

The Contemporary Movement of Traditional Architecture and Urbanism in Latin America

By Miriam and Nadia Samir

Contemporary architecture and urbanism are facing a crisis of cultural identity and sustainability, largely driven by the effects of globalization and dehumanized urban development. This article analyzes the resurgence of a movement that reclaims the principles of traditional architecture and urbanism in Latin America, with special focus on the role of Mexico and international networks that promote an approach grounded in cultural identity, real sustainability, and respect for the natural and historical environment. Drawing on theoretical sources and institutional experiences, it demonstrates how this movement offers a tangible and profound response to current urban challenges.

Words: traditional architecture, sustainable urbanism, cultural identity, globalization, Latin America, heritage.

Introduction

In recent decades, cities have experienced rapid growth, accompanied by a loss of cultural identity and a standardization of built environments. In an era defined by technological advancement, demographic growth, and new ideologies, human life has undergone transformations that seem to outpace the structures that once sustained it.

Modernity, in its pursuit of innovation, has often sacrificed the sense of belonging, sustainability, and quality of life. Not only architecture has been affected, but culture itself, as local traditions and regional identities have been replaced by a global uniform vision, resulting in a homogenization of spaces and thought (Jacobs, 1961; Mumford, 1961).

In response, an international movement has emerged that reclaims the values of traditional urbanism. This movement seeks not only to recover building techniques and styles but also to restore the human being to the center of architectural and urban design.



Photo by Michele Henderson

The Crisis of Modernity and the Contemporary Urban Model

Humanity's growing detachment from nature, culture, and history—reflected both in urban forms and in individual attitudes—has created a void of identity that, rather than connecting, has further fragmented communities. Buildings and cities resemble one another more than ever, and the distinctive qualities that once made towns and regions unique are increasingly blurred. Progress, in its most superficial form, has neglected the importance of preserving what makes local cultures and environments unique (Borja & Castells, 1997).



Photo by Joel Manser

Modern architecture, eager to break with the past, often produced designs disconnected from their geographical, social, and cultural contexts (Choay, 2001). The result has been cities with a generic, impersonal aesthetic. As early as the 20th century, Lewis Mumford (1961) warned of the dangers of an urban model focused solely on efficiency and unlimited growth.

Globalization has exacerbated this phenomenon, standardizing housing models, public spaces, and lifestyles. As Tzonis and Lefaivre (2003) noted, this has led to a progressive loss of regional identities and a deep cultural crisis.

Contemporary urbanism has failed by prioritizing mass production and efficiency over human relationships, tradition, and sustainability. The disregard for cultural roots in favor of blind efficiency is now one of the leading causes of public dissatisfaction with urban and architectural practices (Jacobs, 1961).



Photo by Nat Geo

Traditional Urbanism: Quality of Life and Belonging

Traditional urbanism follows a different logic—it is grounded in history, climate, local materials, and community customs. Christopher Alexander (1977) argues that lasting cities are those shaped by human patterns, not theoretical abstractions.

Similarly, Amos Rapoport (1969) emphasize that vernacular architecture is a direct response to the social and cultural environment, and therefore a powerful vehicle of identity. Rather than imposing, it interprets. It's not about nostalgia, but about functional and cultural relevance.

Mexico City, Mexico
April 21st 2025

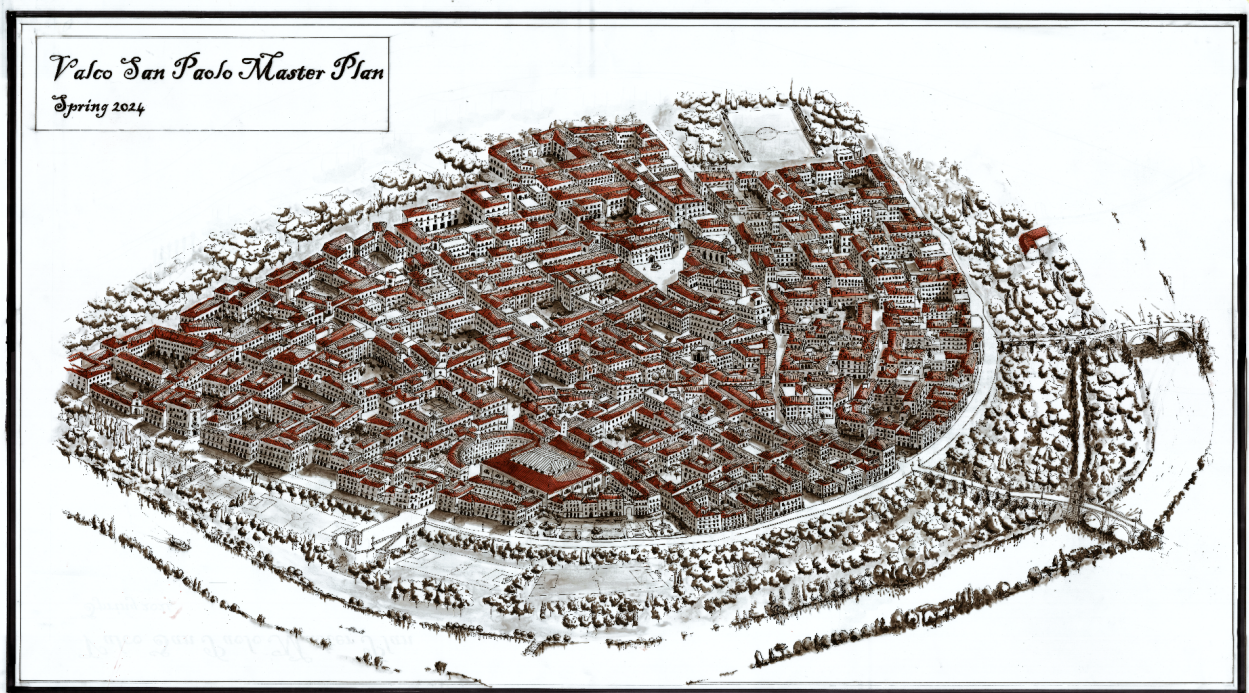
This kind of architecture evolved organically, through daily life, shaping the built environment and forming urban fabric. Over time, it led to the creation of traditional towns and cities. For decades, large infrastructure projects have invaded our historic cities, often altering or destroying spaces and monuments that held the living memory of communities.



Photo by Lloyd Alozie

Resistance to this transformation has grown from a rejection of impersonal, artificial environments, sparking a movement to restore balance between modernity and tradition, between the need for progress and the preservation of cultural identity (Choay, 2001).

This movement does not deny the future—it calls for a more conscious development that maintains the essence of each community and allows its people to preserve a sense of belonging and connection with their environment.



Drawing by Miriam Samir, teamwork proposal

Urban development guidelines have emerged that reject the destructive practices of modernity in favor of regionally sensitive projects. This shift is not merely aesthetic but a commitment to the future and sustainability: cities that respect their cultural identity are more likely to offer a high quality of life to their inhabitants (UNESCO, 2011).

The Latin American Case: Mexico as a Case of Urban Renewal

In Latin America, Mexico has become a central node in this urban renaissance. Its geographical diversity, cultural richness, and architectural legacy make it an ideal testing ground for traditional practices. Other countries—like Cuba, Brazil, Panama, Colombia, and Guatemala, among others—share similar cultural roots and urban challenges.

The creation of a Latin American network is a form of resistance to the dominant global model and a reaffirmation of regional values that have been diluted by cultural homogenization. The response is clear: the need for an urbanism that does not forget the past but integrates it into a more humane and sustainable future (Ramírez Kuri, 2014).



Photo by Nadia Samir

Despite political and economic instability, traditional urbanism offers more than aesthetic solutions—it fosters social cohesion, improves quality of life, and provides a model that respects biodiversity, history, and local culture. It has become a strong tool for urban and social regeneration (Gutiérrez, 1995).

Institutions, Alliances, and New Generations

This movement has gained support from academic institutions, governments, and international organizations like UNESCO (2011), which recognizes the value of the historic urban landscape as integral to sustainable development.

Universities and community collectives organized workshops, research initiatives, and summer schools across the continent. New generations play a crucial role. Far from seeing tradition as outdated, they view it as a way to build a meaningful future.



Photo by Nadia Samir

As Ramírez Kuri (2014) noted, public space should be understood as a stage for citizenship, identity, and memory. Cities reflect our rich cultural heritage. A very important aspect of this movement is the participation of volunteers from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, united by a common cause: to protect cultural richness and diversity in our built environments.

Craftsmanship as Cultural and Architectural Expression

Latin America's artisanal richness is evident in doors, roofs, walls, and other architectural details that tell the story of its people. This knowledge, passed down through generations, is a living heritage that cannot be replaced by anonymous technologies.



Photo by Nadia Samir

Reviving these practices is also a form of cultural, economic, and ecological sustainability (Borja & Castells, 1997). The loss of craftsmanship in Europe exemplifies one of the many consequences of industrialization.

Conclusion

The contemporary movement of traditional architecture and urbanism represents a solid and realistic alternative to the crisis of the modern model. Far from rejecting progress, it proposes an evolution with meaning, where development is not measured in built square meters, but in quality of life, cultural belonging, and balance with the environment.



Photo by Estudio Urbano

The new generations, eager to reclaim the best aspects of our traditions and adapt them to the current context, are leading this movement with enthusiasm and commitment. Through education and collaboration, they are forging a future in which traditional urbanism is not only an aesthetic option but a viable and necessary solution for the cities of tomorrow.

This article encourages the continued strengthening of collaborative networks, the active participation of communities, and the integration of new generations in the construction of more humane, diverse, and resilient cities.

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