

HOW MEXICO'S CHRONIC VIOLENCE HAS DESTROYED THE PUBLIC REALM AND HOW IT CAN BE RECLAIMED.

Francisco Alaniz Uribe, Assistant Professor, University of Calgary, Canada

ABSTRACT

The tradition of public life in Mexico goes back thousands of years. Since pre-Colombian times Mexican cities were planned and developed around public spaces that serve as the stage for multiple expressions of culture (food, art, sport, social connections, etc.). In the past few decades crime and the failure to provide safety has changed how the public realm functions. It is more limited and, in some cases, privatized. This project looked at the morphological changes over time in two Mexican cities, Monterrey and Mexico City. In both cities there are multiple examples of cases where the public realm has been affected in its form and function. Understanding these changes is a key step in addressing the problem and developing strategies for improvements.

Keywords: urban morphology, Mexico, public realm, safety, public life.

INTRODUCTION

Mexican cities have a rich urban history and tradition that dates back over 2,000 years. Since pre-Columbian times the central square, the market and other public spaces were the focus of public life and the stage where culture would express itself (Hassig, 1982). Food, music, open theatre and many other expressions of the arts would take place in these spaces. Social connections between citizens of all socioeconomic status would happen here. That has changed over the past decades. The increase in violence has deeply impacted the way cities are being built and adapted. The failure of crime control has resulted in an inward expression of the built form.

When studying the morphology of large Mexican cities like Monterrey and Mexico City it is apparent how society has surrendered the public realm, in some cases privatizing it and in others turning its back on it (Palma, 2014) (Giglia, 2018). This study used a multi-scale approach to understand changes in form, from the building scale to the neighbourhood scale. It shows how over time block structure was modified and public spaces outsourced to the private sector. The cumulative effect of these changes is a disjointed city lacking permeability and with a hostile public realm. Understanding how we have reached this point is the foundation for remediating strategies and suggesting alternative approaches.

The majority of the violent crime in Mexico is associated to the endemic drug trafficking. The current dimension of this problem dates back decades and needs to be understood as an incremental problem. It started in the 1940s with small organizations, often run by families, that profited from contraband to and from the United States. When drugs started to become popular in the United States these criminal groups started to shift from contraband to drug trafficking. Profits started to make their way into the corruption networks of the security services. Initially the scale of the problem, while significant, was not yet affecting the general population but when the United States government began to persecute drug trafficking routes from Colombia and the Caribbean the main drug trafficking routes shifted to Mexico (Hernandez et al., 2013). It is at this time that the dimension of the problem exponentially grew. Estimates vary from \$5 to \$39 billion US Dollars-worth of drug trafficking originates from Mexico annually (Rizzo, 2019). This money has fuelled a network of corruption that permeates the highest levels of government and has left behind appalling statistics and an impunity index of over 93% of crimes going unpunished (INEGI, 2019).

This new reality of crime has deeply affected the general population and how they interact with the built environment. With a perception of vulnerability, lack of safety and protection by the government (INEGI, 2019), people have built their own mechanism of defense. Shielding themselves from the possibility of being victims of crime, buildings of all land uses have changed their design, neighbourhoods have reconfigured streets, while parks and open spaces have been neglected.

This project documented and analyzed cases of these types of built form transformations using two large cities as case studies. Mexico City, the capital in the centre of the country, and Monterrey the third largest city and an industrial centre in close proximity to the United States border.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this project was based on archival research of photograph and current aerial and street view Google photos. Site visits were also a key component of the research to observe the changes to locations. And finally, a workshop conducted with students for the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City explored the concept around perception of safety and walkability. This research considered the public realm at different scales starting with the building/street wall and continuing with the street, park, plaza and neighbourhood. In the following section examples will be provided to illustrate the different findings at the different scales studied.

FINDINGS

This section is structured around five examples that illustrate the findings of the study. They vary in scale and provide an overview of the built form transformations. Three are located in Mexico City and two in Monterrey.

Jardines del Pedregal, Mexico City: this neighbourhood is a landmark of the modernist movement by architect Luis Barragan. Design in the 1950s it was developed as a high-end residential neighbourhood. It was comprised of different parcel sizes, some of them significantly large. It included a system of parks connected by linear green linkages. Today this is one of the most expensive residential locations. There have been two main transformations in this neighbourhood. The first transformation is the building of security walls and gates in all the parcels consisting of high walls, barbed wire, security cameras, privacy glass and sometimes even bulletproof features. All of these security measures have been built at the property line with no setbacks. This has left the street, the public realm with virtually no eyes-on-the-street, no permeability but for the brief moments of exit and entry. The second transformation is the conversion of some of the large parcels to small gated communities, with 4-6 homes with one single secure gate access and small private common open areas to the interior for children to play. There is no connection between the inhabitants of these houses with the public realm. The streets act like channelized drainages, concrete pipes that only serve the automobile and the few pedestrians which are the domestic workers of the neighbourhood.



Figure 1. Google Maps photos of Jardines del Pedregal showing new gated community and new closed street.

Las Arboledas, Mexico City: this residential neighbourhood it is also designed by Luis Barragan. It was developed for upper middle-class families. With smaller lots than the Pedregal and a concept based on linear parks along the main roadways. It was highly focused on the pedestrian with an interconnected series of parks and plazas. Today the changes have transformed most residences into small fortresses with little to no permeability at all. While the security measures are not as sophisticated as the ones in El Pedregal, most homes now include a high wall and security doors. The one particular change that is different than El Pedregal is the privatization of streets. Residents of a particular block would organize and request to the municipality the closure of their street. When approved the neighbours would team together fund the building of a security gate and contract a security company to man the gate at all times. Anyone not residing within that street will not be allowed to enter. This has created a second police force in Mexico City that is founded by the private sector. It has affected the permeability of the neighbourhood and completely changed how people interact with the rest of their neighbours.

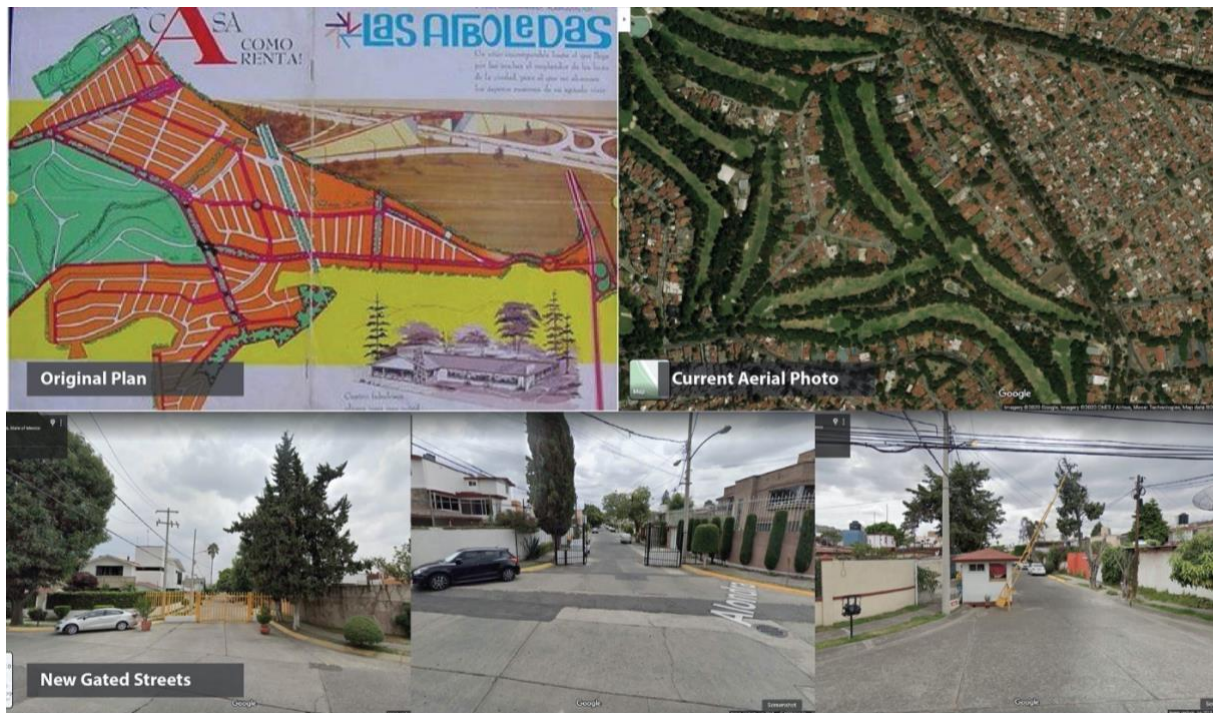


Figure 2. Las Arboledas original plan (Sobre Las Arboledas de Barragán, Melissa Martínez, 2013 <https://laeramainstream.com/2013/11/15/sobre-las-arboledas-de-barragan/>), current aerial Google Maps photo and three examples of closed streets using Google Maps StreetView.

Privanzas, Monterrey: This particular neighbourhood is a new development in comparison with the past two cases. It was not an old neighbourhood to gradually change but a new neighbourhood offering an additional level of security. In the metropolitan area of the city of Monterrey, the municipality of San Pedro Garza Garcia is one of the most affluent in the country based on the income per capita (FitchRatings, 2019). For a long period of time this municipality saw very slow development because of a lack of developable land. When a new track of land was approved for the development, the Privanzas neighbourhood was designed. It was a high end, low density residential neighbourhood as many others in San Pedro but the difference was that instead of having an interconnected grid block pattern it was designed as a series of small gated communities with 20-40 units on each, with a security gate and guard, high walls and small communal areas inside to be used for residents only. The agenda of this new development is not hidden, one of these gated communities is called La Muralla which in Spanish means The Wall. The public realm in these areas is of the lowest quality with sidewalks next to walls that can be as tall as 5 meters high. Essentially the public realm is used in two ways by two different social cohorts, one being the residents in their cars and the other are the domestic and construction workers walking to and from work.



Figure 3. Google Maps aerial photo and StreetView of Privanzas Neighbourhood in Monterrey.

Tecnologico de Monterrey: University campuses offer a unique opportunity to the city and can contribute to the richness of the public realm, potentially adding to the parks and open space system. They are places where the community can interact in a different way and often the surrounding areas of the campus benefit from the high traffic of students and staff. The Tecnologico de Monterrey is one of the best universities in the country and it was founded in the 1950s with the goal to train highly qualified engineers and scientist for the new modern workforce that Mexico needed. The original campus was envisioned as a large park with faculty buildings and ample green spaces. The Rectoria building (main administration building) was the centrepiece of the campus. The campus could be approached from all sides and it was highly permeable. Over time this started to change gradually with fences being built and with multiple security gates. Even then anyone could enter the campus more or less freely. Once again gradually that would change to the point that only a few gates remained open and they were heavily guarded and only people with ID or with an invitation could enter. In 2010 a tragic accident occurred that reflected the level of insecurity and lack of permeability of the campus. Two students trying to get shelter after witnessing a military shootout with members of a drug trafficking cartel were shot and killed by the Mexican army as they tried to enter the campus. The campus because of the shootout had closed all access and gates and the students had no way to escape the danger. They were confused with criminals and died at the edge of the campus. Today the campus is a fortress with no permeability and very little connection with its surrounding community. All of the green spaces and extensions of the public realm have become inaccessible to all but the students and staff. What once was a jewel and pride for the community it is now a walled inaccessible enclave.



Figure 4. Campus Tecnológico de Monterrey 1962 (By Fermin Tellez <http://fermintellez.blogspot.com/2009/06/panoramica-del-itesm-en-1962.html>) and current Google Maps aerial and StreetView photos of the campus

Public Realm Mapping Workshop: In 2019 I conducted a workshop with students of the Universidad Iberoamericana. The goal of the workshop was to show the students different ways to assess the quality of the public realm. In groups of two, students were given a location point in different neighbourhoods in Mexico City. Each group would map and analyze the public realm's different qualities. One of the qualities analyzed was the perception of safety. We understand that depending on how safe a public realm environment feels, people might be more or less inclined on using the public realm (Tiesdell and Oc, 1998). Since there is a difference between mapping crime and crime statistics versus the perception of safety the exercise was for students to “walk” the streets of their particular locations using Google Street View and rank their neighbourhood's public realm safety based on their own perception of safety. After the exercise we discussed how students interpreted key elements they observed to inform their perception of safety. When discussing this and looking at the images collected it became clear that the more a neighbourhood was walled off and less permeable the street-wall was, the more students would categorize the space as unsafe. And if those walled-off spaces also looked ran down showing graffiti, sidewalks in bad condition, unhealthy street trees then the level of safety dropped even lower.

CONCLUSIONS

The levels of crime and impunity occurring right now in Mexico are unprecedented. In many parts of the country it is beyond the control of the government. It is logical than individuals have found a way to increase their security and try to feel safe in their homes and businesses. We can't ask them to embrace the concepts of eyes-on-the-street of Jane Jacobs (Jacobs, 1961) when the perception of safety it's low. It would be naïve to think that urban design and planning can present solutions to the problem of crime but I will offer my view as a Mexican on how civic society can act and try to reclaim the public realm to a degree, without having to wait for the government to act. The only way the public realm can return to be the centre of public life in Mexico is for communities to retake public spaces with large numbers. Programming in the case would be the main weapon. Mexico has a tradition of plaza where music plays and people dance, children play even at night and couples walk around to enjoy the night. More and more communities are coming together to program these spaces and to act together as a group rather than individuals. Second hand and arts and craft street markets get scheduled. Movies are being projected on the high walls of churches for public viewing. Yoga and Tai

Chi classes are taken outside on small community parks. Streets are closed to traffic for days of cycling and running. People will feel safer among other people, their neighbours. Residential neighbourhoods will continue to be challenged by a lack of public realm use and decrease in permeability but the programming of some of its public spaces can provide a gradual recovery. Even individual actions can make a difference. Figure 5 shows local musicians playing in a walled off neighbourhood where a little girl listens from a walled off house, and a painted wall with poetry by Accion Poetica, a movement started in Monterrey that covers neglected walls in the public realm with short poetry. This movement is now in over 40 countries (Vega, 2020).



Figure 5. Retaking the public realm, music and poetry initiatives by community members. (Photos by @Priscilan18 and Accion Poetica).

Unfortunately, during the Covid-19 pandemic this approach has experienced a serious setback. With stay-at-home orders the public realm is more deserted than usual. In San Pedro residents have been order not to go outside, not even for a walk or a run at a park if it's not a way of transiting. With uncertainty of how the post-Covid future might look I am of the view that when allowed to go back to the public realm, people will realize its value and will reclaim it with force. The principle of 'what you miss you value' might be the catalyst for a rejuvenated effort to reclaim the public realm and reconquer public life. Maybe this too is naïve, but I still see it as an opportunity.

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CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Francisco Alaniz Uribe, Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, PF2182, Calgary, AB, T2L 2B6, Canada. falanizu@ucalgary.ca