

6-2016

# Highlights of the CRP summer 2016 field trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

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### *Abstract*

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### Recommended Citation

Dandekar, Hemalata C.; del Rio, Vicente; Chapman, Alex; Ogden, Audrey; Tobin, Kara; Smith, Melissa; and Ash-Reynolds, Tara (2016) "Highlights of the CRP summer 2016 field trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico," *Focus*: Vol. 13: Iss. 1, Article 20. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/focus/vol13/iss1/20>

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## Highlights of the CRP Summer 2016 Field Trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico

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In August 2016 five BSCRIP students joined professors Vicente del Rio and Hemalata Dandekar for a two-week long field trip to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. The trip was made possible by a generous gift to CAED from Architect Rafael Franco (Cal Poly Architecture alumni) that, together with the use of his facilities at Los Arcos, have enabled several groups of Cal Poly students to visit this iconic and historic city.

Mr. Franco's goal is to support education in the design disciplines by stimulating creativity and interaction among students from Mexico, the US, and other countries. He believes that the rich culture and social history of San Miguel de Allende and Mexico provide the perfect context to support this goal. He developed Los Arcos by remodelling an abandoned supermarket in San Miguel de Allende into a large open-plan space that serves as an airy and inspiring teaching/training facility. Space can easily be adapted for studios, seminars, lectures, art exhibits, and even performances. More recently, he added a three-story facility creatively built from reused shipping containers providing 30 single occupancy rooms for students, a large kitchen and a dining room.

Located in the State of Guanajuato, a four-hour drive from Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende was founded by the Spanish in the early 1500s beside an older indigenous Chichimeca settlement. The city has an incredibly rich social history that, together with its natural features, makes it a very special place. Declared a historical monument in 1926, by the 1930s the city's preserved colonial streets and architecture started attracting artists and writers. One of them, Stirling Dickinson, moved there from the US in 1928 and established the Allende arts institute. Soon after, the Escuela de Bellas Artes was created, and several

famous Mexican artists moved there, helping to establish the city's rich arts and cultural circuit, and its bohemian life. In 2008 the UNESCO declared San Miguel's 64 central city blocks as a World Heritage Site due to the well-preserved Baroque colonial architecture and layout. All these factors contributed to the city being a tourist attraction, the chosen residence for many American retirees, and vacation-residence for richer Mexican families. The impacts of gentrification and globalization can be seen everywhere, but the city's high-quality urban spaces, architectural legacy, and social life are alive and well rendering it a living lesson for planners.

*Figure 1: The student group in San Miguel de Allende with the cathedral in the background.*





*Figures 2 & 3: The Los Arcos facility provides an quality flexible space for work, lectures, art exhibits, and events.*



*Figure 4: Los Arcos includes comfortable accommodations for students built from repurposed containers.*



The no-credit, experiential/observational CRP field trip was put together by the two instructors in a very short time period as institutional clearance was obtained late in the Spring Quarter of 2016. We stayed at Los Arcos for the whole duration of the trip but also went on day long visits to places near San Miguel de Allende and to the larger cities of Guanajuato (twice) and Queretaro that have more complex and pressing planning issues. We visited the colonial village of Bernal, where the third highest rock monolith on Earth is located and where there is beautiful textile production, the small Santa Rosa de Lima to admire their pottery production, and the town of Dolores Hidalgo and its elegant plaza where the Mexican Revolution was declared and where we could taste some of the 50 plus varieties of hand-crafted ice cream that vendors sell there.

In San Miguel de Allende the group went on long walks to observe planning and urban design issues –such as historical architecture, housing, the impacts of tourism and globalization, city life, and the quality of public spaces– and stopped for sketching breaks as a method for more intense observation. Around San Miguel de Allende we visited the mineral baths, the Botanical Gardens and its beautiful canyon El Charco del Ingenio, the pyramids of Cañada de la Virgen, a small private astronomy museum that also served authentic home-cooked local food, a small village with 500-year-old tree, the studio of an environmental activist who has distilled Coca-Cola to illustrate to the general public the residual they ingest, and a developer that constructed a building in the shape of goose that provides an unusual disco/party space. During these two weeks, we were as much immersed in the local culture as possible, sampling the offerings of numerous restaurants, bars, food stands, and bakeries. The group is indebted to Architect Rafael Franco for pointing us to various sites, facilitating, and generously supporting some of these trips. His guidance enriched, in immeasurable ways, the group's engagement with the city.

In addition to visits and study walks, the group had the opportunity to hear presentations from Architect Rafael Franco on San Miguel's historical development, from architecture students from the Universidad de Queretaro, from the director of San Miguel's historical preservation agency, and from three Director Generals of IMPLANs (San Miguel Allende, Guanajuato and Queretaro). IMPLAN stands for Instituto Municipal de Planeacion, or Municipal Planning Institute: the local agencies in charge of long-range planning which several cities started to organize based on Mexico's national planning system. The first IMPLAN was created in Leon, in the early 1990s, based on the experience of Curitiba, Brazil, and now there are dozens of them throughout Mexico.

By all accounts, the trip was a success providing rather varied highlight experiences for each participant. The students came back with a wider understanding of planning in the international context, and at least one of them secured internships in Guanajuato and San Miguel for the Christmas and Spring breaks! This reflective essay offers individual



assessments of what was the highlight of the trip for each participant as a way to illustrate what both instructors strongly believe – that international exposure to city planning efforts around the world is a unique way to teach young planners in the USA about how to exercise creative planning practice. Melina Smith, one of the students in the group, wrote on our return:

“Thank you for arranging this trip. I got so much out of it. It has really impacted me, and I have learned so much. This trip has also made me so excited about planning and given me a better sense of direction of where I want to take it in the future.”

Each participant selected one highlight of the trip to present in this essay. These are presented alphabetically as individual opinions, not a collective voice.

**Tara Ash-Reynolds** – *Strategic local city and regional planning in Mexico and interventions by the national government.*

In meetings with local municipal city and regional planners common issues were brought up by staffers from the cities of San Miguel Allende and Querétaro on the difficulty of implementing long-range plans because of the changing political climate and resulting government department re-organization or potential for it. Long-range plans are hard to implement if the political party in power does nothing or if departments do not have a defined role in implementing a plan.

In the late 1990's Mexican political ideology toward technocracy in municipal governance was globally debated by academics, professionals, and others. Peter Ward contends that trends towards technocratic governance in Mexico affects the municipal governance ability to respond to “socio-economic changes and the growing complexity of urban management and planning issues.”<sup>1</sup>

San Miguel Allende is a UNESCO world heritage site. Funding to protect historic buildings, and improve circulation and tourism is supported by grants from UNESCO and the national government. Angel Gastelum Cadena, Director de Patrimonio Cultural y Planeación, heads the effort to create a historical plan for San Miguel. During our meeting with him, he commented on the fact that one challenge to sustained implementation of the plan is that opposing political party if elected can undo or cease funding plan implementation.

The City of Queretaro, one of eight metropolitan cities around Mexico City, is currently experiencing exponential population growth and leap frog development. Planners are balancing the use of state resources to create quality development plans at the municipal level. But these are not easily integrated into other departments making implementation difficult.



Figure 5: San Miguel's main plaza Jardín Principal and the cathedral.



Figure 6: On of San Miguel's picturesque streets.

Figure 7: The group with architect Rafael Franco in front of the 500-year old tree in La Canada.



<sup>1</sup> Ward, Peter. 1998. From Machine Politics to the Politics of Technocracy: Charting Changes in Governance in the Mexican Municipality. *Society for Latin American Studies*, 17(3), 341-365.

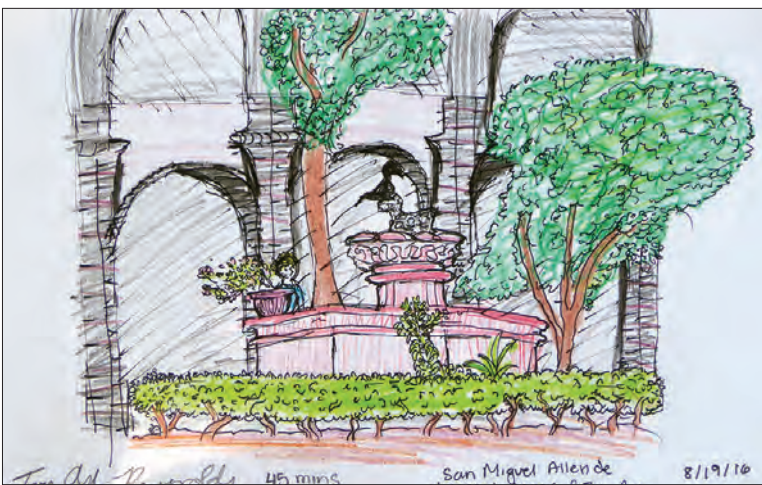




Figure 7: The rock monolith in Bernal.



Figures 7 & 8: Sketches of San Miguel's Cathedral (above) and Fine Arts School (below) by Audrey Ogden and Tara Ash-Reynolds, respectively.



The political shift in styles of government influences how municipalities respond to the needs of the people. There is a need for current and long-range planning at the municipal level to be supported by state and federal government, to have legal protection, and for integration between governmental agencies and departments.

**Alex Chapman – UNESCO designations**

I was fortunate to join the summer trip to Mexico as it provided special experiences that have greatly benefitted my academic and professional career and which I will never forget. I am very grateful that I was able to spend time with professionals, professors, and friends in Mexico. Every person, meeting, city, and space we visited provided unique information that has inspired in me an interest in international planning.

One theme in the many beautiful places and cities we visited caught my attention. While visiting San Miguel de Allende, Querétaro, and Guanajuato, I discovered the strong impact that the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has in these areas. It assists local and state planning globally to protect and preserve world heritage sites that are considered to be of significance to humanity. The designation can bring grants from Unesco's preservation fund to countries that are still considered to be developing. These heritage sites receive extra media attention and attract tourists but the higher profile that this designation brings can draw an influx of visitors that poorer countries find difficult to handle.

UNESCO's cultural policies around the world have created a unique dynamic between local governments and UNESCO. The relationship can be a mixed blessing. I am interested in exploring this topic further in Mexico and hope to return to San Miguel Allende for this. UNESCO's involvement can save places from destruction by natural or human forces but it is worth exploring is if and how such efforts can also undermine a country's right to make decisions about its heritage. I would like to examine the costs and the benefits for San Miguel.

**Hemalata Dandekar – A visit to the pyramids**

The Otomi people built Cañada de la Virgen around 530 A.D in the Laja River Valley as a burial site. The Otomi were avid sky watchers and used astronomical criteria, religious beliefs and agricultural cycles in designing and constructing these structures. The site, which was abandoned by 1050 A.D., was discovered in 1998, excavation began in 2002, and public access was allowed starting in 2011. Access to the pyramids is strictly controlled as the site is on private property. Visits of small groups of 10 to 15 people are supervised as a knowledgeable government guide must accompany a group.

The quiet low-impact excursion made for a very moving visit. The edifices could clearly be experienced as charged and spiritual spaces set in the context of a rural, timeless, seemingly untouched landscape.



### Audrey Ogden – Guanajuato

The city of Guanajuato moulds to the natural topography of valleys formed by mountain ranges in the central valley of Mexico. The city and its buildings nestle in and compliment the surrounding environment. The mountaintop view of the city reveals public plazas, a pleasing array of vernacular architecture in which the buildings flow together at a scale that makes it easy to recognize the places of importance. The domes of the churches, the fortress, and the tree canopies outlining the plazas clearly distinguish these locations of prominence.

The overall layout of the city and its relationship to topography is astonishing. The use of retired mining and flood tunnels as a refurbished road system that is underground and allows for easy movement renders the city itself very walkable. The streets are interesting and lead to, and are punctuated by plazas, market areas, significant buildings like the university, and churches. The liveliness of streets is apparent throughout the city, with lots of people engaging in socializing, shopping, sitting and working on crafts. Carefully trimmed tree canopies demarcate

open spaces and plazas. These canopies are multifunctional, being used as a point of beauty and also providing cover from rain or sun. The individual buildings are painted various bright colors that flow together in a spectrum of blues, pinks, light greens, reds and everything in between. They provide spaces that are conducive for all to enjoy the pleasures of the city.

### Melina Smith – International student connections

The field trip to San Miguel de Allende provided an extremely well rounded and wonderful experience for me. I learned so much from every person we met, every meeting, city visit, and all the places we observed. We visited so many beautiful places and cities it is difficult to choose one as the highlight.

I would say that meeting with the architecture students from Queretaro was a special moment of the trip. We received the chance to sit in on the student's presentations for the preliminary stages of one of their projects. This project is unique to them because it is more of a planning project. Each group provided us with background information about their

Figure 9: Canada de la Virgen pyramid, a recent archeological site near San Miguel de Allende. One-minute sketches by Hemalata Dandekar.

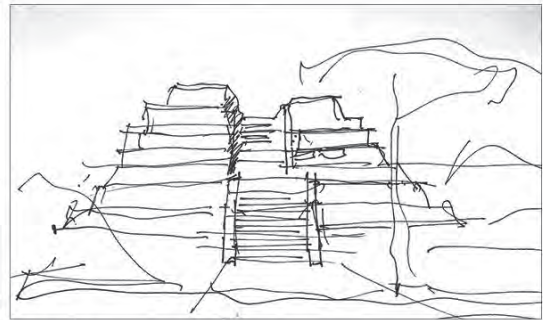
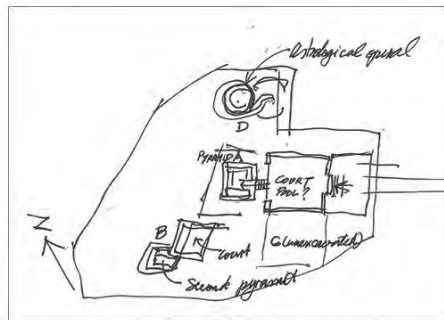
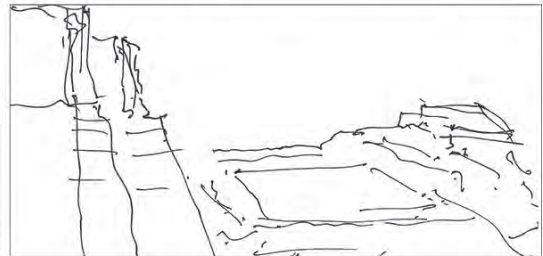
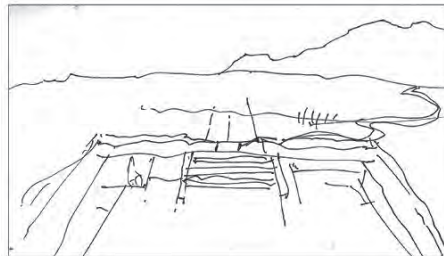


Figure 10: Guanajuato's topography and historic development generated a uniquely attractive city that poses great challenges for planning and urban design.





site, and it was really interesting to see what they came up with. Not only did I learn a lot about San Miguel de Allende from their presentations, but I learned about what was required from them in their projects, and what factors they deal with versus what is required of our CRP students. We also were able to see their teacher's critiques and comments, and provide our own. It was a very interesting comparison to see the dynamics of their class and ours. We were able to talk with the other students, share contact information, and discuss a possible future collaboration. I believe this was an incredibly unique learning opportunity, and I found it to be a stand out moment in the trip.

#### **Kara Tobin** – *A personal evolution*

Initially, I didn't think much of the two-week opportunity to travel to San Miguel de Allende with the CRP department. I figured it would be a small piece of my college experience, perhaps offering a way to strengthen my relationship with the professors or to simply get away for a little time. I returned with a lot more than I had anticipated. I learned so much about planning, travelling, and culture whether I was exploring the diverse history of San Miguel de Allende's development or examining the challenges posed by gentrification. Vicente del Rio and Hema Dandekar, the professors who guided us through the gratifying experience, showed us how to see much more than what appeared to be there. They taught us how to relate the context of the city to overarching planning topics that occur in societies across the world such as historic preservation, political influence, and gentrification. They introduced us to experienced city planners from across the area by setting us up with meetings in San Miguel, Guanajuato, and Guadalajara, giving us various perspectives on how each city approaches planning and social issues.

Throughout the field trip, we had the privilege of staying and learning at the beautiful Los Arcos, built and operated by Rafael Franco—a Cal Poly architecture graduate with boundless knowledge about the history of San Miguel. Rafa, as we call him, is easily one of the most impressive and accomplished people I have had the pleasure of meeting. He presented insightful reflections on society, politics, and contemporary issues within

Mexico. Rafa provided us with a solid mental framework that exposed a truer sense of the city throughout our travels. The people we met offered an interesting juxtaposition between the Mexican experience and our American societal background. I am incredibly grateful for everything this trip offered me in just two weeks of exploring San Miguel and Guadalajara, balancing hands-on learning with memorable periods of free time. Aside from the experience and knowledge I gained from the trip, I also developed and strengthened my relationships with my CRP peers and my professors. Coming from someone who was initially hesitant about whether to go, I cannot stress enough how beneficial this trip was.

#### **Vicente del Rio** – *Learning from Mexico*

I have been to Mexico several times, but this trip was special. Thanks to CAED alumni Rafael Franco's generosity and educational vision, I was able to experience a country from a different perspective. To start with, this was my longest stay in Mexico, and being in a smaller and walkable city with a strong sense of history made all the difference. Also, Rafael, Dr. Dandekar, and the students provided me with the opportunity to see the city through their eyes.

A rich mixture of land uses, architectural types, styles and colors, and incomes mark San Miguel de Allende, particularly its historic downtown and traditional neighborhoods. Its cobblestone streets are full of life, its sidewalks and plazas alive with people and vendors practically 24/7. The old narrow Spanish colonial street-grid makes vehicular traffic always a difficult adventure, but the 64-block historic core and its immediate neighborhoods are quite walkable, particularly to tourists with open mind. Somewhat adapted to the hilly topography, the colonial grid and public spaces also generate interesting and surprising vistas for the pedestrian.

One of our students' most important discoveries was observing how the city's mixture of land uses, building types, incomes, and historical dimensions work perfectly—something so different from the prevalent planning model in the US. Within two blocks along the street where Los Arcos is located there are: several types of residences and small shops, three small grocery stores, two restaurants, a day-care center, a private school, a small commercial center, a car wash, a car shop, an artist's workshop and gallery, a wood shop, and two fantastic small bakery-coffee shops run by families who actually make their own breads (the group's objects of desire every morning!). So, as the reader can imagine, walking in San Miguel is an engaging pleasure and a daily discovery. We encouraged our students to look and observe certain planning-related themes—particularly the impacts of globalization and tourism, gentrification, housing, and the quality of urban design—and we intermixed our walks and visits with moments of peace and relaxation, where we simply sat down to sketch a place or a building, making the act of drawing part of our immersion in San Miguel de Allende. I think all of us were hoping that our photos and sketches could capture at least part of the city's magic.

*Figure 11: San Antonio church and plaza, San Miguel de Allende. Sketch by Vicente del Rio.*

