In the early twenty-first century, rural Mexico is still subject to continuous 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 to better the living conditions are based on the recovery of traditional knowledge geared to revaluing 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 places 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 acquire.

The goal of Cooperación Comunitaria is to support and leverage 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 empowering the recuperation of productive techniques.

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 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 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.
Housing project developed in Guanajuato using the “Superadobe” technique. (Mineral de Pozos, Gto.)

... Cooperación Comunitaria
Habitabilidad: ...
Habitabilidad: ...

... Cooperación Comunitaria
Project realized in three communities in Jalisco (Cocula, Tala, and Ameca), where the inhabitants were trained and supervised during the first stage of the construction.

Photo credits: Isadora Hastings

Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco

The Apparatus of Ownership

It is a well-known fact that Margaret Thatcher suggested the UK should renegotiate its EU membership and join NAFTA. For her NAFTA was preferable, as it was neither a customs union, nor a political/administrative entity—it was simply free trade. Yet, it is also well-known that free trade ideology and the whole neoliberal agenda is not a withdrawal of the state in favour of free-market individualism, but actually requires an intensification of governmental mediation. Indeed, NAFTA goes far beyond trade. It is a complex plan for general economic restructuring, which, in order to facilitate the movement of capital and commodities, indirectly expands its domain of operations: from international relations to domestic ones, from foreign trade to local social services, from corporate protection to self-entrepreneurship, from the wider territory to the realm of private property. What is more, the NAFTA world is one in which, more often than not, ties among individuals are loose; the identification of a society as an agglomeration of owners altogether changes the understanding of collective interest. No wonder Thatcher became a great sympathizer of such a world in which the free market and life become a single dynamic operation, where basic services, social institutions, and, at times, personal interests are treated as service commodities open to the dictates of the marketplace.

While the effects of the agreement are frequently discussed, the actual mechanisms that facilitate its reproduction have been less examined. In Mexico, NAFTA-like agreements tend to require an auxiliary site of intervention in which the effects of economic restructuring are made attractive and thus embraced by large sectors of the population. This essay argues that one of the most crucial sites of intervention is the realm of private property, the most intimate of all domains, where a shift in consciousness can be promoted with far-reaching consequences. At the centre dwells the figure of the home-owner, the main subject of this piece, who plays a crucial role not only in reaffirming the neoliberal agenda through the process of individualization, but also by driving urban development.

If the ratification of NAFTA became the international signature of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s administration (1988–1994), private property became his local strategy, as it facilitated the acceptance of the former. Since his presidency, the widespread desire across the entire population to possess private property has been heavily fuelled through a media campaign promoting the rights of property owners, and expedited by a set of economic mechanisms aimed at expanding the logic of capital accumulation to more spaces and human activities. Furthermore, since his administration, commercial real estate developers have mushroomed, mortgages for housing have become the norm, and property ownership is much more marketed than in previous decades. While housing shortages continue to be a real social concern in Mexico, with a deficit of about nine million homes according to recent government estimates, it also provides a convenient excuse for drastic economic transformation. Twenty years down the line, a series of mortgage-driven modes of urbanization—very common characters of the contemporary Mexican landscape—have left a curious mark on several Mexican cities. Throughout this process, housing developers have contributed not only by constructing houses, but also by erecting a self-perpetuating ideological apparatus centred around the desire for property ownership.

In this context of mortgage-driven urbanization, ownership is not simply an economic or governmental tool useful in