

# Living

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THE NEWS PHOTO: RODRIGO OROPEZA

# CALLE REGINA RENOVATED

Downtown Mexico City's emerging bohemian neighborhood celebrates its new identity with 'Regina de Noche' festivities on Saturday

BY JIM JOHNSTON  
Special to The News

"It feels like Madrid," a Spanish friend remarked as he ambled down Calle Regina on a recent Friday night. With tapas bars, jazz clubs and cozy restaurants scattered along the pedestrian-only street, you might be fooled too. But a strolling mariachi, a "tacos de cabeza" stall and a

mural titled "Earthquake" soon remind you that you're still in Mexico. Heavy metal music wafts out of a bar with gleaming motorcycles parked out front, directly across from an old-age home located in a colonial-era convent. A cultural center offering workshops in "art from recycled materials" rubs shoulders with a dusty old sewing

machine repair shop. The slick Al Andar serves 12 kinds of mezcal for 50 pesos a shot, but you can still get a complete "comida corrida" for 35 pesos at the Cocina Económica Alfredo. This mix of hip and traditional is the essence of the Corredor Cultural del Centro Histórico, or the Historical Center Cultural Corridor Project. The project, which includes

Calle Regina and other nearby streets, has converted old buildings and public spaces into venues for visual and performing arts. On Saturday, the public is invited to take a look at the new face of this old neighborhood during "Regina de Noche," an evening of music, dance, art and food along Calle Regina between Isabel la Católica and



Plaza Coeli and the facade of the 436-year old Church of Regina Coeli, which gives the street its name

5 de Febrero. Outdoor events include an installation of giant heads made of ice, outdoor video projections, stand-up comedians, fire dancers and poetry readings. The transformation of the area began back in 2001 with the founding of the Consejo Consultivo para el Rescate del Centro Histórico, or the Historical Center Rescue Advisory Board, with billionaire Carlos Slim as its executive director. When one of the richest men in the world makes a suggestion for investing, people listen. Joint efforts of both governmental and private agencies, notably the Fundación del Centro Histórico, have aimed to "rescue, protect, restore and revitalize" the old city center. To date, more than 20 billion pesos have been invested in the neighborhood.

**A TRANSFORMATION**  
The oldest area of Mexico City was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987, when it was still reeling from the devastation of the 1985 earthquake. Time and neglect took their toll, and the Centro became a place many people saw as dangerous, decaying and ugly.

But over the past few years, dozens of old buildings have been restored, repainted in a range of pastel colors, and turned into apartments and studios. Plazas are embellished with new landscaping and fountains. Streets and sidewalks have been repaved, new lighting installed and more police assigned to patrol the streets. "Regina de Noche" is a celebration of this transformation.

A photo mural by artist Claudia Adeath captures the essence of the "new" Calle Regina, which seeks to incorporate, not replace, the old. Entitled "El rostro cambia cuando tiene nombre" ("The Face Changes When It Has a Name") the

work includes dozens of photographs of people from the neighborhood, such as Yolanda and Carolina of the local tortillería, Jesús who delivers the gas, Julián the shoeshine man and Father José Cenobio from the parish church. "Surprisingly, there's been no graffiti so far," said Ignacio Hernández, who works at a restaurant nearby. "The local people feel part of what's going on here, a sense of civic pride. They don't want to mess it all up." Ludmila Gracia and Daniel Montalvo are artists who moved to Calle Regina, drawn by the affordable rents. They opened Studio 51 Showroom three years ago as a venue for their own artwork and that of friends. "We've always loved the Centro for its rich mix of history and culture," Gracia said. "Our building is full of other artists and creative people, and there's a real bohemian atmosphere here. We have parties together – it's like a big family." And their 100 square meter space, with high ceilings and full of light, rents for 6,000 pesos a month, cheaper than they could find in other desirable areas of the city.

Jorge Pedro Uribe, who works as an editor for a major publisher, is a recent arrival to

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LUDMILA GRACIA  
Artist and Calle Regina resident

Calle Regina. His move was motivated partly by economic considerations. "It's cheaper here now, but it's the atmosphere that I love. The neighbors are friendly, children play in the street, there's so much life and history here. It's very unpretentious – and there's no valet parking! It's become so much cleaner and safer. I just hope it



Andador Regina

doesn't get taken over by noisy, hip bars – what we really need are more taco stands!" Security is an issue on everyone's mind these days. Anecleto de la Cruz has sold newspapers in front of the Church of Regina Coeli – the 436-year old church that gives the street its name – for the past 19 years. "It's really very quiet here. People have a lot of wrong ideas about the Centro. The main problem has been the garbage. We need more education about that." Three policemen on duty also reported that the street was "todo tranquilo," or "all calm" – apparently so, since one of them headed off to have his shoes shined.

A block from the church is Café Jekemir, a popular hangout for classical musicians. The rich aroma of coffee perfumes the street. The Guraieb family, originally from Lebanon, has run the business since 1938. Cristina Guraieb spoke about the changes on the street. "We had to endure 18 months of very dusty construction – it was awful. But it all seems worth it now. We've put tables outside and extended our hours. It's been good for all the businesses here."

But there are also concerns about the changes occurring in the area. Ilana Boltvinik is an artist and teacher who has lived on Calle Regina for two years. She's created several public artworks that involve the neighborhood. "There's a real feeling of barrio here like nowhere else I've lived. But the process of gentrification is troubling. Prices have started to go up, and I'm worried that soon there will be more bars than cultural centers."

Jim Johnston is author of "Mexico City: An Opinionated Guide for the Curious Traveler." His blog is www.mexicocitydf.blogspot.com.

## MORE INFO

Indoor and outdoor events for the "Noche de Regina"

- Regina de Noche begins at 7 p.m. on Saturday and continues until 1 a.m. In addition to outdoor activities such as movie projections, fire dancers and comedians, indoor spaces will also have special shows.
- Clínica Regina (#24), a cultural space located in a former medical clinic, will inaugurate "Family Freak Show" by artist Frida Cano in its Emergency Room Gallery.
- Restaurante Al Andar (#27), which serves contemporary Mexican cuisine and mezcal, will present paintings by Leobardo Huerta.
- Casa Vecina (1er. Callejón de Mesones No. 7 at the corner of Regina) is a cultural center with multiple exhibition spaces.
- Restaurante Akelarre (#49) will have Basque cuisine and several musicians, including Haitian singer Sylvie Henry.
- Studio 51 Showroom (#51) will exhibit "design objects" by Daniel Montalvo and paintings by Víctor Martínez.
- Restaurante Los Canallas (#58), serving international cuisine, will present paintings by Regina Guerrero and a jazz group.
- For more information about the Fundación del Centro Histórico see their Web site [www.fundacioncentrohistorico.com.mx](http://www.fundacioncentrohistorico.com.mx).



Relaxing atmosphere of Café Jekemir on Regina, corner with Bolívar



Cocina Económica Alfredo, located at Andador Regina 24



Interior of the Church of Regina Coeli, located on the andador