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Sergio Alvarado Vazquez, Cesar Casiano Flores

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AUTHORS
Sergio ALVARADO VAZQUEZ,
César CASIANO FLORES

The Planning Conditions of Public Spaces in Mexico

ABSTRACT
The objective of this paper is to present an analysis of the current development conditions of public spaces in Mexico through the perspectives of different actors. It will also explain the main issues of the actual planning regulatory framework concerning the inclusion of civil society in the planning and design process of public spaces in Mexico. We take into account the Federal law of human settlements, territorial order, and urban development (Diario Oficial de la Federacion, 2016)presented in November of 2016, which became the first federal legislation in Mexico that defines and relates the terms "urban development", "public space" and "social participation" (ANPR & WRI México, 2018). This research aims to present a background of the current conditions of planning public spaces in Mexico according to the federal government for the period (2018-2024), non-governmental institutions, and the private sector where each actor has a different perspective of the conditions of how public spaces should be developed.

KEYWORDS
Public space, Social participation, Technology, Mexico

RÉSUMÉ
L'objectif de cet article est de présenter une analyse des conditions actuelles de développement des espaces publics au Mexique à travers l'examen des perspectives des différents acteurs. Il déterminera également les principaux problèmes du cadre réglementaire actuel de planification concernant l'inclusion de la société civile dans le processus de planification et de conception des espaces publics au Mexique. Nous prenons en compte la loi fédérale sur les établissements humains, l'ordre territorial et le développement urbain (Federacion, 2016), présentée en novembre 2016 et qui est devenue la première législation fédérale au Mexique qui définit et relie les termes « développement urbain », « espace public » et « participation sociale » (World Resource Institute, 2018). Cette recherche vise à présenter un contexte des conditions réelles de planification des espaces publics au Mexique selon le gouvernement fédéral pour la période (2018-2024), les institutions non gouvernementales et le secteur privé, où chaque acteur a une perspective différente.

MOTS CLÉS
espace public, participation sociale, technologie, Mexique

INTRODUCTION

According to different scholars and practitioners, a public space is a physical space with a shared use between the city inhabitants, where social, cultural, artistic, recreational and political functions unfold, and where social expressions and manifestations can be shared with others (Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Madanipour, 1999).
In Mexico, the development of public spaces has been a topic promoted by the federal government, the state and the municipal level. However, the lack of continuity and poor organisation and collaboration between government institutions has stopped their development on a gradual basis. In this research, we want to analyse the current conditions for the development of public spaces in Mexico at the beginning of the 21st century.
It is important to mention the regulatory framework for the development of public spaces in Mexico. Any federal, regional, and municipal programme has to follow a national plan presented by the President at the beginning of his administration with the projects that will be carried out during the administration; from there, the regulatory framework in Mexico has a hierarchy follow-up (fig. 1), according to which every law or regulation has, as a base, the constitution of Mexico.

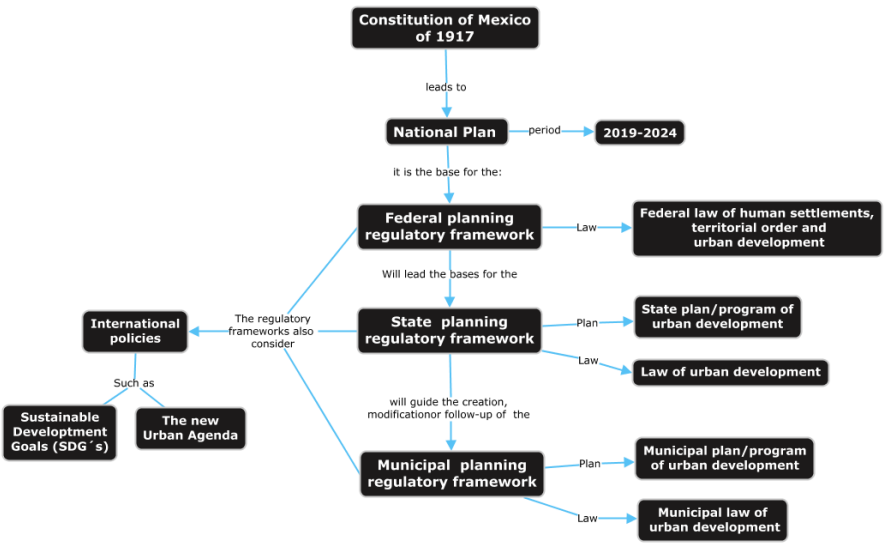


Figure 1. Regulatory planning framework of Mexico (authors' design)

During its presidential period (2012-2018), former president Enrique Peña Nieto created a federal "Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development" (Subsecretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Vivienda, 2014); the acronym in Spanish referred to it as SEDATU. The same year, it presented the Federal Law of Human Settlements, Territorial Order, and Urban Development (LHSTOUDL) (Diario Oficial de la Federacíon, 2016), the first federal legislation ever in Mexico that relates the terms "human settlements", "urban development", "public space" and "social participation". For the first time, public spaces were mentioned as "open spaces or land that belong to human settlements intended for use, enjoyment or collective use, with generalized access and free transit" (*ibid.*).

1. METHODOLOGY

To understand the current conditions of public spaces in Mexico, it is necessary to know what a public space is according to different actors taking part in their development. For this reason, we planned 12 interviews in two Mexican cities, Mexico City and Puebla City, that were selected for their proximity and prior local knowledge of relevant researchers.

We used three primary groups that were part of the development of public infrastructures:

– Government agencies, institutions that work independently at state and municipal level focused on the planning, development and maintenance of public spaces; however, as there was no homologation between institutions, planning and mobility institutes were interviewed.

– Non-governmental organisations, that mostly focus on the local context as a way to represent the social needs of an urban problem and to promote the right to the city, this organizations has been studied by several scholars in order to give the power of the city to the citizens (Borja, 2012).

– Private sector (consultancy firms), which mostly focuses on developing proposals at government requests, when it does not have the technical or operational capacity to develop them (Cuenya, 2009).

Although government actors at the federal level were caught in serious corruption scandals (on August 13th, 2019, the ex-Director of the SEDATU was sent to prison for diverting public resources to universities and private companies for public service contracts, (Fierro, 2019), we managed to interview the new administration.

2. FINDINGS

We therefore led 12 interviews during five weeks, between November and December of 2019 in Mexico City and Puebla (tabl. 1).

Table 1. Interviewed actors in Puebla and Mexico City during November of 2019

Number	Type of Actor	Institution	Place
1	NGO	Barriopolis	Mexico city
2	Private	Thorsten Arquitectos	Mexico city
3	Government	Ministry of Mobility of Puebla city	Puebla city
4	Government	Municipal Institute of Planning in Puebla	Puebla city
5	NGO	College of urbanist and environmental designers of the state of Puebla	Puebla city
6	NGO	RE-Genera Espacio	Puebla city
7	Government	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development	Mexico city
8	Government	Local mayor of Romero Vargas district	Puebla city
9	Private	Entorno Paisaje	Puebla city
10	NGO	TIU	Mexico city
11	Government	Ministry of Mobility of Mexico City	Mexico city
12	Government	Secretaria de Obras y Servicios	Mexico city

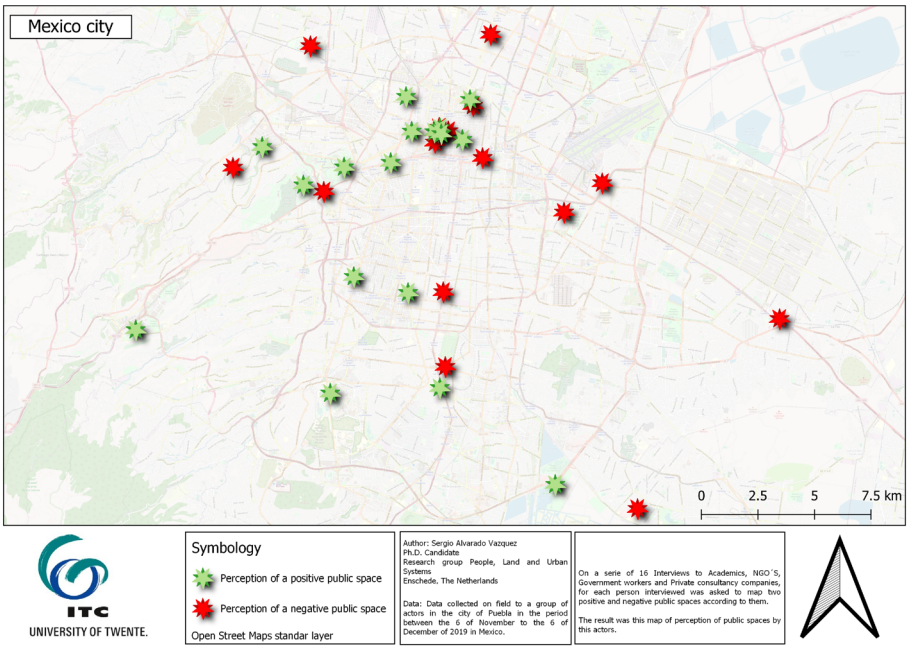
A semi-structured interview was done with each actor around four critical questions:
- How do they define a public space according to each group of actors?
- How public spaces look like currently in Mexico?
- How do they perceive the regulatory framework in Mexico concerning the development of public spaces?
- What do they think is the future of public spaces in Mexico?

It amounted to over 14 hours of audio recordings in Spanish that had to be transcribed and translated to English.

Besides the answers to the questions, the interviewed actors were asked to select two positive and negative public spaces using a tablet device. For this extra exercise, Qgis and the app Qfield, both open-source software's, were used in order to get a perception map about the positive and negative public spaces (fig. 1 & 2) (Yoshimura *et al.*, 2020).

In Mexico City (fig. 2), the perception of public spaces is more positive in the historical part of the city and the south, with more quality, design and maintenance. On the contrary, peripheral areas are perceived as neglected spaces and unsafe to visit.

Figure 2. Perception of positive and negative public spaces in Mexico City
Source: Authors' elaboration with data collected on fieldwork in November 2019



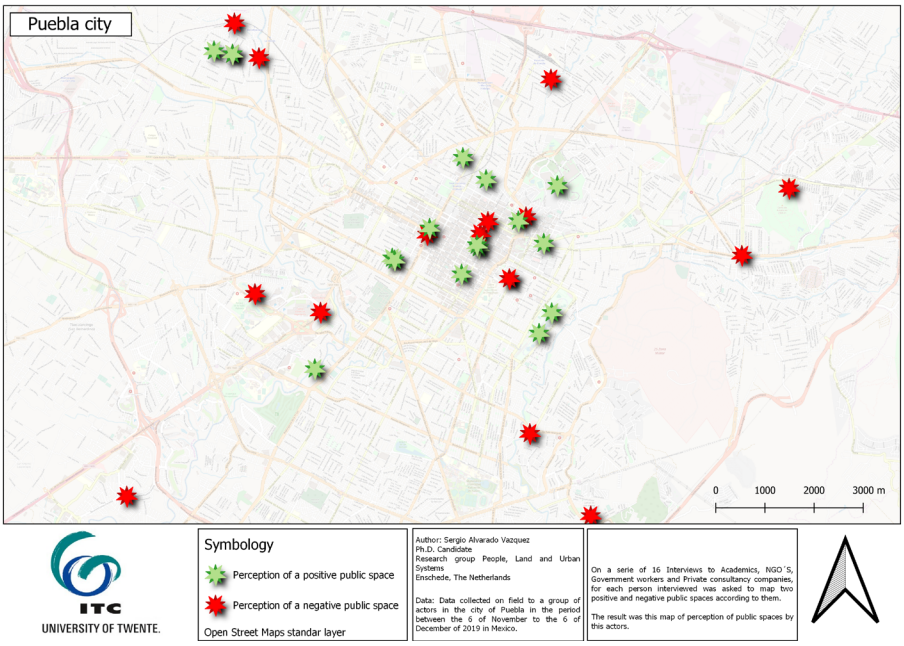


Figure 3. Perception of positive and negative public spaces in Puebla city
Source: Author's elaboration with data collected on fieldwork in November 2019

In the city of Puebla (fig. 3), the perception follows similar patterns as Mexico city, where the historical city centre presents better quality and maintenance of their public spaces while, in peripheral areas, public spaces are considered unsafe, neglected and difficult to access.

3. WHAT IS A PUBLIC SPACE THEN?

In both cities, for actors from the federal to the local government, they are defined as places where people can express and demonstrate, where they can share, learn, and understand the diversity of ideas of people living in the city. From the legal perspective, usually, it works as a donation area by a private actor to the local government compensated by a private construction with recreative functions (Secretaría de Desarrollo Sustentable, 2015).

For NGOs, public spaces are places were community converge and where social understanding is currently being lost due to the lack of attractive and safe spaces. It is understood as a space outside our home or workspace where everyone fits and all activities can happen, where people are free to realise any activity they want and where society can perform activities.

The private sector defines public spaces as all the places in a city that are not private, have a public function and involve complex multifunctionality. It is a space which enables interactions, where people do not have to consume, and which is open for everyone. It can be an open space surrounded by private buildings; it sometimes does not necessarily have to be public for everyone.

4. WHAT IS THE PHYSICAL PERCEPTION OF CURRENT PUBLIC SPACES?

For the government in Mexico, public spaces are physically perceived as neglected spaces, in inadequate conditions in general with no or poor maintenance, generally more prominent in low-income areas, with a need of being renewed. On the other hand, central, touristic or public spaces, that are attended a bigger scales, present better conditions, design and maintenance; their priority is to represent the image of the city.

For NGOs, public spaces look forgotten, and they do not coexist with the urban context. Only historic public spaces are well preserved, that have been used by the rich community in the city centre of the Mexican cities. Also, they are divided into economic zones. Poor neighbourhoods have more neglected public spaces, such as in the periphery of cities.

For the private sector working on the development of public spaces, they are perceived as areas in adverse conditions: Public spaces with green areas are in bad shape. Although Mexico City has a good quantity of vegetation, it is not well maintained and has to be improved. Some need maintenance; only public spaces at the urban or regional scale are adequately maintained.

5. HOW DO YOU PERCEIVE THE REGULATORY FRAMEWORK IN MEXICO CONCERNING THE DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC SPACES?

Government actors perceive that some topics are still missing in the LHSTOUDL. At local level, the regulatory framework is too widespread. They need to choose the laws, norms and regulations, according to their needs to justify a project.

Social organisations are more aware of these regulations as they need to follow them to defend against situations that affect the collective good. NGOs know the importance of the new LHSTOUDL (Diario Oficial de la Federacíon, 2016). In other states, they need to base their efforts on local regulations, and in other cases they gain from best practices at the international level.

The private sector is more straightforward. They need to follow the regulations and norms that exist from federal to local levels and consult international standards. However, depending on the region of Mexico, local regulations change: Some projects are based on the very minimum considerations that the normativity of construction of Mexico city mentions.

6. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC SPACES IN MEXICO?

The different government levels agree that public spaces need to include social participation at the different stages of planning, and the promotion of more secure spaces where people can feel safer. Government institutions are trying to set public spaces as a priority of the federal and local agendas. The government is positive for the future of public spaces and the promotion of new laws and norms to promote them.

For NGOs, the future of public spaces lies in the conditions of each city and the impact of experiences in other countries. They perceive an uncertain future, with an institutional unawareness in Mexico. It seems that there is a potential to rescue them and the vision is positive despite the problems and economic interests that fall on them. NGOs mention that it is necessary to envision social participation in their development to legitimise them.

For the private sector, it constitutes a trend for their development. The improvement of the multifunctionality of the spaces is part of the new models of architecture and for proposals from the private sector, the mix-use and the diversity of spaces are necessary. However, in contrast, they feel a lack of responsibility by authorities to maintain public spaces in good conditions. There is a trend for the capitalisation of public spaces, for example by real estate developers with the promise of creating public spaces in private areas.

CONCLUSIONS

Each group of actors seems to perceive the conditions of public spaces differently and contrastingly with what the government dictates, depending on the type of work that they are doing. Government actors agree that public spaces in Mexico present an important lack of maintenance and are not developed equitably. They also try to promote and solve the issues with new proposal by each administration. There is no continuity of projects made in previous administrations which creates issues at all levels. Every six years, the change of office brings a new proposal, thus diminishing or even putting aside previous projects. The lack of continuity is something that NGOs are aware of. These organisations try to maintain continuity with their initiatives, pushing previously approved projects, but sometimes without proper continuity regarding political rivalries. The private sector wants to keep maintaining projects for being competitive in the market; they are well aware that there is significant non-attendance of the public spaces in Mexico. An integral vision would at least achieve socially aligned solutions.

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THE AUTHORS

Sergio Alvarado Vazquez
University of Twente (The Netherlands)
Faculty of Geo-Information Science and Earth Observation
s.alvaradovazquez@utwente.nl

Cesar Casiano Flores
University of Leuven (Belgium)
Public Governance Institute
cesar.casiano@kuleuven.be