

The history of Mexico City (Part I)

*Luis Ortiz Macedo**

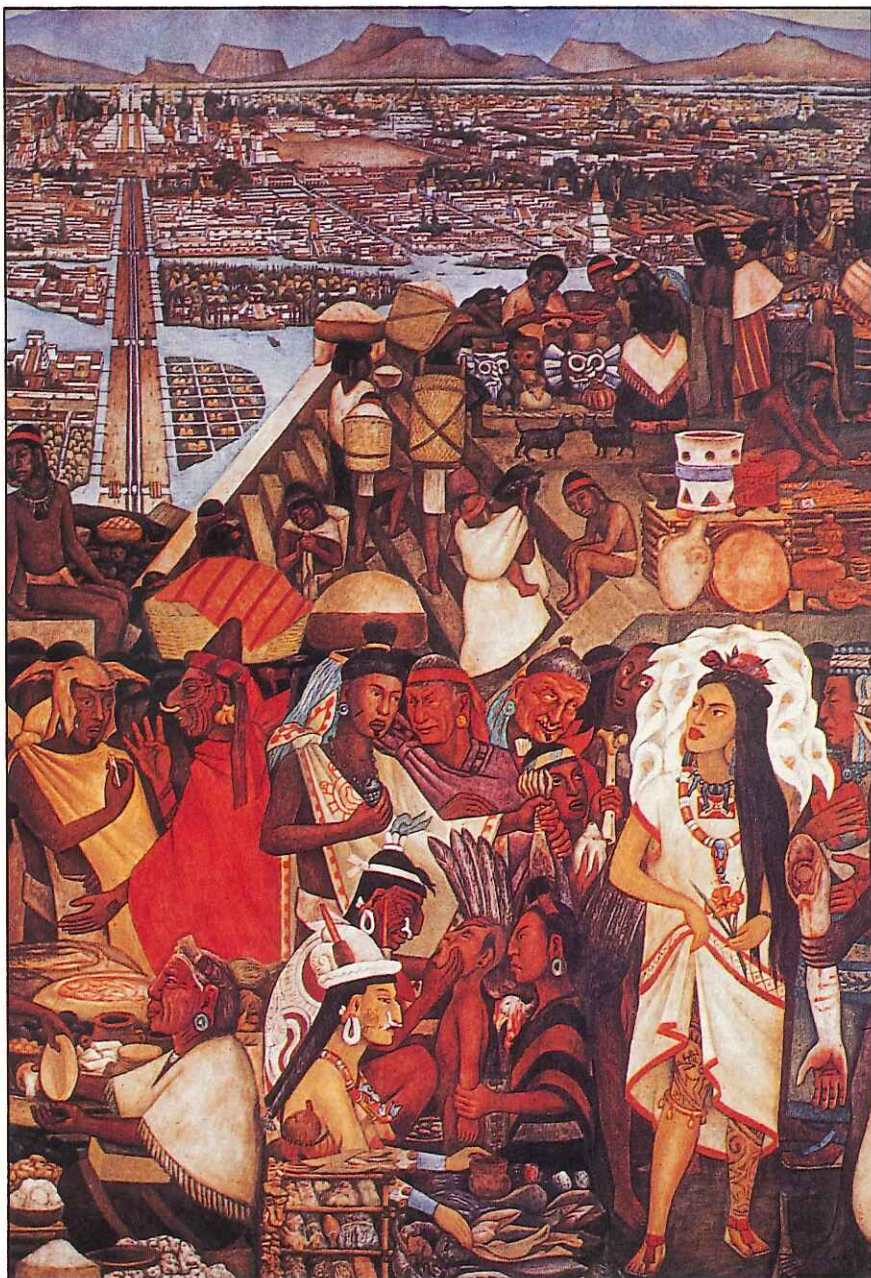
The pre-Hispanic city

Great Tenochtitlan, site and seat of the great empire consolidated on Mexico's central plateau and Central America in the 15th century, was founded three centuries before, in the 12th century. Extending its dominions by conquest, it subjugated civilizations that had flourished much earlier.

It reached its peak under Moctezuma I, and its influence over vast conquered territories soon acquired the characteristics of each tributary civilization.

The site chosen for the great capital was determined by a religious-mythical event. It was built on one of many islands in the complex system of lakes in the Mexico Basin, an enormous natural hollow containing the salt water of Texcoco and the fresh waters of Xochimilco and Chalco.

The dimensions of the island were gradually increased as small areas of water-covered bottom were



Tlatelolco market, with Tenochtitlan and the volcanos in the background. Detail of mural by Diego Rivera.

filled by a method developed in the basin itself. This was known as the *chinampa*, a plot formed by sinking wooden pilings into the bottom and subsequently filling the space within them with earth. As the island grew on *chinampas*, the city spread around a ceremonial complex known as the Great Temple and nearby grounds on which palaces and living quarters for the nobility and priests were built.

During its heyday, Tenochtitlan functioned as a parallel and complement to Tlatelolco, from which it was separated by no more than a broad water-filled canal.

This "sister city" was the site of the great market which so astonished the conquistadors, regulated by its *tecpan* or court of arbitration. Most of its inhabitants were trade and craftsmen. Tlatelolco also possessed a large

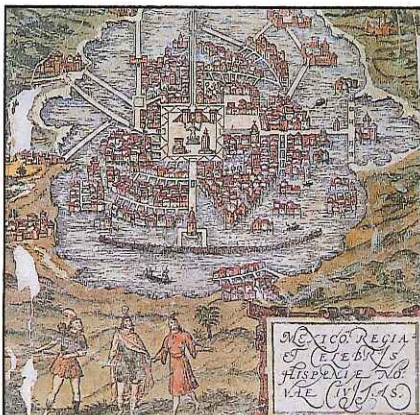
* Professor of Architecture.



Mexico City and the valley in the 19th century.

ceremonial center, discovered thirty years ago in the space now known as the Plaza of the Three Cultures.

Because of its spatial limits as an island, the complex of settlements near the basin must be considered part of the Tenochca metropolis. Some of these were the seats of former independent domains: Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, Xochimilco and Chalco; Tenochca influence reached as far as Texcoco. Hence, the term Greater Tenochtitlan, implying a conurbation, defines it better than the suggestion that it was a single



Plan of Tenochtitlan attributed to Cortés (reproduced from a German atlas).

settlement. Communication between these towns was by means of shallow draft vessels, reinforced by the construction of four long avenues or causeways, connecting the center to Iztapalapa, Los Remedios, Tlacopan, (later called Tacuba), El Tepeyec and Chalco. The urban model from which the metropolis and the neighboring settlements around the basin grew, developed along two basic patterns:

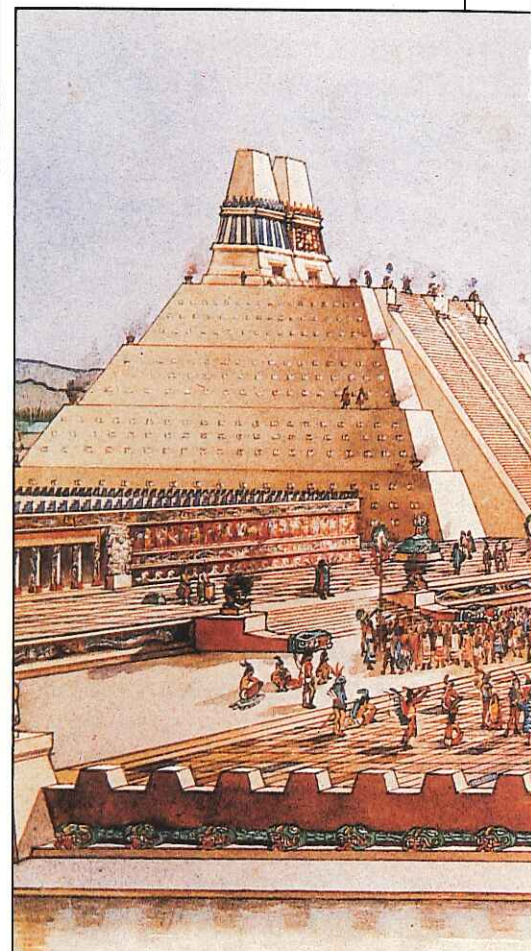
1. Island or lakeside settlements spread by reproducing the *chinampa* model of south bank settlements like Tlahuac, Mixquic and Xochimilco.
2. Settlements on solid ground around the ceremonial centers, adapted to the terrain by means of small arteries laid out in a rectilinear pattern. In residential areas, lots known to the Spaniards as corrals or Indian patios, were disposed along these arteries. They contained the dwellings that housed nuclear families, providing them with the means to carry on such complementary activities as working a small plot of land, or an

orchard and keeping domestic animals.

This particular type of patrilineal family residence, was kept alive in indigenous neighborhoods under three centuries of colonial administration and still survives as a residential unit in settlements around the periphery of the basin.

Areas reserved for religious activities and living quarters for the ruling classes, were carefully marked off from common residential areas which clustered around them in neighborhoods known as *calpullis*. Some of these neighborhoods had their own administrative authorities and even local courts.

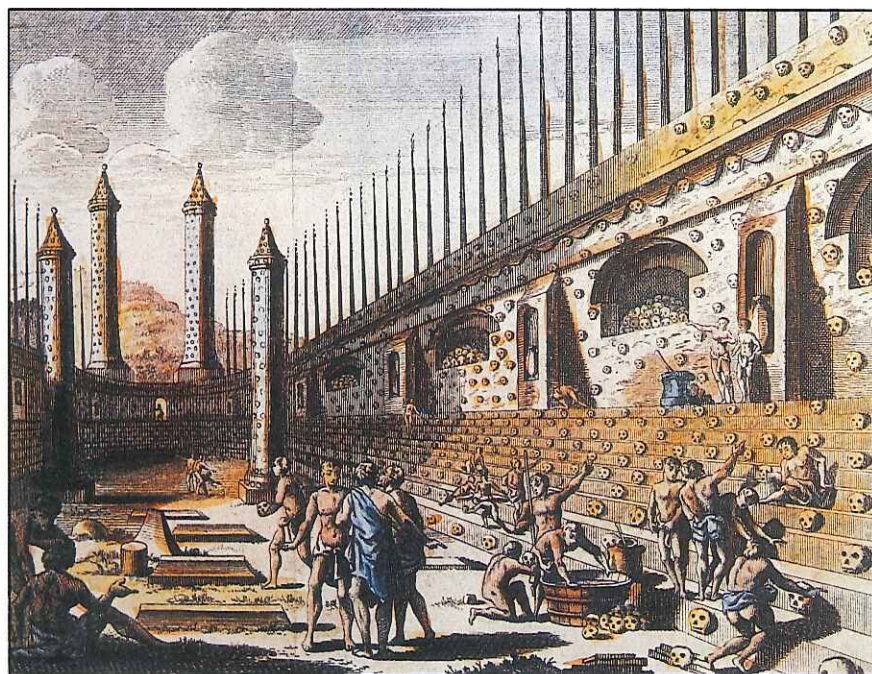
Waterways or canals facilitating waterborne transport were characteristic of island or lakeside settlements. In the metropolis itself, these waterways were



controlled by dykes, dams, earthen walls, and a multiple system of floodgates, during the rainy season.

The constant state of apprehension in which residents of the great capital lived because of seasonal flooding, continued into the early years of the colonial period, until it was finally decided in the 16th century to evacuate the waters by building the gigantic Nochistongo canal. From then on, the level of the lakes began to descend, leaving large areas high and dry, which the Spaniards soon took over and converted into farms and ranches.

The pre-Hispanic city was built on a geometric plan based on rectilinear streets following the cardinal points of the compass from the ceremonial and governmental center. Many of them were waterways, including diagonals that broke the uniformity of the model



Cemetery for victims sacrificed at the great Pyramid (18th century. Dutch engraving).

and even the Spaniards did not fill them in, due to their obvious utility as drainage channels.

The so-called plan of Moctezuma II's city, corresponds in shape and lot size to the one established by Alonso García Bravo by order of Cortés at the end of 1521, to divide land among the conquistadors.

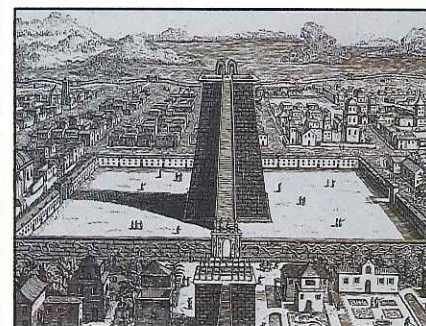
The intent was to fit them into a segregated area, not unlike pre-Hispanic times, with a main square at the center, on the south side of the great pre-Hispanic temples.

Thus, the new metropolis was laid out within the formal confines of the old, preserving the features and the traditional positions of the former *calpullis*, christianizing their names, replacing their temples with Christian chapels, and governing them in a manner similar to the indigenous precedent under the new name of "partialities". However, the peripheral native neighborhoods do not appear in the city plans laid out during the colonial period, which focus entirely on the Spanish city.

The temple as reconstructed by Marquina.

Pre-Hispanic structures, including residential units, were set upon foundations or platforms of packed earth, which raised them above the ground and protected them from frequent floods. This was made necessary by the soft soil at the center of the basin, composed of sediment conveyed by lake currents and heavy rain.

At times, temples and palaces could only be stabilized by means of foundations reinforced with wooden piles and stone embankments of varying height. Even so, larger structures sank under their weight and had to be rebuilt more than once ❖



The Great Temple (18th century engraving).

