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# EVERYTHING WILL BE DESIGNED FOR THE BEST

The first encounter with Distrito Federal, Mexico is marked by the endlessness, monotony, and grittiness of its metro system.

The first impression however, had already been made ahead of time. The existing conditions of our site were charged with the familiar discourse of crisis—the ominous presence of “la mancha urbana” threatening to put an undeserved end to the “Venice of the New World.” Such was the premise of the Mexico City studio—a joint effort between UC Berkeley, Universidad Ibero-Americana, and the California College of the Arts. Our field trip was intended to be a search for Mexico City’s beauty, but also an anticipated encounter with some of its grim reality. The biggest surprise was that Mexico City lives with its abjection in relative peace—a compromise that seemed to mock our Panglossian zeal as architecture students, our belief that everything will be designed for the best and that we would stop encroachment on the canals of Xochimilco with the best of all possible archaeology museums.

Professor René Davids’ assigned program was provocative. He prompted us to re-think the city and the *chinampas* through alchemical experimentation, film-making, and landscape interventions. In other words, employing a cross-disciplinary methodology of design would allow us to transgress the space of the archaeological museum and challenge its status as merely a venue of entertainment. Instead, we were to act as curators by critically questioning the art object. The program was designed to unsettle our indifference for the artifact and to help us overcome our museum fatigue. The studio also prompted us to accept the two mutually exclusive but intimately connected forms of urbanity in Mexico City—characterized by informal settlements and unsustainable growth on one hand, and affluent enclaves and gated communities on the other hand. Ironically, the site of our museum mirrored the fragmentation of its larger

urban context by being divided into a fenced off island or *chinampa* on the western half, and an informal settlement on the east.

The design process for the Xochimilco Archaeological Museum was fraught with resolving the tensions between formal and informal, cultural anxieties and political biases, and rural traditions and urban futures. The catalog of all possible solutions that was presented in our final review speaks to the irreconcilability of some of these elements. For example, in some cases the informal settlement was romanticized



TRANSVERSE SECTION, SC: 1/16" = 1' - 0"



and left intact, while in others the site was treated as *tabula rasa*. Our design solutions attempted to bridge the divide between existing living patterns on the site and the actual topography and urban form. But what if we had considered our informal settlement less as an image, but more as a narrative, a process? Less than a space, or built fabric and more as a boundary? All in all the Mexico City studio strenuously challenged our beliefs in physical determinism and our optimistic design approach by urging us to surrender to the complex, intricate, and contested nature of urban design. <sup>Fw</sup>



Students and faculty at the exhibit at the Mexican Consulate.