

Social Policy and Spatial Regulation in Mexico City

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In recent years, the Government of the Federal District has received widespread kudos for introducing new social programs in Mexico's capital city. While not discounting the distributional benefits of these programs, this paper critically traces some of the increasingly evident tensions between spatial planning and social policy in the Federal District. More specifically, this research examines some of the ways in which land use regulation now folds into and articulates with social policy and geographies in the Federal District, often in regressive ways. The paper investigates this issue in two different urban settings: the "formal" downtown core and the "informal" periphery. In downtown areas, state-led approvals for upzoning measures and other land use changes have facilitated urban redevelopment projects, capital accumulation and escalating land and housing prices. At the periphery, land use regulation now conditions access to property regularization, urban services, and even some social programs for those residing in so-called informal settlements (Connolly and Wigle, forthcoming). Comparing the state's role in urban development processes at these distinct sites reveals the highly discretionary and uneven nature of spatial regulation in different territories of the city, characterized by "fast-track" development approvals in more affluent areas downtown and "slow-track" regularization of lower-income communities in peripheral areas. This situation highlights how urban development in Mexico City often involves the state transgressing its own planning regulations, thereby challenging the conventional distinction between "formal" development and "informal" settlement. The paper seeks to excavate the socio-territorial aspects of some social programs, as well as the implications of land use regulation for broader urban and social development patterns in the city. The paper draws upon existing research on the role of the entrepreneurial state in facilitating property-led urban development, as well recent literature on the state's role in producing "informality". The analysis incorporates academic literature, policy documents and field research to show that land use regulation – and spatial regulation more broadly – is implicated in the production of urban space in ways that undermine Mexico City's stated support for the "Right to the City".

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