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*(Very Much a) DRAFT*

*Producing Globalization in the Public Space of Mexico City*

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**ABSTRACT**

According to Davies (2000) the dystopian “cold” frozen geometries” of US cities are being countered by Latino populations offering “a ‘hotter’, more exuberant urbanism” that is “tropicalizing” the city with colors, smells and new public spaces. Complimentary hopes, with fewer romantic and ethnic overtones, are being expressed for a resurgent civics as Latinos recast the discursive content of the public sphere (Valle & Torres, 2000). Yet, in Mexico, debates about public space draw deeply pessimistic observations of a growing commodification and ‘globalization’ diluting the representation of national, religious and indigenous spatial identities, and concerns around crime prompting gated communities and private security measures. In the public sphere, many consider that deeper institutional democracy has afforded less space to social movements and non-governmental organizations, and an apathy to an active civics.

This paper takes a different perspective. I draw from the “Megaproject” of Santa Fe in Mexico City the largest urban development projects in Latin America during the 1990s and widely decried as insertion of a global urbanism imposed by undemocratic means for the benefit of transnational capital. The paper follows Fabian (1998) that there are many differentiated global spaces and a Lefebvrian perspective of everyday practice to show how urban spaces have been renegotiated and reframed, partly in response to unrealized economic growth, social polarization and urban violence, as well as an incipient social and cultural resistance. Although partially privatized, appropriation through everyday practices opens spaces to the possibility of transformation and subversion of their intended use. I follow the emergence of middle-income ‘street vendors’ providing food to office workers from the backs of cars, the use of the few public spaces for recreation, of proto social movements and the ‘mall youth’. Everyday contestation reveals “the local production of the global”.

**INTRODUCTION**

High on the profile of city imagineering is the megaproject which has become increasingly prominent on the urban landscape as multinational corporations and local or regional counterparts convince politicians and planners (increasingly cast as city managers) of the fundamental need for competitiveness in the global economy, stressing rationality, the independence of opposing or competing participants, and difference from other similarly competitive places (Burgess, 2001). The megaproject extrapolates the “time-space governance” of the global city by shaping/disciplining/controlling production

and exchange, through strategic planning authorities and Public Private Partnerships (PPP), in one-size fits all combinations of high technology office parks, cultural centers, shopping and entertainment malls, refurbished heritage districts, airports, and affluent housing complexes we see around us the ‘non-places’

What is more immediately apparent in the megaproject is their deliberate aim to be, and represent themselves. Poorer areas of the cities are segregated from these spaces by the use of highways, design strategies, and security apparatus. As noted by Graham and Marvin (2001), simultaneous to the infrastructure networks becoming “unbounded,” the built spaces of many cities become “rebounded,” with the connecting networks and enclosed built spaces supporting each other. Moreover, compared to the older idea of cities as ‘engines’ of national economies, the disconnected global nature of megaprojects suggest use of the city to produce profit for the benefit of non place-specific capital: transnational elites who may not claim allegiance to the megaproject cities and thus have no interest in creating a sense of identity in the developments. Navigating the resulting bland, superficial and generic spaces appear to be a cohorts of anomic, lonely individuals detached from a wider urban meanings and spirit.

The only refuge from exclusion and alienation seems to be consumption Garcia Canclini (2001) suggests the new citizenship is through consumption:

“Men and women increasingly feel that many of the questions proper to citizenship – where do I belong, what rights accrue to me, how can I get information, who represents my interests? – are being answered in the private realm of commodity consumption and the mass media more than in the abstract rules of democracy or collective participation in public spaces” (2001: 15)

Of course in broader terms we share the concern of Ortiz (2004) that democracy and freedom are being redefined in an era of neo-liberal globalization, as democracy becomes synonymous with access to a greater number of products, and freedom is reduced to choices for consumption and disengaged from concepts such as justice, equality or rights. However, we also think there is something to be salvaged from amongst the disdain for malls as the least enigmatic spaces in the city. The more generic the city, the more vital it becomes for inhabitants to struggle to reinscribe meaning and identity in these projects

through everyday life practices that might subvert the original intended uses of the spaces. Sometimes these attempts to reinscribe meaning takes the form of overt resistance, at others small everyday behaviors may emerge provoked, ironically, by the projects that seem intent on their repression.

As Bhabha (1994) indicates this mimicry is a sign of an articulation that appropriates an incomplete version of the original. In this slippage between the “original” and the “copy”, the possibility of resistance through appropriation is opened, and new unintended mixtures occur. The local and the global are reinvented constantly, and not inevitably to the preference of the global over a powerless local evening the South (see Hart, 2002) Mitchell (2000). These processes are not unidirectional, on the contrary the local by virtue of being a constitutive part of the global is modifying the global as much as the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyzes the ways in which the use of public space subverts top down planning through its spatial practices. The perspective used for the analysis asserts that local expressions are neither representations nor cases of global culture, rather the local is the global, even as globalization has space for centers and peripheries giving a sense that the global is more global in some places than in others (Fabian, 1998). Our notion of the local then is not a result of mythical inner roots but the product of a unique mixture of influences that, courtesy of neo-liberalism, is restructuring of time-spaces along particular lines, forming a temporary and provisional remaking of space, place and culture of already hybrid products of previous mixes (Massey, 1995). Local places remain to be imagined as particular articulations of social relations including the local and the global, and are thus not simply reducible to simple ideas of generic versus heterogeneous, iconographic or bland, empty or full of meaning, or simply better in one place due to cultural contingency than another. This conception of place is open, porous, hybrid, layered-place; the product of interaction.

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<sup>1</sup> There is little work on the architecture and spatial consequences of globalisation in Mexican cities but see Nivón Bolán (2000) and Murphy Erfani (1999).

## **SANTA FE, MEXICO CITY**

With the aim of making Mexico City more attractive for global capital the city government initiated the Santa Fe urban megaproject at the beginning of the 1990s. Located on the city's western fringe, politicians, planners and early developers presented an image of a desolate landscape with deep and arid ravines inhabited by people living in shacks with cardboard roofs, surrounded by mountains of garbage and by a fetid smell product of the combination of rotten fruits, dead animals, hospital refuse and human and animal excrement. The location of sand mines and the city's western garbage dump, Santa Fe was described by the city government as underutilized and as such an ideal place to develop a megaproject. Although the government also described the area as "populated by a small group of people", in reality approximately 2000 garbage pickers, one of the most underprivileged people in society, had lived there for decades and were displaced in order to build the megaproject." The multimillion dollar project was, to quote Georgina Velásquez a social worker employed by the government who worked with the garbage pickers for more than 10 years, "built on misery".

The Santa Fe megaproject was to convert the rubbish dump, sand mines and squatter areas, into the home of transnational companies, an American style shopping mall, services such as cafes and restaurants, private schools and universities, hospitals, high end gated communities and apartment buildings. The original project was designed by the signature Mexican architects Ricardo Legorreta and Teodoro Gonzalez de Leon and managed under a special agency called SERVIMET. Today, corporate offices of transnational companies such as Daimler Chrysler, Hewlett Packard, Erickson, Citibank-Banamex, General Electric, IBM, ABN Amro, Philip Morris, Kraft, Coca Cola, Sony and Telefonica, together with Mexican transnationals like Televisa, Jose Cuervo and Bimbo, are located in Santa Fe. Two major private universities have their campus in the area, as does Mexico's premier private hospital, and the Santa Fe mall, opened in 1995 as the largest and most luxurious mall in Latin America with 108,000m<sup>2</sup> and around 300 store, 14 movie theatres, a golf range, a sport center, and a kid's entertainment area. There are also dozens of high-end apartment buildings with many more under construction, plus one of the most exclusive gated communities in the city with a private golf course. The

‘success’ of Santa Fe is predicated on spatial segregation, exclusion, and privatization of the city space. Urban developments in the area are advertised with strap lines such as “CITY Santa Fe: Welcome to Civilization. Exclusivity in the best location” or “Grand Santa Fe: Located in the heart of Santa Fe, the financial, commercial, business, cultural, educational and residential center of the 21st century. Data on the population of Santa Fe varies widely, but a reasonable estimate is that around 10,000 live there and approximately 100,000 workers, students and visitors commute to the area during weekdays.

### **GLOBAL PUBLIC SPACE AND EVERY DAY PRACTICES**

Global urban practices seem to overturn the modern ideal that conceptualizes public space as democratic, in which open circulation, collective enjoyment and spontaneous encounters of people from diverse socio economic background granted to everyone. Indeed, the mall has become a symbol of the death of public space, including in Mexico. Juan represents an average patron of the Santa Fe mall, professional and upper middle class, he is the father of 6 and 7-year-old boys and likes to take them to the shopping center on weekends. To the suggestion about taking the boys to the park instead, he laughs with disdain and responds, “parks do not exist any longer, it is impossible to visit them with the current insecurity”. Paradoxically, kidnappings and car thefts at the parking lots of shopping malls have become rather common in the past few years, questioning whether the perception of security is well founded. Indeed, while a security discourse became a vital part of the marketing of megaprojects, there are now moves to present an alternative discourse. Today, the Santa Fe shopping center is one of the less policed in the city, it has 15 guards in the interior common spaces, and four police cars in the parking area.<sup>2</sup>

At first sight the “local” appears to be erased by the “global”. But we witness in the malls, as with other locales in Santa Fe that spaces are opened to wider ‘publics’ through

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<sup>2</sup> Compared with Plaza Galerías which has 30 guards and access is secured by policeman with trained dogs and Pabellón Polanco that has 60 guards (Reforma, 24 June 2004).

informal practices. These practices respond to and break through the design of the megaprojects for social groups and cars. In Santa Fe few concessions were made to the needs of lower or middle level employees: there are no places at walking distance to eat or to shop at convenience; pedestrian crossing points, benches or garbage cans are few.<sup>3</sup> Spaces, however, have been appropriated and contested (an inherent quality of public space), with street vending gaining a foothold due to the lack of services in a complex intermingling of formal (global?) and informal (local?) practices.

In Santa Fe streets seem rarely used by pedestrians, except around lunchtime when office workers come out of the buildings and walk to cars with open trunks, that appear only around lunchtime and sell all kinds of hot food. All the cars are parked illegally — the only legal parking areas are inside private buildings. Office workers eat on the street or go back to their offices with a brown bag containing their lunch, which they consume in eating areas that most corporate offices provide. In Santa Fe the vendors in the cars answer cellular phones, give out food menus written in small pieces of paper and charge for the lunch bags. This is the *new* modality of street food stands: using cars that are “less damaging” to the image of this supposedly pristine and well-organized global space, and cellular phones to inform the clients about the menu of the day and take orders. The values of this global era are flexibility and adaptation to the market demands; these vendors adopt these values through informality and transform them into strategies in order to fit within the new social and urban context.

One of the most interesting characters in Santa Fe’s public space is a woman, always dressed in jeans and a baseball cap, who goes by the name of “Jenny”. She claims to have been an administrative assistant in a one of the top lawyers firms that moved its offices to one of the first corporate buildings in the area. Like her coworkers she experienced the

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, while there are pavements in the business areas, between these and the drop-off points for transport there is much less if any provision. Open areas are criss-crossed with spontaneous paths, crossing points have been informally set up. Passengers of mini buses have to endure rapid drop-off and pick-ups from unscheduled locations, often on the side of the freeways, while some companies have responded to the lack of transport for non-car owning workers by providing coaches.

lack of suppliers of goods and services for the mid and low-level employees. She saw this as a business opportunity and decided to quit her formal sector work and become a street vendor. More than 10 years ago she started selling products from the trunk of her old car. Today, she owns a van from which she sells an incredible variety of goods such as candy, cigarettes, soft drinks, homemade sandwiches, and over the counter medicines. She parks in front of the building where she used to work, and sells her products from 9 am to 4 pm. Jenny makes five times more money as a street vendor than what she used to make while working for the lawyers office, her business keeps growing as the area grows. People from as diverse backgrounds as this gentrified area permits buy at her mobile-store. She is an established informal business, big enough for delivery vehicles of transnational food and beverage companies to serve her car as if it were a formal store. Some clients walk to her car, or she delivers to people's automobiles as they stop by on their way to work.

Of course, Jenny is not the only one who has thought of selling products in Santa Fe streets, but most of the street vendors have been removed or relocated by the neighbors association which, as mentioned above, acts as the only "authority" in the area. The primary concern expressed by this association is the "dirty" and "bad" image of the street vendors. They have tried to remove Jenny several times, but Jenny has found strategies to remain in business. She refuses to move claiming a right to earn an income good enough to send her two kids to school, and the right to use the city space in order to do so, even if, as she believes, it belongs to the buildings' owners. Jenny says that she is giving a service to the community, that she is "needed". She has collected firms in support of her permanence. She also claims to have a letter making the neighbors association responsible if anything bad happens to her. According to executives of the neighbors association, when the police have tried to displace her, she resists by going under her car and when pulled out claims she's being sexually harassed. The head of the neighbors association described Jenny as his main headache and says they are determined to displace her at one point or another.

Carlos, sells and installs glass for the corporate buildings, but as many people found it hard to make a living with his formal sector job and decided to become a street vendor.



He realized the potential of having a business on the side and together with his wife started making croissants and sandwiches and selling them in their car. Now Carlos combines two businesses, the formal glass selling and the informal food selling. He does business with people working for the same companies, at different levels of course, who call him to the same cellular phone at his “office”, that is his car parked on a forbidden spot in Santa Fe. It is interesting to note that Carlos is not the only one doing *formal* work from an *informal* office. The neighbors association, which is extremely concerned with informal activities happening on public space, has its offices in a residential apartment building, which means that they are violating land use codes and therefore are operating as illegally as the street vendors. Of course they are not even aware of their informality. This illustrates how for Mexico City’s inhabitants informal activities are so embedded in their every day practices that are no longer noticed.

Street food stands keep being removed by the police, but they keep reappearing in different spots. It is a continuous fight between the sellers and the neighbors association. Several billboards reading: “Do not promote the street vending, it affects us all. It is illegal, generates insecurity, garbage, pollutes the area and damages the development’s image” signed by the Santa Fe Neighbors Association intend to prevent people from buying from the street stands. However the billboards are largely ignored, not least as in Mexico people from all social strata eat street food. Luxurious cars stop at the food stands and well-dressed executives enjoy a taco next to a taxi driver, car park attendant, or construction workers. For a moment the ideal of modern public life comes true, although few words are exchanged among strangers, and accommodation of difference and equality are made possible. This demonstrates the possibility for tolerant anonymous encounters among different social groups, even if the design of the streets promotes segregation and highlights inequality. When traditional practices open up the opportunity for subverting these intentions, modern public space can be the choice of many people.

In the city, other jobs linked to informality have appeared around the megaprojects in numerous guises. By design, the roads and grassed areas of Santa Fe are form circulation and image, but to the construction workers, cleaners, porters, office workers and others

they become places for catching a nap, something to eat, a place to talk. For a few moments these superfluous spaces appear to be alive, full of people and activity.

The malls and other areas of the megaproject are not accessible to all. The extremely high prices make it impossible for most Mexicans to buy anything. In the case of Santa Fe almost 65% of the visitors claimed to have undergraduate degrees and 12% graduate ones (Cornejo, 2001), an average far higher than Mexico City's median of 22.1% for undergraduate degrees (INEGI, 2000). Not only products for sale are expensive, the options for entertainment are for most people prohibitive. Thirteen year old Oscar whose one bedroom house in an irregular settlement has panoramic views of Santa Fe, told Maria that one day he and his family decided to go to the cinema but once there they discovered they didn't have enough money to enter. They visited the Mexican chain store Sanborns, but once again everything was too expensive. At the other extreme, "Kid's City" (La ciudad de los niños) provides children between 9 months and 16 years with the opportunity to "live like adults" in a scaled down city where children are given "little pesos" or a credit card with which to shop, eat at a restaurant, open a bank account or go dancing. From an early age they learn how the consumer society functions. All the scaled down business that exist in the "city" are real brands such as McDonald's and Coca-Cola. A group of 200 people are in charge of controlling the kids. The managing director explains that the "La Ciudad de los Niños" franchise will soon be exported from Mexico to Japan in 2006 and contracts have been signed for "cities" in Italy and Dubai (Gascón, 2005). While the kids play, the parents can watch videos of different worldwide spectacles or access the Internet with no extra cost; made to feel part of the "world community" is integral to the 'Ciudad' experience.

Other forms of appropriation however are also present. Let us consider 19 year old Alan whom I interviewed while he worked handing out pieces of paper advertising the women's gym Curves at a traffic light in Santa Fe. He was born in the village of Santa Fe, the area next to the Megaproject that gave it its name. He earns less than 200 USD a month and was promised a health insurance, which after a month of work he does not have yet. Alan remembers when the garbage dump was still open. At that time, rumors

about the shopping mall being built started to circulate in town. He says that then no one believed it possible. Nevertheless the mall was built and furthermore it was accompanied by an unbelievable transformation of the place. Alan claims that simply visiting the mall makes him feel like “having money”. He and his friends go to the shopping center to see *güeritas* (blond girls).<sup>4</sup> He says that a few of the *niñas fresa* (rich girls) will talk to them and even invite them to raves, but they have no money to go. They also look at the clothing and music stores to see what is fashionable. After getting some ideas Alan and his friends go to *Tepito* – the largest market of pirate products in the city- and they buy almost identical items at prices they can afford. To Alan many girls from his neighborhood go often to the mall and even if they cannot buy anything just by being there they feel *fresa*.

Rather than represent a separation of public and private, rich (inside) and poor (outside), and global and local, the malls offer a tangling of these categories, indicating once more that these distinctions are not separate and dualistic. On the contrary, we see them as mutually constituted: the private becomes public as the private space of the mall allows more social interaction than public areas. Mimicry too resurfaces. As the rich seek to copy the lifestyles of Miami, Milan, Paris or London through the acquisition of ‘originals’ so people like Alan acquire the pirate versions. The slippage between the “original” and the “copy”, the possibility of resistance through appropriation is opened and the impossibility to be part of a certain consumer culture is challenged through the informal markets. The shopping mall has become a place for encounters where a desire for inclusion and a desire to be alike through consumption of similar brands, some original some not, can be played out.

## Conclusion

Architects may be failing to fulfill humanity’s need to have obviously meaningful buildings in preference for taking the transnational coin, but people are investing these

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<sup>4</sup> The film *Amarte Duele* (Rivera, 2002) portrays these interclass encounters. In the plot two teenagers search for love and freedom amidst class divides, prejudice, peer pressure and urban violence. This Romeo and Juliet story is set in the Santa Fe mall’s surrounding working class colonias and wealthy areas.

landscapes with their own meanings. While we are attuned to looking past places that seem superfluous to the megaproject, we hope to have revealed in this paper how the megaprojects themselves are cut across with small interjections of everyday life beyond the intention of administrators or architects. Our concern, then, is that the debate about contemporary landscape meaning as seen through the space of the megaproject cannot be limited to the world of architectural critique. Before we decry spaces as bland, generic, or shallow, we must consider the possibilities for heterogeneity and the recreation of public spaces. The idea in this paper then is to present a view that follows Lefebvre's (1974) conceptualization of space as being actively produced, which induces us to think about the dynamic and complex interplay of space – ranging from a single building to the global scale – as constitutive factors which are in continuous mutual creation and re-creation. If we think of space as being actively produced, it is easy to recognize that the global situation influences the local one, and vice versa.

We have tried to show that various unintended uses and meanings have been transposed onto the claimed 'global', managed and controlled space of Santa Fe. These meanings have been made possible largely through informal practices, producing a particularly local version of the global, not as an effect of global forces but as an imaginative involvement with and thus constitutive of globalization (see Hart 2002). Of course, this process benefits some more than others, but just as importantly different people appropriate the space in very diverse ways. The shopping mall satisfies a search for modernity through new identity components in consumption patterns, and in which the office, shop and entertainment complex workers, supposedly at the forefront of modernity, are complicit (as uncertain moderns). This site simultaneously produces a new arena of negotiation and conflict, creating new forms of exclusion particularly for the is in some senses private, it is briefly and without strategy, public in ways that are not exuberant, colorful or rhythmic, but quiet, respectful, hard-working and effective.

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