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Urban Sensation and Segregation: Understanding Mexico City's Programa de Rescate and Its Reproduction of Urban Othering

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Abstract: Reflecting a form of entrepreneurial urban governance in the neoliberal context, the Rescue Programme (Programa de Rescate) launched in Mexico City contained a series of renewal policies that intended to redevelop the urban centre. Research has been conducted to either critique this programme from its embedded neoliberal ideology and the urban inequalities it has caused or analyse local residents' agency in resisting this urban planning. Rather than simply viewing the Rescue Programme as a form of entrepreneurial urban governance, this research adopts sensory urbanism as a theoretical framework and concerns this programme as an attempt to implicate sensory governance in Mexico City. From a sensory perspective, this research seeks to explore how the renewal policies of the Rescue Programme have become a source of reproducing urban segregation in everyday-life practices and further generate othering in intimate socio-spatial contestations. Drawing on the concepts of 'urban sensorium' and urban 'othering,' the Rescue Programme has reproduced urban exclusion and segregation by reinforcing the division between different sensory landscapes in the city. Based on such a division, the sensory experiences in inner-city neighbourhoods, which have been excluded from the 'revitalised' process of the urban centre under the Rescue Programme's promotion, have been marketed as a cultural consumption that allows tourists to experience the alternative image of the city. In contrast to the beautification of the urban centre, such so-called 'slum tourism' within the inner-city neighbourhoods has further reproduced urban othering. To improve sensory governance in Mexico City on the basis of the Rescue Programme, the participation of local residents and street vendors is recommended to be involved in the urban planning process in terms of insurgent planning.

Keywords: Sensory Urbanism, Urban Sensory Experience, Multi-Sensory Urban Governance, Urban Segregation.

1. Introduction

Different from the image of a popular tourist destination, Mexico City's centre was characterised by crime activities and informal commerce back in the 1990s [16]. Such a shift in the city's image was largely related to the Rescue Programme (Programa de Rescate), a programme which contained a series of neoliberal policies at the beginning of the millennium. In August 2001, the Rescue Programme was officially launched by a coalition of federal authorities and city authorities as well as private sectors [6]. Combining real estate development, growth of service-industry infrastructure, and touristification of the urban centre, the programme seek to build a physically revitalized and beautified city image, which would attract inward investments as well as tourists [4, 16]. In this sense, the government of Mexico City rearranged the urban space and deliberately removed the 'undesirable' factors while preserving what was desired in the government's perception during the process of promoting the programme. In case of street crimes threatening tourism, homeless people, prostitutes and street children were removed from the streets in line with the increased presence of police [16]. Since street vendors were perceived as inappropriate for the image of a beautiful and safe Mexico City as well, removing street vending was another core strategy of the Rescue Program. Apart from the 'undesirables,' the Historic Centre became another essential focus of the programme with the aim of preserving historical heritage in order to boost tourism and form a solid Mexican national identity.

However, the Rescue Programme has brought not only redevelopment but also urban inequalities and segregation. As Vodopivec and Dürr argued, the programme made urban inequalities less visible but it did not make them disappear [16]. While the neoliberal beautification and securitization policies of the programme were promoting political and business leaders' definition of the city centre, they deepened the gaps between the beautified areas and the inner-city neighbourhoods that were characterized by high crime rates and poverty, reinforcing these neighbourhoods as the disrupting 'other' in Mexico City. The question is, how did the renewal policies of the Rescue Programme become a source of reproducing urban segregation in everyday-life practices and further generate othering in intimate socio-spatial contestations?

To answer this question, this research would adopt the concepts of sensory urbanism as a theoretical framework for analysing the programme. Viewing the Rescue Programme as a sensory manipulation, this research would argue that this urban renewal programme reproduced urban segregation by creating an 'urban sensorium' and shaping different sensory experiences among city dwellers, which further enabled sensory othering in intimate socio-spatial contestations.

The research would first introduce some basic information about the Rescue Programme. Previous debates relating to the programme will also be discussed in line with relevant literature. After this, the concepts of sensory urbanism will be explained as the theoretical framework, including the reasons why this theoretical framework appears suitable and effective in the context of Mexico City. The third part goes back to the Rescue Programme but with sensory urbanism as a lens. Through applying the theoretical framework, the programme would be understood as the government's efforts to reshape urban sensation. Taking Tepito, an inner-city neighbourhood in Mexico City, as an example, this research will explore how

such regulation of proper sensory dispositions and promotion of new sensory experiences reproduced urban segregation and exclusion towards stigmatized inner-city neighbourhoods. Regarding the limits of this renewal programme, this research, in the end, will suggest potential possible changes to the programme to avoid reinforcing urban segregation while shaping urban sensation.

2. The Rescue Programme: Discourse and Implication of 'Rescue'

The Rescue Programme was a government initiative aimed at addressing the crisis of the Historic Center in Mexico City, which has been defined as a combination of problems such as insecurity, poverty, and deterioration of the urban landscape. The objective of the programme was to reimagine and revitalize the area, making it an attractive place to live and invest in. The city government had the concern that investors may perceive Mexico City as too risky for their personal safety and the safety of their capital, which could lead to a negative impact on foreign investment [17].

To achieve its goals, the programme had three stages. The first stage focused on creating a commercial corridor between the Historic Center's main plaza, the Zocalo, and the business district of Paseo de la Reforma. This involved the construction of Torre Mayor, the tallest office and residential tower in Latin America, as well as a new hotel and a cinema. The city also increased police presence on the streets during this stage. The second stage of the Rescue Programme involved the renovation and "beautification" of Alameda, one of the oldest public parks in Mexico City. It also involved the removal of hundreds of street vendors who had been operating in the park for years. The third and most ambitious stage of the programme aimed at 'revitalizing' and 'repopulating' the Historic Center. To achieve this goal, the city renewed all underground infrastructures and cabling, refurbished the facades of buildings, improved street lighting, and standardised street infrastructure such as garbage cans, newspaper stands, and shoe shiners' chairs. The government also tried to guarantee safety and security in the area, which has been identified as the most dangerous in the city, with an average of 17 crime-related activities per day. To address this, security and surveillance systems like closed-circuit television have been installed, and a new police force, the Citizen Protection Force, has been assigned to patrol the streets in order to provide a safe space for tourists. The third stage also involved the complete removal of thousands of street vendors from more than 20 streets in the Historic Center [4]. This has been a controversial measure, as many of these vendors have been operating in the area, contributing to the local economy. However, the government believed that removing them will help to "revitalize" the area and make it more attractive to investors and residents.

Though aiming at 'rescuing' the Historic Center, the Rescue Programme was not the very first attempt to address this goal. One such endeavour was led by Manuel Camacho Solis during his term as mayor from 1988 to 1993. The initiative called Échame una Manita, or "Give me a hand," involved the renovation of buildings, restoration of public spaces, financial incentives for businesses, and a plan to relocate street vendors to 27 new commercial plazas. The ultimate goal was to turn the Historic Center into a Mexican version of Broadway. Despite the previous efforts, the area continued to face challenges, prompting the implementation of the current Rescue Programme [4].

Research has been developed surrounding the implication of the Rescue Programme from various approaches. The context in which the policy emerged and the residents' agency in response to the policy has been intensively analysed by Veronica Crossa. Crossa approached this urban policy from the perspective of entrepreneurial urban governance [3]. Based on the objectives of the programme, she argued that the programme was characterized by a transformation from managerial urban governance to entrepreneurial urban governance, showing that the main concerns of the urban government shifted from providing public services to attracting inward capital to boost economic growth with strategies such as privatization of public space, and collaborations between public and private sectors. Though seeking to improve the living quality of the local population, Crossa criticized that this policy, which was formed by political and business elites, excluded several forms of social interaction that were central to the local population's well-being and self-identification, especially for street vendors and artisans [3]. Later in 2009, Crossa traced the privatization of public space during the implication of Rescue Programme in entrepreneurial urban governance context, but focused on how street vendors developed their resistance to remain on the streets and maintain their livelihood [4]. Most of the street vendors had joined street vending organizations, forming tight socio-economic connections with each other. When facing repressive measures of regulation and prohibition, street vendors formed organizations to fight against police brutality and confront authority. To keep their social networks and kin ties on streets, different organizations also worked together to relocate their members who were removed by the Rescue Programme from their previous locations. Organizations also adopted 'torear' as a strategy that enabled people to sell goods while remaining mobile. Certain members of the organizations were paid to monitor the streets and police activities so that other members could grab their goods and run to safe places before being charged by the police. In 2016, Crossa further analyzed the neoliberal narrative embedded in the Rescue Programme, perceiving informal economy and practices as urban problems that needed to be formally handled and removed [5].

Apart from focusing on its political context and resistance, the economic and political impacts of the Rescue Programme have been another point of analysis. Wigle criticized the programme from the perspective of spatial regulation [17]. By comparing the different spatial regulations in downtown and periphery areas of Mexico City, plannings in the urban center have been identified as 'fast-track' development approvals while plannings in the urban periphery have been identified as 'slow-track' regulation for settlement areas designated as 'informal.' Seeing the Rescue Programme as a set of regulations specifically designed for 'fast-track' downtown area, Wigle argued that such uneven spatial regulation would undermine the objectives of other programmes that focus on involving vulnerable groups and marginalized areas in urban planning [17]. Vodopivec and Dürr also stressed the spatial inequalities caused by the Rescue Programme, as the redevelopment and beautification of the city centre reinforced the division between safe, beautiful downtown and the dangerous, marginalized inner-city neighbourhoods [16]. Setting the implication of Rescue Programme as a context, Vodopivec and Dürr explored how the 'slum' areas in Mexico City had been turned into destinations for cultural

consumption as well while the city centre was revitalized for attracting investments and tourists [16].

The majority of the authors analysing the Rescue Programme have been focused on its contexts and impacts, or the agency of marginalized groups resisting the programme. Little effort has been devoted to studying how the Rescue Programme led to the reproduction of urban segregation in everyday-life practices among urban residents. To answer this question, a theoretical framework that enables this research to delve into the daily practices of urban residents appears necessary, which is sensory urbanism.

3. Sensory Urbanism, Urban Sensorium and Sensory Othering

As an emerging field of urban studies, sensory urbanism has been developed to take the sensorial experience as a significant point of urban analysis. As Jaffe et al. stated, sensorial experience is central to how urban dwellers know their cities when they move between and through different districts and are embedded in different atmospheres [12]. They may find themselves being squeezed into crowded public transport or driving their private cars; being surrounded by loud music and drinking crowds with smells of food on the streets or sitting inside quiet restaurants. All these sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touches constitute the sensory experience of urban dwellers, generating their responses such as discomfort, hate, pleasure and delight. Based on these sensory experiences, sensory urbanism studies the governance of sensation. The governance of urban sensation could be achieved in policies by either regulating the proliferation of certain sensory experiences or promoting new sensory experiences, such as removing factors that are perceived as 'disorder' from the public place and adding street lights [7, 9]. By producing or maintaining sensory experience, certain types of sensory disposition would be gradually installed in urban dwellers' everyday-life practices.

As Goonewardena argued, such manipulation of sensation is usually characterized by an element called 'urban sensorium' [10]. The concept was developed based on theories of Lefebvre's production of urban space, Althusser's production of ideology and Gramsci's hegemony, considering urban space as a mediation of ideology and production of hegemony with the aestheticization of everyday life (Goonewardena, 2005). Viewing urban sensations as the traditional concern of aesthetics, urban sensorium refers to "an ideological, aestheticised form of space that shields the wealthier classes from physical exposure to urban misery" [12].

Furthermore, these manipulations and discourse of sensation will in the next step generate 'visceral micro-politics,' as argued by Pow, the 'sensory othering' that reproduces urban segregation in socio-spatial contestations [15]. Noticeably, this type of sensory othering could be generated by urban policies while establishing urban sensorium, but the process itself later proceeds among urban dwellers in everyday life. When urban dwellers come through different sensory experiences inside and outside of the sensorium, they become more aware of what sensations are 'normal' and what are 'foreign' to them as well as the sensory selves and others [13]. In this context, urban needs that lead to sensations against the dominating urban sensorium would be stigmatized and devalued as 'undesirables' and 'disorders.' Casting these needs as urban others, sensory othering is as such adopted as a tool to preserve the established sensorium and justify urban segregation and exclusion [15]. Under policies that manipulate urban sensations, emotional responses from urban dwellers to the surrounding environments may further reproduce urban segregation and strengthen social boundaries.

4. Reproducing Segregation: Livelihood, Criminal Neighbourhood and 'Slum' Tourism

Applying sensory urbanism as a theoretical framework, the Rescue Programme could be therefore perceived as an example of urban sensation governance. It contained the physical renewal as a large part of the programme, rearranging sensory order with a global standard of aesthetic parameters [7]. By building the commercial corridor, beautifying public parks, renewing street infrastructures, refurbishing estate visuals and improving street lighting, the programme tried to change the sensory landscape of Mexico City into a 'modernized' and 'sanitized' figure that seemed profitable and worthy to be invested for the global audience. Therefore, any signals that reflect the conventional sense of decay and the past, such as the loud voice of street vendors selling their goods, cluttering shoe shiners' chairs and garbage cans, and homeless people on the streets, were deemed to be removed. Even though street vending could be irreplaceable means of livelihood for many families, they were still not considered appropriate in this new sensory landscape promoted by the Rescue Programme.

Seeing the Rescue Programme as a sensory urban policy, it could be identified that the programme has led to the establishment of the urban sensorium. While the 'undesirables' had been removed, not all elements that were concerned by the government as damage to Mexico City's image could not be simply brushed away, including the inner-city neighbourhoods. One of these gated neighbourhoods is Tepito, an old neighbourhood that locates approximately twenty minutes walk from the city centre. Being notorious for its crime-hidden image, Tepito appears as the scene for drug selling, smuggling and illegally copied goods [1]. The overwhelming presence of crime even leads to a perception within the neighbourhood stating every resident is, to some extent, guilty or at least not innocent [11]. The livelihood of low-income residents in this neighbourhood largely relies on street vending and street markets, which constitute the neighbourhood's own culture of feeling proud to have ties to the market [2, 12]. Seeing neighbourhoods like Tepito as problematic for marketing the city, authorities, in the end, focused on distancing these neighbourhoods from the public and imposing repressive regulations [14], reinforcing the division between a safe, beautified urban centre and the criminal, poor, violent Tepito. The urban sensorium that excludes these inner-city neighbourhoods has thus been created.

The sensory gap produced by urban sensorium then has provided the condition for the emergence and development of 'slum' tourism, which commoditises urban poor neighbourhoods as cultural products to give tourists a sense of poverty. Guided by a local resident, tourists are enabled to walk into inner-city neighbourhoods and interact with neighbourhood residents, facilitating multidimensional and place-based experiences in which tourists are fully embodied. During the tours of Tepito, most visitors start their tours from

the Historic Centre or the nearby metro stations to fully experience the contrast between Tepito and the beautified urban centre [8]. As Jaffe et al. described, "The neighbourhood's bustling street market immerses pedestrians in a mix of sensations: they are engulfed by a hot, noisy dense space, crowded from all sides by the many shoppers, by the tightly packed stalls with their yellow and blue tarps and by the sheer quantity of merchandise on display. Visitors are enveloped by the visual abundance of the goods for sale, the cacophony of commerce, the smells of cooking emanating from the food stalls, the heat of the day and the physical contact as people push and squeeze to get through" [12]. In this way, tourism has been adopted as a strategy to show the alternative image of the city. However, this tourism can be another source of urban othering that further generates urban segregation. For most of the tourists, who are middle-class Mexicans and from other parts of the city [12], such tourist experience becomes apparently a disruption of their own sense of comfort, contradicting the urban sensorium in which they inhabit. The more impressed the tourists are, the more aware they are that they do not belong to these places. This sensation of non-belonging produces a sense of distance between middle-class Mexican tourists and these neighbourhoods. In this way, urban segregation has been further reinforced as the image of urban poverty has become a cultural commodity and the socio-spatial distance between urban communities has been experienced by Mexican tourists more than ever. Such urban othering is not directly caused by renewal policies of the Rescue Programme, but indirectly fostered among the Mexican tourists who are attracted by the sensory gap caused by the urban sensorium.

5. Conclusion

To summarize, this research critiques the Rescue Programme in Mexico City for enhancing urban segregation from the perspective of sensory urbanism. In the context of governments competing for obtaining global investments, the Rescue Programme was primarily promoted to 'beautify' the urban centre to make it a safe and profitable area for global investors. The programme thus contains two main elements: beautification and securitization of the Historic Centre in a neoliberal context, leading to renewing urban infrastructure and removing street vendors. However, applying sensory urbanism as a theoretical framework, the Rescue Programme to some extent can reproduce urban segregation by establishing manipulation of urban sensation. The programme firstly established the urban sensorium, an aestheticized space that divided the beautified urban centre from other low-income neighbourhoods, since these neighbourhoods with high rates of poverty and street crimes were perceived as obstacles for marketing the city's image. This contrasting urban sensation further triggered the development of 'slum' tourism, selling the criminal and urban poverty image of these neighbourhoods as an alternative aspect of the city. Tourists have been attracted to experience these sensations that are totally different from what they are used to. However, rather than bringing empathy and inclusion, these tours that originated from sensation governance may reinforce urban exclusion and segregation. Being constituted mainly by middle-class Mexicans from other parts of the city, the disrupting sensory experiences are more intended to remind them that they do not belong to these inner-city neighbourhoods. Under the sensation governance promoted by the Rescue Programme, such a sense of non-belonging could also be identified as another source of urban othering embodied in everyday life that could further reinforce urban segregation.

The rescue Programme could be changed by involving residents from inner-city neighbourhoods in the planning and decision-making process, allowing street vendors and local residents to participate in the form of insurgent planning. Considering the aforementioned street vending organizations, the street vendors have the capability to engage in the planning process by taking collective actions and arrangements, such as endeavouring to have meetings with local officials, collecting general petitions and organising confrontations if necessary. Moreover, while being segregated from the urban sensorium, some inner-city neighbourhoods have formed their own community-based identity which further enhances their capability to participate in insurgent planning. Rather than solely designed by government officials and business leaders, the involvement of local residents will enable the Rescue Programme to truly revitalise the city and create new sensory experiences that are inclusive for local residents without diminishing its objectives.

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