

The history of Mexico City

(Part III)

*Luis Ortiz Macedo**

The Republic

The Wars of Independence and the newly-established Republican government paralyzed civil activities, putting an end to international trade and mining prosperity, which in turn wrecked agriculture and incipient industry.

Mexico City suffered a recession and was no longer able to provide adequate urban services. Unemployment rose among miners and factory workers who flocked to the cities, especially the capital, in search of work.

By 1845, the population had reached 230,000, but no provision had been made to accommodate the extra numbers. Spacious viceregal residences were soon overflowing, more floors were built and orchards and gardens sacrificed.

The city gradually deteriorated and Liberal governments started to disentail city real estate belonging to various branches of the clergy. This property was sold to private owners who soon converted it into crowded, unhealthy public housing.

Political instability and overseas conflicts did nothing to encourage urban development and improvements. However, old baroque buildings continued to be remodelled in the

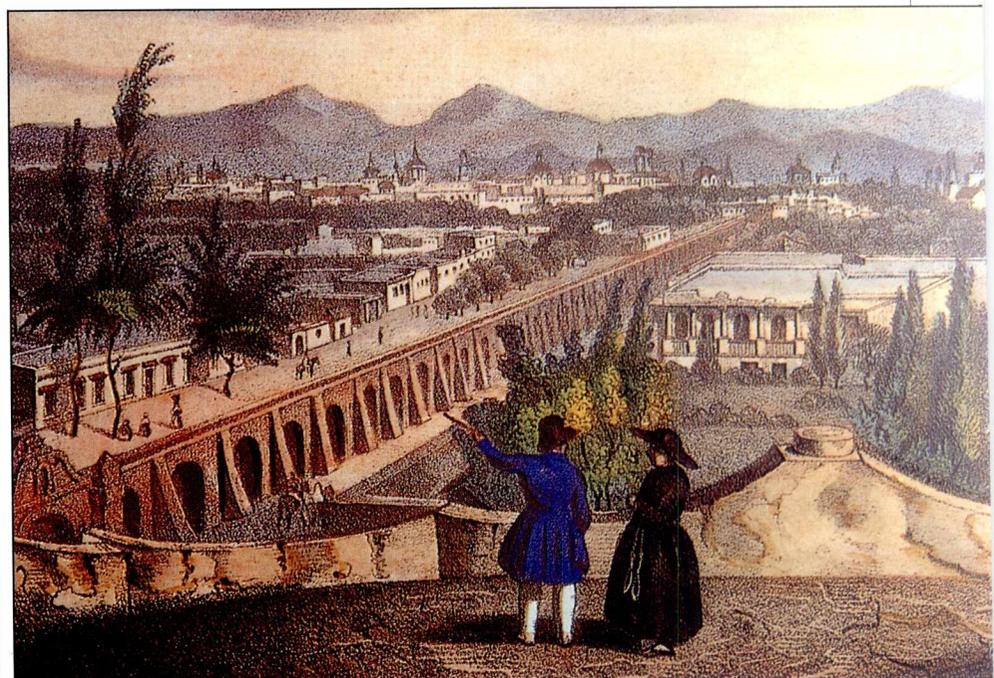
neoclassical style that became increasingly popular toward mid-century.

The few architects who graduated from the recently reorganized academy were determined to find new uses for large colonial buildings and to redesign their façades. The Spanish architect, Lorenzo de la Hidalga, and the Italian, Cavallari, were commissioned to design some of the few public works undertaken, most important of which

were Cinco de Mayo Avenue and the National Theater.

The French invasion and the short-lived Second Empire spawned urban and architectural projects aimed at modernizing the city and adapting the most important buildings. Attention was focussed on the National Palace and Chapultepec Castle, but the only significant work that came to fruition was the Emperor's Avenue, running from the first roundabout on Bucareli to the slopes of Chapultepec Hill. Ambitious Austrian and German projects never materialized.

It was not until Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada's presidency (1872-1876) that the first changes occurred. Together with other city landowners, Martínez de la Torre, a businessman, suggested that the haciendas on the outskirts of the city be subdivided. These were to become the Guerrero, Santa María la Ribera, Juárez and San Miguel Chapultepec districts. The first of these subdivisions or districts was inaugurated by President Lerdo as a center for workers' housing, because of its proximity to the industries that



Mexico City (XIX century).
G.N. Renner (lithograph).

* Professor of Architecture.



Iturbide's entry to Mexico City with the "trigarante" army (XIX century).

had grown up around Azcapotzalco, Tacuba and Santa Julia.

Newly enriched families began to move into the areas near Bucareli and Reforma Avenues (formerly known as Paseo del Emperador) and urban services improved.

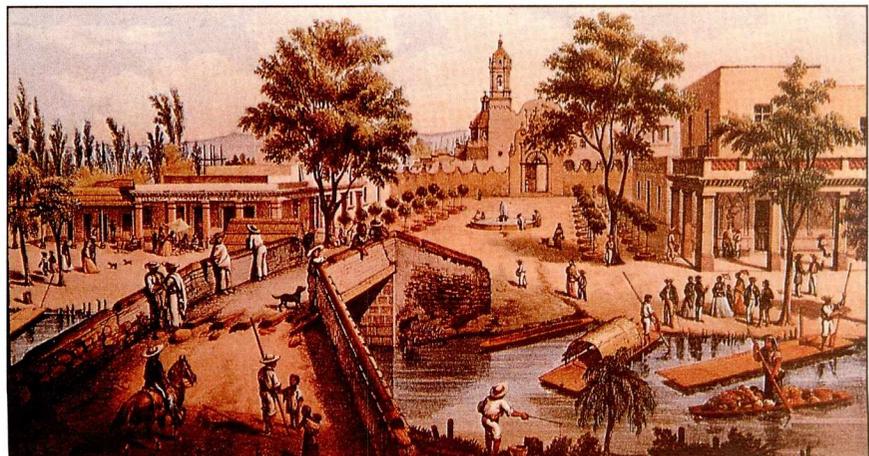
However, the one factor that radically changed city life, by linking towns in the basin and making land transport faster, was the arrival of the railroad, planned and built by two businessmen, Manuel and Antonio Escandón. Rail links were gradually established between the capital and principal ports and provincial cities, providing new opportunities for farming, livestock-raising, and industry.

In its thirty years under General Porfirio Díaz, Mexico experienced a

wave of economic prosperity it had not known since the end of the 18th century. The newly accepted model of urban planning attempted to reach

standards of excellence similar to those in the great European cities.

The government sought to express its prestige through buildings



*Ixtacalco (XIX century).
Casimiro Castro (lithograph).*



Markets were relocated.

symbolizing its modern spirit and the beginning of a new age.

City administration was reorganized in accordance with a new political structure that divided the city into twelve municipalities. Electricity, trams, telephones and telegraphs were introduced at the same time as water and drainage were extended by the Great Drainage Canal.

Towns in the valley were embellished with public parks, their main squares landscaped and schools and social services established. Town halls were built and new markets relocated in spacious areas with metal roofs, specially designed by large European and American companies.

The urban model devised by the so-called *scientists* (the ideologists of the Porfirian era), required drastic changes: efficient and high quality

urban services, new road surfaces to withstand motorized transport, plentiful and effective communication systems, improved housing, and buildings symbolizing progress and efficiency.

Sumptuous *chalets* appeared along the Paseo de la Reforma and surrounding areas; three- and four-storey apartment blocks became

twenty architects available of whom the most famous were Antonio Rivas Mercado, Emilio Dondé, the Agea brothers and Manuel Gorozpe.

The municipality opened the design and construction of its most important buildings to international bids. A French architect, Bénard, was commissioned to build the legislative



Panoramic view of downtown Mexico City. (XIX century). Casimiro Castro (lithograph).

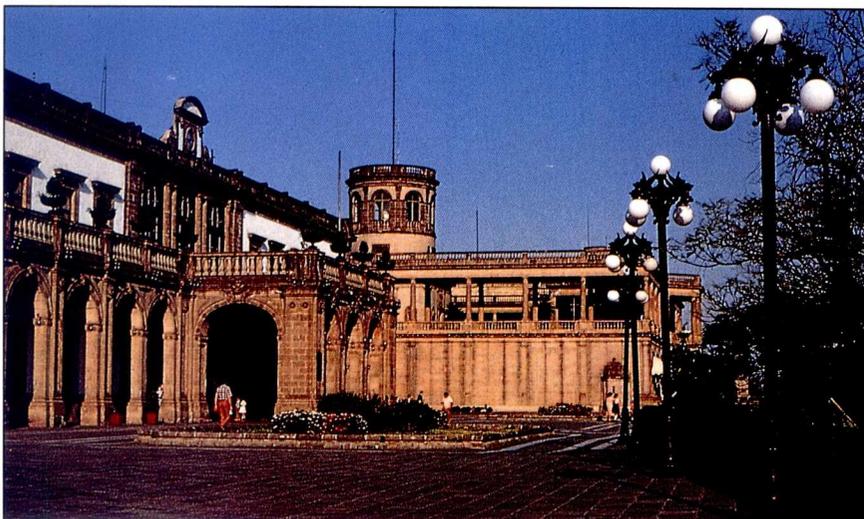
increasingly common, and innumerable colonial houses were demolished to make room for new buildings.

During the early part of the century, the city's population rose to an astonishing 450,000, with just over

palace, and Italians, Silvio Contri and Adamo Boari, undertook the Department of Communications, the Correo Mayor (main post office) Building and the National Theater. Cinco de Mayo Avenue was completed, while Paseo de la Reforma was extended as far as the old Chapultepec Forest. Plans for an international fair on either side of the avenue never materialized.¹

The city put on its best face in 1910 to celebrate the first centenary of the nation's Independence, receive foreign delegations and show the world what it had achieved in the last thirty years.

Despite this ambitious program, the poverty and unsanitary conditions that had plagued the city since the mid-19th century were never fully eradicated **M**



Castle of Chapultepec.

¹ This stretch of Paseo de la Reforma was called Avenue of the Fair in 1910.