



Mario Pani, Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. © Guillermo Zamora, Archive Louise Noelle.

## President Alemán Urban Housing Project

BY LOUISE NOELLE

The *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, inaugurated in 1949, was a pioneer in more ways than one and can be considered as one of the most transcendent works of Mario Pani. It is the first Mexican high-rise housing complex, where many of the ideals of the European masters, especially Le Corbusier, are gathered together but with a design suited to its place and time. Mario Pani shattered the scheme of the single unit dwelling and proposed a density that allowed the presence of garden areas and integrated diverse services. Moreover, he invited the artist José Clemente Orozco to paint a mural, which he commenced on an undulating wall designed by him.

6<sup>th</sup> September 1949 is a date marked by a photograph where architect Mario Pani (1911-1993) and painter José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) are shown together, alongside other prominent personalities. A few days earlier, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September, the Mexican president, Miguel Alemán (1900-1983), had inaugurated the first high-rise urban housing block that coincidentally was christened with his name: *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán* [President Alemán Urban Housing Project]. The multitudinous inaugural event had reverberated in the press and other media, as the building presented a new architectural proposal. That is why the meeting of a few people at the entrance of the complex could have passed unnoticed were it not because of that fateful day, José Clemente Orozco would have begun the painting of his last mural. Alas, he passed away the following dawn.

### Mario Pani, visionary architect

The whole complex was also known as “Multifamiliar Alemán”, or CUPA.<sup>1</sup> It was designed by Mario Pani,<sup>2</sup> who studied at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris in the 1930s, having also the chance to become familiar with the *avant-garde* proposals of Le Corbusier (1887-1965). Upon returning to Mexico, his native country, he approached the original ideals of a socially engaged architecture,<sup>3</sup> and contemplated solutions that combined the benefits of both disciplines. In this sense, it can be deciphered that he was looking for suitable solutions to the problems of the country, proposing new paths, from technical to material, going all the way to the very concept of the buildings and their purpose. That is why the core of his efforts was concentrated in working on certain architectural typologies, like hospitals, schools, and housing.

Mario Pani is among the most prolific and original Mexican contemporary architects. From 1944 to 1946, he worked, alongside José Villagrán García (1901-1982), José Luis Cuevas (1881-1952) and Enrique Yáñez (1908-1990) in the first stages of the *Comité Administrador del Programa Federal de Construcción de Escuelas* [Administrative Committee for the Federal Schools Construction Program, Capfce].

With this group, and in the same period, he collaborated on the *Programa Nacional de Hospitales* [National Hospital Program]. Not only did he plan important public and private works, but he also undertook urban studies in his *Taller de Urbanismo*, a workshop that produced a number of regional and master plans in different parts of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, as a professor he had a very productive period in the National Architecture School at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* [National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM], from 1940 until 1948. Furthermore, the creation of the magazine *Arquitectura/México* is of note, as he was editor-in-chief for 40 years (1938-1979), enhancing his role as leader and promoter of the national architecture.

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Within the housing typology the early undertaking of the CUPA can be considered as one of the most significant and innovative works of Mario Pani. It is the first high-rise housing project, where Mario Pani gathered the ideals of the European masters, in particular those of Le Corbusier, but with a result that was especially suited to the place and time. On one hand, Mario Pani buried the idea of the single unit house, and favored a complex where the concentration of the *habitat* allowed the expansion of the landscaped and sporting areas and offered integrated diverse amenities. On the other hand, he drafted a concept of urban densification that would allow the restriction of excessive expansion, as well as the increase of facilities and transportation. The diverse offshoots of this concept, both in subsequent works by this architect and in official stances, that still nowadays house workers speak of the suitable nature of the proposal and the benefits of its implementation.<sup>5</sup>

This urban center project was the result of a contest launched in July 1947 by the *Dirección de Pensiones Civiles* [Civil Pensions Directorate],<sup>6</sup> under Esteban García de Alba (1887-1959). Mario Pani came out as the winner with a proposal that combined “the optimal use of the land; the biggest population capacity; and the conditions of spaciousness, comfort and size of the dwellings”<sup>7</sup> in

relation to the costs and quality of the construction. In this case, he counted on the collaboration of Salvador Ortega Flores (1920-1972), José de Jesús Gómez Gutiérrez and Jenaro de Rosenzweig and for the urbanism on José Luis Cuevas, Domingo García Ramos (1911-1978) and Homero Martínez de Hoyos (1917-1998). Additionally, to complete the construction of this unprecedented complex, engineer Bernardo Quintana (1919-1984) established the construction company *Ingenieros Civiles y Asociados* (ICA) that, from then on, had a prominent presence in the Mexican construction field.<sup>8</sup>

The complex occupied a so-called super block, encompassing an area of 40,000 square meters (m<sup>2</sup>), within an urban low-density context in the southern part of Mexico City, with a total of 1,080 apartments for rent. The plot needed few perimeter parking spaces, as it was well connected by public transport, flanked on the western side by *Avenida Coyoacán*, an important route to the center of the city with a streetcar service.

The housing complex included six buildings with a ground floor and 12 apartment floors, north-south facing, and six more buildings with the same orientation but with only three floors. It must be noted that the ground floor of the tallest buildings, in spite of being supported by a *pilotis* structure that could allow transparency, was used to house businesses that catered to its inhabitants. Furthermore, the ensemble included a nursery, a kindergarten, a pool and public spaces for sports, gardens, and administrative offices. All in all, a small town that provided its inhabitants with all the services that modern life had to offer at the time. Regarding the urban aspect, the building “pointed the true way that modern cities must follow. With this system, Mexico City could be five times smaller (...) significantly improving its hygienic conditions with the prevalence of green areas over built ones.”<sup>9</sup>

The organization of the taller buildings was inspired in the system designed by Le Corbusier for the *immeubles à redent* at the *Ville Radieuse* (1930, not realized). In this case, the apartments offer an interesting proposal for Mexico, being developed with two stories, an idea that also had its roots in Le Corbusier’s projects, eminently in Marseille’s *Cité Radieuse* (*Unité d’Habitation de Marseille*), which was planned in 1945 but only completed in 1953. Mario Pani borrowed from the Swiss architect the idea of having two apartments that occupy three floors, but with a slight variation, so that the street or hallway access was exterior; the Mexican weather permitted this change, offering, in addition, a *jardinière* [planter] to decorate the passageway. The main area of two apartments is on the access level, where the dining place and kitchen can be found, using the upper or lower level for the bedrooms set around a living room, all in 48 m<sup>2</sup>. Four of these dwellings were gathered around a central light shaft, two looking towards the east and two to the west. For the endings of the towers, where the elevators were located, smaller apartments were designed, as well as in the segments that join the four buildings, with windows facing south.

In every instance, the project represents “a generous attempt for the solution of the problems of family

housing,”<sup>10</sup> as all the apartments had electricity, phone and radio systems, as well as cold and hot water, in addition to chutes that discharged the trash into an incinerator. The precise solution of the structural design of the buildings – that was accompanied by an unquestionable quality in its construction – must be highlighted; it has enabled the complex to come out unscathed through time and several earthquakes. Likewise, the exterior finishes were designed with the idea of reducing maintenance costs to a minimum, favoring exposed concrete and bricks, which have facilitated its adequate conservation.

As for the three-story buildings, they are gathered in two groups of three parallel buildings each, with the same type of finishes. These were planned for simpler apartments with only one bedroom. Here, as in the tall buildings, the dwellings did not have a laundry space: that is why it was indispensable to set up a modern launderette that offered a complete service at a low price for the inhabitants of CUPA.

### Other key contributions:

#### Clara Porset and José Clemente Orozco

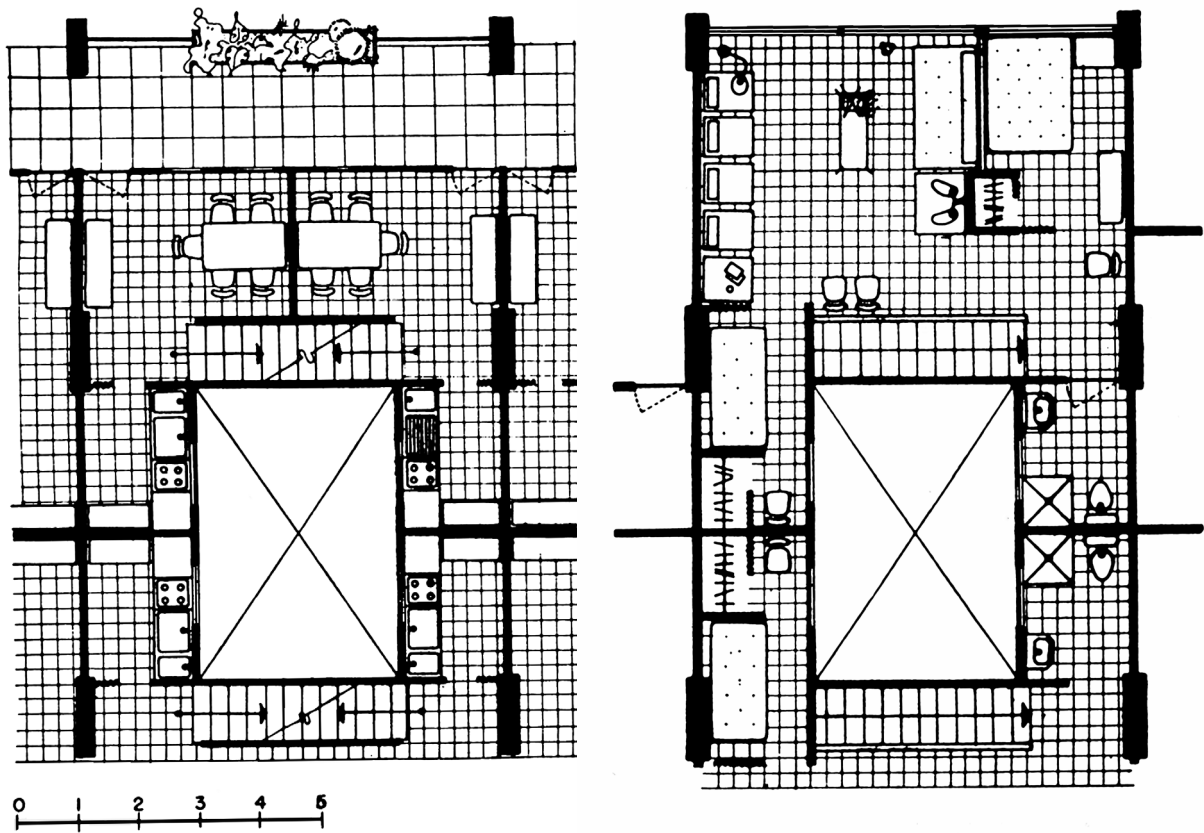
It is essential to point out other participants that added value to the complex, not only because of the scope of their contributions, but by showing Mario Pani as the person who inspired them.

Firstly, the Cuban-born designer Clara Porset (1895-1981),<sup>11</sup> who often worked with her husband, the Mexican painter Xavier Guerrero (1896-1974), must be singled out. As a team, they entered the design contest sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) “Latin American Competition for Organic Design in Home Furnishings,” in which they garnered an award for a collection they had named *Rural furniture*. In a way, these very furnishings were a precedent for the ones Clara Porset designed, later, for the housing ensemble. Clara Porset was an important presence in Mexico, where she lived for most of her professional life. Not only did she undertake the design of industrially produced office furnishings at DM Nacional, she worked



01 Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Entrance to the administrative offices. © Guillermo Zamora, Archive Louise Noelle.

02 Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Aerial view. © Guillermo Zamora, Archive Louise Noelle.



03 Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Floor plan of the apartments: left central level; right upper or lower level. © Mario Pani, *Los multifamiliares de Pensiones*, Mexico, Editorial Arquitectura, 1953, 26-27.



**04** Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Furniture for the apartments designed by Clara Porset. © Photo Archive Clara Porset, UNAM.



**05** Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. José Clemente Orozco on the scaffolding, talking to José Villagrán García and José Luis Cuevas, and Mario Pani looking towards the camera, 6<sup>th</sup> September 1949, at the entrance of the complex. © Archive Louise Noelle.

on various projects with Mario Pani,<sup>12</sup> as well with noted architects like Enrique del Moral (1905-1987) and Luis Barragán (1902-1988), for interior design and furniture. This *oeuvre*, as well as her presence in university lecture halls, has bestowed on her a leading position in Mexico's industrial design field.

This pioneering woman designed a series of furnishings for CUPA. Her proposal was to undertake “in Mexico the transcendent realization to make the dwelling a living unit (...) they are essential elements to the achievements in attaining the goal of (...) the art of everyday life.”<sup>13</sup> 108 units were furnished, 10 % of the total number, seeking to make “the interiors of the apartments lively, cozy and flexible.”<sup>14</sup> The design consisted of low cost furniture, resistant, flexible and versatile, and at the same time modern, comfortable and pleasant to the eye.

Furthermore, the transcendence of the movement known as Plastic Integration,<sup>15</sup> of which Mario Pani was one of the chief exponents, must be recalled here. He had already worked with Diego Rivera (1886-1957) at the Hotel Reforma (1934-1936) and with David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974) at the *Rectoría* [Dean's Tower] (1952) of *Ciudad Universitaria*, the main campus of UNAM. This is why it seems logical that at CUPA he invited the Guatemalan painter and muralist Carlos Mérida (1891-1984) for a frieze and some decorations in the kindergarten, which have since then been lost.<sup>16</sup>

In particular, the presence of José Clemente Orozco, artist born in Jalisco, seems relevant as he had a longstanding professional relationship with Mario Pani. The painter had participated in the first development of the muralist movement in Mexico, with a set of *frescoes* in the former Colegio de San Ildefonso, but he set out for the United States in 1927, where he undertook several murals, coming back to his home country in 1934.<sup>17</sup> By 1945 he began a professional relationship with Mario Pani, carrying out two murals at the *Escuela Nacional de Maestros* [National Teacher's School] and the *Conservatorio Nacional de Música* [National Music Conservatory]. In the first instance, in 1947, José Clemente Orozco painted “on the parabolic wall of the outdoor

theatre (...) [an] enormous work of 340 square meters” the mural *Alegoría Nacional* [National Allegory], “where he applied silicate mineral paint directly on the concrete.”<sup>18</sup> In the second, he painted on concrete on the walls framing the stage of the auditorium.

It was around this time, in the pioneering urban complex, that José Clemente Orozco was supposed to paint an exterior mural, *La Primavera* [Spring], on an undulating and fragmented concrete wall designed by him. “Orozco had never been so busy and with more plans of work than during the summer of 1949 (...) On September 6<sup>th</sup> he sketched the outlines for a figure (...) for the Multifamiliar Alemán (...) The next morning (...) his family found him dead from a heart attack.”<sup>19</sup> Mario Pani narrated this event stating: “That day the maestro found the texture of the wall exceeding in roughness and (...) [he said] if the wall was not covered with a less coarse surface he would not go on painting.”<sup>20</sup> Of this mural, only the first strokes remain, but a photograph caught the event to preserve it for history: José Clemente Orozco is on top of a scaffolding and is talking to José Villagrán García and José Luis Cuevas, while Mario Pani, looking at the camera, talks to other architects. One image that, seven decades later, shows indubitably the importance of this single architectural fact where the main actors sought to achieve the best they had to give.

### As an epilogue

Today, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán* continues to be a milestone in the urban culture of the capital city. Since the end of the 1980s, the rent regime changed to a condominium system that started by favoring the original tenants. In this way, the complex was revitalized and nowadays the apartments are in great demand because the area offers many advantages. Moreover, it must be mentioned that, even if some of the conditions have changed, the quality of the construction and of the materials have favored an adequate maintenance. In short, it is a very attractive Modern Movement example in which to live.

## Notes

- 1 The word “multifamiliar” was coined by the inhabitants of Mexico City, originally with a certain sense of disdain towards a building that is occupied by an elevated number of families.
- 2 For more information on this architect, see Louise Noelle (comp.), *Mario Pani*, Mexico, UNAM, 2008.
- 3 In this sense, the Architecture Theory of José Villagrán García must be noted, where he adds “social value” to the three original values: the useful, the true and the aesthetic. José Villagrán García, *Teoría de la Arquitectura*, Mexico, INBA, 1963.
- 4 Amongst these the Master Plan for Ciudad Universitaria of UNAM, in collaboration with Enrique del Moral, which was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2007.
- 5 Other housing complexes by Mario Pani are: *Centro Urbano Presidente Juárez*, 1950-1952; No. 9 and 7 Neighboring Units, 1950-1951; *Centro Urbano Santa Fe*, 1953; Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing City, 1962-1964; *Centro Urbano John F. Kennedy*, 1965; *Centro Urbano Lindavista-Vallejo*, 1965-1966.
- 6 The *Dirección de Pensiones Civiles* became the *Instituto de Seguridad y Servicios Sociales de los Trabajadores del Estado* [Civil Service Social Security and Services Institute, ISSSTE], on December 1959, in order to cover health services and pensions of government workers.
- 7 Mario Pani, *Los multifamiliares de Pensiones*, Mexico, Editorial Arquitectura, 1953, 22.
- 8 Juan José Kochen (ed.), *El primer multifamiliar Moderno: Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico, Fundación ICA, Fundación Miguel Alemán, 2017.
- 9 “Centro Urbano ‘Presidente Alemán’”, *Arquitectura/México*, No. 30, Mexico, Editorial Arquitectura, February 1950, 269.
- 10 Mario Pani, *op. cit.*, 39.
- 11 Louise Noelle, “Clara Porset, a Modern Designer for Mexico”, *docomomo Journal 46* – “Designing Modern Life”, Barcelona, **docomomo** International, 2012, 54-59.
- 12 In 1953, Clara Porset designed the furniture and decoration for Mario Pani’s own home in Acapulco.
- 13 Clara Porset, “El Centro Urbano ‘Miguel Alemán’ y el espacio interior para vivir”, *Arquitectura/México*, No. 32, Mexico, Editorial Arquitectura, October 1950, 118.
- 14 *Idem.*, 119.
- 15 Louise Noelle, “La integración plástica: confluencia, superposición o

- nostalgia”, in Lucero Enriquez (ed.), *(In)Disciplinas: Estética e historia del arte en el cruce de los discursos*, Mexico, UNAM, 1999.
- 16 Louise Noelle, *The Murals of Carlos Mérida, Chronicle of a Disaster*, San Antonio, UNAM San Antonio, 2019.
- 17 Louise Noelle, “José Clemente Orozco y la arquitectura”, *José Clemente Orozco: otras claves nuevas lecturas*, Guadalajara, El Colegio de Jalisco, 2011.
- 18 Alma Reed, *Orozco*, México, FCE, 1983, 322
- 19 *Idem.*, 329.
- 20 Manuel Larrosa, *Mario Pani, arquitecto de su época*, México, UNAM, 1985, 59.

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06 Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Pool. © Archive Louise Noelle.



07 Mario Pani, *Centro Urbano Presidente Alemán*, Mexico City, Mexico, 1947-1949. Day care and kindergarten. © Guillermo Zamora, Archive Louise Noelle.