

GROWTH OF THE CITY

Between 1940 and 1970, some 50% of the people in the rural to urban migration went to Mexico City. As the city sprawled in size, it destroyed a fifth of the surrounding forests and consumed 50% of nearby farmlands. The city spilled over from the Federal District into the adjacent State of Mexico and continued to expand by 7% annually, consuming land as it expanded. Although migrants receive most of the blame for the city's relentless urban sprawl, speculation by politicians directly, or in conjunction with developers, also plays a role. One notorious example occurred under the direction of President Miguel Alemán just after World War II. The president purchased a hacienda on the city's northwestern outskirts, then divided it into residential lots priced to attract the middle class, and created Ciudad Satélite. The purchase of ejido land, a symbol of the revolution's land reform, had to be handled delicately by those in high-level political positions. In the three decades following the creation of Ciudad Satélite, some 50% of the expansion of the Federal District came at the expense of ejido farmland purchased at below-market prices. Unoccupied federal land, already attracting migrants, was transferred to private hands and sold to the occupants on monthly payments.

The president also consolidated the national university (UNAM) with a new university city to the south of the capital, with spectacular modern buildings with pre-Columbian motifs. This attracted professionals who worked there or wanted to be nearby, and they purchased new single-family, middle-class homes in the area. He also undertook construction of large condominium buildings for the working classes, called *multi-familiares*. These buildings were centered at Tlatelolco, and many were destroyed in the earthquake of 1985. All the construction led to charges of corruption, land fraud, and cheap materials against the administration. Urban planning appeared long overdue.

Ernesto P. Uruchurtu served as regent (mayor) from 1952 to 1964. He held his office by presidential appointment. He introduced urban planning with the intention of avoiding the random proliferation of suburbs. Stopping the relentless expansion of the city to the periphery, he believed, required the creation a comfortable and physically attractive urban environment. Parks, fountains, and, above all, gladiolas and other flowers became his signature for an attractive city. Moreover, he built refrigerated markets, extended the sewer system, widened the streets, and opened new sports centers. In an effort to make the city more attractive to the middle class, he ordered nightclubs to close at 1 a.m. and restricted solicitation by prostitutes. In an effort to make the city more livable, he ordered industries relocated to the outskirts of the city and limited new industrial plants. He opposed the building of a subway and suggested a monorail instead, thinking it would result in a more compact city.

Real estate developers had long opposed Uruchurtu's urban policies and sought to expand developments on the city's outskirts without restrictions. They successfully portrayed him as an unfeeling technocrat more enamored with planning than with people.



Figure 6.3 A slum in Mexico City.

Uruchurtu did not totally ignore the lower class, although his sympathy for their growing numbers remained limited. He ordered the construction of low-cost housing after he directed the demolition of sections of the old colonial center used by slum dwellers, allegedly in the interest of hygiene. His urban renewal included leveling the garden portions of the Zócalo, converting it into a sterile parade ground for the same reason. The use of bulldozers to clear unauthorized squatter settlements became a symbol of "Uruchurtuism" (see Fig. 6.3). In his last act on September 12, 1966, he ordered the razing of a squatter settlement of 300 migrants on the southern edge of the city.

In Uruchurtu's last year in office, the bleak study by US anthropologist Oscar Lewis's, *The Children of Sánchez*, exposed the depth of poverty in the capital. The work provided a composite of the experiences of poor families living in tenements in Tepito, the marginal neighborhood close to the national palace. Owners of older buildings in this and other decaying districts created one-room units that housed as many people as could be squeezed into them. These *vecindades* at least had access to water, sewage, transportation, and other services.

The editors of *Fondo de Cultura Económica* soon published a Spanish translation of *The Children of Sánchez*. Some intellectuals praised the work, but most, including many scholars, condemned it as a US attack on Mexico that exaggerated the level of suffering and appeared to argue that an inescapable culture of poverty existed. The Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística (Mexican Society of Geography and Statistics) demanded that the book be banned and that federal criminal charges be leveled against Lewis. In an amusing counterattack, a

mimeographed piece circulated called *Los hijos de Jones*. The book gave the poverty in Mexico City international notoriety.

After Uruchurtu stepped down as regent, the effort collapsed to save Mexico City from growth like Topsy. Migration proved unstoppable, and migrants assumed that close proximity to the government and its services would make life better. In 1974, the capital had a 5.7% unemployment rate and another 35.3%, the lucky ones, were underemployed. The following year, 2,500 migrants a day arrived in the city.

Overcrowded slums forced many people to search for any unoccupied space, in abandoned buildings, on rooftops, or on the outskirts of the city. On the edge of town, they searched for space, including arroyos and caves, in which to build a shelter. Cardboard boxes held in place by stones served until they could be replaced with stouter discarded materials. Later, the residents poured a concrete foundation and when possible purchased a few cement blocks. Over several years, with luck, a rather permanent structure could be built, followed by adding rooms that created a home. City officials cooperated by sending tankers to supply water, and later other services, including electricity. Eventually the community secured recognition with property titles for the owners.

Transportation over the breadth of the city became a major issue. Rather than controlling urban growth, the federal government seized on a plan for a subway known as the Metro as the solution. President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz (1964–1970) initiated construction of the modern underground system, then suspended it, and it had to be restarted by his successor, Luis Echeverría (1970–1976). The government completed construction of the first line in 1969 and eventually built eleven lines that extend to the outer boundaries of the Federal District. The system has encouraged more sprawl. The Metro serves the Federal District proper with a few lines running to the municipalities in the State of Mexico. Residents not connected by the Metro take minibuses to the nearest Metro stations and then take the Metro into the center (see Fig. 6.4). Travel time to the northern D.F., the location of most manufacturing jobs, from municipalities in the State of Mexico can be as much as 2 hours one way.

The evolution of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl provides a case study of the capital's sprawl and the existence of one of the unique communities of the city. It began on a dry lakebed in 1946 with a handful of improvised shacks. By the 1950s, it had a small permanent population, and later in the decade it began to grow in spite of the absence of water, sewage, medical facilities, law enforcement, and paved roads. In the dry season, strong winds blew dust mixed with fecal matter into the adjacent Federal District, and in the rainy season deep mud made it almost impossible for buses to enter. It represented a poverty frontier on the edge of the Federal District. The lakebed became a dumping ground, and picking garbage represented the beginnings of a local economy.

As the population grew, an organized city began to take shape, and politicians began to court voters as they addressed long-standing complaints about the lack of community services. Nezahualcóyotl became an official municipality of the



Figure 6.4 A packed metro car in Mexico City.

State of Mexico in 1963. The political designation allowed access to state and federal funds for paving roads, street lighting, and critical water and sewerage. The complicated political process of regularizing land titles also began, eventually providing clear ownership.

From its small population in 1950, Neza, as it is known, grew to 1,256,115 inhabitants by the 1980s, and it soon took on typical aspects such as municipal buildings, hospitals, libraries, and schools. The desire to preserve the city's history and for cultural institutions resulted in the establishment of a Museum of Archeology and, in 1987, the dedication of the Jaime Torres Bodet Cultural Center, complete with workshops, exposition halls, conference facilities, the Torres Bodet Library, and the Center for Information and Documentation of Nezahualcóyotl. The center preserves documents of all kinds related to Neza's history. A separate institution, The José Martín Cultural Center, includes the city's first contemporary art gallery. In front of the municipal offices, the ceremonial center of the city, appropriately named the Plaza Unión de Fuerzas, displays monuments to the pre-Columbian poet king of Texcoco Nezahualcóyotl (meaning the fasting coyote), along with the last Aztec ruler Cuauhtémoc, and Miguel Hidalgo, the hero of independence: all three place the former squatter city squarely in the context of the nation's history. Educational facilities extend to the Universidad Tecnológica de Nezahualcóyotl and a campus of the State of Mexico's University. A sports city (*ciudad deportiva*) situated on the Bordo de Xochiaca landfill represented the first stage of the reclamation of an unhealthy eyesore. Facilities for volleyball, tennis, soccer, baseball, and other sports became

available to public in the late 1990s. In 1998 the Orquesta Sinfónica Infantil y Banda Sinfónica de Nezahualcóyotl (Junior Symphony Orchestra and Symphony Band of Nezahualcóyotl), staffed by student musicians, won the State of Mexico's Youth Prize for 2002. Religious respectably came in 2000 with the inauguration of the Cathedral Jesús Señor de la Divina Misericordia (Jesus of the Divine Mercy) by Bishop José María Hernández González. Altarpieces with the Lord's Prayer in Spanish, Latin, Nahuatl, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek linked the town to the history of Christianity. Within a year the cathedral's sanctuary of Nuestra Señora de María Faustina de Polonia was robbed of items with an estimated value of 300,000 pesos, creating the impression of a crime-ridden city.

In 2007, the city landfill was scheduled for excavation, and some 208,000 cubic feet of garbage was converted into energy by a biogas burning process. It became the site of a Wal-Mart de Mexico shopping center, constructed at a cost of 57 million dollars. The Plaza Ecológica Ciudad Jardín (the Garden City Ecological Plaza) fittingly recycles water, heat, and packaging. Nezahualcóyotl's desire to become a respected part of greater Mexico City may eventually be achieved. Nevertheless, Mexico City residents dismiss Neza as a city without roots and filled with unsavory citizens. Reputedly Neza has more crime and drug usage than the adjacent Federal District.