

Field Trip and Project in Mexico

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Mexico is full of contradictions. The most noticeable is the lavish wealth next to miserable poverty, the people's desire to be modern but ambivalent about change, and the beautiful craftsmanship of food and art in the context of half-finished, disheveled buildings.

But it was not until we had spent too many hours on a huge bus driving tiny, twisty mountains at night in rural Oaxaca that I began to feel Mexican. Since I was responsible for 18 Cal Poly students, I stayed awake all night in a mild panic that something would go wrong.

I continuously cursed my decision to leave the relative safety of Puebla, Mexico for this seemingly endless excursion. Several hours later while sitting on the beach in Puerto Escondido enjoying great food, drink, and music, I was continuously asking myself how we possibly could have skipped this place. This was our Spring Break 2003 study in Mexico trip; an exploration of contradiction.

Professor William MacElroy and I, along with 18 students from City and Regional Planning, Landscape Architecture, and Architecture traveled to Puebla, Mexico to engage in a cross-cultural exchange of knowledge in planning and design with faculty and students of Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP). Our initial goals upon arriving were to learn how the BUAP students and faculty approached planning and design challenges and learn about



Students and faculty in Puebla. (Photo: M. Boswell)

Mexican history and culture through some touring. Our main goal, though, was to engage in an interdisciplinary, cross-cultural planning and design “learn-by-doing” experience. The focus of our effort was the La Mora site, a rectangular piece of land of approximately five acres located in a lower working class neighborhood in Puebla, Mexico. The site has flooding problems and, at the regional scale, is a relic piece of a historically extensive drainage and lagoon system that has undergone dramatic change due to long-term climate changes and encroaching urban development. We sought to understand and respond to these changes and the active cultural processes still impinging both upon the function of the system and the resultant quality of life.

This challenge was continuously complicated by contradiction. Downtown Puebla, Mexico is a beautifully rich urban environment which has been designated a World Cultural Patrimony site by UNESCO. The 2,000 Colonial Era buildings give the place a decidedly European feel and wealth and the things it buys are on display in the shops and streets of the city. Our project site in, on the other hand, was surrounded by do-it-yourself, partially completed



Local home restaurant. (Photo: M. Boswell)



Images of the field trip. (Photos: M. Boswell)

construction of drab, boxy buildings made from questionable materials. Do we acknowledge the reality of poverty and create cheap, minimalist designs or do we strive to capture the beauty of Colonial and pre-Colonial designs?

Our work with the Mexican students and faculty was the most rewarding aspect of our trip. They were enthusiastic, generous to a fault, and possessed excellent graphic skills. However, they seemed to lack a sense of urgency or pragmatism in their disciplinary approaches. We struggled to identify the community's problems and possible range of solutions. All the energy and skill of the Mexican students was directed into visionary designs that seemed impossible to implement in the context of the site we had visited. How had the reality of the La Mora community failed to impact students who had the talent and enthusiasm to make change?

It was not all work. We also toured the region to better understand Mexican history and culture. The touring included such places as the historic Puebla downtown, the ancient pyramid at Cholula, the warm beaches of Puerto Escondido, the magnificent ruins of Monte Alban, and the incomprehensible gathering of 30 million people that is Mexico City. All the contradictions followed us, and were equally evident throughout the tour, but they demonstrated to me how I think contradiction is good. It creates intrigue, excitement, and possibility. Mexico's biggest contradiction is one that need not be explained: No matter where we traveled, no matter how poor the people seemed, they were happy.



Example of student work. (Photo: M. Boswell)