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The Slow Rebirth of Mexico City's Centro Histórico

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In late March, Mexico City's Centro Histórico buzzed with the sights and sounds of the annual Festival de México. For eighteen days, crowds packed the streets to attend some 280 concerts, performances and educational events. One Friday night in the Zócalo, a mammoth public square and the civic heart of Mexico, the National Symphonic Orchestra competed with indigenous dancers and drummers for attention.

The festival is twenty-five years old, but its current popularity is a sign of a decade-long effort to push for the revitalization of the Centro. The effort has been driven largely by a public-private alliance and its patron, the billionaire Carlos Slim Helú. Slim has brought massive-scale redevelopment to the area, as well as a spirit of civic pride. His work, executed largely through a charity he funds, the Foundation of the Centro Histórico, has internalized contemporary planning trends into a methodical process of downtown redevelopment. But while it is easy to laud such a comprehensive overhaul of a historically significant, underused area, the breadth of the process and the consolidation of power that has enabled it raises alarms for some civil libertarians, who worry that a quest for profit will lead to the dispossession of multiple constituencies that do not fit into the image of the "new" Centro.

Established by Spain in 1521, Mexico City is now the second-largest urban agglomeration in the world, home to approximately 22 million people. Its Centro Histórico retains the original street grid of the Aztec capitol of Tenochtitlán, established in 1325, and the 3.6 square-mile area has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987. But despite its historic pedigree, the Centro has been in decline since the mid-twentieth century, when a number of public institutions, most notably the National Autonomous University of Mexico and the National Polytechnic Institute, left for newly developed areas of the city. The Centro's population has declined steadily since the 1970s, a trend exacerbated by the devastating 1985 earthquake. The result was a landscape of sagging classical architecture, crumbling infrastructure, high crime and the economic reign of tens of thousands of street vendors- without which there would be little street life. Over the years, the city and national governments fostered prolonged neglect, even though both are headquartered within the heart of the Centro.

But in 1997, the city government changed its approach and embarked on a revitalization project in the Centro, trying to reinvent it as a hub for tourism and international commerce. Because the task was so enormous, city officials turned to the private sector, and in particular to Carlos Slim Helú, the Lebanese-Mexican telecommunications magnate and *Forbes'* second-richest man in the world. Slim, whose father once owned a grocery store in the neighborhood, established a real estate firm and a charitable foundation in 2002, which have since partnered with the city and federal governments. Slim and other members of the private sectors invested over half a billion dollars into the

Centro and spent over fifty million dollars to repair outdated infrastructure, install security cameras, refurbish façades, increase police presence, promote social programming, and create corridors based on business, technological and cultural themes. The result is a dizzying amalgam of philanthropy, civic pride, and savvy real estate speculation.

Slim's organization, directed since its inception by the savvy, United States-educated Adrián Pandál, has tried to tap into the arts as a way to repopulate and revive the Centro. This is strategic; Mexico City already claims the most museums of any city of the world, and over the past few years its contemporary art scene has drawn international attention. In an area designated as the "Cultural Corridor," Slim's real estate company refurbishes buildings and rents lofts to artists for subsidized rates. Evoking what he calls the "SoHo effect," Pandál explains that "based on what we had seen in other cities, such as New York, usually artists, students and intellectuals are most prone to move to and understand these types of places. We invited a lot of artists and young people to move to that area. The idea was to foment activity … to try to push things- to open galleries, cafes, restaurants."

While imbued with a spirit of civic boosterism, this well-financed upheaval is not without its detractors. Some are concerned about a push from Slim and other private developers to consolidate the Authority of the Historic Center, which would give the public-private alliance increasing control over the area, as it would become a city delegation with its own governing power. This concern is compounded by a 2003 government decision to hire Rudy Giuliani's private consulting firm for $4.3 million to develop a zero-tolerance policy for crime in the city. The firm's has already led to the removal of at least 10,000 street vendors in one area of the Centro, an effort the government plans to expand. The move has been met with some applause, but is also the largest point of popular contention, as street markets have endured as a tradition in this area since pre-imperial times, and the post-NAFTA neoliberal economy has forced many workers into the informal sector. Critics contend that this process equates to the privatization of public space, the sanitization of a dynamic urban center, a new culture of surveillance, and the gentrification of a working class community.

Pandál takes issue with the last point. "If I understand gentrification," he says, "it means when new people arrive and it pushes people out. Here, many buildings were empty, so it was just a matter of using that space." He is quick to note that rents haven't risen above inflation, and that the company attempts to keep residents in their homes or help them to locate. However, the dual process of accumulation by dispossession of street vendors and the yuppification of the Centro will undoubtedly raise real estate prices, pushing out residents who aren't lucky enough to live in one of Slim's buildings.

Pandál is also careful to note that this is still a work in progress: the population in the Centro has reached a plateau, but it hasn't risen. Despite the current recession, he believes that the process will continue. "Of course it's a tourist destination, but our idea was to have it alive. The idea is to have people who work there, live there. It's a better lifestyle."