It has become a matter of habit to think of cities in relation to one another. The globalization of travel, tourism, and economic exchange has accentuated this comparative tendency and elevated certain large- and medium-sized cities to model status. In the 1980s and 1990s Berlin and Barcelona, for example, became global capitals of urban-planning innovation and of a process capable of resituating the development of cities as the most dynamic sites for reaping the benefits of the drive toward global growth.

Other cities have become emblematic for their monstrosity and decadence, in particular, Mexico City, which has been singled out as the world's most populous and most polluted city, and among its most dangerous and chaotic. Moving beyond the data refuting these "distinctions" (the population of Tokyo-Yokohama is in fact greater, and several Latin American cities exceed Mexico City in terms of pollution and violence), I explore why the Mexican capital inspires such nefarious images and encounters such great difficulties in facing the challenges of globalization. Furthermore, I evaluate some of its potentialities as a global city in the horizon of the year 2010. My overall goal is to compare the actual city with the imagined city—and with the city that is impossible to imagine.
A GLOBAL CITY?

The exercise I conduct with Mexico City may prove useful for understanding and detecting risks in other cities, as well as examining critically some problems in the theory of globalization. Just as the debate over modernity provided innovative resources with which to analyze cities such as Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, the study of New York, London, and Tokyo today helps clarify the processes of globalization.

If writing about globalization is, in the words of Arjun Appadurai, "a moderate exercise in megalomania," Mexico City, because of its size, is an optimal stage on which to attempt to do so. In fact, this megalopolis meets the four usual requirements for being a global city: a strong multinational corporate presence; the multicultural presence of peoples from different regions within the country and from other nations; a prestige based on the concentration of artistic and scientific elites; and significant international tourism.

While the contradictory development of Mexico City does not allow one to place it among the global cities I have just mentioned, the potential of Mexico City within the regional and global economy is comparable to that of Barcelona, Brussels, Paris, and Hong Kong. Like those cities, the Mexican capital is notable for extending beyond the country's borders its activities in the realms of finance, consulting, design, and the development of audiovisual and computer industries.

Even before there was any talk of globalization, that is, at least from the mid-twentieth century, Mexico City captured the imaginations of thousands of artists and intellectuals, entrepreneurs and tourists, thanks to its powerful pre-Columbian, colonial, and modern history. These attractions were decisive in seducing the world until the end of the twentieth century—perhaps after the construction of the city's National Museum of Anthropology and its Museum of Modern Art, both of which opened in 1964, and for a couple of decades thereafter. But these attractions are not sufficient in the twenty-first century.

What are the other forms of economic and cultural capital of which Mexico can avail itself today? There are at least three: a vigorous industrial infrastructure for the production of books, radio, television, and, to a lesser degree, film and contemporary popular music; multicultural communities created by domestic migrations and by artists, intellectuals, and scientists in exile from Spain, from Central and South America, and from Eastern Europe due to the world wars and, later, the fall of the Soviet bloc; and many years of experience in existing in between Europe, the United States, and South America, in between indigenous legacies and the heritage of modernity. Mexico City is not only the nation's capital but also a privileged site of such cultural capital. As a country and a city, however, Mexico is only beginning to make use of its resources, and then only at a low profile within global circuits.

There are more museums in Mexico City (92) than there are in New York (88), Buenos Aires (55), Madrid (47), and São Paulo (32). Mexico City also supports a greater number of outlets that deal in crafts than exist in all of those cities combined, as well as a repertoire of entertainment sites comparable to that of those metropolises. But to become global, a city must also be safe, boast modern and postmodern commercial and cultural attractions, and, above all, possess efficient services and agile electronic connections.

Studies which register the conditions demanded by five hundred Latin American executives to determine the cities in which they will conduct business and would be willing to live show that a premium is placed on cities that combine high educational standards with qualified personnel, security, efficiency, cultural life, and a good potential for international communication and conducting business. Mexico City is not in a bad position in terms of communications, cultural offerings, and the qualifications of its workforce. Nonetheless, its efficiency and safety are not of a quality in which its residents could pride themselves. Entrepreneurs and leaders have voiced their concern over the increase in crime and the decrease in productivity caused by the slow pace of traffic (each resident spends an average of three hours a day making commutes that should take only one hour). The chaotic disintegration of public life, which has grown more accentuated as the population of the Mexican capital has grown from 3 million to 19 million over the last fifty years, has led writers such as José Emilio Pacheco to say that the Mexican capital is a "post-city"—or in the words of Carlos Monsiváis, "a post-apocalyptic city, because the worst has already happened."

AN IMAGINED CITY, ALWAYS A ROUGH DRAFT

The contradictions between Mexico City's potential and its deficient realization of its calling to globalization make one wonder what may be the consequences of the tension between the exuberant imaginaries that the city has
generated and repeated many times over in its history as a result of envisioning itself as a shared, inhabitable space.

But I will not speak only of Mexico City. It is convenient to link these developments in the city with the shift exhibited in the last twenty years by international thinking in the field of urban studies, to note the contrast between the expansion of studies about urban imaginaries and the reduction of the prospective horizon in urban planning. There is a contradiction, observes the Argentine humanist Adrián Gorelik, between "the cultural (generally academic) reflection on the most diverse ways in which societies represent themselves within their cities and build their modes of communication and its codes for understanding urban life, and the dimension of political-technical reflection (generally concentrated within a handful of professions such as architecture, urban studies and planning) on the way a city ought to be."4

Since the nineteenth century, the creation of Latin American cities has engaged in a lively interaction with the representations produced about those cities. Three analysts of urban history and Latin American intellectual history—José Luis Romero, Ángel Rama, and Richard Morse—have shown that urban imaginaries and cultural imaginaries converged as projects propelling social development. There was no easy agreement between the imaginations of intellectuals, writers, and artists and the work of urban planners, but they nourished each other and together generated matrices of a social understanding and social transformation of modernity.

Today, on the other hand, there is "a symbolic inflation of interpretations of the city and society," says Gorelik, in contrast with a softness of projection and lack of perspective in the diagnoses of urban planners.5 Or, following the Brazilian analyst Otilia Fiori Arantes, there occurs a different kind of complementation: "Among urbanists—usually from a progressive background—and entrepreneurs who have found in the city a new field for accumulation: the former have dedicated themselves, apparently following an epochal mandate, to making projections 'in provocatively explicit, managerial terms'; the latter do nothing more than celebrate the cultural values of the city, praising the 'heartbeat of every street, square, or urban fragment,' for which reason both parties end up speaking the same jargon of urban authenticity that can be termed a market-culturalism."6

How has this tension and contemplation between cultural and urban-planning imaginaries unfolded? Without a doubt, it has manifested itself in a formidable capacity to conceive of something that has not existed for centuries and to invent a city where once there was only a lake. It was necessary to channel the rivers, cover the canals, and imagine a dry city in which there was such an abundance of liquid. It would be possible, too, to list many other conflicts between imaginaries that are still being disputed today in the megalopolis: the fantasies of those who arrive from the provinces seeking work and a better quality of life; the fantasies of those who have come from abroad believing that they have arrived at the most populous and most polluted city in the world. Few megalopolises have been imagined as much as Mexico City, from the descriptions of Hernán Cortés to those of American journalists and Latin American exiles, from travel agencies to international television.

But if the Mexican capital today is more disorderly than baroque, it is because the imaginaries in conflict have worked to destroy or ignore one an-
other, rather than to create a shared utopia—and because many of its catastrophes are tragic revelations of a lack of imagination about the future that was taking shape.

The architect Yoshinoba Ashisara wrote that urban space could be created in one of two ways: by addition or by subtraction. The majority of urban inhabitants and city managers in Mexico City have never felt it necessary to choose between these two strategies. The city expanded from the historic downtown district into the distant mountains, cutting down forests, paving hillsides, tearing down houses to build highway loops and street axes to allow access to the invaded outskirts, adding to those allegedly rapid thoroughfares thousands of overlapping billboards, saturating the visual space with so many promises that no one manages to read, and no one manages to imagine much at all.

Let me examine from several different perspectives how the tension between the imagined city and the unimaginable city occurs today. A first perspective is that of the consumer, who must orient himself or herself with all that has been added to and subtracted from Mexico City. It is difficult for this person to understand where she lives and what spaces she traverses when she crosses this megalopolis, which at the beginning of the twentieth century occupied 9.1 square kilometers and today spills out over an area of 1,500 square kilometers.

Several years ago I and other scholars in the Urban Culture Program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana researched photographic archives to document the changes in the means of travel within the city over the last half of the twentieth century. We then gathered ten groups of people who traverse the city daily—food-delivery personnel, street vendors, taxi drivers, students, transit police—and showed them fifty photographs from which they were to choose the most representative. The images unleashed stories of those things one suspects when traveling through unknown areas of the city. One of the findings of the study was that the majority of participants found it difficult to imagine the city in which they lived, to visualize where it began and ended, even the places they passed through every day. Facing enigmas and threats, they made assumptions, created myths, devised short-term tactics to avoid traffic jams, and made occasional agreements with strangers. None of them had a clear picture of the whole map of the megalopolis. None of them attempted to grasp all of it. They survived by imagining small environments within their reach. Given the difficulty in understanding macrosocial transformations and the structural causes of the city's disasters, they placed the blame on specific groups: immigrants who arrived unprepared for life in the big city, political demonstrations that slowed down traffic, the excess of automobiles (although no one mentioned specific parties at fault), police corruption, or the irresponsibility of car owners who triple-parked their vehicles.

A casuistically constructed urban culture thus engenders a pre-political culture, in which isolated instances of guilt are identified instead of systematic causes.

A second perspective is that of people who are able to view the city from the heights of power and communication. While the dispersal of the city makes interaction between its neighborhoods difficult and dissolves the image of the city as a whole, the mass media distributes images that reconnect its scattered parts. Just as the visuality of the modern city was organized by means of the flaneur and the literary chronicle, in the current megalopolis the pretension of providing totalizing narratives is delegated to the helicopter that hovers over the city and every morning offers, by radio and television, the simulacrum of a vision of the whole. Manned by the police force that patrols the city and by journalists who provide citizens with information, this new panoptic power indicates where there has been a car accident, which streets are congested, and which alternate routes can be taken. The system exhibits a collaboration between control by the police and control by television. Insofar as this media vision does not offer reasoned information about "the uncontrollable," it keeps citizens watching this spectacle of insecurity from their living rooms, rather than help them to imagine their citizenship. One has gone from the "lettered city," as Ángel Rama described the city conceived and narrated by literary texts, to an audiovisual city, the city as "told" by the mass media. One's ability to make any kind of sense of the city now depends not so much on long-form narratives (for example, the novels of Carlos Fuentes and José Emilio Pacheco), but on the information provided daily by the ephemeral discourse of Televisa.

This passing from long-form narratives to instant flashes corresponds to the predominance of "planners" who have abandoned their interest in the total city, or who have simply come too late. No sooner does one learn that
the first normative plan for Mexico City was drafted in 1979 than one begins to think that the people in government between the 1950s and 1970s, during which time the city's population grew from three to fifteen million inhabitants, lacked the imagination to foresee with each passing term the traffic jams and pollution, the indignation and impotence that would afflict the city in the next sexenio. They added thoroughfares and cars and buses, and waited until the 1980s to see what needed to be subtracted or reduced or built at a less-monumental scale in order to avoid the disintegration that would triumph over a sense of community.

In recent years, given the difficult task of solving these problems as a whole, a few of the city's zones were chosen to serve as ultramodern focal points, places where one can fantasize that one is tuning in to globalization. The most recent imaginary, proposed at the start of the twenty-first century, is that Mexico might be able to save itself as a global city. Some theorists of globalization validate this fantasy: Manuel Castells, Jordi Borja, and Saskia Sassen write that the Mexican capital, in fact, meets several of the requirements for being a global city. But these theorists, as well as some local scholars, draw attention to the abysmal contradictions between the city moving toward globalization and the city that is in the process of disintegrating. It's odd: the rapid growth of Mexico City (like that of São Paulo, Caracas, and Lima) in the last half-century is due to the millions of Mexicans who migrated to the capital imagining that the city's industrialization could be of benefit to all. Since the opening-up of Mexico's economy to the rest of the world in the early 1980s, the city has been deindustrializing, and it is believed that the most dynamic growth areas are linked to the arrival of corporate services. Mexico City and its metropolitan outskirts have become one of the twenty urban megacities with the greatest concentration of devices for development, innovation, and commercialization at a global scale. This change is most apparent in the nearly 800 hectares in the Santa Fe area that are taken up by buildings housing Hewlett-Packard, Mercedes-Benz, Chubb Insurance, Televisa, and other companies, as well as by shopping centers and upscale residential neighborhoods. It is also visible in the architectural remodeling of the Paseo de la Reforma, Polanco, Insurgentes, and Periférico Sur areas, in the proliferation of mega-shopping centers, new corporate hotels, the modernization of the telecommunications industry and its satellite connections, and the expansion of computer services and cable and digital television. The wager is that the "monstropolis," as Emiliando Pérez Cruz has called it, will be rescued through its connection with global imaginaries.

I find it suggestive at this point to attempt a comparative hypothesis with Berlin. I cannot for the moment enter into the long and storied public debate, generated in Germany and in the fields of urban and cultural studies and politics, over the metamorphosis of the Potsdamer Platz. But it is significant that the current cluster of corporate buildings, stores, and high-tech entertainment outlets, built by world-renowned architects, was erected in one of the most emblematic, central areas of the German capital city as "an amnesiac space," in the words of Régine Robin, which eliminated all references to the history of modernization in the early decades of the twentieth century, to the Berlin Wall, and to the other historical moments concentrated in that square. On the other hand, Santa Fe—the largest business and corporate center in Mexico and Latin America—was built by overlaying an "American-style" tracing and architectural image onto a marginal area of Mexico City inhabited only by recent migrants, almost all of them extremely poor. But at the same time one could ask whether this great respect for the historical centers of Mexico City and the location of Santa Fe at the edge of one of the
city’s most important urban projects, with which president Carlos Salinas chose to give space to the project of “placing Mexico within the first world,” do not represent a disconnect between a globalist “utopia” and the historic city resigned to a deficient modernity. While Berlin globalizes its urban space by substitution, Mexico City does so by addition.

The creation of nodes of development for global services attempts to isolate this area from traditional sectors, from informal or marginal economic activities, from deficient urban centers, from the frustrated fantasies of unemployment and the fear of crime. The doubling of the global city and the local, marginal, and unsafe city may be the first obstacle for Mexico to overcome in order to be imagined as an attractive site for global corporations. As Borja and Castells have warned, one of the great risks of globalization is that it could occur only for an elite: “One part of the city is sold, while the rest is hidden and abandoned.”

PREDICTIONS AMID IMPROVISATION

It is often said in city and tourist magazines as well as in journals of art and history that Mexico City is the most important pre-Columbian and colonial city in America. At the same time, it is often discussed as a megalopolis that has grown in such a staggered, awkward manner that it seems to lack any sort of master plan, a city in which one can barely conceive one’s day-to-day survival. One has no way of knowing whether tomorrow the city’s plumbing will burst again and flood who knows how many neighborhoods, whether the Popocatepetl Volcano will cover the city in ash, or whether forty different political demonstrations with participants numbering in the thousands will paralyze a quarter of the city.

Who can predict what Mexico City will be like in the year 2010? Amid so many uncertainties, some tendencies in the city’s sociocultural development show a certain consistency. Furthermore, today it is more viable to establish what these predominant lines of development are than it was fifteen years ago, when the first studies relating cultural politics, consumption, and citizenship were conducted. Without a doubt, this is one of the important changes that have taken place in Mexico: one can talk about the city, especially its sociocultural aspects, using data that one did not have two decades ago.

I will rely in particular on the research my colleagues and I conducted in the Urban Culture Program at the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana (UAM), in Mexico City. This set of studies provides some basic references to what remains, and what is changing, in Mexico City from the 1990s through the beginning of the twenty-first century. I will first mention some things that seem rather stable and predictable, then some of what is changing and might trigger innovation by 2010.

PREDICTABLE ELEMENTS

The first tendency that relies on the development of the city is the spread of the urban blot in all directions. This has reformulated the city’s relationships with the environment, just as it has shaped the downtown area’s links with the outskirts of the city, and the relationship of that which can be contained within the city to that which escapes governmental control. This experience of the uncontainable becomes more acute as the Mexican capital develops as a global city, a node of communications, services, and migrations that link it tightly with cities in many other regions in North, Central, and South America, in Europe and Asia.

A second characteristic is the demographic predominance of the city’s
Photo by Paolo Gasparini.

outskirts over the Federal District and the creation of commercial and cultural centers, often interrelated, in the inner and outer peripheries of the capital. More and more one is living in a polycentric, multifocal, and multinodal city. Nonetheless, the predominance of the outer city over the historical city does not allow one to ignore the interactions between the two circles; three million people living in twenty-nine adjoining municipalities commute daily into the city for work, consumption, and entertainment.

Third, one must make note of the democratization of Mexico City and certain aspects of its citizen culture, which manifests itself most importantly in the election of city officials and now also of officials for each district. It is an incomplete democratization, which does not include all aspects of urban life—its cultural aspects, for example.

Fourth, one might also point out the leading role of the mass media as purveyor of information and entertainment, as articulator of the dispersed city and organizer of the public sphere. I will not address at length this internationally generalized process, which has created a new type of public field, managed at its core by the culture industries and by the mass media. The prevalence of the media over firsthand interactions, which began in the mid-twentieth century, will continue to grow as a result of greater access to cable television, computer services, and other modes of home entertainment and information delivery.

Last, I will mention as a unifying trait among urban experiences the increase in violence and crime. These have extended themselves to the entire metropolitan area, not only as constantly occurring, real-life events, but also in the central role they have come to play in the field of information and the re-ordering of the urban lifestyle. This generalized experience is associated with important material and symbolic effects such as the predominance of the private over the public, the prevalence of the imaginary of risk and refuge in closed neighborhoods, or in the home itself, over imaginaries of the shared city.

CHANGES IN COURSE

In analyzing the transformations in contemporary urban life, I will take into account what is visible in the cultural development of the city and also what one might conjecture will be accentuated as 2010 approaches. I would like to begin with a self-criticism. In the studies I and my colleagues conducted over the last ten years in the Urban Culture Program at UAM, we had to rectify several ideas that we had been constructing about transformations in the city. For instance, in the first half of the 1990s we recorded the closing of many movie theaters, which had started happening in the 1980s as a result of an abrupt decrease in the number of viewers. This decline in spectatorship, from 90 million a year to some 28 million in 1995, has been partially reversed with the explosion of multiplexes in many parts of the city. A more equitable distribution of cinematic offerings has made our 1994 book Los nuevos espectadores outdated.

However, other trends in audiovisual consumption found during that period have been reinforced. One of these is the expansion of television offerings. What was an open television media controlled by a single monopoly has
been replaced by a more extensive offering, which could reach several hundred channels in just a few years. These changes have more to do with quantity than variety; when the television industry first began to expand (with the emergence of Televisión Azteca), it was widely thought that "nothing could be worse than Televisa"—but it turned out that there was something worse. However, with the introduction of the Sky network, a portion of the viewership does enjoy cable or satellite TV, and further technological innovations are promised. The expansion in television offerings is, of course, primarily available to the elite and middle sectors.

Second, the construction of multiplex cinemas is modernizing the movie-going experience and attracting a larger public, most notably young people. Cinema complexes and shopping malls, which appear to be associated, are the main reactivators of public life and of cultural consumption in open spaces or outside of domestic life. While in the first half of the 1990s one could perceive a concentration of entertainment in the home, today one can appreciate that a certain reversal has occurred. Without having increased to the former 90 million cinema attendees, the numbers have nevertheless reached some 48 million moviegoers per year. Clearly, some aspects of public social interaction are being revitalized.

A third change is the expansion of technologically advanced communications networks, which are differentiated from the mass media or the cinema: computers, the Internet, faxes, electronically linked banking services, even electronic purchases, the development of which appears to be slower in Mexico City than in other metropolitan areas. In any event, this growth in high-level technological networks, accessible only to certain sectors of the city, is recomposing the fabric of communications, as well as many habits of consumption, in the metropolis. It also restructures the role of the capital as the center of the country and its relationships with global markets and circuits.

Fourth, as a result of the preceding two processes, the public is living with a predominance of video culture and, more recently, of electronic communication over traditional information media (newspapers, magazines, or face-to-face exchanges of information in neighborhood life). One of the most stunning findings in recent memory is the result of a survey on cultural habits, conducted by the newspaper Reforma in January 2001, which showed that the number of people who read newspapers daily in Mexico City coincides with the number who are, or claim to be, daily computer users: 20 out of every 100 inhabitants. Mexico City's low readership index is matched by public fascination with computers.

Between what is left of written culture and the acceleration of a digital culture that reaches very few people, there is a predominant system, at once disseminated and highly concentrated, which, as Paul Virilio suggests, no longer works with discourses but with flashes and images. Just as the process of partially substituting direct interaction with media communications, concentrated in the home, creates a new kind of relationship with space, the predominance of present-tense experiences over the long-form narratives of the lettered city (and in the case of Mexico, of its folklore) engenders a new relationship with social time.

POSSIBLE FUTURES

Finally, I will essay a few considerations on the cultural changes foreseeable as the year 2010 approaches. To this end it is necessary to differentiate between predictable cultural changes—those changes that will occur because they appear objectively inevitable—and those that might come about were there a transformation in the management of public life. In the first place, there begins to be a more equitable distribution of cultural offerings in the metropolitan space, but this distribution is usually carried out by private initiative, seldom by public programs—that is, through television and the cinema, rather than through the decentralization of state-funded mechanisms. There is an advanced democratization in the political sphere, but it is accompanied neither by a redistribution of cultural mechanisms nor by agreements between the Federal District and its surrounding municipalities for the articulation of information and entertainment, or for any other services.

What kind of spatial infrastructure does the public need for its cultural mechanisms? More casas de la cultura, more libraries, more well-equipped theatres and concert halls, in the north and south of the city, in the east and west? Certainly, but the city also needs to develop media and computer policies oriented by and toward public services. It is necessary to democratize the relationship between local cultures and promote their own development with greater resources. At the same time, a city such as Mexico City must assume...
its role as a Latin American capital and global city through festivals, investments in tourism, and cultural and mass-media attractions. At the moment, there can be no cultural policy of the majority, in the city or in any country, if there is not a media policy with a sense of public service. It must be said that the dearth of initiatives in this field on the part of the city and of the nation’s recent governments reveals the lack of a globalist vocation on the part of public actors in our culture.

Of course, these modifications depend not solely on government but also on new options created by civil associations and by new citizens’ initiatives. After all that the 1985 earthquake subtracted from Mexico City, the public was beginning to activate a more cooperative imagination. It appeared determined to bring together the imaginaries of social movements and political parties, of citizens and consumers. However, when such catastrophes recede from memory, the imagination veers away from the sense of common cause, and citizenship is reduced to the limited areas through which one moves.

work, the children’s school, the safety of the block on which one lives. Will this megalopolis be too vast for its citizens to imagine it as a unified whole? Or is it perhaps one of the long-term functions of imaginaries to placate social disturbances, to propose equilibriums and pacts between conflicting forces in their most immediate manifestations? It would appear that in this time, in which global communications promote comparisons and even imitations among cities, the public finds it difficult to experience the different parts of a single megalopolis as being related.

Perhaps one chooses to live in cities not only because of the richness of stimuli that excite our imagination; perhaps one does so also because cities in which precariousness and disorder triumph contain and give rest to our imaginary vertigos. That is why one organizes one’s experience of the urban environment selectively. In the words of Luis García Montero, referring here to his own city, Granada, "Each person has a city which is the urbanized landscape of his or her feelings." Perhaps in order to understand the fascination that living in a global city elicits, it is necessary at once to think of the city, one’s most intimate and restricted metropolis, as a refuge against what one finds vertiginous in globalization. The question that remains is whether this protective function of urban life can be fulfilled when inequality and disconnection prevail over all the things that make people live together.

TRANSLATED BY EDGAR LOY FANKBONNER

NOTES
5. Ibid.