

# REFLECTION CHAPTER

## Overview

The following chapter elaborates on an extensive reflection regarding the conducted research by design 'Asymmetries of Power' towards several topics such as its relationship with the studio-Complex Cities, the methodology and framework's capacity to strategically plan in a complex emergent metropolis of the global south and the potential transferability of the objectives and strategies in other vulnerable contexts.

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The Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico functions under a neoliberal top-down approach towards decision making processes. Regarding urban development this approach has several downsides reflecting the current unjust emergent metropolitan process that worsens the conditions of the most vulnerable population. Lack of accessibility to metropolitan functions such as public transport, job sources, public space, and socio-ecological vulnerabilities such as environmental decay, pollution and water scarcity which are just a fraction of a problem that constrains local development but that can be shifted with new arrangements in the governance system.

This report grounds its conceptualization on the potentials and capacities that local communities can have against the general metropolitan problematisation of social segregation and spatial fragmentation. From that point forward, the adaptive strategic planning suggest a balanced relationship between bottom-up and top-down approaches. However this might become the most difficult challenge of the approach since it necessarily needs of high power level stakeholders to engage agreements and open collaboration not only with each other but with local communities as well.

## 1\_ Method and approach of the graduation project

The studio Complex Cities grounds its focus on the most vulnerable urban environments, which require strategic spatial planning in order to overcome their current and future urban challenges. From this point forward, the selected metropolitan area became an ideal testing ground for strategic adaptability. The method proposed by the adaptive strategic framework acts in several dimensions of the territory; from actors and their capacity to arrange a new governance-decision making system, design and its core role in adaptation, the proposed main principles that bring together several strategies which depend on the correlation of different scales, time and levels of participation to the value of new urban agglomerations defined as sub-centralities to foster endogenous development.

### 1.1\_ The decision making system

Redefining the role of the different actors that can be potentially affected or involved by any of the spatial configurations framed by the approach of this report is a 'must' in order to successfully achieve spatial cohesion.

As a way to practice a more just decision making in the emergent metropolis (MAVM), the bottom-up perspective thus the role of the local actors (civil society) has to change from a being mainly reactors of change to active participants of decisions for change, as for the normative role of public actors (top-down perspective) needs to change to higher interest levels and flexible capacities. Selection and definition of strategies and actions has to be a participatory process that strengths internal and external connections between them, mediating and regulating the multiple interests at stake. This process can be arranged by civil society, NGO's or the public sector. However the proposed actions need to be evaluated by a multidisciplinary team depending of the urban spatial, functional and environmental conditions of the area. This process certainly enables a platform for collaboration to stress the highest possibilities.

Nevertheless there are fundamental tasks that different actors have to address and agree before implementation phases as a way to achieve the settled goals, this process can be long, and interests might change over time, thus limiting transformation. Therefore the proposed framework enables the exploration of scenarios through different pathways as a way to increase options (social and spatial) and reduce bottlenecks during the process.

### 1.2\_ The role of Design on adaptation

Design in this report is the core of the adaptation process, it supports, translates and integrates its different parts acting as a mediator of the planning framework and governance capacities; strategies and objectives; users/participants, and making processes, enabling a coherent process of participation. In this regard, Design acts across different scales and time adding to its capacity of evolutionary change.

### 1.3\_ The value of the main principles (systemic goals)

For a coherent transformation and adaptation the socio-ecological dimension was included in the framework as being essential part of the complex nature of the thesis. The combination of governance, formal and functional structures in the urban fabric with socio-ecological systems allowed the formulation of 5 systemic goals that through connectedness and potentials determine spatial strategies (actions), first at the local level with the capacity to influence a cross border activation. These 5 main principles stress different dimensions of actors, scales and time, thus their capacity for transformation is directly dependent of how those factors generate synergies between them so to increase, accelerate or stagnate adaptation.

During the last chapter of the report, 'adaptive change' was mostly affected by the interests at stake. Different Interest levels regarding the specific goals (main principles) increased at the local level, thus attracting from a bottom-up perspective higher levels of power, until pairing their interests towards an effective adaptive transformation. However since interests are directly proportional to the transformation capacities without them change will not be possible.

### 1.4\_ The value of the sub-centre

The gates, or sub-centres aim for a policentricity in the selected vulnerable area as a way to establish new local connections at the municipal level to a cross municipal perspective enhancing endogenous capacities to counteract the monofunctional character that currently defines them. It has to be noted that several studies define centres and sub-centres as monofunctional spatial configurations mainly related with employment capacities (Krehl, A., Siedentop, S. 2019). However due to the multidimensional exploration in this report, defining the gates as mainly job sources seemed to be a short definition under the proposed framework.

The approach presented in the report, 'the system of gates' enables a new contextualized definition of what a sub-centre can be, an agglomeration capable of reducing the segregated conditions in the selected context. It is not about jobs or density as isolated variables, but about other dimensions as well, such as public space accessibility, enhanced urban lifestyles, accessibility to public transport, resilient capacities and connectedness to other urban functions across borders, in short, more variables need to be added to be considered a sub-centre. By means of design explorations of different gates it was revealed that the aforementioned dimensions can be stress differently among them.

To conclude, the gates establish a connectivity with the overall metropolitan structure, creating opportunities for local development capable of overcoming segregation and fragmentation by means of enhanced economic and community activities that together define a new system of sub-centralities increasing local competitiveness while becoming more attractive to local residents until reaching a higher hierarchy within the metropolitan structure, a metropolitan sub-centre with higher value towards the main centralities.

## 2\_ Societal value, ethical aspects and wider scientific relevance of the graduation project

### 2.1\_Scientific relevance

Recently several approaches have been explored in similar contexts known for their vulnerable conditions, all of which have been proven successful in a theoretical level. This specific research seeks to add to the knowledge of the global south as one of the first adaptive approaches using research by design in the Mexican context (under socio-spatial segregation) capable of adding to the discourse and contemporary debate of spatial justice.

The research project develops an adaptive approach capable of being reproduced in other contexts with its appropriate contextualisation. It deals with 5 systemic goals (water landscape integration and management, green infrastructure system and quality of public and open space, densification of the built system, productive landscapes and means of production, transport and mobility system) that influence any urbanised territory in a multi-dimensional and multi-scalar way, from micro to large actions that influence the dynamics of the given urban system.

### 2.2\_Societal relevance

The project seeks to understand the current socio-spatial segregation condition of the area where fast metropolisation process overcame the urban planning agenda, unable to find solutions to its vulnerable condition. This is embedded in the core of Mexican society which is looking urgently to an urban paradigm shift, a transition that is not only the task of urbanists and planners but it is a goal to be achieved at a multidisciplinary level, institutionally, legally, and academically.

If one of the goals from PND (National development plan) is to increase and democratise the productivity of Mexican economy, then, reducing socio-spatial segregation must be within the same interests towards a more inclusive and just metropolis.

### 2.3\_ Ethical considerations

Mexico's urban planning has been developed under a top-down fashion and certainly has been making progress regarding this matter. The proposed approach to the problematisation of the thesis project suggests a better engagement between actors, it prioritises the process over the final project itself since its success depends on their fruitful collaboration. This necessary condition touches one of the most sensitive topics in the country, 'trust in the political power', which is basically low since the neoliberal economy favours the already privileged and worsens the conditions of the most vulnerable population. People do not trust their government, and the government itself is not flexible enough. Engaging the population on the process proposed by the project and making successful arrangements of collaboration between powers of governance are indeed the biggest challenges.

## 3\_ Scope and limitation of the graduation project

The graduation project became an evolutionary process, constantly changing and continuously challenging its theoretical foundation. The biggest challenge of the project in terms of definition was 'scale' and the effects that different layers have towards the vulnerable condition of the studied metropolitan area. During the research this became the biggest challenge since decisions had to be made in order to tackle the problematisation. As such the scope of the research focused on the broader general analysis in order to depict a manageable scale for intervention which had to be carefully studied. From that point forward the research and design strategies became contextualised and real.

The second challenge of the project was the level of specificity required in the systemic goals which are used to develop the adaptive approach since each of them require an extensive metropolitan evaluation. The graduation project focuses on a manageable scale for the assessment and evaluation processes, thus leaving the overall metropolitan evaluation in a future stage of the research.

The third challenge of the thesis and the biggest procedural one has to deal with the stakeholders and the governance system of the area. During the fieldtrip several interviews were cancelled or postponed due to private interests involved. Information in this regard was gathered by interviewing professionals that had been in contact with the greater governance forces in the country. When studying the specific areas of the project security measures made harder to get in touch with local people involved in irregular land arrangements. Information that was learned from a last minute interview with a local architect whose work is embedded in vulnerable contexts.

Overall the access to the factual and relevant information of current strategic projects and actors required for the graduation project became one of its greatest limitations. The country develops most of the projects in a top-down fashion and information remains in secrecy.

The last limitation is data collection since the country develops a census every 10 years meaning that the data is outdated and will have to be revised once the new census is out. Moreover theoretical papers, and essays regarding the development of the metropolis are not up to date, and the newest publications also use outdated information. This particular condition will limit the final results in a particular level.

#### 4\_ Transferability of the project results

The research project is carried out in a specific area of the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico, taking a specific large urban project as a trigger for the adaptive approach. It has to be pointed out that the goal of the research is to develop a strategic approach towards socio-spatial cohesion, an objective that can be transferred to any other metropolitan area, specifically in the contexts of Latin America.

Adaptation is embedded in the multidimensional decision making process that fosters collaboration between different actors from private, public to civil society, strengthening social alliances, looking for aligned objectives and possibilities in the urban system in a co-evolutionary process. Because of this reason the scope of planning frameworks can readjust by applying the proposed adaptive strategic framework in this report. However it has to be pointed out that strategies and actions may change according to other contexts since social, cultural, economic and political dimensions are different across boundaries with particular vulnerabilities. Nevertheless segregation and fragmentation are both global concerns that can be improved by expanding the scope of current planning frameworks which have shown to be outdated, normative and inflexible to contemporary concerns.

#### 5\_Relationship between research and design

The graduation project is developed under a research by design approach. A thorough theoretical background is carried out in order to develop the methodological approach which guide the entire process of the project. However it has to be clear that design and particularly the design of a complex metropolitan area such as the MAVM requires a constant adaptation even in the process itself.

The complexity and scale of the metropolitan functions and their impact in the vulnerabilities are such that a complete research on every single one is beyond the scope of the graduation thesis. It is because of this reason that the process changed while the research was carried out, narrowing the general problematisation until a manageable scale through which the design can be handled. As such the multiscalar nature of the project is essential to understand the final design. The constant research envelopes the different scales and dimensions of the project from morphological and functional relations to governance processes that influence decision making process where urban design and policy making directly influence the impact that urban planning has in the general urban structure. Understanding the overall metropolitan structure by means of assessing its different layers at different scales allows the design strategies to become more than just ideals but instead they transform into feasible possibilities that if implemented can positively contribute to the problematisation.

About the relation between the (a) graduation project topic with (b) the studio topic, (c) master track and (d) master programme

- a. Graduation project topic: Asymmetries of Power: Adaptive spatial planning as a process to reduce social segregation and spatial fragmentation in the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico
- b. Complex Cities of the Global South
- c. Urbanism
- d. Msc4

\_a and b

The research is part of the Complex Cities studio which has as part of its focus the 'global south' and their socio-spatial problematisations that have a specific urgency due to the fast growing population and urbanisation processes of their cities. In this regard the studio's strategy helps to the understanding of this issues under the framework of spatial planning and strategy which is of the most importance when dealing with complex metropolises such as the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico. Therefore the studio's goals and the research proposed by this thesis are aligned, while the later seeks to contribute to the knowledge carried out at the studio.

\_a and c

The graduation project relates directly to the field not just because of dealing with an urban area but because of the adaptive approach taken which lies in the contemporary concerns of the biggest and most vulnerable metropolises in the world. A strategic pathway that enables socio-spatial cohesion.

\_a and d

The graduation project tests the knowledge acquired in the previous courses, since the adaptive strategy suggests 5 systemic goals, each one deals with a different system of the urban realm, public space, water, transport and mobility, densification and productive landscapes. It is certainly a way to adapt the previous knowledge in one synthetic strategy, capable of achieving the aim proposed by the research project.

## 6\_ The challenge of complexity and uncertainty

Complexity in urban systems requires multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to arrange feasible strategies. This is one of the main challenges, since actors in this regard work at multidimensional levels (e.g. time, scale), particularly in the MAVM and its most vulnerable areas self-governance arrangements (informal practices of land development) paired with high power interests (mainly political) blur the possibility of understanding how certain areas are developed weakening their potential for change and operability forecasted by planning strategies. Moreover emergent metropolis systems are composed by dynamic networks constantly interacting with each other, relationships of the whole system that affect the smallest pieces that conform it. However, the study of its parts does not guarantee a complete understanding of the whole since uncertainty can emerge at any given point of an evolutionary process changing the system dynamics from different angles in unexpected ways.

Complexity and uncertainty are main challenges when it comes to developing new frameworks that seek adaptation, different paths need to be consider in order to be prepared for disruption in the system. However, only by increasing our strategic planning scope we as urban-designers will be able to approach the new challenges faced by our contemporary world and future externalities that will required a rapid adaptation of the urban system in order to be able to surpass them.

In this regard COVID-19 disrupted the live as we know it forcing new policies and alliances to overcome tragedy, but above all the negative effects brought by the pandemic we have to remain positive towards the new platforms open to discussions, debates and think tanks of the ideas that will shape our future cities forcing a change in gear towards adaptation capacities.