

NODES: Nomadic Design and Education System

ANDREW VRANA

University of Houston

MONICA QUIROZ-LUNA

Playa del Carmen

INTRODUCTION

The conflicts that emerge via the expanding influence of global capitalism on local economies and social hierarchies can be observed on many different scales. The by-products of imbalance and excess are the new artifacts of a culture that is increasingly out-of-balance.

We are interested in examining how new forms of inequity are manifested in a place that is fully engaged in a tourism-based economic boom. It is our ambition to provoke an exchange between the touristic consumers, who have colonized the Quintana Roo region of Mexico, and the local and migrant workers, who have become displaced by those forces of development upon which they depend for their livelihood. We seek to initiate a type of activism that would merge a design-sensibility with a unique local economy in order to generate social awareness of the crisis between rapid urban change and the social sustainability of the urban poor. We propose to introduce a discussion of possible solutions to urban problems by injecting ourselves into the public space which is shared by tourists and working class alike.

The socio-spatial exclusion of the working class from the touristic neighborhoods has had different consequences in the urban and social definition of Playa del Carmen, Mexico. It has provoked land occupation as well as alternative social and economic interaction. Public space and the direction of social interaction have been reinterpreted into many different forms. The urban politics for the poor have not been able to solve the everyday needs of the working class. However, the current situation has contributed to the construction of an identity: a social group who reacts against the standardization

of jobs through work informality and self employment.

The leitmotif of urban planning in Playa del Carmen is socio-spatial exclusion. But the wealthy are unable to deny the bricoleur's spirit of ingenuity to engage in alternative forms of capitalism. As in many other cities around the world in which social segregation is (intentionally or unintentionally) implemented to benefit economic interests. Those in power tend to dismiss the fact that people are resilient. The poor people "tend to come back and reclaim public spaces because they critically depend on (these as) places for income"¹; in Playa del Carmen, they come back on utility tricycles that are modified for various entrepreneurial mobile business enterprises.

SOCIO-SPATIAL EXCLUSION: HISTORY OF MODERN PLAYA DEL CARMEN

Playa del Carmen was in Ancient times a strategic commercial zone and a meeting place for Maya women who crossed the Caribbean sea to the island of Cozumel in prayer and devotion to the goddess Ix-Chel. After the Spanish conquest, it became a simple fishermen's village and a crossing point to Cozumel. If we can mark a precise birth date of Playa del Carmen as a touristic destination it would be 1976, with the creation of Playacar, a residential and touristic complex.

In 1984 the developer of Playacar associated with North American investors to start the second phase of the Playacar development, which included 200 hectares, and 11 luxury hotels. This is also the date of the first major immigration to the state of people

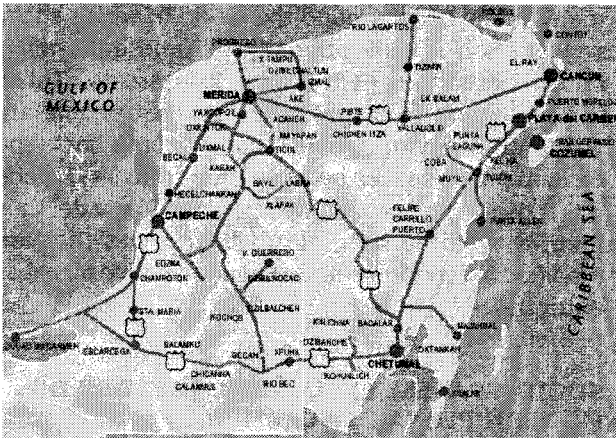


Typical Provisional Worker Housing, Playa de Carmen



Calica Housing Development, Playa de Carmen

who illegally occupied land owned by a Federal Patronage of the Caribbean (FIDECARIBE) which was intended for touristic development, around Akumal, Xel-Há, X'cacel, Chemuyil and Tulúm.



Yucatan Peninsula

The first socio-spatial exclusion practice starts with the same urban design that initiated a real estate boom in the development of the area; Playacar was conceived as a gated community for the privileged. The growth strategy was aimed at isolating all urban phenomena that could be annoying or deemed by the developers as unsightly to the residents and tourists.

What followed was a natural migratory process toward the economic opportunities emerging in the area. A cheap work force was needed to build, serve and provide infrastructure for Playacar. The quota was to be paid, not by the developers, but by the city itself, and in the end, by the working class. In

1985 the first illegal occupation took place in Playa del Carmen, on land located in the area now known as Colonia Gonzalo Guerrero. The illegal settlements grew rapidly, without any foresight toward urbanization, planning or infrastructure. In 1986 the first campments, or temporary houses, were established for the construction workers. These were made without any basic services. For developers, the most popular practice of finding manpower for construction consisted of transporting large groups of anonymous workers for a pre-determined length of time, and then casting them into the local population to join the rest of the work force without regard for their future. In contrast to this situation, the Calica housing development for workers, which started construction in 1986 remains as a good example of what effective planning and government regulation can achieve. Providing housing and decent living conditions can have beneficial repercussions on the urban planning of a city.

In January 1988 the Gonzalo Guerrero neighborhood was formally established and the legalization of the priorly illegally occupied land was done through INVIQROO (Housing Institute of Quintana Roo). With this legalization, the successful formula of:

1. invasion
2. social protest
3. legalized ownership of land

was adopted by a large sector of the newly arrived workers to Playa del Carmen. This would result in one of the most historic land occupations in modern Mexico: the Luis Donaldo Colosio neighborhood.

LAND OCCUPATION, COLONIA LUIS DONALDO COLOSIO

There are many possible ways to occupy land for social reasons, the motivation is almost always the same: reclaiming the right to the city. The definition by Henri Lefebvre "conceived this as a right to direct and shape the character and direction of the city by forms of participation and appropriation which are distinct from, and transcend, the right to property..."². In the case of the Luis Donaldo Colosio, the right of property became the major preoccupation, thus distracting the citizen's involvement away from other more productive ways of appropriation.

In April 1994, 80 hectares of private property was invaded by hundreds of people led by two men. The initial claim for this action was for the people's constitutional right to dignified housing. Later, the real reason became apparent. Playa del Carmen was growing and had no place to expand. To the South, the residential and hotel complex Playacar was an impenetrable barrier. To the west, the Ejido lands were legally protected and thus untouchable, but the 3000 hectares of private property to the south had been caught in litigation for years. Ironically this situation made it "legally non-existent" as an official part of the city. It set a good pretext not to provide basic services to its inhabitants who lived without potable water, drainage, electricity or paved roads for six years, and even more time without the legal property titles.



Luis Donaldo Colosio

URBAN POLICIES FOR THE POOR

"Globalization does not happen by natural law but is intentionally produced and enforced until it develops its own dynamics in power relations and economic, technological and ecological forces."³

The distribution of the benefits & costs of globalization are not evenly distributed or even controllable from the top-down by governmental hierarchies. "Currently three quarters of global population growth occurs in the urban areas of developing countries causing hyper-growth in the cities least capable of catering for such growth."⁴ In 1990 the World Bank

reported the global rate of urban population rising at a rate of 4.5% each year, accompanied by significant increases in the scale of poverty. Quintana Roo officially registered in the year 2000 a 5.8% growth, while 2004 unofficially its estimated to be around 21% per year.

While traditional urban development is based on the assumption of local autonomy and governability, in our day the fixed notion of the city as the provider of quality-of-life or even prosperity is no longer effective. It has been replaced by competition in a hierarchical system of cities that depend on a constant flow of cheap labor and resources. They "have become products to be marketed at a regional and global scale, forcing them to compete on a global stage for investment, exploiting whatever resources and comparative advantages they may have, at times, even to their own detriment."⁵

Quintana Roo leads in the Caribbean tourism market, with a 14.9% yearly growth of visitors entering by air and a 20.6% yearly growth of visitors entering by sea in 2004. From June 1999 to June 2004 foreign investment reached 339.4 million USD, representing 0.4% of the foreign investment in the country, with such diverse origins as:

USA	47.2%
Spain	23.2%
Virgin Islands	15.9%
Panama	5.4%
UK	5.4%
Canada	2.3%
Holland	1.9%
Italy	0.9%

Most of the income and an important percentage of tax revenue resulting from these investments is shipped overseas and not re-invested in Mexico.

The urban development in Quintana Roo is confined to select areas of the cities and corruption and nepotism are present in local decisions. The rest of the cities and whole regions, as well as natural resources remain subjected to exploitation, in the interest of capital.

Cities in the developing world with beautiful environments like Playa de Carmen are at risk for becoming yet another transient short-term thrill for the fickle consumer, so common in today's slash-and-burn mentality of predatory capital. This leaves little or no prospect for a sustainable future for the people living in such places, and many times results in increased unemployment or situations of underpaid work. Meanwhile, more wealth is accrued for the privileged class causing more social polarization to ensue.

The QUINTANA ROO DEVELOPMENT PLAN 2000-2025 elaborated by the State documents the social polarization within the state, with 70% of its population living in the coastline and 1,446 towns of a population of less than 100 people dispersed in the inland portions of the state. A strong polarization between the North and South coastlines is also apparent. All these factors in addition to the strong tourism development pressures in the area are affecting the health of natural ecological resources.

In a general overview, the disequilibria, or imbalance, between the regions of the state will be more evident in the years to come. Due to its expansive growth, Playa del Carmen will see more insufficiency in housing, services and infrastructure. This will provoke profound pollution problems, specially in the underground water system. The poorest sector of the population will be more vulnerable due to the lack of land reserves. The projected deficit in housing is currently estimated at a 100% increase every 5 years.

WORK, INFORMALITY AND POVERTY

Throughout its history, Mexicans of urban poor households have developed new and active ways of organization. The household survival strategies have been more or less the same among the poorest groups, especially since the economic crisis of 1980. The main elements of household survival strategies are:

1. An increase in the number of workers per household. Work intensification strategies mostly fall on women and the young. As a result of the increasing number of women working, domestic economies see a lot more female incomes and many household economies become "feminized". It could be said that this strategy is highly successful, since household incomes are protected from falling at the same rate as individual incomes.

2. The increase in the number of household members: relatives and non-relatives under one roof.

3. Migration to places where employment is possible. Once the practice of males of rural origin, it now includes urban residents, male and female, from working and middle-class backgrounds.

The standardization of work, has always encountered diverse forms of resistance. Playa del Carmen has offered work to the masses since its rise as a touristic destination, but more than 90% of the jobs offered are in the basic services for tourism such as waiters, cooks, chamber maids, construction workers. This standardization of work has provoked the development of a parallel informal work market which has become a very important and active factor of the local economy in Playa del Carmen.

According to INEGI (The National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Data) from January to September of 2004, an additional 88,000 people turned to the informal economy, which now represents 26.6% of the economically active sector.

Latapí, and González de la Rocha in their study of informal employment in Mexico suggest that to understand work informality, one must understand the main reason in terms of people's rationales and actions.⁶ Those working informally belong to two groups: those who have no option and therefore have to work informally, and those who have left formal employment.

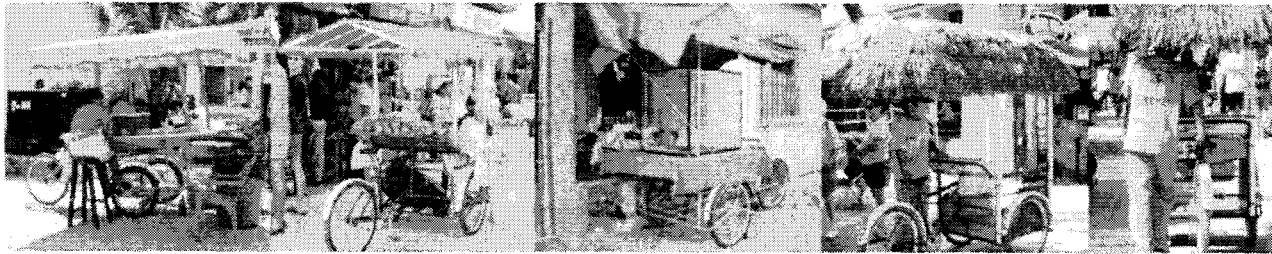
Both groups have grown during the last 12 years. The first, which consists mainly of women and

youths, has increased because the fall in household incomes as a result of falling wages for the male head or other main household worker has forced them to seek employment. Their inappropriate age, marital status or school credentials has pushed them towards informal employment. In fact, the participation of women is still rising, and this rise is occurring mostly in informal occupations. This is partly due to the characteristics of the women entering the labor market: most have little schooling, are over 30, with children, and are married or separated. The second group is self-employed because its relative attraction increases as formal wages decline.

The two groups are clearly distinguishable in terms of their earnings and their working hours as self-employed, informal workers. Skilled, experienced married men earn an average of three minimum wages working a 40 to 45 hour week. Unskilled, married mothers and young men and women earn 1.6 minimum wages working about 6 more hours, on average, than the legal working week. The first group consists most often of mechanics, fitters, joiners, cobblers, and servicemen of various kinds. The second group most often works in market stalls, or performs personal services.

One or both of the following must take place to stop the tendency to marginalize informality and to prevent deepening poverty. First, the incomes of those working formally must recover so that they form a significant market. Secondly, those working informally must improve their capacity to produce and deliver significant goods and services, so that their incomes can also improve.

The icon of self employment in Playa del Carmen is the utility tricycle. They are customized by their owners for various forms of improvised business enterprises. They appear at daybreak offering home made products: food, juices, fruit, bottled water, or services: transportation, paint jobs, plumbing jobs, shoe repairs. They take possession of the city during the day and night. They have become not only a tool for self employment, but also part of the folklore of Playa del Carmen, they are allowed to coexist within the exclusive space of the tourist.



Modified utility tricycles, Playa de Carmen

DESIGNING DIRECT ACTION: NODES

(Nomadic Design and Education System)

It is through the gap in the social and economic structure created by the currently polarized society of Playa del Carmen that we intend to enter and intervene. We seek to draw awareness to these important issues by acting as a NODE within the networks of disparate social groups. In so doing, we hope to demonstrate that through direct action, people can begin to assert their rights to their own city. With the belief that people can re-appropriate and reshape their own spaces and environments, we can combat the view that these inhabited spaces must be colonized only by abstract forces for planning and profit.

The challenge and main objective is to open up the potential of people's imaginations, introduce them to the possible directions their personal urban environments can take, and to provide a discursive experience for people in the community. The Nomadic Design and Education System or NODES is an itinerant forum or mobile information platform of ideas for communicating issues relevant to the sustainable development of the Quintana Roo region on the human scale. By initiating the project on the scale of the tricycle, we can engage the issue on the level of the public realm that the indigenous people, immigrant workers, and the tourists can relate to. From the bottom-up we believe awareness and change can occur.

The NODES can be organized within a traditional market organization, an image which is familiar to all social groups and a space for interaction, communication and economic activity. By using utility tricycles, the traditionally used transportation system in the city, we are conferring it the empowerment symbol of the self-employed. The NODES market will offer appropriation techniques translated into imaginative solutions of self development and potential profit to fund the next scale of intervention. This enables the system to evolve as the interest increases and allows a degree of spontaneity to be maintained by engaging the everyday life of the city.

The project will be initiated with a collaboration between local activist designers in the Quintana Roo region and the United States. This effort will be coupled with the work of architecture students from the US who are fluent in Spanish who will develop the ideas, construct the NODES and participate in the events that ensue. The students will provide the energy and ingenuity to construct the NODES with locally available materials combined with prefabricated components imported before the implementation begins. In May 2005, we will launch the DESIGN MARKET in Playa del Carmen. This event will feature the first NODES that will potentially combine a series of educational programs that promote alternative sustainable domestic practices through their design and activation:

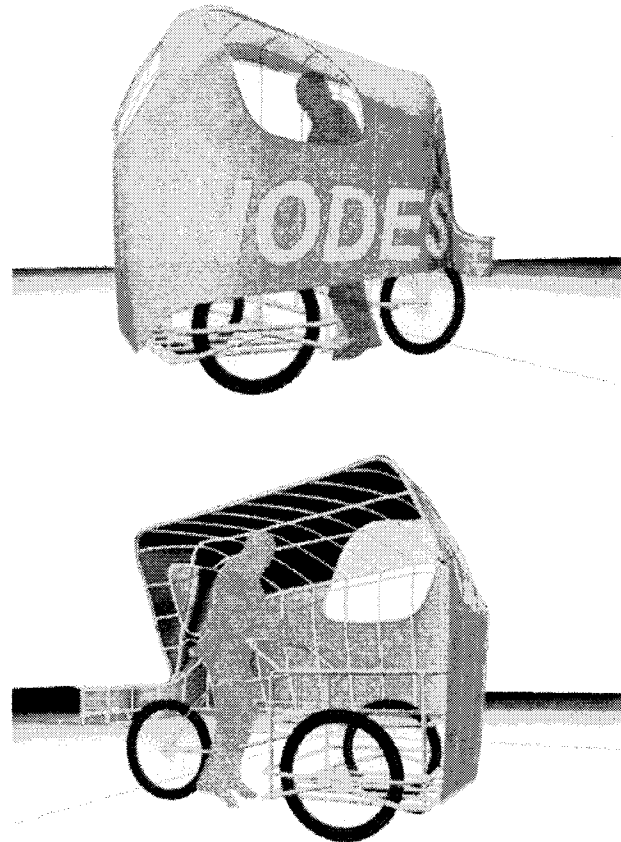
1. Hydroponic Gardening training tricycle



2. Video classroom tricycle
3. Solar Cooking training tricycle
4. Solar Water Pasteurizer training tricycle
5. Mobile architectural office tricycle

The first prototype NODE we have sketched is essentially a mobile tribune for the project. Its shape is determined by exploring the potential to introduce an asymmetrical envelope over the tricycle to maximize its visual impact from the street on its left side and to protect the rider from the dust of passing cars. On its right side, it retains its performative qualities by remaining open with respect to the sidewalk interactions that will emerge as it moves through the public space. A prefabricated frame supports a fabric membrane with the logo sink-screened on its surface. This NODE will traverse the city and disseminate information about the upcoming DESIGN MARKET and solicit for individuals interested in participating.

While these initial steps do not immediately solved the far-reaching problems outlined in this paper, they do offer an opportunity for us to enter the public discouse and raise awareness incrementally. The issues can be addressed through an activism that seeks to incorporate design and intinerate architecture as instrumental in the process of effecting change on the scale of the individual and the choices they can make for themselves on a day-to-day basis. It is through the participation in the ACSA conference and other events that we would like to raise awareness of the project and form a collaborative discussion with others who are working with similar social and architectural agendas.



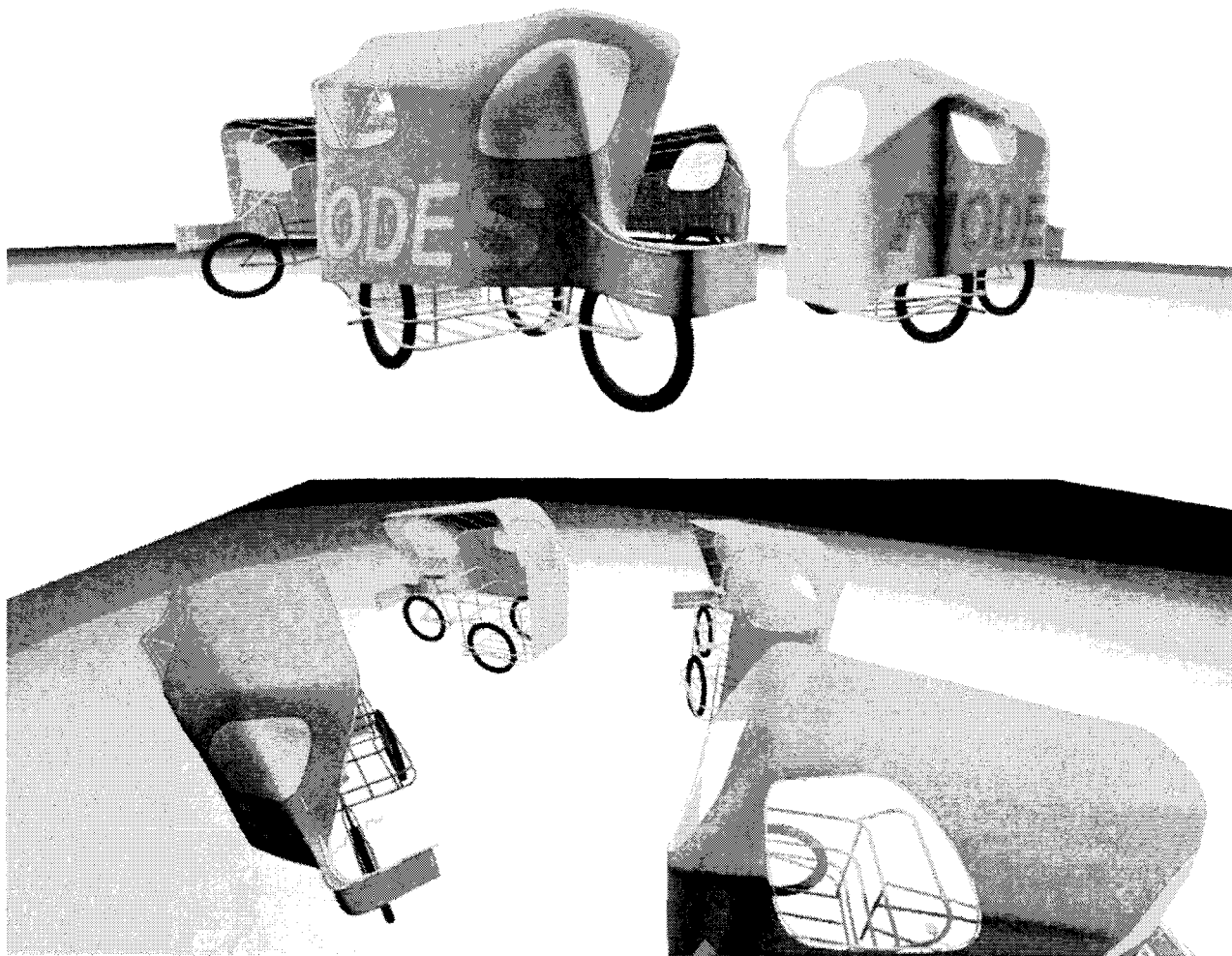
Prototype NODE tricycle

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FOOTNOTES

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⁵ Willem Van Vliet (editor), *Cities in a Globalizing World, Global Report on Human Settlements 2001*, UNITED NATIONS CENTRE FOR HUMAN SETTLEMENTS (HABITAT)

⁶ Latapí, Agustín Escobar & Mercedes González de la Rocha, *Crisis, restructuring and urban poverty in Mexico*, *Environment & Urbanization*, Vol. 7 No. 1, 1995 - IIED