

How would you describe, explain or experience Mexico City, in its physical entirety and with all its history? This was the challenge facing the group of scholars and artists who designed the new exhibit at the Museo de la Ciudad de México (Pino Suárez 30 y República de El Salvador). A sociologist, an artist, a geographer and a historian sat down and talked about how to bring together the flesh and the stone, past and present, of Mexico City for a wide audience; and for the first time in ten years the museum opened a permanent exhibit, "Todo Cabe en una Cuenca" (Everything fits into a Basin), to the public in November (2004).

Throughout the five rooms of the exhibit there is a remarkable balance between the human lives and the physical spaces of the city. The first room screens two movies, the first recounts the history of the Valley of Mexico from before the founding of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán through Mexican independence. The second is a film of images that flow quickly into one another on three screens, capturing the fragmentary nature of Mexico City today: peaceful oases, traffic jams, workers in the service industries, tourists, lovers, markets, amusement parks, graffiti, garbage pickers, the sewer system. The curator, Marcos Límenes, said there are two more movies planned for this room, one about the history of the Valley from independence through the revolution and another on its contemporary history.

The second room, "Con los pies en el Valle" (With Feet in the Valley): covers the standard history and geography of the Valley from the mid-fourteenth century through the early-twentieth century and is the most traditional in design. In this room we see that the cities of Tenochtitlán and Mexico City have

had everything stacked against them from the beginning, from volcano eruptions to earthquakes. It also depicts important people and events that shaped the city, such as the floods of 1629 and the invasions by the conquistadores, the French army, the revolutionary factions and so on. The use of space in this room is fairly standard and conservative; the most innovative design is a large map on the floor in which a sixteenth century map of the city is superimposed on a modern one, emphasising the difference in size and urban patterns.

The exhibit comes alive in the third room, "La ciudad que nunca duerme" (The City which Never Sleeps): here daily urban life erupts into the historical and geographical narratives of the previous room. It begins with a panorama of one day, starting with construction workers eating breakfast at dawn and moves almost minute-by-minute through the day, catching glimpses of different people and spaces of the city. The viewer also sees how history asserts itself in the city's streets and avenues, in their changing names and physical layout, through maps, blueprints and photographs. The trades and tools of the past, like a shoemaker's hammer or a household servant's flatiron, are complimented with a present-day statistical breakdown of employment and unemployment in Mexico City. Alongside these every-day urban lives centered on work, a collage depicts some of the most important figures of the city's cultural and recreational life, from Sor Juana de la Cruz to el Santo, the lucha libre hero.

In the fourth room, "México en el ombligo de la Luna" (Mexico, the Navel of the Moon): the unit of analysis shifts from daily life to movements for social change. What is the relationship between the physical city and its

social movements? This room proposes the street as a gauge for social unrest in the city, with the Zócalo at the heart of protest and demand, from the Motín de Indios in 1692 to the EZLN protests in 1994. A circular photograph of the Zócalo hangs from the ceiling in the middle of the room, which allows the visitor to feel as if he or she is standing in the heart of the city. In photographs, text and slides the room chronicles some of the social movements that have occupied the city including the 1920s workers and muralist movements that literally painted themselves onto the city, the 1968 students who were massacred in the streets, the 1985 earthquake that destroyed many buildings and left so many sleeping in the Zócalo, through the movement for democracy in urban protests and electoral politics. Dreamers have often cast their eyes on the moon, and Mexico City –here, the navel of the moon– holds the hopes and frustrations for social change in its public places, in its bricks and mortar.

In the fifth and final room, “46 veces” (46 Times): the focus moves from social movements to some of the most pressing problems facing Mexico City: water and people. “46 veces” stands for the 46 times Mexico City grew in population during the twentieth century. Along the right-hand wall of the room is a timeline that chronicles the changes in population during that century, considering migration, education and age, among other factors. A large aerial view of the city, made from hundreds of digital photographs taken by the Instituto de Geografía at the UNAM, reminds the viewer of the physical space that changed alongside these demographic shifts. The entire left-hand wall is a representation of the city’s water infrastructure, complete with water running through clear tubes, which

explains the system and the problems it is facing. These two elements pick up the overview of the geography population movements of the Valley in the first room, though here the presentation is more dynamic. The wall facing the entrance is a collection of up-to-date numbers that click by at an almost dizzying rate on digital counters, tracking the number of people who, since January 2005, are born, emigrate, arrive and use the metro in Mexico City. The final counter tracks the number of women and children who have been abused in the city this year; the frightening pace at which this number grows adds a sombre and reflective tone to the room, which compliments the playful organisation of the material.

Following the exhibit like a discourse from one room to the next, a dynamic relationship between history and geography emerges. Each room explores the ways history and human choice have shaped the city, from the draining of lake Texcoco in the seventeenth century to the massive public work projects of the past 100 years. And as the exhibit explores these historical changes, they show how the city itself has played an active role within them. Public spaces like the Plaza de Tlatelolco, the defective skyscrapers that collapsed in the 1985 earthquake and the sewage-choked rivers and streams that run beneath the city’s bridges have all played leading roles in the city’s history and in the lives of its residents.

Indeed, Marcos Límenes told me that the interconnection between history and geography was one of the basic organising principles of the exhibit. This is perhaps most clearly and powerfully presented in the fourth room, which links social movements and urban spaces. Here, the city’s spaces are inscribed with attempts at social change (bullets, murals, massacres); they also give shape to

these movements (where will a protest take place, where will a tent be pitched?). In other rooms history and geography tend to be presented side-by-side, hinting at –instead of arguing for– a critical dynamic. An alternative design for the museum suggests how this dynamic might have been sustained throughout the exhibit. According to Límenes, one earlier possibility was to start from the body of a resident and move, room by room through larger units of analysis: the house; the street and neighbourhood; sections of the city; and the entire city and its relationships with neighbours, close and far. This design strategy might have underscored the ways in which physical spaces and the meanings attached to them can function as historical actors.

This minor quibble aside, the exhibit will interest scholars –in particular historians and geographers who are concerned with the inter-connections between their fields of study– in how it conceptualises this relationship. It is a refreshing take on the city and its history in a public venue and strikes a nice balance between being informative and experiential.

There are plans to add two more rooms to the exhibit this year and possible themes include: travellers to and within the city; impossible projects for the city; and a child's view of the city. A consultation room with computers offers in-depth exploration of the themes in the exhibit and there is bookstore with many titles on the city. Finally, the museum hosts a library designed for researchers and specialists that houses approximately 10,000 volumes; though it emphasises the nineteenth century, it will likely offer something of interest to most researchers.

The title of the exhibit “*Todo Cabe en una Cuenca*” is a play on the Spanish expression *todo cabe en un jarrito, sabiendolo acomodar* (Every things fits in a little jar, if you know how to organize it). Over the centuries much has squeezed itself into the Valley of Mexico; this exhibit offers us a glimpse at some of the different ways it settled into place.

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