



José Chávez Morado's Plastic Monumentalism: Communitarian Integration in an Urban, Social, and Artistic Environment

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This paper discusses the concept of Monumentalism, proposed by the Mexican artist José Chávez Morado, to expand the limits of Mexican Muralism, which is designated here as Plastic Monumentalism. This architectural-artistic movement involves an artistic dialogue on urban spatial reconfiguration, where all the parts are unified—in their respective social, aesthetic, and natural environments—to ensure the integral performance of the city, as well as creating an identity of its inhabitants. We explore the possibilities of the city's subjective existence as a collective construction made out like a work of art but, as Alfredo Siqueiros said, with a social intention in each of its expressive manifestations.

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Concept of Monumentalism

The concept of *plastic monumentalism* is the focal point of these pages. There are no known references on that before the one expressed by master painter José Chávez Morado in 1992. We can find it mentioned in an article by Octavio Aguilar Herrero and Guillermo Romero Zarazúa titled “José Chávez Morado. From Ochre to the Lion Skin”, an interview published in the non-specialized art magazine *Technique and humanism*, from the National College for Professional Technical Education (CONALEP). During this interview, he alluded to the concept *Monumentalist* as a substitute for *Muralist*. In his own words:



The mural I made in the Humanities Tower [at Mexico National University] which sits atop a large window and is covered in one of its sides by travertine marble, has been altered. On it you can see images of heroes Che Guevara and Morelos... I saw a picture of this work and said "If back then I'd had the concept I now have of muralism I would have done the same": using tiles in the incision or using paint the way I did in the SXXI Medical Center mural. Those are the experiences that come later. Because of this I think we shouldn't be called muralists anymore, but rather monumentalists. For example, the facade located in the Mexico National Congress building is made of bronze. Is that a mural? No, it is a big size bronze panel. Also, the center umbrella inside the Anthropology and History Museum, which is a design of mine and was modeled by a group guided by my brother Tomás, is not muralism. In the Caracol Museum there is an eagle and a flag holder, that is no longer muralism, simply because it does not stand over a mural. Its inner door is like a mural that opens and closes, but it is not muralism. That is why I think the term muralist is now obsolete, except when it is used exclusively within specific proportions with any technique. But architecture cannot be altered, that's why they must have agreed with the mural painter. (Chávez Morado, 1992)

We must consider that Chávez Morado used the word *monumentalism* without the adjective *plastic*. This conjunction is proposed here to precise its understanding in the frame of a human activity that reflects and materializes itself in the plastic and visual resources. At the same time, this overcomes the notion that monumentalism only applies to large-scale building works. The word 'monumentalism' doesn't have any known synonyms. According to the academic approach, the word is defined as *the tendency to the use of large-scale in artistic works, especially in architecture or sculpture*, limiting the meaning of *monumental* to the idea of *large-scale*.

If we stopped there, the concept would be apt for "large-scale artwork" as an understandable fact in architecture given the nature of its size and dimensions, but how can we understand "large-scale dimension" in sculpture? Would it be the bigger than human-scale? Would it be the larger than a specified size or format? And what about other forms of artistic expressions beyond sculpture? What about easel painting, poetry, music, literature, filmmaking, theatre, or dance for example? We must not confuse proportion with dimension. It is convenient not to refer only to the physical size of a work as the relevant point of monumentalism. This gives us plenty of possibilities to understand proportion.

The concept of *proportion* refers to the relationship between the parts of a whole unit according to each part. Etymological origin of this term come from the Latin word *proportio*, about which there are multiple theories. Some people consider that it is the result of the prefix *pro*, ahead, and the noun *portio*, portion; but others believe that it comes from the expression *pro portione*, which means according to each one's part.



In both cases, the word proportion is closer in meaning to the relationship between the parts of a whole unit than with the size or dimensions of the physical object. Therefore, we suppose that José Chávez Morado thought that the concept of *monumentalism* was appropriate to better define the activity of the artists as himself, transcending traditional conventions of the fine arts, and even the architecture of their generation and location. They went through the attempts of plastic integration and ran into indecipherable conceptual mazes—aside the egos and differences with other artists—that didn't allow *monumentalism* to cross the international borders as the Mexican muralism did.

The ontology of muralism involves the link between the artistic fact, the artwork and persons that relate to it. We can distinguish them according to the purpose that originates each one. We point out that, although the fact is the same: the transfer of values and ideas to multiple parties with different objectives—may it be the survival, communication of relevant facts or the attempt to exert influence over the rest. This manifests how muralism is useful to depict instances of everyday life, or religious, magical, or political occurrences.

Plastic integration takes the idea beyond that, as it looks for a conceptual integration in which the meaning and usefulness of inhabitable objects merge in total unity. Because of that, the expansion of possibilities of symbolic and visual representation is proposed beyond walls and architecture, all the way to the city itself as a cultural object of social construction: the urban space, architecture, urban landscape, and public infrastructure. All these together become a canvas for monumentalism's collective expression.

In the other hand, we find that a city's cultural heritage is comprised by its existing material objects:

Monuments: architectural works, monumental sculpture or painting, elements or structures archaeological in character, inscriptions, caves and groups of elements that have a universal exceptional value from a point of view of history, arts or science; Sets: groups of buildings, isolated or united of which their architecture, unity and integration in the landscape provide an exceptional universal value from a point of view of history, arts or science; and Places, manmade sites or zones jointly made between men and nature, such as archeological sites with an exceptional universal value from a history, aesthetics, ethnological or anthropological point of view. (UNESCO, 1972).

Plastic monumentalism, understood as a multidisciplinary solution for artistic-urban-social issues, can solve any problem that implies symbolism and political messages, because of being official art, but it also solves problems about private commissions, i.e., without political messaging presumptions, only accurate decoration, and addressing small spaces as well as large-size works. In a way, it would elevate to the level of an artistic movement what is known as



master plan or conceptual project in current processes for planning, budgeting and execution of work oriented to public impact.

Public Space, a Canvas for Social Expression

For human beings, the space is one of the most valuable know resources. Due to this fact, we own, take, seize, and modify it. We transform it into an element of economic, social, and cultural value, all at the same time. Space is the main matter for all the human expression, and material foundation for production and reproduction of society. We must ponder that, in a way, monumentalism can be understood as the inclination to promote the creation of public monuments as an expression of power.

In another opportunity I had suggested a view over the concept of Cultural urbanism:

Cultural urbanism is that which considers the values shared by the groups of a city, and the material and immaterial goods they produce, or which characterize them; values that prevail inside the global interests of the society and referred in principles and proposals to guide the growth and reconfiguration of the urban environment as a living one. (Chávez Rodríguez, 2017).

Hence, the proposal is that in development, growth or reconstruction cities, the plans, opinions, values, traditions, local and regional traditions must be taken into account to become urban design requirements. This strength inhabitants' ties of identity with their environment to encourage space appropriation. This mentioned cultural appropriation is necessary in attaining that the integral care of public space be shared between society and government. Let's remember that an effect of user's identity loss related to the public space is the transfer of responsibilities of all kinds to the government by the people. As an example, we can observe the garbage situation: inhabitants produce garbage and indiscriminately dispose of it in the "foreign" public space, expecting for the government to pick it up from the streets. In contrast, with the cultural appropriation, the same garbage is classified and disposed of in suitable places and times in their "own" space. This makes a call to local users to defend, preserve and enjoy their public space. Similar situations apply to issues as public safety, street lighting, urban maintenance, street furniture, land use, etc.

We developed a methodology to allow identification of values or elements that define a city's most remarkable features originated from its history, traditions, customs, distinctive characters, productive activities—a difficult task when transforming immaterial values into material specifications, i.e., how to transform them into practical instruments. In other words, technical specifications regulated by city's officers for color application on walls, textures on concretes, stamping on streets, finishing materials in buildings, facade styles, urban furniture, sculptural elements, road widths, proportions and placement of areas, dimensions and design of squares and



monuments, among other elements. It can be said that cultural urbanism, in a way, means a conceptual proposal, although mostly it is a form of instrumentation to integrate multidisciplinary work from political actors, municipal authorities, technical personnel, and mainly, social actors, from professional associations, scholars and people interested in the city, for them to be able to actively engage with plans and projects concerning their city and urban intervention.

Plastic monumentalism means also continuing these considerations, for which it is convenient to conceive public space as a space for social expression, and the city as an aesthetic object—a collective artwork. It also signifies the opportunity of a new point of view to solve important aspects like sanitation and urban sustainability.

Sustainable Monumentalism

The city is an extremely complex collective construct. Being the total addition of a culture's complexities, it is a reflection and a testimony of its essence and appearance. Visible and immaterial at once, cultural components can be found in a city, or in the ruins of one. We can read the expressions of moments of cultural fullness, and the causes of their fall, and the reasons for its decay. We can also reveal the abandonment and ending of population centers of ancient civilizations, and we can look at the symptoms of harmony or chaos evident in current cities.

If we could travel back in time and space and meet hundreds of cities from ancient and present times, we would easily notice which of them are attractive to lead a safe and pleasant lifestyle, even conducting to health and longevity; but we would also notice that there are repulsive cities, insecure and dangerous. Questions like these apply in the same way for both cases: How did they get to be what they became? How was the society-city relationship like that led them to be such as they are? What should we do to replicate successful cases for our future urban environments? Apart from the way in which they were conceived in their time, as unitary religious-social-political works, as ceremonial and popular gathering spaces, as commercial urban centers, cities have the features that make them attractive and adequate or repulsive and inadequate to be inhabited. Particularly, the positive features would be a permanent subject of study and perfecting, so that we can avoid the proliferation of cities with fragile development. For example, those vulnerable to climate change that enables natural phenomena to become disasters that cost sometimes hundreds of thousands of lives.

Throughout the different cultures of the world, we can observe a variety of ways of building a city. During the Renaissance not only was it important to create an architectural style, but also a new city style. The rationalist thinking principles were quickly adapted to architecture and were applied to urbanism: Streets widened, fortifications became an important part of the city, and planning made monuments and fountains more important elements. (Glancey, 2001)



Italo Calvino wrote:

cities, just as dreams, are built of desire and fear; even though the thread of their discourses is secret, their rules absurd, their perspectives misleading and each thing hides another one, all cities believe they are creations of chance or the mind, but not one nor the other is enough to keep their walls standing. (Calvino, 2015)

It is interesting to think about the way we look at a city as a proof of its people's culture. This is the space where its inhabitants educate themselves. An example of this was the intervention of Miguel B. Treviño, Mexican economist, Mayor of San Pedro Garza Garcia city, in Nuevo León, his home state. He made interesting proposals for social urban transformations. Among his statements in the Web, we retrieve this one from Twitter, in which he expressed ideas on social order sustained in the basis of urban order:

The public space enlightens. The fact that today, shopping malls are the main public amusement spaces means that we are being educated towards consuming. When the public space gets to be under the shadow of a tree, then we will be getting educated for preservation. (Treviño, 2019)

The city serves to live comfortably. But it also should be apt to transcend in time. It would be desirable that we could socially understand it as a collective artwork that is meant to be enjoyed and through which we can leave a footprint in time, expecting it to be an admirable story to be replicated. The great collective artwork, called the city, must be collectively thought out. It should be a healthy place, beautiful and safe; a witness and evidence of the traits of our thinking and the way in which we perceive life.

The built public space is the largest monumental artwork that a society can make. Public spaces are urban developments that had been designed or had been used as a model for building city segments or whole cities. Although their configuration is oriented from the perspective of a single individual, or a small group of people, they have the peculiarity that, once completely built, affect the inhabitants in a direct and permanent way. These inhabitants can or cannot feel themselves identified with that space, depending on whether their physical and emotional needs are filled or not. In that way, the construction of any monumental object—be it called sculpture, building or city—should be conceived as a social-common asset. This is something plenty of sense, because in a remarkable fashion these monumental objects, built mostly under the initiative or with the approval from the power exerted by government, will only be accepted if they address the economic and fundamentally social community needs.

Architect Ruth Rivera has referred to her colleagues and other professionals who proposed working with plastic integration for the improvement of cities. The purpose remains valid from the point of view of plastic monumentalism, so the diversity of traditional and new jobs, trades,



officials, political actors, and any individual or collective will associated with urban development continue providing interdisciplinary labor.

Architects and artists, makers of this work, belong to the group of professionals that are not satisfied with only exercising their professional activity in a satisfactory manner, but who are also interested in mankind problems, and those other problems belonging to the society in which they participate. (Rivera, 1967).

At present, the efficacy of cities as a place to live in a healthy manner is being questioned again. Recent pandemics have shown that it is not the case. Undeniable demonstrations are the infections acquired in crowded places and events such as subway stations, confined shopping malls, educational spaces assigned to small and poorly ventilated classrooms, down to the inch optimized living facilities, hotel rooms, banks, stadiums, museums that had to shut down, and all that contributing to the collapse of the world's economy.

Architecture is forced to solve the new natural ventilation and social distancing requirements in a different way; urbanism needs to find safer and more efficient solutions to the mobility problem, but it is also crucial that along the entirety of the process the aesthetic sense remains as a traversal axis. The success of proposed solutions will lie in how appropriate the technical aspects are. It is an objective for which humankind already has ample capabilities based on the collecting of studies, techniques and applied science. It is also important that remain included, in the requirements list, the immaterial cultural items linked to human perception. We can now objectively know how many yards are necessary for a car to move, and we can know how many yards people need to move in the sidewalk, but how do we know how many yards we need to meet the criteria of the city's spirit, accounting for the inhabitants' expectations? That is maybe the reason why when making decisions about building of a city, it is of outmost importance to listen the opinion of poets, artists, merchants, grandmothers and grandfathers, children, lovers and philosophers, street sellers, musicians, homeless persons, as well as environmentalists, every kind of engineers, doctors, architects, and city planners, as many willing people with a science background, but also from intuition—maybe an even more valuable asset—to build and inhabit the cities.

Beyond integration

According to what we have already discussed, *Plastic Monumentalism* could signify a continuation for some conceptions pursued by the plastic integration, such as multidisciplinary collaboration, collective work, correct usage of new materials, conceptual consensus between guilds and sectors, among others. Nevertheless, it becomes necessary to define which of the contributions renew and set the tone for a new present in this said continuation.



The difference resides in the dimension of the purpose, the major possibilities to achieve satisfactory results and the need to try it all from one of humanity's higher projects: art. Trial and error exerted in the making of cities, social objects and public spaces show us that humanity has fallen into dire excesses and omissions. We can see it in cities' abandonment, calamities caused by our lack of respect for nature—like in floodings or wildfires with thousands of deaths because of poor urban settlement—, in social conflicts derived from identity detachment between the inhabitants and their city and traditions. Standing before a global and globalized world, where economy and culture tend to standardize and diffuse their borders, it becomes mandatory that we come up with new formulae. But above all it is important to turn back our gaze to know how to adapt them to our time and reality. Plastic integration can have a new opportunity locally, and monumentalism can have one also in a regional and global settings.

Inside the process of artistic creation there is a constant object-subject and creator-creation dialogue. Even in contemporary art, in the apparent distance amid the artist and the making of its work, there are evidence of this creative process, and also subproducts. Despite that process or product were not thought for establishing a dialogue with a third party, it is inevitable the existence of a connection—at least a visual and sensory one—to the artistic evidence. Nevertheless, as this connection becomes clearer, the sensitivity of a person will be impacted, the same if it is one—a third party—or is a crowd—multitude of third parties. Such would be the principle to overcome limitations of bilateral dialogue so we can transform it into an open conversation with the object or process. Then, the relationship subject-object, creator-creation, will become subject-objects, collective-collective creation.

Is at this point that we can elaborate on the previous references about total integration, a thing that dates back to Pre-Hispanic cities. In Siqueiros' words:

In every flourishing period of art history, all plastic expression was integral. So it was in China, Egypt, Greece, Rome, in the Middle Ages, in the Arabic world, in pre-Renaissance, in the Renaissance, India, Pre-Hispanic America and even in Colonial America. It was, to say it in the clearest way, simultaneously plastic expression of architecture, sculpture, painting, polychrome, social discourse, etc. It was unitary plastic. Such plastic art came about fundamentally because of its functionality, being equally integral: a functionality due to its attachment to the geographic space, to the underground and soil characteristics, weather particularities, material techniques, specific and historical tools. And, as a final purpose, to the social aesthetic scope of its works. (Siqueiros, 1948)

We can ask now: which conditions are required to build the right monumental works? In formal solutions to the complex construct of visual components we must perform necessarily a deep historical, social, economic, and philosophical analysis. How has this been possible at other



times? Would it be due to social unity? Or to the functional harmony between classes? Cristina Terzaghi remarks:

Incorporating art to the individual's urban collective space is to allow social access to artistic expressions, which reassemble the individual as a subject in the search for a better quality of life. This is the acknowledgement of individuals as responsible for the making and safeguarding of the city that contains them, inhabitants of an urban space that, as a proposal, would enrich communication and memory of the people who build the city as an identity. (Terzaghi, 2017, p. 70)

Being present, painful, and fatal the consequences of a lack of collaboration between dwellers of mutually concerning areas, for good or bad, among the inhabitants of a city, or in between cities of a metropolitan region, or between neighboring countries, why don't we see—or barely see—to make sure that the making and growth of places we inhabit and walk happen in a collective and harmonious way? Why was not the effort for a plastic integration continued? We know that there are many forms of agreement and collaboration; but we also notice that the methodology we used in those efforts considers in a superficial manner aspects that don't fit the scientific or technical accuracy of its instruments.

Maybe the educational profile of the new leadership could boost a more elevated vision of economic, social, and urban development for the countries and their cities. Never like today has the world had so many possibilities to exercise in full this said leadership. There is not a specific training for Plastic Monumentalists, nevertheless we can notice that the quality of new citizens around the world have in their hands the tools and information to efficiently transform the reality we see, enjoy, and suffer, as we invariably believe it could be better.



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