Mexico City: Urban Ecosystem of Separation

Numerous scholars have defined and studied urban ecosystems from different disciplines and perspectives. Such studies have drawn some common conclusions, appropriated elements from each other to expand particular notions and assumptions, and in some cases dissented with one another. These different attempts to understand urban ecosystems exist as fragments that need to come together to form a discernible whole. Acknowledging such reality highlights the importance of contributing with the discourse that adds to the concept of urban ecosystem, as well as of discussing the significance of studying such networks. Urban ecosystems have been commonly defined as human-dominated ecosystems\(^1\) and as such we can account humanity and social interactions responsible for what these systems have become: spaces of separation that might render them unsustainable in the years to come. Metropolises like Mexico City demonstrate the above argument through their exclusionary actions and the social and environmental costs of such reality.

An argument could be made to say that social segregation has always and will always exist and that in fact it remains essential for cities or urban ecosystems to thrive.

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Professor Richard Florida, for example, argues that an emerging *creative class* of individuals, important because of their innovations, designs and contributions, requires the supporting infrastructure of the service class or the contemporary part-time “servants of an English lord”.\(^2\) Florida states that the *creative class* outsources functions to the service class that were provided traditionally within the household. This existing division of labor is a highly noticeable interaction or dependence between individuals in metropolises like Mexico City. It becomes highly problematic, however, when this separation transcends the job market and creates pronounced economic disparity and social exclusion. Such segregation, driven largely by economic forces, can have multiple and wide-ranging consequences, from social upheaval or decay to environmental degradation.

As an example we can observe housing patterns in Mexico City, where low-income populations cannot afford to live near the economic nodes of this urban area which, nonetheless, depends on the existence of a service or working class. Maria Kaika’s *selective porosity*\(^3\) concept can be applied to this scenario, in which interactions between different income groups are welcome when needed during the work day but rejected at night or in the more private realm. Consequently, a growing majority of the population has been historically and increasingly pushed to dwell in the outer limits of the Mexican capital, in remote and often inadequate or un-serviced locations, which in turn has caused negative and unnecessary social and environmental outcomes and pressures.

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Many detriments result from this forced urban sprawl. One of the clearest consequences of the economic segregation present in the housing market of Mexico City is the almost cyclical flooding that tens of thousands of people, living in both formal housing and informal settlements in the outskirts of Mexico’s capital and neighboring states, suffer when raining season comes.4 These inundations occur every year, yet, state powers have undertaken clearly insufficient action to compensate for the present uneven and unacceptable housing conditions and have not been willing or able to offer a minimum of protection to these already vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals.

Other negative and relevant outcomes have emerged from the sprawl of this particular urban ecosystem, such as pollution, congestion and even, one could argue, the disintegration of the social fabric of the city, since with high commuting times, almost no opportunity remains for education, recreation, and other vital activities. These concerns have much to do with transportation systems which in some parts of Mexico City remain scarce, in other areas they have reached overcapacity, and in a significant segment of the city both issues are true. Although well-known for its traffic problems, this metropolitan area has a vast and increasing public transportation infrastructure; nevertheless, both the economically poorest and richest districts usually lack appropriate coverage. It could be argued that this deliberately impedes unwanted mobility of low-income groups which most of the times do not have private automobiles. Purposefully or not, such reality presents itself as deeply unsustainable because of the well documented over-

crowdedness, contamination, and social and environmental degradation that this city and its inhabitants are forced to endure.

While various relationships and feedback loops that describe our model of an urban ecosystem, Mexico City, may occur in other urban ecosystems around the world, features related to scale, time and location, among other things, make this metropolis unique. Most similarities between Mexico City and other urban ecosystems probably lie in their basic meaning: of being urban and an ecosystem. A number of academics define these terms either explicitly or implicitly. From these conclusions and our own understandings we draw that an ecosystem is composed of interactions between biotic and abiotic elements and their environment, and that the concept of urban, or a city, can be defined as a complex, human-dominated, self-organizing, heterogeneous, adaptive, dense system or environment. Some of these traits might be more evident than others in specific urban ecosystems. We now focus on qualities and relationships that seem vital to understand Mexico City as an urban ecosystem. One might infer, for instance, that the size or dimension of this city in terms of population and land extension makes issues of equity more visible and the impacts of segregation more intense. In the same way, the history and present conditions of an urban ecosystem also make a city unique; Mexico City’s colonial past and its place as a developing city in a global and economically-driven present probably influence strongly how interactions are played out.

Still, in the presence of disproportionate social unrest, not particularly in Mexico City but in the country as a whole, and beyond, it becomes imperative to acknowledge,

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5 Grimm et al., “Integrated Approaches,” 574.
analyze and question urban ecosystems that exist as spaces of separation. By doing so, we will most likely realize their social and ecological unsustainability. With issues such as preventable sprawl we absurdly affect natural ecosystems; through inadequate housing sites and recurrent flooding patterns we create dispossessed and vulnerable communities; by denying access to efficient and sufficient transportation systems we increase commuting times which affects our air quality and destroys the social fabric of our city. Responsibility must take place in the recognition that exclusion equals violence and will probably produce undesirable outcomes. The institutions and rules that we created to protect us and our environments have clearly failed us. As Steiner concludes, symbiosis should replace competition for adaptation and inclusion is imperative for social, ecological and economic sustainability. Symbiosis is defined as a positive outcome for both participants involved in a process, which makes more sense than to exclude individuals in a world that means to be increasingly connected.

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6 Steiner notes that only people create institutions to protect us from our natural instincts.
8 Kaika, “Interrogating the Geographies of the Familiar,” 281.
LITERATURE CITED


