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## **Markets of La Merced: New frontiers of gentrification in the historic centre of Mexico City<sup>1</sup>**

Víctor Delgadillo

### **Introduction**

This chapter analyses the dispute over the markets of La Merced in the context of public policies for the modernisation of food markets and the 'rescue' of urban heritage. After a fire in the largest market in February 2013, the Government of the Federal District (GDF) organised an urban-architectural competition for the 'comprehensive rescue'<sup>2</sup> of La Merced. The area of La Merced is part of the historic centre of Mexico City, accommodating a large quantity of formal and informal trading in eight public markets, various shopping centres, warehouses, shops and hundreds of street vendors. The government intends to seize the 'unpostponable opportunity' to explore the 'possibilities' of modernising La Merced. The megaproject, now postponed, aims to 'recover' the area through the creation of public space, redevelopment of the markets, an increase in building density, improved mobility, modernisation of the business model and the creation of a tourist centre for gastronomy.

The mega-project is part of a trend adopted by local and national governments to gradually abandon domestic production and traditional systems of food distribution to the detriment of food sovereignty, whilst at the same time promoting food imports and increasing the presence of domestic and foreign supermarket chains. According to these governments, the mainstream traditional supply channels are inefficient, ineffective and an obstacle to 'modernisation', while public markets are physically deteriorated, functionally and economically obsolete, and should be renewed and modernised (SEDECO, 2015).

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This chapter is organized as follows: 1. A brief review of theoretical contributions to the concept of 'urban frontiers' in order to emphasize the porous but clear barriers that separate the 'modern city' from the 'traditional city of the markets'. 2. A discussion of the 'regeneration' model of the historic centre driven by the local government in alliance with certain private investors and which since 2009 has spread to other neighbourhoods. 3. A presentation of the main disputes over public markets in the megacity of Mexico City, marked by a discourse of obsolescence and deterioration. 4. An analysis of the megaproject and the dispute over the markets of La Merced along with the interests and views of the main stakeholders. This chapter is based on a study of the urban heritage of the neighbourhood and the markets of La Merced (Delgadillo, 2014), involving qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis including public statistics, field observations, interviews, ethnographic research and surveys. Analysis of the megaproject and the problems of markets is undertaken by analysing critically public policies. We understand public policies as fundamentally political because they are the sphere for discussion and contestation between political parties and groups for different visions of development in the broadest sense of the term. Public policies are not only defined between leaders of different hierarchies and large and small investors, but in some situations civil society plays an important role in disputes over policies and public assets.

## **Urban frontiers**

The frontier is an intrinsic concept for cities. Cities are social and historical products with physical and virtual boundaries that demarcate rural-urban boundaries and separate different political and administrative entities with different powers over the territory. The city, an environment built by generations of people for better living and for integration and relation with others, is a circumscribed, finite and bounded territory that responds to the culture of the limits (Mongin, 2006). However, this city, a symbol of emancipation and social integration, is now confronted with a metropolitan dynamic and globalisation that divides, scatters, fragments, privatises, decentralises, separates and creates new and diverse urban and territorial hierarchies.

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Cities have internal frontiers that separate the private from the public and define appropriate territories for different social groups. The frontier is a concept that can make conclusive and impassable dividing lines, but also barriers that are porous, diffuse and extremely complex. The frontiers are physical, symbolic, tangible, intangible, artificial or natural. Frontiers are social constructions in time for: demarcating social appropriation; separating places and social groups; demarcating identities and belonging; and defining spatial, physical and symbolic domains (Rapoport, 1972). The (im)permeable frontiers mark the contours of socio-spatial segregation, while stronger borders accentuate the limits of insular urbanism and the fragmented city: walls, fences and gates that accompany video surveillance, police or private security.

In his study of gentrification Smith (2012) addressed the expansion of the frontiers of a revanchist urbanism for which the poor, who have dared to live in the centre, have had to pay for. Smith makes an analogy between the conquest of the Wild West of the United States and the young conquerors from the late twentieth century, the 'urban cowboys' who are introduced into neighbourhoods considered deteriorated and dangerous in some US cities, to tame, domesticate and (re)colonise them. For Smith, more than the 'urban cowboys' (or 'pioneers' for other authors) it was the two industries of real estate and culture that redefined the new 'urban frontier'. The first is a voracious industry that pursues profit; while the second, an ally of the former, reproduces the dominant culture, including its version of 'counterculture' to attract tourists, consumers, public, sponsors and investors, which together promote gentrification.

These concepts of frontier and urban revanchism are of interest in understanding the urban transformations in Mexico City and in particular in the area of La Merced. Without specifically talking about frontiers, Delgadillo (2005) and Monnet (1995) nevertheless recognise the historical bipartite condition of the historic centre of Mexico City. This is characterized by the better physical conditions of the southern and western areas with a lower population density, where the 'modern' and trading functions and services for the middle classes are located

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(sometimes referred to as 'The City of Palaces') and the areas to the north and east which house the working class, food markets and informal trade (referred to, by contrast, as 'The City of Slums').

This organisation relates to historic inequalities which have their roots in the colonial era and have been reinforced by public policies and private investment. For example, Altamirano (1995, p. 242) recognised in 1885 the unhealthy and deteriorated east of the city (La Merced), while in 1794 architect Ignacio de Castera of the New Spanish Baroque developed an urban plan designed to 'bring order' to the irregular and dirty neighbourhoods east of the city to correct and remove their wickedness. In these old visions, as in some contemporary ones, urban reform it is at the service of social control.

Ribbeck (1991) recognises that the historical socio-spatial segregation of the historic centre of Mexico City is not static but rather very dynamic over time. For him, this urban bipartition is a struggle between two 'twin cities' that push from each side of the 'frontier' in attempts to conquer the neighbouring territory. Here the dispute is not between civilisation and barbarism but between the modern city and working class or traditional city. Thus there have been periods when the pre-modern and working class city has pushed the frontier to conquer 'the city of palaces' with their practices (slums, informal trade). There are other periods when the government and the elite, through public policy, return the border of the working class to its place, evicting hawkers and slums, revamping obsolete buildings in physical and economic terms; and sometimes trying out public policies to expand their frontier to conquer damaged working class territories and designate them for 'noble' and 'worthy' uses. These twin cities therefore coexist, mutually threatening each other with invasion. Currently public policies for urban heritage extend the border of the 'dignified', modern and orderly historical centre, towards the north (near Plaza Garibaldi) and east (La Merced) towards the historically working class and 'deteriorated' territories that are gradually tamed and conquered.

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## **The model of 'recovery' of the historic centre**

Since 1967 there have been eight generations of public policies for the 'recovery' of the historic centre of Mexico City. 'Recovery' and 'rescue' are concepts used prolifically by governments, advocates and restorers of the urban architectural heritage to describe the actions that they take to extract the built heritage from its state of deterioration, obsolescence and/or inappropriate use. These concepts (coupled with others such as rehabilitation, revitalisation, regeneration, remodelling) are used in a neutral and apolitical manner and therefore the semantic burden of these concepts usually goes unnoticed. There are few critical academics and opposition politicians who ask the question: for what and for whom is the 'rescue' of the historic centre for? Who decides what the economic, functional and physical obsolescence the program of architectural heritage which necessitates its 'recovery'?

With the entrenchment of neoliberalism as an economic doctrine since the 1990s, public policies for the historic centre promote the active participation of the private sector. In this way, the 'recovery' of the urban landscape is part of the discourse for the entire population, dignifying the built heritage and strengthening national identity. But in practice private business, tourism, cultural consumption and the uses of urban heritage by higher-income groups are promoted. This vision stigmatises, criminalises and displaces certain social practices and people considered non grata or suspected of crime. This new urban order is based on five basic components:

1. Citizen 'participation' in the decision-making process: Based on a political agreement between the local and federal governments with the richest investor in the country, Carlos Slim, an Advisory Council for the Rescue of the Historic Centre was formed in 2002. The Mexican tycoon presides over this entity which does not consult anyone and which not a single resident or shopkeeper is part of. Carlos Slim, identified as a philanthropist who 'rescues' world heritage has, between 2002 and 2004, bought 63 properties which have become part of his real estate business (headquarters for his

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companies, housing and commercial rental space) (Delgadillo, 2016).

2. Physical improvement: Renovation of facades and public spaces, the replacement of infrastructure, street furniture, paving and pavements. In 2007 a new Metro-bus route was introduced, linking the historic centre with the international airport. Here, the owners of re-valued properties capture the increase in profits triggered by public investment which is not recovered by the state.
3. Increase in security: an increase in the number of police, surveillance video cameras and systems of citizen's alarms<sup>3</sup> to ensure a suitable climate for real estate, commerce, service and visitors. In 2002 the former Mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, and promoter of 'zero tolerance' advised on the public safety program for the historic centre. Based on his recommendations, in 2004 the local left-leaning local government issued the Civic Culture Law. which grants powers to local government to evict informal activities and those suspected of crime from the streets.
4. Relocation of street vendors: Since the 1990s there have been three generations of public programs to relocate street vendors in shopping centres. The largest recent program was undertaken in October 2007, when 15,000 street vendors were relocated to 36 shopping centres<sup>4</sup> in the historic centre.
5. Expanding the boundaries of the recovery of the historic centre: In 2007 the programmes for the 'recovery' of the historic centre began to push the boundaries of the 'City of Palaces', to include two working class areas located in the north and east of the historic centre: the Plaza de Garibaldi and its surroundings, converted into a theme park of mariachis and tequila (traditional music and drink); and the Old Merced, through the pedestrianisation of streets and the installation of modern shops intended for higher-income consumers. In addition, since 2013 the 'rescue' has been promoted in the market area of La Merced, to the east of the historic centre.

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## **Public markets in the city's food supply system**

For the supply of goods, Mexico City has 1,899 facilities employing 265,000 sellers. Public markets account for 17% of these facilities and 27% of their employees (see Table 1). In the following paragraphs we explain the different types of retail channels in the city.

02\_Table 2.1 goes here

**TITLE: Traditional Retail channels in Mexico City** (Source: Calculations based on data from SEDECO, 2014a)

### *Public markets*

The current market regulations dating from 1951 define public markets as any place 'where there are a variety of merchants and consumers, whose supply and demand is concerned mainly with basic produce' (DOF, 1951). This definition is now restricted to covered structures specifically built for the purchase of goods with necessary spaces and facilities. The state, the owner of these structures, licenses and rents the market stalls. The local government department of the Ministry of Economic Development (SEDECO) oversees the functioning of the markets, while the administrative delegations<sup>5</sup> are responsible for their management and maintenance. Most of the public markets are located in the central areas of the city because since the 1970s no public markets have been built. The supply of the expanding periphery is achieved through other means.

### *Tianguis*

The name of this type of market originates from the pre-Colombian indigenous Nahuatl language and refers to an open outdoor space intended for the purchase of goods and products. The Tianguis receive a permit to occupy public spaces such as squares, parks and streets (For a

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discussion of the Tianguis in Mexico City, see Gómez, in this book).

### *'Wheeled' Markets*

This market is an itinerant form of Tianguis where traders have the authorisation to occupy public space (squares and streets) once a week. These markets move their goods by car and occupy a different place in the same district every day, returning to the first location at the start of each week.

### *'Concentrations'*

This type of market supplies the working class through an 'association of traders who trade in general products on public streets and lacks the most essential infrastructure for their proper functioning' (SEDECO, 2014a). This is informal trade that occupies the public realm.

Informality refers to activities not regulated by the state which are not criminal, that is to say that they are lawful economic activities that use 'illegal' means.

### *Supermarkets*

In Mexico City there are 332 supermarkets and 225 department stores (SEDECO, 2014a).

Supermarkets, virtually unknown in Mexico until the 1970s, have grown in number since the enforcement of the free trade agreement between Canada, United States and Mexico in 1994.

*Contralínea* (2010) characterises Mexico City as 'the City of Walmart', criticising the encouragement of the establishment of supermarkets by the local government, regardless of their effect on public markets. SEDECO (2015, p. 10) notes that in seven administrative districts there are more supermarkets than public markets.

### *Trends and problems in markets*



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The forms of consumption in the mega-city of Mexico City have changed substantially in recent decades resulting from different economic, social and political factors (SEDECO, 2015). The neoliberal policies adopted by local and national governments gradually abandon traditional food distribution systems to the detriment of food sovereignty in favour of food imports (Torres, 1999; 2003). In the city the growth in the establishment of national and international supermarkets has been favoured. These supermarkets vie for the customers of traditional public markets in a very unequal competition. For many governments the traditional channels of supply are inefficient, ineffective and a burden for the modernisation of supply and public markets are dilapidated and obsolete in physical, functional and economic terms and should therefore be renewed and modernised (Castillo, 2003). Based on a review of the problems of the various markets as reported in the press, we outline the following trends in the transformation of and disputes over public markets in Mexico City.

1. Unfair competition: Markets suffer differentially according to their geographical location and the pressure and competition from supermarket chains which offer the same products at cheaper prices, credit, credit card payments and car parking. They also deploy intense marketing campaigns.
2. Transformation from markets of basic goods, including food, to ready-made or takeaway food markets. Although have included a food court that serves customers and tenants. However, as a result of at least three factors <sup>6</sup>, many public markets have gradually turned into markets of pre-prepared food with accessible prices.
3. Declaration of obsolescence and decay: In the last decade there have been some diagnoses of present public markets as obsolete, deteriorated, insecure, vulnerable and / or functioning under irregular legal conditions. These features might not be far from reality but they are magnified according to specific economic or political interests. For example:
  - A local councillor said that in Mexico City 44 markets were at risk of collapse due to

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their age and that 68% of the markets were dilapidated (Suárez, 2013).

- A local councillor said that illegal products were sold in public markets and that one in three shops were abandoned (Cruz, 2009). This is supported by the head of the SEDECO who stated that 35% of local public markets were abandoned or used as warehouses (Reforma, 2007a).

4. Proposals for the replacement of some public markets based on the apparent physical obsolescence of markets. For example:

- The local councillor of the Benito Juárez neighbourhood planned three urban projects which involved the conversion of public markets, considered obsolete, and their replacement with taller buildings (Quintero, 2007).

- The National Chamber of Commerce offered to invest in public markets that were underused and had been colonised by street vendors. 260 public markets (generally one-storey structures) were offered the possibility of increasing more than three stories in order to relocate hawkers (Reforma, 2007b).

5. Selective transformation into gourmet markets: Recently there have been initiatives to transform some public markets in markets of gourmet food for tourists in emulation of the success of the market of La Boquería in Barcelona (Reforma, 2011) and the San Miguel market in Madrid (Suárez, 2014) (See also Salinas and Cordero's analysis of gourmet markets in Mexico City and Madrid, in this book). Of course the presence of an existing market to create a gourmet market is not necessary: in 2014 in the area of Colonia Roma the Roma Market was created in an old industrial structure and in San Angel neighbourhood the Mercado Del Carmen was opened in a colonial house. Both 'markets' share the discourse and marketing of a 'new way of understanding the market' and as places to 'create unique experiences of social interaction.'

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## **La Merced: a contested and problematic megaproject**

La Merced is an urban area characterised by its collection of public markets, street vendors, urban congestion, public insecurity, physical deterioration, sex work, poverty and depopulation. Its name comes from a convent of the Mercedarian order that was almost totally destroyed in 1862 in order to build a new market to relocate ambulant traders and stallholders from a market that had itself been demolished. That nineteenth century market had spilled out into the surrounding streets through informal trading stalls, which created urban congestion and led to its demolition and relocation to the current market area of La Merced. In turn this collection of markets became saturated and a new Central de Abasto<sup>7</sup> (Central Market) was built. However the markets of La Merced retained their metropolitan vocation, and new shopping centres and informal trade add to the strength of the commercial function of the area. SEDECO estimates that between 200,000 and 250,000 people come daily to La Merced to buy goods or work (SEDECO, 2014b, p.10)

The markets of La Merced, built in 1957 (Cetto, 2011), are an icon of modern Mexican architecture and of the local government policy for the construction of markets at that time<sup>8</sup>. Originally there were five public markets (now eight) with 4,900 commercial premises (see Figure 2 and Table 2). Their construction, undertaken in eight months, employed an innovative technology for its time, a reinforced concrete structure with vaulted concrete roofs.

**02\_Figure 2.1 GOES HERE**

**TITLE: Location of La Merced Market (Source: Victor Delgadillo)**

The unplanned markets are located in the 'underpass' tunnels that link the main and small market halls, The Banquetón market created on the west side of the main market hall to relocate those displaced by the construction of the Merced station for the Mexico City Metro, and the Ampudia

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market located in a four-storey building constructed in the 1940s.

02\_Table 2.2 goes here

TITLE: Markets of La Merced, Mexico City (Source: Victor Delgadillo)

Since the 1990s, 14 shopping centres have been built in the area of La Merced through a policy of relocation of informal trade that occupies the streets of the historic centre. Amongst the largest are the San Ciprian market and Merced 2000. The huge informal trading activity has surrounded the markets and expanded into surrounding streets and primary roads, obstructing pedestrian and vehicular traffic. The local authority has tolerated this activity, perhaps recognising the right to work and the lack of jobs, and has gradually regularised the occupation of public space. Thus the Santa Escuela street and the esplanade of the La Merced Metro station have practically disappeared. In the latter, the government has built a structure with a sheet metal roof to order and regulate the informal trade (Figure 2).

02\_Figure 2.2 GOES HERE

TITLE: Roof of La Merced Market (Source: Left Hand Rotation, 2015)

*The issues and problems affecting the markets*

The old, dilapidated, pre-Colombian and colonial neighbourhood of La Merced has become the periphery of Mexico City's historic centre. The commercial vocation that was assigned to the area in the nineteenth century was strengthened with the construction of the markets in 1957 and the shopping centres of the 1990s. These and the construction of other public buildings have been unable to reverse the stigma of insecurity and decline of the area which has historically tolerated sex work, street trading and the presence of a marginal population (homeless people, street children, drug addicts) who find the means for survival in this area. Below we list the most important struggles and issues currently affecting the complex of markets and various retail types in la Merced.

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**Formal traders versus informal trade:** One of the potential problems for tenant stallholders and established formal traders is the presence of around 3,000 hawkers that surround the markets and spill over into the adjacent residential areas. Tenant stallholders accuse the local authorities of allowing the presence and expansion of street vendors that occupy the adjacent streets and markets, complaining that they constitute unfair competition which does not pay taxes, flood the streets with the same goods, occupy the loading and unloading areas and parking lots, and that they constitute a danger because they hinder the passage of emergency service vehicles. In an interview, Petra<sup>9</sup>, a tenant stallholder affected by the last fire in the main market hall, complained that the government tolerates the informal occupation of public space because it yields economic and political gains (interview, 04/03/2015). Meanwhile the street vendors and their powerful corporate and pyramidal organisations defend the right to work in a city that does not create jobs. In addition, hundreds of young people without any training offer the only thing they have - their labour - to load goods as 'diablos'<sup>10</sup>.

**Vehicular and pedestrian congestion:** Due to the teeming occupation of streets, squares and pavements by informal traders and the large influx of buyers the market area is very congested by vehicles and people. In the markets there is a lack of loading and unloading areas and those that do exist have been occupied by informal trade. In an interview in April 2014 the administrator of the main market hall told us that many tenants have to unload their goods in distant streets and pay the 'diablos' to carry their produce to market.

**Physical obsolescence:** The collection of markets has lacked adequate and ongoing maintenance. Each market is in a different condition, but it is possible to generalize various situations. In general, the water, sanitary and electrical installations are in a deteriorated condition and the roofs leak. In addition two markets have suffered fires, the main hall in 1988 and 2013 and Ampudia in 2001 and 2014. According to the local government the fires are due to the informal sale of fireworks and irregular electrical wiring, while for the tenants the causes are the

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negligence of the authorities in charge of maintenance (*Excelsior*, 2013). The rehabilitation works to the main hall following a fire in February 2013 have not been completed (at the time of writing, April 2016); meanwhile tenants have been relocated 'provisionally' on the street.

Public insecurity: the insecurity of the area includes the poor lighting in the street and the markets, obstructions of the streets by informal trade and the refuse left in the streets. In a recent survey we carried out with 300 people from the La Merced neighbourhood<sup>11</sup>, 68.7% of residents surveyed said that insecurity is either a serious or very serious problem, while 69.7% said that street robberies are a serious or very serious problem.

### *The urban redevelopment megaproject*

According to SEDECO the last fire in the main hall represented an 'opportunity' to modernise the area. Since 2013, the local government has promoted a 'comprehensive rescue' of the market area. With the same logic of 'participatory' decision-making, an Advisory Council for the Integral Rehabilitation of La Merced was set up. This council does not consult anyone and does not comprise any tenants of the markets, traders or residents of the neighbourhood. The presidency of the council has been given to a personality from 'civil society', a conservative journalist known for presenting the nightly news programme on the largest private television channel in the country.

In November 2013 a competition for conceptual ideas for the comprehensive 'rescue' of La Merced was held. The winning project uses politically correct and 'cutting-edge' language. It aims to increase the value of 'the public space and markets as facilitators of the commercial, cultural and social activities<sup>12</sup>' and as a 'trigger in the process of rebuilding the social fabric' to 'reconnect' adjacent neighbourhoods and improve the image, mobility, security, performance

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and liveability of the area. The project includes a new National Centre of Gastronomy, branch offices of banks, the creation of a huge new public square in the heart of La Merced (at the expense of the destruction of several buildings) and a network of pedestrian routes to 'increase the commercial potential of the area' (something that this area does not lack). The curious similarity of the concept of this project with the 'recovery' of the Raval district in Barcelona is surprising. In that city a new Rambla was created in a deteriorated neighbourhood as a mirror of the famous Rambla of the Ciutat Vella. In La Merced, the mirror is the Zócalo or Main Square of the city.

The project also aims to increase the building heights (from seven to twelve storeys) on the Fray Servando Teresa de Mier Street and designate the site as mixed residential use (a code that allows building plots to be used for virtually any activity). At the same time a different project plans to build 3,000 new homes in the area of San Pablo, in front of La Merced, through the replacement and repurposing of buildings.

The announcement of this megaproject has led to the various stakeholders (re)defining their vision of the future of the markets. There has been a general rejection of this project by informal traders and the tenants of the markets and shopping centres, particularly the 2000 Merced mall (which the winning project proposes to demolish), and especially at the beginning when a rumour spread that the markets would be destroyed to build a mall (Díaz, 2014).

In La Merced there are different social groups with varying degrees of organisation and with very different interests in the area: resident owners and tenants; established traders; stallholders in markets and shopping centres; ambulant trades; property and business owners; the destitute; indigenous people; the 'diablos' workers; religious organisations; sex workers; NGOs, and so on. These actors have very diverse interests, which are often in opposition, competition or

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conflict, so it is no coincidence that while many of them converge in opposition against the recent La Merced Comprehensive Rescue Project, they do so in different ways.

The traders of the various markets publicly expressed their opposition to the megaproject during the three months that the project was exhibited by the winning architects of the competition during the so-called 'Forum for the Future' which took place at the City Museum in 2014. At one of these public forums, the stallholders of the flower market complained that the architects who had won the competition said that their market had no identity, leading them to ask, 'How are we to blame?' Traders have opposing views about the megaproject and the future of La Merced. For example:

- Petra, a trader affected by the most recent fire in the main market hall, supported the strategy of the megaproject to demolish the Merced 2000 shopping centre because of their bars, which offer a poor service, have no permission to be there and have nothing to do with the traditional markets (interview, 04/03/2015).
- Eusebia, a trader in the food preparation area of the main hall, in an interview on the commented that they are in favour of the megaproject provided that it first clears the streets, relocates the street vendors and ends the private contract for managing toilets in the main hall, which instead of being beneficial to all is a business for the administrator (interview, 04/03/2015).
- Three traders of the Flower Market, recognised the need to address the area but also for traders to participate and remain in the markets (interview, 04/03/2015).
- A trader in the under-used Merced 2000 shopping centre said that more should be done with less, that they should restore buildings instead of demolishing them, recover public spaces by relocating street vendors, police the markets and streets and illuminate them. For the Merced



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2000 centre they proposed a radical transformation, with modern architecture and garish illuminated facades like those used in the USA or Europe in order to convert it into a key commercial reference so that Merced 2000 're-emerges as a modern building' (interview, July 2014).

- Silvestre, a trader that converted his stall which sold produce into a refreshment stand selling pre-prepared food, has on various occasions spoken of imminent displacement, of gentrification (He uses this concept), of the need for tourism and their desire to stay in La Merced, although to do so he has to change his line of business and 'leave behind the quesadillas to sell Spanish cheese and wines'. He built a second floor above his stall (somewhat unauthorised according to SEDECO officials) in order to open a cultural and educational space for the children of the traders. For him the 'comprehensive rescue' megaproject of La Merced threatens the displacement of the traditional traders and products by new traders of select products. Silvestre asked us to bring as many visitors to his stall as we can so that the authorities realise that La Merced, as it is, can attract many visitors without the need for rescue programs. 'Visitors can contribute to the defence of the market as it is now' (interview, 02/04/2014).

The megaproject is now on hold. This is due to three reasons: Firstly, strong opposition from tenants and ambulant vendors who, when it comes down to it, will carry out vigorous protests to oppose it; Secondly, political circumstances: the elections of deputies and councillors in June 2015 and the election of the Constitutional Assembly in June 2016 which will ratify the Constitution of Mexico City as an autonomous entity; Thirdly, economic projects which are much larger than that of La Merced, such as the new airport following the planned obsolescence of Mexico City's existing International Airport by the federal government.

In an interview, the Director General of public markets in the city commented to us that the competition was only for 'concept ideas of what to do with La Merced' and that the winning

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team will carry out a Masterplan for the full recovery of La Merced which will not necessarily include the architectural urban proposals presented in the winning project (interview, 14/04/2015) . In this interview he told us that the Masterplan includes 108 short, medium and long-term projects. The three priority projects are: Housing which includes the improvement of the Candelaria de los Patos neighbourhood and a project in San Pablo; 'Recovery' of public space in the semi-pedestrian Corregidora Street; and the improvement of commercial activity in the small market hall including the renovation and replacement of market stalls. Our interviewee commented that the modernisation of La Merced was 'urgent' and that those who oppose the project 'are informal vendors and irregular tenants who do not want things to change, who continue to take advantage of the situation and to sell things without authorisation.'

In March 2016 the only projects that are moving forward (without notification of the public) are the renovation of the small market hall which has caused disagreements with some of the tenants and the pedestrianisation of Corregidora Street, where negotiations with the leaders of the street vendors have begun. The group 'Left Hand Rotation', who worked intensively for three months with tenants and informal vendors of La Merced in 2015 demonstrate (from evidence collected from interviews) the widespread rejection of the megaproject and a constant complaint about the lack of information about the projects and public policies of local government (Left Hand Rotation, 2015).

## **Conclusions**

The construction of a discourse of the deterioration and obsolescence of La Merced and the condemnation of certain social and economic practices (sex work, street vendors) are historic issues in Mexico City. These so-called indecent practices as well as the overflowing markets and the informal trade are recurrent themes in the history of the city, in the same way that street traders have often been relocated to beautify or 'rescue' public space and decongest the city

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centre.

The project for the 'comprehensive rescue' of La Merced neighbourhood and its markets is part of a dual policy for the preservation of urban heritage and the modernisation of the supply system. The urban frontier of the 'recovered' historic centre, orderly, dignified and clean is extended to incorporate a territory historically considered abnormal and chaotic but one that contains a rich architectural and urban heritage and diverse economic activities. In the context of scarce colonial and nineteenth-century architectural heritage, the markets themselves become part of the heritage. The modernisation of markets promotes the incorporation of traditional sales transactions in formal banking mechanisms, the introduction of supermarket trolleys with the argument of promoting more shopping which appears directed towards the displacement of the other informal practices of the 'diablos' and the recognition of the local gastronomy which aims to incorporate the activities of markets in the industries of tourism and cultural consumption.

The language of the project for the 'comprehensive rescue' of La Merced, apparently neutral and depoliticised, legitimises the discourse of the 'natural' obsolescence of markets: the physical structures are damaged and constantly catch fire, the premises are obsolete and the traditional business model is not very competitive.

Many tenants, formal traders and informal vendors (with very different political inclinations and loyalties) consider the project of 'comprehensive rescue' as implying direct or indirect displacement through the destruction of buildings, the change of the use of the property and / or the type of products sold there. However the authorities do not understand the social rejection of their 'good' intentions and resort to discrediting the opposition, arguing that their opponents have individual interests and are defending illicit activities. Many of our respondents recognise the

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need to confront the problems of La Merced, but demand their continued presence in the market and participation in decision-making.

The dispute over the markets of La Merced is the dispute over urban heritage and a model of society and of the city in its multiple economic, social, cultural and symbolic dimensions. The dispute over the public markets of La Merced is first and foremost the dispute over a type of market, one which is 'chaotic' for traders and working class consumers; and the other which is ordered, aseptic and hygienic for tourists and higher-income consumers.

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<sup>1</sup> Original in Spanish, translated by Neil Turnbull

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'rescue' and 'recovery' are in quotation marks to highlight the vocabulary used by the local government and other stakeholders. Its significance is explained later.

<sup>3</sup> Citizens' alarms are located on posts in the street. In case of emergency citizens can activate the alarm button or a mechanism which alerts the police.

<sup>4</sup> These shopping centres can occupy an entire multi-storey building or are installed on single-storey premises. In both cases, they are enclosed by either walls or fences.

<sup>5</sup> Mexico City is divided into 16 administrative delegations.

<sup>6</sup> For example: transportation costs and travel times (preventing many people from returning home to eat), the incorporation of women into waged work and the proliferation of convenience stores.

<sup>7</sup> As part of a policy of the decongestion and conservation of the historic centre, the new Central de Abasto was established by the Iztapalapa local authority in 1982.

<sup>8</sup> These markets were built as part of public policy that between 1952 and 1966 built 88 markets and opposed and combatted street vending.

<sup>9</sup> The names of the interviewees have been changed.

<sup>10</sup> 'Diablito' is the name given to a cart used to move goods. 'Diablero' is the name given to those who drive these carts.

<sup>11</sup> This refers to 3,000 surveys conducted in August 2014 in 10 central areas by the Research Group *Habitat and Centrality*, funded by CONACYT.

<sup>12</sup> The phrases in quotation marks come from the technical report of the winning project, published by SEDECO (2014b).