

HOUSING SOLUTIONS IN MEXICO CITY. CULTURES OF INHABITING AND URBAN SPACES.¹

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Ways of inhabiting and metropolitan growth.

In a large metropolis like Mexico City very different ways of living coexist, which in turn refer to different ways of producing living space, from the most precarious and unplanned to the most planned and rationalist, directed by public state action. In this article we propose an anthropological definition of inhabiting and then apply it to the study of two different *forms of habitable space*², which represent the two extremes of the relationship between human beings and the space they live in: the rationalist city and the informal city. The text which follows introduces the principal characteristics of these two types of space, in order to propose a definition of inhabiting which allows for a comparative reading of them.

In the history of Mexico City, one of the most populated metropolis on the planet³, the years of greatest urban growth were the decades between the thirties and

¹ Translated by Anne Reid

² For a study of the different types of spaces found in the metropolis see Duhau and Giglia (2008), where a general analysis of the metropolitan space identifies six fundamental types of habitat: the city centre, residential areas, housing projects, low income settlements, conurbated areas and the new type of “insular” residential spaces.

³ Mexico City has almost 18 million residents distributed between the urban zone of the Distrito Federal and the 28 conurbated municipalities belonging to the State of Mexico (Estado de México).

seventies of the past century, when the capital city became the principal pole of industrial development in the country, to which millions of people from all the states of the republic arrived over a short period of time. The most accelerated growth was between 1940 and 1970, going from a little over a million inhabitants in 1930 to more than eight and a half million in 1970 (Negrete Salas 2000). It is during this period that the metropolis was formed, starting with the expansion of the so-called historic city centre and by means of a type of urban development with very limited control and no urban planning. Evidence of this is the fact that by 1970 more than 40% of the urban area was made up of shoddy housing. Almost 30% of the population, representing some 8,300,000 people were living in poor quality housing (Garay 2004:19) This dizzy rate of growth, the result of a process of irregular settlement, produced what is now known as the informal city which results from so-called progressive urbanism, that is to say a form of producing urban space in which in the main protagonists are the inhabitants themselves coming from the countryside: arriving in the city and unable to access built housing, they opt for gradually building for themselves on land which is not urbanized. Building their own home, at the same time contributes to the production and consolidation of their urban setting, generating a type of space known as “*colonias populares*”, low-income settlements, which today represent *more than half of the existing housing in the metropolis* (Connolly 2005). This is an undeniable fact. The fact that more than half of the current metropolis has been produced by self-help construction, obliges us to reflect on the specific characteristics of a metropolis like Mexico City and other major cities, which have experienced equally rapid growth. Given this process we can argue that compared with the other metropoli especially in Europe, Mexico City is an extremely young metropolis, because much of its territory has only been built on and urbanized in the past fifty years, and much of its population has only a few decades of urban life in its family history. This has consequences, given that there are still profound non-urban, rather provincial and small-town, roots which profoundly mark the space of the metropolis and the ways of inhabiting it, which have not been studied in the way they deserve⁴.

⁴ There are some very good studies of the cultural specificity of the conurbated areas, but almost nothing about the regional origins of the people living in low income

However, Mexico City is not only a metropolis mainly constructed by means of so-called progressive urbanism. During the same years in which the most dizzy and uncontrollable urban growth took place, important institutional projects were also carried out, which reflect both a great design effort and elaboration on the theme of inhabiting, an effort which was led by famous architects and expressed in buildings which represent reference points in the urban landscape, among others the housing complex in Tlatelolco and the Miguel Alemán high-rise project designed by the architect Mario Mani. While the city was growing at an uncontrollable rate due to self-help building there was no lack of attempts on the part of government institutions and public universities to deal with the housing problem in different ways, by means of planning and the creation of a modern and functional habitat, which was coherent with the modernizing and rationalist impulse of the post-revolutionary state. They attempted to use new materials and technical resources (basically steel and reinforced concrete) in order to inaugurate an era of mass produced housing according to prototypes, which were adapted to the needs of the working class of the time and to eliminate the ring of slums of precarious housing which were springing up like mushrooms on the outskirts of the city. The first experiments in modern housing date back to the 1920s. In 1932 the architect Jorge Legarreta won first prize in a competition run by Carlos Obregon Santacilia for the design of a prototype of mass produced economic housing. According to Guillermo Boils “what is clear is that this project established the essentials of the pioneering typological designs, which would soon be built on a massive scale by the city government (DDF)” (Boils, 1991:20)

This introduction to these two types of habitat which emerged during the most rapid growth of the metropolis, inspired by diametrically opposed principles, serves to present what I consider the following central theme. Undertaking the study of inhabiting a metropolis like Mexico City one cannot avoid starting from the enormous heterogeneity of the types of spaces which characterize it, of which the self-built low-income neighbourhoods and modernistic housing projects are only the most extreme cases. Both the informal city of the self-built periphery and the purest functionalist style of the “living machines” had their major growth during the same years and constitute

settlements. See Portal and Safa (2005) and Hiernaux-Nicolas (2000) for a study of the presence of *indigenous* (native peoples) in the periphery of the metropolis.

two very different responses to the same problem: the lack of housing created by the explosive growth of the city as a result of the economic model of import substitution. The *rationalist city* produced by public intervention based on visions of modern functionalist architecture and the *informal city* produced by progressive urbanism constitute types of habitat which do not just respond to a different social logic of production, but are also associated with different *cultures of inhabiting*, that is to say different forms of relationship between the residents and the habitable space, which in turn result in important differences in the way of producing, giving meaning to and occupying the housing and its surroundings, which are usually called neighbourhoods⁵.

These days Mexico City is undergoing a process of urban renewal, which seems to reach even the most remote corners of the metropolis. The city looks to us like an urban setting which is never completed, permanently involved in a process of construction and reconstruction. The idea that “the most relevant feature of the urban phenomenon is that it looks to us like a phenomenon of urbanization” is very appropriate for Mexico City, as is the definition of urban as “a form of habitat that is characterized by its constant development” (Radkowski 2002: 104). If urban growth “is not a temporary but a permanent phenomenon” (ivi) illustrated in a particularly eloquent manner in the case of Mexico City, then the study of inhabiting – as the social process of production and reproduction of habitable space – has to play a central role when constructing an anthropological perspective about metropolitan space. To achieve this we need a definition of inhabiting which allows us develop a dialogue between this concept and the concept of culture, with the objective of proposing a definition of the

⁵ The historical conformation of the different types of space in Mexico City means that the notion of neighbourhood (*barrio*) so common in other cities, is at times imprecise and irrelevant. *Barrios*, *colonias* and *pueblos* have different origins and refer to different forms of inhabiting, which cannot be assimilated into those of the housing projects or urban complexes. For a discussion of these differences see Aguayo (2001). It is for this reason that in general it is more appropriate to use the notion of *proximal space*, which alludes to the space which is accessible – preferably on foot – from one’s own home and in which one engages in a set of activities which are part of the reproduction of domesticity and daily life.

culture of inhabiting which recognizes the variety of cultural processes associated with the different types of habitats present in a great metropolis.

Inhabiting and habitus: a proposal for analysis⁶

In a broad sense, inhabiting refers to the relationship of human beings with their surroundings, that is the processes of orientation, perception, appropriation and giving meaning to space which are possible thanks to culture. It is one of the most fundamental human activities, which articulates time and space, marking both dimensions with certain characteristic or typical differences, which can be attributed to different cultures. Inhabiting is an activity which is linked to conditions existing in a given moment in time, but it is also an ongoing activity and in some sense unfinished, continuously recreated by means of the ongoing task of interpretation, modification, appropriation and assigning of meaning which human beings –and some animals- carry out on their environment, converting it into something familiar and useful, that is to say a domesticated space.

The link between inhabiting and habitus may appear obvious but it isn't. When we think of habitat as synonymous with housing or dwelling, we associate it with the notion of a roof over our head, that is, an idea of a space which fulfils a defensive and protective function, a place to feel safe from inclement weather and threats posed by one's surroundings. In this sense to inhabiting is synonymous with "feeling protected", sheltered in Gaston Bachelard's sense described in his book "The Poetry of Space" in which the house is symbolically associated with the dreamlike world of the most intimate and hidden. This link between habitat and inhabiting is not that obvious, because the house does not always protect us from our surroundings, even if it is the place we live in. It is worth asking what type of protection is possible when the material

⁶ Previous and partial developments of this proposal have been presented in Giglia (2007a:2007b:2005)

conditions of the house are very precarious, or when being in our home does not protect us from the noise made by our neighbours nor from the air pollution of the metropolis, or when the common denominator of our relationship with the metropolis is uncertainty, insecurity and risk. Clearly in these cases we inhabit, but we are not protected.

It is therefore necessary to look for a different sense of inhabit, which is not principally linked to the idea of refuge and protection, but rather associates inhabiting with the collective production of a setting imbued with meaning. We can begin by defining inhabiting as our relationship with space mediated by culture. The experience of self-help housing illustrates this point very well. The low income residents who move into non-urbanized land, tend to live for long periods in precarious housing, which does not protect them from bad weather nor other dangers. However, these residents inhabit space intensely by gradually transforming an initially uninhabitable territory into something domestic. Starting out with the simple recognition of space, they continue by establishing a series of reference points and giving them names, they build roads in order to move around, gradually continue building a home, which tends to be called “progressive housing” because it grows as the people living there grow, then, together with other residents, they struggle to obtain basic urban services, from water and drainage to schools and markets, and finally the area becomes part of the city⁷.

Based on the study of settlements of progressive housing in the informal city, I have proposed the adoption of a definition of inhabiting which instead of focusing on the idea of protection is based on the notion of *presence* in a place, that is an awareness of being and making oneself present, both for oneself and for others. It is an idea of inhabiting which is anchored to the *process of establishing and recognizing an order, understood as a set of relatively stable relationships between different spatial elements or points of reference. This order is the product of culture.* In this sense, inhabiting articulates the relationship of a subject – individual or collective – with space and in relation to others. This definition is inspired by Radkowsky, for whom “inhabiting is the same as being able to locate oneself”, in the sense of knowing where one is, which

⁷ Among the main studies of low income urbanization we should consider those of Azuela 1989; Coulomb – Sanchés Mejorada 1992; Duhau 1998; Ramirez Saiz 1993; Salazar 1999; Schteingart 1997. For studies which deal with daily life see Lindon (1999) on the Valle de Chalco and Clara Salazar (1999).

fulfils the important function of “making the subject present”, that is, “ensuring their presence” even though “obviously not as an absolute but rather relative to the spatial-temporal limits of that place.” (2002: 29-30). Defined in this way inhabiting is synonymous with *knowing where I am*, recognizing the space around me, being able to orientate myself within it, name it and use it, and at the same time recognize the uses and meanings which that space has for others. It implies recognizing and at the same time establishing a centre – which may be mobile – and a set of reference points, that is to say an order. It is equivalent to locating oneself within an order, understood as a set of intelligible (and relatively predictable, not random) relationships between a given number of spatial elements. It has to do with recognizing and establishing a spatial and cultural order, which the subject may have created or have contributed to its construction and which is intelligible, at the same time allowing the person to orientate oneself. Once I recognize the position I occupy within this order, I can know where I am and can establish my presence in that place. To summarize: *inhabiting can be defined as a set of practices and representations which allow the subject to locate himself within a spatial-temporal order, at the same time recognizing it as a collective order and establishing one’s own individual order.*

Inhabiting therefore alludes to socio-cultural processes which permit the more or less stable, ephemeral or mobile presence of the subject in a determined space, and from there his relationship with other people and with the rest of the world, To express it in the words of the well-known definition proposed by Marc Augé, inhabiting transforms a non-place into a place, that is a place imbued with meanings and memories. This broad notion of inhabiting evokes the concept of presence as “being in the world” according to the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. According to this author the concept of presence goes beyond that of being localized in physical space, rather referring to the possibility of being consciously in the world, in the existential sense of knowing oneself to be part of time, as synonymous with “being part of history” by means of culture (De Martino, 1977). For De Martino only culture allows human beings to establish a horizon of meaning, to transcend a state of nature, separating themselves from their ties to the natural condition in order to set up a specifically human world, as diverse and specific as cultures are diverse and specific. By ordering space – or putting our house in order – by means of processes of appropriation and attribution of meaning to our surroundings, we are doing no more nor less than *ordering and domesticating the world*, that is converting it into something useful, familiar, with meaning and value. Inhabiting in

summary is a cultural event par excellence, something like the starting point of culture. Concretely, how is this process carried out?

The actions with which we order the space, in which we establish our presence, constitute a set of non-reflexive practices, mechanical and semi-automatic, which can be defined as a socio-spatial habitus, understanding this concept in Bourdieu's sense of socialized subjectivity or corporal knowledge, an unthinking and automated knowledge (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1995).

The link between habitus and inhabiting is not just etimological, but rather involves a profound interdependence between the two, because it is only by starting from the elaboration and reproduction of a habitus that we can inhabit space. In order to inhabit a place in a way that is not just ephemeral, it is necessary to establish a set of signs and meanings within it, practices and uses which allow me to know where I am and avoid getting lost. When we visit someone in their house for a short period, we find it difficult to remember where we left our things, because we have not established a particular place for them in this brief lapse of time. We look for our glasses and our briefcase, and take time to find them or simply have to ask the owner of the house, who has assigned an exact place for our things, so that they do not become elements of disorder. The same thing happens when we move house, we need a certain period of time to orientate ourselves in space and find our way around, and we achieve this by establishing a set of uses and reiterative actions which mediate our relationship with the space in the house, establishing our presence there. Leaving the umbrella in a certain place where I know that I will find it again, or assigning a place for some plants or the desk where I shall work, each place has certain – more or less flexible – rules for their use, which are normally respected if we want to continue using them. These may or may not be written rules; the important thing is that there are rules which the users of that space recognize as such, explicitly or implicitly. For example, my habitus as a driver in Mexico City allows me to recognize that a branch emerging from the asphalt is not a work of post-modern art, but a signal placed there to let me know that there is a hole in the road or an open drain. My response to that signal, which drivers from other cities probably would not know how to read, will consist of prudently avoiding driving over that particular place. Spatial habitus allows me to recognize the order around me (which in the case of Mexico City often appears as apparent disorder) and prepares me to act in harmony with it, while at the same time allowing me to attempt to establish my own order. Spatial habitus is at the same time my ability to read space – and recognize it –

and my capacity to act congruently based on this reading. The notion of habitus as the “culture of inhabiting” reminds us that we order space, but at the same time, space orders us. We could say that it “puts us in our place” imposing certain rules of space that have to do not only nor mainly with material restrictions, but rather with social ones. *Spatial order* as a cultural and social product has to do with not just the ways of reading one’s surroundings, but also the ways of using them and giving them meaning, transforming them into something personal which has meaning for oneself. Spatial order has to do with not only symbols but also social practices and with the collective rules which allow us to be in that space.

Inhabiting shapes a dimension of experience which we can call the construction of domesticity: by using space we transform it into something familiar and useful, with meaning and value, such as our plants and pets. That is why our house, rather than being just a place where we feel secure, is the place where we make our presence known, where *we are situated* by means of the daily exercise of numerous practices which establish our order and with it our presence and an important part of our identity (Pasquinelli 2006). If inhabiting a house is –in general- establishing an order for its use, it is clear that this order cannot be absolute, but has to do primarily with the physical characteristics of one’s own habitable space. This means that space orders us, as well as being ordered. Habitable order can be established during the actual building of the house or can be established on a single occasion – as an inaugural operation – in a previously built house.

In the contemporary metropolis, the variety of housing and of types of habitats reflect many different processes of production of space to inhabit and many different cultures of inhabiting, understood as the different ways of recognizing and establishing order that allows us to be present (or to be located) and which allows us to domesticate our surroundings, from domestic space to the space around our dwelling, based on which we attribute meaning and organize our daily life. In a symmetrical but opposite way we can say that we are in the presence of a certain *culture of inhabiting* when we find ourselves faced with a specific spatial order, the result of the interweaving of spatial forms and ways of inhabiting them.

As regards the different processes of inhabiting, understood as *being in the world* by means of setting up and reproducing an order, there are *grosso modo* two possible relationships with housing. One consists of inhabiting (and ordering) housing as it is built, in the case of the informal city. The other involves moving in to (and

ordering) a mass produced housing unit. They involve different cultural processes, based on a different relationship with habitable space. When we undertake the construction of a house, we are motivated by the aim (or illusion) of ordering our domestic space according to our particular taste and needs, as a way of expressing part of our identity in space and in this way seeing ourselves reflected in it. It is clear that this order will have to be reproduced and renovated on a daily basis, as an ongoing and largely unconscious task. But what happens when we have to install ourselves in a house that we have not designed, but which has been conceived of and designed by other people, based on principles of order and the use of space which are neither immediately intelligible nor suitable for us? What happens is that our order has to take into account this other order which is already incorporated into the space. Our relationship with the world and our opportunity-capacity to domesticate it will have to adapt to the characteristics of the habitable space.

It is for this reason that the design and construction of a habitat, to the extent that it is inspired by a certain idea of inhabiting, has to include a certain *order*. This means that the form of the housing inevitably conditions – although not entirely – the relationship between the inhabitants and the habitable space. If inhabiting establishes an order, this order can be imposed, or at least induced by means of the form of the habitat. This implies that inhabiting can be studied as an intercultural process – and housing as an intercultural product – the study of which allows us to see the contrast and hybrids between imposed order and order produced by the residents. Comparing housing designed and mass produced by others with self-built housing, it is possible to distinguish between different orders which are implicit and materialized in these two types of habitat. This suggests a possibility of rereading the history of housing in Mexico from a new angle; that of the fractures and cultural hybrids between the built models and the ideals and ideologies of inhabiting (both explicit and implicit), on the one hand and the practices of the residents (and/or users) on the other. It would not just be a question of the relationship between needs of habitability and habitable material products, but rather the relationship between inhabiting and habitat as a cultural question, that is, as an issue which involves a certain production of meaning and certain collectively recognized values and norms. In summary it is about recognizing inhabiting as a “total social fact” which should be studied by anthropology, given that it constantly refers back to culture.

The rationalist city and the informal city: the paradoxes of inhabiting

More than half a century after the most rapid growth of the metropolis the two spatial responses to the critical need for housing, the *rationalist city* and the *informal city*, have followed very different paths which have produced surprising and paradoxical results in relation to the habitability of these two types of space. After fifty years in existence, the large scale housing projects still represent an unresolved challenge for architectural rationalism, which aims to order social reality and human relations on the basis of the design of space. In terms of an anthropological analysis of the forms of inhabiting, it is possible to state that in the housing projects the residents do something different with their housing from that which the architects intended. The discrepancies in terms of the “appropriate use” of these buildings by the inhabitants – that is the use conceived of by the architect and incorporated into the form of the space – added to the difficulties involved in maintaining them in an acceptable state, have led to their physical elimination in different countries⁸.

In summary there is a distance and contrast between the vision of space and inhabiting of the people who design this type of habitat and the expectations, needs and practices of the people who live there (Signorelli, 1989). These days the rationalist city of large scale housing projects appears to be a type of habitat which is difficult to manage, essentially because of the lack of the resources needed to maintain such large areas and the difficulties involved in the collective administration of the services and common spaces. With few exceptions currently all of them show considerable deterioration. From the start this type of habitat has provoked conflicting reactions, from enthusiastic acceptance to rejection. However, with the passage of time it is the latter image which tends to prevail, at least as regards the image which outsiders have of the great machines for living (De Garay, 2004). A set of factors, such as the conditions of access to housing and the forms designed for their use, tend to generate a way of

⁸ *The first case of the demolition of social interest housing was Pruitt Igoe in the United States, especially surprising because it had received praise from the Architectural Forum when it was inaugurated (Améndola, 1984).*

living with its own characteristics, especially in terms of problems and conflicts over the use of communal spaces and services. This produces the conditions for the appearance of specific cultural dynamics in the relationships among the residents and in their relationship with their housing and constructed space (Giglia, 1998 and 2000). Living in a public housing project implies a type of sociability in which neighborhood relationships are inextricably mixed with relationships related to the exercise of the collective administration of shared space. As regards the issue of self-management intended to achieve a satisfactory functioning of the services and shared spaces, large scale housing projects represent a huge challenge to the civic culture of its inhabitants, to the extent that they can be seen as laboratories for “democracy in daily life” (Giglia, 1998). To put it differently, the problems posed by large scale housing projects for inhabiting are a reflection of the contradictions of Mexican political culture and state directed modernization. With the decline of the developmentalist and interventionist state, which was in charge of producing and maintaining the machines for living, the large scale projects struggle to survive.

On the other hand, the informal city appears more capable of evolving into a setting defined as *tout court* urban, that is, a complex, poly-functional and poly-meaningful space. Starting from a total lack of services and spaces suitable for living, low income settlements are transformed into habitable space through collective efforts. Residents proudly declare that, “we lack nothing now” in the neighbourhood which has become a city. They have come to inhabit a context where there was no previously defined public space depending on a public authority. It is the opposite of what happens in the case of the residents of the housing projects, who arrive to inhabit a space with functions and attributes which are predefined by the public authorities. In the case of low income settlements the spaces which are occupied initially look like virgin territory, uninhabited, forming part of nature. In this context the limits between what is one’s own and others’ are not formally established in a precise manner, but rather are gradually established through the day to day process of domesticating the surroundings (removing plants, clearing the land, carrying water, digging a rudimentary septic tank, establishing the limits of one’s own space, erecting a tin roof, accumulating or collecting different materials for building, laying out the streets, establishing the communication routes to the rest of the territory, introducing oneself to the neighbors, looking for the nearest school, etc.) and in the collective task of obtaining the minimum services needed for the habitability of the space, so that they can be collectively consumed (streets, drinking

water, electricity, drainage, all those things which are more economical and functional to build for a collectivity than for isolated subjects). It is during this – lengthy and necessarily collective – process that shared rules are generated regarding the uses of space, and the relationship between private and shared space. It involves a process of domestication because it implies familiarizing oneself with the space, beginning to name it, beginning to use it and make it one's own, modifying it to achieve certain ends, transforming it into something useful and from there establishing relationships with other people and with other spaces, to summarize: transforming space into place, a reference point from where to establish relationships with the rest of the world.

The rationalist city and the informal city evolve in opposing ways. In the first case it starts with self-sufficient units, like separate cities, with all the urban services imposed according to an ordering rationality largely alien to the culture of the residents. Their very character as machines for living means that any particular flaw has repercussions for the quality of the whole and its large scale makes collective self-management of shared spaces almost impossible. They deteriorate slowly but inevitably, which significantly reduces their degree of initial functioning. The informal city follows the opposite path. It starts from the disorder of multiple individual initiatives and the absence of prior urbanization, uncertainty and confusion about land titles and even the issue of the legitimacy to occupy and to modify space, which are translated into a state of lasting shortages and precariousness. However, over the following decades conditions usually improve considerably, both in terms of the provision of services and in terms of the urban infrastructure, and they become urban places in the full sense of the term governed by their own social order which results from the collective processes of domestication.

The housing projects of the rationalist city emerge as new centralities, around which the city is supposed to grow. Whereas in the case of the informal city, it is a question of developing the city from the margins of urbanization, to produce and consolidate a space to inhabit. Once habitable space is produced, centers are generated by the efforts of the inhabitants, who demand the construction of schools, markets, health centers, milk distribution centers and hospitals by the authorities. The services which were fought for collectively now serve everyone. In the case of the rationalist city the services and infrastructure provided by the state deteriorate, they disappear or survive in deplorable conditions, as vestiges of better times.

In relation to the domestication of space, the housing projects were intended to be spaces which at the time offered a new form of domestic space, which the residents in turn had to domesticate, whereas the low income settlements are the results of conditions of domesticity produced over time. These two cities are the result of two different processes as regards their relationship with the constitution of an urban order. In the one case it has to do with a spatial order imposed by the state based on theories of architectural functionalism, with a specific goal: the modernization of daily life and the creation of a different city, more efficient and rational, made up of self-contained and self-sufficient urban units; and on the other, it has to do with an urban order without any previous design, which was built gradually over the years often as the result of a logic full of ups and downs and both the individual and collective efforts of different social actors, where institutions and local authorities do not play a leading role. It never fails to surprise that the sum of these efforts, not always coordinated among themselves, has currently produced a more than acceptable urban order, both for its residents and to the eye of the visitor, who no longer sees the traces of the self-help housing and precariousness in a setting like Nezahualcoyotl, but rather perceives a heterogeneous and vibrant landscape.

In the case of the rationalist city there is a type of space which is repetitive to the point of monotony, in which the same housing prototype is multiplied “n” times; whereas in the case of self-built housing each house tells a different story, even though always within repetitive patterns, which have to do with the logic of the growth of the family. The well-known pattern of consolidation, densification and expulsion from low income settlements is reflected *sui generis* in each family history. The growth of the house reflects not only variations in the size of the family but also the changes in the work history of its members, with part of the houses converted into workshops, deposits for merchandise or shops giving out on to the street. The result is a far more diverse and complex space than could have been imagined forty years ago.

In search of *anthropological place* in the metropolis.

The rationalist city and the informal city are just two of the facets – among the most typical – of the landscape of Mexico City, a metropolis in which very diverse types of space (or city) coexist. The polyphony and cultural diversity which are part of a

great metropolis are eloquently expressed in the diverse forms of inhabiting and producing urban order, in terms of a set of places which are meaningful to the city dwellers. In the process of inhabiting urban culture is expressed and at the same time produced, clearly not as something static but as a set of knowledge, practices and values associated with the experience of a given habitable space.

More than 15 years have passed since the publication of Marc Augé's essay on "non-places" as "spaces of anonymity" strongly pervaded with the experience of solitude, which is part of the condition of over-modernity associated with contemporary living. "If a place can be defined as a place of identity, relations and history, a space which cannot be defined as a place of identity nor relations nor history defines a non-place" (1992:83). As opposed to anthropological place, by definition related and historic, and which "is at the same time a principle of meaning for those who inhabit it and a *principle of intelligibility* for those who observe it" (1992:58), non-spaces would be those spaces which are occupied briefly, in transit, as passengers or users, in a situation of solitude: airports, railway stations, motorways, hotel chains, supermarkets. It is worth noting that Augé never wished to establish a rigid dichotomy between place and non-place. On the contrary, he warns us that "place and non-place are rather false polarities: the first is never completely erased and the second is never completely fulfilled, they are palimpsests where the play of identity and relationships are endlessly rewritten" (1992:84) This is just what we are dealing with when we study inhabiting in the metropolis, in terms of the process of production of a cultural order which allows us to locate our place, its rules of functioning and its meanings and at the same time locate it within the broader order of the metropolis. In this sense inhabiting does not only refer to housing but also to the urban context and in general the space lived in. It is here that non-spaces, typical products of contemporary life – which some call globalization – organized by an external order which claims to be universal, can be re-read and given new meaning from the ongoing practice of inhabiting as a process of ordering the world. All of us who know *our* supermarket or *our* preferred airport, know that non-spaces can be experienced intensely, even though we are in transit and alone, we know how to locate ourselves in relation to a constellation of other reference points, other spaces, recognizing at least one of the possible orders, our own. Recognizing in other words that "principle of intelligibility" which would belong to "anthropological place", as a place shaped by culture. In summary, the study of inhabiting enables us to move from

non-place to place, or rather enables us to rediscover the anthropological place which we thought we had lost.

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