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Public policies and programmes for public space improvement in Mexico in the 21st century: The case of Xalapa

By Mauricio Hernandez Bonilla

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Executive Summary

Historically, governments have recognised that actions in the public realm can help to shape development (Garvin 2007:75). In recent years in Mexico, public polices have been promoted which reconsider and recognise public space as fundamental for urban life; and as a key element in the physical and social revitalization of the urban fabric. At different levels, national and local governments have created, managed and implemented public programmes which seek to create safer, more vital and dynamic public urban spaces that contribute to a more sustainable urban life. However, actions for implementation face various common challenges in planning practice in Mexico, such as barriers to planning adequate and suitable projects, effective social participation and decision making, good follow-up and maintenance and modifying impacts to create more sustainable urban development. These barriers may take the form of abandonment and lack of maintenance, lack of inhabitant participation, and the rise of urban violence and insecurity. In spite of these challenges, these programmes are important, not least because of the significant amount of economic resources spent on their implementation, as well as their potential to socially and physically transform public spaces in Mexico. This paper reviews the Mexican government's approaches to public space revitalization and improvement under the framework of national policies and programmes to analyse the way initiatives are understood, interpreted and implemented at the local level. All these issues are discussed with special reference to the case of Xalapa, capital of the State of Veracruz. Although occurring on a small scale and at a slow speed, positive changes are observed at the local level in approaches towards public space in the Mexican context. However, the research shows that in these programmes the democratic, cultural and inclusive functions of public spaces are only partially addressed.

Key words: Public Space, Urban Policies, Global South, Mexico

Public policies and programmes for public space improvement in Mexico in the 21st century: The case of Xalapa

Mauricio Hernandez Bonilla

1. Introduction

The recognition of public spaces as important elements for the progress and advance of urban societies has been observed from ancient times. From the Greek Agora to modern avenues, boulevards and squares, urban public spaces have played an important role in cities and towns. However, during the 20th century, a redefinition of the relationship between private and public was observed and new modernist visions of urban space emerged. These conditions transformed the urban public realm and according to critics (e.g. Jacobs 1961, Sennett 1977, Madanipour 2000) such changes resulted in a general deterioration and decline of urban public space around the world. For example, modernist design (e.g. The Charter of Athens) established a new layout of urban open space based on fast movement, giving priority to cars. In many cities, the traditional streets, squares and plazas with closed vistas that had characterized cities until the 19th century were replaced by vast open spaces and tall buildings. More recently, traditional recreational public spaces (e.g. urban parks) have been replaced by modern shopping malls and stores as recreational spaces. In sum, public spaces have multiplied and expanded, but they have also become less personal, more transient, and at best merely functional or symbolic (Madanipour 2010:5)

Historically, governments have recognized that actions in the public realm can help to shape development (Garvin 2007:75). In response to the evident social and physical deterioration of the public realm that many cities have experienced from the second half of the last century until now, policies and programmes have emerged which seek to address this. During this period in Mexico, unplanned urban growth has resulted in the physical and social deterioration of public space. Furthermore, there has been an evident lack of capacity and resources on the part of governments to implement coherent planning and housing policies and strategies to foster a structured and organized public realm. Finally, during the last decade, the urban environment in many Mexican cities has been perceived to be characterized by crime, insecurity and delinquency. In response to these latter constraints, during the first decade of the 21st century the Mexican government has sought to establish urban policies and programmes for the creation of safer and more civilized and liveable urban environments. A core component of these policies is the revitalization of the public realm of cities.

However, in this context, actions for implementation face various common challenges in planning practice. Planning adequate and suitable projects, effective social participation and decision making, good follow-up and maintenance and modifying impacts to create more sustainable urban development can be difficult to achieve. For example, one problem is the lack of expertise, and human or economic resources to implement projects at the local level. Another issue may be the lack of communication and information exchange between the authorities and neighbourhoods' inhabitants, which can give place to top-down decision making processes, consequently, overlooking people's needs and interests. Moreover, a lack of long term maintenance and use programs for public spaces can lead to abandonment and deterioration. Therefore, it is important to study how these policies and programmes conceptualize the

configuration of contemporary public space, and how they are managed and implemented, in order to take a critical perspective on their adequacy and effectiveness in the creation of better and safer public urban spaces in Mexican cities.

The purpose of this paper is to present a qualitative analysis of some recently created policies and related programmes for the improvement and revitalization of urban public space in Mexico. This is undertaken through an exploration of approaches to public space improvement during the first decade of the 21st century, and an analysis of public programmes in terms of their objectives and values. The case of Xalapa, the capital of the State of Veracruz in Southeast Mexico, is presented in order to analyse how public space transformation is taking place at the local level through these specific programmes.

This analysis forms part of the first stage of the research project entitled "Public Policies and the Transformation of Public Spaces in Mexican Cities During the 21st Century" whose main objective it is to explore, analyse and evaluate processes of transformation and revitalization of public spaces in the light of recent urban policies. In this research, the planning, management, implementation and use of public spaces are considered, in order to offer recommendations for the improvement of public spaces as contributors of greater urban quality of life. It is suggested that in public space policies and programmes the democratic, cultural and inclusive functions of public spaces have been only partially addressed. Prior to this analysis and discussion, the theoretical, contextual and methodological approach to the study are described in the next sections.

2. Public space values and roles

Public spaces such as streets, parks and squares are the opposite of the private and intimate space of the house, workplace and other closed places. Ideally they are characterized by free access to people and the "general public" as a whole, because they belong to the community and are managed by public authorities (Madanipour 1999).

Through urban history, public spaces have represented important elements in the urban configuration. Cities of every era have made provision for open places that would promote social encounters and serve the conduct of public affairs (Kostof 1999: 123). Places such as the Greek Agora were relevant for the development of politics and democracy: the Agora integrated economic, political and cultural activities (Madanipour 2000: 119). The marketplace was an important site for the exchange of goods and social intercourse in European medieval towns; and the Renaissance square played an important role as space of commemoration and political power. During the latter period, city squares were decorated with fountains, monuments, statues and other works of art, and used for public celebration, state proceedings and exchange of goods and services (Madanipour 2000: 120). In the Pre-Hispanic cities of the Americas, plazas were huge open spaces surrounded by massive monolithic structures where everyday rituals and religious ceremonies took place. Later, in the Spanish Colonial settlements, the main plaza was meant to be the starting point for the development of any town (Kostof 1999: 124), and these urban spaces continue to hold great significance in the life of Latin American cities. Thus, over the centuries, public open spaces have played a very important role as strategic components of city development. Ideologically and symbolically, public urban space represents the ideas of democracy, equity and equal rights; and politically, it implies democratic participation and the existence of a true public sphere (Habermas 1989).

In many cities, the historical significance of public spaces has not diminished, and public spaces continue to represent important values, functions and roles in cities. As social, economic, and political centres of cities, they contribute a wide range of functions in urban life, from physical

to psychological, and including social, political, economic, and symbolic dimensions (Akkar 2003: 8; see also Table 1). From the urban design and planning point of view, public space establishes the spatial relations for connectivity in the city, and serves as an essential functional support for urban mobility and land use frameworks. Physically, public spaces are generators and components of the urban fabric, and communication channels with morphological, environmental and aesthetic values (Lynch 1960, 1990; Krier 1979; Woolley 2003). It is the setting for many kinds of urban infrastructure and it gives access to the private environment of the city. In addition, it is the means through which the shape of the city and the configuration of the urbanscape can be perceived. Socially, it serves as the 'glue' of community, and promotes culture (Carr et al. 1992, Madanipour 2003), as it is the space of social activities and interaction. Politically, it is the place where power relations are materialized, meaning it serves as an arena for conflict, political action and negotiation (Mitchell 1995, McInroy 2000, Deusen 2002, Low 2000).

Table 1 Values and roles of public spaces in urban theory

Physical/ morphological	Social	Political	Economic	Psychological	Symbolic
Expression of city form (Lynch 1981)	Sense of community	Citizenship and exercise of rights (e.g. Borja & Muxí 2003, Ramírez K. 2009)	Economic exchange (e.g. Silva 2007, Jaramillo 2007)	Mental, spiritual and physical health (Shaftoe 2008, Jackson 2003)	Sense of belonging and appropriation (e.g. Vidal & Pol 2005)
Urban spatial organization (e.g. Lynch 1960, Gehl 1987)	Social integration and human exchange (e.g. Carr 1992)	Participation and involvement (e.g. Arendt 1987, Alguacil 2008)	Tourist attraction and investment (Madanipour 2010)	Human development	Representation of meanings (Carmona 2003)
Aesthetic, character and identity (e.g. Sitte 1979, Lynch 1960, Shaftoe 2008)	Public life and vitality (e.g. Gehl 1987)	Political action, protest and demonstration (e.g. Habermas 1989)	Contribute to business and land values (e.g. Woolley 2003, (Crompton, 2001)	Place for stimulation and exploration (Woolley 2003)	Social identity and status (e.g. Valera 2010)
Environmental balance (e.g. Woolley 2003)	Social capital generator (e.g. Madanipour 2003)	Conflict and struggle (e.g. Mitchell 1995)	Prosperity and employment opportunities		Memories and feelings

The idealised role of public spaces is thus often conceived of as satisfying and enhancing the lives of city inhabitants, workers and visitors, and socially integrating the community, aspiring to integrate the rich and the poor, the young and the elderly in a shared experience, for the sake of urban democracy. There are strong links between the notion of public space, democracy and politics, and the arena of public policies. State intervention for implementing democratic policies and actions for a better urban environment and people's participation for the development of urban spaces are necessary to create inclusive and high quality public spaces. This suggests the creation of physical and social urban processes, structures and components, which consider urban space as whole, in which people´s lives take place in equal conditions; where physical elements are organized according to real needs through adequate strategies and mechanisms (e.g. public programmes); and where healthy social dynamics and practices are triggered.

In another sense, public space also plays an economic role as the setting for commercial exchange, and as a medium for attracting investment (Francis 1991; Shaftoe 2008; Madanipour 2003). As such, public spaces have been regarded as potentially contributing to the economic development of city areas and regions, for investment, tourism and to attract new residents: in other words, contributing to city marketing. As localities and regions compete in the world economy to attract increasingly mobile capital, they need to create safe and attractive environments for investors and their employees (Hall, 1995 in Madanipour 1999).

Psychologically, public spaces contribute to mental health, and human and educational development (Woolley 2003; Jackson 2003; Shaftoe 2008); while symbolically, they act as creators of collective identity at the neighbourhood, city or country level (Francis 1987; Carr et al. 1992; Low 2000). Through these diverse roles and dimensions, public space represents different meanings for different people.

Public space then can be understood as the main space of urban living, city culture and citizenship (Borja 2003). A failure to understand this complexity, and to appropriately value the benefits that flow from high quality public space, seem to be amongst the key reasons for a widespread deterioration in the quality of public space around the world (Carmona 2008: 199) In modern times, the importance of public space in cities has significantly diminished. Madanipour (1999) points out that this has partly been the result of the decentralization of urban areas and the despatialization of the public sphere, which has severely affected the political, social, economic and cultural significance and importance of public spaces in the city.

At present, there is a widespread tendency for public spaces to be rendered residual, disconnected, fragmented and even privatized. In this sense, with the end of the 20th century Richard Sennett (1994) proclaimed the death of truly public space, the triumph of modern individualism and the loss of confidence in public and community experience, manifested through increasing social apathy towards public life in contemporary urban societies. Therefore, the contemporary city offers an increasingly inhospitable environment for the widespread enjoyment of and use of public space. In particular, fear of crime is leading residents of many cities to avoid public spaces, fostering a downward spiral of avoidance and abandonment (Valentine 2001: 178; Porta 1996: 144).

3. Public space in Mexico

3.1 The deterioration of public space in Mexican urban environments

Mexican urban environments today are characterised by uncontrolled urban expansion, growing marginalization and poverty, deterioration of the urban landscape, increasing crime and insecurity. In this context, and in keeping with the tendencies identified by urban scholars, public spaces suffer serious problems and constraints (Figure 1). This has been recognised by the government at the national level, which has carried out research involving national agencies to identify the current situation regarding public space in the cities across country. According to the diagnosis of problems of public space in Mexican cities carried out by the Secretary of Social Development in 2010, the main issues are that a) public spaces do not meet community needs; b) public spaces are physically deteriorated; c) they are characterised by a lack of recreational activities and inadequate uses, and d) they are also frequently characterised by dangerous and unwanted behaviour (see Table 2).

Figure 1: Low public investment for the equipment and maintenance of spaces
Source: The author

Table 2 Public space constraints and problems in Mexican cities (SEDESOL 2010).

Problems	Causes and reasons
Public spaces do not meet community needs.	Low quality public space design.
	Lack of community involvement in determining public space needs.
Public spaces are physically deteriorated.	Low public investment for the equipment and maintenance of spaces.
	Inhabitants' lack of commitment for taking care of public places.
	Deteriorated urbanscapes.
	Loss of value of nearby properties.
Lack of recreational activities and inadequate use.	Lack of economic resources to promote public activities.
	Little community organization.
	Scarce citizen participation in social interaction, therefore a lack of positive social networks for public spaces.
	Few opportunities to carry out recreational and sporting activities encouraging sendentarism and inactivity.
Dangerous and unwanted behaviour in public spaces.	Perception of lack of safety connected to public places.
	Public space for crime.

These problems are both a cause and effect of the poverty and social and economic inequalities that characterise Mexican urban areas. Mexico is a country with huge social and economic inequalities and contrasts: while a small elite dominates in terms of economic power, a large majority of the population lives on the margins of economic, social and human development. In the public realm, one can observe the constraints of such economic and social inequality in contemporary urban Mexico. On the one hand, financial capital and related interests are observed to modify cities for the benefit of the highest income groups, in privatized developments with restricted access; on the other, factors which characterise the urban environment for the majority include unemployment and social exclusion; lack of adequate land tenure policies or social services; urban blight and fragmentation; precarious housing conditions and poor urban infrastructure (Hernández Bonilla 2012: 68).

Furthermore, in recent years, public spaces in Mexican cities have been affected by violence and insecurity. The increase in drug dealing, kidnapping and violent crime, including homicide, that has been observed in many Mexican cities has adversely affected public space, including its social integration role, as perceptions of insecurity affect how urban space is used. National surveys about people's perceptions of safety and insecurity in Mexican cities have demonstrated that many people experience fear of violence in the urban environment. For example, the

National Surveys of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety (known in Mexico as ENVIPE[1]), carried out by the National Institute of Statics and Geography (INEGI), shows that nearly 70 per cent of Mexicans feel unsafe in their cities, and similarly high numbers of people (between 40 and 60 per cent) had heard or seen situations related to alcohol consumption, robbery, vandalism and drug dealing and consumption near their homes. Moreover, recent surveys show that most people think that this situation will worsen in years to come (ENVIPE 2011, 2012, 2013).

3.2 Government approaches to urban public space

In this context, policy makers have recognized the importance of having healthy public open spaces in Mexican cities, in order to overcome the urban blight that has recently characterized them. For example, in 2010 "Mexico City's Charter for the Right to the City" was created. Regarding public space, it specifies the need for "democratic and equal access to, and enjoyment of, urban space, in the search for social coexistence for the revitalization, development and improvement of public spaces". In this sense, as Ziccardi (2009 in Mier y Teran 2012: 124) argues "public space creation or improvement through so-called urban policies for social inclusion may aim to implement material works but also to generate conditions which further social, cultural, and environmental rights for those who live and work in cities". In Mexican cities, policy makers and the authorities have adopted this approach of intervening in public space in support of urban transformation.

Consequently, over the last decade the issue of public space has been integrated into urban and social policies for the revitalization of urban space more generally, along with efforts to improve the social environment and eradicate crime in urban areas. In response to the problems and constraints that have characterized Mexican cities in recent years, a shift towards reconsidering policy for public space can thus be observed. Signifying a shift away from urban policies which mainly focused on the alleviation of poverty, the Federal Government has emphasised the link between public space and violence, and hence the necessity of improving and restoring abandoned and deteriorated public places in order to promote social cohesion and inclusion. The National Plan for Development published in 2014 aims to:

> Promote the restoration, maintenance, and appropriation of public space for the social prevention of violence and delinquency […] we can talk about a socially sustainable city when there is a strong social tissue, its citizens appropriate public spaces and its urban structure facilitates a harmonious coexistence of the society (SEDATU 2014).

In this context, since the beginning of 21st century, public urban space has been included in the national urban agenda. The issue has become part of national development plans, and urban development programmes, as well as municipal development plans and other local programmes and strategies. Various programmes and initiatives have emerged which aim to tackle urban problems by using public space as the physical means to materialize aspirations for safer and healthier urban environments. These are discussed in more detail below.

During President Vicente Fox's administration (2001-2006), public space was not explicitly included in national development plans, and was mainly considered within programmes to tackle urban poverty. Fox's main objective during his administration was to eradicate poverty and inequality through investment in infrastructure and services, and in public space through the implementation of programmes such as *Habitat",* detailed below. During the administration of Felipe Calderon (2007-2012), public programmes for the prevention of crime, insecurity and social violence in public spaces were created, in order to address the increasing levels of urban

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[1] For a list of acronyms, see Appendix 1.

insecurity and violence which had prevailed since the start of the 21st century. The latter public initiatives sought to establish mechanisms of co-operation and coordination with society to "rescue" public spaces from insecurity and guarantee their use for citizens. In particular, Calderon's administration promoted better development and living conditions through crime prevention and the provision of public spaces in urban communities, in support of the rights and freedoms of urban citizens.

The National Development Plan (2007-2012) established objectives and strategies related to public space at the national level, such as the creation of mechanisms in coordination with civil society to rescue public spaces and guarantee citizens' ownership of them. It also established the promotion, construction and renewal of parks, playgrounds and sports pitches, in support of the restoration of healthy and safe neighbourly coexistence. Under this administration, the importance of research and professional training for the development of public spaces for people with special needs was also considered. Additionally, strategies for the promotion and development of sports infrastructure were implemented, taking advantage of existing open public spaces to build sports pitches as a means of promoting participation in sports. These initiatives intended to reclaim public space to promote community identity, social cohesion and equal opportunities, as well as to diminish urban poverty and prevent antisocial behaviour (PND 2007-2012).

Based on these objectives, various programmes emerged, including the programme "*Rescate de Espacios Públicos*" or PREP (Public Space Rescue, literally translated), which was launched for the revitalization of public spaces; the programme *"Centros para el deporte escolar y municipal"* or CDEM (School and Municipal Sports Centres) for the creation of public spaces for sports and recreation in different neighbourhoods; and the programme "*Pueblos Mágicos*" (Magic Towns) for the tourist promotion of towns and villages. These programmes have had substantial impacts on the urban environment and public spaces of cities in Mexico (Table 3). One of the most influential and significant is the PREP*,* which fosters the relationship between urban and social development through strengthening social cohesion, community participation, citizen coexistence, gender equality and a sense of appropriation and belonging, encouraging inhabitants to take care of public spaces in order to prevent antisocial and criminal behaviour. This programme will be explained further in the next section.

Table 3 Programmes related to public space improvement, revitalization and development at National Level from 2000 to 2014.

President	Periods	Programmes	Ministry in charge	Year beginning
Vicente Fox Quezada	2000-2006	Pueblos Magicos Habitat CDEM	SECTUR SEDESOL CONADE	Created in 2001 Created in 2003 Created in 2003
Felipe Calderon Hinojosa	2007-2012	Habitat CDEM PREP	SEDESOL CONADE SEDESOL	Continued implementation Continued implementation Created in 2007
Enrique Peña Nieto	2013-2018	Habitat CDEM PREP Pueblos magicos PROCURHA	SEDATU CONADE SEDATU SECTUR SEDATU	Continued implementation Continued implementation Continued implementation Continued implementation Created in 2014

3.3 Current planning structures and public space programmes

It is important to note that, since 2012, Peña Nieto's administration has shown a renewed interest in urban and territorial planning, with the creation of a new federal Secretary for Rural, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU). This is very significant in the context of the decline of urban planning at national level: in Mexico, since the end of the 1980s, the importance of planning substantially diminished due to the transferral of responsibility for planning from the Secretary for Urban and Ecological Development (SEDUE) to the Secretary for Social Development (SEDESOL), meaning it became part of poverty reduction programmes. Urban planning therefore lost its power to control, organize and manage urban growth and development at national and regional level.

Additionally, since the 1980s, based on the Mexican Federal State's policies of decentralisation and municipal strengthening, responsibility for urban planning was transferred to municipalities[2]. Since then, municipalities have had to produce and implement their own urban development plans. This has resulted in the uneven, uncontrolled and disorganised urban growth and development that at present characterizes many Mexican cities. In particular, this situation is due to the great differences in planning expertise among municipalities, a lack of understanding of the importance of urban planning and the link between planning and development, and the lack of resources in many municipalities to create, implement and manage urban planning. Urban growth and development have therefore been left, on the one hand, to the informal development propagated by low-income populations striving for a place to live in marginal and precarious urban conditions; and on the other hand, at the mercy of a powerful economic sector which drives territorial and urban development according to its own interests.

The *HABITAT* Programme, created 2003 and still operating today, represents the first initiative to tackle urban poverty in Mexico. It was defined as a programme to link the objectives of social policy with those of urban and territorial policy. It includes actions related to social and community development, employment opportunities, neighbourhood improvement, environmental improvement and risk prevention, creation of Habitat agencies[3], provision of land for housing and urban development, urban infrastructure provision and city image improvement. Regarding public space, it offers funding for the cleaning and revitalization of gullies, road construction, community centre construction and improvement, construction of neighbourhood gardens, sports areas and housing façade renewal (SEDATU 2013). During the first years of the 21st century, the programme represented the government's main policy for social and community development, public space intervention, and urban improvement.

Also established in this year, the School and Municipal Sports Centres Programme -"*Centros del deporte escolar y municipal (CDEM)*"- aims to create suitable places to establish a systematic sports programme with sports leagues, tournaments, and sporting events to develop sportsman-like attitudes and capacities in the youth and general population in order to lessen and prevent antisocial behaviour, and diminish sedentary lifestyles. This programme is often

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[2] In 1983, Article 115 of the Mexican Constitution was reformed to establish the responsibility of municipalities for urban municipal planning and development. This reform granted municipalities the faculty to formulate, approve and manage zoning and development via urban municipal plans; to participate in the creation and administration of territorial reserves; to control and regulate land use within their territorial jurisdiction; to intervene in the regularization of urban land tenure; to issue building permissions; and to participate in the creation and management of natural areas. For further details see:
"Reforma al Artículo 115 Constitucional: Fortalecimiento Municipal" http://www.diputados.gob.mx/cronica57/contenido/cont8/leer5.htm.
[3] Habitat Agencies are local public and social associations for collaboration, negotiation and promotion of urban development projects to improve cities, enhance competitiveness and overcome poverty and marginality.

applied together with the Public Space programme (see below) in order to revitalize recreational areas for sports (Alvarado Solís, 2012; CONADE 2008-2012). According to official reports, this programme has had significant results because it has increased people's participation in sporting activities and has contributed to the decline of drug consumption and antisocial behaviour among the young population (CONEVAL 2009-2010).

The Public Space Rescue Programme (PREP), established in 2007, emerged from the Habitat Programme when funding for public space projects within this was replaced by a new programme focusing exclusively on public spaces. In this programme, public spaces were for the first time recognized as an important component of national urban planning, and as a means of diminishing urban crime and insecurity. It also represented a departure from the conceptualization of public space as a component of poverty reduction and crime prevention initiatives. Nowadays, it includes two kinds of actions: one related to community participation and neighbourhood safety, and a second one focussed on physical improvement. From the social perspective, it seeks to foster social integration and prevent antisocial behaviour through organized social networks; and promote women's rights, community, and a non-violent culture. From the physical point view, it includes actions towards the construction, renewal and revitalization of community public spaces such as sports centres, plazas, squares, green areas, parks and gardens, cultural places, cycling routes, bus stops, paths, and pavements, among other necessary public works around public spaces in order to allow people access and use (SEDATU 2013a).

Under the current administration of President Enrique Peña Nieto, a new programme has emerged from public policies established in the National Development Plan (2013-2018) called "*Mexico Incluyente*" (Inclusive Mexico), which aims to create social inclusion along with equality, cohesion and equal opportunities in a context of safety and peace, free from the threat of violence and crime. The National Development Plan of this administration includes objectives such as strengthening the social fabric and crime prevention through the "rescue" of deteriorated, abandoned and unsafe public urban spaces. It also seeks to encourage local governments to integrate projects for the revitalization of the social fabric and the appropriation of public space into their urban planning and development systems. Additionally, it seeks to work with authorities on extracurricular school activities that have an impact on neighbourhood life for the promotion of a sense of belonging and the creation of safer places. Finally, it aims to contribute to the renovation of existing housing stock, the efficiency of urban infrastructure and services and the improvement of public spaces and neighbourhood centres (PND 2013-2018). These objectives are also pursued by the "*Programa Nacional de Prevención Social de la Violencia y la Delincuencia (PNPSVD)*" (National Programme for Social Prevention of Violence and Crime) created in 2012, which seeks greater coordination and collaboration between the different federal agencies involved in the implementation of national social programmes fighting insecurity and crime.

With the recently created Secretary for Rural, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU), a renewed vision of urban and territorial development and planning has been adopted by the present federal administration. The government has recognized the unsustainable urban growth and development that have characterized regions and towns, and the negative social and physical impacts in the configuration of urban public spaces in recent decades. Therefore, more sustainable planning policies, strategies and programmes are expected in support of positive changes in urban space in the years to come.

For example, the Social Housing Renewal and Revitalization Programme "*Reordenamiento y rescate de unidades habitacionales-PROCURHA*", created in 2014, aims to tackle social housing abandonment and deterioration, private appropriation of public spaces, deterioration of public recreational and sports areas, lack of social identity, crime, and weak social relations and, in sum, the devaluation of individual houses and housing estates. This programme allocates resources in two ways: firstly, it supports actions to foster organized participation, coexistence and social responsibility for the improvement of living conditions; and secondly, it fosters actions related to the physical improvement of public spaces such as public service areas, spaces for circulation, and places for recreation and sports. This includes actions for façade renovation, renewal and renovation of corridors, stairs, plazas, paths, walkways, security offices, improvement of sports areas, recreational areas, parking places, covered streets, porches, playgrounds, courtyards, sidewalks, gardens, parks and all kinds of neighbourhood public areas (Figure 2).

Figure 2 The Social Housing Renewal and Revitalization Programme in Xalapa-Veracruz, Mexico.

Source: The author

The Secretary of Tourism supports various programmes related to tourism in Mexico, which have impacts on the built environment in various kinds of attractive cities – heritage cities, colonial cities and towns, and seaside resorts - for national and international visitors. As mentioned earlier, these programmes focus on the promotion of places to visitors seeking tourist activities; therefore investment in the urbanscape and public urban spaces is at the forefront of

creating attractive and exciting places. Among others, *"Pueblos Mágicos"* is a programme created in 2001, and still running today, which focuses on the promotion of small towns and places characterized by their particular history, culture and landscape. Through this programme 83 towns have improved their public spaces, such as pathways in natural areas, river-fronts, viewpoints, traditional markets, parks and squares. Moreover, the urban space is a focus of attention regarding the homogenization of façades and urban signs, street furniture, artistic lighting and the regularization of street vendors (SECTUR 2007).

In the implementation of these programmes, two approaches are observed in practice. Local governments intervene in central areas according to criteria based on the heritage and historic characteristics of the places, and based on economic factors related to the attraction of tourists, new inhabitants and investors. This approach contrasts with practices in deprived peripheral areas where actions for public space improvement are focused on providing greater functionality and overcoming shortcomings and deficits in infrastructure and urban facilities within the neighbourhood environment. In the context of these practices, what happens for public space development is relevant because it represents a key element in today's urban development processes in Mexican cities. Thus, on the one hand, deteriorated streets, parks and squares located in old and traditional neighbourhoods of central areas of cities are subject to intervention, and on the other hand, streets, neighbourhood parks, playgrounds and sport areas are built in peripheral neighbourhoods for the low income population. In this research both areas of implementation are addressed. In public space production processes, many actors from different institutional backgrounds intervene with their own individual and collective interests. Therefore, through the exploration and analysis of different kinds of neighbourhoods and towns where different and particular physical, social and economic conditions may shape public space development, a broader and deeper perspective on different actors, interests, processes and contexts can be achieved. This comparative perspective can bring a clearer vision in terms of understanding equality or inequality of access to public space or access to funding for improvement. We may find differences in inhabitants´ priorities for improvement and development, as well as contrasts in the different actors´ interests (government, inhabitants and other organizations). Finally, differences and contrasts in the quality of urban space produced may be found. Additionally these issues may be correlated to the location of neighbourhoods, peoples´ social and economic status, inhabitant's capacity to self-organize and manage help and resources.

Ideally public spaces should give opportunities for collective, democratic and common living and enjoyment, where different groups can come together. Besides, they should maintain their public spirit, free access and inclusion in the promotion of the wellbeing of communities. Considering recent interventions for public space development under the framework of public policies and programmes such as those managed by the Secretary for Social Development (SEDESOL) and now by Secretary for Rural, Territorial and Urban Development (SEDATU) and the National Commission for Sports (CONADE), it is important to research processes and the results of their actions. Therefore, the research aims to explore how policies and programmes consider the configuration of contemporary public space; and how accessible, democratic and participatory public space revitalization processes are (in terms of their planning, management, implementation and use). Moreover, it seeks to study the adequacy of public space transformation processes and initiatives and their contribution to physical, spatial and social urban improvement of public spaces; and finally, it intends to explore the effectiveness of public policies for public space revitalization and their influence on urban development at the local level.

4. Methodology

Previous studies of public space production have analysed the actors involved, design approaches, and morphological characteristics, as well as territorial and social impacts (Carr, et al. 1992, Madanipour 1999, Akkar 2003). Meanwhile, other themes have been explored in relation to the social and cultural dynamics of appropriation and use (eg. Riaño 1998, Francis 1991). However, in public space research, not enough attention has been paid to the diversity of processes and dynamics involved in its production in an integrated way (see Table 1). This research approaches public space issues including political-normative, physical-spatial, socio-cultural and symbolic-psychological aspects simultaneously, with the purpose of having a complete understanding of the aspects and conditions in which public spaces are improved, revitalized and developed.

In this way, this study approaches public space analysis in a similar way to Madanipour (2000) and Miles (2000), who argue that intellectual integration is needed to reach a complete understanding of urban space. Madanipour points out the need for a unified approach to examine urban space as the objective, that is to say, to examine physical space with its social and psychological dimensions. This means adopting an integrated conceptualization, in which the ways societies perceive, create and use space are addressed simultaneously. Consequently, this research essentially analyses processes, products and impacts, intending to reach deep knowledge about the complexities of urban space production. Thus, the research project asks the following questions:
1) What is the relevance of public programmes and other local strategies launched at the different governmental levels in metropolitan areas for public space revitalization?
2) In this context, how do planning processes for public space revitalization work?
3) How do revitalization strategies influence new methods of city and public space creation in support of more civilized, safer and greater citizen coexistence?

Here revitalization is defined as the process of renovation and improvement of public open spaces such as streets, parks, sport areas and neighbourhood communal spaces with a sustainable and renewed physical and social life, with the objective of creating safer and more pleasant urban space.

Since this investigation covers a variety of political, normative, physical, social, cultural and symbolic aspects, this work requires a combination of various qualitative and quantitative research strategies, which are based on case study approaches. This allows the combination of diverse instruments and sources of information for data collection and analysis. From a qualitative perspective, in-depth interviews with the actors involved (e.g. authorities, officials, professionals, inhabitants) in revitalization processes were carried out. Alongside actors involved in a professional capacity, it is important to hear the voices of residents in order to know more about the processes and procedures of public space transformation. The perspectives of residents, users and ordinary participants in public space improvement may reveal the way processes of public space configuration occur from a different standpoint, that of local people's experiences, opinions and thoughts. People's knowledge about the way processes occur – through the production and consumption of public places - is an important source of information that helps to disclose issues related to accessibility, participation and democracy in public space transformation, focusing on planning, design, construction, maintenance and use.

Additionally, archives and documents related to political, normative, and physical transformations were examined. From the architectural, design and planning perspective, a systematic visual analysis was carried out in order to explore physical and spatial changes and their impacts on the urban structure and urban scape. These analyses will form the basis for later research activities studying the dynamics of public space use and appropriation following

similar strategies of data collection and analysis; at this stage, a questionnaire survey will also be carried out with managers, inhabitants and users of public spaces, in order to complement the study with people's opinions and perceptions in a broader context, using quantitative methods.

From an academic point of view, this project aims, firstly to design a methodological approach to explore public space revitalization under a specific framework of urban policies; secondly, to contribute to the study of public space from an architectural and urban planning perspective, based on a broad and integrated focus considering processes and products; and finally, to consolidate and research the theme of public space in the context of Veracruz State.

5. The values of public spaces in current government programmes

The public programmes described previously have had an important impact on the configuration of public spaces in the Mexican urban context; and to a certain extent, they include some, if not all, of the ideal values and functions of public spaces (see Table 1). It can be suggested that a successful public space is that one that incorporates all the values, dimensions and functions outlined in this table. This could be seen as an ideal type of public space. However, through history, it has been shown that public spaces have never been totally accessible, democratic, cohesive and inclusive (Madanipour 2010). In this way, it is important to question what public space values and roles are fostered in public programmes for public space renewal and revitalization in Mexican cities. Based on the conceptual and theoretical framework presented earlier, the values incorporated in each programme are discussed.

The *Habitat* programme is one of the most integrative policies because it considers various dimensions involved in the development of urban neighbourhoods, from environmental and spatial to economic and social aspects. Regarding public spaces, the physical and morphological, the social, and the symbolic dimensions of public urban space are promoted through different strategies for the revitalization and improvement of neighbourhoods. According to some researchers (Graizbord & Gonzales 2012:300) who have evaluated its effectiveness, *Habitat* is an extensive programme, with targets and goals covering a wide range of issues to tackle urban poverty and marginalization in an integrated manner (social, economic, environmental and spatial); however, its high aspirations are difficult to accomplish.

Recently, official evaluations (CONEVAL[4] 2012-2013) showed that the programme has been successful in a greater provision of urban basic infrastructure, greater resident satisfaction in relation to urban environmental conditions, and increasing investments in housing and property values. However, it also stated that the programme did not improve social capital in the *colonias* and *barrios* where it operated, perhaps because this has been constrained by the prevailing urban insecurity in the country. These results show that *Habitat* has promoted various values and roles, including economic ones, for the improvement of the public realm. However, far from diminishing urban insecurity, this has limited the programme's success, bringing into question the social and environmental role and value of the programme to improve the quality of the public realm.

With respect to the *Centros del Deporte Escolar y Municipal (CDEM)* programme, the psychological value is the most important. The programme seeks to foster personal and human development through sport, and it recognizes public spaces as crucial in the creation of healthy minds and bodies. Therefore, the restorative quality of public places is a core motive in building school and municipal sports centres in neighbourhoods. On this basis, the social function and value of public places is promoted as these kinds of spaces become centres for social recreation,

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4 National Council for the Evaluation of the Social Development Policy.

connection and interaction in low-income and marginal neighbourhoods. According to official sources (CONEVAL 2009-2010), the programme has been successful because it has promoted family and community integration, as well as a changing attitude towards physical exercise. It has also contributed to diminishing social problems within neighbourhoods where alcohol and drug consumption rates are high. Furthermore, it is argued that substantial changes have been achieved as juvenile offenders and young gang members have been integrated into sports activities. Considering CONEVAL's evaluation, it seems that this programme, in seeking to secure healthy and sustainable public space, successfully supports social and psychological values and functions in fostering social and sport activities for low-income populations. However, if we reflect on crime figures, it can be said that these actions have not had any concrete effect on crime reduction. Indeed, in recent years crime rates have continuously increased[5].

With regard to the *Rescate de espacios públicos* (*PREP)* programme, this has a strong social dimension. It primarily acknowledges the social value of public spaces in cities, and recognizes that the enhancement of the physical and morphological values of public space is crucial to foster its social dimension. The programme's objectives are also focused on achieving greater accessibility, functionality and mobility, which leads to the consideration of public spaces as connectors and integrators of urban form, as Lynch (1992) and Carr (1992) regard them. It is worth mentioning that the political value of public spaces as places for communication and involvement is included in the actions relating to fostering social participation: the programme seeks to promote citizens' input in the planning, implementation and management of public spaces, with the objective of promoting the appropriation of space and a sense of belonging from the early stages of development.

People's participation in the production of the built environment gives rise to people's identification with a given space and the establishment of stronger links with the surrounding environment. This, in turn, can generate a sense of appropriation of and belonging to urban spaces, giving rise to the symbolic value of public space as a complement to social values. Regarding the PREP programme, official evaluations have considered that its strength is its contribution to reducing perceptions of insecurity in improved public spaces, generating trust and confidence for citizen participation and reinforcing social links and interaction among neighbours and in the community (CONEVAL 2012-2013). In this way, the social objective of the programme is fulfilled.

Regarding the programme "*Reordenamiento y rescate de unidades habitacionales-PROCURHA*", the values and functions identified within its precepts are social, political, physical, morphological and economic. Additionally, the recognition of community participation, social organization and physical improvement through well-designed and maintained public spaces underpins its contribution to increasing property values of social housing developments in major cities. This is encapsulated in the aims of the programme as set down in the operating rules:

> To contribute to the improvement of welfare conditions [social value] of people living in social housing developments in cites, through social organization [political value] for the revitalization of common areas, therefore contributing to the improvement of the urban scape and the positive appropriation and enhancement of the space [physical and

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[5] For example, in 2011, 49 per cent of the population of the State of Veracruz perceived the park near their homes as safe and 50.5% unsafe. However, in 2014, 39 per cent of the population perceived the park near their homes as safe and 60.3 % as unsafe (Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVIPE 2011 and 2014).

morphological value] as well as contributing to the increase of housing values [economic value] (SEDATU 2013b).

In a different sense, economic value is also manifested in the programmes implemented by the Secretary of Tourism such as "*Pueblos Mágicos*" (Magic Town), in which the important issue is to promote local identities (environmental, spatial, social, cultural) in order to foster the economy of towns and regions through tourist attraction, in towns such as Coatepec, Xico and Papantla in Veracruz State. It could be argued that symbolic value – contained in beliefs, traditions, and landscapes relating to specific places - is also considered as important, but only in support of the commodification of towns through the brand name "*Pueblo Mágico*". While it is undeniable that this strategy is relevant to stimulate local economies where people's income is low and jobs are limited, in this context place identity, local character and collective activities are mainly seen as important to support the economic component of this initiative. In these sense, the programme has strongly been criticized because of its commercial vision, which has arguably generated greater segregation of local inhabitants, loss of identity, capital gains, and perceptions of social status and security similar to those experienced in shopping malls (Quiroz Rothe 2008).

From a relational analysis of the values and roles of public spaces identified in urban theory compared with the concepts and guidelines established in the above programmes' operating rules, it can be seen that many of these values are incorporated in the programmes' definitions, objectives and goals (Table 4). However, none of them integrally considers each and every potential value and role of public space.

In most programmes the social function and value of public spaces is taken into consideration, since community interaction, social contact and vitality are important elements in their formulation. The physical-morphological value is also included in all of them, since issues related to accessibility, connectivity, and architectural identity and character are incorporated. Basically, architectural-urban physical interventions provide the main channel to support other public space functions and values. Furthermore, political values are also evident in most strategies, since citizen participation, community organization and citizens' rights exercised in the programmes' implementation are part of the planning and building processes. Here, the characteristics of public space as a place of political action, demonstration and protest can also be integrated.

However, some aspects and functions of public space remain ignored or not well recognized in these programmes. From the physical and morphological perspective, the urban structuring function of public spaces is little acknowledged. The creation of interconnected public spaces as an organizing and structuring network for Mexican cities is not well considered. Each programme regards public spaces as separate, isolated and individual components rather than as a whole, or as part of a system through which cities could attain greater organization, structure and balance and equity in the provision of urban public space. Finally, regarding symbolic value, none of the programmes conceptualise public space as a place of representation, meaning, memory, life experience, or individual and collective feeling. It is important to point out that generally these aspects are scarcely present in public space projects, and are infrequently acknowledged as important aspects of urban space configuration and development.

Table 4 Values and roles of public spaces in government programmes for public space in Mexico

Programme / Values	HABITAT	*PREP*	*CDEM*	*PROCURHA*	*PUEBLOS MÁGICOS*
Physical	It considers public space as urban connector, through actions to connect neighbourhoods such as the paving of streets.	It promotes accessibility, functionality and mobility through actions such as the construction of cycling routes, paths, and pavements.	It considers public space as an urban component for recreation, through actions such as the construction of sport pitches and sport areas.	It considers public space as a communal space, and it seeks to tackle physical abandonment and deterioration.	It considers aesthetics and urban image of public space.
Social	It includes actions related to strengthening the social fabric, e.g. the creation of community centres.	It promotes social participation, the fostering of social networks and crime prevention through social strategies.	It seeks to foster social interaction through sports.	It fosters organized participation, social coexistence and welfare.	
Political	It considers urban space as a place to exercise citizen´s rights through actions related to employment and educational opportunities for women.	It promotes people's participation in public space processes.	It promotes people's participation specifically in schools and as members of sport clubs and leagues.	It promotes residents' participation for public space and housing revitalization.	It promotes the participation of different local groups (e.g. authorities, entrepreneurs, associations, etc.)
Economic	It has contributed to raising property values.			It contributes to raising housing values.	It seeks the commodification of urban space.
Psychologi-cal			It promotes personal and human development: healthy minds and bodies.		
Symbolic	It promotes identity and character through urban image improvements and housing façade renewal.	It promotes the appropriation of space and a sense of belonging			It promotes the external projection of beliefs, traditions, and local landscapes.

6. The case of Xalapa, Mexico

To explore the implementation of public policies and programmes for public space revitalization in Mexico, the metropolitan area of Xalapa in the central area of the State of Veracruz has been selected as a case study. This case has been selected because of the ease of access to sources of information and the willingness to participate on the part of public servants

and inhabitants. Later in the research project, other cities in Veracruz will be explored which offer differences in population, territorial, social and economic characteristics, and it is hoped that the research findings will offer a general panorama of the implementation of public programmes related to public space revitalization in Veracruz. However, this paper deals only with the city of Xalapa, as the first case that has been explored.

Xalapa is a medium-sized city with a population of 457,928 (INEGI, 2010), the capital of the State of Veracruz, located in the east of Mexico. As the State Capital, Xalapa functions as a regional administrative, commercial and financial centre (Amezcua Cardiel, 1990 in Lombard 2014:21). Due to a relative absence of any manufacturing industry, Xalapa's economy is mainly based on the commerce and service functions of the tertiary sector. This employs the majority of the city's workforce, specifically in property and government bureaucracy (Meyers, 2003 in Lombard 2014:21).

In comparison to other cities in Mexico, that have few parks and green open spaces, Xalapa boasts many public open spaces, due to the existence of a great number of parks (56) and green spaces (400) with a great variety of exuberant vegetation. However, these spaces, located throughout the city, represent sites of diverse dynamics in accordance with the different agents and users that contribute to their permanence and development. Overall, in both in central and peripheral areas of the city, public spaces have suffered from deterioration and abandonment, and in certain cases – mainly in peripheral neighbourhoods – even disappearance.

In the last few decades, the rapid population growth and physical expansion of the city have provoked various urban problems common to medium-sized cities in the developing world, such as a lack of efficient public transportation, streets congested by the excessive use of private cars, a lack of urban facilities and spaces for recreation, and low-quality housing in new urban areas, as well as social problems such as poverty, insecurity and crime. Consequently, all these factors have contributed to diminishing the quality of city life in Xalapa, with negative implications for the wellbeing of public spaces.

6.1 Public space in Xalapa's planning agenda in recent years

As mentioned previously, national policies and programmes related to public space improvement have acquired great importance in local urban development agendas in many cities in Mexico. Xalapa is not isolated from these urban dynamics. During the last decade, under most recent administrations, the advancement of public space revitalization and improvement has been evident, and various initiatives and their actions have been included in the Municipal Development Plans of the last three administrative periods[6]. The three administrative periods we are referring to are: Mayor David Velazco Chedraui (2008-2010), Mayor Elizabeth Morales Garcia (2011-2013) and the present administration headed by Mayor Américo Zuñiga Martinez (2013-2016) all representing the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI).

The Municipal Development Plan 2008-2010 promoted a guiding principle called "a clean city", in which urban parks, neighbourhood green areas and gardens, as well as other kinds of public spaces, were included in a sustainable environmental agenda. The objective was to boost Xalapa as a hub of metropolitan and regional development through the planning of urban services and infrastructure provision, bearing in mind the conservation and management of assets including natural areas and public spaces. Therefore, the plan aimed to consolidate existing urban parks as spaces of social interaction and recreation to attract more visitors for the benefit of the city and its inhabitants. Moreover, the plan established the creation of new public parks in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods, where people could do exercise, spend time and enjoy

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[6] In Mexico, until 2013, government periods at the municipal level were for three years.

themselves. The municipal council aimed to improve these spaces in collaboration with the state and national governments. According to the Development Plan, the government intended to satisfy people's demand for high quality playgrounds and parks, so that children and teenagers would not use the streets instead, potentially interrupting vehicular traffic or getting involved in antisocial activities.

The Municipal Development Plan 2011-2013 included in its main principles "the use of public space" (page 7). This administration focused on the social and cultural use and appropriation of public spaces; another of its core guidelines was the promotion of culture, and specifically the promotion of a public urban culture, based on the government's identification of a lack of a culture of appropriation of public spaces. According to the Municipal Plan, in the contemporary era, the rise of digital public spaces has contributed to a lack of traditional local identity and commitment to actual public space protection. Based on these considerations, during this administration the promotion of the maintenance, renovation and construction of public spaces was a permanent task. In this view, the functioning of public spaces depends on joint actions relating to security, respect, public space appropriation and a healthy civic and participative attitude.

In the present administration, 2013-2016, the Municipal Development Plan includes the issue of public space, but in contrast to previous administrations the topic is given less importance. Within the Division of Public Works, the plan mentions the need to improve parks and gardens to promote social interaction and recreation. Additionally, the issue of urban mobility is higher up the agenda: in recent years, due to the excessive use of private cars, street congestion has become an important problem in the city. The plan therefore proposes the improvement of transport infrastructure through interventions such as the pedestrianisation of streets, the provision of parking spaces in the historic centre, and the re-designing of streets to allow them to be used with greater safety, comfort and accessibility by all kinds of users.

It is important to point out that all the previous government initiatives and actions included in local development plans are under the framework of national programmes such as the *Habitat* programme, the *Rescate de Espacios Públicos* (PREP) programme or the *Centros del Deporte Escolar y Municipal (CDEM)* programme. The federal government, through these programmes, usually finances most public space interventions at the municipal level. In consequence, at the local level authorities have to apply and meet the different requirements established in the national guidelines for the implementation of actions and interventions.

In the case of Xalapa, for the last 10 years the city has received funding to improve and revitalize different public spaces in central as well as peripheral neighbourhoods. Interventions have been focused on public spaces in the historic centre, along with other public space improvements in residential areas. According to Annual Municipal Reports (H. Ayuntamiento de Xalapa 2005, 2008), over the last eight years diverse actions have been carried out in the city centre, including: the viewing platform at Los Lagos Promenade; the revitalization of the San José neighbourhood; the renovation of the 5 de Febrero Park; the revitalization of Gonzalez Alley; the creation of the tourist promenade "Historic Centre and Los Lagos" between Herrera Street and El Dique Street (Figure 4) ; and the pedestrianisation of Miguel Palacios Street and Arrieta Street (Figure 3).

In the peripheral neighbourhoods various public places have been improved and revitalized such as Macuiltepetl Park; and various municipal and school sports centres have been built, for example in the neighbourhoods of Arboledas del Sumidero, Infonavit-Pomona, and El Coyol, with others constructed in Valles de Cristal, Morelos, Lagunilla, Camino Antiguo a Naolinco, Casa Blanca and Buena Vista (Figure 5). Moreover, many streets have been paved and

improved with drainage, water and electricity services in low-income neighbourhoods. Apart from the physical interventions in many public spaces, social and sports activities, along with job training courses and workshops, have been sponsored by the *Habitat* and *Public Space Revitalization* programmes, organized by the municipality in collaboration with the community.
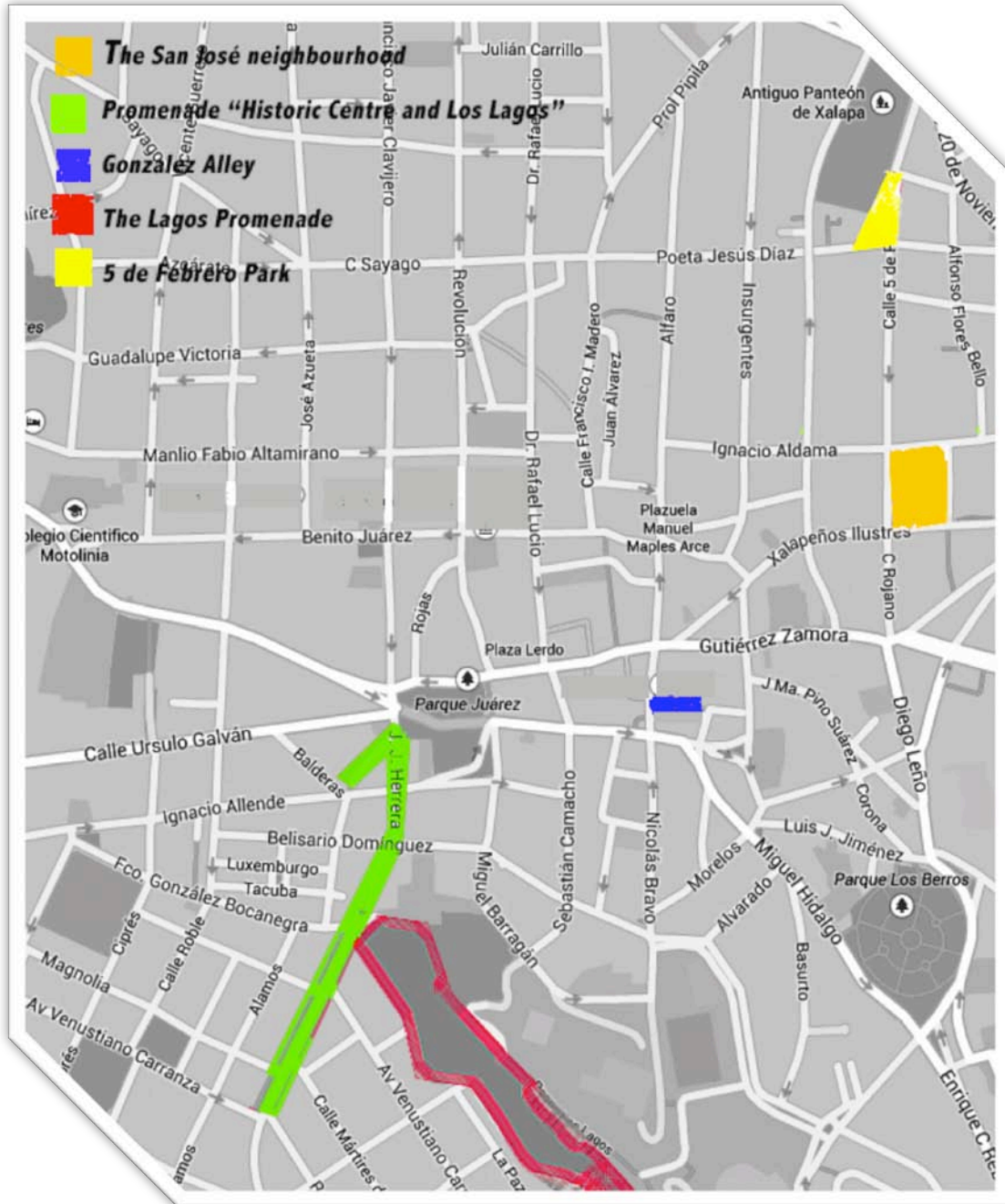

Figure 5 Xalapa´s City centre and the location of recent public space interventions

Figure 4 Improvements in Los Lagos promenade. Source: The author

Figure 5 Public space improvements in a peripheral neighbourhood. Source: The author

These interventions raise important questions with regard to the correspondence of the programmes and the way they are implemented at the local level. These relate to, on the one hand, how these parks, sports centres and other public areas, created under the framework of national and municipal programmes, meet the goals and objectives of the national policies; and on the other hand, how these interventions respond to the community's needs where these improvements have occurred. Moreover, the question about how particular physical, social, contextual and locational conditions (e.g. central or peripheral neighbourhoods) shape public space improvement and revitalization is also relevant. These issues are explored in the case of Xalapa.

6.2 Current constraints and programme implementation

Although there is still a lot of research that needs to be done, recent fieldwork found various mismatches between programme guidelines, implementation and results. According to interviews with planning officials in Xalapa, one of the limitations for the implementation of national policies and programmes such as *Habitat* or *Public Space* is the way in which federal agencies in charge of such programmes, such as SEDESOL (Secretary of Social Development) or SEDATU (Secretary of Rural, Territorial and Urban Development), identify zones for the programmes' implementation in cities. This is usually according to the so-called "*Poligonos de Pobreza*" (classified urban poverty areas). Urban poverty areas are identified and classified according to the current national urban indicators and statistics in relation to unemployment, education, lack of services, infrastructure, housing and so forth. However, in practice planning officials and civil servants argue that often resources cannot be allocated to neighbourhoods in real need because they are not identified by the State Secretaries (in other words, State-level representatives of federal agencies) within their territorial classification of urban poverty. Therefore, local authorities often identify neighbourhoods where it is crucial to carry out interventions, but this is not possible because of the national centralization of policymaking and programme implementation.

Another constraint is the lack of continuity of national programmes at municipal level. This happens for various reasons such as administrative changes (e.g. the turnover of municipal authorities) or failures in the programmes' implementation. Additionally, budget cuts at national level, or a lack of sufficient financial resources at the local level to fulfil the municipal share[7] can be a cause of programmes' disruption. According to municipal officials, programmes such as "*El Rescate de Espacios Públicos*" have very complex procedures and are very rigid and strict. In consequence, project and implementation changes can very difficult to manage, accomplish and get approved by the federal authorities.

> The programme is complex […] any change is difficult to manage […] the implementation of funds, the intervention and its procedures and finally the verification of expenditure have to be very efficient and well done. I don´t know exactly why, but last year, the previous municipal authorities did not apply and as a result, the budget was cut from 30 million to 2 million pesos. (An official of the Administration 2013-2016)

Furthermore, officials in Xalapa argue that for smaller municipalities it can be difficult to access resources and support from national programmes, because they often lack the essential expertise and resources (e.g. professional, technological, administrative) to apply according to the established procedures. Respondents suggested that municipal authorities, from smaller or poorer cities nearby Xalapa, have come to the State capital asking for assistance and help with

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[7] Often, programmes and their projects are implemented on a tripartite basis, each government level (federal, state, municipal) contributing with a portion of resources and funds.

applying to national government programmes. Additionally, as they often lack efficient resources, they also come to use Xalapa's technological and administrative infrastructure.

Another issue relates to how the programmes are implemented at neighbourhood level. For example, the following quote describes how Xalapa's officials approached the improvement and revitalization of *Parque 5 de Febrero* located in the historic centre of Xalapa:

> Parque 5 de Febrero (Public Space Programme): Here there was opposition, they (the municipality) wanted to build some fountains, but here in the neighbourhood nobody accepted this, because these things usually work at the beginning, but later on they become rubbish bins […] In this space, nobody knew anything about the project, the authorities did not ask us, nobody knew, nobody participated, they just arrived and started to demolish the park […] but you know, there is always somebody asking and investigating what is going on, so we came to know that there would be some fountains in the park, so 5 or 6 people started to become involved and we stopped these actions. (A resident living opposite Parque 5 de Febrero)

As mentioned earlier, most programmes establish in their guidelines the participation of the community in various stages of the implementation processes; however, as seen in the case of *Parque 5 de Febrero*, those in charge of public space improvement processes on the part of the local authorities often do not follow these procedures, with potentially negative effects. Firstly, this may be because the real needs of some users, groups or the whole community may not be taken into account in the design of the physical interventions in the space and in the general improvement and revitalization of the space; and secondly, in the long run, it may be because the lack of citizen participation, identification with and appropriation of public space projects could negatively affect participation in ongoing maintenance and protection activities. In this case, the political and the symbolic values of public space, identified in most programmes, are lost in the implementation process carried out by the local authorities. Consequently, in this scenario, some of the main goals of the programmes may not be attained.

The research showed that there are positive results in other cases. For example, the case of the sports area of *Colonia Arboledas del Sumidero,* located in the periphery of Xalapa, shows signs of success in terms of social use, positive appropriation and citizen coexistence:

> Módulo Deportivo Arboledas del Sumidero (School and Municipal Sports Centres Programme): This area is very alive, if you come in the morning, you will find it full, if you check the matches programme, we have seven categories, 5-year-old children come to train for football, many children from the schools around come to this place, teachers also bring lots of children, this area is one of the most visited and used to train for football and other sports in the colonias! (Head of the Football League in Colonia Arboledas del Sumidero)

This case shows that the *School and Municipal Sports Centres Programme* is meeting the needs of the young population and other groups of the neighbourhood. It also suggests that this government programme is having positive impacts in the public life of peripheral neighbourhoods in Xalapa, and therefore through these interventions the programmes' aims have being achieved. According to the interviews carried out with residents and users of the space, this area used to be abandoned, dark and mostly appropriated by undesirable users (e.g. alcohol and drug consumers). Nowadays, the space is in better condition, where a healthier social and physical environment is perceived (Figure 6).

Figure 6 Módulo Deportivo Arboledas del Sumidero.

Source: The author

However, the case of the sports area in *Arboledas del Sumidero* also demonstrates that interventions under the framework of national programmes could be limited due to diverse constraints (e.g. political, financial, administrative, etc.). Following the implementation of public space programmes in *Arboledas del Sumidero*, inhabitants have participated in managing, controlling and improving their sports area with their own resources and capacities, in support of creating the desired public space. Consequently, the construction (social and physical) of this public space has continued through the actions of appropriation, maintenance and use that residents have carried out. They have built toilets and vending/seating stands, they have installed the park's lighting, and nowadays they also pay the electricity bill. These actions demonstrate the emergence of sense of belonging and appropriation on the part of the residents and users of the space. In this way, through peoples' participation and involvement, the social and the political values of the programmes are reflected in this peripheral public space. Moreover, the symbolic value that can emerge from socially driven public space processes is also evident in this case, through peoples' actions of identification with and appropriation of their public space.

In this context, according to officials, an important strength of public space programmes – specifically the "PREP" programme – is that, in parallel to physical improvements and transformations, the implementation of social actions is required. This means that at least 10 to

15 per cent of the budget for public space revitalization must be assigned to the social strategy of the project. Consequently, in the design and construction processes, areas or spaces to carry out these activities have also been taken into account. Thus, in Xalapa, various educational, social and cultural workshops have taken place in improved public spaces, including sports tournaments, embroidery and painting workshops, and even conferences about a variety of topics such as sexuality, employment opportunities, gender equity, etc.

According to Xalapa's officials this social element, implemented by the national programmes' procedures, has implied new ways of working for public space projects within the municipal administration. Therefore, the collaboration of various technical and social agencies to implement the social strategy of public space projects has been required (e.g. the Direction of Public Works, the Direction of Urban Planning, the Municipal System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF), the Municipal Sport Commission and the Direction for Culture). This aspect shows that municipal authorities have understood the complexity of public space projects, as Carmona (2008) mentioned, and the way that public space revitalization should be approached in order to overcome deterioration and abandonment and achieve healthier and higher quality public spaces.

6.3 Public space and local initiatives

At the local level, municipal authorities have launched their own local programmes and initiatives related to public space improvement and revitalization, according to available resources, local characteristics and needs. As mentioned earlier, the municipal council in charge of the city administration between 2010 and 2013 promoted the cultural appropriation of and identity with public spaces, and implemented a recreational and cultural programme in order to enliven public spaces with the creation of urban galleries at strategic points in the city as well as many other recreational, social and cultural activities such as fairs, festivals, tourist tours and walks in various parks and streets. This administration aimed to encourage people to use, enjoy and appropriate public spaces for recreation and relaxation. At the same time, it also sought to create links based on the identification of people with places. While it is understood that many municipal level authorities organise and sponsor cultural and social activities in public spaces as part of their cultural programme, the interesting thing during the administration (2010-2013) was the strong emphasis on the social use and appropriation of public spaces in order to enliven the city's urban space. Through these initiatives the social and symbolic value and role of public spaces was fostered in Xalapa.

At present in Xalapa, interesting local initiatives have emerged in association with the Inter-American Development Bank within the Emerging and Sustainable Cities initiative, which seeks to respond to urban development challenges in emerging cities through a technical assistance programme that helps intermediate cities in Latin America and the Caribbean in identifying, prioritizing and structuring projects to improve their environmental, urban and fiscal sustainability (IDB 2014). In Xalapa, this international programme has focused on public space in order to improve parks and streets in the city and their function as urban connectors and for urban mobility.

In terms of the administrative changes, proposals for the creation of a dedicated office in charge of public space issues have been put on the table, following the trends of other urban administrations such as the current metropolitan government in Mexico City; however, this has not yet been seriously considered in Xalapa. Meanwhile, a municipal committee for urban mobility has recently been created in order to face up to the problems caused by the excessive motorized transportation in the city; and the present municipality has created the Sub-Direction for Public Space Conservation in order to promote the maintenance and beautification of parks, streets and green areas in the city. From this a programme called *"Xalapa florece"* (Xalapa is

flowering) has emerged, in order to sustain and preserve the ecological environment and the beauty of streets, parks and green areas in the city, with the participation of citizens, local organizations and businesses through the adoption of public green areas to maintain and improve them. Again, *Parque 5 de Febrero* is a case where this local initiative has been implemented, because local residents have adopted the park to promote and help to keep it in good condition (Figure 7).

Figure 7 Programme "Xalapa Florece" in Xalapa´s parks (the 5 de Febrero Park).

Source: The author

7. Preliminary insights and conclusions

Further research is needed in order to address the various questions and issues posed by this study. As mentioned earlier, the analysis of some other cities and case studies in the State of Veracruz will be carried out later in the research process. However, so far, the case of Xalapa gives the opportunity to outline some preliminary thoughts about what is happening at the local level in relation to public space revitalization and improvement under the framework of national programmes.

Although occurring on a small scale and at a slow speed, changes have been observed at the national and local levels in approaches towards public space in Mexican cities. It is an issue that has become more significant in the political arena in the country. It is important to note that international organisations and institutions (eg. UNHS, ECLAC IDB) have promoted the significance of public space for the revitalization and regeneration of cities. So, public space policies and strategies are an emerging trend worldwide. Mexican civil servants and politicians have not been isolated from these theses global tendencies of city planning and management. In the case of Xalapa, national programmes for public space improvement and revitalization are very well established, and civil servants recognize the great importance of applying for financial resources from the federal government under the framework of national policies and programmes in order to carry out initiatives.

In relation to public space planning and design at the local and neighbourhood level, it has been observed that physical changes may not be properly discussed and negotiated with the community and future users; this was found in some neighbourhoods in central areas of the city. The renovated urban character of public spaces may not meet community desires and aspirations or may constrain the continuity of previous social and recreational activities that took place before improvement. This situation leads to the reflection that different interests are

observed in public space interventions depending on the context where these initiatives are carried out.

On the one hand, in central areas, authorities' interests are often focused on the commodification of spaces to attract visitors and tourism, affecting the local identity and putting aside the real needs of the inhabitants, as has sometimes happened in the revitalization of public spaces in historic centres and in the "*Pueblos Mágicos*" programme. Thus, economic values and interests seem to prevail. On the other hand, in peripheral areas, the social, political and symbolic values of the local population often prevail, as actions are focussed on the social development of the low-income population and the physical and environmental improvement of marginalized neighbourhoods, as seen in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Xalapa.

Programmes may integrate the ideal values and roles identified with more adequate and high quality public spaces; however, there may be contextual factors and conditions that constrain the implementation process and the programmes' outcomes. As a result, the values incorporated in the programmes' objectives and goals can be weakened in the resulting interventions for public space revitalization. As seen previously, this has happened in some interventions in Xalapa, where the social and political value represented by citizen participation is diminished in the stages of implementation, particularly where officials and authorities have not informed and involved residents about public space revitalization in their neighbourhoods. Besides, the programmes' success could also be constrained by certain conditions such as increasing urban insecurity and crime, which for example have constrained the success of the *Habitat* programme. Finally, as suggested by city architects and officials, some neighbourhoods may need improvements relating to public spaces; however, since they are not identified by state agencies, applications to finance public space improvements cannot be carried out, and therefore public space improvements in accordance with national programmes are not possible.

All these issues support reflection on one of the research goals about how democratic, accessible and participatory the processes of public space revitalization (planning, management, implementation and use) are. So the question of how democracy, participation and accessibility are defined in public space programmes in recent years for the case of a Mexican city such as Xalapa becomes relevant. So far, the research shows that in these programmes the democratic, cultural and inclusive functions of public spaces are only partially addressed.

Finally, reflecting on the values and functions that have historically been identified with public spaces, the role of public spaces as urban connectors and structural components is little recognized. Each programme regards public spaces as individual and isolated elements, but not as part of a system or network that could contribute to a better urban structuration, organization and configuration of more democratic, egalitarian and inclusive cities.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix I: List of Acronyms

Acronym	Definition and Translation
CDEM	Programme *"Centros para el deporte escolar y municipal"* (School and Municipal Sports Centres)
CONADE	Comisión Nacional del Deporte (National Commission for Sports)
CONEVAL	Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo (National Council of Policies Evaluation)
DIF	Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (System for the Integral Development of the Family
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ENVIPE	Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (National Surveys of Victimization and Perception of Public Safety)
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (National Institute of Statics, Geography and Information Technology)
PND	*Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (National Plan for Development)*
PNPSVD	*Programa Nacional de Prevención Social de la Violencia y la Delincuencia (*(National Programme for Social Prevention of Violence and Crime)
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Revolutionary Institutional Party)
PREP	Programa Rescate de Espacios Públicos *(*Public Space Rescue Programme)
PROCURH*A*	Programa de Reordenamiento y Rescate de Unidades Habitacionales *(*Social Housing Renewal and Revitalization Programme)
SEDATU	Secretaria de Desarrollo Agrario Territorial y Urbano (Secretary for Rural, Territorial and Urban Development)
SECTUR	Secretaria de Turismo (Secretary of Turism)
SEDESOL	Secretaria de Desarrollo Social (Secretary of Social Development)
UNHS	United Nations for Human Development

Appendix II: List of Interviews

No.	Pseudonym	Type	Sex	Age	Details	Date
1	Mario	Resident, Arboledas del Sumidero		45	Head of the Football League, in Parque Deportivo Cafetales	10.08.12
2	Fernando	Municipal official	M	43	Public Works Director 2013-2016	30.05.13
3	Roberto	Municipal official	M	57	Public Works Director, Municipal Administration 2010-2012	11.05.13
4	Antonio	Municipal official	M	42	Urban Development Director, Municipal Administration 2010-2012	01.05.13
5	Rossana	Municipal official	F	34	Director of Xalapa´s Historic Centre, Municipal Administration 2013-2016	01.05.13
6	Patricia	Municipal official	F	55	Director of Xalapa´s Historic Centre, Municipal Administration 2000 to 2007 and 2013	02.05.13
7	Manuel	User of Parque 5 de Febrero	M	55	Resident, living opposite Parque 5 de Febrero	15.09.12
8	Ramón	Municipal Official	M	49	Urban Development Director, Municipal Administration 2013-2016	10.05.13

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