

## Cultural management in the National Palace of Mexico: use and heritage conservation

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**Abstract:** Conservation of Mexico National Palace is a complex labor, since implies the preservation, not only of the material aspects of the building and the objects contained within, but also all the immaterial values reflected on the walls of the structure that mirrors the historic continuity of Mexico and therefore part of the national identity. Due these conditions, National Palace is in our days the most emblematic and symbolical government building of the country.

In order to preserve the monument, a comprehensive conservation-cultural management program has been developed and implemented, considering operational aspects of the monument management, that is also part of the cultural infrastructure of Mexico City, since this historical complex attracts around 340 000 visitors each year.

In addition, among the Conservator's Office strategy has been to promote collaboration between different actors involved with the use, operation and conservation of the monument, in which are included external governmental offices and academic institutions, both national and international. This collaborative approach has been crucial in order to implement the Management Program for the conservation of the monument.

**Key words:** Cultural Management, Preventive Conservation, Strategic Planning.

### Gestión cultural en el Palacio Nacional de México: uso y conservación del patrimonio

**Resumen:** La conservación del Palacio Nacional de México representa una labor compleja, ya que no solo contempla los aspectos materiales del edificio y los objetos contenidos en éste, sino que también todos los aspectos inmateriales del inmueble y que muestran la continuidad histórica de México, y por lo tanto, del desarrollo de la identidad nacional. Dadas estas condiciones, Palacio Nacional es actualmente el inmueble gubernamental más emblemático en todo el país.

Para atender el monumento, fue necesario desarrollar un plan de manejo integral para la conservación del inmueble y la atención de las actividades culturales que atraen anualmente cerca de 320 000 visitantes; asimismo, se consideró la operación de las oficinas propias de la Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público; así como las áreas Presidenciales que se encuentran también dentro del inmueble.

Por otra parte, la oficina de la Conservaduría de Palacio Nacional, ha promovido una colaboración trabajo coparticipado entre las distintas oficinas que se ven involucradas en el uso y operación del monumento, así como oficinas gubernamentales externas e instituciones académicas, tanto nacionales como internacionales. Este trabajo en realizado en co participación con los diversos actores involucrados, ha sido crucial para la óptima implementación del Plan Maestro para la conservación de Palacio Nacional.

**Palabras clave:** Gestión Cultural, Conservación Preventiva, Planeación Estratégica.

### National Palace: Heart of the Nation

Mexico's National Palace is located in the Core Zone of the Historical Center of Mexico City, Site inscribed on the List of World Heritage in 1987, which comprises 1000 hectares corresponding to the geographical limits of the City since its foundation, in the XIV century until 1830 (Diario Oficial de la Federación, 1980). This area it's the most representative cultural evidence, not only of the

city, but also reflects the entire country development. Therefore, National Palace conservation is essential to the permanence of national identity since the building, from its origins in the 16th century, hosted the main governmental functions, as today. Presidential Protocol areas, the Office of the Ministry of Finance, operate in conjunction with exhibitions and cultural areas, including archaeological observation ports (Castro, 2003). This results in an influx of nearly 320,000 visitors per year, a

daily dynamic, that generates an intense and constant use by different social sectors. Consequently, it is easy to understand why this monument is socially recognized as the Heart of the Nation.

Given the above, it was transcendental to elaborate an accurate diagnosis of the different uses of the monument, including conservation actions for the building and its collections, as well as planning and optimizing the needs of all the internal and external users. In this way, a comprehensive program of conservation, maintenance and monitoring that allows the coexistence of the monument and its role throughout the continuity of the history of the nation was implemented.

It's worth to say that the main challenge for the conservation of National Palace is given by its location: since it was built over the ruins of the palace of *Moctezuma Tlatoani* and the great *Mexica* ceremonial center, both built over *chinampas*; which surrounding context was the ancient lake modified during prehispanic times to settle Mexico Tenochtitlan. Because of this, the monument was built on a highly compressible clay soil. Therefore its structure is affected by differential subsidence. Due to this, many of the actions focused on the conservation of National Palace involves monitoring the effects on the structural behavior and its interaction with local and regional soil subsidence.

### Government complex since its origins

The National Palace of Mexico has been since its creation a palatial residence; under its foundations are vestiges of the houses built by the *Mexica tlatoani* Moctezuma. During the Spanish conquest, Hernán Cortes recognized in the palace its importance as part of the ceremonial center of the prehispanic city, so he asked for the property as payment for his services after the conquest. Afterwards, Cortes built his palace in a Castilian building style keeping the preexisting emplacement that mesoamerican gave to their buildings, according to the movement of the stars in order to reaffirm the Spanish domain. His son, Martín Cortés, sold the palace in 1562 to the Spanish Crown to be used for the Spanish Viceroy, his family and his court (Saucedo, 2015).

Over time, due mismanagement, lack of maintenance and natural disasters, National Palace was in serious risk: a fire in 1624, a flood that covered the entire city for more than two years; a mob, which angered by the high price of corn, destroyed the entire southwest area of the palace, a second fire in 1692, among other events that left their mark on its walls as a reminder of the consolidation of the country. However, modifications and restorations relived the iconic monument. In the middle of the XVIII century, neoclassicist architectural style made its mark in the expansion and reconstruction of the "Casa de Moneda" between 1779 and 1782 (Saucedo, 2015).

After nearly three centuries of being the Vice regal Palace, the nineteenth century saw the transformation of the Imperial Palace to become the current National Palace. First, during the War of Independence, the new ruling class chose to keep the State Powers in the same palace, so the first presidents lived and ruled from this site. Half a century later, when Maximilian of Hapsburg was proclaimed emperor of Mexico by the monarchist party and the support of Napoleon, he found the palace uninhabitable and infested with blood-sucking insects known as *chinchas* (bedbugs), so he undertook a restoration in order to make it true imperial quarters (Valle-Arizpe, 1936). (UNESCO, 1982)

Upon the end of the short-lived government of Maximilian of Hapsburg, President Benito Juárez decided to maintain the renovated rooms as areas of presidential protocol and moved his residential quarters to the north side on the Moneda Street. Near the end of convulsive XIX century, with the arrival of Porfirio Díaz to power, who ruled the country for 30 years, the National Palace experienced a significant improvement. The governmental activities were decentralized and, therefore, Ministries and employees moved into their own buildings, which stopped the palace from being the particular house of the presidents (Saucedo, 2015).

However, it did not stop being the government headquarters and symbol of national identity, since in 1896 the bell of Dolores, the same bell that served Miguel Hidalgo to call to the Independence of the Mexicans, was installed upon the central balcony of the Palace. Ever since, the "Grito" (shout) ceremony held every september 15, acquired its massive social proportion and became a dialogue between the President and the people who gather in the "Zocalo" square (Alcocer, 1985).

After the Mexican Revolution that began in 1910, towards the second decade of the XX century, the National Palace experienced a renewal that symbolically expressed the consolidation of the new political class, its institutional strength and its openness to the recent world artistic expressions that took nationalist traits. A team of architects and engineers added a third floor and redesigned its facade preserving some of the original architectural elements that since the XVI century gave its fortified character. Also, the courtyard of the Treasury was roofed and decorated with Art Deco motifs, along with an Italian mosaic floor and carved wooden furniture that served as the Treasury of the Federation, today transformed into a hall for official receptions (Castro, 2003).

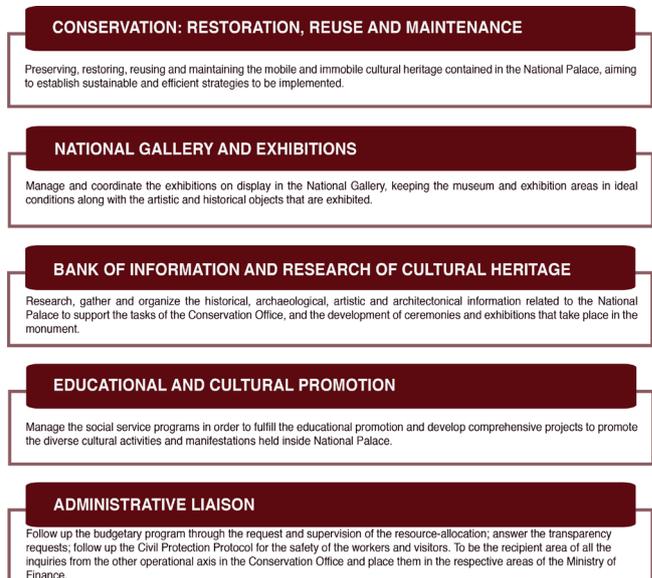
By 1929, Diego Rivera began painting the spectacular murals that adorn the walls of the monumental staircase and the northern corridor of the second floor. The murals depict the epic of the Mexican people, using the symbols and episodes that show the history of our nation. In the 1970s, several works inside and outside the building have uncovered the remains of a courtyard of the XVI century and a prehispanic monolith of relevant archaeological importance. This

allowed a reassessment of the architectural complex that became the subject of study by archaeologists. In addition, it sparked the interest of architects and historians who contributed to the replacement of two elements that had been lost: The Chamber of Deputies, destroyed by a fire in 1872, which was rebuilt and opened to the public in 1972; and, in the central courtyard, a bronze fountain within a marble pile in whose top flutters a sculpture of a Pegasus (Saucedo, 2015).

**Protection, conservation and restoration of cultural heritage**

The main goal of the National Palace Conservator Office is founded on the objectives established by a presidential decree issued in 2013, which is “to protect, conserve, restore and reuse immovable and movable cultural heritage contained in the building” (DOF, 2013). Thus, based on the provisions of the national regulatory framework and in consideration of international recommendations, the Conservator Office seek to ensure optimal operation and use of National Palace, in addition to strengthening the positioning of its museum spaces according to international standards.

In order to accomplish this goal, the team that collaborates in the Conservator Office has the vision to position National Palace as a comprehensive model to conservation of cultural heritage and social convergence, through cultural areas of first level, allowing Mexicans and visitors to enrich their knowledge and appreciate the historical and symbolic values of the monument. This is in synchrony to the Mexico’s Declaration on Principles Governing the Cultural Policy, which states “sustainable development can only be achieved through the integration of the cultural factors within the strategies proposed for this; thus, those strategies should always consider the historical, social and cultural aspects of each society” (UNESCO, 1982). Therefore, the objectives of the Master Plan for the Conservation of National Palace, which is the fundamental methodological strategy of the Conservator Office, is divided into five strategic axes defined by themes:



**Figure 3.-** Axes of Action of the Conservator Office of the National Palace. DGCPN-SHCP internal development.



**Figure 1.-** Diego Rivera’s Murals. One of the main sights for visitors at the inside of National Palace. DGCPN-SHCP. 2016.



**Figure 2.-** Main courtyard on National Palace. The Pegasus fountain in the center. DGCPN-SHCP. 2015.

These axes continuously and transversely implement diverse specific projects and programs to attend the monument, both in its conservation operational aspects.

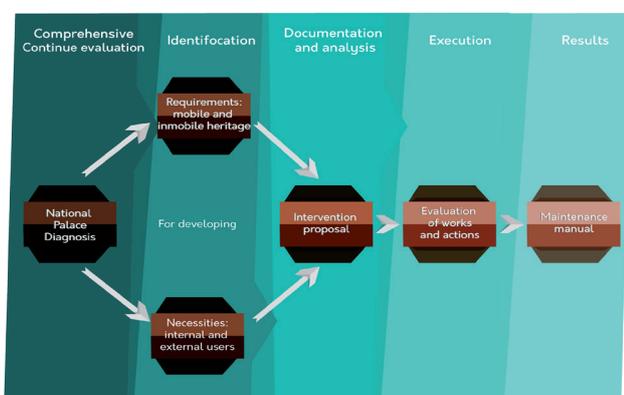
1. Development of comprehensive conservation projects of cultural heritage contained in the National Palace, both immovable and movable.
2. Implementation of exhibitions in the Gallery of National Palace, which aim to show a comprehensive view of Mexican history in order to strengthen national identity.
3. Management for the cultural promotion and educational services of the various activities to be held in National Palace.
4. Coordination of integral projects for the diffusion of the diverse cultural activities and manifestations within the National Palace.

5. Research, registration and documentation of the cultural heritage contained in National Palace, both immovable and movable.

The optimum performance of these programs and actions, which are necessary for the conservation of the monument, are guaranteed by an Interagency Commission, which according to Presidential Decree, "has a permanent character, composed of representatives of several Secretaries of State, the Presidential Office and chaired by the Conservator (DOF, 2013). This Interagency Commission acts as a collegiate group to support and endorse the actions of the Conservation Office, as well as to request the implementation of specific conservation projects in the monument areas needed for the optimal use of the building.

On the other hand, this collegiate group, have endorsed the *Master Plan for the use and conservation of National Palace 2015-2018*, the essential document for the operation of the Conservator Office, that considers both the multidisciplinary approach along with strategic planning. In addition, this document considers the continuous monitoring and evaluation of National Palace, as part of a general and comprehensive diagnosis. The macro process approach consists of a methodology, which redefine, increases and exclude the information resulting from the continuous diagnosis of National Palace, in order to adapt the procedures and actions carried out in the conservation plans.

The actions of the Conservation Office are linked to the National Development Plan 2013-2018 in its guideline "Mexico Prospero", using the strategies for the development of sustainable tourism, which according to the World Tourism Organization, it must consider three aspects: economic growth, the inclusive and equitable development among residents, business and visitors, and, finally, environmental and cultural long-term preservation (OMT, 1995).



**Figure 4.-** Diagram of the proposed methodology "Continuing Comprehensive Assessment for the Diagnosis of Internal Development of National Palace. DGCPN-SHCP December 2015.



**Figure 5.-** Dissemination of cultural activities of the National Palace with visitors. DGCPN-SHCP. 2016.

In reference to the mentioned above, the National Development Plan states that it is necessary to "promote the care and conservation of cultural, historical and natural heritage of the country" in order to, according to the Norms of Quito, "turn tourism into a source of welfare (...), along with the necessity for the restoration and empowerment of cultural heritage to promote tourism, this meaning that investment of financial, human and material resources should be integrated into a regional economic development plan" (ICOMOS, 1967).

### Transversal teamwork

Facing the challenges that implies the preservation, restoration and reuse of the National Palace, is a task that the Conservator Office could not achieve without the invaluable support of the different institutions that work collaboratively and co-shared with the Conservator Office: National Center for Conservation and Registration of Artistic Movable Heritage of the National Institute of Fine Arts (CENCROPAM-INBA for its acronym in Spanish); National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH for its acronym in Spanish); Engineering Institute of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (II-UNAM for its acronym in Spanish), and the Ministry of Culture.

The large conservation projects are implemented through specialized outsourcing contractors, under several strict regulation systems, in order to ensure its proper implementation; these projects are mainly about structural safety given the circumstances of differential subsidence of the Historic Center of Mexico. Otherwise, minor conservation, maintenance and preventive procedures are done with the Conservator Office's team along with the other maintenance offices of the Ministry of Finance.

In relation to the internal work of the Conservator Office, the main subject of this paper, various programs have been implemented for the conservation and protection

of the monument. Based on the document for heritage conservation, the Chart of Vantaa, established within the Rafael program of the European Commission in 2000, and also based on the *Master plan for the use and conservation of National Palace 2015-2018*, where each strategy corresponds to one line of action, the Conservator Office has proposed drawing up a Maintenance Manual for National Palace, in which the following characteristics are considered:

—*Leadership*. The Conservator Office team assume the leadership in the conservation of the cultural heritage contained in the National Palace.

—*Institutional Planning*. The Master Plan includes both, the direct actions for conservation and restoration, as well as preventive conservation in long-term institutional planning, using methodologies according to this concept.

—*Training*. All persons who are related on the care and maintenance of the cultural heritage contained in National Palace must be trained in the field of preventive conservation, according to their roles and responsibility.

—*Access to information*. All persons who are related to the care of the cultural heritage contained in National Palace must have access to archives and bibliography to obtain knowledge and international information on preventive conservation, according to their needs.

—*The role of the public*. People should know about the concept of preventive conservation and participate on its implementation and execution.

### Looking ahead: prevent to preserve

The correct performance of all the personal involved in the conservation of the National Palace is crucial to achieve a good preventive program, in other words, those responsible for the conservation of heritage sites has to converge into a single line of work in order to achieve this purpose. This tasks have been achieved by the formation of trained personnel, who have been given the knowledge of methods and criteria that allow them to identify and prevent potential risks in the conservation of the cultural heritage in National Palace, at the same time they have been given the necessary tools for the proper monitoring and control of the monument. Thus, sustainable preventive conservation tools are established (Lopez Ruiz & Cuba Taboada, 2014).

Developing preventive conservation plans and sharing it with all the workers involved in the monument, will allow less restoration actions in the future and, thereby, the Conservator Office will achieve at National Palace a model of intervention that may lead to sustainable preventive conservation (ICCROM, 2000).

In this way, the main challenge has been met, since the Conservator Office prepared and dictated the first



**Figure 6.-** On site practice of the preventive conservation course. 36 workers participate in the active conservation of the cultural heritage in National Palace. DGCPN-SHCP. July 2016.

Preventive Conservation Course for 36 workers, all of them involved in the maintenance of the different areas of the National Palace, so that they are prepared with the knowledge, methods and criteria, and therefore, enabling them to identify and prevent potential risks in the conservation of the cultural heritage with the necessary tools for proper monitoring and control of the monument.

That is how the Conservator Office have generated organizational, procedural and maintenance manuals for the cultural property, in addition to catalogs of objects that are held in the building, along with the development of conservation courses and seminars with the main objective to contribute to academic activities related to the conservation of the cultural heritage.

### Conclusions

Considering that National Palace it's a building in which the most of the political activity in the country is developed, the work of the Conservator Office must be a strategic conciliator, that is to say, to promote the collaborative and inclusive work, at any hierarchical level, of all the offices and actors that are involved in the conservation of the monument; this along with a continuous process of heritage appropriation and education about preventive conservation process. Only through this process the utmost goal will be achieved: the conservation of the most important monuments that conform the vast cultural heritage of Mexico.

Consequently, these actions will enable a harmonic and respectful work, because of the understanding of the complexity of the use and conservation of such important heritage site, and therefore, the balance of the necessities of the users along with the conservation requirements of the monument.

It's very important to understand that many of the deterioration process are consequence of the interaction of

the heritage and its use, and because of that, it is necessary to develop comprehensive preventive conservation strategies in wherein, by a systematic methodology for the assessment, identification, evaluation, and control of the agents that may deteriorate the building, objects and collections (that is to say, any cultural heritage), those risks of deterioration are minimized or eliminated by acting on the origins of these, that in most cases are a consequence of external factors on which the heritage is surrounded. In this way, the necessity of future major interventions, which could be more intrusive and expensive, can be avoided, and the conservation of the cultural heritage content in National Palace will be a strategy of continuous preventive actions.

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Degree in Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage, Diploma in Museology Studies, Master in Contemporary Art History, has 29 years of experience in the field of cultural management, coordination of projects in conservation, restoration and museum in situ and heritage collections. National Coordinator of Cultural Heritage INAH (2007-2013); in this period she led several national and international projects, including the preservation of Moctezuma's headdress, in the City of Vienna, Austria, and Conservation of Heroes of Independence Remains, both published projects. "Paul Coremans" award winner for the interdisciplinary Project for the descendant and conservation of Pakal's tombstone, Palenque Chiapas.

Supervisor for the conservation of historic buildings such as National Palace, Cathedral of Mexico and the palace "Marques del Apartado". She has collaborated in the preparation of various exhibitions in Mexico and abroad, and lectured and participated in seminars as a speaker and contributed in various national and international forums.

Councillor for Mexico at ICCROM Rome in 2009-2013, academic advisor for the project of the European Union Nano for Art 2011-2014, scientific committee member at YOCOCU since its creation. Assessor for México on the EU project NANORESTART 2015-2018 on Nanotechnology science for the conservation of contemporary art.

She is currently Head Conservator of National Palace, and provides advice to the various technical and academic institutions at request, in support of heritage conservation.