



# Oaxaca Times

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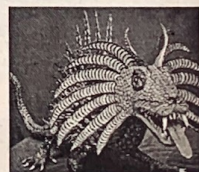
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# Culture Wars: Opposing Agendas

by Jack Lanter

There's been growing controversy over what exactly is going on in Oaxaca's zócalo, ever wilder rumors of government corruption and tree-genocidal agendas, all fueled by a growing sense of sadness and suspicion that one of the most beautiful historical sites in the world has been irrevocably lost through government meddling. The argument for a new, improved zócalo seems to be based primarily on the notion of increased tourism, yet such an argument must seem dubious to most tourists, many of whom come to Oaxaca to enjoy a historical town more or less as it was a hundred years ago.

When works began in early April, it appeared to be no more than a minor restoration for maintenance purposes. Almost overnight, all the pavement was torn up, causing passersby peeking through the corrugated metal fences to wonder about the real extent of the project. When the first tree fell on April 18th, crashing into the Palacio del Gobierno, word traveled fast. Concerned citizens spent the night around the tree to make sure it wasn't removed for timber and to demand answers about the renovations. This was the beginning of the Comité de Vigilancia Ciudadana (CVC, Citizens' Watch Committee).

Rumors began to circulate that the plan involved getting rid of all the laurel trees that shade the Zócalo, some saying that it was because they were non-native, others claiming it was because they blocked the view of historical buildings. Officials maintained that it fell by accident and that they had no intention of removing trees. With help from the Chief of Public Security, the tree was kept safe and replanted. Shortly after, however, another tree fell, inciting an even stronger public outcry.

Mass confusion ensued, erupting in street marches, allegations of rampant government corruption and sensationalist newspaper articles. A key factor in the chaos was the unconventional way in which the project began. As a UNESCO (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization) World Heritage city, Oaxaca is required to maintain authenticity of its historic landmarks and seek public consent before constructing or altering public property. Builders must also have their plans approved by INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia) and by state and city government before proceeding. Generally, projects of this magnitude begin with a "contest," selecting the best plan from bids by various designers. In this case, the team of planners, painter Luis Zárate (who designed the original renovation plans), Alejandro de Ávila (director of the Ethnobotanical Garden), Architect Saul Alcántara



and Carlos Melgoza Castillo (director of the Instituto Patrimonial Cultural de Oaxaca) were appointed directly. Usually, projects are delayed a few months for securing permission, which involves surveying the land and performing ecological impact studies to trouble-shoot any potential problems. Whether in order to have the renovations ready for the tourist season and the Guelaguetza, or simply to bypass public resistance, beyond obtaining backing from the state governor, none of these protocols were followed.

Shortly after the second tree fell (hitting a nearby restaurant), the drama escalated further. Zárate, Ávila and Alcántara resigned from the project, declaring that the destruction of the trees was never intended. Zárate called for the government to suspend the works, saying "This is no longer our project... they're going to make a mess of it... they're going to ruin everything." Melgoza, the last member of the team and also an architect, carried on with the project, submitting his own design to

INAH. After it was approved, the works continued under a new plan.

Melgoza, director of IPCO, is quick to dismiss the rumors about the zócalo as local politics. He says there was never any intention of transforming the zócalo but only in preserving it. He says that the drainage pipes, which are over a century old and in a state of decay, were allowing sewage to leak out, damaging the gardens and eating away at the foundations of the square. He also insists the zócalo is not being remade, but rather renovated and repaired after decades of poor maintenance. Much of this work was already initiated last year, including: \$1,500,000 pesos for the restoration of the kiosk; \$400,000 pesos for the irrigation watering system; \$98,000 pesos for the restoration of the Alameda; \$30,000 to clean fountains; and the installation of two new cisterns. One of the CVC's chief complaints is that this money has been wasted by the new zócalo works. According to Melgoza, all of the work is being retained, and the current costs are simply





# and Oaxaca's Zócalo

extensions of the restoration begun last year, and that anything that is being removed, such as benches, will be used somewhere else in the city. Whatever the case, Melgoza insists the cost of the project is nowhere near the \$600 million pesos claimed by the newspaper *Noticias* (which is vocally opposed to the project), but presently approaching a final figure of \$27 million pesos. However, because there is no legal requirement in Oaxaca for the government to disclose this information (no transparency law), there is no way of ascertaining the actual figure.

In regard to the two lost trees that have caused such controversy around the city (the CVC collected 20,000 signatures in favor of saving the laurels), Melgoza claims that, contrary to popular belief, the first tree to fall was only 35 years old (not 125), and that it was already leaning dangerously. He says another problem was that the tree had been surrounded by concrete, as if in a giant plant pot, with no way for its roots to grow outward. He says the second tree fell because 90 percent of its roots had been eaten away by fungus over the last decade. The CVC, on the other hand, blames the damage on excess water resulting from construction during a rainy period.

Melgoza regards the falling of the trees as a tragedy that complicated matters, and stresses that they are doing everything possible to ensure that it doesn't happen again. He says the other trees in the zócalo have all been examined by specialists and found to be in good health, besides suffering from the inevitable stress of the construction. Eight "forest supervisors" are now on hand to watch over the trees, he says, and prevent any further damage. Barring an act of God, Melgoza predicts the safety of the remaining trees, saying that "Only God can say if a tree falls or not; no man can give a guarantee." He adds, "During the recent heavy rains a total of 12 trees fell in Oaxaca, but no one said a word about the other 10." When it is suggested that there probably wasn't heavy construction work going on next to the other fallen trees, Melgoza admits the two trees may have been lost as a result of builders' negligence. But he reiterates his belief that the panic surrounding the issue is unfounded, and is being cynically exploited by people with their own political agendas.

The zócalo project, Melgoza insists, is not a political matter, but a cultural one, part of a general Oaxaca renovation plan begun by Gov. Ulises Ruiz Ortiz in December 2004 when he came into office. According to Mendoza, Ortiz' vision is to make Oaxaca a more cultural city, and hence more attractive to tourism. The first objective, Melgoza explains, is to banish the perennial protestors by moving the govern-



ment palace somewhere else (and converting the Palacio del Gobierno into a museum). The second is to support the tourist industry by renovating cultural sites, such as the zócalo.

According to Melgoza, the basic design for the new square is based on how the zócalo looked a hundred years ago. The plan is founded in history, he says, but shaped by the desires of *Oaxaqueños* today. He gives a list of the things "We, Oaxacans" want, and which they will preserve: the shade trees, the walkways, places to sit, the kiosk, the fountains — as well as the balloon-sellers and the *boleros* (shoeshine boys). Things they will dispose of include the surrounding roadway (to be transformed into a pedestrian *andador*), the steps and multiple layers (making the entire square level), and the cobblestones (which he claims were rotting — they are to be replaced with grey stone squares, more or less resembling ordinary sidewalk). Other renovations include the restoration of the kiosk, the cleaning of the metal work and the installation of lights inside the fountains. Melgoza assured us that there was never any intention of getting rid of the trees. He says Zárate's idea was to bring new (native) plants and trees into the zócalo, but never to replace the original ones. Melgoza claims that in fact, the current trees need more space (at least seven meters around) for their roots to grow, which they didn't have before but will have now, so the project is actually helping the trees to live longer.

Melgoza repeats, "This is what Oaxacans want." Apparently (besides being a Oaxacan himself), Melgoza's view of what the public wants is based on historical research and studies of past zócalos, rather than the public's actual input. One of the main criticisms of his opponents is that the public was not informed of the project before it began; the few public meetings held were only designed to give information

on what was already happening, rather than to find out what the public really thought. When tentatively suggested that people might have been less suspicious of the government's intentions if the project had been officially announced, its basic nature shared with the public before the works began, Melgoza counters matter-of-factly, "The government doesn't have to announce everything it does."

Asked if the zócalo is being modernized, Melgoza says no. He says the plans included studies of the zócalo throughout the centuries, and is being designed to commemorate the old styles. He adds that the zócalo of three months ago was actually redone in 1977, so was rather less than a historical site. But when asked if the new zócalo will really look like it did a century ago, he replies, "It will be a 21st century version of it." He says that it was originally intended to be ready in time for the Guelaguetza, but because of delays will not be completely finished until August. It should, however, be open to pedestrians by the end of July.

Francisco Verastegui, a member of the CVC, is pessimistic about the new look, and finds it ironic that the changes are being made in the name of tourism. "The quality of tourists' experience is going to decline. It's going to be more like a Disneyland replica... Why [would tourists] come here now? This plan is the product of the whim of some appointed bureaucrats and some *à la mode* artists who saw the zócalo as ugly."

The zócalo, the symbolic heart of the city and once the most beloved gathering place for people of the community, is now creating a great rift within it. Whether it is truly a work of beautification is in the eye of the beholder. All speculations aside, it won't be long before we can see, and decide, for ourselves whether it is something that "we, Oaxacans" want.



# Batman Begins

Chris Nolan's New Movie is Dark and Brooding and Kind of Dumb

by Jake Horsley

Those who go to see *Batman Begins* expecting another Hollywood summer action flick may be pleasantly surprised to find a little more depth, realism, character development and archetypal resonance than your average comic book adaptation. Those who go hoping to see the latest auteur work from Christopher Nolan (the gifted director of *Memento* and *Insomnia*) are likely to leave the theater wondering what the hell happened. The answer is simple: another auteur down.

Watching the film, it's easy to imagine how Nolan and his co-writer David S. Goyer started with a vision, determined to create a rich and imaginative reworking of the all-too-familiar Batman myths, one that would be acceptable to Warner Bros. and justify the enormous budget with a big action summer smash hit to resurrect the franchise. The film takes plenty of time (though not enough) tracing Bruce Wayne's journey eastward and his mystical training with the Ninja Ra's Al Ghul (an oddly cast Liam Neeson); the script makes repeated nods towards the psychology and morality of the orphaned Wayne, as he embarks on the quest for vengeance that will eventually transform him into a black-winged crusader for justice. And it's the first of the films (five so far) to allow the hero to have real live bats for his allies: in one of the best moments in the film, Batman calls on his familiars and becomes not only an archetypal avenger but an elemental force of nature, a shadowy demigod. But there's a problem, and it's probably insurmountable: all of this good, meaty stuff is shackled to a Hollywood franchise based on a beloved comic book character that (for most audiences) has long since moved closer to action hero cliché than Jungian archetype.

Using something that falls sadly short of depth psychology, Nolan, valiantly but vainly, attempts to inject dramatic realism and authenticity into the old familiar tale. Since he is contractually bound to cut to the chase and deliver the goods (Batman franchise product no. 5), it all feels rushed, cursory, and contrived. There isn't a single scene in the film that exists for its own sweet sake, or that is allowed to play at a leisurely pace or unfold at a natural rhythm, and so develop some depth. It's all there to keep the motor turning and get the movie where it's going: Batman kicks ass. The characters and the story—the archetypal/psychological

underlayers that Nolan works so hard to get in there, finally even Nolan himself—are all shackled to a big blind machine that moves relentlessly forward with no more purpose than any other Hollywood blockbuster—thrills and spills and big summertime profits.

In the end, Nolan's sincere attempts at depth may undermine the movie as much as enhance it, because, when you get right down to it, there's just no way to inject psychological realism or flesh and

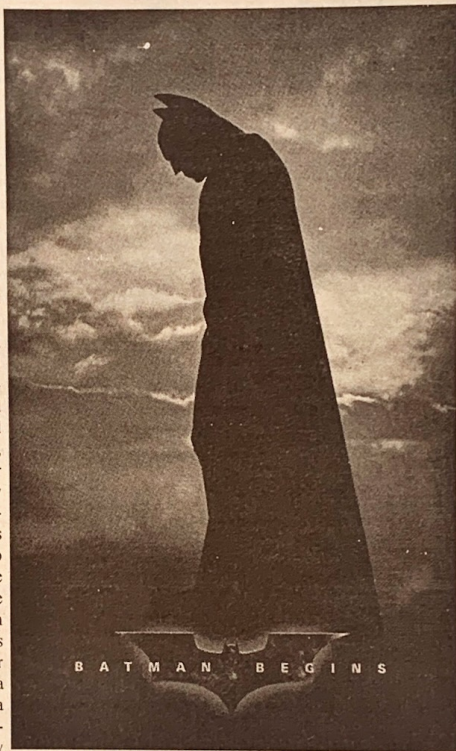
gun), and Christian Bale is probably the most convincing and affecting Wayne/Batman so far. Gary Oldman would make a terrific Commissioner Gordon, too, if only he'd been given something to do (and a solid back story to do it in). But in the end, there is no story to the film except, Wayne becomes Batman, Batman saves Gotham city from evil (Ra's Al Ghul's demented spiritual terrorism). Ho hum. Miller's genius was in populating that story with real characters, driven by real needs, and in bringing

the back story to the fore so that the usual hero-melodrama was not only what drove the story, there was *human* drama to draw us in. In the end, there's just no way to believe in Batman, unless we can believe in Wayne and the world he's fighting against. *Batman Begins* tries hard, but it never manages to make its world (or its Wayne) believable.

There seems to be a common assumption that comic books adhere to a lower standard—aesthetically and dramatically—than other art forms, an assumption that Hollywood is temperamentally disposed to go along with (having congenitally lower standards of its own to uphold). Judging by the glowing reviews of Nolan's film, any treatment of a superhero story that isn't basically sub-literate is greeted as if it were Shakespeare, and any summer blockbuster that is halfway coherent, has a rudimentary amount of integrity and fidelity to its story and characters, and doesn't actively insult audiences' intelligence, is seen as a virtual revelation. *Batman Begins* is good "sophisticated" action-fantasy fare for teenagers, and as a dumb Batman flick smartened up by an auteur coming from an artist of psychological subtlety and depth—and one of the leading talents in American movies supposedly on his way to maturity—it's a real bummer. Apparently Nolan couldn't resist getting his hands on that big Hollywood train set, even when the tracks were already laid down, and he knew exactly where they were taking him. *Batman Begins* may not insult audiences' intelligence, but it sure as hell dumbs Nolan down.

For times call Multimax Cinema, 5167929.

Jake Horsley is the author of *The Blood Poets: A Cinema of Savagery*, *Matrix Warrior*, and the up-coming *Dogville Vs. Hollywood*.



blood characters into a movie about a man who dresses up as a bat to fight crime. Frank Miller did it with his comic book *Year One*, a work of genius that puts Nolan's film to shame. But the medium of comics is fundamentally different to that of movies; Miller's approach was to use the Batman story as a vehicle for his own vision and his formidable storytelling gifts, thereby transforming the material. With *Batman Begins* it works the other way around. Nolan's gift—and any vision he brings to the movie—is hamstrung into service of the franchise, and the only transforming that gets done is that of a formerly brilliant filmmaker into one more Hollywood hired hand.

Make no mistake, *Batman Begins* has great things in it; Cillian Murphy is genuinely scary as the Scarecrow (until he gets chased off by Katie Holmes and a stun