

## Two Mexican Housing Units developed by the Social Security Institute

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In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century in Mexico there was a close link between collective housing production and the most important welfare state in the country. IMSS commenced its brief but active program of housing provision with its 1956 complex of almost 500 apartments, followed by its emblematic projects: the *Santa Fe* Unit (1957) and the Independence Unit (1960), with around 2,200 dwellings, each one placed among gardens. The agency's apogee was ruled by a social justice mandate that contributed to having high quality living standards in its complexes.

**Turkish aphorism: where one builds, trees are planted. Among us, trees are withdrawn.<sup>1</sup>**

Le Corbusier

From the early years of the 1930s until the 1960s, different government agencies in Mexico had to deal with the housing shortage in major urban areas caused by intense migratory movements from surrounding villages in the hope of better job opportunities.

However, not all housing projects of the State at this time were produced to meet the dwelling needs of the economically vulnerable population. While some institutions dealt with these groups, most knew their target: public employees.

### The Welfare State in Mexico

In 1943 the Mexican Social Security Institute (*Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social*, IMSS) was created to cover all of the social demands of medical care, cultural and sporting activities, and housing, in order to promote a collective way of living. Despite this, the full housing action of the IMSS only started with its first complex in Mexico City during the 1950s.

In general, the housing complexes were kept in good condition during almost 30 years in which the agency was fully in charge of its administration and maintenance of the facilities, including taking care of the common areas and gardens until such time that the social relations between its inhabitants were established.

The decay of these urban structures became visible in the 1980s when some of their original inhabitants moved, other tenants enclosed public areas as if they were theirs, the parking

areas were insufficient and there was a lack of organization to solve neighborhood issues.

### First Period (1952–1958): the Pursuit of an Identity for the IMSS Housing

At this time, the political alliance that ran the development plans for the social benefits and the buildings that must shelter them, consisted of President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, the IMSS director, Antonio Ortiz Mena, and the IMSS Building Construction Department.

Using the surplus funds of the government agency four housing complexes were built in Mexico City, two more in its suburbs, and four in the north of the country. Of these 10 estates constructed almost simultaneously, three had houses of one or two floors and apartments blocks in their design, while the other seven only utilized a high-rise typology.

From the beginning, the agency leased all the dwelling units to the residents as it was claimed that the average Mexican worker did not have sufficient financial means to buy property. This statement would make the beneficiaries safeguard the buildings.<sup>2</sup> The first IMSS housing complex was inaugurated on 18 May, 1956 in Narvarte, Mexico City. Three 6-level blocks were arranged in an acute angle due to the shape of the land. They had 492 one-bedroom apartments with an area of 49 m<sup>2</sup> each; the materials used were reinforced concrete and brick walls.

In four cities of the states of Sonora and Durango 288 flats within 10 buildings of four and six levels were built, although for political reasons were categorized as residential complexes. To this day their height is foreign to their areas since their immediate surrounds have buildings averaging two floors in height.

It should be noted that the apartment blocks located in two of these cities are in imminent danger of being demolished. In one case, because of its earthquake damage and in the other one, by a capricious urban proposal.

In the western area of the Federal District, existing tenements were demolished as part of the renewal of the deprived areas and, the Legaria and Tlatilco complexes were built with the same materials as above. The Legaria complex had 626 one-bedroom units of 28 m<sup>2</sup>, within 39 buildings of three floors each. The Tlatilco complex repeated that typology but increased the number of apartments to 756 with one, two or three bedrooms within a 45.70 m<sup>2</sup> area.

In the textile villages of Ayotla and Tequesquinahuac, in the municipalities of Ixtapaluca and Tlalnepantla in the State of Mexico, the IMSS bought recently-built houses from another agency in spite of promoting them as town centers with a complete set of urban services.

The study of its previous experiences led the Institute to formalize the concept of *Social Services and Housing Units* in connection with the doctrine of social welfare. The *Santa Fe* Unit as the first modern housing complex that wholly contained within it dwelling units, schools, daycare areas, shopping and sports centers, a health clinic, gardens and a central area for social gathering.

While Ayotla integrated 576 apartments within similar buildings to those in Legaria and Tlatilco and attempted to emulate the social center of *Santa Fe* with an open-air auditorium, a fountain and a rest area, Tlalnepantla imitated the architectural configuration of the apartment blocks and reached 1,540 units, but without any urban attributes.<sup>3</sup>

### The First Social Services and Housing Unit: Santa Fe

The office of the architect Mario Pani was chosen to design the *Santa Fe* Unit in the western area of the city, by virtue of his political connections and his design precedent of *Housing Units* in Mexico, the President Juárez Urban Center (1952), and the completion of the construction of the "Model" Neighborhood Cluster that had commenced in 1947.

In his dwelling works, Pani absorbed the urban planning principles of Le Corbusier who, in his early considerations, assumed the idea of a city configured by geometric blocks set in extensive pedestrian gardens; the trees, in contrast to the built works, would create a the human scale.<sup>4</sup> Le Corbusier proposed that

01 Alejandro Prieto, José María Gutiérrez & Pedro Miret, Independence Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1960. 2-floor dwellings and gardens. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



02 Alejandro Prieto, José María Gutiérrez & Pedro Miret, Independence Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1960. 4-floor apartment block façade. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



man should generate efficient *housing units* of adequate size to achieve, along with the greenery, his material and spiritual needs at the foot of the dwelling.<sup>5</sup>

The *Santa Fe* Unit was inaugurated on July 15<sup>th</sup> 1957. This 30-hectare urban project defined a peripheral road for car traffic separated from pedestrians.

There were 832 apartments in 22 buildings of four floors and 100 more within a 5-storey building whose ground floor was supported on columns facing the complex's central area; All of the buildings had analogous plastic characteristics to those typologies in Sonora with a reinforced concrete and brick wall structure and cement lattices to facilitate natural ventilation. This housing complex also had 1,225 houses with 35 to 129 m<sup>2</sup> of floor area that were spread over nearly the entire site and alternated with small public gardens (enclosed later on). Their construction had begun before Pani took over the project.

High-rise buildings located on the northern fringe of the complex achieve human scale because they were organized as isolated

blocks between green areas. However, space proposal inside the buildings was not as innovative as the office's previous works.

The merit of this housing complex, in terms of its architectural and urban setting, is the central open space consisting of an extensive garden area that faces a two-level esplanade connected within by staircases as a consequence of topographical conditions. In this *civic and social center* are developed group encounters between the inhabitants due to it being surrounded by the shopping area, the complex's administration, the clinic, day care area, fitness center, a multi-purpose space, a fountain that commemorates national heroes and an open-air auditorium with a concrete shell built by Félix Candela. The social dynamics promoted in this space provide, for some moments, the feeling of living in a traditional neighborhood of the city.

Furthermore, *Santa Fe* Unit was the second leading work of modern housing that praised the regime. The first one was the President Alemán Urban Center in 1949. Up until 1958, the Institute had built about 6,500 dwellings

of which 2,400 were houses with one or two floors and approximately 4,078 apartments.<sup>6</sup>

### **Second Period (1958–1964): the Consolidation of the Social Doctrine**

The climax of the IMSS welfare programs corresponded to the era led by “don” Benito Coquet Lagunes during the presidential term of Adolfo López Mateos, when housing issues were considered as an obligation of social justice. It should be noted that Coquet was Mexico's Ambassador to Cuba<sup>7</sup> in the mid-1940s where he would have observed acts of social injustice in a time of political tension between the communist and the capitalist blocs. Ten years later, this would have contributed to increase the agency's thoughts of social equality under his command. This thinking was echoed by the architects Alejandro Prieto Posadas, José María Gutiérrez Trujillo and Pedro Miret who were genuinely interested in understanding the habits and behavior of individual families.



**03** Alejandro Prieto, José María Gutiérrez & Pedro Miret, Independence Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1960. Civic and Social Centre. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



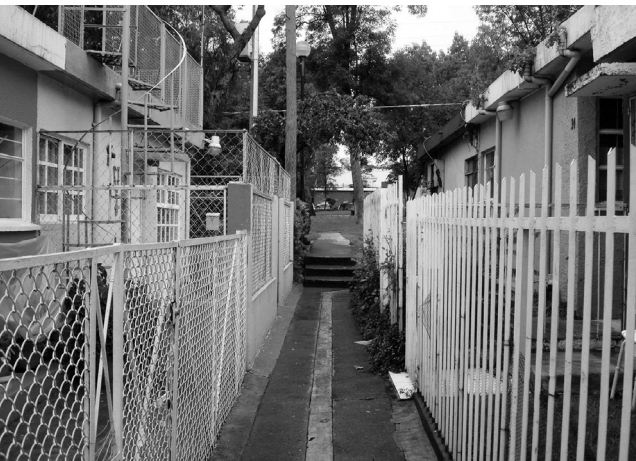
**04** Alejandro Prieto, José María Gutiérrez & Pedro Miret, Independence Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1960. 4-floor apartment block and gardens. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



**05** Mario Pani, Luis Ramos & Salvador Ortega, *Santa Fe* Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1957. Civic and Social Centre, staircase and 6-floor apartment block. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



**06** Mario Pani, Luis Ramos & Salvador Ortega, *Santa Fe* Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1957. 4-floor apartment block. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



**07** Mario Pani, Luis Ramos & Salvador Ortega, *Santa Fe* Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1957. Enclosed public gardens in housing area. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.



**08** Mario Pani, Luis Ramos & Salvador Ortega, *Santa Fe* Social Services and Housing Unit, Mexico City, 1957. Open-air auditorium at Civic Centre by Felix Candela. © Juan Pablo Rodríguez Méndez, 2010.

The recognition of an entire housing complex that strengthened social well-being encouraged the welfare agency to declare that its housing complexes would never again segregate the population, and also to establish social programs to preserve physical and spiritual health that would have the same weight as the construction of the dwellings. No one wanted to repeat the past formula but to learn from it. These ideas were synthesized in the IMSS's major housing project: the Independence Unit.

Apart from this, between 1960 and 1962, 205 houses within Hidalgo Unit at Manzanillo Harbour, Colima were built to deal with the housing shortage caused by natural disasters and 529 more dwelling were created within Sahagun City Unit, in the municipality of Tepeapulco, in the state of Hidalgo to accommodate the employees of the new industrial zone.

In 1964, the Institute had determined to complete 4,000 dwelling units within its biggest complex. In spite of this, the six-year presidential period ended and only 58 houses and a high-rise building were built at the Revolution Unit north of the city, next to the Basilica of Guadalupe.

### **The Materialization of the Collective Way of Living in Mexico: the Independence Unit**

This complex was erected in a 33-hectare *hacienda*, a horseshoe-shaped parcel of land owned by the Japanese Matsumoto family, where they had installed a greenhouse and a hostel for their compatriot refugees after the start of the World War II. This land in the southwest of Mexico City was selected by the president himself because he lived nearby.

Coupled with the philosophy of the Institute and modern urban theory applied to the project concept, López Mateos outlined the principles of the social organization of the western villages of the city founded by the Spanish missionary Vasco de Quiroga in the fourth decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order to interpret the way of rooting the inhabitants within their community through neighborhood watch, the comfort and the occupation of the society, and an aesthetic that would be identified by them.<sup>8</sup> In addition, it was said that the dwellings would be assigned to those who worked within a 9 km radius, with some exceptions for those who had to go downtown.

The Independence Unit, opened on 20 September, 1960, and was divided into three districts with essential amenities and an elementary school in each district. The green areas comprised approximately 60% of the land, making evident the importance of the pedestrians who were separated from the

traffic flows of the perimeter. The civic and cultural center, the main shopping area and the sports complex articulate the three sectors, although not in a balanced manner in terms of distances. This center attempted to promote a national sentiment through the appreciation of plastic works with pre-Hispanic components.

The complex assembled 2,235 dwellings between gardens. There are around 795 two-floor houses grouped in fours, with two and three bedrooms, and with an 80 to 96 m<sup>2</sup> floor area. All of these units have private exterior spaces on the ground floor (porch) and on the first floor (terrace).

As well as the houses, the agency built approximately 1,340 apartments of one, two and three bedrooms, with a floor area that oscillates between 46 and 93 m<sup>2</sup>, and distributed in 39 buildings of four levels each. The façades of these buildings were designed with balconies alternated with extruded solid vertical stripes from the volume and some were coated with natural stone mosaics designed by Francisco Eppens. A bent covering attenuates the view toward the laundry area on the rooftops.

Both typologies based their construction system on a reinforced concrete structure, brick walls and cement lattices. In the same way, and because of the uneven topographic condition, both types of buildings were placed at different heights to avoid overlooking the neighbors directly while they are in their private spaces.

Also, 100 dwellings of 128 m<sup>2</sup> in area, with three bedrooms and a private service area were built within three apartment towers with five and 10 floors.<sup>9</sup>

Currently, although this housing complex is physically enclosed almost in its entirety with a 4 m high stone wall, it can be accessed without any problem. Still, for the past decade access has been more controlled due to the inhabitants' perceptions of insecurity. Unlike *Santa Fe* Unit, this complex had presented few cases of the appropriation of public areas.

The experience of the open space evokes an idyllic dwelling within a forest with all the amenities. The whole urban composition was precisely one of the elements that gave support to the original sense of community among the inhabitants. The cultural and sports activities, that are offered in collective buildings, in which anyone can participate, maintain the spirit and the social support that was envisaged.

### **Learning from the Experience of the IMSS**

In its maturity the agency had formalized an ideology of social well-being that had

produced housing units with formal results that benefit, even today, the everyday life of its inhabitants. This learning has to do with the study of past experiences, the knowledge of the cultures, and at least, in theory, the concern of land characteristics and the recognition of ancient sites.

It is critical to observe that the importance of the IMSS housing approach does not lie in the amount of dwellings that were built but in the quality intervention that acclimatized the modern urban theories attached to the open space composition and the procedures and materials of the building tradition in Mexico. ■

#### Notes

- 1 Le Corbusier, "vi. Clasificación y Selección (Decisiones oportunas)", in *La Ciudad del Futuro (Urbanisme, 1924)*, Buenos Aires, Infinito, 1985, p. 44.
- 2 Hilario Galguera, "El IMSS no Vende sus Casas", *Arquitectura México*, No. 59, 1957, p. 140-176.
- 3 Benito Coquet, *La Seguridad Social en México: 1958-1964*, México, IMSS, 1964.
- 4 Le Corbusier, "4<sup>th</sup> Part: The 'Radiant City'. 4. To Live! (to Breathe)", in *The Radiant City: Elements of a Doctrine of Urbanism to be Used as the Basis of Our Machine-Age Civilization*, New York, Orion, 1967, p. 104-111 [1935].
- 5 Le Corbusier, "Las Reglas: lo Humano y lo Natural", "Adquisición de un Instrumental", *Cómo Concebir el Urbanismo*, Buenos Aires, Infinito, 2001, p. 53-115 [Manière de Penser l'Urbanisme, 1946].
- 6 Enrique X. de Anda, "Unidad de Servicios Sociales y de Habitación Núm. 1 (Santa Fe)", in *Vivienda Colectiva de la Modernidad en México: los Multifamiliares durante el Periodo Presidencial de Miguel Alemán (1946-1952)*, México, UNAM-III, 2008, p. 309-335.
- 7 *Arte y Arquitectura del IMSS*, México, IMSS-Artes de México, 2006.
- 8 José María Gutiérrez, "Responsabilidad Social de las Empresas Constructoras y de los Despachos de Arquitectura", *Conferencia Magistral, 12/10/2012*, class Francisco Centeno, Mexico, Facultad de Arquitectura, UNAM.
- 9 Benito Coquet, "Unidad de Servicios Sociales y de Habitación Independencia", *Arquitectura México*, No. 73, 1961, p. 2-46.

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