

Mexico City Down through Time... AN INFINITE MAP

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A city that fades little by little from the collective memory reemerges where nostalgia, curiosity, and discovery converge. Created in February 2011, *La ciudad de México en el tiempo* (Mexico City Down Through Time...) is a Facebook page, conceived by a team of three Mexicans passionate about the city, who have managed to revive the memory of a sector of its inhabitants.¹ A number of albums show black-and-white and color photographs of the city, most from the twentieth century: its transportation, panoramic views of places, people, and important events.

The Villasana-Torres Archive is the main source for its images, although the site also uses material from other public archives and private collections. Carlos Villasana, one of the page's collectors and coordinators, says that his love for photography began when he was very small, when his father, Carlos Villasana Cedillo, who promoted the televised middle-school project, used to bring him postcards from the places he visited for work. The Villasana-Torres collection is made up of about 80 000 images, among them photographs, postcards, publications, and peculiar magazines.

What is important about a collection is not only preserving it, but sharing it. That is why Carlos Villasana, Juan Carlos Briones, and Rodrigo Hidalgo took on the task of creating this page. Currently, it has 170 000 "likes," and the number is increasing by the minute. The scope of the social networks is surprising and limitless: in a single day, a photograph can be seen by 40 000 people. As Villasana says, "It would be difficult for that number of people to visit a museum in a single day."

"The images show spaces that no longer exist in the city, and even people who have disappeared, like the neighborhood gendarme or the man who would lead a bear through the



▲ La Parisiense pastry shop.

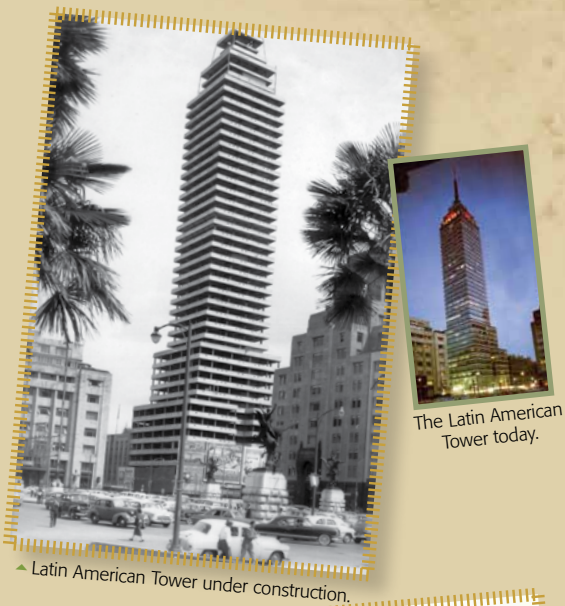


▲ Metropolitan cathedral.



▲ Guardiola Annex of the La Nacional, Seguros Latinoamérica building.

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The Latin American Tower today.

▲ Latin American Tower under construction.



▲ Central Alameda Park.

The photographs show the city that existed before globalization. A city where movie theaters were enormous, each with its own name, like the Ópera, the Majestic, the Roxy. Many were demolished or abandoned to make way for the multiplexes of today.



▲ The Encanto Cinema.

streets. Today, there are others that we might not like much. These are transformations that the city has gone through,” he reflects. Nostalgia for these losses is one of the driving forces that make the page work:

In the new millennium, hopes are extinguished or weakened, and the data about demolition spreads. We inhabit a description of cities characterized by fear and sensations of being besieged, signaled by the exhaustion of basic resources and the constant deterioration of the quality of life. We move among the instantaneous ruins of modernity and, due to the lack of an inventory, we make memories the institutions of discoveries and possessions.²

The photographs show the city that existed before that modernity, before globalization. A city where movie theaters were enormous, each with its own name, like the Ópera, the México, the Majestic, the Roxy, the Regis, the Hipódromo, the Centenario, and the Rivoli. It is said that the Rivoli seated 1950 people, complete with side boxes and a balcony. These cinemas had outstanding architecture from the period when they were built, like the elegant Ópera’s art deco style, although later it was abandoned and became an almost phantasmagorical ruin. Most of these movie houses, inaugurated in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s still stood in the 1960s and 1970s. Later, many were demolished or abandoned to make way for the multiplexes of today.

The albums entitled *Cines y teatros* (Cinemas and Theaters), *Pulquerías y cantinas* (Pulque Bars and Saloons), and *Edificios abandonados y más...* (Abandoned Buildings and More...) show us spaces that are no longer there, have been remodeled, or have tumbled into ruin. Together with the spaces, customs and traditions have also disappeared or changed, like in the case of the *pulquerías* (*pulque* bars). Today, few people drink *pulque*, the most popular Mexican beverage in the nineteenth century, and few bars sell it since beer took its place many years ago. The experience of going to the movies has also changed: we no longer see long lines at the box office that used to trail down the sidewalk.

Another aspect of the city that has changed over the years is its transportation. The railroad and streetcars have disappeared, though their rails are still visible in some areas, and despite the fact that today the city has better and more means of transportation, people still yearn for them. The photographs spark nostalgia even among those who never knew them. Trolley cars and buses still exist, but the colors and

shapes have changed; memories are superimposed on them and the images help distinguish them, recover them.

Other images show the construction and evolution of infrastructure indispensable for city residents: the subway. It is curious how a single photograph can contain so much information, not just about the changes in the space as such, but in the people, fashion, or the number of people there were then; since the subway opened, it has served millions of people.

University City, a city of knowledge within the great metropolis, is another important icon. The images from its inauguration until our day demonstrate the growth of the student population to the point that, today, its space is insufficient. However, the beauty of its architecture has been respected, bestowing on it the category of World Heritage Treasure.

Two albums are dedicated to the 1957 and the 1985 earthquakes. In 1957, the most impressive event was the “fall of the Angel,” that is, the monument to independence located on Reforma Avenue, one of the city’s most important thoroughfares. Young people who visit the page cannot believe the image is real: the Independence Column without its crowning angel. Also shown are some buildings damaged or collapsed during that earthquake.

The second album is a testimony to the 1985 quake, which registered 8.2 on the Richter scale, revealing the defects of many badly constructed buildings. The most damaged sections of the city look like war zones; the city is barely recognizable under the rubble and dust. Many of the spaces left by fallen or damaged buildings were later turned into plazas or parking lots and the vacuum still does not seem to have been filled even today. The photos are the other scars of the wounds caused by the earthquake and testimony to the unity of a people amidst tragedy.

To these tragic events is added 1968, a year of contrasts. On the one hand, the student movement, and on the other, the Olympic Games, the two impossible to separate. “We don’t want Olympics, we want revolution,” chanted the young people of that time. The new venues to house the athletes and to witness their prowess, like the Olympic Village, the Sports Palace, the Olympic Pool, changed the urban landscape, and the students, with their rebellion and appropriation of the streets and public spaces, did the same. The colorful, festive images of the city during the Olympic Games alternate with those of enthusiastic students at marches, but also with the tragic events of police and military repression.

To situate these events and spaces in today’s reality, the photos in the page’s albums have a link to Google Maps,



▲ Statue of Carlos IV, known as “The Little Horse.”



▲ Monument to the Latin American race.

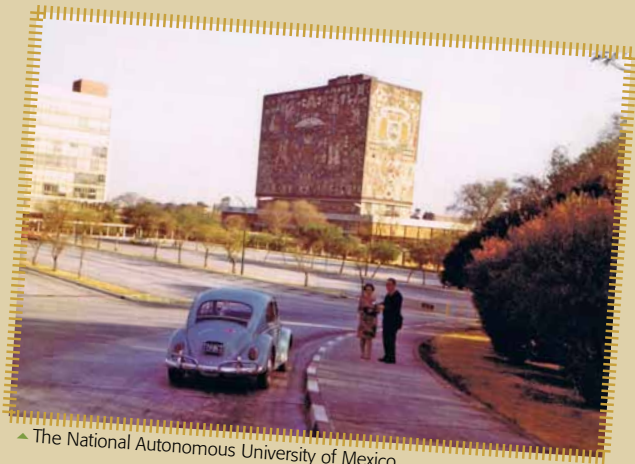


▲ The Angel of Independence.

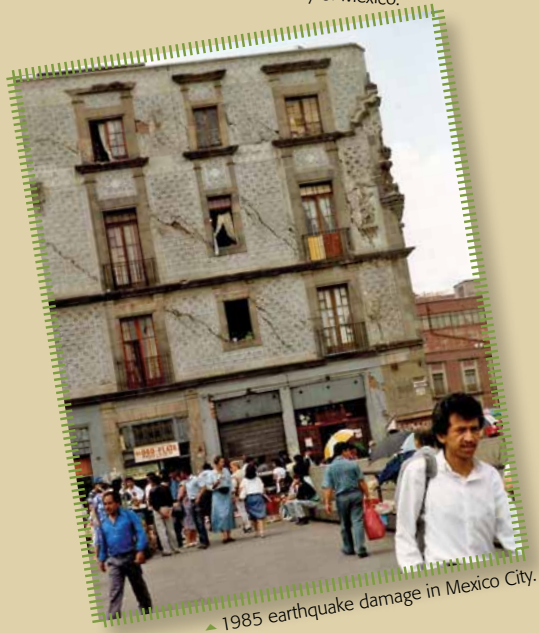
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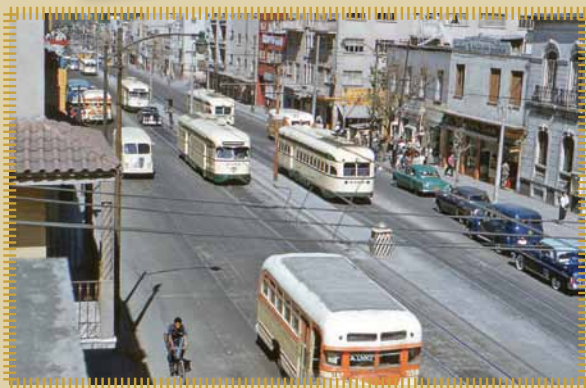
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▲ The National Autonomous University of Mexico.



▲ 1985 earthquake damage in Mexico City.



▲ Streetcars.

where the visitor can access the location and see what it looks like today, both on the street level and in panoramic shots. But it is not only the physical spaces that are recovered through the images: what is also shown is what they represented for the city's popular culture. To do that, each photograph is accompanied by explanations or fragments of Mexican writers' works alluding to the places depicted.

Images and texts invite participation, reflection, and interaction. "The most impressive thing," says Carlos, "is how the page has become a meeting place for different generations, where a young man of 16 can converse with someone 50 or more." The comments under each reproduction are often nostalgic or enthusiastic about having discovered one space or another, and others mention personal stories or experiences:

How great it is to see a photo of where I was born and still live! I had my first communion at that church and I also studied at the Mercedes High School. I would love to also see a photograph of the Castillito cinema where my parents used to take me to the movies.

I have a vague memory from the early 1970s, when I was two or three, of taking the streetcar from the Del Valle Neighborhood to downtown, and having gone through that roundabout. I was with my grandmother and the streetcar was made of yellow wood. Does anybody have any idea if that could be true?

As time goes by, the stories get garbled and we make an effort to remember, to try to identify with others, and perhaps find an answer. Photographs are a way to recover the city and assign it the value it deserves. It is also a way to learn its history, since the city has not just been a stage where history unfolds, but, like in the 1985 quake, a protagonist and victim together with its inhabitants. Mightn't it be the case that we are the stage where the city happens. When I visit *La ciudad de México en el tiempo*, I think of all the cities that may exist in their inhabitants' memories, and not just in their memories, but in their dreams and desires. As many cities as photographs exist; and then I imagine the city as a jigsaw puzzle of interminable moments.

In the attempt to reconstruct the jigsaw puzzle, it was decided to open the page not only to visitors' comments, but also to their photographs. This way, you can share your little piece of the city. Sunday walks next to Chapultepec Lake, the Alameda, or the Fine Arts Palace, images of suburbs

that revolutionized the way of inhabiting the city, like Satellite City, a popular children's movie house, and family stories that took place there: these are the kinds of photographs people post. "It's like we were looking through a family album," says Carlos.

After a photographic tour, it is clear that Mexico City is no longer the same and is fading each day, borders blurring, and its inhabitants, seeing the images of what was, feel the impulse to hold on to what has been their home, where they and their forbears were born, to the experiences and stories that sometimes are also left under those "ruins of modernity" that Carlos Monsiváis talked about. The photos act as lifesavers against oblivion, they recover the need for identification, the pride in belonging to a place, and, in younger generations, they awaken desires to know more about the space where they live.

In that sense, *La ciudad de México en el tiempo* takes on a social function that consists in disseminating the history of a place through its images. That is why the album entitled *Pasado y presente* (Past and Present) shows photos comparing specific places in the city from more than 20 years ago and today.

Some of the photos show buildings that were part of the identity of capital dwellers and that were demolished or abandoned because of neglect and the lack of value place on them or due to interests contrary to preserving the city's patrimony. The images point to that carelessness, putting their finger in the sore, so to speak, recriminating for what was left undone or what was done to the detriment of a space that belonged to everyone. Preserving day-to-day spaces that are important for the inhabitants, and not just tourist spots, is one way of giving back the city its harmony.

When a space disappears, the jigsaw puzzle is incomplete, and although some pieces can be repaired, others are lost forever. Thus, the only tangible, visible thing that remains of those spaces is the photographic record and the memory of its survivors. *La ciudad de México en el tiempo* reconstructs the map of the city through its photographs, from the memories of its inhabitants, and from the literary texts it has inspired. It is an infinite map, with many dimensions and as many possibilities for reading it as there are memories and yearnings in each of this great city's lovers. **MM**

NOTES

¹ www.facebook.com/laciudaddemexicoeneltiempo.

² Carlos Monsiváis, *Apocalipstick* (Mexico City: Debolsillo, 2011).

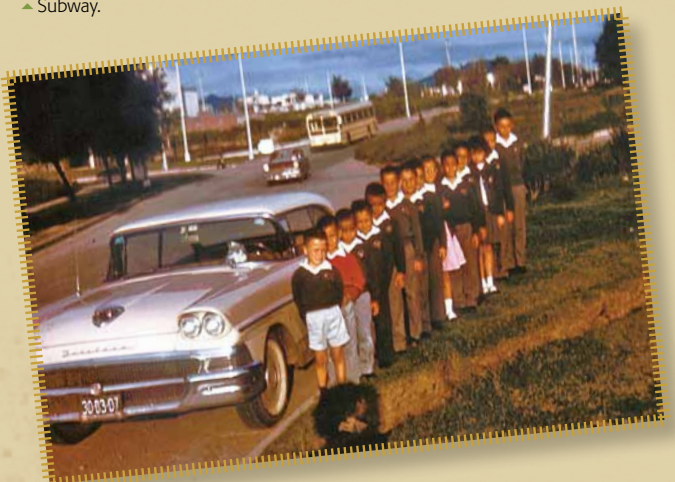


▲ Mexico City's Fine Arts Palace.

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▲ Subway.



▲ School children.