

Urbanismo in Mexico

Ana Padilla

Student, BSCRIP, Cal Poly.

In the summer of 2016, BSCRIP junior Ana Padilla joined a group of Cal Poly architecture colleagues for a two-month study program in Mexico. Led by instructor Humberto Norton, the program was based at Los Arcos, an educational facility run by local architect Rafael Franco in San Miguel de Allende. Ana writes about her many learning experiences which made her realize how important travelling is for a planner's education.

I am no stranger to Mexico, after all, it is my heritage, but I've never looked at it from a planner's point of view. Going to Mexico with architects was a completely new challenge that I did not anticipate. I learned how to experiment with design by stepping back and going back to basics.

Initially, I thought the program would be like any other trip I had taken to Mexico, but I was quickly proven wrong, and I am glad I was. The program included a week of travelling to the states of Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, and Guanajuato, two months in the town of San Miguel de Allende, and a week in Mexico City. An assignment we had throughout the trip was to make a codex. A codex, historically, is a book that looks like an accordion that contains a lot of history and writings from the times of the Mayans and Aztecs. We each made our own as the trip progressed; we made it travel size by making each page the size of our hands. What would go inside was up to us; we could draw whatever we wanted, with the exception of a few drawings that the instructor asked for. I drew so much there wasn't any white on the page; everything from maps to people, landmarks, food, I wrote what I heard, smelled, felt, and thought. I even experimented painting with Agua de Jamaica, a typical Mexican drink made from hibiscus flower that stains easily. So I tried water coloring with it, and it worked out really well adding a new quality to my drawings!

Our trip began in Leon, where we got to smell all the leather from the local industries, and followed to Aguascalientes, where we enjoyed the hot springs, and to Zacatecas where we experienced a callejónada, a local traditional street party held in the plazas. Every city was so different! Leon is very industrial and had a transportation system similar to one I had seen in a case study from Curitiba, Brazil. The main boulevard had elements of a complete street: benches, trees, bike paths, pedestrian lights, trash cans, plenty of room for pedestrians, and even free Wi-Fi in some areas. Aguascalientes was a bit smaller but was experiencing a lot of construction and a community campaign. It looked like Aguascalientes was reorienting its values towards making a more community-based city focused on

family life. In Zacatecas, we got to experience a very colonial and well-preserved city with its many alleyways and plazas. The alleyways or "callejones" are pedestrian streets that only bicycles and motorcycles can use, and where kids play, friends gossip, and grandmas sell homemade food. This trip taught me to be more analytical and experiential, and I learned how to be more aware of my surroundings and how everything was laid out. Upon our arrival in San Miguel de Allende, the group was hungry for more! The official project for the summer was to design a mixed-use building that consisted of a workshop and gallery and residential spaces for a local artist. San Miguel de Allende is well known for its active arts scene. Me and two architecture students from the group decided to learn ceramics at the school of Bellas Artes. For almost two months, we learned how to make a mug, a plate, clay figures, and jewelry out of clay. I decided to take the teacher as my "client" for the project we had to do, and designed around my interviews with him and his needs.

Figure 1: Ana at Teotihuacan, near Mexico City.





Figure 3: Two pages from Ana's Codex. A self-made diary-sketch book where she sketched, diagrammed, and wrote down observations during the trip. These pages record her impressions from Guanajuato.

I used the drafting and design skills I learned during my studios in CRP program, and enhanced them through this program having to draft site plans and section-elevations by hand. The most challenging part of the trip was experiencing my first architectural critique after being in San Miguel for two and half weeks. I had no idea what to expect nor was I prepared for what the experienced architects had to say about my proposal. Yet, they helped me enormously with redeveloping my design and in refining my design and presentation skills.

By the time they had to prepare for the last presentation, I had become pretty aware of the design of Mexican towns. Throughout the trip, I noticed how most, if not all, the places we visited have a grid layout with a main plaza and a diverse amount of shops and services. For example, just outside our hotel in Guanajuato there was a small pedestrian plaza with a church on one side, a convenience store on the other, a garden in front, a stairway to the subterranean road system and, within a 5 to 10-minute walk, a wide variety of restaurants, museums, and housing. Most streets are one-way and all towns we visited had plenty of good bus and taxi servicetowns. Mexico takes a lot of pride in its cities: colorful and innovative architecture, lively public spaces, walkable streets, plenty of public events with music, elegant plazas, and savory food.

In our way back to the US, after leaving San Miguel de Allende, we stopped to visit Mexico City, an "urban monster". Experiencing Mexico City made me redefine what diversity, complete streets, overcrowding, faith, corporations, a central park, public art, swap meets, community, waste, museums and traffic, lots of traffic, meant to me. We got the opportunity to go to the helipad on top of the 3rd tallest skyscraper in Mexico City, "Torre Mayor", and the view was scary. Not only was I at the top of a 55-plus tower but I saw the immensity of Mexico City, and realized how complex and vast *urbanismo* is, and that I was going to be able to help plan for better cities. Mexico City was simply amazing to me. This trip was an unforgettable experience that I will always cherish. I cannot wait to explore more of the world.

Figure 2: Ana's studio space in Los Arcos, San Miguel de Allende.

