



# Oaxaca Times

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## GUELAGUETZA!



Travel

Art

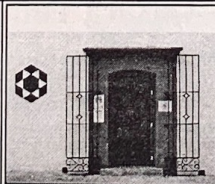
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# Mitla

## The enigmatic City of the Dead

Though Mitla's name and its numerous tombs may cast the city as a somber burial ground, historians speculate that it was once a buzzing metropolis, whose population exceeded 10,000 as late as 1350. For years, tourists have explored both the subterranean crypts and ground-level buildings in the "City of the Dead," yet without much scholastic knowledge of the intended function of each edifice. According to some arguments, the reason academics have been unable to decipher the character of the ancient city is because of a Euro-American ethnocentrism—the same hubris that has alienated the potentially-helpful locals and even damaged the site. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the 20th Century, certain indigenous groups reclaimed the ruins and infused its reputation with new meaning by celebrating the Day of the Dead in the tombs every autumn.

The little history on which academics and rural Mexicans generally agree concerns the regional groups that founded ancient Mitla, now bordered by a modernized pueblo, also called Mitla. In the 13th or 14th Century, Mixtecs, forced south by rival Aztecs, came upon the Valley of Oaxaca's local Zapotecs, with whom they collaborated on the construction of a city of integrated cultural traditions and, unsurprisingly, unique architecture.

The most-popular ruins of ancient Mitla are the tombs, which are located throughout the ruins, burrow underground for unknown lengths distances, and are freely viewable by visitors. Although some have argued that the tombs served as camps for the ancient society, the macabre paintings on the tunnel walls, as well as the 30 skeletons that have been exhumed over the years, makes its function as a burial ground seem the best explanation.

Though it might not inspire the same intrigue as catacombs, the most-distinctive aspect of the former city is that it is spread among five "clusters." According to historian Arthur G. Miller, "despite its name, tombs per se are not what distinguish Mitla from other Valley sites built in the same time and during earlier periods; rather it is the individuality of the building groups." Whereas sites like Monte Alban feature a grandiose and united architectural core, the clustered buildings of Mitla, none more than one-floor high, are sprinkled along a stream bed, now dry.

Mitla's architectural niceties have survived to this day thanks not only to

the masonry of the city's founders, but also to the protection and veneration of its bordering pueblo. Unlike neighbors of other ruins, today's Mitlenos did not pillage the abandoned materials, which include stones and brickwork potentially useful in constructing new buildings. What is more, Miller writes, the Mitlenos regarded the site as religiously important, "bragging to inquiring outsiders about the ancient personages who once lived there."

Unfortunately, the interest of outsiders has not necessarily served the city well. In 1832, upon seeing replications of Mitla's painted lintels, Jose Lopez de

the site's survival. In 1888, Bishop Eulogio Gillow challenged the locals' guardianship of the site, saying, "the people of this pueblo are not civilized enough to comprehend [the ruins' importance]."

Soon thereafter, the ruins were ruled off limits to the Zapotec-Mixtec rituals, in deference to the church. For this reason, as well as continued meddling by the state, today's Mitlenos largely lost interest in taking part in the preservation and further excavation of their heritage, still unknown to recorded history. Their detachment allowed historians, mostly from Europe and the US, to characterize ancient Mitla in a Euro-American cultural context in order to tie loose ends together. For this reason, Miller writes: the prevailing notion that Mitla's tombs were dedicated to Zapotec "popes" says more about Euro-American culture than that of Oaxaca.

Although the surviving Mitlenos may have halted their preservation of ancient Mitla, other indigenous cultures have begun again to practice ritualistic worship on the site, if for only one day a year. Since the early 1900s, certain rural groups have made a tradition of traveling to

Mitla every November 2 to celebrate Day of the Dead. For reasons not yet explained by academia, the celebrants enter the tombs and collect moisture from the damp walls to rub onto their bodies.

Ancient Mitla, also translated as "Hell" and "Place for Those Who Rest," was a distinctive society whose social trends have been obscured by time, presumptuous investigators, and tons of dirt. Despite this, the tourists and indigenous cultures that fill the ruins today bring a new energy, helping the City of the Dead live to see a brighter day and, if future excavations are more sensitive, all its glory.



Ortigoza, governor of the state of Oaxaca, allocated state funds to "protect" Mitla. Yet, this supposed state-sponsored help only harmed the site. In 1852, Juan Carriedo, one of those who had drawn the influential lintel copies, reported that the paintings he had mimicked were no longer visible.

The Catholic Church, too, has hurt the preservation effort, though it purported to help. In addition to the physical damage the construction of a cathedral has caused the northern cluster of the site—90 percent of which is still underground—Catholic officials have condemned the local indigenous society and its ancient traditions in the attempt to win jurisdiction of the ruins, thereby angering the contingent most responsible for

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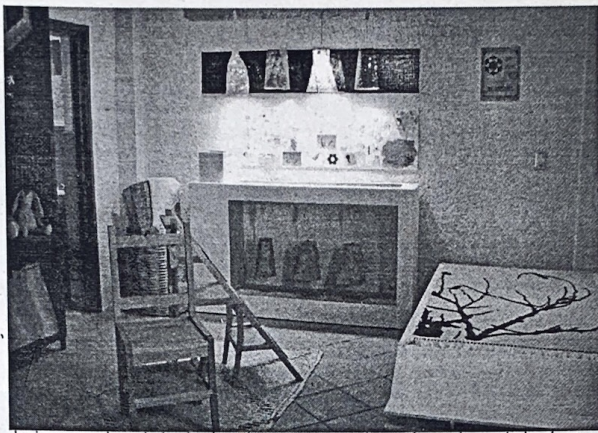
Ce soir, et tous les soirs  
Questa notte e tutte le notte  
Heute nacht un alle nächte

Oaxacan Dinner

# Black Box

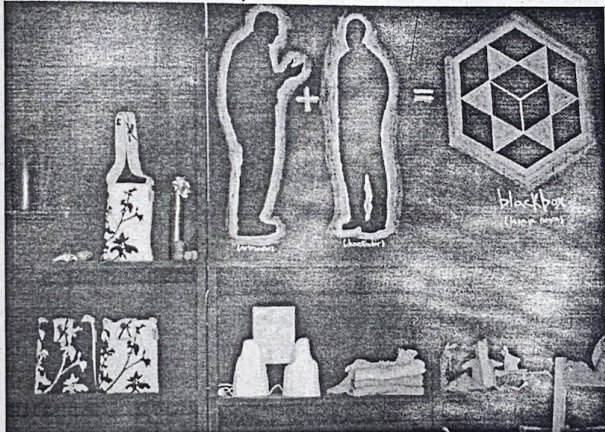
*Complex and mysterious art*

Since he began studying industrial design, Gustavo Fricke, founder and creator of Blackbox, has worked with communities in Mexico that earn a living by creating handicrafts, a line of production that continues to unite the work of mind and hand. During his last year in college, Fricke lived and worked in Tekax, a small village in southern Yucatan recognized for its carpentry workshops and denim *maquiladoras*. He redesigned and created new products with carpenters in the region, experimenting with recycled and leftover wood. After graduating, he began designing for a leading marketing company in Mexico City, but soon realized that line of work was not for him. No longer fascinated by "The City", and stifled by marketing design, Fricke left Mexico, DF in pursuit professional and person-



design constituted the basis this creative exchange and a sustainable working relationship.

steps down from the artistic theater-market-garden *el Pochote*, following a cobblestone road lined by the historical aqueduct on *la calle Rufino Tamayo*. With handmade artisan pieces formed with natural materials, the store is designed to *re-evolutionize* traditional design. *Re-evolutionize* in the sense that each object has an esthetic purpose and blends traditional and modern design, but also forms part of a dynamic possibility that includes environmental and economic sustainability for the artisans involved in this project, while respecting the tradition and way of life from which the handicrafts evolved. In Blackbox, you can find original products such as hand-woven textiles from *Teotitlan del Valle*, black pottery from *San Bartolo Coyotepec*, and paper lamps that are molded from pulp made in the paper factory in *San Agustín Etla*, to mention a few.



al growth. At this point he chose to establish himself in Oaxaca and continue working with artisans.

In 2004, Fricke began traveling to communities dedicated to making handicrafts in Oaxaca. People of the communities imparted their knowledge of artisan traditions, techniques and uses of the diverse materials in the region, while also sharing stores that illustrated their economic struggles; it was becoming increasingly difficult to survive with the little income they made selling their crafts. Fricke learned much from the artisans and, over time, together they developed ideas that would continue the evolution and exploration of new possibilities for Mexican handicrafts. Artisan methods combined with Fricke's knowledge of industrial

May twenty-eighth of this year, Blackbox opened its doors; this gallery-store can be found only a few

## MANIFESTO

"THE TERM BLACK BOX HAS BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE SOMETHING THAT PERFORMS A FUNCTION, BUT ITS INNER-WORKINGS ARE COMPLEX AND MYSTERIOUS"  
DR. MICHAEL J. BEHE

OAXACA HAS ONE OF THE HIGHEST EMIGRATION RATES OF ALL MEXICAN STATES, IN RESPONSE TO THIS, BLACKBOX SEEKS TO CREATE A SOLID, HIGH QUALITY AND CREATIVE HANDCRAFT INDUSTRY THAT INCLUDES SEVERAL COMMUNITIES IN THE CREATION OF NEW PRODUCTS. THIS INDUSTRY PROVIDES JOBS IN RURAL OAXACA, AND THEREFORE RESPECTS AN ANCESTRAL WAY OF LIFE THAT WAS INHERITED THROUGH THE GENERATIONS. EVERY PRODUCT IS UNIQUE, BREAKS WITH THE ESTABLISHED AND EXPERIMENTS WITH THIS FORM OF CREATION. THIS IS OUR REVOLUTION, OUR WAY TO SEEK CHANGE, WITH MUD OR PAPER PULP ON OUR HANDS, SAWDUST COVERING OUR FACES AND WEAVING A DREAM THREAD BY THREAD, A DREAM OF AUTONOMY, OPPORTUNITY AND FREEDOM THAT IS FULL OF EXPRESSION.

ID GUSTAVO FRICKE  
BLACKBOX MANAGER

# La Encantada

*Arquitecto Octavio Suárez reveals the beauty of Oaxacan Orchids*

Nature and evolution have conjugated in thousands of years of forms and wide variations of orchids; varying from those difficult to see to those impossible to miss. Architect Octavio Suárez's garden has both types and more or less everything in between.

The distribution of orchids is limited, for example American orchids are not found in Asia, Africa or Europe. Every continent has its own gender and proper species.

Spanish conquistadores of the 16th century were astonished contemplating Mexican orchids. A large number of orchids were taken from the mild humid forests of the new continent and sent to Spain with the aim of cultivation. A common belief that these flowers were greenhouse plants meant that very few made a safe trip across Atlantic waters.

Aztecs discovered the "Tlilxochitl": an orchid with world-wide importance changing completely the taste of almost all known desserts by the 17th century. The *tlilxochitl* (or vanilla as it is commonly known) was used as an infusion that helped overcome tiredness, as a heart tonic and to ease sore muscles. This Aztec culinary delicacy was taken to the Spanish courts and later to the rest of Europe where it was a great success. The most important aspect was its use to flavour chocolate beverages as it changed completely the taste of this unique drink.

The orchid family is considered far developed due to its own specific characteristics in terms of evolution. Orchids have a huge number of seeds (3,700,000 of them of microscopic size) which only wind and insects can distribute as far as they can find a place to germinate. However, to this day, the artificial growing of orchids has advanced a great deal.

The cells' strong structural support of the hollow stem which serves to store water and nutrients allows the plants to grow to lengths of various metres. The leaves also have the same structure which serves to endure long terms without rain.

Orchids have developed a feeding system

with aerial roots, where small particles like water from rain and organic elements are held. The roots also act as a holding device as, while some orchids grow on ground level, their preference is

and the maintenance of the place are greatly appreciated.

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Arquitecto Octavio Suarez shows us how orchids reproduce

on trees where sunlight is not excessive and neither is darkness.

In the whole world there is an account for 20,000 species of orchids and Mexico has more than 1,300 types. Oaxaca has 698 species and Chiapas has 650 species. If we add these amounts, compared to the total in the Mexican Republic, we will find that we have 80% of the orchid species in the South-East territories.

In 1974 Architect Octavio Suárez joined a study group to explore Oaxaca and its orchids and the knowledge he acquired during that year was a strong motivation for him to start growing orchids at home. With his own money and almost no financial support he has, year by year, expanded his collection of orchids on the skirts of the Sierra Juárez in a place called "La Encantada" (the Enchanted).

When asked how he started to think about growing orchids Mr. Suarez recalls: "Liking orchids came when I was almost a baby boy and my mother used to buy them at our house door...My mother had the ability and patience to replant any flower, and I think I inherited that love and kindness for plants..."

Mr. Suarez has many particular goals with growing orchids and showing them to the public: "I want to enhance the relationship between edu-



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