

Ibid., 7.


Ibid., 7.


Livia Corona Benjamin

From the Series Two Million Homes for Mexico (2006–present)

In 2000, Mexican presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quesada proposed an unprecedented plan to build two million low-income homes throughout the country during his six year term. On the eve of his election, Fox proclaimed, “My presidency will be remembered as the era of public housing.” To enact this initiative, the federal government of private bank INFONAVIT ceded the construction of low-income housing to the private sector. Then, almost overnight, grids 20 to 80,000 identical homes sprouted up, and they continue to spread in remote agrarian territory throughout the country. To encounter these developments by land, air, or even via satellite imagery, evokes a rare sensation. These are not the neighborhoods of a “Home Sweet Home” dream fulfilled, but are ubiquitous grids of ecological and social intervention on a scale and of consequences that are difficult to grasp. In these places, urbanization is reduced to the mere construction of housing. There are nearly no public amenities—such as schools, parks, and transportation systems. There are few commercial structures—such as banks and grocery stores. Yet demand for these low-income homes continues to increase and developers continue to provide them with extreme efficiency. During Fox’s six-year presidency, 2,350,000 homes were built, at a rate of 2,500 homes per day, and this trend is set to continue.
French Pastry, Ixtapaluca, Edo. Mex., 2008

Living Room to Bedroom Conversion, Mérida, 2011
Day Worker at Home Expansion Site, Cancún, 2010

Moving in, Zumpango, 2009
Progressive Development, Los Héroes, Puebla, 2008

Homeowner Activism Center, Cuatro Vientos, Edo. Mex., 2011

... Two Million Homes for Mexico (2006-)

Livia Corona Benjamin
Mexico City Modern: A Review Essay

“Overcrowded, polluted, corrupted, Mexico City offers the world a grim lesson.”¹ Thus proclaimed Time Magazine in 1984. Never mind that it could just as easily have been describing any number of cities in the world, including a number of metropolises in the US, as Mike Davis’s indictment of Los Angeles (City of Quartz) showed six years later. But Mexico City—in theory so close to the US, so far from modernity—was much easier fodder for the progenitors of predictable caricatures of elsewhere.² Recent media obsessions with narco-trafficking and its attendant violence are only the latest instantiation of a long tradition of casting Mexico as a lawless, corrupt, and failed state. Meanwhile, the US State Department warns travelers away from Mexico (the entire country!) even as the body count in the US from gun violence—merely random, unpredictable, scattershot, apolitical, and utterly routine—grows at a steady clip.³

Projections and predictions such as those articulated by Time are nothing new, as Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo shows in I Speak of the City. At a hefty 500 pages, Tenorio-Trillo’s book offers a vision of the city’s history not found in most travel guides, popular journalism, or history books. It is reminiscent at times of Jamaica Kincaid’s A Small Place, although less polemical in tone and more elliptical in style, in its efforts to force readers out of clichéd visions of authenticity, paradise, or hell—and radical (often racialized) otherness. Or, in this case, “fiesta, siesta, sombrero, pistola and Frida Kahlo.”⁴ One suspects, by sheer virtue of its prominent absence in the text, that revolution is also part of that canon for Tenorio-Trillo. Mexico’s social revolution of 1910-1920 has cast a long shadow over the country’s twentieth century history and historiography. Invocations and images of the agrarian leader Emiliano Zapata, the social bandit Pancho Villa, and a landscape of peasants and pueblos dominate the historiography, overwhelming the radical Flores Magón brothers, industrial workers, urban anarchists, and Mexico City itself. This is a revolution defined by pueblos and peasants rather than cities and communists—for compelling reasons, as Alan Knight has demonstrated in his two-volume magnum opus.⁵

Mexico City was not, of course, removed from the revolution: pitched battles unfolded in its streets, plots were hatched behind its closed doors, varied armies occupied its plazas, its hillsides, and its Sanborns.⁶ But Tenorio-Trillo is interested in Mexico City not as a site of revolutionary history but as a capital of modernity. The revolution perhaps serves up too many visions of peasants and pistols which, along with tropicality and indigeneity, caciques and calaveras, have long haunted the pages devoted to Mexico’s history. Thus, for Tenorio-Trillo 1910 is a date notable less for the purported “start” of the revolution than for the celebrations of the centenario in Mexico City, which marked the 100th anniversary of the rebellions that would culminate in Mexican independence from Spanish rule. And 1919 is notable less for the purported end of the armed phase of the revolution than for the moment of its intellectual and political commodification, when an array of radicals and intellectuals from other shores arrived in Mexico City’s central streets seeking a location in which “to safely try out all sorts of enchantments and disenchantments.” In the process they helped create a Mexico “frozen as a modern metaphor of atemporal race, endless community, and redemptory violence,” or what Tenorio-Trillo calls the “Brown Atlantis.”⁷ The revolution, then, is very present—just as not the self-contained, agrarian, peasant rebellion it would come to...
By the early 1970s the ruling party had incurred the ire of more than students and radicals. President Luis Echevarría’s leftist rhetoric, combined with increased economic uncertainty, drew sharp responses from private industrialists and businessmen. If in the 1960s the government had appeared poised to make the jump to “first-world” status, the 1970s were, as Louise Walker shows in vivid detail in Waking from the Dream, a cold reality check as the economic slowdown, inflation, increased foreign debt, and spiraling public deficits took their toll. (The country’s foreign debt—deuda externa—would grow in the early 1980s to such a size that it would be wryly referred to as the deuda eterna—the eternal debt.) In the meantime, rural migrants poured into Mexico City by the hundreds or thousands each day, looking for shelter and work. This vast migration simply overwhelmed the state’s capacity to provide, and most new arrivals settled on the ever-expanding edges of the city. They built with what they could find and, as the population increased, the informal but very real neighbourhoods that developed would eventually reach a size where they could petition the government for various services. The quintessential example is Ciudad Neza, a cold reality check as the economic security and infrastructure of Mexico City by the 1970s with a population that was, and remains, marginalized in terms of housing, lighting, housing, sewage, trash collection, schools, public transport, and the like. Like many of the grassroots organizations formed at the margins, it acquired dramatic importance in the wake of the devastating earthquake of 1985, which levelled parts of downtown Mexico City. Neza.12 Life may not be easy there, but it is no more a “place” of fatalism than Polanco or Las Americas—two of Mexico City’s most elite districts—are places of bourgeois anomy or individualist success. Judith Adler Hellman’s Mexican Lives, a wonderful collection of interviews from the early 1990s, gives us a window onto the practices of working people on Mexico City’s outskirts, in the process demolishing the persistent and pernicious stereotypes of fatalism, machismo, waste, and apathy.20 Life on Mexico City’s margins in fact has spurred all kinds of political mobilization and social innovation. The economic crisis of the 1970s—as well as the effects of the repression in Tlatelolco—spurred a new wave of organizing efforts in the form of coordinating bodies (coordinadoras) that would address the needs of labour, peasants, and urban dwellers. As Tom Barry notes, the autonomous space they created made them very hard to co-opt or control, and set the groundwork for a vibrant grassroots democratization movement.21 Among such efforts was the Urban Popular Movement’s National Coordinating Committee (or Conamup). Founded in 1981, Conamup organized people not in places where they were subject to direct control by PRI infrastructure (the workplace, for example), but in the barrios where they lived, taking up issues such as lighting, housing, sewage, trash collection, schooling, etc. In the barrios, “grassroots whites” there was a high level of political organization. Many of the grassroots organizations formed at the margins, it acquired dramatic importance in the wake of the devastating earthquake of 1985, which levelled parts of downtown Mexico City. Here Mexican civil society revealed that it would more than make do while a lethargic state wallowed in confusion in the immediate aftermath of the seismic event that took some 10,000 lives. The short-term result of the work of such grassroots organizations was a real challenge to PRI’s supremacy in the 1988 elections; the long-term result has been, in part, various responses by the government to popular demands for low-cost housing, rent control and the like. These are the broadest of brushstrokes... A Review Essay
for making sense of Mexico City in the late twentieth century. For a street-level view of the city, there is a particularly revealing collection of things fairly new in Mexico City's most astute and highly regarded commentators, assembled by Rubén Gallo in The Mexico City Reader. If there is one book to throw to your luggage on a future trip to the D.F. (Distrito Federal), this is the one. It is all the very best in the city's recent history—say, the past five decades—as well as its rich literary output. The Reader offers to the general (and non-Spanish speaking) reader a collection of writings on the city by some of its most prominent intellectuals and observers—including Juan Villoro, Carlos Monsiváis, Jorge Ibargéntuigitoia, and Guillermo Sheridan—as well as some newer voices. Gallo's introduction is a rich evocation of the city and an effort to rethink how one might theorize the city: "What kind of questions should we ask to try to understand Mexico City?" His answer draws us back to where we started: Tenorio-Trillo's work. Too many studies of Mexico City, in Gallo's reading, have compared the city only to itself. Obsessed with its deep historicity, commenta tors end up either celebrating the city's continuities or lamenting its ruptures. In either case, the city remains a prisoner of a kind of exotic parochialism, "isolated from other cities around the world." Rather than compare Mexico City's challenges, successes, or Metro system to, say, Moscow's, Gallo attempts to compare it to itself. Or see its only drift toward uniformity, fettering over its preservation as if it were a specimen to be pickled. In contrast, Gallo's collection brings together essays which focus on the experience of the city, taking "the reader through a series of fragments, creating a reading experience that would approximate the feeling of walking down the streets of the capital and being relentlessly bombarded by heterogeneous impressions and sensations." 23

The collection is organized around various themes: "Places," "the City," "Monuments," "Eating and Drinking," "Maids," "The Margins," among others. It is a wonderful and rich intro duction to the city, built out of short crónicas, a cross between "literary essay and urban reportage." A few riffs from some of the essay's opening lines are useful for illustrative purposes:

"In the future there is a single city, that of Mexico City, that in the US, have taken up the charge of writing about youth culture (Mexico City's population is young: one in three residents in the D.F. is between the ages of 15 and 29), underground music scenes, popular culture, and Mexico City's geographic complexion and construction of modernity. For these writers the city is delirious, frenetic, and improvised, terms which at times veer close to cliché, although the subject matter in any given chapter might demand such exuberant terminology. This is Mexico City from the perspective of a particular set of users, the city as everyday life, assembled from spatial practices, which is, as some would have it, the essence of the city itself: "You can be born and raised in this city, vow never to leave it, and still hardly know it: to live here is simply to practice (ejercer) the dazzling verb employed by Salvador Novo) some of its locations, those that best conform to one's temperament." 24 It is a city to be celebrated rather than condemned for the apparent futility of centralized planning, a city seen from its streets, all 85,000 of them, 850 of which are named Juárez, 750 named Hidalgo, and 700 named Morelos; a city which is a contingent assemblage of architectural forms that quickly escaped efforts at continuity and conformity, an effective "jumbling of historical lineages, a city seen from its streets, all 85,000 of them, 850 of which are named Juárez, 750 named Hidalgo, and 700 named Morelos; a city which is a contingent assemblage of architectural forms that quickly escaped efforts at continuity and conformity, an effective "jumbling of historical lineages, an emergent form of historical literacy."

This is a revolution of a different kind: one more anarchic in its sensibilities than Marxist or liberal, more horizontal than hierarchical. There is a danger of fetishizing improvisation, as if daily practice itself were somehow emancipatory. It is not. But the term does nonetheless work as a means to give voice to the revolutions of everyday life in a Mexico City which residents continually make their own. They know that, contrary to Tenorio-Trillo's magazine's grim lesson, there are no "grim lessons" to be learned from Mexico City that could not be learned in any other major metropolis. And in the meantime, there is much still to be taught.

Notes
1. Ibid., xv. See also ibid., 415. I was reminded in places of Doreen Massey's essays to see time and space as so simply "folded upon itself" that one could not discern "simultaneity of stories so far," rather than as a means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that were more accessible and politically valenced. See Massey, Space, Place, and Political Ideology (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).
2. Tenorio-Trillo, I Speak of the City, pp. 1, 2.
3. Ibid., xvi.
4. Ibid., 415. I was reminded of the way in which was understood as an urban and cultural hybrid.
5. Ibid., xvi. See also ibid., 415. I was reminded in places of Doreen Massey's essays to see time and space as so simply "folded upon itself" that one could not discern "simultaneity of stories so far," rather than as a means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that were more accessible and politically valenced. See Massey, Space, Place, and Political Ideology (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).
6. Tenorio-Trillo, I Speak of the City, pp. 1, 2.
7. Ibid., 416. For an effort see: "On the art of the possible: the means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that were more accessible and politically valenced. See Massey, Space, Place, and Political Ideology (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).
8. Tenorio-Trillo, I Speak of the City, pp. 1, 2.
9. Ibid., 415. I was reminded of the way in which was understood as an urban and cultural hybrid.
10. Ibid., xvi.
11. Ibid., 416. For an effort see: "On the art of the possible: the means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that were more accessible and politically valenced. See Massey, Space, Place, and Political Ideology (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).
12. Ibid., 415. I was reminded of the way in which was understood as an urban and cultural hybrid.
13. Ibid., 416. For an effort see: "On the art of the possible: the means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that were more accessible and politically valenced. See Massey, Space, Place, and Political Ideology (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005)."
In the early twenty-first century, rural Mexico is still subject to chronic blows that have limited the capacity of its communities to adequately manage the social, cultural, economic, and environmental aspects of the territories they inhabit. Poverty, environmental damage, cultural alienation, loss of productive capacities, and depopulation are some of the conditions in which millions of people build their lives. As a response to the ravages caused in rural Mexico by the political and economic model implemented over the past few decades, Cooperación Comunitaria works to improve the habitability of marginalized rural and indigenous communities through projects that foster economic autonomy, social organization, and the self-production of sustainable and dignified living spaces. These efforts are based on the recovery of traditional knowledge geared toward reconciling local populations with their territory.

Cooperación Comunitaria’s working methodology is based on fostering sustainable development by using appropriate techniques, technologies, and construction materials according to each specific area and culture. The purpose of Habitabilidad is to stimulate an array of self-management techniques that promote development, dignified housing, and cultural diversity. Cooperación Comunitaria has worked in marginalized communities in different territories throughout Mexico (Veracruz, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Oaxaca, and Chiapas), focusing on the recovery of local materials, the reassessment of traditional construction techniques, and the training of people to build their own community modules with the “super-adobe” technique pioneered by Cooperación Comunitaria. This technique, although it uses industrial materials (raffia and barbed wire), primarily employs earth, a material used ancestrally throughout the Mexican territory. Earth contributes to a regulated thermal environment, and it distinguishes itself from other construction materials by not producing CO₂, allowing for the buildings to be more sustainable. It is also a building technique that is easy for anyone to learn.

The goal of Cooperación Comunitaria is to encourage and enhance local self-construction techniques and technologies. By providing training and accompanying, Cooperación Comunitaria enables communities to enhance their building capacities, contributing to their self-sufficiency and enhancing the efficiency of professionals working in the sector. For instance, a community model designed for the Masahual and Totonac peoples living in the Sierra de Puebla, Northwest of the State of Veracruz, was developed in part from an analysis of the cultural uses of space, in order to understand how social relationships and culture are shaped by their built environment. Adapting traditional forms as well as local materials and techniques, community modules are built by the users themselves, who are given training and supervision, and who assign the buildings a use—either private or communitarian. Ultimately, these architectural solutions respond to the climatic, environmental, and cultural needs of the inhabitants, strengthening their relationship to the territory in which they live.

Habitabilidad: Cooperación Comunitaria

Housing project based on local cultural uses and techniques. Not yet conducted.