

People Change

Other things have changed in the Central Valley of Mexico besides the quality of the air. City dwellers are no longer the same, either.

Not even a trace is left of Tenochtitlan, the imperial city that impressed the Spanish conquerors with its pristine lakes, clear air, imposing pyramids and perfect social organization. Today, more than 400 years later, modern Mexico City is one of the most chaotic, polluted and crowded population centers in human history.

The city's growth has been incredibly rapid. In 1950 there were some 3.5 million inhabitants living in about 240 square kilometers; today there are some 18 million people—roughly 23 percent of the country's total population—who live in the city's 1000 square kilometer area. As a result, population density is higher than in most other cities, even those like Tokyo, traditionally considered to be among the most densely populated in the world.

INDUSTRIALIZATION AND URBAN GROWTH

The Valley of Mexico metropolitan area began its anarchic growth during the 1920s. The country began a period of industrialization that grew steadily and peaked during the Miguel Alemán Velasco administration (1946-1952). This growth tended to concentrate the nation's work force and its industrial plant in a few urban centers (Mexico City and its metropolitan area, Guadalajara and Monterrey being the most important). In the process, the country's predominantly rural economy was broken down, and thousands and thousands of peasants migrated to the cities in search of industrial jobs.

Mexico City's dizzying growth transformed all of its original spaces. Downtown, for example, was replaced as the center of student and cultural life when University City was built in the southern part of the metropolitan area. The old downtown bookstores on Donceles, Argentina and San Ildefonso Streets moved to the more suburban Coyoacán and San Ángel neighborhoods, as cultural life in general moved south. And thus the city became divided: culture in the south, the mansions of wealthy businessmen and industrialists in the western suburbs of *Las Lomas*, blue collar workers and factories in the north and slums encircling the entire city.

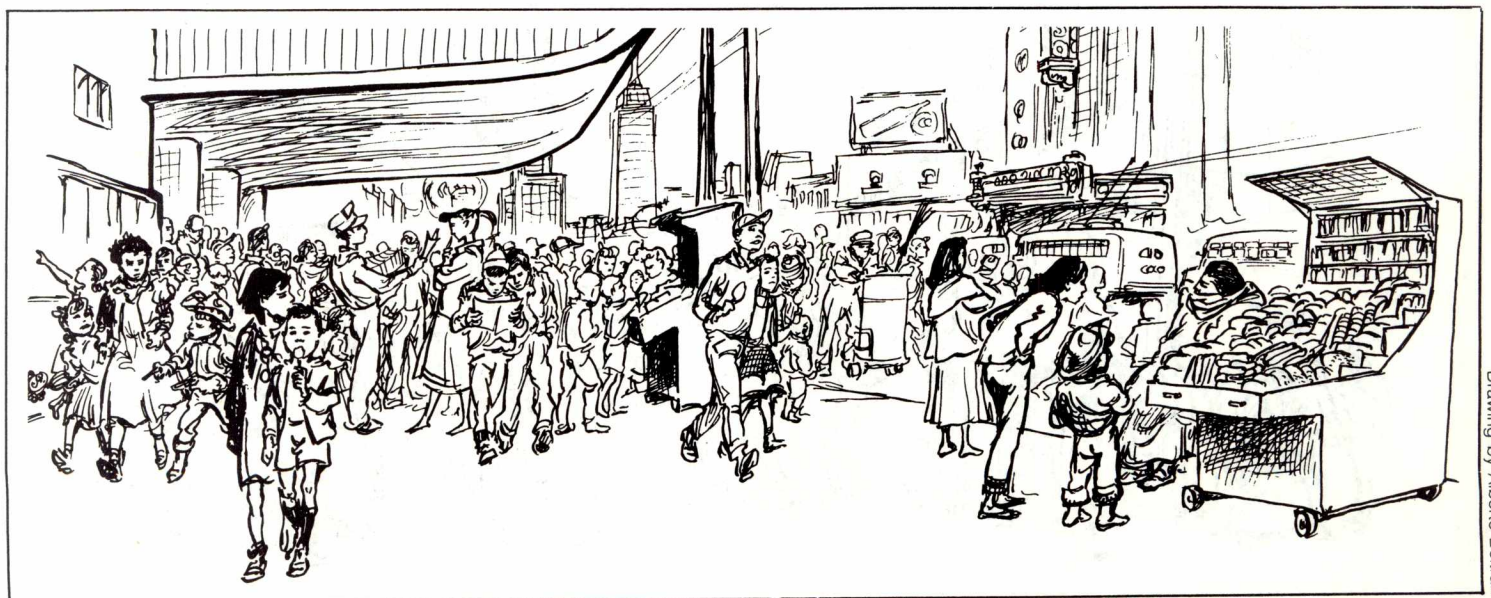
The classic urban center is being replaced by new population centers: Naucalpan, Tlalnepantla, Ecatepec, Nezahualcóyotl, etc. in the state of Mexico. And the Valley of Mexico's traditional landscape has been changed completely. The old neighborhoods that produced a fuller and stronger urban culture, the arid lands left behind as the ancient Texcoco Lake (home of the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan) dried up and the surrounding agricultural lands have all given way to commercial speculation, real estate transactions and the merciless laws of supply and demand.

PEASANT CULTURE VS. URBAN CULTURE

"The peasants who migrate to the city are people with deeply rooted rural cultures," explains Héctor Manuel Romero, chronicler for the Federal District's Cuauhtémoc Delegation (an administrative sub-division of the capital city.) "They build a protective wall around themselves against the lack of communication and the hurried pace of life, and they close themselves off in a kind of little island. There are thousands of these little islands that coexist in the same city, with no communication between them. It's really a problem of mass psychology: how to incorporate peasants into a city where people speak a different psychological language. I still don't see any solution for the problem."

According to Carlos Monsiváis, a leading Mexican writer and journalist, there are four main processes of cultural change taking place in the Federal District.

The first is the increase in cultural activities. Until the 1960s, the city's cultural life was concentrated in just a few places: the Palace of Fine Arts, a few galleries and film centers and several specialized bookstores downtown. Beginning in the 70s, cultural gathering places were displaced toward the university center (a modern cultural complex built by the National Autonomous University of Mexico), theaters and bookstores in the southern part of the



Drawing by Alberto Beltrán

the nation

city. Beginning at about the same time, cultural activities began to diversify to include the excellent concerts, plays and exhibits characteristic of the world's great cities. To a large extent this process is a result of the growth of the city's middle class, whose cultural level has risen considerably since the consolidation of the Mexican Revolution.

The second process is related to the new mood on the part of students who take the lessons of 1968 (a year marked by huge student demonstrations and culminating in a large massacre on October 2) as the basis for changes in their attitude toward life and society.

The third process has to do with the "nationalization" of rock music, a legitimate language of youth, rooted in the 60s and continually developing with its own dynamics and traditions. The words to songs by Mexican rock groups like the "Three Souls" express an urban perspective on the massification of life; on marginalization within massification, to put it one way.

A fourth point is peoples' new attitude toward reading. Books have lost their virtually sacred character and reading is becoming a more natural activity. Unfortunately, the latter process has been interrupted by the economic crisis and the tremendous increase in the cost of paper.

IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING, THERE IS STILL SOLIDARITY

About half of Mexico's population lives in large urban centers, where the consequences of a social organization that offers no real possibilities for a decent life and more humane interactions

are most obvious. Nonetheless, according to Carlos Monsiváis, there is still solidarity in the city, despite the enormous psychological damage implicit to life in such a chaotic and closely-packed environment. "It would seem," he explains, "that life is just like it is in any other big city. But I don't think that's really true; we still haven't reached the degree of indifference, reserve and rejection that marks life in major, Western urban centers. In Mexico City peasant culture and old-time workers' culture still have a certain importance, and we have yet to get to the point of total isolation and rejection of our neighbors; I think we're not there yet. Everyone in the Federal District shares the hardships and lives in a climate of perpetual tension and anxiety, yet people still find time to maintain some minimal forms of communal life, to continue as best they can the classic traditions of family, friendship and *compadrazgo*.* On the one hand, it is a city of 18 million people, representing a completely new phenomenon in the world, yet at the same time people hold on tightly to traditional social forms."

THE EARTHQUAKE AND CITY LIFE

The September 19, 1985 earthquake is perhaps the most important factor in recent times to radically change peoples' behavior in Mexico City. People went out from their houses and helped their neighbors. And we rediscovered each other, all of us who make up part of this city. We had lost sight of the city as a whole; with September 19th, we regained that awareness.

The city is not the same as before; it looks different now. The quakes destroyed a large number of buildings in the downtown area, and the ruins are now another part of the urban landscape. The deaths of so many thousands traumatized us, and we will never be the same again either.

"It is impossible to say what things will be like in the year 2000," says Héctor Manuel Romero. "They calculate that by then there will be some 35 million people living in this already saturated city."

What is clear is that Mexico's major cities will continue to be the centers of political power and wealth in the country; and they will also be its centers of increasing misery and social disintegration. ★

Mercedes López

* relationships established between god-parents; traditionally an important component of Mexican community life.

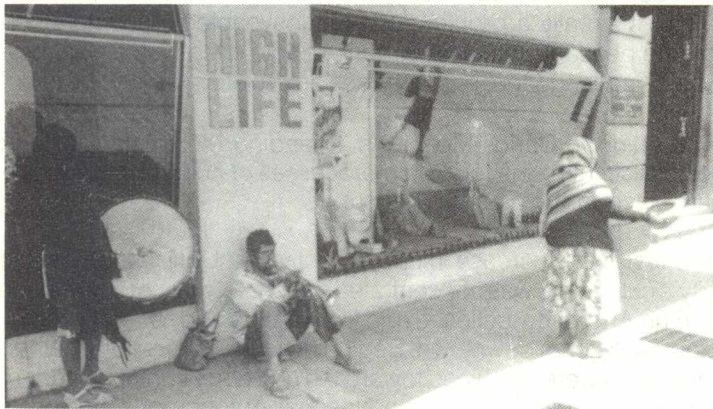


Photo by Sergio Dorantes

New arrivals earn a living in Mexico City.



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