

Acknowledgements



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URW Information



The Urban Research Workshop on Sustainability in an International Urban Context is intended to provide Columbia University undergraduate students the opportunity to examine issues that effect cities around the globe. The workshop has two components: individual, intensive, yearlong, comparative research projects and a speaker series. Participants in the workshop conduct intensive field work in New York City and one other pre-selected international city. In addition, students attend a bi-weekly speaker series in which experts are invited to discuss their perspectives and their own research on the workshop theme. The speaker series is intended to provide the context in which the individual research projects of workshop participants are conducted.

For more information about the workshop, or if you are interested in participating next year, please visit:

www.columbia.edu/cu/curp

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The Urban Research Workshop on
Sustainability in an International Context:

New York City - Mexico City



Workshop Exposition, May 2, 2005

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Comparative Research



METHODS

During the Fall semester, our workshop invited a series of guest speakers to help frame our exploration of various dimensions of international urban sustainability. During the Spring semester, we took our exploration to the field by conducting fieldwork in New York City and Mexico City. Using our fieldwork and secondary documents, we sought to understand sustainability as an environmental and a social phenomenon. During the course of the night and in the following pages, we present to you, our findings.

DISCLAIMER

We recognize that no comparison is perfect. Clearly, Mexico City and New York City possess distinct cultures, geographies, governments, and socio-economic conditions.

However, we invoke the argument of Prof. Sakia Sassen that a few cities, including Mexico City and New York City, have risen to the status of “Global Cities,” where advanced international transportation and communication networks have rendered them essentially the same.

Further, in the tradition of Lewis Mumford, who had the chutzpah to try to trace urban development throughout human history, we argue that there are certain challenges that all cities seek to address, such as providing transportation, trade, and defense. To this list of challenges basic to every city we add one more: sustainability, which broadly defined is the ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability to meet the needs of the future.

Social Issues



Divided here for ease of organization, we emphasize that Social Issues cannot be divorced from Environmental Issues and must be addressed together. The following are summaries of our findings:

INFORMAL ECONOMY

In Mexico City's Zocalo plaza and New York's Times Square we observed large groups of licensed and unlicensed street vendors, as well as day laborers. Unregulated workers in New York tend to be undocumented migrants who suffer from discrimination and poor working conditions, whereas in Mexico City most unregulated workers are accepted and respected members of society.

SECURITY

In both cities, growing investment in policing—such as increased police discretion, private security guards and more surveillance cameras—represent efforts by municipalities to manage the symptoms of social inequality rather than the underlying causes.

TOURISM

Two significant issues, corruption and natural resource allocation, prevent urban strategists in Mexico and New York City from reaching their tourism and development goals. Unfortunately, we observed that many development efforts in both cities—such as the one led by Carlos Slim in Mexico City's Zocalo, and the redevelopment of Times Square in New York—seek to attract tourists, rather than combat corruption or inequality.

Environmental Issues



AIR QUALITY

Mexico City's air ranks among the most polluted in the world, in part because surrounding mountains prevent air circulation. New York City benefits from regular wind currents, though air quality varies by neighborhood. Both cities have enacted automobile emissions control policies that have yet to be fully enforced.

GREEN SPACE

We studied distribution of green space in both cities. We found that low-income neighborhoods are more likely to contain pollution and noxious land use, but less likely to contain green areas that would help mitigate affects of these health hazards.

SOLID WASTE

New York City's waste collection and disposal services consist mainly of formal recycling and incineration. Although Mexico City provides less state-sponsored collection, relying more on informal and private management, it diverts roughly the same proportion of collected waste to recycling.

WATER

NYC sometimes has water shortages, but is fortunate to have access to clean water from the Delaware River and the Catskills. While Mexico City transports water from outside the city, it cannot transport enough water due to geographic constraints. Mexico City is currently employing several innovative tactics to avoid a water shortage and to help make water distribution more equitable.