

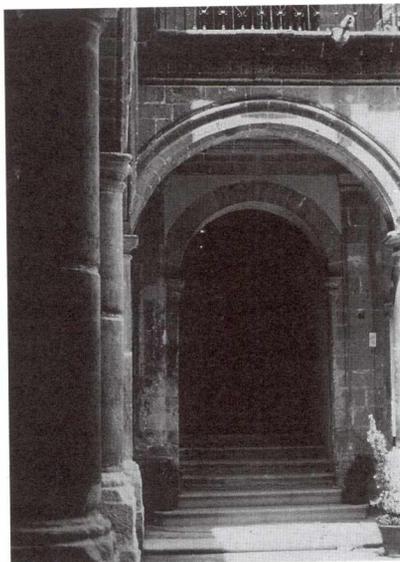
# Housing and Realty

## In Eighteenth Century Mexico City

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Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Mexico City was both one of the world's largest and most beautiful cities. Its environs were magnificent, set as it was amidst a great high plateau surrounded by mountains and lakes.

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The center of the city was situated on the so-called *traza*, the piece of land given to the Spaniards in the sixteenth century to live on, set apart from the indigenous neighborhoods that surrounded it.<sup>1</sup> The district was set up according to both pre-Hispanic settlement patterns and the Renaissance concept of urban areas, and, as a result, it



The House of the Count of Miravalle at 20 Isabel la Católica Street. **Above:** The Heras and Soto House.

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became one of the world's first modern cities from the point of view of city planning. The blocks were drawn like a chessboard with wide streets.

The architecture was superb. Most of the structures were great stone houses taking up entire blocks. Almost all the buildings were two stories tall, giving the area a feeling of unity, with the many church atria and spires to break the monotony.

The size and magnificence of the houses were such that Baron Alexander von Humboldt later baptized Mexico City "The City of Palaces." The buildings' harmonious facades testified to the quality and creativity of the architects of New Spain.

These buildings were not only dwellings, but also host to political and cultural institutions, as well as workshops and shops of all kinds. We must remember that Mexico City was the most important political, financial, cultural and economic center of New Spain.

In contrast with today, the buildings were utilized to their complete capacity. They included areas for owners or officials to live in, and the rest was rented out for family dwellings, trade, workshops, small manufacturing and institutions.

For example, the Viceroy's Palace accommodated offices, apartments for the Viceroy and members of the court, as well as jails. In addition, on what is today Moneda Street, storefronts were rented out. Space in the Casa del Cabildo, or town hall, was similarly distributed: there were rooms for the *corregidor*, or chief magistrate, and his family and for a few other officials, and rented dwellings and storefronts on the ground floor.

Convents, schools and hospitals, as well as other religious and charitable institutions' buildings, also included rooms destined for rentals when they began construction.

Owners lived on the second floor and used the rest of the building for



Patio of the Heras and Soto House. **Right:** House at 23 Vizcainas Street.





their businesses or made some other profitable use of it. Therefore, people who belonged to different social classes and had very different kinds of occupations worked and lived under the same roof.

Although rented dwellings and commercial property were created mainly for the owners' profit, they also contributed to solving the housing problem in the city and fostered the establishment of commerce in the downtown area.

The buildings were rectangular and their outer walls extended to the sidewalks. Between the street and the buildings, then, there was no space, as is often the case today. Almost all the buildings were two stories high and many also had an entresol or mezzanine, a low, extra story between the first and second floors. Space was utilized to the maximum, and, with the exception of the patios which were both sources of light and means of access from one part of the building to another, the entire surface was covered with construction.

The buildings were generally made of stone, although some were brick. The roofs were flat, held up by timber-work. The patios almost always had stone columns that made beautiful corridors and galleries on the second floor. Doorways and windows were made of wood protected by beautiful wrought iron.

The outside walls of the buildings had recesses built into them called *accesorias*, rooms used as stores, workshops or dwellings that the owners rented out. These rooms usually had no direct access to the inside of the building and could only be entered from the street.

The *accesorias* used for dwellings had one or two rooms with a door and sometimes a window onto the street. It was common for them to be built on the ground floor (in Spanish, the *planta baja*) of ecclesiastic buildings and often the streets were named after them, like, for example, *Calle de los bajos de San Agustín* (Street of the low part of Saint Augustine), or *Calle de los bajos de la*

House of the Count of Miravalle.



*Profesa* (Street of the low part of The Avoled). The *accesorias* rented as shops were rooms of variable size, some of which had a second room on the top floor, often used as a dwelling. This kind of *accesoria* surrounded the Terceros Hospital, for example, the Royal Pontifical University and the Royal Native Hospital.

When buildings were on a plaza, the owners were allowed to occupy 21 feet of it on the condition that they build a portico used for commerce with housing on the second floor. In the Santo Domingo Plaza, for example, each unit had a portico, a storefront and a back room on the ground floor and a dwelling on the second floor.

*Accesorias de taza y plato* (cup and saucer rooms) were very common: they had a single room divided in two by a wooden loft reached by a steep ladder or stairway. The name was derived from the fact that the two areas created by the loft were stacked on top of each other. These shops were rented by artisans or

merchants who had their workshop or store on the ground floor and lived in the loft. For example, the Royal College of Saint Ignatius of Loyola had 60 *accesorias* of this kind on three of its sides, forming a kind of wall that isolated it from the outside. Many private homes also had them, like that of the Count of Santiago of Calimaya which today houses the Museum of Mexico City.

Access to the interior of the buildings was through the large front door. Workrooms, servants quarters, offices, storerooms for wood and coal, carriage houses, stables for horses and mules, pig sties and chicken coops were distributed around one or several of the interior patios.

In the middle of each patio was a well or fountain that provided water for the inhabitants. Laundry sheds and toilets were common areas usually situated in one of the back patios.

Some buildings had patios the owners did not use that they rented to the

poor at very low prices. The tenants lived in huts they made of whatever materials they could find. The Mexican expression “*vivir en quinto patio*” (literally, “living in the fifth patio,” meaning to live very poorly) originated with this practice.

The stairs to the entresol, or mezzanine, and the second floor were in the patios. The large buildings used to have independent staircases to the owner’s rooms and separate stairs for the servants.

The mezzanines were usually rented out to people of middle income, and the number of medium-sized family dwellings in each building depended on the size of the construction. Each apartment had a kitchen, dining room, drawing room, bedrooms, indoor patio and, sometimes, a bathroom, sewing room, office or other extra room.

The top floor was for the upper classes, including government officials like the viceroy, the rector of the university and the director of the mint, as well as wealthy families. These apartments were often very spacious, with many rooms: reception rooms, sitting rooms, bathrooms with tubs and heaters and the others required for refined living according to the customs of the time. They also had the privilege of having private toilets, laundry sheds and drying rooms. In many cases, this part of the house was more luxurious architecturally and better finished than the rest.

In addition, whole buildings, called *vecindades*, were built to rent to people of middle and low income. Most of these had wide corridors from one end of the building to the other with the rooms on either side. The most modest accommodations had a single room; others had, in

Interior of a house on 5 de febrero Street.



addition to the one room, a small yard. The laundry sheds, kitchens and toilets were shared. Some of the *vecindades* had more spacious living quarters on the top floor.

On the outskirts of the city in the old indigenous neighborhoods, beyond the original area reserved for the Spanish, land was used very differently. In these areas, much of the land still belonged to the indigenous people themselves and was worth much less. The constructions were of adobe and thatched with palm leaves. There was no public lighting, water or clean-up services. The huts were surrounded by small vegetable gardens and fenced yards for domestic animals.

The inhabitants of Mexico City lived in whatever kind of housing they could afford. High government officials and the well-to-do lived in spacious apartments on the upper floors that kept away the noise and stench of the street and put them out of the reach of thieves and beggars. They could enjoy the roofs with their beautiful views that gave them fresh air on hot summer days and sun in the winter. They also had carriage houses, stables, servants' quarters and storehouses on the ground floor.

People of more modest means had to make do with a mezzanine or a *vecindad*. They had several rooms and a kitchen and most probably their own bathrooms, but lacked the other facilities of the wealthy.

The poor lived in one or two rooms, in the *accesorias*, in a *vecindad* or in one of the inside patios, sharing the kitchen and other conveniences. To bathe, they went to the public baths.

But even these families were fortunate compared to the great number of

people who were homeless and slept under the open sky. During the day, they formed bands of beggars who accosted passers-by, making the city very unsafe. They lived off rubbish, alms and food distributed by some of the convents.

Overpopulation was one of the city's biggest problems. At the end of the eighteenth century, Mexico City was the largest urban area in the Americas and one of the largest in the world. According to the census ordered by Viceroy Revillagigedo in 1790, the city had 112,296 inhabitants. In addition, a considerable transient population poured into Mexico City, the commercial and political center of the colony, from the rest of the country.

Not only was it a problem that there was insufficient housing for the size of the population, but also that those families that did have a roof over their heads lived in very cramped conditions, fostering promiscuity, a lack of hygiene and violence.

On the other hand, it was very difficult to have a house of one's own. Most families of all social classes lived in rented accommodations because construction was very expensive and very few empty lots were available except in marginalized areas. Buying a home was more viable because many people went bankrupt and houses changed hands frequently. Auctions offered attractive terms of payment: the buyer only had to put down a small sum and the rest could be paid off by taking on the mortgages on the buildings, usually held by ecclesiastical institutions. However, the difficult part was keeping the house, because the owner had to pay the interest on the mortgage, which came to 5 percent annually. Many owners could not make these payments and ended up losing the property to their creditors.

Most buildings belonged to different church institutions, which rented the dwellings, storefronts and workshops to private individuals or other institutions.

House of the Count of Calimaya.



Urban rental property was one of the best capital investments, so institutions bought as many pieces of property as possible. They also acquired them through donations or after being attached for debt. It has been calculated that toward the end of the colonial period, about 45 percent of all the buildings in the city, among them the very best, belonged to these institutions. For example, by 1785 the Convent of the Conception alone owned 55 pieces of property which encompassed 86 houses, 48 dwellings and mezzanines, 86 *accesorias*, 134 rooms in different *vecindades*, 17 stores and 11 smaller stalls, called “merchant’s boxes.” In this way, through paying rent on their real estate, civil society contributed to the maintenance of the clergy.

Until today, no specific comparative studies of rents and tenant income have been made, but apparently rents were high for most people and owners had difficulty collecting. Some convents hired bill collectors, but even in those cases they always had renters who left their bills unpaid.

A constant complaint from tenants was the lack of maintenance done on the buildings. On the other hand, the owners seem to have had problems with tenants who damaged the installations. Some tenants were so poor that they unscrewed the locks on their little rented rooms to pawn them.

Another enormous problem was the bad sanitary conditions caused by crowding, the absence of toilets and drainage



Mayorazgo de Guerrero House.

or running water and people living together with animals. The beautiful patios we admire today in the colonial buildings were not covered with flowered hedges as some people romantically imagine. Quite the contrary, they were full of refuse and filth because they were the pathway for carts in and out and the animals who lived there. And all the rooms and storehouses faced them. In the back patios were the laundry sheds and toilets that were used by the many inhabitants of the lower floor. Given the way the buildings were laid out, the foul air circulated little and

many dwellings had no ventilation at all.

Personal cleanliness must have been precarious. Only very few fortunates were able to bathe in their own homes. The rest had to go to public baths, but since they were not free, many went without bathing. Hygiene in food preparation and drinking water were also bad. The lack of hygiene was the source of many diseases and caused the epidemics that periodically besieged the city causing innumerable deaths.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the city had very few green areas. The borders of the original tract of land that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made it necessary to concentrate the buildings in a small area impeded the creation of parks and gardens inside the houses. The only ones which existed were in the atria of the churches and the convent orchards. To enjoy nature, one had to go to the Alameda Park and the La Viga Promenade. In the afternoons, wealthy women would go out for a drive in their carriages to these areas, accompanied by their menfolk on horseback. Longer drives could be taken to Chapultepec, Tacubaya or San Antonio de las Cuevas, today known as Tlalpan. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The tract of land went from what is now José María Izazaga street on the south to Belisario Domínguez, República de Venezuela, Perú and Apartado on the north, and from today's Jesús María street on the east to San Juan de Letrán, Ruiz de Alarcón and Aquiles Serdán streets on the west.