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Does McDonald's belong in a Mexican city square?

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McDonald's Vs. Mexico

By [Lawrence Herzog](#) | Monday, December 16, 2002

Is historic preservation more than the mere protection of buildings? Is it not incumbent upon governments to protect their cultural patrimony from activities that will permanently disturb the historic sense of place? As Lawrence Herzog explains, historic preservation is of great value to each country — if not the global tourism industry.

Global fast food and history don't always mix south of the border. There are 270 McDonald's franchises in Mexico, and the company claims it has plans to build 100 more in the next two years. But, most of these McDonald's tend to be located on the outskirts of cities, in shopping malls — or near other commercial centers.

Out of place?

It's one thing to build a fast food chain on the outskirts of Oaxaca (where one already exists), it is quite another to cantilever a McDonald's into the tightly knit fabric of one of Mexico's most beautiful colonial squares.

McDonald's Corporation wanted to build a fast food franchise on the nearly 500 year old plaza mayor (the main square) of Oaxaca, Mexico.

the nearly 500-year-old plaza mayor (the main square) of Oaxaca.

Yet here in the historic core of a sacred colonial city — in one of the most important regions of indigenous culture in MesoAmerica — the battle between globalization and cultural preservation was waged — and has now come to a dramatic end.

McDonald's Corporation wanted to build a fast food franchise on

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A popular protest movement led by national and local artists, writers, intellectuals and environmentalists, and

backed by worldwide figures — from former First Lady of France Danielle Mitterand, to well known author of books on Mexican cuisine, Diane Kennedy — fiercely opposes this move.

Cultural conquest?

In the end, Oaxaca's city council voted against the McDonald's plan to build on the plaza.

At stake was not merely the cultural heritage of the city's downtown historic district, but the symbolic war between global corporatization and the preservation of precious historic resources, which, like the earth itself, once destroyed cannot be recovered.

Mexico's architectural culture

"This is nothing less than a cultural conquest," claimed one critic, Gustavo Esteva, at one of several forums put on by the city government.

This will not be the last attempt by a global franchise to inject a landscape of fast food into a historic zone in Mexico.

But in this instance, the messages of colonial buildings arrayed around an old plaza won the day.

After oil, the global tourism industry in Mexico rivals the assembly manufacturing sector as the second-largest source of foreign export revenue.

The importance of history

History is especially crucial here. Mexico is a nation of memory, a culture formed in stone: ceremonial pyramids with truncated platforms, masonry plazas of all sizes and shapes, lined with colonial arches, monumental cathedrals, palaces built of tezontle (pink colored rock), poured concrete modernist skyscrapers.

Perhaps that is why Ricardo Legorreta, among Mexico's most respected modern architects, has said: "Every Mexican is an architect in his heart."

Follow your nose

And every taxi driver in every city will tell you about the oldest buildings, the most interesting architectural sites — and how to get to the pre-colonial ruins.

McDonald's (and other similar companies) is more than a mere fast food franchise. It

Here in Oaxaca, you don't need a guide to find the historic center. Just breath in and let your sense of smell lead you: to pungent tamales with shrimp and pumpkin seeds baked in banana leaves, greasy chapulines (deep fried

represents a cultural paradigm of globalization.

crickets), spicy chile powder spread over cacahuetes (peanuts) and lime juice — and richly aromatic mole sauce which simmers for days.

Translating culture into economics

This savory montage and the buzz of vendors and people circling through the narrow streets and across the ancient plaza are part of the authenticity that makes historic Oaxaca unique.

How different the world looks from the sleek, glass, high rise office towers of the accountants, financial consultants, investment bankers, marketing experts, risk analysts, cost estimators and design consultants hired by global companies to make decisions about new investment sites.

For a country like Mexico, the value of its unique historic districts cannot be underestimated.

For them, there is simply no way to measure the alchemy of sound, smell, time and architecture that embody a place. It cannot be translated into economic value.

Marketing culture and history

Accordingly, they see historic buildings and spaces as mere backdrops in the inevitable spread of the global marketplace.

For a country like Mexico, the value of its unique historic districts cannot be underestimated. After oil, the tourism industry in Mexico rivals the manufacturing assembly sector as the second-largest source of foreign export revenue, generating between eight and ten billion dollars per year.

The golden arches of globalization

McDonald's (and other similar companies) is more than a mere fast food franchise. It represents a cultural paradigm of globalization. McDonald's is a symbol of rationality, assembly-line production, efficiency — and homogeneity.

There are 270 McDonald's franchises in Mexico and the company claims it has plans to build 100 more in the next 2 years.

Everything about the experience of eating in a McDonald's is about sameness and predictability. The portions are calculated. The ingredients are uniform. The interior design is virtually the same — and the experience of eating faster and more impersonal.

This goes against the grain in every sense of the rhythm of Mexican historic centers

anchored around their zocalos (main plazas), like the one in Oaxaca.

Moving in on Mexico

"Oaxaca's center is part of who we are," Alejandro de Avila, who directs a botanical garden near the Regional Museum of Oaxaca, has told the media. "It gives us a very special sense of place. McDonald's does not correspond to that sense of place."

Oaxaca's zocalo is children running after colorful balloons; people sitting on benches, reading or talking, or relaxing in the sun, against the backdrop of centuries old arcades, columns, ornate churches. Weddings and family reunions take place here.

Over 40% of people in Oaxaca have said they are willing to let the hamburger chain locate in the historic downtown.

Political rallies and strikes almost always land in the plaza. And rain or shine, there are the vendors, selling corn, tamales, peanuts in white paper cones. Musicians wander and serenade customers. On Thursday evenings a local band plays classical music and old Mexican songs in the raised kiosk.

Fast world, fast food

In today's world, many people prefer to eat quickly. Indeed, over 40% of people in Oaxaca said they were willing to let the hamburger chain locate in the historic downtown. But eating quickly is only part of the experience. In a larger sense the homogeneity of McDonalds or other fast food chains has deeper implications.

It is one thing to build a fast food chain on the outskirts of Oaxaca (one already exists), it is quite another to cantilever a McDonald's into the tightly knit fabric of the main colonial square.

Oaxaca's colonial center has been declared a "World Heritage Site" by the United Nations organization UNESCO. This brings instant value to the historic district, as long as it can preserve its uniqueness.

But at what point does a historic place lose its meaning as it is overrun with fast food, malls, supermarkets — and global video outlets? In a sea of sameness — for tourists and locals — how can city planners preserve a distinct

sense of different locales?

Mexico will continue to have more McDonald's and other fast food operations. But the question is not whether they should come, but where to put them. Should they be allowed to simply perforate the sanctity of sacred plazas and historic spaces? The city of Oaxaca has offered its answer: no.