

Reseña / Review

Luis M. Castañeda, *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda, and the 1968 Olympics*.
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**Cultural Violence and the Olympics:
Art and Design in the Interests of State and Capital**

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In 1963, officials planning the new National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City descended on the village of Coatlinchán to begin an enormous task. They proposed moving a 167-ton monolith of the ancient rain god Tlaloc to the museum, ideally to sit in the center-most Aztec room, where it would serve as a star attraction. For almost two years, those same officials had scanned the Mexican countryside for similar antiquities, often plucking them up against local opposition, but this one presented special difficulties. First, it was so large it required a custom-designed trailer to haul it. Second, the villagers so hated to lose it they sabotaged the trailer. They were mocked for worrying that the rains would stop if the god were removed, but they might as easily have feared an end to their tourist trade. At length, the government sent in troops to guard the trailer all the way to Mexico City, and offered Coatlinchán a school and clinic, among other amenities, to patch up relations. Though the massive

stone never made it to the Aztec room, it did come to rest in front of the museum, where it stands today. Mexican poet and sometime state official Salvador Novo savored the museum's acquisition. "Ironically, the arrival of the rain god was greeted by the heaviest storm ever recorded for this ordinarily dry season, and there seems to have been an abundance of showers ever since," he wrote. Or, as Luis M. Castañeda put it in *Spectacular Mexico: Design, Propaganda, and the 1968 Olympics*, Novo effectively, if subtly, transferred supernatural authority from an ancient god to the modern state.

The removal of the Tlaloc statue was but one episode in a larger tale of power and posing *Spectacular Mexico* reveals. Set against the backdrop of the "Mexican miracle"—a period of explosive economic growth in the mid-twentieth century—Castañeda's research focuses on the country's "cultural bureaucrats" as they sold Mexico as a suitable host for the 1968 Olympics, designed accommodations for the Olympics, and then used the Olympics to re-imagine Mexico City. However, as cultural elites in the service of a one-party state, they had more to consider than athletic games. Domestically, they were recruited to present the state as a benefactor that gave Mexico its economic miracle and united its diverse population into a single, forward-marching nation. Internationally, they had to contend with a developmentalist political environment that categorized Mexico as a "third world" country and therefore a target of "first-world" capital. The result was what Castañeda called an exportable, consumable image of Mexico that combined self-exoticism, racial hybridity, and futurism in an attempt to make the country colorful enough to attract tourists, progressive enough to attract foreign capital, and powerful enough to attract Mexicans to their government. Though Castañeda does not use the term, *Spectacular Mexico* could be understood as a tale of cultural violence, meaning culture used to justify unequal and exploitative relationships. Occasionally, as in the removal of the Tlaloc, the violence was visible, but that was unusual. More often, it involved PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) politicians and their capitalist colleagues manipulating memory and identity to elide social conflict and secure domestic clients while negotiating their own clientage with richer international partners.

The cultural bureaucrats were already honing their message a decade before the 1968 Olympics. Mexican pavilions at world's fairs in Brussels (1958), Seattle (1962), New York (1964), and San Antonio (1968) provided earlier venues for Mexico to position itself as a place to do business. To do so, it had to overcome the negative connotations of its "third world" designation—and especially the fact that traditional, indigenous, and agricultural cultures were seen as backwards by the first world's

developmentalist mindset. Though the PRI was willing to embrace industrialization and urbanization, it could not turn its back on the country's rich cultural past. Instead, it sought a way to reinterpret Mexico's diversity in a way that made the country seem "progressive." In his analysis of the Mexican pavilion at Brussels, Castañeda found in its architecture and design three themes: a fusion of "Indian" and "Spanish" that cast Mexico as a place where diverse people came together to form a new nation without having to give up their unique identities; an emphasis on aesthetic aspects of Mexican culture which were distinct from European cultures but were not threatening to international investment; and a call for peace that implied Mexico was a country more interested in building its economy than building bombs.

In addition to these international appeals, the cultural bureaucrats found domestic uses for the nation's art and antiquities. The National Gallery of History in Chapultepec Park in central Mexico City, completed in 1960, presented visitors with a stylized version of Mexican history as they climbed the hill toward the National Museum of History. The gallery greeted visitors with a bronze door featuring "Indian" and "Mexican" figures, repeating the theme of racial hybridization, and followed a winding path of Aztec artifacts and inspiring scenes of the Mexican past. It ended in an altar-like space where visitors gazed upon a copy of the 1917 Constitution lit by sunlight through a fiberglass dome—almost as if all of history had lead up to the sacred present. The Aztec Room in the National Museum of Anthropology produced a similar effect. All other rooms led to it, its ceiling was the highest in the museum, and special lighting illuminated an Aztec Calendar Stone that towered above visitors. As Castañeda noted, comparisons between Tenochtitlán and Mexico City were not hard to grasp. Once the Aztecs brought Mexico to greatness with their superior strength and wealth; now the PRI state, literally standing on the shoulders of the Aztecs, did the same.

Even if Mexico's carefully crafted images of exoticism and racial harmony helped persuade the International Olympic Committee to award it the 1968 games, and even if its historical propaganda aggrandized the PRI, the bureaucrats knew that culture alone was not enough to give Mexico the international stature they craved. Mexico City's infrastructure also had to be up the task of hosting the world's most prominent athletic event. Fortunately for elites both inside and outside the government, preparing the city's sports venues, road, hotels, and housing offered even more ways to shape the country's image. Compared to earlier hosts, Mexico City built relatively few new structures, but the cultural bureaucrats spun that as further

evidence of Mexico's progressive dynamism. Unlike countries that had to start from scratch, Mexico had *already built* much of what the Olympics required, they said. The centerpiece of their argument was Aztec Stadium, begun in 1961 and completed in 1966 in a previously rural area south of Mexico City. As Castañeda noted, Aztec Stadium, perhaps more than any other project, revealed the rising importance of private capital in the shaping of Mexico's image. Traditionally, sports venues had been public projects, but Aztec Stadium was a public-private partnership involving major corporate figures including the radio and television magnate Emilio Azcárraga, Jr., of *Telesistema Mexicano*. Nowhere was private capital's influence more obvious than in the stadium's box seats (which Azcárraga promised would help pay for the venture) and in the many ways the stadium accommodated television cameras. That the stadium displaced enraged *ejidatarios*, or small farmers, in the area surrounding it was no more advertised than the protests in Coatlinchán had been when the Tlaloc was removed. Once again, protesters were paid off, though in the stadium's case, some had to wait as late as the 1990s to see their money.

For the cultural bureaucrats, Aztec Stadium was just a beginning. Castañeda demonstrates how the Olympics served not only as a way to burnish Mexico's international reputation, but also a way to gentrify the capital city. A plan (never realized) to paint certain roads with bright colors matching a route map given to visitors; highway projects such as the Anillo Periférico; and Mathias Goeritz's "Route of Friendship," a series of roadside sculptures, deliberately lured traffic—including international visitors—away from the city's politically embarrassing poor sections and toward spectacles the cultural bureaucrats designed. Castañeda found the Route of Friendship especially provocative. Its sculptures bore futuristic, Utopian themes partly in their grandiose designs and partly because they combined art with transportation to construct an image of national virility. That Goeritz favored international sculptors further implied that Mexico had become a focal point of global cultural achievement. The most ambitious reinvention of Mexico City was the building of the city's subway system from 1967 to 1973. Though not completed until five years after the international games, the subway's designers included many of the same cultural bureaucrats who worked on Aztec Stadium, and it extended the work they did to prepare and present the Olympics. As Castañeda revealed, the subway did more than ferry people from place to place. It also moved ideas—the notion that Mexico City had "arrived" among first-class world cities, an image of the PRI as Mexico's tireless leader, and the developmentalist assumption that technological progress somehow

equated cultural achievement. Reporting on the subway project in 1969 the U.S. business magazine *Fortune* praised Mexico City for surpassing its peers in exhibiting cultural artifacts in subway stations. Technology, capital, and power commingled with art to present a system that was as much a tool of social control as it was a triumph of engineering.

Finally, the government's cultural violence operated by omission as well as commission, especially when suppressing critics or even admitting that criticism was possible. Sometimes critics were silenced, as when the PRI paid off villagers and farmers, but a more common strategy was to downplay the fact that Mexicans ever disagreed about anything. Ignoring or diminishing social conflict is a time-honored tactic for exaggerating the degree to which values or identities are shared among a given population. Castañeda cited a 1965 pamphlet promoting new designs for the Plaza of the Three Cultures that promised an area of "filth and poverty" would be replaced by "the Mexico of tomorrow." By combining elements of Aztec, colonial, and Mexican culture, the Plaza sent a message of unity and accomplishment, the pamphlet stated, before announcing that in the Plaza of the Three Cultures, "all the wounds have healed and all the grievances have quieted down." Similar rhetoric surrounded the same architect's Nonoalco-Tlatelolco housing complex, which wrapped a developmentalist project in egalitarian verbiage. Not everyone was fooled. Commenting on the opening of the new National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park in 1963, the prominent Mexican literary figure (and then ambassador to India) Octavio Paz found the museum's political agenda to be obvious. "[T]he diversity and complexity of two thousand years of Mesoamerican history [were] presented as a prologue to the last act, the apotheosis-apocalypse of México-Tenochtitlán," he wrote. Or as Castañeda put it, the single-party state exaggerated cultural unity much as the Aztecs had, not based on democracy but on "the personal charisma of absolute—and ruthless—rulers."

Spectacular Mexico is a highly accessible book that should appeal to scholars and educated general readers alike. Not only historians of art (or sport), and not only Latin American specialists, but peace studies scholars also will find in Castañeda's account of Mexico's preparation for the Olympics multiple examples of the present raiding the past, the state raiding civil society, and private capital raiding a people's cultural heritage for purposes of power and profit.