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➤ Dematerializing Patrimony: The Mexican Bicentennial in the Digital Era

This article is an analysis of the portrayal of the Mexican Bicentennial on the Internet. Specifically, I look into the use of virtual social networking as a portal into national history, and the virtual images and other web presentations of the controversial and ultimately abandoned Torre Bicentenario project of the D.F. as revealing the gaps between global and local perspectives on the event. In both cases, the web represents Mexican history and development in ways that are expressive of post-national rhetorics of attention. In his book, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (2006), Richard Lanham explains that the shift to an information economy has contributed to a shift in representation from “thing” to thought. In other words, echoing Alan Greenspan’s characterization of the economy as increasingly rooted in ideas rather than “physical effort” (1996), Lanham contributes to a critical discourse associated with global economics which substitutes industrial-age things with weightless commodities such as services, lifestyles, thought, concepts and ideas. A comparative look at the Mexican Centennial celebrations of 1910 and the current Mexican Bicentennial celebrations as they are portrayed on the web reveals a similar pattern. While the Centennial of 1910 marked the end of the Porfirian era of construction and industrial development, the Bicentennial as interpreted and transmitted through digital media allows us to consider the impact of weightlessness on ideological views of the nation that have traditionally been anchored in material things.

Anticipating the Celebration: Then and Now

Between the years of 1907 and 1909, more than forty books were published in anticipation of the centennial celebrations of Argentina, Mexico, Ecuador and Bolivia. In Mexico specifically, newspaper coverage of the construction processes leading up to the inauguration of the great late nineteenth/early twentieth-century national monuments such as the Ángel de la Independencia (inaugurated in September in 1910) was prolific.¹

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¹ See Ida Rodríguez Prampolini’s three-volume collection of newspaper articles, all centered on mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century art criticism: *La crítica del arte en México en el siglo XIX* (1997).

One hundred years later, despite the majority of the official Bicentennial festivities not yet having begun in Latin America, conference events, meetings, historic city tours, art expos and scholarly publications related to the much-anticipated events have started to appear.² Notwithstanding the criticism that Mexican historian Enrique Krauze directed toward UNAM professor Alicia Mayer's 2007 anthology on the Mexican Bicentennial, in which he maintains that it would be "preferable to celebrate 2010 in 2010" (Krauze 2007), the appearance of anticipatory literature with respect to large-scale national celebrations of this type is not new.

Even given the existence of this anticipatory literature a hundred years ago, however, it is the Internet that has most profoundly affected the ways in which we anticipate, access and experience this type of event. The official commemorative websites of the Bicentennial offer a plethora of historic materials in digital format, host web forums and link visitors to current news and events related to the celebrations. In this context, far from prejudging the festivities in a way that limits their discursive potential, the reflections on the Bicentennial that have appeared in anticipation of the official commencement highlight a fundamental change in the way that we experience the trans/national event in the global era. Simply put, there has been a subtle shift in focus from thing to thought—a transition that becomes particularly ripe for analysis when applied to physical, material, *in situ* events such as the national commemoration. Building upon the argument proposed by Herbert Simon (1971), Michael Goldhaber (2006), and (more relevant to this study) Richard Lanham (2006), in which the digital era entails a fundamental shift from a thing-oriented to an "attention economy," I propose here that investigating the Mexican Bicentennial as a web phenomenon both illuminates approaches to the national commemoration that reflect the current global/digital era and bridges the presumed conceptual divide that separates material thing from virtual representation.

Before commenting on Mexico's web representation of the Bicentennial, it would be useful to summarize some of Lanham's ideas and the reasons for their applicability to this study. In *The Economics of Attention*, Lanham makes a two-step argument. First, he argues that in the current era of knowledge abundance brought about by digital access—a state of affairs often referred to as the "information economy"—attention, rather than things, is the new "commodity in short supply" (2006: x). The paradox that the author derives from this observation is also worthy of mention: despite the fact that we live in an age in which we are apparently "more overrun by [material] 'stuff' than ever," thought—in other words, ideas and concepts—now dominates thing as a generator of greater value. Expanding Greenspan's original claim that economic value is now increasingly "weightless" and linked to ideas rather than physical bulk, Lanham expands this concept to apply to much broader contexts, including the relationship between consumers and information (see Coyle 1999: vii). Rather than the "stuff" itself, it is "what we think about stuff" that now occupies the foreground in our relationship to both physical space (see his example of the Swiss cow, now a tourist prop set up to recall a formerly organic landscape feature) and the digital interface (Lanham 2006: 3, 5). Secondly, building upon the idea of information as the replacement for things in this new form of

² See Gutman/Appadurai (2005) for an anthology on the upcoming Bicentennial celebrations in Argentina. For Mexico, see Alicia Mayer's anthology (2007).

circulation and exchange, he argues that rhetoric, or “our thinking about human communication,” can be viewed as “the new economics” (21). Rhetoric, argues the author, involves the marriage of the physical to the abstract, or thing to thought: “It was always concerned with returning abstract thought to the three-dimensional world of behavior where it had to work” (25). With these two points in mind, Lanham explores the concepts of economics, capital and productivity from within the framework of the “attention economy” and the oscillation in perspective (between material thing and immaterial idea) that it generates.

Turning to the Mexican Bicentennial, an examination of the official national website (<www.bicentenario.gob.mx>) reveals a provocative shift between thought and thing. While there are plenty of references to material national icons in the form of digital scans, photographs and links to video clips of historic objects and landmarks, the conceptual framing of these materials and the overall website itself occupy more than just a backdrop or stage set up to refer viewers to ‘real’ material things. In addition to the links such as “*quiénes somos*” and “*Decreto*” for example, which lay out the goals behind the creation of the Bicentennial commission and the place that the website should occupy within those goals, there is the fact that the entire digital ‘performance’ of nation—or the transmission of social, political, historical and ideological messages—takes place within a global venue. As a result, several questions come to mind: how do we regard the unique patrimonial object—that most regionally- specific of things—in the digital era of ‘universal’ access? How does one go about celebrating a national/transnational event in the age of global culture and networking? Which tensions between the local and the global affect the ways in which the commemoration materializes? In the spirit of exploring the relationship between the web and the upcoming Mexican Bicentennial of Independence, a close review of one of its official websites reinforces one of Lanham’s key points: between the Centennial and the Bicentennial, there has been a subtle yet fundamental shift in emphasis from the physical to the abstract. In other words, the physical changes to urban environments that characterized the Centennial in Mexico City—the monuments, the parks and the immense efforts to construct the vision of a modern urban environment as observed by Tenorio Trillo (1996)—these now take second place to the ideas *about* the nation and its symbolic repertoire of patrimonial things that will inevitably mark the transcendent occasion.

This is not to say that the Bicentennial does not involve significant amounts of physical construction—it indeed does, and large-scale urban structures in the D.F. such as the projected Arco del Bicentenario, the Plaza Bicentenario (currently under construction) and monuments such as Manuel Felguérez’ *Puerta 1808* (2007) are testament to the tremendous impact that the Bicentennial will have on the creation and experience of public spaces. Nor do I wish to argue, on the other hand, that the Centennial did not involve a tremendous amount of investment in the conceptual underpinnings of the event. Quite the contrary, indeed—with the nation at the height of its era of political consolidation under the *Porfiriato* and well into the onset of modernization, the urban reforms, commemorative structures and events that marked the celebrations of 1910 were offered to the public amidst a plethora of commemorative speeches, toasts, ceremonies and banquets all aiming to reinforce their symbolic significance. My point is that the allure, ubiquity and popularity of the digital communicative space and the virtual structures that it houses has altered the way in which we experience commemorative

events in both the temporal and spatial realms. Extending Lanham's thoughts as outlined above, the digital format has shifted our relationship not only to material things, but to *in situ* events as well. The unrepeatable commemoration event and the series of unique objects used to mark and reinforce it are now linked to a representational space that transforms the requisites of presence and expands the possibilities of experience to the virtual domain. The digital interface thus affects the commemorative experience of history and historical representations in provocative ways.

Within the main official website for the Mexican Bicentennial of Independence/Centennial of the Revolution, the transposition of history from temporal (historical) into spatial terms—an idea already applicable, for example, to the museum exhibit or private collection—intensifies in the fluid digital interface, and has a profound impact on the way in which the web visitor experiences the historical representation. The traditional, linear chronology of the physical event has not been completely effaced; in fact, it shows up quite literally on several of the official Latin American bicentenary websites (such as those of Mexico, Chile <www.chilebicentenario.cl>, and Colombia <www.bicentenarioindependencia.gov.co>) in the form of a digital clock that tracks the countdown toward the official inauguration in days, hours, minutes and seconds. Specific reminders of historical commemoration dates, objects and landmarks also occupy the front door of these websites. The Mexico site features digitized nineteenth-century newspapers, brief newscasts outlining historical events and several educational videos highlighting events related to both Mexican independence and the Revolution. In claiming that temporal/historical referents have been transposed into the spatial realm on the web, I apply an argument originally made by Susan Stewart concerning collected objects. In *On Longing*, Stewart describes what happens to the individual object when integrated into a collection: its unique, chronological history becomes subsumed in the collective physical arrangement—the *space* that now generates meaning (1993: 151-154). Something similar happens with the presentation of unique historical data on the Mexican Bicentennial website: the supplementation of static print with mobile images, the front door layout with its collage of simultaneously accessible information and the nonlinearity of the web visitor's journey all lead to a curious reversal in the time-space hierarchy expected of the historical commemoration. In contrast with the comparatively static spatial arrangement of the museum, it is now the dynamic virtual space that occupies the foreground of attention. Time is expressed through a vocabulary of fluid and mobile space. As a result, it is not the range of digitized historical materials available but rather our journey into and through those materials that stands out; not the individual, specific piece of data but its relationship to the collective whole that attracts one's attention in the navigation of the site. What follows is an exploration of two distinct examples of this shift in the way we experience the national commemoration through digital media: the first involves the use of social network sites to promote the Mexican Bicentennial, and the second is an exploration of the polemic that surrounded the controversial Torre Bicentenario project during the summer of 2007.

The Social Network Site in the Promotion of the Bicentennial

There are different sponsors behind the two main websites that house the most complete information on the compendium of events related to the Bicentennial; one is the

Mexican government—more specifically, the Organizing Commission (created in 2006) for the Bicentennial/Centennial events,³ and the other, which was developed first in 2005, is a co-sponsored site initiated by the companies TelMex, Condumex and the Centro de Estudios de Historia de México.

Toward the top of the front door page of the Mexican government's bicentenary website, underneath a heading that reads "*Síguenos en las redes sociales*", there are links to official Facebook and Twitter pages as well as a series of theme-appropriate YouTube videos. Underneath the Facebook icon, there is a subheading that reads "*También puedes seguir a,*" which leads to a drop box containing a handful of links to a series of fictional Facebook profiles. Each of these corresponds to a specific heroic figure related to independence, the *Reforma* or the Revolution of 1910: Francisco Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Miguel Hidalgo, Porfirio Díaz. Within these fake profile pages—all clearly marked "*Página de las conmemoraciones de México de 2010*"—members of these sites post questions directly to the deceased hero, who is identifiable by name as well as by icon—a painting or photo that identifies him/her on the main profile page and also accompanies any post. The hero, in turn, answers questions and comments directly in the first person. In no place is it revealed who is masquerading for these defunct heroes in any of the fake profiles, but it is clear that these Facebook "puppeteers" are historically well-informed. Witness, for example, the following exchange between a site member named Mario and 'Don Porfirio Díaz':

[pregunta de 'Mario']: Don Porfirio, donde esta sepultado su hno., el tambien General Felix Díaz Mori, quien fue torturado por una bola de juchitecos [...] Usted es el general menos reconocido en este país, porque la historia es injusta y porque los mexicanos no tenemos memoria [...]

[respuesta directa de "Porfirio Díaz"]: Mario: Mi hermano Félix fue asesinado en Cerro de Perico, Pochutla, Oaxaca, el 21 de enero de 1872. Sus restos fueron trasladados a la ciudad de Oaxaca, donde fueron sepultados en el Panteón Municipal. Ahí se erigió después un monumento en su honor. Por eso agradecemos su participación en estos foros, para que la memoria regrese y no nos quedemos en el olvido. Muchas gracias.⁴

In addition to petitions for historical clarification, general laudatory remarks, laments over both history's mistreatment of Don Porfirio and, on the other hand, his perceived abuses of power, some of the user posts appeal to more contemporary issues. Witness, for example, one May 26 posting by a younger site member:

[Edgar, 26 May]: Master Mister, Se le extraña don Porfix, no tendríamos narco, ni [...] partidistas si usted anduviera aquí [...]

[Luis, 19 May]: Mexico necesita otra vez de la mano dura de Diaz para pacificar al pais. Q suerte tuvieron los mexicanos q vivieron en la epoca del porfiriato, tenian paz y un gobierno q la garantizaba.⁵

³ "México 2010", in: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=47525298649>> (09.05.2009).

⁴ "Porfirio Díaz (página de las conmemoraciones de México 2010)", in: <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Porfirio-Diaz-pagina-de-las-conmemoraciones-de-Mexico-2010/53287412445?ref=search&sid=632409341.1030687732..1>> (01.12.2009).

⁵ *Ibidem*.

[Respuesta de Porfirio a Luis, 26 May]: siempre fue esencial para mi gobierno la paz y el progreso [...] gracias Luis.⁶

The use of the first person is predominant throughout these “official” fictional profile sites, including the “Personal Information” page, which lists the preferred websites of the profile holder (in this case, those listed are related to the Bicentennial) and other sorts of “personal” information. In the case of Porfirio, the following is included under the category of “Personal Interests”:

- * En mis estudios en el Seminario Conciliar de la Santa Cruz en Oaxaca, aprobé con excelencia las materias de artes y filosofía, pero no era muy aplicado en latín.
- * En el Instituto de Artes y Ciencias, Benito Juárez fue mi maestro de derecho civil.
- * Cuando era joven me apodaban “el Pelón”.
- * Durante la intervención francesa, las autoridades imperiales ofrecieron 11.000 pesos por mi cabeza.⁷

The performative and theatrical nature of Facebook makes it a particularly suitable venue for this role-play exercise in national history. Rather than maintaining a strict divide between performer and audience, these roles have become fluid and dynamic within the digital interface offered by Facebook. They occur interchangeably and simultaneously, as participants both perform and witness in this pretend, first-person exchange between the defunct historical hero and the Facebook user. The profile photographs that both reveal and mask the site users provide a type of prop for the digital stage, and the facial gestures and tone that orient viewers of a live or taped performance are replaced by the variations in formality, grammar, punctuation and digital gestures such as the “thumbs-up” icon that users apply to various posts. The personalization of the Bicentennial as exemplified here highlights the personal interaction— the site visitor’s thoughts and questions— as the principle generator of meaning, rather than the icon or monument itself. The idiosyncratic subjective experience is framed in such a way that it renovates the static national icon.

In one section of her article titled “Friend Me if You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance,” author E.J. Westlake describes Facebook as both a “writerly text,” as defined by Barthes in *S/Z*, and an interactive, performative venue in which the exhibition of self coincides with various opportunities to construct a defined yet fluid identity via frequent status updates, participation in group forums, the addition of “friends” and the creative use of a variety of interactive features.⁸ Linking her observations regarding Facebook to Erving Goffman’s work on the “performance of self” in 1959, the author writes the following:

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ <<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Porfirio-Diaz-pagina-de-las-conmemoraciones-de-Mexico-2010/53287412445?ref=search&sid=632409341.1030687732.1#!/pages/Porfirio-Diaz-pagina-de-las-conmemoraciones-de-Mexico-2010/53287412445?v=info&ref=search>> (01.12.2009).

⁸ While it began, as Westlake (2008) points out, as a limited online network available to Harvard students, the site has now increased exponentially in popularity. According to Robert D. Hof (2007), the 35-and-older crowd doubled between June of 2006 and 2007, and 41 percent of the site’s visitors in 2007 were business professionals using the site for professional networking purposes.

Goffman defined performance as “all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (1959: 22). This “continuous presence” can be in the form of an “unseen audience” provided the performer continues to act as if the observer were observing (Westlake 2008: 27).

In addition to the idea of the unseen audience influencing and shaping the individual performances of self put forth on Facebook, Westlake points out the symbiosis between the stable, “static text” of the user profile with the more “immediate and fluid” texts of status updates, pokes and other more immediate interactive features.

The fundamental dynamic that Westlake identifies between the stable, fixed entity of the user profile and the fluctuating, tenuous self that uses, interacts, interprets and interrogates from within that defined but fluid space of the user profile in fact parallels the rhetoric employed in the web promotion and representation of the Bicentennial as a whole. Take the following excerpt from the mission statement found both under the “*Quiénes somos*” link on the front door of the Bicentennial web page and on the main bicentennial Facebook page:

No se trata de celebrar simplemente para recordar una fecha, sino para revivir los valores e ideales que le dieron sustento a nuestra nación. Contribuir a darle un sentido de contemporaneidad a nuestra historia y actualizar su significado es nuestro objetivo.⁹

The idea of “giving a sense of contemporaneity to history” and “updating its meaning” is not unique to the Bicentennial, as studies on the Centennial of independence such as those of Michel J. González (2007) and Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo (1996) have already shown. However, unique to the Bicentennial is the vast array of means through which this sense of contemporaneity is made possible. Specifically, the digital interface provides an arena in which to enact the merging of static national icons and printed texts with dynamic, vibrant and fluctuating representations, interpretations and modes of accessing, using and applying the information provided. Links such as the “*Cuéntanos*” option from the main Bicentennial web page allow users to participate in the composition of the site—mimicking Barthes’ ideal “writerly text” as referenced by Westlake above—as individuals share personal anecdotes and family histories connecting to relevant moments in Mexican national history. The Bicentennial Twitter page, which at the time of drafting this article has 1, 687 registered followers, offers by-the-minute updates on new web portals related to the Bicentennial, the Liberal Reform or the Mexican Revolution, opportunities for participation in related festivities, announcements of digital galleries to visit, and daily reminders of the anniversaries of more and less-known related historical anniversaries of births, deaths and other events. Likewise, the “most frequently visited” You Tube videos, also available on the front door of the main national Bicentennial website, introduce visitors to a variety of mini-history lessons such as “La Revolución Mexicana” and “Sucesión Presidencial”. Together, these web options assemble a dynamic profile not only of the Mexican nation, but also of the users themselves

⁹ “México 2010”, in: <<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=47525298649>> (09.05.2009).

who both navigate through the sites and leave traces of their wanderings through tracking devices, registrations on different sites and input when the opportunity is provided.

So what can the social network site tell us about the national commemorative event in the global age? First of all, that the traditional hierarchy of power that prioritizes writer over reader and print over (secondary) orality has been turned on its head. As Westlake indicated in her reference to Barthes' "writerly text," web visitors now contribute as co-authors to the sites that they visit. In the Facebook site, it is the question posed by the site visitor that determines the historical information offered by the deceased hero. Along with this shift in roles between writer and reader, there has also been a change in register: the customary use of indirect discourse—that most associated with the writing of history—has been replaced by the direct first-person address. Here, it is the personal experience of history that takes center stage over the material of history itself. Both the dethroning of the traditional author and the move toward informality in the digital interface imply a new type of authority. As Aleida Assmann indicates, the traditional homage given to the static authority represented by "monumental heroism" has been replaced. It is now the speed and flow of information that presides over the immobile, static version of monumental authority associated with the print age (2006: 15).

The second conclusion to derive from the commemorative social network site is that the nature of 'content' shifts in the digital interface. It is not the national icon, but the user's subjective perspective that drives the interaction and type of information that is exchanged. In fact, the icon is no more the focus of the Facebook page than are the users themselves. We access Porfirio's Facebook page not only to learn about the historic figure, but also to evaluate both the virtual community that surrounds him and performs these virtual interactions and our own placement within or outside of it. As actors and audience share the performative space, it is the interaction that governs site content, rather than the reverse. Thirdly, and this connects to the next section, both the social network site and the commemorative website enable us to view the divide between materiality and virtuality from another perspective. Far from mutually exclusive, the virtual representation and the material thing stand in dialectical relationship to one another. As can be seen in the museum exhibit that includes interactive digital features or the event that generates live Twitter updates from attendees, there are points of contact between the virtual and material realms that merit further exploration. Whether accepting Lanham's re-ordering of thought over thing in the electronic space, or, as Jeff Malpas (2008) argues in "Cultural Heritage in the Age of New Media," defending a place in critical interpretation for the original material object, the digital interface offers a dynamic frontier from which to negotiate the conceptual rift that separates thought from thing, image from object and visuality from materiality.

The Virtual Image as a Generator of Meaning: The Controversial Bicentennial Tower

With a scheduled inauguration date of September 16, 2010, the unveiling of the *Torre Bicentenario* project was to be one of the principal commencement events of the Bicentennial festivities. Combining the design of Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, the London-based engineering consultant group Arup, the Mexican developer Grupo Danhos and the

Spanish real estate holding company Ponte Gadea, the building project became controversial soon after it was announced in July 2007 due to its violation of local building codes, the possible demolition of a proposed site of historical heritage and the planning of an underground parking lot underneath part of Chapultepec Park. On September 28, 2007, following a fury of public mobilization, the project was officially abandoned.

The power of the Torre as a virtual image can be measured by its impact on the public realm. And even though I will be referring here to the Bicentennial Tower as a virtual structure only, it was often both lauded and criticized as if it had a concrete material existence. In fact, the title of one brief article published in the *El Excelsior* following the Mexican real estate and shopping center developer Grupo Danhos' September announcement that the tower had been indefinitely shelved describes its demise in physical/material terms: "*Cae rascacielos antes de erigirse*". Part of the reason for the rhetorical emphasis on materiality here is due to the highly publicized height of the project: its most salient feature, as described in the first press release announcing the project, was its physical size. At 300 meters tall, it was claimed by some as the highest skyscraper in Latin America.

The web images of the tower's design are revealing in terms of the public divide that they provoked—a rift powerful enough to bring about the rejection of the originally proposed location and indefinitely postpone the project. Developed by a local representative for the PAN in the fourteenth district of Mexico City (Margarita Martínez Fisher), one community blog created in order to collect citizen opinions on the proposed project features a rather ominous image of the tower as it would appear in its proposed place at the northeast corner of Chapultepec Park.¹⁰ Reminiscent of the panoramic cityscape photograph, this particular digital image, which was taken from the "projects" link on the website of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) (Fig. 1), features a gigantic building that in the framework of this particular web page appears to be both exaggeratedly disproportionate to its surroundings and paradoxically vulnerable despite its intended projection as a symbol of power and progress.

Yet context plays a powerful role in how this image is to be assessed. Viewed together, the tower images originally posted on the OMA's website (and re-published on websites like those of the London-based architecture and design firm Dezeen or on the web forum Skyscraper City) present favorable views of the megatower, featuring the intricacy and balance of architect Rem Koolhaas' design. Figure 2, for example, depicts a structure in which the immense size of the tower is counterbalanced by a quality of porosity which causes the building to appear to be infused with light, an effect that is also apparent in the night views (fig. 2).

In its most favorable renditions, then, the building fuses global contemporary urbanity with a strong sense of national historical specificity. With the shape of two pyramids fused at the base and stacked atop one another (the design was said to have been inspired in part by the pyramids at Chichén Itzá), this project proposed not only a multiple-use facility (including a site museum, office and retail space, restaurants, a gymnasium and a convention center), but also a symbol for the Bicentenario celebrations of 2010 with a

¹⁰ "Vecinos de Miguel Hidalgo", in: <<http://www.vecinos.com/miguelhidalgo>> (12.06.2009).



FIG. 1: Image of the Bicentennial Tower.¹¹

“form that is both familiar and unique”.¹² Criticisms of the aesthetics of the design found on architecture blogs include allusions to the architect’s obsession with “bigness”¹³, the shape as appearing “pregnant” and the overall divorce between the dimensions of the building and its surrounding environment.¹⁴

The story of the infamous Torre Bicentenario illustrates not only the rift that divides thing and thought as described in the last section, but also the conflicts that can surface between local and global interests. Although it had not yet been constructed, the controversy that surrounded the proposed tower, along with the thirty million dollars that had

¹¹ Copyright OMA. Online image. Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Projects: Torre Bicentenario, Mexico, Mexico City 2007 (13.05.2009). <http://www.oma.eu/index.php?option=com_projects&view=portal&Itemid=10&id=497>.

¹² “Torre Bicentenario in Mexico City by OMA” (2007), in: <<http://www.dezeen.com/2007/07/24/torre-bicentenario-in-mexico-city-by-oma>> (10.07.2009).

¹³ “Torre Bicentenario-Delirio Obsesivo” (2007), in: <<http://www.arqhys.com/construcciones/torre-bicentenario-delirio.html>> (18.05.2009).

¹⁴ “Torre Bicentenario, Ciudad de México/OMA: la más alta de Latinoamérica” (2007), in: <<http://www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/2007/07/29/torre-bicentenario-ciudad-de-mexico-oma-la-mas-alta-de-latinoamerica>> (28.05.2009).

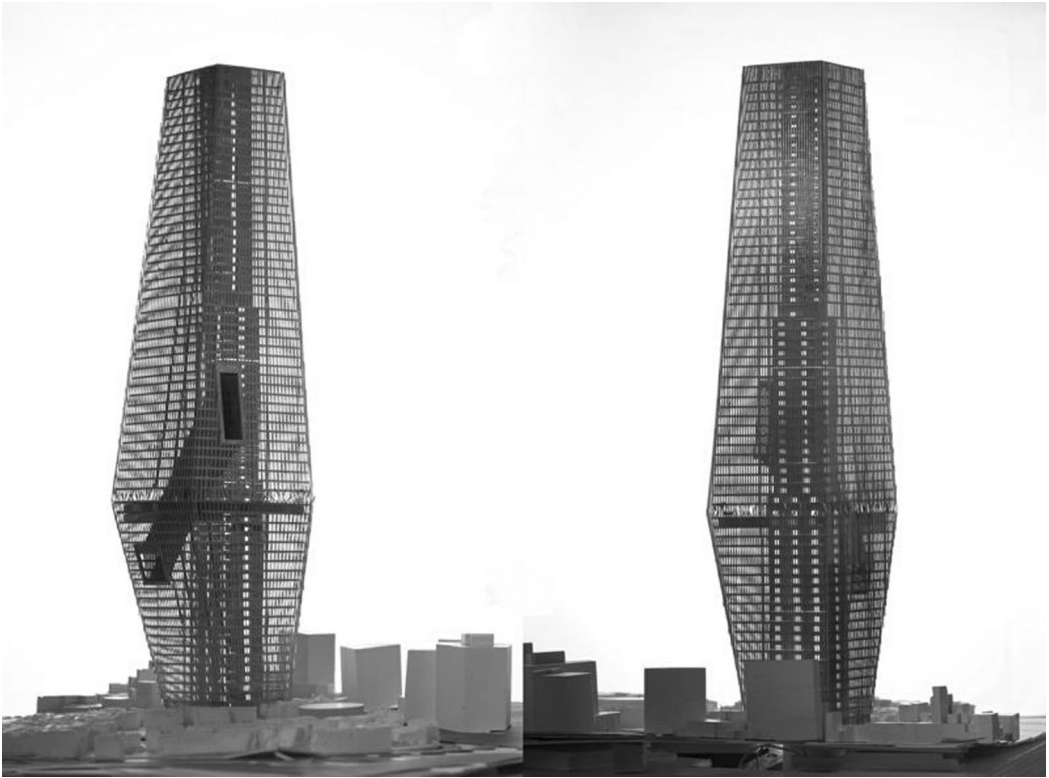


FIG. 2: Model of the Bicentennial Tower.¹⁵

already been invested in the project¹⁶ made its existence as a looming prospect quite ‘real’. Following the web release of virtual design images of the tower as it would appear fully-constructed and in position in the D.F., the massive public response in the form of supportive and critical feedback by Mexico City residents and international architects alike points to one undeniable quality that distinguishes this Bicentennial from its historical antecedent: the virtual presence as a generator of meaning. And the contradictory meanings associated with the tower echoed nineteenth-century conflicts between traditional conservatism and progress-oriented liberalism: the promoters of material/capital progress faced up against the supporters of tradition and conservation of historical patrimony. Curiously, monuments seem to have a history of embodying both. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the monuments constructed along the Paseo de la Reforma served not only as artistic embellishments to the capital city and the founding signs of a politically consolidated national history, but also as markers of progress and

¹⁵ Copyright OMA. Online image. Office for Metropolitan Architecture. Projects: Torre Bicentenario, Mexico, Mexico City 2007 (13.05.2009). <http://www.oma.eu/index.php?option=com_projects&view=portal&Itemid=10&id=497>.

¹⁶ “Cae rascacielos antes de erigirse” (2007), in: <<http://www.prensaescrita.com/diarios.php?codigo=MEX&pagina>> (01.06.2009).

nascent capitalism. Defenders of the Torre Bicentenario project also assessed its value in terms of both the material benefits that it would generate (the creation of thousands of jobs, a new and expansive parking area, the positive restructuring of urban development) and the abstract, status-raising impact that it would have in the transnational/global realm. Marcelo Ebrard, PRD affiliate and Head of the Government of the Federal District explained his enthusiasm for the project in a way that spanned both global and local perspectives:

Porque era una inversión muy grande. Todas las ciudades del mundo que están creciendo, que son exitosas, tienen zonas con este tipo de torres, ¿por qué nosotros no? Y porque estaba involucrado uno de los mejores arquitectos del mundo. Y porque lo que está ocurriendo en Las Lomas es que todo mundo está vendiendo sus viviendas para construir edificios en un proceso muy desordenado. La Torre hubiera servido para ordenarlo.¹⁷

While it is beyond the scope of this article to enter into detail concerning the public debates around the proposed Bicentennial Tower – which spurred discussions among political parties and across the private/public sector divide – there are some key points to consider while contemplating the implications of constructing national celebrations and commemorations in the global age.

First, it would appear that the boundary that separates the public and private sectors has become increasingly blurred. As Wimal Dissanayake argues in his article called “Globalization and the Experience of Culture: The Resilience of Nationhood”, the ‘local’ and the ‘global’ are inextricably linked in a cycle of mutual influence. As a result of its contact with global interests, the ‘local’ continues to redefine itself in newer and more complex ways:

The local is never static; its boundaries, both temporal and spatial, are subject to ceaseless change. It is characterized by a web of power plays, agonistic interests, pluralized histories, and struggles over polysemous and asymmetrical exchanges. The local is constantly transforming and reinventing itself as it seeks to reach beyond itself and engage the translocal (Dissanayake 2006: 25)

Furthermore, explains the same author in referencing Deleuze and Guattari’s 1986 study on Kafka, the local is to be understood from within the framework of its own ‘deterritorialization’—specifically, its direct influence by “the nexus of activities occurring elsewhere” (26). Applying this idea to the tower project, one could say that international status, for example, was an important factor in generating political support for the project. The fact that its designer, Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, has been a Pritzker Prize winner (2000) and has designed major urban constructions all over the world (including Beijing, Copenhagen, New York City, Seoul, Riga and Lille) influenced local political and citizen support for the tower, as reflected in Ebrard’s above quote and in websites such as <www.vecinos.com/miguelhidago>, which contains a blog called “Ayúdanos a apoyar a la Torre Bicentenario” and houses several favorable assessments of the

¹⁷ “Sobre la derrota de Ebrard en Torre Danhos Lomas” (2007), in: <<http://www.lupaciudadana.com.mx/SACSCMS/XStatic/lupa/template/notaTema.aspx?sc=3&su=173&t=1542&n=16923>> (22.06.2009).

project and the local impact that it would have. Defenses of the tower project posted by citizens angered by the abandonment of the project expressed their dissent in terms that connected the divorce between global and local interests with forward-looking progressives and stagnant conservatives, associating the latter with Mexico's insistent 'mediocrity' and 'refusal of progress.'

Indeed, when applied to concrete materializations such as that of the proposed Bicentennial Tower, the dynamic that Dissanakye mentions between the realms of the local and the global points to some difficulty in situating the structure simultaneously within the vocabularies of local, national and global interests. Concretely, there was a question about whether or not the building should serve as a symbol for the Bicentennial celebrations. The website for a citizen group called "Let's Defend the Woods and the City",¹⁸ which formed in opposition to the tower project, contains a post in which the writer expressed outrage over the idea that a project which would defy current construction regulations and destroy a building of historical and patrimonial interest could be proposed as an "icon" or "symbol" for the country.¹⁹ On July 27, 2007, *El Universal* published an article in which UAM investigator Roberto Eibenschultz Hartman defended his position that public patrimony and private investment were irreconcilable; the date should be commemorated with "anything of a public nature. In other words, something that allows the people to own it and consider it as a symbol for everybody and not only for the investment sector" (Hartman 2007). In a similar vein, one blog post written in response to an editorial published in *El Excelsior* criticizes the association between the tower (as a product of private enterprise) and the upcoming Bicentennial celebration:

La primera pregunta es: ¿Por qué el Gobierno del DF determinó que el símbolo del bicentenario de la Independencia y del centenario de la Revolución Mexicana sea un edificio de oficinas?

Y la segunda es: ¿por qué le van a regalar a un grupo privado un predio en el Bosque de Chapultepec, ocho veces más grande que el terreno que ese grupo compró para construir la Torre del Bicentenario? [...]. La respuesta [...] se reduce a dos palabras: por dinero. De construirse, la Torre del Bicentenario, que el gobierno de Marcelo Ebrard quiere empujar por encima de los reglamentos vigentes, será el símbolo bochornoso de los negocios entre particulares y gobernantes (Dagio 2007).

If the public questioned the viability of the tower as a national symbol, it appears that their doubts were not unfounded. Mexican architect and Danhos representative Jorge Gamboa de Buen admitted in an August 2007 interview that the tower project was in fact conceived independently of the Bicentennial, and that it was "perhaps naively that we thought it could be called the Bicentennial Tower, because we thought that it was going to be part of a series of public and private events and edifications to shape the celebrations, as is happening in Chile".²⁰

¹⁸ "Defendamos el Bosque y la Ciudad", in: <<http://www.dfendamos.org/cartas.asp>> (12.06.2009).

¹⁹ The Law of Urban Development of the Federal District and the Partial Program of Development prohibits the construction of properties taller than six stories. See "Vecinos de Miguel Hidalgo" (2007), in: <<http://www.vecinos.com/miguelhidalgo>> (12.06.2009).

²⁰ "La torre abolida" (2007), in: <http://goliath.ecnext.com/coms2/gi_0199-6969222/La-torre-abolida-conflictos-entre.html> (01.06.2009).

This questioning of the contradictory value systems implied by the transcendent national symbol on the one hand and the transient commercial project on the other is not new. The underlying tension between these differing values has been present since the first politically consolidated and cohesive national expressions of patrimony were formed during the *Porfiriato* (Garrigan 2006). Commemorative objects such as monuments and national paintings have a history of straddling these two realms of value, and it is only now in the proliferation of “the global” as a defining term for the current era that this dynamic has acquired a more public profile. As it turns out, the dynamic of international commerce as represented in events such as the nineteenth century World’s Fairs helped to shape national patrimony in ways that anticipated the intersections between global and local cultural artifacts in the current era.

The debate that surfaced around the Bicentennial Tower during the summer of 2007 brings both the interconnectedness of and the tensions between the local and the global to light. Defenders of the tower couched their arguments in local as well as global terms (such as “progress” or “modernization”), while detractors concentrated more on the local—the specific impact that the tower would have in the originally proposed territory of Miguel Hidalgo and in the other fifteen boroughs of the federal district. Among the concerns named by Gabriela Cuevas, head of the borough of Miguel Hidalgo, during a meeting of the Asamblea Legislativa in August of 2007, were the road and traffic problems that the tower would produce, the negative impact on public services and the legal violations that would be entailed in the construction of the tower in its designated place.²¹ To further bolster local voices in the face of this monumental project, PAN deputy Margarita Martínez Fisher began a website designed to post the concerns of Miguel Hidalgo delegation residents on the proposed construction of the Tower.²² A directory of the deputies of the Asamblea Legislativa was included, in order to provide further avenues for residents to voice their opinions.²³

More specifically, Mexico’s tower debate points to one of the questions that Lisa Maya Knauer and Daniel J. Walkowitz present in their co-authored introduction to *Memory and the Impact of Political Transformation in Public Space*:

Who has the right (or power, authority) to decide what happens at a particular site? [...] Carried out in op-ed pages, public forums, and the proverbial back rooms and boardrooms, the ongoing discussions illustrate the transformative power of a political event to reshape the historical meanings we impose upon, or derive from, a contested public space (2004: 2).

While Knauer and Walkowitz wrote the above quotation with ground zero in New York City in mind, it alludes to a more universal dynamic around official memory and commemoration that supplements the national anniversary with material markers. In

²¹ The tower was to be constructed at Calle Pedregal 24, in the colony Molina del Rey of the delegation Miguel Hidalgo. One of the chief concerns expressed by critics in the controversy that ensued had to do with part of Chapultepec Park that would be compromised due to the construction.

²² “Respeto a Nuestras Colonias”, in: <<http://www.vecinos.com/miguelhidalgo/14999/2007/10/02/gracias->> (12.07.2009).

²³ “Buzón virtual sobre Torre Bicentenario” (2007), in: <<http://www.cnnexpansion.com/actualidad/2007/7/19/buzon-virtual-sobre.html>> (14.05.2009).

fact, the struggle for authority between official commissions created to oversee the construction of national symbols and the general public can be traced back to nineteenth century Mexico, when the first proposed monument project to the recently deceased Benito Juárez in 1872 was eventually abandoned due to public disagreement about where to place the monument and a general public mistrust of the panel of judges assembled to assess the project proposals. Over a hundred years later, the Bicentennial Tower debate echoes a parallel struggle in the politics behind the creation of another national symbol. Following Ebrard's announcement on the 27 of September of 2007 that the construction of the tower would be abandoned due to the indefinite court battle taking place between the Grupo Danhos and the INBA, a post from one influential community website describes the triumph as the result of a grassroots effort in which citizens, journalists, architects and politicians joined forces and upheld the law, protected the green spaces of the federal district and stopped those politicians whose desire for development at all costs outweigh their capacity to protect their city.²⁴ Here, local mobilization presided over global interests in what played out for some as a type of David-versus-Goliath triumph. For the opposing viewpoint, which echoes nineteenth-century liberal criticisms of Mexican modernization, the failure to launch this project indicates the extent to which Mexico remains unable to meet the criteria of leadership on the path to progress.

In sum, the contributions made by academic studies on the nation have the tendency to be framed by the relationship between thought and thing. The works of Benedict Anderson (2006), Eric Hobsbawm (1983), and, with respect to Latin America, Arturo Escobar and more recently, Jens Andermann and Beatriz González Stephan (2006) all deal with the connections among things, words and the transcendent values that they come to represent. The Mexican Bicentennial as represented on the web invites users to explore what it means to represent the nation in a post-national, global era. Yet due to the nature of the digital venue and the types of interactions that it generates, there occurs a subtle shift in focus: more than how the national event is represented on the web, it is where one stands in relation to it and how the web visitor decides to navigate through those representations that occupies the foreground of attention and experience. More so than ever, the vastness of the collective national event and the way that the commemoration materials are presented on the web turn us back toward ourselves. The introduction of the social network site adds a new dimension to the materials of history, including a generational leap that embraces the informal registers of communication and dialogue that characterizes Generation Y. In addition, Facebook profiles the performative mode in a manner that transposes the material of a solemn museum visit into a venue that privileges play as the primary rule of interaction. Likewise, the Torre Bicentenario illuminates some relevant questions when considering how it is that the global and the local co-exist in the digital and material worlds. The use of digital imagery, websites and blogs in both the promotion and criticism of the proposed building not only shifted public attention from the thing itself to the social and political divisions that it helped to illustrate, but also emblemized the struggle between the local and the global that constitutes one of the fundamental conflicts of the current era.

²⁴ "Un revés de Allura" (2007), in: <<http://www.vecinos.com/miguelhidalgo/14958/2007/09/30/arquitectura-mexico>> (10.06.2009).

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