BEYOND RECONSTRUCTION
IN OAXACA, MEXICO

SA+P - 4.184
Fall 2018 Workshop

Wednesday 10:30 – 1:00 PM — 3-329

Instructor MIT:
Lorena Bello; lobello@mit.edu
Partner Instructor GSD:
Diane Davis; ddavis@gsd.harvard.edu

OVERVIEW

In September of 2017 Mexico experienced a series of devastating earthquakes that spread across wide swathes of the national territory, hitting not only the capital city but also several of this nation’s most historically, culturally, and politically significant states ranging from Morelos to Oaxaca to Chiapas. The devastation was widespread but affected each location differently, given the widely varied urbanization patterns across the country. Whereas in Mexico City middle and upper classes were disproportionately affected by the destruction, and where damage to buildings and their physical recovery was a principal concern, in the outlying states it was primarily the rural poor who found their cultural traditions and economic practices in jeopardy, preoccupations made more intense by the long-standing neglect of these regions and their settlements. The earthquake effects became both symptoms and evidence of asymmetrical urban, territorial, and social development. For this reason, our team agrees that any ethically defensible response to this catastrophic event should go beyond “mere” reconstruction and imagine new, more resilient, and more equitable forms of urbanization.

In collaboration with both Diane Davis and Jose Castillo, and counting on my involvement and that of several other MIT students, we collectively mounted a research seminar at the GSD during the Spring of 2017, intended to lay the preliminary scholarly groundwork for a more sustained examination of post-earthquake Mexico. That class (ADV-9147) sought to use the disaster as an opportunity to rethink, conceptually redefine, and proactively reconfigure new forms of reconstruction in Mexico (we will make that class’s syllabus available for those who want to engage the more abstract readings on reconstruction). The student and faculty work that emerged from that seminar helped frame initiatives undertaken during the summer of 2018 and into this fall. These efforts were advanced by funding from MISTI Mexico and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard (DRCLAS) both of which supported the fieldwork of a total of 12 students from MIT and the GSD, who spent from two weeks to three months in Mexico City and Oaxaca during this past summer (2018). They met, interviewed, worked and made alliances with the many stakeholders that are involved in these processes of reconstruction in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in the State of Oaxaca. A research workshop was also undertaken during the last two weeks of August 2018 in an ongoing collaboration between MIT, Harvard, and Anahuac Universities.

The workshop was launched with a symposium at UNAM University in CDMX, bringing together government officials, affected civilians, as well as those professionals actively working on the reconstruction of the very centralized capital of the country. “Experiences on Reconstruction Following the 2017 Earthquakes” sought to target lessons and gaps that could shed some light on our future work in the State of Oaxaca. A two-day research workshop followed at Casa de la Ciudad in the city of Oaxaca, in which GSD students who had spent 2 months in the Isthmus already helped jump start a conversation with the different government officials, foundations, NGOs, and activists involved in the recovery process. The following three days we visited some of the affected towns in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec named: Tehuantepec, Ixtepec, Asunción Ixtaltepec, El Espinal, Juchitán de Zaragoza, Santa María Xadani and Salina Cruz. This territory is one of the most culturally rich regions of Mexico, where 68 different languages are spoken, and it has hundreds of small villages and towns where people’s cultural patrimony and employment needs have long been neglected. The economy of the region has long been vulnerable, with local agricultural employment under threat from repeated government efforts to introduce major infrastructural projects that prioritize the nation’s energy and export needs at the expense of local populations, and which for the last
seventy years have focused on exploitative resource extraction, including the introduction of windfarms and an oil pipeline that fail to distribute benefits to existent village economies. Local vernacular architecture is also under threat from the forces of reconstruction, migration, and environmental vulnerabilities (contaminated rivers, hurricanes, frequent earthquakes, etc.), even as government authorities have become concerned with colonial monuments and other amenities in an attempt to foster tourism.

Our collective fieldwork led to an engagement with the Ministry of Culture, the Office of the Governor as well as the mayor of the town in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, called Ixtepec. This mayor asked students if they would be willing to undertake a strategic plan for reconstruction in the town, in which historic sites were damaged and local livelihoods destroyed. In addition to being vulnerable to floods, social conflicts, marginalization, and other natural and social disasters, these strategically located towns play a key role in Mexico’s commerce, communication, and migration networks. This city and its surrounds serve as a stop-off on the migration corridor from Central America, and thus has many imported social problems that lead to competition for scarce jobs and insecurity. Together with the above-mentioned surrounding towns, they integrate the Tehuantepec’s Isthmus corridor, connecting the Pacific and the Atlantic Ocean. After the earthquake, almost 80% of houses in these sites were affected, and 90% of traditional buildings were at risk of demolition. Recovery of the urban fabric, public space, infrastructure, and heritage buildings as well as rubble recyclability and relocation are a top priority.

**COURSE AIMS AND STRUCTURE**

The course takes this preliminary work to its next logical step: the development of a series of projects and proposals that could be used to advance some of the key aims articulated by the stakeholders that we met over the summer. In the spirit of continued collaboration, it is open to students in all programs at MIT SA+P and the GSD, with the hope that a transdisciplinary dialogue will produce more innovative strategies for re-constructing a new future in the city of Ixtepec in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. We would like to design a vision for a more socially vibrant, environmentally sustainable, culturally and aesthetically sensitive Ixtepec, paying special attention to the inequalities and injustices played out across urban space and seeking to remedy them through novel reconstruction practices. The class will be led by Lorena Bello Gomez at MIT and will meet periodically with Diane Davis at the GSD (look at schedule), who is meeting bi-weekly with GSD students. Here at MIT, we will count on the participation of a variety of leading scholars from Mexico and the Boston area. Preference will be given to Spanish speakers and those students with a big interest and/or experience in the topic. Our aim is to conduct separate but complementary research that allows MIT and GSD students to advance reconstruction aims in the Isthmus.

The workflow will be divided in three blocks starting with an individual research topic, that will allow to project actionable goals + projects in teams next, and ending collectively with a synthetic urban design plan that brings all the team projects together. We would like to go back to Ixtepec in January --funds requested but pending of approval at the moment—for meeting the Mayor, soliciting his input, and potentially hold a design-build work with the community.

**Research Topic** - We expect students to dig more deeply into the history, cultural heritage, ecology, economy, or territorial dynamics of the site, and include this contextualization as guiding principles for their future projects. Research lines of inquiry could include a) critical evaluation of regional megaprojects; b) re-assessment of what aspects of the local cultural patrimony (buildings, traditions, livelihoods, community rituals, and so on) should be conserved or strengthened; c) commitment to developing new processes and practices of citizen involvement; d) new ideas about employment and community prosperity; and e) inventive forms of planning, urban design, landscape architecture, and architecture that contribute to the aforementioned aims. This research will serve as the basis for a short class presentation and group discussion on **October 3rd** and it would be assembled into a booklet for **October 10th**.

**Midterm Actionable Goals + Projects** – According to their area of interest, students will be asked to team up to envision actionable goals towards possible projects that try to give an answer to some of the problems found during their fieldwork and/or research. Programs for projects would likely address priority topic areas mentioned above in the overview. The different Actions + Projects will be presented during the midterm review to architects, landscape architects, urban designers and planners here and in Mexico on **October 31st** and projects would be updated with their input for the next class on **November 7th**.

**Final Projects + Urban Design Plan** – The different projects would be combined collectively to produce a synthesis plan that could serve as model to guide the efforts of reconstruction not only in Ixtepec, but also for other towns in this region. The draft of this plan and its related proposals is slated to be shared with the government of Ixtepec during the second week of November. After receiving input, students will revisit their projects, which will be presented the
final week of November. At present, the final presentation is expected to take place on **November 28th** and a group presentation with GSD students will be held in **December** on a date **TBC**.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

- Recognize and document how long political, economic, and cultural histories intersect with contemporary state and citizen responses to crisis and disaster, across both ‘urban’ and ‘rural’ territories.
- Identify the various ways that various stakeholders – from NGOs and the state, to civil society – intersect, through cooperation, cooption, and conflict in times of ‘crisis’ or ‘disaster.’
- Critically reflect on various methodologies deployed to achieve post-disaster aims.
- Develop the analytical skills to propose post-disaster recovery projects that challenge longstanding urbanization patterns and their unequal distributional impact.
- Offer projective ideas and grounded proposals for the case of Mexico that, if implemented, could alter the lives of citizens affected by recent disasters in that country.

**GRADING AND ASSIGNMENTS**

30% Research Topic. Description and analysis with different media
35% Midterm: Actionable Goals + Projects
35% Final Projects + Urban Design Plan

**OVERVIEW OF COURSE SCHEDULE**

**Part 1: Research Topics. Different Media**
9/05 First Class – Intro
9/12 Work in Progress
9/19 Pin Up
9/26 Pin Up

**Part 2: Actionable Goals + Projects**
10/03 Presentation of Research Topic (To be hold at the GSD at 6:00pm)
10/10 Research Booklet Due
10/17 Work in Progress
10/24 Pin Up
10/31 Midterm: Actionable Goals + Projects. (To be hold at the GSD at 6:00pm)

**Part 3: Final Projects + Urban Design Plan**
11/07 Update from Review
11/14 Pin Up
11/21 Work in Progress
11/28 Final Presentations. (To be hold at the GSD at 6:00pm)
12/xx Final Presentation with GSD (TBC)