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Air Nationalism: Norman Foster and Fernando Romero's Mexico City Airport

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As air travel increasingly compresses our muscles and nerves—cue threats of thrombosis and incidents of passenger rage—airports expand their programs, taking up increasingly larger swaths of land. These programs, inflated by extensive security protocols and ambitious retail spaces, are usually arranged under sculptural canopies, like extra weight tucked under additional layers of clothing. Anthropologist Marc Augé famously described airports as "non-places," generic spaces of transience that resist the rootedness of memory. [1] However, the increase in border security has turned Augé's description upside down. As the architecture that often constitutes a country's first point of entry, airports are borders, and as such have become loaded with cultural and patriotic tropes. This nationalist anxiety hides the real politics of the expanded airport program.

A few weeks ago, the Mexican state unveiled the plans for a new airport to serve Mexico City, in the form of a digital video that was equal parts promotional rendering and documentary homage to the leader of the design team, Lord Norman Foster. The competition (which Alejandro Hernández has rightly criticized for its lack of transparency) paired famed international architects with local designers—the rationale, one has to assume, being that the Mexicans alone didn't have sufficient experience in airport design. Foster's Mexican complement is the young architect Fernando Romero—communication magnate Carlos Slim's son-in-law. The need to include both a "local" representative and a big name from the world of architecture stardom has the further effect of directing attention away from the third but equally vital component of the team—the airport consultancy. In the winning team, this firm is NACO, a Dutch firm with a long history of designing and supervising airports in Saudi Arabia. They describe their role as involved in "every aspect of airport design and development." The delightful coincidence of their acronym "NACO"—a distinctively pejorative term for "unculturedness" in Mexican Spanish—doesn't fully explain their almost occult presence in the project. The presence of their technical expertise runs counter to the video's portrayal of Foster's extensive experience with the airport typology ("the most highly qualified airport architect in the world"), and it reveals Foster's participation as something other than that of the "outside expert." The design team instead triangulates between global stardom, increasingly specialized technical expertise, and a questionably

[1] See Marc Augé, *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (New York: Verso, 1995). Similar discussions go from phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur's fear of universalization in "Universal Civilization and National Cultures", cited as a warning by Kenneth Frampton in his argument for Critical Regionalism, to Rem Koolhaas' critical fascination with "Junkspace" (2001).

"local" avatar of Mexican identity. These multiple readings—purposefully sought by the Mexican state and enthusiastically illustrated in Foster's competition submission—mark the building as yet another attempt to overcome the irreconcilable binary of local and global through a kind of architectural ambivalence.

Someday, or not, there will be a building to discuss. For now, we have a video—which is a medium of architectural persuasion unto itself, and one that warrants legitimate consideration. And our cinematic journey through the project (with Foster as our guide, skipping over the complicated network of relationships embodied in the design team and presenting the project itself as nothing less than a sublimation of the Mexican nation-state) can only be described as very, very weird. Foster waxes poetically about his passion for flight, then takes us through a sequence of airports he has designed. The series is presented as an evolution, a series of breakthroughs—of his Stanstead Airport, he argues that "since then, architects and designers have copied this model worldwide." Yet he also reassures us, insistently, that his Chek Lap Kok airport in Hong Kong was "voted by the traveling public their most favorite." This evolution sets up Mexico as the next breakthrough in airport design, stroking the country's ego with the promise of global prominence—at least until Foster's next commission.

We're then introduced to Fernando Romero as representative of the younger generation. Romero's Mexican nationality does not need to be stated—he speaks to us in Spanish. Foster and Romero's collaboration is portrayed through a wonderful sequence where they thoughtfully scribble over the curves of CAD-drawn, plotted plans with colored pencils. Romero outlines the story, telling us that he and Foster are joined by their interest in technology, architecture's capacity for social transformation, and a shared wish that "this airport becomes an emblematic project that contributes to build the identity for the Mexico of the twenty-first century."

Foster comes back to inform us that to do so, he brought in the best airport planners, the previously mentioned NACO. But just as he is about to expand on their experience and actual role in the process, the video cuts and moves on to a description of the architecture, which is here reduced to one word—canopy.

For Foster, the building begins and ends with the roof structure,

Lord Foster and Romero knock heads, color in CAD drawings. Screen capture from Foster and Partners video.

a curved membrane that hugs the sides of the building. This membrane combines Foster's penchant for large canopies, heavily reminiscent of the work of Frei Otto, here dressed up in a silvery white skin that recalls the voluptuous curves of Romero's Museo Soumaya—Slim's homage to his late wife and Romero's somewhat infamous launch onto the global architecture scene. [2] This membrane (or "beautiful canopy," in Foster's words) is the project's supposed breakthrough. The simplicity of one big roof with repetitive elements and few supports was ideal for the soil condition—Texcoco, the project's site, used to be a lake—and still more importantly, "fast and economic" to build. The system "which is made in Mexico," is "close to self-erecting" and "doesn't need scaffolding." The takeaway, of course is that this system "composed of small elements, each of which is easy to handle" means that scores of untrained workers will find employment on the project, but Foster tries to phrase things more delicately. In the video, after this literal and figurative zoom to the level of detail, we return to the emphasis on the project's large spans and general monumentality with a short sequence in which Foster replicates Antonio Gaudí's "upside-down" model technique to explain a parabola. One wonders how the dimples in the canopy will accommodate Mexico's generous rainfall, which recently broke through the ceiling of the current airport, but those details are not for this video to address. [3] These claims of joining local manual labor and advanced technology in the design and construction of the canopy reinforce the local/global dichotomy at work throughout the video.

We move on to the arrival and departure sequences. The entrance, for Foster, is "truly heroic…in that scale we also associate with historic structures in Mexico." Foster encourages us to imagine that we're about to depart on a plane, and thus we naturally feel the need to hang out in the main atrium of the airport. In a key sequence, a large water feature in the center of the atrium is replaced by a small orchestra surrounded by seating, a display of Olmec heads, and an exhibition of cars. Decoration, culture, and history are fluidly interchanged. [4]

A celebration of the role of light in the building is savvily interspersed with a cut to the Aztec Sun Stone, hinting at the many nationalist references yet to come. The arrival sequence, pointedly subtitled "A Gateway to Mexico," invites us to look at the project from our airplane window.

[2] Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret's proposal for the Water Pavilion at Liege, Belgium (1937) is perhaps an early precedent. Frei Otto's large canopies at the West Germany Pavilion at Expo 67 Montreal (1967), and at the Munich Olympic Stadium (1972) are the best-known representatives of the genre.

[3] See https://twitter.com/REFORMACOM/status/519112873348300802.

[4] Thanks to Etien Santiago for pointing out this sequence to me.

Olmec heads make a pleasing diversion in the airport atrium. Screen capture from Foster and Partners video.

"This is your first contact with the nation, this is a showcase of the ability to be able to construct this building from components which are made in Mexico." With these words, Foster sets the stage for his Mexican partner to explain the project's codification of Mexico's identity.

Romero rehearses a series of well-traveled Mexican tropes. The airport, we are told, is modeled after the Aztec symbol of an eagle atop a cactus, eating a serpent. We are meant to find these symbols in a cactus garden, the drop-off road—"to be built with elements that symbolize the serpent"—and the canopy as eagle. [5] The bright reds and yellows of "Mexicanness" will be represented by this canopy and serve to visualize its structural behaviors—on cue, the render turns bright red. Up until this moment, the silvery white canopy could have matched the muted white tones of Foster's own office, visible in the background of his takes, and the viewer is left at a loss over this unexpected transformation in color. Finally, Mexico's tradition of monumental architecture is referenced through Pedro Ramírez Vásquez's National Anthropology Museum. [6] The central atrium, Romero claims, is meant as a celebration of Mexican engineering—never mind the fact that it's designed by foreign consultants.

Rising upward to take in the urban scale, the airport is portrayed as a catalyzing force in regional development, a model of sustainability (LEED platinum, no less), and the need to build lightly in the shaky terrain of the former lake, here explained as environmental responsibility and economic efficiency. But wait, there's more! Surely we wouldn't expect these designers to be content only with revolutionizing the present—the last segment takes us to the year 2062, when Air Mexico's sci-fi-looking spaceships are landing in the airport and little trains deposit passengers safely on the curbside drop-off. The video concludes with the airport turning into its skeletal parti, a letter *X* that rotates to become part of the word Mexico—architecture reduced to supergraphical typography.

It's not the first time this simultaneous evocation of futurity and tradition has been wielded in Mexican architecture, nor will it be the last. To take one of Mexican architecture's most remarkable adaptations of the language of international modernism, the architect Mario Pani used similar phrases in 1966 to describe the Tlatelolco Housing Complex, also meant to represent Mexico's past and future greatness. Pani, a modern architect trained in the Beaux Arts system in France but devoted to promoting the Corbusian doctrine in Mexico, also had close ties to the Mexican financial system. His uncle was former minister of finance Alberto Pani, considered the author of the "Mexican Miracle," a financial strategy that promoted sustained economic growth during the post-WWII period, but that also generated increased income inequality. In this context, the housing complex, which encompassed several important Aztec ruins, was presented as a syncretic sublimation of Mexico's proud Aztec past and modern, globalized future. [7] The replacement of a large slum with modern, middle-income housing units hinted at the transformation of the country at large from a struggling developing nation, to a global contender. On October 2, 1968, Tlatelolco was the site of a large protest that resulted in terrible tragedy, with a still uncounted number of civilian deaths perpetrated by the military. I will not go into the details here, but the magnitude of the event still haunts modern Mexican

[5] Fred Scharmen and Daniel Cardoso reminded me how Foster used similar animal tropes for a new terminal at the Beijing International Airport (a dragon) and the Zayed National Museum in Abu Dhabi (falcon feathers).

[6]: Beyond Romero's claims for Mexican modern monumentality, it's important to remember that the impressive monuments of Aztec architecture, still present throughout Mexico, are a source of national pride. It is interesting to compare the official discourse's embrace of Aztec cultural artifacts and the more secondary role given to Mayan objects and buildings, perhaps most obviously in their location in the same Anthropological Museum referenced by the video. Here, the Aztec room interrupts the chronological narrative to occupy the central axis of the building. Mayan works, centered around the Yucatán peninsula spanning Mexico and Guatemala, are less central to the state discourse than Aztec works, whose capital, Tenochtitlán, still lies under Mexico City. Remains of Tenochtitlán have been uncovered around the corner from the Zócalo, the main square of the city and former ceremonial center of the Aztec capital.

[7] Luis Castaeda has insightfully analyzed how these tropes were mobilized for the 1968 Olympics ready for its world close-up at the Olympics of 1968. See Luis Castaeda, "Beyond Tlatelolco: Design, Media, and Politics at Mexico '68," *Grey Room* 40 (Summer 2010), 100–126.

identity, and its architectures.

There are further notable parallels between Tlatelolco and Foster and Romero's airport, which bring us closer to understanding the degree to which this otherwise breezy video contributes to a particular architectural conception of a territory with a long history. Both projects have ties between private capital and state investment, geared toward the benefit of specific groups. At the same time, their claims to social benefits for large low-income populations gloss over the larger private financing of the project. Additionally, they have both been presented in a way to conjure the imaginary of a proud past and the slick modernity of a globalized future. While designing Tlatelolco, Pani was surprised by the presence of several large Aztec ruins on the site. In the end, he took advantage of the ruins and made them part of the project. In the case of the airport, a group has called out the likely presence of a large concentration of remains of Paleolithic mammoths and their human companions, the first people to populate the area (something that goes unmentioned in Foster's claim that "we know the soil conditions are very special"). [8] Although these remains have yet to be unearthed, these parallels give the airport an uncanny sense of déjà vu. Haven't we seen these strategies mobilized before, and haven't we learned, by now, their problematic subtext?

[8]: The group "Somos Nómadas" has presented their assessment at http://youtu.be/4VjPOoTJCRs. More about their work can be found at http://www.somosnomadas.net. The group documents Mexican archaeology and paleontology, and hopes the airport will allow specialists to survey the zone per the country's protocol but is concerned about the large scale of the research that would be involved. In the video, the group doesn't oppose the construction of the airport, but calls for the necessary preliminary research and the creation of a museum near the site.

It is easy to criticize Norman Foster, Zaha Hadid, or any number of "starchitects" for their involvement or lack thereof in the processes and regimes with which they collaborate. But it's more important, and more difficult, to take on these architects' professed impotence. As program complexity increases, the figure of the consultant has pushed aside many of the roles that architects previously assumed. If we compare these architects' secondary roles to that of Pani in Tlatelolco, we get a sense of how the discipline has been split between the form-making of the architect-artist and the programmatic management of the consultant. In this light, the program of the building is a conspicuous absence in Foster's video. While the architectural membrane becomes loaded with a series of nationalist messages, its operational aspects are omitted. Architecture here is reduced to form on the outside and well-lit void on the inside. The architects are thus recast as form- and image-makers in search of the objective correlative of a globalized Mexican state. Or to say it more simply, they're three-dimensional publicists.

In order for the global network of airports to function, their programs have become increasingly precise and standardized according to elaborate specifications. For the cosmopolitan traveler, increased security protocols seem to go hand in hand with expanded retail opportunities. This is where the real spatial politics of the airport program lie—in the entrails of corridors that sort us by immigration status, in the machines that scan our bodies and our belongings, in the long lines of human beings surrendering their dignity in exchange for the illusory promise of safety. It is telling that the bulk of airport retail is located between the two poles of security, the security check upon departure, and immigration control upon international arrival. Caught in this limbo, we are left free to wander through the world of duty-free shopping, international retail chains, and overpriced food—fear, assuaged by consumption. These spaces are absent from the architectural

brief as described by Foster. The emphasis on nationalist tropes, from eagles to serpents, is a desperate populist appeal covering up the construction of a highly politicized space. This video invites us to join the architects in turning a blind eye to these realities.

Norman Foster with inverted catenary arch. Screen capture from Foster and Partners video.