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“THE PERSONALITY OF A RUIN:
RECONSTRUCTION OF A MEXICAN HACIENDA”

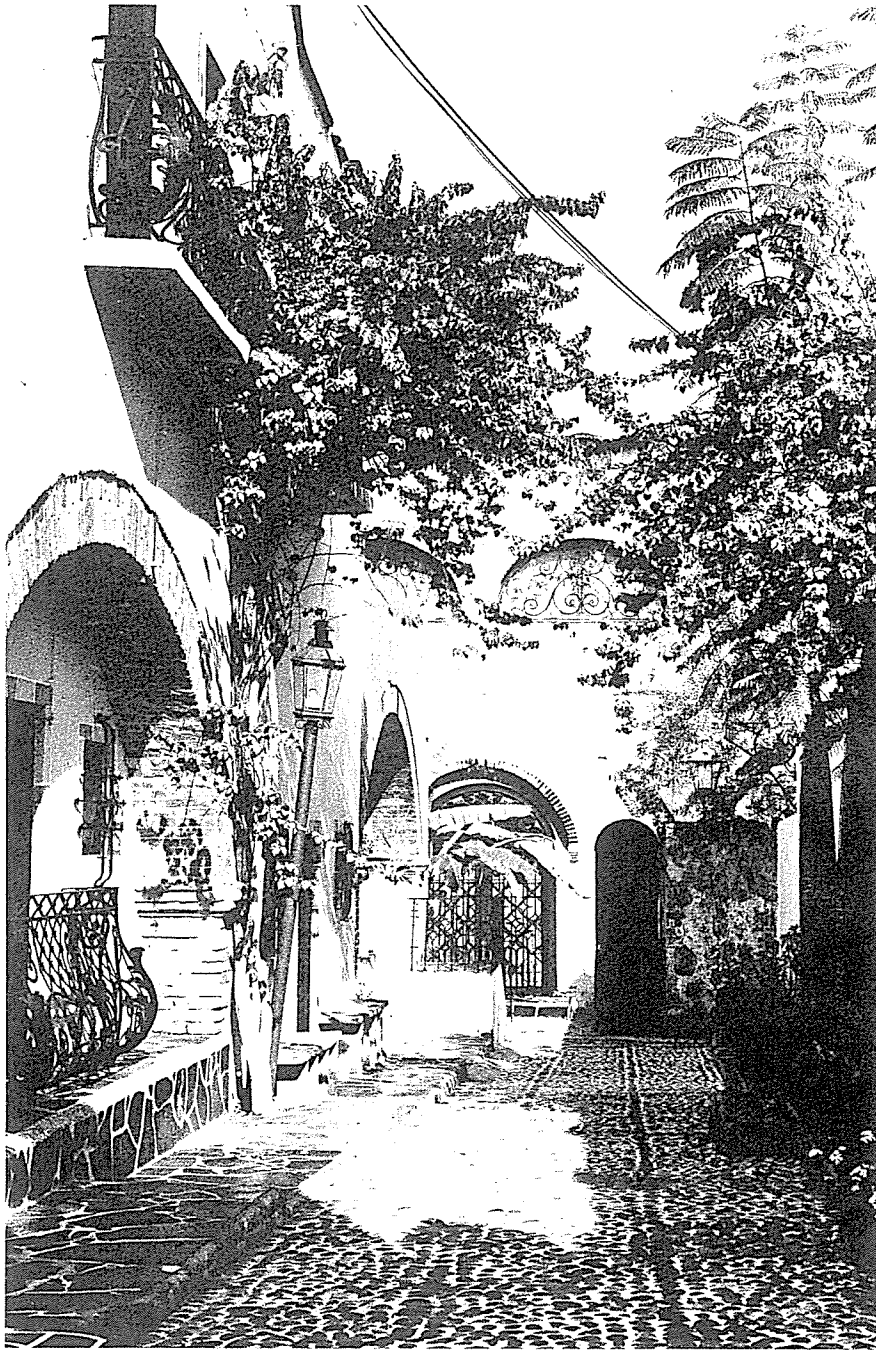
The Personality of a Ruin

The large Mexican haciendas that flourished until the beginning of the twentieth century were neither primarily residences nor rural factories, but quite complete and architecturally articulate communities bounded by walls. They contained quarters for the owners and staff, offices, chapels, buildings for manufacture and storage, stables and water systems, and, in some locations they also established markets and adjacent villages for working families. As political centers of the industrialized segment of the Mexican countryside, they also became prime targets for the Revolution of 1910–17. During this remarkable epoch most of the haciendas were destroyed, and today their picturesque and sometimes ghostly ruins populate the landscape as mementos of a recent past.



Bell Tower

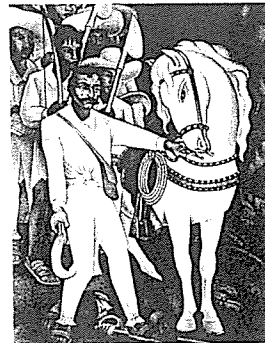
"Colonial" Street



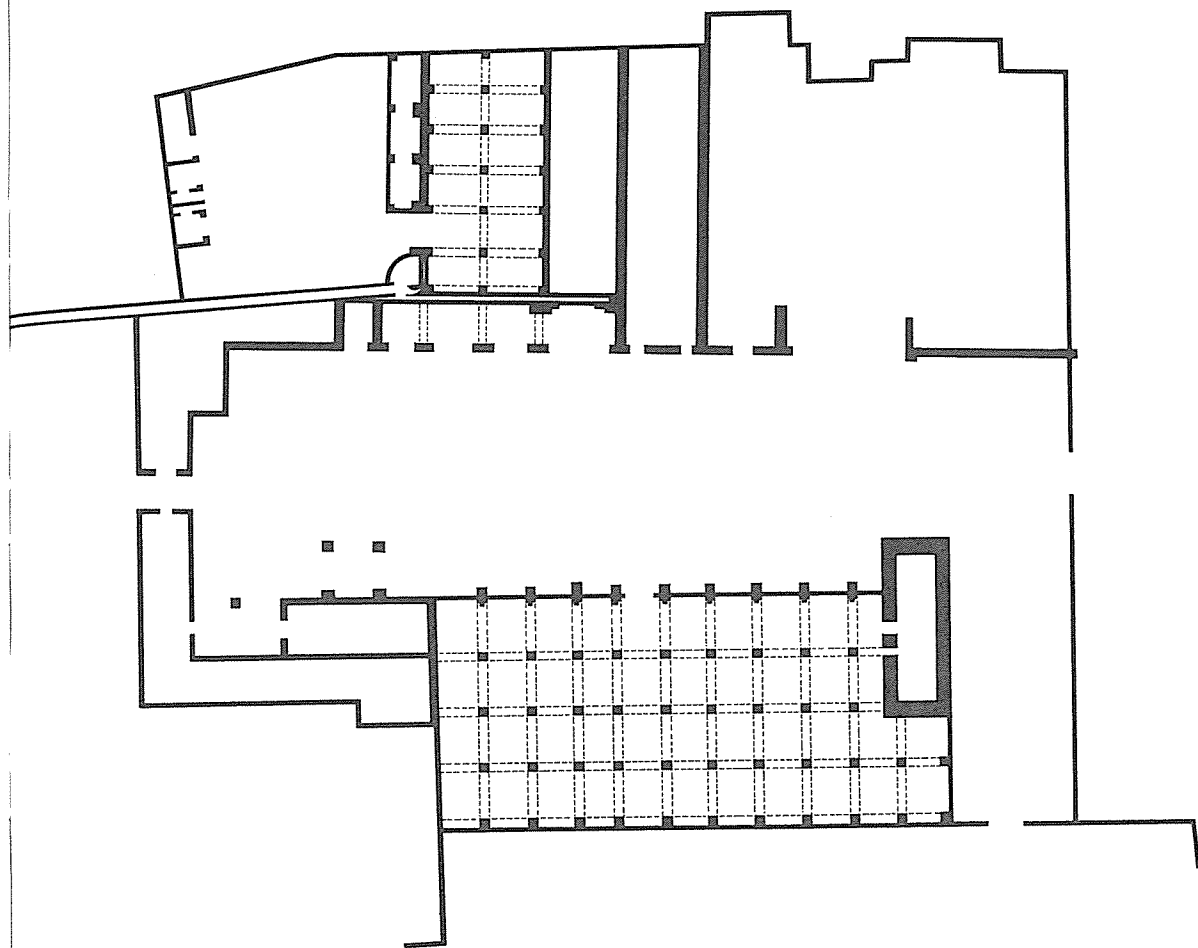
In 1913 the Hacienda de San Jose Vista Hermosa in the state of Morelos was seized and partially destroyed by units of the Southern Revolutionary Army of Emiliano Zapata. One cannot help but be curious about the personality of the destruction of this hacienda as well as of the others that are in the states of Morelos and Puebla. The buildings were not reduced to rubble, but were instead picked away at, villified, and crippled; essential machinery was smashed, fuel tanks exploded, pieces of wall pulled down, and chapels desecrated. The Zapatistas evidently despised the machinery of industrialization but recognized that further destruction would have to extend to the substance of rural life itself.

Indeed, the great haciendas at the turn of the century were both benefactors and sources of ruin to the natives of rural Morelos. Most of the original villages (with names like Anenecuilco, Jonacatepec, Cuautla . . .) had been founded more than five hundred years before the Spanish conquest and had developed communal economics and land "ownership" traditions which were totally alien to both the concept and the legal foundation of the haciendas. Essentially self-supporting communities, the villages were social islands in a large countryside which had previously been available as an open pasture and place for crops. For the natives much of the countryside was perceived as a public domain.

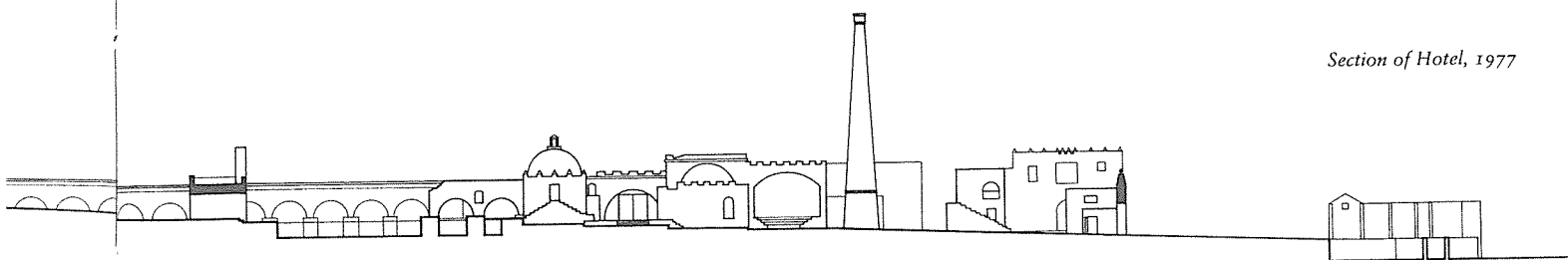
The haciendas, by contrast, were privately owned country estates which, as they grew larger and claimed more territory for the commercial production of crops (especially sugar), absorbed and threatened the dwindling communal property of the villagers. The effect was to precipitate a complex border war between a federally supported network of industrialized haciendas and a network of primitive agricultural communities which resided in their midst. (For a splendid account see *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* by John Womack. New York, A.A. Knopf, 1968.) The Mexican Revolution of 1910-17 vented the anger of an ancient population which wished to preserve its identity, although it was already in the twentieth century where legal ownership and commerce were social fundamentals.



"Emiliano Zapata", painting by Diego Rivera, Gift to Yale University Press by Samuel W. Meek.



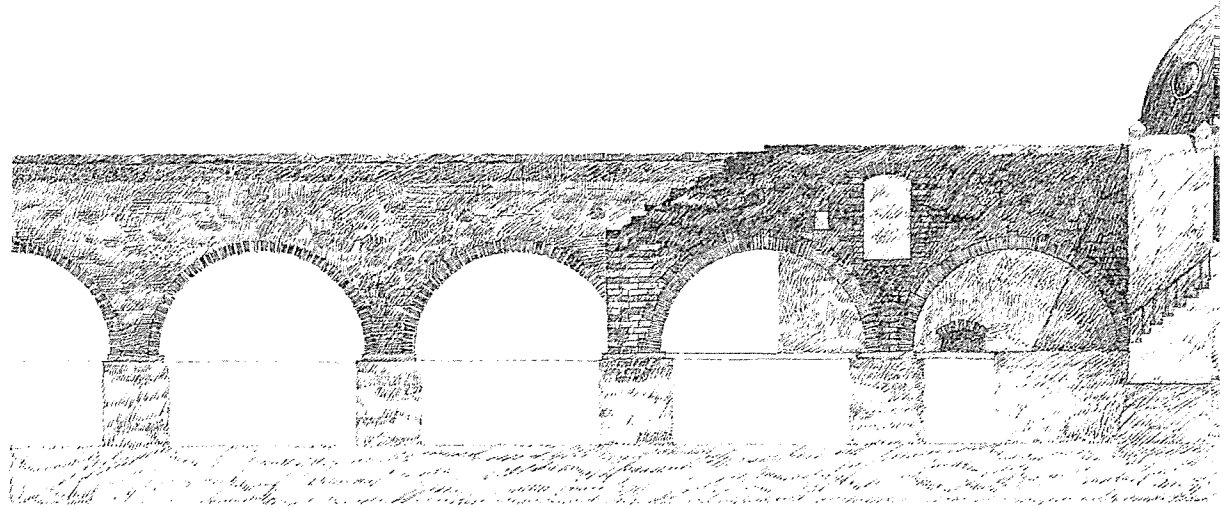
Plan of Hotel



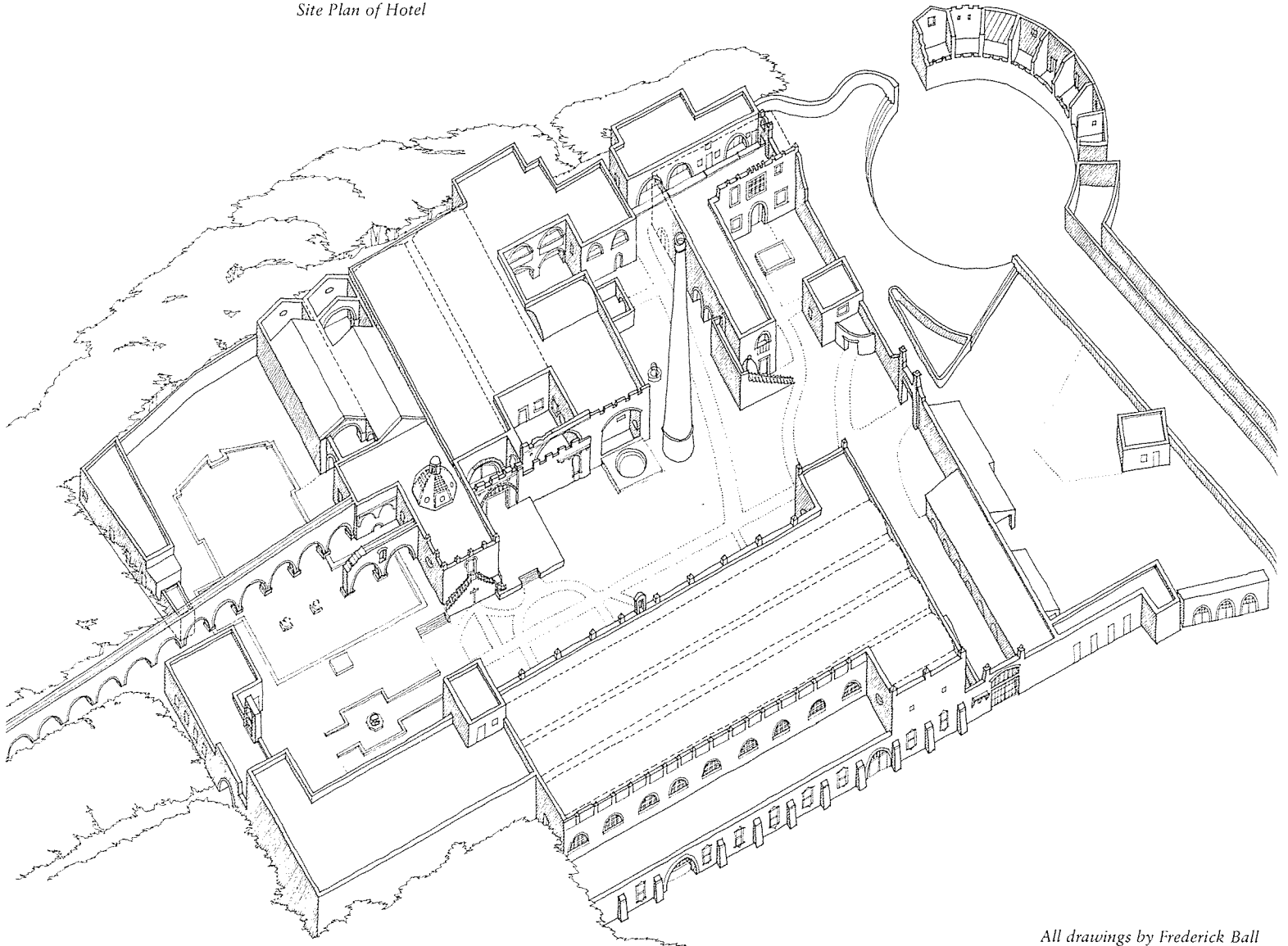
Section of Hotel, 1977

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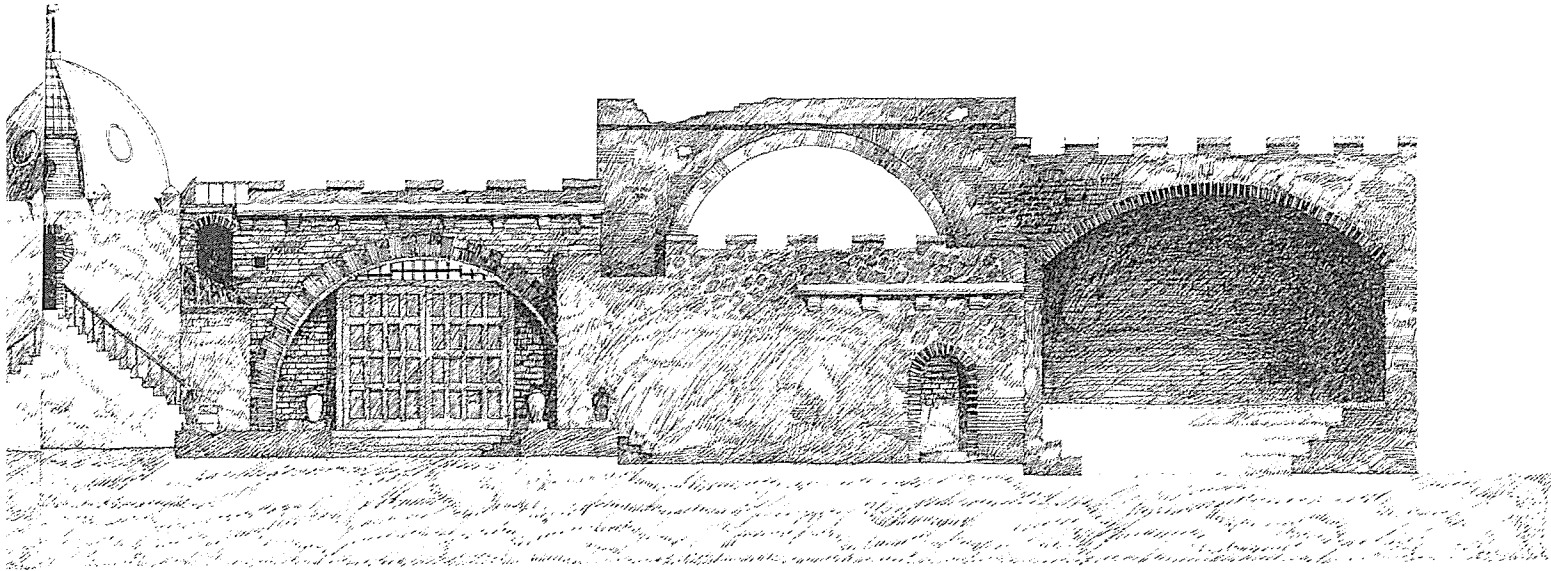
Site Section of Hotel



Site Plan of Hotel



All drawings by Frederick Ball



After the Revolutionary Constitution of 1917 much of the arable land in the south of Mexico was distributed among the people as small private farmland and as agricultural communes (*ejidos*). The Hacienda San Jose de Vista Hermosa was reduced from a great plantation of 44,000 acres to an enclave of 45 acres containing the principal buildings and a 650-foot aqueduct. The "liberated" workers' housing became the autonomous Pueblo of San Jose. Eventually, because of non-payment of taxes, the ruins of the Hacienda were offered for sale by a local credit society, and in 1944 were purchased by Fernando Martinez and Fernando Gonzalez Casanova for the purpose of developing a resort hotel. The climate of Morelos happens to be among the most ideal in the world for vacationing, with almost perpetual sun and only occasional rainfall.

As they began the job, the new owners developed an intriguing philosophy for their architecture which recognized not only the history of the buildings, but also acknowledged the hostile regional sentiment towards haciendas, still prevalent in the forties. "We wanted the new hotel to become a symbol, a sign representing the destruction of whatever was wrong, but at the same time respect and love for the noble and good that past generations left us," declared Fernando Martinez. Zapata's contribution to the history of the Hacienda was not to be disguised. Moreover, the possibility of developing contemporary architectural themes was also precluded if, indeed, the owners wished to combine evidence of destruction with the elegance that preceded the destruction. Both considerations prescribed an orientation which was backward rather than forward in time, and thus the Hacienda was to remain, essentially, as a ruin.

By 1944 almost all the roofs were destroyed, the doors and woodwork vandalized or decayed, the gardens filled with debris, and the dry soil of the courtyards banked against the walls from wind and lack of water. Fuel and modern machinery were extremely scarce. The accessible technology and labor for the reconstruction, however, seems to have been in complete harmony with the esthetic purpose of the new owners. Not unlike the Catalan masons of northern Spain, Mexican craftsmen are able masons who are facile in the fabrication of arches, vaults, and buttresses, although their finishes are somewhat crude and the brick and stone parts are not mystified by the more exacting geometries of classical Mediterranean masonry. Vernacular Mexican masonry is often large in scale and sparing in mass while remarkably strong, free in form, and archaic in feeling.

A construction company was formed by the new owners which consisted of a master-mason and a sculptor, sixteen mechanics, and sixteen laborers. In fourteen years of steady work this original group transformed the ruin into a commercially successful resort.

When they began, the centerplace of the Hacienda consisted of several main buildings which faced an enclosed street and occupied nearly five acres of land. Surrounding these were ten additional outer acres of walled property, thirty acres of pasture, and a village of winding streets for the workers. Serving the core from a gently rising eastern landscape was a 650-foot aqueduct which stemmed from a river at grade level and rose to twenty-one feet above grade at its spillway. By 1900, however, this aqueduct was already an antique, its water no longer needed to operate a pelton wheel for the grinding of cane. A steam-driven mill was subsequently installed within the walls of the Hacienda.

The largest of the main buildings faced the central street from the northern perimeter and was organized around two levels of forty-four quatrpartite brick and rubble vaults with transverse spans of thirty feet. An easterly extension of that building included the main residential quarters and kitchen as well as the parapets, bell tower, and vestibules which form an entrance portal.

On the southern side of the street another major sequence of buildings contained stables, steam engines and mills, a chapel, storage facilities, and a large mesa-like courtyard on the southwest quadrant. That courtyard originally contained tanks for alcohol storage. In 1944 there remained only foundations for these tanks, arranged in a series of bays served by an access driveway for trucks. The western end of the Hacienda consisted of loading docks and roadways leading to the fields and a railroad siding.

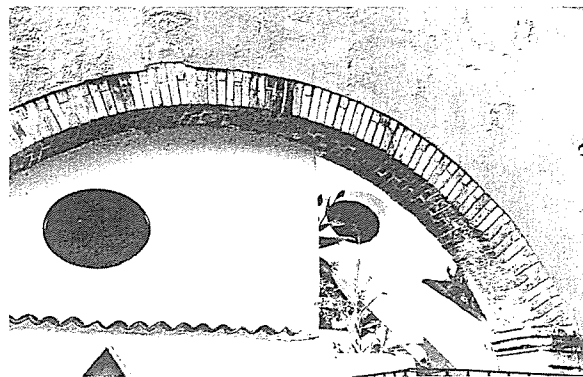
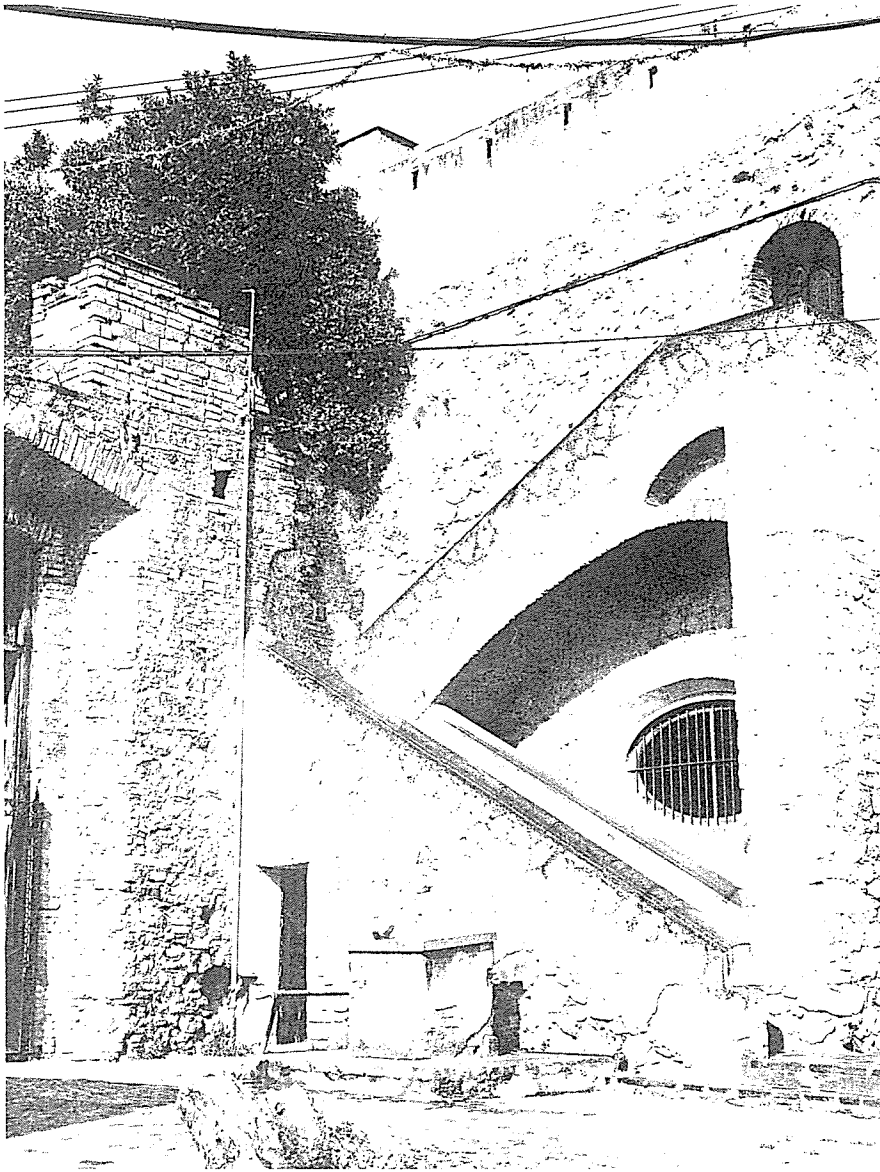
In converting the Hacienda to a resort hotel all the original "urban" zones were conserved, while being given new assignments. The great vaulted building became a lobby on the ground floor and a corridor of rooms on the second. The former residence is still used, partially as a residence for the owner, and the rest for hotel guests. The forecourt to the stable frames an enormous swimming pool, while the adjacent stables and factory buildings house a restaurant, bar, dance hall, and game rooms.

The most remarkable transformation occurred in the southwest quadrant. In 1953, when rooms were being planned for this location, Martinez was visiting the city of Guanajuato where, late at night, he chanced upon a small residential street which seemed to have a ground plan and dimensions similar to the bays on which the alcohol tanks were situated. Finding the native architecture that he had visualized for this part of his hotel, he instructed his masons to reproduce this street in the Hacienda's courtyard, maintaining the proportions although not necessarily the actual dimensions.

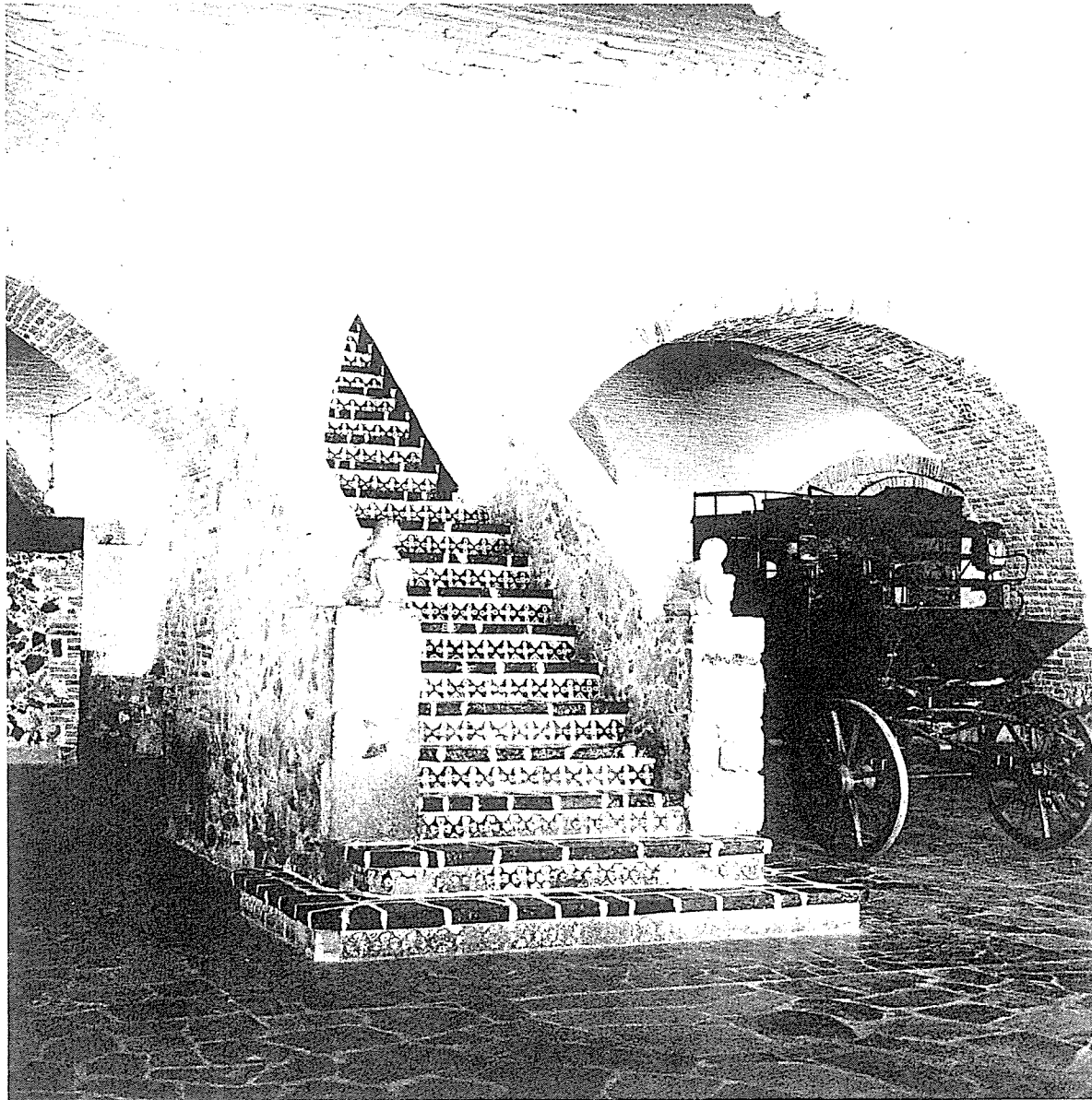
The presence of this colonial street, with its twenty-four guest rooms tucked into the fabric of a larger, industrially scaled surround, offers much more to the resort than its own intrinsic charm and intimacy. It returns to the Hacienda its legacy of harboring a native village, one which must have appeared fragile by contrast with the enormous scale of the boiler, grinding rooms, and smokestack nearby. If this new building group had acquired a more institutional or hotel-like image it would have competed with the industrial ruins which, in the meanwhile, had been transformed into places for play rather than work. For the guests the experience of awakening in this village and "going" to the body of the Hacienda is analogous to leaving home and going to a miniature city; and then "returning home" again to the village street.

The owner has commented that when visitors arrive at the resort for the first time they seem to be intimidated by its complexity and hence prefer the more ordinary rooms. As a consequence, the most frequently occupied rooms are the most conventionally arranged ones on either side of the large second floor corridor of the main building. However, once the visitors become more familiar with the buildings, they prefer to inhabit some of the more remote edges, like the colonial street.

Exterior Stairway



Detail of "Colonial" Street



Interior Stairway

Central access to the second level of the principal building was accomplished by cleaning out a crater that had been blown into the center of a pier by a Zapatista bomb. By installing a doorway in the crater, between eight and fourteen feet above the floor level, the masons were able to build a stairway with a continuous run between floors. This required a slight thickening and straightening of the lateral arches in the bottom half of the pier. The experience of ascending this extraordinary stairway focuses on the opening itself which leans slightly forward over the stairs and belongs as much to the ceiling as to the wall. By contrast, the architectural announcement of the stairway in the lobby space is marked by a solid pier rather than the customary void or well.

On the western end of the building an exterior stairway utilizes the endwall buttress for a landing, and features a branching arch which serves as a cap over an oval window for the transmission of light to the entrance lobby. The lower half of this stairway also buttresses the entry gate and serves as a small housing for a side door into the lobby. In both stairways the ingenuity of the Mexican mason is demonstrated.

In 1946 the Mexican architect, Manuel Parra, persuaded the new owners of the Hacienda that an enormous swimming pool would act as an oasis, another central "place" amongst the ruins, underneath the four bays of the aqueduct. This project was more elaborate than originally thought necessary, but Parra was given complete authority to proceed, and the pool was completed by 1947. Built on a sloping site, the eastern side of the pool is at grade level with the old entrance to the Hacienda while the western side is about four feet above the floor of the dining room which adjoins the pool. In plan the pool carves out a modulated terrace for the old walls instead of introducing a new geometric entity within the ruins. It is difficult to imagine what the space must have been like without this pool because of the ideal fitting of the new and the old. One large wall on the northern side of the pool had to be torn down to make way for the 130-foot north-south dimension of the pool, but even here the pedestals under the entrance arcade of the old wall were preserved, and today hold sculptures out in the water in place of the missing wall.



Major Sequence of Vaulted Rooms

Running through the pool on an east-west axis is the old aqueduct, reactivated to produce the sound of rushing water overhead and also to generate a waterfall through foliage and trees which have grown onto the ruin near the spillway. A small harbor was carved out of the terrace on the eastern side where the aqueduct enters the pool, and thus an extra arcaded bay is situated to serve as a stepped entrance vestibule into the water. Because the water level was brought to exactly the major horizontal axis of the semi-circular arches, the reflection on still water at night is of four enormous and half-submerged circles parading through the water.

The design and locations of additional guest rooms that were planned throughout the Hacienda, as the demand for space increased, did not conform to the "zones" originally conceived, but were fitted into the old structures wherever space and excitement could be found. This augmented the theme of occupying a ruin; and when all the available space within the central core was exhausted, new "houses" were constructed immediately outside the main inner walls which, in addition to the new stables and tennis courts, have become suburbs to the walled "city."

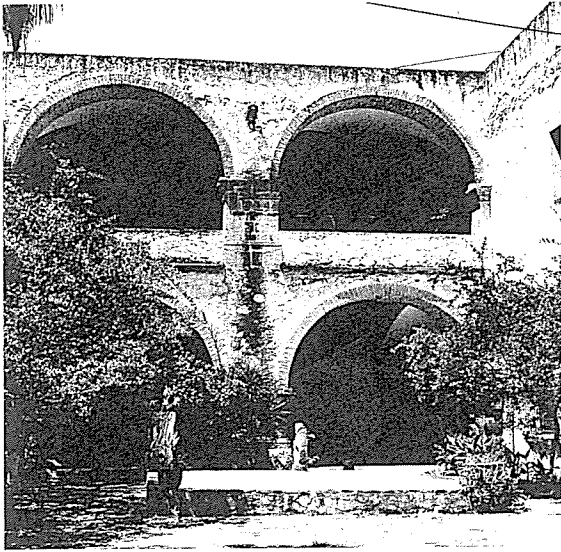
The Hacienda now is a resort hotel which has managed to find its way into the last quarter of the twentieth century with practically no signs, maps, or schedule of events visible. Perhaps it is part of the Mexican character that practically no "second language" is called upon to plan your experience for you, or to produce the feeling that your environment is under control. Or, perhaps, the absence of signs is itself consistent with the desire to allow the architecture alone to be the sign of ruin and nobility as the owners intended.

Fernando Martinez expressed regret that his ability to continue developing the buildings with the masonry technology he originally employed may be declining. During the first fourteen years, prior to the unionization of construction workers, he was able to stand up walls and tear them down until they achieved the desired effect. If there was a particular event or celebration proposed for the hotel, he would construct tables, fireplaces, fountains, and walls for the occasion, even if it was never to be repeated. When a famous bullfighter appeared for several years, in the 1960s, he built a bullring for him, and now it is primarily used for special events such as charro festivals.

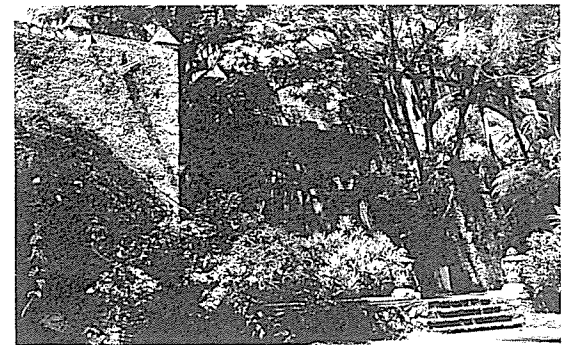
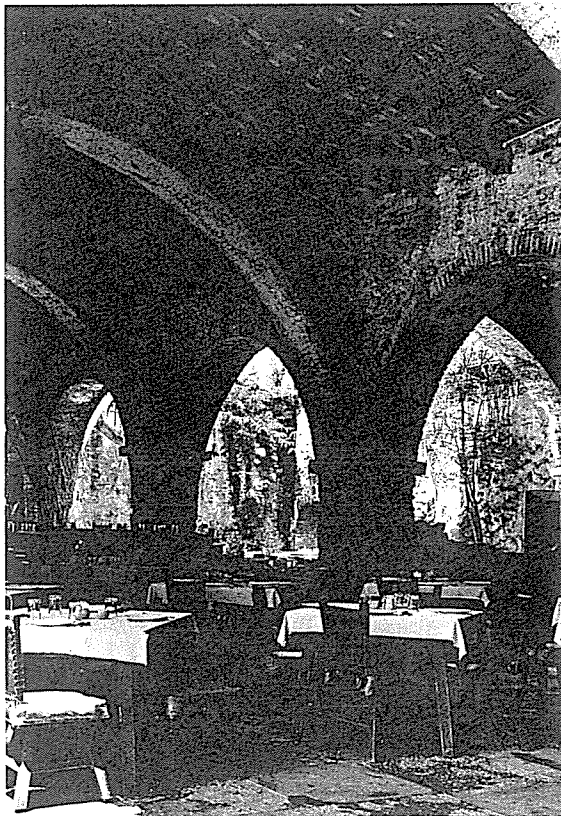
A more conventional and practical hotel architecture at the site of the Hacienda might not have been as successful as the present scheme which includes small new structures together with several old, majestic, and vaulted structures as the center. There is an impression, and this seems to be true throughout all of Mexico, of many new, yet incompleting projects, although these many "beginnings" carry with them feelings of timelessness and antiquity. Indeed, the ground floor of the main building has never been utilized for any permanent function, and presently it houses random passages, a large collection of horse-drawn carriages, and exhibitions of antiques, paintings, and sculptures. You find in one corner an enormous table with enormous chairs that you can hardly imagine sitting in, or at the center, a large unused fireplace built for one special celebration.

It is exciting to be in a covered space so enormous (over 90 by 275 feet) that people gather in knots, as though they were lost in the streets of Rome. It is a confirmation of the power of an architecture which possesses a communal form, rather than a specific program. It is also a measure of the tens of thousands of acres in which the Hacienda resides. In this respect, the enormous central spaces of the Mexican hacienda must be understood as the critical spatial property of a walled and introspective architecture which was so elegantly rendered in this nearly extinct building-type.

Main Building



Dining Room



Main Residence