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Social Representations of Mexico City Historic Center: Heritage and Controversial Memories

MARTHA DE ALBA[1], LESSLIE HERRERA[2], and JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LOUBIER[3]

[1]Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Iztapalapa, México

[2]Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, Switzerland

[3]Haute Ecole de Gestion et Turisme, Switzerland

In this paper, we present the results of a research project that deals with the controversial memories of historic urban landscapes that have been designated as World Heritage sites by UNESCO. We observe – through the study of social representations of Mexico City Historic Center – how the World Heritage label transforms the meanings and memories of such landscapes. In the first part of this paper, the concepts of social representations and collective memory, and the role of heritage in the marketing of cultural memories are discussed. The empirical research conducted in Mexico City Historic Center is presented in the latter part of the paper. The focus will be on the analysis of interviews applied by combining different techniques and analytic methods commonly used in social psychology and geography. Research results show that different layers of city memories coexist in the social representations of Mexico City Historic Center nowadays, and that the World Heritage site designation recognizes and gives value to old cultural memories that become products for touristic consumption. This makes collective memories of social actors' struggle to survive when their neighborhood was being transformed into an open museum.

Correspondence should be addressed to: mdealba.uami@gmail.com

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This article synthesizes some results and interpretations about controversial memories and social representations of Mexico City Historic Center (MCHC) in the context of urban interventions aimed at protecting heritage and rehabilitating the city's ancient core[1]. The colonial outline of Mexico City was confined to approximately a $10km^2$ perimeter, designated in 1980 as the MCHC, by a presidential decree. MCHC was divided in Perimeter A (zone of a high density of buildings older than 1900) and Perimeter B (area of protection of Perimeter A). Rehabilitation projects, carried out by the government of Mexico City, tend to follow UNESCO recommendations, since the Historic Center became a World Heritage site in 1987.

The objective of this paper is to observe if the designation of World Heritage introduces new social representations of the site (Melé, 2006, 2014), that differ from its traditional meanings which are anchored in collective memories recreated by social actors that have lived there for decades. We consider that the process of transforming a place into World Heritage site can produce controversial memories and socio-spatial representations.

Social representations constitute commonsense knowledge socially constructed through communication in relationships between people, mass media or any other form of information diffusion (Moscovici 1961). Social representations are anchored on cultural contexts and collective memories (Halbwachs, 1925, 1950), on groups and on the daily experience of remembering (Bartlett, 1932, Moscovici & Marková, 1998). Many authors have discussed the relationship between social representations and collective memory (Jodelet, 2015; Jodelet & Haas, 2019; Laszló, 1997; Laurens & Roussiau, 2002; Pereira de Sá, 2005; Jovchelovitch, 2007; Páez, Techio & Márques, 2007; Banchs, 2014; Wagoner, 2015; Villas Bôas, 2014; de Alba, 2011, 2016; Psaltis & Cakal, 2016). In this paper, we focus on the relationship between Moscovici and Halbwachs

[1] This research has been part of a larger project entitled "Mapping controversial memories in the historic urban landscape: a multidisciplinary study of Beijing, Mexico City and Rome", coordinated by Florence Graezer Bideau and Yves Pedrazzini, from EPFL, financed by SNIS. Lesslie Herrera, co-author of this paper as part of the Mexican research team, based her PhD thesis on the methodology utilized in this project.

because the latter highlighted the importance of urban spaces for the reconstruction of collective memories.

Space, as a collective memory framework, is critical for our research. Halbwachs considers space as a reflection of the social structure. In a dialectic process, the group constructs its space as much as space gives identity to the group. So, space becomes a collective memory framework because individuals and groups can find on it the marks of their lives.

According to Nora (1989), in contemporary societies, individuals, groups, and institutions have been constructing "lieux de mémoire" [places of memory] to keep their memories and maintain their identity. They are particularly relevant for the construction of the ideals of national identities and narratives of cultural memories (Laszló, 2001). They provide symbolic material to help the creation of social representations of history that legitimize social and political arrangements (Liu & Hilton, 2005).

Huyssen (2003) considers that there is a boom of social and cultural memory in contemporary societies. There is a recreation of the past that tends to transform our world into a museum. Since the seventies, historical places have been restored as open museums in Europe and North America, creating a massive marketing of nostalgia. Huyssen (2003) proposes that this culture of memory could be a reaction to globalization processes. The public concern for memory implies a fear of oblivion. The study of individual or social memory today has to consider the influence of mass media in the construction and diffusion of memory as a consumable product.

HERITAGE AND THE MARKETING OF CULTURAL MEMORY

In the Mexican context, the discourse of heritage arose at the end of the 18th century, at the center of aristocratic concerns during the sanitarian era. Precisely, with the interest in "Mexican antiquities", which were exclusively represented by the pre-Hispanic archeological pieces, this notion was reinforced after independence, when Mexicans reconstructed their national identity by distancing themselves from Spanish culture (Monnet, 1993, 1995).

In the 60s and 70s an increasing international movement emerged, accompanied by international agreements such as the Convention concerning the protection of the world cultural and natural heritage (UNESCO, 1972). This convention promoted national public heritage policies and legislation, including procedures and techniques to establish and recognize places as heritage (cultural or natural), and divided the heritage in three large groups: monuments, sites and groups

of buildings.

Mexico has actively participated internationally in the implementation and ratification of letters, conventions and other documents. Since 1967, Mexico has hosted a UNESCO National Office and the Convention (UNESCO, 1972) was ratified in 1984, which allowed the inscription of the perimeter A of the MCHC in the World Heritage list in 1987.

The special interest in the urban as a form of heritage would continue to come together at an international level through a series of recommendations[2], established and specifically directed by UNESCO and supported by advisory bodies (especially ICOMOS and ICCROM). Today, one of the most important recommendations is the Vienna Memorandum (UNESCO, 2005a), which was aimed at discussing some of the limitations of the traditional approach, by describing historic urban areas, not as a sum of monuments and urban fabric, but rather as a comprehensive system made by historical, geomorphological and social relationships, with its setting and its environment, and characterized by a complex layering of meanings and expressions (Bandarin & van Oers, 2012). This memorandum gave rise to the *Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape* (UNESCO, 2011), which was established in 2011. This was the last recommendation concerning urban heritage.

Also, since 2005, UNESCO (2005b), through its *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, provides instructions for the management of the properties inscribed in the World Heritage List, which are of a general nature. However, it defines the objectives of a management system to protect heritage of *Outstanding Universal Value*. This value:

> means cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for the present and future generations of all humanity. As such, the permanent protection of this heritage is of the highest importance to the international community as a whole... (UNESCO, 2017, p. 19)

[2] For example, the Recommendation concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas (UNESCO, 1976); the Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (ICOMOS, 1987); and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003).

Through this vague definition, the value of heritage inscribed in the World Heritage Convention acquires a global meaning, and implies a transferring of tangible/intangible property to the next generations.

Nowadays, clearly different perspectives concerning the understanding of the heritage concept have appeared. The traditional and political thinking of heritage recognized as the authorized heritage discourse stresses the aesthetic attractiveness of material objects (such as monuments, places and landscapes) that have to be preserved and protected for future generations, thus forging a sense of identity based on the past (Smith, 2006), and designating containers of memory (i.e., what should be remembered and how it must be remembered). This posture is supported by preservation as a national discourse, and situated in the international framework and national institutions, generally with a top-down management. This means focusing on the conservation and identification of authenticity, integrity and other historical values, as well as sustainable development and change management (Albert, Bernecker & Rudolff, 2013; Bandarin & van Oers, 2012, 2015; Rodwell, 2007).

Nevertheless, UNESCO, as the main institution that promotes heritage discourse and its international position, has been highly criticized (Harrison & Hitchcock, 2005; Keough, 2011). Over the past decade, the problems surrounding heritage discourse have been highlighted in many directions, for instance, in the process of how something becomes heritage itself (Choay, 2001, 2009; Gravari-Barbas & Veschambre, 2003; Veschambre, 2008). Scholars claim that this approach legitimizes a version of the past that is usually an aristocratic one, which ignores other stories, and excludes a wide range of other social and cultural experiences (Delgadillo, 2011; Gillman, 2006; Harvey, 2001; Smith, 2006). Therefore, the past is reduced to the history of a select group, and represents what is important for this group's identity, and often the other forms of identity are obscured and devalued. Heritage has become a form engaging with history and is indeed a contemporary product molded by the past (Lowenthal, 2015). Another relevant point is the role of the visitors, who are generally reduced to "passive consumers of the heritage" (Graham et al., 2000, p. 156-7). Heritage – as a container of cultural memory – is therefore reduced to simple entertainment and a form of economic benefit, and historical cities are converted into museums (Boyer, 1994). This means that heritage branding over the historic city has become a kind of platform where architectural elements generate a fictional experience of the city, and where certain memories are used to activate nostalgic visions of the past. However, these narratives do not

generate a relationship with the objects but rather make of visitors alienated viewers – away from a possible connection and commitment to the site (Boyer, 1994). In addition, Heritage is held by a select group of experts, and therefore receives knowledge from historians, archeologists, restorers, and so on (Smith, 2006).

In the case of Mexico City and its Historic Center, Heritage has become a matter of politicians, experts and private investors who have imposed their memories and social representations of the past from a long time ago (Monnet, 1993; Delgadillo, 2011). The local population does not necessarily agree with the hegemonic social representations of Heritage (Coulomb, 2009; García-Canclini, 1993; Melé, 2014; Rojas, 2015).

METHODOLOGY: CONTROVERSIAL MEMORIES AND REPRESENTATIONS OF THE MCHC

Controversial representations and memories emerge because of different interpretations of events; because society is heterogeneous and unequal concerning political power. Different representations of present and past coexist in the same context. Some of them are recognized more than others, some could be opposite to others. Jovchelovitch (2007) refers to hierarchical representations supported by power differentials across knowledge systems. Following Alexander (2012), the memory of a group becomes hegemonic because this group has more power and access to the media than others.

We consider that social representations and collective memories of MCHC are different from the official cultural memories which are recognized as world heritage. In order to explore this hypothesis, we performed qualitative research combining several methods. We conducted 21 interviews with different social actors (residents, traders, street vendors, and Catholic church members) in the Northeast sector, 14 interviews in the Southwest area, and 9 interviews with social actors (researchers, authorities, investors, and civil organizations) related to MCHC in general[3]. We recorded and transcribed all interviews, which were conducted using several techniques: free word associations, questions related to cognitive maps (sketch maps), and generating present and past narratives about personal experience, social dynamics and practices. This work was complemented by a spatial-visual analysis of the area by using photography and mapping different

[3] Most of the informants were recruited by personal invitation during our several visits to the North and South sectors of MCHC. Other social actors and authorities were recruited by formal appointments and invitation letters.

urban factors (urban spatial structure, connections and articulations of spaces, forms of appropriation and perception of space, etc.). These tools allowed us to have a complete panorama of the socio-spatial interactions.

In this article, we focus on the analysis of cognitive maps and interviews on social representations and memories of MCHC. We consider cognitive maps (Kitchin, Perkins & Dodge, 2009; Lynch, 1960) as geographical and figurative dimensions of social representations of urban spaces (Jodelet, 2015; de Alba, 2011; Haas, 2004). This study is important when boundaries become unclear, or when places suffer geopolitical transformations (Moscovici, 2007). It allows us to conceive of territory as a social framework of memory that changes during time, as the historic core of Mexico City has had major transformations since the origin of the city.

ANALYSES: COMBINING PSYCHOSOCIAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES

One important aspect of this research concerns the combination of conceptual and methodological approaches in the study of social representations and memories of urban space. Until now, we have discussed the territory represented by social actors and individuals from a socio-psychological point of view. From the point of view of geographical science, it is a question of visualizing and spatializing individual representations which, treated with spatial analysis, reveal socio-spatial continuities/discontinuities in the studied territories. This is a standard approach in quantitative geography and refers to the paradigm of spatiality (Pumain & Saint-Julien, 2010; Darly, 2008).

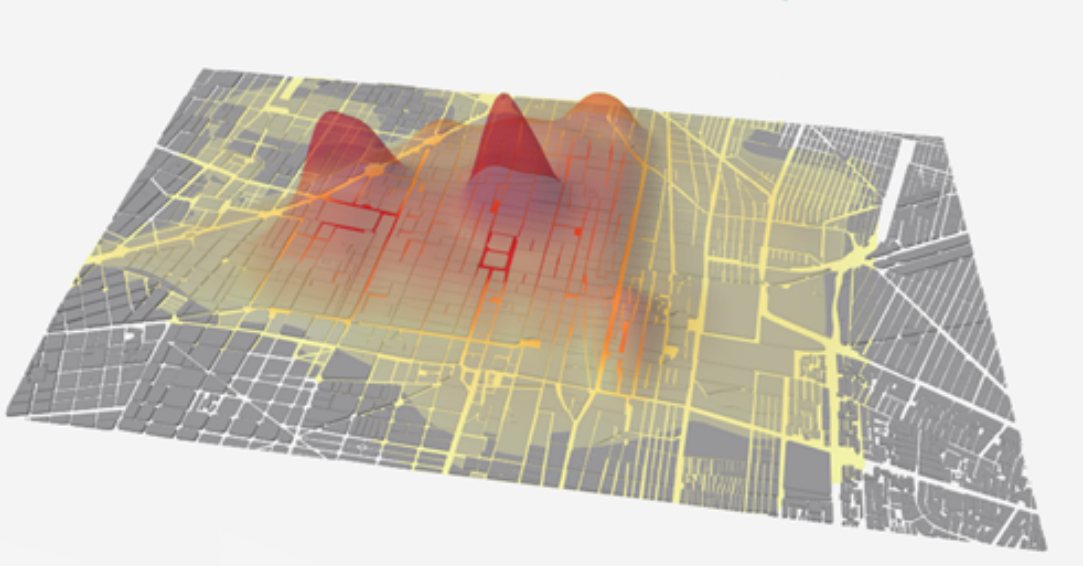
The space of the geographers is defined by means of three concepts used simultaneously in the territory: the localized space, the individual living space and the geographical space which is collective. The localized space allows taking into account the position of objects in space. These are systems of positioning on the earth's surface. These are scales of measurements for better controlling the passage from reality (taking into account the curvature of the earth) to a 2D representation on a sheet of paper or a computer screen. The advantage of properly managing projection systems is that this allows the stacking of maps in a geographic information system exactly on top of one another, provided that these maps share the same position in space. For Mexico City, the projection system used is:

North_America_Lambert_Conformal_Conic_ITRF_1992[4]. After conducting the interviews and collecting data, the spatial database construction process was technically developed in four phases:

- Photographing flat maps and creating a repertory of maps per individual
- Positioning these photos in the projection system of the studied territory
- Digitizing maps and filling in attribute fields
- Merging and interpolation of the results of the different actors
- Creation of a heatmap for analysis

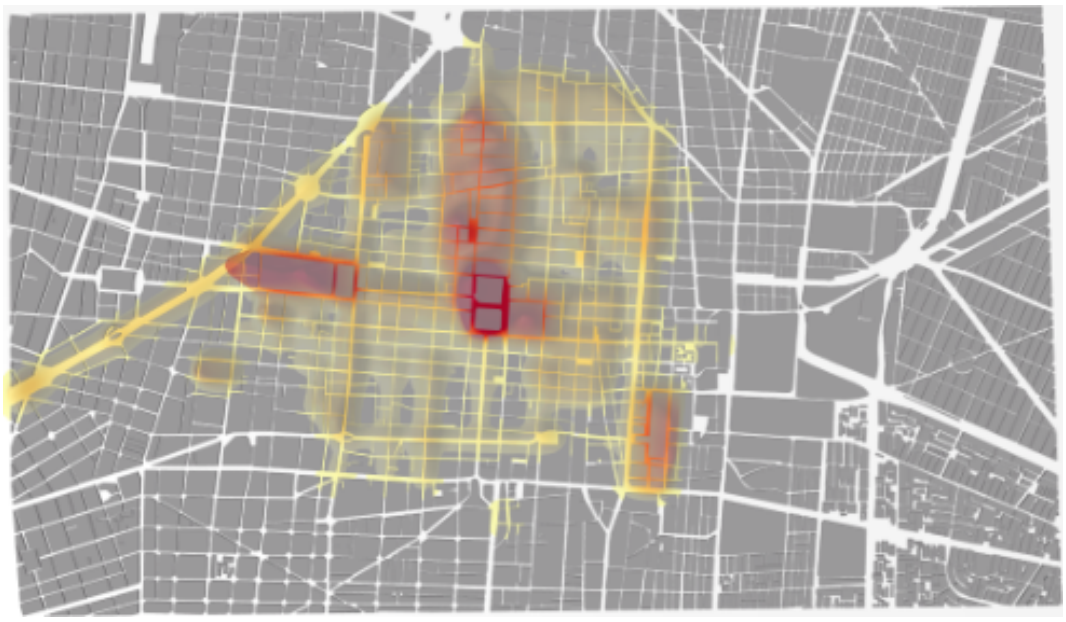
The result produces a correspondence between the layers of the environment built into the geographic information system and the individual maps of the interviews. The geographical analysis allowed us to observe cartographic social representations and memories of MCHC produced by interviewed people living or working there. On *Map 1* and *Map 2*, we can observe the superposition of all responses about opinions and practices in the MCHC, of the informants that worked on maps during the interview (see Figure 1 & Figure 2).

Figure 1. Map 1: Cartographic social representations and memories of MCHC (3D Version).



[4] This is a system of spatial reference.

Figure 2. Map 2: Cartographic social representations and memories of MCHC.



Our objective is to interpret the cartographic representations according to the social, historical and political context in which they were expressed by the different respondents, in order to observe the role that heritage protection policies have played in generating memories and social representations in the controversy.

To study the meanings of the places drawn on the maps and the layers of memories they combine, we conducted a content analysis of the interviews and official documents that were referenced. Here, we present a general interpretation that synthesizes such results. We also include interpretations of the results from previous research on social representations of the MCHC.

In Map 1, three-dimensional projection shows that places drawn in the sketches are concentrated in three areas of the MCHC: Southwest, Northeast and Center. The first two correspond to the places where we conducted the study and where the interviewees live or work. We observe that the socio-spatial representations of the place are linked to their daily practice and their residential environment. However, there are more places drawn in the center and in the Southwest of the MCHC. This may result from the negative social stigma of the Northeast, due to its limits with the badly known Tepito neighborhood, because it concentrates more popular housing, a greater quantity of street vendors and less intervention in urban improvement policies. The area has buildings with historical value and cultural dynamics that could be classified as

tangible and intangible heritage. Because of its unfavorable social representation, it is not part of the tourist circuit of the cultural memory of the MCHC.

> *Interviewer:* Can you indicate on the map the areas of the MCHC that you consider problematic?
> *Gonzalo:* It's all this part here (points out the northeast sector) ... All of that is the neighborhood that I consider dangerous and problematic. And part of here is Tepito... What I see there is the whole situation of street vendors, mostly, and where there is more robbery, more people ... Here is a neighborhood of street vendors. And the neighborhood of Tepito are ... the heaviest... the Turibus does not get into those streets... and the people on this side of the Historic Center, of the beautiful part (points out the area that goes from the Zócalo to the west), they are mostly tourists, they are different people. *(Gonzalo, tailor, Northeast area)*

The results of Map 1 and Map 2 show that the most mentioned places (in red color in Figure 2) were the central square of Plaza de la Constitución (Zocalo) and surrounding buildings: Cathedral, National Palace, and commercial buildings. In previous studies about social representations of the MCHC (de Alba, 2007, 2014), we have also observed that these places have a potent symbolic force because of their historic relevance; they represent the national powers and origins of Mexican culture. Other places with strong meaning are Alameda Park, Bellas Artes Palace, Santo Domingo Square and La Merced Market. They are all reminiscent of ancient Mexico City's multiple functions: places for recreation, culture, religion and commerce. The Central and Western sectors of the MCHC are widely recognized as sites of high heritage value and touristic consumption.

We found changes in the cartographic representations of those interviewed in 2006 and 2016. There is an increase in the presence of the streets located to the East, behind the National Palace, and the North of Santo Domingo Square. We believe that this is due to the urban policies implemented in the last 10 years in these sectors: relocation of street vendors, and refurbishment of sidewalks and streets.

In this study (and previous ones; de Alba, 2007, 2014), we observe that social representations of the MCHC depict a more extensive territory than the official one. The mental maps of the participants express experiences of the city center that include several neighborhoods, functions, and memories which go beyond the actual concept of the MCHC. For instance, they

include in their sketch maps the entire Tepito region, but only a few streets are part of the official plan. Participants never distinguish between perimeter A and B of the MCHC. Some of them think that the most touristic sites are considered as part of the MCHC, ignoring that their homes or shops are inside its limits. It is clear that there is an inconsistency between the space experienced by inhabitants in everyday life and the territory conceived by authorities. Collective memories do not entirely correspond to the cultural memory promoted by the concept of heritage.

As we can see, cognitive maps express complex experiences, representations and space memories. Some sites included in them are linked to a personal experience, others correspond to collective memories of occupants' groups, and others are symbols of national identity and Mexican history.

LAYERS OF URBAN AND SOCIAL MEMORIES CONVERGENT IN PRESENT TIME

We observe that different layers of city memories co-exist in the mental maps of the MCHC. They are anchored on historical moments and correspond to hegemonic representations of the city in every period. They are not static but evolve with time, and are evoked to elaborate social representations of the MCHC in the present.

We find two kinds of the MCHC layers of memories. Some layers are related to an imaginary of the ancient city depicted in myths, legends, murals, and an official history that legitimizes the national identity. The most drawn places on the MCHC maps materialize this cultural memory (Huyssen, 2003), which has been promoted by being signified as a historical heritage of humanity. Other layers are linked to how the city is experienced in everyday life, social dynamics and political events or programs. The less drawn places in the sketches are part of these layers of social memory.

Cultural Memories of the Ancient City

The imaginary of the ancient city sustains a cultural memory that helps interviewees imagine the pre-Hispanic city, as well as the Spaniard metropole, or the city of the 19th century. In their mental maps, interviewees construct a memory of a city which they did not live in, reproducing linear official history:

> Well, we have a very beautiful city, for me, my city is beautiful, with smog and with everything you want, but it is beautiful ... because of the culture of our ancestors, because, truly, we have a lot. When they were making arrangements to do the Metrobús they dug there and found pyramids ... *(Blanca, resident, Northeast area)*

> Historic Center is… let's suppose that on the plate of the Zocalo is where the whole history meets because... that is where many things are talked about, how Mexico was founded as they were building each state, every town, because in the Historic Center is where the base is made... It is the history of original peoples. *(Juana, street vendor)*

The pre-Hispanic memory also appears on the institutional discourses about Mexico City or its historic core, legitimizing urban programs and intervention policies, related to heritage protection. Architect Alejandro Suárez-Pareyón recovered the four Aztec original neighborhoods to elaborate the Partial Program of Urban Development (*Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano*) for the MCHC (Suárez-Pareyón, 2010). The text of The Constitution of Mexico City starts with a phrase, written in Nahuatl (Aztec language) and Spanish, which commemorates the Aztec City: "As long as the world exists, the glory and fame of Mexico-Tenochtitlan will never end" (Ciudad de México, 2017, p. 13). The memory of the Aztec City is frequently emotive and nostalgic. The pride of indigenous origin is mixed with indignation for the destruction of the pre-Hispanic temples, monuments and buildings. It is a traumatic memory (Alexander, 2012), still alive, like old grief.

Mental maps also recall the Spanish origin of the colonial city. Almost all of the sketch maps drawn in 2006 (de Alba, 2007) and 2016, reproduce the central square (*Plaza de la Constitución*), surrounded by the Cathedral, the National Palace and other buildings of the viceregal period. On the mental maps, Metropolitan Cathedral appears as a symbol of the Catholic Church in Mexico.

Eva, owner of an old bar, believes that the building dates from the colonial era: "What I know is that this property was part of the first hospital for the Indians, in the year of the conquest ..." (Southwest sector). For her, this continuity between the indigenous and colonial past with the present gives her bar a special meaning. Getting into her bar would be like taking a journey through time.

During the 20th century, the ancient "city of palaces" became a place of bureaucratic activities and popular commerce. The West sector was crowded during the day and empty by night. The central Square of *Zócalo* was the symbol of federal power and, for that reason, the spatial target of political protests. The rest of the Historic Center hosted low-income residents, attached to their popular neighborhoods.

The social representation of decadent central areas justified the creation of programs of heritage rescue. In 1987, the core of the city became world heritage and suffered a process of *museification*. Heritage rescue policies and world heritage nomination put in evidence a symbolic conflict of different social representations and memories of this territory: is MCHC a place for living or an open museum? Interviewees (residents and social actors) recognize the historic relevance of MCHC, but they also conceive it as their neighborhood or place of work where they have created collective memories.

Collective Memories and Social Representations of MCHC

Layers of collective memory of a recent past have been elaborated during social interactions and intergenerational transmission by residents who had inhabited the MCHC for a long time and had witnessed the transformation of their space of life. The places marked in yellow on Map 1 and Map 2 (see Figure 1 & Figure 2) represent sites corresponding to everyday activities not necessary linked to places of cultural or historical memory.

The social representations of the MCHC from residents and traditional business owners refer to different collective memories: childhood memories in collective housing, greater communication and personalized relationships in local stores and markets, community life in neighborhoods, intergenerational transmission of craft-making (tailors, barbers, shoemakers, etc.) and trades:

> Practically, here those who know each other, who have lived in collective housing for a long time, we help each other, we accompany each other, we all work, we help each other in every way, we spend time together, everything happens. *(Raúl, Shoemaker, Northeast area)*

> *Interviewer:* since when does the restaurant exist?
> *Rafael:* the restaurant exists since 1923 ... The Taquito has three characteristics: it has

> never changed ownership, it has always belonged to the same family, it has always been called "El Taquito", and the third one, has always been in the same place, Carmen and Bolivia streets. That makes it the oldest place in the Historic Center. There are other old places but they do not have those characteristics, they change their name or place. It's a family business, we're the third generation right now. *(Owner of El Taquito restaurant, Northeast area)*

There are two collective memories that are important references for understanding the MCHC in present time. The first one relates to the 1985 earthquake and the second to the beginnings of street commerce in the early eighties:

> *Interviewer:* What are the most important changes the center has had in recent decades?
> *Blanca:* The most important change was when the earthquake, definitely, that was the one that came to ... I feel that it came to grind the Center... why? because well there were many people who became homeless, I mean their houses fell... *(Blanca, resident, Northeast)*

The earthquake not only affected the material infrastructure but the political one too. The collapse of official buildings and social housing projects put the political corruption on display. The government institutions were overwhelmed by the size of this tragedy. Residents and organized civil groups came to the rescue of many victims. This experience of social organization was politically fruitful. Popular urban movements got stronger after the earthquake and learnt how to defend their neighborhoods. Many architects and urban specialists from different universities worked with organized groups of residents, searching to maintain the architectural design of traditional housing (*vecindades)* in downtown (Connolly, Coulomb & Duhau, 1991). Most of the *vecindades,* damaged by the earthquake, were rebuilt as social housing. The former residents were able to buy them with affordable loans.

As a consequence of the 1982 economic crisis and growing unemployment, street vendors' organizations invaded most of the Perimeter A and the Northeast areas of Perimeter B's public spaces. Many street vendors were residents of the MCHC, thus these organizations emerged as strong political actors. Local governments have been dealing with them to recover the streets from the invasion of thousands of informal traders (Crossa, 2018).

The informal economy of street vendors produces a large amount of untaxed income for many families working on it. Their organizations have enough economic power to negotiate with local officials to get permission to sell all kinds of products on the MCHC streets. They rent empty apartments or entire buildings for merchandise stocking.

Since the late eighties, the local government has implemented programs for relocating street vendors. There is a permanent fight between their organizations and authorities trying to move them from the MCHC public spaces. Authorities and other social actors have negative attitudes towards informal commerce. Nevertheless, street vendors consider themselves the heirs of pre-Hispanic markets, especially when they have indigenous origins. Informal commerce is not only an economic subject but also a socio-cultural matter. While drawing her MCHC sketch, Juana comments on her experience as a street vendor for approximately four decades:

> The Correo Mayor street... all the streets, Isabel La Católica for example, here the Venustiano Carranza street... from here the Zócalo where before we sold.... and we have been removed three times, evicted from here, from the Zócalo, from here, from the Zócalo plate mainly... I was a kid back then, like, 40 years ago. I remember how we got evicted and then another eviction came in 1993... then another eviction comes in 2007. Right now we're waiting for the relocation, but they are all going to go, they are going to disappear, because we are talking about thousands of comrades who have been evicted... A few might leave but the merchants' struggle will continue. The relocation could be, but it is not enough, then the fight will continue, there will be street vendors, because we will not stop working, they have to continue the fight… it has to continue. *(Juana, street vendor)*

Between Old and New Collective Memories

The MCHC is managed by a complex system of institutions and regulations. The Historic Center Authority and the Historic Center Trust deal with several institutions responsible for different aspects of the city: public spaces and security, economy, public services and so on. The regulation of the MCHC depends on several local and federal urban plans: three Partial Programs of Urban Development (Historic Center, Alameda Sur and La Merced approved in 2000); two Urban Programs corresponding to Cuauhtémoc y Venustiano Carranza districts; and programs of the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing (SEDUVI), the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) and the National Institute of Belle Arts (INBA).

The idea of buildings and tangible landscape protection prevails in this complex administrative system. MCHC regulations and most of the institutional discourses consider only the material aspects of heritage, as a cultural memory with high marketing value of historical places.

MCHC residents have witnessed a strong transformation of their space due to several urban projects that had been applied through several steps, during the last two decades, imposing a new urban order (Giglia, 2016). In the beginning, they agreed with such projects, but now social actors organize themselves to protect their territory from the imposition of an urbanism that does not respect their ways of life (Delgadillo, 2016). Some of them have started to incorporate the concept of gentrification into their discourse.

The arrival of inhabitants with higher education and income, attracted by the idea of living in the MCHC, is modifying the social character of the area (Moctezuma, 2016; Hiernaux, 2008; de Alba, 2007). This cohabitation is not always easy, because of cultural differences (Leal, 2014). Some new residents are developing economic projects in the MCHC that popular inhabitants cannot afford.

Social actors coming from stigmatized areas of the MCHC demand the local government to take care of problems surrounding violence, drug trafficking and the regulation of street commerce. The protection of historical heritage for touristic consumption is not a priority for them.

The contrasts of interests, values, lifestyles and ways of experiencing the MCHC amongst the traditional inhabitants and the new inhabitants become evident in the places they draw on their maps and in the responses that express different social representations of the site. For example, when considering the questions, “Are there different types of residents in the center? What, who are they?”, the answers correspond to social representations of the MCHC elaborated from very different sociocultural anchors.

Juana, a street trader of indigenous origin, responds by locating different groups of indigenous migrants who have settled in the center. For her, the Zócalo symbolizes the origin of the Mexican nation with pre-Hispanic roots. While for Luis, a senior manager of a bank who decided to live in the center because it became fashionable, the groups of inhabitants are: “Asians, Europeans, diplomats, students, merchants, people dedicated to tourism, researchers”. The words that come to his mind associated with the MCHC are: “culture, art, museums, theaters, history, entertainment, tourism”.

FINAL REMARKS

We have identified, at the end of this exposition, multiple social memories of the MCHC. Historical memories have been materialized in places of memory (Nora, 1989). Some historical and cultural memories are part of the contemporary global economy because they are touristic products, promoted by the media and the internet. At the level of everyday life, we observe that groups (residents, traders, street vendors, etc.) have constructed collective memories related to their local identity and cultural practices.

All of the memories that we have observed converge in the same place as layers of remembrances of different periods. They help to construct social representations of the MCHC that justify social actions, official programs, economic projects, and decisions which are transforming the MCHC. Institutions and groups with economic and political power are imposing hegemonic social representations as defenders of national heritage. Groups with less economic and political power struggle to maintain their memories and their permanence in the MCHC.

When the rehabilitation programs started, residents and traders were not aware of the consequences that urban transformations would bring for them. After 20 years, they see that most of the interventions have been done in Perimeter A. Residents and traders from Perimeter B perceive that they are being neglected. They have incorporated the concept of gentrification to their vocabulary, which they consider as a threat.

In the analysis of geographic representations of the MCHC, we observe the impact of interventions on specific zones, streets and public spaces. Interviewees marked them as valuable and important. On the contrary, they located the places that they consider problematic in the Northeast sector. We find that these social representations reproduce the historic socio-spatial segregation of the MCHC: West side with a positive image versus Northeast with a negative reputation.

It is important to say that we do not criticize UNESCO recommendations in themselves, but their application in local contexts and their misinterpretation to justify particular actions. Authorities and social actors use UNESCO recommendations to defend their interests in the MCHC, based on a special interpretation of them. The definition of tangible and intangible heritage is still confused in official programs and regulations.

In the case of the MCHC, UNESCO recommendations tend to materialize local culture and to conceive local heritage as a consumable product, separated from the entire social life. Mexico City Historic Center has serious social and urban problems, like the rest of the city. Its historical aspect is only part of the totality. We conclude, following Coulomb (2016) and Carrión (2010), that urban planning should conceive of the core of ancient Mexico City as a complex urban territory, not only as tangible heritage.

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MARTHA DE ALBA is research professor of Social Psychology in the Department of Sociology at the Autonomous Metropolitan University, Iztapalapa Campus, Mexico City. She gained her Ph.D in Social Psychology from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris, France. Her research interests deal with social representations and collective memory in urban spaces. She is cofounder of the National Research Network on Social Representations and the Centre of Mexican Studies in Social Representation, and she is a member of the National System of Researchers of the National Council of Science and Technology in Mexico. EMAIL: mdealba.uami@gmail.com

LESSLIE HERRERA is doctoral assistant, she is writting her thesis on Collective Memory and Resistance at Ecole Polytecnique Fédérale de Lausanne. She is also Consultant at United Nations Refugee Agency. EMAIL: lesslie.herreraquiroz@epfl.ch

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LOUBIER is Professor at the Haute Ecole de Gestion et Turisme in Switzerland. He holds a PhD in science from the Joseph Fourier University of Grenoble in the field of spatial dynamics and structures. He has specialised in the problems of human-environment interfaces and more particularly in the field of the effects of the implementation of sustainable development on complex systems combining mass tourism, economy and the environment. In parallel with this thematic approach, his current work is being developed along two lines: methodological and epistemological research, the objective of which is to address the complexity of geography in the quantitative field on the one hand, and geogovernance on the other. EMAIL: jchristophe.loubier@hevs.ch