



Public Life and Urban Space

THE BREATHING SPACES OF THE CITY

Mario Schjetnan, Founding Partner, Grupo de Diseno Urbano

Public open spaces are democratic city spaces par excellence; one place belonging to and for everyone. Streets, boulevards, cultural facilities, public gardens, squares, parks and nature reserves constitute a vacuum, a negative space that gives its form, organises, structures and embellishes the city, allows it to breathe and live. Public spaces generate balance between what is built and what is private, the opening that society, by consent and by norm, has given itself in order to co-exist. In general terms, we can say that it does not matter how large, extensive or dense a city is, if in return, it allows its residents to access a variety of quality public spaces. In so far as we are able to stroll through its streets, gardens, squares and parks, we will have a more equitable and democratic and, in short, more human, city. However, who is responsible for ensuring that the space that belongs to everyone is not violated, occupied, invaded, abandoned or ignored? How are marginal areas of the city affected by the absence or non-existence of public space and the lack of access to culture? Do social and economic differences become even greater?

Chapultepec is the largest public space in Mexico City, bringing together history, culture, nature and leisure in an exceptional way. There are few parks in the world with such a layering of historic and symbolic weight and an intensity of cultural offerings and facilities in a single place of such ancestral natural beauty. It is also a central space, easy to access from the metropolitan area using mass low cost transport: Chapultepec gets between 15 and 16 million visitors a year, 46% of whom come from the Federal District, 35% from the State of Mexico and just 19% from the rest of the country and overseas. Chapultepec holds a huge attraction for visitors, faced with an urban landscape that offers little, and suffers enormous disparity and inequality in the distribution of public open spaces and cultural and leisure facilities. These absences are particularly marked in the north and east, areas with the highest population growth and territorial expansion in the metropolitan area. What is most impressive in the initiatives and actions that have been implemented to reverse the gradual decline in the ecology, services and maintenance of Chapultepec is the fact that these have been promoted and called for by

civil society. The institutional model of intervention, with significant citizen participation. This model, although not perfected, has demonstrated a capacity for leadership, drive and follow-up within the enormous complexity and simultaneity of factors and problems. Fund-raising campaigns have been launched with a level of participation unheard of in our society. The masterplan for Chapultepec has made possible the co-ordination, promotion and scheduled implementation of multiple actions, which go far beyond immediate or physical intervention. A level of citizen commitment and involvement has been established that is rarely seen in urban programmes in our country. This is the lesson it has learnt. How can we move from this towards a metropolitan strategy for public spaces and cultural offerings? I would like to use this forum to propose a vision that I have called “1, 10 y 100 – Espacios Abiertos y Culturales en la Macropolis de la Ciudad de Mexico” (1, 10 and 100 – Open and Cultural Spaces in the Macropolis of Mexico City).

ONE (1) SUPER-CITY SPACE

The great opportunity for the configuration of a major system of open spaces and supercity nature reserves is the former Vaso de Texcoco, as various architects, town-planners and engineers have pointed out. I have here a unique opportunity for the region, given the availability of federal public land in the centre, of which an enormous urban sprawl has already been created. It would be possible to create a vast network of parks, lakes, wetlands and conservation areas complemented by public service facilities for the most vulnerable population. However, Texcoco could turn into a huge problem; these areas have been invaded and populated at a rapid rate.

TEN (10) METROPOLITAN SPACES

The cycle track along the old Cuernavac railway is to be completed, turning it into a lineal metropolitan park (1) connecting up a chain of public spaces to the west. Starting at the lakes and wetlands in Tlahuac to the south (2) and passing via the important archaeological remains at El Cerro de la Estrella (3) and El Cerro Texcoxcingo (4), the lineal park will extend to

metropolitan parks to the north, in El Olivar de los Padres (5) and La Cañada de Contreras (6), finishing up in El Cerro del Ajusco (7). This vision of cultural and archaeological metropolitan parks is complemented by the zone of the Pirámides de Teotihuacan (8), where an extensive masterplan is required, for heritage protection and for urban parks that service visitors and residents. Proposals have also been made for Tepozotlan (9), to the north, for the configuration of a system of parks, open spaces and heritage sites. The old Azcapotzalco refinery (10) also constitutes a major reserve for the creation of a large park with metropolitan cultural and leisure facilities in the central-northern region of the Federal District, representing a significant offering that balances out over-use and concentration in Chapultepec.

100 URBAN SPACES

However, an ordered system does exist within the context of all these problems, these inequalities and this chaos in Mexico City. Heritage is an equaliser of quality of urban life because of its history, its precedent. Mexico City is a huge galaxy or universe of chaos and construction (not necessarily architecture) with multiples oases. I refer to the fact that no matter how poor or extensive or outlying a zone of the city may be, we will always find wonderful oases in a small square, the historic part of the district, a little glimmer of history. That is to say, we live in a space that has already been inhabited, which we have transformed, and combined in just one city, but which we will always come across and which is always here. This is not a conservationist or nostalgic vision, but a tool that initiates an ordered system of equality. This is my proposal for 111 urban, civic, natural, historic, accessible and cultural spaces that could, significantly create a habitable democratic super-city.

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