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Mexico City And Its Crisis Of the Modern Paradigm



On September 4, 1969, President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz inaugurated the first line of Mexico City's subway system. This infrastructure, which undoubtedly transforms life in a big city, arrived late to the Mexican capital when we take into account that a century earlier London had opened the first line of its underground train system. Nevertheless, the subway was hailed simultaneously as a social and popular endeavor and as bold and avant-garde and was used as publicity for Mexico City as a great international capital. Curiously, more than a gap that was finally filled, the metro represented a zenith for the city's modern paradigm.

Mexico City's demographic growth was so vertiginous and startling in the twentieth century that it put to test any state capacity to carry out a uniform urban development plan. Grandiose modern urbanization projects to address housing, industrial organization, food and water

supplies, public spaces, incorporating the hinterland, mobility, and managing solid waste and sewage were all undertaken in Mexico City in a haphazard and disorganized fashion and usually left incomplete. Since the 1950s, or even earlier, Mexico City has almost always been in a constant state of emergency and cannot do much more than respond to immediate problems with limited capacities.

By the 1960s, Mexico City's centralized urban development appears to have borne its best fruits. This was also the climax of the authoritarian regime of the single party that governed the country for most of the twentieth century, where control of the capital city was exercised directly from the president's office. Mexico City had been chosen as the venue for the 1968 Olympic Games and the 1970 World Cup. In the midst of the Cold War, the regime was poised to present Mexico as a development success for what was then called the Third World.

To accomplish this, Mexico City was supposed to appear to be a traditional and nationalist city that was also cosmopolitan and global. The regime was so determined to present a favorable image that it would go to great lengths to hide any evidence of backwardness, poverty, unequal-

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Photo courtesy of the author.

ity and, above all, any notion of lack of control. For example, it was the Díaz Ordaz administration that carried out the violent repression and massacre of the 1968 student movement. The scandal caused by the publication of the book *The Children of Sanchez*, by U.S. American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, is also noteworthy. Lewis gives an account of the life of a poor family in rundown housing in downtown Mexico City. The director of the state-owned publishing house that published the Spanish language version of the book was fired. The government denounced the author for defamation and the Sanchez family had to break their anonymity to prove that Lewis had not invented them.

Order and progress, the old positivist slogan of bourgeois governance for a world that accelerated its interconnections, its industrialization, and, therefore, its urbanization achieved its maximum expression up until then in Mexico City. The subway was just one of the works of infrastructure used as propaganda for a welfare, developmentalist state. By the 1960s, the city had already created and expanded expressways for automobiles; piped the main rivers turning them into drainage canals; reorganized the food markets by building a central supply center in La Merced; and begun large-scale modernist housing developments like the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco urban complex or urbanizations like Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl for the working classes, or Ciudad Satellite for the middle classes. Industrial reorganization was also underway, moving the old Porfirian manufacturing sites out of central areas and relocating them in the periphery. It was only a decade earlier that the Lerma River hydraulic system was built to bring drinking water to the Valley of Mexico from a neighboring basin to the west, or that the enormous UNAM campus was constructed on volcanic rock, and the main institutions of the welfare state were founded.

Since then, like other great megalopolises of the world, Mexico City has been paying the price for the modernist paradigm and does not have the capacity to handle large-scale, profound urban renewal. The logic of responding to emergencies continues in Mexico City, but it has been almost impossible to imagine or manage new solutions based on other paradigms. Each new situation or critical need is addressed cosmetically or minimally, knowing that it will reemerge later on.

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ture or ordering that can provide new ways of relating to the urban space and the Valley of Mexico. There are many examples of this.

The subway is insufficient. Even though the network has expanded slowly, thus far it only covers a small part of the metropolitan area. Investment in other cheaper means of public transportation like a BRT (bus rapid transit) system or infrastructure for bicycles has increased, especially over the past two decades, but is far from meeting the city's demand or covering its entire area. It is clear that the model of urban mobility based on the automobile has failed, but given the state's incapacity to provide an efficient public transportation system on a regional scale, it has continued to invest in the expansion of urban highways, which are apparently cheaper or more profitable for a continually expanding vehicle fleet.

Mexico City continues to face, and confront with the same imagination of 400 years ago, the paradox of being a city that is simultaneously drowning and thirsty: bringing drinking water from distant sources and expelling rainwater and wastewaters from a closed basin valley. Along with local wells, the Lerma system, built at the end of the 1940s, is still the main water source for metropolitan area residents. In recent decades, the network of dams outside the Valley of Mexico that feed the system has increased and water is pumped into the basin. The distribution network has also been expanded, but the underlying problem persists.

The same is the case of drainage. Rainwater, leaks, and wastewater are all mixed together and channeled northward to be expelled from the basin into a neighboring valley. The East Emission Tunnel, inaugurated in 2019, is a major work of infrastructure that handles drainage just as it was conceived by the colonial authorities at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Taking advantage of rainwater, as well as separating drainage from natural rivers, requires considerably more investment than the current paradigm but would be a much better response to the city's growth.

Other issues have the same track record. The idea of managing the city's food supply and distribution system through a large central market was maintained. When the scale became inadequate, this central market was moved from La Merced to a location in Iztapalapa, inaugurated in 1982. New metropolitanization involved regularizing occupied or even invaded areas at the edges of the expanding urban sprawl, especially in northern and eastern parts of the valley; or they sprang up in response to corporate or elitist interests that created a disorderly and poorly planned pole of urban growth toward the west that was hostile toward working classes. There have been no other major projects to reorganize housing or to expand metropolitanization.

Along with the absence of major projects or an overall paradigm of new ideas for organizing the territory, over the past 50 years Mexico City began to experience uncontrolled growth of urban problems: environmental degradation manifested in deteriorating air quality; rapidly increasing insecurity and urban violence; swiftly growing numbers of street vendors; and over the past 20 or 30 years, gentrification of the downtown area. The lack of urban infrastructure on the peripheries and the absence of a plan for deconcentrating economic and employment poles have given way to rising costs in central areas and, therefore, growing class segregation throughout the city.

Perhaps the most significant change in the capital city's paradigm over the last 50 years has occurred in politics and the notion of citizenship. During the 1980s and 1990s, the first metropolitan commissions were formed to begin to consider the urban problem outside the limitations of no-longer-functional government policies. However, to the extent that the previous century's political system has been debilitated and is shifting toward greater democracy, what was then known as the Federal District, which today accounts for barely half or less of the metropolitan area—the rest of which is in the State of Mexico and a small part in the state of Hidalgo—has become autonomous. In 1997, for the first time, residents of the capital city were able to elect local authorities and representa-

tives to a local legislature; in 2000 they elected the Federal District's head of government.

Just recently, in 2018, the nation's capital promulgated its first constitution, wherein the term Federal District was cast aside and the name "Mexico City" was approved, thereby separating it from the rest of the metropolitan area. While this has been a positive change that broadens out citizenship rights and political representation for those residing in what is now Mexico City, there are also some negative aspects. Upon decentralizing decision-making in the metropolitan area and dividing the city territorially into different orders and levels of government, the political coordination needed to carry out large-scale projects that could change living conditions for the Valley of Mexico's inhabitants is now less feasible. This is even more the case when the president of Mexico, the governors of the bodies that comprise the metropolitan area, and the local authorities are not members of the same political party.

Over the last few decades Mexico City has become a very baffling place. It exhibits signs that the worst urban nightmares are about to materialize and, nevertheless, it resists. Major earthquakes, like the ones that rocked the city in 1985 and 2017, clearly demonstrate this. Despite all this, the city continues to amaze us. In the midst of the violence, the chaos, the risks of disaster, and the degradation constantly present in Mexico City, innumerable small spaces exist that harmonize life in the city and give it meaning, strengthening the bonds of coexistence. On almost any ride on public transportation one can experience the disconcerting sensation of being caught between fragility and solidarity. The immanence of emergency is exhausting, but it also binds us together.

The major challenge for Mexico City, as it faces the future and tries to escape from the logic of emergency, is the same as for any great metropolis. It must abandon the modern paradigm of habitability once and for all and conceive of post-urban ways of inhabiting the world. It will be necessary to conceive of ourselves not as citizens of a metropolis, but rather of a great region articulated internally and connected to other regions. This transformation will require new levels of coordination and centralization. How can this be achieved without creating new forms of authoritarianism? The answer lies in imagination and the willingness to engage in this conversation on a global scale. Only in this way will we be able to advance to the next great paradigm of habitability. ■■■

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