OVERFLOWING ARCHITECTURE:
HOME, NEIGHBORHOOD AND NATION
IN MEXICO’S MODERN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

Unidad Santa Fe (USF), dedicated in 1957, is a housing and social services complex for 2,200 families in western Mexico City. Commissioned by the Mexican Social Security Institute from architect Mario Pani, it was as an agent and showcase of national progress. Starting in 1982, the project was sold to its residents, heralding reforms that liberalized the country’s economy and coincided with political fragmentation. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in USF, archival research, and interpretations of photographs, buildings, and literary texts, this dissertation debunks popular notions that put forth space as an a priori category from which communities follow, suggesting instead that architecture emerges hand-in-hand with the practices and representations of its occupants. Initiatives to manage community life, accounts of the past, engagements with state institutions, and everyday interactions in the project show that shifting groups and relations, and not autonomous citizens, give shape to social and urban settings. Local perspectives offer alternatives to both expectations of democratization and indictments of Mexico as irreparably ruined.

By exploring breaks and intersections among solidarities and built forms, this dissertation elucidates connections among family homes and histories, as well as among neighborhood identities and infrastructural configurations. By detecting participation in social life and city development beyond official realms, the text reveals urban spaces as shaped by acts of inclusion and exclusion and never as simply “public.” Shifts in genre, scale, and time demonstrate how narration of divergent versions of the past and present is linked to the circulation of power and the formation of groups, in processes with roots in the 20th century. Upon USF’s dedication, residents collaborated with officials in constructing an image of modern Mexico by playing the part of ideal state subjects. Their actions qualify analyses that suggest planning is invariably a top-down imposition. Despite changes in government, people in Mexico City continue negotiating their positions with respect to each other and to authorities by crafting representations of facts and experiences and denouncing those by others. By attending to these practices of meaning-making and their physical manifestations, this dissertation proposes an anthropological approach to the study of the built environment.
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Starting in 2007, Márgara Pani (1935-2015) offered a cherished window onto modern Mexico. Conversations on her collections, dinner parties in her house, concerts, and visits to museums with her molded my understanding of the country’s past and present. My grandfathers, architect Agustín Landa Verdugo (1923-2009) and Dr. José Ruiloba Benítez (1916-2015)—both deeply implicated in Mexico’s modernization—provided first person accounts of nation building and state formation since I was a child. I first explored Mexico City and its architecture with my father, Agustín Landa Vértiz (1951-2015), who read the second-to-last version of this dissertation with great pride. Also behind me at every turn were my mother Carmen Ruiloba Madero, brother Agustín Landa Ruiloba, maternal grandmother Conchalulpe Madero, and a caring cast of aunts, uncles, cousins, in-laws, and nephews.

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Maps and Locations

Fig. 1. Unidad Santa Fe and surrounding neighborhoods. The project’s blocks are numbered one to six. Drawn by Mariana Flores Eguiza and Juan Carlos de la Garza.
a. Heroes’ Plaza, the project’s central square.
c. Theater.
d. El casino. Originally a social club, now a sports club managed by the Social Security Center.
e. Health Clinic.
f. Social Security Center.
g. Private shops, formerly a publicly managed bakery.
h. Las canchas. Basketball courts.
i. Enclosed parking lot, formerly a soccer field.
j. Kindergarten. Formerly had an adjacent commercial area.
k. Police stations and parking.
l. El súper. Largest commercial area in the project.
m. La bomba. Central cistern and water pump.
n. Public elementary schools.
o. Day care center.
q. Water wells.
r. Vehicular and pedestrian accesses to Unidad Santa Fe.
s. Enclosed parking lots, formerly open plazas.
t. Ambulance parking lot, formerly a plaza.
u. Cristo Rey church.
w. Gym Jaguar Azteca.
1. **Unidad Santa Fe.** Housing project for 2,200 families commissioned by the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) from architect Mario Pani. The complex has been the subject of an ode by Alfredo Rode (1958), a photo essay by Onnis Luque (2013b), a B.A. thesis by Eunice McLean (2008), an accusatory documentary by José Antonio Quiñones and Jose Ángel Villegas (2009), a celebratory documentary by Fernando Panzi, Gerardo García and Facundo Torrieri (2007), and the present ethnographic monograph.

2. **Santa Fe Pueblo.** Town established in 1532 by Spanish jurist Vasco de Quiroga as a refuge for Indians displaced from Mexico-Tenochtitlan by colonization. Quiroga modeled the town on Thomas More’s *Utopia* (2010[1516]). In the second half of the 20th century, the Pueblo was integrated to Mexico City’s urban fabric. Residents were peasants and workers in a nearby gunpowder factory. Today many are service providers in the contiguous Santa Fe corporate zone. Unidad Santa Fe derives its name from the pueblo, which is located four kilometers west along *Camino Real a Toluca,* “Royal Way to Toluca,” a colonial road.
3. Santa Fe corporate zone. Née Zona Especial de Desarrollo Santa Fe, this district was built in depleted sand mines over a government landfill starting in the nineteen-eighties. The Zone, contiguous to the historic Santa Fe pueblo, is comprised of dozens of high rises, corporate parks, exclusive residential and shopping areas, and four walled universities. Some of Mexico’s largest companies are headquartered here, as are local branches of transnational corporations.

4. Lomas de Chapultepec. Upper class neighborhood west of Mexico City’s historic center along Paseo de la Reforma. It was conceived in the nineteen-thirties as a garden city by architect José Luis Cuevas and an English development company, and built on a jagged landscape of hills and forested ravines.

5. Tacubaya. A pre-Hispanic settlement on the western edge of the Lake of Texcoco, it was a popular retreat for Spanish colonial elites and, later, Mexican aristocrats (Reynoso 2011). After being incorporated to the fabric of Mexico City, it became a working class enclave and a transportation hub, with heavily trafficked subway and bus stations, and expansive markets.

6. Paseo de la Reforma. Avenue extending from Mexico City’s historic center to the central shopping mall in the Santa Fe corporate zone towards the southwest, and to the Tlatelolco housing project towards the northeast. The earliest section of the avenue, commissioned by emperor Maximilian in the mid-19th century, connected the city to a palace in the Chapultepec forest. This avenue and monuments on it are popular sites for political demonstrations, pilgrimages, and nationalist celebrations. Its modernist buildings, which once replaced 19th century villas, have begun to be replaced by skyscrapers that house luxury apartments and corporate offices.

7. Monumento a la Revolución. The “Monument to the Revolution” is a massive steel and stone structure in downtown Mexico City dedicated in 1938. It was conceived as a “national symbol” (Jiménez 2001:137) by architect Carlos Obregón Santacilia, who intervened an existing steel structure conceived by architect Émile Bénard as the central cupola of the Legislative Palace, left incomplete after the 1910 coup that unleashed the Mexican Revolution. The Monument was reproduced in institutional logos, postcards, and coins. It hosts the mortal remains of revolutionary heroes Madero, Carranza, and Villa, and of presidents Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas. In 2010, it was rededicated after a full-fledged restoration by Mexico City’s government.
8. **Tlatelolco.** Officially known as *Centro Urbano Presidente López Mateos,* “President López Mateos Urban Center,” this housing project was designed by Mario Pani and associates, and was dedicated in 1964. With 103 housing buildings, it was the largest in Mexico. Its main “civic space,” the *Plaza de las tres culturas,* “Three Cultures’ Plaza,” brings together the ruins of a pre-Hispanic ceremonial center, a colonial Church, and modernist housing and government buildings.

9. **Zócalo.** Mexico City’s central plaza, built over Tenochtitlan’s main ceremonial center. It is enclosed by, among other buildings, the National Palace, the Metropolitan Cathedral, the Federal Supreme Court, and the headquarters of Federal District’s government. The Zócalo is a common destination of demonstrations by social movements, and a stage for nationalist celebrations and political rallies. For centuries, there were pre-Hispanic stone sculptures buried under the Zócalo, which would be exhumed to be studied by naturalists and explorers, only to be buried again.

10. **UNAM.** *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México,* “National Autonomous University of Mexico.” The central campus of the country’s oldest and largest institution of higher education was built on a bed of volcanic stone and dedicated in 1952. Dozens of architects participated in its design, under the direction of Enrique del Moral and Mario Pani.

11. **Unidad Independencia.** IMSS housing project in Mexico City dedicated in 1960 and designed by the IMSS architecture department, under the leadership of Alejandro Prieto and José María Gutiérrez. Much like Unidad Santa Fe, Unidad Independencia was a showcase of national identity and progressive politics. In addition to the services offered in Unidad Santa Fe, Unidad Independencia had a swimming pool and a garden with a small zoo. Its dedication, which doubled as a commemoration of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution fifty years earlier, was presided by Adolfo López Mateos and John F. Kennedy.
Prologue: Forbearers, Flashbacks, Unidad Santa Fe Unforgotten

My father, Agustín Landa Vértiz (1951-2015), liked bringing up his childhood home as evidence of the venerability of the tradition of which his own work was part:

“The columns in the living room were fifteen centimeters in diameter, steel, and the windows towards the garden, floor to ceiling glass. There’s nothing new to what we are doing today. We follow in the steps of our masters. We are not inventing architecture; we are cultivating a craft.”

He also believed we have to be true to our time:

“If we are to be modern, so better be our dwellings. If we were in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, our architecture would be Gothic or Romanesque or a revival of Roman temples, but today it must be modern!”

This was common sense when I was growing up, surrounded by books on Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, and buildings by, among others, Agusto Álvarez, Enrique Carral, Enrique del Moral, José Villagrán, and Mario Pani. When we drove through Mexico City, my father would point at a building and say:

“That one right there is Mario Pani’s… On the corner, that one is by José Creixell and Enrique de la Mora… You see that white building right there? You wouldn’t guess, but it is Luis Barragán’s.” On main avenues, every other building had an author, and my father spoke as if their author was also in some way their owner.

My grandfather, Agustín Landa Verdugo (1923-2009), was somewhat younger than José Villagrán (1901-1982), Mario Pani (1911-1993), and the rest. He was their student in the National Architecture School in the first half of the nineteen-forties. I wonder if it was he who first initiated us into the practice of navigating the city by evoking its architects.
After the 1985 earthquake that destroyed hundreds of lives and buildings, my grandfather avoided going to Mexico City’s central areas, where most of its modernist structures were built. A number of his buildings had collapsed and their absence was too much to bear. That is probably why I do not recall him pointing at buildings and saying who first imagined them, but I suspect we picked up this habit from him.

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“I hear Pani’s daughter keeps his archive,” my uncle told me during a family lunch in 2007. “I got her number in case you want to pay her a visit.”

Some weeks before, I had expressed interest in Mario Pani, well known as “the main architect of the infrastructures, housing projects, and urban systems of the post-revolutionary Mexican state” (L. Castañeda 2014:187). I called his daughter, told her I was the grandson of architect Agustín Landa Verdugo and she told me I could go see her. After lunch in my grandfather’s house, I walked over to hers, a few blocks away on Paseo de la Reforma.

Márgara Pani opened the doors of an antique cabinet in her living room—I thought it was Chinese but she explained it had been made in the 16th century in Michoacán, under the influence of Asian furniture that arrived in Mexico through the Manila-Acapulco galleon route—and brought out boxes with hundreds of prints and negatives that documented her father’s architectural corpus. Most images were by Guillermo Zamora (1913-2002), a photographer who collaborated with Pani for decades. The negatives also preserved blueprints, architectural models, presentation boards, and perspective drawings.

“This engraving right here”—I had gone mute, overwhelmed by the images that emerged from the cabinet, but Márgara continued talking; she pointed to one of the frames on her living room’s wall—“this engraving is by a Piranesi imitator. I also have a real Piranesi, but I keep that one upstairs.”
We walked to the second floor through a spiral staircase enclosed by stained glass to see another part of Márgara’s collection: the 119 numbers of Arquitectura, a magazine her father published from 1938 to 1978, and fourteen albums with newspaper clippings that document his life and career. The first clipping in the first album is from Excelsior, a Mexico City daily, and was published on June 30, 1930. The headline, next to a picture of the future architect, reads: “Mario Pani, who has attained a resounding victory in Paris.”¹ His victory, as a nineteen-year-old, was earning first prize in the competition to enter the architecture program at the École de Beaux Arts. Four years later, the Panis returned to Mexico City after seventeen years abroad as a diplomatic family. Nineteen thirty-four marks the beginning of Mario Pani’s meteoric professional career. For thirty years, he played a leading role in public policy in Mexico through the design of housing projects, apartment buildings, public schools, hospitals, and urban development plans for dozens of cities.

When I first saw the albums in 2007, the last clippings were death notices published in Mexico City dailies in February 1993. “My brother Mario was in a somber mood and he bought every newspaper every day of that week,” Márgara explained. Her father’s archive had continued growing after his death. Today, the last set of clippings document a retrospective of Pani’s work in Mexico City’s Fine Arts Palace (Palacio de Bellas Artes), which Márgara organized in 2000. Half a decade after I met Pani’s daughter, she asked me to help her glue these clippings. Soon after, in September 2012, Márgara deposited her collections in the rare books and photography archives of the Tec de Monterrey (Mendoza Lemus 2012), where my father was an architecture professor.

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Between 2007 and 2012, I spent much time in Márgara Pani’s living room. I read Arquitectura, newspaper articles and photographs without a predetermined purpose, letting

¹ Spanish: “Mario Pani, quien ha alcanzado sonado triunfo en Paris.” Throughout this dissertation, translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
one document take me to the next, as if I were a detective following leads to figure out a case, but not knowing yet exactly what I was looking for. I knew many of Pani’s buildings from journeys across the city with my father. I set out to see them with new eyes. I also looked for the sites where buildings now demolished had once stood, or for which they were proposed and never built. On weekend expeditions, I read the city alongside Márgara’s documents.

One Saturday, I visited Unidad Santa Fe, a housing project in western Mexico City [Fig. 1].

Unidad Santa Fe has a prominent place in Pani’s clipping albums and collection of images. A complex for 2,200 families\(^2\) built by the Mexican Social Security Institute of (IMSS) for its affiliates in the mid-fifties, it was widely celebrated in the press. “Mexican workers are starting to enjoy better lives, in a context of all-encompassing security,” read a headline in Zócalo (1957b). Revista Hoy announced that, through the construction of the project, “the Mexican Social Security Institute fulfills a high calling to service” (1956). Other headlines described the project as “transcendental to the nation’s future” and said it “gave prestige to the fatherland” (Quiñones and Villegas 2009).\(^3\) In these publications, Unidad Santa Fe was presented as the first in a series of neighborhoods that would transform Mexico into an egalitarian and prosperous society by integrating affordable housing and health, education, sports, cultural, and commercial facilities. According to the speech by IMSS director Antonio Ortiz Mena at Unidad Santa Fe’s dedication, the project would give shape to “generations of young people who will live without social resentments and who will mold their character in kindness towards others, love for nature, and respect for our institutions”

\(^2\) Other sources state that the project had 2,199 units (e.g. Correa and Garcíaaveliz 2015:106). The additional unit I count was the residence of the project’s manager, contiguous to its health clinic, which has since been converted into a pharmacy.

\(^3\) Spanish: “El trabajador mexicano empieza a disfrutar de una vida mejor, en un ambiente de seguridad integral”…“El Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social cumple una misión elevada de servicio”…“trascendental para el futuro de la nación”…“da prestigio a la patria.”
(Ortiz Mena 1957:134). From this perspective, Unidad Santa Fe represented the consolidation of a strong centralized state and the beginning of the end of class struggles.

Though many others had consulted Márjara Pani’s collections, when I first visited Unidad Santa Fe, this project was relatively unknown to architects and historians. Unlike other housing complexes designed by Mario Pani, such as Centro President Alemán Urban Center and Tlatelolco, which have been widely discussed by academics and have become icons of Mexico City, Unidad Santa Fe was absent from writings on Mario Pani’s work and from architecture guides. This is partly because of its location in a marginalized area of Mexico City, and partly because its design is not as spectacular as that of other works. My first visits to Unidad Santa Fe were colored by the contrast between its past fame and its present abandonment. I encountered residents who readily offered accounts of the project’s “Golden Age” and its decline. Their vision of Unidad Santa Fe’s past corresponded to the exalted newspaper articles in Pani’s clippings albums.

Residents located the beginning of the fall in a presidential edict from 1982 that mandated the sale of houses and apartments in Unidad Santa Fe (and ten other IMSS projects) to their occupants. The complex’s management office was replaced by a trust

4 Spanish: “Generaciones de jóvenes que vivan sin resentimientos sociales, que moldeen su carácter hacia la bondad para sus semejantes, el amor a la naturaleza y el respeto a nuestras instituciones.”

5 Mexico City architecture guides that omit Unidad Santa Fe include those edited by Ramírez Moreno (1999) and de Anda (2001). The project is mentioned only in passing in books that offer panoramic views of Pani’s career by Graciela de Garay (2004:44) and Manuel Larroza (1985:113). Similarly, in an anthology of texts on Pani compiled by Louise Noelle, there are photographs of Unidad Santa Fe, but only one mention of the project in the texts (Noelle 2008:284-286, 287). CUPA and Tlatelolco are perhaps Pani’s most well-known projects. The former is the subject of a monograph (2002) and an edited volume (2004) by Graciela de Garay. The latter has been the subject of texts by Peter Krieger (2008) and Rubén Gallo (2010c), among others. In the catalogue of the 2015 exhibition of modernist architecture in Latin America at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Tlatelolco is documented in a two-page spread (Bergdoll, Comas, Liernur and Del Real 2015:242-242). An exception among academics is Enrique de Anda, who dedicated a chapter of his book Vivienda colectiva de la modernidad en México (2008) to Unidad Santa Fe.

6 The projects built by the IMSS after Unidad Santa Fe, all dedicated between 1957 and 1965, were Legaria, Tlatilco, Ayotla, Narvarte, Tlalpan, and Independencia in the Federal District and the State of Mexico, and those in Guaymas, Navojoa, Manzanillo, Ciudad Obregón, and Ciudad Sahagúin. All were contemplated by the 1982 edict. One of the few studies that considers these projects as a set that emerged under a common institutional framework is Garza and Schteingart’s La acción habitacional del Estado en México (1978). An important source for the study of these projects is the IMSS’ Manual de Operación de Unidades de Vivienda, “Housing Projects Operation Manual” (1964).
(known as the *Fideicomiso*) that would gradually transfer responsibilities to a neighbors’ association, which would operate as a condominium board. The 1982 edict was issued in the context of an economic downturn caused by falling oil prices, the Latin American debt crisis, and the exhaustion of “corporativism” in Mexico (Davis 1993; Escobar and González 1995; Lomnitz 2003). By 2001, Unidad Santa Fe was officially a private condominium. Its buildings and common areas, no longer under the care of IMSS maintenance staff, deteriorated. Neighbors interpreted these changes as evidence of a betrayal by the state institutions that had once championed them as the vanguard of a national history of progress.

The decline and fall narrative I heard from neighbors in my first visits—and which I have continued hearing since—marked the point of departure of my research. How had state officials and institutions constituted relations among project residents, and to what extent had they shaped their identification as members of a neighborhood and of a national community? How had the relationship between government and the governed been reconfigured since 1982? How did Unidad Santa Fe residents speak of the past, and what expectations did they hold for the future? By investigating these questions I hoped to offer an account, from the ground up, of Mexico’s recent political and economic transformations—of their effects on people’s sense of history, place, and community.

On June 2011 I moved to Unidad Santa Fe to conduct long-term ethnographic fieldwork. As I gained a sense of place and time as a resident in the project, I conversed often with Onnis Luque, an architecture photographer, and Fernando Panzi, a filmmaker. “I’ll meet you tomorrow in your office,” Onnis would joke. He was referring to a bench where I often sat to write fieldnotes. I met Fernando there too; others gathered in this spot to socialize on late afternoons, sharing one-liter beer bottles we bought from Pancho at the local store. Strangers are easily singled out in Unidad Santa Fe where, I was warned early on, in spite of
its population of over 12,000, “everyone identifies with each other, everyone knows each other.” My presence became inconspicuous after some months of exposure.

Early on in my stay in Unidad Santa Fe, on two separate occasions, I invited Onnis and Fernando to go see Márgara Pani’s collections. We followed my by then habitual trajectory from Unidad Santa Fe to Lomas de Chapultepec, seven kilometers north. Las Lomas, as it is known for short, was born Chapultepec Heights, a garden city suburb designed in the nineteen-thirties for the country’s upper class by José Luis Cuevas—who would later be Pani’s partner in his planning workshop—and a British firm. Unidad Santa Fe and Las Lomas, separated by the city’s largest graveyard, felt like different worlds. Class differences in Mexico City today readily map unto spatial and ideological differences. Especially as the 2012 presidential elections approached, speaking to people on either side of the graveyard seemed like speaking two people in different countries. The photos in Márgara’s cabinet offered a connection. In our visits to Márgara’s house, Onnis and Fernando browsed excitedly through the prints as if discovering the place where words and their meaning—shadows and the objects that cast them, blueprints and their execution—came finally together. Like me, they recognized something of themselves in these photographs. I started wondering what could be made of our sense of loss.

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While my dissertation is centered on Unidad Santa Fe, visits to surrounding neighborhoods—especially Cristo Rey, María G. de García Ruiz, and the Santa Fe pueblo—inform my arguments. I also conducted interviews with architects, public servants, policy consultants, and housing developers, and consulted archives at the IMSS’s Centro Médico, Instituto Mora, and the architecture school of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Throughout my research I continued visiting Márgara Pani’s house, where I helped her

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7 The neighborhood’s original name was in English.
transform her collections into an archive. I oversaw two college students Márgara hired to make databases of her negatives and prints. Together with her, I searched the house for other documents that could be relevant to researchers. We found typed lectures, audiocassettes, diplomas, sixteen-milliliter films—some of which were of bullfights; others documented buildings—and more photographs. I also welcomed the dean of architecture and the director of the rare books library of the Tec de Monterrey when they went to appraise the archive they acquired soon after.

On September 2012, I was invited to speak at the ceremony to celebrate the arrival of what was by then known as “Mario Pani’s Personal Archive” to Monterrey. A few months later, I received an invitation from the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Monterrey (Monterrey Contemporary Art Museum; MARCO) to curate an exhibition and edit a book on Pani (Landa 2014). In the show’s opening on March 2014 I described it as part two of the exhibition Márgara organized in 2000. Among the images and objects on display were period and new prints of Zamora’s photographs, originals and reproductions of blueprints, clips of films that use Pani’s works as locations, videos of interviews with residents of Pani projects shot and edited by Fernando Panzi, scale models made for the show by students from the Tec, issues of Arquitectura, books from the architect’s library and others written by his father and uncle (both prominent public servants), and works by contemporary artists and photographers that reflect on the legacy of modernist architecture in Mexico.

In the exhibition’s section devoted to Unidad Santa Fe, there was a set of photographs by Onnis Luque alongside Zamora’s, a scale model of the project, and axonometric drawings of the transformations experienced by two houses I commissioned from architect Andrés Gordillo. There was also a collection of thirty-two snapshots from family albums of Unidad Santa Fe neighbors. Some of the photos had been featured in the documentary Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe (2007), produced by neighbors Fernando Panzi, Gerardo García, and
Facundo Torrieri; others will illustrate a book of local anecdotes and lore Gerardo has been working on for years. In the exhibition, the photographs were a reminder that Unidad Santa Fe, a milestone in the histories of statecraft, social security, housing, and architecture in Mexico, is also a place that happens to be inhabited.

While different in its emphasis from the museum exhibition, this dissertation also integrates different genres, sources, and points of view. My investigations combined ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and the analysis of buildings, photographs, films, and literary texts. Other sources include texts, both popular and academic, by anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, historians, art historians, journalists, and architects writing in Mexico and from afar. In the following pages I have assembled fragments gathered as I set out to interpret a place and time comparatively, in an exercise where one lead leads to the next, and on to others (Boon 1982). Prose and visuals index buildings and relations, and they mirror and complement each other. The resulting document proposes an approach for the anthropological exploration of the built environment.

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The introduction begins by characterizing routine life in Unidad Santa Fe. It then considers ideas on modern architecture and planning formulated by social scientists, and locates this dissertation with respect to them. I introduce the notion that Unidad Santa Fe neighbors, rather than victims resisting state power, were willfull colaborators of architects and authorities. I then discuss the project as a work of modernist architecture in the context of nation building, linking my primary fieldsite to a 20th century history of statecraft, and a longer history of city planning and building. I also present the project as a vantage to interpret Mexico’s recent “democratization” and economic opening, processes that encompass new housing policies much unlike those that led to the construction of Unidad Santa Fe. Towards
the end of the introduction I note some textural proclivities of my own as an anthropologist at least adjacently native to Unidad Santa Fe.

Chapter 1 is constructed around episodes from the life of Don Willy, a neighbor recognized by others as a keeper of Unidad Santa Fe’s history. Don Willy moved to the project soon after its dedication in 1957. As an IMSS employee, active union member, inquisitive journalist, and collector of photographs and documents, he has encyclopedic knowledge of the institutional frameworks of Unidad Santa Fe’s past and present. His anecdotes help characterize the political system that consolidated in mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century Mexico, and provide an opening to reflect on the diverse accounts of Unidad Santa Fe’s origins. The latter part of the chapter argues that representations of the project in photography, film, and journalism made Unidad Santa Fe into a showcase of the government’s progressive policies and an image of Mexico as a modern nation. Don Willy and other neighbors were recruited to play the part of ideal subjects of the state, a role they took on gladly in exchange for the promise of participation in a national community.

Chapter 2 considers more deeply the private lives of neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe and the ways they were shaped by government interventions. The project was the site of a social engineering project, with constant oversight by social workers, security guards, and physicians. By showing the ways in which people have inhabited, transformed, and inscribed their houses and apartments with meanings since the project’s dedication, I suggest they were not simply the subjects of the state, but agents shaping relations and institutions. In the second section I step out of houses and apartments to discuss the project as a whole. I consider how its infrastructure and its history are related to the identity of residents as an urban community. I then compare Unidad Santa Fe to the nearby María G. de García Ruiz neighborhood as a way to reflect on the position of the project with respect to other
communities in Mexico City. Despite apparent differences, both neighborhoods developed within a framework encompassing national and local politics and urbanization processes.

Chapter 3 is centered on Julián Severiano, a middle-aged resident in Unidad Santa Fe whose experiences and opinions help characterize the social and spatial dimensions of the country’s “structural adjustment.” The first section narrates the emergence of youth gangs in Unidad Santa Fe in the eighties, partly as a reaction to the state’s “abandonment.” Gangs helped fix distinctions among private and common spaces in the project, and memories of them continue influencing present patterns of participation. Adjustment also saw the inscription of religion on the land, which was previously kept away from Unidad Santa Fe by the state’s aggressive secularism. In the second section I consider transformations of nationalist ideologies over time, and ways in which they are entangled with class, ethnicity, and political ideologies. The chapter argues that Unidad Santa Fe established certain forms of belonging that continue being negotiated through the narration of different versions of the past and present, and through interpretations of built forms.

Chapter 4 opens with an account of efforts by Ms. Elba Santos to set up a management office in the project in the first decade of the 21st century, followed by a discussion of other ways in which neighbors are organized and engage in politics. This chapter responds to scholars and public intellectuals in Mexico who believe the country suffers from a deficit in participation. My analysis suggests their definition of participation is too narrow. In the second section I analyze narratives I heard from Roque Salvatierra that speak, first, to the location of the project in a history of spatial segregation, and second, to ways in which categories assigned to urban spaces are deployed as instruments of power by architects and government officials. Spaces are shaped by acts of inclusion and exclusion and are never simply “public.” The chapter argues that Unidad Santa Fe and similar neighborhoods have tightly woven social and spatial orders, something that makes change in
them slow and arduous, while at the same time protecting them from outside influences, including territorial drug trafficking corporations.

Chapter 5 considers ambiguous and changing spaces and relations in Unidad Santa Fe. The first section characterizes the attitudes of young men in the project—those who have no personal memories of Unidad Santa Fe when it was publicly owned. Often, they engage in practices similar to those of their elders, and contribute to the continuation of a political system that emerged after the Mexican Revolution. On other occasions, they hint at new ways of conceiving and practicing power. I consider their engagement with drugs, their political uses of social media, and their participation in mass demonstrations. The second section turns to the analysis of the uses and representations of spaces in Unidad Santa Fe that challenge dominant categories and reveal complexities associated with personal histories and relations. This chapter puts three of the threads running through the dissertation at the foreground. First, alongside symbols of the state are others that represent families and local communities, corporations, and social movements, with none of them ever assuming complete ascendancy. Second, there is an ever-present tension between the fixity of built forms and the taken-for-granted character of social relations, and their possible reconfigurations. Third, everyday practices and relations bridge seemingly incompatible scales and stakes. The chapter’s closing presents Unidad Santa Fe as a pedestal from which one can view Mexico City as a cosmos.

In the postscript, I introduce Felix, Unidad Santa Fe’s “paparazzi,” a man who might be a mirror image of me as an ethnographer in the project. I then return to Márgara Pani’s home and collections, where a letter from Carlos Fuentes to Mario Pani’s widow offers an opening for reflections on Mexicans’ ambivalence towards their past. To conclude, I offer additional thoughts on how this text was researched and built, and on how it relates to bodies
of literature on Mexico’s present. The postscript is an accumulation of detections and
dilemmas of detection introduced and developed in previous sections.

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In the interest of privacy, most names in this dissertation are pseudonyms. I use real names,
however, for people with public personas, and for those whose names can be found in official
documents and publications about Unidad Santa Fe. I have asked for permission to report on
some details about people’s lives. Many others I have kept to myself. To write more freely on
matters that might be compromising to Unidad Santa Fe residents, some characters are
composites, and some details have been changed. I use the word “neighbor” where other
anthropologists use the words “informant,” “interlocutor,” or “consultant” as a way to
highlight the focus of this study in a neighborhood and, as I discuss in detail in Chapter 4, to
point to relations as they are conceived and negotiated locally. I translate the term unidad
habitacional as “housing project” to underscore similarities of my fieldsite’s typology to that
of complexes in other countries; as I explain below, despite considerable variations, this
typology has a common history across borders. Spanish terms that appear repeatedly in the
text, as well as place names and acronyms, are defined in the Glossary. Place names are
introduced alongside maps preceding this preface. Quotes from texts in Spanish are rendered
in translation in the main text, and in the original in footnotes. All translations, unless
otherwise noted, are my own. During fieldwork, I rarely recorded interviews and
conversations. All dialogue in this dissertation has been reconstructed from fieldnotes. I
anticipate that neighbors who read this text might know different versions of episodes I
describe. I do not presume my accounts to be definitive.
Introduction: Glimpses of a Would-be Model Community

Neighbors of Unidad Santa Fe have a shared sense of place and time (Jackson 1994). The project’s spatial organization makes it stand out—its freestanding buildings, open gardens, and pedestrian circulations contrast with the dense, mostly unplanned neighborhoods surrounding it. There are four entrances and exits to the complex; gates to all except one, where there is a police station, are closed at eleven at night. Inside and outside Unidad Santa Fe are, for the most part, unambiguous categories. Also, neighbors speak a common language: only they (and postal workers) tend to understand Unidad Santa Fe’s complex nomenclature system, which was conceived in architect Mario Pani’s studio. Areas uninterrupted by car circulations are called Manzanas (Blocks). There are six in the project, and they vary in size and shape. Buildings and contiguous houses within Manzanas are called Grupos (Groups), and are numbered sequentially. Houses and apartments within groups are also numbered. Instead of a street name and a number, addresses are constructed as a sequence of numbers referring to block, group, and house or apartment. In addition to this official nomenclature, neighbors have given names to landmarks within Unidad Santa Fe: they identify, for example, El súper (a commercial area), La bomba (a cistern and water pump), Las canchas (the project’s sports fields), El Casino (formerly a social club, now a sports club), and the Plaza de los Héroes (Heroes’ Plaza, a central square that concentrates public buildings). These and other sites are the stage on which unfold Unidad Santa Fe’s daily, weekly, and yearly cycles.

Mornings in the project are quiet—people walk swiftly out its gates to go work and children are at school. The main entrance to the project is busy with people buying fresh orange juice or tamales for breakfast. Local stores open at ten or eleven; many stop by to chat
with salesmen. At noon, and again at three, children are let out from the local elementary
schools. For about half an hour they fill the project with voices and laughter. On afternoons,
at around four, Octavio sets up his baked goods stand in the southwest corner of the Heroes’
Plaza, under a covered walkway. A group of middle-aged men gather around him to drink
and chat. For some, this is where they unwind after work, to the sound of seventies and
eighties rock from Octavio’s sound system. For others it is the beginning of their day. Young
men and some older women also start gathering in the Plaza in the late afternoon. Women
knit and gossip; youths might stay out all night, drinking beer and smoking marijuana. Others
visit taco and hamburger stands in various parts of the project that open in the evening. At
every turn, people run into friends and acquaintances and say hi.

On weekday mornings, propane tank trucks circle Unidad Santa Fe filling up tanks in
the project’s houses. Bottled water distributors announce their arrival with distinctive calls.
Three times a week, Don Félix walks around the project with a tray of meringues. He told me
the project’s former manager decades ago liked meringues and gave him permission to sell
inside Unidad Santa Fe when no one else was allowed; he has been a regular presence since.
Garbage collectors also make the rounds. They fill two-hundred-liter barrels in their carts
with trash they pick up from regular clients in exchange for a tip. La bomba stops working
from eleven at night to five in the morning. Some in the project have cisterns they fill up
during the day. Others might keep full buckets in case they need water in the middle of the
night.

On Thursdays there is a tianguis, itinerant street market, in Las canchas and the street
between the project and the Cristo Rey neighborhood. Many neighbors do their weekly
shopping there; others eat lunch in its celebrated food section. On these days the project is
busy with activity and it is difficult to find parking spots. Neighbors say there are more thefts
on Thursdays, since dozens of people from surrounding neighborhoods enter Unidad Santa
Saturdays are also busy days, with dozens of people in the Heroes’ Plaza, but they are mostly locals. Around noon, young and middle aged men play touch football. People continue arriving into the late afternoon and socialize around the Plaza’s concrete benches. Saturdays are the only day when young women are seen in this area. Gatherings often turn into parties. The project’s sports fields are also busy on weekends, with neighbors drinking beer or playing soccer or basketball. When they talk about these practices they assure each other they have been in place for decades: “I have not missed a single Saturday game since I was a eight, and now I’m forty six. You do the math.”

Yearly cycles are marked by political events and religious and national celebrations. Every August, neighbors are invited by banners on the project’s gates and by fliers placed under doors to an assembly to elect the condominium’s manager. Between one and two hundred people attend, out of over two thousand members of the condominium, but many more discuss the elections. At other times of the year, neighbor organizations hold meetings, often in the Heroes’ Plaza of the Casino. On September, *el mes de la patria*, “the fatherland’s month,” some decorate their houses with Mexican flags. On November 2, the Day of the Dead, children from surrounding neighborhoods wearing costumes enter the more affluent Unidad Santa Fe to trick-or-treat. Towards sunset it is difficult to walk past the multitudes lining up outside houses that give out candy.

On December 12, many neighbors participate in celebrations for the Virgin of Guadalupe. There are generally masses by the shrines in El súper and the taxi stop by the project’s main entrance. Around that date, neighbors start decorating their houses for Christmas. They put up lights and set up elaborate nativity scenes in their front yards. Decorations are taken down after January 6, the day of the Three Wise Men. Neighbors in different areas of the project organize posadas on the days leading up to Christmas; some years, there is a posada in the Heroes’ Plaza, organized by the condominium’s management.
office, to which the whole project is invited. Local families set up food stands to earn some cash. When neighbors vacation, they do so during holy week or in July or August, when children are out of school. In the past, many went to Oaxtepec, a vacation center of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) south of Mexico City. “It was like being in Unidad Santa Fe, but wearing bathing suits,” Daniel Domínguez told me. “It was as if, every year, we all decided to go to Oaxtepec at the same time, and everybody you ran into was your neighbor.”

Every three years residents of Mexico City elect heads of delegaciones (boroughs or municipalities) and representatives to the Federal District’s Legislative Assembly and the Federal Congress. Every six years, there are elections for Mexico City’s mayor, Mexico’s president, and federal senators. During electoral periods, candidates visit Unidad Santa Fe; they hold rallies in the Heroes’ Plaza and give out gifts to neighbors. Lampposts are covered with plastic banners with candidates’ names and photographs. Candidates also promote themselves through incessant advertisements on radio and television. Neighbors are prone to cast doubt on statements by candidates and those who support them. In street chats they expound theories on who might be supporting whom behind the scenes.

The project’s dedication in 1957 and the beginning of its privatization in 1982, referred to as “when the IMSS left,” mark neighbors’ sense of historical time and divide it into three distinct periods: before the project’s creation, its Golden Age, and its decay. Neighbors also recall Unidad Santa Fe’s fiftieth anniversary celebrations in 2007. Other groups, organized by generation, place of residence within the project, or identification with different neighbor organizations, remember other events: the election of a project manager, political rallies, murders, gang battles, or changes to the project’s infrastructure. For example, the erection of a gate restricting parking in one of the project’s cul-de-sacs marks a before and after for those who live there.
I gained this sense of time and place after fourteen months living in the Unidad Santa Fe. On May 2011, I walked around the project dialing every number on “For Rent” signs on apartment windows and within a month moved into Manzana 3, Grupo 8, Entrada C, Departamento 12 (Block 3, Building 8, Entryway C, Apartment 12), which is owned by a local family that bought it as an investment. One of the first neighbors I met was Pancho, who tends a store by the Heroes’ Plaza. I bought half a kilo of ground coffee from him and we started talking; it had taken him so long to help me, he said jokingly, because people come to his store to “confess their sins and ask for absolution.” I told him I was doing research on the project’s past and present, and he immediately suggested I talk to Don Willy Nava and Fernando Panzi, and he gave me their addresses. Both became key informants and close friends. Pancho also introduced me to other neighbors. When I wrote fieldnotes in the Plaza, Pancho called me over from his store when he thought I should meet one of his clients.

Soon after moving to Unidad Santa Fe, I started attending meetings of different neighbor organizations. There, I met Ms. Elba, a well-known community leader, and others involved in local government. Eventually, neighbors identified me as an anthropologist, as a historian, as “the guy with the notebook,” as “a young man who has much love for the project”—a common explanation for interest in its history—or, as I was once told, “the police disguised as a writer.” After leaving my apartment, in September 2012, I have returned often to Unidad Santa Fe to attend parties, get haircuts from Gerardo García, and visit other friends. In the process of writing this dissertation, I have requested verification and expansion of details in my fieldnotes by phone, e-mail, and through Facebook, where I remain a member of a number of neighbor groups. In the following sections, I offer glimpses of some of the major themes in the chapters ahead.
In *Discipline and Punish* Michel Foucault (1995) identified built forms—epitomized by Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon—as technologies through which power is deployed. Certain building types and urban configurations contribute to grant states an omniscient presence in the lives of individuals, which are thus regulated. In an interview Foucault stated that panopticism is the foundation on which states rest (1980:72). He elaborated by identifying geography as a form of knowledge where physical space comes together with policing as a strategy to manage populations (69). In his lectures *Security, Territory, Population*, Foucault suggested policing is an effort at “making the kingdom, the entire territory, into a sort of big town” (2007:336)—that is, a place that falls under the persistent gaze of power.

Stimulated by Foucault’s writings, much of the literature on planning and architecture in anthropology has denounced their use by state authorities as an aide to policing. This is the case, for example, of Paul Rabinow’s *French Modern* (1995), where he describes urban planning, primarily in the 19th century, as an effort at “normalizing” populations, linked to the expansion and rationalization of bureaucracies and to colonial pursuits. Rabinow suggests that city planning was not simply one of the functions of French imperial authorities; planning was itself colonization. Notably, Rabinow characterizes planning as enacted by experts and professionals and not as experienced by their subjects (Boon 1990).

James Scott (1998) reached similar conclusions to Rabinow’s in his analysis of planning in the 20th century. The construction of the cities of Brasilia and Chandigarh were attempts at charting space to make its occupants legible and therefore easier to govern. In these “high modernist” projects, planning and architecture were instruments of simplification and categorization. From Scott’s perspective, modernist architecture—as an effort to standardize design and construction processes, to make the structures, functions, and materials of buildings legible, and to bring together problems, plans and their execution under
a scientific framework—is a technology inextricably tied to institutional power. This point of view is prevalent among not only anthropologists, but also cultural historians who have characterized modernist architecture as allied to oppression. Some scholars of modern Mexico have placed blame on Mario Pani for the 1968 student massacre in the Tlatelolco project (Castañeda 2010a:120): his “architecture of control,” with few exits and easy surveillance from buildings’ rooftops, “allowed the army to trap the students inside the complex” (Gallo 2010c:62).

Scott celebrates people who stand against state power and glosses their actions, whether overt or covert, as “resistance” (1985). In a more recent work, The Art of not Being Governed (2009) he narrates the history of people in southeastern Asia who have for centuries eluded states. In Scott’s arguments, the actions and intentions of people implicated with officialdom are distinct from those who have the misfortune of being their subjects. This opposition is present in a number of other works on government and planning, including Modernist City (1989) and Insurgent Citizenship (2009) by James Holston. The former book critiques power inequalities implicit in the creation of Brasilia in the sixties. The later narrates how, since the eighties, people in Brazilian cities have earned a role in planning processes through mobilization against or from the margins of state institutions.

Following this literature, one could analyze Unidad Santa Fe by opposing architect Mario Pani, IMSS director Antonio Ortiz Mena, and their collaborators to the project’s residents. The lives of the people of Unidad Santa Fe could be narrated in terms of their transformation into a population normalized and managed, and in terms of their actions to resist state power and exercise their own. From my first visits to the project, however, residents made it clear they had not resisted, but rather had collaborated with the state in the construction of the project. In the nineteen-fifties, many in Unidad Santa Fe welcomed

For eloquent accounts of these aspects of modern architecture, see Le Corbusier’s book-length manifesto Towards a New Architecture (1986) and the writings by Mies van der Rohe and Theo van Doesburg in the collection by Conrads (1971).
interventions by government agencies in their lives and embraced the views of planners. Over the years, they were complicit in the construction of the project as a community inhabited by what were presented in the press as ideal subjects of the Mexican state.

Unidad Santa Fe residents often describe benefits they obtained from moving to the project. In the words of a neighbor, “We all arrived here wearing nothing but our underwear. We had nothing else!” Families advanced socially and economically under the watch of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP), which managed the project’s schools, and the IMSS, which, from its creation in 1943 to the dedication of Unidad Santa Fe in 1957, had expanded its services to include housing, health services, retirement and disability pensions, day care for children, funerary services, and cultural and recreational centers. By law, all salaried employees in Mexico (except bureaucrats and members of the army, who have their own social security institutions) are affiliated to the IMSS, which is financed by their contributions, matched by employers and public funds. This means the Institute protects millions⁹—however, only a select few had access to housing in its projects. Unidad Santa Fe residents were privileged and they knew it. While state officials and political scientists have often described the benefits of property ownership as a way to grant autonomy to individuals and help them assume the role of citizens in democratic regimes (de la Calle and Rubio 2010:57-61; see also Economist 2004), people in Unidad Santa Fe denounced—and continue denouncing—the project’s privatization. Neighbors perhaps do not value democracy as much as its defenders in policy circles, or they doubt that democracy, an ideal as elusive as Guillermo Zamora’s photographs of Unidad Santa Fe, has ever existed in Mexico.

Some have pointed to the illusory character of memory in contexts that have changed rapidly, such as post-socialist countries. Their texts suggest people are mystified or deluded as they whitewash the past and suppress experiences of violence (e.g. Beumers 2004; K.

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⁹ Millions are also excluded—including most of the self-employed and those who work under short-term contracts or without a legal contract.
Smith 2004). One could make a similar assessment of the work of memory in Unidad Santa Fe—people remember idealized accounts of the project found in newspaper articles and speeches by government officials, and not the techniques of domination implicated in its design and management. However, to paraphrase Sergei Oushakine’s commentary on assessments of memory in contemporary Russia (2007), neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe are nostalgic but they are not stupid. They do not tend to speak as historians or scientists before facts or general propositions, but as individuals immersed in dense social webs they configure and reconfigure through the articulation of narratives. In this dissertation I argue that the people of Unidad Santa Fe, whose lives have unfolded within state institutions, tend to be aware of how power circulates—they know its rules and they play by them. Their discussions of the past and present are a means whereby they form bonds of solidarity and position themselves with respect to their neighbors and the state institutions they have helped shape.

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Recent anthropological works have introduced more nuanced understandings of state programs and interventions. João Biehl (2013b), for example, has shown how laws and state agencies are not unilaterally produced by the powerful few, but are actually a sum of negotiations among people across different milieus. Biehl shows that, suing the government to have access to prescribed medications, residents of the city of Porto Alegre have participated, together with physicians, judges, activists, and other actors, in the construction of an idea of the state and in defining its responsibilities vis-à-vis Brazilians. In this light, the state is revealed not as an autonomous, closed realm, but as something constantly in the making through concrete relations. In this process, people shape spaces where institutions and interactions play out. I identified similar processes of collaborative state making, which cast doubt on accounts founded on the separation of people and the state.
By reading documents in Márbara Pani’s house alongside interviews I made with current and former government officials who worked with Pani and Ortiz Mena, a sketch of the state emerged as a set of relations in flux. The opinions of those who participated in the creation of Unidad Santa Fe can hardly be described as conforming to a shared conception of the Mexican government and its aims. Experiences and points of view of project residents also were and continue to be diverse; in our conversations, people with different backgrounds, occupations, and political persuasions emphasized different aspects of the past and present of Unidad Santa Fe in their narrations. I identified shifting groups forming around ideas, interests, and circumstances. This diversity exists within a common discursive framework that acknowledges a disconnection between representations and underlying realities.

The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party; PRI) ruled Mexico from its creation in 1929 until 2000, when the first opposition president came to power. Twelve years later, Mexicans elected Enrique Peña Nieto, handing the presidency back to the PRI. I observed the electoral campaign during fieldwork; many neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe expressed the belief that Televisa, the country’s largest television network, was behind Peña Nieto. One evening in the project’s central plaza, Daniel Domínguez told me that for years, public relations firms owned by Televisa had groomed the then governor of the State of Mexico by writing his speeches, managing his looks, and giving him considerable presence on electronic and printed media to introduce him to national audiences. In 2010, Peña Nieto married Angélica Rivera, a well-known soap opera star who, Daniel explained, was chosen for the role of first lady in a casting. This marriage opened spaces in gossip shows and entertainment magazines to Peña Nieto, whose manufactured popularity made his election in 2012 inevitable.
Accounts of this sort are common in Mexico City, and are supported by journalistic investigations. In 2009, Jenaro Villamil published the exposé *Si yo fuera presidente*. This book details Peña Nieto’s dealings with Televisa and other media conglomerates. Villamil claims that, as governor, Peña Nieto paid media corporations thousands of millions of pesos. These deals are the foundation of a political project that blurs distinctions between marketing and government. Within this framework, actions by elected officials matter little; what matters is their representation in mass media. Villamil locates the beginning of government through marketing in the successful presidential campaign of Vicente Fox in 2000 (2009:56). Peña Nieto, Villamil suggests, represents a consolidation of this model through the fashioning of government as “a reality show,” where what is presented as factual in television and other forms of mass media is in fact scripted and has slight or no correspondence to what people observe or experience.

“We live in *la República de la Simulación*, the Republic of Simulation,” Onnis Luque once told me in a conversation on the upcoming elections. I began hearing many others use the word “simulation.” They pointed to the exploitation of isolated facts as representative of broader realities and, more generally, the slippage between the words and actions of elected officials, bureaucrats, and neighbors with leadership positions. As I delved into documents and recollections of the past, I realized that despite the apparent novelty that comes from Peña Nieto’s alliance with television, simulation is not a recent development, but has been a dominant mode of government in Mexico for decades. In this dissertation, I suggest that Peña Nieto’s electoral campaign and government are part of an ongoing production of “imaginative realities” that people embrace, challenge, and qualify as ways of negotiating belonging, understood as a sense of membership to different publics that afford them certain privileges and obligations.
I borrow this term from Oscar Wilde’s 19th century polemic “The Decay of Lying” (1998[1889]), where he contrasts the evocative works of Honoré de Balzac to what he sees as dry reporting by Zola and other “realists.” Imaginative realities involve the recreation of facts in ways that offer new points of view on them and reshape perception. This is not simply invention, but rather the visualization of different ways in which evidence can be configured into coherent narratives. Balzac’s art, Wilde writes, “takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms” (457). Politicians and the electorate in Mexico engage in processes similar to Balzac’s as means of exercising power, challenging its uses by others, and forming and asserting bonds of solidarity.

James Boon likens the writings of realists (in fiction) to functionalists (in anthropology). Zola’s novels and Malinowski’s monographs were “concerted description and analysis of routine life,” where “the author was always implicitly absent” (Boon 1982:13-14). Functionalist arguments and realist narratives also have a sense of finality—they present events and relations as part of coherent political, religious, economic, and linguistic systems. The Kula ring in Argonauts of the Western Pacific (Malinoswki 2014[1922]) and the department store in Au Bonheur des Dames (Zola 2002[1883]) are “central machines” (Brooks 2005:119) that neatly explicate practices and relations that unfold in and around them.

By contrast, imaginative realities do not presume finality or comprehensiveness. In Unidad Santa Fe and beyond, people do not craft definitive interpretations of their relations. Rather, both officials and their constituents tinker with views of the world while accounting for contradictions in their own shifting perspectives. Through narration, they envision possibilities. People challenge imaginative realities by producing other representations; they thus open up spaces from which they can position themselves as deserving of certain privileges, undermine their adversaries, or align with or distance themselves from neighbors.
and relatives. Denouncing simulation is not necessarily a way of distancing oneself from image making; it is often a way of activating a political field and participating in it.

A number of scholars have described the dominance of simulation in Mexican culture and proposed multiple origins, including, for example, the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica, during which Indians were expected to manifest Catholic devotion, but were allowed to hold on to their true beliefs in private (Paz 1999[1950]:47). This and comparable assessments (e.g. Usigli 2014[1938]; Hiriart 2001) tend to ignore regional variations on ideas of reality and the practice of politics in the country documented by anthropologists (e.g. Yeh 2012; Hernández 2002), and assume that deception is inherent to Mexican culture. This dissertation suggests there is a connection between today’s imaginations of the past and present in Unidad Santa Fe and the country’s emergence as a national community in the years that followed the Mexican Revolution, an armed conflict that began in 1910 and lasted for over a decade. This should not be read, however, as a conclusion to be generalized to the entire country, an attempt to uncover definitive origins or essences, or as yet another culturalist account of Mexican national character.

To a significant extent, the creation of the PRI was a strategy to win the peace by the war’s surviving military leaders: they came together into a party that conciliated divergent and at times conflicting interests. Instead of fighting, or formalizing differences by establishing political associations that could compete in elections, PRI founder Plutarco Elías Calles brought hundreds of parties and factions into a unified government. The PRI, soon difficult to differentiate from the federal government, offered political representation (Hellman 1994:130) by integrating groups with divergent ideologies, unions, social movements and intellectuals. As a “revolutionary state,” the PRI derived its legitimacy not from traditional authority but from the promise of a future order. This order was built on a
shared language and a set of principles and not on laws, which were consistently sidelined in
the name of an emergent society (see Borneman 1998:155).

A nationalist history that presented the actions of Mexico’s government as the
peaceful continuation of the Revolution of 1910 blanketed diversity within the PRI and its
constituents throughout the 20th century. People recognized constant pronouncements in
favor of the rule of law, democracy, and freedom of speech (see Ruiz Cortines 1957) as
illusory. However, millions—including most neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe—willingly
participated in this exercise of simulation and benefited from it. Historian John Mraz cites a
particularly telling example in his discussion of illustrated magazines from mid-20th century
Mexico. Under the government of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952), the press was increasingly
controlled; state officials routinely paid journalists for positive coverage, and newspapers
were under the threat of boycotts by the publicly owned paper industry and by newspaper
salesmen organized into a PRI-controlled union. However, every year, president Alemán
welcomed media impresarios to a lavish banquet to celebrate freedom of the press
(Mraz 2001:122-123).

In this dissertation I discuss specific instances in which neighbors participated in the
crafting of representations under the framework of the PRI. The examples I discuss are
attentive to “the quotidian process whereby the… state engaged the popular classes and vice
versa” (Joseph and Nugent 1994:12). I suggest my informants were not merely subjects, but
often also agents of state formation. The configuration of power I describe is one whose
participants were complicit with unfolding contradictions and paradox. My portrayal of
informants follows Boon’s contention that “seriocomic reflexivity characterizes ‘native’
practices too. Theorists err… when we deem reflexivity (or theory) solely ‘ours’” (1999:176).

10 The party was founded as Partido Nacional Revolucionario, “National Revolutionary Party” (PNR). Over the
following decades it changed names and some aspects of its internal organization. For a recent account of its
origins and organization, see Bertaccini (2009). For an early celebratory account of the country’s politics as seen
from the United States, see Cline’s Mexico, from Revolution to Evolution (1966).
Unidad Santa Fe residents often display awareness of the ironies that stem from their complicity with the PRI and from their current rejection of this—and other—political parties.

Although laws and institutions have changed considerably since the fifties, paradox remains integral to power relations. Neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe, however, are not cynical, nor have they relinquished hope (cf. Miyazaki 2010). When they rally behind a candidate running for office or a community leader, neighbors often believe they represent exceptions in a world of simulators—their intentions, words and actions actually correspond to each other. Alternatively, neighbors identify the marriage of image and fact in the past, as when they see Guillermo Zamora’s photographs of Unidad Santa Fe as evidence of a paradise lost. I read these windows onto better times and places as critiques of assessments in which deceit is an immovable attribute of Mexican culture.

**Modernity enacted**

Whereas in other sites infrastructure is “boring” or visible only in certain junctures (Star 1999:380; Chu 2014:352), in Unidad Santa Fe buildings, walls, and utilities have remained at the center of negotiations among individuals, social groups and institutions for over half a century. When the project was publicly owned, neighbors took pride on the freshness of the water—from local wells—that came out of their faucets. Today, when they see a burnt out street lamp, they remember that before, IMSS staff would quickly replace bulbs in common areas. Infrastructure and its upkeep differentiated the project from its surroundings and reminded neighbors they were privileged. Today, the materiality of Unidad Santa Fe remains the site of negotiations on forms of belonging and the distribution of power and resources.

The role of the project as a site of negotiation is connected to the history of architecture in 20th century Mexico. Starting in the nineteen forties, architects and state institutions collaborated in ambitious school, hospital, market, museum, and housing building
programs (Arañó 2011; Noelle 2008; Ramírez Vázquez 1998; Vargas 2001). New structures, generally built after standardized designs produced by a small group of architects in Mexico City, extended public services and the presence of the federal government throughout the country’s territory. In this way, they contributed to integrate different regions into a centrally produced vision of Mexico’s past and future. Notably, postcards from the fifties and sixties often feature public schools and health clinics; towns and small cities were represented not by what made them unique but by what manifested their participation in an emergent nation brought together by a modernization agenda. Historic buildings and natural features, symbols of Mexico in the 19th century (Craib 2002), had been displaced.

The efficacy of architecture in nation building derived from the shared aesthetics of state buildings, which ignored regional construction practices and other local conditions. For most of the 20th century, buildings were erected in steel, glass, and concrete, had no ornamentation, and were composed of freestanding orthogonal volumes with flat ceilings. Since the nineteen-thirties, modernist aesthetics in Mexico became a symbol of the state. In her 1935 guide to Mexico, Franz Boas’ student Anita Brenner wrote: “functionalism”—a local term for modernist architecture (Obregón 1952:79, 94-97)—is “a novelty almost everywhere except in Mexico, where it is now so completely acclimated that it is taken for granted.” This was so, she explained, because “some young architects in official positions established a kind of dictatorship, requiring all government construction to be ‘functional’” (1935:53). While in the United States modernist architecture was the fancy of a small elite, and in most of Europe it was implicated with the counter-establishment,11 in Mexico it found a place at the center of the country’s official life. This made the modern movement remarkably prolific and influential (see Gower 2014).

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11 For elucidation of the ideological implications of modernist architecture, consider the case of Hannes Meyer who was director of the Bauhaus in Dessau, was exiled by Nazis, collaborated with Stalin, and arrived in Mexico to take part of Latin America’s class struggle (de Anda 2008:175). Also see Schlemmer 1971.
The layout and the meanings inscribed in Unidad Santa Fe by its creators illustrate the ways in which statecraft and architecture came together in mid-20th century Mexico, and the extent to which buildings remain important in conversations on history and identity. The project’s main entrance is framed by an arch with its name and the logo of the Mexican Social Security Institute, designed in the nineteen-forties by muralist Federico Cantú: an eagle—perhaps the same one that graces the Mexican flag—shelters a woman with its wings, who in turn holds a baby in her arms. The eagle can be read as a representation of the IMSS or the Mexican state at large, which, through its services, nurtures families much like a mother. Despite the project’s privatization, this symbol remains in place.

Unidad Santa Fe’s gate marks the beginning of a one-way street that encircles the complex [Fig. 2]. As one enters, on the right side, between the street and the avenue beyond the project’s limits, stand fifteen four-story apartment buildings. On the left are clusters of contiguous single-family houses, which are accessed through narrow walkways. On the end opposite to the street, walkways open to a garden enclosed by houses on the north and south. On the west end of the garden are the project’s two elementary schools, a day care center and a kindergarten. The garden slopes down towards the east and culminates in a space for “civic functions” (Díaz Arias 1957) known in Pani’s blueprints and by neighbors today as the Heroes’ Plaza. A health clinic, a theater, a commercial area, a Social Security Center, and Building 45, the largest in the project with 100 apartments, surround the Plaza. Between the Plaza and the garden stands a concrete shell kiosk designed by “structural artist” (Billington and Moreyra 2008) Félix Candela [Fig. 17]. This kiosk, known locally as La cola de pato, “the duck’s tail,” because of its shape, is a common reference point for residents and a symbol featured in logos and Facebook pages of neighbor groups.

The Plaza also includes a monumental flagpole and a mosaic mural by Jorge González Camarena with the names, in bronze letters, of some of the most celebrated men in
Mexico’s history, together with a year associated with their main contribution to the nation’s development: Hidalgo 1810, Morelos 1813, Juárez 1587, Madero 1910 and Carranza 1917 [Fig. 18]. The Plaza’s name refers to these heroes. Next to them is a plaque unveiled at the project dedication; it includes the names of IMSS director Antonio Ortiz Mena, chief of construction at the IMSS Julián Díaz Arias, and architect Mario Pani, as well as that of president Adolfo Ruiz Cortines and a poetic quote by him: “Our Revolution sustains these affirmations: Men as the site of dignity, Family as the site of autonomy, Nation as the site of sovereignty.”

The uses around the Heroes’ Plaza and the project’s central garden are instruments of the progressive agenda pursued by the Mexican government at the time through public health, education, and social development. The IMSS logo and the president’s message on the dedication plaque contribute to articulate a nationalist history of progress oriented towards a future of justice and shared prosperity. In his speech during the project’s dedication, Ortiz Mena (1957) narrated the country’s past in terms of the progressive liberation of its population. The heroes memorialized on the project’s mural had freed Mexicans from foreign rule, the undue influence of the Catholic Church, and economic domination by landowners and oligarchs. Ortiz Mena suggested that by freeing its residents from need and want, the project was a new step in a wider process of liberation.

By moving to the project from precarious shantytowns and vecindades (glossed as “tenements” by Oscar Lewis [1970:441]), families also moved from the margins of a national community to its center. The meanings inscribed in Unidad Santa Fe reveal it as a form of media comparable to photographs, radio broadcasts, stadiums, and cement buildings some decades earlier, which Rubén Gallo (2005) has described as sites and agents of modernization. In the case of the project, modernization was undertaken not by artists and

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12 Spanish: “Nuestra Revolución sostiene estas afirmaciones / El hombre como dignidad / La familia como autonomía / La nación como soberanía.”
writers, but by state agencies. Architecture historian Luis Castañeda has identified modern buildings in Mexico as part of a “unified effort of state propaganda” (2010b:101). While my work recognizes the connection between architecture and propaganda, I question its characterization as “unified” by showing the state as multiple and changing. Moreover, by focusing on people on the receiving end of propaganda—the residents of Unidad Santa Fe—I show they were not un-reflexive. Michel de Certeau described the process of watching television as “another production” (1984:xii); similarly, interpreting buildings and inscribing them with personal meanings are processes whereby they are produced anew.

Unidad Santa Fe families populated households with personal objects and, when the IMSS began loosening internal regulations, they started changing the physical configuration of built spaces. Since the nineteen-eighties, most families have built additional stories over their houses, and fences that convert previously common areas into private patios. Many have decorated their houses’ façades. To the disappointment of defenders or Mexico’s modernist heritage (e.g. de Anda 2015), Unidad Santa Fe looks much unlike what Mario Pani intended. Houses, once identical to those around them, now form a collage of colors, styles and shapes.

Divergent experiences and interpretations of Unidad Santa Fe surfaced with greater force after privatization, at a time when, throughout the world, old categories crumbled and apparently uniform communities were revealed as “splintered” (Geertz 2000). Before privatization, Unidad Santa Fe was generally accepted as a symbol of a state-sponsored view of the Mexican nation. Today, old imaginings of Mexico as a nation have been put into question, and new ones have been invested in other symbols. This has colored negotiations among groups of neighbors and state institutions with a sense of longing. Despite losing privileges, the project’s residents remain engaged in discussions on their physical environment through which they imagine possible futures and pasts for communities they
have formed along the lines of kinship, generation, vicinity, friendship, and ideology. These communities, like place names, are inscribed on the land and form part of long histories.

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Unidad Santa Fe is located in Mexico City’s Santa Fe region. It was first given this name in 1532 by Vasco de Quiroga, a Spanish lawyer—later ordained and appointed bishop of Michoacán—who read Thomas More’s *Utopia* (2010[1516]) and sought to implement it in the New World. Santa Fe, which translates as “holy faith” was the name of the camp where, in the last years of the 15th century, Isabel of Castile and Ferdinand or Aragon—perhaps dressed in “Moorish clothes” (Menocal 2000:9)—waited for news on the capitulation of Granada, the last Muslim bastion in the Iberian Peninsula. It was also there that they negotiated the terms of their partnership with Christopher Columbus before he set out on his first transatlantic trip. Quiroga memorialized these events in a community where Indians could find a refuge from the ruthless Spaniards who were conquering the once-ruthless Aztec empire. For decades, the town of Santa Fe survived as an agricultural community organized on the basis of rules outlined in Quiroga’s will (1997[1565]). Residents earned the right to food, shelter and clothing by working the land for six hours a day. They lived in extended family households, and the eldest member of each patriline represented it in an assembly that enforced rules and settled local disputes (Zavala 1992).

Santa Fe became a source of water for Mexico City with the construction of an aqueduct that began in 1571 (Pineda 2000). Water in the area also made it suitable for the construction of a gunpowder factory by Spanish colonial authorities. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the town’s population dwindled. It surged again with the construction of a rail line connecting the area to Mexico City (Leidenberg 2001:22-23, 26), and with the rededication of the factory by president Porfirio Díaz in 1910, in an event of the ambitious program to commemorate the centennial of Mexico’s Independence (Tenorio 1996:78). In 1946, a
military school was built by the factory. This and other expansions led to the transformation of the area into a military base, which today is walled off and carefully guarded. I visited on two occasions during fieldwork and discovered an orderly place, much unlike the shantytowns behind its walls, where soldiers and their families make use of dining halls, laundry facilities, cultural centers, and sports facilities. One soldier confessed he had moved out of the base because he did not enjoy being under the constant watch of his superiors. He commutes to work for two hours and finds that preferable to surveillance. Others told me they were proud to live in the base.

In the first half of the 20th century, the growth of the military camp, the exploitation of sand mines in the area, and the extension of rail lines to the town of La Venta (Leidenberg 2011:34), helped the Santa Fe pueblo grow as a circulation and commercial hub. In 1957, the Federal District’s government13 converted some depleted mines by the pueblo into the city’s main landfill. Also in 1957, four kilometers east of the landfill and three from the military base along the road that Quiroga followed out of Mexico City in the 16th century in search for a place to recreate Utopia, president Adolfo Ruiz Cortines dedicated what was officially known as Unidad habitacional y de servicios sociales no. 1 del Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, “First Social Services and Housing Project of the Mexican Social Security Institute.” People knew the area as Santa Fe, so the project soon began to be known as Unidad Santa Fe.

In 1957, the areas surrounding Unidad Santa Fe were mostly unpopulated. Aerial photographs in Pani’s collections reveal two preexisting neighborhoods: Cristo Rey, immediately east of the project, and María G. de García Ruiz, to the west. Families expelled from more central areas of Mexico City by gentrification settled both neighborhoods (Landa

13 In this dissertation, I use the term Federal District (Distrito Federal)—the official name of Mexico’s capital until 2015—when discussing administrative matters. Otherwise, I use the term Mexico City, which was common before the constitution of Mexico as a federal republic, and today describes the city’s metropolitan area, which extends beyond the limits of the Federal District. The terms are hardly equivalent: the Federal District has 8 million inhabitants and has been governed since 1997 by the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD); the capital’s metropolitan area has approximately twenty million inhabitants and a big part of it lies in the State of Mexico, which is a PRI bastion.
2015b). Others were settled after the project’s dedication. South of Unidad Santa Fe, in an area neighbors call *atrás de la barda,* “behind the wall,” squatters invaded private lands and formed the Isidro Favela and Abraham González neighborhoods; Primera Victoria, east of Abraham González developed through subdivision and the sale of lots by their owner. North of the project emerged La Conchita, also through land invasions, in what once was property of a cement company. North and east of La Conchita are the Pólvora and Unidad Santo Domingo neighborhoods. The latter was state-built and populated by families displaced by urban renewal in downtown Mexico City. By the nineteen-eighties, there were few open lots between Unidad Santa Fe and the Santa Fe pueblo. In the nineties, the area became denser as families built additional stories over their houses and occupied the remaining lots (Romero Téllez 2012).

Many children from surrounding neighborhoods were enrolled in Unidad Santa Fe’s public schools. Those affiliated to the IMSS visited Unidad Santa Fe’s health clinic and attended classes in the Social Security Center; as the population in areas surrounding the project increased, so did the proportion of “outsiders” who used its facilities. The project concentrated public institutions and, neighbors insist, was kept “spotless” by the IMSS; by contrast, some of the surrounding neighborhoods did not have running water or electricity, and their streets were only paved in the nineteen-nineties. This marked Unidad Santa Fe as a regional center. As in Spanish colonial cities, where elites lived close to central plazas and the poor in their outskirts, people living inside and outside the project were and remain marked as different by their access to services and proximity to state symbols. Some Unidad Santa Fe neighbors call people from surrounding neighborhoods *mugrosos,* “the dirty ones,” and outsiders might identify project residents as privileged, spoiled, or rich.

Historians have often drawn attention to commonalities among strategies of modernization and colonization in Mexico, in processes that have involved the construction
and circulation of hybrid images and symbols (Gruzinski 2001). During reconstruction after the Revolution of 1910, minister José Vasconcelos sought to “integrate the country through education and culture” (Florescano 2002:401). Teachers were fashioned as missionaries, and, starting in the nineteen-thirties, modernist public schools were chapels where converts would gather. The religious tenor of nation-building efforts is palpable in Diego Rivera’s murals at the Ministry of Public Education and the Presidential Palace in Mexico City (410-413), which recall the works of Giotto and other Renaissance masters. Films also reproduced the state’s “sacred atlas of time” (Wallace 2005). In Luis Buñuel’s El río y la muerte (1954), modern Mexico City—represented by the recently dedicated UNAM campus—is contrasted to barbarism in the countryside and presented as the endpoint of a process of civilization founded on education and science. Similarly, the American film The Forgotten Village (Hammid and Kleine 1941), written by John Steinbeck, dramatizes the clash in a Mexican village during an epidemic between traditional healers and a young man initiated to scientific medicine by government employees.

Unidad Santa Fe, as an image of modernization and a place where, in a common local expression, la gente se superó, “people bettered themselves,” can be understood as part of a process whereby elites, not without violence, colonized Mexico’s working class. It is also a place remembered by neighbors as “a paradise” and “an orchard.” These possible pasts, vibrant in the present, underline tensions and ambiguities that emerge from the project’s similarities to both the Santa Fe pueblo—as a once utopian community and a colonial town—and the nearby military base: a place where the lives of the working class were strictly controlled by a watchful state (Landa 2012). The project’s multiplicity is not lost to its inhabitants: during fieldwork I heard Unidad Santa Fe described as a sports club, an electoral gold mine, a gated community, a masterpiece of modern architecture, a successful and a failed social experiment, the site of an unspeakable fraud, a collection of ruined buildings, a
tightly knit urban community, a place with a fragmented “social fabric,” a socialist enclave, a prison, a drug distribution center, a microcosm of Mexico, a place where the poor live, a place where the rich live, and a neighborhood just like any other.

**Change lapsed**

In recent decades, Mexico transitioned from being ruled by the PRI to a multi-party system with what political scientist José Woldenberg has described as “an electoral system capable of offering impartiality and guarantees of equity” (2012:15).\(^{14}\) In Woldenberg’s description, this process took place over a quarter of a century through reforms promoted by civic associations, intellectuals, and opposition parties, and permitted by the PRI as concessions to a growing opposition. In Unidad Santa Fe, the effects of what some have described as Mexico’s “democratic opening” (Preston and Dillon 2004), is evident in the expression of diverse political opinions among neighbors who had earlier been expected to unanimously stand behind the PRI.

Matthew Gutmann’s *The Romance of Democracy* (2002) characterizes Santo Domingo, a working class neighborhood in Mexico City, at the turn of the 21\(^{st}\) century. Gutmann’s informants identify with candidates from different parties and discuss politics earnestly. The people in Santo Domingo, despite their mistrust of people in power, shared Woldenberg’s expectation for democratization. Gutmann conducted fieldwork during an optimistic moment in the country’s history when many anticipated the fulfillment of long-postponed hopes through electoral politics. My work looks at a similar context a decade later, when optimism in Mexico City had become a rarity. Most in Unidad Santa Fe do not believe that Mexico’s political system can be described as a democracy, or that its laws and institutions are as sophisticated as Woldenberg and other writers claim. Those who agree that

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14 Spanish: “un sistema electoral capaz de ofrecer garantías de imparcialidad y equidad.”
Mexico’s laws are adequate might recognize this does not guarantee that they will guide the actions of state officials.

In this context, people’s hopes for the future do not tend to be articulated in terms of nation or even citywide redemption, but through localized communities and initiatives. In my discussion of this phenomenon in this dissertation, I present neighbor organizations and debates on local affairs as evidence of the wide extent of what scholars have called “civic participation” (e.g. Meyer 1994; J. Castañeda 2011) beyond parties, government institutions, and established social movements. Public discussions on local and city matters, and ever multiplying community initiatives in Unidad Santa Fe, challenge Woldenberg’s narrative, which corresponds neatly to those of politicians in power. A few in the project aspire to construct a democratic system where everybody is equal; most others work hard to preserve exclusion and acquired privileges. They often do so by employing democratic instruments such as elections, and the regulations of state institutions.

Simultaneous to what Woldenberg describes as democratization, Mexico transitioned from having a protected economy founded on import substitution and state investments (Ortiz Mena 1998) to what many have characterized as a neoliberal regime. In processes that encompass the privatization of Unidad Santa Fe, dozens of state enterprises were sold to private investors and public agencies shifted their focus from internal growth to the creation of a favorable climate for foreign investments and the increase of exports (Escobar and González 1995:63-64). Social scientists have observed that liberalization in Mexico has increased socioeconomic inequality (Portes and Hoffman 2003), made the middle class more vulnerable to shifts in the economy (Torche and López-Calva 2013), and accentuated precariousness among the urban poor (González de la Rocha 2006). Many of those who recovered their savings and assets after economic crises 1982 and 1994 did not recover their sense of security (Gilbert 2005). Much like in other countries (Caldeira 2000; Low 2003;
Srivastava 2012; O’Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013), “structural adjustment” has manifested in a rise in narratives of urban violence, the use of new surveillance technologies, and spatial segregation through the construction of gated communities and exclusive business and upper-class enclaves.

One such enclave is the Zona Especial de Desarrollo Santa Fe, “Santa Fe Special Development Zone,” known more commonly in the project as the Santa Fe shopping center (centro comercial) or Santa Fe corporate zone (zona de corporativos). In 1982, the year of the edict that mandated Unidad Santa Fe’s privatization, Mexico City’s government evicted garbage collectors living in the landfill next to the Santa Fe pueblo and laid the groundwork for its transformation into a collection of luxury apartment towers, corporate parks, and high-end shopping centers (Moreno Carranco 2008; Pérez Negrete 2010). The Santa Fe corporate zone, where state institutions have made themselves unobtrusive—commemorations of events or heroes from nationalist history are absent and, until recently, there were no government offices, public schools or health facilities in this area\textsuperscript{15}—stands in sharp contrast to Unidad Santa Fe. The two places can be construed as opposites in a spectrum with statism on one side and laissez-faire on the other (Tamayo 2001). This contrast, however, offers an overly schematic view of the layered processes associated with neoliberalism as it takes root in specific contexts.

Anthropologists have shown the diverse and often contradictory effects of neoliberal policies in various Latin American locales. Kedron Thomas (2009) has described how, in Guatemala, neoliberal reforms are linked to the imagination of urban space as dangerous, rather than as fit for free commercial exchanges. In Campinas, Brazil, as described by Sebastian Dent, economic opening, instead of straightjacketing local music with global models, has been met with the rise of “pre-modern” temporalities and forms of artistic

\textsuperscript{15} In 2015 a campus of the public Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM) was dedicated in the Santa Fe corporate district. It joined three private universities in the area. A second public university, Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica (CIDE) is adjacent to the new district.
expression (Dent 2009:241). For her part, Clara Han has shown how in Chile, much touted
transitions from dictatorship to democracy and from neoliberalism to increased social welfare
did not translate into new economic practices or institutional frameworks (Han 2012:4).
Similarly, Mexico’s transitions can hardly be described as linear. As a case in point, I identify
strong continuities bridging the country’s present to its modernist past. For many in Unidad
Santa Fe, the corporate zone does not conjure fears of unhinged, all-powerful corporations,
but of the same old politicians working for their own benefit. As I discuss below, Roque
Salvatierra claims that Mexico City officials have been planning to evict project residents—
to seize private property—like they evicted garbage collectors three decades ago. In the site
of the project will emerge a government-sanctioned Wal-Mart. In this and other visions
narrated in Unidad Santa Fe, imaginative realities—more so than the unmediated workings of
the market—remain a means of opening spaces to exercise power and critique or curtail its
exercise by others.

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Rihan Yeh has suggested that people in Tijuana, Mexico relate to each other under the
assumption they are autonomous subjects in a Habermassian public sphere. They claim to
operate in an egalitarian context and relate to others rationally (Yeh 2012:192-3). Yeh’s
description of Tijuana resonates with an account I heard from a resident of the Cristo Rey
neighborhood who returned home to care for his ailing mother after decades in that city.
There, he told me, he had a prosperous business and was treated with respect by his clients.
Back in Cristo Rey he had run into the longstanding divide between neighbors of Unidad
Santa Fe and people from surrounding areas. “They have never learned what it means to
work, to really work,” he explained as we stood by a group of men from the project getting
drunk on the sidewalk. “In Tijuana, if you work, you get ahead, but here it’s different. Here
you have to know the right people, live in the right place, and then you just wait to get things
for free.” This assessment challenges the views of those who believe political systems tend to evolve away from clientelism and on to citizenship, and that authoritarianism eventually crumbles and gives way to civic participation (Woldenberg 2012; de la Calle and Rubio 2010). In Mexico City, this does not seem to have happened.

Popular uses of the term citizenship suppose that individuals, as rights-bearing members of a nation state, are the constitutive unit of society (Stack 2012). As the critique of Unidad Santa Fe by the Tijuana transplant suggests, Mexico City might be best portrayed as existing within shifting webs of complicity and solidarity through which people produce and maintain different forms of identification, access power, and distribute resources. The categories people use in Unidad Santa Fe to describe themselves and others—notably vecino, “neighbor,” and culero, which translates roughly as the insult “asshole”—reveal how they establish distinctions among people and come together into groups—people speak, make demands and manifest affects not as individuals, but as members of communities. These words describe people through their relationships to others and their belonging to different constituencies. Through their use, people negotiate complex affiliations and identifications.

The persistence of longstanding practices makes change appear elusive. A pervasive sense of stasis has been reinforced by official discourses. The rhetoric of president Calderón’s government (2006-2012)—articulated in the context of a drug war—circumscribed his government to the immediate present. At the height of violence, the Office of the Presidency aired television and radio spots acknowledging that the country’s situation was bad, but insisted that “We would be worse of if no one had stepped up to organized crime.”

This official effort to foreclose alternatives—which closely paralleled the president’s speeches—left little space within the state for people to think of the past or present critically. In 2012, when Peña Nieto assumed power, his government sought to

16 Spanish: “Estaríamos peor si nadie le hubiera entrado a detener al crimen organizado.”
inaugurate a new vision of the future, which would be attained through ambitious reforms and a shift away from talk of violence. The first batch of TV spots his government issued described a new spirit in the country characterized by tenacity, hard work, know-how, and pride. As suggested the approval of president’s Peña Nieto’s performance by only 34% of the country’s population (CNN México 2015b), few were convinced by this new narrative.

And yet, not all has been said and done, as new generations seek to refashion old discourses as they navigate among “multiple sites of sovereignty” (Lomnitz 2005:496), including churches, private businesses, political parties, NGOs, newspapers, and social media. In the electoral campaigns of 2012, thousands of students protested against what they described as Peña Nieto’s “imposition” through his secret alliance with Televisa. In 2014 a new wave of protests erupted after the disappearance of 43 students from a rural Teacher’s College. Thousands took to the streets under the slogan Fue el estado, “The state did it.” These gatherings, attended and passionately debated in Unidad Santa Fe, reveal that many believe there are alternative ways of conceiving and practicing power and solidarity.

The study of emergent politics runs the risk of normalizing people’s actions and ideas by framing them within existing categories, or explaining them away as evidence of the rise of new macro paradigms (say, the replacement of government institutions by businesses or criminal organizations) or, as the slogan “The state did it” invites, of wishfully constructing a space untouched by government (Spencer 2007:23). Against these risks, the messiness of ethnographic data reminds us that people’s experiences and imaginations both exceed the analytic frames of state institutions and the social sciences (Biehl and McKay 2012:1123–4), and might in fact bring about realities these frames do not yet account for. Glimpses of what is to come are best appreciated by keeping one’s eyes and ears on the ground, in places of intense sociability such as Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza.
**Housing projected**

In recent decades, housing projects have attracted scholarly attention around the world. The literature on them can be read as an assessment of modernity after its end. For example, *Manhattan Projects* (Zipp 2010) offers a thorough account of some of New York City’s most distinctive housing complexes. The book’s narrative arc reproduces those of others that have critiqued modernist planning. After describing the motivations and procedures employed by housing authorities for decades, the last chapter narrates how, in the nineteen-sixties, the spatial organization of projects was revealed as flawed by social activists—with Jane Jacobs as their figurehead—who ushered a new consensus on how cities should be built. Similar accounts have been articulated in Europe. In *La crise des banlieues*, Jean-Marc Stébé (2010) documents the optimism that led to the construction of *grands ensembles* in Paris and their eventual transformation into hotbeds of violence and anti-government sentiments. In these and other texts, projects are identified as concentrations of social problems, a logic that sustains segregation and aggressive policing (Fassin 2013).

A number of academics have interpreted Mexican projects through the lens of those in the United States and Europe. Accordingly—like most authors writing on gangs and urban culture until the nineteen-nineties (Coughlin and Venkatesh 2003)—they frame their studies as documentations of problems requiring interventions (Graizbord and Schteingart 1998:9; Villavicencio 2006:12). The identification of projects as problematic is also behind many government initiatives, including the *Programa de rescate de unidades habitacionales*, “Program for the rescue of housing projects,” sponsored by Mexico City’s government (Moreno Armella 2004), the *Programa de reordenamiento y rescate de unidades habitacionales*, “Program for the reordering and rescue of housing projects,” by the federal Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (SEDATU 2014), and recent initiatives by INFONAVIT, the country’s largest housing agency in Mexico, in which famous architects
have proposed “improvements” to Mexico City projects and alternative designs for new ones (INFONAVIT 2015). The word *rescate*, “rescue” or “recovery,” is as a norm used without an indirect object; that is, government institutions have set out to reclaim projects from unmentioned noxious agents.

Notably, denunciations of modern housing and government programs tend to focus more on the spatial configuration of public housing, and less on the social, economic and legal circumstances of project residents. Some scholarly reflections have departed from this view. The documentary *The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* (Freidrichs 2011; see also Bristol 1991) addresses housing beyond its material conditions. The Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis, Missouri, with thirty-three apartment slabs, was built in the fifties and demolished twenty years later. By then, dozens of apartments had been abandoned, criminals had seized control of its spaces, and government officials had declared the project unmanageable. The Pruitt-Igoe has been cited as evidence of the failure of modern architecture (Jencks 1984:9). The documentary, by contrast, shows that its demise was not the unmediated result of an inadequate design, but of unemployment caused by deindustrialization in St. Louis, and of spatial and economic segregation brought by suburbanization.

*The Pruitt-Igoe Myth* offers insights for the analysis of projects in Mexico. Socioeconomic circumstances of project residents allow for the differentiation of Mexican complexes from those in Europe and the United States. While project residents in other countries are often unemployed, recently arrived immigrants, or ethnic minorities facing discrimination, public and affordable housing in Mexico has historically been assigned to people with stable incomes (Graizbord and Schtein 1998:11-12; Zamorano 2007:77). Most of Unidad Santa Fe’s original residents were low-level bureaucrats and unionized factory workers who had access to health care and other benefits. The population in other projects was similarly composed (Monsiváis 2011:211). This reveals the life trajectories of
people in Mexico’s projects as different from those in Europe and the United States: public housing, together with targeted subsidies and social security provisions in mid-20th century Mexico, facilitated social advancement (Davis 1993:49; Escobar and González 1995:59).

Moreover, people in public housing were often proud of their living environment because it made them into characters of a national history of progress. Through the collection of oral histories in President Alemán Urban Center (CUPA), Graciela de Garay (2002) has revealed that this project’s residents identify and are proud of their living environment. A similar image emerges from the documentary Ciudad Independencia (Amato and de la Garza 2010), which recounts the history of a later IMSS project, and from accounts of the past in Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe (García, Panzi and Torrieri 2007). Their narratives suggest that residents’ attachment to the project has to do with both benefits they were afforded and the symbolic content of their living environment. Conversely, the decay of modernist projects in Mexico cannot be described only in terms of their architecture. Critiques of Unidad Santa Fe by its residents today—some of which paint it as unredeemable (see Quiñones and Villegas 2009)—are connected to their loss of a leading role in the country’s history and to inconveniences stemming from the erosion of social security.

In the 20th century, state institutions in Mexico constructed housing for millions. Between 1950 and 1974, government agencies built approximately 460,700 houses and apartments, which represent 14% of the total built in the country (Garza and Schteingart 1978:65-66). Most projects were in Mexico City, which grew rapidly and consolidated as the unequivocal center of the national territory. While some projects were more prominent than others as symbols, their modernist design inscribed all of them in a common idea of Mexico as a nation. Accordingly, thousands in the country’s capital share the experiences of neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe. They constitute a sizable “status group” (Weber 1958)—that is, a community that shares a “style of life,” and enjoys certain privileges, in this case,
stemming from a common history and position with respect to government institutions. This group emerged at a specific juncture of state-formation and participated actively in this process. As this juncture came to an end, housing policies changed dramatically.

The provision of affordable housing started concentrating in INFONAVIT with its creation in 1972. After two decades of intense building, this agency started transitioning into a mortgage bank (Prado 2006). Under the INFONAVIT’s present framework, affordable housing is built and commercialized by private developers. Salaried workers contribute 5% of their wages to individual accounts, through which they make down payments and pay their credits. This model has led to the construction of millions of freestanding houses in the outskirts of Mexico’s cities. Marketing ploys and land prices have driven affordable housing out of metropolitan centers. Since new neighborhoods are rarely coordinated with state planning efforts, they tend to have deficient public transportation and few, if any, public services such as schools and health clinics.

Policy consultant Genaro Robles Camacho told me home ownership gives people security and frees them from corrupt unions and leaders. Unlike those who join social movements that organize squatter settlements, those who acquire a house through INFONAVIT can vote for whomever they choose and are not required by leaders to pay fees or attend mass protests. This defense of contemporary policies reveals that, much like those of Brazil (Bonduki 2008; Cavalcanti 2015), Chile, Costa Rica, and Colombia (Held 2000), today’s housing programs in Mexico are sustained by liberal ideals. Moving to Unidad Santa Fe meant moving to the center of a national community; moving to a house financed by INFONAVIT involves entering a context primarily shaped by market relations. Residents of new affordable housing neighborhoods are far not only from public services and their places of employment, but also from sites that, like the Heroes’ Plaza, represent Mexico as a nation.
In recent years, revaluation of modernist works by architects and academics has brought Unidad Santa Fe back to the center of debates on housing in Mexico. Today, some tout the onetime forgotten project as a model for future affordable housing developments (see Landa 2014:69). This dissertation attempts to destabilize Unidad Santa Fe’s role as a model and show it instead as a site built by its thousands of inhabitants over the past six decades. The text’s main contribution to debates on housing is the displacement of the views of experts, who generally assess projects from the outside or on the basis of abstract propositions, and bring the opinions and actions of residents to the foreground.

**Home textured**

I was born in Mexico City but grew up in Monterrey. And although I visited Mexico City often to see family, the city is stratified and class differences manifest spatially: I had driven past Unidad Santa Fe, but I had never met people who lived there. Before graduate school—when I first met Márgara Pani and started consulting her collections—I resided in Mexico City. At this time I began exploring the city deliberately, especially its housing projects. Moving to Unidad Santa Fe involved entering a world both familiar and strange where, for instance, people used words I had never heard before. As I began writing about this place I found inspiration in the works of V.S. Naipaul. An ethnic Indian born in Trinidad and educated in Oxford, Naipaul has written about displacements while in transit. His portraits of “home” are marked by an incomplete attachment that at times manifests as longing. In my case, having a personal stake in Mexico City, I find it easy to critique some local practices and feel pride in others. Fieldwork involved negotiating my own allegiances.

My grandfather Agustín Landa Verdugo had an architecture firm with his brother Enrique. In the nineteen-fifties, they designed a number of buildings and complexes for the IMSS, including the Legaria and Tlatilco housing projects, dedicated in 1958, one year after
Unidad Santa Fe. Unidad Santa Fe was conceived as a showcase of the Institute’s programs; the projects my grandfather and his brother designed, built for workers who earned minimum wage, were more modest, with smaller apartments and less amenities. Other commissions from the IMSS included a regional hospital in Chihuahua and one for employees of Mexico City’s airport. Through their collaboration, my grandfather and Antonio Ortiz Mena became friends. This led to two personal commissions: the Ortiz Mena family houses in Mexico City and Cuernavaca, where they spent weekends.

My father remembered a dinner party at home when he was a child. By then Ortiz Mena was Minister of Finance and one of the most powerful men in the country. There were rumors he might one day be president. Secret service officials checked the house thoroughly the day before. When Ortiz Mena and his wife arrived, his driver knew exactly where to park. Only my aunt Mercedes and my father, the oldest of ten siblings, were allowed to go downstairs to say good night before going to bed. In addition to the minister, guests included my great-uncle Enrique, Jesús Rodríguez y Rodríguez, the minister’s executive assistant, and their wives. My grandmother, not commonly in the kitchen, took over from the family’s cooks that night.

A couple years before he died in 2009, my grandfather started giving me photographs he thought I might find interesting. Among them were shots of buildings his firm had designed. There was also an official portrait of Antonio Ortiz Mena and an aerial photograph of a neighborhood I later discovered was Unidad Santa Fe. Why would my grandfather keep a photograph of Unidad Santa Fe? Perhaps, I thought, Pani (he invariably called him “el maestro Pani”) had given it to him. In his old age, Pani was known to give away photographs from his archive to his friends and colleagues. After moving to the project, I found a piece of evidence that suggested a different trajectory for the photo: number 59 of Arquitectura (Pani 1957) lists the “people who participated in the construction of this project.” Among them are
architects Enrique Landa Verdugo and Jesús Aguirre Cárdenas, representatives of Propulsora de Habitación, the company that built Unidad Santa Fe. The photograph suggests that my grandfather—always his older brother’s associate—was also involved in some capacity.

This finding shows that my links to Unidad Santa Fe run deeper than I had initially suspected. My family connections, however, are with the professionals who built this project for Mexico City’s workers, not with the workers. They gave me easy access to policy makers, architects, and their descendants. In Unidad Santa Fe, however, I discussed my background only with some informants, partly because it would have made me appear as an expert—someone who would tell neighbors about their project rather than learn about it from them. From my own perspective, asserting a connection might have confounded my own sense of awe at what I was discovering as a new world.

As I sought to reconstruct this world in writing upon moving out of Unidad Santa Fe, I found hints on how to begin ordering my observations in V.S. Naipaul’s Miguel Street (2011[1959]). These short stories, part autobiography and part fiction, paint a portrait of a neighborhood in the author’s native Trinidad. Each story focuses on a character that recurs in the book. Miguel Street reminded me that, like fiction, ethnography can both present arguments and occasion feelings—even invite identification with characters or the narrator. Readers may experience connectedness meaningful in its own right. In Naipaul’s words, “A stranger could drive through Miguel Street and just say ‘Slum!’ because he could see no more. But we who lived there saw our street as a world, where everybody was quite different from everybody else” (2011:51).

Attention to local detail is a defining characteristic of anthropology with a long genealogy that crosses contemporary disciplinary distinctions and goes back to Alexander von Humboldt and other 19th century German naturalists (Bunzl 1996). In his essay “The Study of Geography,” Franz Boas (1996[1887]) contrasts two different approaches to the
physical world: the first, which he associates with physicists, involves isolating observed phenomena and categorizing them to allow for the deduction of laws. By contrast, the cosmographer, he writes, “lovingly tries to penetrate into” a landscape’s “secrets until every feature is plain and clear” (14). Boasian anthropology and its disciplinary descendants often dwell in the specific. This approach, however, posits a challenge for ethnographers: as we produce descriptions based on fieldsites we inevitably have to leave something out, lest we become like the cartographers from Borges’ fable (1935) who made a map of an empire so detailed that it was equal in size to what it represented.

The challenge involves deciding what details to represent and what experiences to share. A possible strategy is to establish the argument one wants to make and select observations that sustain it. This, however, seemed to me somewhat unfair, as it converted the lives and words of informants into stepping-stones for something presumed to stand in a higher order, selling ethnography short as mere raw material for theory or philosophy (Biehl 2013a). Inspired by Miguel Street I began writing stories showing everybody in Unidad Santa Fe as different from everybody else. Stories need not underpin generalizations; rather, anecdotes and characters might engage readers’ sympathies. I wrote drafts of stories and then organized them to highlight certain themes. This mode of writing shows the on-the-ground complexity of what other disciplinary traditions reduce to models. Readers of ethnographies, as readers of fiction, ideally discover how certain facts and arguments relate to others in changing sites tainted by contingency. After reading, what sticks in a reader’s mind might be a character, a sentiment, or a sense of intimacy with a time and place.

In his rejoinder to Philip Roth’s autobiographical The Facts, his (fictional) alter ego Nathan Zuckerman critiques him for “making everything signify something, when in life I don’t believe it does.” Roth’s book, his character claims “is just such an extraordinarily, relentlessly coherent narrative, that’s all.” (1988:190). Following Zuckerman, I believe that
ethnography can aspire to more than coherence. With Rena Lederman (2007), whose reading of Roth (and Zuckerman) identifies parallels in the research and inscription processes of fiction writers and anthropologists, I recognize the presence of imagination in the exercise of producing narratives from field observations. At the center of this dissertation is the recognition that fictions (also dubbed imaginative realities) are not only explicative, but also productive of relations and experiences of the world.

Howard Bloch, a scholar of French Medieval literature, has said that the pleasure of his pursuits is attached to the search for origins (2004:49). This search is always illusory, as there is inevitably something before the place where we set up camp. “But,” Bloch continues, “the pleasure of grounding our understanding in a place, investing our desire in an original object, is… akin to finding a pleasurable place…where the mind’s anxious quest comes to rest for as long as such rest does not itself become an object of longing” (49-50). In my own search I chose Unidad Santa Fe and its “high modernist” architecture (Scott 1998), perhaps a place as arbitrary as any other, to anchor understanding and begin to reimagine my world. The housing project is a pedestal from which I can begin tracing journeys across Mexico City as far into the landscape as I can see.
1. Accomplices of Modernity

Onnis Luque’s maternal and paternal grandparents moved to Unidad Santa Fe at the time of its dedication on July 1957. His parents met there and stayed after they married. Onnis was born and grew up in the project; he attended one of its public schools and played with his childhood friends in its gardens. When I met him, in 2009, he lived in an apartment he built over his family’s house, and was working on a photography essay on the project that would be published as a book four years later (Luque 2013b).

In 2011, Onnis went with me to Márgara Pani’s house, where she kept an extensive collection of photographs of her father’s buildings. He sat on the dimly lit living room with a bunch of prints by Guillermo Zamora on his lap. In them, Unidad Santa Fe looks sparkling and, for someone who had lived there all his life, utterly unfamiliar. Today, the project’s trees are fully grown and its houses are a collage of styles, colors and shapes. In the photos from the fifties, houses are all alike, with freshly painted walls, and vegetation does not obstruct views. Zamora’s shots feature minute pedestrians and ancient looking Chryslers and Fords surrounded by grandiose buildings in open space [Fig. 1].

“Can you imagine what it was like to move in to a place that looked like this?” Onnis exclaimed, holding up one of the prints. Unidad Santa Fe probably looked like that for only an instant, but the photographer had fixed it for posterity.

We returned to Unidad Santa Fe when the sun was setting and sat for hours in my apartment’s living room drinking tequila and talking about architecture and photography. Onnis had recently traveled to a number of states in Mexico to photograph schools for a book that would soon be published by the Ministry of Public Education (Arañó 2011). Onnis told me that in this trip he had begun to appreciate some of the past achievements of Mexico’s government. The buildings, the flags in their patios, the many busts of heroes in them, the
schools’ patriotic names—all of this had made him see 20th century policies as coherent. Building so many schools, and with such architectural quality, Onnis told me, required conviction and a great deal of dedication.

Fig. 3. Unidad Santa Fe in 1957. Photograph by Guillermo Zamora. Fototeca Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mario Pani collection.

The experience of photographing public schools had also colored Onnis’ vision of Unidad Santa Fe. When I first met him he did not have many good things to say about the project. He had written a description of his budding photographic essay as a documentation of the limitations of what he called the “positivist” vision of planners, architects and politicians who thought they could change the country through housing. The many transformations Unidad Santa Fe had suffered proved that the project had not responded to the needs and desires of its residents. Onnis’ views were sustained by his politics. As many others born in the nineteen-seventies and eighties in Mexico City (I count myself among
them), he has very negative views of the PRI, a party known for corrupt and authoritarian practices and for the mishandlings the country’s finances that led to economic crises in 1982 and 1994, which debilitated the working and middle classes.

One of the schools Onnis photographed is the one he attended in Unidad Santa Fe [Fig. 3]. Being there for the first time in over twenty years allowed him to see it not only as part of his personal history, but also of an ambitious nation building program. After a few tequilas, Onnis told me he was struck by the optimist outlook of state-built modernist works. In Zamora’s photographs of Unidad Santa Fe and in his own of public schools in Durango, Jalisco, Zacatecas, and other states, buildings could be read as auspices of a brighter future. While much had changed, he observed, the schools are still standing and continue educating children much like he was educated. And it works, Onnis and I agreed. He brought himself up as an example: his grandfathers were laborers with no high school education and he was a successful photographer with a major monograph on the way. Refill the tequila glasses!

The tone of our conversation changed when I brought up the TV spots that the PRI was running at the time in anticipation of the 2012 presidential election. They showed old footage of Mexico City while a narrator spoke of the party’s achievements in the construction of institutions and in offering decisive, countrywide solutions to major challenges. The government under the PRI, the ads reported, had not adopted piecemeal solutions, but gotten to the root of the country’s problems by building institutions: they were behind the black and white images that caused profound impressions on many Mexicans. In our exhilaration, with the period photographs of Unidad Santa Fe we had just seen as a backdrop, we had enacted one of these spots. And it was not pleasant to become aware of it. Our emotions seemed legitimate, and the spots were, well, partial and manipulative.

This conversation took place shortly after I moved to Unidad Santa Fe. In the following months I often thought of it as I met former bureaucrats, union leaders, and
beneficiaries of public programs who declared animosity towards the PRI, which was indistinguishable from the government for most of the 20th century (Bertaccini 2009:42)—the party’s logo is, in fact, a transformation of the national flag. It seemed that people were caught in a contradiction. My informants had benefited much from state institutions and had an affective connection to them; their lives can hardly be narrated without reference to public schools or the IMSS. And yet they declared the government to be useless, corrupt, irredeemable. Their attitudes were perhaps a response to the project’s privatization, stemming from feelings of abandonment. When, as Unidad Santa Fe residents say, “the IMSS left,” the project began to deteriorate and they lost the privileged position they once enjoyed as chosen subjects of the state. As I inquired into past opinions and attitudes toward the state, however, I discovered that paradox was always inbuilt to power relations in Mexico City.

This chapter’s main character is Wilfrido Nava Lara, whom others and I call Don Willy as a sign of respect. He moved to Unidad Santa Fe in 1957 and today is recognized as the project’s chronicler. Neighbors visit his house to hear stories about its past and consult his expansive collection of documents. The chapter’s first section characterizes the PRI as an organization that orchestrated ambiguities and contradictions through the discussion of some of Don Willy’s anecdotes. It also considers the background of other neighbors and the ways they obtained houses in the project. The second section explores the multiple motivations behind the construction of Unidad Santa Fe and its status as a stage set for nationalist spectacles in which neighbors willingly participated.

Underlying this chapter is an account of the different types of expertise that have shaped the Mexican government’s policies. In the 19th century, presidents often heard advice from Positivist intellectuals and scientists (Zea 2005). After the Revolution, scientists and hygienists remained influential (Tenorio 2012); they now advised men with military careers. Towards the nineteen-forties, licenciados (lawyers), physicians, and architects worked
together in the definition of state policies. Like other countries in Latin America (L. Castañeda 2012; 2014), architects in Mexico synthetized ideas for social and economic development into building programs and urban layouts. Pani’s firm conceived financing plans for affordable housing that served as a foundation for the design of new neighborhoods, envisioned as an instrument of social change (Pani and Gómez 1949; see also Sánchez B. 1950). In 1944, architects and physicians, invited by government officials, worked together to define the country’s health care policies (Baz 1944). Managing these actions were figures such as Antonio Ortiz Mena, who, trained as a lawyer, was in charge of economic policy in the country for over a decade.

Other influential architects include Carlos Lazo and Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, who were state ministers and shaped education, health, rural development programs, and other policies aimed at extending the reach of social services and integrating Mexico as a nation. In the eighties, economists and marketing specialists began replacing lawyers, physicians and architects, and today they have a dominant voice in politics. As in other countries shaped by neoliberal reforms, social policies and planning in Mexico today are often subservient to the logic of economics. Alongside economists, marketing specialists have been recruited to conduct surveys and opinion polls, and to communicate government policies and boost the image of politicians and government agencies through radio and television advertisements. Targeted media campaigns in recent decades in Mexico have been described as “deafening” (Economist 2012). Rather than suggesting that present trends are unprecedented, the rise of marketing professionals puts into focus the role of modernist architecture as “mass media” (Colomina 1994) through its reproduction in newspapers, magazines, film, and television.
An Uncommitted Crime

When Wilfrido Nava Lara, better known as Don Willy, moved to Unidad Santa Fe in 1957 he was disappointed. The housing project was supposed to be a dream come true. It was a place where people could live as a community, with gardens, sports facilities, a social club, and dozens of maintenance employees and social workers from the IMSS. But, Don Willy remembers, many neighbors did not seem to realize how privileged they were. They were not used to having so many things. They imagined they would soon be taken from them. So they stole magazines, newspapers and even furniture from the Casino, and they carved their initials on its wooden chairs and tables. Children broke the thin trunks of newly planted trees and their parents said nothing to them.

“The gardens were designed by Matsumoto,” Don Willy told me. “But what would people here know!” Tatsugoro Matsumoto, a Japanese gardener, arrived in Mexico in 1892 and set up greenhouses and a gardening company that worked for local elites and government institutions (Reforma 2003).

Don Willy decided to shape Unidad Santa Fe into the community he had hoped for. On evenings, after arriving home from his job at the IMSS, he ran a small restaurant by the Heroes’ Plaza. Soon after he opened, people started asking for permission to place advertisements on the walls. They announced services they offered in their houses: shoe repairs, food for take-out, application of injections. Some offered to pay to put up the fliers and this gave Willy an idea: he would edit a newspaper with local news and ads. With 2,200 houses and apartments, Unidad Santa Fe was the size of a village, and a newspaper could help produce a sense of identity.

Three days a week, Willy would wake up at four in the morning and buy groceries for his restaurant in La Merced, Mexico City’s central wholesale market. He would return to the housing project by 7:30, and then take a bus to the IMSS on Paseo de la Reforma, where he
worked until three in the afternoon. He spent the rest of the day in his restaurant. Throughout, he listened in to his clients’ conversations. After closing, at 11, he would write down what he heard, develop pictures and format *Noticia*, which he published weekly through 1958 and 1959.

Neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe were mostly young couples in their twenties and thirties, so there were lots of children in the project. Willy recruited a dozen of them to sell his newspaper. They would sell it for twenty cents and get to keep five (later the price increased to thirty cents, and the boys kept ten). On Fridays, children would roam the housing complex crying out the headlines:

*Cristo Rey Church to be demolished and rebuilt!*

*Linda Maria de Jesús Baltazar turns 15!*

*Local boy scouts group has more than 80 members!*

*Would-be thief suffers giant scare!*

*Ortiz Mena visits Unidad Santa Fe!*

“Did I tell you of the time Ortiz Mena ordered me killed?” Don Willy asked me one evening in his house.

Antonio Ortiz Mena, director of the IMSS when the housing project was built and dedicated, would remain one of the most influential actors in Mexican politics in the in his role as Minister of Finance from 1958 to 1970, and director of the Inter-American Development Bank from 1970 to 1988.

According to Don Willy, Ortiz Mena ordered him killed after a dispute in the IMSS union. Willy was part of a group that supported a candidate for union Secretary General that Ortiz Mena believed to be “too independent.” After the candidate’s election in an assembly, the director sent a trusted employee to tell Willy’s group that elections would be held again
and that their candidate should back down. “Ortiz Mena wants you to remember that we live in a directed democracy,” the envoy told them.

Don Willy went to see a friend who worked as a reporter in Excelsior, one of the city’s main dailies. He told him what had happened. What Ortiz Mena feared, Willy explained, was facing a truly autonomous union. He did not like their candidate because he showed too much passion, he could move the masses. Ortiz Mena was not willing to let IMSS employees exercise the power that was rightfully theirs.

As a way to protect himself, the reporter disclosed his source in the article he published the next morning: IMSS employee and union member Wilfrido Nava Lara. It was then that Ortiz Mena ordered him killed.

“Of course I did not know any of this when I invited him to be godfather in my wedding,” said Don Willy.

Some years after the union incident, Ortiz Mena toured Unidad Santa Fe, as he often did, with a group of foreign dignitaries in an official visit to Mexico. According to Don Willy, it was either a group of French senators or a retinue with Princess Margaret of England. Or perhaps it was the Lion of Ethiopia.

As they walked through the complex, they ran into Willy’s paperboys:

Four dead in bus accident in Tacubaya!

IMSS housing project dedicated in Sonora!

Student breakfasts to be tripled in Unidad Santa Fe!

Butcher aims gun at competitor!

Lost engagement ring found!

The visitors were impressed. Unidad Santa Fe was in fact, as they had been told, a little city with everything its residents might need, including a local newspaper.
The next day, Ortiz Mena called Willy to his office to congratulate him. Over the next
couple of years, the director of the IMSS invited Willy to meet other prominent visitors to
Unidad Santa Fe. That is how he met the Russian Prime Minister and ambassador, among
others. Gerardo García, a neighbor who collects old photographs, has one of young Willy
walking alongside Ortiz Mena, surrounded by other men in dark suits.

“When I invited Ortiz Mena to my wedding he offered to pay for the banquet. I now
realize I was very stupid, because I told his assistant that I wanted something for me,
something I could keep, not food and drink for the hordes of freeloaders who would go to the
party. So he sent me a china set that my wife kept when we split up.

“We had the party here, in the Casino. I wrote a note about it in Noticia, and I also
published a picture… look how handsome I look with that funny little moustache. We had
our honeymoon in Acapulco.”

“And what happened with the union?” I asked.

“Oh… of course we didn’t get the leader we wanted, the one we had voted for. Had it
not been for one of my teachers from the National Preparatory School, he taught Greek and
Latin etymologies, they would have killed me and thrown my body in the Zumpango Lagoon,
as they did to so many others at the time. This teacher was an advisor to the IMSS, and in a
meeting he assured Ortiz Mena that I was a good boy, that I would come to my senses. He
would make sure of it… and well, I did. After I was mentioned in Excelsior I stayed still,
kept mostly out of trouble.”

Temporary guidance
I told the story of Don Willy’s would-be assassination to a number of people who worked in
government or whose parents worked in government in the mid-20th century. Some said the
story was plausible. Repression was not uncommon, and hundreds of people were killed or
“silenced” during the PRI regime (Condés 2007). Others assured me Don Willy was exaggerating or lying. Ortiz Mena is irreproachable in the memory of many of his collaborators. While most in government engaged in corruption and repression, they assured me, Ortiz Mena did not. However, the term “directed democracy,” 

\textit{democracia dirigida} in Spanish, sounded familiar to all. They said it did sound like something Ortiz Mena might say.

Much like the name of the country’s ruling party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, “directed democracy” is an oxymoron. Those who used these terms, however, seem to have done so earnestly. In an interview, Patrocinio Luengas, who worked in the IMSS and later in the Ministry of the Interior from the fifties to the seventies, explained that Ortiz Mena and other politicians at the time understood that the country was not ready for a full-fledged, liberal democracy. People needed to be educated and guided for some years before they could assume full responsibility for electing their leaders and representatives, much like the economy needed government oversight and considerable public investments before it was handed over to capitalists and entrepreneurs.

Gonzalo Mandujano, who worked for decades under Ortiz Mena, shared a comparable vision, centered this time in Unidad Santa Fe: he assured me the project’s creators expected neighbors to organize and take over its management within a decade of its dedication. They would become a sort of commune, where neighbor assemblies would be the highest decision making bodies. Similar processes would take place in public hospitals, which would eventually be owned and managed by autonomous doctor and nurse unions. He suggested I study the self-management systems of towns in the Spanish Republic and of factories in communist Yugoslavia to understand what Ortiz Mena intended.\footnote{My pursuit of this connection has yielded no leads, except for a research trip that Antonio Ortiz Salinas, Ortiz Mena’s son, told me he made in Yugoslavia and other European countries. This trip, however, took place some years after the dedication of Unidad Santa Fe.}

The ideas of Luengas and Mandujano have important differences. They outline the wide range of ideas current among the country ruling elite in the fifties. However, both
Luengas and Mandujano’s account suggest that the notion that present policies were transitional was common (see Loaeza 1989:72). Eventually, both seem to suggest, Willy and his fellow union members would be able to choose their representatives freely. For that to happen, Mexican society first had to be given elements for self-determination by an enlightened elite. Years later, historian Enrique Krauze (1986) would write an impassioned plea for Mexico to become a “democracy without adjectives.” In the nineteen fifties, when Willy Nava was ordered killed, democracy was invariably qualified.

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Mexico’s directed democracy mirrors Chile’s “protected democracy” under Augusto Pinochet; between 1974 and 1990, his government decentralized operations as a way to fragment opposition and it readily repressed dissidents (Han 2012:18). Farther afield and a few decades earlier, Indonesia lived under a “guided democracy” where president Sukarno mediated among factions with different ideologies, ethnic groups and bureaucratic and traditional leaderships. Mexico and Indonesia’s identification manifested in a visit by Sukarno to Mexico in 1958. Mexico’s president Adolfo López Mateos reciprocated with a visit to Indonesia in 1962 (SRE 2004). López Mateos’ foreign policy involved strengthening Mexico’s relations with other leaders of the “third world.” These connections suggest searches for alternatives to liberal democratic values and practices while maintaining the guise of adherence to the ideals of dominant world powers.

What were the particular characteristics of Mexico’s directed democracy? The term suggests an organization of power founded on a strict chain of command. The country’s president was the highest link in this chain. During his tenure, he was the ultimate authority in Mexico. In the words of historian Daniel Cosío Villegas, he was an emperador sexenal (1975:7), an emperor, with unlimited power, for a period of six-years. The limit to his power
was temporal because the pact on which the PRI was founded forbade reelection. Although they chose their successor, presidents invariably gave up power at the end of their term.

The Secretario de gobernación, “Minister of the Interior,” was often the president’s closest collaborators and was seen as his likely successor. The regente “regent” of the country’s Federal District was also a powerful cabinet member. Regents were mayor-like figures, appointed by the president until 1997, when elections were held for the first time. States had governors, but their power was subordinated to that of the central government. Senators and deputies in a one-party congress for most of the 20th century served ceremonial functions. Positions of power were often granted by presidents as a way of paying favors or indebting individuals or groups within the PRI. When a person changed positions, their camarillas, “power cliques,” went with them (Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar, and Adler 2010:16).

Individuals made life-long careers in government, although they rarely stayed in a position for long. Senators and governors might step down to be appointed ministers, and they could change without much warning from, for example, a position in water management to one in firearms control or religious affairs (P. Smith 1979; Cosío Villegas 1975:26-27). Together, public servants above a certain rank integrated a group with a distinct identity from the country’s dissolving aristocracy and its rising plutocracy. Its members had emerged from the army, bureaucracy, and the urban middle class after the Revolution, and they intermarried (Nutini and Isaac 2009:109).18

Ascent within the PRI’s ranks was, to a great extent, a function of personal connections. Established procedures were consistently sidelined in the name of public order—as in the case of the revocation of Don Willy’s union election—or to serve personal interests. Throughout the 20th century, outside observers struggled to pinpoint the rules

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18 This group remains in place—a recent study suggests that 88 families have been in control of Mexico’s Congress since 1934. The prohibition of reelection motivated the transfer of power among close relatives (E. Rodríguez 2015). Moreover, many in Peña Nieto’s cabinet are relatives of former presidents and high-ranking members of the PRI.
whereby the PRI operated (Cosío Villegas 1975:9-36), in part because negotiations often took place behind closed doors, and in part because individuals had much decision-making power. If democracy, enshrined in the right to free elections and political representation in the country’s constitution, could be bent by the addition of a qualifier, so could other legal guarantees if the president and those close to him so wished.

The system was notoriously arbitrary and capricious. Participants, however, spoke a common language that was “often theatrical, highly polished and full of word games” (Bertaccini 2009:19) and abided by a few inviolable rules. Chief among them was loyalty—public officials accepted the mandates of the country’s president and others above them in the political chain of command in order to maintain their position. An often-repeated phrase to characterize power in Mexico was, “He who moves doesn’t get to be in the picture.” This meant that politicians should wait for the decisions of their superiors, rather than try to get ahead by garnering public support or making deals with other politicians. Those who stepped out of the bounds of their positions ran the risk of being extricated from the PRI.

Another unwritten rule required acceptance of the party as more lasting than individual power. To the extent that senators, congressmen, governors and presidents—and therefore the ministers they appointed—had a limited time in public office, others would be able to eventually be in power, too. The possibility of being rewarded with a position of greater influence encouraged politicians to remain loyal to those in office at a particular moment, even if they did not agree with their political positions. Thus, for example, a minister who believed in the virtues of the free market might implement protectionist policies with the expectation that soon a government favorable to his ideas would come to office.

According to the constitution, presidents were chosen in general elections. However, while there were other parties in addition to the PRI, they were small and not very influential;

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19 Spanish: “a menudo teatral, lleno de prolijidad y juegos de palabras.”
20 Spanish: “El que se mueve no sale en la foto.” This phrase is attributed to longtime labor leader and PRI pillar Fidel Velázquez (J. Castañeda 1999:243).
most among them were satellites of the PRI. Electoral campaigns were therefore elaborate rituals through which PRI candidates were introduced as future presidents to the country’s population, and groups within the PRI pledged their support (Adler-Lomnitz, Salazar, and Adler 2010). The actual process whereby a president chose his successor was not enshrined in the law. It was, however, predetermined. The terms used to describe it were informal, but also well known: dedazo, “finger wag,” referred to the act by a president of choosing a successor; tapado, the “hidden” or “masked” one, referred to the chosen candidate before his official presentation (Woldenberg 2001). For its part, la cargada, the “loading” or “carrying,” described the act of uniting behind a candidate and expressing, as party members and government officials, unconditional support for his election.

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The phrase “he who moves doesn’t get to be in the picture” is generally used to describe the selection of presidential candidates. Those who openly sought to be nominated were often excluded from the process. The phrase, however, also applies to politics in other, less visible contexts in 20th century Mexico. It helps understand, for example, Don Willy’s run-in with Ortiz Mena’s operators and its outcome. By insisting that his candidate’s election as union leader be respected, Don Willy was going against the PRI’s loyalty pact. He placed his union’s written rules ahead of the better judgment of his superiors, challenging the party’s chain of command, which at the time encompassed practically all aspects of government and labor organization in the country. By doing this, he risked not getting to be in the picture. That is, he would be excluded from the system and its benefits.

On the other hand, “keeping mostly out of trouble” proved profitable for Don Willy: rather than being killed, a few years after the incident, he was given a house in Unidad Santa Fe, where he formed a family. Living in the complex gave him and his children access to quality health care, education, and a number of cultural events. It also cemented their position
in an influential network of political relations. Don Willy’s friendship with Ortiz Mena was made possible by their encounter in Unidad Santa Fe. He also formed relations with others, such as Dr. Ángel Cifuentes, first manager of the project, and PRI leader Rodolfo González Guevara, whom he lauded in his newspaper (Noticia 1958a).

Don Willy grew up in poverty in the outskirts of Mexico City. As a child, he lived in a town contiguous to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe, nine kilometers from downtown Mexico City. In the nineteen-thirties, most houses in this area were made of cardboard and spare pieces of wood and metal. They had no sanitation, running water or electricity. From an early age, Willy carried water buckets from a nearby stream to his family’s house. His mother washed clothes in the stream. Many of their neighbors were petty thieves. Others were manual laborers who worked occasional jobs. Willy’s father was a policeman.

After finishing elementary school, Willy started high school in the National Preparatory School—one of the country’s few institutions at this level at the time. He did not earn a diploma, but this did not stop his ascent in the IMSS, where he began working as a messenger when he was fifteen. He delivered mail to different floors in the Institute’s headquarters, and brought employees lunch, earning tips in addition to his salary. Sometimes he prepared sandwiches himself, to make a bigger profit, and he walked around the IMSS offering products he bought in bulk. Soon, Willy was head of messengers, overseeing friends from school he invited to work with him. He continued rising in the IMSS’ organizational chart, and when he retired thirty years later, he was an area supervisor.

Today, Don Willy’s children and grandchildren have successful careers in business, academia, and the arts. Many of his descendants have advanced degrees. Don Willy’s family history is similar to that of dozens in Unidad Santa Fe, whose members experienced rapid social and economic ascent. Their mobility was facilitated both by their participation in the country’s political system forged the mid-20th century and by their willingness to respect the
authority of their superiors by “staying still.” Don Willy repeatedly told me that “99.9% of PRI officials” were corrupt, lying thieves. He was, however, active in the party from his youth until the turn of the 21st century. Among the documents he keeps there are party membership cards and letters with the PRI letterhead. When I once questioned him on these grounds, he joked, “I was part of the 0.01% of honest people in the party!”

Social mobility was also made possible by economic growth and the consolidation of social welfare institutions. Moreover, Mexico was a “small country” (see Hannetz and Boyer 2013:197-198). While today its population is approximately one hundred and twelve million, with more than nineteen living in Mexico City (INEGI 2007), in 1940 Mexicans numbered only twenty million, and in 1960, thirty five million (INEGI 2001:3). The relatively small population in the country facilitated connections between workers and the country’s elite. The relationship between Ortiz Mena and Don Willy, as those between other powerful public officials and bureaucrats and workers, was personal. Vastly different people were brought together by membership in the same party or their work in the same institution. Their relationships often went beyond official realms—they could encompass friendship, complicity, and the threat of murder.

To the extent that greater proximity to individuals in high office increased people’s capacity to maneuver in politics, sites where they could meet and interact with politicians afforded greater opportunities. Centralization concentrated these sites in Mexico City. Among them were urban complexes built and managed by state authorities, such as the UNAM’s main campus, and housing projects such as Unidad Santa Fe. In the UNAM—especially in the faculty of law (Cosío Villegas 1975:26; see also Huacuja 2001)—students from different backgrounds and regions of the country came together and formed relations they later cultivated to carve out a space for themselves in public administration. Similarly, in Unidad Santa Fe, people who worked in different companies, belonged to different unions,
and had roots in different parts of the country came together in a place where they had direct contact with members of the country’s elite. By moving into the project, individuals broke down levels of separation between themselves and the president, and this gave them a better position for political maneuvering and further social ascent.

**Charolas and influyentes**

Given the unyielding chain of command that characterized public life in Mexico, the effectiveness of connections was proportional to how close they brought a person to the country’s president. Thus, for example, being friends with the Minister of the Interior made a person more powerful than being friends with the mayor of a provincial city. Not surprisingly, hundreds of thousands moved to Mexico City in the 20th century in search of opportunities. The country’s capital concentrated jobs and offered greater possibilities of entering into contact with powerful people. For those who managed to locate themselves in strategic places such as Unidad Santa Fe, sustained contact with the country’s elite was more probable.

Connections were made tangible in *charolas*, literally “trays.” A charola was a presentation card of a powerful person or another item bearing their name, such as a copy of an official identification. Many politicians also made cards specifically for this purpose, often with the legend, *Con los atentos saludos de*, “With warm regards from,” followed by their name. People would obtain these in meetings with them, and they would use them to circumvent laws or receive preferential treatment in other contexts. A charola would show that the individual carrying it had had personal contact with the person whose name was printed on them. One could, for example, present a charola to cut line in a government office, or show it to a police officer to avoid being given a ticket for skipping a red light or driving over the speed limit. For charolas to be effective, the person seeing them had to recognize the
name on them. The higher up in the chain of command this person was, the more leeway they
gave those who carried them.

In his ethnography of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl (Neza), a region settled by squatters
starting in the nineteen-fifties east of Mexico City, Carlos Vélez-Ibañez writes that his
informants were routinely mistreated when conducting bureaucratic procedures “unless the
calling card of a state or federal official [had] been obtained requesting the person be helped”
(1983:82). Vélez-Ibañez also describes the use of “letters of introduction” by local political
leaders; they were a prerequisite for squatter leaders to be received by the municipal
president or the governor of the State of Mexico, where Neza is located. On one occasion, a
leader procured a letter from then-president Luis Echeverría’s father-in-law that he used to
schedule a meeting with former president Lázaro Cárdenas. Cárdenas made a phone call to
the governor of the State of Mexico, who was thus compelled to receive the Neza leader in
his office. “These three contacts with members of elite domains, and the steps leading to their
establishment, illustrate the basic sequence of relations necessary to generate a local political
structure” (99). They also underlie the impact of presidential power in unexpected domains in
the country—a charola produced by the president’s father-in-law had a decisive impact in the
distribution of power in a shantytown.

Having a charola made a person influyente, “influential.” The word is used both as an
adjective an as noun in Mexican Spanish. As an adjective it has a very similar usage to its
English cognate. A book might be influyente if it contains ideas that change the way people
think. A person might be influyente in another person’s life if he shapes his outlook or
behavior. As a noun, the word has a slightly different meaning. It refers to people who have
proximity to power and can use their connections for their personal benefit and those of
others around them. That is, an influyente wages proximity to power to circumvent
established rules. A person might become more of an influyente by rising to a position closer
to the country’s president or by having a relationship of consanguinity or affinity with someone else in a position of power.21

During fieldwork in Unidad Santa Fe, the word influyente was often evoked in a jesting tone. I once heard a mother comment that her nice had refused to help her wash the dishes after her father had been appointed director of the municipality’s impounded cars lot. “Now that her father is influyente she jokes by saying she no longer has to do household chores.” In most occasions, however, the term was used to describe people in the past. The cashier at the IMSS in the sixties—he was responsible for giving employees their paychecks—was influyente and could therefore get away with having an affair with his boss’s secretary. Similarly, I heard an account of a man in Unidad Santa Fe who built a new room over his house without a permit years before this was a common practice, but was not admonished because, as a close friend of the director of social benefits at the IMSS, he was influyente.

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Don Willy kept some charolas in his collection of documents, including the calling card of a relative who was high-ranking member of the PRI. As his anecdotes suggest, Don Willy was an expert at wielding the power of influyentes through the use of these documents. In his early twenties, he was once waiting outside the IMSS director’s office and a group of young people approached him, assuming he was the receptionist. They were part of a theater company and had been invited to San Antonio, Texas to present a play. “They told us you might be able to help us,” they said to Willy. “We need money to pay for transportation.”

21 In a text that describes the “stereotype” and “archetype” of the Mexican politician, Carlos Monsiváis illustrates the value of proximity to the country’s president with a hypothetical (and satirical) speech by a government official: “And to represent the President in some level, to be the envoy not of the State or of the government, but of the President himself, makes me different from you, mere emblems of capitalism, or of labor organizations… Look at me well, because in our authoritarian country, at this moment I am (in this heartfelt handshake I give you) your only possible encounter with Supreme Power.” Spanish: “Y representar al Señor Presidente en algún nivel, el ser enviado directo no del Estado ni del gobierno sino del Presidente, me hace distinto a ustedes, emblemas modestos del capitalismo en general o de los gremios… Véanme bien, porque en un país autoritario, yo soy para ustedes en este momento (en este apretón de manos) el único encuentro posible con el Poder Supremo” (2001:57).
“Go to the office of the president,” Willy said to get rid of them. “Tell them you have been recommended by Wilfrido Nava Lara,” and he laughed to himself—he knew nobody in the office of the president, and they would have no idea who he was.

A few days later the actors came looking for Willy in the IMSS and they thanked him profusely: president Miguel Alemán’s executive assistant had given them his business card and a letter instructing the national railroad company to give them free tickets for their trip. “This would not have been possible without your help,” they told Willy.

Willy decided to tell another lie: the government wanted them to travel with a supervisor, so they should give him one of their tickets. And they did.

To travel, Willy needed permission from his boss. He called him by phone, put a handkerchief over the speaker, and pretended to be someone from the National Fine Arts Institute. His boss gave him authorization to miss work for two weeks, and even gave him a letter stating that he was an official representative of the IMSS.

In a collection of pictures he keeps at home, Don Willy appears in an American train, in a theater in San Antonio, and in a party offered to the group in a Tex-Mex restaurant. He always appears surrounded by actors and actresses, smiling at his incredibly good fortune.

**Drivers and queridas**

The first houses in Unidad Santa Fe were assigned in 1955 and 1956. According to Don Narciso Saldívar, who has lived in the project for over five decades, initially “nobody wanted to move here because it was too far away from the city.” Buses were infrequent and slow; it could take two hours to get from the city’s center to the project. Taxi drivers often refused to drive people there, either because they claimed it was dangerous to cross the forested area between the project and the city or because they would rarely find passengers to pay for the ride back. These conditions made the occupation of Unidad Santa Fe a slow process.
Don Willy told me the project was planned for employees of the Social Security Institute. When they resisted moving there, IMSS officials allocated units to different companies for them to assign. The largest among them were Luz y Fuerza, a public power company; Telmex, a telephone company, also public; and different American car assembly lines with operations in Mexico and backed by local investments, including General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. As the complex filled up, living there became the prerogative of a privileged few.

How did the IMSS and companies assign Unidad Santa Fe’s houses and apartments? Who was admitted into the project and who was not? According to press articles of the nineteen-fifties, families who would live in the complex were those with greatest needs in Mexico City and those whose breadwinners worked in the area, so commutes would be short and inexpensive. They could not own property elsewhere and would have to demonstrate their “moral quality.” Before being assigned a house, families would be visited in their current residence and interviewed extensively by IMSS social workers (Excelsior 1957b; Zócalo 1957b). However, none of the neighbors I asked remembered such a rigorous process. In fact, their accounts suggest there was not a single standard procedure to obtain a house.

Leopoldo Sánchez was assigned a house in Block 4 because he was a personal friend of Dr. Cifuentes, the project’s first manager. Sánchez was self-employed as a salesman of equipment for health clinics. Carolina Cerillo was the manager of the employee dining hall at Chrysler and was very well liked by her boss, who personally offered her one of the largest houses in Unidad Santa Fe, in Block 6. Paulo Orozco worked as a personal assistant to a high ranking IMSS official; his connections allowed him to obtain not one house, but three, where he housed his very large family, including his sisters and their children. Gabriel Pineda requested a house and was put ahead of others in the waiting list because his brother-in-law worked in the social services division of the IMSS. None of the people who told me how they
obtained a house referred to connections in labor unions. Like Don Willy, however, many neighbors were active in them before moving to the complex, and this likely helped them obtain a unit. Their capacity for political maneuvering by wielding personal connections multiplied when they came into contact with each other.

Much like the concept of directed democracy, the processes whereby people obtained houses and apartments in the project shows that laws and established procedures were secondary to personal relations and the interests of the powerful. They also reveal the extent to which the official presentation of government actions was not straightforward. Mexican politicians celebrated democracy while acting in undemocratic ways. Similarly, public officials developed elaborate schemes for the assignment of houses in Unidad Santa Fe—those described in the press—which they perhaps never intended to implement.

Older neighbors remember that the queridas, “mistresses,” of a number of politicians lived in Unidad Santa Fe. One of the most talked about women in the project was a querida of president López Mateos (1958-1964). A big black car would pick her up and drive her to meet her lover. She moved out of the project decades ago, but other women rumored to have had relationships with politicians still live in Unidad Santa Fe. By housing queridas in the project, politicians gave them adequate houses while keeping them away from their own social circles. They were probably also exempt from paying rent, something that would not have been the case if they had housed their queridas in private apartments.

Similarly, the drivers of a number of notable figures were housed in the project—including those employed by Benito Coquet, director of the IMSS from 1958 to 1964, Jesús Rodríguez y Rodríguez, Ortiz Mena’s longtime executive assistant, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of president Lázaro Cárdenas and a high ranking government official before leaving the PRI to run for president as an opposition candidate in 1988. Like mistresses, drivers were “socio-cultural ‘tricksters’ that interrelated contradictory categories and roles”
(Boon 1974:138)—with working class backgrounds, they had intimate relations with their employers and their families, witnessing and often participating in the “private lives” of high-ranking members of government. Neighbors spoke to me with great deference about Cárdenas’ driver—they told me he had worked for decades with him, and still drove him to his native state of Michoacán to vote in every election. I was told on two separate occasions that when Cárdenas, the longtime “moral leader” of the left-wing Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), once considered collaborating with a right-wing candidate in opposition to the PRI, his driver had played an important role in making him stay true to his beliefs.

The relationship between Cárdenas and his driver as described by neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe is a relationship of care. Their case is not isolated. Sergio Martínez son of a minister in president López Mateos’ cabinet once told me, “Germán, our driver, he was like our nanny when we were growing up.” He protected him and his brothers from bullies and gave them advice about girls and alcohol. His father, Martínez told me, employed another driver, who was his personal assistant and confidant. Their relationship was one of solidarity and complicity. Housing drivers in Unidad Santa Fe was a way of consolidating these relationships; by giving them a place to live, public officials asserted that their bonds would “extend indefinitely over time” (Biehl 2012:251).

Both drivers and mistresses had insights into the thoughts and actions of elites. They were part of el pueblo, “the common people,” who could listen in to conversations and phone calls between the president, his ministers, and others close to him. They knew who had met with whom, and often had a sense of what they had agreed—and whether what they declared to the press corresponded to what they said in private. I propose that drivers and mistresses are extremes of a type descriptive of most neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe. While only a few were as close to the president as mistresses and drivers, all were in positions where they could attest whether representations of the actions and speeches by government officials were
acts of simulation. As in the case of Don Willy, many neighbors maintained intimate relationships with government officials while contributing to sustain illusions about their actions and intentions featured in the press. By moving into the project, they had entered into a relationship of care with the state, which they expressed as “respect for our institutions” (Ortiz Mena 1957:134). Care was a connective tissue built on a delicate balance of gift giving, fidelity, and make-believe that state officials and subjects perhaps hoped would last forever.

**Buildings as Stage Sets**

Don Willy remembers the first time he went to the site where Unidad Santa Fe would eventually be built: it was on a Saturday, as part of an expedition organized by the IMSS workers’ union. Union members got in buses, loaded with food for a picnic, and drove west. The buses went past the city’s limits and into the forest. Passengers started worrying. Where were they going? Who had the idea of planning a housing project so far from the city? Once in their destination, they were met by heavy rain. Union members returned to Mexico City disheartened. There was no chance, they told their leaders, that they would go live in those faraway lands (see García, Panzi, and Torrieri 2007)

This expedition took place in the late nineteen-forties. A few years earlier, Hannes Meyer, second director of the Bauhaus in Dassau, a birthplace of the modern movement in architecture, and a refugee fleeing Nazi persecution, drew blueprints for the Lomas de Becerra Workers Neighborhood, a housing project for the site where Unidad Santa Fe would eventually be built. Meyer had worked with Stalin’s government in the conception of the Soviet Union’s Five Year Plans. In Mexico, Ignacio García Téllez, first director of the IMSS and later Minister of Labor, welcomed him as an advisor (Leidenberger 2014). In this role,
Meyer proposed the construction of public housing and designed Lomas de Becerra as an example of what he envisioned.

Lomas de Becerra would house workers from two nearby industries: the sand mines of San Antonio, east of the site, and the gunpowder factory to the west, by the Santa Fe pueblo. The project’s architecture would exalt workers and labor rights: in addition to vast gardens, kindergartens, schools, and sports facilities, Meyer’s proposal had a large plaza for workers’ demonstrations in front of an auditorium for union meetings (H. Meyer 1944; de Anda 2008:183). Pani’s design for Unidad Santa Fe, which he started drafting in 1952, maintains some aspects of Meyer’s layout. Among them are its organization on the basis of a single, radial street, its central garden, the combination of houses and apartment buildings, and the placement of taller structures on the project’s outer limits.

To some extent, Meyer’s political views also survived in Pani’s design. They were present in the expectations for the future of some involved in the project’s construction, and expressed by IMSS officials as a desire to “obtain the solidarity of all classes that constitute our people” (Díaz Arias 1957:177).22 Some neighbors also viewed Unidad Santa Fe as a socialist community. Among them was Librado Aceves, a Spanish refugee who settled in the housing project at the time of its dedication. According to his widow María, Aceves fought with the Republican Army and worked as a typesetter. When Franco assumed power in 1939, Aceves fled Spain and arrived in Mexico with thousands of other refugees. He found work in an illustrated magazine and married María, a Mexican. When he read about Unidad Santa Fe in the newspaper, he rushed to the IMSS headquarters to sign up for a house—he saw the project as the realization of long pursued ideals, and remained persuaded that its construction was an important step in the search for a just society until his death in the nineteen-seventies.

22 Spanish: “obtener la solidaridad de todas las clases de nuestro pueblo.”
Not all shared such lofty ideals. According to Don Willy, the motivations for the construction of Unidad Santa Fe were more pedestrian. Mexico City’s population grew rapidly as a result of immigration from rural areas and a high birth rate, and housing was insufficient. The Federal District’s government froze rents in 1942 (Méndez 2001:46), eliminating an important incentive for the construction of housing for the poor by private investors. Vecindades were crowded and shantytowns multiplied. At the same time, the IMSS, established in 1943, had liquidity; workers had started making contributions, but the Institute did not yet have many pensions to pay. IMSS officials thus decided to invest in housing. Don Willy says that rents were expected to give good returns on the investment. By building projects such as Unidad Santa Fe, the IMSS would also address the city’s housing shortage and implement a vision of social security as a means to “elevate people’s ways of life, trying to make them healthier and more comfortable” (Díaz Arias 1957:173).

Mystery of the mastermind

I interviewed architect José María Gutiérrez in the offices of Mexico City’s Colegio de Arquitectos, a professional organization. Born in 1924, Gutiérrez remains active in efforts to make housing affordable for the poor. As a young architect, he worked in the design office of the IMSS, under Alejandro Prieto. With him, he designed Unidad Independencia, the seventh project built by the Institute, dedicated in 1960. Gutiérrez assured me that this and earlier complexes were modeled on the Santa Fe pueblo and other towns established by Spanish jurist and bishop Vasco de Quiroga in Michoacán, which in turn were modeled on Thomas More’s Utopia (2010[1516]). “Starting with Unidad Santa Fe, IMSS projects sought to meet Quiroga’s ideal of creating places where residents could meet every one of their basic needs and had a sense of security, and which were also beautiful.”

23 Spanish: “la elevación de sus formas de vida, tratándola de hacer más sana y más confortable.”
The importance of Quiroga’s work as a model is supported by a book published by the Institute that describes him as a “precursor of social security” (Cárdenas 1968), and by the opening section, titled “Doctrine,” of the operation manual of IMSS housing projects from 1964, which makes explicit reference to Quiroga as an inspiration (Coquet 1964). In a collection of blueprints of Unidad Santa Fe I found in the abandoned offices of the IMSS in the project, some are of an unrealized 1964 plan, signed by architect Guillermo Carrillo, to erect a monumental sculpture to Quiroga in the plaza east of Building 45, which is now a parking lot. I asked Gutiérrez if there was no contradiction between the Mexican state’s aggressive nationalist and secular agenda and the celebration of a 16th century Catholic priest and Spanish colonizer. He did not think there was. He explained that many high ranking officials were admirers of Quiroga, among them Adolfo López Mateos, Minister of Labor at the time Unidad Santa Fe was dedicated, and president from 1958 to 1964. “He was a very well read man, an intellectual and philosopher.” Also, Benito Coquet, who succeeded Ortiz Mena as IMSS director, was a devout Catholic. He was known to have a private chapel in his house, and did not see this as inconsistent with his work as a government official.

I discussed the possible influence of Vasco de Quiroga with Patrocinio Luengas, who advised Ortiz Mena during the construction of Unidad Santa Fe as an IMSS employee. He said that Quiroga had not been celebrated until Coquet took over the Institute. The proximity of the first housing project by the Institute and Quiroga’s first settlement, and the fact they are both called Santa Fe, were coincidences and he urged me not to read much into them. Luengas told me, however, that the original plan for Unidad Santa Fe included a Catholic Church. While there was a strict separation between church and state in Mexico—for most of the 20th century, clerics did not have the right to vote, religious organizations had no official

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24 And perhaps there was not. Harry Levin writes that “irony was the essence of More’s career, which took him from his woolsack to execution, martyrdom, and sainthood, and yet permitted him to envision an ideal Commonwealth whose inhabitants were not even Christians” (1970:90). His adoption second-hand through Quiroga at the time of modernization is in the spirit of his ironic work and career.
government recognition and could not own property (Preston and Dillon 2004:220)—

Luengas and others in the IMSS recognized the social import of religion. “It is what brings us together!” he told me. “When I go to mass in the church around the corner from my house I encounter all of Mexico, people from all classes and walks of life.” Luengas and some of his colleagues believed that the presence of a Catholic church was important as a strategy to bring neighbors together as a community. He told me it was planned for the site that later became the soccer field and today is a parking lot, but that it had been unfortunately left until the end and because of budget constraints had remained unbuilt.

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“There is no way they would have built a church!” said Bruno Parra, who worked in Mexico’s central bank in the nineties and is now a policy consultant. “There’s not a single church built by the government in the 20th century,” he assured me. He had a point, although this is not exactly true: the National Anthropology and History Institute (INAH) restored dozens of colonial churches catalogued as historical monuments, and there are grounds to suspect that the Office of the Presidency during the tenure of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) contributed funds for the construction of the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in an attempt to use religion to bolster morale in a time when official nationalism was in crisis (Blancarte 1992:304).

Parra continued talking as we walked through Unidad Santa Fe: “There are many strange things about this place. You said that houses were originally rentals? That the IMSS expected to get good returns on the investment?” Parra considers himself a pragmatist; in his work in the central bank, he fought to keep budgets balanced and made spending cuts. “That is unlikely,” he continued. “Ortiz Mena was no fool. He knew that inflation would continue going up, and that the IMSS would have difficulties raising rents. You cannot just raise rents on organized workers. Something is not right. Ortiz Mena was a very prudent man. He would
not have put his money in the wrong place. I have seen the studies they did back then; very rigorous studies were required before big investments… Perhaps Ortiz Mena knew from the beginning that this place would be expensive to maintain, but chose to build it as part of a political ploy.”

We had been speaking earlier about Ciudad Sahagún, a new city built in the fifties in the state of Hidalgo by the Mexican federal government. Sahagún was home to a number of government industries that manufactured cars, trucks, train cars, and steel products. In the late fifties Victor Manuel Villaseñor started working in Sahagún. Eventually, he became the director of the whole combinado industrial, industrial combine, which was modeled after the Soviet Union’s kombinats, state-owned corporations that brought together related industries in planned cities. By giving Villaseñor this position, Parra assured me, the government kept him from resuming “subversive activities” he conducted in the forties as a vocal opposition leader (see Villaseñor 1976). Meanwhile, government institutions pursued very different economic and development policies elsewhere.

“This place,” said Parra referring to Unidad Santa Fe, “must have been similar to Ciudad Sahagún. It was built to keep certain people happy, to make them think that the government was on their side. Ortiz Mena probably encouraged all to think what they wished. He let Patrocinio Luengas think there was a plan for a church, and made others believe they were involved in the construction of a socialist commune, and all were happy and managed to work together despite having very different ideologies.”

I found this image of Ortiz Mena as cunning manufacturer of simulations appealing. It helped explain the diverse views of those involved in Unidad Santa Fe’s construction and those who occupied its houses and apartments. But, if Parra’s interpretation of Unidad Santa Fe was correct, did this mean that Ortiz Mena had manipulated the truth in his exalted speech at the project’s dedication? The text reads as heartfelt, and is very similar to statements he
made in other contexts as director of the IMSS and later as Minister of Finance (see Ortiz Mena 1970, 1998). If he was insincere, he was a remarkably consistent liar who created an entire ideological system as a front and did not steer off for decades.

What if the joke was on Ortiz Mena and not on people such as Gutiérrez and Luengas? What if they knew the project was just a way to make them think the government was on their side and, without calling the IMSS director’s bluff, took advantage of the situation to pursue their own agendas? What if they did not let Ortiz Mena know what they knew, to make him think he was in control? Or perhaps all were aware that the project sustained different versions of reality and were content with that… The many possible explanations for the actions of Ortiz Mena and others involved in the construction of Unidad Santa Fe illustrate the difficulties associated with encasing the contents of officialdom in Mexico. PRI rule allowed for people with different points of view to work together. The organization of power in the country made possible, for instance, the intimate relationship between Don Willy and Ortiz Mena, marked by antagonism, betrayal, and complicity.

In an interview with Graciela de Garay, architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez referred of the noteworthiness of collaborations in the design of modernist buildings among people with vastly different ideologies. He cites the harmonious work of architect Carlos Lazo—a Catholic with mystical inclinations—and muralist Juan O’Gorman—a Trotskyist—in the construction of Ministry of Transportation and Communications. Ramírez Vázquez attributes the friendliness of their relations to a context of freedom where respect trumped ideology (Ramírez and de Garay 1991:13). His assessment leaves out the status of the PRI as a framework where diverse factions and individuals come together in the pursuit of personal and party goals. It also ignores coercion employed against those who stood outside or challenged this framework. In the words of a character in a novel by Álvaro Enríquez, PRI opponents received “first a beating, then a seat in congress, and then begins the fight to
change the system from within” (2011:113). Two assumptions here are that people would sooner abandon their positions than successfully challenge the PRI, and that seats in congress would be available only for those who survived beatings or managed to avoid them altogether.

**Nationalist spectacles**

When architect Mario Pani and his collaborators began planning the Tlatelolco housing project in the late fifties, they collected information on the site of intervention and the people who lived there. Photographs preserved in Pani’s Personal Archive characterize the area as dismal. They show women at work, hanging clothes out to dry, in lines that go from one makeshift shack to another, or cooking in improvised outdoors kitchens. Other images show idle men sitting by railroad tracks, surrounded by houses made of spare sheets of metal. Streets are unpaved and the floor is covered with trash [Figs. 4 and 5].

Figs. 4 and 5. “Slums” demolished for the construction of the Tlatelolco housing project, ca. 1958. Fototeca del Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mario Pani collection.

25 Spanish: “primero una madriza, luego una curul y a cambiar el sistema desde adentro.”
These images of the Tlatelolco area before the construction of the housing project could be mistaken for stills of Luis Buñuel’s 1950 film *Los Olvidados*, which characterizes the lives of the poor in Mexico City as miserable. This movie questioned the country’s official optimism and laid bare the extent of urban misery (V. Fuentes 2000:99-105). By producing images that evoked the movie, Pani’s workshop offered a compelling argument for the area’s transformation. The images, however, were one among other possible realities that could have been captured photographically. If the photos looked like stills from the film *Nosotros los pobres* by Ismael Rodríguez (1948), where poverty in the city’s vecindades is
shown as romantic and dignified, razing people’s homes to build a project would have appeared cruel rather than a necessity.  

Like the images of the Tlatelolco area, *Los Olvidados*, and *Nosotros los pobres*, the photographs of Unidad Santa Fe by Guillermo Zamora helped construct a particular vision of reality. His images presented the project much like Ortiz Mena described it in its dedication ceremony—as a site that would “mold” people’s “character in kindness towards others, love for nature, and respect for our institutions” (Ortiz Mena 1957). This is exemplified by Zamora’s hand-colored shot of one of Unidad Santa Fe’s kindergartens [Fig. 6]. It features a teacher and her students in a classroom that opens to a garden with a uniformly green lawn and a bed of red flowers. The building consists of a zigzagging concrete slab supported by sleek steel columns. The teacher wears a dress in the same light blue tone as the student’s uniforms. Students are all sitting down, working on an assignment while their teacher looks attentively over them. Figures are small and one cannot distinguish individual faces. Outside the classroom are three chairs carefully aligned in front of a brick wall. The image documents the intended effects of Pani’s architecture over their users: sheltered by the modernist kindergarten, teacher and students have been shaped into clean, healthy and disciplined individuals in harmony with their environment.

Modernist planning in Mexico and elsewhere had roots on the idea that people would take the form of the spaces they inhabited. In his book-length manifesto *Towards a New Architecture*, first published in 1923, Le Corbusier famously stated, “It is a question of building which is at the root of the social unrest of to-day: architecture or revolution!” (1986:7). With these words he established the priority of buildings over social relations. If

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26 Vecindades were a common setting for film and other media in 20th century Mexico. Other popular films set in vecindades include *El Rey del Barrio* (Martínez 1949), with comic Germán Valdés “Tin Tan,” and *Ruletero a toda marcha* (Baledón 1962) starring Eulalio González “Piporro.” These movies show vecindades as the site of arrival of poor rural migrants in Mexico City at a time of rapid urbanization. The comic book *La familia Burrón*, published from 1948 to 2009, and the sitcom *El Chavo del Ocho*, which ran from 1972 to 1980 and is popular throughout Latin America, were also set in vecindades (see Monsiváis 2011:77-89).
buildings and cities were hygienic, orderly and egalitarian, so would be their inhabitants. Le Corbusier’s statement is a summary of a century of policy thought. Reformers in industrializing cities in Europe and the United States believed better living conditions would make workers healthier, more productive, and alleviate problems such as delinquency and social discontent. Proper housing offered a “direct route to virtue” (Wright 1981:117, 228).

In Mexico, these ideas started being discussed in the late 19th century as intellectuals and hygienists expressed concerns over the sanitary conditions of vecindades (Tenorio 2012:69). Campaigns to embellish Mexico City—which intensified in 1810 for the commemoration of the centennial of country’s independence—included efforts at clearing squatter settlements, although they were often more intent on keeping the unseemly out of sight than improving conditions for the poor (Tenorio 1996). Substantial developments would come in the 20th century. Shortly before the signing of the Constitution of 1917, one of the first successful steps towards bringing the Mexican Revolution to an end, Alberto J. Pani, Mario Pani’s uncle, published La Higiene en México (1916), a study of the living conditions of the poor in Mexico City and a program to implement far reaching urban reforms. Influenced by the arguments of Pani and other urban reform enthusiasts, the Constitution guaranteed the right of workers to “comfortable and hygienic” living quarters, which would have to be facilitated by employers (Art. 123: XII).

Unidad Santa Fe is part of this history. A newspaper article published shortly after its dedication reports that the project would implement a system of “family control for the improvement of workers” (Zócalo 1957a). The IMSS would issue cards to the head of every household that would include demographic data and the immunological history of their dependents. This would allow monitoring the improvement of indicators over time. Changes

27 Spanish: “Control familiar para el mejoramiento obrero.”
would be facilitated by the layout of units in the project, their modern furniture and appliances, and hygiene measures enforced by social workers (Zócalo 1957c).

The project’s creators, however, appear to have understood that its form would not in itself transform society—people had to be taught how to perceive and use them. Zamora’s photograph of the kindergarten and others in this series are imaginative realities—that is, recreations of observed facts to sustain certain viewpoints and reshape perception—that helped inscribe Unidad Santa Fe with particular meanings. In them the project is perfectly planned, with precise geometries and built in solid materials. These images represented the project as herald of a new society and thus helped its users and visitors recognize it as such. Zamora’s images circulated widely in newspapers and magazines as announcements that Mexico was at last becoming a modern, orderly nation.

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In *Mexican Modernity* Rubén Gallo (2005) identifies stadiums as one of the “technological innovations” of early 20th century Mexico. He narrates the history of the National Stadium, a structure dedicated in 1924 in Mexico City, as keystone of the education and nation-building program of education minister José Vasconcelos. The stadium, designed by José Villagrán—who would later become a propagandist of “functionalism”—was, like other buildings commissioned by Vasconcelos, neo-colonial in its detailing (Fraser 2000:29-30). The U-shaped structure had a portico on the ground floor enclosed by arches with stone moldings; on top of its massive external surface was a decorative parapet similar to those of baroque buildings in downtown Mexico City.

The stadium had a capacity for sixty thousand people and was conceived as a site for spectacles where the masses that had fought in the Mexican Revolution would premier as a healthy and disciplined population. Performances in the stadium included choreographed dances and gymnastic displays with thousands of participants. The audience was itself a
spectacle in events such as the inaugurations of presidents Plutarco Elías Calles and Lázaro Cárdenas, and official receptions to presidents Harry Truman from the United States and Carlos Prio Socarrás from Cuba. In these events Vasconcelos and his successors showcased Mexico as thriving in peacetime—the orderly crowds and their artistic numbers demonstrated that the country had made considerable technical and cultural progress in recent decades (Gallo 2005:202-205).

Vasconcelos was a racial theorist. In his treatise *The Cosmic Race* (1997), first published in 1925, he announced the emergence of a mestizo race and culture through the fusion of Spanish and Native American cultures and racial traits that would assume a dominant role in world history. While Vasconcelos believed the days of the cosmic race were yet to come, his stadium announced it was already here: the building’s frontispiece read “Race: shine in your joy, health and strength,”28 “as if the final stage of civilization” he announced in his racial treatises “had already been achieved” (Gallo 2005:209). Vasconcelos also spoke of the cosmic race as an accomplished fact in the stadium’s dedication and other events (ibid.). By asserting the existence of the cosmic race, Vasconcelos sought to bring it into being.

The stadium had a short lifespan. It was demolished in 1950 due to structural damages. That same year began construction, on the same site, of the President Juárez Urban Center, a housing project for bureaucrats designed by Mario Pani. According to Gallo, the replacement of the stadium by the project signaled a shift in both architectural and government tendencies from nationalism to internationalism (205). President Miguel Alemán commissioned the new project; his government gave power to professionals and businessmen over the military. Industrialization during his presidency was often fueled by foreign investments; many of the factories established in Mexico were car assembly lines.

Accordingly, Pani’s design was influenced by social housing projects going up at the time in Europe (de Garay 2002:15; González Pozo 2004:310), and its layout celebrated automobiles as harbingers of modernity. A spectacular underpass for cars ran under six of the complex’s housing slabs. The concrete walls enclosing the underpass were decorated with murals by Carlos Mérida conceived to be seen from the windows of cars swiftly passing through.

The Juárez complex was an elaboration of the first projects of its type in the country, the President Alemán Urban Center and Unidad Modelo, both dedicated in 1949 and also designed by Pani. A few years later, the architect would design Unidad Santa Fe, incorporating elements from his earlier housing projects. While these complexes were different from the stadium and other works commissioned by Vasconcelos in their architecture, they were not all that different as sites of spectacles through which the Mexican government showcased national progress to locals and foreigners. Spectacles in housing projects were not choreographed dances, but the everyday life of bureaucrats and working class families redeemed by modern architecture and progressive policies. Displays took the form of political rallies in their gardens and plazas, guided visits to the projects guided by figures such as Antonio Ortiz Mena and official state publications, film reels, and newspaper and magazine features distributed throughout the country.

According to Don Willy, during Unidad Santa Fe’s early years the project welcomed dozens of visitors. “We were observed like we were little animals in the zoo!” he said once. “We were expected to just go about our lives while people watched us and someone from the IMSS explained to them how the project worked, who lived here, what we did…” This and similar accounts suggest that modernist housing projects were not only a place for people to live and have access to government services, but also as a vitrine of government policies—here too, masses were orderly and a demonstration of progress. The press invariably
registered the impressions of foreign and local visitors to Unidad Santa Fe as positive (see Excelsior 1957a; Novedades 1957; Excelsior 1958).

Other projects also received notable visitors—among them, Unidad Independencia stands out: in the early sixties, its residents and employees welcomed, among others, John F. Kennedy, Charles de Gaulle, and Marshal Tito (Amato and de la Garza 2010). The 1964 operation manual of IMSS housing projects includes and extensive list of people who visited Unidad Independencia, alongside instructions for day to day operations of theaters, social security centers, sports facilities and other services in housing projects. There was a registered visitor practically every day since this project’s dedication in 1960. This suggests that projects doubled as showcases of state policies and as home to thousands who both performed for curious observers and made spaces their own.

**Hollywood Santa Fe**

Architecture historian Luis Castañeda describes the *Palacio de los deportes*, “Sports Palace,” an arena built for the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, as an “image-machine” (2010b). The arena was built to be seen in the original—by audiences in events and by people driving by or, given its proximity to the city’s airport, flying over Mexico City in commercial airplanes—and in television, newspapers and magazines. Through its circulation as an image, the arena served the key non-programmatic function of presenting Mexico as modern. Like the National Stadium from the nineteen-twenties and housing projects from the fifties, the Sports Palace helped construct a particular image of Mexico.

Unidad Santa Fe can also be described as an image machine—as something built to convey a message. The project, however, might be better described as a stage set, as it was
meaningful not in itself, but as the site of human lives unfolding. In addition to its presence in print media and the visits by eminent guests, the project was represented in two popular films. In *Quinceañera* (Crevenna 1960), the main character, Toña—played by Maricruz Olivier—lives in Unidad Santa Fe and begins a relationship with a boy from a rich neighborhood that in the beginning appears impossible due to class differences. At the end of the movie, Toña’s neighbors surprise her with a party to celebrate her fifteenth birthday in the housing project’s Casino. Given that her family is poor and cannot afford to pay for the party, her neighbors contribute to cover the costs. Unexpectedly, the rich boy shows up, choosing to be with her rather than in a party among people of his own social class.

A number of the movie’s scenes were shot on location. In a two-minute sequence, Toña gets off a public bus and runs joyfully through the passageway under Building 45, crosses the Heroes’ Plaza and the complex’s central garden to arrive in her family’s house. As Toña moves through the housing project, the music changes quickly; each new frame offers a different postcard view of Unidad Santa Fe. Outside her house, Toña kneels to say hello to children playing in the garden, and is greeted by a neighbor sweeping the walkway. The scene’s music is joyful—with cha-cha-cha beats and caricaturesque string plucking—and contrasts to the polished jazz orchestra from the previous scene in an upper class household.

This sequence features the housing project as a place with a vibrant community life, where neighbors care for each other, in contrast to the houses of the upper class, where people are characterized as inauthentic. *Quinceañera* has a carnivalesque quality, insofar as it instantiates an “inversion of status” (Turner 1979:466) in which the poor are presented as the betters of the rich. A takeaway message from the film is that neighbors are “deserving poor,” and the IMSS has done well to build Unidad Santa Fe. From this perspective, the characters

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29 For a related description of modernist buildings in Mexico as stage sets see “The Castle” by Terence Gower (2007), where he notes that famed architect Francisco Artigas treated modernity as a style interchangeable with any other. His streamlined houses of glass and steel seamlessly gave way to a house for his family modeled on sets of English castles from Robin Hood movies.
of *Quinceañera* are like those of *Nosotros los pobres* after state institutions have taken note of them and welcomed them into public housing. Another reading might be that the project had redeemed the poor and thus made them generous and caring towards each other. In either case, Unidad Santa Fe is the model community that visitors were expected to see when guided by IMSS officials.

The second film that features Unidad Santa Fe is *Tres lecciones de amor* (Cortés 1959). This movie stars comic actor Germán Valdés “Tin Tan,” and closes with a sequence in which he has a vision of a city ten years in the future. The city he sees is Unidad Santa Fe. While the project is not identified, the fact that it was considered an apt image of a city in the future inscribes its buildings in a history of progress. The association by viewers of modernist architecture and Mexico as a nation made these scenes believable. The film sustained the idea that the future would be in fact be the way it was being constructed by architects, photographers, and statesmen.

State institutions at the time shaped cinema by financing the production of movies and controlling distribution (Fein 2001). In this sense, film was part of state propaganda. However, given the diversity of opinions within the Mexican government, propaganda was not necessarily a unified effort, but rather part of a complex process whereby different versions of reality were set against each other. *Quinceañera* and *Tres lecciones de amor* both offered a positive image of Unidad Santa Fe, and therefore, of state programs and institutions. However, these movies were not final assessments on modern architecture or public housing. The meanings of the buildings represented, as the motives of people involved in their creation, remained multiple—they were colored by the lives of residents, who never ceased to have desires, regrets and hopes of their own. Moreover, audiences of film and the press often did not take officially sanctioned representations at face value. They had personal interpretations of the evidence they were offered. As in the case of indigenous people’s
idiosyncratic adoption of Christian “rituals, representations and laws” in the Americas under Spanish colonial rule, in Unidad Santa Fe the particular “ways of using the products imposed” by a dominant order (De Certeau 1984:xiii) was beyond the control of state authorities.

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In *Las batallas en el desierto*, a celebrated novella by José Emilio Pacheco (1981), Carlos, the narrator, describes how, as a child, he attended rallies for the dedication of public buildings. He was bused to them together with his classmates from school. They were given little flags to wave and were instructed to clap and cheer. Government ministers, and at times the country’s president, spoke at these rallies. They gave impassioned speeches and cited the buildings being dedicated as evidence of the country’s progress. However, the buildings in question often had not yet been built. Officials spoke before heaps of stones on empty plots of land. Neighbors from Unidad Santa Fe remember events much like the ones described by Pacheco, which they attended as elementary school students, members of unions, or government employees. The day after, newspapers would reproduce images of the crowds of which they had been part.30

As people with close ties to state institutions and often, witnesses to political spectacles reported in the press, neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe were aware of the imprecisions in public statements by politicians and articles they read in the press. However, they accepted their role as actors playing the masses. In the words of an Unidad Santa Fe neighbor known as El Químico, “They bend the truth, this is what politicians have always done. They lie and lie and lie… but that’s how the system works, and one needs to know the rules to get it moving. One needs to know how to play it *para salir adelante*, to get ahead.”

30 There are many accounts of this sort in the literature on 20th century Mexico. See, for example, Claudio Lomnitz (1998:1052) account of López Portillo’s dedication of a research facility as his presidency was coming to an end. On that occasion, the stage was set for official photographs; when the event was over, a team came to roll up the grass and take the potted plants away from the site, presumably to another place where the dedication of an unfinished building would take place.
Unidad Santa Fe has many nicknames: in their everyday conversations, people playfully refer to the project as *Chancla Fe, Humildad Santa Fe, Unidad San Café,* and *Hollywood Santa Fe,* among other names. The first name is a play on the word for “cheap slipper;” the second substitutes Unidad for “humility.” Both play on the role of the project as a home to the poor. The third name substitutes *Fe,* faith, for “coffee,” which is slang for marijuana, and humorously calls it holy. This name indexes the long history of drug distribution and consumption in the project (see Chapter 5). Hollywood Santa Fe is the most common among these nicknames. In the locally produced documentary *Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe* (García, Panzi, and Torrieri 2007), it is mentioned twice. When in the Heroes’ Plaza, I was often approached by neighbors who asked why I was interested in “Hollywood Santa Fe” and went on to tell me anecdotes about their life in the project.

When I asked how this name originated, neighbors offered different explanations. Some said that the term referred to the many neighbors who had become soap opera personalities, such as Elizabeth Aguilar and Olivia Collins—both of them also centerfolds in the Mexican edition of *Playboy.* Others referred to the use of the project as a location in *Quinceañera* and *Tres lecciones de amor,* and to the use of its theater as a set for popular television shows in the sixties and seventies, such as *Teatro Fantástico* with Cachirulo, the game show *Dr. IQ,* and a talk show with Paco Malgesto. These explanations underscore the use of Unidad Santa Fe as a stage set. Neighbors were played by famous actors in film, and played themselves before visitors to the project. To the extent that Unidad Santa Fe was part of state propaganda, residents were not only consumers, but also participants in its production; they contributed to weave imaginative realities, at times calculatingly, and often aware of the status of the resulting representations as one among other possible configurations of observed facts. Today, in the narration of their lives in the project, neighbors continue to engage in this process.
**Actors evermore**

The afternoon I went with Onnis Luque to consult Mario Pani’s personal archive, Márgara joined us in her living room as we went through Guillermo Zamora’s prints of Unidad Santa Fe. She had only been to the project once, in 2007, as a guest of honor at the celebration of its fiftieth anniversary, which included the premier of *Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe* in the Heroes’ Plaza. Gerardo García had invited her, and she remembered him well: “He was very proud of the project! He told me that some famous journalists, a bunch of soccer players, actors and actresses, and two Playboy models had grown up there…” her eyes sparkled: “If you ask me, that’s great evidence of its success.”

That afternoon, Onnis told Márgara that her father had shaped his life immensely. He said that Pani had first imagined the house where he grew up, the gardens where he played, and the school he attended as a child. In his late teens Onnis had started studying in a private university. He was ambitious and decided to simultaneously study another program, in architecture, at the UNAM, in the campus built in the fifties after Pani and Enrique del Moral’s master plan. One morning, as he walked through the University’s central esplanade, he realized it was time to quit the private university, which compared to the monumentality of the UNAM, felt like a junior high school. It was time he focused on becoming an architect; it was time took advantage, he told himself, of being in “a real university.” Mario Pani’s work had occasioned this conversion.

Márgara told us that comments such as these are the best homage that can be made to her father. She appreciates awards, ceremonies and lectures given in his honor. But nothing moves her like people telling her of the impact her father’s work had in their lives. Director and producer Guillermo Ríos, who grew up in the President Alemán Urban Center, expressed similar feelings when they met. He had recently made a soap opera, *Mientras haya vida* (2007), in which the complex plays a major role: part of the plot revolves around a
developer’s plan to demolish it and replace it with a new one. The show features discussions about the Miguel Alemán and its value. At some point, a character says that the buildings should not be torn down because they are important in the country’s history: a book has been written about them—and he points to a volume by historian Graciela de Garay, a Pani scholar and Márgara’s close friend. Márgara’s description of this scene made us think of Onnis’ forthcoming book (Luque 2013b). Would this volume be used like de Garay’s book? Would people see it as a validation of the importance they ascribe to their home? Would those who dislike the complex come to see it differently?

Today, Unidad Santa Fe is well known among architects who participate in conversations on housing in the country. Onnis’ photos have contributed much to give it notoriety. In the role of Unidad Santa Fe native and emergent architecture photographer, he is often interviewed in the radio and featured in specialized magazines (Luque 2012, 2013a). Onnis has also presented his book throughout the country. The first presentation took place in Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza on March 16, 2013. He invited Fernando Panzi, Don Willy Nava and I to speak. The audience included both locals and people from other neighborhoods who had seen the event’s announcement online or were invited by the publishing house. Before we began, Onnis asked us to steer the conversation away from routinized narratives that idealize the project’s past and find the present unredeemable. He was weary the book presentation might become like neighbor meetings, where people air their grievances and rarely listen to what others have to say. So we did: we spoke of aspects of the project as it stands today we believed were worthy of being celebrated.

When we had all spoken and some of the people in the audience had offered their opinions and asked Onnis questions, we did a tour of the project, directed to people who were

31 My work has had a similar impact. In addition to curating a museum show on Pani’s work for MARCO that features Unidad Santa Fe prominently, in 2009 and again in 2013 I led city tours organized by an art collective in which we visited the project. Videos of these tours and others of interviews or talks about the project circulate online. Onnis and I, along with Dr. Juan Ignacio del Cueto, presented my own book on Pani (Landa 2014) at UNAM in 2015.
visiting for the first time. We walked from the Heroes’ Plaza to the project’s outer blocks, and then back to the central garden through a walkway. As I spoke about the location of Unidad Santa Fe in the history of housing in Mexico, Don Willy interrupted and said: “In the early years of the project, we were observed like we were little animals in the zoo! We were expected to just go about our lives while people watched us and someone from the IMSS explained to them how the project worked, who lived here, what we did… Tour groups were very much like our little group today.”
2. At Home in the Projects

Most photographs in Mario Pani’s Personal Archive feature buildings at the moment of their dedication. They do not show their state under construction or once in use. Interiors are empty and façades look clean, with precise geometries. By representing the instant between construction and habitation, these photographs lend the illusion that blueprints correspond perfectly to built realities. They ignore that, as Latour and Yaneva have suggested, “Euclidean space is the space in which buildings are drawn on paper but not the environment in which buildings are built—even less the world in which they are lived” (2012). In the few shots in the archive that feature people, buildings dwarf them; they are not individuals but “human scales”—a representational strategy to show Pani’s architecture as grandiose.

An exception in the archive is a series depicting President Alemán Urban Center (CUPA) that features the first residents of this project, dedicated in 1949. The most intriguing show people seen from the back or from the side looking out windows and balconies onto the project. In one of them [Fig. 7], a woman sitting on a couch leans towards her apartment’s floor-to-ceiling window. Sunlight comes in through thin drapes. Guarding the woman’s back are two frames, perhaps with portraits of ancestors. In another image [Fig. 8], the silhouettes of three women with their backs to the camera lean on the parapet in one of the project’s open-air corridors. They do not seem to be engaged in conversation; rather, they contemplate the landscape before them, with CUPA’s massive central building visible on the left, and the city, sparsely populated at the time, extending to the right.

Many of CUPA’s residents had lived in cramped rental apartments in central Mexico City. When they moved to the project, they occupied brand new fourteen-story concrete and brick buildings in farmland that was quickly being urbanized. With airy and well-lit apartments, CUPA was assertively modern. Women, used to wash clothes by hand, could
have ten kilos washed for free every week in machines on the project’s ground floor. Each apartment had its own bathroom and a radio through which residents heard announcements from the local administration. CUPA also had vast gardens—buildings occupy only 20% of the four-hectare plot—and a swimming pool. The people looking out of windows were most likely posing. In 1949 lighting conditions in interior spaces made it difficult to capture candid photos. In the role of actors, however, residents were constructing scenes that revealed how they felt: they were captivated by the spectacle of modern life. Their lives had changed radically and they likely were both disoriented and exhilarated.

There are no comparable photographs of Unidad Santa Fe, but accounts of their first months in the project by neighbors also suggest a state of bewilderment. Don Valdivia, a butcher and a boxer in his youth, moved to the project from downtown Mexico City, where he was born and raised. In his vecindad, every morning, he ran into his neighbors the moment he stepped out of his family’s apartment—children playing, women who had come out to fetch water, and to the gatekeeper, who started sweeping the patio at dawn. He made the sign of the cross by a small shrine to the Virgin of Guadalupe that often had fresh flowers, and walked two blocks to the market where he worked. One of Unidad Santa Fe’s early nicknames was Pueblo quieto, “Quiet Village.” There was little chatter in its gardens. The project, Don Valdivia remembers, was cheerless, with its newly minted buildings and rows of identical houses.

“One night, well many nights, probably,” Don Valdivia told me with a chuckle, “I arrived here a bit drunk and could not find my house. I was holding the key in my hand, but did not know which was the right door. They all looked the same! So I chose a group of houses more or less at random and started trying on the key in every door. No one stopped me because no one saw me. I don’t know how long it took me, but I found my house eventually.” I imagine Don Valdivia walking confused through the project as it appears in
Zamora’s photographs [Fig. 9]. He must have looked small in such vast spaces, and out of place—an impure presence in a pristine work of architecture.

Figs. 7 and 8. Residents of President Alemán Urban Center, ca. 1949. Fototeca Tecnológico de Monterrey, Mario Pani Collection.
By the time he told me this story, Don Valdivia was quite at home in Unidad Santa Fe. We sat in his living room, on a red imitation leather couch by a large flat screen television. On the outside, his house stands out from those around it—it is large, with two stories over the original structure, and it is painted bright blue. We walked up to Don Valdivia’s study, a room on the third floor where, he told me, he does not let anyone in. “This is the one place in the house that is mine, only mine. My wife does not come up here.” On the walls there were photos of him as a young boxer and, hanging from a lamp, were medals he won decades ago. “I come here to listen to boleros,” Don Valdivia said as he put a cassette in his sound system and hit play. A trio sang a romantic song from the fifties. I walked to the west-facing window; I saw broken furniture abandoned and laundry left out to dry on surrounding rooftops. Turning right, I caught a glimpse of the project’s central garden, with children playing under ageing trees.

Others in Unidad Santa Fe have built spaces of their own and lookouts onto the world around them. Their windows frame a world that is much unlike the one people in CUPA’s early photographs were taking in: it is an environment they have produced themselves. As discussed in Chapter 1, to the extent that modernist housing projects were “state
propaganda,” their residents were not only characters who gave it substance, but they also participated in writing the script. Over decades, residents in Unidad Santa Fe and similar complexes have inscribed their environment with personal meanings and made physical modifications to their houses and apartments. What do these processes of signification say about the relationship of neighbors to each other, to the past and future, and to the state? How do they establish and alter people’s sense of belonging to different publics within and beyond Unidad Santa Fe?

This chapter addresses these questions by exploring the ways in which the project’s neighbors have shaped their physical environment over the past half-century. By considering patterns in house transformations, and the domestic arrangements of Martha Redendiz and Dolores Bautista, the first section discusses homes as accretive assemblages of objects and spaces that represent family histories and relations. The second section considers life trajectories of neighbors alongside changes to common areas and infrastructural arrangements in the project. The chapter focuses first on domestic spaces and scales out to the neighborhood and to the city beyond it. My arguments address longstanding conversations on the intersections of architecture and social relations among architects and anthropologists.

Modernist architects often believed they could transform society through built forms. Le Corbusier sought the cultivation of a “‘new man’ who would transcend the limits of bourgeois society” (Frampton 2001:161). In the sixties, many of the critics of modernist architecture questioned its forms, rather than the materialist assumptions of its proponents. Thus, figures such as Jane Jacobs (1993[1961]) contrasted modernist housing slabs to the mixed-use streets of traditional American cities. The latter, she argued, were conducive to the formation of integrated, healthy neighborhoods. In further works, Jacobs (1969, 1983) had much to say about government and economic development. Among architects and planners in
Mexico City, however, her initial ideas are seen as a validation of the notion that, as a professor at Mexico City’s Universidad Iberoamericana told me, “society follows form.”

This idea is akin to “cultural materialism” (Harris 1979) within anthropology, which supposes that social formations are human responses to environmental conditions, and ignores their symbolic dimensions.

In *Tristes Tropiques* Lévi-Strauss (1973:244-246) invites the analysis of the man-made environment not as a definitive reality with unmediated implications, but as a representation with variable meanings. The Bororo, he explains, describe their social organization as consisting of two exogamous moieties. Accordingly, in their villages houses are arranged in a circle divided by an imaginary axis, with each moiety occupying one side. The self-representation of the Bororo and the layout of their villages, however, are deceptive, as marriages only occur between members of certain houses, in a way that villages are in fact constituted by three endogamous descent groups. Lévi-Strauss’ analysis reveals the slippage between images and practices. Lilia Schwarcz and Boris Kossoy (2012) have offered similar insights through the analysis of photography. Their work shows that images at times disguise more than they say. Yet they also have elements—unexpected presences or the attitudes of those photographed—which undermine or qualify staged narratives.

The cases I discuss below suggest that the relation between the social and its representations, whether architectural, graphic or narrative, is graced by opacities, ambiguities and contradictions. Unidad Santa Fe as a lived-in work of architecture is not a reality prior to the social life of its inhabitants; rather, its material configuration and the relations it harbors have emerged hand in hand over decades. And yet they do not perfectly correspond to each other. Homes furnished with personal objects and physically transformed

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32 This statement is a playful variation of a famous maxim coined by turn-of-the-century Chicago architect Louis Sullivan: “Form follows function.” Architects and historians beyond Mexico share the convictions behind this statement, as is evident in the works essays such as “The Architecture of Community” and “America at the Millennium: Architecture and Community” by Vincent Scully (2003), and in headlines such as “Public unrest sends urban designers back to drawing board” (Nasser 2015), common in American media.
Evidence Unfolding

In the late nineteen-forties Mario Pani’s office prepared a diagram showing the expected trajectories of families in public housing projects [Fig. 10]: people who lived alone and couples who did not yet have children would occupy apartments in tall buildings; couples with young children would live in tall or low rise apartment buildings, or in small, contiguous houses. The elderly and disabled would live in low apartment buildings or contiguous house clusters. Larger, freestanding houses were reserved for families with many children. People were expected to move as their configuration changed over time. This was possible because at the time houses and apartments in government built projects were rentals. In keeping with the rhetoric of modernist architecture, the diagram suggests that dwellings were conceived to “satisfy needs” of families—that is, they were conceived under rational and even scientific pretenses. Years later, this rhetoric would be used against modernist buildings, as critics sought to bring personal desires and opportunities for individual expression into the picture.

Unidad Santa Fe has two apartment types, the most common of which is 35 square meters, and eight types of houses, which are 35, 57.5, 59, 65, 66, 82, 85.5 and 121 square meters. The most common is the two-bedroom with 57.5 square meters. The smaller types are grouped in tight clusters; houses share their north and south walls. The largest houses, in Block 6, are freestanding, with front yards and a parking spot. These housing types cover all those contemplated in the diagram from Pani’s office. Families who occupied different

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33 Information on, and blueprints and photographs of the different types of houses and apartments in Unidad Santa Fe can be found in number 59 of the magazine Arquitectura.
units, however, did not necessarily match the profile that corresponded to them. Large families were assigned to apartments, and single people were assigned to houses. Moreover, families changed quickly and they rarely moved. Eight, ten, and even more individuals lived in the same apartment. Conversely, some retained large houses when their children moved out.

Families in Unidad Santa Fe were also more diverse than those contemplated in Pani’s diagram. Households in the project often brought together grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins; their design appears to have considered only couples and their children as potential neighbors. All units—with the exception of the smallest houses and apartments,
with a single room—were divided into two types of spaces: bedrooms, connected to a bathroom, and what architects in Mexico describe as *área social,* “social area,” with a living-and-dining room and a kitchen. This division was new to many families, who had lived before in *cuartos circulares,* “circular rooms”—that is, apartments with a single space that served multiple functions. These rooms were organized temporally and not by physical divisions. At night, rooms were sleeping quarters; during the day, they were places for cooking and eating, and often, for women to do work to supplement men’s income. In Unidad Santa Fe, sleeping areas would remain empty during the day, and each unit had a specific place for cooking, a private bathroom, and an area designated for family meals and other daytime activities.

Interior spaces in Unidad Santa Fe, however, were not always used in ways their designers expected, especially by families with many members. Large families in small units used inventive furniture, some of which was sold in a store in the project, on the ground floor of Building 45. Older neighbors remember beds that folded out of walls, bunk beds with three levels, and tables adapted for children to sleep underneath.34 Thus, people spent the night in living and dining areas and, if at home during the day, they might socialize or work in bedrooms. Also, households extended beyond the limits of single houses and apartments. A few families managed to obtain two or more units; some of their members might live in an apartment and others in a house. Some obtained contiguous houses and they broke down walls to connect them.

Eventually, as they felt more at ease in their new homes—and had the certitude that they would remain in the same units indefinitely—families started making more lasting

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34 I never saw this furniture. By the time I conducted fieldwork families were no longer living in overcrowded households and had gotten rid of old gear. I have found no information on the furniture store in the project in different archives I have consulted. The store appears to have been a private initiative, unconnected to government programs. Photographs in Mario Pani’s personal archive, however, represent furnished interiors of Unidad Cantinflas, which is contemporaneous with Unidad Santa Fe (Pani 1954). A few years back, designer Clara Porset designed furniture for apartments in President Alemán Urban Center (Porset 1950). Furniture in Unidad Santa Fe might have been inspired by furniture in these projects.
physical transformations to their environment. These transformations included both modifications to the internal distribution of rooms, and expansions. Construction with brick and cinderblock—which are considered permanent materials, as opposed to wood, metallic panels, and sheetrock—became more common after the beginning of privatization in 1982. While the Mexico City government requires people to obtain construction permits for major work on a house, few in Unidad Santa Fe have felt compelled to follow established procedures (an exception are those who process government loans for house reforms). I often heard neighbors say people had stepped out the bounds of the law by building additional stories over their houses or by walling off common areas, but they also said there was little that could be done to stop them. In the words of a neighbor involved with the project’s administration, “We would have to fine everybody in the project!”

Unidad Santa Fe’s physical transformations say much about the lives of its residents; they are also a commentary on modernist architecture, its practitioners, and the state that commissioned works from them. Changes to houses and apartments follow certain patterns; analyzing them helps understand architecture as an accretive, collaborative process that goes beyond the translation of blueprints into buildings. As a process, architecture unfolds over time and integrates a wide range of participants. As such, in encompasses not only walls and roofs over them, but also the objects they contain and the actions that take place there, which constitute “a symbolic system” (Bourdieu 1970:152). That is, the different parts of a house are not isolated elements, but signify together; they are woven by personal and family narratives, and by relations among kin and neighbors.

**Tapancos.** The Nahuatl word *tapanco* translates roughly as “attic.” In Unidad Santa Fe, neighbors use this word to describe wooden structures they built to divide high-ceiling social areas into two stories. This strategy gave families a new room, often used by children,
without making permanent alterations to their rented units. Tapancos were supported by wooden beams or by ledges that could be unscrewed from a house’s reinforced concrete walls.

Since building additional stories on houses is now a widely accepted practice, most tapancos have been dismounted. One of the few I saw was in Fernando Panzi’s house. He explained that, as a child, he slept on the tapanco with his brothers. We went up a spiral staircase to see it, but did not go in: the ceiling was too low. Now Panzi’s nephews use this space to play and store toys. Below the tapanco, when he remodeled the house twenty years ago, Panzi lowered the living room’s floor thirty centimeters to make it feel less cramped. It is now two steps below street level.

**Ground-level expansions.** All units in Unidad Santa Fe were originally equipped with a small, four-burner stove. For many, habituated to cook with wood, stoves were a novelty. They were connected to propane tanks that stood right outside of houses and were filled periodically by pipes that circulated around the project.\(^{35}\) Tanks also fed the water boilers in compact patios, with a latticework wall towards walkways, that were contiguous to kitchens.

These patios are known as azotehuelas—the word it is a diminutive of azotea, “flat rooftop,” which has roots in Arabic. Azotehuelas contained a washing sink, and were used to put clothes out to dry. The IMSS management did not allow neighbors to hang laundry outside of houses or on rooftops. One of the first changes to their houses many neighbors made—often before the project’s privatization—was putting a roof over azotehuelas and obstructing the openings on the latticework. Neighbors say they did this because they wanted more privacy or needed a covered place for storage. Also, they could dry clothes in their back

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\(^{35}\) In apartments, propane tanks on rooftops were shared. Families in houses paid for their propane consumption. The IMSS covered the cost for those in apartment buildings.
patios, which were larger. Today, practically all azotehuelas in Unidad Santa Fe have been closed off and integrated to kitchens that, neighbors explain, were far too small.

Back patios, enclosed on all sides by walls in the original project, have also been subject to transformations. Initially, many covered their grass surfaces with cement. They did this to make their maintenance easier and to prevent people from bringing mud in their shoes into their houses during the rainy season. Before privatization, this change was often done with the acquiescence—or without the knowledge—of the project’s management office. Other changes in back patios were more notorious, and did not become common until after IMSS oversight over neighbors was loosened in the nineteen-eighties: putting a roof over patios was an economic strategy to build an extra room.

Fig. 11. Two modified houses in Block 4, Group 10. This image shows additional stories organized in half-levels, fences that have converted common gardens into private patios, cobblestone borders forming plant beds, and decorative elements on façades, including cornices, bay windows, and balustrades. Photograph by Onnis Luque, 2009.
**Additional stories.** Today most houses in Unidad Santa Fe have two or three stories; some even have four. In most cases, additional stories were built progressively over decades. Second stories required flattening slanted roofs over social areas. People did this by building a small wall on their lowest end and using it as support for a new, flat floor slab. This left an empty air compartment between stories. Replacing original roofs was inconvenient both because of the effort and expense of demolishing reinforced concrete, and because doing so required vacating houses while construction took place above them.

Since in original houses social areas have higher ceilings than bedrooms, additional stories are often organized in half levels [Fig. 11], with one section on the second story a few steps above the other. In larger houses with zigzag staircases on the outside, half levels mean that there is a door on each of their landings.

Families have often built staircases on back patios or on front façades to avoid having to break their houses’ ceilings. This also gives independence to upper levels from the ground floor, allowing them to operate as separate households. For example, after her divorce, Tere Salinas moved back to the project and occupied a second story with an independent access built a few years back by her brother over his house. For his part, León Lezama moved to an apartment over his parents’ house when he finished college. When his parents moved to another city, his younger brother kept the ground floor and León remained in the second story. Today, both have moved out of Unidad Santa Fe and rent their property to two unrelated families. The Lezamas, like others in similar cases, have a single property title, receive only one electrical bill and one water bill, and pay taxes on a single house.

When additional stories are integrated to original houses, their construction leads to changes in floor plans. For example, many families have taken down the walls separating the living-and-dining room and bedrooms in two-room houses. Social areas, now larger, remain on the ground floor, and bedrooms are moved upstairs. Staircases are often built in the area
formerly occupied by bedrooms. Significantly, structures are not damaged by the demolition of internal walls. Houses are held together by external concrete walls and roofs reinforced with steel (Aguirre 1957). Given the solidity of these structures, additional stories do not require reinforcements. Many have verified this experimentally. Others have had it confirmed by construction experts.

Fig. 12. Children playing in a cobblestoned playground in Block 1, ca. 1960. Photo courtesy of Gerado García.

Some expansions on rooftops are initially built with metal frames and fiberglass sheets. Upon saving enough money, people replace them with brick, cinderblock, and stone. Originally, much of the surface of Unidad Santa Fe’s gardens was cobbled in river stones [Fig. 12]. This would prevent the formation of mud ponds in the rainy season. According to Fernando Panzi, around that time that privatization began, an official in the administration
office decided to raise all the stones in the project and sell them for a profit. This encouraged neighbors to use stone for their own purposes, including building new walls.

**Fences.** According to property titles, doorways mark the limits of houses and apartments in Unidad Santa Fe. Areas beyond their walls are the property of the condominium. This includes entryways in buildings, walkways leading from the project’s street to its main garden, and the ditches on either side of them, originally covered in cobblestones and grass.

Old photographs of the project show that many put on low wooden or metallic gates enclosing a small area in front of their houses. These gates created a vestibule between common areas and a house’s interior. After privatization, neighbors began building more permanent fences and enclosing larger areas with them. Today, most houses have fences that go all the way to the edge of the project’s cement-paved walkways. The lower part of fences is often built in plastered cinderblock, with rods or metallic grids on the upper part. With back patios converted into rooms, new front yards are convenient places for pets. Many also explain the construction of fences as ways of keeping the pets of others away—before they had walled off the area outside their houses, some told me, it was often covered in dog excrement. Also, people do not litter in areas enclosed by fences.

Apartments on the ground floor of buildings in Unidad Santa Fe open directly to the gardens surrounding them. Many of those who live in these apartments have also built fences and converted common areas into private patios. In some cases, walls have progressively replaced these fences and people have built roofs over them, effectively expanding their apartments into common areas. Houses on corners of clusters, with gardens on their north or south façades, have also been expanded in beyond their plots.

Some apartments on upper levels have been enlarged through the construction of balconies or the expansion of existing ones. In the original project, some apartments had
small balconies that fit only one person. A common practice is to put metal and glass structures to close these balconies and integrate them to interior spaces. A few families have widened balconies, making them as broad as their apartment’s façade. In one of the building types, apartments in upper levels are accessed through open air corridors. Many, especially those at the end of these corridors, have closed them off and integrated them to their apartments. In one case, the second to last apartment expanded into the corridor and the family in the last apartment built its own staircase to the garden below.

**Façades.** Together with expansions to houses often come new façade designs. Some embellishments are minor, such as painting walls a different color, adding a cornice on a lintel, or setting up window grates. Others involve major transformations of houses. For example, Ms. Mayra Galante remodeled her three-story house to resemble a photo from a small village in the state of Veracruz shot while on vacation. Now, her house has earthenware tiles on its pitched roof, a brick arch as an entrance, black ironwork on windows, earthenware latticework, and white walls with a red baseboard. A number of other houses have been decorated with elements and materials from traditional Mexican architecture.

Other houses are decorated with classical motifs. They integrate columns with ornate capitals and bases, gables framed by cement moldings, and bay windows with reticulated frames. Balustrades with elaborate piers have been used to convert rooftops into terraces. Elements of contemporary architecture as represented in newspapers and magazines—gray handrails, frosted glass, flat white surfaces—have been incorporated to other houses. Exteriors of buildings are more difficult to decorate; some have done it by paining the area of the façade that corresponds to their apartment a different color. In one notable case, a family put a gabled roof over its balcony and converted into the image of a single-family house protruding out of a building’s façade [Fig. 13]. These alterations to houses and buildings have
transformed Unidad Santa Fe, originally a complex with uniform modernist aesthetics into a collage of colors and architectural styles. Each house embodies the history of its residents; patterns in their transformations speak to the position of families as part of a community.

Fig. 13. Apartment building in Unidad Santa Fe’s Block 3. Ground floor apartments have fenced common areas. In the second floor, a balcony has been shaped in the image of a house with a gabled roof. Photograph by Onnis Luque, 2010.

Few neighbors hire architects to help them transform their houses; they see design as a service only available for the rich. I heard of a single case where an architect intervened in the transformation of a house—he was the brother of the house’s owner. Neighbors do, however, hire construction workers to help them conceive and implement their plans; they often have much influence on a construction’s “style.” In the late eighties and early nineties, a time when many in the project expanded or remodeled their houses, there were a few construction crews that worked on a number of them. For example, maestro Carmelo, with two assistants, built an elaborate stone arch at the entrance of Fernando Panzi’s house. A
family living nearby was impressed by his work and hired him to build a similar fence for their house. Carmelo, an expert stoneworker, had worked in the project for years.

**Intent upended**

As James Holston (1989) has shown in his analysis of Brasilia, architects’ intentions can be overridden by unintended effects, as modernist designs are often inadequate to the tasks they are called on to fulfill. This critique can be applied to Unidad Santa Fe. Modifications to houses and apartments reveal inadequacies in their design and unveil personal tastes, desires, and aspirations identical units suppressed. Also, the original project is now, to use a common word among neighbors, “chaotic,” with families unilaterally taking over common spaces and building without permits—and at times without regard for their neighbors. Large houses, for instance, block sunlight and the vistas of others around them. These assessments, however, respond to master narratives that ignore the specificities of places such as Unidad Santa Fe.

In a conversation with Raúl Cisneros, an architect who grew up in the project, he suggested that Pani and his collaborators must have contemplated the possibility that the project would be transformed over time. “Otherwise,” he told me, “why would they make the structures of houses so sturdy? They built houses that welcome two, three extra stories without reinforcements.” He went on to explain that the original houses invite certain ways of building over them. “Even after a ton of modifications, houses share certain characteristics, they are all organized in half-levels. If you ask me, Pani had something to do with that.”

Two years before the dedication of Unidad Santa Fe, the Colegio de Arquitectos, a professional association, published *La Cartilla de la vivienda*, a manual for auto-construction processes. The manual’s coordinator was Félix Sánchez Baylón (1955), Pani’s collaborator in the design of Unidad Modelo in the late forties (Sánchez and Zetina 1952; Landa 2015a). When one evening in Unidad Santa Fe I mentioned the *Cartilla de vivienda* to Don Willy, he
told me he had once owned a copy and used it to build two houses in Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua, where he lived for some years while working for a regional office of the IMSS. “I liked the distribution of apartments in Unidad Santa Fe so, before I left for Ciudad Cuauhtémoc I went to the manager’s office and got copies of their blueprints. They had them all there for neighbors to see them. In Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, on a piece of land I bought, I built two little houses, one to live in, and the other to rent and make an extra buck. I used the blueprints, but I multiplied all measurements by two, because apartments were too small and I wanted something a little bigger.”

There are other sites in the history of modernist architecture in Mexico where the line that places auto-construction, slums, and free play on one hand, and modernist housing, rationality, and order on the other is upended. In San Juan de Aragón, a project in eastern Mexico City dedicated in 1964, architects Héctor Velázquez and Alfonso Liceaga prepared a manual that illustrated how families could expand their houses. This manual was given out along with property titles to the project’s residents, most of whom were assigned a house after being displaced from shantytowns in more central areas of Mexico City to make way for redevelopment. San Juan de Aragón was part of a city-wide planning effort prepared in Pani’s studio and described in presentation boards as “President Adolfo López Mateos’ housing and urban renewal program” (Landa 2014:127).

This does not mean, as Raúl Cisneros’ comments imply, that Pani expected all along that Unidad Santa Fe would be modified, and that he knew how this would happen. It does mean, however, that his intentions—perhaps, in the absence of writings or interviews in which he speaks explicitly about these matters, reflected in Guillermo Zamora’s photographs of the project—are not the only measure by which one can interpret Unidad Santa Fe. Beyond condemnations of projects as inadequate and the celebration of architects as all-
knowing is the interrelation, vividly illustrated by Don Willy’s integration of assisted auto-construction and modernist plans, of ways of building, using, and representing architecture.

Moving beyond the intentions of architects, one might read Unidad Santa Fe as a realization in an unexpected place of the vision of Hundertwasser, a vocal critic of modernist architecture’s suppression of individuality. The Austrian architect famously advocated for “man” to “be allowed to paint everything around pink as far as he can reach with a long brush, so that people can see from far away, from the street: a man lives there who differs from his neighbours” (Hundertwasser 1971:158). The distinctive design of many houses in Unidad Santa Fe, with elements that serve no programmatic purpose, can be read as the deliberate expression of the personalities of their residents. People have made houses unique as a way of standing out from others in the project.

This reading, however, is also lacking, insofar as it upholds a view of society constituted by autonomous individuals, each with a unique, bounded identity. This view is compatible with those of marketing experts who suggest people express individual desires—and in fact produce their individuality—through choices in consumption (Goodman 2004:93-94). While perhaps useful to characterize consumer practices, these theories tend to overlook the location of individuals in specific cultural junctures. Houses in Unidad Santa Fe are situated within a culture and reveal shared histories of their residents. Links among households and between interior spaces and common areas form the main thread running through life histories that people narrate through descriptions of their environment. In these narratives, houses and apartments are revealed not as expressions of individual identities, but as sites where people come together into families, neighborhoods, and other communities.

**Martha’s chess set**

I met Martha and Domingo Reséndiz while waiting in line to pay our electrical bills in
Unidad Santa Fe’s telegraph office on the ground floor of Building 45. Martha had heard from a neighbor that I was studying the project’s history, and said she had some photographs I might be interested in seeing. Later that week I visited in her apartment.

While Martha prepared three cups of instant coffee in the kitchen—for her husband, herself and I—a boy came into their 36 square meter apartment without knocking and said: “Aunt, my mom asks if she can borrow your iron.”

“You know where it is son,” she answered barely looking at him, and the boy took it from a drawer.

We sat by the dining table and Martha invited her daughter to join us—she promised we would have a great conversation—but she chose to stay in her room with her boyfriend and they kept the door closed. Martha and Domingo had ceded the apartment’s only room to their teenage daughter. They slept in the living room, on a foldout couch next to the table where we sat. Before they went to sleep, I imagined, they would fold the clothes left out to dry in metallic racks by the couch and in the kitchen. By the table there was a cabinet with a microwave oven, plates, and cooking pots. Next to the cabinet was a full sized refrigerator—it would not fit in the tiny kitchen—and, by the door leading to the building’s hallway, there was an old desktop computer under a bookshelf.

Martha saw me looking around and said: “You think this place is crowded? Back in the day much larger families lived in apartments this small. Our neighbors downstairs, they had ten children. Once, I saw the two oldest kids crying, saying that their mother was dying, that she was in bed making horrible noises. It turned out she was going into labor.

“At that time we lived very close to each other. When our neighbor had a newborn, my mother would take care of her kids. She did the same thing for us. We also took care of

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36 A public company, Telégrafos mexicanos is a survival from the 20th century. While one can still send telegrams, the company’s outposts are used primarily to pay utilities and bills, deposit or cash checks and, in some cases, to collect government benefits. In Unidad Santa Fe, one can pay monthly maintenance fees to the project’s administration there.
our younger siblings. The older girls looked like mothers, carrying babies around… We had it a bit better than our neighbors. We were eight kids, but we lived in two apartments, right next to each other, and although the project’s manager told him he was not supposed to do that, my father tore down a wall to connect them. The children, we lived in one of the apartments, the girls in the little room and the boys in what was supposed to be the living room, and my parents lived in the other, where we also cooked and ate. My uncles lived with us for a while, until they married. Grandmother slept in the living room, by the kitchen.”

Fig. 14. IMSS employees in Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza, ca. 1965. Private collection.

Martha brought a little box with the pictures he wanted me to see. They were of his father, a policeman in Unidad Santa Fe. In one of the images he is eating lamb tacos and Coca-Cola with his colleagues. Martha’s father is not looking at the camera. His stylized hair is shiny with Vaseline. He has a thin, carefully groomed mustache. In the second picture [Fig. 14] he is in the Heroes’ Plaza posing with other policemen in full uniform and IMSS employees in suit and ties.
“Isn’t he handsome?” Martha asked. “They called him ‘El Marshall’ because he looked like a character in an American TV show. He was tall, light skinned, and very strong. He always took great care of himself.”

El Marshall arrived in Unidad Santa Fe in 1956, some months before it was dedicated. He settled in an apartment with his mother and younger brothers. Soon after, he began a relationship with his next-door neighbors’ daughter. They had a child and got married when she was pregnant with the second one, who they named Martha. “My parents were fast!” she laughed.

El Marshall patrolled Unidad Santa Fe at night. Martha’s mother locked the door when he left. “But she was exaggerating,” explained Martha. “It was very peaceful here. There were some petty thefts, some drunken fights, but nothing serious, and we all knew our neighbors, so we took care of each other. Even my husband had what we might call ‘a run in’ with El Marshall.” Domingo assented as she started telling this story: “Once he was walking to kindergarten and he decided to stop on his way there, to sit in the garden, open his lunch box and eat his sandwich. And my father saw him, asked him why he was not in school, and took him by the hand to his mother… Can you imagine a time when kids would walk to kindergarten by themselves, and when the police knew them and was friends with their parents? Those times are long gone!”

Martha made it clear, however, that not everything in the past was to be cherished. She told me the story of her maternal family. Her grandfather was a landowner in the state of Puebla. He was a very violent man; he raped Martha’s grandmother—that is how his mother was conceived. “My grandmother stopped having children with him after a couple of years, but he had many others with the women in town. My grandmother ended up taking care of all of them… Perhaps that’s why my grandmother was so happy to come live in Unidad Santa Fe, to start over. Before she came here she burnt many of her things. She did not want to
remember the past. She even burnt a picture in which, as a child, she’s sitting on Zapata’s lap. Can you imagine?” Emiliano Zapata fought for peasant’s rights in the Revolution and has been consecrated as a hero in Mexico’s national history.

Martha’s mother had managed to salvage some objects from the fire. Among them Martha’s favorite was her grandfather’s wooden chess set. Neither she nor her husband or daughter played chess, but she had a special place for the set in her apartment. She pointed to it in a shelf over the couch in the living room.

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Martha’s accounts show how the boundaries of households in Unidad Santa Fe were and remain fluid. Early on, her parents’ marriage brought together two families in the project into a single household. This new family lived in close proximity to others in their entryway, sharing meals and childcare responsibilities. Years later, Martha repeated her parents’ story by marrying into another local family. Today, her sister lives in her same building, and her apartment’s door remains open for her and her children. Martha’s life history can hardly be told as that of an individual and a discrete place that expresses who she is.

Martha, like many others in the project, links events in her family’s history to physical changes in her environment. Her kinship chart in different moments of her life can be mapped onto the changing layouts and uses of spaces in her household. When she was young, gender, age, and marital status determined who slept where and with whom. This is still true today, as shown by the use of the apartment’s room by Martha’s daughter. Further, in Martha’s descriptions, spaces are populated by objects—they, too, are landmarks in her family history. Her photographs and the chess set are invested with contrasting affects. Photos of her father represent Unidad Santa Fe’s early years as harmonious. The chess set stands for an act of violence from which her family originated and which haunted some of its
members for years. This contrast helps put homes into perspective as places where complex—and at times painful—relationships form and are narrated.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston de Bachelard (1969) describes the house as an image of the ideal. He does not say the house *is* an ideal set of emotions or relations, but rather something that we imagine as such; a representation that orients us as we conduct lives that are inevitably complex. Home, he writes, is “a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (6). In Martha’s apartment, objects contain discrete aspects of her past, and perhaps lend the illusion that they can be contained, controlled and even archived. This is not the case for all neighbors. Rather than seeing their homes as a place where they are in control, many neighbors speak of them as a burden. The place where they grew up is not a source of comfort, but something they want to leave behind.

Deejay, twenty-three when I first met him in 2011, repeatedly told me he wanted to move out of Unidad Santa Fe. Settling in another neighborhood or in cities that welcome internal immigrants looking for work, such as Cancún and Monterrey, is generally seen in the project as a sign of socioeconomic advancement. Deejay has left Unidad Santa Fe many times, but after losing a job or using up his savings he returns to his room in his parents’ house and to his friends in the Heroes’ Plaza. At home, he fights with his father; in the Plaza he goes back to drugs. “There’s something about this place, it traps you,” he explained to me in 2015. “It’s like a magnet and we’re stuck to it.” For Deejay, while the project offers him security, it also makes him restless—he returns not to a place of harmony, but to struggles he hopes to escape.

Many others see home as a place that brings together relief and a sense of brokenness. This combination qualifies Bachelard’s characterization of the home. The project is a place where concrete events, represented by places and objects, make people confront untidy family histories. The sense of self-awareness associated with homes in the project derives
perhaps from the fact they are not places that neighbors remember, but places where they continue living. As in Martha’s case, many remain in the same houses and apartments where they grew up. During fieldwork, older residents often asked who my parents or grandparents were as a way to locate me within local kinship networks. Their assumption was that if I had moved into the project, my family history must be connected to it. Others who move in are actually returning—after years of living in other cities or neighborhoods, often upon marriage, they return to units they inherit from their parents, or which they rent to be close to relatives. Thus, as the case of Ms. Dolores Bautista narrated below illustrates, many of the project’s residents live together with their past, something that makes it difficult for them to compartmentalize and idealize it.

Ms. Bautista’s archive

I met Ms. Bautista in a neighbors’ meeting. She spoke to me, as the only male and person under sixty in attendance, in an attempt to differentiate herself from others there. She told me she had traveled widely and that her children were successful professionals. A week later, I visited her large house in Block 6.

“What a nice place you have,” I said as I came into her living room. I had walked with her through a large, walled-off front yard. There were two cars there—she told me she lets her neighbor park there—and a picnic table surrounded by a small lawn. Inside the house there was a woven screen covered in vines between the living-and-dining room and the hallway leading to the rooms and the back yard. There were pastel-colored tapestries on the walls, and tables with an extensive collection of decorative boxes. Ms. Bautista went to prepare a cup of coffee for me in the kitchen, which she had installed in what was previously a patio. It was lit by sunlight coming through its glass ceiling.
I sat in a sofa next to Ricardo, Ms. Bautista’s son, who was visiting his mother. “You really think this is nice?” he asked. He evidently did not. “My mother was thinking of going to go to Tijuana, where my sister lives, but with the violence as it is it makes no sense to move there now, just when people in border towns are looking for a way out.”

Ms. Bautista, an accountant at the IMSS, moved to Unidad Santa Fe with her mother and her three children in the sixties. She requested a big house—and refused one in another project because it had rooms on the second level and her mother could not walk upstairs. Her job made her an influente—she had leverage over her superiors, whose finances were not always honest—so she got what she wanted right away. She told me she bought the house from the outset. Others paid rent for years, until the project was privatized, but Ms. Bautista never did. She claims she paid for her house in full within five years. This probably required bending, if not outright breaking, local regulations and federal laws.

Once in the project, the Bautista family kept its distance from others, and not much has changed. “When I go buy groceries,” Ms. Bautista explained, “I go out of the project and take the bus to the market in Cristo Rey. On the way back I take a taxi, because it’s difficult to move around in a bus carrying bags.” What she meant to say was that she does not walk through the project. She is rarely, if ever, in its street and central garden. She does not buy from Pancho, or stops by to hear the latest gossip in the Heroes’ Plaza. She only ventures to this area to attend neighbor meetings, and that is only because her next-door neighbor asks her to go along with her.

Ricardo echoed his mother’s sense of alienation from Unidad Santa Fe: “It was not very nice to grow up here, you know. You seem to like the project, but I think you might have to tone down your enthusiasm. When I was a kid there were areas where you could not walk through without being harassed. There were always thugs drinking and doing drugs there, looking for someone to steal from or to beat up.”
At the beginning of a federal administration in the eighties, Ms. Bautista decided to retire from her job. The new director of the IMSS hinted that he would persecute his predecessors; he promised to investigate the diversion of public funds. “At the time, the IMSS had air ambulances, can you imagine? It was a time of abundance! There was also a lot of money that was never accounted for. I had to play with numbers in the books to make things look normal. My boss, he was responsible for some of the missing money, but he was also very good to me, and I figured I had to leave to avoid having to testify against him.”

Before leaving her office, Ms. Bautista photocopied every document in her archive. With the help of her assistant, she brought the copies home. She told me she keeps dozens of cardboard boxes in one of her house’s many rooms. “They were my insurance. If they came after me or anybody else, I would be able to see if accusations were true, and perhaps even find evidence against the accusers. I would be able to divert investigators and detectives, or to keep them quiet. I would be able to keep the witch hunt under control.”

In the end, nobody was persecuted. Ms. Bautista’s boss and others in the IMSS moved on to other government agencies, and some were promoted to higher posts. For years Ms. Bautista saw them every day; she had intimate knowledge of their personal lives. Since she retired, she has not spoken with any of her superiors. It seemed to me that Ms. Bautista wonders where she would be today if she had chosen to remain at the IMSS instead of locking herself at home with the yellowing evidence of a war never fought.

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Anthropologists have long documented the political dimensions of domestic life. John Borneman (1996), for example, has put into question the neatness of kinship charts by showing they exclude relationships of care outside normative marriage and parenting. Borneman upsets common notions of domesticity as, on the one hand, transparent—readily available for representation by anthropologists, legal regimes or census data—and, on the
other, as detached from larger social fields. Relationships of care, he suggests, open up households to other spaces. In the case of Unidad Santa Fe, care reveals households configurations other than those expected by architects and government officials. Ms. Bautista’s house is open to other times and to relations beyond descent or affiliation. Her past work and power relations among IMSS officials are present in her private life.

On another visit to her house, Ms. Bautista spoke again of her work: “Back then we had beautiful events. In the dedication of Unidad Independencia, President Kennedy was guest of honor. He stood side by side with López Mateos and el licenciado Antonio Ortiz Mena in a stage on the project’s plaza. There was confetti, music and dance numbers. Piporro”—a popular singer and comedian—“performed that day. And Kennedy liked it so much that he asked for him to sing another song. I was the one who went up to the stage and gave a bouquet of roses to President Kennedy. ‘I love you Mr. President’ I hold him.”

“Wasn’t Jackie jealous?” I joked.

“That day they sent her to the Basilica, she was visiting the Virgin of Guadalupe,” she responded earnestly.

A few days later I told this story to Sergio Martínez, son of a minister in Adolfo López Mateos’ cabinet. “You know, if she was chosen to give Kennedy flowers she must have been a very beautiful woman. She must have been Ortiz Mena’s querida, if not the president’s. You just didn’t get an honor like that for being a good accountant.”

Perhaps then, Ms. Bautista’s home is not only a garrison fortified for a war of documents, but also a space tinged by a secret a relationship with a powerful man. As the case of Ms. Bautista and others in Unidad Santa Fe suggest, home can be a place charged with discomfort where past wounds take center stage. Home is where secrets, hidden in an outside where one must “keep up appearances,” can begin to be revealed. Alongside
cherished memories, a family’s house might shelter relations other than those sanctioned by
the law, memories of broken liaisons, and lingering doubts.

**Houses vs. apartments**

In an interview with Juan Pablo Lanzagorta, an executive in a real estate company that builds
affordable housing, he showed me images of recently finished houses in different styles.
While their plans are similar, some of them have elements of vernacular architecture, such as
moldings and earthenware roof tiles, while others are what brochures describe as
“contemporary” or “minimalist.” Lanzagorta told me that styles are a response to demands of
the market. “People don’t want a box. They want something that represents who they are, so
we give them options.” I asked if his company offered the choice of apartments. He explained
that only houses sell. “No matter what you give them, people want their own house, not
buildings. We’ve done our research, we did focus groups and we offered people a house far
from the city or an apartment, which was actually cheaper and closer to their place of work,
and they chose the house, ten times to one.”

Like other real estate companies, Lanzagorta’s owns expansive plots in the outskirts
of the country’s cities (Sánchez Corral 2012:36, 100), much of which they bought at the turn
of the 21\textsuperscript{th} century when the federal government announced plans to open millions of credit
lines through INFONAVIT, the country’s largest public mortgage bank. If you built
apartments, I told him, you would only sell a portion of your land, and I suspect your biggest
business is selling land. He assured me that the profit margin for the whole operation was in
fact quite small. “And now more than ever,” he said, “because Peña Nieto’s government is
developing new policies. We’re going to have to adapt to very stringent regulations soon.”

Academics have weighed in on the question of why people shun apartments. Political
scientist Jorge Castañeda pins the choice of houses to a debilitating flaw in Mexican culture.
He believes that “Mexicans today still are imbued with—and dominated by—a premodern individualism that is firmly rooted in the past” (J. Castañeda 2011:32). For this reason, he claims, Mexicans fail at team sports, act only at the behest of charismatic leaders, and avoid having to share spaces with others in condominiums. Castañeda’s wording supposes that individualism is inherent to people insofar they are Mexicans, and that, through cultural evolution, they might finally sever ties from a damming primordial past and learn the virtues of teamwork.

During fieldwork I collected other opinions on this issue. I was told that people prefer houses because they want a connection to the earth; many come from rural areas to the city and feel confused if they own a slab of cement on the air and not a patch of land. Others told me that people want houses like the ones they see in American movies—Mexicans, too, dream of the suburbs. These arguments put the burden on people’s choices and ignore the role of marketing and the incentives on development companies to build houses. They also consider houses as finished products and not as part of larger processes whereby people build their family histories over time.

Architect Paloma Vera, who has helped land squatters east of Mexico City conceive houses that can be easily expanded or transformed, had a different perspective: “Developers and people in INFONAVIT will say whatever is best for them,” she warned me. “People don’t want houses because they have some sort of idyllic image of themselves watering their lawn with their dog. People are more practical than that. They want houses because they can modify them! An apartment you can hardly expand, and houses can grow over time.”

Paloma’s suggestion steps out of the circular argument that people make certain choices because they are hardwired to do so as members of a culture. It is grounded on the histories of families she has heard over years—and which she has seen unfold as built spaces. These histories, like those of Martha, Ms. Bautista, and others in Unidad Santa Fe, show that
houses are not representations of individuals or closed off realms where nuclear families see reflections of themselves as they might or should have been. Instead, they show people’s lives and the spaces in which they take place as intertwined and in the making. In the mid-20th century, IMSS officials and Mario Pani imagined they would shape families when they moved to a new environment. Families certainly changed, but this is only part of the story, as houses, too, have been shaped by events and relations they enshrine.

Below, I consider neighborhoods in comparable terms to houses as discussed so far. Like houses, I suggest, neighborhoods develop over time alongside their histories, in processes that bring together material and symbolic phenomena.

What is a Neighborhood?

“The old ladies in my block,” Susano Padilla told me, “they all call me mijito [short for mi hijito, ‘my little son’]. Maybe it is because I always say good morning to them, and I know their names. We just made a list of each other’s phone numbers, and our neighbors keep a copy of our keys in case there’s an emergency. I know many of them since I was a child. I live in the house where we grew up. I even sleep in my childhood bedroom!”

Susano, sixty-one years old, had recently retired. He worked as a physician in the emergency room of an IMSS hospital. He now has time, for the first time in years, to be at home and among his neighbors.

“I eat often in the little café in El súper, and I’m amazed at how far a simple ‘good morning’ and ‘thank you’ can take you. Doña Silvia, the cook, she gives me some of the blue corn tortillas she keeps for herself.”

I suggested we meet there for lunch the following day.
As we took a table, Susano told me the story of Rosaura La lagartona, “The Big Alligator,” a woman who “slept with everybody” in Unidad Santa Fe in the sixties. Susano’s parents used her as a warning to his sisters: “Don’t wear that, you look like La lagartona!” or “You better get home by eleven or people will think you’ve become like La lagartona.”

Susano laughed heartily. “Don’t be fooled: this place was just as beautiful as people claim it was,” he said. I had earlier questioned the idealization of the project’s early years by older neighbors.

“In the school,” Susano continued, “beautiful nurses, like the ones you see in the movies, with their starched white uniforms and bonnets, would serve us large glasses of cold milk. Unidad Santa Fe was one of the first sites where they started serving breakfast to elementary school students. I have not tasted fresher milk since!”

Doña Silvia brought us two bowls of the soup of the day and a pitcher of orange water. Susano continued: “The program was started by Eva Sámano, the wife of president López Mateos, and she came here a few times. She was beautiful! If the nurses looked like angels, she looked like the queen of angels. She had this bright aura, and would walk through the school smiling and patting us on the head, as if imparting blessings.”

Doña Silvia brought us blue tortillas and we ordered our main course. It was a luminous spring afternoon. There were no clouds in the sky. “This is what I missed out on when I was in the hospital day in and day out for the past thirty years,” Susano said, sprinkling salt on a tortilla.

During Unidad Santa Fe’s early years, the project was the site of other social policy experiments besides school breakfasts, he told me. For some time, pediatricians visited families with children every two weeks. They kept precise records on all of the project’s children, and made recommendations to their mothers and to the administration on the basis of their observations.
“‘When did you last defecate?’ the doctor would ask, and then, ‘Was it solid or liquid? Large pieces or small ones like the ones sheep make?’” He laughed again.

Susano continued: “This program, having a community physician assigned to every one hundred or so families was abandoned here after a few years, but it was taken on in England. The IMSS was a pioneer in many social security programs that were then implemented in other countries… I should have been one of those physicians, visiting my patients from house to house all day, chatting with children, and being offered a cup of coffee by their mothers.”

Most adults in Unidad Santa Fe’s early years were young and had children. Families were large. Susano was the fourth of seven siblings. His neighbors four houses away, however, were childless.

“I became a son to them, I guess. I went there after school. My siblings would go back to my mother, but I went to see Ms. Fuentes. She would cook what I liked and had clothes for me in her house. It is not like I abandoned my parents, but they had six other kids, and Ms. Fuentes and her husband had only me.

“On January 6, the Three Wise Men would bring me presents in my parents’ house and with the Fuentes. I took this to mean that I was their child, too.”

**Mothers and fathers**

As Susano’s recollections suggest, state employees had a prominent role in the private lives of Unidad Santa Fe’s residents. In addition to physicians and nurses in schools, there were social workers who instructed families how to arrange furniture in their houses and use their different rooms (Zócalo 1957c). Beatriz Alvarado, a neighbor in the project and a teacher in its Social Security Center from 1957 until her retirement, assured me this made families change radically. “Our work involved civilizing them,” she said. “You have no idea how
horrible were the places some of the families came from. I remember people getting excited when they saw water come out when they turned the tap, and trying to figure out how to light the gas stove. Many people were used to cooking with wood in the middle of their apartments.”

After school, children would go home to eat lunch and then they went to the Social Security Center. Beatriz and her colleagues helped them do homework and organized them into clubs. Children learned music, dance, drama and painting. Under Beatriz’s guidance, children in the project formed seven music bands. In the written testimony of Salvador Villanueva, one of her former students and a dance instructor in the project’s Social Security Center today, Beatriz and her colleagues were women “who knew how to guide us, who did not shy away from directing us, reprimanding us or giving us that pat in the back to encourage us, and who, with great love and wisdom, formed our Clubs for children” (Villanueva nd.a).37 By this account, social workers and teachers in the project were mother figures.

The IMSS also employed coaches for local basketball, baseball and soccer teams, some of them recruited among residents; when the children were old enough, they played in a league with teams from other IMSS projects. Adult women also attended the Social Security Center, which offered, among others, cooking, sewing, and upholstery classes. The center also hosted a book club. All activities were free for neighbors. “Cooking classes were very popular,” Beatriz told me. “I remember the line of women waiting to sign up going around the building… We had good equipment for all of this. We had sewing machines, and the IMSS would provide all the ingredients for the cooking classes.”

Every Monday morning, Beatriz and others supervised the raising of the Mexican flag in the Heroes’ Plaza. On May they organized a pageant for Mother’s Day, and handed out

37 Spanish: “que supieron encausarnos, ellas que no hicieron distingo alguno para guiarnos, regañarnos y darnos esa palmadita de ánimo y con gran amor y sapiencia llegaron a formar los Clubes Infantiles.”
presents on April 30, Children’s Day. “The IMSS provided toys for them, and sometimes the wives of IMSS officials would come to give them away. They also did that for Christmas. I remember well Ms. Martha Salinas de Ortiz Mena, wife of the IMSS director. She was a very distinguished lady.” Beatriz continued, “These are beautiful times you are making me remember. Neighbors also remember well. When I walk through the project I feel like a celebrity, with all these grownups that were once my students saying hi to me and thanking me for everything we did for them… You see, we were like goddesses to them because with our help, little by little, se fueron superando, they bettered themselves.”

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Originally, the Social Security Center was called Casa de la asegurada, “Female Right Holder’s House.” It was a space dedicated to the education of housewives and the regularization of “informality:” in them government officials performed civil marriages and provided assistance on other procedures such as drafting birth certificates for children (Revista Hoy 1956). The Casas had a precedent in alphabetization centers set up through the collaboration of the IMSS, its union, and the Ministry of Public Education starting in 1945. In addition to teach people how to read, these centers would educate people on their rights, as enshrined in the Social Security law of 1943 (Villanueva nd.b).

In an interview, Patrocinio Luengas, a government official who was involved in the establishment of Casas de la asegurada, told me the IMSS used them as access points into places where state authorities were not always welcome: into “problematic” neighborhoods and the interior of people’s houses. Beatriz Alvarado described their objective as “the improvement of homes through women.” Luengas put it more candidly: “Through the Casas we would get the women to convince others to vote for our candidates, and we also had a way to modernize domestic arrangements.” Between 1956 and 1957, the IMSS set up thirty-seven Casas (Castro 1979:390). Most were in Mexico City; some in housing projects, and
others in working class neighborhoods. Before the one in Unidad Santa Fe was operational, there was one in the Santa Fe pueblo.

In Unidad Santa Fe, the objectives of Social Security Center were reinforced by other surveillance and disciplining strategies. Among them were the visits by pediatricians to households Susano Padilla remembers and the constant presence of security guards in common areas. Other strategies were more informal, but perhaps also scripted. For example, neighbors remember that Unidad Santa Fe’s first manager, Dr. Ángel Cifuentes, made daily walks through the project. His assistants walked with him and noted his observations—if he pointed out, for example, that a family was violating local regulations by leaving laundry out to dry in the walkway, they wrote this down and later returned to admonish those at fault. Cifuentes said hello to neighbors passing by, and at times, in his role as a physician, offered consultations. Cifuentes is remembered as both strict and caring. If social workers were mother figures, Cifuentes was perhaps a father.

**Female and male**

In Pierre Bourdieu’s famous analysis of the Kabyle house he maps a series of binaries onto the interior and exterior of houses: among other things, women, intimacy, darkness, and nighttime are opposed to men, work, public life, light, and daytime (Bourdieu 1970:155, 157-158). These binaries organize daily activities among the Kabyle. Men leave home early to work in the fields or the market; women remain at home where they cook, weave, and perform other domestic tasks.

The creation of Casas de la asegurada suggests a similar understanding of space on the part of IMSS officials in mid-20th century Mexico. They saw the interior of houses and apartments as female domains. Conquering the hearts of women was therefore an avenue into the private lives of families; women were seen as agents in the transformation of populations.
at the domestic scale. In the words of Salvador Villanueva, the IMSS focused on women “because they are root and glue of the family nucleus and, therefore, of the Fatherland” (Villanueva nd.b).38 This logic persisted when the Casas were renamed *Centros de seguridad social para el bienestar familiar*, “Social Security Centers for Family Welfare,” later shortened to *Centros de seguridad social*.

![Fig. 15. A girl, perhaps dressed for her fifteenth birthday party, on a bench in the Heroes’ Plaza. Behind her is the Social Security Center and Building 44, ca. 1960. Photo courtesy of Gerardo García.](image)

Under this gendered framework, spaces outside houses and apartments were marked male. This is still the case today. The Heroes’ Plaza is the domain of adolescent and adult men. They meet there to drink and smoke marijuana, and they often assert the importance of being educated in *la calle*, “the street.” “The guys whose parents overprotected them, the

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38 Spanish: “ya que ella [la población femenina] es raíz y vínculo del núcleo familiar y por ende de la Patria.”
ones who were not let out to play with the rest of us, to run free and do stupid things, today they are messed up,” Martín Bastida told me once. “They said that it was dangerous out, so they stayed locked in, and today they’re alcoholics, or they’re depressed and have no friends.”

![Fig. 16. Women and children in Unidad Santa Fe’s central garden, ca. 1963. Photograph courtesy of Onnis Luque.](image)

On another occasion, Rogelio Caballero echoed this sentiment by stating his intention to bring his children to the project more often. He had divorced a few years back, and his two sons lived with his wife. “They live in a condominium with a small garden. They can do nothing there, they are not exposed to reality. There’s all sorts of rules, and there’s always someone watching them. I feel they are missing out. Every time I see the kids here playing soccer or just running around, I feel my kids are missing out, and I fear they might grow up with some sort of lack.” This statement reveals the similarity of the Plaza to commons in European villages well into the 19th century, which were sites “where the common people, and particularly adolescents, could exercise and play and enjoy themselves, and at the same
time participate in community life” (Jackson 1984:129). Like in the commons of old, in the Heroes’ Plaza men are socialized as members of the community and engage in games that involve “‘defending’ the community” by watching out for non-residents, “letting off steam, and achieving personal renown” (128).

By contrast, young women rarely venture to the Plaza. Those who do are often derided by older women—who can be in this space with impunity—as easy or stupid. Nayeli, one girl who was in the Plaza often described herself as a rebel: “I don’t care what they think. They go around saying things about me, but I’m free to do whatever I want.” Soon afterwards, in a conversation with older women in the Plaza, they spoke ill of Nayeli and her mother, who they said was irresponsible. The proper place for “that girl” to be, they insisted, was in her house. Young men and women meet in house parties. In these events, men change their behavior: they do not do drugs, as twenty-three year old Rifle explained to me, “out of respect for the women.”

The distinction of interior and exterior spaces, however, does not appear to have been as rigid in the years that followed Unidad Santa Fe’s dedication. The Plaza was not the site of disorderly games of young men, but a space for “civic functions” (Díaz Arias 1957:179) such as raising the flag. Moreover, families preserve photographs that show women using the project’s gardens. Some of these shots show women posing on special occasions such as birthday parties or first communions [Figs. 15]. Others are instances of a recognizable type from the mid-20th century in Mexico: women sit on the grass surrounded by children. While posed, the photos suggest that those represented were not simply passing through the project’s gardens and stopped to be photographed. Rather, women were watching children at play when someone suggested they gather for a portrait [Fig. 16].

I discussed these images with Martín Bastida; I asked him why he thought women no longer sat on the grass. “There’s dog shit everywhere,” he responded. “Nobody can sit on the
grass anymore.” When Unidad Santa Fe was publicly owned, residents were not allowed to keep pets. Today, hundreds of families do, and only some clean after their dogs when they take them out for walks. I suspected, however, that this clue did not offer a complete explanation for the changes in the uses of common areas.

Don Willy told me that houses and apartments in Unidad Santa Fe were intentionally small because IMSS officials wanted people to use the project’s gardens and Plaza as their living room. “You see, if you had friends over at home, they would not fit, you could not have a party inside. So people would meet in the garden, or by my snack shop. This was a way to encourage sociability, to make neighbors get to know each other, have them become friends. Houses were to be used only for eating and sleeping.” If this was the case, in its early years the whole project functioned as a single household divided into social areas and sleeping quarters. Common areas, under the watch of social workers, were the image of a house’s living rooms. However, like in Kabyle houses as described by Bourdieu (1970:169), the use of gardens by women does not mean that the authority of men was undermined. As the person in Unidad Santa Fe with the least degrees of separation from the country’s ultimate father, the president, Dr. Cifuentes was still the project’s master.

**Infrastructure**

Susano Padilla and Beatriz’s recollections illustrate the degree to which state authorities penetrated into family homes in Unidad Santa Fe. The archive abandoned in the project’s former management offices documented other ways in which bureaucrats exerted control over neighbors in the project. I entered this space after obtaining permission from the project’s manager and found a folder for each of Unidad Santa Fe’s houses and apartments. Folders contain demographic information collected in local censuses in 1967 and 1977: the names, date of birth, educational attainment and occupation of each resident, as well as a list
of their assets—cars, televisions, work equipment—as a household. Folders also include permit slips to introduce or extract furniture through the project’s gates, with a description of the items and the times at which they would be moved. Some folders preserve citations for people who, for example, were denounced by their neighbors for being too loud at night, or who had failed to pay rent in time. There are also manuscript letters by neighbors explaining why they missed payments. 39

Susano and Beatriz’s accounts also show the extent to which intimate relations unfolded in common areas, outside family homes. The fences neighbors have built to enclose common areas might be evidence of a hardening of distinctions between private and common areas. As I explore in Chapter 3, after privatization the project’s gardens and Plaza, in the absence of government employees to oversee them at all times and with the rise of youth gangs, began to be perceived as unsafe. Neighbors today often report the robbery of wallets and car parts. In the past families left doors to their houses open; today they keep them locked. Moreover, after expansions, interior spaces can more readily accommodate guests, so parties do not spill into common areas. Despite these changes, the project can still be read as analogous to a house. According to Brian Larkin, “infrastructures are built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (2013:328). The image of the project as a house is sustained by its infrastructure, which establishes parameters whereby residents use and share resources. Flows of water, electrical power, and garbage bring together neighbors as a community and help establish its limits. Walls contain and order these flows.

39 IMSS employees left these documents behind a closed door in 2001, when the project’s privatization process concluded. I consulted them after obtaining authorization for Juan Barrera when he was the project’s manager. The rooms where the archive was stored were occupied by the IMSS in 2015, with authorization of a new administration in the project. Today it is an extension of the local health clinic. Some neighbors, including Barrera, protested this change, claiming that the office belonged to the condominium and not to the IMSS. The documents abandoned by the IMSS—which also included dozens of blueprints of the project—appear to have been lost.
Water. From dedication until 2012, the project’s water system was fed, at least partly, by wells in Block 4, Group 5 and by the day care center in the same block. Water flowed from the wells to a cistern in the project’s central garden; from there it was pumped to Unidad Santa Fe’s 2,200 houses and apartments. The first well has not been functional for decades; the second one stopped working in 2012. Technicians from Sistema de aguas de la ciudad de México, the Federal District’s water agency, extracted a large piece of equipment from the well. I heard them tell Juan Barrera, the project’s manager at the time, that they would examine this machine to determine whether the well was now dry or its pump was broken. Barrera told me they never returned and had not offered answers when he called. “It is election season,” Otto Martínez observed when I mentioned this in the Heroes’ Plaza. “They will not put money on something like this. All the money goes to the campaigns, or those in power steal it, it’s their last chance.”

Since 2012, all of the project’s water comes from the city’s pipes. Water, however, still concentrates in Unidad Santa Fe’s central cistern and is distributed from there. La bomba, “the pump” feeds water to the project’s school and health clinic. For this reason, the IMSS retains control over the pump and pays for the electrical power it consumes. Gerardo is the last employee of the Institute working for the project. He turns the pump off at eleven at night, and on again at five every morning. Every couple of months, a burnt fuse or a broken pipe leads to water shortages, which Gerardo is entrusted to fix. Water shortages animate discussions online and in the project’s common areas—neighbors often blame the manager for inconveniencing them and for not solving the problem quickly enough. The least affected are those with water reserves in rooftop tanks and underground cisterns.

When Unidad Santa Fe was publicly owned, neighbors did not pay water rights. After the privatization process began in 1982, the city’s water agency began installing meters to measure each household’s consumption and bill them accordingly. Some neighbors protested
and in the negotiations that ensued they agreed that only houses would have meters; apartments would pay a fixed bimonthly rate. When I lived in the project, the rate fluctuated between 40 and 46 pesos, approximately four US dollars of the time. The deal with water agency included the construction of a water treatment plant on the north end of the project. Treated water is used in the project’s gardens. From time to time, trucks are filled up with water and driven elsewhere for use in the city’s parks.

**Power.** Unidad Santa Fe residents are billed for power they use within their houses and apartments. Some receive shared bills for power used in apartment building entryways, but few among them pay. The only case I encountered in which neighbors collected money and paid this bill was one organized by a former employee at the project’s management office who told me she believed in order and in following rules. In my apartment’s entryway we did not receive a bill.

Power used by lampposts in the project’s street, gardens, sports fields and central plaza—all of which officially belong to the condominium—is unpaid. Power is provided by CFE, the *Compañía Federal de Electricidad,* “Federal Electricity Company,” which took over from *Luz y Fuerza,* “Light and Power,” another public company dissolved by the federal government in 2009. After taking control, CFE asked the management’s office to pay for power in common areas, which had been provided for free for decades. CFE officials calculated a bill for millions of pesos. Neighbors who heard about this took it as a joke—the condominium does not have cash to cover even a small percentage of that amount.

According to some neighbors, the *Delegación* should pay for power used in common areas. Roque Salvatierra—to whom I return in Chapter 4—has sued the IMSS for what he claims is neglect of its responsibilities towards Unidad Santa Fe as stipulated in the 1982 edict that mandated Unidad Santa Fe’s privatization. One of his demands was heard by a
federal court, which instructed authorities to “municipalize” public services and utilities in the project. This means, Roque told me, that the local government is legally responsible for the upkeep of common areas in the project, and this includes paying for power. However, up to this day, power continues being provided to the project and no one pays the bill.

**Garbage.** Garbage trucks owned by the Delegación circulate regularly through the project, as they do other neighborhoods in the city. In other places, garbage collectors pick up trash bags from people’s houses or apartment buildings. In Unidad Santa Fe, perhaps given the impossibility of accessing households clustered around narrow walkways with trucks, people bring their garbage to them. Trucks park on regular spots at regular times. Collectors announce their arrival by ringing bells.

However, many neighbors—including people who are at work when garbage trucks visit the project—chose to give their garbage to collectors who walk through the project pushing carts with one or two two-hundred-liter bins. They pick up garbage their clients leave in front of their households in exchange for tips. Collectors work independently. Different people might serve neighboring houses. Some collectors were IMSS employees who were laid off at the time or privatization, but continued working in the project without a contract. Others have taken over the jobs of their parents or grandparents. At the end of their routes, collectors deposit garbage in a small landfill in the project’s southeast corner, which is controlled by a man and his family who have lived there for decades. Collectors pay the landfill’s keeper a fee to take their garbage and to store their pushcarts.

Some refer to collectors as *finqueros*, a word that derives from *finca*, “farm.” Others call them *pepenadores*, which derives from the Nahuatl word for gatherer. A related word is *viña*, “vineyard,” used by older neighbors for garbage dump, and used for the now disappeared village inside the Santa Fe landfill, La Viñita. These words speak to the role of
garbage as a resource from which some extract value. Garbage does not come to a standstill in landfills, but continues circulating through reuse and recycling. In Unidad Santa Fe’s dump, garbage is sorted and later sold. In this sense, the project’s garbage collection system, a small-scale version of the city’s, is an arrangement that brings together streets, carts, and a sorting area to enable the flow and commercialization of refuse.

**Walls.** Unidad Santa Fe’s water, power, and garbage disposal systems bring together material elements for the circulation of goods and people. They also help establish limits that define Unidad Santa Fe as a neighborhood. Outside the project, utilities are arranged differently. Another built feature that contributes to establish the limits of the project is its peripheral wall. Walls are a form of infrastructure created to obstruct flows rather than to facilitate them (cf. Larkin 2004).

Originally, Unidad Santa Fe was enclosed only on the south and west. Behind a tall cement partition there was, neighbors say, “nothing”—at the time of dedication, the area had not been formally or fully urbanized. By contrast, towards the open sides of the project, on the north and east, there was Roque Velasco Cerón Avenue and Camino Real a Toluca, both of which were paved. Within approximately one decade of dedication—no one I asked could remember the exact date or the justification offered by IMSS officials—a wall was built on these ends. The new wall has brick sections that alternate with metal fences; this allows people to see through it. The wall established unequivocal limits to the project and concentrated the flow of people and goods on its doors.

Unidad Santa Fe is similar to walled cities, where belonging is verified at gates. Although only one is currently in use, there are booths for security guards in the project’s four entrances. Since 2008, after an agreement brokered by Ms. Elba Santos, the project’s manager at the time (McLean 2008:49), Mexico City police has a base at the project’s main
door and another one on its southwest end, where they park police cars and motorcycles. For some, regular patrolling of common areas is not enough; on a number of occasions neighbors have sought to have guards permanently stationed at the project’s entrances. In addition to deter criminals, guards would prevent people from surrounding neighborhoods from using the project’s limited parking. In 2011, manager Juan Barrera hired a private security company to register the number plates of every car that entered the project at night. After a few weeks, however, guards left because there was no money in Unidad Santa Fe’s coffers to pay for their services. The project first tried to permanently monitor its gates in the mid-nineties. The most recent attempt dates from 2014.

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Certain actions in Unidad Santa Fe’s common areas also mark the project as separate from surrounding areas and again evoke the image of the project as a house. Drinking in the street and in parks and plazas is illegal in Mexico City. However, in Unidad Santa Fe neighbors drink freely. The police raid young men only from time to time, but they look for drugs and turn a blind eye on alcoholic beverages. Once I asked men who gather on the Heroes’ Plaza to drink every evening if they were not afraid of the police. “Screw them,” Gordillo told me holding of a plastic bottle of mezcal, “this is our home and they have no right to come tell us what to do.” Otto was less confrontational: “You should know that this is a world apart. It’s like we live in a Caracol.” Caracoes are walled territories ruled by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (EZLN) in the southern state of Chiapas. Rebels who control these spaces do not welcome state officials or programs and uphold their own legal codes. A comparable space in Mexico City is the UNAM campus, where the city’s police is only rarely given access, as the university community is defensive of its autonomy.

Another manifestation of the domestic character of Unidad Santa Fe’s common areas is the fact that local vendors do not have to pay rights over their use. For some time, neighbor
Zito McLean had a stainless steel cart where he cooked and sold food on evenings. Since, unlike most of the city, Unidad Santa Fe is not part of a merchant’s association’s turf, no one asked Zito to pay. For electrical power, he connected a cable to a lamppost. Manager Juan Barrera once asked Zito to move to the esplanade outside the Casino. Zito was adamant: “I can set up my cart wherever I want! Who does he think he is trying to move me? People know I will be here, my clients expect me to be here. And Barrera, he’s a newbie. He doesn’t seem to know that that place is reserved for other things…” He was referring to the use of the area outside the Casino for sex. Since Zito, now in his sixties, was a teenager, youths have met in this area, partly enclosed by stonewalls, for sexual encounters.

The project’s separation from surrounding areas is maintained by the profiling and attribution of negative traits to “outsiders.” Olga, a forty-five year old woman who is often in the Heroes’ Plaza constantly screens people there: “Those kids, they’re not from here. They will get everything dirty! They don’t have a right to be here.” From time to time—when she sees them throw trash on the floor, for example—she asks them to leave. José Luis Pardo has assumed a similar role in the project’s sports fields, from which he chases out youths when they are carrying spray paint cans. “Behind the wall is different,” he told me. “It’s a difference in education. They’re not like us.”

Neighbors often lump all people from surrounding neighborhoods and designate a number of distinct communities in the area as atrás de la barda, “behind the wall.” That way, they establish a clear opposition between the project and the world beyond it: for Unidad Santa Fe residents, outsiders are dirty, have no respect for others, lack education, and do not know how to live as a community. Given the many similarities between Unidad Santa Fe and other neighborhoods in the region, these distinctions are overwrought.
María G. de García Ruiz

*El campeón*, “the Champion,” grew up in María G. de García Ruiz, the neighborhood immediately west of Unidad Santa Fe, also known as *El cuernito*, “The Little Horn.” At fifty-nine, he still lives there. When I met him, he owned an internet café in El súper, which he operated with his sister and niece. He offered to show me around his neighborhood and introduce me to people who could tell me its history; I paid him a visit on a Sunday, when he told me I could find him in a quesadilla stand outside his family’s house.

Campeón’s nephew served me three quesadillas and a Coca-Cola in a glass bottle. It was market day in the neighborhood, so its main street was closed to car circulation and there were dozens of people shopping. Many said hello to my host: “Good morning Campeón!”

“I only won a few fights,” he explained, “I was very good, a heavy weight. What happens to all boxers happened to me. I started drinking, was carried away by fame and women and I ended up losing everything I had. But my friends here, they still remember the good old days when I was at the height of my boxing career.” He drank a long gulp from his Coca-Cola and said: “Enough about me. Let’s go find one of the Valles, the children of the man who founded our neighborhood.”

We ran into Jorge Valles sitting on a stool outside his house. He agreed to tell me his father’s story after Campeón told him I was a journalist. Soon, Jorge’s brother joined us. They took turns narrating the origins of María G. de García Ruiz:

As a young man in the nineteen-forties, Salvador Valles made a pilgrimage from his native city of Tampico to the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the outskirts of Mexico City. On his way there, he stopped in the house of some relatives who had squatted in an area the Federal District’s regent announced would become part of Chapultepec Park. Valles decided to help his hosts and went looking for Miguel Alemán, the country’s president. He stood outside his house for days, until Alemán lowered his car’s window and heard what
Valles had to say. The president offered his calling card for him to use as a charola, a type of safe-conduct discussed in Chapter 1.

Valles, said his son Jorge, anduvo la legua, “walked the league,” searching for a suitable place for the Chapultepec squatters to resettle. He found a piece of land west of Mexico City whose owner was a Spanish lady in her deathbed. Miguel Alemán’s charola gave Valles access to her hospital room, where he convinced the woman, whose name was María G. de García Ruiz, to sell the land to the government. As a concession to her memory, she asked that the neighborhood and all its institutions should have her name. To this day, the local school and market are called María G. de García Ruiz. Within a few months of Valles’ visit to Ms. García, he led a few dozen families in the settlement of her land. He assigned each family a plot where they started building their houses. By then, Valles had decided to stay in Mexico City. Over the following years, he had sixteen children, who helped him out in his many businesses. He controlled commerce in the neighborhood, collecting fees from merchants. He also owned the first industrial tortilla machine in the area, which he obtained from a government official.

Tortilla machines were transformative: before they existed, women spent a good part of their days making corn dough. The machine gave Salvador Valles control over the local food staple and consolidated his power. Assuming a common role in PRI-governed Mexico (Shefner 2001:595), Valles was the conduit through which people made demands on state institutions, and through which these demands were addressed. Over thirty years, Valles led gestiones—which translates as both as “processes” and “negotiations” (Hilgers 2008:137)—to bring running water, sanitation, and electrical power to the neighborhood. He also negotiated the pavement of its streets. In exchange for favors and attentions from state officials, Valles was responsible for getting his neighbors to vote for the PRI. The party

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40 An informant in *The Meanings of Macho* (Gutmann 1996:252) identifies similar effects some years later in the proliferation of food blenders, which made molcajetes, “stone mortars,” obsolete and expedited cooking.
would provide buses, which Salvador Valles never failed to fill with María G. de García Ruiz residents on each election day.

“The Valles,” Campeón told me as we walked back to his family’s quesadilla stand, “they speak of their old man as a saint, but he was a cabrón, bastard. You did not want to be on his wrong side. If he told you to do something, you had no option.” I asked if there was still a leader in the neighborhood. He said no. “We all have to take care of ourselves now.”

We saw a short man wearing a suit and dark glasses walk by with two bodyguards. Campeón said hello to them and turned to me: “That man is charging people fees for their spot in the market. He’s the market’s leader. I don’t have to pay because I once helped him out of a mess he was in. He got into an argument with his boss, a woman who controls many markets in the city, and he wanted protection, so he asked me, since I was a boxer and I’m still a big man. All I did was stand behind him as he negotiated, but he got what he wanted and he’s a grateful man.”

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For their residents, Unidad Santa Fe and María G. de García Ruiz are very different places. In the housing project neighbors had, as officials would say, “everything they might need” from the moment they arrived, while in the neighborhood settled by Valles services and utilities were slow to arrive. Students of Mexico City have often established oppositions between neighborhoods built by real estate developers or state institutions, and auto-constructed “irregular” settlements. The former are associated with legality, and the later with informal arrangements between politicians and their constituents. Squatters and others who settle neighborhoods with the help or acquiescence of state officials are described as “client groups,” which exchange votes for benefits with government officials, in arrangements beyond the scope of the law (Shefner 2001:594-596).
However, the two neighborhoods have much in common. Dr. Cifuentes, first manager of Unidad Santa Fe, and neighborhood leader Salvador Valles were similar figures; both were the unequivocal leaders of their communities, and they derived their power from their relative proximity to the country’s president. This allowed them to represent people in their neighborhoods before state institutions. Unlike Valles, Cifuentes had a set of official rules to enforce—but he and his successors as managers of Unidad Santa Fe often went off script and made concessions to neighbors who, for example, remodeled their houses. Moreover, officials in Mexico enjoyed much leeway, as is evident from the analysis of government archives. Documents from the mid-20th century either concentrate on minute details, such as the type of desks that should furnish government offices, or describe the lofty goals of state programs and institutions. In between these two extremes was a space where public servants could pursue goals they deemed important through means of their choice.

The local leadership in both neighborhoods contributed to shape interior and exterior spaces in their respective neighborhoods. Like social workers in Unidad Santa Fe, Valles entered homes through women, whom he liberated from grinding corn and kneading dough. His tortilla machine “modernized” work patterns and family dynamics. Valles also controlled the use of a central area in his neighborhood that was used as a market—he authorized vendors and charged them fees. This area is now used a playground, with a soccer court and children’s games built by the Delegación; decades ago, the city’s government moved the market north of the neighborhood.

Today, both neighborhoods lack a unanimously recognized leadership. Their limits, however, are maintained by infrastructural and administrative arrangements. Under the Federal District’s presupuesto participativo, “participative budget,” neighborhoods have become administrative units. Each receives a government grant once or twice a year for improvements to common areas or infrastructure. Neighbors with an official identification
that shows a local address have the right to vote in support of different projects. Also, since the first decade of the 21st century, each neighborhood elects a Citizen’s Committee; these bodies are liaisons between city authorities and neighborhoods.

Unlike Unidad Santa Fe, Campeón’s neighborhood has no walls, but residents know their limits well. Once as I walked with him, Campeón pointed at the Abrahám González neighborhood and said: “On the other side of this street began el monte, “the hills.” All of this was ours to play, to hunt rabbits. They said they were going to make it into a park for us, but then came these squatters, they were backed by this guy from the PRI, and they took over.” A woman heard him and interjected: “Campeón, you always say that. Get over it already. We moved in here more than thirty years ago. You had a right to a park, but we had the right to a place to live, and it was hundreds of us who had no homes!”

Early on, children from “behind the wall” attended schools in Unidad Santa Fe. They also played in the project’s gardens and sports fields. “We liked going there,” Lauro, Campeón’s childhood friend told me, “because the ball would actually bounce when we played basketball. The ball wouldn’t bounce on our dirt streets.” Also, the only public telephones in the area were in Unidad Santa Fe. “Outsiders” would line up on evenings to make calls. Eventually, María G. de García Ruiz had its own school. Other neighborhoods were also equipped with public services. Towards the end of the 20th century, Unidad Santa Fe lost its role as a regional center. Lauro explained: “Before, during elections, candidates would come to the project, and we would all go there. Now they make rallies everywhere, in all neighborhoods.”

As a private condominium whose residents have a shared past, Unidad Santa Fe is akin to houses in what Lévi-Strauss called sociétés à maisons: the project is “a corporate body holding an estate made up of both material and immaterial wealth” (1982:174). The project condenses a number of forms of classification: descent, residence, and sometimes
even political party affiliation (see Boon 1990:100). Often, neighbors speak of each other “in the language of kinship or of affinity” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:174). In the words of Susano Padilla, “the project is like a big family, sometimes we fight, but we all know each other, we are all connected.” Participative budgets draw other types of neighborhoods that do not own property in common close to this definition—their residents, long bound by a shared past and sense of belonging, now have shared ownership over an amount of money.

Time has equalized Unidad Santa Fe and María G. de García Ruiz in other ways. The transformations of houses in Unidad Santa Fe make them resemble those of María G. de García Ruiz. Today, both neighborhoods appear to be “self-built,” with houses of multiple sizes and façades decorated in different ways. Hermeneuts of these equivalences might suggest Unidad Santa Fe has lost its modernist birthright. Descriptions of architecture in Brazilian favelas by Ruth Verde Zein (2011) and Fernando Lara (2009) make way for alternative readings. Verde Zein reminds us that the flat roofs of self-built houses—which welcome additional stories and function as terraces and clothes’ drying areas—are in line with Le Corbusier’s design principles. Lara suggests that construction with concrete cinderblocks—prefabs made of cement, an industrial material—and the use of exposed brick, among other formal and structural features, are evidence of the extent to which modernism has shaped auto-construction. Lara also argues that the progressive differentiation of spaces by their uses in working and middle class dwellings has been influenced by functionalist conventions in architecture. Houses in Mexican “favelas”—including those with official and with relatively official roots—share all of these features; their builders keep the modern movement alive.
3. The Truth about Conspiracies

The first time I visited Don Willy, Unidad Santa Fe’s chronicler, he said, “You tell me you are interested in the history of the project? How far back do you want to go?” For the next two hours I heard him speak about the pre-Hispanic history of the Valley of Mexico while his cats watched over the notes I was scribbling. There were human settlements in Tacubaya, Don Willy told me, since at least the 5th century before Christ… For him, the rest of the region’s history—including his own life, and the nation-state in which it unfolded—could be glimpsed from the high pedestal of antiquity. This perspective is common since the turn of the 20th century, when historians and anthropologists converted the pre-Hispanic past into the point of departure of a national history (Brading 1988; Florescano 2002:353). Unidad Santa Fe can be inscribed in this framework through the identification of continuities in the construction of cities over centuries. This longue durée offers a vantage for the interpretation of the project with relation to enduring attributes of Mexican culture—and also for framing alternative accounts of its past and present.

Since the era of Teotihuacán, a city built between the 1st and 7th centuries of the Common Era, Mesoamerican space was organized on the basis of territorial units known as altépels. Altépetls were divided into four, six or eight rectangular sections, oriented cardinally, each of which belonged to and was inhabited by a lineage. Different lineages elected a tlatoani, a leader who ruled over an altépetl, commanding religious and military operations. Lineages took turns assuming cargos, which involved paying tributes, doing work for the collectivity, and overseeing religious rituals. Altépetls can be said to show the “inextricable relation between territory and social organization” in ancient Mexico (Florescano 2005:43).  

41 Spanish: “relación inextricable entre territorio y organización social.”
Altépetls were symbolized by a glyph of a mountain with a water cave at the core, which was rendered tangible in pyramids in ceremonial centers of Mesoamerican cities (45). In Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, established in the 14th century on an islet in a lagoon in the Valley of Mexico, the Templo Mayor, “main” or “major temple,” was the “fundamental center of the whole universal structure” (Matos 2013:79).42 It was a hinge between earth and the cosmos that condensed Aztec myths and historical events. Spanish colonizers, under the leadership of Hernán Cortés, understood the importance of the temple when they decided to establish their own capital over Tenochtitlan rather than, as some of his collaborators suggested, settling in nearby locales where the ground was dry and solid, and had suffered less damage in recent wars (Matos and Domínguez 2015:151; Cuevas 1952). Spaniards built their own temples using stones from Aztec constructions they dismantled.

Tenochtitlan, known by then as Mexico City, became the symbolic center of the New Spain. Its layout followed that of the old city: it was organized around a ceremonial square enclosed by embodiments of religious and political power, among them the Metropolitan Cathedral and the National Palace, built over the ruins of the Templo Mayor. The city’s layout was soon institutionalized in the Ordenanzas de Nueva Población issued by Philip II in 1573, which stipulated that new settlements in Spanish colonies would have regular street grids, with a plaza at their core surrounded by public buildings. This new urban order, a transformation of one they knew, helped introduce native Mexicans to a new cosmology (Ribera 2007:299-301). Throughout the colonial period, central plazas were a principle of order through which social distinctions were established and enforced. They served for military exercises and other displays of power; the rich lived close to them and, for Indians, access “was strictly controlled” (Jackson 1984:17; see also Low 1996:867).

42 Spanish: “centro fundamental de toda la estructura universal.”
Mexico City’s central plaza remained the main stage of the country’s ritual life after the end of Spanish rule. In the first half of the 20th century, president Antonio López de Santa Anna proposed the construction of a monument to Mexico’s independence at center of this space. This effort was left unfinished: only a plinth, known as zócalo in Spanish, was built. The zócalo became a reference point and, after its demolition, the word remained associated with the city’s core (Novo 2005:30-31). Other cities in the country were organized around plazas analogous to Mexico City’s Zócalo, some of which—including those of Puebla, Cuernavaca, and Oaxaca—came to be known by the same name. These plazas, as “franchises” of the capital’s Zócalo, represented the country’s centralized powers in other locales.

Fig. 17. La cola de pato, “Duck’s tail,” also known as La pata de pato, “Duck’s foot,” El abanico, “Fan,” and Kiosco musical, “Musical kiosk.” This seven-centimeter reinforced concrete structure, with a seven-meter cantilever, was designed by architect Félix Candela. Photo by Onnis Luque, 2008.
Modernist architecture is often associated with the introduction of a new symbolic order to cities. Many of its practitioners were driven by egalitarian and iconoclastic impulses; they sought to erase traditional representations of power and distinctions among spaces used by members of different classes (see González Lobo 2004). In the nineteen-forties, Mario Pani led an unrealized effort to build a new center for Mexico City, which would have brought together commercial and office space around a monumental roundabout at the intersection of the city’s two main thoroughfares. This project implied displacing the Zócalo and its symbols (Pani 1946; Landa 2015c). In other works, however, Pani was more conservative. Among them is Unidad Santa Fe, which rather than defying, reinforces the existing spatial and political organization of the city. The Heroes’ Plaza is a scale-model reproduction of the Zócalo (Landa 2013). As the center of a community, this space brings together symbols of power and was conceived as a stage for public rituals. The Heroes’ Plaza also includes the *Cola de pato* [Fig. 17], a modernist interpretation of 19th century kiosks, built as central squares became spots for leisurely walks by elites and for parties and concerts.

New uses of plazas in the 19th century sprung from liberal efforts to end the Catholic Church’s monopoly over public festivities and promote secular nationalist values (Ribera 2007:307). The construction of Unidad Santa Fe, two decades after the violent clash of church and state in the Cristero War (1926-1929), furthered secularization by creating a new plaza without a temple, an element ubiquitous in colonial ensembles. This exclusion was calculated. The PRI-government in the 20th century sought to take the place of the Catholic Church by fashioning heroes as sacred figures, “granting them an aura of infallibility, and guaranteeing their place in the Fatherland’s Beyond” (Monsiváis 2012:142; see also Lomnitz 1999:286). The historical figures immortalized in Unidad Santa Fe through the inscription

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43 Spanish: “concediéndoles el aura de lo infalible y asegurando su pertenencia al Más Allá de la Patria.”
of their names on the mural on the Plaza’s north end [Fig. 18] are much like Catholic saints. Also, the project’s design and its buildings imbued public health—embodied in the health clinic—and nationalist values—instilled in local schools and in the project’s theater and Social Security Center—with a religious significance. These uses stand in place of an absent church.

Fig. 18. Names inscribed in bronze letters in the Heroes’ Plaza. The mosaic mural behind them was conceived by muralist Jorge González Camarena. The area in front is a fountain that it is rarely turned on. Photo by author, 2011.

In a history of the ways in which Mexico has been represented as a nation over five centuries, historian Enrique Florescano describes the last decades of the 20th century as a period of “evanescence and collapse of images of fatherland and nation” (2005:391). In what he identifies as a crisis, artists and architects have abandoned pre-Hispanic and folkloric motifs, historians have railed against nationalism, and schools “have stopped belonging to the nation and serving the state” through the abandonment of civics as a subject, the

44 Spanish: “Evanescencia y colapso de las imágenes de patria y nación”…“la escuela ha dejado de pertenecer a la nación y de servir al Estado.”
impoverishment of history lessons, and the rise of a corrupt teacher’s union (439). For Florescano, the endpoint of the nation’s symbolic fall is the use, during the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), of a modified version of the country’s official seal that includes only half of its eagle (444). Through this new design—produced, most likely, by a corporate marketing firm—the Office of the Presidency itself turned against its erstwhile inviolable symbols. Florescano’s vision supposes that the demise of nationalism, embodied in visual representations, is tantamount to spiritual impoverishment.

In the years after dedication, Unidad Santa Fe neighbors collaborated with its architects and state authorities in shaping the project into a representation of Mexico’s present and future. Starting in the eighties, the country experienced profound economic and political transformations—among which was the privatization of Unidad Santa Fe—that some claim made its symbols bankrupt. Did people in the project, as inhabitants of a representation of the nation, experience these changes as a crisis in the terms described by Florescano? How did local transformations relate to the reconfiguration of relationships between state subjects, institutions, and officials? How did the relationships of the people of Santa Fe to each other change, and to what extent did this reshape “their sense of membership in a public, and the conditions of their self-knowledge” (Greenhouse 2010:2)?

As I explore answers to these questions, I suggest that, while privatization certainly involved a loss, what was lost was not all there was or all that can be. Neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe lived and continue living alongside representations of multiple pasts and communities. Rather than leaving neighbors orphaned, privatization has led to the reconfiguration of solidarities and their symbols. Some in the project narrate recent changes as a replacement of some institutions by others—churches, gangs, and other local organizations are imagined as taking the place of the state. Below, I account for these substitutions while qualifying them. First, state institutions have not been completely
replaced, as they maintain an important presence in Unidad Santa Fe, and neighbors identify as Mexicans in the terms established by the country’s national history produced in the 20th century. Second, substitutions do not mean equivalence. For instance, while the state might be imbued with sacredness and religion is no doubt political, people in Mexico City distinguish between these two realms by, for example, respecting street shrines—they are immune to graffiti, the theft of offerings and, for the most part, from the discard of garbage near them—and by vandalizing state-built memorials. Commemorative plaques are often tagged or stolen.

This chapter’s main character is Julián Severiano, a man of fifty-four who came of age at the time of the project’s privatization. His life history and opinions help map recent social transformations along changes in Unidad Santa Fe’s spatial configuration and its status as a symbol. In the first section I describe the role of gangs and religious organizations in these processes. I follow Laurence Ralph (2014), who has recognized gangs not as groups of senseless rebels or merely reactionary forces, but as sites of what many in Mexico call “civic participation” (e.g. Tamayo 1997; Meyer 2005) and, in fact, as repositories of age-old values. In the second section, I focus on attempts by economists and state officials at translating nationalist discourses to what can be described as a neoliberal language—a move contested by Julián’s bold first-person accounts of Mexico’s recent history.

Of Saints and Heroes

When he was a young man in the nineteen-eighties, Julián exercised in Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza and sports fields. He was, in the words of Otto Martínez, “a fitness maniac,” the housing project’s resident bodybuilder. Peers gathered around Julián, filled with
admiration, and tried to follow his excruciating routines. He thrived on being dismissive of their efforts.

Julián was a member of a gang that controlled a central area of Unidad Santa Fe. He rose to prominence after defeating Attila in a street fight. Attila was a notorious bully who kept mostly to himself; he was not affiliated to a gang. For years he had been terrorizing the neighborhood by unexpectedly turning violent and by forcing youths in the streets to buy marijuana from him. Julián beat him up after a trivial argument; nobody really remembers how it started. As they fought, others gathered in a circle to watch. Julián threw Attila on the floor with a well-placed punch. The punch chipped Attila’s tooth and his nose started bleeding. Attila did not stand up, and Julián walked away triumphantly.

Julián did not enjoy his fame for long; he left Unidad Santa Fe soon after the fight. Some say he went to Puerto Vallarta, where he made a fortune selling drugs to American and European tourists. According to Otto, he came up with a system that never failed him: he set up a flower company and personally delivered drugs hidden in bouquets to hotel rooms. But this may or may not be true. Julián does not talk about that period of his life.

A few years later, Julián, not only strong and athletic, but now also wealthy and a family man, bought a house in Unidad Santa Fe. He wanted his children to grow up in the same neighborhood he had, and where he was still somewhat of a celebrity. He made his prominence visible by building two stories over the original structure. His house is the tallest in its group. A heavy metallic door keeps intruders out.

By the time he returned to Unidad Santa Fe, Julián had stopped fighting and selling drugs. He had become, in his own words, “a man of peace.”

“Why are you asking me so many questions, anyways? What is it that you really want to know? It seems to me that you are just chasing after the wind. This anthropology thing, it is pure vanity, you know,” Julián would tell me.
After he was born again, Julián would stand on the cement benches in the Heroes’ Plaza and preach the word of Jesus Christ. Some of those who had gathered years before to exercise with him now stood around his pedestal and listened.

I never saw Julián preach. By the time I arrived in Unidad Santa Fe he had become disillusioned with his teacher and church. He had stopped trusting his fellow men. “They are all after money and power,” he would tell me. “Now I only talk to those that will understand. I talk only to discerning minds.”

“I am a natural leader,” Julián would continue. “People come to me. They follow me. People need guidance, they are like sheep. If they only knew what I know, they would know that the times are ripe.”

Julián taught physical fitness to children in Unidad Santa Fe. Twice a week, ten to fifteen children would train with him in the project’s gardens or sports fields. He would take the classes very seriously and made this clear to his students: “Don’t go thinking I’m like those phony teachers you have in school who don’t care for their jobs. Here we do things right! Run faster! Faster I said!” He charged parents a small fee, he told me, to make sure they committed to bring their children in time for lessons. He was not doing it for the money; he was helping make Unidad Santa Fe a better place. One day he stopped.

“Parents just wanted to abandon responsibility over their children. They would bring them to me for the same reasons they put them in front of a TV. They don’t want to have to deal with them, to educate them,” he explained. “Today’s children are degenerate. Just look at them,” and he would point at teenagers in the Heroes’ Plaza, “look how they dress, the boys with homosexual clothes, and those girls look like sluts. This generation is enslaved by television and junk food. The Bible warned us that these days would come, the days when you cannot tell one thing from another, when roles are inverted. And the parents of these children don’t care, many are also degenerate. But I am different, I can see. The government
doesn’t care either. What do you make of these politicians letting the country fill up with fast food chains? They are poisoning our children with pizzas and fake meat! If I wasn’t a man of peace I would go kill those bastards who are poisoning our children. I swear I would kill all the fake leaders out there.”

Privatizations

As a teenager Julián Severiano was a rebel. His period of rebelliousness coincides with economic and political adjustment in Unidad Santa Fe and Mexico at large. The grip the PRI kept on the country’s political life—especially tight in the project—started loosening as the party lost legitimacy and budgets became insufficient to fund existing or new programs.

In 1982 Mexico entered a profound economic crisis caused by both mismanagement and a worldwide recession; it manifested in a considerable devaluation of the peso. Once the crisis had begun, in one of his last actions as president, José López Portillo (1976-1982) unilaterally nationalized the country’s banks. His declared intention was to stop an ongoing cash drain started by unpatriotic Mexicans. His action was highly symbolic, as it mimicked the nationalization of the oil industry by president Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938, celebrated as a decisive step in the country’s revolutionary history. In the words of Claudio Lomnitz, “by nationalizing banks, López Portillo momentarily transformed the announcement of the catastrophic failure of the peso into a commemoration and celebration of the Mexican Revolution” (2008:47). The president’s actions were in line with the names and dates in Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza, which narrate the progressive liberation of its population from corrupting forces and influences: in 1810, Hidalgo began the war of Independence against Spain; Morelos continued this war and in 1813 emancipated slaves; Juárez curtailed the undue influence of the Catholic Church by separating it from the state in laws issued in 1857; in 1910, Madero began the Revolution that ousted dictator Porfirio Díaz and cut the
privileges of the elite and foreign investors with operations in the country; in 1917, Carranza signed the Constitution that converted demands that drove the Revolution into laws. López Portillo wished perhaps to include his own name in this list as he claimed to liberate Mexicans from greedy capitalists who had put their economic welfare ahead of the country’s at a time of crisis. The president, however, gambled his legacy on the continuation of a vision of the country that was in crisis.

Incoming president Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) soon reversed López Portillo’s action and banks returned to private hands. The new president also adopted austerity measures to keep government afloat. Among them was the privatization of IMSS housing projects. By the eighties, these complexes were costly, as their buildings began to age and needed repairs. Also, rents had remained low and could hardly be raised. Neighbors admitted they would have protested against rent hikes, although they knew that what they paid did not cover the costs associated with the project’s upkeep and management. Houses and apartments were thus sold to their occupants for nominal fees. The IMSS did not expect to make a profit from this transaction; it was rather getting a burden off its hands.

These actions announced the liberalization of Mexico’s economy. De la Madrid laid the groundwork for the privatization or restructuring of state companies, realized by his successor, Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). For example, Telmex, a telephone company that operated as government monopoly since 1972, was sold to private investors in 1990. The once influential telephone workers’ union, which counted many members among Unidad Santa Fe’s neighbors, was significantly weakened. Other neighbors were laid off when, in 1994, Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, a state printing press, was converted into Cooperativa de Talleres Gráficos. Through the re-founding of this and other companies, the federal government voided collective contracts and left thousands without a job.
For its part, in face of cash shortages in last decades of the 20th century, the IMSS focused its efforts on the provision of health services and the payment of pensions. The view of Mexico as a country where, in president Ruiz Cortines’ words, “social justice constitutes the guide of our modern history,” and where “by insuring society, we assure ourselves as its members” (Ruiz Cortines 1957:69, 77), no longer had a place in presentations of official actions. For Unidad Santa Fe neighbors, these transformations not only reduced the benefits they had enjoyed as workers and neighbors in a public housing project, but also changed their position with respect to the state. With privatization, Unidad Santa Fe residents were no longer the protagonists of the history narrated by the mural in the Heroes’ Plaza—in fact, aspects of this history began to lose footing among officials. The project stopped being home to a chosen few and became a neighborhood much like any other.

Julián Severiano’s strong words on politicians and his mistrust of state institutions stem from what he characterizes a “shameless scam” consummated through the privatization of Unidad Santa Fe. “They did it for the money, those guys at the IMSS got rich while they took away what was rightfully ours,” he told me. Julián’s pursuits in fitness, drug trafficking and Christianity, might also have an origin in the dislocation brought about by privatization—like many other neighbors, Julián sought replacements for the PRI-government where he could ground his understanding of himself and others.

Opposite of loyalty

In a conversation with Bruno Parra, who worked in the Mexico’s central bank in nineteen-nineties, he summarized the country’s transformations since 1982 century as follows: “For decades, the government disbursed money to whoever asked. That was the way to keep potential opponents quiet. That’s why the government appears so incoherent for most of the

45 Spanish: “La justicia social… constituye la guía de nuestra historia…”“nosotros, los individuos, asegurando a la sociedad, nos aseguramos como miembros de la misma.”
20\textsuperscript{th} century. It would fund all sorts of initiatives, many in evident contradiction to each other. It did so to make everybody feel the government was on their side, to keep everybody happy. This worked until there was no money left. In the eighties the state went broke, and that was the end of the PRI. That’s when the opposition started gaining footing. There was now room for others to take on causes the government could not.\textsuperscript{46}

Starting in 1982, the government’s lack of liquidity limited the extent to which state institutions could reward loyalty. In contrast to the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century, by the eighties being loyal to the PRI was no longer a dependable strategy to obtain benefits. For those who remained within state-owned companies or institutions, incentives to be loyal to superiors and participate in state-orchestrated simulations—an effective way to advance socially and economically decades before—had for the most part disappeared. Ascent within the country’s bureaucracy was increasingly unattainable. For those in the private sector, both job security and real wages decreased with the devaluation of the peso, and cuts to social security benefits (Nutini and Isaac 2009:147; Escobar and González 1995).

In this context, in the nineteen-eighties youths formed territorial gangs in Unidad Santa Fe and surrounding neighborhoods. These gangs were aggressively iconoclastic. Their actions were the opposite of loyalty: young men raided middle and upper class neighborhoods, where they destroyed property, and staged performative street fights and battles. Los Panchitos, a loose federation of gangs that formed in neighborhoods west of Unidad Santa Fe, became especially notorious. In the words of writer Juan Villoro, they “managed to make the news on the persistence of fist punches” (1986:116).\textsuperscript{47} In previous decades, their neighborhoods’ leaders exchanged votes for favors and improvements to local infrastructure. Now the pact was broken, as officials had no resources to disburse.

\textsuperscript{46} Urban sociologist Diane Davis offers a similar assessment in “The Dialectic of Autonomy: State, Class, and Economic Crisis in Mexico, 1958-1982” (1993:60).

\textsuperscript{47} Spanish: “había logrado ser noticia a punta de madrazos.”
While Los Panchitos often stole in their raids, this was not their main objective. In an interview with Doria, a former Panchito I met in La Mexicana neighborhood, he told me they were trying to call attention to their abandonment. In this respect, they were like architects in the sense advanced by Guy Dabord and other Situationists artists in Europe in earlier decades: they did not seek to give shape to built forms, but to create “emotionally moving situations” (Sadler 1998:107) that would make visible the city as it exists beyond the intentions of planners and the police. While Situationists rebelled against modern architecture and its pretense to rationality, Los Panchitos rebelled against the failure of the state to offer them benefits comparable to those their parents enjoyed. According to Doria, the country’s economic and political elite used newspapers, television, and the radio to defend their interests while alienating the country’s working poor. As a response, Los Panchitos enacted counter-performances that denounced the city’s segregation and the failings of government.48

Los Panchitos raided Unidad Santa Fe a number of times. Neighbors remember they would hide indoors when they heard them come, and would turn off the lights to avoid calling their attention. Cars were hard to protect—their owners just had to hope they would be spared. Windshields were shattered with metal chains and stones. The members of local gangs remember engaging invaders. Once there was a battle many still talk about: youths from Unidad Santa Fe went inside Don Flores’s store by the Heroes’ Plaza and defended themselves from there. They had cobbled stones from the project’s gardens (one of which is immediately in front of the store, contained by a wall that doubled as a fort) as well as glass bottles and cans of food, which they used to make Los Panchitos retreat.

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Around 1985, there were four major gangs in Unidad Santa Fe: Tarkus, Doken, Chips, and Banda Pañal, later renamed Los Stones. Their members lived and had grown up near each

48 The awareness of Los Panchitos of their social position and its perils is revealed by a manifesto they sent to the press in 1981. This document describes the plight of the city’s young and poor as a reaction to their characterization as vagrants and delinquents (Feixa 1998:10).
other, within their turf. As remembered by Fernando Panzi and Gerardo Garcia, Tarkus—to which both belonged—controlled the Heroes’ Plaza and surrounding buildings and house groups; Chips controlled Blocks 3 and 5, on the north of the project; Doken was from the project’s west end, around groups 27 and 30, and The Stones controlled Block 1. Gang members defended their territories—and the girls living in them, often their sisters—through fistfights in the project’s common areas. The most popular sites for fights were the Heroes’ Plaza and the garden in front of the project’s elementary schools. Fights were generally between two individuals from opposing gangs. Others observed but did not intervene. Fights helped establish status distinctions. Julián Severiano’s fame was founded on his victories in street fights, and reached its high point when he defeated Attila. Others rose to prominence in the same way. Today, three decades later, individuals still remember particular fights and derive prestige within their age group from their triumphs.

Although they did not raid other neighborhoods like Los Panchitos did, gangs in Unidad Santa Fe were also highly performative. Men in their forties and fifties today often speak of the American film *The Warriors* (Hill 1979) as an inspiration. In this film, New York City gangs use distinctive dress and make up, and have particular tastes in music and dance. In Unidad Santa Fe, gangs were often associated with sound systems that organized dance parties. Tarkus members specialized in break dancing and participated in competitions in other parts of the city. Others were linked to Mexico City’s underground rock and roll scene—since the Avándaro Festival in 1971, Mexico’s response to Woodstock, this genre was associated with counter-cultural movements (Feixa 1998:4-5)—and to disco and Colombian music. The names of most gangs were in English or sounded like they were. This linked them to *The Warriors* and similar movies, and distanced them from the state’s nationalist orthodoxy. Until the nineteen-nineties, the Mexican government mandated that Foreign brand names and words in the press be Hispanicized.
Gangs competed against each other and protected their turf. Their primary territory, however, was the project, which they defended against outsiders. As they did the night they fought off Los Panchitos from Don Flores’ store, Unidad Santa Fe’s gang segments came together when faced by gangs from other neighborhoods. One evening in the Heroes’ Plaza, Sebastian Sosa told me: “I swear it was like this, I was fighting Mole right here and the rest were watching, and we heard these guys from El Cuernito coming in through the garden. So we stopped and fought them together. One minute we were killing each other, and the next we are fighting side by side against the intruders.”

Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla (1991) suggested that in the eighties, a “new territoriality” emerged in Mexico City’s housing projects. The defense of Unidad Santa Fe’s boundaries by gangs shows that this territoriality emerged not through the development of an alternative spatial logic, but through the transformation of existing elements. Despite their disruptive antics, gangs were in many ways conservative (Feixa 1998:3), as they did not seek to introduce a new social order, but to preserve the world they had known as children. Like their elders, those who came of age in the eighties idealize the project’s Golden Age and seek to return. While gangs exist only as memories, many of their members insist that Unidad Santa Fe is “historic” and needs to be protected against further deterioration.

Juan Stone—he goes by the name of his gang—is well known as a collector of photos and toys. In 2012 he started a Facebook page called “Unidad Santa Fe help me” (in English in the original), to promote participation in actions for the benefit of the project. Juan publishes photographs of plastic superheroes, playing cards decorated with Disney characters, and wrestler masks, alongside black and white shots of Unidad Santa Fe, images of the project’s damaged infrastructure, and occasionally, representations that can be readily be identified as national symbols—for instance, in September 2015 he posted a photo of a modern interpretation of a pre-Hispanic sculpture with the caption, “These are my roots and
my customs. I am Mexican.” In the comments to these images, neighbors celebrate a shared cherished past. As Juan hoped when he made the Facebook group, this motivates his followers to express indignation at the project’s deterioration. Notably, past and present are bound together not only by official imagery of state institutions, but also by consumer goods from other times. For Juan and his peers, the memory of Unidad Santa Fe as a state-owned complex is entangled with their idealized childhoods.

Conservatism of the middle generation also manifests in their support at the turn of the 21st century of efforts to transform Mexico’s political system from within. In 2012 elections, people between forty and sixty in the country had high participation rates (with 67 to 72%), far above the rates of voters between twenty and thirty (53%), and only exceeded by people between sixty and seventy (74%) (IFE 2013). Many men and women of the middle generation identify or have identified with the Partido de la Revolución Democrática, “Party of the Democratic Revolution” (PRD). This party formed in 1989 as a coalition of left-wing splinters of the PRI that sought to keep alive the brand of nationalism founded in the narration of the Mexican Revolution as a permanent process. One of the founders and the longtime leader of the PRD was Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the son of president Lázaro Cárdenas whose driver lives in Unidad Santa Fe. Journalist Alfredo Corchado cites a source explaining the role of Cárdenas: “Imagine FDR’s son coming back to take down the Democratic Party” (2014:89). The PRD governs the country’s Federal District since 1997, and, as I explore in more detail in Chapter 5, has maintained a commitment to 20th century nationalist symbols.

Other loyalties
For decades, religious organizations had a limited role in Mexico’s official life. As part of his attempts to consolidate the federal government as the country’s dominant site of sovereignty, president Plutarco Elías Calles (1924-1928) implemented anti-clerical laws from the 1917
Constitution. Catholic rebels and the country’s government fought the bloody Cristero War from 1926 to 1929. Although animosity waned in the nineteen-thirties and early forties as church and state developed an informal agreement, known by historians as the *modus vivendi* (Blancarte 1992), the laws defended by Calles remained in place throughout the 20th century: religious organizations, having no official recognition before the state, could not own property, and clerics did not have the right to vote or hold office. Unlike other countries— notably those within the Soviet Union (Hann and Pelkmans 2009)—the state’s secularism did not mean Mexicans were forced or even encouraged to renounce their faith. The overwhelming majority of the country’s population remained Roman Catholic; they were allowed to practice their religion freely as long as they simulated secularism in official domains.

As part of his broad liberalization program, president Carlos Salinas introduced reforms to normalize the state’s relationship to churches. The president established diplomatic relations with the Holy See in 1990, and welcomed pope John Paul II as a foreign dignitary in 1991. That same year, congress approved a constitutional reform that gave clerics the right to vote, authorized teaching religion in private schools, and recognized religious organizations as legal entities (Preston and Dillon 2004:220). These changes were significant not only for the Catholic Church. While there were dozens of religious congregations in the country, they had kept a low profile for decades, often under the guise of cultural institutions. Towards 1991 these groups began to proselytize actively and gained thousands of adepts. In 1970, non-Catholics represented 2.2% of the country’s population; by 2000, they were 7.6% (INEGI 2005). In 2010, this percentage had grown to 17, with more than half among them identifying with non-Catholic Christian denominations (INEGI 2011).

Crisanto Quintero—a Catholic priest who grew up in the project and is in charge of a parish in Molino de Santo Domingo, a nearby neighborhood—assured me that organized
religion was never absent from Unidad Santa Fe, even when it was owned and managed by the IMSS. Nuns from a nearby convent visited and organized games for children in the project’s gardens. Many families kept religious images at home, and they attended religious services. Crisanto told me that despite pronouncements of secularism, many in government were believers or respected the beliefs of their friends and family members. His own grandfather had fought in the Cristero War on the side of the government, but he was “not ideological,” as he respected his many relatives who were practicing Catholics.

By Crisanto’s account, the transformations of the eighties and nineties did not involve reemergence of religiosity—religion had never faded—but the rise of a charismatic spirit, with origins in spiritual retreats for youths. Energized adolescents encouraged their parents to participate in events for adults or married couples. The center of these activities was the Cristo Rey church, which, starting in the late seventies, was transformed from a wooden cabin into a large concrete structure under the leadership of, among others, Unidad Santa Fe neighbor Rosa Camacho. Ms. Camacho raised funds by organizing raffles and bazars, and by applying to grants. She coordinated different actors, including the office of the bishop, the parish, an architect, and a construction firm.

Neighbors from Unidad Santa Fe who attended church in Cristo Rey at the time also volunteered as missionaries in surrounding neighborhoods. In the manner of nuns who visited the project decades earlier, they organized games, sang religious songs and told stories to children. Meanwhile, a number of neighbors who were raised Catholic or non-religious converted to other Christian denominations. Conversions were also driven by youths; a few became interested in the Bible through contacts in other neighborhoods and, after being born again, invited their friends from the project to follow suit. Soon, groups gathered to read the Bible and celebrate services in people’s houses. When Julián Severiano preached in the
Heroes’ Plaza, the project was bustling with new Christians, renewed Catholics, and a few Hare Krishnas.

Since the 19th century, protestant congregations have been linked to dissidence in Mexico—at the time, their opposition to the powerful Catholic Church facilitated alternative modes of association and challenged traditional powers (Bastian 1989). Perhaps this eased Severiano’s trajectory from gang membership to religion: while he became “a man of peace,” he remained positioned counter to traditional authorities. Severiano’s conversion might also have helped him renounce drugs and illicit activities. To this day, many neighbors find institutional support in religion that their parents’ generation found in state agencies.

In Chapter 1 I suggested that families who moved to Unidad Santa Fe willingly assumed the role of actors, and this made them protagonists in a national mise-en-scène. Collaboration with state institutions also gave them benefits and opportunities for advancement. Similarly, for the children of Unidad Santa Fe’s first generation, religious organizations have offered them a sense of membership, and often, they have given them access to benefits the state no longer offers. This does not mean that conversions were purely instrumental, much like becoming an accomplice of the state in the fifties involved more than calculation. In both cases, there is an affective dimension that stems from the experience of being part of a community.

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One afternoon I was writing field notes outside of Pancho’s store when Mar, a seventeen-year-old girl approached me. “I’ve seen you hang out with Rifle and the others,” she told me. “You know, he was my boyfriend, but I dumped him a year ago. Has he ever talked to you about me?” Rifle is one of the young men who gather regularly in the Heroes’ Plaza. I had not heard him speak of Mar, but said nothing. “I broke up with him because I wanted to continue school, I started fearing I might lose my way from being with the boys all day. My
mother told me, she warned me telling me stories of people she knows. I wouldn’t listen, but then I became a Mormon and that changed everything."

I asked how she had become a Mormon.

“One of the Elders invited me.” She meant one of the young (and often American) missionaries who live in an apartment in Block 1 and roam Unidad Santa Fe and surrounding neighborhoods in pairs, wearing white shirts and plastic nametags. They stay in the project for three months and then move elsewhere to continue their missions.

Mar continued: “When I entered the ward, it felt right. It was cozy inside… At that time my grandfather was living with us. He was very ill, and had not spoken a word for months. He just sat in front of the TV and was very quiet. But once I was alone with him and he spoke. He said that he loved me, that he wanted me to make the right choices in life. At that time I was trying to decide whether I should get baptized. I had been going to the ward fairly frequently, but had not yet decided. But then I did it, this past May.”

Since becoming a Mormon, Mar had a new group of friends and stayed away from the young men in the Heroes’ Plaza. Her grades had improved and, with only a year left to finish high school, she was starting to think about college.

Conversions have changed the course of other people’s lives in Unidad Santa Fe. Tania Cortés always expressed great pride in her son, who had studied college in the United States and had married a French woman. They now live in Paris, where he works in a marketing firm and she is sales representative for a major fashion company. When I asked how his son had arrived in the United States she explained: “We are Presbyterian, so he did it through the church. American missionaries came once to our service, and he became friends with them, and then they invited him to go visit Denver when he was in high school, and they gave him advice on how to write his college applications and helped him with his English. He met his wife in church in the United States.”
Religion can also be a strategy for recovery from addiction. Julián Severiano was not the only person who quoted the Bible to me in Unidad Santa Fe. Many others did. Among them was Jordan, who turned to charismatic Catholicism after crashing his car while drunk, and Ramiro, once a crack user and now a devout Evangelical. Both spoke to me of how God had helped them overcome addiction. However, as the case of anexos suggests, religion is not always means to an end. Anexos, literally “annexes,” are “hybrid” institutions in private residences “composed of parts 12-step program, mental asylum, prison, and church” (Garcia 2015:1) where families send their addicted relatives—generally young men—when they feel they have run out of options. Anexos generally do not employ physicians, nurses or other health professionals, and are not licensed by the government to provide care to addicts. Some anexos are Christian ministries and others “embody a Roman Catholic sensibility that conjures sacrificial pain” (2). In the interpretation of anthropologist Angela García, their objective is not to cure patients; rather, they are sites for “expressing and managing the pain of the self and community” (14). The attitudes of Unidad Santa Fe neighbors who had family members interned in anexos supports this account: much like those with relatives in prison, they did not expect them to be cured or corrected, but, I was told, perhaps they would understand and assume the pain they had caused and find some comfort in being with others who share their problems.

**Marcos 1994**

Much like religion was never fully absent in Unidad Santa Fe, after privatization, the state did not fully go away. The IMSS retained control over the project’s health clinic, theater, day care, Social Security Center, and Casino—now a sports club. The Ministry of Public Education manages the project’s schools. Moreover, the hero-centered history taught in these schools and reproduced in rituals and speeches in the Heroes’ Plaza remains the normative
understanding of the country’s past.

One afternoon I noticed an inscription on the mosaic mural in the Heroes’ Plaza, next to the names of the leading men of the country’s official history—it read “Marcos,” and looked like it had been carved with a rock or a knife. I imagined it referred to Subcomandante Marcos, the spokesperson of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, “Zapatista Army for National Liberation” (EZLN), a guerrilla movement that declared war on the Mexican government on January 1, 1994. Today, the rebels remain in control of certain territories, where they have set up autonomous communities. Periodically, they issue declarations commenting on current events. A few days after I first saw it, I mentioned the inscription while sharing a beer by Pancho’s store with Otto, Daniel, Marlon and their friends, most of whom were members of Tarkus.

“I wrote that!” said Otto proudly.

He explained: when the Zapatista uprising was first reported on television, gang members commented the news excitedly. “Every time something big happens, people in Unidad Santa Fe come out to the Plaza to discuss it with their neighbors,” he told me. “And we did that on the day when the Zapatistas declared war.”

The EZLN gave Otto and his friends hope. For years they had resented the PRI and its economic policies and authoritarianism. Now there was a rebel group that promised to liberate the country from the party. In the excitement of the moment they decided to carve Marcos’ name next to those in bronze letters. Like official heroes, Marcos marked a beginning in Mexican history. Otto remembers using his car’s keys; he and his friends took turns. Someone might have started carving another letter with a screwdriver. I told Otto that a more radical act of rebellion would have been to take down the monument representing the country’s state-sponsored history. Yet the names of the Mexico’s official heroes remain intact.
In *The Myth of the Revolution*, historian Ilene O’Malley (1986) describes the process whereby a group of select participants in the Mexican Revolution became national heroes, while others were forgotten. The consecrated represented different interests during the war, and they were often at odds with each other. By putting their differences to the side, the PRI-government “created the impression that the revolution had been a unified rising-up of a people whose common Mexicanness was their most salient and determinant characteristic” (127-128). Hero worship took the form of commemorations of their death, use of their names for towns, streets and public buildings, and narrations of their lives using conventions of Catholic hagiography. Like saints, each hero became the patron of a cause or group. Francisco Madero, who revolted against a man who had been president for thirty years, became patron of non-reelection. Emiliano Zapata, who fought for land reform, became patron of peasants. Venustiano Carranza emerged as patron of 1917 Constitution, which he promulgated as president. Pancho Villa, who launched an attack on Columbus, New Mexico during the Revolution, was at times fashioned as patron of anti-imperialism, and at times as patron of the idea of revolution, given his prominent place in film and popular media. The creation of PRI involved the unification of parties, factions, and regions (see Chapter 1), as well as the assemblage of a hero-centered history. The pantheon consolidated, together with the party, towards the end of the nineteen-thirties.

In the Catholic Church, once consecrated, saints can hardly be demoted. Different figures, however, tend to gain prominence in different junctures. In the second half of the 20th century, for example, Church leaders waged the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of Mexican nationality to contain the expansion of Protestantism in the country (Monsiváis 1987b). Other saints have risen without deliberate institutional intervention: at the turn of the 21st century, Saint Judas Thaddeus, patron saint of *causas imposibles*, “impossible causes,” gained
millions of worshipers among the young and poor in Mexico City. Judas has almost completely displaced a saint formerly venerated by Mexico City’s poor, Saint Martín de Porres, the was illegitimate son of a Spanish nobleman and a freed black slave in colonial Peru who took care of orphans and animals. Since veneration of Judas does not always adhere to Catholic orthodoxy, the Church has only halfheartedly welcomed this change. This shift perhaps stems from a new consciousness among the urban poor, who no longer identify with the meek Martín, seek assurance in their hopelessness, and embrace the ambiguity stemming from Thaddeus’ association with Judas the traitor. Worshipers of Judas Thaddeus seem to know that loyalty and betrayal are not easily set apart.

Similarly, as the inscription of Subcomandante Marcos’ name on the wall of the Heroes’ Plaza suggests, national heroes rise and fall from prominence by state design and against it. Otto once told me that Zapata was obviously not among the heroes memorialized...
by the IMSS. Perhaps inspired by the use of this figure by the EZLN, he believes that, unlike the names inscribed in bronze letters, Zapata was not engaged in politics-as-simulation, but was truly concerned with the poor and destitute. For their part, some of those who opposed the PRI in the nineties in electoral politics rallied around Madero, waging a long ignored aspect of his doctrine: *sufragio efectivo,* “effective suffrage.” After his election in 2000 as the first opposition president since the creation of the PRI, Vicente Fox sought to give official recognition to those who had made possible the consolidation of electoral democracy in the country. In 2003 and 2004, he presided over ceremonies to transfer the remains of Manuel Gómez Morin, founder of the PAN, Jesús Reyes Heroles, a PRI reformer, and Heberto Castillo, an intellectual affiliated to the PRD, to the Rotunda of Illustrious People in Mexico City’s Dolores Cemetery, two kilometers north of Unidad Santa Fe. By proclaiming members of the country’s three main political parties as heroes, Fox sought to fashion the national pantheon as a democratic institution. Like young residents of Unidad Santa Fe in 1994, the president chose to complement the history developed under the PRI, rather than challenge its underlying logic.

For decades, streets in neighborhoods surrounding Unidad Santa Fe have come together around shrines. These are often small brick and cement structures in the shape of a church where people who live in surrounding houses keep religious images [Fig. 19]—the most common, present in practically all shrines, are the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Judas Thaddeus. Different neighbors assume responsibilities for cleaning, painting, and decorating shrines. On December 12, the day of Guadalupe, they gather to celebrate mass or pray around them. In Unidad Santa Fe, a space where public displays of religion clashed with official secularism, shrines and other religious images were found only inside houses and apartments. Since privatization, however, some have appeared in common areas [Fig. 20]. A neighbor in Block 3 keeps a shrine in a common garden in front of his building. He presents flower
offerings regularly, and redecorates for major religious holidays. People who do not reside in the project have introduced other religious images. Merchants in El súper keep a shrine, as do taxi drivers in their two bases by the project’s entrances, and paramedics in the IMSS ambulance parking lot. Conversely, as areas surrounding Unidad Santa Fe have been “regularized” by state authorities, they have been furnished by effigies of secular saints. For example, in La Mexicana neighborhood west of the project there is a newly refurbished bust of Morelos [Fig. 21].

Fig. 20. Image of Saint Judas Thaddeus in front of pinball machines in El súper, painted on the wall of a bakery (left). Fig. 21. Bust of José María Morelos, hero of the Mexican Independence, and plaque that commemorates its rehabilitation by the local government, in the nearby Colonia La Mexicana (right). Photos by author, 2012.

In 2012, I heard Unidad Santa Fe neighbors talk about the presence of Vatican investigators in the area. They were collecting data that would warrant the beatification of Vasco de Quiroga five centuries after his attempt to implement Utopia and five decades after IMSS officials recognized him as a “precursor or social security” (Cárdenas 1968). Not long before, the Delegación had unveiled a full-body bronze of Quiroga on Camino Real a Toluca
near the Santa Fe pueblo. The Catholic Spanish colonizer celebrated by the Mexican state would now be officially elevated to sainthood. As I considered the new role Quiroga was being recruited to perform and the celebration of Subcomandante Marcos by neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe, I wondered if descriptions of “evanescence and collapse of images of fatherland and nation” (Florescano 2005:391), rather than attesting to the disintegration of shared values, betrayed a sense of loss over the breakdown of the state’s monopoly over nationalist symbols. This monopoly allowed for the imagination of Unidad Santa Fe as a place where, as in idealized characterizations of pre-Hispanic cities offered by historians and archeologists, social and political organization corresponded perfectly to the physical environment. The breakdown of this illusion after privatization shows that built forms might be put together to tell a story, but they can also help conceive its alternatives. Signs and their meaning are not intrinsically connected; the arbitrariness of the former welcomes re-significations, replacements, and transpositions in new iterations of old narratives.

How the Middle Class Votes

Julián Severiano is one of Unidad Santa Fe’s most visible neighbors. He walks his dog in the project’s gardens regularly and is a vocal presence in neighbor meetings, where people resist handing him the microphone. “He’s right most of the time, you know, but he’s a bit forceful with his opinions,” Otto told me.

After talking to Julián a few times, he confided there is a secret, international group of Jews who decide for the rest of us, and there is nothing we can do to resist them. In Mexico there is another group, a step down the ladder of power, that makes decisions of local import. The president and everybody else in politics are just a front; they have no real power.
“In the eighties, these men decided in one of their meetings that there would no longer be a middle class in Mexico. They decided that from then on the country would be divided into rich and poor.”

Julián counts himself among the poor. He owns a three-story house in Unidad Santa Fe and has two cars. His daughter just finished college (“Join the police force,” he told her, “that’s the only way a girl from Unidad Santa Fe will ever be taken seriously and move up the ladder”). Julián makes a good living as a contractor. I suggested that he might not be exactly poor. Both of us, I told him, had seen real poverty. And it looked to me like he was well off. Middle class, I would say.

“That’s exactly what they want you to believe,” he said, squinting as he does when he is being dead serious. “You are falling for their game, they have gotten to your mind.” He continued: “I went to do some plumbing work yesterday for a Jew in his new house in Tecamachalco. The client was this kid in his twenties, his father had given him this huge house as a wedding present. Just the garden is larger than a whole group of houses here, and then they come from the Delegación to try to stop us from using water, they tell us we have to save water all the time. Can you imagine how much water that kid uses watering his garden? But of course they tell him nothing.

“So the Jew shows up to pay me, to hand me a check, and he’s carrying a child, a newborn, barely two or three months old. As soon as I saw the baby I thought ‘I’ve lost!’ No matter how hard I work, how much I try to get ahead, that baby has fucked me already. He doesn’t have to lift a finger. Just by being born to this family he’s richer and more powerful that I’ll ever be.”

Some days after Julián told me this story, I ran into him walking his dog. It was election day, in July 2012. He had not voted. Over the past weeks, the radio had been playing
spots by the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) encouraging people to go to the polls. Some were narrated as children’s stories: “Once upon a time…”

“Did you hear those ads?” Julián asked. “They’re telling us the truth, but people don’t want to see it. This whole thing, the elections, all of politics is a fairy tale. And history repeats itself. The Aztecs gave the Spaniards their gold in exchange for mirrors and cheap trinkets. And now people give politicians their vote, they give them power, in exchange for a sandwich or a t-shirt in a campaign rally. They go like lambs and give votes to these crooks in exchange for empty promises.

“You know the root of the word politics? It’s from the Greek, it means theater, make believe. The word says it all. Everything is fake. Those ramps right there”—he pointed at two ramps cutting through the stairways that lead to the Heroes’ Plaza—“the Delegación said they built them for wheelchairs, but they’re really for garbage collectors, so they can push their carts here. Garbage makes money, and nobody really cares for people on wheelchairs.

“And have you seen the roasted chickens they sell in Cristo Rey? When you go there you see them going around the roaster, but I’ve seen it, they actually cook them in a gas oven and then they put them there, to make us think they are roasted, but I know better, me they can’t fool!”

Why, I asked Julián, would they go through the trouble of making such an elaborate display? Wouldn’t it be easier for them to just roast the birds? He squinted and looked into my eyes. “You don’t get it, do you?”

He continued: “We live in a world of illusions. People lie by default. Just like Barrera, that wannabe licenciado. I helped him get elected manager. I spoke on his behalf in an assembly. But as soon as he was elected, with my support, it was clear he was just after power, like everybody else.
“Just look at those old snakes in the Citizen’s Committee. That’s what happens to people here. They do nothing with their lives and then they try to make up for not having money, not having achieved anything by ruining the lives of those who’ve been successful, who have made a career. That gets them off! What would an old man like Eugenio’s father know? He’s done nothing all his life. That’s why his wife left him. And he is out giving speeches on how to be a good neighbor! I’m tired, I’m leaving this place. I’ll sell my house and move somewhere else.”

After the elections, I left Unidad Santa Fe for a few days. I was exhausted from hearing descriptions of the world as a hall of mirrors. Like Julián, neighbors increasingly described it in these terms as election day approached. The proliferation of imaginative realities made it difficult to ground one’s opinions: everything was up for questioning. The day I returned I saw Julián from afar, walking his dog, but we did not talk. I did not feel like hearing his assessment of the PRI’s resounding electoral victory.

Soon after, I stopped seeing him. I found out some weeks later that a thief in Tacubaya had injured him when he was changing buses. The thief pointed a knife at Julián and asked for his wallet. Julián resisted and got ready to fight, but the thief moved faster and pushed the knife through his chest. The doctor said the knife missed his lung by a few millimeters. Since then Julián had been convalescing in his house, looking down on Unidad Santa Fe from his room on the third floor.

Illusions of backstage

So-called conspiracy theories that circulate in Unidad Santa Fe sustain that decisions of consequence in the country are made by powerful people behind closed doors—often unnamed, conspirators might include U.S. government operatives, the superrich, drug cartel leaders and prominent politicians. These theories are supported by exposés by investigative
journalists and by popular media—the plots of recent thrillers such as Colosio: El asesinato (Bolado 2012) and La dictadura perfecta (Estrada 2014) hinge on secret discussions among government and business elites. These representations derive their appeal from suggesting a world clearly divided into a front and a backstage (Goffman 1959). The former, available to all, is the territory of representation, while the latter, the territory of truth, is inaccessible.

In a revealing essay on state power, Philip Abrams concludes: “The state is… in every sense of the term a triumph of concealment… The state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is” (2006:123-125). By this account, a state’s front stage lends the illusion there is something behind it, while being in fact a mask with nothing underneath. One might apply this understanding to perceptions of the Mexican state: the secret meetings Julián and recent films narrate, where the powerful decide for the rest of the country’s population, do not in fact take place. Accounts of these events sustain the belief that behind arbitrariness there is order, and that in contrast to the emasculation Julián might feel, others have unlimited power. This gives conspiracy theorists assurance that there is a thought-through logic behind the actions of the powerful and the structural forces that the shape lives of Mexicans. This point of view is self-sabotage insofar as it helps sustain the precarious power of the elite by making it appear indisputable.

There is more than delusion, however, to the narratives of Julián and others. One might read them, for instance, as allegories. In a country used to mythological renderings of the past, the proposition that a group of powerful people decided in a meeting to eradicate the middle class offers a synthetic account of the complex processes whereby the economy was liberalized and the uneven distribution of resources in the country. Another possible reading—one that gets us closer to the texture of politics in Mexico City—recognizes that what is at stake is not the truth-value of Julián theories. For him and other neighbors in
Unidad Santa Fe, narratives are not necessarily accounts of facts, but ways of constructing relations and using and challenging the use of power by others.

This dimension of conspiracy theories comes across in Julián’s suggestion that the roasted chickens in Cristo Rey are “not really roasted.” He sees meaning in the apparently nonsensical act of cooking chicken in an oven instead of using a perfectly functional roaster. According to art historian Kirk Varnedoe, abstract paintings and sculptures, as opposed to their figurative counterparts, show “anything except themselves” (2006:25). Following Oscar Wilde, in the Introduction of this dissertation I contrasted realism to imaginative recreations of evidence. Here I elaborate on this analogy by suggesting that Julián’s narratives, as those of other neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe, are like abstract art: they are often meaningful unto themselves and not as characterizations of the world. What matters is the recognition of deception as the rule, the natural state of affairs.

Mexico City residents are constantly engaged in the production of representations that do not presume to have a factual basis, because the factual is in itself highly suspect. In local and national politics, everything is false until proven otherwise—and nothing can ever be proven definitively. From this perspective, the state is not a mask hiding a real reality, but rather, a web of contradictory images and assertions, all present at surface level. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard (1994[1981]) sounds off an alarm by proclaiming that in the contemporary world, images have lost their referential value. People in Mexico City appear to be a step ahead of Baudrillard. Far from not knowing they are within a world of abstractions, they have willfully constructed and navigated among them for decades.49

In *Bordering on Chaos*, an account of Mexico in the first half of the nineteen-nineties, journalist Andres Oppenheimer (1996), writes that The Coca-Cola Company translated a popular slogan from American advertisements, “Coke: It’s the real thing” into Spanish as

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49 For further anthropological challenges to Baudrillard’s high-stakes bet on a vanished authenticity, and in advance of references to Coca-Cola ahead, see Boon 1999:249-262.
Esta es la verdad to use in Mexico. Focus groups, however, reacted negatively to the slogan. Oppenheimer suggests this is because truth has a negative connotation in Mexico (270). More than a negative connotation, however, in Unidad Santa Fe and beyond, truth is assumed to be non-existent or impossible to pin down. If something is described as truthful, authentic or definitive, people immediately suspect that it is not. Positive statements make sense only as way of giving way to other positive statements that challenge them. Truth is slippery and, in fact, irrelevant.

For Julián, what seems to be at stake is not whether the meeting he described happened or not. What is at stake is his participation in communities that share his experiences and understanding of the country’s past and present. Inclusion and exclusion through the narration of facts and fictions play out both locally and in the country as a whole. Politicians and intellectuals who set about to shape Mexico into a democracy in the last decades of the 20th century hoped for a system where statements would be straightforward, finances would be transparent, and government would operate rationally. Government practiced in these terms, however, was soon subsumed by the logic of imaginative realities.

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In the nineteen-nineties, the PRI-dominated congress approved electoral reforms as concessions to an ever more vocal opposition, and the PAN and the PRD won elections and the results were respected (Woldenberg 2012:116-118). Electoral fraud, once common, was now more difficult to accomplish. By 1997, congress had a substantial number of senators and congressmen from opposition parties, and they governed three states in the country. The biggest blow to the PRI came in 2000, when Vicente Fox, former Coca-Cola executive, governor of the state of Guanajuato, and a member of the PAN, won the presidency. Journalists, intellectuals, and thousands of voters hailed his triumph as the consolidation of Mexico as a democracy after decades of authoritarian rule.
During the campaign and in his early years in government, Fox had the support of a broad coalition across social classes and political leanings. What brought them together was Fox’s promise of “change,” which crystalized in his stated desire to “get the PRI out of Los pinos”—the presidential residence. Since the nineteen-eighties, opposition to the PRI had been a principle of national unity. Anti-government sentiments were shared across classes and political ideologies. A future when the PRI was no longer the dominant force in politics was anticipated as a future without corruption, nepotism, and bureaucratic inefficiency, and where all Mexicans would reap benefits from democracy and economic prosperity. After Fox’s triumph, however, transformations were slow to arrive, partly because the “bureaucratic machine” (Weber 1958:228-230) built by the PRI was entrenched and made revolutionary changes unlikely. Soon, many of Fox’s supporters felt betrayed (e.g. Muñoz Ledo 2008; see also Tuckman 2012).

Fox staked his reputation as a force for democracy on the eradication of corruption through “transparency.” The president created the Instituto Federal de Acceso a la Información Pública Gubernamental, “Federal Institute for Access to Public Government Information” (IFAI). Fox and his fellow reformers perhaps thought this institute would lay bare a “real reality” that had been lurking for decades behind representations (see Cejudo, López, and Ríos 2012), but, after years of living among possibly false narratives, people had no reason to believe that this time facts and their appearance actually corresponded to each other. The IFAI emerged as a new image machine and not as the blow that would shatter politics once and for all as a field of contrasting representations.

Early in his government, Fox also sought to bring wrongdoers to justice. In 2002, former president Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) was asked to testify on his involvement in the student massacre of 1968 in his role as Minister of the Interior. Echeverría, however, was not
charged, and others accused of crimes during PRI rule remained free. After Fox’s election, prominent PRI members cautiously stayed out of the spotlight, but they soon returned, reassuming important positions in congress, the senate, and in state governments. Some years into his tenure, Fox stopped demonizing the PRI and found a new enemy in Andrés Manuel López Obrador, elected mayor of Mexico City in 2003 as a member of the PRD. Their highly publicized disputes as the two most powerful politicians in the country brought back the production and contestation of images and narratives as a strategy for the negotiation of solidarities and the construction of political constituencies.

This strategy crystalized in the 2006 presidential elections, in which López Obrador faced Felipe Calderón, a minister in Fox’s cabinet and a lifetime member of the PAN. Elections were framed as a contest of ideologies. Voters would choose between López Obrador’s platform of social welfare programs and large-scale public works, and Calderón’s proposals to fight corruption and crime, and to maintain favorable conditions for macro-economic growth. For weeks, the candidates were tied in vote intention polls, and the election’s results were difficult to call. Eventually, the IFE declared Calderón the winner with a margin of 0.58% of the votes.

The 2006 elections were divisive. TV advertisements by Calderón’s campaign said that López Obrador was “a danger for Mexico” and implied he was authoritarian and “a socialist” by comparing him to Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. For his part, López Obrador insisted that a secret mafia integrated by the country’s richest and most powerful people backed Calderón because he would serve their interests. After election day, López Obrador did not accept the official results, claiming that this mafia had orchestrated a fraud. When

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50 In his analysis of former socialist states in Eastern Europe, John Borneman (1997) has argued there is a relationship between the persecution of former authoritarian rulers and the legitimacy of emergent democracies. In contexts where there is no reckoning with the past, he suggests, legitimacy is weak and “cycles of retributive violence” (6) continue. In Mexico change was “more apparent than substantive” (155). Failure to come to terms with the PRI’s legacy offers a plausible explanation for rampant violence in the country today, which tends to be explained away, rather simplistically, as a consequence of the “war on drugs” (cf. Escalante 2011; 2012).
Calderón was inaugurated a few months later, the PAN and the PRD had consolidated their positions as representatives of two groups who welcomed their conception of the country’s past and present as common sense. In Mexico City, these groups mapped closely to social classes: the upper class identified with the PAN and the lower middle class and the working poor identified with the PRD.

Far from making the interests of different groups intelligible to others, the 2006 elections made the groups Julián describes as “poor” and “rich” appear, from the other’s perspective, as selfish and misinformed—that is, willing to engage in elaborate deceit tactics to advance personal interests. Meanwhile, each side represented its claims as conducive to the benefit of the country as a whole. The elections fragmented a population that had first come together as the PRI’s willing collaborators and later, as the party’s victims speaking against it in unison. If in the nineteen-nineties Mexicans could come together by blaming their problems on the government—still one with the PRI—a decade later government, now a space of contestation among parties, could hardly be characterized as a unified entity. Besides this, not much had changed: far from engaging in rational debate in a democratic field reformers had hoped to build, people kept alive the tradition of describing others as liars while not pretending that accusations rest on facts.

The 2012 presidential elections were business as usual, as candidates publicly cast doubt on the honorability of their opponents. Tom Wainwright, a correspondent from *The

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51 After a conversation on this issue, an Unidad Santa Fe neighbor sent me an editorial by Jesús Silva-Herzog Márquez (2013) that argues quite emphatically that Mexico is a fragmented country: “The last thirty years in Mexico have been an era of polarization… it has been, to use an expression coined by Polish journalist Adam Michnik, a cold civil war that has split the country in a way that there is no institution, power or instrument capable of breaking down the stubborn hermeticism of its factions… When I speak of polarization I am not speaking of a strong culture of opposition, with an ideological confrontation with vencedores and defeated parties. I am speaking instead of the identification of the other as a subject that must be annihilated because he does not have the right to exist.” Spanish: “Los últimos treinta años mexicanos han sido la era de nuestra polarización… ha sido, para usar una expresión del periodista polaco Adam Michnik, una guerra civil fría que tiene partido al país sin que haya una instancia, un poder, un instrumento capaz de vencer los tercos hermetismos… Cuando hablo de la polarización no me refiero a la existencia de una dura polémica opositora, de una confrontación ideológica con vencedores y vencidos. Me refiero a la identificación del otro como el sujeto que debe ser aniquilado porque carece del derecho de existir.”
Economist in Mexico observed with surprise that, in a debate on live television, PAN candidate Josefina Vázquez Mota said it was important the country’s future president had no links to organized crime, implying that Peña Nieto did (Cayuela and Krauze 2012:43). Vázquez Mota did not present any proof of what she suggested, and the press ignored her comment—in the context of Mexican politics, her words were not exceptional, but rather part of an ongoing exposition of abstractions. Today, as in the past, statements by Mexican politicians, like abstract art, “cannot be judged by verisimilitude” (Varne doe 2006:31). Despite Vázquez Mota’s conspiracy theory, Peña Nieto was elected president, with votes from the disillusioned and the cynical, and from old and new client groups. Many in his cabinet and among advisors are the children and grandchildren of old PRI statesmen. Upon Peña Nieto’s election, only twelve years had passed since millions thought that Mexico was finally rid of the PRI (Zaid 1995; Meyer 2001:98).

**Insider talk**

Although he has held important posts—including Mexico City mayor and national PRD chairman—López Obrador derives charisma from presenting himself as an outsider to politics. Politicians are assumed to be self-interested liars; those among them who are “not like the rest” can presume to be free of their vices. In his second presidential campaign in 2012, López Obrador promised to bring about cambio verdadero to the country, that is, “true change,” adding an adjective to Fox’s slogan of a decade earlier and thus critiquing his failure to deliver. He also asserted that his rule would be characterized by honestidad valiente, “brave honesty,” and that his would be a república amorosa, “loving republic.” Much like, as discussed in Chapter 1, IMSS director Antonio Ortiz Mena qualified democracy in the nineteen-fifties by calling it “directed,” half a century later López Obrador
qualified change, honesty, and republicanism, participating in an ongoing play of images and narratives.

Like López Obrador, Julián Severiano fashions his status as an outsider as evidence of the truthfulness of his statements. Julián is not alone: many neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe claim a privileged insight into politics, which they attribute to the fact they are not bureaucrats or politicians. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they shun the pursuit of self-interest by people in government. A neighbor in Unidad Santa Fe once told me: “We all know politicians are corrupt and never say the truth, no matter what they claim. I’ll be honest, if I were in their position I would use it to my advantage, I’m not stupid… Otherwise what are jobs in the government for?” This and similar comments suggest that critiques of officials should be read neither as a definitive differentiation of “us” and “them,” nor as a moral positioning vis-à-vis corruption. Rather, denunciations of people in power set politics into motion, opening up a space for other elements and voices to enter the conversation. For Unidad Santa Fe residents, once protagonists of a national history, critiques of power can be interpreted as attempts to reclaim a lost privilege. Neighbors might be outsiders but, like López Obrador, they know well what it means to be part of the state.

For most of the 20th century, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI, “was the center of the political organization of the entire society,” with an expansive network labor unions, peasant associations, chambers of commerce, and other groups that functioned as a system of representation “based not on residence but on class and occupation” (Bertaccini 2009:49).\(^\text{52}\) The pervasive reach of this arrangement is attested by the fact that ethnographies on all sorts of and sites topics in Mexico—ranging from middle school education in the city of Aguascalientes (Levinson 2001) to sex work in Tuxtla Gutiérrez (Kelly 2008) and professional wrestling in Mexico City (Levi 2008)—tend to include discussions of the PRI’s

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\(^{52}\) Spanish: “era el centro de la organización política de toda a sociedad… la base de la representación no era la residencia sino la clase u ocupación.”
history and practices. Unidad Santa Fe, a symbol of Mexico as a national community shaped by the party of the Revolution, was well placed within its system of representation: residents had ready access to government officials that could address their concerns.

With the country’s “democratic opening,” many old organizations and emergent “social movements” maintained ties to the PRI; others came under the wing of other parties (see Chapter 4). Certain sectors of the population, however, were cut off from state power. Reformers expected that foreclosing “informal” lines of communication to government institutions would consolidate the system of representation established by the law, and members of congress would speak for the interests of their constituents in official forums (see Aguayo 2011). With Unidad Santa Fe’s privatization, however, neighbors abruptly lost the proximity they once enjoyed to the country’s political elite, while elected representatives remained primarily committed to the interests of their parties. In recent years, some new bridges have been built. For instance, the PROSOC, Mexico City’s “Social Attorneyship,” oversees housing projects since 1997 (Zambrano 1998) and has become a point of contact between their residents and the city’s mayor and other powerful politicians. However, given the absence of a leader recognized by most in Unidad Santa Fe and the new status of the project as one among hundreds, communication is not as immediate as it once was.

Residents in Unidad Santa Fe have experienced greater distance from power as a form of exclusion. This helps explain why, for Julián Severiano, his economic wellbeing and assets do not qualify him as a member of the middle class. He is certainly better off economically than his parents were, but he inhabits a social space that has been severed from political and social relations that once linked his family to power. Moreover, when Julián considers his social and economic position by comparing to that his upper class clients, he sees insurmountable differences. Inequality in Mexico today is more pronounced than it was half a century ago, with a widening gap between rich and poor (Portes and Hoffman 2003), and, as
a neighbor once told me, “state institutions are great, but only if you are rich.” In the past, people from different classes (and ideological inclinations) identified with each other as members of a national community; today this is hardly the case.

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Anthropologist Roger Bartra has written on the “post-Mexican condition,” suggesting that the “crisis of the [country’s] political system” and its opening to the global economy through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have put an end to “specifically Mexican forms of legitimization and identity” (2014[1997]:306; see also Bartra 2013). Other scholars have spoken in similar terms, even after globalization, much feared in the nineteen-nineties as a homogenizing force, failed to flatten the world. Historian Lorenzo Meyer, for example, sees the end of nationalism in recent reforms to Mexico’s energy sector that opened parts of the state-owned oil industry to private investment (Aristegui Noticias 2014). These accounts could be backed by Julián Severiano’s experience of exclusion, which would be explained as the result of the disappearance of the national community in which he grew up. This perspective, however, would ignore that belonging is not a binary, and that nationhood is multiple and malleable.

Carlos Monsiváis (1987b) wrote a brief history of nationalism in 20th century Mexico that contemplates the shifting relationship between government and the governed. His chronicle can be synthesized as follows: from 1920 to 1940, the years of reconstruction that followed the Revolution, the Mexican nation was closely identified with the central government through the enshrinement of a new official history in discourses and monuments, and its dissemination through public education. The period between 1940 and 1960 was the highpoint of nationalism as an attribute of the state. Progress, presented as an inevitable outcome of Unidad Nacional, “National Unity,” was imbued with religious significance;

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53 Spanish: “condición post-mexicana”…“crisis del sistema político”…“formas específicamente ‘mexicanas’ de legitimación e identidad.”
collaboration with state institutions was widely seen as virtuous. From 1960 to 1980, nationalism waned as Mexicans established some distance between themselves as the state, which was increasingly seen as incompetent and authoritarian. State institutions promoted nationalism as they had before, but their cast of accomplices was dispersing. The student movement of 1968—crushed by the massacre of hundreds in the Tlatelolco housing project—led to a conscientious revision of Mexico’s past. The state never recovered its luster, and from 1980 on, Monsiváis suggests, “popular nationalism” rose above its state-sponsored variant. That is, rather than being circumscribed to of state rituals, celebrations of Mexico as a national community started to take place beyond the purview of officials.

A key point in this account is that Mexico as a nation is not an essence shared by a homogeneous population, but a process marked by acts of inclusion and exclusion. This process, often spearheaded by state institutions, has also been motivated by works by intellectuals and social scientists. Meditations on national character—as in other Latin American countries, especially Brazil (Schwarcz 1995), an obsession since the 19th century—do not simply reflect observed facts, but help construct nationality. This is the case, for instance, of the influential El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México by philosopher Samuel Ramos (1951[1934]) and The Labyrinth of Solitude by poet Octavio Paz (1999[1950]). Both of these texts and dozens of responses and elaborations to them describe “Mexicanness” through accounts of el mexicano, where “el” is the singular male pronoun. This supposes that national culture is inherent to the male body (Gutmann 1996:236-242), and leaves women as secondary—or absent—characters in the nation’s history. A recent anthology of texts on national character (Bartra 2014) is appropriately titled Anatomía del mexicano, “Anatomy of the Mexican.” Other acts of exclusion—poetic, official, and both—have erased regional identities and indigenous peoples from images of Mexico as a nation.
Historically, the terms of inclusion have been decided by elites within the government. Since the nineteen-eighties, the ebbing legitimacy of state institutions, however, has allowed for diverse understandings and practices of nationhood. What Monsiváis describes as “popular nationalism” is very much alive in Unidad Santa Fe, where neighbors speak of themselves as Mexicans and describe some of their practices as distinctly national. This is manifest, for example, in the profound identification of many with the country’s soccer team, or in pride over the country’s landscape. Unidad Santa Fe residents often remark on the beauty of places where they have traveled as evidence of that of the country as a whole. When the federal government introduced new energy policies in 2013, many neighbors claimed to be more patriotic than president Peña Nieto who, they said, “is selling what is rightfully ours to foreigners.” Through this and similar pronouncements, neighbors affirm the existence of nationalism beyond current state practices and policies, and fashion themselves its depositaries.

Further, the language of nationalism formulated by state authorities between 1940 and 1960 remains present in Unidad Santa Fe, even if its focus has changed from the nation as a whole to other communities. The proposition that “National Unity” would bring benefits to all finds expression today in calls for project residents to work together to sacar a la colonia adelante, “push the neighborhood ahead.” Architect Mario Pani used the term unidad after Le Corbusier, who called his housing complexes unités, French for “units” or “collectives.” The old and young in the project, however, suppose the word references the importance of unity: “Not for nothing is this called Unidad. We live here together and we have to act as one.”

Similarly, public education in the mid-20th century often described the motivations of national heroes in terms of their amor a la patria, “love for the fatherland,” which would presumably inspire the country’s youth to follow their example. Today, when listing the qualities the manager of the project should have, neighbors tend to list first amor a la
Unidad, “love for the project,” and their opponents often accuse local leaders of not “having love for the project.” Conversely, those interested in Unidad Santa Fe’s past and present are generally assumed to have this quality. When they heard about my research, neighbors often said I must love the project very much.

Survivals of an old nationalist rhetoric, much like denunciations of the anti-patriotic actions of government officials, imply a contrast between state practices today and in the mid-20th century. Some politicians, chief among them Andrés Manuel López Obrador, have insisted on this contrast. In speeches during his 2012 presidential campaign, he located a break in the country’s history in the early nineteen-eighties, and proposed reverting economic liberalization. The candidate often used words with the prefix “re,” including “recover,” “reactivate,” and “reestablish.” Not surprisingly, López Obrador obtained approximately half of the votes cast in Unidad Santa Fe. In the booth where I voted, López Obrador received 292 votes, Peña Nieto 172, and Vázquez Mota 124. The pattern was similar in the four other booths in the project and in Mexico City as a whole.54 The country’s capital, a site with a high concentration of bureaucrats and where state services have historically had broad coverage, has been a bastion of the left-wing PRD since the nineteen-nineties. Proximity to the PRI for decades makes the city’s residents, first, well positioned to critique it, and second, prone to favor a party that has promised a return to the PRI of old.

**Middle class nation**

In his analysis of post-war Germany, John Borneman (1992) considers the relationship between personal narratives and master narratives of nationhood, in a process whereby citizens and authorities give shape to identities together. Correspondence between these two types of narratives lends legitimacy to states; its absence undermines them. Half a century

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ago in Unidad Santa Fe, personal narratives of its residents participated in the construction of Mexico as a nation. At the time, accounts of the country’s past, present, and future across classes and status groups shared certain elements—including a belief in progress through public works and the extension of social security—and people identified with certain symbols, which were reproduced in newspapers, film, and television. By contrast, today’s accounts by Unidad Santa Fe neighbors do not correspond to those advanced by state officials, and, as Julián Severiano’s sense of distance from his clients suggests, they often contrast to those of elites. While different social groups in Mexico City are bound by language and territory, this does not bind them as a national community; divergent interpretations of events and images reveal the absence of a shared sense of identity.

These changes are related to increased socioeconomic inequality, spatial segregation, and to the demise of old narratives of identity by state institutions. This does not mean, however, that old narratives have simply been discarded. Rather, they have undergone transformations, reflecting a new logic in the understanding and exercise of power. In the years following the Mexican Revolution, philosophers and anthropologists had a key role in the formulation of narratives of nationalism; towards the nineteen-fifties they were joined by poets such as Octavio Paz. Starting in the nineteen-eighties, economists assumed a dominant role. Their ideas propose a vision of Mexico as a nation in which the terms of exclusion and inclusion are sustained by an economic logic.

In the second decade of the 20th century, Manuel Gamio, a student of Franz Boas, had a prominent role in giving shape to Mexico’s nationalist history. Gamio helped consolidate a vision of Mexican nationality as founded on the pre-Hispanic past. He did this through the reconstruction of Teotihuacan and its conversion into a tourist destination and national symbol (Brading 1988:78), and through studies on the sequence of cultures in Mesoamerica (Gamio 1924). He also helped established mestizaje, “miscegenation,” a concept much
debated in the 19th century, as official doctrine (Brading 1988:75). In his book *Forjando Patria (pro nacionalismo)*, “Forging the Nation (Pro-Nationalism),” Gamio (1916) claimed that a new Mexico would emerge from the fusion of “steel and bronze”—that is, from the mixing of the country’s light and dark skinned populations (Alonso 2004:466).

José Vasconcelos was also influential, especially in his role as Minister of Public Education between 1920 and 1924, from which he promoted the use of the arts for public instruction. Under his watch, muralists painted frescoes in public buildings that narrated the country’s history, and teachers traveled to distant parts of the country in campaigns to increase literacy. They were armed with classic works of literature and new didactic materials prepared by famed writers and illustrators. Vasconcelos commissioned architects to design the National Stadium (see Chapter 1), the Benito Juárez School, and government offices, all of them in “neocolonial” style. For the minister, this was a mestizo style—it combined Spanish typologies and Mesoamerican styling and building techniques—and a nationalist reaction to the European models favored in the 19th century (de Anda 2006:164). Perhaps the most well-known text by Vasconcelos is *The Cosmic Race* (1997[1925]), where he celebrates the future emergence of a new civilization—the pinnacle of universal history—from the mixing of different races in the American continent.

After Gamio and Vasconcelos, censuses did not collect data on race or ethnicity for decades. Officially, all Mexicans were of mixed ancestry. Being a national subject was tantamount to being mestizo, and vice versa. Recognizing oneself as mixed was an assertion of participation in a national culture. This doctrine is eloquently expressed in an inscription unveiled in 1964 on the *Plaza de las tres culturas*, “Three Cultures’ Plaza,” the symbolic center of the Tlatelolco housing project, which integrates pre-Hispanic ruins and a colonial church surrounded by Pani’s modernist housing slabs: “Heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to Hernán Cortés. It was not a triumph or a defeat. It was the painful birth of
the mestizo pueblo that Mexico is today.”55 This phrase underscores the inevitability of mestizaje as the outcome of the encounter of two cultures.

This model of the country’s history was famously challenged by anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil in Mexico Profundo (1987). The country, he suggested, was not the result of racial mixing, but of a clash of a “deep Mexico,” associated with indigenous cultures and history, and an “imaginary Mexico,” rooted in western civilization’s project to suppress differences. The encounter between cultures had been real and in fact painful, but it had not resulted in a harmonious mix. Others inserted their voices to this debate, including indigenous peoples. Among them were Tzotzil and Tzeltal members of the EZLN who, with Subcomandante Marcos as their spokesman, declared war against the federal government on the day NAFTA came into effect. The Zapatistas encouraged many to embrace indigenous languages and practices, previously hidden as markers of exclusion.

An amendment to the constitution from 1992 describes Mexico as multicultural nation. This insertion was, according to Enrique Florescano, the final blow to the mestizo as the definitive national subject (2005:434). Among scholars, there have been further developments that cast doubt on constructions that suppose that nationality is a neutral category existing independently from power relations and outside concrete historical and spatial contexts (e.g. Lomnitz 2001; Gutmann 1996; Monsiváis 2014). However, to borrow a formulation from Gombrich, “the facts which gave rise to [this] myth are still stubbornly there to be accounted for” (1989:22). New theories by social scientists have not eroded popular assumptions that Mexicans must share a historical destiny. In recent years, a new state-sponsored ideology has emerged that supposes that, if we cannot all be mestizos, we might all be middle class. Race, class, and nationality in Mexico, as in other countries (Ortner 1998; Telles and Flores 2013; Schwarcz 2012:50), have always been implicated—some in the

55 Spanish: “Heroicamente defendido por Cuauhtémoc, cayó Tlatelolco en poder de Hernán Cortés. No fue triunfo ni derrota. Fue el doloroso nacimiento del pueblo mestizo que es el México de hoy.”
mid-20th century suggested that the middle class was in fact be the space where races mixed and would consolidate Mexico as a mestizo nation (Mendieta 1955). Recent theories do not see the middle class as the site of nation formation, but as the destination of this process.

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In 2010, Luis de la Calle and Luis Rubio of think tank CIDAC published *Clasemediero*, a report that describes the rise of the middle class in Mexico. The report’s subtitle—“Poor no more, but not yet developed”—summarizes its contents. De la Calle and Rubio argue that poverty has decreased considerably in Mexico. They credit the country’s economic stability for the past two decades, sustained economic growth, and government programs such as the conditional cash transfer program *Oportunidades* (formerly *Progresa*, now *Prospera*), in place since 1997, with the solidification of the middle class. Other factors include increased educational attainment, improved health indicators, and rising property ownership. For the first time in the country’s history, the authors write, the majority of its population is part of the middle class.

Part of the report is wishful thinking. “Although there is still extended poverty, Mexico is no longer a poor country,” reads the document (2010:39). The next page includes a graph showing that more than one fourth of Mexicans live in poverty, out of which close to 20% suffer “food poverty”—that is, they go hungry because they do not have enough resources to obtain food. As a whole, however, the report offers a coherent argument backed by facts and figures. Some observers of Unidad Santa Fe might in fact suggest its recent history supports the report’s arguments. Since privatization, neighbors are property owners. Many of them, like Julián Severiano, have cars, go to the movies and take vacations, all indicators of membership in the middle class according to *Clasemedieros*.

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56 *Clasemediero* is a derogatory term for a member of the middle class that the report’s authors give a new, celebratory connotation. The use of this word in recent years indicates participation in discussions on the characteristics and status of the middle class initiated by the CIDAC report.

57 Spanish: “Aunque exista pobreza extendida, México ya no es un país pobre.”
A number of scholars, following the lead of Rubio and De la Calle, have elaborated on their observations (Merino 2011; Aguilar Camín 2012; Bartra 2015). Their arguments are very much like those present in official discourses, which assert that the objective of government is to shape Mexico into “a middle class society” (Peña Nieto 2012; see also Notimex 2006; Ferrari 2012; Excelsior 2013). This goal positions the middle class as the endpoint of the country’s history, taking on the place afforded to mestizo culture decades ago. Both clasemedieros and mestizos, as national types, celebrate uniformity, and are associated with civic virtues. Gamio and Vasconcelos imagined mestizos as proud, brave, and honorable. Theorists of the middle class imagine its members as rational and democratic.

De la Calle and Rubio express a belief that “Democracy coincides, in a natural fashion, with the characteristics of the middle class” (2010: 22).58 This, they argue, is because members of the middle class favor stability and continuity and are not prone to follow charismatic leaders who offer radical change or who might amass power through the formation of patron-client relations. Rather, the middle class votes and consumes judiciously, and it forms associations to pursue shared interests. This characterization of members of the middle class presents them as the abstract subjects of classical economics. Thus, in the view of Clasemedieros, the ideals of democracy are concurrent with neoliberalism. By this account, in the figure of “civil society,” conceived as a homogeneous collection of “autonomous citizens” (Habermass 1994), the mestizo gives way to the homo economicus.

Julián Severiano from Unidad Santa Fe rejected my description of him as a member of the middle class. Perhaps he recognizes that the distribution of honor does not necessarily correspond to income distribution (Weber 1958:180). Perhaps, if he is going to be a clasemediero, he demands a sense of participation in the national project advanced by the country’s economic elite, under whose watch income differences have widened and the safety

58 Spanish: “La democracia empata, de forma natural, con las características de la clase media.”
net for millions has been dismantled. Or maybe he challenged my claim as a way to start a conversation about the configurations of power in Mexico and their forms of exclusion. As a gang member in the nineteen-eighties, Julián participated in taking down symbols of authority to call attention to the precarious position of the country’s youth at the dawn of the Mexico’s economic opening. Perhaps he remains an iconoclast, ready to take down categories others assign to him to open up a space to formulate his own.
4. In the Vicinity of Politics

Señor René—who died prematurely in 2014—had white hair and a thick black moustache. He wore button-down shirts and carried a measuring tape strapped to his belt. He lived in Building 45 and was well known in Unidad Santa Fe for his work as a contractor for the project’s administration; he was often in the project’s street, sports fields or in the Heroes’ Plaza supervising workers.

One morning I ran into Señor René fixing streetlamps. He was holding a ladder while an electrician installed a large bulb. Two other men were fixing the wiring on another pole, and a third brought supplies from storage in a pushcart.

“It will look nice and bright at night,” said Alejandrina Saucedo who had worked to secure money from the Delegación for this project together with Ms. Elba, president of the project’s Citizen’s Committee at the time. Alejandrina was busy, with a bunch of documents in her hand, and she left the Plaza in a hurry.

“Good to see the lamps are getting fixed,” I said. A few had not worked for months and there had been complaints in neighbor meetings and on Facebook.

Señor René shook his head: “This is terrible, terrible. It will not help at all. They continue giving us things, so neighbors will demand more,” he explained. “Nos han malacostumbrado, they have spoilt us. People don’t pay maintenance fees, which mind you, are mandatory, and they don’t go to assemblies as it is. And now, with this help from the Delegación, they will continue expecting everything to be done for them without having to put in any effort. They think they deserve everything. It’s always been like this, things never change.”

A few days later I ran into Señor René waiting to meet with the project’s manager. “Have you heard?” he asked. “People are already finding all sorts of faults with our work.
The man with the hamburger stand yelled at me for cutting off his illegal power connection. What did he expect? For me to leave a lamp unfixed for his sake? And others started spreading rumors that I was stealing equipment from the project. Just you wait and they’ll crucify me!”

The word *malacostumbrar* means to make someone get used to undue privilege and lead them to adopt decadent habits. The notion that the IMSS did this to neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe and that other government agencies continue doing it is widespread. In the nineteen-nineties intellectuals and politicians began to praise *participación ciudadana*, “civic participation,” as a strategy to reshape the country’s public life (e.g. Creel 1994; Meyer 1994; Calderón 2001). People would participate in government not only by voting but also by expressing points of view that together would represent “public opinion,” and by forming associations to pursue causes dear to them. From the perspective of Señor René and many other neighbors, this coming to political maturity halted throughout the country—and it had not chance of taking hold in Unidad Santa Fe, where the IMSS had long before crushed the seeds of citizenship by giving residents everything they asked for. This narrative is analogous to accounts of parents who overprotect children and thus make them both individualistic and incapable of navigating everyday life on their own. The parallel is expressed in the common metaphor *papa gobierno*, “father government,” used to critique paternalistic practices by state institutions—especially when others, and not the speaker, enjoy their benefits.

Despite claims to the contrary, neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe participate actively in politics, even if their actions do not always assume the form that government officials, laws or analysts expect. When, upon moving to Unidad Santa Fe I asked a man outside of Pancho’s store if neighbors were organized, he said no. I continued asking questions: Was there a local administration? Did the project have a manager? Did neighbors hold assemblies? At my insistence, he said there might be an administration, but assured me it was useless. He
had never attended an assembly, but it was not unlikely that they took place. Over the next months I found out that there were in fact dozens of sites where neighbors came together to discuss local affairs and manage relations to each other and to state institutions—some are official, others are mostly invisible, and all are routinely derided as irrelevant.

Among official sites of politics are the project’s administration office—integrated by an elected manager and a Supervision Committee, and instituted on the basis of Mexico City’s Condominium Law—and its Comité ciudadano, “Citizens’ Committee,” with an elected president and a board with five members who serve for three year periods. The Committee is authorized by the 2004 Ley de Participación Ciudadana, “Civic Participation Law.” There is another group, Condóminos Titulares de la U.H.S.F, Asociación Civil, Civil Association of Title-Holding Condominium Members, which, backed by federal laws, challenges the project’s administration as the legitimate representative of the condominium before the state. Neighbors are also organized in less official ways. Groups emerge for concrete causes, and some buildings and house clusters work together in the upkeep of their common spaces. As I show through the discussion of the terms vecino, “neighbor,” and culero, roughly, “asshole,” the territory of politics is constructed through the celebration of disqualifications of others, the telling of jokes, the narration of different versions of the past and present, and expressions of outrage such as Señor René’s. In these processes, neighbors form or undermine bonds of solidarity, make demands on institutions, and use and challenge authority figures.

The first section of this chapter is centered on Ms. Elba, a community leader in Unidad Santa Fe. By exploring how others interact with her and speak of her actions I characterize the project as dense with participation. I follow scholars who have studied participation in Mexico beyond electoral politics, official representation systems and legal regimes (e.g. Shefner 2001; Stack 2012; Tamayo 2010), and highlight that politics beyond the state are not necessarily conceived in relation to government functions and institutions,
and are not always organized into “social movements.” The second section is centered on Roque Salvatierra, whose fears of the encroachment of private interests in Unidad Santa Fe point to a long history of segregation in the city (Schteingart 2001; Monkkonen 2012) that is being furthered by attempts at making spaces in Mexico City accessible and democratic. I question assumptions behind the category “public space,” en vogue among architects and policy makers, by showing locations in the city as inevitably shaped by acts of inclusion and exclusion, and marked by ways of distributing and using power that can hardly be described as rational.

In Chapters 1 and 2, I suggested that the presence of the PRI-government in Mexico is pervasive. This does not mean, however, that the political encompasses all sites and relations in the country. People in Mexico City readily distinguish political from other forms of authority. They question the honesty of statements or actions coming from government officials, candidates for office, and members of organizations that might challenge or share the power of the state, including NGOs and neighbor associations. Conversely, people express great admiration—one might even say they are willingly gullible—when interacting with artists, professors, writers, athletes, and professionals whose role is seen as non-political. Statements by these figures are often taken to be truthful. Through differentiated attitudes towards figures who derive their authority from different sources, people define the boundaries of politics and construct it as a field of artifice. The political is that which one should suspect, and what one finds suspect is most likely political.

This distinction became clear in attitudes I observed in on the one hand, events such as concerts, book presentations, and museum tours, and, on the other, political rallies and neighbor meetings. In a set of lectures I attended with Unidad Santa Fe neighbors in a nearby university—to which I return in the latter part of this chapter—the audience was remarkably receptive to what was said by a social studies professor, and readily censured audience
members who, when making comments, reported they represented a political party or government institution. The boundaries of politics suggest a different organization of power than that described through the distinction between public and private realms. Mexico’s would-be “public sphere”—defined by the free circulation of consumer goods and information, and the presence of spaces for the rational discussion of public affairs (Habermass 1991; see also Piccato 2010)—is undermined by the automatic suspiciousness that surrounds officialdom, and by the willing suspension of critical judgment before what is not political.

**Of Culeros and Vecinos**

As stipulated by the edict that led to Unidad Santa Fe’s privatization, the Fideicomiso—a public trust that managed the project from 1982 to 2001—would organize neighbors into an asociación civil, “civil association,” that would take its place. Fideicomiso employees held dozens of meetings and taught courses to residents. Ángel Salazar was invited to participate in the project’s transition because of his experience in public administration as an employee of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE). He told me, voicing a common opinion in Unidad Santa Fe, that the Fideicomiso had failed him and his neighbors: “The day IMSS officials came to hand us over the housing complex,” Ángel explained, “too many questions remained unsolved. In part, there had not been enough time to resolve them, and it part they did not want to do it. They wanted to relinquish all responsibility over the project, to get out of here as soon as they could. Some of us had organized and were asking them not to leave until they had finished their job. They said they were done, but they were lying. So we stopped them, we did not let them hold a ceremony they had planned. They had brought cases of sparkling wine, they wanted us to toast to the beginning of a new era in Unidad Santa Fe’s history, but
we wouldn’t take any of that. We heckled them, drove them away and told them to return when they had finished their job… A licenciado who worked with the Fideicomiso, José Luis Sánchez I think was his name, sneaked back and locked the offices. He took the key, and they have been closed ever since.”

For some time after that event, there was no official local government in Unidad Santa Fe. This means there was no one in charge of watering gardens, cutting grass, sweeping streets and the Heroes’ Plaza, and doing maintenance work on buildings. At this time, Ms. Elba, a soft-spoken woman who has lived in Unidad Santa Fe since its dedication, came to the center of the project’s public life. She started working without telling anybody: she would sweep the area in front of her house and then keep on going. After sweeping her walkway, she would make it to the project’s central garden and start picking up garbage. She also watered common gardens in the dry season. In the absence of public employees she figured someone had to take over.

In 2006, the Procuraduría Social (PROSOC), the Federal District’s Attorneyship for Social Affairs, started pushing for the formation of administrative bodies in the city’s projects. Mexico City laws stipulate that these neighborhoods are condominiums. As such, they must have a legally constituted assembly that elects a manager. The PROSOC’s intention was to implement this law, and Ms. Elba volunteered to help out in Unidad Santa Fe.

In order to call on an assembly whose decisions would be legally recognized and binding to all neighbors, one fourth of households in the condominium had to present their property title and sign a document. Not everybody in Unidad Santa Fe has a property title (McLean 2008:10). Estimates vary, but some suggest only about a third of households do; the rest never paid the fees required to obtain these titles, or never picked them up, or they

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59 For more on this archive and its contents, see Chapter 2.
bought or inherited the houses where they live unofficially. Moreover, few neighbors were willing to sign a document for a cause they did not fully understand. Ms. Elba sat behind a desk by El súper and explained why it was important to have a local administration. With a manager to represent them, she told those willing to listen, neighbors would be in a better position to negotiate benefits with the IMSS, the Delegación, and the Federal District’s government. Also, the administration would bring neighbors together in efforts to improve life in the project. Concurrently, PROSOC employees held informational meetings and workshops to cultivate what they call cultura condominal, “condominium culture.” After a year, Ms. Elba managed to collect the required signatures.

The first Unidad Santa Fe assembly was held in 2007. Neighbors elected Javier Valencia, a “professional manager”—a man who did not live in the project and was employed by Promotora de Mantenimiento Inmobiliario (PROMI), a company that works for condominiums throughout the city. However, when Ms. Elba and her supporters presented their choice to the PROSOC, they found out PROMI was not officially registered before them (McLean 2008:ii). Valencia took on the job while his company regularized its situation, but he left after a few months, never to be seen again. Neighbors say he took off with money he had collected as maintenance fees. The Federal District’s laws stipulate that owners in a condominium have to make monthly contributions to their administration, and the more conscientious in Unidad Santa Fe had started paying.

The second manager was Jorge Esmelin, who had worked with Valencia. Neighbors claim his administration was as ineffective as the previous one (ibid.). Disappointed, Ms. Elba decided to take on the role of manager. In 2009 she was elected for a one-year period; one year later, she was reelected. She did not run again because the law does not permit managers to stay in office for more than two consecutive terms. On the third year, neighbors elected Juan Barrera, a lawyer in his thirties who grew up in the complex. In 2011 he had
recently returned to Unidad Santa Fe and settled with his family in a new apartment over his parents’ house.

At this time, Ms. Elba was elected president of the project’s Citizens’ Committee. She was the second person to occupy this position since the creation of these bodies a few years back. Together with a group of board members elected as a formula, Ms. Elba took on the role of liaison between neighbors and government institutions. As manager, Ms. Elba had refused to take a salary. She said that funds raised as maintenance fees were much needed for other purposes. As president of the Citizens’ Committee, an “honorary,” non-remunerated position, she did not have to make this decision.

I first met Ms. Elba in the information meeting she held in the Heroes’ Plaza to inform neighbors on the terms of a conflict between Barrera and his Supervision Committee. Upon taking office, Barrera had opened a bank account for neighbors to deposit maintenance fees. The account was in his name and did not have a co-signer. Members of the Supervision Committee denounced this as an attempt to steal from the project and retaliated by banning Barrera from using funds raised during Ms. Elba’s tenure and by asking neighbors to deposit monthly fees in their account. Given this dispute, the manager had no funds to pay sweepers and gardeners, and they had stopped working. Neighbors were starting to feel the consequences of the conflict; they complained of overgrown grass and the accumulation of litter in common areas.

After the informational meeting I asked Ms. Elba for an interview. She said no. I could read everything about her work in a website set up when she was manager. The website included copies of bank statements and receipts showing how much money had been raised during her tenure and how it had been allocated. Ms. Elba also told me I could attend the weekly meetings of the Citizens’ Committee—open to all interested neighbors—held in a
classroom in the project’s Social Security Center. Ms. Elba was hoping more young people would become involved in local affairs, so I was more than welcome.

Over the next months, I witnessed Ms. Elba’s pragmatic approach to politics. In meetings, she did not respond to criticisms of her work. She always explained the rationale of her actions by referring to the law. Participants accused Barrera of using his office to pursue his self-interest. Other local leaders, such as Roque Salvatierra—of whom I write below—fared no better. Ms. Elba, however, never expressed negative opinions about them. She explained how some of their actions might have sidestepped a law, but her comments were never personal. As the end of Barrera’s tenure approached, participants in meetings discussed who might challenge his reelection. Many asked Ms. Elba to run; she did not say yes until a week before the annual neighbors’ assembly. In August 2012, she was elected for a third term as manager by a wide margin; a year later she was reelected.

The hero

People close to Ms. Elba speak of her with deference and admiration. Señor René once told me: “She is truly selfless. A few months ago there was a water leak in a house in Block 2. The Delegación and the city’s water commission said they would not pay because it was inside a family’s property, and Barrera was nowhere to be found. When I told Ms. Elba, she gave me some money, out of her own pocket, so I could fill up a gas tank and weld the broken pipe.”

Chano Alva, who was part of the Supervision Committee the first time Ms. Elba was manager told me: “If it weren’t for her, Unidad Santa Fe would be a much bigger mess than it is today. I have never seen a more dedicated person. Once there was an emergency, a car crash by the project’s main gate in the middle of the night, and she was there helping out at three in the morning. You wouldn’t believe how much energy she has!”
Not everybody, however, shares Señor René and Alva’s views. Julián Severiano, a vocal middle-aged neighbor of whom I wrote extensively in Chapter 3, is very critical of Ms. Elba: “She became administrator just to screw the rest of us. She’s resentful because she did nothing all her life and she’s angry with those of us who did. From a position of authority she can take her revenge… She said the other day she wants to stop people from building second and third stories over their houses. She says it’s illegal to build without a permit, but the real reason is that she’s frustrated because she doesn’t have money to build another story to her own house! If she had the money she would stop being so obsessed with rules, she would live and let live.”

Randy Coronado shared another common assessment on Ms. Elba: “She is senile. How can a woman her age make decisions for the rest of us? She has no idea what is best for the project, and her collaborators take advantage of her. If she’s not stealing from us, I am sure they are!” Alejandrina Saucedo kept the project’s books when Ms. Elba was manager. When she was president of the Citizens’ Committee, her longtime collaborator defended Ms. Elba’s actions in public discussions. For Coronado this made her especially suspect. He reasoned “you don’t make such a fuss if you’re not guilty.”

For his part, Juan Stone, who often takes on the role of spokesperson for Block 1 residents, told me Ms. Elba does not do enough, and that her actions favor only some neighbors in the project: “She and her people talk and talk about all the things they are going to do, but nobody ever does anything. They get stuck in discussions and never-ending meetings, but they don’t take action. When they finally do something, like cutting down the dead branches of trees, they do it in Block 4. It’s as if other blocks don’t even exist. It’s always been like that!”

In her first tenure as manager, Ms. Elba succeeded in increasing the number of people who paid maintenance fees in the project. She also secured additional funds for maintenance
works by applying for government grants and making direct appeals to politicians in office. Over the years, she has cultivated relationships with people in many areas of Mexico City’s government. She attends informational meetings and courses for community leaders organized by the Federal District’s government and, during elections, openly expresses support for candidates she believes will benefit the project. This is invoked as evidence of her dishonesty. “She’s just like the rest! She’s part of the same mafia. All people who go into politics are alike,” Dulce Pulido told me one day, as if sharing a big secret: “I know for certain, someone from the Delegación told me, that she’s stealing our money. She gets a cut of every government grant. Pretty soon we’ll see her expanding her house, getting a new car. Just you wait. She might be fooling some, but she’s not fooling me, I can tell you that! Or just tell me, explain why she would do all that she does if she’s not getting something out of it?”

To this day, Ms. Elba continues to work without accepting a salary. Her supporters suppose she lives off support from her son, her savings, and the Federal District’s modest pension for people 68 and older.

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I told Luis Durango, former deputy minister in Mexico’s Ministry of Finance and now a policy consultant about Ms. Elba and the questioning she experiences. “That woman is a hero,” he said. “And that’s all very good, but we cannot build a political system on heroism. Our problem is that we lack laws. Or rather, we lack ways of enforcing the laws that we have, we lack a cultura de la legalidad, culture of legality. This Ms. Elba works for her community, for the improvement of everybody’s life, and she does this by sticking to the law, and all she gets are attacks…”

As the role of influyentes in Mexican public life attests (see Chapter 1), the PRI was built on personal relations. While the PRI no longer holds the tight grip it once did over government institutions, so-called “informal power”—that is, power rooted in connections
and the awareness of a slippage between everyday practices, laws, and other forms of representation—is still dominant in the country (Selee 2011:11-12, 166). According to Luis Durango, people in Mexico do not come together into associations to pursue common causes because if they did, in the absence of transparent reglas del juego, “playing rules,” they would hardly attain their objectives. Therefore, as they did in the times of the PRI, people complain in the hopes of being offered benefits in exchange for their silence. Ms. Elba’s work goes against the grain of politics. For Durango, her adherence to established procedures is admirable, but also somewhat naïve.

Durango’s arguments go hand in hand with common claims by analysts and public intellectuals that there is a deficit of participation in Mexico. For Jorge Castañeda, Mexico’s former Foreign Minister and a professor at New York University, Mexicans are individualists who work for their own benefit and shun collective action. For this reason, they engage in participación ciudadana, “civic participation,” at much lower rates than, for instance, Colombians, Brazilians, and Chileans (J. Castañeda 2011:30). Scant participation in collective affairs correlates with lower voter turnout in presidential elections in Mexico in the past three decades than in other Latin American countries (IFE 2013:2, 126).

Castañeda’s work builds on the arguments of Federico Reyes Heroles, president of the think tank Transparencia Mexicana, “Mexican Transparency.” Reyes Heroles has observed that in the United States 85% of citizens are affiliated to five or more civic associations (including churches), while 85% of Mexicans do not belong to a single association. Other troubling indicators he identifies are the country’s weak culture of volunteering and philanthropy (Reyes Heroles 2008). Like Alexis de Tocqueville in the 19th century, Reyes Heroles sees associational culture as an unequivocal indicator of democracy. Accordingly, Mexico’s participation deficit sustains an authoritarian state (see also Meyer 2005; Selee 2011:168-169).
The laments of Castañeda, Reyes Heroles and others—which neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe evoke by saying they have been spoilt—reveal frustration with what many hailed as a decisive democratization process two and three decades ago. One of the origins of this process was the 1985 earthquake that destroyed hundreds of buildings in Mexico City. As Carlos Monsiváis (2005) famously argued, the earthquake galvanized Mexico City residents to organize in their own terms; the slow and often incompetent response of state authorities to recover bodies, rescue the living trapped under the wreckage, and feed and house the victims was met with spontaneous acts of solidarity that cut across class lines. These actions took place independently of the government. Instantaneous associations revealed state agencies as superfluous and, in fact, an obstacle to their goals. Many neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe participated in these efforts. “I cooked many kilos of beans and rice in my biggest pots, as did many others here, and we brought them to feed the victims,” neighbor Roxana Toledo told me.

Associations formed in 1985 developed into “social movements” integrated by victims that demanded housing. They soon incorporated recently arrived immigrants in the city and people living in shantytowns (Hellman 1994:136). These and other groups found a space to operate in the void left by state institutions after the liberalization of the country’s economy (Shefner 2007:184-185). As a response to widespread misuse of public funds, people in Mexico also organized to demand reforms to the country’s political system and transparency in public finances. Excitement over these movements as a democratizing force, however, was short lived. With the rise of Carlos Salinas de Gortari to the presidency in 1988, the federal government appropriated the language of grassroots organizations and succeeded in absorbing or demobilizing hundreds of them (Hellman 1994).

*Solidaridad*, a vast welfare program managed directly from the Office of the Presidency, gave resources to organized communities that contributed labor and some
resources of their own. Salinas stated that Solidaridad constructed democracy “from the bottom up” (Preston and Dillon 2004:222). In practice, the program helped transform autonomous movements into client groups much like those that had constituted the PRI base for decades. Many movements, now operating as client groups, changed party affiliations when electoral competition increased in the late 20th century (Fox 1994:182; Hilgers 2008:134). Within the framework of party politics, these groups—many of them still active—are notoriously authoritarian and are used by their leaders as platforms for personal gain (Sotelo 2000; Hilgers 2005).

When measured through the rise and evanescence of social movements, civic participation in Mexico is faint. As Luis Durango told me, in Mexico, those who engage in politics out of honest motives are bound to see their hopes crushed. This assessment, however, is partial. It supposes that Ms. Elba is an exceptional individual who works for the common good while others seek to undermine her as a way to pursue their self-interest. However, Many of Ms. Elba’s critics, although not part of legally constituted associations, also work for their community without remuneration, and are, too, subject to scalding critiques. Emphasis on the institutional dimension of participation by Castañeda and Reyes Heroles effaces the dense webs of relations and negotiations in which actions by the likes of Ms. Elba’s unfold.

**Participation otherwise**

As discussed in Chapter 3, Julián Severiano—who claims Ms. Elba became administrator to spite others—taught physical education to children in Unidad Santa Fe. Twice a week, Julián would arrive home from work, change into sweatpants and go meet his students, many of them sons and daughters of his childhood friends. Julián used equipment he bought with his own money and which he stored in his house: hurdles, hoops, balls, and cones. “I do this to
contribute something to the community, to make this place better,” he explained. “I want these kids to grow up strong and healthy like I did. If I don’t teach my classes, they’ll stay home watching TV and eating junk food.”

For his part, Randy Coronado organized brigades to clean common areas when payments to sweepers and gardeners were frozen. The first time he did this, on a Saturday afternoon, he brought out brooms and garbage bags from his house and gave them to youths and women in the Heroes’ Plaza. “Let’s clean this place,” he told them. “We cannot let our project look like this. Si todos cooperamos, if we all cooperate, we will be done in less than an hour.” Soon, there were more than ten garbage bags in the corner of a clean Plaza. Some of the women contributed money to pay Alvaro, a garbage collector, to take the bags away.

In another instance of participation, Juan Stone led the construction of an outdoors gym in the project. Juan and his collaborators, many of whom were part of The Stones, a nineteen-eighties local gang, began by asking help from government agencies. After more than a year of knocking on doors they had not gotten very far—a candidate for the Federal District’s Legislative Assembly gave them two metallic tubes out of which they could build equipment; no one else offered to help. Juan and his friends thus decided to take matters into their own hands. They chose a residual piece of land in the project by its sports fields, close to Block 1. On weekends over six months, they picked up garbage that had accumulated for years, cut off weeds with machetes, and put together the tubes they received from the candidate and others they bought into fitness equipment following a plan Juan drew [Fig. 22]. Some neighbors contributed money; others helped organize a bake sale to raise additional funds. They used them to buy cement and pay for a welder’s services.

I worked with Juan and his peers a few times. One Saturday, we stopped for a break and shared a large bottle of beer. Federico said, “There will be rules in this gym. There will be no drinking, no pets, no drugs, no smoking. We’ll have to enforce these rules ourselves.
Maybe we can put a wall and a door with a lock. Or we can put a sign that states the rules clearly, so people have no excuses.”

Juan, who had inscribed some of these rules in his blueprint, agreed. He said, “The gym will help us know each other better, to know our neighbors. That way, if we see a girl walk by, we won’t say bad things to her, because we will know whose sister she is… It will be like in the past. We’ll get those good for nothing kids who smoke weed all day in the Plaza to do something productive. If they work out together they will protect the housing project rather than sit on their asses all day.”

Juan and his collaborators shared a vision of the gym as a strategy to bring back the time when gangs were in control of Unidad Santa Fe’s common areas and engaged in
fistfights and battles with outsiders. The links of their endeavor to the past and to visions of heroic masculinity is underscored by the name Gym Jaguar Azteca, which refers to elite pre-Hispanic warriors celebrated in nationalist histories.

In September 2012, Ms. Elba, recently elected for her third term as manager, asked the Delegación to stop the gym’s construction. She said the land Juan Stone and his peers had occupied belonged to the condominium, and that the construction of the gym would have to be approved by neighbors in an official assembly. She also suggested they might need a permit from the Delegación. Policemen came and said this much to those who were working that morning, and construction halted for a week. Stone and his collaborators, however, decided to disregard the police’s orders. Regardless of what Ms. Elba or the Delegación thought, they had been taking care of this part of the project for years. Over the past decade, they had been organizing brigades to clean up Las canchas and paint the wall around them, which is often tagged with graffiti. They also organize a yearly posada that, Juan assured me, has helped people in that part of the project develop a compromiso, a sense of commitment to their surroundings. Juan thus felt he had the right to take over the unused plot of land to build the gym. “Others talk, and they get trapped in never-ending discussions, but I work, I get things done,” he reported.

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“Civic participation” by Julián Severiano, Randy Coronado and Juan Stone does not take place within legally constituted associations. From the perspective of Reyes Heroles and Castañeda, it is non-existent. Actions of others are even harder to detect because they do not take place in visible areas and are often uncontroversial. For example, around 2003, neighbors in a cul-de-sac in the project got together to set up a gate to prevent others from parking there. They painted yellow lines on the floor to divide up the space by sidewalks and assigned parking spots equitably among households. Residents remained organized
thereafter. One of them took on the task of collecting a weekly ten peso fee from every household to pay another neighbor, who at that time was unemployed, to sweep, pick up garbage and mow patches of grass inside the cul-de-sac’s gate. In a meeting, members of this group agreed that those who did not pay fees would lose the right to park inside the gate. As a check on their system, they would change the lock and distribute new keys periodically.

I first heard about this arrangement when I was in a neighbor’s house and someone knocked to collect the weekly fee. The person I was with knew of my interest in the ways in which neighbors are organized, but had said nothing about the arrangement reached by his immediate neighbors. For him, their actions were commonplace and merited no attention. Their arrangement was informal and did not belong in the same category as the project’s administration. I inquired into the existence of comparable forms of organization and found many others: they were all small, bringing together people living in a single building, entryway, or along a walkway. Some had been in place for years and held regular meetings. Others had only come together once or twice for specific actions.60

A few months before I left Unidad Santa Fe, my next-door neighbor in my apartment building knocked on my door to tell me we should fix the roof to prevent pieces of cement and brick from falling off. She explained that the low concrete parapet was crumbling and this could be a safety hazard. She listed each apartment in our entryway speculating who would cooperar with money and who would not; she based her conjectures on earlier experiences. She figured we could rely on seven out of the sixteen apartments, and calculated we would each have to put in 150 pesos. One of the neighbors had already told her he would not put in money, but labor—he was a construction worker. And she, too, could help with construction. She wanted to get this done as soon as possible to prevent her grandchildren,

60 In his “Reflections on Liberty,” Lévi-Strauss speculates that humans have a “need to live in small communities.” “Even a large-scale solidarity like national solidarity,” he writes, “results from the congregation of small solidarities within these societies” (1985:288). This suggestion helps interpret communities within Unidad Santa Fe as the building block from which larger communities are formed—and it intimates that what I observed during fieldwork is not new. The project has perhaps always been a constellation of small solidarities.
who played in the gardens around the building, from being hurt. I was no longer living in the project when neighbors in my entryway did maintenance work on the rooftop, but next time I visited the parapet had been fixed.

As Mathew Gutmann has observed (2002:121-22), *cooperar*, to “cooperate,” or chip in, participate or act in solidarity, is a key aspect of everyday relations in Mexico City. It refers to helping out those in need, with the expectation that one might require their help at some point in the future, as well as doing one’s part in a community for a common interest cause. In the case of Randy’s clean up brigades, *cooperar* involved sweeping and picking up garbage along with others. In the case of my next-door neighbor’s plans to fix our building’s roof, it involved contributing money or labor. Cooperating is characteristic of actions that do not involve state institutions and where those involved are not bound by formal obligations; people cooperate out of their own accord, and thus express belonging to a community. This action is similar to volunteering and giving charity, celebrated by Reyes Heroles (2008), with the differences that it is not mediated by an institution and it establishes a sense of equality, rather than reinforcing economic and social differences.

People in Unidad Santa Fe often accuse others of acting in their self-interest and to the disadvantage of others, while defending the preeminence of the common good. As in electoral and presidential politics, where politicians, candidates and the electorate state their intentions and describe observed realities imaginatively, in Unidad Santa Fe accusations of Ms. Elba and others in positions of authority are not necessarily intended as definitive assessments of facts. Rather, they are ways of marking conversations as political and establishing a point of departure for discussions on the distribution of power and resources.

In this context, Ms. Elba, as the most visible authority figure in Unidad Santa Fe, is often brought up as a dummy. Many of those who talk about Ms. Elba barely know her or are aware of what she does. The questioning of her intentions and actions, however, has a “phatic
function”—that is, it serves “to establish, to prolong, or discontinue communication, to check whether the channel works… to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (Jakobson 1960:355). After questioning Ms. Elba, people point to other actions that are outside the purview of established associations, such as Julián’s classes and Juan Stone’s gym. In other contexts, Juan and Julián are accused of pursuing their self-interest rather than what is best for their neighborhood.

Those who can mistrust the same person are part of a common political space. Neighbors of Unidad Santa Fe come together through conversations on Ms. Elba. In surrounding neighborhoods, residents do not know who she is, but might come together with project residents by doubting the intentions of the head of the Delegación or local congressmen. Beyond the Delegación, people identify with each other as participants in a common political space by questioning the city’s mayor or the country’s president. As Luis Durango suggested when he called Ms. Elba a hero, the practice of uncritically taking down people in positions of authority might hinder the emergence of a system based on rules that would be more fully intelligible. To the extent that this is the case, it affirms the argument that the problem in Mexican politics is not apathy, and that participants are not simply heroic or naïve, but rather part of a dense system of representations and counter-representations. Politics in Mexico City might be flawed in multiple ways, but low “participation indexes” (IFE 2013) is not one of them.

**Solidarities in flux**

Politics—understood as a process whereby people come together into social groups or are excluded from them, often through the staging of simulations and the cultivation of suspiciousness—do not only take place through collective action and the pursuit of common causes. The use of the nouns culero and vecino shows that everyday forms of categorization
also establish parameters of belonging. Vecino translates as “neighbor” and is used as a title when speaking of someone in the third person, often in formal contexts. In a meeting someone might start a comment by saying, “As vecino Jorge just said, I also think…” In this usage, the term asserts equality among project residents, and sidelines ways in which they might be different, such as their party affiliations, income or occupation. The word vecino is also used to admonish people who are perceived to be breaking a rule. Thus, if someone litters in the project’s street, he might be approached by someone saying, “Vecino, could you please clean up after yourself?” This use also highlights equality—in this case before the law. The word vecino is a reminder of established regulations.

The term vecino appears to have been popularized by government institutions. In recent years, the PROSOC has used this word in conflict resolution workshops, brochures that identify best practices, and talks on city laws (see Esquivel 2007). Agencies of the federal government speak a similar language. The Ministry of Public Safety, for example, sponsors the Movimiento Pro-Vecino, “Pro-Neighbor Movement,” which has designed programs for Formación de vecinos, the “education” or “cultivation” of vecinos, and the promotion of Cultura del buen vecino, “good neighbor culture” (Movimiento Pro-Vecino nd.). In these formulations, vecinos are much like citizens—that is, people with a relationship of equality to others in the same category, sustained by shared rights and responsibilities. Notably, however, vicinity has less expansive limits than citizenship, for it excludes people who reside beyond one’s neighborhood. Unlike citizens, vecinos often have personal relationships and recognize each other beyond legal frameworks.

The flipside of vecinos are culeros. The word culero can be translated as “asshole.” Older neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe reported that in their youth, culero referred to people who were afraid. In some locales in Central America and the Caribbean, it is an offensive word for homosexuals and an archaic word for a child’s diaper or adult underwear. In the
project, these last uses do not resonate with neighbors. The word derives from *culo*, which translates as “buttocks” or “anus.” As a swear word, it is not often used by women, and is most common among young and middle aged men. In conversations in the Heroes’ Plaza and other common areas, its use is pervasive. Anthropologist Matthew Gutmann notes, *puto* and *marica*, derogatory terms for homosexuals, also mean coward—that is, men “outside the bounds of masculinity” (1996:238). This helps establish a possible trajectory of the word *culero* as meaning both homosexual and coward before assuming its current meaning in Mexico City. In this reading, terms of inclusion and exclusion among those who socialize in the street are regulated through their suspect status as courageous and straight men.

In its usage in Unidad Santa Fe, *culero* refers to people who refuse to *cooperar*—those who could have chosen to join others in a common cause or play by the unwritten rules of a social group for the benefit of their peers and chose instead to follow more official rules. Similarly, a person might be considered a *culero* if he favors personal interests over those of a collectivity. That is, a *culero* is chastised for being selfish or refusing to give preferential treatment to friends or acquaintances. One might be called vecino when breaking established rules, and a *culero* when choosing to enforce them.

For example, I heard Don Montes, who owns a bicycle repair shop in Cristo Rey being described as a *culero* because he refuses to give people their bikes back if they do not bring the ticket stub they received when they brought them in. Even though Don Montes knows most of his clients, and he knows their families and friends—he has run his shop since 1956, and it is the only one in the area—he does not let this overrun the rules of his business. Other people accused of being *culeros* include a lady in a local store who, unlike her husband, does not let you borrow beer bottles. She makes you pay a deposit, even if you drink the beer in front of her and return the bottle as soon as you are done.
A man who spends afternoons on the sidewalk by Unidad Santa Fe’s entrance and calls the cops on people drinking in the area is also a culero: he does not let people he knows well and sees almost every day break what they consider a minor law. Teenagers in the Heroes’ Plaza often referred to their parents or older brothers as culeros for not giving them money when unemployed, or for asking them to be back home at a certain hour when going out at night. Accusing someone of being a culero is equivalent to saying they could have “cut you some slack” and chose not to. The accuser feels entitled to be treated in a special way because he identifies in some capacity with the accused. Culeros are traitors to the social groups of which they are part. By accusing them of being culeros, people not only chastise them, but also affirm their belonging in a community. The word is paradoxical—it is as much a rejection of someone as it is an assertion of identification with them and a recognition of their social position.

Through the words vecino and culero the boundaries of social groups are constantly negotiated as people are included and excluded from them. The use of these words sets into high relief tensions between intimacy that comes from sharing a living environment, and the institutional dimension of people’s relationship as members of a condominium and as subjects of city and federal laws. Through their interactions and ways of categorizing each other, neighbors identify their peers as members of groups defined through kinship, friendship, vicinity, and the support of different leaders and causes, and assume—or reject—responsibilities, rights and privileges that derive from their social roles.

While vecinos necessarily live in the same neighborhood, Mexico City residents recognize people beyond their immediate surroundings as culeros. On September 15, on celebrations of Mexico’s Independence, the country’s president traditionally makes an appearance in the balcony of the National Palace in the Zócalo, the central plaza of the country’s capital. Online videos show crowds welcoming presidents Calderón and Peña Nieto.
by chanting “culeeero, culeeero, culeeero…” (see also Vergara 2011). In this and other occasions in which people from Mexico City accuse politicians of being culeros they critique them for not using their offices to help them out, while implicitly giving legitimacy to these offices as positions from which they can favor party interests. By attending rituals led by the country’s president, people who are highly critical of them lend legitimacy to his office.

People also use the word culero in sporting events. In soccer, the most popular sport in the country, referees are usually identified as culeros when they mark a foul committed by one’s team, even when it is properly marked. The implication is that referees could have cut the team and its fans some slack by “letting it pass.” In soccer games and other mass events, the word culero can lose its focus from an accused individual and become the battle cry that unites a crowd. In a famous account of a soccer game in the 1986 World Cup in Mexico City’s Estadio Azteca, Carlos Monsiváis describes thousands chanting “culero” before television crews. Among them, the writer saw a man lifting “his son up, for the camera to register this priced object, a boy inaugurated as a Mexican” (1987a:221).  

Citizenship

For outside observers of Unidad Santa Fe and those who privilege quantifiable manifestations of civic participation, it is easy to notice the actions of Ms. Elba while ignoring others that take place outside established legal frameworks. Their perspective posits a dichotomy in understandings of politics that gives the so-called “formal” a privileged position. Onsite analyses suggest that officialdom overflows. The suspension of rules at the time of Unidad Santa Fe’s creation in actions such as the assignment of units discussed in Chapter 1, show that the exercise of power beyond institutional frameworks is a longstanding phenomenon. Today, formality remains difficult to demarcate. While officially a condominium constituted

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61 Spanish: “un señor levanta en brazos a su hijo, que registre la cámara a este objeto preciado, un niño que se inaugura como mexicano.”
by property owners, as Ms. Elba discovered when collecting signatures in 2006, dozens of households do not have property deeds. Perhaps fewer neighbors in the project keep official documentation than do people in squatter neighborhoods in the area whose status has been “regularized.” After privatization, Unidad Santa Fe neighbors had to process their property titles in a government office and pay a fee. They also had to cover utilities debts they might have. By contrast, residents of the nearby Pólvora neighborhood told me they received their deeds in a ceremony led by president José López Portillo in Estadio Azteca.

Scholars and government agencies often describe the fabric of Mexico City through the contrast of legal and illegally settled neighborhoods (Quiroz 2008:50-54; ONU-HABITAT 2011). Parallel analytic lenses distinguish between formal and informal sectors of the economy, formal and informal jobs (INEGI 2013; Luna 2015), and the exercise of citizenship and patron-client relations. The opposition of the formal and informal erases the location of associations such as the one presided by Ms. Elba within shifting relations, ideas, actions, and conversations.

The texture of life in Unidad Santa Fe undermines accusations of self-interest neighbors make against politicians and each other. For liberal economists such as Luis de la Calle and Luis Rubio, who have celebrated the rise of the middle class in Mexico (2010), self-interest might be an innate drive behind individual actions and, in fact, a virtue. For neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe, self-interest is antithetical to the common good. Neighbors are expected to act in ways that benefit not only themselves, but also their community. They recognize, however, that the boundaries between what is best for them and what is best for others are not clear-cut (see Escalante 1994). Culeros, believed to act in their self-interest, only exist because they form part of a community to which they are perceived to be obligated. Culeros are far from the rational, self-interested individuals of classic economics who make choices in isolation—they are agents constituted through their relations.
The word culero shows how self-interest often overlaps with common interest, and common interest takes many forms, depending with what collectivity one associates. A person who chooses to cooperate with their entryway’s neighbors to do maintenance work rather than pay the project’s fees might be a culero from the perspective of the housing project as a community. By contrast, if he chose to pay fees to Ms. Elba’s administration and present this as an argument to excuse himself from acts of cooperation with his next-door neighbors, he would be considered a culero from their perspective. The word thus suggests an ongoing negotiation among different social groups that sets up their interests against each other. People make choices, but not in a straightforward self-interested fashion: people choose as members of communities.

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Roberto DaMatta (1979) argues that Brazilians extend the domain of home—where relationships are characterized by hierarchy and complementarity—to the street, where all are equals as citizens, to avoid the application of the law. People use the phrase “Do you know who you are talking to?” to make others aware—especially authorities—of their personal connections and thus avoid penalties for transgressions. Taking Da Matta’s insights as a point of departure, Claudio Lomnitz (1999) has sketched a history of citizenship in Mexico. He observes that personal connections have always been central to relations among people and the state. While the official scope of citizenship has progressively expanded since the country’s independence to include people of different sexes, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and classes, the consolidation of state power and the preservation of order have often been deemed more urgent that implementation of laws. Until the present, Lomnitz observes, citizenship is unevenly distributed and personal relations overshadow the law.

Lomnitz shows that discussions on citizenship, as a word and concept, have a long history among Mexican intellectuals and ruling elites. Trevor Stack (2012) approaches
citizenship from a different angle by exploring the concept from the bottom up. Stack’s ethnographic observations on western Mexico suggest that discussions of citizenship among bureaucrats and academics place too much importance on the state as granting and guarding citizenship. From official vantages, the state should uphold the rule of law as a step towards greater equality in the distribution of rights, which would contribute to the country’s further democratization. By contrast, Stack’s informants imagine their position as citizens as dependent on their membership in local communities, which are shaped over time by their own efforts to live harmoniously together. Stack’s offers his field observations as a way to “get beyond the broadly liberal normativity of much social science of citizenship” (873).

In Unidad Santa Fe today, as in the spaces analyzed by Lomnitz and Stack, the words citizenship and citizen are ubiquitous. Notably, however, people do not speak of themselves or of others as citizens. Rather, the word appears only in official documents and names of organizations, and in declarations by elected officers and other government employees. The absence of self-identifying citizens in Unidad Santa Fe invites the displacement of this word by local terms. Doing this contributes to Stack’s attempt to understand relations beyond liberal paradigms. Culeros and vecinos cast doubt on the viability of characterizing Mexico City politics as inevitably democratizing; that is, as a progressive conformation of the population into a homogeneous mass of citizens who associate freely and benefit from the preservation of the rule of law. In Unidad Santa Fe, the building blocks of politics are relations, not individuals. Neighbors do not generally pursue equality, but the establishment and perpetuation of distinctions.

Some among those born in the sixties and seventies in Unidad Santa Fe know the cement wall that encloses the project on the south as The Berlin Wall. Perhaps they adopted this name because they saw the fall of its namesake on television at an impressionable age. The analogy is fitting because the wall in Unidad Santa Fe separates two vastly different
places, with relative privilege on one side and relative dispossession on the other. Whereas the project was considered safe, neighborhoods “behind the wall” were imagined as breeding grounds of criminals. These differences account for neighbor Gustavo Ramos’ nightmares in the early nineties: “At the time the Delegación said they would take care of the project, they would pay for the maintenance of everything, the gardens, the Plaza, buildings. But they said we would have to tear down the wall. If we wanted to be treated like other neighborhoods, the project would have to be open. I was fifteen or so, and I dreamt every night that they demolished the wall and hordes invaded Unidad Santa Fe.” Gustavo’s dreams did not come true: the wall stayed, and it continued growing. Today, sections of it are twice as tall as they were when the wall was first built, and are extended further with metallic fences. The Berlin Wall has done its part to keep distinctions in place.

Public Spaces, Common Places

About a dozen people were gathered in Unidad Santa Fe’s Heroes’ Plaza on a Saturday morning for a meeting called on by Roque Salvatierra. “Our fight…” he began speaking. A retired bureaucrat, he enunciated every word with precision, and moved his hands in the manner of politicians. “Our fight is to make the Social Security Institute respect the 1982 Edict. No more and no less. We will make them relinquish all the property that does not rightfully belong to them. The Edict, for instance, does not recognize the ambulance parking lot by the health clinic as the Institute’s property. That space belongs to us, the neighbors of Unidad Santa Fe, and we are a condominium. If they want to park their ambulances there, well, that’s fine, perfectly fine by me, so long as they pay rent to us. We will fix an amount and they will give us a monthly check. That would be just, and the legal way to go about this… And who do I mean by ‘us’? I mean the Association of Title-Holding Condominium
Members. On the basis of the 1982 Presidential Edict, the Social Security Institute was responsible for setting up a Neighbor’s Association before they left Unidad Santa Fe, but they did not, they failed us. They left us like a runaway groom leaves a bride. Dressed up with a brand new dress, filled with expectation, and by the time she realizes what’s happening, the would-be groom is kilometers away, in another state, in another country… So we had to set up this association ourselves. We are the rightful representatives of the housing project. We sued the Social Security Institute and a federal court gave us official recognition. What I mean is that we now are, before the law,” he raised his right index as he said this, “the only legitimate neighbors’ association of Unidad Santa Fe.” With this statement he sought to discredit the administration office established by the PROSOC and Ms. Elba’s, the Citizens’ Committee, and other groups that might challenge his authority.

Roque could have gone on elaborating his arguments with references to laws and court cases, but someone interrupted him:

“What do you propose we do about people who reserve parking by blocking spots with rocks and buckets? Or even worse, those who put tubes and chains in the pavement! Those areas are not private property, they belong to all of us, they are not supposed to do that.”

Someone responded right away: “It is wrong, but what is one supposed to do? I have a two-year-old daughter, and she’s often ill. What if I have to leave my house in the middle of the night to bring her to the hospital? I need to have my car nearby. I wouldn’t have blocked a parking space, but what else can I do?”

Others jumped in with their opinions all at once.

“All of this,” Roque took the floor again, “we will regulate in due time. It is as the saying goes, ‘One does not skin the ox until it’s dead.’ We have to do things in order. First we will get the Social Security Institute to uphold the Edict. Then we can go on to other
things. Once the waters are clear, we will fix a fair amount for maintenance fees. It is as the saying goes, ‘When the river is murky all benefit.’ The river is murky now, so that’s why people get away with not paying, and we don’t really know what happens to the money of those who do. When the river is clear, we will have the money to make our project beautiful once again, with services for all, as it was before 1982.”

When I asked Ms. Elba about Roque, she described him as an enemy to the project. He had not only sued the IMSS, but also her and others with whom he disagreed. Lawsuits were complicated by incompatibilities between federal and local laws. Juan Barrera, a lawyer, acknowledged Roque was not easy to work with, but told me his case was legally sound. Roque was inspired by an earlier attempt at suing the IMSS by Mr. Leal (who has since moved out of the project) that had not prospered. Roque’s efforts kept alive his hopes of eliminating ambiguities between private and public property as a way to better govern Unidad Santa Fe and obtain resources from government agencies.

**Roque’s struggle**

Roque Salvatierra met every week with his closest collaborators in a pizza shop in Cristo Rey—three to four men who, like him, are retired. In one of these meetings, Roque turned to me and clarified his motivations: “Our struggle began a day I went to the PROSOC and discovered the plans they had for us. They said they would increase maintenance fees, first to 250 pesos, then to 300. Some months later they would make them 350 and so on until they would make us pay 1,000 pesos or more each month. Many cannot even pay 100. I’ve seen this: an old lady comes to the store, she asks for half a kilo of eggs. The storeowner puts the eggs on the balance while she counts her coins. A few cents here, a few cents in the other pocket, and she only had enough money for half a kilo of eggs minus one egg! This is a reality among us, and we have to acknowledge it. By raising fees, they would soon start
kicking people out. Those who cannot pay get evicted, and the government keeps their property. That was their plan, to take what is rightfully ours by driving maintenance fees through the roof. That way they would redevelop our home, convert it into a luxury development.

“Ah! And something else! They wanted to demolish El súper. They wanted it to become a ruin and then they would say it was a safety hazard and take it over. They had plans already, I saw a drawing by an architect, to convert it into a Wal-Mart. That would give them millions of pesos, and they would get the land for free by taking it away from us. This is exactly what they did in the Santa Fe corporate zone. They closed down the landfill, kicked out the people who lived there, and sold the land to corporations and private universities. The government made millions, and not pesos mind you, millions of dollars! They had the same plans for us. That is why I decided to start this fight.”

The Santa Fe corporate zone is four kilometers west of Unidad Santa Fe, along the same avenue—the colonial road from Mexico City to Toluca. The area was excavated to extract sand and was used as a landfill starting in 1957. In the nineteen-eighties, approximately five hundred families of garbage collectors were displaced when the Mexico City government began plans to develop the area (Guillermoprieto 2004:307). Responding to a growing demand for corporate office space, stimulated by the opening of the country’s economy, the city’s government converted the area into a business and shopping district comparable to those built at the time in other countries, including La Defène in Paris, Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, and Barra da Tijuca in Rio de Janeiro (Tenorio 2004:235). The direct model for Mexico’s new district appears to have been Century City in California (Moreno Carranco 2011b:159-160). Today, the corporate zone encompasses 900 hectares of land and has 1.9 million square meters of office space. Approximately 35,000 people live within its limits, and 100,000 go to work there every day (Ortiz Struck 2014). The area
includes the headquarters of, among others, Televisa, Mexico’s largest TV network, and Bimbo, a junk food conglomerate, as well as local branches of IBM, Hewlett Packard, Daimler-Chrysler, Ericsson, Kraft, Sony, Citibank, Santander, and HSBC, which are housed in high-rise buildings and walled corporate parks.

The Santa Fe corporate zone has been described as an “urban translation of neoliberalism” (Ortiz Struck 2014). As such, it is a particular type of infrastructural arrangement that facilitates financial flows across international borders, which concentrate on similar nodes in different parts of the world. These nodes are relatively unencumbered by national cultures and state regulations. Architecturally, they tend to be “generic” (Koolhaas 1995), as they are shaped not by local design traditions, materials or construction techniques, but by international corporate standards. Some decades ago, “global cities” concentrated in developed countries. Deregulation and the construction of spaces such as the Santa Fe corporate zone has incorporated Mexico City to lists complied by analysts of the spatial dimensions of the global economy (Sassen 2005; Parnreitet 2002).

Roque’s imagined future of Unidad Santa Fe as a luxury development is a reminder that despite its outward connections, the Santa Fe corporate zone is also solidly grounded on Mexico City’s history of social and spatial segregation. The corporate zone’s shopping center, the largest in the Latin America (Monsiváis 2011:346), is the endpoint of an axis of office space and upper class neighborhoods along Paseo de la Reforma, with downtown Mexico City on its other end. Emperor Maximilian of Hapsburg, who ruled Mexico from 1864 to 1867, built the first section of this avenue to connect the Alameda, a public park, to Chapultepec, an old weekend retreat of Aztec emperors. Embellishments during the presidency of Porfirio Díaz converted the avenue into a museum of the country’s liberal history, with dozens of bronze sculptures and monuments (Novo 2005:65-79). At the dawn of the 20th century, the rich started moving out of the city’s center, leaving old houses behind
that were subdivided into vecindades. New upper class neighborhoods flanked Paseo de la Reforma. The avenue was extended west in 1920 to connect new upper class residential neighborhoods (Correa and García-Velázquez 2015:100). Its most recent expansion, from some of these neighborhoods to Santa Fe’s monumental shopping center, dates back to 1985 (Ortiz Struck 2014).

Mauricio Tenorio Trillo (1996; 2012) has written on the role of Paseo de la Reforma in an ideal city imagined and partly shaped in preparation for the centennial of Mexico’s independence in 1910. This operation involved simulating prosperity by excluding disorder or poverty from the avenue and its surroundings. The avenue was fashioned as an exhibition space that narrated Mexico’s progress for the benefit of rich locals and foreign visitors. Its layout shaped the geography of the country’s capital. One hundred years later, the city’s west, following Reforma, is considerably wealthier than the east, with higher rents and prices of common goods (Torres 2014). The east experiences regular water shortages and has subpar public services. The creation of the Santa Fe corporate zone is thus part of a long process whereby socioeconomic differences have been produced and inscribed on the land.

In addition to evoking this history of segregation, Roque Salvatierra’s description of a possible future in which Unidad Santa Fe becomes a new corporate zone, however farfetched, resonates with fears of exclusion grounded in the project’s privatization. The housing complex is located in one of the poorer areas in western Mexico City. Its surroundings, however, have transformed in recent years through the construction of exclusive apartment buildings, many of them for people who work in the corporate zone but cannot afford to live there. Along Camino Real a Toluca there are dozens of newly opened chain stores and restaurants. Local convenience stores now face competition from 7-Elevens and their Mexican counterpart, OXXO. Near the project there is an Elektra, a chain store that sells appliances on credit, a Bodega Aurrera, a supermarket owned by Wal-Mart, a Burger King,
and a Popeye’s, among other franchise shops and restaurants. While Unidad Santa Fe’s buildings deteriorate, manifestations of a rising economic order start to surround it.

Through association with the garbage collectors of the disappeared Santa Fe landfill, Roque highlights the vulnerability of neighbors and asserts his intent to protect them. In his vision, state authorities are agents who, at the vanguard of an aggressive liberalization program, undermine the authority of public institutions. This perspective underscores the difficulty of making sharp distinctions between public and private interests and spaces in Mexico City. Roque wants to secure the project for its neighbors, to consolidate its character as a condominium by gaining control of all of its spaces from government institutions. His intention is to expel the state, to finish the privatization process begun by the IMSS, as a way to guarantee that Unidad Santa Fe does not fall in the hands of private companies that might take advantage of neighbors. That is, as a representative of a private association of property owners, he wants to curb the influence of the public sector to prevent private interests from taking over his neighborhood.

For those most affected by neoliberal reforms, it is not inconceivable that state authorities might conspire with global capital to obliterate Unidad Santa Fe. In this context, neighbors identify a wide array of government programs as privatizing in their intent. For instance, Otto Martínez once described to me the embellishment of public gardens in neighborhoods around Unidad Santa Fe as part of a scheme to increase police oversight in certain areas and thus make them safe for the operations of private companies. “Before they started fixing the parks behind the wall, putting new streetlamps and flowers, guys there would rob Coca-Cola and Bimbo trucks, but now they’re safe to go in and restock convenience stores. Apparently there are also fewer thefts of auto parts, because there’s always armed policemen nearby.”
Official space

According to a report by Mexico City’s *Autoridad del Espacio Público*, “Public Space Authority,” “Planning is reflected in concrete actions. The recovery of the city through the creation of public spaces promotes new possibilities of coexistence, collective life, social organization, and civic life.” The report continues: “There is no social integration without public space. Structuring the community and producing its physical space are inseparable aspects of the same approach. Expanding physical spaces for gathering, creating adjacencies, and stimulating participation, are the new objectives and the success of the democratic city. As we build the city and its public spaces, sociability increases and democracy is strengthened” (in Sachs 2012:36).  

These statements are representative of the logic behind recent state-sponsored attempts to embellish or improve the city’s form. The 19th-century belief that better spaces lead to a better society is very much alive in Mexico City. However, whereas urban reformers at the age of industrialization hoped to contribute to the construction of a more healthy, productive, and morally upright population (Wright 1981:117, 228; Le Corbusier 1986), those who work in the “recovery of public space” in Mexico City today expect to produce a “civil society” and consolidate democracy. The logic is more or less as follows: public spaces are owned by all citizens; they are therefore accessible and egalitarian. In them, people can meet with those who are like them, and become acquainted with those who are not. Through their interactions, people become aware of their differences and can discuss them freely. The outcome are communities whose members associate freely, without the tutelage of state institutions.

In visits to architecture studios in Mexico City universities I often heard students and professors articulate this logic. They explained their models and drawings by placing agency

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62 The report, previously available online, was removed from the Agency’s website in 2012, a common practice when governments change. I quote, therefore, from a master’s thesis that cites long excerpts in translation.
the built forms they represented rather than in their users: “This corridor flows to the plaza, which will generate community life. It will bring people together by allowing them to interact with each other.” Architects refer to efforts to create and recover public spaces as hacer ciudad, literally “to make city” (see Amato and de la Garza 2011). This expression mimics the equally awkward grammatical construction hacer patria, “to make fatherland,” which was used by government officials in the 20th century to describe actions that would exalt Mexico and make the country progress (see Bertaccini 2009:75). The neo-nationalists who seek to “make city” today believe urban contexts, as opposed to suburbs, are sites of virtue and conducive to the formation of citizens.63 A common critique of buildings isolated from their surroundings or of subdivisions on the outside of urban centers is that they no hacen ciudad, they do not contribute to the construction of the city as a site of egalitarian, democratic engagement among its inhabitants.

Architects in Mexico City identify “the privatization of public space” as a force counter to the construction of the ideal city. In this, they convene with social scientists who have denounced encroachment of parks, streets and other urban spaces by private interests (Low 2006a; 2006b). Spaces in the Santa Fe corporate zone exemplify the negative effects of privatization (Pérez-Negrete 2010). In this area sidewalks are often non-existent and open areas are part of commercial buildings and are under the constant watch of cameras and security guards. The corporate zone’s central shopping center is a closed building surrounded by expansive parking lots where people from nearby poor neighborhoods know they belong only as store clerks or janitors. Local university campuses—including that of the public UAM—and the one park in the development are walled off, with controlled access.

Behind critiques of the privatized city is public space imagined, in the manner of the Public Space Authority, as neutral and eminently accessible. In fact, public spaces, including

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63 Notably, this logic inverts that of urban reformers and developers from the 19th and 20th centuries, who characterized cities as decadent and idealized suburbs as conducive to health and morality.
those constructed or recovered by state authorities with a democratizing intent, tend to be shaped by relations that establish exclusive forms of belonging. In her ethnographic investigations of downtown Mexico City, Alejandra Leal has documented that in recent decades, dozens of old vecindades have been brought and converted into commercial spaces by a public-private partnership established by Carlos Slim, a telecommunications magnate. These actions have concurred with efforts to free streets from informal commerce, converting the neighborhoods of the urban poor into a shopping district for the middle class (Leal 2007). Increasingly, comparable acts of disenfranchisement throughout Mexico are framed as strategies to recover plazas—a word used for both public squares and for the smuggling routes and the turf of criminal organizations and drug cartels (Corchado 2014:7, 44)—while not stating who they are recovered for.

In recent years, “recovery” has involved clearing certain areas from drug salesmen and users—this act is part of a performative territorial war that opposes those worthy of protection to the state’s enemies. This became clear to me when, one afternoon in Unidad Santa Fe a middle aged woman threatened young men who regularly smoke marijuana in the Heroes’ Plaza by telling them she had a friend in the office of the Attorney General (PGR), and she planned to ask him to send police officers to recuperar este espacio, “recover this space.” She was upset by the loud antics of youth in the Plaza at night, and by the trash they left behind. In this case, “recovery” would have involved marginalizing a group of neighbors whose behavior is deemed reprehensible by others. That is, rather than making the Plaza neutral and open for the cultivation of democracy, it would have established a distinction between first and second-class neighbors.

64 Similar actions have taken place in other Latin American locales. Chris Garcés (2004), for example, links repression of the poor and the criminalization of popular culture to the transformation of the waterfront in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Michael Donovan (2008) describes struggles between street vendor associations and city authorities in Bogotá, Colombia over the control of streets in the context of “public space recuperation.” While Donovan sides with state authorities, his analysis reveals the disenfranchisement of hundreds in the name of the public order.
As a “public space,” the Heroes’ Plaza has always been exclusive. Among those not welcome are people who do not live in Unidad Santa Fe, young women and, in the eighties and nineties, those who belonged to gangs with bases in other parts of the project. The same is the case of other “public spaces” in Mexico City such as the Zócalo, the broad sidewalks of Paseo de la Reforma, and the plaza around the Monument to the Revolution (see Chapter 5). These places are accessible to some and not to others, and social groups form through the uses they give to them. Their recovery by government agencies does not restore “public spaces” to a primordial state, but conquer them for some publics while taking them away from others. In Mexican cities strongly hit by the war on drugs, recovery has often involved leveling local social fabrics through the dismantlement of gangs and other organizations suspected to be linked to the drug trade and their replacement by policemen and the army, a process associated with the unleashing of violence (Escalante 2011).

Notably, the term “public space” is not common among Unidad Santa Fe neighbors. When they group all areas in the project that are not privately owned, they tend to use the term áreas comunes, “common areas,” which is the one found in the city’s condominium law. Another common term, áreas verdes, “green areas,” which refers to gardens and plant beds, also has legal origins, as construction regulations stipulate a certain percentage of plots should be reserved for plants and water absorption. Neighbors, however, generally speak of places by their local names—Las canchas, El súper, the Heroes’ Plaza—rather than treating them as different expressions of a uniform substance. Names of sites in the project underscore the uniqueness of their uses and history. As I explore in the following pages, their uses and representations bar their characterization as discrete realms or as equivalent to each other; rather, they are locales that mediate between different scales and bridge times and places in particular ways.
Cycles of hope

One morning, I went with Ms. Elba, Silvia Gutiérrez and Alejandrina Saucedo to the Tec de Monterrey’s campus in the Santa Fe corporate zone to attend a workshop on civic participation organized by the Delegación for members of Citizens’ Committees. We met by the university’s door, where we showed official identifications and signed our names in a ledger. The morning’s activities were organized around a set of lectures by a professor. His central argument was that the present is characterized by individualism and a “weakening of the public” with roots in 20th century modernization processes. The goal of Citizens’ Committees, he explained, was to revert fragmentation and bring back collective goals through the progressive reconstruction of “the social fabric.”

“I think that was very interesting,” Ms. Elba told me when the lectures finished. Others in the auditorium were also satisfied. “I was glad to hear lectures by a real scholar,” a woman told the professor, shaking his hand. Another thanked him for giving us “a long-term perspective of social cohesion.” He responded: “Others will enjoy what we do today, just like we enjoy things for which others gave their lives in the past.” By celebrating those who had “given their lives” for our benefit, he situated his claims within a nationalist discourse of sacrifice familiar to his audience. In light of his arguments, one could see sweeping the gardens of Unidad Santa Fe as part of a return, however slow, to lost communitarian ideals. In this way, the professor encouraged people like Ms. Elba, even if, he said, altruistic actions are not always appreciated and do not produce immediate benefits.

A resident of a neighborhood near Unidad Santa Fe had driven his taxi to the Tec. We rode back with him. As we traversed the Santa Fe corporate zone on Vasco de Quiroga Avenue, Alejandrina Saucedo showed off by exhibiting her familiarity with our surroundings: “That mall right there, it just opened. It has a movie theater and many
restaurants. My son who lives in the United States came to visit and took my husband and me out for dinner there. It’s delicious food, well worth its cost.” The rest of us were silent.

One of the new forms of development in Mexico City that does not “make city” are large complexes that integrate luxury apartments, shopping centers and a vast array of amenities. These developments, increasingly common in the Santa Fe corporate zone, are advertised as cities unto themselves where residents can find everything they might need. They are “utopian places” (Moreno Carranco 2011a) that offer comfort and luxury and establish clear boundaries between inside and outside, minimizing interactions among residents and people with other social backgrounds. Alejandrina pointed to one of these new developments and said, “My nephew has a friend who lives in one of those buildings. They say they are the next thing, a new concept, with gyms and shops and all sorts of things. And I told him it’s not really new, we’ve had it in Unidad Santa Fe for fifty years!”

With this statement, Alejandrina underscored similarities between the once-public social services and housing project and today’s ever-more exclusive apartment complexes. From this perspective, Roque Salvatierra’s dystopic image of Unidad Santa Fe as the site of a luxury development has long been realized. His intention to secure all common areas in Unidad Santa Fe for residents and efforts to control access to the project more strictly would not be a radical innovation; his actions would contribute to officialize existing distinctions between inside and out and consolidate the project’s status as a gated community.

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Some weeks after my visit to the Tec de Monterrey with Ms. Elba and her collaborators, Juan Barrera, in his role as manager of Unidad Santa Fe, called a meeting to discuss a new waste management system. Perhaps because the meeting had a guest, an outsider, members of both the Citizen’s Committee and the Supervision Committee were in attendance despite their differences with Barrera. More surprising still: after an hour they had reached an agreement.
“It was time they stopped fighting and started working together,” said Olga.

“It took a stranger to make them agree,” said Lidia.

Olga sentenced: “That’s how Mexicans are here, always fighting until they have to look good to a stranger.”

“That’s why we don’t get ahead. We are always behaving like children,” agreed Lidia.

As news of the meeting circulated the following day, everybody talked about El ingeniero, “The Engineer,” a man who had showed up unannounced in Unidad Santa Fe and had offered a deal nobody could refuse.

This is the plan to which everybody agreed: the Engineer would take over garbage collection in Unidad Santa Fe. He had recruited a group of young men and women who would pick up garbage from house to house. Unlike the usual garbage collectors, the Engineer’s recruits would do it for free; they would take no tips. He would pay them 950 pesos a week, and sign them up for insurance in a public hospital. Money for all this would come from sorting and selling the garbage.

“Trash is a gold mine,” said Olga. She had once been to the Santa Fe landfill and attested that the houses of collectors were “ultra-modern,” with all kinds of appliances and luxuries. From the outside, they looked like a mound of trash, but they hid immense riches within.

Under the Engineer’s scheme, there would be enough money to fix the Cola de Pato and the concrete benches in the Heroes’ Plaza, which had been broken up by tree roots. The Engineer had also recruited construction workers, and they would start right away.

“This is a win-win. They do it like this in my sister’s housing project. In the future this might even reduce maintenance fees,” said Lidia.
Olga agreed. They were sitting outside Pancho’s store, drinking coffee and having a cigarette. They met there two to three nights a week.

“But I feel bad for Alvarito,” Alma Reynoso interjected.

Alvaro, thirty years old, is one of the approximately eight garbage collectors who have worked in Unidad Santa Fe for years.

“Good morning Alvarito!” neighbors say when they see him walking by.

“Good morning,” he responds as he continues pushing his cart.

“You know Alvarito is getting married next weekend?” Alma asked. “Lucky bride! I wouldn’t mind being her!”

“Oh yes,” agreed Olga. “He is a very handsome man!”

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On Monday, the Engineer’s recruits started making the rounds. There were dozens of them—men and women in their teens and twenties, mostly from the neighborhoods that surround Unidad Santa Fe—and they were full of energy.

“They came twice to my house today,” said Olga. “The second time I had to look for stuff they could take. There was nothing in the garbage can.”

“In the beginning I would not give them anything, I thought they had been sent by Barrera. I thought this might be his way to indebted us. But when I heard the Citizen’s Committee was involved I started giving them my trash. Spread the word, tell your neighbors this is for the good of us all,” Rita said.

“Look how beautiful everything looks! They are picking up trash from the gardens as well, and I saw some of the Engineer’s people watering plants. They are going out of their way and you can see it,” said Laura Gómez.
“Well, I still refuse to give them my trash,” said Alma. “I keep it until Alvarito shows up. Otherwise he’s going to be without a job soon, and remember he’s getting married. He cannot be married and unemployed.”

“Perhaps he could work for the Engineer. He said he would welcome everybody that was willing to work,” suggested Olga.

“Let’s wait,” Alma responded. “It’s only been a week. You never know how long a thing like this will last. It seems too good to be true.”

And then: “Alvarito invited me to his wedding this weekend. I have known him since he was a child, ever since he started coming with his grandfather. I am sure it will be a fun party.”

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At the end of two weeks of work, when the time came to give a description of the Engineer to the police nobody seemed to be able to do it.

“I think he was bald,” said one of the garbage collectors.

“No, no, I distinctly remember a full head of white hair,” said another one.

“Really? I remember his hair was dark.”

“How would we know about his hair? He was always wearing a hat.”

“What are you talking about? I never saw him wear a hat.”

The garbage collectors and some of the construction workers were outside the police station. It had been two weeks and they had received no payment. The Engineer had not answered his cell phone, and when collectors went looking for him in an address he had given them, it turned out that it did not exist.

The police let one person enter the station to file an official complaint on behalf of all of them. Rosa stepped in. For the past two weeks she had been the second in command in the Engineer’s operation. She confessed she had not seen or spoken to him for days. She also
said he had spoken about a ranch, where he would invite everybody for a weekend. Two girls who had started collecting garbage in Unidad Santa Fe since the first day were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they were with him, perhaps they were in the ranch.

“Might this be a prostitution ring?” someone asked. “Might this supposed Engineer be a trafficker of young boys and girls?”

“He was just after money. He got some and disappeared.”

“I’m not sure he got any money. Who gave him money? If he left, he left empty handed,” someone clarified.

When Rosa was inside the police station some of the young men left. There was no chance they would find this man, they said. They would never get the money they had been promised. They went to the site where they stored garbage and took bags of PET bottles and aluminum cans. By selling them they would get some of the money they were owed.

Ten minutes later, one of the young men returned to the station, carrying a picture of the Engineer. It had been shot by Felix, the housing project’s “paparazzi.” He takes pictures of people in the project without asking and then tries to sell them.

“At last Felix made himself useful,” said Señor René when I ran into him in the Heroes’ Plaza two days later. “I gave that good for nothing 10 pesos for the picture and gave it to the boys, for the police record. This might help them find the bastard, but I doubt it.”

As he said this, Alvaro walked by, pushing his cart, a new ring on his left hand. His expression was unaffected, as ever.

“Good afternoon Alvarito!” cried Alma from the other side of the Plaza.

“Good afternoon,” he waved.

**Temporal orientations**

“Garbage has become an obsession for the inhabitants of Mexico City, spawning any number of fantastic stories, all of them true,” writes journalist Alma Guillermoprieto (2004:291). The
ghostly Engineer that visited Unidad Santa Fe and was never seen again illustrates the texture of time, hope and politics in Mexico City. I have often observed neighbors come together around a new leader or cause that they believe will represent a breakthrough. Many had high hopes in the election of Juan Barrera as manager in 2011; in 2012, neighbors campaigned for presidential candidates, especially Andrés Manuel López Obrador; in 2014, middle aged men organized a night watch as a response to a perceived rise in crime and soon began talking of taking on other causes. Hope for substantial change is perhaps animated by the great social transformations in the country’s history taught in elementary schools: the Independence movement, described by Victor Turner as “not cyclical but irreversible” (1974:125), and the Revolution, which Friedrich Katz said “incorporated popular classes to the State” (Katz and Domínguez 2015:318). In each recent surge of hope, however, neighbors were soon disappointed, either after the loss of confidence in a leader or initiative or, in the case of López Obrador, the failure to get elected. Upon the return of normality after each cycle of hope, neighbors point to the observed pattern: “Nothing ever changes!”

The Engineer was a new presence in Unidad Santa Fe that encouraged neighbor organizations to briefly modify the terms of their relations. Changes in the project, however, have to account for relationships among people who have lived together for decades. They tend to be slow and easily reverted, as entrenched practices tend to reoccupy their place. On a larger scale, proposals to introduce radical transformations to the country’s political system—the formulation of a new constitution or a shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system—have been presented as strategies to revitalize an overly routinized administrative landscape (e.g. Muñoz Ledo 2008). Both locally and nationally, “past saturation” (Lomnitz 2008) hinders the realization of alternative futures.

In an interview, a former PROSOC employee who participated in setting up Unidad Santa Fe’s administration office told me he suggested the project be broken up into smaller
condominiums, each with its own manager. It would be too hard, he told Ms. Elba, to manage a community with over 2,200 households. For Ms. Elba, however, the legitimacy of the administration depends on its direct descent from the IMSS office that managed the project during its Golden Age. “There’s a reason why it is called ‘Unidad’,” she said often, articulating the common belief that the project’s creators chose this term for the project because of its meaning “unity.” “We have to stick together, stay united, in order to sacar a la unidad adelante, push the project ahead.” Roque Salvatierra’s civil association responds to a similar understanding of Unidad Santa Fe as a reality that is more than the sum of its parts.

“You say it’s not the buildings, but there’s something to them,” Raúl Cisneros told me once. A thirty-five year old, he studied architecture at UNAM. “There’s something about the way the houses are placed too close together that traps you in some way, something that prevents the community from changing.” We had recently had a conversation on the intersections of architecture and social relations. I had expressed myself against the environmental determinism I perceived in ideas of “public space” promoted by government officials. Other neighbors spoke of Unidad Santa Fe terms similar to Raúl’s. I eventually gathered that neighbors were not speaking of built forms before they were occupied or in the abstract, but rather, of the histories and relations they embody. Raúl was about to move out of his apartment in Unidad Santa Fe; this involved stepping away from the dense web of relations in which he had grown up and marking a new beginning in his life. As other displacements before his since times immemorial, Raúl’s would be not only in space, but also “in time and in the social hierarchy” (Lévi-Strauss 1973:85).
Insofar as the Zócalo and the blocks surrounding it have historically been sites of power, leaving this space has often been associated with defeat: the city’s garbage and its poor, displaced by gentrification, have historically followed trajectories away from the city’s core—to the Santa Fe landfill or to neighborhoods such as Cristo Rey and María G. de García Ruiz. These trajectories, however, can also set into motion the “reserve[s] of the imagination” (Foucault 1986:27). In the 16th century, the vanquished moved out of Mexico City after its capitulation by Spanish conquistadors. They were stepping away from a place imagined as the hinge of the cosmos. Some found refuge in the Santa Fe pueblo, sixteen kilometers west of the site of the Templo Mayor. There, Vasco de Quiroga and his followers projected a new social and spatial order. The “invention” of the American continent involved a shift from perceiving the world as “definitively made” to its conception as “a world in the process of becoming always a new world” (O’Gorman 2006:76). Five hundred years ago, the land that would become Mexico invited alternative ways of being.

Since Europe’s antiquity, Hercules’ Columns—the farthest point this mythical character reached in his explorations, associated with the strait of Gibraltar—represented the limits of the world. In 1620, Francis Bacon published the *Novum Organum*, where he synthetized the methods of a new science. Bacon’s work suggested that the goal of scholars was no longer to study and comment on given texts, but to make discoveries and produce new knowledge. The book’s frontispiece depicted a galleon sailing past Hercules’ Columns; it established an analogy between exploration of new lands and scientific activities. Both would progressively reveal an unknown world. Some decades before, under the reign of Charles V, the coat of arms of the Spanish empire had been modified through the addition of Hercules’ Columns and the Latin motto *plus ultra*, which translates roughly as “there is more beyond.”

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65 An exception, discussed earlier in this Chapter, was the movement of members of the upper class out of the city’s center to neighborhoods west of the city, along Paseo de la Reforma, starting in the first decade of the 20th century.
This logic, both expansionist and committed to the possibility of other realities (Buarque 2010; C. Fuentes 1998:29), perhaps encouraged Vasco de Quiroga’s attempt to realize Thomas More’s *Utopia*—itself an account of travel and discovery—through the establishment of the Santa Fe pueblo. Utopia, “there is no such place” in Greek, cannot by definition be implemented (Levin 1970:89). However, on what colonizers perceived as land without a past (Paz 1992:13)—beyond Hercules’ Columns—reality must have appeared malleable. The vanquished Aztecs were the raw material for the construction of a new world, and its location was the frontier—which began in the forests and ravines on the edge the Valley of Mexico. In 1532, barely ten years after the conquest of Tenochtitlan, Spaniards hardly knew how they would organize their new territories. Quiroga conceived his settlement as a model that would restore the Golden Age Europeans had long left behind (Zavala 1992:73).

Centuries later, the construction of Unidad Santa Fe also involved a stepping away from the city, from the established urban and social order, as an attempt to realize new possibilities of being. The open lands between the Santa Fe pueblo and Mexico City, unencumbered by the social texture of vecindades and old neighborhoods, were an apt place for the construction of a new city that would give shape to healthy, productive and loyal Mexicans. Moving welcomes the possibility for starting anew, for personal and social reinvention (Jackson 1984:91-101). The population of the project involved separation from markers of low class and insertion into a new context where relations among neighbors and to state institutions would be reconstituted. Unidad Santa Fe was a model for other complexes that would reorganize the country’s territory and thus shape Mexico into a modern nation.

Ortiz Mena and his collaborators imagined the project’s houses and apartments as rentals (H.G. 1957), something that would keep residents free from the burdens of private property and allow them to keep on moving. Most of them, however, stayed put. Almost six
decades after the dedication of Unidad Santa Fe, relations among neighbors have sedimented. Family homes, built originally in reinforced concrete and later permanently expanded with cinderblock and stone, are monuments to the past of the families that own them. Changes in the project are slow because they have to account for existing complexity—they arrive not through revolution or demolition, but through murmurs, the spread of possibly true accusations, cultivation of grudges, partial reconciliations, and ongoing tinkering with modernist forms. By contrast, moving away involves a shift in one’s temporal orientation—a break from cycles of hope and disappointment or the cultivation of a new form of hope—that leaves history behind and honors the future.
5. Cosmos from the Passenger’s Seat

_Arqueología política_ by artist Minerva Cuevas [Fig. 23] is a collection of photographs of the logos of political parties on rocks and walls throughout Mexico. Some of the signs are old and half-washed off; others look fresh. Paintings of this sort—at times found in unexpected sites, disrupting pastoral landscapes or views of remote villages one might imagine detached from national politics—are made to promote parties during electoral campaigns by their sympathizers. Cuevas’ work documents the literal inscription of official power on the land. 

_Archeología política_ is a reminder of longstanding strategies to integrate nation and territory by state institutions that dates back to the 19th century.

Fig. 23. Minerva Cuevas. 2005. _Arqueologia Política_. Set of 16 digital prints. Source: Galería Kurimanzutto (kurimanzutto.com)

In the decades that followed the country’s independence in 1821, politicians and scholars wondered how “an extensive and complex landscape and its inhabitants” could
“cohere as an intelligible material unit” (Craib 2002:34). Under the auspices of government, in 1857, Antonio García Cubas produced a landmark map, the *Carta general de México*. Although the result of scientific expeditions, this document was not intended as a contribution to academic geography, but was rather an effort to produce a new understanding of the country’s territory. García Cubas produced other documents that were compiled into an atlas used for instruction in public schools (Florescano 2005:219; Castañeda Rincón 2007: 539-541). His cartographies were less an image of, and more an image for the nation (Craib 2002:38). That is, they early attempts to bring a national community into being.

Another strategy— one closer to the one documented by Minerva Cuevas—involved not representing the land, but constructing symbols of the nation on it. In the mid-19th century, president Benito Juárez—who in 1859 declared Prussian naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt *benemérito de la patria, “a national hero”* (Clark and Lubrich 2012:138)—ordered the construction of an astronomical observatory, a building that would extend land surveys to surveys of the universe and thus help locate the nascent nation in the cosmos. The observatory was entrenched in Juárez political project insofar as it attempted “to convert a disciplinary culture—astronomy—into ‘emblematic architecture,’ and thus express, in the materiality of a building, that science was a state affair” (Azuela 2007:92).66 The observatory, originally built in the National Palace by the Zócalo, was relocated to Tacubaya in 1908, and today survives in the name and symbol of a subway station [Fig. 24] one kilometer north of Unidad Santa Fe.

During his long tenure as president, Porfirio Díaz (1884-1911) continued the practice of commissioning buildings that were instruments of nation building. Among them was a Legislative Palace that would congregate representatives of different states. Its construction, however, halted with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, and the building

66 Spanish: “de convertir en ‘arquitectura emblemática’ una cultura disciplinar—la astronomía—y expresar en la materialidad del edificio, que la ciencia era un asunto de Estado.”
remained unfinished for almost three decades. When construction resumed, the unfinished structure was given a new function: architect Carlos Obregón Santacilia (great-grandson of Benito Juárez, by then benemérito in his own right) converted it into a Monument to the Revolution. Obregón covered the steel structure in stone, finished its dome with bronze, and surrounded it with a gallery for visitors to look unto the city. The resulting monument is a four-legged colossus with four art deco sculptural groups by Oliverio Martínez representing Independence, the Laws of Reform and the more recent agrarian and workers laws (de Garay 1982:55). The legs host the mortal remains of a number of revolutionary heroes. Images of the monument, on a broad plaza surrounded by buildings of government agencies and unions loyal to the PRI, circulated widely. In the nineteen-eighties, it was featured in 200 and 500 peso coins, as a background to the profiles of four revolutionaries: Zapata, Madero, Carranza, and Villa [Fig. 25].

Fig. 24 (left). Sign of the Observatorio subway station, the westernmost stop in the system’s Line 1. Source: Sistema de transporte colectivo de la ciudad de México (metrodf.gob.mx).
Fig. 25 (right). Commemorative coin of the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Mexican Revolution. 200 peso copper coins with the same design circulated widely until the mid-nineties. Source: Banco de México (banxico.org.mx)

In the years that followed the dedication of the Monument to the Revolution in 1938, the PRI-government built other symbols that helped sediment the country’s new national history. These included public schools, hospitals and clinics, markets, and housing projects,
often built after standardized models. Schools were especially potent as national symbols; thousands were built after two standardized models that did not vary whether they were by the beach or in a high mountain. Roberto Cienfuegos, a retired teacher, explained to me how, in the nineteen-sixties, he built a rural public school in the state of San Luis Potosí despite the opposition of the local priest and landowner. Originally, the landowner granted the plot for the school that would instruct the children of his employees. However, under advice from a Catholic priest, he tried to stop construction once it had begun. The priest had cautioned him that the public school would teach socialism and turn the community against him. Armed with the law and a set of blueprints and construction materials he received from federal officials, Cienfuegos prevailed, and the school opened its doors within a year. “The peasants, they were so thankful that they wanted to name the school after me, but I refused. We named it Miguel Hidalgo, as we had been instructed,” Cienfuegos told me. This case is one of hundreds in which public buildings were used, like the flags planted by old colonizers in the Americas, to assert ownership over the land. Modernist buildings were the most conspicuous expression of a new symbolic order that also included textbooks for instruction in national history and geography, and naming practices that honored official heroes.

With the economic crisis of the nineteen-eighties, construction by the PRI-government halted. It rose again, in a new spirit, during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). Rather than commissioning reproducible schools and health clinics, Salinas built isolated monuments, primarily in Mexico City. Money raised by selling lands in the Santa Fe corporate zone paid for construction of a lavish Children’s Museum, as well as the remodeling of the Chapultepec Zoo and the National Auditorium in the image of foreign models (Moreno Carranco 2008; Pérez-Negrete 2010:61-62). At the time, Mexico signed NAFTA and became part of the OECD, a rich country’s organization. Salinas, “a master of political showmanship” (Preston and Dillon 2005:183) spoke regularly of Mexico’s
inevitable emergence as a developed nation. The works Salinas commissioned fashioned Mexico as a city among world cities.

After Salinas, the construction of symbols of the state upheld his model: the federal government has commissioned singular works that represent presidential legacies. Meanwhile, as a result of administrative decentralization, in the nineteen-nineties states and municipalities began commissioning works previously authorized by federal institutions. Public schools, for instance, are now built by local governments. Greater control over budgets has also led to the construction of local history museums that, unlike monuments of old that championed a national culture, mark cities throughout the country as centers of regions with distinct identities. Architects, once agents of national integration, now celebrate diversity. Juan Carlos Cano (2011) has characteristically praised new schools that respond to local conditions and emerge from community-based processes.

Rising regionalism has also shaped Mexico City. For decades the city’s identity was indistinguishable from the identity of Mexico as a nation, much like Tenochtitlan was once fashioned as a compendium of the Aztec empire (Townsend 1979). On the basis of the 1917 Constitution, the president appointed the city’s mayor, known at the time as regente. In 1997, mayors began to be popularly elected and Federal District residents voted overwhelmingly for Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the left-wing PRD. Since then, the PRD has been the dominant political force in the city. The Federal District’s attempts to differentiate itself from the PRI and PAN have motivated declarations and media campaigns asserting the city’s uniqueness as a site of diversity, tolerance, and thriving youth movements. These campaigns have resonated with locals and outside observers (see Hernandez 2011). City residents now recognize themselves proudly as “Chilangos,” a formerly derogatory term.67 Popular culture also conveys satisfaction in the city’s identity. “Chilangolandia,” a “love song” by rock band

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67 Chilango is also the name of a popular magazine modeled on New York Magazine, published since 2003, and of a number of bars and restaurants.
El Tri, celebrates Mexico City as a place where one can find everything one might want, and where “even the bald can braid their hair” and “the toothless chew on rails”—that is, a city where, through distinctive inventiveness, people manage to do as they wish.

Characterizations of Mexico City as and a place of freedom and opportunity are rooted in its history as a destination for immigrants from other parts of the country throughout the 20th century. The city’s self-fashioning as progressive references its longstanding rejection of the PRI—at least since the 1988 elections, voters in the Federal District have decisively favored opposition candidates.

In recent years, the city’s government has commissioned public works, including overpasses and transportation hubs that organize circulations in the city and sustain a sense of connectedness. Most notably, however, the city’s government has “recovered” old plazas and monuments, among which stands out the Monument to the Revolution. Long abandoned, the structure that marked the emergence of Mexico as a new nation under the PRI was refurbished and its balcony reopened to visitors. Mayor Marcelo Ebrard rededicated the Monument in 2010; in statements to the press, he linked the structure’s restoration to the PRD’s salvage of the revolutionary heritage abandoned by the PRI through neoliberal reforms (Romero Sánchez 2010). From this perspective, it is not Mexico City that has changed, but the rest of the country that has abandoned its once proud nationalist outlook.

Old symbols keep on giving.

García Cubas’ 19th century maps are a relic known to historians and antiquarians. Official textbooks have been changed on a number of occasions, responding to changes in government that highlight certain aspects of the country’s past and revise or cut out others (Gilbert 1997). Buildings, however, remain. Mexico City residents live side by side with

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68 Other spaces and structures intervened by the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing during Marcelo Ebrard’s government (2006-2012) include Plaza Tlaxcoaque, Alameda Central, the Moorish Kiosk in Santa María la Ribera, the Garibaldi district and the Monumento a la madre, “Monument to Mothers,” designed in 1943 by José Villagrán. Earlier administrations embellished Paseo de la Reforma.
symbols produced in different eras. Over time, many of these symbols have been modified and given new meanings, but they are not stored away in archives; they remain planted in the street. Flâneurs, “ambulantes” (Gallo 2010b:165), pilgrims, protestors, public transit passengers, drivers, and others who traverse the city can read its edified history. Their readings at times involve reconstructions of the past that help understand the present, and at times ground visions of the future.

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In the previous chapter, I considered the dense and gappy texture of social relations in Unidad Santa Fe, which contributes to make change in the project slow and tortuous. In this chapter, I explore possible breaks in this texture that animate hope and announce ways of thinking beyond official histories and accepted wisdom. In the first section I characterize the opinions and experiences of those who do not have personal memories of Unidad Santa Fe before privatization. In the second section, I consider the circumstances under which older people conceive alternative pasts and possible futures. I do this by exploring social relations in connection to spaces in the project that contradict, qualify, open up, and make converge other spaces, or which challenge their habitual classifications (Foucault 1986). I consider cars, which are extensions of domestic space that, by moving, change relations to their surroundings; parking areas, whose ownership is a constant site of contestation, and rooftops, which are neither common nor private, and fuel the imagination by offering views of the project and the Valley of Mexico beyond it. Although the history of the city is written in stone and cement, I suggest that one might narrate it differently and reinvent the present.

This chapter also serves the purposes of a conclusion. Accordingly, I return to some of the questions that have animated the preceding pages. Caldeira and Holston have observed a shift in Brazilian cities away from centralized and authoritarian planning closely allied with modernism, to more democratic, less sweeping decision-making processes (2005). While
participatory budgets and the creation of Citizens’ Committees might suggest a similar trajectory in Mexico, by centering my arguments on the point of view of Unidad Santa Fe neighbors, I have suggested an alternative perspective. In Mexico, modernist works were actually the result of collaboration, and “new instruments of urban management” (Caldeira and Holston 2005:411) are not necessarily democratic interventions, but forms of simulation through which people negotiate belonging and the distribution of power as they have done for decades. This is evident in the engagement of the young with state institutions I describe below, which shows politics in Mexico City remains a field of artifice.

This field is constructed through the production of what I have dubbed imaginative realities. I borrowed this term from Oscar Wilde, who was whimsically taking part in an age-old conversation among artists, writers, and philosophers that goes back to Plato and Aristotle. In the 20th century, Erich Auerbach (1953) as a literary critic and Ernst Gombrich (1989) as an art historian showed that reality has a contextual bias. Ideas of reality are mediated by particular “patterns” (Boas 2010[1927]:83), “styles,” or cultural conventions. Gombrich’s analysis of 19th century painting often parallels Wilde’s arguments. Gombrich, too, suggests that “Life imitates Art” (Wilde 1998[1889]:463): Whistler, he writes, created London’s fogs, and Constable, by participating in a tradition in which pictures were “standards by which nature is to be judged rather than the reverse,” recreated the English countryside (Gombrich 1989:324, 315; see also Schwarcz 2014). In 20th century Mexico, I have suggested, architect Mario Pani and his colleagues, following in the steps of 19th pioneers such as cartographer García Cubas, participated in the representation of Mexico as a modern nation, helping it to come into being. The representations architects first imagined happen to be inhabited. Residents of Unidad Santa Fe, students in public schools, and patients in government hospitals were not incidental presences, but agents who shaped buildings into symbols and thus became members of a national community.
In previous chapters I have argued that, unlike what modernist architects might have expected and many urban renewal programs in Mexico today presuppose, people are not a malleable mass that takes the shape of its environment, but agents who give it shape by forming relations and transforming and interpreting their surroundings. By considering the built environment not as an a priori category, but as an aspect of a local culture that emerges and develops together with it (Geertz 1972), I also show that symbols are not univocal. Images circulate, are transformed and re-signified by forming new relations to others or by being integrated into new narratives in processes that cannot be fully controlled by officials. Below, I highlight that “sovereignty” does not equal “full autonomy” (Grant 2011:674), by considering the location state symbols among others that complement, qualify, or contradict them.

People I describe navigate not only among state institutions, but also businesses, religious organizations, and consumer good. Perhaps more than in the past, products that are bought and exchanged to signal status and identity, and experiences associated with them, shape people’s sense of themselves as members of communities. New discourses also offer elements that help reframe the story of Unidad Santa Fe’s decline and fall. For instance, when I asked Oscar, a twenty-three year old biologist who grew up in the project, how it had changed in recent decades, he said: “The soil in is depleted, with no nutrients. When I was a kid you could see earthworms come out of the soil when it rained, but now there’s none left. And the trees, they’re aging, there are few birds and few spiders. We have pushed them all out, killed them off.”

69 An article in Don Willy’s newspaper Noticia offers an ironic rejoinder to Oscar: in 1958, neighbors, who had recently moved from dense urban settings to what at times felt like the countryside, were inconvenienced by thousands of earthworms that appeared to fall on the project together with torrential rains (Noticia 1958b).
“Look at the Martyrs,” said Don Dragón. “Look how much they suffer!” Don Dragón is a retired bureaucrat. He spends most afternoons in the Heroes’ Plaza. Others join him from time to time to talk about soccer and the day’s news. Close by, young men meet to drink beer and smoke marijuana. The term Martyrs alludes to the Martyrs of Tacubaya. In 1859, in an episode of a war between liberals and conservatives over civil rights and the separation of church and state, general Leonardo Márquez marched through the hills of Santa Fe and arrived in the nearby town of Tacubaya, where he fought a group of liberal rebels and ordered survivors killed. The war ended two years later with the triumphant entrance of Benito Juárez to the country’s capital. His government elevated those killed in Tacubaya to the status of martyrs. Today, few remember the circumstances of their death, but a neighborhood, a street, and a park near Unidad Santa Fe are named Mártires de Tacubaya.

Don Dragón calls the young men in the Heroes’ Plaza Martyrs ironically; he thinks they are the opposite of people who give their lives for a cause: they are hedonistic, lazy, and unprincipled. Many share his views. Among them are middle-aged men such as Juan Stone who denounce the unwillingness of today’s young to defend Unidad Santa Fe’s boundaries, and others who complain that they are disruptive at night and litter in common areas. Unlike what others assume, however, youths today often are, much like their elders, critical participants in the city’s public life. Differences among generations are in modes of engagement with authority, and not necessarily in the substance of their understanding of power.

I refer to the youths as either Martyrs or ninis, a term common in newspapers, television and in declarations by politicians (e.g. Macías 2011; Notimex 2013; Peña 2010). This word is a conjunction of the Spanish word for “neither” and “nor” and describes those who “neither work nor study.” Both Martyrs and ninis imply a critique; I use these terms
taking the lead of Mexico City youths who have embraced denunciations of their social position as means of reflection and, at times, self-assertion. For ninis both the past and future are in the making as they negotiate their position vis-à-vis other social groups and institutions, and as they juggle old and emergent symbols of identity.

**Graffiti**

One morning Unidad Santa Fe residents woke up to discover new graffiti on the project’s walls. “We will soon be here,” it read, and it was signed “La familia michoacana.” I counted six instances of this message. All were written in the same handwriting in orange spray paint.

Neighbors chose not to talk about this. When I asked, people admitted they had seen the graffiti but said no more. They had heard about La familia (later renamed The Knights Templar), a notoriously violent criminal organization based on the west of the country, and were likely afraid they would take over Unidad Santa Fe.

Some days passed, some weeks and then some months. It appeared that La familia had chosen not to come. Or perhaps they had, but remained quiet, hidden among us. If this was the case, why had they announced their arrival? Perhaps they were sending a message to someone, or they were warning other groups to stay away.

“All sorts of things happen here,” thirty-six year old Daniel Domínguez told me one night, “and we don’t find out until later, if ever. In that house in the corner there was a couple who counterfeited money. They were there for years, I remember their kids when they were small, I saw them grow up. And one night I went out for a smoke in the balcony and someone pointed a laser at me, one of those lasers they use to aim guns. There were dozens of cops surrounding the house and they went in but found no one. They found some of the equipment this couple used for counterfeiting, but there were no people. Someone had tipped them off and they were gone.”
The house remained empty. Police put chains on its gates, and seals that said the crime for which its owners were being prosecuted. Daniel assured me the couple was eventually detained in Tijuana and was now serving time in prison. Armed guards stood by their house for some time, but were gone after a few weeks. The house’s windows were now broken, as were the police seals.

“They emptied the house, the ninis. They probably sold the furniture and blew the money on weed,” Daniel explained.

One of the spray paint messages warning neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe that La familia michoacana soon would be there was on the façade of the counterfeiter’s house. It was one of the six I counted.

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“Don’t talk about rats,” Deejay, one of the Martyrs, said one night. “I have a rat phobia, ever since I stepped on one in La Merced market.”

Deejay continued: “All of its bones cracked, I felt how they broke into pieces, but the rat didn’t die, it just stood there trying to run away, but it couldn’t move. If I see a rat now I run away. And I don’t like going to La Merced either. I avoid it as much as I can.”

“Who wants some ecstasy?” asked Hercules. “I’ll give these pills away for 35, 40 pesos.”

“Show them,” said Joe.

“I just want to sell them, to get my hands off them. If I keep them I’ll take them and I shouldn’t. I’ve done enough shit today.”

Rifle bought one. He had sold four t-shirts from a lot he bought from a wholesaler, so he was carrying cash.
“The mountains in Venezuela, the fucking jungle!” Rifle said. He had watched a documentary on the Amazon rainforest the night before. “Those mountains are a trip. You don’t need any of this shit when you are there,” and he opened his hand to show the pill.

Rifle watched a lot of TV. He often spoke of news shows and documentaries he had seen the previous night. “We also have jungles in Mexico, but they’re fucking them up. There’s this German girl who’s fighting the transnationals that are stealing Mexico’s coast, destroying everything on the coast of Quintana Roo.”

“Corporations!” said Deejay, matching Rifle’s indignation.

“This girl, of course the Mexican government is on the side of the transnationals, and they say she’s lying. They only care about money.”

Deejay asked if someone had a twenty-peso bill. Others knew what this meant and showed excitement: he had crack cocaine!

He crushed the stone by putting it on the bill, folding it over and pressing with the butt of a lighter. He explained that you have to put a tiny bit on your tongue to see if it is “good stuff.” If it makes you feel numb right away, it is. That night’s stone passed the test.

“I fought with my cousin,” said Rifle. That explained why he was wearing a bandage on his wrist.

“The culero went to a military school and he’s all smug about it. But he didn’t hurt me. They stopped us before we hurt each other. What happened is that I hit my room’s door. I was so angry at the bastard. He acts all macho, putting women down, and my mother took his side. So I went to my room and punched the fucking door.”

When Joe lit a joint Hercules said, “That shit smells deep!”

Joe passed it around. They had taken all sorts of drugs over the past hour.

“Let’s play soccer,” said Deejay as he produced a ball. They split into two teams of four and played with great precision, with an excess of energy. I do not play soccer, so they
asked me to take care of their things and filled my pockets with small bags of marijuana, rolling papers, crack cocaine, ecstasy pills in a Mini M&M’s container and a couple cell phones. By then it was midnight.

The game stopped when Cholo arrived. He was in his twenties, with slick back black hair. Two other men walked a step behind him and did not speak. I had never seen them before and could tell they were not from Unidad Santa Fe.

“I’ve got this chain,” Cholo addressed the Martyrs. “I’ll give it to you for 100 pesos. It really gives you the narco look.”

The Martyrs admired it quietly.

“And these sunglasses”—Cholo took them out of his jacket’s front pocket—“Ray Ban originals. Police glasses. I’m selling them for 50 pesos.”

“They’re cool, really cool,” said Deejay, trying them on. “But I was laid off my job today, I can’t afford them.”

Joe also liked them, but said someone would steal them from him the moment he stepped off the bus in Tacubaya. Cholo and his two assistants left without making a sale. He warned us he would be back soon.

“Who’s that guy?” I asked Rifle.

“He’s a nobody,” he answered.

“I didn’t like him. He’s too cocky,” I said.

“With people like that it’s better to be careful,” said Hercules.

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When I returned to the Plaza the next day the Martyrs were already there. It was four in the afternoon.

“Did you see the eye I drew?” Rifle asked.
I had seen it on my way to the market that morning. There was a new graffiti on the wall of the project’s health clinic. It was an eye with a tail and a crown on top, hastily drawn.

Roberto was also there that afternoon. He was friends with the Martyrs but was not often in the Plaza. He spent most of the day in school, where he was enrolled in an arts program. He concentrated on illustration and dreamt of becoming a tattoo artist. The Martyrs were passing his sketchbooks around, commenting admiringly on its contents.

“You should learn from this, Rifle,” Hercules said. “Either you learn to draw, take some drawing lessons from Roberto, or you go back to scaring the shit out of everybody by writing that La familia michoacana is coming to Unidad Santa Fe. When you wrote that at least you showed some sense of humor, a fucked up sense of humor, but at least that was something.”

“That night I was flying man, I flew out of this planet and into the next!” Rifle said with a broad smile.

“When are you not flying,” said Deejay. “I don’t think I know you sober.”

**Boundaries**

During the many evenings I spent with them, the Martyrs often spoke negatively of presidents Felipe Calderón (2016-2012) and Peña Nieto (2012-) and other politicians. They championed those who challenged the establishment, such as the German environmentalist attempting to save Mexico’s Caribbean coast. Sometimes they celebrated drug traffickers such as Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán, a man with a third grade education who, as leader of the Sinaloa Cartel, has become one of the richest men in the world. His business operations extend across borders, and the webs of complicity he has spun have helped him escape maximum-security prisons on two occasions. In parts of Mexico, El Chapo’s organization obtains loyalty by providing services state institutions do not (Keefe 2014:41).
“I am going to write El Chapo a letter,” said Deejay one night. “I am telling him to build a nuclear arsenal to defend the country from invaders. He has the money and the balls to defend us, unlike the coward Calderón. He’s sold the whole country to the gringos.”

The identification of Calderón and a drug entrepreneur as opposites is congruent with the president’s self-presentation as a righteous, tough-on-crime politician. Through a “routinization of the discourse of war on crime” (Fassin 2013:40) similar to that of the United States and France, the president rationalized the use of violence against citizens while establishing a sharp contrast between government and outlaws. In his speeches and in advertisements on the radio and television, the Office of the Presidency constructed an elaborate yet simplistic narrative identifying drug cartels as a threat to the nation’s territorial integrity and justifying the deployment of the army to contain them (Escalante 2012:106-107). Given the low regard for Calderón and government in general, some accepted this clear-cut distinction, but sided with the president’s enemies.

In 2011, Francisco Blake Mora, Minister of the Interior—the highest ranking member of the president’s cabinet—died in a helicopter crash. He was the second person in this position to die while in office during Calderón’s government: in 2008, Juan Camilo Mouriño had died when his plane crashed into Lomas de Chapultepec in Mexico City. The official version of Blake’s death stated that the helicopter’s pilot crashed into a hill due to low visibility. For neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe this explanation was blatantly false. Hercules told me that the government “had it coming” for openly declaring war against criminal organizations. He joked that he would make a demonstration in which people would walk to through the city chanting, *El narco, unido, jamás será vencido*, “The drug world, in unity, will never be defeated,” a play on a well-known slogan that asserts the invincibility of *el pueblo*, “the people.”
For most of the 20th century, when the PRI dominated politics in Mexico, the boundaries of criminal and political organizations were not as sharp as Calderón made them out to be. A number of PRI politicians were accused—and indicted—for tolerating or even profiting from the drug trade. Among them was, for example, Arturo “El Negro” Durazo, Mexico City’s police chief from 1976 to 1982. In 1984 he was arrested with charges of corruption, extortion and drug trafficking. He was made into an example of the worst aspects of the PRI by the press and the party itself, which tried to cleanse its image through his imprisonment (Lomnitz 2003).

In a conversation with Vicente Guajardo, a high-ranking official in Mexico City’s government and a member of the PRD, he said the increased power of drug cartels had a lot to do with the demonization of figures such as Durazo. He was corrupt and evidently had links with the drug trade, but that is what allowed him to keep criminal organizations in check. According to Guajardo, when state institutions started severing ties from these organizations, they were left unwatched and spiraled out of control (cf. Corchado 2014:38-46). Now cartels have developed into transnational corporations, with operations across borders, considerable assets, and openly conflicting interest to those of government.

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In Unidad Santa Fe the use of marijuana is widespread. Many also consume crack cocaine and synthetic drugs. Neighbors associate drug use with teenagers and young males. While others are also frequent consumers, this group is most visible. Critiques of the Martyrs in neighbor meetings, however, were not necessarily about their use of drugs, but about their disruptive antics. Tolerance of drug use has to do with the fact that the Martyrs are de buenas familias, “from good families”—that is, neighbors know them and their parents or grandparents personally. Alma Reynoso, who lives in Building 45 once told me, “Rifle and
his friends, they are good boys, they will grow out of it like so many others before them have.” Like Alma, others interpret drug consumption as part of a stage in life.

Tolerance of drugs also has to do with their long history in the project. According to neighbor Gerardo García, starting in the nineteen-sixties, outsiders came to Unidad Santa Fe to conectar, literally “connect”—that is, to buy drugs. They lined up under the Cola de pato in the Plaza waiting for a child who would walk with them to the wall on the project’s south end. They jumped over and found Carola, a woman who sold illicit substances. Carola’s house and shop was in a shantytown, and access to it was considered unsafe. Buyers thus used the contiguous Unidad Santa Fe as a gateway. This practice appears to have been tolerated by IMSS authorities. Two upper middle class men in their sixties told me in unconnected conversations they had visited Unidad Santa Fe regularly to buy drugs in the sixties and seventies and confirmed the details of Gerardo’s account.

Carola is legendary in both Unidad Santa Fe and surrounding neighborhoods. People attribute her incredible feats and privileged political relations. According to a man from María G. de García Ruiz neighborhood, a federal police helicopter once fell in the area. Everybody in it died except for Carola, who miraculously walked out of the debris. Someone else told me she would personally distribute drugs to members of the president’s cabinet. Carola’s role—real or imagined—as figure between government and illicit activities is similar to Durazo’s; it is a reminder of the vague boundaries between these spheres for most of the 20th century in Mexico.

While Carola’s descendants are said to have continued her business after she died in old age, the drug trade now takes place primarily within the boundaries of Unidad Santa Fe. The Martyrs sell small amounts of marijuana, synthetic pills, and other drugs to each other. Others buy from Elvis, a man who moved into the project in the nineteen-eighties. Elvis is both feared and admired by neighbors. Some seek his advice and protection. He is said to
have contacts with people who run *anexos*, informal rehabilitation centers for addicts (see Chapter 3). One of the Martyrs—a regular customer—told me Elvis had put in a good word for him among inmates when he was in prison, something that made his time more tolerable.

Elvis does not speak much about his trade, but is ready to tell neighbors he can procure them “anything they might need.” At the time when Unidad Santa Fe was built, IMSS officials described the project as a neighborhood that, by combining housing and health, commercial, sports and cultural facilities, would free the country’s working class from all want and need (H.G. 1957:141). Officials believed that making need and want disappear would end “class resentments” (Ortiz Mena 1957). Ideas on need have changed. Elvis does not expect to offer definitive fixes, but is rather recognizes he is part of a consumer chain that facilitates experiences, forecloses some possibilities, and allows for the imagination of others, in a process whereby desire is ever renewed (Biehl 2010).70

**Apathetic generation**

As a general rule, youths of Unidad Santa Fe live with their parents until they marry or move in with their partner or their partner’s family, often after having a child.71 Some hold advanced academic degrees and have successful professional lives. However, they are not as visible as the Martyrs. For example, Rodrigo Maurer, who owns a computer repair company with two of his college friends, can rarely be seen in the project. He spends most of his time at work, and socializes with friends who live in other neighborhoods.

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70 In architecture, modernists often spoke of their works as responses to needs—forms and spaces were conceived for discrete functions. In a commentary on this mindset, architecture historian Vincent Scully cites an exchange between two students: “Who needs that?” asks the first, referring to the highly ornamented Vanna Venturi house, an icon of postmodernism. “Everybody needs everything,” responds the second (Scully 2003:320). An earlier commentary on the understanding of modern architecture as a strategy to satisfy needs through the design of functional spaces is Magritte’s painting “This is not a Pipe.” James Harkness says this painting might have been a “riposte” to Le Corbusier’s presentation of the pipe as an example of functionalism (see Foucault 1983:60).

71 In most cases, when a young couple has a child before marriage, the father moves to the mother’s parent’s house. This arrangement is seen as temporary; couples expect to move out once they have stable jobs or have saved enough money.
Although they are a minority, some of those who socialize in the project’s Plaza also have stable jobs and are, by their own account, satisfied with their work situation. Joe, for example, inherited his grandmother’s car and started making a living as a messenger and driver for his neighbors. Erick, the son of the groundkeeper in a public school, makes a living managing a cooperative that sells food to children during recess. Kevin is a children’s soccer coach, and works mostly on weekends. All three of them have unusual work schedules, which allow them to spend a lot of time in the project’s common areas.

Others among the Martyrs, however, have unstable work arrangements. They tend to work low-paying jobs intermittently. Deejay, in his mid-twenties, has worked as a crypt salesman for a funeral home, a cook in a sushi bar, a waiter in a restaurant, and an apprentice in a carpentry shop, among other jobs. In none of them, however, did he feel he had a future; he often claims his superiors were culeros who took advantage of him. He has quit on several occasions because of disagreements with them. At least twice he was caught stealing from customers and was fired. Between jobs Deejay takes a few weeks or months off; he waits until he has spent his savings before looking for a new source of income.

Rifle, for his part, has worked handing out fliers in the street, as a bouncer in a strip club, and as a clothes merchant in street markets. He quit high school when he started a training program to work in Luz y Fuerza, a public power company. His mother was about to retire and he was set to inherit her position. With the dissolution of Luz y Fuerza in 2009, Rifle was cut off from this trajectory. He considered returning to high school, but he admitted he was a bit lazy and felt he might be too old. I helped him fill out job applications where he wrote he hoped to earn 4,000 pesos a month, approximately 300 dollars. In the absence of better opportunities, his peers expect similar wages, which come without health care or other benefits. Companies tend to keep their wages off the books.
The Martyrs often talk about gang movies, especially *The Warriors* (Hill 1979), which circulate among them as multimedia messages on their phones. However, as middle-aged Juan Stone constantly reminded me by saying they are “idle good for nothings,” young men in Unidad Santa Fe are not organized into gangs. According to a former policeman who grew up in the housing project, gangs disappeared with the rise of drug cartels. Their members were either recruited to distribute drugs, and thus became part of larger organizations, or were frightened into disbanding when drugs salesmen, backed by armed guards, entered their territories. This theory has been offered as an explanation for the changing configuration of space in the city of Monterrey (Carrión 2012). Similarly, Fernando Escalante (2011) has observed that the presence of the Mexican Army correlates with increasing violence in the country; he suggests that attempts to impose order by force have shattered local agreements that had previously regulated violence.

These explanations, however, seem inadequate for Unidad Santa Fe and other parts of Mexico City. The country’s capital is not under the control of any one particular cartel and the army has not been deployed in its streets. When I conducted fieldwork, Mexico City was considered one of the safest places in the country. While I heard stories suggesting the presence of various cartels in the Santa Fe region—and the possibility that La familia michoacana would soon be there was believable to neighbors—these were isolated incidents rather than evidence of control over the area by one particular group. As sociologist Sergio Galaz told me (personal conversation, June 2011), much of the city’s “public spaces” are under the control of powerful merchant organizations with complex networks of patronage, something that has likely contributed to keep drug cartels at bay: in contrast to Monterrey, Reynosa, Torreón, Tampico and other cities, the streets in the country’s capital have never been up for grabs.
The dissolution of gangs in Unidad Santa Fe and surrounding areas can also be explained as the result of larger economic and political phenomena. Towards the year 2000, with the fragmentation of power into different political parties, state agencies, criminal enterprises, media corporations, churches, and other organizations, neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe and elsewhere in Mexico City no longer identified a unified entity they could oppose. Youths in the project do not have a distinct “enemy” to rebel against. Moreover, unlike Don Dragón who mourns the passing of what he describes as “Mexico’s Golden Age of social security and union organizing,” young neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe have never experienced a context they might contrast to the present. Youths appear to believe that if employers are abusive and jobs inadequate, it is because that is how they are. Absence of expectations manifests as apathy.

Ninis by choice

So far I have characterized ninis in Unidad Santa Fe as the product of their circumstances; they have bad jobs or no jobs at all because of economic and political determinants. However, another interpretation holds: some youths are ninis because they can, and they choose to. In the mid-20th century and into the seventies, people in Mexico City married young, and women had children at a younger age than today (INEGI 2001; Mendoza and Tapia 2010:15-16). In Unidad Santa Fe, widespread use of contraceptives among youth—condoms are readily available and inexpensive in local pharmacies—and the legalization of abortion in Mexico’s Federal District have allowed young men and women to extend adolescence, the period in which they start seeing “the pathways of their own lives” as they move toward what might appear as “an unknown future” (Mead and Heyman 1965:185). Before, marriages after the conception of a child led couples to move swiftly into adulthood.
With no obligation to pay for food or rent in their parents’ homes, young adults are free from the need to earn a stable income. The jobs Deejay and Rifle take give them money for drugs, alcohol and transportation. They might also make a profit from buying and selling drugs to their friends or products such as the police glasses and the decorative chain Cholo offered when he visited the project. Irregular forms of income allow ninis to minimize humiliations by employers and free them from an office or business’ strict schedule. For older people this attitude is evidence of the absence of a “sense of responsibility;” for some ninis it is a way of expressing alienation from institutions that they believe fail to represent them.

This sentiment is aptly expressed by a graffiti [Fig. 26] I saw in different places of Mexico City in 2012 that reads, *Y vivieron ninis por siempre*, literally, “And they lived ninis
forever,” a play on the Spanish version of the trope “they lived happily ever after.” The lightheartedness of this statement undermines the seriousness of the accusations of unproductivity waged against ninis and characterizes their situation as a choice. Through such expressions, ninis embrace their ambivalent position with respect to political parties, businesses, and schools and universities as an act of nonconformity and celebrate their ability to carve out different life trajectories than those of their parents.

In the words of Laura Gómez, a middle-aged neighbor in Unidad Santa Fe, by neither studying nor working, young people are not “contributing to society.” she told me “they are parasites that only think of themselves.” The point of view of many ninis validates this accusation—and suggests a critique of “society” as conceived by the likes of Laura. In this, however, ninis are not much different than rebels before them. In the nineteen-eighties, young men organized into gangs that challenged modes of government that emerged from the country’s structural adjustment. Today’s youth have chosen to express their dissent by celebrating their status as ninis; some have also asserted their political consciousness by staging mass protests. During the 2012 elections they demonstrated against PRI candidate Enrique Peña Nieto, denouncing politics as an exercise in simulation. They pointed to the use of representations as substitutes for what they considered undeniable facts, in hopes of ushering more genuine political practices.

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On May 11, 2012 a controversy broke out when a group of students from Universidad Iberoamericana (Ibero), a private Jesuit university in the Santa Fe corporate zone, protested against Enrique Peña Nieto in a visit to their campus (Cervantes 2012). The candidate’s team declared the protesters were not students, but paid activists who had infiltrated the event. Outraged by the way they were represented, protesters made a YouTube video showing their university IDs. The video featured 131 students; it gave rise to a movement named Yo Soy
I am number 132, an expression of solidarity with the Ibero students, often written without spaces because of its use as a Twitter hashtag. #YoSoy132 developed into a decentralized network of youth groups that communicated online and came together in mass gatherings in various cities.

In the eyes of protesters, the characterization of Ibero students by Peña Nieto’s campaign proved the PRI was orchestrating a media manipulation campaign—much like it had during its many decades in power. For YoSoy132 sympathizers, news on TV and major newspapers were part of a conspiracy to make Peña Nieto president and, after two presidents from the PAN, fully restore PRI rule. The main ally of the PRI in this process, as seen by student protesters, was Televisa, the country’s largest television corporation and a propaganda outlet for most of the 20th century (Hernández and McAnany 2001). PRI opponents insisted that Televisa stations were complicit in making Peña Nieto into a soap opera beau, or in choosing a candidate that met this profile: handsome, impeccably dressed, photogenic and, depending on who you asked, either very measured in his declarations or bland and empty. His marriage in 2010 to soap opera star Angélica Rivera—known popularly as La Gaviota, “The Seagull,” after one of her TV roles—was often called out as part of the dishonest crafting of the candidate’s image.

The perception of Peña Nieto as a puppet controlled by invisible forces was sustained by a number of gaffes (Zapata 2011; Didriksson 2011) his critics presented as proof that he had no ideas of his own and was unable to articulate a coherent thought without a script. Protesters characterized Peña Nieto as ignorant and lacking cultivation. In a YoSoy132 march I attended with a group of Unidad Santa Fe neighbors, participants chanted, “One must study, one must to study; he who does not study will end up being like Peña Nieto,” a variation a slogan used against the police in soccer matches and other mass events. We were part of a

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72 Historian Serge Gruzinski identifies Televisa as the “culmination” of a war of images that began with colonization of the American continent, in a process that made it a “land of all syncretisms” (2001:3-5).

73 Spanish: “Hay que estudiar, hay que estudiar. El que no estudie en Peña Nieto [en policía] va a acabar.”
crowd of thousands on Paseo de la Reforma, united by the characterization of the candidate as stupid or unprepared to be president.

Fig. 27. Student protest in Paseo de la Reforma, 2012. The poster reads, “Intention polls lie, [physical] presence does not. Your exacerbated favoritism awoke the public conscience.” On the left is Televisa’s logo; on the right, that an editorial that publishes El Sol de México and other newspapers. Source: Pensemos Juntos (mx360.tv)

Historian and public intellectual Enrique Krauze wrote an opinion piece suggesting that YoSoy132 should organize into a political party if it wanted to have a lasting voice in politics (Krauze 2012). Others spoke in similar terms (e.g. Sheridan 2012). YoSoy132 sympathizers, however, refused to collectively support a candidate or party and resisted participation in politics through official channels. During the protest on Reforma, Facundo, a philosophy student at UNAM and a friend of an Unidad Santa Fe resident, told me that Krauze had missed the point: YoSoy132 was not a centralized, hierarchical organization, but an assemblage of like-minded people who wanted to challenge politics as usual. Facundo
explained that forming a party or supporting a candidate would imply working within a system that had consistently failed to represent the interests of ordinary Mexicans like himself. For decades, state institutions had served only the rich.

In addition to pointing out Peña Nieto’s lack of cultivation, protesters set up a series of contrasts between artifice and reality through their slogans. They chanted: “Peña Nieto: TV is yours, but the streets are ours,” “Turn your TV off, turn your mind on,” and “We want schools, not soap operas.” In these and other phrases, the PRI, deceit, and television were grouped together and set up against the party’s opponents, books, and education. Protesters also chanted, “This is the survey! This is the survey!” This slogan was a reaction against published voter intention polls that showed Peña Nieto was ahead of other candidates by a wide margin. The surveys, PRI opponents insisted, were manipulated to make Peña Nieto’s election appear inevitable. For those in the streets, the protest’s turnout invalidated surveys. Their bodies were real, while numbers printed in newspapers were, as most news articles were assumed to be, part of a unified effort of state propaganda [Fig. 27].

There were unacknowledged ironies in YoSoy132 demonstrations—the distinction between education and artifice was fraught, to the extent that the majority of protesters had studied in public schools or was enrolled in public universities established under PRI rule. The schools they had attended and now championed were more than sites for the education of children—they were also part of the construction of a nation and consolidation of state power through the deployment of buildings as symbols. Moreover, by claiming to stand outside the establishment and thus being able to offer a detached, objective view of politics, protesters used a tactic that had been conventionalized by presidential candidates Vicente Fox in 2000 and López Obrador in 2006 and 2012, both of whom derived charisma from their self-fashioning as outsiders. Ninis had found a way to be conventionally unconventional.

Spanish: “Peña Nieto, la TV es tuya, las calles nuestras”…“Apaga la tele, enciende tu mente”…“Queremos escuelas, no telenovelas”…“Esta es la encuesta! Esta es la encuesta!”
Variations on failure

For some weeks, a chapter of YoSoy132 met in an apartment in Unidad Santa Fe. It brought together young neighbors and some of their high school and college friends. They placed signs on the apartment’s windows and façade. Others in the project expressed support for the movement, and opposition to Peña Nieto was widespread. Miriam, a neighbor who organized a rally for a PRI candidate for congress in the Heroes’ Plaza, told me she acknowledged that the party was deceitful and corrupt but that unlike others, “it got things done.” She insisted this was preferable to the “disastrous government by the PAN,” which had led to unprecedented drug-related violence. The few other PRI sympathizers I encountered spoke in similar terms—they did not express outright support for the party but characterized it as the more suitable choice in face of the incompetence of others. During the rally Miriam organized, I stayed on the side of the Plaza with Rifle and Deejay, who would occasionally face the people gathered and scream, “We are 132!” and “Down with the PRI!”

Cultivating politics as a field of artifice, many in Unidad Santa Fe spoke of YoSoy132 as a something other than what its supporters claimed it was. Some told me that powerful people were using youths to defeat the PRI (they pointed fingers at telecommunications magnate Carlos Slim)—that is, the movement was parallel to the PRI-led conspiracy, initiated by the party’s powerful detractors. Others intimated that the PRI itself had created YoSoy132 to make it seem it had real opposition, while in fact they were and had always been fully in control of the country’s political life. There were also rumors of an alliance between the Jesuit Ibero and López Obrador’s left-wing PRD.

Notably, the one sustained argument I heard in Unidad Santa Fe suggesting the student movement represented more than an illusion came from Julián Severiano, the project’s chief conspiracy theorist. Some days after the incident that led to the formation of YoSoy132, I talked with him in the Plaza. He said that Peña Nieto was just one more
character in a longstanding history of organized deceit. He pointed to a security guard standing by the door of the Social Security Center and said, “She’s one of the children of [presidents] López Portillo and Miguel de la Madrid. She was once the future. Every person you see around with a shitty job was once the future. Every person in power in the past half century has said that children are the country’s future, but at the same time they rob them of opportunities.”

He continued: “The kids at Ibero realized just that. They have no future. A few years ago, it was enough to have a college degree to find a decent job, and it was even easier if one came from a private university. But now there’s this super-elite that sends their children to Harvard or Yale, and the rest of us are fucked.” Julián celebrated the students for standing up to the powerful, even if he was convinced their actions would not produce the desired results. He explained that young men and women could protest as much as they wanted—the ruling class would let them do that, so they would think their voice matters—but their actions would have no lasting effects. The election’s outcome had been decided—as so many other things were—long before YoSoy132 came into the picture.

After the elections, some of the critiques of YoSoy132 appeared to be validated. Antonio Attolini, who had gained prominence as an articulate spokesman for the movement accepted a job at Televisa as a political analyst (Solís 2012). Many said the movement had amounted to nothing. In a conference, I heard a well-known political scientist describe YoSoy132 as “another futile revival of 1968,” a reference to the student movement that ended with the massacre of hundreds of protesters by the Mexican Army in the Tlatelolco housing project. These assessments suggested that YoSoy132 did not shatter the representations against which it declared war, but rather played into the logic of the country’s political system and left its symbols intact. While youths in Unidad Santa Fe sympathized with YoSoy132, they did not express much disappointment when, after the elections, the
movement faded. “Things will never change, you know,” Rifle told me. “We’re better off if we just chill and smoke a joint.”

Mateo’s future

One afternoon someone kicked a soccer ball into the abandoned IMSS offices by Unidad Santa Fe’s Plaza. Deejay and Mateo, an eight-year-old, went in through a broken window.

Juan Barrera, the project’s manager at the time, was in a room next door when he heard noises. He called the police right away. Barrera was weary of thieves. He kept equipment and documents in this space.

There is a police station some two hundred meters away from the Plaza, so they got there quickly—three officers on motorcycles. By the time they went into the abandoned offices, Deejay was back in the Plaza with the ball, but he had left Mateo behind. When Mateo saw the officers walk towards him menacingly he started crying.

A lady who was walking by got a hold of Mateo’s mother, who was home a few house groups west. When she arrived she was furious. She glowered at her son, and at the police and Barrera. What did they think an eight year old could do to warrant detention by three police officers? They shouldn’t dare touch him. She then turned to Mateo. Had she not told him to stay out of trouble? Next time she would leave him to be dealt with by the police. Next time she would not come to his rescue.

She held the child’s hand and they walked away. Barrera gestured to the police to let them go. It was enough to give Mateo a good scare. That would make him more conscientious, and others would hear about what had happened and stay away from the abandoned offices. By then there was a group of passers-by who had stopped to see what was going on. Among them were the youths who had been playing soccer; Deejay was there, with
the ball in his hands. When Mateo saw him, Deejay put a finger on his lips meaning, “Keep your mouth shut, don’t dare say I went in there with you.”

“That bastard Barrera would have pressed charges against me if they had caught me, and I’m old enough to go to jail,” he explained.

That evening in the Heroes’ Plaza everybody talked about the break in.

“That kid Mateo,” Joe said, “he’ll either end up mob boss or he’ll be in prison soon. He’s only eight and has gotten in trouble with the police twice this month.”

“A few weeks back,” Carlos clarified, “he stole 500 pesos from his stepfather and he called the cops to teach the boy a lesson.”

Another Martyr interjected: “But it’s not the kid’s fault. His parents are the problem. He’s eight and they can’t control him!”

“If he was my kid I would take him out of the project as soon as I could. Here he’s only going to find bad influences. If he stays here, he’ll be trapped, won’t be able to escape,” sentenced Carlos.

Five young men participated in this conversation. They were passing a joint around. Hercules had made it “extra special” by crushing a pill of ecstasy and mixing it with the marijuana. “This stuff is really hitting me… give me more,” Deejay said as he extended his hand towards Joe, who took a long drag, and then another one. “Hey, culero, pass it around! Leave some for the rest of us!”

By saying Mateo will end up a successful criminal or a convict if he remains in Unidad Santa Fe, the Martyrs offer a critique of themselves. They are the “bad influences” that might doom precocious children. Some among them believe they are kept down by addictions and by their relations in Unidad Santa Fe, and predict a similar entrapment for younger generations. In these assessments, they echo Julián Severiano’s belief they have “no future.” However, when they fashion their rejection of formal politics and the breakdown of
patterns of social reproduction as modes of self-assertion, youth in Mexico City intimate there might be more to their position than meets the eye of their critics. Since 2012, there have been other youth mobilizations in Mexico. In 2014, demonstrations returned to the streets after the disappearance of 43 students from a rural teacher’s college under circumstances that implicated government officials. Alongside demonstrations, a number of new publications and political groups have emerged. Perhaps—it is too early to know—YoSoy132 was in fact an opening to new modes of engagement with power.

In previous chapters I have considered how houses and objects kept in them are connected to family histories, as well as ways in which the spatial organization of Unidad Santa Fe is entangled with its organization as a community. There are clear correspondences—the formal can be read as an archive of the social, and social relations offer avenues for the interpretation of the built world—as well as contradictions and erasures. The practices and opinions of Ninis—renegades who are rarely at home, and might be cynical, self-aware, and distrustful of other generations—might expand the possibilities of power and solidarity. Lévi-Strauss suggests that families and homes, although revealing windows into culture and society, are not all there is: “Family life is little else than the expression of the need to slacken the pace at the crossroads and to take a little rest. But the orders are to keep on marching; and society can no more be said to consist of families than a journey is made up of the stopovers that break it into stages” (1985:61-62). In these journeys space is yet uncharted. It is there that the Martyrs of Unidad Santa Fe and beyond could emerge as a new type of public.
Mr. Narciso Saldivar, a retired engineer in his late eighties, has built second and third stories to his house, and long ago he converted his backyard into a room. He reminded me often, however, that he did all of this with the authorization of the IMSS and, in a second stage, the Delegación. Every time his wife or daughter suggests building a fence to convert the common area in front of their property into a private garden, he gets angry. Once he explained why to a group of young men in the Heroes’ Plaza: “We have no right to do that! All neighbors should be paying taxes on their houses, property taxes that correspond to their actual size, not to their size fifty years ago… and people who have taken over common areas, they should pay a fine to the condominium. We’re rich, you know, we just need to get people to pay for what they have stolen and the project would have all the money it needs to fix its buildings and take care of its gardens.”

Saldivar continued: “I’ve been thinking, why don’t we transform the condominium into a cooperative? We’ll charge a peso a day for every car that’s parked here. We could use the money for the project’s upkeep and distribute what’s left. Nobody minds paying one peso, and we would all benefit!” A few days earlier, Juan Barrera, the project’s manager at the time, had deemed Saldivar’s ideas unfeasible because they stood outside the legal frameworks that regulate the project. On this occasion, Joe and Hercules, unencumbered by knowledge of the law, listened attentively and agreed with Saldivar. Hercules was tired of hearing his older brother complain about not having a place to park. Implementing Saldivar’s proposal would get him to stop.

“There are many things we could get done, we could get past the small group that has seized the project’s administration, if only we worked together,” Joe said. “I would be willing to do stuff if only we were a bit organized.” But Saldivar was not listening. Excited by the young men’s approval, he had moved on to a new audience and was telling them about his
plans for parking, and for the rooftops of buildings, which he insisted could be converted into social clubs. “I will make fliers with my ideas and the children, my best friends here in the project, will distribute them to every house. I will then treat them to apple soda I will buy in Pancho’s store. Isn’t that a sweet plan?”

Saldivar calls attention to possible ways in which Unidad Santa Fe could be transformed. He is not alone in thinking and enacting strategies to reorganize space and social relations in the project. Some do this piecemeal, through small-scale interventions; others conceive large-scale transformations that encompass the entire project. These two approaches correspond to two modes of interacting with the city discussed by Michel de Certeau. By walking, people produce “poetic geographies on top of the geography of the literal” (1984:105). Walking is synecdoche of everyday actions and relations. By contrast, seeing the city from above affords detachment from daily experiences and allows people to assess their location within larger webs of significance (91). Below, I consider the uses of cars, parking spots, and rooftops in Unidad Santa Fe in connection to changes in the project over time, and to ways of conceiving and narrating it as a whole.

**Older brother**

“You shouldn’t believe everything they tell you, you hear? Or at least get confirmation. If you hear a story from someone get other versions to check the facts.” Güero said this to me after he saw me talking to the project’s manager.

After this warning, he introduced himself. His name was Adalberto Pérez, but everybody knew him as Güero, which translates as blond or light skinned. He had been born forty-seven years ago. He was an importer-exporter, he “moved merchandise,” mainly clothing, between Panama, Puerto Rico, and Mexico.
“It’s a huge business. I have to travel a lot; sometimes I move a million dollars of goods a month.”

His business kept him away from Unidad Santa Fe. Now, he told me, he was taking a break, staying in his mother’s apartment in Building 44 for a few days. I found him in the same spot the following nights, often alone. After three cans of rum and coke he would say goodnight to whoever was around and leave.

“If you want to know the story of this project,” he told me, “you should know there are all kinds of neighbors, rich, poor, good, bad, influentes, destitute. Some have made a lot of money and left. You should not ignore them; it makes no sense to focus only on those who have been left behind. That’s why I think it might be useful for you to record my story.

“As a child I was lucky, we were privileged. My father was chief of a police precinct, so we had money, lots of money. Some people had barely enough to pay for the bus, and I was driving my own car. I was driving by the time I was thirteen, the first of my friends.”

No one could beat him at driving, he assured me. They would run races in Viaducto Miguel Alemán, a freeway, and in the Cuernavaca highway. He won every time. His favorite game was “follow the leader”—a group of friends would drive in a line, and the one at the front did feats the others had to imitate.

By the time he was eighteen, he drove an armed car for a bank, moving money around the city. Soon after, he became personal driver to one of the bank’s executives, and later to his two daughters.

“They gave me that job because they knew I could protect them, they trusted me and knew how I drive. I saw the girls grow up, I was an older brother to them.”

He would pick them up from school, drive them to swimming and ballet lessons, to their friend’s places and to do shopping.
“When they were older, as teenagers, one day they came and asked if I could get them some weed, they wanted to try it. I didn’t know what to do, but decided to get some and smoke it with them. It was better that way, because they were going to find weed anyways, and if I got it for them at last I could keep an eye on them.”

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One evening in the Heroes’ Plaza, Güero had an argument with Gordillo. “Let’s get out of here,” El Químico told Güero. “Don’t waste your time with these fools.” And then he turned to me, “Come, come with us, we’re going to a much better party.” He led us to his car.

We drove a few dozen meters to Cristo Rey, the neighborhood immediately east of Unidad Santa Fe, and parked outside a grocery store, the only one in the area that remains open after midnight.

El Químico placed a large bottle of whiskey between the two front seats. Güero sat to his side and I stayed in the backseat.

Upon Güero’s request, El Químico confirmed that he was Unidad Santa Fe’s most dexterous driver.

“This car, you crashed this one a few times,” El Químico reminisced. “It’s a gold mine, this car, it has given me so much money. That’s why I keep it, you know. It’s old, a bit over twenty years, and it’s aching, but it means the world to me.”

Some years ago, El Químico had run an elaborate insurance scam, often with the help of Güero. He would insure a car with multiple companies, up to nine, crash it on purpose, and then collect money from all of them.

“There were expert crashers, like Güero and Alan, who had been a professional racer. They would know exactly how to hit the car, at what speed, to make it a total loss. They wore special clothes to avoid getting hurt.”

“The adrenaline, it was amazing,” said Güero.
“And we would hire pretty girls from Unidad Santa Fe to pretend they were the ones who had been driving, because the police was more likely to be nice to them.

“This car right here, the one we are on, is the only one I had fixed after every crash. I would use the money from one insurance company and keep the rest. It’s paid its price at least twenty times over…”

After crashing his own cars and those of his friends, El Químico started crashing the cars of strangers who came looking for him. He would give them more money for their cars than people in the used car business. His enterprise prospered for years and he made a fortune. That’s how he built two stories over his house in Unidad Santa Fe’s Block 2, covered the façade in cantera stone, and thus transformed it, in his own words, into “a mansion.”

Güero and El Químico drank swigs of whiskey directly from the bottle. They also did lines of coke on the car’s dashboard. They were both speaking for my benefit, but looked ahead, into the empty street. From time to time I would catch their eyes on the car’s mirrors.

“We stopped when they started introducing computers, insurance companies made a shared database. Some of them suspected us, but they could never take action against us. When I was in prison it was for something else, and the culeros had to let me out because I met a magistrate’s price.”

As he finished his story El Químico looked at me: “You can write all of this, every detail. Just don’t use my name when you do.” He paused. “Actually, you can use my nickname because there are others who use it, so just write ‘El Químico.’”

I did not see Güero for the entire week after that night. I ran into El Químico and asked him if he had gone back to Panama.

“Panama?” El Químico asked, puzzled. “That poor devil has never been out of the country, let alone been to Panama. Ever since he lost his job and his wife kicked him out of
the house he’s been living with his mother in Unidad Santa Fe,” he pointed to Building 44, “but he will make himself scarce from time to time to make you think he’s a big shot.”

As he walked away he turned back and said, “You know, you shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

**Uses of cars**

Early on, few families in Unidad Santa Fe had cars. Neighbors went to work by bus—there was a route that came from downtown Mexico City to the project, circled around its street and made its final stop by its east end. At that time, parking spaces were easy to come by: streets broadened into mostly empty bays [Fig. 3]. Some families in the project keep photographs from the sixties with family groups proudly posing in front of their car. Many of them feature adult men surrounded by their descendants [Fig. 28]. Today, a common point of contention in the Heroes’ Plaza is which family was the first to own a car in the project. Many claim this honor, and cite their car’s make and year as evidence. These conversations underscore the importance of cars as markers of wealth at a time they were rare.

Photographs from the seventies and eighties generally feature a single person in front of a car. By then automobiles had become more common and were associated with individuals, not families [Fig. 29]. They remained, however, a marker of wealth. Güero owned his first car in the eighties. Like him, people who had pictures taken of themselves with cars, appear to have imagined their vehicles as expressions of their personal identity. Güero associates his car with his father’s power as chief of a police precinct. This power also allowed him to drive before he could obtain a legal license and get away with speeding through the city’s freeways.

In addition to means of transportation and status markers, cars had and still have other uses. Güero, El Químico and I used a car as a place for socialization. For those who live in
crowded apartments, meeting friends in a car is a welcome alternative to meeting them at home or in common areas, where they might not have the privacy they desire. Also, in a context where, as discussed in Chapter 2, houses and apartments are the domain of women, cars tend to be marked male. Men such as Güero and El Químico drink and consume cocaine freely in their cars, without having to respond to wives or mothers. Others in Unidad Santa Fe use cars as storage units. They keep objects that do not fit in their houses in trunks and backseats. In this sense, cars are extensions of domestic space. Cars are also family assets, a source of income, and a source of opportunities. For Güero, ownership of a car and his driving skills led to profitable jobs and to the formation of bonds of care. When driving their car of the bank executive, he was welcomed into his domestic circle. In the case of El Químico, cars were, by his own account, “a gold mine” that made him wealthy.

For most of Mexico’s 20th century, cars were associated with the future. Architects, engineers and artists celebrated cars though the construction of sculptural overpasses such as those in the UNAM’s University City, and with artworks made to be seen from moving automobiles. Among them are the murals in the underpass in the President Juárez Urban Center by Carlos Mérida, and the Satélite Towers designed by Mathias Goeritz and Luis Barragán (Eguiarte 1996:153-154). The Towers, which rise on a freeway’s median, were the emblem of a new suburban development north of Mexico City designed by Mario Pani. Car assembly factories were instrumental to Mexico’s industrialization (Ceceña 1965), and Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors employees were among the country’s working class elite—many of them lived in Unidad Santa Fe.

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75 Eguiarte describes the Satélite Towers in connection to the geography of the Valley of Mexico: “The place selected was ideal for tall volumes that would mark the northern access to the city in a point from which the landscape was outstanding, because views extended limitless over the Valley of Mexico, with the Ajusco volcano in front, Xitle volcano slightly left, and on the far left, the Popocatépetl e Iztaccíhuatl volcanoes.” Spanish: “El lugar elegido era un espacio perfecto para volúmenes de gran altura; debían ser objetos que marcaran el acceso norte de la ciudad en un punto desde el cual el paisaje era sorprendente, pues la vista se extendía sin limites sobre el valle de México: al frente, la cima del Ajusco, el Xitle un poco más a la izquierda y, al extremo izquierdo, los imponentes volcanes Popocatépetl e Iztaccíhuatl” (1996:153).
Fig. 28. A family poses in front of its car in Unidad Santa Fe’s Block 4, ca. 1963. Photograph courtesy of Onnis Luque.

Fig. 29. Car and its owner by Unidad Santa Fe’s north entrance, ca. 1978. Photograph courtesy of Gerardo García.

Writer Salvador Novo described drivers in Mexico City in the first half of the 20th century as “the young generation thrown out to drive machines, to live speed” (2008:181). He understood cars as instruments of individual freedom and social change (see Gallo 76 Spanish: “la joven generación lanzada a manejar las máquinas, a vivir velozmente.”)
they made possible movement through the growing metropolis and facilitated interactions among members with different backgrounds. Neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe built additional stories over their houses with cement, stone, brick or cinderblock, and these are associated with family histories going back two or three generations. As in the case of Güero, cars, by contrast, were instruments for the formation of new spatial and personal relations. These relations often involved stepping away from family, neighborhood, and social class.

For some young neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe cars still represent a source of pride and income. This is the case of Joe, who earns money by running errands in the car he inherited from his grandmother. However, youths in Unidad Santa Fe today do not appear have the same fascination with cars as Güero, El Químico and other middle-aged men. This is partly due to the fact that many more people in the project own cars today—they have become fairly accessible—and they no longer have the role they once did as markers of wealth.

**Uses of parking**

Today, Unidad Santa Fe’s parking bays are generally full, and neighbors park cars on both sides of the project’s street, leaving one lane for circulation. A common complaint is that it is difficult to find a parking spot in the project, especially at night when people are back home from work. In other housing projects in Mexico City such as the nearby Lomas de Plateros, neighbors have built *jaulas*, “cages” to park their cars and use as storage space (J. Castañeda 2011:63). Previously open parking lots are now dense with metallic constructions. In Unidad Santa Fe there are no cages, but people have devised other strategies to reserve parking spots. Through these strategies, they controversially appropriate common areas.

Some residents own or rent a spot in one of the project’s three closed parking lots. One of these lots is on the former soccer field, and the two others occupy sites that were
previously plazas: one is east of Building 45 and the other by the Casino. In the first of these parking lots, neighbors pay fees, which are used to cover the wages of security guards who stand by its door. People who use the two other lots do not pay fees; they inherit or buy parking spots, and use a key to open their gates. Closed parking lots are not sanctioned by the project’s administration, and presumably originated when groups of neighbors unilaterally appropriated common areas in the nineteen-eighties. By transforming a soccer field and two plazas in the project into parking lots, neighbors symbolically placed cars above community life and civic rituals associated with those spaces [Fig. 30].

Fig. 30. A child on the edge of a fountain in a former plaza converted into a parking lot. In the background is Building 45, ca. 1990. Photo courtesy of Gerardo Garcia.

Others have devised ways to reserve parking spots individually. The simplest strategy involves placing large stones on the pavement. An alternative are cylindrical containers filled with cement and with a metal tube sticking out of them. These containers—used originally for paint—are larger and heavier than stones. To move them, people tip them over and roll
them on their rim. The tube makes them easier to manipulate. The problem with these strategies is that people can move stones and cylindrical containers with relative ease. They are effective when someone can remain standing by them, and they are therefore used to reserve parking for short periods of time. Cement cylinders are common by the project’s health clinic, where there is regular movement of cars throughout the day.

More permanent ways of saving parking spots include removable tubes, placed in holes in the pavement. These tubes have protruding plaques with a hole welded on them. When this plaque meets another one, on the ground, people lock them together. The tubes sticking out the ground prevent cars from parking. Others place chains or steel cables demarcating parking spots, which they keep in place with a lock. Neighbors also reserve parking spots with junk cars. Some of the spots in the project are immediately in front of others; a second car parks right behind the first one. Thus, if one leaves a car permanently in the first spot, it leaves the second free and inaccessible. When people arrive home, their family members help them push the junk car to the front, and they park behind it.

Changes in Unidad Santa Fe’s street to reserve parking are not always permanent—the appropriation of a spot is open for contestation. Neighbors in one of the projects cul-de-sacs were asked to remove a metallic gate by a Mexico City court after they refused to do it upon Ms. Elba’s request. Ms. Elba decided to fight this battle because that cul-de-sac offers access to the project’s elementary schools, and she believes students should not find obstacles on their daily trajectories. Other neighbors have reverted private parking spots into common areas by cutting chains that enclose them or by requesting that junk cars be removed from the project by the Delegación. At times these actions are successful. Through them, common areas remain sites of negotiations among neighbors on their rights and responsibilities towards each other as a community.
Improvisations on rooftops

On weekdays, at twelve thirty and two thirty in the afternoon, children are let out Unidad Santa Fe’s schools. Their parents, grandparents or older siblings pick up many of them; they wait by the doors of the project’s two elementary schools, and walk them home. Others, however—especially the older ones, in the fifth and sixth grades—walk home by themselves. Many live beyond the project’s walls, so they have to make their way from school to one of the complex’s four gates. Urban space is reconstituted not only through material interventions, but also through transformations in their uses and meanings. Children participate in these processes by following inventive trajectories across Unidad Santa Fe.

In these trajectories, children walk on the edge of fountains and fences, jump over walls, climb trees, or walk on top of the cantilevered concrete surface of the Cola de pato in the Heroes’ Plaza. Adults in the project admonish them by saying, “Be careful! You will get hurt!” “Be warned: if you fall no one will come to help you,” “Where are your parents? They should take better care of you,” or “That thing will break and you will be to blame!” Transgressions, however, continue. In 2010, some children carved a hole under the concrete wall that separates Unidad Santa Fe from the Primera Victoria neighborhood. They would sneak through the hole, with their backpacks, and emerge on the other side covered in dust. This made journeys to and from school approximately twenty minutes shorter. They used this shortcut until Ms. Elba, prejudiced against disobedience, ordered the hole to be filled up with cement.

Children also play “follow the leader” as they walk through Unidad Santa Fe. One of them walks in front of others who do what he does. “We used to do just that. We played that game when we were kids,” Alfredo Padilla told me one day when we saw a group of children trying to climb a lamppost one after the other, and then going down a stairway two steps at a time. “At times we were more daring than we should have been. We would go up four, five
stories through the latticework on a building’s stairways, all the way to the rooftop. Or we would jump from the roof of one house to the next one, over a considerable span. The whole project was our playground.”

Alfredo, fifty-four, also remembers playing on the rooftops of buildings in Unidad Santa Fe. As a child, he and his peers were often asked to take care of the clothes women left out to dry in exchange for a coin. Most women would do the week’s laundry on Saturday. They would take one of the sinks lined on the rooftop and wash side by side their neighbors. By the time they were done, the rooftop would have transformed into a labyrinth, with clothes and bed sheets hanging from the wires forming passages and enclosures. The children watched out for thieves until the clothes dried.

“I loved it there,” Alfredo told me. “We were nine, ten, twelve years old… too young yet to be in the street or the Plaza. We belonged on the rooftop. I made some of my best friends there. It was also fun to see what each woman washed and hanged on her wire. We would look for our little girlfriends’ underwear,” he laughed. “On the rooftop I had my first kiss, my first beer, and I tried weed for the first time. Even when we were not watching clothes dry, we started meeting there, where nobody would bother us. When we were thirteen or so, I remember Otto brought a Pink Floyd poster and pasted it on one of the propane tanks there. We would lie down and look up at the sky, at the clouds passing by… You could call it a gang. People said we were a gang, but we were just a group of kids who became friends, and forty years later we’re still friends.”

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Each building in the project has washing sinks and an area where clothes can be left out to dry. This arrangement is similar to that of vecindades and working class apartment buildings in Mexico City, where laundry areas were collective and often on rooftops, where the air and sun dry clothes quickly. Women often washed at the same time. Rooftops were one of the
few spaces where neighbors interacted with each other in the absence of men. The expression *chismes the lavadero*, “washing area gossip,” is still common in Mexico City—it derides “women talk” as untruthful and irrelevant, perhaps because, when unmediated by men, they were considered potentially subversive (see Lomnitz 2001:157).

As Alfredo’s account shows, rooftops were, by extension of their use by women, spaces for children. Alfredo remembers his building’s rooftop as a formative space where he began to transition from child to adolescent. Today, women no longer wash together—most in the project have washing machines and dryers, and those who use common washing areas do so at irregular times. Accordingly, rooftops no longer are privileged spaces for women and the socialization of children. They still are, however, spaces associated with danger. This has to do both with ambiguities over their uses and ownership. Rooftops challenge clear-cut distinctions between private and common. They are not susceptible to interventions by state authorities or the project’s administration office, and yet they do not belong to one particular family.

Garbage often found on rooftops includes cigarette stubs, beer cans and bottles, and condom wrappers. Many apartments in the project are crowded, and some of their residents step away from home for a moment of peace on the rooftop, where they might smoke a cigarette. Cans and bottles get there because parties at times grow too big and extend beyond an apartment’s doors into a building’s entryways and rooftops. Some also go there to drink furtively when they fear being reprimanded for doing so at home or in streets or the Heroes’ Plaza for being too young. Condom wrappers reveal the use of rooftops as a place where youths have sex—those who live with their parents often find relative privacy there.

Stories circulate about neighbors who were kicked out of their houses by their parents or spouses and lived on the rooftop. Muerto, a crack addict who would walk around the project looking for cigarette stubs, confided that he had lived on her sister’s building’s
rooftop for over a year. He used a set of cardboard boxes to build an enclosure supported by the rooftop’s latticework walls. Some of the building’s neighbors knew him and pitied him, so they let him stay there as long as he kept the place clean. Others did not know he slept there, because he would disassemble his refuge early every morning. Eventually he found a better place to sleep: his uncle’s junk car, which has been parked in the same spot for years.

Rooftops also offer information about the relationships among neighbors in a building or entryway. Buildings need periodic waterproofing. In the few cases when all neighbors on the top floor of a building agree to work together, waterproofing is uniform. When they do not, surfaces waterproofed at the same time have different tones; they reveal if one, two or more neighbors hired a contractor together. Differences are also evident in cages similar to those found in the parking lots of other projects that close off an area of a rooftop for exclusive use. There is not enough space for every household to have one, and those who enclose an area can be accused of affecting the interests of others. Once a family has built a cage, however, it is unlikely that they will give up the area they have taken over; some people have, in fact, put a roof over their cage and transformed it into an extra room.

The duel

Isabel Gómez Dorantes built a cage over her fourth-floor apartment. “I realized we needed it,” she told me, “after the lazy good for nothings from apartment three stole a coat from us. I took the space only because I wanted to protect our things. You see, my daughter wanted this fancy winter coat, and she found it in a store where we could pay it in monthly installments. I bought it for her, for her eighteenth birthday, and she would wear it all the time. It was too nice for her to wear here in the project, but she would not take it off. Every time she was out she would wear it. Even in spring, as it started getting warmer, she still would wear it. After some months the coat was very dirty, so I washed it, very carefully to avoid damaging it. You
can never be too careful with a coat like that. And then I left it out to dry, in the wire I always used, the one I had put on myself. And, you won’t believe it, when I went up to see if it had dried it had disappeared. I had not yet finished paying for it and it had been stolen!

“I suspected the girl from apartment three, but I said nothing at first. I had seen how she looked at my daughter when she wore the coat. She’s always been jealous of her, because my daughter is prettier and was always more popular in school. And then one day I saw her wearing it. She was going out the building with her mom, and I approached them and said, ‘Nice coat there Carlita.’ Her mother said, ‘It’s nice, isn’t it? Her father bought it for my little girl.’ It’s ridiculous how cynical people can be. I told her she shouldn’t be so cheeky. That coat belonged to my daughter and she knew it. They don’t have that kind of money. Rita lives off the crumbs her ex-husband gives her, and from a pension she collects that amounts to nothing. That good for nothing ex-husband shows his face once a year at best. I knew there was no way he would give Carlita that coat.

“They denied everything I said and walked away. I could see they were avoiding me in the following weeks. So I waited, I waited until they had to wash the coat, until they had to leave it out on the rooftop to dry. When they finally did, I grabbed a knife from my kitchen and ripped the coat; I made in it five long slits. If they were not giving us the coat back I would not let them have it either. The scoundrels thought they could get away with it… It was after that incident that we built the cage.”

Isabel’s cage is on the corner where two latticework walls come together. Its two other walls are made from a prefabricated metallic frames. The cage has a fiberglass roof. Isabel keeps a washing machine and a dryer there, as well as broken furniture and plastic boxes she uses for storage. Her two dogs also live there. They bark violently at anyone who steps on the roof, except at Isabel and her daughter. Outside the cage stand Isabel’s water boiler and her propane tank—it is filled periodically through a hose from a gas truck that
makes the rounds through the project. Before, all apartments had one of these tanks, but now most are connected to the city’s natural gas system, which Isabel claims is more expensive. Around the tank, she keeps pots with cacti, which she told me are ideal, because she does not need to water them ever. Behind the tank one can see the immense Valley of Mexico.

**Readers of the cosmos, unite!**

In a visit to Unidad Santa Fe, Georg Leidenberger, a historian, told me that one of the reasons Hannes Meyer—the German architect who designed a project in the nineteen-forties for the site where Unidad Santa Fe was eventually built—had been interested in the area was because of the views it afforded. He believed it would be a valuable gesture to give workers a panoramic perspective of Mexico City.

Georg showed me a site plan by Meyer. A Stalinist, he did not likely think a Catholic church should be part of the complex. He acknowledged, however, that one existed already in the place he proposed to intervene—his plan integrates the Cristo Rey chapel. At the time, it was a small structure on the side of the road. Inside the church today there is an oil painting that shows how it once was. The church is a wooden shack on the left of the canvas. Standing by it are Jesus, Virgin Mary, and a Felipe de Jesús, a saint born in the New Spain, martyred in Japan. On the floor is a crown that identifies Christ as a king. Jesus gestures beyond the shrine towards the Valley of Mexico, which extends on the right side of the frame. This canvas, dated 1930—one year after the end of the Cristero War—and signed “Cahero,“[77] conveys the emotion Meyer perhaps hoped workers would experience when they saw the view from the housing project. From their privileged vantage, workers, redeemed by socialist

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[77] I believe this is the signature of Emilio Garcia Cahero, who in the first half of the 20th century flirted with the muralist movement, estridentismo, Mexico’s response to Italian futurism, and, apparently, sacred art inspired by the Cristero War; rebels found an emblem in Cristo Rey, “Christ the King.” Sources in the Cristo Rey parish have not been able to confirm the painting’s authorship.
planning and architecture, would see the whole city, with its factories, parks, department stores, temples, and high-rises, at their feet.

Views from above are associated with power. In early modern maps, at a time before airplanes and air balloons, bird eye views such as those of Mexico City drawn by Spanish cartographers were technically impossible—they postulated the existence of a god who watched the world from above. In the 20th century, top-down perspectives were instruments for architectural interventions by state authorities and professionals. Mario Pani’s personal archive includes a number of aerial shots of Unidad Santa Fe used to study the site and to document its construction process. At the time, these images were not readily accessible; they remained the privileged vantage of those who were called on to set the terms whereby Mexico would emerge as a modern nation.

Michel de Certeau reflects on the experience of seeing New York City from the observatory of the World Trade Center by asking, “To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? Having taken a voluptuous pleasure in it, I wonder what the source of this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts” (1984:91). One explanation for de Certeau’s pleasure is the understanding that emerges from seeing the entirety of a city at once. At ground level we perceive too much and get lost in the details. From above, we lose sense of specific sites and relations and the conflicts and ambiguities they postulate and see only the general.

Seeing the city from above is similar to seeing it represented in a scale model or work of art. In the reduction of scale or simplification in artistic reproductions, one can identify a whole and then proceed to the appreciation of its parts. This process, Lévi-Strauss writes—in a similar spirit to de Certeau—“gratifies the intelligence and gives rise to a sense of pleasure” (1966:24). The outcome of understanding, however, is not only pleasure; it is also power and self-awareness. It is God who sees from above in the western cartographic tradition. In 20th
In the 18th century, the Roman city of Pompeii, destroyed by the Vesuvius in the year 79 CE, came to the attention of European artists and writers. City and volcano captured their imagination as evidence of the power of nature over humans. Archeological investigations also put the mighty Romans into perspective as ordinary folk. The volcanic explosion had preserved people’s households intact, with tables set for dinner, storerooms filled with wine, and individuals petrified next to their pets. Historicist reconstructions of the city and landscapes with its ruins before the ever-present Vesuvius became favorite subjects among artists.

Eugenio Landesio, born in Altessano, Italy in 1810, brought images of the Vesuvius to Mexico, where he painted the Popocatépetl and the Iztaccíhuatl, contiguous volcanoes that enclose the Valley of Mexico, in their likeness. His most famous student, José María Velasco, born in Mexico, painted the volcanoes, too, in expansive tableaux that give viewers a sense of gliding into the Valley in flight. Mexico City, small and surrounded by lakes, is often present in his paintings, dwarfed by the mountains. Velasco was involved in scientific pursuits. In 1865 he participated in an expedition to document the geography of Metlaltoyuca, in the state of Puebla, alongside, among others, cartographer Antonio García Cubas. Moreover, he was an active member of the Sociedad mexicana de historia natural, “Mexican Natural History Society,” and a contributor of drawings and texts on botany and zoology to its magazine, La Naturaleza (Trabulse 1989). His work as a painter was linked to
scientific pursuits that sought to establish the shape of the Mexican nation. These pursuits found an emblem in the volcanoes.

I remember visions of Popocatépetl and the Iztaccíhuatl from my childhood in Mexico City—there was a 19th century oil by a German explorer of them in my grandfather’s living room, and he made wallpaper for his office from an enlarged black and white reproduction of a Velasco painting. The volcanoes were also often on television—most evocatively in black and white films photographed by Gabriel Figueroa. Neighbors in Unidad Santa Fe, too, grew up under the volcanoes’ shadow, and representations of them can still be found in the project. Mr. Narciso Saldivar has a photo of the volcanoes at home, over a cabinet with his wife’s cut glass. There is also one, cut out from an old calendar, on the wall of a tortilla shop in Cristo Rey. In recent years, Roberto, student and aspiring tattoo artist, included the volcanoes’ profile in a mural he painted in a middle school, as the background to an Aztec warrior in full regalia. A common trope to refer to the mid-20th century in Unidad Santa Fe is “back when you could still see the volcanoes from the city.” The trope characterizes the past as a Golden Age; the city’s now polluted air was “transparent” (see Reyes 1923[1917]; C. Fuentes 1972[1958]) and urban life was not yet, to use a popular word among Chilangos, “chaotic.”

Between 1947 and 1949, Juan O’Gorman, modernist architect and artist, painted a cityscape featuring the volcanoes [Fig. 25]. The image captures downtown Mexico City “just like it can be seen from the summit of the Monument to the Revolution”78 looking towards the east. Among the buildings and sites shown are the city’s Cathedral and other structures around the Zócalo, as well as flagships of modernization programs from different periods in the country’s history: the Fine Arts Palace, the Alameda public garden, and the National Lottery building. Different elements in the painting evoke the city’s past. Close to the

78 Spanish: “tal y como se ve desde arriba del Monumento de la Revolución.”
volcanoes, a blue hue suggests remnants of the Lake of Texcoco. In the 14th century, the Aztecs founded the city on an island in this lake, which began to be drained by Spanish colonizers. Above the volcanoes, there is, among other symbols, a flying plumed serpent, which represents Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god of war. The Spanish conquest is represented by the reproduction of a 1540 map, which is held at the painting’s foreground by two hands—the map evokes the understanding of space and time introduced by Spaniards. A construction worker who stands on the painting’s foreground, in front of a brick wall he is building.

O’Gorman shows Mexico City as a collection of spaces in transformation. Soon, the painter warns viewers, the view he captured would be different. The streets below are dense with automobiles, streetcars and pedestrians who, by going about their daily lives—and without necessarily knowing it—were reshaping Mexico City as a modern metropolis.

Fig. 31. Juan O’Gorman. La Ciudad de México, tempera on wood panel, 1947-1949. Original painting in the collection of the Museo de Arte Moderno de la ciudad de México.

While trees are overgrown and, unlike what Hannes Meyer would have wished, the Valley of Mexico is not visible from most parts of Unidad Santa Fe, during a few days every winter, when the air is clear, views of the city are spectacular from the project’s rooftops. When this
is the case, the word spreads and neighbors walk up the stairs. One afternoon, I went up to the rooftop of Building 45, the project’s tallest, with Gerardo García and Fernando Panzi, who, a decade ago, shot scenes there for the documentary *Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe* [Fig. 32]. Two women were washing clothes and saw us come in. “We are going to start charging a fee to see the view,” one said in jest. A couple was leaning on the parapet, wrapped in a blanket and looking east, and a group of teenagers chatted nearby. When they saw us, they furtively hid a marijuana cigarette. We stood by the site where, thirty years earlier, Alfredo Padilla and his friends had marked their territory by putting up a Pink Floyd poster, and where they had laid down to look at the sky.

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 32. A human silhouette and the Popocatépetl volcano with a fumarole seen at night from the rooftop of Unidad Santa Fe’s Building 45. Part of the Iztaccíhuatl is visible on the left. Still from the documentary *Un tostón para la Unidad Santa Fe*. Courtesy of Fernando Panzi and Gerardo García.

From Building 45 one gets a good sense of Unidad Santa Fe and its location in the city. One can see the project’s parking lots, its street lined with cars, and its houses of different sizes and painted in different colors. One can know if El Químico is in the project if his car is in its spot, and discern, on one of the buildings on the north, Isabel’s rooftop cage. From this spot there is also a clear view of the project’s Casino, the theater, the health clinic.
and the Social Security Center, all arranged around the Heroes’ Plaza, with the Cola de pato at the center. Behind it is the main garden, with robust trees deeply rooted to the project’s wormless earth.

West of the project, framed by forested hills, one can see the sleek glass skyscrapers of the Santa Fe corporate zone. Right next to them are the stone and cinderblock houses of the Santa Fe pueblo established by Vasco de Quiroga in 1532. The street that passes in front of the project and leads towards this area, Camino Real a Toluca, “Royal Way to Toluca,” was once a Spanish colonial road on the crest of a hill. On both sides of the road, the terrain quickly drops and forms ravines through which water flows towards the city’s center. The ravines come together northeast of the project and are channeled through a concrete duct, which is the median of Viaducto Miguel Alemán, named after the president who dedicated it in 1950 (Correa and García Veléz 2015:106). Three decades later, this avenue was the site of Güero’s speeding competitions.

On the ravines north and south of Unidad Santa Fe, are dozens of neighborhoods built by squatters. Towards the south they cover a vast expanse of land, following the rough topography. Only public schools, built after standard models and painted in bright colors, interrupt the texture of gray cinderblock. Pablo López Luz (2012), whose aerial photographs of Mexico City circulate widely online, has brought attention to this and similar areas. The shots give a sense of the city’s enormous expanse. Rather than giving viewers a sense of control, they remind them of how much remains to be known. In Lopez Luz’s photos the city’s surface is like the surface of the ocean, with incalculable depth.

North of the project is the Dolores Cemetery, with the Rotunda of Illustrious People, where heroes have been buried in state funerals since 1872, and the large Chapultepec Park. Behind them are Polanco and Lomas de Chapultepec, upper class neighborhoods. Farther north, towards the city’s largest industrial area, live middle class families. Paseo de la
Reforma cuts across Chapultepec Park and continues northeast towards the city’s center. Tall corporate buildings, many of them under construction, flank the segment of Reforma I walked in June 2012 as part of a YoSoy132 rally. If one looks hard enough, one can catch a glimpse of the Monument to the Revolution surrounded by these buildings. The avenue continues on to the Tlatelolco project. From Unidad Santa Fe one can identify some of its taller buildings. Farther in that direction, dust clouds rise from the dry bed of the Lake of Texcoco.

Towards the east there are middle class neighborhoods, with four and five story apartment buildings that enclose small parks. In this direction the city is flat until, kilometers away, the land folds and rises thousands of meters to form the Iztaccihuatl and Popocatépetl volcanoes. It was January when I was there with Gerardo and Fernando, so the volcanoes were snowcapped, shining against a metallic blue sky. The landscape’s colors made it look like a José María Velasco painting.

Gerardo, always on the lookout for new projects, broke the silence turning to Fernando: “Imagine a movie that had this view as its point of departure. It would be a collection of interrelated stories. One would be, for example, about a college student, and the camera would zoom into the University City, which is right there,” and he pointed with his hand. “Another one would be a doctor at the central hospital of the IMSS,” he pointed again, “and another about a technician in the airport’s control tower,” and he gestured to a queue of five airplanes in the air, descending towards the runway, barely visible on the east. “From here we could show,” exclaimed Gerardo, “how the whole city works!”
Postscript: Detections, Digressions, the Culprit Revealed

Fig. 33. Boys by El súper in the early nineteen-eighties. Photograph courtesy of Gerardo García.

“This picture right here”—Gerardo García showed me a black and white snapshot of three teenagers standing outside El súper [Fig. 33]—“Felix shot it.”

The boys are wearing denim pants and posing for the camera as if staging a record cover. It was the early eighties, and gang culture was budding in Unidad Santa Fe. “That was shortly before he left for Germany. Even then he was taking pictures.”

Felix went to East Berlin on a fellowship and people in Unidad Santa Fe heard nothing of him for more than a decade. He enrolled in a food engineering program but dropped out after six months. He was nineteen and the last thing he wanted to be was an engineer. He wanted to be an artist. He tried transferring to a photography school, but had neither the patience nor the knowledge of German to navigate the local bureaucracy. He
stopped attending university but continued receiving a stipend. He was paid for five full years, which he filled with drugs and rock and roll.

His band, formed in the university’s dormitories, included a Peruvian, a Moroccan, a Pole and a Latvian. The Peruvian is still in Berlin, working as a sound technician. Felix has lost track of the rest.

When his fellowship ended, Felix made money playing guitar in the streets. The Kinks, Chuck Berry, Carlos Santana—they liked that music in socialist Germany. He also worked odd jobs, as a dishwasher and janitor, and tried his luck as a street photographer. He had a treasure: a Polaroid camera. He shot pictures of people in Alexanderplatz and sold them for a few marks. For the most part, he stayed out of trouble with the police.

The Berlin Wall fell and Felix remained. Four more years, and then he started making his way back to Mexico. He left a son in Berlin. From time to time they talk on the phone.

“The man is crazy. Who knows what he saw and what he did in Germany. He left part of his mind there,” said Otto Martínez, one of the men who gather in the Heroes’ Plaza on evenings.


“That poor man, he’s a good for nothing, a freeloader,” said Gordillo.

“Felix, he’s bipolar. When you don’t see him out in the Plaza he’s in a depressive stage, and he hides in his childhood room in his mother’s house,” said Señor René.

Felix, in his mid-fifties, lives with his mother, who collects her late husband’s pension. “Meat, she cooks meat for me. I’m tired of eating tortillas and beans. I need something better, I need flesh. I want some Wiener Schnitzel! So my mother, she wants me out of the house, but she leaves out a plate of beef stew for me, and I come back. I mean, who wouldn’t?”
Felix tries to make money as a photographer. He takes pictures of passersby with his cellphone—he lost the Polaroid long ago—in Unidad Santa Fe’s common areas, prints them, and then sets out to sell them.

He once talked me into buying my portrait, which he had shot without my noticing. “Give it to your mother, it’s a nice present,” he said. But he never gave it to me. He kept it so he could show it to others and say, “This one I sold already, to the anthropologist.”

When I ran into him in the street he was always on his way somewhere.

“I’m going to the Bob Dylan’s concert in the National Auditorium. Last night I got in for free. I’ll try again tonight, and I’ll take Bob Dylan’s picture…” “I’m off to XEH, the radio station. I’m going to see if I can talk to one of their producers…” “I’m off to see my girlfriend. We had a fight last night, but I am going to make up tonight. I’ve told you I need meat, haven’t I?”

After saying he was leaving he would linger. He would be jumpy, with his hands in his pockets and his long black and white hair bouncing. If he happened to walk by, Señor René would say, “Cut that hair already, you look like you’re homeless! You look like you never shower!” Felix would ignore him and shout at people walking by, tell them he had a picture of them, and then turn to me and say:

“We have similar risks, you and I. Every profession has its risks, and ours are that others think we’re lazy, because we don’t seem to work, and that we may not be liked by the people we work with. People might not like you asking questions and taking notes, and they might not like me taking their picture. Am I right?”

He also said: “You got lucky because for your work you got paid in advance with a fellowship, but I get paid only after taking pictures, and only sometimes. Many don’t want to pay, like that wannabe licenciado Barrera, even if the shots are really good. Did I tell you he got angry at me for taking his picture?”
Felix’s speech is jumbled. He does not always make sense. One has to listen long enough and put the fragments together. But he is often sharp, one might say clairvoyant.

Once I was carrying a copy of *La región más transparente* (translated as *Where the Air is Clear*) an ambitious novel about power and politics in mid-20th century Mexico, and Felix said, “Carlos Fuentes, I was thinking this morning, he’s a tree killer. How many novels did he write? More than twenty, I think, and they’re all fat and they’re in German and Polish and Russian, in every language. If you try reading one—I tried, I started one of them—you won’t get past the first pages. Nobody does! So there you go, dead trees for nothing.”

Felix’s opinions stuck to my mind and helped me come to terms with some aspects of my research and my position in Unidad Santa Fe. My thoughts on the experience of fieldwork have also been shaped by fiction and by anthropological readings of fiction.

**Detectives**

In a partly autobiographical essay, anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (2013) reflects on the social context of detective fiction in Sweden and England. In the years following the Second World War, he writes, both countries were enjoying a moment of economic growth and national cohesion. Their citizens were content with their lot and optimistic about the future. Accordingly, mysteries are “largely uncritical of the existing social order” (268). Their plots tend to begin with a crime that alters business as usual, which is eventually solved by competent—and often brilliant—police officers. In the end, order is restored and people go back to their peaceful existences. These texts offered readers a sense of control; they posited a world in which there were causes to every effect, and where, by following the right leads, one could answer every question.

In the mid-20th century Mexico too was enjoying increased economic prosperity that allowed thousands to leave poverty behind and become part of a confident national
community. This period saw an outburst of popular culture, with the production of dozens of films and the publication of acclaimed novels. Few of these works, however, are detective mysteries. Many Mexican authors, like Juan Rulfo and Elena Garro, narrated the travails of the Revolution. Others wrote comedies of class and manners, often intertwined with political intrigue. A notable example is Casi el paraiso by Luis Spota (2005[1956]), where an Italian immigrant tricks the recently enthroned PRI politicians and their business associates by pretending to be a prince by the name Ugo Conti. The impostor lives off the generosity of the country’s emergent upper class and gets close to marrying one of their daughters. Alternatively, works on class show the poor to be the moral betters of the rich, as in the case of the film Quinceañera set in Unidad Santa Fe, and those featuring comic actor Mario Moreno, better known as “Cantinflas.”

Fig. 34. 1968 edition of La región más transparente. Cover photograph by Pedro Bayona.
The works of Carlos Fuentes, especially his first novels, combine reflections on the Revolution with the portraits of the social order that emerged from it. Fuentes reflects on what he characterizes as a miscarried modernization, where political power easily elides with economic supremacy and thousands remain destitute. In these works, Mexico City is diverse, muddled, and burdened by millennial violence. Sacrifice is a central trope in *La región más transparente*. The novel is partly narrated by Ixca Cienfuegos, who doubles as a torrid vagabond and a mythical being in search for a sacrificial victim. This and other works by Fuentes can be read as reflections by the author on his own condition as part of Mexico’s revolutionary elite. The son of a diplomat, he was a *licenciado* trained at UNAM, he often received government patronage, and occupied various government posts.

I took the copy of *La región más transparente* that prompted Felix to describe Fuentes as a tree killer from my grandfather’s library. The old paperback, a 1972 edition of the 1958 book, features a manipulated photograph of three modernist buildings on Paseo de la Reforma on its cover [Fig. 34]. The one at the center was designed for Seguros Anáhuac, an insurance company, by architect Juan Sordo Madaleno. The one on the right, by Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral, was dedicated in 1950 and housed the Ministry of Water Resources. The Ministry replaced Café Colón (Larrosa 1985:145), popular among the country’s post-revolutionary families and intellectuals (Novo 1967:33). The building on the left, by Pani and Jesús García Collantes, was dedicated in 1952 and housed the American embassy. The cover is fitting—scenes from Fuentes’ kaleidoscopic novel might as well have taken place in these buildings, which rose together with Mexico as a modern country, putting parts of its past behind and exalting others. Pani and Fuentes were both witnesses and protagonists in a developmentalist tragicomedy.

Pani’s buildings on the cover of *La región más transparente* were damaged in the 1985 earthquake. In later years, they were partly demolished, restructured and remodeled.
The old American Embassy is now a Le Meridien Hotel, with a Starbucks on its ground floor. The Ministry of Water Resources, its ornate façade now covered in reflecting glass, is a private office building. On its ground floor is one of the city’s dozens of Sanborn’s, a department store owned by Carlos Slim, CEO of Telmex, Mexico’s privatized telecommunications monopoly. The earthquake gave rise to a new era in Mexico City that displaced old heroes and symbols. Pani’s work and character were called into question: intellectuals and op-ed writers challenged his work and legacy. Among them was journalist Román Munguía Huarto, who wrote: “With the earthquakes not only did hundreds of buildings fall: some demiurges of the great Mexican architecture also fell from their fragile pedestals. The mythification of Mario Pani ended up being as lightweight as some of his buildings… Tlatelolco and the President Juárez Urban Center are a tragic testimony of yielding constructions whose architectural design wanted to be the façade of a false national modernity” (1987; see also Impacto 1985; Uno más uno 1986; Suárez 1986).79

“They all died after the earthquake,” Luis Ortiz Macedo told me. An architect, he was a close friend of Pani in his old age. “They died of sorrow, not only Pani but many others. Pani was well known, so the press went after him. The truth is nobody expected an earthquake of that magnitude, not architects, not engineers, nobody.”

Others among Mario Pani’s friends remained loyal to him. When the architect died in 1993—some months before NAFTA came into effect, the declaration of war against the Mexican state by the EZLN, and the economic crisis that wiped out a large segment of the middle class—Carlos Fuentes sent his widow a letter [Fig. 35]:

79 Spanish: “Con los sismos no sólo cayeron cientos de edificios, también se cayeron de su frágil pedestal algunos demiurges de la gran arquitectura mexicana. Se vino abajo uno de los grandes mitos de la arquitectura nacional: la mitificación de Mario Pani resultó ser tan deleznable como algunos de sus edificios. Tlatelolco y el Multifamiliar Juárez son el trágico testimonio de endeble construcciones cuyo diseño arquitectónico quisieron ser fachada de una falsa modernidad nacional.”
Very dear Señora Pani,

The recent passing of Don Mario Pani filled me with disbelief, pain and also, joy.
Disbelief because the vitality of your husband was almost an assurance of eternity.
Pain because of so many moments, so old already, I shared with him, with you and with your family.
And joy because of the sense of a life well met and a solid work, cemented in art, beauty and contribution to the community.

Convey my feelings of affection and solidarity to your children, especially Márgara.
For you, the affection of your friend,
Carlos Fuentes

Márgara Pani, the architect’s daughter, gave me this letter in 2014, a few months before she passed away. She had once been good friends with Fuentes, who was part of her clique in Acapulco, where many members of the country’s revolutionary elite spent their vacations, and he attended family meals in the Pani household as a young man—the extended family, presided by ambassador Arturo Pani, sat for lunch at two thirty every day; they were often accompanied by writers, artists, and architects.

“You figure out what you do with that,” Márgara told me. She had recently moved out of her house of half a century and was, for once, giving up objects and documents that had been with her all along.

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During fieldwork in Unidad Santa Fe, neighbors often called me out for what appeared inconsistencies in my research. They would say, “You said you are interested in housing, but you keep asking about Vasco de Quiroga…” or, “What do petty fights between neighbors have to do with architecture?” I explained my work as an exercise in following leads. “It’s like I’m a detective and I go wherever new leads take me. In the end,” I said, “this will let me paint a portrait of a time and a place.”

“If you’re a detective,” a neighbor once asked, “what’s the crime you’re investigating?” This question complicated my analogy: I explained I was acting like a detective, but did not yet know what crime I was investigating. By the end, by the time I left
and wrote my dissertation, the crime would be clear. Perhaps I would put to the side all the leads I had followed that had not revealed relevant information, and it would appear as if my research had in fact been planned and deliberate, guided by one crucial question. If I did not look like a detective then, I would hopefully look like one in retrospect.

Fig. 35. Letter to Margarita Linaae, Mario Pani’s widow, from Carlos Fuentes.

When in 2014 Márgara Pani gave me Carlos Fuentes’ letter to his mother I wondered if what I had been investigating throughout was the death of Mario Pani. The culprit might be
the 1985 earthquake, as Luis Ortiz Macedo suggested. But I figured I had to look into other possible causes. By 1985, Pani had been away from the spotlight for decades, with practically no commissions. He claimed that, upon assuming power, president Díaz Ordaz (1964-1970) said, “How is it possible that Pani gets so much work. I don’t want him to be given a single other commission” (Pani and de Garay 2000:89).\footnote{Spanish: “Cómo es posible que a Pani le den tanto trabajo. No quiero que se le dé ni una obra más.”} The most notorious work by Pani’s firm for the government of Adolfo López Mateos (1958-1964) was the Tlatelolco project. But he had also designed, among others, the Kennedy, Lindavista-Vallejo, and Lomas de Plateros projects, as well as urban development plans and tourism infrastructure for cities along the border with the United States as chief architect of the Programa Nacional Fronterizo, “National Borderlands Program.” From one day to the next, Pani had no work. Projects not yet dedicated in 1964 were finished quietly a year later, and most of the designs for the border remained unbuilt.

Díaz Ordaz’s decision to ostracize Pani perhaps marked the beginning of his death. Yet it seemed too neat to pin his demise to an individual’s decision. Pani had been part of a group of policy makers who first came to prominence during the government of Miguel Alemán (1946-1952). Among them was Rodrigo Gómez, governor of the country’s central bank from 1952 until his death in 1970. That same year, Antonio Ortiz Mena, Minister of Finance for more than a decade, quit his post and left for Washington, D.C., where he became director of the Inter-American Development Bank. The minister’s transfer was an escape from the deterioration of the country’s political climate: the 1968 student massacre in Tlatelolco had galvanized the opposition, and the government’s response, under the leadership of Luis Echeverría, Minister of the Interior and president from 1970 to 1976, was populist rhetoric and violent repression of dissent. Ortiz Mena, who had been a possible presidential nominee (J. Castañeda 1999:321), was at odds with Echeverría (Krauze
A witness told me Mario Pani once visited Ortiz Mena in his Washington office. As the architect walked in, the former minister exclaimed: “They have made a wreckage of our Mexico, Mario. They have ruined everything!” Both men had once been influyentes; by then—it was the early eighties—they had been decidedly cut off from the president’s inner circle.

If Pani’s vitality, as Fuentes wrote, had once appeared an “assurance of eternity,” that assurance had long evaporated by the time of his visit to Washington. At the height of his career, the architect spent afternoons on his Acapulco yacht with president Miguel Alemán. He was head of an office that, in an expression I often heard from his colleagues, “looked like a state ministry.” His last years offered a stark contrast. Pani traveled to different cities in the country, inaugurating chapters of the National Architecture Academy with performances of Eupalinos, a Platonic dialogue by Paul Valéry he had translated as a young man, upon his arrival in Mexico from France. Dressed in white robes—“they looked quite ridiculous” a descendant of Mario Pani once told me—Luis Ortiz Macedo became Phaedrus, Francisco Treviño became Socrates, and Pani, Eupalinos. If the country’s president no longer answered his phone calls, perhaps a new audience of students and provincial architects would succumb to the sound of his unfaltering voice.

I read the letter by Carlos Fuentes as the final clue in a long chain, confirming that Pani had been a cornerstone subsequently discarded. Or perhaps Fuentes, the tree killer, was the sacrificial victim? The letter is handwritten in the novelist’s personalized stationary, with a humorous image on top: a Chacmool, with a modern man wearing a suit and a hat, leisurely sitting on it. Chacmools are a type of pre-Hispanic stone sculpture that depicts figures lying down with their hands on their chest, where offerings were placed, including the hearts of sacrificial victims. Carlos Fuentes, a mid-20th century literary prodigy long interested in pre-Hispanic rituals, was as good a victim as Mario Pani.
At the time of his death in 2012, the press lauded Fuentes’ legacy as a novelist but did not ignore his political sins. The writer spoke in favor of president Echeverría, whom he identified as the country’s defender against fascism. Fuentes stood by the president after a major student massacre in 1971—the second in three years—characterizing the incident as part of a plot by reactionary forces to test the country’s regime (Ávila and Bautista 2012; Amador and Ponce 2012). The writer then lent his virtuosity to a nationalist restoration effort by writing *Tiempo Mexicano* (C. Fuentes 1998[1971]), an overly earnest vindication of the country’s character and its past. Whereas his early novels Fuentes embraced and multiplied ironies and ambiguities, in this historical essay he put down semantic play by suggesting, for example, that “the *albur*”—often sexual double entendres common in everyday conversation and famously waged in “battles” among Otomi speakers of central Mexico—“makes all dialogue impossible” (25).

Years later, Fuentes recanted and, towards the end of his life, spoke critically of candidate Enrique Peña Nieto. Perhaps he was trying to cleanse his image but, as a onetime defender of the PRI’s worst practices, he never fully shed the aura of officialdom.

Sacrifice, as Mauss and Hubert wrote (1964[1899]), is an ambiguous act, as it makes its object sacred by destroying it. A victim stands for the collectivity that presents it in offering. The sacrificers destroy a part or a representation of themselves. This makes both Fuentes and Pani suitable sacrificial victims. They embody the mix of pride and discomfort many Mexicans experience when realizing we are part of a system whose legacy we alternatively celebrate and denounce. The condemnation of the tree killer who stood by Echeverría and the designer of plazas for the assassination of students are a form of “social scapegoating” that identifies individuals “to kill, symbolically or actually,” in order cleanse a group of people (Borneman 1997:22). Those performing the sacrifice forget for a moment

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81 Spanish: “el ‘albur’ imposibilita todo diálogo.”
that they, too, are accomplices of modernity, and foster the illusion that purity can be restored.

This dissertation and other Mexican mysteries (thousands have been serialized in newspapers since the beginning of the war on drugs) are much unlike those of mid-20th century England and Sweden. They could be imagined as part of a different literary tradition, exemplified by Sicilian writer Leonardo Sciascia. In *The Day of the Owl* (2003[1961]), a detective struggles as he inquires into a mafia crime; many among those questioned deny the mafia exists. The detective discovers connections between the mafia and the police, but the case is left unsolved after the main witness is killed. In *To Each His Own* (2000[1966]), a detective discovers his informants have deceived him and finds himself at the center of a vast web of complicity; he is eventually murdered. Sciascia’s characters are often unmoved by assassinations, assuming that the dead, like themselves, must in some way be guilty. Sciascia, knowledgeable on the opacity power as any Mexican, was a member of the Italian Chamber and the European Parliament. In this dissertation, like in Sciascia’s fictions, the detective does not restore order, blame does not fall on deviant individuals, and the morality of readers remains unconfirmed. Deaths are not by murder but by sacrifice. As such, they are collective acts through which thousands acknowledge identification with anti-heroes they at times also find worthy of commendation.

**Prophecies**

In one of my visits to her house, Márgara Pani noticed I was carrying *Casi el paraiso*, (the novel about the Italian who pretended to be a prince), and confided that it was based on a true story. The young girl who almost married Ugo Conti was the older sister of her childhood friend. Luis Spota—“that scoundrel!”—had barely changed real names and details; the reputation of the family in question suffered more from the novel than from the incident with
the Italian imposter because “everybody read it.” Mexico’s mid-20th century fiction, which today may or may not appear farfetched, was in fact imitating reality.

Meanwhile, the reality of Mexico as a national community has been imitating fiction ever since. In “The Decay of Laying,” the text where he introduces the term “imaginative realities,” Oscar Wilde suggests that “Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction” (1998[1889]:463). This offers a template for the effect of books such as The Labyrinth of Solitude, in which Octavio Paz (1999[1950]) describes Mexico’s national character in sweeping poetic brushstrokes. The book, read in high schools and colleges throughout the country since its publication, insists the national type Paz calls el mexicano, “the Mexican,” is deceitful, ever hiding behind masks. The Mexican is also prone to violence, has historically welcomed authoritarianism, and favors form over content. Through repetition, these suggestions have come to appear incontrovertible. Not surprisingly, evocations of the national character in Unidad Santa Fe and elsewhere in Mexico City tend to be damning: people bring up their character as Mexicans when breaking rules or doing something halfheartedly by saying their actions are a la mexicana, “Mexican style.” Similarly, when someone blames others for their problems rather than assuming personal responsibility, or values getting ahead over contributing to the welfare of the collectivity, people might shake their heads and say, así somos los mexicanos, “this is how we Mexicans are.” These “decadent” (Lomnitz 1994) assessments of Mexico’s national culture, as described by a neighbor in Unidad Santa Fe in a moment of reflection, “are self-fulfilling prophecies.”

The widespread use of television advertisements to promote their actions and image suggests that Mexico’s presidents and others in government understand the power of fiction. Backed by massive marketing campaigns, actions by state institutions are secondary to their
representations. Since the presidency of Vicente Fox radio and television advertisements by state agencies and candidates for office have been a form of statecraft. As journalist Jenaro Villamil (2009) has suggested, government in Mexico is much like reality television. Evening news and newspapers offer partial accounts of current events in the country; soap operas are used to promote controversial government reforms (Aristegui Noticias 2013), and popular artists and soccer players are allegedly paid to express support for PRI candidates and their allies on Twitter (CNN México 2015a). As I have argued in this dissertation, these representations are part of a long tradition of simulation and performance that encompasses modernist buildings and their reproductions in film and photography. Perhaps, if the state once attempted to form Mexican subjects by shaping domestic spaces and their uses, it was found in television and other media a novel way—one that is less conspicuous—to penetrate people’s lives (see Schwarz 1998:8-9). If this is the case, it helps explain why the federal government took on the task of distributing over thirteen million free flat screen televisions to the country’s poor in 2014, in preparation for the country’s digital television transition (Milenio 2014). This social program prevents people from falling off the state’s purview.

Against the onslaught of government through television, some artists and writers have sought to produce texts that can be used to counter those sponsored from official quarters. Novelist and public intellectual Juan Villoro (2012) has praised journalists who reveal the inner workings of criminal organizations and their complicity with state officials. A number of them have organized in writers’ collectives that seek to bring to light what is edited out of government-controlled media. Elsewhere (Villoro and Pavón 2008), Villoro has suggested he feels an impulse to repair the country through writing. In the context of widespread destruction and violence, accounts of solidarity that describe Mexicans who do not look like Octavio Paz’s el mexicano, can be repositories of hope. Villoro’s dream of healing through imaginative realities is credible given the long history whereby Mexico has been shaped.
through representations and counter-representations. However, despite their pedigree—
Villoro had been described as Carlos Fuentes’ heir (Sin Embargo 2012) and as someone who
has qualified and put up to date his characterizations of Mexico City (Zavala and Ruisánchez
2011:10-11)—his words might be lost in a cacophony of radio and television waves,
punctuated by gun blasts and disbelieving readings by culeros.

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Elvis, the most prominent—or at least the most notorious—drug dealer in Unidad Santa Fe,
provided considerable help during my research. I met him soon after I moved to the project,
and he often offered very lucid commentary on my findings. I also suspect he protected me
from those who might have been disconcerted by my inquisitive presence. When, in March
2013, Fernando Panzi, Don Willy Nava and I presented Onnis’ book of photographs of
Unidad Santa Fe—where I wrote an article—in the Heroes’ Plaza, he bought a copy and
asked me to autograph it. I wrote: “For my friend Elvis, with thankfulness and affection.” A
woman reading over my shoulder gave me a questioning glance. Many neighbors are in
friendly terms with Elvis because they fear him, but they do not like him. He is a “bad
influence,” the stubborn face of a shameful underworld in the project.

About a year earlier, I arrived in Unidad Santa Fe one afternoon and found nine police
cars with glaring red and blue lights. “They are here for Elvis,” I thought. I ran towards his
house, in case there was still time to warn him. When I arrived he looked calm. “What’s all
the fuss about?” he asked. It was evidently not about him. He would have known.

I walked to the Heroes’ Plaza, where some had gathered and were looking towards a
cordoned off area. “I think there was a murder,” a lady said. “It is only local police. If they
were busting some drug operation, there would also be federal agents.”

“Move on, go back home, you can read all about it tomorrow in the tabloids,” said
someone else, pretending not to be interested.
“Who got killed?” asked a man in his twenties who was walking by.

By then someone else had arrived who knew what he was talking about: “It seems that Guillermo Oviedo killed his cousin Mauricio.”

A couple hours later we heard that he had also killed himself. As far as we could piece the story together, Mauricio was sleeping with Guillermo’s wife, and Guillermo had found out. He called Mauricio over to his house, presumably to have a man-to-man talk. But he had planned it all in advance: he shot his cousin in the living room—two bullets point blank—and then put a bullet in his own head.

A few minutes earlier, Guillermo had called his wife and asked her to come over. He wanted her to find their corpses. She would be the one who called the police, who would explain what had happened. It was not clear if their sixteen-year-old daughter had arrived with her. In any event, nobody had seen her. We hoped she was at a safe distance from the crime scene. Someone said she was at her grandparents’ place, a few house groups west.

Somehow—the consensus was that the Oviedo family had met the journalists’ price—the news was not in the tabloids. Rumors, however, continued circulating; the most scalding was that the unrepentant widow paid for her lover’s funeral, but not for her husband’s.

When I found Elvis two days later in his habitual corner he was eager to hear what I had found out about the murder. “Guillermo,” he told me, “asked me to get him a gun a few weeks back. I knew at once what was going on, I knew what he wanted to do. ‘Don’t be stupid,’ I told him. ‘If you kill that bastard you will end up locked up, and your wife will continue fooling around.’ I told him to calm down, to deal with this rationally.”

Elvis was visibly upset. I had never seen him like that. Perhaps he felt guilt for inadvertently putting ideas into Guillermo’s mind. As for the gun, Elvis assured me he had no idea how Guillermo got a hold of it.
As we pondered the details of the murder-suicide, Felix approached pointing his cell phone camera at us. Elvis stopped him, using an awkward but telling grammatical construction: *Acuérdate que soy anónimo*, “Remember I am anonymous.” This meant that, for the sake of his business and safety, he did not want his photograph taken. Felix, rarely deterred by his subject’s requests, put his cell phone down. I wondered what I would do. Elvis’ request not to be photographed was an implicit request not to appear in my dissertation. How would I write without mentioning a person who was so central to my understanding of Unidad Santa Fe? How would I offer an adequate representation of the project while overlooking an informant who was also a friend and an accomplice of my research? If I did mention him, I would reveal myself as a spy. I figured that, unlike the journalists praised by Juan Villoro, I would not be able to offer an account whose main virtue was truthfulness. I would not write and antidote to government propaganda, or advance ethnography as a healing technique. I figured I would have to scramble some facts, plant contradictions, and leave some gaps in my narratives. If I were to write a mystery, I might have to bury some leads.
The following are commonly used Spanish terms and acronyms in this dissertation. They appear in italics when used for the first time in each chapter.

**Culero.** Close in meaning to “asshole” this swearword is widely used in Mexico City, primarily by men. A person is accused of being a culero when he could have chosen to play by the unwritten rules of a social group and chose instead to follow more official rules. Similarly, a person is considered a culero if he chooses to pursue his self-interest rather than that of a collectivity. That is, a culero is both part of a group the insulter is part of, and excluded from it for refusing to give preferential treatment to other members.

**Delegación.** Borough or municipality. Mexico’s Federal District is divided into sixteen delegaciones, which are governed by delegados or jefes delegacionales, elected for three-year terms, without the possibility of reelection (although this might change with the implementation of an electoral reform drafted in 2014). Unidad Santa Fe is located in Delegación Álvaro Obregón, with a population of 727,034 in 2010.

**EZLN.** Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, “Zapatista Army for National Liberation.” Rebel group, based in the southern state of Chiapas, which declared war on the Mexican federal government on January 1, 1994. Open confrontations were short lived; they gave way to talks between representatives of president Salinas and guerrilleros. Talks resulted in a détente but not in peace. Today, Zapatista “Councils of Good Government” are in control territories known as “Caracoles.” From 1994 to 2014, the EZLN’s main spokesman was Subcomandante Marcos, who wrote poetic press releases and appeared before television cameras wearing a black balaclava.

**IFE.** Instituto Federal Electoral, “Federal Electoral Institute.” This agency of the Mexican federal government was integrated by magistrates without political affiliations, and was in
charge of organizing and overseeing elections from its creation in 1990 until its dissolution in 2014, when it was replaced by the INE, National Electoral Institute.

**IMSS. Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, “Mexican Social Security Institute.”**

Established in 1943 by labor minister Ignacio García Téllez, the IMSS extended the pension and social security services offered to bureaucrats to employees in private companies. By law, all salaried employees in the country are affiliated to the IMSS, which is financed by their contributions and those made by employers and the government. The Institute’s services include pensions, medical and funerary services, day care centers, and cultural, recreational, and educational activities through their Social Security Centers, vacation centers, and sports clubs. The IMSS offered housing to a select group of affiliates between 1957 and 1982. The majority among the country’s self-employed and without formal employment is not part of the IMSS.

**Influyente.** People identified as influyentes in Mexico are those who can wage personal relations for personal gain. In the 20th century, they were often those with greatest proximity to the country’s president. Personal connections were at times made tangible in charolas, calling cards or documents signed by powerful politicians that afforded privileges to those carrying them.

**Licenciado.** Lawyer. The word gained prominence as an honorific in the mid-20th century when graduates of the UNAM’s law school became prominent members of government (Cosío Villegas 1975:26). Among them was Miguel Alemán, Mexico’s first civilian president since the Revolution of 1910, and Antonio Ortiz Mena, director of the IMSS and later Minister of Finance. The term is used today to respectfully refer to college graduates with a wide range of majors.
**NAFTA.** The North American Free Trade Agreement, negotiated by Canada, the United States, and Mexico came into effect in January 1, 1994. The Agreement consolidated a shift in Mexico’s economic policy away from the protection of internal markets, and towards the manufacturing of products for export. Among NAFTA’s effects are increased inequality, decreases in real wages, and the erosion of social security (González de la Rocha 2006).

**PAN. Partido Acción Nacional, “National Action Party.”** Established in 1939, the PAN is the oldest surviving “opposition” party in Mexico. It has aligned at different junctures with economic elites and the Catholic Church. From 2000 to 2012 Mexico was governed by two PAN presidents, Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón. The party has a modest following in Unidad Santa Fe.

**PRD. Partido de la Revolución Democrática, “Party of the Democratic Revolution.”** In 1988 presidential elections, former PRI member Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas ran with the support of a coalition of left-wing parties and organizations. After the election, they formalized their alliance by integrating a new party. Cárdenas became Mexico City’s first elected mayor in 1997. Since then the city has been governed by the PRD, as have most of its delegaciones. In 2012, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the city’s former mayor and twice a presidential candidate, formed MORENA, effectively dividing the PRD.

**PRI. Partido Revolucionario Institucional, “Institutional Revolutionary Party.”** Established in 1929 as National Revolutionary Party, (PNR), it brought together dozens of smaller parties and political organizations, helping consolidate and centralize power in the country. It acquired its current name in 1946. The PRI ruled Mexico practically undisputed throughout the 20th century. Towards 1985, the party began losing its ascendancy, and it was eventually defeated in the presidential elections of 2000. The PRI came back to power in 2012, and it is again the main political force in the country.
**PROSOC. Procuraduría Social,** “Social Attorneyship.” This agency of Mexico City’s government was created in 1989 to receive and process complaints from citizens against public institutions. Since 1997 it oversees housing projects (Zambrano 1998). It helps them host assemblies and form local administrations, oversees their elections, organizes workshops to cultivate “good neighbor culture,” and settles disputes among residents.

**Querida.** Literally, “dear,” this term was used to refer to mistresses in mid-20th Mexico (see Pacheco 1981:19). A man who had a querida was said to keep a *casa chica,* “small house.” Unidad Santa Fe neighbors claim that the queridas of a number of prominent politicians were housed in the project.

**SEP. Secretaría de Educación Pública,** “Ministry of Public Education.” Established in 1921, the SEP oversees education in Mexico, which was highly centralized for most of the 20th century. In Unidad Santa Fe, the SEP operates two elementary schools (grades 1 to 6) and two kindergartens.

**Vecindad.** Housing typology associated with urban poverty (Lewis 1970), common in downtown Mexico City. Many vecindades were large colonial houses around patios that were subdivided into one-room apartments as the rich moved out of the city’s core. In the early 20th century, some were purpose-built by real estate investors (Tenorio 2012:65). Many neighbors who moved to Unidad Santa Fe in the nineteen-fifties had earlier lived in vecindades.

**Vecino.** Neighbor. People in Unidad Santa Fe recognize each other as equals under this rubric. It includes all who live in the project, and differentiates them from those who live elsewhere, especially people from surrounding neighborhoods, who are seen as having lower status.
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Dates in brackets refer to the original publication; they appear in the main text when relevant to arguments. Other dates refer to editions consulted for this dissertation. The bibliography includes full names, with patronymic and matronymics when used by authors. In the main text I include only patronymics, except to distinguish authors with the same last name. First name initials differentiate authors who use only patronymics. I have classified ‘coordinators’ and ‘compliers,’ terms often used in Mexican publications, under the generic rubric ‘editor.’

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