



**Museo Rufino Tamayo, ed.** *Picture Mexico City: Landmarks of a New Generation* = *Camara! Ciudad de Mexico: Monumentos de una nueva generacion*. Los Angeles: Getty Conservation, 1997. 127 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-89236-490-9.



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### Through Children's Eyes

This book is a collection of 75 black and white photographs of Mexico City taken by ten youths, ranging in age from nine to eighteen. These young Mexicans photographed their city over a five month time period beginning in October 1996. Miguel Angel Corzo of the Getty Conservation, who was responsible for the concept of the book—part of a series that also includes works on Los Angeles, Cape Town, Mumbai, and Paris—asked the question “[H]ow does today’s youth—stalked by contemporary messages of music, advertising, television images, and so many other sensorial stimulations—see the future of their past?” The project directors posed this question to the group of youths in Mexico City, asking them to respond through photographs and writings on “landmarks” in the Mexican capital. The previous works in the series were on cities that contain a large, diverse, pluralistic society within their confines (and often sprawling out beyond those confines). Mexico City is no exception. It has been the capital of the Aztec Empire, a Spanish colony, and now an independent Mexico. The city retains “landmarks” from all of these periods.

While the subjects of the photographs are diverse, there are several categories into which a great number of them can be placed. “Historical monuments” are

prominent, representing Mexico City’s various periods. A wide-angle photograph of nearby Teotihuacan, taken from the Pyramid of the Moon, shows Mexico’s pre-Hispanic past (p. 71). Mexico’s colonial past can be seen in photographs taken in the city’s central square, the zocalo. The youths have recorded images of the cathedral and national palace there. Indeed, one of the opening photos of the book, taken by Apolonio Carrillo, is a wide-angle view of the city’s historic center, with the cathedral and a large Mexican flag towering above the large, central square, itself a legacy of Spanish urban design. The lingering importance of the center of colonial power can be felt in a quote by Natassja: “The Zocalo has a power over people because it represents all the parts that make up our society. To me it’s very awesome (p. 30).” Mexican independence is represented by an imposing photograph of a statue of Miguel Hidalgo in Colonia Coyoacan, arm raised in a gesture of defiance (p.28). The 19th century is also seen in the statue of Benito Juarez. It is, however, disconcerting to read the words of Luis Ignacio, who uses the statue as a landmark to show that he is almost home: “It’s pretty neglected.... The reactions of the youths to the monument are illuminating, showing the extent to which the Revolution has entered the popular conscience, even of very young people in Mexico. Rocio wrote that [I]t’s a

monument to a war that was fought for Mexico, not for anything else, for Mexico and its people. It's a monument so that they never forget the Revolution (pp. 26-27)."

Religion is another theme that is prevalent throughout the book. The presence of Catholicism is made clear in a photograph of the cathedral on the city's central square. The pedestrians in the photograph are dwarfed by the imposing colonial structure. The photo is also telling in that the large Mexican flag flies even higher than the cathedral, symbolically showing the traditional antagonism toward the Church (p. 29). A photograph of an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the interior is also telling, as like the image of the cathedral, it is taken from a very low angle adding to the reverential feel (p. 107). The young girl who took the photograph also added some commentary to the image: "Little children are always taken to be presented to the virgin, to God, and to all the saints. My mom told me that when I was little and my brother was born, my dad went in on his knees carrying the two of us and remained kneeling. He didn't sit down... when he came back his pants were torn and his knees were scraped (p. 106)." And Apolonio adds "the virgin inside protects us that we don't get sick. Her name is Maria. In Huichol she is called Tanan. We are her children and she looks after us everyday where we go (p. 106)." An interesting complement to the image of the Virgin is a photograph taken by Rocio on December 12, Virgin of Guadalupe Day.

As might be expected from a work on Mexico, images of the Day of the Dead are present in the book. There are two images representing November 2, both very different, yet with a similar purpose. Fourteen year old Varinia took a photograph of an altar for her father, who died when she was still an infant. Her words that accompany the image are moving: "The altar is for dad; my mother and I do it every year. For me it's a way of imagining that my dad is still here; it's like I still remember him even though I didn't know him that well (pp.44-45)." In contrast to the image this altar for a deceased family member in a private home is a photograph of graffiti art on a wall in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl for all to see. This wall is dedicated to gang members who had died. The photographer, Luis Ignacio, who was born on the Day of the Dead, wrote that every November 2, offerings are made at the site to deceased gang members (pp.42-43).

A final category I will mention is that of sports, a theme perhaps not surprising, considering the age of the photographers. The country's national pastime, soccer, is represented by a photograph of the jam-packed Estadio Azul Grana, where the fans watch a match between Chivas and Cruz Azul. The photo is interesting in that it focuses not on the game itself, but on the crowd, emphasizing the spectacle. The photo is also significant in that the omnipresent Corona beer signs can be seen lining the stadium (p. 94). The Corona sign also looms large in the photo of the bull ring, which also shows the crowd, not the bull fight (p. 61). Also seen are wrestling, a bike race, and skate boarding. More sobering is the photo of a sports center in Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl. What appear to be soccer fields look more like a barren moonscape, showing the neglect of the area, much like the statue of Benito Juarez (p.73).

Overall, this an enjoyable book. While certainly not an "academic" work in the strict sense, the book nevertheless will be of interest to anyone concerned about urban issues—particularly in Latin America—if the photographs are read as a "text" on present-day Mexico City. At the same time, the work is appealing to a general audience. In general, the photographs are both visually pleasing and thought provoking. They provide a glimpse into Mexico City from the point of view of inhabitants of the city. It will also serve as a record of this "mega-city" during the 1990's, illustrating how young people in the Mexican capital viewed their own city at a certain point in history. It is helpful that the book includes short biographies and color photographs of the photographers. This background (age, social class, family life, etc.) often helps explain the choice of subjects in each of the youths' photographs. Also, it would be interesting to see the results of a similar project carried out in, say, another ten years. Would the "landmarks" be the same? Finally, one can only hope that the Getty will continue to issue other books on other cities around the world.

Commissioned for H-Urban by Clay McShane

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