

Small, independent **art** spaces are having a big impact in Mexico City.

When it comes to museums and galleries, bigger isn't always better. For an insider's look at the city's art scene, seek out the alternative exhibition spaces that showcase up-and-coming artists—creating small but thriving communities of local talent.

By Julie Schwieter Collazo Photography by Paul Raeside

¡Arte Pequeño!



FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS Mexico City has been in the thick of a well-publicised art boom. The city is second only to Paris in total number of museums: more than 150 at last count, though officials admit it's hard to keep track. And that number, impressive as it may be, represents only a fraction of the places where art lovers can survey the creativity of the capital. Beyond the official museums, there are hundreds more spaces, both formal and informal, where visitors can take part in an art scene that's as energetic and varied as the city itself.

Commercial galleries, collaboration centres and workshops allow travellers to glimpse the art world outside the heavily trafficked museums. And for those who want an even closer, ground-level understanding of this world, intimate, often appointment-only spaces—some in personal residences—offer an alternative to the more traditional institutions. While many of these spots are well known locally, they're much less familiar to even the most art-savvy visitors. Discovering and gaining access to such spaces provides unmatched insight into the current generation of artists and curators in Mexico City.

It's these small, independent spaces that make this a fascinating time to experience the Mexico City art scene, says artist and scholar Tamara Ibarra, who has conducted a multi-year study of them. "The history of art in Mexico is marked by groups of artists who reconfigure the scene regularly," she says, with a "reset" tending to occur every 12 years or so. Independent spaces aren't a new idea—they hark back at least to the 1980s and '90s, when projects like La Panadería and Temístocles 44 were established. But a perceptible change in this movement arose around 2012. It was then, Ibarra says, that Mexico City began to see a new wave of artists working to create independent spaces that could contribute as much to the local artistic conversation as conventional museums and galleries.

Part of this new wave, Lulu is tucked inside an apartment in the Colonia Roma neighbourhood (Bajío 231, Colonia Roma Sur). Its co-founder, Chris Sharp, an American curator who lived in Paris, came to Mexico in late 2012. He started Lulu "somewhat spontaneously" shortly thereafter, and he agrees that the capital is experiencing an exciting moment with respect to art. "When I arrived," Sharp says, "the art was characterised by a certain protocol: conceptual, and socially and politically engaged. This all has a place, but I feel like things have opened up a lot more, and now you can see all different kinds of art."

“ Discovering and gaining access to these art spaces provides unmatched insight into the current generation of artists and curators in Mexico City. ”



previous spread:
a resident artist at Cráter Invertido
this spread:
(clockwise from top left) an installation by artist Kostis Velonis at Casa Mauuad; owner Diego Le Provost at the entrance to Galería la 77; strolling the Avenida Amsterdam



IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Art-space insiders recommend their favourite local haunts.

Chris Sharp
Co-founder, *Lulu*,
Colonia Roma

Eat | Casa de Toño
(Avenida Cuauhtémoc 439) "Not only is pozole the specialty here, but the riotous, cantina-like atmosphere is splendid."

Tres Galeones
(Jalapa 117) "The garlic shrimp tacos are to die for. Small, but incredibly rich, their modesty can be deceptive."

Drink | Cardinal Casa de Café (Córdoba 132) "I am drawn here by both the quality of the coffee and how relaxed the place is. A great spot to unwind after a long day."

Francisco Cordero-Ocegüera
Founder and director,
Lodos,

Colonia San Rafael
Eat | Tacos El Paisa
(corner of García Icazbalceta and Rosas Moreno)

"The tacos here are delicious—one of a kind in the city, thanks to their secret sauce."

Explore | La Biblioteca Vasconcelos

(Eje 1 Norte Mosqueta S/N, Cuauhtémoc) "This library is a tranquil, captivating space, whether you're going to the archive, to study or just to relax in the gardens."

continued on pg. 98



this spread:
(left) Inside Espectro Electromagnético, artist Manolo Garibay's studio; (right) outside, the address has an industrial feel—with colour and creativity awaiting beyond the gates.



this spread:
 (left) An exhibit at Galería la 77, housed in a 19th-century building;
 (top right) a taco lunch in the Colonia San Rafael neighbourhood;
 (bottom right) La Quiñonera owner Néstor Quiñones helped revive the independent art movement in 2012.



North America



Four Seasons Hotel México, D.F.
 The oldest city in North America, Mexico City is a blend of rich culture, bold architecture and amazing food. Perfectly reflecting that blend is the newly renovated, hacienda-style **Four Seasons Hotel México, D.F.**

Set around a tranquil garden in the Colonia Juárez neighbourhood, the Hotel is an inviting home base for your artistic adventures. Savour its new drinking and dining options, and view the in-house collection of Mexican folk art, including papier-mâché fantasy creatures known as *alebrijes*.

Exhibition spaces like Lulu have helped foster this expansion, and in many the physical layout is as important as the works shown within. In the case of Lulu, Sharp and co-founder Martín Soto Climent inserted a white cube into Soto Climent's living room, turning the 100-square-foot (9.3-square-metre) space into what Sharp describes as more akin to a small museum than a gallery, with work by contemporary artists from all over the globe.

North of Colonia Roma, small, independent art spaces abound in the gentrifying neighbourhood of Colonia San Rafael, where a string of galleries and workshops sit on Calle García Icazbalceta. It's far outside the museum mainstream at the city's Centro Histórico or its museum-rich park, Bosque de Chapultepec. In contrast, the alternative art spaces on Icazbalceta are surrounded by working-class businesses where people go about their daily lives, making copies at a stationery shop, getting a pair of shoes resoled at a nearby market or taking a break for a plate of tamales at Tamales Emporio.

At the warm and welcoming Galería la 77, in a restored 19th-century house, visitors frequently find artists hanging out in the living room (García Icazbalceta 77, Colonia San Rafael). The unpretentious, appointment-only gallery presents four shows each year—three individual and one group—and all work is for sale. The space exhibits younger artists,

who typically have a harder time accessing traditional galleries and venues, and it even has an area reserved for “urban artists” who are invited to paint murals, reflecting the commitment such spaces often demonstrate to their community.

A short walk away are a cluster of neighbouring art spaces—Lodos, Espectro Electromagnético and Cráter Invertido (No. 30, 31 and 32 García Icazbalceta)—open to visitors primarily by appointment only. Not all make a homey impression like Galería la 77. Outside, Lodos often causes visitors to stop and double-check the address, as No. 30 appears to be a mechanic's shop, blending in with the blue-collar businesses around it. But step inside and a

more creative type of workshop is revealed. As with Lulu, Lodos is small. But founder and director Francisco Cordero-Oceguera says

MEXICO CITY | Art Orientation



Illustration Ole Hantzschel

continued from pg. 94

Diego Le Provost
 Founding partner,
Galería la 77,
Colonia San Rafael
Eat | Restaurante
la Tía (Manuel María
Contreras 20)

"Open for breakfast
 and lunch. The menu
 here changes daily."

Drink | La Polar
(Guillermo Prieto 129)

"This classic cantina
 has been around since
 1934. They claim to
 have the best *birria*,
 a goat stew, in Mexico."

Explore | Parroquia
de los Santos Médicos
Cosme y Damián

(Ribera de San Cosme,
between Miguel E.
Schultz and Serapio
Rendón) "In a city that
 has plenty of churches,
 all with compelling
 stories, this one is
 often overlooked."



this spread:

Admiring Mexico City's architecture provides an artistic experience in itself. Richly decorative 1920s and '30s buildings contrast with the sleek modernity of structures like the aluminium-tiled Museo Soumaya.

that although limited room does impose certain constraints, “these same limitations give rise to unique exhibitions.” Expect multimedia installation pieces, video projections and, if your timing is right, a performance piece that’s part of an exhibit opening. “It’s a young space,” Cordero-Oceguera says, “but its curatorial intent is serious, and is one that isn’t common in Mexico.” (The gallery will be closed for summer, but look for Lodos pop-up exhibits in European cities including Paris. A move to a new location is in the works for fall.)

Espectro Electromagnético and Cráter Invertido are physical spaces, yes, but they’re also conceptual ones, challenging conventional approaches to seeing and interpreting art. Both pull visitors out of passive spectator mode, inviting them to engage in creative processes and in conversations about what they’re seeing.

Also in Colonia San Rafael, Casa Maauad (Ignacio Manuel Altamirano 20) insists that it is not a gallery, but a “meeting point for artists, curators, institutions, museums and galleries” with an interest in contemporary art in Mexico City. Semantics aside, Casa Maauad mounts exhibits that are free and open to the public by appointment. The 6-year-old space—housed in an early-20th-century mansion—is among the best artistic venues of any kind in the city for visitors to get a sense of its current, ambitious generation of artists and curators.

Farther south, in Coyoacán, La Quiñonera (Santa Cruz 111) is an artist-run space inside a beautiful, sprawling house. Opened in 1986, it’s the granddaddy of independent art spaces, preceding the projects that have proliferated since the 2012 shift. La Quiñonera, says owner Néstor Quiñones, has evolved by establishing new values and questioning its own objectives.

An objective shared by many alternative art spaces is to move beyond the image of Mexican art as one largely still defined by Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera and their mid-20th-century contemporaries. These venues expand the conversation about what Mexican art *is*. While museums tend to feature artists who are already known to a larger public, the names of artists at independent spaces may not be familiar. But those who take the time to consider these emerging talents—and perhaps meet them or view their works in progress—will be richly rewarded. These artists are a key part of a larger panorama, a colourful new generation in the midst of defining itself. ■

Julie Schwieter Collazo, based in New York and previously in Mexico City, writes for *Afar*, the *BBC*, *The Guardian*, and *Roads & Kingdoms*.

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this spread:
(clockwise from top)
Entrance to Lulu,
home to world-class
art in a small space;
Idalid, an artist
at Espectro
Electromagnético;
wrought-iron
door detail at
Galería la 77



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