

El Museo de los Niños

Although it is known by the name of the Children's Museum, the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica is much more than a museum. In a short time it has become the most varied cultural complex in Central America.

In the middle of the city of San Jose there is a building that looks like a castle. This building is easily located because it is one of the oldest buildings in the capital. The people know it as the Children's Museum, but those who are older know it as the Old Central Penitentiary, one of the largest prisons ever to have existed in Costa Rica. That is how the story of the "castle of dreams" began. It is an example of how human beings are capable of transforming prison darkness into light for the knowledge and smiles of children. An initiative of the ex first lady of the Republic, Mrs. Gloria Bejerano de Calderon succeeded in transforming a dark, gloomy prison into a cultural complex where the arts, education and entertainment meet in their multiple manifestations.

Although it is known as the Children's Museum, it should be known as the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica: an institution that opened its doors for knowledge on the afternoon of 27th of April, 1994. From its opening it marked the guideline in some aspects, seeing as it houses an interactive museum where children learn by means of playing. It also contains the largest art gallery in the country.

But the magnitude of the project is not intimated in what has been mentioned. It has been almost two years since the inauguration of the National Auditorium, a modern theater endowed with comfortable box seats, the most modern light technology and is the headquarters for the National Symphonic Orchestra. It also houses the Carlos Luis Saenz Juvenile Library. This is a concept in libraries that breaks away from the traditional norm in that it supplies information in books, encyclopedias, compact discs, educational videos, music and an access to high speed navigation of the Internet.

By housing so many projects it needs a lot of space and the castle of yellow tonality contributes its construction of 12,000 square meters (43,056 sq ft.). It also has 80,000 square meters (95,680 sq. yds.) of open, green areas surrounding it that belong to the culture center. Apart from the other projects, this outside space endows the capital with a powerful environmental lung called the "Arboreto". It is entirely dedicated to the cultivating of species of trees common to the flora of Costa Rica but today are found to be in danger of disappearing. Among the outstanding species are the Saman Rain trees, mahogany, Savannah oak, poro, yellow corteza, among others. As if the aforementioned were not enough, this cultural complex will be adding another child to the family when construction is finished on the National Amphitheater. The largest in the country, it is designed to have excellent acoustics and to house multitudinous operas, rock concerts and other types of music.

Without doubt, the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica is more than the Children's Museum in as that the attractions it offers are many, which makes it an "must see" stop for tourists that visit the capital of Costa Rica. Another element of great value is the history that secludes itself in the halls and corridors of this place. For this reason, the Republic Government declared the monumental construction as National Patrimony in 1988 by the executive decree #18-284 due to all the situations that occurred inside this place.

A past of dark memories

According to research done by historian Alonso Rodri-guez, the beginning of this historic account arises at the end of the XIX century, an era in which Costa Rica needed a prison due to the growth of delinquency provoked by the increasing population. To solve the problem, in 1889 the governor of the Republic sent a lawyer, Octavio Beeche, to Europe to visit different jails with the purpose of observing the organization, rules, architecture and other important aspects to incorporate them in the penitentiary system in Costa Rica. After making his observations he brought back the ideas for the infrastructure and finally, after waiting for many years, the plans of engineer Nicolas Di-as were transformed into the largest prison in the country.

The Central Penitentiary building that is now occupied by the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica opened its doors for confinement in 1910 at an elevated cost of ¢587,424.40 (app. 160 1910 US dollars), a gigantic monetary investment for that era. By a strange twist of fate, the Cartago earthquake of that same year caused considerable damages to the new structure. This site, created for inmates and criminals, was a construction of major prestige, surpassed only by the majestic National Theater.

The prison operated from 1910 until 1979. During those years, millions of pages filled with cruelty, anguish and terror were written. It was so bad that in the final years the prisoners literally left their cells, a situation which created an even more terrifying atmosphere due to constant mutinies, premeditated fires by the convicts and mass escapes. The above was combined with the lack of concrete actions to improve the living conditions of the prisoners. The overcrowding, inaction and the growth of violence ultimately motivated a devastating fire. On the 20th of December, 1979, the president Rodrigo Carazo decided to eliminate the "national embarrassment". But no one imagined that the "national embarrassment" would be transformed as if through the art of magic into "the pride Costa Rican culture".

The darkness is filled with light

From that closing until 1994, the building remained in almost ruins, reduced to a place filled with debris, a haunt for the indigents of the capital city. The authorities had planned to demolish the building. Non the less, first lady Gloria Bejarano de Calderon succeeded in having this building donated for the development of the first Children's Museum of Central America. The idea seemed preposterous, but it succeeded in materializing. The structure filled with debris, filth and bad memories still maintained its hidden beauty, something that only this visionary woman could see, whom at her first arrival to these horrible installations came face to face with the chaos. Still she realized that it was possible to construct the museum of which she dreamed, but as one of the components of a cultural complex.

"Upon entering for the first time, I came across pavilions, pavilions and more pavilions. The place was immense. At this moment all of the pieces fell into place and I realized that this was the ideal place for a cultural center, but at the same time there was a lot of work to be done. It reeked of frightful odors, trees were growing through the walls and everything was consumed in the horrible semi darkness" remembered Gloria Bejarano de Calderon, the intellectual author of this grand project.

To this enterprising woman, achieving this longed for challenge was an almost magical experience. The devotion of many people and the collective effort had succeeded in transforming the guarded nightmares in the silence of all of the abandoned nooks into a castle where the dreams of many people are fulfilled. But Gloria Bejarano wants to continue dreaming although she knows that the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica has succeeded in coming together in a short time and now has become one of the principal points where cultural and entertainment events of all types are generated.

The most pampered piece of this puzzle is the Children's Museum, a solution that responds to the educational needs of childhood. Not from just the formal perspective, but more from a perspective full of entertainment that is capable of breaking from the stereotype that all museums are boring. In this particular case the opposite occurs. This museum is 100% interactive. Its 35 salons were built with specific thematic fundamentals without departing from the idea that enjoyment and playing are the best forms of learning. It is a falsehood to affirm that only children can enjoy themselves: adults may also bring out that child that lives inside.

The attractions at the museum are innumerable. They include three animated robots designed to pay homage to the cultural contributions of three outstanding characters: writer of children's tales Carmen Lyra, eminent scientist Clorito Picado and astronaut Franklin Chang Di-az, who is currently doing research at NASA to create a plasma based space fuel. It is also possible to learn about the history of Costa Rica, feel the experience of an earthquake with the aide of a simulator, capture your shadow with a photographic experiment, compose songs with an enormous piano that you can play with your feet, among many others. The visitors never wander alone through the salons, a team of bilingual guides backs up the journey with explanations of the devices and the thematic subject matter.

Although the entire building is popularly known as the Children's Museum, it is much more than that. For example, the National Gallery is a space dedicated to the largest sculptural arts of the country. It has spacious salons that are covered with the finest Costa Rican art all year long. It recently served as headquarters for the Central American Biennial of Painting, one of painting's main events in the region. A recent study made by this institution showed that the gallery is constantly visited by fans of art from all over the world.

According to the director of the gallery, the principal attraction takes root in that month to month they display a minimum of seven different artists and variety is always presented with offerings of contemporary art. Beyond the paintings, the salons have been open to house other manifestations of the arts such as sculpture, photography and even caricature focused on modern, conceptual, traditional and vanguard perspectives. For its part, the National Auditorium currently serves as the headquarters for the National Symphonic Orchestra on Sundays and has been converted into one the most popular scenarios for the development of spectacles of music, theater, dance and others.

There are many options and the future will reveal more novelties and attractions, seeing as all is possible when love builds from the debris. Once an anonymous prisoner wrote from behind the bars the following thought about the Central Penitentiary: "In this damned place full of misery, they do not punish crime, they punish poverty." But neither he or anyone else could imagine a day in which the Science and Culture Center of Costa Rica would be inaugurated; the president Rafael Angel Calderon expressed the following phrase, placed on one of the main walls in gold letters: "The search for knowledge and truth allows us to break the chains of the past of Costa Rica for the future."