

Astrid Velasco*

#FuerzaMéxico (#FortitudeMexico)

Every morning the city repeats a routine to launch the day: we leave home, we walk, we drive through the traffic; we look, feel, talk; something always reminds us that we're alive. Nobody thinks that they might die or be injured; nobody wants to see their loved ones or those close to them suffer. Terrible is the random occurrence that can suddenly hit and transform us. Those of us who lived through the earthquakes will never be the same. The 1985 quake brought us face to face with death and disaster, but also with the incredible version of Mexican society in all its solidarity and support. 2017 also filled us with sadness and, at the same time, hope.

In my memory, September 19, 1985 meant shock and optimism. At 7:19 a.m., horror took possession of our city and of us. In just a few minutes, the loss of life, of property, surprise, rage, and pain flooded us as forcefully as dust and the stench of death filled our lungs. Unofficial estimates put the damage at 30 000 homes destroyed 70 000 homes partially damaged, 45 000 dead, 4 100 people rescued, and more than 40 000 injured. However, we also witnessed an incredible version of Mexican society that became a milestone in community organization and the organization of society in general. That new Mexico managed to unite people, make them aware, provide them with a catharsis, and mobilize them to demand a government response to deal with the victims.

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Carlos del Valle, Janteteico Brigada

The new Mexico managed to unite people, make them aware, provide them with a catharsis, and mobilize them to demand a government response to help the victims.

In 2017, despite the fact that for some time the seismic alarm had been operational and we had been able to hear it through loudspeakers installed in at least four cities nationwide, the earthquakes took us by surprise. First, on September 7, at 11:49 p.m. Civil society support was immediate: donations, caravans, and brigades of architects and engineers who went out to the affected areas accompanied the always criticized response of the federal government and its institutions. Outstanding at that moment was the participation of the artists Francisco Toledo and his family, as well as Demian Flores and the Almadia publishing house; from the start they collected money, food, and other kinds of aid, and with their own money paid for trucks to transport what they collected to Oaxaca.

Twelve days later, on a date already charged with drama because of our memories, September 19, another devastating earthquake stunned us. Devastation and death



Zazilha Lotz, Jantelco Brigade

the people they thought were still alive underneath the debris. Others directed traffic. Still others passed on news and picked up or gave rides to people who couldn't get to the places their loved ones were or who had no form of transportation.

Around the 20th, donation centers had already been established to collect clothing, food, blankets—later, some of them specialized in items for children, preparing food, collecting books and toys for the little ones, household goods and furnishings, etc.—; accounts had been opened for making donations in cash, as well as websites indicating where to take donations in kind; and locations were established for distributing what was needed to those removing rubble or who by that time had already painfully discovered the loss of their property and material goods. Individuals or brigades of architects, engineers, and people responsible for construction sites (DROS) ventured out to review buildings and evaluate damage; others purchased or loaned input to deal with the emergency: picks and shovels, circular saws to break up concrete, lamps, tents, crowbars, buckets. Some people were able to offer rescue workers cranes and machinery. Others went from place to place verifying information so that all the efforts could be efficient (one very significant example of this was #Verificado19s, plus individuals who contacted Mexico City's C5 center [Center for Emergency Attention and Public Protection]). Many people lent their vehicles (trucks, automobiles, and bicycles) to transport aid or classify it so it could be sent where required (a brigade of cyclists verified information and transported aid). Shelters were set up and many people even opened their homes or bathrooms so those affected could spend the night or bathe.

Hospitals and doctors also gave a lesson in solidarity; not only did they go out into the streets to offer support and services, but for the first time, both public and private hospitals opened their doors to receive the injured free of charge. Alberto Palacios describes it like this:

Three decades later, the same nightmare. Buildings with cracks down the side, collapses, death again; children buried in schools, civil society in movement and coming to the rescue. . . . Perhaps this is the most outstanding and praiseworthy. Women and men who jettisoned their fear and ran to move rubble, to listen for heartbeats and sighs under the rocks, to save people they didn't know but who, from one

flew around us and could be breathed in the air. News flew: collapsed buildings, a school where children and teachers lay under fallen walls. An enormous crack opened up in the eastern part of Mexico City. Thousands remained in the street, and in the city's marginalized areas or outside the city, tragedy mounted. Many did not have deeds to their homes or possessed nothing other than what they had lost, or, even worse, their existence had turned into mourning for those close to them.

On that September 19, 2017, we knew that an earthquake drill was scheduled; we were prepared by commercials and announcements everywhere. But no one warned us of the horror and devastation that followed the real earthquake.

This time, the death toll was lower, but not for that any less atrocious: 370 dead, taking into consideration the countrywide figures (Mexico City, Morelos, Puebla, the State of Mexico, Guerrero, and Oaxaca).¹ However, like in 1985, the response from society was swift, and perhaps even quicker thanks to the existence of cell phone communications and the social media: it was extraordinary. From the 19th on, people moved toward the flattened buildings to help with the rescue and care for the injured. Human chains removed rubble, concrete slabs, and iron to get out

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moment to the next, had turned into their own injured, their companions in tragedy.

The apocalypse cannot take us by surprise, they seem to repeat as they pick up debris and twisted iron rods. Perhaps food, water, and electricity are missing, but what there will be in abundance is fortitude, common effort, the ability to become what is most noble in the human spirit: goodness. That night and all the hours that follow, the rescue workers are fighting against time. They know that down there, amidst the earth that has been torn apart forever, someone is waiting with a breath of life, and they don't allow themselves rest. Every minute counts.

The hospitals and public services have opened their doors to all, an example of democracy that we never see in times of peace and tranquility. Once again the civilian population has surpassed the authorities, like in 1985, when that president and his cabinet hesitated, while the streets filled with citizens willing to give over their bodies and time to save others, the fallen, the crushed. Brothers all.²

As the website *MxCity Guía Insider* writes, laundries were set up to wash the donated clothing and the clothing the victims had with them:

That's why the Laundry Brigade came into being. It was an idea born when five friends got together to look for a simple, practical way to fulfill this need, so important in day-to-day living. The point of the project is that anyone who has a washing machine, dryer, detergent, or transportation can contribute.

The brigade's activity consists of picking up clothing at the shelters, distributing it among the network of volunteers, or laundries, that will launder the clothing at home and return it to its owners in perfect condition.³

Formal clothing was also offered for people who had to go to work in offices and needed suits, shirts, or special items. Other people babysat or took care of the injured; mental health professionals (psychologists, psychoanalysts) created their own brigades to listen to and help people with post-traumatic stress so they could overcome what we had been through.

Rescue dogs lent support to Army and Navy personnel, the "moles," and brigade members, and graphic designers and illustrators uploaded coloring books to Internet free of charge so that people could have a cathartic experience when coloring in their canine heroes.

Hospitals and doctors also gave a lesson in solidarity; for the first time, both public and private hospitals opened their doors to receive the injured free of charge.

Some people also wrote or translated manuals or adapted reading materials about security and earthquakes, or children's texts that explained and helped families overcome their fears and feel safe in their homes, schools, and workplaces.

With the passing days, and after dealing with the emergency of rescuing people who had been buried by the walls that previously had sheltered them, the brigades turned their efforts to offering all manner of aid: legal advice; architects, engineers, and officials responsible for construction sites (DROS) inspected buildings and supervised demolition and reconstruction; offering different workshops, like a collective that worked on textiles and embroidery in the shelters; or brigades of young people who went to hard-hit communities in Morelos and Puebla. **MM**



Zazilha Lotz, Janteteico Brigade

Brigade Members Speak

Emilia Ruvalcaba de la Garza, a member of Infrarural

Infrarural is an organization that does community work, and right after the September 19 earthquake, we began activities to help people in the towns that had been hit hard. A day after the quake, we went to the communities in the state of Morelos to see what kind of help was needed. A truck driver sent us to a community where he said no one from outside had visited and where they urgently needed shovels and people to use them. So, two and a half hours later, we arrived in Alpanocan, Puebla.

Ninety percent of the homes had been destroyed and a huge cloud of dust surrounded the entire town. Fortunately, no one had died, but you could see how people's belongings had been destroyed, buried, flying through the streets; women were weeping as they saw how their homes had collapsed; people spent hours in long lines just to get a plate of food that had been cooked on fires lit in the middle of the street.

After a few days in the community, food supplies began to arrive and also to be in excess. What was needed was support for what would come after the exhaustion of the volunteers and the immediate necessities.

First, we worked in brigades to help with analyzing structural damage, with psychological support, and working with children, since all the schools had collapsed. Later, we decided



Multidisciplinary Brigade of Support to the Communities of Mexico

to launch a reconstruction campaign to build quality housing, to create a space that would allow residents to recover the stability and tranquility of the homes they had lost.

A month after the earthquake, people were still sleeping in tents, under tarps, or in livestock pens. Thanks to civil society support, we were able to raise enough money to begin to build homes. By January, together with volunteers and community members, we had built three homes; this allowed families to take up their normal activities again and recover the security and tranquility lost during the earthquake. **MM**

(Testimony of Emilia Ruvalcaba de la Garza, member of Infrarural, February 5, 2018)

Ana Barriga

On September 19 the earth shook and thrashed about, both inside and outside us. That's why we didn't hesitate to volunteer; there were things to pick up and other things to deliver to the people who needed them. And, above all, because we also distrusted most of our institutions. We spent the first four months amidst shovels, walls, and buckets in different parts of Morelos. Later we settled indefinitely in Jantetelco, where some days we passed out food or gave workshops, and other days we lugged rocks out of homes. We ended up with physical injuries, like most of the improvised, non-expert volunteers; we had bruises, cuts, and scrapes on arms and legs; back pain; lack of sleep, allergies, coughs, and burning eyes.

One of those mornings when we couldn't get out of bed because of how our bodies ached, we remembered that "when it hurts, we have to give even more," because we can assure you that we never saw prayers that propped up some old persons' house or good vibes that made food appear in the hands of brigade members and earthquake victims. We can assure you that it was people, taking risks, giving of their time and resources, who got things done.

We all heard stories of businesses that donated their merchandise without thinking of how they were going to get it back later. Those reactions were the ones that made us think that if they can do it, then we can also give everything without expecting to get it back tomorrow. And we'll

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keep on like that, giving, despite the fact that it hurts, because that's the logic of the thing, that's what life is about. Being human means doing what has to be done, just because; because it's a duty, because we aren't rubble. **MM**

**(Testimony of Ana Barriga,
Jantetelco Brigade, February 2018)**



Lucero Sandoval, Jantetelco Brigade

Mariana Velasco

According to Mariana Velasco, brigades were also formed to support the work in the shelters and offer families entertainment and catharsis.

That's how the cultural brigades came into being. The examples are innumerable; there's the work of the National Institute of Anthropology and History and the Institute for Aesthetic Research. Different publishing houses and people in the cultural milieu made outstanding efforts; they went to the shelters and camps to read and offer books; and the Topos-LIJ (Moles-LIJ) group (<https://albertogarcia835.wixsite.com/topos-lij/nosotros>) also created little libraries in those places.

The community working in the area of children's and young people's literature (authors, illustrators, editors, promoters, story-tellers, cultural managers, editorial designers, science disseminators, among others) also responded. They offered stories to the little boys and girls who, after an ex-

traordinary event like last September 19's earthquake, were in dire straits; at times like that, books can be good company and a tool for chasing away fear and recovering tranquility.

In homage to the *Topo* [Mole] Rescue Brigade, so widely-known, beloved, and admired in our country, this collective took the name "Topos-LIJ," alluding to the much-needed rescue of our children when faced with events that make them feel vulnerable, and it's not their lives that are in danger, but the full enjoyment of their childhood and youth.

Other people took theater, music, and children's activities to shelters and camps.

The help concentrated to a large degree in Mexico City, Oaxaca, and Puebla; but some very hard-hit places were practically forgotten.

In Valle de Bravo, civil society also organized to participate in cultural brigades to support quake victims in communities in the State of Mexico. One example is the Smiles Brigade, created by artists and cultural promoters. This team has committed to following up with visits to the communities of Ocuilan, one of the municipalities hardest hit by the earthquake, until the homeless and displaced persons recover their homes. The Smiles Brigade brings with it good humor, stage activities, creativity workshops, and also books and toys donated by the people of Valle de Bravo, to make sure children's rights are respected. **MM**



Smiles Brigade, fotografía cortesía de Lavinia Negrete

**(Testimony of Mariana Velasco,
Smiles Brigade, February 2018)**

Bioescénica

The world will end when no one fights anymore,
when love is not spread,
when no more smiles shine,
when hope is not revived.

We're in time.

ÍCARO, POET

After the damage done by the September 19, 2017 earthquake, a group of women got together to guide and foster solidarity in a coordinated, collaborative, emotionally supportive way with the children and young people of Xochimilco who needed it.

Educational psychologist Angélica Sánchez, manager and artist Ana Gómez, community psychologist Valery Hernández, and artist and curator Minerva Hernández are a working group with four years' experience fostering inter- and trans-disciplinary activities in Xochimilco to build the towns' autonomy and strengthen inhabitants' identity.

We work directly with the families affected and offer support from our own fields of knowledge (psychology, art, science, education, and childcare). We link up cultural activities with collecting donations, supporting the construction of temporary housing with material or our professional training, as well as legal follow-up and psychological care in the towns using the censuses taken by the residents of Santa Cruz Acapulco, San Gregorio Atlapulco, San Luis Tlaxialtemalco, Santa María Nativitas, and some parts of downtown Xochimilco; these are people who know their community and can identify their own needs.

We created cultural caravans that used integration techniques with games and songs to recover the cultural wealth and tradition of the Xochimilco towns and townspeople; we



Minerva Hernández, Bioescénica

Based on our experience in these towns, we decided to turn the cultural caravans into an on-going project to create spaces for living together, playing, and learning.

also carried out emotional support activities, created a science laboratory, reading areas, and a game center, plus physical activity games.

Based on our experience in these towns, we decided to turn the cultural caravans into an on-going project to create spaces for living together, playing, and learning. The plan is to carry out cultural activities every three months in the towns of Xochimilco to continue strengthening ourselves as a community.

These efforts involve different collectives and volunteers, like the Coordinación de Pueblos (Towns Coordinating Committee), Barrios Originarios y Colonias de Xochimilco (Xochimilco First People's Neighborhoods), Bioescénica, Xochiquitines, ¿Cri-Crées que pasa? (What Do You Think's Happening?), Unión Comunitaria por el Pueblo de Tepepan (Community Union for the Town of Tepepan), An Meztli, María Valeria, Ana González Pérez, Vaj Rei, Ix Chel, Ana, Brenda, Kissy, Paula, Andrea, María, and Vicky... **MM**

Notes

1 Mexico City reported 228 deaths; Morelos, 74; Puebla, 45; the State of Mexico, 15; Guerrero, 6; and Oaxaca, 2, according to information from the Senate, "Recuento de los daños 7s y 19s: a un mes de la tragedia," *Notas estratégicas* no. 17, October 2017, http://bibliodigitalibd.senado.gob.mx/bitstream/handle/123456789/3721/2017_16_ne_recuento%20de%20da%c3%b1os_231017.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

2 Alberto Palacios Boix, "Septiembre diecinueve," *Ocells. Reflexiones a vuelo de pájaro*, September 20, 2017, <https://ocells.wordpress.com/2017/09/>.

3 "Brigada lavandería y su propuesta para cuidar la ropa de los albergues," *MxCity Guía Insider*, September 2017, <https://mxcity.mx/2017/09/brigada-lavanderia-y-su-propuesta-para-cuidar-la-ropa-de-los-albergues/>.