

Haunted Heritage

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Introduction

1

Why do we attach a haunting to a house? This was the question that initially shaped this thesis. It came to me whilst exploring Granada with my sister, where we took several free tours of “haunted houses” in the city. A tour guide would take us around the city but instead of showing us the typical touristy spots, she took us to dark alleys and abandoned buildings as she told us the stories of past lovers, greedy monks, and demented women. These tours were popular all throughout



Fig I. A fountain in the centre of Granada. Photo by the author.

Fig II. An abandoned house in Granada where the ghosts of patients of a madhouse supposedly appear. Photo by the author.



Spain, and we took several of them in Madrid, Barcelona, and Sevilla. The tours provided a different perspective of the city—a more intimate and narrative one—where one could get to know more intimately some of the beliefs and happenings of the ordinary people who once lived in these old cities. The thing that stood out to me the most, however, was the way in which these stories were linked to space. And so the question was born: how do space and narrative interact? And why are these buildings, heritage buildings, haunted?

The most immediate comparison I could find in my own country to study a case like the one I found in my Spanish tour was Guanajuato, a small colonial city known throughout Mexico due to its legends. The initial research was shaped by intrigue of the supernatural element. Whilst my focus was architecture and space and its relation to the haunted, why we feel supernatural presences inside heritage buildings felt like an intriguing question to answer. Yet as I delved more into researching, I was attracted to what is usually the driving force of

haunting stories: emotion. Ghosts are usually still lingering in this plane of existence due to intense emotion and unresolved feelings before their death. As such, several layers of emotional understanding in space came to me. What are the stories shaping these hauntings? What types of ghosts are there?

The first one was obvious: a haunted house has the ghost of the person who lived in it. The essence of a past inhabitant lingers in the space it once inhabited. The second one was both a consequence of the first and the first on a larger scale. The story of a haunted house is transmitted through collective storytelling, which can be influenced by or can become folklore. The third one was the hardest: the presence that is felt through absence, the uncanny feeling of something missing where something should be, the knowledge that something was once there and is no longer. The framework seemed complete until I analysed it further and noticed that these ghosts are not perceived in the same way by every person. The wife of the ghost of a man in a haunted

*“Invisible
things
are not
necessarily
not-there”*

Toni Morrison

Fig. III Abandoned buildings are usually thought to be haunted, but the people that once used them might perceive them differently. Photo by Ben Swihart.



house might be happy to encounter his presence, whilst people who live in that house generations later will probably be scared by it. Listening to a folkloric tale will have different meanings for people of two different countries. Perhaps the tale of a witch will be perceived as scary for a European visiting a small town in Oaxaca, but the people of Oaxaca might understand that she was probably a healer or a shaman, making cleanses and helping people.

The European listener might think she's scary, but the Oaxacan person could think she was a benevolent sage. A person visiting the catacombs of Paris might say these were all bodies of cursed people, or victims of a revolution, or the bodies of slain vampires that support the city, if their imagination runs too wild. All of these perceptions shape the ghost created by the essence of past inhabitants, folklore, or just the absence of something, and can create entirely different ghosts depending on how they are balanced.

Spending three days in Guanajuato further shaped my understanding of how these ghosts exist in heritage spaces and

how they interact with everyday life—the way they not only coexist with the tourism industry and shape preservation, but how their misuse might actually be damaging to the heritage at hand. What began as a spooky thesis topic transformed into an analysis of emotion in architecture and urban space, an analysis of memory and lingering and the human resolution to be remembered. Yet this research highlighted how remembrance might be a privilege of the richer and erasure the inevitable fate of everyone else.

This thesis explores the way human presence shapes the space it inhabits in an intangible manner and the way it animates said space by creating emotional connections, the way heritage management can shape these connections, and the way said connections are part of an intangible heritage that is often forgotten. Humans yearn to be remembered. Architecture is the way we've etched our existence into the planet, proving we existed, that we were here. And these places house that very feeling: a hope of not being forgotten.

Theorising Haunting

2

The Ghost Metaphor

A memory is a retelling of past happenings that each person keeps in their mind. It is shaped by ideas and emotion, making it a personal experience. Haunting however, is not a personal experience, as it can be perceived differently by different people; it becomes a physical occurrence instead, an external one. The ghost of a building is the building's spirit, its personality, the very thing that makes it unique and gives it character. A building can't have memory, but it can preserve it, and can be attached to it.

A building can't remember, but it can hold memory. This memory is shaped by the physical evidence engraved on it - proof of the inhabitants' existence, proof of the happenings the building was subjected to. A completely

*“an
animated
state in
which a
repressed or
unresolved
social
violence is
making itself
known.”*

*Avery Gordon.
Ghostly Matters*

new, pristine house can have a spirit – a small, weak, almost powerless spirit, but a spirit nonetheless. The spirit gets powerful the moment that space is transformed by its users. When we enter an abandoned house, an old school, or an old church, we sense the power of its presence. When we see a mark on the wall, we can infer that a picture frame may have been there. We know a church is old, not only because of its style (which is itself part of its spirit) but because we can see traces of the past engraved in it. The ghost in the building is the image that narrates its story.

Avery Gordon describes haunting in *Ghostly Matters* as “an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known.”¹ She talks about

ghosts as the sociological apparition of something that isn't necessarily there but whose effects can be felt. Let's think of a haunted house. What makes it feel haunted? The traces of decay, the proof of the passage of time, the old pictures, the creaky floors - all characteristics embodying the person that once inhabited it and that is still inhabiting in an invisible way. A ghost tells the story of the lives once lived through the physical traces left behind.

However, different cultural contexts can give a different meaning to the concept of a ghost. Gordon comes from the United States, making her relationship with death more akin to one of loss, fear, and sadness. In my case, coming from Mexican culture, the relationship with death and spirits is completely different.

Adding a heritage focus to Gordon's take can reveal different layers to her interpretation. I come from a culture that thinks of receiving back the spirits of the departed as a party filled with music, laughter, food, and remembrance. The Day of the Dead (Día de Muertos) turns what others perceive as a morbid way to idolise death into a celebration of a life once lived. This cultural interpretation adds an important understanding to the preservation of heritage. Unlike Gordon's urge to acknowledge the ghost in order to resolve its haunting, heritage haunting should be preserved, as it is the very thing animating the built environment and celebrating the lives that lived in it, regardless of how negative or positive the connotations of their spirit might be.

Identifying ghosts in a city is identifying the city's personality, the memory that has been left in the physical reality. Why should we leave a mark made by a chair moved a thousand times? Some might see it as damage, but if we know the place was a classroom lived in by students over several generations, repeating the same actions over centuries, the mark gains meaning and enriches our understanding. It tells us where the chairs used to be; if they are no longer there, it may tell us it was a classroom. Removing the mark might restore the floor's original functionality, but it will erase the hundreds of days that chair was pushed, the times countless students sat on it, and maybe the very essence of the room as a classroom. Noticing the ghost makes us aware of its presence, and noticing its presence helps us keep it around.

Noticing the ghost makes us aware of its presence, and noticing its presence helps us keep it around.



Fig. 1 In Mexican visual culture, death is frequently personified through figures such as La Catrina, commonly associated with the Día de Muertos tradition.

In ghost stories, spirits remain tied to the living world through unfinished business, violent death, strong emotional attachment, or because someone remembers them and calls them. But haunting doesn't always manifest itself in the same ways. Haunting can come from different sources and ghosts can be perceived in different ways, and heritage operates similarly. Maybe there's unresolved conflict, a strong collective memory of trauma. Maybe it's the yearning for a golden era that's long gone, the awareness of the way different generations experience the same city. The fact that grandparents would like their children to experience the city they knew and that is now long gone. Maybe it's our human reluctance to embrace change.

†
ERASMO HERNANDEZ
FALLECIO MAYO 25 DE 1926
SU ESPOSA E HIJOS LE
DEDICAN ESTE RECUERDO
R.I.P. PERPETUIDAD

162

LA VIUDA DE LA SRA
RAMONA HERNANDEZ
V. DE TORRESCANO.
JULIO 27 DE 1910.
RECUERDO DE SU HIJA JACOBA.
PERPETUIDAD

91

PERPETUIDAD

Fig. 2 Traces of names, traces of presence.
Photograph by the author.

Margarita Muñoz

VICENTE

MAYO 2

A PERP

REST

MARCIANA

18 DE FEBR

MIGUEL

21 DE ACO

R.

HILARIO

Sources of Haunting

The essence of past inhabitants

In “The Fragile Agency of the Draftsman’s House,”² Piccoli describes the way the apartment of his former colleague, architect Franco Rosso, had an agency that came from the way the objects in it were arranged. He talks about how the traces of his everyday life, as well as the decline in his mental and physical health, were mapped out by the way in which they were arranged throughout the apartment. The paintings, the drawings, and even the apartment’s configuration gave the people who went to Rosso’s apartment an intimate glimpse into his life, his history, his personal, maybe even

unconscious preferences, to such a degree that the very absence of the architect was felt heavily as a presence. Even while the architect was still alive—residing in a nursing facility in poor mental condition—when his life’s work was being collected for archival purposes, the ghost of his former self haunted the apartment he once inhabited. Summoned and kept alive by the traces of his daily habits, which evolved throughout his life, and being exorcised little by little by the people who would preserve his life’s work. Although a part of his professional ghost will forever be kept safe in an archive, the intimate and personal ghost of his persona

Fig. 3 Entrance corridor of Franco Rosso’s apartment.
Photograph by Maurizio Gomez Serito (2014).



was removed little by little. Piccoli's experience inside his colleague's apartment, however, is not an isolated occurrence. Houses are the most obvious case studies, since they're inevitably intimate—the very space that shelters us from hardships, the one place where we rest and unwind. But traces of past inhabitants are left in every place that has been inhabited. A school has traces of children, teachers, and parents, and every single worker that made it function as such, the same extends to a bakery or library. There is, of course, a different level of intimacy and accuracy of the ghosts perceived in each and every one of these cases, but the haunting is there. The ghost that Piccoli sensed through the agency of the objects left behind by Rosso was an intimate, personal, and powerful presence not only because he had known Rosso

personally, but because of the freshness of Rosso's inhabiting of the space. His past actions and movements were felt strongly because it hadn't been that long since he had left his apartment. But what happens when there's a much larger distance in time? Maybe a layer of intimacy will be lost, a part of the understanding of who was once there will go away, but by no means will the presence be less powerful. The interpretation and perception of the ghost will change, but the ghost will not disappear.



Figs. 4 & 5 Franco Rosso's apartment.
Photograph by Maurizio Gomez Serito (2014).



Sources of Haunting

Folklore and collective memory

Personal traces, although naturally associated with the intimacy of a memory best kept by friends, colleagues and family, can be transformed through time and affected by scale.

My grandparents have lived in the same colonia (neighbourhood) for most of their lives. They met there, got married and had my father and uncles, who all grew up there and live nearby. What was once a small colonia obrera, or working-class neighbourhood, made for tranviarios (tram operators) in the outskirts of the Coyoacán borough in Mexico City, became a middle-class colonia in the middle of several big avenues and



Fig. 6 Spring Festival in the Espartaco neighbourhood. Mexico City 2003. Author's personal collection.

streets, with many of its original inhabitants having passed away or having sold their now valuable houses. A vibrant community that died with the never-ending growth of a massive metropolis and a changing population.

My grandma remembers the neighbours that lived nearby: the man who used to walk his rooster, the lady that had a candy shop where my dad used to steal candy as a toddler, the mean lady that lived next to her and was fiercely proud of her house. Whenever she'd gather with her friendly neighbours, they'd tell the stories of the parties once had and the people now gone. Little by little the stories solidified, and I grew up knowing about the guy who used to walk his rooster. Although I personally never saw him, I could feel his presence walking down the streets of my grandparents' neighbourhood. The children around the neighbourhood knew the story as well,

and we would all imagine him in a similar manner.

This is a story that died when the children scattered away, dispersed by life's circumstances and the constant threat of gentrification that has so vastly transformed Mexico City as well as many other cities in the world. But let's imagine the population stayed the same. Let's imagine I stayed in the place my grandparents grew up in and grew up telling the story of the guy who walked his rooster, or the haunted house in the corner, or the house of the proud lady, and those stories transformed into legend, generation upon generation. This is the ghost summoned by folklore and collective memory.

The word folklore stems from combining the words folk and lore - the stories of the people.

*Her hair faded into
white,
yet no ship ever
returned her love.
And in the town
they whispered her
name
the madwoman of
the pier of San
Blas.*

*Translation of
Maná's
En el muelle de San
Blas*

Where the ghost of Franco Rosso was summoned by Piccoli and his colleagues intimately, the ghosts created by folklore are summoned and transformed by a much larger audience. But how does this collective begin to imagine? Let's begin with a woman, let's say this woman passed away in her house. The news of her death spread, and the speculation that fills in the gaps creates a narrative. Some say she was alone and waited for her husband to come back. Let's add context: the house is in a port town, so naturally, the husband turns into a sailor. The poor woman waited and waited until she eventually died of heartbreak. Suddenly, everyone passes the abandoned house left by the poor woman who passed away from a broken heart.

This is the story I heard at San Blas, a small port town in Mexico. Although there is no house nowadays, every abandoned house has the potential to become the house of La Loca de San Blas. The story doesn't have to be true, but the abandoned house makes it plausible.

The traces left behind by someone are an intimate knowledge, connecting us to this person's existence. They are an emotional connection to the person who made the traces. But folkloric stories live in an ever-changing place. They exist not only in an ever-changing landscape but in an ever-changing society. The ghost created by folkloric stories is a ghost that can be experienced by a collective, maybe a collective that is

*Su cabello se blanqueó
Pero ningún barco a su
amor le devolvía
Y en el pueblo le
decían
Le decían la loca del
muelle de San Blas*

***Maná
En el muelle de
San Blas***



Fig. 7 Statue of La Loca de San Blas in San Blas, Mexico. Photo by Edecolec 2023.

not even part of the community that created the story. A story, however, can create the very reasons that make us care about the heritage building in the first place. The abandoned house in San Blas may have only been a house without the story, but the legend gave it significance. This relationship between narrative and preservation is not accidental—stories generate the emotional attachment necessary for conservation.

Victor Hugo understood this dynamic perfectly well and used it in his favour to instil a sense of pride, nationalism, and empathy towards historical buildings in 19th-century France. After several attempts to call for the restoration and conservation of buildings (particularly those in Paris) that had been left in a state of disrepair, Victor Hugo realised

that his biggest tool was his own ability to take the public to the very place where history happened. Notre-Dame de Paris (also known as The Hunchback of Notre-Dame) was Victor Hugo's attempt to preserve what he believed were the witnesses of France's history—its buildings.

According to Sarah Zammit, to Hugo, “these buildings were the living roots, foundations and witnesses of society.”³ Zammit argues that Victor Hugo created a relationship between the 19th-century French population and the mediaeval version of Paris, where Notre-Dame was at its most glorious. He understood the importance of narrative to create a sense of belonging and care, to instil the very empathy that would preserve

the buildings. In this case, folklore was not on his side. Living in the aftermath of the French Revolution, the collective memory held a tarnished perception of older buildings, so Victor Hugo had to transport readers to 1482, before the Revolution's destruction, through an imaginative narrative. By positioning the cathedral as the main character and using precise descriptions that allowed readers to mentally time-travel, Hugo enabled the French public to witness the building's significance across temporal zones. And it worked. Notre-Dame de Paris, as well as many other buildings, underwent major restoration in 1844 carried out by Viollet-le-Duc.



Fig. 8 Notre-Dame de Paris during its most recent restoration, reflecting the long history of care and cultural value shaped in part by Victor Hugo's advocacy. Photo by Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz

Sources of Haunting

The Presence of Absence

The two previous sources had a very important aspect to them: there were material traces, physical evidence of something that happened somewhere. The materialisation of a habit, of a routine, of a community. But what happens when there are no longer traces? When the only thing left is absence, and the only proof of existence is memory?

Robert Gaunt discusses his childhood neighbourhood Brinksway, in Stockport, England,⁴ and the way it was erased, with only its previous inhabitants left to tell the story and photographs as the only evidence of the lives once lived. This is the haunting of erasure—the lingering of the little pieces of life that refuse to be forgotten as the world’s constant change forces them to disappear. Gaunt describes photographer Michael Danyliw’s work documenting the



Fig. 9 Picture of a festival in Brinksway. Michael Daniliw. 1962

Brinksway community before the houses, pubs, and schools were demolished to make way for a motorway. Years later, remnants of the community gathered on Facebook, sharing memories and pictures, sustaining what Gaunt calls “the impossible desire to save everyone who ever died from being forgotten.”⁵ This is the most precarious source of haunting: without material support, it exists only in memory, and when the last person who remembers dies, the ghost dies with them.

Perceiving Ghosts

Imagination

Bradley Garrett writes, “an embodied living history begins not with the site but with the visitor.”⁶ The visitor’s capacity to imagine the past is the foundation of all haunting. Imagination allows us to mentally time-travel, to fill the gaps left by absence, and to perceive ghosts through material traces.

Urban exploration exemplifies imagination-based haunting. Garrett defines it as the “discovery of unseen parts of the built environment with a focus on derelict places.” Urban explorers trespass into abandoned buildings—hospitals, asylums,



Fig. 10 Whittingham Asylum, December 2007. Photographed by urban explorer Winch, <http://www.thewinch.net>.

hotels—seeking what Garrett calls “haunted memory.”

These people enjoy going into abandoned, forgotten, and ruined buildings in order to read the stories of the lives that passed through them. They can interact with these spaces freely: without a specific narrative, without restriction, and with the freedom to engage with the building as they please.

“Images of bodies are often conjured up in ruins, particularly by people’s jettisoned clothing and empty chairs,”⁷ Garrett writes, as he wonders what happened to the children who left behind toys in an abandoned hospital.⁸ He talks about reading hospital logs and wondering what happened to the people who abandoned these things. There’s an archaeology to analysing waste—noting what people discard and what these

choices reveal about the lives once lived. In order to do all of this, explorers must imagine: to imagine the past, to mentally time-travel to the building’s prime, to its construction, to its inhabitants’ daily lives, and to their subsequent abandonment.

Urban exploration requires a specific sensibility: the ability to value what has been discarded, forgotten, and left to rot. This creates a form of empathy—but a limited one. Urban explorers develop emotional connection to buildings only in their “afterlife,” after they cease to function. They appreciate the aesthetic of decay without understanding the building’s lived history. Garrett advocates for leaving these buildings to decay naturally, arguing that conservation efforts would be inauthentic. When asked if the abandoned Kosmos Hotel

should be preserved, one explorer replied, “hell no, that place is a shithole.”

This reveals imagination’s fundamental limitation: appreciation without responsibility, sympathy without full empathy. You cannot be fully empathetic without knowing what you’re being empathetic to.

Perceiving Ghosts

Memory

Imagination summons ghosts, but memory gives them emotional connection. What if the urban explorers had been part of the building's life? What if their children had been born in that hospital or if they had attended that school now lying in ruins? Their understanding of the space would be completely different. Memory—whether personal or inherited—creates emotional stakes that pure imagination cannot achieve. Imagination unanchored by memory creates narratives susceptible to manipulation or distortion by external forces.

Brinksway shows how powerful memory can be even when the physical place is gone. Gaunt describes standing in a parking lot, knowing he could still locate the exact area where he was born despite the complete demolition of the neighbourhood.

The place is gone, paved over, yet his memory makes that parking lot meaningful.

Imagination can idealise past experiences, erasing their complexity and obscuring the realities they contained. He and the Brinksway Clan Facebook group work to keep the neighbourhood's memory alive because they fear what happens when no one remembers: complete erasure, not just of buildings but of the lives lived within them.

I understand what Gaunt fears because I've watched something similar happen in Espartaco, my grandparents' neighbourhood in Mexico City.

Like Brinksway, Espartaco was a working-class neighbourhood with a tight community. My grandmother and grandfather

both lived there before knowing each other, met there, and still have ties to the few remaining original residents. My father grew up there, first in my great-grandparents' house, then in the house my grandfather built just blocks away. I spent much of my childhood there myself.

But the neighbourhood my grandparents and father experienced no longer exists. The physical evidence is still there—the houses still stand, the streets follow the same paths—but the people are long gone. Espartaco's location, surrounded by major avenues, made it valuable. Gentrification came slowly. Original houses were sold and demolished for apartment buildings. The ones that remain rent at prices the original residents could never afford. The children I played with have scattered. The



Fig. 11 The community of Brinksway. Michael Daniliw 1962.

community that gave Espartaco its character has dissolved.

When my father and I walk through Espartaco, his memory transforms what would've only been houses into places with significance. "This is where my friend Arturo used to live—his mother passed away when we were in middle school," he'll say. Or: "This is where my elementary school teacher lived." Suddenly a house becomes a place where something happened, where someone lived, where loss occurred. His memory activates ghosts I could never see through imagination alone and empathy, grounded in memory, creates the care and ethical accountability that imagination

alone cannot generate.

Memory can be inherited. My father's stories about Espartaco don't just inform me—they let me see ghosts in a neighbourhood I never experienced in its original form.

When my grandparents point to a corner and tell me where their friends lived, where someone died, where my father fell from a window, they're giving me access to layers of meaning that imagination alone could never create. The physical traces provide evidence, but memory is what makes the material meaningful. Empathy requires knowledge of others' experiences—without memory, this understanding cannot exist, and ethical engagement is blocked.

Even Garrett talks about this in his urban exploration

article. He describes visiting an abandoned country club with friends. One friend loved the space particularly because he knew the story behind it: an eccentric billionaire had spent his entire fortune building it, and it operated for only a few months before abandonment. The story—the memory of what happened—added value that the decaying architecture alone couldn't provide.

Memory creates empathy because you project your own experiences onto someone else's past. I empathise with Brinksway's former residents because their experience is similar to what I've watched happen in Espartaco: the slow dissolution of community, the fear of being forgotten, the desperate effort to preserve memory when physical preservation fails or

when physical preservation happens but the community is displaced.

This shows memory's role and its limitations. Memory adds understanding—it turns observation into connection, appreciation into responsibility. It's a lens that makes ghosts clearer. But memory is fragile. It lives in people, and when those people leave or die, memory fades. The neighbourhood my grandparents knew in Espartaco is dying not because buildings are demolished but because the people who remember are disappearing. Physical preservation without the people who hold the memories produces only empty shells.

This is where cultural framework becomes necessary. Memory alone cannot keep ghosts alive across generations without cultural structures to preserve and transmit it.

Perceiving Ghosts

Culture

In certain areas of Mexico City, it is not uncommon to find outdoor parties. Celebrations close entire streets, with loud music and fireworks, sometimes in the middle of the week. Loud and noisy celebrations are almost a stereotype of Mexico, and I grew up with these habits.

Which is why it was shocking to me when a European friend visited during a family gathering. What I considered a small, intimate, and quiet party in my grandparents' garage was a big worry to my friend, who thought the neighbours would call the police. This type of gathering would likely not be allowed in Italy, but my perception of it was that of normalcy, not even considering that we could have been loud or disturbing.



Fig. 12 Closing streets to make parties are a common sight in Mexico's cities. Photo by the author.

My friend knew why the party was being made, and had met my grandparents and family before, but to her, the gathering felt wrong; she didn't have the same cultural framework I did.

Culture is a layer of understanding that pure memory cannot provide. It is like translating a joke—you can know all the words, have correct grammar and pronunciation, but the literal translation might not convey what makes it funny. The correct translation isn't the literal one, but the one that transmits the idea. Understanding why something matters requires cultural context, not just factual knowledge.

The same applies to ghosts in heritage. Imagination lets you project onto a space. Memory adds emotional connection. But the cultural framework provides the context that makes both meaningful—it shows you which traces matter, why spaces were used in certain ways, what practices signified. Without it, you might know the facts but miss what they mean.

Together, the three modes create full perception. Imagination summons the ghost, memory gives it weight, and cultural framework makes it legible.

3

Haunting in practice



Fig. 13 A family looking at the sights of Guanajuato. Photo by the author.

Haunting in Practice

The case of Guanajuato

In this chapter, haunting operates through Guanajuato's urbanism, illustrating the three sources of haunting: the essence of past inhabitants, folklore and collective memory, and the presence of absence. Each source is perceived through different combinations of imagination, memory, and culture, producing distinct ethical outcomes across the three case studies.

El Callejón del Beso demonstrates imagination constrained by memory and culture. The legend emerges from spatial traces (narrow balconies, class proximity) and persists



Fig. 13 Patrocinio alley, leading to El Callejón del Beso.

through collective memory and commercial transmission. The story retells the city's past: rich and poor, Spanish and indigenous, coexisted in the same space—close enough to kiss but not close enough to be together. Its commercial appeal sustains the legend but threatens the urban fabric grounding it.

The *callejoneadas* exemplify folkloric tradition and its relation to space. Through singing, joking, and storytelling, the performance narrates the city and its qualities. Space becomes a main character, and the audience experiences past and present coexisting. Memory and culture operate actively through the performance, whilst imagination is shaped by the *estudiantinas*' theatrical staging and audience participation.

The mummies museum demonstrates the presence of absence: despite displaying actual bodies, the museum erases identities, histories, and contexts. What remains is silence—no memory of who these people were, only morbid spectacle. This case analyses the destructive effects imagination can have when detached from culture and memory, how it can be exploited for commercial purposes, and how minimal cultural framing can fuel morbidity and disconnection.

Together, these cases reveal how different configurations of imagination, memory, and culture produce



Fig. 14 The streets of the centre of the city of Guanajuato.

radically different ethical outcomes within the same urban and cultural context. This chapter examines each case to demonstrate when haunting guides ethical heritage decisions and when it enables exploitation, ultimately arguing that memory's presence or absence determines whether commercial engagement sustains or destroys intangible heritage.

Haunting in Practice

Physical context

Guanajuato is a city located in central Mexico and is the capital of the state that shares its name. Situated within the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt at an elevation of 2,084 meters, the city belongs to what is known as the Bajío region, characterised by its broad plains, moderate altitude, and fertile soils.

However, unlike most cities in the Bajío region, the city is situated in a narrow, winding valley. Though several etymologies exist for the name, most sources agree that the meaning of the word stems from the Purépecha *kuanasi* and *uato*, meaning “frog hill”.

Map of Mexico



Map 1 Own elaboration with vector file from Freepik.

Although the region was inhabited by several nomadic tribes—namely the Chichimecas (or Teochichimecas) and the Guachichiles—these were mainly nomadic groups and no large urban settlement existed in the area prior to Spanish colonization.

Surrounded by hills, the area where the city is located was carved by the Río Guanajuato which now forms one of the city's most peculiar characteristics: its underground tunnels and passages, now used by pedestrians and cars.

Unlike the vast majority of Mexican cities, which follow the Spanish grid pattern, Guanajuato's layout adapted organically to its terrain. Its unique topography and rapid

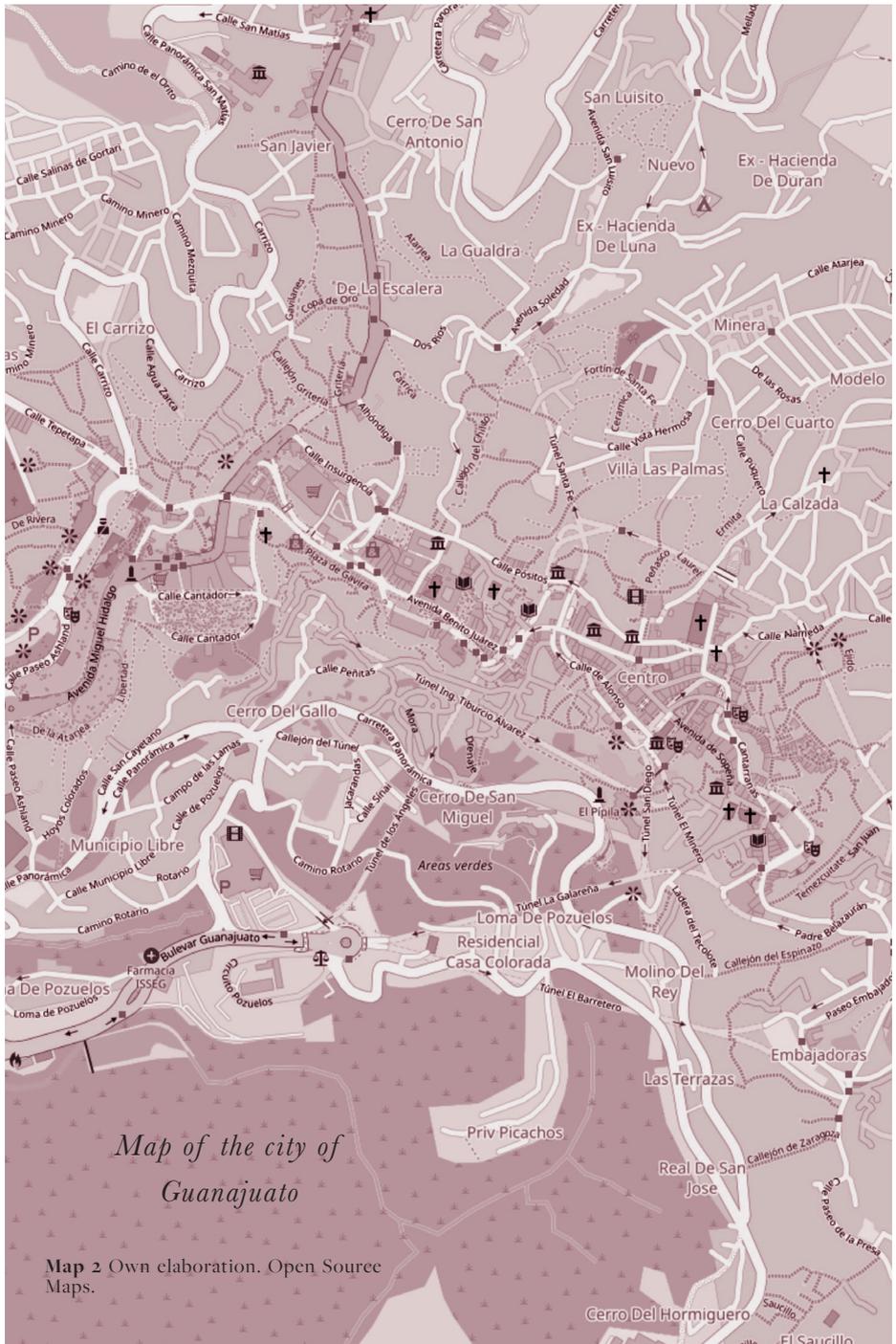
growth created the city's most representative characteristics: narrow alleys, irregular paths, and a series of buildings that appear stacked on top of each other.

The city comprises 26 *barrios*, 17⁸ of which are located in the Historic Centre, as well as several emblematic terraced piazzas such as Jardín de la Unión, Plaza de la Paz, and the Plaza de los Ángeles.

In July of 1982 a Presidential Decree recognised the Area of Historical Monuments (Zona de Monumentos Históricos) which holds most of the 833⁹ buildings of architectural importance cataloged by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH in Spanish).

The city's architecture reflects its most significant historic periods with examples from

the colonial period in a churrigueresque style that can be seen in the churches of La Valenciana (1765-1788) y La Compañía (1745-1765), both showcasing the city's wealthy mining period and several examples of neoclassical buildings such as the Teatro Juárez (1903) and Mercado Hidalgo (1910) built under the presidential mandate of President Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911).



Map of the city of Guanajuato

Map 2 Own elaboration. Open Source Maps.

Haunting in Practice

Historical context

The area that is now the city of Guanajuato was never densely populated.

Although little is known about the indigenous population of the land, archaeological investigations have shown traces going back to 600 BCE attributed to the Chupícuaro culture. Unlike the densely populated central Mexican highlands, this northern frontier zone—known as the Gran Chichimeca—lacked the major urban settlements characteristic of Mesoamerican civilizations.

By the time the Spaniards began to survey the area, it was inhabited by semi-



Fig. 15 Temple of the Church of “La Valenciana” decorated with gold. Photo by José Ignacio Lanzagorta.

nomadic Chichimeca groups, divided into Teochichimecas, Guamares, Guachichiles, and Otomíes, who survived as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Between 1526 and 1530, the Spanish began to survey the area, establishing small agricultural settlements in what is now the state of Guanajuato. The region’s fate changed between 1552 and 1556 when silver deposits were discovered in the hills.

According to local legend, a miner named Juan de Rayas, travelling from Mexico City to Zacatecas (then New Spain’s primary silver-producing region), discovered silver and alerted nearby settlers. Rayas

established the first mine in the area, La Mina de Rayas, naming it after himself. As additional silver deposits were found, the Real de Minas de Santa Fe de Guanajuato was officially founded in 1554. Between May and June of 1559 alone, more than 40 mines were registred. The settlement grew rapidly as migrants arrived from various regions to work in the mines.

The immense wealth generated by silver mining financed baroque masterpieces including the churches of La Compañía de Jesús (1745-1765) and San Cayetano also known as La Valenciana (1765-1788), considered masterpieces of Mexican Churrigueresque style.

During the 17th century, Guanajuato's mining operations expanded steadily, consolidating its position as a crucial supplier of silver to the Spanish crown. In 1619, the settlement received the title of "Villa de Santa Fé de Guanajuato," recognising its growing importance. As mining intensified, the indigenous population in the region decreased significantly, while Spanish and mixed-race populations became dominant. By this period, approximately 77% of mining workers were locally born, indicating the establishment of a stable resident workforce. The 18th century would elevate Guanajuato to even greater prominence. On December 8, 1741, King Felipe V conferred upon the settlement the title of "very noble and loyal city" in recognition of its abundant

mines of silver and gold, its considerable population growth, and its flourishing commerce. This royal recognition acknowledged Guanajuato as "one of the most useful mining centers of New Spain."

The late 18th century marked Guanajuato's apogee as a mining center. The discovery of the La Valenciana mine in 1767 proved transformative—between 1788 and 1810, this single mine produced approximately 60% of all Guanajuato's silver output. The city as a whole contributed roughly 25% of New Spain's total silver production, establishing it as one of the viceroyalty's most crucial economic centers. By the late 18th century, Guanajuato's population had swelled to approximately 70,000



Fig. 17 Alhóndiga de Granaditas built by order of the Intendente Juan Antonio de Riaño y Bárcena in 1793. Photo by author.

also known as the church of La Valenciana (1765-1788), stand as masterpieces of Mexican Baroque churrigueresque style. The construction of the Alhóndiga de Granaditas, begun in 1793 and completed in 1809, provided essential infrastructure for grain storage and commerce. Noble houses lined the winding streets, their elaborate facades testament to the fortunes made in silver. These monuments to mining wealth continue to define Guanajuato's skyline and urban character today, embodying the city's extraordinary 18th-century prosperity.

Yet this prosperity was punctuated by crisis. In 1760, a devastating flood ravaged the city. The expulsion of the Jesuits in 1767 sparked riots and social unrest. The famine of 1786, known as the “año del hambre,” brought widespread suffering. Despite these challenges, 1786 also marked an administrative elevation: Guanajuato was designated capital of one of New Spain’s twelve intendencias, with jurisdiction over a territory nearly equivalent to the present-day state. Intendente Juan Antonio de Riaño y Bárcena brought Enlightenment ideas to the city, promoting neoclassical

Fig. 18 Plazuela de San Fernando in the centre of Guanajuato. Photo by Rodrigo Peredo.



architecture and fostering an intellectual circle that included figures such as Alexander von Humboldt, Manuel Abad y Queipo, and José Mariano de Sardeneta y Llorente. This combination of mineral wealth, social turbulence, and Enlightenment thinking would profoundly shape Guanajuato's role in the coming struggle for independence.

On September 28, 1810, just twelve days after Miguel Hidalgo issued his call to arms in what is now Dolores Hidalgo, insurgent forces stormed the Alhóndiga de Granaditas. This violent confrontation became one of the insurgent army's first major victories against Spanish colonial authority and marked Guanajuato as the symbolic birthplace of Mexican Independence.

The Alhóndiga de Granaditas, which Lucas Alamán had jokingly called a “palace for the maize,” was one of the city's most ambitious architectural projects of the late 18th century. Intendente Juan Antonio de Riaño y Bárcena had commissioned the building as a public granary where grain could be stored to protect the population from famine during droughts or poor harvests. Construction began in 1793 and was completed in 1809, just one year before it would witness the violence of independence.

When news of Hidalgo's approach reached Guanajuato, Spanish authorities and wealthy residents—primarily the city's rich miners—took refuge in the Alhóndiga with their valuables and the city's treasury. Intendente Riaño himself led



Fig. 19 El Pipila monument. Photo by the author.

*There are
still many
granaries
to burn.*

*Inscription on
the monument to
El Pípila.*

the defense of the building he had commissioned.

The battle was bloody but decisive. According to legend, a miner named Juan José de los Reyes Martínez Amaro, known as “El Pípila,” tied a stone slab to his back for protection and set fire to the Alhóndiga’s main door, allowing insurgent forces to breach the fortress. Although some historians have questioned whether El Pípila existed, others maintain he was a real person—a miner who worked in Mellado. Today, a monument to El Pípila overlooks the city, commemorating this act that has become one of Guanajuato’s most celebrated independence legends.

The victory at the Alhóndiga was short-lived. Royalist forces under Félix María Calleja retook Guanajuato on November 25, 1810. According to local accounts, the city

faced potential massacre as retribution for the violence of September. Conde Manuel Flon was prepared to order the execution of civilians when Fray José María de Jesús Belaunzarán y Ureña, guardian of the Convento de San Diego, emerged holding a crucifix and physically stopped Flon's horse, pleading for mercy. His intervention is credited with saving the city from slaughter. Hidalgo himself was captured and executed in July 1811. Mexican independence would not be achieved until September 1821, more than a decade after the events in Guanajuato. Nevertheless, the attack on the Alhóndiga remained in collective memory as the symbolic beginning of the independence struggle, cementing Guanajuato's identity as "the Cradle of Independence.

Following independence in 1821, Guanajuato's mining industry entered a period of decline. Without Spanish capital and expertise, the mines never recovered their colonial-era prosperity. Several attempts were made to revive the industry through foreign investment, but most proved short-lived. By the late 19th century, American companies had acquired most of the major mines from the descendants of Guanajuato's once-wealthy mining families.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911), Guanajuato underwent a period of modernization. New infrastructure and technological improvements were introduced, and several important public buildings were constructed, including the Teatro Juárez and the Mercado Hidalgo. These buildings drew eclectically from various architectural traditions, representing a departure from the colonial baroque architecture that had previously dominated the city.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) had limited direct impact on Guanajuato, though the city felt its economic consequences. In the mid-20th century, the city underwent significant urban transformation. Several historical buildings in the center were demolished to make way for the Universidad de Guanajuato, which would become one of the city's most iconic institutions and shift the city's identity from a mining center toward university city.

Growing recognition of Guanajuato's architectural and historical significance led to formal protection measures. On July 14, 1982, a presidential decree established the Zona de Monumentos Históricos de Guanajuato, officially recognizing the need to protect the city's colonial architecture and urban fabric.

Five years later, on December 17, 1987, the city was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List as "Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines." The inscription was formally published by ICOMOS in September 1988, marking international recognition of Guanajuato's exceptional universal value as both a mining center and an architectural ensemble.



Fig. 20 Panoramic view of Guanajuato as seen from El Pípila monument.



Fig. 21 *Papel picado* decorating the Callejón del Beso. Photo by Laura Albanese, 2025.

Haunting in Practice

El Callejón del Beso

El Callejón del Beso sits in the heart of Guanajuato's historic centre, just steps from the Plaza de los Ángeles. Most visitors approach through the Patrocinio alley, where souvenir shops begin to cluster and signs point toward the famous site. The narrow passage slopes upward toward a small gathering point where three alleys converge¹⁰. When we arrived, the area wasn't crowded - a couple who looked American with their guide, a few other visitors - but the space still felt activated by the legend's presence. As I began studying the balconies, two girls pushed past,

asking us to move so we could photograph them on the third step- a ritual where couples kiss, wishing for good luck in their relationships.

At the convergence point, natural light still reached the open space. But as we moved toward the balconies themselves, the buildings drew inward and the atmosphere shifted. The passage darkened. A small twist near Carlos' house suggested another alley opening, but revealed only a door. The stairs began at odd angles where the walls met unevenly, though a sliver of light from Venado Street above suggested the passage eventually opened up. The narrowness forced a strange intimacy - whoever you walked with was suddenly uncomfortably close, pressed together by the architecture

itself.

Looking up, the two balconies came into focus, where they nearly touched. From below, Carlos' balcony was partially obscured - a wall with plants prevented any view into the space itself. Ana's balcony - on the left following the route from below - belonged to a salmon-pink house and protruded from its facade, protected by an ornate metal railing. Carlos' balcony, on the right, was built into its orange-colored building rather than projecting outward, enclosed by a low celosia wall decorated with flowers. Both buildings had a distinctive red stripe painted at ground level, about a meter high, with a different texture from the walls above. Both houses shared the same decorative motif: stacked semicircles in the celosia work. At their closest point, the

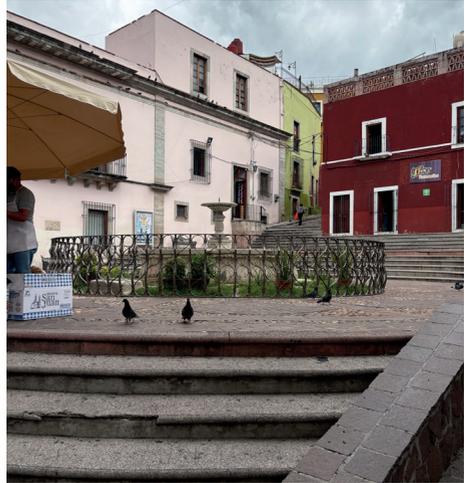


Fig. 22 Plaza de los Ángeles. Photo by author.



Fig. 22 14 types of kisses. A government sign encouraging tourists to try different types of kisses on the third step. Photo by author.

balconies were separated by approximately 60 centimeters - an arm's length¹¹. Carlos' sat slightly higher, perhaps 15 centimeters above Ana's.

Under Ana's balcony, two doors opened into the building - a larger, ornate one and a smaller, almost hidden entrance where a man stood inviting visitors to the souvenir shop inside. Following his invitation, I climbed a tight spiral staircase with minimal light guiding the way up. The room next to Ana's balcony was crowded with colorful tourist goods. Light streamed in from the balcony



Fig. 23 Patrocinio Alley announcing the proximity to El Callejón del Beso. Photo by author.



Fig. 24 Souvenir stores on the intersection between Patrocinio and El Callejón del Beso.

opening, where a woman explained we were free to look but would need to pay 50 pesos to take photographs.

After paying, I stepped onto the balcony. From there, the view was limited but telling: Carlos' balcony directly opposite, close enough to see into the souvenir shop on that side; the converging alleys below with their cluster of tourist shops; and above, two more stories of Ana's building rising into brighter light.

Though several versions of the legend exist¹², the one told on the site goes as follows: Ana was a rich Spanish woman with a strict father, and Carlos was a poor miner. Every night, they would meet on their balcony to profess their love to each other until they were caught by Ana's father, who said he would kill Ana if she continued to meet with Carlos. Ana



Fig. 25 El Callejón del Beso looking towards Ana and Carlos' balconies. Photo by author.

disobeys, not believing the severity of her father's words. They continue to meet and are found again by Ana's father, who, in a fit of rage, takes a knife and stabs Ana. Carlos is stunned, and as he watches his lover die, he kisses her hand. Ana's father, filled with guilt after watching his daughter die, takes the same knife and stabs himself.

This version reflects one of Guanajuato's defining characteristics: rich and poor were separated by class, but not necessarily by space. The city's geography forced a kind of physical proximity between social groups that remained divided socially. The balconies that inspired the name of the alley are so close that lovers could kiss across them, but that same proximity could never bridge the societal

distance between them. This contradiction—intimacy of space versus separation of class—is part of what gives the legend its emotional weight.

Other versions with little variation are also told on the site. In some, they claim Ana was to be married to an older, rich Spaniard and was to be sent back to Spain. Carlos, in desperation, tries everything to see his lover once more, gaining access to the balcony right in front. These versions vary as Carlos does not live in the house in front of Ana's, but rather uses the balcony to meet his lover one last time. Though popular on the site, no mention of the third-step ritual is made in any single version of the legend.

The proximity of the balconies gives the romantic tragedy

physical credibility. Tourists can see how the lovers might have reached across to touch hands. This spatial intimacy makes the narrative believable in a way that distinguishes it from countless other tragic love stories. Local tour guides report that oral transmission of legends within families is declining among younger generations. The tourist ritual—kissing on the third step, staging photographs across the balconies—has become the primary mechanism through which the story circulates. Commercial tourism now performs the cultural work that family storytelling once did. The legend persists not despite its commodification, but because of it.

El Callejón del Beso demonstrates how haunting operates through continuous

*The city's
geography
forced a kind
of physical
proximity
between social
groups that
remained
divided socially.*

performance rather than historical accuracy. The space is “haunted” not by actual events from the colonial era, but by the collective desire to believe in the story the architecture seems to tell. The narrow gap between balconies invites romantic imagination, and the tourist ritual sustains that imagination across generations. The legend shapes the character of the place, giving it meaning beyond its material form.

However, this preservation comes at a cost. When tourists step daily into the narrow alley, the once private and intimate space becomes public spectacle. The houses surrounding El Callejón del Beso, including those identified as “Ana’s” and “Carlos’s,” no longer function residentially. Souvenir shops, hotels, and

restaurants now occupy spaces that once housed families.

In 2023, the owner of the house designated as Ana’s complained about abusive behaviour from photographers who treated her private property as a public stage. The balcony remained closed for several days before she resorted to implementing a photography fee¹³. The space is preserved and the story circulates, but what began as a domestic space—a balcony where someone might hang laundry or water plants—has been transformed into a commercial asset that must be monetised to justify its continued existence.

The souvenir shops lining the alley represent the neighbourhood’s pragmatic response. If the space will inevitably be dominated

by tourism, at least the commercial infrastructure can generate income for those who remain. Yet this This solution acknowledges a fundamental shift: the legend persists, but the residential community that once animated these streets has largely disappeared. The architectural conditions that gave rise to the story—neighbours living in close proximity, domestic routines visible across narrow gaps—no longer exist as lived reality. but the social fabric has been replaced by commercial transactions.

El Callejón del Beso exemplifies haunting through folklore and collective memory—a legend that animates the built environment and gives it presence beyond its material form. The form of haunting, however, has fundamentally

transformed. In the past, the legend circulated through memory-based transmission—grandmothers telling children nearby about Ana and Carlos, or María Teresa and Alfonso, or whatever names the lovers were called, their forbidden romance sealed forever in the city’s memory by one last display of love. Although the original storytellers are long gone from the area, the echoes of their storytelling reside in the place it originated from. What was once memory-based has become imagination-based haunting, sustained primarily through tourist ritual and commercial performance rather than familial transmission.

Yet perhaps this legend can survive the shift precisely because it may have always been imagination. Unlike many other Guanajuato legends



Fig. 26 Souvenir store next to El Callejón del Beso. Photo by author.

where fact and fiction intertwine and actual historical characters are mentioned, this story cannot be proven. The houses, according to INAH's catalogue of heritage buildings, date from the 19th century¹⁴. Unless they are from the very early 1800s, there is little likelihood the events occurred during the golden era of mining with Ana as a Spanish lady. The story persists not because it is historically true, but because the spatial conditions enable perpetual projection. It does not need anyone's memory to exist—it just needs a place to reside. As long as the balconies exist, the story will be told and people will come from all over to hear it. The question remains whether this constitutes sustainable haunting or merely the preservation of narrative infrastructure without the social fabric that once gave it deeper communal meaning.



Fig. 27 Carlos' balcony as seen from El Callejón del Beso.



Fig. 28 Ana and Carlos' balcony as seen from below.



Figs. 28&29 Stairs climbing up to Ana's balcony. A sign can be seen offering a photography service. Photo by author.



Fig. 33 El Callejón del Beso intersecting with Calle Venado.



Fig. 30 El Callejón del Beso as seen from Ana's balcony.



Fig. 34 Carlos' balcony as seen from Ana's. A sign states the \$50 price of taking a picture.



Fig. 31 Measuring the distance between the two balconies. Photo by a photographer on the site.



Fig. 32 Looking up to the balconies from below. The third step can be seen painted in red. Personal collection.

Haunting in Practice

Callejoneadas

On the evening of my second day in Guanajuato, I participated in two different performances. The first was a “Tour of Legends” inside the Hotel La Casona de Don Lucas, once the house of Lucas Alamán, an important politician, historian, and naturalist in both Guanajuato’s and Mexico’s history. Several of the city’s legends were reenacted in a comedic manner for a family audience.

The hotel was used as a stage without any alterations to its physical qualities. A small hall leading to the bathroom served as a changing room for the actors, the upstairs

balcony that led to guest rooms served as theatre boxes, the lobby or inner patio served as the stage, and the stairs connecting to an underground level served as exits for the actors. The hotel exemplified what was later described to me by the director of the theatrical company as an “*espacio itinerante*”¹⁵ or itinerant space—a space that allows actors to perform without the need for a formal stage. The odd morphology of the hotel served as a small-scale example of what I would later experience with the *callejoneadas*.

Callejoneadas are a tradition deeply rooted in Guanajuato since the mid-20th century in which an *estudiantina*—a band of students from the city’s university dressed in traditional costumes—tours the city at night while singing and joking.

They typically take tourists through the city’s narrow alleys and plazas whilst discussing the city’s history and legends. This tradition transforms the centre of Guanajuato into a stage, filling the alleys with song and laughter and, in traditional Mexican fashion, with partying.

The *callejoneada* I attended began at the Plaza de la Paz in front of the church of the Basílica Colegiata de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato. It was sold to us as the last tour of the night. A band of seven or eight people began playing traditional Mexican songs as people gathered in a circle to listen. A group of around thirty people formed whilst the band played and the *juglar* told jokes.

The tour began as they directed us towards an alley, with people



Fig. 35 Lobby of the hotel “La Casona de Don Lucas”

singing and dancing as we followed. Drinks were sold to us by two girls dressed in the *estudiantina*'s uniform. The audience, largely Mexican, cheered as they recognised the songs being played. We stopped in strategic locations: the only well-lit area in an alley, stairs where the band stood so the audience could see from behind, an area where alleys converged, and finally the Plaza de los Ángeles, where the tour ended.



Fig. 36 *Estudiantina* singing at the Plaza de la Paz. The juglar can be seen at the front, lost in the music. Photo by the author.

As the band sang and played music, the joker's job was to keep the audience engaged through jokes, laughter, and storytelling. Neighbours opened their windows, gazing towards the band and singing along. When we reached the stairs I mentioned earlier, he separated the group into men and women, taking us women to a well-lit area beneath a balcony.

As he explained how *estudiantinas* began as a way for men to bring musicians to serenade their loved ones, describing the tradition of *serenatas*, he attempted to sell us pins that we could give to the men who were waiting for us. After some of the women purchased them, he called in



Fig. 37 Small and dark alleys created a forced proximity between audience members. Photo by the author.

the men, who arrived from a poorly lit alley that had escaped my notice. The men came holding roses for the women, whilst the women pinned the purchased pins to their chests, reenacting a tradition of the *estudiantinas*.

As we finished the tour, the band played its final song and the juglar invited us to sit on the steps of the Plaza de los Ángeles. He proceeded to select members of the audience to help him reenact the city's most famous legend: that of the lovers in El Callejón del Beso. The tour ended amongst laughter and jokes, with the audience

feeling light-hearted as they continued their evening.

The *callejoneada* demonstrated how the architectural and urban elements of Guanajuato allowed the space to become more than a stage—the city became part of the performance itself. By beginning the tour in a large plaza, the *estudiantina* called people to gather in a circle. The backdrop of the Basilica served as a dramatic counterpoint to the silliness of the jokes. The tour then led us through a small alley, creating a sense of intimacy not only with the band but with fellow audience members. The first few songs were not received with the same emotion as later ones; there was a shyness in the audience when the tour first began. Walking through tight, narrow, sometimes steep or poorly lit alleys made

the group grow closer whilst simultaneously loosening up.

The band exploited the city's theatrical atmosphere by playing more upbeat songs in areas that were less constricted or better lit. The irregular way in which the alleys presented themselves gave the audience a sense of unexpectedness—you never knew which turn would come next. Balconies along the route served as a reminder that the audience was not just the people on the streets but the people in the buildings, which fostered a sense of connection to the city and its inhabitants.

The moment they divided the audience between men and women demonstrated how easily the city could function as a stage: numerous converging alleys presented opportunities for entrances and exits. The

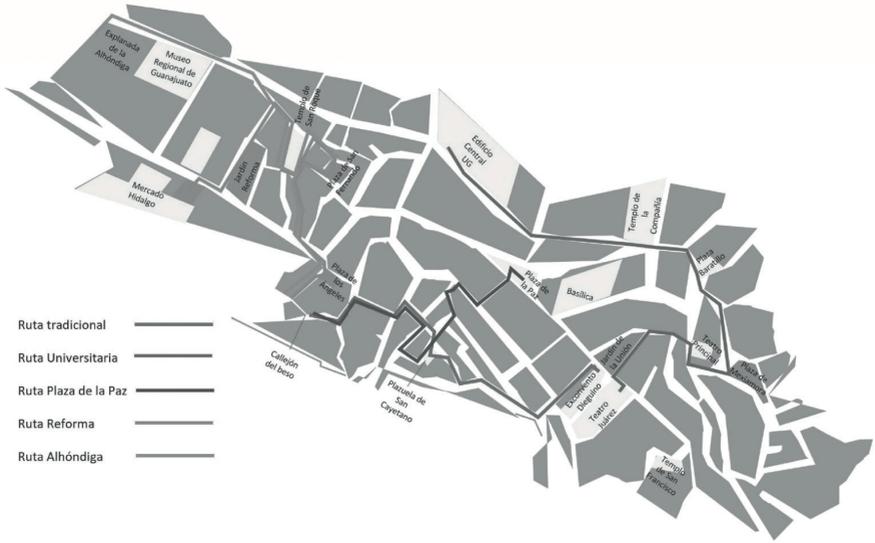


Fig. 38 Authorised routes of the *callejoncadas*. Gustavo Galván Cázares.

lighting made the entrance unexpected; the irregularity of the alley meant the women could not see where the men came from. An element of surprise.

Areas like the Plaza de los Ángeles presented the band with an opportunity to perform in a more traditional manner—this was the moment when the city’s performance stopped and the *estudiantina* regained its protagonism. An actual reenactment took place after the band’s final performance, which the city could not literally participate in.

The performance left me, like other audience members, with a light heart and a sense of pride in this distinctly Mexican tradition. Yet this emotional resonance existed alongside a

commercial reality that cannot be ignored. The *callejoneada* operates within a regulatory framework that determines who can perform, where, when, and at what cost—a structure that has transformed what was once a spontaneous university tradition into a managed tourist experience.

From the moment one enters the city centre, invitations to join *callejoneadas* are constant. Numerous vendors dressed in traditional *estudiantina* attire approach tourists attempting to sell tours. According to a study carried out by Natalia Bieletto Bueno and Gustavo Galván Cázares¹⁶ *callejoneadas* have been heavily institutionalised by the municipal government. Limitations have been imposed on the number of *estudiantina* groups, the number of tourists

who can join tours, the tour routes, and the number of groups that can perform simultaneously. A percentage of the *estudiantinas*' earnings must be paid to the municipal government, and groups have reportedly resorted to bribing inspectors to be allowed to play beyond permitted hours. Restrictions have also been imposed on other musicians in the area, creating spaces where only *estudiantinas* can perform.

The tour cost us 150 pesos¹⁷ per person, with a discounted rate as it was low season and offered as the last performance of the night. Throughout our days in Guanajuato, we were quoted prices ranging from 200 to 300 pesos¹⁸. During the performance, girls from the *estudiantina* offered drinks provided by a local bar located

along the tour route. The sale of roses and pins represented yet another layer of commercialisation embedded within what initially appeared as spontaneous tradition.

According to interviews conducted by Bieletto Bueno and Galván Cázares¹⁹, neighbours in the area hold mixed opinions on the *estudiantina* performances. Some remain tolerant, whilst others assert that the tradition has become “pure business.”

The concern about noise remained constant throughout my experience of the tours. Although several neighbours came to windows and sang along, suggesting participation, enduring performances every night likely proves taxing over time. Bieletto Bueno and Galván

Cázares explain how the delimitation of areas where groups can perform has created a hierarchy of neighbourhoods within the centre. Only certain neighbourhoods host these tours, bearing the acoustic burden of nightly performances. The municipal government has attempted to address noise concerns through regulation: limiting the number of *estudiantina* groups, establishing specific performance hours, designating different routes, and restricting group sizes. However, these controls have been pushed to their limits by the volume of tourists the city receives, forcing *estudiantina* groups to resort to bribing inspectors to accommodate larger groups and extend performance hours beyond permitted times. The limitations imposed on other types of



Fig. 39 Public performances in Guanajuato are highly institutionalised and festival-led, leaving little room for spontaneous, unauthorised use of public space. Photo by author.

performances, combined with the fees *estudiantinas* must pay to the municipality, have contributed to a form of spatial control that privileges certain performers whilst excluding others.

The issue, as neighbours interviewed by Bieletto Bueno and Galván Cázares noted, is that the tradition has become extremely business oriented. The economic logic is straightforward: if demand exists and performances generate income, supply will follow regardless of regulatory constraints. What began as a university tradition rooted in local social life has been transformed into a commercial service responding to tourist demand, with regulatory frameworks attempting—with limited success—to manage the resulting tensions

between economic activity and residential quality of life.

The first performance demonstrated why the *callejoneadas* work so effectively: they ground memory in the space that generated it. Whilst the hotel possessed qualities akin to the city—irregularities, balconies, unusual entrances of light, random accesses—it detached the legends from authenticity by converting them into performances that could take place anywhere. The *callejoneadas*, by contrast, require the city as protagonist; movement through space is integral to the performance. Without Guanajuato's narrow alleys, dramatic darkness, and colonial backdrop, they would be mere theatre. The hotel re-enactment failed because imagination remained restricted

by lack of spatial memory. The interview with the theatrical company revealed this tension: they were uncertain whether spaces generated the legends or legends were arbitrarily attached to spaces. These legends require place to function as heritage. Otherwise, they are simply stories.

The *callejoneadas* demonstrate how traditions resist *patrimonialisation* through continuous evolution. Despite municipal efforts to regulate and categorise the practice, it continues adapting: repertoires change, jokes stay contemporary, commercial elements integrate. This evolution sustains both authenticity and marketability. What began as university serenades and legend re-enactments has transformed

into performances mixing song, comedy, and storytelling, yet the core practice remains recognisable. The tradition persists not through exoticism but through connection to living Mexican cultural practices.

All three modes operate simultaneously. The *estudiantina* incites imagination through period costumes, poetry, and dramatic staging, rooted in a cultural tradition specific to Guanajuato's memory. The mix between Spanish origins and Mexican traditional songs with contemporary joking and storytelling keeps the culture in a past-present symbiosis. The performance requires the city's narrow alleys, colonial backdrop, and dramatic darkness—it is inseparable from the place that shaped it.

What makes this ethically distinct from both El Callejón del Beso and the mummies museum is that all three modes remain active and balanced. Unlike El Callejón, where commercialisation threatens the residential fabric grounding the legend, the *callejoneadas*' commercial success enables evolution—performers professionalise whilst the tradition adapts. Unlike the mummies museum, where memory has been systematically severed, the *callejoneadas* maintain connection to their origins: students still perform, songs still transmit cultural memory, the city's architecture still shapes experience. The tradition remains authentic precisely because it evolves rather than remaining static as a *patrimonialised* performance. Its ability to evolve has kept it true to itself.

Haunting in Practice

El Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato

As we left the centre on our second day, we headed towards the Museum of the Mummies. The drive wound through residential streets and, though not far from the centre, felt more distant than it was. As the narrow streets widened, views of the mountains opened up. Houses stacked on the hillsides in tiers of colour.

The museum announced itself with a large, mostly empty parking lot surrounded by souvenir shops - most of them closed. A small fountain marked the centre of the space. The building itself was white and simple, its purpose declared in big black letters



Fig. 40 Sign showing the way to the Mummies Museum. Photo by Laura Albanese.

on the wall: “Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato.” Another sign in the same style, bilingual this time, pointed towards the entrance. Louvre shutters filtered light through several openings along the facade. Red trim outlined the walls, and behind, a tall brick wall rose into view.

Inside the entrance, we reached the ticket office. A long hallway with queue railings suggested crowds, though the space was nearly empty when we visited. The entrance tickets were priced as follows: 106 pesos for a regular ticket, 62 pesos for children, teachers, and students, 32 pesos for the elderly, and free entrance was offered to disabled people and citizens of Guanajuato. An extra fee of 38 pesos had to be paid in order to take pictures²⁰. The museum offered a “Death Cult” exhibition which, being unrelated to the

mummies, we decided not to take.

As we passed the turnstiles, the area darkened. Little light was reflected on the walls, all painted black, with most of it being directed towards the mummies and some of it coming indirectly from the ceiling. Tall groin vaults shaped the structure of the ceiling. The first room was a long hallway where the first couple of remains were exhibited.

The tour guide began by telling us that, contrary to popular belief, only one of these mummies was actually buried, while the rest were placed in crypts in the Santa Paula Cemetery, located behind the museum. After five years, if the perpetuity fee was not paid by the family members, the bodies were exhumed and moved to the

*Man who walks
in search of a
failed chimera,
here life ends,
and eternity
begins.*

*Inscription on
wall, Museo de
las Momias de
Guanajuato.*



Fig. 41. 175 Mummies, Panteón Municipal, Guanajuato circa 1920. INAH. Colección Culhuacán.

ossuary. The lack of oxygen, the wooden caskets and the proper airflow generated the appropriate conditions to dry the bodies, which preserved them.

The next room held the body of Remigio Leroy, a French doctor, one of the only bodies to have clothes and the first to be exhumed. It is one of the few bodies that has been identified and whose story is told. The tour guide noted that the perpetuity fee was a small amount. "Look at the body," he said, stating that the clothes, the shoes and his overall appearance told us he had money. "He was abandoned by his family," he said. This became a recurring theme throughout his explanations.

Continuing his explanation, the guide directed us towards

the pictures on the walls. The lack of light made it so he had to pull out a lamp in order to reveal the pictures to us. We were told about the original way the bodies were exhibited - how people bribed the workers of the cemetery to let them see the already famous mummies. A picture of a man kissing one of the mummies illustrated the disrespectful way in which the first visitors behaved.

While some of the bodies had names, most of them were purely for identification purposes. Nicknames like "*La China*", "*El ahogado*" or "*El apuñalado*" stood out from names like "Flores" or "Oralia" (in quotes signalling identification purposes). While the guide attempted to humanise some of the remains, most of his explanations held some sensationalism. "What



Fig. 42. Teacher Lauro Aguirre, kissing a mummy circa 1920. INAH. Casasola Colection.

is the stain in this man's stomach? You may ask – he was stabbed.”

Moving deeper into the museum, raised glass cases displayed the most shocking part of the exhibition. Several babies, most dressed as saints or virgins, were on display. Their tiny hands still preserved, their nails still visible. Behind them, several pictures depicted the relationship past people had with child mortality, some showing mothers holding their deceased baby. “It was a way to remember them, to say goodbye,” the guide said. He pointed us towards one of the babies dressed as a saint. The material of their clothes looked recent. He pointed towards the material of one baby's diaper, making us realise it was made of plastic, showcasing its proximity to our era. “Their

families are still alive; the fact that they're here doesn't mean they don't have families,” he stated as he reminded us again of their abandoned condition.

Right in front of these babies stood the “smallest mummy in the world.” Although it had lost its title according to the guide, the tiny fetus still contrasted with the body of its mother lying behind. The guide explained that the fetus, of around six months of gestation, was extracted from its mother's body after death.

Though most of the people died of natural causes, a couple had violent deaths, including that of Ignacia Aguilar de Chirilo, who, according to the guide, died after a cataleptic attack made her family members bury her alive, subsequently killing her.



Fig. 43. A baby dressed as a saint. Photo by M. Wright for National Geographic.



Fig. 44 The mummies' display was changed against INAH's advice in 2024. The damages reported include a severed arm and a neck fracture. Photo by A. Navarro for Excelsior.

One of the final bodies we were shown was that of a man whose finger was missing. The guide framed it as one of the disrespectful acts carried out by the first visitors, stating the finger was taken as a morbid souvenir.

The guide reminded us that the bodies exhibited were abandoned and if they were to be claimed by the families, they would be removed from the exhibition and returned. The tour ended on an earnest note with the guide reminding us to live fully and to tell our loved ones how much they mean to us. "Bringing flowers when they're gone means nothing - do it while they're here," he finished. Other memento mori poetry written on the walls echoed his feelings throughout the exhibition. The exhibition's linear route lasted no longer than 25 minutes.

At the end of the last room, the exit opened back into daylight. Some visitors appeared disturbed, but most seemed unmoved. A child ran between the display cases while parents did nothing. Some visitors took pictures. Others looked away, troubled.

The commercial narrative of death

The mummies museum demonstrates how narrative treatment of the dead serves institutional and commercial functions rather than purely commemorative ones. The museum makes a deliberate choice to maintain objectifying distance rather than fostering empathetic engagement.

Different narrative contexts produce fundamentally different relationships to the dead. In Gabriel Medrano de Luna's book, "*Como me lo contaron se los cuento*"²¹, the literary treatment of mummies can be genuinely empathetic. One legend describes a man spending

To the right are piled thousands of human bones [...] of those who doubted everything, even their own existence; of those who loved deeply and died loving; of those who hated, and hating descended into the grave; [...] for when earthly life comes to an end, one arrives at the single truth: that we are nothing.

Carlos de Gante, Cuentos Históricos Guanajuatenses.²⁴

the night in the underground crypts, reflecting on his own mortality while hearing the cries of the deceased - their fears, unfinished business, and final experiences. This represents narrative as a tool for contemplation and connection across time.

The museum's presentation operates differently. It deliberately maintains objectifying distance through sensational nicknames like "the witch" or "the pregnant woman." These labels provide just enough narrative interest to engage visitors while preventing the full humanisation that would

make the exhibition ethically uncomfortable. This is not an inevitable outcome but a deliberate institutional choice. The museum could theoretically reframe itself as a contemplative space focused on mortality and dignity - similar to certain ossuaries or catacombs that create respectful engagement with death. However, it actively chooses spectacle over contemplation because morbid curiosity drives higher visitation numbers and greater commercial success.

The museum's institutional contradictions reveal these priorities clearly. A *memento*



Fig. 45 The mummy known as “The Witch” who, until 2020 was exhibiten inside a cage. Author unknown.

mori inscription on the wall reads “how you look, I looked, and how I look, you will look” - a gesture toward dignified reflection on mortality. Yet this is immediately contradicted by actual practice: a vitrine displaying dead infants in traditional costumes, photography fees that commercialise the dead, poor museography with inadequate lighting and minimal information, and documented cases of physical neglect including one mummy losing an arm due to improper handling²².

The tour guide interview confirmed morbidity as the primary driver of visitation. He candidly admitted that over 50% of visitors come out of morbid curiosity rather than scientific or historical interest. His attempts to defend the museum revealed the ethical

tension he cannot fully resolve. When asked if invented narratives harm the people the mummies once were, he dismissed concerns by saying they are “abandoned” bodies and the stories are “harmless fantasy.”²³ This reasoning is ethically problematic - abandonment by family does not justify any form of treatment. If anything, it makes respectful stewardship more important, not less.

The guide’s contradictions became more apparent when discussing institutional care. He first claimed the museography was respectful, then immediately admitted it “leaves much to be desired.” He acknowledged that despite the mummies being Guanajuato’s primary tourist attraction, the authorities do not give them the treatment or maintenance

they deserve. His deflection when visitors complained about disrespect - “but you paid to be here” - reveals the complicity embedded in the system. Both staff and visitors participate in a structure that requires objectification to function commercially, and acknowledging the full ethical problem would implicate everyone involved.

This creates a system where commercial success and institutional neglect coexist. The museum profits substantially from morbid fascination but does not reinvest adequately in preservation, proper museography, or respectful presentation. The bodies generate revenue while suffering physical deterioration and continued indignity.



Fig. 46 Crypts at the Panteón de Santa Paula where the bodies from the Mummies Museum were exhumed from.

A ghostly imbalance

The museum does display cultural framework, but it is limited, detached from memory, and presented in ways that maximise imagination for profit. The bodies of children dressed as saints reflect a cultural practice: religious parents hoped their unbaptized offspring could attract the pity of the saint and be allowed into heaven. These bodies, displayed alongside heartfelt photographs of families mourning their dead children, seem almost frivolous when juxtaposed with the sensationalised “smallest mummy in the world.” Culture is presented as an exotic attribute that enhances appeal instead

Fig. 47 Abandoned sepulchral slab inscribed with two names, likely moved after the expiration of the burial period and subsequent exhumation. Photo by the author.



of a way of contextualizing the ghosts of memory. This isn't a coincidental omission—it is a systemic and intentional practice.

Oehmichen-Bazán²⁵ (2013) identifies how tourism commodifies otherness: tourists seek the exotic as entertainment, and the industry provides it as spectacle. The cultural context presented in the museum works as an enhancement of the mummies' exoticism, purposely detaching them from memory to turn them into a profitable object for tourism. This model operates by exploiting morbid curiosity while limiting emotional connection. This is demonstrated by the museum's own origins and its unsustainable management practices. The bodies are commodified to a degree that

requires complete detachment from their previous humanity.

The museum is managed by the Municipality of Guanajuato and supported by experts at the National Institute of Anthropology and History at a consulting level; this means management decisions are carried out entirely by the Municipality, while advice from INAH functions as mere suggestion. A 2020 agreement (convenio) formalised this structure²⁶, and subsequent incidents demonstrate its dysfunction. In 2023, the Municipality transported several bodies to Mexico City for a tourism fair without consulting INAH. When INAH later reviewed media photographs, they observed what appeared to be fungal proliferation on at least one body, publicly noting it was

“worrying and strange” they had not been called for assessment before the transport²⁷. Other discrepancies appeared in 2017 when INAH noted a body was missing an arm after an exhibition move; the museum’s management claimed the arm had been missing before the move²⁸, revealing either poor documentation or a lack of proper accountability. This demonstrates that detachment from humanity extends beyond museography and narrative into the very management of the bodies themselves. Those charged with caring for the remains operate within a system that benefits from—and therefore perpetuates—their objectification.

This detachment has economic origins. The bodies were exhumed in the first place due to non-payment of perpetuity

fees—families who could not afford to maintain burial plots. The museum now inverts this logic: bodies that were removed because they cost money now generate money for the municipality. The economic commodification is not new; only who profits has changed. Memory is severed not just conceptually but materially: these bodies represent Guanajuato’s working class whose poverty excluded them from permanent burial and now funds the city’s tourism economy.

The bodies are not only conceptually detached from their origins—there is physical detachment as well. Although the museum sits adjacent to the Santa Paula Cemetery, no direct access connects them. The cemetery entrance is on the opposite side of the



Fig. 48 Main entrance to the Panteón Municipal de Santa Paula. Photo by the author.

museum, reached via one of the few car-centric roads in the city, with no clear signage to guide visitors.

Marta Cuadras, writing for National Geographic España, described the museum as a site museum that could reveal “the realities of people from the 19th and early 20th centuries: what they ate, what they did, how they lived, and how they died.”²⁹ Yet this potential was so absent from the museum’s narrative that it had escaped even my perception. Despite vast potential to narrate Guanajuato’s social history, the museum prioritises sensationalism over historical significance, erasing the bodies’ value as evidence.

This is an intentional choice. Connecting the museum to the cemetery would require

acknowledging that the exhibited bodies belong to the same category as those being mourned next door—deceased people deserving dignity. Spatial separation enables visitors to experience morbid curiosity without confronting the ethical reality that these were people, not specimens. The architecture of detachment serves commercial logic: empathy is less profitable than spectacle.

This museum is a cautionary tale for Guanajuato itself: the realities of a working class turned into profitable tourism objects through their exoticism, aesthetic appeal, and cultural significance. Guanajuato risks having the rich memory that ties imagination and culture severed, turning the city into a theme park—an empty shell of its once magnificent past.

Haunting in Practice

Synthesing Guanajuato

These cases exemplify haunting through its different sources—the essence of past inhabitants, folklore and collective memory, and the presence of absence—as well as the way these are perceived through imagination, memory, and culture. These perceptions shape how ghosts interact with heritage and influence preservation decisions made by those managing it. In the case of El Callejón del Beso, the legend is validated by the traces in the city: the proximity validates the image of two lovers, the shape and decoration of the houses validate the potential for them being inhabited by



Fig. 49 The hills seen from the Alhóndiga de Granaditas. Photo by the author.

Guanajuato is orderly disorganised.

*Tour guide at the Museo de las
Momias de Guanajuato.*

poor or rich people.

Imagination in this case is constrained by the city's memory: this story could have happened because it was a reality in the city's past. People came from Spain, miners became rich overnight, indigenous and Spanish coexisted. This is not an unfathomable narrative.

The place preserves authenticity by remaining as close as possible to that reality: the collective image of a neighbourhood where two lovers share a kiss across two balconies requires the place to be preserved as a neighbourhood.

Despite the commercial aspects of the place, it still feels like a neighbourhood. Yes, several of the places that

were once houses now serve a commercial purpose and cater towards tourists, but a street away, the intimacy of the narrow alleys still exists. What survives is the spatial framework and narrative. What is threatened is the residential community whose daily life once grounded the legend in lived experience.

Callejoneadas remain a living tradition, evolving continuously through marketability—changing jokes, music repertoires, and complementary sales (beer, flowers, pins). Yet current management has proved inadequate in handling mass tourism and public space sharing. There is an ethical tension between preserving the current tradition and enabling new ones: whilst *callejoneadas* are privileged due to their



Fig. 50 *Estudiantinas* at Jardín Unión. Photo by the author.

revenue generation, other public performances must fight for the right to use public space. The local government charging fees to *estudiantina* owners raises further questions about public space commodification. Both the *callejoneadas* and El Callejón del Beso, however, remain connected to the spaces that generated them. Neither would function without the city itself, generating a symbiotic relationship between space, legend, and commercial success.

The mummies museum, by contrast, demonstrates what happens when public participation is excluded entirely. Prioritising institutional management above citizen interests creates an unsustainable mode of preservation: one that maximises imagination

for profit, exoticises culture in order to objectify it, and severs memory to reduce empathy.

The biggest difference amongst the three case studies is the degree of stakeholder participation. The houses in El Callejón del Beso are owned and managed by citizens, the callejoneadas groups are owned by citizens and supervised by the municipality, and the mummies museum is entirely managed by the municipality with advice from national government institutions. Citizens are the main carriers of memory—they shape it and transmit it. Citizens need to participate in the preservation of their own historical narratives for memory to be appropriately preserved. However, the issue extends beyond citizens versus municipalities.

Ethical heritage preservation requires involvement from all stakeholders: citizens, local businesses, and institutional management.

The conflicts at El Callejón del Beso show what happens when businesses conflict with citizens due to lack of institutional management. Callejoneadas demonstrate institutional management conflicting with local business, where lack of citizen participation in decision-making turns tradition into privatisation of public space. The mummies museum exhibits a lack of both local business involvement and citizen participation, driving complete detachment from the city and its inhabitants—both spatially and narratively.

Analysing the case studies

reveals a clear pattern: none of them are properly managed. Although El Callejón del Beso and the callejoneadas appear better integrated at a surface level, both face significant issues. El Callejón del Beso confronts the threat of gentrification and thematisation, detaching citizens from the urban fabric that shaped the legend which made it famous. The callejoneadas have created a profit system that privatises public space and determines who can use it.

The three modes of perception—imagination, memory, and culture—present in all three cases reveal what happens when imbalanced: memory can be dramatised into sellable stories, imagination can detach heritage from materiality and turn it into exploitable objects, and culture can be exoticised as spectacle. The key in all three cases is how they balance heritage preservation with commercialisation. Guanajuato is experiencing a transition from mining city to tourist destination, facing the challenges of turning its heritage into a product to be sold.

4

Managing Heritage

Managing Ghosts

Management Structure and Institutional Tensions

On July 14, 1982, a presidential decree established the Zona de Monumentos Históricos de Guanajuato, officially recognizing the need to protect the city's colonial architecture and urban fabric. Five years later, on December 17, 1987, the city was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List as "Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines." The inscription was formally published by ICOMOS in September 1988, marking international recognition of Guanajuato's exceptional universal value as both a mining center and an architectural ensemble³⁰. UNESCO World



Fig. 51 Protected area of the Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines. UNESCO. Date unknown.

Heritage Status and Heritage Management

In 1988, the Historic Town of Guanajuato and Adjacent Mines were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List. The inscribed property covers 190 hectares, including both the urban area with its unique examples of colonial, baroque and neoclassical architecture and mining infrastructure such as “La Boca del Infierno”, a mineshaft plunging over 600 meters. The cultural landscape includes roads, bridges, tunnels, and the underground river system shaped by mining activity.

Heritage management in Guanajuato involves overlapping jurisdictions that create both coordination and conflict. The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia

(INAH), under federal authority since 1982, holds primary legal responsibility for the historic town³¹. However, the 2023 UNESCO Periodic Report identifies major deficiencies in INAH’s capacity and resources to enforce legislation within the World Heritage property.

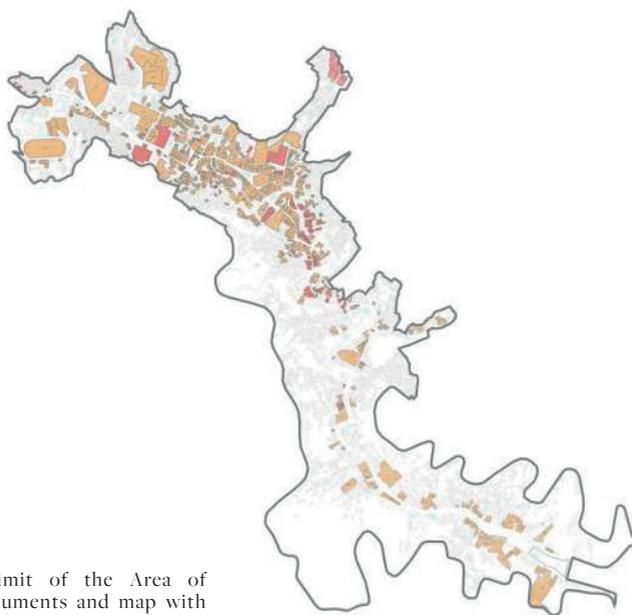
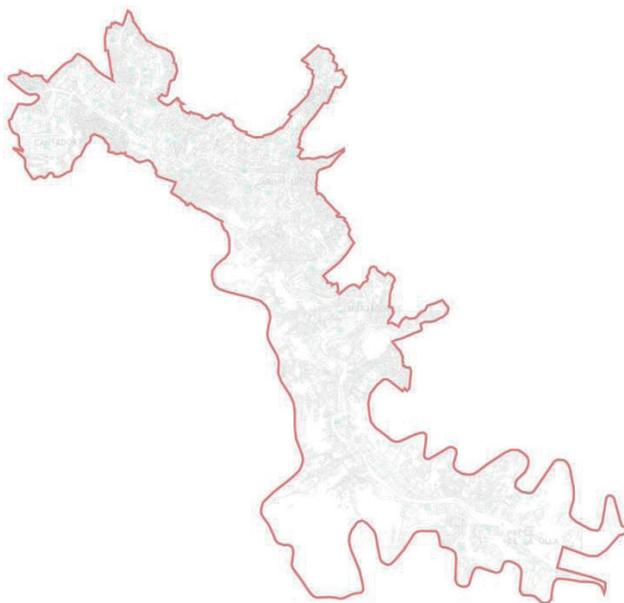
The Municipality of Guanajuato Capital operates the Management Unit of the Historic Centre (established 2018, with INAH agreement signed 2019), which functions as the primary operational body for day-to-day heritage management. Significantly, the municipality also operates the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato independently of INAH—a source of ongoing jurisdictional tension that exemplifies the institutional complexity.

Property ownership exists under a mixture of federal, municipal, and private hands.

Approximately 830 buildings catalogued as “*inmueble catalogado*” include both public and private holdings, complicating coordinated conservation³². The tourism sector—including callejoneada performers, museum operators, and hotel owners—represents another major stakeholder group that benefits economically from heritage while simultaneously exerting pressure through visitor volume and commercial adaptation.



Fig. 52 A plaque with the inscription “*Inmueble catalogado*” on a building in the centre of Guanajuato. Photo by the author.



Maps 3&4 Limit of the Area of Historical Monuments and map with catalogued buildings. IMPLAN.

Managing Ghosts

Conservation Challenges

The 2023 UNESCO assessment reveals significant concerns. Mining fortifications are seriously compromised, and vestiges of Haciendas de Beneficio are compromised. The management plan is only partially adequate, and implementation remains incomplete. Critically, no buffer zone exists to protect the property from development pressures, and boundaries remain unknown to most residents and property owners³³.

Two priority issues affect intangible heritage directly: society's valuing of heritage shows negative impact trends with only medium



Fig. 54 Basilica Colegiata de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato. Photo by the author.

management capacity to respond, and tourism impacts show increasing trends with significant impact but only medium response capacity.

UNESCO inscription into the World Heritage List can bring several positive outcomes: better conservation strategies, international attention, increased tourism revenue, and most importantly, status³⁴. Designating something as relevant to both national and world history should give sites a better chance at proper conservation and management. Yet all outcomes depend on local government and institutional actions³⁵.

UNESCO's 2023 Periodic Report reveals Guanajuato's core management failures: lack of coordination between governing bodies (INAH, Municipality, State) and inadequate citizen participation in heritage decisions³⁶. The report notes that "no mechanisms for the local community to participate" exist in the management plan, and relationships between property managers and local communities, youth, and local

businesses are rated “poor.” Most critically, “society’s valuing of heritage shows negative impact trends”—residents are disconnecting from their own heritage despite its UNESCO World Heritage status and institutional recognition.

This pattern is seen across all three case studies. El Callejón del Beso demonstrates sustainable ghost preservation through citizen involvement—residents own the houses, narrate the legend, manage tourist access—yet the absence of institutional mediation has allowed exploitation. Photographers appropriated private balconies for commercial photography, forcing owners to implement fees to protect their homes. The legend persists because citizens maintain it, but they

remain vulnerable without institutional support. The interview with the theatrical re-enactment crew revealed another dimension of disconnection: oral tradition is failing. Parents no longer tell children the legends they grew up with. Younger generations, as noted in field interviews, are losing connection to the stories that historically animated heritage spaces. This decline severs both culture and memory, leaving institutional frameworks to preserve buildings whilst the narratives that give them meaning disappear.

The UNESCO 2023 report evidenced the priorities of national and international management entities: preservation of monumental examples of heritage over preservation of those related to

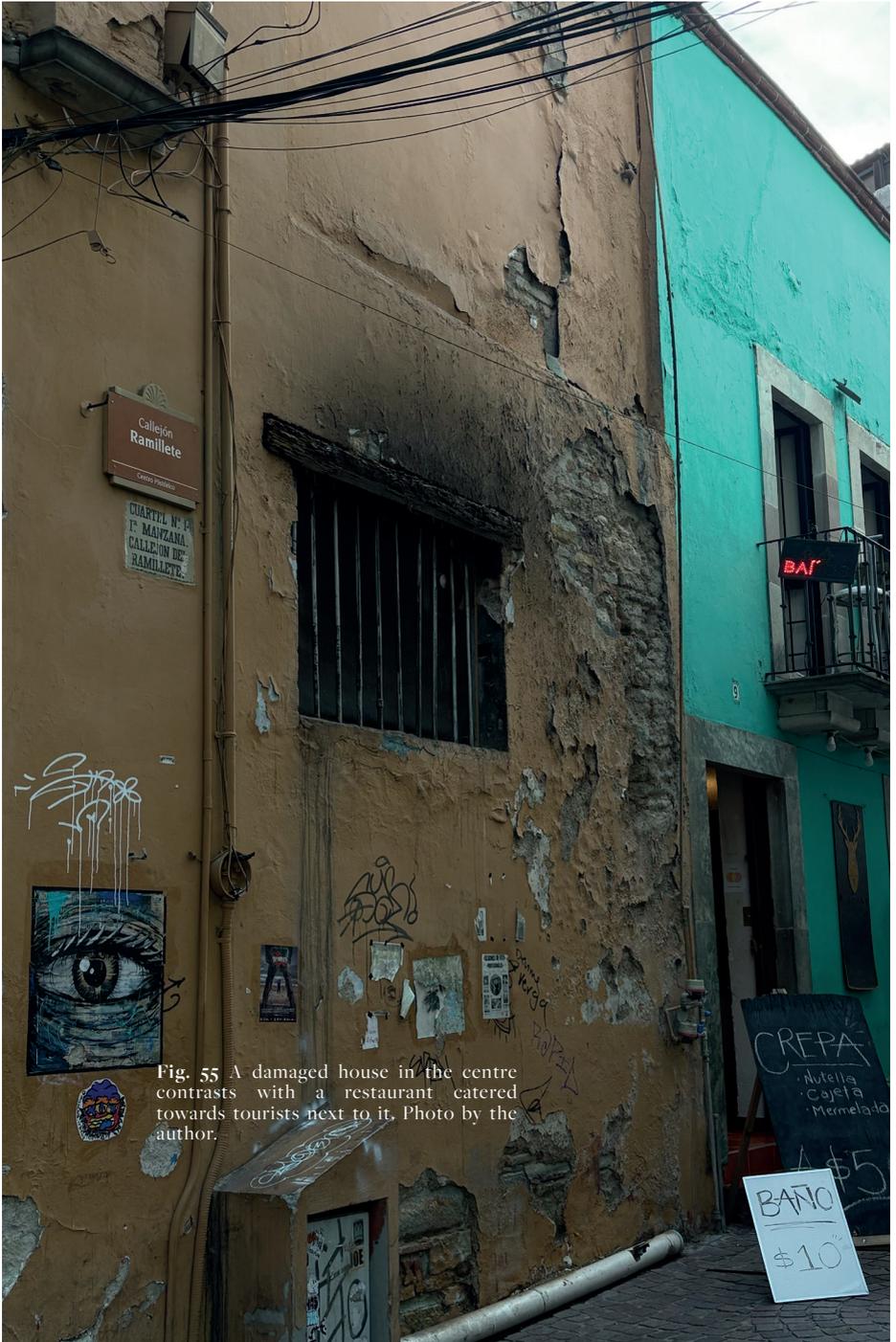


Fig. 55 A damaged house in the centre contrasts with a restaurant catered towards tourists next to it. Photo by the author.

the daily life of the people who created that heritage. Whilst the churches of La Valenciana and La Compañía have been marked as preserved, the mines have been registered as compromised.

Within this negligence, however, emerges an unexpected positive outcome. Oehmichen-Bazán discusses the phenomenon of *patrimonialisation* and its particular manifestation in serving commercial purposes for the tourism industry, where frameworks that preserve heritage work alongside interests in commodifying it³⁷. Guanajuato has failed to become a complete product precisely because the city has created porosities that allow its physical properties to deteriorate whilst the social fabric surrounding them

evolves naturally.

The cases of El Callejón del Beso and the callejoneadas highlight failed municipal intervention, which inadvertently allowed private citizens to avoid *patrimonialisation* of their heritage, thus keeping it alive. However, these shortcomings have presented issues: the owners of the houses have had to fight against problems caused by mass tourism. The intimacy of what was once private space was forced to become semi-public, and the popularity of a tradition has been appropriated by institutional regulation.

Yet the case of the mummies exemplifies what these two other cases would have faced had institutional management intervention been stronger: the heritage at hand would have

been turned into a commercial object, where institutional control monopolises a narrative, and bodies are reduced to spectacle divorced from the community they once belonged to.

The INAH itself struggles with defining what heritage is. Article 33 defines monuments as those with “relevant aesthetic value” based on representativeness, insertion in a particular stylistic current, degree of innovation, and materials and techniques used³⁸. This reveals a clear blind spot in the preservation framework: it is made to preserve objects deemed valuable, not the context surrounding them. Article 36 further prioritises buildings constructed between the 16th and 18th centuries—the colonial period. As Alma

Pineda Almanza argues, the law protects buildings because of their meaning to constructed history rather than their documentary capacity³⁹.

An interesting debate arose when categorising the mummies within this heritage framework: pre-established definitions address man-made heritage but not men themselves. The bodies fit no category⁴⁰. Similarly, popular housing receives no protection under frameworks prioritising aesthetic monumentality. What gets preserved is what fits national narratives: baroque churches, neoclassical mansions, colonial civic buildings. What gets neglected is what documents the lives of those who built them: the mines where they worked, the modest houses where they lived.



Fig. 56 An old shoe store and seamstress in the centre of Guanajuato. Business catered towards local audiences still exists in the centre of the city. Photo by the author.

Ghosts live in continued use, where citizens continue using space, inhabiting it, narrating, and creating what will one day become history. History is created in everyday life. Although the biggest events will always be amplified, it is the everyday that shapes them, and it is the everyday that leaves ghosts behind. Institutions preserve the bigger examples: the monuments, the outstanding houses made by incredible minds, the innovations that changed something. Yet they fail to preserve the little ideas that made the innovations possible, the working places that allowed the monuments to be built, and the small houses made with pure resilience in mind.

Institutions exist to protect heritage, to preserve it, to study it, to restore it. Yet an overreach in their actions can produce adverse results. Spatial protection is needed to preserve built heritage, and institutional intervention is necessary, yet this must be balanced with citizen participation. Institutional control needs to be constrained by collective narrative in order to prevent patrimonialisation. Daily life is constantly evolving—it is contradictory, messy, and nuanced. Ghosts need that in order to exist.

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5

Heritage through a haunted lens

Heritage Through a Haunted Lens

A methodology for identifying ghosts

Heritage assessments tend to rely on standardised frameworks, checkboxes to tick, questions to answer objectively, and specificities to report on. These tools, whilst helpful in unbiased documentation, leave no space for nuance.

This research was conducted through unplanned observation practices. Walking around the city with an open schedule allowed the city and its inhabitants to guide me to wherever I needed to go. Talking to any local in the city will reveal pride in the city they inhabit, the places they deem most important, most relevant, or more



Fig. 57 A lady walking down the streets of San Miguel de Allende. Photo by the author.

interesting for an outsider to visit. Deeper conversation with locals adds a layer of emotional connection to the site. There's an emotional bond formed between an outsider and the memories that will be passed through communication. Locals will not only guide you to the best restaurants no tourists will go to, they will tell you about their favourite places, their favourite legends, the way the city has changed for the better or the worse. Your perception of the city will be enriched by their own and new things will be revealed.

This approach reveals what standardised assessments cannot measure: the emotional geography of heritage. Perception captures how spaces feel—the intimacy of narrow alleys, the atmosphere created by half-open doors, the

rhythm of daily life continuing alongside tourism. These qualities exist independently of architectural merit or material condition. A street can be deteriorating yet beloved. A building can be pristine yet emotionally empty.

Ghosts live in this unmeasurable territory. They exist in the pride locals express when describing their city, in the stories waitresses tell between serving tables, in the way ticket sellers speak about family traditions. UNESCO reports can document that “society’s valuing of heritage shows negative impact trends,” but cannot explain why. Conversations with residents reveal the mechanism: younger generations losing connection to oral traditions, families unable to afford living in gentrifying neighbourhoods,

performative heritage displacing lived practice.

The limitation of this methodology is obvious: three days captures a moment, not continuity. A longer stay would have revealed seasonal patterns, deeper community networks, conflicts invisible to brief visitors. Yet this limitation also clarifies the method's purpose. The goal is not comprehensive documentation—that is what institutional frameworks already provide. The goal is to identify where ghosts exist, whose memory animates them, and what threatens their survival. These questions require presence, conversation, and attention to what standardised checklists exclude.

The question that has been

looming throughout this thesis is: who is this for? Who is heritage being preserved for? It is this question that determines whether preserving ghosts is important, relevant, or necessary. The answer can range from vague to specific and varies depending on who you ask.

If you ask UNESCO, they will tell you they're preserving for humanity, for future generations⁴¹. If you ask INAH, they will tell you they're preserving for national identity, for Mexicans of the future⁴². Guanajuato exemplifies heritage being preserved for both national identity and humanity as a whole, as seen in the priority given to monumentality. The heritage preserved in this case protects a narrative. What is preserved serves the purpose of forging

national identity—a narrative of national pride, grandeur, and history that makes a nation identify itself as such. This perspective prioritises exceptionalism. Churches are preserved whilst mines are compromised: an example of heritage being preserved for a vague audience.

If the answer is preserving heritage for tourism, then the focus changes. Tourism holds a different perspective. Some details will be lost or simplified, such as the legend of El Callejón del Beso. Others will be dramatised and commercialised, their exotic attributes exploited for sensationalism. The mummies case demonstrates how imagination can be exploited through morbidity and culture turned into spectacle. Heritage preserved for tourism values

aesthetics, exoticism, and marketability.

Heritage preserved for future generations is a vague narrative, and vague answers lead to vague results. Who are these future generations? Are they national? International? How will this heritage translate to them? Is it for their understanding? For their comprehension of the past? For their study? For their aesthetic appreciation? UNESCO claims to preserve for future generations but answers none of these questions. According to UNESCO, “protecting and safeguarding the world’s cultural and natural heritage and supporting creativity and dynamic cultural sectors are fundamental to addressing the challenges of our time.”⁴³ Yet this statement’s lack of clarity translates into a lack of



Fig. 58&59 Whose future gets preserved?
Prayers on the margins of heritage. Photos
by the author.

positive results.

If we narrow the answer, results become clearer. Consider preserving Guanajuato for the people who reside there—for their understanding of where they came from, for study of their ancestors, for future people who will inhabit the same place. The who changes the how, and ghosts hold different meanings for each.

This is not to argue that heritage must be preserved exclusively for current inhabitants, or that national and international preservation are inherently wrong. Many sites have no living community attached to them. Others hold significance that transcends local meaning. The argument is not about choosing one audience over others, but about clarity of purpose.

When preservation serves multiple audiences simultaneously without acknowledging their competing priorities, management decisions become incoherent. Guanajuato is preserved for national identity (churches prioritised), for international tourism (mummies exploited), and ostensibly for residents (whose boundaries remain unknown to them, whose participation mechanisms don't exist). Each audience demands different things. Nationals want symbolic monuments. Tourists want marketable spectacle. Inhabitants want liveable heritage embedded in daily life. The problem is not serving multiple audiences—it is serving them without recognising the contradictions. A framework that identifies ghosts asks: which audience

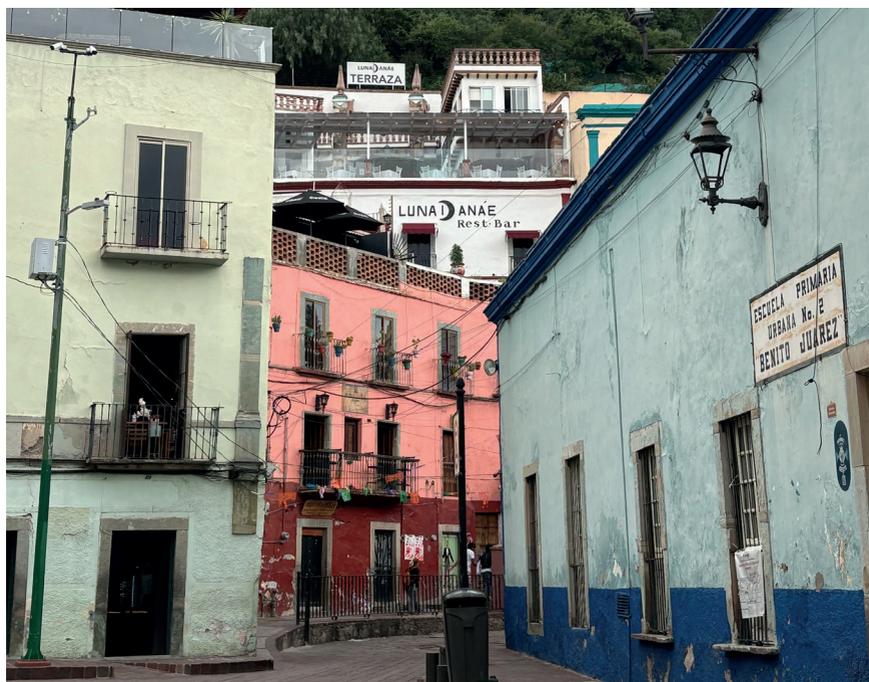


Fig. 60 Past and present buildings coexisting.
Photo by the author.

does this decision serve? When churches are preserved but mines are compromised, the answer is clear: national narrative over working-class memory. When mummies are displayed without context, the answer is clear: tourism revenue over empathy. When *callejoneadas* are regulated without performer input, the answer is clear: institutional control over living tradition.

Identifying the audience clarifies whether ghosts matter. For abstract “humanity” or “the nation,” ghosts are optional—monuments suffice. For tourism, ghosts are marketable—but risk exploitation. For inhabitants, ghosts are indispensable—they are why heritage remains meaningful. The framework does not prescribe which audience to prioritise. It diagnoses which audience decisions actually

serve, and what that choice erases.

This chapter has outlined a methodology for identifying what standardised heritage frameworks overlook. The framework proposed here is not meant to replace UNESCO protocols or INAH assessments—these serve essential functions in documentation, legal protection, and resource allocation. Rather, it offers a supplementary lens for recognising what gets erased in the process: the marks left by thousands of tourists who have imprinted their essence into El Callejón del Beso, the echoes of callejoneadas lingering in streets after performances end, the old canteens quietly observing ever-changing neighbourhoods. These are the small ghosts that might be

forgotten when preservation prioritises monumentality.

Memory, imagination, and culture are not new concepts. They are obvious. This framework simply names them, makes them legible, asks heritage managers to notice what might otherwise be overlooked. It is diagnostic rather than prescriptive—it identifies what is being erased and whose interests decisions serve, but does not dictate solutions. The value lies in making visible the small details that give heritage meaning to those who live with it daily. Not every ghost needs saving. But every erasure should be acknowledged.

Conclusions

6

When I first started this thesis, I wanted to find the link between story and space, between spooky narrative and haunted house. Research led me completely elsewhere. What I found was how emotion is embedded into space, particularly urban space. I examined Franco Rosso's apartment and how his presence lingered through his habits after his absence. I talked about the Espartaco neighbourhood where my

grandparents still live and how it's changed through the years, how stories were created and embedded in space—how a building suddenly becomes the building where someone once fell, or a street becomes the street where a guy walked his rooster. I talked about how certain stories form, how they take shape and are transmitted through generations. Finally, I talked about Brinksway, a community in England that was erased to make way for a highway—erasure for progress. The preservation of this place serves no purpose in the national narrative. The place doesn't stand out from what was probably a common occurrence in the past century, where countless neighbourhoods were destroyed in the name of progress and modernity. Its few survivors keep remembering until there is no one left to tell the tale of a place that once existed.

The point where my entire

focus changed was when I read the legends of Guanajuato compiled by Gabriel Medrano de Luna. I expected them to be more akin to the legends I heard as a child in Mexico City—spooky, thrilling, sometimes with a moral, mostly told for entertainment. What I found was something entirely different: heartfelt tales, memories about a city lost to time and violence, pride, tradition, and an intricate example of mestizaje in Mexico, where two different worlds collided, coexisted, and mixed. Visiting Guanajuato added to this perspective. Every single conversation with locals revealed a deep sense of pride, happiness in my interest in the city, and joy to talk about their experiences. The case of the mummies museum touched me deeply because I felt profound empathy towards

these people, regardless of the lacking museography. The callejoneadas filled me with pride in Mexican culture. I loved the way they made space come alive—the storytelling, the music echoing in the walls. It was a very particular experience.

This thesis argues that haunting is the spatial persistence of emotion, memory, and lived experience—and heritage preservation often fails because it does not know how to conserve emotion. Current frameworks measure material damage, spatial boundaries, architectural integrity—but not whether spaces still carry the emotional weight that makes them meaningful to those who inhabit them. The three cases examined in Guanajuato reveal a pattern: when emotion is preserved

through citizen participation, continued use, and narrative openness, ghosts survive despite commercialisation. When these are severed through institutional control or neglect, beautiful corpses remain—physically preserved but spiritually empty.

This research was carried out with several limitations. The case study was chosen because of my cultural understanding of the place, its architecture, its history and context, which may have biased my analysis. The majority of the research was conducted in Italy, which meant lack of access to physical documentation about Guanajuato and its history, further creating biases. The framework—imagination, memory, and culture—stemmed from my own experience and observations

in the city as well as personal reflection. Different cities or case studies might cause different reactions, which means this framework could be expanded. Cases like Venice or Paris, where ghosts may have been severed to an extent but might be saved through conscious decisions as they transition into cities catered for mass tourism, could be interesting case studies which could further enhance the framework. Guanajuato is still transitioning between a mining city and a tourism city, which makes for an interesting exploration of things that could be prevented.

Emotions already structure space. Preservation choices determine whether those emotional structures survive. We must acknowledge this or continue creating theme

parks—visually pristine heritage sites emptied of the very thing that made them worth preserving in the first place. Every heritage decision serves someone's interests. This thesis makes visible whose emotions matter, and whose are being erased.

Annex

7

Interview with Alberto Macías Macías, tour guide at the Mummies Museum of Guanajuato, August 27, 2025.

How much do you think the city and its urban design influenced the generation of these stories?

I think quite a bit. The reason is simple: Guanajuato has never had a [formal] design. Urbanistically speaking, there is no urban design—we have a very well-ordered disorder. And I think, through narrative, as was mentioned, the fact that these types of narrow streets gave rise to the most classic of all legends, which is “El Callejón del Beso”—the circumstance of houses so close together that open onto balconies, where people can almost be together as if they were at street level—I consider this to be part of what draws people to visit Guanajuato, because they don’t find this elsewhere.

How much do you think the mummies have added to Guanajuato’s identity?

Oh boy, well, first of all, we owe it to cinema, and through cinema, the legends that were created around the mummies. And I consider it vitally important that the mummies form

part of the heritage we have today because this is what attracted tourists.

Initially, the mummification phenomenon, with all those fantastic narratives about types of deaths and all that—I consider it has been extremely important that this phenomenon was found here in the Guanajuato Cemetery (Santa Paula).

Do you think the stories created about the mummies to make them more interesting are harmful to the people they once were?

I don't think so. I don't think so because it's part of fantasy, and harmful—I don't see the point. We're talking about people who were abandoned, because the origin of them being exhibited—the law establishes a certain period of time for which their families would have had to pay a tax, which is perpetuity, which ensures the body is respected. You can verify this by going up to the cemetery and seeing the dates on the tombs, because there are still bodies older than the mummies themselves because there were families with that financial capacity or simply the knowledge that they had to pay.

In the case of the bodies exhibited in the museum, unfortunately, they are in a state of abandonment.

How much do you think morbidity influenced the creation of a museum of this type?

Well, the first—the first reason people come here is morbid curiosity. Yes, why? Because, I'll say it clearly and as it is—the vast majority of people who come to the museum don't have the slightest idea what this represents for science. The discovery of these bodies, now through the documentation we can have of the preservation phenomenon, enriches us quite a bit, right? But, what a shame, what a shame that people—I think more than 50% [of visitors] come out of morbid curiosity.

How do you think the space—the cemetery itself— influenced the generation of stories about these people [the mummies]?

I think, well, it goes without saying that I should comment on this, but the fact that originally, people who came to see this phenomenon entered the cemetery, and walking among tombs and reading epitaphs, approaching and suddenly seeing at ground level a wooden door lift up, cold, macabre air coming out, an unpleasant smell, and that sensation of mystery—what's down there? And they begin to descend and walk the corridor as the first visitors did—I think this is what generated what is today one of the most visited museums.

Do you consider the museum currently respectful to the people these mummies once were?

In terms of museography, yes.

Oh boy, it's a topic that's very difficult for me to answer personally because I understand that exhibiting the deceased can be disrespectful, but from the moment they open it and people pay to enter and visit them, well, that enters into each person's conscience, right? Because I've had to deal with people who tell me "listen, this is disrespectful," [and I say] "yes, but you're paying to be here."

Regarding the museography work, it leaves much to be desired—I hope my superiors don't hear this. Because we, as service providers here, see that sometimes they don't give them the best treatment, and the authorities don't give the mummies the place they deserve, because without doubt, the mummies are Guanajuato's main tourist attraction. And also many "pseudo" tour guides deceive people and take them to other places.

Do you consider that the legends in the city have contributed to it being designated a World Heritage Site as it is today?

No. Because the criteria for declaring a space heritage are not based on legends—they're tangible things. And although it enriches Guanajuato's tourist context, I don't think it influenced [the designation].

I don't have exactly clear what the criteria are for a place to be designated heritage, but from the moment the word "heritage" exists, I don't think it's based on legends. Rather, I think it's based on verifiable facts, historically speaking. And our tourism is understanding this better and better, because, well, with all that awareness that should exist in the tourist—because there's also a "pseudo" tourist who sometimes dares to visit a space and wants to leave their little souvenir there. But I don't think, I mean, in my way of thinking, I don't think it was important for it to be declared heritage.

But do you consider that they add value to the city, that they enrich it?

Yes, without a doubt. I have absolutely no doubt that yes, of course they do.

*Interview with actors from
a small “Legends Tour”
company, conducted in the
lobby of Hotel La Casona
de Don Lucas after the
theatrical performance
held there, August 27, 2025*

How do you feel the alleys in each of the stories have influenced the creation of these stories?

Director: You know, something we’re very aware of here in Guanajuato is itinerant space. In theater or performing arts, we use itinerant space to refer to architectural spaces that allow us to have multiple entrances and exits at the same time and to use them “scenically” with different lighting.

As you saw, this part down here is like a passageway (referring to stairs leading to an underground room), this part functions as a dressing room (referring to a hallway connecting the main room with the bathroom area), all this part (the room where we were) is our stage, this part (pointing to internal balconies in the upper part of the room) are like, let’s say boxes, we take them as theater boxes.

I feel that the architecture here, being so strange—I think you saw some spaces where you say, what’s the logic of this?—allows us to give that magical touch and can make the audience become more immersed in the legends without

needing a projector, without needing a very elaborate stage.

Actress 1: Yes, like the stories themselves. Since they date back many years, houses began to be taken as references. There are small plazas where there are large houses that were, once upon a time, owned by foreign landowners—they would come, try their fortune, strange things often happened to these people, and from there the tradition began to take root of saying “oh, in that house such-and-such happened” or “in this house.” And as you can see, the entire center is full of these big houses. And most importantly, especially in the center, there’s a lot of architecture that President Porfirio Díaz commissioned, and there’s a lot of French-influenced style, many things that he saw in Europe fascinated and brought here, and precisely one of his favorite places was Guanajuato.

Another of those very beautiful settings, very characteristic of the architecture initiated by Don Porfirio, is the Presa de la Olla—he actually inaugurated it. If you have the opportunity to go there, there’s very beautiful architecture at the dam, and as our director mentions, in every little corner there’s a stage that leads you to imagine. Because they’re called—there are alleys, one called Del Chango, another called Del Charro, another called La Cabacita, El Baratillo—all of these have strange stories, and not always in accordance with that architecture, but yes, those stories became embedded there.

Do you consider that legends associated with a place influence the way we perceive and value it as heritage? Do you think these stories contribute to generating greater care or affection for these spaces?

Director: You know, curiously, the population—I'm talking now about the child and youth population of Guanajuato—doesn't know the legends, so for them it passes as an unnoticed space. It's not until someone tells them, because I've heard people on the street where grandmothers tell them "the devil appeared here," then the children begin to relate to it. But before, even just in my generation—I'm from 2005 onwards—respect for certain places was very significant for us, mainly because of the folklore of the legends. When we were little, most of our mothers and fathers told us "respect this place because the devil appears here and can do something to you."

So I feel that yes, the legends effectively help a lot to relate to and care for the spaces that exist here in Guanajuato, and I think it's very important to keep reminding future generations because I see that they're already forgetting and well...

So you would consider legends part of your cultural heritage?

Everyone: Yes, yes, definitely.

And would you consider that spaces are protagonists of their legends?

Director: Yes, in a way, because legends, at least here in Guanajuato, are still preserved more through oral tradition than through architectural memory. Many of us know the legends but don't locate the spaces initially—they tell you, well, El Callejón del Tecolote, many don't know where it is but they know what happened. So I feel that on this side of legends, it goes more hand-in-hand with oral tradition than with care or architectural memory.

Would you consider that the space gave rise to the legend, or that the legend emerged and was assigned a space?

Director: That's something—actually a question I hadn't asked myself. Now that I think about it, most legends were first created as—for example, La Llorona here in Guanajuato has a lot of weight but doesn't have a space. And I feel most legends are like that—many were told, were preserved, but the space wasn't well known, so anyone could have said “well, this happened near my house,” others believed them, and that place stayed that way.

Why did you choose the legends you presented today?

Director: Um, I feel they're legends that are a bit more

comfortable for an audience that's not yet familiar. Here in Guanajuato it's very common to see legends, hear them—there's a show by the *estudiantina*, these guys who wear their costumes, their guitars (referring to the *callejoneadas* show). They tell, always, legends, legends and songs, so it's very related. But for the tourist audience, I understand that not all cities or states in Mexico preserve this tradition of legends very much.

I could say we chose these because they're the easiest to understand and tell. They lend themselves more to a bit of—here we call it “*chascarillo*”—a little joke so the audience can lighten these things, because suddenly there's a lot of historical data or things that aren't in their context and they say “I don't understand, I'm embarrassed to ask, I'm embarrassed to interrupt, I'm bored now” or like that. So the jokes that these legends allow us to make can generate a kind of bond or trust with the audience.

What's your favorite legend?

Director: I really like *La casa de las brujas*—it's a legend from the dam.

Actress 2: I suppose, well, mine is *Comadres*. I'm fascinated by how they were so close but over just a material thing they broke their friendship and broke their lives, and life, or

a life lesson, gave them a very specific form in which they transform.

Actress 1: There's one, there's a legend that belongs precisely to the city center that I really like—los hermanos Carcamanes. If you have another opportunity to visit us, you'll see that here, love and love triangles play a very important role. And it's impressive because to this day there are people who say that in that house you can still hear murmurs, laments. There's another area too where, precisely, it's called the house of laments—currently it's a museum, precisely because it carries a theme of those very powerful people who lived in Guanajuato and were victims or witnesses of events that had no explanation. So I think those were the legends I like most, and of the ones we performed today, precisely El Tecolote seems very sad to me.

Actor 1: Well for me, it would be the Tecolote. Also because I'm a fan of these little birds—they're so beautiful. Plus, yes, well, that sad vibe it gives to the poor guy.

Actor 2: Oh, obviously, the musician who played for the devil.

Besides El Callejón del Beso, which legend do you consider most related to space?

Director: By space, I feel one of the most striking structures in our city is the Presa de la Olla, precisely because of the historical weight it has and the fact that—I don't know if you've visited it but if you do visit, it's composed of several gardens, boat docks, which is very beautiful, it's a replica that, you could say, has certain French tones, French-influenced. Porfirio Díaz had it built [said as a question, addressing Actress 1]

Actress 1: Yes, in fact, Parque Florencio Antillón preserves that—it's a very large garden, very solitary because of this. Very, very beautiful, it preserves that Porfirian peace, and the surrounding houses.

Director: Since Comadres (referring to the legend) takes place there, it's interesting to see how this mixes—the space, the water, with women who became a caiman and a snake.

Field trip journal

Day 1

We arrived in Guanajuato around 3 p.m. After leaving our things at the hotel, we went to eat in the city centre at Mercado Hidalgo.

My first impressions of the city contrasted with the vague memories I had from my last visit over ten years ago, and they also echoed my more recent experiences in European cities — particularly Spanish ones, with Granada most present in my mind.

After parking the car in one of the tunnels, we stepped directly onto a street. Thousands of colours appeared instantly as the light opened up after leaving the tunnel's shadows. One of the biggest contrasts I noticed with similar European cities was the abundant vegetation, winding its way through the streets amid the myriad colours of houses of different sizes and periods.

The plaques indicating that certain buildings had been

catalogued caught my attention. I will need to check later if I can find more information about them.

I found it curious how the streets open and close in an almost random manner. In some areas, light enters abundantly, while in others, very little. The buildings are not very tall, but it is clear that from the rooftops there must be plenty of light.

In the afternoon, after lunch, we found a small café with a terrace on the second floor, from which we could see the mountains leading directly to the famous Pipila monument. Afterwards, we walked toward the University of Guanajuato. We came across a small plaza, somewhat dark but warmed by the afternoon light.

The university campus is small but imposing, with its very grand staircases. The cathedral is modest in decoration yet still beautiful.

The Juárez Theatre stands out, though it is curiously difficult to fully appreciate from such a narrow street. The plaza in front of it is remarkable and intriguing, with a small kiosk hidden within a circle of leafy trees.

Day 2

On the second day, after breakfast in one of the piazzas we had discovered in the centre, we headed towards the Mummies Museum.

This also contrasted with my memories, as it was much farther from the centre than I had expected. Arriving there by car was a little difficult.

The museum is much smaller than I imagined. There is heavy exploitation of the morbid aspect of it all — taking photographs costs extra.

In the first exhibition room stands the corpse of a Frenchman (I forgot his name). It is one of the few in the collection not only still clothed but also identified.

The museography was poor. All the rooms are painted black, the lighting is minimal — perhaps to preserve the corpses — but this makes several photographs and written explanations unreadable or barely visible. The tour guide even had to use his lamp to illuminate some of the images. Several of the corpses are given nicknames such as the witch or the pregnant woman.

I found the fact that visitors were allowed to take pictures

quite disrespectful and decided not to, even if it meant losing potential material for my research.

Much of the guide's information conflicted with what I had previously read online. Some sources claim that the corpses had been buried and later exhumed once families stopped paying to extend their burial rights, while others say they were never buried at all but dried naturally in the mausoleum, resulting in mummification. According to him, the latter is partly true: the bodies were removed after their burial period expired and, if unclaimed, left to dry out. He assured us that if any corpse were to be claimed by relatives, it would be returned and likely reburied.

The visit lasted only about twenty minutes. Overall, it felt deeply disrespectful to the deceased, despite the guide's efforts to narrate respectfully. Most tourists were taking photos, laughing, gagging, or chatting. Children were running around while parents did nothing.

Apparently, this is nothing new. The guide explained that from the very beginning, when the bodies were exhumed, people visited purely out of morbid curiosity. Disrespect has been a constant, with early visitors even taking "souvenirs" such as fingers or pieces of clothing. The current museography does nothing to solve the issue, instead capitalising on it — selling pricier tickets for

photography and advertising the “world’s second smallest mummy,” a fetus.

After the tour, I interviewed the guide. He believed that the nicknames and narratives assigned to the unidentified corpses were harmless. I disagreed, since I think restoring their names and stories would encourage empathy and more respectful behaviour from visitors.

He also criticised the museography, saying the place clearly needed maintenance and more careful attention from the authorities.

He suggested we visit the attached cemetery, from which the mummies were originally taken, so we did.

The cemetery was composed of traditional graves and tombstones, some very distinctive, with unusual shapes or colours that reflected the deceased’s personality.

Surrounding it were walls of mausoleums marked with plaques, with dates ranging from the early twentieth century to the present. Many were inscribed with the word *perpetuidad* (perpetuity), which, according to the workers, meant the bodies could never be moved — confirming the guide’s explanation.

While there, we stumbled upon a funeral, which reminded me why the museum had felt so uncomfortable: all the displayed bodies were once someone's loved one, a person with a mind, feelings, and a story.

Afterwards, we returned to the centre to visit the Pipila statue.

One of the most pleasant surprises about Guanajuato was the lack of businesses catered to mass tourism. While there were some souvenir and crafts shops, most of the commerce in the centre was locally owned and targeted, keeping a distinctly neighbourhood-like atmosphere. Walking around, we found tortillerías, tlapalerías, and shoe stores — the sort of businesses one expects in a traditional city centre.

This sharply contrasted with Guanajuato's sister city, San Miguel de Allende. Now a popular destination for U.S. retirees, San Miguel is crowded with gentrified versions of its former shops: overpriced crafts, boutiques, and restaurants catering more to an international wealthy audience than to locals. Not finding this phenomenon in Guanajuato was a very welcome surprise.

Another point worth noting was the lack of international tourism in general. This might have been due to the time

of year, but most tourists we encountered were national, largely from León or Querétaro. We did meet a handful of Spaniards, Latin Americans, and some Americans, but the general lack of the latter was striking.

Most surprisingly, the city had several signs in Japanese, suggesting they might receive visitors from there.

To reach El Pipila, we took a cable car that is part of a hotel, since the statue stands on a hill that requires a climb. The statue itself is large and modern-looking but otherwise rather unremarkable. The area functions mostly as a panoramic viewpoint, offering sweeping views of the city. Around it are souvenir shops and a few restaurants.

On our way back down, we wandered through some alleys. It was interesting to see how the buildings mixed old and new elements, many marked as “catalogued buildings,” indicating historical relevance despite minor modern interventions.

The smaller alleys were entirely residential, with commercial activity concentrated nearer the centre or along larger streets.

Despite the limited public spaces, we came across several music performances, most of them in front of the Teatro

Juárez. Its grand staircase serves as a stage for these events, though the viewing area is small, partly obstructed by dense, leafy trees.

Beside the plaza are a few restaurants with outdoor seating, and in the centre stands a small kiosk.

Later, we visited the famous Callejón del Beso. It lies in the very centre, just steps from a plaza. The surrounding streets and alleys were crowded with tourists and souvenir shops.

The houses with the balconies have become souvenir shops themselves, charging entrance and photography fees. A photographer was on site for tourists.

Taking a picture on the famous third step proved nearly impossible, with queues of visitors waiting.

Earlier that day, the guide from the Mummies Museum had recommended a legends tour, which we decided to take that night.

Although rather disappointing - more a staged re-enactment inside a hotel than an actual tour - my later interview with the actors offered some insight into how Guanajuato's citizens relate to their legends and to the city itself.

Afterwards, we joined the last callejoneada of the night.

This turned out to be very different from what I had expected.

The tour was led by a *estudiantina* - a band of “student” musicians in traditional costume - and a *juglar* who entertained the audience. The band moved through several alleys, transforming them into improvised stages as they played boleros and traditional Mexican songs.

The event ended in the plaza in front of the Callejón del Beso, concluding with the story of its famous lovers.

Notable Aspects

One of the most striking features of Guanajuato is its network of underground tunnels.

There are several entrances scattered throughout the city, connecting the streets above with the subterranean levels.

At first, I thought the tunnels were mainly for cars and buses, but many are pedestrianised and also include parking areas and bus stops.

Some tunnels open up to the sky at intervals, producing

constant shifts in lighting.

Although one might assume the irregular alleyways reflect the city's age and spontaneous urban growth, this is not entirely true. Even in newer areas outside the UNESCO World Heritage zone, where wider streets exist, alleyways still dominate the urban fabric.

On our way back to Mexico City, we stopped in San Miguel de Allende, and the differences were clear.

San Miguel has wider streets and a less rugged topography, which allows for more regular urban planning.

As mentioned earlier, gentrification there was shocking in scale. Walking around, we often heard more English than Spanish. Many shops had signs exclusively in English, and local businesses like tortillerías or tlapalerías were practically absent.

San Miguel was, however, noticeably cleaner and better maintained than Guanajuato.

Notes

1 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

2 Edoardo Piccoli, "The Fragile Agency of the Draftsman's House," in *Dwelling on the Everyday: Houses, Ghosts and Ellipses*, ed. Helen Hills and Alice E. Sanger, *Open Arts Journal*, no. 11 (Summer 2024): 121-130.

3 Sarah Zammit, "Notre-Dame as the Memory of Paris: Hugo, the Historical Novel and Conservation," *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand* 40 (2023): 627-629.

4 Robert Gaunt, "Memory and Place in the Brinksway Photographs of Michael Danyliw," in *Dwelling on the Everyday: Houses, Ghosts and Ellipses*, ed. Helen Hills and Alice E. Sanger, *Open Arts Journal*, no. 11 (Summer 2024): 77-93.

5 Gaunt, 73.

6 Bradley L. Garrett, "Assaying History: Creating Temporal Junctions through Urban Exploration," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29 (2011): 1062

7 Garret, 1061

8 Piñeda Bañuelos, Gilberto Jesús. *Relatos introductorios para una historia gráfica de la ciudad de Guanajuato*. Primera edición digital. Guanajuato: Universidad de Guanajuato, 2023.

9 Unidad de Innovación y Políticas Públicas, *Perfil de Guanajuato* (Guanajuato: Gobierno Municipal de Guanajuato, n.d.), accessed <https://www.guanajuatocapital.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Breve-Perfil-de-Guanajuato.pdf>.

10 Although it may appear that three alleys converge in this area, only two actually do. The Alley of Patrocinio continues at an angle, giving the impression of a separate street despite sharing the same name.

11 Measurements vary depending on the point of reference. Published sources report distances ranging from 50 to 68 centimetres.

Based on photographic documentation taken during fieldwork (August 2025), the distance at the narrowest point corresponds to approximately 60 centimetres, measured by extending an arm (shoulder to fingertips) across the gap.

12 In *Como me lo contaron se los cuento*, Medrano de Luna includes ten different versions of this legend. See Medrano de Luna, *Como me lo contaron se los cuento*, 53.

13 José Luis Jiménez, “Siguen sin resolver el conflicto en el Callejón del Beso,” *El Sol de León*, 20 February 2023, <https://oem.com.mx/elsoldeleon/local/siguen-sin-resolver-el-conflicto-en-el-callejon-del-beso-20202803>. The owner temporarily closed her souvenir shop and displayed a banner calling for action from local and national authorities. Some residents interviewed for the article argued that the house should become government property given its status as a de facto public monument.

14 Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, “Ficha del Catálogo Nacional de Monumentos Históricos Inmuebles número I-11-00584,” Coordinación Nacional de Monumentos Históricos, accessed 10 October 2025, http://catalogonacionalmhi.inah.gob.mx/consulta_publica/detalle/18203.

15 Actors from a small “Legends Tour” company, interview by the author, lobby of Hotel La Casona de Don Lucas, following a theatrical performance, August 27, 2025.

16 Natalia Bieletto Bueno and Gustavo Galván Cázares, “Estudiantinas in Guanajuato: Street Music, Architectural Heritage, and the Making of Space Hierarchies,” in *Ambiance, Tourism and the City*, ed. Iñigo Sánchez-Fuarros, Daniel Paiva, and Daniel Malet Calvo (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), [43-61].

17 At the August 2025 exchange rate (~€0.046 per MXN), 150 pesos was approximately €6.90.

18 Approximately €13.80.

19 Bieletto Bueno and Galván Cázares, 51.

20 Approximately €5.30, €3.10, and €1.60 respectively, with photo-

graphy costing an additional €1.90. The exchange rate has remained relatively stable at around 20-21.50 pesos per euro throughout 2024-2025.

21 Medrano de Luna, *Como me lo contaron se los cuento*, 334

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Fig. 1 Calavera de la Catrina (Skull of the Female Dandy), from the portfolio 36 Grabados: José Guadalupe Posada, published by Arsacio Vanegas, Mexico City, c. 1910 ArtDaily.org

Figs. 3-5 Piccoli, Edoardo. “The Fragile Agency of the Draftsman’s House.” In *Dwelling on the Everyday: Houses, Ghosts and Ellipses*, edited by Helen Hills and Alice E. Sanger. *Open Arts Journal*, no. 11 (Summer 2024): 121–130.

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Fig 8 <https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/ciudad-francia-punto-de-referencia-paris-15229046/>

Fig 9&11 Gaunt, Robert. “Memory and Place in the Brinksway Photographs of Michael Danyliw.” In *Dwelling on the Everyday: Houses, Ghosts and Ellipses*, edited by Helen Hills and Alice E. Sanger. *Open Arts Journal*, no. 11 (Summer 2024): 77–93.

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Fig 45 <https://lasillarota.com/guanajuato/vida/2020/6/4/carmen-la-momia-acusada-de-bruja-exhibida-entre-barrotes-232429.html>

Fig 51 Historic Centre of the City of Guanajuato and its Adjacent Mines. Map, scale 1:7,872. 30 January 2009.

Fig 54 Mehmet Turgut Kirkgoz : <https://www.pexels.com/es-es/foto/ciudad-francia-punto-de-referencia-paris-15229046/>

Maps 3&4 https://www.implanguanajuato.gob.mx/?page_id=1597

