Contesting Neoliberal Urbanization: The Mexican Case.

By H. Sohn*

Introduction
The advance and encroachment of neoliberal ideologies in all realms of our contemporary world have had significant impact upon the built environment. Although almost no aspect of the urbanization process has been exempt of the negative effects of urban policies implemented under the guise of liberalization and deregulation operating in the interest of private capital, it has been the social housing sector, which has arguably been the one where some the most important transformations have been registered, and which without a doubt will have long-termed effects upon cities. The neoliberal urban model follows quite similar formulas throughout the globe: the privatization of public interest being one common denominator that deeply affects the understanding and implementation of schemes aimed at providing the lower-income population and urban poor with viable alternatives for housing. Particularly interesting in this case are the elevated failure rates that are becoming patent in most of these schemes, and the problems that this phenomenon represents for the city.

Within this framework, the present paper will introduce the background to the contemporary Mexican case, presenting an explanation of the forces at work in the dissolution of public agendas within the social housing sector and its absorption into the private sector of construction developers. Furthermore, it will investigate the culprits that render this process as corrupt and failed, highlighting the possible consequences that lay ahead. Two specific cases will be introduced and discussed as examples of this process: the housing development known as Las Américas, in Ecatepec de Morelos, State of México, and that of Riberas del Bravo, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua.

The final aim of this paper lays in opening up to some of the possibilities of intervention for spatial planners and designers, and their role in the processes of re-conception, re-composition and recovery of housing developments erected under the neoliberal precepts that have become untenable today.

The mechanisms of neoliberalism: the case of Mexico
Elsewhere, I have shown how Mexico’s transition into neoliberal global capitalism during the mid-1970s, 1980s and 1990s debilitated the social imaginary of the nation-state, systematically eroding many pre-neoliberal forms and constituencies of nation and citizenship, and thus contributing to the dismantling of the revolutionary state project, the weakening of politics and political participation, and the enforcement of an ideology of individualism based on the pursuit of private property and individual ownership. [01] There, I argue that three interrelated trends conventionally associated with neoliberal processes of state restructuring: the denationalization of the state, the de-statization of political systems, and the internationalization of policy regimes [02], together with a parallel wave of finely tuned reform- and deregulation-driven privatizations of state-owned or state-managed public, social and common goods, has produced a conflation of interrelated and interdependent phenomena that have ultimately signified the weakening, and in some case the defeat, of public and social interest agendas and the rise of a new power geography in which government has shifted to governance. [03]
These phenomena occur at various levels and scales, some of them not immediately connected in conventional literature and discourse. On the one hand, the macro politico-economic measures imposed from outside by foreign interest groups as part of the bail-out of the Mexican financial system after the collapse of its economy in 1982 and the pressure these have exerted thereafter within the country, have produced the deterioration of the conventional ‘spatial-fix’ associated with the nation, which has had important transformations on the understanding of scale, and the production of space. On the other hand, they have been the lubricant of a piecemeal ‘mechanics of subjectivization’ -- the process by which ideology impregnates in the formation or deformation of subjects--, of civil society that, as a reaction to anti-social and privatizing politico-economic practices and transformations, has uncritically adopted the ideology of self-interest typical of advanced global capitalism. The outcomes are legion, but in this context translate in a changed attitude towards private property infused by new consumerism trends, preferences, and desires, which have strong impact upon the production of (urban) space, as well as on its demand and supply dialectics.

In very rough terms, Mexico’s neoliberalization is based on the redefinition of territorial (geographical, regional and metropolitan) questions involving land tenure and ownership, the reform of labor, and the exploitation and management of social, communal or public assets, all of which necessarily entail the social dimension.

In the context of this paper, it is relevant to focus on two spatial domains that have been affected by these vicissitudes, but which have also been central collaborators in this transformative change: the geographical (regional) and the urban (metropolitan). In many of the theories that challenge unrestrained adoptions of free market logics in so-called ‘developing’ countries it has been discussed widely how and why one of the most important processes of late capitalism has been the spiking of uneven geographical development and asymmetric growth. [04] In the case of Mexico, contemporary uneven (regional and urban) development is arguably a consequence of the so-called Free Trade Agreements (FTA’s) including GATT, NAFTA, PPP [05], among others, coupled with the strategic implementation of the neoliberal model of urbanization. These represent the scenario upon which one of the textbook examples of neoliberal capitalism’s contradictions is laid bare, namely the struggle of achieving stabilization or equilibrium through structural change. [06] In this sense, two relatives simultaneously collide and collaborate: the regional scale, where the industrial model based on international competitiveness [07] fosters the productive, economic side of neoliberalization (‘maquilas’ - assembly plants i.e.), and the urban scale, where neoliberalism has traditionally merged the political with the economic into a witches brew of genuine social needs, guised and overt privatizing tendencies, political debauchery, ineffective social programs and welfare rhetoric, financial deregulation, ideological tampering, and the like.

**Industrialized urbanization: an incomplete project**

It is almost common knowledge by now that one of industrial capitalism’s main objectives was to deconstruct the traditional rural-urban dichotomy and recompose it into the industrializing urbanization scheme. This is visible in much of modern urbanization across the developed world, and is epitomized by the creation of an ideology of social housing for
the new industrial working class. With the inception of neoliberalism and post-industrialization in developed regions from the late 1960s onwards, however, the meaning of public housing has been overtly transformed into an economic instrument with socio-political potential. In so-called underdeveloped or developing countries, however, this has meant something else. Although the modernization of Mexico signified -- at least in statistic indicators and political discourse [08]--, the transition of the population from rural to urban, the rural/urban dichotomy was never fully displaced by the industrial urbanization model, at lest not seamlessly; and while the relationship between industrialization and urbanization is undeniable, accounting for the intensification of the urban problematic epitomized in the explosive growth that a few cities in key regions experienced during this process, social housing remained one of the cornerstones of many modern and postmodern political agendas. In other words, social housing systematically was used a political tool and an engine to promote state-power and social stability. Until recently, that is. Originally, it was conceived under similar precepts than its counterpart in developed countries, but the asymmetrical distribution of industrialized urbanization rendered it as an engine for rural/urban migration rather than aiding in the transformation of the rural hinterlands and small-scale cities into industrialized, ‘developed’ geographies. In short, while it tried to attend to the problem of overcrowding produced by rural-urban migration fuelled by industrialization in a few regions and cities, it tacitly acted as an added urban attractor to these urban or industrial hubs, thus contributing to the problem it tried to solve. This partially increased the asymmetrical concentration of power, the accumulation of wealth, and uncontrolled growth in the capital, leaving an impoverished, largely rural countryside behind. On the other hand, this placed the capital in an apparently advantageous position in relation to other medium sized cities throughout the country, thus producing poignant centralization and uneven competition among cities. The exceptions to this model were the cities located in strategic regions where the shifts in the global mode of production and its mood swings, demanded the provision of cheap housing for the emerging maquiladora workers. Such a case is Ciudad Juárez in the northern state of Chihuahua, which I will address in the following sections. The central point here is that the incomplete process of modernization through industrialization during the first half of the past century, which increased the asymmetries between the rural and the urban domains, did not allow for a seamless application of the neoliberal model of ‘development’ thereafter. Further, it is important to highlight that the role of state-led programs to address the growing problem of housing the poor, in spite of their virtues, was not covering the demand for affordable dwelling in satisfactory terms. In other words, the official discourse maintained that structural change remained difficult to achieve, in part because the state was over-burdened by social programs -such as social housing- designed to keep social performativity (and thus politics) in check. In this regard the transformations undergone in the social housing during this time are central.

**Eroding the social agenda: from social housing to ‘social interest’ developments**

The reduced space of this paper makes thorough historical and analytical recounts of the politico-economic transformations within the social housing sector in Mexico impossible.
There is a wide range of relevant literature on this topic, where the different programs and plans for social housing are explained in relation to (national and global) political and economic events. Suffice it to say that during the modernization period in the first half of the twentieth century and leading up to the 1970s, there were substantial efforts to deal with the increasingly problematic question of urban explosion and housing the working class, the bureaucratic sector, and the urban poor, encompassing the creation of sectorial policies, financial and institutional programs that generally positioned the state as the main regulator of social housing. In spite of the problems that the model of state-led and state-built of (urban) social housing entailed, there are many outstanding examples of the virtues of this form of housing (mostly in Mexico City, however) in which the relation to the urban -- existing or envisioned --, was kept in the design schemes and implementation, as well as in the very social nature of these developments. Moreover, and although the typologies of the dwelling units remained minimal in their size and cost, thus making them affordable, the quality of these units in constructive terms was relatively sound.

Nevertheless, the sheer magnitude of the demand to house the urban poor in combination with the spatial and political problems of unmet demands for a very large sector of the population -- a problem that was being tackled in parallel by other processes such as illegal, illicit peripheral self-building practices--, placed a tremendous stress upon the state to comply. It is at this time, in the period preceding the 1982 financial collapse, when many imperceptible changes began to emerge and take shape, including the shifting role and power of the state as the regulator of social housing schemes. In the early 1970s, the federal government founded the FOVI, a financial institution in charge of managing --via the Bank of Mexico and a host of private financial institutions-- the distribution of credit-based loans for the construction and improvement of social housing. With the creation of the INFONAVIT (the federal institute in charge of the workers’ housing) in 1972 the relegating transition of state-controlled construction and financing of social housing began to become visible. Around this time Mexico saw the emergence of a few private enterprises and construction companies, such as SARE and Grupo GEO, dedicated exclusively to the production of ‘social interest’ housing.

I will return to this point in brief, but suffice it to say for now that it arguably is during this time, when government starts to shift into governance.

With the onset of neoliberal tendencies, which in the northern regions bordering the United States began to be introduced as early as the 1960s, and the inevitable entry into this system during the last three decades of the twentieth century, the provision of housing for the lower income populations (regardless of whether urban or rural or any combination thereof) underwent a set of dramatic changes coupled with constitutional reforms which redefined the urban poor and the working class into credit subjects in exchange for dwelling, and peasants into temporary individual land owners, or cheap labor, almost overnight. In a matter of a few decades, the state-protection of both urban poor and peasants was transformed into a machinery of profit for private capital. In Mexico, this was achieved through the activation of two important reforms. Firstly, the setting in motion of the constitutional reform (‘Ley Agraria’, 1992) that aimed at the privatization of the ejido and many other forms of collective and communal land tenure, during the administration of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) led to the subsequent sell-off of large semi- or suburban areas
that fell under the post-revolutionary communal land tenure schemes. [12] Secondly, the impulse of the maquiladora industry in the northern border regions fostered by a host of labor law reforms and tax-exemption policies increased the demand for cheap, unskilled labor, and thus facilitated the ‘importation’ of low-income groups and peasants from other, mostly rural regions to border cities to support the assembly industry. [13] Both these processes unleashed tremendous stress on the urbanization process, which needed to be tackled as the demand for affordable housing was increasing accordingly. This was propelled by the creation of a dozen or so of private construction enterprises during the late 1970s and 1980s, dedicated exclusively to the construction of ‘social interest’ housing. [14] This sector boomed during the late 1980s and 1990s, multiplying the production of housing complexes in suburban or peripheral areas characterized by their uniformity and low density. As such, they further contributed largely to the explosive and uncontrolled sprawl of cities across the country. [15]

Following the trends of postmodern, neoliberal economics that were taking force at the time, it became almost unavoidable that the role and agency of the state had to be redefined, also in the social housing sector. As a result of national and international restructuring imperatives, the participation of the state in the housing sector was restricted to that of promoter of financial schemes and privately developed ‘social interest’ housing, limiting its input by stimulating programs for social and private construction of new housing and the improvement of existent one. During this time, under the Salinas administration, many of the social programs and urban development initiatives were abandoned and substituted by other perspectives that emulated the neoliberal urbanization model. This required the execution of a finely grafted set of constitutional reforms, which had been under public scrutiny for several years, as they were deeply ingrained in the social imaginary as post-revolutionary social ‘values’ and advancements. The prime example is, as mentioned earlier, the reforms of land tenure and the privatization of communal and ejido land. These had important implications. Firstly, these measures entailed a necessary “change of heart” in the public. Guised in a veil of demagoguery and social rhetoric, public opinion was slowly diverted into a partial acceptance of the benefits for peasants and ejidatarios (often the poor) to have freedom of negotiating their lands for sales-transactions. Although this had some advantages -- at least in theory --, in practice however, it produced the massive sell-off of strategically located land to private agents, who promoted the construction of low-density, low-quality housing developments in the fringes of cities across the country, which were sold via mostly state-financed mortgages to the lower-income sectors of the formal economy. While this was initially taken as a way to solve the problem of demand for affordable housing, it did not address the question of how to house the population active in the informal economies. Neither did it foresee an important, but often minimized or overlooked, phenomenon. These transactions due to the very nature of the ejido-system, were problematic as they allowed private agents to strip their counterparts not only of their livelihoods, but also of their inhabitable land, therefore adding to the problem of increasing demand for housing. In other words, the sell-off of ejido land produced more urban poor in need of affordable housing, who often did not have access to the formal employment sector. Needless to say, these transactions ultimately resulted in very unbalanced ratios of profit, with the seller often left with literally nothing, except the need for a house, and the buyer-
developer reaping the benefits. Building for the poor became, in this sense, an extremely lucrative business for certain interest groups in politics, financial institutions, and private developers, which, it needs to be stressed, were not interested in the socio-spatial aspect at all. This is reflected in the much-criticized spatial and typological characteristics and constructive quality of more recent housing developments. The shortcomings of these developments are multiple, but I will return to these further on in the exposition of the case studies. Aggravated by very lax urban planning strategies and deficient urban policies on this new type of development, the only advantage brought by this situation it seems, was that the massive amounts of new housing units appeased the problem of demand and state-responsibilities on paper for a brief time. [16] The collaboration of private and political interests produced a deficient ‘solution’ to the housing problem, and although there have been several federal programs to regulate development (DUIS) these have unfortunately not met the necessary standards. Needless to say, this model has had a relatively short life span.

The emergence of a new ‘product’ in the housing market, namely the so-called contemporary version of the ‘social interest’ housing, has created what some experts are presently referring to as a housing bubble, which threatens to burst soon, if it has not done so already. It also placed the state-led financing programs and funds in very a uncomfortable position as they now have to deal with accumulating problems such as foreclosures, evictions, auctioneering and the reuse of empty-standing houses of very low quality, while rethinking policies and strategies for re-financing. [17] As the privately developed housing complexes reveal their unsustainability in virtually all realms, deficient inhabitation, abandonment and under-occupation, as well as a lack of interest and purchase power in potential buyers, have left a landscape of ruined, anti-urban and anti-social ghost-towns, empty ‘sleep-burbs’, in the peripheries of most cities across Mexico. It is estimated that in the country there are approximately 5 million units that fall under abandonment, which have been vandalized, lay vacant, or unfinished, in the past decade. Meanwhile, the private construction sector goes through a steep crisis, with profits halting and losses surpassing their capacity. [18] What once was a political tool to achieve social stability and socio-political performativity at best, and at worst as an economic tool for the accumulation of private capital, has become yet another failed application of neoliberal urbanization. Today we are witnessing what arguably is a turning point in the social housing sector in Mexico, and this, beyond pure critique, opens real opportunities to rethink and redirect the efforts of accommodating the poor and the lower-income population in dignified homes according to contemporary national and international laws and rights. [19] The challenges are multiple, but the stakes are equally high. [fig.01]
Contesting neoliberal urbanization: the case studies

In an attempt to reduce the descriptive aspect of the case studies, and underlining that this elaboration is not intended to function as a comparative study, I will briefly introduce them in the context of the expositions made in the previous sections. That is to say that each example serves as a case of the failure of contemporary, neoliberal measures to house the lower income population of the country according to the two scalar units that I addressed in the problématique: namely the regional and the urban. Interestingly, both cases are located in the fringes of cities that have been central in the transformation of the country into free market driven development: Ciudad Juárez, the 'capital of the assembly plants', and Mexico City, the capital city. Each case is in itself a nexus of factors and problems directly related to the shifts in the mode of production of late capitalism and its echoing crises; while contemporary Ciudad Juárez epitomizes the case of industrialization in its late stages, contemporary Mexico City represents the metropolitan scope of urbanization under neoliberal precepts. Both cases are considered as national indicators in social, demographic, political and economic terms. As such, they may reveal the tendencies of contemporary models of urbanization in two key regions of the country, signaling the dire consequences that these will have on cities and their inhabitants at a time of global economic recession, and of regional and local conflicts. The case studies may as such serve as heuristic devices to understand and approach the future of urbanization in Mexico.
At this point it is necessary to point out that the present elaboration on the case studies is the result of thorough analytical and historical research carried out by the Urban Asymmetries project and their participants at the graduate programs of Architecture and Urbanism of the Faculty of Architecture of the TU-Delft. [20] Due to the characteristics of this paper, however, the findings will be synthesized to contextualize the shift to free market logics, and their impact on social housing, from the 1970s to date. The strategies and projects included in the following items were developed by the graduate participants of two different studios (2011-2012 and 2008-2010, respectively) guided by the mentor team of the Urban Asymmetries research program. [21]

**Riberas del Bravo, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua**

The case of ‘Riberas del Bravo’ in Ciudad Juárez makes it an emblematic case of contemporary suburban ‘social interest’ housing developments gone wrong. Its location on the fringe of the problematic border city of Ciudad Juárez in the northern state of Chihuahua epitomizes many of the vices implicit in contemporary approaches to public housing in Mexico, and as such serves as an example of the intricate relationship between political and economic interests. But more than that it exhibits the different trends of neoliberalism in its advanced stages, often with dramatic effects on particular localities. The increase in the rates of violence, of the use of force, as well as the militarization of social life have all been identified as ‘new practices’ of the neoliberal regime. [22] And although these signs are visible relentlessly across the country, in Juárez they have become center-stage. One of the obvious explanations to this would be its highly contested geopolitical location, on one of the most important connections along the borderline with the USA. But a more accurate explanation, however, is that Juárez is the point where a whirlwind of factors and forces conflate into an extremely complex mesh. In that sense, Juárez is more than a case study; it is ‘a study for many cases’. [23]

The Cd. Juárez study group produced a thorough historical and analytical research on some of these factors and forces in order to approach its contemporary crisis of ‘social interest’ housing, namely the collapse of the dialectic relationship between demand and supply. The study revealed important connections (either causal or relational) of items, which are traditionally kept in separate discursive fields, and thus remain distanced in many analytical approaches. These include the correlations between global and local changes in the means of production; migration patterns and policies; international, bi-lateral and border politics; militarization and the economies of war; the problem of organized crime and the so-called war on drugs; violations of human rights; morphological and typological transformations; and the production of a highly specific ‘border culture’. [24] In this occasion I will highlight the correlation between economic interests represented in the different measures taken in response to the fluctuations in the global means of production as they directly affect the changes in the industrial sector, and the political responses to them. This explicates in some degree the dialectics of structural change and state-performativity as embodied in the industrializing urbanization scheme, which ultimately affect the approaches taken in the social housing sector. It is crucial to mention at this point that presently Ciudad Juárez shows one of the highest indexes of empty-standing social interest housing in the country,
with over 45,000 units fallen in disuse. The periphery of Juárez has become a shocking landscape of abandonment.

Riberas del Bravo is such a case. Located on formerly arable land in the southeastern fringe of Ciudad Juárez periphery, it borders with the United States on its eastern perimeter along the Río Bravo. It is composed of nine construction phases (2000-2005/6), with approximately 13,000 housing units, which range between 31 and 58 square meters of inhabitable space. At the time of the analysis, the percentage of empty units oscillated between 13.2% and 25% in different areas of the development, representing approximately 2,500 empty units. Originally envisioned as a receptacle for maquiladora workers, the fourteen private local ‘social interest’ housing developers involved in this project only managed to partially apply the master plan under which it was conceived, and this, together with other nefarious characteristics—the lack of properly designed and managed public space, basic and deficient urban services, the distance to any sources of employment, the very low quality of the building materials and typologies used, as well as insalubrious conditions and environmental shortcomings—rendered it as a ‘social interest’ housing development for the lowest income groups.

Most of the units were financed by INFONAVIT, and inhabited by ‘imported’ labor from other regions. With the economic crises of the first decade of the twenty-first century, which hit the maquiladora industry especially hard, and the confluence of other forces, such as the intensification of violence related to the infamous narco-wars in Ciudad Juárez, Riberas del Bravo experienced a massive exodus. Unable to pay for their mortgages due to growing unemployment in the maquiladora industry and in the burdened city, disappointed by the physical state of the units and the development itself, and threatened by an increasing influx of organized crime in the area, the inhabitants fled, often returning to their origins in other states of the country. This left a virtually deserted landscape behind, where a significant percentage of the housing was initially abandoned and later fell into physical decay, thus contributing to the vicious cycle of deterioration. [fig.02]

As a result of the growing pressure on public institutions (including INFONAVIT and the municipality of Juárez) there have been some efforts to improve the area in recent times. [25] However, these efforts seem to place a great deal on the general aspects and physical
characteristics of the complex, without dealing with the underlying causes that drove most of its inhabitants away.

**Strategic counter-proposals**
After the analysis that the study group carried out for this case, it found that in spite of the importance of bettering the material conditions of the housing, and the public spaces of Riberas, as a form of increasing the identification of the inhabitants to their living environments as previous initiatives had already proposed, it was paramount to address and challenge the very essence of its conceptualization and design as culprits of deeper issues. In very short terms, it investigated the clash of the industrializing urbanization model as embodied in contemporary unbalances between the provision of secure, long-term employment and the necessary provision of housing. It argued that without tackling questions of inhabitation as intimately related to the fluctuation in the means of production of the region (maquiladora vis a vis the global economy) it was futile to intervene at all. The argument for this case was also heavily influenced by a quite interesting predicament. While common approaches to social housing deal with questions of insufficient and unmet demands, this case presented the opposite: the main problem rested on an over-supply of vacant housing units and a shrinking population. This led the study group to propose a set of strategic tools to tackle a few of the inherent problems of this development and of the inhabitants left behind, via the proposal of relational, phased interventions that connected the different stages of this development, while reaching out to the urban, metropolitan and regional scales. This was achieved through a set of spatial and strategic elaborations and recommendations, which envisioned distinct forms of community participation and self-governance, accompanying by the spatial and typological proposals. [fig.03]
The main spatial strategy recommended a reorganization of the scheme along an intervention of the open sewage canal running across the entire length of the entire development, and centering on the redevelopment of the middle area of the complex where the majority of empty houses are located. [fig.04]
The program for the intervention to Riberas del Bravo included a series of experimental proposals focusing on operative landscape urbanism (water-management and landscape design), a sanitation/mental health/rehabilitation unit linked to a transportation hub and transferium connecting the area via a fine-tune system of pedestrian and bicycle routes and a metropolitan system of transportation to the maquiladora area and the inner city, a project on urban agriculture, a school, and three innovative proposals on ways to re-interpret the morphology and typology of the vacant lots into urban blocks with self-sustainable and process-based traits. Independently, these project proposals worked on the level of filling the omissions and lacks in the original master plan, supplying the area with programmatic needs, while serving as attractors to other, similar developments in the immediate region. On the other hand, the projects conveyed deeper motivations with didactic and self-taught strategies for the inhabitants to learn to live and inhabit differently taking advantage of their own skills and knowledge as a means to employment, while activating notions of self-organization, self-management and governance, in the light of existing programs, funds and structural interests to participate in the improvement of the area, and its future re-inhabitation.
The case of Las Américas, in Ecatepec de Morelos in the State of Mexico is a textbook example of neoliberal approaches to urbanization. It is located in the northeastern periphery of Mexico City, but pertains to the political entity of Estado de México. Its location and physical characteristics make it a classical case of neoliberal approaches to urbanization in a post-industrial situation. Developing along an industrial corridor during the 1950s, the municipality of Ecatepec became one of the first settlements of migrant workers. Presently, most of the urban fabric consists of irregular, self-built low-density housing, while new privately developed ‘social interest’ or ‘affordable’ housing has sprouted in the past decade. Las Américas (2004-2009) is one of them. It was developed as a profit-based project by Casas ARA, consisting of 14,000 dwelling units conceived under the same typological and morphological characteristics than most other developments of this kind. [fig.07] Advertised as a safe ‘gated community’, displaying colorful neo-colonial facades surrounded by greenery, the price range of the units was relatively high in contrast to other developments in this category. Following the neoliberal model of urbanization, the housing development lays adjacent to a high-end shopping mall complete with luxury hotel, retailed as an ‘added value’ to the housing complex. More than ‘social interest’ housing, Las Américas aimed at buyers in the ‘common interest’ development niche. As such it represents an emblematic case of how the need for dignified and affordable dwelling has been turned into an object of consumerist desire.

Las Américas, Ecatepec de Morelos, State of México
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This mono-functional housing development is completely isolated from its surroundings tucked behind a perimeter wall intended to function as a symbol of enclosure and safety. But in reality, this is nothing else but the materialization of an imaginary class boundary between the inhabitants and the original population in the vicinity, between ‘mortgage-slaves’ and ‘informal settlers’. As most other developments of this kind, Las Américas was erected on insalubrious, saline land not fit for inhabitation, flanked on one of its perimeters by a notoriously polluting former sodium hydroxide treatment plant known as El Caracol, crisscrossed by open-air sewage canals, high voltage infrastructure and other physical obstructions. The connection to the inner city is extremely problematic as it gives inhabitants with low incomes few affordable options but to take public transportation to reach their workplaces. Needless to say this represents significant commuting times and costs, which the inhabitants cannot cover without overburdening their already dire economic situation. On the northern and western fringes the development borders with older, 1970s social housing and self-built settlements and contains the cheaper units. The provision of social and urban amenities included in the master plan was only partially and deficiently built in later stages. At the time of our study, while the development was still being built, it was already showing signs of physical and social deterioration, as well as modification in the units themselves to accommodate to the unmet needs of the inhabitants. A host of informal and semi-formal commercial and social practices were emerging within Las Américas. This exemplifies one of the failures of the neoliberal urbanization model: the very nature of the conceptualization of these anti-urban and anti-social developments as monofunctional ‘master plans’ in which the projected provision of urban, social and public amenities is conventionally never realized,
renders them inflexible and closed-off to any positive transformative change. The fact that the population often has to invest extra resources in the changes to the existing (new) units and inventing alternative income opportunities within their homes, often in detriment to their own livelihoods and inhabitation, is a clear example of what happens with rigid, ill-designed typologies within closed developments. The necessary transformative potential of a housing unit and a housing development to add to the urban tissue, is blocked within a structure that dislocates individuals from the city and corners them into spatial, social and economic ‘gated cul de sacs’.

**Strategic counter-proposals**

The urban strategy for this project emerges as a result of a thorough investigation of the inherent politico-economic factors and forces that have made these types of ‘common interest’ developments possible in Mexico. Focusing on the existent problems of the case study as a point of departure, the study group analyzed the possible, latent possibilities within emerging marginal, local activities and practices as a locus of change and as the basis for a future form of urbanity with more socially sustainable features. The strategic counter-proposal for Las Américas consists of a set of relational physical, spatial, social and economic interventions that aim at the phased introduction of discrete or radical elements conveyed as generators of change. [fig.08]

The reduction of dependency of the area to the city core, and the strengthening of local economies and social exchange via cooperative structures are the driving engines of this strategy. These aims are intended as a way of approaching the case study as a part to a whole, namely as an entity isolated within the complex array of physical and material components of its surroundings. Hence, the proposal suggests sequenced phases of physical transformation within the development and on its perimeter as a way to open it to its surroundings, and thus encompasses the urban and the architectural scales in important ways. The urban (and regional) components of the strategy includes three interrelated proposals on different aspects of the area: intervening the mountain-side informal urbanizations on the ‘Sierra de Guadalupe’ with a regional scale proposal for water management and ecological recovery of the mountain slopes; a ‘tabula-rasa’ intervention on a former industrial area complete with housing, commercial and retail space for the community and a proportion of controlled free-market housing; and an urban proposal to connect the fragmented neighborhoods of the area via an urban intervention that taps into existing plans of public transportation and traffic infrastructure, and the strengthening of commercial corridors in three strategic zones of the project.

The architectural brief contained three projects: ‘reconnecting the social’; ‘making wastelands productive’, and ‘alternative urbanization’. These three project proposals emphasized the need for integration in both spatial and social terms of the area under scrutiny, and related this to the wider planning problem of Mexico City. The proposals that resulted from this are ambitious in their scope and reach, but nevertheless manage to cover most of the items and aspects that are traditionally lacking in urban and architectural projects.
More than programmatic and compositional items, the projects carefully contemplate the possibility of proposing new social, spatial, financial and economic models that adapt to the actual conditions of the population, allowing the possibility for different forms of urbanity to emerge from these proposals. All of them include a process-based, relational understanding of ‘project’ and integrate the notion of phasing as a central design parameter. Another aspect that is present in all project proposals is the emphasis on developing alternative structures based on community cooperation and other schemes of social organization countering the individualistic approach conventionally associated to free market logics, which almost by rule reduce the potentials of human agency as a significant element of change. These different perspectives embody more creative understandings of strong social exchange, thus fostering latent possibilities for alternative forms of urban co-habitation in the anti-urban landscapes left behind by capitalist development. One of the core intentions of the proposals is to generate moments of possibility where dispossessed, deprived or powerless communities may find the motives for empowerment, thus fostering once again a sense of struggle to regain the right to the city. The schemes envisioned by the studio participants in addition to contributing to a wider, more flexible understanding of ownership, property and stake holding based on collective formations i.e., also provides a solid basis of technical knowledge for the proposal of improved methods of auto-construction or self-building practices. All the projects make use of local knowledge, local means of production and technologies, local practices, traditions and customs, as well as local materials and incorporate them into the proposals. The understanding of transformation is extended to a fuller comprehension of the particular context that includes key elements of the everyday life of the local inhabitants. [fig.09] [fig.10]
Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of incomplete and partial applications of the industrialized urbanization model during the twentieth century, and the subsequent postmodern and neoliberal forces that have driven the development ideologies in Mexico since the late 1970s, the discrepancy between policies to achieve structural change and retain state-led socio-political equilibrium has produced an increase in uneven, asymmetrical development in Mexico. The promised benefits of the free-market regime in exchange of state power and national sovereignty have not been met; while wealth, justice and welfare remain unequally distributed. The weakening of social policies in contemporary development models comes with extreme social costs, loosening and fostering the decomposition of social and collective ties without which a society cannot exist. The impact on space has dramatic consequences: the piecemeal erosion of the built and natural environments have contributed to a growing impotence of the spatial disciplines to intervene in these processes, leading to a generalized form of performative paralysis. And this needs to be over-ruled in order to re-direct development under more just parameters. In Mexico, this necessarily means devising strategies for the resuscitation and ideally, for the rethinking of a social agenda within society itself. Arguably, under present conditions, this can only happen with the active involvement of civil society in a spirit of collectivity, and real, direct communal interests, and an adequate response to these demands on the side of the authorities. In short, what is necessary is a dialogue between diverse forms
of existing and emerging social self-governance and genuine government involvement to foster and sustain the needs and demands of the population. In the same line, the transformations undergone by the social housing sector and the spatial management of the country brought about by the defeat of social and public agendas, point towards the rapidly increasing problematic of unmet socio-spatial demands and human rights according to national and international laws, which stipulate that every individual is entitled by right to a dignified dwelling. If these processes continue unchanged, the future scenarios are nothing short of encumbering. No discipline, architecture and urbanism included, will be able to deal with the situation of social housing under neoliberal parameters in isolation, and without enforcing critical thought at the educational level. Hence, it is imperative to devise and propose responses to urban problems related to the provision of affordable housing through the development of multidisciplinary theoretical and pragmatic frameworks that go beyond the conventional ones used in the academic fields of architecture and urbanism. This necessarily entails the formation of critical individuals who are informed of the forces that drive contemporary ‘development’; who are able to take a position in given situations, thus exercising their historical consciousness within their disciplinary fields. Furthermore, if the future practice of the spatial disciplines intends to exert any form of meaningful influence in the complex processes that shape the built environment, it is paramount to speculate on possible virtual scenarios upon which new forms of ‘making the city’ may be actualized, challenging present day urban development models, which are today showing the ugly face of failure.

Bibliography and Endnotes
04. The term derives from Marxist theory, but it has been the field of geography where it has taken on force over the past decades. See, among other publications: N. Smith, Uneven Development: nature, capital and the production of space. (The University of Georgia Press: Georgia) 1984; D. Harvey, Spaces of Global Capitalism: uneven geographical development. (Verso: London & New York); Krishna Dutt, Growth, Distribution and Uneven Development. (Press Syndicate of University of Cambridge: Cambridge) 1990; or see the work of Doreen Massey on the relation of labor with uneven geographical development.
05. Under the illusion of national interest, Mexico’s recent willingness to participate in the - until now- failed FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas), which is nothing less than the hyperextension of NAFTA, and its active engagement in the materialization of the related PPP (Plan Puebla-Panamá), a macro-development project that pretends to convert Mexico and parts of Central America into a giant maquiladora zone with nearly 60 million people, shows the coercive pressure of external economic imperatives and foreign interests, in

06. B. Jessop, ‘The entrepreneurial city: re-imaging localities, re-designing economic governance, or re-structuring capital?’, in N. Jewson, and S. Macgregor, (eds.) Transforming cities: contested governance and new spatial divisions. (London: Routledge, 1997) p. 37. [My emphasis] In 1988, then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari stressed the ‘need to deepen the reforms with the aim of achieving a true transformation of the economy and society in order to adapt them to the market forces and enable the economy to compete successfully in the international market.’


08. Indicators show that the total urban population in Mexico had increased from 35% in 1940 to 58.7% in 1970. In 2010 the urban population had increased to 71%. It is, however, noteworthy to mention here that there is a great discrepancy among urban populations between large, medium and small cities (considered urban with 2,500 inhabitants). Source: INEGI


10. During the 1940’s and 1950s especially, but also during the 1960s and 1970s, a variety of social housing schemes --first as single multi-family inner city buildings, and later multi-family housing units or ‘unidades multifamiliares’ were constructed in Mexico. The CUPA, ‘Unidad Independencia’, or ‘Unidad Habitacional Nonoalco-Tlatelolco’, are existing examples of this type of social housing approach.


12. Although the Agrarian Reform of 1992 under the Salinas administration established certain limitations to the selling of agrarian land under the ejido system, it prepared the ground for subsequent reforms. The case of the proposed privatization of all rural ejido land under Felipe Calderón’s administration (2006-2012) in late 2012 is an example of this. Ballinas, V., and Becerril, A. ‘Calderón plantea agilizar la privatización de ejidos’, in Periódico La Jornada, 29/11/2012, p. 12.

Note available online: http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/11/29/politica/012n2pol


14. The most influential enterprises are Homex, Casas Geo, Urbi, Hogar, Grupo Ara, Sare, DeMet, and Sadasi.

15. It is noteworthy to mention that in 5 to 10 years private developers increased the construction of social interest housing from 10,000 to more than 50,000. Needless to say
this had a direct impact on urban sprawl in most central cities, spreading subsequently across the entire country. See J. Sánchez, Op. Cit. 11

16. The electoral campaign of Vicente Fox in 2000 is a good example of this. He lobbied to finance 750,000 dwelling units per year, adding up to nearly 2.5 million units during his administration, which meant 2,300 units per day. What these ciphers don’t reveal is that most of these units were part of the stock of privately built ‘social interest’ developments far removed of the inner cities.

17. Private developers in Mexico are being affected by the over-supply of housing units and the fluctuations of stock exchange interests. The index ‘Mexico Habita’ in the Mexican Stock Exchange, which includes six private developer companies, has dropped 36% in 2012. According to INFONAVIT foreclosures have more than doubled between 2011 and 2012, reaching a record of 43,853 units.

18. While the official discourse denies that the housing sector is going through a crisis, private developing enterprises have lost credibility in the international stock market and thus have lost hold of investors. In April 2013, Homex, Mexico’s largest housing developer reached record lows and was forced to request a state bailout of initial 144 million Mexican Pesos for its financial rescue. Source: Reporte Indigo, 17/04/2013. URBI, the third largest developer in Mexico plummeted 60% in 2013. Source: 24 Horas, 04/04/2013

19. In 2011 the Human Rights section of the Mexican Constitution was reformed to include in its Article 1 that all norms related to human rights will be interpreted according to the Mexican Constitution and national and international treaties. In its Article 4, the Mexican Constitution establishes the right of every citizen to a dignified dwelling. It further directs the state as responsible to ensure this right. This is accompanied by the entry of Mexico in the International Treaty of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PIDESC) of the United Nations, where it is stipulated that all member states are required to guarantee the access to adequate levels of life, including proper nutrition, clothing and a dignified dwelling. Source: K. Said, El Barzón. 20/05/2013.

20. The Urban Asymmetries research and design program was conducted at the Delft School of Design from 2007-2013, and included projects in Mexico City, Santiago de Chile, Newark, Amsterdam, London, Ciudad Juárez, and Athens.

21. The Urban Asymmetries research project was conducted by T. Kaminer, M. Robles-Durán, G. Bruyns, H. Plomp, D. Sepúlveda, S. Kousoulas and H. Sohn. It counted with the participation of more than sixty international graduate students of the Architecture and Urbanism Departments of the Faculty of Architecture of the TU-Delft.


24. The participants of the Ciudad Juárez study group presented the findings of the research at the 2o Congreso Internacional de Ciudades Fronterizas organized by Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez in November, 2011.

25. There have been several strategic proposals to improve the present conditions in Riberas del Bravo. I consider the work realized by the municipality in collaboration with the civil association UNES the most relevant as it includes community participation in the
formulation of the strategic plan (PEV 2011-2015), which seeks to recover population and strengthen social tissues with 87 physical and social projects for the area.

*Heidi Sohn is Assistant Professor of Architectural Theory at the Theory Section, Faculty of Architecture, TU-Delft. She obtained her PhD in 2006 and her MSc in 2001 from the Faculty of Architecture, TU-Delft. From 2007 to 2012 she was project and research director of the DSD Urban Asymmetries program. Currently, she is interim head of the Theory Section, where she coordinates the graduate and postgraduate academic program. She lectures, teaches design studios and theory seminars for the Faculty of Architecture, TU-Delft, and for The Berlage Institute. She is visiting professor of Architecture Theory at UMA School of Architecture, in Umeå, Sweden. She is originally from Mexico City and lives in Amsterdam since 1999.

heidi_sohn@mac.com / h.sohn@tudelft.nl