

# Mexican Civil Society Organizations: How the Pursuit of Formal Housing Undermines the Vision of a Just and Equitable City

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In Mexico City, a robust network of grass-roots civil society organizations (CSOs) have all but transformed the shape of housing development within the last forty years. Since their inception from student-led activism during the late 1960's, CSOs have emerged as leading advocates in housing reform on behalf of citizens who are otherwise invisible in the top-down project of city-building. CSO-led development has left an indelible mark on the urban fabric; that of irregular settlements, urban improvement projects, and numerous subsidized housing projects.

By their principles, CSOs are radical, empowering, and crucial to the welfare of Mexico City's poor. However, in the single-minded pursuit of formal housing through the state, these same groups have become complicit in producing a mode of urbanism which completely contradicts their stated ideological purpose, that of economic fairness, egalitarianism, and political autonomy through solidarity. Realized low-income housing developments divide, indebt, and individuate residents through a coordinated set of "aesthetic, economic, social, and political strategies" which enshrine ownership to the benefit and control of elite financial stakeholders. Even if they produce material gains, CSO housing development does little to challenge, and perhaps deepens the impediments towards an equitable urban environment -- that of socio-spatial exclusion, marginalization, and homogenization.

Based on my ongoing involvement with the civil society group, *el Frente Popular Francisco Villa Independiente* (FPFVI), this paper attempts to explain the transformation of civil society's legitimate democratic demand for *vivienda digna* through an ideological logic of ownership which undermines that very idea.

## 00\_RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research for this paper is the result of ongoing correspondence and design development of a subsidized housing project with the FPFVI, including 9 months of fieldwork conducted between August 2014 and May 2015 with the US Fulbright Program. During this period, I spent time in several of FPFVI's settlements conducting interviews with community leaders, gathering quantitative and qualitative data from individual members of the community, and touring subsidized housing projects that the group had already realized. I also sat in on several meetings with the city housing institute (INVI) as FPFVI leaders negotiated the terms of the project with which I was involved and presented working drawings of the building scheme. Finally, I met regularly with several local architects to help refine the design, and give consult as to the best process by which to realize this project. In the 18 months since the conclusion of the program, I've maintained contact with the community and continue to pursue the project via semi-regular visits to Mexico City.

My involvement as a researcher and designer mirrors the project's dual nature as both an academic critique and an active project with intent for realization. Both aspects of the project relate and inform one another, but inevitably diverge just as theory does practice. In my conclusions, practice largely refers to a series of design tactics employed to address the perceived issues at play. In theory, the research assumes a larger scope in proposing alternative political or financial models in tandem with design to produce more substantial change.

## 01\_MEXICO CITY: AN URBAN PARADIGM OF INFORMALITY AND SOCIO-SPATIAL EXCLUSION

In 1950, late Mexican poet and political activist Octavio Paz compared Mexico City to "a monstrous inflated head, crushing the frail body that holds it up"<sup>1</sup>. Even if prone to overstatement, Paz's words need no more affirmation than a vantage of the city from the window of a descending flight. Rolls of vast, wave-like sprawl extend far beyond the horizon, soundly obscured by a thick fleece of smog and other emissions, the result of Mexico City's geological basin-like condition. This expanse, the contiguous metropolitan zone of the Federal District, contains over 22 million people, more than half of which live below the poverty line and in deeply stratified states of citizenship.



Figure 1: Air-borne view of Mexico City. Photo by Author 2016

Mexico City represents a paradigm of burgeoning informal growth and acute spatial segregation which has become the norm for most developing world cities, particularly in the global south. Over half of urban development in Mexico City can be considered informal, a broad term referring not only to notions of illegality, but issues of regulation, social practices, economy, and governance<sup>2</sup>. The central delegations of the city contain the concentration of the city's wealth, capital and economic opportunities. Similarly, these areas benefit from the full recognition of the Mexican state and are planned from the top-down with an assumed requisite of livability. Parks, museums, historical monuments, and active municipal services like water, electricity, and public transport starkly differentiate el Centro from the ring of low-density, informal sprawl which surrounds it.

Mexico City's growing peripheral ring, home to approximately 10 million people<sup>3</sup>, seems as if to exist in parallel to this privileged urban core. Dense, cinder-blocked sprawl dominates the urban periphery, auto-constructed by the residents themselves. Open public space occurs few and far between and is more likely to be co-opted as markets, political arenas, and informal settlements known as colonias populares. Even the most basic municipal services like potable water are woefully inadequate, and are instead either privatized or decentralized among numerous ad-hoc actors. The absence of state services in the periphery is widespread and largely by design. In a "zero-tolerance" policy meant to disincentivize the proliferation of informal development, authorities are not allowed to build roads, extend public services, or provide housing improvements to irregular settlements, which are deemed illegal encroachment, a strangely cruel strategy for a city in which all urban growth has occurred outside of the urban core for the past 60 years<sup>4</sup>.

It is this political vacuum, enabled by decades of popular discontent, that has given rise to Mexico City's civil society, a dense network of autonomous political associations which posture themselves counter to state government and advocate on behalf of those typically silenced or excluded by the top-down political processes: workers, indigenous peoples, and the urban poor. CSOs are distinguished by their assumed independence from party politics, their efforts to democratize political power, and the demand to be seen as "public interest entities, entitled to intervene in the public sphere"<sup>5</sup>.

## 02 ORIGINS AND RISE OF MEXICO'S CIVIL SOCIETY

Mexico's civil society took root in student-led activism during the late 1960's. Mexican students formed a broad coalition against the state's dominant political party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), pushing for a socialist agenda of wealth redistribution and power. A series of key moments in the following two decades both exposed the corruption of Mexico's political class and solidified civil society's influence in its wake including the violent repression of student activists at the Tlatelolco-Nonoalco housing development in 1968<sup>6</sup>. In spite of the massacre, the student movement catalyzed subsequent grassroots mobilizations during the 1970's and 80's – this time addressing the needs of a rapid influx of poor migrants to the city. Among such organizers was the Urban Popular Movement (MUP), founded in 1981. MUP petitioned the state for various public services, including "lighting, housing, sewage, trash collection, schools, public transport, and the like", an agenda which remains largely unchanged today<sup>7</sup>.

The critical role of civil society acquired new meaning in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake which shook Mexico City in 1985. The 8.0 magnitude earthquake levelled many parts of Mexico City, resulting in at least 5,000 fatalities<sup>8</sup> and destroying central infrastructure like potable water distribution and electricity. The speed of civil society's response to the event both proved their capabilities

and underscored the state's comparative incompetence and corruption. A growing public confidence in civil society coupled with the perceived weakness of the state created substantial threat to the PRI's supremacy during the 1988 elections and in the long-term, has enabled CSOs to grow in scope and ultimately leverage their power in negotiations with the state. Today, the network of CSOs in Mexico City collectively represent a large and powerful base of members. Through use of protest, mobilization, political partnerships and clientelistic exchange, CSOs are able to enact their agenda on a number of levels and has led a number of top-down initiatives to the benefit of informal residents. CSOs offer a new another model of politics, a set of practices which allow marginalized citizens to cultivate themselves as political subjects, even in the context of serious poverty and disenfranchisement.

However, the dealings of CSOs in their pursuit of housing and basic services are still rife with flaws and inconsistencies. The persistence of political exchange through party affiliation (known as clientelism) and the resulting fragmentation of Mexican civil society at large has



Figure 2: Examples of FPFVI mobilization and democratized community engagement. Photos by David Adler 2014.

precluded CSOs from undertaking coordinated political action on a broad, city-wide scale. As a consequence of this fragmentation, CSO's in their disempowered position are forced to reduce and localize their agenda a while "channeling dissent and demand-making into state-sanctioned spaces" that legitimize government control and oversight<sup>9</sup>. This paper examines this process through the lens of social housing, using the Independent Francisco Villa Popular Front (FPFVI) as a prototypical example of a prominent CSO in Mexico City today.

### 03 . CASE STUDY: EL FRENTE POPULAR FRANCISCO VILLA INDEPENDIENTE (FPFVI)

The Independent Francisco Villa Popular Front (FPFVI), known colloquially as Los Panchos, is a faction of one of the most visible civil society organizations operating in Mexico City today. The group has also become one of the leading advocates in housing rights, responsible for numerous government-subsidized housing projects around the city. At the many protest rallies members are required to attend, the group can be easily identified by their bright red t-shirts, emblazoned with the organization's acronym and the FPFVI logo – the silhouette of Francisco Villa atop his horse. The FPFVI acronym denotes both its affiliation to the broader Frente Popular and its distinction through the explicit disavowal of electoral politics. The FPFVI is a fascinating organization in its own right, and provides a clear window into the lives of marginalized citizens living in Mexico City, and their relationship to the state via subsidized housing.

Like other Mexican CSOs, el Frente Popular emerged from a wave of civil society activism in the late 1980s. In early nineties, the FPFV continued to grow both in strength and numbers, staging numerous protests, and using their influence to push a broad mandate of "independence from the government and political parties, unity in action, and liberty for each organization"<sup>10</sup>.

However, the 1997 federal elections provoked the group's first major schism. As support emerged for the leftist PRD party, several local branches began to reconsider the issue of party affiliation, negotiating leadership positions in city government with PRD members in exchange for party support. In all, about half of the FPFV branches were absorbed into the PRD, defaulting the other half as the FPFV-Independiente. The

group further fractured in 2005 when attempts at forming an alliance with the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) forged conflict in defining the scope and direction of the FPFVI's efforts. In the end, the latter groups formed their own sub-faction, further separated themselves, and reduced their focus to localized issues.

The tumultuous history of the FPFVI is crucial to understanding how they operate today: how they negotiate services from the state, how they represent their message, and how they attempt to transpose that message onto the urban environment. Having disavowed party alliances, the FPFVI are forced constantly to mobilize their members in the demand of basic services and influence in negotiating projects like low-income housing. Every gain, from formalizing plots, to receiving electricity, water, and materials, becomes a "conquest" rather than a set of rights conferred by the state. Mexico's 6-year political cycle or so-called *sexenio* burdens this process further. The state's ban on re-election means that at the end of each political term, whatever key alliances FPFVI leaders have cultivated over that time are dead-ended, and they must start again from scratch. It's an arduous, at times counter-productive process, and one that prevents the FPFVI from tackling issues beyond their own localized scope.

Under these constraints which have precluded the FPFVI from undertaking a larger, collective fight against inequality, the pursuit of formal housing has become a focal point for rallying people around a common, tangible cause. As Kathleen Bruhn writes in her study of urban protest in Mexico and Brazil, "people are very practical, they don't want to fight for reform. But they will mobilize for housing"<sup>11</sup>.

### 04 THE PATH TO FORMALIZATION

The FPFVI's path to formal housing typically follows three stages: illegal occupation, semi-irregular growth, and regularization. In the first stage, leaders identify empty plots of land and mobilize existing group members to clear the territory and allocate plots to new tenants. Initially settled without the formal permission of the government, it is considered illegal, and therefore ineligible for public welfare or municipal provisions.

In the second phase of development, the territory is infilled both informally and through coordinated building efforts. Members auto-construct their homes within their designated plots which they expand incrementally over time. Through a combination of member taxation and NGO partnerships, the territory is later supplemented with basic

infrastructure and amenities: paved roads, drainage, electricity, pay-phones, playground, even eco-friendly services like rainwater harvesting and dry toilets.

In the final stage, the FPFVI pursues regularization. Via extensive protest and negotiation, the FPFVI embarks on a process to legally purchase the land such that they can solicit the support of the Mexico City Housing Institute (INVI) in financing construction of a formal housing project. Most often the design of any given project is preconceived by INVI's developers in a kind of cookie-cutter strategy, engineered for greatest cost-efficiency. The FPFVI, however, has also employed their own developers in past projects, although the scheme remains largely the same.

### 05 APPARATUS OF OWNERSHIP

Despite their impassioned socialist creed, the FPFVI's push for formal housing is at its heart, a capitalistic endeavor. Families who participate in social housing projects are failed in two respects: the financial model which indebts them, and the building design which isolates them. FPFVI projects, like most other CSO-led housing typically engage two typologies: low-density pseudo-suburban clusters, and mid-density apartment walk-ups with ground-floor parking. Neither typology supports a collective, socially-robust environment, and in fact, compels residents to individuate themselves. Housing developments are ubiquitously surrounded by large perimeter walls, psychically and literally disengaged from their surroundings.

The failure of these schemes to make material socialist, egalitarian principles is related as much to the mechanisms of housing finance as it is to wishes and desires residents themselves. In short, top-down policies meet bottom-up impulses to mutually reinforce an "apparatus of ownership," a term I borrow from architect Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco<sup>11</sup>. In her article of the same title, Santoyo-Orozco defines this "apparatus" as an ideological construct which enshrines ownership through a set of "inter-related aesthetic, economic, social, and political strategies". Indeed, the logic of ownership is central to the conceptualization, promotion, and materialization of subsidized housing projects like those produced by the FPFVI. Home-ownership is widely seen as emancipatory by poor residents, even if housing payments indebt them for decades.

As it turns out, state actors like the Mexico City Housing Institute (INVI) have little cause to challenge this modality. Ownership is a useful governmental tool for accumulating capital and exercising control through a credit-debt relationship. INVI's financial policy requires that potential residents establish a formal bank account and produce a minimum deposit in order to even apply for an opening. Families who manage to acquire a spot in a social housing project are then charged interest rates which over the term of their loan (between 10-30 years) can easily triple the cost of their unit. By this model, absurdly, INVI's banking partners become the primary beneficiaries of subsidized housing and radical CSOs like the FPFVI are reduced to glorified developers, expanding the realm of private property for the state.

### 05 PARKING

The ambition for parking is an excellent lens by which to examine the "apparatus of ownership", and one which is reinforced from both

top-down policy, and bottom-up impulses. Transportation is already a highly contentious issue in Mexico City. An immense network of roadways and freeways which serve Mexico City have long suffered near constant congestion since a population explosion during the latter half of the twentieth century. By the 1990s, Mexico City had become infamous for its unprecedented levels of air pollution, due in large part to vehicle emissions. To its credit, the city has managed to drastically improve air quality by implementing a number of city-wide environmental programs including Hoy No Circula or the Today Does Not Run program which bans high-emissions vehicles from the road one day out of the week<sup>12</sup>. It's worth mentioning that there is no shortage of other options for residents to get around the city, including a metro system, rapid bus transit, independent micro-buses known as paseros, taxis, moto-taxis, even a recently introduced bike-share program (although this program is limited to a small central zone). Regardless, Mexico City's air pollution and perpetual traffic congestion remain a very real issues, ones which underscore a necessary and continued shift away from individual car ownership.

In spite of the obvious problems created and sustained by car ownership, subsidized housing projects are designed and produced to reinforce dependence on car usage through minimum regulated parking. For low-income housing projects, INVI requires a minimum allocation of parking for 60% of the total constructed units (13). Most housing projects accommodate this requirement by converting the entire ground level to parking. In an area of the city where public space is already lamentably scarce, valuable open space is wasted on parking for families that might not even own or be able to afford a car.

Poor families also advocate for ample parking, regardless of their financial state. For some, this is an economic necessity, like *taxistas*. For others, simply the aspiration of car ownership is enough to demand parking. Of the FPFVI residents I interviewed, nearly all of them didn't personally own a car, but cited their desire to in the future. Analysis of FPFVI's census material revealed just how distant that aspiration might be. Based on the 56 completed census forms, FPFVI families earned an average of 4500 pesos a month, or roughly \$232 US<sup>14</sup>. Accounting for an average of 3 members per household, this would imply that each resident subsisted on just \$2.50 a day, assuming they spent their total stated income without saving. The quantitative research leads me to conclude that aspirational ideals are a much more powerful driver in the pursuit and eventual shape of social housing than contextual realities like poverty, scarcity, and environmental impact.

### 07 PRIVACY AND SECURITY

The widespread desire for privacy and security are yet another example of how residents and institutions alike perpetuate the apparatus of ownership in the production of low-income housing. It should be mentioned that the cultural fixation on privacy and interiority transcends class in Mexico, and is subsequently reflected in the aesthetic, material, and programmatic realization across diverse housing typologies encompassing socio-economic extremes. Whether in the plush social enclaves of Las Lomas, one of the wealthiest districts of the city, or FPFVI's own low-income housing projects in the urban periphery, large perimeter walls

and other defensive features like security cameras, barbed wire, and spiked surfaces are nearly ubiquitous traits for housing.

For poor residents living in unstable, sometimes violent areas, privacy acquires another level of personal significance. Fortification doubles as protection, or at least a sense of security, particularly in outlying delegations like Iztapalapa and Tlahuac, where violent crime is not uncommon.

This isn't to suggest that notions of security and community are inherently at odds with one another. The desire for security isn't necessarily mutually exclusive with collective action. In one of the FPFVI's irregular settlements, security is assumed by a vigilance committee, a small, rotating group of residents that patrol the community and look out for suspicious activity. However, in the transition from informal to formal housing, the need for such coordinated efforts are rendered irrelevant. What was addressed through collective action gets substituted for blunt and liberal use of physical barriers.

## 08 CONCLUSIONS

Is ownership necessarily a bad thing? Not necessarily. Home-ownership and other forms of ownership can act as crucial catalysts towards economic upward mobility. This paper seeks not to challenge ownership itself but rather how it's imagined, sought, and realized by in the given context.

Housing is pitched and fetishized as if homeownership in and of itself were somehow emancipatory, such that the tradeoffs like debt and risk are largely ignored by the families that receive it. Mutually reinforced ideas of housing across socio-economic strata construct a desire to live in contained, homogenous, individuated urban enclaves. In the construction of housing, privatization prevails. Incentives for developers to build most cost-efficient units result in poor quality building, far from city centers and economic opportunity. Families enter into long-term high-interest mortgages to the primary benefit of big banks. And finally, housing is employed as sole means of urbanism without public, commercial, or cultural amenities.

Designers can do little to change the systemic issues which produce inequities in the housing process, but in such context, certain priorities emerge, these being: integration of public space, sustainability, mixed use program, and minimized costs through material selection and programmatic configuration while maintaining overall building quality. However, quality design alone is not and can never be the solution.

Reconfiguring financial and political models in tandem with design can assert broader change. This would include lowered interest rates for families, or rental units instead of property creation. Parking requirements should be minimized if not eliminated in exchange for investment in more centrally located plots and public transportation

These conclusions just begin to scratch the surface of the issues at play. As my ongoing research continues, I hope to gain more understanding of this process and critically apply those understandings to a realized project in the city.

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