

IRIS Summer Fieldwork Award, Summer 2016

**“The Land Should Be Loved and Defended, Not Sold”:
City-Making, Gentrification, and Resistance in Mexico City**

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October 21, 2016

With the support of a Summer Fieldwork Award from the Institute for Regional and International Studies, I was able to conduct fieldwork for my MA thesis during a 3-month period in Mexico City this past summer. My research this summer looked at the community response to a series of development projects in several neighborhoods in southern Mexico City. This current phase of research builds on historical research that I conducted several years ago. I will use my previous and current research to construct an analysis over time of how the community residents' experience of “city-making” has shaped their vision of and relationship to the city, and how this plays out in their resistance to local infrastructure and real estate development projects. Over the course of the summer I conducted 31 interviews with area residents and engaged in participant observation.

Prior to beginning my PhD program I had the opportunity to study the history of a Mexico City neighborhood called Santo Domingo. Santo Domingo was formed in 1971 after a group of migrant families occupied a plot of communal agricultural land on the city's periphery, which was eventually expropriated and privatized by the government. In the decades following its foundation, residents fought for property titles and service delivery, doing much of the hard labor and financing of neighborhood construction themselves. During the 1960s and 1970s, as Mexico City's population exploded, occupation-expropriation-privatization was the principal mode through which the periphery was urbanized. This previous research informed a new set of questions that I seek to address in this second phase of research: How does the experience of “city making” shape citizens' relationship to the city and the state? What are the political and social consequences of urbanization through the occupation-expropriation-privatization mode? What is the role of irregularity/informality in the accumulative project of the city?

I originally intended to study the neighborhood's response to “Future City,” one component of a city-wide public-private development initiative that included a series of specialized “campuses” of innovation in medicine, science, and technology. Future City, which would be located adjacent to Santo Domingo, was a proposed center of private research institutes, government offices, and housing for researchers and employees. I had been following neighborhood organizing efforts in Santo Domingo to prevent the construction of Future City since 2013 (before I began my PhD program) and decided to use it as a case to address my research questions. In January 2016, the Mexico City government quietly and unceremoniously suspended plans for Future City, though residents maintain demands to convert the space into a public park.

Shortly after arriving in Mexico City, however, I realized that most of the community's energy had shifted to focus on other projects. Though residents in the community expressed personal skepticism about the motivations for and even the veracity of the cancellation of Future City, the lack of an immediate and tangible threat had resulted in a shift of collective organizing focus. Within the first few days of my arrival, I was directed by residents toward the area's new focus of organizing efforts: Aztecas 215.



The inundated construction site of Aztecas 215.

Aztecas 215 is the address of a stalled luxury condo development on the border of Santo Domingo. Residents of Santo Domingo and other nearby neighborhoods had organized a permanent encampment outside of the construction site after residents became aware that the developer had altered the natural drainage/water system by excavating to build an underground parking structure. I first visited the encampment in mid-May, at which point the encampment had only existed for a few weeks. At the time of writing this report, the encampment has been around for over 175 days. The residents are organizing around two central demands: 1) definitive cancellation of the apartment building and 2) expropriation of the site for the public good (residents envision a park). I spent much of my summer at the encampment and talking with residents about their views about the encampment, the apartment development, and generally their sentiments and opinions about how the neighborhood has changed over time. I also collected data on the neighborhood's class shift since its foundation, both in observed and subjective terms. Finally, I continued to look at the ways that residents linked their present views about the neighborhood with their experience with or ideas about the neighborhood's history.

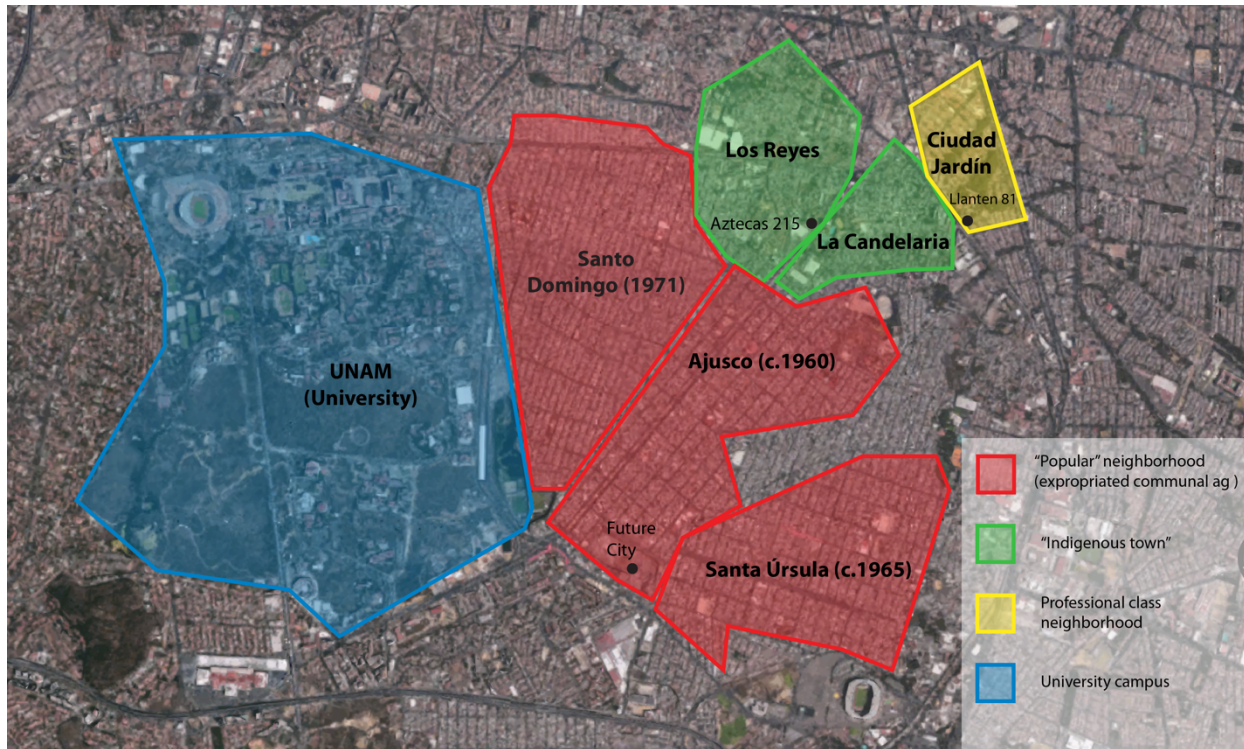


The permanent encampment maintained by community members outside of Aztecas 215.

I ended up expanding the scope of my research to include the neighborhoods adjacent to Santo Domingo. Two of the other neighborhoods—Santa Úrsula and Ajusco—have a history of autoconstruction similar to Santo Domingo and retain a working class identity. Los Reyes and La Candelaria are *pueblos originarios* which can be understood as “indigenous towns” that have precolonial roots. The city essentially grew around these towns and they maintain strong cultural identities and traditions. The residents of these two neighborhoods were the original “owners” of the land now encompassed by Santo Domingo, Santa Úrsula, and Ajusco.

Residents from these five neighborhoods banded together in the early days of the organizing against Aztecas 215 to form the Neighborhood Assembly that maintains the encampment. Disagreements in strategies and tactics, however, have created a rift between the residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria and the other neighborhoods. The ways that residents from Los Reyes and La Candelaria have responded to Aztecas 215 provides an important point of comparison to how the “autoconstructed” neighborhoods have responded to the imposition of private interests in the area.

Finally, Ciudad Jardín is a professional/middle class neighborhood that I have included in my analysis because they are organizing against a luxury condo development in their neighborhood and have sought support and solidarity from those involved in the Aztecas 215. This case similarly provides a compelling contrast to the other neighborhoods resisting similar projects.



Map of the neighborhoods and cases

I also examined two other points of community organizing in Santo Domingo and nearby neighborhoods that I plan to use in answering my research questions. The first is community opposition to plans initiated by the government to install piped gas lines through a private company, Gas Fenosa. The second is a long-term organizing project by residents to demand modifications to electricity prices and property taxes. The mechanism through which residents are organizing around these demands is a neighborhood assembly meeting that they hold on a weekly basis in the street, which I attended regularly.

To resume, I collected data through ethnographic study and interviews on several comparative cases that I will use to construct my analysis and address my research questions:

	Neighborhood Type		
	Autoconstruction (Santo Domingo, Santa Úrsula, Ajusco)	<i>Pueblo Originario</i> (Los Reyes, La Candelaria)	Professional/Middle Class (Ciudad Jardín)
Case	Luxury Apartment Development (Aztecas 215)	Luxury Apartment Development (Aztecas 215)	Luxury Apartment Development (Llanten 81)
	Future City		
	Service Delivery (Gas Fenosa, electricity/property tax prices)		