

XOCHIMILCO ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM AND BOTANICAL GARDEN:

THE MEXICO CITY STUDIO

The Mexico City studio conducted during Spring 2007 explored the manner in which the physical and conceptual understanding of landscape can enrich current forms of architectural and urban design practice.

BY RENÉ DAVIDS



The Xochimilco area of Mexico City is well known for its extended series of canals—the remaining vestiges of an ancient system of lakes stretching for most of the valley of Anahuac in the middle of which Tenochtitlan, the impressive capital of the Aztecs, was located. Originally drained by the conquistadors to reproduce the conditions found in Spain, today the lake-bed is almost entirely occupied by Mexico City. The loss of subterranean water has had various ecological ramifications including: the gradual sinking of large parts of the city, loss of natural habitats, depletion of native vegetation, and the obsolescence of traditional agricultural methods of cultivation in the middle of the water called *chinampas*. Often referred to, incorrectly, as “floating gardens,” the *chinampas* were in fact, stationary artificial islands created by staking out the shallow lake bed and then fencing in the area with

wattle. The fenced-off area was then layered with mud, lake sediment, and decaying vegetation, which eventually brought it above the level of the lake. *Chinampas* were separated by channels wide enough for a canoe to pass.

The worsening environmental situation in Xochimilco has generated a demand to conserve its landscapes and artifacts while also integrating them to the needs of modern society. The creation of an Archeological Site Museum and Botanical Park was seen as an important catalyst for this goal. Arguing that archeological exhibits need to be conserved within their contexts rather than as objects of display based on their aesthetic values, the studio attempted to connect each exhibit to the historical relationship between nature and man.

To understand the social, political, and environmental context of design, and in order to foster collaboration with Mexican students, architects and landscape designers, UC Berkeley students visited Mexico from January 8th to the 15th. Students were asked to research Mexican culture, artists, and architects; study precedents; create films; and collect rubbings and photographs of the building/construction sites in Mexico. They were also required to draw and research twenty pieces displayed at the Anthropology Museum in Mexico City which would be exhibited in the



Right: Review of final plan for the Museo.

Xochimilco Archeological Museum. Throughout their design process, students were frequently asked to switch from the urban to the museum-interior scale and vice-versa.

The program for the Archeological Museum was developed in conjunction with students from the Universidad Iberoamericana of Mexico City headed by Isaac Broid, Mauricio Rocha and Luis Villafranca and an advanced studio from the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco headed by Sandra Vivanco. Mid-semester review for the studio took place along with the CCA and Mexican students at a grand review held at the CCA. The objective of the international studio was to encourage cooperation and collaboration among higher educational institutions in the United States, and Mexico, increase the knowledge of cultures and institutions in both countries, and help prepare students to work throughout North America. The work of the three schools was exhibited in the Mexican Consulate in San Francisco from May 18 to June 1, 2007 and will also be exhibited at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City later this year. ^{FW}

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