In December of 1955, Colonia Proletaria Gabriel Ramos Millán—henceforth Ramos Millán—celebrated its 5th anniversary. The weeklong festivities were organized by Ramos Millán’s official resident association; those invited included the president of Mexico, Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, the regent of Mexico City, Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, representatives from the PRI, and officials from the municipal government. The celebrations included horseraces, cockfights, a soccer match, singing competitions, fireworks, and a performance by the famous comedian Jesús Martínez, “Palillo.” These snippets of information can be extracted from the flyer reproduced below. It is unlikely that everyone attended the event, particularly since newspapers did not record it, but the mere existence of this flyer—sponsored by Corona, its logo familiar then as now—evidences the resources at the disposal of Colonia Ramos Millán. The names of representatives Julio Ramírez and Francisco Aguirre Alegría signal the role that the PRI played in obtaining urban services for neighborhoods such as Ramos Millán (the party logo is only partially visible at the top of the image). More noteworthy are the names of Rafael Suárez Ocaña and Carlos Zapata Vela, the current and former heads of the Oficina de Colonias, the municipal office tasked with managing colonias proletarias.
This image bears testament to a decade of dramatic and unscripted change. While it is possible that the ‘traditional’ images of charros and jarocho dancers illustrate the crafting of a nationalist imagery from within a modern and cosmopolitan city, it is also true that in 1955 Ramos Millán did not have a system of streets, sidewalks, and houses
that we associate with modern cities.\textsuperscript{1} And still, its story as an urban settlement was to that point extremely successful, if ambivalent and contested. December of 1955 also witnessed a fraught election of the colonia’s new president. Such cleavages seem normal in a settlement growing at such a speed: created from scratch, Ramos Millán’s population skyrocketed from zero to 70,000 in five years, a number that made it the largest neighborhood in Mexico City. As dizzying as the numbers are, they were increasingly common. The Oficina de Colonias registered 304 colonias in 1955, 38 of which had more than 1,000 thousands lots, hence population that could be close to 10,000.\textsuperscript{2}

As explained in previous chapters, colonias proletarias drove most of Mexico City’s growth during the forties. These settlements occupied a liminal space between formality and informality, between top down government oversight and bottom up organizing by non-government agents. Most of the time, the Departamento del Distrito Federal (DDF, or municipal government, both of which I will use throughout the chapter) recognized colonias proletarias and started the distribution of urban services once developers and settlers had taken possession and distributed lots. This sequence highlights the fact that the municipal government did not control urban growth but attempted to catch up with it and regulate it.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{1}For the crafting of traditional national stereotypes from the locus of Mexico City, see Ricardo Pérez Montfort, \textit{Juntos y medio revueltos: la ciudad de México durante el sexenio del General Cárdenas y otros.}}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{2}Exact figures for the population of colonias are hard to determine because census results are segmented by delegación, but these numbers offer a start. Iztacalco, the delegación where Ramos Millán is located, increased its population from 11,212 in 1940, to 33,945 in 1950, to an astonishing 198,204 in 1960. A census of colonias proletarias conducted by the Oficina de Colonias around 1955 informs that Ramos Millán was, with 5,907, the colonia with the largest number of lots in Mexico City. Since residents further subdivided, rented, and sold their lots, the figure of 70,000 noted in the register is by no means implausible. “Relación de colonias proletarias.” AHCM-DDF-SG-323. In 1952 José Bonilla Pérez calculated 195 colonias proletarias in Mexico City, 14 of which numbered more than 10,000 residents. AHCM-DDF-OP-658-1.}
Unlike most colonias proletarias, Ramos Millán was a deliberate state project and not a direct response to pressures from landless families, greedy developers, and political brokers. Colonia Ramos Millán’s population and size are, then, less noteworthy than the fact that the municipal government used it as a testing site and model for a state-led, popular urbanization. The DDF bought the land where Ramos Millán was located with the explicit goal of establishing a colonia proletaria. Afterwards, it relocated there the first residents of the colonia, who were previously living in the banks of River San Joaquin, at the other end of the city. When this first cohort of residents arrived in December of 1950, Ramos Millán still was not urbanized, but it was placed on a “fast track” for provision of public services. It took over half a decade for Public Works to build roads, pipelines, and schools in a piecemeal fashion, but such changes would have been unthinkable a few years earlier, when canals and fields crossed the area.

The history of Ramos Millán illustrates both an array of state projects and aspirations as well as the obstacles faced by such projects and the shortsightedness of those aspirations. At least four projects can be identified in a little over a decade. First, during the late 1930s, the Ministry of Agriculture divided Ramos Millán and distributed it among neighboring peasant communities who requested ejido lands. Then, in the early Forties, the DDF decreed the area an industrial zone. Afterwards, the DDF bought the land, and considered building a housing project designed by Mario Pani, Mexico’s most important modernist architect. The fact that none of these plans materialized bears witness to the gulf between state imaginings—of agriculture, industry, and housing—and local realities: far from becoming a successful ejido, or an industrial powerhouse, or a modernist housing project, Ramos Millán became a colonia proletaria. Measured against
the agrarian, industrial, and modernist aspirations of the 1930s and 1940s Ramos Millán failed. Later, when social scientists in the 1960s analyzed places like it they also deemed them an urban failure, an aberration of the modernization to which they aspired. However, when analyzed from the perspective of the municipal offices that managed it, Ramos Millán appears a more successful urban experiment. Despite lacking a blueprint it somehow worked; in this sense, it was not exceptional but representative of the successful municipal management of popular urbanization.

Changes in the Land

The land of Iztacalco, the delegación where Ramos Millán was founded, experienced dramatic changes over the first half of the twentieth century. The general process could be summarized as one of urbanization, but this concept obscures a series of competing ideas of the city vis-à-vis the countryside, agriculture, industry, and modernization. The 1929 Atlas General del Distrito Federal described Iztacalco as an area of “little historical importance,” a dismissive view that glossed over this community’s long history, which stretched all the way back to fourteenth century. This description, however, reflected the condition of Iztacalco at the start of the twentieth century. During the 1930s, Iztacalco was (and remains) the smallest delegación of the Federal District both in area and population, its four thousand inhabitants concentrated in the small towns of Ixtacalco— the ancient cabecera of the area—and Santa Anita. Both towns were located on the

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3Spelling for Iztacalco changed over the past century; it used to be Ixtacalco but Iztacalco has replaced it. In this chapter I use the contemporary usage, Iztacalco, and write Ixtacalco when referring to the town with the same name within the delegación (e.g. Ixtacalco was the largest town in Iztacalco).

western fringe of the delegación, closer to Mexico City; the ranches, paddocks, and haciendas that constituted its remaining area were left unnamed by the 1929 *Atlas*, which also failed to include them in its map. In fact, the whole eastern half of Iztacalco was omitted from the map, confirming the little importance that the city government gave to the area.

This brief description failed to acknowledge the transformations that Iztacalco had experienced over the Porfirian period. The towns of Ixtacalco and Santa Anita, for example, were communicated with Mexico City by a tramway line. They lacked water and sewage services but were interconnected by roads and illuminated with electrical lampposts. Bordering Santa Anita to the east lay the Rancho de la Viga, which would later become Colonia Proletaria Independencia, and which already bore signs of urbanization in the shape of a partial grid. Such omissions in an official publication that sought to offer encyclopedic cataloguing (the *Atlas*, for example, enumerated the number of buildings in each delegación) reveal the government’s limited recognition of the processes and actors that were transforming the Federal District. Under the radar of the state purview a quiet demographic explosion was taking place, fuelled by land developers who were fractioning and urbanizing the hinterland of Mexico City.

Iztacalco was an amphibian and essentially agrarian area, crisscrossed by canals and rivers and covered for the most part by floating gardens or chinampas where cereals, alfalfa, and flowers were grown. During the colonial period and the nineteenth century these products were boated to Mexico City through the Canal de la Viga, which ran all the way from Chalco to the Merced, Mexico City’s central market. But this aquatic universe was changing fast, as rivers, canals, and lakes suffered from a long and secular
process of desiccation. When the Sanitation Council closed the Canal de la Viga in 1915 its halycon days were clearly behind, as its omission from the *Atlas General* insinuates. Instead, tramway lines communicated Iztacalco with Mexico City, and producers relied on trucks to transport their produce to the capital.

Porfirian and post-Revolutionary governments regarded bodies of water as health hazards and obstacles to progress. Engineers, health officials, and urban planners drained lakes and piped canals in order to create a sanitary and modern urban environment and to accomplish the “conquest of water.” Today, nostalgic voices lament the disappearance of the chinampas, canals, and rivers that characterized the southeast of the Federal District (the delegaciones of Iztacalco, Ixtapalapa, and Xochimilco), but the transformation of this environment into an urban one was seen at the time as the ineluctable face of progress. A social worker investigating disease in the area during the 1940s described the change in an impassioned, mater-of-fact manner:

> El avance de la cultura y las necesidades del hombre han transformado al pueblo y a sus habitantes y así tenemos que Santa Anita se ha transformado en una colonia, las chinampas han desaparecido y como se carece de urbanización se van ocupando los antiguos canales como vías de comunicación.⁶

But the “conquest of water” did not pave the way towards the urban modernization aspired by liberal reformers. “Whatever a city in the North Atlantic economy might be,” wrote Daniel Rodgers, “it was everywhere a great, churning, legally sustained market in land and shelter.” This is only partially true for Mexico City, whose land and housing markets were undoubtedly great and churning, but also complex,

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segmented, and far from legally sustained. When seen through the prism of its legal conflicts over land tenure, use, and ownership, the story of Iztacalco (and colonias such as Ramos Millán) becomes extremely inchoate. Several government offices and private actors surveyed the land, divided and distributed it, regulated its zoning, and passed sentences regarding its ownership. The outcome of these actions was not the legibility that James Scott identified as the driving goal of state action over territory but its opposite—confusion. In retrospect, resorting to concepts such as state or market as either agents of change or historical outcomes therefore makes little sense when explaining the emergence of Mexico City’s largest colonia proletaria in an area such as Iztacalco.

The land where Colonia Ramos Millán was founded in December of 1950 belonged to the ranches of Tlacotal and Bramaderos, an assortment of paddocks and fields divided by several canals and ditches. The soil in the area was poor, saline, and unfit for agriculture, according to a report prepared by the Federal District’s Comisión Agraria Mixta. During the 1930s, Tlacotal and Bramaderos lay surrounded by agrarian patches and human settlements that attested to the uneven processes of urbanization in this area and are represented in the agrarian blueprint reproduced below. A branch of Mexico City’s main sewage line—the Gran Canal del Desagüe—bordered Tlacotal and Bramaderos northern limits, and past this canal and the railroad line running parallel to it lay Colonia Independencia, fractioned late in the 1930s but only bearing a few houses in 1945, as attested by aerial photographs taken this year. Southwards, Tlacotal and Bramaderos were encircled by the ejido lands of Ixtacalco. A branch of the Churubusco

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River delimitated the ranches’ eastern side, and further east were the Colonia Agrícola Oriental and the Colonia Federal, two of the largest and earliest urban settlements in the area. These settlements concerned public officials because their distance from the city rendered the provision of urban services very expensive. Unlike them, Tlacotal and Bramaderos was still uninhabited; its only physical structures were the old hacienda building and a few barns, water tanks, pumps, and a warehouse.

According to Andrés Lira, who mentions “Tlacotal and Bramaderas” in passing, the ranch was purchased by the town of Ixtalcalco in 1856, following the proclamation of

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11Cristina Montaño, La tierra de Ixtapalapa: luchas sociales desde las chinampas hasta la transformación urbana (Mexico City: UAM, 1984). On the early settlement in Agrícola Oriental see the report prepared by engineer Romo, “Rindiendo informe de los trabajos efectuados en el poblado de Ixtacalco,” AGA-Ixtacalco-25-904-5 [DSC04332]. According to Claudia C. Zamorano, Colonia Federal was in fact a 1920s project for public housing that was not built until the 1950s. Vivienda méxico posrevolucionario: apropiaciones de una utopia urbana (Mexico City: CIESAS, 2013).
the Lerdo Law. Lira mentions this purchase as an example of a community that bought its land—using some of its most reputed members as proxies—in order to reinforce its corporate control over it, defeating the law’s purpose.\textsuperscript{12} What happened later is beyond the pale of this chapter, suffice it to record that in 1923 the estate belonged to Ángel García Lascurain, who divided it with his wife Luz Calderón de García Lascurain. Upon his death, in 1934, she inherited the whole estate, which she divided and sold.\textsuperscript{13} The partitions and sales of the landholding hint at the practice, common after the passing of the 1917 Constitution, of dividing land in order to prevent its expropriation and distribution among landless pueblos.\textsuperscript{14} But this defensive tactic proved ineffectual in Tlacotal and Bramaderos, as the legal battles with a group of neighboring pueblos would show.

Luz Calderón’s estate came under siege by several pueblos requesting land grants. Ixtacalco was the first of them, requesting an ejido restitution in 1918. As other neighboring pueblos and communities followed suit, the Agrarian Commission proposed that Tlacotal and Bramadero could be divided between several of them. In the end, the land was divided between four communities: Ixtacalco, which received the largest grant (69 hectares), and Mexicaltzingo, Colonia Independencia, and San Juanico Mextipa, which were awarded smaller extensions.\textsuperscript{15}

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\textsuperscript{12} Andrés Lira, \textit{Comunidades indígenas frente a la ciudad de México: Tenochtitlán y Tlatelolco, sus pueblos y barrios, 1812-1919} (Mexico City: El Colegio de México-El Colegio de Michoacán, 1983), 254.

\textsuperscript{13}[DSC04331]. A different report from the Departamento Agrario states that the estate was divided in 1924 [DSC04397].


\textsuperscript{15}“Se informa sobre la situación legal de los poblado de Colonia Independencia, Ixtacalco, San Juanico Mextipa, y Mexicaltzingo,” April 3, 1945. AGA-Ixtacalco-23-910-5 [DSC04403]. In December 1935 these lands were awarded to the aforementioned communities [DSC04397]. In April of 1938 a presidential decree granted the rest of Tlacotal and Bramaderos to members of the community of Ixtacalco [DSC04401]. This resolution settles the matter for the moment.
In 1941, Luz García Calderón filed an amparo suit against the expropriation of her land. The judge ruled in her favor, granting an amparo on March 1942. Since Tlacotal and Bramaderos continued to be under possession of the ejidatorios, on December 1944 the judge sentenced that they be returned to Calderón. The ejidatorios counterattacked and, on January 15, 1945, requested a restitution from the local Agrarian Commission. The Commission approved the restitution, which was backed up by a decree signed by the Regent of the DDF on April 25, 1945.¹⁶

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Such a bundle of legal claims, counterclaims, and sentences was far from unusual. Land was expropriated to grant lands to communities but the original owners requested amparos that they usually won. However, more often than not, ejidatorios stayed in the land. These confrontations have sometimes been explained in clear-cut ways, for instance, as conflicts between peasant communities and large landholders, or between agrarian communities and the national government, pushing for an industrialization agenda. But these narratives are challenged by the many different legal resolutions passed by different government bodies with apparently little consequence.

For example, as we have seen, on April 1945 the regent of the DDF signed a decree that returned to the pueblo of Ixtacalco its lands. However, before the passing of this decree favoring the pueblo, a presidential decree had declared “Tlacotal and other contiguous ranches” as an industrial area. This decree was drafted by the municipal Public Works, and clearly in line with the modernizing vision of this office; it also ordered that industrial establishments in the area would have to follow Mexico City’s planning regulations and building codes. In less than six months, then, the area was declared industrial and afterwards restored as land grants to the community of Ixtacalco.

During the 1940s Public Works designated several industrial zones for Mexico City as part of a larger national industrializing drive. Close to the city but sufficiently distanced from its more exclusive areas, Ixtacalco seemed an ideal location so the DDF

18 *Diario Oficial*, “Decreto que declara zona industrial la comprendida al oriente de la ciudad de México, dentro de la Delegación de Ixtacalco, D.F.,” November 24, 1944. This decree was sent to the President by Public Works, as seen in “Relación de asuntos que hoy entregó la Dirección General de Obras Públicas a la Jefatura del Departamento para el acuerdo presidencial de esta fecha [October 6, 1944].” AHCM-DDF-OP-248-1.
considered several projects submitted by industrialists. Little trace of these projects remains. In September of 1942, architect Enrique Guerrero proposed an “industrial fractioning in the ranch of Tlacotal.” Mexico City’s municipal archive holds an unsigned and undated blueprint that could be Guerrero’s; its large lots had 240,000 square meters, and it took advantage of the railroad lines that ran north of Tlacotal.

On March 9, 1945, following the municipal industrialization decree but before the federal decree that restored the land to the ejidatarios, an industrial association bought Tlacotal and Bramadero. In the dispute between the Sociedad de Fraccionamientos Industriales and the pueblos that followed the purchase, the representative of the industrialists argued that the decree of November of 1944 “incorporated Tlacotal and Bramaderos into Mexico City” and represented a “frank invitation from the government to the entrepreneurs of the country to […] industrialize the area.” He claimed that Public Works had approved the industrial fractioning proposed by his clients and maintained that the 1944 industrialization decree provided legal certainty to their purchase and project. A final presidential decree attempted to settle the matter for good. Published on January 31, 1946, this decree stated that the restitutions of Ixtacalco, San Juanico Nextipac, Mexicaltzingo, and Colonia Independencia were not procedentes. This decree marked the end of any further claims from pueblos.

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19 AHCM-DDF-OP-161-1.
20 “Fraccionamiento Tlacotal.” AHCM. Planoteca-Planos y Proyectos. 78-4.
21 “Que por decreto presidencial se declaró zona industrial la comprendida al Oriente de la Ciudad de México, dentro de la Delegación de Ixtacalco, formada por los terrenos del rancho “Tlacotal y Bramaderos”… Que constituyendo el decreto de referencia una franca invitación por parte del Gobierno a los hombres de empresa para contribuir a la industrialización…” “Dictamen que presenta la consultoria #4, a cargo del C. Ing. Jesús Molina Urquidez, en el expediente de restitución de ejidos al poblado de Ixtacalco, delegación de Ixtacalco, del Distrito Federal.” AGA. Ixtacalco. 24-910-15.
22 At least the paper trail at the agrarian archive is lost here. In 1951, the ejidatarios received new lands elsewhere. “Ejidatarios que se muestran,” El Universal, March 6, 1951.
What happened to the land during these years is not certain. The most significant feature from a set of aerial photographs taken by the Compañía Mexicana de Aerofotografía in 1945 is the absence of urban settlements, clearly visible in neighboring lots. Their proximity to Mexico City made Tlacotal and Bramaderos extremely attractive, particularly when one considers that little empty land was left in the area. The neighboring Colonia Agrícola Oriental, for example, was in the midst of a process of fast urbanization, despite the fact that agrarian grants were being distributed there. Seizing the opportunity, the DDF bought the land from the Compañía de Fraccionamientos Industriales de México in May of 1948 with the explicit goal of creating a colonia proletaria.

**Colonia proletaria Gabriel Ramos Millán**

The decision to purchase land in order to develop popular housing demonstrates the growing involvement of the DDF in fixing Mexico City’s *problema de la vivienda*—an issue that had transformed in scale and character during the 1940s. Traditionally, this problem consisted of insufficient units for rent in Mexico City, particularly its central neighborhoods where the urban poor lived in crowded tenements. Since peripheral delegaciones were relatively depopulated, housing shortages were mainly a problem of the central city. However, as Mexico City’s population rose, some of its poorer families moved to the northern and eastern delegaciones such as Azcapotzalco, Gustavo A.

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23. The photographs only reveal a road, some canals, and remains of the hacienda. [Quote: AGN].
24. The total value of the 1,300,000 square meters was $4,330,725.75 ($3.25 per square meter), which the government planned to recover after selling the land to proletarian families in need “Libro de Registro de Acuerdos y Decretos Presidenciales años 1941-1950.” DDF-OP-247-2. The details of the sale, which included a permute between the DDF and the Sociedad de Fraccionamientos Industriales can be read at DDF-OP-248-2.
Madero, Iztacalco, and Ixtapalapa, while the wealthier groups of the city moved south and west, where developers built modern middle and high-class neighborhoods. The project of creating a colonia proletaria in Iztacalco followed these trends and attempted to meet the increasing need for cheap housing. But the supply of housing offered by the government could not match the demand, so the DDF faced the challenge of distributing a limited number of lots to an overwhelming number of people.

In an interview given to *El Universal* in May 1949, regent Fernando Casas Alemán announced that his government had acquired a 1.5 million square meters terrain that it would sell to families in need.25 During the previous decade, the most important government policy regarding popular housing had been the expropriation of land that organized settlers had bought from illegal fractioners.26 In order to solve the ensuing legal conflict the government intervened politically, expropriated the land, and then distributed it to its settlers, who gained a path to ownership by accepting the government’s political and financial conditions. Casas Alemán’s plan for Ramos Millán was more assertive: rather than sanctioning irregular possession through expropriation, it sought to build a colonia proletaria from scratch—purchasing the land, dividing it, providing it with urban services, and, finally, building houses.

This interview illustrates Casas Alemán’s plan for creating colonias proletarias as well as the political capital that he expected to gain. It exemplifies the Regent’s *glissement à gauche* at a time when he meditated a run for presidency (a position for which he was briefly considered the frontrunner) with the support of associations of poor inhabitants.

As shown in Chapter 2, Casas Alemán was also pushing for a more progressive planning law that would make of the creation of colonias proletarias a government duty. At the time, the Mexican political system was still unstable, election years were rife with uncertainty and political conflict. In the end, Casas Alemán would lose the candidacy of the PRI to Adolfo Ruiz Cortines. And his successor as regent, Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, would abort these progressive measures and pass instead a stricter law that he used to limit Mexico City’s expansion.

*El Universal* responded to Casas Alemán in an editorial that voiced the more conservative interests and positions that Uruchurtu would come to represent. *El Universal* deplored the fact that the DDF would allocate public resources to provide squatters with urbanized lots. The editorial also asked who would pay for the houses in Ramos Millán. If the DDF was incapable of doing so, which seemed obvious, the burden would fall upon the squatters themselves, who would certainly build unhygienic shacks. Despite such financial considerations, *El Universal* did not deem housing an economic problem, but pointed out to the “administrative, sanitary, and cultural” aspects of urbanization that would remain unresolved by Casas Alemán’s project.

In his 1949 newspaper interview, Casas Alemán specifically mentioned a group of families living on the banks of the San Joaquín River as the prospective residents of the still unnamed colonia proletaria. The move from San Joaquín to Iztacalco had been

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27 Casas Alemán was widely expected to gained the presidential nomination from the PRI. Sánchez Mejorada, *Rezagos de la modernidad*, 72, 82; Manuel Perló, “Política y vivienda en México, 1910-1952;” Aaron W. Navarro, *Political intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1954* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 2010).


considered by the DDF for at least a year, as evidenced by a petition from early 1949
made by a group of families living in the banks of the river. The availability of lands in
Iztacalco triggered dozens of similar petitions, many of which came from people living in
areas threatened by public works. Unsurprisingly, the modernization of the city during
the presidency of Miguel Alemán disrupted the lives of thousands of its poor residents.
Therefore, the creation of colonias proletarias in the periphery of the city represented the
flipside of the transformation of areas such as Atlampa—an industrial neighborhood
where the housing unit of Tlatelolco would eventually be built—or the banks of rivers
piped in order for the capital to continue its expansion. For the DDF, Ramos Millán
represented an escape valve where the displaced could be relocated.

Just as the purchase of Tlacotal and Bramadero created a housing opportunity for
thousands of families in need, the availability of municipal land generated prospects for
several agents close to the government. At this point, the story of Ramos Millán intersects
with that of Mexico’s urban planners and architects described earlier in this dissertation.
In September 1949, Mario Pani presented to the Planning Commission a housing project
for Tlacotal and Bramadero. The project was signed by Pani and architect José Luis
Cuevas, both heads of the Taller de Urbanismo del Banco Internacional Inmobliario. Pani
was at the time Technical Advisor of Iztacalco, one of the planning sections in which
Mexico City had been divided in order to integrate a Master Plan. Therefore, his

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31 In February of 1949 the Comité Ejecutivo de la Unión de Colonos de la Zona Federal del Río San Joaquín requested to the president credit facilities and government aid with a prospective move. “Relación que manifiesta los puntos petitorios de los colonos de la zona federal del Río San Joaquín en Tacuba Distrito Federal, que se presentan el C. Presidente de la República para su resolución,” February 29, 1949. AGN-MAV-418.2/23.
32 This disruption is mentioned obliquely in the yearly Memorias of the period. See, for instance, Resúmenes de actividades, periodo Miguel Alemán Váldez 1948.
33 AGN-CL. [Confirm exact date].
engagement with the project was dual, both as its author and as the government advisor in charge of the area where it was located.

Pani’s project was swiftly approved by the Planning Commission and newspapers reported on its prospective construction, but the “Unidad de Vivienda Tlacotal and Bramadero” was never built.\(^{34}\) Still, the project offers a glimpse at the architectural, urban, and political imagination of period. At the time, Pani was contemplating different urban solutions for the challenge of overcoming the eighteenth-century city and developing a metropolis for “automobile era.”\(^{35}\) Eventually, Pani would identify two solutions for fulfilling this aspiration. Firstly, he proposed tearing down decaying tenements and replacing them with modern housing projects; this strategy, which he called “building city within the city” (*hacer ciudad dentro de la ciudad*), is best exemplified by his 1964 project of Nonoalco-Tlatelolco. The second solution Pani described as “building city outside of the city” (*hacer ciudad fuera de la ciudad*), an effort that he identified with the project of Ciudad Satélite.\(^{36}\)

Pani sometimes referred to his housing projects as urban cells, autonomous units connected by highways that together integrated a modern metropolis.\(^{37}\) Beginning in 1949, he designed several versions of these urban cells. Between 1949 and 1950 Pani


\(^{37}\)Entrevista realizada a Mario Pani por Graciela de Garay, el día 11 de julio de 1990 en la Ciudad de México. Archivo de la Palabra del Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora.
designed the Unidad Habitacional Presidente Alemán and the Unidad Modelo 9, as well as several unidades vecinales that were never built, among them Tlacotal and Bramadero. Unidad Habitacional Presidente Alemán is well known as Mexico’s first mutifamiliar; in this project, Pani famously opted for constructing high-rises in order gain the larger part of the lot for communal spaces such as gardens and a daycare center. Similarly, El Universal described the Tlacotal and Bramadero project as an “essay” that would include public spaces with sports fields, schools, market, daycare center, and churches. However, it did not feature the high-rises and the same ratio between construction and green spaces. The project was composed of 21 groupings, each with a number of houses ranging from 144 to 576. Each of the 21 groupings is further divided in 6 to 20 lots—each of which would have between 20 and 30 houses. The residents would pay for their lot, their house, and services such as water and electricity through a monthly payment below market rates.

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38 The rest of the unidades vecinales were Centinela, Guadalajara, Avante, Hogar y Seguridad, and Ejército Mexicano, all of them in collaboration with José Luis Cuevas and Domingo García Ramos. List in Louise Noelle, comp., Mario Pani (UNAM-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Mexico City: 2008), 385. Mario Pani’s ideas for unidades vecinales and, in general, the growth of Mexico City can be found in Mario Pani, “Mexico: un problema, una solución,” Arquitectura/México 60(1957):198-226. See also Enrique Alanís de Anda, Vivienda colectiva de la modernidad en México.


40 Ibid. “Con esto se pretende hacer un ensayo para resolver los grandes problemas que agobian a la Metrópoli en el problema de la habitación popular.”
Unlike the Unidad Habitacional Presidente Alemán, Tlacotal and Bramaderos was a municipal project that lacked federal patronage. The DDF purchased the land and helped the new residents relocate to Ramos Millán, but its support ended here. Whereas Unidad Habitacional Presidente Alemán (as Nonoalco-Tlatelolco, Pani’s largest project) was built with a bureaucrat middle-class in mind and financed by federal credit institutions, Tlacotal and Bramadero was envisioned for families with less resources. This was partly by design and partly the result of economic, social, and ecological forces beyond government control. Since the wealthier groups had moved towards the southwest, the southeast quadrant of Mexico City became, almost by default, a low-income residential zone.
As we saw earlier, ejido and communal lands covered large extensions of this area. For Pani, this situation represented an absurdity but also a wonderful planning opportunity. Ejido lands became increasingly incongruous as the metropolitan area expanded; they were also unjust, because peasants benefited from the increase in the land value driven by urbanization, becoming “small capitalistic multimillionaires.”41 Pani considered that since ejido lands were outside of the land market the government could acquire them at a fair prize for their owners but cheap enough for them to be sold to poor families. The direct acquisition of ejido lands by the government and its subsequent sale to poor families would cut out the middlemen—the developers who bought land from peasants, divided and sold it, thus pushing for the anarchic development of the city. As a result of this intervention, the municipal government would be able to organize an urban, architectural, and financial deal that was beneficial for poor families and conducive to the harmonious development of Mexico City.42 In Pani’s grand vision, twenty-one of the resulting unidades vecinales would transform the southeast of the city from an agrarian into a popular housing area.43

The southeast quadrant of the city did become a low-income residential area but the process was not rationally driven by the state. Instead of becoming a barrier for urbanization, as Pani feared, ejido lands produced different patterns of urbanization, rich in unintended consequences. Over the 1920s and 1930s, the threat of expropriation by the federal government pushed several large landholders to fraction and sell their land before

42 Ibid.
it was distributed among agrarian communities. Themselves the outcome of expropriation, ejido lands were also expropriated in order to create residential and industrial zones. Finally, agrarian communities circumvented legal prohibitions and divided and sold their land to urban residents.  

In November 1952, Pani collaborated with José Bonilla Méndez in devising a plan for Mexico’s colonias proletarias. Although their efforts bore little reward, they exemplify how experts understood the relationship between low-income housing, city zoning, and Mexico City’s complex patchwork of land tenure regimes. Pani and Bonilla Méndez counted 195 colonias proletarias where 700,000 people lived (the area added to 2,500 hectares, approximately 20% of the city); instead of having colonias proletarias haphazardly mushroom across the Federal District, they proposed locating them in the southeast area, where the existence of ejidos had created a land reserve outside of the market. Locating in a single area of the city all colonias proletarias had been an aspiration of the DDF since the early 1940s, but the idea was doomed to failure because most proletarias were not planned by the government but founded by developers and granted official recognition ex post facto. Nonetheless, the ambition of gathering together all colonias proletarias together exemplifies the reading of extremely complex political, economic, and legal realities into simple categories of analysis, such as zoning. In the imagination of planners of the period, Mexico City’s southeast quadrant would be immediately legible as a “low-income” housing zone.

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44Ann Varley, “¿Propiedad de la revolución? Los ejidos en el crecimiento de la ciudad de México,” Revista Interamericana de Planificación, 22, 87-88 (1989); Ma. Soledad Cruz Rodríguez, Propiedad, poblamiento y periferia rural en la zona metropolitana de la ciudad de México; Antonio Azuela; Marta Schteingart. [More references needed].
The challenge of planning urban growth was huge, but the DDF also faced the more prosaic political challenge of distributing a finite number of lots in Ramos Millán among a seemingly endless number of families. In December of 1950, after more than two years of negotiations, the Oficina de Colonias began moving families from the San Joaquín River to Ramos Millán, at the other end of the city, fourteen kilometers away. On December 17, 1950, the first 120 families were moved. Many others followed, aided by several government offices. The army helped in bringing down the residents’ old shacks and setting the tents where they would initially live. The DDF provided trucks for transportation and Carlos Zapata Vela, head of the Oficina de Colonias, supervised the move, along with representatives from the PRI.

It was around this time when Tlacotal and Bramadero officially became Colonia Proletaria Ramos Millán. I have found no official explanation for this name change but it obviously honored General Gabriel Ramos Millán, who died in a plane accident in September of 1949 and was a close friend of president Miguel Alemán. The name is rich in ironies since, along with his well-known history as Mexico’s “Apostle of Maíz” Ramos Millán was also a real-estate developer in the 1930s, along with Miguel Alemán and Ezequiel Padilla (both of whom, ironically, would compete for the PRI nomination in 1946). The partnership was not lacking in ambition. Years later, Alemán recalled that Ramos Millán bragged about not being “afraid of six-digit [businesses].” Polanco, their most important enterprise, became one of Mexico City’s wealthiest neighborhoods. Colonia Ramos Millán would end up becoming a slightly different kind of business.

49. Memorias Miguel Alemán Valdés. [Fundación Miguel Alemán, revise citation].
The Mayo Brothers captured the move to Ramos Millán in a series of stunning photographs.\(^5\) These pictures were used by the government to promote its actions, as the laudatory content and tone of the newspaper articles that featured them makes clear: “The ‘Lost City’ is Gone and its Inhabitants have a New Home;” “Installment of 120 proletarian families in Tlacotal.” The privileged access enjoyed by the photographers also attests to the fact that the DDF used the transfer to Ramos Millán to publicize its efforts in fixing the city’s housing problem.

Figure 2 and 3. Carlos Zapata Vela in River San Joaquín, c. December 1950; Tlacotal and Bramadero, c. early 1950. AGN. Fondo Hermanos Mayo.

But more than political propaganda is at play here. The dozens of photographs taken by the Mayo Brothers that remained unpublished and are kept at the Archivo

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\(^5\)The Mayo fled from Spain after the Civil War and reached Mexico in 1939, where they worked as freelance photojournalists. Carlos Monsiváis has written an illuminating essay on their work and times. “Los hermanos Mayo: las variedades de la experiencia histórica,” in Maravillas que son, sombras que fueron: la fotografía en México (Mexico City: CONACULTA, ERA, Museo del Estanquillo, 2012).
General de la Nación document the enormous feat that the move represented and provide a feeling of how it was experienced by its participants. Carlos Monsiváís wrote that the Mayo captured “the triumphalist surface of [the 1940s] society as well as its obverse: the tragedy of social invisibility, the overflow of the marginal in cities that ceaselessly grew.”51 Their photographs offer a feeling of what it was to build a city from scratch, and of how such a place would look like. Families gathered their belongings—suitcases, chairs, tables, cabinets, a rocking horse, as well as dogs, pigs, birds—and placed them in trucks, along with wooden planks and metal plates that would be crucial for building a new home. Tlacotal and Bramadero offer an eerie sensation, away from roads, walls, light posts or any sign of urbanization. No traces of Mexico City are visible.

51 Carlos Monsiváís, “Los hermanos Mayo: las variedades de la experiencia histórica,” 92. “Y los Mayo captan la superficie triunfalista de la sociedad y su complemento: las tragedias de la invisibilidad social, el desbordamiento de lo marginal en las ciudades que crecen sin término.”
It is easy to forget how much of Mexico City resembled a refugee camp over the 1940s and early 1950s, a period when its growth in extension outpaced its population increase. Perhaps the most famous painting of Mexico City from these years, Juan O’Gorman’s “Paisaje de la ciudad de México,” captures a highly legible modern city, with its workers, street traffic, effervescent activity, and rapid urban transformation as viewed from the rooftop of the Monumento a la Revolución. “Paisaje de la ciudad de México” received the first-prize in a competition organized by the DDF and the newspaper Excelsior under the heading of “Mexico City as Interpreted by its Artists.” The second-prize winner, “La tolvanera,” by Guillermo Meza, is not as iconic as O’Gorman’s painting, probably because in this painting the city and its markers are strikingly absent. Meza portrayed a group of children playing around a section of a huge water pipe amidst a dusty and barren landscape. Geographical markers are scant, but the painting was probably set east of the city, where neighborhoods such as Ramos Millán were increasingly hit by sandstorms or tolvaneras. Born close by, in Iztapalapa, Meza had an intimate knowledge of the poorer margins of Mexico City neighboring Lake Texcoco, which he depicted throughout his work. In paintings such as “La Tolvanera,” “Las Lavanderas,” or “Alrededores de la ciudad,” Mexico City is seen from afar, from the perspective of the garbage pickers or washerwomen who were part of the urban economy but occupied a liminal space between the city and its hinterland. Meza’s

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paintings juxtapose bucolic objects such as magueys with signs of a poor and still incomplete urbanization like low cardboard houses and open sewers.\textsuperscript{54}

This is what the “ceaseless growth of the marginal” looked like. The challenge that living in a place such as Ramos Millán represented, at least during the initial years of settlement, was not dealing with what early twentieth-century sociologists thought of as the hardships of the city—overcrowding or anonymity—but of nature in its “most negative aspect”: a landscape “devoid of water and trees, resembling a desert,” as an expert in colonias proletarias phrased it.\textsuperscript{55} And still, those who arrived to Ramos Millán were—and knew themselves—a lucky lot, as a comparison with other colonias proletarias highlights.

\textsuperscript{54}Raúl Flores Guerrero, \textit{Cinco pintores mexicanos} (Mexico City: UNAM, 1957).
\textsuperscript{55}Guillermo Ortiz Flores (Miembro de la Sociedad Mexicana de Urbanismo), “II. La vivienda popular,” October 1959?, AGN-INV-12.
Since its residents arrived after the city government bought the land, and since they never had to fight to obtain recognition for Ramos Millán as a colonia proletaria, they were spared from many of the conflicts around possession and recognition that afflicted residents from other colonias. Colonia Escuadrón 201 offers a well-documented example of these conflicts. In 1946, the city government expropriated the land where Escuadrón 201 was founded and authorized a group of government workers to occupy the land. These initial settlers did not count with any government help and were left to their own devices and ingenuity. They dug holes in the ground, lit fires, and built shackles or with wood, cartons, and grass bundles. A greater challenge came from the owner of the land, who requested and obtained an amparo from a judge. The years following the sentence were marked by violent conflicts with the police until a political agreement, negotiated by Minister of Government Adolfo Ruiz Cortines, was reached in 1949.56

The absence of violent conflicts with police forces did not guarantee a seamless urbanization. Colonia Proletaria Ajusco was settled around the same period as Ramos Millán, in the rocky area of El Pedregal, south of the city. The beginnings of the colonia were rough. Settlers occupied the caves in the area and built shacks using the crevices of the volcanic rock; they lacked facilities such as water, roads, or stores. Despite these hardships, the colonia slowly gained population, growing from 16 families in 1952 to 165 in 1955. In 1952, settlers requested legal recognition from the Oficina de Colonias, beginning a long process; in order to gain official recognition, the colonia needed to elect an executive committee, draft an official blueprint (which required hiring an engineer), lift a census that added to 200 families, and create an official Asociación Pro-

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Mejoramiento. When this process was completed, in 1956, the urbanization of the colonia began, being accomplished by 1960, more than 10 years after its initial settlement. 57

Unsurprisingly, competition for a place in Ramos Millán was fierce. The first cohort that moved there in December of 1950 carried a voucher signed by Carlos Zapata Vela securing a spot in a government truck and a lot in the colonia. But for every person in possession of a voucher there were hundreds of others requesting a lot; these people lived in different areas of the city, belonged to different social classes, and found out about the availability of lots by different means. They petitioned different government officials for lots, appealing to different laws and principles, and using the intermediation of an array of political brokers. Many petitioners worked in the municipal or federal government; these included cleaning workers, teachers, and federal workers from the Ministry of Agriculture. 58

Settlers came from the neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, Atlampa, Escuadrón 201, Peralvillo, Nonoalco, and Guerrero after suffering from floods and the collapse of their

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57 The date is uncertain, as beginning in 1948 several attempts were made to build a settlement in the area. The invasion that finally prospered took place in 1952. Colonia Ajustco was the subject of a lengthy investigation led by Jorge Alonso. Jorge Alonso, ed., Lucha urbana y acumulación de capital (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones Superiores del INAH, 1980), 303-321.

58 These requests were sent to mayor Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, who sent them to the Oficina de Colonias. Many of them are held in AHCM-DDF-OP-471-2, “Fraccionamientos: Gabriel Ramos Millán.”
homes (all of these neighborhoods were central tenements, relatively close to the city center). Many came originally from other states in Mexico, but for the most part their previous place of residence was Mexico City. They were thus already acquainted with broker politics and connected with some of the city’s patronage networks.

In 1951 the residents of Ramos Millán elected Conrado Mercado as their first president. As an official colonia proletaria, Ramos Millán was regulated by the 1941 Reglamento de las Asociaciones Pro-Mejoramiento de Colonias en el Distrito Federal [Reglamento de Colonias henceforth]. The Reglamento de Colonias ordered that proletarias must have a single resident association, government board, and president. This regulation sought to define a single intermediary between the city government and urban populations. Since the DDF owned the land in Ramos Millán, the Oficina de Colonias had, in theory, immense power to distribute lots as it pleased. As the intermediary between the municipal government and the colonia, Conrado Mercado was a key actor in this distribution.

Much the control that the Oficina de Colonias held over colonias proletarias such was the result of widespread legal uncertainty. This condition enabled several types of abuses that have been documented by the literature on popular urbanization. A common conflict arose when a single lot was assigned to more than one person. Several residents

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61. The rest of the government of the colonia was directiva was Secretario: Jose Tabayas C.; Srio. de Conflictos: Estanislao Padilla M.; Srio. de Prensa y Propaganda: Jose Nieto Torres; Srio. de Ac. Social: Benjamin P. Camacho; Srio del Exterior: Gelasio Enriquez; Srio de Actas: Jose Lara; Sria. de Acción Femenil: Leonarda Leon; Srio de Asuntos Educativos: Benjamin Pineda. El Nacional, September 21, 1951.


63. A long, long, footnote needs to stand here. As a starting point: Antonio Azuela, La ciudad, la propiedad privada y el derecho (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1991).
of Ramos Millán accused Mercado of selling them lots that already belonged to someone, or of selling their own lots to another person.64 These conflicts proliferated in a setting when practically everyone had some kind of voucher signed by the Oficina de Colonias, Conrado Mercado, or other political brokers who will be mentioned below. Residents also accused Mercado for charging undue fees for services such as water and electricity. Although these chicanerías were a daily occurrence, public acknowledgement of such mishandlings could put pressure on the authorities of colonias. In the summer of 1954 La Prensa published a story that portrayed Mercado as a swindler; later that year it ran a story about an Italian engineer named Ambrosi who bought a large amount of land and illegally rented houses and rooms to tenants. The following spring El Popular reported that engineers in Ramos Millán were charging undue fees for the installation of water pipes.65 In response to these accusations, Rafael Suárez Ocaña—who replaced Carlos Zapata Vela as head of the Oficina de Colonias—announced that Mercado would be removed but no action was undertaken and in the December of 1955 Mercado would be running again for president of the colonia.66

Uncertain property rights gave characters like Conrado Mercado and Rafael Suárez Ocaña large powers, but government attained control over colonias proletarias through other means as well. Crucially, it relied on a detailed knowledge generated by different offices; the register of official colonias proletarias, lot censuses, and blueprints of colonias were some of the most important expressions of this knowledge, indispensable for distributing people over space. Since there was not a cadastral map of

64This happened, for example, to Vicenta González and Erasto Castillo in 1954. AHCM-DDF-OP-471-2, “Fraccionamientos: Gabriel Ramos Millán.”
the colonia and since most settlers did not possess official titles, Rafael Suárez Ocaña and Conrado Mercado had the power to assign lots, manipulate their boundaries, and decide when public works such as street paving and drainage would be undertaken. In order to protect this power, Public Works and the Oficina de Colonias jealously guarded this kind of information. Whenever the president or the regent needed to distribute lots they ultimately had to resort to the Oficina de Colonias.67

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colonia</th>
<th>Delegación</th>
<th>Cta. Catastral</th>
<th>Prize (m2)</th>
<th>Lots</th>
<th>Owner (Private or Government)</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Official Blueprint</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramos Millán</td>
<td>Ixtacalco</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>$4-4.50</td>
<td>5,970</td>
<td>Official</td>
<td>1,332,531</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Escuadrón 201</td>
<td>Ixtapalapa</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>$3.00</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>Official</td>
<td>717,000</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajusco</td>
<td>Coyoacán</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Particular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reproduced above is a fragment of the census of colonias proletarias carried out by the Oficina de Colonias in the mid-1950s; along with that information on Ramos Millán I have included that on Ajusco, and Escuadrón 201, the two colonias mentioned briefly above. Ramos Millán and Escuadrón 201 are recorded as government-owned colonias—as we have seen, Ramos Millán was purchased by the DDF whereas Escuadrón 201 was expropriated. Colonia Ajusco, in contrast, was privately owned, although property conflicts existed there. Ajusco lacked an official blueprint, was not integrated into the municipal cadastral map, and its area and number of lots were unknown. The blank spaces in the census signal the incomplete control that the Oficina

67For instance, in July of 1954 the Coalición Popular de Colonos del Distrito Federal, an association loosely attached to the PRI that sought to requested lots in Ramos Millán to the DDF; the request was then sent to Rafael Suárez Ocaña who answered that the census of lots of the colonia was being revised “Me permito comunicar a usted que se está haciendo una depuración de los lotes contratados en la Colonia Ramos Millán, para saber que posibilidades tiene la Oficina de disponer de algunos para los fines solicitados.” DDF-OP-471-2, “Fraccionamientos: Colonia Gabriel Ramos Millán.”
de Colonias had over Colonia Ajusco; conversely, they hint at the scarce government help that this colonia had received so far. But the inclusion of Colonia Ajusco in this register is extremely significant: it suggests that a path for legal recognition and urbanization had already been opened.

The contrast with Ramos Millán is telling. Since it was established with the goal of creating a colonia proletaria, the DDF bought the land, Public Works fractioned it, and the Oficina de Colonias carried out a register of lots and residents. The municipal government had, in sum, much more information and, hence, control over Ramos Millán than over a place like Colonia Ajusco. In addition to the municipal government, federal health and housing institutions (more on this below) were also active in the colonia, further bringing it into the tutelage of the state institutions.

Government oversight was challenged, however, by the continual arrival of thousands of residents to Ramos Millán. This streaming of people presented the residents and authorities of the colonia both with business opportunities and practical challenges. The Reglamento de Colonias prohibited speculation and placed restrictions in the sale of lots, measures that scholars have interpreted as intended to control the urban poor while protecting them from market forces. However, residents fractioned, sold, and rented lots, business ventures that often spiraled into occupancy right conflicts. The existence of a real-estate market within colonias proletarias and, more generally, popular neighborhoods in Mexico City, had been noted by researchers and is confirmed in the

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68 Susan Eckstein, *The Poverty of Revolution*. These restrictions echo those placed on ejidos, a point made by Antonio Azuela and María Soledad Cruz. I explore this point in another part of the dissertation.
case of Ramos Millán; according to a 1963 survey, over half of its residents were owners while the other half rented.69

Whereas the sale of lots represented an economic opportunity, the increase in population density affected everyone. A common complaint arose when public areas in colonias proletarias that were originally intended for public services such as parks or schools were fractioned. In the case of Ramos Millán, this dynamic crystallized in a conflict around the park of the colonia. In June of 1953, Conrado Mercado requested the Oficina de Colonias and the police department for help in dealing with a group of invaders who had settled in the park.70 According to Mercado, the invasion leaders—Salvador Flores, Jesús Chávez, and Estanislao Padilla—were trying to divide the residents of the colonia and undermine his authority; these men, who were not from the colonia, had taken advantage of the area’s lack of public services in order to “put the residents against him.”71

Mercado continued to protest against the fractioning of the park over the following months. But the following summer, in a reversal of roles, it was Mercado who was accused of fractioning the park.72 Probably acting in Mercado’s defense, Suárez

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69 Martha Regina Jiménez y Castilla, “Bramadero: un caso ilustrativo de población marginal.” B.A. Thesis, UNAM, 1963. Most colonias originated by invasions had a similar pattern. A first generation of residents received their lot from a community leader while a second generation bought their lot from the previous possessor (despite the lack of official titles). Jorge Alonso calls this process “densification of lots;” it is visible in Sector Popular, Santo Domingo de los Reyes, and Isidro Favela. Lucha urbana y acumulación de capital, 57-59.


71 “Estos elementos […] pretenden dividir la colonia con fines personales aprovechando la falta de servicios municipales que el Departamento hasta la fecha no ha podido instalar por falta de presupuesto, esto no considero que sea culpa mía, pero lo aprovechan para agitar a los colonos en mi contra, esta labor la considero en mi perjuicio ya que sus versiones han tenido la audacia de hacerlas llegar hasta las autoridades, tratando de crear un mal ambiente en mi contra, ya que mi criterio ha sido siempre el de mantener a toda costa la unidad de la colonia.” Ibid.

72 Conrado Mercado to Enrique Rodríguez Cano, secretario del Presidente de la República. August 4, 1953. AGN. ARC. 418.2/13
Ocaña denied that there was an invasion. He explained that the government had
distributed lots among new families, but these lots were not located in the park but in a
strip of lots adjacent to it, thus following the official blueprint of the colonia signed by
Public Works. Who exactly was squatting and dividing the park is hard to tell. But
asking where the “park” was proves an equally difficult question because at the time the
colonia was still halfway urbanized, so its park was probably a strip of partially vacant
lots. In such conditions, the existence of an official blueprint representing a park and
clarified its location became extremely important for making claims. This information
gave the Oficina de Colonias and Rafael Suárez Ocaña an authority that other groups
could not match.

The conflict between the Conrado Mercado and the invasion leaders reproduces a
common pattern by which the Coalición de Colonos del Distrito Federal challenged the
power that the Oficina de Colonias had over colonias proletarias. Founded and headed
by Salvador Flores, The Coalición de Colonos was loosely affiliated to the Confederación
Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (CNOP), the popular sector of the PRI. Beginning
in the 1940s, it became the most important and constant source of pressure for the
municipal government. In 1944, for example, Salvador Flores organized a group of
residents from Colonia Ampliación Niños Héroes with the goal of fighting against the
official blueprint and distribution of lots in the colonia. The colonia’s official resident
association countered with accusations similar to those made by Mercado ten years later,
claiming that Flores was looking for “uneducated settlers, making them false promises,
and rejecting the approved blueprints and divisions” agreed by the legitimate residents

73 AHCM. DDF-OP-471-2 “Fraccionamientos: Colonia Gabriel Ramos Millán”
74 The rest of the leaders at the time were Roque Plata Belmont (Secretario del Interior), Leopoldo Guerrero T (Secretario de Conflictos), and Emeterio Gutiérrez N. (Secretario de Finanzas). [DSC04521]
and the Oficina de Colonias. But Flores continued to present himself as something of a Robin Hood defending Mexico City’s homeless poor against the abuses of the Oficina de Colonias. The Coalición de Colonos also engaged in larger urban conflicts. When in 1950 Mexico City’s Planning Commission debated the extension of Reforma Avenue, the Coalición de Colonos protested against such action because it entailed the destruction of the homes of thousands of poor families.

It is therefore unsurprising to find Plata & Co. in the business of organizing families in Ramos Millán. In 1952, the secretary of the Coalición de Colonos, Roque Plata Belmont, began negotiating the transfer of 200 families from Atlampa to Ramos Millán. Atlampa was located northeast of the city, close to the railroad tracks where Luis Buñuel shot *Los Olvidados*, a fact that Plata Belmont did not fail to mention in his petitions to authorities. The houses inhabited by the families were at the brink of collapse and suffered from continuous floods; the Red Cross described them as “pigsties” dwelled by miserable people living in the utmost promiscuity. Suárez Ocaña surveyed Atlampa and ascertained its dire conditions of the colonia; after factoring in his decision the fact that Public Works had declared the area industrial, he approved the petition of the

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75 “Colonia Ampliación Niños Héroes.” Directiva Américas Unidas and Directiva Ampliación Niños Héroes to President Manuel Avila Camacho, February 3, 1944. AGN-MAC-418.2/167. My emphasis.
76 In 1945, for example, Flores accused José Garibay—the predecessor of Rafael Suárez Ocaña as head of the Oficina de Colonias—for “una continua serie de maniobras, atropellos, despojos de lotes, negocios fraudulentos y pillerías de todo género, que tienen en continua agitación y descontento a la colonia, en la que ya ha corrido sangre por las pugnas provocadas por el mismo Garibay.” AGN/MAC 418.2/97 “Colonia Gertrudis Sánchez”.
78 Roque Plata Belmont to President Adolfo Ruiz Cortinez. AGN-ARC-418.2/232.
79 Find quote. Photographs of the area can be found in Arquitectura/México.
Coalición de Colonos and designated a number of lots to the families represented by the
Coalición de Colonos.  

Notwithstanding this pledge, the move to Ramos Millán stalled and the next
summer the Oficina de Colonias communicated Plata Belmont that there were not any
available lots. Plata Belmont accused Suárez Ocaña of playing dirty tricks against his
clients, adding that an engineer from the Oficina de Colonias had divided 241 lots
specifically for the families from Atlampa that he represented. Despite these obstacles,
Plata Belmont continued pressuring the Oficina de Colonias and addressing the president
and the regent, almost certainly gaining his followers a foothold in the colonia. Over the
following years, the division between “original” residents—holding paperwork signed by
the Oficina de Colonias—and squatters represented by the Coalición de Colonos (a
simplification of a much more complex history) continued to divide the area.
Accordingly, when in 1955 the Ministry of Education prepared a monograph on Ramos
Millán, it mentioned a group of squatters from colonias Atlampa and Escuadrón 201
living there, most probably clients of Salvador Flores and Roque Plata Belmont.

When Colonia Ramos Millán celebrated elections in December 1955 the colonia
was divided by several other conflicts. Although the Reglamento de Colonias forbid it,
numerous associations of residents (not the official resident association) were requesting

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80 Rafael Suárez Ocaña to Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, December 18, 1953. AHCM-DDF-OP-471-2
“Fraccionamientos: Atlampa.”
Atlampa.”
82 “Monografía de la Colonia Gabriel Ramos Millán. Sección Bramadero.” AHCM-DDF-OP-471-2,
“Fraccionamientos. Sección Popular.” This short monograph was sent to the president in January of 1955;
it included information on the infrastructure and population of the colonia. Its existence, in my
interpretation, supports the claim that Ramos Millán was a model colonia proletaria, or a testing site for this
type of popular urbanization.
lots and titles from the Oficina de Colonias, the regent, and the president. More importantly, a rift had already opened between Rafael Suárez Ocaña and Conrado Mercado. Mercado denounced the Oficina de Colonias of charging the residents of Ramos Millán illegal fees. He also accused Suárez Ocaña of selling lots, using police forces to divide the colonia, and rigging the elections. Supporters of the new president, Leonardo León, rejected the accusations and made a show of strength for León by paying visits to different newspapers.

[My plan is for the 1955 election to close this section, but I have not been able to put together an account of this event]

The conflict between the Oficina de Colonias and the Coalición de Colonos—loosely affiliated with the PRI—that emerges from this account contributes to our understanding of urban politics during the 1940s and 1950s. Scholars of political clientelism often lump together the PRI and the municipal government; accordingly, the creation of the CNOP—the popular sector of the party—in 1943 has been interpreted as giving the PRI political control over Mexico’s capital. This symbiosis between party and government appears as quite strong in the specific case of colonias proletarias. Settler associations in colonias proletarias, for instance, were affiliated to the PRI following a non-written rule. The PRI and the local Health Ministry organized joint sanitary brigades in colonias proletarias that the party defended as “modern propaganda,” high in “social content.” Nonetheless, as Cristina Sánchez Mejorada has argued, the municipal

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83 Among others, the Sociedad de Colonos Proletarios para la Vivienda Familiar.
86 Diane Davis, Urban Leviathan.
87 Azuela and Cruz, “La institucionalización de las colonias populares y la política urbana en la ciudad de México (1940-1946).”
88 “La propaganda de tipo moderno debe caracterizarse en todos los aspectos, por su alto contenido social y llenar toda una función para que al llegar al pueblo lo haga pensar en un organismo que desarrolla una
government and associations of residents “competed for urban clienteles” and were engaged in conflicts that are still to be understood.  

Ariel Rodríguez Kuri identifies three forces—an “infernal triangle”—that shaped politics in Mexico City between 1930 and 1970: the municipal government, the local PRI, and of petitioners of urban land. In his view, the conflict between municipal managers and party brokers was finally won by the latter group in 1966, when Ernesto P. Uruchurtu—the most powerful regent in the history of Mexico City—was forced to resign after the National Congress protested his removal of two squatter settlements. This conflict between brokers and managers is analyzed in depth in chapter 3. In this chapter, I focus in a single colonia proletaria and the gamut of forces—government and non-government—shaping it.

Up until 1955, the history of Ramos Millán highlights both the government position towards colonias proletarias as well as the tools at its disposal for dealing with these places. As scholars have noted, the Oficina de Colonias often granted recognition as colonias proletarias to neighborhoods that already existed in order to control them politically by opening a pathway for the provision of official titles and public services. But the government also engaged in more proactive actions such as buying land, dividing it, and distributing it. Blueprints and censuses were powerful tools for achieving control

89 Rezagos de la modernidad, 243-252.
90“Ciudad oficial,” 455. Iterations of this conflict can be found throughout the history of Mexico City. Diane Davis offers an interpretation of a slightly different interpretation of this triangle. Urban Leviathan, 104.
91Robert M. Jordan, “Flowers and Iron Fists,” 225-229. Uruchurtu’s government curtailed urban growth, with the unintended consequence of pushing irregular neighborhoods to the neighboring State of Mexico, with more lenient urban codes.
over colonias proletarias, a point that might seem obvious but one that nonetheless hints at the entangled relationship between political brokerage and state building.

[The previous three paragraphs, which close this section of the chapter, are still rather speculative; I am including them in the hope that they spark questions or comments. I am currently writing another, more analytical, chapter that analyzes the relationship between political brokerage and expert knowledge in the context of colonias proletarias. I am therefore reading primary sources from other colonias as well as secondary literature on politics and political clientelism]

Reappraisals

Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, managing urban growth became a pressing duty for Latin American governments. And starting around 1950 urbanization in Latin America—as elsewhere in the “developing world”—also turned into a scholarly problem. This was partly a simple matter of scale: Mexico City, Sao Paulo, or Buenos Aires grew immensely during the first half of the century, becoming some of the largest cities in the world. But Latin American cities were also intriguing because they seemed to deviate from theories of urban growth based upon North Atlantic experiences. How exactly they deviated and what exactly is this North Atlantic model was and still is matter for debate. Finally, the study of urbanization in Latin America also responded to the specter of social revolt and communism ignited by the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution. Largely by influence of U.S. scholars, think tanks, and government, Latin

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92 Sociologists avant la lettre such as the Mexican criminologist Julio Guerrero described Latin American cities in the period between 1870 and 1930, but this group lacked a cohesive urban framework. For an analysis of ideas and cities in this period see Richard Morse, “The Multiverse of Latin American identity.” Useful interpretations of the following period (c. 1940-1970), from which I draw in the following pages, include Priscilla Conolly, “Vaivenes tempranos del urbanismo popular en América Latina;” Brodwyn Fischer, “A Century in Present Tense: Crisis, Politics, and Intellectual History of Brazil’s Informal Cities;” Ariel Rodríguez Kuri, “Secretos de la idiosincrasia.”

93 An example of a highly influential theory was Ernest Burgess’s concentric zone model of urban growth. Based on the history of Chicago, Burgess’s model was tested in Mexico by authors such as Edmundo Flores and Floyd and Liliana Ota Dotson.

94 When in 1961 the United Nations organized an international seminar to discuss this matter, Philip Hauser—University of Chicago sociologist and one of the seminar organizers—described Latin American cities as standing halfway between the North Atlantic and Asian models. Philip Hauser, Urbanization in Latin America, 20.
American policymakers and intellectuals began viewing urbanization as rife with uncertainty, danger, and hope. Thus, Mexican colonias proletarias—as their Latin American counterparts—became not only a local nuisance but also a profound problem, perhaps the problem, of the region as a whole.  

In 1963, Ramos Millán became the object of this kind of enquiry in the shape of a B.A. thesis written by Martha Regina Jiménez y Castilla, a student from the Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales of the UNAM. “Bramadero: un caso ilustrativo de población marginal” offers a radiograph of Ramos Millán a decade after its foundation, as seen by the social sciences of the period. At the time, Mexican sociologists were moving away from the German anthropological and hermeneutic tradition and were adopting instead methods such as the sample survey for dealing with big numbers.  

These methods required institutional backing and larger pools of funding, as exemplified by the comprehensive 1950s housing surveys undertaken by the Banco Nacional Hipotecario y de Obras Públicas and the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social. Likewise, Jiménez y Castilla’s thesis was part of a much larger research project led by Mexico’s premier demographer Raúl Benítez Zenteno and supported by the Escuela Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales of the UNAM.  

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95 Fischer, “A Century in Present Tense,” 29. Wayne E. Cornelius’ seminal study of Mexico City was written in response to these concerns. “Are the migrant masses revolutionary?,” he asked. The unequivocal answer, of course, was no. Wayne E. Cornelius, Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).  
97 Rodríguez Kuri, “Secretos de la idiosincrasia,” 23. A positive assessment of this change was offered by Pablo González Casanova, “América Latina y el cambio de las ciencias sociales en la posguerra.”  
98 BNHOP, El problema de la habitación en la ciudad de México; Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social, Investigación de vivienda en 11 ciudades del país. See chapter 3 for more information on these surveys.
Nacional de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales of the National University of Mexico and the NY based Population Council, Inc.99

“Bramadero: un caso ilustrativo de una población marginal” was framed by the theories of modernization and marginality.100 In a nutshell, modernization theorists believed that societies progressed in time through a series of entwined processes, e.g., rationalization, industrialization, secularization, urbanization, etc.; different authors gave greater or lesser weight to each of these, but the fact that they came as a package and were unidirectional was a basic premise to them all. Manuel Germán Parra, a Mexican modernizer from the period, believed that “industrialization is transforming the worldview of the Mexican. It is no longer that of the landlord and the peon but that of the industrialist, the businessman, the banker, and the factory worker.”101

Broadly speaking, the notion of marginality referred to the belief that certain groups or sectors of the economy were lagging behind, or were obstacles to modernization. Some authors identified marginality vis-à-vis the national economy, or the developed world, but all agreed on the mutually constitutive nature of the modern and the marginal sectors. In Latin America, the concepts of modernization and marginality were most clearly identified with the millions of rural migrants who were considered unprepared for urban life, clinging to their own traditional, folk worldview. Thus, migrants living in places such as Ramos Millán faced a dramatic “cultural conflict” upon

99I need to delve more on this “Population Inc.” I think it was lead by Hauser but I have not found much information in his papers, here at UofC.
100My understanding of marginality has been influenced by Janice E. Perlman, The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro, and Larissa de Lomnitz, Cómo sobreviven los marginados.
101“El proceso de industrialización está transformando [la mentalidad del mexicano]. Corresponde cada vez menos a la psicología del hacendado y del peón, y cada vez más a la del industrial, el comerciante, el banquero y el obrero.” La industrialización en México (Mexico City: Imprenta Universitaria, 1954), 153.
their arrival to the city, whose social, cultural, and economic values were the opposite as those from the countryside. In the words of Jiménez y Castilla,

…el poco adiestramiento técnico, el manejo de marcos de referencia concretos y los bajos niveles educacionales de los inmigrantes, los define empíricamente como poblaciones marginales de los grandes centros industriales. Tales características les impide participar plenamente de las actividades económicas, sociales y culturales que les ofrece la ciudad.\(^\text{102}\)

Notice that the basic binaries between tradition and modernity, city and country, were not put in doubt. Questioned instead was the capacity of migrants to adapt to urban life, a matter of faith for Parra and his ilk. Jiménez y Castilla categorized three-fourths of the colonia’s population as migrants, a group with less schooling than natives and maladapted to life in the modern city. Although Mexico City offered work opportunities and living conditions inexistent in the countryside, she argued that “not all peasants achieved their goals,” in part because they had to compete with urbanites that were better prepared to undertake “technical activities.”\(^\text{103}\) But a closer look at Jiménez y Castilla’s statistics suggests that she overemphasized the difficulties faced by rural migrants. Regardless of their gender, education, or place origin, residents in Ramos Millán followed the Mexican press and owned a radio, proving far from alienated.\(^\text{104}\)

The thesis suffers from other significant blind spots. Jiménez y Castilla did not describe or even mention the networks of political patronage that controlled Ramos Millán and linked it with organizations such as the Oficina de Colonias and the PRI.

\(^{102}\text{Ibid.}\)
\(^{103}\text{Ibid., 33-40, 96}\)
\(^{104}\text{Jiménez y Castilla noted that different groups within the colonia followed different newspapers. “En Bramadero, uno de los contactos abstractos más frecuentes son los periódicos, de los cuales los preferidos son “La Prensa” y “Tabloide” tanto para los hombres como para las mujeres, sin embargo la mayor escolaridad hace que aumente la preferencia por los periódicos llamados “grandes”, pero la predilección por “La Prensa” no disminuye. Este periódico tiene arraigo entre las personas de los grupos marginales por la forma de presentar sus noticias siempre en forma alarmista…” Ibid., 47.}\)
Local politics are absent from her account, an unsurprising omission given the fact that sociologists and political scientists would not study broker politics until the 1970s.\(^{105}\)

Pointing out at these omissions and logical inconsistencies today is as unfair as it is futile. Marginality, modernization, and the folk-urban continuum were criticized by Oscar Lewis, Wayne Cornelius, Janice Perlman, and other social scientists in the 1960s and 1970s so there is little worthy in beating that dead horse. But the fact that Jiménez y Castilla did not mention that Ramos Millán was created by the government is much more significant and intriguing. This omission is particularly striking since Ramos Millán was, arguably, the most important government experiment in popular urbanization and had been founded only a decade earlier. Therefore, it had received water, sewage, and electricity by 1963.\(^{106}\) None of these services was provided exclusively to Ramos Millán, but as a showcase colonia proletaria it received them in a timely and consistent manner.

By the early 1960s Ramos Millán had also been integrated into an incomplete and imperfect, yet tangible and consequential, Mexican welfare state. The government built two schools and a market where a state-owned CEIMSA store could be found.\(^{107}\) In collaboration with Ramos Millán’s official resident association, personnel from the Ministry of Health undertook pest controls, provided medical care and sanitary and maternity training for children and mothers, and conducted surveys on the conditions of

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\(^{105}\)Wayne Cornelius published his influential *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico City* in 1975. Two years later Susan Eckstein published her *Poverty of Revolution*. The Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana’s program of urban sociology was launched in the 1970s, as the area of urban studies at El Colegio de México. Gustavo Garza, *Cincuenta años de investigación urbana y regional en México, 1940-1991* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1996), 78. And yet, some authors such as Ezequiel Cornejo had described this kind of local politics with a sharp sociological and journalistic eye in the 1950s.


\(^{107}\)CEIMA stores sold food at cheaper than market prices. Readers of *Children of Sánchez* might remember their importance for the lives of the urban poor. CEIMSA could be found across all of Mexico but most of them were located in Mexico City. Enrique C. Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico: The Political Uses of Food since 1910*, 145.
the colonia and its population.\textsuperscript{108} Starting in 1956, the Ministry of Health also supported a Centro de Bienestar Social Urbano in Ramos Millán. The Centro de Bienestar was located in the same building that housed a maternity clinic; it provided daily meals and classes on “domestic economy,” “beauty culture,” bakery, and decoration.\textsuperscript{109}

The Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda (INV) had also built a small housing unit (36 houses) in Ramos Millán. Created in 1954 with the objective of streamlining the government housing policy, the INV was divided in large programs, one of which was geared towards improving conditions in colonias proletarias.\textsuperscript{110} After negotiations between different parties that included the Health Ministry, the DDF, and architects David Cymet and Guillermo Ortiz—experts in colonias proletarias who had begun their careers in Public Works in the early 1950s—the INV decided to build housing units in colonias Agrícola Oriental, San Juan de Aragón, and Ramos Millán, where the DDF could provide land. Ramos Millán was chosen because of its general “good conditions” (specially its sewage system and market) and because it did not have conflicts regarding ejido lands, quite common in the area, as we have seen.\textsuperscript{111}

The welfare web that emerged in Ramos Millán and other colonias proletarias was at the center of several analyses from the 1960s and 1970s analyzing the relationship between the state and the urban poor. Scholars such as Wayne Cornelius and Susan Eckstein analyzed in depth the links between the organization of colonias, their control

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{108}Dirección de Salubridad en el D.F. “Informe narrativo de las labores desarrolladas por las diversas dependencias de la Dirección de Salubridad en el D.F., del día 1° de septiembre al 31 de diciembre de 1953.” SSA-SubSyA-45-1/or/SSA-SubSyA-32-4.
  \item \textsuperscript{109}SSA-SubSyA-32-4. “Informe de María Luisa Flores sobre el 6° Centro de Bienestar Social Urbano Benito Juárez.”
  \item \textsuperscript{110}Enrique Villa Michel to Raul Salinas Lozano, “Proyecto de programa de inversiones en las colonias proletarias,” July 17, 1957. AGN-INV-Box 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{111}José María Gutiérrez to Enrique Villa Michel, July 30, 1957. AGN-INV-Box 1. José María Gutiérrez to Enrique Villa Michel, August 10, 1957. AGN-INV-Box 1.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
by the government, and their access to public services. Reading such accounts one senses a tight and pervasive web of state institutions that touched everyone living in colonias proletarias. Although Cornelius and Eckstein were highly critical of the state—stressing the control it exerted over the urban poor and the social stratification that it reproduced—they were still describing a functional system of urban governance. The difference between them and analyses of marginality are very significant.

Conclusion
The fact that a model colonia proletaria—one featured extensively in newspaper articles and official reports, discussed at sessions of the Planning Committee, and where different government offices built schools, markets, and clinics—was described as marginal a decade after its foundation opens several historical questions. Did the government project fail? What categories did different actors use to assess colonias proletarias? What historical perspective is needed to think about such places?

The story of Colonia Ramos Millán cannot be told apart from that of the political projects and social theories projected onto neighborhoods like it. I have argued that different government agencies envisioned a variety of projects to transform Tlacotal and Bramadero ranging from agrarian collectivization to industrialization to the creation of modernist housing units. However, none of these ideas materialized; moreover, when measured against them, Ramos Millán appeared to be a failure. What did crystallize lacked a blueprint—both in the concrete and the more metaphorical senses of the word. During the 1940s, different government offices collaborated in putting together a policy for colonias proletarias. The government passed laws such as the Reglamento de
Colonias, purchased land and distributed lots, moved people across the city, and managed conflicts between brokers and their clienteles. Historians debate how cohesive or disjointed these policies were. As a model colonia, Ramos Millán may provide insight into these answers as it offers the most cohesive image than can be made.

A lot of things happened between 1940 and 1960, not the least of which was the semantic shift suffered by the word “proletarian.” In the 1941 Reglamento de Colonias, the word evoked the progressive ideology of the 1930s as well as a corporatist political imagination projected into a metropolis conformed by colonias proletarias. By the 1960s “proletarian” had turned into a negative term, closely linked to notions of poverty and marginality. Colonias proletarias shifted in meaning as well. During the 1920s and 1930s, planners considered peripheral irregular neighborhoods a huge problem because it was extremely costly to provide them with urban services. Afterwards, during the 1940s and 1950s—the period covered in this chapter—colonias proletarias were hailed as a solution to the challenge of urban growth. By the 1960s, they had become, again, a blight decried by public officials and intellectuals. And over the last thirty years scholars have begun to reevaluate colonias proletarias, describing them as progressive environments, where lives actually became better over time.