

THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC SPACE IN TODAY'S MEXICAN CITY

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Abstract

Public space is the setting of public life and ideally functions as a forum for political action and expression; as a 'neutral' or common ground for social interaction, intermingling, and communication; and as a stage for social learning, personal development and information exchange. Throughout history, communities have developed public spaces that support their needs, whether these are markets, places for sacred celebrations, or sites for local rituals. As the social, economic, and political centres of cities, they have played a variety of roles in human life at the physical, psychological, social, political, economic and symbolic levels. However, in contemporary urban life, public spaces have lost a lot of their value and contemporary trends have constrained their development. Nowadays, more than 75% of the population of Mexico lives in cities, yet poverty, insecurity, social and physical fragmentation, and low quality environments are the main characteristics of Mexican urban spaces. This paper intends to examine how the transformation and appropriation of public space is taking place socially and spatially in the diverse and contrasting settings of contemporary urban Mexico. In this context, it is crucial to discuss how Mexican cities should reconstruct and reproduce their public spaces to meet the challenges of the 21st century and build more responsive and sustainable urban environments.

Keywords

Public space, Mexican city, urban transformation, public life.

Introduction

Public spaces in cities are important for health, well-being, learning, conflict resolution, tolerance and solidarity (Shaftoe, 2008). They are the settings where history, culture, development, progress and even the drawbacks of a society become visible. In this sense, public urban space and the public realm are useful indicators of how societies are coping with the new challenges posed by the contemporary economic, social and environmental trends of the 21st century city.

Today, Mexico's urban centres are the product of an increasingly diverse range of actors, interests and values. Various contrasting approaches to producing, transforming, and managing urban environments in terms of territorial growth, housing production, urban and economic development and revitalization, can be identified. In this context, cities are

built and rebuilt not only under the influence of current tendencies, but also according to traditional and emerging political, social and cultural practices particular to present day Mexico.

Nowadays, in urban Mexico, different forms of public space production and consumption can be observed. On the one hand, in the affluent areas of most cities, public urban space reflects contemporary economic trends and the dominance of wealth; on the other hand, public spaces in traditional areas and lower-income neighbourhoods reflect completely different rationalities and dynamics.

This paper intends to examine how the appropriation and transformation of public space is taking place socially and spatially in the different and contrasting settings of contemporary urban Mexico; it will also discuss specific examples of the (re)construction of more "habitable" and "democratic" urban spaces. The main question is: 'How are Mexican cities reconstructing and reproducing their public spaces, through these various processes, to meet the challenges of the 21st century?'

Contemporary Constraints on Public Space

Public space, like the city as a whole, is both container and content. It is a space for being: physically, socially and culturally. However, public space is not only a stage or setting; it also implies a process of social production which includes all those social, economic, ideological, and technological factors that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting (Low 2000). Moreover, public space is also a social construction, which implies the

consumption of the space produced.

These perspectives involve looking at urban space in relation to how places are used and appropriated and what meanings derive from those spaces in the minds of those who consume them. In this way, public space is produced and consumed by everyone that lives in cities: urban managers, local authorities, planners, designers, ordinary citizens, visitors and tourists - all the actors that make and transform cities, leaving their imprint on urban settings.

Since the end of the 20th century, several analysts have examined the different aspects that constrain contemporary public space in cities. In terms of the fragmentation and privatisation of public space, Richard Sennett (1994) proclaims the death of truly public space, the triumph of modern individualism and the loss of confidence in public and community experiences, which is manifested in the increasing social apathy towards public life in contemporary urban societies. Similarly, Loukaitou-Sideris (1988: 7) argues that public life has become spatially disjointed, dispersed, and discontinuous. The educational, informative and communicative character of public space has also weakened. Some of these functions have migrated, largely to the private sphere. Boyer (1996:9) suggests that the 'public' has become a negative concept, in contrast to the 'private' which has been refurbished with an exalted 'image'. This has contributed to a decline of public life in which public space has become, 'empty space, a space of abstract freedom but no enduring human connection' (Sennett, 1994: 375).

Other researchers have argued that the modern city offers an increasingly inhospitable environment for the widespread enjoyment

of and use of public space. Çelik et al (1994) argue that in many parts of the world, streets no longer seem to be a viable social and cultural space. She affirms that there has been a disengagement from the city because it is a place of uncontrollable diversity (Çelik, et al. 1994). Similarly, Valentine (2001:199) points out that, 'the public realm, rather than being a social order of civility, sociality and tolerance, has increasingly become one of apprehension and insecurity.' Fear of crime is closely associated with perceptions of who occupies and controls the space of the street, and is leading people to avoid public space and a spiral of avoidance and abandonment is setting in (Valentine, 2001: 178; Porta, 1999: 144).

Transport and communication technologies have also constrained urban public spaces. In most traditional cities, before the common use of vehicles, the street was an extension of the buildings that faced onto it. People sat in chairs in front of their homes, and businesses displayed goods on mats and tables in the street. With the rise of motorized vehicles, the street became less a part of the community and more of a place for transient strangers, and people passing through (Ford, 2000: 6-7). Nowadays, public spaces have often become residual spaces, used for parking cars, or at best associated with particular limited functions, such as tourism and retail (Çelik et al. 1994; Madanipour, 2003).

Moreover, Madanipour (1999, 2003, and 2010) argues that the growing size of the city has led to a specialization of space, which has dismantled the symbolic and functional coherence of both public and private spheres. Furthermore, a disconnection between private and public space in these pseudo-public spaces, such

as the fortified shopping mall, has contributed to the decline of the significance of public space (Çelik, et al. 1994). Similarly, bazaars and market places have been exchanged for window shopping in malls, where the shopper has been converted into the passive spectator, the isolated individual, silently contemplating merchandise (Crawford, 1992:17).

In this way, the increasing intervention of the private sector in public space production has contributed to the privatisation of space, and now public space is treated as a mere commodity (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1988; Burgers, 2000; Madanipour, 2003). This situation has led to the reduction of their 'publicness' and the emergence of a shifting process from being somewhat 'open' to somewhat 'closed' (Davis, 1990; Sorkin, 1992; Mitchell, 1995; Gulick, 1998). Sorkin (1992: xi) regards this as the emergence of a new kind of city, a city without a place attached to it, where a disaggregated patchwork of urban fabric forms a bland, senseless environment.

In contrast to these arguments, which are mainly drawn from cities in the northern hemisphere, with regard to public life and spaces in the present day Latin American city, Segre (2002) argues that despite the adoption by the minority elite of imported models and habits, most people's everyday life and recreational activities in Latin America and the Caribbean continue to be concentrated in open public spaces. The majority of Latin Americans still wish to experience the city rather than retreating to isolated shopping malls. Streets, parks, plazas, and promenades constitute spaces for encounter and hold a social value in opposition to the individualist city of the elite (expressed in

gated neighbourhoods and shopping malls). In contrast to those who argue about the exalted image of the private, in Latin America people claim the need for a more outdoor public life, as demonstrated in research carried out by the United Nations Development Program-Chile 2000 (UN 2000), in which the demand for public space was expressed.

Public Space Transformation in the Contemporary Mexican City

Different facets of public space can be observed in Mexican cities. In this context, public space represents an important source of information about the history, culture, social values, and contemporary development of Mexican society. Whilst public space shows the prominence of a great heritage, culture and collective life, unfortunately, the drawbacks of contemporary Mexican society are also evident.

Mexico is a country with huge social and economic differences and contrasts: while there is a small elite dominating most of the economic power, there is also a large majority of the population living on the margins of economic, social and human development. In the public realm, one can observe the constraints of contemporary urban Mexico. On the one hand, several factors are evident, such as unemployment and social exclusion; lack of adequate land tenancy policies or social services; urban blight and fragmentation; precarious housing conditions and poor urban infrastructure, while on the other hand, financial capital and interests can be seen modifying cities for the benefit of the highest income groups, in privatized developments which only

a few have access to.

This situation is apparent in the physical characteristics of the space, social interaction, political protests and all the practices of appropriation that people carry out in city centre streets and squares, on pavements, in parks and market places and other urban spaces in their neighbourhoods. In this way, Mexican cities exemplify public space with the characteristics described and discussed by public space analysts and researchers. Renovation and beautification of public places is constant, especially in historical areas, an elite-exclusive city is promoted in new luxury/high-end developments, and abandonment and neglect are the normal condition of many marginal public places, where social fragmentation, exclusion and insecurity are often common characteristics.

The Values of Social Equity

In low-income peripheral neighbourhoods and some other fragmented environments, public space embodies the precariousness and marginalisation of the community. However, through the struggle to defend, protect and improve public places, residents develop a sense of belonging and attachment, and learn to value public space, which leads to actions for improvement. We may think that the urban poor in Latin America are not interested in public spaces, but on the contrary, there are residents in low-income neighbourhoods who aspire to urban continuity rather than discontinuity, integration rather than fragmentation and spatial quality rather than merely satisfying basic necessities, and this is shown in the different public spaces developed in low-



Figure 1: The low-income populations build public space through solid collective participation in Xalapa, Mexico. (Source: Local residents).

income neighbourhoods. In Mexico, streets, parks and pavements have been built by the low-income population through solid collective participation (see Figure 1).

In the city of Xalapa, Veracruz, inhabitants of low-income peripheral neighbourhoods have been observed protecting and improving streets and parks in their neighbourhoods. People have defended public green areas from new residents who want to illegally occupy these spaces in order to build their houses. In order to avoid the invasion of public space, inhabitants have built playgrounds, paved streets, and maintained public places to benefit children and young people. Moreover, inhabitants have organized themselves in order to achieve the

upgrading of public space with the help of local authorities, an important actor in the adequate and permanent development of public spaces.

Public space production and consumption in these contexts show people's capacity to organise, reach consensus and work collectively for their urban environment. Figures 1 and 2 show that in low-income neighbourhoods there is a legitimate interest in public space transformation and improvement in order to construct a more integrated city. Public space improvement is regarded as part of the solution to social problems such as vandalism or social fragmentation that may occur in neighbourhoods. Furthermore, public space is also seen as an asset with educational and

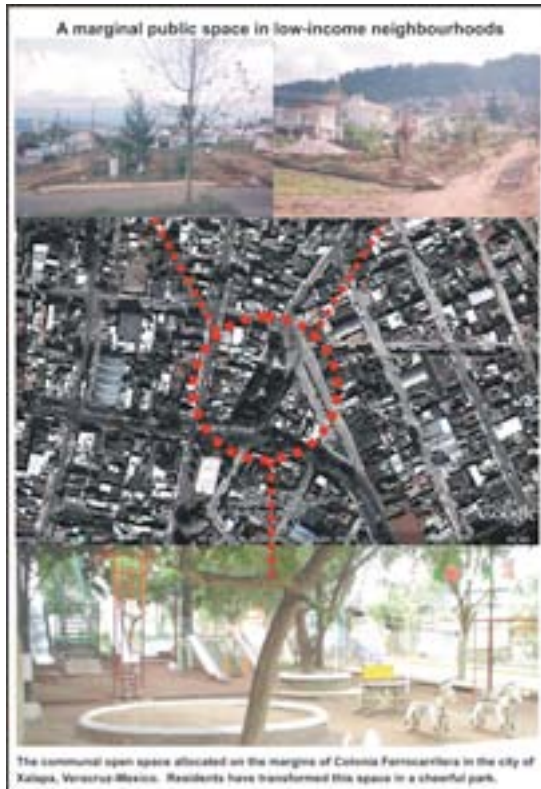


Figure 2: A public space in Xalapa (Source: Image created by the author, aerial photo by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática retrieved from Google Earth 2012, Date: 06.06.2012, other photographs taken by the author and local residents).

social significance for the positive development of children and young people.

Privatized Public Space

However, from a different perspective, the

urban populations with more economic power are building/developing new forms of urban space which promote privatisation and fragmentation through the creation of closed residential neighbourhoods, protected by walls and gates, where only the inhabitants and members of the inhabitants' community are allowed access. Moreover, shopping malls and international/multinational supermarkets combine with this new city growth, where public space is regarded only as a space for the traffic and therefore lacks a pleasant pedestrian environment. Privatisation of public space through these new urban development leads us to reflect on the relationship between public and private space in our cities.

The promotion of private and individualistic values in contemporary society, and the attitudes and policies of city authorities in favour of private interests and actors, have been decisive factors in the configuration of 21st century public space. Nowadays, in most major Mexican cities there are well-off areas where shopping malls, restaurants, offices and luxury gated residential areas are being developed. Santa Fe, an area located in the south of Mexico City, symbolises the new values of contemporary public space. A public-private urbanism that seeks to break the city into fragments emerges in Santa Fe, isolating people and segregating social groups, enclosing each group in their own ghettos without public spaces and confronting them with their own environment. Santa Fe seems to be a walled city for the exclusive use of its cowardly and wealthy residents (Borja, 2003). Furthermore, in areas like this, public spending on infrastructure and services is also concentrated to the benefit of private investment/investors; this is in contrast

to the lack of investment and improvement of public spaces in low-income areas (see Figure 3).

Public space in these contemporary urban environments is at great risk. Lara (2007), in her research in Merida, Yucatan, argued that the configuration of urban space, strongly determined by economic interests, had brought about low-density land use, and the creation of inaccessible areas in cities due to physical barriers and gates where only residents or those with permission have access. Therefore, social and physical fragmentation has become a common characteristic of many Mexican cities. Since contemporary development is exclusive to some areas and particular groups, the lack of provision of urban services, green areas, and public spaces for the benefit of low-income areas and the city as whole is also very common. Moreover, Lara (2007) found that since neighbourhoods are gated and privatized, the city authorities also neglect these areas and fail in the provision of some public services (e.g. rubbish collection or public street lighting). As a result, the impoverishment of the urban space in cities is evident; Mexican cities have developed with corridors of shopping malls and private gated neighbourhoods in some privileged areas, described by Sorkin (1992: xi), as a "disaggregated patchwork of urban fabric [which] forms a bland, senseless environment."

Public Space, Tradition and Identity

In the last few decades, public space in historic city centres has also received a lot of attention in most Mexican cities. Since the country has been strongly promoted as an attractive



Figure 3: Plan of land use in Santa Fe, Mexico City, aerial photograph and a view of the shopping mall (Source: Image created by the author, Land use plan from the Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano de Santa Fe, Gobierno del Distrito Federal (2000), Aerial photo by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI 2012) obtained from Google Earth 2012, Date of access 06.06.2012).

tourist destination, historic city centres play an important role in economic development. City centres have been transformed into spaces for tourism and retail, with the view that historic city centres are part of the urban heritage which should be preserved and revitalised in order to bring about economic revitalisation

and regeneration. Although, some successful physical improvements and conservation strategies have been implemented in Mexico, these have been carried out to favour tourism and economic development, while local inhabitants, and social and symbolic identities that have characterized these urban spaces for many centuries, have been weakened.

Some interesting urban interventions can be observed: for example, in the renovation of Mexico city's historic centre, a great deal of public space, such as streets, squares and parks, has been improved, together with the promotion of major development projects (hotels, restaurants, offices, housing). Considering that this central area was totally abandoned for many decades with serious problems such as crime, low property prices, invasion of public space by street vendors and cars, and with very low occupancy of housing, the regeneration strategies implemented in this

area have led to successful urban revitalisation. However, integrated development frameworks need to be visualised, planned, designed and implemented by urban managers in order to find a successful means of urban renovation and regeneration (see Figure 4).

Public spaces and the urban townscape have been renewed in many historic city centres, but without any intervention in social and economic development for inhabitants and local businesses. This has given rise to revitalisation strategies with poor long-term sustainability. The case of the historic centre of the port-city of Veracruz is a good illustration of this. Here, renovation has taken place in public spaces and the facades of buildings, but there is a lack of urban, economic and social strategies to sustain physical renovation and revitalisation. There are still many areas with very low quality environments, characterised by abandoned properties, with many rundown



Figure 4: Mexico city's historic centre, The "Zocalo" and Madero Street recently pedestrianized (Sources: Author).

buildings housing multiple families (patios de vecindad), and a total neglect for transport and mobility services. Moreover, the conservation or restoration of the interiors of buildings is not very high on the agenda.

Finally, the lack of interest and consensus among actors, agencies and government to establish long-term architectural, urban, social and economic strategies that trigger a holistic development process is evident. This situation leaves a high degree of uncertainty for viable renewal and revitalisation processes in historic city centres.

Environmental Revitalisation

When political willingness, economic and social support and legitimate benefits for the city and its citizens are present, urban projects are usually very successful. In the north of Mexico, the Paseo Santa Lucia (Saint Lucia's promenade) in the city of Monterrey is a thriving case of public space development. Monterrey is the richest city in northern Mexico, and has a strong industrial base with a very strong economy. Its people are often characterized as enterprising and dynamic, and this is also reflected in the image of the city. It has a large public space known as the Macropiazza, which is currently the second largest plaza in the world after Tiananmen Square in China. It covers an area of 400,000 square metres, consisting of various monuments, smaller plazas and gardens.

In this context, Paseo Santa Lucia is an approximately three-kilometre linear park linking the historic centre with a former 'fundidora,' or steel foundry, which has been converted into an urban park. The Paseo is a canal along which

pedestrian footpaths, fountains, green areas, public art, cultural spaces, and restaurants are located. Local residents and tourists can stroll along the promenade or take a boat from Parque Fundidora to the city centre and vice versa to enjoy the different features of this public space. Parque Fundidora was opened in 2001 and is also considered one of the largest public spaces in the country because it is a park covering 114 hectares where many recreational facilities, including an amusement park, museums and shops, are found within the metropolitan area of the city.

These new public spaces have been very successful in giving Monterrey a new face, for the enjoyment and socialisation of city inhabitants and visitors from all over the world. These examples represent urban places that have brought real environmental, social and economic benefits to the city and its inhabitants. Nowadays, international sport events, celebrations, meetings and trade fairs take place in Parque Fundidora and Paseo Santa Lucia. Paseo Santa Lucia has revitalised the urban environment of many neighbourhoods with green areas, new local businesses, cafés, restaurants and spaces for recreation and relaxation (see Figure 5).

Spaces of Fear and Insecurity

Mexican public space is full of contradictions: whilst in some urban areas worthwhile public spaces are encouraged and built, as seen in the previous case, in other areas, private actors and local authorities are promoting a privatised city, as with the development of closed residential compounds. Moreover, some cities are characterised by public spaces

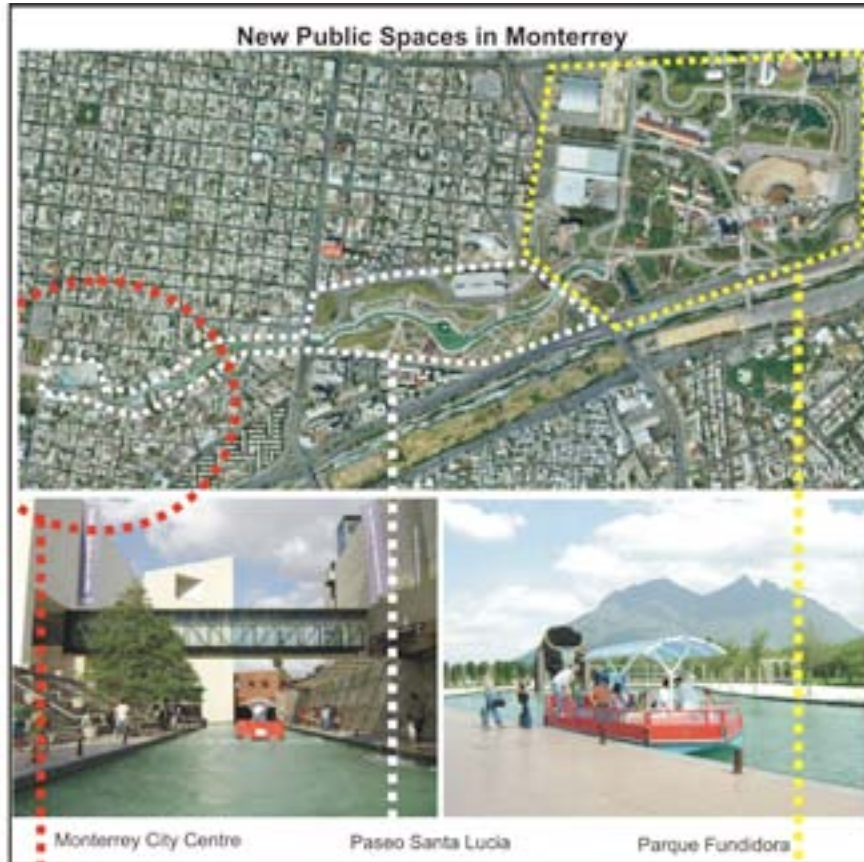


Figure 5: Parque Fundidora and Paseo Santa Lucia (Source: Image created by the author, aerial photo by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (INEGI 2012) obtained from Google Earth 2012, Date: 06.06.2012).

full of violence and insecurity and a lack of social values. Ciudad Juarez, on the northern border, is a city where public space has lost its role as a social integrator and linker. This is an unhealthy urban environment, characterised by drug dealing and killings in public space, and where the murder of women has been a problem for almost a decade. In terms of

public space improvement, local authorities have made efforts to improve and upgrade neighbourhoods, in order to create a better and safer physical environment, but these interventions have been insufficient and had little impact.

The causes of the unsafe urban environment

in this city go beyond the poor quality of public space. Ciudad Juárez represents a passageway to the United States for many Mexican and Central American migrants who look for a better life in the "American dream". In addition, the city is the hub of one of the most important drug cartels in the world – the Cartel de Juárez. As a result, the city and its urban environment are under constant threat. For this reason, social interaction, economic exchange, and collective activities in public space have significantly decreased. Inhabitants' interactions in many neighbourhoods in the city are characterized by fear of crime and insecurity. Moreover, the low quality of the urban environment is a general feature, because public areas are now abandoned spaces which have turned into derelict land occupied by people considered undesirable and frightening to the general population.

To sum up, urban environments in this city are deserted and threatening. It could be said that public space in Ciudad Juárez is an example of what theoreticians have presented as the emergence of a hostile, unsafe and unhealthy public space, where the real significance of urban public places has been totally lost. Even worse is the fact that due to public policies against organized crime promoted by the Federal Government in the last few years, this situation is being replicated in many other cities in the country.

Real Democracy and Pluralism

All city dwellers have a right to a sustainable public space. In many urban neighbourhoods, residents are concerned about high quality public space, and consequently they struggle for their right to

enjoy public spaces that promote a healthier urban environment within their communities. In this way, it is believed that a real understanding of the values and roles of public space for the benefit of urban communities, in accordance with more participatory and democratic processes, should lead to the improvement of urban environments in our cities.

In contrast to the improvement of Ciudad Juárez, the case of Ciudad Bicentenario in Metepec, Estado de México, is an important example of citizens participating to defend a great public space against the state authorities, who intended to sell the land to private investors to build a new commercial and financial centre, putting at risk more than 100 hectares accessible as public urban space and affecting the capacity of urban infrastructure available to the city. The citizens organized the defence and protection of this space through strong urban protests and the establishment of a social movement, called "Salvemos SEDAGRO" supported by the "Grupo Pro Reserva Natural Bicentenario" (a group in favour of the Bicentenary Nature Reserve).

The movement managed to make the authorities reconsider their plans, and instead of this public land being privatised, inhabitants achieved the planning of a park and public facilities for the city. In its first stage, the park opened in 2009 following an investment of 70 million pesos (approximately 6 million USD). The park includes extensive green areas, water features, running tracks, an environmental education centre, museum, library, sports and commercial areas, parking space, information points and medical centre, all with an environmental focus to promote the protection and conservation of the natural environment. Parque Bicentenario provides a good example



Figure 6. Parque bicentenario (Source:<http://diariportal.com>. Date of Access: 06-06-2012).

of citizens' participation in the conservation of open urban spaces in Mexico (see Figure 6).

Discussion

There is a general tendency towards privatisation in most areas of modern life, and public space is no exception. In contemporary neoliberal capitalist societies, authorities seek to favour internal investment and present a positive urban image to international capital investors by offering images of urban order and modernity, envisioning and creating controlled and well-managed urban spaces, but often neglecting ordinary inhabitants, the needs of public space users and the aspirations of those who are less powerful.

In Mexico, even though some groups enjoy high-quality spaces with similar characteristics to those located in the urban environments of most developed countries, there are other groups who are deprived of this right within urban society. Social exclusion and inequalities that prevail in Mexican urban environments

are an aspect that weakens social and human development, social inclusion, participation and access to a high-quality urban environment.

Moreover, public space processes have been affected by undemocratic political practices. In many neighbourhoods, spaces for local parks, playgrounds and other public facilities have been left at the mercy of corrupt leaders, authorities, politicians and many other individuals and groups who negotiate in exchange for private interests, political or economic power. The spaces allocated for public use are public properties legally managed by the authorities, however, different actors (inhabitants, governments and investors) speculate with these areas, neglecting their public status and their value for the social, environmental, and cultural development of urban communities, and promoting their privatisation to develop a more profitable city. Furthermore, a privatised city that only favours economic gains is characterised by physically fragmented urban places that only promote individualism and exclusion.

Fully participatory and collaborative city planning and design to maintain the balance between the different interests (public-private, economic-political, collective-individual) do not really exist in contemporary urban Mexico. Frequently, the resulting public space is strongly dominated and controlled by the actors with most economic and political power, to the point that these ride roughshod over the process and people's desires. Citizens often have to organise themselves and struggle against government, investors and/or developers in order to defend their right to public space and eventually the right to a better and healthier urban environment. In future research, it is important to interview the actors involved in processes of transformation: residents, planners, urban managers, and other professionals, in order to determine peoples' perceptions about power relations and community power. Moreover, appraisals through questionnaires and interviews with different users are important to find out their sentiments and opinions about the quality of the improved public spaces.

Conclusion

At present, the important question to ask is how to reconstruct public space in the Mexican city of today, overcoming the tendencies of privatisation of public space, the creation of environments of fear and abandonment, and social and political inequalities. Actors in charge of the management of our cities should make an effort to direct their public policies towards the values of social equity, identity, environmental quality, economic efficiency, political participation, real democracy and pluralism in city planning and design, and promote development that takes these aspects

into account. Moreover, more than 75% of the Mexican population now lives in cities, yet poverty, insecurity, social and physical fragmentation, and low quality environments are the main characteristics of Mexican cities. Solving, or at least reducing, these contemporary problems by providing better housing environments, safe areas, education and employment opportunities, high quality streets, parks and green areas, and efficient public transport, in other words, a higher quality of life in cities, represents a real challenge for most cities in the 21st century.

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