

## Earning A Livelihood from One's Home: The Castillo Ladies of San Miguel de Allende

Hemalata Dandekar

*PhD.; professor CRP, Cal Poly.*

*The CRP Field Trip to San Miguel Allende in August 2016 revealed several facets of Mexican urbanism, including social histories that helped to reveal the city's development. In this article, Professor Hemalata Dandekar describes one such enriching experiences, noting its implications for planning.*

Walking downhill on Calle Canal in West San Miguel Allende, we cross Calle Quebrada and are out of the UNESCO-delineated World Heritage Zone. The trappings of the tourist economy that dominate the streets radiating away from city center and Plaza Principal, with tiny ground floor stores selling local crafts and souvenirs give way to stores catering to the daily needs of working families. They offer everyday groceries, cheap “knock off” branded T-shirts, flimsy affordable clothing, glittery cosmetic jewelry, cell phone repair and SIM cards and pirated CD's (Figure 1).

The area we have entered, noted on the tourist-office map as offering “places of interest to tourists” is not stringently regulated, as is the World Heritage area we just left. Working families who provide services and labor to the city live in this neighborhood. Children in uniforms returning from school come for treats and women with purses and shopping bags in hand stop off after work for practical items they need for the evening meals or for the home. Signs of gentrification, the taking over of properties by outsiders, are apparent in clusters on the side roads branching off of Canal, but they are not yet the dominant element shaping the streetscape of this area.

From Canal, we navigate back streets aiming for Los Arcos on Stirling Dickinson Street, our temporary home in San Miguel. On Calle 20 de Enero North, hobbling over the picturesque but uncomfortable walking surfaces of cobblestone streets, we pass the gate of the Gorilla Garage (Figure 2) its sign underscoring the counter-culture artistic character of the neighborhood we are in.

Dominated at night by the lighted dome of the San Antonio de Padua church, the San Antonio neighborhood offers relatively

### Notes:

- 1) The author thanks Professor Vicente del Rio, Ph.D. and Architect Rafael Franco for translating the on-site conversations between the author and Maria and Reina Castillo. This story could not have been written without their help and sensitivity to context and culture.
- 2) All photos by the author except where otherwise noted.



Figure 1: Houses and house/stores on Canal Street.

Figure 2: Gorilla Garage.

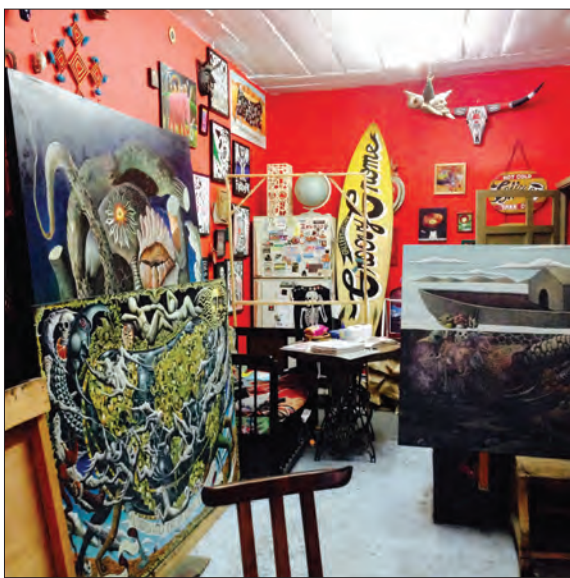




Figure 3: An artist's mural on Canal Street.



Figures 4 A & B: An artist's billboard and customized transportation (top), and his inside the garage-studio of a surrealist artist, both at Canal Street.



lower rents and has attracted, by some estimates, fifty or more working artists (Figure 3). Taking over the street fronting rooms or garages of homes in the neighborhood, these artists sustain the creative expression that make this city attractive to outsiders (Figures 4 a & b).

Attracted by colorful masks peeping out of a doorway, above which a tile plaque proudly announces that this is the home of the Family Montiel Castillo, we step into a small store (Figure 5). Inside, on the walls to our left and behind, is a dazzling array of colorful paper mache masks (Figure 6). Facing us, a counter displays a large array of traditional Mexican sweets (Figure 7). Clearly, this store is different from the ubiquitous stores throughout the city, which sell basic necessities and are run by women from the front rooms of their homes. The one we have entered offers specialized products, attractive to local consumers but also to regional and international buyers. Theirs is a "globalized" product mix.

At the back of the store, Reina Montiel Castillo and her mother Maria Dolores Castillo, aged 83 years, sit companionably side by side on a small love seat. It is early afternoon and they are ready for walk-by customers like us. Reina tells us that Maria Dolores has been making cookies to sell in the downtown for most of her life. She points to a small basket at Maria's feet in which there are cookies that have been shaped for baking. Reina tells us that, although she tells her mother to rest and not work so hard, Maria insists that she likes to make and sell her cookies. Reina shows us an old newspaper article written about her mother when she was 63 years old which notes that at that time she had been in this business for 51 years: Maria clearly started to work as a very young girl (Figure 8).

When we comment on this Reina tells us that she too started selling sweets downtown when she was just 11 years old. The family fortunes have now clearly improved. They now sell candies from this home-store and also the masks, which are made by her brother Juan Jose in a workshop just a few blocks away. Her father was the entrepreneur who started this business.

How did he get into this business we wonder? Maria tells us that her husband used to help feed the people who participated in La Fiesta de los Locos (literal translation Day of the Crazies) which is exclusively celebrated in San Miguel Allende on the Sunday closest to June 13th.<sup>1</sup> He taught himself to make the paper mache masks that participants wore in the parade and slowly established the business of making and selling them. His son, Reina's brother Juan Jose Montiel Castillo, learned the craft from his father and continued this work in his workshop on Calle Sabino #19, also in the San Antonio neighborhood. He hires six women to work with him. Maria quickly adds that these women too are not just working for hire, they also have their own independent businesses plying this craft. Jose business has grown and he now caters to large consignment

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jmlR41tFk8>



Figure 5 A & B: The modest entry way to the store and the tile above it with the address and the family's name. (photos by V. del Rio)



Figure 7 A & B: Maria and Reina with the author (top), and Reina behind the candies with the door to the residence's patio showing behind (below). (photos by V. del Rio)



Figure 6: The paper mache masks. Artistic exuberance and creativity an indigenous cultural expression.



Figure 8: Maria, at age 63, making traditional sweets for sale. (photo provided by Maria and Reina Castillo)