

The history of Mexico City (Part II)

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A capital for the Spaniards

Strategic factors led the Spaniards to lay their new metropolis upon foundations made precarious by excessively soft subsoil, the ebb and flow of water, and frequent earthquakes. Many of the misfortunes that have plagued the capital since have been due to this irrational choice of location, accentuated by progressive desiccation of the lakes as well as urban sprawl over the entire expanse of the original basin.

Estimates of Tenochtitlan's population vary between 120,000 and 300,000, making it the world's most densely populated settlement at the beginning of the 16th century. This would refer to the total population of all the conurbated settlements on or around the basin, as the repopulation of the Spanish city brought in only 20,000 dwellers at the end of that century and 140,000 by the end of the viceregal administration.

The layout adopted henceforth was centered on the Plaza Mayor, which harbored much of the city's commercial activity in such markets as the Parián, Volador, Alcaicería and the Portal de Mercaderes. Around it stood the colonial government's administrative buildings, the city council, the management of the Marquisate of Oaxaca and, with pride of place, the Metropolitan Cathedral. To these were added the Metropolitan Chapel, the Seminary and the Cathedral Archbishopric.

Other subordinate centers were opened at the same time in the shape of plazas in front of the original convents and parish churches of Santo Domingo, San Agustín, Santa Veracruz, Santa Catalina, Loreto (the center of the students' quarter), San Miguel and the Rinconada del Conde.

From the 17th century on, the neighborhood of San Juan Moyotlán sheltered an active native market that survived as such until the end of the 19th century and, like Tlatelolco, had its own *tecpan*. The civic centers of the city's remaining divisions were attached to church atriums, also used as cemeteries.

The extremely generous land distribution policy established by the original planners quickly crumbled under the constant pressure of growing demand for building sites. Furthermore, the church and religious orders absorbed so many lots that by the middle of the 18th century they were administering more than half of those not belonging to the city or the Crown. Dwellings offered for rent were classified into two basic categories:

1. Multifamily structures, usually around two or three interconnected patios that provided sleeping space and large



The Main Square, with 1238 personages, painted by Villalpando in 1695.

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Moorish-Renaissance fresco,
Jesus Hospital.

areas for communal living, including cooking and washing, activities carried on collectively and strictly segregated. Only Spaniards were allowed rooms facing the street, inner quarters were left to creole, mestizo, mulatto and indigenous families, the lower their social status, the farther they lived from the street.



Jesus Hospital (16th century).

This apparent segregation was mainly strategic, guaranteeing protection of main arteries in case of revolt by native Mexicans or black slaves.

- The second category included dwellings and shops destined for craftsmen and merchants, in outbuildings known as *cup and plate* from the fact that the living space was on a loft over the shop



Jesus Hospital.

floor at street level. Structures of this sort were built on most property inherited by primogeniture, in numerous institutional buildings, and even in palaces of the nobility, in order to earn additional revenue.

The survival of the open air pre-Hispanic *tianguis* market, soon overflowed the structures designed to contain such trade. The municipalities of New Spain fought constantly to curb burgeoning street vending on pavements and in city squares, a

residences of heirs and noble families, whose architectural style ultimately imposed the increasingly homogeneous and grandiose formal traits that became the characteristic urban image of the metropolis. Separate mention must be made of the often immense convent and monastery complexes that spread over several blocks, enclosing an alternative urban model to the city's, closer to the Islamic than to the Renaissance tradition imposed upon the metropolis since the Conquest.



17th Century folding screen.

problem that has not been eliminated to this day.

Apart from some growth over time, the viceregal metropolis brought about few changes in urban structure, the original settlement managing to accommodate whatever social requirements arose.

Religious buildings stood out like urban milestones by virtue of their towers and high peaked roofs, and also with vaults and cupolas, indicating the key points around which city life developed.

Next in importance were government, educational and welfare buildings, and the sumptuous

During the administrations of viceroys Croix, Bucareli and above all Revillagigedo, municipal services improved considerably. Pavements and drains were renewed; water flow was regulated by channeling it through vaulted conduits; night lighting was installed, and the original street layout was enforced.

Most of the city's early structures crumbled or were engulfed in the mud of the 17th century's great floods (the one in 1629 lasted 3 years), causing the city to be almost entirely rebuilt. By the next century this had given the city the elegance and grandeur so admired by travelers who have described it

since the voyages of Alexander von Humboldt, until one of them called it the "City of Palaces".

The changes made by Ignacio Castera, the city's master builder during the Count of Revillagigedo's tenure, coincided with the advent of neoclassical and the end of baroque style, and began to change the face of the city. Neoclassical models were first executed by builders schooled at the brand new San Carlos Academy of Noble Arts of New Spain, and began

recently drawn Paseo de Bucareli, a broad avenue lined with trees and embellished by three roundabouts with monumental fountains.

Similar expansion ensued in the conurbated settlements of the basin and its surroundings, which by then were surrounded by fertile agricultural land and pastures that supplied the city's foodstuffs.

Crafts and preindustrial trades multiplied under the administrative reforms imposed by Charles III



Façade and convent doors, Franciscan convent of Xochimilco (16th century).

to appear in the remaining cities of the vast viceregal domain as well.

New architectural styles and methods of construction were generously contributed by the many academics and military engineers who came to Mexico.

Many of the most outstanding buildings bequeathed by the Colonial period were erected at this time. The Royal Court of Mines, built by Manuel Tolsá; the Loreto church, built by architect José Paz, based on a Tolsá project, and the Royal Tobacco Factory, the work of Manuel Constanzo, are some examples.

During this period, the city began to expand westward, around the

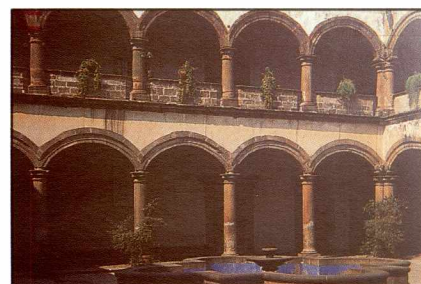
through his agents sent to accelerate the process.

In spite of the economic and political centralism stemming from the viceregal administration, provincial capitals and tribunal seats, mining towns, ports, and commercial centers benefitted from the great concentrations of capital that developed toward the close of the 18th century.

Metropolitan influence did not attempt to impose urban models or implant styles in the remaining towns, so that each town in New Spain developed a strong personality and growing autonomy in the decisions of its municipal council.



St. Jerome church (17th century).



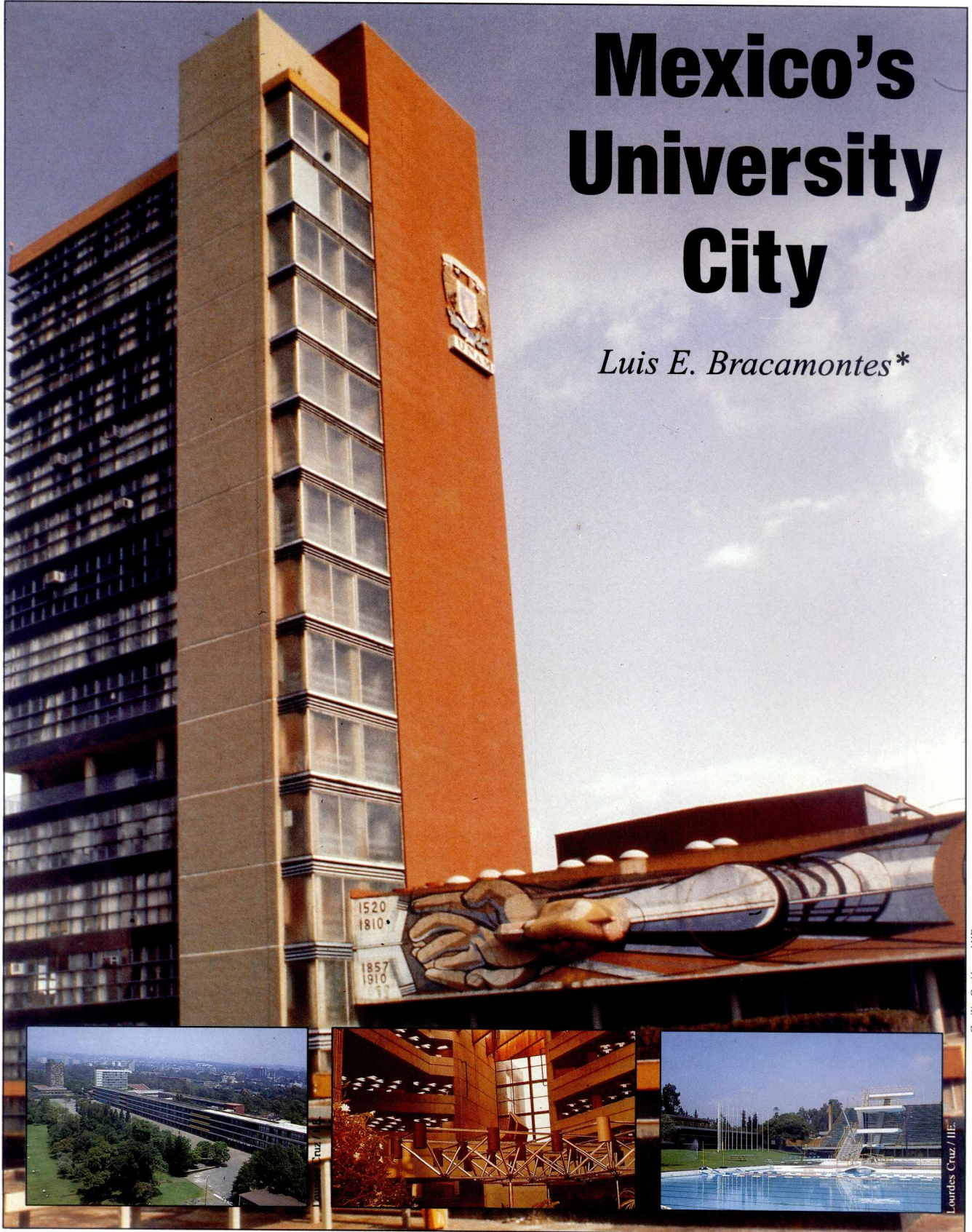
Cloister of the Franciscan convent of Xochimilco.



Cloister of the Augustinian convent of Culhuacán (16th century).

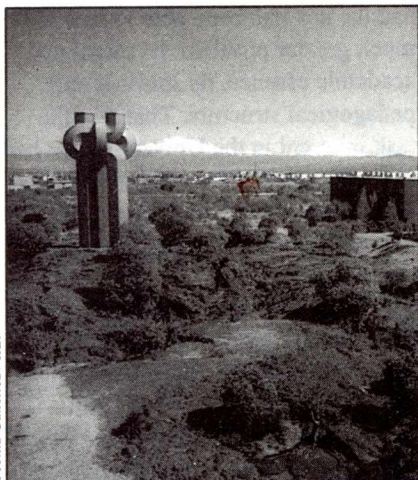
Mexico's University City

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University City with volcanoes in the background.

Mexico's University City (CU) was inaugurated forty years ago, in November 1952.

Some historical determinism may be said to have played a part in its location. The foundations of the newest "City of Learning" were laid on the site where the continent's most ancient civilization had flourished, in the incomparable landscape of the Pedregal de San Angel where the remains of "Pedregal Man" were found under rivers of petrified lava.

The University City campus was built on a 7,300,000 square meter tract in the southern part of Mexico's capital. Its axis coincides exactly with the continent's, the Pan-American Highway, and its center is the frontier between two races and two cultures, a crossroad and synthesis of peoples.

The uniqueness of the landscape, its wide-open spaces, its climate and multiple communications



Rectory Tower.

Panoramic view of the University City (below left).

National library (below center).

Olimpic swimming pool (below right).

* Construction Manager, University City (1950-1955).

opportunities all come together to create what Alfonso X, the Wise, recorded in the 13th century with respect to the University of Salamanca, "the villa where the university shall be established should enjoy clean air and handsome walks, so that the teachers who expound and the students who learn may live a healthy life, relaxing and enjoying themselves in the afternoon when they rise weary from their endeavors."

Both Mexican and foreign critics and commentators praised the coordination, quality, and low cost at which the first stage of the campus was built (1950-1952); they all agreed that a record had been set in this type of effort.

The University City's construction was approached as a problem of integral planning on an appropriate scale, starting from such basics as physical, human, financial and politico-administrative factors. The goal was to build a real city with all the characteristics and problems of an urban complex enclosing an agglomeration of human beings.

Mexico's University City was not just a change of locale, but a genuine structural transformation of physical, social, pedagogical, and moral proportions. A transformation capable of furthering the integration of university life, of an authentic community of professors and students that, as it combined the humanism of classical education with the dynamic scientific knowledge of our age, would influence not only future university generations, but the country's destiny as well.

A distinguished nucleus of Mexican scientists, technicians, and specialists worked in close coordination with the best assortment of building contractors, all graduates of the National University, who had presented winning bids for their contracts. More than 140 engineers, architects, and specialists in different areas, took part in this great enterprise.

Close to 10,000 laborers worked day and night, Sundays and holidays for 28 months. All were imbued with a spirit of noble emulation and healthy competition. CU would not have become a reality had it depended only on technology. Its construction was powered by faith and creative mystique that overcame all obstacles and difficulties.

The new University City campus organization was established on April 1, 1950, at a time that was far from promising. There was actually no definitive overall project. Not even in the last two years previous had the architects in charge of partial projects reached the point where the construction of buildings could begin. The only exception was the group assigned to the Science Faculty and Institutes.

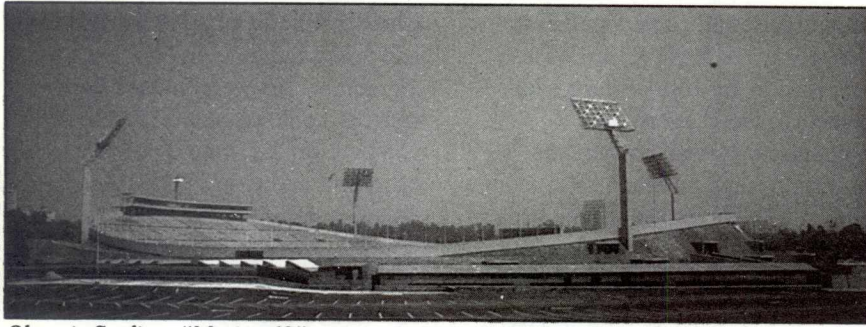
The University City was a small organization in terms of the number of its members. The success of its labors stemmed from planning, efficient distribution of functions, and individual and overall dedication.

The symbolic beginning of construction on the first edifice took place on June 5, 1950. Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, then Secretary of the Interior, represented President Miguel Alemán, who was away from Mexico City at the time. Ruiz Cortines stated that the event was symbolic of the best expression of Mexico's will to demonstrate combined effort by people and government, both lovers of culture, and he underlined that Mexican university graduates were part of the people.

The event held special emotional importance, because an old dream that had seemed unattainable was becoming reality.

From that day on, the doors of the University's new home were practically open. The move to its new abode would leave a Colonial past and two stages of its life behind: its founding in 1910 and its autonomy in 1929.

Cecilia Gutiérrez / IIE.



Olympic Stadium "Mexico 68".

Bordering on the San Angel residential area to the north and the Cuicuilco archaeological zone to the south, Mexico's University City was built on both sides of the city's longest avenue, Avenida de los Insurgentes.

The academic and administrative areas are located east of the avenue, along with sports facilities. The great botanical garden, including both Mexican and foreign plants donated to the University, and the spectator sports installations are located on the west side of the avenue.

The first stage was built on approximately two million square meters. It was planned to provide classrooms for 30,000 students. In 1950, the National University of Mexico enrolled 8,500 undergraduates. The large area that remained at the end of the first stage was reserved for further growth. Today it is populated by a total of 87,415 undergraduate and graduate students.

CU represented a change of attitude in Mexico's way of doing things. It was striking not only architecturally but in the novelty of its structural design. In order to stay within a budget far below the necessary for conventional concrete construction, the stadium was built of earthworks consolidated and then covered with the lava rock that abounds in the area. Lava rock was used wherever it was advisable and logical. New materials were manufactured to replace imported ones, and they later became export products.

Mention must be made of the exterior murals that cover large surfaces, and the painted sculpture on the stadium façade (unfinished since the death of its creator), and other sculptures. The walls of the Main Library were decorated with multi-colored stones, specially sent from diverse parts of the country, which helped to create a harmonious whole.

That November 20, anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, was the date chosen to inaugurate the campus was not accidental. The idea of a new university, alive in this setting, was both product and legacy of the Revolution, without which it would never have taken shape.

A revolution is not only an armed movement to subvert and transform a given political and economic order. It is, above all, a permanent longing for human creativity, for peace and justice, animated by an incomparable and eternal mystical force.

Thus, Mexico's political, industrial, and spiritual revolutions came together to round out their symbolic significance, to make their highest ideals a reality, and to shed inextinguishable light on and give voice to their initial aspirations.

November 20, 1950, marked the beginning of a new cultural calendar. It also created the need for a new life, in thought, purpose, action and conduct. Because having solved one of the university's fundamental problems—that of its physical space—would have solved nothing

had we not also been able to face a much greater problem: its moral and academic essence, its spiritual and pedagogical structure. That was the task inherent in the University that had to be fulfilled so that it would always be an enclosure of civilization and culture upon which a better Mexico could be built.

With lofty spirit and great generosity, President Ruiz Cortines furthered this great project, the pride of all Mexicans, bastion of Latin culture and wonder of visitors. That is why, like Miguel Alemán before him, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines deserves Mexico's and particularly her university students' and graduates' unending acknowledgment and gratitude, for quietly continuing the overall plan and program for the University City by investing the large sums necessary to do so.

The National University began operations on its new University City campus for the 1954 school year. Surely Mexico has never made such a fruitful, beneficial and lasting investment. It will maintain scholarly tradition and infuse Mexico's young with those elements of faith, intelligence, and culture that have so far endured.

Forty years after the University City's inauguration, I offer my memories and acknowledgements to those who, on April 1, 1950, made that new organization possible: Carlos Novoa, President; Carlos Lazo, General Manager, creator and director of the new organization; Gustavo García Travesi, Planning and Investment Manager; Almiro P. de Moratinos, Public Relations Manager; Enrique del Moral, in the Master Project, and many others who, like them, are no longer with us, and were dear friends and colleagues all. University rectors Luis Garrido and Nabor Carrillo, and presidents of Mexico Miguel Alemán and Adolfo Ruiz Cortines earned an unforgettable place all their own **X**