Re-Centring the City

Bach, Jonathan, Murawski, Michał

Published by University College London


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81369

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2772648
Of all the urban projects that the Mexican architect and urbanist Mario Pani completed in his life, perhaps the largest single exercise that combined the restructuring of urban spaces, transport infrastructure, housing and services was the Conjunto Urbano Nonoalco Tlatelolco (Nonoalco-Tlatelolco) developed as an idea and built between 1949 and 1964 in Mexico City. At its opening on 20 November 1964, it was a collection of 102 buildings capable of housing 100,000 people. Yet this monumental scale was just a portion of what was planned. In Pani’s words:

We wanted to continue with more projects, to expel all those who were living in poor neighborhoods, we wanted to build more and more housing complexes. I was planning on building five or six Tlatelolcos, with an extension of over 3 million square meters, two million square meters of gardens, and a capacity for 66,000 families.

Monumental in terms of its built scale, its social programme, and its narrative promise for the Mexican nation state, Nonoalco-Tlatelolco was the end point of a series of larger and larger urban interventions led by Pani throughout the 1940s and 1950s. And yet, like much post-war architectural and urban production, it is made up of, and responsive to, the domestic. While a definitive history of the development of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco site has yet to be written, particularly one that brings together its social, political, architectural, material and visual manifestations, this chapter turns to the productions of a specific set of materials from the Taller de Urbanismo, an urban research studio founded by Mario Pani.
In doing so it demonstrates that foundational to the concept of the city and its new modernist monumentality was the domestic. In analysing this large state-funded modernist housing estate project in Mexico City, I work towards a concept of domestic monumentality, that is, the standardisation of the family and the place in which the family lives, in order to make possible through scales of relationship the concept and idea of the city itself.

The urban object

In preparation for the VII Pan American Congress of Architects in Havana from 10 to 16 April 1950, the Taller de Urbanismo centred on the development of an idea that would form the core of an urban approach to housing the urban poor in Mexico City, and would be used to justify the approach and logic of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco. On 6 March 1950, the then president of the Society of Mexican Architects and of the Colegio Nacional de Arquitectos de México Guillermo Zárraga wrote to President Miguel Alemán informing him of the upcoming congress, and given that several high-ranking diplomats and governmental representatives from across the Americas would be in attendance, he requested to be an official representative of the Mexican state. Zárraga also announced that the VIII Congress was selected to take place in Mexico City in 1952. On 27 March 1950, Zárraga was officially granted permission to represent Mexico at the Congress. The Mexican delegation included Guillermo Zárraga, José Luis Cuevas, Mario Pani, Carlos Contreras, Raúl Cacho, Héctor Mestre and Alonso Mariscal.

The title of their presentation in Havana gives a good description of its intentions: ‘Experimentos concretos de dispersión organizada y de concentración vertical para el mejoramiento de la habitación de la clase trabajadora en la capital de la República Mexicana’ (Concrete experiments of organised dispersion and vertical concentration for the improvement of the housing of the working class in the capital of the Mexican Republic). Pani and Cuevas’s study marks a distinct shift from the one produced a decade earlier by the German émigré and CIAM member Hannes Meyer. Theirs turned to a theory connecting working-class housing with the regeneration of what they termed the ‘central hovel areas’. In short, the argument presented in Havana was as follows: as people move into new housing units, they vacate their older homes, which are then occupied by people from even lower classes, who vacate their homes. This housing ladder continues until the lowest-quality housing is vacated, so that ‘the
authorities can freely dispose of these slums, once emptied, transforming them, for example, into magnificent sports fields'. On 15 April 1950, the Office of the President received a letter of praise from Benito Coquet, the ambassador of Mexico to Cuba, about the Mexican participation in the Congress, noting the extraordinary press coverage in Havana, with one paper commenting on the relationship between modern architecture and the revolutionary movement in Mexico.

The visual materials analysed in the two sections below stem from this presentation at the VII Pan American Congress of Architects in Havana, which were published in Arquitectura/México, and original presentation boards based on the study for the Congress from the Archivo Pani in the Faculty of Architecture at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In the first section, I examine the visual in terms of how it allows the translation of scale from the whole (city) to the part (domestic apartment). Scale as a geographical and urban concept has a long history, as does the relationship of the whole to the part. Latour suggests that the whole should be considered less than its parts, and explores the implications this could have for theorising the aggregate in social and physical relations. In some ways, the ‘operational concept’, to use Certeau’s words, worked to create a whole (Mexico City in the 1950s and 1960s) that privileged a new understanding of the parts (the domestic interior). That is to say, in working to confront the urban problem of Mexico City as a whole, there first needed to be the legitimisation of the scale of the intervention, one which worked between the apartment block and the neighbourhood unit. In what follows, I look at some of the visual representations of Mexico City from the part to the whole, to try and uncover ways in which the visual itself contributes to the legitimacy of its scalar concept.

**Scales of relationship**

In 1961, Mario Pani’s Urban Studio published a diagram showing the city of Mexico from whole to part as it is, and as it should be. On the right of the diagram, Pani’s studio interprets Mexico City as it is, with drawings of geographical units descending from the scale of the metropolis, to the city, to the quarter, to the sector, to the barrio, to the block, and to the house. The left of the diagram proposes a new order, beginning still with a drawing of the metropolis, but then moving to an urban community, to the neighbourhood unit (see below), to the superblock, to the group, and then to the house. Arrows draw us down from
the large scale of the urban to the small scale of the home. By identifying scales of relationship between parts of the city and their aggregates, this diagram creates the justification for intervening in them. By constructing the city from house to group to superblock to neighbourhood unit, this diagram positions the neighbourhood unit as a legible and legitimate scale of intervention. The Nonoalco-Tlatelolco project was defined at precisely this level.

The work presented at the Congress in Havana gives evidence of how visualisations of these scales can create links that do the work of assembling the parts into the whole. The research studio was using the terminology of the ‘neighbourhood unit’ or *unidad vecinal* as the organising principle for the city. That is, the neighbourhood should be a unique and self-sustaining part of the city as a whole, and therefore more needs to be considered in its planning than just housing. The neighbourhood unit should contain other public, commercial and social services, becoming a micro-city within the city.¹² The first thing one notices in a cursory overview of the document is that the visual register allows the authors to jump scales very quickly. The visual allows mental leaps of scale whose connection is not at all clear, by being able to contain the whole, the map of Mexico City, on one page, for example, and a part of that whole, a neighbourhood unit, on another. It moves from broad statistical information and mapping of the entire city of Mexico, to smaller models of a neighbourhood unit, to the individual house, complete with architectural drawings of interior rooms including details like house plants, and a person sitting cross-legged and reading a book. To the contemporary reader used to Google Earth flyovers, popular images of satellite photography zooming in to smaller and smaller parts, this may seem natural. However, the ability of the visual to produce such convincing scalar representations *produces* a relationship between the various scales which is such that things that may or may not be related do relate. A living room and a map of Mexico City, by way of their being within the logic of zooming in become, not just relational, but subject to a logic of aggregation. A change to the parts, the argument goes, will therefore have an effect on the whole.

**The domestic made monumental**

In the productions of these studies by Pani’s Taller de Urbanismo, the living room is the house, is the unit, is the neighbourhood, is the zone of the city, is the city itself, not because they appear in the same publication,
but because they are represented through the same visual logic linked through scalar relationships. They become analogically related through their shared method of visual representation. The notion of scale in the urban is meaningful precisely at the movement between two or three or four scales, a movement that produces the city as a fluid assemblage of aggregates made visible and articulable at certain distances to and from the object of the urban itself. The city is made to appear to the viewer only at certain intelligible scales, so that the question of what the city looks like between scales – for example, between the neighbourhood unit and the housing unit, between the visual script of the flow of pages in this document – becomes an impossibility, a non-representational movement between representable typologies of the city.

It is important for Pani and his colleagues in the Taller de Urbanismo that Mexico City is produced as both a whole in and of itself, a thing that can be defined, has boundaries, exists, and as an assemblage of parts, all interconnected and related. This is important because then one could justify thinking about the layout of a home as central to the structure of a block or neighbourhood and base this on structural or demographic information about the city as a whole. The visual construction of a relationship of scale constructs the mobility of content. The requirements of the neighbourhood unit in terms of services, for example, could provide legitimation for potential changes to city-wide transport, sewage, water or other infrastructures. Equally, having defined a problem at the urban scale, one could consider a solution that intervenes in a part of it, with a desired effect scaling up to the whole. This is how the domestic is made monumental.

While the move from the very large of the city to the very small of the room is not in any way an innovation in this particular set of visual materials, they do suggest that the arbitrariness of the zoom should be considered. What is the next appropriate scale after one has produced a visualisation of the scale of ‘the city’? Is it the ‘neighbourhood’? How big is the neighbourhood unit, and why? How much peripheral context do we show, and what detail of the particular? We do not get the choice of asking this question in the document examined here as it is published. Rather it asserts that the five spatial scales are: the city; the cardinal zone; the neighbourhood unit; the unit (apartment or house); and the room. The confidence of this scalar flow as a visual argument masks the debate, the controversy and finally the decision or professional understanding that the ‘neighbourhood unit’ would be an agreed, legible and legitimate unit in planning the city. Equally, it presumes that the smallest scale is that of the single-family home – a modern invention at the time with its own contextually produced histories.14
In analysing the visual presentation of scale in Mexico City from the publications of the Taller de Urbanismo in preparation for the Pan American Congress of Architects in 1950, it seems that one of the many strategies of the visual is that it allows the representation of an assemblage as an object. That is to say, it is a strategy to flatten the complexity of a myriad assemblage like a city. Returning to the presentation of the Nonoalco-Tlatelolco project a decade later, the organisational structure is equivalent. It opens with the city, shifts to the neighbourhood unit, and ends with details of the apartment blocks themselves. Without the ‘map’ of the city, and without the scales of this entity which are such that work can be broken down, divided, and reassembled into a whole, the presumed objective methods of urban research could not function. A research method requires an object, and the visual method is research, in and of itself, as much as it is the technology that produces the object it is researching. Equally, the legitimacy of the specific architectural interventions of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco depends on the relationships of scale created through the visual narrative from part to whole, so that the two-bedroom floor plan becomes an intelligible solution to the rapid urban growth of Mexico City. This is how the domestic becomes monumental in the modernist city.

I began this chapter with a quote from Mario Pani about the failed monumentality of the monumental modernity at Nonoalco-Tlatelolco. I end here with a quote from the project’s inauguration on 20 November 1964. The speaker was introduced by Guillermo H. Viramontes, the president of the financiers of the project, the Banco Nacional Hipotecario Urbano y de Obras Públicas (today known as Banobras). President Adolfo López Mateos took the microphone and began:

At a distance of 443 years, you have given new life to Tlatelolco by creating this impressive city inside the great capital, next to the same venerable stone of our ancestors, enhancing the dignity and heroism of our race. This monumental urban estate aspires to be a symbol of the greatness of Mexico.\(^{15}\)

As I focused on the visual artefacts produced in urban research studios and the projects of Mario Pani and his Taller de Urbanismo, at times I lost sight of their materiality. This inaugural moment brings the materiality of Tlatelolco back to the foreground. It opens our thinking not only in thinking the monumentality of the project, nor the link to the materiality of antiquity (the venerable stone whose ambiguous reference
could point to either the temples of the ancient Aztec city, or to the sixteenth-century cathedral built on their ruins), but also to the relationship between architecture and the materiality of the state. What’s missing among the ruins of monumental temples and churches is, perhaps, a material gesture to the tiled floors, the upholstery on couches and chairs and the texture of house plants, the materiality of the modern domestic imaginary that fuelled the scalar urban monumentality of the revolutionary Mexican state.

Notes

1. 20 November in Mexico is el día de la revolución (‘the day of the revolution’), commemorating 20 November 1910, regarded as the start of the Mexican Revolution.
3. Notable projects include the first multi-family housing block, the Centro Urbano Presidente Álđman, completed in 1949, and the Centro Urbano Benito Juárez, completed in 1952.
4. Box 433/622, Folio Presidente Miguel Alemán Valdes, Archivo General de la Nación. The Mexican edition of the Pan American Congress of Architects in 1952 centred on previews of the newly constructed University City, and provoked the comment from the US-based architect Richard Neutra that ‘The epoch of the prima donna is, perhaps forever, gone. If architects want to accomplish the mission they have claimed in our time they should do as the Mexican architects: work in teams and understand that a common mission can only be realized collectively’ (quoted in Flaherty, 2013, p. 258).
5. It is interesting to note that on 16 March 1950, nine days before granting Zárraga permission to represent Mexico at the Congress, Rogerio de la Selva, the President’s consul, received a letter from Mario Pani, in his capacity as El Vocal Pro-Cultura (representative for culture) at the Society of Mexican Architects, confirming the status of Guillermo Zárraga as president of both the Society of Mexican Architects and the Colegio Nacional de Arquitectos de México. Both letters from Box 433/622, Folio Presidente Miguel Alemán Valdes, Archivo General de la Nación.
6. Carlos Contreras is widely heralded as the most important urban planner in post-revolutionary Mexico, responsible for the 1933 Plan Regulador del Distrito Federal (Contreras, 2003).
10. The study from the archives is authored by the architects Mario Pani, José Luis Cuevas, Dominguez García Ramos and H. Martinez de Hoyos and the engineer Victor Vila; the publication is twenty-seven pages long and primarily visual. Some of the images were subsequently published in Arquitectura/México: see, for example, Gomez Mayorga, 1949; Cuevas, 1950; García Ramos, 1959.
13. For a history of the concept, including the argument that the ‘neighbourhood unit’ has its genesis not in an influential paper written by the US sociologist Clarence Perry ([1929]1998), but in earlier professional debates in Chicago between 1898 and 1916, see Johnson, 2002. For more on the neighbourhood unit in practice, see Mumford, 1954.
14. For a history of the home in Mexico, see Shipway and Shipway, 1960. For modernist ideals of the future of the home in Mexico, see Hannes, 1982. For a contemporary reading of the space of the home in Mexico, see Pader, 1993. For a history of modernity and changes to the single detached home in the US, see Clark, 1986, pp. 131–70.
Bibliography


Cuevas, José Luis. ‘Raíz, contenido y alcance de una ponencia’, *Arquitectura/México* 31 (1950): 20–5.


