



THE MEGALOPOLIS
THAT REBELLED
AGAINST PLATO
(AND OTHER
EXPERIMENTS FROM
MEXICO CITY)

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Mexico City

The Megalopolis That Rebelled Against Plato (And Other Experiments From Mexico City)

Text by Gabriella Gómez-Mont

Perhaps my favourite cities in the world are the cities that still seem to be in the process of imagining themselves out loud, even 600 years on. A publicly and privately unfolding story: always slightly undone, always at the edge of a perpetual becoming, always enticingly hinting at the secret and subjective lives taking place between and beneath its physical folds.

Perhaps that is where my stubborn love for megalopolises lies – the Mexico Cities, the Istanbuls, the Moscows and Tokyos, the Seouls of the world – the unthinkable expanse, the layer upon layer of history and time, still enigmatic enough and unstable enough and ungraspable enough to let us remake a life with our own particular mix of city pieces. The metropolis's mix of people, its micro-territories, its commons; its vernacular aesthetics, its labyrinthine corners; its urban forms and its particular political and social rules of engagement: all impossibly entangled with our own fantasies and compulsions, memories or forgetfulness; our personal histories, daily habits and the lines of desire that we draw upon it. A city after our own making – but also out of the making of millions of others. A city that feels to be at the intersection of worlds.

So I fully agree with David Harvey when he says that:
...the question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of daily life we desire, what kinds of technologies we deem appropriate, what aesthetic values we hold. The right to the city is therefore far more than the right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire.

It is here that I believe we must experiment and explore: where mind (or heart) anchors to matter. The public realm mingling with that most internal of spaces. Not only the city out there, objective and full of statistical data, but also the city we carry in our heads, including its poetic licences. It is what I think urban planners forgot at one point, with all their talk of efficiency, productivity, velocity, static forms and stable functions, demanding our citizenship conform to these pre-established ideas of how a society should coordinate to become alpha, or to become global or smart. We forgot that cities are immense cultural artefacts we are all creating together, shifting continuously. We forgot that cities are also emotional beings, with their underworlds and vertical uses of intimacy. This is why I find it so important to bring back the exiled poets (and the rest of the artists), both to Plato's ideal Republic and into the contemporary City Hall. Because, in the end, cities are about making experiences and creating meaning – individually and collectively. They have symbolic infrastructures, not only physical ones. What better than to bring in the creators of alternative realities – the masters of symbol and metaphor – and let them also have a say in the DNA of our cities and our collective blueprints for reality, helping redefine the parameters and possibilities of the public spheres? Democracy I believe would be better for it, even if Plato should disagree.¹

As a journalist and documentary filmmaker (my 'past life' as I now call it), I've had fabulous excuses to continuously explore Mexico City (the place I call home, plus one of my biggest passions); to fly in a helicopter for a documentary for the BBC; to interview the former mayor on how to handle the water crisis; to spend several weeks with the *pepenadores* of one of the largest dumps in the city, then a month immersed in Televisa with the glitzy telenovela actors for *Colors* magazine; to talk with homemade-porn masters over coffee and spend time with witty and sharp-tongued intellectuals in their libraries, followed by bantering with masked wrestlers in their changing rooms, still sweaty, still adrenaline-filled, pupils dilated from the fight, fresh blood on their bodies indicating that the *lucha libre* might be a bit more than just theatre.

Simultaneously, as an artist, urban interventions were another of my interests. With my troublemaking partners of Laboratorio Curatorial 060 – an arts collective I cofounded – we put several projects into motion. One was *Traffic*: an illegal itinerary exhibition that took over the main highway of Mexico City during rush hour, with the help of the (just as illegal) street vendors who sell everything from gum to maps to the drivers sequestered in congestion. Together we hoisted on poles a series of huge, beautiful photographs created by several artists, parading around images that talked of our skewed notions of progress and some of our perverse ‘first world’ utopias. These were mixed in with others carrying political phrases ripped out of idealistic historical discourses that then proceeded to go very wrong. At the same time, we intervened in all the car radios with the help of technology and played pied-piper-type music, right out of the devious mind of Miguel Ventura, a fabulous artist who has worked with neurolinguistic programming and is a ferocious social commentator, but also continuously filled with happy mischief. All of this was to protest the building of an elevated highway – in construction above our heads as we marched – that once again promised to take us at the speed of light to the wrong side of history; our emerging-world status chasing after defunct first-world urban paradigms. *Traffic* lasted more than an hour. Then the police came, as it is an offence to march around our ‘speed’ way. But we were well-trained by the vendors, activated our escape plans successfully and had newspapers conversing about it all the next day – about the intervention, yes, but more importantly, about the elevated highway, just as we had planned.

What beautiful irony that a few years later I would be working for the Mexico City government, the same lineage as the one that laid the cement of said highway. And now, on stages with the mayor of Mexico City, some years later, I give my own political speeches, my own splintered utopias in my hands.

I have been heading Laboratorio para la Ciudad for the last four years: the experimental office and creative think-tank of the Mexico City government, reporting to the mayor himself. The Lab, officially, is a place to reflect about all things city and to explore other social scripts and urban

futures for the largest megalopolis in the western hemisphere, working across such diverse areas as urban creativity, mobility, governance, civic tech, and public space. Extra-officially, the Lab is also a small Trojan horse (full of pied-piper music I'd like to think) bringing the 'poets' back into government. Here, artists, filmmakers, designers, writers, activists, historians and architects work hand-in-hand with political scientists, urban geographers, mathematicians, internationalists, urban planners and civic tech experts. The combination was explosive at the beginning – and not necessarily in the best way. Several years later, I believe this mix of viewpoints and languages – this need of continuous translation of worlds into another – is one of the strongest assets of my team. We now form what I like to think of as a new legion of creative bureaucrats, of city makers.

At the Lab, we continuously explore and activate projects within the realm of our agenda, which is at core our vision for the city: an open, human-scaled, participatory, pedestrian, creative and playful city... which is also how my team is divided, into tight and transdisciplinary working groups. We specialise in the gaps: conversations that are not being had, disciplines and methodologies not being used, people not being tapped. We have done everything from passing new laws (the 'Open City' law, which is our first incursion into the digital commons and a legal framework for government experimentation and new forms of governance) to small interventions in the public realm, working closely with other artists. In addition, the Lab searches to create links between civil society and government, constantly shifting shape to accommodate multidisciplinary collaborations, insisting on the importance of political and public imagination in the execution of its experiments. The Lab is also where hard data and the importance of subjective worlds meet, where strategy and tactical projects work hand-in-hand.

In many ways, independent of the project, the provocations that propels us forward are these: how can the creative capacity of a society help solve challenges and also tap new paradigms and possibilities? Can we explore the relevance of political imagination more effectively? What can story, symbol and metaphor add to the conversation of a polis? What does it mean to bring culture deeper into the urban conversation?

Things start to come full circle. I still get to experiment with symbolic gestures that speak to the imagination and open up spaces of possibility – in 2016 we closed down the aforementioned elevated highway to cars for a day, legally this time, allowing pedestrians and bikers to take over for the first time ever. But, simultaneously, we now also work hand-in-hand with the ministers of Mexico City – bringing in the activists – and, to give just of many examples, helped create Mexico City’s first road safety plan. (Traffic collisions are the leading cause of death among children in Mexico City.) We also created *Mapatón* – a city-wide game that crowdsourced much-needed informal bus routes, for which more than 4,000 people signed up. Mexico City now has its first open dataset for these minibuses, which is used for both public policy and mobility apps – something that had been an unsolvable puzzle up until this point, because of its expanse and complexity.

To give another example: the Lab’s department of urban geography created hundreds of maps that can give a block-by-block statistical and objective reading of Mexico City. But we also found it important also to dive into the subjective city, and so we surveyed 31,000 people across 1,400 neighbourhoods about their ‘urban imaginaries’: their pains and pleasures related to the city, the words that come to mind, the future they imagine. We can now also navigate this data by neighbourhood, age, or gender.

With these types of hybrid tool, we are able to find hotspots to intervene in, experiments to create. For our playful city strategy – which explores play as a city-building tool, as well as bringing children deeper into the creation of public policy: for and with them – we work on the strategic as well as the tactical; we are just as interested in the policy frameworks as in instigating new typologies of ludic spaces for the megalopolis.

This tool has helped us see that we need to be rethinking spatial justice: some parts of the city have more green space than almost any other city in the world, but then places like Iztapalapa have just half a square meter of green per inhabitant, when the UN recommends nine square metres. (Paradoxically, the Iztapalapa borough also has the greatest concentration of children in Mexico City, almost 500,000 in an area of just over 116 square kilometres.)

Back at the Lab, crossing concentration of children, indexes of marginalization and segregation plus lack of access to public space, we can suddenly zoom in to specific areas and work with both government and communities on more locally tailored projects: creating play streets, or putting out an open call for proposals that explore ‘urban toys’ – ephemeral objects and interventions that can point us to more imaginative solutions for playscapes in the city, beyond plasticky playgrounds. Public space that signals possibility. So, in summary, the Lab means creatives not only intervening public space, but intervening before, laying the grounds of intervention, the rules of engagement. We are now also working closely with all of the participatory budgets of the city (US\$60 million a year) to see if we can bring our ideas deep into rethinking policy, especially around creative urban regeneration.

Here, Felix Guattari’s idea about wedges comes to mind: Those who, individually or collectively, are in a position to intervene on people’s psyches include not only psychoanalysts but educators, artists, architects, urban planners, fashion designers, musicians, sports and media people, and others, none of whom can hide behind a so-called transference neutrality. They must help bring about change by introducing a wedge, producing an interruption or making openings that can be inhabited by human projects leading to other ways of feeling, perceiving and conceiving. An ethical paradigm has to be complemented with an aesthetic paradigm that will prevent processes from getting fixated in deadly repetitions. In the case of the latter, each concrete performance introduces openings that cannot be assured by theoretical foundations or any authority but that are always ‘work in progress’.

This ‘creative capacity’ starts with creatives coming into government and having a say in things, beyond the arts and culture. But it should not stop there. If in Mexico City we are to take seriously ‘The Right to the City’ protected in our brand-new city constitution (still celebrating), we need to have government become not only a provider of services but also a catalyser of talent. We need to rethink its role, help shape new hybrid actors and translators; give society new tools,

create new types of civic institutions and participatory scaffolding, more ingenious social articulations; to understand the physiology of cities, yes, but also understand the importance of wedges in the world.

Both the Right to the City and the Open City Law give a legal framework for experiences and experiments in the wild, knowing that cities and their societies are dynamic beings, in constant change. We have an opportunity in Mexico City to integrate creative explorations into civic and urban life, using new approaches and paradigms. I am convinced that the dynamics of art and culture should be part of this, let loose beyond the cultural institutions and into daily life.

I feel we have barely begun this exploration, grasped the possibilities. There is so much to experiment: to understand from choreographers and filmmakers how bodies move across space, from writers what it takes for us to imagine ourselves as another, from visual artists how aesthetics can be a point of departure for debate. And concerning strangeness and surveying strangeness: also a chance for discovery, for becoming another. And from poets (yes, Plato, the poets) what it is that inspires us and moves us, beyond the rational and the reasonable, how to leap over the gaps to make new meaning, how to be fascinated again by the political and the social. And how this all can redefine our notions of civic life and public participation.

So “let us build cities for lovers and friends” instead of cars or corporations, as Lewis Mumford proclaimed. Might artistic practices in the public realm permit us to become more entangled with each other – to understand how entangled we already are with each other – while encountering ourselves in public, if even for a moment. Suddenly face-to-face with each other at a very tiny corner of the vast expanse of the impossibly gargantuan megalopolis – different, and strangers, but also bound together by an endless city and its future, by our public and collective imagination.



Gabriella Gómez-Mont

Gabriella Gomez-Mont was the founder of Laboratorio para la Ciudad (2013–2018), the award-winning experimental arm of the Mexico City government. She now directs The Urban Task Force: a new type of nomadic and creative office specialised in cities, and which constantly shifts shape to accommodate high-level, transdisciplinary collaborations across the world.

Besides her fascination with all things city, Gabriella is a journalist, visual artist, and director of documentary films, as well as a creative advisor to several cities, universities and companies. She has received several international recognitions for her work in different fields, such as the first prize in the Audi Urban Future Award, the Best Art Practice Award given by the Italian government, The Creative Bureaucrats Award by the German government, and the TED City 2.0 Prize, among others. She is an MIT Director's Fellow, a Yale World Fellow, a TED Senior Fellow, as well as being a fellow of the Institute for the Future Fellow and the Salzburg Seminar, a Fabrica alumna and a World Cities Summit young leader. Gabriella is also part of the international advisory committee on social innovation for the mayor of Seoul, as well as of NACTO's Streets for Kids, the XXII Triennale of Milan, C40's Knowledge Hub and UNDP's Lab Accelerator. She was recently named one of the 100 most creative people in business by Fast Company magazine. She is now working on a book called *The Experimentalists: Cities, Political Imagination and Social Creativity*.



Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer. Previously, she was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations, an international arts producing company. For full details on the 15-year period of projects and for access to publications and resources, visit www.situations.org.uk.

Footnotes

¹ In Books III and X of *The Republic*, Plato takes on the poets: the imitators of the world, and “like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and from the truth,” dangerously corrupting youth by inciting their passions instead of the faculties of reason. Poetry, including the narratives of others' lives, appeals to the emotions; it “feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness and virtue.” And so, Plato concludes: poetry must be banished from the hypothetical, ideal society.

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The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

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