

Agriculture to Urbanization in Chicoloapan: The Importance of the Ejido in Housing Development

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This project explores the role that methods of land control, land division, and property right agreements play in shaping housing and urban development in Mexico City's peripheral municipalities. We argue that a typology of housing development has emerged through competing territorial agendas between formal (government sponsored) and informal (sponsored by social organizations) urban expansion. The project maps those housing types in order to understand informal development's role within Mexico's attempt to house vast quantities of population as its citizens continue their transition from agrarian land occupation to urban inhabitation. This analysis renders explicit the formal organizations that result from various histories, relationships, and alliances between key actors in housing and urban development processes.

Formal organization in Mexico is largely shaped by practices related to a distinction between ownership and stewardship of communal land, or ejidos. These practices have existed in Mexico since the founding of its first indigenous tribal towns. Historically, rulers have owned their village's ejidal lands, allowing residents to steward, farm, and use resources from those lands. The village ejido provided most of the village's collective resources; from wood for fuel, to quarries for building, pastures and stables for animals, and the agricultural lands that provided most of the village's food. A village's dependence on the ejido transformed into dependence on the government that provided access to the ejido; so much so that the conquering Aztecs as well as the Spanish colonizers maintained some form of communal lands within the villages they controlled. As corruption and bureaucracy spread throughout Mexico, rulers and municipalities became less effective in protecting and providing collective resources to their citizens. In response to the absence of effective governance, radical social organizations formed promising to fill the needs that the government neglected. Consequently, organizations have claimed swaths of land – often previously ejidos – for peasants and disenfranchised citizens largely ignored by the Mexican government.

We have limited the extents of our study to Chicoloapan; a municipality in which we believe Mexico's land types and uses, formal organizations, and governments coexist as a microcosm of Mexican urban expansion. Unlike many municipalities adjacent to the Federal District at the tail-end of their transition from agrarian dependency to urban development, the ring of development that includes Chicoloapan is in the middle of this transition. Informal settlements, government subsidized formal settlements, agricultural land, an historical center, an uninhabited forest, and a mountain range all converge within Chicoloapan's boundaries. The remnants of its ejidos provide a window into its historical patterns of land distribution, organization, and evolution that are consistent with the development of many other municipalities throughout Mexico. Some lands have been developed by social organizations with the primary goal of gaining political control, while others are government subsidized developments that have been driven by the private profits of developers. Each type of urban development in Chicoloapan provides different qualities of infrastructural, residential, and commercial distribution. Collectively, this typology significantly contributes to the form of Mexico's emergent totalizing urbanity.

