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# Losing My Religion in Oaxaca

## Heraclitus in Oaxaca<sup>1</sup>

You never step into the same market twice, never more so than when you wade into the Mercado Abastos, the largest market in Oaxaca City, and one of the largest in Mexico (Figure 1, and #1 in Figure 4).

Limitless and nearly unnavigable, seemingly walled and roofed by goods, it is in constant flux. Residue of a Middle Eastern bazaar is easily imagined, as if ancient forms were passed from the Umayyads to the Spanish to the Mexicans, where they mixed with indigenous markets which independently arrived at similar morphologies. Yet to invoke the Middle East reduces the singularity of the place into a stereotype, as if any exotic bazaar must trace itself back to Fez. Yes, the Mercado Abastos is Mexican, but it is not the Mexico primed and readied for American consumption. There is nothing else like it in Oaxaca, especially not the more polite and organized markets near the historic core. This makes it a site for urban pilgrimage, but definitively not a tourist site. In fact, tourists are sometimes warned away. Where the tourist might see a lowly, even dangerous, market, the urban pilgrim would see a higher purpose.

Opposite: Santo Domingo



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

Form and placement tell part of the story. Abastos is a patchwork of adjoined markets, some under fixed roofs, others under the deep shade of a tarp, and still others improvised and jerry-built (Figures 2-3).

It sprawls on the edge of the historic city (# 1 in Figure 4), adjacent to the second class bus station and the Periférico, a multilane ring road with a defunct rail line running down the center. The area is the antithesis of the World Heritage designated historic center of Oaxaca, where beautifully preserved colonial buildings are part of one of Mexico's most elaborately planned and funded civic projects of the last generation. Abastos is a strikingly local market in a decisively tourist city.

Yet urban pilgrimage flattens the distinction. Market and historic monument are virtually identical to the underlying aesthetic sensibility of the contemporary urban pilgrim. Pilgrims, like many tourists, seek edification, titillation, consumption, and—through these experiences—



transformation. They can find all of these in the Abastos Market or in the ensemble of baroque churches and colonial buildings in the protected zone. Market and church are both “photo ops” and land side-by-side on Pinterest and other “archives” favored by urban pilgrims, where both enter the ever growing pilgrim’s guide to Oaxaca (Figure 5).

Indeed, urban pilgrimage concerns itself with a paradox: the search for unique types or inimitable experiences that cannot escape stereotype. Many people come to Oaxaca for its historic center, which, along with its craft villages and archaeological sites, became a World Heritage Site in 1987. The center is jammed with baroque churches, Mediterranean courtyard houses, and other historic buildings built of the local green *cantera* stone. The churches are majestic, both in extent and in detail. The Baroque operated by rendering believers awestruck by the endless undulations and curves, figures and moldings, all gilded and designed so that every detail enters into a fugue of structure and ornament (Figure 6).

Such a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, pairs infinitude with coherence in an attempt to deliver a transcendent experience. The churches stand as evidence of the sincere, if misguided, conquest of the native soul. Now part of the architectural canon, they make claims on the urban pilgrim’s soul, if there is such a thing, much like the church once laid claim to the Zapotec soul.

The market, in the general sense, is not so different. Unbounded, infinite, sublime, it, too, is a site of illusion, authenticity, and transcendent experience. In this regard, the Mercado Abastos might exceed the churches and convents in Oaxaca that have been preserved into death mask versions of their original selves. Perhaps this is because the market makes no pretense about what time it is, while the church pretends it is still the 16th or 17th century. Preservation is often maligned for the wrong reasons: by fixing buildings in a certain moment long ago, it

blocks them from being part of the changing life of a city. In Oaxaca, this is not a problem, since the showpiece buildings are invariably incorporated as museums or civic spaces into the daily life of the center, which is aimed at tourists. Their sin is thus not so much one of frigidity or dysfunction, but rather of telling tales about time, something the market never does because it is relentlessly in the moment.

Hence the analogy at the top of this essay to Heraclitus's river ("No man steps into the same river twice, for its not the same river and he's not the same man."), which relates place and time. We go to cities so often to displace ourselves from the present, either by finding or experiencing the unique or original presence of a building or area from the past, or, as with Shanghai and other rapidly changing cities, experiencing a place that, with remorseless violence, cleaves off the past and throws itself into the future—a specious past and future, the former an embalmed cadaver, the latter a pretentious bid to escape the present.

Preservation freezes Heraclitus' river so that, in fact, we *can* step into this world repeatedly. It does so through a form of studied replication and simulation within a legitimately old fabric. To consume these places is to consume time as a commodity represented as authenticity (the authenticity of the market, by contrast, rests on its relentless insistence on being in the present). Here, Alois Riegl's attempts to categorize types of value for the preservation of monuments can be updated.<sup>2</sup> The value of the historic center is not the presence of age, per se, but rather something more phenomenological yet indivisible from the economy of tourism, which Riegl could not yet have imagined on the scale it now operates.

Urban pilgrimage might thus be understood as a particular aesthetic category embedded, like tourism, in unavoidable economic structures. Oaxaca's historic center has been preserved by a combination of funding





Figure 6

from local philanthropists, like the Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú (the former owner of the largest Latin American bank, Banamex—now Citigroup), federal sources, and the UNESCO World Heritage Fund. It takes immense infusions of capital to freeze a Mexican river, and that's because Mexicans divert the warm currents of their markets into every aspect of life. It is not just that alongside every fiesta springs an impromptu market; patrimony itself is conceived in terms of capitalism. Indeed, churches once used as barracks, cinemas, stables, schools, and industrial sites were—often with liberal guesswork—“restored,” which really means the seduction of tourists drove their reconstruction.

### This Little Pilgrim Went to Market

The Abastos market is virtually untouched by the tourist economy. It remains unadulterated by those seeking eternal life for buildings and,





Figure 7



Figure 8

consequently, it is temporally ambiguous. It is also aesthetically deprived by the standards of UNESCO or the Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú. It is not part of the patrimony-tourist economy. But it is a site for urban pilgrimage for the following reasons.

Although they cleave, the highly cultivated historic monument and the unself-conscious market share aesthetic categories, in particular, the sublime. To behold a baroque space like the barrel vault of the narthex of Santo Domingo in Oaxaca is to encounter the uncountable (Figures 7-8).

In Spanish, as in English, “count” and “account” share a root having to do with reckoning. A story or *cuento* is something that can be counted or accounted. Not so with the baroque surface. The stories surrounding the Christian pantheon are often told, but remain beyond accounting, and so too must be sites of encounter with Christ. Measurement gets us nowhere. Images come to the rescue. We all know that humans shaped the seemingly limitless folds, concavities, and unnamable

moldings, painted, and gilded them. When multiplied the church over, these millions of shapes have a similar effect to the infinite objects in the market, equally uncountable—the Pinterest blogger in Figure 5 used the word “amazing” to refer to both—and unaccountable, since an informal economy predominates. Both church and market elude definite narrative. The pilgrim fills the void, those parts left open to the imagination. Yet her account—on Pinterest, in her blog, on Twitter—narrates but does not explain the phenomenon of encounter.

In the end, both are systems of belief: the church is a frontispiece of God, the market the physical manifestation of market forces. Both must be taken on faith because they defy logic, even if some economists insist on the rationality of their god. The church gilds its surface with a veneer that has often served as a form of rainy day equity, while the market hides its lucre in tills or socks and shoes.<sup>3</sup> Both use the aesthetic of the infinite to suggest that, with investment, anything is possible—the infinite is balanced out by the singular.

As noted, central to urban pilgrimage is an encounter with things that are one of a kind—a *unicum* that can only be seen in that place, and which is in a reciprocal relationship with the place. The Guggenheim made Bilbao a place of urban pilgrimage, and Bilbao made the Guggenheim. They're indivisible, but it's the “Bilbao effect,” not the Guggenheim effect. Novelty, extreme novelty in fact, is part of the pilgrimage market, but just as often, urban pilgrims fetishize age. Historical age and uniqueness drive our peregrinations.

Once UNESCO sanctified Oaxaca as worthy of World Heritage status, it ensured that the older fabric would endure. The market is not so lucky. As permanent and singular as it seems, the Abastos is also ephemeral and generic. Not only does it change physically, but it also is impossible to date from mere observation. It could be a century old, with later additions, but in fact it is scarcely more than a generation in

age. Built in the 1970's, it is now slated for destruction, to be replaced by a mall. The whole turns out to be as transitory as its parts.

For all of its generic quality and temporariness, and in spite of being the antithesis of a tourist site, the Mercado Abastos achieves, or enables, one of the most intriguing aspects of pilgrimage: a temporary citizenship or sense of belonging, however fleeting, in another alternative governing structure exactly coterminus geographically and temporally with the one left behind, yet thoroughly Other. The word pilgrim, which comes from the Latin *peregrinus*, was a legal term meaning “stranger” or “foreigner”; in other words a non-citizen. The suspension of disbelief this parallel universe requires is, of course, a form of belief, an affiliation with cultural, economic, or class attachments. Unlike medieval Christian pilgrimage, which leveled all pilgrims and erased class and national distinctions, modern urban pilgrimage is all about class because of the steep price of admission. Economics, however, doesn't seem to spoil the illusion. Unlike the tourist, the contemporary urban pilgrim may come armored in irony, but it is an armor forged in fires of credulity. How else can a pilgrim laugh off the absurd power relationships and the ugly intersections with tourism without a sincere quest for enlightenment? The urban pilgrim would not deign to be a tourist, even when she is.

### Follow the Green

The market and the historic tourist core had to be forcibly separated. This is the sort of historical event that helps preserve the age value of historic buildings and devalue the historicity and aesthetic of the market. It is the historical act that separates tourism from urban pilgrimage. It is not happenstance that the Abastos sits physically, economically, and aesthetically, apart from the historic center. The ubiquitous nature of Mexican markets had to be tamed or sequestered in order to create a stage set for the consumption of World Heritage.

Part of readying the city for historical tourism was to empty the core of unsightly businesses and interventions that would spoil the suspension of disbelief. Although early preservation efforts can be found even in the late 19th century, and a zone of monuments was established under local auspices in 1976, comprehensive urban plans produced in 1979 and 1986 lacked a vision of cultural patrimony. These were thoroughly practical and local in concern.<sup>4</sup> As late as the mid-1990s, with preservation well underway, no catalogue of monuments or standards for preservation existed.<sup>5</sup>

Between the preservation of Santo Domingo in the 1980s and the present, a game of dominoes ensued. The *Alcala*, a street lined with historic buildings, was pedestrianized so that tourists (and locals) could stroll uninterrupted from the central square, the *Zocalo* (#3 in Figure 4), a 16th-century plaza laid out according to the Laws of the Indies, to Santo Domingo, a jewel of a church and monastery that was reinvented as a museum of Oaxacan culture and history (#4 in Figure 4). The only problem was that the central markets had spilled chaotically into the streets near the *Zocalo*. Some of its stalls already catered to tourists—as Oaxaca has been a tourist destination for decades—but others sold decidedly untouristic things, which posed a threat to the placid surface of the tourist experience, if not to the physical wellbeing of the people and the historic area itself.

In a series of fitful interventions with no overarching plan, and initiated by a combination of private and public sponsors, the historic buildings to either side of the *Alcala* were preserved and cars were removed from the street and adjacent plazas (see the yellow lines on the map in Figure 4). Much more ambitious plans to pedestrianize the historic center along the lines of a European city were thwarted by a public deeply ambivalent about the tourist economy.<sup>6</sup> But preservation was impossible to stop. Churches were deconsecrated long ago by the

19th-century Laws of Reform and historic houses were refitted for new cultural institutions. In red, on the map in Figure 4, these include the Santo Domingo Cultural Center and museums devoted to archaeology, textiles, stamps, graphic arts, and contemporary art. The old train station was recently restored as a train museum and a new historical archive planned by the Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú centers on the preservation of documents. One local Oaxacan confided in me that he thought there were too many museums for people in the city.

In recent years, the random array of projects was made coherent, as with many European cities, with a tidy paving scheme that marks out the historic area. At great expense, blocks of green *cantera*, or materials that simulate the same effect, were installed. They form a potent, albeit subconscious, part of the experience of the historic core. The paving matches the ground to the buildings and, almost with the clarity of a map, creates a color-coded and sensual system of movement and boundaries (Figure 9). Green marks the tourist route. Where the roads turn to asphalt or get unpleasantly bumpy, one has transgressed, strayed from the tourist's way. Here begins the pilgrim's progress.

To prepare the ground, markets were sanitized (by Mexican standards). The Mercado 20 de Noviembre (#2 in Figure 4) became the polite market, easily accessible to tourists and brimming with artisanal goods, mounds of mole, baskets of spiced grasshoppers, and Zapotec women preparing traditional foods. The local market shifted to Abastos, which is not on most tourist maps. Its location next to the bus station tells the story succinctly.

Comprehensive conservation planning came late. The *Plan de Ordenamiento de la Zona Conurbada de la Ciudad de Oaxaca de Juárez Resumen* of 1994 finally called for the "rescue" of areas in the center for conventions and "cultural equipment" and, linked to that, a plan to provide space for the Abastos and a bus station.<sup>7</sup> It took its cue



directly from the UNESCO designation of Oaxaca in 1987 as a cultural and natural area worthy of preservation, calling for environmental restoration alongside historic preservation.<sup>8</sup> Central to the plan was the pedestrianization of the center of the city on a vast scale.

To put this in a larger historical perspective, as many European nations (or cities) were formulating their early ideas about preservation in the 19th century, Mexico was dismantling its historic assets because of the Reform Laws and the revolution. Its Napoleonic moment of deconsecration came several generations later, in the 1860s, when the new government of Benito Juárez confiscated church property in order to raise funds for his fledgling government. “The clergy were left their altars; everything else—land, money, candlesticks, and buildings—became the governments.”<sup>9</sup> In fact, many altars in Oaxaca were carted away by the military or government for their valuable materials.<sup>10</sup>

The story in Oaxaca’s, and all of Mexico’s cultural patrimony, is one of religious monuments, especially, but also civic and private buildings, passing into the hands of the state. Those buildings that managed to resist the ravages of time were put to use in radically different ways. Cloisters became barracks, jails, and playing fields; convents became administrative offices and schools, theaters and garages, while many were left to molder. The state “liberated” church properties and, in theory, made them public property, but in fact sold them to the highest bidders. Most of the colonial art, which was religious in nature, was “burned, melted down, scattered, or indiscriminately destroyed.”<sup>11</sup> As part of the revolutionary process of decolonization, Mexicans placed little merit on the patrimonial value of the buildings in the 19th century. Contrarily, the newly formed Mexican government hoped to distance itself from its colonial past and the yoke of Spanish Catholic rule.

Just over a century later, beginning in the 1960s, the state again became the primary benefactor of the Reform Laws by recasting long

neglected buildings as foundational to the patrimony of Mexico and the world. Although pre-Hispanic sites continued to be valorized over colonial ones, many of the latter being destroyed to preserve the former, international protocols for the preservation of patrimony began to influence Mexican archaeologists.<sup>12</sup> Mexicans looked to the Norms of Quito in 1968, the ICOMOS meeting in 1969, and to the 1972 UNESCO convention in Paris, which expanded the definition of cultural patrimony to include buildings, sculpture, painting, archaeological remains, inscriptions, caverns and grottoes, with exceptional value from an artistic, scientific, or historical point of view.<sup>13</sup> Still, Mexico was slow to change. Historic sites were not incorporated into a national plan for tourism until the mid-1980s, when the Secretary of Tourism realized that over 100 million tourists had visited archaeological sites between 1976 and 1982.<sup>14</sup>

Spanish heritage, once despised, became priceless. This was a shift in political economy, reversing the state's role as a champion for political and economic autonomy to being an instrument of international collaboration in an historical project that would transform the economy of Oaxaca into a dynamic tourist mecca. The context for the change in attitude about patrimony was again economic. The Mexican economy experienced an acute and protracted recession in the 1970s due to an astronomical trade deficit with the United States on which it depended for over 70 percent of its trade and about 85 percent of its tourism.<sup>15</sup> In this period, "the whole government-industrial complex was kept solvent and viable by only one phenomenon: the Mexican tourist industry."<sup>16</sup> Preservation in Mexico is inextricably linked to the economics of tourism and perhaps nowhere more so than in Oaxaca, which boasts almost no other productive industry.

Conservation planning thus arrived much later in Mexico than in Europe. Many European cities began to reinvent their cores with

vast pedestrian zones that parlayed their historic assets into tourist and service zones after World War II.<sup>17</sup> The first legislation enabling the preservation of historic zones, as opposed to single buildings, occurred in France in the 1960s.<sup>18</sup> In Oaxaca, which is arguably Mexico's first example of this sort of conservation planning, the effort began in earnest in the 1980s, although piecemeal efforts began as early as the 1930s.

Piecemeal or not, the result is a protected zone, often pedestrian, of historic and contemporary encounter. Such a space, temporally ambiguous and extensive in itself, raises urban pilgrimage above the level of metaphor. After all, pilgrimage is about bodies in motion across landscapes; it requires a route, preferably one traversed on foot. Hence the importance of paving. The pilgrim, like the government, can follow the green. To be sure, planes, trains, and automobiles can be vehicles of transformation and pilgrimage as well, but no technology has supplanted the pilgrim on foot, along with the direct visual and bodily encounter with the world at two to three miles per hour. It is a speed conducive to transaction, verbal or economic. The movement is also guided by the pilgrim as an alien seeking a higher form of citizenship in the peculiar spaces of contemporary cities. Urban pilgrims may not walk on bloodied knees between sites to prove their devotion, but a higher calling is at stake.

### A Humanist Blogging the Light Fantastic

What can the design fields do with these seemingly ineffable spaces of urban pilgrimage? The typical design studio would "map it." Architects might map out the types and flow of goods, movement systems, edges and gradients between environments, materials, changes across the day, or, given a humanist's time frame, across years. Sectional cuts of a place like Abastos, dizzying though they would be, might augment

the maps, help sort out the ant-like movement of people, and yield a more bodily sense of the scale of activity. Sketches could restore flesh to what the maps flayed.

While maps and sections often reveal the invisible, they struggle with the ineffable. Geographic information systems (GIS) and parametric design might come to the rescue. Phenomena that seem infinite might merely be too large for the naked senses or the unaided imagination to perceive. GIS, in theory, is utterly empirical—it sticks to observable and locatable facts; and parametric design uses these facts to generate possibilities. Its power is that of repetition, endless variations on a theme. While this description neatly matches that of the market stalls, the affinity is misleading. Parametrics is, as the word describes, a tool of measurement. It can do little with the immeasurable. Unless it somehow is linked to neuro-scientific imaging, there will not be a parametrics of love and hate, or awe and faith. The sublime begins where measurement ends. A parametrics of phenomenology thus seems remote.

If mapping is too literal a technique to understand urban pilgrimage, we might heed Wordsworth's incitement to "UP! up! my Friend, and quit your books." The poet espied something that rational inquiry could not penetrate: "Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; Our meddling intellect Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—We murder to dissect."<sup>19</sup> Put differently, if you found an elf in the woods, would you dissect it? Well, maybe a dead one, and that's the point. The things that pilgrims encounter are living, not in any literal sense, of course, but in the metaphysical way that some places produce unpredictable, unrepeatable, and seemingly supra-rational effects. Our books are useless, our methods ineffective.

The church of urban pilgrimage does have a holy book of sorts. The new Saint Faith, patron saint of pilgrims, is the bodiless,

unpredictable, automatic blog, descendent of Baedeker's, Fodor's, Let's Go, Rough Guide, etc., but active! Here one can send out prayers to the world and concrete instructions for salvation return: three Gaudi's, one Bilbao, and a few mixed drinks will lighten the existential load of most urban pilgrims.

Libations aside, in its rawest sense, religious experience resists architectural and humanist methods alike. However, the issue is not whether some transcendent power or experience exists, but rather to what use people are putting their experience. This, at least, the humanities can plumb. It would require another essay to flesh out a full explanation, but suffice it to speculate here that contemporary society, so often bereft of socially sanctioned experience of the supernatural, seeks it through other means. To encounter time scrambling sites, like Oaxaca, challenges the unforgivingly linear quality of modern time. As Mircea Eliade has argued, moderns have turned their backs to cyclical forms of experience favored by traditional society as a refuge from the soullessness of modern history, in part because of history's inability to offer succor in the face of calamity.<sup>20</sup> In spite of its best efforts, preservation may be one way that moderns bend time's arrow.<sup>21</sup>

[Endnotes]

1. Thanks to Professors Vera De La Cruz and Gerardo Korres for their guidance on preservation history in Oaxaca.
2. Alois Riegl, "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origins" [1903], Trans. Kurt Forster, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 20-51.
3. In fact, the Mexican Revolution in the 1860s deconsecrated the church in order to liquidate its treasures, often finding that the gold on altars and liturgical objects amounted to little.
4. "Plan de Ordenamiento de la Zona Conurbada de la Ciudad de Oaxaca de Juárez Resumen," *Aurea* 1, 7 (November 1994): 7-11. Juan Francisco Ferreyra Velasco, "El Patrimonio Monumental de Oaxaca Indefenso ante los Vaciós Legales," *Aurea* 2, 13 (December 1995): 12-13. All translations by the author.

5. Velasco, 12.
6. From an interview with Oaxacan preservation architect and professor Gerardo Korres, December 12, 2014.
7. "Plan de Ordenamiento," 9.
8. Ibid. 10. See also <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/415> for the UNESCO designation.
9. T. R. Fehrenbach, *Fire and Blood: A History of Mexico*, revised edition (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995): 420.
10. *El Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de Oaxaca* (Oaxaca: Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca, 1986): 22. The extraordinary altars in the Capila Rosario in Santo Domingo date from the 1950s.
11. Fehrenbach, 421.
12. Nelly M. Robles and Alfredo J. Moreira, *Proyecto Mitla: Restauración de la Zona Arqueológica en su Contexto Urbano* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990): 28-31.
13. Ibid, 31.
14. Ibid, 36.
15. Fehrenbach, 645; Nobles and Moreira, 36.
16. Fehrenbach, 644.
17. G. J. Ashworth and J. E. Tunbridge, *The Tourist-Historic City* (London; New York: Bellhaven Press, 1990).
18. For the larger context, see Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
19. William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," *Lyrical Ballads* [1798] London: Oxford University Press, 1969.
20. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
21. See Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).