United States war industry, and then, as the administrations of Ávila Camacho and Alemán liberalized the economy in order to harness that prosperity and industrialize the country. It was also the period in which the Mexican Revolution, especially as revived under Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), was formally declared complete, in other words successful. Under Ávila Camacho and then, even more so, under Alemán, Mexico was declared ready to experiment with more liberal economic and social policies as the state shifted its aspirations to make Mexico a modern, as opposed to a revolutionary nation. While the economic re-opening of Mexico was officially launched during the administration of Ávila Camacho, according to Stephen R. Niblo, it reached 'landslide proportions' during the Alemán years (Niblo 1999: 75). In the wake of the failures of the 'Mexican miracle', Hector Aguilar Camín and Lorenzo Meyer have argued that it was during this period that the ideals of the Mexican Revolution (1910–17) 'ceased to be a real force' (Aguilar Camín & Meyer 1993: 160).

During the decade, as protectionist policies were gradually abandoned, the economy shifted from its basis in agricultural production to an emphasis on industrialization. Aguilar Camín & Meyer argue that the nation's 'traditional center of gravity' moved from the countryside to the cities, which expanded as 'the ranks of the proletariat, the bourgeoisie and the middle-class grew' (Aguilar Camín & Meyer 1993: 162). Above all, urbanization and demographic growth were centred in Mexico City. Today, the capital

city's growth is described in apocalyptic terms, and this extends to the entire nation as it grapples with successive failures of neo-Liberal economic policies not unlike those of the 'Mexican miracle'. In the 1940s and 1950s, however, the growth of the capital city and Mexicans' embrace of consumerist culture were touted as evidence that Mexico had arrived.

In the context of the euphoric rhetoric of the period, *Paisaje de la Ciudad de Mexico* might appear to be an uncomplicated endorsement of *alemanismo*, the term used to describe the economic policies set in place under Miguel Alemán. That misconception is suggested by the manner in which the painting was reproduced as the frontispiece of *Fragments of a Golden Age: The Politics of Culture in Mexico since 1940*, edited by Gilbert Joseph, Anne Rubenstein and Eric Zolov (2001). In that collection of essays, the editors and their authors astutely demonstrate not the coherence and triumphalism of the so-called 'golden years', but rather the 'fragmentation of cultural consensus' that unfolded in the decades following the socialist-leaning administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). Critical interpretations now hold that the ideological reordering set in place in the 1940s, which culminated in the massacre at Tlatelolco in October 1968 and the collapse of the 'Mexican miracle', was actually inaugurated in the last years of the Cárdenas administration (1934–40) (Aguilar Camín & Meyer 1993: 159–98). This has complicated long-standing assertions of the integrity of the radical nationalism of the Cárdenas regime (Niblo 1999: 75–81). Those complications are astutely traced in Joseph, Rubenstein, & Zolov's volume (2001).

In order to illustrate the critical orientation of the essays in the book, the press's book designer deemed it appropriate to fragment O'Gorman's painting into three sections (Joseph, Rubenstein, & Zolov 2001). The re-working of the image suggests that only by splitting O'Gorman's painting into three fragments, could it evoke the disjunctive realities of the historical, ideological and cultural processes of the Golden Age. O'Gorman's painting was, apparently, misread by the designer as being a positive depiction of the politics of modernization and industrialization. The historical interpretations offered by the volume's editors and authors are in many ways valuable, but the book designer need not have altered the painting. The vision offered there is already sufficiently fragmented.

Mexico City, 1949

Paisaje de la Ciudad de México is a complex composition that seems intended to elicit a game of identifying buildings and decoding symbolic meanings. Curiously, despite its complexity, scholars have been seduced by the orderly vista, bypassing the invitation to contemplate the painting's symbolism. Until very recently, the streets remained much as they were when O'Gorman created the view. Most of the architecturally significant buildings depicted still stand, although some were destroyed in the earthquakes of 1957 and 1985.

O'Gorman offers us a panoramic view of the western edge of Mexico City, precisely the section under development in the 1940s. The view offered is from atop the Monument to the Revolution, but only the parapet of the monument is visible, upon which the viewer is situated, looking through O'Gorman's hands and the surrogate figure of the bricklayer. That O'Gorman intended this to be a sympathetic figure is clear from the inscription in the far lower left corner: 'Dedico este trabajo a los albañiles de México, constructores de esta ciudad.' Wearing patched overalls and work boots, and holding a blueprint and trowel, the mason has indigenous features. Behind him, on the left, rises a reinforced concrete frame wall, filled with the course of brick he has laid. At

his feet lie a chisel and hammer, a mortar bucket and tray, a plumb line and a two-by-four. To the far right, matching the brick wall, is a rubble masonry wall of the type built in Aztec times. Together these two walls create compositional closure in the foreground. They also create a fissure out of which opens the vista of the modern city. While the mason appears to be following the blueprint, this actually illustrates a steel-frame structure. Given O'Gorman's inscribed dedication to the masons of Mexico, the juxtaposition of the blueprint and the construction methods depicted suggests that in the age of reinforced concrete and steel-frame construction, the brick and rubble masonry will soon become obsolete. For example, the Torre Latino, forty-four storeys tall, begun in 1948 and completed in 1956, was a showcase of new building technologies. Period photographs of its construction, taken by Nacho López in 1951, just two years after O'Gorman completed *Paisaje*, suggest the degree to which this worker's tools are out of date (Mraz 1999: 146–47). Seen from this vantage, the mason seems overwhelmed by the modern structures that spread across the city.

The particular vantage assumed allowed O'Gorman the opportunity to demonstrate how the civic history of the city and of the nation were reflected in its urban form. First, Avenida de la República bisects the image. It was named in honour of the restored Republic following President Benito Juárez's overthrow of the French intervention in 1867. Travelling along it, we cross Avenida Reforma, so named for Juárez's liberal Constitution of 1854. The intersection of República and Reforma is marked by Manuel Tolsa's equestrian monument to Charles IV (1796). There, a five-storey building made of red volcanic stone recalls Mexico's colonial era, which came to an end in 1810. There too, Avenida de la República becomes Avenida Juárez, which terminates visually in Carlos Obregón Santacilia's Guardiola Building (1938–41), the new headquarters of the Bank of Mexico.

Just beyond the Guardiola, O'Gorman included a corner of the House of Tiles, another colonial mansion built in the late sixteenth century by the Counts of Orizaba. There, Avenida Juárez bends right, continuing as Madero, named for Mexico's Revolutionary president Francisco Madero. Avenida Madero terminates in the Plaza of the Constitution, or Zócalo. The Zócalo is visible only to the extent that a three-storey baroque retablo-style portal designates the National Palace, seat of the Federal government. Behind and to the left of the Guardiola building, a bell-tower and dome designate the Metropolitan Cathedral, also on the Zócalo.

On the left, nestling at the far edge of the leafy Alameda park, are visible the golden domes of the Palace of Fine Arts. Begun in 1904 to showcase the cultural accomplishments of the regime of Porfirio Díaz, the Palace remained incomplete until 1934, its construction interrupted by the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910. The original design was by the Italian architect Adamo Boari, but in 1930 a redesign was commissioned from Federico Mariscal, and the *beaux-arts* building was transformed through the addition of Mexicanized art deco elements and a reorganization of the interior space. As Mary K. Coffey has argued, that redesign and the commissioning of murals by Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco for the interior effected a 'process of resignification' wherein the Revolutionary regime reclaimed a public symbol, declaring the reorientation of Mexico's cultural politics (Coffey 2004: 200). Opposite the Palace and the Alameda is visible the distinctive art deco roof cone of Manuel Ortiz Monasterio's National Insurance Company building (1930–32), Mexico City's first skyscraper.

Throughout the view are hints of other landmark buildings, including Obregón Santacilia's Bank of Mexico (1926–28), and his Hotel Reforma (1933), a collaboration with

Mario Pani, labelled 'E.H.R.'. Across from the Alameda, we see the modernist, curving façade of Obregón Santacilia's Prado Hotel (1933–41), which until its collapse in 1985 housed Rivera's mural, *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Alameda* (1948). Visible just beyond the equestrian monument, we see the headquarters of the Federal Electricity Commission, labelled CFE; the Metropolitan cinema; the distinctive conical Deco corner detail of the Police and Fireman's Building (1928), designed by Vicente Mendiola and Guillermo Zárraga; and a generic building labelled 'Asociación Mexicana de Periodistas', or the newspaper writers' union headquarters. In addition, amidst a sea of geometric, reinforced concrete buildings, dotted with the occasional church dome or colonial building, four partly built steel-frame skyscrapers punctuate the cityscape.

Just behind the mason's head rises the tallest building in the image, the eighteen-storey National Lottery building, with its distinctive antenna. Designed by the engineer José Antonio Cuevas in 1933 and completed in 1946 with the addition of an art-deco façade, this was the first building in Mexico City to employ a floating foundation (Katzman 1963: 138, 147–48). Just opposite the National Lottery, in the direct centre of the near-middle foreground, is a stark international-style building. This building, actually the Corcuera Building designed by Manuel and Luis Martínez Negrete (1934), was severely damaged in the earthquake of 1957, requiring its demolition (Obregón Santacilia 1952: 89). O'Gorman labelled the building on the upper-rear corner facing the viewer: 'Edificio Internacional. Se alquilan despachos', or 'International Building. Offices for Rent'. In the 1950s, the building was surmounted by a large advertisement for Goodrich-Euskadi tyres. It housed a variety of foreign businesses, including the 'Banco Internacional, S.A.' along with the offices of Air France and LAMSA (Lineas Aéreas Mexicanas, S.A.), the Mexican branch of United Airlines, and the offices of the Burroughs Corporation, the Detroit-based manufacturer of adding machines, typewriters and early computing systems.

Intended or not, the connotations given to the building by O'Gorman's inscription evoke the Mexican government's re-opening of the Mexican economy to foreign investment, a signal change after Lázaro Cárdenas's expropriation of foreign oil holdings in 1938 (Niblo 1999: 140, 207–12). Somewhat prophetically, a work dating to 1947 by the painter Carlos Tejeda entitled *La Ciudad de México allá por 1970*, uses the Corcuera building as the central motif in an apocalyptic image of political corruption and environmental degradation in Mexico City (Pérez Gavilán 2005: 85).

Of all the buildings on view, the orientation foregrounds Cuevas's National Lottery, an innovation in engineering, and in the distance, Obregón Santacilia's Guardiola with its clean-lined, volumetric, white marble art-deco façade. Above all, however, Obregón Santacilia's Monument to the Revolution, upon which we, along with O'Gorman and the mason, stand, is a powerful metaphoric presence, even if its colossal frame is not visible (Figure 2). The Monument occupies the site as well as the steel structure of an earlier construction project, the Legislative Palace. Commissioned in 1900 from the French architect Émile Bernard by the regime of Porfirio Díaz, it was one of several construction projects undertaken to celebrate the centennial of Mexican Independence in September 1910; however, like the Palace of Fine Arts, the building was left incomplete with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in November of that year.

As James Oles has written, the steel skeletons of these aborted Porfirian projects stood abandoned until the early 1930s, 'still charged with the sins of their patrons', namely, aesthetic copying and the all-round failure of the Porfirian *científicos'* modernization



FIGURE 2. View of the Monumento a la Revolución, c. 1955. (Courtesy Mary K. Coffey.)

projects (Oles 1998: 273). Conversely, however, the steel-frame structures of both buildings were also feats of modern engineering, inspiring architects like Obregón Santacilia and O'Gorman, for whom they stood as harbingers of the utopian urbanism yet to come under the Revolution. Just as the Palace of Fine Arts was reclaimed and resignified, so too the Legislative Palace. In 1932 it was slated for demolition, having suffered structural damage in the ensuing decades; however, Obregón Santacilia petitioned to stop the demolition, proposing instead that it be transformed into a monument to the Mexican Revolution. Commissioned with its redesign, he supervised construction between 1932 and 1938 (Obregón Santacilia 1960: 19, 35–36). Refusing any trace of the original *beaux-arts* design, Obregón Santacilia created a simple, if massive, geometric structure. Like the Guardiola building, the Monument exemplifies his austere deco-inspired style. The sculptural programme was given to Oliverio Martínez, whose blocky figural groupings cap the four massive piers, and render ennobled the working class. Indeed, O'Gorman's mason, though slight of build, might be read as one of Martínez's workers sprung to life. In sum, O'Gorman's choice of the Monument as the site from which to view the city is not accidental. The view afforded from the top of the Monument serves as a homage to those builders he most admired: the engineer José Antonio Cuevas, and the architect, Carlos Obregón Santacilia, in whose office he worked from 1924–28. O'Gorman would have been attuned to the fact that their buildings, like the National

Lottery and the Guardiola, housed institutions for the improvement of Mexico's social welfare.

From Functionalist to Organic Architecture

Juan O'Gorman (1905–82) studied architecture at the National School of Architecture from 1922 to 1929. Of the teachers with whom he studied, he most credited Cuevas and the architect Guillermo Zárraga for their mentoring. From Cuevas he gained technical expertise and Zárraga instilled in him an understanding of architecture 'in relation to the Mexican condition', as well as a spirit of innovation and the belief that architecture was a living art, epitomizing both technical and aesthetic progress (O'Gorman 1973: 123).

In 1929, after four years in Obregón Santacilia's office, O'Gorman resigned. He set about designing, for himself, the first Functionalist house in Mexico. It was inspired by Le Corbusier's *Vers une architecture*, which he had read in 1924. Then, in 1931, inspired by Corbusier's maxim that houses should be 'machines for living' he designed his most famous Functionalist project: the conjoined studio-homes of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Over the next several years, he designed Functionalist homes for members of the intellectual elite (Frances Toor, Manuel Toussaint, Luis Enrique Erro, Julio Castellanos, and Narciso Bassols). Then, working for the Mexican state, O'Gorman employed the key principles of Functionalism, namely 'maximum efficiency for minimum effort', to design twenty-three primary schools, a vocational school (Escuela Técnica Industrial), the headquarters of the Syndicate of Cinematographers, and unrealized designs for the Mexican Confederation of Workers (CTM) and a residential complex for workers (O'Gorman 1933: 109; Jiménez 2004b: 75–77).

In 1932, at the invitation of left-wing Minister of Public Education Narciso Bassols, O'Gorman collaborated with his mentor, José Antonio Cuevas, to found the Escuela Superior de Ingeniería y Arquitectura (ESIA) within the National Polytechnic Institute (Instituto Politécnico Nacional), where he taught until 1948. In his memoirs, O'Gorman described the controversy elicited by the curriculum they designed, recalling that some architectural colleagues were outraged that architecture should be taught as a branch of engineering. They called for his licence to be revoked, as they had done earlier, upon seeing his Functionalist houses (O'Gorman 1973: 120–21).

By 1936, however, O'Gorman ceased practising architecture and turned to painting. He deplored the business of architecture. Above all, he was disillusioned by the application of Functionalist principles under the label of the International Style. According to O'Gorman, International-Style architecture gave the appearance of Functionalism without being functional at all. Furthermore, it was out of touch with the needs and sensibilities of the Mexican working class. In the pursuit of 'maximum efficiency for minimum effort', the creative aspect and aesthetic pleasure of architecture were sacrificed (O'Gorman 1955a: 180). Although Functionalism had a valuable application in regard to creating a more equitable society in which workers and schoolchildren had access to well-designed and efficient schools and homes, these ideals degenerated when the style was co-opted by architects with no understanding of its precepts. Under the label of the International Style, it was employed not for workers' housing but for luxury residences, in which Corbusier's dictum was corrupted by contractors, who sought 'maximum profit for minimum investment' (O'Gorman n.d.: 136). Developers, he stated, were intent on ushering in the 'coca-colonization of Mexico' (O'Gorman 1953b: 61–63; O'Gorman 1955b: 188).

Arguing that Functionalism had nothing to do, aesthetically, with the Mexican context, he cited the example of a workers' housing complex built in 1933 by Juan Legarreta.

After its completion, the residents embellished the simple Functionalist buildings with vernacular additions, including tile work and bright colours (O'Gorman 1952: 167). O'Gorman praised their additions, recognizing in them a response to the imposition of austere Functionalist form. In 1952, he lamented that Mexico City had lost its character, having assumed an aspect of 'pochismo' as a result of the slavish adoption of a style ill suited to the region (O'Gorman 1952: 168). 'Pochismo' carries the negative implication of the infiltration in Mexico of US consumer culture. Although such comments post-date *Paisaje de la Ciudad de Mexico*, that these ideas and critiques were repeated time and again, through the 1940s and into the 1950s, needs to be brought to bear on interpretations of the symbolism and mood of this painting, and others, in his oeuvre.

Paisaje de la Ciudad de México is without question O'Gorman's best known easel painting, not least because it illustrates his commitment to the architectural profession, despite his refusal to design buildings. Given that he entered the painting in *Excelsior's* competition, it is safe to assume that he hoped that, like any allegory, it would instruct Mexicans on the potentially productive relationship between urban development and architectural design, and revolutionary ideals as he defined them. O'Gorman was vocal on these topics, especially after he ceased practising architecture. From that moment on, he was a staunch detractor of Functionalist architecture and through the 1950s he repeatedly linked the so-called International Style to a profit-oriented betrayal of both the Revolution and of the Mexican national aesthetic.

Nevertheless, in recent decades O'Gorman's contribution to Mexico's place in the history of modern architecture has been recovered and much celebrated. Some scholars describe O'Gorman as the father of modern Mexican architecture, touting the adoption of the International Style as evidence of Mexico's unqualified commitment to modernism, a claim that is somewhat more difficult to make on behalf of its social-realist painters. Recently, however, Keith Eggner and Edward Burian have offered more measured assessments of O'Gorman's contribution to Mexico's architectural history, acknowledging his shift away from modernism and his deep ambivalence about the wholesale adoption of the International Style. An analysis of his pictorial production from the 1940s onwards demonstrates a parallel process of disillusionment and dissent.

In addition to being recognized as one of Mexico's most important architects, O'Gorman was a prolific easel painter and muralist. His pictorial production ranged from morbid surrealist meditations to romantic idealizations of the Mexican Revolution and the revolutionary political process. O'Gorman began painting landscapes in the late-1920s. One of his earliest, *La excavación* (1927), demonstrates his longstanding interest in architectural and industrial forms, his miniaturist's precision, a compositional system governed by a high-profile perspective and the creation of spatial recession through interposed horizontals, accented with diagonals. The juxtaposition of manmade forms against a mountainous horizon is present in *Fábrica* (1931), a fresco on cement panel. *Fábrica* took joint first place in a competition sponsored by Cementos Tolteca, a British-owned company that was Mexico's leading producer of cement and concrete. Artists were invited to represent the firm's Mexico City factory; O'Gorman and the photographer Manuel Alvarez Bravo took the highest honours. Their winning entries bespeak an interest in industrialization's formal possibilities (Oles 1998: 273).

Whether as an architect or painter, O'Gorman was committed to creating a more equitable and just Mexico. He described himself as sympathetic to the working class and he was close to Diego Rivera (O'Gorman 1973: 78, 173–74). He was especially devoted to Frida Kahlo, having an affinity for her delicate, sharp-focus, narrative pictorial style.

With Kahlo, and the painter Antonio Ruiz, he shared a tendency toward surrealistic imagery. According to O'Gorman, Kahlo described that tendency as deeply rooted in the Mexican character and its love of satire (*burla*). He quoted Kahlo as saying 'Surrealism allows me to make fun of people without their realizing it, those who realize it, become my pals'. He also described her as a realist, in that 'realist painting not only serves to describe and illustrate the events of the world [...] It helps humankind to better understand reality by explaining, *emotively*, the world that surrounds us' (O'Gorman 1968: 243–45). The quality of satire, emotion and complex allegorical iconography found in Kahlo's work, is evident in O'Gorman's painting as well.

During the 1940s, O'Gorman painted several other tempera on panel paintings that express a deep, surrealistic pessimism.¹ These include *La ciudad corrompida* (1938; also known as *La ciudad podrida*, or *The Rotten City*), *Proyecto de monumento fúnebre* (1943; also known as *Project for a Funeral Monument to Industrial Capitalism*), *Los Mitos* (1944; *The Myths*); *Consumado está* (1945; also known as *Consummatum est*), and *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas* of 1949 (Figure 3; *From Ruins Are Born Other Ruins*). In each, a putrid conglomeration of architectural structures emerges out of an arid landscape. In most, grotesque figures cavort, reminiscent of Hieronymous Bosch's.



FIGURE 3. *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas*, 1949, tempera/masonite. (Courtesy of Landucci S.A. de C.V.)

¹ Throughout the scholarship, O'Gorman's paintings are given variable dates; I therefore rely on the dates given in the catalogue of his retrospective in 1950, the only such exhibition held during his lifetime, *Exposición de la obra del pintor Juan O'Gorman* (Mexico City: Palacio de Bellas Artes, 1950).

La ciudad corrompida (1938) was among the earliest to introduce the nightmarish thematic that dominated his easel production for the next decade. There the horizon-line is barely visible behind a conglomeration of buildings. The cityscape is dominated by a rectangular building and dotted with a few colonial and neo-classical buildings, which are overrun by an infesting tangle of vines. The palette has a putrid quality, dominated by purplish reds and blues. While the location is indeterminate, a domed building resembles the US Capitol. The reinforced concrete structure in the centre recalls his description, in 1936, of Functionalist architecture as 'cajones con agujeros' or boxes punched with holes (O'Gorman 1936: 118).

In *Proyecto de monumento fúnebre* and *Los Mitos*, tentacles metamorphose into culvert pipes that connect various industrial buildings. Recurring forms, motifs, buildings and symbols interrelate the paintings, suggesting a prolonged, serialized nightmare. While the inclusion of clusters of skyscrapers and elements resembling US landmarks might make it tempting to view these works as allusions to US capitalism, especially *Proyecto de monumento fúnebre*, O'Gorman refuses to situate them precisely.

In several paintings, as in *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México*, O'Gorman employs nude female allegorical figures, who hover in the sky, bearing inscribed banners. In *Proyecto de monumento fúnebre*, the figure, though nude, wears shoes, and her banner, the tri-colour Mexican flag, is inscribed with the title of the painting. In *Los Mitos*, three overall-clad workers are shown on a scaffold. With brushes in hand, they put the finishing touches on the volcanic hills in the background, revealing the scene to be a fresco. With their backs to the viewer, the painters on the wood scaffold are, like details elsewhere, a whimsical tribute to O'Gorman's friend, Diego Rivera and his mural *The Making of a Fresco, Showing the Building of a City* (1931; San Francisco Art Institute). It might seem strange to compare such apocalyptic images to *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México*. Admittedly O'Gorman produced other landscapes over the decade, like *Recuerdo de los Remedios* (1943), which offer a positive image. Yet the positive images are all rural scenes. Without exception, the urban themes that consumed his imagination over the decade were invested with negative connotations.

Of all of the urban views, *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas* (Figure 3) most closely resembles *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México*. In both paintings, a more open foreground plane gives way, as the view recedes, to a densely built-up urban environment of nearly undifferentiated buildings. In *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas*, the volcanic horizon of *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* is replaced by a sky polluted by smoke stacks that spew forth. Several structures, topped by crosses, have the quality of grave markers. In the middle-foreground, a coliseum-like structure encircles two important landmarks: the skeletal steel structure of an unfinished skyscraper sits alongside a spiralling, petrified cone that splits into two towers, from which emerges a human figure. The petrified mass steps down in a ganglia-like root that grows toward the ground, threatening to exceed the picture plane.

In one account of her friendship with O'Gorman, the art historian Ida Rodríguez Prampolini recalled that he was optimistic in character and a believer in utopias (Rodríguez Prampolini 1999: 199). She also acknowledged, however, that prior to his death, he was taciturn and embittered over the course of the world, particularly what he saw as a disastrous economic system and imminent environmental disaster. O'Gorman committed suicide in January 1982. The majority of his easel paintings show evidence of the morose sensibility that would periodically consume his imagination and his mental well-being (Vallarino 2005: 58–59, 68–71; O'Gorman 1973: 160–62).

Despite the morbid cityscapes in paintings like *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas*, many of his architectural projects suggest a utopian spirit, for example his early Functionalist projects and later organic structures, like the mosaic-adorned home for the composer Conlon Nancarrow, his mosaic murals at the National Library, and the second residence he designed and built for himself beginning in 1948 (destroyed in 1969). A curious similarity exists between the vine-invaded architectural ruins and the architectural style he began to champion in 1948. In a complete rejection of architectural modernism, O'Gorman turned to cultivating an organic style that, he argued, was rooted in native precedent (Burian 2005: 221). His second personal residence was carved out of volcanic stone and was located in the lava fields that engulfed the south-western zone of the valley of Mexico.

Compared with the organic putrefaction depicted in *De unas ruinas nacen otras ruinas*, it is easy to interpret *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* as rendering the city as 'clean and modern and full of hope for the future' (Baddeley & Fraser 1999: 45). In their analysis of the painting, Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser astutely link its compositional structure, first and foremost the artist's inclusion of his own hands holding a map, to El Greco's *View and Plan of Toledo* (c. 1609; Museo del Greco, Toledo). As a highly educated member of the revolutionary intelligentsia, O'Gorman may have been familiar with that painting, but he was equally, if not more concerned with a local, self-referential iconography. Throughout his pictorial oeuvre he included, as well, references to the Mexican artists he admired most, Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, Frida Kahlo and Antonio Ruiz. Seen in the context of his own work, not to mention his extensive writings on architecture, one cannot help but question assertions that *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* offers a positive rendition of the city. On the contrary, it is, at best, a deeply ambivalent meditation on the growth of Mexico City, and the socio-political reorientation, under *alemanismo*, of the revolutionary programme toward one of capitalist industrialization.

Despite interpretations to the contrary, *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* is not an endorsement of the political, economic, and cultural course underway by the late 1940s, but rather an equivocal allegory that reveals O'Gorman's sense of Mexico's continuous struggle to reconcile its past and present, in order to shape the future. The symbolism employed relates expressly to O'Gorman's vision that, since the conquest, Mexico's authentic culture, the pre-Hispanic, lay buried. For O'Gorman, its survival was evident in popular art, vernacular architecture and revolutionary cultural politics. He argued that the roots of this aesthetic reached deep into the national soul and continued to flourish despite the 'grotesque seductions posed by Motorola, Coca-Cola and International-style architecture' (O'Gorman 1955b: 185–86). Similarly, in *Paisaje de la Ciudad de México* there is no apparent trace of the Aztec city, yet key symbolic elements attest to the survival of, what anthropologists have termed 'deep Mexico' (Bonfil Batalla 1996; Lomnitz 2001). Historically, proto-nationalists and nationalists, from the late seventeenth century onwards, constructed Mexican identity as grounded principally in indigenous culture. Here, the face of modernizing Mexico City seems to lament the erosion of the authentic substrate of Mexican culture under the impact of economic colonization in 1949.

In support of that interpretation, a few more details bear discussion. First, although it appears to be a realistic and meticulous rendition of the buildings on the western edge of the city, the space depicted from the Monument of the Revolution to the Guardiola Building is foreshortened. O'Gorman eliminated several blocks along Avenida de la República. The effect monumentalizes the National Lottery building. Furthermore, the

map he holds upright is oriented incorrectly *vis-à-vis* the view depicted. For the view and the map to correspond to one another, O'Gorman would have had to turn the map 180 degrees. Notwithstanding those modifications, in the immediate foreground, an inscribed scroll informs us that the painting 'represents the heart of Mexico City, *exactly as it appears* from atop the Monument of the Revolution, toward the east, Juan O'Gorman, 1949'. My italics highlight the fact that the inscription uses the idiomatic expression 'tal y como se ve' to imply accuracy. O'Gorman's meticulous painting style, his inclusion of the map in the painting, and the inscription have led Fausto Ramírez to establish a correlation between the artist's 'obsessive attention to detail', his 'urge to depict nature with the greatest fidelity possible', and that of the author of the map reproduced (Ramírez 1995a: 75). However, while both O'Gorman's cityscape and the sixteenth-century rendition are precise in many of their details, I suggest that both are invested with other concerns as well.

When compared to the paintings that claimed third and fourth prize in *Excelsior's* competition, namely Guillermo Meza's *La Tolvanera* (1949; location unknown) and José Chávez Morado's *Rio Revuelto* (1949; Museum of the Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, Mexico City), the pessimistic imagery of which is more overt, O'Gorman's has seemed to offer little of deep interpretive import. The lack of interest in a close reading of the painting probably derives from the fact that O'Gorman took first prize, as if this suggested that accuracy was his governing criterion; second, it operates under a misunderstanding of O'Gorman's motives, which are hinted at by his inclusion of the sixteenth-century map and the fact that he holds the document upright, inviting a comparison to the cityscape. In copying the map, he should have realized the orientation was incorrect. Furthermore, his inclusion of the map might be misread as a claim to the accuracy in his version of the modern city. However, such a reading would be based on a misunderstanding of conventions of painted maps and early modern *vedute*, the pictorial conventions to which he refers, and the desires invested therein.

O'Gorman's *Paisaje de la Ciudad de Mexico* is an allegory in which the artist invites the viewer to meditate on the revolutionary social contract and its imminent betrayal. His extensive, indeed almost compulsive, writing on architecture in the period substantiates my interpretation. The painting is, therefore, by extension, a critique of the ideological shifts underway in the 1940s. The buildings, landmarks and symbols in the painting can be identified and discussed, but the symbolism of the image has to be examined as a whole.

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Este ensayo ofrece una reinterpretación del cuadro, Paisaje de la Ciudad de México (1949) de Juan O'Gorman, el cual ganó el primer premio en un concurso convocado por el periódico Excelsior. Desde entonces la obra ha sido descrita como una visión positiva de los cambios arquitectónicos e ideológicos inaugurados por los programas triunfalistas de Miguel Alemán. Por medio de una interpretación iconográfica, considero el cuadro con relación al corpus del artista, inclusive sus comentarios sobre la arquitectura, y propongo que la obra ofrece una crítica de los cambios ideológicos de la época. O'Gorman es reconocido por su destacado papel en la promoción del modernismo arquitectónico en México, pero su aguda crítica de la corrupción del estilo debe ser considerada en cuanto a su obra pictórica, dado que en 1936 abandonó el ejercicio de la arquitectura dedicándose a la pintura. Sus obras pictóricas son desconcertantes y han sido denominadas como surrealistas pero no han sido interpretadas dentro de su contexto sociopolítico. En este trabajo propongo una interpretación de Paisaje de la Ciudad de México que considera sus fuentes, desde Diego Rivera a Ambrogio Lorenzetti, y reflexiona sobre el comentario pictórico de O'Gorman acerca de los cambios en el entorno urbano.

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