

"Saving the Historic Center? Design and Politics in Downtown Mexico City"

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A crescendo of excitement is evident among architects, designers and city planners in Mexico City. The government is programming an international competition for the redesign of Mexico City's monumental main plaza or *zocalo* in the historic center. This great Mesoamerican space has been the symbolic town square of the nation for five centuries; its redesign will attract some of the world's greatest 20th century architects. The reinvention of the *zocalo* will be an important layer of a major redevelopment program that will dramatically reshape one of Latin America's most important historic centers.

Mexico City finds itself at a crucial moment of change. The largest metropolis in the western hemisphere, Mexico's City's future is now tied to two intersecting sets of conditions: first, the increasing globalization of the Mexican economy, accelerated by NAFTA, with Mexico City as the headquarters; second, the changing political landscape in Mexico, highlighted by democratization and decentralization of political power, the latter clearly illustrated by the first elected Mayor of Mexico City--Cuahtemoc Cardenas-- taking office in the Fall, 1997.

Ten years ago, the United Nations agency UNESCO designated Mexico's *centro historico* (historic center) as a World Heritage Site, based on the fact that it has the largest collection of Spanish colonial-era buildings and public spaces in the Americas. Despite this prestigious designation, until recently, relatively little has been done to address the future of Mexico City's historic core.

Various development scenarios for the historic center are possible. These range from: a) its complete preservation as a historic site, with limited access; b) it's redevelopment as a tourism and high tech commercial center; or c) its regeneration as a residential zone with supporting services. Obviously, what is needed is a comprehensive economic development, land use and urban design strategy that lays out exactly what mix of these various scenarios will work best. Each scenario implies different outcomes for the various interest groups concerned about land use change in the city center.

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Mexico City's Historic Core

Mexico City is an ideal laboratory for examining the politics of inner city land use in the global age. As the national capital, economic and political heartland of the nation, command center for the NAFTA, and largest metropolis in the Americas, the stakes are indeed high with regard to the future of downtown. The NAFTA encapsulates a trend that has been in place throughout this century, but has reached its greatest magnitude ever: the increasing importance of foreign capital in the transformation of the metropolitan area. Like many other "global cities", Mexico City's destiny is firmly tied to the world economy, but especially to the economy of its trade partners, the U.S. and Canada. The future of downtown Mexico City may no longer be solely dependent on the vision of state/national actors. New actors will appear-- transnational real estate investment firms contemplating everything from tourism and commercial development ventures to high tech office development.

Mexico City's downtown must also be understood within the context of the larger spatial decentralization of the metropolis, and specifically, the shift of the activity centers and commercial zones of concentration toward the west and south. The gradual exodus of high income residents (and investment) toward the periphery has slowly moved the center of gravity in Mexico City away from the traditional downtown. There is now a major build up of commercial/office/high tech activities along the corridor that runs from the Zona Rosa/Polanco to the new development at Santa Fe. There are also important commercial agglomerations to the south, including those along Insurgentes, heading toward Coyoacan/San Angel and UNAM, and nearby commercial centers.

The main value of the historic center lies in its incredible catalogue of historic buildings, plazas, and monuments. A 1980 study by the Special Commission on the Historic Center found 743 landmark buildings, 542, monuments, 67 religious buildings, 78 plazas and gardens, 26 fountains, and 19 cloisters.² Downtown no longer is the primary node of commercial and office activity in the metropolitan region (it has been displaced by emerging centers in the south and west as mentioned), although its symbolic value continues to attract government and private sector office and tertiary activities. In fact, the symbolic role of downtown is its greatest asset. Its symbolism has been exploited by the Mexican government since the 1930's and 1940's; political leaders, according to some experts, have constructed a myth of collective memory, in which the historic center is transformed into a sacred space and symbol of national identity.³ Architecturally, this has left downtown with many "hardened" public spaces-- plazas and squares devoid of benches, trees, flowers, street vendors and decoration-- vast swaths of concrete open space, in effect, giant open air museums for the display of government sponsored nationalism. This is best illustrated in the *zocalo*, where all of the landscaping,

² Chanfon Olmos, C. 1987. "El Centro Historico de La Ciudad de Mexico." in G. Garza, ed. *Atlas de La Ciudad de Mexico*. D.F.: Colegio de Mexico, 240-244.

³ Monnet, J. 1995. *Usos e Imagenes del Centro Historico de La Ciudad de Mexico*. D.F.: Departamento del Distrito Federal.

benches and other furniture and adornments were removed decades ago to create a ceremonial plaza of the state. Official government rallies and events occur here, including the well known celebration of Independence Day every September, when some half million people gather to hear the President declare Mexico a free nation.

Meanwhile, Mexico City, like so many other mega-cities, has experienced a significant decline in quality of life over the last decades. Over three million vehicles make 23 million person trips/day in the metropolis. Traffic is often routed through the center, making its streets virtually impassable during the work day. Millions of city dwellers come to the center for a pedestrian experience, in nearby markets and stores, but noise, pollution and overcrowded conditions are making these activities less and less viable. Environmental stress also takes its toll on architecture, and many of the older buildings in the cities are rapidly deteriorating, and in need of significant rehabilitation.

The Politics of Contested Space

The main reason the "quality of life" problem is relevant to the historic center is that a sizeable population lives in and around the historic center in such areas as Alameda, Merced, and Tepito. Recent estimates suggest a population in the central city and environs at around 2.7 million. Most of these residents tend to be working class and lower income city dwellers. As a group they represent a major voice in the contestation of downtown spaces. Their objective is to protect the quality of life for residents in the central city, while lobbying for the government to build more affordable housing. Residential political power has become an important element in Mexican politics, owing to the rise of urban social movements and popular protest throughout Mexico.⁴ Unfortunately, the interests of the popular sector may collide with a different vision of the historic center that has been termed "refunctionalization", where the historic center is transformed in the interests of tourism and business, and where the poor are largely excluded.⁵

Meanwhile, other groups also compete for access to the best possible outcome in this arrangement. For example, *ambulantes*-- street vendors-- have been a volatile political force in the politics of downtown Mexico City. In a society that is unable to employ its working age population, a vast array of informal economies emerge to allow these city dwellers to survive. One important activity, is, of course, street vending. The big challenge for the city planners is where to locate vendors. Logically, the *ambulantes* want to be in the places where the largest flow of pedestrians occurs. And that is precisely where the government planners don't want the vendors to be, as the downtown streets are already severely congested, and store owners and businesses are strongly opposed to having competing sellers on the public streets and plazas.⁶

⁴ Bennet, V. 1995. *The Politics of Water*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

⁵ Tomas, F. 1991. "El Papel del Centro en la Problematica Metropolitana Actual," en M. Scheingart, ed. *Espacio y Vivienda en La Ciudad de Mexico*. D.F. : Departamento del Distrito Federal. 107-119.

⁶ See Jones, G. and Varley, A. 1994. "The Contest for the City Center: Street Vendors versus Buildings." *Bulletin of Latin American Research*. 13: 27-44.

As Mexico City's downtown space becomes more valuable, there will be even more pressure from land owners and global businesses to keep the streets free of clutter, and especially, to keep *ambulantes* out. Planners are now looking to downtown public spaces-- plazas, gardens, etc.-- as anchors for redevelopment.⁷ In this scenario, the government would recuperate some 63 civic squares, plazas and gardens in and around the historic center, physically rehabilitate them, install new facilities (like bathrooms), expand police presence, and promote cultural programs like "Sunday plazas in the historic center," which will bring antique dealers, artists, book fairs and entertainers to downtown squares.⁸

The impact of global actors

Globalization is now one of the major areas of conceptual discourse in urban planning and design, yet studies of its impact on historic downtown zones are far more scarce. UNESCO's designation of the historic center as a cultural heritage site provided a crucial form of international legitimation of the historic infrastructure of downtown, and a catalyst for schemes to promote new investment. This clearly began to correct the negative perception of Mexico's inner city fostered by the global media coverage of not only the 1985 earthquake, but also the problems of air pollution in the early 1990's, prior to the signing of NAFTA, and more recently, reports of crime against foreign visitors.

NAFTA has, of course, opened the path for major hotel chains to fill a huge gap in the city center: the lack of high end (four and five star) hotels. A number of international hotel chains are showing interest in Mexico City's historic center. One of the icons of downtown modernization-- the Latin American Tower-- will finally undergo a major structural rehabilitation. This building is a kind of symbol of 1950's/1960's modernist architecture at its best, and its redesign would make it available to global service industries seeking office space downtown. It is also a testimony to an earlier form of earthquake-prevention technology that Mexicans can point to as successful-- the tower was undamaged by the 1985 disaster.

Global capital itself has shown greater interest of late in the historic center, particularly in the Alameda district. The attraction of the Alameda is that it is adjacent to the historic quarter, but not inside the boundaries of the landmark district, where severe restrictions on building height and development would impede large scale investment. Thus, it could be said that the Alameda is where global capital will come to rest in the historic center.

The appointment by Mayor Cardenas of an international trade expert, with no previous experience in urban development, to head up the major promotional and development agency for the Alameda district, suggests the government is committed to using global capital to finance the revitalization of downtown. Critics worry about

⁷ Mercado y Asociados. 1997. *Proyecto Centro Historico, Ciudad de Mexico*. Mexico, D.F.: Asamblea de Representantes.

⁸ Fideicomiso del Centro Historico, 1998. *Plan Estrategico Para La Regeneracion y El Desarrollo Integral del Centro Historico de La Ciudad de Mexico*. D.F.

international developers wiping out the existing culture and way of life of districts like the Alameda to clear the way for high tech luxury hotels, convention centers and post modern shopping districts.⁹

What's clear is that evidence of globalization abounds today in Mexico City-- where high tech skyscrapers march up the Paseo de La Reforma like soldiers of the 21st century world economy. The high rises stop short of the landmark historic center, but just barely. Geological limitations and historic preservation will keep the global skyline out of the *centro historico*.

All eyes thus remain on the Alameda district, the true epicenter for NAFTA and the transformation of the downtown. Here too is where the political contest will be played out among competing actors: street vendors, car owners, investors, criminals, global capital, the government. Who will win? It's hard to say. But, the good news is that city planning and urban design have a better chance to be a significant part of the new politics of downtown Mexico City. The bad news is that these professional groups have not yet flexed their muscles. *Poco a poco*.

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⁹ See more generally Herzog, L. 1999. *From Aztec to High: Architecture and Landscape Across the Mexican-United States Border*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (in press).