



México Interdisciplinario / Interdisciplinary Mexico

ISSN 2193-9756



XXII. LA CIUDAD DE MÉXICO, PALIMPSESTO

2022/2, año 11, n° 22, 138 pp.

Editores: **José Ramón Ruisánchez, María Moreno Carranco**

DOI: 10.23692/iMex.22

Narrating Change: urban transformations in the Roma-Condesa, Mexico City

(pp. 110-121; DOI: 10.23692/iMex.22.9)

María Moreno Carranco

(Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Cuajimalpa)

Abstract

This paper focuses on innovative ways of producing urban history. I seek to explore how places, objects, and environments are constructed subjectively and how this subjectivity is cut across by affective relations. Looking to advance the idea of Mexico City as a discrepant city to common frames of reference such as the global city or the megacity models. This work examines the correlation between the urban and material world and the affective dynamics produced by it. This is done by analyzing four spaces –a park, an empty plot of land, an ice cream store, and a fashion boutique– in the Roma-Condesa area in Mexico City in connection to three affective relations: charm, fear, and melancholy.

Keywords: México City, Urban History, affect and place, Roma-Condesa.



Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Website:

www.imex-revista.com

Editores iMex:

Vittoria Borsò, Frank Leinen, Guido Rings, Yasmin Temelli

Redacción iMex:

Hans Bouchard, Bianca Morales García, Emiliano Garcilazo, Ana Cecilia Santos, Stephen Trinder

Narrating Change: urban transformations in the Roma-Condesa, Mexico City¹

María Moreno Carranco

(Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana Cuajimalpa)

As Nigel Thrift has pointed out, cities are places where affect is ubiquitous (Thrift 2008). From delight to fear, we constantly encounter manifestations of affect that engage the city space in different ways. Moving around a city, gestures of desperation, suffering or resignation in a traffic jam, or public celebrations filled with joy and excitement at a victory of the national team are continually present.

In this paper I will investigate new ways of constructing (an) urban history and new understandings of the city. By bringing everyday lived experiences, situated practices, and the affectivity generated by places to the center of the account, I seek to acknowledge how particular places, objects, and environments are constructed in subjective terms of affective relations.

Trying to move away from predetermined frames of reference widely used to study cities, I aim to build on the idea of "global cities as ordinary cities" as proposed by Jennifer Robinson (2002) and to advance the idea of Mexico City as a discrepant city to global city or megacity models. I also intend to elaborate on the performative qualities of objects and places, which are transformed into greatly personalized zones of subjective engagement.

The discrepant global city absorbs international trends, but only to a certain extent. The standardized consumption in the city is limited to shopping malls; the city streets are too messy to be themed. Next to the occasional Starbucks, all kinds of shops, street vendors, overfilled garbage cans, street performers, traffic jams, people, and dogs can be seen. Mexico City is not a pristine and controlled environment, but it is also not -only- the violent and dangerous place portrayed in international media. In this sense, the city is non-conforming to neither of the two images produced for global consumption. It has the flavor of an aspiring global city that suffers from violence. Departing from this situation, I propose to work with three affective relations: charm, fear and melancholy.

¹ The main ideas and concepts in this paper were developed in discussions with C. Greig Crysler over several years.

In Mexico City, global glamor and its allure are constantly undercut by other aesthetics and affective relations. Glamour, as described by Thrift, is a constant quality in consumer spaces that mix the human and the non-human to produce greater captivation (Thrift 2010: 297). It is pertinent to cite Jane Bennett's argument that presents the idea of thing-power materialism promoting acknowledgment, respect, and even fear of the thing's materiality (Bennett 2004: 349). It is clear that much of our affective relationship to the world is mediated by space and things. All this, in addition to the ways in which human beings and "thinghood" overlap and articulate emphasizing the moments in daily life when the us and the it slip and slide into each other. Glamour operates on a human scale, in the everyday, engaging the imagination through familiarity. It has an allure that blurs the boundaries between person and thing in order to produce captivation and magic (Thrift 2010: 291). However, Mexico City's glamour is not perfect enough, this imperfection makes it discrepant from the global glamour, so I argue that allure in this context is produced by charm rather than glamour. Charm is different from glamour in that it is less controlled and pristine, it is not shiny and new. Charm, in my understanding, is more diverse and messier, it is a palimpsest of history and practices: different architectural styles, street vendors, vacant plots, mom-and-pop shops, unleashed dogs, fancy stores, and upscale restaurants. These very qualities make it appealing and desirable. It is a lived space where the layers of time are evident and visible.

The magic produced by charm is undercut by fear –of the State failing, of corruption, of the uncertainty generated by the lack of trust in the institutions and of violence–. It is also enriched by melancholy, which is defined by Yael Navaro-Yashin as

the loss of the self to the self, the loss of a sense of the self as clean and pure. This is a feeling of an abjected self, or the abject inside the self, of subjectivized or interiorized abject to the point where the abject is normalized and no longer recognized as such. Melancholia, then, is both interior and exterior (2009: 17).

In this sense, melancholy is present as a persistent sadness for what has been lost, including hope, people, and places, therefore it is interior and exterior. It is a sadness related to a past that is always remembered as better and to a sense of longing and intractability. Hence, charm never fully achieves the magical qualities attributed by Thrift to glamour. The magic of Mexico City is different from the immaculate magic found in many cities, particularly in the Global North, and it is achieved in a different fashion. It makes evident the impossibility to please everyone. Charm exhibits the artificiality, even the ineffectiveness of glamour. Charm is transient, melancholic and incomplete.

While works on affect theory are profuse, there is a scarcity of texts that put theory into practice, particularly in relation to space and the built environment. One partial exception being

Löfgren's (2015) work on everyday life which engages with the circulation of objects, affects and activities in the home, but does not directly address space. This article will attempt to engage in this endeavor by working through the practice of affect and spatial politics on four spaces within the centric Roma-Condesa area in Mexico City: the Parque México, an empty plot of land, an upscale ice cream store and a fashion boutique.

As Navaro-Yashin (2012) has argued, the relation people have with objects and in this case places, is determined by context that should be studied within its political and historical specificity. The Roma-Condesa is lived and perceived in particular ways, partially due to its relational placement within Mexico City. It is a centric area with unique urban characteristics. It is a composite space with different layers that constitute the palimpsest of its current materiality. Every assemblage of subjects and objects must be read as specific to their history and politics, and no particular relationship should be taken for granted. The specific assemblage to be presented here is not a neutral one; many things, places, and people have been left out, very few are included and still our aim is to construct an alternative narration and understanding of the place, including the everyday lived experience and the affective qualities that subside beneath its materiality.

With a European and cosmopolitan atmosphere, the Roma-Condesa is very different to the rest of the city. It is a highly privileged enclave filled with eclectic European *art déco* and functionalist buildings mixed with contemporary architecture. The scale is intimate and human; it gives you the illusion of a small bourgeois space, differentiated from the unmanageable metropolis. This combination of elements at first generates affective sentiments of attraction, allure and charm, but looking closer melancholy and fear are equally present.

The Roma-Condesa area was originally a "Hacienda" belonging to the countess (in Spanish, *condesa*) of Miravalle that included the pastures of La Romita, hence the names. With the pressures created by the city's growth in the second half of the 19th century, the areas developed and marked a period of class restructuring in the city. It became an alternative "modern" space for the wealthy aristocrats wanting to escape the deterioration of the city center. The neighborhoods were advertised as having "perfect sanitation, abundant water, paved roads, beautiful parks, wide sidewalks, trees and gardens" (Museo del Objeto, 2013). The area with its museum-like quality and its European, particularly Parisian, atmosphere has attracted immigrants since its creation. Jewish, Spanish, and South American communities lived here in the 20th century when synagogues, kosher stores, and other specialized services opened in the neighborhood.

Nowadays, looking down from a building, the dense canopies of the Parque México make it difficult to see the ground. Two oval-shaped avenues surround the park, which in addition, is the starting point of radiating non-parallel streets that make orientation difficult. The neighborhood's distinct geometry and its aesthetic are a direct result of the place's origin: it was a hippodrome in the early 20th century. The outer oval is a palimpsest of the racetrack, and the park used to be the central area of the horse ring, illustrating the juxtaposed layers of the city's history. This unusual urban fabric can produce a feeling of disorientation and confusion or can be a source of delight and fascination (figure 1).

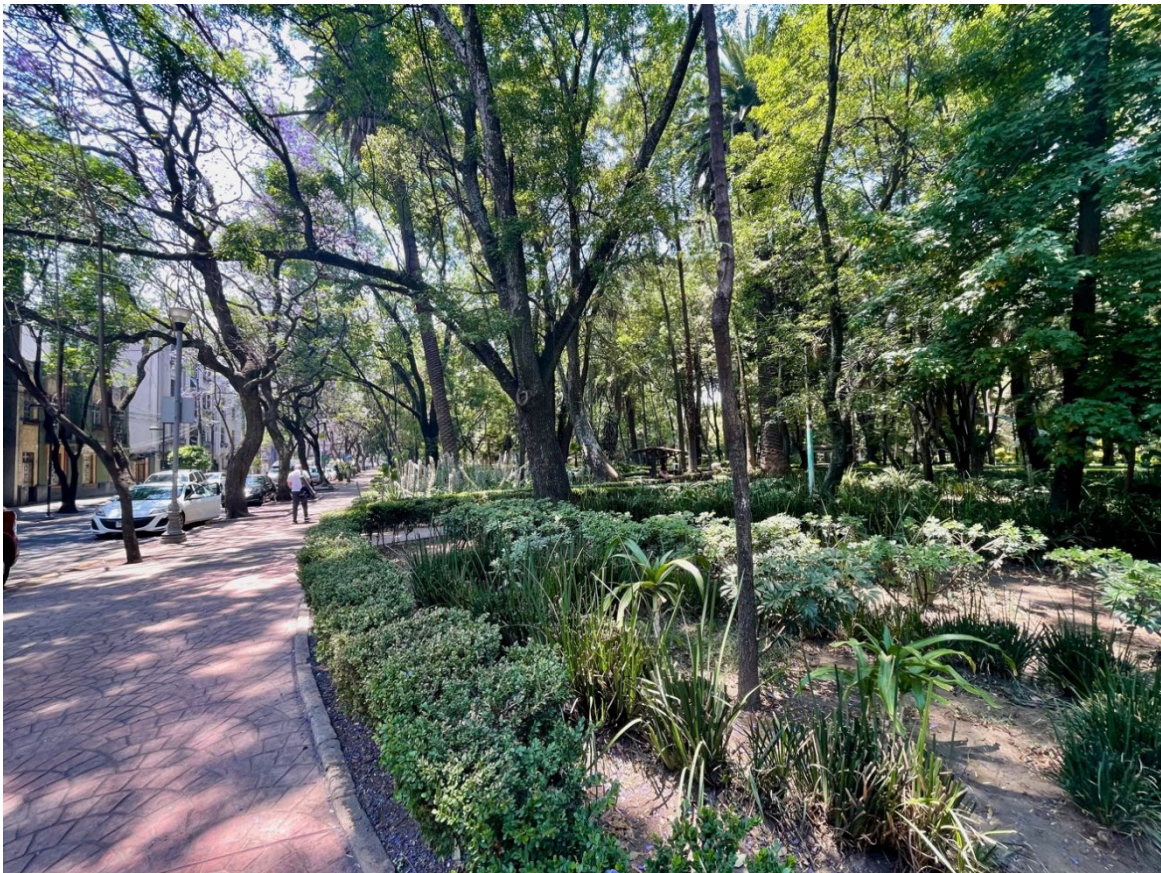


Figure 1: Parque México, 2022 (Photo by the author).

The planting in the park is so thick that it is difficult to see across, the main paths are paved but the rest are soil trails, often mudded or dusty. The benches and the *art déco* insertions resonate with the surrounding houses and buildings. On weekdays the park is busy with residents strolling, dog trainers, kids playing, people exercising, and a few vendors selling fruit, newspapers, balloons, or potato chips. It is a place of encounter that gives the area a village quality. You feel in a different place, it is not the big and overwhelming metropolis anymore. These elements contribute to its "charming" quality, attracting visitors on the weekends when a multitude of activities occur simultaneously. Among many things, you find tango lessons, a

crafts bazar, a religious preacher, yoga and meditation classes, dogs that are up for adoption and entertainment for kids, such as a trampoline and battery cars for rent. It is difficult to walk around due to the amount of people. This amassment of persons and doings temporarily paused in the early months of the COVID19 pandemic, when the park was practically empty, only to resume its business with even more intensity as soon as activities in open spaces were declared safe.

The boundaries of the park expand to the outer ring of Amsterdam Avenue, where the display and production of the body through fitness activities is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the park, gay demonstrations of affection are common; the Roma-Condesa is a gay hub that deflects the homophobia of the rest of the city (figure 2).



Figure 2: Runner on Amsterdam Ave, 2022 (Photo by the author).

Restaurants, cafes, design stores, boutiques, galleries, and gourmet stores turn the park into a pastoral backdrop for consumption. Wide ranges of objects, from the buildings to the products being sold, have a pre-industrial quality with artisanal properties. Handmade dresses reinterpreting indigenous textiles, buildings with skillfully casted concrete walls, along with

small businesses offer services of pre-industrial labor, such as shoe repair and tailoring, bestowing the area a feel of artisanal modernity.

This kind of modernity, epitomized by the old ways of preindustrial craftsmanship, shows one of the many, gradually diminishing, long-established services that make the area desirable. These places add to the neighborhood's charm, beckoning new businesses and residents, although ironically endangering their existence. It is the nostalgia of the gentrifier, who concurrently destroys what s/he seeks.

Charm is a strong element in the park. However, fear and melancholy cut across the space and make it more complex. At night it is a lonely and feared territory that turns into a black hole that should be avoided: visitors are advised not to enter after hours. Homeless people sleep on the benches. They are not regarded as a threat, but accounts of frequent assaults and thefts are common. Fear is also present in respect to what is considered the park's adequate use and maintenance: the overflowing garbage cans and the large number of dogs using the space generate anxiety among residents. The charm of the park is also crosscut by nostalgia for the days when only the local population used it when consumer options were limited, and the sidewalks were free from cafés and restaurant tables. As in many cities around the world, during the pandemic restaurants expanded the use of public spaces to allow for more tables in open space; sideways, parking spots and even fountains have been converted at least temporarily into eating areas (figure 3).



Figure 3: Restaurant with tables on parking spaces, 2022 (Photo by the author).

The park is remembered and longed for as clean and calm but ironically was also remembered, even years ago, as a place to be feared and avoided at night, illustrating the contradictions of its idyllic past. A longtime resident recalls:

I was attacked several times at the park because in the 80's there were many people living there, everyone said: "Do not go to the park after 6 pm" because you will put yourself at risk. There were two gangs, one living in the small park and the other in the big one and they fought among each other and if you were not in any of the two, they would attack you. At this time the park was a muddy place, there was no asphalt there nor on Amsterdam's promenades...(Israel Icaza, hairdresser, 2014).

Around the park it is possible to see the original houses and buildings, some have ground floor shops, many converted into high-end business occupying what initially were everyday services for the neighborhood as a palimpsest of what was there. Most buildings have traditionally been closed off to the street. The newer ones have doormen for security purposes. It is not the very elaborate display of security found in other parts of the city, here it is a discrete component of the buildings that is easy to miss. This downplayed security is carefully produced so it does not diminish the allure of the place. However, accounts of violence have been common for several years, especially regarding extortion fees that businesses in the area need to pay to the local authorities and to the mafias (Fuentes, 2015; Ruiz, 2021).

Even if the place seems long finished and complete, there is always room for change. Empty lots resulting from the demolition of old houses or from buildings damaged in the 2017 earthquake open possibilities for new construction (figure 4). The demolitions produce feelings of nostalgia for what has vanished, sadness for the lives lost, and are a constant reminder that more than four years after the last big earthquake the reconstruction process is far from finished. Sometimes it is difficult to remember what was there in the first place and now is gone forever. There is also fear for the lack of normativity enforcement, due to corruption and a constant dread that anything could be built (Reyes, 2016).



Figure 5: Empty lot as a consequence of the 2017 earthquake temporarily converted into a parking lot, 2022 (Photo by the author).

There is fear that the charm of the place could be lost by overdevelopment and still the possibility of transformation to some extent ultimately adds to the complexity and richness of the Roma-Condesa. However, the dimension of displacement and exclusion is always present. Each new building seems to be more expensive, luxurious and unattainable than the previous one. Occasion for diversity seems to be vanishing. The uncertainty produces many anxieties in some residents. An architect who has worked and lived in the Condesa explains:

In these 15 years I saw how we spoiled everything, it stopped being an incredible urban opportunity, we abused the zoning and the infrastructure and ruined it all. It is like a laboratory of lack of public spirit...everything has become a business opportunity (D. Dellekamp, architect, 2015).

One of the recent housing buildings on Amsterdam Avenue had a sophisticated ice cream store. In many ways this place embodied the aspirations of a global metropolis. The store, named *Nómada*, alluding to its origins as a street truck, was masterfully decorated with an industrial but also artisanal feel. This artisanal modernity stands as a key component of the charm. The ice cream flavors were sophisticated and original, like the combination of hibiscus, cinnamon, and ginger. The unhealthy, but emotionally comforting ice cream was very well-liked. Even if the prices were out of range for most people, the store seemed to be thriving, until mid-2020

when the pandemic lockdown prevented people from promenading along the street and buying ice cream and the store closed, only to be converted soon after into an organic wine shop, *Vinos Chidos*, as a new extravagant and excessive establishment in the city keeping the same aesthetics with a carefully designed bottle display (figures 5 and 6). Mexico City is another one of the places selling the dream of the urban and inviting metropolis, where people can go out and consume endless options.



Figure 5 and 6: Vinos Chidos, 2022 (Photos by the author).

Our last stop in the Roma-Condesa is a trendy fashion boutique called *Carmen Rion*. It is a small shop with a glass façade overlooking the Parque Mexico. The store is filled with colorful textiles from different parts of Mexico turned into handmade pieces of high fashion. The clothing, mainly for women, was made in a building two blocks from the store until the 2017 earthquake, when the building was damaged, and the workshop was relocated to a more affordable location. Carmen, the owner and designer, is often at the store helping clients choose the right outfit. This personalized service adds to the charm by giving the sensation of exclusivity and familiarity that is impossible to find in a big fashion house, no matter how expensive (figure 7).



Figure 7: Carmen Rion, 2022 (Photo by the author).

During the pandemic, the number of foreigners living in the area has rapidly increased this phenomenon has made headlines such as "Fleeing Lockdown, Americans Are Flocking to Mexico City" in *The New York Times* (López 2021) or "La Condesa 'speaks English'" in *El País* (Reina, 2022). Consequently, rent prices have soared and upscale bars, stores, and restaurants are booming. For the first time in the city's history non-Spanish speakers tend bars, serve tables or perform haircuts, which is an interesting reverse on the immigration dynamics between Mexico and the United States.

Branding ubiquity and the turning of the citizen into a consumer as a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary urban condition play a central role in the latest place-making. This peculiar way of place-making is entangled with what Thrift calls "worlds" (Thrift 2008: 433). These are spaces formed by capitalism whose aim is not to create subjects, so much as the world in which the subject exists. Capitalist and neoliberal practices produce these worlds, which are driven by aesthetics and triggered by "cognitive heritages". Furthermore, aesthetic worlds are "formed by capitalism" as spaces for the subject in which to exist. It would appear that aesthetics are historically determined by bodily conditions of reception as part of capitalist totality. The objective when creating these built environments at every scale --from the park to

the organic wine store-- is to construct a world, a space differentiated from the rest. Mexico City, with its violence and contradictions, fades out when inhabiting the market-oriented entrepreneurial spaces of the Roma-Condesa. An architect who works there describes the world created in the area in these words:

In such a big world city, it is surprising these spaces exist, so maybe due to this you enjoy them more, right? You know you are in a terribly complex city and in this area, you can ride your bike with a 10 year-old girl and get an ice cream at the bar, which sounds very romantic and so it is... (F. Christlieb, architect, 2014)

At this point, when we have visited several places, we become something else as a consequence of our specific entanglement with the world around us (Figure 9). The affective pleasure, generated by consuming an exotically produced organic wine at *Vinos Chidos* or of buying a colorful ethnic-inspired dress by *Carmen Rion* illustrates how we are also nonhuman and how things too are essential players in the world (Bennett 2004: 349).



Figure 8: Functionalist building by the Parque México, 2022 (Photo by the author).

This way of constructing history as a series of layers -both material and affective- shaping the current city hopes to provide a more composite understanding of how urban settings change in particular ways. The changes are derived not only from historic conditions but also by how these conditions are continually reshaped by affective relationships with places and things. As we can see, the Roma-Condesa as many other areas in all cities, is the result of layers of history, generating affect, that leaves traces and underwrites the urban condition in certain ways depending on the context.

The layers of affect: charm, melancholy, and fear overlap and build upon each other. Meaning, for example, that the charm is enhanced by melancholy, and much of the fear is derived from anxiety about losing the endearing quality of the place. Additionally, to the layers of affect, we find material layers in the Roma-Condesa: a bullfight ring transformed into a department store, a department store turned into a condo, a cinema turned into a bookstore, the old Hacienda turned into the Russian Embassy and many other examples of elements, embodying the composite city constantly challenged by seemingly contradictory affective relationships.

Works Cited

- BENNETT, Jane (2004): 'The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter'. En: *Political Theory*, 32.3, 347-372.
- FUENTES, David (2015): 'Cuiden Condesa de extorsión; puede extenderse': expertos'. En: *El Universal*, 2 de julio. <http://archivo.eluniversal.com.mx/ciudad-metropoli/2015/cuiden-condesa-de-extorsion-puede-extenderse-expertos-1111378.html> [19.04.2022]
- LÖFGREN, Orvar (2014): 'The Black Box of Everyday Life. Entanglements of Stuff, Affects and Activities'. En: *Cultural Analysis*, 13, 77-98.
- LÓPEZ, Óscar (2021): 'Fleeing Lockdown, Americans Are Flocking to Mexico City'. En: *The New York Times*, 2 de enero. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/02/world/americas/virus-mexico-visitors.html> [19.04.2022]
- NAVARO-YASHIN, Yael (2012): *The Make-Believe Space: Affective Geography in a Postwar Polity*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- NAVARO-YASHIN, Yael (2009): 'Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge'. En: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 15, 1-18.
- REYES, Luis (2016): 'La colonia Condesa asediada por violaciones al uso de suelo'. En: *El Día*, 3 de abril. <http://www.aldf.gob.mx/comsoc-condesa-asediada-por-violaciones-uso-suelo-periscope-y-presion-vecinal-herramientas-que-autoridades-actuen-martinez-fisher--24505.html> [19.04.2022]
- REINA, Elena (2022): 'La Condesa 'speaks English''. En: *El País*, 4 de marzo. <https://elpais.com/mexico/2022-03-05/la-condesa-speaks-english.html> [19.04.2022]
- ROBINSON, Jennifer (2002): 'Global and World Cities: A View from Off the Map'. En: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 26.3, 531-554.
- RUIZ, Kevin (2021): 'Despliegan operativo en corredor Roma-Condesa para combatir la extorsión'. En: *El Universal*, 28 de octubre. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/metropoli/despliegan-operativo-en-corredor-roma-condesa-para-combatir-la-extorsion> [19.04.2022]
- THRIFT, Nigel (2010): 'Understanding the material practices of glamour'. En: M. Gregg / G. J. Seigworth (eds.): *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.
- THRIFT, Nigel (2008): *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*. London: Routledge.