

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Rescuing heritage to enhance it, the case of the Historic Center of Mexico City

Rescatar el patrimonio para valorizarlo, el caso del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México

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ABSTRACT

The article analyzed the process of urban renewal in the Historic Center of Mexico City (CHCM) since the beginning of the 21st century, highlighting its link with neoliberal policies and its impact on the transformation of urban space. It explained that the renovation was based on heritage rescue as a development strategy, combining public and private investment to rehabilitate buildings and public spaces for tourism and commercial purposes. It was argued that urban renewal framed within the neoliberal model has favored the commodification of space, turning cultural heritage into an economic resource. The implementation of these policies responded to a model of governance in which local governments, companies and international organizations directed the intervention strategies. This phenomenon intensified urban inequality, favoring areas of high economic profitability while marginalizing other areas without commercial potential. The article highlighted the role of culture in urban renewal, as cities with a heritage legacy used their cultural resources to attract investment and tourism. In the case of the CHCM, heritage conservation was guided by commercial interests, establishing regulations on access and use that restricted the enjoyment of the space to certain social sectors. Finally, it was concluded that culture-based urban renewal requires a theoretical approach that articulates the materiality of space with the ideologies that underpin its transformation.

**Keywords:** Urban Renewal; Neoliberalism; Cultural Heritage; Commodification; Urban Inequality.

RESUMEN

El artículo analizó el proceso de renovación urbana en el Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México (CHCM) desde principios del siglo XXI, destacando su vínculo con las políticas neoliberales y su impacto en la transformación del espacio urbano. Se explicó que la renovación se fundamentó en el rescate patrimonial como estrategia de desarrollo, combinando la inversión pública y privada para rehabilitar edificios y espacios públicos con fines turísticos y comerciales. Se argumentó que la renovación urbana enmarcada en el modelo neoliberal ha favorecido la mercantilización del espacio, convirtiendo el patrimonio cultural en un recurso económico. La implementación de estas políticas respondió a un modelo de gobernanza en el que los gobiernos locales, empresas y organizaciones internacionales dirigieron las estrategias de intervención. Este fenómeno intensificó la desigualdad urbana, favoreciendo zonas de alta rentabilidad económica mientras marginaba otras áreas sin potencial comercial. El artículo destacó el papel de la cultura en la renovación urbana, ya que ciudades con legado patrimonial utilizaron sus recursos culturales para atraer inversión y turismo. En el caso del CHCM, la conservación del patrimonio estuvo orientada por intereses comerciales, estableciendo regulaciones de acceso y uso que restringieron el disfrute del espacio a ciertos sectores sociales. Finalmente, se concluyó que la renovación urbana basada en la cultura requiere un enfoque teórico que articule la materialidad del espacio con las ideologías que sustentan su transformación.

**Palabras clave:** Renovación Urbana; Neoliberalismo; Patrimonio Cultural; Mercantilización; Desigualdad Urbana.

## INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of this century, urban renewal based on heritage actions has inaugurated a new stage of transformation of the Historic Center of Mexico City (CHCM). Based on the history, architectural legacy, political importance, and cultural significance of the area, the urban renewal policy was proposed regarding the heritage rescue of the historic center for the enjoyment of the citizens (Delgadillo Polanco, 2008). This renovation has continued over time under successive administrations that flew the flag against the neoliberal economic model but implemented an urban project born of that paradigm (Delgadillo Polanco, 2012).

## DEVELOPMENT

### Urban renewal and Neoliberalism

The neoliberal facet of capitalism has produced an urban space that responds to its economic dynamics, mercantile vision of cities, and reorganization of society (Peck et al., 2013). Renewal programs are one of the central planning policies that incorporate this paradigm. Material interventions such as the beautification of areas in decline, the construction of new infrastructure, and the productive reconversion of areas, among others, have been accompanied by a reconceptualization of the urban (Jessop, 2002, p. 452).

The adoption of the neoliberal model took place in an international context of economic crisis and the search for new mechanisms to increase the rate of capital accumulation (Smith, 1982, p. 152). The 1970s were marked by a gradual process of industrial restructuring in the developed world, altering the productive vocation of large cities (Hernandez, 2010, p. 2). This process was identified as the leading cause of urban problems such as mass unemployment, fiscal crisis, the physical degradation of entire areas of cities, the increase in poverty and violence, as well as a catalyst for the rise of the ideology that appealed to the primacy of the market and privatization as a means of resolving the crisis (Harvey, 1989, p. 5).

Implementing Neoliberalism in cities meant the conquest of space by capital, while the urban was subjected to the logic of valorization (Moraes et al., 2009). Development came to be managed from a mercantile conception, manifested in the private management of essential services, the handing over of the real estate sector to capital, and greater freedom of action in the labor and consumer markets (Martínez Toro, 2015; Brites 2017). In spatial terms, the city became the scene of the contradiction between searching for private profit and satisfying collective needs (Gough, 2002).

A key aspect of Neoliberalism in cities is the change in the state's role, which went from being an administrator of economic policy to being an entrepreneurial agent (Jessop, 1997; Harvey 1989). This occurred through a public-private alliance as a mechanism for investment and planning of the urban economy in a global context of competition between cities (Díaz Orueta & Lourés Seoane 2013, p. 8). The State ceded control over political sovereignty in collusion with supranational agents, whose dictates are designed according to cultural guidelines that mask a hegemonic project under discourses of democratization and participation of civil society (Jessop, 2002, pp. 454-455). This scheme has been defined as "governance," a network of institutional actors that materially intervene in space and the production of meanings through policies and actions oriented by commercial needs (Panesso and Martínez Hincapié, 2023, p. 81).

The primacy of the market in urban space and governance combine to make cities places where a dynamic of rent, that is, private control over productive aspects, prevails (Harvey 2007, 418 ff.). Territorially, rent is expressed as the capitalization of specific areas in urban space, which necessarily implies the opposite phenomenon: areas with no significant economic potential that are marginalized. This contradiction, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, has been defined as uneven geographical development (Smith, 2008, p. 7). Neoliberalism sharpens and increases inequality, making it a structural feature of urban morphology, as the link between social reproduction and capital becomes fundamental (Smith, 2002, p. 435).

One of the main changes occurred in the adoption of a policy of "entrepreneurship," understood as a series of actions with which governments sought to attract the investments they were losing as a result of deindustrialization in the context of new models of accumulation focused on the financial sector (Harvey, 1989, p. 7). The systematic implementation of these measures reorganized urban space at an international level, placing it at the service of the business class through commercial strategies aimed at achieving competitiveness (Díaz Orueta & Lourés Seoane 2013, p. 9).

The predominant actors in neoliberal urban renewal have been a mixture of national and local governments, multinational companies, international organizations, and civil associations, and others (Theodore & Peck 2012). Together, they draw up the general guidelines for the renovation projects, their justification in virtue of the deterioration that cities are undergoing, they organize the ideological discourses that support it, and they

finance the material interventions on urban space (Lungo, 2005). Governance, a characteristic of the neoliberal model, has urban renewal as one of its most effective strategies for transforming cities and renewing them (Hernandez, 2014).

In the context of renewal, cities are selectively intervened about various specific criteria, whether it be heritage conservation (Dumitrescu, 2014), the rescue of declining historic areas (Gunay & Dokmeci 2012), or the creation of development poles for innovative industries (Belussi & Sedita 2013), among others. In market terms, what is done is to produce a product based on the place; the space is commodified (Buser et al., 2013).

### **Culture-based urban renewal**

Culture is one of the main axes along which urban renewal has been implemented in cities, as it has been used as a central part of their economic development (Miles & Paddison 2005, p. 833). Cities with a heritage legacy, a long history, architectural heritage, or innovation in the creative industries convert their symbolic value into economic value, and culture allows them to do so (Rutten, 2006, p. 1).

Thus, the cultural value of subjects, objects, and events is converted into economic value (Rutten, 2006, p. 1). Culture-based urban renewal aims to identify and exploit the cultural resources available in the space, not only in urban but also in rural areas (Yory, 2019). The commercialization of these attributes involves the construction of new meanings for the sites; it is the creation of a product based on the place and its commercial potential (Davidson & Lees 2010, p. 396). Heritage is assigned a commercial value based on the characteristics that make it unique and special, even if it is just one more cultural goods available on the market (Jameson, 1999, p. 4). Culture, as the expression of a dynamic that constitutes social meanings, is replaced by reifying cultural content into tourist values (Petrić & Mikulić 2009) (Rojo Quintero et al., 2018, p. 5).

### **Heritage-based urban renewal in the Historic Center of Mexico City**

Urban renewal began in Mexico City in the early 2000s and has focused on heritage conservation, i.e., the rehabilitation of public spaces, the improvement of urban infrastructure, the promotion of cultural discourses on designated objects, and the organization of a series of sites and activities that facilitate the consumption of this culture (Zarlenga, 2022, p. 8). The CHCM concentrated most of the heritage actions, although other areas of the Mexican capital underwent different facets of urban renewal, such as Santa Fe, Polanco, and the Roma-Condesa corridor (Moreno Carranco, 2008; Giglia 2013).

The implementation, design, and financing of the policy of patrimonialization of the city center was carried out by both the federal and local governments, as well as by business people and representatives of civil society (Ramírez Kuri, 2015, p. 17). The investment required to fund the renovation program exceeded the government's financial capabilities, so it turned to the private sector, a fact that, in practical terms, meant submitting patrimonialization to private interests (Nemeth-Chapa & Del Zetina-Rodríguez 2017, p. 6). The public-private partnership determined that the patrimonialization would be a valorization of the cultural heritage of the area, to commercialize it and place Mexico City on the international stage as a city with an important cultural heritage to offer (Moctezuma Mendoza, 2021, pp. 58-59). The State conserved the heritage but commercialized by the private sector (García Canclini, 1990, p. 86).

The CHCM rescue project was presented as a comprehensive intervention in the area. However, in practice, the actions were taken on specific sites and buildings, as well as to recover public spaces, squares, and streets with more significant economic potential (Paquette Vassalli, 2020, p. 48). This piecemeal implementation is because the primary motivation for conservation has been commercial, which conditions the creation of tourist corridors or bubbles in the space since not all places are susceptible to being valued (Rojo Quintero et al., 2018, p. 23).

The distinctive feature of the heritage designation of the CHCM has been the implementation of guidelines and rules for access to and use of the rescued sites, the aim of which is to preserve them from the disorder and chaos of the hustle and bustle of the historic center (Giglia, 2013, p. 28). This approach has meant that the patrimonialization of the area distances users from enjoying its cultural heritage, as it responds more to the dispositions of the elites than to popular expressions (Suárez Pareyón, 2004, p. 91). One particularly contentious issue has been the reorganization of street trading in the area, the subject of disputes and conflicts over heritage provisions and the commercial use that the lower classes make of public space (Silva Londoño, 2010, p. 196). In short, the intellectual elites plan the historical heritage as a set of monuments that are abstracted from the context in which they are located and protected from the hustle and bustle of the people (Ortega García, 2018, p. 72).

The CHCM is rich in places that convey Mexican history and culture, from the pre-Hispanic ruins of the Templo Mayor to the Metropolitan Cathedral, the National Palace, and many other sites (De Alba, 2006, p. 665). The institutional recognition of this heritage took the form of the designation of the city's central area as a "historic monuments zone" in the 1980s. At that point, it acquired the nickname of the Historical Center (Monnet, 1995, pp. 13-14). In the context of heritage policy, the CHCM urban renewal project intervened in

this cultural legacy to enhance it, certify it before international institutions, and give it a commercial halo for the benefit of tourism visiting the.

## CONCLUSIONS

This exhibition analyzes the particular issue of the CHCM's urban renewal, whose effect on changing the parameters of understanding and thinking about the area still requires a theoretical approach that links it to the process of implementing the neoliberal model as globalization of the capitalist mode of production and its application in concrete reality: Mexico City.

The systematic development of the theory of representations of space is an incipient effort that still requires elaborating a study methodology that appropriately articulates the theoretical with the empirical to avoid excessive speculation or the description of the obvious.

The theoretical proposal of representations in urban renewal based on culture is a research axis rich in content because it combines material intervention in space and the images, discourses, conceptions, and ideologies that culture as an object of action arouses in cities.

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