

Wood Doors in Heritage Buildings in Mexico City

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Presentation

The city of Mexico, capital of the country, the same as Rome, has its origin in a foundational myth, and so far, after more than 800 years, the city conserves the name that its founders gave it.

Mexico City was founded by a tribe, the Mexica, who appropriated of a small island, located amid a great lake; and after years of intense work and hard fights against their neighbors, they created a powerful empire and built a blinding city.

That glory only lasted three centuries, since in 1521 started the Spanish conquest and after two years of bloody fight, the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan was destroyed and a new form of life began, under the European rule.

The new city

Viceregal architecture is characterized to have gathered a singular combination of elements that were conserved along the three centuries of the viceroyalty, highlighting the use of richly worked quarry in covers and jambs of windows, wide walls lined with the beautiful stone called "tezontle", of reddish tones and great nimbleness, which was defined by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, winner of the Prize Nobel, as: "dry blood color stone." An additional detail of the viceregal constructions -and that speaks about the appraisal that the Mexican had for coloring- are the domes and cupolas, even wide walls, covered with multicolor tiles. From the thousands of centennial constructions that have survived, such as churches and convents, government buildings and nobiliary palaces are still conserved in many Mexican cities; the splendid wooden doors are remarkable examples. I will present some of them.

The viceregal city

In a date as early as 1524, even before the destroyed city began its full operation, Hernán Cortés, the conqueror,

founded the first hospital in Mainland on one of the main avenues; the Hospital de Jesus that today still keeps its assistance functions and preserves the layout that it had in the 16th century. It also conserves some important ornamental details intact: the beam roof and the beautiful wooden coffered ceiling that is the unique copy that has survived in excellent conditions in the city of Mexico, and that is composed by 57 octahedrons of precious wood, with a rosette in the bottom covered in red and with a Malt Cross. It is known that Nicolás de Yllescas performed the gilding of the coffered in the year of 1587, but on the other hand we ignore who the constructor was.

The reconstruction of the city, the razed capital of the Mexica empire, began as soon as it was possible to return to downtown to proceed to the distribution of the extensive lots between the conquerors. This way began the population, the creation and operation of institutions and the administration of what already was the capital of the most extensive Spanish viceroyalty in the American continent.

Some years later, in January 14 of 1527, the Town Council of the city of México, capital of the New Spain, appointed Alonso García Bravo as "surveyor" to perform the "layout" of the city, according to the European Renaissance norms in force. In February 8, the Town Council suspended the construction in the lots already assigned until García Bravo had revised the dimensions of each lot. This way began the construction of a city that to the date conserves vestiges of the layout traced in that far time.

We know with detail, -because there are the Town Council records- the development of the administrative works that gave form to the government of the city. Concerning the topic of our interest, the timber works, it is registered that in July 5 of 1532 it was agreed to pay to Juan Franco, carpenter, the amount of 17 pesos and 4 gold tomines, to make the doors of the City Town

Council. This amount was completed in September 13 with other 20 and half pesos that were paid to another carpenter, Francisco Martin, for other doors for the same houses of the Town Council.

One year later, in 10 October of 1533, 25 gold pesos were paid to the carpenter Juan Francisco for the doors of the recently built Audience building.

However, it was up to August 30 of 1568 when the Town Council issued the Ordinances for carpenters, carvers, assemblers and violeros (guitar makers), which for three centuries would regulate the operation of that important guild of artisans. Since that moment were defined the working conditions that ended in thousands of major and minor wood works: roofs, doors, furniture and altarpieces that were and are still today, fundamental part of the city's image.

The relation of payments in the records of the Town council continues, in November 11 of 1594, 50 pesos were paid in advance to the carpenter that made the Town Council stalls. Another circumstance, of the greatest importance in the organization of the New Spain, was a religious festivity, the Corpus Christi celebration, which meant an expenditure of 80 gold pesos that were paid in May 28 of 1597 to the carpenter Juan de Saucedo for the elaboration of the stages where the diverse acts of the religious celebration were carried out, to which the civil and ecclesiastical authorities converged and practically all the inhabitants of the city. Meanwhile, the city was being built.

The emblematic buildings

Once the distribution of the lots was made, the construction of houses of all categories and dimensions began, as well as of buildings for the diverse instances of the administration and the religious orders; among others the Cathedral and the temples of the orders that had presence in the wide conquered space since 1525. Some of these were the Nun Convents that would have great importance in the development of those first years.

Nun Convents

During the 300 years of the Viceroyalty, 21 nun convents were built in the capital of the New Spain, of the diverse religious orders that settled in the territory. In this relation we will only refer to three of them. The Concepción Convent

The first nun convent founded in the American continent and in the capital of the New Spain was the convent of the Pura y Limpia Concepción, of the Conceptionist Order of Saint Beatrice of Silva, founded in 1540, hardly 17 years after the destruction of the capital of the Mexica empire, with charities collected by the first archbishop brother Juan de Zumárraga. It began with two simple adobe houses that Andrés de Tapia donated to the bishopric so that in them settled a church, a college or a beaterío (devout house). In 1589, King Philip II placed the Concepción Convent under his Royal Patronage, although its appointment as Royal was obtained until the 18th century, when King Charles III granted it with all the jurisdictions and prerogatives. The first novices were the daughters of the conquerors that accompanied Cortés and of some of the first residents. In the records appears the name of the young Ana, daughter of Alonso de Ávila and Juana López, who pronounced the four votes of poverty, chastity, obedience and enclosing from hands of the Illustrious Brother Juan de Zumárraga in September 22 of 1542, taking the name of Ana de San Buenaventura. The next was the daughter of Juan de Tapia and María de Echánez that took the name of Úrsula del Espíritu Santo.

A group of mestizo girls, the most outstanding in the New Spain, also arrived, Catalina and Isabel Cano Moctezuma, granddaughters of the last Aztec Emperor, daughters of Juan Cano Saavedra and of the princess Doña Isabel Moctezuma. When they professed in May 28 of 1597, they gave up the rights of the property and estates of the important encomienda that Hernán Cortés granted to Doña Isabel.

The church had to be rebuilt in 1655 by sinking problems, due to the muddy ground of that area of the city. It has a single nave as most of the nun churches of the New Spain, in the exterior the two twin covers can be observed, with their splendid doors that allowed the access of the public to the religious services, but that kept the nuns from being observed, since they lived in an enclosure régime for life. At present, only the centennial church is conserved, without the original altarpieces, since the enormous convent was almost completely destroyed during the 19th century.

Santa Inés Convent

The doors of Santa Inés Convent are undoubtedly the most outstanding artistry copy of the wood carving

works of the 17th and 18th centuries in the capital of the New Spain. It is another Conceptionist convent, founded in the year of 1596. It calls our attention because it conserves, in spite of all the vicissitudes suffered during the 19th century, some outstanding elements.

The current construction, the cloister and the church were built in the 18th century; the two-body tower was destroyed at the beginning of the 20th century, as many other viceregal constructions. The two facades of the church finished by 1770, conserve the most beautiful doors carved in the 18th century that show scenes of the life and martyrdom of Saint Agnes, as well as the figures of the patrons of the convent, Diego Caballero and Inés de Velasco, owners of the most extensive and productive sugar mills in the New Spain, those of Amilpas and Amanalco, who donated their flows to found a convent to which poor young maidens could enter without contributing any dowry. A Papal bull issued in March 23 of 1595 made the project possible. In 1599 began the convent life with 33 nuns that left the Concepción Convent to be of the same religious order, establishing in that way a remarkable relationship between the convents.

Although it lost its altarpieces, paintings, and other wealth that were plundered, vandalized and destroyed in the 19th century, due to the secularization law, and after having been used for diverse commercial activities, the temple opened again to the Catholic religious cult, and the convent that in this case was not destroyed, as most of the 21 that existed in the viceroyalty, is headquarters of the José Luis Cuevas painting museum.

Corpus Christi Convent

Another female convent, this of the order of Discalced Capuchins of Saint Francis, was founded in 1720 by the viceroy Baltasar de Zúñiga Guzmán, to house only daughters of noble Indians or caciques. It was the first and only convent institution that allowed the entrance of indigenous women. Although it did not have the support of the New Spain's society, ferociously racist and classist, the viceroy continued his endeavors and in 1727 obtained the Papal Bull of approval.

The entrance of the Indian youths to the convent was made with great magnificence, with music

accompaniment and fireworks. It is registered that Sister María Magdalena de Jesús, daughter of the caciques of Tlaxomulco (diocese of Guadalajara) arrived accompanied by a caravan formed by the family and a great entourage of indigenous people from the region.

Indigenous youths from the regions of Oaxaca, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Valladolid and Jalisco entered. Among the noble Indians that joined was found María Teresa de los Reyes Valeriano y Moctezuma, sixth granddaughter of the Aztec Emperor; Apolonia de la Santísima Trinidad, daughter of caciques (indigenous lords) from the city of Mexico; Sister Gertrudis de Señor San José, daughter of the caciques of Xichititlán.

The temple and the convent were built outside of the limits of the original layout, on a wide lot in front of the Alameda Central, the great public park, the first one that existed in the American continent. The constructor of the temple, Pedro de Arrieta, modified the traditional outline of the two lateral covers of the nun convents and used a single facade at the feet of the nave. This innovation would appear later in other religious constructions of the New Spain. The enormous cover is decorated by the original door, remarkable example of the viceregal carpentry.

After the destruction of the cloister in the 19th century, the church was used for diverse purposes: cellar, temple of the schismatic Mexican Church and finally it became Museum of Popular Arts. At the beginning of the 21st century, after an intense restoration, it was destined to preserve the headquarters of the Notarial Archives. During the restoration works, the mummified heart of the viceroy founder of the convent was located buried near the remains of the altar, inside a silver coffer, as a viceregal legend affirmed it.

In the three mentioned cases, the rich ornaments, the altarpieces, archives, libraries and furniture, even the wrought iron grills and the bells, disappeared as a result of the ferocious Secularization laws, enacted by the middle of the 19th century, which dispersed and destroyed important portions of the cultural heritage.

The New Spain's nobility

An expert of the history of the nobiliary palaces, Luis Ortiz Macedo, refers the construction of 32 nobiliary

palaces in Mexico City, of which less than the half survive in acceptable conditions; to that extent has been the destruction of our built heritage.

Now we will refer to three elegant houses, of noble families, colloquially called palaces by the inhabitants of the city of Mexico: that of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya, that of the Counts of San Mateo de Valparaíso and that of the Counts of Heras Soto that are conserved under acceptable conditions and with their intact wooden doors, although for completely inadequate uses, and with parts of their interior distribution modified.

Nobility titles

The first nobility title in the New Spain was granted by the Emperor Charles V to the conqueror Hernán Cortés, under the denomination of marquis of the Valle de Oaxaca, to reward the incorporation to the Spanish Crown of the wide territory of what would be the New Spain.

Palace of the Counts of Santiago de Calimaya

The first viceregal title of count was conferred by King Philip III, to Fernando de Altamirano, with the name of Santiago de Calimaya; the title was used by fourteen descendants to the last of them, Don Ignacio Cervantes Ayestarán who was also the thirteenth marquis of Salinas del Río Pisuegra. We know a contract celebrated with the stonemason that gives news of the quarry work that was carried out in the primitive houses located “on the street of the Hospital that goes to Ixtapalapa” today Pino Suárez Avenue. In 1768 a strong earthquake caused big damages to the construction, so in 1776 it was necessary that the then count Juan Manuel Gutiérrez Altamirano, requested the construction of the current building to the architect Francisco Guerrero y Torres.

Of the palace of the Count of Santiago de Calimaya it is worthy to mention the beautiful facade that highlights for the rich ornamentation of the main access door that worked simultaneously as door for carriages. It is a unique example in our city, which reminds us the intense business dealings that the New Spain had with the Philippine Islands; the monumental door was entrusted to a merchant from Philippines and it was manufactured in Manila. Initially, this outstand-

ing piece of the Baroque carpentry was lacquered in vermilion and gold borders; in the day when the hall door was placed, a multitude attended to admire it, because the news was published in the *Gaceta del Virreinato*.... (Gazette of the Viceroyalty). As sign of the presence of the Mexica culture in the viceregal city, a corner of the building shows an enormous monolithic snake head of basaltic stone that was originally in the Major Temple of the Aztecs. Likewise, it is the only nobiliary palace of the city of Mexico that was occupied by the proprietors until the mid-20th century. At present time it has a completely different function; it is headquarters of the Mexico City Museum.

Palace of the Counts of San Mateo Valparaíso.

Philip V awarded Colonel Fernando de la Campa y Cos, knight of the order of Alcántara, the title of Count in 1727. The second countess, Ana María, married Miguel de Berrio y Zaldívar, first marquis of Jaral de Berrio, knight of Santiago and Chief Accountant of the Audience of Mexico. They ordered the construction of the splendid residence. It was built in 1769 by the architect Francisco Guerrero y Torres who put a spectacular design of quarry chains or laces ornamentations carved on the facade, besides a turret in the corner with a niche, and a facade with a typically Baroque composition, flanked with infantile atlases on both sides of the coat of arms, framing the enormous wooden panel door.

The construction was modified in the years 30's of the 20th century to serve as headquarters of a bank institution that respected the wealth of its interiors, although controlling the access to the public that cannot enjoy the beauty of the construction.

Palace of the Counts of Heras Soto

This building was not built as nobiliary palace, but a series of financial transactions by the middle of the 19th century, put the construction in hands of the heirs of the title Heras Soto, that same as those aforementioned, is an excellent sample of the viceregal architecture of the New Spain.

In 1972 it was acquired by the Mexico City Government that destined it to house the Historical Archive of Mexico City that contains documentation from 1522 to 1928.

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