

# Mexico City: growth and development

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**B**y the time of the fifth millennium B.C. the Valley of Mexico had become an area of stable settlements where farmers cultivated corn, chiles, squash, avocados and beans. Development continued slowly, under these conditions, until the year 1,000 B.C.; the *altiplano* (highlands) began to feel the influence of the Olmec "mother culture," originating along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. The first influences arose in what is now Tlatilco, where the oldest archeological remnants are to be found. At the same time, Cuicuilco flourished to the southeast of the Valley of Mexico.

Teotihuacan was founded just a few miles from the Anáhuac Valley, becoming the first great city in all of Mesoamerica—we understand Mesoamerica to be the area from the northern center of Mexico, in the state of Zacatecas, to Honduras and Nicaragua in Central America.

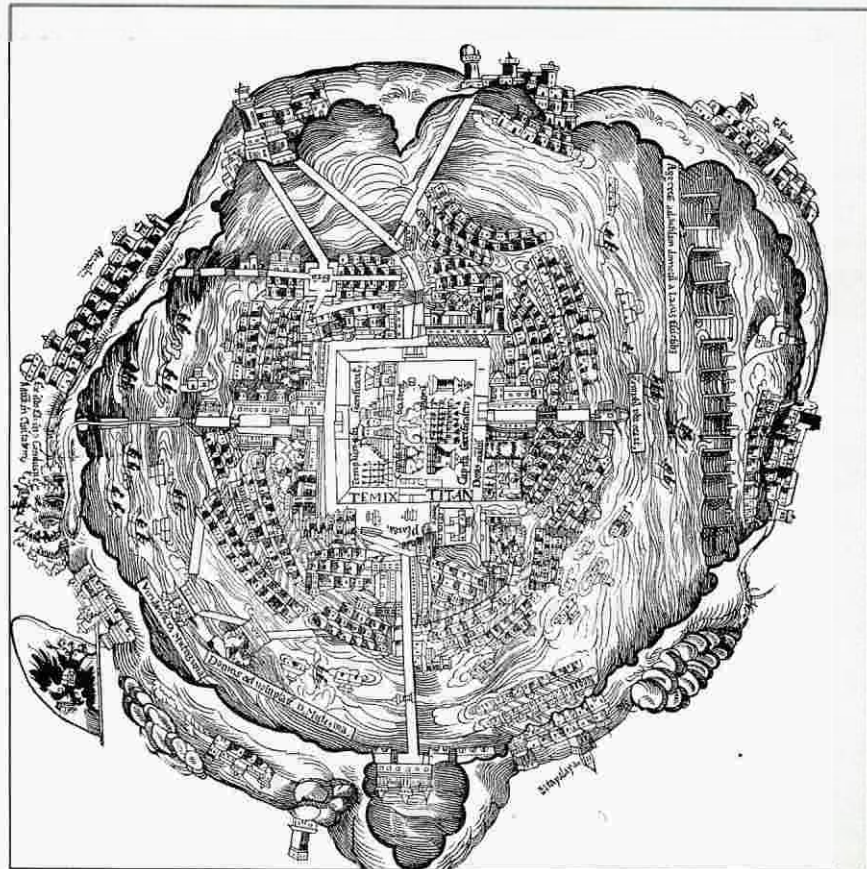
The great Tenochtitlan—today Mexico City—served as headquarters for the greatest kingdom, consolidating itself in the 15th century A.D. throughout the vast territories of the *altiplano*.

The location of the great capital was due to a mythical-religious

occurrence which motivated settlement on the small islands within the Valley of Mexico's system of lakes. This enormous natural basin contained the salt water of Texcoco lake as well as the fresh waters of Xochimilco and Chalco lakes. According to legend, on one of the

islands the leader of the Mexicas (Aztecs) found an eagle perched on a cactus plant devouring a serpent, and that is what led to the foundation of this great city.

The island gradually grew in size due to the deliberate drying out of several small adjoining surfaces. This



Map published by Pierre Bertius, ca. 1620, derived from the map attributed to Hernán Cortés.

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was the result of an invention called *chinampas* —plots built on a pile of wood filled with earth. This technique arose in the Valley of Mexico and can still be seen in Xochimilco and Chalco.

The huge, open religious capital had no evident defenses, although its island location allowed for visual oversight of all access points. One must also take into account the support provided by the city's allies and tributaries along the banks of the lake.

Tenochtitlan was founded in 1325. Developing together with the capital was Tlatelolco, founded around the year 1337 and home to the huge provisions market as well as great schools for warriors and nobles. In addition, the lakeside cities of Azcapotzalco, Tlacopan, Xochimilco, Chalco and Texcoco achieved great splendor.

The first four of these settlements are now included within the metropolitan area of Mexico City. This provides us with an idea of how big Lake Texcoco was in the 16th century.

Island towns such as Tláhuac, Mixquiq and Xochimilco followed the same pattern as Tenochtitlan. They grew together with the parceling out of *chinampas* (averaging 1640 square feet each), which provided the framework for the establishment of "Indian patios" —family groups which made it possible to carry out complementary activities such as farming the plots and orchards as raising domestic animals.

The areas set aside for religious activities and for housing the upper classes (both the clergy and the military) were clearly delimited from the areas for commoners, who congregated in neighborhoods called *calpulis*. The *calpulis* were linked by means of a system of canals and irrigation channels navigated by canoe. This provided the



Map sent to Charles V by Hernán Cortés.

interconnections for the social life of the metropolis.

At the time of the Conquest, according to the scholar González Aparicio, the city had a basically rectangular shape and measured approximately two miles wide, from east to west, and two and a half miles long. Thus, the total area covered was around 5 square miles.

After the arrival of Hernán Cortés, many maps were made during the era of the Conquest. The most important are "Cortés' Map" and the "Map of Santa Cruz." The first was published around 1524, together with the Conquistador's *Cartas de relación* (Narrative

Letters). The second, clearly made by the Indians themselves, is preserved at the University of Upsala, Sweden.

After the Conquest, Alonso García Bravo had the task of reconstructing the city. His design was based on the layout of the Aztec capital. Thus, the old access roads were preserved: Tenayuca (today the Vallejo causeway), Tlacopan (presently the Mexico-Tacuba road), Iztapalapa (today Tlalpan avenue), and Tepeyac (now called Misterios road).

The four great Indian neighborhoods were also preserved, and now bear both their Christianized names from the Colonial period,

together with their old Nahuatl or Mexica names: Santa María Tlaquechiucan (today Santa María la Redonda); San Juan Moyotla in the southwest; San Sebastián Atzacualco in the northeast and Santiago Teopan in the southeast. When this design was begun, Tlatelolco, the equivalent of a fifth neighborhood, already formed part of the city.

According to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún the Mexica ceremonial center had 78 important buildings. It was here that the most important public edifices were built during the Colonial period and where a Renaissance plaza was constructed, surrounded by buildings on its four sides.

The most important ruins from Tenochtitlan's ceremonial center are found in the plaza which was discovered east of the Cathedral and Metropolitan Sanctuary and underneath both buildings, causing serious structural problems in the Cathedral.

For their participation in the conquest of land and subjects for the

Crown, the Spaniards were given concessions of Indians, who were forced to pay the conquistadors tribute in labor as well as in kind. Indians played a key role in the construction of the great Spanish cities, built by the Indians' indefatigable hands as they worked as bricklayers, stonemasons and carpenters, as well as in the transportation of construction materials.

The most important representatives of the Crown were the viceroy and the *audiencias* (High Court). Below these were the *cabildos* (councils), which in general terms—depending on the importance of the given population area—were made up of government aldermen and “ordinary mayors” charged with administering justice. All these officials were subordinate to the Chief Mayor.

Large commercial and administrative centers developed in conjunction with the foundation of Mexico City, such as Oaxaca, Puebla, Guadalajara, Atlixco and Valladolid (now Michoacán). Around 1574 there

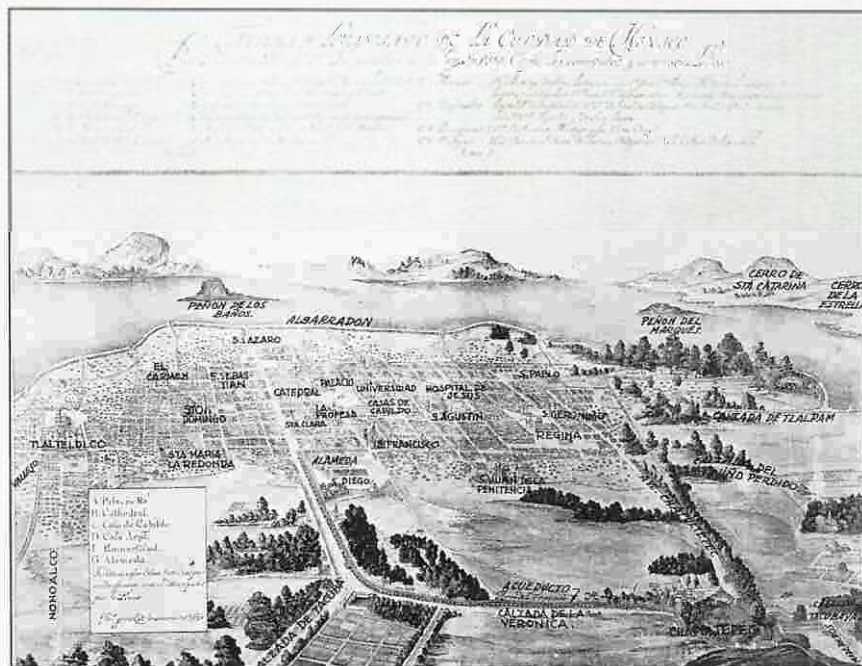
were already thirty of these cities. Other centers were built in Indian towns, such as Tlaxcala, Cholula, Huejotzingo and Texcoco.

By the 16th century the urban structure of the island had been divided into three parts: in the north was the Indian community of Santiago Tlatelolco, to the south was another Indian community, San Juan Tenochtitlan, while the central area was occupied by the Spaniards. This central urban area is clearly outlined by the streets of San Juan de Letrán (now Lázaro Cardenas) to the west, Santísima to the east, Colombia on the northern side and Izazaga to the south.

In accordance with the “state of alert” in effect during the first years after the Conquest, Hernán Cortés permitted the conquistadors to build their homes as if they were fortresses, with walls and towers featuring many small windows. Cortés installed four towers in his home, while his great captain Sandoval built but two, doubtless so as to denote that he had less status than his superior. In 1524 the Hospital of Jesus was founded, and it is there that the remains of Hernán Cortés are to be found today.

Four large religious convents—San Francisco, Santo Domingo, La Merced and San Agustín—already occupied an important place in the city's layout. The first three were modifications of the same rectangular design, occupying several blocks. Inside the Indian neighborhoods the *cihuacalli* was preserved—a Roman-style “women's house.” The aqueducts of Tlaxpan were preserved and reconstructed, using water from Santa Fe, Cuajimalpa and Chapultepec.

Convents, while originally prohibited, were eventually built—mainly during the 17th century—



Manuel Toussaint's interpretation of the map drawn by Juan Gómez de Transmonte around 1628.

and were small cities in themselves. Buildings such as hospitals, the Viceregal Palace, the Cabildo halls and the University made up the rest of the city's great edifices.

The geological structure of the valley's basin, constant rain and the lack of control over accumulated water brought about several floods, despite the large number of containment works based on stone dams built during the reign of Ahuizótl and Nezahualcóyotl. A great flood, beginning in 1629 and lasting three years, caused the cement to soften in most buildings, leaving them in total ruin; this is the reason for the city's reconstruction in the 17th century.

One year before the flood, Juan Gómez de Transmonte drew a beautiful perspective of the city.

Lithographed centuries later in Florence, it gives us a picture of the development of the city, which had spread to the east and west. The most important buildings represented in this perspective are: 18 religious convents, 14 other religious buildings, 8 hospitals, 4 colleges and parish churches, the Cathedral (still under construction), the Royal Palace and the Cabildo hall. One can also see the aqueduct which reached the fountain of Tlaxpana near the Alameda, bringing spring water from Chapultepec. On the east side, the ancient dam built by Ahuizótl and later reconstructed by Luis de Velasco after the flood of 1555 can also be seen.

Despite periodic great plagues, large-scale immigration and

population growth caused land to be distributed in ever smaller plots. This did not hinder the rich from building majestic homes as well as buildings for rent, leading to construction along such streets and plazas as Mayor, Volador, Tlatelolco, Regina, Santo Domingo, San Juan and Concepción. By the 18th century there were 78 such areas.

Two types of housing units were characteristic of the 18th century. The first, called a *vecindad*, was made up of two or three patios joined in linear fashion, providing ample sleeping spaces. This type of housing arrangement promoted communal life through the carrying out of collective activities, such as preparing food and washing laundry. Following a rigid class criterion, the front dwellings were reserved for Spanish colonists, while the interior rooms were inhabited by *criollo*, *mestizo*,<sup>1</sup> Indian or mulatto families, in accordance with their social position.

The second type was made up of artisan and commercial dwellings and workshops, organized under the "cup and plate" plan—that is, a workshop on the bottom floor and living quarters for the artisan or shopkeeper on the upper level. In addition to artisan and manufacturing activity, commerce and mining developed as the most productive fields during the Colonial period.

Mexico City's large, majestic homes were built during the 18th century. Among them are: Los Azulejos (or the house of the Condes del Valle de Orizaba) on Madero street; on the same street, the Palace of Iturbide (or of the Marqueses del Jaral de Berrio); on Isabel la Católica avenue, the Palace of the Condes de San Mateo Valparaíso; on Pino Suárez, the Palace of the Condes de Santiago



Map by Diego García Conde, ca. 1793.

<sup>1</sup> *Criollos* were "pure" Spaniards born in the colonies (as distinguished from *peninsulares*, who were colonists born in Spain). *Mestizos* means people of mixed racial ancestry. (Editor's note.)

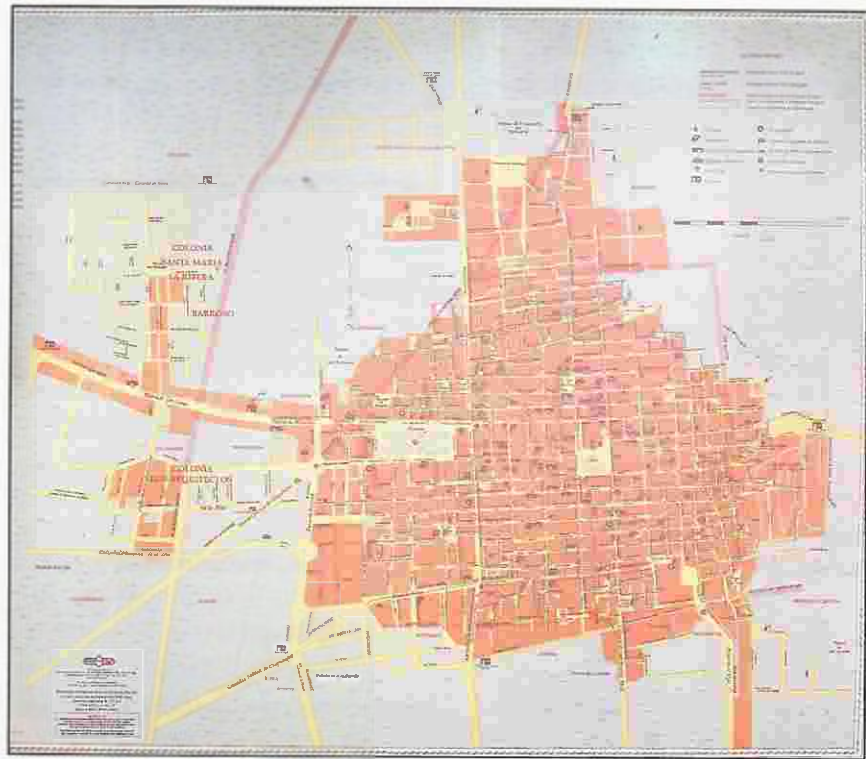
de Calimaya —and many other palaces which give grandeur to our city, which Alexander von Humboldt baptized the “City of Palaces.”

18th-century nobles’ homes were traditionally two-story buildings; in some cases there was a third level with towers. As in the case of the Palace of Iturbide, these were later converted into loggias. The first floor usually had two patios —the main patio and the service patio— designed for general use, as well as garages, sheds, barns for the animals and streetside annexes along the lines of the aforementioned “cup and plate” system. The mezzanine, which was part of the second floor, held offices, guest-rooms and service areas.

The second floor had two main areas: the social and the private or family area. The social area included the “Salon of the Dais” (a parlor featuring portraits of the viceroy and various members of the royal family). Homes whose owners boasted Castilian titles of nobility included the “Salon of the Docel.” This salon was furnished with a raised throne and a portrait of the ruling monarch, whom the family hoped someday to receive in their home. Another area was called the “Cabinet,” a salon filled with collections and scientific objects used to demonstrate culture and display family members’ travel mementoes.

These noble homes also had a chapel as well as a library, music and game rooms on the second floor. The private area contained bed-chambers and antechambers —hallways to the bed-chambers. The service rooms, servants’ quarters and kitchens were located in the second-floor patio area. The houses were decorated with applied Mexican artwork, folding screens of Chinese lacquer and Japanese inlays, walnut-wood beds, Chinese marble and silk, Egyptian and Turkish rugs.

By the end of the century the urban area covered about 2,658 acres, compared to 1,633 acres in the 17th



Reconstruction of the map of Mexico City around 1869.

century. In 1786 the Academy of San Carlos was founded (its original name was the Academy of Noble Arts of San Carlos and New Spain), featuring both civilian and military teachers who had settled in Mexico. This led to such works as the Royal Tribunal of Mines, built by Manuel Tolsá; the Church of Loreto, by the same architect; the Royal Tobacco Factory (now the Ciudadela), by Manuel Constanzó, and other great urban works like the famous Paseo de Bucareli.

The urban areas as they were in 1793 can be seen clearly on the map produced by Diego Garcia Conde, with 897 streets and alleys, 78 plazas, small squares and taverns, the Cathedral, 14 parish churches, 41 convents and 3 retreats, 10 colleges, 7 hospitals and a poorhouse, as well as the Royal Factory of Cigars and Cigarettes.

Starting in 1762 public lighting was provided by property owners, who had to install lanterns in front of their homes. By 1790, when the clergy possessed more than 40

percent of Mexico’s urban real estate, road-paving and cleaning began. Toward the end of the century the Indians were expelled once again from the urban center for non-payment of taxes, thereby accentuating social differences and discontent.

In the 19th century, due to turbulent political, economic and social changes, Academy architects were unable to carry out many projects. However, during the French intervention the city was modernized and key buildings such as the National Palace and Chapultepec Castle were remodeled. In the Juárez era Church property was secularized; many ecclesiastical edifices were demolished or divided and converted into public buildings such as libraries, hospitals and *vecindades*.

During the presidency of Lerdo de Tejada, the capital was influenced by a powerful impulse for innovative change. The haciendas located

on the outskirts of the urban area began to be divided up, creating such neighborhoods as Guerrero, Santa María la Ribera, Juárez and San Miguel Chapultepec in the Tacubaya area.

The economic prosperity generated during the 30-year government of Porfirio Díaz led the government to create buildings which represented modernity and the beginning of a new epoch. The Ayuntamiento (municipal government) redivided the city into 12 municipalities, introduced electrical power, trams, telegraph, telephone, water supply and drainage systems. A large drainage channel was also constructed.

In 1910, as part of the celebration of 100 years of independence, huge public works like the Palace of Fine Arts, Central Post Office, Palace of Communications and the Geologic Institute were built. Mexico City's wealthy families moved from the city center to the Juárez neighborhood. Most streets and avenues in the city center and wealthy neighborhoods were paved, and public roads in general were improved. The Paseo de la Reforma was laid out in the style of the Champs Elysées in Paris, with monuments to Cuauhtémoc and Columbus, as well as the Column of Independence. Around this same time large commercial stores were built, like the Casa Boker, Puerto de Veracruz and Palacio de Hierro.

At this time the city's population reached 470,000 inhabitants, occupying an area of about 20 square miles. By 1920 the city had 740,000 inhabitants, who began to move toward the southwest, creating the Guadalupe Inn, San Angel Inn and La Florida neighborhoods. Industrial and working-class neighborhoods — such as today's Industrial Vallejo, Lindavista, Rastro and Michoacán areas — were established in the north

of the city. In December of 1918, the "Organic Law of Federal Districts and Territories" was approved, creating the Department of the Federal District.

Twelve years later the city had 1,500,000 inhabitants, distributed in four main *delegaciones* (administrative regions) — Cuauhtémoc, Venustiano Carranza, Benito Juárez and Miguel Hidalgo — occupying approximately 50 square miles, with an average population density of 129 people per hectare.<sup>2</sup> By 1948 1,595,000 people lived in the Federal District, whose urban area covered almost 72 square miles. In 1950 the number had grown to 3,283,000, of whom 93 percent were part of the Federal District and 7 percent part of the adjoining municipalities in the state of Mexico — Naucalpan and Tlalnepantla. The urban population in 1960 occupied nearly 250 square miles and about 410 square miles in 1970, with a density of 135 people per hectare. This rose to 167 per hectare when the population of the Mexico City metropolitan zone reached 7,500,000 inhabitants. The metropolitan transport system — the "metro" — was established around this time.

Although it was prohibited, people settled to the east, in the flood zone of the former Lake Texcoco. Between 1974 and 1976 these settlements were regulated, and in 1980 they became Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. Mexico City's population grew from 14,455,000 in 1980 to 19,000,000 in 1988.

The National Population Institute estimates that programs designed to slow the growth rate may lower the rate from the 1.87 percent reached during the 1990s to 1.67 percent by

the year 2000. It is estimated that the metropolitan area's population will reach 25 million by the year 2000, and 30 million by the year 2010.

In 1980, the agency which carries out the "census" of Mexico City's historical legacy promulgated a decree outlining an area with two subdivisions: perimeter "A," the Historic Center, which covers the zone occupied by the pre-Hispanic city and the areas it occupied through its expansion during the Colonial era, up to the War of Independence; and perimeter "B," which covers the areas into which the city expanded, up to the end of the 19th century.

Today the population of the Mexican Republic is almost 93 million. The Federal District is home to 11.56 percent of that total, while the state of Mexico has 15.54 percent. If we add together the figures for these areas — many of which are adjoining and overlapping — we observe that one fourth of the country's population is concentrated in the metropolitan area of Mexico City and a number of municipalities in the state of Mexico.

The growth rate of the Federal District is the country's lowest, at 0.19 percent, while states like Quintana Roo and Baja California have rates of 6.26 percent and 3.99 percent respectively. Thus, action must be taken to bring about immediate decentralization, with the aim of correcting Mexico's unequal population distribution. It is only through such measures that we can minimize disorderly growth, which, judging by the dimensions of the problem, has reached uncontrollable levels in the large cities, inevitably bringing social and economic damage, as well as risk that we may lose such national treasures as our unparalleled Historic Center, the "City of Palaces." ❧

<sup>2</sup> A hectare is approximately equal to 2.5 acres. (Editor's note.)