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# The Obstinacy of Tepito

In Mexico, even those who have never visited the neighbourhood of Tepito would testify to its stigmatization. It is typical to introduce it as one of the most dangerous places in Mexico City, to link it to crime, and to posit it as the place where "everything illegal" can be bought in its famous tianguis.[1] This discourse is based on fear and frequently disseminated in the media. Eduardo Nivón explains that the sense of belonging to a place is cultivated in the imaginary, and that "it is developed on the basis of sharing a symbolic universe amongst us and the others."[2] The neighbourhood of Tepito, due to its location and origins, embodies "the Other" in Mexico. The category "dangerous" is itself woven in with the notion of social class, and figured as early as the sixteenth century after the first traza divided Mexico City, when the centre was destined for the Spanish and the periphery for the Indians. The castes and conditions for the "uncultivated" were also defined then, along with the living areas for precarious workers who had not learned a trade, thieves, and criminals. This logic perpetuated class segregation by way of zoning, and was accentuated throughout the city's industrialization and modernization periods.

During the alleged stage of progress and modernization in the 1950s,[3] most of Tepito's population lacked economic resources and services, and the neighbourhood was considered to be full of delinquents. At the time, racial mixing was promoted in the official national imaginary, in order to agglomerate the Mexican population under the concept of a single "race" within a nation. However, as is often the case, while the State sought to eliminate racial tensions by trying to convert indigenous peoples into mestizos (creoles), racial and status differences in fact deepened.

Nowadays, Tepito is no longer located in the periphery and is part of Mexico City's Historic Downtown. It is a neighbourhood whose history is intimately linked to the territory and to the use of the street as a marketplace. Its inhabitants' identification processes have adapted in response to political changes, agreements, and negotiation, among neighbours, merchants, and municipal and State authorities, who have gradually changed the uses and meanings of public space. The case of the cult of Santa Muerte (Holy Death) illustrates this. Unlike the Virgin of Guadalupe, "la flaquita" (the skinny one) does not perform miracles, but residents ask paros favours) of her, to resolve any given aspect of their lifes: money, work, marriage, etc. Such phenomena have, constructed unique cultural forms that selectively forget and/or remember traditional customs, while incorporating other local features that transcend both the colonial past and the fixed relationships between the subaltern and the hegemonic.

The neighbourhood has managed to preserve its identity and remain within its own territory, while at the same time, it exists as a product of, academic study and as part of the collective imaginary; moreover, los tepiteños (whose who come from Tepito) are strongly tied to social movements. In other words, tepiteño identity functions politically, as an attitude of resistance. At first, its inhabitants sought to identify themselves as tepiteños to defend the neighbourhood against real estate capitalism, and quickly, the tepiteño identity became affirmative.

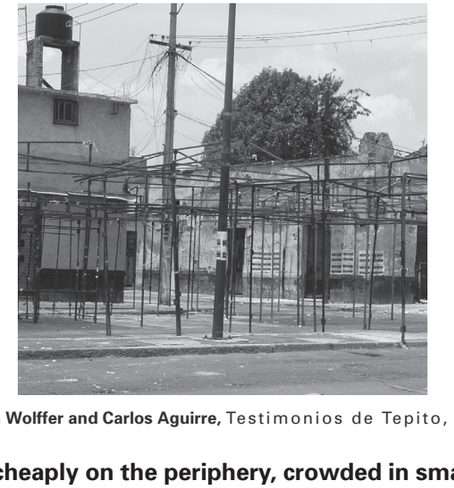
Tepito works as the hinge with perimeter A of the City's Historic Downtown,[4] and yet it appears to be segregated from it. Informal commerce dominates the area: the market uses the streets every day except Tuesdays, when the merchants take their day off. There have been many transformations in housing and commerce. The areas' inhabitants have

decreased with recent land use changes in the zone, as warehouses have replaced many homes. Today, ambulantaje (itinerant selling) is an important source of income, as well as culturally significant for many people. Tepito has a population of over 5,000 distributed across 60 blocks, and on Mondays through Saturdays, the famous market covers approximately 50 of them. On Sundays, the sale of antiques and handicrafts prevails, and at least 1,500 additional stands are added, expanding the market some 12 blocks more; at night, it is reduced to 10 blocks, with about 850 merchants.

In Tepito, there are also four markets and very close to it, in La Lagunilla, another three, with 2,600 tenants in total. The commercial activities of this huge tianguis represent 15,450 formal and informal sales points, drawing a daily influx of approximately 22,000 wholesale buyers and retail customers. They are there to buy new, used, recycled, imported, pirated, and stolen clothes, shoes , household appliances, and electronic gadgets.

The word tepitoyotl, "small thing," has to do with the size of this neighbourhood in comparison to nearby Tlatelolco.[5] For most people this means that Tepito was the last neighbourhood with an indigenous character, and the first marginal urban neighbourhood. According to Guadalupe Reyes and Ana Mantecón, however,[6] this assertion does not consider the role of the Spanish urban traza (urban design), which marginalized the indigenous populations when Colonial Mexico was founded. Tepito is also considered to be the place where the last Mexican tlatoani (chief), Cuauhtémoc, lost his last battle and was made prisoner near what is today the intersection of Constancia and Tenochtitlán streets, where one can read a sign that states: "Tequipehuecan" (place where slavery began). Here emperor Cuauhtemoctzin was made prisoner on the afternoon of August 13, 1521."

Since it came to be the capital of an independent nation, Mexico City has faced housing shortages due to lack of space for social housing. As a result, people coose to



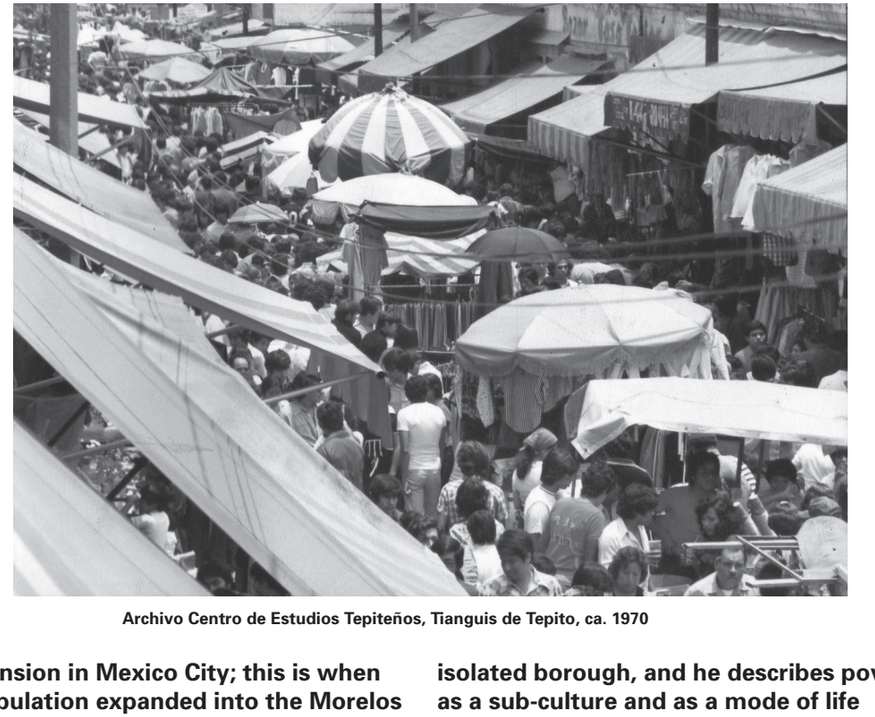
**Lorena Wolffer and Carlos Aguirre,** Testimonios de Tepito, **2010.**

live cheaply on the periphery, crowded in small rooms with high ceilings where mezzanines are often built in order to maximize space. This kind of housing, organized around a large common patio, is called a vecindad, and the proliferation of vecindades gave Tepito an urban dimension that distinguished it from the rest of the city. Tepito's importance can also be attributed to its geographical location, the character of its inhabitants, and its long and storied history." Barrio (borough) is different from colonia (neighbourhood or gated community), which is a word used in more affluent areas of the city. For tepiteños, their borough operates at an urban scale that both instantiates and preserves their roots, identity, and culture.

From the mid-nineteenth century until the beginning of President Porfirio Día's regime (1877), the north of the city was heavily re-structured: it was enlarged and thus included sections of downtown, amongst them the neighbourhoods such as La Bolsa, created in 1870, followed by Díaz de Leó and by Violante, "created in 1882 by priest Juan Violante in the borough of Tepito."[7] Tepito thus gradually ended up unifying different neighbourhoods, and in spite of the territorial divisions caused by the new arrangements, its inhabitants learned to consider themselves as tepiteños.

The period between 1860 and 1890 constituted a historical moment of intense





**Archivo Centro de Estudios Tepiteños, Tianguis de Tepito, ca. 1970**

urban expansion in Mexico City; this is when Tepito's population expanded into the Morelos neighbourhood (known as Violante) and other zones peripheral to downtown, such as Doctores and Santa María la Ribera. Leisure options in this area developed as another aspect of everyday life, generating public and leisure spaces like "night centers, pulquerías (pulque bars), bars, restaurants, taquerías (taco restaurants) and lunch-places. Sites began to be distinguished by the people who used them."[8] It was thus during this period that the stereotyping of Tepito began.

Most of the vecindades in Tepito were built during Díaz's regime (1877–1911), and originally conceived to be used as hostels that would lodge travelers arriving from the provinces in order to sell their merchandise in the city. These were gradually transformed into permanent housing. Oscar Lewis' well-known novel, Los hijos de Sánchez (Sánchez's Children) portrays the difficult and precarious life of the Sánchez family, who lived in a vecindad known as Casa Blanca. He presents Tepito as a subaltern, marginal, and isolated borough, and he describes poverty as a sub-culture and as a mode of life perpetuated over generation, the result of the adaptation and reaction to marginalization. In actuality, however, tepiteños have long incorporated elements from hegemonic culture in order to tailor them for consumption by subaltern classes, demonstrating a capacity not to remain isolated, but rather adapt over time. This peculiarity has allowed Tepito to remain relatively in sync with global market processes. It would thus be a mistake to define tepiteño culture as unique, because both hegemonic and subaltern cultures have given rise to the place.

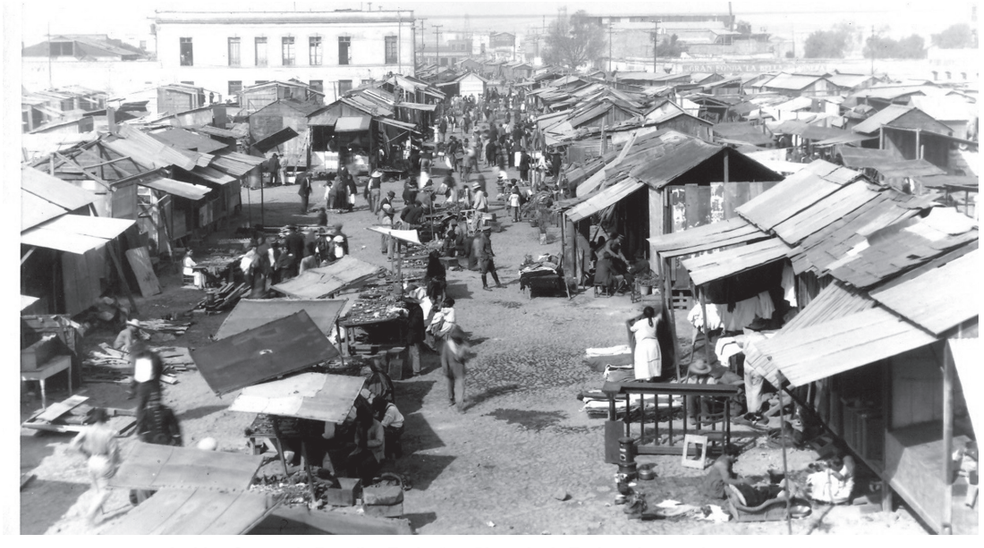
By 1911, the poor quality of life was not only reflected in the type of housing in the borough, but also by the lack of basic services. Tepito was a sordid region, a neighbourhood with a bad reputation, where it did not matter if the population was degraded or damaged. Boroughs came to be absorbed as the city grew, as previously peripheral zone, were added to urban conglomeration. Differences within the city were accentuated as it grew, and Tepito was increasingly inhabited by the working

class, whose poverty ended up generating other problems in the area, thus earning Tepito the title of the "tough borough."

In the 1920s, Tepito attracted many tradespeople, and migrants from places like Jalisco and Guanajuato arrived en masse. Commercial activity in the zone had not yet acquired the scale it would achieve later on, there was a food market in the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas plaza, but few other retail or wholesale businesses. After 1940, when the boroughs of Violante, La Bolsa, Díaz de León, and El Rastro were integrated to form Morelos, commercial activity intensified, and small stands flourished on Aztecas, Caridad, and Tenochtitlán streets. There, the ayateros or cambiadores (clothing merchants) would sell clothes and second-hand objects that they exchanged for molasses in middle-class areas. The demand for used objects grew during World War II and commercial activity continued to intensify immediately afterwards.

The streets themselves began to be used for trade, and in 1956 three markets were built in order to house the merchants, as itinerant commerce was forbidden: one for food, another for shoes, and a third for used goods. But the allotted spaces were not large enough and sales fell, so salespeople returned to the streets. In 1972, itinerant merchants without a fixed place gained official support to continue with their trade. In 1976, there was a second influx of tradespeople and merchants to Tepito from Guanajuato; this led to the appearance of family workshops that crafted leather goods, and craftspeople and merchants from Tepito began to form organizational systems, which would later become the backbone of resistance to proposed changes to the area.

In the 1970s, new urban projects started to radically reorganize the city. A significant change was planned for Tepito, as the area was divided by the construction of three new urban axes: one North along Ignacio López Rayón and Héroe de Granadita, another east along Avenue Del Trabajo, and another North along Manuel González. These roads fractured the neighbourhood and made local developments incredibly challenging. In addition, these new plans favoured commercial land use over housing, which was a cause of some local concern. These urban transformations, the expansion of the tianguis, and the success of fayuca (goods smuggled from the US)



Archivo Centro de Estudios Tepiteños, Plazuela de Tepito, vista poniente, ca. 1920



**Video still.** Dos caras del Silenci, **Iván Edeza, 2009.**

Natalia Alonzo Romero-Lanning. Jardín vecindari de Jerónimo Hagerman, Vecindad Casa Blanca, 2012.

created yet another Tepito. According to Georgina Sandoval, Tepito and Morelos are exemplary cases of neighbourhoods organizing themselves in order to resist the new projects. There formed 36 cultural, social and political organizations. [Tepito's] inhabitants found a way to enable for themselves all the provisions needed for everyday survival, create their own defense mechanisms, reappropriating space in a way that everything that they need, is available in the zone.[9] As a consequence, this new transformation of Tepito revalorized space once more and significantly increased the value of the streets through their commercial use.

By the beginning of the 1980s, neighbourhood and merchant association leaders acquired increasing power, and even collected fees for each sales point in the tianguis; certain collective organizations suffered from corruption, and individual interests prevailed. During these years, cocaine emerged as a significant good in these markets, with attendant social consequences. As Lourdes Ruiz, a saleswoman, explains: "Tepito got fucked when Doña Blanca [Snow White, or Cocaine] came to beat the shit out of her dwarfs." A small group of merchants emerged spontaneously, driven by their concern for addicted youths who frequently committed crimes. This is how the "Comisión del 40" (located at Tenochtitlán 40) emerged to organize an array of activities such as medical services, legal assistance, and workshop, for young people. The organization then extended its activities to collaborate with the City's Government Housing Restructuration Program. Soon after, the "Comisión del 40" united under the name "Colonia Morelos Neighbours' Association," and by 1974 there were 350 organized homes who succeeded in defending the neighbourhood from government projects and real estate speculation. By mid-1982, there were about 6,000 itinerant tradespeople organized in 21 associations. As is always the case, these alliances between neighbours and merchants came to the attention of politicians so that the social movement was affected by political partisanship; by 1990, there were 29 associations linked to the PRI, the ruling Institutional Revolution Party. What started as a movement of solidarity amongst neighbours and merchants was thus transformed into a form of power tied to the government. The management of information, external contacts, and proposals for action ended up being controlled by the organizations' leaders, which exacerbated corruption among the unions, bringing the formerly collective interests into crisis.

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The 1985 earthquake was also a major justification for the re-development of the area. The social fabric was severely damaged and the quality of life greatly reduced, which led to a process of gentrification that sought to displace the original population in order to significantly increase the value of the land and attract a new population with greater income and social status. Just prior, however, and more significant, was the redesignation of the downtown core, including Tepito. After the Templo Mayor ruins were discovered in 1978, the area was named "Mexico City's Historic Downtown" by a presidential decree two years later. Indeed, the most important collateral changes in the last two decades have been undertaken through the "Rescuing Historic Downtown Program," officially initiated in 1990. It has been executed with public resources in collaboration with the private sector, especially entrepreneur Carlos Slim, who funded the Centro Histórico Foundation, which acquired many of the area's buildings. Another similar institution, Mexico City's Centro Histórico Trust Fund (FCHM), originally created as a private entity, was transferred to the government when the leftist PRD (Democratic Revolution Party) officially took power of the city in 2001.

Due to the increasing prominence of the Historic Downtown designation, a considerable number of itinerant tradespeople located in the area's "first" square were displaced, beginning in the early-to-mid-2000s, putting pressure on the merchants of Tepito to accommodate them. In response, the local government intervened: taking away the merchants stands from the street, and installing surveillance cameras. Marcelo Ebrard, then Mexico City's mayor, also expropriated a major housing unit —40 Tenochtitlán Street—arguing that illegal activities were taking place such as piracy and drug trafficking. As a result all the inhabitants where evicted from their homes.

Throughout this turbulent recent history, Tepito's population has diminished and diversified; its inhabitants no longer solely make a living by selling in the tianguis, and not all of its merchants still live there. Shoe production has almost disappeared because the new types of housing do not allow for family workshops. Indeed, some of the extant workshops are anthropological treasures, although street commerce is still very common. Characterized as part of the global market, Tepito had already been North Americanized before NAFTA due to the great fayuca boom of fake or smuggled goods in the 1980s and 1990s, and all the pirate CDs and DVDs as well as chinaderas products that began to be imported from Asia. The global aspect of Tepito is not only a phenomenon that affected it from outside, but a result of internal ruptures that led the neighbourhood and its inhabitants to carry out complex relations of recognition and legitimation over and over again.


Monumento a Tenochtitlán 40, **Colectivo Bulbo, 2008**

In Tepito, the informal market prevails, continuing with its ancestral heritage, articulated historically in an originary borough—authentic and rough by birth. The area still lies under the mark of Xipe-Totec, the flayed god and patron of commerce, to whom the streets themselves pay homage, with their tubular structures covered with canvas that resembles his skin. Tepito's energetic potential still works structurally as a rhizome, articulating poles with concentrations of employment and services, nodes that integrate different media and routes for free mobility, corridors with streets and places connected to the rest of the borough and the city it remains the tapete barrial (the borough's carpet), with



schools, markets, sports facilities, services, and vital spaces of identification.

For tepiteños, the tianguis, aside from being their main economic compass, operates as a quotidian social factory against the powerful crime industry and its delinquent Fordism. Emboldened by its location and history, Tepito is a neighbourhood that resists through informal commerce and creates its own sense of belonging; it feeds on its obstinacy and remains in its native place, nourished by the sap from its genealogical nopal (cactus). Tepito functions as a socioeconomic laboratory that resisted the ruinous processes of the neoliberal system. Because Tepito learned to mix local culture with its street economy, it has not allowed itself to be entirely "scaled down," but through self-sufficiency solves its own problem, dismissing governmental urban solutions, it affirms its own life through its vocations of crafts and commerce. In Tepito, there are still 15,450 businesses that represent more than 5,000 tepiteños who make a living every day, submerged in their own histories.

**Notes**

1 Market, from the Náhuatl tianquiztli, market or plaza, and tiamiqui, to sell. This practice is still alive in Mexico City as exercised by the tiangueros

2 Eduardo Nivón,"Los barrios en la ciudad de masas," in La Ciudad y sus barrios, ed. José. Lui. Lee and Cels. Valde (México: UAM, 1994), 17.

3 Specifically, in 1957, four public markets were built as the street tianguis was dismantled, but only a year later it was back on the streets and had begun to grow.

4 Mexico City's Historic Downtown encompasses an area of nine square kilometres divided into two perimeters: A and B; A delimits the first square with the most buildings and public spaces that have been declared part of the patrimonial heritage; B defines the outer limits of Historic Downtown where there are some historically significant sites.

5 Elena Enríquez Fuentes, Imagen y espejo: Los barrios de la ciudad de México (México: Praxis, 2010), 131.

6 Guadalupe Domínguey and Ana Rosa Mantecón, Los usos de la identidad barrial: Tepito 1970 –1984, (México: UAM, 1993), 32.

7 María Dolores Morales, "La expansión de la Ciudad de México: El caso de los fraccionamientos," Ciudad de México: Ensayo de construcción de una historic, (Mexico: INAH, 1978, 191.)

8 Armando Palomo, "La política urbana y el futuro de los barrios," La ciudad y sus barrio (Mexico: UAM, 1994), 292.

9 Georgina Sandoval, "Añoranza y actualidad por la casa y la ciudad," La ciudad y sus barrio, (Mexico: UAM, 1994), 253.