HECTOR DIAZ

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Museum of Contemporary Art:
From historical debt to artistic transformation,
in Ciudad Juárez



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From the "Bilbao Effect" to the "Juárez Effect"

At the end of the last century, Bilbao, in Spain, was a strictly industrial city, gray and overshadowed by severe economic and social crises; an almost exact reflection of the challenges facing Ciudad Juárez. However, the bold decision to build the Guggenheim Museum forever transformed its destiny, triggering tourism, a new economy, and local pride. This global phenomenon is known as the "Bilbao Effect."

It is essential to understand how this bold decision worked: the imposing building, a masterpiece by Canadian-American architect Frank Gehry, belongs to the city, while the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao is an exceptional collaboration between the Basque Administrations and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. The American foundation provides the name, advice on museum management, access to its international network of museums, and the organization of shared temporary exhibitions.

Juárez could seek an alliance of this type, or develop its own project that operates unfailingly under the highest international museum standards. If a declining industrial city was able to reinvent itself through a cultural venue, it is time to propose and materialize the "Juárez Effect."

The "Case Method"

In the most prestigious business schools, such as IPADE—which uses the same methodology as Harvard—great case studies are not solved with theory, they are dissected through the "Case Method," a tool that consists of dividing them into three fundamental blocks: facts, problems, and solutions. For this analysis, I apply this method to delve into and reflect on the historical artistic stagnation of Ciudad Juárez.

The Facts

1. **Wounds transformed into stigmas:** The tragic stories of the murdered women of Juárez, the shadow of the cartel, and the label of the most dangerous city in the world due to the war against drug trafficking, have marked this city. One of the greatest international challenges is eliminating this deeply rooted reputation. While the State has responded with years of militarization, it has completely omitted the reconstruction of the social fabric through cultural infrastructure.

2. **Reputation and honor are not the same:** At the level of external perception, Juárez is a city that has been stripped of its reputation, but the people of Juárez have honor. The border is crying out for dignification.

3. **Culture and art are not synonymous:** Juárez has culture (activities, festivals, fairs, concerts, and theater), but lacks a living art ecosystem (represented artists, galleries, collectors, masterful exhibitions, museums, and auctions).Consequently, the people of Juárez cannot enjoy art for a harsh reason: there simply isn't any, neither art nor museum.

4. **The orphanage of infrastructure:** Juárez does not have its own art museum. The museum located in the PRONAF zone illustrates this abandonment: it does not belong to the city, nor to the state, nor to the university, nor to private enterprise; it belongs to the federation. Although the value of its architecture—designed by Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, author of the National Museum of Anthropology—is undeniable, today it is an aging building with operational deficiencies. By depending on INBAL, it condemns the community to centralism, denying it exhibitions by great Mexican and international masters, as if the border public were not "worthy" of first-rate art.

5. **The absence of heritage:** The city lacks an art collection and institutional mechanisms to acquire or receive artwork donations. There is no collection because there is no museum.

The Problems

1. **The generational void:** What exactly has been lost without a contemporary art museum? Entire generations have been left adrift. The right to aesthetic appreciation has been snatched away, denying the city the opportunity to feed its spirit and its intellect through art.

2. **The abyss facing the US border:** The problem of not having a collection is painfully magnified when crossing the border. While Juárez lacks works of art, the El Paso Museum of Art (EPMA) safeguards a permanent collection of more than 7,000 works ranging from the Renaissance to contemporary art. This abysmal difference shows the magnitude of the cultural lag that the city suffers compared to its own neighbors, and is the exact reflection of everything the border is missing out on.

3. **The asymmetry of investment:** We always hear about "economic investment," but never about "artistic investment." The former will never be sufficient for the integral development of a society if the latter is, as in this case, nonexistent.

4. **The inertia of the industrial model:** The maquiladora model that dominates in Juárez generates enormous wealth, but with profoundly unequal dynamics. The great beneficiaries of this economic spillover are the three levels of government (local, state, and federal), transnational corporations, the owners of industrial parks, and a smaller percentage of workers who hold executive positions. However, this economic model does not favor the city in the same proportion in terms of comprehensive social impact. Flooding the city with maquiladoras without a counterbalancing artistic and cultural plan has fragmented its identity and social fabric.

The Solutions

1. **From "labor" to "ultra-luxury services":** Juárez's geographical location is its most precious asset. For any Latin American artist, entering the US market represents the most important milestone of their career, and the border enjoys an unbeatable position facing economic powers like Texas, California, and Florida, encompassing a strategic coast-to-coast corridor. If the maquiladora industry has taken advantage of adjoining the United States, the art industry can too. Added to this privileged position is its greatest demographic strength: binationality. The people of Juárez master English, the language that governs the art world, becoming the natural interlocutors between Latin American talent and a country that acquires more than 40% of art worldwide. Juárez could be converted into a strategic point to serve this market, going from being seen as a "condemnation" of accessible labor, to an epicenter of ultra-luxury services.

2. **The perfect pairing for business tourism:** Juárez will soon have its long-awaited Convention Center, which will trigger a constant flow of business tourism. This visitor profile demands and consumes high-level experiences. A contemporary art museum, backed by a living ecosystem of art, exhibitions, artists, and galleries, is the perfect pairing to capitalize on this flow. The success of venues like Expo Guadalajara multiplied the economic and cultural impact in its state precisely because the city already had a solid artistic infrastructure ready to absorb that demand. Juárez must prepare its artistic ecosystem so as not to let this opportunity escape.
3. **The epicenter of society:** For a museum to be the true epicenter of the community, it must belong to the city. The time has come to found our own Museum of Contemporary Art, free from the hurdles of centralism. This coincides with the maxim of current national policy: the border is ready for "collaboration," but it no longer accepts "subordination."

4. **Expert governance and political shielding:** The museum should be financed in its construction and operation by government funds—Mexican and American, given the binational condition—but never directed by politicians. Its management must fall to a Board

of Trustees made up of experts: museum directors, gallery owners, collectors, artists, philanthropists, businessmen, and academics. Replicating the civic management model of titans like the MET in New York will not only guarantee operational excellence, but will shield the venue from partisan campaigns and whims.

5. **A vision of global impact:** To guarantee its success, the museum must be born with the ambition of bringing the most transcendental art of the contemporary scene. The initial anchor must be world-class to position the institution; by consolidating this international platform, the perfect vehicle will be created to eventually catapult local talent to the place it deserves.

6. **A tangible commitment:** Great transformations begin with concrete actions. As a native of Juárez and a gallery owner, I want to do my part and I commit to donating the first work of art for the foundational collection of this museum. Likewise, I will extend this invitation to other artists and collectors to join this cause, creating a network of donations that strengthens the heritage of the city.

Final Reflections

Art has an incomparable transformative power; it not only beautifies, but heals, provokes, and rebuilds the social fabric of a community.

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What if the next great transformation of Ciudad Juárez doesn't come from another *maquiladora*... but from art?

In a special collaboration for *Ser Empresario*, gallerist and founder of HECTOR DIAZ, Héctor Díaz, initiates a conversation that our border city needs to have.

🎨 Ciudad Juárez has a historic debt to art.

While other cities have used major cultural projects to reinvent their economies, attract tourism, strengthen their identities, and transform their global image, Juárez remains without a contemporary art museum of its own.

Héctor Díaz proposes looking at the so-called "Bilbao Effect" and asking ourselves:
Could there be a "Juárez Effect"?
A contemporary art museum would be more than just a building.
It could become:

✨ A new symbol of identity

🌎 A bridge between Mexico, Latin America, and the United States

💼 An opportunity to boost business tourism

🎭 A catalyst for the creative economy

🏛️ An asset that truly belongs to the city

🚀 A platform to showcase Juárez to the world

Because talking about the future of Juárez also means talking about the kind of city we want to build for future generations.

This collaboration opens a necessary dialogue among business leaders, artists, officials, academics, and citizens.

📖 Read the full article: "Contemporary Art Museum: From Historic Debt to the Artistic Transformation of Ciudad Juárez"

🔗 Link in comments and link in bio.
Do you think Ciudad Juárez is ready to create its own Contemporary Art Museum?
Let us know your thoughts. 👇

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