



## A MEXICO REFLECTION

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Three important events from the past 50 years define the present and future state of Mexico City. Firstly during the student mobilisation of October 1968, people spontaneously appropriated public spaces and claimed back streets and squares. The city had not witnessed such a democratic social movement in many years, perhaps since the Mexican Revolution. Anti-government demonstrations of civil society groups were repressed brutally and a sense of distrust spread among the population. A few days later – at the Olympic Games – the ‘orderly’ occupation of the same spaces was choreographed by repressive forces. In any case, the citizens of the metropolis were once again celebrating and occupying urban public space. The earthquakes of 1985 caused an important rupture within the physical structure of the city, particularly in low lying central zones where ‘the bottom of the lake’ once stood. Population movement towards higher areas in the periphery was another consequence of this shock: the empty spaces and urban scars that the quakes left behind are still visible today. Subsequent rescue operations provided the city’s population with a new opportunity – under very different circumstances – of reappropriating its civic spaces and reinstating social bonds among citizens. The economic crisis of 1994 – which coincides with the Zapatista insurgency in Chiapas – produced a significant social dismemberment in Mexico’s capital city. It opened new holes in the urban tissue and governmental vacuums in certain ‘transitional’ zones and ‘no man’s lands’. This opened opportunities for the most negative forces from our communities to fill these vacuums and cause social instability, violence and insecurity. As the wider population found itself displaced from such places the metropolis lost much of its public space.

Together with inadequate planning policies, these events have led the city in a direction that parallels that of other developing metropolises: areas with the highest potential for urbanity have stopped growing and the natural densification of the better serviced parts of the city and those with the best infrastructure has not occurred. At the same time there has been growth and expansion of a sub-urban outer ring where patches of poverty and wealth (a lot more on the poverty side!) stand side by

side without meshing. This peripheral or rather post-peripheral zone – now extending well beyond the unfinished Periférico ring road – is already challenging the geographic limits of the Valley of Mexico. It devours woods and other natural zones and has become a spongy ‘frontier’ absorbing both the centrifugal forces that lead people to leave the city centre and the centripetal forces of those who attempt to in-migrate to the city and never make it. This zone that surrounds Mexico City – which includes some of the wealthiest and most popular zones of the metropolis – has attracted most of the private speculative investment at all levels. The public expenditures that the city was forced to incur have been able to provide only a tenuous and minimal infrastructure given the enormous costs associated with the elevated and difficult topographies of these zones and the significant distances from traditional centres. The city has been incapable, almost without exception, of keeping up with this accelerated horizontal sprawl and of providing urban infrastructure and services to these remote areas. At the same time, Mexico City has experienced a diversion of funds that could have strengthened under-utilised infrastructure in inter-peripheral zones. We have also witnessed the progressive erosion of the city’s polycentric character that had turned our city into one of the most vibrant modern metropolises of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is worth mentioning that Mexico City was born modern, due to its peculiar geography and the vision of its Aztec founders who built diverse centres and an intense network of communication. These settlements flourished in a unique condition of simultaneous tension and interdependency. Tenochtitlan, Tlatelolco, Coyoacán, Tlalpan, Xochimilco, Tlahuac and others provide the basis for the contemporary metropolis. The amalgamation and texture of our city is explained by the growth of these centres that eventually overlapped at their perimeters and produced new zones with increasing complexity and networked interrelationships. The life of the contemporary city and its architecture takes place in these transitional zones. Looking at the city as a whole, space is defined by the complex vector relationships that emerge from its fragments and by the movements of people, goods and information. There is a

coexistence of the most diverse patterns of social life, from highly orthodox to the most subversive and defiant. The contemporary city allows multiple readings, superimposed, of restless orders, happenstance, destabilisation, and change. Life in this city is as ephemeral, fragile, transitory and fragmentary as contemporary society and culture. Transitional zones offer a most important opportunity of achieving new possibilities for living with higher density and less congestion. Two recent conditions have deepened this process of deurbanisation. The erosion of the quality of life and the urbanity of the city has been accelerated by: the rising oil prices that have resulted in a new, and even more unequal, prosperity for the country and therefore for Mexico City; an absent planning and growth policy with political interest of a marked populist tendency that at the same time shows conservative and reactionary elements. These situations have led to a 'strange' alliance between the commercial interests of real estate developers and the political interests of those governing the city to invest in the peripheral belt with a completely sub-urban vision for newly developing zones. We have seen 'bedroom cities' mushroom and the American-style 'malls' that service them become the sole evidence of interaction and urban life in these new public-private spaces. In parallel the culture of public and democratic space in our city has been abandoned.

It is worth mentioning the few exceptions to this phenomenon. Some zones have experienced a renaissance, due their richness and texture; the great quality of their public spaces, and their important tradition of urbanity that extends over a century – several centuries in some cases. Polanco, la Condesa, la Roma, Coyoacán, San Ángel and other neighbourhoods have undergone a positive transformation thanks to the in-migration or return of some of the most daring groups from our creative communities who have decided to take certain risks and reclaim urban values. We are now also seeing a second generation of transitional neighbourhoods where a new urbanity is increasingly appreciated. The recent regeneration of Escandón, San Miguel Chapultepec, Santa María la Ribera and others gives us clear signs for optimism. They have exploited the city's opportunities. A number of interventions have been very successful and produced high quality architecture. A new and important generation of artists, designers and architects from Mexico City has emerged in the post-1968, post-earthquake, post-devaluation context. They are reinventing the way their disciplines are practised, based on a global vision and a reflexive education. Transitional zones have become their favoured places of intervention

and participation. Our city had not experienced such an interesting and stimulating moment since the post-war period when that generation of Mexican architects produced one of the best collections of modern architecture in the world including works such as the Ciudad Universitaria.

I felt privileged to take part in the Urban Age with some of these talented young professionals who have achieved this well deserved success through their work, and their important commitment to the city. They have been able to displace the previous generation – my generation too – and its exhausted discourse on urban issues. To me this is a great incentive and stimulus, a source of renewed hope. Finally I would like to join this creative force of young voices in Mexico City and contribute with the following proposals for future discussion. We need to:

- Create a truly multidimensional city, a 'new-built topography' that will grow vertically on top of the urban layout and texture of the traditional, modern, interperipheral city;
- Reverse the out-migration from the centre and propose an alternative of multiple concentricities, taking advantage of the rich overlap of fabrics in the city;
- Recover the polycentric city and its diverse cores that have been submerged and surrounded by the peripheral belt;
- Redensify and occupy the volumes that can be built above the existing inter-peripheral city, strengthening the various traditional centres in the metropolis;
- Take advantage of the zones created by the overlap of various centres in the city that have the greatest potential for urban life. These neglected zones (Tepito, Bondoquito, Guerrero, Obrera, Doctores, and many others) supply some of the best opportunities for development and urbanity and constitute the 'lost' places of the city;
- Promote public investment in the most urban centres and their overlapping peripheries with the creation of specific projects that stimulate the development and recovery of urban spaces, infrastructure and basic services, to secure a better quality of life in the multiple urban centres of Mexico City.

Translated by *Miguel Kanai*, Urban Age Project Researcher, LSE

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