

# **PROFOUNDLY URBAN: PRACTICES OF RESISTANCE**

of the women of the Otomi community in Mexico City

MYRTO EFTHYMIADI

Explore Lab 37

Msc3- Master of Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences

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Research Tutor:  
Robert Gorny

Design Tutor:  
Heidi Sohn

Building Technology Tutor:  
Rufus van den Ban

## MEXICO IMAGINARIO, MEXICO PROFUNDO

Mexico City is incredibly diverse. Within its territory, 55 out of the 68 used indigenous languages of Mexico, are spoken.<sup>1</sup> Decades long organised abandonment by the central government has caused people to migrate from rural to urban environments in search of greater opportunities, better education, and work. Subsequently to the high number of people internally migrating there was a city-wide restructuring. Mexico City being the capital, it is and has been, the centre of the nation building process that largely perpetuates pre-existing codes with remnants of a colonial disposition and western patterns of growth and development. The nation that has been built stands in tension with the heterogeneous indigenous identity that is also present in the city. Spatial differences that arise due to the city's pluriversality are blurred through the homogenising processes of the western capitalist model of commercialization and progress. This process has diluted pueblos originarios and redefined spatial dynamics. In Mexico Profundo, Guillermo Bonfill Batalla differentiates between the Imaginary(Imaginario) and Profound (Profundo) Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Mexico Imaginario and Mexico Profundo are co-constitutive in the context of Mexico city, being present through development projects that disposess groups of their land, resistance to such efforts by the very people that are affected and also active processes of restitution. The city is a dynamic environment that houses the embodied experiences of Mexico Imaginario and Profundo with its local, immigrant, indigenous and mixteca population and is in a process of continual growth. Even the last census in 2020 revealed that the State of Mexico receives the highest number of migrants in the country.<sup>3</sup>

The Otomi community situated in the central Mexican plain are an example of this pattern of movement and re-settlement. They are not part of the barrios/ pueblos originarios. They are a historically migratory group and have had to adapt and evolve to external invasions and changing conditions of life over the centuries of the community's history many times. To quote Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing from *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, "changing with circumstances is the stuff of survival."<sup>4</sup> The Otomi form an incredibly significant

1 *Bloomberg.com*. 'Is Mexico City Ready to Listen to Its Indigenous Residents?' 4 June 2018. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-06-04/the-indigenous-voice-of-mexico-city>.

2 Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. *Mexico Profundo: reclaiming a civilization*. University of Texas Press, 1996.

3 'Migración Interna En México: Ciudades de Destino'. Accessed 15 June 2024. <https://migdep.colmex.mx/destinomexico/jaime-sobrino.html>.

4 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015. 27.

part of Mexico's cultural history because they have been able to preserve their cultural identity throughout the various interventions they have experienced. The presence of Otomi in the city, throughout its every facet, brings opportunities to hybridize narratives, existing stories, introduce alternative existences and complex identities. Mexico City is increasingly pluricultural and yet the veiled racism, exploitation and discrimination of the Otomi community is representative of the disunification and fragmentation of the city. This is very problematic, given the extent of the city's diversity. The city is a volatile territory overlayed with co-existing paradigms on multiple scales of action, local, national and global. That means there is opportunity to imbue space with alternative narratives. Currently, Otomi people are housed in various properties in the city, with a high concentration in Colonia Roma, mostly in informal housing settlements. A lack of available land, disputes over property and increasingly unaffordable land and rent prices has made housing and community spaces a major issue within the Otomi community. Communal space is sought, to allow the community to establish more permanent foundations in Mexico City, which would provide much needed stability. In the past few decades, the Otomi informally occupied and built on several properties to house their community as a response to the lack of government housing and assistance. It is important to recognise some things that have changed recently, in response to decades long demands from the plethora of indigenous groups that originate and inhabit Mexico City. The SEPI programme that was started in 2019 has various goals to cover housing needs, educational initiatives and a lot more through a centralised, state service. However, the SEPI programme requires people to register as indigenous to be granted their rights.

The question is, to borrow the words of Catherine E. Walsh, "Can a social movement continue to be considered as such once it entered the state structure and institutions and begins to assume more than just an outside position? Can it be inside and at the same time against?"<sup>5</sup> This has been something that has been troubling me while reading all the initiatives put forth and accomplished by SEPI and INVI respectively. The colonialist project is ever evolving and changing form, making it difficult to comprehensively understand the degree to which they are helping the communities or compromising efforts of resistance.

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5 Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. 74.

A positive or successful example of these initiatives is the building located at 342 Chapultepec Avenue, in the centre of Mexico City. This project stands to show how resistance has been effective in demands for fair housing. In the late 90's a plot of land in Roma Norte, that was empty, began to be occupied by multiple Otomi families, reaching 23 families by the early 2000's. Slowly, each family built on the land and the property was named *La Casona*. On February 15 2008, there was an explosion near *La Casona*, which was used as an excuse to expropriate the Otomi families of *La Casona*, claiming issues of safety and security of the structures.<sup>6</sup> There is a lack of information regarding the development of the space after the explosion, yet through satellite and street photo information it is visible that in 2011 the plot lay empty, probably with the informal structures having been demolished and as of 2022, there is a building serving as housing for the Otomi. It is safe to assume that through negotiations the community was able to formally occupy the plot and build an apartment complex. This complex due to clear inscriptions of the building itself, seems to have been built in collaboration or with the aid of the INVI programme (Housing Institute of Mexico City) of the central government. All this to say, there is great potential in the activism of the community and while state initiatives have certain drawbacks it is through the combination of the bottom up-action of the Otomi activists and the top down government initiatives that issues of both property and community demands are addressed sufficiently.

Similar processes of expropriation like that of 2008 in *La Casona* are evident currently across other Otomi occupied land in Mexico City. The Mexican authorities have attempted to expropriate the properties of Londres 7 and Roma 27 which has been met with long-term resistance since August, 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021. The Otomi community recently has been in active disputes with local authorities after another attempted eviction from *El Casa de los Pueblos* or The house of the peoples which they have been inhabiting for the past three years. This space largely houses women, women that are pregnant, elderly women and young girls.<sup>7</sup> It serves a crucial role of a safe space for community gathering where issues can be addressed. These processes of top down forced re-settlement point to the larger issue of a systemic violation of rights. In the past five years, 26% of the population over 18 years old has had their rights

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6 Valverde Lopez, Adrian. 'Los Otomies de "La Casona" En La Colonia Roma'. *Secuencia* September-December, no. 75 (2009): 119-42.

7 *Injusticia! La Comunidad Otomi de La Ciudad de Mexico Fue Atacada*, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/@ruidoenlaredooficial/video/7290661090160020741>.



unjustifiably violated.<sup>8</sup> The systemic character of the problem is why I find the term 'inherited social scars' as is defined by Conaie when referring to "illiteracy, poverty, unemployment etc."<sup>9</sup> to be an accurate and just way of understanding the struggles faced by the Otomi today while acknowledging the systems at play that keep them in the margins of society and perpetuate disadvantaged conditions of living. (Sentence introducing decolonialism, classism and feminism) In this discussion, decolonialism, classism and feminism are correlative dimensions of the issue of oppression and struggle because the women of the Otomi community through being indigenous, working class migrants and women experience living in Mexico City in a way that creates a triple bind of oppression which is ultimately hard to escape from. The specificities of their identities and their environment is Profoundly Urban.

I seek to utilise decolonialist, feminist and class focused lenses as de-stratifying tools of the assemblages that are at play in the everyday lives of Otomi women in Mexico City.

In the paper I hope to cover the ways in which systemic structures oppress the women of the Otomi community in Mexico City, however, my intention is not to portray these women as victims. While they are affected by systems that historically and currently are created to benefit a few, a group that excludes them, they are still active members of the city, participating and engaging with the material and immaterial flows that make the city the vibrant and culturally unique place that it is. What I seek to show is how, despite these constraints, they use indigenous practices and knowledges, as they have been adapted to function in an urban setting, as a form of resistance to the colonial, classist, and patriarchal systems to demand their constitutionally given rights and provide for their immediate family and greater community. They do so through cultural practices that are functions of change, as they actively challenge the more dominant ideology and put forward alternative conceptions of the world. These practices take the form of education classes, protesting in the streets, traditional embroidery, cooking, making muñecas Lele, and construction. These practices are individual and collective at the same time.

Appreciating how valuable traditional practices are, I framed my research to address: *How do situated knowledges and practices establish spatial dynamics that make liberation movements successful?*

They can be practiced alone or in a group, they build communal identity, and they foster valuable moments of encounter. They can be categorised as practices of care as they involve activities that change self-perception by introducing exterior influences and attitudes. This also connects to the idea that caretaking is civilizational and genetic. They preserve heritage and allow the cultures to remain distinct even though adapting to current living conditions. The practice of culturally significant traditions not only protects important cultural knowledges, but it also introduces novel perspectives and ways of doing to more mainstream ideologies. For example, they introduce manners of production that diverge from the capitalist model but rather are of the opinion that "the art we create is something useful and beautiful."<sup>10</sup>

The Otomi women in Mexico City often work as street vendors, also known as *Marias*. Finding work can be challenging and ever since Otomi people started migrating to Mexico City in the middle to end of the 20th century, the women found that selling small goods such as gum or artisan products traditional to the Otomi, they could sustain themselves. This is becoming increasingly difficult

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8 Ibid.

9 Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. 62.

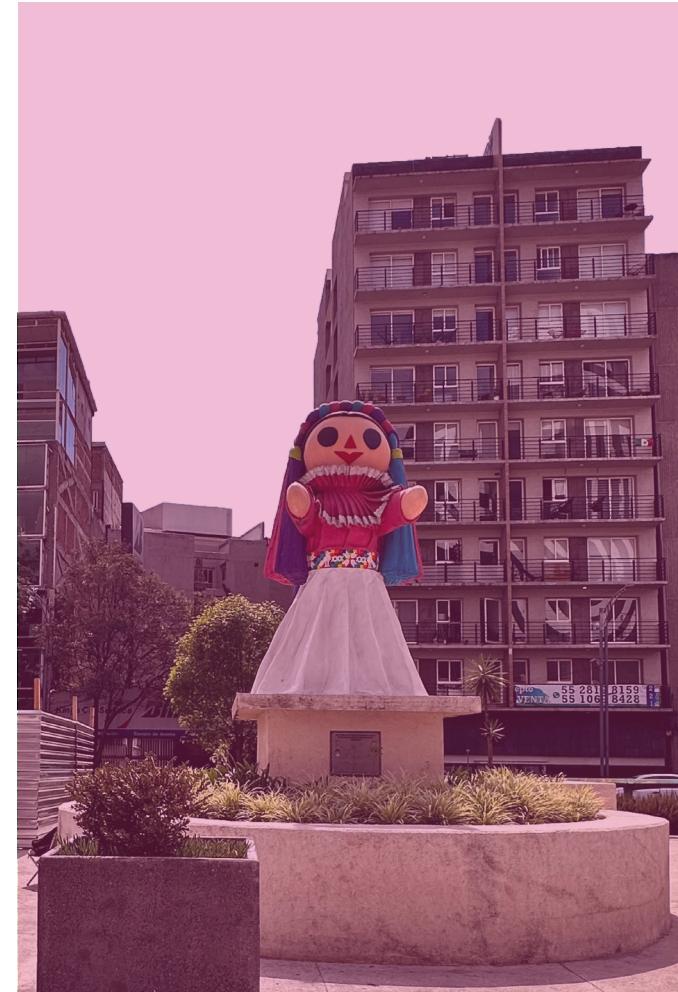
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10 *Ar Lele, La Historia de La Tradicional Muñeca Otomí*, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hKCfJ9XE7k>.

to do, in an informal way, as was done until now. There are a few markets across Mexico City that cater to indigenous crafts and products and a fair was organised the summer of 2023, in the centre of the city, named IX Fiesta de las culturas Indígenas Pueblos y Barrios Originarios de la Ciudad de México (IX Festival of the Indigenous communities of the city of Mexico). This festival had a record breaking 1.4 million visitors.<sup>11</sup> This market stands as an example of how important celebrating and making visible the indigenous communities is within the city and for its residents who make up a large part of its population.

There is a increasing commercialisation of indigenous material as symbols of an imagined past, while simultaneously failing to embrace the embodiment of culture as part of everyday life. Material products of those practices such as the muñeca Lele and the embroidered tenangos have global recognition and acknowledgment with Lele being referred to as “a symbol of the resistance and traditions of Mexico reflecting its ethnic and linguistic diversity”<sup>12</sup> and the tenango being used in international fashion houses without the recognition of the contribution of the Otomi community. At the same time within the Otomi community, the women express that the muñecas are a tool to make money, send their kids to school and finance themselves out of poverty. In the words of Juana Perez, an artisan, “elaboramos la muñeca lele para poder salir de ahí”<sup>13</sup> (we work on muñeca lele to be able to leave from here). Within the context of the interview, here stands for the difficult living conditions of Mexico City and the discrimination the community faces. The muñeca is consistently being used as a symbol of culture, becoming a token of indigeneity in international events as a promotional tool of travel and tourism, with a prominent statue being placed in honour of the Muñeca Lele just off the major junction of Glorieta de los Insurgentes in Colonia Roma, while the women that make and sell them in Mexico City do not have spaces to call their own. There is a disjunction between the personal, societal value for the women and the community that make them and the commercial value they have when they are sold. The cultural significance is lost in the translation between making and

selling on a local and especially the global market.



**MUNECA LELE STATUE, AVENIDA CHAPULTEPEC, CDMX**

<sup>11</sup> Contra Réplica. 'Fiesta de las Culturas Indígenas en CDMX rompe récord de asistencia'. 22 August 2023.

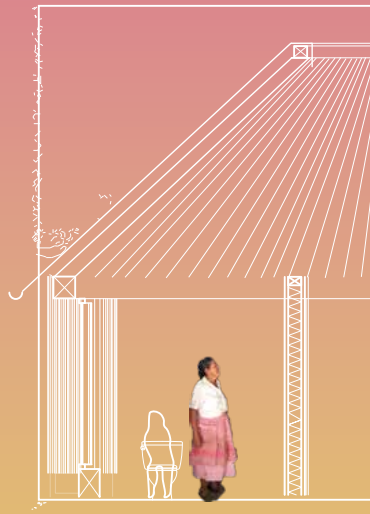
<sup>12</sup> gob.mx. 'Lele, la muñeca otomí, viajó a QUITO, ECUADOR, la capital más antigua de América del Sur y declarada Patrimonio Cultural de la Humanidad'. Accessed 20 January 2024. <http://www.gob.mx/sre/galerias/lele-la-muneca-otomi-viajo-a-quito-ecuador-la-capital-mas-antigua-de-america-del-sur-y-declarada-patrimonio-cultural-de-la-humanidad>.

<sup>13</sup> Otomíes En La CDMX: Una Historia de Racismo En México | Documental, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNiOU8siDg>.

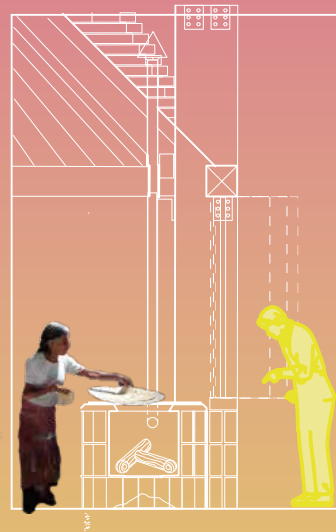
## PRACTICES



Selling



Resting



Cooking



Making

Educating

## DECOLONIAL RESISTANCE

From indigenous discourse, knowledge and experience we know that indigenous communities are always engaged in the struggle, they have had to endure hundreds of years of oppression, displacement, persecution, and injustice, from the Americas to Australia to small yet expansive island complexes. These experiences tend to bear similarities in the way communities have had to fight to preserve the cultural heritage, while also being highly and contextually specific. When it comes to current events and issues that are faced, they are externalised and made visible through online platforms. It is possible to follow, through the publication of posts on social media websites, the dissatisfaction and demands for change alongside the expression of solidarity and support for other struggles on a local and global scale by various indigenous groups and social organisations. It is vital to acknowledge the specificities of each struggle and fight for recognition. In the context of the Otomi people currently, there is continuing solidarity with the Zapatista movement and engagement with issues around the destructive implications of capitalism, the potential of commoning, active genocides around the world, femicides in the country and the constant efforts for decolonisation. Decolonising efforts are, for example, the requests made to change the curriculum that is taught in schools. Currently curricula are widely based on western ideologies, which can be understood as epistemic violence, because it often omits indigenous knowledge and sidelines alternate ways of thinking.<sup>14</sup> Decolonisation is also inextricably bound to the dismantling of capitalist processes that seek to globalise and homogenize, in favour of profit, over preservation of tradition. The struggle for decolonisation seeks an otherwise to colonial order. An otherwise that focuses on respecting the intricate relationality existent in any context. A diversification of thinking and knowing in the mainstream conceptions of the world that is understood as a decolonial pluriversality. The Otomi women through their communal resistance introduce their existence into the mainstream narratives of relations and patterns of power and thus do important decolonial work. Catherine E. Walsh in *On Decoloniality*, makes an important point about the value of resistance in the process of decolonisation which is that there is a relationship between the notion of re-existence and resistance. In communities that are threatened by colonisation processes, like the Otomi, there are ways to resist re-existing and simultaneously to re-exist resisting.<sup>15</sup> For the Otomi in Mexico City this applies

<sup>14</sup> Dussel, Enrique. *The Ethics of Liberation: In the Age of Globalisation and Exclusion*. Duke University Press, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018. 62.

to the specific ways they resist conforming and thus re-existing to the dominant ideologies, and they re-exist or strategically incorporate new cultural elements to remain a distinguishable collectivity through the process of resisting. The process of resisting to re-exist comes before the process of re-existing through resisting, both of which have as a principal goal the preservation of cultural patrimony. These processes are forms of becoming. Resistance as daily practice and the contextually specific issues that it seeks to address, over one generation or more, becomes structuring of people and the community. Protests are central to Otomi community cohesion. Resistance also exemplifies the womens' understanding that within the structures in which they live there are ways to counter the binds of the systems that oppress them and their community, one of them being through education.

Now to the issue of education. According to reports, 46.7% of women and 39.9% of men in indigenous communities are behind on their education.<sup>16</sup> This is an number that represents all indigenous groups in Mexico, however it reflects the lack of education opportunities and adequate educational resources of the Otomi living in Mexico City. Access to education for indigenous communities living in the State of Mexico also lie slightly below the average of the national level, at 5.81 percent compared to 6.01 percent of people having access to middle and higher education.<sup>17</sup> The problem with limited access to education relates to state education but also to the aforementioned lack of indigenous curriculum in the state education. To this point, illiteracy is contextually specific, with the understanding that knowledge has been colonised, illiteracy data often refers to state education. Even so, children's state education is a priority for Otomi mothers given how crucial it is to being able to challenge social marginalisation. Women, specifically in the Otomi community, must deal with the consequences of high levels of alcoholism and drug use among the men of their community. School is believed to be an environment that helps prevent young people of the community from getting involved in drug use, which is another incredibly important reason why mothers want their kids to go to school. Materially this is an important condition of contemporary gender balances. And in the interest of a design proposal this is important because the conditions within which women can collaborate are intricately connected to their material conditions. The consumption of alcohol and drugs from an

<sup>16</sup> Sandoval-Forero, Eduardo Andrés, and B. Jaciel Montoya-Arce. 'La educación indígena en el Estado de México'. *Papeles de población* 19, no. 75 (March 2013): 239–66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

early age that renders a lot of people incapacitated due to their addiction has required a lot of women to become the sole breadwinners of the household, accompanied by all the responsibility and stress this entails. This dynamic paired with a heavily masochistic culture, however, builds contemptuous emotions unfortunately leading to domestic violence cases, which is far from uncommon amongst the community. This contributes to the oppression of women within the Otomi community. Overall, having a largely single income household, an income which in the case of street sellers is highly unstable and low-income, further sediments the families in poverty. This means the women often must resist against three classes of discrimination, being women, being indigenous and being working class or poor. In the interest of identifying ways of resisting oppressive systems affecting Otomi women, education is fundamental. This also holds space for the questioning of what education means for different groups of people.

The previously introduced Otomi practices are pedagogical in nature, whether it is phrased as passing down knowledge from one generation to another or otherwise, these practices bridge contemporary and ancestral knowledge with their unique meanings and beliefs to construct a dynamic, contemporary framework of Otomi culture. They relate to the caring of the community, its history and memory. There is a saying, “Si tienes memoria y tienes su historia jamás vas a morir.”<sup>18</sup> It translates to “If you have memory and your history then you shall never die.” The process of cultural preservation results from intricate layers of memory that are stored in these everyday practices of the community. In the practices of care, there are different types of memory at play and in their conjunction allow for unwritten heritage elements to be passed down. To understand this further it is imperative to distinguish between the three forms of memory, as presented by Steigler, epiphylogenetic, sociogenetic and epigenetic. The epiphylogenetic understanding of memory bridges the nature-culture divide and presents them as sympoietic elements of evolution. “For Stiegler, technical objects are essentially to be understood as a form of social memory, constituting what he calls an epiphylogenetic memory (‘epi’ meaning on top of, through which an individual memory becomes available to the species-‘phylo’ as a whole.)”<sup>19</sup> For example, a traditional cooking utensil can be

18 Otomíes En La CDMX: Una Historia de Racismo En México | Documental, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNl0Ou8siDg>.

19 Lemmes, Pieter, and Yuk Hui. ‘Reframing the Technosphere: Peter Sloterdijk and Bernard Stiegler’s Anthropotechnological Diagnoses of the Anthropocene’. *Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*, no. 2 (2017): 28.

understood as a technical object that functions as an exteriorisation device for the Otomi becoming a technological memory of how and for what something can be used for. The making of a muñeca Lele, understanding the significance on the number of pleats of the dress, the braiding of the hair and the choice of material, all hold important cultural knowledge. The embroidery of tenangos, their colours and representation techniques also form part of the technological memory preserving Otomi heritage. Memory structures knowledge and in the words of Alicia Juarrero, “memories can thus become incorporated into governing constraints on possibility space.”<sup>20</sup> The traditional practices due their reliance on memory become affective in the evolution of Otomi culture.

As previously mentioned, Otomi women struggle against systems that discriminate against them due to their gender, indigeneity but also because they are migrants. An important part of the structuring of subjectivities in the Otomí community in Mexico City is their identity as migrants. While they are migrants from within Mexico, their relationship to the urban environment is adaptive and affective of the urban setting as well. It changes the social actors of their new territory; in the ways they are also being affected by their interactions with their new environment. The promise of better opportunities which led a lot of people to move to Mexico City neglected to consider the possible alienation of community and the dominance of western ideologies in the city. The Otomi do not integrate fully in the urban environment, they retain their ties to their cultural places of origin, something which builds a more complex identity. There is an active effort to introduce their own particular and rich cultural elements into the dominant culture. This has been so far successful partly due to the wealth of their practices and partly because this process adheres to the capitalist processes of commercialization of culture. Illustrative of this dynamic is noticing traditional Otomi clothing in central Mexico City. Outside of commercial activities or traditional celebrations, wearing clothing that in ways “betrays” someone’s indigeneity attracts attention and people opt not to wear them to avoid being discriminated against. Where can one come across women wearing Otomi clothing? Is it solely as street vendors or also in other in other professional and leisure settings? These attempts at resignification of customs from the community of origin into the dominant culture becomes subversive and an important form of resistance. The diversification of the cityscape and the context in which elements associated with indigenous culture can be seen

20 Juarrero, Alicia. *Context Changes Everything: How Constraints Create Coherence*. The MIT Press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14630.001.0001>: 144.



can combat the mystification or sensationalization of indigeneity. This begins to establish spatial dynamics that strengthens community spirit and encourages expressions of resistance. Traditional practices link the population residing in the city to the rural, geographically, but also the very acts of making have cultural significance. Tracing the community bonds that result from these practices is how the research parallels the feminist practice of examining the crucial role of cultivating community bonds and rejecting the individualistic capitalist ideologies has on community survival.



## EXTRAPOLATING PRACTICE

The process of further understanding the implications and connections of these practices led me to develop what would become a navigational tool based on Deleuze and Guattari's organisation of matter, in relation to content and expression. For each practice I have extrapolated on the scales of micro, meso and macro. By plotting these I can identify the ways in which each practice becomes transversal and, in their combination become affective and build intricate relationships of dependence, or otherwise assemblages. The assemblages at work are specific but their mechanics are generic. Precisely because the mechanics are generic, by understanding the spatial conditions that allow these assemblages to function in these ways I can propose other configurations that will in turn create change in the configuration of the assemblage. For example, a craftswoman participates in traditional practice that belongs to knowledge systems that are valuable in her community and as products that are able to be sold in the local market from where they can be commercialised. On the top down configuration this follows the way the commercialization of products makes them more desirable, creating competition, altering what is considered valuable which on the scale of the local market influences what is produced, sidelining tradition in favour of objects that are often fast produced, removed from processes of craftsmanship. These changes in the macro and micro scale alter the relations between the people that make products. In the Otomi community, products that are produced, besides their cultural and commercial value, have a role in building relations between the women and men that make them. The loss of these processes is damaging to community cohesion and dynamics. All of these configurations are isolated snapshots of possible interactions of the practices within active assemblages that are far more complex.

This arrangement highlights the practices as technologies of production, but understanding both the top down and bottom-up processes and how they relate, I can identify the technologies of power that are intricately intertwined with the way these are connected. Since these technologies do not work separately, what also is imbued within this are the technologies of the self. Specifically, the way in which these become identities and then societal constraints dictating the capacity of Otomi women to function outside of them. On the micro scale, a practice can be seen to sit inside and at the same time outside capitalist processes. Given that so far the artistry has not been fully commercialised Muñecas and tenangos are still prepared by hand with all the labour hours that it requires. Yet, given that products are sold in ordinary markets in Mexico City and around the world, they are influenced by capitalist processes which seek to extract value and make profit.



24



Commercialization

Market-place      agricul-  
ture

cook      commer-  
cialization

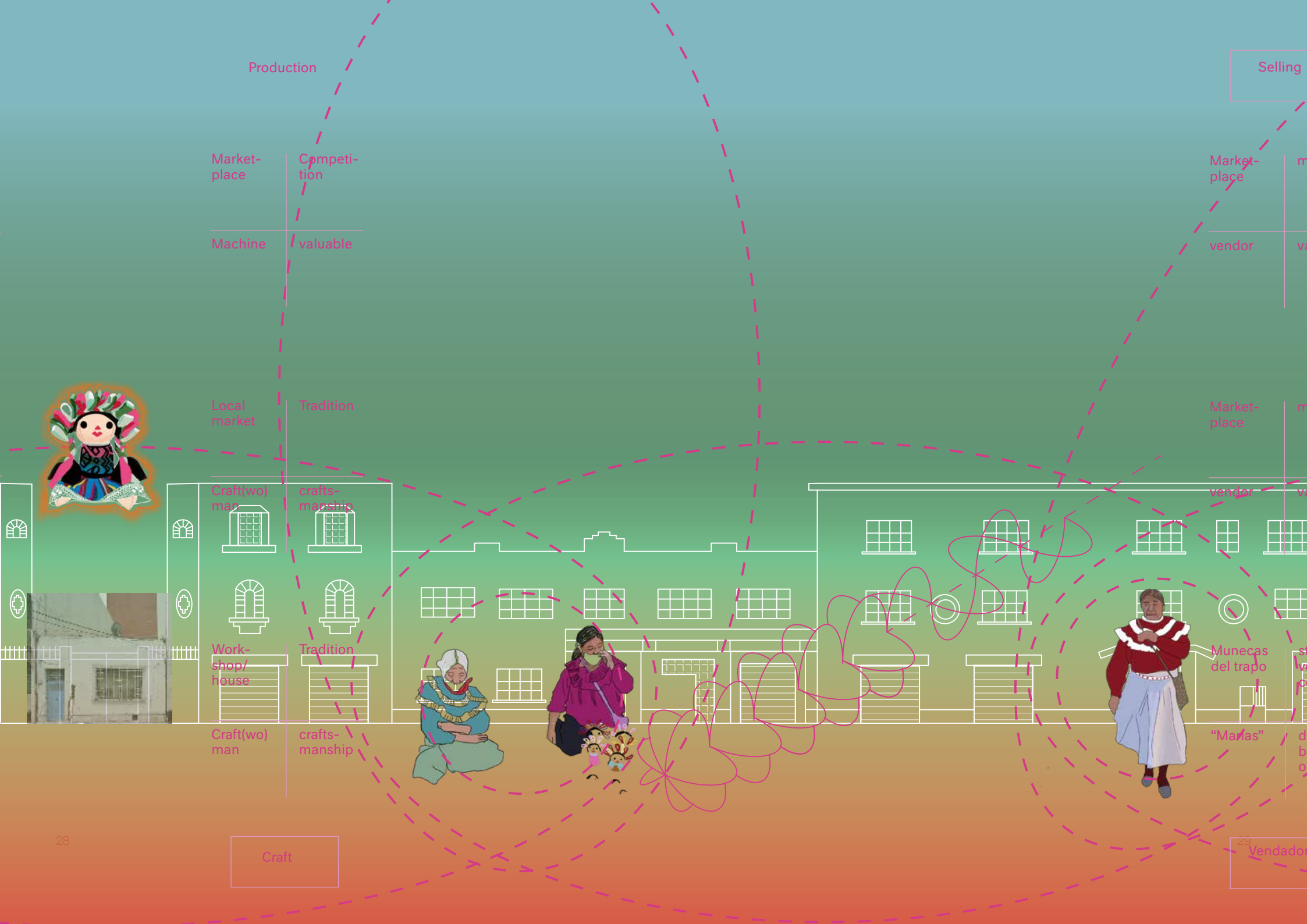
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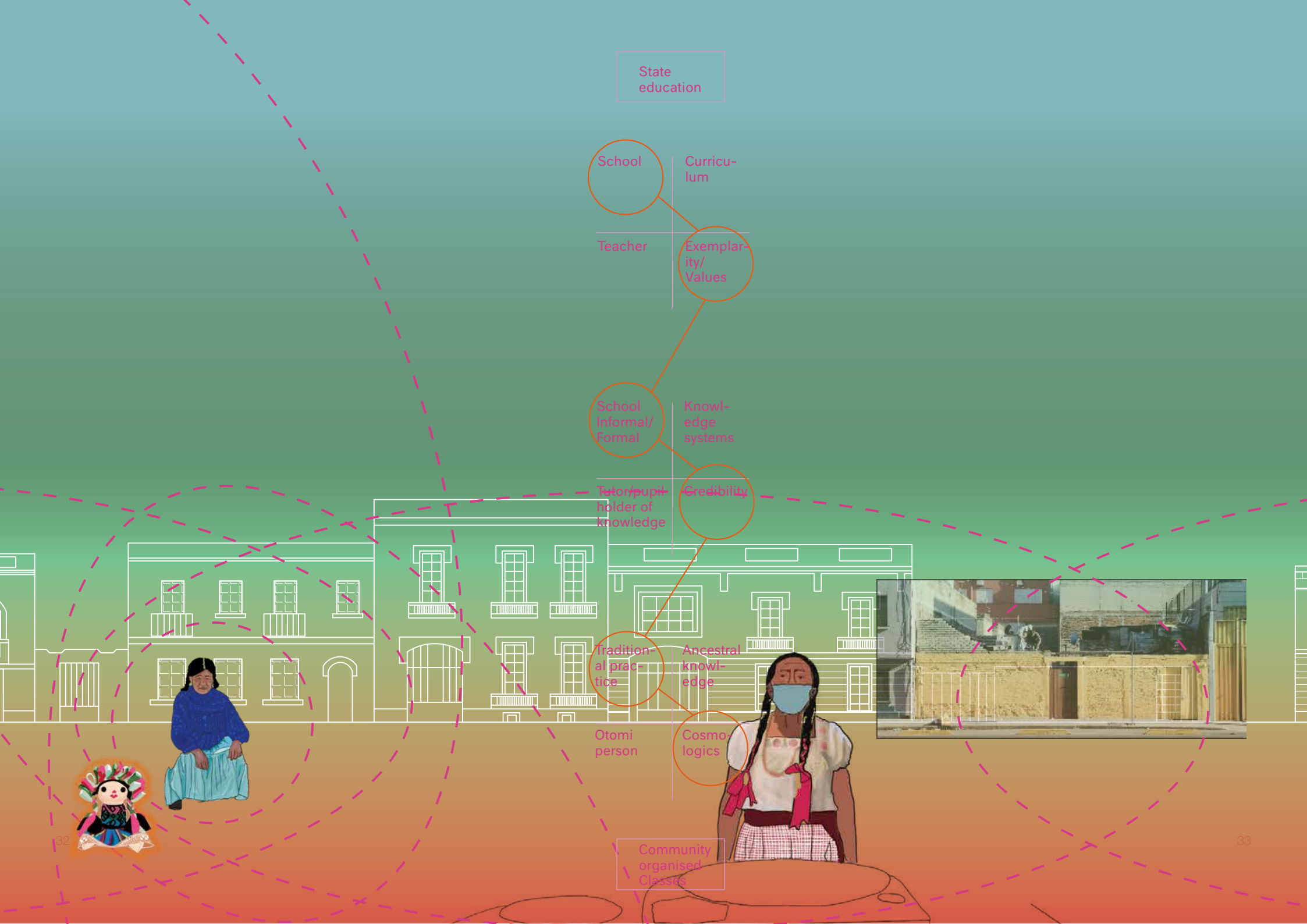
table      agricul-  
ture

cook      seasons

27  
Cooking







Protesting

Municipality

legal framework

Activist

Citizenship

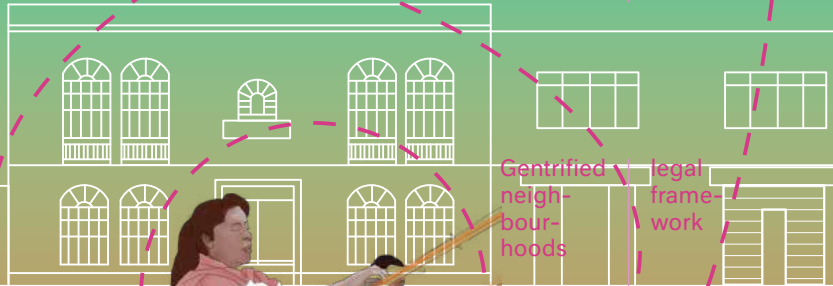
Municipality

legal framework

Activist

Citizenship

School Informal/Formal



Gentrified neighbourhoods

legal framework

Otomi protestors

Citizenship



Protest

Otomi person





## PROCESSES OF TRANSLATION

During my visit to Mexico City this past February, I attempted to get in touch with women of the Otomi community. While I was not able to establish trust and have long conversations during my short time there, I spent my time noticing. I walked around the area of Colonia Roma and Zona Rosa and I came across a lot of women selling products on the street, in market stands and in mercados. However, there was one instance that stood out. I came across a *Maria*, a street seller, that was resting, asleep on the sidewalk waiting for customers. In the process of research I had not given enough space to consider time of rest in the unfolding of these cultural practices. This brought to the forefront that this project is one of translations. Translation of perceptions and priorities, whether those of the Otomi women and other Mexico City residents or my own. There are specificities of how these practices are embodied and experienced that I was not aware of and varying processes of translations needed to occur for the proposal to come to reflect the lived experience of being an Otomi woman in Mexico City. Translation in this instance can be understood as "drawing one world making project into another."<sup>21</sup> One of the great pleasures of these project has been the ability to learn from the world making or cosmotechnics of Otomi women.

An important and yet often dismissed part of urban life is the necessity for rest. Rest is not only necessary but it is also a subversive form of resistance. "Sleeping bodies outside the domestic realm challenge the racist and sexist logics of the neoliberal city."<sup>22</sup> I am interested in the possibilities of urban space to be used in non-conformist ways that question the way cities have been designed and for whom. Rest is often dismissed and yet the very expression of exhaustion publicly brings to light the difficult working conditions and need for rest. The implications of adequate rest are far-reaching, from the body to the community. Tricia Hersey, founder of the Nap Ministry, has dedicated her research to the impact of rest and to quote her, "to uplift rest from a community care ethic is to interrupt the dominant culture while giving the power back to the people where it belongs."<sup>23</sup> In the vastness of Mexico City where labour, harsh working conditions due to climate and work insecurity, rest is especially pertinent. Our understanding of rest is cultural, the degree to which people

21 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015. 62.

22 Peirson, Ellen. 'Rest in Public as Resistance'. *Architectural Review* (blog), 9 August 2022. <https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/rest-in-public-as-resistance>.

23 Hersey, Trisha. *Rest Is Resistance: Free Yourself from Grind Culture and Reclaim Your Life*. Great Britain: Aster, 2022. 66.

feel they have a *right* to it, where and when they can rest is largely societally negotiated. The language around it reveals the boundaries of rest in communities. This is where translation becomes important yet again, in its more literal definition. The word rest, *descansar* in Spanish, is *tsaya* or *ntsaya* in HÑÄHÑÜ, the Otomi language, however, it is also a courtesy word for when one receives a visitor. So, *tsaya* refers to rest and hospitality. Community being central to the structure of Otomi society, it is unsurprising that hospitality is akin to rest, if we understand rest and hosting others as rejuvenating practices and vital to the preservation of cultural life. This dual understanding of rest became a starting point for the conceptual development of the design. Centred around spaces of rest and gathering, I can honour the value of community in Otomi society while acknowledging the everyday rhythms of life that require respite.

Having established the demanding life led by Otomi women who are providers and protectors, rest becomes a decolonial and feminist tool of resistance. Beyond this, what does to decolonise specifically in architecture entail?



english

spanish

otomi

Rest

Descansar

tsaya

n' tsaya



**WOMAN IN REST, COLONIA ROMA, COMX.**

From a research perspective it is possible to engage with discourse, with readings and ethnographic findings around the injustices and struggles of people. As a practitioner however, knowing the importance of participatory design, of immersing oneself in the culture to better understand it, it becomes more challenging to accept the responsibility of imposing oneself and one's design intentions onto a community. Decolonising is intricately related to the future and to world building. Through the design I seek to understand my response-ability to the conditions that I have identified in Roma Norte and the Otomi women. The community already has the response-ability to address the issues I discuss, as a designer I wish to work on mine. In this line of thinking, the choice of working in an urban environment is also significant. As expressed by Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, the City has always been a colonial battalion,<sup>24</sup> the way the city is structured and continues to be restructured makes indigenous culture subordinate to the dominant other and hence the spotlighting and literal making of space for any Indigenous groups is part of the decolonial process. Challenging the privileged spaces of encounters lies within my design intentions.

The Otomí serve as stratigraphic elements and ardent fighters of the immorality of capitalist systems that contribute to humanity, becoming the writers of its death (speaking of the capitalist systems). They are an example of consistency in the everchanging landscape of the world. Kathryn Yusoff writes of the landscape of the 'future geologist... a foil, a material and discursive device to trace a geological sentence back and forth across this epochal threshold.'<sup>25</sup> If I adopt the role of the geologist to practice this back and forth in the context of the Mexican plateaus the Otomí stand as an example of consistency. The practices of care and production allow for their cultural preservation, central to which is the respect and symbioses with the greater ecosystem. Kathryn Yusoff introduces *nature is us* a concept of a future existence where there will no longer be discourse that separates the human from nature. For the Otomí, "*nature is us* is not a future moment, it is a now and has always been part of the structuring ideology. To quote an Otomi woman during an-interview: "Cuales son las demandas históricas que ha tenido específicamente el pueblo otomí?

La vida, el agua, el bosque, las montañas porque son nuestra vida, madre

<sup>24</sup> Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. *Mexico Profundo: reclaiming a civilization*. University of Texas Press, 1996.

<sup>25</sup> Yusoff, Kathryn. 'Anthropogenesis: Origins and Endings in the Anthropocene'. *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 2 (1 March 2016): 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276415581021>. 4.

tierra."<sup>26</sup>

The bifurcation of nature and human, their consideration as not being parts of the same whole have created opportunities where man is pictured a subject upon nature and creates space to act as an independent agent on the thing that is termed nature. This is evident in the construction of Mexico City, the disregard of the original fresh water lake the city is built on, which now poses a major challenge for the government and the citizens because of the frequent flooding of the city and the impending lack of useable water. The collection, filtration and re-distribution of rain water on site will be one way the project is decolonial since it will give Otomi women useable water, through passive management becoming a part of a larger system for a water sensitive Mexico City. My own intervention, follows the plan already set forth by the Dutch companies De Urbanisten and Deltares, in collaboration with the Municipality of Mexico City,<sup>27</sup> which relates to smaller urban interventions that will allow for the retention and reuse of rain water due to the location of the site on the original fresh water lake.

Decoloniality, resistance and struggle is embodied differently in the Otomi community of Mexico City than in other parts of the country or any other community. It is local and embodied with the specificity of the Mexico City sidewalk, in the way it affords Otomi women to sell muñecas del trapo and other small products by occupying a part of it. Also, in the way it allows active protest by closing the road. It is local in the way the touristification of Mexico City controls the quantity of Otomi products that are sold as signifiers of indigenous culture as a whole with or without the nuance of heritage, historic and contemporary significance. It is local in the available government programmes that fill gaps that previously overlooked indigenous communities and their rights to housing and other public services.

<sup>26</sup> *Entrevista Comunidad Otomi CDMX (primera parte)*. Radio Kuruf, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkCYeQY3OI>.

<sup>27</sup> Eduardo Marín Salinas. *Towards a Water Sensitive Mexico City: Public Space as a Rain Management Strategy*, 2016. <http://archive.org/details/water-sensitive-mexico-city>.

## CONTAMINATED DIVERSITY

In all the location's specificity it remains diverse. The chosen site is an entangled territory as it involve many agents. They all have unique ways in which domination and resistance present themselves within the dynamic contextual relations. Anna Tsing writes of contaminated diversity,<sup>28</sup> a requirement for survival. Tracing the particular ways the environment is diverse due to its relational contamination allows for a better understanding of the general and particular agents that are possibly encountering one another on the site. In the case of the corner of Glorieta de los Insurgentes I have identified those as being existing infrastructure (conditions), Otomi women, outside users, the design proposal, water cultivated and reused and vegetation, existing and introduced. These have become functional constraints with which to navigate the site in order to design spaces for productive encounters with the goal of positively altering the assemblage arrangements that are oppressive to Otomi women. They are inextricably bound, working in conjunction to create the possibility space of how things will unfold. By changing the conditions of one, all will be affected. This connects back to the understanding that *nature is us*. The existing infrastructure and amenities, invites or deters certain users, which in turn can create a hostile or inviting environment within which the Otomi women can work and rest. At the same time, rest is reliant on certain needs having been met, such as a comfortable shades space, hunger, thirst and other urban affects having been addressed. This is why vegetation and water, especially in a water scarce city such as Mexico City, are so vital in any proposal. They extend comfort from immediate relief to long-term security, at least in the confines of the site. The agency of each one becomes an instigators for the processes of another. For example, vegetation, of the verb vegetate, *to live or spend a period of time in a dull, inactive, unchallenging way*, etymologically relates to rest yet in the project, the vegetation used, such as large evergreen trees and medicinal plants come to create spaces that seek to allow the body to rest either by providing shade or alimentation. At the same time, the sustenance of these plants is reliant on irrigation provided by either rain or treated water from the proposed water system, as well as their maintenance by either Otomi women or outside users. All of these relations have been taken into consideration and have directed the design considering the climate of Mexico City and what the existing conditions allow. But again, all of these are considered within the specificity of Glorieta de los Insurgentes in Colonia Roma.

28 Lowenhaupt Tsing, Anna. *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Princeton University Press, 2015. 32.



The area of colonia Roma was an attractive option for this project given its proximity to high traffic areas such as Chapultepec Avenue and Avenida Insurgentes, which allows the Otomi to sell products on the street. As is argued by Manuel DeLanda, habit is a critical factor of territorialization<sup>29</sup> and the practices of making and selling muñecas, as well as embroidery and cooking (out with of their commercial success and serving as the primary source of income for the women) help in defining boundaries where the community resides and works which further promotes and solidifies their social networks. It is significant that the community has set foundations in Roma Norte and have allocated resources and time over the past 40 years to claim space and occupy it as a community.

The design will try and build on the values of the Otomi living in Mexico City, one that relates to the indigenous knowledges and practices in convergence with the contemporary living requirements of an urban mezcla environment. As it stands the city is functioning on multiple levels of seen and unseen worlds. The Otomi occupied land in Colonia Roma takes the form of sight unseen, they are obscure facades that do not wish to attract attention, existing next to new development of luxury housing that advertise their availability with large posters, further boasting about the amenities of the area, most of which is financially unattainable for the Otomi community, whose resources are limited and amenities poor. This creates small urban enclaves that work on the basis of whether or not they want to be made visible to the passers-by, attracting and detracting attention accordingly. "Urban enclaves are spaces in contemporary cities which are defined by specific recognizable boundaries within the city and are explicitly connected with specific protocols of use. Urban enclaves are the islands of the urban archipelago."<sup>30</sup> The informal housing settlements, like the one at Zacatecas 74 and Chapultepec 380, have strict boundaries, demarcated by metal sheeting and high brick walls respectively, preventing passerbys from being able to look into the property. Some of the spaces inhabited by the Otomi community in Colonia Roma are informally agreed upon as theirs and their rights to occupy those spaces are often threatened. The plots of land on which they have built homes have been occupied and their ownership questioned. There

29 DeLanda, Manuel. *Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh University Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474413640>. 27.

30 Stavrides, Stavros. *Common Space the City as Commons*. London: Zed Books, 2016. <http://www.vlebooks.com/vleweb/product/openreader?id=Edinburgh&isbn=9781783603299>. 18.

seems to be problem of ownership and property amongst the Otomi in Mexico City especially during times of growth and touristification of those very areas with property prices increasing and benefits of selling or repurposing land into hotels or commercial spaces rising.

The diversity of Colonia Roma is far from a negative thing. It not only reflects the multiplicity of Mexico City but it also gives space to pluriversality since it already serves such a varied group of people. The issue lies with whether there are spaces that are inclusive and sensitive to all the people inhabiting the area. I do not wish to disregard that by opening up the programme, to other human and non-human actors it will lead to further disharmony. By loosening measures of control, environmental and in terms of access it broadens possibilities yet heightens risk. Physical safety is a serious concern in Mexico City, something which has not escaped my attention, however, in researching the other properties belonging, either under law or in the way they are occupied, to the Otomi community I have come to realise that there is a sense of collective responsibility around the safety of the space and a respect for the spaces from outsiders because they are Otomi spaces. Even if the community has to deal with structural systems of oppression and commonplace prejudice, the communality of their spaces, safeguards them to a degree from further harassment. "The power to define the meaning of a place is also the power to create symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion."<sup>31</sup> In my position as the designer, I have indeed *defined a meaning of place* and I recognise the importance of acknowledging the obscured relations of inclusion and exclusion that will result from the proposal. I can speculate on them but rather I can reiterate my intent which is to create a safe space for the women of the Otomi community, where they manage the accessibility to the space to outside users depending on their own needs. A place that turns their practices into practice of everyday resistance and rest.

31 Kern, Leslie. 2022. *Gentrification Is Inevitable and Other Lies*. London ; Brooklyn, NY: Verso. 39.



**hmunts'i**

spn. reunion  
eng. gathering

**et'i**

spn. plantar  
eng. to plant

**thi**

spn. baño  
eng. restroom

**|butho**

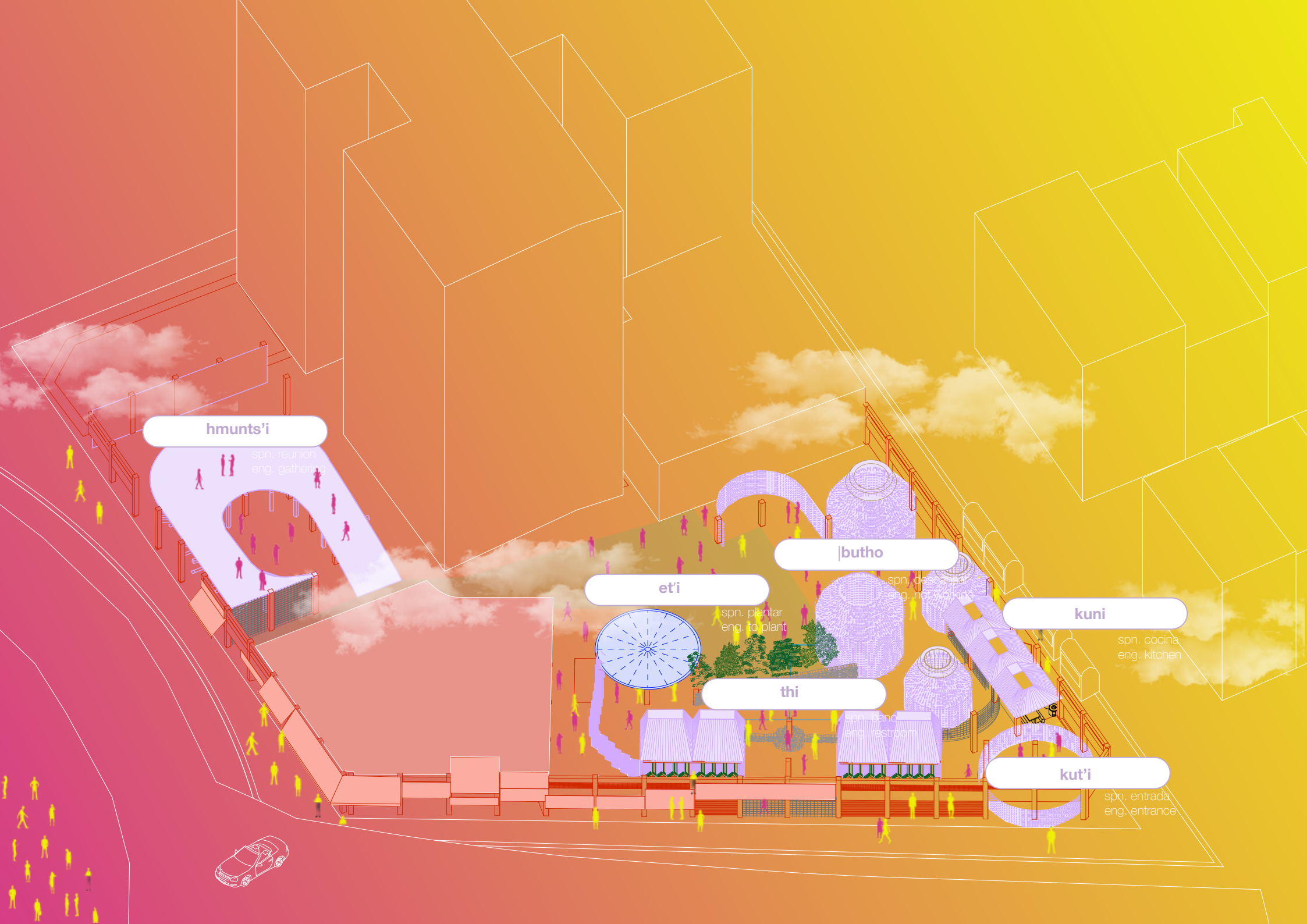
spn. de  
eng. now

**kuni**

spn. cocina  
eng. kitchen

**kut'i**

spn. entrada  
eng. entrance



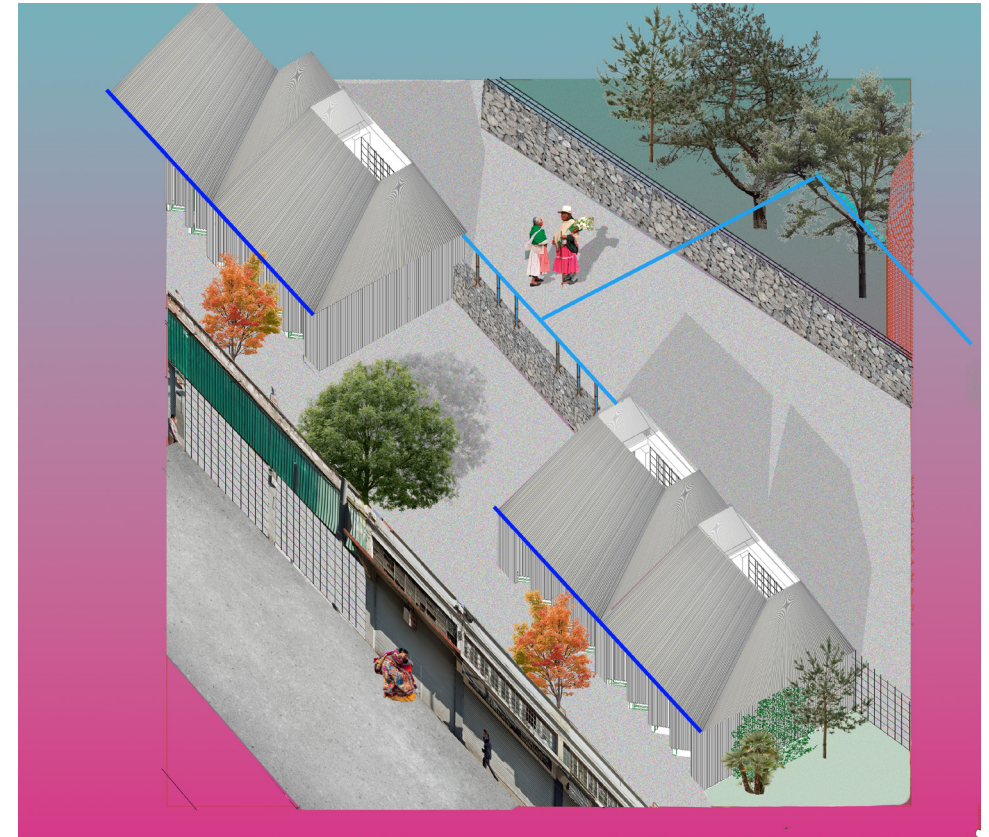
## IN INCONCLUSION

The research has allowed me to engage with non-Western ways of thinking, challenging any idea of universal values, both in relation to societal understanding but also in terms of architectural practice. The function of architecture as mediator could not be approached in the same way as anywhere else. The material conditions which it is tasked to mediate are bound in colonial, sexist and classist ideologies entangled with rich indigenous knowledges and practices. The framework then of decolonial and feminist practice, of tracing of community bonds, specifically as they are created through Otomi practices can address those conditions with respect to their entanglements.

The programme will work towards new solutions and strategies of accommodation that allow the Otomi to survive as a distinguishable collectivity, whose members have access to their own common cultural patrimony. Space is conceived more in terms of continuous collective relationships that in terms of privacy. Through the proposal I seek to identify how the site agents can have the most empowering process of interfacing. By identifying them and the conditions that direct their movement I speculate on the ways that positive encounters can occur within the corner of Glorieta de Insurgentes.

This research project has not come to a conclusion, presented in this paper are what has come of this process so far and yet I will remain interested in further understanding the conditions of life in Mexico City for the women of the Otomi community. With all the layers, conditions and constraints of this project it feels as though beyond the technical aspects, nothing can be fully resolved. It is, after all, a speculative process of translations with the ultimate goal of establishing space for encounters. Ones that spur conversations, that in turn fuel resistance efforts, that are grounded on invaluable indigenous knowledge and practices. For all its speculations, I use the research as my support of their realisability. The project developed alongside the way my thinking changed, processes of broadening and focusing, the former giving me invaluable contextual and historical information and the latter introducing specifics about moments of encounter that create change. I most certainly will be revisiting this project, not in the sense of reworking but in hopefully expanding upon it, based on the foundations it has provided through the theoretical framework and design process.

I can only hope that I have done justice to the way of life of Otomi women and translated the specificities of their embodied experience with care.



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