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by Larry Herzog

A Beginner's Guide to Tijuana Architecture

You've been to Tijuana a zillion times. Tijuana architecture? The bars on Revolution, right? Been there, done that, you say. We say, go back — sober. You may have missed a few things. Try either the old or new sections of town.

THE OLD

Avenida Revolución is always a good place to begin any tour of "old" Tijuana. Revolution Avenue is to Tijuana what Main Street, U.S.A., is to Disneyland — a grand promenade that sets the mood for a carefully choreographed tourist experience. There are few places left where San Diegans, Southern Californians, can walk. Disneyland is one of them. Revolution Avenue in downtown Tijuana is another. If the experience of Disneyland begins by walking from a parking lot through entrance gates onto Main Street U.S.A., the experience of Tijuana moves from the tourist parking just north of the border in San Ysidro through the pedestrian border gate and along the path that leads directly onto Revolution Avenue.

Few consider the irony of a street name (Revolution) that speaks of rural peasants fighting for land ownership at the turn of the century. Here, "Revolution" is carnival — buildings decorated like zebras or Moorish castles, flags, and colorful blimps floating overhead.

"The owners of establishments on Revolution Avenue have a funny way of thinking," says Eugenio Velazquez of the Tijuana architectural firm Arte Proyecto. "They think that by making things ugly, that will attract Americans. Americans are tired of seeing everything so perfect and well made on their side of the border; they want to have a moment of relief. So they

There are hints in Cacho of what a neighborhood must have been like a half-century ago in the United States.

come here to take refuge. They come here to feel rich, to spend a little, because here, even with what little they might earn over there, here they're like millionaires."

Ask any architect in Tijuana to describe the tourist section of town, and they will use the same word: "scenographic." As in stage set.

"Revolution Avenue is theater," says architect Jorge Ozorno. "It's a stage set that shows how gringos came in and built up the town. Today, you see a life-sized yellow school bus on the exterior of a building — it's oriented toward the market of American stu-

dents 18 to 21 years old who just got out of high school; since they can drink beer in Mexico [the drinking age is 18], they come here, and subliminally, they're delivered certain images — 'Now, get on your school bus where you can drink.' They can make fun of it. It's all an exercise of border craftsmanship — all of the buildings on Revolution Avenue are carefully crafted. They're built for a party, with their friezes, their carvings, their adornments — it's a much more vulgar architecture than what we have in the rest of Mexico."

The idea that part of their city has been reduced to caricature has not eluded the Mexicans. "We've badly adjusted to our tourism," comments Velazquez. "We've gotten into bad habits. The knickknacks the tourists buy on Revolution Avenue are like the buildings. In the end, it is a form of art, a picturesque moment, a landscape like your Las Vegas. But all architecture reaches a limit and then begins to fall. Revolution Avenue may be in its hour of decline."

A few buildings are left from the exotic street created in the Roaring '20s. Anchoring the south end of the avenue is the Jai Alai Palace (corner of Revolution and 8th street), once described by a San Diego art critic as "palatial concrete rising majestically over the business center of Tijuana." Designed by San Diego architect Eugene Hoffman, the festive, Moorish-



Jai Alai Palace

detailed structure was begun in 1926 but not actually completed and opened until 1945 (the depression of the 1930s had a way of slowing things down). Its massive concrete walls owe less to the architect than to the fact that, at the time of construction, the owner of the building cut a deal with the government on a massive amount of cement left over from the construction of the Rodriguez Dam on the southeastern outskirts of Tijuana. The extra concrete was purchased at a bargain and used to build the Jai Alai structure.

At the north end of Revolution lies El Banco Internacional (corner

of 2nd and Revolution), originally the turn-of-the-century site of one of the town's first commercial establishments, the Big Curio Store. Today, the refurbished version of the 1929 neoclassical building features a handsome black marble base, pilasters and arch windows, finished exterior stone, and plaster relief, including decorative cornices, spiral scrolling, and floral design around a large clock. El Banco Internacional tends to get lost in the carnival-like chaos of Revolution Avenue, but it can be a pleasant relief from the surrounding scene.

The remains of the once-legendary red-light district, the Zona Norte lies

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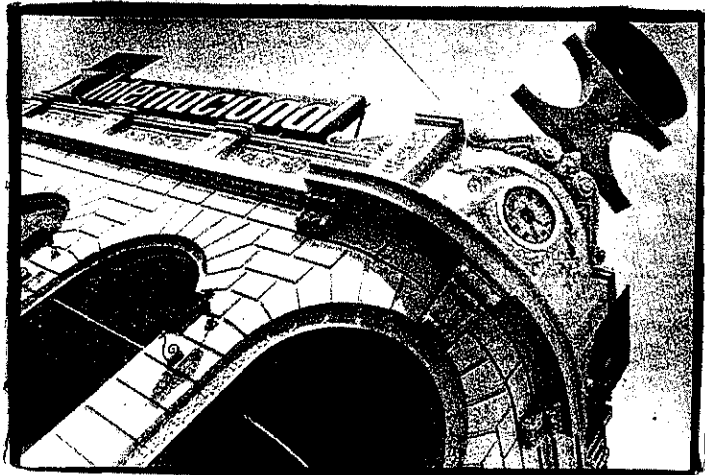
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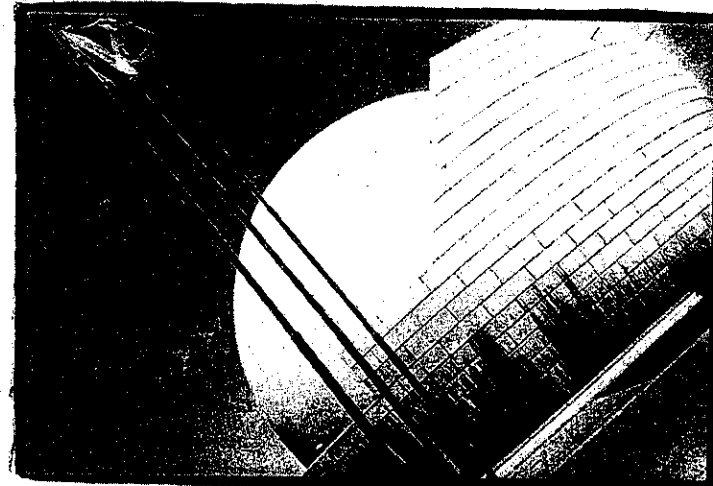


Banco Internacional

at the north end of Revolution. Just north of the "North Zone" at the international boundary is the new metallic wall, completed recently by the

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Residents are gradually covering it with murals and graffiti, including the ever-popular "¿Si el de Berlin cayo, el de Tj-

juana, porque no?" (If the Berlin Wall came down, why not the one in Tijuana?) Several blocks east of Revolution Avenue, a small slice of traditional Mexico is found in the Parque Teniente Guerrero — a well-manicured neighborhood park with a central kiosk, street vendors selling hot dogs and corn, and the quintessential wooden Mexican shoeshine stands. Built in the 1920s, the park will re-



Centro Cultural de Tijuana

mind anyone who has been to Mexico's interior of the lovely *zocalos* (plazas) in the old sections of colonial cities. Across the street from the park is a replica of a Spanish colonial church, the *Iglesia (Church) of San Francisco*.

Just east of downtown on a hill is the *Casa de Cultura* (House of Culture), originally the *Escuela Alvaro Obregon*, a school named after the Mexican president who was assassinated on the same day in 1930 that the building was inaugurated. The *Casa de Cultura* features a classical Greco-Roman or Beaux Arts-inspired formal design, with a series of columns forming the building's *façade*, the kind often used in libraries, schools, and public buildings north of the border in

the '20s and '30s. Indeed, the design of the original building in Tijuana was said to be a copy of a school in Yuma, Arizona, with the exception that the Yuma school was made of yellow brick and the Tijuana one of red brick.

No tour of Tijuana's past is complete without a visit to the ruins of the *Casino Agua Caliente*, the great Mediterranean villa fantasy resort located off the *Paseo de los Héroes* in the River Zone, east of downtown. The resort, designed in 1926 and '27 by two San Diego architects, Wayne and Corinne McAllister, blended a kind of mission and Spanish superstructure with elements of Italian, Byzantine, and Moorish architecture.

All that remains on the original

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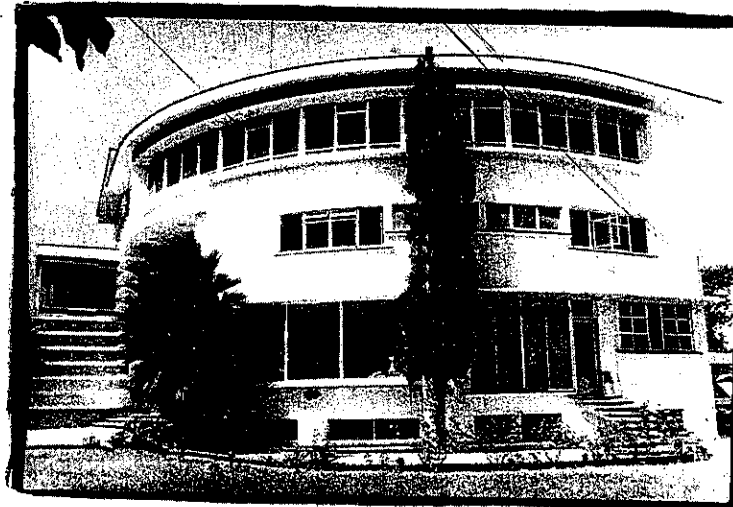
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Architecture

(continued from page 29)

grounds of the casino today (which was converted to the largest public high school complex in Tijuana in the 1930s) are the tiled minaret-tower (which once served as a chimney for the kitchen and laundry staff), a glazed tile arch, an abandoned swimming pool, and a small village of 1920s bungalows, which long ago lodged Hollywood celebrities but today boards the public school teachers. The California-style bungalows vary in form: some have front wooden porches, others have a Santa Fe or a Spanish Colonial Revival look, while still others carry Arabian arches and tiles imported from Spain.



Casa Walicias

THE NEW

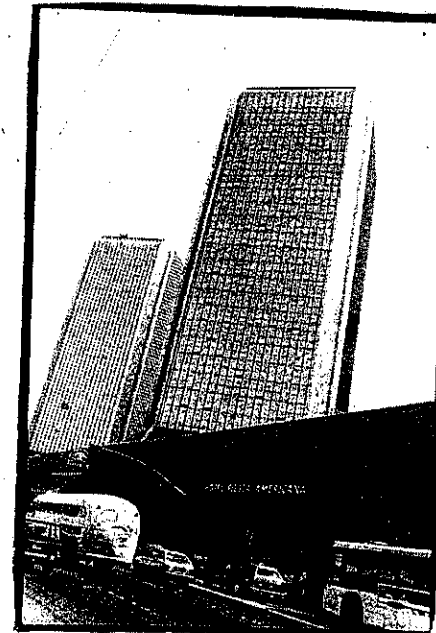
Heading south out of downtown, you arrive shortly at one of Tijuana's first post-1950 residential neighborhoods — Cacho. Not only will you find interesting architecture here, but there are also hints of what a neighborhood must have been like a half-century ago in the United States: the corner stores, the patios and porches that once faced the street (but increasingly lie behind fences and walls), the sidewalks. New development has unfortunately driven homeowners up into the hills, leaving behind sagging properties. Still, many of the homes are well preserved and offer a sample of 1950s Mexican functionalist modern architecture. The Casa Walicias is a large, white, dignified structure built in 1952 on Aguas Calientes Boulevard; this rotund-shaped house belonged to a wealthy Tijuana family of the era

(it's named after one of the daughters) and reflected a blend of international design trends of the time: Frank Lloyd Wright's horizontalism, German Expressionism, Le Corbusier. It has tremendous presence, the kind of building you imagine housing an embassy.

Architects here speak of *las esquinas de Cacho* — the corners of Cacho — since the biggest and most interesting homes were built on the larger lots at street corners. These houses share a number of attributes: inclined, angular roofs, balconies, porticos, and columns. Some have large bay windows and stone walls. There are also examples of Spanish Colonial Revival-style houses, whose designs were copied from prevailing examples in Los Angeles and San Diego. Nearby is the original Plaza de Toros (bullring) of Tijuana, a great steel engineering feat of the late 1940s painted fire

engine red. Also nearby is a fine church, the Iglesia de Carmen, whose elliptical roof brings to mind the parabolic designs of contemporary Mexico City architect Felix Candela.

One of the first important post-war public buildings was the Puerta de Mexico, the border crossing structure completed in 1965 by architect Antonio Bermudez. Its arching curves excited a San Diego critic writing in the late 1960s to describe it as a "capricious border funnel, intriguing as a nautilus chamber." Unfortunately, the years of heavy traffic and increased congestion in the world's busiest international border crossing have left this building much the worse for wear. The Mexican government is contemplating an expansion and upgrade.



Twin Tower of Agua Caliente

Most of the contemporary architecture of the 1980s lies in the River Zone. The most striking addition to the cityscape is the Centro Cultural de Tijuana (CECUT) complex, notable for a sandstone-colored spherical element that stands out against an L-shaped companion building. Set against the backdrop of the Tijuana hills, townspeople affectionately call it "la bola" (the ball). CECUT sits in a great outdoor plaza, and one has the feeling of the earth (the sphere) gently resting in two hands.

Nearby are modern glass office buildings of

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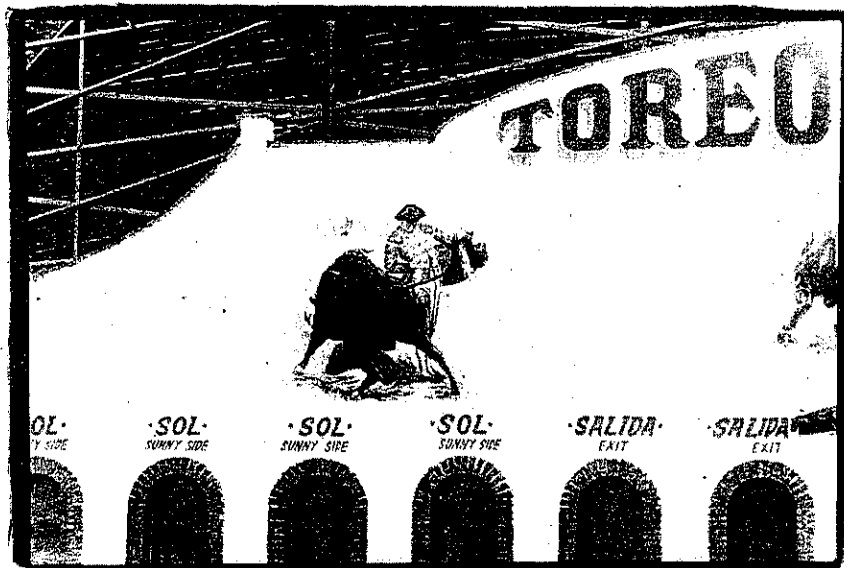
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Plaza de Toros

varied shape and form, some ugly, some ordinary, a few outstanding. The hulking, somewhat dull black crystal box in the center of the River Zone is the ASEMEX (Aseguradora de Mexico, an insurance company) building. Nearby is **Bancomer**, a miniaturized copy of a Mexico City-based bank (several buildings here are copies of larger Mexico City ones). The **Banco Internacional** has a three-story-high triangular-shaped glass façade. The architect, Luis Liciaga, who designed the gray **Torremol** high-rise office structure adjacent to the CECUT building, says he tried to design a modern skyscraper using the elements of a traditional

colonial church: base, tower, and windows. A great cathedral window in the tower part of the building 'turns' to face the street corner it lies on. The tallest modern skyscraper in the River Zone is the **Twin Tower of Agua Caliente** complex, which houses offices and a hotel. The twin towers are more impressive from a distance; up close, they seem out of proportion with the one- and two-story commercial and residential buildings in the surrounding neighborhood of La Mesa.

The River Zone's parallel two- and three-lane roads are intersected by *glorietas* (traffic circles). Inserted in the center of the *glorietas*



La Monumental de Playas

are civic sculptures, including the **Cuahtemoc** (last Aztec chief) **Monument**, the **Statue of Abraham Lincoln**, **La Diana** (a smaller version of the Mexico City monument to the goddess), and the abstract V-shaped sculpture near the CECUT building that locals call **La Tijera** (the scissors).

The scale of streets makes the River Zone stimulating to drive through; you don't move as quickly as on a California freeway, but the public monuments, the landscaping, and the mix of buildings make it worth your while.

The River Zone is noteworthy also for its explosion of modern shopping centers. Most well known is the **Plaza Rio Tijuana**, an unpretentious, if not somewhat conventional U.S.-style outdoor regional shopping mall. Nearby are two shopping centers designed to look like colonial Mexican towns: **Plaza Fiesta** and **Pueblo Amigo**, with their lanterns hanging

above old wooden doors, second-floor balconies with iron railings, and courtyards with public fountains. The centers' stucco comes brightly painted in lime greens and pink pastels. There are many vacancies in these recession-hit centers, so they end up looking like Hollywood set ghost towns, but they are not unpleasant to wander through.

One of Tijuana's newest communities, the beach area of **Playas**, could be mistaken for an Italian coastal resort from a distance, with white stucco and red tile-roofed houses cascading down the hills toward the azure Pacific Ocean. Here lies Tijuana's famed bulking-by-the-sea, **La Monumental de Playas**, a massive structure of exposed concrete built in 1962. Strangely, the designers did not think to pry open the bulging structure so that the ocean, which lies just a few blocks away, could be seen from inside — not to mention the light at sunset. ■