Chapter 3:
OUR URBAN IDENTITY:
72810

3. Our Urban Identity: 72810

The focus of this chapter will be on defining how people individually relate to places, why they settle down or decide to transform their surroundings and how that impacts the city's evolution. The title includes San Andrés Cholula's zip code – 72810 – because it identifies the location and is becoming a popular designation for this city.

One characteristic of the city of San Andrés Cholula is that it has been continuously inhabited for many centuries and even boasts the title of oldest city in America.

> Throughout centuries, Cholula's landscape has been defined by human activity. It is a region that has been densely used since precolonial times due to its favorable land conditions, profitable weather for agriculture practice and strategic location. The city is known for having been occupied for more than twenty-five centuries and uninterrupted occupation, making it the most ancient city in Latin America. (Dominguez, p. 5–6)

Due to this constant use of the city area, tremendous amount of transformation has taken place. Citizens of Cholula generally identify with the area and have constantly endeavored to shape their surroundings. In previous chapters I have mentioned the rivalry between the two Cholula's – San Andrés and San Pedro – this dispute encompasses the way people identify themselves as locals. In San Pedro people identify themselves as *Cholultecas*, but in San Andrés Cholula they usually prefer to call themselves

San Andreseños. Some people that have been living in Cholula for a long period of time might be able to characterize themselves as *Cholultecas*, however, the name *San Andreseños* is a quite exclusive designation reserved only for people whose ancestors are from the city of San Andrés Cholula and who have been raised here for generations.

A few months ago, a picture was taken for the promotion of the city of San Andrés Cholula that features several personalities of the night‑life scene here in Cholula, including local bar owner Jean Paul Alcaraz, one of the proprietors of Bar Fly, a chain of bars located in different cities throughout Mexico. In this picture we see a dozen of people posing in different positions with funny props or doing sort of odd activities and at the bottom left of the picture there is the title Cholula, denoting that these people both embody and portray the city.

Portrait of residents. San Andrés Cholula, Mexico (Picture by www.ilove.mx/Cholula)

The interesting thing about this picture is that none of these people were born in Cholula or even raised here. Still, they feel confident enough to affirm that this is their city and that "they are Cholula". Most of them have come here, settled down and are active in nocturnal city life, including local DJs *Damn Disko* seen in the back left side of the picture. This is only one example of a peculiar phenomenon that occurs in Cholula: people easily identify with the space and quickly make it their own.

The city, in the words of urban sociologist Robert Park, is "man's most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart's desire. But, if the city is the world man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself". (Harvey, p. 23)

Citizens are the key element to the transformation of the city and identification with the urban realm helps make a cohesive and punctual intervention on the built environment.

3.1. Development of identity in Cholula

In order to identify with the urban realm – including both the built and social environment – it is important for individuals to develop an emotional bond with the city. This bond is necessary for people on a personal level because they seek association with others. According to Butterworth, "the connection between place attachment and the development of local connections and roots are linked to a person's personal history, and feelings

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of comfort and security. Trust in others and society is seen as the deepest‑lying element of the basic security system needed to control existential anxiety. Self identity and personal growth at any stage of one's life are hampered if one is stuck in a hostile, unpredictable, un‑trustworthy, anxiety‑invoking environment". (p. 8) In the case of San Andrés Cholula, although locals are known for being very private, the overall social environment is diverse and inclusive.

Butterworth explains this as the concept of "sense of place", affirming that it "refers to the feeling of attachment or belonging to a physical environment, such as a place or neighborhood, and the sense of personal and collective identity that comes from this sense of belonging". (p. ii) This sense of belonging gives citizens a reason to interact with their surroundings and partake in community life, be it a social group they belong to or a larger group of individuals working towards a common goal.

Some specialists attribute what happens in city life to the urban development of each place. Dovey argues that these actions are a product of what has been infra‑structurally placed in the surroundings. He affirms that "everyday life is 'framed' in the cities, streets, buildings, spaces and rooms in which we live our lives. These places may even become an invisible context for our lives, of which we are not fully aware. Our actions are mediated and shaped by the built environment. Meanings are generated by buildings and spaces, which we 'read' as actors passing through them". (Dovey, 1999) While this relationship does indeed exist, I believe that it is a reciprocal one wherein each part cannot exist without the other. Hiss explains that "our relationship with the places we know and interact with, is thus not abstract, but is close and intricate. As the places in which we live and interact change, so do we undergo personal change". (1999)

Taking this one step further, this explains why the city of San Andrés Cholula has changed so drastically in the last decade: the citizens themselves are modifying the urban realm. Overall population growth has played an important role in this change but it is the social diversity that dictates the great variety of establishments in the city and the increasing presence of new and distinct services.

3.2. Identity in a community setting

Once individuals identify with a place, they begin a process of selecting spots that feel akin to their preferences. In these places they encounter other with similar proclivites. On this subject, Butterworth writes:

> The way a community functions is the result of a complex interrelationship between its history, the way that people, groups, and institutions are organized and interrelated, and the way that power and resources are dispersed. The degree of complexity of a community and its interrelationships will largely determine any efforts to change any aspect of it, including the psychological and physical wellbeing of that community's inhabitants. (p. 3)

Although these individuals interact with each other in select groups, it is only in a healthy urban environment that all of these elements – social groups, institutions, government and businesses – are able to interact and participate in community activities. Butterworth affirms that "sense of

community reflects the symbolic interaction in which people engage as they use aspects of the physical environment". (p. 3)

The urban realm must develop new strategies to include all of the city's actors because "built environments that promote social interaction and participation will also afford the development of social networks, social ties, social support, sense of community, community cohesion and competence, and sense of place – all seen as important determinants of community mental well–being". (Butterworth, p. iv) Fostering relationships between the city's people improves the social fabric.

As to how we can create these new strategies, Butterworth provides an explanation about how this "sense of community" is developed:

> [Sense of community] emerges from the common symbols people use to designate their sense of belonging to and shared membership in a particular territory, as well as designating their particular personal territory. In addition to the positive influence of existing landmarks, sense of community has been found to be enhanced by urban planning that encourages visual privacy, ensures residents have easy access to amenities, parks, recreation facilities and a town or neighborhood centre; offers pedestrian–friendly spaces; provides streetscapes so that houses have view of the surrounding neighborhood; encourages open verandas and low fences in order to encourage social interaction; and restricts motor traffic. (Butterworth, p. iii)

In order for people to develop this sense of community, they must have shared goals. Berkowitz affirms that "social support is a key element to

sustainable communities: community life is sustained when social networks are strong, when there are people with common interests and who feel a sense of common fate". (p. 452) If everyone feels a dependence on the same area to thrive both as individuals and as a community, then it is more likely action will be taken shape and define the urban environment. If we can create this sense of common fate, then different aspects arise that comprise the process of belonging to the community, Butterworth writes:

> Sense of community comprises four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to the feeling of belonging and relating to others. Secondly, influence refers to a person's sense that their membership matters to other members and makes a difference to the group, and that the group matters to them. The third element, integration and fulfillment of needs, refers to the reinforcement that people derive by having their needs met by being part of the group. Finally, shared emotional connection refers to members' sense of shared history, places, time, symbols and experiences. (Butterworth, p. 11)

The gap between a personal perspective on community and the wider view of the urban realm is narrowed by the involvement of people and groups in the concept of "sense of community" which "attempts to characterize the relationship between the individual and the social structure". (Chavis & Wandersman, p. 56)

3.3. Citizen impact on urban transformation

Landscapes are not static, but constantly changing and evolving as a result of the combined impact of physical and social factors. (Butterworth, p. 4) As previously stated, it is a collective action of individual interests that shape the urban realm and this influences the formal structure of the city over time.

72810 Music Festival: In March of 2012, the first major music festival was held near the pyramid in San Andrés Cholula. The venue, usually used as either a baseball or soccer field, was the perfect spot to hold such a large event. The name of the festival, which refers to the city's postal code, was made into a sign that was lit up from the top of the pyramid. (Picture by Gutierrez, 2012)

Butterworth argues that "to create living cities and strengthen civic identity, people need to take an active role in claiming their sense of belonging by cultivating political debate over the quality of the built environment and the culture of cities". (p. v)

An example of this type of action was the campaign aimed at saving the bike lane in the main street that leads to the center of San Andrés Cholula. The campaign, organized by local non – profit group *Cholula en Bici* (Cholula On Bike), collected around two thousand signatures from locals who could no longer ride safely on the street after infrastructure remodeling eliminated the existing path. This community action lead to government officials acknowledging this issue and finding ways to solve the problem.

Manifestation by community members to recover the bike lane. San Andrés Cholula, Mexico. (Picture by Flores, 2013)

When citizens take action in how their surroundings are transformed they are partaking in civil activities essential to city life.

> The opportunity to participate in civic life has been identified as a core human need, and essential to the psychological health of individuals and communities. Aspects of the built environment influence participation, in terms of architectural design, population density, and control over environmental stressors; the geographical and built characteristics of a particular district, place or space; and a community's demographic profile, sociocultural norms, traditions, and social and neighborhood networks. (Butterworth, v)

In the aforementioned landscapes, Altman affirms that "we do not just 'exist' within a physical environment — we interact with it and derive important meaning from it. The physical environment is more than an influencing factor in people's behavior — it is also a medium, milieu or context in which personal relationships are embedded and without which they cannot be viable". (p. 34)

In fact, the built environment becomes an intrinsic part of a person's life and forms an important element of an individual's emotional context.

> Spaces, places and buildings are more than just props in people's lives; they are imbued with meaning and resonance, as they symbolize people's personal histories, interpersonal relationships, and shared events in people's extended relationships, families, communities and wider

culture. Indeed, Boyer described cities as repositories of 'collective memory'. Environmental meanings are not only constructed by individuals, but also by the broader culture and social structure in which people live. Appreciation of the link between the quality of people's relationship with place and their individual and collective well‑being has been somewhat limited. (Butterworth, p. 6‑7)

There are no limits as to who can work as a facilitator in the development of these relationships with the built environment. Furthermore, this important link between individuals and the urban realm has been forgotten or viewed as unimportant but, as research shows, is key to promoting healthy city living.

3.4. Benefits of identifying with the urban surroundings

In previous paragraphs I have explained the importance of an individual's identity with their surroundings. The benefits of improving this relationship are usually found on an emotional level for each citizen. "People do not simply look out over a landscape and say 'this belongs to me'. They say 'I belong to this'. Concern for familiar topography, for the places one knows, is not about the loss of a commodity, but about the loss of identity. People belong in the world: it gives them a home". (Jacobs, p. 109) The ability of individuals and groups to feel ownership of a larger entity, in this case the city of San Andrés Cholula, provides them with emotional stability.

Given these emotional advantages, it is more likely that these citizens will become part of the transformation of space in their community and be

concerned about the quality of such space. "Satisfaction with features of the local built environment has been found to play a major role in predicting perceived neighborhood safety, and to act as a stronger predictor of safety than experience of property violation or personal victimization. Women and older people are strongly affected by the safety implications of isolation. If a space is unused, then it becomes (perceived as) dangerous, because there is no one else to observe the space and the interactions that occur". (Butterworh, iv)

We can quantify on an emotional level the impact of space identification. Additionally, the effect of these actions on the space also enhances security, heightens community life, improves urban infrastructure and enriches the social fabric of the city and the overall well being of its citizens. However, these changes cannot be made on an individual scale. A person must first become part of their community by identifying with other groups and the built environment. An individual's experience of space is delineated by their own personal background and history. Consequently, their background functions as a means to personalize a situation and attack it from their own narrow perspective. When citizens solidify their relationship with others and with the community as a whole, they engender a broader range of opinions and experiences that enrich the modifications to the urban realm. Dominguez writes:

> All the knowledge people have from the world is a product of their experiences, these start out at from a biological standpoint and go through practical interests up to the intellectual realizations. This process of acquiring

knowledge contributes to building our own personal image of reality.

Nature, when it minimizes or eliminates people from its landscape; habitat, observing how people adapt to their natural environment; artifact, seeing impacts of human activity; process, when we emphasize human interaction with the natural environment; problem, if an obstacle is presented that prevents human life; ideology, searching for cultural and philosophical value; history, focusing on the concrete human activity marks throughout time; place, if the observed landscape is composed by identifiable sites; or esthetic, if the landscape is observed in terms of artistic quality.

These concepts each represent a different perspective on the relationship between people and their environment. (p. 23–25)

We must promote a healthy relationship between individuals and the urban realm in order to enhance their involvement in community and city life. If this existing relationship is cultivated, then not only will we improve citizens' well–being by promoting "sense of place", but we will also have a city that responds to its citizens' needs, a city that both reflects and embraces the existing social diversity and complex social fabric. These are the characteristics that make a city truly special and unique.