Mexican modernist architects were deeply involved in the preservation of the country’s cultural heritage at least a generation before the Mexican state formally promulgated legislation defending the country’s patrimony. As early as the 1910s, in conjunction with the Mexican revolution, a critical reassessment of the country’s architectural past began, focusing especially on the viceregal period (sixteenth through nineteenth centuries). Modern architects in Mexico City, particularly José Villagrán García (1901-1982), his disciple Enrique del Moral (1905-1987), and others associated with the School of Architecture of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma, advocated for the preservation of historic buildings, taking them as architectural expressions national character and as lessons for modern designers to draw upon. Many modernist architects in Europe and the Americas theorized modernism in terms of continuity rather than rupture with historical precedents. While their desire to insert their work within the framework of historic buildings was eloquently articulated in theory, in practice they were often denied the opportunity to work on historic buildings by preservation authorities. In this essay, Villagrán argued that an “authentic theory of monument restoration” had to open itself up to the work of modernist architects. Part of a series of lectures delivered at Colegio Nacional in Mexico City in 1966, the weight that this essay carried both in Mexico and abroad cannot be overstated. It came from a recognized master, acknowledged internationally as the father of Modern Mexican architecture, who designed what is widely regarded as the first modernist building in Mexico, the Granja Sanitaria de Popotla (1925). He had just designed important modernist office buildings in Mexico City, as well as the School of Architecture and the Art Museum in the Ciudad Universitaria’s modernist campus (1951). He held the prestigious post of Professor of Architectural Theory at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México from 1953 to 1970. Villagrán defended the importance of the architect’s subjective creativity against the preservation bureaucracy’s insistence on objectivity. He sharply criticized the prevailing “zealous” and by then predictably formulaic doctrine to conserve buildings “as found” and to deny subsequent interventions. The teachings of John Ruskin and William Morris might have been necessary in the mid 19th century, but a century later they seemed obsolete. It was not only justified, but actually necessary, to allow contemporary architects to intervene in historic monuments, he argued, because their work was a necessary form of aesthetic interpretation that made the past intelligible to the present and current within contemporary culture. His theory rested on two presuppositions, which he attempted to elucidate: the possibility that architectural design might be methodologically analogous to historiography and the notion that culture structured all human activity. Villagrán maintained that architects required an innate cultural understanding of the historic buildings they were to intervene on, one which could only come through being born in the country, and raised in the national culture, where the monuments stood. It was not enough to know preservation technology. The architect’s ineffable understanding of “Mexicaness” was thought sufficient to authorized him to intervene within the entire continuum of Mexican building history—including pre-Columbian works. Villagrán’s preservation opened the door for emblematic projects such as the Plaza of the Three Cultures (1963), which restored a 16th century Franciscan Mission, a pre-Columbian pyramid of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolca tribe, and combined them with a modern Ministry of Foreign Affairs within a modernist urban composition designed by Mario Pani.

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