

**Public Transportation as an Agent of Modernization and Urban Order: A Study of the  
First Cable Cars in the State of Mexico**

by

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## Abstract

The Mexicable was Mexico's first cable car system that served to transport residents from marginal communities nestled in the distant mountainsides that previously lacked efficient ways to access urban centers. The new mode of public transportation has largely been recognized as a tourist attraction in the peripherals of Mexico City, and remains a token of accomplishment for president of Mexico at the time, Enrique Peña Nieto, and the president of the State of Mexico, Eruviel Ávila Villegas. This essay seeks to understand the impact of the infrastructure and reconcile community participation within transportation policies to produce political agency for members of marginalized communities in Ecatepec. Findings from this essay problematize the role of the Mexicable in pursuit of increasing Mexico's competitiveness and its subsequent reiteration of neoliberal practices within Ecatepec. The infrastructure enabled the state government to organize urban communities according to the needs of the government over the needs of its residents. In doing so, the federal and state government limited the impact of the Mexicable by minimally focusing on social interest.

## Introduction

In 2019, I traveled to Mexico and stayed in the State of Mexico where I learned about the nation's first cable car system located in Ecatepec. Ecatepec de Morelos, commonly referred to as Ecatepec, is a municipal in the northeastern part of the State of Mexico that shares its southern border with Mexico City.<sup>1</sup> I saw firsthand Ecatepec's proliferation of shantytowns, or informal settlements consisting of cheaply made houses as a result of disproportionate economic growth and poorly redistributed resources in the city. Luckily, I was able to observe the shantytowns from a bird's eye view while aboard the cable car system adeptly named the Mexicable. The technologically advanced infrastructure stood out against its backdrop of marginalized communities. Research studies about cable cars in major Latin American cities is expansive, and studies urban mobility in a social and political context that better frame the impact of the infrastructure in marginalized communities. There are few articles about the Mexicable with most covering general information about the infrastructure that is based on the limited data released by the government.

The significance of the Mexicable in this essay is to better understand the lack of political agency from residents of shantytowns in Ecatepec, while also offering an opportunity to problematize Mexico's national goal of competitiveness. In actuality, state and national ambitions for economic stimulation are important reasons that drove the Mexican president, Enrique Peña Nieto, to implement infrastructure during his time in office. Moreover, securing funds from private lending agencies, like the World Bank, were imperative to build new infrastructure given the limitations of Mexico's own economy. These agreements signified that the federal government was required to implement developmentalist policies, per the World Bank and United Nations, into state and municipal development plans. Although, in spite of the

good intentions of international developmentalist programs that highlighted social equity from participating governments, the Mexican government excluded social participation in the planification of the Mexicable. Instead, the state and federal governments emphasized the efficiency and reach of the cable car system to the industrial sector of Ecatepec as a way to stimulate productivity. In doing so, the Mexican government reiterates neoliberal practices to organize Ecatepec's marginal communities and dissuade informal practices with a government subsidized mode of transport.

There has been insufficient consideration for the region of Ecatepec as a victim of failed neoliberal practices which, in effect, rose the poverty rates and produced more informal settlements in the city. This rendered a negative public perception of the government in which residents felt abandoned by their government. The Mexicable would have been an opportunity to address contentious issues wherein reforming transportation policies to include social cohesion can turn around the treatment of residents as second-class citizens. However, five years later, since the Mexicable was first inaugurated in 2016, the infrastructure only proved to have completed Peña Nieto's goals and became a token of accomplishment for his administration without providing transformative changes for the residents of Ecatepec.

For context, Ecatepec is densely populated with 1,677,678 people<sup>2</sup> which is only expected to increase as living expenses continue rising in Mexico City. The Mexicable serves marginal communities northeast of Mexico City from Santa Clara Coatitla to the farther shantytown nestled in the mountains, San Andres de la Cañada. The cable car system saves residents over forty-five minutes in travel time since a roundtrip on the cable car takes fourteen minutes in total. Throughout that short time frame, residents are able to safely glide through the air with a magnificent view of Ecatepec and part of Mexico City. The ride also grants onlookers

a close view of shantytowns where they can see the poorly paved streets and beaten-down cars that run in incoherent patterns throughout communities. It is estimated that Mexicable cost the state and federal government roughly 1.700 million pesos (US \$87 million) to construct, and as a result of budget constraints, the use of the private donors was necessary.

This research aims to broaden the discussion of the Mexicable as a mechanism in imposing urban order and modernizing Ecatepec. In assessing the impacts of the Mexicable I was able to collect significant findings behind the social, political and economic contexts behind the creation of the infrastructure. The political ambitions of President Enrique Peña Nieto's administration in Mexico's competitiveness limited the possibilities social inclusion in transportation policies. Although the Mexicable is a successful collaboration between the State of Mexico (acronym EDOMEX) and the Federal government, it fails to create opportunities of social mobility for residents in Ecatepec's shantytowns. Instead, it is an agent of urban order that establishes the presence of government in informal sectors of the Ecatepec.

It is generally understood that Mexicable addresses the transportation needs of underserved communities in Ecatepec. While the efficiency of the Mexicable is undeniable, I conclude that the Mexicable falls short of creating transformative changes that could amplify the political agency of residents in the shantytowns of Ecatepec. Therefore, the Mexicable should be considered as conducive of political interests, a repetition of neoliberal practices, and a missed opportunity for social cohesion in urban transportation policies.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Mobilizing Demands Through Public Transportation: Case Studies in Latin America***

The political power of the Caracas Metro, or MetroCCS in Caracas, Venezuela reflected ideological visions for the country in its planification according to mission statements outlined in the Metro's campaign.<sup>3</sup> The violence that characterized the nation in late February of 1989 to

early March of 1990 was known as the Caracazo and consisted of retaliations against failed promises for decentralization (Kingsbury, 2017). The violent uprisings underscored the public's contempt for neoliberal reforms in the Punto Fijo system, a repressively elitist command that undermined social issues and prevented class formation. The public transportation system was perceived as troublingly neoliberal in its implementation despite its use to provide accessibility for distant parts of the city (Kingsbury, 2017). Donald V. Kingsbury interprets the MetroCCS's subsequent appropriation by the public as a demand for inclusion in the decisions that affect their urban space and their livelihoods.

The Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela added articles to the constitution in 1999 that emphasized democracy and citizenship as a forefront in the government following public actions.<sup>4</sup> Much of the frustration laid in the inadequate legislative movements to promote public action as its importance had only been acknowledged in writing (Kingsbury, 2017). The shift towards democratization in the urban planning process was better seen through the appropriation of the MetroCCS. It became a center for education, and participatory gatherings modeling Venezuelan's visions of social justice under the Bolivarian Revolution.<sup>5</sup> A case can be made for the nature of Venezuelans seeking opportunities to exercise their political power in the examples of community engagement with the metro. Public transportation systems,<sup>6</sup> in the context of Venezuela, were used by both the government and the public as representations for the trajectory of the nation's democratic future. The MetroCCS was an ally in the government's response to the 2014 city protests for Nicolas Maduro's removal. Furthermore, the infrastructure laid at the core of public defense against a militarized state in allowing citizens to act upon their constitutional rights (Kingsbury, 2017).

The presence of cable cars in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil generated a large body of work that studied the urban infrastructure as an opportunity to create urban order absent within the communities of Complexo do Alemão and Morro da Providência. Likewise, the expectations for the cable car system demonstrated potential for significant changes in the social and political realms. Ahead of major worldwide events,<sup>7</sup> the “Teleférico do Alemão” and “Teleférico da Providência” were implemented from the Growth Acceleration Program in tandem with the Pacification Police Unit Policy (Freire-Medeiros and Name, 2017). The use of brutal police force demonstrated during incidents such as the “PAN Massacre” generated deeper divisions between the state and the community amid outcries of right violations. Several scholars have argued that the cable cars act as a symbolic representation for the future of the country; however, based on the tumultuous nature of political interest in Latin America, these visions often weaken the role of citizenship (Kingsbury, 2017; Freire-Medeiros & Name, 2017; Guzmán Pizarro, 2019).

Citing the Mayor Eduardo Pae’s low tolerance for public intervention in the Teleférico da Providência, the public transportation system reprised neoliberal reforms in favelas that favored tourism as an opportunity for economic stimulation (Freire-Medeiros & Name, 2017). Subsequently, many favela residents were displaced and faced difficulties integrating within new communities as shown in records of their relocation. Jorge Mario Jauregui, an architect for the project, expected the cable car systems to lead the way for civil liberties inspired by the impressive public transportation service (Guzmán Pizarro, 2019). Despite desires for public action, Guzmán Pizarro (2019) joins many other scholars in discussing the shortcomings of the Brazilian cable car system due to the deteriorating conditions of the metro cables, missing community enrichment projects and threatening police surveillance.

The “Metrocable” in Medellín, Colombia is recognized as the most well-integrated system for urban development that was modeled after “social urbanism” (Brand and Dávila, 2012). “Social urbanism” defines the role of the Metrocable as an inclusive “urban upgrading” project with broad social goals for marginalized communities (Brand & Dávila, 2012). The perception remains that the Integrated Urban Project (Proyectos Urbanos Integrales) created the model to “repay the city’s debt” to marginalized communities;<sup>8</sup> therefore, the model is inclusive as it takes into consideration factors besides mobility such as housing, public space and the environment (Brand and Dávila, 2011, 2012; Guzmán Pizarro, 2019).

The metro cables in Latin America redefine the means of providing services for underserved communities but with varying degrees of social participation that prove to be more conducive for a stronger integration of government-imposed infrastructure. The gondola lifts in marginalized urban settings cultivate spaces where citizenship is constantly contested and reimagined.<sup>9</sup> These spaces generate possibilities for negotiations to take place between the government and its citizens therefore pushing the boundaries to advance interest on both sides.

### ***Participation, Urban Space and “the Right to the City”***

This essay builds upon the scholarship that understands urban space as a place of contestation, the locus of encounters of different interests and actors, including policymakers, experts, real estate interests, and urban citizens. Urban sociologist, Jean Lojkin, views the city as a battleground between society and government. The Mexicable, as a governmental infrastructural urban project that seeks to intervene in informal areas of the city but excluding demands of the inhabitants, is precisely one of the cases to explore the urban space as contested. Emilio Duhau and Angela Giglia define the urban space as a dynamic place in which exchanges never cease between people, practices, beliefs and experiences.<sup>10</sup> Considering the multitude of



demands and interests at play, one would not be alone in perceiving urbanity as a “naturally conflictive” space (Carmona Rojas, 2016). Regulatory frameworks manage and protect the urban space in the form of laws, policies, and rights granted. Laws exist to regulate urban spaces, create order and ensure the government’s right to assigns functions within a space full of people fighting for the collective good of the community (Carmona Rojas, 2016). There is constant tension between opposing interests, as both parties, the government and its citizens, demand rights to the urban space (Carmona Rojas, 2016). Representatives of special interests can create a middle ground between the demands of urbanites and the interests of the government. For instance, the integration of a new transportation system meets the demands for accessibility to other areas of the city while also fulfilling the government’s compliance of global developmentalist policies.<sup>11</sup>

Public action shows that people desire to participate in the spatial transformation through their engagement, appropriation of elements within the space, and protests of intrusive policies. Their everyday actions reaffirm the uses for the space as well.<sup>12</sup> Participation means negotiation and consent to anything affecting the spaces they inhabit but can also present an alternative to modifications and regulations that organize the urban space. Henri Lefebvre’s concept of “the right to the city” has appeared more often in recent scholarship to explain acts of protest and social unrest. Lefebvre conducts a critical analysis of public action, concluding that it is done to reclaim the urban space and reinstate it as a shared space “in a fight against gentrification, privatization, police and private surveillance, socioeconomic inequality, and political exclusion” (Kingsbury, 2017, p. 776). Therefore, civil participation is a demand for inclusion in the urbanization process where exclusion manifests the private interests (Harvey, 2008). The right to

the city is a right to partake in the development of the urban space through democratic actions (Harvey, 2008). Citizenship is ultimately an integral component in the fabric of urban life.

Neoliberal policies create barriers for public demands by placing individual interests at the forefront of major development projects occurring within the city (Harvey, 2008). According to Jean Lojkin, a successfully managed city produces upgrades within the urban space to maximize levels of productions in a capitalist society. The formation of the urban space prioritizes efficiency, yet in practice it does not guarantee full participation with the public sector under pressures for government modernization. Lojkin considers that special interests designate functions within the city to maximize capital. Situating the Mexicable in the peripherals of the Ecatepec, but also Mexico City, is an upgrade that meets special interest. The metro cable serves communities of irregular settlements that have been marginalized<sup>13</sup> and disconnected with the rest of the city. David Harvey (2008) believes that the right to the city applies to everyone in the shared space, not only is it a right of the public sector, but it is also a right of those imposing their hegemony on the urban space.

### *Visions for Ecatepec de Morelos, State of Mexico*

At first glance, Ecatepec is visually captivating with curious make-shift homes invading the hillsides that stretch northeast from the Valley of Mexico to the Sierra de Guadalupe. Twenty percent of the region is populated with irregular settlements and seventy percent are designated as low-income areas.<sup>14</sup> The irregular or “informal settlements” are often characterized by the relocation of marginalized groups away from the city and into unregulated territories, but also federal territories, and strain the legitimization of local authorities (Pineda Chaves et. al., 2016, p. 9). Informal settlements are an attribute of urbanization, as they represent people’s strategies to the lack of affordable housing or more equal land policies but are treated as an isolated entity

not belonging to the city for its ungovernability (Pineda Chávez et al., 2016, p. 4) Urbanization in the municipality of Ecatepec has a history of government imposing urban order through public policies, and development projects led by the State of Mexico. The past meets the present as the government continually pools together funds for developmental projects despite the disconnect between informal communities and their government.

Urban sociologist, Angela Giglia identifies marginalization as the lack of urban order which can be tied back to the irregular communities in Ecatepec.<sup>15</sup> Exorbitant costs of living in Mexico City, overpopulation, and the failing housing market exhausted the possibilities for affordable housing (Sohn, 2014). The rise of irregular communities in Ecatepec begins with the rapid urbanization of Mexico City in the 1970s and 1980s which sent many residents to the city's borders where the land had lost significant value. It is estimated that the influx of people relocating to Ecatepec from Mexico City began with 216,408 habitants in 1970 to 784,507 in 1980.<sup>16</sup> The absence of police presence, rampant crime, and inadequate public facilities altogether are urgent issues within the informal communities surrounding the Mexicable.<sup>17</sup>

The chaotic surges of informal settlements in marginal areas of Ecatepec have led to government projects that restructure the state amidst the growing disconnect between Ecatepec and the rest of the State of Mexico (Sohn, 2014). In 2004 the State of Mexico partly invested in an affordable housing project in the district of Las Americas, located in the municipal of Ecatepec. The project created 14,000 housing units with a uniform design that were advertised as safe gated communities.<sup>18</sup> Its design as a gated community intended to dissuade further creations of shantytowns that defined the area (Sohn, 2014). Furthermore, Byeong-hae Sohn has argued that the affordable housing project turned into a "social interest" housing project whereby private investors created more housing units for the financial gains despite the geographically isolated

location of Las Americas. The case of Las America shows that investors oversaw developments in low-income areas as a beneficial investment rather than providing useful services for the residents. This is noted in the final product that were unfinished housing units that now sit deteriorated and inhabitable. The state government complied with agreements set forth from financial foreign aid organizations to supplement costs for the project. Sohn (2014) criticizes the state's approach in handling informal and unproductive parts of Ecatepec as a project where the outcome would manifest their visions for urbanity. The example of the housing project models after a neoliberal practice of governance in that affordable housing was privatized as a public and social goods. The issue with this model is that it establishes barriers to social and public agendas that would best benefit the community of Ecatepec (Sohn, 2014). Consequently, the housing project as formal practice, that is owning property, would solidify the marginalization of "informal settlers" into "mortgage-slaves" (Sohn, 2014). Las Americas was deemed unsuccessful in the end as an affordable housing option given the residents' unlikelihood to choose living there due to its distance from urban centers. The failure of Las Americas renders the neoliberal urbanization model as ineffective in the modernization of Ecatepec (Sohn, 2014). Also, Sohn considers the continual creation of informal settlements as a response of "anti-urban" and anti-social developments" given the State of Mexico's rigid plans for a narrow vision of urbanization.

The community of Ecatepec wants changes in the urban fabric that feature a holistic approach and integrates useful resources beyond what is already provided (Sohn, 2014). Alternative planning schemes for Ecatepec are different in their approach to create potential types of urbanity that reflect the current trends of informal practices. These visions of urban life discard the influence of private interests and are closely centered to the actual realities of life

from many residents leading to an increased likelihood for significant changes (Sohn, 2014). By opposing the neoliberal model, Sohn (2014) believes would open urban planners to alternative methods for urbanization. Therefore, the counterproposals to modernize and develop Ecatepec looks at the residents' contemporary informal practices and broadens the understanding of ownership and property, concepts already narrowly defined by the state (Sohn, 2014). He believes that these counterproposals lead to significant changes since they incorporate an aspect of community engagement that uplift social demands, and encourage social policies rooted in community practices.

Ecatepec de Morelos has seen a history of urban order attempts through neoliberal methods of urbanization that targeted the city's informal sector. Counter proposals accounted for social inclusion and environmental preservation now reflected in the municipal plans for the region of Ecatepec (Sohn, 2014). Specific areas of development highlighted in the municipal plans for 2015 focus much more intensely on informal settlements with concerns for their infiltration into the mountain valleys that form La Sierra de Guadalupe. Since the United Nations conference "Habitat I" (2000) which proclaimed the message of "good governance" to international governments, the government of Mexico and State of Mexico needed to address the increasing numbers of settlements. The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements or simply Habitat launched a global campaign on *Urban Governance* (2000) in pursuit of generating an inclusive city with concentrations on "decentralization and local participatory democracy, efficiency, equity and security" (Taylor, 2000, p. 199). The global campaign stresses the importance for transparency within the government and its responsibility to procure the needs of its citizens to practice "good governance". Global pressures ushered in new changes to the level of reach in aid from governments. These standards were then reflected in the State of Mexico's

development plans as means of ensuring that new administrations created projects that worked towards the visions of an inclusive city. According to the Municipal Plan for Urban Development in Ecatepec, informal settlements have posed several difficulties for the State of Mexico in implementing initiatives to strengthen ties with Ecatepec.

## **Discussion**

### ***Mexico's Focus on Competitiveness***

In early October of 2016, the governor and president of the State of Mexico, Eruviel Ávila Villegas and Enrique Peña Nieto, coordinated transportation policies to reach the demands for public transportation from shantytowns cut-off and confined to the mountainsides of La Sierra de Guadalupe. The Mexicable was a solution for issues of accessibility from peripherals of Ecatepec. At the inauguration ceremony of the Mexicable, Mexican politicians and participating officials reiterated the allure of a cable car system in State of Mexico's most marginalized neighborhoods as an opportunity to attract the foreign gaze of tourist and stimulate local market growth. The Mexicable marks an accomplishment in the president's term and promise to increase infrastructure in Mexico. Under Peña Nieto's presidency, governments emphasized the creation of infrastructure that supported connectivity between different modes of transportation from the metro to highways and now a gondola lift. For example, a significant feature of the Mexicable was the ability for passengers to easily transfer to the 4 Mexibús at the first station, this bus route heads into Mexico City thus enabling easy movement between the two cities. Reliable, innovative, and interconnected transportation services that guaranteed easy travel within the State of Mexico was result of a larger national project under Peña Nieto's presidency. At the time, Ecatepec was the 8<sup>th</sup> city with the largest population, fast forward into 2021, it is now the 3<sup>rd</sup> most populated major city in Mexico.<sup>19</sup> The new infrastructure for public transportation was a

success celebrated in the 4<sup>th</sup> annual report of Peña Nieto's administration as referenced in the preface of the report:

“...we have advanced in the construction of infrastructure works that trigger better economic development, connectivity, and mobility with the objective of consolidating us as a logistics platform that strengthens our competitiveness and capacities as a center for the production of high-tech manufactures” (p.14)

The president reiterated most of this language during his speech at the inauguration ceremony. A cable car in Mexico meets the administration's goals of tapping into unproductive sectors of the economy all the while stimulating technological innovations in transportation. For the administration, consolidating areas that pose problems to productivity such as transportation would enable more time to focus on the economy where the government desires improvement.

Competitiveness has long stood front and center as an objective in incoming administrations in Mexico working towards economic restoration since the financial collapse of 2008 and again in latter periods of economic turmoil. Competitiveness refers to the advancement of productivity in order to generate economic development within various sectors that would benefit the country altogether.<sup>20</sup> The government regularly consults with various reports of the nation's competitiveness ahead of major investments, a few of which involve opinions from the World Economic Forum (WEF) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Major development projects funded by the federal government rely on international lending agencies such the World Bank with an added help from private donors. The Mexicable used a mix of state and federal funds with private donations of which it is worth mentioning that any detailed reports of the spending or names of donors have not been released. Yet, it is understood that technological advancements and a new method of transportation were thought necessary by participating lenders to trigger Mexico's competitiveness. In order to receive funding from the

World Bank, Mexican policymakers inserted language relaying World Bank standards for international development projects into development plans that ultimately influence the ways communities are impacted. It is useful for marginal communities now considered important in meeting World Bank standards which then affect transportation policies as opportunities for direct action. The Mexicable complies with international development standards set by the World Bank, and its partners such as the United Nations to produce the international standards of an inclusive city. The federal and state governments utilize the physical placement of the Mexicable as a testament to its fulfilment in obligations to marginalized communities in Ecatepec.

A period in which Mexico considered itself at a low point in competitiveness was during the economic collapse of 2008 and a few years after. The global financial crisis deterred the trajectory of strong economic growth in many countries such as the United States, Japan, and those belonging to the European Union. Other regions of the world such as India, Brazil, Mexico and Russia suffered serious repercussions amidst the economic turmoil that destabilized their rates of growth for years to come. According to the State of Mexico's statistics for international competitiveness, the Mexican economy experienced a decrease in economic growth of about 6.1% following the crisis. In the subsequent years, several countries experienced significant hurdles to reactivate their economies following financial constraints as a result of inflation, rampant unemployment, and currency devaluation. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank estimated that Mexico possessed potential to reach a maximum growth rate of 3.2% to 3.3% in 2012, agreeing to expect a 3.6 percent increase in the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>21</sup> A major reason for this projection points to the United States' slow economic restoration and its impact as Mexico's own recovery given their



trading pact. However, the initial goal for reaching competitive growth at the ranks of other global superpowers such as the United States remained out of reach for Mexico and other developing economies for several reasons relating to the volatility of the market economy. In spite of circumstances, the global recessions increased pressures to sustain internal development projects and formulate feasible long-term goals. Mexico's leaders organized long term, and short-term frameworks within development plans for the state, federal and down to municipal governments to increase outcomes that directly improve the nations competitiveness from investments to infrastructure. In order to optimize competitiveness, the nation's resources are directed to institutions and sectors that present advancements in productivity. Important to competitiveness, productivity such as producing more capital is highly emphasized. Each state in Mexico is responsible for encouraging and funding projects that maximize competitiveness in all areas of the country to generate capital growth (Gobierno del Estado de Mexico, 2017). With a great focus from administrations on Mexico's competitiveness, development plans promise its benefit for Mexican citizens stating that the citizen should expect a better quality of life with employment opportunities as a result of a competitive economy (Gobierno del Estado de Mexico, 2017). In theory social advancements should expect to occur simultaneously alongside Mexico's economic growth following the economic liberal idea that wealth would trickle down to the whole society, yet these projections and casualty usually fall short of expectations for various reason due to a heavy focus on economic development over social advancements.

Detailed information such as spending reports about major government financed projects are difficult to access in Mexico. It is the lack of transparency in the government that is a point of contention for many citizens and source of mistrust in the Mexican government. Mexican news source, *SinEmbargo* reported that in the seven months following the inauguration ceremony, no

information about the budget or source of funds has been released to the public. In 2013, one year ahead of the when the government began construction of the Mexicable, the administration at the time created seven new departments including la Secretaría de Movilidad (Ministry of Mobility), la Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Metropolitano (Ministry of Urban and Metropolitan Development) and el Sistema de Transporte Masivo y Teleférico (The System of Mass Transportation and Cable Cars) among others. The Ministry of Water and Public Works (Secretaría de Agua y Obra Pública) oversaw the logistical planning for the Mexicable, they were also the point of contact for records. They were dissolved in the months after the inauguration which made *SinEmbargo*'s requests for a copy of the spending reports on the infrastructure all the more complicated and time consuming to obtain. Based on findings documented on *SinEmbargo*, 40 percent of funds for the Mexicable were from the federal and state government, while 60 percent was from the private sector. Releasing the spending track for the Mexicable is another example of a transparent government that informs citizens of how their money is managed. The negative public perception of government administrations are based on disingenuous elected officials whose rampant corruption, incompetence, clientelism, and bureaucracy have disillusioned citizens' hope for transformative changes (Sanchez-Juarez, 2018). Some Ecatepec residents even underscore the Mexicable as another business venture with more concern for the personal benefit of politicians and administrations than for the social advancement of Ecatepec. These opinions can be explained by instances of misuse of public funds in Mexico where resources are diverted away from infrastructure. Professor of urban studies mentioned earlier, Julio Dávila, explains that cable car systems themselves are generally inexpensive to fund and are constructed fairly quick within the time frame of one administration.<sup>22</sup> Personal gains is not only capital but also in the form of perceived success tied

to the accomplishment of a goal. Through the lens of some residents, the Mexicable is a personal accomplishment for the president and a testament to the success of Enrique Peña Nieto's administration. His name will always appear as accredited on any published work featuring the infrastructure.

Economic competitiveness was a focal point of the Mexican government for years, and Peña Nieto's administration recognized poor infrastructure as an inhibitor to productivity. Numerous sectors within the country have transformed significantly following Mexico's entrance into the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with the United States and Canada thus expanding economic opportunities for many of its citizens. Faced against China's competitive success, Mexican trading consultants reduced costs of trading with other nations and redirected its practice of only trading with nations that were low-cost export partners such as the United States (World Bank, 2006). Although trading proved beneficial at first, relying heavily on one economy resulted in a difficult economic restoration process following the 2008 financial crisis. Even more concerning were Mexico's weak relationships with European and Asian companies that lent better economic opportunities, and the nation's decision to stand by their alliances with the United States and Canada as noted by the World Bank. Reports from the World Bank concluded that Mexico lacks competitiveness in recent years following several economic collapses. While international trade remains a vital component to the Mexican economy, the World Bank (2006) suggests that further triggers in the economy should come from restructuring and investing in internal sectors, promoting transparency within the government, and encouraging businesses to propose solutions for competitive low-cost exports. The World Bank remains a supportive pillar in Mexico's economic advancements towards increasing productivity and raising its status as a global competitor.

In 2006 the World Bank invested \$300.76 million toward the completion of a three-phase Programmatic Competitiveness Development Policy Loan (DPL) in Mexico.<sup>23</sup> Reasons for program's launch state that Mexico maintained a low productivity rating over the years due to a reduction of its share within the US trading market. While international competitors, like China, Chile or collectively East Asia, grew at rates of 3.3 percent to 7.7 percent in comparison to Mexico's 1.2 percent growth of GDP (World Bank, 2006). The program would contribute ideas to reduce poverty and guide administrations in their agendas using models to implement competitive measures (World Bank, 2006). Shifts in policies added a new approach for competitiveness looking towards "consolidating efforts to make Mexico a responsible team player" (World Bank, 2013). This language enabled flexible interpretations that urged policymakers to encompass broader issues within their policies that would elevate the needs of disadvantaged communities in Mexico. According to World Bank standards, better education systems and quality social services were deemed an investment back into the economy. Therefore, transportation policies including areas of opportunity for community engagement is not far from the initial visions of the World Bank. However, policies in Mexico lack definitive objectives and tangible plans that could stimulate social advancements (Sanchez-Juarez, 2018). Worsening the prospects of inclusive policies with social agendas are Mexico's financial constraints. As previously mentioned, the Mexicable received 60 percent of funds from the private sector. A high percentage of private donors were given political agency in the planification of the Mexicable. Governments are incentivized to shift priorities when creating public policies out of the fear of losing funds for projects (Alvarez, 2018). In the case of the Mexicable, transportation policies that presented visions for the infrastructure withheld considerations for social advancement despite suggestions from the World Bank. Social

advancements are not always in the best interest of private donors for reasons such as misaligning interests. This is important when considering that 60 percent of funds derived from the private sector. Marginal communities depend on fair public policies which emphasizes the need for multidisciplinary policy makers who can protect public interests however, this is unlikely if the state government opts to consult with policy makers whose priorities are to maintain private investors at bay and secure funds for future products.

World Bank reports inform Mexican policy makers of contingencies in urban planning, and present areas of weakness relevant to sustainable measures of development. The Mexico Country Partnership Strategy (CPS) created by the World Bank, and implemented from 2014-2019, included sustainable approaches for development to induce economic growth. For policy makers, this decision signified an increase investment in technological innovations that could achieve competitiveness while also reducing toxic wastes, pollution, protect natural resources. The reason being that in the past, the adverse effects of indifference towards the environment has come at a costly 6.3 percent of the nation's GDP (World Bank, 2013). Mexico holds the record as the 12<sup>th</sup> country producing toxic levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Latin America (World Bank, 2013). It came as no surprise when the government enacted the General Climate Change Bill (Ley General de Cambio Climático), as a momentum in the steps towards reducing carbon emissions. The World Bank suggests that Mexican policies concerned with the urban space should include sustainable development to protect the surrounding ecology but also to conserve natural resources (World Bank, 2013). Projections for the General Climate Change Bill estimate that levels of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions should drop by 30 percent in 2020, and 50 percent in 2050.<sup>24</sup> The reports belonging to the fiscal year of 2014 (FY14) conclude that Mexico's preferred method to transport labor (human capital) and capital is through cars or large vehicles, estimating that it

contributes to around 77 percent of the nation's urbanization rate. The World Bank cites issues with this method of action as damaging to the environment with carbon emissions, and a strain on productivity. Therefore, physical mobility, the ability to efficiently move throughout the city without further damaging the environment is essential to Mexico's competence as a modern nation and competitive nation. The Mexicable facilitates mobility between the State of Mexico and Mexico City powered by electric energy and in that way acts as an agent of modernization in the nation's visions.

### ***Repetition of Neoliberal Practices and Urban Order***

In the words of the Mexican president, the Mexicable is the government's opportunity to "change the urban face of this region. If not to bring order to it or at the very least, allocate much needed basic services [to Ecatepec]" (Presidencia Enrique Peña Nieto, 2016). The informal settlements on the hillsides of La Sierra de Guadalupe formed sporadically at a rate that outpaced the schemes of urban planners. Evidence of an irregular growth can be seen in the incoherent traffic flow between neighborhoods which complicate the possibilities of creating a cohesive bus system that serves shantytowns. Residents substitute traditional buses with informal urban practices such as combis which are privately owned and operated vans that follow their own routes in marginalized areas of the city. Consequently, unregulated urban practices fracture the city into two where Ecatepec's shantytowns continue growing and inventing new informal practices to facilitate developing needs unmet by the state government. These urban practices strain the visions of municipal development plans for Ecatepec. The city is meant to be "equal, equitable, socially cohesive, as well as spatially interconnected" (HAEMEEM, 2015, 249). The Mexicable acts on visions to re-establish urban order in this region. For the city and state, the infrastructure is a government presence in their informal urban space. While some may view this

as intrusive, the cable car system is a formal mechanism for crafting a functioning city in strengthening connectivity between Ecatepec and its peripheral region facing Mexico City.

Many scholars have studied the urban phenomenon of informal settlements with focuses on their social and environmental roles as populations grow in at rapid rates.<sup>25</sup> Research findings reveal that informal settlements are indivisible from the urban fabric, but their rapid growth excludes them from urban development plans (Samper, 2020). Mexican governments have historically regularized these informal settlements and continue to do so under laws and constitutional reforms. Informal place-making typically occurs on federal lands; however, these lands were originally communal lands known as *ejidos* and reparations from the Mexican Revolution. Over time the communal lands were privatized by the federal government through a series of land amendments such as the Agrarian reform. The federal government registered houses that sit on *ejido* territories in demonstration of a regulatory practice.<sup>26</sup> Due to the natural topography of the Guadalupe mountain, the informal settlements are disconnected and primarily dependent on one main roadway, Avenida San Andrés with connection to Via Morelos, a highway that extends into Mexico City (HAEMEEM, 2015). However, this roadway is still at a significant distance from shantytowns closer to the mountainous valley of La Sierra de Guadalupe. Ecatepec is significant to nation's economy as an industrial sector, at one point making up about 50 percent of the municipal's GDP (HAEMEEM, 2015). At its peak, Ecatepec formed a strong economic relationship with Greater Mexico City which bore roadways that ran north-south (HAEMEEM, 2015). La Autopista México Pachuca would be an example of a major roadway that northeast and straight into Mexico City but passes through many areas of Ecatepec. The Mexicable glides over this major roadway as well. Yet, at the time when Ecatepec was a booming as an industrial sector, development plans emphasized a push for connective roadways

that traversed through Mexico City and both residential and industrial areas of Ecatepec. Eventually, the production output in the region plummeted. The partial decline of Ecatepec's industrial sector in the 1990's was a consequence of increasing irregularity in land use, specifically the proliferation of irregular settlements (HAEMEEM, 2015). Yet, the continual government practice of creating infrastructure in prosperous, whether real or envisioned, is seen through the creation of the Mexicable. The urban infrastructure is another instance of a regulatory practice to dissuade informal ones and stimulate productivity in Ecatepec.

For the community members of San Andrés de la Cañada all the way to Santa Clara Coatitla, the Mexicable towers over shantytowns. The strangeness of the sight is in part to a sudden government presence in the area. For residents that claim the state has forgotten them, the infrastructure poses as a proxy for government intervention in marginalized communities. The Mexicable creates a disruption in the urban practices of commuters and marks an example of formal practices. In the past, the State of Mexico has attempted to absorb the peripherals of Mexico City. In response, the government of Mexico City co-opted zoning laws and manipulated land use to increase urban development projects within the region (Connolly and Wiggle, 2017). With new technology-based mapping tools, the government of Mexico City could absorb territories by pushing the parameters of its borders (Connolly and Wiggle, 2017). Advanced mapping tools has made it possible for both the State of Mexico and Mexico City to claim a right to regulate shantytowns previously unclaimed by a federal entity. Technological advancements, if managed properly, are understood as dependent on pressures from governments and therefore subject to become agents of political or elite agendas (Harvey, 2005, p.69). The use of technology is invaluable for state governments seeking access into marginalized communities on the peripherals as well as the right to govern them.



Ecatepec is the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest city with a population of 1.6 million residents according to a 2020 census. In 2016, when the Mexicable began operating Ecatepec was the 8<sup>th</sup> largest major city in Mexico. The large population favors Ecatepec's modernization efforts where political interests may see the city as an area of investment for the state government. The city's past record as a strong contributor to the economy may illicit a hope that history can repeat itself. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that the Mexicable stresses access to Mexico City, examples look no further . In addition, passengers can conveniently transfer onto a bus that will take them to the metropolitan area. The infrastructure grants the State of Mexico access to a large work force which is paramount to stimulate the productivity of Ecatepec. Previously mentioned, the infrastructure was designed with a simple goal in mind that was to trigger economic development as well as social development. Enrique Peña Nieto's administration plays a significant role as to which of the two developments were emphasized in the planification of the Mexicable. His administration prioritized creating infrastructure that would yield in Mexico's competitiveness. Enrique Peña Nieto was a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), the dominant, hegemonic political party that ruled Mexico for 79 years. For years, the PRI thrived under neoliberal theories of governance, and profited off the maquila programme, which granted US corporations permission to manufacture their products in Mexico using cheap labor with minimal restrictions (Harvey, 2005). At the time violent political suppression called into question the legitimacy of the political party as workers grew concern over the government's tactics to protect economic growth (Harvey, 2005). In order to appease the public demands, the PRI generated additional employment opportunities through their acquisition of private business. This move turned out disastrous as Mexico proceeded to acquire a loan from New York bankers interested in the oiling industry. In 1982, the country declared bankruptcy as its financial stability

plummeted over declining demands for Mexican products, Volcker's interest rate policy and a default in oil prices (Harvey, 2005). The devastating loss of capital and blow to the nation's market power was the fault of a heavy reliance on trade with the United States. In its aftermath, unemployment rose prompting a surge of informal settlements in the peripherals of Mexico City.

Mexico's economic bailout by IMF, World Bank and the US treasury further imposed neoliberal reforms that corrupted the financial system with foreign interest (Harvey, 2005). The presidency of Carlos Salinas from 1988 to 1994 emphasized a reorganization of Mexico's monetary management within individual states to improve productivity in capital accumulation. *Salinismo* refers to the neoliberal strategies instilled during this period that asserted changes within the frameworks of Mexican states to promote economic growth.<sup>27</sup> These frameworks emphasized capital gains and productivity as a national project. Previous attempts to profit favorably off international trade failed and underscored the need for foreign loans to continue funding development policies (Morton, 2003). In 1984 Mexico received its first loan from the World Bank. The ensuing worldwide financial crisis prompted the World Bank to grant a rescue loan to Mexico, one of many other nations, in an attempt to stabilize international concerns over diminishing investment deals. Throughout the recession, there were severe cuts to public services in the realms of education and health care. The following year, Mexico City suffered significant reductions in investment towards urban services and an increase in crime as resources became scarce (Harvey, 2005). The stifling debt of the nation reached a peak of \$58 billion in 1982 prompting the nation's leaders to turn towards privatization practices and opening many Mexican enterprises for foreign ownership (Harvey, 2005). The administration at the time exposed their regional economies to exploitative foreign interest groups and privatized public assets in nationalizing the banks. Under the presidency of Carlos Salinas, Mexico entered foreign markets

through NAFTA as a major opportunity to fortify relations with Canada and reconcile with the United States. The agricultural sector in Mexico reported significant losses as many people were unable to compete against major market prices. It prompted an exodus of farmers relocating to cities in search of jobs resulting in overpopulation in major centers such as Mexico City. The reorganization of Mexico's financial system created twenty-four billionaires who were owners of banks, firms, and many enterprises.<sup>28</sup> Notably, the political power of the PRI persisted with a formation of an elite class which strengthened the influence of neoliberalism and consisted of IMF analysts, investors, bank members and government officials (Morton, 2003). The visions for capital growth were embedded in every aspect of the country's financial system. It has resulted in speculations that public policies could have been aligned with private interests to promote international developmental reforms within the state and the public spheres.<sup>29</sup>

Governments work with state powers to contain opposition groups against capital growth with the threat of marginalization (Harvey, 2005). Resistance groups in the past take a stance against the restrictive approach of the governments solely focused on competitive growth. Morton (2003) suggests that unionization efforts and left-wing political parties banded together in opposition to politicized reforms that devised voter suppression methods. In 1977, the Law on Political Organizations and Electoral Process (LOPPE) was formed with the specific intent to welcome political parties that were pro-economic reformists yet limited their legal power as opposition groups focused on the public sector's demands (Morton, 2003). The PRI manipulated political reforms such as the LOPPE to protect an economic agenda that was ultimately successful following the dissolution of opposition parties. The former president of Mexico, Luis Echeverría Álvarez, claims that the LOPPE was an opportunity for democratic participation in Mexico's most important decisions. The out of character act was a last-minute attempt to

prevent another protest. Further insight offered from Mark Middlebrook believes that inclusive measures are a response to ensuing social tensions and a way to deter from unequal distributions of wealth that would continue under Mexico's compliance with international policies.<sup>30</sup> The PRI's attempt to control counter groups reached a maximum peak in which they rendered state involvement as a civil responsibility. Morton (2003) observes the hegemonic powers of the PRI's neoliberal practices as a principal conductor for restoring economic elite powers and imposing economic reforms throughout the country to influence states and their populations. Hegemonic practices and the "passive revolutions" that followed demonstrate a developed class consciousness of economic elites who were forthright with their concerns over the international political and economic climate (Morton, 2003). For years international practices pressured the PRI for increased economic stimulation and productivity at the expense of social needs vocalized during civil unrest.

Under the administration of Enrique Peña Nieto from 2013 to 2018, the educational reforms such as the New Education Model (NME) reiterated neoliberal language. These reforms faced backlash over its specific business centered language that failed to reform the quality of education. Language such as "quality" and "efficiency" applied production efficiency standards to students.<sup>31</sup> Efficiency measures economic production which leads to the conclusion that the government authorized an education reform with discretionary interests to prepare students for the work force. One scholar argues that the liberties of educators were under constant attack from subordination tactics deployed by the state that infringed on the educator's autonomy (Bocking, 2019). Neoliberal practices within the modern PRI diminished the political power of teachers over threats of labor movements resurfacing. The determinant language used in public policies limited the representative powers of agents involved, in this case limiting the opportunities to

reform teaching practices. State-imposed standards within education policies limited the quality of education in order to satisfy business-oriented evaluations. The state aided in national visions for competitive growth at the expense of students, teachers and parents. Similarly, the Mexicable aids in the economic stimulation of Ecatepec's industrial sector without provisions for social advancements in the underserved region. This may be for several reasons relating to an indifference from the private sector who covered most of the cost to build the Mexicable.

### ***Proposal for Social Cohesion in Urban Transportation Policies***

The Mexicable serves as an explicit reminder of the government's responsibility to residents in the marginalized communities of Ecatepec. The city remains a highly volatile area governed by gang violence from local groups with connections to nationally recognized drug cartels such as the Michoacán family and the Beltrán Leyva Organization (International Crisis Group, 2018). Ecatepec ranked highest among other major cities in Mexico for maintaining a consistent track record of criminal activities including "extortion, kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery, burglary, car theft and cargo theft" (International Crisis Group, 2018). Personal accounts supplied through interviews conducted as recently as March of 2018 from a nonprofit organization called Crisis Group expose a strong mafia presence in the city that targets Ecatepec youth. According to their findings, the residents face uphill battles to denounce drug related criminal activities that threaten the community meanwhile politicians and police officials receive impunity despite allegations of collusion with the cartel. The steady pace at which crimes occur and its failure to decrease over the years foster general unease for most residents that feel unsafe in Ecatepec. The National Survey of Urban Security (Encuesta Nacional de Seguridad Urbana) ranks Ecatepec as seventh on a list of urban Mexican cities with a public perception of insecurity. To make matters worse, gender-based violence known as femicides are terribly

prevalent in Mexico. In cases of femicides, families of victims have witnessed government authorities fail to conduct just trials over their mishandling of evidence. Instead, locals have taken it upon themselves to keep track of cases and advocate for families to safeguard any evidence in the investigation. Citizen's Observatory Against Violence, Disappearance and Femicide in Mexico State is a nonprofit that deals with femicides in Ecatepec but most importantly ensures government accountability. One group of community advocates recorded 168 femicides in the State of Mexico in 2017 with 21 of those took place in Ecatepec (Bautista, 2019). Grassroot groups and other forms of public action are in response to lax government initiatives for social equity in Ecatepec. Major challenges facing the city's residents involve forging a stronger political presence in the government. Residents in the shantytowns are already conditioned to a second-class citizenship where the government delimits their rights as privileges (Eisenberg, A., & Lenard, P., 2020). The state government creates conditions for second-class citizenship based on the complacency of its constituents to rules and regulations (Eisenberg, A., & Lenard, P., 2020). Shantytowns, and criminal activities are a defiance of state law and subject residents to exclusions that violate their universal citizenship which protects their rights to a dignified life.

In 2016, the National Survey of Urban Security found that 98.2 percent of Ecatepec residents felt unsafe taking public transportation. Most residents are likely to travel using the cable car system since they are spared from assaults and robberies while aboard. The slow advancements in safety measures for marginal areas can find solutions through conscious urban policies. Current transportations policies reflect vague ways that they intend to manifest social advancements. However, them doing so would promote social cohesion within urban transportation which can lead to inclusive agendas that impact the current socio-political

situations of the region (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). Public transportation can be an asset in the fight for political agency above all granting residents the right to safer living conditions and better facilities. The desire for social cohesion is clearly marked as an immediate vision for Ecatepec in the development plans where they reference the need for infrastructure that can become a permanent addition to the city (HAEMEEM, 2015). The Mexicable employs that vision but falls short due to the limitations of transportation policies that pay little attention to social equity. Social cohesion is not only about the interconnectivity of the city but implies opportunities to empower residents who can do more to integrate the infrastructure (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). An appropriation of the infrastructure has been seen time after time in different capacities throughout other major Latin American cities where cable cars play a stronger role in shantytowns. These examples provide insights into the potential influence of the Mexicable as means of negotiation between the residents of Ecatepec and their government. Resident members have better opportunities to employ appropriation tactics to promote changes in policies that affect other areas of the city such as education.

For policy makers, conversing with the community to collect information better suited to the needs of Ecatepec can turn discussions of contentious issues such as access and poverty into infrastructure with facilities for the community. Unfortunately, there was disregard for community voices throughout the construction of the Mexicable, and minimal facilities made available to community members. To the detriment of the residents' perception of the government, authorities aided in the dislocation of residents from their businesses and homes, places that were going to be torn down to make stations of the Mexicable.<sup>32</sup> Owners would have complied had they been offered fair prices for their properties, yet their negotiations were suddenly upended once authorities forcefully dislocated them. For there to be an envisioned social cohesion, communication between urbanites and

policy makers is vital to create practice solutions (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). Social cohesion refers to the use of urban mobility in the fight for social inclusion (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). Urban studies scholars advocate for public participation in the planification process of transportation policies where they can benefit policy makers with lay knowledge of the area set to receive new infrastructure. Lay knowledge includes knowledge of contemporary informal practices that urban dwellers partake in which may offer policy makers ideas in modernizing marginal communities through the communities' own understandings of concepts such as ownership, property and mobility. By analyzing informal practices, policy makers are expanding on concepts already narrowly defined by the state to meet the needs of shantytowns. A practical reason behind the Mexican government's inability to successfully incorporate social participation in transportation policies is due to its "framing by neoliberal discourse of economic competitiveness" (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). The Mexicable achieves fast travel, yet this only speaks to transportation policies as solely serving the purpose of reducing congestion and demonstrating to the state's ability to respond with adequate resources. In other words, neoliberal practices are the federal government's opportunities to demonstrate state capabilities in reaching visions for Mexico's competitiveness. New research focuses on a transdisciplinary approach to transport that prioritizes human needs over economic interests (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012).

Mexican policy makers are making efforts to broaden the scope of transport by implementing sustainability measures in transportation policies. The Mexicable demonstrates itself as a sustainable mode of transportation that is energy efficient, and environmentally conscious. During the construction, new trees were planted at each station. These forms of action, albeit it small, can amount to larger projects with results seeking to improve the living areas of the residents in Ecatepec in ways that are much more significant. These small instances have more meaningful impacts in the long run



but still provide a visual upgrade to the shantytowns surrounding the Mexicable. Visual upgrading of the marginal communities in the peripherals of Ecatepec was a government project. With support from the Secretariat of Agrarian, Land and Urban Development (SEDATU), the State of Mexico painted 180,000 houses located on the mountainside with bright neon colors to revitalize the look of shantytowns and attract the attention of onlookers to La Sierra de Guadalupe. Afterwards, the project received praise from the Mexican president where he problematized the grey hues of the shantytowns that blur the city and its mountains. Citing the development plan of Ecatepec, the municipal government backed projects that could honor the history of the region and Mexico (HAEMEEM, 2015). The Mexicable was a larger project that not only brought a new mode of transportation to the region but also large works of art to Ecatepec, once again visually enriching the region. A total of fifty murals were created and made ready in time for the inauguration of the Mexicable. Many of these public works consisted of diverse subjects from sharks appearing to open their mouths to a portrait of Frida Khalo painted by Alex Monopoly. Sculptures of figures resembling elephants by Fernando Andriacci were installed at the first station of the Mexicable. The beautification of these shantytowns was intentional to promote tourism and attract residents from neighboring towns. Most of the murals are depictions of icons in Mexican culture or at the very least represent something unique to the region. For example, the mural featured at the sixth station entitled *Valeria* depicts a young girl smiling in a curled-up position. This can be interpreted as a way to convey safety and security in the shantytowns of Ecatepec.<sup>33</sup> The artwork speaks volumes and adds character to Ecatepec as envisioned by the municipal development scheme.

The murals in Ecatepec aid in integrating these marginal communities into society after years of their residents experiencing a disconnect with the rest of the city. Many residents reported feeling seen that is feeling acknowledged as a part of Ecatepec. There was an influx of people flooding into the

shantytowns after the inauguration and the Mexicable garnered extensive media attention prompting community members' hopeful response due to the sudden attention. Many people in Ecatepec were pleased to see the large groups of people in the area given its negative reputation as generally unsafe for visitors. The municipal government installed new lanterns in the streets and paved a few roads ahead of the inauguration ceremony. Despite all the changes made to the mountainsides of Ecatepec in preparation for the grand opening of the Mexicable, members of the community see the works as temporary solutions to larger issues confronting the region, poverty being the most prevalent.<sup>34</sup> Soon after the inauguration ceremony of the Mexicable, data indicating the poverty and social deprivations between 2010-2015 in Ecatepec were released by the National Council for Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL). Reports indicate that 37.8% of the population in the Ecatepec experienced moderate poverty, and 4.91% experienced extreme poverty (CONEVAL, 2015). Both, moderate and extreme poverty groups declared that social security, reduced health services, and food access were shared disparities.<sup>35</sup> Extremely impoverished residents were assessed to have experienced a minimum of three deprivations not limited to welfare and quality of life (CONEVAL, 2015). Future hopes for transformative changes brought upon by the attention of the Mexicable were suppressed as time went on and much remained the same. Residents of the region remain skeptical of the government with many referencing the fake grass planted on a nearby soccer stadium in preparation of the inauguration ceremony due to predictions that the event would attract a large media presence. However, people noticed workers removing the grass days later. This act was the little proof residents needed to criticize the government as displaying false concern over improving the lives of residents living in shantytowns. Criticisms were also directed at the Mexicable which considered

the infrastructure as another statist project that only benefitted the perception of the president's administration.

Inclusive transportation policies would enact transformative changes that members of shantytowns in Ecatepec seek out in their government. There are several ways to revolutionize the urbanization of marginal communities in Ecatepec through fundamental changes to transportation policies. By adding elements of social inclusion into the planning process, locals can weigh in on the proposed infrastructure and eliminate doubts for urban planners. Altogether, communication between urban planners and locals would avoid disruptions in the cohesion between new infrastructure and pre-existing infrastructure. On the ground, it is evident that urban planners installed the Mexicable with disregard for pre-existing infrastructure. In some instances, the supportive bollards that hold the metal ropes in the air were built on top of roads in places that obstructed the flow of traffic.

The Mexicable could have been an opportunity to practice expanding transportation policies that encompassed revitalization projects for shantytowns in Ecatepec. Revitalization projects that go beyond the beautification of Ecatepec would tackle social needs through the use of community engagement. Ways to create inclusive transportation policies involve broadening the goals of urban transportation policies to match standards in regular public policy that may then lead to social cohesion (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). For Ecatepec, social cohesion would constitute a fix to the growing economic disparities in the city that exacerbates the poverty margins. Therefore, community involvement in the planification process of public transport would see opportunities for social mobility implemented into future transportation policies. Community engagement is imperative in the fight for political agency since members are the ones uplifting their social demands and protecting social agendas in the process. The Mexicable

has the possibility to not only facilitate the physical mobility of residents throughout the city, but it can also mobilize residents of Ecatepec out of their marginal status in society. Social cohesion is a relatively new concept in with many invisible barriers stemming from political and economic interests (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). Ultimately, this concept offers an interdisciplinary approach to transportation policies that yields to a smooth integration of infrastructure so long as it uplifts community voices.

The Mexican state and federal government sought to limit informal practices through the Mexicable in order to stimulate productivity for Mexican competitiveness proving that urban transportation policies were also limited by the narrow scope of neoliberal practices. As a consequence, residents are disconnected from the infrastructure and see it as a distraction from the real issues that informal practices temporarily relieve. The reality is that many older residents of shantytowns continue commuting using combis and bicycles over the Mexicable simply due to the extra costs encountered when transferring onto other modes of transportation. Urban studies scholars advise policy makers to consider pre-existing urban practices in areas set to receive new infrastructure (Miciukiewicz, K., & Vigar, G., 2012). The purpose is to encourage policy makers to study these urban practices in the event that they can regulate them or at the very least understand the circumstances behind their formation. This form is much more conducive towards long-term successes in the fight for improving the rights of residents in Ecatepec's shantytowns. Mexican policy makers and urbanites must collaborate on urban transport policies to generate practical solutions that are concerned with community needs. Social inclusion efforts can aid in the fight against second-class citizenship and, thus, provide opportunities for feasible urban mobility of marginalized groups in Ecatepec. Approaching transportation policies with multidisciplinary lenses will allow members of shantytowns to craft a space where discourse addresses contentious issues that the state and federal

governments evade. The Mexicable is the result of Mexican competitiveness which dominates the language of transportation policies and excludes community participation.

### **Conclusion**

The Mexicable represents the visions for economic prosperity in Mexico while also meaning to display the government's capabilities to procure the needs of its constituents with innovative infrastructure. With financial backing from the World Bank, development projects in Mexico were supposed to consist of forms that demonstrated the nation's inclusivity of marginalized sectors within its modernization. Mexico's competitiveness was bolstered by Peña Nieto's administration as the forefront of Mexico's modernization. It was reinforced on multiple levels from state and municipal development plans for Ecatepec all the way to political speeches given during the inauguration ceremony of the Mexicable. Yet, the infrastructure raises issues Mexico's competitiveness as a form of modernization full of limitations and a lack of political agency for members of marginalized communities.

The Mexicable begs the question of what other ways has the Mexican government appropriated the infrastructure in the quest to improve Mexico's competitiveness. In knowing that the shantytowns posed problems for the state and municipal governments, the infrastructure created a means for government intervention in informal areas of Ecatepec. They utilized the power of a regulated practice through public transport to dissuade other informal practices thereby organizing the community around the needs of the government rather than on the needs of its residents. The Mexicable imposes urban order in an area once deemed economically significant for the federal and state government. Therefore, public interests were never prioritized in the planification process of the infrastructure which is proven by the lack

community investments. The result is a new technologically advanced infrastructure in communities with, yet again, the same social concerns and needs for basic resources like water.

This essay leans on the importance of social cohesion in transportation policies as an example of Mexico's modernization that seeks its citizens as an investment. More importantly, residents of Ecatepec's shantytowns would benefit much more with opportunities focusing on community enrichment in addition to the advantages of the Mexicable. Urban scholars call upon policy makers to diversify their focuses within transportation policies. The simple reason is that through mediators like infrastructure, policy makers can create social mobility opportunities for members of underserved communities. While the Mexicable presents a form of social equity for marginalized communities, the possibilities of change from the infrastructure stop at the prospect of social advancements to eradicate poverty and need in Ecatepec. Moreover, multifaceted transportation policies can engender political agency which is vital to enable community members a say in ways to organize the urban spaces to better suit their needs. If this were to happen, then it can lead to improvements in the relationship with the government and residents of shantytowns. Moreover, this would increase the visibility of marginal members in society to then be able to procure their needs. Whereas now, the Mexicable is representative of political and economic interests, social cohesion in transportation policies forces policy makers to seriously consider social interests for once.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> The State of Mexico and the City of Mexico are two separate autonomous entities located in central Mexico. The City of Mexico, also known as Distrito Federal, almost entirely engulfed by the State of Mexico shares two-thirds of its borders with the state and the State of Morelos. Despite the official name of Ecatepec de Morelos, the city belongs to the State of Mexico.
- <sup>2</sup> Data Mexico. Ecatepec de Morelos. *Datamexico*. <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/ecatepec-de-morelos>
- <sup>3</sup> To see a few campaign posters announcing the MetroCCS visit: Kingsbury, Donald V. *Infrastructure and Insurrection: The Caracas Metro and the Right to the City in Venezuela*. no. 5, 2017, pp. 775–91.
- <sup>4</sup> Kingsbury cites that “autogestión” and “cogestión” or community projects were formed by community members to address the poor conditions of available resources, police brutality, and accessibility to the city (Kingsbury 2017, 781)
- <sup>5</sup> The goal of the MetroCCS was interpreted differently under the Bolivarian Revolution as citizen participation introduced an element of inclusivity into conversations of future visions (Kingsbury 2017).
- <sup>6</sup> The MetroCable was also cited as a mediator where people would be able to express their grievances (Kingsbury 2017, 783).
- <sup>7</sup> The Complexo do Alemão and Teleférico da Providência were initiatives led by the government of Brazil upon its selection as host of the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games in 2016 (Freire-medeiros & Name, 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> Irregular settlements were integrated as a key component during the planification of the Metrocable to guarantee the residents’ participation in the model of “social urbanism” (Brand and Dávila 2012).
- <sup>9</sup> Brand, P., Dávila, J. D. (2011). *Mobility innovation at the urban margins*. 4813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13604813.2011.609007>
- <sup>10</sup> Duhau, E. & Giglia, A. (Mayo-Agosto 2004). *Conflictos por el espacio y orden urbano*. *Estudios demográficos y ambientales*, n° 56: 257-288
- <sup>11</sup> Global policies set forth by the World Bank, a financial lending agency to developing countries.
- <sup>12</sup> Duhau, Emilio y Angela Giglia. (Mayo-Agosto 2004). «Conflictos por el espacio y orden urbano». *Estudios demográficos y ambientales*, n° 56. 257-288.
- <sup>13</sup> Marginalization, in socioeconomic terms, occurs when lower-class citizens suffer from market attempts to “commodify common life” leaving many alone to struggle with displacement, inequality, poverty, and dispossession (Harvey 2008).
- <sup>14</sup> Statistic gathered from the Gobierno del Estado de Mexico. n.d. “Concesión Para La Construcción, Explotación, Operación, Conservación y Mantenimiento Del Sistema de Transporte Teleférico ‘Mexicable Ecatepec’, Municipio de Ecatepec de Morelos, Estado de México.”
- <sup>15</sup> Giglia, A. (2012). *El habitar y la cultura. Perspectivas teóricas y de investigación*. Barcelona: UAM-Iztapalapa, Anthropos.
- <sup>16</sup> Data from Grafica 1 on page 12 in Pineda Chávez, A., Trujillo Muñoz, A. H., & Pérez Corona, J. (2016). *Proceso de urbanización y asentamientos irregulares en el municipio de Ecatepec de Morelos, 1970-2015*. *21º Encuentro Nacional Sobre Desarrollo Regional En México*. AMECIDER-ITM., 1–26. <http://ru.iiec.unam.mx/3266/>
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- <sup>18</sup> Sohn, H. 2014. “Contesting Neoliberal Urbanization.” : 1–13.
- <sup>19</sup> During the inauguration ceremony, the president of Mexico at the time stated in his speech that Mexico ranked 8<sup>th</sup> place. According to an inform on the website, City Population, with data taken from the census, Ecatepec is currently the 3<sup>rd</sup> largest major city with a population of 1,643,623 residents.
- <sup>20</sup> While the exact definition of competitiveness varies across organizations providing routine reports on this matter, the definition association with productivity does not come into question.

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- <sup>21</sup> Gobierno del Estado de Mexico. (2017). “PLAN DE DESARROLLO 2011-2017.” : 7–37. [https://edomex.gob.mx/sites/edomex.gob.mx/files/files/plandedesarrollo11-17\\_1.pdf](https://edomex.gob.mx/sites/edomex.gob.mx/files/files/plandedesarrollo11-17_1.pdf).
- <sup>22</sup> Professor of urban studies, Julio Dávila, speaks in depth about the uses both politically and socially of cable cars in Latin America in a BBC podcast entitled *Urban Cable Cars*. To listen please visit the following link: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3csv3hk#play>
- <sup>23</sup> For more details visit: World Bank. (2006). Mexico - First Programmatic Competitiveness Development Policy Loan (English). Washington, D.C. : *World Bank Group*. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/252441468281746504/Mexico-First-Programmatic-Competitiveness-Development-Policy-Loan>
- <sup>24</sup> The World Bank. (2013). Country Partnership Strategy for the United Mexican States for the Period *FY2014-2019*. World Bank, Washington, DC. © 2013 by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. 5–148. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/819661468051245938/pdf/834960WP0P12700Box0382091B00PUBLIC0.pdf>.
- <sup>25</sup> Samper, J., Shelby, J.A., & Behary, D. (2020 November) "The Paradox of Informal Settlements Revealed in an ATLAS of Informality: Findings from Mapping Growth in the Most Common Yet Unmapped Forms of Urbanization, Sustainability, MDPI, *Open Access Journal*, vol. 12(22), pages 1-25,
- <sup>26</sup> Salazar, C. E. (2012). Los ejidatarios en el control de la regularización [Ejidatarios in control of regularization]. In C. E. Salazar (Ed.), *Irregular: Suelo y mercado en América Latina* [Irregular: Land and market in Latin America] (pp. 265–305). México: El Colegio de México.
- <sup>27</sup> For more information regarding *Salinismo* read Centeno, Miguel A. (1994). *Democracy within Reason: Technocratic Revolution in Mexico*. Pennsylvania: *Pennsylvania State University Press*. 41
- <sup>28</sup> MacLeod. *Downsizing the State*. 99-100; Chua. *World on Fire*. 61-3
- <sup>29</sup> Valdes Ugalde, Francisco. (1996). *The Private Sector and the Political Regime Change in Mexico*. Gerardo Otero (ed) *Neoliberalism Revisited: Economic Restructuring and Mexico’s Political Future*, Boulder CO: *Westview*. 42
- <sup>30</sup> Middlebrook, K.J. (1995). *The Paradox of Revolution: Labor, the State and Authoritarianism in Mexico*. Baltimore, MD: *John Hopkins University Press*. 223-224
- <sup>31</sup> Estrada, S. (2018). Las Consecuencias del Nuevo Modelo Educativo. *La Izquierda Diario*
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- <sup>34</sup> Bernett, V. (2017, January 3). Fascinación y escepticismo para un teleférico en las afueras de Ciudad de México. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2017/01/03/espanol/america-latina/fascinacion-y-escepticismo-para-un-teleferico-en-las-afueras-de-ciudad-de-mexico.html>
- <sup>35</sup> Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social. (2015). *Poverty and Social Indicators 2010-2015*. <https://datamexico.org/en/profile/geo/ecatepec-de-morelos>