The Hermeneutics of Irresolution: A Mapping of Mexico City’s Urban Imaginary

Tlatelolco is a symbol of something mythical in status, universal in scope. It is a milestone that goes further in meaning than the Maoist-infused student riots of the same year in Paris, or those of a select few several months later in Rimini could ever have hoped to go. It accomplished very much the same as did the Prague Spring – namely, very little in the short term, reverberatingly much in the long. This comparison can extend further: *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas* (in Tlatelolco) is to Mexico City what the Old Town Square is to Prague.

Tlatelolco’s main plaza, as the name infers, displays three architectural period-types: the pre-Columbian, the Colonial, and the Modern. Prague’s Old Town square also displays three architectural period-types, similarly indicating the socio-cultural hegemony of the day: Gothic (Carolingian), Baroque (Bohemian), and Modern. Both of these squares were the main sight of their citizens’ respective revolts against authoritarian oppression in 1968, and, tellingly, both were the sight of the most widespread abuse by the oppressors (Williams, p41). The location of both these revolts, however, was neither random nor pragmatic in the organizational sense; it was purely symbolic. The protesters were invoking something that was too great for banners, something that the myopic tyrants ruling them were too blind to see – they were saying, “We have a history and it is around us, organically … and we are proud of *all* of it. This [however] we are not proud of” (Poniatowska, *Massacre*, p318).

If I had as my task to explore Prague’s urban imaginary – that is, the varying imagery Prague has provoked throughout its history – then the Prague Spring, and especially the Old Town Square, would have to find a way in. Given my current task to chronicle Mexico City’s urban imaginary, *La Plaza de las Tres Culturas* will serve as my vantage point for exploring not three, but four period
types, as bisecting the umbrella definition of modern to include pre-revolution and post-revolution proves highly important in Mexico City’s case.

In analyzing pre-Columbian Tenochtitlán, I will use the image initially created by European mapmakers for circulation in Europe while contrasting it with the more scientific, true to form evidence that archaeological hindsight has provided us about the Aztec capital. In doing this, I aim to dichotomize the urban imaginary of Tenochtitlán / Mexico City pre-17th century and hence explicate the dualist inconsistencies between image and reality that were especially prevalent during Spanish colonialism’s ‘coming of age’ in New Spain. Given that the pre-Columbian period so determinedly spills into the Colonial in regards to Mexico City’s image, the analysis of the Colonial period will principally center on the distinguishing features of this new period, such as the newly developing administrative functions the city took on, as well as the socio-historical happenstance that this new city-type adapted itself around (i.e. criollo class emergence, natural disasters).

The pre-revolutionary image of Mexico City is one where the Porfiriató and its francophone tendencies (and the thirty year creative license they were awarded) not only changed the urban landscape of the capital, but also effectively transformed the projected image of Mexico (and its capital) into something entirely novel in ideology. The transfer to post-revolutionary Mexico City proves less abrupt than one might think. Given the extenuating time span that such a definition allows, I will include three main periods/events which I consider to be particularly noteworthy in re-imagining Mexico City in the twentieth century: first, the revolution itself, with its bucolic populism and gun-wielding modernism extending into the 1940’s and adapting into a highly dysfunctional kind of socialism; next the student massacre of 1968 precisely because it is a case in point in the broadcasting of an image-type (city or otherwise); and finally the earthquake of 1985 as the imagery provoked through it was both aesthetically and institutionally relevant to re-imagining yet again the Mexico City urbs. Because I have chosen Prague as an urban-cultural parallel, I will make occasional references to the Czech capital where I see that they might further strengthen a given observation on
Mexico City -- this is not, I should add, to emphasize the importance of the events of 1968 over those of other historical periods, but rather to demonstrate what I find to be a prescient instance of transcultural synchronicity.

I. Pre-Columbian

Tenochtitlán was at the height of its greatness at the time of Cortés' arrival -- both culturally as a highly developed city and politically as the nerve center of the most powerful empire for a thousand miles. We will never be able to recapture the awe of the dumbfounded conquistadors when they looked upon the quarter of a million-person city for the first time from the heights of Chapultepec. Nevertheless, those who made it their task to represent the Aztec capital to their anxious (and bankrupt) patrons in Spain initially did so for reasons that had more to do with preexisting ideas about the mystical, otherworldly nature of the Americas as a whole than with anything remotely cartographic in the technical, scholarly sense of the term. Once conceived of in tangible form, however, these imaginative illustrations (most often in the form of woodcuts) were swiftly expropriated by the Protestant mapmaking establishment of northern Europe (Kagan, p88-89).

Given the vehemently antagonistic political climate of the day vis-à-vis religion, these Hanseatic craftsmen had very little incentive to "civilize" the Islario image of 1524 that had come to exist largely through Cortes' letters to Charles V (Kagan, p90). Instead, Mexico City remained Tenochtitlán, a Pagan city replete with idolatrous symbolism and sacrificial imagery. It could be capably argued that these mapmakers might have been invoking their views on one of the most debated issues of their day -- namely, transubstantiation. But whether their reasoning behind keeping the frontispiece-style image of Mexico City well into the 17th century was in a conscious decision to correlate cannibalism (as the Amerindians were collectively stigmatized) with the particular theological significance Catholics attributed to the taking of the Eucharist (i.e. actual flesh, not symbolic flesh) is less important than the result -- specifically, a rendering of post conquest Mexico City that was highly idealized and unconcerned with actuality.
To be fair to the Protestants though, the *Islario* image of 1524 that remained definitive through the publication of several new atlas editions – with its extravagant bridge-network and sultry, cloud-like form – was not entirely the result of neglect or misrepresentation by the era’s preeminent cartographers. The only way, in fact, that the *Islario* image could have lasted as long as it did as Mexico City’s urban imaginary in Europe was through Spanish assistance, however indirect. It was, then, at least in part, through the Hapsburg monarchy’s superstitious (and unequivocally ignorant) desire to keep American town plans unpublished that the city was relegated to being an utter anachronism for over a hundred years after its ‘founding’ (and in several cases, much longer).

So Mexico City, through a combination of European Reformation tension and general administrative awkwardness on Spain’s part, did not exist from a purely visual perspective in Europe until Arnoldus Montanus’ 1671 birds-eye view from Chapultepec was published (Kagan, p92). This would obviously affect the image of Mexico City as seen in Europe; the urban imaginary of those
living there, European or not, was, however, antithetically Aztec, ardently dissociating itself from Tenochtitlán. Yet the pre-Columbian Tenochtitlán does, in itself, merit a word or two in this context, for its immediate and preserved selection by the Spanish as the viceregal capital of the New World had its reasoning in the past.

Tenochtitlán was, visually speaking, not so very different from the 1524 illustration. It was an island connected to the mainland by causeways, and the central square of its urbs was of utmost importance to the rest of the city. This importance, however, was not design-oriented, but rather steeped in a cosmological apprehension about how a city should visually reflect the vertical hierarchy of the world. The Aztecs therefore developed the city center in order to distinguish sacred space from profane space (Matos, p191). The Spaniards, not surprisingly, cared little for the motivations behind the cultural practices of their new vassals. It is in this vein that the Spaniards interpreted their new acquisition – they were readers of the urbs, to use Henry James’ famous quip, “upon whom everything is lost” (James, p3); the greater message fell on tin ears, as is often the case with the victors. But without delving too deeply into the intricacies of their teleological speculations, it might be worth noting how, for example, the Templo Mayor being located at the “navel of the city” affected the later architectural consciousness of the Spaniards.

The answer proves more political than architectural actually, but is noteworthy nonetheless. Tenochtitlán’s importance was not only in that it was a well-developed city (for the Spaniards would effectively transform that), but more so that it had many similarities to what they (as well as the Italian theorists who came to influence them) felt a city needed to have in order to be successful at administering an empire. The city’s centripetal nature already existed, and while the Aztecs’ more spiritually profound, organically envisaged reasoning behind having it provides for splendid speculation, the results of their ‘grand visio’ were interpreted from a wholly European, plainly bureaucratic perspective. Much of Tenochtitlán would be razed, but this notion of a city having a heart, and the power implied on those who controlled it, would be actively taken up by the new power.
II. Colonial

Within only a few years of the Spanish conquest, the transformation from Aztec capital to Spanish bureaucratic center was already becoming evident. The city immediately became segregated: the *traza*, or city square, became reserved for Spaniards while the natives were castigated to the *barrios*, or perimeter neighborhoods. Texcoco, the lake surrounding Tenochtitlán, was already undergoing plans for an enormous landfill project; customary buildings like prefects and produce markets were becoming commonplace, and the *Templo Mayor* was being replaced with a Baroque cathedral (Kinsbruner, p40). The *peninsulares* had as their models Seville, Rome, and Venice; but the ethnic make-up of this newly formed *urbs* was, to the unfeigned embarrassment of the city’s new elite, anything but European in representation.

While the Spaniards were surely upset at the reflective connotations of the fairytale-like image being publicized of one of their two most important American hubs (the other being Lima), the new residents of Mexico City made it their determined cause to dispel them. The reaction by the *peninsulares* and *criollos* was a backlash of exaggeration that made Mexico City out to be a “new Jerusalem,” in contrast to Tenochtitlán’s Babylon (Kagan, p152). But from a purely visual interest there was a desperate need for an updated chronicling of this new urban identity via cartography; for without it, the negative connotations that the new residents of Mexico City were actively shunning (and persecuting) would only be broadcast locally, leaving those who had never visited to discover not a geometrically-functioning, mnemonically Albertian *urbs* in their research, but rather an image nearer to that found in Baroque travel literature – mermaids and spires effectively being replaced with more pertinent exoticism, but the rest of the hoi polloi remaining.

While one could convincingly argue that Tenochtitlán and its pre-Columbian self-regard ceased to exist immediately after 1521, the mythically imbedded urban imaginary of Mexico City as a symbol, rather than as a European *urbs*, that was first drawn up in 1524 lasted even longer than Trasmonte’s 1628 bird’s-eye plan, as Savonarola’s 1713 *Islario*-influenced engraving demonstrates
(Kagan, p93). The point here is that Mexico City was missing an accurate design plan to form that necessary line of demarcation between pre-Columbian and colonial, “savage” and “civilized”, Babylon and Jerusalem; without this, Mexico City as of 1521 was just a mere continuation of a preexisting urban narrative.

(Trasmon, 1628; Kagan, p94)

It took Arnoldus Montanus’ 1671 eastward city view to achieve this in much the same way, in fact, that it took Leonardo Bruni and other “historians” of Italy’s Quattrocento to delineate the Classical Age from the Middle Ages, and then their self-described Renaissance from it (Panizza, p135). But in truth, however unconcerned with graphic accuracy as it was, it is probably more appropriate to designate Trasmon’s 1628 bird’s-eye print as Mexico City’s definitive break from Tenochtitlán, for while Trasmon’s illustration was neither intended for publication nor for any other
purpose really than as a general sketch for preventing floods, it did succeed in endowing Mexico City with the possibility to spatially create its own urbs – to ‘know’ itself, as it were. One should still note, however, that this by no means represented the proper, mathematical approach to urban design that the Renaissance theorists had made the architectural vanguard of the time, and which the Enlightenment would later come to epitomize. Such a design plan would have to wait until Tomás López’s 1758 orthogonal ground plan of the traditional city center (Kagan, p95). Nonetheless, Trasmonte’s plan allows for a nice segue into the much more influential biombo paintings that proved substantial in their influence towards the construction of a Mexican identity, visual and otherwise.

The origin of the biombo is oriental and anonymous. It most probably arrived in New Spain through the tandem connection Spain had with the Philippines and the Americas. The style was adapted by resident painters in New Spain to simultaneously depict a historical urban narrative as well as a work of art. What is more, in using Mexico City as their subject, they depicted three distinct culture-types because of what can only be explained as a surreal willingness to capture the full panorama – historical as well as visual – of what was in the process of becoming a cosmopolitan urbs: the Aztecs (i.e. suns, feathers), the Spaniards (i.e. the cathedral, the distinctly European design of the city), and lastly the criollos (a focus on Tepeyec, the alameda). The first two are not surprising given the story-like function of this type of pictorial, yet this last focus on both the shrine location of la Virgen de Guadalupe and the alameda pleasure park as a distinctly New World, criollo luxury has monumental significance (Kagan, p157).

The urban imaginary of this new period is one of a highly developed, aesthetically relevant city that correlated directly, yet distinctly, with what it considered to be its European counterparts: the aqueduct of nine-hundred arches had Arles and Segovia, the alameda had the Nortre-designed gardens of Italy, and to a greater extent, the Hanging Gardens of classical Mesopotamia, and the zócalo, of course, had the Rialto – a civic center where beggars and bureaucrats alike shared the same walkways and enjoyed the same scenery (Kagan, p161).
This notion of the Latin American consciousness being dependent on European value judgments is a stigma that recurs throughout Mexico's history, up through the present day, but what this particular historical period might have had different was a protracted desire to earn distinction from its European forefathers by attempting something "better" - that is to say, something worthy of both liberation from Spain (economic) and distinction by Spain (cultural). This sentiment was altogether criollo, soon to be also mestizo, and it would come to full effect after the tumult of the first part of the 19th century - initially with independence from Spain in 1810, then from the overthrow of Emperor Maximilian in 1867 - in the unabashedly extrovert form of the Porfiriato.

III. Pre-Revolution

The positivism that August Comte excitedly conceived of and which 19th century European political systems collectively disqualified as being in the best cases utopic, in the worst quixotic, has its greatest legacy in Latin America - specifically in modern Brazil but aptly in Porfrián Mexico as well. Briefly, the idea behind positivism was the achievement for society of the highest stage of human evolution as described by the French Revolution (liberté, fraternité, égalité). It was, in effect, a social formula wherein a complete and genuine appeal to scientific determinants would result in the collective progression of society to a greater "realm of living" (Comte, p24). In the thirty year rule of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911 with a four year exception), the secularist doctrine of this brand of anthropological evolutionary theory would succeed in altering the image of the city both for an international audience as well as for Mexico City's own citizens.

In the Colonial era pre-1810, there was the certainty that existed in the close cultural relationship New Spain had with its Iberian colonizer. While instances arose wherein the new criollo class made a point of delineating itself from Spain in different socio-cultural mediums (i.e. Baroque formality, Churiguerrresco deviations), the main rift was economic, with everything else largely subservient in importance. But even though these cultural distinctions existed, and occasionally a more heterogeneous effect was achieved, the source material for cultural cultivation was primarily
Spain; and, as was previously noted, in the pre-1810 colonial era, the result was, in many cases, a 
stoic replication of preexisting Spanish towns (i.e. Talavera), and in Mexico City’s case, a design 
model more akin to Seville than, say, Rome. In any case, independence from Spain changed this 
phlegmolyptic regard towards the other side of the Atlantic, and succeeded in bringing about a reticent 
ambiguity about who to take heed from, culturally speaking. Porfirio Díaz competently put an end to 
such uncertainty, and the urban design that Mexico City underwent provides an appropriate reflection 
of his sympathies.

The Aztecs had their teleological reasons for concentrating their urban development in the 
center of Tenochtitlán, and the Spanish had their evangelically pragmatic ones. Nonetheless the 
religious connotations the zócalo revealed were not at all welcome by the secular wishfulness of the 
new government. The result was a moving of the “city’s center of gravity” (Reese, Nationalism, p4) 
from the traditional centro histórico to the alameda, and the near-replication of Haussmann’s grands 
boulevards model to serve as the new residential districts. The alameda became the space around 
which the Porfiriato would commission the great public buildings that would serve as a moniker for 
their ideals, such as the National Theater (1904), while the new housing plan would seek to emulate 
the dramatic modernization that Paris underwent during the reign of Napoleon III.

The flooding problem that had plagued Mexico City since its early colonial days was 
effectively resolved through the government-sponsored desagüe project which served the greater 
purpose of being an attraction of international acclaim – a kind of project, that is, whose raison d’être 
was more of a self-important exhibitionism than a concerned state consciousness; both ends, in this 
case, just happening to coincide. Less altruism – to use the positivistic term – is visible in, say, the 
pompous Art Nouveau exterior of Boari’s Palacio de Bellas Artes.

It is this obsession with outward perception that best characterizes the Porfiriato: while the 
“order and progress” banner was flung high for the Mexican people to revere and follow, the top hats 
of those holding it were tipped in the direction of the Western powers in general, and France in
specific. But in its attempt at secularizing Mexico City and rendering moot the highly superstitious, obsessively ritualistic imagery that the country provoked abroad, the Porfiriato realized that it would be left with an entirely disingenuous heritage which foreigners would never truly respect. It combated this early on with the conscious decision to resurrect the ancient civilizations of its past, effectively modernizing them, much as Haussmann, in razing Paris to the ground, chose to leave the Rue Saint Jacques intact, its connotative symbolism as the ancient road to Rome being an artifact worthy of association. Hence, the Porfirián example of modernity attempted a hybrid nationalism that while claiming to be on the path towards equal association with the industrialized powers of the day, also anchored its notion of nationhood in the “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, p6) of the ancient civilizations that happened to share their same geography; the result was a collective ideological willingness to identify Mexican-ness, or mexicanidad (Reese, Nationalism, p3).

The urban imaginary of this period, unlike in the anarchic sixty years previous, appeared to have been conceived of in as systematic a way as the nation’s technocratic motto of “order and progress”. As with most other examples of apparent linear perfection, rivets do, of course, exist. Hence, regardless of the implied democracy and cultural awareness of the Centennial of Mexican independence in 1910, to take a noteworthy example, the underbelly of such highfalutin cultural design came to reek of aloofness and elitism (Reese & Reese, Centennial, p363). Indigenous people had no role in this positivist-infused brand of Mexican modernism, or if they did, it was well-monitored (i.e. curfews placed on being in the city proper). This neglect for the popular coupled with the ‘testing of the waters’ of democracy (hoping its positivism might be at an evolved enough stage to stand alone) led to the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Revolution, however, added its own problems in trying to create a more popularly inclusive urban imaginary for Mexico City.

IV. Revolution and Post-Revolution

The Mexican Revolution has been called a failure in many respects. Zapata’s agrarian reform was a disaster and the subsequent caudillo years brought about heavy destruction, both institutional
and human. It is interesting, then, that people look back on the events of 1910 and draw from them their own take on what happened, often glorifying the Revolution as a harbinger of Mexico’s seemingly exclusive brand of Latin American stability. As any student of Mexican history knows, however, the popular ideals that were supposedly fought for turned out to be a mere power grab that lasted more than a decade. The result, even by the late 1920’s, was the institutionalization of an illusory ideal – namely, the purportedly self-evident, clearly “mythologized” notion of stability as a consequence of revolutionary struggle (Barthes, p24-27).

Mexico City’s urban imaginary did, however, change drastically in the decades after the Revolution. Partisan politics aside, one of these changes was in the development of the Toltecismo movement, an artistic vanguard in the 1920’s which sought to make use of pre-Hispanic Mexico’s folk traditions in a very different way than had the Porfiriato. For example, rather than venerating Aztec hegemony by reenacting an Aztec procession with Moctezuma at the head or erecting a Cuauhtémoc statue, the likes of Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros sought to plebeianize high art in a uniquely Mexican way – specifically, by doing it through publicly placed murals where the characters were Aztec, yet the sentiments were contemporary. The greater effect of this was to draw the (highly illiterate) Mexican people together through historical depictions that expressed the disquietude of their current status through an ancient lens. From an urban perspective though, these Marxist “reproductions” of history, as well as other such community-conscious initiatives, indirectly succeeded in bulking up the cultural reserves in and around the centro histórico, effectively segregating the slowly-emerging outskirts of the urbs from this new form of mexicanidad – a form, given the antithetical nature of this new wave of revolutionary thought, more aptly relatable to la Malinche than to either la Virgen de Guadalupe or Vasconcelos’ raza cósmica (Paz, Massacre, xii).

Manuel Avila Camacho’s presidency provokes some controversy. By initiating social security in 1943 and freezing rents for an extended period of time soon thereafter, he actively helped support low-income citizens. But in Mexico, the fiscal label of lower-class does not correlate to the
agrarian workforce; it is a necessarily urban association. Hence, these socialist reforms in no way served to positively affect the country’s large rural populations. In fact, these policies proved to be the final blow in a war initially waged by Madero, personified by Zapata, and trivialized by Lazaro Cárdenas in the previous administration. The agrarian reforms had failed unequivocally, miserably; and so the only hope for these rural populations seemed to be hiding in the cities – and, what is more, they all happened to come to this conclusion at roughly the same time.

The result of this massive wave of urban immigration was the mass territorial expansion of Mexico City into the north and east. This is where the large-scale industry, whose investiture would come to be a hallmark of Miguel Alemán’s administration, came to be zoned in; and therefore, is where many of the city’s newly arrived hopefuls would set up house (or, in many cases, tent). From a visual perspective, the city took on the form of a full-fledged megalopolis by the late 60’s with a population nearing ten million and a persistent territorial expansion that was quite simply dumbfounding – in some cases doubling, even tripling the size of the city within a decade (García Canclini, p58-60). So, the logical consequence was that the city’s population emanated outwards – more towards the suburbs, that is, than the city center. Yet the post-revolutionary culture did not follow suit. Instead, the same historic museums and the same beautified theaters remained the setting for cultural investigation, in effect, relegating the barrio-dwellers to self-ignorance about such newly defined concepts as mexicanidad and the struggle to reanimate the original tenets of the Revolution (Monsivais, p87).

Mexico City’s urban imaginary, then, became what T.S. Eliot’s spastic and disenchanted narrator, J. Alfred Prufrock famously referred to as “a patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot, p54). The cityscape as distant and intangible, almost ethereal to this herd of men, women, and babies whose confusion about the modern age is perennial and all-consuming. As Carlos Monsivais notes, “immigrants live where they can, transforming the perspective of the city...[yet] institutionally, nothing tempts the crowds who invade, consume and define the Federal District to appreciate urban
beauty" (Monsivais p92-93). The urban imaginary, then, ceases to exist as a whole as man’s preternatural survival comes to thoroughly subvert the possibilities of the imagination: the city is neither the mechanical Leviathan of Porfirio Díaz’s imaginary or the nostalgic, pulque-drinking capital of the 1910 revolutionaries; nor is it the socialism with a human face that Avila Camacho halfheartedly intended it to be – it is nothing; a mere self-segregated partiality of some inconceivable whole.

The unsurprising failure of the country’s rural immigrants to properly integrate into the urban nexus of an already large capital only worsened as the city’s image grew in international recognition. Global preoccupations effectively stymied serious popular considerations in the government as macroeconomic goals became the focus of a highly centralized nation that considered terms like ‘political stability’ more important than ones like ‘democracy’ and ‘education’ (Davis, p259). The reality was that Mexico City had become selectively diametric to what Kevin Lynch termed urban “imageability” – that is, the particular vividness that a city exerts on a viewer (Lynch, p22-23). The vividness still existed in places like the alameda and the centro histórico, and naturally so, but one would think that such “imageability” would correlatively expand outwards given the sheer scale of the city’s growth in both size and population – at least to an extent. Not so. The ‘stockpiling’ of “cultural capital” continued, and this, along with the dire economic straits that the new immigrants found themselves in, contributed to a sentiment of disaffection that trade unions and leftist ideologues would come to explicitly politicize. Tlatelolco was a result.

*La Plaza de las Tres Culturas* is flanked by a large apartment complex (1964), the church of Santiago Tlatelolco (1610), and various pre-Hispanic ruins. It was, for those who appreciate numinous dates, October 2, 1968, ten days before the Summer Olympic celebrations were to be held. The protest was largely organized by the UNAM Student Union, but this particular rally was a beautiful instance of workers working together with students to achieve a similar goal – in this case, democracy. “*México – Libertad – México – Libertad*” was the main chant that resonated throughout
the historically variegated plaza that afternoon, but before sunset gun shots and bayonet lunges would put an immediate end to thoughtful pleas for democratic representation and free speech – some five-hundred dead, thousands arrested and a government whose doddering reiterations of “four dead, twenty wounded” were lambasted by even the most contrived newscasters the world over, courtesy of the conveniently situated international press (Poniatowska, *Massacre*, p204-207; Fallaci, p205).

The significance of the site of the massacre was not overlooked. The National Strike Committee had obviously not anticipated the end result, but rallies had begun to take up a doctrine of embrace towards the past, conjuring up revelatory images not just of Marx but also of Benito Juárez (Taibo II, p8). In the same way, when Soviet tanks bulldozed into Prague’s Old Town Square, banners were initially flown not just of abstract ideals like ‘peace’ and ‘love’, but of figures like 14th century political dissident and philosopher Jan Hus (Kundera, p263-264). The leaders of these movements, in most cases, did not really occupy the stereotype of the schizophrenic rebel, but rather strategized their approaches to upcoming protest rallies by taking notes from history, and not necessarily 1789 or 1917. In the case of Tlatelolco, the simultaneously juxtaposed artifacts of the past and present surrounding the dissidents proved, in the long run, to be far more substantial to dissident history than even the Bolshevik storming of the Winter Palace – one invoked the nascent ‘good’ of man and his past, the other irreverently shattered it.

Tlatelolco’s effect on changing the greater urban imaginary though was not ideologically exclusive. On the contrary, the PRI’s image as an authoritarian, uncaring sycophant to anti-Soviet policy states came to full light, though it would take nearly thirty years for even partial congressional investigations on the massacre to be conducted. This was not the incompetently well-intentioned government that populism brought to Mexico up through the early 1940’s; this was a repressive state that would join the likes of most other Latin American countries in adhering to a policy of servile flattery towards US Cold War policy and crypto-fascism towards its more ‘dysfunctional’ citizens. The blood-stained walkways of *la Plaza de las Tres Culturas* would be the image that struggling
proletariat and student movements around the world would hang in their lockers or in their
dormitories. The events that occurred on this Fall day in 1968 would affect the rest of the world’s
conception of Mexico City in an altogether different way than how either Arnoldus Montanus’ 1671
plan affected European scholars or the Porfiriatro’s 1910 Centennial of Mexican Independence
impressed the western bourgeoisie – Tlatelolco would impassion the world towards Mexico in a
contradictorily apocalyptic way, showing “turmoil [to be the] repose for [these] city-dwellers”
(Monsivais, p31). Mexico City became Prague, or Kent State University; it was a death field of
organized chaos.

On September 19, 1985 two earthquakes brought to the ground much of Mexico City’s
downtown area. While the city center of Mexico City is known for its archaeological monuments and
giant office buildings, in truth, the majority of the damage, both human and concrete, was residential.
The effects were drastic by any scale, but the aftermath of the earthquake brought to surface several
key questions about the healthiness of Mexico City’s extreme centralization, the government’s
prioritization of economic stability over human calamity, and the heroism of thousands of
plainclothes civilians.

In a rhetorical response to the centralization question, Elena Poniatowska cuttingly remarked,
“How is it possible that 55,000 branches that connect the south with the north of the country, and the
whole country with the world were all concentrated in one single old building on Victoria Street?
(Poniatowska, Nothing, p206). Mexico’s centralization was commonplace by 1985, with an urban
population representing roughly ¼ of the entire country (Garcia Canclini, p61). But, as Jean-François
Gravier explained in his sociological study-turned book about France’s demography, “[after realizing
state centralization] it is the state’s responsibility to initiate growth elsewhere... and if it neglects this
the result is the desertification of a country, [everything] subservient to the great city” (Gravier p28,
33; my translation). France took heed, creating initiatives for Île de France residents to move to
burgeoning investment centers like Toulouse and Lille, and setting up secondary administrative
networks in Lyon (Gravier p51). Mexico, while showing diversity in the stark difference between its industrial north and rural south, was absolutely dependent not just on Mexico City, but on about ten square miles of Mexico City (Davis, p262-263). The earthquake(s) served to expose this in the most vilely natural of ways by cutting Mexico off from the rest of the world in its time of greatest need. That said, new evidence shows us that the government was not really interested in what the rest of the world could offer – this was, as far as they were concerned, a purely Mexican problem with a purely Mexican solution.

With such disasters, prioritization must always occur, some things forcibly being designated as more important in the immediate future than others. For Miguel de la Madrid and his administration, the first designated priority – while people suffocated under piles of rubble and bystanders put together cardboard coffins – was preserving the progress made on economic liberalization by getting the communications system back up and running. It was the people of Mexico City who were responsible for saving thousands of injured and burying thousands of dead – it was the mothers, the commuters, the well-to-do housewives of Las Lomas who saved the city, not the redundant speeches the government gave about ‘stability’ and ‘economic recovery’ (Poniatowska, Nothing, p200). Worse yet, many of the buildings that fell did not meet zoning regulations upon later review, hence bringing to light the graft of a government that allowed room for its business-minded allies to loophole inconvenient fees. Taken to its logical conclusion, the government, in effect, killed many of the earthquake’s victims.

The resulting urban imaginary was a more inclusive, less overtly oppressive apocalypse than the Tlatelolco massacre. Where Tlatelolco was determined by the authoritarian high-handedness of a president (and interior minister), the earthquake(s) was a biblical style punishment on a city whose image had become that of Sodom or Gomorrah – a hellish megalopolis where the rich and powerful capably retained their status quo through lies, pay-offs, and neglect. They had learned from Tlatelolco that chopping hippies’ hair and executing communist rabble-rousers was unnecessary and
especially inefficient; economic pressure (as seen in the sweatshop workers who died in the earthquake) was a much better policy now that they had people like Nancy Reagan openly on their side (Davis, p265).

The twentieth century was the most exciting (and terrifying) century to date. Mexico mirrored this to a narcissistic extreme, first with the revolutionary fervor of a few brave men, but then with the complacent sloth that befitted one continuous oligarchical regime (that put on, of course, many different faces, from altruistic to asinine and everything in between). While the ideological whims of, say, sending bullets to Spain to support the Republican cause (Orwell, p35) or publicly lauding Cuba’s July 26 movement as “[bringing forth] a fruitful transition” (Moore, p7) are commendable from a purely intellectual appreciation of socialism, they can only be condemned as ridiculous, even criminal, given the detrimental state the Mexican people were living in at the same time. The urban imaginary of Mexico City in the modern age, then, can be appropriately linked to the disillusionment expressed by the young Ezra Pound: “cataclysmically irresolute, mortally negative, and basely appealing” (Tytell, p81).

V. Conclusion

La Plaza de las Tres Culturas is a fine place to spend an afternoon. But it is more: through it the visual representations of Mexico City come to life. The pre-Hispanic indigenous ideals about the subservient nature of man in a world governed by overwhelming powers are visible in the detail they put into their city structures, as well as their choice location for their placement. Through the church of Santiago Tlatelolco, one can see various imaginaries of the Mexico City urbs: contradictory Franciscan humility and sword-wielding circumstance, tensions with the reactionary Hapsburg Empire, and the willingness to artistically deviate from Iberia (i.e. mestizo chernibs). The images that Europeans had (and, in many cases, continue to have) in relation to Mexico City (i.e. tropical backwardness) were fomented by their beliefs of cultural superiority which the maps they made
accurately mirrored. But as we have seen, this only fueled a willingness on the part of *criollos* (and especially *defensores*) to break ties with Spain, politically as well as culturally.

Tlatelolco was not a neighborhood that was especially pursued by the Porfiriato. But the Porfiriato, like Comte’s positivism, was predictably non-permanent. It was so unrealistic and far-removed from the people it claimed to be representing that its historical mark on Mexico, however poignant during those thirty years, proved to be nothing more than a generational matter of fact. To be sure, while it might have transformed the aesthetic of Mexico City more dramatically than any cultural ideology in Mexican history, its urban imaginary would be capably crushed by the Revolution, and subsequently lampooned or quite simply forgotten in the modern age.

The apartment complex in *la Plaza de las Tres Culturas* was shaken up by the earthquake(s) of 1985, but unlike some of the buildings behind it (i.e. Nuevo León), it did not crumble to the ground. If we remain true to the discourse I initially set out to spark, and keep *la Plaza de las Tres Culturas* as the visual and cultural vantage point to examine the city, then this apartment complex, called Escobedo, is the *Inri* on the rood on which Jesus Christ was crucified; it is the ultimate symbol of what Octavio Paz referred to as “*la chingada*” — literally, the ‘fucking over’ of the Mexican people in the modern age for ulterior, in most cases avaricious, reasons (*Paz, Labyrinth, p37*). The urban imaginary of Mexico City in the modern age is not, then, one meant for at historical monographs, but rather for war-torn lament, something abstract and formless — the battlefield of the Mexico City *urbs*. Hope through the image — aesthetic transcendence, so to speak — proves impossible for most who are condemned to survive amidst the fervid cloak of Mexico City’s prosopopeial Lady Sorrow. The urban imaginary, then, is but a conglomeration of hopelessness.
Works Cited