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LIMITED EDITION COVER
BY CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

THIS PICTURE, THE RESTORED 18TH-CENTURY MANSION SITS ON MORELIA'S MAIN PLAZA
BELOW, THE GROUND FLOOR BAKERY, FORTUNATA Y JACINTA



OPENING SHOT

How a Mexican movie mogul is hoping to revitalise his home town with a multi-venue master plan

Morelia is a sleeping beauty of a town, built in the 16th century and with a historic centre that rivals the best of Europe. Today, the city is as well known for its colonial buildings in rose-coloured stone and its international film festival as for being the capital of Michoacán, the state where Mexico's drug war began. As a result, Morelia is something that is increasingly hard to find: a 'touristic city without tourists', in the words of the Argentinian architect Luis Laplace.

Based in Paris, where he has run his own practice (with co-founder Christophe Comoy) since 2004, Laplace had never visited Mexico before first going to Morelia three years ago. Since then, he's spent quite a bit of time in this city, renovating a 4,000 sq m property overlooking the central plaza.

The property's owner, Alejandro Ramírez Magaña, is CEO of Cinépolis, one of the world's largest cinema chains. Born in Morelia, Ramírez wanted to buy a secondary residence here. The house he chose included shops at street level, which he decided to



maintain as public spaces, hoping they would enhance Morelia's appeal for others who might restore and reoccupy its old palaces. 'Morelia is where I grew up,' Ramírez says. 'The city has changed since then and become more a place to come to work rather than live. I want people to come back. The city has a lot to offer: architecture, historical museums and the film festival.'

Built in 1730, the property was run-down but beautiful, a typical Hispanic Mexican stone mansion with courtyards. It had been the birthplace of Don Mariano Michelena, one of the original conspirators plotting Mexico's independence in 1809. Michelena also introduced the coffee plant to his country, which is appropriate, since the new project includes a café/bookstore called Café Michelena. There's also a restaurant, La Conspiración de 1809, serving a creative take on Mexican cuisine by a local chef named Cynthia Martinez, and a bakery, Fortunata y Jacinta, run by a baker who mixes French traditions with native flavours. »

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1. Café Michelena, featuring Spanish-influenced encaustic floor tiles and shelves lined with locally made terracotta pots. 2. A mural inspired by Mexican flora in the main restaurant, La Conspiración de 1809. 3. La Conspiración also boasts a new baroque-style decorative door frame, built by local stonemasons. 4. The bookstore area of Café Michelena, with an original ceiling featuring Parota wood beams

To rehabilitate the property, Ramírez hired Laplace, who had already worked for him in the US and Europe. (The project is co-signed by a Mexican architect, Christian Gantous, who worked on the residential areas.)

Laplace chose to turn the public spaces – 400 sq m in all – into something elegant yet welcoming, and unmistakably Mexican. ‘Go anywhere today,’ he says. ‘The fancy restaurants want to be like those in New York, Paris, London. I did not want this to be the case. I wanted to put value in local artisans, and work with them.’

Laplace started by researching the area, finding local craftspeople working in wood, stone, ceramics and fabrics. He used copper, a speciality of a nearby town, to make everything from champagne buckets to the front of the café counter, something he says would be ‘insanely expensive’ in Europe.

For the floors, he combined old patterns to make Spanish-influenced encaustic tiles, while original Parota wood beams still line the high ceilings. Stonemasons built

a decorative frame for an existing door, a Mexican version of Spanish baroque.

One day during the renovation, Laplace was drinking his morning coffee on a terrace in Morelia when a woman came up asking him to buy one of her terracotta pots. He surprised her by purchasing them all. A few minutes later, she came back. ‘I turned around and the entire family showed up with bags full of pots,’ he said. He scattered the small, round pots everywhere, on counters, shelves and tabletops.

While Laplace is used to working with artisans in France, he says this was a totally different experience. ‘I would spend half an hour making a drawing for someone, and two days later the guy would come back with the project. Something that would take two months anywhere else. People were engaged, and happy to work with a crazy foreigner.’

He brought his office team in from France and hired hundreds of locals for the work site, an army of people who took on any task. ‘Don’t forget, these are people who built

pyramids,’ notes Laplace. ‘You bring something huge, like a super heavy table in solid oak that comes with a crane and cannot go inside, and six guys – they just do it.’

Murals are an important part of Mexico’s culture, and the architect was thrilled to find that Morelia has a particularly impressive mural by American artist Philip Guston on a wall of the university library. Called *The Inquisition*, it was painted in 1935 and hidden by a false wall until the late 1970s. Laplace wanted to put a mural in the restaurant – decorative, not political – and he hired a young local artist to paint the four walls of one room with lush flora from the region, giant leaves and palm fronds practically rustling behind diners’ heads.

Now that the space has finally opened, tables here have become hot property. On TripAdvisor, one reviewer complains that the Café Michelena is ‘crowded all the time’. To this, Laplace simply responds: ‘Great, mission accomplished.’ ★ luislaplace.com; laconspiracionde1809.com