

# CONSTRUCTION AND CONTRACTORS

## A Methodological Approach to the Study of Architectural Styles in Mexico City, 1780–1805

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The information for this study was obtained from volumes 773 and 774 of *Obras Públicas en General*, in the Archivo del Antiguo Ayuntamiento de México. These documents contain a complete register of the architectural activities undertaken as public works or private homes from 1780 to 1805. It was hoped that a thorough study of the *Obras Públicas en General* would provide interesting data for the urban history of Mexico City and, more specifically, for the history of art and architecture in the federal capital.

The *Obras Públicas en General* offer the following information regarding applications for building permits filed at the City Hall in Mexico City: (1) Name of the architect, (2) name of the proprietor of the building, and (3) type of architectural work to be undertaken. The types of work were classified as follows:

1. Repairs—work undertaken to maintain or preserve a building already standing in the city (e.g., painting, replacing shingles, etc.).
2. Structural modifications—changes in the original appearance of the building which may imply stylistic changes (e.g., the conversion of window to a balcony).
3. Re-edification—the destruction of an old building and the construction of a new building on the same lot. This denotes a qualitative change in architecture, though it does not alter the “urbanness” of the area.
4. Construction—the construction of a new building, thereby modifying the urban environment.

When the architectural activities undertaken between 1780 and 1805 were ordered chronologically, three distinct periods in the architectural development of Mexico City became apparent:

1. 1785–1791: Works in the city increased gradually until 1789 then declined sharply in 1791.

2. 1792–1797: Marked by the greatest increase in activities.
3. 1798–1805: Gradual decrease in activities undertaken throughout the city.

Three maps of Mexico City were prepared (one for each of the time periods) and the city block in which each architectural activity took place was located. Symbols for the names of the architect and the proprietor were included. The architects who practiced in Mexico City during this time were classified into two main groups: One was dedicated primarily to working in the baroque style, while the other worked basically in neoclassic styles. The conclusions were summarized as follows:

1. The greatest number of architectural works were registered in 1792.
2. The years of least architectural work were 1786, 1801, and 1805.
3. Structural modification was the most common architectural activity in Mexico City from 1780 to 1805. It was followed in importance (or frequency) by reparation and construction; re-edification was the least common.
4. The structural modifications and reparations executed between 1780 and 1805 were performed primarily in the central and older regions of the city. The constructions were located along the outside borders of the city, crossing into the slums (the so-called "*barrios de indios*").
5. The poorest constructions were raised near Tlatelolco and San Pablo, areas traditionally occupied by Indians.
6. The number of civil works were always greater than religious works.
7. Church property was concentrated in the central and older sections of the city. The architectural activities on church property were limited to structural modifications and reparations.
8. Civil property was more widely dispersed throughout the city. Nearly all constructions in Mexico City from 1780 to 1805 were civil—not religious.
9. The works performed by the baroque-style architects predated those of the neoclassic architects.
10. The most outstanding architect (for volume of work) in the federal capital was D. Ignacio Castera.
11. The majority of architects worked on civil property. Only Garcia Torres preferred to work on religious property.
12. There was no specific zoning of activities; most architects worked in all sectors of the city at one time or another.