“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.⁷ 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.”⁸ The revolution, then, is very present—just not as the self-contained, agrarian, peasant rebellion it would come to
by anyone attempting to speak, write, or other expression culture.”

with increased economic uncertainty, drew sharp responses from private industrialists

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by fatalism, abandonment, resignation, and machismo.

Life on Mexico City's margins in fact

These are the broadest of brushstrokes

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. 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...
The collection is organized around various themes: "Places," "the Dead," "Monuments," "Eating and Drinking," "Maids," "The Margins," among others. It is a wonderful and rich introduction to the city, built out of short crónicas, a cross between a 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 will be a street called Insurgentes." "The Cuauhtémoc District, like the rest of Mexico City’s district boundaries, was a brain wave of President Luis Echeverría that our city hardly deserved." The Zona Rosa, in contrast, is "cheap perfume in a fancy bottle." Or take Augusto Roa Barros’s approximately 500-word whirling, run-on paragraph on maids, which begins thus: "I love maids because they’re real, because they leave, because they don’t follow orders, because they embody the last vestiges of unstructured labor and they lack insurance and benefits [...]."

Jonathan Hernández’s efforts to document pretending to be deaf and mute, he asked each bureaucrat he encountered to write down what he needed to do in order to get a replacement student ID. The resulting labyrinthine experience—expressed in a series of photographs—bears witness to and ironic homage to bureaucracy. (It took some three dozen steps to get his replacement ID.) Or take the selected images of Daniela Rossell, who photographed friends (mostly women, wealthy, and politically connected) primarily in their homes in the Las Lomas district of Mexico City. Her subjects included Paulina Díaz Ordaz, grand-daughter of President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz and stepdaughter of Raul Salinas de Gortari. In contrast, Gallo, Mexico City’s reading, has compared the city only to its deep historicity, commentators 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, that of Barcelona, Gallo’s collection is to compare it to itself. Or see its only drift toward uniformity, fretting over its preservation as if it were a specimen to be pickled. In contrast, Gallo’s collection brings together essays which focus a specimen to be pickled. In contrast, Gallo’s collection brings together essays which focus on the difference of stories so far, rather than as a means to construct discrete locations on temporal axes that are morally and politically valenced. Mexico City, at least, their experiences of stories so far, that emphasized the urban and outward-oriented history of Latin America, and sought to counter the persistence of images of Latin America as rural, fundamentally feudal, insular, and isolated, and see Latin American Modernity, as the unifying idea (Medellín: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1999).

In the future all the roads in Mexico City, that is, the “cultural transmutations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict, that is, the “cultural transmutations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict, that is, the “cultural transmutations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict, that is, the “cultural transmutations triggered by new media in the years after the armed conflict.”

For a classic work that emphasized the urban and outward-oriented history of Latin America, and sought to counter the persistence of images of Latin America as rural, fundamentally feudal, insular, and isolated, and see Latin American Modernity, as the unifying idea (Medellín: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1999).
In the early twenty-first century, rural Mexico is still subject to continuous blowouts 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 to better the living conditions are based on the recovery of traditional knowledge geared towards unlocking local populations with their own 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 enable and empower local self-construction techniques and technologies. By providing training and accompaniment, Cooperación Comunitaria enables communities to enhance their building capacities, contributing to their self-sufficiency and enhancing their quality of life.

For instance, a community model designed for the Masehual 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 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 communal. 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.