

# Architecture, urban form, and assemblage aesthetics in Mexico City's street markets

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to consider Mexico City's street markets as temporary and modular architectural products that emerge out of intensive, routine and repeated negotiations over urban spatial affordances in a crowded metropolitan environment. Particular attention is given to the polychromatic visual form, not as some detached work of art, but as a collection of tiny signals of the labor, commerce and social relations unfolding below.

**Design/methodology/approach** – For this paper, the author has deployed a methodological approach that blends scholarship and creative practice. From 2016 to 2018, the author conducted fieldwork during three trips to Mexico City, making site visits, undertaking structured observation and engaging in conversations with vendors and customers. The author also collected data available from various municipal agencies, and reportage from newspaper articles, blogs and magazines. Meanwhile, the author developed a creative practice method grounded in the production of rendered aerial views, which allowed for the identification of typologies based on the organizational logics of the street markets.

**Findings** – The paper identifies five typologies of street market, including: the linear, the circuit, the cluster, the contour and the hybrid. The application of these typologies by street market vendors allows for the optimal exploitation of spatial allotments for buying and selling goods. In the end, the paper reveals the polychromatic markets as expressions of an assemblage aesthetic, each a variation on a theme grounded in the cumulative daily choices, desires, routines and thickly woven collaborations of working-class people in one of the world's great conurbations.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study is based on a limited number of cases. There are currently 1,400 street markets regularly operating in Mexico City, 200 of which set up on any given day. In order to provide some depth and texture to the study, this paper only examines 15 markets falling into the five typologies identified above. Further research would help to refine these typologies, quantify the daily and quarterly transactions that take place in the markets and assess the impacts of street vending on their surroundings.

**Social implications** – Mexico City's street markets provide employment for some 800,000 vendors, suppliers, transporters and laborers. They also provide one-fifth of all household goods purchased in the city and 40 percent of all fresh produce. And despite the conflicts that arise, they offer an associational approach to the labor of street vending, as well as crucial economic opportunities for women with children. However, it is apparent that street markets face a range of challenges that could be mitigated with supportive policies.

**Originality/value** – While there is a small and growing literature on Mexico City's street markets, there is no work to date that examines the assemblage aesthetic that comprises their daily emergence on the landscape. Nor do any extant studies situate the aesthetic composition within the varied urban forms, social relations and labor practices that undergird the street markets.

**Keywords** Street markets, Mexico City, Modular, Temporary architecture, Labour, Aesthetics, Globalization

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

One of Mexico City's most vital institutions is the tianguis or street market. On any given morning, scores of tianguis blossom across the metropolitan landscape, abuzz with activity, their colored canopies stretching through the arteries and intersections of the urban fabric. Organized on a quasi-formal basis, the municipal government estimates that over 1,400 tianguis regularly operate in the city, drawing on 46,000 suppliers and providing economic sustenance to some 800,000 people (Ciudad de México, 2010). And while they are not part of the city's formal planning apparatus, they nevertheless constitute a routine feature of everyday life in the capital.



This essay examines the form and aesthetics of the tianguis, using their striking colors to emphasize their insertion into the urban fabric (Figure 1). It is part of a broader study of Mexico City's urban morphologies and cultures grounded in fieldwork, interviews, analysis of legislative and planning documents, and photography. The purpose of this paper is to move beyond merely "seeing the megalopolis as a work of art," as Peter Krieger (2011, p. 56) puts it, but rather to "develop new types and strategies of aesthetic interpretation" suitable to complex urban forms. Such interpretive strategies must not only account for artistic expression as a formal object, but also as a spatial affordance arising from manifold processes of human labor, social relations, spatial occupation and institutional governance.

Mexico City's street markets resonate with an emergent architectural quality grounded in a habitual and repetitive practice. Architecture, of course, is not reducible to the production of unique, geospatially fixed buildings designed by professionally credentialed architects. Rather, architecture instantiates through generative practices of form making, temporal marking and aesthetic expression grounded in human culture. These practices unfold along continuum from professional to untrained, fixed to mobile, unique to repetitive, integral to modular and permanent to momentary. The form and content of the city, then, reflect constant negotiation among people over the nature of beauty, the making of habitat, the occupation of space, the terms of exchange and the conduct of everyday life (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 159-165).

Such negotiations can be found in high concentration in the tianguis; indeed, street markets in Mexico City take shape precisely around people's unceasing efforts to produce convivial spaces – spaces with life, for gathering the things of life, for making meaning and creating a home amid the vast metropolis (Bachelard, 1969). As an integral element of social reproduction, the tianguis rise out of the city's manifold geometries, taking form in the



**Sources:** Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°18'51"N, Longitude 99°04'15"W, Altitude 2,742 ft (accessed February 18, 2018)

**Figure 1.**  
Tianguis at  
Tulyehualco,  
Canal de Garay

vortices, filaments and public thoroughfares of the everyday urban landscape. At each step of location, assembly and operation, vendors and their advocates must contend with a tangle of interests, from police and inspectors to local residents, business owners, delivery drivers, porters and, of course, customers.

At the same time, while the city is an intricately negotiated expression of human community, the capacity to shape the built environment is by no means evenly distributed (Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 335-354; Brenner, 2008). In Mexico City, as in most large cities, real estate investors, developers, financial institutions and governing agencies exert far greater power over the city-making process than most capitalinos (Boltvinik and Scheingart, 1997). With a high percentage of poor families, many of the city's neighborhoods continue to be characterized by economic precarity and social marginalization, particularly in terms of employment, land rights, water access and transportation (Ziccardi, 2016, p. 206). However, in the case of the street markets, working-class people have produced a highly resonant urban practice that flows from a particular mode of spatio-temporal organization, scalar assemblage and creative expression. Through this urban practice they are engaged, in the words of Raymond Williams (1989, p. 5), in the art of "writing themselves into the land."

### **Blending methods**

For this paper, I have deployed a methodological approach that blends scholarship and creative practice. From 2016 to 2018, I conducted fieldwork during four trips to Mexico City, making site visits to numerous tianguis, engaging in structured observation and holding casual conversations with vendors and customers. I also collected demographic and economic data available from the city's Ministry of Social Development, planning documents from the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, and newspaper articles reporting on activities in the street markets. Meanwhile, I developed a creative practice method grounded in the production of rendered aerial views showing street markets in their urban contexts – a "making-as-research" approach articulated by Scholars such as Stephen Scrivener (2009), Laura Kurgan (2013, pp. 13-14), and Linda Candy and Ernest Edmonds (2018). This has enabled me to draw out relations of architectural form and urban spatial practice that hitherto remained obscure, while honoring the aesthetic commitments of tianguis workers.

In order to ground this creative practice approach, I treated each artifact as a case study involving three stages: conducting a site visit to a particular street market, gathering material about the street market from government and documentary sources and locating the image in Google Earth, rendering it through the method describe below, and studying its adaptation to the urban tissue. The process is inherently iterative and can be initiated at any one of the three stages: in some cases, my introduction to a particular street market came from an initial visit, which then prompted me to gather relevant documentation and produce a rendered image. In other cases, searching Google Earth resulted in the location of a street market, which I then captured and rendered, and which in turn prompted me to gather information and make a site visit.

To produce the images, I made very large screen captures of Google Earth tiles (5,118 × 2,784 pixels), which I then cropped and desaturated in Photoshop, rendering them as 20 × 24 inch black and white images. To restore the color to the tianguis, I built a new layer and applied the eraser tool at a very fine grain (5 pixels), which slowly exposed the brilliant colors in the original layer below. As the colors re-emerge, each tianguis exposes its structure and form within the morphological condition of the city. This method of contrasting the vivid colors with the gray figure-ground reveals the tianguis as richly varied and densely saturated features of the Mexican street culture (Desimini and Waldheim, 2016, pp. 137-138).

### Aesthetics and urban culture

Any work that focuses on the creative artistry of everyday urban life in working-class communities runs the risk of aestheticizing social or economic precarity (Dovey and King, 2012; Roy, 2011). Seen from above, the brilliant colors of the tianguis do not immediately announce the intense human labor that comprises the system of food and household goods provision in Mexico City. Nor do the colors provide clues as to the wages earned or distances traveled by vendors in the course of their hard work to support their families and feed the metropolis. At the same time, the colors viewed from the ground convey neither the scale nor extent of the tianguis across the metropolitan landscape, nor the collective assemblage aesthetic that characterizes the tianguis as a creative artifact.

Rather than aestheticize precarity, then, this project seeks to connect forms of labor, political economy and social organization to aesthetic production across scale by working-class people. Tianguis vendors have made collective decisions to organize themselves spatially and to announce themselves chromatically. Their actions both reflect and give rise to a vibrant urban culture of trade, signified by the brightly colored canopies of the street markets. Thus, the images included here reveal an already extant set of aesthetic choices made by ordinary people through recurrent spatial assemblages. The tianguis constitute a vernacular expression of people's tacit commitment to a polychromatic urbanity; the artistry emerges from the application of a routine thousands of times over in an ongoing practice of city making (Edensor *et al.*, 2010; Von Wissel, 2016, pp. 295-297).

Of course, Mexico is renowned for its colors, the consequence of an astonishing botanical variety, the Aztec heritage of adornment and decoration, and the rich tradition of mural painting (Plate 1). This is not simply the etic vision of a tourist imaginary, though sojourners to Mexico have long noted the suffusion of color into everyday life. Rather, color constitutes a core element in the self-conception of "Mexicanness," from the scale of the nation to the daily life of the barrio (Roque, 2003; Phipps, 2012). Residents coat their homes in vivid hues as soon as they can afford to purchase paint. Multi-colored signs, some handmade, others prefabricated, line street walls and frame entrances to shops. Elaborately airbrushed patterns and aerosol murals adorn cars and building façades (Folgarait, 1986). Periwinkle jacarandas and dark green palms tower over streets and parks, while bright red bougainvillea creep along the tops of perimeter walls. Fruits, vegetables and flowers grow in small gardens, rest in regimented pots on balconies, and weigh down produce carts on corners.

Viewed from above, however, the city appears rather more monotonous. If nothing else, Mexico City is a metropolis made of concrete: poured, stacked, mortared, cured and repeated millions of times over (Walker, 2000; Fry, 2008). While walls and façades might roil with applied color, rooftops tend to remain unfinished for many years. Indeed, only red clay tile adds a touch of variation to an otherwise immense expanse of concrete. This gray roofscape shades into the light brown sandy soils and weather-beaten asphalt road surfaces that comprise the urban topography. Zones of new construction tend to be coated in layers of concrete dust, rendering them even grayer than the older settled districts that surround them. Amid this monotonous aerial view, the city's tianguis stand out as linear bursts of color, at once enabled and constrained by the streets and roadways through which they unfold.

The visual method deployed in this study, then, is an effort to trace an urban working-class aesthetic in Mexico City as it emerges from the agglomerations of activity, assemblages of parts and everyday social relations among laboring and consuming bodies. In making this case, I draw on work in relational and affective aesthetics. Bauriaud (1998), for example, argues that aesthetics are not immutable properties of artifacts, but rather emerge through relations among people, institutions and discourses that assign value and meaning to things. Architectural Theorists Barbara Prezeli and Heidi Sohn shift the conceptualization of aesthetic production from a focus on its purely



**Plate 1.**  
Color suffuses  
everyday life in  
Mexico City

**Notes:** Clockwise from top left: Roses in front of a mural in San Angel; Display at the Mercado de Coyoacán; Street scene in Colonia Federal; Stringing flowers on a canal at Xochimilco  
**Source:** Photographs by author

representational qualities to its “affective, ethically and politically enabling potentials.” Prezelj and Sohn (2016) are interested in the “ways by which the experience of landscape—understood through an immanent notion of aesthetics – may trigger specific forms of action” (p. 30).

Reversing their trajectory, this piece examines how specific forms of action produce aesthetic work at the scale of the urban landscape. These forms of action are embodied, tacit and routine, so that aesthetic production emerges out of everyday social and spatial negotiations. It is not so much an aesthetic of resistance as it is one of presence, of occupation, of collective dreaming. The use of color by vendors signals a bid for attention in what Architect William Braham describes as “a visually cluttered and competitive world” (Braham, 2010, p. 138). In this way, the polychromatic patterns of the markets convey both individual choices made by vendors as well as their associational stake in the city. Their aesthetic commitments ultimately reveal a collective desire to claim space amid the vast metropolis.

### Tianguis in context

A vital part of the economy of Mexico City, the tianguis, is also one of the oldest; the word is a Spanish approximation of the Nahuatl *tiyanquiztli*, or “place for trading.” The tianguis survived the otherwise brutal conquest relatively intact, providing a space of exchange between indigenous and Spanish communities, as well as nodes of surveillance and religious conversion by colonial administrators (Villegas, 2010). During the Porfiriato, tianguis

outlived several waves of “modernization,” where authorities attempted to clear away what they perceived to be outmoded traditional practices in order to forge a modern republic. After the Revolution, the tianguis were largely tolerated as a part of everyday life, and even embraced since the 1920s as indicative of Mexican heritage, culture and collective memory (González and Delaplace, 2016, pp. 47-48).

In their contemporary form, tianguis operate within the regulatory regime of the Ciudad de México (until 2016, the Distrito Federal), which in turn devolves oversight onto the delegations in which the tianguis are located. While the city conforms to the boundaries of the former Federal District, the conurbation of Greater Mexico City actually sprawls into the State of Mexico and the State of Hidalgo. The city is divided into 16 delegations, each functioning as a semi-autonomous borough or municipality, with its own head of government. Article 304 of the Federal District Code establishes the principle of regulation based on the occupation and use of the city's thoroughfares:

Merchants in public roads with semi-fixed posts, located at more than 200 meters of public markets, can occupy an area of 1.8 by 1.2 meters or less; likewise traders in the mode of Tianguis, Ambulantes, or Bazaars can occupy up to a maximum of six square meters, as long as they have a valid permit, issued by the Delegations, to carry out commercial activities [...] and will pay quarterly for the use or exploitation of the roads and public areas. (Instituto, 2011)

Tianguis and ambulantes (roving vendors) comprise key elements in a broader ecology of quotidian commercial exchange in Mexico City, particularly for food and household goods. Throughout the twentieth century, for example, the Government of Mexico City constructed over 300 permanent public markets across the city, with the intention of dispersing commercial activity from the crowded Centro Histórico and establishing a municipally regulated “pivot between the tianguis of indigenous tradition and wholesale trade” (Torres and Pensado, 2006, pp. 4-5). Not only do these public markets constitute important achievements of civic architecture, they remain a crucial part of the alimentary and commercial landscape.

However, the metropolis expanded more rapidly than public markets could be constructed and maintained, and after the oil shock and successive recessions of the 1970s, the government sharply curtailed additions to the inventory. As a result, many areas of the city still lack fixed public capital investment in food provision. In wealthier neighborhoods, grocery stores and big box chains have proliferated to fill the gap. But for most working-class families, the nimble, modular tianguis continue to provide the main access to food and household goods (Torres and Pensado, 2006, p. 30; Macias and Cencorta, 2002, p. 226). And they comprise a vital part of everyday communal life in the barrios and colonias of the city (Plate 2).

### **Assembling the tianguis**

The tianguis comprise a polychromatic urban form that unfolds in repeated, temporary and dynamic bursts across the metropolitan landscape. They grow out of the great urban rhizome through axillary nodes such as plazas, parks, roundabouts, churchyards and street junctions. From there they spread their filaments through the interstices – the streets, roadways, sidewalks, paths and open space edges – only to disappear and return again. They range dramatically in size and extent, from a handful of vendors on a street corner to thousands stretched out on major thoroughfares and arterial roads. Typically, each tianguis recurs in the same place on the same day or stretch of days every week, though some alternate locations while others might move because of construction or to accommodate feast days and other neighborhood demands. Thus, while there might be one or two hundred tianguis operating in Mexico City at any given moment, the map of tianguis changes through the week and the seasons.

**Plate 2.**  
View down Calle  
Coyamel toward the  
tianguis, Pedregal de  
Santo Domingo



**Source:** Photographs by author

At ground level, the tianguis offer variations on a theme, following a simple code or set of rules repeated over and over. The material elements of the tianguis constitute a kit of parts that include the plastic canopy cover supported by aluminum poles, the kiosk or table for the vendor (usually covered by a tablecloth or oilcloth), signs advertising wares and prices, crates and cooking equipment and other materials, and stools for the food stalls. Some vendors obtain these elements as standardized products available through suppliers, while others use more makeshift means to construct their operation (Figure 2).

In any case, the rules determine how this kit of parts is organized and spatially arrayed. The standard floor area for one allotment is  $1.8 \times 1.2$  m (6 ft  $\times$  4 ft), although many vendors use more than one allotment up to  $6 \text{ m}^2$ , while others split one allotment into two or more subunits (Mendez, 2017). The vendor must cover her allotment with a canopy to protect her wares and those of her neighbors from rain and hot sun. Vendors set up adjacent to one another, with no spaces in between, breaking only for doorways, streets and other apertures. The repeated application of these rules results in the production of tianguis in a wide range of sizes, colors and forms.

Perhaps the most iconic feature of the tianguis are the brightly colored canopies, which act as signifiers of the enterprise. The canopies come in several hues, including white, pink, red, dark blue, light blue, yellow, forest green and grass green. Some tianguis deploy uniform colors, effectuated through pooled acquisition of canopies by the vendors' association and subsequently required of all new vendors. Other tianguis present a mix of colors, sometimes interspersed, other times alternating from one block to the next. Multiple colors might indicate a preference by the vendors, or it might indicate a less established tianguis where vendors have yet to agree on a uniform scheme. In all cases, the result when



**Note:** Images culled from Mexico-based supply catalogs

**Figure 2.**  
Typical items used to  
assemble a tianguis  
operation, including  
stools, signage,  
propane tanks, poles,  
tables and canopies

viewed from above is a dramatic, brightly reflective polychrome line. From Plate 3, with the sun bearing down, the canopies cast people and wares in moody iridescent colors.

Vendors in the tianguis sell a wide variety of goods. In addition to the raw fruits, vegetables and meats on offer, shoppers also find numerous stalls selling prepared foods made to order and consume on the spot. With batteries of propane tanks, grills and portable ovens, these vendors sell all of the typical street food of the city, including tacos, quesadillas, cemitas, tlacuyas, ceviche, fried fish, nopales and mole dishes. In addition to food, the most common items sold are electronics equipment, sunglasses, toys, new and used auto parts,



**Plate 3.**  
The canopies at the  
Pedregal de Santo  
Domingo street  
market

**Source:** Photographs by author



household goods, even furniture. There is a substantial volume of traffic in new and used compact disks, some of which are bootlegged; these vendors often provide the lively soundtrack for the market, sending out bachata and reggaeton beats at high volumes. Other vendors sell clothes, ranging from used articles and cheap Chinese tee shirts to more expensive name brand items.

While largely a self-organizing system, tianguis occupy a gray zone with respect to governance and the local state. Each tianguis is managed by a non-profit association that receives its charter from the delegation in which it operates. A committee comprised of vendors oversees the tianguis association's business. The head of the committee collects fees from vendors, ensures payments to the delegation, troubleshoots technical problems, intervenes in disputes and brokers between the interests of vendors, neighbors, and local officials (Peña, 1999, p. 369). The committees provide a venue for collective bargaining as well as a buffer against abuse, harassment, detention and confiscation of wares by police (González and Delaplace, 2016, pp. 156-159). To press their interests and make claims on the legal system and spatial regulation of the city, individual tianguis associations band together into larger confederations, such as the Unión de Comerciantes, la Asociación Nacional de Comerciantes, Tianguistas y Ambulantes "Enrique Flores Osorio," Federación de Mercados y Concentraciones Populares, and the Unión de Comerciantes de los Días de Tianguis del Distrito Federal y Estados de la República (Anonymous, 2016).

Meanwhile, every vendor must also obtain an individual license from the delegation to sell goods on the street, whether they do so through the tianguis or as ambulantes. Estimates vary widely as to how many street vendors are licensed in the city, but most studies suggest no more than half. The remainder operates outside of the formal regulatory apparatus of the state, particularly the hawkers and small cart operators whose margins simply do not yield enough to pay regular fees. This illustrates the porous boundary between the so-called "formal" and "informal" economies, where the same job performed by different people falls on either side of the line based on the payment of fees and the acquisition of official licensure (Portes and Haller, 2005, p. 419).

### **Illuminating urban form**

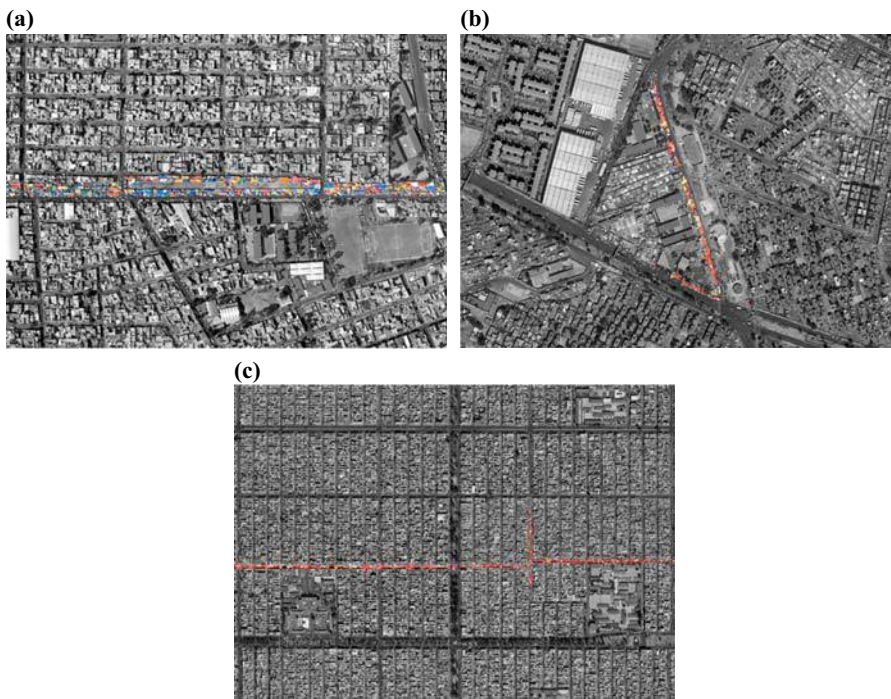
As a temporary, repeating modular construction, the tianguis take shape within the urban morphology of the metropolis. Mexico City's urban morphology is highly variegated, with compositional arrangements of streets and blocks reflecting different moments in the city's historical development (Heathcott, 2019). The Centro Historico, laid out in the years following Spanish conquest, presents a rigorous orthogonal grid of square block forms emanating outward from the Zócalo. Nineteenth century grids, by contrast, typically make use of longer rectangular blocks, often with chamfered corners. In the twentieth century, planners and developers experimented with a panoply of forms, some with zigzagging streets and cul-de-sacs, others comprising towers on superblocks. Planners also experimented with diagrammatic forms, rigging streets and blocks to geometric shapes such as circles, parallelograms and polygons. Meanwhile, in the more marginal precincts of the city, streets and blocks typically conform to natural features of landscape once deemed uninhabitable, such as ravines, cliffs, pedregals (lava fields) and steeply sloping terrain.

Each tianguis applies the rules and kit of parts to fit the urban morphology of the neighborhood in which it is located. The final landscape signature of any tianguis reflects intricate scalar negotiations and micro-adjustments between vendors, spatial allotments, associational and governance interests, traffic flows and built environments. Despite their variation, however, the tianguis tend to fall into five typologies, which I will call the linear, the cluster, the circuit, the contour and the hybrid. I will examine these typologies below with reference to specific cases, making use of the rendered images. This approach will

highlight the insertion of the tianguis into the urban fabric, reveal their spatial adaptations to the street grids and natural forms, locate them within the changing urban landscape and expose the immense scale on which they operate.

*Linear type*

The linear tianguis is the most common, forming a simple straight line along a designated thoroughfare. Some linear tianguis set up on each side of a street, covering sidewalks while leaving the central thoroughfare unobstructed. Others cover the entire street, forming an unbroken canopy. Still others, such as the tianguis at José López Portillo (Figure 3(a)) alternate such arrangements from one block to the next, depending on the streetscape or the demands of the neighborhood. Occasionally the linear tianguis will have two or more offshoots, as in the case of Chinampac de Juárez (Figure 3(b)) and Nezahualcōyotl (Figure 3(c)). This angular tianguis at Chinampac de Juárez cuts through an area once dominated by self-built housing. Some of the old “shantytown” remains; the corrugated metal roofs are visible as small white and gray squares packed into tight lines to the left of the market and in the upper right corner of the image. Much of the neighborhood has been cleared and rebuilt since the 1980s with mid-rise social housing blocks. The massive tianguis at Nezahualcōyotl stretches for over a



**Notes:** (a) Top left, Tianguis in Jose Lopez Portillo; (b) top right, Tianguis in Chinampac de Juarez; (c) bottom left, Tianguis in Nezahualcoyotl

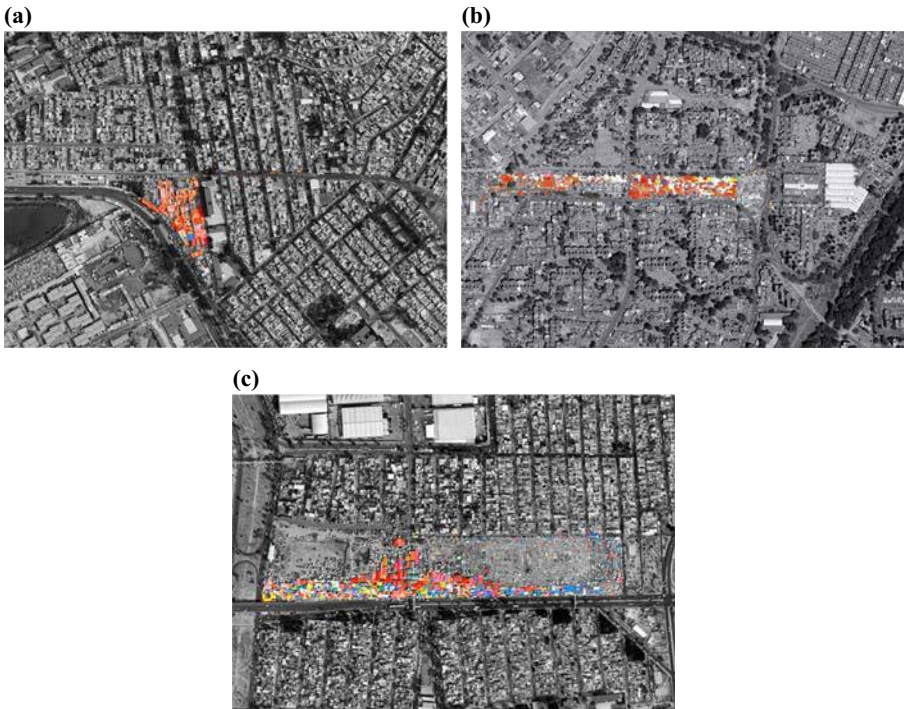
**Sources:** (a) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°18'29"N, Longitude 99°10'58"W, Altitude 2,559 ft (accessed February 18, 2018); (b) Google Earth, February 11, 2017. Latitude 19°22'33"N, Longitude 99°02'60"W, Altitude 2,758 ft (accessed February 24, 2018); (c) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°24'15"N, Longitude 99°00'17"W. Altitude 5,202 ft (accessed February 18, 2018)

**Figure 3.**  
Linear types

mile and a half through the highly rectilinear grid. The main section runs down Cielito Linda, crossing the wide Avenida Señora Juana Inés de La Cruz, then jogging slightly at Avenida Dos Arbolitos, where a small section branches north and south. Often referred to as “Nezayork,” the area’s connections to New York City come not only from migration, but also from trafficking in narcotics, pirated music, and knock-off name brand clothes. All of this is amplified in the commercial nexus of the tianguis, where one finds an abundance of Yankees and Mets hats, Knicks jerseys and “I ♥ NY” t-shirts.

*Cluster type*

Clustered tianguis form shapes by filling in square plazas, triangular intersections, roundabouts and other open spaces throughout the metropolis. Some of these open spaces are multi-purpose, so that the tianguis can only operate once per week according to the schedule of other activities. For example, the Tianguis De Segunda Mano at Guelatao (Figure 4(a)) occupies an asphalt municipal soccer field adjacent to the Casa de la Cultura Tonacalli – the circular building at the top of the market. The tianguis, which specializes in used clothing, borders several large-scale social housing projects, including a low-rise project funded by the State Workers pension fund above and to the left of the market, and the massive Unidad Ex Lienzo Charro at the bottom left of the market. In many cases,



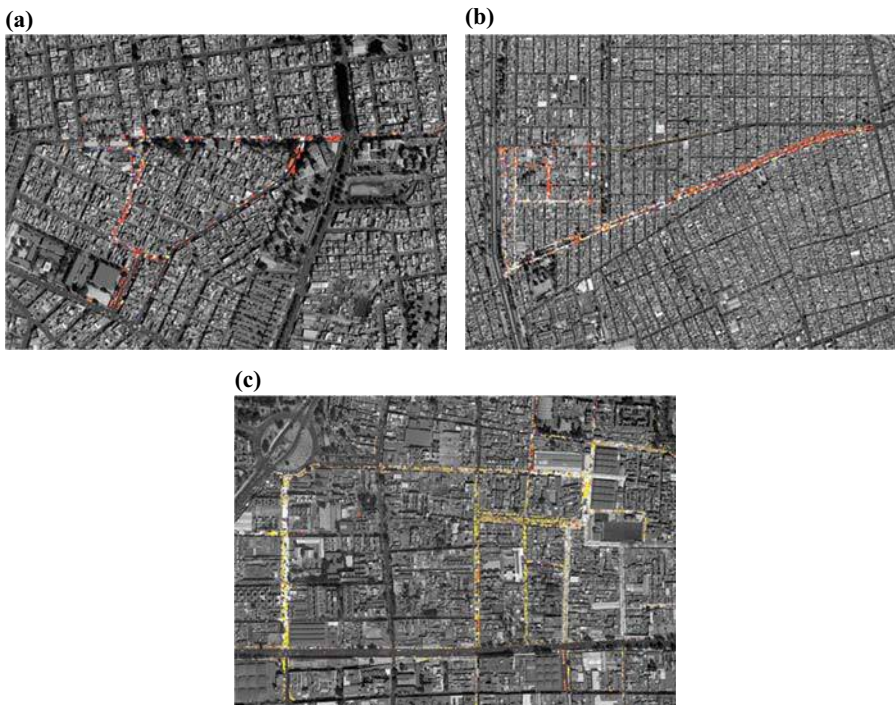
**Notes:** (a) Top left, Tianguis De Segunda Mano; (b) top right, Tianguis at the Mercado del Carmen; (c) bottom left, Tianguis Mendez, Colonia Renovacion  
**Sources:** (a) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°22'29"N; Longitude 99°02'00"W, Altitude: 3,285 ft (accessed February 24, 2018); (b) Google Earth, February 11, 2017. Latitude 19°40'38"N, Longitude 99°13'01"W, Altitude 3,493 ft; (c) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°21'77"N, Longitude 99°03'03"W, Altitude 3,559 ft (accessed February 23, 2018)

**Figure 4.**  
Cluster types

tianguis fill in plazas that extend in front of fixed public market buildings, as shown at Mercado del Carmen (Figure 4(b)), located in a recently built-up area of the State of México, just outside the city limits. Still other clustered tianguis occupy marginal and otherwise underused open spaces. The Tianguis Méndez (Figure 4(c)), also called “the Towers,” sets up daily on a 9.2-hectare right-of-way belonging to the Federal Electricity Commission in Colonia Renovación, Iztapalapa Delegation. In addition to the typical selection of produce, prepared foods and household goods, the Towers is well known around the metropolis as a source for cheap auto parts, many alleged to be stolen, as well as for presence of “narcomenudistas” – small-time drug dealers, who sell around the periphery of the market.

### *Circuit type*

Circuitous street markets are similar to linear types, but they contain looping or interconnected branches, their colors exposing discrete parts of the metropolitan grid. In a simple case, the tianguis at Mixcoatl (Figure 5(a)) begins at the bottom alongside the large primary and secondary school campus, then branches into two filaments, one following Calle Tlalpacatl (left) and the other Calle Cuitlahuac (right). The two branches connect back again along Villa Franqueza at the top. At the other extreme, the Sunday tianguis in San Felipe de Jesus (Figure 5(b)) is reputedly the largest street market in Latin America,



**Notes:** (a) Top left, Tianguis in Mixcoatl; (b) top right, Tianguis in San Felipe de Jesus; (c) bottom left, Tianguis in Tepito

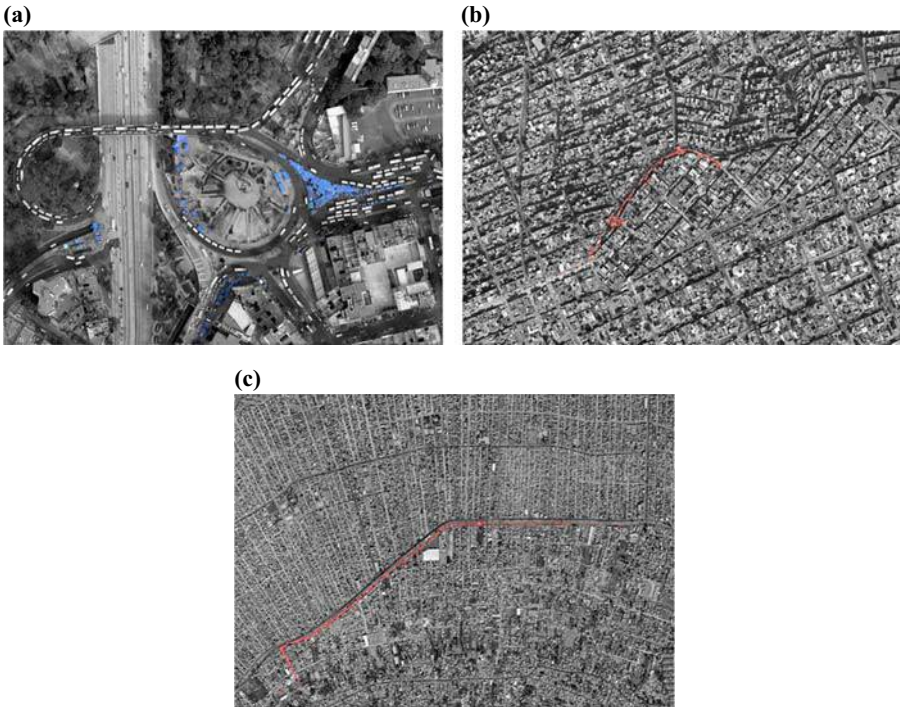
**Sources:** (a) Google Earth, February 11, 2017. Latitude 19°19'31"N, Longitude 99°02'53"W, Altitude 4,279 ft; (b) Google Earth, February 11, 2017, Latitude 19°29'19"N, Longitude 99°04'24"W, Altitude 8,116 ft (accessed February 18, 2018); (c) Google Earth, February 11, 2017. Latitude 19°26'42"N, Longitude 99°07'42"W, Altitude 4,140 ft (accessed March 2, 2018)

**Figure 5.**  
Circuit types

stretching over 7 km through the neighborhood with multiple strands and circuits. Besides food, clothes and household goods, the tianguis is well known as a source for new and used tools, auto parts and antiques. Nearly as extensive, the tianguis at Tepito (Figure 5(c)), located just north of the Centro Historico, stretches out from the two public markets at top right of the image. With some 12,000 merchants, this is the city's largest daily tianguis. As the tianguis winds through the streets, it illuminates the grid of Tepito, almost as though an electric current traveled along the vendor's canopies. The densest section runs east–west along Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, while the longest section runs east–west for half a mile between the public market buildings and the roundabout at Paseo de la Reforma. The barrio of Tepito sustained extensive damage during the 1985 earthquake, which the city used as justification to evict residents, impose redevelopment schemes and crack down on the tianguis. Vendors and residents pushed back, with some success, and today the tianguis, barrio and government persist in a tense standoff.

*Contour type*

Street markets often follow the contours of natural or human-made features, revealing elements of the landscape such as ridgelines, valleys, elevation changes, roundabouts and curvilinear street layouts. In Figure 6(a), the tianguis at Chapultepec Metro station takes its



**Notes:** (a) Top left, Tianguis at the Chapultepec Metro station; (b) top right, Tianguis in Naucalpan de Juarez; (c) bottom left, Tianguis in Chimalhuacan

**Sources:** (a) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°25'15"N, Longitude 99°10'58"W, Altitude 1,426 ft (accessed August 10, 2018); (b) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°27'55"N, Longitude 99°15'33"W, Altitude 3,759 ft; (c) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°25'90"N; Longitude 98°57'11"W, Altitude 10,344 ft (accessed February 24, 2018)

**Figure 6.**  
Contour types

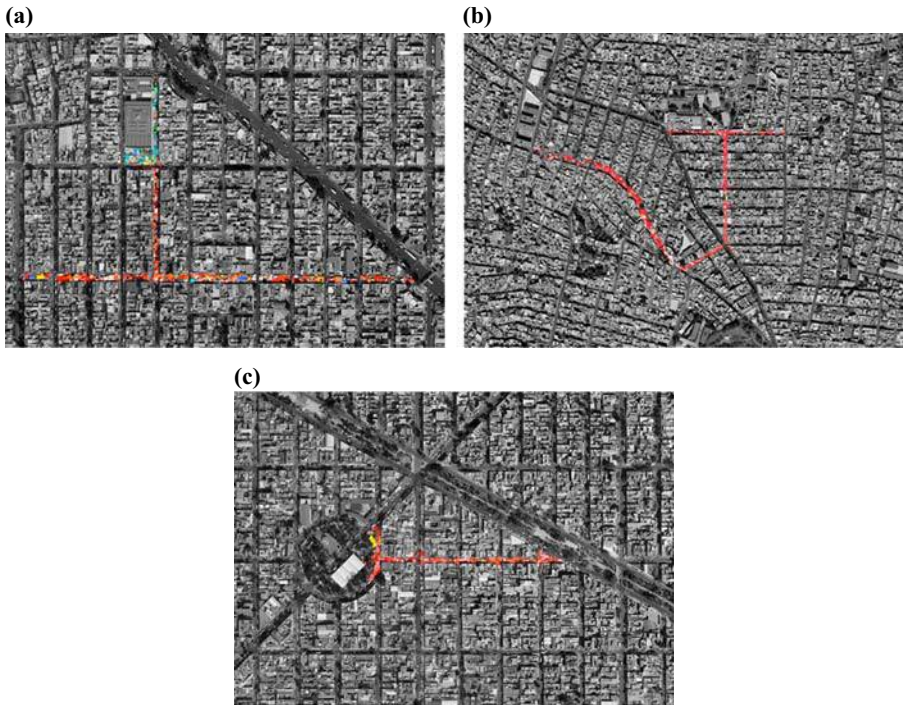
shape from the roundabout and median that forms an interchange between the busy transport stage (right) with the massive Circuito Bicentenario (left). This tianguis caters primarily to transport workers and commuters, as well as to tourists entering and leaving Chapultepec Park. The tianguis at Naucalpan de Juárez (Figure 6(b)), by contrast, follows a ridgeline created by a combination of ancient earthquakes, pyroclastic flows and water erosion. These natural processes have folded the landscape into ribbons, around which varied urban morphologies have taken shape. The tianguis resembles a hook with little barbs extending at intervals into cross streets. Located in a barrio with very few grocery options and no public market building, the tianguis primarily serves clientele from the surrounding streets with a range of agricultural produce and prepared foods. Meanwhile, the immense tianguis in Chimalhuacán (Figure 6(c)), located just over the border in the State of México, stretches for 4 km along Avenida Peñon. The tianguis describes an arc around the base of the gently sloping cone of Chimalhuachi, an extinct volcano that rises 200 m above the valley floor on a base that extends over 3 km in diameter. The Chimalhuacán tianguis passes through multiple barrios, and serves a regional clientele with a wide range of food, electronics and household goods.

#### *Hybrid type*

Many street markets in Mexico City combine two or more typologies into hybrid forms that optimize the spatial conditions established by the grid. In a relatively simple example, the tianguis at Colonia Ampliación Progreso Nacional (Figure 7(a)) combines clustered and linear types. Vendors squeeze into the plaza of the Preciado de la Torre public market, selling their wares under a mix of blue, green and yellow canopies. The tianguis then travels southward along Calle 12, where it connects perpendicularly to Avenida Progreso Nacional, a large east–west thoroughfare, all under predominantly red canopies. Similarly, the tianguis at Santiago Acahualtepec (Figure 6(b)) combines two types: the linear and the contour. Located in the Iztapalapa delegation, Santiago Acahualtepec is an area of high social marginalization, according to the city's Ministry of Economic Development. Without a large public market nearby, this "J" shaped tianguis holds a vital place in the community. The "T" section follows the grid of Calle Sauce (top) and Higuierilla (perpendicular). The bottom section turns onto Calle Cedro, and then follows the long curve of Avenida Primavera. Meanwhile, the Tianguis in Moctezuma combines three types: the contour, the linear and the cluster. The Colonia Moctezuma, with its highly regimented grid, is located in the Venustiano Carranza delegation near the airport. The colonia's Saturday market forms a red arrow connecting the Aviación roundabout with the tree-lined diagonal Avenida Iztaccihuatl. A small filament of canopies links the tianguis to the public market – the large white building in the roundabout – while a triangular cluster forms at the other end alongside Iztaccihuatl.

#### **Political economy of the tianguis**

Whatever forms they create through their codes and routines, vendors in Mexico City operate on the assumption that those who work on streets share in their ownership. By occupying the street to ply their trade, vendors claim the prerogative to earn a living through their labor in public space (Cross, 1998; Peña, 1999; Muñoz, 2018). But as Nora Mendez (2017, p. 78) observes, selling goods on the street is a precarious occupation. Operating a stall in a tianguis is time- and labor-intensive, and the margins of return tend to be thin and variable. Vendors earn on average \$141 per month, out of which they have to pay a daily fee of 830 Pesos (60 cents) to use the street. Most vendors do not live in the neighborhoods they serve, but rather undergo lengthy commutes from some of the poorest barrios. Preparations begin very early in the morning, and vendors seldom return home



**Notes:** (a) Top left, Tianguis in Progreso Nacional; (b) top right, Tianguis in Santiago Acahualtepec; (c) bottom left, Tianguis in Moctezuma

**Sources:** (a) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°31'11"N, Longitude 99°09'24"W, Altitude 2,426 ft (accessed February 18, 2018); (b) Google Earth, December 18, 2009, Latitude 19°20'38"N; Longitude 99°00'24"W, Altitude 3,427 ft (accessed February 18, 2018); (c) Google Earth, December 28, 2009. Latitude 19°25'31"N, Longitude 99°06'05"W, Altitude 2,870 ft (accessed February 18, 2018)

**Figure 7.**  
Hybrid types

before nightfall (Hayden, 2014). Unscrupulous suppliers, shifting competition and inclement weather all add to the unpredictability of the enterprise.

Given their ambiguous status, interstitial form and economic importance, tianguis concentrate many of the tensions abroad in the everyday life of the capital (González and Delaplace, 2016, p. 82). Vendors and residents struggle constantly over parking, sidewalk space, blocked access to buildings and other spatial affordances. Shopkeepers and vendors must constantly negotiate the position of kiosks down to the smallest dimensions so that fixed businesses do not suffer from proximity to the temporary enterprises in front of them. For some of these businesses, the tianguis presents a continual nuisance; for others, it brings customers to the area who might not otherwise come. Meanwhile, association committees comprised of long-established vendors control access to coveted berths, often clashing with new vendors, many of whom set up outside of the boundaries of the tianguis if they cannot secure a place within. Journalists and opposition politicians frequently levy the charge that city officials issue far more permits than can be accommodated on the streets, expecting the permitted vendors to vote in favor of the party in power (Anonymous, 2004; Ochoa, 2015). All of this effectively expands the market beyond its limits, compounding the problems of access, flow and noise already extant in the neighborhood (Plate 4).



Source: Photographs by author

**Plate 4.**  
Spillover, crowding,  
and traffic at the  
margins of the  
tianguis in Pedregal  
de Santo Domingo

Other difficulties arise from the murky status and thin government oversight of the tianguis. While licensed by the delegation, commercial activity in the tianguis is ostensibly regulated by district and federal laws (Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico, 2010). These include public safety, consumer protection from counterfeit and adulterated goods, scale weight integrity, pedestrian and vehicle traffic flow and prohibition of the sale of banned goods such as fireworks and weapons. However, the city government has little capacity to inspect and enforce laws across so many tianguis, so it falls to the delegations. Delegation staff must not only issue permits and record changes at the tianguis, they must also conduct regular inspections of gas couplings, ensure the stability of apparatus, respond to traffic complaints, and manage other public safety issues that do not fall within the jurisdiction of the police (Ciudad de México, 2016, p. 110, p. 114, p. 134). Delegational governments, however, vary considerably in the degree to which they are willing or able to regulate the tianguis.

Two consequences flow from this variable, uneven oversight. First, city officials target particular markets for enforcement, focusing attention on those close to tourist zones, those prone to violence, and those known for selling dodgy goods (Hernández, 2017; Suárez, 2017). This creates an apparently arbitrary system of punishment, adding mental stress and cost burdens onto already beleaguered vendors. Second, with thin police presence, many markets attract a significant criminal element, from vendors selling bootleg and illegal wares to cartels operating drug and firearm sales in the surrounding streets. The Delegation of Iztapalapa recently shut down the Santa Cruz Meyehualco tianguis due to the extensive sales of drugs and alcohol, particularly to minors—a frequently cited problem (Anonymous, 2017).

Meanwhile, well-organized gangs often control parking in the surrounding streets through a protection racket, extorting money from vendors and shoppers for open parking spaces and for guarding vehicles. Con artists and pickpockets operate in many of the markets, and officials have been known to extract bribes from vendors, particularly those operating without permits. Women can be particularly vulnerable to street violence perpetrated by criminals and police in the blocks surrounding the tianguis, whether they are there as vendors or shoppers (González and Delaplace, 2016, p. 165).

Perhaps the greatest challenges to earning a living in the contemporary tianguis come from economic restructuring (Plate 5). As Macias and Cenecorta (2002, pp. 228-229) demonstrate, the tianguis as a form of commerce developed over the last five centuries around densely layered trade relations between farmers, rural suppliers, intraurban distribution networks and vendors. In just two decades, however, a “modern supply system”



**Plate 5.**  
Globalization in Mexico City favors the supply chains, controlled labor force, and highly capitalized physical plant of large corporations



**Source:** Photographs by author

has taken shape, optimized around global finance and transnational trade priorities, rapid distribution networks, predictable pricing, greater speed in marketing, diversification in payment forms and spectacle-driven consumption. Federal and municipal governments in Mexico have exacerbated these transformations by embracing aspects of the “creative” and “entrepreneurial” global economy, generally favorable to corporations and financial institutions, while often criminalizing and dislocating street vendors and other actors in the so-called “informal” economy (Crossa, 2009; Becker and Müller, 2013).

Additionally, international trade agreements such as NAFTA have restructured the terms of labor, commerce and exchange unevenly around the priorities of multinational corporations – enterprises large enough to operate on a global scale. To be sure, NAFTA resulted in the relocation of hundreds of manufacturing plants from the USA to the maquiladoras and the creation of industrial employment opportunities. But the broader impact on Mexico has been the erosion of small-scale and labor-intensive enterprises, and the influx of billions of dollars of foreign investment in retail operations that undercut forms of commercial exchange grounded in long-term social relations (Maya, 2008; Mize and Swords, 2010; Gálvez, 2018).

This emergent system is rapidly reconfiguring the terms on which all commercial operations function, including the tianguis (Torres and Pensado, 2006, p. 22, p. 25). For example, large chain grocery stores, organized in full alignment with global financial performance criteria, have a far greater capacity to spread risk, invest in new transaction and inventory technologies, and absorb market fluctuations, all of which allows them to maintain stable prices. A tianguis vendor, by contrast, sells a far smaller range of goods, and must adjust her prices according to the costs she incurs (Garza-Bueno, 2013). She is vulnerable even to small changes in markets for produce, fuel, transportation and other inputs. This forces vendors to adopt mitigating strategies that include: diversifying their wares, which is difficult to do in such small allotments; increasing margins by selling adulterated goods or tampering with scales; shifting to more specialized wares flowing through the global market, such as electronics and brand name products; or selling pirated goods such as CDs and DVDs (Cross, 2007; Aguiar, 2013).

Despite these challenges, tianguis remain a vital part of Mexico City’s street culture, and continue to offer important spaces of transaction, encounter and conviviality. Vendors eke out a living in a rapidly changing metropolis through a combination of very hard work, canny marketing and established relations of trust with customers. Although they once

supplied nearly all basic goods sold in the city, today tianguis still account for 20 of household purchases and 43 percent of produce (Secretaría de Desarrollo Económico, 2010; Anonymous, 2016). They not only provide indispensable infrastructure by substituting labor for capital (Simone, 2004); they reveal, in their polychromatic form, a resonant suite of claims to legitimacy, collective rights and self-organization – values increasingly difficult to assert amid the spatial foreclosures of the globalizing metropolis.

## Conclusion

Sprouting up everyday across the metropolitan landscape, Mexico City's street markets comprise a form of temporary, recurrent, modular architecture grounded in civic codes and everyday social relations. Each tianguis articulates the fixed architectural and infrastructural forms of the urban fabric in which it unfurls. Their presence reflects historic and changing modalities of commercial exchange, as well as a range of spatial practices geared toward optimizing returns for the grueling investment of time, labor and materials. And as an ensemble work, the tianguis channel the ongoing assertion of collective usufructory rights – rights of working-class people to use the remaining slivers of commons left to them to earn a living.

Additionally, the tianguis continue to offer an associational approach to the hard work of street vending that would be difficult to duplicate in emerging forms of labor–capital relations. For example, women can bring their children to work if they need to do so, or they can pool resources for on-site childcare, a social affordance that is rare in the formal service sector (González and Delaplace, 2016, p. 194). Vendors can cover each other's stalls when they need to take breaks or run errands. Moreover, a vendor who rents her own stall and sells her own wares is not going to be fired for being late or for engaging in a dispute with a customer.

Meanwhile, big box grocery chains and retail outlets have mushroomed across the city over the last decade, their globally optimized supply chains allowing them to compete with and undercut tianguis. Unions have been slow to form in these venues, making it difficult for workers to assert collective grievances. Chain stores post fixed prices over which shoppers have no room to bargain, and buyers and sellers do not form social relationships amid the impersonal logistics of stock aisles and checkout lines.

Nevertheless, that thousands of vendors maintain their participation in the tianguis speaks to the opportunity this ancient form still provides for people to make a living. That tens of thousands of people shop at the tianguis everyday confirms the continued importance of street commerce for urban households in the ever-expanding metropolis. The organized, collective and roughly democratic nature of the tianguis creates a relatively predictable and safe environment for vendors to ply their trade and for shoppers to browse, bargain for and purchase what they need.

In this sense, the colors of the tianguis reveal not only the urban forms that channel them and the aesthetic preferences of vendors and their associations; each tiny swatch of color also testifies to the labor and aspirations of the person selling goods below the canopy. As an ensemble work, the kaleidoscopic bands of color reveal the city as a place of thickly woven relations, a site of contestation and struggle, and a medium for collective dreams. The colors mark out the claims being made for the right to the city by socially marginal people, and assert the ongoing relevance of the tianguis to everyday life in Mexico City.

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**This article has been cited by:**

1. SalamaAshraf M., Ashraf M. Salama. 2019. Prospects for research in architecture and urbanism. *Archnet-IJAR: International Journal of Architectural Research* 13:1, 2-7. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]