



MONUMENT TO ABSENCE

Mexico City, Mexico

19.6159, -99.1366



Image by Carmen Alcázar (Wotancito) via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Executive Summary

The Monument to Absence commemorates the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre when government forces opened fire on a student protest at Mexico City's *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Square of the Three Cultures). The monument was created in collaboration with the Executive Commission for Attention to Victims (CEAV) and the University Cultural Centre Tlatelolco (CCUT). Memorialisation of the massacre is part of a meaningful set of actions, both institutional and grassroots, which continue to confront this historical event. It follows one memorial that was never built and a second highly criticised memorial, each erected on key anniversaries of the Tlatelolco Massacre. At the same time as the inauguration of this monument, protestors erected an anti-monument in Mexico City. This case study examines the complex history of the memorialisation process and the role that the leaders of the student movement played in having the State eventually recognise the tragedy.

Introduction

El Monumento a la Ausencia (The Monument to Absence) was inaugurated by the *Centro Cultural Universidad - Tlatelolco* (University Cultural Center of Tlatelolco, CCUT) on October 1, 2018, in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 1968 Tlatelolco Massacre. This artistic work was created in close collaboration with the victims' families and survivors, who stamped their footprints into a cement square built in the central courtyard of the CCUT. It is a contested site due to the legacy of state violence in Mexico which has caused deep distrust of state institutions, the police, and the military.

Background

The *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) has defined Mexico's contemporary history by remaining in power since its initial foundation in 1929 until 2000.¹ The PRI was a political coalition that embraced a wide range of political ideologies, from the centre-left in its origins to the centre-right during the 1980s.² What started as a revolutionary project to restructure Mexican society became a hegemonic party in which the concentration of power, authoritarian practices and corruption shaped Mexican politics.³ Officially, Mexico's democracy is one of the most long-lived in the world, since 1930 all Mexican presidents have served their term of office and there have not been any attempts to overthrow the democracy.⁴ However, Mexican political reality has been questioned due to the PRI remaining in power for seven decades, in the 1990s, writer Vargas Llosa called it 'the perfect dictatorship, characterised by the permanence, not of a man, but of an immovable political party.'⁵

In the 1960s there was increasing dissatisfaction with the PRI's dominance and Mexico's political system.⁶ In addition to this, the pressures of the Cold War were felt throughout Latin America as the United States' foreign policy prompted active military, economic, and diplomatic interventions across the region.⁷ Due to this growing distrust, since the 1980s, the PRI began to progressively lose positions of power culminating in its defeat in the presidential elections of 2000 against the National Action Party candidate, Vicente Fox. Since then it has been part of the opposition, except for the six years mandate from 2012 to 2018, when the PRI briefly returned to government with Enrique Peña Nieto as president.⁸

¹ Victoria Ontiveros, "El PRI, 70 años dominando México," *El Orden Mundial*, August 25, 2019.

² Gill, Antony. "Mexico". In *Comparative politics: interests, identities, and institutions in a changing global order*, eds. Jeffrey Kopstein, Mark Lichbach, and Stephen E. Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ Victoria Ontiveros, "El PRI, 70 años dominando México," *El Orden Mundial*, August 25, 2019.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ El País, "Vargas Llosa: "México es la dictadura perfecta",," *El País*, September 1, 1990.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dash, Robert. "US Foreign Policy, National Security Doctrine, and Central America" Nora Hamilton, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, and Manuel Pastor, Jr.(eds.), *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and US Policy in the 1980s* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988) 272 pp. 9.95", *Latin American Perspectives*, 16, no. 4, (1989): 68.

⁸ Victoria Ontiveros, "El PRI, 70 años dominando México," *El Orden Mundial*, August 25, 2019.

The Summer of 1968

In 1968, Mexico was enjoying a period of sustained economic growth thanks to the successful economic policies of PRI. During its first four decades in power, Mexico experienced high growth rates of GDP, an increase in *per capita* GDP, low inflation, and a sustained increase in the growth of wages.⁹ This economic growth was coupled with improvements in the country's social wellbeing indicators, such as increased literacy rates, an increase in the average level of schooling, increased life expectancy, and a reduction in infant mortality.¹⁰ Internationally, this period was described as the 'Mexican miracle', and it was when Mexico City was chosen as the first city in the Spanish-speaking world to host the 1968 Summer Olympic Games.

Nevertheless, the sustained economic growth had exposed the extreme economic inequality in the country. Poverty affected millions of farmers in rural areas, while the so-called 'misery belts' (*cinturones de miseria*) surrounded the increasingly crowded urban centres.¹¹ As a result, social discontent started to grow. Inspired by the European student movement of 1968, Mexican students throughout the country used the international attention the Olympic Games generated to publicly protest against the lack of democracy and social justice in Mexico and to seek reform on these matters. Mexico City emerged as the epicentre of this student movement. Between June and July of 1968, students from the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM) and other high schools and universities like the *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* (National Polytechnic Institute), protested in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (Square of the Three Cultures).¹²

As more students from nearby schools joined the protests, the movement grew so too did the government's response escalate.¹³ On July 29 the authorities ordered a group of paratroopers to use a bazooka to destroy the door of a historic preparatory school that had been occupied by the protestors.¹⁴ The violent reaction from the state towards the protestors fueled the movement, even more, marking the start of a wave of protests that ran through the whole country, with universities on strike, thousands of political prisoners interned, and many people 'disappeared'.¹⁵

By August 8, 1968, the student movement, which had started with a focus on protesting police brutality, coalesced into a political force when various student *comités de lucha* (fight committees) organized themselves under the umbrella of the *Consejo Nacional de Huelga* (National Strike

⁹ Valenzuela García, José Ángel. "Carlos Tello Macías (2010), Sobre la desigualdad en México, México, Facultad de Economía-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; 366 pp", *Región y sociedad*, 24, no. 53, (2012): 296.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Valenzuela García, José Ángel. "Carlos Tello Macías (2010), Sobre la desigualdad en México, México, Facultad de Economía-Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; 366 pp", *Región y sociedad*, 24, no. 53, (2012): 296.

¹² A square located at the centre of Mexico City, within the Tlatelolco area, with an important pre-Hispanic cultural weight as it was the site of the last bastion of resistance against the Spanish conquest. It is named after the three periods of Mexican history reflected by its architecture: pre-Columbian, Spanish colonial and the independent Mexican nation.

¹³ Pensando, Jaime M. *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 205-206.

¹⁵ Teresa Moreno and Pedro Villa y Caña, "Entérate. Así inició el movimiento estudiantil del 68", *El Universal*, July 23, 2018, National.

Council, CNH).¹⁶ The CNH issued six demands: (1) Liberty for all political prisoners; (2) Abolition of the *granaderos*;¹⁷ (3) Dismissal of the Mexico City chiefs of police; (4) Elimination of Article 145 (a law of sedition) from the Penal Code; (5) Indemnification for the victims of repression; and (6) Justice against those responsible for the acts of repression.¹⁸

To justify the violent repression, the government stated that the protestors had been infiltrated by foreign communist regimes in an attempt to destabilise Mexico and disrupt the upcoming Olympic games.¹⁹ Throughout August and September, clashes between the protestors and the authorities continued to escalate, while the president Díaz Ordaz and the radical wing of the CHN refused to negotiate with a clear message for the protestors: 'no more unrest will be tolerated.'²⁰

The Tlatelolco Massacre

The climax of the 1968 student movement took place on October 2, when approximately 5,000 people gathered at the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* to discuss the next steps for the movement. While discussing how to increase international coverage of the movement, they proposed a 10-day hunger strike in support of political prisoners, and demanded the departure of troops from the occupied *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* (National Polytechnic Institute, IPN).²¹ As the protest went on, more than 10,000 people gathered in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*, including not only university students but also workers and residents of the Tlatelolco area. In addition, the protest had attracted the attention of several foreign correspondents, who were there to cover the Olympic Games, which would begin on October 12.²²

After a couple of spokespersons addressed the large audience, the troops who had been watching from the roof of the IPN opened fire against the crowd, in an attack that lasted for over 40 minutes according to the survivors.²³ Over the following days, the official account of the events from the State was that the soldiers had to fire back to defend themselves from the attack of the students and that there were only four casualties.²⁴ Under the PRI government, no formal investigation was ever initiated²⁵ but following international pressure, the State gave the official death toll as 30-40 at that time.²⁶ However, foreign press²⁷ and opposition leaders placed the death toll closer to 350 in 1988,²⁸ a figure which has come under scrutiny more recently with scholars suggesting it may

¹⁶ Pensando, Jaime M. *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 206.

¹⁷ The *granaderos* were the riot police force used to repress the social protests. In 2018, when mayor Claudia Sheinbaum was elected, as a tribute to the student movement of 1968, she announced the disappearance of the police force. See: Darinka Rodríguez, "¿Cuáles son las labores de los policías granaderos en la ciudad de México?" *Verne El País*, December 6, 2018.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ NPR, "Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?" *NPR*, December 1, 2008.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² El Universal. "Crónica de una masacre. Así recuerda la UNAM la matanza del 2 de octubre en Tlatelolco". *El Universal*, October 1, 2018, National.

²³ Richard Nelsson, "How the Guardian reported Mexico City's Tlatelolco massacre of 1968", *Guardian*, November 12, 2015, Cities.

²⁴ NPR, "Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?" *NPR*, December 1, 2008.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Pensando, Jaime M. *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209.

²⁷ Richard Nelsson, "How the Guardian reported Mexico City's Tlatelolco massacre of 1968", *Guardian*, November 12, 2015, Cities.

²⁸ Larry Rother, "20 Years After a Massacre, Mexico Still Seeks Healing for Its Wounds". *New York Times*, October 2, 1988.

have been inflated.²⁹ Despite international coverage and protests against the PRI, the Olympic games went ahead as scheduled.³⁰

After the fall of the PRI in 2000, there was a new hope to find the truth. And in November 2001 the newly elected president Fox ordered the creation of a 'special prosecutor for the crimes of the past' to investigate the massacre. But little was uncovered, only 40 victims were identified³¹ as no siblings, parents or friends of the remaining casualties have come forward with names to add to the list.³² Despite the uncertainty over the death toll, it is still considered one of the most dreadful massacres in Mexico's recent history.³³

Public Commemorations Following the Massacre

According to a study by Kate Doyle,³⁴ from the National Security Archive, the public attempted to memorialise the massacre almost immediately:

Shortly after the massacre, family members and activists sought spaces in Tlatelolco Square at which they could leave offerings and pay their respects to the dead. Initially, such spaces were hard to come by. The plaza was heavily guarded in the days after October 2, and the church of Santiago Tlatelolco rejected family members' requests to set up an altar on November 2, 1968 (*Día de los Muertos*) to those who died in the massacre. Family members were instead forced to leave flowers, wreaths dedicated 'to the martyrs of Tlatelolco' and candles on the pavement of the plaza in front of the church.³⁵

The National celebration of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) that happens every year on November 2, allowed mourners to evade the authorities and to mourn in public in a context where public commemoration of the dead is culturally acceptable.³⁶ However, it was not until 1978, on the 10th anniversary of the massacre, that large-scale public commemorations started to take place yearly. This year was marked by a large protest with an estimated 50,000 in attendance who marched through the streets of Mexico City, and ended in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*.³⁷ Protestors shouted phrases such as '*Gobierno / Farsante / Que mata estudiantes*' (Government/ Deceitful/ Who kills students) and '*No que no / Sí que sí / Ya volvimos a salir*' (No we don't/ Yes we do/ We are out again). At the same time that troops had opened fire 10 years ago, 18:10, the march stopped and held a moment of silence for the victims of the massacre.³⁸

²⁹ Mya Dosch, *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 196.

³⁰ Pensando, Jaime M. *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 209-213.

³¹ NPR, "Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?" *NPR*, December 1, 2008.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Larry Rother, "20 Years After a Massacre, Mexico Still Seeks Healing for Its Wounds". *New York Times*, October 2, 1988.

³⁴ Kate Doyle, "The Dead of Tlatelolco. Using the Archives to exhume the past," *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book no. 201*, October 1, 2006.

³⁵ Mya Dosch, *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 199-200.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

Since 1978, the October 2 march has become an 'annual ritual and activists often use 1968 as a synecdoche for state violence.'³⁹ The popular nature of the memorialisation process, with people claiming the public space as their own, will remain as a stable feature of the commemoration. The annual protests are now a ritual of memory with artistic expressions from pre-Hispanic dancers, plastic artists, and musicians. 'It is a festival rather than a solemn commemoration', remarks Mya Dosch.⁴⁰

2014 Iguala Forced Disappearances

The 2014 Iguala forced disappearances of 43 students on their way to Mexico City to commemorate the Tlatelolco Massacre has also been a source of contention and mistrust between supporters of the student movement, family members of the victims, and the state.⁴¹ The specific details of the event remain unclear, however, there has been a renewed effort by the current president to deal with the traumatic legacy of the event.



Figure 1: 'March on the first anniversary of the 2014 Iguala Mass Kidnapping'.
Image by PetrohsW via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

The 43 victims were teachers in training at a left-leaning college in the town of Ayotzinapa. They were part of a group that had travelled to Iguala to protest against discriminatory hiring practices for teachers. The same group raised funds to attend the annual march to commemorate the Tlatelolco Massacre. As the group were travelling back from the protest, the municipal police confronted the buses and opened fire on them. Multiple students and bystanders were killed, 43 of the group were reported missing after the clash with the police. The government then said that

³⁹ Ibid, 84.

⁴⁰ Communication in a private email with the author.

⁴¹ Orsetta Bellani, "Seis años de la desaparición de los 43 estudiantes de Ayotzinapa: los dos gramos de fragmento óseo que cambiaron la versión oficial," *Público*, September 26, 2020.

corrupt police officers had handed over the 43 to a local drug gang who murdered the students and disposed of the bodies. At the time, relatives of the victims believed the students had been taken to a nearby army base and protested outside of it.⁴² Their suspicions about the accuracy of the government's account have since been partially upheld as forensic experts rejected the official account,⁴³ and prosecutors are investigating the official in charge of the first probe.⁴⁴ The demands for truth and justice for the 43 disappeared have become a social clamour in Mexico, not only because it is considered 'one of the greatest acts of social aggravation carried out by the government of Enrique Peña Nieto,'⁴⁵ but also because of its similarities with the 1968 state of violence and more specifically the Tlatelolco Massacre, where many students disappeared and were killed.

Following his election in 2018, Andrés Manuel López Obrador re-opened the investigation and created a special commission with a new prosecutor.⁴⁶ In September 2020, López Obrador announced that arrest warrants had been issued for police and military staff who were suspected of being involved in the disappearances.⁴⁷ But the issue continues as families still feel that there are many unanswered questions, to date, only the remains of three victims have been identified. The feeling of the families is encapsulated by the words of Nicanora García González, a mother of one of the missing, who said in 2019 that: 'the boys aren't missing; they were taken by people in uniform...they know where they left them, they just refuse to tell us.'⁴⁸

History of the Contestation

The process of erecting a physical memorial to the Tlatelolco Massacre has been complex. Before the commission and installation of *El Monumento a la Ausencia* in 2018, there were two other planned projects: one which failed as it was never built and another that was heavily criticised; and an 'anti-monument' installation. The contestation centres around how to appropriately memorialise the events of 1968, particularly the Tlatelolco Massacre, and who, exactly, should be included in the decision-making processes, given the general distrust of official bodies due to the lack of transparency and investigation on the events.

The Memorial that Did Not Happen, 'The Crack'

In 1988, former student movement leaders Raúl Álvarez Garín, Roberto Escudero, Rolf Meiners, and Marta Servín launched an international competition to design an art installation to commemorate the victims of the state in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*.⁴⁹ The winning design was a collective project named *La Grieta* (The Crack), which consisted of a physical crack in the middle

⁴² BBC News, "Mexico missing: Protestors try to enter army base", *BBC News*, January 12, 2015. Latin America.

⁴³ David Agren, "Forensic experts reject Mexico's claim that criminals burned missing students", *Guardian*, February 9, 2016.

⁴⁴ BBC News, "Mexico missing students: Questions remain five years on", *BBC News*, September 19, 2019. Latin America.

⁴⁵ J. Jesús Lemus, "A siete años de la desaparición de 43 estudiantes normalistas, prevalece la "verdad histórica" de Peña Nieto," *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2021.

⁴⁶ Marina Franco, "Five Years Ago, 43 Students Vanished. The Mystery, and the Pain, Remain," *New York Times*, September 26, 2019.

⁴⁷ Deutsche Welle, "Mexico orders arrest of soldiers in 2014 missing students case", *Deutsche Welle*, September 27, 2020.

⁴⁸ Marina Franco, "Five Years Ago, 43 Students Vanished. The Mystery, and the Pain, Remain", *New York Times*, September 26, 2019.

⁴⁹ Mya Dosch, *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 151.

of a raised concrete platform in the centre of the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*. The idea was that visitors could access the crack via a ramp to walk through it, and the walls of the crack would be lined with the names of those who had died.⁵⁰

Due to the high costs of the project, 100,000 pesos (4165 euros), it was not financially viable and due to the difficulty to gather the funding, it ultimately did not happen.⁵¹ By 1993, the organisers had only raised 17,000 pesos (708 euros) due to a combination of the absence of public funding and the desire of the organisers to not accept money from corporations in order to avoid any potential commodification of the 1968 student movement.⁵² Dosch⁵³ argues that another reason the memorial was not built was the 1988 electoral fraud that led to the continuation of the PRI control in the federal government.

The Criticised Memorial, 'The Stele'

In 1992, a few members of the same commission created for *La Grieta* proposed the installation of a bronze plaque in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* with the funds that had been raised previously.⁵⁴ The idea was that the monument would work as a placeholder until *La Grieta* could be completed, and would be installed for the 25th anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre the following year.⁵⁵ They discussed the design with the sculptor Salvador Pizarro, who suggested a free-standing stone stele instead.⁵⁶

The stele was unveiled at the commemorative rally of October 2, 1993, with the approval of the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (National Institute of Anthropology and History, INAH). The stele, loosely based on Mayan stelae forms, features a dove relief adapted from a student movement poster,⁵⁷ a partial list of the victims' names, and an excerpt from a poem by poet and author Rosario Castellanos.

The stele was widely criticised by both leftist activists and art critics.⁵⁸ Activist's criticisms focused on the inclusion of



Figure 2: 'Tlatelolco Plaza Monument'.
Image by Thelmadatter via Wikimedia
Commons [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tlatelolco_Plaza_Monument.jpg)

⁵⁰ Ibid, 154.

⁵¹ Ibid, 176.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Communication in a private email with the author.

⁵⁴ Mya Dosch, *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 178.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 179.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 178.

⁵⁷ The dove had originally been part of the branding for the Olympic Games (named as the 'Games of Peace' and had been designed by Lance Wyman to represent the World Peace cultural program. The dove was displayed throughout the city in the summer of 1968 and protestors would spray red paint on the white dove making the dove look like it had been shot.

⁵⁸ Mya Dosch, . *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 179-180.

only 20 names of the victims on the monument, as it was argued that the shortlist upheld Díaz Ordaz's narrative from the time by appearing to collude with the widely-disbelieved 'official' death toll.⁵⁹

The Tlatelolco University Cultural Center

The *Centro Cultural Universitario - Tlatelolco* (University Cultural Center of Tlatelolco, CCUT) is a cultural centre for the UNAM, and is located next to the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*. It repurposes the Tower Tlatelolco, a 102m tall tower built in the 1950s to house all the administration and work of the federal government's *Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores* (Secretariat of Foreign Affairs),⁶⁰ and which played a role in the 1968 Massacre as it was where the government was monitoring the shootings in 1968.

The Cultural Centre hosts permanent and itinerary exhibitions, many of them related to the movement of 1968,⁶¹ and it holds the biggest collection of Mexican art.⁶² Since 2018, the Centre has been home to the permanent exhibition of the 1968 Memorial and other social movements, called M68, as it states in its webpage, the project aims 'to document, research and disseminate the social movements that since 1968 have promoted the recognition of rights in Mexico.'⁶³ It also holds a digital repository *M68 Ciudadánías en movimiento* (M68 Citizens in Motion) as well as the *M68 Centro de Documentación* (M68 Documentation centre).⁶⁴

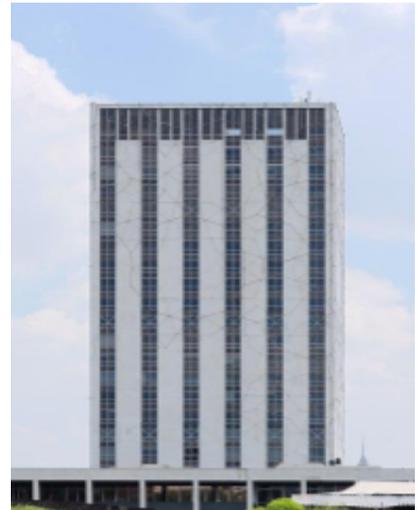


Figure 3: 'Facade of the entrance to the Tlatelolco Cultural Center'.
Image by Cvmontuy via
Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

The Final Memorial, 'The Monument to Absence'

In 2018, the CCUT and the *Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas* (Executive Commission for the Attention to Victims, CEAV)⁶⁵ organised an international art competition where artists were invited to submit their designs for the new commemorative monument. On July 27, 2018, the winning design was announced: the project of Israeli artist Yael Bartana.

Bartana's design was a large concrete square with the impression of 400 footprints in the central courtyard of the CCUT. The key element of Bartana's design was the participation of victims and survivors from the Tlatelolco massacre, who, after 50 years, walked over the cement plate and left

⁵⁹ Ibid, 180.

⁶⁰ Karina Duque, "Clásicos de Arquitectura: Torre SRE Tlatelolco / Pedro Ramírez Vázquez," *Plataforma Arquitectura*, July 24, 2020.

⁶¹ Mya Dosch, *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. (PhD Diss. The City University of New York, 2018), 180-181.

⁶² Karina Duque, "Clásicos de Arquitectura: Torre SRE Tlatelolco / Pedro Ramírez Vázquez," *Plataforma Arquitectura*, July 24, 2020.

⁶³ M68, "Colección", accessed October 12, 2021. <https://m68.mx/acerca-de>.

⁶⁴ "M68", Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, 2018.

⁶⁵ The CEAV is a governmental body aimed at guaranteeing, promoting, and protecting the rights of victims of crime and human rights violations committed by state bodies or federal authorities.

their footprints.⁶⁶ As the artists explained, the work serves to 'tie [the] footprints of survivors in cement to the memory of those who were murdered'.⁶⁷

The second element of the design includes two protest slogans from the 1968 summer engraved on the upper part of the buildings that surround the courtyard, to commemorate the moment when those gathered in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas looked up at the buildings where the army was shooting at them from.⁶⁸ They are '*¡Pueblo, no nos abandones! ¡Únete pueblo!*' (People, do not abandon us! Join us!) and '*Ni perdón ni olvido*' (Neither forgive nor forget!). Additionally, as part of the project, a victim census was carried out to obtain accurate numbers and give them a name.⁶⁹



Figure 4: 'Surviving Footprints 1968'. Image by Secretary of Culture Mexico City via Flickr [CC BY 2.0](#)

The *Monumento a la Ausencia* was inaugurated on October 1, 2018, on the 50th anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre. The inauguration was a large event, with many high-profile individuals in attendance as well as participants of the protagonists of the 1968 movement and residents of the area.⁷⁰ At the inauguration, the Executive Commissioner of CEAV, Jaime Rochín, stated that the moment 'is part of the collective reparation actions for the victims of the student movement, which planted the seed for a different country and with whom you still have debts.'⁷¹ This idea of an open and ongoing process of reparation towards and mediation with the victims of state violence was echoed by Severiano Sánchez, a survivor who participated in the inauguration. Sánchez stated that the student movement of 1968 represented 'life, joy, freedom and democracy' but that

⁶⁶ El Universal, "Sobrevivientes del 68 dejan sus huellas en el Monumento a la Ausencia", *El Universal*, September 29, 2018, Culture.

⁶⁷ E-flux, "Mischa Kuball: res-o-nant and performing the public Yael Bartana, Mischa Kuball, Gregor H. Lersch", *e-flux*, August 12, 2019.

⁶⁸ El Universal, "Sobrevivientes del 68 dejan sus huellas en el Monumento a la Ausencia", *El Universal*, September 29, 2018, Culture.

⁶⁹ Enrique Graue Wiechers, "INAUGURA LA UNAM MONUMENTO A LA AUSENCIA Y PRESENTA PLATAFORMA M68, EN EL CENTRO UNIVERSITARIO TLATELOLCO", *DGCS UNAM*, October 2, 2018.

⁷⁰ In attendance were the president of the National Human Rights Commission (Luis Raúl González Pérez), the general director of the General Archive of the Nation (Mercedes de Vega), the Secretary of Culture of Mexico City (Eduardo Vázquez Martín), the coordinator of Cultural Diffusion of the UNAM, (Jorge Volpi), and the general director of the National Institute of Fine Arts (Lidia Camacho).

⁷¹ Colectivo Híjar, "Permanencia del antimonumento 68", *Change.org*, October, 2018.

'50 years after the massacre in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas* there is no forgiveness and we do not forget. Justice is what we want.'⁷²

The Anti-Monument, 'October 2 is Not Forgotten'

At the same time that the *Monumento a la Ausencia* was inaugurated, another memorial was erected without permission from the government. In a small public garden next to the *Plaza del Zócalo*, a group of protestors decided to erect this anti-monument to commemorate the 50th anniversary. It features the peace dove symbol, not like the one in the 1993 Stele but like the 1968 Olympic official logo done by Lance Wyman and Peter Murdoch, and the words "1968 2 de Octubre / No se olvida / Fue el ejército / Fue el estado" (1968 2nd October / It is not forgotten / It was the army / It was the State).

The following day, October 3, 2018, Eduardo Vázquez Martín, then-Secretary of Culture of Mexico City, tweeted that following the orders of José Ramón Amieva, then-Head of Government of Mexico City, the monument would be left *in-situ* pending citizen consultations.⁷³ At the time, a Change.org petition was started by protestors demanding the federal and local governments that the anti-monument would be left in place.⁷⁴

The petition stated that the CNH demands from 1968 were still in force and that the anti-monument was an attempt to reiterate these demands and their struggle for justice. The anti-monument still stands as evidence of the contested nature of the memorialisation of the Tlatelolco Massacre and the 1968 student movement.



Figure 5: 'Anti Monument to October 68' Image by Edibur
via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 4.0](#)

Decision-Making Processes

Although the decision-making processes for these four works differed, they share several key features. First, the inclusion of survivors and the victim's families in the process; second, the inclusion

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Jacqueline Guillermo, "Montan en el Zócalo antimonumento del 68", *El Universal*, October 10, 2018, National.

⁷⁴ Colectivo Híjar, "Permanencia del antimonumento 68", *Change.org*, October, 2018.

of the voices from activists and members of the CNH; third, due to the claims of corruption and lack of transparency on the State official statement of the time, the need for transparency if official bodies are to be involved; and lastly, how to navigate the feeling of mistrust from the affected communities towards those involved in police brutality events: the State, the police and the army.

The first attempt to officially commemorate the victims of the 1968 massacre, was initiated by a group of students grouped to install the collective monument called *La Grieta* in 1988, which has never been built. To decide the monument, the organisers brought together nine well-known Mexican artists, architects, and critics to judge the entries.⁷⁵ Even though the group did not have official permission to install a monument,⁷⁶ they planned to install it if sufficient funds could be secured,⁷⁷ which didn't happen in the end. In addition to the lack of funds, the project lacked political will. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the candidate for the *Frente Democrático Nacional* (National Democratic Front, FDN) for the 1988 elections, who had a close association with the student movement of 1968. Cárdenas had been at the 20th-anniversary rally of the Massacre on October 2, 1988, when *La Grieta* had been unveiled as the winning project. In light of his defeat, designers felt that the project was unlikely to be completed.⁷⁸

Considering what to do with the funds raised for *La Grieta*, part of this group of students decided to try to install another monument five years later during the celebration of the 25th anniversary, in 1993. This second monument was approved by the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (National Institute of Anthropology and History, INAH), which preserves the multiple pre-Hispanic heritage assets located in the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*. It was a pivotal point in the memorialisation process of the Tlatelolco Massacre as it meant the first inclusion of a federal government body in the process. However, the monument was highly criticised by activists as, by including the short official list of victims, it followed and legitimised the state's official narrative of the events.

The third monument was inaugurated in 2007, the CCUT, with support from Andrés Manuel López Obrador, then governor of the Federal District and current president of Mexico. It is home to both permanent and temporary exhibitions dedicated to the Student Movement of 1968. Some of these exhibitions were positively contrasted with the stele, for their inclusion of a wide range of voices. Here too, a blend of agents and decision-makers from institutional bodies to grassroots activists participated in the decision on what is the appropriate way to commemorate and memorialise the event.

After the CCUT's inauguration, the next biggest commemoration happened in 2018, the 50th anniversary. This year, the CCUT and the *Comisión Ejecutiva de Atención a Víctimas* (Executive Commission for the Attention to Victims, CEAV)⁷⁹ of the Federal Government, in collaboration with various groups from the 1968 Student Movement, came together to create a space for 'reflection and

⁷⁵ Ibid. They were: Arnulfo Aquino, Juan Luis Díaz, Angela Gurría, Mathias Goeritz, Mario Rendón, Ramón Vargas Salguero, Ernesto Velasco León, Jorge A. Manrique, and Ida Rodríguez Prampolini.

⁷⁶ Abelleyra cited in Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 152.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ The CEAV is a governmental body aimed at guaranteeing, promoting, and protecting the rights of victims of crime and human rights violations committed by state bodies or federal authorities.

memory.⁸⁰ Together they organised a permanent exhibition about the summer of 1968, *M68*, and started an international competition for a new monument. The jury was made up of two art historians (Harriet Senie and George Flaherty), a curator (Taiyana Pimentel), and an artist (Regina-José Galindo). The winning design was the *Monumento a la Ausencia* made by the Israeli artist Yael Bartana. Even though the decision-making remained in the federal institutions, the victims' families and survivors were included in creating the monument. However, for some activists, it was not enough and they organised their anti-monument without official permission. In contrast to the *Monumento de la Ausencia*, this was fully a grassroots project, becoming the first successful attempt to memorialise the Tlatelolco Massacre to be erected without the help of federal bodies or government officials.

Summary and Conclusions

The *Monumento a la Ausencia* is part of an ongoing process of reconciliation connected to the problematic and traumatic legacies of state violence in Mexico. It is clear that there has been a controversy surrounding the question of how to appropriately memorialise the victims of the Student Movement of 1968, and Tlatelolco in particular, and who should be involved in the memorialisation process. Initially, there was a refusal on the part of the state and the party in government to allow people to mourn or memorialise the events. The distrust between the state and members and supporters of the Student Movement of 1968 has been a key theme of the memorialisation process of the Tlatelolco Massacre. For example, when it came to the 20th anniversary of the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1988, people who had been involved in the 1968 Student Movement sought to memorialise the event without involvement from the state or businesses - to the extent that they did not seek official permission to erect a structure. Although this initial attempt to create a physical memorial proved to be unsuccessful, it was the first in a set of concrete steps taken to address the troubled legacy of the summer of 1968 and the state's actions.

The case of the *Monumento a la Ausencia*, and the monuments that preceded it, underscore how monuments require their audiences to legitimise them. The inclusion of those for whom the monument is meant to commemorate is integral to the legitimisation process. The 1993 stele is a case in point where, despite the monument being designed and erected by those who had been involved in the Student Movement of 1968, it was heavily criticised.

Similarly, even though the designer of the *Monumento a la Ausencia* included victims' families and survivors in the monument's fabric and narrative in a literal way, protestors erected an anti-monument in another part of Mexico City on the day of the annual commemorative march. This anti-monument makes clear the views of another group of stakeholders by explicitly stating the fact that they still hold the state and the army responsible for the Tlatelolco massacre.

⁸⁰ Farrah de la Cruz Cárdenas, "Monumento a la ausencia. Huellas de sobrevivientes del 68", *UNAM Global*, September 29, 2018, Humanities.

Despite there being three different monuments and a permanent exhibition dedicated to the Summer of 1968 and the Tlatelolco Massacre, the memorialisation of the event remains an emotive and contentious subject.

Research contributed by Catalina Gaete, Katharine Burnett and Paula O'Donohoe

Last updated January 2022

References

- Agren, David. "Forensic experts reject Mexico's claim that criminals burned missing students." *Guardian*, February 9, 2016.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/09/missing-student-teachers-ayotzinapa-mexico-investigation-evidence-dump>.
- Alexander, Ryan. "Myth and Reality of the Mexican Miracle, 1946-1982". In *The Oxford Handbook of Mexican History*, edited by William Beezley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020.
- BBC News. "Mexico missing: Protestors try to enter army base." *BBC News*, January 13, 2015.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-30793499>.
- BBC News. "Mexico missing students: Questions remain five years on." *BBC News*, September 19, 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-35539727>.
- Bellani, Orsetta. "Seis años de la desaparición de los 43 estudiantes de Ayotzinapa: los dos gramos de fragmento óseo que cambiaron la versión oficial." *Público*, September 26, 2020.
<https://www.publico.es/internacional/mexico-seis-anos-desaparicion-43-estudiantes-ayotzinapa-gramos-fragmento-oseo-cambiaron-version-oficial.html>.
- Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco, M68, 2018. <https://m68.mx/acerca-de>.
- Colectivo Híjar. "Permanencia del antimonumento 68." *Change.org*, October, 2018.
<https://www.change.org/p/gobierno-de-la-ciudad-de-m%C3%A9xico-permanencia-del-antimonumento-68>.
- de la Cruz Cárdenas, Farrah. "Monumento a la ausencia. Huellas de sobrevivientes del 68." UNAM Global, September 29, 2018.
<https://unamglobal.unam.mx/monumento-a-la-ausencia-huellas-de-sobrevivientes-del-68/>.
- Dash, Robert. "US Foreign Policy, National Security Doctrine, and Central America," In *Crisis in Central America: Regional Dynamics and US Policy in the 1980s*, edited by Nora Hamilton, Jeffrey A. Frieden, Linda Fuller, and Manuel Pastor, Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988): 9-95. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2633695>.
- Deutsche Welle. "Mexico orders arrest of soldiers in 2014 missing students case." *Deutsche Welle*, September 27, 2020.
<https://www.dw.com/en/mexico-orders-arrest-of-soldiers-in-2014-missing-students-case/a-55067183>.
- Dosch, Mya. *Creating 1968: Art, Architecture, And the Afterlives of the Mexican Student Movement*. PhD Diss.: The City University of New York, 2018.
- Doyle, Kate. "The Dead of Tlatelolco. Using the Archives to exhume the past." *National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book* no. 201, October 1, 2006.
<https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB201/index.htm>.

- Duque, Karina. "Clásicos de Arquitectura: Torre SRE Tlatelolco / Pedro Ramírez Vázquez." *Plataforma Arquitectura*, July 24, 2020.
<https://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-172394/clasicos-de-arquitectura-torre-sre-tlatelolco-pedro-ramirez-vazquez>.
- E-flux. "Mischa Kuball: res-o-nant and performing the public Yael Bartana, Mischa Kuball, Gregor H. Lersch." *e-flux*, August 12, 2019.
<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/270980/mischa-kuballres-o-nant/>.
- El País. "Vargas Llosa: "México es la dictadura perfecta"." *El País*, September 1, 1990.
https://elpais.com/diario/1990/09/01/cultura/652140001_850215.html.
- El Universal. "Sobrevivientes del 68 dejan sus huellas en el Monumento a la Ausencia." *El Universal*, September 29, 2018, Culture.
<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/galeria/cultura/sobrevivientes-del-68-dejan-sus-huellas-en-el-monumento-la-ausencia#imagen-4>.
- El Universal. "Crónica de una masacre. Así recuerda la UNAM la matanza del 2 de octubre en Tlatelolco." *El Universal*, October 1, 2018, National.
<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/sociedad/cronica-de-una-masacre-asi-recuerda-la-unam-la-matanza-del-2-de-octubre-en>.
- Franco, Marina. "Five Years Ago, 43 Students Vanished. The Mystery, and the Pain, Remain." *New York Times*, September 26, 2019.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/world/americas/Ayotzinapa-mexico-students-anniversary.html>.
- Guardian. "Mexico urges Israel to extradite former investigator in 43 missing students case." *Guardian*, July 22, 2021, Mexico.
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/22/mexico-israel-extradite-investigator-disappearance-43-students>.
- Gill, Antony. "Mexico". In *Comparative Politics: interests, identities, and institutions in a changing global order*, edited by Jeffrey Kopstein, Mark Lichbach, and Stephen E. Hanson, 301-338. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.
- Graue Wiechers, Enrique. "Inaugura La Unam Monumento A La Ausencia Y Presenta Plataforma M68, En El Centro Universitario Tlatelolco." *DGCS UNAM*, October 2, 2018.
https://www.dgcs.unam.mx/boletin/bdboletin/2018_627.html.
- Guillermo, Jacqueline. "Montan en el Zócalo antimonumento del 68." *El Universal*, October 10, 2018, National.
<https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/sociedad/montan-en-el-zocalo-antimonumento-del-68>.
- Lemus, J. Jesús. "A siete años de la desaparición de 43 estudiantes normalistas, prevalece la "verdad histórica" de Peña Nieto." *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 2021.
<https://www.latimes.com/espanol/mexico/articulo/2021-09-29/a-siete-anos-de-la-desaparicion-de-43-estudiantes-normalistas-prevalece-la-verdad-historica-de-pena-nieto>.
- Moreno, Teresa and Villa y Caña, Pedro. "Entérate. Así inició el movimiento estudiantil del 68." *El Universal*, July 23, 2018, National.
<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/sociedad/enterate-asi-inicio-el-movimiento-estudiantil-del-68>.
- Nájar, Alberto. "La matanza de Tlatelolco: el controvertido (y poco conocido) papel de la CIA en el conflicto estudiantil de 1968 en México." *BBC News*, October 2, 2018.
<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-45662739>.
- Nelsson, Richard. "How the Guardian reported Mexico City's Tlatelolco massacre of 1968." *Guardian*, November 12, 2015.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/from-the-archive-blog/2015/nov/12/guardian-mexico-tlatelolco-massacre-1968-john-rodga>.
- NPR. "Mexico's 1968 Massacre: What Really Happened?." *NPR*, December 1, 2008.
<https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=97546687&t=1557771989218&t=1634034742661>.
- Ontiveros, Victoria. "El PRI, 70 años dominando México." *El Orden Mundial*, August 25, 2019.
<https://elordenmundial.com/el-pri-dominando-mexico/>.
- Pensando, Jaime M. *Rebel Mexico: Student Unrest and Authoritarian Political Culture During the Long Sixties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Rodríguez, Darinka. "¿Cuáles son las labores de los policías granaderos en la ciudad de México?." *Verne El País*, December 6, 2018.
https://verne.elpais.com/verne/2018/12/06/mexico/1544055397_564761.html.
- Rother, Larry. "20 Years After a Massacre, Mexico Still Seeks Healing for Its Wounds." *New York Times*, October 2, 1988.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/10/02/world/20-years-after-a-massacre-mexico-still-seeks-healing-for-tis-wounds.html?pagewanted=all>.
- Valenzuela García, José Ángel. "Carlos Tello Macías (2010), Sobre la desigualdad en México, México, Facultad de Economía- Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; 366 pp." *Región y sociedad*, 24, no. 53, (2012): 293-299.
<http://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/regsoc/v24n53/v24n53a10.pdf>.

Figures

- Carmen Alcázar. "File: Monumento_a_la_Ausencia.jpg." Wikimedia Commons, August 1, 2019,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5f/Monumento_a_la_Ausencia.jpg.
(Cover Image).
- PetrohsW. "File: Ayotz1napa ohs202.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, September 26, 2015,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ayotz1napa_ohs202.jpg. (Figure 1).
- Thelmadatter. "File: TlatelolcoPlazaMonument.JPG." Wikimedia Commons, July 9, 2009,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TlatelolcoPlazaMonument.JPG>. (Figure 2).
- Cvmontuy. "File: Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco 2019p1.jpg." Wikimedia Commons, July 27, 2019.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Centro_Cultural_Universitario_Tlatelolco_2019p1.jpg. (Figure 3).
- Secretary of Culture Mexico City. "File: 45045548021_7cf3c376e6_o.jpg", Flickr, October 1, 2018, <https://flic.kr/p/2bCwd4F>. (Figure 4).
- Edibur. "File: Anti-68.jpg", Wikimedia Commons, March 6, 2019.
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Anti-68.jpg>. (Figure 5).

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen
Program Director
+33 66828327
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat
Riouwstraat 139
2585HP The Hague The
Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu
www.euroclio.eu

Published by IHJR-EuroClio in February 2021
This document is copyright © The Contested Histories Initiative 2021

Some right reserved [CC BY 4.0](#)

To cite this publication:
The Contested Histories Initiative, "Monument to Absence in Mexico", *Contested Histories Case Study #101* (January 2022), retrieved from [link].

The Contested Histories Initiative receives support from the Europe for Citizens Programme of the European Union. The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.