

**Erasing Popular History:
State Discourse of Cultural Patrimony in Puebla, Mexico**

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Abstract

Despite the 1987 UNESCO designation of the historic center of the city of Puebla, Mexico as a “*patrimonio cultural de la humanidad*,” the state government effected in 1998 a North American-style urban renewal project which displaced hundreds of working class residents from their homes and workplaces. This paper explores the discourse of patrimony wielded by the state government in order to neutralize active resistance to the project.

I. Puebla, a World Heritage Site

In accordance with the 1972 Federal Law on Monuments and Archaeological, Artistic and Historic Zones, the government of Mexico determined in November of 1977 that the historic central district of the city of Puebla was a *zona monumental*, an area with structures of historic importance that merit protection. The area contains a host of churches, convents, houses, plazas and public buildings constructed between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, none of which could be altered by owners or renters or preyed upon by developers without official permission. From 1977 forward, all construction, repairs, renovations or any change in the architectural integrity of buildings designated “historic” would have to be approved by and conducted under the auspices of, the National Institute of Anthropology and History, or INAH.

Center city Puebla certainly merits the distinction, “historic.” Located at the halfway mark along the colonial route that connected the gulf port of Veracruz with the capital city of Mexico, Puebla was erected in the 1530s in order to provide a home for the ex-conquistadors whose services were no longer needed in battle, but in colony-building. Unlike other Mexican cities, Puebla was not situated on the site of indigenous temples or pyramids, but on a high, open plain transversed by several rivers, an area which proved to be apt for growing the wheat needed to make the bread to supply the Spanish fleet. The former soldiers were granted the labor of indigenous peoples to construct the edifices in which they would live and labor, not only homes, but churches and chapels, convents and the entire structural apparatus that served the large number of religious orders that settled in the city to tend to the spiritual needs of its inhabitants, as well as to convert and maintain the indigenous peoples, or “naturals,” in a state of grace. At least twenty-eight churches and convents can be distinguished on a map drawn in 1698, and a map from the 1750s illustrates fifty-six religious complexes.

Puebla proved to be an agricultural and commercial success for the crown, and it soon became the colony’s second-most important city. This designation was held from the colonial period well into the twentieth century, when the city was eclipsed in size and economic importance by the northern metropolitan centers of Monterrey and Guadalajara. Urbanist Gustavo Garza (1998) maintains that Puebla’s proximity to Mexico City siphons off much potential for development.

Over time, the city outgrew its original limits, but it wasn’t until the twentieth century that it began to stretch well beyond the original historic center. In what became the first wave of suburban residential development in the 1920s, builders adopted new architectural styles, and were especially fond of European aesthetics (Salamanca M. n.d.: 11; Contreras C. 1999). Despite trends toward modernization, however, many of the older buildings were reasonably well conserved until the mid-twentieth century, when accelerated expansion changed not only the size, but the face of the city. Between 1960 and 1970, the city’s population grew five percent, and another five (4.78) percent between 1970 and 1980 (Mele 1994: 19). As the middle and upper classes moved to new housing developments outside the historic core, many of the older structures were “literally demolished,” according to architect Juan Salamanca (n.d.: 12). Some were torn down to make way for modern office buildings, commercial establishments and parking lots, and in other cases the facades were left intact and the insides demolished (Salamanca n.d.). By the 1970s, the history held in Puebla’s many colonial-era churches, convents, hospitals, asylums, homes, fountains and municipal buildings had become an endangered species.

The designation as a *zona monumental* halted the destruction and allowed the proposal of plans to recuperate buildings in a state of ruin. However, the residential mix in the center city had shifted by that time to include a high proportion of poor and working class families. Elegant colonial homes had been converted into multiple-dwelling *vecindades*, apartment buildings that housed entire families in one or two rooms, and whose sanitary facilities were woefully inadequate. It is not uncommon for all the residents of a building to share one or two toilets and baths. Absentee owners were not interested in, or did not have the capital to, renovate the old structures (Marroquín n.d.; Percas n.d.). The entubing and paving over of the San Francisco River in the 1960s further added to the architectural distress, since many buildings along its banks had been expropriated by the state in order to carry out the project, and those not demolished were left in a state of ruin along this main, north-south thoroughfare.

By the time that Puebla's monumental district was further distinguished in 1987 by the UNESCO designation of the city as a "*patrimonio cultural de la humanidad*," or world heritage site, the historic center housed primarily the working class and the poor, the administrative offices and liberal arts departments of the state university and unsightly "modern" office buildings and parking lots, all of which are punctuated by a plethora of colonial-era churches and convents. In short, Puebla contains a melange of architectural styles and land use.

II. New Urban Development: the Paseo del Río San Francisco

When long-time, ruling party functionary Manuel Bartlett Díaz came to Puebla in 1992 as the party's designated gubernatorial candidate, he brought with him important political and financial connections to the federal government. His presidential aspirations for the year 2000 made it imperative for him to achieve a substantial public record in Puebla. The vehicle he chose was "Plan Angelópolis," a grand urban development scheme which included road, highway and bridge construction, drainage systems and a landfill project, all designed to order and regulate the city's growth. The support of then-President Carlos Salinas Gortari made Governor Bartlett Díaz's project financially feasible.

Although most aspects of Plan Angelópolis affected the urban periphery, local newspapers reported on August 11, 1993 that the municipal government had voted unanimously in closed session to declare "of public utility" twenty-seven manzanas (18.9 hectares or 46.81 acres) on the eastern fringe of the city's historic center. The purpose of this declaration was to clear the terrain for the eventual construction of an urban development project whose core would consist of a convention center and tourist complex. The project, known as the Paseo del Río San Francisco, was intended to foster tourism and thus detonate the weak urban economy.

The plans were developed by United States firms (McKinsey & Company, Inc. and HKS Architects y Sasaki Associates, Inc.) who modeled the scheme after the San Antonio, Texas Riverwalk and added the tourist attractions of an artificial lake and a cable car. Since, as noted, the San Francisco River had been underground since the 1960s, the Paseo project would presumably require its uncovering to recreate the river along which tourists would walk (Durán Guzmán 1998a). As rumors began leaking out about what the project actually entailed, critics called into question the logic of creating an artificial lake and luxury hotels in an area of the city lacking the infrastructure to deliver water on demand and control flooding during the rainy season. University-based professionals centered their attacks on the destruction of local culture and identity and the lack of an authentic public voice during the planning process (Aguirre 1993; Aguirre M. 1993; Durán Guzmán 1998a, b).

Several groups formed in opposition to the project, the main lines of differences among them based on property ownership. Despite this fundamental contradiction, however, participants functioned in concert for several years following the announcement of the declaration of public utility, manifesting their opposition by requesting stays of execution in the courts, holding public demonstrations, diffusing their views through local media, meeting with public officials and taking their case directly to UNESCO to protest the lack of attention paid to Puebla's *patrimonio cultural*. The courts granted some writs of habeas corpus, and the propaganda campaign was successful in publicly countering many of the government arguments. Stymied by this active opposition, the government could not proceed with the Paseo project for several years. They could, however, catalogue the buildings and excavate the area to establish its historic value. This work was conducted by the state INAH office.

By the time the government decided to act, planners had discarded the riverwalk, cable car and artificial lake and settled for a six-manzana (4.2 hectares or 10.4 acres) project featuring a convention center, museum, hotels, restaurants, a shopping plaza and movie theaters. The outgoing municipal government that had declared the public utility of the twenty-seven manzana area three years earlier, expropriated the six-manzana zone in February 1996. The few families who held out until the bitter end, desperately hoping for the courts or the opponents of the project to come to their rescue, were violently evicted in May of 1997, and the Paseo project area was finally "cleared" of human habitation and ready for construction (Churchill 1990).

The six-manzana development zone was chosen for its low residential rate, which meant fewer evictions. The core of the project contained a number of factory buildings, only a few still functioning, as well as the remains of a seventeenth century Franciscan convent. Still, the area is surrounded by housing, businesses, a clinic and an elementary school. A survey conducted by architectural students (Autonomous University of Mexico, Xochimilco) in 1994 found that these barrios are solid, working class neighborhoods, many of whose residents have deep roots in the area. Seventy percent of residents were renters, and only twenty-four percent property owners. The vast majority (eighty-six percent) of the residents worked within one kilometer of their residences, and ninety percent did their daily shopping within six blocks of their homes. The major housing problems included construction problems (seventy-five percent) and the lack of adequate water supply, sanitary facilities and drainage (thirty-nine percent) (González Aragon et al, n.d.: 42).

Once the residents blocking the Paseo project were evicted, the convention center which would constitute the core of the new zone, was erected almost overnight. Governor Bartlett had only a short time left in office, and without his presence and the financial support he had garnered, the project would never come to fruition. Toward the end of his term, construction proceeded literally around the clock. The final core site contains a convention center, several small parks and a museum, all built largely with government funds. The selling of the remainder of the sites to private enterprise for the hotels, restaurants and shops that would complete the tourist complex has lagged, with only a few sites negotiated and sold for these purposes to date. Once the core site took form, however, the government agencies responsible for its realization sought to silence their critics. It is this discourse that I wish to treat today in this short exposition.

III. The Legitimizing Forum

In May of 1998, Puebla's INAH office sponsored a forum entitled, "The Foundation and Development of the City of Puebla de los Angeles." The individual and panel presentations would

be multidisciplinary and cover the topic from a variety of specializations, including “history, archaeology, art, architecture and urbanism.” The conference was held in the former textile factory known as “la Violeta,” in the middle of the newly-landscaped area behind the Convention Center and between the Pescaditos park and the former Franciscan hospital.

The event’s planners clearly intended on creating an atmosphere of excitement, given the high-tech presentations featuring visual imagery through slides and videos, a bevy of prestigious presenters and a significant level of media attention. The ex-factory and its surrounding grounds were still in the process of renovation, but had been emptied, excavated and sufficiently restored to lend a rustic but elegant feel to the space. Multi-colored paper flags fluttered in the breeze over the walkway between the former factory and the hospital. In the presentation hall, huge, cloth banners announcing the forum and naming its various spaces hung from the high ceilings.

The exhibitions available for perusal in what would soon become a museum included the Plan for the Conservation and Urban Ordering of the “Paseo del Río San Francisco,” the Master Plan for the “Paseo del Río San Francisco” project, the Architectural Conservation Project of the Paseo del Río San Francisco, Pueblan Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries and Monastic Architecture in New Spain of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Three videos were presented at various times during the forum. Talavera pottery shards collected during INAH’s excavation were presented in glass cases, and a special, beribboned set of color prints illustrating these findings were distributed to all conference presenters by the State Secretary of Urban Development and Ecology, or SEDUEE.

As people strolled through the exhibition area, examining the diagrams, photographs, maps, blueprints and descriptive texts that accompanied the remnants taken from the factories whose space had so recently been converted into new uses, they might feel that they were standing on the threshold of a discarded and forgotten past whose “recovery” led to a future full of promise, art and culture. The expositions showed the degradation of the buildings before the renovation began, as well as taking them through the various stages of renovation. By giving them a privileged, first look at all the conservation and renovation that had been done in the “public interest,” the viewers were converted into ambassadors who would spread the word in their social circles, singing the site’s praises to those who did not yet know its special nature.

The conference was replete with celebrities domestic and foreign. The national director of INAH, Teresa Franco, presided over the inauguration, which was attended by the Secretary of SEDUEE (Eduardo Macip Zuñiga), the Rector of the Autonomous University of Puebla (Enrique Doger Guerrero) and by the president of the philanthropist Mary Street Jenkins Foundation (Angeles Espinosa Yglesias). Architects, conservationists and specialists in monumental restoration abounded, as did historians of the colonial period in Puebla and researchers who focus specifically on Franciscan architecture, art and history. A large contingent of Pueblans were complemented by several other Mexicans (from Mexico City and Veracruz), and distinguished guests from Italy, Colombia, Spain and Bolivia.

Although the program announced a span of time from founding to “development,” little attention was paid to anything postcolonial. The forum was clearly intended to showcase the archaeological and historical findings to date, thus justifying the Paseo project in terms of *patrimonio cultural*. Distinguished historians from Puebla’s state university discussed the city’s founding, the role of the Franciscan order, the formation of indigenous barrios surrounding the Franciscan church-convent complex, health and water supply in the early years of the settlement and the city during the Porfirian era. Franciscan monks were credited with Puebla’s founding, the

exact location of which was the site on which they constructed their church, convent, hospital and cemetery. In accordance with the Franciscan order's penchant for angels, the city was dubbed, "Puebla de los Angeles."

The founding site identified and reclaimed with much fanfare and gusto during the INAH forum was not destined to become the heart of the new city. A few years after the Franciscans first said mass in Puebla de los Angeles, the city moved across the San Francisco River to its western bank, the location of the vast majority of the buildings that now comprise the federally and UNESCO-recognized historic center. Despite this fact, a whole set of presentations focused on the Franciscans and their mission, theology and penchant for convent building. The presenters thus lent the site of the forum, which is synonymous with the Paseo project, not only with authenticity, but with divine presence. The Franciscans, as the historians have it, considered it their mission as to establish a new city, a blessed city, to counter the evil inherent in settlements like Tenochtitlán, the capital of the conquered Aztecs. Legend has it that Puebla's location was decided by the divine intervention present in a vision experienced by the first Bishop of Tlaxcala. The first mass in the new settlement was held at Easter, the 16th of April, in 1531, since the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the highest holy day in the Catholic calendar. Puebla was to be the Jerusalem of the New World (Mendoza, n.d.).

IV. The Legitimizing Document: A Report on the Progress of Plan Angelópolis

A glossy, seventy-nine page report on Plan Angelópolis was distributed to all forum attendees. Only eight pages are dedicated to the Paseo project's accomplishments, but they are rich in visual imagery: twenty-nine color photographs highlighting the excavation and restoration of the zone accompany six paragraphs of text. However scanty, the text contains a series of concepts of discursive power that highlight the government's attempt to legitimate their actions.

The second paragraph describes the Paseo project as a "rescue program ... oriented toward increasing the quality of life of the population and avoiding the negative effects caused by the deterioration of the natural and cultural environment." The text continues, noting that the project will "recuperate" the zone, "modernize" the use of the area's buildings, and "improve the historic barrios and preserve their customs and traditions" (State of Puebla 1997:34). Not only are some of these phrases simple euphemisms for common practice in classic urban renewal schemes, so that "modernizing" building use really means evicting low income tenants and gentrifying the area; but the text suggests that the working class residents are responsible for the state of the buildings in which they live and work, and the government, on behalf of the public interest must "rescue" them from the hands of those who have maltreated them. The solution to this sad state of affairs, is to "recover" the historic buildings from the working class in order to restore them to their original state, thus revalorizing them. This will be done "through the development (of the zone:) ... a riverwalk, the ... convention center, commercial areas a museum and other installations" (State of Puebla 1997:35).

On page 36 we find perhaps the most telling passage:

In 1997, (we) concluded the liberation of the buildings, continued investigative work and rescue of historic and cultural vestiges (and) began the consolidation of buildings with historic value, among them (parts of) the Franciscan Convent, the ovens of the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century, the former factory, La Violeta and the ... Pescaditos (Park).

Thus, recent history is rewritten to smooth over the rough edges and erase memory of the fierce resistance to the project: the buildings were “liberated,” as though they had been occupied by a hostile army, instead of being lived in by the families who had owned them for three generations (Churchill 1999). Historic and cultural vestiges were “rescued” as though they had been kidnapped or held hostage. The enemy is never clearly defined, and many be read to be the passage of time, the deterioration caused by rain, wind or industrial contamination, or even the working class whose neglect has caused the area to decay. And again, the assignment of “value” to things Spanish and colonial: the convent, the factory, the recreational area known as the Estanque of the Pescaditos.

V. Discussion

Sonia Lombardo de Ruiz (1996:198) links the movement to conserve historic buildings in Mexico to the construction of the concept of *patrimonio cultural*. She specifically locates its origins in “the birth of nationalism during the formation of the nation State following independence” from Spain (Lombardo de Ruiz 1996:199). The liberal spirit that guided the establishment of nationhood demanded the creation of a new, national culture that could incorporate the multitude of social and ethnic groups that lived within Mexican territorial limits, providing all with a national identity that would differentiate this new nation from others. This was accomplished, according to Lombardo de Ruiz (1996:199-200), by incorporating the contribution of indigenous populations under the general rubric of “the glorious past,” and assigning the spheres of religion, colonial administration and the slow but steady move toward civilization to the Spanish. These two racial strains would each bring their discrete strengths to bear on the creation of the new race, the *mestizo*, which would solidify the new *patrimonio cultural* of the hybrid nation and carry it into the future.

The INAH forum’s exclusive focus on the founding of Puebla by and for the Spanish constitutes the city as a special place, the city of the angels. The Spanish are simultaneously imbued with the ability to transcend the alleged glory of their indigenous predecessors. That is to say, since the “naturals” were brought to the area after the Franciscans decided to locate themselves along the banks of the river they renamed in honor of their patron, the implication is that the Spanish, and not the indigenous peoples, are those who deserve the glory of historical recognition. Even the *mestizo* is ignored in this version of Pueblan history. S/he comes later, after the indigenous build the city on the western banks of the river for the Spanish and retire to their barrios and artisan workshops along the eastern bank, crossing the river only to sell their wares and labor in the convents of the religious orders and in the homes of Spanish settlers. Confined physically to the other side of the river and written out of history in the fervor to celebrate the great works of the Spanish founders, converters, civilizers and later, modernizers, the residents of Analco, La Luz, El Alto, Xanenetla and the other barrios are absent in Pueblan historiography.

When the Spanish moved the heart of their new city to the other side of the river, they abandoned the area around the Franciscan complex to the “naturals.” In fact, Analco means “the other side of the river” in Nahuatl. Four centuries later, neither Analco, La Luz, El Alto nor Xanenetla bear any evidence of those ancestors. These barrios have lost their indigenous cast and are now known for housing the popular classes: the working class and the poor. However, the popular classes continue to recreate the intangible culture of their ancestors, along with new ideas and practices. These combine with those of the national culture project propagated through the

educational system and the media, to constitute contemporary working class culture. But in the class logic that pervades contemporary capitalist social relations, working class culture is a poor second cousin to the national culture celebrated by the middle and upper classes; so that everyone listens to mariachi music, but the poor prefer música tropical to the opera occasionally listened to by the upper classes; and everyone follows *fútbol*, but the popular classes also insist on *lucha libre* at celebrations of the barrio's patron saint. The wealthy do not dance in carnival, nor do they carry saints through the streets on high holy days, while the poor continue to ask for days off from work to express their faith and community solidarity through these practices that constitute their *patrimonio cultural*. Even though Puebla's barrios are replete with such, their residents lack the indigenusness encountered in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Michoacan, with their wide variety of ethnic groups, each with a special artisan product, woven dress and language. One must leave the city of Puebla and travel to the northern part of the state to find indigenous peoples wearing embroidered clothing and speaking native languages

Since the 1950s, says Sonia Lombardi de Ruiz (1996), the concept of *patrimonio cultural* has been inserted into a "new sphere," that of tourism as economic development. This has placed the notion of conservation of *patrimonio cultural* on a collision course with the dynamic of capitalism, since conservation is not always profitable nor desirable. Tourism, however, has become so. Sites which can claim the representation of various periods of history in one place are more profitable, as are those which can claim bright, colorful, festive practices and products that can easily be commercialized. The simple expressions of working class solidarity found in Puebla's barrios hardly bear such promise. Thus, the official discourse in that city continues to define *patrimonio cultural* as the built environment, as monuments which bear identifiable architectural features.

The place in which the popular classes live is replete with *patrimonio cultural*. The colonial presence on the east side of the river is abundant in the buildings around the San Francisco church complex and along the streets adjacent to the string of churches and chapels that themselves lined the former San Francisco River, running north-south. From the area just north of the church, with its baths and chapels that constitute the *vía crucis*, to the south, past the chapel *Ecce Homo* and the barrio church of La Luz, and on into the barrio of Analco, where the Franciscan brothers served the "naturals" in the tiny hermitage known as Las Ánimas, the buildings along these streets and alleys range from restored to pristine state, to occupied but in a state of deterioration, to just plain ruins. This is the *patrimonio cultural* that the government and its many agencies, the architects and conservationists and historians wish to "restore."

In the INAH forum, the discourse succeeded in moving the focus of discussion of *patrimonio cultural* away from the intangible culture of the popular classes, past and present, to the city's colonial past. The barrios touched by the Paseo project were present only through their physical proximity. In terms of presentations, an architect represented a discussion of "the indigenous barrios of Puebla and proposals for their rescue," and an historian presented on the formation of working class barrios in Puebla. Otherwise, the barrios were absent in this discussion of the founding and development of the city, and their residents were conveniently erased from Puebla history. And when a living, breathing resident of the barrio of Analco stood up to present his complaints in what was characterized by the INAH as an "open" forum, the head of the agency, Hector Alvarez Santiago characterized him as "conservative" and position as "recalcitrant," presumably for suggesting that the modernization proposed by the Paseo project would have a negative effect on traditional barrio culture (Mellado May, May 25, 1998:n.p.).

It appears as though the intangible *patrimonio cultural* of the barrios adjacent to the Paseo project cannot be considered for inclusion in its future. The current residents did not build the colonial era buildings, they no longer produce the artisan products that would attract tourists, and they are thus, in the sense of the economic future of the area, useless and valueless. They have been stripped of their meaning discursively, and of their homes and businesses through the expropriation. Like their indigenous ancestors, they are people without history, with nothing to say or contribute.

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