



The John Turner Archive:

Palo Alto Co-operative, Metropolitan Mexico. Rural migrants gain secure housing in Mexico.

Building Community: a third world case book, Ed. Bertha Turner, Building Community Books, London, 1988

Rural migrants gain secure housing in Mexico

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Palo Alto Co-operative

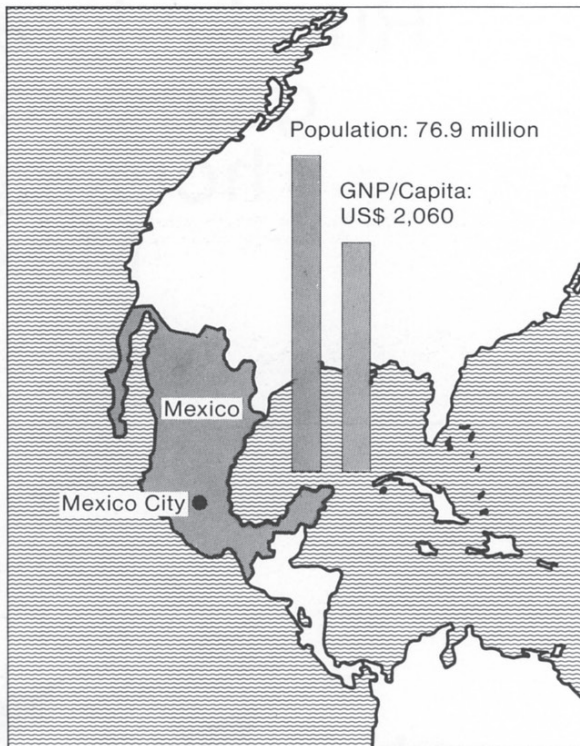
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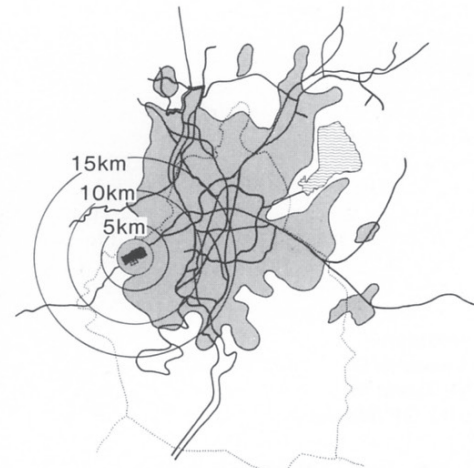
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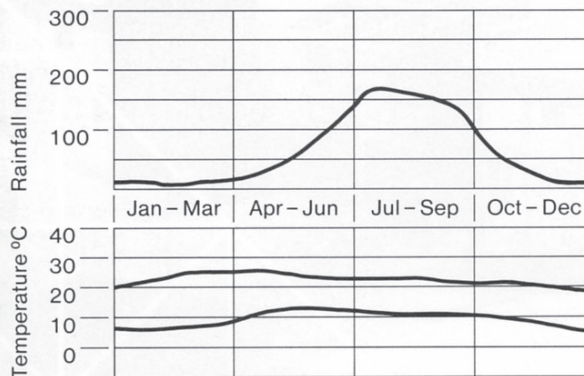


Population Metropolitan Area (1986): 20 million
Population Federal District (1986): 9.5 million
Population Palo Alto: 1,330

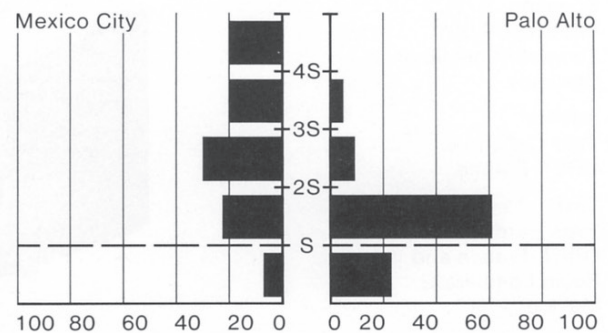


Mexico City

- Built-up Area
- Main Traffic Routes
- Palo Alto
- Federal District



Climate Graph Mexico City (2,315m)



Percentage Distributions of Population by Income Level
S=when 85% of household income must be spent on food



Abbreviations:

COPEVI Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento A.C.

The Palo Alto Co-operative was organized in 1972, when a group of settlers, formerly from the rural areas, joined together to obtain the rights to land they had occupied for more than 30 years. The co-operative is made up of 317 families, or about 2,250 people. Their average monthly household incomes are the equivalent of US\$100.

Palo Alto District is located about 15 kilometres to the west-south-west of the Federal District of Mexico, on the Toluca road. Situated in a very rugged area at an altitude of 2,455 metres, it is higher than the central part of the city. The locality is only partially urbanized: agricultural land covers 57.8 square kilometres of the area, compared to the 15 square kilometres which are urbanized.

Background, from 1940 to 1969

For half a century, Mexican economic development has been accompanied by an uninterrupted migratory flow from country to town, reflected in the staggering growth of the built-up area of Mexico City (nearly 20 million inhabitants in 1987), and in the average density of urbanized space in the Federal District (178 inhabitants per hectare).

From 1940 onward, small groups of peasant families from the Contepec region (Michoacan) began to arrive at the Palo Alto site, seeking jobs in the local industries, particularly in the sand quarries, where they received a minimal wage for working an 11 hour day. Their employer rented them the land they occupied, and they built squatter housing, using locally available materials (stones, mud, roofing felt). Some families sheltered in the abandoned caves left by the sand quarries. At the start, water, electricity, and drains were totally lacking and the new inhabitants used oil lamps for lighting. Lack of contact with the outside world made them unaware that any change in their lives was possible. In their isolation, they endured a life of sub-human conditions and exploitation.

A struggle for land 1969-79

In 1969, the landowner decided to sell, in order to add his land onto a neighbouring estate of predominantly luxury housing: 'Bosques de las Lomas' (Woods of the Hills). Threatened with eviction, and rejecting the idea of being

Palo Alto: The squatter settlement near sand quarries ... the first houses under construction. In the back, upper class area where luxury housing predominates.



PHOTO: KNA, WEST GERMANY

relocated, the inhabitants of Palo Alto united and formed the 'Union de Vecinos de Palo Alto' (Palo Alto Neighbourhood Union). They received the support of a Catholic priest, Father Escamilla, who, together with a few social workers, was already striving to achieve some minimum facilities (a clinic in particular) in the area.

In 1972, they organized themselves into a co-operative and contracted technical assistance from COPEVI (Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento A.C.) a non-

PALO ALTO



PHOTO: KNA, WEST GERMANY



The inhabitants of Palo Alto consider that their organization into a neighbourhood union (1969) and then into a housing co-operative (1972) is at the root of the successes achieved.



PHOTO: COPEVI, MEXICO

From 1940 onward families from Michoacan arrived on Palo Alto site where they lived as squatters.

governmental organization. The Palo Alto Co-operative was officially registered in the same year, and an area of 46,242 square metres was designated for a project to house 237 families (1,330 people).

In 1973, after two years of negotiations with the authorities, and with the landowner, who made attempts to break up the co-operative, the members took possession of the land. Official recognition of their land tenure had become a reality.

A financial compromise was found with the heirs, who recognized the rights of the occupiers, in return for a phased payment of P200,000 (US\$16,000 in 1975), as the total land price.

Despite the progress made, the co-operative members felt that they were living in a hostile environment. The owners of the neighbouring luxury estate, 'Bosques de las Lomas', built a stone wall to avoid all contact with them, and denied them connections with the public infrastructure which served their estate. Other sides of their site are bordered by a busy highway (the Toluca road), a high tension cable, a ravine and a firing range!

The Palo Alto residents, wanting above all to ward off the danger of eviction, preferred to build their houses in permanent, durable materials to increase their security. For the same reason, their homes had to be completed quickly, and before the installation of basic infrastructures. The co-operative members decided to build their homes through mutual aid and self-help. COPEVI was given responsibility for the design and for monitoring the implementation.

A two-storey model house was built first. Then, the neighbourhood was built in 3 stages: 75 homes started in 1976 were completed two years later; 57 homes started in 1978 were completed in 1979; financial preparations for 34 homes began in 1980.

During the intervening two years, 46 additional homes were built by their occupiers, entirely with their own resources, and according to their own methods of building.

By the end of 1985, 189 homes were completed for a community of 237 families. This has satisfied 80 per cent of the demand.



PHOTO: COPEVI, MEXICO



Self-help building brigades were organized by the co-operative members to erect durable houses.

PHOTO: COPEVI, MEXICO



Professional masons were hired to speed up the works.

PALO ALTO

Housing the next generation

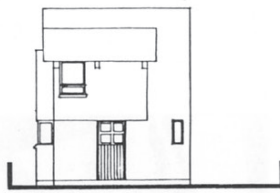
In the remaining 48 plots, 144 housing units are planned, to be built for the next generation. The idea of reserving part of the site for the children of the co-operative members, who would one day be forming their own families, was at first received with mixed reactions. Some were enthusiastic, while others suspected the motives behind it. Anxiety led a few residents to question the principle of co-operatives, as compared to private property. But as the works progressed, their fears were dispelled. The cohesion of the group had been tested, and was quickly restored. The community was even strengthened by adding a new dimension for the original co-operators, bringing security in old age as future generations grew up in Palo Alto.

A clinic, a community hall, a chapel, a dairy, a communal store, a storeroom, and a cement block factory were built, and playgrounds were prepared. Despite difficult beginnings, Palo Alto has become a self-contained neighbourhood.

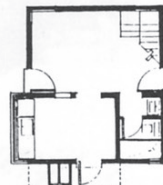
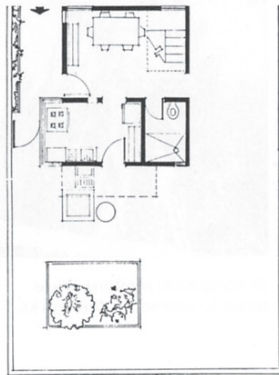
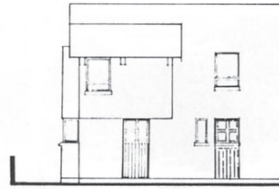
Basic infrastructure started in 1979 is now complete: water, drains, public lighting. The streets are paved and a few public telephones installed.

PHOTO: COPEVI, MEXICO

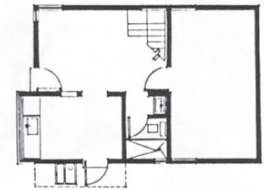




Core house with 52 m² floor area that can be expanded to a maximum of 108 m².



First floor



Ground floor on a 9 x 12 metre plot.

PALO ALTO

Key factors in Palo Alto's achievements

Collective tenure

The legal structure of a housing co-operative unified and strengthened the group by making it possible to hold the land and housing in collective tenure. Permanence on the site was secured. Collective tenure avoided the pitfalls inherent in private ownership of land: speculation, rising prices, changes of occupants and tenancy, which could have weakened the community spirit and eventually caused their organization to collapse.

Community control of land and buildings has protected the interests of the co-operative members. Fifteen years later, the co-operative still controls the property, and the original population continues to benefit — a rare case in a luxury, residential suburb of Mexico City.

'Evolutionary' housing

The co-operative needed to establish their hold on the land by erecting permanent housing quickly. But, lacking

the economic resources to build completed houses, they decided to build 'evolutionary' housing, which could be enlarged and completed as time and finances allowed.

Everyone started with the same core house of 52 square metres, as an expression of their unity. It could be enlarged in three stages, to the maximum size of 102 square metres on a 108 square metres (9 x 12 metres) plot. On the ground floor are sanitation, kitchen, living room; the first floor is an area for bedrooms.

The plot size was larger than that provided by the government or the private sector to families of this income level. Yet large families of 6 people or more, who are the majority (40 per cent of the population is under 16 years of age), were concerned with the smallness of the initial core house (52 square metres). Some spoke of a 'doll's house'; the possibility of building extensions was not yet clearly perceived. Shortly after completion of the first phase, many families built an additional room on each level, as a lean-to against one of the walls of the core house. Some went on to build over the entire plot.



The decision to build permanent housing before the services were installed brings into question the wisdom of the conventional sites-and-services approach to housing programmes for the low- and very low-income settlers. Sites-and-services programmes may solve the problems of land acquisition, sanitation, and health, but their costs are usually beyond the means of the intended population, and they often turn into middle-class neighbourhoods.

The legal framework and housing type chosen in Palo Alto were important factors in modifying existing housing norms, which at that time were the same for both low-income settlements and middle-class areas.

The issue of affordable, incrementally-built housing for low-income people has had a major impact on housing policy. It has inspired official programmes of 'core' and 'progressive' dwellings which have been promoted by both non-governmental and government organizations.

Self-help and mutual aid

The democratic structure of the group stimulated active participation. Men, women, and even children took an active part in the decision-making and programme development.

To strengthen community organization and to promote fairness in the allocation of the houses produced, the community labour force was organized into mutual aid and self-help groups.

The building technology adopted had already been successfully used in Uruguay. It consisted of prefabricated elements, including reinforced brick panels and prefabricated concrete beams, covered with a ferrocement screed as roofing. This system provided a more economic alternative to the traditional reinforced concrete slab. The walls were of cement blocks made on the site. The women strongly influenced the choice of this unfamiliar technology, since this building method allowed them to take part in the construction.

Some families, along with some of the professional masons, were doubtful about the earthquake-resistant properties of this unfamiliar method, and so chose to build in the traditional, time-consuming way. Out of a total 189 families, 143 completed their homes through self-help building, using the recommended system. Subsequent extensions were built with a standard, on-site, reinforced concrete floor slab.

Increases in the costs of building materials, particularly bricks, caused some anxiety about the expected

economies. But a later survey in 1985 confirmed that the new technology not only reduced costs, but also increased family participation in the building process. Families spent up to 80 per cent of their free time in building their own homes.

From 1977 onward, a production unit was set up to produce cement blocks and metal door- and window-frames, creating eight jobs for co-operative members.

Pioneering alternative finance

It proved difficult to raise the funds needed to start the project, as no banking institution would agree to grant loans collectively to low-income co-operative members. To remove this stumbling block, COPEVI negotiated a grant in 1976 with MISEREOR, a foreign foundation, to create FONVICOOP, a non-profit organization providing building materials loans to housing co-operatives to a value of P14,000 (P15.44 equalled US\$1 in 1976). This established the precedent of granting credit collectively. It also led to the government's establishment of INDECO (National Community Development Institute), which granted a loan to the Palo Alto Co-operative in 1980. (INDECO now no longer exists.)

Palo Alto played a pioneering role: it was the first time in Mexico that credit was allocated to a collective, instead of to individuals. This gave hope to many low-income people in squatter settlements, groups denied credit by the banks and, therefore, the opportunity to build permanent homes. FONHAPO, 'Fideicomiso Fondo de Habitaciones Populares', or, in English, 'National Fund for Popular (low income) Housing', which evolved directly from INDECO, intended to increase the financing of new housing co-operatives, but increasingly ran into financial difficulties.

Solidarity and democracy

The basis for Palo Alto Co-operative's success lies in its community organization and sustained effort. Their solidarity enabled the inhabitants to withstand the threats of eviction, the attempts to divide them made by the landowner and his heirs, and to find the financial resources to build successfully. They pay tribute to Father Escamilla, who died in 1976. Together with the social workers, he laid the foundations of the alliance between the inhabitants and their collective work. Most of the members credit the shared, organized action as the major factor in their successful struggle for their rights.



Since 1970, the residents have met together in a general assembly at least once a week to debate, plan and co-ordinate community matters. This long experience of direct democracy has ensured collective decision-making and effective implementation. The high level of democracy and participation developed in the Palo Alto Co-operative is not commonly found in other settlers' groups.

The co-operative has also instituted committees for administration, co-operative education, social welfare, communication, technical, and financial matters. This prevents work and power from being concentrated in a few hands, or in an internal bureaucracy, as well as ensuring collective control of information, knowledge and a broader participation.

A modest but long-term social impact

The Palo Alto experience occurred under inauspicious circumstances. There was no significant urban movement capable of paving the way, and the repression of the 1968 movement was still in the air. The new arrivals on the Palo Alto site, coming directly from the very feudal atmosphere of the countryside, were not conditioned by past experience to conduct the long struggle against landowners and administrative authorities in which they

found themselves. The relative isolation of the site and the limited number of people involved (237 families, 1,330 people) raised fears that the authorities might easily overpower and defeat the Palo Alto protestors.

Yet forty-five years after the first arrivals, Palo Alto has well and truly taken shape, and the housing co-operative's achievements have also become a landmark, inspiring similar approaches at national policy level. Besides generating integrated development of community self-help and influencing new procedures which made finance accessible to the very poor, it has also helped to develop a more flexible legal, financial, technical, and administrative framework to assist and support projects of other community-based organizations.

Wider awareness of the potential for a higher degree of control by local people over their own homes and neighbourhoods has been generated. Low-income settlement areas, now labelled 'colonias populares' (popular or low-income districts), benefit from a special ruling which helps to resolve the structural problems of these areas.

Palo Alto demonstrates that housing co-operatives can work, even when people have very low incomes, expanding the range of alternatives possible in other developing countries.