



Collective housing typologies in contemporary urban space:

Understanding housing adaptation in Mexico City's historic centre

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Abstract

How have self-produced housing typologies adapted to economic and environmental pressures in Mexico City's historic centre? This space has undergone significant transformations from its pre-hispanic origins to the present day, including its colonial reorganisation and modernist interventions. Despite these changes, many collective housing typologies continue to function as crucial living spaces for a large portion of the population. This study analyses the evolution of emerging typologies projects and their relationship with urban morphology, emphasising their role in addressing the ongoing housing crisis in the city. From pre-hispanic *calpullis* (indigenous house) to 20th-century *vecindades* houses, this research evaluates which typologies have successfully addressed housing accessibility for most of the population. It highlights how urban policies and economic factors have shaped these housing solutions over time, sometimes reinforcing inequality while at other times serving as mechanisms for social integration. Using a morpho-typological approach, the study employs GIS-based cartographic analysis, fieldwork involving site analysis, and documentary policy and economic analysis, and environmental conditions, such as earthquakes and flooding. These methods help evaluate the resilience of these typologies. The findings reveal that typologies such as platter-and-cup housing (*vivienda de taza y plato*) and mansions adapted into *vecindades* remain essential for marginalised sectors, mitigating the housing crisis in one of the city's most unequal areas. These typologies demonstrate a remarkable capacity for adaptation, maintaining their relevance despite urban renewal and gentrification pressures. The study proposes a hybrid urbanism approach, where heritage conservation is integrated with inclusive policies that ensure accessible housing. By recognising the importance of historical and self-produced housing solutions, policymakers can develop strategies that reinforce urban resilience and social equity. This perspective challenges conventional urban planning approaches that prioritise aesthetic and historical preservation over the actual needs of residents, advocating instead for a more dynamic and inclusive vision of the historic city.

Keywords: Geospatial analysis, urban morphometrics, urban taxonomy, data visualization



Introduction

This paper examines how collective dwelling has mediated habitability in the Historic Centre of Mexico City across successive regulatory and socio-economic regimes. Here, habitability is treated as the capacity of the built environment to sustain everyday life through spatial adequacy, access and adaptability embedded in long-lived urban structures (Lefebvre, 1969; Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960). A collective dwelling type is understood as a recurrent configuration of plots, buildings and shared spaces—such as *accesorias*, *vecindades*, rooftop rooms and apartment blocks—that organises cohabitation through common circulation, services or tenure while remaining anchored in the plot and street interface (Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Moneo, 1978; Moudon, 1997). Urban morphology provides the analytical frame for tracing these relations through time, focusing on the interplay of streets, blocks and plots as material expressions of cultural, economic and regulatory processes (Muratori, 1959; Conzen, 1960; Rossi, 1966; Moudon, 1997).

The study is motivated by two linked gaps. First, while the Historic Centre has been widely documented for heritage and policy purposes, less attention has been paid to how its enduring spatial armature has channelled the evolution of collective dwelling and everyday habitability over the *longue durée* (UNESCO, 2016; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000). Second, debates on renewal often privilege programme or tenure over the morphogenetic continuities that condition what can be adapted without rupture. Addressing these gaps, the paper asks: How have plot-based geometries and patio systems structured the persistence and transformation of collective dwelling? Which spatial invariants underpin adaptation across pre-Hispanic, viceregal, liberal-modern and contemporary periods?

Methodologically, we adopt a mixed typo-morphological design that couples historical periodisation with GIS-based cartographic reconstruction and typological analysis (Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Moneo, 1978; Moudon, 1997). Historic maps (including the *Plano Regulador de la Ciudad de México*) are georeferenced against contemporary basemaps to visualise continuity and change in streets, blocks and plots (Contreras, 1933; INEGI; Jiménez Vaca, 2013). These overlays are read alongside archival, policy and conservation sources to link regulatory and economic turning points—such as post-1985 reconstruction—to concrete spatial outcomes (Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; UNESCO, 2016). Four case studies—Colegio de las Vizcaínas, Peralvillo 15, República de Brasil 42 and the Regina corridor—provide architectural and social depth and serve to validate the broader morphological interpretation (Brera, 2013; Suárez, 2002; Hernández, 2013; Ibarra, 2006).

The contribution is threefold. Empirically, the paper reconstructs a diachronic account of collective dwelling in the Historic Centre, showing how productive ground floors, street–patio–rear gradients and incremental vertical or rearward accretions have persisted as a local morphogenetic code (Lamas, 2010; Panerai, 2006). Analytically, it operationalises typo-morphological reasoning with reproducible geospatial procedures to relate policy and economy to form. Practically, it reframes conservation and housing action around service upgrading and structural reinforcement that work with—rather than against—plot-based continuities (Crossa, 2009; Bromley & Mackie, 2009; Garza, 1987). In doing so, the study situates habitability as an emergent property of durable spatial relations in Mexico City's core.



Methodology

The research follows a mixed typo-morphological design that integrates quantitative spatial reconstruction with qualitative historical and typological interpretation. The typo-morphological approach, developed in the European school of urban morphology (Muratori, 1959; Conzen, 1960; Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Rossi, 1966), considers the built environment as a product of layered processes—economic, cultural, and regulatory—that unfold through time. It operates through the comparative study of building and plot typologies to uncover structural continuities and ruptures in urban form. This analytical tradition, later operationalised for urban design research (Moneo, 1978; Moudon, 1997), enables the connection between morphological observation and design reasoning. In this study, it provides a replicable framework to trace the transformation of collective dwelling within Mexico City's changing legal and socio-political contexts, informed by urban theory on property, rent and the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1969; Harvey, 2003), and practice-based urbanism (Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960).

The methodology combines four interrelated components: (1) historical periodisation and archival analysis to identify key inflection points in the evolution of the built environment; (2) GIS-based cartographic reconstruction of the urban fabric to visualise persistence and transformation in streets, blocks and plots; (3) typological analysis of collective dwelling types to interpret changes in form, use and tenure; and (4) in-depth case studies to validate and contextualise the broader patterns. This mixed structure builds a diachronic account of how the Historic Centre's spatial framework and habitability have co-evolved over time.

The spatial scope corresponds to the UNESCO-listed Historic Centre of Mexico City and its adjacent blocks, which preserve the same morphological logic of the colonial grid and courtyard typology (UNESCO, 2016). The analysis is diachronic, structured around four periods that mark shifts in urban regulation and collective dwelling: the Pre-Hispanic period (hydraulic urbanism and lacustrine settlement), the Viceregal period (colonial grid consolidation), the Liberal-Modern period (nineteenth to mid-twentieth century subdivision and mass rental housing), and the Contemporary period (post-1985 earthquake urban renewal and repopulation). These divisions correspond to moments when new property regimes, infrastructure and risk conditions reshaped urban habitability (Contreras, 1933; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000).

The study draws on a corpus of heterogeneous but cross-verified sources. Primary cartography includes sixteenth- and nineteenth-century city maps (1845, 1880) from the Archivo General de la Nación (AGN) and Casa Baukeller y C. de Paris, the Plano Regulador de la Ciudad de México (Contreras, 1933), and contemporary INEGI basemaps. Archival and textual sources include chronicles, institutional records and hydraulic data related to property, rent and water infrastructures (Jiménez Vaca, 2013). Urban policy and conservation documents comprise the Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano del Centro Histórico (Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000) and UNESCO's World Heritage Listing Report (2016). Scholarly literature on housing, tenancy and urban transformation (Coulomb & Sánchez-Mejorada, 1991; Delgadillo, 2008) provides analytical grounding, while case-specific studies offer detailed architectural and social documentation for the four selected exemplars (Brera, 2013; Calderón Fernández, n.d.; Beascochea Arambarri et al., 2015; Luiselli, 2015; Suárez, 2002).

Cartographic layers were assembled and georeferenced using ArcGIS, while diagrammatic drawings and overlays were composed in Adobe Illustrator. These software tools were employed exclusively



for visual reconstruction and comparison; no custom code or computational scripts were developed. The workflow and resulting figures can be fully reproduced from the cited datasets following the same procedures.

The analytical process unfolded in three stages. First, a geospatial database of the Historic Centre was created through the georeferencing of historic maps and their alignment with contemporary street networks and cadastral data. This enabled a systematic visualisation of persistence and change in the city's structural framework—streets, blocks and plots—across five centuries. The acequia (canal) system, documented by Jiménez Vaca (2013), was superimposed to reveal continuities between hydraulic infrastructures and later urban layouts. Second, a diachronic morphological interpretation linked regulatory and economic turning points—such as the introduction of the Plano Regulador (1933) and the post-1985 reconstruction—to concrete spatial and typological outcomes. The building-type analysis decomposed each collective dwelling type (e.g. *accesorias*, *vecindades*, rooftop rooms, apartment blocks) into its constitutive relations of plot depth, patio configuration, circulation and mixed-use adaptability (Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Moudon, 1997). Third, four case studies—Colegio de las Vizcaínas (*accesorias*), Peralvillo 15 (*vecindad*), República de Brasil 42 (rooftop rooms), and Regina Corridor (mixed-use apartments)—provided spatial and social depth through plans, axonometrics and photographic documentation, validating the wider morphological interpretation.

In sum, the methodology constructs a transparent and replicable framework that bridges historical documentation, spatial analysis and typological interpretation. By combining GIS-based mapping with morphological reasoning, the study situates the evolution of collective dwelling within the *longue durée* of Mexico City's urban form—where continuity, adaptation and governance converge to shape the lived conditions of habitability.

Results and discussion

The spatial reconstruction of Mexico City's Historic Centre reveals a remarkable continuity of its urban framework, where centuries of political and economic change have reconfigured use and meaning but rarely erased form. When the sixteenth- and nineteenth-century maps are aligned with contemporary cadastral data, the traces of the ancient hydraulic system reappear beneath the colonial and modern grids. The acequia lines, once channels of water and commerce, now define the alignments of streets and plot edges. Their persistence across five centuries suggests that the logic of the lacustrine city was never fully buried (Fig.1): it was absorbed and rearticulated by each subsequent regime of urbanisation (Jiménez Vaca, 2013; UNESCO, 2016).

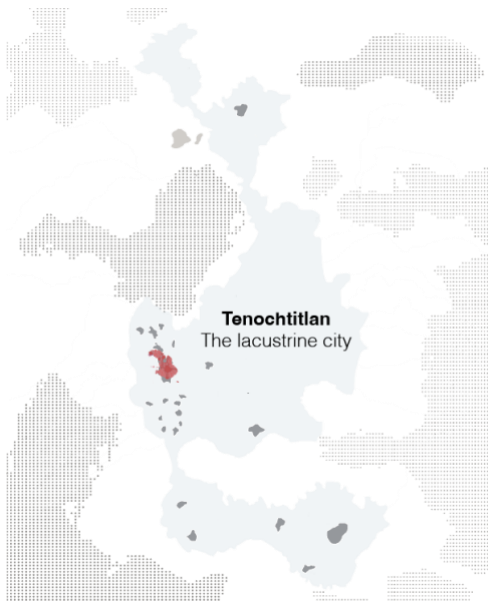


Fig.1. Lacustrine city, currently Mexico City

In the overlays that compare pre-Hispanic, colonial, liberal and modern layers, one reads not replacement but superimposition. The colonial grid did not obliterate the indigenous hydraulic topography; the liberal replotting of the nineteenth century did not dislodge the colonial cadastral rhythm; even the modernisation of the 1930s, with its arterial cuts and zoning ideals, operated within inherited geometries. The result is a palimpsest city, where spatial persistence coexists with social transformation (Contreras, 1933; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; Garza, 1987). The rhythm of the plot—its depth, its courtyard, its relation to the street—remains the primary regulator of habitation, production and exchange. It is within this frame that the collective dwelling types emerged, adapted and continue to evolve (Fig.2).



Fig.2. Historic maps to understand urban development of the city (AGN, INEGI, Casa Baukeller, self-elaboration in ArcGIS)

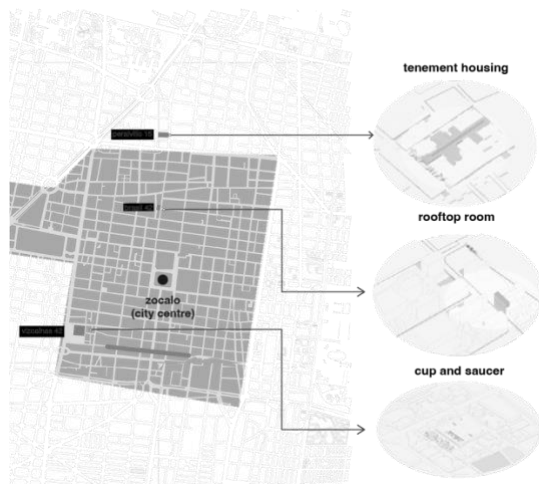
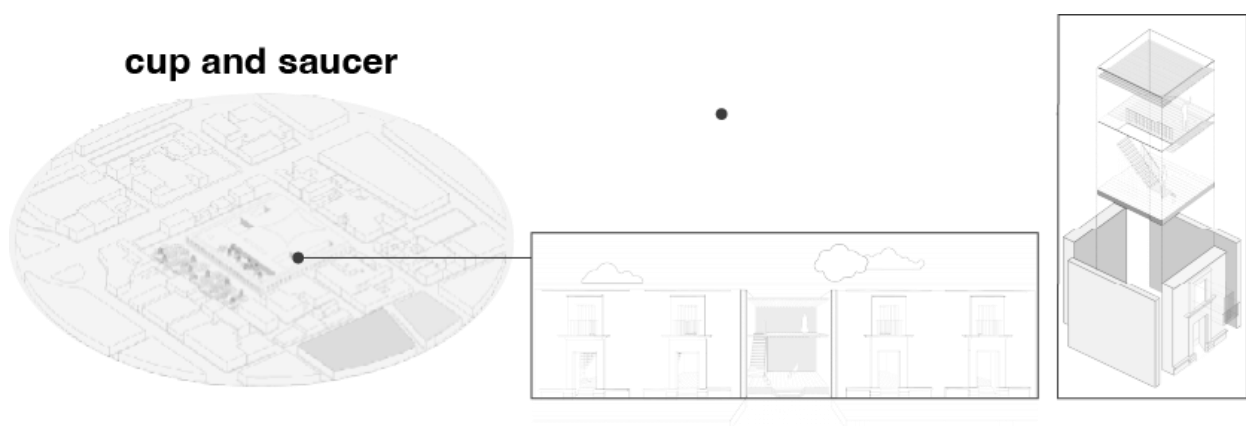


Fig.3. Location of case studies of typologies of collective housing.

In the early twenty-first century, the Regina corridor exemplifies this adaptive continuity. Although façades were restored and streets pedestrianised, the parcels beneath them retained their pre-modern alignments, commercial conversions at street level and modest residential renewal above revived long-standing patterns of mixed use. The intervention combined heritage conservation, infrastructure improvement and social-housing goals and drew on dedicated governance vehicles such as the Fundación e Inmobiliaria del Centro Histórico (Ibarra, 2006; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; Rocha Xavier and Cejudo, 2010; Suárez, 2002). The outcomes—renewed activity alongside tensions around displacement—reveal the importance of aligning physical renewal with local socio-economic practices (Crossa, 2009; Bromley and Mackie, 2009).

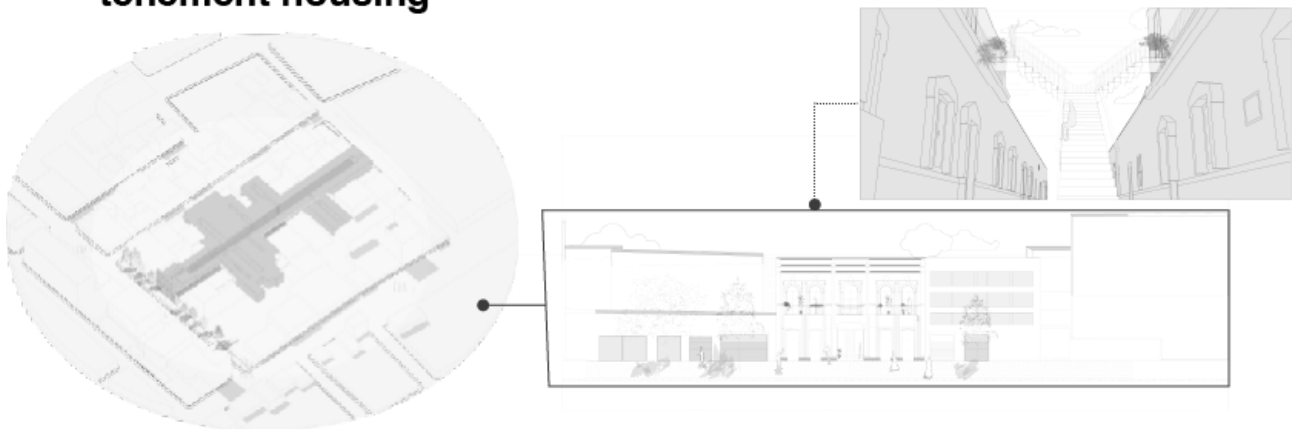
The archival and cartographic evidence demonstrates that collective housing in the centre has never been a singular typology, but a spectrum of spatial adaptations negotiated through time (Fig.3). The earliest and most emblematic are the *accesorías* of the Colegio de las Vizcaínas, constructed as the economic engine of an educational institution and as an infrastructural interface between domestic, commercial and civic life. The four façades hosted seventy units at ground and mezzanine level; their rents financed operation, salaries and maintenance. In 1768, 1,923 residents—25.8% of the total—occupied these street-front premises, and rent series recorded sensitivity to macro-cycles: +46% by 1803, +23% by 1811, and -38% by 1818 (Brera, 2013; Calderón Fernández, n.d.; Obregón, 1949). The rectangular block with independent façades and six internal patios embodies a model of resilience through adaptability—its economic function inseparable from its spatial intelligence (Brera, 2013; Obregón, 1949) (Fig.3 and 4.).



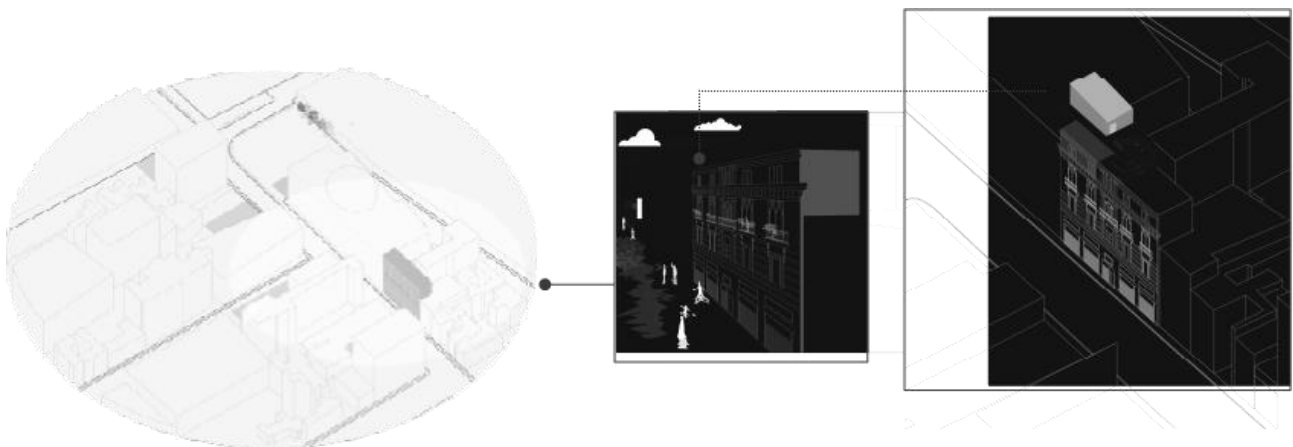


By the nineteenth century, as population pressure and property reform accelerated subdivision, the *vecindad* crystallised as a dominant form of collective dwelling. Peralvillo 15 illustrates its spatial and social logic: approximately sixty rooms arranged around a central patio, linked by galleries and staircases that structure both movement and social encounter; the site's long conversion from Cortés's stables to a convent and then to a tenement encapsulates the incremental re-use that characterises the central city (Beascochea Arambarri et al., 2015; Hernández, 2013). At district scale, Tepito's commercial economy sustained the house-workshop ecology that *vecindades* spatially enable, despite periodic attempts to relocate street vending and reorder marketplaces (Ramírez Alfonso et al., 2007; Crossa, 2009; Bromley and Mackie, 2009) (Fig. 3 and 5).

tenement housing



Above these layers, roof rooms, or *azoteas*, extended habitability through vertical accretion. Originally built for domestic service, they later housed workers, migrants and, at times, intellectuals—most famously Salvador Novo at República de Brasil 42—illustrating cultural and residential hybridity (Luiselli, 2015). Contemporary reuse as storage or events space can overload structures and displace potential housing, yet the *azotea* remains a latent asset for central regeneration, provided structural and service upgrades are addressed (Hernández, 2013; Luiselli, 2015) (Fig. 3 and 6).





By the late twentieth century, as Mexico City confronted depopulation and the 1985 earthquake's aftermath, apartment buildings and post-disaster programmes reframed central living. Along Regina, multi-era apartment stocks with vertical circulation and transitional spaces coexist with intensified ground-floor commerce; governance and security measures sought repopulation and rehabilitation, with ambivalent social outcomes (Ibarra, 2006; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; Leal, 2007; Crossa, 2009).

Across these examples—Vizcaínas, Peralvillo 15, Brasil 42 and Regina—the evidence converges on three invariants: a street-patio-rear gradient that organises privacy, airflow and access; productive ground floors that underwrite maintenance and livelihoods; and incremental intensification (mezzanines, annexes, roof rooms) that expands capacity without altering the cadastral base. Read through the lens of typo-morphological theory, these invariants constitute a local morphogenetic code enabling the city to evolve without rupture (Caniggia and Maffei, 1995; Moneo, 1978; Lamas, 2010; Panerai, 2006).

The four case studies provide empirical anchors for this interpretation. The seventy *accesorías* of the Vizcaínas complex, accommodating nearly two thousand people in the eighteenth century, illustrate the coupling of economic productivity and architectural durability. Peralvillo 15, with its sixty rooms and communal courtyard, demonstrates how spatial depth becomes a medium for social depth. República de Brasil 42 shows the resilience of informal vertical expansion, while the Regina corridor situates this long history within the politics of contemporary urban renewal. In each, the plot remains the operative unit of transformation, more stable than ownership, regulation or programme.

Quantitative synthesis reinforces this conclusion. The *accesorías* display narrow frontages and deep interiors, their dual-band structure—commerce at the front, living quarters at the rear—mirroring the economic duality of work and home. The *vecindad* adapts the same geometry, substituting the single household with multiple micro-units around a shared courtyard. Roof rooms operate as lightweight extensions, and apartment blocks reinterpret the typological grammar of patio and gallery in vertical form. Vulnerabilities differ—economic volatility, shared services, structural fragility—but the spatial principles remain constant.



<i>Typology</i>	<i>Parcel and access</i>	<i>Interior organisation</i>	<i>Use economy</i>	<i>Vulnerabilities</i>	<i>Improvement strategy</i>
Accesorías (Vizcaínas)	Narrow frontage, deep plot; direct street access	Productive front band + rear living cell; connected to courtyards	Rental and small commerce sustaining institution	Economic fluctuation; touristic pressure	Service upgrading; acoustic and load regulation (Brera, 2013; Calderón Fernández, n.d.)
Vecindad (Peralvillo 15)	Multiple entries from street to patios	Central courtyard + galleries + stairs; ~60 rooms	House-workshop; neighbourhood commerce	Fire risk; shared sanitation	Modular wet-core retrofit; seismic reinforcement (Beascochea Arambarri et al., 2015; Hernández, 2013)
Azotea (Brasil 42)	Common stair access via courtyard	Lightweight rooms on terrace	Low-rent housing; cultural reuse	Structural overload; impermeability; wiring	Reinforcement; visible service lines; legalisation (Luiselli, 2015; Hernández, 2013)
Apartment / Regina corridor	Aggregated lots or block interiors	Vertical circulation; small patios	Social housing (~42 m ² units) with commerce	Disconnection from local economies	Activate ground floor; integrate micro-commerce (Ibarra, 2006; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; Suárez, 2002)

Table 1. Comparison table of typologies, case studies.

While the georeferencing of historic maps achieved reliable alignment through cross-verification, differences in scale and projection introduce minor positional uncertainties; these are mitigated by triangulation across independent datasets and plan/photographic evidence (Plan Integral de Manejo del Centro de la Ciudad de México, 2011; Garza, 1987). Informal or unregistered roof extensions remain underdocumented, though their presence and risks are recognised (Luiselli, 2015).

Taken together, the findings portray a city that renews itself through the persistence of its smallest parts. The Historic Centre's enduring armature is not a static relic but a living framework within which successive generations have negotiated the terms of dwelling, production and collective life (see table 1). Its resilience lies not in preservation alone but in the capacity of inherited form to host new social arrangements. The morphology of Mexico City's core thus reveals a deeper principle of urban continuity: habitability, in its collective sense, emerges less from the novelty of buildings than from the adaptability of the ground on which they stand (Caniggia and Maffei, 1995; Moneo, 1978).

Conclusions

This study has shown that the Historic Centre of Mexico City is characterised less by episodic ruptures than by a long continuity of urban form. By integrating archival periodisation, GIS-based cartographic reconstruction and typo-morphological interpretation, we demonstrated that the city's persistent armature—streets, blocks and plots—has accommodated successive social and regulatory regimes without extinguishing its underlying spatial logic. The overlays between sixteenth- and nineteenth-century cartography and contemporary cadastral data reveal how hydraulic traces, colonial grids and modern regulations were superimposed rather than erased, producing a palimpsest in which inherited geometries remain operational (Jiménez Vaca, 2013; UNESCO, 2016; Contreras, 1933; Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000).



Across scales, three invariants emerge as the morphogenetic code of collective dwelling: (i) a street–patio–rear gradient that structures access, privacy and ventilation; (ii) productive ground floors that subsidise maintenance and livelihoods; and (iii) incremental intensification—mezzanines, annexes and roof rooms—that adds capacity while retaining the cadastral base. Read through European typomorphological theory, these invariants explain how diverse collective dwelling types—*accesorías*, *vecindades*, *azoteas* and apartments—can evolve within the same spatial grammar (Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Moudon, 1997; Moneo, 1978). The four case studies—Vizcaínas, Peralvillo 15, República de Brasil 42 and the Regina corridor—confirm this adaptive continuity, coupling spatial persistence with changing uses, tenures and forms of governance (Brera, 2013; Hernández, 2013; Suárez, 2002; Ibarra, 2006).

Methodologically, the paper contributes a transparent, reproducible workflow for diachronic urban analysis. Georeferencing of historic maps against contemporary basemaps, combined with typological decomposition of building–plot relations, offers a replicable path to relate regulation and economy to spatial outcomes. While minor positional uncertainties remain due to scale and projection differences, triangulation across independent cartographic, textual and photographic sources supports the robustness of the findings (Plan Integral de Manejo del Centro de la Ciudad de México, 2011; Garza, 1987).

Substantively, the results call for policies that work with—rather than against—the city’s morphogenetic code. Conservation and housing programmes should prioritise service upgrading and structural reinforcement for *vecindades* and *azoteas*, regulate acoustic and load conditions in *accesoria*-dense blocks, and recognise the role of micro-commerce on ground floors as part of habitability rather than a nuisance to be displaced (Brera, 2013; Hernández, 2013; Crossa, 2009; Bromley & Mackie, 2009). Governance instruments that align heritage aims with neighbourhood economies, as in the Regina corridor, can leverage continuity to deliver social as well as physical renewal, while guarding against displacement through tailored tenure and rent tools (Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 2000; Ibarra, 2006; Rocha Xavier & Cejudo, 2010).

Limitations of the study temper these prescriptions. Informal or unregistered roof-top extensions remain systematically under-documented; census-independent data are needed to map their prevalence, risks and contributions to central-city housing (Luiselli, 2015; Hernández, 2013). In addition, the focus on four exemplars, while analytically productive, cannot capture the full diversity of collective dwelling trajectories across the Historic Centre’s sub-districts.

Future work should: (1) enlarge the case sample and pair it with block-level metrics of depth, frontage and patio ratios to test the generality of the three invariants; (2) integrate building-scale structural assessment (including seismic performance) with typological categories to prioritise retrofits; (3) deploy systematic remote sensing and on-site audits to quantify *azotea* additions and their service loads; (4) reconstruct longitudinal series of rents, tenures and ground-floor uses to link economic cycles to spatial adaptation; (5) evaluate governance arrangements and financing instruments that protect mixed-use livelihoods while enabling rehabilitation; and (6) develop comparative studies with other Latin American historic centres to distinguish what is local from what is regional in the morphogenetic code (Coulomb & Sánchez-Mejorada, 1991; Delgadillo, 2008; Panerai, 2006; Lamas, 2010).

Taken together, the findings reframe central-city habitability as an emergent property of durable spatial relations rather than isolated building projects. Planning for resilience in Mexico City’s core should therefore begin from the ground—plots, patios and street interfaces—treating conservation



as the management of typological continuities that allow new social arrangements to take root within an inherited form (Caniggia & Maffei, 1995; Moneo, 1978).

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