Upon entering the massive carved wooden doors of the Palafoxiana Library, one is struck by the rich Old World scent of fine furniture and leather-bound books. The morning sun beams through the windows of a high vaulted ceiling, playing off the voluptuous baroque ornament of the three-tiered bookcase that envelops the room. Narrow staircases and walkways provide access to the stacks, their shelves lined with early editions of Vitruvius, Homer, and Seneca, commentaries on Canon Law, and treatises devoted to all manner of scientific inquiry—most bound in goatskin, their titles rendered in sepia script.

Savoring the library’s seemingly timeless ambiance, it is hard to imagine that only five years ago, this great repository of learning in the heart of historic Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, lay in ruin, rocked by an earthquake at 3:42 on the afternoon of June 15, 1999. The quake, which measured 6.7 on the Richter scale and damaged many of the city’s famed historic buildings, sent a wave along the library’s south wall, cracking its masonry and causing its bookcases to ripple and fold. Stacks on the north wall, anchored by the more substantial architecture of the Colegio de San Juan y San Pedro, buckled and sheered under the differential strain, sending myriad rare volumes tumbling to the ground. In less than a minute, centuries of scholarship collapsed in a massive heap of dust. Still further destruction would come three months later, when a second quake struck on September 30.
Since 2001, however, the Palafoxiana Library has been the subject of an ambitious restoration campaign that has returned the institution to its colonial grandeur and, perhaps more important, has enhanced its ability to withstand future seismic activity to which the region is prone. Spearheaded by Alejandro Montiel, Puebla’s undersecretary for culture, and carried out under the rubric Palafoxiana Library in the Third Millennium, the project is a collaborative effort underwritten by World Monuments Fund through its Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve our Heritage; Fomento Cultural Banamex, the philanthropic division of Mexico’s largest bank; and a substantial commitment from the Ministry of Culture for the State of Puebla.

Founded in 1646, the Palafoxiana Library began as a personal collection of some 5,000 volumes bequeathed to the Colegio de San Juan y San Pedro by Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, then Bishop of Puebla and by all accounts one of the more colorful intellectual and cultural figures of seventeenth-century New Spain. Born at Fitera in Navarra, Spain, on June 24, 1600, Palafox was the bastard son of Jaime de Palafox, future Marquis of Ariza, and a young Aragonese widow, Ana de Casanata y Espés. He would not carry the Palafox name, however, until his father officially recognized him as his son in 1609. Soon after, the young Palafox began to enjoy life in the company of Spain’s nobility and pursue a formal education. Ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1629, Palafox was known for his erudition, which attracted the attention of Philip IV. Under his aegis Palafox held several important posts, serving on the king’s war council and council of the Indies. A decade after his ordination, Palafox was appointed to the Episcopal See in Puebla, and it was there that his passion for books, his “jewels” as he often called them, took on epic proportions.

A quintessential polymath, Palafox was at once a theologian, prolific writer, political commentator, patron of the arts, and a defender of the rights of New Spain’s indigenous peoples. According to one of his biographers, historian Ricardo Fernández Gracia of the University of Navarra, Palafox was ahead of his time in his progressive views toward pastoral care, firmly believing that priests should be “more like mothers than fathers to their parishioners, and under no circumstances like lords.” His views were a welcome change in light of the atrocities inflicted on New World inhabitants by clerics—most notably

A PAIR OF EARTHQUAKES THAT STRUCK PUEBLA IN JUNE AND SEPTEMBER 1999 CAUSED CONSIDERABLE DAMAGE TO THE COLONIAL LIBRARY AND ITS EXTRAORDINARY HOLDINGS.
Diego de Landa—in the early years of the Spanish conquest. Intellectually insatiable, Palafox eagerly learned the languages of his congregants. His library is rich in volumes in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldean, Sanskrit, and a host of Prehispanic languages, including Mixtec and Totonac.

On September 5, 1646, Palafox gave his library to the Colegio de San Juan y San Pedro, which he himself had founded, on the condition that its volumes be made available to the general public rather than limited to the inquiries of ecclesiasts and seminarians as was then common practice. More than a century would pass before the collection would find a permanent home.

In 1772, Bishop Francisco de Fabián y Fuero broke ground for the baroque cloistered building that now houses the library, having augmented its collection with books confiscated from the Jesuits upon their expulsion in 1767. To these were added still more volumes donated by fellow bishops, various religious institutions, and private individuals. Completed in 1773, the library occupies a 43-meter-long vaulted hall on the building’s second floor. The bishop had its walls fitted with two tiers of bookshelves made principally of cedar, ayacahuite pine, and coloyote wood; he also acquired the splendid mid-fourteenth-century retablo of the Madonna of Trapani, painted in by the Sicilian master Nino Pisano, which graces its western wall.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the library’s holdings had swelled to more than 41,000 volumes, requiring the addition of a third tier of bookcases to accommodate the acquisitions. Ironically, the added weight of this third tier of bookcases would contribute in large part to the damage the library sustained during the 1999 earthquake.

Weakened by age and insect infestation, the lower levels of the bookcase were simply no match for the quake,” says Mexico City-based conservator Norma Laguna, as we ascend one of several narrow staircases that lead to the second tier. According to Laguna, who guided the restoration of the bookcases over an 18-month period, it was critical that reconstruction of the bookcases would enhance their ability to withstand future seismic activity. “We knew from the pattern of destruction and subse-
quent engineering assessments of the library that we had to drastically reduce, if not altogether eliminate, the weight of the third tier on the lower stacks.”

Prior to any work on the bookcases, however, the building itself had to be structurally stabilized and repaired. The quakes had caused large cracks to develop in the vaults and walls, particularly over the window bays, damage exacerbated shortly thereafter by heavy rainfall. It was feared that without immediate intervention, the building would likely collapse in the event of a subsequent quake. Architectural conservators from Mexico’s Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia began the task of restructing the building, relaying the foundations of its walls and buttresses, and repointing the entire structure. Cracks in the ceiling and walls were filled and the whole building was later waterproofed.

Once the library building had been restored—a process that took more than two years—Laguna began the task of rebuilding its bookcases. Laguna and her team devised an innovative scheme to support the third tier and its walkway with a series of large, cantilevered joists anchored in the wall, rather than having them rest on the stacks below.

“What had once been load-bearing columns on the second tier,” she says, “are now just decorative elements.” As we saunter along the walkway, it is possible to discern the placement of the joists underfoot. During future quakes, the original
Among the more interesting volumes in the library’s collection are those that were censored either because they were considered heretical or because they contained content thought to represent amoral behavior. The folio, above left, written by Sixtus of Siena, bears interpretations of the Holy Bible that were at odds with the Catholic Church while the page at right, depicting New World inhabitants, contains nudity. A fourteenth century painting of the Madonna of Trapani by the Sicilian master Nino Pisano, facing page, graces the library’s western wall. Above it is a small oil depicting Thomas Aquinas.

Bookcases will move with the floor while the top tier will travel with the wall; a cosmetically hidden buffer zone has been placed between the two to absorb any differential strain.

“Throughout the reconstruction, our goal has been to integrate as much original material as possible,” she says, adding that some 80 percent of it was cedar, a wood that is an ideal host to voracious xylophagous insects. “Where necessary, we have replaced damaged elements with pine, which is more resistant to infestation. What had not succumbed to infestation had been damaged by water infiltration, which had caused warping and cracking.” Although close inspection reveals distinct differences in the wood grain of the stacks, particularly on the third level, the quality of the joinery is such that it is difficult to discern old from new.

More than 40 artisans worked on the bookcase restoration, carefully disassembling the stacks, conserving their individual elements, crafting new ones where necessary, and treating the whole ensemble with natural varnish and insecticides. In addition, all of the metal elements—enameled signage and shelf tags, pulls, and hinges—were also conserved.

A third phase of work continues with the complete cataloguing and conservation of the volumes themselves, which now number 41,556, as well as the creation of an online digital archive—a massive undertaking underwritten by Banamex. Recently, a plan has been proposed to renovate an adjacent room to accommodate numerous volumes that do not fit in the library.

In concert with the library restoration, Laguna and her team developed a maintenance program so that conservation is an ongoing process. According to Judith Fuentes Aguilar, the assistant director for the library, efforts are also underway to establish an endowment for the institution so that its future is not at the mercy of ever-changing governments.

Since its reopening in 2003, the Palafoxiana Library has hosted several extraordinary exhibitions: Libros Prohibidos, which highlighted the “censorship” of texts in the library’s collection once thought to be heretical or exhibit amoral behavior, and the Art of Navigation, which is now on view.

For those finding themselves in Puebla, less than a two-hour drive from Mexico City, the library is an absolute must-see. For more on the library and its exhibitions, see www.bpm.gob.mx.