

## Green and Modern: Planning Mexico City 1900-1940

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During the early decades of the twen-tieth century, a group of visionary planners undertook the physical transformation of Mexico City reinter-preting concepts from Ebenezer How-ard's Garden Cities, Jean Claude For-estier's *Systèmes de parcs*, to Patrick Geddes' Regional Planning to provide green public spaces and comprehen-sibly enhance the quality of life in the city. Miguel Angel de Quevedo, Car-los Contreras and Jose Luis Cuevas Pietrasanta set the urban planning framework which addressed social, functional and environmental issues during this period, after which indus-trialization policies radically trans-formed urban planning into an in-strument to achieve economic devel-opment rather than a tool to extend welfare.

Although Mexico City has always tried to embrace modernity as a recurrent aspiration over the centuries, the perception of the urban environment has changed according to ideal views of social order, material and cultural progress and the role of the city within the nation-building project. However, the importance of key planners of that period and the breadth of their thought on the physical development of Mexico City has been overlooked as well as the major sources where they drew insights and concepts.

### 1. HAUSSMANN: THE MODERN CITY IDEALS

There is little doubt that Haussmann's interventions as *Prefect de Seine* in Paris granted him a widespread influence on planners in Latin America. The Baron's spectacular transformation of Paris was soon embraced as unquestioned urban *savoir faire* which strengthen the French predominance not only in social and political thought but also in the Fine Arts and city design. Mexican Elites worshiped Haussman's Paris as the ultimate model to follow in order to join the capitalist circuit of world-class cities<sup>1</sup>. City reforms in general and urban renovation in particular, were part of a package to update

urban structures and come to terms with urban modernity.

Urban planning in Mexico City has been legitimized by ideological frameworks that have been used to manipulate and enhance power structures over time. The idea of planning became part of the political agenda since the end of the XIX century, when Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) ruled Mexico following enlighten and hygienist models from Europe to "modernize" the country by benefiting the interests of the wealthy Elite. However, Díaz was to be surrounded by a group of *científicos* and highly eminent specialists in planning, such as Miguel Angel de Quevedo and Jose Luis Cuevas Piet-rasanta whom, among others, were concerned about the quality of life in the city and the provision of public open spaces<sup>2</sup>. Even more decisive for the undertaking of the *grand-stravaux* was the intervention of Mr. Jose Yves Limantour, State Secretary of Finances, who worked his way up to the realization of the projects he had in mind from a land developer perspective stated in his *memoirs*:

"In politics, when you want to achieve an objective, it is always necessary to move ahead in zigzag or in curves [...]. It is not as in man-agement where if you need to get good results, the only way is the straight line."<sup>3</sup>

Miguel Angel de Quevedo was ap-pointed as Head of Mexico city's De-partment of Parks and Gardens in 1903, where he set up the task of raising the standard of public space by creating more than 40 parks, in-creasing the public space percentage up to 15% of the total area and pro-viding open spaces at less than 500 meters from any given point in the city. Trained as an engineer in France, Quevedo was deeply influ-enced by the ideas Jean Claude Nicho-las Forestier and Ebenezer Howard's garden cities<sup>4</sup>;

Moreover, he was convinced that cities would have to be healthier and serve the human needs of its citizens and became known as the "tree apostle" out of his extensive reforestation campaigns, and his efforts stressed the importance of an inclusive approach to policies, addressing social welfare concerns as well as the cultural significance of the new spaces in relation with the existing context<sup>5</sup>. Following similar organizations around the world, he founded the *Liga de la Defensa Urbana* (Urban Defense League), as an entity aimed to protect and preserve parks and gardens within the city and also was in charge of creating future public landmarks such as the Alameda park as well as the Santo Domingo, El Carmen and Vizcainas plazas.

"Our Alameda is a place which provides great benefits to a large number of citizens who feel overwhelmed by urban stress, every time more intense, sickening and annoying. This park may help to restore a healthier physical and mental equilibrium"<sup>6</sup>

Based on hygienic arguments, Quevedo would complain about street vendors exposing food in an unsterilized environment, but also because they reduced public spaces and walking areas. Aesthetics were also part of his agenda, and the creation of promenades, boulevards and plazas formed part of an "embellishment" strategy that could take advantage of every opportunity to ameliorate the environment.

It is worth noting that Quevedo looked closely to Frederick Law Olmsted interventions in Boston and Chicago for inspiration when designing metropolitan parks, and was also influenced by Jose Luis Cuevas Pietrasanta's inclination towards Ebenezer Howard and his vision of garden cities as a possible solution for workers' housing. These compounds were envisioned as suburban schemes for the emerging industrial workers population and some remarkable examples were envisioned at "El Buen Tono" and "Colonia Ferrocarrilera" in Orizaba. Following the latest theories in England and the United States, sub-urban housing was intended to become natural enclaves where communities, work and nature would merge altogether. The seminal idea of an industrial and commercial center connected to the residential periphery was present in the minds of planners and public officials all over the country.

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the XX century a more European model started to unfold when residential "Colonias" around public spaces and modern infrastructures and services emerged. Roma, Juárez, Hipodromo Condesa, and Santa Maria la Rivera districts were developed by private international investors who profited from the government provision of licenses and tax benefits to enhance real state developments.

Under Diaz's dictatorship and with a stable economy, the city aspired to access world-class circuits, even when income disparities and social inequalities were developing and strengthening a *dual* socioeconomic system.

Before the revolution broke up in 1910, planning had been characterized by hierarchical decision-making, the legitimization of plans by group of "experts" and international business-men taking a leading role. Industries started to locate near the northern part of the city and simultaneously, segregation was introduced through zoning: lower income citizens in the north and east, middle in the center and the higher income in the west. As the country's economic engine, Mexico City attracted many people from the rest of the country which settled in the worst areas of the inner city, rental housing known as "vecindades" or in the peripheral areas, mainly as tenants.

## 2. THE "GARDEN CITY" MOVEMENT AND OTHER KEY INFLUENCES

Despite Howard's publication of his influential book "To-morrow: a peaceful path to real reform" was first published in 1898, it was its second edition "Garden Cities of tomorrow" (the new title for the 1902 edition) which was the most influential in Latin America<sup>7</sup>.

Ebenezer Howard stands alone as a social reformer concerned with improving the living conditions of the working classes. It was deeply influenced by the utopian tradition of the XIX century (Owen, Fourier) in their aims to create a perfect self-sufficient and independent community although he had in mind its reproduction into conurbations of hundreds of thousands of people.

Howard's ideas were to be shaped during his *sejour* in Chicago from 1872-1876, in which he may have

experienced the post-fire rebuilding process (after 1871) as well as being aware of Frederick Law Olmsted's Riverside garden suburb just outside of Chicago<sup>8</sup>. However, one particular book have been credited to influence Howard's ideas deep inside: Edward Bellamy's *Looking backwards 2000-1887* (1888) which was very critical of capitalism and proposed a society organized on moral principles structured around central planning. Regarding this last volume, Howard reflected on the living conditions of his fellowmen in London: "...there came to me an overpowering sense of the temporary nature of all I saw, and of its entire unsuitability for the working life of the new order –the order of justice-, unity and friendliness"<sup>9</sup>.

Howard decided to apply these ideas within the well-defined scale of a city and published his influential book in 1898, the same year when he founds the Garden City and Town Planning Association in order to create a City planning movement aimed by social reforms<sup>10</sup>. Howard materialized his ideas in the Garden-City concept, although there were various predecessors. John Ruskin wrote about green belts within a short walk from the city and he even attempts to build a garden-suburb outside Oxford in 1871<sup>11</sup>. Another key influences were Henry George, Peter Kropotkin and Benjamin Richardson.

Henry George arrived in London in 1884 and was already know for his "simple tax" proposal, to re-integrate the rental income back to the communities, Kropotkin influenced Howard with his writings on "industrial villages" dealing with the symbiosis between the industry and the countryside made possible through the decentralizing capabilities of electric transport<sup>12</sup> such as Benjamin Ward Richardson's *Hygenia or the city health* (1876) dealing with good communications, natural environment and wide public spaces.

Interestingly, Howard followed the fate of the earliest radical utopia colonies as was the case of Topolobampo in Mexico. This communitarian enterprise started with Albert K. Owen, an American engineer invited to collaborate with the Mexican government in the layout of railroads across the northern part of the country<sup>13</sup>. Owen started by horse-riding his way from Colorado Springs to Mexico City in order to oversee the possible route of the railway. Finally, he settled in Topolobampo bay and started his social experiment by founding a utopia colony in which he would control all productive activity.

Owen's attempts to centralize all finances proved to be far too overwhelming for the community and after nearly five years of its foundation, the experiment simply fell apart.

Howard assembled his ideas from all these sources and advocated for de-centralization of society in residential communities of no more than 30,000 people surrounded by a green-belt of factories, farms and parks. A critical issue in the ideal community plan was the appropriation of the surplus resulting of the rise in land values created after the originally agricultural land would be transformed into semi-urban land. First, the money would go to repay the original investors, then to purchase the bonds issued for the construction and finally, the rents could be used to fund schools, hospitals and other services for the community<sup>14</sup>.

A crucial accomplishment regarding the social ideal was the materialization of the first two Garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn where the architectural interpretation of Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker became the poster child of the movement nationally and abroad. Ironically, the communal experiment instead of having been supported financially by the cooperative movement in Britain, it was to be funded by a group of liberal magnates<sup>15</sup>.

Ebenezer Howard's had a profound influence in Mexico City's planners: Jose Luis Cuevas Pietrasanta first experiment was the "Colonia Ferrocarrilera" in the city of Orizaba, which was intended to improve the rail company workers' living conditions. However, when designing Chapultepec Heights (1922) and Hi-podromo Condesa (1926) developments after the "garden city" concept, Cuevas left aside the original idea of social welfare for the more lucrative of residential housing for upscale markets.

It is possible that Howard's ideas of social change were not acknowledged in Mexico at the time since the main planning journal emphasized his commitment to decentralize the cities and to join nature, work and dwellings as his main achievement, leaving behind his broader aims for community work, redistribution of resources as well as his social utopian project<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, a special report from the same issue addressed the "new town" of Radburn, New Jersey as the "first city designed to solve in a scientific fashion, the existing problems of transit congestion and public security". The report stressed the scientific methods used to conceive such a

wonder in which nature and leisure would stand out already with the ingredients of the suburban neighborhood that was to follow.

Therefore, concerns for building residential developments around public spaces remained, but the intended betterment for the working classes diluted in front of the interests of developers. It is worth noting that even when Letchworth and Welwyn were eventually populated by middle and upper-middle income groups, Chapultepec Heights and Hipodromo Condesa "colonias" were envisioned to be high-income residential neighborhoods right from the beginning. Moreover, the intended "marriage" between town and country was also overlooked since the "colonias" were envisioned as part of the city and not as a satellite sub-centers which would preserve farming, protect the natural environment and prevent the overcrowding associated with urban centers.

Even when Ebenezer Howard's ideas had quite an impact in current planning at the time, it was Jean Claude Forestier who influenced Miguel Angel de Quevedo earlier and to a greater extent. As a keynote speaker at the Hygiene Exposition of 1911, De Quevedo acknowledged Forestier's guidance in documenting the cases he presented in his address from which it is also possible to trace the same rationale exhibited in *Grandes Villes et Systèmes de Parcs*<sup>17</sup>. De Quevedo advocated strongly to generate the right conditions of hygiene and sanitation in the city while Forestier would go even further to prevent the risks of physical or moral contamination through open spaces.

Forestier himself was also influenced by the Garden city movement and also claimed the return to the country side, praising the creation of parks, gardens and playgrounds not only because of their benign and healthier features but because of their potential to raise land's value.

De Quevedo was eager to apply Forestier's conception of a system of Parks and he advocated for the establishment of broader areas for natural reserves as greenbelts on the western and southern parts of Mexico City. In his writings, he presented his arguments referring implicitly and explicitly the work of Forestier, and even using his former comparison of cities according to the equation of hectares of open space per inhabitant including Mexico City.

Quevedo undertook the challenge of Greening the capital with an structured plan to create a system of parks which included parkways, promenades, parks, woodlands, squares, etc., and even followed the Urban Defense Leagues initiative set by Forester to advocate for urban public space, and enforce the existing regulations to protect open areas against speculation, change in land use or the alteration of common good projects.

### 3. GREEN AND MODERN: CARLOS CONTRERAS' MASTER PLAN

"The embellishment of a mayor city, capital of a Nation, is not an issue of academic or abstract beauty, but suggests a cultural element to assert the national identity"<sup>18</sup>

The planning agenda's opening remarks of major Aaron Saenz right after the agrarian revolution impasse reflects an explicit commitment to aesthetics, culture an identity which at the time reflected a heart-felt aspiration to define what it meant to be Mexican. In the context of post-revolutionary Mexico, Carlos Contreras represented the international approach to planning that drew ideas from ongoing plans and programs around the world and promoted the establishment of urban legislation, construction codes and regulations within the Mexican legal framework. He organized the Sixteenth International Congress on Planning and Housing in 1938 by direct appointment of the president Lázaro Cardenas, and this served to elevate the status of planning to the highest levels of public policy in the country.

Carlos Contreras is credited of having introduced modern planning in Mexico. Educated at the University of Columbia and a delegate at the various international housing and planning conferences, Contreras advocated for the need of urban legislation and construction codes. In a period in which Bauhaus and Le Corbusier's ideas were highly praised around the world, Contreras followed the idea of automobile-based cities connected through networks of roads (highways systems). Influenced by the Regional Plan of New York of 1929, Contreras embraced suburban cities for both residential compounds and working class units in his plan while the first experiment on working class compounds

was Colonia Balbuena (1933).

With a strong emphasis on zoning as the priority tool for planners job, Contreras criticized the ongoing growth through additions and disordered overlapping of building and suggested the creation of a more defined and rational organization of space.

In this period the International Con-gresses of Modern Architecture (C.I.A.M.) were on the make and they had already a huge resonance around the world. In the official statement of the preparatory congress of 1928 is read:

“Urbanism is the organization of all forms of collective life within the city and the countryside. Urbanism cannot be determined by aesthetic considerations but rather exclusively by functional demands. It is the prime duty of urbanism to order functions: housing, working and leisure”.

Contreras advocated for the creation of public spaces and provided an amazing set of creative solutions: from an agricultural park in Texcoco to the creation of extended parkways along the main avenues like Insurgentes and Tlalpan. He also proposed the extension of major existing parks such as Chapultepec and Alameda, the creation of new plazas and parks which at the time –surprisingly- contemplated a mix of public, private and residents’ ownership. A major concern for Contreras was the establishment of a vast Forest Conservation Districts System within the city (as Coyoacan, Xochimilco and Mixcoac) as well as a parks and gardens system surrounding the metropolitan area (Desierto-Los Remedios-Milpa Alta-Xochimilco-Texcoco) which would have proved a visionary urban statement. Landscape recycling was another variation on the conservation theme, including the recovery of the canal’s network and fluvial transportation within the city (at the time a real option), as well as the creation of promenades along the existing creeks in Chapultepec Park, or even recycling old railways into linear parks.

Contreras envisioned a Master Plan for Mexico City (1932) that was highly influential ever since, and even if the plan was only partially implemented at the time, many of the proposals were enacted in later stages such as the *Circuito Interior* highway, extending Pino Suarez and 5 de Febrero avenues, as well as several parkways. Contreras suburban



Fig.1. Contreras’ Master Plan for Mexico City, 1933.

thrive was evident with the proposal to electrify the train’s system to nearby Cuernavaca in order to foster suburban residential developments along the way particularly in Lomas de Chapultepec, Mixcoac, San Angel and Tizapan. Contreras paid special attention to the provision of public spaces, parks and forests. Private parks were incorporated into the public domain, new parks were created from scratch, or profiting from a land use charge (Noche Buena Park created after the closure of a brick factory), the cemeteries were considered as “commemoratives parks”, traditional parks as Chapultepec and Balbuena were remodeled, reforestation programs in the outskirts of the city were implemented (Lomas de Tacubaya, Santa Fe, Ajusco, Lomas de Chapultepec), and sports clubs and new plazas flourished. The role of the state in reinforcing this model relied on the priority of improving communications in order to lay down the basis for industrialization. It is widely acknowledge that in order to achieve the Mexican miracle of *steady growth*, the physical infrastructures played a crucial role. However, the idea of “progress” had a significant role in legitimizing the use of the automobile rather than public transport. Moreover, the growing population in the capital demanded mass

transport in order to cope with the incoming number of people who joined the industrial impulse of the thirties and which would dominate the development rationale for decades to come.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The aspiration to achieve modernity following the paths of "development" has been instrumental to legitimize change, transformation and decisions grounded mostly on ideological assumptions. The allocation of public space in Mexico City during the earlier decades of the twentieth century was far more concerned with health and welfare issues than with an emerging new utopian society that Ebenezer Howard proclaimed. In a certain way, the implementation of the garden city's concept in Mexico followed the more pragmatic experiences of Letchworth, Welwyn and Radburn rather than following the aspirations to transform society. Finally, a comprehensive approach to planning may require a second thought on social welfare and redistribution, in which planning can be used as an instrument to include, integrate, redistribute and better allocate the benefits –such as public space– for the entire city.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arturo Almandoz, *The emergence of modern town planning in Latin America –after a histo-riographic review–* Paper presented at the Fin-nish research seminar on Latin America, Hel-sinki, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Cuevas Pietrasanta was influenced by Ebene-zer Howard and by Patrick Abercrombie since he attended some of his conferences in London and later incorporated these ideas into his own proposals.

<sup>3</sup> Jose Ives Limantour, *Apuntes sobre mi vida pública 1892-1911*, Mexico: Porrúa, 1965, p.97.

<sup>4</sup> Forestier also designed parks and open spaces in Buenos Aires an Havana in the mid-twenties while Howard had only influence on various garden suburbs for middle and working classes in the 30's.

<sup>5</sup> In fact his first concern was health and infra-structures and he attended international conferences on hygiene in Paris (1900) and Berlin (1907), were he collected ideas on systems of parks and public spaces.

<sup>6</sup> Revista *Planificación* No.27, Mexico City, 1932.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting the difference pointed out by may in the sense that crucial graphics to understand his statement

were missing in the second edition preventing the readers from an accurate picture of his thought.

<sup>8</sup> Beevers, R. *The garden city utopia: a critical biography of Ebenezer Howard*. London: Macmillan, 1987.

<sup>9</sup> E. Howard "Spiritual influences toward social progress", in *Light*, April 30, 1910, p.195.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, his hardcore supporters were not architects or planners but social reformers, included Sydney Webb and George Bernard Shaw.

<sup>11</sup> J. Ruskin, "Sesame and Lily" (1865), in P. Lavedam in *Histoire de l'Urbanisme, époque contemporaine*, Paris, 1952.

<sup>12</sup> Kropotkin, Peter *Fields, factories and work-shops (1898): or Industry combined with agri-culture and brain work with manual work*, New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1913.

<sup>13</sup> Most notably, the Chihuahua-Pacific scenic route.

<sup>14</sup> However the rent increase envisioned by Howard was to be restricted in the first Garden City in order to guarantee the tenants that they would not experience drastic rent increases.

<sup>15</sup> Cooperativists argued that the Garden City would be the ideal grounds for capitalism structures to be preserved.

<sup>16</sup> *Revista Planificación* Tomo II, No.14, Enero-Marzo, Mexico City, 1929.

<sup>17</sup> De Quevedo M.A., *Espacios libres y reservas forestales. Su adaptación a jardines, parques y lugares de juego*, Mexico: Tip. Y Lit. Gomar y Busson, 1911.

<sup>18</sup> Saenz Aarón, *Gobernar a la ciudad es servirla*, Informe del C. Jefe de Gobierno del Dis-trito Federal a la Ciudad de Mexico, 1934.

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