



BACK FROM THE BRINK

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Mexico is the city that was always spoken of as if it was one day going to be the biggest settlement on the planet. It was probably the first of the 20th century's monster cities to make an impression on the wider world, portrayed as an unstoppable eruption of humanity swamping the landscape to reach the horizon in every direction. In the 1970s, predictions were made that it was well on the way to becoming a megalopolis of 30 million people or more. As it turned out, that has not happened. The population of the city centre is static, and some of its denser historic areas have been in decline, an issue addressed by the formation of a special public private partnership to encourage investment and development. What growth there is now concentrates in the urban sprawl beyond city limits in the administrative control of the State of Mexico. The lower-middle classes are moving out into areas where gated communities are not just for the privileged. Certainly Mexico City grew fast from the 1940s when it began to lose its former incarnation as the Garden of Eden, blessed with a near perfect climate, reminiscent of the golden age of Los Angeles, but shaped physically by the remains of its Aztec and its Spanish past as represented by flower studded baroque courtyards, the presence of the surrounding mountains, and the famous lake. The photochemical smog that accompanied its discovery of the motorcar through the medium of the locally produced Volkswagens that once monopolised its streets made that growth look particularly threatening. That toxic haze was not helped by Mexico City's extreme altitude, and its mountains, two elements that conspire to entrap the city's pollution in the brown cloud that seems to thicken under the wings of descending aircraft.

Certainly Mexico City is huge, 18 million or so people now live in the sprawling metropolis. But that is a close match for Shanghai, New York and London – when their respective city regions are taken into account. All three have their own disparities in wealth, even if Mexico's seem more violent, and more entrenched, and do not have the pervasive impact of 50 years of Mao and Marx to damp down the sometimes chaotic lawlessness of the country in the way in which China has. There are street children and kidnappings and water shortages in Mexico City and a sewage system at the limits of its

original design life. But the metropolis never became the horror story that it sometimes threatened. For a start, its growth has started to taper off, almost to the point that one might begin to consider the idea that growth might be self limiting. And second, its reputation might have something to do with its accessibility and its proximity to the United States, and so its visibility. For those with a taste for the dizzying sense of staring into the urban abyss, Mexico City is a lot more convenient to get to than Lagos, or Tehran, Dacca or Cairo. But Mexico City has nothing to be complacent about. It could deal with its two greatest problems: photochemical smog, caused by its infatuation with the car coupled with extremely low petrol prices, and water shortages that are the product of its profligate use of its underground reservoirs. But it has failed to address these issues, and between them, they could still render the city all but uninhabitable.

Mexico City has had more than the explosive growth of the flight of the dispossessed from the countryside to contend with. It has a fractured government system to deal with, divided between the Federal District – a territory that was tightly controlled by the federal government in the same way that Washington, D.C. and many other national capitals were until they began acquiring locally elected mayors – and the surrounding municipalities of the State of Mexico. Until very recently the two administrations have failed to come to a shared view of what the place needs to function properly. To complicate matters further, the whole country is having to deal with a gradual reawakening of a national democratic politics. Mexico City has within it the elements of a global city and the visible impacts of a globalised economy, both negative and positive. It has slick business parks and boutique hotels, and it is losing industrial jobs to both the NAFTA-boosted factories on the US border and more recently to China. An overvalued peso is not helping either. But it is also a city where what could be seen as pre-modern conditions still prevail in certain aspects of civic life. It displays the chronic symptoms of uneven development in its lurch toward the global economy. Illegal land sales blight development in some areas, and the informal economy is far more than the all pervasive street traders and the

120 000 taxis on the city's busy roads. The Federal District in particular has seen the impact of competing power centres. The five year track record of the left leaning Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador says a lot about what happens when a democratic politician has to juggle constituencies with radically diverging ambitions for a city. Yet, recent agreements between the current mayor, Alejandro Encinas, and Enrique Peña Nieto, governor of the State of Mexico – each from opposing parties -to collaborate across boundaries to solve the city's structural problems does give rise to some optimism about Mexico City's future. Obrador, who has recently stepped down to run for president in the national elections to be held in the summer of 2006, was the second elected mayor since the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) relaxed its three generation grip on the country and its capital. The presidential candidate of the Party of Democratic Revolution (PRD),Obrador is now vying for the presidential palace with candidates from both the PRI and the National Action Party (PAN), the party of the current incumbent Vincente Fox. The PRD's symbol is a highly charged Aztec sun, which might go some way to explain Obrador's vigorous campaign as mayor against the national government's imposition of daylight saving measures.

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