

# Domus México and its Theory on the go

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## ABSTRACT

The article tells the story of Domus México, published from June 2012 to July 2013 as a local version of the iconic Italian magazine. The topic is approached from a general review of the context, the editors, the content, the relationship with Domus and the line of thought. The essay seeks to answer where the theory of Domus México was, and concludes on the importance that the magazine had at a local level and the possible consequences of its existence. A review of different sources was made, such as the seven issues published, and other journals of that time. Interviews with the editor in chief and the editorial coordinator of Domus México were also conducted.

## DOMUS MÉXICO AND ITS THEORY ON THE GO

The first edition of Domus México was on sale in June 2012. Its arrival in the country was motivated by Joseph Grima – one of Stefano Boeri’s pupils –, who was the editor of Domus between 2011 and 2013. Grima’s interest was more

on systems than on isolated objects. He travelled around the world to meet young collaborators, introduced some original sections and tried to expand the horizons of the magazine through platforms like a new webpage and the iPad application. His global view took him to expanding local editions of the magazine and Domus México was a consequence of this<sup>(1)</sup>.

Led by Mario Ballesteros (editor in chief) and María García Holley (editorial coordinator), Domus México was published for little over a year. Seven bimonthly issues were published with a very particular and novel editorial line that showed an alternative perspective to what was offered by national publications. Domus México arrived partly to shake the atmosphere at a moment in which the architectural scene was beginning to change in the country<sup>(2)</sup>.

## BALLESTEROS AND GARCÍA HOLLEY

Mario Ballesteros (Ciudad de México, 1980) studied International Relations at Colegio de México, where he received a traditional academic training. Throughout his career he has questioned once and again the disconnection between academic theory and practice, as well as the promotion of an abstract theoretical thought that does not touch reality. A previous interest in architecture from the perspective of the history of ideas made him close to it in the latest years of his career. Ballesteros sees architecture as an extension of cultural practice and social reality, which allows him analysing it as part of the social, cultural, political and economic framework.

This background, together with his wish to find a concrete and practical way out for his interests, led him to a Master’s degree in Architecture and Cultural Urbanism at the Universidad Politécnica de Cataluña (2006-2007). He was later the editor of Actar (2006-2009), an editorial focused on architecture, design and art founded in Barcelona in 1994, and then part of the editorial team of Quaderns d’Arquitectura i Urbanisme (2011-2012), the journal of the Colegio de Arquitectos de Cataluña (CoAC) founded in 1944.

In December 2011, while he was the editor of Quaderns, Ballesteros was invited to an interview in Italy and received the proposal to become the editor of the new Domus México. Ballesteros returned to his country in February 2012, to head this project. Almost two years later, he left the post and he is today the director and curator of the Archivo Diseño y Arquitectura of Mexico City.

María García Holley (Mexico City, 1986) studied Architecture at UNAM, where she found an affinity for theory, history and research. This motivated her to be a volunteer at the archive of Mexican architects and participate in various types of work, like a book about Augusto H. Álvarez, one of the best-known functionalists in the country (as part of the Colección Talleres, an editorial project of the Faculty of Architecture that seeks to make known to new generations the work of modern Mexican architects). From experiences like this, García Holley began to pay attention to the world of printed architecture and the narratives through which the architectural situation can be told. She did a Master’s degree in

*History of Art, also at UNAM, and became involved in Docomomo, the International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement – in which Mexico has participated since 2003.*

*In 2012, Ballesteros invited her to be editorial coordinator of Domus México. García Holley left the journal shortly before Ballesteros and, since then, has been part of the Laboratorio para la Ciudad in Mexico City, now in the area of strategies for the creative city.*

*Ballesteros and García Holley are practically the full team that runs Domus México, in addition to a designer who comes at the end of the preparation of each edition. They write, commission, edit and translate, among other tasks. Although they have different views because of their training and previous experiences, they coincide in their searches and their interest to show a wider perspective of the profession than the one there is at the moment. He knows personalities from contemporary culture; and she, from the academic world. They manage to create a mixture of diverse and interesting people to form an editorial board and find collaborators. With their experience in Domus México, they founded Andamio, an independent editorial and curatorial consultancy that seeks to challenge “the traditional notion of spatial production and its media” (Andamio, n.d.) through exhibitions, publications, research and collaborations.*

## IN AND OUT

*Domus arrives in Mexico at a moment in which architecture and the communication of architectural culture are going through a very particular situation. The ‘guild’ of architects is very closed, centralised and self-referential,*

*led by a few big names that have monopolised publications for years. Few young architects are receiving attention, in spite of the fact that many of them are beginning their work. Publications on architectural culture are an active part in this process and, furthermore, are of little interest.*

*Arquine, a magazine started in 1997, is a best-seller. The editorial project has been growing with the publication of books, the organisation of competitions, conferences and other events, and with the exploration of digital media. It is a full machinery inserted and driving the guild. Other periodical publications, such as Enlace or the Entremuros supplement of the Reforma newspaper, produce only monographs, full of pictures of works by well-known and connected architects. Bitácora, a peer-reviewed journal run by the Faculty of Architecture of UNAM, started in 1999, has a content that promotes critical and historical reflection: however, its link with practice is not significant and it is only read by a very specific sector.*

*This situation means there is a lack of opportunities for new architects or spaces for recent voices, for unprecedented reflections or for global times. This way of running the discipline is beginning to tire out; unknown names are pushing the barriers and finding alternative means of practicing and communicating. This is when Domus México arrives, with a pertinent position, to deal with proposals which are still alternative, but which are already being identified. As Ballesteros states: “it was an interesting moment for the local scene because Postopolis<sup>(3)</sup> had just taken place in Mexico City, the proposal of the Pabellón Eco<sup>(4)</sup> had already come up and names like Frida Escobedo were being heard; people were doing different things” (personal communication, October 30, 2017).*

*Ballesteros says that there has been, from the beginning, three basic criteria with which they try to develop the publication (personal communication, October 30, 2017). In the first place, they want to shake up the situation because the scene is dull and it is not showing what they consider interesting at the moment. They want to distance themselves from what other media are doing to find young people and fresh proposals. They want to spread first works and give priority to unpublished projects. The second of the criteria implies following the line that Domus has historically had: integrate design, art and architecture. This interest for breaking the strict limit, found in Mexican journals at the moment, led them to search for a wider range. The third criterion has to do with facing the history of Domus, with its almost eighty years of existence – and that at the moment has an editorial line established by Joseph Grima that implies changes –, in a territory where few people know the magazine and its importance. In brief, they had to find a way of inserting a periodical publication that showed the Domus myth, together with the new approach that presented an uncommon sight in the country, into a closed and traditional context.*

*Following these three criteria, Domus México manages to get into the national scene. It is welcomed by many who look for a refreshing of architecture in Mexico, and it is rejected by others who do not see in the proposal the traditional view with which they build their career. The publication gets in discreetly, sows certain seeds and leaves a series of trails whose tracks can still be identified. Several people whose work is boosted by its publication begin to appear in other spaces. Domus México opens the door for a new generation that is still active today. Architects like Miguel Montor and Estudio Atemporal in Mexico City, and S-AR and Covachita in Nuevo León are some of*

them, as well as photographers like Onnis Luque, Ramiro Chaves and Rafael Gamo. Domus México shows that there are more productive brains in the national architectural culture and there is more than one way of telling stories.

Domus México causes many expectations. Its position and its contents rapidly make it a referent for those who look for renovation and new possibilities. However, it is not a commercial project and it is very difficult to sustain. María García Holley leaves in April 2013 and Mario Ballesteros stays until June of the same year. The local edition merges with Central America and the Caribbean one (started in 2011), leaving the experiment behind.

### INTERIOR AND EXTERIOR

In order to answer the three guiding criteria and develop the interior and exterior contents of Domus México, the editorial team looks for, and invites, collaborators who can carry out quality research, speak in a different way about some topic or go deeper into some current concerns. The idea is that the majority of the texts are commissions specific to each edition. Domus requires twenty percent of the Mexican edition's contents to be original, and it manages to reach around sixty percent in each edition. It is one of the publications that generates more local content: they practically make a full journal every two months.

Domus México aims at separating itself from the rest of the national magazines and making its own mark. The editors try to consider the circumstances of the country and the world in order to establish a guiding topic, by means of which a more complex design thinking can be approached. The topics are subtle and malleable, but they allow giving coherence to the contents. Issue

01 reflects upon new formats of cultural infrastructure and public space. Number 02 explores the concept of the minimum cell from different perspectives, to speak about housing. Number 03 shows the different options there are for design and architecture through the meeting of different powers. Issue 04 focuses on memory as a tool for change and reactivation. Number 05 deals with architectural, artistic and design production in the North of the country. Issue 06 is a reflection on everyday in architecture and design. And 07, the last edition, enquires about the relationship between density and difference.

The graphic proposal is an important component of Domus México, mainly through the covers. Each cover is commissioned to a Mexican artist – and one Greek – and it is thought of as an excuse to activate and link what is inside, and not as a commercial tool. There is an implicit position on architecture: there are no photographs of buildings but only abstract illustrations that allow connecting the contents with the various themes. With the commissioned texts, the editors look for critical positions, which are provided by accomplices like José Esparza, Gabriela Álvarez, Pablo Landa, Regina Pozo and Daniel Garza Usabiaga. "Collaborators wrote well, with heart. These were succinct articles, interesting and comprehensible for a general public. They wrote not only about making architecture and thinking with architecture, but also of representing it and understanding it from a different point of view" (M. García Holley, personal communication, October 31, 2017).

The journal has different sections, some inherited from the Italian version, like the reviews, articles about works or essays, and others of their own. Each edition starts with an Editorial, then it has an Op-ed,<sup>(5)</sup> written by Mexican and

foreign guests of different profiles, then a commissioned and composed Mixtape of songs linked to each edition's topic, and a Photo essay, also related to it. These two last components have been created by Joseph Grima and their adaptation to the Mexican discourse allows giving the journal a local nature, through music and images, that at the same time converses with the Italian edition. A section called Journal (in English in the original Spanish version) is a sort of guide of what is happening in architecture, design and art in Mexico and the world. Essays on Mexican and international projects are published, some translated and others commissioned. Each edition has a Cold Case section, in which some article from the Domus archive is rescued, either because it relates to the country or the guiding topic. The Mexican Embassy section (inspired in Walter Benjamin's text, which has the same name) includes a collaboration from a foreigner saying something about Mexico.

The seven editions, along with their topics, make an X-ray of the Mexican architecture, art and design scene, in connection with the local and global reality. Domus México is different because it proposes to look at the production in the whole of the country, to stop looking at the architectural or design work in isolation, and complete the scene with other disciplines. It proposes a critical, complex and inclusive discourse that enriches discussion and experience.

### IMPORT AND EXPORT

Domus México is an import and, as such, runs the risk of creating a produce that is not related to the local reality (due to the use of a format that speaks of, and denotes, a Eurocentric view). However, the way in which national production appears – and the fact that it is discussed

*in the same way that the international one – opens the door to a process of appropriation that not only finds new values in architectural culture in Mexico, but also a way of showing them to the world, in dialogue with Domus in Italy and the global view established by Joseph Grima.*

*“He came in, breaking with the paradigm of the Italian design magazine that was already very worn out by self-absorption. He tried to put it back at the edge of the most interesting discussions on architecture from the global view of that moment and in order to do that, he looked for collaborations from various parts of the world and from very interesting people. (...) Besides, Domus Italia has characterised itself for showing the tension between local and global and it seemed interesting to talk about that; relating the situation there with the situation here. The architecture of the whole 20<sup>th</sup> Century experienced exchanges, interpretations, contamination of ideas, imports; and that is in the historical spirit of the magazine” (M. Ballesteros, personal communication, October 30, 2017).*

*The editors say that this complex mixture makes Domus México one of the most appreciated of the local versions. Part of the contents developed here is translated and used in the Italian magazine and on the international webpage. Despite there being a risk, they are not the youngest children who copy everything, but a source of content production and thinking that can be exported, because it coincides with the themes that are being discussed at an international level. “It was done in a very autonomous way, it had no commercial agenda behind and that was its great value. All the magazines existing in Mexico in 2012 had a very powerful*

*machine of interests behind” (M. García Holley, personal communication, October 31, 2017).*

*Domus México’s import, adaptation and export exercise exemplifies part of the Mexican reality. Historically, the mixture is inevitable; the culture and architecture of the country are structured that way, through blending. Although for local traditions and identities many of the consequences of these processes are negative, others have positive results. The Mexican version of Domus is an example of the enrichment and reinterpretation that builds a critical dialogue among different players. Mixtapes, for example, are a local mixture with a specific view and are composed of Mexican and international musical themes. In published projects ‘La Tallera Siqueiros’ by Frida Escobedo or ‘Tepoztlán Lounge’ by Cadaval & Solà-Morales, it is possible to find the value of cultural combination and evolution. Both show the syncretism of cultural and natural Mexican heritage, foreign influence and contemporary reality.*

*Fusion is also identified in the articles about the Corona chair or the Panam shoes, everyday objects that are icons of Mexican design. Likewise, in the themes presented in Cold Case it is possible to identify the mixture produced by bringing topics already published in the Italian version, and also because several show the influence of imported modernity and the dialectics built in the work of architects like Luis Barragán, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Mario Pani, Enrique del Moral and Juan José Díaz Infante. With the opinions of personalities like Terence Gower, Bruce Sterling, Teddy Cruz and James Oles, the section Mexican Embassy ratifies that Mexico also exports ideas to promote mixtures abroad.*

## PRACTICE AND THEORY

*The background, searches and contents of Domus México invite reflection on the development of theoretical thinking in Mexican architecture, and the role the publication plays in that growth. Mario Ballesteros considers that, in Domus México, theory is neither inside a rigid academic format nor in the complex and cryptic texts in which architecture protects itself. The publication is totally focussed on practice.*

*“Each edition was a discovery of things that were being done. Young people who were exploring other ways, not only from a theoretical perspective and in drawing, but making real projects. This could be done in Mexico, unlike in Europe and the United States, where producing is very difficult. In Mexico it is the contrary, you can do anything” (M. Ballesteros, personal communication, October 30, 2017).*

*For María García Holley (personal communication, October 31, 2017), the assumed position regarding architectural thinking and its relationship with practice is related to making theory and history as the magazine is produced.*


*“It was not a historiographic thing, nor did it try to represent the models of Villagrán [José Villagrán García] or of Le Corbusier, but drawing new lines and new ways of thinking on the go. The theory of Domus México was the whole magazine. The theory of the contemporary, but looking towards the historical and the emerging. A rather mixed theory that in the end can be read and understood very well in the seven editions. The theoretical line that was done on the go” (M. García Holley, personal communication, October 31, 2017).*

Domus México is a verification of the reality of theoretical production in Mexico. On the one hand, the construction of thinking in the academic field is not related to practice; on the other, practicing professionals do not set themselves to developing and writing a theory of the work they do. In Mexico, thinking is developed at the same time as practical work. Economic, political, social and cultural circumstances motivate this reality. The work of Juan Carral, Nicolás Vázquez or Frida Escobedo, all of them published in the journal, is full of ideas and constant reflections in evolution; however, there is no written theory to explain it. Domus México shows the existence of a new way of thinking, a new way of practising that nobody is registering. This is identified with the publication of the work of Tiliche (later called APRDELESP) focussed on architecture seen as an appropriation of space. Also, in the practices of the collective Somosmexas and its space of independent production Atea at La Merced, in Mexico City.

#### BEFORE AND AFTER

By reconstructing the history of Domus México, talking with its editors and reviewing the seven published editions, it is possible to identify a before and an after. Architectural culture is expanded, new ideas come in and a contemporary generation is given voice. Besides, works outside Mexico City are shown, especially in issue 05, dedicated to the North of the country – with projects in Tijuana, Mexicali and Monterrey. Domus México comes at the right moment, asks upsetting questions that had to be asked and opens up an unexpected scene. For García Holley and Ballesteros as well, the adventure is a theoretical and practical lesson that marks a brief but very important moment for the development of contemporary

editorial history of architecture in Mexico. The short existence of the magazine was enough to leave a mark and provoke modifications in the communication of architectural culture. The existing media progressively modify their contents and other independent ones accompany the new pursuits, like *Ensamble*<sup>(6)</sup>, *Folio*<sup>(7)</sup> or *PortaVOZ*.<sup>(8)</sup>

Five years after it was launched, Domus México is seen as an exercise in breaking rigid structures, the discovery of new proposals, of revaluation of local architectural production, of international dialogue, of identification of theoretical thinking in practice and of promotion of critical work. It is an idealistic and visionary magazine that gets its time and believes in a world that is more open and eclectic. The editors know how to express their perspective, find an echo among others like them. The short existence of Domus México has something poetical, full of images, sound and contents. The mixture of emotions and intellects shakes things so that others can think and reconstruct while practising. 

#### NOTES

(1) Today there are five local editions: *Domus China*, *Domus Germany*, *Domus Sri Lanka*, *Domus India* and *Domus Central America & Caribbean*.

(2) The author of the article thanks Mario Ballesteros for the interview held on October 30, 2017; and María García Holley for the interview held on October 31, 2017.

(3) *Postópolis!* was an initiative motivated by Storefront for Art and Architecture, the purpose of which was to organize events focused on reflecting on the role of architecture blogs in architectural communication and discussion. Several editions were done in various cities like New York, Los Angeles and D.F. (today Mexico City), this one in 2010.

(4) Since 2010 there has been a call for emerging Mexican architects to participate in the yearly competition for the design of a spring pavilion installed in the courtyard of Mathias Goeritz's El Eco Experimental Museum, in Mexico City. The *Peabellón Eco* [Eco Pavilion] has become an interesting platform for architectural reflection and experimentation.

(5) It is a short personal opinion text, originally put "opposite the editorial page" of periodical publications, which explains its name.

(6) [https://issuu.com/ensamble\\_mx](https://issuu.com/ensamble_mx)

(7) <http://folio.news/>

(8) <https://portavoz.tv/>

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