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**Producing, consuming and transforming the neighborhood: "La Condesa in
Mexico City"**

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Introduction

Increased attention has been given to the production and consumption of design at the neighborhood level. Richard Florida's thesis of the creative class, which positions the creative class as the motor of urban regeneration and economic growth, has generated both acceptance in policy making and controversy in academic discussion.

Cultural industries are a characteristic site of discussion, equally in relation to production and consumption as in their reciprocal relationship of symbolic and material manifestations. Design is produced and consumed in specific places; furthermore these activities contribute to particular ways of place making. This work will concentrate on the neighborhood of La Condesa in Mexico City. An area often described as the local SOHO where new ways of cultural production and consumption are transforming the urban space.

New spaces of consumption are emerging simultaneously with spaces of production and innovation in areas such as advertising, film, architecture, publicity and graphic design. The urban dynamic of the area has been profoundly transformed in the last decade from being mainly a low density residential area to a design production and consumption district; traditional businesses are disappearing while "creative offices" and design stores proliferate. As a consequence of the rebirth of the neighborhood and its redensification, buildings are being upgraded, public spaces are being improved, semi-public spaces are on the rise –such as restaurants, coffee shops and bars-, and real estate prices have skyrocketed. The neighborhood is attracting Bo-Bo (Bourgeois-Bohemian) youth at the same time it undergoes a process of gentrification that manifests in the displacement of traditional and long time residents

Furthermore, the redensification of the neighborhood and its economic growth has also brought urban problems at the community level. On the one hand lack of parking

availability for neighbors, insufficient urban services, increasing traffic, on the other the proliferation of restaurants and bars and their use of public spaces such as sidewalks and street parking are often points of conflict with long time residents of the area and neighbor associations.

In this paper we aim to analyze the transformation of La Condesa in the last decade, its economic restructuring in creative and service oriented firms and design consumption markets, and the complementary infrastructure of public and semi-public spaces that are used both for recreation and work-related meetings. In doing so, we will also analyze the impact of these transformations in the lives of residents and traditional businesses that are being affected by these changes.

La Condesa

The area known as “La Condesa” includes three neighborhoods; Condesa, Hipodromo Condesa and Hipodromo, which are located in the central area of Mexico City. The area was first developed at the beginning of the XXth century, populated during the 1920s and 30s by middle and upper middle classes. Wide avenues, roundabouts, medallions, and two of the main city parks characterize the neighborhood. About 40% of the zone is dedicated to open spaces being this one of the sections with more green public spaces in the city. From its origins La Condesa attracted artists and intellectuals. People like Tina Modotti, Agustin Lara and Mario Moreno “Cantinflas” lived here.

1 Work and play; living in La Condesa

1.1 Patterns of change

Mexico City has changed as other major cities in the world from a high concentration of manufacturing jobs into an advanced services economy (Garza 2008). The industrial concentration in Mexico City reached its pick in the 70s when 50% of all manufacturing employment in the country was located in this area. At the end of the

70s and during the 80s an industrial de-agglomeration took hold, having as destination cities around Mexico City as Queretaro, Toluca, Cuernavaca, and Puebla. Many firms relocated or opened new investments in the periphery of the city giving a large impulse to the growth of the state of Mexico in general, and in particular industrial zones in the surroundings of Tlalnepantla and other northern municipalities. This industrial migration was first promoted through decentralizing policies, like barriers to new industries to locate in Mexico City and fiscal incentives to relocate industries in surrounding states, but it was strongly accelerated by the opening of the economy from 1986 and the beginning of NAFTA in the 1990s. The opening of the national economy affected mostly the non competitive and highly protected Mexico City manufacturing firms.

The downfall of the traditional manufacturing employment sector was aggravated by the damage –physical and psychological- impact of the 1985 earthquake. The damaged areas were almost entirely within the confines of the central city extending into the south including the neighborhoods of La Condesa and La Roma. As a result a process of depopulation of the central city began. Real estate values declined, damaged structures were vacated, and the area lost its traditional shine.

From 1990 to 2004 the central areas of the city underwent a slow process of depopulation due to migration to the periphery and to other growing cities in the country.

While the changing structure of the economy where taking place, and the hollow out of population took stand in DF's central delegations, an increase in office space also took hold on these areas. With the exception of the historic district and the Corredor Reforma¹ --which was incorporated some years later--, small service offices started to locate in residential neighborhoods, like Polanco, Las Lomas, La Condesa, La Roma

¹ Corredor Reforma was the historic business center of the city. It was almost vacated after the '85 earthquakes due to the heavy damages it suffered. In the last ten years has received heavy investment and now is one of the most expensive areas to live and work in the city (apartment prices are around \$4000 USD m²).

and their surrounding areas. Being the first two areas wealthier than La Condesa and Roma, they attracted more powerful, larger, and in some cases multinational service firms, while La Roma and La Condesa, were invaded by small specialized local service firms.

Prior to the office explosion, La Condesa had been a middle class area that had attracted, from the 40s and on, Mexican professionals, and educated foreign migrants like the Jewish community, and the Spaniard and Latin American migration of the 40s till the 80s. In this period and with the settling of diverse communities in the neighborhood, residential services and family owned businesses started to flourish such as bakeries, tailor shops, cleaners, barber shops and beauty salons, plumbers and locksmiths, schools, and more community specific needs such as kosher stores and synagogues. During the decade of the 1960's the urban pattern started changing as old houses and buildings, mostly constructed at the beginning of the past century, were demolished in order to build new condominium and office buildings. These changes and the combination between residential, service and commercial use of the urban space were not welcomed by all the original inhabitants, and displeased neighbors moved out to other areas in the city. Complementary to this, an important number of members of the Jewish community, one of the main residents of La Condesa in the first half of the twentieth century, moved to more exclusive areas such as Polanco, Tecamachalco, Cuajimalpa and Santa Fe (Neri, 2009).

The depopulation and office proliferation of La Condesa accelerated after the earthquake in 1985, following which many families left the area and rented their homes as offices.

The rebirth of the neighborhood –in cultural, economical, and social spheres- started being visible during the decade of the 1990s and widely spread after 2000.

The depopulation tendency of the neighborhood started to be reverted after 2004 to a great extent, as a consequence of the Bando Dos, a set of urban policies implemented in 2001 intended for the re-densification of the inner city and the control of peripheral sprawl. Bando Dos encourages the construction of housing and commercial developments in the central areas while preventing the construction of new units in the rest of the Federal District. Only in 2005 and 2006 over 220 000 people moved into the central neighborhoods (Ortega Alcaza). The redensification process was possible mainly due to the replacement of old single-family units with multistory apartment buildings. The main justification behind Bando Dos was to attract residents to the areas with better urban services, however the urban infrastructure was insufficient to handle the rising demand for water, sewage, electricity, parking and public transport. As a result of the increased urban pressures local residents expressed their opposition to Bando Dos arguing that the set of policies actually ended up promoting the problems they were intended to prevent.

Parallel to the redensification process, the first successful trendy restaurants opened in La Condesa, specifically in Michoacán Street. This is not to say that before this there were no restaurants, we just want to distinguish that the new restaurants had, from the beginning, a different profile of costumers, being more oriented towards young professionals and intellectuals; latter most restaurants got absorbed by the trend and, with it, more restaurants have located within the district. With the success of Michoacán Street now populated with bars, cafes and design shops, other parts of La Condesa and its surrounding area boomed with this kind of businesses².

² According to the last economic census, 412 restaurants (complete service, limited service and food to go) were located in the three neighborhoods of La Condesa, Hipódromo, and Hipódromo Condesa, accounting for nearly 12.7% of businesses located in the area, being also the type of business with most units in the district. INEGI (2009). Directorio Estadístico Nacional de Unidades Económicas. México, D.F. , INEGI.

1.2 New residents, new lifestyle: Economic restructuring and urban transformations in La Condesa

Changes in the economic activities not only affected both the internal organization of firms and their external relationships with other firms and customers, but also their relation to the immediate urban space. The emergence of the service sector in DF, accompanied with the changing structure of occupations and skills, demanded office spaces. This led to a two fold process, on the one hand multinational companies and big firms required triple A office buildings which started to be constructed in Santa Fe, Palmas-Reforma and Polanco, on the other hand the opening of small offices, predominantly in residential centric neighborhoods, strongly affected La Condesa and La Roma. The displacement of local population by these office firms was accompanied by larger effects for the city in terms of work mobility patterns elevating the movement of people from the periphery to the central areas.

Although the constant opening of offices in La Condesa displaced resident population, and changed many areas from residential to service and commercial use, at the end of the day it also created the basis for an attraction of new residents connected to the jobs being created, in addition to the redensification policies from the Bando Dos. The relationship between residents and offices is complex because they are connected. Conflicts expressed during these changes shows this complexity. So if we take a look at residents, we can see a complex multidimensional arena of –problems-possibilities-restrictions-openings- of the perceptions of the urban space.

1.3 La Condesa as a design producing and consuming district: Between the private and the public realms

One of the most visible transformations of this area, as mentioned before, was the location of small design related firms –such as publicity, graphic and industrial design, architecture- and the proliferation of fashion boutiques and stores for design

consuming clients. The co-location of these businesses can also be seen as part of the economic and urban regeneration that has been propelled by an emergent creative class.

Creativity related activity	number of business
Design	45
Architecture and Interior Design	56
Advertising and related activities	122
Fashion and accessories	78
Furniture, antiques and art dealing	41
Total	342

Regarding opportunities and possibilities created in the urban space of La Condesa from the stand point of economic development, we can point at interesting spillovers of information, knowledge, and other “free intangible resources” available mainly for those who work and play in La Condesa. In order to illustrate these effects we have to start identifying the organizational particularities of the most advanced services being produced in the area. The nature of some of the work carried by the services like advertising, design and architecture, have two requirements that are central for this study. First, the products made -publicity, graphic design or architecture- are tailor made final products which need close and frequent interaction between the service provider and the service consumer. Such reunions -for defining the product and for following the steps in their production- are both carried out in offices and, most interesting for us, in public and semipublic spaces like restaurants, coffee shops, bars, park benches and the like. Second, the products being developed in these service sectors are made by teams with members of different companies, and/or freelance associates. So once the team is formed, the work is also done and discussed in meetings carried on in private, public and semipublic spaces. Sometimes, these work-related meetings are closely intertwined with leisure activities and so the boundaries between personal time and work time get blurred, along with the boundaries between

the private (office, studio), public (parks) and semi-public spaces (restaurants, coffee shops, bars, etc.). This working mode is closely related to Florida's creative class and to the idea of creative people as the motor of urban regeneration and economic growth. Due to the intense use of semipublic and public spaces for work related activities, the neighborhoods where this happens become vibrant areas with heavy open space use. Furthermore outlets for the consumption of products related to design, art and fashion emerge as an almost natural consequence.

We think that forms of use of semipublic spaces for work are more frequent in small firms than in large firms. And that these semipublic spaces are used more often when the working dynamic is done through individual projects, made by temporal and changing groups. It is also clear that most freelancers, when interacting with clients and suppliers, use the surrounding restaurants and coffee shops to work negotiations and even the final delivery-presentation of final work products. In general the intense meeting demand for such type of work has made La Condesa a perfect space for the location of these businesses.

We must add that many of the persons involved in the functioning of these services/offices live also in the same neighborhood, adding a layer of complexity to the entanglement of personal and professional activities. The home office is evidently very common as well. The shifting of work between office and say restaurants and the actual using of the restaurant as an entertainment space are roles rapidly changeable because there is always the chance of occasional encounters, transforming consumption or working spaces into other momentarily and accidental meetings. Consequently, spaces for production and consumption are not clearly defined.

The high rate of creative Bo-Bo youth moving into La Condesa have promoted the proliferation of contemporary design "lofts", apartment buildings and studios in lots previously occupied by single housing as well as the renovation of architecture with

historic value in the area. Architects living and working in the neighborhood have designed many of the new constructions. The incoming residents find an ample selection of trendy furniture and design objects. Furthermore there are plenty of restaurants, cafes and bars to choose from. One of the most appealing characteristics to the Bo-Bo is the possibility of walk or bike to solve needs like going to the supermarket, the dry-cleaning, the bakery or the gym. It is one on the few neighborhoods in the city where this is possible. Due to the characteristics of the incoming residents dogs, bikes, kids and strollers heavily occupy the streets and parks.

1.4 Spatial economic resources

Looking at Overlapping spaces of work-consumption-living from the economic perspective shows the construction of multiple possible interactions, interdependencies and resources of tangible and intangible nature.

Tangible or traded interdependencies appear between a buyer and a producer. This is the input-output relation. At this point in the research we do not know if there are connected businesses in the area and if so how extended and deep are those connections. Although there are some interactions that we can assume exist between editorials, design offices, and advertising offices in the area. We also know that at least at a very shallow level there are office suppliers and office support services all around the area. But again to discover if there are deeper connections qualitative and detailed research is needed. Another area that requires exploration is the possibility of clients being located in the area or within comfortable distance. Other interesting question is if we can consider restaurant and bars as connected business to offices; it probably will depend on the intensity of their use for business meetings and for carrying individual work.

Intangible or untraded interdependencies appear in interactions that do not occur necessarily through an economic transaction (Storper 1997). These untraded

interdependencies are important because they create the possibility of acquiring information and knowledge from competitors. Intangible resources are mostly carried on by social networks. Social networks of this kind are usually the result of historical trajectories of individuals -education, school, place of residence, and so on- and or constructed through jobs trajectories. Social networks facilitate getting information from the industry inner workings and secret advantages or dealings of specific firms; friends exchange information even from competing firms.

How untraded interdependencies work is a current debate, besides social networks there are other two well established mechanisms detected by the geography of innovation literature. The mechanisms for information dissemination under spatial proximity conditions are “observing” and “comparing” (Malmberg and Maskell 2006). By being in spatial proximity we can observe what our competitors do, what is the design store selling best, what clients is the next door advertising office getting, and so on. But when we observe others we also make comparisons of how we are doing in relation to them, and if we are doing things the same way. Both forms of interpretation of the competitor give valuable information, otherwise very hard to get. Most interestingly, spatial proximity creates the possibility of yet another diffusion mechanism, called the buzz effect (Storper and Venables 2004), which is the diffusion of information through informal conversations, gossiping and in general the passing of information through informal conversations, facilitated in proximity by sporadic and unplanned meetings in public or semipublic spaces.

La Condesa with its high density of advanced services in design, architectural and advertising offices, that use spaces of consumption and entertaining as parallel work spaces, and where some of their owners and personnel live and work, constitute a living design district. The production of information and knowledge about design trends, styles, fashions and fads, constitute the advantage of being there.

2 Conflicts and perceptions on the urban transformation of La Condesa

Even though the birth and consolidation of a design producing and consuming district and its private-public space dynamic has regenerated the image and urban landscape of this historic and residential neighborhood; the actual perceptions that have emerged regarding these transformations are divergent and conflictive, mostly distinguished by the perception of the adult population that has lived in the neighborhood for some time, and newcomers –young professionals- attracted by the service and design boom that has transformed La Condesa into a trendy neighborhood.

Regarding differences between these two broad groups and results on a research done by Anna Ortiz (2006) we can identify a positive perception by young professionals and newcomers that highlight the quality of urban living found in the neighborhoods, and a sense of *‘barrio life’* characterized as tranquil, comfortable, a place in which design stores (shopping), cafes, libraries, parks, restaurants, bars, nightlife, and other recreation spaces are in the walking distance, and bumping into friends and colleagues is part of the everyday life in the neighborhood.

Some of the highlights people –newcomers but also long time residents- often mention is their centrality and accessibility to public transportation and main streets, the green public spaces, and the availability of diverse services within the area. As one of the interviewees of Ortiz puts it: *‘My everyday world is very little for living in a city so big’* (Ortiz, 2006: 48). Other highlights are the architectural value of the neighborhood, with *art deco* and *Californian* houses and buildings from the first half of the XXth century, and the cosmopolitan and diverse –both culturally and sexually- lifestyle, the latter being more appreciated by younger residents (*ibid.*).

But as things change, there are people that find benefit from transformation and some that lose with change. The regeneration of La Condesa into the *hippest* part of town

has been accompanied by real estate pressures. For instance, a person we interviewed that had over 40 years living in the neighborhood, owner of a traditional barbershop in La Condesa since 1968, stated:

“(...) from the time that I was living here, which were many years, I had to leave because the building I was living in was going to be remodeled for sale, and so they asked everyone that was living there to leave” (José, Barber, 68 years old).

Urban renewal in La Condesa has transformed the landscape into a mix of buildings with historical value, with the ones built during the sixties and seventies, to the ones that are being built by younger *avant-garde* architects and real estate companies. In benefit of the latter, old buildings are being demolished or remodeled for sale and so, people that use to inhabit these buildings are being displaced.

These transformations are not only affecting long time residents, but small neighborhood businesses as well. The constant increase in prices, which have at least doubled in the last 10 years, is augmenting the strain in the traditional business to sell or rent out their shops. Convenience stores are being replaced by mini markets such as 7 Eleven, coffee stores by Starbucks, chain restaurants are opening and so on. Simultaneously to this process of “homogeneization,” specialty stores and upscale restaurants are opening. The design of the new establishments -being restaurants, stores or bars- is much more refined. The clientele attracted comes from other middle or upper class areas of the city. These changes are perceived by many residents as signs of the loss of the traditional uses and identity of La Condesa.

The urban transformation process is complemented by a second broad perception attributed mostly to older, long time residents. A sense of nostalgia of what the neighborhood represented in the past -a tranquil, residential, familiar place- is being contrasted with the new generation living in the area and its urban transformation.

The most common points of conflict between the two urban imaginaries –of conservation of what the neighborhood was and the revitalization of the urban space and experience by new generations- are the use of public spaces by restaurants, their proliferation, and unintended consequences of the redensification and increase of movement –of persons and vehicles- in the infrastructure of a residential neighborhood, now with a high concentration of service-related businesses.

Indeed, the pressure on urban services has increased, as noted in some of the problems mentioned with the Bando Dos urban policies. Older neighbors often complain that there isn't enough space on sidewalks which are "filled" with tables, chairs and people in restaurants, that there aren't enough parking spaces and the few they have are being hoarded by restaurant's valet parking's and *franeleros*.³

Some of the most known groups of opposition are neighbor associations. The "Friends of Parque Mexico and España" (founded in 1992) was one of the main activists in the most media-covered conflict of La Condesa. In September 1996, around 300 workers of the Cuauhtémoc Delegation responded to the association's demands and tore down restaurant tents that were installed on sidewalks of La Condesa (Hiriart 1996; Pastrana 1996; Rascón 1996). The neighbor association argued that the proliferation of restaurants had made the neighborhood "inhabitable"; while restaurant owners and neighbors that sympathized with them argued that the presence of these businesses had improved the quality of living in La Condesa (Ortiz 2006; Neri 2009). Although the matter's been somewhat settled, the conflict remains around the proliferation of restaurants and bars, and the traffic problems that have emerged with

³ In Mexico City, *franeleros* are people that work illegally on streets holding parking spaces on streets and charging a fee for "keeping a spot" and taking care of cars. This type of informal employment has proliferated in the city where free parking spaces are limited and demand is high. For some people their role in the urban dynamic may be functional, because it's a form of employment and you can easily park in one of the spaces they're holding and pay them a fee. But it is also a form of privatization of the public space and finds opposition by neighbors in a sense that "why should I pay for the use of a public space?" *Franeleros* are also subject of corruption practices by cops that make "rounds" and charge fees for letting them operate illegally. In other Delegations of DF, pilot programs are taking place in which Universities give *Franeleros* classes for a better interaction with citizens. An interesting note on this was recently published by *Reforma* (22/05/11).

the redensification and economic restructuring of La Condesa. Parallel to this process, citizen efforts have increased for the demand of a participatory process for policy design and implementation on these issues (Transeunte 2010; Transeunte 2011; Vargas 2011).

Another active association is the “Union of neighbors of Hipodromo, Roma and Condesa, A.C.” (2004). One of the main objectives of this association is the defense of the residential profile of these neighborhoods, the regulation of permits for commercial and service use of spaces, and the protection of the historic patrimony of the built environment (uniondevecinos.org). In this point, we can highlight the concern of the loss of the “personality” of the place, to certain “homogeneity” by new architecture (Ortíz, *ibid*: 58).

Final Remarks

As stated at the beginning of this paper, there has been increased attention on the role played by the creative classes in the transformation of urban spaces. The case of La Condesa in Mexico City is a good example.

La Condesa has transformed in the last 10- 20 years from a quiet low density residential area into a design production and consumption oriented district, characterized by the proliferation of architecture, publicity, editorial and design firms, fashion boutiques, design furniture stores, shops, restaurants, bars, cafes and a highly recognized city night life.

The process of redensification of La Condesa by these design production and consumption oriented businesses, and the new residents attracted to the neighborhood that were part of this socio-economic transformations started changing the urban

landscape and its spatial dynamic that continues transforming this urban scenario today.

The nature of the creative activities developing in the neighborhood, in which frequent interactions between clients and firms, and between different collaborators in tailor made design, architecture, publicity and other design related products and processes, have turned La Condesa into a living design district. The readily available public and semipublic infrastructure accessible at La Condesa -with parks, restaurants, cafes, bookstores and bars- is an ideal place for the development of these activities.

However, the urban regeneration of La Condesa into a trendy and economically dynamic neighborhood has also propelled a simultaneous process of gentrification and a developing process of homogeneization. Real estate pressures, new architectural projects, and the constant restaurant and bar openings with a high-end profile are pushing the real estate market in the neighborhood, and the cost of properties and rents have skyrocketed. As a consequence, long time residents and traditional businesses are being displaced by new ones; and small entrepreneur restaurants, cafes, and local convenience stores are being displaced by franchise restaurants, Starbucks and 7 Eleven's. The homogeneization process is more visible from the architectural standpoint. Old buildings are being demolished or remodeled to more *avant garde* and contemporary architecture with an extensive use of steel, glass and apparent concert, are changing the urban landscape of the neighborhood known by its *art deco* and *Californian style* architecture.

We might say that the first transformations of La Condesa were mainly a bottom-up process in which new residents appropriated the neighborhood and transformed it. As it developed spontaneously, it was also unplanned. But with time, and as an emergent effect of the change of the neighborhood's image and the increasing value of property, along with the upgrading of the area by high-end services, it has transformed this

process mostly into a top down imposition to the original Condesa settlers. In Klunzman's words "Each story of regeneration begins with poetry and ends with real estate" (Klunzman, 2004: 2 in Evans, *ibid.*: 959). In this sense, Evans critique of culture-led urban regeneration as a distraction from underlying power over place and the imposition of projects and landscapes to neighborhoods that are being renovated, is useful (Evans 2005).

Transformations have also had an important impact in the everyday lives of original Condesa residents, which often complain of traffic, noise and parking problems that have emerged with the economic restructuring of the neighborhood.

We should start imagining the ways in which the positive effects over place and community led by the *creative class* could come together with the traditional business and long time residents. La Condesa might end up losing its particular richness, in terms of diversity and tolerance, if the gentrification process continues and upscale places become the only option. Certainly there are other places in the city where little mix of people and spatial uses are possible, and having one more, will not promote spatial justice, democratic spaces and the accommodation of difference.

However, given the pros and cons of La Condesa's transformations and without neglect of the negative impact of spatial change in this neighborhood, it is important to highlight the socio.-economic dynamic that is taking place, the creative processes facilitated by the proximity of different actors involved, and the revival of the public space in a city where insecurity, traffic and long distances often inhibit social interaction in the urban experience. Taking into account the contradictions of these transformations, complementing decision making processes with community based participation for the solution of emerging problems, reducing social, economic and spatial homogeneity, the Condesa urban transformation experience could be a learning

model of the problems being addressed through urban regeneration and also the problems that emerge through these efforts.

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