A Multi-University Planning Studio in Mexico City, Summer of 2006: A Successful Experiment in the 2nd World Planning Congress

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Inspired by the fact that the 2nd World Planning Congress was to be held in the Historic Core of Mexico City in July of 2006 Arizona State University (ASU) and Universidad Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) initiated a joint studio, which, running concurrently with and following the Congress, drew upon the resources of the Congress to offer planning students an opportunity to work collaboratively with students from several institutions on themes that were of importance to Mexico City.

The UNAM/ASU studio was held in the Academy San Carlos, a beautiful 18th century, courtyarded building, set in the heart of Mexico City’s Historic Core, adjacent to the Palacio Nacional and the Zocalo. Eight students from ASU, OhioState and University of Oregon (on an ASU study abroad course on Mexican Metropolises which introduced them to planning issues of metropolitan cities in the Mexican industrial heartland stretching from Guadalajara, through Queretaro to Puebla) were joined by ten students from UNAM and nine from the University of Illinois Champagne Urbana. They were exposed to major urban planning issues faced by one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world, Mexico City, and had the unique opportunity to observe and analyze in situ the intersections of metropolis formation, globalization, sustainability and governance as it impacts the life-space, fabric, and lives of people. The student-centered pedagogy of the studio emphasized observation, discussion with practitioners, data collection, group reflection, and integration of theory with hands-on experience in formulating designs, policies and actions. Faculty from ASU’s School of Planning: Dandekar, Lara-Valencia and Balsas were joined by UNAM’s Sergio Flores Pe_a and provided logistical support by Enrique Soto Alva. University of Illinois Champagne Urbana professors Elizabeth Sweet, and Elizabeth Harwood and Professor Teresa Vazquez-Castillo of Cal State Northridge brought their experience of working in Mexico to the studio discussion and jury.

Student teams consisted of students from the different institutions. They worked with each other, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers to come to shared definition and policy recommendations around the following four topics:

1. Urban Revitalization and StreetVendors in the City Core
2. Thematic Tourism in the Centro Histórico of Mexico City
3. Mexico City Water Infrastructure
4. Housing Challenges of the City Core.

Students attended panels of the World Congress; joined workshops; made site visits that educated them on the thematic areas they were addressing in the studio. Illustrated were: the complex social, political and economic context of urbanization and urban planning in Mexico; the richness of the urban fabric and landscape of this major Mexican metropolis; the legacy of pre-colonial and colonial past on its present urban form and functions; the challenges of globalization and sustainability for metropolitan planning; the visions, strategies, and practices of Mexican planners; and, the perspectives of local actors, including neighborhood residents, business leaders, politicians and scholars.

Some 30 students participated in the various aspects of the studio and presented their results on the last day (July 19, 2006) to a jury of invited practitioners and studio faculty. Although the working language of the studio was English, several students and faculty were bilingual helping to make the exchange and collaboration a success.

Student teams did visual survey and asset mapping; tapped into secondary sources of information; developed trend analyses; drew on the existing literature and research; integrated data into designs and programs; and, developed policy recommendations in the context of constrains and opportunities of the site. Local experts who lead the guided tours and workshops during the congress and the studio helped define the critical parameters of the planning problems to be addressed. At least one or two members of each team had good Spanish speaking skills. The fact that team members had just met did not hinder their ability to work together. There was cooperation in sharing
information, and constructive strategies emerged to ensure that work was distributed commensurate to the level of engagement. The ASU study-abroad student group was the only one receiving academic credit for the studio work. It was gratifying for the faculty involved to see the depth of investment and the contribution that all students including those not receiving academic credit, made to the idea sets, vision, data gathering and problem formulation effort.

It was clear to the ASU instructors of the for-credit course (Dandekar, Lara-Valencia and Balsas) reviewing the quality of the written reports and to all faculty who juried the final studio presentations in Mexico City that the goals of this venture effort to encourage international student collaboration had been richly met. The objective had been to provide a stimulating context, replete with compelling planning issues, and to encourage groups of planning students, from different countries, planning institutions and problem definitions, to engage in collaborative planning research and program formulation. From the studio and course evaluations received it is clear that student participants appreciated the opportunity and strongly endorsed that these objectives had been achieved. They had found the experience to be exciting, rewarding, and greatly valued the opportunity to work with students from other institutions and countries. The evidence seems strong for making this international studio offering a regular component of future World Planning Congresses.