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Curatorship of the Architectural Space: The Historical Building as an Aesthetic/Affective Experience

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ABSTRACT

This text explores the potential of historical buildings as catalysts for aesthetic experiences and presents a curatorial proposal aimed at integrating visitor's subjective and intersubjective perspectives. Drawing on theorists such as Foucault, Bachelard, and Dewey, it examines how emotional interaction with architectural heritage can enrich narratives and disrupt the linearity of official discourse. As an example, it describes an activity carried out at the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec, in which a group of elderly people shared memories and redefined the former convent through their lived experiences. This collaborative approach demonstrated that visiting museums can foster a more intimate, reflective and creative connection with people.

KEYWORDS

culture, museology, imaginary, curatorship, historical building

INTRODUCCIÓN

Entering a museum means entering a reality that is mediated and, in a sense, controlled by the museum itself. In the case of history museums located in historical buildings, mediation often focuses on the historical discourse of the collections and the architecture, which limits the possible meanings constructed by visitors. This study aims to develop a narrative flow that

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emerges from the intimate and subjective relationship between the space and its visitors, making the aesthetic dimension of the historical building more perceptible.

Through curatorship, it is possible to highlight perspectives and discourses that foster an emotional connection with the space, encouraging audiences to construct personal meanings based on their own experience. As Boris Groys notes, "Signs escape any conscious control by power, thanks to the continuous movement and displacement of their meanings" (Groys, 2008, p. 44). This article explores new discursive possibilities for museum-curated architectural heritage. As a case study, it analyzes the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec[1] (State of Mexico), where a curatorial proposal was developed based on the theories of Groys, Foucault, Bachelard and Dewey, following an activity carried out with elderly people in said museum.

MUSEUM AND ARCHIVE: NARRATIVES AND EXCLUSIONS

The museum can be understood as an entity structured around two main aspects: forms of content and forms of expression (Deleuze, 2013, pp. 25-33). The former encompasses both the physical space and the objects comprising its collection. In this sense, the museum space may be perceived as an architectural container that houses collections, or these are selected to complement and create a discursive system in relation to the space. In other words, the space is subordinated to the collection, or the collection contributes to the discourse about the building that we seek to emphasize. In turn, the forms of expression derive from the ideological framework that gives meaning to the museum and encompass both the institution as a whole —with its policies and objectives— and the specific narrative conveyed through its exhibition, in which forms of content are linked to forms of expression.

Thus, the museum functions as an archive from which the institution extracts a way of presenting a specific reality. This is constructed based on the objects chosen to form the collection, the architectural aspects highlighted in the interpretive flow, and the semantic relationships generated between these elements and the museography. According to Boris Groys, the archive collects and safeguards the objects that are relevant to a culture, while everything considered irrelevant or worthless is left out (Groys, 2008, p. 11). Therefore, whoever has the power of selection determines the museum's con-

[1] Museo Virreinal de Zinacantepec

tent and the curatorial and conceptual perspective from which it will be approached.

Félix Suazo introduces the concept of *ungovernable semantic surplus*, which refers to the fact that the collection, the architectural space, and the narratives can communicate something different from the image the museum intends to project. Then, there are silent languages between what is shown and what is narrated, which are marginalized and obscured, while the museum's official elements and discourses occupy the foreground (Suazo, 2012, p. 2). In order to ensure the coherence of the message the institution seeks to convey, this semantic surplus is excluded. In this way, what challenges discursive unity remains outside the archive and ignored by museography.

Boris Groys also distinguishes two places where what remains outside the archive can be found. The first is the profane space, which includes objects and places deemed culturally irrelevant, such as access areas, lobbies, hallways (Figure 1), or administrative areas in the context of buildings. The second is the submedia space, which lies beneath the surface of the archive (Groys, 2008, p. 27), in some museums this can be stories of the architectural construction itself that are relegated to the background, in favor of highlighting the stories of the objects housed in the museum. For example, in the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec, the *New Spain graffiti*—historical markings on the walls of the former convent—are not part of the museum's design and often go unnoticed, except by those aware of their existence.

The exclusion of certain aspects responds not only to the need to preserve discursive and historical homogeneity, but also for practical reasons. Elements that are difficult to archive, such as the transient or the unstable, are frequently omitted, as they could complicate the clarity of the museological project. This includes visitors' emotions, community memories, the perception of time within the museum space, or the manifestation of the ephemeral moment in architecture, which is revealed through sensory perceptions.

History museums located in architectural monuments[2] are a clear example of how institutions exclude narratives and meanings from objects and spaces that do not align with the official narrative.

[2] The difference between a historic building and a historic monument lies in their official recognition. A historic building is culturally or historically important due to its age or relevance, while a historic monument, according to the National Institute of Anthropology and History, has legal protection status and is officially designated as part of the nation's cultural heritage (INAH, 2024).



FIGURE 1. Hallway of the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec (Photograph: Andrea Zelaya, 2022; courtesy: Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec).

In these cases, the appreciation and emotional connection that could emerge from experiencing a historical building in the present are relegated to the background, as the priority—far from highlighting the building's technical or aesthetic qualities—is to immerse the public in the represented historical period.

This narrative exclusion is evident at the Franz Mayer Museum (Mexico City), where the discursive flow focuses on the collection of artistic and decorative objects, relegating the history of the building —formerly the Hospital of San Juan de Dios— to a secondary role. The space primarily emphasizes the beauty of the exhibited works, while the architectural history is reduced to a cartouche with brief historical details. This approach simplifies the semantic richness of the space and directs the public's attention solely to the artworks, omitting the historical or social connections that might otherwise emerge through interaction with the environment. María

Jiménez-Blanco criticizes this tendency, which turns artistic and historical works into simple elements subordinated to a narrative predefined by the institution (Jiménez, 2021, p. 15).

The limited conception of the museum and the imposition of a singular discourse can constrain the complexity of interpretations and meanings, thereby limiting people's ability to interpret and personalize their experience. As Michel Foucault argued about a literary work, a museum is not constituted as an immediate, uniform, or definitive entity; rather, it is formed through a complex web of discourses and temporalities (Foucault, 2010a, pp. 36-37). Therefore, the ways of seeing, understanding, and engaging with a museum are varied.

THE HISTORICAL BUILDING AS A CATALYST FOR AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES

As Vito Suzan points out, architectural heritage can be understood as a means of finding a sense of continuity, as it invites people to value the processes of cultural transfer, reception, and appropriation that have shaped humanity up to the present day (Suzan, 2017, pp. 33-39). In this sense, the historical building becomes a catalyst for aesthetic experiences due to its capacity to house multiple meanings and narratives. Because it preserves the traces of its past—its original function and the various uses it has acquired over time—it offers a wealth of narratives.

Although definitions of the concept of aesthetic experience have varied over time, they all agree that it is an experience in which a person focuses on their senses, triggered by something that arouses interest or pleasure. Giovanna Mazzotti Pabello and Víctor Manuel Alcaraz Romero describe it as an act of knowledge in which emotion is always present, generating a fusion between the experiencer and the observed (Mazzotti and Alcaraz, 2006, p. 37). On the other hand, Nicole Everaert-Desmedt distinguishes between aesthetic pleasure, related to the judgment of beauty, and artistic pleasure, linked to admiration; since she points out, that the latter generates an interpretive hypothesis that seeks to decipher the meaning of the object (Everaert-Desmedt, 2008, p. 94). In this ESSAY, which aligns closely to Mazzoti Pabello's and Alcaraz Romero's approach, the term *affective experience* will be used, primarily to emphasize the emotional dimension of interaction.

Due to its symbolic potential, museum-curated architectural heritage is an ideal space for developing curatorial narratives that give greater importance to the public's affective experience with the building. This approach requires institutions to recognize people as

active participants in the construction of meaning and promote an environment that encourages interpretive freedom. However, many historical museums limit these experiences by imposing a single discourse that excludes the personal context of visitors. Georges Didi-Huberman (2011, p. 36) points out that rejecting anachronism avoids projecting contemporary concepts, tastes, and values onto historical objects, implying that their understanding depends exclusively on their past. Integrating spatial and temporal elements of the historical building into the curatorial narrative can transform this dynamic, fostering more personal connections.

John Dewey (2008, p. 18) describes two environments that hinder affective experience. One is the world of flux, where constant activity and change prevent the stability needed for reflection and reorganization. The other is the finished world, characterized by its immutability and the absence of uncertainty or crisis, which eliminates opportunities to resolve or reconcile tensions. This resembles historical museums with a single narrative, where visitors simply receive information with no opportunity for interaction or personal transformation.

Here, there is no reciprocity; visitors enter and leave without being transformed by their surroundings, without appropriating them (Suazo, 2004, p. 4). An example is the Museum of Anthropology and History of the State of Mexico, located in the former Hacienda San José la Pila (Toluca). Its chronological itinerary celebrates *mestizaje*[3] as a harmonious ideal, but omits the underlying dynamics of exclusion and power. This approach restricts the visitors' ability to establish critical and personal connections with the space, the collections, and the presented discourse.

To counter this inertia, it is essential that people remain aware and attentive to their surroundings, allowing their emerging thoughts and sensations to reveal new knowledge and insights. Dewey argues that true aesthetic experience is characterized by a rupture with the conventional and the mediocre (Dewey, 2008, p. 47). Unlike everyday environments, such as offices or schools, which are often perceived as repetitive and utilitarian, the historical building, far from being a commonplace, appears as something extraordinary, laden with meaning, inviting us to pause, reflect, and experience a profound connection with time and space.

Historical buildings function as receptacles for multiple temporalities, where the traces of the past engage in dialogue with the present and project possibilities toward the future (Didi-Huberman,

[3] Miscegenation.

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2011, p. 13). Museography can highlight elements that demonstrate time's passage within the space: the wear and tear of materials, the symbols or graffiti accumulated on the walls, the changes in light that mark the hours of the day, or the shapes and shadows the building generates as it interacts with its surroundings. This approach invites visitors to connect sensorially with the place, allowing each moment to be experienced as a pause filled with meaning. As Bachelard explains, in these experiences, the "present does not pass, because one instant is left only to find another" (Bachelard, 1999, p. 46).

To construct a discourse that fosters this type of appreciation, it is essential to distinguish the sensory qualities that shape the experience. As Nicole Everaert-Desmedt notes, "a work of art is an object or an event in which a quality of feeling becomes intelligible" (Everaert-Desmedt, 2008, p. 96). Understanding architectural heritage from this perspective involves returning to that initial encounter with the space, assimilating the emotions and meanings that arise from interacting with it. However, this type of relationship requires a greater commitment from those who visit the museum, motivating them to observe attentively, reflect, and construct a personal interpretation of their emotions and thoughts. Therefore, the institution, as a mediator of the experience, must develop strategies that meaningfully connect with diverse audiences.

A museum located in a historical building can contribute to this objective by offering complementary exhibitions: one related to its historical theme or specific vocation; the other centered on the building as a space that triggers aesthetic experiences. This approach broadens the possibilities of appreciation by offering at least two levels of interpretation.

REDEFINING THE VICEREGAL MUSEUM OF ZINACANTEPEC THROUGH MEMORY AND COMMUNITY EXPERIENCE

In November 2022, an activity was held at the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec, located in the former Franciscan convent of San Miguel, with the aim of exploring the emotional relationship between the public and the space. For this initiative, a group of residents of the Zinacantepec Senior Citizens' Home were invited to share their experiences and memories linked to the former convent. They were first asked about their connection to the site, and many tried to recall historical details related to the conquest of the Toluca Valley and the Viceroyalty. Their responses reflected a certain degree of uncertainty, since, as mentioned at the time, some lacked suffi-

cient historical knowledge. However, once it was clarified that the purpose of the activity was to retrieve their memories, opinions, and personal experiences, they felt more comfortable and began to reminisce together, collectively building and interweaving their anecdotes.

As the activity progressed, the group participants' comments and expressions revealed deeper, more intimate connections with the space. Their stories revealed significant experiences linked to the place, such as group weddings, baptisms in the Zinacantepec baptismal font, and childhood games in the surroundings of what was then a convent (Figure 2). These narratives redefined the space, transforming it into a place of living memory that, along with the community's beliefs, opinions, imagination, and affections, transcends its historical-institutional use —its role as a container of official history— and creates a new way of understanding the building: as a space deeply connected to their personal lived experiences.



FIGURE 2. View of the Zinacantepec Senior Citizens' Home (Photograph: Diana Ricárdez, 2022; courtesy: Zinacantepec Viceregal Museum).

A notable aspect of the activity was that the staff of the Senior Citizens' Home was unaware of many of the shared stories. This finding highligths the importance of preserving and processing this kind of information to give voice to the subjectivity of the individuals who interact with the museum. Incorporating these personal stories into the museum discourse not only broadens and adds complexity to the official narratives but also transforms the museum into an inclusive and dynamic space, capable of resonating with the diversity of experiences and perspectives within its community.

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Curatorship of a Historical Building

The exercise conducted with elderly people served as the basis for developing a curatorial script for the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec. The proposal's narrative is grounded in a reflection on the differentiated temporality evoked by the historical building.

Based on Michel Foucault's concept of *heterotopia*, the museum can be interpreted as an "other" space, where the rules of the outside world are suspended and transformed, enabling the creation of new norms, experiences, and meanings (Foucault, 2010b, p. 89). Like other heterotopias, such as gardens or ships, the museum establishes a unique relationship with time and space, condensing historical and cultural meanings into an environment that invites reflection and interaction. Within this framework, the exhibition seeks to highlight the intersubjective histories of the religious building and its spatiotemporal experience through index cards, technical labels, and personal testimonies that reveal unique, often unnoticed details that distinguish the building from other structures. This approach fosters active and personal exploration, encouraging people to construct their own meanings. As Nina Simon points out in *The Participatory Museum*, the museum space is enriched by the multiplicity of voices and interpretations, becoming a place where social reality is reflected, questioned, and transformed (Simon, 2010, p. 3).

The proposal suggests a discreet set of exhibition labels that demands close attention to be discovered, in which elements such as columns (Figure 3), ornamentation, murals, and light effects predominate. The aim is to move the public away from passivity by inviting them to explore the space with curiosity and assume an active role as interpreters. In this way, the museum experience becomes a subjective experience that transcends simple historical perception, in line with Gaston Bachelard's ideas on the emotional dimension of space (Bachelard, 2020, pp. 9-37). Although the exhibition, originally planned for the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec, could not materialize due to administrative changes, the proposal is presented as an adaptable model for future museum projects with similar characteristics, offering a conceptual basis for new initiatives.

Objectives of the museological proposal:

1. Highlight the symbolic potential of the historical building as a catalyst for aesthetic experiences.



FIGURE 3. Details of the architecture of the viceregal museum (Photograph: Andrea Zelaya, 2022; courtesy: Museo Virreinal de Zinacantepec).

2. Present a discreet and evocative form of mediation that invites personal interpretation, stimulating curiosity and active participation among visitors.
3. Emphasize the spatiotemporal experience of the monument, highlighting the traces of time and the aesthetic qualities of its architecture.
4. Foster an intimate and emotional connection between people and the museum space.
5. Position the museum as a living archive that draws on people's experiences, memories, and knowledge, generating continuous feedback.

The exhibition will be structured into five thematic cores-three focused on the experience of time and two on that of space-conceived as spaces for contemplation and distributed across different areas of the former Franciscan convent of San Miguel. These areas invite the public to explore the site as a whole and interact

with it reflectively. The curatorial texts emphasize two fundamental forms of sensory perception: interoception, which allows us to recognize and process the body's internal sensations and states, and exteroception, which relates to the interpretation of sensory stimuli from the environment, such as vision and hearing (Seth, 2013, p. 567). From this perspective, the visitor's experience is understood as an ongoing dialogue between internal and external perception.

Thematic cores focused on the experience of time (1-3) and space (4-5):

1. *The Museum as a Witness to Time*: invites reflection on the passage of time, highlighting the heritage significance of the building and the sensory experiences that emerge when moving through it.
2. *Memory of the Building*: narrates the multifaceted history of the building, emphasizing the different uses and events it has witnessed over the centuries.
3. *Living Archive*: presents the museum as a participatory space enriched by the memories and experiences of its visitors, connecting past, present, and future through individual and collective narratives.
4. *Secrets of Space*: invites the discovery of often-unnoticed architectural details, especially their visual, historical, and symbolic value, and encourages more thoughtful observation.
5. *Between History and Aesthetics*: explores the relationship between the building's historical and aesthetic values, showing how elements such as light, shadows, and architectural layout transform the experience of the site.

According to Boris Groys, the observer's full subjectivity emerges when they reflect on their own perception (Groys, 2008, p. 38). To foster this subjective connection between people and space, welcoming and quiet environments that encourage introspection are proposed. Inspired by Gaston Bachelard, the thematic cores are designed as places of contemplation that stimulate the search for personal meanings within the environment (Bachelard, 2020, pp. 9-37).

The following are some of the texts proposed for the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec:

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The Museum as a Witness to Time

"Here time pauses to intertwine with you.

The former Franciscan convent of San Miguel, built in the 16th century, not only preserves history: it builds it with you, step by step. The worn stone of its staircases, the marks on the pantry walls, the sundials that continue to cast their shadows... everything here is a conversation between the past, the present, and the future.

Take a moment. Look around and choose a corner that draws your attention. What story does it tell you? What emotions does it stir in you? Your thoughts, memories, or assumptions are not only valid, they are part of this dialogue.

Allow this space to speak to you and, as you walk through it, become another link in its history. (Exhibition label text of own authorship, proposed for the exhibition)"

Living Archive

"This is not just a museum; it is a story in the making.

Each visitor leaves a mark, not only with their footprints, but with their thoughts and emotions. This space is a living archive that transforms with each visitor who walks through it.

You can also be part of this narrative. Share what this place inspires in you with a word, a memory, a drawing or an emotion. Leave your testimony in our archive and let your voice echo with those who came before and those who will come after.

What you write here will not disappear: it will become part of the collective memory of this space, enriching its meaning with each new contribution. "What story will you tell today?" (Exhibition label text of own authorship, proposed for the exhibition)"

Finally, this curatorial proposal seeks to present the museum as a dynamic and multifaceted entity composed of diverse layers of meaning. By transcending the traditional historical narrative (Figure 4), the discourses and imaginaries associated with the building are expanded, emphasizing the importance of preserving the testimony of the personal experiences of those who visit it and fostering the historical, aesthetic, symbolic, and constructive appreciation of cultural heritage through its social and cultural reactivation (Aragón, 2024, pp. 130-131). As a possibility, and taking advantage of the benefits of technological tools, the use of a digital platform is proposed to effectively record, share, and store the narratives of visitors. These interactive technologies enrich the museum experience, making it more engaging and educational (Vivar-Cordero, 2023, p.

23). However, whether through digital tools or analog methods, the essential goal is to offer diverse visual and emotional perspectives on the experience within the historical building, contributing to a deeper collective understanding of the place.

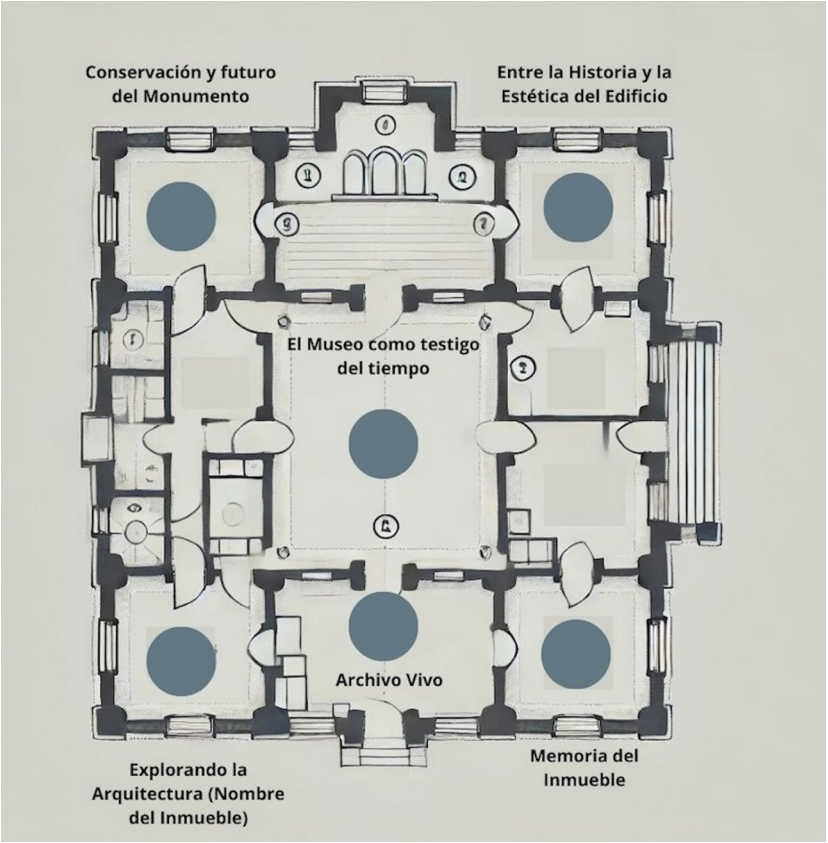


FIGURA 4. Current exhibition (Photograph: Andrea Zelaya, 2022; courtesy: Museo Virreinal de Zinacantepec).

CONCLUSIONS

This text has explored the spatial and temporal experience in a historical building. As Boris Groys explains, signs acquire meaning through the medium in which they manifest, whether it is language, writing, visual arts, or film (Groys, 2008, p. 61). In this case, the medium is the exhibition, which allows for the shaping and communication of the multiple narratives associated with the museum and its heritage value. By applying this perspective, the interpretive possibilities are expanded, and an exhibition alternative is presented that could be replicated in other museums with characteristics like those of the Viceregal Museum of Zinacantepec.

The proposal of a complementary exhibition does not replace the institutional narrative; instead, it adds a layer of meaning that opens new forms of interpretation and appreciation. This approach highlights the polysemy of the historical building, inviting visitors to construct their own interpretations of the space. At the same

time, it encourages future research on curatorial structures capable of unfolding multiple routes of meaning, where interpretation emerges gradually, offering the public the freedom to choose how to experience the museum (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5. Visit to the Zinacantepec Senior Citizens' Home (Photograph: Diana Ricárdez, 2022; courtesy: Zinacantepec Viceregal Museum).

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